

SHETLAND LITERATURE AND THE IDEA OF COMMUNITY

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Does Shetland have what can be called 'a literature'? Is literature, in fact, not too grandiose a word for the few odds and ends of verse and prose that make up Shetland writing? And if there is, how good is it, and what does it have to say to us to-day, what light does it throw on our past and present? These are some of the questions this essay will try to address.

What about the quality of the writing? Can Shetland compare for instance with Orkney which has produced such famous authors as Eric Linklater, Edwin Muir and latterly George Mackay Brown? It could be argued of course that these three Orcadian writers all chose to write in English — giving them ready access to a national, indeed international public, whereas most Shetland writers have opted for their native dialect, and consequently a more restricted, local readership. But that has not prevented the perceptive outsider from appreciating the true worth of our dialect writing. For example, Neil Gunn, the distinguished Scottish novelist, said of Vagaland's poems: 'When the ends of the earth and their savagery worry too much I can take up his poems — They have the Northland in them, the space and the sparseness, and they take me back to my beginnings. I find the dialect attractive and not too difficult . . . and always the rocks and the seas, the maas and the divers, the strength and the austerity' (Robertson 1975:xx). In fact it could be argued that Shetland has produced a wider range of writers than Orkney and that the best work of at least a dozen of our local writers should be rightfully included in any representative anthology of Scottish literature over the last hundred years.

Modern Shetland literature began only a little over a century ago. From the period before this little has survived, though Hibbert in 1822 records that a rich native literature had once existed. In fact he says, 'Shetland was from time immemorial celebrated for its native poets.' After 1469 when Shetland was transferred from Norwegian rule to Scotland, the old Norn language gradually became Scotticised, and later anglicised, till we have the dialect that exists today. All that remains of the old Norn traditional literature is the 'Hildina Ballad', a long poem recorded in Foula in 1774 by George Low, the 'Unst Boat Song' recorded more recently in Unst, and various Norn fragments collected by Jakob Jakobson who rescued thousands of old Shetland Norn words from oblivion in the eighteen-nineties.

Three writers laid the foundations of Shetland literature. First we have Basil Anderson, a poet from Unst who died tragically young at the age of twenty-seven, leaving behind his masterpiece, 'Mansie's Crö', a superb description of Shetland life last century. Next we have James Stout Angus who hailed from Nesting and wrote some of the finest examples of the old

speech we have. The third writer was Haldane Burgess, poet, novelist and linguist whose popular book of poems *Rasmie's Büddie* broadened the scope of dialect verse to include satire, political comment and philosophical speculation. All three wrote their best work in the dialect and the lasting popularity of their poetry confirms the rightness of their choice of language.

Basil Anderson's long poem 'Mansie's Crö' has been called by local poet and critic, William J. Tait, 'the finest poem ever written in the Shetland tongue' (Tait 1949:16). It is about an old Unst crofter and his 'crö' (or 'planticrub' as it would be called in other parts of Shetland), how he built it, and how as well as providing food for him and his livestock it became a noted landmark, a 'meid' at sea, even a time-piece for the folk round about and a shelter for sheep, cattle and ponies on the hill.

But it comes to mean far more than an old planticrub on a hillside — as old Rasmie's evening prayer suggests:

Da shapter read, he bood him doon
 An prayed at He wha rules abön
 His hand roond dem an dirs wid keep
 For he wid wauk tho dey sood sleep
 An gaerd dir herts laek stocks a kale
 Fae dat black kyunnen caaed da Deil. *rabbit*
 An staund a waa aroond dem tö
 Far surer dan Auld Mansie's Crö.

Later when the poet shows Mansie growing old and feeble and his crö begins to crumble as well, the same resonance comes through:

At last despite baith sheep an kale
 Maunsie and his crö began to fail.
 Time bood his rigg and shöre his tap *backbone*
 An laid his crö in mony a slap. *broken down part of dyke*
 Snug shoarded by his ain hert-sten *supported*
 He lost his senses een by een
 Till lyin helpless laek a paet
 Nor kale nor mutton could he aet:
 Sae deed, as what we aa man dö
 Hae we, or hae we no, a crö.

As Tait has also pointed out, the whole development of the poem is beautifully shaped. It unfolds in ever-widening circles around the centre-point of the crö, like ripples on a pond. It describes in turn the cycle of a typical crofting day from dawn to dark, then the cycle of the seasons, next with Auld Mansie's death — a human life come full circle. And finally the cycle not only of the years, but of the generations:

Bit years gaed by as aye dir geen -
 Da winter white, da summer green,
 Da voars aye sawn, da hairsts aye shoarn *seed-time*
 Aye some-een dead, aye some-een boarn.

Words simple and unpretentious, just right for the context, without a trace of moralising or false sentiment.

His short poem ‘Coming Fae da Hill’ records a dialogue between an old woman laden under a burden of peats and a young neighbour who offers to help. Here Anderson evokes beautifully the neighbourliness, the quiet dignity and resignation of old Betty and the natural grace of the old tongue he remembered from his early days in Unst:

Lamb, A’ll juist cerry what I can
Bit blissins be in every bane
An mak dee, jewel, a stately man
Fir dy sweet kindness. So, du’s geen.
Da Loard len me His heevenly staff,
Till Christ sall lift my kishie aff.

straw peat basket

James Stout Angus, our next poet in what has been called ‘the Golden Age of Shetland Poetry’, was born in 1830 and lived to the ripe old age of 93. His rich resources of dialect speech can be seen in his collection *Echoes from Klingrahoole* and also in his *Glossary of the Shetland Dialect* which he published when he was 84 years of age. The richness of dialect used can be seen in his poem ‘Eels’ first published in 1877 as a verse contribution to a local controversy in *The Shetland Times* on, of all things, ‘the theory of spontaneous generation of eels from the hairs of pigs and horses’. From this unlikely source sprang a remarkable poem — probably the first truly original poem written in what we know as Shetland dialect. This is how Angus describes the heavy Lammas rainfalls in August in the poem:

Da Lammas spates lek fljuget aets
Abön a flakki laavin
Fell frae da lift wi a heavy drift
Da sam as hit’d been kaavin
Da burns aa rase abön da braes
For stanks an stripes were tömed in
Till every ljoag whar an eel could oag
A neesik nicht a swömed in.
Da hedderkows upo da knowes
Lay drooket and disjasket.
Da taatie-shaas an bulwand taas
Were wuppled lek a gasket.

*heavy showers, winnowed
straw mat
sky
snowing heavily
streamlets, poured
hollow, crawl
porpoise
bunch of heather
exhausted
mugwort roots
entangled, rope*

Angus’s joy in the rippling flow, sound and vigour of the dialect is very evident in these lines.

Later in the poem he describes a Shetland scene at daybreak:

An noo up ower da aestern sky
Da daybrak spreads a glöd,
Da leedfoo leverik rives da dim
Wi a sweet angelic löd,
An baess and birds an fock come oot
Ta seek dir mornin föd.

*dawn, glow
diligent, twilight
tune*

A flekket strik be-oot da dek	<i>stirk</i>
Rises oot o her böl,	<i>resting place</i>
Shakkin da dew fae her sholmet shoks	<i>white jaws</i>
Shu njoags an sets a kröl	<i>moans, humps her back</i>
An waanders awa ta da burn ta tak	
Her slokkin at a pöl.	<i>quenching drink</i>
Da muckle skerry be-oot da teng	<i>rock, flat point of land</i>
Is covered ower in raas,	
Wi flachterin scarfs an ploodshin looms	<i>shags, paddling guillemots</i>
Dunters an swabbi maas,	<i>eider ducks, black-backs</i>
An da lang banks girse waves fitfully	
Ta every pirr at blaas.	<i>very light breeze</i>

Seldom do we find such a beautifully articulated picture of man and Nature, 'baess an birds an fock', all part of a harmonious whole — a seamless garment of living things, a true community.

But communities are fragile things too, subject to pressures from within and without. Another of Angus's poems 'Da Lad at wis taen in Voar' shows the violent intrusion of the Press Gang on the Shetland scene and the feelings of a young lass who has seen her lad taken away in early spring, and who still waits loyally for his return long after. It is a ballad of love, longing and loyalty told with all Angus's apparent artless ease and clarity of vision.

Haldane Burgess, the third of the group, is probably the best known of the three. He was an amazing personality, immensely gifted, and possessing an irrepressible sense of humour. He was a scholar, a brilliant linguist, a prolific writer and a socialist in later life — and all this despite the fact that he was struck with blindness in his twenties when at Edinburgh University. His long narrative poem 'Scranna' which tells of an old crofter's battle with the devil can be read and enjoyed on more than one level: as a superbly comic poem in the vein of Burns' 'Tam o Shanter' or as an allegory of the poet's own rejection of the dogmas of the established church of his time. Burgess himself had intended to enter the ministry, but began to question some points of Church doctrine and cut short his divinity course rather than compromise his beliefs. It can be seen as another fine portrait of a Shetland crofter like Anderson's Mansie — a man secure and self-sufficient within the hill-dykes of his convictions, philosophical, untouched by the lure of ambition, shrewd and outspoken in his perception of hypocrisy, greed and pride. This is a theme which recurs again and again in Shetland writing. It is another aspect of that strong sense of community already alluded to. And here we see the significance of Burgess' choice of the dialect for his poetry. The dialect was the language of the ordinary working folk, the community whose voice was seldom to be heard in public places. He wanted that voice, the voice of the oppressed, to be heard and recorded. Unconsciously he was following Brecht's words written many years later: 'The most important teaching of

Socialism is that a future for mankind can be seen only from underneath, from the standpoint of the oppressed and exploited.'

I have emphasised up to now the positive side of the old community, its virtues, its strengths. But it must always be remembered there was a darker side too, the endless toil, the poverty, the hunger, the fear, the lives shadowed by superstition, disease, ignorance, threat of eviction and above all the iron rule of uncontrolled Market Forces. That is the background of Burgess' 'Jubilee Ode'. Here Rasmie the old crofter sits down to write an ode to Queen Victoria on her fifty 'glorious' years as monarch. Tennyson, the Poet Laureate, and others had all joined in the general chorus of applause for Victorian values and prosperity, so Rasmie thinks he'll have to have *his* say on the great divide between Royalty with its 'roogs and roogs a siller' and the 'poor wi his aald rivlin girnin at da tae' (*moccasin open mouthed at the toe*).

JUBILEE ODE

Fifty voars I'm dell'd an set da taaties,
Noo my aald rig complains ipo da wark;
Fifty simmers ower da Muckle Watter
I'm sailed, an rouwed, an striven, an set on;
Fifty hairsts I'm gaddered in da coarn, —
An hirdit my sma crop; *harvested*
An fifty winters peyd my rent, and grudged it,
For it was dooble what it sood-a-been;
Fifty years I'm heard da wolf o hardship
Jöst snuffin wi his nose alow da door;
Fifty times I'm clampit my aald troosers *patched*
Till no anidder clamp dey'll had ava;
An du sat on dy tronn awa in Lundin,
An never sae muckle as said, 'Rasmus: yun's you.'
Or raekit oot dy haand ava ta help me, *reached*
For aa 'at du hed roogs an roogs o siller, *heaps*
An laand oot in Ameriky, dey tell me, an idder pairs.
O du, du, Wheen Victorey! I raelly widna-a-tocht it o dee;
I hae a picter o dee, whin du wis a lass —
It's hingin ben abön da shimley-piece — *mantelpiece*
A boanie face, göd feth, as e'er I'm seen,
An fu o kindness; bit dat wis dan
Whin du wis onnly laernin ta be Wheen;
An weel I mind da hoops I hed o dee,
O aa da grit an noble things du'd dö,
Whin du cam up ta be a wife; hoo du'd no bear
Ta view da poor wi his aald rivlin girnin at da tae:
O less-a-less! What is du döne trou aa da lang half-centiry o time
At du's been Wheen? I kno no what
An dan, —
Ach! dis be blow'd
For a Jubilee Ode!

A young friend of Burgess, sharing his interest in poetry and politics was Jack Peterson (b. 1895, d. 1972). He first came into prominence as a First World War poet writing under the pen-name of Private Pat. His first book (in English) *Roads and Ditches* reflected his experiences in the war where he was wounded in action. They are, for the most part, bitter, angry poems showing intense disillusionment at the horrors and waste of war. *Streets and Starlight* published in 1923 is a mellower book which contains some poems in the dialect. But 'Seine-netters' written in the 1960s shows best his skill in the old tongue and his love for the sea and a community bred to that sea. It conveys vividly the harsh rigours of the fishermen's lives, the awareness of a sea-going tradition spanning the centuries from Norse times to the present day, and the urgent need to cope with the uncertainties not only of wind and weather, but of market forces in the highly competitive world of to-day:

Black aa roond, an da steep seas makkin; Gunwale to gunwale, til da decks rin white;	<i>building up</i>
Mast-head licht in a swirlin moorie	<i>blizzard</i>
Loopin aboot laek a thing geen gyte	<i>leaping, mad</i>
Hullo! — Hullo! — Hullo! — 'Daybreak' callin 'Venture' — 'Venture' — 'Venture' — Venture' — 'Daybreak' calling 'Venture'	
Fag-end glint i da wheel-hoose window; Tide-lumps brakkin laek ghosts on da baem; Lost aa sicht o da laand fir an oor noo — Dis is da rodd da Norsemen cam haem.	<i>massive tidal waves</i>
Swein, an Hal, an da Bare-legged Magni, Brusi da Black, an Kol Brokkenbanes, Day an nicht, wi der een ta da wastard, Strampin da seas laek der ain briggiestanes.	<i>striding</i>
Hullo! — Hullo! — Hullo! — Twa drags — forty boxes — Twa drags — forty - Twa drags — forty boxes	
Androo John an Grace Ann's Robbi, Willi by Nort an Hugh frae da Hadd, Day eftir day, i da hert-hol a winter, Shuttin, draggin an guttin laek mad.	<i>depth</i>
Oot an awa afore you an me's waakin, Niver dune till lang eftir dark; Trivvlin der wye by baa an by Voder, Fishermen, makkin fur haem frae der wark.	<i>groping, underwater reef</i>
'Venture' calling 'Daybreak' — 'Daybreak' — 'Daybreak' — 'Daybreak' — What's da price a haddocks In Aberdeen da day?	

Da price! Da price! An da Nort Baas brakkin!
 What's da price, braks a winter's gale?
 Senses tuned ta a world obstropolis *obstreperous*
 Ready ta act sood onything fail.

What's da price, an da squall comes dirrlin; *hurrying*
 Black aa roond, nor iver a glaem -
 Compass, wheel, an a ee ta windward,
 Haddin da rodd da Norsemen cam haem. *holding*

Shetland poetry since the last war owes a tremendous debt to Peter Jamieson, another socialist writer and poet, who launched in 1947 *The New Shetlander*, a quarterly magazine which had as its chief aim the encouragement of local writers. In its pages first appeared the poems of T.A. Robertson or 'Vagaland' as he called himself. Though a quiet gentle poet, Vagaland was fiercely passionate about the virtues of the old tongue and the old traditions — the heritage which had shaped and formed so much of his own attitude to life. 'A Skyinbow a Tammie's' is a fine tribute to that language — its beauty, strength and significance for to-day. Here are the concluding verses:

Trowe wir minds wir ain aald language
 still keeps rinning laek a tön;
 Laek da laverik ida hömin, *twilight*
 sheerlin whin da day is döne; *singing*
 Laek da seich o wind trowe coarn *sough*
 at da risin o da mön,

Hit's da skriechin o da swaabie, *screeching*
 an da kurrip o da craa, *croak*
 An da bulder o da water *bubbling noise*
 in aboot da brakkin baa;
 Hit's da dunder o da Nort wind *thunder*
 whin he brings da moorin snaa. *drifting heavily*

Hit's da soond da sheep maks nyaarmin *bleating*
 whin you caa dem on afore,
 An da noise o hens, aa claaagin, *cackling*
 layin Paece-eggs ida Voar;
 And da galder at da dug gies, *loud barking*
 whin a pik comes ta da door. *knock*

Wirds laek Freddie Stickle's music
 whin he played 'Da Trowie Burn',
 Wirds wi fire an frost ita dem,
 wirts at nearly maks you murn.
 Some we hae, baid coorse an haemly,
 nane can better dö da turn.

Things at maks dis life wirt livin,
 dey're jöst laek da strainin-post;
 Whin he's brokken, hit's no aesy
 gettin new eens — an da cost,
 Hit'll shön owergeng da honour
 if da aald true wyes is lost.

Just as the straining-post, firmly imbedded in the ground, helps to hold together the crofter's fence which surrounds his livelihood, so the culture, the music, the old speech and the web of associations these invoke — the 'things at maks dis life wirt livin', strengthens the whole community.

Another of *The New Shetlander* group of poets is Stella Sutherland. She writes highly accomplished verse on often complex and delicate themes and is equally at home in both English and dialect. Her two books of poetry *Aa my Selves* and *A Celebration* (which won the Shetland Literary Prize for 1992) contain poems which could take pride of place in any collection of modern verse. Outstanding among them is 'At da Croft Museum'. It is a beautifully written poem, vivid in its detailed particulars of bygone crofting life, its joys and sorrows — especially the 'winters a hert's bittersie', that came with the evictions. Yet, through it all, survival is the keynote, a quiet determination — 'dybin on an on becaase dey most', towards the promise of a better future. A celebration of endurance:

Dey büre an strave; gret sair, or keepit in — better ae hert ta brak as aa da world ta winder!	<i>wept</i>
Boady an breath dey gae wis, an da foond o aa at's wirs eenoo, an da regaird	<i>foundation</i> <i>just now</i>
we feel for aa at's right ta inward sense. Dey yearned forever upward, laek da flooers bund i da seed under black tons o time —	<i>bound</i>
draemin o light, strivin towards da light, an dybin on an on becaase dey most —	<i>toiling</i>
till dis caald eart sood tak a warmer cant, an da frost melt an lat da simmer trow, an burst dir laef, dir blossom an dir sang!	

'A Celebration' is one of her finest poems in English. It celebrates the life of her father even though that life was crippled by the social and economic circumstances of his time: the lack of opportunity, the war and the years of the Depression — circumstances which created 'a web in wait, a snare, a net', the 'cage' he had to wear.

A CELEBRATION

The cage my father wore was made,
 that crippled all his day,
 before his parents ever met
 and close together lay:

A web in wait, a snare, a net
of intricate design
a tender fret that closed and cut
of filigree too fine.

He was caught and set at naught,
confined without reprieve,
without avail, to toil and fail,
and little to achieve.

But in one poignant surge of bliss
he let me here begin:
my world, as I uncurled, to his
converse, and yet akin.

For me, the cruel filigree
sprang jewels at the tips;
the gift he gave that's mine to have,
they shine without eclipse
And now, too late, I celebrate
him and his cripple day:
He never had a gift so glad
as that he gave away.

That poem could stand as epitaph for many who went through those troubled, constricting times.

Rhoda Bulter (1929-94) is one of our most popular poets to-day. She published four volumes of verse all in the dialect: *Shaela, A Nev Foo o Corn, Link-stanes* and *Snyivveries*. Humorous, satirical, meditative and always vividly descriptive her poetry is a triumphant assertion of the vitality of the Shetland dialect to-day. Her poems reflect an intense love of the local scene, the land and the sea, the flowers, the birds, the animals and the crofting communities she knew when young. Her pictures of the old traditional life could have been simply nostalgic, but she is saved from this by the vivid realism and intimacy of detail which vitalises these scenes. She is conscious too of the darker side of life and is moved to bitterness and anger by the destructive side of man, his greed, his abuse of the land, his cruelty to wild life, industrial exploitation and the ultimate crime of nuclear war. She would have agreed with the writer who said, 'We abuse land because we regard it as a *commodity belonging to us*. When we see land as a *community to which we belong*, we may begin to use it with love and respect' (Aldo Leopold). Rhoda Bulter never regarded land as a commodity. She saw herself as belonging to that land — a land to care for and to love, as she shows at the end of her poem 'Wir Inheritance' describing the impact of oil on small communities.

Dan a caald braeth blew across me face,
An I lookit aroond at a different place,
Back ta da hertless giddy race
O life da day.
Ley crofts wi juist a yowe or twa,
Wi nane ta work an nane ta maa.
Whaat wis it at gluffed da fok awa,
An left caald clay?

frightened

Could it be dem wi da might an means,
At cam here wi dir muckle machines
An ruined da place as we kent it eence -
Baith mine, an dine?
Nae towf for da hame at anidder med,
Nae towf for da life at anidder led,
Nae towf for da laand in beauty cled,
No lang sin syne.

Juist bore an dreel an gurm an shap,
Roog in da siller athin dir lap,
Dan birze da aert for da hidmost drap
Dey tink is tane.
An sae up anchor an pit ta sea,
Rubbin dir oily haands wi glee,
Laevin da brucks ta da twa or da tree
At widna geng.

engage in dirty work

squeeze

remnants

Dir aye da twartree at hae da care
Ta bide an bigg up whaat lies wasted an bare,
Ta lave somethin livin for idders ta share,
Laek dey hed wance.
Tho da gaet might be herd an da night be lowng,
Lat it be lightened wi wird an sowng,
Aye uttered idda midder towng —
Wir inheritance.

build

path

Among recent Shetland poets, W.J. Tait has been the most ambitious, in choice of theme, technical skill and use of language. His translations of Villon, Ronsard, and other foreign poets are amazing achievements and show how the dialect can be extended in surprising contexts. His masterpiece is 'A Day Atween Wadders'. It is a love poem celebrating a memorable day in early spring when sunlight and shadow, love and death, Past and Present are all caught up, blended and transformed by the poet's heightened awareness into something new and beautiful.

'A day at we'll hae but eence — wha cares? Gie tanks fur da day.'

His long poem 'Hogmanay Sermon 1964' was sparked off by an article in *The New Shetlander* — 'Muness Sixareens' — which vividly described the

storms the haaf fishermen had to battle against last century. He contrasts this vivid piece of writing with the tired, sugary sentiments on trivial themes local writers too often indulged in, and chastises them for failing to tackle the realities of life to-day:

Dir aald men, young men, weemen, lasses — or dey wir.	
Dey canna be aa gien blude spring ta boutiques!	<i>with great speed</i>
Dey tüilye ower hooses; plan mills, naachtify	<i>quarrel, belittle</i>
Dem at plan mills; dey fish an sometimes droon;	
Dey drink an dunna drink; dey even lie	
Drunk up a closs; dey spin lang yarns — or fine	<i>lane</i>
Lace wirsit, still; write letters ta da papers;	
Bigg boats an paet-stacks; elt wi motor-bikes;	<i>work</i>
Dance, feycht, mak love — toh dat as laek as no,	
We canna mention i da <i>New Shetlander</i>	
‘Open da box’, I said. I say: Open your een	
Dunna glinder i da aze. Hit maitters little	<i>peer, blaze</i>
What wye you look, as lang as you look hard.	
Look atween your taes, look back, look up,	
Look foarward even. Lang sycht comes wi age -	
Or so dey say: I doot it. If your een’s gien fae -	
Get glasses; but no rose-tinted eens. An write.	
Write wis up; write wis doon; write wis aff;	
bit fur Goad’s sake write	
As if you meant it. Mean it. An göed luck!	

As we have seen Shetland poets have achieved much over the past hundred years. What of the prose writers? A look at three novels portraying different periods in our island history reveals creditable achievement in this field too: *Tang* by Haldane Burgess, *Thin Wealth* (a novel from an oil decade) by Robert Alan Jamieson and *Shadowed Valley* (a novel based on the Weisdale evictions) by John Graham.

Tang was written in the closing years of the last century. It tells the story of a young girl, Inga, and her divided love for two men: one, her devoted admirer, a steady, hard working fisherman, and the other, a newly arrived minister, young, idealistic, unsure of himself and very susceptible to feminine charm and persuasion. It also presents a picture of a small community of crofter-fishermen, their women-folk, the merchant, the teacher, the minister and the laird. Burgess brings out the darker side of this community, the hypocrisy and occasional dishonesty, the servility of some crofters towards the gentry, the malicious gossip, the petty jealousies and spitefulness within the congregation and the damage done by itinerant hot-gospellers and ‘their infernal, illegitimate-producing revival meetings’ as Hakki, the agnostic schoolmaster, calls them. The novel certainly gives an unflattering picture of what passed for religious life at this period. Here is old Magnus, the shoemaker, who no longer goes to church, giving his views on public worship and the congregation to the new minister:

Public worship! Yea, it's public anoff, but I don't know aboot da worship. Hoo mony o da fok, tink ye, goes dere ta worship? Da most o da lasses goes to shaa aff dir bits a claes, da most o da lads ta sit an glower at dem agen, an da most o da aald fok becaase it's da custom ta go an dey're frightened fur what dir neebors wid say if dey didna. Tink ye at da laek o Hansi Bolt wid budder wi da kirk if it wisna fur his shop? Not he, feth, sir.

The arguments between Hakki, the outspoken agnostic, and the minister and laird are among the highlights of the book and it is obvious where the author's sympathies lie. It is certainly an unusual novel for its time when the Scottish Kailyard school of writing was still at its height.

Our second novel *Thin Wealth* depicts the sudden impact of North Sea Oil on the life of an island community. It is a swiftly moving story, sensitively told, with a wide range of characters all reacting in their various ways to the new and rapidly changing environment: the young vulnerable, the old stoical, some taking what they can get out of it, some confused, angry, alienated and lost. As a local critic has said, 'The central character, Linda, can in many ways be regarded as symbolic of Shetland itself. She carries with her the buried memories of a troubled past, is caught up and loses her way in the turmoil of the oil-boom, strikes back and eventually through a series of traumas finds her true self through a new insight into her traditional past.' The turbulence of the times leaves many characters bruised and scarred but some at least emerge with a new understanding of the other side of affluence and a reappraisal of their old loyalties and roots.

Our last novel *Shadowed Valley* has the clearances for its theme. It is a story of the life and death of a crofting community in Weisdale. But it is more than that. It is a commemoration of these half-forgotten folk, giving them a voice hitherto unrecorded. As a critic has said, 'it is the community itself which is the central character'. We see it in all its variety, enjoying itself at the Beltane and Lamma Foyes and in story-telling sessions round the fire; joining in the excitement of caain the whales, bidding farewell to the whaling-men bound for a six-month voyage to Greenland and the hectic activity at the fishing station, and finally the sad exodus of the families from 'all the emptied homes of Weisdale'. The book has a wealth of characters: Johnnie Hunter, the outspoken Radical, Seemon, the young hero's father crippled with frost-bite from the whaling, the imperturbable Rasmie, a Trafalgar veteran, Da Sodger, the laird's 'watchdog', Baabie, the hard pressed anxious mother, Aald Maalie, the midwife and Hakki himself, the young boy through whose eyes the story unfolds. And worlds apart from these folk, we have the ministers, the lairds and the lawyers debating the priorities between people or profit, crofter or sheep-farmer, compassion or progress. Only the Rev. Turnbull of Tingwall and Duncan, the Lerwick lawyer, emerge with any credit from these discussions. Turnbull in fact pays a fine tribute to an almost invisible section of the community, the women folk:

I find the Shetland women have a simple quality of enduring which is remarkable. The Shetland men are fearless at sea but irresolute ashore. It is the women who are at the heart of the community, shaping it in their own quiet way.

Shadowed Valley tells a tragic story but it is one which still has lessons for us to-day.

What kind of common theme or attitude emerges from the works we have been discussing? I would say that a strong sense of community and its survival against the odds permeates most of these poems and novels. Endurance is the keynote throughout as the last quoted extract suggests.

A recent Prime Minister said not so long ago that there is no such thing as community or society, only individuals. A study of Shetland literature shows how utterly wrong she was.

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