

Political change and cultural reconstruction of the past in Shetland

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Introduction

FOLLOWING the discovery of oil in the North Atlantic, the Shetland Islands promoted their own concept of devolution, comparable to the experience of the Faroe Islands. The 1990s brought the constitutional question to the forefront, especially as a result of Margaret Thatcher's eleven years in Downing Street and the development in Scotland of a 'democratic deficit' – a nation voting for Labour and ruled by the Conservatives. This was paralleled by an increasing awareness of cultural identity and the use of references to the Nordic countries in political rhetoric.¹ With Tony Blair's Labour government taking power at Westminster followed by the devolution referendum on 11 September 1997, and the re-establishment of the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh, Shetland also had to reassess its relationship to the Scottish mainland in the sphere of cultural and regional identity.²

If Shetland is to be considered a region along the same lines as politically autonomous insular regions, it is necessary to explain the ways in which regions are viewed in contemporary academic research. Regions as social and cultural concepts are constructed, fluid and negotiable. Emphasis is frequently placed on social interaction and ambiguous spatial boundaries. Until recently, it was unusual to think of regions in these terms, as pointed out by Aronsson

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1 Newby 2009, 310.

2 Human geographer Anssi Paasi proposes a distinction between a region's identity and regional identity (regional consciousness). This distinction is essential for the understanding of differences between the historical construction of a region and the life histories of its inhabitants. The concept of regional identity (or regional consciousness) refers to the ways in which the inhabitants of a region experience the history of the region, its specific characteristics and its relation to all other areas of society. Paasi 1998, 172-176.

(2005), because the regions already existed before the nation-states emerged. Since the 1990s theories and ideas from the study of nation-states, such as Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, have been applied to regions.³ The ability of a region to maintain ethno-cultural distinctiveness is dependent to a large extent on its opportunities and resources to develop a socio-cultural system on its own. Territory as such is not sufficient as the basis of identity construction – a complex group of other elements are needed in order to connect the actors of the territory culturally.

The following article is partly based on my doctoral dissertation *Ambivalent Self-Understanding? Change, language and boundaries in the Shetland Islands* (1970-present). In my doctoral dissertation I explored nationalism and regional consciousness in Shetland with a particular emphasis on language and history as creators of boundaries of difference and belonging. My main focus was on the existence or absence of political, cultural and linguistic autonomy in relation to mainland Scotland.⁴

My examination of political discourses in Shetland was based on the analysis of local newspapers and magazines, principally *The Shetland Times* and all issues of *The New Shetlander* from the period 1970-2004, scholarly works on Shetland and the works of local writers as well as official reports produced by Shetland Islands Council (SIC) or on behalf of SIC. My examination of cultural matters was also based, in addition to the above, on archival material, writings in *Shetland Life* and reports produced by the Shetland Arts Trust and activist groups. In my doctoral dissertation I explored these issues more extensively and in wider contexts whereas here I have chosen to present some of its main themes and findings.

In this article I discuss the desire for constitutional change which became an important element of consciousness in both national and regional contexts. The primary focus is on the change in regional discourses in the 1990s. Fieldwork carried out in the isles in the 1970s and 1980s suggested the existence among Shetlanders of pro-Scandinavian feelings which were at times anti-Scots. As cultural promotion and feelings of separateness in the isles were boosted by the discovery of North Sea oil in Shetland waters, the first period I will discuss here is the period of the initial two decades of the oil era.

3 See e.g. Anderson 1991; Jones & Olwig 2008 and Vainikka 2005. I am very grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for the useful and constructive comments on the manuscript of this article.

4 The concept of autonomy is defined as related to actions, to beliefs, to reasons for actions, to rules, to the will of other persons, to thoughts and to principles. As a concept it can be applied to social groups, such as nations, government departments, committees, or for example to language. Most of the political autonomies in the world are islands and this can be explained by insularity itself. See Olausson 2007 and Nihtinen 2011, 32.

The second period includes events such as the referendum of 1997 and the re-establishment of the Scottish parliament in 1999. After a brief presentation of political change from a historical point of view, I move on to a discussion of the rise of political consciousness expressed through resistance to the idea of a Scottish parliament among the majority of Shetland's population and also through the emergence of an autonomist movement. In the second section, attention turns to the 1990s, which witnessed changed attitudes to devolution. In the third section of the article I analyse the cultural aspects of economic and political change in the isles immediately after the discovery of North Sea oil. In turn, in the fourth section I consider the post-devolution reconstruction of the region's identity. The questions I seek to answer are: How did the political atmosphere in Shetland change during the two time periods in question? Were there connections between political and cultural nationalism? Where these changes reflected in local historical writing both in the isles and about the isles?

The political change

At present Shetland and Orkney are part of Scotland and the United Kingdom. During the medieval period, however, they were governed by Norway while also remaining closely connected to the Scottish kingdom. Vikings from Norway arrived in Orkney and Shetland in the late-ninth century and assimilated or exterminated the indigenous population.⁵ At the time of the Viking raids both island groups were characterised by Pictish settlements and culture. Although Shetland is geographically closer to Norway, it was Orkney that became the centre of the Orkney Earldom.⁶

At its height in the eleventh century, the Earldom extended from the Isle of Man in the south to Shetland in the north, and included the Hebrides, Caithness and Sutherland. The Scandinavian language brought by the incomers became known as Norn. In 1468-1469 Christian I, King of Denmark and Norway, pledged Orkney and Shetland to King James III of Scotland in lieu of his daughter Margarethe's wedding dowry. The isles adopted different cultural influences from both directions. As contacts with Scandinavia diminished, contacts with Scotland grew in importance and this affected the language situation in both island groups.⁷ From the fifteenth century onwards the isles became incorporated into the Scottish kingdom and joined the political entity of Great Britain in 1707 together with the rest of Scotland.

5 For example Bäcklund 2001; Fellows-Jensen 2005; Smith 2001.

6 Øien 2005, 81.

7 See e.g. Knooihuizen 2005, 105-117, van Leyden 2004.

Shetland autonomy and Scottish devolution

Shetland had enjoyed a certain degree of autonomous administration since the late-nineteenth century. By the means of the Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1889 a county council was set up in the islands and an Education Authority was established in 1918. The significance of a county council was clearly observable in the fact that, unlike Shetland and Orkney, the Western Isles were not given a council of their own; instead, they were divided between two counties.⁸

The notion that Shetland might become Scandinavian again did not attract much support in the late-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, during the 1880s a so-called Udal League flourished for a short time.⁹ The London-based Orcadian Alfred W. Johnston was the driving force behind the movement.¹⁰ Johnston started writing letters and articles for newspapers such as *The Orkney Herald* and the *Shetland Times*. Together with other islanders who shared similar views he founded the Reform League for Orkney and Shetland in 1886, which was shortly after renamed as the Udal League. The League wanted to “encourage the upholding and revival of peasant-proprietorship in Orkney and Shetland”, an ideal based on earlier writings of Samuel Laing and David Balfour.¹¹

While not interested in independence, Shetlanders became increasingly involved in the search for their historical roots and culture, within the wider imperial context.¹² Growing interest in Shetland’s Norse past became frequently expressed in local life in the late-nineteenth century around the time when the Crofters’ Holdings (Scotland) Act of 1886 was passed. The Act introduced crofting changes in Shetland by giving crofters security of tenancy of their property. Opposition to the landlords led to crofter solidarity and a new-found class consciousness. Norse Romanticism emerged as a form of counter-culture and sought to inspire in popular consciousness an appreciation of Shetland’s Norse heritage, including the history, culture and language of the Norse.¹³

This growing interest in the Norse in the nineteenth century both relied on and sometimes contributed to wider interest and scholarship on this subject in Britain and Europe. Although late-nineteenth century fascination with the Norse was used in Shetland as a counter-culture to Scottish culture, the emphasis on a Norse cultural and racial past was in fact an important strand of Scottish, and British, identity as a whole.

8 Manson 1978, 13.

9 The term ‘Udal’ refers to Udal Law, which was the Norse legal system.

10 Seibert 2008, 128.

11 See e.g. Thomson 2001, Seibert 2008, 128.

12 Hunter 1999, 334.

13 Brown 1998, 58.

Interest in the Vikings had become important during the Victorian period, within the wider British context. Victorian Britons on both sides of the border drew parallels between them and the Vikings. Such an interest was to an extent a response to newly available studies based on Icelandic sources, the dissemination of which stimulated a reassessment of the merits of Classical and Gothic culture. The material was used as an insight into Teutonic racial history and culture, but also focused attention upon the Norse.¹⁴ Within the wider British context the fascination with the Vikings was not only cultural. It was accompanied by an interest in Scandinavian politics and, at the end of the century, provoked lively discussions. Such rhetoric was not only cultural-literary; instead, both Unionist Nationalism and Northern discourses were part of contemporary political debates.¹⁵

It was not until the 1970s, however, that the Shetlanders' interest in constitutional change grew in importance, yet such an "urge for autonomy" had also been present in the previous decade.¹⁶ The later 1960s saw the publication of the Wheatley Report on local government reform, which proposed an amalgamation with a Highlands and Islands administrative unit.¹⁷ This was resisted by both the Council and in local public demonstrations. The perceived threat for Shetland was that the islands would be administered from a great distance leaving them without control, in the view of the locals, over their own affairs.¹⁸

In the 1960s Shetland was already looking at examples of island communities which had successfully gained autonomous status. The preoccupation with Scandinavia had a long history in Shetland, expressed as an interest in things Norwegian, but in the field of local government inspiration had come from the Faroe Islands.¹⁹ The Shetlanders' interest in obtaining special status only increased after the Zetland County Council Act in 1974.²⁰ The second major extension of the Council's influence was connected to oil and the Zetland County Council Act of 1974 was promoted by the Council to control oil developments for the benefit of the Shetland community. Simultaneously, in Scotland the nationalist movement was growing in strength in the 1970s and although there were many reasons for this, the discovery of oil was one of the most significant. Oil gave new impetus to Scottish nationalism as Scotland found itself possessing an economic resource which could compensate for

14 Cohen 1983, 491. See also Wawn 2000 and Fielding 2008.

15 Newby & Andersson Burnett 2008, 44-49.

16 Manson 1978, 13.

17 Smith 1977, 9; Macartney 1986, 7-23.

18 Donald 1983, 214.

19 *The Shetland Report* 1978, 150.

20 *The Shetland Report* 1978, 150. Also Smith 1977, 10; Massie 1978, 27.

the disadvantages of being so distant from international markets.²¹ The oil industry was seen as an economic saviour and it was a focal feature of the SNP's electoral campaign, featuring slogans such as 'It's Scotland Oil' and 'Rich Scots or Poor Britons?'²²

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, while the Scottish nationalists were saying it is "our oil" and using this as an argument in favour of Scottish independence, Shetlanders felt that it was Shetland's oil and not Scotland's. A new question emerged in the devolution debate, as expressed in an editorial of *The New Shetlander*: if Scotland does not need England, does Shetland need Scotland?²³ As one of the councillors remarked, few members of the Shetland Islands Council accepted that "what was good for Scotland as a whole was good for Shetland."²⁴ If North Sea oil could be regarded as Scottish rather than British, because of its proximity to the Scottish coast, then two thirds of it, lying in Shetland waters, could be considered as belonging to Shetland. Similar arguments found their place in historical writing. For example, in her history of Scotland, Rosalind Mitchison remarks that several centuries of misgovernment of various kinds by the Scots had given them a bad name in Shetland. Shetlanders simply saw no reason to co-operate in the movement for a more direct association "with their oppressors in Scotland."²⁵

Oil-related developments were seen initially in terms of threats, ravages and "alien ways of life".²⁶ Local commentators on political discourses of that time included, among others, one of the leaders of the Shetland movement James Irvine.²⁷ Other commentators included journalists such as Jonathan Wills, who, already prior to the founding of the Shetland Movement, suggested the formation of a Shetland Socialist Movement, which never came to existence.²⁸ In 1977 a small Shetland Group was established tasked with getting the people of Shetland to think about the future.²⁹ This was transformed in 1979 into the Shetland Movement as a party, successfully gathering as many as 800 members. One of its suggestions concerned an elected Shetland Assembly to be responsible for all existing local authorities and health board functions, for local control of the fishing industry, and for local development of traditional and new industries.

21 Mitchison 1982, 418.

22 Finlay 2004, 329.

23 Editorial 1976, 5.

24 Editorial 1976, 5.

25 Mitchison 1982, 418.

26 Button 1974, 28-30.

27 Irvine is also author of several books on Shetland history, see Irvine 1982 and Irvine 1985.

28 Wills 1975a, 21-24; Wills 1975b, 23-24.

29 'Da Wadder Eye' 1983, 22. On the Shetland Movement see also Editorial 1976, 5; Editorial 1978, 5; Goodlad 1979, 10-12; Irvine 1979, 13-14.

The emergence of the Shetland Movement has been often interpreted as a political reaction to oil-related developments. However, Shetland had already been interested in constitutional change in the 1960s. The formation, in 1977, of this new political entity, the Shetland Movement, was an important expression of difference from the mainland but only followed the Zetland County Council Act passed by the UK parliament in 1974, which granted the local government significant economic and developmental powers. The Shetland Movement, while possessing characteristics of an opposition faction, was nevertheless an insider group, enjoying the support of almost half the Councillors on the Shetland Islands Council.³⁰ As the movement did not exhibit a clear ideology and did not adopt a position either for or against Scottish self-government, it remained open to both Conservative and SNP supporters.³¹

By 1993 the movement had six of the twenty-five seats on the Island Council, alongside sixteen Independents, and two Labour seats.³² Ultimately, however, in order to achieve political change it was necessary to take political action and seek allies; as time went by, it was believed more useful to build island autonomy into the Scottish Home Rule movement.³³ In the 1990s, as the following section shows, the Shetland Movement's views on devolution were already different.

The 1990s – post-devolution: Support for a Scottish parliament and further devolution

When the idea of a Scottish parliament returned to the political agenda in the 1970s, there was a vigorous debate in Shetland.³⁴ Most Shetlanders were opposed to the idea of Scottish devolution and this was confirmed in a referendum in which Shetland's vote was the highest 'No' vote within Scotland, closely followed by neighbouring Orkney. In 1974, 73% of the Shetlanders voted against staying in the European Economic Community. Five years later, in 1979, the Shetlanders voted overwhelmingly 'No' in the devolution referendum. The percentage of voters rejecting the proposal (72%) was much higher than that in Scotland itself. It has subsequently been acknowledged that Shetland's debate on Scottish devolution during the 1970s was somewhat paradoxical and self-contradictory.³⁵

30 Macartney 1986, 17.

31 Although not necessarily at opposite ends of the political spectrum in Scotland, these were nevertheless opposites on the issue of the constitution.

32 Brown 1998, 176.

33 Macartney 1986, 8.

34 The idea of a Scottish parliament is often described as entering the political agenda in the 1970s. However, there had been debate on re-establishing a Scottish parliament in the 1880s and 1890s.

35 Goodlad 1997, 23.

While the concept of Scottish devolution was unpopular and people in Shetland were largely opposed to it, at the same time many were arguing that the Shetlanders should have more say over their own affairs. SIC played a very important role in this debate. They were also active in securing the Grimond amendment, including a proposal that a Royal Commission be set up to investigate Shetland's constitutional position in case a Scottish parliament was re-established. The Nevis Research institute was paid to produce a report which clarified nine different possible constitutional statuses for Shetland, together with their implications.³⁶

These options included: the status quo; the rest of Scotland devolved but not Shetland; Shetland within a devolved Scotland; Shetland as part of an independent Scotland; Shetland devolved separately from Scotland; Shetland as part of a federal UK; Shetland as a condominium of England and Scotland; Shetland with special status; Shetland fully independent. As regards the consequences of Scottish devolution for the preservation of distinct identity and culture in Shetland the report considered the question of "how far Shetland is part of Scotland – in its sympathies and culture, and in its 'affairs of state' – the political, administrative, legal, educational, etc., activities of modern government."³⁷ On the one hand, it was pointed out that many Shetlanders felt somewhat detached from Scotland, and were distinctive in many aspects of their culture. On the other hand, Shetland was closely linked with Scotland for most of her 'affairs of state':

Whether these links serve them well is another matter, and in the face of Scottish devolution, some people in Shetland have sought to break them, presumably because they fear the consequences of a decision-making process which is more Scottish than the present process. These people consider that the present control exercised by the UK Parliament over all Scottish decisions is the best guarantee of Shetland's interests, and that devolution would weaken, if not destroy, that control.³⁸

The fact that many desired more influence for Shetland but were reluctant to see Scotland devolved was, nevertheless, contradictory. The Shetlanders actually had to vote 'No' to Scottish constitutional change – the paradox was that in order to achieve autonomy for Shetland, Shetlanders had to be against devolution in Scotland.³⁹ As devolution was not achieved at that

36 *The Shetland Report* 1978, 96; see also Manson 1978, 7-9; Grønneberg 1978, 62-69.

37 *The Shetland Report*, 96.

38 *The Shetland Report*, 96.

39 For local reflections on Shetland and the Scottish Parliament from this time period see e.g. Goodlad 1997, 23.

time, however, all other considerations were also forgotten as they became irrelevant.

Twenty years later there was much more support for devolution. Several issues of *The Shetland Times* published between March and September 1997 provided the reader with clear indications of the change in political atmosphere.⁴⁰ The Shetland Movement organized joint political party talks, meetings with local MP Jim Wallace and SIC convener Lewis Smith. As a direct result of the cross-party meeting, a letter was sent to the Secretary of State for Scotland, Donald Dewar, and this was considered a historic document. Representatives of local branches of all the political parties signed the document. The letter requested that Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles be given special consideration because of their historical and geographical circumstances. In addition, it requested that the structure of islands' government be embedded in the Scotland Act subject to Parliament's approval. An article in *The Shetland Times* entitled 'Movement's 'historical document' backed' stated:

Not everyone in Shetland will agree that a Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh is a positive step. However, it may well be the first step in a process of island devolution and as such cannot be ignored. The majority of people in Shetland are irritated and annoyed by basic services being handed over to anonymous voices, hundreds of miles away. Imagine any other community having to phone across 200 miles for emergency services. A greater level of local control is surely desirable and a Scottish Parliament may be our only chance to grasp it.⁴¹

The question now was whether the Shetlanders were going to vote, and, if so, how would they respond to the two questions asked: Should there be a separate Scottish parliament and, if so, should it have tax-raising powers? The Shetland Movement was hoping to mount a vigorous 'Yes/Yes' campaign in the run-up to the referendum. The article concluded that Shetland was probably the only community in Scotland which had achieved such a high level of political agreement over a Scottish parliament and its relationship to Shetland, and emphasised that everyone should take action and "make

40 See e.g. 'Support for own parliament. Althing debate', *The Shetland Times*, 14 Mar. 1997; Thompson, 'Paper Plans for future'; Thompson, 'Plea for opinions – not apathy', *The Shetland Times*, 1 Aug., 1997; Thompson, 'Double Yes' says council as White Paper on devolution welcomed', *The Shetland Times*, 8 Aug. 1997; 'Nailing colours to the mast', *The Shetland Times*, 8 Aug. 1997; Thompson, 'Opinion split down the middle as devolution debate gathers pace', *The Shetland Times*, 22 Aug. 1997; 'Your questions answered', *The Shetland Times*, 5 Sept. 1997.

41 'Movement's 'historic document' backed', *The Shetland Times*, 27 June 1997.

the most of this historic opportunity".⁴² There was, nevertheless, much less debate around these issues in 1990s Shetland in comparison to Shetland of the 1970s, and yet the proposed powers of a Scottish parliament were now much greater.

Another article published in *The Shetland Times* indicated that several voters supported the idea of a Scottish parliament, albeit to varying degrees.⁴³ There were arguments both in favour of and against devolution. Those in favour claimed that voting 'Yes' was necessary in order to secure democracy and to give power back to the people. Those who were against argued that there would be more bureaucracy and no advantages for Shetland, and that being British was preferable to being Scottish. Some interviewees thought that feelings in Shetland had probably changed since the last referendum. It was claimed that whereas many Shetlanders would like Shetland to be independent, most Shetlanders realised it was unrealistic and felt that "a slightly devolved form will bring them slightly nearer to the seat of government."⁴⁴

A brief survey carried out among the population in July 1997 showed that 69% were in favour of a Scottish parliament. The survey included an additional question relating to identity, which showed a very varied response. While 40% thought they were either "Scottish not British" or "more Scottish than British", the highest percentage of respondents (25%) preferred to be regarded as "other" category. Of these, 83% regarded themselves as Shetlanders.⁴⁵ In Shetland there was a consensus with regard to why Shetland needed a Scottish parliament.⁴⁶ In September 1997, public opinion in Shetland had already moved clearly towards the average Scottish opinion. In that year 62.4% voted 'Yes' in the devolution referendum.⁴⁷

The percentage of votes cast in Shetland was still notably lower than the average of 74% and the second 'Yes' was only narrowly accepted. Yet, while Shetland was still less enthusiastic about the proposed Scottish parliament in comparison to most places in Scotland, things had changed since the 1970s. The Shetland vote was locally seen to represent "a sea of change in opinion" since 1979, when about 72% of voters in the islands were against the idea.⁴⁸ This represented a swing of about 30%. The results of the vote were close to those found in the survey carried out in Shetland in July 1997.⁴⁹

42 'Movement's 'historic document' backed', *The Shetland Times*, 27 June 1997.

43 'Voters exchange support for Union Jack with union flak', *The Shetland Times*, 25 July 1997.

44 Local informants quoted in the above.

45 'Devolution thumbs-up in survey', *The Shetland Times*, 4 July 1997.

46 Yard, 'Politicians united over devolution', *The Shetland Times*, 29 Aug. 1997.

47 Thompson, 'Voters give double yes to devolution', *The Shetland Times*, 19 Sept. 1997.

48 Thompson, 'Voters give double yes to devolution', *The Shetland Times*, 19 Sept. 1997.

49 'Devolution thumbs-up in survey', *The Shetland Times*, 4 July 1997.

Because the re-establishment of the parliament in Edinburgh did not initially meet widespread approval in Shetland as discussed in this section, it is also necessary to ask what reasons lay behind the apparent shift in voting between 1979 and 1997. In the aftermath of the Second World War British politics had been dominated by the development of a welfare state, the structure of which was identifiably unionist. As noted in a recent article by Andrew Newby, although the eventual results of the referendum in 1979 maintained the constitutional *status quo*, a great deal of debate and analysis was undertaken in Scotland and this focused on issues such as self-government, nationalist strategies and Scottish identity. The Thatcher era saw the development of a 'democratic deficit' – with the Scottish nation voting solidly for Labour while being inevitably ruled by the Conservatives because of English voting behaviour.⁵⁰

As put by a Shetland commentator, the Tories seemed "to destroy our health service, our education system, our social security, our employment, our housing, our very dignity and sense of responsibility to each other, even our imagination."⁵¹ The need for a Scottish parliament became clearly pronounced in Scottish academic and polemic writing. In 1997 Tony Blair's Labour government took power at Westminster and the devolution referendum promised by the new government took place on 11 September 1997, resulting in a majority in favour of a creation of a Scottish parliament with tax-varying powers. This time Shetland saw in devolution an opportunity to have a greater say over its own situation.⁵² During a local debate in August 1997, it was remarked that during the eighteen years of Conservative rule more and more power had been taken away.⁵³ It was important to bring government closer to the people and ensure that decisions were taken by people who were closely in touch with their communities. Furthermore, it was thought that a Scottish parliament "will go a long way to remove the democratic deficit in Scotland" and would offer the Highlands and Islands much better representation than they ever had at Westminster.⁵⁴ Two reasons behind the shift in voting between 1979 (>30% in favour) and 1997 (62% in favour) are most apparent from the discussion presented above. The first is the impact of Thatcherism. The second is the feeling of increasing realism among the Shetlanders themselves.

These reasons are confirmed in the information gathered by correspondents of *The Shetland Times* and quoted earlier in this section.

50 Newby 2009, 308.

51 'Da Wadder Eye' 1992, 23.

52 For local reflections on Shetland and the Scottish Parliament from this time period see e.g. Goodlad 1997, 23.

53 Yard, 'Politicians united over devolution', *The Shetland Times*, 29 Aug. 1997.

54 Yard, 'Politicians united over devolution', *The Shetland Times*, 29 Aug. 1997.

While many Shetlanders had initially desired independent development for Shetland, by the 1990s devolution was increasingly seen as beneficial for the islands.⁵⁵ Yet, already in 1978 it had appeared improbable that Shetland could ever function as an independent state. *The Shetland Report* remarked that “the circumstances in which this might come about are hard to visualise.”⁵⁶

A similar explanation has been given by Callum Brown. Shetlanders were less concerned with big constitutional issues in the referendum votes of 1974 and 1979 than with the protection of their immediate interests. The ‘No’ vote could be seen as a critical reminder to the authorities of the Shetlanders’ interests and feelings.⁵⁷ By the late 1990s the oil-prices had stabilised and Shetlanders were thriving in comparison to their situation during, in Brown’s words, much of their twentieth-century history. As a consequence, the boundaries that were being drawn between locals and newcomers by the community in the 1970s were becoming less significant.⁵⁸

In the locals’ view, those Shetlanders who argued in favour of a Scottish parliament and had supported this position over the years had done so on the grounds that this would give the peripheral regions more local control and a greater influence on national decision-making. The main problem now was to ensure that there was effective communication between the island authority and national government and that grassroots ideas were taken into consideration in the decision-making process:

Shetlanders have, albeit with little enthusiasm, endorsed the idea of a Scottish parliament. Those who have argued in favour of a parliament over the years have done so on the grounds that it will give the peripheral areas more local control over their affairs and a greater input into national decision-making. It is a two-way process, and close contacts with Scottish Office politicians are essential as are with the civil servants. While closer contact is already being demonstrated, with visits from three ministers in as many weeks, perhaps Thatcher’s visit to Scotland last week was a timely reminder of how out of touch governments can get with the regions, giving a further boost to the yes campaign.⁵⁹

It was also noted that the taxation arguments raised by the opposition had an effect, evident in the voting figures.⁶⁰ Whether or not the proposed

55 Thompson, ‘Voters exchange support for Union Jack with union flak’, *The Shetland Times*, 25 July 1997.

56 *The Shetland Report* 1978, 164.

57 Brown 1998, 177.

58 Brown 1998, 178.

59 ‘Making it work’, *The Shetland Times*, 19 Sept. 1997.

60 ‘Making it work’, *The Shetland Times*, 19 Sept. 1997.

parliament would be a first step to independence remained to be seen. Yet, it was perceived as only a small step in the reform of government promised in the Labour manifesto. SIC had already called for further devolution of power in the 1990s when there were unsuccessful attempts to gain more say for the three island groups.⁶¹ While Scottish devolution and the proposed Scottish parliament were seen to have potentially been a good deal for Shetland, some forms of centralisation were considered unnecessary by the Shetlanders: some services, such as water, and some aspects of tourism were handled from the mainland whereas they could be, in local opinion, successfully managed by the isles.⁶²

North Sea oil – challenges to Shetland’s distinctiveness

In the 1970s, as considered above, oil-related developments strengthened the Shetlanders’ desire for political autonomy and led to the emergence of an autonomist movement, while at the same time the majority of Shetlanders resisted the idea of a Scottish parliament, which was reflected in referendum results. Was there a connection between political change and the ways in which Shetland’s past was constructed? Whereas a variety of different opinions have been recorded by researchers visiting the isles in the 1970s and the 1980s, fieldwork accounts agree on the significance which Shetlanders attributed to the Norse history of the isles.⁶³ Examination of articles published in local newspapers and the literary magazine *The New Shetlander* also shows the extent to which Shetland culture was seen at times as opposite to, rather than part of, Scottish culture.

One example was an article published in *The New Shetlander* in 1972: an anonymous author turned the readers’ attention to the proud medieval history of the isles.⁶⁴ The well-known scholar of the isles, Barbara Crawford, had just given a lecture a few weeks earlier to the Shetland Archaeological and Natural History Society on Shetland’s medieval history.⁶⁵ Highlighting the theme of Crawford’s lecture, which concerned the transfer of the isles to Scotland, the author expressed his regrets that Shetland pupils were brought up on a “diet of Scottish culture and history” while they at the same time were ignorant of the fact that their home islands had an interesting and honourable past. Commenting on the opinion of another Shetlander, the author noted that “his comments were logical but his terms were poorly defined and would

61 Robertson, ‘Cluness calls for more local control’, *The Shetland Times*, 7 Mar. 2008.

62 Personal discussion with Sandy Cluness, 4 March 2008.

63 See e.g. Renwanz 1980; Melchers 1985.

64 ‘Da Wadder Eye’ 1972, 35.

65 For Crawford’s work on Shetland see e.g. Crawford 1971, 1987, 1995.

have left England as well as Shetland bereft and cultureless. To him culture was synonymous with bag-pipes and kilts."⁶⁶

Views such as the ones criticised above fell into the mythology of the Celtic Romantic movement and were based on stereotypes of Scottish culture and identity. By commenting on the use of Scottish versions of the past in education this commentator suggests a focus on Shetland's Norse history at the expense of its Scottish history. The issue of resistance to Scotland as a perceived hegemonic power becomes particularly obvious in the writings of this commentator. Similar comments on education, however, can be found much earlier, for example on the pages of *The Shetland News* in the early 1940s.⁶⁷

What made the new situation different from the previous periods was the political character of the time period. Perceptions of Shetland as culturally Norse had existed since the nineteenth century. Towards the late-nineteenth century circumstances in the isles had changed and growing interest in the Norse past became a characteristic feature of local writing around the time of the passing of the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act of 1886. Different interpretations have been given by locals and researchers on the significance of the emerging discourses aiming at creating a cultural distance between the Northern Isles and the rest of Scotland. Some authors, such as Bronwen Cohen, have seen the initiation of a cultural movement as a comment on the oppressive nature of Scottish rule and "a tendency to ignore, regret or reject the Scottish contribution to Shetland society."⁶⁸ Others, such as Callum Brown, have emphasised its character as a form of counterculture, which did not have a serious impact on political life.⁶⁹

For the purposes of analysis I focused on scholarly works published during the period and the work of local writers and editors such as John and Laurence Graham. In many respects the arguments presented in the local press mirrored national thinking in general, and there were parallels between the uses of Norse history in late-nineteenth century and the 1970s. The national press and Shetland journalists used similar arguments, thereby scholars and writers from outside the isles contributed to images and perceptions of Shetland as a special case and as particularly Norse. It had become common to back the case for autonomy by references to Scandinavia and these discourses were also reproduced through research literature. Gunnel Melchers, for example, described the pledging of Shetland as "only a few hundred years ago" and the

66 'Da Wadder Eye' 1972, 35.

67 For a wider discussion of cultural separateness during the war and cultural promotion through Shetland organisations before and after 1945 see Nihtinen 2011, 88-99.

68 Cohen 1983, 491.

69 Brown 1998, 58.

culture of the isles as an “amalgamation of two cultures, but uniquely distant from both”, by which she referred to the blending of Norn and Scots.⁷⁰

Examination of the writings of John and Laurence Graham, who edited *The New Shetlander* for more than forty years, proved to be useful in analysing the ways in which terms and concepts have evolved with the change in political circumstances.⁷¹ In the late 1970s local articles described the contemporary dialect as a product of “the merging of Norn with Scots and English”, an amalgam in which the Norn element was progressively disappearing.⁷² Similarly, Graham’s *Shetland Dictionary* depicted the dialect as “an amalgam of Norse, Lowland Scots and English, each element reflecting a period in the islands’ history dominated by these respective nations”.⁷³ The images of decline Graham portrays were connected to the fact that Shetland had no regular schools until the early-eighteenth century, when the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge began to send itinerant teachers to the isles. Commenting on the language at the beginning of the eighteenth century John Graham wrote that language “enshrined the cultural identity of the Shetlander”. Furthermore, its strong Norse flavour was, Graham argued, “a living link with Shetland’s Scandinavian past, now tending to become idealised against the background of Scottish exploitation and disregard of local custom and tradition”.⁷⁴

Similar examples of national historical writing can also be seen in Laurence Graham’s article on Shetland crofters and another one on the Shetland dialect and the Shetland press, which consider aspects of late-nineteenth century Shetland.⁷⁵ Island patriotic rhetoric was vigorous in Shetland of the 1970s and 1980s, but at the same time it was a continuation of a long tradition.

The 1990s – post-devolution: regional within Scotland

... Shetland identity has been constructed by several generations of local writers. Saxby’s construction of Shetland as culturally Norse (and that of her peers such as Burgess and Arthur Laurenson) has been influential, although no other writer has been as bombastically in favour of empire as Saxby. Shetland is often still seen in these terms as an everyday marker

70 Melchers 1985, 89.

71 It is worthy of note that in the consideration presented above the views of John and Laurence Graham are treated as similar only on the basis that they were the editors of the *New Shetlander* together and thus represent a certain type of editorial practices and commentaries.

72 Graham 1977, 6.

73 Graham 1999, XI.

74 Graham 1977, 6.

75 See e.g. Graham 1980, 6-7.

such as Old Norse place names on road signs shows. But the somewhat fetishistic (I use the term here in the Freudian sense) contemporary invocation of Scandinavia can often be a reductive and, at worst, xenophobic trope, used to separate Shetland from the Scottish polity it has clearly and straightforwardly been part of since the mid fifteenth century.⁷⁶

Recent understandings of Shetland culture can be described in two ways. Firstly, historical writing has aimed at redressing Norn-related myths. Secondly, regional consciousness has been expressed by dialect promotion, the reassessment of Shetland literature and images of Shetland in tourism as well as wider promotion of other aspects of Shetland history as socio-economic rather than nationalist projects. In the early 1990s in an article on the Shetland dialect Derrick Tulloch wrote that while the Shetland dialect has been generally described as a mixture of Scots and Norn, it would be just as correct to call it 'heavily Norn-influenced Scots.'⁷⁷ The Shetlanders had seen their dialect as "unique" and not related to the mainland Scots dialects, but if Shetlanders were willing to see it as part of the Scots language then its future "would be at least one of survival and perhaps of expansion".

For the purposes of my study of discourses produced in the 1990s and the start of the new millennium I focused not only on the views of those scholars who had reconsidered and reassessed the history of Norn and Scots, but also on local writers and commentators active during the time period as well as on representatives of the younger generation of writers such as Mark Smith. In popular discourses and tourist material it is still not uncommon to encounter images of Norn as modified or "watered down" into Shetland dialect. A key component of Shetland folklore as seen, for example, by contemporary Shetland storyteller and author Davy Cooper, is "the ancient Norn language which has been modified and watered down into the present Shetland dialect".⁷⁸ Images of erosion or loss can be questioned as the situation of the Shetland dialect is not much different from the situation of dialects in other British and European communities, especially as modernisation and globalisation have similar effects on dialects.

The use of Norse elements has, nevertheless, been significant for literary production and experimenting with language, as suggested for instance by authors such as Robert Alan Jamieson. A contributing factor to separateness has been also, somewhat paradoxically, the production of Scots dictionaries,

76 Smith 2009, 27.

77 Tulloch 1992, 35.

78 Cooper 2007, 31. Davy Cooper is also the author of *Viking Stories*, published by the Shetland Amenity Trust in 2004.

such as the *Concise Scots Dictionary*, which explicitly declared exclusion of vocabulary from Shetland, Orkney and Caithness, more specifically material “from these areas which belongs not to Scots but to Norn, the Norse language formerly spoken there”.⁷⁹

A brief look at the collection of writings on Shetland identity published in 2009 can be seen as representative of changing discourses: it includes themes such as oil, landscape, Shetland’s exiles and Shetland literature as major themes of identity.⁸⁰ In Orkney the theme of exile has also grown into a central identity theme. For instance, Orcadians have become increasingly aware of their islands’ Canadian connection.⁸¹ The contribution of Shetland writer Mark Smith shows how recent historical writing in the isles has reconsidered the role of individual writers, such as Margaret Chalmers and Jessie M. E. Saxby, to mention just a few. In Smith’s conception the beginning of Shetland literature can be traced back to the early-nineteenth century when a number of poetry books and a novel emerged. Margaret Chalmers, who in 1813 reflected on Shetland’s Scandinavian past and British present, mentioned Shetland’s Norse heritage but distanced herself from the past in favour of contemporary British patriotism, the dominant discourse of her time. Britain and Europe were her source of inspiration.⁸² Similarly, in Smith’s presentation, the main literary figure of the period of Norse Romanticism Jessie M. E. Saxby explored Shetland as Scandinavian and British. She admired the values of the Empire and saw them embodied in the Norsemen. This presentation of Shetland literature also emphasises the fact that Shetland has been clearly and unquestionably part of Scotland since the fifteenth century.

Similar overtones have been given to place branding and marketing strategies. The use of the Vikings and Norse imagery continued in literature and in the cultural landscape of the isles throughout the twentieth century up to the present day.⁸³ The strategies adopted by both a place branding project (2003) and a dialect promotion movement (2004), however, demonstrated that the image of Shetland was both modernised and culturally reconstructed as that of a region within Scotland.⁸⁴ Similar motivation was also discernible in tourism presentations to the Highlands and Islands Convention in Lerwick in 2008: Shetland was seen as “indisputably part of Scotland” yet a very

79 Robinson 1996, XVII-XVIII.

80 *Identity Essays Shetland* (2009); Smith (2014). On language and literature see also D’Arcy (1996) and Hall (2010).

81 Seibert 2008, 309.

82 Smith 2009, 23.

83 See e.g. Brown 1998, 28; 58.

84 On place branding see report by Lodge 2003. On dialect activism see Dialect Convention papers in *Dialect* 2004.

different part. Distinctiveness was seen as an asset for Shetland and reflected the national strategy by presenting to customers a “national dish with local flavour”.⁸⁵

Conclusion

In this article I discussed some of the main themes and findings of my doctoral dissertation, which examined Shetland from the perspective of nationalism and regional consciousness in relation to mainland Scotland. In my dissertation, I highlighted some of the ways in which Shetlanders have responded to recent changes in the isles and Scotland as a whole, during two broad time periods: first, the beginning of the North Sea oil era – 1980s, and second, in the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium, by focusing on issues of political, cultural and linguistic autonomy. Within the context of economic and political changes in the late-twentieth century, the most recent ones being the impact of Britain’s North Sea oil and the reconstruction of a Scottish parliament, political discourses in Shetland changed from opposition to Scottish devolution in the 1970s to support for it in the 1990s. The explanation for these developments were found both in Thatcherism and the strengthening of Scotland’s and Shetland’s economy as a result of the development of oil industries and funds. These developments were paralleled by increasing emphasis on cultural aspects of difference in the isles. During the first time period cultural promotion was constructed as a defence project, which also corresponded to the political atmosphere in the isles. In turn, the examination of discourses produced in the 1990s and post-devolution showed a shift towards the reconstruction of Shetland as more clearly culturally Scottish, while at the same time retaining its cultural specificity.

Further research on contemporary spatial narratives, regional identities and regions in British contexts combined with analysis of the development of ideas of cultural distinctiveness would provide interesting additional information. Through further examination and inclusion of two distinct regions it would be possible to receive a wider picture of the ways in which ethnically-derived conceptions of nationalism are rewritten and redefined.

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