
NORTHERN STUDIES

The Journal of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies

Volume 55

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2024

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WINNER OF THE MAGNUS MAGNUSSON ESSAY PRIZE (2023)

‘Farmers, Fishermen and Ferryloopers’: the Influence of the Scottish Presbyterian Church on Northern Isles Society and Culture in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Iain D. Cameron

IN 1700, Church of Scotland minister John Brand journeyed to the Northern Isles as part of a deputation appointed by the General Assembly to produce a report on the religious and moral standing of the islands. Brand’s expedition journal provides a rare, if rather limited, insight into Orkney and Shetland society and culture at the beginning of the eighteenth century. His assertion that ‘ignorance of the principles of our holy religion doth greatly prevail among the commonality’ caused much alarm within the Kirk, raising concerns that the Northern Isles abounded with godlessness, ignorance and immorality.¹ Indeed, Brand’s expedition instigated a renewed vigour on the part of the General Assembly to ensure strict Presbyterian doctrine was adhered to in every parish, no matter how geographically remote from Edinburgh. Certainly, the Northern Isles had been slow to embrace the ways of the Reformation, as suggested by Charlotte Metheun, and now faced the prospect of further subjugation from the Kirk, which sought to banish all traces of Catholicism and Episcopacy from the islands.² Just how successfully it managed to do so, while influencing societal and cultural change on the islands, will be the main focus of this paper. In the context of Orkney and Shetland society, this is a period largely overlooked by historians, and it is hoped that the following research will contribute to a

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- 1 Brand 1703, 56; Brand spent around three weeks on Shetland and only a few days on Orkney with a brief stopover in Caithness before returning home. He does not appear to have travelled extensively across the islands and much of his description is based on hearsay.
 - 2 Metheun 2019, 25-53

broader understanding of the social and cultural influences the Kirk brought to bear on the islands and the impact this had on the people of the Northern Isles.

Firstly, in attempting to influence religious change across the Northern Isles in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, the Kirk ran into serious problems. Presbyterianism in the far north competed with a long tradition of Episcopal worship deeply rooted in Scandinavian influences.³ The enduring appeal of Episcopacy on both Orkney and Shetland was characterised by the popularity of clergymen, such as James Wallace, who regularly administered Holy Communion to large congregations gathered within the confines of St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall.⁴

By contrast, Presbyterianism was seen by many islanders as a 'foreign religion', treated with a mixture of suspicion, apathy and occasional hostility. Neither clergy nor congregations were willing to embrace Presbyterian ways, and before Brand's visit of 1700, the Kirk had made very few inroads in persuading change among the local populace.⁵ Attempts by presbyteries to purge Episcopal ministers amounted to a few token cases such as that of Thomas Fullerton, minister for Westray and Papa, who was forced into premature retirement, accused of being 'a bitter enemy against the government both of Church and State'.⁶

Such dismissals were rare on Orkney and unheard of in Shetland. In most instances, Episcopal ministers simply remained in post, and worship continued largely as before.⁷ It took almost a decade after the Presbyterian ascendancy of 1689 for John Wilson, the popular Episcopal clergyman who succeeded James Wallace as minister for St Magnus Cathedral, to be fully ousted in favour of the less popular Church of Scotland incumbent, Thomas Baikie. Despite being a native Orcadian, Baikie faced the wrath of his congregation on numerous occasions, including an 'unwarrantable hostile intrusion' in the cathedral, an episode documented in Kirkwall Town Council Minutes of 1691.⁸ By way of appeasing the people of Kirkwall, the presbytery allowed Wilson to maintain a pastoral role in the parish, and he continued to preach in disused churches and private meeting houses for many years.⁹ Episcopal clergy continued to visit Orkney throughout the first half of the eighteenth century and were always met with great enthusiasm.¹⁰ Presbytery minutes from 1731 note with some

3 Imsen 2003, 1

4 Wallace 1883, Introduction

5 Craven 1883, 78

6 Orkney Archives, CH2/1082/5, Presbytery Book of Kirkwall, 7 June 1698

7 Campbell 1938, 67-68

8 Orkney Room, Kirkwall Town Council Minutes, 21 November 1691

9 Campbell 1938, 75

10 Craven 1883, 60

displeasure that 'the people of the Parish [of Burray] come to hear Mr [William] Harper and not the minister of the Parish' and that Mr Harper 'prays not for our Protestant King'.¹¹

Episcopacy also maintained great popularity on Shetland, chiefly through the influence of the landowners, most of whom held episcopal sympathies. Landed families, such as the Nicholsons of Lochend, employed Episcopal ministers for private baptisms, weddings and funerals and to serve as tutors for their sons and daughters.¹² It was 1729 before the last Episcopal minister on Shetland, James Taylor, left the islands, having been excommunicated by the presbytery for ignoring several warnings to desist from preaching.¹³

A shortage of qualified ministers further impeded the Kirk's ability to influence change in religious practice across the Northern Isles. To fill vacancies, parishes often became the province of young and inexperienced probationary ministers from the mainland. The Reverend Francis Liddell, a native of Orphir, described his southern colleagues as 'a troop of poor ragged students from the College of Aberdeen'.¹⁴ A perception of Presbyterian clergymen as 'ferryloopers' did little to help relations between minister and local congregations.¹⁵ Ministers serving Northern Isles parishes often faced detachment and antagonism from their parishioners. John Reid, minister for Orphir, proved so unpopular that he was prevented from entering his church after the doors had been locked by an angry mob.¹⁶ It is perhaps no surprise that Orkney ministers served for less time in their parishes than those in other rural parts of Scotland.¹⁷ Shetland's new Presbyterian clergy fared rather better, perhaps because only those of the strongest fortitude were likely to endure the harsh realities of serving there. Few Presbyterian ministers demonstrated greater tenacity or longevity than John Mill, minister for Dunrossness, Sandwick and Cunningsburgh, whose diary provides a remarkable insight into the hardships of serving Shetland parishes, not least the requirement to make perilous journeys on the Sabbath to reach sometimes ungrateful congregations.¹⁸

One of the most concerning aspects of Northern Isles society highlighted by Brand's visit was a dearth of educational opportunities, the 'Latin School at Kirkwall' being the only school of permanence to be found anywhere on

11 Orkney Archives, CH2/443/, Kirkwall Presbytery Minutes, 7 April 1731

12 Linklater 1990, 160-161

13 Crawford 1901, 24

14 Thomson 2008, 183-184

15 Brock and McCallum 2021, 166

16 Thomson 2008, 175-176

17 Brock and McCallum 2021, 169

18 Mill 1889, 45

the islands.¹⁹ The culture of Kirkwall Grammar School was, however, deeply ingrained in former religions as evidenced by a rulebook of the time which compelled pupils to communicate only in Latin.²⁰ From 1709, the Presbyterian-affiliated Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) began its mission to provide a parochial school in every parish. This presented a particular challenge in the Northern Isles, where there were many financial barriers to building schools and where the location of proposed schools caused much debate. This was highlighted by the Shetland laird Thomas Gifford, who argued that ‘parochial schools ... when set up in one place [were] found to be of little use to the whole’.²¹

Funding for school buildings was dependent on the support of the lairds, most of whom were Episcopal in their beliefs and understandably reluctant to donate funds to build Presbyterian schools.²² John Anderson, minister for Stronsay and Eday, noted: ‘the heritors ... are not so ready as might be expected to unite with the ministers of the gospel in promoting the cause of religion and virtue, with regard to parochial schools’.²³ The influence of local clergy was also a determining factor in whether a school was built or not. James Buchan, minister for Walls and Sandness, repeatedly petitioned the Society to build a parochial school in his parish and contributed £30 from his own pocket towards its construction.²⁴ On the other hand, John Mill, despite a zealous passion for religious teaching from the pulpit, made no attempt to encourage the building of a school within his parish at any time during his long tenure as minister at Dunrossness.²⁵

By 1800, only three parochial schools had been built on Orkney, these located in the parishes of Birsay, Orphir and Rendall, and three in Shetland, located in Bressay, Walls and Tingwall.²⁶ Other parishes petitioned the presbyteries in vain, most having to make do with the short-term provision of charity schools. In 1723, for example, the Society provided £12 to support the maintenance of a charity school at Orphir for only one year.²⁷ Some parishes, such as Unst, were even less fortunate, with no provision made for any kind of school building throughout the eighteenth century.²⁸

19 Brand 1703, 68

20 Thomson 1976, 12-13

21 Graham 1998, 3

22 Greig 1892, 30

23 *Statistical Account of Scotland*, Stronsay and Eday 1795, 426

24 Jamieson 1937, Introduction

25 Graham 1998, 72

26 Ibid, 255, and *Statistical Account of Scotland*. The precise number of parochial schools is open to debate and varies depending on sources, due to variable definitions of ‘parochial schools’ and issues of permanence.

27 Orkney Room, SSPCK Records, 27 June 1723

28 *Statistical Account of Scotland*, Unst 1793, 198

The recruitment and retention of presbytery-approved teachers also proved a particular challenge. James Sands, minister for Birsay and Harray, bemoaned that there were no teachers on Orkney he could recommend to fill a vacant position. One candidate from the mainland who had been identified as suitable for the post 'would not condescend to go so far'.²⁹ The problem was compounded by unfavourable salaries and poor working conditions on offer to teachers taking up posts in Northern Isles schools. Alexander Moncrieff, a teacher at Harray, complained that he was 'impoverished' due to the paucity of his salary and soon left his position.³⁰ Another teacher appointed to Westray stayed only a short time before announcing that he had 'obtained a better place in his own county of Moray'.³¹

Certainly, the ruinous condition of school buildings and dwellings did little to entice teachers from the mainland. Walls and Sandness kirk session minutes record that the schoolhouse in Papa was 'very insufficient both roof and tables thereof' while the schoolhouse at Norbie was 'in danger of falling'.³² A further obstacle to retaining teachers was the isolation and hostility they sometimes faced as outsiders in the local community. John Saunders pleaded with the Society to remove him from his position at Sanday after becoming the victim of a local smear campaign.³³ Hector McLean informed the Society that a party within Harray had 'formed against him and in a violent manner locked up the schoolhouse and taken away the key'.³⁴

Despite these unfortunate episodes, many Society teachers provided an excellent education for their students. A kirk session deputation to the charity school in Walls was 'satisfied with both the master and scholars' in their proficiency in reading and their knowledge of the Bible.³⁵ In time, the school curriculum became more suited to the particular needs of island communities. James Tyrie, minister for Sandwick, petitioned the Society to send a schoolmaster 'who would teach navigation to the common people'.³⁶ Sir Andrew Mitchell, Laird of Westshore, requested the Society to send teachers who might be skilled in agriculture, and schools were later permitted to offer instruction on trade, manufacturing, housewifery and spinning.³⁷ Presbyterian schools also played

29 Orkney Room, SSPCK Records, 22 May 1713

30 Ibid, 1 August 1712

31 *Statistical Account of Scotland*, Westray 1795, 258

32 Shetland Archives, CH2/380/1, Walls and Sandness Kirk Session Minutes, 3 August 1744 and 22 January 1749

33 Orkney Room, SSPCK Records, 5 August 1784

34 Ibid, 2 September 1784

35 Shetland Archives, CH2/380/1, Walls and Sandness Kirk Session Minutes, May 21 1742

36 Orkney Room, SSPCK Records, 14 July 1756

37 Graham 1998, 39-41

a wider charitable role by providing books, shoes and clothing, which helped to alleviate at least some of the economic hardship facing the people of the parish.³⁸

Another priority of the Kirk was to positively influence the moral standing of Northern Isles society through a combination of church discipline and charitable provision. Brand's observation that 'manifest wickedness and devilry' prevailed in some parts of the islands doubtless raised concerns that much work needed to be done in this regard.³⁹ The ability of the Kirk to tackle immorality through the presbyteries and kirk sessions was, however, severely hampered in some parishes by insufficient numbers of elders to form kirk sessions in the first place.⁴⁰ On Shetland, the authority of the Kirk was further restricted by lack of a permanent civil court to enforce moral judgements. Consequently, Lerwick gained an unenviable reputation for having twice the number of cases of fornication per head of population than anywhere else in Scotland.⁴¹

As well as the typically mundane, kirk session minutes for Northern Isles parishes reveal a range of more serious offences, including the use of violence in some communities. Elizabeth Anderson was held to account by the kirk session of Kirkwall for 'cursing and beating Margaret Bommie to the effusion of her blood'.⁴² Most disturbingly, Walls and Sandness kirk session minutes highlight concerns over an apparent culture of domestic abuse on the Island of Foula, prompting minister James Buchan to order his parish elders to undertake an investigation into the matter and seek resolutions at the earliest opportunity.⁴³

Additionally, there are numerous references to Sabbath-breaking linked to illicit activity on the islands. The minutes for Walls and Sandness include an intriguing entry concerning 'several boats [which] were employed on the Sabbath ... in transporting goods from a ship which had put in the voe of Futaburgh'.⁴⁴ The legitimacy of these goods is not documented, but smuggling was rife in parts of Orkney and Shetland at this time, and the potential revenues to be made would often override fear of appearing before the kirk session.⁴⁵

Traditional games and festivities commonly held on the Sabbath or to celebrate Holy Days became another source of strong Presbyterian disapproval. These were noted by the minister George Low to include games of football

38 Shetland Archives, Journal of the Visitation of the Charity School of Sandness, 5 December 1745

39 Brand 1703, 55

40 Graham in Withrington 1983, 227

41 Brown 1998, 69-72

42 Shetland Archives, CH2/1078/2, Tingwall Kirk Session Minutes, 24 August 1707

43 Shetland Archives, CH2/380/1, Walls and Sandness Kirk Session Minutes, 29 June 1746

44 Shetland Archives, CH2/380/3, Walls and Sandness Kirk Session Minutes, 9 April 1775

45 Smith 1978, 22-33

played in Kirkwall and Stromness; and an abundance of celebrations centred around Lerwick such as 'Christmas, Newyearsday, Uphaliday, Johnsmass, Lambmass, Candlemass [and] Hollowmass'.⁴⁶ The ongoing popularity of such festivities in the Northern Isles during the later part of the eighteenth century contrasted with other parts of Scotland, where they had long been abolished, suggesting that in Orkney and particularly in Shetland, the Kirk often lacked the authority to fully enforce its own moral code.⁴⁷

The Kirk was perhaps more successful when acting as a force for good through the administration of charitable relief. At a time when Scotland as a whole was prospering, Orkney and Shetland faced severe economic hardship due to a downturn in local fishing and agriculture.⁴⁸ A letter by Birsay minister Thomas Hepburn paints a bleak picture of the 'dismal look of poverty, misery and all manner of wretchedness' facing many islanders at this time.⁴⁹ In spite of difficult circumstances, most parishes did their best to support parishioners in need. In 1755, the treasurer for the kirk session of Stronsay reported that £55 15s had been raised through fines and collections, from which £18 4s was immediately distributed to the poor.⁵⁰ Records for the kirk session of St Magnus Cathedral show that disbursements were issued to the destitute of Kirkwall on a quarterly basis.⁵¹ This put a considerable strain on parish funds, as noted by a complaint to the kirk session lodged by Bailie Sutherland in 1749.⁵²

Poverty on Shetland, as highlighted by Thomas Gifford, was accentuated by the sharp decline in foreign trade that followed the Act of Union.⁵³ Most Shetlanders lived in a state of perennial servitude to the lairds, many of whom were themselves heavily in debt.⁵⁴ Kirk session minutes for Walls and Sandness reveal the depth of poverty in the parish by lamenting the lack of a mortcloth to preserve the dignity of the deceased.⁵⁵ Impoverishment was exacerbated by 'bad money', the collection box at Walls revealing '135 bad half-pennies, 19 bad Hollander stivers, 2 bad 5 and a half-penny pieces, a Swedish groat, a French groat and 2 Hollander blankies'.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the range of social welfare

46 Low 1879, 82

47 Brown 1998, 71-73

48 Devine 2011, 182

49 Hepburn 1885, 29

50 Orkney Archives, CH2/1104/1, Stronsay Kirk Session Minutes, 26 December 1755

51 Orkney Archives, CH2/1082/5, Poor's Disbursements, 1668-1679, Kirk Session of St Magnus Cathedral

52 Orkney Archives, CH2/443/, St Magnus Cathedral Kirk Session Minutes, 20 November 1749

53 Gifford 1879, 6-7

54 Smith 1984, 45

55 Shetland Archives, CH2/380/3, Walls and Sandness Kirk Session Minutes, 29 August 1792

56 Ibid, 3 September 1742

provided by the parish was indeed remarkable and included contributions towards the provision of food and clothing, infant care and funeral expenses as well as the upkeep of a leper colony on Papa Stour.⁵⁷

Overall, it seems reasonable to argue that the Scottish Presbyterian church had a considerable influence on the society and culture of the Northern Isles in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though in some respects it was less influential than might have been anticipated by the Kirk itself. Presbyterian influence on religious practice across Orkney and Shetland often proved superficial. Visitors to Orkney and Shetland in the later part of the eighteenth century noted the same sort of spiritual void encountered by Brand a century earlier and were often shocked at the poor state of religious observance on the islands. The evangelical preacher James Haldane described the islands in 1797 as ‘as much in need of the true gospel of Jesus Christ as any of the Islands of the Pacific Ocean’.⁵⁸ The fact that episcopal sympathies remained and local superstitions and beliefs linked to Scandinavian tradition persisted in some places reinforces the suggestion that Presbyterian influence was limited. This adds credence to Peter Marshall’s belief that Presbyterianism failed to represent a ‘spiritual conquest’ of the islands, as its impact was short term and already in decline by the end of the eighteenth century.⁵⁹

The influence of Presbyterianism in improving educational provision across the Northern Isles was also fairly restricted. Despite the efforts of the SSPCK and the enthusiasm of individual parish ministers to enhance educational opportunities at local level, lack of funds and resources, poor quality of school buildings and teacher shortages limited success. The stated intention of the Kirk and its charitable affiliates to provide a school in every Northern Isles parish never came close to being realised. For many children, educational benefits were marginal and often amounted to little more than reciting the catechisms—of little practical use in island localities like Orkney and Shetland, where the two main concerns of fishing and agriculture underpinned the regional economy. As noted by John J Graham, however, for some Orkney and Shetland children, Presbyterian education offered at least a glimpse of a better world.⁶⁰ By the end of the eighteenth century, most children had received some kind of basic schooling, with a more diverse curriculum and improved literacy rates bringing benefits for future generations of islanders.⁶¹

57 Shetland Archives, CH2/380/3, Walls and Sandness Kirk Session Minutes, 19 July 1736

58 Haldane 1798, 51

59 Marshall 2020, 18

60 Graham in Withrington 1983, 228

61 Graham in Crawford 1984, 181

Presbyterianism also had a somewhat limited influence on moral standards, and while kirk sessions became increasingly influential in people's everyday lives during the eighteenth century, church discipline was not always enforced—particularly on Shetland, where many local traditions contrary to Presbyterian doctrine continued unabated. The Kirk did contribute positively to Northern Isles society through charitable provision, which helped to alleviate the worst poverty and suffering in many parishes even if hampered by local circumstances. This evidence tends to validate William P L Thomson's argument that the Kirk helped to create a more socially just society by the end of the eighteenth century.⁶²

There is little doubt that while the Kirk brought some social and cultural benefits to the Northern Isles, its influence was uneven due to local circumstances. Further, the islands' geographic and cultural detachment from the centre of Presbyterian power in Lowland Scotland meant it was never fully embraced by the people. To most Orcadians and Shetlanders, Presbyterianism was always perceived as a 'Scottish' religion, and the Kirk's failure to take greater account of the unique cultural heritage of the islands ensured that in the longer term, its influence would not be fully realised. The social and cultural identity of Orkney and Shetland continued to be shaped in the nineteenth century, not so much by remoteness and dislocation but by a renewed connectedness to outside influences.⁶³ As Donald J Withrington suggests, the enduring bond that transcended the islands through their age-old affinity to both Scandinavia and Scotland would continue to evolve as Orkney and Shetland sought to maintain their own unique identity in the modern world.⁶⁴

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62 Thomson 2008, 196

63 Malm 2013, 40

64 Withrington 1983, 37

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