

THE CONFERENCE OF THE SCOTTISH SOCIETY
OF NORTHERN STUDIES IN ORKNEY

A Personal View

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I hope - I am sure - that everyone who attended the Society's Conference on "Orkney in the Saga Period" came away after their week in Orkney filled, as I was, with satisfaction and the exhilaration of achievement.

As we displayed our healthy, weather-beaten faces and our fascinating slides and photographs to our less fortunate friends and relations, I am sure we all cried with infuriating heartiness:

"Oh, yes! The weather was appalling! Snow, hail, sleet, gales of wind - you name it, Orkney has it. And the crossings on the St. Ola! Waves like mountains! But we had a wonderful time. We enjoyed every minute of it, even the discomforts. Everything went according to plan, at least on the intellectual side, which was what we went for, and now we can't wait for the conference next year!"

All of which really means that the President and Committee of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies did a magnificent job of organization. Those living at the Tomison Academy may have done

so under truly Viking conditions, but they turned up every morning smiling through the steamy windows of their mini-bus. The very fact that we were an integrated group with a well-thought-out programme made the sneakingly faint-hearted ashamed even to think of shirking an expedition because it was snowing, or a lecture because the hall in Kirkwall was unheated. And how foolish that faint-heart would have been for every expedition was packed with interest, whether because Ted enacted the drama of the murder of Sweyn Breast-rope among the ruins of the hall at Orphir so that the whole scene, ale-casks and all, sprang into being on the green grass or because the sun emerged just in time to cast the long shadows of the orthostats of Brogar dramatically across the confining ditch of that great circle. And every lecture was so absorbing that even a group of nordic students saturated with the strong, fresh air of Orkney was compelled to stay awake. How Ted and John managed to organize and instruct all day and lecture with such passion in the evening remains a mystery.

Everyone will have his or her cherished memories. Some of mine are these:

a dozen whooper swans grazing like geese in a meadow with snow-capped Hoy behind them; the

whimbrel's sad, bubbling call, not heard since
summers in Iceland;

salt wind, booming breakers and gusty spray
at Skara Brae, showing just why the settlement had
been built huddled into a snug, sheltered entity,
proof against the elements;

more waves breaking in towers of spume against
the cliffs of Birsay, while the receding tide un-
covered the ridged black rocks across which the
little causeway to the island led up to the peace-
ful ruins of the tiny cathedral where St. Magnus
first was buried, flanked by the Bishop's palace
and surrounded by its scattered Viking village,
the whole hanging, as it were, between the roar
of the waves and the cry of the whaups. In the
midst of this empty and abandoned spot I caught
sight of the round, rosy face of our youngest
member, sound asleep in a bag on her father's back;

tangle drying over a fence at Aikerness in
the same way as the Icelanders dry hay, and beyond,
on a sandy headland, the Broch of Gurness, where
the well-tailored slabs of stone that divide the
interior into separate dwellings still litter the
beach below as they did when the conquering Viking
settlers went to carry up these pre-fab partitions.
In the centre of the broch is a well, reached by a

dank, narrow stair down which huge men squeezed their way and vanished, but fortunately not for ever;

the yellow lichen on the roofs of the Barony mill, where brown water washed over the great mill-wheel, grinding flour for the health-shops of Britain; more lichen on the roofs of the ruined farmstead of Midhouse whose eighteenth century builders had used the local stone slabs to make their cupboards, storage-shelves and neuk-beds, just as their remote forerunners had done at Skara Brae:

Kirkwall, beautiful in the rain, with its narrow, twisting main street paved with more great slabs, the same as are used to roof the old houses; the rust-coloured cathedral veiled but not hidden by the bare branches of the trees; inside, the splendid vaulting springing from supports ornamented with the bearded profiles of Vikings; the contrast of the strong, austere Bishop's palace, where King Hakon died, and the convoluted ebullience of the red-gold, Renaissance Earl's palace, like something spirited by devils from France, where the bitter wind now blows relentlessly through the great, empty bow-windows; the elegance of Tankerness House which holds its own with the splendid buildings across the square.

On a lesser scale and perhaps more unexpected was the gaily coloured charm of fishing-boats against the grey stone cottages of Stromness and St. Margaret's Hope and the sophistication of the prosperous, step-gabled country mansions of the peery lairds, who lived on their acres and cared for their farms, setting an example of industry and good sense to their tenants.

Finally, there was the warm, gay party (one must not say ceillidh in Orkney) round the fire at the Murray Arms, where all sorts of surprising musical talents were uncovered; and the dark, rich reddish gleam of Orkney whisky, drunk on the premises of the Highland Park Distillery, a dram to warm the chilliest marrow.

I did not visit the neighbouring islands with those who got up early enough to catch the 6.30 steamer. But instead I crawled into two magnificent chambered cairns (one of them the stalled cairn at Onstan where long ago a Viking scratched a tiny picture of a diving gannet on a door jamb) and into a claustrophobically small earth-house that is lost in the middle of Kirkwall's one slum, a derelict and unsavoury ex-R.A.F. camp that is an offence to a beautiful city. I did not, however, venture into another cairn which the guide-

book said was "not recommended for the elderly or obese as the passage is only seventeen inches wide"! But these cairns must all yield pride of place to Maeshowe; such an insignificant little pimple when seen from the outside, such a splendid piece of elegant architecture within. Here also the Vikings indulged the human failing of scribbling on the walls.

The last picture in my mind's eye is of the Old Man of Hoy, seen from the bounding deck of the St.Ola, as it came peering round the snow-powdered headland of Hoy and slowly emerged into full view - a rectangular wedge of rock which looks as if it had been sliced from its parent island by a playful troll and round whose attenuated base the waves worry endlessly. One day they will bring it crashing into the sea.

What made this Conference so worth while was the happy balance of sight-seeing and study. The lectures will speak for themselves elsewhere. I will only say that they provided exactly what was needed to stimulate the mind and create the right atmosphere.

To conclude, may I beg the Committee to start planning in good time for next year's expedition? And may it be as interesting and successful as our visit to the "Orkney of the Saga Period"!