

The Unst Lay; ancient verse, or the earliest Shetland dialect poem?¹

Brian Smith

1

IN MAY 1878 Karl Blind contributed an article to the Berlin literary journal *Die Gegenwart*. It was entitled 'Liedertrümmer aus der Edda in Shetländer Volksmund':² 'song fragments from the Edda in the Shetlandic vernacular'.

Blind was a political exile from Germany. He had arrived in London in 1849 with Karl Marx and other revolutionaries. Since then he had moved to the right, and had become fascinated by anthropological and folklore matters. Blind was a pan-Teutonist. Now he published a fragment from Shetland. We shall see in due course how he came by it. He had primed the press already: in January British newspapers had reported that Blind had been acquiring '[s]ome remarkable relics of Odinic myths, still current as folk-lore rhymes ... from Shetland'.³ Now, in May, he revealed all.

Nine days he hang pa da rütless tree;
For ill wis da folk, in' güd wis he.
A blüdy maet wis in his side—
Made wi' a lance—'at wid na hide.
Nine lang nichts, i' da nippin rime,
Hang he dare wi' his naeked limb.
Some, dey leuch;
Bit idders gret.

1 I gave this paper at meetings hosted by the Centre for Nordic Studies and the Scottish Society for Northern Studies in Kirkwall, Edinburgh and Scalloway, in November 2017 and January 2018. I am very grateful for help and suggestions to Andrew Wawn, Joan Robertson, Morag Macinnes, Colin Harris (Bodleian Library), Blair Bruce and Michael Barnes.

2 Blind 1878.

3 *Belfast Weekly News*, 19 January 1878.

The Unst Lay, as it is sometimes called, is a remarkable piece of Shetland dialect verse. But Blind's main interest in it was about what he thought was its source. He had spotted its similarity to strophe 138 of the *Hávamál*, part of the Elder Edda, the famous passage where Odin hangs himself and invents writing in runes.⁴ The verse showed, he said, that 'there are yet tales and bits of rimes current among the common Shetland folk, in which, with fuller research, strange echoes from the Germanic world of Gods may be recognised'.⁵

Blind conceded that the Unst Lay had what he called 'a semi-Christian garb'.⁶ Jacob Grimm had long ago pointed to the similarities between Odin's rune-rhyme and the story of Christ crucified.⁷ But it was the verse's alleged Teutonic ancestry that fascinated Blind.

Since 1878 others have followed him. In 1908 the antiquary W.G. Collingwood said that the Unst Lay 'is a survival, through nearly 1000 years, of the famous lines of *Hávamál* about Odin's self-sacrifice'.⁸ Fifty years later E.O.G. Turville-Petre, calling it 'the Unst "folksong"', said that '[t]he subject of these lines is Christ, but the nine days, and perhaps the nipping rime accord better with the myth of Óðinn than with the legend of Calvary'.⁹ Even so sceptical a scholar as Judith Jesch has given it the benefit of the doubt.¹⁰

Some have waxed lyrical about it. It has been anthologised several times in collections of local verse.¹¹ In 1957 Peter Jamieson, the founder of the *New Shetlander* magazine, called it a survival from 'Shetland's "Golden Age", when the folk knew, "told" and sang ballads and lays excelling anything written since'.¹² Recently Stewart Sanderson has called it a 'tantalising snippet ... all that remains of a once much longer poem, a gallimaufry of Christian and Odinic theology, which at some point made the jump from Norn into the Shetlandic form of Scots. ... I found myself longing for more fragments as compelling as the "Unst Lay"'.¹³

I shall now argue that the Lay was a glorious hoax, the creation of a brilliant young Shetland housepainter around 1877.

4 Here is Benjamin Thorpe's translation (1866, 51): 'I know that I hung,/ on a wind-rocked tree,/ nine whole nights,/ with a spear wounded,/ and to Odin offered,/ myself to myself;/ on that tree,/ of which no one knows/ from what root it springs.'

5 Blind 1878, 308.

6 Blind 1879, 1097.

7 Grimm 1844, 758.

8 Collingwood 1908, 261.

9 Turville-Petre 1964, 43.

10 Jesch 2009, 56-7.

11 Graham and Robertson 1964, ix; Graham and Graham 1998, 11.

12 Jamieson 1957, 207.

13 Sanderson 2014.

2

Lerwick in the 1870s was a town without academic libraries; but it had scholars and autodidacts, more than might have been expected. In 1835 a Lerwick Subscription School had opened, staffed by Moravian teachers. Those young men, according to Catherine Spence, 'were received with open arms by the community, and German ideas and literature held thenceforth a measure of attention in the place which they had never had before'.¹⁴ Their best pupil was Arthur Laurenson.

Born in 1832, he was the son of a hosiery merchant. Although he followed his father into the family business, and made his living there, he kept up his literary interests. In fact he lived for them. His favourite text was the *Hávamál*. He was besotted with Thomas Carlyle, and with his writings about the heroic north.¹⁵

'Turning over the leaves of his own especial copy of the Edda,' his biographer wrote later, 'we perceive from the amount of pencilled notes and references from the first page to the last how carefully he had gone over the book, compared one myth with another, and weighed the various opinions of a crowd of German critics'.¹⁶

Writing to a fellow-Shetlander in 1873, Laurenson says: 'If you come across any book on the Edda, would you kindly let me know. Where would I get Grimm's Edda, do you think? I have the second part containing the Hero-lays; but not the first with the early God-songs. ... I think a good deal may be done in familiarising the reading public with the early Norse lays which are known to surprisingly few'.¹⁷ He tried to do so. He published books and wrote essays in the local press about Norse poetry,¹⁸ gave lectures on the subject, and formed reading groups. When Laurenson died in 1890, his friends paid for a brass memorial to him in Lerwick Town Hall. It bore a quotation from the *Hávamál*, of course: 'Wealth perishes; kinsmen die; a man himself dies, but a good name worthily won never dies'.¹⁹

Laurenson had colleagues. The most interesting of all was George Sinclair. Twenty years younger than Laurenson, he was the son of another hosiery merchant in the town. Robert Sinclair had been a poor fisher-boy in the parish of Aithsting, but he became a prosperous merchant. Laurenson

14 Spence 1901, 4-5.

15 See *The Shetland Times*, 15 November 1890, for Laurenson as originator of Carlyle's 80th birthday presentation in 1875.

16 Spence 1901, 18-19.

17 Letter by Laurenson to Gilbert Goudie, 22 September 1873, in Spence 1901, 33.

18 Laurenson 1872a, 1872b, 1873a, 1873b, 1873c, 1885

19 *Shetland Times*, 24 September 1892.

and Sinclair senior were staunch Congregationalists, and both became town councillors in Lerwick on the same day; they shared a passionate interest in Shetland folklore as well.

George Sinclair was a member of the group. He owned a copy of Guðbrandur Vigfússon's great Icelandic dictionary before any of his peers,²⁰ and they shared it during their discussions. Sinclair's knowledge of the literature became prodigious. But, younger than the others, his formation was different. He was one of the Lerwick 'Boys' of that period, who were addicted to practical jokes as well as learning. He liked to play the fiddle and to paint. He was enthusiastic about mumming and burning tar-barrels, the two favourite winter occupations of Lerwick youth.²¹ He did not follow his father into the knitwear business. Instead he became a housepainter, and left home to work in Edinburgh.²²

Those two utterly different scholars, Laurenson and Sinclair, gave the Unst Lay to the world.

3

In May 1874 a friend read Laurenson's paper 'On certain beliefs and phrases of Shetland fishermen' to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. On New Year's Day in 1876 it appeared in *The Shetland Times*. Some indignant readers complained that he had attributed views to the fishermen that they did not hold. We need not pay much attention to the paper here; it was not Laurenson's best piece of work.

What is more important is the sequel. A month later *The Shetland Times* published an editorial which aimed to sum up problems raised during the controversy.²³ It is a remarkable piece of work. The author, who certainly was not the editor, referred to works by Jacob Grimm, Karl Simrock, and Benjamin Thorpe, among others. All of those were editors or translators of the Elder Edda.

Our anonymous writer had an argument. He mentioned a traditional verse that Jacob Grimm had written about, 'The charm of the wresting thread'. He said that he recalled 'an old Aithsting wife' reciting it.²⁴ That is

20 Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Misc. d.131 folio 332, Letter by Laurenson to Guðbrandur Vigfússon, 22 December 1879.

21 For the Boys see Brown 1998, chapter 5, 'Mischief and misrule at Yule 1800-72'. Another learned practical joker in Victorian Lerwick was William Alexander Grant (1828-65): Smith 1987.

22 In the 1871 census he appears as a 'painter journeyman' at 4 Bank Street, Edinburgh.

23 *Shetland Times*, 5 February 1876.

24 *Ibid.*

our clue about who the guest editor was. George Sinclair's father was a native of Aithsting. Five years later Karl Blind reported that a servant in the Sinclair household, Inga Georgedughter, was a fount of information about Shetland lore, and in fact about that very charm.²⁵ *The Shetland Times* editorial is beyond anything that Laurenson or Robert Sinclair could have written; I am certain that it was written by George.

He goes on: 'This is a case of a Pagan survival under a Christian form, so far as the words go. The rite is pre-Christian, but Christian phraseology has been borrowed, after the introduction of Christianity into the North. . . . It is a very usual mistake to fail to recognise "survivals", because they assume a later guise. They are survivals, nevertheless'.²⁶ That idea about 'a Pagan survival under a Christian form' became central to the eventual discussion about the Unst Lay.

In January 1877 Karl Blind wrote an article for *Fraser's Magazine* about Yggdrasil, 'the Teutonic tree of existence', as he called it: that very tree where Odin hung himself.²⁷ Did George Sinclair read the article? We know he did. Still based in Edinburgh, he wrote home to Laurenson. 'You ask me for the Rune Rhyme of Odin. I have always been intending to send it to you. Curious[ly] enough you will see that Karl Blind mentions something about a resemblance between this tree and Christ's cross, and I have little doubt he would be glad of this Christianised version'.²⁸ He then sent Laurenson the Unst Lay:

Nine days he hang pa da rootless tree
For ill wis da folk in guid wis he
A bloody mait wis in his side
Made wi a lance it widna hide
Nine lang nights i da nippin rime
Hang he dare wi his naked limb
Some dey laaghed
Bit idders graet.

And he adds, in his humorous way: 'Really, Mr Laurenson, it is not to be wondered at that these old people should share Odin of his honours for Christ's sake'.²⁹

Laurenson was delighted by what he received. He immediately wrote

25 Blind 1881, 187.

26 *Shetland Times*, 5 February 1876

27 Blind 1877.

28 Shetland Archives, D37/7, Fragment of letter by George Sinclair to Laurenson, date missing but written early in 1877. I have to thank Blair Bruce for finding this item.

29 *Ibid.*

to Karl Blind. ‘I send you’, he said, ‘what I think will be found a rare and valuable specimen of a “survival” – that word again.’³⁰

It is evidently a Christianised version of the Rune Rime of Odin, from the Hava-mal, and is curious for the way in which the Rootless Tree of the Northern mythology is confounded with the Cross. The second line is quite Christian, the fifth purely pagan. ... I am afraid this fragment is all we can now recover of the Unst Lay. No doubt there was more, which by Time’s attrition has been rubbed away.

It is striking to see how Laurenson the Congregationalist stressed the Christian material in the verse, just as Blind would in due course emphasise its paganism.

Blind too was excited. As we have seen, he wrote up the discovery for *Die Gegenwart*, and later, in more detail, for the London journal *The Nineteenth Century*. But first he examined the new discovery with care. Laurenson had put him in touch with George Sinclair. They corresponded for a while, and Sinclair visited Blind in London. Gradually the circumstances of Sinclair’s acquisition of the Lay seemed to become clear. ‘The woman who repeated the rune rime to me’, Sinclair wrote, ‘was called Russlin. Her house was in, or near, the village of Norwich [Norwick], in Unst; and as nearly as I can remember, the conversation took place in the summer of 1865. I was not very old at that time; and I regret very much I did not make some attempt, however runic [another of his little jokes], to take notes’.³¹

That was sufficient for Blind. ‘Those who know’, he said, ‘how the brothers Grimm gathered from the lips of the people the tales in which so many precious relics of ancient belief are embedded, or survive in a transfigured form, can easily imagine how desirable it is to find out the last depositaries [*sic*] of such “old wives’ fables” as the one which the woman Russlin told ...’.³²

Blind was convinced about the genuineness of the verse. He thought that it was a translation from the *Hávamál* into Shetland dialect, done at some distant period by a long-forgotten Shetland bard. He even imagined that some of the metrical effects of the original, alleged alliteration and the like, had survived in the more recent version. ‘The staff-rime’, he wrote, ‘... runs through the whole Shetland text – even as in its Eddic counterpart. Thus the ancient Teutonic origin of the Shetland poem comes out powerfully, in spite of the slightly deceptive addition of the end-rime’.³³

George Sinclair emigrated to New Zealand before Blind’s article

30 Letter by Laurenson to Blind, in Spence 1901, 52.

31 Blind 1879, 1095.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Blind 1879, 1094.

appeared. He sailed from London in November 1877, with his fiddle. His diary of the voyage has survived, and I quote two short extracts from it. They sum up the way he looked at life. Soon after they departed he remarked: 'Read the *Day of Rest* [some religious magazine] all Sunday in Chips' bunk. I heartily wish I had the Prose Edda, or some of my favourite literature'. And then again, on 4 January: 'The fellows at home will be preparing their guising things for tomorrow. I wonder whether they'll burn any tarbarrels'.³⁴

4

Arthur Laurenson went on with his Eddic studies. In December 1879 he wrote for the first time to Guðbrandur Vigfússon in Oxford. He was missing George Sinclair. 'I am meaning to buy your magnificent dictionary', he said. 'As yet I have had the use of a copy a friend had. He was an enthusiast about Norse things also, but has lately gone to New Zealand'.³⁵

They struck up a correspondence. In due course Guðbrandur wrote to Laurenson that, as he said, 'I am now in deep work on a Corpus Poeticum, the 1st volume containing all Eddas in the widest sense ... and the 2d vol. is to be proceeded with immediately containing the Court poetry. Please wait with your Eddic studies till you get this book'.³⁶ At the end of 1883 Laurenson got a copy of the *Corpus*. He found it 'a great treasure', he told Guðbrandur, and reported that he was buying copies for friends.³⁷

I do not know how long it took for Laurenson to notice the bombshell on page lxxiv of the *Corpus*, a footnote which runs as follows:³⁸

[I]t is well to note that the discoveries of 'Odinic fragments' in the Shetlands are utterly illusory. A poem in a fragmentary and corrupt condition, in fact in an advanced stage of decomposition, is taken down in the twelfth century just as it is fading out of tradition; and it is believed that this very

34 State Library of Victoria, La Trobe Australian Mss. Collection, MS.8166. Sinclair continued his unusual career in New Zealand, and eventually in Australia. In 1880 he was displaying a painting in a shop window in Dunedin, 'intended to illustrate a "Mad Song", by ... William Blake. ... [T]he spirit in which it is carried out', according to *New Zealand Public Opinion*, 17 July 1880, 'is of that mystic kind that is quite in keeping with the ideas of Blake.' In Australia he seems to have become a freethinker, and became father-in-law of the anarchist Will Andrade: Andrade n.d.

35 Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Misc. d.131 folio 332, Letter by Laurenson to Guðbrandur Vigfússon, 22 December 1879.

36 Shetland Archives, D3/20/21, Letter by Guðbrandur Vigfússon, Oxford, to Laurenson, 24 May 1881.

37 Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Eng. Misc. d.131 folio 334, Letter by Laurenson to Guðbrandur Vigfússon, 5 November 1883.

38 Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1883, lxxiv.

fragment (covering, it is to be observed, by a miraculous coincidence, a space included in the fragment we already have) can be still on record in the nineteenth century, a fragment which yields nothing new, no fresh word or idea. – *Credat Judæus Apella!* [Tell that to the marines.]

Let us remember, putting aside all other possibilities, that Resenius' printed text, with a Latin translation, has been accessible for more than two hundred years.

Guðbrandur's analysis was cogent. His argument is that if a fragment of an ancient and ill-preserved poem like *Hávámál* had survived for hundreds of years, the remnant would not have corresponded exactly to strophe 138 of it in modern editions. He ends up by accusing the unknown hoaxer of using Resenius's text of 1665 as a crib.

I imagine that Laurenson spotted the bombshell immediately. He never referred to the Unst Lay again. In 1886 he began to give lectures on 'Old Norse literature and language' to the Lerwick Mutual Improvement Society.³⁹ There is no reference there to the rune-rhyme of Odin.

A year later he wrote to Karl Blind on the subject. Laurenson had drawn the obvious conclusion: that George Sinclair, the discoverer of the fragment, had also been the author of it. Blind replied anxiously. He wrote to Sinclair's father, who by that time had followed his son to the Antipodes. '[H]e answers', Blind reported,

that his son George 'indignantly protests against any attempt to discredit his veracity', and that the latter will write himself to me, though he thinks that after so long a lapse of time, and being on the other side of the globe, he could do nothing effectually to vindicate himself, except to appeal to internal evidence.

'Perhaps, if his letter comes,' Blind went on – but he does not sound hopeful – 'something might be done in a note to an essay on folk-lore matters, which I intend writing'.⁴⁰ The essay duly appeared, but there is no reference to the Unst Lay in it.⁴¹ George Sinclair had been rumbled.

Not everyone agreed with Guðbrandur. In the 1880s the Norwegian philologist Sophus Bugge wrote at length about the Unst Lay in volume one

39 *Shetland Times*, 20 February and 11 December 1886; Spence 1901, 123-53. It is worth asking if Laurenson, who had Unst family connexions, had made his own enquiries in that island.

40 Shetland Archives, D3/19/6, Letter by Blind to Laurenson, 29 November 1887.

41 Blind 1888.

of his *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Heltesagns Oprindelse*. Bugge's reasons why he thought that the Lay is genuine are a splendid example of wishful thinking:

I cannot share Vigfusson's opinion. The poetic form of the Shetland verses, their mode of expression, and especially the fact that the conception to which they give expression stands midway between the conception in the *Hávamál*, and that of the orthodox Christian religion, seem to me to be a proof of the fact that they are genuine folk productions and that they originated before Resenius' translation of the *Hávamál* appeared, from an altered form of either the strophe in question in the *Hávamál*, or of a strophe very much akin to it.⁴²

The idea that the Lay 'stands midway between the conception in the *Hávamál*, and that of the orthodox Christian religion', as Bugge puts it, is not proof that it is a genuine folk production, but only that Bugge approved of it.

I will explain in a moment why such a Shetland dialect verse could not possibly have been written down before Resenius's translation of 1665. Bugge went on to say that there are 'many witnesses to the fact that poetic fragments of a very early origin have been preserved in the mouths of the people on the Shetland Islands'.⁴³ There are such fragments, collected in the introduction to Jakobsen's great dictionary of the Norn language;⁴⁴ but they are in Norn, not in the Shetland dialect current in the 1870s.

5

It is my turn, now, to look closely at the Unst Lay. If we study it with care we can see that Guðbrandur was right. It is a hoax.

Some of the evidence is circumstantial. If you look at Jessie Saxby's long essays on Unst folklore literature from the 1880s,⁴⁵ or Laurence Williamson's slightly later treatment of traditional verse from the North Isles of Shetland,⁴⁶ you will find no reference to the Unst Lay. There is no trace of it, either, in the notebook that Sinclair took to New Zealand,⁴⁷ although it contains other Shetland verses. The Unst Lay appeared from nowhere in 1877.

Meanwhile, Sinclair's account of how he collected it is highly suspect.

42 Bugge 1881-9, 312-13.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Jakobsen 1928, xci-cxvii.

45 Saxby 1880; Edmondston and Saxby 1888, 136-46, 179-229.

46 Williamson 1957.

47 See note 28.

There were, indeed, three Rusland sisters in Norwick in the summer of 1865, the date that George Sinclair mentioned to Blind. But at that time he was twelve years old, and it strains credulity that he recorded the Lay, or committed it to memory, at that age, with or without a notebook. No-one, I need hardly say, bothered to consult the Rusland sisters about the matter, although they lived to a hearty old age. I wonder if they knew they were being discussed avidly in German and British journals.

But the internal proofs of a hoax are the most striking. Take for instance the fifth line: 'Nine lang nights, i' da nippin rime'. Shetlanders speak about lang nights, but they never, ever speak about 'nippin rime', or even about rime. It is a literary phrase. I have seen it in three places, all of them English: a poem of 1824, a translation of Aeschylus of 1846, and another poem of 1873.⁴⁸ '[A]gain wilt thou be glad/', warbled the Rev. G.C. Swayne, rendering the first scene of *Prometheus Bound* into mannered English, 'To see that sun, thy foe but yestereven, / Return thy friend, to chase the nipping rime'.⁴⁹ Nothing could be further removed from any Shetland idiom. George Sinclair made a bad blunder there.⁵⁰

There is, on the other hand, a good reason why he may have had the word 'rime' in mind, and it takes us back to the Elder Edda. In 1872 Arthur Laurenson had translated and published the Eddic text called the *Prmysquida*, about how Prym, prince of giants, stole Thor's hammer. In his glossary Laurenson quoted verbatim his hero Thomas Carlyle's bogus etymology for the name Prym. He derived it from the word rime – 'the old word,' Carlyle had said, 'now nearly obsolete, but still used in Scotland to signify hoar-frost. Rime was not then as now, a dead chemical thing, but a living löttun or Devil'.⁵¹ It is more than likely that George Sinclair had read Laurenson's work, and filed away the word 'rime' for future use.

Another word in the Unst Lay, this time a Shetland word, is significant. The man on the tree has '[a] blüdy maet' in his side – an echo, of course, of the wound endured by Christ. But 'mett' is a tricky word. Its primary and oldest meaning in Shetland is boundary mark. Thomas Edmondston, writing in 1866, said that a mett was a march;⁵² James Stout Angus, in 1914, called it a measure, or 'a mark made to show the extent of a measure'.⁵³ These definitions conform with the Old Norse originals *meta*, to estimate, value or tax, and *mat*

48 Hodge 1824, 166; Swayne 1846, 4; Hull 1873, 187.

49 Swayne 1846, 4.

50 The 'lance' in the man's side is another unShetlandic interloper, as Morag Macinnes has pointed out to me.

51 Laurenson 1872, 31; Carlyle 1840, 22.

52 Edmondston 1866, s.v. 'Met'

53 Angus 1914, s.v. 'Met'

or *mát*, measure, mark, estimation.⁵⁴ The sense in which the word is used in the Unst Lay, wound or injury, is secondary, metaphorical and, I suggest, late. I have seen it in modern Shetland dialect writing, but not in anything older.

Apart from the nipping rime, the main reason why the Unst Lay cannot be an old translation from the *Hávamál* into dialect verse is that there was no tradition of writing such verse before January 1877, when George Sinclair wrote to Arthur Laurenson. The work up till now regarded as the earliest Shetland dialect poem, James Stout Angus's 'Eels', appeared twelve months later.⁵⁵ There is nothing comparable from any earlier decade. The Unst Lay is a modern Shetland dialect poem, modern in style. The proposition that it was centuries older is absurd and cannot be sustained.

6

The protagonists in my story began to die. The Rusland sisters passed on between 1889 and 1897; Arthur Laurenson in 1890; Bugge and Blind in 1907. George Sinclair lived on in Australia until 1928. He kept up his Shetland and Eddic interests, and his sense of humour. In 1920 he wrote to his friend Haldane Burgess in Lerwick, who had just written a song for the Up Helly Aa festival, the successor of George's beloved tar barrels. 'The song and your letter', he said, 'gave me great delight and revived to my mind many things which lay slumbering ever since they were whispered before breakfast by Muninn in to the ear of Odin himself'.⁵⁶

There is an extraordinary sequel to the story of Sinclair's Unst Lay. I mentioned a while ago that there is no reference to it in the writings of the Unst author Jessie Saxby in the 1880s. In 1932 she was ninety years old, and she published a work called *Shetland Traditional Lore*, bringing together her life's research. In a chapter entitled 'Veesiks and goadiks' – rhymes and riddles – she revisited the material she had studied fifty years previously.

There were a few additions. Saxby recited a verse which, she told her readers, 'was softly crooned to a melancholy tune, and with hands stretched upwards and outward in earnest beseeching'.⁵⁷ This is how it went:

54 Jakobsen 1932, s.v. 'Met'. Significantly, Bugge thought that 'maet' in the Unst Lay must be a mistake for Scots 'mael', 'A spot in cloth, especially what is caused by iron': 1881–9, 309.

55 Smith 2004. George Stewart's *Shetland Fireside Tales* also appeared in January 1877, and George Sinclair's father wrote a Shetland novel, 'Da Tief i'da Neean', serialised in the *Shetland Times* from 11 January – 20 September 1879.

56 Shetland Archives, D2/1/87, Letter by Sinclair to Burgess, 18 March 1920.

57 Saxby 1932, 59.

Nine lang oors on da rütless Tree
Hung he der fur au ta see;
Nine lang days in a murky howe
Lay he, we nedder mate or lowe;
Nine lang winters gaed ower his een
Afore he cam till He's ain ageen.

It is of course a version of the Unst Lay, which had been published by Catherine Spence in 1901, and was by then readily accessible; but with a markedly different text.

To understand what is going on here we have to consider Jessie Saxby's literary habits. Back in 1892 a controversy had erupted in the *Shetland News* which throws light on them. A contributor to the paper had submitted some folklore material, and claimed that it was traditional and genuine. Saxby's riposte was ferocious. She said that she could prove the material was hers. She had altered the original verses, she said, because they 'contained lewd objectionable matter which I would have no hand in preserving. This is legitimate interpolation [she went on] in the case of stories gathered and woven for amusement, and not intended to assert themselves as "scientifically accurate", but rather to portray in poetic form the old legends of a people ...'.⁵⁸

What happened in 1932, I believe, is that Saxby had access to Sinclair's Unst Lay, most likely in Catherine Spence's book, and balked at the words 'blüdy' and 'naeked' in it. She rewrote it in a more decorous form, and published her new version. It is interesting to note that she has replaced the 'mett' in the side of the man on the tree with 'mate', food, perhaps because she came to the same conclusion about 'mett' that I have done. Jessie Saxby's version of the Unst Lay is another kind of hoax. Her proposal that performers 'crooned [it] to a melancholy tune ... with hands stretched upwards and outward in earnest beseeching' is hilarious. Buttoned-up Shetlanders do not behave in that way.

And yet, and yet. I have not stressed enough that George Sinclair's poem, and Jessie Saxby's new version of it, are very fine pieces of work. Writing in the *New Shetlander* magazine in 1947, George Mackay Brown said that Saxby's verse was 'as great literature as will come out of Shetland till the end of time'.⁵⁹ That is going a bit far, but both versions are remarkable. The original is better, as my friend the late Billy Tait pointed out to Brown.⁶⁰ With its short lines and vivid vocabulary, it is a striking piece of modern Shetland verse.

58 Saxby 1892.

59 Brown 1947, 11.

60 'Hansi' 1947, 2.

Since 1877 George Sinclair's *Unst Lay* has convinced and delighted nearly everyone who has read it. In old age, in Melbourne, he may have thought fondly about the time fifty years previously when he met Arthur Laurenson in a *Hávamál* reading group, manoeuvred a tar barrel through the streets of Lerwick, and devised the rune-rhyme of Odin, the first Shetland dialect poem.

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