

SHETLAND
(July)



JULY IS THE TURN of Britain's year: counterintuitively, perhaps, it's the true peak of spring. At the month's onset, auks and waders throng the coastline. Gulls and skuas feast on the eggs and fledglings of smaller birds, while lumbering monsters like the basking shark rise from the ocean's depths to predate the algal bloom. In this month of frenzy, travellers by kayak can't be sure of an onshore place to sleep, however much they scrutinise the map: when a landing is met by chattering terns the only option is to slide back onto the sea. But by July's end, seabirds slip the leash that briefly tethered them to the land: wax becomes wane in the glut of coastal life. Winds rise, then temperatures fall, as species after species leaves, till every crag that was once a thick white fudge of feathers and excrement is flayed clean by gales.

I spent my first night on Shetland high on some of Britain's most dramatic cliffs and north of every road and home in the British Isles (figure 2.1). All night, seabirds returned to ledges below, gradually ceasing their daytime cackle; I watched the last light of a sun that barely set gleam on the backs of fulmars and puffins as they wheeled in to roost. When I woke (a mere three hours after closing my eyes) a fat skua sat feet away on the storm-stunted grass. It stared as though keeping watch, with feathers only occasionally ruffled by a hint of breeze. This morning could barely be a better one to begin my journey: in this most wind-lashed extremity of Britain all was sunshine and stillness.

Shetland felt like a fitting place to start. It embodies July's double nature more fully than anywhere else in the British Isles. In the early summer, 'the aald rock', as these islands are affectionately known, is a cauldron of life as rich and distinctive as any of the world's celebrated archipelagos, from the Galapagos to the Seychelles; its

species – whether wrens, voles, moths or mosses – have evolved along unique trajectories. This month’s journey will bid farewell to the fecundity of spring with a carnival of screeching, mewling life of which this morning’s seabirds are just the start. The descent into winter in the Scottish mountains, when every plant or creature seems miraculous, will be dramatic.

Within an hour, early on the last day of June, I’ll have paddled to Out Stack: a small rock that is the northernmost scrap of Britain. I’ll turn. When I shift the sun from my right shoulder to my left, a journey that has filled my mind for months will begin. I wonder whether I should have some ritual ready: it’ll feel odd for the act that begins this venture to be a paddle stroke like all the others. But I can’t think of a ceremony that wouldn’t seem ridiculous performed, alone, at sea. So I paddle north to my starting point, passing up a long, fjord-like voe called Burra Firth. This is lined to the east with Shetland’s characteristic rich-red granite crags and stacks. To the west, a contorted, steely gneiss is shot through with quartz that, like the water, glints with silvery light. All the cliffs are swathed in a fleeting green: grass, moss and sea pinks cling to fissures in the rock through the short Shetland summer.

Reaching the mouth of Burra Firth was a decisive moment. If I turned right, around the red headland of Saxa Vord, I’d travel coasts sheltered from raw westerlies by the land mass of Britain. I’d write a book about the North Sea. But turning left is to choose the more austere Atlantic, its swell built through 2,000 miles of open ocean, and its coasts ravaged by some of the most powerful and unpredictable forces on the earth’s surface. In her unparalleled trilogy of books on seashores, the Pennsylvanian Rachel Carson makes this coast a case study precisely because of the violence of waves which sometimes break, she says, with a force of two tons per square foot.¹ For now I was still shielded from swell by a long line of rocks, some with ominous names like ‘Rumblings’. These outcrops are usually known

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simply by the name of the largest, Muckle Flugga, which is topped by a large, precarious Victorian lighthouse. Out Stack is the last and least imposing of the group.

Only later would I learn the need to ignore names like Rumbblings and Out Stack, as late impositions on the landscape. It's a signal of Shetland's long separateness that the islands as their people know them are named differently from how they appear on maps: Out Stack, for instance, is merely a garbling of 'Otsta', a name still used by Shetland fishermen. These historic names of Shetland were collected and mapped for the first time in the 1970s, and those who undertook the task referred to the lived tradition they recorded as '100,000 echoes of our Viking past'. Muckle Flugga is among the names that reveal the resilience of local terms most clearly: for a century, officialdom imposed the bland 'North Unst' on this rock, but in 1964 gave in to the Shetlandic name which – derived from the Norse for large, steep island – speaks more eloquently of geography, history and Shetland's singularity.

Despite the shelter of the skerries, I proceeded south from Otsta with caution: as the sea spills round Britain's apex, strong tides can change a boat's course and sweep it into offshore waters. Just as the Atlantic breaks against these cliffs with unusual force, the tides round Shetland and Orkney are some of the most treacherous in the world. These forces, because they draw in floods of nutrients and prevent disturbance, are the skerries' greatest asset: they permit whales to feed and seabirds to breed.

On this still day, at the height of spring, this fecundity was spectacular. It felt like a stronghold: a vision, perhaps, of how all these shores might have been before human action ravaged them. By the time I left the firth, I was no longer alone but surrounded by life, and the new entourage that whirled around me provided the sense of occasion I'd thought impossible. A moment that could

have been anticlimactic became entirely magical. A long string of gannets, slowly thickening, had begun to issue from the southernmost skerry of Muckle Flugga. Within minutes, hundreds of these huge birds – with wingspans of almost two metres – formed like a cyclone overhead. They circled clockwise, from ten to a hundred feet high, tracing a circuit perhaps a quarter-mile wide, each individual moving quickly from a speck in the distance to loom overhead (figure 2.2). Moments later, dozens of great skuas (known to Shetlanders as *bonxies*) joined the fray, pestering the gannets (*solans*) and drawing the only squawks from this otherwise voiceless flock. Black guillemots (*tysties*) and puffins (*norries*) flew by too, but took no part in the larger choreography, plotting small straight lines across the expanding circle.

More perhaps than any other bird, gannets evoke the bleak world of seaweed, guano, gales, crags and mackerel that sweeps north and west of the British Isles. Spending summer in dense communities, they colonise the steepest and most isolated elements of the Atlantic edge, building a world that looks like an oddly geometrical metropolis. Their chicks are known as squabs or guga, and dozens of these black-faced balls of silver fluff were visible on Muckle Flugga as I passed. During July the guga turn slowly black and leap from their ledges into a journey south that begins with a swim: they jump before they can fly. The young birds then make vast foraging flights, gradually securing a place on the edge of a colony that might be hundreds of miles from their birthplace. Then, they'll perch year after year in their tiny fiefdom, unmoved by everything the weather of Shetland, Faroe or Iceland can throw at them. I could feel no sense of identity with full-grown gannets, whose command of air and water transcends clumsy human seafaring; yet the guga's hare-brained, ill-prepared flop into the sea made me imagine it as an emblem of this journey's running jump into an alien ocean world. If I were ever to give my boat a

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name (and at least one Shetlander I met was taken aback, even offended, that I hadn't) I thought an excellent choice would be *Guga*.

Despite the infrequency of their squawks, the noise the gannets made as they swirled above was extraordinary. The sound of millions of feathers scything the air was enough to drown the ocean. This was the first time I'd considered the importance of hearing to the kayaker: unable to listen for dangers over the sound of the gannets, such as breakers over barriers in the sea, I felt shorn of a tool critical to navigation. And the thousand shadows of these powerful creatures created just the slightest sense of threat. Indeed, besides a few seventeenth- and eighteenth-century references to their sagacity and *storge* (the familial fondness they show towards their offspring), humans have rarely associated gannets with anything benign. Their appearances in art and literature are shaped by their most characteristic act: the fish-skewering dive from height into the depths. Wings folded back, the angelic, cruciform bird becomes a thrusting scalpel. This is, according to the leading naturalist's guide to the species, 'the heavyweight of the plunge-divers of the world' (and the gannet's evocative power is such that even this scientific monograph can't resist noting the bird's 'icy blue stare').² In the 1930s, an island joke held that plans were afoot for the canning of 'fird' (gannets tasting like a cross of fish and bird) but that no tin could hold 'the internal violence from the northern isle': the gannet had come to stand for the storms of its northern outposts as well as its own oceanic stink and sudden plummet.³ And the shift from soaring beauty to abrupt violence has long been a theme to build macabre visions on; as I moved beneath the avian storm cloud I couldn't keep the most sinister of gannet poems, Robin Robertson's 'The Law of the Island', from needling its way into my head. In this beautifully distilled poem, an island outlaw is lashed to a barely floating hunk of timber, with silver mackerel tied

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across his eyes and mouth. The islanders who have been his judge and jury push him into the tides:

They stood then,
smoking cigarettes
and watching the sky,
waiting for a gannet
to read that flex of silver
from a hundred feet up,
close its wings
and plummet-dive.⁴

This captures something of the force with which these bright birds, wreathed in shining bubbles, pierce the gloomy depths. Yet real gannets are ocean survivors, not kamikaze warriors, so there was no need for empathy with the island outlaw, and never a Hitchcockian threat in this great wheeling.

In fact, the leisurely hour I spent in the sun at Muckle Flugga would be the last moment of safety for some time. As I began the journey south down the island of Unst I hit a wall of breakers and swell that beat against the most preposterous cliffs I'd ever looked up at. With astonishing precision, fulmars traced the profiles of complex waves that seemed entirely unpredictable to me. Crests soon hit the boat from both sides, forcing its narrow bow beneath pirling water until its buoyancy saw it surge up through the foam. The bow would then smack down – diving through air where there had just been wave – into a sucking surface of receding sea. Twice in the first half-hour an unforeseen peak forced me sideways and into the ocean and I had to flick my hips to roll back upright, wrenching the paddle round to twist my body out from underwater (I was desperately glad of the previous week, spent practising short journeys in surf off North Uist with the most foolhardy kayaker I've ever met, my

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partner, Llinos – figure 2.3). As the last of my gannet escort returned to their pungent white promontories, I felt my sense of distance from everyone and everything keenly. I wouldn't see another human today, not even a silhouette on the cliffs that tower above. Even if someone was looking down, the roiling stretch of intervening ocean meant we might as well have been a world apart.

Passing down Unst was the hardest day's travel I'd ever done. In the evening I pulled into the shelter of a small cove, Westing Bay, with the sensation that I'd walked repeatedly through a brine car wash. I set out my sleeping bag on an islet called Brough Holm which, like so many tiny Shetland skerries, has a ruin attesting to productive purpose long ago. Covered in golden lichen, the remnants of this *böd* (fishing store) stand among deep-yellow bird's-foot trefoil which gives way suddenly to kelp and bladderwrack: a colourful world of greens, gold and brown that was made still richer by the evening light. The remnants of the Iron Age and Viking sites of Underhoull commanded the landward horizon, with a vantage along tomorrow's path, which would take me across a major sea road of the Norse world: the sound that separates the island of Unst from its southern neighbour, Yell, was once the easiest route between Norway and conquest.

Safe from the sea, I shuddered at the thought of what today's journey would have been like in less forgiving weather. I spent sunset drying out while reading about the small boats of Shetland, and thinking of centuries of families who'd rowed these coasts in all conditions.⁵ Far from an anticlimax, this dramatic day felt like a grand fanfare to see me on my way. Although it would be a while before I learned to sleep well in July's perpetual light, I did doze for more than three hours that night, mostly unbothered by the outraged squeak of an oystercatcher each time a gull strayed close.

By some kind of miracle, the calm weather in which I set out held for days, with only brief early-morning interludes of cloud and

breeze. I was able to travel what should have been the most challenging stage of my journey with few hardships beyond some sunburn round the ears. The two rolls in the maelstrom round north Unst were my only submarine adventures. Covering an average of thirty-two miles a day – not as the crow flies, but in and out of gorgeous inlets with imposing headlands – I still had hours to read or hang around at sea when gannets dived or porpoise fins rolled above the waves. In the orange evenings and white mornings I stretched my legs across the islands I'd chosen to sleep on and nosed round their ruins (I've never been anywhere with so many abandoned buildings from so many centuries). I began to think up questions for present-day islanders and for the past Shetlanders whose lives persist in the archives. But this still idyll, I had to remind myself, could not last.



The sensible way to undertake a journey along Britain's Atlantic coast would have been from south to north. With prevailing sou'west-erlies at my back I would have been working with, rather than against, the weather. But I couldn't bring myself to do that. While planning this trip in moments snatched from university teaching, familiar English and Welsh coastlines felt like the wrong kind of start. If I was to make sense of the Atlantic coastline, I had to begin by disorienting myself with total immersion in the seascapes and histories of a place I still knew mainly through clichés of longboats, horned helmets, sea mist and gales. This place is the seam between the Atlantic and North Sea, where waves rule Britannia and always have. It is a coast of staggering diversity as well as a thriving cultural hub: those coasts and that culture are thoroughly intermixed.

The bond between Shetlanders and their extraordinary tradition

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of small boats is rightly renowned. There are many Shetland dialect poems whose message boils down to the principle that a boat is more than a means of transport:

Take time; name dy boat weel,
fur du's
naming a wye o life.
Du's
naming a attitude.⁶

Most families in nineteenth-century Shetland had a 'fourareen': a small, wooden vessel for inshore fishing and ferrying supplies (known as 'flitting'). Shetland's 'national poet', Thomas Alexander Robertson, who wrote under the name Vagaland, popularised an old Faroese proverb to sum up the ethos of this family vessel. This is now well known across Shetland:

Fragments of battered timber:
teak, larch, enduring oak,
but from them may be fashioned
keel, hassen, routh and stroke.

A homely vessel maybe,
we build as best we can,
to take us out of bondage:
bound is the boatless man.

Vagaland was born in 1909 in Westerwick, a tiny village on the Atlantic coast. Around this settlement are impressive *drongs* (the Shetland term for sea stacks). These are tall needles and prickly ridges, forming cauldrons in which the incoming Atlantic beats and swirls. Vagaland had reason to hate the sea: his father drowned here

before young ‘Tammy Alex’ was a year old. But, like so many Shetlanders, he found poetry in boats, coasts, and rows or walks along the cliffs of the ‘wast’ side. Vagaland’s verse is full of evocations of small boats in driving gales on ‘da wastern waves’, of constellations reflected in still seas, and of rhythmic songs of sailors and fishermen.

Boats were essential to a family like Vagaland’s because Shetland life and laws necessitated coastal and inter-island links. An inhabitant of tiny Out Skerries, for instance, had rights to flay the peat from the more fertile island of Whalsay: like the people of most small islands, Skerries folk would regularly ‘flit da paet’. This didn’t just imply a single journey, but weeks of seasonal back-and-forth for cutting and turning to prepare the fuel for use. Provision boats, postal boats, fishing boats and social boats negotiated tidal channels in everything but the fiercest storms: many routes I took, between islets and along coasts, were once widely travelled in those ways.

Elegant Shetland-style boats now rest onshore in coves of the Atlantic coast, some in use and others in decay. But their distinctive form has a long and illustrious pedigree. The famous Gokstad ship, excavated in Norway and dated to AD 850, was accompanied by two small vessels that differ little from later Shetland examples. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, parts were bought from Norway to be pieced together on the islands. These Nordic kits made light, narrow and double-ended vessels. They ‘pranced’ on the water; their gunwales (the top edges of a boat’s sides) tapered before the bow and stern so the ship would flex and twist, dancing with the waves in ways that few boats can.

Yet each part of Shetland had different ocean-going needs, so the Shetland style developed local variations. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, three things accelerated this divergent evolution. First, the supply of Norwegian kits was interrupted by the Napoleonic Wars, giving Shetlanders new impetus to build for themselves. A generation later, the advent of steamers to the Scottish mainland

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allowed access to Scotland's oak and larch, reducing the reliance of this treeless archipelago on Norwegian pine. Between these two changes, the need for vessels more suited to Atlantic conditions became horribly clear: in June 1832, thirty-one boats were wrecked in a sudden storm that lasted five days. A hundred and five fishermen drowned.

Soon there were boatbuilders all over Shetland, experimenting with styles suited to local waters. Of all the islands, Fair Isle – twenty-five miles south of Shetland mainland and twenty-four north of Orkney – maintained Norwegian design features such as the narrow beam and short gunwales most faithfully. Fair Isle craftsmen could rely on tides and isolation to bring enough drift- and wreck-wood to construct much of their yoaIs. The most specialised and distinctively shaped parts of the boat, however, had to be recycled from old boats into new ones. This explains why Fair Isle vessels were conservative in form.

In the rest of Atlantic Shetland, lightness was slowly sacrificed for ocean-going heft. Adaptation was modest in the south, and more dramatic in the north. At Sumburgh Head (the mainland's southernmost headland) an extraordinary tidal splurge known as *da roost* provided excellent fishing, particularly for pollock (called *piltocks* by Shetlanders). Saithe boats stayed close to shore, but needed to hang on the edge of the tide, controlled by two skilled rowers, while two others ran lines through the racing sea. These boats were shallow and manoeuvrable; each could run *da roost* more than once a day.

A little further up the Atlantic coast, around the islands of East and West Burra, fishing grounds were sheltered, so there was no need for long, deep or beamy (wide) boats to carry large cargoes on heavy seas. Jetties were rare so boats were dragged up beaches to be kept in *noosts* (hollows in the ground). Short overland carries could help avoid tidal streams around these small islands and peninsulas.

The result was that lightness remained a priority even as boats widened and lost their prancing flex.

The seafaring traditions further north were different. The demands placed on Unst boats grew rapidly after the Napoleonic Wars, partly because of the new confidence and abilities acquired by seamen returning from war, but also due to growing international demand for white fish which swam in grounds so far offshore that, in the words of an eighteenth-century commentator, distance ‘sink[s] the land’. Boatmen began to take the extravagant risks associated with travelling to the edge of the continental shelf and spending nights on the wild fishing grounds known as *da haaf*. With lines up to three miles long, bristling with a thousand hooks or more, they fished after rowing or sailing thirty to forty miles from home.

The boats that answered these demands were known as sixareens. They were as large and muscular as little wooden rowing boats can get. The width of Norwegian precursors was expanded dramatically, because the new, stupendously long and heavy lines would have dragged a yoal over. Space onboard was such that once lines were laid, fishermen would make a fire in the middle of the boat: they’d light pipes, brew tea, perhaps cook some of the herring caught for ling bait, and pass the time until they began the four-hour task of ‘hailing the lines’. Yet lightness had not been entirely sacrificed: even the most robust sixareen could be carried by its crew of six. Twenty-five to thirty feet from stern to bow, the biggest of these boats was less than double the length of my eighteen-foot kayak. While kayaks are designed to pop back up if submerged and overturned, sixareens were open-topped and undecked. If tipped or swamped they were lost: no one has ever righted a sixareen at sea.

To attempt to comprehend the Shetland experience of the Atlantic I returned to Unst on the first day of really rough weather. By chance, I arrived at the Unst Boat Haven on the same day in July that, 135 years earlier, a storm took fifty lives. Most accounts from

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survivors of the 1881 storm were chilling but similar word-pictures of still waters turning quickly violent, so that ‘the sea commenced to rain over us’. But one document was different: it asked searching questions about how the characteristics of Shetland sixareens had shaped the tragedy. This text was notes taken in a 1979 interview with Andrew and Danny Anderson who had rowed sixareens in their youth: their father had survived the 1881 storm, but their uncle was killed by it.

I asked a custodian of the Boat Haven, Robert Hughson, whether he knew any more about the family. He recalled Andrew, in his nineties, telling a tale of being caught in sea fog (*haa*) with his father. As they fished, none of the six on board mentioned the *haa* or said anything about navigation. But when they completed their tasks, the older men just set to rowing and cruised straight into their *noost* on Yell. Andrew had a long career as master mariner and captain of one of the first supertankers, but insisted that he never discovered what skill allowed his father’s generation to navigate fog without so much as a compass. Such are the stories the sixareens inspire.

But Andrew wasn’t entirely dewy-eyed for the previous generation of boatmen and boats. In the 1979 interview, he explained why he thought late nineteenth-century changes in sixareen construction magnified the storm’s impact. The heaviest and longest sixareens, he claimed, had lost their key advantage: the lithesomeness of the small Shetland boat. It was impossibly gruelling to prevent these boats being caught side-on to a rough sea. And when a boat plunged into troughs between waves (or ‘seas’ as the brothers always call them), even the best crews lacked time and strength to turn its helm upwards and make it what they called ‘sea loose’ for the next barrage. Andrew and Danny detailed the actions required of boatmen during the phases of a wave; they described main swells forty feet high and the complex action of the intervening lesser swells, as well as how to

deal with each. Their imagery is rich: boats reaching messy peaks were ‘running through a sea of milk’. And they detailed the nature of the dangers: a sixareen could take a breaking sea filling it to the gunwales, but failing to clear the boat of water by the next such crest spelled ruin.

Andrew described how in a gale, every captain had a choice. They could raise the sail and run, risking ruin on skerries and being pushed into unsafe landings. On the night of 1881 almost all sixareens took this option because skippers knew they were too heavy to manoeuvre under oar: ten were wrecked. The alternative was what the brothers called ‘laying to’. The smallest sixareen at sea on the night of the storm was the *Water Witch*, an older boat exactly the same length at the keel as my kayak. This was the only boat whose six oarsmen dared confront the weather. The crew fought a war of attrition with the storm, rowing solidly into the oncoming sea all night to keep the boat from ever yawing side-on to breaking swell. They won a battle with the winds that no other crew could have taken on, and they rowed safely into harbour next morning.

Lying in the path of deep depressions that sweep the Atlantic, Shetland regularly sees beautiful weather for a few short hours, sandwiched between storms and blanket fog: the crew of a sixareen rarely had the luxury of knowing what seas they’d confront. That they risked everything in small wooden craft for modest hauls of fish demonstrates their intrepidity, but also indicates the harsh conditions – both climatic and political – in which islanders often found themselves during times of oppressive governance before the present era of oil-driven affluence. As the Shetlander John Cumming put it,

The boat as transport and fishing tool has shaped so much of Shetland’s history and its culture. We worked the land, true, but all too often a poor, thin land, and in desperate times fishing kept us

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alive. It made us who we are, a virile, confident, skilled and highly adaptable people with many stories to tell and a unique tongue in which to tell them.⁷

I had assumed, when reading all the admiring writing on the age of the sixareen, that the narrative of Shetland fishing must be one of decline from a golden era when saithe or ling could be plucked from the sea at will, so was surprised to find that the catches of Shetland ships have never been greater than they are today, the technological skill of earlier boatbuilders growing through the age of nets and herring (rather than lines and ling), then steam, motors and engine grease. The question of whether such innovation has been wholly positive – saving lives, but devastating sea life while reducing the number of livings to be made from the sea – is a different matter altogether.

In the serene conditions of the first few days, I felt distinctly un-intrepid, with Shetland's boating tradition a constant reminder of what humans are capable of when confronting the profound forces of the ocean. I moved slowly on, finding kayaking most pleasurable at night, when winds were lowest and the light dramatic. Between spells of paddling I worked through books I'd picked up in Lerwick, discovering more about the traditions and stories of these islands. Much of this reading was done in the boat, rocking gently on the swell as I rested. Without the splash of constantly rotating paddles, birds and animals often popped up close by, some reacting with surprise but others with curiosity at this bright intrusion in their midst. One gannet appeared within touching distance, allowing me immersion in the infamous ice-blue eye. Like a salt-rimed sea swan, it arched its wings defiantly, but made no sign of moving off. Seated on the waves, the bird's white tail feathers and black wing tips stretched a surprising distance from its bill (which, slightly hooked, resembled interlocking plates of some long-tarnished metal). Minutes

later it launched itself past my bow, bouncing repeatedly on the water and coating my camera lens in sea spray: as elegant as a camel on ice. When I landed, I couldn't resist a look at the Shetland dialect 'wird book' I'd brought along, in case this maritime language had words to evoke things I'd been seeing. To my pleasure, sea spray was *brimmastyooch*.



It took three leisurely days to pass down Unst then Yell and reach the Shetland mainland. The crossing from Yell to the mainland was the most challenging hour since Unst. With tidal streams running along the sound, around the imposing Ramna Stacks to its south, and then across Fethaland (the finger thrusting out from north mainland), there was no possibility of tackling the whole crossing during the brief slack water between the incoming and outgoing tides. Today, the overnight cloud refused to lift quickly, and a few gusts from the *haaf* helped amplify my trepidation. But if I had one regret about my paddle down the difficult stretches of Unst and north Yell it was that I'd been too cautious in taking photos: however unsettling it proved to be, I resolved to use my camera even when among the contorted waters at the Stacks (figure 2.4).

The coast of north mainland – the region called Northmavine – is perhaps the most outlandish landscape in Britain: I'd entered a science-fiction vision of an ocean planet. The first headlands, gnarled, grey and viciously gouged by sea, contain some of the oldest rocks in Britain. These soon give way to young red granite pillars and pinnacles, topped with puffins or Arctic terns, which rise directly from the ocean (figure 2.5). Some are smooth and torpedo-like, others prodigiously spiked, and still others have broad bases cut through by arches resembling the galleries of a flooded cathedral. I thought

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of ‘the living floriations and the leaping arches’ of David Jones’s long poem *The Anathemata*; in presenting cathedral architecture as an extension of the natural world, Jones insists that nature and culture shouldn’t be seen as separate. Passing through in windless conditions gave me rare access to each dark transept in these enclosed, steep-sided spaces.

These islands are drowned mountains. Six hundred million years ago a vast ‘Caledonian’ range stretched from what is now Norway to the present-day United States. The islands of Shetland were then peaks of Himalayan majesty, before aeons of erosion ground them to their cores. This mountain heritage shapes Shetland’s modern character: the ocean floor falls away from these ‘erosional remnants’ faster than from most of Britain, so that a depth is reached in half a mile that takes a hundred miles to reach from many English shores.⁸ The behaviour of the ocean and the distributions of fish or oil are all defined by those underwater inclines. The first, grey headlands in Northmavine are a rare point at which no remnant of the Caledonian mountains survives, worn down to bedrock laid 3 billion years ago from quartz and feldspar, before laval heat deformed it into the coarse gneiss basement of today. Later, thick sediments settled over this foundation before the clash of continental plates which, through buckling, thrusting and folding, made the Caledonian mountains. When I gazed up at many mainland cliffs, I was staring through cross sections of those ancient hills, with an access to the distant past that is rarely possible from land. The vast variety of rocks – including granite, marble, limestone, gabbro and sandstone – generates the diversity of foliage above. Limestone feeds patches of green munificence, while gneiss and granite starve the ground into blanket bog.

Geological distinctiveness has drawn scientists and artists to Shetland for generations. The driving force behind the great twentieth-century renaissance of Scottish literature, Hugh MacDiarmid, moved here in search of ‘elemental things’, by which he meant old language as well

as rocks and the forces that moulded them. In ways that are often neglected, his career was defined by Shetland: it is indicative of the scale of Shetland's impact on his work that most of pages 385–1,035 in his collected poems were written here. MacDiarmid's son described the strange scene in their Shetland fisherman's cottage:

The blazing peat fire, surviving in its grey ashes through the hollow of the night to be fanned fresh with the rising sun, patterned his legs to a tartan-red, and great blisters swelled. But nothing matched the white heat of passionate concentration, the marathon of sleepless nights and days that suddenly ended the sitting around for months indulging in that most deceptive of exercises – thinking.⁹

When MacDiarmid explored these islands – in his own words, 'rowing about on lonely waters; lying brooding on uninhabited islands' – he was actually in the company of a geologist (Thomas Robertson) and a fisherman (John Irvine of Saltness). It seems hard to imagine a group better suited to exploring Shetland than these experts in boats, rocks and words. One result of this alliance, MacDiarmid's long poem 'On a Raised Beach', is perhaps the finest evocation of the entanglement of Shetland's geology, sea and culture ever written. It becomes a kind of metamorphic metaphysical, with a famous opening – 'All is lithogenesis' – that rang true as I weaved my way through dramatic features formed from vertical layers of differentially eroded stone. This is a poem that demands to be read aloud, and deliberately snares the reader in thickets of dialect and science: words piled together like stones on the beach.

I dug my MacDiarmid from my dry bag and savoured his insistence that seeing is not enough when we confront Shetland rock:

from optic to haptic and like a blind man run
My fingers over you, arris by arris, burr by burr,

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Slickensides, truité, rugas, foveloes
Bringing my aesthesis in vain to bear
An angle-titch to all you corrugations and coigns.¹⁰

When I reached Ronas Voe, one of the most dramatic sections of this coast, I took a kind of risk I never had before, sleeping at the bottom of tall red cliffs, where a tiny beach of silver-white stones seemed to stretch two yards behind the tide line: just enough space to keep me and my kayak out of ocean. From here, I looked up to Ronas Hill, the highest point in Shetland: a frozen former magma chamber from a huge Caledonian volcano.

Although the days were still fine, this was my first really wet night. Each day so far, I'd stopped kayaking a couple of hours before sleep in the hope of drying out. While at sea, I wear wetsuit boots, neoprene trousers and a thin rash vest that starts out black but after two or three days is mottled silver with salt. Each evening I'd change into warm and comfy land-wear. Sitting back in the sun, with a book by a Shetland author, I'd eat bread and cheese while watching the tides and seabirds pass. But tonight a thin drizzle set in, making the stones of my little beach shiny and slippery.

Rain makes decisions that would otherwise be of little consequence, such as when to change clothes or how to pack the sleeping bag, into significant moments when mistakes can lead to days of discomfort. I had just one set of land clothes (and nothing has ever dried in the hold of a kayak). So tonight, I rushed straight from my kayak gear into the sleeping bag and went to sleep early. Dampness increased as the rain thickened. True to form, my waterproof sleeping bag let nothing in for hours until I was woken by a thin trickle of water rolling down my neck and pooling above my collarbone. I was glad to be sheltered from the wind that had picked up, but decided that the best chance of comfort was to make a very early start.

This was the day I'd reach St Magnus Bay: a bowl in the side of Shetland, fifteen miles across, 140 metres deep and forty miles along the involuted edge I'd paddle. Many of the most dramatic remnants of Shetland's tumultuous geological past line its circumference. I decided to take my time over the first stage of this journey, passing down the stupendous Eshaness cliffs before landing in a cove at a tiny settlement called Stenness and walking to spend the night on the precipice I'd kayaked beneath. But conditions were slowly changing. Where the sea until today had been a blue-vaulted expanse with perpetual views, the swell had risen overnight to become a series of narrow corridors whose silver walls could obscure even the tallest cliffs. I'd wondered whether I might see basking sharks round Eshaness, but today they could have passed within feet without me knowing. For most of the day, this swell was immensely peaceful, its phases gentle and unthreatening as I moved through four dimensions with every stroke. But at the bottom of the Eshaness cliffs, the swell seemed to come from all directions at once: unpredictable and disorienting. The way to deal with this in a kayak is less about the arms than the hips and thighs. At leisure, I sit straight-ish, but the means of responding to complex seas is to lean forward, lower the centre of gravity and grip the kayak tightly with the knees, creating a sense of connection with the boat. After a damp night and in cold wind, I was deeply reluctant to roll this morning and relieved once I reached the simpler water near Stenness Island. Here I stopped on the swell to take pictures back along the cliffs, as best I could, and to observe the place I found myself: the bowl of another volcano. It felt strangely appropriate that in a spot where I was separated from writhing magma only by time, I should be plunging and leaping with violent swell, head rhythmically plunging beneath where my feet had been.

I landed at Stenness in time for lunch, left my kayak beside an old *haaf*-fishing station, and began the walk towards the lighthouse

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to learn these cliffs by watching the setting sunlight shift across them. Before I'd got beyond the bay, the local crofter approached and we discussed the caves along this coast. He insisted I explore the hollow interior of the island known as Dore Holm, rather than just looking up at its huge arch, and told me about a small entrance just north of the Eshaness lighthouse that had been found only a few years ago. It leads, he said, to a huge chamber inside the cliffs. This was my first reminder that apparently timeless and knowable cliffs are mysterious and shifting. There'd soon be many more.

Next day, I continued along the sweep of St Magnus Bay, spending a night that was close to perfection on the cliff-bound island of Muckle Roe. The cove I pulled into through a small gap in the island's towering crags was as rich in grasses, bog cotton and small flowering plants as anywhere I'd seen. Unsurprisingly, the products of the slow dissolution of contrasting rocks – a wildly varied sward of grasses and flowering plants – appear in Shetland culture almost as much as fish and boats. The star among young poets writing from Shetland today, Jen Hadfield, is particularly attentive to plants of bog and cliff such as the butterwort:

I've fallen
to my knees again not five
minutes from home: first,
the boss of Venusian leaves
that look more like they docked
than grew; a sappy nub;
violet bell; the minaret
of purpled bronze.¹¹

In 'The Ambition' she even dreams of becoming butterwort, lugworm and trilobite, though her ultimate ambition is to be ocean, 'trussed on the rack of the swell':

THE FRAYED ATLANTIC EDGE

*The tide being out, I traipsed through dehydrated eelgrass
and the chopped warm salad of the shallows, and then
the Atlantic breached me part by part.¹²*

I sat in this immersive scene and watched Arctic skuas (*sķootie alan*) chase Arctic terns (*tirrickʃs*) as, in displays of balletic brutality, they forced them to drop their catch or vomit recent meals. And as the air cooled, moths began to clamber up the grasses: after sleepily fumbling upwards they'd shift abruptly, as though at the flick of a switch, into a manic spiral through the evening air.

After Muckle Roe, a long voe leads far inland, ending in the town of Aith. Following the coast now meant plunging into the heart of mainland. Here, I visited Sally Huband – ecologist, nature writer and Shetland-bird surveyor – who made me soup and pizza, as well as providing valuable local knowledge for the next stages of my journey. Sally explained several of the characteristics of Shetland's wildlife that had struck me as I travelled. She told me, for instance, that the absence of peregrine falcons is partially explained by the dominance of fulmars in their favoured nest sites: when threatened, fulmars spit a thick oil that's enough to debilitate a peregrine chick or compromise an adult's flight. Sally had just flown back from the outlying island of Foula where she'd been collecting great-skua pellets as a favour for a friend who needed them before going to Greenland. Her descriptions of Foula's geological and biological distinctiveness convinced me that once I'd finished my month's journey south I would have to make my way there: without reaching Foula I couldn't claim to have travelled Atlantic Shetland.

Back on the water I headed for the mouth of St Magnus Bay, but before I could round the lower lip a large island blocked my route. For any sea kayaker, Papa Stour is the 'jewel in the crown' of Shetland: a mile-wide rock with a twenty-two-mile coastline, pocked with some of the deepest and most complex caves and arches in

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Europe. It is stranded in the ocean amid speeding tides, and I decided to break the journey through them with a night high on the island's cliffs. I watched a trawler pass the remote Ve Skerries (another ancient knuckle of bedrock) as a group of Arctic skuas clucked and quarrelled like the drunk family at a seaside caravan park.

Papa Stour also appealed to Shetland's first geologists. In 1819, Samuel Hibbert described his arrival across transparent water, which made the boat appear 'suspended in mid-air over meadows of yellow, green, or red tangle, glistening with the white shells that clung to their fibres'. He observed 'red barren stacks of porphyry' that shot up from the water, 'scooped by the attrition of the sea into a hundred shapes'. Hibbert described many customs, including the Papa residents' tradition of trapping seals in the famous caves to club them until 'the walls of these gloomy recesses are stained with their blood'; but he gives a more picturesque vision of his own journey underground:

The boat . . . entered a vault involved in gloom, when, turning an angle, the water began to glitter as if it contained in it different gems, and suddenly a burst of day-light broke in upon us, through an irregular opening at the top of the cave. This perforation, not more than twenty yards in its greatest dimensions, served to light up the entrance to a dark and vaulted den, through which the ripples of the swelling tide were, in their passage, converted by Echo, into low and distant murmurs.¹³

Hibbert was a polymath prone to taking long excursions in corduroy breeches and leather gaiters, accompanied by his dog (delightfully named Silly). It was one of these excursions that took him to Shetland in 1817, but his relationship with the islands was transformed when he happened across commercial quantities of chromite on Unst. In 1818 he began a geological survey covering

all the archipelago. In the evening or during storms, he would appear at the doors of crofters, seeking bed or food. Then, according to his daughter-in-law, he would ‘retire to rest lying down in his clothes, dry or wet, on a bed of heather or straw, but not always sleeping, for swarms of fleas might lay an interdict on sleep’. On Papa Stour his hosts treated him to tusk fish and ‘cropping moggies’ (spiced cod liver mixed with flour and boiled in the fish’s stomach). Such dainties, he writes, should make Shetland a place of pilgrimages for discerning gourmands. He adds one caveat: for variety the poor islanders sometimes resort to coarse foodstuffs like lobster.

In the morning, I explored the caves, though I couldn’t pass far into their depths, lacking the conditions that Hibbert recommends ‘when the ocean shows no sterner wrinkles than are to be found on the surface of some sheltered lake’. I then swung round the headland beneath St Magnus Bay. Passing under yet more rugged cliffs, I called in on the memory of Vagaland at Westerwick, before embarking on the final stages of my Shetland voyage.



Once I was beyond the geological spectacles of the north, I made my way towards a world of small, fertile islands that were long smattered with settlements but are now home only to sheep. The day I set out through these islands was my first experience of the infamous Shetland *haa* and so the first time I really had to navigate. After ten minutes on the water, I tore my new compass from its plastic packaging and checked I could read it as I rocked. The conditions were haunting. Sometimes the *haa* sat flat against the gentle, three-foot swell. At others, it hung just inches from the water and tendrils of grey-white cloud seemed to stroke the surface of the

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waves. I had intended to spend the night on the island of Havera. But this, I'd since heard, was a place without streams: its community had been sustained by two wells that, a century later, I couldn't afford to rely on. So I aimed first to find my way between the Peerie Isles (*peerie* being Shetland dialect for small) to the outside tap at the local Outdoor Centre.

Mist is an excellent ally in wildlife watching. Today, not much after 4 a.m., an otter stood and watched as I drifted quietly by, while several red-throated divers, known here as rain geese, left it late to sidle off. Conditions, landscape, wildlife and atmosphere had all changed dramatically since St Magnus Bay. After landing and stocking up on water I set off for Havera, a place I'd long been intrigued to see. Slowly, the mist rose, wisps clinging to the moors east of the island, so that Havera gradually brightened from the west. Soon, it was stranded in a wedge of weak light beneath dark and silent skies. Clouds still licked the feet of the rough pewter cliffs long after their brows were clear. As I entered the mile of open water between mainland and the island, the swell was slow and gentle. On this day more than any other, the strange sensation of movement in multiple dimensions was something my body would retain: when I slept, many hours later, the cliffs seemed to undulate beneath me.

Havera is surrounded by richness. *Nories* and *tysties* surfaced laden with sand eels; forests of green-brown kelp seemed to grasp towards the surface. I'd planned this day and the next to give me time on the island. Here, if anywhere, I could begin to comprehend the lost communities of Shetland and the ruins that line the shores. The Havera folk left behind an archive, including recordings describing life on the island. A collaborative project of photography, research and writing used these to build a beautiful book, *Havera: The Story of an Island* (2013). I'd saved this to read *in situ*, where I could follow up each reference to a hill, promontory (*taing*) or

rocky inlet (*geo*) by exploring it myself. Later, I'd spend a day on the Shetland mainland listening to recordings of the people of Havera and contextualising the extracts in the book. This was my best chance so far to explore the 'archive of the feet'.

Travelling south, I reached the island at the deep clefts of Stourli Geo and Brei Geo on its north side, and used a dialect poem, Christina de Luca's 'Mappin Havera', to guide me towards a landing. This poem begins with a warning:

Havera's aa namit fae da sea.
 We could box da compass
 o wir isle; hits names markin
 ivery sklent da sea is med,
 da taings an stacks an gyos.

If on your wye ta Havera
 an mist rowled in,
 ivery steekit bicht spelt danger;
 you had ta ken dem, ivery een.¹⁴

The poem then provides the necessary 'kenning', tracing the aids and obstacles encountered by fishermen at the island's edge, until spying safety at 'Nort Ham,/wir peerie *haven*/Mak for dere if you can'.

Having followed these directions, I pulled into Nort Ham at the island's south-east corner (figure 2.6) and was met with an onshore sea of wildflowers and grasses. I pulled my boat up among the buttercups, where I found the egg of a wheatear (*sten-shakker*), plundered by a neater and more precise predator than the *bonxies* who might ordinarily be culprits. But there were also *sten-shakker* fledglings, less cautious and more curious than their chattering parents. Without this pretty sheltered inlet at Nort Ham, Havera might never have been inhabited. Over

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centuries, the people and goods that entered or left the island came through this tiny gap: the community's single link to the world beyond.

I packed myself a bag of food and warm clothes, since new weather seemed to blow in by the hour. Havera has several landmarks I wanted to investigate. The most substantial is the abandoned village packed tightly into the corner known as Da Yard, which was the last place in Shetland's small isles to sustain a population. In 1911 it boasted twenty-nine occupants from five families. Inland, there are two outlying buildings. One is an old schoolhouse, the other the imposing trunk of a huge ruined windmill: a *meed* (sea mark) visible from many miles away. I decided to take my bearings according to the landscape before investigating the ruins. This proved trickier than expected since most headlands were colonies of terns: to disturb them is not just harmful to a threatened species, but also draws a volley of intense and committed dive-bombing far more likely to cause injury than the infamous attacks of great skuas (a *bonxie* attack is never conducted in such numbers or with such frenzied persistence).

When I finally found a spot to sit and read, I was gazing out onto Havera's satellite, West Skerry. Each spring, island sheep and cattle were swum here, across the hundred-yard sound, to protect the Havera crops. This ridge of rough pasture, completely separate from Havera's arable land, was key to the success of the island community. But it is arable richness that was Havera's greatest asset. The island is less than a square mile in size, yet its interior is not the rock- and wrack-strewn waste found on many islets of similar area. It's an unlikely idyll of well-drained, fertile earth, perpetually replenished by soft limestone that intrudes in veins through the region's granite bones. From the era of Neolithic field boundaries (still sometimes traceable), to the moment when the crofters left, this limestone made Havera a fine place to grow grain. Indeed, its name is probably derived from *hafr*, the Old Norse for 'oats'.

The island was generally presented by its last inhabitants as a

plentiful and perfect home. Gideon Williamson died in 1999, seventy-six years after he left Havera; he remembered his birthplace as unique in Shetland because its fertile land was not ‘just bits a patches here an dere’ but one great expanse of rock-less, weed-less loam: ‘you could tak a ploos an ploos da whole lot up . . . Hit wis entirely clean.’ Shetland tradition accords to tilled Havera earth pest-repelling tendencies that verge on the magical.

Yet the topography did have drawbacks. Wells were no substitute for streams because running water had uses beyond cleaning and quenching thirst. The most common ruins I’d passed along other Shetland coasts were small, simple watermills built where rivers met the sea. But the people of Havera had to row their grain to Scalloway (a five-mile crossing) or Weisdale (eight miles) and pay for its grinding. This added labour, cost and risk to the challenges of island life. In the 1860s, a solution was dreamed up: the only windmill ever built in this storm-ravaged archipelago. The innovator might have been Gifford Laurensen, a skilled mason who was entrusted by the Society of Antiquaries with repairing the Iron Age Broch of Mousa (then ‘mouldering into dust’). Between 1848–52, the Laurensens married into Havera families twice, and Gifford’s sister and father (also a mason) moved to the island.

The significance of Gifford Laurensen’s link to the Broch of Mousa is that the Havera mill evokes ancient Shetland more than modern. It stands like a round Iron Age edifice in a region where circular buildings are rare. It is a landmark that, like an ancient fort, puts Havera on the map: the most instantly recognisable of the small islands and, according to one local seafarer, ‘a kinda lodestar for whaar you wir’. That incidental function is all well and good. But so many compromises were made with the mill’s design, in order that it might withstand the Shetland weather, that it was useless for grinding grain: Havera folk quickly quit and resumed their mainland journeys.

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The large, ill-fitting stones make the mill easy to climb, so I edged my way carefully up the green and golden lichen to an exceptional vantage on its walls. From here the world of which Haverø was the centre could be surveyed. The rough low hills of the southern mainland, with their scattering of small white houses, occupied the eastern horizon, the shores becoming ever sandier as the hills sank and stretched south. These were the coastlines that Haverø folk traversed on calm summer days. But beyond the southern extremities of the mainland, thirty miles distant, Fair Isle stood out on the horizon. From there, sweeping west, a long stretch of ocean was punctured only by the mad cliffs of Foula, frequently referred to as the wildest inhabited spot in the British Isles. These two islands signalled a remoter world to which, in certain weathers, Haverø most certainly belonged.

I wandered downhill to the village, where small buildings are packed into a narrow isthmus with surprising neatness. This order is a product of the history of habitation. Although Haverø had long been lived on (this is probably its first period of abandonment in millennia), the population was increased, and several new crofts built, during a sudden enforced settlement in the eighteenth century when landlords aimed to increase rents from every part of their domain. When the island was abandoned, it wasn't because of clearance, but was an after-effect of the overpopulation engineered by the lairds. A few Gaelic place names round the coast suggest that some incomers might have been Scots, not Shetlanders; two very different cultures forced together.

The overwhelming impression amid the ruins was of how communal life must have been. Doors and windows of the small neat houses look onto one another, while amenities such as the single village kiln suggest prominent shared spaces (in most of Scotland at this time each croft had a kiln of its own). Inside houses, outlines of two rooms, the *but* and *ben* (living room and bedroom), are often

clear, although the interiors of some have been converted into well-crafted winter sheep pens. A single habitable house stands on the inland edge of the village. It is used by those who tend the island's sheep but its occupation seems irregular: a faded chess set and 1990s magazines accompany a toy animal that stares incongruously from a window.

This building shows that the village is not entirely abandoned. But nor is it entirely uninhabited. As I walked around its eastern edge I realised that the honking of fulmars was not just coming from the precipice below, but also from the ruins of crofts: the birds use the village walls as crags. Despite the healthy human population shown in the 1911 census, the last residents left the island in 1923. Jessie Goodlad, born on Havera in 1903, explained why:

Dey left becaas dey wir naebody left ta geeng back an fore wi da boat . . . becaas da young menwis aa laevin . . . weel, dey wirna laevin exactly, dey wir aa gyaain tae da fishin . . . dey wir naebody to steer dis boat, dis saily-boat, back an fore.¹⁵

Fulmars spread across Britain's Atlantic coasts in the early decades of the twentieth century. The first of these birds may well have begun to nest here after the Havera folk had left (there are still retired Shetland fishermen who recall the time they were told, as children, to come and see this strange bird, the *maalie*). There is as much social change in nature, and as little permanence, as there is among people. Few events demonstrate this more fully than the sudden and unforeseen expansion of the fulmar across the North Atlantic world; this might even be called the most dramatic conquest of Britain since 1066.

Fulmars are the most characterful of seabirds. They seem to be constantly at play, especially in high winds, and appear to demonstrate an inexhaustible curiosity in humans, quietly approaching any boat at sea. Many photos from the kayak can be filed under 'Photobombed

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by Fulmar'. These birds are often written about as though they possess an unflappable mastery of the winds, but much of their personality comes from clumsiness. As they misjudge a gust and lose their poise, a huge webbed foot is thrust into the air; after a split second of feather-ruffling slapstick they'll be balanced on the breeze again.

The arrival of thousands of fulmars has transformed the experience of Havera from anything its crofters would have recognised. But fulmars are not the only change to the island's avifauna: the hilltop rigs where crops were grown have also been conquered. These thin strips of rich land were known and named in detail: responsibility for rigs called things like Da Peerie Wirlds, Da Hoolaplanks and Da Kokkiloori was circulated round crofters every season. Now, the space where kale, oats and bere (the traditional four-rowed barley of the Northern Isles) were grown is barely traceable beneath the same foliage that would be there had the island not been farmed. Ruling this feral domain is another victor in the struggles between species: the *bonxie*. Every rocky vantage, whether a corner of the old schoolhouse or a chunk detached from a long-flattened dyke, is now a watchtower for a bulky skua.

This two-century legacy of change is a profound demonstration of the entanglement of human and natural worlds. The Havera way of life was transformed – ended – not only by the ill-judged whims of distant landlords but by the movement of fish offshore, while many differences between Havera today and in the past are a result of the changing social lives – the histories – of birds. At the end of my Shetland journey, I spent a night in the shadow of the Havera windmill's twin, the fourth-century Broch of Mousa. This is a domineering monument to human belligerence, yet now its walls reverberate with the gentlest purring. Storm petrels nest in the cracks between stones, and as I settled down to sleep, hundreds of tiny stormies fluttered across my sight line. Masons making ready for war had unwittingly built the perfect hive for these sparrow-sized seafarers.

It is tragic to see abandoned places that were once filled with people, especially when (as in the case of Havera) their magnetic personalities – their pleasures and regrets – shine through recordings of their voices. Yet in a world where humans wage wars of conquest not just among themselves but on almost every species on the planet, it might be heartening to see the agency of animals reshaping realms to which humans are, more than ever, peripheral.



At about 3 a.m. on my night on Havera, heavy rain set in. As I paddled south, soaked to the bone and (for the first time in this journey) truly cold, the windmill remained on my horizon, only briefly hidden by the heaviest downpours. Both the red cliffs of the north and the fertile, low-lying isles were now left behind. A diverse geology, including complex whorls of multiple rocks, had taken over. Drongs were no longer the square-edged towers of St Magnus Bay, but rugged grey wedges like spittle-wreathed teeth. Few mishaps had occurred so far, but I'd now misjudged the battery level of my phone and was left unable to check tides and weather. I knew such accidents would happen quite often, but with the tidal challenges that lay ahead, this was not a time I would have chosen. Momentarily I thought there was a virtue to this failing: that it made my journey more 'authentic' (not a word I'd ever usually trust). But I quickly realised that every seafarer of the pre-digital age had resources to judge tides that I lacked. I had some familiarity with what to expect, built up over the last two weeks (I knew, for instance, to expect ebb tides in the afternoon) and I also had time: if I confronted hostile tides or weather I could, in theory, sit them out and consume the ample food and reading still stowed in my boat.

The sky began to clear as I passed St Ninian's Isle, linked to the

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mainland by its tombolo beach. This pretty strand of sand, lapped gently by the sea on either side, is perhaps the most famous landmark in Shetland. Like many of Shetland's spits and bars, it indicates an alarming reality: a drowned coastline that has not stopped sinking. Shetland may have sunk as much as nine metres in 5,000 years, in contrast to most Scottish coasts that follow a more usual post-glacial path of continuing ascent ('isostatic rebound' once freed from the weight of their Ice Age glaciers). The scale of this change, over so short a time, explains some of the extraordinary transitoriness of this coastline. This would be driven home even more strongly as I continued towards the final tidal barriers in my path.

The first challenge was Fitful Head. Yet again, the wind was low as I reached a point where any breeze would have spelled trouble, and yet again, this was enough to draw the sting from a possible threat. I bounced fast enough through the tidal overfalls at the Head to consider tackling the second challenge before dark. But Sumburgh Head was worth waiting for: it offered the possibility of whales and the chance to see one of Britain's most spectacular tidal runs, *da roost*, in action.

As the sun rose over another subdued sea – the fading swell preserving the memory of long-departed breezes – I launched. Porpoises, closer than any I'd seen so far, edged along the coast ahead. I soon passed the largest stretch of sand on Shetland. There is no hint when paddling past that this was once the thriving village of Broo. Landowners and tenants in the early eighteenth century began to note deterioration in the quality of their land. Soon, it was 'declared valueless'. By the mid-eighteenth century, the once-wealthy village had been obliterated beneath 'a small dusty kind of sand, which never possibly can rest, as the least puff of wind sets it all in motion, in the same manner as the drifting snows in winter'.¹⁶ Caused by the climatic cooling of Europe's 'little ice age' (the 1690s were one of the coldest decades in the last millennium), this tragedy was the

most dramatic evidence I had seen so far of the scale and unpredictability of transformation on these coasts.

Passing this eerie site, I soon found myself sandwiched between tides, and forced to make split-second decisions about my route. At the first asking, I got it wrong, choosing not to go round the island of Horse Holm but to tackle the straits between the island and the mainland. This felt like taking a bike without suspension down a steep road of huge cobbles: the powerful tide was with me, but at times I was afraid the huge overfalls might bury or even break the kayak. My spare paddle was strapped to my deck in two pieces, but it was clear, as overfalls wrenched at the one I held, that a second without a paddle would be disastrous. I'm frequently surprised by how short these infamous tidal runs tend to be: I thought I was at the start of a long and harrowing ordeal when I found myself spat out into placid water. After this, Sumburgh Head itself was straightforward. The sun appeared as I made my way out to sea, south of the whole of Shetland, and for the first time in my journey I could see people gazing down, bird-watching binoculars raised to assess the small yellow form scraping across the sea. They were there in numbers, I soon discovered, looking for orcas that had been sighted the previous day.

I landed at the launch of the tiny Fair Isle ferry and crossed the narrow neck of land behind Sumburgh Head. This took me to a spot rich in historic remains, including Shetland's most dramatic Viking tourist-draw: Jarlshof. The Norse traditions of this southern tip of Shetland are nearly as rich as those of Unst. Even the tidal stream I'd just swept through is rich in story. The *Orkneyinga Saga* is a tale of competition between Norwegian earls for the coasts and archipelagos of the North Atlantic; like most such sagas it is gripping and evocative but fiercely elitist, with barely a glimpse of perspectives beyond those of its entitled male protagonists. In 1148, the saga says, Earl Rognvald Kali Kolsson, ruler of the Northern

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Isles, was travelling between Orkney and Norway. With breakers all around, he was forced to run ashore at the south of Shetland. Rognvald wandered local settlements, enjoying anonymity and frequently (as was his habit) breaking into verse. One day, he met a poor elderly man near Sumburgh Head. Learning that the man had been let down by a rowing companion, Rognvald (disguised in a white cowl) offered to help him fish. The two rowed out to Horse Holm making for the 'great stream of tide . . . and great whirling eddies' that I'd just swept along. As the old man fished, Rognvald's task should have been to skirt the tidal stream by rowing the boat against the eddies. Instead, he guided them deep into the turbulence where the fisherman began to draw up enormous fish, but soon cried out in terror 'Miserable was I and unlucky when I took dee today to row, for here I must die, and my fold are at home helpless and in poverty if I am lost.' Shouting 'Be cheerful man!', Rognvald rowed like a man possessed, eventually drawing them clear of the chaos and back to shore. Still incognito, he gave his share of the catch to the women and children preparing the fish on land, but then slipped on the rocks, provoking howls of mocking laughter. Rognvald muttered one of his verses, rendered here by the Orkney poet George Mackay Brown:

You chorus of Sumburgh women, home with you now.
Get back to your gutting and salting.
Less of your mockery.
Is this the way you treat a stranger?

Think, if this beachcomber
Hadn't strayed to this shore by chance
Your dinner tables
Would be a strewnment of rattling whelkshells today.

THE FRAYED ATLANTIC EDGE

Sumburgh women, never set staff or dog or hard word
On the tramp who stands at your door
It might be an angel,

Though here, with the Sumburgh querns grinding salt out there,
It was only a man in love with the sea,
Her beauty, her rage, her bounty,

One who knows that, all masks being off,
In heaven's eye
Earl is no different from a pool-dredging eater of winkles.

'They knew then', Mackay Brown writes,

that the reckless benefactor was Earl Rognvald Kolson (nephew of St Magnus), one of the rarest most radiant characters in Norse history. A fragrance and brightness linger about all Rognvald's recorded doings and sayings, as if the long sun of northern summers had been kneaded into him.¹⁷

But *da roost* and Rognvald's antics are unusual: old stories tied to Shetland landscapes are few, and documentation of Shetland's early history is far sparser than that for other parts of Britain. From the centuries when much of the landscape would have been named we receive only the barest skeleton of events. The *Orkneyinga Saga* says that Shetland was split from Orkney in the 1190s after a rebellion of the 'Island-Beardies' (as Orcadians and Shetlanders apparently called themselves). From then on, Shetland was largely left to its own devices, although it changed hands (from Norway to Scotland) in 1469. Only when the conditions of medieval Shetland began to collapse, in the dire economic circumstances of the late sixteenth century, are there detailed written records of what life here might

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have been like: bitter complaints at the loss of order and well-being. By this point, Shetland was an exceptionally cosmopolitan place, the islands frequented by merchants from around Europe and the North Atlantic, so that Shetlanders often spoke some German and Dutch as well as their own Norn language.

The reason for the dearth of early Shetland stories is the eighteenth-century death of Norn. In literary terms, this loss was total: remarkably, no Norn literature survives except in second-hand fragment. Yet Shetland's dialect tradition is a worthy successor to the Norn heritage and a key impetus behind the wealth of current literature. This is undoubtedly the richest dialect in Britain and a constant presence in the experience of visitors (few, I imagine, leave Shetland without succumbing to the temptation to call small things 'peerie' or to replace 'th's with 'd's and 't's). It is among Shetland's greatest assets and the source of much of the archipelago's distinctiveness.

Once Norn died, dialect flourished. The nineteenth century has an awful reputation where dialect traditions are concerned: the bureaucratisation and centralisation of British life led many autocrats to think like Thomas Hardy's mayor of Casterbridge, who labelled dialect words 'terrible marks of the beast to the truly genteel'. Yet Shetland bucked the trend, forging – as always – a path all its own. By 1818, the crofters visited by Samuel Hibbert used words and grammatical constructions substantially the same as those employed by Shetlanders today (although, as the Shetland archivist Brian Smith puts it, 'naturally, the vocabulary is different, since we live in a society where dozens of words for small-boat equipment or seaweed, are unnecessary'). But the 1880s and 90s, during which Shetland crofters and fishers were freed by national legislation from the worst exploitation of landlords, marked a particular moment of growth. The first Shetland newspapers were founded in 1872 and 1885, and both specialised in dialect prose. They ran long serials such as 'Fireside

Cracks' (*Shetland Times*, 1897–1904) and 'Mansie's Rüd' (*Shetland News*, 1897–1914) which used island language to offer subtle observations of island life. 'My inteention', says the narrator of 'Mansie's Rüd', 'is no sae muckle ta wraet o' my warfare i' dis weary world, as to gie some sma' account o' da deleeberat observations o' an auld man, on men an' things in a kind o' general wye.' As this suggests, these columns were not inward-looking things, but helped form distinctive island perspectives on the world at large. In this newly prolific era, Shetlanders such as Laurence Williamson began collating and categorising dialect words and phrases, while others, such as the Faroese linguist Jakob Jakobsen, began to attempt to recover the old Norn language.

In this atmosphere of renewed self-confidence, some Shetlanders, such as the dialect poet William Porteous, began to use English to evangelise the islands to those mainlanders who, if they thought of Shetland at all, pictured a dreary scene. Poetry 'advertising' Shetland to the urban south embraced a flamboyant romantic aesthetic that wouldn't have been possible a century earlier. This marks, perhaps, the beginning of the idea that Shetland is the northernmost and fiercest expression of a frayed Atlantic edge worth celebrating. Ferocious storms, wind-whipped seas and bleak, unpeopled headlands could be romanticised, rather than being dismissed as incompatible with progress or politeness. In Porteous's descriptions of the 'strange exultant joy' to be found in confronting ocean weather, many touchstones of later evocations of the North Atlantic sublime can be found.

Two days after completing my descent of Shetland I found Porteous's verse in the local archives and was struck by his heroic efforts to make storms not just poetic, but an actual tourist draw. I felt that, having kayaked this far in improbably blissful calm, I still lacked a crucial aspect of the Shetland experience. But there was no need to have worried: five days after I rounded Sumburgh

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Head a brief but grisly weather front was forecast. I'd already decided, thanks to Sally Huband's influence, that my last Shetland venture had to be to Foula. Given the risk of rough weather I chose not to paddle the crossing but booked my kayak onto the twice-a-week passenger ferry. At thirty feet long this is essentially just a diesel sixareen with a lid. It was perhaps surprising that only the youngest of the eight passengers was sick as, rocking and rolling, we meandered a slow course across the sea's contours. Minutes after disembarking in Foula's tiny harbour I launched the kayak and was paddling up the island's east coast. By the time I reached the north-east corner, I was in a sea terrorised by breakers three times my height, from which I could look east to the whole Atlantic coast I'd paddled down. That night I wandered through the Foula coastline's meadows of ground-nesting seabirds, taking great care to find myself a spot to sleep away from any chicks (figure 2.7).

It was on the second of my three days on the island that I finally met the force that Porteous had pronounced Shetland's true ruler: the 'Storm King'. That morning I'd climbed the island's tallest cliffs and lounged, lodged among puffins, with my feet dangling 1,200 feet over the sea (figure 2.8). I sat gazing north while clouds gathered in the west and large, cold drops of water began to fall. Hundreds of screeching kittiwakes took to the air, disturbed by eddies in the wind, while spindrift skimmed the sea in all directions. The real arrival of the storm was preceded by minutes of strange, thick warmth. Then lightning flashed across the ocean, lending the swell fleeting new patterns of light and shadow, before rich, deep thunder reverberated through the rock. Puffins and fulmars joined the kittiwakes in panicked flight, and the booming cliffs themselves seemed to have come to life. The whole spectacle was as sublime and life-affirming as Porteous had, a century before, promised his urbane readers it would be:

THE FRAYED ATLANTIC EDGE

And when the Storm King wakes from his sleep
in the long, long winter night,
And, robed in his garment of silver spray, strides
southward into the light –
At the sound of his voice ye shall see the waves
race in for the land amain,
Then, broken and beaten on cliff and beach, fall
back to the sea again.
Ye shall see the tide-race rise and rave, and rear
on his thwarted path,
Till stack and skerry are ringed with the foam
of the hungry ocean's wrath.
Ye shall watch with a strange, exultant joy, the
winds and waters strive,
And your hearts shall sing with the rising gale,
for the joy that you are alive.¹⁸