Shetland and the School of Scottish Studies

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The School of Scottish Studies was established in 1951 at the University of Edinburgh to collect, research, preserve and publish material relating to Scottish folklore, cultural life and the traditional arts. 2011, as well as being the 60th anniversary of the School, marked the Year of Scottish Islands. Much of the material in the Archives was collected in the Northern and Western islands of Scotland – at the time that the School was established there was a concern to gather in material that was on the verge of disappearing and the islands were seen to have the last vestiges of dialects, songs, tales and traditions that were no longer extant in most mainland communities. Over the past sixty years, with the many changes in economic conditions and cultural life, it is to be supposed that much of the oral tradition held in the Archives is no longer transmitted in the communities in which it was recorded.

There are around 700 recordings with contributions from Shetland. From Fair Isle to Unst, Papa Stour to Out Skerries and in between, the recordings contain a variety of material – music, songs, stories, customs, beliefs, riddles, rhymes, verse, place-names, oral history and descriptions of life in Shetland communities. Whilst collecting was not systematic, dependent, rather, on the interests of the particular fieldworker, most areas of ethnological and folkloric interest were covered and supplement the written and oral records created and held in Shetland. A certain amount has been published. Sound recordings feature on a number of the CDs on the Scottish

Tradition series, in particular fiddle music, wedding customs, children's lore and tales[1]. Transcriptions have regularly appeared in *Tocher*, the Archives journal, and Shetland tales feature in *Scottish Traditional Tales* and *The Green Man of Knowledge*[2]. There are various articles in the journal *Scottish Studies* and, apart from archivist Alan Bruford who was especially interested in the Northern Isles, as was one-time Director, Alexander Fenton, Shetland has been of particular interest to ethnomusicologists Peter Cooke and Katherine Campbell who have undertaken extensive work on fiddle music[3]. Access to material has greatly increased with the creation of a website with a selection of material from the Archives, the result of a collaborative project enabling digitisation and on-line access to material in the Sound Archive. There are now over 1800 items from Shetland on the Kist o Riches website which can be accessed from anywhere in the world (www.kistoriches.co.uk).

Given the vast amount of material from Shetland, this paper will present only a taster. This aims to reflect life in Shetland as well as enabling comparison with aspects of life and oral tradition on other Scottish islands. The transcriptions that follow were made by a variety of individuals over the years and have been left as they were rather than attempting standardisation. Transcription is an indefinite art and there will be differences, largely depending on the individual transcriber and their knowledge of Shetland. Where audio material is in the public domain, via *Kist o Riches*, this has been referenced.

Shetland is not especially renowned for its song tradition (unlike the Gaelic speaking islands), however there is a repertoire which incorporates

1 *Shetland Fiddle Music* Scottish Tradition Series No 4 CDTRAX 9004, 1994.
The Fiddler And His Art Scottish Tradition Series No 9 CDTRAX9009, 1993.
Chokit On A Tattie Scottish Tradition Series No 22 CDTRAX9022, 2006.
Wooed And Married And Aa Scottish Tradition Series No 23 CDTRAX9023, 2008.

2 *Shetland Traditional Tales*, D A MacDonald and A J Bruford (eds), Polygon 1994.
The Green Man of Knowledge and other Scots traditional tales, Alan Bruford (ed), Aberdeen University Press, 1982.

3 See *The Fiddle Tradition of the Shetland Isles*, Peter Cooke, Cambridge Studies in Ethnomusicology, Cambridge, 1986; *The Fiddle in Scottish Culture: Aspects of the Tradition*, Katherine Campbell, Birlinn 2007.

both indigenous compositions and those gathered from elsewhere. A song with a special place in Shetland is the ballad *King Orfeo* (Child Ballad 19) with its Norn-influenced refrain. This linguistic legacy reflects the strong connections between Shetland and Scandinavia. Shetland was only ceded to Scotland in 1472, having been under Norse control since the Viking invasions of the 8th and 9th centuries. The ballad concerns King Orfeo's journey to fairyland to search for his wife. He succeeds in rescuing her by playing so well that he is offered anything he wants as a reward. The ballad is well known and originates from medieval times. Whilst the text has been documented in Shetland, the tune was considered lost until it was unearthed by Pat Shuldham Shaw when talking to well-known fiddler John Stickle of Unst in the late 1940s[4]. Stickle gave only a few stanzas. A longer version by Kitty Anderson of Lerwick was recorded by Francis Collinson in 1953 and also in 1955:

King Orfeo

Der lived a king inta da æst
Scowen örla grön
Der lived a lady in da wast
Whaar jorten han grön oarli

Dis king he has a-huntin geen
An left his Lady Isabel alane.

'Oh, I wiss ye'd never geen away
For at your hame is döl an wae

For da King o Faerie wi his dairt
Has pierced your lady ta da hert.'

An efter dem da king has geen
But when he cam hit was a grey stane.

4 See Pat Shuldham Shaw, 'Folk Music and Dance in Shetland', *Journal of the English Folk Song and Dance Society, 5*), Pat Shuldham Shaw, 'The Ballad 'King Orfeo', *Scottish Studies* 19.

Dan he took oot his pipes ta play
But sair his hert wi döl an wae.

An first he played da notes o noy,
An dan he played da notes o joy.

Noo he's geen in inta der haa,
An he's geen in among dem aa.

Dan he took oot his pipes ta play
But sair his hert wi döl an wae.

'Noo tell tae us what you will hae
What sall we gie you for your play?'

'What I will hae I will you tell
An dat's my Lady Isabel.'

'Ye's tak your lady an ye's geeng hame
An ye's be king ower aa your ain.'

He's taen his lady and he's geen hame
An noo he's king ower aa his ain.[5]

Mention of the fairy realm brings us to the trows. The word is reckoned to come from the Scandinavian 'troll' but in terms of behaviour trows are in many ways more similar in size and appearance to the fairies, or Gaelic *sìthean* who dwell in the Western Isles. Like the *sìthean*, they are particularly associated with knowes or knolls (in Shetland they are sometimes called the hill folk)[6]. They have a capacity for good or ill in their relationships with humans and the theme of human-fairy encounters is as strong in

5 Kitty Anderson, Shetland recorded by Francis Collinson, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1955.145.B4–6. Transcription by Francis Collinson and Doreen Waugh. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/47965/7 (March 2012).

6 See Alan Bruford 'Trolls, Hillfolk, Finns, and Picts: the Identity of the Good Neighbours in Orkney and Shetland' in Peter Narváez (ed) *The Good People: New fairylore essays*, pp 116–141, Garland: New York 1991.

Shetland as in the Western Isles – (unintended) visits to fairyland were not uncommon:

> *There were two brothers and they were comin home from the piltocks one night. It was in the autumn and they were walkin along the lane to the house and the wan was in front o the ither like, wi da rod, and the other fellow was carryin the fish when the one in front missed the brother and he didna think anything on it. He went right on t' the house and of course the other brother never turned up and eventually they went and looked for 'm and they couldn't find him nowhere, never saw no trace of him. And they couldna understand what was become of him. And time went by – a whole year passed and then at the year's end he walked into the house carrying his sillocks on his back in a kishie. And they were still fresh – same as they were. And they wondered – they all of course got upset – they didn't know what – they thought it was a ghost. But anyhow he asked them what was the matter. And they told him, did he know he had been away a year? 'Oh', he said, that was nonsense he hid only been away a few minutes cause he said he just waitet a few minutes behind because, he said, he was passing along and he heard a fiddle playing, some music. And he turned around and looked, he said, he saw a door open. And he went to the door and looked in and he saw inside a lot of people dancin so he wondered what it was. He was a bit of a musician himself so he went inside to hear what was going on. And, of course, he stood what he thought was only a minute or two and then one of the people inside, the man inside, spoke to him and wanted him to come in farther. And he said, 'no', he hadn't time, he had to go home. So the man clapped him on the shoulder or on the back somewhere and he went home. And that's the time that he'd been, a year. But after he'd got home this place where the man clapped him on the back turned sore and ill, and anyhow eventually it was the cause of his death. He never got over it.*[7]

7 John Robertson recorded by Calum Maclean, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1954.111.1. Transcription by Cathlin Macaulay. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/30945/1 (March 2012).

The fairy world has a different time-scale to the human world. As well as losing time, in this instance, the man loses his health, perhaps because he refused the request to enter further into the fairy realm. Trowies and fairies are tricky to deal with and a refusal to comply with their wishes often leads to some form of retribution. However, the fairies are also associated with the giving of gifts such as that of healing ointment in the story of *Farquhar's Pige*. Trows and music are closely associated and in Shetland the fairies are the source of many fiddle tunes including *Hyaltadance, Winyadepla, Vallafield* and *Aith Rant* of which there are many versions in the Sound Archive with the stories of their origins[8].

Changeling stories, where a baby is taken by the fairies who substitute one of their own, are not as common as in the Western Isles but this anecdote by Andrew Hunter indicates how to deal with a trowie baby:

> *The way 'at the real baby was brocht back again – the wuman – she took a, well we should say a kishie wi so much earth or something in 'm and she scattered them aal on the floor, you see? She took da trowie baby and she put 'm on the floor and she sweepit 'm along wi dis what we would call möld* [earth, which would have been on the earthen floor] – *well she sweepit 'm along wi this and she sweepit 'm out the door … and then she got … her real baby would come back again.*
> *Alan Bruford: In the cradle?*
> *AH: Yes.*[9]

The trows and the seals are related according to Brucie Henderson who says that both are fallen angels who sided with the Devil and were kicked out of Heaven – 'the ones 'at fell on the ground was supposed to be the

8 See 'The Fiddler and the Trows', *The Fiddle in Scottish Culture: Aspects of the Tradition*, Katherine Campbell, Birlinn 2007 and 'When the Trows Danced', *The Shetland Folk Book* Vol 2, p17, ed ES Reid Tait, Lerwick, 1951. Audio versions of fiddle tunes from the School of Scottish Studies Archives are available on http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk.

9 Andrew Hunter recorded by Alan Bruford, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1974.203.A1. Transcription by Cathlin Macaulay. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/77020/11 (March 2012).

Andrew Hunter, Nesting (Alan Bruford, 1974)

trows or fairies, and the ones 'at fell into the sea was supposed to be the seals. And that's the way when you see a seal sweemin wi a fine day, if you just look carelessly at 'm, 'at you would think it was a man…'[10] There are several versions of the archetypal story about the seal who becomes a man's wife, he hides her sealskin and she eventually finds it – often in a corn stook or the byre – and returns to the sea. An interesting variant, told by Catherine Mary Anderson of Fetlar (1886–1981), involves a seal rescuing a man, who has been stormbound after a seal hunting expedition, in return for his son's skin. The event is said to have taken place on Sule Skerry or the Skerries[11].

10 Brucie Henderson recorded by Calum Maclean, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1955.97.2. http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/33150/1 (March 2012).

11 Catherine Mary Anderson recorded by Alan Bruford, SA1974.244.B7; reprinted in *Scottish Traditional Tales,* A J Bruford and D A MacDonald, Polygon 1994, p368.

Another supernatural creature who has associations with water is the nyugle. This horse-like creature is similar to the *each uisge* or water kelpie but does not seem to take on human form. It is associated with water mills and Brucie Henderson, of Arisdale, South Yell told of one encounter with the creature:

This nyugle in Shetland was a thing that they feared very, very much. Maybe aboot two hundred year ago, and it was aboot the time that they were quernin all their grain, the corn and the bere and all. And dey had at that time mills, and dat mills was near burns and dey were lochs at the tops o the hills and they took dat lochs and they had to go and open it [like opening a sluice gate]*, and dey were a man frae Newfield in East Yell at took a bag o corn on his back and he went to this mill wi the bag o corn and set it doon in ita the mill and the place where the mill was built is the Queyon Tiptins* [?] *an its oot by East Yell atween that and Mid-Yell. And then he had to go wey up t' the top o the hill intil a park 'at's called Peter Broon's Park. And dey were a loch dammed in there and he opened him and he gaed doon t' the mill and he was supposed to grind this seck o corn an he never returned. An dis wife had two children and they were lyin in ita their bed in Newfield and the boy was supposed to be five years old and he waakened and he said 'Mammy, da's dead oot, da's dead oot'.*

An she says 'Wheesht boy;' she says, 'dey're nothing o the kind.'

But the moarning came and dey were no father at came and den dey made a search and den the mill was overthrown and dey took his body oot 'n under the underhoose o the mill and it was supposed to be the nyugle that was upset the mill and him yondroo ida the heart o the hills himsel and his body was taen and it was buried close be the mill in the Queyon Tiptins and you can see the marks yet o the heid o the heidstone an the footstone yet an that'll be aboot two hundert year ago and that's all I know.

Calum Maclean: Yes. You would have heard old men tell that too… Now had they any idea, a description of the nyugle? What was it, was it an animal like a horse?

Brucie Henderson: That's what they said it was like, a horse.

Calum Maclean: And did it go in water, did it stay in water?
BH: Yes, they said so, yes.
CM: And did it frequent mills too?
BH: Yes it was mills that it always tormented … so in dat time it was always two that went to the mill for fear that the nyugle came and dey were wan always on watch and he was supposed to come in through the trap on the mill and overthrow the miller.
CM: I see.[12]

While crofting is a mainstay Shetlanders have been described as fishermen-crofters rather than crofter-fishermen. Fishing has long been a primary occupation undertaken both for subsistence and commercially, the latter controlled in previous years by the landlord who took a disproportionate share of the catch. As in the Western Isles, lairds and their henchmen were not generally popular. There is much historical tradition concerning the trickery and double dealing of lairds from the Scottish mainland who took land from those who had farmed for generations and, according to Udal law, already had possession. Clearances and evictions were a feature of the 19th century and are remembered down the generations to the present day.

Many different types of fishing took place. Around Shetland itself, haaf or deep sea fishing with long lines was the main source of income in the 18th and 19th centuries. Men, based at shore stations on the islands and the coast, would be out during the summer, usually twice a week, from mid May to mid August. On the sixerns there would be six men to a boat and once they were out to the deep sea the lines would be fed out by half the crew and the other half would keep to the oars. Cod, ling, tusk and saithe were the main fish sought. There are many descriptions of fishing on open boats including descriptions of boat parts and equipment, the various waters and the taboos associated with fishing, such as turning

12 Brucie Henderson recorded by Calum Maclean, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1954.113.4. Transcription by Cathlin Macaulay. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/31176/3 (March, 2012).

Corn screws, Foula (A Fenton, 1958)

sunwise, and those involving names and naming of familiar people and creatures. Many of the names for boat parts use Norn elements, and the Norn song, *The Unst Boat Song*, reflects this.[13]

As in the Western Isles, the indigenous herring industry developed as the white fishing declined. Whaling was also a source of employment, particularly during the 19th century and apart from serious descriptions of life aboard ship and catching and dealing with whales[14], we have a few tales that are associated with trips to Greenland. Tom Tulloch of Yell was the master of some very tall stories as well as many other supernatural legends

13 A version by Kitty Anderson is available at http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/47851/2 (March 2012). The archetypal version by John Stickle (also held in the School of Scottish Studies Archives) is transcribed and translated in *The Shetland Folk Book* Vol 2, p60, ed. ES Reid Tait, Lerwick, 1951.

14 See *Tocher* 22.

and historical tradition[15]. Conditions in the Arctic were tough as Rabbie Ramsay found out:

> *The Rabbie Ramsa' 'at stoppit up the rodd here 'at telled so many tall stories, 'at he wis, accordin to him – whither he was there or not I dinna keen – but he wis also at the Greenlant sealin an whalin, and this parteeclar day he was been a fairly long trek ower the ice, an he lighted in wi a polar bear. An he fired wan shot at him, but that seem't to hae very little effect. An he came to lodd his gun fir a second shot: he discovered that he hed plenty o pooder, but he hed no dredge* [of shot]. *An he cam oot in a sweat, an hit was that terribly cowld, 'at the sweat draps wis no shüner foarmed upon him as they all froze into beads. An he pickit the frozen beads o sweat aff o'm, aff o his broo an aff o his face, an he pat them i the gun insteed o the dredge, an he wadded up the gun; an be yun time the polar bear was come pretty near til 'm, an he took the gun til his shooder an he fired at the polar bear an he shot him stark deid wi the frozen beads o sweat!*[16]

It was common to take a fiddle on the ship for entertainment and many fiddle tunes such as *Ollefjord Jack* and *Willafjord* and, indeed, songs and ballads were brought back through the whaling and mercantile shipping industries. The archive has a large repertoire of Shetland fiddle tunes, much of it gathered and organised by Peter Cooke. Songs served a functional purpose aboard ship as described by John Barclay whose father was a shanty man:

> *Peter Cooke: You say your father was a shanty man … was this in the days of sail?*
> *John Barclay: In sail, yes.*

15 The repertoires of Tom Tulloch and Brucie Henderson, both from Yell, have been investigated by Vilborg Davíðsdóttir as part of her MA thesis 'An Dat's de Peerie Story': Interpreting legends told by Two Shetlanders (University of Iceland, 2011).

16 Tom Tulloch recorded by Alan Bruford, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1978.63.B2; *Tocher* 30, p369. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/81181/5 (March, 2012).

PC: What time was this – the turn of the century?
JB: It must have been … … before the turn of the century, about 1885 to 1900.
PC: What routes was he sailing on?
JB: He was sailing round the Horn and up the west coast of America, Guyana … He would sing to the men and of course they would keep time.
PC: And that was his job?
JB: Well not exactly a job but …
PC: He was a deckhand?
JB: He was one of the sailors but then when they were any rope pulling to be done he got clear of that – he sang and they knew the exact time to pull on …
PC: As a shanty man … did he make up songs?
JB: Well of course they did, they had these shanties you know – you'll hear that … the crowd doon in England there – of course they have these shanty songs that's suitable for drawin room singin but of course the sailors they used to put in all sorts of words … the songs they had to amuse themselves wi …
PC: And did he not have to do the pulling?
JB: No, no, he was just singing and they knew the exact time to pull[17].

Songs lyrics also reflected voyages and disaster and one of those with particular resonance in Shetland is the *Wreck of the Pacific*, telling the story of a ship that went down near Whalsay in 1871. The cargo of timber collected around Fetlar, Unst and Yell. Needless to say it was rescued and well used on these treeless islands despite the efforts of police and customs officers. (A scene that is perhaps reminiscent of the sinking of the *SS Politician* near Barra in later years, with its cargo of whisky.)

The great storms in Shetland are well remembered and the archive contains various descriptions of the storm of 1881, July 4th, heard first hand from the previous generation. Ten boats were lost at sea and 58 men

17 John Barclay interviewed by Peter Cooke. Transcription by Cathlin Macaulay. School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1972.097.

died. Those who survived have passed on vivid accounts of their attempts to reach home.

It was not just the vagaries of the sea itself that were feared. In the early part of the 19th century the pressgangs roamed. Sometimes those coming back from the whaling were captured before they reached home. There are tales of men pretending they were dead or simple in order to escape, and there were many hiding places. Robert Slater from Trondra, discusses these:

> *They was this old man 'at lived over here; he was Irvine, perhaps James Irvine, but my people, they used to say at he was the Laird, the Laird o Houll – that was the land right across here* [from Trondra] *but I've never really found his name in any book so I canna be fairly certain but I think that he owned the land anyhow. An i the days o the press-gaing, he seem't to – somehow or ither – get the information, that he knew when they were comin. An there wis a family as far as I know they were Moncreiffs, 'at lived over in the valley 'at they call the valley o Uradale – that's jist on the ither side, aest side o Cliff Soond – and they hed a peat stack built in the hill, but it was hollow inside, it was jist two waals, you know, jist roofed over wi ether peats or earth or something like that to cover – make a bit o a roof ower it; 'Coorse it would ha been completely disguised. But anyhow it was oapen so 'at the sons used to go inside this stack, when the waarnin came 'at this pressgang … wis near. And then their old man, their father, he'd ha been too old for them to take: and this old man* [the Laird] *must ha been too old, or they would ha taken him … … So the pressgaing, they might come roond an look but there wis nothin to be seen, there wis jist a peat stack standin in the hill… … There wis anither hidin place 'at seemingly some o them used … … that's a little loch back over the hill here, you canna see it from here: but there wis a burn 'at ran into this loch … … I think it's from the west … … and the burn seemingly had worked a hole in the aerth, like a pit: as far as I can understand it was never dug oot, nobody ever dug it oot, but it wis quite deep so 'at men could go there an [be] almost invisible.*[18]

18 Robert Slater, Trondra, recorded by Alan Bruford, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1974.214 A2–4, *Tocher* 29 p308.

The contours of the landscape are central in many tales and historical events and place-names can be very evocative. There are descriptions in the archives of features such as springs and wells with curative powers. Other water cures include imbibing salt water to ward off seasickness, and water in which mice had been boiled to cure bedwetting.

Discussion of traditional knowledge includes information about telling the time using the sun and stars, and reading the signs to predict the weather through bird behaviour, for example:

> *Brucie Henderson: In Shetland wance in time dey hed a wadder gless an dat wadder gless is still goin strong in Shetland yit … hit wis a bird. An hit wis da red throated diver … Weel, we call her da rain goose or da red throated diver. Well, dey wir a lot o Shetlanders at kent whit sho said an whit it is at sho says whin it's goin ta be good wadder is --*
> *"Drowt ower aa, drowt ower aa, drowt ower aa."*

Brucie Henderson, South Yell (Peter Cooke, 1970)

An whit sho says whin he's goin ta change an be waer wadder --
"Waer wadder an waer weet, waer wadder an waer weet."
Dat's whit sho cries. An if you pay attention till her properly you wid swear at dat's whit sho's sayin.
Alan Bruford: She has the two calls?
BH: Yes. An dan dey said --

Whin da rain gus gengs ta da hill let a man poo doon his boats an fill
Whin da rain gus gengs ta da sea let a man poo up his boats an flee.

AB: She only went out in stormy weather, when it was going to be rough.
BH: Yes. So dey said.[19]

Work was hard and unremitting. Celebrating events and seasonal customs broke up the year. Guising took place at Halloween and during Yule, a 24 day festival, leading up to the New Year. Kitty Laurenson described events in Delting relating to Yule to Elisabeth Neilsen.

In my day, years ago, children used ta go a good deal a-guising, on Hallowe'en Nights and Christmas Eve nights, New Year's Eve nights. And, of course, hit wis long dark nights at dis time an we used ta go from house ta house with a melodeon, sometimes a mouth organ, sometimes a tin whistle. An you had to be able to play a tune or two, always somebody could play a tune. And they wir six ta dance, which is whit's needed fur a Shetland reel. The tune would be da Flowers o Edinburgh or the Soldier's Joy or somethin like that, sometimes an old Shetland tune. But it was mostly all Scotch tunes in my day.

Well, we went to the door and said Happy New Year or Hallowe'en, Gud Hallowe'en, if it wis Hallowe'en time, an everybody wis welcome. So da door wid be opened an in we'd go an we had on masks, sometimes straw suits, which was a skirt made of straw and another kind of skirt which went around the shoulders like a shoulder cape. And a hat

19 Brucie Henderson, Yell, recorded by Alan Bruford. Transcribed by Angus Johnson. School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1970.243. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/66840/2 (March, 2012) Another version by Calum Maclean, SA1954.115.5.

made oot of straw and the ends plaited an stuck up till it was a great height above our heads. And we'd go in and dance dis reel on da floor and everybody wis pleased ta see you. Sometimes dey gave us sweeties, sometimes an apple or an orange if it wis aboot Christmas, though it wisna very plentiful in those days, we only saw it aboot Christmas. It wis never brought inta da shops durin da rest o da year. But everybody wis glad ta see da peerie guisers an we wid say, thank you an shout Gud New Year ta you or Happy Christmas, according as the time wid be, go away on ta da nixt hoose.

Elisabeth Neilsen: What did you call the guisers, what was the Shetland name?

Kitty Laurenson: Dey wir just guisers. Skekklers sometimes, dey wir called. I don't know if dir called skekklers in any other place.

EN: That was up in your place?

KL: That was up in Delting. Oh weel, dey hed da same habits in Yell or Nesting, Lunnasting, all round. It was never a nice Christmas or New'rday here when you didn't see a peerie guiser. An sometimes da big boys wid go on Christmas Day in da afternoon. They wid dress up, of course, and they wid have a fiddle an go aboot from house to house. And they always had a game of football on Christmas Day. They got up early in the morning an sometimes goin guising first thing. Den dey wid go off ta da fitba green an play da ba. An dan dey wid dance at night, usually New Year's Night dey danced, dey never ever left a New Year oot withoot havin a dance, dey thought dat wis bad luck.[20]

Guising has a long tradition in Shetland and the Western Isles. George Nelson indicates that the word *skekkler* is a corruption of *skuddler*, originating from the crew of the boat known as the *skudda*. The chief guiser or skuddler was the steersman. The older custom, *St Mary's Men,* involved men rather than children. Dressed in straw costumes they would

20 Kitty Laurenson, Delting recorded by Elisabeth Neilsen, SA1961.89.A5. Transcription by Angus Johnson. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/41323/5 (March 2012).

go round the houses singing, with a creel or kishie, the carrying horse, to collect gifts.[21]

Divination was common at these liminal times of year, especially Halloween, often to find out a future spouse. Common practices involved objects such as shirts, turning the sark, wool, ash. Andrew Hunter describes cutting an apple in two, and standing in front of a mirror holding it on a fork behind you. Your future partner would come and pick at it and you would see their image. Johnsmas or Midsummer was another important point in the year and Kitty Laurenson describes the associated customs:

Johnsmas in my time wis celebrated on the fifth of July and the feast that we hed wis on da fourth of July, the night of the fourth. And people say nowadays that Johnsmas is da 24th of June which wis the eve of the 25th and Johnsmas, of course, is St John's birthday, and half a year before Christ's birthday. But in my time it was the old style that was held. That's the fourth of July. And we separated the sexes, of course, as they do in this description you have. And the girls would be in one hoose, the boys would be in another. And each had a bit of a feast an we never went ta bed on Johnsmas Eve. Now there was a superstition that you could take your neighbour's profit, that is stop his corn ta grow or his tatties ta grow, if you had a grudge against him, by staying up and doing certain things, on Johnsmas Eve. But in my time my people didna believe in it, you see, and we had just a bit of a children's party.

But one thing we used ta do, wis we got whit wis Johnsmass flooers, wi a certain flooer, I'm not quite sure of da name of it bit it hed a black head and yalloo seeds on it. And you plucked off da yalloo seeds and rolled this, a pair of the black heads, wi da stalks, in a dock leaf and you hid it away under a fell, a bit of earth someplace. And nobody knew where you put it, and you named dis for your partner, whidder you were ta be married or not. Maybe if you had a sweetheart, you wid name it for him. An you pat

21 George Nelson, Tingwall recorded by Elisabeth Neilsen, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1961.90. There are various versions of the song *St Mary's Men*, See *Tocher* 20, p142.

it dere all night, an if in da morning, whin da sun rose, da seeds had grown on again den, of coorse, you wir goin ta be all right, you wir goin ta be married an have a family an all da rest o it. Bit if dey wir nothin growin on da seeds, on da pods, dan, of coorse, it was goin ta be a failure.

An another thing we did wis ta cut a hol in da ground ta see our fortune, we took a big knife an cut a deep hol in da ground an saw at dey wir no worms or clocks [beetles] *or anything at all alive in dis hol, put back da bit o earth an laid a ston on it an left it till nixt morning. An whitever wis in da hol wid give you an idea of whit your future wis ta be. If dey wir plenty o wirms an maybe forky tails or bits o clocks an things, dan you wir goin ta be very fortunate an have plenty in your hoose. Dis hol apparently represented your hoose, fur all future time.*

Bit den, of coorse, … da boys never let da girls see dir hols, an da girls never let da boys see dir hols. Because some times you wid fin wheer things in your hols if dey found out where you'd cut dis hol.

We always hed a feast on Johnsmas an we always had whit we caad milgruel, hit wis oatmeal porridge made on milk, milk that had not been creamed, just as it came from the cow an it wis very, very good indeed. I widna mind haein a plate da night fur me supper.[22]

Milk was a very important part of a subsistence diet and there are a number of ways in which it was served – fresh and sour, liquid and solid. Incidentally, many of the accounts of witchcraft centre on profit taking which would stop the milk from turning into butter. There were various ways of working out who the witch was, and of providing counter charms. Witches also had the power to overturn boats, raise storms and were generally to be feared and there are descriptions of the last hangings for the offence of witchcraft in Scalloway.

Oats and bere were grown and used for various foods including the bannocks and cakes made to celebrate different times of the ritual year.

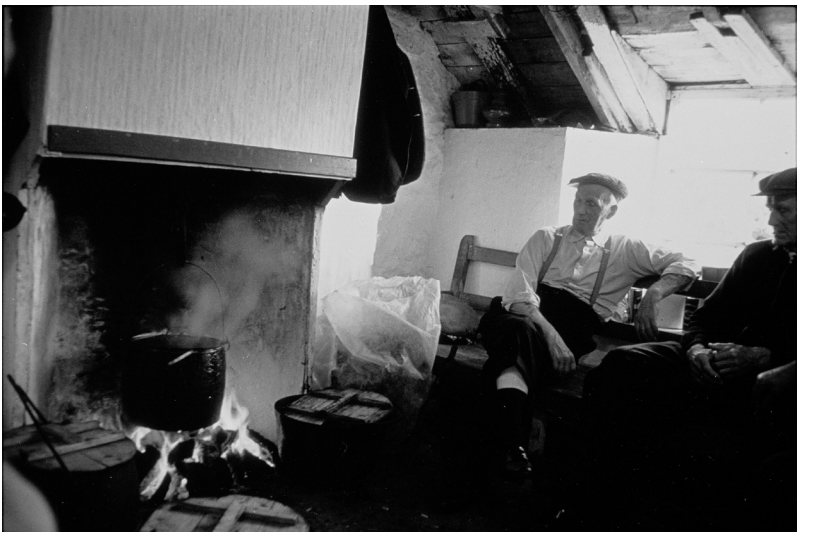
22 Kitty Laurenson, Delting recorded by Elisabeth Neilsen, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1961.89.A5. Transcription by Angus Johnson. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/42183/56 (March 2012).

A special oaten cake was used to crumble over the bride during a wedding and this was a time of great feasting and fun.

Fish and meat generally provided an important part of the diet and were preserved by salting and drying. In a subsistence economy it was important to use all of the animal, as Laura Malcolmson describes, nothing was wasted:

> *They even hid the hooves for glue, and then the puddings or … the tripe part was made into puddings just like the haggis but different puddings some floury puddings and mealy puddings and there were some that … made the blood, blood puddings… … and then the entrails of the sheep was often used to… that's the small gut was often cleaned very particularly an threaded and striped* [stripped] *until it came very, very thin an you stretched them, you washed them an stretched them and then you doubled straw an you striped them as clean as could be. This also took off the fat you know, the extra fat … … and after there were nothing left but the skin and that was stretched out and then you always wound this … wet it and wound it round a piece of wood or even a peat and dried it so far and then startit the process over again… … wash it particularly clean and stretch and stretch and wash again and stretch. And then latterly they were put in a wheel and they were spun through a spinning wheel and then they used to make the band or the belt for going around and driving the wheel. And the trimming band … where you used to put it into the fly of the wheel that was a thinner … … that was all made from sheep's guts. And it was more pliable than cord or anything like that. … … I've seen it done, time and time again. So they were nothing wasted and then the skins, if they were flayed round, they werena split open. They were used to make the fisherman's bows* [buoys] *to keep their nets up and the womenfolk used them as buggies* [baggies] *for to keep their wool in when they were having the cardings.*[23]

23 Laura Malcomson, Cunningsburgh, recorded by Alan Bruford, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1970.236. Transcription by Cathlin Macaulay. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/64870/7.



Cooks' House, Whalsay (Peter Cooke 1973)

It took a lot of work to maintain a household and this continued into the evening. As women were spinning and men were making straw rope, entertainment might consist of fiddle music, riddles or stories. The following riddles or guddicks were recounted by Robina Bruce:

Twa gray bairds lyin i da sty,
Da mair dey get da mair dey cry
Da lesser dey get da stiller dey lie.
I wis comin ower da rigs o' Bressay,
I met me sister Annie,
I aff wi her heid,
I drank her bluid,
I left her body staundin.[24]

24 Answers: the mill grinding [millstones], a bottle of whisky. Robina Bruce recorded by Calum Maclean, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1954.107.2. Audio: http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/32820/2.

The supernatural, pressgangs, sheep, food. The following story mentions all of these topics. It is recounted by Tom Anderson from whom there is much material in the archive in his capacity as fiddler, fieldworker, teacher and scholar:

This is Innbanks we're sitting at here, at Mangersta Voe. There's a story told to me by an old lady many years ago. The story goes back to the time of the war with France, you know, the time of the pressgang and the French privateers. It's said that the privateer came in here, a French vessel came in here, and they were needing food, they were needing vegetables, they were needing everything and they saw this was a croft. Of course they knew they would probably plunder the thing. And the captain said, 'Let's send a party ashore and we'll seize some sheep and some cattle.' The doctor on board the ship, the surgeon, ship's surgeon said, 'No, do it my way first before we do any bloodshed or anything'.

So he went ashore with the boat's crew and he went up to the house. And the story goes now – and I'll continue it as the old people told it afterwards – that the man came up, and was very nice, shook hands, he could speak English. And he told them they'd a very beautiful place, he said, and 'Look round there', he said. 'Look at all the animals and look at all the strange things you see.'

And he said the old lady and the old gentleman, the crofter and his wife, they looked and what they saw were huge birds sitting on top of huge trees. There were beautiful flowers, there were high trees and there were like wild animals going round, striped like tigers and a huge, huge thing like a dog only it was about the size of a horse. And the daughter who was ben the hoose came but in the middle of this and she was inclined to be a bit – 'What was all this going on?'

And he turned to her and said, 'Don't you see?'

And she says, 'I'm not so sure, I only see darkly,' she says, 'I don't see' she says, 'There's something wrong here, it's like a mist'.

And he said. 'Alright' he says, 'you go to bed, and you'll be in bed for two days'. And he said, 'You won't get out of bed until midnight, tomorrow night'.

And they left and the old people sat there for hours and then when they came to they looked and just in a flash, just in the twinkling of an eye, they looked, and what they were looking at was the sterlings [starlings] *as we call them now, sterlings and the sparrows sitting on the dockens. And the cats – they had four cats – and the cats were going round. All their sheep had gone, most of the sheep had gone and they'd left them one cow. The girl slept and they couldn't get her wakened until midnight the following night when she woke up, completely ok … …*

A direct descendent of the lady who lived in this house told me that story. That happened during the French wars in the early 1800s cause the Pressgang was going up until about 1816, 17 so presumably that was sometime between 1800 and 1816, 17 … that's the story, Maggie.[25]

This small selection of material from Shetland has, I hope, given a glimpse of the range of voices in the archives and an insight into islands' culture. Listening to the audio material collected now and over the past sixty years – the individual expression of each voice, the intricacies of dialect, the emotional nuances, the musical intonation – we have a sense of immediacy, intimacy and connection that the written word alone cannot adequately convey. Through this artistry of the ordinary, we can both illuminate and move beyond the everyday.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Angus Johnson, Doreen Waugh, Peter Cooke, Stuart Robinson, Colin Gateley, Caroline Milligan.

25 Tom Anderson recorded by Margaret Mackay, School of Scottish Studies Archives, SA1970.303 *Tocher* 4 p105.