

REVIEW

Berit Sandnes

Fra Starafjall til Starling Hill: Dannelse og utvikling av norrøne stedsnavn på Orknøyene

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THIS is the book of a doctoral thesis presented to the Faculty of History and Philosophy in the Institute for Nordic Studies and Literature (Det historisk-filosofiske fakultet, Institutt for nordistikk og litteraturvitenskap) at the NTNU in Trondheim, Norway, which also funded it. It was supervised by Professor Jan Ragnar Hagland and Dr Kristin Bakken, and completed in 2002. It is in print so quickly because of the admirable Scandinavian requirement that all Ph.D.s must appear in published form. The title translates 'From Starafjall to Starling Hill: formation and development of Norse place-names in Orkney'. It is both an in-depth survey of the place-names of the parishes of Evie, Rendall (later the united parish of Evie and Rendall) and Firth on the west mainland of Orkney, as well as being a treatise on language contact, in this case Norse and Scots, with toponymy providing the chief evidence.

The title of the book touches on this central theme of language contact, replacement and interaction. Starling Hill and Starra Fiold are present-day names for two hill-tops in the same ridge, side by side in the upland area on the boundary of Evie, Birsay and Harray

parishes. Sandnes suggests that Starra Field (in Evie) derives from Norse *staraffjall* 'starling hill' (Norse *stari* (m.) 'starling'). Its neighbouring top Starling Hill (in Birsay and Harray) is therefore a translation of the Norse name. This she would see as a unique example of the survival of the Norse name alongside its direct Scots descendant. However, its uniqueness, rather than distancing it from the general place-nomenclature of the West Mainland, puts it at one end of a complex spectrum of interaction between the two languages. It is this complex spectrum which provides the main theme of the book.

The opening sentence of Chapter 1 clearly states the core problem of her data and her study-area, solutions to which much of the book is devoted. 'In order to work with Norse place-names of Orkney we must be able to distinguish between Norse coinings and Scots coinings.' She goes on to say that much has conspired to make this task far from easy. The two languages are closely related, with much vocabulary in common. Furthermore, many Norse appellatives (common nouns) have been borrowed into Orkney Scots, which means that a place-name containing a Norse-derived element is not necessarily a place-name coined in a Norse-speaking environment. On the other hand an originally Norse coining can appear in Scots guise through the process of later adaptation. Thus her first goal is to establish criteria to decide whether a name is of Norse or Scots origin.

To those working in the wider field of British and Irish toponymics, the same problem, and much of the same methodology developed and applied in this book, will sound familiar. Sandnes has a sophisticated, comprehensive and well-articulated awareness of how languages can interact in a language-contact situation, and how that interaction can be expressed and analysed through the study of place-names. Such an awareness can be usefully applied to other contact-situations, for example the far less well understood and evidenced one between Pictish and Gaelic in eastern Scotland.

From the outset Sandnes makes it clear that her focus in the book is on language and language-history, not on cultural or political history, although of course the latter cannot be ignored entirely. Nor does she: in Chapter 2 she creates a historical framework into which the linguistic development of Orkney can be set, from the

introduction of Norse (from which Norn) through the introduction of Scots (from which modern Orkney Scots) from about 1300, to the death of Norn, which she would see having happened by about 1780.

Sandnes shows exemplary care in distinguishing between Scots and English (both received pronunciation and Scottish Standard English) at all periods. I was aware of only one small slip in this regard, when in her useful diagrammatic survey of Orkney history from 700-1800, she describes the Sinclair earls, who ruled Orkney from 1379, as being 'English-speaking' (*engelsktalende*), rather than Scots-speaking, although in the 14th century the latter has to be the case.

Chapter 3 describes the two languages, Scots (especially Older Scots and Orkney Scots) and Norn, in some detail, drawing on the latest and best research in both languages, such as the *Edinburgh History of the Scots Language* (ed. Charles Jones, 1997) for Scots, and *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland* by Michael Barnes (1998). A problem fully acknowledged by Sandnes is the unequal state of knowledge about the two languages in question. There is so much we do not know about Norn, dead by the late 1700s, but which still haunts both the language and the place-names of present-day Orkney. In fact, Sandnes's book itself furnishes a new and important contribution to our knowledge of Norn.

As with any modern Scandinavian work on place-names, much time and space are given to theory, with Chapter 4 titled simply 'Theory'. Rewarding to read, this is a useful overview of various theories of naming strategies within a language-contact situation, at the core of which Sandnes places the language-user and their choice and motives either to coin a new name or to borrow an existing one formed in another language. However, onomastic and linguistic theory is not confined to this chapter, but also plays an important part in the final chapters of the book (Chapters 7-9).

Chapter 5 is a valuable overview of research carried out to date on the place-names of Orkney, especially that of Hugh Marwick. The problems with and objections to his chronology of settlement-names are clearly rehearsed.

At the heart of the book is the place-name survey of the three parishes, a gazetteer of place-names many with four-figure national

grid reference, pronunciations, early forms, dates and sources, and detailed toponymic discussion. It constitutes Chapter 6, and runs to over 100 pages. The names are arranged by parish. In each parish there are three main sections (four for Evie and Rendall, where the parish-name constitutes an introductory section). The first section consists of settlement-names; the second section of field- and artefact-names ('teignavn og artefaktnavn'); and the third section of names of natural features, including coastal features, water-courses and hills ('naturnavn'). The artefact-names of the second section include names for roads, burial mounds and brochs (p. 106). Each name is also usefully furnished with a code from which its linguistic provenance can be seen at a glance: N for Norse, Sk for Scots and O for names transferred from outwith the Orkneys.¹ In a few instances no code is shown against a name, which indicates that its linguistic provenance is uncertain. For example the Rendall place-name West Taing could be either a Scots formation using the Norn loan-word *taing* 'point', or it could be a Scots adaptation of an existing Norse place-name **Vesttangi*. For this reason Sandnes quite rightly assigns this name neither to Norse or Scots.

The sources which Sandnes has used are impressive. Besides the rich seam provided by the Ordnance Survey Name Books of the second half of the 19th century, she also mined the Sheriff Court Records (from 1601 onwards), the unpublished papers in the Orkney Archives of earlier researchers J. Storer Clouston, Hugh Marwick and Ernest Marwick, as well as estate plans and oral sources. However, as Sandnes herself is only too aware, many of the names in the second and third sections have been recorded only in the last two centuries, that is in the period after Norn had died out. This makes interpretation especially fraught with problems, and poses a major challenge to anyone trying to use this evidence to come to meaningful conclusions about history of language and settlement. It is a challenge which Sandnes admirably rises to.

With any large-scale toponymic work such as this, there are always going to be details of interpretation where alternatives can be offered. What follows is in no way intended to undermine the high

1 While these abbreviations are explained in 6.0.1. (p. 111), it would have been helpful to have them also included in the general list of abbreviations on p. 384.

standard of Sandnes's etymologies, but is really an excuse on the reviewer's part to discuss one particular name. Within the book's study-area the name in question is fairly minor, but in terms of the early medieval archaeology and settlement-history of Orkney it is a big one. The name is Buckquoy, well-known as the site of the excavation led by Anna Ritchie of a settlement identified as a Pictish farmstead. This Buckquoy is in Birsay, immediately opposite the Brough of Birsay. However, the Buckquoy discussed by Sandnes is the name of a small point of land on the coast of Evie parish (HY36 27). It is obviously the same name as its more famous counterpart in Birsay, and there is another Buckquoy in Harray parish (HY32 15). Buckquoy, Evie, has apparently no early forms (although it does in fact occur as such on the 1882 Ordnance Survey map 6 inch 1st edition);² and there is no recorded settlement associated with it. In fact, one of the possibilities discussed by Sandnes is whether it might be a transferred name from one of the other places called Buckquoy. The second element is of course *quoy* from Norse *kví* 'fold, enclosed piece of ground', so common as a place-name element in Orkney, so rare as such in Norway (as discussed by Sandnes Section 8.4.3.10, p. 322). Her discussion of the first element is puzzling. She says that Hugh Marwick, in his *Orkney Farm-Names* (Kirkwall, 1952) suggests a first element *bygg* 'barley, bere', but goes on to state that the development of Norse *y* to / *ø* / (in 'buck', rhyming with 'cup') is unusual, and that the phonology suggests rather Norse *bukkr* 'buck, he-goat, ram etc.'. This is all very well, but when the early forms of Buckquoy in Birsay are examined (*Bikquoy* 1595, *Bigquoy* 1627, *Biggaquoy* 1727, 1760, 1794), Sandnes's etymology starts to look decidedly shaky, while Marwick's remains convincing. The development of *i* to / *ø* / is in fact a very late one, and belongs within a Scots-speaking context, where it becomes less of a problem: it is the very change described by Sandnes earlier in the book 3.1.1.2. (p. 40), where, in her discussion of the special features of Scots, she mentions the lowering and centralising of the short *i* as a particular marker of Scots and Scottish English, expressed in writing as *Wullie* for *Willie* etc.

2 In the gazetteer in general there does not seem to be any consistent indication as to whether a name occurs on this earliest edition of the Ordnance Survey map or not.

As already mentioned, Sandnes usefully gives the local pronunciation for most of the place-names in the gazetteer, using IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). The pronunciation she gives of Buckquoy is /'bʊkwɪ/, with full stress on the first syllable, and rhyming with 'see'. Later (p. 322), in her discussion of the element *quoy*, she states that a more recent pronunciation is /kwai/, rhyming with 'fly'. It never rhymes with 'toy'. Archaeologists please note!

As Sandnes points out, *kví* (quoy) is the most common place-name element in Orkney, and developed a secondary meaning of untaxed land (p. 322). This probably explains why this element is not always hard-wired into a place-name, and, depending on the focus or emphasis of a given text, it can be omitted or included. This has important consequences for understanding the instability of generic elements in other linguistic contexts, for example *Pit-* and *Bal-* in some Scottish names of Gaelic origin. The element *quoy* was used to form place-names in the Scots-speaking era, as in the name Hillquoy. Sandnes is of the opinion that local Scots-speakers did not only use it as a place-name element, but must have borrowed it into Orcadian Scots as a word meaning 'enclosure', although Marwick is less clear that it was ever a loan-word. It appears also in constructions in which the specific element, usually a personal name, comes after the generic, for example Quoyblackie and Quoysinclair. It has been suggested that this word order developed under Celtic influence, but Sandnes rejects this, pointing to a Norse construction in which a noun is followed by a personal name in the genitive, and arguing convincingly that it remained productive in the Scots period, especially in names containing the element *quoy*.

In Chapter 8 (8.3.2) the author discusses the vexed question of the so-called 'X of Y' names, such as Brecks of Scarataing (Evie) or Styes of Aikerness (Evie). Sandnes stands by her suggestion, first made in *Northern Studies* (1997) that the many Orkney names constructed in this way are a result of French influence on Scots. I was unconvinced by this when I first read it several years ago, and I remain unconvinced. I would refer the reader to Richard Cox's 2004 article 'The Norse element in Scottish place names: syntax as a

chronological marker'³, in which he suggests there is a perfectly adequate Scandinavian model which can be invoked to explain this construction.

This book greatly enriches the cultural, linguistic, environmental and settlement-history not only of the north-west Mainland of Orkney, but of the Northern Isles and beyond, and is an important contribution to the subject of language contact and interaction in general. Sandnes has published some of her thoughts on language contact in Orkney in her 1999 *Northern Studies* article 'Place-Names in Orkney as Evidence for Language Contact', but this eleven-page piece does scant justice to the rich detail and well-constructed arguments of a 390-page book. And even if the book had contained an English-language summary, say a translation of the 4-page long Chapter 10 containing a summary and conclusions, which it does not, this would still not be enough. The book itself deserves a much wider readership 'west over the sea' than its Norwegian version at present allows, and I very much hope an English-language version will be appearing soon.

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3 In *Unity in Diversity: Studies in Irish and Scottish Gaelic Language, Literature and History*, *Léann na Tríonóide Trinity Irish Studies* No. 1, edited by C. G. Ó Háinle and D. E. Meek (School of Irish, Trinity College, Dublin), 37–49.