

ANNUAL CONFERENCE : CAITHNESS : 9th–13th April, 1979

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It is a far cry to Thurso for most of us (particularly if you go up by train) and it is some time now since our conference there in April, 1979. Nevertheless, I would like to think that the reflections on our spring cruise, which are actually being written in the autumn, have been put into a truer perspective by the physical detachment from the scene, the lapse of time, and what has happened to us all in the interval. For example, I have already discovered for myself that my opinion of the weather experienced at the conference has quite changed. At the time and, after such a hard winter, I remember finding it somewhat disappointing. In the light of the so-called summer which has followed I now realise how fortunate we were in this respect as we were in so many others.

The theme of the conference had been given out to us as 'Caithness — A Cultural Crossroads.' It is an attractive title and one which seemed to indicate a very profitable and suitable line of approach to a study of Caithness in its Scandinavian setting. In this we were not disappointed, because seldom has a text or theme been more clearly expounded or more pointedly illustrated than this one was over the four days of our stay. This was achieved by means of a carefully devised and ambitious programme, supported by skilfully chosen and related field studies or excursions, and backed up by generous help from all sorts of local sources. The balance kept between lecture and excursion was good and properly varied. Gradually the story of Caithness unfolded to us and, as far as it could be done, in chronological sequence. In this way most of the aspects likely to interest us were brought to our attention, and there was a suitable emphasis on the Scandinavian background.

As a society we were indeed privileged to enjoy such a profusion and variety of scholarship. The speakers came from a wide range of disciplines, including in their number several 'white settlers' who might be regarded as modern Scandinavians if they were not so associated with technological development. There

could be no better evidence than this lecture programme supplied of how, by its nature and position, Caithness has always been debateable land, how different its Scandinavian occupation was from Scandinavian occupations elsewhere, and how the cross cultural process still goes on.

The practical survey of Caithness in general and of its selected features in particular which accompanied this lecture programme was conducted from a comfortable bus. Out of this vehicle innumerable forays were made as required into open country and places of habitation, and always with the help of knowledgeable guides. In this way and even in the short time available we were able to cover most of Caithness, except perhaps for the extreme south east through which most of us had already come anyway by train or car. Many of the memories which we retain of the Caithness landscape will remain, like our snapshots, largely private and individual, but for a long time to come the mere mention of certain features — the cairns of Camster — the flagstones quarries of Spittal — the harbour at Whaligoe — the meal mill at John o'Groats — and not forgetting Dunnet Kirk — all, for one reason or another, evoke and enable us to relive such enjoyable experiences together. It is strange how the landscape of Caithness dominates all that goes on there. It carries an air of mystery and of the unexpected about it, of things hidden and more to come. This feeling, normally associated with great mountains or deep valleys, comes out of the horizon more suddenly in Caithness and hits you more quickly. On the day that we walked up to see the horned cairns of Reay I suddenly saw Dounreay in front of me, looking curiously like a temple to an unknown god or an alien faith. It gave me this feeling that I have been trying to describe and for a moment or so I could imagine what it must have been like in Reay long ago to see the morning mists clear off the sea at this point and to catch sight of the Scandinavian long-ships, full of menace, lying close offshore.

On such a stimulating diet of lectures and discussions the time passed too quickly for us all in Thurso. We were comfortably housed at the Pentland Hotel. The little that we were able to see of the town itself made a favourable impression but at such

a conference there is always plenty of congenial company. The last item on our programme was the traditional ceilidh, supported generously as usual by local artistes and as enjoyable as ever. For all I know it may still be in progress because I left while it was in full blast, but I am really not allowed to lift the veil any further on what takes place at these affairs. I simply mention it because this was truly the ultimate expression in cross culturalism and as such thoroughly in keeping with our theme and purpose on this occasion.

In conclusion, there would seem to be only one more point to be made. It is to express our gratitude once more to all who helped to make this conference so profitable and so enjoyable for us. Perhaps we could make special mention of John Baldwin, the national organiser, and Donald Omand, the local organiser. For a conference to be as successful as this one undoubtedly was, the local organiser, if he can be found, is obviously a key figure.

LECTURE PROGRAMME : CAITHNESS CONFERENCE 9th–13th APRIL, 1979

‘Caithness – A Cultural Crossroads’

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| 1. The Evolution of the Caithness Landscape. | D. Omand |
| 2. Early Caithness: An Archaeological Perspective. | E. Talbot |
| 3. Caithness and the Sagas. | E. Cowan |
| 4. Excavations at Viking Freswick. | Colleen Batey |
| 5. Subsistence Fisheries and Cultural Heritage. | J. Baldwin |
| 6. The Caithness Flagstone Industry. | J. Porter |
| 7. Scandinavian and Scot in post-Norse Caithness. | Barbara Crawford |
| 8. Traditional Buildings in Eastern Caithness. | G. Stell |
| 9. Pultneytown and the Planned Villages of Caithness. | Jean Munro |
| 10. The Making of Modern Caithness. | J. Bramman |
| 11. Gaels and Scandinavians in Caithness: (The Place-Name Evidence). | W. Nicolaisen |