Scotland’s Nordic Ballads

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That traces of Scotland’s Nordic ballads could still be found in the last days of the nineteenth century is surprising, but there is nothing “commonplace” about the story of their texts, contexts, and what we know of them more than one thousand years after the Northmen came to Scotland.

The area in question includes the Orkney and Shetland Islands, north of the Scottish mainland at approximately sixty degrees north latitude, about halfway between Norway and the Faroe Islands—or one third of the way from Norway to Iceland. In this essay, I will discuss how this geographic position combined with historical developments to bring us Nordic ballads. Using that foundation, I will then consider each of the songs in greater detail: how it was discovered and what links there are to other Nordic members of the genre. This is not quite as arduous a task as it seems because the corpus is sadly slim.

Our northern islands of Orkney and Shetland were among those North Atlantic areas subject to invasion from the eighth century on, when that great wave of Nordic migration swept around Europe. The nature of the islands’ native population is not clearly known, although some, if not all, were apparently Pictish. It appears there were also Irish religious hermits, if we can judge from such residual place names as Papa Westray and the similar situation in the Faroe Islands.

Farther to the south, the Viking invaders controlled the Scottish western isles and much of the western coast until they met defeat at the Battle of Largs in 1263. That area was ceded to the crown of Scotland by the Treaty of Perth in 1266. In this same treaty, the only islands exempted from transfer to Alexander III, king of Scots, were the Orkney and Shetland archipelagos, “which were specially reserved to Norway” (Anderson 1981: lii). Farther to the east, “The Orkneyinga Saga” tells us that by 875 the Norse had conquered as far south as the Ekkialsbakkí—the River Oykel. But Norse power retreated north. By the mid-thirteenth century, only the lowland sections of Caithness and the northern islands remained occupied by the Norse aristocratic families, who were by then intermarried with the natives and increasingly hard to distinguish from similar Scottish families. As the political and cultural boundaries moved north, so also did the use of the local variant of the West Scandinavian language, which became known as Norn. In 1308, Norway and its colonies (the Faroe Islands,
Iceland, Orkney, and Shetland) came under Danish rule, but direct administration did not pass to Copenhagen until 1536.

Before that time, however, the Orkney and Shetland Islands were transferred to Scottish control when they were offered as surety in 1468–69 for the dowry of Princess Margaret, daughter of King Christian I, when she married James III, king of Scots. In Orkney and Shetland, few, if any, changes occurred before the 1560s because it was generally expected that the islands would be redeemed by the payment of the sum due. This did not happen, and Scottish sovereignty continued. This was probably as much an exercise in realpolitik as finance: It was unlikely that the Scandinavians could have continued to control distant islands whose leading families also owed fealty to the Scottish king for estates held on neighboring mainland Scotland. Surrender of sovereignty did not include property rights, however, and the “Lords of Norway” continued to own property in Shetland. In 1611, Shetland and Orkney were integrated into Scotland, and Scots law and statutes were adopted.

The latest date we have for a surviving Shetland legal document in a Scandinavian language is 1607, and the language is Danish—the language of administration (Renaud 1992: 217). The legal use of Scandinavian appears to have ended considerably earlier in Orkney, where a more fertile landscape had attracted greater numbers of Scots-speaking settlers. The use of Norn, however, lingered on. The expected return to Scandinavia was the earliest factor encouraging the native islanders to cling to their Nordic heritage. In 1539, a priest newly transferred to the Shetland island of Unst was sent to Norway to learn the language because his congregation could understand no other (Scott 1928: 298). But the language was pushed ever north by lowland Scots-English spoken by the settlers and the language choice of the rest of the population. Norn became one language among many. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Dutch was the second language of Lerwick because of the enormous size of the fishing fleets from the Low Countries. In the eighteenth century, we know little about the use of Norn in Orkney, but we do know more about the situation in Shetland. In 1773, Thomas Gifford of Busta wrote that everyone spoke English with a good accent but many still spoke Norn among themselves (Gifford 1879: 31–32). Brian Smith, the Shetland archivist, has estimated that Norn was the language of the people until the balance began to shift in the late seventeenth century. By the early years of the eighteenth century, “Norn was on the way out: not because of oppression, but because the Shetlanders, especially younger Shetlanders chose not to speak it. They turned their attention elsewhere. It’s as simple as that” (Smith 1996: 35).
Shetland was turning to Scotland. Contacts with Scandinavia remained, but the previous focus on the Northlands diminished. Fewer people continued to sing the old songs, but they did not disappear without a trace. George Low, an early traveler, gave an account of his 1774 journey to the islands, where he noted that most of the remaining Norn fragments still in circulation were “old historical ballads and Romances, this kind of poetry being more greedily swallowed and retentively preserved in memory than any others, and most fitted to the genius of the Northerns” (Low 1879: 107). On this same page, Low quotes his contributor, William Henry, a farmer at Guttorm on the isolated Shetland island of Foula. Henry claimed that there were three kinds of poetry in Norn that were repeated and sung by the old men: the “ballad” or “romance,” the verse then commonly sung to dances, and the simple song. What he called the ballad or romance seems to have been valued chiefly for its subject matter and was sung by the fire during the long winter evenings. They were probably similar to the extended adventure tales or epics which are famously present in the Faroese corpus.

The dance in Shetland at the time of Low’s visit was described this way: “...then would a number of the happy sons and daughters of Hjaltland [Shetland] take each other by the hand, and while one of them sang a Norn viseck, they would perform a circular dance, their steps continually changing with the tune” (Hibbert 1891: 563). This form of dancing was the local variant of the chain and ring dances known throughout Europe in the medieval period and still danced (although self-consciously) in the Faroe Islands. But the language was going, and the round dance and its accompanying songs were making way for the Scottish reels and the playing of the fiddle.

What I have described so far has been the history and social context of a Nordic ballad society in the throes of change. Now I would like to turn my attention to what we know of the ballad fragments.

The first text that we hear of—though sadly we have no written record—involves a minister on the Orkney island of North Ronaldsay, who, in 1770, read to his older parishioners Gray’s ode “Fatal Sisters” (an interpretation of the “Darraðarljóð”) because it was a poem which “regarded the history of their own country.” In return, they pointed out to him that they already knew this work in their own language (Norn) and had recited it to him in the past (Scott 1871: 460–61). Some scholars have maintained on linguistic grounds that this “Song of Darrad” was actually written on Orkney and there are good reasons for believing that other Norse poetry, such as the “Krákumál” [Lay of Krák] and the
“Málshattákvædi” [Proverb Poem] were also products of this same area (Olsen 1932: 147–53). These works now exist only in Icelandic texts.¹

Let us, however, return to George Low’s 1774 journey. Concerning the northern islanders, Low wrote, “Most if not all of their tales are relative to the history of Norway, they seem to know little of the rest of Europe but by names; Norwegian transactions they have at their fingers’ ends” (Low 1879: 114). Our good fortune is that he provided an example. He took down from William Henry the text of thirty-five verses of a Norn ballad concerning the relationship between Hildina, a Norwegian princess, and an earl of Orkney. Low wrote the text in his journal under the heading of “Foula,” and this manuscript is now in the library of the University of Edinburgh. Low did not understand the words he heard, but he interpreted the sounds as any Scot might and attempted to use standard English orthography to reproduce phonetically the Norn of an eroded dialect. He did, however, know the story and called his text “The Earl of Orkney and the King of Norway’s Daughter.”

Here is a brief summary of the story. The earl [jarl] of Orkney abducts Hildina, daughter of the king of Norway, during her father’s absence. The king comes in pursuit. Hildina persuades her husband the jarl to make peace with her father, and her father accepts the jarl as a son-in-law. After the meeting, however, Hilluge, a jealous courtier who lusts after Hildina, reignites the king’s anger. A general battle gives way to a duel between the jarl and Hilluge. The latter cuts off the jarl’s head and throws it into Hildina’s arms while taunting her. Hildina must now return with her father to Norway. Hilluge seeks Hildina’s hand, her father presses the suit, and the lady agrees after being granted the right to serve the wine at the wedding feast. Hildina drugs the wine and, after all fall asleep, has her father removed from the house. At that point, the house is set on fire, and Hildina gains her revenge by preventing Hilluge’s escape. She, in fact, grants him just the same mercy that he gave to the jarl.

The ballad received some attention before the publication of Low’s manuscript, but this was virtually limited to the reproduction of Low’s text. The actual publication occurred when, for a variety of social and political reasons, islanders’ interest in their Nordic heritage began growing. This change in attitude also attracted the interest of the linguists Jakob Jakobsen and Marius Hægstad (who gave the ballad the name “Hildina”). Hægstad’s monograph “Hildinakvadet” (1900) goes through Low’s text thoroughly, pointing out where Low made changes. He stresses the fact that the linguistic problems are difficult to untangle, and, in addition to poorly distinguished line and verse divisions, there are problems with Low’s handwriting. For ballad scholars, this may appear less than crucially
important, but I must point out that Hægstad was also trying to determine the structure of the Norn language.

The first three verses of the “Hildina” text (Low 1879: 101) are:

1. Da vara Iarlin d’Orkneyar
   For frinda sin spur de ro
   Whirdì an skildè meun
   Our glas buryon burtaga.

2. Or vanna ro eídnar fuo
   Tega du meun our glas buryon
   Kere friendè min yamna meun
   Eso vrildan stiendi gede min vara to din.

3. Yom keimir cullingin
   Fro liene burt
   Asta vaar hon fruen Hildina
   Hemi stu mer stien.

This ballad has been poorly served by translators, although the initial work was done by Hægstad himself in his Danish monograph. An additional Hægstad translation (1901) into Nynorsk was freer since the author needed slight alterations to accommodate a rhyme scheme. W. G. Collingwood published the only existing complete translation into English, and his aim was to present the ballad in “readable English without sacrificing rhyme and metre to literal translation” (Collingwood 1908: 211). Some sample stanzas indicate the general tenor:

1. It was the Earl of Orkney
   Of his friend has taken rede
   Whereby to bring a maiden
   Forth of her perilous need
   From the Broch of glass to save her.

2. “Take ye the maid from the Broch of glass
   Dearest friend of mine,
   And aye as long as the world may stand
   Shall be told this deed of thine.”
3. Homewards comes the noble kin
   From the hostings as he rides,
   But gone is the lady Hildina;
   At home her step-dame bides.

9. “Now shalt thou take thy horse in hand
   And down to the water wend,
   And greet my father fair and blithe;
   He will gladly be thy friend.”

Here is a more-literal (but not poetic) translation of the first verse:

   It was the Earl of Orkney,
   he asked his kinsman for advice,
   whether he ought to take the girl
   away from her suffering, and away from Castle Glass.

   There is no equivalent to this entire ballad narrative in Scottish tradition, but
   individual motifs do occur. “Earl Brand” (Child 7), for instance, also concerns the
   abduction of a willing young noblewoman and the inevitable pursuit. The pleas
   for mercy, however, are quite different. Where, in the middle of battle, Hildina
   calls out to save her lover,

   “Father for the sake of humanity
   don’t waste more men’s lives” (verse 20).

Lady Margaret cries,

   “O hold your hand Lord William!” she said,
   “For your strokes they are wonderous sair;
   True lovers I can get many a ane,
   But a father I can never get mair.” (Child 7B: 7)

Hægstad made this same point when he wrote in 1901, “I have neither seen or
heard any song which is quite like this one in any other country” (1901: 9) He
then commented on a long series of Scandinavian ballads about abduction,
rescue, and revenge—such as the Faroese “Kappin Illhugi” and its Scandinavian counterparts listed under E 140 in *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad* (Jónsson et al. 1978). Others have extended this search for parallels and suggest that the first part of “Hildina” resembles the legend of the Battle of Hjadninga as told in both “Younger Edda” and “Sóra Þáttr” [Saga of Olav Tryggveson], both dating perhaps to the thirteenth century (Hægstad 1901: 11–12). Such is the zeal of scholars on the trail. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that this text from Shetland is firmly embedded in Nordic rather than Scottish tradition.

Jakob Jakobsen is an important figure in the study of Norn—historically, if perhaps not theoretically. He was a Faroese philologist who went to Shetland in 1893 and remained there for two years recording Norn remnants. He submitted this work as his doctoral thesis in 1897, and it was published as *Det Norrøne Sprog på Shetland*. He made two further brief visits to Shetland in 1905 and 1912 but did his major collecting during his first visit. His other publications, as far as Shetland Norn is concerned, are *The Place Names of Shetland* (1936) and the extraordinary two volumes of the *Etymologisk ordbog over det norrøne sprog på Shetland* (1908–21), which was translated and published in 1928–32 as *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*. This work lists ten thousand individual words and fragments of Norn (Barnes 1998: 2–3). Unfortunately, there is no detailed record of his interviewing techniques, and the Norn fragments are sometimes left without comment (Barnes 1998: 4).

Among these “fragments” are small pieces of songs and a ballad. Neither Liestøl (the Norwegian folklorist) nor Child mention Norn songs, other than ballads, that survived in Shetland. Jakobsen, however, noted the existence of two lines of a cradle song, some fragments of an eagle song from Foula, and a boat song with some varying lines now known as “The Unst Boat Song” (Jakobsen 1928, I: lciv, cxii–cxiii).

The ballad fragments involve two scraps, one of two lines and another of four. Jakobsen suspected that the two shreds might be related but was unable to identify the ballad because so few lines survived. It was the mid-1930s before the Norwegian Knut Liestøl confirmed that suspicion and demonstrated it in the Faroese canon (Liestøl 1936: 80). Jakobsen recorded the four-line section phonetically and then reconstructed it in what he thought was the original Norn. Alongside it I have placed the fifth verse of “Hústrú og Bóndi” (*CCF* 179).
Norn | Faroese
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Ek hef malit meldra mín (or meldrann), | Bádi havi eg kýrnað,  
ek hef sópat husin; | og feiað havi eg hús,  
enflá sefr (sófr, liggr) flat sêta lín | statt nú upp, kæra hustrú  
(hin sêta mín), | mín,  
ok dagrinn er konin í ljós. | og nú gerst dagurin ljús!  
(Jakobsen 1897: 19)  

[I have ground my corn,  
have swept the house;  
yet my wife is still sleeping,  
when daylight is dawning.]  

The two-line fragment is more difficult to duplicate because Jakobsen did not transcribe it from the phonetic notation.

Idla jå’lsa swa’rta tap,  
skala fœ’verte hâŋga. (Jakobsen 1897: 153)

The text apparently concerns the care of a black-crested hen which gave the husband many problems. To help interpret this two-line segment, Liestøl pointed out that, in Jakobsen’s own Norn dictionary, the expression “Idla jâlsa” can be translated as “Devil take her” and the second line appears to mean that the creature ought to be hung. In a similar manner, verse 10 of the same Faroese ballad offers us,

’skamm faí tú, reydða toppa,  
tað mundi eg av tær notið  
Confound you, redcrest,  
this happened because of you.

The following first two (of twenty-three) verses indicate what might have been sung in Shetland some four hundred years ago.

1. Árla var um morgunin,  
hôsini tôku at gala,  
hústrú vekir upp bónda sín,  
biður hann fara at mala.  

It was early in the morning,  
roosters were starting to crow,  
the wife wakes up her husband,  
bids him start grinding (corn).
2. Tað var Jógván stólti, It was proud Jógván,
snippar og hann grætur: he cried and lamented,
’skamm faí tín høsn, “Confound your chickens,
ið tiðliga gala um nætur.” that crow so early at night.”

A distant parallel to this is “The Wife of Auchtermuchty,” although this is not included in the Child collection. In the Scottish case, however, the role reversal is caused by the husband, who considers his wife has an easy life inside the house while he slaves away at the farm work in all weather. At the end, the farmer admits that his assumptions are all wrong and he is willing to return to his own work:

Quoth he, Dame, I sall hald my tung,
For an we fecht I’ll get the war,
Quoth he, When I forsuke my plewhch,
I trow I but forsuke my skill:
Then I will to my plewhch again;
For I and this house will nevir do weil. (Herd 1973, 2: 129–30)

There is here, however, no sign of the unending public shaming that is an essential part of the Faroese “Hústrú og bóndi” or its Danish cognate “Den huslige bondeman” [The House Husband]. Here again, the Shetland ballad is firmly part of a Nordic tradition.

The only other possible remnants of Nordic balladry are an Odinic ballad found in Unst and the debased Norn burden of Child 19, “King Orfeo.” The eight lines found in Unst during the nineteenth century are interesting: Turville-Petre gives the text in Shetlandic Scots as

Nine days he hang pa de rütless tree;
for ill was da folk in’ güd wis he.
A blüdy mael wis in his side—
made wi’ a lance— ’at wid na hide.
Nine lang nichts, i’ da nippin rime,
hang he dare wi’ his naeked limb.
Some, dey leuch;
but idders gret. (Turville-Petre 1964: 43)
More importantly, it was the knowledge of this text that encouraged Child to expect to find ballads in Shetland. His only discovery there was the fascinating “King Orfeo,” and scholars have been busily trying to determine its significance and authenticity ever since (Fischer 1996).

The corpus of Nordic ballads in Scotland is very small and usually overlooked. We should not forget it, however, as it is a link to important aspects of Scottish history.

Notes
1. But the matter is hard to judge because of the vagaries of document survival.
2. This was not actually published until 1879.
3. The “Darðaðarljóð” recounts that Darð had a vision in Caithness on Good Friday of 1014 concerning the Irish Battle of Clontarf which took place that same year. The eleven stanzas of the “Darðaðarljóð” are found in Njal’s Saga (Magnusson and Pálsson 1960: 349–50).
4. Nynorsk, formerly Landsmål, is a literary form of Norwegian, created in the later nineteenth century as a purer language (more closely based on Old Norse) than the usual Dano-Norwegian, known as Riksmål or Bokmål (ed.).
5. It is, however, listed in Wehse (1979: 372) as no. 248.
6. While recognizing the Christian ambiguities of this text, Turville-Petre points out its similarity to the “Rúnatal Þáttir” in the Hávamál (1964: strophs 138–45).

References
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Low, George. 1879. *A Tour through Orkney and Shetland, Containing Hints Relating to their Ancient, Modern and Natural History, Collected in 1774 by George Low.* Kirkwall: W. Peace and Son.


