

THULE PRESS

Alan J. Bruford

The publishing firm of Thuleprint has been a welcome presence on the Shetland scene for several years now, producing good-looking and moderately priced books of local interest: not that their well-established rivals, The Shetland Times, had not been doing a good job already, but they were so cautious in estimating their print-runs that intermittent visitors to the islands like myself could easily find their most popular publications already out of print before we even knew they existed, and a competitor could only be a stimulus. A year or two ago Thuleprint's list ranged from Annie Deyell's delightfully personal ragbag of memory and tradition *My Shetland* to reprints of such works as Gifford's *Historical Description of the Zetland Islands* of 1733, or *The Second Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Truck System (Shetland)* of 1872. It also took in topical symposia such as *Island Futures* (edited by Roy Grønneberg, £1.95) in which politicians, journalists and local worthies took brief turns at gazing into an oil-streaked crystal ball; the works of the most popular living poet in Shetlandic, Rhoda Butler (*Doobled-Up*, £3.95); Jenni Simmons' practical if inevitably rather fishy-tasting *Shetland Cook Book* (£2.95); the late George Nelson's retelling of legends of local characters (largely reprinted from the *Shetland Folk Books*) *Reminiscences of the Shetland Fireside* (£1.20); and *Shetland Scandals*, the first printed version of *Laxo's Lines*, an eighteenth-century mock epic satiring an eccentric autocrat of a laird in Lunnasting, which survived not in oral tradition but was handed down in covertly-circulated manuscripts until the 1970s when I first saw it (well worth 75p). A less happy venture was the shortlived *Shetland Review* (published jointly with *Scotia Review*) which contained only a couple of items by native Shetlanders and, these apart, did not achieve the literary standards of a second-rate school magazine, far less of the occasional excellent publications of the Anderson High School. It did nothing to shake the established position of *The New Shetlander* as the main periodical outlet for writing from or about Shetland in English or the vernacular.

Despite rumours of financial instability the firm celebrated its fifth year in 1979 by changing its imprint to "The Thule Press" and issuing an ambitiously extended catalogue, including books on ecology (of course), Celtic art and Scottish lighthouses, and an impressive list of works in English from or about the Faroes, Iceland, Norway and other Nordic countries for which they were to be either publishers or agents. They may have taken on too much: no list for 1980 has reached me, the two books which have are published not from Compass House, Sandwick (south of Lerwick) but from 63 Kenneth Street, Stornoway (a town which now houses several publishers — changed days from ten years ago, when it had not even a general bookshop!) and it seems that one volume I looked forward to, John F. West's *Faroes Folk-Tales and Legends*, is now to be brought out under the imprint of "The Shetland Publishing Company". Incidentally despite the names recent Thule Press and Thuleprint volumes have not been printed in Shetland, though earlier ones apparently were, and nicely too; they are now produced by various firms from Guildford to Inverness.

The two recent books I have been sent will serve to illustrate what a gamble adventurous publishing must be. Jon Leirfall's *West Over Sea* (159pp., £4.95) is not the first book of that name in English, but the title is promising. The subtitle "Reminders of Norse Ascendancy from Shetland to Dublin" is however misleading. Only the last fifth of the book is a sort of potted guide to present-day Orkney and Shetland (covering pre-Norse antiquities as well as Norse survivals): the rest is history, much of it of a sort which suggests a better subtitle might have been "1498 and All That". Certainly the octogenarian "farmer-politician" author has written both humorous and historical works, his writing seems to range in tone from popular to flip-pant, and he can throw off statements such as "William the Conqueror seized control of England and Ireland" or "James IV had fallen in battle against the English in 1414" apparently unnoticed by translator or publisher. The early chapters on the original settlements, and one on the legal status of the mortgaging on Orkney and Shetland, are reasonable. The rest relies heavily of rehashed *Orkneyinga Saga*, confused by a tendency to abandon chronological sequence to illustrate a point, and too

often accepting saga-writer's fiction as fact: once the sagas run out then seven centuries are skimmed over in 20 pages.

For many Norwegians, who will not mind the misdating of Flodden by a century and will appreciate the author's evident efforts to relate distant history to things they will know more of, such as the experiences of Norwegian emigrants to the U.S.A., this could be a useful guide to an area on their doorstep of whose past and present they may know little. To Scots, Orcadians and Shetlanders what is meant to be familiar will be strange and much of what is being introduced as new will be familiar: so why bother translating it? The translation itself is lively and colloquial, at least where the matter is not too complex, but tends to founder on names where the translator has neglected to check what form will be recognised here: so we get under-translations ("Patrickholmen" for St. Patrick's Isle at Peel, I.O.M.) or indeed overtranslations ("Saga of the Sandbank-dwellers" for Eyrbyggja Saga), strange spellings ("Robbery" for Roeberry in South Ronaldsay!), modern Norwegian forms where we would expect Old Norse ones, or just different usages ("Helge the Thin" for Helgi the Lean).

The most disappointing thing about *West Over Sea* is the hope kindled by the title and indeed the earlier chapters that it might give a refreshing new perspective on the entire Norse settlement area from Shetland to Dublin, which no study in English that I know of treats as a whole from the Dark Ages to the present day. The point of view from Norway does add one or two interesting sidelights — for instance, that Quisling seems to have dreamed of reclaiming Orkney and Shetland for Norway once the Nazis had conquered Britain — but the area is not treated as a whole throughout. Indeed the Hebrides after 1266 are treated more as an awful hole, first ravaged by the feuds of bloodthirsty clansmen — how unlike the home life of their douce Viking predecessors! — and since then backward "in social, economic *and cultural* respects alike" (my italics: and they publish this ill-informed judgment from Stornoway?) The Isle of Man gets a pat on the back for retaining its institutions, but its recent history is also dismissed in a couple of pages. The Northern Isles, especially Orkney for which Leirfall clearly

has a real affection, get much fuller treatment throughout, but many other books in English have as much to offer on this subject.

The Shetland Dictionary compiled by John Graham (xxvii + 124 pp., £4.95) on the other hand is designed for Shetlanders and lovers of Shetland, and achieves its modest aim of "presenting a picture of the Shetland speech" of today well enough to satisfy any but specialists. Hitherto any outsider wanting to follow Shetland speech and writing has had to rely on oral tradition, on James Stout Angus's handy but almost unobtainable *Glossary of the Shetland Dialect* (1914), on Jakob Jakobsen's massive *Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*, or latterly on the useful entries in the even more massive *Scottish National Dictionary*. Jakobsen, the major authority, included only words of certain or possible Norse derivation, whereas a great deal of Shetland dialect is Scots, unco braid Scots at that. Moreover his two volumes are so scarce that they sell for over £100, and his Norse-style spelling makes them difficult to use. Indeed the application of his rules to non-Norse words can give the impression that written Shetlandic is mostly Scots spelt like Eskimo. John Graham sensibly prefers to base his spelling "on the convention most familiar to the reader, which for most Shetlanders will be English." (There are exceptions — the word for a gale which I always thought of as "valency" is spelt "vaelensi", following Angus, no doubt to avoid misunderstanding.)

He provides, in fact, a practical and portable tool, a book which will fit into the coat pocket, containing some 3,000 words and phrases still current in Shetland which might give difficulty to an Englishman. (Some are included which would give no trouble to a Scot, such as the use of "maet" and "flesh" for food and butcher-meat respectively.) This is not a mere word-list but a guide to usage and idiom: "aye, aye" is both "a form of greeting" and an "indication of agreement but, depending on tone of voice can convey scepticism, especially if followed by *I hear dee*." Most of the words are illustrated with a phrase to show how they are used, some with two or three to illustrate different shades of meaning. There is also an introduction

giving a brief history, grammar and phonology of the dialect, including a list of strong verbs whose conjugation follows a Scots rather than an English pattern. There is even an English-Shetland section with over a thousand entries for the benefit of those wanting to pass for natives, or more likely to write in the dialect.

There are of course difficulties. The forms used are normally those of the author's Central Mainland native area: the more notable of the many regional variations, especially in vowel sounds, are mentioned in the Introduction, but it may still take some time to recognise, say, a Yell variant in the dictionary. The modified *ü* sound which occurs alongside modified *ö* in the North Isles is not even mentioned, and the complete range of words still known to local people with exceptional memories such as Tom Tulloch in North Yell is certainly not represented. Still, a good deal of the rich vocabulary describing weather, natural objects and utensils is there, and basic distinctions (as between "neesterin" and "peesterin", the squeaking of inanimate and animate objects respectively) may be shown by the examples if not by the definition. The undogmatic orthography could do with rules in some cases: I see no reason why "kabe", a thole-pin, is spelt with K and "caavie", a blizzard, with C. One or two entries perpetuate wrong usages, such as "nicht" for a word no Shetlander pronounces in the Scots way, though a sort of pre-aspiration is often added to the English pronunciation — I would spell it "nyht". But aside from such quibbles, accepting this as a handy popular guide rather than a definitive work, it is very welcome, and more interesting to read through, not just consult, than most dictionaries.