

Shetland's Norse Past and Scottish Present in the Early Eighteenth Century

Linda Riddell

THE THREE EARLIEST substantial descriptions of Shetland were produced in the first half of the eighteenth century. They are noteworthy for, among other reasons, the variety of writers. One description was a composite of accounts by several people edited by Sir Robert Sibbald (who was never in Shetland), another was written by a visitor, the Rev. John Brand, and the third by a Shetlander, Thomas Gifford.¹ While these works have been studied individually, here a comparative approach has been taken in relation to three sets of questions about their contents.²

Shetland had been part of the Norwegian kingdom until pawned to the Scottish crown as part of the dowry of Margaret of Denmark on her marriage to James III in 1469. By the end of the seventeenth century, it had been governed as part of Scotland for over two hundred years. Contact with Norway had gradually eroded, as described by Brian Smith, until by this time, traffic 'must have been very slight indeed, and the cultural links, other than antiquarian ones, correspondingly tenuous.'³ But Shetland was remote from the centre of political power in Scotland and, to say the least, not generally well known before these three works were written.

The first set of questions concerns the romantic notions about the Norse heritage of the Shetlanders (and Orcadians) prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They have been widely discussed, most comprehensively by Bronwen Cohen and Sebastian Seibert; some of the questions continue to be discussed today.⁴ This article assesses whether and how these ideas were acknowledged, and if there was evidence of potential

1 Brand 1701; Sibbald 1711; Gifford 1879

2 Riddell 2017 (Sibbald); Smith 2003 (Brand); Smith 1976 (Gifford)

3 Smith 1990, 35

4 For Shetland, Cohen 1983 and, for Orkney, Seibert 2008

conflict between Shetland's Norse past and Scottish present at the earlier period when Sibbald, Brand and Gifford wrote.

Also well-recognised is the Shetlanders' aversion to being termed Scottish, and again – among some islanders at least – this still exists today.⁵ The next interconnected set of questions therefore involves Shetland in relation to Scotland. When the descriptions were written, in the words of Charles Withers, 'Geography and chorography as useful knowledges were in this period the principal means to the construction of patriotism and national identity.'⁶ When the methodology of these emerging disciplines was applied to Shetland, to what extent was its unique history recognised and were distinctive Shetlandic characteristics being explored, explained, exaggerated or diminished? Was there a sense that a Scottish identity was being imposed on Shetland?

The final question concerns the social and economic circumstances in Shetland. Some momentous events on a national scale, from the 'Glorious Revolution' in 1688 to the Union of the Parliaments in 1707, occurred at this period. It also saw great change in Shetland. The famines of the 1690s were particularly severe, and there was 'disorder among all classes of Shetlanders'.⁷ The wars with France were destructive, and in 1700 came the first of a series of devastating attacks of smallpox.⁸ Finally, fiscal legislation put an end to the diminishing trade operated by German merchants, who had dealt directly with both tenants and landowners.⁹ The gap was filled by local landowners who developed trading links. They also, however, introduced fishing tenures that ensured that tenants sold their fish only to their landlord or his appointed alternative, and thus tied them into a process of truck and debt.¹⁰ This has been described as 'a small revolution', but one which 'catapulted most Shetlanders from a relatively free state into an unfree one'.¹¹ This article therefore also questions whether these events, which had such significant and far-reaching consequences nationally and locally, can be traced in these contemporary accounts.

The Sources

The first publication of the three in 1701 was Brand's *A Brief Description of Orkney, Shetland, Pightland Firth and Caithness*; Sibbald's *Description of the*

5 The best source is social media but see Malcom 2012 and Nihtinen 2011, especially 158-164

6 Withers 1995, 375

7 Smith 1976; for the famine see Cullen 2010, especially 86-92

8 For the effects on Shetland's population see Thomson 1983

9 Smith 1984, 35-45; Smith 1979, 16; Smith 2017, 4-9

10 Smith 1976

11 Smith 1976; Smith 2000, 80

Isles of Orkney and Zetland was published in 1711; and Gifford's *An Historical description of the Zetland Islands in the Year 1733* not until 1786.¹²

Sibbald's is the most complex of these works and it has not been widely known, partly because it was later ascribed to Robert Monteith, leading to some confusion over its provenance.¹³ Robert Sibbald (1641-1722) was and is, however, by far the most widely known of the three authors, a founder of the Botanical Garden in Edinburgh, President of Royal Society of Physicians and the first Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh University. Educated in Edinburgh, Holland and France, he was a distinguished physician and a polymath with a vision for the creation of useful natural knowledge. So, as well as medicine, his interests included natural history, geography, chemistry, divinity and antiquarianism, and he wrote on many topics in both English and Latin. Career success in the seventeenth century required an influential patron and Sibbald's was James Drummond, the Earl, and later Duke of Perth and Chancellor of Scotland. This prominent courtier was a convert to Catholicism and a friend of the Duke of York, later James VII and II, who was resident at Holyrood Palace in 1681-2. With Perth's support, Sibbald was knighted in 1682 and appointed Physician-in-ordinary to the King and Geographer Royal for Scotland.¹⁴

His commission was to produce a natural history and geographical description of Scotland, and he gathered material both from existing accounts and contemporary informants. He advertised for information using questionnaires, one version sent to parish ministers and others to landowners and officials.¹⁵ This was a method employed by others before and after him – the best-known example being the (Old) *Statistical Account of Scotland* published by Sir John Sinclair in the 1790s. Sibbald compiled a mass of material, some of which he used in writing on topics ranging from the Picts to contemporary fishing and whaling. The intended atlas, however, did not come to fruition and the volume on Orkney and Shetland was one of only three published; the others were on Linlithgowshire and Stirlingshire, and Fife and Kinross (both 1710).

Sibbald's description starts with a map, then includes a general section, lists of the parishes concentrating on harbours, islands and churches, and fuller descriptions of some parishes. The last two chapters are called 'Concerning the *Natural Advantages of Shetland*, for the Inhabitants, and their Usefulness to the Crown of Great-Britain' and 'Of the first Inhabitants of these Isles,

12 Gifford's *Historical Description* was first published in John Nichols (ed.) 1786, *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica* No. XXXVII, London: J. Nichols

13 The provenance of Sibbald's information is analysed in Riddell 2017

14 Withers 1996, 44-48

15 His warrant, advertisement and questionnaire are printed in Withers 1996, 65-69

that they are the *Thule* mention'd by *Tacitus*, and how they came to belong to the Crown of *Scotland*'. These final chapters reveal Sibbald's particular interests. Since he drew on a number of sources, new and existing, there are repetitions, overlaps and even contradictions. He edited the material sent to him but discarded very little of it and made little personal contribution. Most information came from ministers of the Church of Scotland, most of whom had been in Shetland long enough to be able to give knowledgeable accounts from the standpoint of their class, calling and specific geographical location.¹⁶ Although probably all the material dated from at least a quarter of a century before publication, he did not mention the dates or suggest it might no longer be accurate. Of course, much of the topographic description remained valid, but other information must be considered within the context of the 1680s (and some much earlier), rather than the publication date of 1711.

By then, Brand had published his description. John Brand, (1669-1738) was born and educated in Edinburgh and appointed in 1694 to the parish of Bo'ness, where he remained until his death.¹⁷ The General Assembly sent him on commissions, including in 1700 to Orkney, Shetland and Caithness. His book, prompted by and dedicated to the Duke of Hamilton, contained four chapters about Shetland; two were general descriptions of the place and people, the third was about 'Ancient Monuments, Curiosities, strange Providences' and the last concerned the fish trade. It was the first publication to deal comprehensively with Shetland, which he judged 'unknown to most of the Nation'.¹⁸ His intention was to give 'a Particular View ... of the several *Isles* thereto belonging; Together with an Account of what is most Rare and Remarkable therein'.¹⁹ He was in Shetland for about three weeks; his description is not a travelogue, and does not say where he went – probably not far from Lerwick – or whom he encountered, though he did mention meeting gentlemen and merchants including a 'Hamburgher-Bremen'.²⁰ His informants were not identified by name, though, unsurprisingly, some were ministers. We hear their voices in the descriptions of the problems they faced and the poor state of the churches.²¹

The third description was by Thomas Gifford (c.1680 – 1760). He was descended from a sixteenth-century minister in Shetland and succeeded his

16 Their material has been printed in Bruce 1908 and discussed in Riddell 2017.

17 Cadell 2004; Smith 2003

18 Brand 1701, Preface

19 Ibid., Title

20 Ibid., 67, 129 It was based on his diary, 'but a diary transcribed' (Preface), and was not written in the first person. According to Flinn 1989, 134 he went only as far from Lerwick as Scalloway.

21 Brand 1701, e.g. 92, 95, 97, 103-104

father as the Chamberlain for the Earl of Morton, who held the Earldom of Orkney and Lordship of Zetland.²² Gifford was one of a group of professional men who bought substantial lands when previous landowners went bankrupt at the end of the seventeenth century.²³ He added to his estate so that it became the largest in Shetland and was a pioneer of the new methods of fishing tenures and trade.²⁴ As Steward and Justiciar Depute, he collected taxes and crown rents, was responsible for local government and so was ideally placed to know about the economy and society. His book contains a map and descriptions of the topography, agriculture, trade and people, chapters on the first inhabitants, earlier and current government, property law and crown rents, and copies of documents, such as local 'Country Acts', as appendices. His account is an authoritative one, but he gave no reason for writing it. It may have been for the thirteenth Earl of Morton, his employer.²⁵ A copy was presented to the Earl or his successor among others, but it was not published in Gifford's lifetime.²⁶

Sibbald's description is such a concoction from various sources that we must be wary of the provenance and date of his information.²⁷ Brand's style is not dissimilar to Sibbald's, less obviously a compilation and less repetitive, but discursive, and he digressed at length on religious topics. In contrast, Gifford's literary style is 'as terse and lucid as that of his business letters'.²⁸ All the descriptions are structured around the parishes and contain a lot of geographical material such as topography, geology, meteorology, agriculture, fishing and settlement, plus wild life and items of antiquarian interest. Each contains some unique details; all include some qualitative appraisal as well as straightforward description, but not a detailed analysis of the current economic or social scene. They are similar in basic structure and purpose -- the dissemination of knowledge about Shetland -- and the ideas which influenced Sibbald's nationwide work, which will be discussed later, can be seen in them all. Unlike the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the period when they were produced has not been given a great deal of attention in the context of Shetland's Norse and Scottish past.

22 Stevenson 1879, x-xi. Gifford probably served four earls; Paul 1909, 380-381

23 Smith 1976; Smith 1979, 14

24 Stevenson 1879, xi; Smith 1976; Smith 2003, 71-76

25 In 1733, George Douglas, (1662-1738) was 13th Earl of Morton; Paul 1909, 380-38. Hibbert 1832, 326 suggested it was not published because the Earl was offended by some of the content.

26 Stevenson 1879, viii stated that Gifford presented a signed copy when the Earl of Morton was President of the Royal Society. This is not possible as Gifford died in 1760 and James Douglas, the 14th Earl, was President from 1763. Morton was president of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh from 1737 and visited Orkney in 1739; Guerrini 2004.

27 Riddell 2017

28 Smith 1976

Contemporary Geographical Enquiry

Of the three writers, the only one to make an impact on the national stage and on later scholarship nationally was Sibbald. The environment of his work has been recognised as a time of vigorous scholarship, generally considered a prelude to the Enlightenment of the following century, both in its spirit of enquiry and its multidisciplinary nature.²⁹ Recent studies have emphasised the dynamism and cosmopolitanism of the culture and what Clare Jackson termed the 'spirit of virtuoso pansophism'.³⁰ Sibbald was one of the leading scholars who benefitted from this brief period of royal patronage of Scottish intellectual activity.

Geography was emerging as an academic discipline and became part of the intellectual climate, though perhaps not of the mainstream of Enlightenment.³¹ It was only one of the interlinked disciplines and philosophies which Sibbald engaged in, and he practised methodologies of geographical enquiry, gathering information which could be the basis of a comparative approach to how things differed across locations. His projected atlas has been set within the context of 'how Scotland came to know itself' through topographical investigation and mapping, spurred by patriotic aspirations to tackle Scotland's weaknesses.³² In his published studies of Scottish counties, Sibbald was a chorographer, describing specific areas rather than developing large themes.³³ His wider purpose was, however, a desire to increase knowledge not just for philosophical or theoretical reasons, but also for practical ones – to identify ways of increasing prosperity both for the good of the people and to increase royal revenue.³⁴ It was also linked to the 'spirit of improvement', which led to the agricultural changes in the later eighteenth century, but which was conspicuously lacking in Shetland.³⁵ In his utilitarian focus, therefore, as well as his questionnaire methodology, Sibbald prefigured later geographical study.³⁶

Sibbald envisaged economic development within a political and social framework of a cohesive monarchical government and establishment, with stability ensured through hierarchy, and the recipients of his questions

29 This view refutes statements that Scotland was barren of intellectual activity before the Union; e.g. Emerson, 1988, 42-43; Allen 1993, 8; Ferguson 1998, 173; Withers 2001, 69, Jackson 2003

30 *Ibid.*, 27; Bowie 2012

31 Withers 2000, 70

32 Withers 1995, 375; Ouston 1982, 151-153

33 Rohl 2011

34 Ouston 1982, 135-136, 151-152; Emerson, 1988, 48, 55-56; Wood 2003, 97

35 Withers 2007, 7; Smith 1979

36 Withers 2000, 69

reinforced his ideas.³⁷ It was a two-way process; patronage financed his endeavour of national natural knowledge, which he pursued with altruistic scholarship but with an eye on bolstering his pet ideas and retaining his patronage. This backfired when James' religious/political actions in favour of Roman Catholics meant that Sibbald, who had converted to Catholicism, had to flee from Edinburgh and, despite his re-conversion, his later career suffered from lack of political support.³⁸

Sibbald's Shetland work was published more than twenty years after his initial research and so spanned two periods of political status. Some scholars have suggested that the Union brought a change of ideas on both identity and the pursuit and purposes of knowledge, but this work was published shortly afterwards and firmly rooted in pre-existing research.³⁹

Besides fostering attempts to survey and map the country, Sibbald's methodologies of learning included the avid amassing of books, documents and material from his wide correspondence.⁴⁰ An unintended result was that his work suffered from too wide a focus – he wrote much more than he published – as well as from disputes and misfortunes.⁴¹ His enquiries into the past were part and parcel of his geographical investigation. When writing, he was an antiquarian rather than a historian. Like other chorographers of the period, he borrowed from earlier accounts and tried to integrate local knowledge with current scholarly ideas and his own objectives.⁴² In his Shetland volume, he often quoted his sources verbatim; on the other hand, he sometimes used unattributed material uncritically, combining material from different periods. He was particularly interested in the origins of the Scottish nation. In the contemporary discourse about national identity, as analysed for example by William Ferguson and Colin Kidd, Norse roots were given scant consideration.⁴³ In the Northern Isles, they could not be ignored.

A similar drive to increase knowledge, both of contemporary and of historical circumstances, can also be discerned in Brand's and Gifford's writing. Their work has not been discussed in the context of the development of historical or geographical thought, though both are important in the local historiography.⁴⁴ Brand wrote that 'the Knowledge of History, is that which the Most of Men are taken with, as being both Pleasant and Useful'.⁴⁵ Having

37 Ouston 1982, 151

38 Emerson 1988, 51

39 Ferguson 1998, 173

40 Allan 1993, 29. Emerson 1988 lists his wide range of contacts.

41 Withers 2001, 75; Riddell 2017, 35-36

42 Rohl 2011, 15-16

43 Ferguson 1998, 144-195; 13; Kidd 1999

44 Smith, Brand and Introduction to Gifford

45 Brand 1701, Preface

visited Orkney and Shetland, he was inspired to share his knowledge with a wider readership largely ignorant of the islands, and he also added his ideas on how their economies could be developed for the public good. His methodology was different – based on his own experience and face-to-face encounters, rather than the questionnaires and contribution-gathering of Sibbald. Gifford wrote, presumably, for a private readership, but his local knowledge was greater than both of the others. His ideas for the development of the economy were practical and already put into practice; whether they were for the ‘public good’ was a major contention of the anti-Scottish commentators of later times.

The Romantic View of Shetland’s Norse Past

The idealisation of Shetland’s Norse past in comparison to its history since the transfer to the Scottish crown has three strands. The first is the belief that, after 1469, Shetlanders were subject to unusually harsh treatment by Scottish incomers who acquired land and positions of power. The nefarious activities of the sixteenth-century Stewart Earls, Robert (Earl 1581-93) and Patrick (1593-1614), and their kinsman, Laurence Bruce of Cultmalindie, appear to have been retained in memory.⁴⁶ Nineteenth-century writers such as Patrick Neill, Arthur Edmonston, Samuel Hibbert and Christian Ployen commented on them.⁴⁷ The sixteenth-century documents printed in 1859 in *Oppressions of the Sixteenth Century in the Islands of Orkney and Zetland* illustrated the theme and tone.⁴⁸ The exploitation of their tenants by local landowners with fishing tenures, truck systems and debt, which had then been in place for well over a century, became construed as ‘Scottish tyranny’.⁴⁹ If ‘heritage seems both inherent and a matter of choice,’ as David Lowenthal argued, this portrayal of Shetland’s past conformed to his concept of the ‘virtuous victim’.⁵⁰ In emotive language, Scotland was blamed for ‘the wounds which were inflicted during the dark centuries of neglect and oppression which followed upon her acquisition of the isles’.⁵¹

46 Anderson 1992, 1-13

47 Neill 1806, 87; Edmonston 1809, 91-94; Hibbert 1832, 48; Ployen 1894, 22-23

48 Balfour 1859 The documents included objections to the rule of Earl Robert Stewart 1575 and to Laurence Bruce in 1577

49 Smith, 1978; Wills, 1984; Smith, 2000 A truck system is an arrangement in which employees are paid in commodities or some substitute (such as vouchers) rather than with money. In Shetland, payment for fish and other produce was set against rent and the cost of goods supplied on credit.

50 Lowenthal 1998, 223, 74-75

51 Clark 1906, 13

The second strand was the growth of interest in the Vikings, Norse history and mythology in Britain generally, and in the Northern Isles in particular, especially after the publication of Walter Scott's *The Pirate* in 1822.⁵² It was set in Shetland and Orkney in the late seventeenth century, with an anachronistic background of the demise of Norse culture and the introduction of agricultural improvement.⁵³ Described later as 'a good guide book, but pure tushery as fiction' because of its detail about traditions, folklore and topography, it was nevertheless widely disseminated.⁵⁴

Paradoxically, Scott is credited, or blamed, with initiating the 'tartan, bagpipes and shortbread' imagery of Scottish identity: romantic, unrealistic and irrelevant to Shetlanders.⁵⁵ They resented being lumped together with Highlanders and Western Islanders, for whom they may have shared a racially-based contempt, Norse ethnicity being represented as genetically superior to the lazy, feckless Celt.⁵⁶ This antagonism is the third strand in this paradigm. Even in the late twentieth century, Lowenthal claimed: 'Minorities construe their heritage by negating the mainstream ... Orcadians and Shetlanders know little of their Norwegian roots but know well they are not Scots, not Gaelic, not Highland Chieftain's churls'.⁵⁷

These three strands had come together during the nineteenth century, and Shetlanders chose to exalt their Norse past above their Scottish, emphasising their Norse roots in archaeology, history, language and placenames.⁵⁸ Cohen has shown how antiquarians 'composed an identity for their people that denied their Scottish heritage, and polished their folk tales and fragments of Shetland history into the story of how Scottish oppression overturned the idyllic life of Norse udallers'.⁵⁹ These ideas were expressed in writing – historical, political, poetry and fiction – and in imagery such as street names and coats-of-arms; the best-known demonstration is in the Viking elements incorporated into the festival of Up Helly Aa.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the picture of a society looking nostalgically to a largely mythological past is questionable.⁶¹ This heritage was fostered by a group of antiquarians, many of whom were not residents, as opposed to 'the natural

52 Cohen 1983; Wawn 2008, 74-85; Seibert 2008; Riddell 2012

53 Wawn 2000, 80-81

54 MacKenzie 1932, quoted in Simpson 1983, 137; 'Imitated, illustrated, epitomised, excerpted for children, set to music, dramatised ... and translated'; Wawn 1996, 1

55 E.g. Withers 1992; Grenier 2005, 53-58; Kelly, 2010

56 Devine 2011, 118; Cohen 1983, 87-113, 432-43; Lowenthal, 1998, 128-29

57 Ibid., 234

58 Wawn 2008; Cohen 1983

59 Ibid., 391 Udallers held their land by udal tenure, i.e. with no feudal overlord.

60 Cohen 1983; Smith 1993; Brown 1999; Riddell 2012; Leslie 2012

61 Riddell, 2012

observations of all Shetlanders of such solid evidence that still exists of their Norse past in the language, traditions, and place-names'.⁶² As described by Andrew Wawn, Vikings were not popular only in Shetland, and the ideals connected to Shetland's Norse past also fitted well with the ethos of Empire, which were also prevalent at the time.⁶³ Some Shetlanders at least were willing to treat the flights of fancy with a sense of humour, while others used Shetlander's 'difference' when it suited.⁶⁴

These ideas, or elements of them, are resilient. Though there are still writers who portray Shetland's early modern history in terms of 'Norse good' and 'Scots bad', recent historical writing has moderated the Romantic idealism.⁶⁵ Nevertheless many Shetlanders would not go as far as Tom Nairn's opinion that 'being a Viking is too improbable and remote to be taken seriously.'⁶⁶ Even now, it is still 'the Norse heritage ... which dominates the Shetlander's sense of history,' although 'heritage relies on revealed faith rather than rational proof'.⁶⁷

All of this discourse was, however, in the future when the three sources analysed here were written, but this article examines whether its roots were apparent in them.

The Depiction of Shetland's Norse Past

All three descriptions gave some account of Shetland's past. It was common knowledge that Shetland had been part of the Norwegian kingdom. Sibbald wished to emphasise Scotland's sway over the islands and was one of a group of scholars who, inspired by 'powerful national sentiment', 'invoked "the spirit of the Picts" and wallowed in utter nonsense' about their 'Teutonic' origin.⁶⁸ He claimed Shetland had been Pictish and therefore 'Scottish' before the advent of the Norsemen.⁶⁹ Brand was also aware of this controversy and agreed: 'it is generally acknowledged that both the Picts, and the Saxons, were originally descended, of the same *German Nation*'.⁷⁰ But Gifford, although he devoted a chapter to the first inhabitants of Shetland, was not partisan: 'at what time or how long they were possess by the Pights, I could never see any such account therof as is much to be depended on; however peremptorily

62 Cohen 1983, 4

63 Wawn, *Viking and the Victorians*

64 Riddell, 2012; Lowenthal 1998, 81 referred to 'minorities that deploy heritage not to opt out of nation-states but to achieve gains within them'.

65 The most recent is Brown 1999, 18; Hill 2014.

66 Nairn 1998, 19

67 Lowenthal 1998, 2

68 *Ibid.*, 11

69 Sibbald 1711, 9, 40-41

70 Brand 1701, 99-100

asserted by some of our old Scottish historians, who talk of a long succession of the Pights, kings of Orkney and Zetland'. 'However far the names of places, customs, language, and traditions of the old Zetland inhabitants may go to prove them of Norwegian extract', he decided, because the Norse and Pictish languages had an 'affinity', to 'allow the ancient inhabitants to be equally descended from both, and I know not by which they have the most honour'.⁷¹

Understanding of how Shetland was transferred to Scottish rule varied. Brand's version was that the Northern Isles had been given to Norway by Donald III and recovered by Alexander III in 1266.⁷² Despite one of his informants concurring in this error, Sibbald did not.⁷³ Gifford knew the correct date and claimed that the King of Denmark had renounced by charter his rights to the Isles on the birth of James IV.⁷⁴ They all cited the Norn language and the use of patronymic surnames as evidence of the Norse origin of native Shetlanders. Sibbald reported that 'many of them are descended from the *Norwegians* and speak a *Norse Tongue*, corrupted, (they call *Norn*) amongst themselves, which is now much worn out'.⁷⁵ Gifford confirmed that 'the customs, manners and language of the old Zetlanders with their way of living, was the same as in Norway, even down to the time of some old men still living'.⁷⁶ But when he wrote, although many Shetlanders still spoke Norn among themselves, mostly 'English' was spoken 'with a very good accent'.⁷⁷

Under Norwegian rule, government, laws and customs had been different from those in Scotland. Sibbald mentioned 'St. Olla's laws and customs', some of which were still in use, and discussed local weights and measures, land taxes and inheritance practices.⁷⁸ Brand briefly referred to the continued payment of scat [land tax] and discussed the lawthing, and he included unique information about sanctuary rights.⁷⁹ Gifford gave much more detail, with whole chapters on local government, udal succession and crown rents, which have been described as 'superb pieces of historical reconstruction'.⁸⁰ These add up to the most valuable secondary source for Shetland in the previous few centuries, as well as for his own time.

71 Gifford 1879, 19

72 Brand 1701, 15 His source was Rev. James Wallace 1693, *Description of the Isles of Orkney*, Edinburgh: J. Reid

73 From the account of Hugh Leigh; Bruce 1908, 10

74 *Ibid.*, 33. This information comes from the continuation of Boece 1574, *Scotorum Historiae*, Paris and Sir Thomas Craig 1655, *Jus Feudale*, Edinburgh: Ruddiman; Goudie 1904, 215

75 Sibbald 1711, 4

76 Gifford 1879, 18-19

77 *Ibid.*, 28

78 Sibbald 1711, 9, 41-42

79 Brand 1701, 65, 121-122; Smith 2003, 12

80 Smith 1976

The way local people referred to Scotland suggested that they felt that Shetland was still not integrated into the country. Brand wrote: 'When I speak of Orkney or Zetland, as not in Scotland, tho depending thereupon, I express my self, as the Countrey do'.⁸¹ Ignorance about Shetland was likely to lead to preconceptions such as he displayed: 'The People are generally Discreet and Civil, not so Rustick and Clounish as would be expected in such a place of the World.'⁸² Nevertheless, this was the most disparaging of his comments and, on the whole, he was not particularly condescending but generally well-disposed towards the islanders.⁸³

As would be expected at this period, people were differentiated by class, but here also by the place of family origin. Norse ancestry was not claimed by the gentry for themselves. They were considered to be of Scottish descent, and one of Sibbald's sources had told him that none of the 'ancient families' (the landowners) had been there over 200 years but many were cadets of Orkney or Scottish families.⁸⁴ He did not repeat this but wrote, 'The Gentry in manners, customes and Fashions agree much with the Gentry of the Mainland of *Scotland*, from whence they came: they are most of them well-bred, and inclined to Hospitality'.⁸⁵ The common people were a mixture of Norwegian and Scottish, '... either the old Natives for immemorial Possess[i] on, or such as not long since came hither from Scotland'.⁸⁶ Some of the Norse descendants still held substantial udal lands which had been in the family for generations: 'Divers of them are *Udalers*, that is Proprietaries of the Land (manured by them) by immemorial Possession, several of them are men of Substance'.⁸⁷ The mindset that these udallers were not gentry was implied, rather than openly stated, by three of Sibbald's informants.⁸⁸

Sibbald did not repeat some of the more unfavourable remarks about the gentry made by the ministers who wrote to him, but he was less restrained in his criticism of the common people.

The Incommers (whose residence in these Isles is not above a few Centuries of years) are very politick, ... they are Sagacious and Subtile, and readie to take advantage of these they have business with, and are proud and stubborn, if softly treated: but if they be roughly handled, they are flexible;

81 Brand 1701, Preface

82 Ibid., 66-67

83 Smith, 2003

84 Bruce 1908, 15-16

85 Sibbald 1711, 4

86 Ibid., 4

87 Ibid., 4

88 Bruce 1908, 3-4, 16-17, 44-45

they are many of them great Drinkers and given to Venerie, and are Quarelsome.⁸⁹

Likewise, 'The Inclination of many of these of *Norwegian* Extract is base and Servile, Subtile and false, and Parasitick; they are wise to deceive. And if they be not restrained by severe Lawes, they are much given to Theft. They are generally very Sharp, and consequently docile'.⁹⁰ So while he, or at least his informants, thought they could distinguish the behaviour of people on racial grounds, the differences in the two depictions do not seem that significant. The Norse descendants were, however, 'less given to Venerie and Quarrells, and more Sober than some of the other Inhabitants of a *British* Extract'.⁹¹

In this rather complicated web of social commentary and prejudice, despite the emphasis on place of birth, class was more important and more definitive of behaviour than lineage. The lower classes, of whatever origin, could be ascribed common traits with even-handed bigotry. Natives, however landed and prosperous, were not considered gentry, and presumably those landowning families who had a Scottish surname ignored any ancestors who did not. Sibbald's correspondents, the ministers, aspired to be part of the same society as the gentry and would certainly be considered 'Scottish'.⁹²

Like Sibbald, Gifford described the gentry's customs and manners as 'much the same as in Scotland'; they were 'as polite here as elsewhere, and live as handsome ... as any in Britain of their rank,' many having their children educated in Edinburgh.⁹³ He thought that 'the common people also in their manners and way of living are no way inferior to those of that kind in the north parts of Britain' and 'the industrious and saving are rich, and the indolent and careless miserable poor; the last being still most numerous in the islands of Zetland'.⁹⁴ He did not make any overtly racist connection with the Norse decent of the current population. He even approved of some of the Norse customs, for example udal inheritance (which he thought was simpler, being conducted without lawyers), while disapproving of others, for example, the complicated 'old country practice' by which crown duties were collected.⁹⁵ But he was disparaging of the previous Norse inhabitants: 'The ancient inhabitants

89 Sibbald 1711, 4

90 Ibid., 4

91 Ibid., 4

92 Riddell 2017

93 Gifford, 27

94 Ibid., 27-28

95 Ibid. 47-53, 51, 54-59

of Zetland were a very indolent simple sort of people, who lived very meanly and 'had neither thrift nor sense' to improve ground for themselves.⁹⁶

When it came to the interface between Norwegian and Scottish rule, one of the comments that Sibbald did not repeat was about landowners and land which had previously been held by udal tenure. The Rev. Theodore Umphray had written to him that, after the transfer to the Scottish crown, 'severals from the S[outh] came to site themselves here, & acquired the whole Lands from the Natives'; immigrants acquired land 'per fas & nefas [by fair or unfair means], so that few Natives are Heritours'.⁹⁷ According to Brand, the 'old Inhabitants of the *Danish* blood' were 'much worn out of this Country'.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the population was increasing: '... there be many who have lately come to it from *Orkney, Caithness, Sutherland, Buchan.* and other places especially in the North of *Scotland*'.⁹⁹ He made it sound a fairly recent phenomenon. Gifford also described the influx of people but set it in an earlier period: 'After Zetland became subject to the crown of Scotland many Scottish people came over to it, some in a civil, others in an ecclesiastic capacity, and settled here, who in the process of time acquired most of the arable land from the ancient inhabitants, who became their tenants'.¹⁰⁰ He also said that 'these incomers found no great difficulty in purchasing of land from the poor simple inhabitants' and 'the ancient simple Udellers were turned out of their old inheritances, and obliged to improve that ground for others that they had foolishly neglected to do for themselves'.¹⁰¹ This has been interpreted by later antiquarians as being hostile to the Scots, which would have been surprising as he himself was of Scottish descent.¹⁰² In fact, Brian Smith has pointed out that Gifford condensed a complicated and lengthy process, perhaps to enhance his own connections with longer-landowning Scottish lineage.¹⁰³ He may also have been inhibited by fear of offending the Earl of Morton and other landowners.¹⁰⁴ He raised an interesting question about motive: '[T]heir purchases were not always such as to admit of judicial confirmation, or if they wanted to introduce Scots laws and customs, or partly both, I know not'.¹⁰⁵

96 Ibid., 27

97 Bruce 1908, 16

98 Brand 1701, 67

99 Ibid., 70

100 Gifford 1879, 27

101 Ibid., 49, 50

102 Smith 1979, 20

103 Smith, 1976; Smith 1979, 15. Providing themselves with an impressive genealogy had been a concern of land-owning families in the late 17th century; Ferguson 1998, 152. This was a basic component of chorography; Withers 2001, 38

104 Stevenson 1879, xiii quoting Hibbert. See n.25

105 Gifford 1879, 50

The *bêtes noires* of the later pro-Norse enthusiasts, the Stewart Earls of Orkney, were already notorious. Brand merely mentioned Patrick in connection with the coerced building of Scalloway Castle.¹⁰⁶ Gifford said that Earl Robert acquired lands by oppressions and forfeitures and 'exercised a very arbitrary and tyrannical government', while Patrick was 'said to be much more vicious and oppressive than his predecessor'.¹⁰⁷ He blamed them for the high crown rents, but also describes the granting of charters to both feuars and udallers in the seventeenth century by Alexander Douglas of Spynie, the factor, which resulted in landowners falling in debt and having to sell their land because they were unable to pay the high feu duties and public charges.¹⁰⁸ The perceived injustices of the transfer to Scottish rule were already acknowledged, though Gifford, as a beneficiary, was not likely to suggest there were similar issues in his own time.

It is evident that Sibbald's and Brand's informants and Gifford recognised a distinction between people of Scottish and local native descent. What is not clear from what they said is when most of the immigration into Shetland had taken place; although it is often assumed that it was in late sixteenth century rather than later, it appears that 'natives' and 'incomers' were still not entirely integrated when these accounts were written. The gentry, it was agreed, were well-bred and enjoyed a standard of living comparable to their equivalents on the Scottish mainland. They identified themselves as Scottish even if they had local antecedents or their families had been in Shetland for several generations; presumably this was for reasons of snobbery and to distance themselves from local people, whom they deemed inferior. Of the three accounts, only Gifford's gives a clue as to how the 'native' people viewed themselves: 'Still these old Danish inhabitants value themselves much on their antiquity.'¹⁰⁹ This is the sole hint of the reverence for Shetland's Norse traditions that was to be revived so successfully in the next century.

After some landowners went bankrupt in the financial upheavals around the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century, Gifford and others amassed large estates and society became even more stratified. This allowed later antiquarians, as already described, to depict society before the transfer from Norway to Scotland as equitable and prosperous in comparison with contemporary injustice and tyranny, to label the landowners as Scots, blame Scots for the poverty of ordinary Shetlanders and define oppression by landowners in ethnic terms.¹¹⁰

106 Brand 1701, 90-91

107 Gifford 1879, 34-35

108 *Ibid.*, 37-38, 55, 50-53

109 Gifford 1879, 19

110 Cohen, 392-412

Contemporary events

The three descriptions concentrated on Shetland and rarely alluded to the national and international context. The burning of the fort in Lerwick by the Dutch in 1673 was mentioned in all the descriptions, and Sibbald wrote that, because of the reliance on trade, Shetlanders 'are at great loss in time of War'.¹¹¹ Brand explained: 'Their Countrey lying very open, and in many places but thinly inhabited, exposeth them in the Hostile incursions of Pirates in a time of War, as of late the *Frenches* did much infest their Coasts'.¹¹² Gifford also discussed the war with France, though he understated the effects.¹¹³

Sibbald had been informed that 'the people here are generally Loyal, and without Dissatisfaction, as to matters of Government, in Church or State'.¹¹⁴ This was clearly written before James VII and II was deposed, since many of the Shetland landowners were Jacobites, though not, as far as is known, actively involved in the later rebellions. Brand did not appear to discern this, though he did report that, when in 1689 a fisherman brought news of the revolution of the previous year, some people wanted to impeach him for treason.¹¹⁵ This and a reference to the Darien venture were Brand's only references to current affairs other than in relation to Shetland's vulnerability to attack.¹¹⁶ Gifford, although he was said to be 'a Whig, attached to the Hanoverian succession' unlike the majority of Shetlander landowners, did not discuss politics.¹¹⁷

Brand gave little detail about his business in Shetland on a commission to ensure the Shetland church conformed with the new Presbyterian governance.¹¹⁸ His memoirs tell us the commission 'found Scandal, deposed some ministers there, suspended others, received several into Ministerial Communion'.¹¹⁹ Some of these were the ministers who had sent descriptions to Sibbald.¹²⁰ Gifford was well aware of the past changes in church government and gave more information about the commission's activities. He said that only two or three, 'more bigoted than prudent', were turned out, so his sympathies were not with them.¹²¹

111 Brand 1701, 88; Gifford 1879, 6-7; Sibbald 1711, 30, 9

112 Brand 1701, 82

113 Gifford 1879, 6

114 Sibbald, *Description*, 5

115 Brand 1701, 82

116 *Ibid.*, 136 Brand was interested in Darien since many of his parishioners had gone there; Cadell 2004

117 Nichols 1786, xi

118 He specifically declined to: 'As to the Commissioners' work, I have not meddled therewith'; Brand 1701, Preface

119 Flinn 1989, 132

120 Riddell 2017, 35

121 Gifford 1879, 30

None of the descriptions suggest that the writers were aware of the scale of the crucial changes that were happening in Shetland. Sibbald's was already out-of-date when it was published so his account described Shetland not long before these events. His information about the economy included places where German merchants and the Dutch fishing fleets traded, both of which were fewer than in the past.¹²² Although he was keen to emphasise Shetland's economic potential, there were indications that fish were becoming scarcer and trade was in decline.¹²³ Poverty was caused 'not so much by the decay of Fishes, as by the exorbitant exactions of the Customers [Customs officials] ... whereby they have banished the Dutch and Hollanders from this place, without whose Commerce it can hardly subsist.'¹²⁴ These increased duties were the result of the prevalent mercantilist idea that the nation's manufactures and commerce would best be encouraged by reducing foreign competition, though the local Shetland impact was far from beneficial.¹²⁵ Although Sibbald was well aware of the famine of the 1690s, having published a treatise, *Provision for the Poor in time of Dearth and Scarcity* in 1699, he did not refer to it in the Shetland context.¹²⁶

Brand gave considerable detail about the German trade, including their wares: 'Liquours, as Beer, Brandie &c. and wheat-Bread, as that which they call Cringel Bread, and the like, they also sell several sorts of Creme-Ware, as Linen, Muslin &c.', and, significantly, that they dealt directly with the fishermen and, as well as bartering, they paid in money: '[T]he Merchants will give them either Money or Ware which they please'.¹²⁷ He also described trade both with Dutch fishermen, particularly in stockings 'which is very beneficial to the Inhabitan[t]s, for so Money is brought into the Countrey, there is a Vent for the Wooll, and the Poor are Employed', and with Orkney, exchanging money from foreign trade for corn and other produce.¹²⁸ He recognised that fish were generally not as numerous as previously and that fishermen had to go farther to find them.¹²⁹ But there was still considerable trade and in 1700, the fishing was plentiful.¹³⁰ He also noted that some local merchants had started a trading company, an early sign of how control of trade was beginning to pass into local hands.¹³¹

122 Sibbald 1711, 11, 15, 18, 26, 33, 35, 38

123 Ibid., 30

124 Ibid., 21

125 Shaw 1980, 181-182

126 Cullen 2010, 1

127 Brand 1701, 131-132. Gifford listed 'hemp, lines, hooks, tar, linen-cloth, tobacco, spirits and beer'; Gifford 1879, 25

128 Brand 1701, 73-74, 132

129 Ibid., 128-129

130 Ibid., 129

131 Ibid., 136

It is surprising that his account does not give a stronger picture of the problems of the recent past, not mentioning the famine, except that in 1699, although the barley crop had been good, there had been a problem with fish and animal livers.¹³² Both he and Sibbald described the sand-blow which threatened Brew, one of the largest estates, but without considering the impact; Gifford recorded that 'a good deal of arable ground ... is overblown with sand and lost'.¹³³ Soon after Brand's visit, smallpox struck 'and was so universal, that upon one Lord'-s Day there were 90, Prayed for in the Church of *Lerwick* all sick of the same Disease, ... the third part of the People in many of the Isles are dead thereof.'¹³⁴ But he did not express a sense of the horror or any concern about the likely impact of such a loss of population.

Three decades later, much had changed and Gifford gave unique evidence about the transformation of economy and society. Trade with the Dutch was decreasing, *Lerwick* had declined and there was much poverty in the country.¹³⁵ The German trade had disappeared: '[W]hen the high duty was laid upon foreign salt, and custom-house officers sent over, and a custom-house settled at *Lerwick*, these foreigners could not enter, and so the inhabitants, and many of the heritors or landlords, were obliged to turn merchants and export the country products to foreign markets.'¹³⁶ In those brief words he described the critical switch to landlord-dominated trade. He commented that the fishermen, who still had some power, would not change the price, indeed could not afford to. But from his, the merchant's, point of view, the cost of curing was high and the markets precarious and so the business depended upon government bounty.¹³⁷ But Gifford painted no picture of the social upheaval that accompanied this change.

Sibbald's purpose in assembling local knowledge was as a means to national improvement and promoting 'What is wanting to make the people in all those places Happy'.¹³⁸ So he discussed the value of *Shetland* to the nation as being in the fishing and the potential for shelter and provisioning of shipping.¹³⁹ Similarly, Brand recommended that the Government should encourage fishing and trade: '[S]ince thereby not only would a number of

132 *Ibid.*, 72, 110

133 *Ibid.* 83; Sibbald 1711, 17; Gifford 1879, 3

134 Brand 1701, 72-73

135 Gifford 1879, 46, 6-7, 5

136 *Ibid.*, 25-26. At the Union, the English Navigation Laws were applied, prohibiting the import of foreign salt in foreign ships and raising customs dues; Rössner 2008, 120

137 *Ibid.*, 26

138 Withers 1996, 62

139 Sibbald 1711, 39-40. He had already written a treatise in 1698 on the subject, 'A discourse Anent Improvements may be made in Scotland for Advancing the Wealth of the Kingdom'; Withers, 1996, 62

able Seamen be Yearly Trained for the use and service of the Nation, and the Nation thereby put in a better Capacity for Undertaking and Supporting greater Projects of Trade in the more remote parts of the World, but likewise many poor People would be Employed who are ready to Starve'.¹⁴⁰ Giving preference to domestic interests over foreign in order to bring 'happiness' had particular meaning in Shetland. One of the few parts of the accounts submitted to Sibbald that he did not include said of the gentry: 'They seldom unanimously bestir themselves for the promoting & management of a publick good'.¹⁴¹ When Gifford wrote, after the economic disruption of the intervening years, trade had been taken over by local merchant/landowners, many of whom might have come to prominence since the time Sibbald described, but who still considered themselves truly 'Scottish'. But in the longer term this was not to the benefit of most Shetlanders, who found themselves in debt bondage.¹⁴² Although the Germans' commercial influence had been in decline for some time, and the hiatus before trade revived with new merchants was not protracted, this period has been termed a 'cataclysmic break', as the effects for Shetlanders were so detrimental and long-lasting.¹⁴³ This was one of the factors which, in the next century, were to fuel the Norse romanticism which saw the Scots as pernicious parvenus who destroyed Shetland's free, egalitarian and prosperous Norse past.

Conclusion: Shetland as part of Scotland

The later antiquarians who harked back to a utopian past considered the late sixteenth century as the main period of change when Scots acquired ownership of Shetland land and thereafter oppressed their native tenants. These descriptions, as well as other evidence, show that this was not such a short or simple process.¹⁴⁴ But concern for Shetland's diminishing Norse culture was not at all a central interest of Sibbald, Brand and Gifford.

All of them, however, had an interest in the past. Antiquarianism was one strand of Sibbald's search for knowledge and he sought information on relics from the past. His book was part of a bigger project, and so he might be expected to focus on how Shetland was different from other parts of Scotland. But, as already discussed, he was constrained by his source material and was much more concerned to prove the prior claims of the Picts than investigate

140 Brand 1701,136

141 Bruce 1908, 3-4. Sibbald wrote something similar about the Ancient Britons; quoted in Allan 1993, 96

142 Smith, 1976; Smith, 1979; Smith, 2000

143 Smith, 2017; Rössner 2008, 119-120; Zickermann 2013a; Zickermann 2013b, 87-103; Smith 1984, 35-45; Smith 1979, 16

144 Smith, 1976; Smith, 1979; Smith, 2000

the Norse heritage. Brand included antiquities in his catalogue of what was 'rare and remarkable', but, despite his emphasis on utility, he tended to be most attracted by magic and the supernatural. Gifford was well-informed about some aspects of Norwegian rule and gave his fullest information about the topics which impinged upon his employment and livelihood, such as government, property and taxes. But he was not interested in the 'abundance of trifling curiosities and of fabulous traditions in Zetland, that some would have thought worth the relating'.¹⁴⁵

For all of them, describing the contemporary scene was the aim, rather than enquiry into what had been or might have been. The Norse past was taken as a matter of fact but not used as a basis for mourning the passing of the previous way of life or for changing the status quo. There is nothing in any of the accounts to suggest that Shetland might be reclaimed by Norway / Denmark or that people were discontented with the current situation. Even Gifford, who regretted some lost benefits and struggled with inconvenient surviving laws and taxes, was most concerned with what was of value to him and his employer. Although he did not say so, he was no doubt adept at using the resulting ambiguities to his advantage.

To obtain local knowledge Sibbald used a network of contacts for his survey, a method used both before and since. Brand was an outsider but used local sources. He met some of Sibbald's informants and one, the Reverend Hugh Leigh, was Gifford's uncle.¹⁴⁶ Although he had been to Shetland, Brand reported mostly what he was told; Gifford (other than for his prehistory) what he knew. Derek Flinn, in his book about visitors to Shetland, suggested that 'the traveller may not always have understood what he was seeing' and 'certainly did not see everything', but the Shetlander was often blinkered by familiarity.¹⁴⁷ Both groups had their prejudices and created their own distortions, Shetlanders often because 'writing about their own way of life most of them felt a need to defend it'.¹⁴⁸ But not Gifford. In what has been called 'the best and in some ways the worst account' of the Shetland merchant lairds, Gifford 'began to rewrite history' but 'skates over the subject in a twinkling'.¹⁴⁹ His statements are tantalising. He does not spell out the social and economic conditions which he considered normal and perhaps even uninteresting to his readers; 'like most pioneers he was too busy making history to ponder over its nuances and interconnections'.¹⁵⁰

145 Gifford 1879, 59

146 Grant 1907, 84

147 Flinn 1989, Preface

148 Ibid. 239

149 Smith 1979, 14-15

150 Smith, 1976

One of the sources Sibbald used stated that in 1469 the islands 'became without debate belonging to the Crown of Scotland'.¹⁵¹ Be that simplification as it may, when he wrote, Scottish identity was being promulgated on a personal level by the elite of Shetland society and Norse connections were seen as in the past or only surviving among the lower classes. As might be expected from the period of writing, the interests and social position of the writers, their sources of information and potential readership, none of the descriptions attempted to express the views of the common people. Only Gifford was aware of any residual pride in Norse heritage. The romantic view developed by nineteenth century antiquarians is absent; on the contrary, Gifford contended that Shetlanders had been as oppressed by the Norse governors as much as by later rulers.¹⁵² Being too much part of it himself, he made no mention of any contemporary oppression. There was certainly no assertion, such as later became customary, that under Scottish rule the islands' 'history has been a continuous tale of wrong and oppression, of unscrupulous rapacity and unheeded complaint'.¹⁵³

All three writers were dependent to some extent upon aristocratic patronage. Sibbald's geography was formulated with the intention of regulating the whole nation, upholding the authority of crown and church. It was to be written 'from above', based on information garnered from gentry and ministers.¹⁵⁴ Brand, a minister, had the same background as Sibbald's Shetland informants and wrote a grovelling dedication to his patron. As the foremost landowner in Shetland society, Gifford was interested in maintaining and bolstering his position. So, the attitudes displayed are those of the Shetland establishment, gentry and ministers, emphasising their Scottish roots. Shetland's 'Norseness' was recognised but not romanticised.

Sibbald's aim was to delineate and describe Scotland for the benefit of the Government; it was unlikely that he would suggest that Shetland was not a part of the realm. The purpose of Brand's journey was to ensure that Shetland conformed to the Scottish form of Presbyterian church government; despite his interest in curiosities, he also was concerned with incorporating Shetland into the national model. Gifford would not have wished to upset his employers and political masters, though he may well have seen it in his interests if they were satisfied to leave local government in his hands.

Although, according to Michael Lynch, '... a widespread, multi-layered exploration of Scotland's identity had emerged by the last quarter of the

151 Bruce 1908, 17 from an anonymous description

152 Gifford 1879, 33

153 Balfour 1859, xi

154 Withers 2001, 77-78

seventeenth century', the contemporary national identity was not about celebrating 'otherness'; local traditions were viewed as 'curiosities'.¹⁵⁵ The main purpose of knowledge was to realise utilitarian value and potential improvement for the progress of the nation. In these books, Shetland's utility was endorsed; it was accepted as part of Scotland.

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155 Lynch 1998, 89

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