

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 His comments on 'Commerce and Culture' are also very much superseded by the volume of essays produced by the Department of Scottish History in St Andrews on *Scotland and Scandinavia* and *Scotland and the Sea*.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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Barbara E. Crawford

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

conference proceedings and brings together a diverse range of papers not included in those other works. Aimed at environmental archaeologists and palaeoeconomists, the volume ranges geographically from Norway westwards to Greenland and has as its common thread the exploration of issues concerning human exploitation of the natural environment.

Irmelin Martens begins with analysis of marginal settlement in the Norwegian homeland during the Viking and Middle Ages. She presents a general characterisation of marginality and goes on to evolve a classification of four different farm types according to a scale of increasing marginality. There follows a discussion of the way in which marginal settlement is closely linked to nearby more densely populated or exploited agricultural lands, and an analysis of the way marginal sites functioned as part of wider economic systems often covering several ecological zones.

Moving westwards to the Northern Isles, Gerry Bigelow considers 'Issues and Prospects in Shetland Archaeology' – essentially an overview of recent work in those islands. He re-examines such thorny issues as the Pictish-Norse interface, attempts to deal with 'those problems of chronology which permeate our knowledge of Norse settlement history' and includes a large section on prehistoric and transitional economies. An extensive bibliography is appended. Sadly lacking is any mention of Lindsay Macgregor's extensive work on Norse settlement in Shetland, which would have been particularly pertinent to Bigelow's discussion of the value of place-name evidence in settlement studies.

Colleen Batey's paper relates to mainland Orkney and is a lively and well-illustrated account of the identification and subsequent excavation of the underhouse of a horizontal mill at the Earl's Bu, Orphir. Extensive on-site sampling was undertaken, significant in that it provided the first material to be recovered from a stratified context at the Bu, and the results of the analysis of the ecofactual material are comprehensively discussed. The wealth of both the artefactual and ecofactual material was such that it will be possible to make comparisons with contemporary sites throughout the Norse Earldom.

The report of 'Excavations at Freswick Links, Caithness 1980–82' is one of a series of reports on the work of the Viking and Early Settlement Archaeological Research project at Freswick. This one deals with environmental column samples from the cliff-side which demonstrated the variety and richness of the environmental data, including an almost solid layer of fish bones leading to the conclusion 'that a fishery specialising in the capture of large cod and ling in addition to saithe of all sizes was operating at the time the deposits were laid down'. The methodology of the sampling is described in some detail. Particle size and acidic soluble phosphate analysis was undertaken as it was considered that the characteristics of the deposits might assist towards some conclusion in respect of evidence for agriculture on the links. The results, amply illustrated with graphs, charts and tables are described in some detail.

Four papers relating to Iceland are included; Thomas Amorosi deals with 'Climatic Impact and Human Response in North-East Iceland: Archaeological Investigations at Svalbard, 1986–88', while a companion paper by Cynthia M. Zutter concentrates on the archaeobotanical analysis of the midden at the same site. The research at Svalbard represents an international co-operative effort to study the process of Norse cultural expansion, stabilisation and contraction across the North Atlantic Zone from a zooarchaeological perspective. The site is well documented historically and was approached in an interdisciplinary way. Excavation concentrating on the midden deposits revealed a dramatic change in North Atlantic climate and human resource use between the days of the Commonwealth and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Palaeoecological investigations at Reykholt in Western Iceland, an area containing some of the best farmland in Iceland, are recounted by Paul Buckland, Jon Sadler and Gudrun

Sveinbjarnardottir. Like Svalbard, the site is documented in Icelandic records and the initial aim of the excavation was to locate the extent and nature of archaeological remains at the site. A palaeoenvironmental sampling programme was undertaken at the site of the post-medieval farm allowing the identification of 'activity areas' within the building and giving an indication of the farm's immediate local environment.

A series of rescue excavations at Bressastadir, the official residence of the Icelandic President, provided valuable environmental evidence for trade patterns which are discussed in 'Site, Status and the Palaeoecological Record'. Of particular note was the great number of grain beetles found, indicative of regular importation and perhaps strong trading links with the Scandinavian core and the European continent.

Finally, Greenland. Thomas McGovern in 'Bones, Building and Boundaries' gives a masterly and very readable account of the growing debate over the nature of Norse Greenlandic society during the Middle Ages and its development from chiefly Viking period prototypes. His discussion of the evidence for subsistence economy is wide-ranging and deals with zooarchaeological evidence, archaeofauna, architectural evidence and the phenomenon of the 'cash hunt'. Concluding that, while Greenlandic subsistence economy was clearly related to Iceland and the rest of Scandinavia in several respects, it was radically different in others, for the basic unit of survival was not the independent farmstead but the interdependent local community headed by one or more of the large farms.

Although this volume makes no pretence to give a comprehensive coverage of settlement and subsistence in the North Atlantic region it has, nonetheless, done much to draw together many interrelated strands of Norse and post-Norse activity. The traditional concepts of 'marginality' and 'peripheral location' are, in many cases challenged and redefined. The book will prove valuable, not only to those primarily concerned with economy and environment, but to all those interested in Viking, Norse and Medieval archaeology.

Anne Johnston

John Gifford (ed.), *The Buildings of Scotland: Highlands and Islands* (Penguin Books, 1992). 683 pp., 125 halftone illustrations, £30.00.

The fifth volume in the *Buildings of Scotland* series, John Gifford's *Highlands and Islands* is a tired successor of a style and tradition established over thirty years ago by Nikolaus Pevsner. As a single volume it is a monumental accomplishment, but it is work which is inherently flawed in concept, content and presentation. Having said this, it is not without its value, but the positive gains of such a volume must be weighed along side its negative features and judged accordingly.

It is a bold editor who chooses to approach the study of the buildings and architecture of an area equivalent to a little over one third of the geographical landmass of Scotland in a single volume, let alone expand his scope to encompass both the Northern and the Western Isles. One could argue, as Gifford does, that the volume neatly covers the administrative divisions of northern and western Scotland. After all, the administrative framework was the guideline set down by Pevsner in the 1950s. But here we are faced with a situation created by the straitjacket of editorial convention. The chief problem is that use of the Highland Regional Council area, plus the three Islands Councils, creates a territory that contains internal variations in geomorphology, geology, social structure, culture, economics, politics and history, such as are