

Edinburgh College of Commerce, in schools as far apart as Bristol and Shetland, in libraries, in British Rail, Glasgow Transport, in branches of architecture, design, etc., etc.

It is strange to envisage the Newcastle Department without his strong personality, his Aberdonian greeting and his booming laugh. He has, however, made his mark and is already something of a legend. He is also very much alive and well, and while wishing him an enjoyable liberation from the responsibilities of office, we are confident that his expert knowledge and his energies will not lie fallow. One chapter may be drawing to a close, but those of us engaged in Scandinavian Studies hope he is going to remain in our midst and help us with the next chapter.

The Second Conference
of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies
held in Lewis and Harris

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"But why," asked a surprised voice, "did the Vikings want to settle in Lewis, of all places?"

Lewis lay all about us, flat, dun-coloured, seamed with peat-cuttings and dotted with lochans. Here and there on the low skyline a row of little houses, each with two chimneys like pricked ears, stood guard over their strips of croft, but in the main the landscape seemed chiefly inhabited by black-faced sheep and hoodies. Even the grander, mountainous prospects of Harris looked dour and forbidding - peat and rock, rock and peat as far as the eye could see.

To those accustomed to a douce, green, tree-shaded countryside, all this seemed uninviting. The truth is that most of us who visit the Hebrides do so from the opposite direction to the Vikings, from the south. Our standards of convenience and prosperity are very different from theirs, as different as an open, square-rigged hafskip, with its high prow and striped sail, is from MacBrayne's car-ferry.

To the Norsemen the Southern Isles, as they named the Hebrides, were evidently desirable. Although they did, of course, colonize further south - Normandy was their greatest success - and raided and traded right into the Mediterranean, my own guess is that they were not entirely at their ease in those lush lands where one harvest followed another from April till October; where the summer climate was consistently agreeable and enervating. They hankered for the sharp sea winds and the simpler life to which they were accustomed, and probably to them the islands of Lewis and Harris offered an almost ideal prospect. Lewis and Harris were, in the first place, near enough to the homelands for their ships to ply easily to and fro in the sailing season, hopping from the Southern Isles to Caithness, from Caithness to Orkney, from Orkney to Shetland and so on to the Norse mainland. Secondly, around the shores of Lewis and Harris were numerous sandy or shingly beaches so that it was always possible to find some sheltered haven, no matter which way the wind was blowing, to beach their ships in safety. Thirdly, the Celtic inhabitants of the Hebrides were, we may deduce, neither numerous nor hostile; there was room enough for the Norsemen to settle alongside the Celts, the bachelors taking brides from among their neighbours' daughters. Fourthly, compared with the climate at home, the winters were surprisingly mild; the ground never froze, crops could be planted on the machair of the west coast or in "lazy-beds", such as can still be seen today, on the east; there was plenty of peat for burning, water always near at hand, salmon and trout

in the rivers and lochs, game on the hill; maybe there were spinneys of birch and rowan, all blown aslant by the strong south-westerly wind, but even if wood was almost as scarce as it is today, the great forests of Caithness - the forests in whose secret groves Unn the Deep-Minded caused the ship to be built which carried her to Iceland - were only a short sail across the Minch. Lastly, the Hebrides enjoyed, with those even more northerly islands, Iceland and the Faroes, one great advantage which we find it particularly hard to appreciate today. The Norsemen came from a world of small communities which, for a great part of the year, were cut off from each other by snow, ice and dense forest. To them the forest was the enemy (it is hardly surprising that they peopled it with trolls and hobgoblins) and to survive they must drive it back, hack it down, clear narrow, precipitous paths and, whenever possible, cling to the edges of the fjords which were their summer highways. But in the Southern Isles the tracks leading from settlement to settlement were never blocked. The bays and sea-lochs were never frozen over. The worst the inhabitants had to contend with were the wild equinoctial gales that churned up the seas and sent the stinging rain beating horizontally across the sodden landscape. Even these did not deter a stout-hearted man from crossing the islands or keep the boats huddled for more than a few days in harbour, waiting for a break in the storm.

So, to the Vikings, Lewis and Harris - indeed, all the Hebrides - had much to commend them. There some of them settled and bequeathed to their descendants the blond heads that outnumber the black round the counters of Woolworth's in Stornoway and among the idlers at Tarbert pier. They bequeathed also the names of their farms - Grimsta, Scarista, Uig, Keose - and the names of their founders, emerging with a Gaelic prefix as MacAuley, MacLeod, Morrison, MacSween. We can find two good examples of how these families came into being by taking two names from among the members of the

Society: Morrison and MacLeod. The first Morrison, who called himself in Gaelic "the son of the servant of Mary", is said to have been the illegitimate son of Olaf the Black, Norse king of the Isle of Man, the last King of Man to call himself Lord of the Hebrides. Did young Morrison's royal father, I wonder, have him fostered in a priestly household? He certainly arranged for him to marry an heiress, the daughter of a Celtic chieftain in Lewis. Leod, whose two sons were the first MacLeods, was, on the other hand, the true-born youngest son of the same King Olaf the Black of Man. He received the lordship of Lewis and Harris as his patrimony, but acquired the Castle of Dunvegan and parts of Skye through his marriage with the daughter and heiress of MacRaidl Armuin. The MacRaidls or sons of Harald must have been Norsemen and the second part of this MacRaidl's name suggests that he may have been King Olaf's steward in the Islands. But, as both parts of his name show, he was already fully acclimatized in a Gaelic-speaking community.

We have proof, therefore, that there are Norse relics buried in the language of the Hebrides. What relics lie beneath the ever-growing peat of Lewis and Harris, perhaps future archaeologists will one day discover. Meanwhile, we must content ourselves with the great rabble of ivory chessmen which cascaded one day from a sand-dune at Uig, with an embossed belt-buckle from Northton, a loom-weight or two and a piece of a pot in which a Viking may have cooked his supper. There are the graves of two reputed Norse princesses, one buried among the Lewis MacLeods in the ruined church at Eye, the other lost among the nettles and detritus of an ancient, roofless chapel at Uig. On St. John's Eve, when ghosts are allowed to leave their graves, this lady flies all the way to her home in Norway and is said to return to Uig long after her fellow ghosts are back in their resting-places. A courageous Lewis-woman once laid her spindle across the empty grave and questioned the princess who explained that she was late because she had so far to travel.

I find it hard to believe that we have not another Viking relic in the shape of the black-houses whose ruins dot the landscape. Those which still retain their thatched roofs, tucked so snugly into the wide coping at the top of the rough stone walls, strongly evoke the Norse long-houses. Anyone walking down the narrow, twisting street of the village of Garenin to stand above the shingle beach of its well-protected little bay must feel that a thousand years ago it can have looked little different.

No doubt many Vikings, who drew up their ships in coves such as this, saw Lewis and Harris wearing their all too common aspect: grey mist blowing in from white-capped seas to meet grey rain soaking down into grey rock and brown heather. But some of them must have seen the islands as we saw them, in cloudless, sunny weather with hills and moorland all blurred by the haze that rose from the drying peat-hags. We were able to picnic in shirt-sleeves - this at the beginning of April! - and walk over dryground which should have been bog. White boulders were emerging from the shrunken rivers and the islanders were already cutting peats - a job for May - while the Minch, that bogey of the seafarer, was smooth and innocent as glass.

After last year's experiences in Orkney we had all come swathed to the eyes in woollens, anorakked and gum-booted against the worst weather in Britain. In the centrally-heated Gibson Hostel in Stornoway, where most of us were housed, conditions were near tropical and the bedsocks and balaclava helmets were quickly bundled out of the way, while the thoughts of some of the hardiest turned to swimming-gear. The first Conference braved and triumphantly survived the pattern-book of varied weather supplied by Orkney; perhaps it was a generous bonus from the Norsemen's old gods that the second Conference had so few physical hardships to contend with!

These Norsemen may have left few tangible relics but other, more ancient, civilizations are nobly represented in Lewis and Harris. Two thousand years before the Vikings sailed to the Southern Isles, another people came island-hopping from the south and left along the western shore of the Hebrides the traces of their passing. They placed tall stone markers along the coasts to guide shipping, lived in rude houses but built elaborate chambered tombs for their dead, erected on a headland above Loch Roag in Lewis the greatest neolithic stone circle in Scotland. They travelled the same route as the Vikings but in reverse; they originated, very probably, among the islands of the Mediterranean and ended up, via Orkney and Shetland, in Scandinavia. Fifteen hundred years after them, the broch-builders dotted the islands with their watch-towers, of which a splendid example dominates the west coast of Lewis near Carloway. From its top the naked eye can command all the sea-lanes that might bring enemies and, no doubt, the broch was used by subsequent generations to keep watch for Norse invaders. After those invaders had merged peacefully with the people of the islands and long ceased to think of themselves as Vikings, one family of Norse origin, the MacLeods, built at Rodal in Harris a splendid church, probably upon Columban foundations. There at least two of their chiefs are buried; the early sixteenth century tomb of Alasdair Crotach, the eighth chief, is adorned with some of the finest sculptures in the Highlands.

But, as we now and again reminded ourselves, these jaunts through the sunlit countryside were not the real reason we were attending the Conference. We were there to enjoy and learn from the very full programme of talks and lectures which were more than up to the standard of those we listened to in Kirkwall last year. Several local speakers added to our appreciation of, and interest in, Lewis and Harris, in particular Mr. Roderick Morrison, the headmaster of Laxdale School, who gave us a very vivid glimpse of his childhood in the village of Back. He was one of the few Lewismen who admitted

willingly that the Hebrideans might owe something to the Norsemen; he recalled that as a boy he had been fired by the thought of the Viking invasion and had worked out how conveniently placed were the four sandy beaches near Back - the Norsemen called it Brekka - where ships could easily be dragged ashore. He also said that, in the stories his grandmother told him, the heroine was never a fairy queen, but always a princess from Norway. One of the interesting side-lights on the islanders that came out in discussions after the lectures was that, in this last stronghold of the Gaelic language, no one wants to concede that he might be descended from a Viking, not a Gael!

Gaelic brought us one great pleasure at the now traditional ceilidh that rounded off the Conference. We recognized many of last year's talented performers, but were delighted to welcome among the new ones the Society's secretary, Ian Fraser, whose fine, nostalgic Gaelic singing blended so well with the peat-reek, the tang of whisky and the bright moon outside the window, making a pathway across the quiet waters of the loch. Let us hope that he and all the other singers, reciters and story-tellers, who kept us enthralled and oblivious of the time in a home in Harris, will be with us again next year at the third Conference of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies on whatever island of the Viking world is chosen as our meeting-place.