

## BOOK REVIEWS

Alexander Fenton, **The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland.**  
John Donald Publishers Ltd., Edinburgh 1978, pp. 721 £15.

In a celebrated passage dealing with the essence of sacred exegesis, St. Gregory the Great makes the significant remark that the words of Holy Writ are like square stones; the observer cannot grasp the total meaning of any given expression or description without, as it were, turning it over and looking at it from different angles. The assumption that all serious works of literature, however simple they may appear on the surface, are by their very nature polysemous and multivalent is now accepted as a firmly established critical fact; a principle purpose of literary interpretation is precisely this: to reveal the concealed complexities of the work under study. The same exegetical principles appears to apply to ethnological studies: when we set out to make sense of the lives of people constituting a single community or tribe, however primitive their existence may appear to the casual observer, our findings will inevitably be of limited value unless we proceed from the basic premise that every manifestation of human activity or thought can be studied from several different points of view.

In his immense and masterfully informative study of Orkney and Shetland, Alexander Fenton is guided by two inter-related principles: first, that the ethnologist should gather the maximum of relevant information about his subject; and, second that the material should be presented and interpreted in a systematic and coherent fashion, revealing all the human complexities involved. The book is, as he succinctly puts it, 'an approach to history through people and the things they did, the tools and equipment they used, the houses they lived in, the food they ate . . . . It is a kind of book with a mix that has not hitherto appeared in Britain, though not uncommon in some other countries of Europe, where it will be recognised as a contribution to the subject that is now commonly known as "European ethnology".' (pp. 632-4). **The Northern Isles** provides us with as definitive an answer as we are ever likely to get to the intriguing question: What did it mean to be an Orcadian or a Shetlander in times bygone? Drawing on masses of archaeological,

documentary (including unpublished materials) and linguistic sources, which he combines with his own fieldwork and the accounts of many oral informants, Mr. Fenton presents a remarkably detailed and meaningful picture of island life as it was lived from prehistoric times to the age of the North Sea oil. But the ultimate value of the book is not confined to Orkney and Shetland alone: it impinges on their neighbouring communities, in particular those of Norway, the Scottish mainland, the Western Isles, the Faroes and Iceland. Indeed, reading the book, I found myself constantly wondering why such a detailed study of the material culture of my own country has not yet been attempted, and I have no doubt that **The Northern Isles** will serve as a model and a source of inspiration for future researchers in Iceland and elsewhere.

The overall structure of the book can be taken as an indication of Mr. Fenton's sophisticated approach to his subject. The book divides into 71 chapters, each scrutinising a particular topic, but at a different level the volume falls into thirteen major sections surveying such broad aspects as settlement patterns, buildings and other human artifacts, fuel, transport, cultivation, animal husbandry and fishing. A mere catalogue of chapter headings would give a false idea of the nature of the book taken as a whole: since each element has more than one facet to it, demanding divergent ways of looking at individual phenomena, there is a good deal of unifying recurrence and cross-reference. So in order to get a clear understanding of detail it is not enough to study any given chapter or section in isolation from the rest: each problem is subordinated to the author's total vision of human existence in the Northern Isles.

Of individual themes running through the book like quicksilver thread, one might mention briefly the question of continuity and change. Survivals from the Scandinavian past are manifested not only in numerous terms used by farmers and fishermen alike, but no less so in traditional artifacts, customs and conventions, some of which still have close parallels in Norway, Iceland and the Faroes. But there are also certain elements which appear to pre-date the Viking Age, and post-Viking Scottish influences on the

Islands go back to the thirteenth century, if not earlier. It is a part of Mr. Fenton's stupendous achievement that beyond exploring in vivid detail how the islanders conducted their lives in the past, he has clearly demonstrated how their unique culture evolved over a long period. Excellent illustrations, supporting the verbal description, an extensive bibliography and an invaluable index, all combine to make this publication a most remarkable event.

It is pleasant to note that **The Northern Isles** came out just about the time when its author took up his appointment as Keeper of the National Museum. This auspicious coincidence augurs well for the future of archaeology and ethnology in Scotland.

**Hermann Pálsson**

#### **SCOTS IN THE BALTIC**

**Report on a Conference, edited by A.M. Stewart available from the Centre for Nordic Studies, University of Aberdeen or from the Secretary, at 25 pence.**

Yet another milestone in the development of interdisciplinary co-operation between Nordic subjects was set up at Aberdeen on Saturday, 29th October, 1977 when the Centre for Nordic Studies hosted a seminar on 'Scots in the Baltic'. The report, unfortunately, does not include Professor J.K. Cameron's paper on Scots Lutherans in Denmark, but the other disciplines are amply represented: Literature by Professor Mennie; history by Dr. Manson and Dr. Dukes; economics by Professor Smout and Mr. Gray; and his historiography by Dr. Stewart.

Professor Mennie singles out James Ramsay (of Simplissimus fame), Robert Monro (Scott's Dugald Dalgetty), Malcolm Sinclair (Sinclairsvisan) and George Sinclair (Sinklarvisen) for special attention in this informative and stimulating paper. It left me wishing that my reading knowledge of the Scandinavian language were more perfect.