

in the Norse colonies of the North Atlantic. The non-Danish reader is helped by an English summary, but an index would have been useful for all to find their way to discussions of particular subjects.

Barbara E. Crawford

Michael P. Barnes

The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland

The Shetland Times Ltd.,
Lerwick, 1998.

58pp., £9.95.

ISBN 1-898852-29-4.

Norn is the form of Scandinavian language used in the Northern Isles between c. 800 and c. 1800. Michael P. Barnes, a leading expert on Norn, has over the years produced several articles on the subject, but this is his first attempt to present his knowledge to a non-academic audience. He has done so very successfully. Within less than 60 nicely produced pages Professor Barnes has managed to give a thorough biography of this extinct language. The first half of the book deals with the history of Norn and the second half presents and comments on the principal sources we have for the language. As always, Barnes is careful to point to what is documented and what is only indirectly assumed, which is of crucial importance for anyone working on the history and language of

REVIEWS

Orkney and Shetland – with so little written history and with so many myths. After careful consideration of the linguistic situation when the Norsemen arrived, Barnes continues with what we may call educated guesswork on what happened in the following centuries. There is precious little evidence from this period. The only contemporary source for the linguistic situation is the Bressay stone from c. 900. The ogham inscription on this stone contains a possible Norse word and two words that may be Gaelic in the midst of unintelligible passages in what may be a non-Indo-European Pictish language. This stone leads Barnes to believe in a period of linguistic co-existence when both Norse and one or several Pictish languages were in parallel use, maybe up until the middle of the eleventh century. It is not evident why Barnes assumes that Pictish was still around one and a half centuries after the Bressay stone. Neither is it easy to explain how such a long period of co-existence could take place without the native Pictish language leaving a large trace behind

in the language of the newcomers. For example, is it credible that the Picts would have kept up their own onomasticon for such a long time without contaminating the Norse place-names? Just to say that the Norse must have had 'a low regard' for the Pictish language certainly does not satisfy this reader. In all fairness, it has to be said that this reviewer is also in the lucky position of not having to produce any hard evidence to contradict Barnes' view.

The author points several times to the many parallels between the Northern Isles and the Faroe Islands, not only linguistically but also when it comes to a striking lack of early written material. The inventory of both runic material and documents in the Roman alphabet is so small that it causes Barnes to suggest that literacy in Scandinavian cannot have been widespread in the islands.

The author is careful to indicate the phonological links between Norn and the various west-Norwegian dialects. However, even Barnes is a little careless when he says that the

palatal forms of /n:/ and /l:/ have their centre in Trøndelag. This is of course true, but in this context it is surely also relevant that you find the isoglosses stretching as far south as Sogn.

It is sobering to see a modern linguist re-examine material that many people thought was dealt with, once and for all, by Jakob Jakobsen and Hugh Marwick, the great collectors of Norn remains. Products of the linguistic thinking of their days, they assumed that Norn died a lengthy death, being gradually corrupted by Scots. Barnes takes much care in undermining this well-established hypothesis, as well as in debunking the opposite claim that Norn remained pure until the death of the last speaker. Barnes points to modern research into language-contact situations in which there are no examples of any one language dying simply as a result of melting into another. Language death is a result of outer pressure on the language. Barnes presents an account of the recent re-evaluation of the relevant historical period in Shetland, where Brian

Smith questioned the validity of the traditional scenario in which the brutal Scottish land-owners and merchants enslaved the free Shetlanders. According to Smith, the replacement of Norn with Scots happened, because Scots became the language of commerce, in other words, a more useful language than Norn. Barnes himself estimates that the last speakers of Norn in Orkney died around 1750 and in Shetland around 1800.

In his foreword, Barnes warns us that certain parts of the book might be more of a hindrance than help to some readers. It is true that the author makes use of quite a number of linguistic terms and that there is a fairly detailed discussion of the features specific to Norn. This may be demanding reading for the general tourist who would like to broaden his or her mind about the Northern Isles. Then again, anyone willing to pay the rather hefty price of £9.95 for a booklet of 58 pages, ought to be motivated. Apart from the price, the book is most recommendable.

Arne Kruse