

FAROE AND ITS SHETLAND CONNECTIONS

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There is little evidence of direct connection between Faroe and Shetland before the 19th century, but traditions and sagas, confirmed and modified by archaeology, indicate that from time to time they came under the same influences.

BEFORE 1800

In Faroe a complete Viking-age homestead was excavated in 1942 at Kvívík, on the west side of Streymoy, the main island. It showed that the inhabitants had a byre for 8–12 cows and kept also pigs, sheep and horses. They fished and also wove their own clothing on upright looms. And in 1955–56, at Tjørnuvík in the north of the same island, Viking-age graves were found containing twelve skeletons and a rare cloak-pin now in the Tórshavn Museum.

Between 1968 and 1971, research through pollen analysis showed that Tjørnuvík was inhabited in the first half of the 7th century A.D., well before the late 8th century emigrations from Norway to Shetland and Orkney, and well before the further emigrations to Faroe and Iceland 100 years later. The analyst's interpretation is that these pre-Norse settlers in Faroe were the Irish hermits described by the Irish geographer Dicuil, writing in 825, as the sole inhabitants of islands full of sheep and many kinds of seabirds, reached by sailing two days and nights beyond the northern islands of Britain; but that they had come about 100 years before Dicuil said (Jóhansen 1971).

Unlike Faroe, Shetland had an earlier, known, pre-Norse population, amongst whom also had come missionaries of the Celtic Church, who are commemorated by the Papa and Papil place-names and the sculptured stones found at Papil in West Burra and on St. Ninian's Isle. Some of these monks perhaps went on to Faroe.

Dicuil says that Norwegian Vikings caused the Faroe Islands 'to be devoid of monks', but no weapons were found in the Faroe excavations, so the Norse incomers may have been peaceful settlers. That there was a complete absence of weapons in the Viking-age houses uncovered at Jarlshof in Dunrossness and Underhoull in Unst, and their extreme paucity so far elsewhere in Shetland, throws further doubt on the assumption of violent incursion.

As to the first Norwegian settler in Faroe, his name (Grim Kamban), and where he took land about 825 A.D. (near Funningur village, in the north-east of Eysturoy), have come down in Faroe saga tradition. There is also an oral tradition in Faroe (told to me there in 1933 by the late M. A. Jacobsen, then Librarian and Museum Director in Tórshavn) that Faroe received some of its population from Shetland.

However, records are so scanty that we know remarkably little, not just of the Viking period, but equally of the mediaeval period in Faroe. We know that a Norse earldom of Orkney including Shetland was established at an early date,

but that there was no such provision for Faroe, which from time to time came under direct Norwegian influence. We also know that Shetland had an association with one of the most celebrated men in ancient Faroese history, Sigmund Brestisson, who on one occasion was sent by King Olaf Trygvissón of Norway to introduce Christianity into Shetland. There can be little doubt, however, that in this he had been forestalled by missionaries of the Celtic Church.

In mediaeval times a long-enduring link between Faroe and Shetland was forged in the course of a civil war in Norway in which the dominant figure was King Sverri. Though born in Norway he had been brought up from infancy mainly in Faroe and had been educated for the Church in the priests' school which still stands at Kirkjubøur, near Tórshavn — the site of the bishopric of Faroe, set up around 1100. In 1194 an armed attack on him was mounted and carried out from Orkney and Shetland. Sverri defeated the 'Island Beardies', as they were called, and took Shetland away from the Orkney earldom to be governed direct from Norway along with Faroe, an arrangement which lasted nearly 200 years.

From this period of direct rule from Norway there has come down the text of a document dated 1298 and called the *Seyðabrævið*, or Sheep Letter, a set of regulations for the management of agriculture, particularly sheep and sheep pasture [see Fig. 10.10]. Addressed simultaneously to the Lawman of Shetland and the Bishop of Faroe, it is the oldest extant Norse document associated with Faroe and Shetland, and one of our very few early sources. That it was addressed to the Lawman of Shetland points to a fully developed system of local government in Shetland at that time, for the Lawman was elected by members of the Lawting to interpret the laws to the people, and was quite distinct from the Foud, an official appointed by the King. It also suggests a real sense of relationship between Faroe and Shetland, since it is to both these named individuals that Duke Hákon Magnússon turns to make his authority in the Faroes clear (cf. *Seyðabrævið* [1298] 1971. 5, 45, 54, endpapers. — Ed.).

For the ensuing 500 years the only known link between the two groups of islands is a wealthy woman of the 14th century, Gudrun, daughter of Sigurd, a Shetlander. She both lived and owned property at Húsavík on the island of Sandoy in Faroe, and she owned property in Shetland and Norway. The inventory of her belongings is a revelation of the material standard of living that could be achieved by an individual at that time in those remote islands. That she was also a most extraordinary character is attested by the traditions about her still very much alive on Sandoy, where she is just known as the Housewife of Húsavík. (Goudie 1904. 194–195; *The Shetland News* 12/6/1930, p.4 col. 6; 19/6/1930, p.8 col. 3; Manson 1971. col. 3).

In the course of these five centuries, political changes worked steadily in the direction of separating Faroe and Shetland. Shetland became a part of Britain and lost its Norn language — being left with only a dialect, though one very rich in words of Norse origin. Faroe came to be under Danish instead of Norwegian rule but retained its own language in full vigour, so that today all Faroese people are bilingual in Faroese and Danish.

The survival of the Faroese oral language was of crucial importance. Unlike the Icelanders, the Faroese did not produce a written language in the

mediaeval period, but they preserved their history and traditions in an enormous number of ballads which they used regularly and still use as vocal music for their popular traditional ring dance. They had to fight hard to gain recognition for their language from their Danish masters. The writing down of the language and the ballads began in earnest in the late 18th century, but it was not till the mid-19th century that the system of spelling most used today was finally worked out and agreed (West 1972. 106–120). With this as an instrument, a rich modern native literature including drama arose and continues to grow.

There is a little evidence that ancient ballads called 'visicks' were used as vocal music for some kind of ring dance in Unst, in Shetland, in the late 18th century (Low [1774] 1879. 163). The change of language, however, was fatal to the survival of such traditions, and the one or two fragments of Norn poetry that are left today are only partly comprehensible.

The very distinct cultural identity which the Faroese thus preserved was one of two major factors in their eventual emergence as a small but vigorous nation. The other factor was an economic one, and it was in this field that Shetland unintentionally and accidentally came to Faroe's aid.

AFTER 1800

The Economy:

At the beginning of the 19th century the Faroese people were a very stable farming community augmenting their food supply by fowling and inshore fishing [Fig. 2.1]. The population was extremely small, only 5,000 for the whole island group. Owing to the scarcity of agricultural land in a very mountainous, sea-girt country, a larger population could not have been supported in this way. All external trade was in the hands of a Danish Government trade monopoly, and while this may have given some security, as time went on it was found to be a serious obstacle to progress.

There was no more severe critic of the monopoly than the Danish Governor of Faroe, Christian Ployen, who in 1839 made a tour of Shetland, Orkney and Scotland in order to think out ways and means of improving the lot of the Faroese. He published his *Reminiscences* of this voyage in Copenhagen in 1840. An English translation by a Shetland lady, Catherine Spence, published in Lerwick in 1894, became for a long time a favourite book in Shetland.

Contemporary Shetland was in a more active state, though the people were poor. With more agricultural land than in Faroe, the economy was a mixed one of small-scale farming and fishing, and the population of Shetland, which has about the same basic area as Faroe, was over 22,000 in the year 1801 and growing. It reached its peak of over 31,000 in 1861.

On the one hand, the Shetland crofter-fisherman did not have the independence of the Faroese farmer. The Shetlander was the tenant of an estate proprietor, a landlord, who was also his fishery employer, operating a system whereby goods and equipment were supplied to the tenant on condition that he sold the fish he caught to the landlord. Only a very few landlords and tenants had mutual agreements which gave the tenants access to an open market. Generally, the whole affair was a matter of book entries, with



Fig. 2.1.— Faroe's population has increased dramatically, but has migrated to the bigger settlements. Gásadalur on Vágur typifies the more remote settlements. Difficult of access by land and by sea, it depended more than most on sea-bird fowling, livestock and a little cultivation and is now in as rapid decline as many settlements in Shetland. 1970. (Photograph: J.R. Baldwin)

the tenant as often as not shown perpetually in debt to the landlord and, therefore, handling hardly any cash at all. But if the Shetlander lost out as tenant, at the same time the expansion of the fishery on a big scale through the 18th century developed in him a high degree of skill in handling boats.

The type of boat used was open, double-ended, and nearly 30 feet in overall length. It was powered by six oars. A sail was also used in suitable wind conditions, Shetland being a good environment in which to practise the art of sailing. It was customary to go between 20 and 40 miles off the land to the fishing banks and to remain at sea for two or three days at a time. Ling, cod and tusk were caught at this summer 'haaf fishing' (from the Norse word *hav*, ocean; to distinguish it from close inshore fishing). The boats were called 'sixerns' from the number of oars, and at the beginning of the 19th century, when this fishery was at its height, there were, on an average taken over several years, 459 such boats working, employing 2,754 fishermen (Edmondston 1809. I. 244). The fish when brought ashore were split, washed, salted and spread out on beaches to dry in the sun, before being exported, the principal market being Spain.

From time to time many of the men broke loose from this situation to go to

sea in the Merchant Navy or ship on board the English and Scottish whaling ships which called annually at Lerwick to complete their crews before proceeding to the Arctic. Moreover, throughout the Napoleonic Wars, very large numbers of Shetland men served in the Royal Navy.

As all this took place before steam power became preponderant, experience and skill in the handling of sailing vessels of all sizes, from the open boat and up, was well spread among the male population of Shetland precisely when a completely new fishery, calling specifically for this particular expertise, appeared. It was this new fishery which not only provided a form of emancipation for an increasing proportion of Shetland fishermen, but in the end completely transformed the Faroese life-style. This was the Shetland cod fishery of the 19th century, triggered off in 1788 when a Shetland master mariner, John Slater, accidentally discovered rich cod-fishing grounds 35 miles west-south-west of Foula. As it was beyond the range of the haaf fishing boats, larger decked sailing vessels were required. Enough capital had been accumulated in Shetland by merchants as well as landlords, and in a very few cases by fishermen, to enable suitable vessels to be bought from Grimsby. The processing of the fish, and the overseas markets, were the same as with the haaf fishing, but as the sailing smacks remained at sea much longer than the sixerns, the splitting and the salting of the fish was done on board by the fishermen. (Goodlad 1971. 130 et seq.).

While the grounds near Shetland continued to be exploited, the cod fishery rapidly became a distant-water one. From 1840 to 1849, several Shetland cod fishers fished up the Davis Straits, on the Disko Bank and along the coast of Greenland; while by the 1870s the grounds off the North Cape of Norway had also been tested by some of them.

About the middle of the century, however, apart from the home grounds, the Shetland cod fishers settled down to using Faroe as their advanced base, operating in that region in the early season, which began in April, often running 250 miles to Rockall if the Faroe Bank proved unsuccessful. The smacks returned briefly to Shetland about mid-May, or sooner if they were full, to land their catches. After about ten days they returned to sea for the mid-summer voyage, which usually lasted till the middle of August.

In the autumn, the largest smacks went on to fish cod around Iceland, especially off the north coast, ranging from Langaness to the North Cape of Norway. Some of these smacks had special wells with sea-water inlets built aboard, in which — on their final homeward run for the year — they carried fish alive right down to England.

The late Capt. Adam Halcrow (1950. appendix) lists 131 Shetland-owned fishing vessels which operated in the 'Faroe fishing', as this fishery came to be called. They were not, of course, all working at the same time. Most of them carried 12 to 15 men on the distant grounds, 8 to 10 on the home banks. The height of the fishery was between 1860 and 1880, when over 1,000 men were regularly sailing on the smacks, representing about one-third of the Shetland fishermen at that period. Side by side with the Faroe fishing, the haaf fishing continued to the last quarter of the century.

Naturally the Faroese were keenly interested in the new cod fishery carried

on by Shetland men who regularly came ashore on Faroe and whose speech they could partly understand, but the Faroese had several handicaps. In a country in which it is dangerous to use a sail on a small boat on account of the swirls of wind sent down from the mountains rising straight out of the sea (as explained to me in Faroe in 1933 by the late Mr. Poul Niclasen, then editor of the Faroese newspaper *Dimmalætting*), there was no tradition of sailing as there was in Shetland, and the avenues of employment at sea so much frequented by the Shetland men were not open to the Faroese. There was thus a lack of nautical accomplishment. At the same time, the Danish trade monopoly prevented the use of what capital had been accumulated in the islands.

The Faroese got their chance, however, in three ways. First, in employment on the Shetland smacks when these were short-handed, as they often were. This became increasingly the practice as the Shetland men left the cod-fishing in growing numbers for other employment. A by-product of this was that many Faroese fishermen became personally known in Shetland just as many more Shetlanders had become personally known in Faroe.

Today the Faroese themselves strongly emphasise that it was on board Shetland smacks under Shetland skippers that their men acquired their experience and expertise as seamen in deep-sea fishing, a training which transformed them from a community of farmers into a population of fishermen. But they were also exceedingly enterprising. For example, one individual, Jens í Dali, at the age of 17 came to Shetland for a whole year to study methods and gain experience as quickly as possible. He later became not only a leading skipper but the founder and first teacher of the School of Navigation in Tórshavn, which today grants merchant navy certificates as well as fishing skipper certificates (information from an interview for the *Shetland News*, by the present writer, with the son and successor of Jens í Dali).

A second opening for the Faroese came in 1856 with the lifting of the Danish Government trade monopoly — a very great event. It was not long after that till they began to buy smacks for themselves and to enter the cod-fishing in their own right. Meantime the population had grown to over 8,000.

The third and greatest opportunity for the Faroese came at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, when Shetland pulled out of the cod-fishing altogether. The main cause for this was the great British herring boom which began in the last quarter of the 19th century and continued almost unabated to the outbreak of the First World War.

Unlike the particular cod fishery which we have been discussing, this was not just a Shetland fishery but a national British one of gigantic proportions, which owing to the habits of the herring, centred on Shetland every summer, moving down to Yarmouth in the winter. But it was a fishery in which Shetland boatowners and fishermen participated to the full. To the men it was attractive because of the easier working conditions compared with the Faroe fishing. In the cod-fishing they had to be away from home most of the time; and the work of line fishing from the gunwales of the smacks, with the splitting and salting of the fish, was toilsome and monotonous in the extreme.

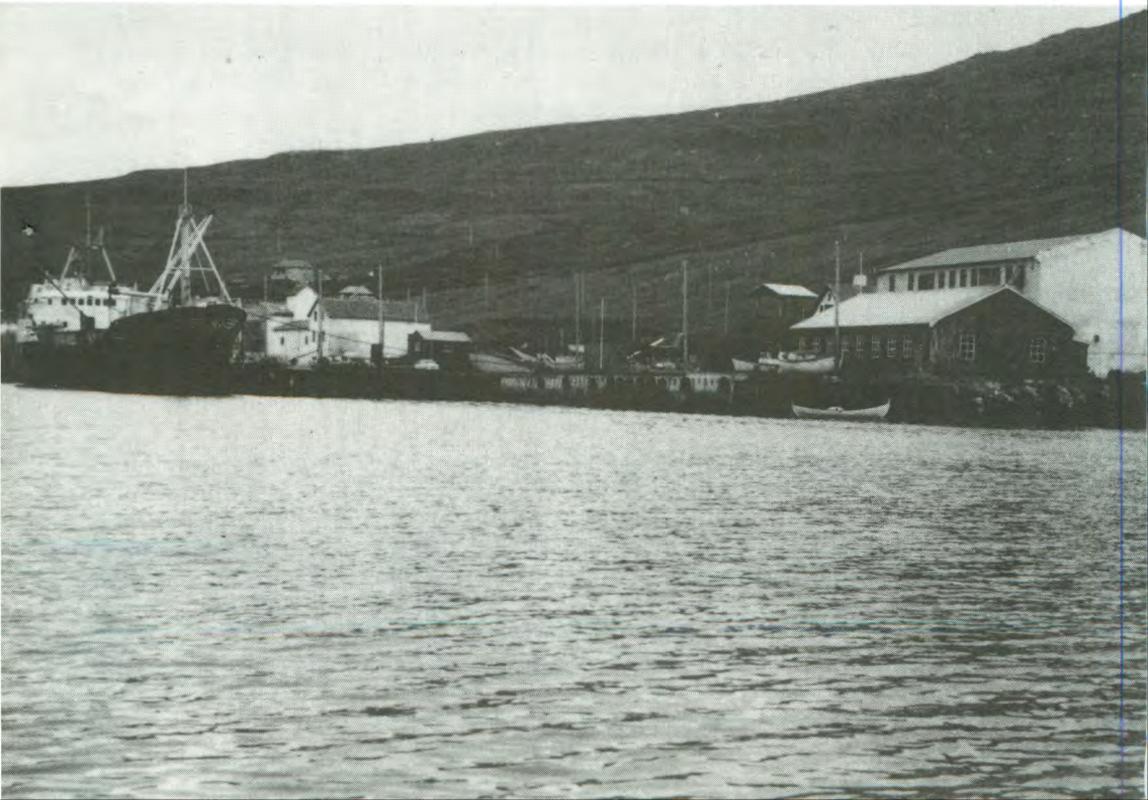
In the herring fishing, drift nets were used and the fish landed every morning to be taken over by shore workers. During the summer months the

men could be home with their families nearly every weekend, a big change from conditions in either the cod fishing or the Merchant Navy. Thus, many Merchant Navy men took summers at home, occasional or regular, to participate in the herring fishing. Fishing for the elusive but often abundant herring was a more speculative occupation than either cod fishing or sailing on merchant ships. And it had the attraction of all speculations, for while the luck was often bad, there was always the chance of its being good.

When this great change took place, the Faroese quickly bought a number of the Shetland smacks secondhand, retaining their original names, besides buying other smacks direct from England. 'The great age of sloop buying was the twenty-year period 1890 to 1910, during which the Faroese deep-sea fishing fleet rose from fourteen to 137 sloops. At the turn of the century over 1,000 men were employed on these sloops, and by 1910 the figure was 1,823. (Over the same period, the population as a whole was growing from just over 15,000 to nearly 18,000.)' (West 1972. 126).

With this augmentation of their fleet the Faroese simply took over the Shetland cod fishing, including the Spanish market, as Shetland willingly let it go.

Fig. 2.2. — Sørvagur, at the head of the fjord, has drawn many younger men from settlements such as Gásadalur. It has a modern harbour and fish-processing plant. As in Shetland, the modern Faroese fisheries are concentrated on a few major harbours. 1970. (Photograph: J.R. Baldwin)



The year 1905, when the herring fishing at Shetland was at its peak, was also the year in which a Shetland-owned smack operating at Faroe was manned entirely by a Faroese crew, and it was one of only two Shetland smacks at Faroe that year. (*Shetland News* 30/12/1905, p.4 col.2). Two smacks continued to go to Faroe from Shetland up to and including 1908 (*Shetland News* 1908). But by then the Faroese-manned smack had been sold to Faroe, and there is no further mention of Shetland-owned smacks at Faroe. Two Shetland skippers in command of Faroese smacks in 1912 seem to have been the very last of Shetland in active participation in the cod fishery (Goodlad 1971. 158).

Since then to this day, Faroe, despite many ups and downs, has developed this fishery to quite enormous dimensions, exploiting fishing grounds at Iceland and Greenland more than at home, opening up new markets in South America and elsewhere, and replacing the sailing smacks with modern power-driven vessels furnished with the latest equipment. The fishing vessels are mostly shore-owned, often by the owners of the fish-processing factories, which also are very modern and very numerous [Fig. 2.2]. Faroe depends almost wholly on this industry, though associated with it is a local shipbuilding industry which has built a number of the fishing vessels, including steel trawlers; other craft include an inter-island passenger ship and four of the five vehicle ferries now working in Shetland, where there is no shipbuilding yard.

Faroese Culture:

Along with this industrial expansion, developments have taken place in all fields of Faroese endeavour, cultural as well as economic; in addition Faroe has a very large measure of self-government. It even has what is really a very small university, which it calls an academy. Besides providing courses of lectures in the winter, the academy grants scholarships to people from outwith Faroe to come and stay while pursuing appropriate studies.

If Shetland unintentionally paved the way for Faroe's economic development and all that followed, there was much more of set intention behind the benefit conferred on Shetland by Faroe in the cultural field through the work of the great Faroese philologist Jakob Jakobsen. Born in 1864, his chief but by no means only contribution to Faroe itself was his splendid collection of prose stories from the villages. He was mainly interested in languages, however, particularly the variants of Norse, and was a skilled philologist. He chose Shetland as his field of work, and made the investigation of the predominant Norn element in the Shetland dialect his principal aim, with the Shetland place-names as a correlated study. This proved to be his life's work.

Jakobsen's *Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*, containing over 10,000 words, obsolescent as well as current at the time, was published in Copenhagen in Danish, in four volumes from 1908 to 1921. The fourth and largest volume, though practically finished by him, was a posthumous publication, as he died in 1918 at the age of 54 while working also on the Orkney Norn and a Faroese dictionary. In compliance with his wishes, his sister, Mrs. Anna Horsbøl, published an English translation of the Dictionary in two volumes in 1928 and 1932, in London and Copenhagen. In 1936 she

published, again in London and Copenhagen, an English translation of his *Place-Names of Shetland*, publication of which in Danish had preceded that of the Dictionary.

The works in English of Jakob Jakobsen on the Shetland dialect and place-names also include, and actually began in 1897 with the publication in Lerwick of two popular lectures which he gave there and in other places in Shetland, following his three years' sojourn in the islands from 1893 to 1895 — the first and longest of his visits. This book became and remains the best-known in Shetland of all his works, and was republished in Lerwick in 1926.

Apart from his published works, Jakobsen's personal influence in Shetland was tremendous. A man of homely ways and fine personality, he was popular wherever he went in the islands. The spectacle of a great scholar devoting himself full-time to recording the Shetland dialect and its variants roused the keenest interest, and helped local writers to raise the status of the dialect in the eyes of the people. Jakobsen's name became a household one, and he is still the main source of reference for any query about Shetland words or place-names. After comparison with a wide-ranging mass of Scandinavian word-material, he came finally to the conclusion regarding the origins of the Shetland people 'that the central point for the emigration to Shetland is to be sought in the south-west and south of Norway' (Jakobsen 1928. xxxiv).

Other links between Faroe and Shetland continued to be forged, including a religious one. In the 1890s a Scottish member of the Plymouth Brethren, Wm. Gibson Sloan, after some years in Shetland, went to Faroe and formed a branch of the sect, who are now very strong there, though the official church is Lutheran.

Soon, a young son of Mr. Sloan's, Paul, was responsible for something, the importance of which could not have been realised at the time, namely, the introduction into Faroe of the game of football which he had practised while at school in Lerwick.

In 1928 strength of sentiment for Shetland impelled the leading Faroese editor, Poul Niclasen, to bring to Shetland the 'Faroe Film' which he had been commissioned by the Faroe Lagting to take on tour in Europe to open up new markets for fish. At the same time, Mr. Niclasen issued an invitation for a Shetland football team to visit Faroe. The invitation was gladly accepted; special travel arrangements were made, there being no regular communications between the two island groups; and in 1929 a Shetland football team went to Faroe and began the series of reciprocal social and sporting visits which, apart from the war years, has continued ever since at intervals of about three years.

After the Second World War, Faroe came round to the making of roads, depending before that entirely on internal sea communications. As a further example of interest and goodwill, the Shetland County Council on several occasions released their County Road Surveyor and a small staff to go to Faroe and give instruction in road-making.

A result of these contacts and of press reports of the visits has been an awareness in Shetland of progress and development in Faroe which would not otherwise have arisen. One by-product was the fact-finding mission sent to

Faroe in 1962 by the Shetland County Council, concerned over the ceaseless decline in Shetland's population. By then it was 17,483 (1961 census), whilst that of Faroes was steadily rising as the economy, based on the fisheries, blossomed. Indeed Shetland's population fell steadily from 31,579 (1861 census) to 17,320 (1969 doctors' lists). In that same year the trend at last turned upwards — after some years of exceptional prosperity in Shetland's indigenous industries, and before the advent of the North Sea oil industry. Except for one short-lived drop, it has risen steadily to 19,636 (March 1977 doctors' lists). By contrast, Faroe's population has shown a steady rise from about 5,000 at the very beginning of the 19th century to 41,211 in 1976, stated in the 1975 [sic] statistical report of the Danish Ombudsman in Faroe.

Population statistics, however, are by no means the sole basis for the mutual interest which thinking Faroese and Shetlanders have in each other. Despite the continued lack of regular communications, intercourse between the two groups of islands may be expected to continue. Poul Niclasen's dream of a close community of interest is as yet afar off, but the hospitality regularly dispensed by the Faroese to those Shetlanders who do visit Faroe is quite unforgettable. Maybe it is coloured by earlier cultural and ethnic links. Nonetheless, it is based very much upon a recent linked past and upon a closeness of identity in the modern world.

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