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Naught but Trouble – The Hays in Yell 1755-1824

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THIS new collection of letters and related documents about the Hay family adds a unique and interesting case study to the growing area of Northern Studies, especially Orkney and Shetland Studies. Edited extracts from personal correspondence, court records and historical descriptions detail various aspects of the mercantile activities in the Shetland Islands in the period 1755 to 1824. This is perhaps the best known of Shetland firms, and the survival of so much detailed information provides a valuable snapshot of the life of a merchant family in the Scottish Northern Isles during the 18th and 19th centuries, and a unique insight into the everyday relationships between the local fishermen, tacksmen, landowners and merchants. The main focus is on the island of Yell, where the Hay family was involved in the fishing trade, before moving their business activities to the growing town of Lerwick in the early 19th century. John Ballantyne is a historical researcher in Edinburgh, who visits Shetland regularly. Together with Shetland Archivist Brian Smith he has published a series of edited collections, such as *Shetland Documents, 1195-1579* (1999) and *Shetland Documents, 1580-1611* (1994). As a source for micro-historical research, this collection is a useful addition to publications such as James Nicolson's *Hay & Company, Merchants in Shetland* (1982), or works covering the wider context of Shetland's trade such as Hance Smith's *Shetland Life and Trade 1550-1914* (1984/2003) or John Armstrong's *The Vital Spark: The British Coastal Trade 1700-1930* (2009).

William Hay, the first of what became an enduring family business in the Shetland Islands, initially built a house on the shore of Southladies Voe in Yell in 1760. The family retained their interest in the fishing trade in the north of the Shetland Islands, with the documents providing fascinating details of

the summer fishing from Fethaland and Northmavine. Other family members moved away from Yell to set up additional ventures and business partnerships in other parts of Shetland, such as the Shetland Bank (1821), Hay & Ogilvys (1822), and finally Hay & Company in Lerwick (1844). As general merchants the Hays established shops at Lerwick, Scalloway, Whalsay, North Roe and other parts of the Shetland Isles, becoming in time the largest supplier of coal and timber. The firm also played a major role in the fishing industry, both as fishcurers and owners of fishing vessels. Smuggling also contributed to the family's prosperity, forming part of their everyday commercial activities. The economic gains of this illicit trading activity were reinvested into the existing local industries, with the Hay family instrumental in the development of the Shetland fishing industry, trade and shipbuilding well into the 20th century.

The book begins with a short introduction giving a detailed family history, starting with William Hay's birth in 1723 in the Kilsyth district of North Lanarkshire, his move to Shetland after the death of his father, and the activities of his descendants in Shetland that relate to the fishing trade, cattle trade, kelp trade and Greenland whaling. This is followed by extracts from correspondence between the Hays and their employees and tenants, as well as other related documents. Nine appendices then cover a specific topic such as a 'Description of the Lands in Westsandwick on the island of Yell, c.1774' (App.1), the establishment of a Fishing station at Sound, West Yell (App.2) and 'Rental of lands of Windhouse Estate set in tack by Robert Neven to William Hay, October 1780' (App.3). Appendices 4 to 7 are extracts of existing publications that relate to the Hay family and their commercial activities, and as such provide good pointers on where to find both published and unpublished research materials. So, for example, extracts from 'Evidence to the Parliamentary Committee of Enquiry into the state of the British Fisheries, given by James Hay, merchant from Lerwick, 1785' (App.4) also refers to papers and correspondence of James Hay in connection with the proposals. This is followed by a report 'On the State of Fisheries in the Islands of Zetland, 1786 by a Native of Zetland' (App.5), and further extracts relating to the fisheries of Shetland from John Shirreff (1808), Samuel Hibbert (1818) and Charles Fothergill's journal of his visit to Shetland, 1806 (Apps. 6, 7, 8). The last appendix (9) provides a detailed case study of a lesser known type of Scottish fisheries, the 'whale caas' or coastal whaling. It documents both the conduct of one particular 'caa' in 1819 on the island of Yell, and the legal action regarding the share of proceeds that followed. The book concludes with sections detailing bibliographical information on some of the people mentioned in the documents, a useful list of local placenames and ships mentioned in the book, including notes about

the skipper, the route taken or the ships' activities, and a final glossary and list of references.

The selection of photographs and other illustrations is excellent, with both archival and contemporary images used, which brings alive the historical events and landscapes referred to in the texts. However, the outline maps on pages 11-13 could perhaps have been supplemented with a small selection of historical maps (such as seen on p. 225), which would have added to the quality of the information. For the in-depth reader, it would perhaps have been also beneficial to not only add references to primary resources, but also cross-references to particular sections in the book. Particularly in the last three sections (consisting of bibliographical notes, placenames and ships names) this would have allowed interesting links to be made across different texts, although the references to primary documents such as court records make further research easily accessible.

Due to the large quantity of historical documents included, the introduction is perhaps short, with only a brief chronological outline given of the activities of the Hay family, without adding any wider historical context or pointers to related literature. Nevertheless, Ballantyne's collection enables a deeper and more nuanced understanding of historical sources, and provides an opportunity to fill gaps in the analysis of the social and economic relationships between fishing merchants, landowners and population across northern Scotland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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