

WIR AIN AULD LANGUAGE:
attitudes to the Shetland dialect
since the nineteenth century
by Brian Smith

1

I want to start this morning with Thomas Hardy. Hardy was interested in dialect – ‘the’ dialect, as he sometimes called it, just as we do - and it often features in his work.

In chapter twenty of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, first published in 1886, Elizabeth-Jane Newson, the mayor’s stepdaughter, makes a faux pas at dinnertime. She says: “‘If you’ll bide where you be a minute, father, I’ll get it.’”

“‘Bide where you be,’” he barks. “‘Good G--, are you only fit to carry wash to a pig-trough, that ye use such words as those?’”

The mayor, you will recall, is a pig. He resents what Hardy calls Elizabeth-Jane’s ‘occasional pretty and picturesque use of dialect words - those terrible marks of the beast to the truly genteel’. Here we have, right away, an explosive negative reaction to dialect.

Five years later Hardy wrote *Tess of the Durbervilles*. In chapter three he makes an interesting distinction between Tess’s use of language and that of her mother. ‘Mrs. Durbeyfield habitually spoke the dialect [he writes]; her daughter, who had passed the Sixth Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, used it only when excited by joy, surprise or grief.’ When Hardy revised the novel, in 1912, he altered this passage. In the new version he says that Tess ‘spoke two languages; the dialect at home, more or less; ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality’. Tess’s experience is more complex than Elizabeth-Jane Newson’s. It is education that affects her use of dialect, not a tyrannical parent.

Things have happened in Shetland, from time to time, like these events in Casterbridge and in Tess’s village of Marlott. We have had lots of dialect-hating teachers, and the occasional genteel parent. Like Tess we switch from language to language, according to our mood and audience.

But I’m going to argue this morning that our attitudes to dialect are more complex than those in Dorset. The point about Elizabeth-Jane and Tess is that they are sublimely unaware of dialect. They don’t debate it, or think hard about their use of it. I sometimes think that in Shetland we do little else. We agonise over dialect. We yearn after the alleged golden age of Norn; we worry that everything is falling apart; spelling agitates us; we are pessimistic about the future. These attitudes emerged here in the late nineteenth century, and they are alive and well today.

I will argue that there is no need for pessimism. I have to say, like Raymond Williams, that ‘[t]hrough some accident of time or temperament I always arrive rather late for Golden Ages’. There was no such age. And during the past two centuries Shetlanders have spoken a dialect which has changed from time to time, as society changes. That is natural and desirable, and not a tragedy. It would be tragic if we didn’t change.

It is time to stop wringing our hands. Instead we should explore and enjoy and celebrate what we have. I hope that is what we will do this weekend.

2

I start with Norn, with a view to getting it out of the way. There are controversies about Norn, not least about how it disappeared; but they are academic ones. They have nothing to do with our concerns on this occasion.

Up till 1893 no-one in Shetland gave Norn a thought. A century or so had passed by then since the last Norn-speaker died. But in the summer of that year a young Faroese linguist took up lodgings with Mrs Linklater in Prince Alfred Street, and everything changed.

Jakob Jakobsen arrived here at a significant moment. During the 1880s and early 1890s Shetland changed utterly. For two centuries Shetlanders had been forced to kow-tow to their landlords, and had been bound in perpetual debt to merchants. Now, in a matter of a decade or so, national legislation (the Crofters Act) and market forces (in the shape of the Scottish herring fishery) had emancipated them. In 1889 and 1892, just before Jakobsen arrived, 2000 Shetlanders applied to the Crofters Commission for fair rents, and during the hearings they spoke at length, sometimes in dialect, about the unpleasant things that had been happening in the islands for so long. Jakobsen walked into a society which had just become free, and which was violently disaffected from its own modern history.

While he was here, and when he went home, he did us great service. His meticulous research, and the great dictionary that emerged from it, are achievements that every Shetlander should cherish. My old friend Jóhan Fredrik Poulsen will be giving us some account of Jakobsen's distinguished career in the Faroes as well. But some aspects of his work had a less happy result here. Jakobsen was the Faroese patriot par excellence. He told one Shetlander that the Faroese had 'the most perfect system of local government in the world'; that they had 'no policemen, crime, poverty, debts or arrears'; and that they were 'all tall, yellow-haired, blue-eyed, respectably dressed, and of a merry disposition.' And as we might have guessed, he thought that Shetland was less well-endowed. In particular, he believed that the language that he heard in Shetland was the palest reflection of its Scandinavian cousins.

His reaction wasn't contempt, of course, but it was pity. Two months after he arrived here he wrote a progress report for the Faroese newspaper *Dimmalætting*. '[T]he more I study this ill-treated speech', he said, 'and attempt to weld the fragments together, the stronger my love for it and the greater the hatred of the Scots and English who have methodically stunted its growth and future development.' Jakobsen hinted, here and elsewhere, that the Shetland dialect was in some way childish and retarded. He quoted with approval a letter that he received from his friend Sophus Bugge, a Norwegian philologist, which referred to Jakobsen's Shetland Norn fragments as '[t]he last lisp of a dying child'. That is a very odd epithet to use about a language that was 700 years old when it died.

There is a second problem, as I see it, about Jakobsen's statements about Norn, and it is related to the first. As Michael Barnes pointed out, in a brilliant lecture delivered in Lerwick in 1993, Jakobsen seems confused from time to time about when Norn died, and about its relationship with the modern dialect. This confusion is more perplexing when

we recall that Jakobsen was a brilliant philologist, and that he knew perfectly well what the difference is between a language and a dialect. But one moment he says that ‘The common dialect at the present day in Shetland resembles the Lowland Scotch’, and the next he publishes what he calls *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*, a collection of words from that dialect which happen to have Scandinavian roots.

The problem is that Jakobsen didn’t have a realistic concept of language death. Norn died in the eighteenth century, after a period of frailty. The modern Shetland dialect is an entirely different language. But according to Jakobsen, by some process observed in no other language, Norn slowly *dissolved* into the Shetland dialect, by a process of *deterioration*. ‘The process has been a steady and gradual one,’ he writes, ‘which is still continuing even at the present day’. Jakobsen was willing to believe that a man called Walter Sutherland, who died at Skaw in Unst around 1850, was a Norn-speaker, while acknowledging that Walter’s Norn ‘can hardly have been of much account’. The message in everything that Jakobsen says is that Shetland’s Norn language decayed and degenerated, until it turned into the dialect spoken here when he arrived in 1893. And he thought that the dialect’s days were numbered. ‘[C]ompulsory education ...’ he predicted, ‘will involve, in the near future, the Anglicising of practically the whole speech’.

The reason I dwell on these matters is that Jakobsen had a huge impact here, in his own day and afterwards. He fell in love with Shetland, and Shetland fell in love with him. To recapitulate, Jakobsen’s account of Shetland’s linguistic history has two aspects. On the one hand he paints a picture of a golden age, the era when Shetlanders spoke Norn. And the other side of the Jakobsen coin is that the modern Shetland dialect is a vastly inferior version of the old language.

For a perfect expression of Jakobsen’s influence, as far as these questions are concerned, I jump from 1893 to 1953. In that year an expatriate Shetlander in Shropshire, William Sandison, produced a little book. It had the significant title *Shetland Verse: fragments of the Norn*. It comprised poetry by half a dozen Shetlanders, the oldest of whom, James Stout Angus, was born in 1830. None of these Shetlanders spoke Norn, of course; all the poems in the book are in the modern Shetland dialect. The reason Sandison chose his title was that he had been infected by Jakobsen’s belief that that the Shetland dialect is a degenerate and fragmentary version of Norn. ‘The Shetland dialect’, he wrote in his preface, ‘... is now, at last, it may be, in its final stages of degeneration ...

[I]n a few more decades [he continued], it shall have reached its end, as nothing more than a corruption or mispronunciation of the English language. ... Those goodly-vowelled old words, those broad renderings of the modified ‘a’, and the modified ‘o’, showing, as they did, the kinship of the Shetland Norn with the Old Norse from which the Norn came, are now quickly dying out ...

But Sandison was actually writing at a moment when Shetland dialect verse was experiencing a major revival! The *New Shetlander* magazine had come into existence a few years previously, and poets like T.A. Robertson and Billy Tait were writing splendid material for it. But Sandison ignored their work. ‘Just as the strong tongue that Burns knew is dwindling down into the tawdriness of “Lauder” Scotch,’ he moaned, ‘so the tongue our ancestors cherished, is falling now, exhausted of its richness, into the grip of the humourists of the local press’. What a travesty!

Sandison's last word is even more significant. He admired Norn, or what he thought Norn might have been. But he didn't want to do anything practical about it. 'There is no wish', he said

to further any movement towards the Norn, in the way that a section of the Norwegian people are struggling to bring their modern language back to the old Folksmaal. Any such retrogressive movement is unthinkable, in the face of modern developments.

Instead he wanted to wallow in nostalgia. 'Let such beauty as is gathered here', he concluded,

stand as a mark, however slight, of what now is past; as a soothing, perhaps, to those who, against reason, must dream at times of olden things; and as a curiosity of etymology to those whose thoughts are purely scientific.

As far as I am concerned, these attitudes are fantasy. They give a false account of our linguistic history. They portray the way we speak, and the way our poets write, as degenerate. They are the mayor of Casterbridge in reverse! This way of looking at Shetland dialect has no relevance for our discussions this weekend, and I turn now to more interesting matters.

3

There is a popular theory about dialects. At an early date, unencumbered by schools, or prejudices about gentility, or television, they are rich and vibrant. But then the schools and broadcasters get to work, and genteel habits prevail. Dialect speakers, the theory goes, forsake their old language. Their lexicon becomes thinner and thinner. The way to gauge this process in Shetland, the story goes, is to count the number of dialect words in Jakobsen's dictionary, and to count those that youngsters understand today: the fewer they know, and of course they know only a tiny proportion of them, the more parlous are our dialect prospects.

There is a morsel of truth in this theory, as far as Shetland is concerned, but it is far too extreme. We know what the Shetland dialect of the early nineteenth century looked like, and we can hazard a guess about what it sounded like. There are enough written representations of it, from Hibbert's account of a Shetland fisherman's speech, collected around 1818, for us to deduce that it is the same dialect that Shetlanders speak today. Naturally, the vocabulary is different, since we live in a society where dozens of words for small boat equipment, or seaweed, are unnecessary. But I don't mourn or panic because of the disappearance of these words, any more than I hyperventilate because I don't know the meaning of thousands of words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

A better way of gauging the health and prospects of Shetland dialect, I suggest, is to consider the written and literary versions of it, and the debates about it, that have appeared during the past 130 years or so. These texts and arguments are very rich indeed. They do not sustain an argument that there is a linear decline from a rich and robust dialect in 1820, to a pör aamos object in 2004.

During the nineteenth century, and especially from the 1840s onwards, there was vast amounts of dialect writing everywhere in Britain: in the north of England, for instance, and the north-east of Scotland. And it wasn't writing for the sake of writing. Authors who chose dialect did so because they had firm ideas about society. For them dialect was the voice of the people, far more lively and democratic than the highfalutin language of

scholars and statesmen. They used dialect to celebrate the common people, and what they regarded as the people's common sense.

The arrival of local newspapers everywhere gave a huge boost to this movement. When such papers come on the scene there is always a big increase in the amount of dialect writing. That is exactly what happened in Shetland, except that it happened later rather than sooner. It wasn't until 1872 that there was a well-established local newspaper, and 1885 that there were two. Right from the outset the *Shetland Times* and *Shetland News* specialized in Shetland dialect prose, sometimes of remarkable quality. There is a tendency to regard this material as kailyard, usually without much study of it. Certainly the first substantial Shetland dialect text, George Stewart's *Shetland Fireside Tales*, published in 1877, errs on the side of the couthy. No-one could read the adventures of Baawbie o Brigstanes and the Hermit of Troswickness without chuckling in inappropriate places. But there were far better things on the horizon. In 1897 both the *Shetland Times* and *Shetland News* began to publish dialect serials, respectively called 'Fireside cracks' and 'Mansie's rüd'. They ran until 1904 in the first case, and 1914 in the second. Both of them, especially the second, are magnificent pieces of dialect prose. They are not well known, because of their enormous length, but both deserve careful study.

'Fireside cracks' is the more conventional work. Written by Peter Greig, a native of Lerwick, it always portrays a weekly discussion round the fire at the fictional croft of Okrabister. Week by week Arty and Gibbie, the householders, and their neighbours, discuss topics of the day. Their deliberations have a strong moralizing content. This is especially true of the contributions of Gibbie, who has been a seaman and speaks fo'c'sle English rather than dialect. Gibbie usually tries to sum up the discussion, sometimes by quoting a sententious poem, but his colleagues more often than not come down on him like a ton of bricks. They regard his contributions as unpractical and finicky. The point of the exercise, it seems to me, is not only to show how Shetlanders speak – and it does that superbly – but to portray the subtle strength of dialect as a medium of discussion and debate.

'Mansie's rüd' is an even finer piece of work. It was the brainchild of James Inkster, who came from Sandvoe in Northmavine, one of the most isolated places in Shetland. Whereas 'Fireside cracks' is a series of speeches, contributions by half a dozen actors, Inkster's work is an introspective first-person narrative. 'My inteention', says the eponymous hero, 'is no sae muckle ta wraet o' my warfare i' dis weary world, as to gie some sma' accoont o' da deleberat observations o' an auld man, on men an' things in a kind o' general wye'. In a kind o' general wye: it is this movement from the particular to the abstract, from the reality of day-to-day life to a discussion of the world, that is so impressive about these productions.

The editors of the *Shetland News* and *Shetland Times* published many hundreds of thousands of Shetland dialect words during the decades before the First World War. What they commissioned wasn't slapstick, or kailyard, but serious material. There would have been no point in publishing these huge slabs of text if the public didn't want them, or if it couldn't make sense of them. This dialect wasn't in decline: it was in its heyday.

The Great War stopped 'Mansie's rüd' in its tracks. During the period from 1914 until the 1960s our society changed, and attitudes changed. Most of that era was a period of dire economic depression and social dislocation in the islands, and every now and then

there were doubts about the viability of local speech. But there were always advocates as well. I shall mention three occasions when there was keen debate on the subject. During the Second World War, for instance, roughly between the British invasion of Abyssinia and Pearl Harbour in 1941, there was an extraordinary correspondence in the *Shetland Times* about dialect, book-length in size. A dozen contributors took part. Not surprisingly, because of the international situation, most of them were insecure, and mournful, and sometimes angry. But there was always a seed of optimism in their remarks. ‘Dialect and folk-idiom ...’ one of the participants conceded,

are always changing, and it is probably the case that with the passing of old ways of life and work, as society evolves from the old home, handicraft stage to modern, mechanised, manufacture, old words and idiom tend to pass away, or drop into the background. Yet it would seem a pity [he continued] if Shetland dialect speech were to be thrown aside by any of our islanders, become neglected, or only brought out from the lumber-room of memory to be laughed at. It is a folk-speech rich in beautiful, poetical words and forms, full of words of a deep human expressiveness.

A decade later Shetland was facing another kind of peril: the deepest economic depression. Fears of depopulation abounded. Again there were signs of anxiety, and this time they could take the form of contempt. A teacher in Cullivoe wrote to the *Shetland News* in 1950. ‘I should like to know’, she said,

where a Shetland scholar is going to gain anything by being able to talk Shetland – a language which we hope is fast losing ground. ... Many a smart Shetland girl has gone south, and lost a coveted position because she couldn’t talk properly. And many a needful case has been lost at a public meeting through the inability of the Shetlander to stick up for his rights. And all through the curse of the Shetland dialect. ...

I’m afraid that in the future [she warned] Shetland boys and girls will have to find ways and means of making a living outside of Shetland, so it’s up to themselves and their teachers to see that they develop suitable speech, along with what personality belongs to them, which helps them to build up a good appearance, all of which goes a long way in procuring, perhaps, the coveted situation.

She was an old reactionary, of course. But during this period of economic decline there were attacks on the Shetland dialect from every quarter of the political compass. Writing in the *New Shetlander* in 1961 Willie Thompson, a member of the Communist Party, went to town on the subject. The death of dialect, said Willie, was ‘inevitable and readily understandable’. Using the crudest form of Marxism imaginable (dialect materialism, I suppose), he argued that the reason it was dying was ‘because the society in which it was embedded is dying’, and that it was ‘going out of use because it has no further valid function’.

He was equally contemptuous about dialect literature. ‘[T]here are basically only two channels through which such work is any longer capable of flowing’, Thompson said: a degenerate sentimental mush about which the less said the better, and an idiotic form of humour which is not even funny. Undoubtedly there are still worthwhile things to be said about Shetland [he conceded, rather reluctantly], but it is beyond question that they can no longer be said in the dialect.

4

I disagree with these pronouncements by the Cullivoe teacher and the young Communist. So did many Shetlanders: the correspondence columns of the *News* and the *Shetlander* were full of ripostes. But there are some questions to answer. First of all, is it true that recent Shetland dialect literature is sentimental and slapstick? And is the language in which it is written so etiolated and degenerate that it is in terminal decline?

There is evidence, I propose, that the Jeremiahs got it all wrong. Since the Second World War dialect writing in Shetland, in prose and verse, has shown every sign of good health. I shall mention one more piece of prose. Eighteen months ago, readers of the *New Shetlander* had the privilege to read a short story, 'Naanie Geordedaughter', by George P.S. Peterson, who was born six years after the author of 'Mansie's rüd' died. 'Naanie' is, quite simply, the finest piece of Shetland dialect prose yet written. It is delicate and heart-stopping. When I read it I notice that the dialect whose obituary Jakobsen wrote in 1893, and William Sandison rewrote in 1953, and whose coffin Willie Thompson re-upholstered in 1961, is in better and better fettle!

The same goes for verse. Obituarists like Sandison drooled over the work of James Stout Angus, who died in 1923. But as we have seen, Sandison reckoned that quality of dialect verse is related to knowledge of a given number of dialect words. When Angus, his colleagues and their linguistic knowledge passed on, he reckoned, the verse would deteriorate.

Angus was, indeed, a fine poet. His long poem 'Eels', published anonymously in 1877, is the first important poem in Shetland dialect, and one of its glories. But Angus himself misunderstood its importance. He too thought that it had linguistic rather than literary importance. 'The writer of the following bagatelle', he wrote alongside it, on first publication,

does not suppose that it possesses any poetical merit. It is meant as a joke, nothing more. Nevertheless, he thinks, it may not be altogether without interest to the student of our fine old Norn language, as being, in his opinion, a fair sample of our modern vernacular dialect.

But 'Eels' isn't just a collection of dialect words: it is a poem, and a great one. And there are many great Shetland dialect poems. I only have time to mention the briefest selection, with a multiplicity of themes and tones: Haldane Burgess's 'Scranna', a hilarious account of a philosophical problem that we all encounter; Jack Peterson's 'Seine netters', about the world of work and exploitation; Peter Jamieson's delicate 'Boanni fisher lass', translated from Heine; Vagaland's mystical 'Sneug wal'; Billy Tait's 'Lux in tenebris', perfect lyric; Stella Sutherland's 'At da croft museum', a meditation on Shetland's whole human history; Rhoda Bulter's anti-nuclear 'Da maara'; Laureen Johnson's 'Vegetarian', with its peerless final line, 'Will du aet a egg?' John Magnus Tait's quirky autobiographical 'Reffelation o Sant John'; Christine de Luca's 'Cover up', a feminist poem in this month's *New Shetlander*, a new departure in her work. Only an idiot would claim that these masterpieces are written in a debased language, or that they are 'degenerate sentimental mush'.

What happened in Shetland is interesting and unusual. After all, there is no similar development in Orkney. While preparing this paper I looked at Ernest Marwick's

Anthology of Orkney Verse, which appeared in 1949, and my jaw dropped. There are only half a dozen dialect poems in the volume. '[O]nly [Walter Traill] Dennison has contrived with any success to use the vernacular as a vehicle for verse,' Marwick writes in his gloomy introduction, 'and even he did not attempt anything more pretentious than a few humorous paragraphs of familiar local stories.' And Marwick didn't regret this state of affairs! 'The time for attempting to make the vernacular a vehicle of serious verse', he says, passed long ago ...' The contrast with Shetland is staggering.

I think I've shown that Shetland dialect is a fine vehicle for writing, and that predictions of its demise are getting stale. But the critics raise other questions about it that are worth considering. Willie Thompson argued forcibly, as others have done, that Shetland dialect 'has practically no power of abstract expression', and that 'attempts to make it do work for which it was never fitted invariably turn out to be horrible abortions'.

I think there is something in this argument. For a perfect example, inspect the website of the University of the Highlands and Islands. The university aims, and I quote, 'To establish in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland a collegiate university which will reach the highest standards and play a pivotal role in our educational, economic, social and cultural development'. So far so good. There follows a series of translations of this ambition into Scots, Gaelic, and the Orkney and Shetland dialects. This is the Shetland version: 'Ta lay up, apo da haemower colleges i da Isles an Hielands o Scotland, a university at will ta can ta rack da hychest standards, an be a aacht in kyuckerin up wir haemaboot hain, wints an laire'. It is a fascinating manifesto, but it seems to me to justify Willie Thompson's words of warning. You maybe lay up a sock, or a collection of riddles, but you never, ever lay up a university.

On the subject of Shetland dialect I am inclined to be non-interventionist. I favour the use of dialect in schools, as long as that involves the imaginative use of it, rather than rote-learning. I am against dictionary-grubbing for archaic Shetland words, unless a genius like Billy Tait is doing it. In 1893, for instance, a Shetlander in Australia wrote down the dialect horror story 'Lang lies Lowrie at da mill'. Here is a snippet from it: 'Lowrie pits doon da bland an brönie, klaas his head wi simmishment an stoors first upon da skyrin fase o Kirsie an dan upo da lowin kongles – he ants no da paatie grish quin shö snappit aff da lave o da bröni'. For me that sentence is a horror story by itself. The author is translating an English sentence into Shetland dialect and reading Edmondston's *Etymological Glossary of the Shetland and Orkney Dialect* with rapt attention at the same time. The result is the same as the manifesto on the UHI website. Resurrectionism of this kind is a waste of time, and it is likely to scunner readers rather than inspire them.

I have been arguing with the Shetland dialect Jeremiahs today. These people are far more interested in words, individual words, than in the way that men and women use them in discourse and text. They moan because Norse is obsolete; they groan because young people don't know the Shetland word for a bluish-gray sheep. It is an unrealistic way of looking at the world, and it results in false predictions of disaster.

The key evidence that Shetland dialect is in good, challenging form is its literature. That growing body of work reflects and portrays modern Shetland. And it doesn't just reflect; it alters the way that Shetlanders speak to each other about the world and its travails.