

REVIEW ARTICLES

John Stewart: *Shetland Place-names*. Shetland Library and Museum, Lerwick, 1987. 354 pp.

John Stewart was born in Whalsay in Shetland in 1903. He was educated at Brough School in Whalsay, the Anderson Educational Institute in Lerwick and Aberdeen University. His working life was spent teaching in Aberdeen but his leisure time was devoted to the study of the languages and history of Shetland and in 1950 he embarked on the ambitious project of recording all Shetland place-names. With the assistance of the schoolchildren of the islands he assembled a vast body of material, which he supplemented by his own work in the field and in archives. His original intent had been to register all the names but he found it advisable to concentrate first on producing a comprehensive study of the island- and farm-names. He plotted all names on maps and recorded their Grid reference, collected early written forms and noted the pronunciation in phonetic symbols. The names and the elements they contained were compared with place-name material from Norway, Faroe, Iceland, Orkney and northern Scotland. A general introduction to the collection, entitled "Shetland Farm Names", was presented to the fourth Viking Congress in York in 1961 and published by the University of Aberdeen in 1965 in the Congress proceedings. Unfortunately, John Stewart died in 1977 before he had been able to publish the material on which his lecture had been based. Generously, the Shetland Island Council agreed to finance the present publication and its preparation for the press was entrusted to Brian Smith. John Stewart's typescript has been published as he left it, except that the format of the entries has been regularised and information about the markland values omitted.

Brian Smith emphasises in his introduction that John Stewart had not prepared the work finally for publication nor, as far as is known, had he submitted it for critical scrutiny to a professional place-name scholar. It is, therefore, not surprising that the present reviewer has some reservations about the presentation of the material. It is unfortunate that Stewart elected to arrange the farm-names under the individual name elements, as Jakob Jakobsen had done in his pioneering study *Shetlandsøernes Stednavne* (1901), English

translation *The Place-Names of Shetland* (1936), rather than topographically, as Hugh Marwick had done in *Orkney Farm Names* (1952). In all modern scholarly editions of place-names the material is topographically arranged, since this makes it easier to gain a picture of the toponymy of individual areas. It must be admitted, on the other hand, that arrangement by elements has advantages for those who are interested in comparing the distribution of individual Norse elements in the various Viking colonies.

The presentation of the elements and the names containing these is clear and full, making it possible for the reader to decide for himself whether or not the etymology proposed by Stewart is the most satisfactory one. John Stewart's intimate knowledge of the islands and the documentary sources for their history ensures that his opinion is always worthy of consideration. I was therefore delighted to note that his approach to the names in *-boer* led him to conclude that there is nothing to support the view that they represented an old stratum of names and that "*Boer* in Shetland seems to have been a common noun rather than a place-name" (p. 68), views in close agreement with my own, which are based mainly on name-typology.

Stewart's knowledge of Shetland Norn and its gradual replacement by Scots has also stood him in good stead. His isolation of the place-names containing the Scandinavian adjective *breidr* 'broad' for example, is dependent on his knowledge that the Scots word *brae* was not used in Shetland much before the middle of the present century and hence could not lie behind the place-names with old forms in *Brae-* or *-brae* (p. 60). It seems likely that his knowledge of the Scots spoken in Shetland also accounts for other instances where he has preferred a Norse word to a Scots one in an etymology. The linguistic comments could well have been fuller and it would have been a good idea to reprint in the book Stewart's paper on "Norn in Shetland" from *Fródska-parrit* 13 (1964) to give the reader some idea of the relative status of Norn and Scots at various periods.

Alternative interpretations of some individual names suggest themselves. Hascosay (p. 4) might contain *skot* n. 'promontory' rather than *skógr* m. 'wood'. The old forms of Sumburgh (e.g. *Svinaborgh* 1491, *Swinburgh* 1498) make it unlikely that Stewart's explanation as 'south broch' (p. 49) is correct. The name can be compared with

Svendborg in Denmark, whose first element is generally explained as *svín* n. 'pig (tame or wild)' or 'porpoise' but which might just possibly be **svín* n. 'land only under water at high-tide' (*Danmarks Stednavne* 13. 7).

It is sad that John Stewart did not live long enough to be able to take account of such recent treatments of Shetland names as A. Fenton's *The Various Names of Shetland* (Edinburgh, 1973), Lindsay Macgregor's prize-winning essay printed in *Northern Studies* 23, or Þorhallur Vilmundarson's convincing illustrated demonstration (in *Grímnir* 2 (1983), 120-21) that the Icelandic Reyðarfjörður, a parallel formation to Reafirth (p. 87), must have been named after the mountain Reyður or Reyðarfjall, which is shaped just like a *reyður* or 'finback whale'.

We must be grateful to John Stewart for the zeal with which he collected the material, his painstaking marshalling of the assembled evidence, and his perceptive analysis of it. Our gratitude is also due to Brian Smith for preparing this difficult material so conscientiously for the press and to Brenda Laurenson for proof-reading so carefully. Some few errors have managed to creep in but in most cases they will cause no confusion. Students of the fauna of Shetland, however, should be warned against undue excitement at discovering apparent evidence for the presence there of bears (Gult Holm, p. 8) and of an otherwise unknown fish called *prestr* (Priesthoulland, p. 195). *göltr* means 'boar' not 'bear' and *prestr* 'priest' not 'fish'.

Gillian Fellows-Jensen

Alastair J. Durie: *George Washington Wilson in Edinburgh.*

John S. Smith: *George Washington Wilson in Orkney and Shetland.*

Aberdeen University 1986, 44 pp. each.

Those of us fortunate enough to have had access to some of George Washington Wilson's collection know what rich perspectives it provides on life in Victorian Scotland. It is good to see the University of Aberdeen committed to making a selection of the material available to a wider public by way of these "regional snapshots".