

THE ARMADA AND THE NORTHERN ISLES

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In the summer of 1984 members of the Spanish group *Orden Tercio Viejo del Mar Oceano*, some in 16th century costume, made pilgrimages to Fair Isle and to Anstruther, scenes of the trials of the crew of *El Gran Grifon*.¹ The presence in Shetland of the Ancient Regiment of the Ocean, formed to commemorate the formation of the Spanish Marine Corps in 1537, bears testimony to the continuing fascination with the Spanish Armada and the fate of its ships – not only in England, but also in the country whose fleet suffered this very complete and public defeat.

This year (1988) the 400th anniversary is celebrated in England of the victory over the Spanish Armada. The mobilising of the great fleet in 1588 was precipitated in part by the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots the previous year, though it formed only one episode in King Philip's long war with the English. It was awesome to behold, but was outgunned and outmanoeuvred, ignored by the Duke of Parma whose forces in the Low Countries it was intended to transport to England, and assailed by appalling weather which ensured that one third of the company never saw home again. Yet Spain remains interested in her Armada, still ironically referred to as *La Invencible* to this day. Outside Spain its commanders and men have seldom received the credit they deserved. The plan they were given was unworkable, and liaison between the king and Parma was poor. Its leader the Duke of Medina Sidonia, for all his inexperience of command at sea, displayed exemplary bravery and good sense throughout. His unusual modesty afterwards was such that historians have tended to accept his own valuation of his shortcomings. Although the English undoubtedly had the better of the exchanges, when the Spaniards turned away into the North Sea, their opponents were not under the impression that they had been put to rout, but felt that they could easily regroup and return to the fray. Only when stories came out of Ireland of wreck after wreck was it clear that the danger was past. In the end it was the weather, as much as the virtues of the English seamanship and gunnery, which administered the *coup de grace*.

Though historians may argue endlessly over the final significance of the Armada, there is no doubt that it remains a matter of absorbing study in

both combatant nations. As it was at the time – it is not too much to say that the whole of Europe was watching when the Spanish fleet set sail. Lists of the ships, equipment, supplies and men, far from being strictly classified, had actually been published by the Spaniards and pirated widely elsewhere, with ill-wishers adding to the repertory the pincers and racks of the Inquisition. When the Armada was scattered and many of its ships destroyed, the facts were made similarly available by pamphlet.² Some of this attention was directed to the Armada's activities in Orkney and Shetland, and ever since the Armada has had a permanent place in the real and legendary history of the Northern Isles.

Attitudes in Scotland to what was happening, though as anxious and excited as in England and the Netherlands, were much more ambivalent. Scotland was officially neutral, and King James was never to see any percentage in the war with Spain; he concluded the long conflict himself fifteen years later, saying that as king of Scots he had never fought with Spain, and saw no reason why he should do so as king of England. Though clear in his own mind on the religious element in the conflict, he was anxious that nothing should happen that would directly offend either side. Already, only a year after his coming of age, he was preoccupied by the thoughts of the English succession. On the other hand, although the king of Spain had called him a heretic and unfit to take his mother's throne,³ he also had reasons for not wishing to offend the Spaniards. The Catholic nobles of Scotland – Huntly, Errol, Angus, Bothwell – were in intermittent contact with Parma. His attitude to their activities was in general very lenient, partly because of personal regard, partly because dealing harshly with them might give offence to Madrid. This circumspection was further encouraged by the attitude of the merchants of Edinburgh, who were very wary of any action against Spain which would endanger their interests there.

Conflicting views were expressed by two close observers of the Armada events and the part played in them by the Northern Isles. Francisco de Cuellar was aboard one of the four Spanish ships wrecked in Sligo Bay. After terrible privations, he escaped from English custody and took ship for Scotland – a common escape route. The vessel was forced to run before a gale and he ended up spending some days in Shetland. Unfortunately, despite the fascinating detail of other parts of his account, he says little of his stay there. Although he was eventually able to make his way back to Flanders on a Scots ship, his opinion of Scotland and her king was not high. He believed King James to be in the pay of Queen Elizabeth and his – de Cuellar's – safety guaranteed only by the nobles of the Spanish faction, who told him that they longed for the day when King James's place would be taken by King Philip.⁴

James Melvill, minister of Anstruther, watched what was happening in quite a different spirit. :

‘For a lang tyme the newes of a Spanishe navie and armie haid bein blasit abrode; and about the Lambes Tyde of the yeir 1588, this Yland haid fund a feirfull effect thair of, to the utter subversion bathe of Kirk and Polecie, giff God haid nocht wouderfullie watched ower the sam, and mightelie fauchten and defeat that armie be his souldiours, the elements, quhilk he maid all four maist fercelie to afflict tham till almost utter consumption.’

The General Assembly at Edinburgh sobbed and sighed and prayed, ‘when the newes war crediblie tauld, sum tymes of thair landing at Dumbar, sumtymes at St Androis, and in Tay and now and then at Aberdein and Cromertie...’⁵

As the Spaniards, pursued by the English and then driven by storm, made their way northwards, seeking a course homewards beyond Shetland and to the west of Ireland, the rumours flew as to their progress, and the English diplomats listened eagerly to each piece of news as it came in. Beginning their flight from the Channel early in the second week in August, ships from the Armada were sighted between Orkney and Shetland about 10 August,⁶ where they were said to have taken on water and fish, as well as Scottish and Dutch seamen and pilots from among the fishermen, and carried on their course. Towards the end of the month, there was a further rumour that they had returned to Orkney, but thereafter there was little new until the arrival of the crew of the ship wrecked in Fair Isle.⁷ On that day, 10 August, one of the Armada company wrote to the Venetian ambassador to Spain, from the ‘Gulf of Vacallaos’, saying little of what was happening, but complaining of hunger and thirst:

for no one has more than a half pint of wine and a whole one of water each day; and the water you cannot drink for it smells worse than musk. It is more than ten days since I drank any. The voyage is not so short but that there remains to us four hundred leagues of road.⁸

The ‘Gulf of Vacallaos’ has been interpreted as being in the vicinity of Scalloway. When the fleet was at about the northernmost point of its journey, Medina Sidonia ordered Don Balthasar de Zunica to take a fast pinnace back to Spain in advance of the main body of the fleet bearing news of what had happened. It is thought this letter was borne by him, though there is clearly uncertainty here, since unlike the ships in the English report that of the complainant had been unable to pick up water or supplies.

The rumours of a fleet passing between Orkney and Shetland and then returning bear a striking resemblance to the story of *El Gran Grifon* and her companions, though they did not pass that way till about a week later. The wreck of *El Gran Grifon* in Fair Isle was much the most significant and best-documented occurrence to happen in the Northern Isles in connection with the Armada. She was, in her way, an important ship, being the flagship of the hulk, or supply fleet; the leader of her company, Juan Gomez de Medina, was its admiral. Like many of the hulks, she was not Spanish, but from Northern Europe, in her case Rostock in Mecklenburg. Also like them, she had been forced to struggle along behind the fighting ships of the Armada crescent formation, at once slowing the progress of the whole fleet and becoming herself exposed to attack. She received the attention of Sir Francis Drake himself, in the *Revenge*, and had to be taken in tow for a time, having suffered scores of casualties and forty shot holes in her hull.

It was in this state, though under her own sail, that she made her way into the North Sea behind her companions. On the night of 17-18 August, she and three other ships became detached from the main body of the Armada and instead of making their way to the north of Shetland, as Medina Sidonia had ordered, they found their way between Orkney and Shetland. For twelve days they struggled unavailingly against head winds. First one ship, then another went down and a third disappeared, leaving her alone. Her crew sighted St Kilda; they came down the West coast of Ireland to the latitude of Galway Bay.⁹ Driven north again, they decided to turn and run for Norway, but this served only to force them south, then north and west again. They crossed and re-crossed the wilderness of water between the Western and Northern Isles, sighting Sula Sgeir, North Rona, Stack Skerry and Sule Skerry. On the night of the 26th September, more than a month after they had parted company with the rest of the fleet in the same area yet obviously in some doubt as to where they were, they found themselves off the North Isles of Orkney, sighting what were probably Papa Westray, Sanday and North Ronaldsay. At first light they tried to make for North Ronaldsay but failed and were condemned to another day of buffeting by rain and wind. At last, on the afternoon of 27 September, they saw Fair Isle.

What happened then is the subject of some conjecture, since the diarist who provides us with the whole sad story, possibly Admiral Gomez de Medina himself, does not speak of it. The most recent attempt to piece the story together¹⁰ suggests that the ship spent the night of 27-8 September at anchor to the east of Fair Isle, and that the following day an attempt was made to beach her in Swartz Geo. This turned into disaster when the tide through the Sound o da Fless diverted her into the steep-sided geo of Stromshellier where she sank. There was no actual loss of life at this point,

and legend has it that the Spaniards, some of them in shining armour, escaped from the vessel by climbing from the lower yards to a ledge of rock. They lost all their supplies, though they managed to save their treasure.¹¹

The Spaniards had come ashore without loss from an appalling period of hardship – well over a month of running before storms, continuous pumping and, as we have seen, lack of fresh water. Before the Armada ever set off, Drake had destroyed a merchant fleet off Cape St Vincent, carrying hoops and seasoned barrel-staves for the Spanish fleet. Without these, stores leaked or became contaminated and it was lack of water which drove so many ships to try to land in Ireland, against the express orders of their admiral. *El Gran Grifon* had suffered as much as any, and her company came ashore ‘much consoled, though we saw we should still have to suffer. But anything was better than drinking salt water’.

It was true that they still had much to suffer. It is perhaps difficult for us today to visualise how perilously close to starvation life on places like Fair Isle could be in the 16th century. In 1613, quarter of a century after *El Gran Grifon*, a party led by Walter Ritchie visited the island, charging the inhabitants to pay their rents to the tacksman of the earldom of Orkney and lordship of Shetland, after the forfeiture of Earl Patrick. This was one of a series of visits all over Orkney and Shetland, and among items in Ritchie’s accounts were provisions taken to Foula in case his party was ‘stayit thair with evill wether in respect of the povertie of the peple in that Ile’; in the case of Fair Isle he did the same ‘for feir of evill wether and taryng lang thair’.¹² But Ritchie’s party and the oarsmen who conveyed them there, probably numbered little more than a dozen to eighteen. If the Fair Islanders were known to find it difficult to feed such a number of extra mouths, then it puts in perspective the grim prospect which faced the Spaniards of *El Gran Grifon*, who numbered 230 in themselves, with another 40 rescued from one of their sunken companion vessels. For all of October and half of November they remained on the island. During that time 50 men died of hunger, including the vessel’s master and mate. The dead were buried in mounds on the south coast of the Island still known as the ‘Spainnarts’ graves’. Until late in October they were unable to send for help, and those who went were delayed in their return.

The story of their rescue, like that of their wreck, is something of a mystery. The tradition in Shetland, first recounted in 1633 by Robert Monteith of Egilsay, is that they obtained help from Andrew Umphray of Berrie, the tacksman of Fair Isle, who sent a boat to convey them to Quendale in Dunrossness. There they were entertained by the laird, Malcolm Sinclair, who arranged for their passage south. Gomez de Medina’s own story was that they had been saved by ‘conducting that bark

out of Orkney'. There is no reason why both stories cannot be true. Brand met an old lady about 1700 who remembered eyewitnesses to the Spaniards' stay at Quendale, and it is said that remains of their shelters could still be seen in the middle of last century.¹³ Monteith on the other hand speaks of the south harbour of Fair Isle as 'no harbour but commodious for Orkney boates that travel to Zetland'.¹⁴ It is quite possible that the boat which rescued the Spaniards was not Umphray's own boat, as is sometimes said,¹⁵ but one on a routine trip between the islands which he chartered for the purpose. When the Spaniards arrived in the south they were said to be in fishing boats;¹⁶ no doubt several boats were employed, the officers in the 'bark', the men in humbler vessels.

The possibility of an Orkney connection is strengthened too by the former existence in St Magnus Cathdral of a stone bearing the inscription: 'Here lyes Captain Patricio of the Spanish Armada, who was wrecked in the Fair Isle 1588'. The fate of Captain Patricio is an enigma. He is assumed to be Captain Patricio Antolinez of *El Gran Grifon* who died in Orkney on his way from Fair Isle. In fact Captain Patricio survived to reach the Spaniards' first port of call in Scotland and was still drawing his troops together for their final trip home as late as July 1589.¹⁷ And yet there is no doubt at all about the existence of the stone.¹⁸ Perhaps he fell ill on the journey back to Spain – taken northabout, despite English safe-conducts – and was laid to rest in Kirkwall.

It was in Anstruther at dawn on 26 November that James Melvill was wakened by one of the bailies of the town, saying that a ship full of Spaniards had arrived in the harbour. Alarm at such an occurrence was by now a thing of the past; the Spaniards were there 'nocht to giff mercie bot to ask'. Admiral Gomez de Medina impressed observers as 'a verie reverend man of big stature, and grave and stout countenance, grey-headed and verie humble lyk'. He bowed low repeatedly, his face near the ground, even touching Melvill's shoe, as he told of his company's misfortunes. In reply he had to listen to Melvill's strictures on the pope and on the allegedly barbaric treatment of Scottish merchants in Spain. Medina wisely steered clear of religion and maintained that he had met Scots in Calais and treated them well.¹⁹ At the time, neither knew in detail the fate of the rest of the Spanish fleet, but soon afterwards Melvill was in St Andrews and obtained a printed account of what happened, probably the English pamphlet *Certain Advertisements out of Ireland*, giving the names of the principal men and their fates. Seeing this, Medina burst out weeping.

Admiral Gomez de Medina is in some respects an attractive character. He is said to have been known as *Il Buen*, the Good.²⁰ According to Melvill, his hospitality to Scots continued after his return to Calais,

indicating that his humility in Anstruther was not merely ingratiating. On the other hand, none of the considerable wealth which he had saved from his ship was used towards the welfare of his men, 'for the maist pairt young berdless men, sillie, trauchled and houngered, to the quhilk a day or two keall, pottage and fische was giffen'. That was in Anstruther at the end of November. In Edinburgh a month later they were still 'in great misery', while Medina and his lieutenants were being feted by the Catholic lords. Bothwell gave a dinner for them, attended by Thomas Fowler, an English diplomat, and the pro-English John Carmichael of that Ilk, who lost the war of words with their rivals of the Spanish faction.²¹ Medina was sent home in the ship of a pro-Spanish stalwart with the words of Scotland's 'well-willers' ringing in his ears.²² He took with him no more than three or four companions, leaving the rest in Edinburgh with others of their unfortunate countrymen, now swelled to the number of 11-1200.

One noteworthy absentee from events in Orkney and Shetland during the Armada's flight was the earl of Orkney, Robert Stewart. This is curious, since he is known to have been on the fringes of the Spanish faction and in residence in the Northern Isles during the months that the Armada ships were passing and repassing. One might wonder if he met the Spaniards who called at Scalloway, but there is absolutely no evidence for this. Robert had been moving slowly into the pro-Spanish, pro-Catholic camp for some years. His part in the fall of the regent Morton around 1579-81 had pleased the Spaniards (Morton was strongly Protestant in outlook, if only for reasons of self-interest) and as the 1580s wore on, he made overtures to another Catholic nation, France. In December 1586 he was named by the Spanish ambassador Don Bernardino de Mendoza among the Scottish nobles friendly to Spain, and one year later he concluded a bond of friendship with the earl of Huntly, a prominent Spanish sympathiser.²³

Robert Stewart was notoriously cynical and untrustworthy, and had only the most self-interested of reasons for supporting the pro-Spaniards. These reasons had nothing to do with religion (in earlier days, he had in fact supported the cause of the Reformation) and were twofold. Firstly he was in trouble at court, and in danger of losing his lands to political opponents. Secondly he was seeking revenge for action against him by the English and the Dutch. English activities in northern waters had long been a source of irritation. Throughout the century their ships were associated with plunder and oppression, so that when Martin Frobisher, himself a hero of the Armada, anchored in Kirkwall Bay on his voyage in search of the North-West Passage in 1575 the populace fled in terror, though his intentions were entirely innocent. In 1586, Robert complained to French diplomats that the English had descended on 'the isle of Chetland in Orkenay' and carried away goods worth £30,000. Two years later, actually

during the Armada campaign, one of his ships the *Phoenix*, was intercepted while attacking English shipping by a Dutch vessel from Enkhuizen. Most of its crew were executed.

For years after the defeat of the Armada, the Catholic lords and their followers continued to intrigue, though Robert was not involved in such affairs as the Brig o' Dee or the Spanish Blanks, and his relationship with Bothwell, his nephew, was a stormy one. In 1590, Bothwell was threatening to invade the Northern Isles to ensure a better reception for any future Spanish visitors; he was to talk of this possibility more than once in the 1590s. The threat might have been a response to Robert's lack of co-operation in 1588; nevertheless the earl of Orkney did offer assistance to the 'Spanish Barque' – the galleass which visited Scotland in 1589 and 1590, rescuing Armada survivors, making contact with Scottish sympathisers, and attacking English shipping. It too visited Anstruther, perhaps as a result of the favourable reception accorded to *El Gran Grifon*. However its crew fell into dispute with the townsfolk and were forced to flee to Orkney, with one of Robert's servants as their pilot. In Orkney, Robert offered them hospitality and support in the capture of the English fishing vessels, as well as the services of one of his illegitimate sons as pilot on the early stages of their homeward journey.

The story of *El Gran Grifon* lies at the centre of a number of stories in Orkney and Shetland, some of which may be true, others perhaps merely legend. There are various versions of the story of the Spaniards' sojourn on the Fair Isle. They are said to have forced the islanders to feed them, and although the Spaniards paid punctiliously for everything, money was of no use on the island. In the end the inhabitants took to picking off any Spaniard who ventured out from the group.²⁴ In one incident, a large number of Spaniards were living in a turf house with a flag roof. By night stones were placed on the roof and then the roof-tree pulled away causing the roof to crash down, killing many of the occupants. Those who survived were thrown from the cliffs.²⁵ This account has always been vigorously denied by the islanders themselves. The presence of so many extra individuals must have placed a severe strain on local resources and it would be surprising if this had not led to tension; yet the Spaniards themselves made no mention of losing men by any other means than hunger. There is a slight possibility that the stories arise from confusion with events in Ireland where, if de Cuellar is to be believed, many killings did occur. In Sligo and Galway, the Spaniards were stripped naked by the Irish for the money sewn into their clothes, and killed by marauding bands of English soldiers.²⁶ But Ireland was not Shetland. In Fair Isle they almost certainly outnumbered the local population and could possibly have commandeered food from them. In fact they did not, and seem to have behaved very well, but it is unlikely, even in their extremity, that they

would have permitted aggressive actions against them without response, or not mentioned them if asked.

Another story of the Spaniards in Shetland, first told by Monteith, seems particularly unlikely. During their stay at Quendale, their leader arrogantly asked Sinclair of Quendale if he had ever before seen such a man as he. To this Sinclair is said to have replied 'Farcie in that face, I have seen many prettier men hanging in the Burrow Moor';²⁷ his accent was so broad that the interpreter did not understand him. This story is spoiled by the confusion of the leader of the Spaniards, Juan Gomez de Medina, who was admiral of the hulk fleet, with his uncle²⁸ and leader of the whole armada, the Duke of Medina Sidonia; and from what we know of the characters of these men, neither is likely to have behaved in such a way. The story seems to derive as much from the conventional idea of the haughty grandee and the plainspoken islander as from the known facts.

The confusion of Medina and Medina Sidonia started early, beginning with Monteith of Egilsay in 1633, and it has lasted to our own time. David Scott made the same mistake in the *Orcadian* in 1970. It was one of the reasons for Jacob Row's attempt to explore the wreck of the *El Gran Grifon* about 1750, since he was under the impression that the ship was the *San Martin*, Medina Sidonia's flagship.²⁹ It is splendidly illustrated in Sir Walter Scott's peroration in his diary of his visit to Fair Isle in 1814, in which he dilates on 'the change of situation from the Palaces of Estramadura to the hamlet of the Fair Isle':

'Dost thou wish for thy deserts, O Son of Hodeirah?
Dost thou long for the gales of Arabia?'³⁰

Mr Strong, Stewart of Brough's factor on Fair Isle, gave Scott a 'curious old chair' formerly belonging to Sinclair of Quendale 'which a more zealous antiquary would have dubbed "the Duke's Chair".' Another chair associated with the ship found its way into the Edmonston of Bunes family, and thence into the possession of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.³¹ The Balfour family are said to have possessed a silver cup, given by Medina to Malcolm Sinclair for his kindness, and forming part of his daughter's dowry when she married Michael Balfour about 5 years later. The cup used to be exhibited when Balfour Castle was open to the public, though doubt has been cast on its provenance. Another supposed relic of the Armada was originally in the possession of Traill Dennison himself. This was a sword given by an Armada Spaniard to a founder of the Traill family in Orkney. The Spaniard had been taken, gravely ill, into Traill's house and as he slowly sank he would grasp the sword from time to time. About an hour before he died he summoned Traill and gave him the sword out of gratitude. Traill Dennison speculated if this could have been

a reference to the death of Captain Patricio. It is intriguing thought, but quite unverifiable.

A more dubious tradition, though an attractive one, is that the men of the Armada taught the inhabitants of Fair Isle their celebrated knitting patterns, as well as the making of dyes from vegetable matter and seaweed. It is clear that the men of *El Gran Grifon* had more immediate preoccupations than teaching the islanders new knitting patterns, and in any case did not really stay long enough to exert such an influence. The legend has been described as a means of explaining oriental decorative features in an art which is basically Scandinavian. Fair Isle's fame lies in its preservation and re-exporting of an art that died out in other islands. There is a tradition that a local girl incorporated in her knitting a design inspired either by a cross painted on the bow of the wrecked ship, or by its gryphon figurehead;³² by this more plausible means it is possible that Spanish influence did indeed come to the knitting of Fair Isle and of Shetland.

But much of the best known, in Orkney at least, of the legends which have their origins in the story of *El Gran Grifon* is that of the 'Dons of Westray'. These were a strain of people living in Westray who displayed particular ethnic characteristics, both in physique and in temperament. They had black wavy hair, short necks, a Mediterranean cast of features and volatile natures, being incapable of sitting still and given to practical joking. The legend of their forefathers' journey to Westray survives both where it began and where it ended. In Fair Isle it is said that 5 or 6 Spaniards, faced with starvation, took a boat and made their way south, landing in Westray. They quickly found the place to their liking and never saw their homeland again, nor did they seem to want to. They married local girls and took their surnames, their own being unpronounceable. The families they founded went by the names of Balfour and Hewison; in time the names Petrie, Reid, Rendall and Logie were added. They built houses at the North Shore, probably at Bigging in Rackwick. After the first marriages with local girls they kept very much to themselves, not permitting marriage outside their own circle and enforcing this with severe punishment. Their quickness of manner, thought and action were said not to have been possessed by the original Dons, but to be the product of the combination of Norse and Spanish blood. They became fine seamen, fishermen and smugglers.

There are numerous stories told of the Dons of Westray, but I have found only one about the original Spaniards' life in Orkney. It concerns a confrontation with the notorious Earl Patrick. In a remarkably short space of time – Patrick succeeded his father only five years after the Armada – the Dons built up a prosperous trade with the continent, particularly with

Norway, and the earl cast envious eyes on their fortune. For a time they managed to buy him off, but at length Patrick sought to arrest their leader, Gilbert Hewison, on trumped up charges, including that of sailing to Norway without licence. He sent a boatload of his followers to Westray, but Hewison and his companions made most of them drunk and knocked the others unconscious. Then they fled to the Western Isles, to return after Patrick's fall.³³

What are we to make of the stories of the Dons? There is no doubt that there are still people today who think of themselves as Dons. Mr Bill Hewison, author of what is now the standard history of Scapa Flow, is one such, though he keeps an open mind regarding the question of Spanish descent. He has heard it stated by a Norwegian commentator that a dark-complexioned strain of people is to be found in the Stavanger area of Norway, whence came the Orkney and Shetland settlers, and such apparently Mediterranean traits have also been explained as recessive Pictish characteristics. There is nothing in the written record to give credence to the stories, and yet the idea of Spaniards in such a situation is not wholly implausible. Some of those who survived the wreck of the *Juliana* in Ireland were still in Ulster in 1596, eight years after the event,³⁴ and there are similar traditions in the west of Ireland about Mediterranean characteristics. But the hundreds of Spaniards who escaped to Scotland from Ireland believed that they had left few, if any, of their fellows behind – certainly not enough to impose their likeness on any significant proportion of the population.³⁵ The physical influence of a few Spaniards might be much more noticeable on the smaller population of the North Isles of Orkney, but at best the truth of the Dons' Spanish descent must be found not proven.

But if we assume that they are indeed of Spanish descent, did their forebears come from *El Gran Grifon*? David Scott casts doubt on this. He takes the view that they came not with the Fair Isle ship, but with another, unnamed, which broke up in Dennis Röst off North Ronaldsay. Two boats put out, one of which disappeared in the Boar Röst; the other landed at Pierowall in Westray.³⁷ There are also other Dons, though whether anyone today claims kinship with them may be doubted. The Dons of Yesnaby allegedly came from a ship wrecked at Yettnageo in the parish of Stromness. The evidence consists entirely of curious anecdotes. A priest from the ship was seen kneeling on the grass by the shore with a glittering cross in his hand; he was killed by a man called Louttit from West Biggin, and buried under the largest stone in the area. Among the survivors was a doctor, called Thallan or Thallian, who settled in the parish of Stromness and became famous for cheap cures; his son lived at Quildon, the 'Quoy of the Dons'. A seaman, found hiding in a pigstye, built the house of Don in the parish. Two brothers called Cathal were rescued; one remained in the

parish, the other settled at Cathalie in Hoy. The Stromness side of the family became very wealthy through the breeding of pigs. Two settled at Southerquoy, called Captan and Sebastian. Captan is said to have been the sailing master, and had a daughter who could cure disease by dancing; Sebastian Orcadianised his name to Sabiston and became progenitor of the only family of Yesnaby Dons still surviving at the end of the last century.³⁸

Shetland, as far as I can gather, has no Don legends as such, though swarthy people in Cunningsburgh are said to show Spanish descent; but it does have perhaps the most credible tradition of an Armada ship wrecked elsewhere than in Fair Isle. On the tiny islet of Kirk Holm in Sandsting, lying very close to the Mainland, are the foundation walls of buildings said to have been erected by the Spaniards, who are also said to have worshipped at St Mary's chapel in the churchyard of Sand.³⁹ It is extremely unlikely that these buildings are Spanish, and the ship cannot, as has been alleged, have been the *Annunciada*, which we know to have been burned and scuttled by her crew at the mouth of the Shannon.⁴⁰ Nevertheless the legend persists very strongly, unlike virtually all other such legends in Shetland. The ship is said to lie buried under a mountain of sand called the Meethe on the Haddock Sands, where fishermen have caught their nets on its masts. In 1985 a research team from the university of Strathclyde explored the seabed around Fore Holm, to the east of the Haddock Sands, but without finding anything.

The only contemporary evidence of other Spanish shipwrecks in the Northern Isles is a letter of 19 September 1588 from Sir Geoffrey Fenton, Secretary of Ireland, to Lord Burghley, enclosing a note of ships wrecked in Ireland 'also of 2 ships and 800 men drowned and sunk in the North West Sea of Scotland'. Burghley notes 'But in truth they were lost in Zetland'. This was *before* the final grounding of *El Gran Grifon*. If indeed any of the legends of Orkney and Shetland can be matched with real Armada wrecks, then it is the Haddock Sands ship, whatever its name, that has the best claim. It is possible to put in an Orcadian bid by citing the legends, together with the hazy English views of Northern Isles geography; but the case is not a strong one. (The Spanish view of the geography of the British Isles was even hazier; to them all ships, including *El Gran Grifon*, were lost in Ireland).⁴¹

The problem with the truth about legendary Armada ships is that the evidence is so vague. Out of the 130 ships of the Armada, 27 or so remain unaccounted for. Many of these were small pinnaces or tenders, commandeered by the Spaniards, which felt no compulsion to struggle back to Corunna or Cadiz and sought refuge in any safe port they could find. Of the remainder, some important ones, such as *El Gran Grifon's*

companion the *Castillo Negro* simply disappeared without trace. They are naturally presumed to have foundered at sea and gone down with all hands. But the unsolvable mystery surrounding their fate gives ample scope for the growth of legends, and who is to say that there is not some truth in these? Local knowledge may often embroider stories of sunken ships, confuse Armada ships with later vessels and create survivor legends – yet there are cases where local knowledge has proved sure, notably in pointing out wreck sites. Colin Martin found this when he pitted his own theory of where *El Gran Grifon* lay against the local (and seemingly unlikely) suggestion of Stromshellier.¹ Local knowledge was correct, and has been proved so elsewhere, notably in Antrim.

Aside from stories of the Dons, what has been the legacy of the Spanish Armada? First of all, there remained a keen interest in what treasures could be rescued from the ship in Fair Isle. In 1594, only six years after the wreck, Earl Patrick concluded a contract with the Orcadian William Irving of Sabay, for recovery of the ship's guns.⁴³ Patrick understood that there were more than 36 and expressed surprise two years later when Irving had raised only six.⁴⁴ These were probably added to the armaments of the castle of Kirkwall, being taken to Edinburgh after Patrick's fall,⁴⁵ though at least one remained in Orkney, being in the possession of an Orkney landowner in 1907.⁴⁶ The boat remained undisturbed until 1728, when Captain Jacob Row and William Evans made a brief inspection in the vain hope of treasure. Since 1970 modern technology and diving techniques have enabled Colin Martin and his colleagues to salvage many fascinating artefacts, including guns and spent English ammunition. One of these guns is now to be seen in the Shetland Museum in Lerwick.

The story of the Spanish Armada in the north, particularly in Shetland, has fired the imaginations of writers of varying abilities. The earliest is perhaps *The Treasure of Don Andres* by the celebrated Shetland writer Haldane Burgess, published in 1888. Earlier writers tended to fall in with the older views of the defeat of the Armada, and liked to feel that Orcadians and Shetlanders might have been involved. In Robert Duncan's *Captain John Duncan: Master Mariner*, published in 1914, the hero escapes from the quarries of Earl Patrick and goes to sea, fights on the English side against the Armada and at length after many other adventures returns to capture the earl and send him south to trial for his misdeeds. (The chronology of this is admittedly eccentric.) In his rather curious long narrative poem *Taen wi da Trow* John J. Hunter anticipates history by speaking of the Armada's defeat as a British victory; for him however, the chief benefit of the episode was this:

Bit faith, whin aa did come ta aa
Aald Shetlan got maist benefit,

Shū go da Fair Isle Jumper braw
An weel shū's stickin till him yet!⁴⁷

(He then goes on to depict Earl Patrick in a kilt!)

In more recent years there have been two historical novels based on the Fair Isle shipwreck, Mary Bawn's *Galleon's Grave* published in 1963, and *The Mortal Moon* by Alison Thirkell, which appeared in 1983. Both are love stories set against the events of the Armada. Mary Bawn, who appears under the impression the Shetlanders speak Gaelic and refers to Juan Gomez de Medina Sidonia (thus trying to have it both ways), ends her tale with a Spaniard deciding to turn down the opportunity of rescue to settle down in Fair Isle with his lady. Alison Thirkell's heroine comes from Anstruther and her loved one is from *El Gran Grifon's* crew.

These two books are modest attempts to recreate imaginatively a fascinating story, and take their place as part of an extraordinary mixture of vivid real-life heroism and hardship, stories woven round incidents half remembered at the back of the popular mind, legend pure and simple, relics real and spurious, remnants brought to the surface for the first time since the sixteenth century. This year, four centuries after the Spanish Armada set sail, we have the opportunity to look again at the Northern Isles' part in, and inheritance from, events which shook Europe in their time. It has been the purpose of this paper to focus our attention on a rich episode in a rich historical tradition, that of the Northern Isles.

NOTES

1. *Scotsman* Magazine, June 1984; *Shetland Life*, xli (March 1984), 8..
2. The best account of the whole enterprise, using both English and Spanish sources, is still Garrett Mattingly, *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada*; in his small pamphlet *The Spanish Armada and Elizabethan England*, Mattingly takes a sceptical view of the Armada's major significance.
3. Elton, *England under the Tudors*, 371.
4. Stephen Usherwood (Ed.), *The Great Enterprise: the History of the Spanish Armada*, 191-2.
5. Melvill, *Diary*, 261; quoted in full in Tudor, *The Orkneys and Shetland*, 432.
6. *CSP Scot*, ix, 600; *Cal. Border Papers*, i, 628.
7. *CSP Scot*, ix, 602.
8. *CSP Venetian*, viii, 745-6.
9. Martin, *Full Fathom Five*, 143.
10. Thomas Henderson, cited in Manson, 'The Fair Isle Armada Shipwreck', *The Scottish Tradition*, 121-131, from which much detail

- of this event is taken.
11. *CSP Scot*, ix, 656; in Edinburgh Medina and his men had 'good store of money'.
 12. Orkney Rentals and Accounts, SRO E, 41/3.
 13. Brand, *A Brief Description of Orkney, Zetland, etc.*; Martin, *Full Fathom Five*, 151.
 14. Monteith, *Description*, 25.
 15. E.g. letter from Jerry Eunson, Lerwick, to G.A. Tulloch, Kirkwall, 1965, Ernest Marwick Papers, OA D.31/7/2/8.
 16. *CSP Scot*, x, 640.
 17. Martin, *Full Fathom Five*, 154; *CSP Scot*, x, 122.
 18. Tudor, *The Orkneys and Shetland*, 434; Hossack, *Kirkwall in the Orkneys*, 50; it is noted by Hossack as being on the east side of the north-east pillar of the choir, though by his time it was lost to view, since the floor of the choir had been raised. Traill Dennison, in 'Armada Traditions' (*Orkney Herald*, 8 May 1889; *Northern Notes and Queries*, iv(1890), 120(no.236)) states that the inscription was transcribed for him by a friend, Robert Tulloch.
 19. Melvill, *Diary*, 264.
 20. R. Stuart Bruce, 'Some Old-Time Shetlandic Wrecks', 40.
 21. *CSP Scot*, ix, 670.
 22. *Ibid.*, 680.
 23. For much of the information regarding Robert Stewart's activities, see Anderson, *Robert Stewart*.
 24. Monteith, *Description*, 25.
 25. Traill Dennison, 'Armada Traditions'; much of this was used in Scott, 'The Dons: Legends of the Armada', *The Orcadian*, 19 Nov. 1970.
 26. Usherwood, *The Great Enterprise*, 179-80.
 27. *CSP Scot*, ix, 656.
 28. Monteith, *Description*, 26; Scott, 'The Dons: Legends of the Armada.'
 29. Martin, *Full Fathom Five*, 162.
 30. Scott, *Northern Lights*, 53; David Scott stated that the chair given to Scott was from the captain's cabin of *El Gran Grifon*, but Scott makes no mention of this – in fact the connections between his chair and the ship seems somewhat tenuous.
 31. Bruce, 'Some Old-Time Shetlandic Wrecks', *OLM*, 39-42.
 32. Nicolson, *Shetland*, 144-5; Martin, *Full Fathom Five*, 148.
 33. Scott, 'The Dons: Legends of the Armada'.
 34. Monteith, *Description*, 25.
 35. Martin, *Full Fathom Five*, 274.
 36. Mattingly, *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, 311.
 37. Scott derives the tradition of the North Ronaldsay ship from Traill Dennison, but it is he who makes the connection with the Westray Dons.

38. Transcription by Ernest Marwick of paper given by George Marwick, Yesnaby, to Mutual Improvement Association, 1895, (Ernest Marwick Papers OA D.31/4/1/vi). According to Gregor Lamb, there is a Sabiston family who, while retaining the conventional spelling, pronounce their name Sabastian; perhaps a fancied Spanish descent is the reason (Lamb, *Orkney Surnames*, 53).
39. Bowden, 'The Search for the Annunciada', *Shetland Life*, lxix (1985), 8; the suggestion that the ship might be the *Annunciada* appears to have come from Sir Julian Corbett (1854-1922) a writer on Drake and the Tudor navy, relayed to R. Stuart Bruce. (SA R. Stuart Bruce Notebooks, Tom Henderson Collection).
40. Martin, *Full Fathom Five*, 127.
41. Bruce, 'Some Old-Time Shetlandic Wrecks', 39-42; *CSP Ireland* 1599-92), 43.
42. Martin, *Full Fathom Five*, 167.
43. Irvine of Midbrake Papers, SA D.17/388/32; OA Misc. Papers, D.8/1/3; Tudor, *The Orkneys and Shetland*, 437.
44. Craven Beq., SRO GD.106/135.
45. Fea of Clestrain Papers, SRO GD.31/8.
46. Bruce, 'Some Old-Time Shetlandic Wrecks'.
47. Hunter, *Taen wi da Trow*, 84.