

The Hebrides, Vikings and Celts.

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The editor of "Northern Studies" has invited me, as the incoming President of the Society, to contribute something to this edition of the bulletin. First of all, I am glad to have the opportunity to express my gratitude to all those who have paid me the compliment of believing that I might usefully preside over the Society's fortunes for a short space. I am the more conscious of this mark of confidence because learned societies are generally – and rightly so – the preserve of professional academics and I am not to be numbered in their ranks, much as I like to think of myself as a "professeur manqué". The joke would be, that, had I indeed followed an academic career, it would almost certainly not have been in Old Norse! As it is, like all my ex-colleagues in the Diplomatic Service, I have discovered that, as one grows older, one learns less and less about more and more and that this is often counted unto you for wisdom! In itself this situation is not unhappy; one learns how to take an intelligent interest in a surprisingly wide range of odd topics. I can honestly say that, while having no expert knowledge of any of the subjects which concern the Scottish Society for Northern Studies – history, geography, linguistics, archaeology, literature, anthropology and, of course, ship-lore – they are all branches of knowledge which I enjoy and should like to know better. I hope that the Society may afford me just that chance to improve myself.

Like many school-boys I grew up on the "Heroes of Asgard", but I did not realize until much later that my own people in the North West owed much of their ancestry and cultural background – not to the heroes, but certainly to the folk who told tales about them. Names of people and places, topographical references in the sagas, unexplained coincidences in historical accounts, became significant and relevant. One of the reasons for getting myself posted to Iceland was that I hoped that it would give me the opportunity to learn some Old Norse

and more about the Vikings. I did not work at it as hard as I should have done, but my appetite was certainly whetted for me and I had the additional bonus of meeting the real experts – etymologists, geologists, philologists, archaeologists – who were kind enough to tell me about their several disciplines and – sometimes – their theories. In this way I found myself in due course linked with the London Viking Society and began to understand a little better what it was all about. I found the Saga Books, the transactions of the London Society, compulsive reading, but, as time went by, I was conscious of an uneasy envy. I asked myself why so much was known, why so much work had been done, on the Norse settlement of the Northern Isles and little or nothing on the Vikings in the Hebrides. There could be no doubt that the Norsemen had settled in these inviting islands of the pleasant South – the “Sudreyjar” in their tongue, a word which persists in the ecclesiastical title “the Bishop of Sodor and Man”. Moreover, these were MacLeod lands and he would be a bold man who queried the Norse origins of that clan. The bardess Mairi nighean Alasdair Ruaidh says the MacLeods were descended from “might Vikings” from the “town of Bergen, which is the beginning of their history”. The forebear was Ollaghair son of Ochraidh, more commonly known as Olaf the Black, son of Godred. Both the Bannatyne and Kilbride manuscripts substantiate this claim. Tradition has it that Leod, the eponymous ancestor of the clan, was the brother of Magnus, the last king of Man, by Olaf the Black’s first marriage. Tradition goes on to suggest that the name Leod derives from the Norse “ljótr”, that it was a nickname for someone who was either indeed very ugly or perhaps just handsome, but vain, or that it was a deliberate bad-luck name to avert evil.

The answer to my question may be that people in Orkney and Shetland were sufficiently conscious of their cultural and historical background and had the resources to establish an organization – “the Social and Literary Branch of the Orkney and Shetland Society of London, or Viking Club”. In course of time this Society succeeded not only in making known to

the outside world the history and culture of the Northern Isles from the darkest beginnings to the present day, but also in inducing the governments and scholars of the Scandinavian countries, and indeed further afield, to make significant contributions to the already extensive literature on them. The achievement of the Viking Society is certainly impressive.

On the face of it there seems to be no reason why the same development should not have taken place in the Hebrides. There is no lack of local scholars or antiquarians and there is certainly no lack of material. The Long Island constituted one of the major migration routes for the many races who moved north-eastwards from the Iberian peninsula with regular frequency in pre-historic times – hopping from island to island, from headland to headland, up both sides of the Irish Sea and the Minches, round the perilous corner of Cape Wrath and then on through the archipelagoes of Orkney, Shetland and Faeroe to Scandinavia itself. The Uists abound in chambered cairns, barrows and wheel-houses. South Harris has revealed important Bronze Age settlements at Northton, now in grave danger of being sucked into an invading sea. The standing stones of Callanish, probably older than Stonehenge, and the broch at Carloway, younger by perhaps two thousand years, testify to movements of population which seem to bear little relation to today's empty acres of abandoned tilth. Of Norse remains there is little to show. Such as they are, they are most probably covered by later structures in places like Kishimull or Dunvegan or the great church of St. Clement at Rodel in South Harris. (Is it a coincidence that the patron saint of this church is the same Clement to whom the first church in Nidaros was dedicated before the shrine of Saint Olaf took its place? Saint Clement was the third successor of Saint Peter and the first Apostolic Father. According to legend he was condemned to hard labour in the Crimea and in the end was martyred by being lashed to an anchor and thrown into the sea. Presumably a holy anchor would be much venerated by sea-faring folk such as the Norsemen.)

Unfortunately, although sporadic excavations have been

made at a few sites, the results have remained largely uncoordinated and unpublished. Many theories about the Callanish stones have been given currency – some by people who have never been near them – but I am not aware that anyone has ever seriously excavated the site. In recent years Dr. Iain A. Crawford of Cambridge University has been doing valuable work in the Udal in North Uist – the strata cover 4,000 years of human habitation from before the Beaker Folk up through the wheel-house people, the pre-Viking, Viking and medieval settlers to the present day. One can only hope that work of this kind will be continued throughout the islands and that public interest may be quickened into an expression of sustained support. Perhaps the Scottish Society's 1974 Conference in Stornoway may help to focus attention on the possibilities of these much neglected islands of the West.

As I have said, Norse remains in Harris and Lewis do not leap to the eye, but in a thoroughly unscientific way I am sure that they are there for the digging. However that may be, the linguistic evidence as provided by even the most superficial study of place-names is overwhelming. I need mention only such words as “Uig”, “sgeir/sker”, “Keose”, “Geo” and “klett/cleit”. Much work needs still to be done in this field, but we are fortunate in having already a valuable contribution by Professor Magne Oftedal. His “Village Names of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides” was published in 1954 in Vol. XVII of the “Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap”. Other Scandinavian scholars have also been active in this area – notably C. Borgström in his “Dialect of Barra” (1937) and “The Dialects of the Outer Hebrides” (1940). I wish that Professor Oftedal had been able to carry out a similar survey in the rest of the Long Island, particularly Harris, itself a name which still bothers us whether in Norse, Gaelic or English. The linguistic evidence is, however, often confused because such texts as there are may be very unreliable. First of all the old Nordic names were Gaelicised. Then these forms were transliterated into English spelling, usually very inadequately. Professor Oftedal claims that the phonological approach is the only safe way, but pitfalls abound. It is not particularly easy to catch a Gaelic-speaker off-guard,

talking entirely unself-consciously. If you ask him to repeat a word carefully, he almost always begins to have doubts and will probably end up by confirming any suggested rendering you yourself care to make. Modern techniques in recording speech are much improved since the early '50s and it is to be hoped that some of our younger researchers may be able to collect more material much more accurately than was possible twenty years ago.

The use of Gaelic may indeed be fundamental to our understanding of, and attitudes towards, the Norse culture of the Outer Hebrides. The late Dr. Donald MacKinnon suggests that with the cession of the Western Isles to the King of Scots after the Treaty of Perth in 1266 the Norse language, culture and law simply had to go. My friend Mr. Alick Morrison, in his introduction to "The MacLeods – the Genealogy of a Clan", a work begun by Dr. MacKinnon, writes "the Hebrides were now brought within the orbit of the Gaelic civilisation operating in the North of Scotland and among their kinsfolk in Ireland". With the greatest respect, I find this too much of a generalisation. It does not explain why one of the last strongholds of the Gaelic language happens to be amongst a population which is for the most part Norse in origin. We have not only the evidence of the place-names, as shown by Professor Oftedal, but also that of surviving personal names – Tormod, Torcall, Ruairidh, Magnus, Ronald, Somerled, MacSween, MacAskill, MacAuley, Lamont – as well as that of physical, genetical characteristics. It is dangerous to talk of average types, but the average Hebridean looks very much like the average Icelander. They are both probably the same average type, but one speaks Gaelic and the other Old Norse.

According to one controversial theory, the Northern Isles were uninhabited in the 7th century when the first Norse immigrants began to arrive and it followed therefrom that their language and culture and law should become indigenous to the new lands of settlement. There was no opposing culture, because the earlier inhabitants, the Picts, had withdrawn. A

similar situation existed in Iceland. (An Icelandic friend of mine once attributed the success of Norse settlement in Iceland to the emptiness of the place – apart from a few wretched Iro-Scottish “pappar” – and compared it with the failure of the Norsemen to settle in Greenland and America in the face of Eskimo and Red Indian opposition respectively.) If this was the case in Orkney and Shetland, the situation in the Hebrides must have been quite different, despite the evidence of extensive Norse colonisation there. The Picts may have disappeared in the North, but in the Long Island Celtic-speaking people were everywhere, except possibly in Harris, a rugged, infertile district in comparison with Lewis. Perhaps the Norsemen dubbed it their “district” or “*hérað*” *par excellence* and so gave us the puzzling name of Harris. There is not much written evidence of this, but the Irish annalists in the “Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh” state that the Norsemen and the Hebrideans co-operated in enterprises to the South, to Ireland and beyond. They were not very flattering about the Hebrideans whom they called “ignorant, barbarous, thoughtless, irredeemable and unsociable foreigners” – but then this is an Irish account of history.¹ More importantly, the Icelandic sagas are full of references to Hebrideans. Kinsfolk in Orkney and Shetland are always mentioned in the same terms as kinsfolk in Norway, as indeed are those in Iceland or the “Sudreyjar” themselves. But in Ireland and the Hebrides there were other people, socially linked but racially distinct, speaking some Norse no doubt, but also keeping their own tongue more or less intact.

As in the Irish annals, the Hebrideans who figure in Norse literature make no good shewing. They are invariably associated with witchcraft, magic and evil spirits – rather like the Lapps at the other end of the geographical scale. If the customary

1 (Footnote. Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh. LXXXVII. Ro tochured cucu, dna, Siucraid mac Lotair, iarla insi Orc ocus na ninsi archena, ocus comtinol sloigh *buirb, barbarda, dicheillid, dochisc, dochomaind*, do gallaib insi Orc, ocus insi Cat; a Manaind, ocus a *Sci, ocus a Leodus*; a Cind Tiri, ocus a h Airer goedel, ocus da barun a Corr Bretnaib, ocus Corndabbliteoc a Bretnaib Cilli Muni) More importantly, the Icelandic

sacrifices to the Nordic gods failed to produce the desired result, you went to a Hebridean for a charm. The *Laxdaela*, the saga of the men of Laxdale, provides us with all the elements of this racial co-existence. First of all, Unnur or Audhur the Deep-Minded, daughter of Ketil Flatnose, was married to Olaf the White, a Norse Viking who dominated Ireland in the third quarter of the 9th century. The Irish called him Amhlaibh or Amhlaith Conung. (This Irish spelling of Olaf must explain Shakespeare's choice of name for his prince of Denmark.) After his death, Unnur and her household joined her son Thorsteinn the Red in Caithness (the "insi Cat" of the Irish annals). Thorsteinn was in constant conflict with his Scottish neighbours who in the end slew him in battle. After a short stop-over in the Faeroes Unnur sailed on to Iceland and took land at Hvamm in the Laxdale, as green and spacious and noble today as it must have seemed then. We learn that she gave land there to one Erp, the son of Earl Meldun – undoubtedly the Celtic Mael-Duin – who seems to have been a high-born Celt enslaved perhaps in one of her husband's or son's wars; she clearly felt that a man of such birth, though technically a slave, should hold land of his own.¹ Next we come to Hrapp, the son of Sumarlidi. The saga tells us he was Scottish on his father's side, but his mother's family came from the Hebrides – an interesting distinction.² He was an extremely troublesome ghost to lay. Then we have Olaf Peacock whose mother, bought as a slave from Gilli the Russian by Hauskuld Dala-Kollsson, turned out to be no less a personage than Melkorka, daughter of Myrkjartan, a king in Ireland. In due course we have the famous account of Olaf's visit to Ireland to find his grandfather. The chronology

- 1 (Footnote. *Laxdaela*. VI. "Eptir þat gefr Unnur fleirum monnum af landnámi sínu En yðr er þat kunnigt, at ek hefi frelsi gefit þeim manni, er Erpr heitir, syni Melduns jarls; fór þat fjarri um svá stóraettaðan mann, at ek vilda, at hann baeri þraels nafn".) 2 (Footnote. *Laxdaela*. X. "Hrapp hét maðr, er bjó í Laxárdal fyrir norðan ána, gegnt Høskuldsstöðum sá bae hét síðan á Hrappsstöðum; þar er nú auðn. Hrapp var Sumerliðason ok kalladr Víga-Hrapp; hann var skozkr at fōðuraett, en moðurkyn hans var allt í Suðreyjum, ok þar var hann faedingi")

is all wrong – at the best he can have found only his uncle, a half-brother of Melkorka's perhaps – but the tale is true in all essentials. Olaf was a typical Norseman in many respects, but part of the fascination of his complex character surely springs from the strong Celtic strain in his blood and education.¹ One last example from Laxdaela – the unedifying episode of Kotkel and Gríma. These people, the saga says, had come from the Hebrides. “They were all extremely skilled in witchcraft and were great sorcerers”.² They raised by magic a freak storm which overwhelmed Thord Ingunnarsson in a place where no ship had ever been in trouble before. They climbed onto the roof of Hrut Herjolfsson's house and chanted spells which ended in the death of little Kári. Their son fled from the district leaving curses upon it which no doubt played their part in the subsequent tragedies.

References to the Hebrides, perhaps more kindly and geographically more precise, occur frequently in the later literature of the Christian and chivalric periods – for example, the accounts of the journey of Bishop Gudmundr Áraason as given in the Sturlunga saga – Prests saga Gudmundar Árasonar – and Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar. These references tend to shew, I would argue, that Norsemen and Celts co-existed both in Iceland and Scotland on more or less friendly terms. In Iceland, the Faeroes, Orkney and Shetland, we can have no doubt that the dominant, indeed the only language was Norse. My submission is that, in the Hebrides, Norse was certainly not the only language and, moreover, may not have been even the dominant language.

1(Footnote. Laxdaela. XIII. “hann heyrði mannamál; hann gekk þangat til, sem laekr fell fyrir túbrennkuni; sá hann þar tvá menn ok kenndi; var þar Óláfr, sonr hans, ok móðir hans; faer hann þá skilit, at hon var eigi mállaus, því at hon talaði þá mart við sveininn”. What a touching scene this is of the first lessons in the mother-tongue! And later in Ireland. XXI. “Konungr svarar: “Auðsaett er þat á Óláfi þessum, at han er stóraettaðr maðr, hvárt sem hann er vár frændi eða eigi, ok svá þat, at hann maelir allra manna bezt irsku”).)

2Footnote. Laxdaela. XXXV. “Þessir menn váru súðreyskir. Öll váru þau mjök fjölkunnig ok inir mestu seiðmenn”).)

The survival of a language rests in the last resort on the speech of the mother the mother-tongue, la langue maternelle, even in a patriarchal Vaterland - die Muttersprache. It is noticeable that today non-Gaelic speakers in the Hebrides are usually the children of imported English-speaking mothers - not fathers - from the mainland. We know that the Northern Isles and the Faeroes and Iceland were colonised by Norsemen who arrived, not in horned helmets and shield-girt long-ships, but in tubby, roomy knorr, with wives, children, cattle, household gear and, of course, their high-seat posts. They found few or no indigenous competitors for the land they took. Perhaps it was different in the Hebrides. Perhaps in these more fertile islands of the South there were Gaelic-speaking girls a-plenty whom the footloose cadet members of Norse families found and married - and tradition has it that Leod was a younger brother for whom land outwith the elder brother's domain in Man had to be found. If this happened, the children would have grown up with Gaelic as their first language. Their fathers would not have made an issue about it, provided their sons bore good Norse names and their crofts were named after themselves. This seems to be exactly what happened. We have seen how, even in Iceland, Melkorka secretly taught Olaf Peacock how to talk Gaelic - there would have been much less difficulty in the Hebrides. Up and down the Long Island we have crofts or villages called Carloway, Grimersta, Linshader, Earshader, Ungshader, Caryshader and a host of others. And we still call our sons Tormod and Torcall and Ruairidh.

If this hypothesis holds water, Dr. MacKinnon's suggestion that the Hebrides were Gaelicised after 1266 becomes more credible in the sense that Gaelic was already widely spoken there and only now received the official stamp of political approval. I find it difficult to accept the notion of the Scots' forcing their Celtic language on a Norse-speaking population from a standing start. The Normans did not try to force the Saxons to speak their Norman French two centuries earlier and the Scots did not change the speech of Orkney and Shetland two centuries later. Perhaps if land communications across Sutherland or the

sea-lanes round Cape Wrath (Gaelic an Carbh and Norse Hvarf an interesting metathesis) had been safer, the Hebrideans would have preserved their Norse culture much longer. Indeed the links might never have been broken. Haakon the Good might never have needed to make that fateful journey down the west coast, anchoring in the narrows between Skye and the mainland which still bear his name – Kyleakin – to be blown ashore at Largs, to forfeit his claims to the Norse North West and to die in that warm-red Bishop's Palace in Kirkwall which we visited last year. But "ifs" are not history.

It would be agreeable to think that some day scholars might find the time and resources to disentangle the fascinating Norse-Celtic love-hate relationship in the Western Isles. At the moment it looks as if we Hebrideans are in great danger of losing both the component parts of our culture. The exploitations of the discovery of oil in the North Sea may engulf our Norse-Celtic civilisation in a flood tide of Anglo-American technology, heavy with a factory-processed way of life and a professional jargon of bastard parentage. My hope is that we shall react to this challenge reasonably and jointly. Already twice in this century the neglected, forgotten islands of the North and West suddenly became important to the makers of decisions in London – there was an invasion of "foreigners" which included not only non-Gaelic speakers, but Americans, French, Poles, Czechs and who knows what else. The interesting thing during the second World War was that the presence of this polyglot and utterly alien community in our midst provoked an ardent desire to preserve and foster our own "secret" language. If we are to suffer this same experience yet again, let us hope that it will give us another shot in the arm and fortify us in our design to make safe that which we still have, whether it be the Gaelic language or our Norse ancestry or just simply our outmoded way of life. I believe that our Society may have a vital role to play here. It is my hope that the 1974 Conference in Stornoway may prove a landmark in the preservation of our common heritage, a rallying point for all those, in Scotland and furth our shores, who will not accept universal materialism as the only norm.