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REVIEW

Atina Nihtinen

Ambivalent Self-Understanding? Change, Language and Boundaries in the Shetland Islands (1970-present)

Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2011; pp.348

ISBN 9789517656085

THE title of this book is promising: as someone who has moved to the Northern Isles myself, I can testify that the self-understanding here strikes one as different from elsewhere in Scotland, and furthermore that many people here have pride in the local dialect. So it immediately seems reasonable to hypothesise that language or dialect plays some sort of role in the creation, perpetuation and continual development of the local self-understanding. I was looking forward to finding out precisely what that role is.

The aim of the book is declared as the following: 'The first aim of the dissertation is to consider Shetland nationalism and the role of language for the emergence of distinct self-understanding among the Shetlanders in comparison to the role of other elements of history and culture. In the second instance the thesis discusses the concepts and arguments used in discourses about language, culture and national belonging during the last decade. Taken together these will seek to explain how recent developments and changes in prevailing discourses have affected Shetlanders' self-understanding in relation to Scotland and being Scottish and the role of language in this process' (p. 15).

One immediately spots two things which became increasingly apparent as my reading of the book progressed: (1) it is a Ph.D. thesis, and (2) its aim is broad and ambitious. It is not unusual for a Finnish Ph.D. thesis to be made available to a wider readership, which is a good thing. My reason for pointing it out is merely to give the prospective reader an idea of what

to expect. In terms of its aims, it might perhaps best be compared to books such as Sebastian Seibert's *Reception and construction of the Norse past in Orkney* (Frankfurt am Main 2008), or Michael Lange's *The Norwegian Scots: an anthropological interpretation of Viking-Scottish identity in the Orkney Islands* (Lampeter 2007), except that it differs in its more explicit emphasis on dialect and language. Neither of these Nihtinen references to, strangely enough (perhaps because they concern Orkney rather than Shetland?).

In the first part of the book, the readers are guided through a very interesting account of nationalism in Scotland, which sets the context for the subsequent exploration of notions of separateness in Shetland. We learn how Shetland reacted to the Scottish devolution referendum in 1979 and about the budding, but ultimately failing, 'Shetland movement'. This is all very interesting for establishing the wider context for the exploration of the Shetland dialect's part in the islanders' cultural self-understanding. It is, however, rather long and perhaps dominates too much in a book which is intended to be about language. The part which deals with language and dialect only starts on page 170!

The book also gives us a potted history of Shetland's national belonging and affinity, having been passed from Norwegian to Scottish rule in 1469. Since I was already somewhat familiar with this history, the thing which interested me the most here was two fleeting references to an article claiming that although Shetlanders still believe that the islands theoretically could be bought back by Denmark or Norway, as Denmark-Norway only pawned the islands in 1469, 'in reality, as pointed out earlier, the claim by Denmark-Norway was given up in the 1640s by Christian I for the city of Newcastle in pawn' (page 147). This is an extraordinary claim which has the potential to upturn much of the self-understanding of Shetlanders and Orcadians, and would therefore seem to be crucial for a thesis dealing with the islanders' self-understanding. Having got hold of the original article by Steve Murdoch in *Northern Review*, 9-10 (2001), it turned out that the proposed deal between Christian IV of Denmark-Norway and Charles I was never put into effect, and in the end changed nothing for the 180-year-old claim that Denmark-Norway had to Orkney and Shetland. This was moreover only one episode in a series of negotiations between successive generations of monarchs on both sides (see Brian Smith, 'When did Orkney and Shetland become part of Scotland? A contribution to the debate', *New Orkney Antiquarian Journal*, 5 [2011], 45-62).

When the section on language and dialect finally comes, it raises some interesting questions, such as: why has the contemporary Shetland community decided to start a dialect movement rather than a language movement, given

the rhetoric of Shetland dialect being something different from Scots and twenty six out of thirty one respondents to Nihtinen's questionnaire saying they would not use the term Scots to describe the Shetland dialect? This leads to a very interesting discussion of the various aspects of what it means to be a Shetlander and whether there is such a thing as a 'true' Shetlander or whether one can be a Shetlander 'by choice'.

Methodologically, the text is somewhat non-transparent. The primary data material for the Ph.D. project seems to be a qualitative questionnaire answered by thirty-one informants. There is nothing wrong with that in itself; however, I would have liked to know much more about who these thirty-one people were and how they were selected. The research is qualitative in the sense that it is interested in the informants' own construction of meaning and not in statistics. However, this leads to some rather bizarre quasi-statistical statements, for example, 'by and large, being Scottish was seen by some informants as . . .'; or 'older informants were more likely to refer only to Britain as the nation' without defining what 'older' means or how likely 'more likely' is (p. 159). This last statement becomes even more bizarre when the 40-49 age group is referred to as 'older' on p. 159, but as 'younger' on p. 163. I would also have liked to see many more direct quotes from the informants' replies.

The book also makes use of letters and articles from local papers and magazines. It is, however, not always clear whether references to these are intended as primary data material or secondary sources. If this distinction had been made clearer, the book would have had a much stronger project.

The coming of oil industry to Shetland in c.1970 is treated throughout the book as a watershed in Shetland's history. This may be true, and it is certainly perceived so by Shetlanders themselves, for instance in Shetland poetry and fiction. However, the book gives no empirical evidence for its being a watershed in terms of dialect change, and makes no attempt to prove what the influx of oil workers meant for the dialect. Instead, the book is a-priori assuming the same position as the local community's belief in the matter, namely that the coming of oil was a defining moment in the island group's dialectal history. However, it also points out that perhaps Shetland is not so different from other dialect areas in terms of the general influence of greater mobility, globalisation and mass media. But without empirical data, the reader cannot judge. As a discussion of local perceptions, however, it is still interesting, although muddled by the book's failure to demarcate clearly between its own stance and that of the informants.

At the end of the book, a comparison to two areas in Sweden and Finland is appended. This is interesting, but not very well integrated with the rest of the book. And unfortunately, and despite all the interesting discussion, we

never arrive at a final conclusion about precisely what language or dialect contributes to the Shetland self-understanding. However, the text raises many good points and has good potential for being turned from an undigested Ph.D. into a revised and more strictly edited book.

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