

Peripheral Visions: Engaging Nordic Literary Traditions on Orkney and Shetland

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Abstract

This article examines the reception of Old Norse literature and culture in the literatures of the Scottish islands of Orkney and Shetland. It compares in particular the work of Shetland author James John Haldane Burgess (1862-1927) and the Orcadian author George Mackay Brown (1921-1996) and it evaluates the ways in which these two figures use their geographically peripheral positions as unique vantage points from which to reframe Nordic identity in their writing. By re-orientating the Scottish Islands from the periphery of Britain to the centre of important scenes in Nordic history, Haldane Burgess and Mackay Brown each construct a distinctive sense of geographical and cultural place. This approach allows the boundaries of the Nordic cultural sphere to be extended, and for a new and complex third space to emerge, in which the islands connect the Nordic and Anglo-Celtic realms and situate them within world literature.

Keywords

James John Haldane Burgess, George Mackay Brown, Peripheries, Scottish Islands, Nordic identities, Literary Geographies

I tried my hand at a little play, set in the Viking period. I remember that finishing it gave me a small but agreeable surge of power. Walking along the street the next day, I felt for the first time like a free townsman: no need to slink from doorway to doorway like a leper any more. I had made something that I knew in my bones to be good. (Brown 1997: 62)

This article investigates a set of exchanges between two supposed 'literary peripheries' in Europe – the Nordic and the Scottish – and illustrates how these exchanges have enriched the regional literatures of the islands of Orkney and Shetland. It challenges traditional interpretations of Nordic texts and authors as marginal figures, according to which writers use Old Norse culture predominantly to establish individual national narratives within Scandinavia (Neumann 2000: 239-243, Øien 2002: 80-104). I argue instead that we can acquire a new understanding of the value, significance and reach of Nordic literatures by reading them through other cultures that have similarly been labelled 'peripheral'. In my view, reinterpreting works by writers from the literary peripheries of the Scottish Islands and the Nordic countries alike can give a new significance to the role played by Nordic literatures outside Scandinavia and to the peripheries of the North as such, not least through the exchanges that have taken place between them. Peripheries can, after all, clearly act as positive positions that enable transnational affinities to develop on the basis of their being marginalised together. I would argue, however, that the works examined here opt rather to extend the boundaries of the Nordic cultural sphere, and create a third space, in which the islands of Orkney and Shetland come to connect the Nordic and Anglo-Celtic realms, but also place them squarely within world literature.

As Simon Hall comments in *The History of Orkney Literature* (2010):

Literature is of primary significance to local sub-national or national identity in all of the former Norse colonies of the North Atlantic. The sagas provide modern writers in these islands with a keen sense of atavistic impetus, and the feeling that literature

is very much what people do, that it is the key traditional art in the North. (Hall 2010: 3)

Narrative is clearly 'central to historical explanation as the vehicle for the creation and representation of historical knowledge' (Munslow 2000: 169). However, this process also crosses and interrogates established geo-political boundaries, especially when writers use the position of the non-metropolitan periphery as a positive driving force to enable a third, 'hybrid' identity to be created and new paradigms to be formed (Bhabha 2004: 38). The writers then provide a clear challenge to and critique of the centre-periphery model, offering alternative interpretations of Nordic texts and authors, and unique, archipelagic perspectives.

Of the two authors whose work I am going to discuss, the first is James John (J. J.) Haldane Burgess (1862 - 1927), a poet, novelist, linguist and Scandinavian scholar. After he had returned to Lerwick in the Shetland Islands following his studies in Edinburgh, Haldane Burgess published works in Shetlandic, or Shetland Dialect, and English. He was a prolific writer who, although blind from the age of twenty-seven, produced dozens of short stories, poems and articles for journals (Smith 2014: 72-91). The German scholar Arthur Döge places him in the wider field of 'Heimatkunst' (Döge 1908: 9-10) or 'art of the homeland', alongside writers such as George Moore and William Yeats (Ireland), Jan Maclaren and Matthew Barrie (Scotland), and Hall Caine (Isle of Man).

Haldane Burgess was a gifted linguist who taught himself many languages, including Danish and Norwegian. He developed a lifelong interest in Nordic culture but, perhaps most importantly for Shetland's literary and popular culture, Burgess was the author of what can only be described as Shetland's 'national anthem' the *Up-Helly-Aa Song* (Burgess 1907). This was a poem written in the late 1890s and later put to music by Thomas Manson. It is one of the songs still performed by a procession of over a thousand guizers (people 'disguised' in costumes and masks) on the night of the annual Viking Fire Festival or *Up-Helly-Aa* (Leslie 2012). Elements of Burgess's 'Norse persona' are also apparent in his personal correspondence held at the Shetland Museum and Archives, which contains letters frequently addressed to 'Dear Borgar' or 'Borgar Jarl' (D2/2/9). In a letter dated 7 March

1892, for instance, his editor, J. Walter from Edinburgh, writes about a planned ‘magnum opus’ by Burgess (later published as *The Viking Path* (1894) in the following terms:

In a former letter you gave me an inkling of the subject of your opus, namely, that it is to deal with the beginnings of [Christianity?] among the hardy Northmen. Now that, I judge, is a study of exceeding interest. There is a place for it in fiction of the ‘Specialist’ type. Within the last two or three years there has been a good few things of the Elsmirian¹ sort put on the market. It is the tangible outcome of the desire of the time to have everything reduced to its elements [...]. (SMA, D2/2/7)

Our second island writer, George Mackay Brown, was born in Stromness, on the Orkney Islands in 1921. After studying English at the University of Edinburgh he returned to Stromness and became a full-time writer. Like Haldane Burgess, George Mackay Brown was prolific, publishing several poetry, short story and essay collections, two plays and six novels. Also like Haldane Burgess, Brown was fascinated by Orkney’s Norse past, especially its literary past, in the shape of Old Norse literature. The *Orkneyinga Saga*, in particular, was very influential on Mackay Brown’s work, with explicitly Norse or Viking themes appearing in the novels *Magnus* (1973) and *Vinland* (1992), as well as in his poems and plays. In this, Mackay Brown’s writings contribute to an existing literary tradition surrounding the local reception of the *Orkneyinga Saga*, which was first translated into English in 1873, and which ‘would come to be regarded as a “national epic” on the islands’ (Hall, 2010: 9). In the Introduction to Longman’s (Schools) edition of *Selected Stories of George Mackay Brown* Mackay Brown states:

I feel that I am not an isolated story-teller writing in the late twentieth century; but I draw from a treasury of narrative written and unwritten out of the islands’ past; ancient voices speak through me; I am part of a tradition. (Orkney Archives, George Mackay Brown Collection, D124/1/2/6: 6-9)

James John Haldane Burgess and George Mackay Brown are often seen as part of the wider response to modernity from the peripheries, although they develop two very different visions that correspond to their own individual literary and historical sense of identity and place. Even though they are clearly interested in contemporary issues and a wide range of historical and contemporary literature, both writers chose, however, to use Saga literature, and Nordic traditional folklore and myth, to construct their own historicity and sense of place within the world.

Boundaries and peripheries

In order to understand the context in which these two authors extend Nordic cultural space into the British Isles, the history of British – and not least Shetlandian and Orcadian – receptions of Nordic literature is imperative (see also Fjågesund in this issue). The reception of Old Norse literature in Britain and Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries frequently focused on Viking sagas and traditions as part of a wider revival of both Celtic and Nordic identities within the British Isles (Conway 2011). These were created in support of a sense of national identity that suited growing British imperial ambitions (Wawn 2002). The Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century had already created a new literary landscape within European culture that celebrated personal liberty and sublime northern landscapes, resulting in a rich body of historical fiction, travel publications and popular writing (Fjågesund 2003). Historical novelists such as Walter Scott, in particular, developed iconic literary visions of Scotland's peripheries, introducing Victorian audiences to the wild and remote Shetland Islands populated by pirates and Norse witches in the Romantic novel *The Pirate* (1822). The history and culture of the peripheral societies of Scotland and Ireland thus became the source for much of the cultural material used in the construction of these heroic identities based on ancient warriors and Celtic myths (Newby 2013: 239-260). Victorian writers were therefore keen to connect this Viking legacy with the construction of a new British Nation – as a brotherhood of nations with common roots in the Old North.

Following the First World War, the British state contracted within its internal, insular borders. A dissolving Empire and weakening union with Scotland and Ireland was increasingly visible, both with the emergence of the Irish Free State (1922) and with increasing calls for an independent Scotland during the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s. This shaped another conceptual shift within the literary world about where peripheries could be found. Writers such as W. H. Auden and Hugh MacDiarmid became increasingly concerned with a northern archipelago on the peripheries of Britain and Ireland. These were places where retrotopian visions could be rekindled, and 'a new understanding of archipelagic commutuality'² could be explored (Brannigan, 2014: 15). George Mackay Brown, himself a writer from a geographic periphery, contradicts this new sensibility – which still centred on metropolitan cities such as Edinburgh or London – with an intense localism. The creation of his communal narrative is primarily based on Orkney's historical past, rather than on a greater, archipelagic whole, and it acts as an allegory for the human condition more generally. As Berthold Schoene observes in *The Making of Orcadia* (1995), Mackay Brown played 'a significant part in this narrative process of constructing and maintaining communal identity' (Schoene 1995: 5). This corresponds with many aspects of Haldane Burgess's writings, but also (in his view) with those of another Orcadian writer, Edwin Muir. 'The facts of our history – what Edwin Muir called The Story – are there to read and study,' MacKay Brown wrote:

the neolithic folk, Picts, Norseman, Scots, the slow struggle of the people towards independence and prosperity. But it often seems that history is only the forging, out of terrible and kindly fires, of a mask. The mask is undeniably there; it is impressive and reassuring, it flatters us to wear it. Underneath, the true face dreams on, and The Fable is repeated over and over again. (Brown 1969: 11)

On the Viking path

Apart from the wider historical and ideological context of the British fascination with Viking heritage, there are also national and local antiquarian receptions of Old Norse literature to consider that shaped the construction of northern identities. It is not without significance that both Shetlanders and Orcadians played a central part in bringing English translations of Old Norse literature to Victorian audiences. The Orcadian antiquarian Samuel Laing (1780-1868), for example, is remembered for publishing the first English translation of the Icelandic chronicle *Heimskringla* in 1844. This has been identified as one of the most influential publications to inspire Victorian Viking enthusiasm in Britain. Another Scandinavian scholar – Shetlander Gilbert Goudie (1843-1918) – meanwhile, commissioned Jón Andr sson Hjalt n to produce the first English translation from the Icelandic of *Orkneyinga Saga* (Anderson and Goudie, 1873). Similar publications by local saga enthusiasts followed in the late 1870s, culminating in Goudie’s highly influential work *Celtic and Scandinavian Antiquities of Shetland* published in 1904.

Antiquarian activity clearly provides an important background to literary production during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. History matters to Victorian writers and audiences, as it supports narratives of Britain’s cultural dominance abroad, as well as the maintenance of social and cultural power structures at home (Mack 2006: 147). So when it comes to constructing internal northern identities within Britain, the Norse and Celtic past(s) also take precedence over other cultural influences (Newby 2013: 162). This approach is apparent in the nineteenth-century literatures of Orkney and Shetland, where an important factor in the creation of a distinctly Nordic cultural identity in Orkney and Shetland was a growing ‘Nordophile Network’ of intellectuals in Kirkwall and Lerwick (Cohen 1983: II). Sebastian Seibert’s study of the *Reception and Construction of the Norse Past in Orkney* provides a regional chronology of Nordophile enthusiasm within the intellectual circles of Orkney (Seibert 2008: 166-171). This relates to the wider cultural movements within Northern Europe that combined historiographical writing with the creation of individual

national identities (Anderson 1991, Beller and Leerssen 2007, Leerssen 2006). Thus 'Early Old Northernism' during the Scottish Enlightenment was followed by the energetic 'Viking Enthusiasm' of the Udal League during the mid-1880s. The closely related 'Golden Age of Antiquarianism' (itself greatly influenced by Scottish nationalism of the 1920s and 1930s) thus provides 'the historical basis for twentieth century patriotism' (Seibert 2008: 171).

Within Britain and Ireland as a whole historical narratives were increasingly popularised not only by antiquarian networks, but also through the development of a landed elite, which encouraged the consideration of how 'the county' operated as a powerful 'imagined community' alongside metropolitan culture and the national press (Sweet 2004: 43). This was accompanied by a further expansion of the reading public in two interrelated ways: downward, to include the lower ranks of middle-class and working-class readers, and outward, to include readers in small towns and rural villages (Murdoch and Sher 1988: 127-142). This led to a 'social circulation of the past' (Sweet 2004: 79) in which writers and audiences from the geographical peripheries were able to gain access to literary production much more easily. Writers from the Scottish islands of Orkney and Shetland made use of their newfound popularity during the late nineteenth century and employed their knowledge of saga literature to reimagine the islanders' Scandinavian identity (Cohen 1983, Seibert 2008). They often created literary narratives that not only revived Viking historical characters, but also explored contemporary issues. This meant a movement in the perception of the Scottish Islands from the periphery of Britain to the centre of important scenes in Nordic history, a movement which correspondingly transformed Old Norse literature into an important source of creativity for writers wishing to interrogate and negotiate their relationship with other – Scottish, British and/or global – literary spaces (Reeploeg 2010b: 74-75).

Earlier writers from Shetland, such as Jessie Margaret Edmondston Saxby (1842-1940), had grown up in an island community that featured a 'patriotic society of Zetland gentlemen' established in the early nineteenth century. Saxby grew up in a household 'visited by naturalists, linguists, scholars and intellectuals' which included

'George Webbe Dasent, translator of *Njal's Saga*' (Smith 2014: 55). Her uncle, Dr Arthur Edmondston (1775-1841), had already published *A View of the Ancient and Present State of the Zetland Islands* (Edmondston 1809), which made no mention of the special significance of Shetland's Nordic heritage. Chapter II on the 'Remains of Antiquity, Language and Literature of the Zetland Islands' largely concerns itself with Pictish, Norwegian and Roman architecture, and gives only a short list of place-names 'of a Scandinavian derivation', mentioning only two short visits by Norwegian kings. Jessie Saxby, on the other hand, already a collector of Shetland folklore and traditions and passionate about the islands' Scandinavian past, made a first foray into developing Shetland's Norse heritage as a literary theme. Her children's adventure novel *The Viking Boys* (1892) 'combines her theme of ancient Vikingism with contemporary British imperial life' (Smith 2014: 57). In this she engages with contemporary discourses that romanticised and domesticated Norse history and literature for Victorian audiences (Reeploeg 2010a: 112-115).

Haldane Burgess's novel *The Viking Path* (published only two years later, in 1894) also intersects with this enthusiasm for Shetland's Viking heritage, and re-contextualises the historical saga to 'create a thematically complex and exciting historical novel' (Smith 2014: 81). The novel is set in Shetland and Norway in the ninth century and deals with a group of Vikings who travel to Shetland (*Hjaltland*) because they are unwilling to submit to Harald Fairhair in Norway. Instead, they sail 'out into the Western Haf, to find a home in Iceland, Faroe, Shetland, and the northern Scottish isles' (Burgess 1894: 7). Upon arriving in Shetland, one group of Vikings encounters a character named Geron Whitebeard, a Christian priest, as well as Thorvald, a Norwegian who has converted to Christianity. The narrative then centres on an imaginative retelling of aspects of Norse history and mythology, and on the contrast between pagan and Christian values and perspectives. While drawing on Scaldic storytelling, the novel evokes not only Nordic imagery and ancestry, but also a very specific and localised sense of identity, expressed through place names and language. So, for example, when they arrive in Shetland, the Vikings meet Kolbein, a Norwegian settler, who points them towards *Breidyair Sund* (Bressay

Sound), where land is still available, and the group decides to settle:

Next day they steered the Hofvarpnir, followed by the other ships, round by the northern entrance into the *Breidyair Sund*, and the Jarl landed on the west shore of the *sund*, beside the bluff on which he had made up his mind to set his burg. To the south of this there was a little bight, the shore of which was shining sand. To this little bight the Vikings gave the name of Leirvik [...] He made his folk wall in the piece of land that lay about the burg. This was the home field, or, as it is still called in the Shetland dialect, *da tun*. (Burgess 1894: 63-64)

This sequence not only establishes a symbolic narrative depicting the Norse origin of Shetland's main town Lerwick, it also provides a direct linguistic link between the language of the new settlers and the modern Insular dialect. This is an example of storytelling and historiography that combines with the literary narrative to create a distinct cultural landscape for Shetland, which deliberately excludes Celtic or non-Norse elements.³ The islands are described as empty of people, apart from the existing Norse community, although the figure of Whitebeard provides a link to pre-Norse Celtic (Christian) culture. The text does not, however, focus on any conflicts between Whitebeard and his (possibly Celtic-Christian) beliefs and the Viking settlers, but between the converted settler Thorvald and the other Vikings, who consider him a 'weak fool and *nithing*' ('a famous coward', p.86) for adopting what they consider inferior beliefs. The narrative here establishes the dominant voice of the colonist as the only voice available to describe island society, which is presented as culturally part of 'Northland'. The Viking settlers frequently break into praise poetry, riddles and heroic songs in a manner that reflects the Romantic aspects of Victorian representations of Viking culture. There are Wagnerian references to the Jarl's winged helmet ('his golden helmet with its eagle plumes outlined against the sky', p.25), class society ('champions of lower order', *ibid.*), and 'the wild sea-rovers' bursting into rather civilised applause (*ibid.*). Intertextual references to other romantic historical novels of the time form part of the overall style of *The Viking Path*,

with the narrative ending with a picturesque evening scene above a fjord:

One night they sat thus in the golden twilight, and the air about them was as full of peace as though no war or wrong had ever marred the face of the earth. Before them stretched the fjord – beside the shore of which the farm lay – the steep hills on its sides empurpled with rich heather-bloom and mirrored in the waveless sea below [...] Then the three sat silent, gazing westward, and over land and sea there fell the red, Valhalla glory of the sinking sun. (Burgess 1894: 374-375)

Nordic history and storytelling also form the backdrop for many of George Mackay Brown's texts. By setting his narratives around the Orkney Islands, Mackay Brown deliberately moves the islands to the centre of the Norse world, connecting literary and historical spaces that allow for different, non-metropolitan modernist geographies and conceptions of time. To do this, Mackay Brown often returns to the historical episodes and characters contained in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, which inspire his overall work:

These historical events form the backdrop to much of the narratives and verse that I have written. Without the violent beauty of those happenings eight and a half centuries ago, my writing would have been quite different. (I was almost going to say, it would not have existed; but of course the talent that will not let one rest would have had to latch on to other themes. There are, fortunately for me, many legendary and historical sources in Orkney from later centuries that any native-born writer can seize on with delight – but still the great story of Magnus and Hakon is the cornerstone). (Mackay Brown 1997: 3)

When ill with a suspected recurrence of tuberculosis Mackay Brown immersed himself in Orkney history, with a growing conviction that the Reformation had removed 'the feelings of awe and mystery' from ordinary Orcadians since the sixteenth century (Fergusson 2006: 166).

This is a recurrent theme, with religion (especially Catholicism and the nature of sanctity and sacrifice) joining the inspirational aspects provided by the *Orkneyinga Saga*.

Magnus (1973), for example, re-works episodes of local hagiography leading to the murder of Magnus, who later became Orkney's patron saint. However – and this is an interesting departure from his other writings – the Mackay Brown version of *Magnus* compares the fate of the medieval Earl with the murder of the German pastor and philosopher, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a Nazi concentration camp. This radically changes the tone of his writing from expressing timeless and symbolic qualities to providing a critical commentary on contemporary twentieth-century history. As Mackay Brown notes:

The truth must be that such incidents are not isolated casual happenings in time, but are repetitions of some archetypal pattern; an image or an event stamped on the spirit of man at the very beginning of man's time on earth, that will go on repeating itself over and over in every life without exception until history at last yields a meaning. The life and death of Magnus must therefore be shown to be contemporary, and to have a resonance in the twentieth century. I did not have far to go to find a parallel: a concentration camp in central Europe in the spring of 1944. (Mackay Brown 1997: 178-179)

Another work inspired by the *Orkneyinga Saga* is *Vinland*, a historical novel published in 1992. It is set in eleventh century Orkney and centres on Ranald Sigmundson, an Orcadian farmer who travels to the Canadian coast and has many adventures before returning to Orkney. Again, use of the historical setting and narrative structure of the Norse sagas here allows Mackay Brown to explore contemporary issues within Orkney society and the wider world, as well as to negotiate the hybrid nature of his own cultural background, which connects Nordic and Celtic traditions:

I think that, in the writing of narratives, I learned a great deal from *Burnt Njal*, *Grettir*, *Orkneyinga Saga*. It is good, for certain

kinds of writing, to use as few words as possible. The structure and form of the saga stories are magnificent. I think I have learned from them the importance of pure shape. But from my mother's side, the Celtic, I delight too in decoration. Look at the intricacies of early Gaelic art. Whether it is desirable to marry "pure narrative" with elaborate decoration is not for me to say. I write as I must. (Mackay Brown 1997: 65)

Texts from the Nordic tradition are therefore not simply received and adapted within Mackay Brown's texts, but are part of a complex dialogue between wider historical and philosophical traditions that revitalise and inspire new forms of literary expression. As Michael Stachura observes:

Brown could infuse those traditional elements with a modern, minimalist tongue and deep philosophical imagination. Just as Pound and MacDiarmid had turned to traditional forms and texts such as the Japanese haiku, Scottish ballads, Homer's *Odyssey* and the poetry of Henryson and Dunbar in order to make a new, modern poetry, Brown turned to the traditional forms and texts of Orkney's Scandinavian cultural inheritance such as skaldic poetry and *Orkneyinga Saga* and revitalised them as sources for his own modern experimentation and cultural expression. (Stachura 2011: 14)

Within the context of Orkney and Shetland literature this means that island writers use Old Norse literature to construct a form of regional modernism linked to a sense of place that is both local and international. In this, both writers write back to what has been called 'the insular turn' in late modernism in Britain which, in an attempt to counteract the overtly metropolitanising aspects of modernism, turned to national and regional cultures, especially islands, for inspiration (Brannigan 2014: 184-199).

As an international movement, it is important to understand that 'there were, in fact, many modernisms and that their distinguishing qualities could, and did, vary, depending on the conditions of time and

place' (McCulloch 2009: 2). Accordingly, rather than follow the fashion of (metropolitan) modernism and abandon tradition, and associated nostalgic styles and values, the two island writers examined here can be seen to adapt and re-contextualise these very features. Far from resulting in insular and parochial texts, this approach revives elements of the saga tradition for wider contemporary audiences, and provides an opportunity to reflect on the role of the poet within their own communities and the wider world. Crucially, for writers like Mackay Brown, it creates a third space where 'setting in time and place are of as little significance as contemporary literary fashions and genre. All times and all places will demonstrate the same essential human nature' (Hall 2010: 138). They create their own (non-metropolitan) geographies of modernity, using Nordic narratives as a type of allegorical tool that enables expression of localised experiences of modernity. At the same time, the works transcend modernism's narrow definitions, with its systems of homogenisation (Ewbank 1999:12), and oppositions between new and traditional, progressive and nostalgic. Their work connects the local vernacular directly to world literature, providing a new type of continuity for regional literatures, a regional modernism independent from metropolitan centres (Alexander and Moran 2013).

Facts and fictions

In order to understand the approaches taken by Haldane Burgess and Mackay Brown in relation to their complex individual contexts in two different Scottish island communities and two different historical periods, it is important to compare the two writers' approaches to their source material. Haldane Burgess's correspondence shows a wide network of contacts in Scandinavia with people who would often discuss folklore and literary matters with him. His network included famous figures within both British and Nordic literature, such as the Scottish poet John Buchan (1875-1940), the Danish poet and cultural historian Karl Kjersmeier (1889-1961), and the Norwegian philologist and director of the Bergen Museum, Torleiv Hannaas (1874-1929). It also features Norwegian sea-fisheries specialist and friend Oscar Sund (1884-1943) (Fig. 2) and the Icelandic horticulture pioneer Einar

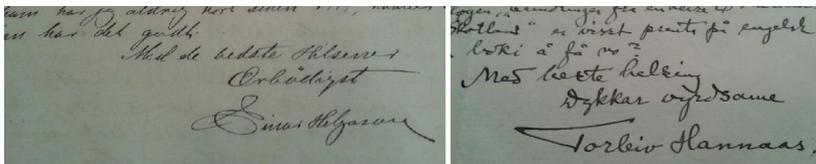
Helgason (1867-1935), who connects him with Old Norse-Icelandic scholar Jon Helgason in Copenhagen (Figs. 3 & 4).



Figure 1: Correspondence from Carl Kjersmeier, March 1919, Copenhagen. Photo: S. Reeploeg.



Figure 2: Correspondence from Oscar Sund, December 1915, Bergen. Photo: S. Reeploeg.



Figures 3 & 4: Shetland Museum and Archives, D2/15/3/5 (letter from Einar Helgason), D2/13/3/2 (letter from Torleiv Hannaas). Photos: S. Reeploeg.

Karl Kjersmeier (Fig. 1) writes to thank Haldane Burgess for sending him a 'beautiful poembook' (Rasmie's Büddie, published in 1891), and in return encloses his latest collection of poems 'Digte, 1915-1916'. He mentions that he has translated Haldane Burgess's poem 'Draem - Flooers' (Burgess 1891: 89-90) and promises to 'publish all essays in [sic] your work' (Kjersmeier 1919). In November 1924 Oscar Sund (Fig. 5) wrote an article about Haldane Burgess in *Bergens Aftenblad* (19 Nov 1924), which provided an overview of Haldane Burgess's recent works, including the translation into Norwegian of the introductory poem in the preface of *Tang* (an earlier novel about everyday life in Shetland published in 1898). The English original of *Tang, a Shetland Story* (Burgess 1898) was reviewed in the German paper *Die Zeit* (24 September 1905: 20), followed closely by a German translation of *The Viking Path* (translated by Hermann Besser), which was reviewed by the same author in *Die Zeit* 6 January 1906: 22).

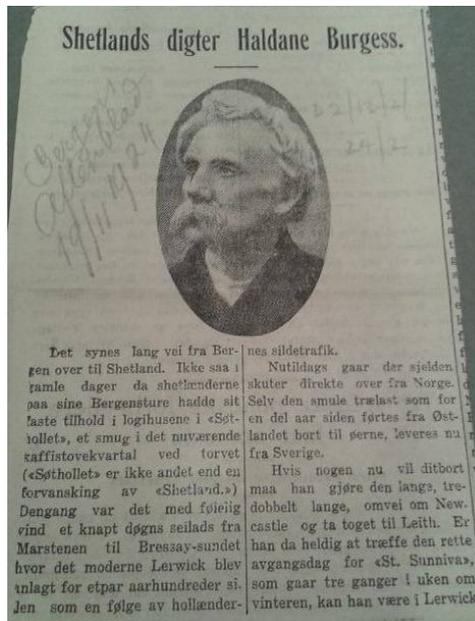


Figure 5: Article by Sund in *Bergens Aftenblad* (19 Nov 1924), Photo: S. Reeploeg.

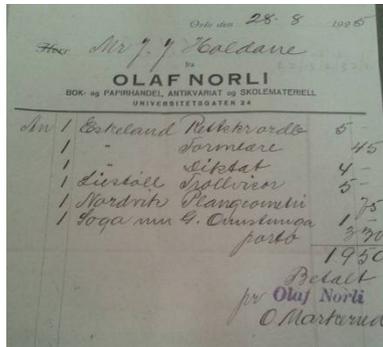


Figure 6: Receipt from Norli, Bergen, D2/13/2/32/2, Photo: S. Reeploeg.

Some of the receipts in Haldane Burgess's personal papers show that he regularly purchased books and papers directly from Norway (Fig. 6). However, his interest in Scandinavian folktales is combined with a cosmopolitan openness to all types of literature and cultures. As Haldane Burgess writes in a letter to Arthur Döge (who wrote his doctoral dissertation about him at the University of Leibzig):

For my own pleasure I have hunted after beauty of thought and expression in every field, whether British or foreign, that I could manage to enter either through the original language or through translation. Hebrew poetry, as presented in the Bible, has always had a strong attraction for me. My own little bits of verse have simply been attempts, to express my own thoughts in as poetical a way as I could, without conscious imitation [...] (Döge 1908: 30)

This contrasts with Mackay Brown's private papers, which show little correspondence outside Britain. His inspiration draws on one specific piece of literature, the *Orkneyinga Saga*, the source of a series of unique fables that connect Orkney to world literatures.

It is perhaps significant that it is not until later in life that Mackay Brown discovered the *Orkneyinga Saga*, as it was certainly not part of his childhood education in Orkney. Among his early influences he lists only Anglophone classics, as well as folkloric material such as Grimm

and Andersen's *Fairy Tales*. 'Literature entered the mind stealthily, like a thief', he recalled, 'only it was a good thief, like Robin Hood or Brecht's Asdak, and left treasures instead of taking them' (Mackay Brown 1997: 41). The Romantic poetry of Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth and Byron formed part of his early studies, as well as the works of Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, John Buchan and the Scottish national poet Robert Burns. However, when reflecting on these early influences, Mackay Brown also comments on the cultural differences between mainland Scotland and Orkney: "'To a Mouse", which we had to learn by heart, made an immediate appeal, though many of the Scottish words were strange to us half-Nordic islanders (Mackay Brown 1997: 44)'. This again shows a third position, not English, not Scottish, but one that transcends both and connects to a different, mythical historicity and place from which existing national historiographies can be critically examined:

There is no doubt that the heroic Norse period was the most splendid that Orkney ever knew. Great men walked then in the islands – Sweyn Asleifson of Gairsay, who was a Viking in the spring, a farmer in the summer, and a drunkard and a politician in the winter; Saint Magnus, who let his blood be spilled on a barren Egilsay field, so that a cornstalk might miraculously soar from that heart of stone to become a symbol for all Orkney: Rognvald Kolson who could play chess and catch cod and write love-poems and kill men and pray to God with the same deep relish.

Orkney had need of its heroic age, because soon there was to come a time of bitterness and degradation. And this tyranny descended on Orkney from Scotland, the land of Wallace and Bruce. Shameful things were done to the islanders by their new overlords – their land taken from them, the weights and measures tampered with, the old laws twisted to fit an alien interpretation, physical violence and torture and everyday occurrence. The Scotsmen of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries proved themselves, in Orkney, as accomplished tyrants as any in history. (Brown 1955: 55)

Island societies often find themselves at a crossroads between different nation-building narratives and therefore at the crossroads of interesting and complex cultural responses to them (Øien 2002: 100). In our case, this involves both a revival and a re-contextualisation of Scottish literature at different periods in time (Sassi 2014: 3). So, for example, the period 1850-1914 saw the whole concept of 'Northernness' taking on a more Romantic, but also political flavour (Aronsson 2009, Byrne 2013, Fjågesund 2014). Bergur R. Moberg, in his study of Faroese literature, argues that the literatures of the islands of the North Atlantic should be seen as part of a world literature that operates on the margins of movements such as modernism. The development of individual national and regional literatures in the North can thus be seen to form part of various cultural and political processes, including 'modernism's overlapping geographies' (Moberg 2014: 487). This includes the complex positions of 'major' and 'minor' literatures within Britain, with further differences drawn between English and 'the rest', or Highland and Lowland regional cultures within Scotland.

In his article 'Nationalism and its Discontents: Critiquing Scottish Criticism', Christopher Whyte discusses the differences between Scotland's cultures, and how 'Scottish lowland culture can be "minoritised" with respect to England, but "majoritised" with respect to the Highlands and Islands' (Whyte 2010: 27). This is significant for the writers analysed here, as it implies that the Highlands and Islands have often been rendered doubly peripheral: by British Imperialism, which relegates them to the Northern peripheries of the British Isles, and by those seeking to establish a culturally homogenous Scotland, which relegates them to the peripheries of the Scottish nation. It also redefines literary difference within Scotland as not being one between English and Scottish, but between the 'major' literature from the Scottish mainland (Edinburgh) and the 'minor' peripheries of the Highlands and Islands (Mack 2006: 21). These dichotomies are then often transferred to content and style, with writers from 'minor' literatures commonly represented as immature examples of the 'major' cultural or literary movements of the canon.

Peripheral visions

Cultural politics are never complete or all-encompassing, and writers and readers alike draw inspiration from constructing alternative realities contained in peripheral experiences. One of the central questions explored in this article is how Old Norse literature is used to mediate between various national and regional literary peripheries, connecting texts from the Orkney and Shetland islands to the wider world of cosmopolitan literary developments.

As the work of the two writers examined here demonstrates, the re-contextualisation of Old Norse narratives within their own creative practice enables an alternative – *both* an insular *and* a cosmopolitan space – to be created that transcends the fixed centre-periphery geographies and historical chronologies of the metropolitan centres of London and/or Edinburgh. This third space cannot be analysed using the binary models of pre-modern and modern, colonial and postcolonial, aesthetics and politics (Moberg 2014: 450-454). Rather than attempting to move ‘the centre’ to a specific nation, language or race (Gaelic/Scottish/Shetland) the authors instead situate their work alongside that of other texts from the North, irrespective of time. Mackay Brown illustrates this process in a discussion of his own reworking of the poem *The Jomsvikings*:

The poem of the Jomsvikings was written down by the good Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinson in Orkney sometime about the year 1200. We can call it an Orkney legend, in the sense that all songs and stories, from Greenland to Byzantium, belonged to all the folk who lived in that great arc of Norse culture. (*The Jomsvikings*, Orkney Archives, D124/19/4/2: 6)

‘That great arc of Norse culture’ can be seen to provide a non-temporal cultural resource for the creation and expression of hybrid identities in Scotland’s islands, one that connects text and territoriality across the North, and represents an ‘alternative modernity in a world literary context’ (Moberg, 2014: 456).

The examples discussed in this article expose the intercultural qualities of literatures that ‘write back’ from what are often seen as both a geographical and a cultural periphery. As such, they reveal how such a positionality enables them to participate powerfully in the constant making and remaking of the image of the North ‘with the old world lingering on alongside the new’ (Fjågesund 2014: 75). At the same time, these writings also provide a challenge to the centre from the periphery by writing back and providing alternative visions of Nordic texts and authors. Understanding their peripheral visions has the capacity to provide scholars of Nordic literature with novel, archipelagic positions from which to view their material. Peripheries, then, provide ‘reflective localisation strategies in a cosmopolitan context’ (Moberg 2014: 454). From such a vantage point, the periphery is no longer a debilitating, marginal concept, but one that forms the basis for a critical stance, a place from which one can acquire new understandings of the cultural impact of Nordic literatures outside Scandinavia, and of literary peripheries in general.

Endnotes

¹ Elsmereism – from *Robert Elsmere*, a novel by Mary Ward (1888) – became a label for the phenomenon of clergymen who had a crisis of faith, often converting to agnosticism or, as in Elsmere’s case, to a modernised Christian progressive social activism.

² Commutuality here relates to a mutual understanding of a sense of place and an expression of affinity between the peripheries of the British Isles.

³ For an analysis of Shetland’s pre-Viking history and its use in the formation of the islands’ local identity, see Grydehøi (2013).

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Images (Figs. 1-5) courtesy of Shetland Archives.

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