

INTRODUCTION

Ronald G. Cant

The title selected for the conference of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies held at Thurso in April 1979 when the papers in this collection were first delivered, and for the publication itself, is singularly appropriate. The late Donald Grant's pithy dialect verse identifies many varying cultural strands and Caithness has indeed been a cultural crossroads, not once but many times. As Donald Omand has shown in his analysis of its geographical form and landscape this has been in great part through its location at the extreme north-eastern tip of Britain and its attraction as an area for settlement, low-lying and relatively fertile beyond the forbidding rocks and moors of the northern highlands.

The early significance of Caithness is attested by the great burial cairns of the late Stone Age and the standing stones of the Bronze Age, while its numerous Iron Age defensive structures — including well over a hundred brochs — are indicative of the conflicts for its control in this period. But the emphasis of the conference was on historic rather than pre-historic times. That four of the papers should deal with the Viking and 'post-Viking' age, from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, is understandable, for it was beyond doubt the most crucial phase in the historical evolution of the area. And although in the outcome the Norse settlements were drawn into the political structure of the Scottish kingdom, Caithness has remained different from all other mainland territories through its retention of strong Scandinavian characteristics in its population and way of life.

The papers concerned with this problem not only illustrate particularly interesting aspects of its character. They also demonstrate the use of contrasting forms of evidence in the elucidation of historical developments. For Colleen Batey the investigation of the late Norse site at Freswick was essentially archaeological. William Nicolaisen's analysis of the distribution of Scandinavian and Celtic elements throughout Caithness was based on place-name evidence, though he was careful to emphasise its limitations no less than its uses. Edward Cowan concentrated, with dramatic effect, on the picture of Caithness life and certain major individual happenings as presented by the sagas. And Barbara Crawford employed a more complex and far-ranging documentary approach to explain the eventual ascendancy of Scottish over Scandinavian influences in this critical borderline between their respective spheres of control.

The succeeding historical period — from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries inclusive — was deliberately, and defensibly, omitted from detailed consideration at the conference. For the fact is that the distinctive character of Caithness society, its political, social, and economic organisation, were largely determined by what had happened in

the preceding period and did not greatly alter in these four centuries. And while it is true that the church, here as elsewhere in Scotland, experienced changes in worship and organisation at the Reformation and after, it continued to be based on the old medieval unit of the parish. Technology too, in the cultivation of the land, in hunting and fishing, in building, crafts and transport, changed relatively little throughout this time. And as John Baldwin showed in his study of hand-netting techniques, an effective and proven conservatism, shared with other comparable communities, might continue even longer in certain particular instances.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, Caithness came under the influence of a whole series of new developments that revolutionised the character of economic activity in Britain and thus of its social organisation and population distribution. While Caithness might seem far removed in distance from the epicentre of these developments in the industrial heartlands of Scotland and England, it could not escape their eventual impact. In any event the leaders of its economic and social life, the greater landowners and merchants, were well aware of the new methods of cultivation, manufacture, finance, trade and communications, and anxious to introduce them here, as far as might prove feasible, under their own informed direction.

In the basic industry of agriculture, Caithness had long been noted for its relative productivity, exporting a surplus of grain on a scale rivalled only by Lothian within Scotland. From the late eighteenth century cultivation and the rearing of stock began to be put on a more scientific basis, a great deal through the influence of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster (1754-1835), the outstanding 'agricultural improver' of his generation in Britain. Sir John not only introduced these reforms on his own extensive farmlands. He created a new planned township at Halkirk and extended the old burgh of Thurso in a like manner as service and marketing centres for areas further afield. He also encouraged the formation of modern 'turnpike' roads and bridges by the county authorities.

Associated with agricultural improvements was the reclamation of marginal land for tillage and pasture, as exemplified by many of the small farm buildings in Latheron and other parts of Caithness described by Geoffrey Stell and visited by the conference. In the longer run, however, it proved impossible to sustain agricultural activity at this level. After 1861 the rural population of the county was in continuous decline and the margin of settlement retreated. Thus a characteristic if somewhat sombre (though interesting) feature of the Caithness landscape has come to be the ruins of these enterprising settlements of the early and mid nineteenth centuries. But in more fertile areas the 'improved' farmhouses, steadings, and mills form a more enduring memorial to their creators of this same general period.

In addition to this reorganisation of its agriculture, Caithness was to experience a quite remarkable growth of two other ancient indigenous industries in this same period. One was fishing. Here, beyond the building of new harbours and the improvement of old by individual proprietors,

there was the creation of the major fishing port and planned settlement of Pulteneytown across the river from Wick from 1808 onwards by the British Fisheries Society. This was a state-supported enterprise — the most ambitious ever undertaken by the Society — and was responsible for the growth of Wick and its neighbourhood into one of the most important fishing centres in northern Europe. This development was admirably explained by Jean Munro, the recognised authority on the British Fisheries Society, who set the Pulteneytown scheme in the context of its other similar enterprises and of the planned villages elsewhere in Caithness.

The other indigenous industry which was to expand even more rapidly than fishing and to suffer an even more dramatic decline was the production and export of flagstones. This type of stone → unique in quality and quantity in its Caithness form — had been in use for walling, roofing and paving virtually from the beginning of organised life here. But as an ‘industry’, operating on a large scale and for an export market, it owed its extraordinary growth to James Traill of Castletown (1758-1843). From modest beginnings in the 1790’s, by 1825 he was exporting vast quantities of stone from his own quarries and port, an example followed in other parts of the county, until it stood second only to Aberdeenshire in quarrying production and the streets of every major city in Britain and even further afield came to be paved with ‘Caithness flagstone’. While some of this product was sent south by the railway completed in 1874 much of it continued to be despatched by sea.

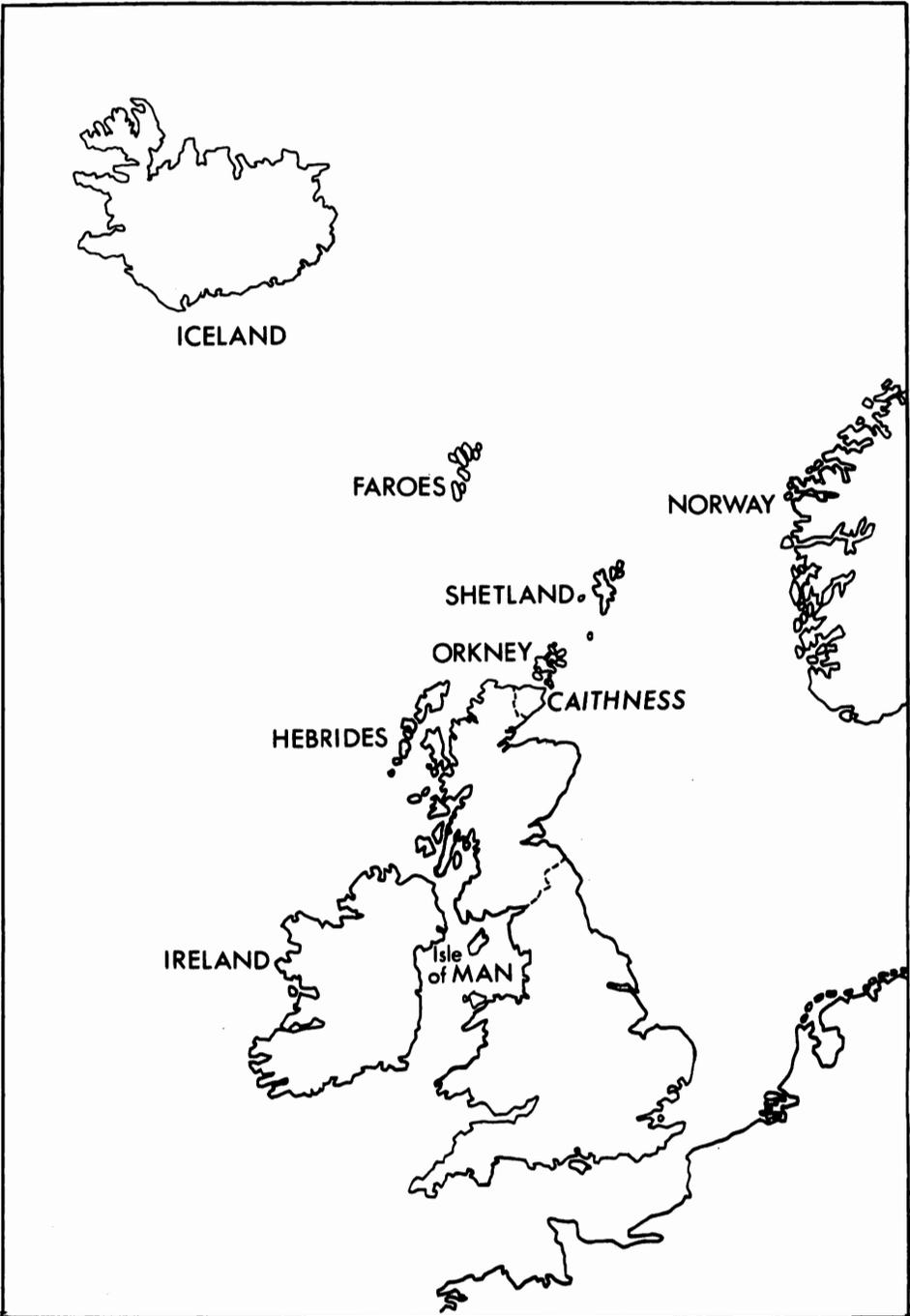
This remarkable story was well told by John Porter of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority whose decision to build a new experimental establishment at Dounreay from 1955 onwards brought Caithness to its most recent cultural crossroads. If it is too early to be certain of the long-term success of this venture, it can at least be said that the short-term problem of integrating the resulting influx of new residents had been reasonably well surmounted. By 1951 the total population of the county had fallen, from a maximum of 41,000 in 1861, to under 23,000. By 1971 it had been raised to over 29,000, most of this growth being in Thurso which increased from 3,000 to 9,000 in the same period without undue loss of its distinctive character and the acquisition of a fine Technical College and other facilities. But Wick, with a population of 7,500, remained the administrative centre of the area, though (as previously with the railway) its fine airport has not sustained its early activity.

What the future — with its promise of a growing share in Scotland’s oil industry — may hold for Caithness is impossible to forecast except in so far as its history shows a remarkable and repeated resilience to the challenge of political and economic change. At times this has involved acute conflict and prolonged tension but in the end society has moved on from each successive crossroads, with renewed vigour, to a new stability and harmony.

All those who attended the Thurso conference, whether coming to Caithness for the first time or returning after many visits, were made aware, or reminded, of its unique and powerful identity — in its landscape,

its history, its people and their way of life. To Donald Omand in particular and the many other Caithness friends who contributed to the success of the occasion, the Scottish Society for Northern Studies is indeed most grateful. And the interest which the papers aroused at the time of their delivery has encouraged it to publish them here in a more permanent form and for a wider public.





ICELAND

FAROES

NORWAY

SHETLAND.

ORKNEY

CAITHNESS

HEBRIDES

IRELAND

Isle
of
MAN