

REVIEWS

Alexander Fenton

The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland

Tuckwell Press, East Linton, Scotland, 1997.
721pp., £20.00.
ISBN 1-86232-058-6.

What a pleasure it is to see an old favourite appear in a new format! I am sure that many people will add this paperback volume to their bookshelves, even though they already have the original hardback with the coastal view on its green dust cover. My original falls open at the many pages to which I return again and again for information about the past in Orkney and Shetland, and I expect that the same will, in time, happen to the paperback, with its bright cover design featuring the small fishing boat which subtly captures something of the islands' past in their present. I know that it is still possible to see many such neat, lobster boats in use around Shetland and yet, by comparison with the modern monsters of the present fishing fleet, the small red

boat, with its chipped paint, definitely represents the past and is symbolic of the process of change, which is really what this book helps us to understand.

There is something to satisfy a multiplicity of ethnological interests in *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland* and it is difficult to know where to begin informing readers of the wealth of material covered. My own favourite sections relate to language and, in particular, the terminology associated with the various activities described in the book, such as the chapter entitled 'The Sea Language of Fishermen and the End of Norn' and the chapter on 'Yoles and Sixerns: Construction and Terminology' both of which are laden with information. The same applies to the chapter on 'Native Sheep and New Breeds' where there is detailed comment on the terminology of lug marks, much of which was not previously recorded in a single accessible place for the general reader who wishes to understand the customs of a northern rural community. There is perhaps a slight

quantitative bias to be seen in the emphasis placed on the recording of terminology about the sheep rather than the process of preparing the wool for knitting and producing garments, but there *is* information on the latter process, although not quite so detailed. In a book which sweeps so widely across the life of a community, it is not surprising that there is the occasional time when the reader wishes that there had been more coverage of a particular point. It is a real compliment to Alexander Fenton's encyclopaedic knowledge and thorough approach that it happens so seldom.

Other aspects of community life which appear in the book include homes and working places, fuel for the hearth and baskets for carrying it, horses and ponies, cattle used both for draught and as providers of food, and various ways of garnering the resources of both land and sea. All are well illustrated with pictures from the past which are vividly evocative for this reviewer who grew up in Shetland in the middle years of this century. Some of the

pictures are from the early twentieth century but the household scenes which they depict could still be found on the west side of Shetland in the 1950s. I am transported back in gustatory memory as I read and remember reested mutton, saat piltocks, slices of kirn milk spread with rhubarb jam and all the other delicacies on which I was nurtured and which cannot be matched anywhere! As well as photographic illustration, the book also contains several line drawings which very clearly depict objects from the material culture of the islands which are no longer in everyday use, such as a circular kelp kiln (p. 65), clibbers (pp. 248-9), a Shetland spinnie (p. 460) and so on.

It is impossible to give a full impression of what this book has to offer and I recommend that you go and read it for yourself, if you have not already done so and, if you have, dip into it again. Finally, I should like to encourage Alexander Fenton to pick up the thread of narrative from the point in his 'Conclusion' where he says, '...this book was to have closed with a discussion

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of the social system of the people of the Northern Isles, their beliefs and customs, seasonal celebrations, weddings and funerals, nicknames, education and religion, their views of the world, all the things that make up the business of living as opposed to or in parallel with working. It soon became evident that the presentation of an adequate cross-section of the basic information on working life and organisation was more than enough for one book. The rest must remain for some other time.' (p. 623) Many would share with me in hoping that the time will come soon.

Doreen J. Waugh

The Diary of Patrick Fea of Stove, Orkney, 1766-96

Transcribed and edited by
W.S. Hewison.

Tuckwell Press, East Linton,
Scotland, 1997.

543pp., £20.
ISBN 1-898410-88-7.

This edition of an eighteenth-century Orkney farmer's diary forms Volume 5 in the series *Sources in Local History* sponsored by the European Ethnological Research Centre, which is based at the National Museums of Scotland under the aegis of Professor Alexander Fenton.

In his foreword Professor Fenton recalls that the transcript of Patrick Fea's diary proved 'a first-class source of Orkney words' for the Scottish National Dictionary, as well as providing a wealth of material for his own ethnological researches on the Northern Isles. Scholarly interest in the data to be gleaned from farmers' diaries and account-books has greatly increased in recent years, now that