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Shetland Documents, 1612-1637

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THIS VOLUME is the long-awaited third in a series of which the previous two, both co-edited by Ballantyne and Smith, were *Shetland Documents, 1580-1611* (1994) and *Shetland Documents, 1195-1579* (1999). The first volume, in turn, already located the genesis of the work 'more than ten years ago' (*SD, 1580-1611*, ix), dating the inception of this magisterial project to well over thirty years past. The wait has been well worthwhile, however, as the present volume continues the tradition inaugurated by its predecessors and will be an essential source of reference for the foreseeable future.

When Ballantyne and Smith published their first volume in 1994, very few Shetland documents were in print, save in scattered antiquarian collections or in Gordon Donaldson's pioneering editions of the *Court Books of Shetland* for 1602-04 and 1615-29. The 1580-1611 volume began to rectify that, focusing on documents produced during the turbulent reign of the Stewart earls. The second volume – though first in its chronological order – was far more ambitious. It contained the early documentary record for Shetland's history, commencing with an extract of an agreement recorded in *Sverris saga* (dateable to spring 1195) and concluding with a 1580 supplication by a Leith skipper which already pointed towards Shetland's future as part of the extended political and economic network of the growing kingdom of Scotland.

At 814 pages this new volume dwarfs both its predecessors and testifies to the exponential increase in documentation available for early seventeenth-century Shetland, a by-product of the rapid bureaucratisation of the Scottish state during this period. A short but invaluable introduction provides the social, political, and economic context of the volume, explaining the annexation of the

lordship of Shetland to the crown and its subsequent consequences. Shetland emerges from this as very much a part of a larger North Sea world, with local complaints being tendered to the privy council in Edinburgh at the same time as Norwegian absentee landlords objected to the difficulty of collecting their rents, East Neuk fishermen vied with their Dutch and German counterparts for the herring fisheries, and a Spanish privateer raided the islands and burnt Muness Castle. While famine remained a constant threat – as in other areas of northern Europe throughout the Little Ice Age – Shetland was a flourishing and richly transnational space in this period.

This volume contains 1,610 discrete documents taken from archives including the National Library of Scotland, National Records of Scotland, Orkney Archives, Shetland Archives, and National Archives at Kew, as well as seven appendices containing important documents such as a copy of the rental of Shetland, *circa* 1622-25, and a 1627 description and valuation of the parishes of Nesting, Lunnasting, Whalsay, and Skerries. These are complemented by an extensive glossary, paying close attention to linguistic usage (of value for students of older Scots), and indices of persons, places, and ships. Editorial conventions strike a good balance between calendaring and diplomatic transcription. For most documents, only abstracts are given, but where the original item is reproduced, in part or in full, it is presented as it appears in manuscript save for some inserted punctuation and *i/j* – *u/v* standardisation. Ease of reading has evidently been prioritised as abbreviations have been silently expanded. The only editorial choice which slightly concerned this reviewer was the statement that ‘in the case of personal names, christian names have generally been modernised, but surnames are usually given as rendered in the documents’ (vii). It is a minor point, but it would have been preferable to see this applied consistently and in favour of the original spellings. The preface suggests future additions and corrections to the series, extending into the early eighteenth century, will be made available online in due course and it is very much hoped that this will prove to be the case.

In the midst of day to day legal transactions, there is much that is vivid and colourful, showing us the human dimension of everyday life in early modern Shetland. Sometimes this partakes of the dramatic, as when Laurence Sinclair of Burgh raises letters of inhibition against his wife, Jean Bruce, for pawning his jewels, departing Shetland for the bright lights of Edinburgh, and running through his ‘rent and revenues, quhilkis ar of such great antiquitie’ (no. 855). At other times, a less illuminating note is sounded, as in a 1613 obligation for £100 Scots, the value of the goods and lands which had once pertained to Nicoll in Incista, in Brassay, who had been executed ‘for the abominable cryme of bowgrie comittit be him with ane kow’ (no. 95).

This is a volume of major importance: essential for any student of Shetland and the Northern Isles, but also casting important new light on the history of Scotland and the North Sea world as a whole. It will be of interest to all libraries with Scottish- or Northern European-focused research collections, as well as to scholars with similar interests, prosopographers, economic historians, family historians, and anyone who wishes to better understand the tumultuous and complex history of Hjaltland/Ȝetland/Shetland.

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