

# CROSSROADS OF THE NORTH

By ALEX. S. MOWAT

TO one who knows and loves the Orkney and Shetland Islands it is surprising to find how little other people know of them and annoying to discover how often they are confused with the Hebrides. All three, of course, are groups of islands lying off the coast of Scotland, the Hebrides to the west, the Orkneys and Shetlands to the north. They therefore have some geographic and climatic characteristics in common. But, despite half a century and more of compulsory schooling in English applied to all, the inhabitants of the northern and western isles remain very different in culture and tradition. The Hebrides once spoke only Gaelic and many still speak it as a first language. It is unknown, and always has been, in the Orkneys and Shetlands. The Hebridean is a Celt, a representative of a dying culture, looking back into the gloom and mystery of the Celtic twilight. Nostalgia for the storied past breathes from his beaches and his shielings. He has loved and lost. The Orkney-man and the Shetlander have neither the inclination nor the time to spend on such nonsense. A shrewd and hardy vigour, descending (they declare) from their Norse ancestors, saves them from any trace of that melancholic lethargy sometimes attributed to the Hebridean Celt. While they are passionately attached to their islands and well versed in their history and traditions, they are equally interested in the latest methods of egg-production and the price of fish at the Aberdeen fish market.

Orkney and Shetland cannot be understood without a map, preferably a map of Europe, since on maps of Great Britain the Shetlands, and sometimes the Orkneys, are usually placed in an inset far from their proper place. A glance at a map of North Western Europe will show that the Orkneys consist of about half a dozen large and many smaller islands just off the extreme north-eastern corner of Scotland. The Shetlands, a group of similar size, will be found about sixty miles north-north-east of the Orkneys. It will also be seen that the Shetlands lie in the northern entrance to the North Sea and are only two hundred miles due west of Bergen in Norway. This geographical position made both groups of islands a veritable crossroads of the north in the great days of the Norse explorations and conquests, when the Norsemen followed the sea paths westward to Orkney and Shetland and from there north-westward to the Faeroes and thence to Iceland, to Greenland and eventually in the person of Lief Ericsson, to the mainland of North America. From

Orkney they also proceeded towards the south-west, down the west coast of Scotland and eventually to the Isle of Man which became their headquarters in the Irish Sea.

Norse influence is everywhere in both Orkney and Shetland. The present inhabitants, though not noticeably Scandinavian in appearance, do not regard themselves as Scots. The connection with Scandinavia has always been kept up, partly through the natural channels of fishing and trade and partly through deliberately planned contacts like the now firmly established biennial Viking Congress, first organised by Dr. T. M. Y. Manson of Lerwick, Shetland. During the last war a further link was forged. After the German invasion of Norway in 1940 many Norwegians, following the paths of their fore-fathers, escaped from the grasp of the Nazis in fishing boats, small sail boats or even in rowing boats, and set off hopefully westward. As may well be imagined, many of those departures were made in haste and without preparation. As a result some refugees found themselves in stormy seas, under overcast skies and without navigational aids. It is related that one such group after several rough days at sea made land and drew into a sheltered harbour. "Scotland?", they asked a local inhabitant. He shook his head. "England?", they asked, less hopefully. Still he shook his head. They were astonished. Could this be Iceland, or America? Impossible! They talked among themselves. At last one said "Shetland?" A vigorous nod of the head assured them they were among friends.

To-day the Orkneys contain about twenty thousand people and the Shetlands a like number. They are served by excellent steamer and air services from Aberdeen on the mainland of Scotland. Approach to the islands is likely to be dramatic either by air as the plane dives through the usual cloud cover to reveal the pattern of islands below or by sea in the calm of a silvery dawn or through an aura of spray if there is a gale blowing or a sea running. There is no land west of the islands till the coast of Labrador is reached and in winter gales out of the Atlantic are frequent and furious. To the visitor from outside the first noticeable feature is the complete absence of trees. A few survive sheltered by buildings in the towns but elsewhere the salt-laden winds soon stunt and wither any sapling. Houses are solidly built of stone and roofed with slates or tarred roofing material carefully nailed down. Field boundaries are marked by wire fences or more frequently by stone walls built without mortar. The sea is always at hand and everywhere there are magnificent panoramas of sky and sea with chequered fields and

heather-clad hills, glittering bays faced by crescents of sand, and cliffs and crags above foaming surf. In the old days the sea was the main means of communication (as it still is between islands) but now all the larger islands have excellent paved roads.

Man has lived in the islands for thousands of years. Clear and abundant evidence of his presence from remote times is to be found on every hand. The traveller does not proceed far before stumbling across the tombs of prehistoric men, or their monuments, like the Standing Stones of Stenness, or their strongholds such as the many brochs or Pictish towers. Modern archeologists have even uncovered the dwellings of prehistoric man, which were so much more fragile and expendable than the other edifices he raised. At Skara Brae in Orkney and at Jarlshof in Shetland are to be seen the remains of his little round stone huts, (which were roofed perhaps with skins), his hearthstones, his storage bins, his rubbish heaps and the narrow passage ways between, the whole comprising a prehistoric village or succession of villages. Here long before the Christian era on these bleak and wind-swept shores men lived and died, subsisting at first, as their rubbish heaps indicate, upon shellfish, but in later centuries tending domestic animals, growing crops, manufacturing tools, first of stone and later of bronze and iron, defending themselves against marauders from the sea and (in Orkney) laying their dead to rest in most elaborate communal tombs. All those facts we learn from excavations. The thoughtful spectator asks himself whence they came and why? The answer to the first question we now know. They came from the south, from the mainland of Great Britain. This is proved by the recovery of pieces of pottery and other artefacts similar to some discovered in Scotland and England. But why? What would attract men to the Shetlands, which lie in the same latitude as the southern tip of Greenland, or to the Orkneys, which lie in the same latitude as the summer port of Churchill on Hudson Bay? The answer lies in the two words "Gulf Stream." This blessed current laves their shores. As a result although their summers are cool, winters are warm, somewhat warmer than winter in London or Paris and much warmer than winter in New York. They have little frost and less snow. In addition there are plenty of fish around their shores and plenty of easily accessible peat for fuel, and the rainfall is moderate and well distributed throughout the year. Most important of all for prehistoric man is the fact that the islands are treeless and have always been so. One may legitimately think of those first settlers escaping to the Orkneys from the gloom of the great

Caledonian forest to the south with something of the elation of the first farmers escaping from forest-bound eastern Canada to the grassy boundless plains of the prairies. Almost all of Orkney is low-lying with light well-drained and fertile soil. The primary cover was probably grass and the islands to-day support large numbers of excellent sheep and cattle as they supported the sheep and cattle of prehistoric man in addition to the red deer which were also in those days found in the islands. Shetland is much more rugged, and extensive areas have an acid soil which favours heather and bog plants, but there are some cultivable areas similar to those in Orkney. It is on those that prehistoric remains are found.

That the prehistoric inhabitants prospered is evident from the number and extent of the structures they left behind. The most remarkable of them are the brochs or "Pictish towers" previously mentioned, of which there are over fifty ruined sites in Orkney and a similar number in Shetland. Many hundreds more are to be found all over the north and west of Scotland and they have no parallel anywhere else in the world. The best preserved of all is found in Shetland on the small island of Mousa. The Mousa broch, like all the others, is a circular tower built without mortar, about 50 feet in diameter externally and now standing to a height of about 45 feet. The only opening to the outside is a single doorway large enough only to admit one person at a time and provided with arrangements on the inside by which it could be blocked up rapidly and completely. The walls of the broch are 15 feet thick with a staircase running up spirally to the top in the thickness of the wall, internal galleries, a well, and several hollow chambers in the wall at ground level. All brochs are very much alike. They were obviously used for defence, but in what circumstances is not known. We know from pieces of pottery found inside that some were occupied during the time of the Roman occupation of Britain. Some were perhaps built during that era. We also know that for the most part they were in ruins when the first Norse invaders arrived in the 8th century.

The completeness of the Norse settlement is attested not only by the known history but also by the fact that practically all place names in Orkney and Shetland are of Norse origin. The occasional occurrence of the place name "papa" (priest) suggests strongly that there were Christian missionaries in the islands before the arrival of the Norsemen and excavations at Birsay in Orkney have confirmed this beyond any doubt. Most authorities think that those missionaries came originally from

Ireland and were part of the mission of which St. Columba is the most famous figure. But it is just possible that they belonged to the mission of St. Ninian which preceded St. Columba's by more than a hundred years and originated in South west Scotland before the Romans left Britain. Be that as it may, the first Norsemen were heathens and it was some centuries before Christianity returned to the islands. These Norsemen were of the same breed as those who spread themselves from Scandinavia all over the world, touching points as far distant as Constantinople, Sicily, Iceland and even the New World. They were magnificent seamen, doughty fighters, munificent in hospitality and excellent organisers. The present day Orkneyman or Shetlander is intensely proud that the blood of these hardy wanderers still runs in his veins. The Norse domination of the islands was complete for many centuries. At first they were under the crown of Norway and later under that of Denmark, until they finally passed to King James III of Scotland in 1470. For centuries after that they remained Norwegian in customs, disputes were settled according to Norse law and even as late as the beginning of the seventeenth century it is related that a Scottish minister of the Reformed Church proceeded to Norway to get instruction in the language in order the better to communicate with his parishioners. Some Norse words still survive in the dialects, especially words connected with boats and the sea. Boats constructed in Shetland in build and rig are the direct descendants of the old Norse ships, (though this is no longer true of boats built in Orkney). There are many Norse surnames such as Marwick, Eunson, Halero, Rattar, Inkster, Isbister, Peterson, Manson (Magnus' son) and Ollason (Olaf's son) and a few Christian (or first) names such as Hilda, Inga or Vaila.

But the most obvious debt to the Norse, as already stated, is in the place names. The commonest place name is naturally the Norse suffix for island which appears variously spelt as -ay, -ey, -or -a. Hildasay, Ronaldsay, Sanday and Westray explain themselves. Egilsay is church island (ecclesia); Foula is bird or wild fowl island; Whalsay is whale's island; Linga is heather island; Hoy is high island. [Similar names are found in many other parts of Great Britain, for example in Anglesey (Island of the Angles) or Chels-ea (Chel's island) in London.] Other common suffixes in place names are -ster or -sta (a homestead), -garth (an enclosure), -wick (a broad shallow bay—hence the word Vik-ings), and -dal (a valley). In addition there is a whole Norse vocabulary connected with the sea and sea-coast. A low rocky island without herbage is a skerry; a small

grassy island is a holm; a high isolated rock sticking out of the sea is a stack; a broad shallow bay is a wick; a deep narrow inlet a voe, a small narrow inlet between cliffs a geo, a channel between two islands a sound. The sea birds (though not the land birds) are known by Norse names; so are the old tools like the tusker, the tool for cutting peat, still everywhere in use, (tusker—turf-scar, the turf cutter). In the islands the Norse heritage cannot long be forgotten.

The Norsemen also left other more tangible records. It was they who introduced the rectangular house (previous dwellings were circular in plan), and the foundations of some of their houses may be seen, as at Jarlshof. But by far their most remarkable memorial is the red sandstone cathedral of St. Magnus in Kirkwall the greater part of which as it now stands dates from the twelfth century and is typically Norman in design. It is very much smaller of course than the great cathedrals of the south but still a considerable building in height, in length and in structure. It was built by Earl Ronald in honour of his uncle Magnus who was murdered on the island of Egilsay and a generation later venerated as a saint and a martyr. Who designed it and how it was built we do not know. But it is strange to think of the masons laying the foundations of St. Magnus' Norman pillars in 1137. At that date the vaulting of the great Norman structure of Durham was just being completed. William of Sens had not yet come to Canterbury. Notre Dame in Paris had not been begun; nor had Wells nor Salisbury. Yet here in these remote northern islands highly skilled men were starting out to build their rounded pillars to be surmounted in due time by triforium, clerestory and stone vaulted roof. How well they built you can see to this day.

The history of Orkney and Shetland since the great days of the Norsemen has not been without excitement. After 1470 they went through a long period of adaptation to Scottish language, law and customs. In 1588 the remnants of the great Spanish Armada sailed by and one ship was wrecked on the Fair Isle. In the seventeenth century the great Dutch herring fishery centred around the islands in the days when it was said that Amsterdam was built upon herring bones. But the greatest days of island history were reserved to the twentieth century when in two world wars the Shetlands were known as "Britain's Best Battleship" or "The Cork in the Bottleneck", referring to their position across the northern entrance to the North Sea, and when Scapa Flow in the Orkneys twice became the head quarters of the British Home Fleet. War has gone from the

islands now; but it has left its mark. Here and there in the Shetlands one can still see a Norwegian fishing boat which brought refugees from Norway in the early years or took part in the stirring adventures described in Howarth's book "The Shetland Bus," (when a Norwegian patriot felt that things were getting too hot for him in Norway he would tell his friends "I think I'll take the Shetland bus"). In Orkney one may see the mighty Churchill barrier (something like Canso causeway) built to seal off one entrance to Scapa Flow after the sinking of the "Royal Oak." But the greatest mark of the two wars upon the islands is not a visible one—it lies in the exceptional losses in young men suffered on both occasions. For the young men of Orkney and Shetland were largely engaged on the most dangerous, trying, and hazardous work of the two wars. They were seamen on the warships or merchantmen of the North Atlantic.

Many young men from the islands go to sea and visit the remote corners of the world. When a film unit went to the lonely island of Foula in 1936 to make the film "The Edge of the World" some of its members boasted to the local inhabitants of their connections with such distant and exciting places as London, New York and even Hollywood. The local men were not impressed, and it turned out later that most of them had been round the world and back as merchant seaman and had visited places far more exciting and exotic even than Hollywood. But the fascination of the islands will always draw them back. Even to the outsider who has once tasted of their scenery and dipped a little into their archeology and their history, the pull is irresistible. The two groups of islands do of course differ somewhat in geographical conditions, in history and tradition. There is a certain friendly rivalry between them. Each is a unit with its own council of local government and its own strength of local sentiment. You can always get a rise out of an Orkney man or a Shetlander by disparaging his islands just as you can with a Cape Bretoner. But for my part I do not wish to see any weakening of those powerful local loyalties which you find in Orkney and in Shetland (and of course in that part of Nova Scotia which was once an island but is now an island no more.)

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