

## REVIEWS

**Gordon Donaldson, *A Northern Commonwealth. Scotland and Norway* (Saltire Society, 1990).**

Only Professor Donaldson could have written this book. It is a reflection of a lifetime's interest in and love of the northern links which Scotland has had with the Scandinavian lands: the very core of the interest around which the Scottish Society for Northern Studies revolves. His roots in Shetland gave him an inbred affinity with the North Sea world while his wide-ranging knowledge of the history of Scotland gave him the professional understanding of the different phases of the relationships built up over the centuries across the North Sea. This book is therefore a remarkable mixture of specialist detail, as in the discussion of the properties of sailing craft, and of broad sweeps of generalised information, as with his analysis of the eleventh-century Scandinavian impact on the British Isles as a whole. There are very few historians with the self-confidence to treat such complex events with the magisterial touch and make it so intelligible. Inevitably the simplification leads to some distortion and the professional quibblers could have a field day. But then the professional quibblers could not have written a book like this . . .

Ranging over the Scandinavian impact on Scotland, Professor Donaldson focused particularly on the royal 'Cruises' of the Norwegian kings to their colonies in the west and on the political interaction between the kingdoms culminating in the tangled events surrounding the death of the Maid of Norway. Since he wrote, this situation has been the subject of a conference organised by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and London and Newcastle, which resulted in a volume of essays in *Scottish Historical Review*. His comments on 'Commerce and Culture' are also very much superseded by the volume of essays produced by the Department of Scottish History in St Andrews on *Scotland and Scandinavia* and *Scotland and the Sea*.

But clearly Professor Donaldson has written a book for the general reading public, and not merely for the specialist historian – who will certainly be frustrated by the lack of any referencing system, except for a very selective reading list. Hopefully, it will be read by a spectrum of the Scottish population who would otherwise be unlikely to know anything about the Viking impact on Scotland; or the story of Hakon Hakonsson's last voyage and death in Kirkwall; or the ballad from Gudbrandsdal written after the untimely end of the Sinclair expedition of 1612. Very few historians could write a book of this kind – actually very few would *dare* to write a book of this kind – and we must accept it for what it is: a personal commentary by Gordon Donaldson on an important facet of Scotland's past which does not get the recognition it deserves, a situation which this book should help to redress.

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**Christopher D. Morris and D. James Rackman (eds.), *Norse and Later Settlement and Subsistence in the North Atlantic* (University of Glasgow, Department of Archaeology, 1992). 230 pp., £16.00 paperback.**

The late 1980s saw two major conferences on Norse history and Archaeology. In 1988 Tom McGovern and Gerry Bigelow organised 'The Norse in the North Atlantic' at Bowdoin College, Maine, and in 1989 the 11th Viking Congress met in Caithness and Orkney. *Norse and Later Subsistence in the North Atlantic* is intended as a companion volume to those published