Northern-ness

By The Unreliable Narrator

Ring of Brodgar, Orkney [Wikimedia Commons]

> *Much of what is good and true in our laws and social customs, much of what is manly and vigorous in the British Constitution, and much of our intense love of freedom and fair play, is due to the pith, pluck, enterprise, and sense of justice that dwelt in the breasts of the rugged old sea-kings of Norway!*
>
> *—R. M. Ballantyne, Erling the Bold: A Tale of the Norse Sea-Kings*

In 2017, we published our first issue on Scottish island writing, looking at works from, and set in, Scotland's Western isles. A monstrous whale of a task, and we barely got our camp-fire going on its back before it sounded, and left us bobbing in the green Atlantic swell. But where would we be if we all learned from our mistakes? In this issue, we lay our course North and East to encompass the literature of Scotland's other outer islands, those centres of power from the Neolithic to the Petrochemical: Orkney and Shetland.

Is there a better example of our multiform, our infinite Scotland, than the comparison between the Northern isles and the Hebrides? So near, and yet so far apart; the old distinction between the Norðreyjar and the Suðreyjar still holds. Scandinavian settlers swept across them both, and south as far as Ireland, but from Lewis on down they were absorbed by Gaeldom; Orkney and Shetland, though, are Norse in language, history, and outlook.

Traits such as hardiness, valour, a vigorous common sense – to say nothing of ruthlessness, aggression, and a grim appreciation of the transience of life – are commonly ascribed to Northerners, by whomsoever they happen to be North of. The English attribute these characteristics to inhabitants of such southerly, Middle-England burgs as Leeds and Richmond, and even more so, with added wildness and eccentricities, to residents of South and Central Scotland – who in turn look to Aberdeen and Inverness to find their Northerners. These stereotypes probably have as much basis in fact as any other; certainly, no-one was ever moved to cry "The Southmen are coming!" in tones of general alarm – even though history shows that such arrivals usually bring evictions and rent increases, or at least a rise in economic inequality.

For the British isles, though, Orkney and Shetland are where the tropes run out: they are Unst-toppable. They are the North's North. So we shall grit our teeth, bend our oars, and take the seal-road north, in the simmer dim.

Leading the line we have Christie Williamson, a Shetland poet resident in Glasgow, but fastened yet to **A deep, owld anchor**; then, with the red dawn behind them, Hanne Tange and Gunhild Agger turn their eyes to **Auld rock meets Nordic Noir: A Danish gaze on Shetlandic Scandinavian-ness**, before Simon Hall rides the tides of history in **Norse Past, Victorian Present: Orcadian Readings of Orkneyinga Saga**. Taking advantage of the clear northern light, Sarah Neely follows with **Persistence of Vision: Blue Black Permanent** and the enduring legacy of Margaret Tait's life and work; then Harry Josephine Giles tastes salt on their tongue, and gives us **The New Orkney Language Literature**, and places ***Deep Wheel Orcadia*** in the unkent future, among the northern stars.

Cresting in 'Upon Another Point', Oliver Robinson-Sivyer braves solans and warlocks in **"It's an unco place, the Bass" – A Scottish EcoGothic interrogation of Stevenson's 'The Tale of Tod Lapraik'**, and **a flock of book reviews** wheels and soars in our wake.

The Unreliable Narrator carved these runes.

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