

INTRODUCTION TO THE FAROES

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As the Chinese proverb says “One picture is worth a thousand words” and although I was able to show several hundred slides to the Conference on the Faroes (27.11.82) I am unable to conjure up even one such visual picture here with the few words at my disposal.

You yourselves must imagine how these eighteen rocky, basalt islands rise steeply out of the waters of the North Sea, where there are only a few favoured places that allow one to launch a boat. It is precisely at those spots where the eroded valleys incline to the shore that you find most of the 120 Faroese settlements which vary in size from 3 inhabitants (Naesvig) to 12,800 (Tóshavn). These settlements are grouped into villages which tend to be nucleated while their brightly painted houses – reds, blues, greens and yellows – make a cheerful sight against the background of bare, greyish-brown, ridged hills that look so forbidding. A century ago the picture was quite different since the *total* number of houses was less than half that found in today’s busy capital of Tórshavn. The few houses that you would then find in each village would have been almost indistinguishable since their turf roofs and low, tar-covered walls blended so well into the landscape that only a row of small boat-houses near the shore or, perhaps, a wooden jetty gave indication of human habitation. How has this great difference come about?

The harsh environment – strong winds, strong currents, bare rock, sparse vegetation and little sun – demanded the utmost toil even to eke out a living growing barley (that had to be artificially dried) and grass for the cattle and sheep besides catching sea-birds and collecting their eggs. Thus it is hardly surprising that the population remained at the 5,000 level from the Middle Ages until the beginning of the 19th Century since this was the upper limit for survival i.e. some 1,000 families altogether.

Starting with the cession of the Faroes to Denmark in 1814 the population gradually grew as trade picked up after the Napoleonic

wars when Europe settled into a more peaceful existence. Trade was a royal monopoly whereby local produce, knitted hose, butter, dried fish, and oil, were collected as taxes and also exchanged for necessities like grain, salt and iron. With the abolition of the royal monopoly in 1856 trade accelerated but it was only 100 years ago that the Faroese at last began exploiting the rich fishing grounds of the North Atlantic and the North Sea and their population had doubled in size to what it had been in 1800. Starting with some second-hand British sailing sloops the Faroese went to Iceland, caught cod, dried them at home, and exported the split-cod to the Continent. This primitive method of fishing with hand-lines continued up to 1945 when, having accumulated sufficient sterling by transporting fish to Britain during the war, they purchased trawlers. Partial autonomy in 1948 enabled the Faroese to direct their own affairs and after several false starts they acquired the most modern and efficient fishing fleet in the North Sea. Their increasing wealth helped to transform their society into one that boasts a higher standard of living than we ourselves have. Their population had quadrupled during the last century and now stands at 44,000.

The Faroes were mainly settled by the people from West Norway in 825 AD and they still speak an old Norse dialect which has retained its ancient grammatical forms. Hence the language is nearer to Icelandic than it is to Norwegian and sounds nothing at all like modern Danish. The Faroes were forcibly converted to Christianity in 1000 AD and equally made Protestant in 1540 by Danish royal decree. The Lutheran doctrine, with its hint of Calvinism, sat fast in the Faroese mind until quite recently so that no action of a risky nature – fishing or climbing of bird cliffs – was undertaken without a prayer and the singing of psalms. However, in 1865 a Scots missionary came to the Faroes and converted some of the poorer fishermen to the beliefs of the Plymouth Brethren – a popular sect in British fishing communities. Today the Brethren are the largest, richest and most devout of the Christian sects in the Faroes while the State church is no longer the force it was a couple of generations ago.

Denmark's take-over of the Faroes in 1814 led to the abolition of the ancient Faroese *thing*. The Faroes became a county of Denmark and received a resident Danish Lord Lieutenant. When Denmark

received a new Constitution, so did the Faroes and they could now send an MP to Copenhagen. In 1854 the *thing* was restored but it now only had the status of a consultative body. The following year the Royal Monopoly was abolished and private trade blossomed between Denmark and the Faroes. Compulsory schooling (in Danish) was introduced in 1872 – the very year in which the first fishing sloops were purchased. This was an era when national fervour was stirring in Scandinavia and it led to a demand for a Faroese literature in the mid 1880's – the script had only been invented forty years previously. The new literature began with poetry and was only extended to the novel later in this current century. Not unnaturally this efflorescence of nationalistic feelings sparked off a demand for independence but this was resisted by the Danish authorities until their hands were forced by the British occupation of the Faroes during the last war. A referendum was held in 1946 about the issue and a slight majority voted in favour of separation from Denmark but this was not granted; instead, the Faroes were given only partial independence. Ever since then the Faroese have differed on this question: fishermen tend to support the independence parties while farmers prefer to keep ties with Denmark. However, today the Faroese language is recognized as the official tongue in local government, schools and the church while most newspapers and books are published in Faroese.

This brief outline of the progress that the Faroese have made over the last century is a slight corrective to the accounts that follow. Do not expect to find a society rich in historical remains, nor one that ardently pursues agricultural activities, neither will you come across many Faroese agonizing over their fate. Today's picture is more banal: modern cars speeding along broad highways, modern houses, plenty of luxury goods and smartly-dressed people. Of course the pace in the villages is much slower but do not be deceived. In that charming, old turf-roofed, black-painted wooden house you will find all today's mod. cons.: a bathroom, W.C., oil-fired central heating, a modern kitchen, washing machine, radio, television, hi-fi, telephone, and modern Danish furniture! A slight exaggeration perhaps but only a slight one: be warned! However, everywhere you will find a friendly, easy-going people who are coming to terms with affluence.

The following articles discuss specific areas of Faroese life and

culture. They are mainly historically-oriented which is why this introduction has been designed to give a background to the past and to the present.

Ian Keillar's article on Kirkjubøur deals with a tricky problem in Faroese history that concerns the dating of the various churches at this ancient, rich settlement. There is a famous, unfinished ruin here that has been held to be *the* cathedral of the Faroes. This article skilfully discusses the pros and cons of the case.

John Baldwin is concerned with a small village and its adaptation within the old agricultural system that is fast fading from the Faroese scene. He also gives a picture of how the society used to be at the turn of the century.

Glyn Jones examines the way that novelists have portrayed life in the traditional village and how the emphasis on fate characterized the old struggle for existence.

These three articles give a good understanding of that special quality in the Faroese character which has enabled them to overcome the difficulties that have faced them, and which has almost led to the creation of a mini-nation in the turbulent waters to our north.

For further reading one could look at:

1. K. Williamson: *The Atlantic Islands*. 1970. It is somewhat dated but has some good descriptions of traditional life.
2. J. West: *Faroe*. 1972. An historical account which becomes even less reliable the more one approaches the modern era.