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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE UTTERMOST PART OF THE EARTH: ISLANDS ON THE EDGE ... AND IN THE CENTRE OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC

Silke Reeploeg

The Shetland Islands are a good example of what island cultures and societies can tell us about the construction and maintenance of national identities, as well as the way in which historical perspectives and internalised ideas influence how we locate parts of Britain. How do these “other” islands become part of the national mental map? And how do islanders themselves incorporate “Britishness” into their cultural identity?

For the “Northern Isles” of Orkney and Shetland, their geographical position has historically meant being an *outpost* of the British Isles, at its Northern “edge,” as noted by Sandy Cluness, Convenor of the Shetland Islands Council, in an interview with *The Journal*: “We are on the periphery and have all the higher costs that come with that and not many of the advantages.”¹

The Scottish Northern Isles, the islands of Shetland and Orkney were historically and politically part of a “Nordic kingdom,” a historical and cultural space, traversed by Norse migration routes, that continued to exist well into the early modern period. Politically, both the Shetland and Orkney island groups were part of a Dano-Norwegian kingdom, and were first mortgaged in 1468 and 1469, then formally transferred to the Crown of Scotland in 1472.² Shetland’s geographical position, in particular, has meant that the islands have long been at the centre of a North Atlantic socio-cultural region: a network of North Atlantic colonial settlements that form part of what is now referred to as Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway Sweden). Political regional communities such as the medieval Kalmarunionen have characterised social and cultural periods where the three kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden (including Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Shetland and Orkney and some of Finland) were united under one monarch. There is also evidence of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hanseatic trading links and various sea-faring and fisheries related connections, which brought regular German, Dutch and Scottish contact.³

From a British perspective, the islands are part of the British Isles and of the United Kingdom. The islands are also part of Scotland, a “nation within a nation.” From a regional perspective, Shetland and Orkney’s culture and identity are part of a Nordic cultural region. The history and cultural identity of the Northern Isles can therefore be considered to occupy a borderland, a meeting of nation states, demonstrating a regional uniqueness, an *otherness*, which stems from a continuous dialogue with neighbouring cultures across the whole North Atlantic region and beyond.

This poses important challenges to incorporating the islands within a “British” island identity, and to the concept of islands as being outposts or satellites of any nation or society. In fact, a closer look at particularly the Shetland Islands’ history and cultural heritage shows the islands to be at the very centre of North Atlantic social contact, and rather well connected, rather than the “remote” and “isolated” outpost that modern and contemporary national narratives suggest. My second question, in terms of “Britishness” or cultural identity is therefore related to how the islands are not outposts, but are at the centre of an intercultural conversation between two “other” cultural identities: the Nordic and Anglo-Scottish.

This chapter will show that the cultural heritage of the Northern Isles actually insists on being “other,” often resisting, and sometimes opposing, the dominant, national historical and political narratives. The Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland are therefore of real interest in terms of exploring the complex and adaptable nature of representing “otherness” within British identity, and the way islanders actively utilise their economic, political and cultural-historical environment to create a multiplicity of localised island identities within the national narrative.

Islands, regions, cartographies

In the past twenty years, the study of regionalist cultural dynamics has received an increasing amount of attention, with authors analysing the “politisisation of regional distinctiveness” by exploring how regional identity has “developed through hegemonic struggle between different kinds of region and nation-building projects within and outside the region.”⁴ Of particular interest is the complex, and often complimentary, relationship between nineteenth- and twentieth-century European cultural history, cultural and political regionalisms and nationalist agendas.⁵ As these approaches are also all clearly relevant to the analysis of the construction and maintenance of national and regional island identities, it is important to draw together the study of historical, cultural and political discourses, regionalisms and border studies, and critically consider historiographical and cartographical evidence about and from the Northern Isles region.

One significant factor during the eighteenth and late nineteenth century is the way in which geographical knowledge changed, in “a world in which explorations shifted from sea to the land, and the closure of the imperial space was accompanied by the popular and racialised representation of colonised ‘other’.”⁶ As noted by Brian Harley in *Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe* “cartography was primarily a form of political discourse concerned with the acquisition and maintenance of power.”⁷

Map-making and the visual and the textual reorganisation of narratives of and about the past are therefore intrinsically connected to the separation of chorography, which differentiated “the character and individuality of local places,” from the more objective, or scientific, cartography and geography of early modern Europe.⁸ Maps from the sixteenth century onwards offer particularly good opportunities for the exploration of a new perspective on the changing and reciprocal relationships between the rise of the nation state and the expansion of cartography.⁹ William Ferguson connects this change within British and Scottish viewpoints to historical studies: “In the course of the seventeenth century the political map of Europe was beginning to acquire its rough modern outlines ... In Britain the changes in national attitudes came to be dominated by new interpretations of the past.”¹⁰

For social scientists, historians and geographers alike, it became an accepted practice to isolate cultural and historical studies within the current imperial, national or regional limits. This was accompanied by a shift towards associating modernity with progress through economic development and industrialization, which, by incorporating them into this new national chronology of industrial progress, redefined non-urban areas within Europe as peripheral or pre-modern. Modern social, political and cultural historians have generally respected these political or linguistic boundaries, with cultural identity often hinged upon “belonging” to a homogenous nation-state, ethnic group, language area or developed/underdeveloped region. In terms of cultural and historical identities, this means a corresponding strengthening or weakening of perceived connections to and from a centre or “mother country” over time—and a corresponding perceived “outpost” status for the smaller British Isles. As Hance Smith points out in *Shetland Life and Trade 1550–1914*, this approach has “led some authors to believe that Shetland—and indeed Scotland—did not emerge from the Middle Ages until [the Act of Union] 1707!”¹¹

In view of recent developments in postcolonial studies and an increased awareness of the plural nature of British cultural identity, it is therefore constructive to approach history and geography in terms of cultural practices and changing narratives, rather than static concepts or reflections of a unified, underlying socio-cultural or geo-political reality. Narratives are “central to historical explanation as the vehicle for the creation and representation of historical knowledge and explanation.”¹²

Map-making: a visual narrative

One of the earliest maps featuring both Orkney and Shetland is the *Carta Marina* published by Olaus Magnus, scholar and Archbishop of Uppsala, at Rome in 1539.¹³ Supplemented with a fuller narrative account in 1555 with a volume extending over 815 pages, this description and history of the Northern Peoples supplies one of the oldest maps of the Nordic region. Significantly, the map features both the Orkney and Shetland Islands as part of a Nordic topography and ethnography or *Volksgeschichte*. The *Carta Marina* thus represents an early example of the creation of a visual cultural-historical narrative. It combines patriotic, religious and political motives with an interest in the past, the myth-making and creative dynamics of antiquarian and historical accounts that still motivates national histories and historians today. Peter Foote, in his introduction to the English translation of the *Historia* notes that “Olaus’s antiquarian interests are in constant evidence, often associated with his patriotism, for he is anxious to see constitutional laws and traditions as derived from the distant past.”¹⁴ The *Carta Marina* is also part of the beginning of a Golden Age for maps that lasted well into the eighteenth century. It depicts the “marvels of the North” as a piece of art, designed to hang on the wall for display, a display of ownership, an “intellectual conquest of space.”¹⁵ The map provides a historical and visual narrative, which happens to locate Orkney and Shetland in the centre of the Nordic World, a crossroads or stop-off point for a seafaring people, but also an outpost of the Nordic Empire. As a descriptive illustration and, as Olaus Magnus himself noted at the time, the map “not only gives satisfaction and a singular delight, but also preserves a record of the past and constantly brings glimpses of history before your eyes.”¹⁶

What happens to the position of the Northern Isles, in terms of cartographic representation, after the fifteenth and sixteenth century reflects corresponding historical and political changes. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century maps incorporate the islands into the history and geography of Scotland and, not much later, into the mental map of the British Empire. Modern and contemporary geography relocates the Shetland Islands into a box, closer to Scotland, where they become a permanent feature of the coastline of north-east Scotland.

Of course, national-historical perspectives are by no means restricted to Britain. Norwegian history books mention the Orkney and Shetland islands in a medieval context, or during “the migration of the Northmen,” but then cease to refer to non-Scandinavian links at all—after what is referred to as post-medieval “territorial consolidation.”¹⁷ Both regions and islands are thereby subsumed under the national historical narrative, and with them a plurality of cultures and histories. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century chronology and geography are part of this homogenizing strategy, seeking to incorporate “outpost” islands into the nation, but, at the same time, keeping them as satellites—the uttermost parts of the Empire. In this way historical narratives reshape and restructure, as they create.¹⁸

Another important part of this process is played by contemporary descriptions. Texts covering pre-historic, medieval and modern periods of Shetland's history range from early geographical and natural descriptions such as Martin Martin's *A Brief Description of the Isles of Orkney and Shetland* (1695) and George Low's *Tour through the North Isles and part of the Mainland of Orkney* (1778), to Patrick Neill's *A Tour through some of the Islands of Orkney and Shetland* (1806). These historical narratives offer, again, to "locate" the "other" British islands in one form or another, to present them to the emerging British Empire, and both the British and Scottish "national" public. The way in which this locating and describing takes place, and that it takes place at all, already indicates that this activity is mostly about exocentric expectation and perception, rather than the lived reality of the islanders themselves. However, the Reverend John Brand acknowledges the cosmopolitan nature of the islanders;

The People are generally ... not so Rustick and Clownish as would be expected in such a place of the world ... which may be much owing to their Converse and Commerce with Strangers, who repair to these isles in the Summer Season and with whom the Inhabitants do keep a constant Bartering or Trade.¹⁹

120 years later, Samuel Hibbert, in his *Description of the Shetland Islands*, notes the unique characteristics of the culture and language of the islanders, pointing to the fact that they are now part of Britain, "the nation to which they were annexed."

The Scandinavian natives of these islands gradually abandoned the Norse language in consequence of their increased intercourse with the nation to which they were annexed but they still retain many Norwegian terms and along with these their own national accent.²⁰

The ambiguity in how the "other" British Isles are now perceived can be seen in the way Hibbert does not refer to a language, but an accent. Though, at the same time, the "Scandinavian natives" are clearly still speaking in "their own national accent." In a similar integrative move, the languages used in Shetland and Scotland are currently referred to, within Britain, either as a dialect or slang, merely a variation of English. This is part of what Homi Bhaba has referred to as an "apparatus of cultural fictions" that supports the construction of the British nation as an "imagined community."²¹ In terms of geography and chronology, this particular dynamic supports the imaginary construct of a unified "British" nation, that includes some variety, but acts as a kind of overarching national-historical identity.

Geography and chronology are often defined as "the two eyes of history."²² For example, the author of the eighteenth century *Geographical Illustrations of Scottish History*, David MacPherson, clearly motivated by the perceived lack of geographical evidence for the Scottish national historical narrative, complains that "if Geography is one of the eyes of history, it may with great truth be affirmed, that the history of Scotland has in all ages been blind of at least one eye."²³

In Scotland's case, the reinterpretation of the past through cultural narratives via the "three institutions of power," the census, the map, and the museum, has had the effect that regional variety, as well as links to "outside" the Empire or nation-state, are increasingly represented as secondary, or simply as a thing of the past.²⁴ This particular perspective has left scholars invariably searching for the abandoned "remains" of either Celtic or Scandinavian "traces" in the landscape and language of the now "British" (or Scottish) islands. So, for example, Shetland antiquarian Gilbert Goudie's *The Celtic and Scandinavian Antiquities of Shetland* (1904) is the first study to not only provide "the first connected history of Shetland" but also to divide Shetland's history and culture into distinct chronological periods: Pagan, Celtic and Scandinavian.²⁵ Goudie's account was preceded and informed by a study of the language of the islands in the late nineteenth century by the Faroese linguist Jacob Jacobsen. Drawing on information gathered from various local informants during visits to Shetland in the years 1893–1895, Jacobsen collected what he considered the "remains" of the Scandinavian language of Norn spoken in Shetland at the time. His *Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Speech in Shetland* was published in Copenhagen in 1897 and London in 1928, forming the basis of a historical canon of decay about the Nordic heritage of these "outpost" islands.

In order to define a Scottish identity for the Northern Isles, Andrew O'Dell establishes a simplified "transition narrative" for the Northern Isles, noting that "The residual links with Norway were being rapidly broken as new links with Scotland were forged."²⁶ This leaves students of Scandinavian regional cultural links in the Viking age, and modern historians and students of cultural history connected primarily to the Anglo-Scottish/British "mainland" or national centres. Research documenting links prior to becoming part of Scotland's historiography follows a similar trajectory—concentrating on pre-national history.²⁷ Cultural links and change within the "Nordic World" are dealt with, generally, within the medieval period,²⁸ and discuss a historical and cultural landscape that, although influenced by past intercultural links, has now become distinctly national, "British" and "Scottish."²⁹ So, for example, using the work of Shetland antiquarians Gilbert Goudie and Edwyn Seymour Reid Tait as his starting points, O'Dell's *Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands* adds an additional sub-division of Shetland's history from a Scottish perspective: "The Pre-Scottish Period," "The Period of Scottish Penetration 1612–1712," "The Rise and Decline of the Dutch Fisheries and Merchants 1712–1795" and "The Rise of the Landmaster-Trader."³⁰ Significantly, and relating to the above discussion of maps and visual narratives, O'Dell also provides an extensive list of around sixty historical maps ranging from 1555 to 1933 (by kind permission from the then Royal Scottish Geographical Society and now to be found at the Scottish National Library). Interestingly, his selection excludes the previously mentioned

Carta Marina of Olaus Magnus' *Historia de Gentibus*, a historical source which earlier antiquarians such as Shetlander Gilbert Goudie were well aware of, with Goudie citing the *Carta Marina* as part of his "Miscellaneous Papers."³¹

Antiquarian and geo-political interests are therefore combined, in order to provide a new, nationalised mental map of Scotland's territory and cultural identity. Regional descriptions of the now "Scottish Northern Isles" aid a clear orientation towards an additional identification with Scotland as a homogenous, national-historical narrative. Andrew Newby and Linda Andersson Burnett refer to this as "the phenomenon of 'unionist nationalism'" which, "in spite of being very strongly bound up in notions of union, Britain, and empire" provided Scotland with "a very strong sense of national identity and pride throughout the nineteenth century."³² Localised strategies and reasons for combining chorography with cartography in the creation of regional narratives are discussed by Richard Helgerson, who points out the non-conformist, even subversive, role chorography or regional historiography plays in the creation of regional identities;

In place of the royal government, a dispersed network of individuals and communities—a schoolmaster, a London tradesman, a number of lawyers and country gentlemen working at their own expense, courtiers supplying patronage unrelated to official court purposes, printers responding to commercial opportunity ensured the continued production of chorography.³³

As noted by Hance Smith, in what seems to be the only study of Shetland's modern links with the world outside the United Kingdom, it remains important to "appreciate that Shetland was and *remains* in reality far from remote in the context of things British and European. It has European roots—a sea centre of communications in the Middle Ages which led to *enduring* cultural foundations and overseas links."³⁴

If seen from Smith's perspective, it is actually much easier to understand that, despite becoming part of the "British Isles," Nordic narratives have persisted in the Northern Isles—particularly during and since revivals of Scandinavian cultural identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁵ Norwegian historian and politician Jon Leirfall, on a visit to Shetland during the 1970s, lists the long and varied cultural symbols of Shetland's links with, in particular, Norway: from the welcoming placard at Lerwick harbour bearing words from the Gulating Law (the first Norwegian legislative assemblies held in Gulen, on the West Coast of Norway): "Med Logum skal Land byggja" (With laws shall the land be built), to street names and Norwegian symbols "in patterns on silver, in advertisements and in names of firms."³⁶ As a cultural and social practice, Shetland's Nordic heritage is thus not just a nostalgic look back to times past, but a continuous chorographic activity that resists, or subverts, being a British or Scottish "national outpost." It can be defined as an intercultural interpretation by the islanders themselves of their unique "otherness" or regional cultural identity, that combines a Scandinavian-Scottish flag, annual Viking fire festivals, a language rich in both Anglo-Scots and North-Germanic vocabulary and grammar, with regular Sunday afternoon teas "the most British of traditions," held in the village halls around the islands.³⁷

In conclusion, when examining British island identity, the history and culture of the "British Isles" (Northern or otherwise) cannot be studied as a group of isolated or remote "island outposts," but has to be approached as a network of diverse identities that include intercultural features. The fluidity of borders is perhaps the main theme that runs through both Britishness and island identities as such, with a complex agenda of socio-cultural practices orientated towards pragmatism and conformity towards national constructs, but also exceptionalism from them, in terms of regional difference. Although islands have a very easily defined border, between sea and land, the cultural identities of the islanders neither define themselves in isolation or only in relation to their nearest "national centre." In view of an intercultural analysis of cultural practices and historical narratives, the sea that surrounds the British Isles is therefore not a barrier, that somehow keeps "Britishness" contained, but "more of a bridge, a link to the world beyond."³⁸

The sea, to the islander, presents opportunities for intercultural contact that lead to a variety of cultural identities, as well as a tool for demonstrating regional variety or even autonomy. Being a "Northern Islander" in Britain means being in a continuous dialogue with all your neighbours, across the sea. The resulting conceptual "map of identification" is therefore one of an intercultural and plural network of neighbouring European regions, of which Britishness is an element, but which ultimately has the islanders' interests at its centre. Or, as the Shetland author Robert Alan Jamieson has put it: "Da sie's da wy da wirld kum's ta wis (The sea's the way the world comes to us)."³⁹

Notes

1. Sarah Clark, "Shetland Chief Calls for Independence," *The Journal*, November 23, 2008, 14. <http://www.journal-online.co.uk/article/5121-shetland-chief-calls-for-independence>.
2. Hance Smith, *Shetland Life and Trade 1550–1914* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1984); William P. L. Thomson, *The New History of Orkney* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008).

3. Donald Withrington, ed., *Shetland and the Outside World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Smith, *Shetland Life and Trade*.
4. Frans Schrijver, *Regionalism after Regionalisation: France, Spain and the United Kingdom*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 21; Ketil Zachariassen, "Rethinking the Creation of North Norway as a Region," *Acta Borealia* 25, Issue 2 (2008), 113–137.
5. Erik Storm, *The Culture of Regionalism: Art, Architecture and International Exhibitions in France, Germany and Spain, 1890–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).
6. Charles Withers, *Geography, Science, and National Identity: Scotland Since 1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
7. John B. Harley, "Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe" *Imago Mundi* 40 (1988), 57–76.
8. Harley, "Silences and Secrecy," 65.
9. Harley, "Silences and Secrecy," 65.
10. William Ferguson, *The Identity of the Scottish Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).
11. Smith, *Shetland Life and Trade*, 323.
12. Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000), 169.
13. Olaus Magnus, *Carta marina et descriptio septentrionalium terrarum ac mirabilium rerum in eis contentarum diligentissime elaborata anno dni 1539*. Map Collections, Uppsala University Library <http://www.uu.se/en/Collections/Map-collections/Section-for-Maps-and-Pictures-map-collection/Carta-Marina>.
14. Peter Foote, *Olaus Magnus: A Description of the Northern Peoples 1555* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1996), ixiv.
15. Foote, *Olaus Magnus*, ixiv; Jonathan Jones, "Here Be Monsters," *The Guardian Review*, April 24, 2010, 16.
16. Olaus Magnus, cited in Foote, *Olaus Magnus*, 5.
17. Rolf Danielsen, ed., *Norway: A History from the Vikings to Our Own Times* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1998), 21, 25.
18. Peter Burke ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).
19. John Brand, *A Brief Description of Orkney, Zetland, Pightland-Firth and Caithness* (Edinburgh: William Brown, 1701, repr. 1833).
20. Samuel Hibbert, *A Description of the Shetland Islands* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1822), 99.
21. Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 49; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
22. William B. Carnochan, *Gibbon's Solitude: The Inward World of the Historian* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 30, 196.
23. David MacPherson, *Geographical Illustrations of Scottish History* (London: T. Bentley, 1796), 1.
24. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 163.
25. "Lerwick to Leith and Back," *Unkans: The Newsletter of the Shetland Museum and Archives*, March 2010.
26. Andrew O'Dell, *Historical Geography of Shetland Islands* (Lerwick: Manson, 1939), 285.
27. The list of antiquarian and historical writing on the pre-modern history of the Scotland and the Northern Isles is extensive, but for a short overview see: A. Edmonston, *A View of the Ancient and Present State of the Zetland Islands* (London: James Ballantyne, 1805); G. Goudie, *The Celtic and Scandinavian Antiquities of Shetland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1904); and Grant Simpson, ed., *Scotland and Scandinavia* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1990).
28. See John Baldwin, ed., *Scandinavian Shetland: An Ongoing Tradition* (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1978); Alexander Fenton, and Hermann Palsson ed., *The Northern and Western Isles in the Viking World: Survival, Continuity and Change* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1984); Julian D'Arcy, *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: The Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1996).
29. For studies about the changing national narratives and historiographies of regions within the United Kingdom see: Hilary H. Birks et al., ed., *The Cultural Landscape: Past, Present and Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Dauvit Broun, R. J. Finlay, and Michael Lynch, ed., *Image and Identity: The Making and Remaking of Scotland through the Ages* (Edinburgh 1998).
30. O'Dell, *Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands*.
31. G. Goudie, *The Celtic and Scandinavian Antiquities of Shetland*, 288.
32. Andrew Newby and Linda Andersson Burnett, "Celts or Vikings? The Battle for Scottish Identity in the National Museum of Scotland, c. 1860–1900," Paper presented at the Seventh European Social Science History Conference, 2008, Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History (IISH).
33. Richard Helgerson, "The Land Speaks: Cartography, Chorography, and Subversion in Renaissance England," *Representations* 16 (1986), 51–85.
34. Smith, *Shetland Life and Trade*, 289, my emphasis.
35. See: Sebastian Seibert, *Reception and Construction of the Norse Past in Orkney* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008).
36. Jon Leirfall, *West over Sea* (Shetland: Thuleprint, 1979), 158.
37. A white cross on a blue background, it is similar to Iceland's first "unofficial national flag," the Hvítbláinn ("white blue") designed by Icelandic poet and lawyer, Einar Benediktsson (1864–1940) in 1897.
38. "Shetland's Sunday Teas", The BBC Food Programme (7 Sep 2009, 16:00 on BBC Radio 4) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00mf27d>.
39. Smith, *Shetland Life and Trade 1550-1914*, 323.
40. Robert Alan Jamieson, *Nord Atlantik Drift* (Edinburgh: Luath, 2007), 74.