

## REVIEW

*Sebastian Seibert*

*Reception and Construction of  
the Norse Past in Orkney.*

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THIS book begins with the statement that 'it is not possible for us to access the past as it really was'. Our view of Norse Orkney is an artificially constructed image constrained by the quite limited range of material which has come down to us, and it is shaped by the mental frameworks we create. Perhaps the less real information available the more our view of the past depends on the imaginary society which exists only in our minds.

This was the theme of Sebastian Seibert's research for a PhD degree for the university of Keil. In the eighteenth century knowledge of the Norse period was extremely limited, and it was only with the appearance of Torfaeus's *Orcades* (1697) that even the most basic facts about saga-times became known. Even the identity of St Magnus was a bit of a mystery to early eighteenth century writers. Another early source was the first printed edition of *Orkneyinga saga* by Jonas Jonæus (1780) but, like Torfaeus's book, it was written in Latin and published in Copenhagen, so it is understandable that neither of these books was widely known in Orkney.

It was through the work of scholarly ministers such as George Low, George Barry and Alexander Pope that Torfaeus's work eventually filtered into the Orkney consciousness. Yet progress was slow: Low's admirable *History* remained unpublished until 2001, and it was more than half a century before a rather garbled version of Pope's translation of Torfaeus eventually appeared in print.

But our view of the past depends not just on the factual information available to us but also on how we receive it. Knowledge of Orkney history began to emerge in the early nineteenth century against the background of the Romantic Movement and the poems of Ossian. This enthusiasm was fuelled by Sir Walter Scott's immensely popular Orkney and Shetland novel, *The Pirate*, and it was in this hot-house atmosphere of uncritical admiration of Norseness that Samuel Laing wrote his *Tour of Norway* and David Balfour his *Oppressions of Orkney and Shetland*. The same ideology runs through the voluminous papers by A.W. Johnston which appear in the early publications of his Viking Club.

By the time Storer Clouston wrote his *History* and Hugh Marwick produced his scholarly work on language and place-names there was a huge increase in factual knowledge of the past, yet both Clouston and Marwick continued to operate within what was essentially the same romantic structures. Clouston in particular looked back to a Norse 'Golden Age' and saw Orkney history in terms of corrupting Scottish influences which brought about a decline from the greatness of saga-times.

The successors of Clouston and Marwick have had the advantage of access to many more documents, further work on place-names, archaeology and DNA studies. But by the second half of the twentieth century they also operated within a different framework where it was less easy to see violence as 'romance', where there was a distrust of racial stereotypes, and it was no longer fashionable to write history purely in terms of the deeds of great men. All this creates a different Orkney identity, although hardly so compelling as the romantic image which enthused their predecessors and still captivates many Orcadians.

Sebastian Seibert's book contains a thoughtful discussion of the work of these people and many more historians, novelists and poets, but it contains comparatively little about present-day writers. Our contemporaries may largely have escaped from the romanticism and biases which characterised the work of past historians, but it would be optimistic to imagine that, however hard they try, they can be entirely objective and free from their own implicit constructions and assumptions. A little probing of their attitudes would not come amiss.

It is immensely creditable that the author was determined that this detailed and scholarly thesis, although produced for a German university, should be written in English and published in a form accessible to Orkney readers.

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