



Ethnicity and the origins of local identity in Shetland, UK—Part I: Picts, Vikings, Fairies, Finns, and Aryans

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Received 27 April 2013; revised 9 June 2013; accepted 25 June 2013

Available online 15 August 2013

KEYWORDS

Islands;
Orkney and Shetland;
Vikings;
Ethnicity;
Racial anthropology;
Aryans

Abstract The population of the North Sea archipelago of Shetland, UK possesses a distinct sense of ethnic identity, which connects the island's present-day community to that of its Old Norse/Viking settlers from Scandinavia. This sense of Viking ethnicity, however, is relatively recent, first arising in the 19th Century. This paper argues that Shetland's cultural identity must be understood in terms of the islands' historical interconnectedness with trends in literature and scholarship in mainland Scotland, Britain, and Europe as a whole. Part I of this two-part paper looks at how works of literature and international academic research into folklore, racial anthropology, archaeology, and philology influenced and were influenced by the Shetland community's conceptions of its own history. Over the course of the 19th Century, a sense of ethnic uniqueness and identification with the Vikings gradually developed in Shetland, linked to ideas concerning Shetland's past inhabitants (Picts and Vikings), past folk belief (Finns, mermaids, and fairies), and the increasing prominence of research into Aryan/Indo-European ethnicity. Despite its geographic isolation, the history of ideas within Shetland is fundamentally one of interchange with the wider world.

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1. Introduction

The increasing consolidation and international recognition of the field of island studies has resulted in growing theoretical sophistication and negotiation. There are currently various

lines of discussion that are moving in dialogue—and occasionally in parallel—to define the ideal aims, scope, perspectives, and subject matter of the field itself. For instance, [Stratford et al. \(2011\)](#) have suggested an archipelagic approach, noting that the dominant understandings of 'the island' as either a singular entity or as a cultural or economic community relative to the mainland have tended to marginalise investigation of island-to-island relations. [Hayward \(2012\)](#), in turn, has stressed the importance of the sea itself in our understanding of islandness, a challenge with which [Fleury \(2013\)](#) has grappled in his analysis of 'the island/sea/territory relationship'. As [Juni'chiro \(2012, p. 13\)](#) has illustrated, even the concepts of 'island' and 'archipelago' are far from fixed, with conceptions of island

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Peer review under responsibility of Mokpo National University.



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and archipelagic status changing significantly over time in the Japanese context, where “the consciousness of the Japanese state as a *shimaguni* (island nation)” takes on new strengths and connotations as circumstances demand.

One argument that many of these contributions to island studies’ theoretical foundations have in common is that islands can never be regarded in isolation. There are “different *kinds of insularity* as well as [...] different *degrees of insularity*” (Biagini and Hoyle, 1999, p. 6), and though we may be urged to study islands ‘on their own terms’, even their own terms are never theirs alone (Baldacchino, 2008), as their economies remain dependent on imported and exported goods and people, and their cultures are affected by inflows of new ideas. Island communities are fundamentally interconnected with the world around them—the sea, other islands, large landmasses.

The interconnectedness of islands has, in fact, become something of an island studies commonplace: Despite there being little evidence of scholars within the field seeking to argue that islands are closed systems, much time and energy is spent asserting the contrary. This comes, however, with the risk that, in constantly declaiming that islands are not ‘insular’, we lose sight of the very real effect that island status can have on a community’s development. The present two-part paper uses an exploration of the Shetland archipelago’s place in the European history of ideas to illustrate how the interconnectedness of island communities with the outside world does not preclude islands from fostering “unique cultural habitats” (Jennings, 2010, p. 1) precisely by nature of their relative geographic isolation. The story we shall consider here might be one in which an island community plays a small role in a series of much greater cultural movements, but as we shall see, this small role is one that only an island could play: Sufficiently connected to the outside world to exchange ideas with it yet also sufficiently cut off from the outside world to be readily essentialised by both islanders and outsiders. We cannot merely study islands ‘on the own terms’, for islanders themselves frequently conceive of their homes and cultures in opposition to or otherwise with reference to the outside world. To be an islander is, in some ways, to self-identify with difference and with place (Olwig, 2007).

This, then, is a study of conceptions and self-perceptions—in other words, of ideas. Ideas can have real impacts: A failure of cultural imagination within an island community can contribute to political, economic, and social stagnation (Grydehøj and Hayward, 2011) while the shifting cultural values of neighbouring communities can lead to an infinitely changeable island landscape of political, economic, and social power (Grydehøj, 2011b). The ideas and ideals of everyday citizens, parallel to or in interaction with those of the elite, can coalesce into nation-building movements with profound effects (Erikson, 2012), as the present two-part paper will also indicate.

Shetland (see Fig. 1) is a North Atlantic archipelago that is a subnational jurisdiction of Scotland, which is itself a subnational jurisdiction of the United Kingdom (UK). With a population of around 22,000 and a highly peripheral location, Shetland would not appear to be an obvious site of geopolitical importance. Nevertheless, its Sullom Voe Terminal—one of the largest oil and gas terminals in Europe—has made Shetland significant to the British economy. Now, as the debate over Scotland’s proposed independence from the UK heats up, the potential arises for Shetland to play a pivotal role in the constitutional future of the country as a whole. This is because a con-



Fig. 1 Map of the North Atlantic. Shetland lies to the northeast of Scotland and west of Norway. (Source: adapted from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Blank_Template_for_Greater_Europe.PNG).

siderable segment of the Shetland population has a heartfelt desire to keep Shetland out of an independent Scotland, which is due to a widespread—though not universal—antipathy toward Scots in general and toward Scottish rule over Shetland in particular. Within Scotland and the UK as a whole, however, there tends to be a lack of understanding as to why many Shetlanders might be wary of being part of an independent Scotland. Even within Shetland itself, it is not immediately obvious why this might be the case—unless, of course, one is willing to beg the question by accepting the prevalent local historical narrative that emphasises Scottish oppression of what had once been a free Scandinavian people (Fig. 1).

So far from begging the question, we will seek to tease out the answer to it by following various strands of Shetland’s cultural history. In the present article, the first part of this two-part paper, we will consider the period from the Iron Age until the start of the 1880s, discussing the historical development of ideas concerning Shetlanders’ ethnic identity as well as contemporary and retrospective historiographic interpretations of folk belief in Shetland. Though this is a history that involves such apparently parochial issues as descriptions of fairies and mermaids, it is, in fact, part of a wider history of the development of European thought and thinking on European identities. It is also a history that is continuing to exert influence in British politics. In this paper’s forthcoming second part, we will consider the cementing of a particular ethnic nationalist historical narrative within Shetland from the 1890s on and will discuss the results this has had both in Shetland and internationally.

2. A brief history of Shetland

The Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland were first settled by a people from the Scottish mainland (hereafter, *Scotland*) in the Mesolithic or Neolithic period and had developed an agricultural society by around 3000 BCE. A highly complex society arose around 2000 BCE and continued until a few centuries before the start of the first millennium CE, as is evi-

denced by archaeological remains of roundhouses and a type of tower called a *broch*, both of which are common to and show continued cultural exchange with the Scottish mainland.

Northern Isles society seems to have continued developing in line with that of Scotland: The dominant inhabitants of Northern Britain, who the Romans identified as *Picti* (hereafter, the *Picts*) may or may not have been the same people who first settled the Northern Isles (hereafter, the *proto-Picts*), but there can be no doubt that at least a portion of Northern Isles society came to acquire the domestic, artistic, and religious trappings of the Pictish culture. Scotland's Picts spoke a Celtic language (evidently of the P-Celtic variety, i.e., more closely related to the ancient Welsh, Cornish, and Breton languages than to the Gaelic and Manx languages). The Picts underwent at least a partial conversion to Christianity in the 6th Century, and there was an active Christian community in Shetland from around 700 CE at the latest.

In about 790 CE, Vikings from Norway began arriving in the Northern Isles. The Vikings may initially have simply used the islands as staging grounds for raiding trips to Scotland and Ireland, but widespread permanent settlement took place over the following decades. It is unclear whether the indigenous Pictish population was forced to emigrate, was assimilated into the growing Norse population, or was exterminated, but one way or another, it is evident that, within a short time, the Northern Isles possessed a purely Norse culture: There was no cultural continuity between the archipelagos' Pictish era and their society following the Viking settlement. In 875, the Northern Isles became part of the Norwegian state and remained strongly Scandinavian until Lowland Scottish influence began asserting itself in the mid-12th Century (Wiggen, 2002, pp. 20–21). Orkney and Shetland formally passed over to Scotland in 1468 and 1469, respectively, yet it was only with the coming to power of the Stewart earls in 1581 that the islands truly fell under Scottish administration.

Under Scottish rule, Shetland remained thoroughly integrated into the European economy as its fishery continued to supply consumers on the Continent, and the archipelago was frequented by boats from a variety of countries. Even as late as 1774, the herring trade with England and Scotland was hugely overshadowed by trade with the Continent (Low, 1879, p. 66).

The great change came in 1886, when the UK Parliament abolished the 'truck system' by which Shetland's large-scale landowners economically exploited their tenant farmer–fishermen in a manner somewhat akin to feudalism. At the same time, Shetland's main town of Lerwick was growing in importance, leading to the development of a politically radicalised urban working class, the ideas of which seem to have quickly filtered out into rural Shetland (Cohen, 1983). Shetland, however, remained economically marginalised and reliant on fishing and agriculture until the late 1960s, when the discovery of North Sea oil set into motion the process that would transform this subnational jurisdiction into one of the richest in the UK. We have previously described and analysed this economic process and its cultural determinants as well as their impact on Shetland and Scottish politics in considerable detail (Grydehøj, 2008, 2011a, 2012, 2013) and will not go deeply into these issues here.

3. The early development of Shetland identity

3.1. Shetland identity today

Shetland is home to a strong local identity concept. Although few Shetlanders self-identify as Scandinavians, most self-identity as Shetlanders *per se* rather than as Scots. There is a tendency for Shetlanders to complain about outsiders associating them with Vikings, but there is no doubt that the Vikings play a strong role in local discourse and that any present-day association of this sort by outsiders results from the importance of the Vikings to the community's self image. Present-day Shetland culture is widely regarded locally as a continuation of the Viking culture, and local complaints concerning outsiders' perspectives seems to be rooted in distaste in outsiders contributing to the identification of Shetlanders rather than in disagreement with the content of the identification itself. It is noteworthy that the discourse surrounding this identity is not primarily of a genetic or ancestral nature, so that people rarely make claim to actually possessing 'Viking blood', thereby allowing this sense of identity to take on a nearly aspirational character (Grydehøj, 2011a): It is as much that Shetlanders today resemble the Vikings than that they are descended from them. Consider, for example, this quote from a local leadership workshop:

Here too, the Sea, the Sky and the weather dominate. Our culture, our heritage surrounds us, shelters us, and determines who we are. We are Norse, Vikings, people of the North Atlantic. Our Myths are of Norse Gods, trolls, giants and Finn Folk. Our Saints are Olaf and Magnus. (Coutts, n.d., 7–8)

Here, Shetland identity is linked to the natural environment, with the implication that this was itself linked to Viking culture. Shetland's 'myths' and saints here are purely symbolic: It is not that Shetlanders have much occasion to think of the Old Norse gods or Viking saints but, rather, that these say something about the Shetland character. The passage quoted above evokes a sort of ruggedness and wildness to be understood in contrast to an implied soft and tame culture to the south, in Scotland.

In order to identify how and why this identity arose, we will trace its development from the earliest available written sources describing Shetland society.

3.2. When Shetland became Scandinavian

In the earliest post-Medieval writings that discuss Shetland society, the islanders are described as being of Scandinavian ancestry. Thus, Monteith (1711, pp. 15–16), a landowner in Orkney, writes in 1633 that "Many of them are descended from the *Norwegians*, and speak a *Norse Tongue*, corrupted, (they call *Norn*) amongst themselves, which is now much worn out." He furthermore notes that "They are generally very Sharp, and consequently docile, and because of their Commerce with the *Hollanders*, they promptly speak Low Dutch." This is closely echoed by Marr (1908, pp. 250, 254) in 1680 and again by the visiting churchman Brand (1883, p. 104) in 1700,

the latter of whom notes, however, that the Norse language has almost entirely died out in Orkney but is still common in Shetland's northernmost islands. By the time Gifford (1786, p. 31–32), the landowner at Busta House on the Shetland mainland, comments on these issues in 1733, it is clear that Norn is in sharp decline as the prevalence of English rises and Dutch remains strong.

By the end of the century, the Norn language was either dead or close to dead (Barnes, 1998, p. 26). Indeed, Thomas Gifford's grandson Gideon Gifford, writing on the Norse influence on the Shetland language in 1774, mentions only the continued existence of Norse place names (Low, 1879, pp. 142–43), and Arthur Edmondston (uncle of Thomas Edmondston, Biot Edmondston, and Jessie M.E. Saxby) of Buness House, Unst writes in 1809 that “pure Norse or Norwegian is now unknown” and that, instead, “the common dialect is a mixture of Norwegian, Scotch, Dutch, and English” (Edmondston, 1809, pp. 141–142). We can note that, despite the universal agreement on the prevalence of Dutch in Shetland up until the early 1800s, few Shetlanders today reckon that the Dutch left much of a cultural imprint on the islands. Rather, from around 1800, discussion of Old Norse or Scandinavian influence increases dramatically.

Significant English and Scottish interest in Scandinavian history stretches back to the mid-1700s. As with much else in Scottish cultural history, the 19th Century development of Shetland identity is partly attributable to the efforts of the author Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832). Scott, who had an interest in Old Norse history, visited Shetland in 1814, eventually resulting in his writing *The Pirate*, a Shetland-based novel published in 1822. Just as Scott played a formative role in the creation of both Highland and Lowland Scottish Romanticism, he brings his historical knowledge to bear on Shetland: Although *The Pirate* takes place in the early 1700s, it is rich in overt Scandinavian atmosphere (Wawn, 2000, pp. 60–83).

This atmosphere, however, is entirely of Scott's own invention. For instance, one of *The Pirate*'s main settings is Sumburgh, a historical manor house in the south of the Shetland mainland, which was built by Earl Patrick Stewart in 1605 and was already in ruins by Scott's time. For the purposes of his novel, Scott changes the house's name to Jarlshof and gives it a Medieval Norse—rather than an Early Modern Lowland Scottish—history. Over the following decades, Jarlshof—its literary name having stuck—became a regular tourism site for visitors to the isles. *The Pirate* not only had a major influence on Mainland Scottish Scandinavian Romanticism; it also alerted this movement to Shetland's potential as Britain's Scandinavian exemplar (Wawn, 2000, pp. 81–83).

We saw above that 17th and 18th Century writers had been aware of Shetland's past settlement by the Norse, yet this was only remarked upon with reference to Shetlanders' language. There is little to suggest that Shetlanders during this period regarded themselves as in any way Scandinavian. There is, however, evidence for anti-Scottish sentiment in Shetland prior to the development of Viking Romanticism (Cohen, 1983, pp. 317–318). Shetlanders—or at least the Shetland elite who were writing at the time—had constructed an ‘other’ in the form of the Scottish but had not yet constructed a clearly defined Shetland identity. Thus, when Scott visited Shetland, he encountered not only a community that had set itself up in opposition to Scotland but also one upon which he could

overlay his own Norse historical interests, thereby refining Shetland's ‘us against them’ concept by portraying the local-outsider culture clash as a conflict of Norse versus Scottish sensibilities.

Even as outside interest in Shetland's Scandinavian history flourished, conceptions of identity within Shetland remained more or less stable. There are a few signs of local celebration of Viking heritage with direct reference to *The Pirate* in the 1830s, but the local Romantic movement was at most a minor undercurrent in Shetland cultural life (Cohen, 1983, p. 324). One reason why Shetlanders may have found it difficult to self-identify with the Vikings is that they lacked a clear idea of who the Vikings were. It was not until well into the 19th Century that British perceptions of Norse history and culture disassociated themselves from ancient Roman texts, none of which, of course, actually dealt with what we would today consider Viking culture at all.

3.3. ‘The Pictish Question’ in Celtic and Germanic Romanticism

By looking at the descriptive texts concerning Shetland, we can witness a decrease in historical knowledge as the era of Scandinavian rule grows more distant. Monteith (1711, pp. 79–80) is aware in 1633 of the details of how Orkney and Shetland had been transferred to Scotland. He states that the archipelagos had first been settled by Norwegian and Baltic Goths (later known, he says, as Picts); then were temporarily taken over by Norwegian pirates; and finally, “upon the marriage of King James the third, [they] were given up with *Orknay* to our King, and were since annexed by Act of Parliament to the Crown.” A century later, Gifford (1786, pp. 20–22) provides an uncommonly nuanced evaluation of contemporary historical thinking: He declines to conclude whether the Picts or the Norwegians were the first settlers of Shetland, maintaining only that Shetland was settled and influenced by both of the peoples at one time or another and that both were ‘Teutonic’.

The knowledge available to Monteith and Gifford, both of whom were Scottish landowners settled in the Northern Isles, was evidently not available to even well-read and inquisitive outsiders. Thus, Brand (1700, pp. 22–23) writes a detailed but not terribly accurate picture of Orkney and Shetland history, dating the Norse conquest of the Northern Isles around three centuries too late and dating the official Scottification of the archipelagos nearly two centuries too early. His account is, in fact, a condensed version of that in James Wallace's 1688 *A Description of the Isles of Orkney*. Significantly, Wallace holds that the Picts were a Germanic people (Wallace, 1883, pp. 79–93).

Indeed, none of the authors we have mentioned so far regard the Picts as Celtic. This was in keeping with wider trends in British scholarship. In the 1780s, the early philologist John Pinkerton gave new grounds for arguing—incorrectly, as it happened—that the Picts were of Germanic origin and had been a Scythian race (Smith, 1951, p. 175). By the late 18th Century, ‘the Pictish Question’ had become a major front in the emerging debate as to whether the Scots were primarily of Celtic or of Germanic heritage. The influential 1805 *History of the Orkney Islands* by George Barry, Minister of Shapinsay, cites Pinkerton in holding the Picts to be a rather civilised “people of ancient Scandinavia” who “committed themselves to the mercy of the waves”

and settled much of Scotland (Barry, 1805, p. 79). This 18th and early 19th Century idea that the Northern Isles had first been settled by a proto-Viking race is important because, as we shall see in Part II of this paper, it is at odds with what would become an underlying theme in Shetland's narrative of difference.

At the moment, however, it will be difficult to fathom the intellectual development that presents itself in Edmondston's (1809) book, written just 2 years after that of Barry. Edmondston regards the Picts as a Scandinavian race that replaced the Northern Isles' earlier Celtic population: "The subsequent residence of the Picts and the Norwegians in these islands, obliterated every trace of their primary Caledonian ancestry, and the few imperfect vestiges of antiquity which Zetland at present affords, all bespeak a Scandinavian and Norwegian origin" (Edmondston, 1809, pp. 17–18). Yet Edmondston also cites Pinkerton for what will seem a very odd idea, namely that, at the time of the Viking conquest, the Northern Isles had been inhabited by "two distinct nations, known by the appellations of *Peti* and *Papæ*" (Edmondston, 1809, p. 31). This idea ultimately derives from *Historia Norwegie*, a 12th Century Latin-language chronicle of Norway and the only Medieval source to mention the Northern Isles' pre-Viking population. Here is the account from *Historia Norwegie* (2003, pp. 65–67):

Originally those islands were inhabited by Pents [*Peti*.] and Papes [*Papæ*.]. One of these races, the Pents, only a little taller than pygmies, accomplished miraculous achievements by building towns, morning and evening, but at midday every ounce of strength deserted them and they hid for fear in underground chambers. [...] Of the place where these Pents came from, we know nothing at all. The Papes were so called on account of the vestments in which they clothed themselves like priests, and for this reason all priests are known as papen in the German tongue. One of the islands is still named Papey from them. However, as the appearance and letter-forms of the books they left there behind them testify, they were from Africa and clove to the Jewish faith.

In the days of Harald Fairhair, king of Norway, certain vikings, descended from the stock of that sturdiest of men, Ragnvald jarl, crossing the Solund Sea with a large fleet, totally destroyed these peoples after stripping them of their long-established dwellings and made the islands subject to themselves.

This account neither supports nor opposes the later mistaken belief that the Picts were of Germanic origin, yet it would later come to be of considerable significance for the way in which Shetlanders identify themselves.

By the time the Manchester-born geologist Samuel Hibbert published his 1822 *A Description of the Shetland Islands*, Pinkerton's theories of Pictish origins had declined in popularity. As a result, Hibbert regards the Northern Isles as having been inhabited by a Celtic race (which later disappeared); then "a Gothic tribe of Saxon rovers"; and then, around the start of the 6th Century, the Scandinavians, "who were the progenitors of the present race of inhabitants" (Hibbert, 1822, p. 18). Hibbert thus rather audaciously circumvents the Pictish problem by labelling as *Picts* the people who we now know to have been the proto-Picts, and the people who were the Celtic-speaking Picts proper, he turns into a nameless tribe of Gothic (Ger-



Fig. 2 Broch of Clickimin in Lerwick, Shetland. (Source: Adam Grydehøj, 2007).

manic) pirates. Part of Hibbert's difficulty is that he incorrectly sees Shetland's broch towers (see Fig. 2) as rather splendid and essentially Germanic architectural innovations with Scandinavian parallels (Hibbert, 1822, p. 252). This had been argued previously by both Barry (1805, p. 96–07) and Arthur Edmondston (1809, 117). As we shall see in Part II of this paper, there would later be a decisive shift away from this view.

Over the course of the 19th Century, the weight of scholarship had been creeping toward ascribing the Picts non-Germanic origins. In 1866, for example, Hector MacLean (1866, p. 212–216) could use philology to argue that:

The first name given by the Romans to the bravest and most prominent people in North Britain, was Caledonii, *Gael daoine*, the fair or kindred men, which, it will be observed, is identical with one of the names, *Gael* or *Gaedal*, by which the Irish Scots were distinguished. And as it may be inferred from Tacitus's remarks that they were fairer than the rest of the Britons [...]. Indeed, from Tacitus's description, and from the accounts of the ancient Gael or Feinn handed down by tradition and old Irish writings, it must be concluded, inevitably, that both peoples were of the same race, and that, in this respect, the Dalriads did not differ from the Picts, on whom they encroached.

MacLean seems to posit two distinct waves of Celtic migration into Scotland. This is not too far from the historical truth: After all, the P-Celtic proto-Picts or Picts migrated northward over the island of Great Britain in prehistory, and the Q-Celtic Gaels/'Dalriadic Scots' later entered today's Scotland from Ireland to the southwest. This makes it surprising to find this same author stating in 1891 that the Picts "resembled the Iberians more than the Gauls. They were seemingly a Turanian people" (MacLean, 1891, p. 170). In this view, the Picts are a Finnic race and in the same family as the pre-Celtic conquest inhabitants of Ireland.

MacLean's development of thought is not, perhaps, as strange as it at first appears. It primarily represents a terminological shift. The linguistic debate on the hypothesised Uralic–Altaic language family was exerting a practical influence on the study of Scottish and Irish history. In 1866, MacLean is

interested in showing that the pre-Anglo-Saxon and pre-Norse inhabitants of the British Isles were non-Germanic; in 1891, he is intent on showing that they were non-Aryan. The Celt/Teuton distinction in the earlier work nearly disappears, and in the later work, the British Isles are populated by a profusion of postulated non-Aryan tribes: Iberian (i.e., proto-Basque), Finnic, Median, Urgic, etc. in heritage (MacLean, 1891, pp. 171–72; 176–77). This was the result of developments in the wider scholarship. For instance, by 1891, John Rhŷs had argued that the Scots themselves were non-Celtic, thus permitting MacLean's early assertion of Scot-Pict unity to stand. We can also note an increased blurring of racial and linguistic research in the latter half of the 19th Century, which will be a focus of Part II of this paper.

In 1893, the Shetland antiquarian Gilbert Goudie (1893, p. 137) is also in possession of this new scholarly understanding when he writes an academic article on the date and origin of the brochs of Orkney and Shetland. Goudie identifies the brochs as Celtic and even (correctly) argues that the brochs could date “as far back as the commencement of the Christian era, or earlier.”

4. Descriptions of the supernatural in Shetland

Before we can move on to the next stage in the development of racial theories in Shetland, it is necessary for us to return to where our own study began, namely the Early Modern period, in order to undertake an overview of writing about Shetland's traditions of the supernatural. As it turns out, descriptions of contemporary and past folk belief ended up having a major influence on the development of Norse Romanticism in Shetland.

This might appear unlikely. After all, the subjects of folk belief that we will discuss here—fairies, mermaids, *etc.*—are not, presumably, things that ever truly existed. How, then, could the study of them add usefully to our knowledge of the reality of life in Shetland? The answer to this is twofold. Firstly, those in the past who believed in these supernatural beings acted as though these beings existed, avoiding certain activities that might put them into danger from the supernatural realm: In other words, these non-existent beings had a material effect on contemporary life. Secondly, and most importantly for our purposes, those who later wrote about past belief in supernatural beings did so in order to develop certain narratives and did so in light of their own understandings of past culture and reality. These understandings could, of course, very easily be incorrect, for we can scarcely assume that 19th Century descriptive writers would have had good knowledge of past folk belief when they knew very little about other aspects of past society in Shetland. In this sense, even if—as is highly probable—17th Century Shetland featured no actual living mermaids whatsoever, it is still possible for a 19th Century writer to describe these non-existent mermaids incorrectly insofar as that later writer is attempting to describe past belief.

4.1. Early descriptions of fairies (trows)

Already the first Early Modern descriptive work on the Northern Isles, Jo. Ben's 1529 *Description of the Orkney Islands*, devotes space to describing supernatural beings that live in and around Orkney. For example, Ben writes that the people of

the island of Stronsay “also greatly believe in fairies (the Fairies), and say men dying suddenly afterwards live with them, although I do not believe it. Trowis, under the name of a marine monster, very often cohabit with women living here” (Barry, qtd. in MacDonald, 1936, p. 231).

As far as the evidence permits, *trow* may be regarded as the Northern Isles equivalent of the mainland British *fairy*, with all of the imprecision that the latter word implies: That is, just like mainland British fairies, Early Modern texts variously describe trows as sociable beings (human-sized or smaller) that live in hills, spirits that rise up from graveyards, marine spirits, actual demons in the direct charge of Satan, etc.

Like Jo. Ben, John Brand (1700, p. 173) reports that “Creatures do appear to Fishers at Sea, particularly such as they call *Sea-Trowes*, great rolling Creatures, tumbling in the Waters, which if they come among their nets, they break them, and sometimes takes them away with them.” These trows may be aquatic, but they are obviously not of the same nature as those that Jo. Ben describes as carrying on sexual relations with women in Orkney. Both Jo. Ben and Brand regard the spirits they discuss as demonic and as fundamentally the same as demons the world over. Concerning Orkney, Brand (1700, p. 96) writes that “Evil Spirits also called Fairies are frequently seen in several of the Isles dancing and making merry, and sometimes seen in Armour.” As we shall see in Part II of this paper, this single, modest sentence came to be picked up by later authors with points to prove.

Sir Walter Scott later gets into the act in *The Pirate*, explicitly associating trows with beings from Old Norse belief. A terminological comparison shows that Scott's description had a direct influence on that of Eliza Edmondston in 1856 (21):

Another of the universal superstitions of the Shetlanders, is that relating to the Drougs or Trows; in the present day more generally called “*Fairy Folk*.” But these are essentially a different race from the classical subjects of Oberon, who people the flower-bells,—drink from acorn cups,—and float on the moon-beams; and from the Irish fairies that dance round the daisies, and feast under the mushroom; and even from the useful and good-natured Scottish *brownie*.

Edmondston's daughter, Jessie M.E. Saxby, would eventually end up setting out this argument more boldly and at greater length. It is first in the latter half of the 19th Century that Northern Isles-based writers, such as Eliza Edmondston above, begin stressing the uniqueness of the islands' supernatural traditions. In contrast, the Orkney-based George Barry in 1805 (343) and George Low in 1777 (1879, p. 82) as well as the Shetland-based Arthur Edmondston in 1809 (74–78) clearly regard the Northern Isles' trows/fairies as the same as those in Scotland.

Eliza Edmondston was, however, preceded in her differentiation of Shetland and mainland British folk belief by the non-islander Hibbert (1822, p. 189–90). Hibbert asserts a Scandinavian character for local traditions and places trows in the context of the “*Duergar* or dwarfs” of Old Norse cosmogony:

It has been supposed, that this mythological account of the *Duergar* bears a remote allusion to real history, having an ultimate reference to the oppressed Fins, who, before the arrival of invaders under the conduct of Odin, were the prior possessors of Scandinavia. The followers of this hero

saw a people, who knew how to manufacture the produce of their mines better than they themselves, and, therefore, from a superstitious regard, transformed them into supernatural beings of an unfavourable character, dwelling in the interior of rocks, and surrounded with immense riches.

Hibbert cites Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* here for an idea that prefigures the theory of the anthropologist David MacRitchie, which will be a focus of Part II of this paper. Although Hibbert (1822, p. 190–91) makes strenuous claims as to Shetland folk belief being distinct from that of mainland Britain, there are English and Scottish—and indeed, Continental European—analogues for every one of the numerous legends he records.

We thus come to Jessie M.E. Saxby's 1888 *Home of a Naturalist*, an autobiographical-descriptive work co-authored with her brother Biot Edmondston. Unlike Brand, Hibbert, Low, and Eliza Edmondston, Saxby grew up in Shetland. Saxby was an accomplished author of poetry and prose fiction whose writings gained popularity across Britain. In *Home of a Naturalist*, she attributes her description of trows to "the husband of a witch [...]. He was employed in building a boat at the time, I remember; and I used to seat myself for hours beside his simmering tar-kettle plying him with questions which he answered readily enough" (Edmondston and Saxby, 1888, p. 189). Nevertheless, Saxby's description is striking for its originality. Although some of its details are common to fairy legends everywhere in Western Europe, its worldview is utterly unique:

This interesting race of supernatural beings is closely allied to the Scandinavian Trolls, but has some very distinctive characteristics of its own. The Trow is not such a mischief-making sprite as the Troll, is more human-like in some respects, and his nature seems cast in a morbid, melancholy mould. We cease to wonder that it should be so when we learn that there are no female Trows. [...] They only marry human wives, and as soon as the baby Trow is born the hapless young mother pines and dies. No Trow marries twice—in that respect they are far in advance of the race from whom they take their brides, so that their period of matrimonial felicity is very brief. It seems a wise arrangement that there should never be more than one son to inherit the questionable character of a Trow. (Edmondston and Saxby, 1888, pp. 189–190).

Unlike her more scholarly predecessors, Saxby is consciously writing for wide audiences both within and outside of Shetland, yet much of the interpretation in the above passage clearly belongs to Saxby and not to "the old boat-builder" who she claims acted as her source.

Saxby was living in Edinburgh in 1888, yet her life in mainland Scotland was not precisely cut off from Shetland ties: She was president of the Edinburgh Orkney and Shetland Association, belonged to the Glasgow Orkney and Shetland Literary Association, and helped found the Viking Club in London (Cohen, 1983, p. 369). Also, as Brown (1998, pp. 34–37) notes, Saxby's descriptions of the same topics and narratives tend to increase in complexity and detail throughout her lengthy literary career. Since, for Saxby, fiction and folklore are always mixed, we can ponder whether she is later: (1) simply adding traditional details to topics because they have become of greater interest to her, (2) using scholarly texts to adapt her ac-

counts into what she views as more complete forms, or (3) creating additional details in order to tell a better tale. The answer may be a combination of all three.

The popular history included in *Home of a Naturalist* is not merely eccentric; it has an overriding purpose. We will consider two examples for the moment. One is Saxby's account of a migratory legend ('The Heather Ale'), which tells of the extermination of the Picts by the conquering Vikings. She prefaces this legend with a description of how the Picts left their French homeland before settling in Scotland and then Shetland. This narrative is spiced up with two pieces of absurd folk etymology, which Saxby clearly views as jokes. Then she moves on to describing the Picts themselves:

They were very small, but strong and ingenious.

They were very peaceable, kindly folk, but lazy. They built brochs, which were always made so that one flat stone covered the top, and no one can tell how far down in the earth the lower rooms went; for the Picts, after finishing the tops of their habitations, continued to add vaults and cells and passages innumerable underneath the ground. They never provided more food than what was required for the day's wants (Edmondston and Saxby, 1888, pp. 222–223).

This account is utterly unlike anything we have seen from a Shetland author so far: All of Saxby's predecessors who we have mentioned (save for Goudie) and who discuss the subject assume that Picts were Germanic proto-Vikings, and Goudie himself is full of respect for them. Saxby's description resembles nothing so much as that derived from *Historia Norwegie*, yet even so, her ideas on broch construction are not based on local scholarship.

Her description of the Picts has, however, much in common in terms of tone with the way in which she concludes another story, this time about a trow that marries a witch:

Nothing further is known than that from this remarkable couple sprang a race differing from ordinary Trows, and soon becoming known by the name of Finis. ["Finis." Certainly this word is the same as that which often appears at the end of a volume. A Finis being the apparition which appears before death, before *the end*.] Those beings appear before death, personating the individual who is to die. Sometimes they are seen by the person himself, sometimes by his friends, more often by "unchancie folk." If we were acquainted with the moral government of Trowland we should doubtless discover some profound theory why the Finis should be the offspring of a Trow who feared death (Edmondston and Saxby, 1888, p. 191).

Saxby's *Finis* is today typically spelled *feyness* in Shetland—and indeed, in Scotland as a whole. It is derived from the word *fey*, meaning 'doomed', which occurs already in the Old English *Beowulf* poem. In terms of both tradition and genuine etymology, the *feyness* is not directly linked to the trow. As in her description of the Picts, Saxby engages here in some flagrantly false etymology, mixed with a knowing humour that invites the reader into contemplating the internal logic behind what she views as rustic tales. For her, stories of the Picts and stories of the trows can be treated in the same manner.

In this light, it is all too easy to dismiss Saxby's popular history writing as purely designed for amusement. It is, however,

more than that, for behind the humour is an attempt to combine disparate elements of Shetland folk belief and history into a unified whole—for Saxby does not, of course, spell *feyness* as her contemporary Shetlanders do. She spells it *Finis*, which causes the word to resemble another group of potentially supernatural beings that is described by some authors concerned with Shetland: The Finns.

4.2. Early descriptions of Merfolk and Finns

The first Northern Isles text to mention Finns is James Wallace's 1688 *Description of the Isles of Orkney*:

Sometime about this Country are seen these Men which are called *Finnmen*; In the year 1682 one was seen sometime sailing, sometime Rowing up and down in his little Boat at the south end of the Isle of *Eda*, most of the people of the Isle flocked to see him, and when they adventured to put out a Boat with men to see if they could apprehend him, he presently fled away most swiftly: And in the Year 1684, another was seen from *Westra*, and for a while after they got few or no Fishes, for they have this Remark here, that these *Finnmen* drive away the fishes from the place to which they come. [...] One of their Boats sent from Orkney to Edinburgh is to be seen in the Physicians hall with the Oar and the Dart he makes use of for killing Fish (Wallace, 1883, pp. 33–34).

The subject is also taken up by Brand (1700, pp. 76–77) not long after:

There are frequently *Fin-men* seen here upon the Coasts, as one about a year ago on *Stronsa*, and another within these few Months on *Westra*, [...] but when any endeavour to apprehend them, they flee away most swiftly; Which is very strange, that one Man sitting in his little Boat, should come some hundred of Leagues, from their own Coasts, as they reckon *Finland* to be from *Orkney*; It may be thought wonderfull how they live all that time, and are able to keep the Sea so long. His Boat is made of Seal skins, or some kind of leather, he also hath a Coat of Leather upon him, and he sitteth in the middle of his Boat, with a little Oar in his hand, Fishing with his Lines: And when in a storm he seeth the high surge of a wave approaching, he hath a way of sinking his Boat, till the wave pass over, least thereby he should be overturned. The Fishers here observe that these *Finnmen* or *Finland-men*, by their coming drive away the Fishes from the Coasts. One of their Boats is kept as a Rarity in the *Physicians Hall at Edinburgh*.

There is no indication that either Wallace or Brand consider these Finns anything but human. In addition, both of the above descriptions concern Orkney rather than Shetland.

Later, when discussing Shetland, Brand (1700, pp. 171–73) describes marine beings that he *does not* consider to be human, including a figure “with its Head above the Water, [...] the Face of an old Man, with a long Beard hanging down,” which had been sighted two and a half or three years earlier. He also provides a more complex narrative, said to have occurred five years earlier, concerning a creature “a Creature” with “the Face, Arms Breasts, Shoulders

&c. of a Woman, and long Hair hanging down the Back, but the nether part from below the Breasts, was beneath the Water.” Brand (1700, p. 173) summarises thus:

That there are Sea-Creatures having the likeness of Men and Women seems to be generally acknowledged by all who have enquired thereunto, they having found it confirmed by the testimony of many in several Countreys, as their Histories do bear. Hence are accounts given of those Sea Monsters, the Meermen and Meermaids, which have not only been seen but apprehended and kept for some time. And hence probably the fiction of the Poets concerning the Sirenes, hath had its rise; these enchanting Songsters, translated Meermaids by our Lexicographers, whose snare Ulysses so happily escaped. Creatures do appear to Fishers at Sea, particularly such as they call *Sea-Trowes*, great rolling Creatures, tumbling in the Waters, which if they come among their nets, they break them, and sometimes takes them away with them.

Brand more or less identifies the first of these groupings of Shetland beings with mermaids and mermen and treats the ‘sea-trows’ as something distinct.

A lengthier description of merfolk/seal people tradition is offered by Hibbert, who speculates as to how these beings (in which he clearly does not believe) are able to breathe beneath and travel through the sea. Hibbert (1822, pp. 262–264) follows this description by citing Brand and unifying his predecessor's descriptions by assuming that the vast difference between Brand's merfolk and sea-trows can be explained by religious habits of the day. Hibbert's innovation is necessary because he is intent on bringing together the sometimes touching, sympathetic stories told of the seal people with those told of the merfolk.

Brand is the explicit source of some of Hibbert's supernatural folklore, and Hibbert himself is the unnamed source of much that Eliza Edmondston wrote. What is less clear is from where the German exiled revolutionary and academic Karl Blind received *his* information on the Finns in 1881. Karl Blind's anthropological and linguistic writings show a strong inclination toward pan-Teutonism. Blind, however, does not identify his sources, which is particularly distressing since he is the first writer to go a step beyond Hibbert and combine not only merfolk/seal people/sea-trows but Finns as well. The conflation is complete: Finns are swift rowers who chase after other boats; they are “deeply versed in magic spells”; and their ability to manoeuvre in the sea is granted by a certain “wrappage” that they can take on and off. Blind places these Finns in Shetland as well as Orkney and goes so far as to *explain* the origin of Finn traditions:

Repeated investigations have gradually brought me to the conviction that the Finn or Seal stories contain a combination of the mermaid myth with a strong historical element—that the Finns are nothing else than a fabulous transmogrification of those Norse “sea-dogs” [...]. The assertion of a “higher” origin of still living persons from Finns . . . would thus explain itself as a wildly legendary remembrance of the descent from the blood of Germanic conquerors. The “skin” wherewith the Finns change themselves magically into sea-beings I hold to be their armour, or coat of mail. Perhaps the coat itself was often made of seal-skin, and

then covered with metal rings, or scales (Blind, qtd. in MacRitchie, 1890, pp. 1–2).

As we shall see in Part II of this paper, this discussion of Picts, Fairies, and Finns was soon afterward combined by the Edinburgh anthropologist David MacRitchie, whose own theories were picked up and altered by Jessie M.E. Saxby—which resulted in a decisive change in Shetland self-identification and permitted for the first time on the islands the construction of an ethnic nationalism grounded in a narrative of historical development.

5. Conclusion

Besides leading up to the analyses that will take place in Part II of this paper, the present article has set forth the historical case of a geographically isolated island community with a culture and cultural self-perception in constant exchange with Scottish, British, and European society. It is not merely that these small islands were influenced by the outside world; they served to influence the chain of ideas in the outside world as well. Furthermore, the role they played in the outside world was precisely an island role: Because Shetland was far removed from mainland Britain, outsiders expected it to be different, and these expectations came to be embraced by the islanders themselves.

Because it is an isolated archipelago, Shetland was first settled relatively late, and although it has evidently maintained a cultural exchange with Scotland since the Neolithic period, this geographic insularity makes it tempting to read its history in terms of waves of immigrants: The Picts came and replaced the proto-Picts; the Vikings came and replaced the Picts; the Scots came and conquered the Vikings; and more recently, Shetlanders have laid claim to what they regard as their Viking heritage, even as their community continues to function as a subnational jurisdiction of Scotland.

As we have seen, the movement of ideas to and from Shetland from the Early Modern period up to the close of the 19th Century was not just a movement across geographic distance; it was also a movement across social distance. All of the earliest men who write about Shetland belong to the Scottish church or the Scottish landed class—what would become the two most-hated categories of persons in Shetland's emerging historical narrative. But there are strong indications that their ideas made an impact among the lower classes—the Lerwick labourers and the farmer-fishermen living in rural Shetland—as well. Later, Sir Walter Scott's scholarly writings about supernatural folklore inspired Samuel Hibbert's idle popular historicising, which in turn inspired Eliza Edmondston and then her daughter Jessie M.E. Saxby. By the same token, Scott's novel *The Pirate* directly led to increased interest in Shetland among tourists, who sought out, moreover, the landscape and archaeological sites that Scott's literature had transformed into specifically Scandinavian tourist attractions.

Meanwhile, in the background, philology was in the process of developing into a sort of universal scholarly discipline, encompassing linguistics, anthropology, archaeology, folklore, human biology, history, and countless other research traditions besides. The rise of philology was, as will become clear in Part II

of this paper, linked to national ambitions. We cannot, for instance, understand the research of John Pinkerton in the late 18th Century or Karl Blind in the late 19th Century without understanding that they both sought—for different reasons and on different bases—to celebrate a Germanic heritage. 'The Pictish Question' became so fraught not because the Picts were particularly mysterious; indeed, the Picts were relatively well documented all the way from the Roman period until they gradually ceased, over the course of the 10th and 11th Centuries, to be considered a distinct people within the new nation of Scots. Instead, the Picts were subject to such heated debate because—unlike the Gaels, the Anglo-Saxons, the Danes, and the Norwegians—they had not yet been successfully wedged into a ready-made, easily deployable racial type.

In Part II of this paper, we will consider how the convergence of 'the new philology' and emergent Shetland Romanticism in the close of the 19th Century affected mindsets and events both in Shetland and farther afield, taking us from Nazi Germany to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to present-day neo-Pagan movements.

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