

The second part of the volume is largely devoted to a series of essays on place-names on maps of the Western Isles, and to studies of the conceptions that Hebrideans, and others, have of their environment. The spatial relationships between individual topographic features, and how individuals cope with this concept; the way in which the surveyors performed their mysterious scientific rites among a people who were often puzzled by the significance of the survey (an extract from Brian Friel's *Translations*); the role of the place-name informant in the first Ordnance Survey operations in the islands; all these subjects are discussed.

The chapters by Domhnall MacAmhlaigh and Richard Cox are partly concerned with the topic of Anglicised Norse and Gaelic place-names, an issue which goes right to the heart of the very nature of such names. While maps give us the measure of a place and the relationship between physical features, the people who walk the ground, tend their livestock, fish the waters and till the soils can impart much more of the spirit of the landscape. This is well expressed in Tim Robinson's chapter on Connemara, and Hugh Brody's piece on the Inuit of Canada, where he reveals the Inuit's knack of constructing "dream-maps" which are "guides to the most elusive terrain, both descriptions of and metaphors for the ultimate journey". It is this comparative material, looking at other remote areas and cultures, which makes *Togail Tir* such an important publication. The implications for the historian and the geographer are obvious, but the overall theme is one of a unique culture, and how it is approached by the cartographer. It is a real attempt to place the history of map-making in the Western Isles in a cultural context, with all that this implies.

The book is splendidly illustrated, and attractively laid out. The financial assistance provided by the Scottish Arts Council and the National Gaelic Arts Project has certainly been put to good use.

Ian A Fraser

**C D Morris: *The Birsay Bay Project Volume I Brough Road Excavations 1976-82*
Department of Archaeology. University of Durham, 1989 ISBN 0 905096 08 8**

Members of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies will feel a particular interest in the publication of the first volume of Christopher Morris' excavation reports of the Birsay Bay Project. Over many years we have followed the activities and discoveries of his students and colleagues as they pursued an ambitious programme of research on the West Mainland of Orkney and provided a steady stream of accounts of the excavations in *Northern Studies*. Now we have the whole story – or part of it, for this is only the first volume to appear, and it is concerned with the research programme on the Mainland coast opposite the Brough of Birsay. There is still the report of the Beachview excavations to come as well as the Investigations which have been undertaken on the Brough itself – in an attempt to help elucidate that most complex and baffling collection of historical remains.

The Birsay Bay Project has in many ways involved a new approach in the excavational history of Scottish archaeology, – certainly in the Viking sphere. Its immediate aim was to record the number of sites in the locality, many of which were at risk from erosion, development and even rabbits; to sample soils from different areas in order to analyse middens, buildings and other

remnants of human activity; to excavate a selected number of sites in order to gain the widest picture of the whole pattern of human settlement in one of the most favoured areas of Mainland Orkney. At the end of the project it will hopefully be possible to understand the overall history of the impact of man in that coastal zone, and the changes in the pattern of settlement which have occurred over the centuries. Of course, the fact that Birsay was the favoured residence of the early Norse earls of Orkney, as well as the later Stewart earls is a historical factor which looms large in the general interest of the whole project. But this factor is to the archaeologist only one – and by no means the most important – of the relevant considerations that he has to take into account. In general archaeological terms it is the wide overall view of one location that will be gained which will be particularly valuable, and which is so different from the results of most excavations, where a single house-site, or a single community is exposed and bathed in a shaft of light surrounded by an area of total darkness.

Naturally, this approach is a very time-consuming and expensive method of archaeological investigation. The present volume concerns projects which took place over six seasons, involving perhaps hundreds of students and researchers, and certainly many thousands of pounds. It was a huge research programme which is very unlikely to be repeated in the near future in the Northern Isles. Ambitious strategies of this kind were to flourish in the brave new archaeological world of the 1960s and 1970s, and they brought their own problems, one of which was the enormous burden placed on the shoulders of the excavation director who was responsible for the finalising of the research programme and particularly for the writing-up of the excavation report. It is of course to Chris Morris' credit that he is succeeding in bringing out the publication of this ambitious undertaking. The logistical and organisational effort involved is beyond the understanding of anybody who has not taken part in – and particularly directed – an archaeological excavation! The world of archaeology is littered with the corpses of those who found the task beyond them.

That task is many-sided. An archaeological report has to be a scientific record of a series of experiments which have destroyed the evidence; and it has also to be a readable account. The combining of these two requirements has proved to be beyond the abilities of many archaeologists. There are too many reports which are simply unreadable – as the majority of archaeologists are well aware. In fact, the present climate of justifying all expenditure of public money has brought the requirement of readability very much to the forefront of the debate about archaeological recording. The paying public has the right to be able to read and understand the results of archaeological excavations. This is not always easy for the archaeologist who may find the process of writing popular archaeology not to his taste. (After all, historians don't have to make their writings all that intelligible to a reading public. They are permitted to write for fellow-historians – and usually despise the popular historian. But then historical research is a very inexpensive item in the league table of University research programmes). Moreover, archaeology is of immense interest to the public at large, due largely to television, and this is an additional burden that the professional archaeologist has to bear.

So, the debate about whom the archaeologist is writing for is of very great concern at the moment. He has to present the results of his experiments in a scientific form which allows the battery of experts concerned with the archaeological field today to assess his results on the basis of their informed understanding of his methods. But it is fully acknowledged that he must discuss his results in a straight-forward enough way for the intelligent layman to understand how his excavations have advanced our understanding of the history of mankind in one small corner of

the inhabited world.

I think that Chris Morris has succeeded in fulfilling both of these requirements admirably. It has to be said that the bulk of this volume is a scientific record of his excavations, and that the non-expert will not understand everything that is written, or indeed wish to read it all. It is an archaeological report. There is nonetheless an informed breadth of approach. The author has brought together other experts' understanding of the geology, topography, toponymy and history of the Birsay Bay area and he links his own archaeological findings into the whole cultural, social and economic picture. Eventually a complete picture will be drawn of the history of human settlement in this locality; or as complete as it will be possible to be, given the restrictions on excavation in the most important section of the Brough remains, and around the church in the village. Given those restrictions, the most pressing historical questions about where Earl Thorfinn's residence and church must have been situated will never be answered! However the next volumes of The Birsay Bay Project will certainly help to answer some questions about that high status site on the Brough as well as others near the village. We wish Chris Morris good speed in the next stage of this remarkable undertaking – as well as our congratulations on his appointment to the Chair of Archaeology in the University of Glasgow. The Society looks forward to more meetings in Glasgow in the future and to the further development of Viking studies in Scotland which his appointment is sure to foster.

Barbara Crawford

Derek Flinn: Travellers in a bygone Shetland: An anthology. Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press. pp xiv 278, figs, plates, indexes, sources.

For many in Scotland and England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Shetland seemed to be incredibly remote. Not so for many from Continental Europe, who came to fish or sailed past bound to and from the Atlantic. This book concentrates on the personal experiences of many travellers, especially from mainland Britain, and mainly between the mid-eighteenth century when the first regular packet services commenced, till the mid-nineteenth century, at the time when steamship links began to be a regular feature of communications between Shetland and mainland Britain.

The book begins with a very useful chapter dealing with the history of the packet services in this period. There follows a series of 20 chapters based on the occupations of the travellers. Half of these are in the plural, and deal especially with those who followed the sea as a means of making a living, ranging for example, from the shipwrecked seamen through fishermen and Greenland whalers to the hydrographers. The other half are individuals, including some very well known travellers such as Samuel Hibbert, the geologist; Sir Walter Scott; Biot the French physicist; and Christian Ployen, Danish Governor of Faroe in the late 1830s.

The basic approach is to include very long extracts from journals and other sources, suitably woven together by the author's text, to give a flavour of the personal experiences of the travellers concerned, rather than what they were told by the local people or learned from books. There thus emerges some graphic accounts which evoke both the atmosphere of the