

The Study of Norn

1. Introduction

Da vara Iarlin d'Orkneyar
For frinda sin spir de ro
Whirdè ane skildè meun
Our glas buryon burtaga.

Or vanna ro eidnar fuo
Tega du meun our glas buryon
Kere friendè min yamna meun
Eso vrildan stiende gede min vara to din.

These lines, which comprise the opening two verses of a Shetland ballad, will for many be hard to understand. The more so if they are read aloud (although we cannot be sure precisely how the words sounded in the mouth of a native Shetlander, linguistic comparisons offer a useful guide). The complete text – thirty-five stanzas in all – is known in Norwegian as *Hildinakvadet* and often referred to in English as the *Hildina* ballad. It was written down by the Scottish minister and naturalist George Low during a visit to the Shetland island of Foula in 1774. His informant was an old man called William Henry. Low describes the language of the ballad as “Norn”, which he understands as a type of “Norse”, i.e. a Scandinavian idiom (1879:105, 107). Low’s understanding was wholly correct, and that is why the two verses I have cited will not mean much to anyone unfamiliar with Old Norse or its descendants.

I stress the Scandinavian pedigree of the language Low encountered to avoid any misapprehension. As is well known, the Northern Isles were invaded by Viking raiders and settlers in the 800s. By the year 1000, if not before, their type of speech had become the sole medium of communication in the islands, superseding the language or languages of the pre-Viking Pictish inhabitants. A form of Scandinavian

remained the dominant tongue until it began to be challenged by Scots in the late Middle Ages. The proximity of Orkney and Shetland – especially the former – to the Scottish mainland facilitated the immigration of considerable numbers of Scots speakers into the islands, and with the pledging of Orkney in 1468 and Shetland in 1469 to King James III of Scotland, both the political and linguistic fate of the Northern Isles was sealed. They were to become a fully integrated part of the Scottish kingdom, and ultimately of the United Kingdom; they were to adopt first Scots, and then (in writing at least) standard English, as their language(s).

The term “Norn” used by George Low to describe the Scandinavian of Shetland and Orkney derives from the Old Norse adjective *norrænn* ‘Norwegian’ ‘Norse’, and/or the corresponding noun *norræna* ‘Norwegian language’ ‘Norse language’. In a broad sense therefore, Norn may designate Scandinavian spoken not just in the Northern Isles but other parts of Britain as well. And the term has occasionally been so used. But because the language survived longest in the far North, there has been a general tendency to apply Norn solely to the Orkney and Shetland situation – although some have also wanted to include north-eastern Caithness (cf. Thorsen 1954:230-38), an area intimately linked with the Norse Earldom of Orkney.

Whatever the geographical confines in which we place Norn, there is no doubt it represents a form of speech that has its origin in the language of the Viking invaders; and their language was in the main a western type of Old Scandinavian or Old Norse. It is thus confusing when ‘Norn’ is applied to something else. It is, for example, often held that modern Shetland dialect is a kind of Norn. But that is patently not the case. Modern Shetland dialect is Scots. It contains a small Scandinavian element, and one that is steadily diminishing, but in terms of pronunciation, structure and vocabulary no linguist would have any hesitation in identifying it as fundamentally Scots. That is not to say all philologists or linguists agree on the definition of Norn. To some the term denotes any piece of Scandinavian language material emanating from Scotland or, more narrowly, the Northern Isles – including medieval runic inscriptions and roman-alphabet documents. To others Norn means

only the spoken Scandinavian of Orkney and Shetland and written records of such speech. In fact the language of the medieval inscriptions and documents from the Northern Isles is more or less identical with that found in contemporary inscriptions and documents from Norway, so these manifestations of Scandinavian seem better designated as Old Norse or Old Norwegian. For my part I would restrict “Norn” to mean “the distinctive form of Scandinavian speech that developed on the Scottish mainland, in the Hebrides, and in Orkney and Shetland”. Since no Norn is recorded from the mainland or the Hebrides – outside place-names and odd relics (mostly single words) in Scots or Gaelic – this means in practice I use the term almost exclusively to refer to Scandinavian speech as it developed in Orkney and Shetland.

2. Early references to Norn

It is hard to say precisely when the study of Norn begins. The earliest documented use of the term is dated 1485 (Johnston, Johnston and Jón Stefánsson 1907-42, 1:55). But this refers to the language of a Norwegian letter dealing with a Shetland matter, and thus not to Norn as I have defined the term. In 1549, Donald Monro, “High Dean of the Isles”, uses the phrase *norn leid* ‘Norn language’ while discussing the origin of the island name Jura (< ON *Dýrey*; Munro 1961:50). From the sixteenth or perhaps seventeenth century comes the greeting *goand da boundæ* recorded in *Descriptio Insularum Orchadiarum* ‘A Description of the Orcadian Islands’ by a man styling himself “Jo. Ben” (Marwick 1929:224). Ben glosses the greeting ‘Guid day Guidman’. The phrase *goand da* compares with modern Icelandic or Faroese *góðan dag* ‘good day’ ‘hello’, and shows the adjectival accusative masculine singular ending *-an*, which is still characteristic of the two island Scandinavian languages. Regrettably Jo. Ben does no more than comment on the fact that Orcadians use a different form of speech from others and provide this one example. Where we would hope for further glimpses of the common Orcadian idiom of his day, he simply appends the unsatisfying

abbreviation “&c.”. Jo. Ben is not alone in noting the existence of a language other than Scots in Orkney. A number of those writing in the seventeenth, eighteenth or early nineteenth century about the islands or island affairs comment on the use of what they variously call “*vetere Gothica lingua*”, “the language of Norway”, “Norse”, “Noords or rude Danish”, “Norns” and “Nor(e)n”. Whatever the appellation, the writers generally make it clear it is a Scandinavian idiom they have in mind. What they generally fail to do, though, is provide examples. An exception is James Wallace, who in the second edition of his *Account of the Islands of Orkney* includes a Norn version of the *Lord’s Prayer* (1700:68-9). Unfortunately he does not say how he came by this text. And he is very far off course in his identification of its language as “derived [...] either from the *Pights*, or some others, who first planted this Country”. Many of the contemporary or near-contemporary references to the use of Norn in Orkney – as well as Jo. Ben and Wallace’s samples – are reprinted in Marwick (1929:224-7).

There are early references to the existence of a Scandinavian idiom in Shetland too, here called “Gothic(k)”, ‘Norwegian’, “Norse”, ‘corrupt Danish’ and “Norn” (cf. Stewart 1964:163-6). Once again, very few writers offer samples. Sir Robert Sibbald tells us that “all the Inhabitants of these Isles in their Countrey Language call themselves *Yalts* [...] and their Language by themselves is called *Yaltmol*” (1845:68). *Yalt-* – minus the English *-s* plural – would seem to go back to ON *hjalti* ‘Shetlander’, while *Yaltmol* must be derived from an unattested ON **hjaltamál* ‘language of the Shetlanders’. However, Sibbald also tells us that the Norwegians and Danes call Shetland *Yealteland*, the people *Yealtines* and their speech *Yealta mole* (1845:11), and it is not inconceivable these Scandinavian designations have been wrongly attributed to the Shetlanders themselves. For in both Orkney and Shetland Norn initial *hj-* seems mostly to develop to [ʃ]; Scots *sheltie* or *sholtie* ‘Shetland pony’ is, after all, supposedly derived via Northern-Isles pronunciation from ON *hjalti*.

3. George Low and Thomas Irvine

Sibbald's few Norn appellations – if Norn they are – are eclipsed by George Low's material. Low's manuscript of *A Tour through the Islands of Orkney and Schetland* (published 1879) contains two pieces of continuous Norn: the *Lord's Prayer* and the *Hildina* ballad referred to at the outset. In addition he presents a Norn word-list containing thirty items. Low's little collection is justly famous, and has been used by scholars to give an impression of Norn as it might have been while still a living language. There are several difficulties with this, however. Low was not a student of Norn, indeed it is fairly clear he knew no Scandinavian at all, and his language material is presented as part of a general account of the Northern Isles. He does provide brief explanations of how he acquired his Norn samples, from which it is clear the *Lord's Prayer* and the ballad come from Foula, and seemingly the word-list too. But the description he gives of the language situation on Foula in 1774 is hazy, and has been taken by some to mean that Norn was still regularly spoken and by others to indicate it was but a dimly remembered language of the past. Nor is it clear that Low's material can be taken as representative of eighteenth-century Shetland Norn as a whole – let alone of Orkney Norn. There are considerable differences between the type of language he recorded and that documented by later investigators. Low's texts and word-list show various affinities with Faroese, which do not reappear in the later material. In the light of this it is legitimate to wonder whether there might not have been some Faroese or other West Scandinavian input into the Foula Norn of 1774. The island appears to have been devastated by plague, presumably smallpox, at the turn of the seventeenth century – and possibly again in 1720 – (Edmondston 1809:85; Baldwin 1984:55), and there are several traditions of Faroese fishermen being cast ashore at “Dale of Walls” and subsequently settling on the West Side and Foula (Baldwin 1984:50; Shetland Archives D.1/172/28/2-3). On the other hand, oral tradition and circumstantial evidence combine to suggest that the William Henry who communicated the *Hildina* ballad to Low may well have been a pre-epidemic survivor (Baldwin 1984:59-60).

Begun in 1814 and continued for a few years thereafter are Thomas Irvine's unpublished *Zetlandic Memoranda* (Shetland Archives D.16/394/3). Irvine was no more than Low a student of Norn. He was, however, a native Shetlander, who early in life developed a strong interest in the traditional language, tales, songs and ballads of the islands. In his introduction to the *Memoranda* he notes that his grandfather – also Thomas Irvine, of Midbrake, Yell – who died in 1803, “was one of the few whom I remember who could speak the Norn or repeat complete Visics [ballads]”. The author goes on to regret his failure to commit any of this and other material to paper before his grandfather and “many of the oldest people” had died. In this we may heartily concur, and only wonder, if his interest was as great as he professes, that he neglected to preserve even a couple of lines of continuous Norn for posterity. What he does offer is a very brief account of Norn, its origin in Viking expansion, its relationship to other forms of Scandinavian, and its ultimate demise. He observes that there was “a slight difference in pronunciation” between Shetland and Orkney Norn, and that the language became “corrupted with Scotisms” in Orkney and died out much earlier than in Shetland. He goes on: “In the North Isles of Zetland the Norn continued to be spoken exclusively by a great number of the natives and was generally understood by all of them, about the year 1720. Indeed some of the elderly people in North Yell & Unst did not understand a word of Scottish, and from prejudice would not learn to speak it” (p. 52). For this information he cites the authority of his grandfather. The latter is presumably also the source of the statement that “upon the whole the Norn appears to have retained a considerable degree of purity even to the last in Zetland” (p. 53). How other parts of this account are to be understood is less clear. Was Thomas Irvine the grandfather a native speaker, for example, or did he learn Norn later in life from a sense of local pride? It does not seem Norn was commonly used among people of his generation. For although young Thomas reports that his grandfather spoke the language well, the most he will say of other old people he knew in his childhood is that they “could repeat Norn Vissics or Songs” (p. 53). They knew some Norn ballads

or songs by heart, in other words – or parts of them – but they are not credited with an active knowledge of the language.

Zetlandic Memoranda does present some language material. This is in the form of a word collection, said to be taken from “a peculiar dialect [...] used by the Fishermen of North Yell when they go out to sea, from a superstitious motive that luck attends it” (p. 53). This collection (pp. 55-7), which covers more than fishing terms, contains many words of almost certain Norse origin, e.g. *scundie* ‘haste’ ‘make speed’ (cf. ON *skunda* ‘hasten’ ‘speed up’, *skunda sér* ‘hurry’), *fye* (presumably [fa:i], < ON *faðir*) ‘father’. But there are also non-Scandinavian items, e.g. *skuny* or *skonic* ‘knife’, surely from Gaelic *sgian*, *platticks* ‘feet’, most obviously derived from the Low German adjective *plat* ‘flat’. Borrowing of more recent Scandinavian terms seems to be reflected in, e.g., *handtaag* ‘hand-line’ (literally ‘handle’) and *vigvise* ‘compass’ (literally ‘signpost’ ‘guide’). What we are dealing with here is the naming of certain subjects or objects in oblique terms by fishermen at sea. This phenomenon has been termed “taboo” language because fishermen were held to consider it unlucky to name the subjects or objects concerned directly. Clearly superstition is involved, but in the case Irvine describes, it seems to be less from a sense of foreboding than a belief that employment of a set of circumlocutions could make the fishing more successful. Most of the words listed occur in the same or similar form elsewhere. A useful source is Fenton (1978:618-22), who observes that although the majority of the circumlocutions are of Norse origin, some come from Scots, Dutch or Low German.

4. Early Shetland dialect studies

Shetland dialect rather than Norn was the concern of William Grant and Arthur Laurensen, both mid-nineteenth century Lerwick merchants (Smith 1996:36-7). Grant started to compile a Shetland dictionary, with suggested etymologies for numbers of the headwords. His work was never published, but after his death a good deal of it was

incorporated into Thomas Edmondston's *Etymological Glossary of the Shetland and Orkney Dialect* (1866). Many of the words included are compared with cognates in different Scandinavian languages, from which their Scandinavian pedigree may be inferred. Laurenson contributed a brief piece to the Danish periodical *Annaler for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* entitled 'Om sproget paa Shetlandsöerne' 'On the language of the Shetland Islands' (1860:190-201). As an introduction to this description of Shetland dialect, he offers a potted account of the decline and demise of Norn, claiming that the language was still spoken in the eighteenth century, at least in Unst and Foula, the most outlying islands. He also advances the view that Norn was corrupted more and more until it was finally ousted by "de nye Herrers Sprog" 'the language of the new rulers' (1860:190). Appended to Laurenson's contribution is an article by the Danish philologist, K. J. Lyngby. He discusses both Norn and modern Shetland dialect, providing analysis of some preserved specimens of Norn (chiefly Low's from 1774), and a rudimentary survey of the pronunciation of the current idiom. Most of what is said of Norn in the two accounts is derivative. However, they do offer insight into contemporary Shetland speech, Laurenson especially.

Some might want to include among contributions to the study of Norn James Stout Angus's *A Glossary of the Shetland Dialect* (1914). In his preface the author claims his object in publishing the *Glossary* "is to help to preserve what yet remains among us of our old Norn language", while at the same time giving "a fair sample of our dialect as it was spoken in the nineteenth century and on to the present time" (1914:5). Yet since the work consists of an alphabetical list of Shetland words with pronunciations, meanings and some examples of usage – but no etymologies – the reader is without the guidance that would help determine whether a particular word included is of Scandinavian origin or not. On the positive side, however, it should be stressed that Angus's *Glossary* is much fuller than Edmondston's and seems largely independent of it.

5. Jakob Jakobsen

By common consent, the academic study of Norn begins at the end of the nineteenth century with the work of Jakob Jakobsen. Jakobsen was a Faroeman, and a versatile philologist. He did much to elucidate and promote his native Faroese, and was also a respected etymologist. In keeping with the climate of the times, his approach was strongly historical. Even his efforts to promote Faroese as a language capable of dealing with the demands of the modern world sprang in part from a veneration for its Old Norse origins. It is no surprise, then, that when Jakobsen in the years 1893 to 1895 made a study trip to Shetland, his efforts centred on Norn, a language of the past also descended from Old Norse. By the time he arrived Norn had probably been extinct for some considerable time. Nevertheless, he worked with single-mindedness and dedication to record any remnant of the language that could still be found. Words, phrases, snatches of conversation, proverbs, rhymes, riddles, place-names – as well as other, less conspicuous features – all were carefully noted down and most subsequently analysed and discussed. Although Jakobsen made two further brief visits to Shetland, in 1905 and 1912, it was in the years 1893-5 that the bulk of the work of collection was accomplished. Orkney was also on the agenda. He went there first in 1909, but in the event never stayed for any length of time. And what he managed to collect in the more southerly group of islands was insignificant compared with the Shetland harvest.

Following the 1893-5 visit, Jakobsen began to issue the results of his research in both learned and popular form. (A more or less complete bibliography of his published work can be found in Grønneberg 1981, which separates from the rest those items that deal with Orkney and Shetland.) Important to mention here are his doctoral thesis, *Det norrøne sprog på Shetland* ‘The Norse language in Shetland’ (1897a), the two popular lectures, *The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland* (1897b), the pioneering *Shetlandsøernes stednavne* (1901), an English-language version of which came out under the title *The Place-Names of Shetland* (1936, reprinted 1993), the

article ‘Nordiske minder, især sproglige, på Orknøerne’ ‘Scandinavian relics, particularly linguistic, in Orkney’ (1911), and the monumental two-volume *Etymologisk ordbog over det norrøne sprog på Shetland* (1908-21) together with the English-language version *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland* (1928-32, reprinted 1985).

Jakobsen’s doctoral thesis offers a general account of Norn in Shetland, though it is heavily concerned with individual lexical items. *The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland* provides entertaining and lucid summaries for the lay reader of the author’s most important discoveries. *The Place-Names of Shetland* addresses names of Norse origin by type. We find, for example, ‘Words forming place-names which denote natural features’, ‘Names of farms’, and ‘The fishermen’s place-name tabu’. There is also a section on ‘Celtic place-names in Shetland’. The ‘Nordiske minder [...]’ article gives a historical introduction to Norn in Orkney and makes various comparisons with Shetland. A good number of examples are also provided of Norn words preserved in Orkney speech. While this contribution cannot be considered more than an introductory survey, it assumes a certain importance since Jakobsen otherwise published very little on Orkney Norn. His major work on Northern-Isles Scandinavian is undoubtedly the *Etymological Dictionary*. A one-hundred-and-four-page introduction presents the essentials from his doctoral thesis, while the dictionary proper runs to over a thousand pages and contains some 10,000 entries.

Jakobsen’s publications on Norn were well received by his contemporaries – specialists and lay people alike. Partly no doubt because of his stature, but perhaps also because interest in Norn seems to have declined in the 1930s and post-war years, there was for a long time little or no academic debate about the strengths and weaknesses of Jakobsen’s work. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that sporadic criticism began to be voiced. Some of his phonetic transcriptions were deemed confusingly varied, certain of his etymologies were questioned, and, above all, his account of how Norn came to be replaced by Scots was seriously challenged. As part of a reasoned critique of Jakobsen’s work on Norn, I have tried to summarise

these criticisms and weigh up their merits (Barnes 1996). One of my own complaints is the lack of systematisation in his treatment of the data. Too often it is as though Jakobsen fails to see the wood for the trees. But the weakest aspect of his presentation is undoubtedly the account he renders of the Norn-Scots language shift in Shetland, which is seen in terms of a gradual but increasingly Scots dominated intermixture of the two languages. I will return to this question towards the end of my paper.

6. The *Hildina* ballad

Less well known than Jakobsen's work is Marius Hægstad's edition and study of *Hildinakvadet*, the ballad collected by George Low on Foula in 1774. The edition appeared as early as 1900, but is written in an antiquated and austere kind of *landsmål*, and has never been translated into English. Yet Hægstad's contribution represents an important milestone in the study of Norn. He dissects Low's often garbled text and on the basis of a comparison with Old Norse tries not so much to restore it to an assumed original state as put it into the form in which he believes William Henry or his immediate predecessors will have recited it. At the same time Hægstad offers us his understanding of how the vowel and consonant sounds of Old Norse are reflected in the Norn ballad.

Hægstad was not the only Norwegian to work on this text. As early as 1838 the celebrated historian, P.A. Munch, had published all thirty-five stanzas together with outline commentary (1838:118-26). Sophus Bugge, the famous nineteenth-century philologist, also studied the ballad, and his interpretation, with emendations by other Scandinavian scholars, was ultimately published by the Danish folklorist Hakon Grüner-Nielsen in 1939. Bugge's interpretation, as it appears in Grüner-Nielsen's presentation, consists of no more than a rendering of the text into Old Norse. Grüner-Nielsen himself adds detailed commentary on ballad parallels – individual words, phrases and motifs. His conclusion is that *Hildina* can be considered part of a genuine

Shetland tradition; it is not a late introduction from the Faroes, as some might be inclined to believe (1939:151). A full English translation of the ballad exists, based on Hægstad's amended text (Collingwood 1908), and there is also a general introduction in English: *Shetland's Hildina Ballad: Its Discovery and Further Discussions* (Rendboe 1993).

7. Hugh Marwick and George Flom

It was in the early decades of the twentieth century that Orkney Norn was given full scholarly treatment. The investigator was Hugh Marwick, himself an Orcadian, and his research culminated in 1929 with the publication of the appropriately titled *The Orkney Norn*. Marwick was an admirer of Jakobsen, and his book follows in basic outline the earlier scholar's *Etymological Dictionary* (in the production of which Marwick assisted, Jakobsen 1928-32:vi). By way of introduction to the glossary of Norn words, which forms the backbone of Marwick's contribution, the reader is given a brief account of the history of Norn in Orkney, sundry grammatical notes, samples of idioms, proverbs, riddles, etc., and a rather more systematic account than Jakobsen provides of vowel and consonant developments. The glossary itself fills just over 215 pages and contains some 3000 items. *The Orkney Norn* concludes with four appendices: appendix I lists unusual linguistic forms in the Maeshowe runic inscriptions; II contains the texts of the four preserved Scandinavian-language diplomas from Orkney; III cites a number of "literary references to Orkney Norn"; IV tabulates variations in vowel sounds in the modern dialect between different parishes in Orkney. Like Jakobsen, Marwick had a strong interest in place-names, and in the Northern Isles most of these are of course of Norse origin. He published on names in several of the Orkney islands as well as in the Mainland parish of Birsay. His onomastic work culminated in the monograph *Orkney Farm Names* (1952). Marwick was first and foremost a collector of material, and in this he also resembles Jakobsen.

The analysis in *Orkney Farm Names* can be solid and persuasive, but the introduction to *The Orkney Norn* scarcely rises above the routine. Jakobsen's spirit hovers over the presentation, and when it comes to discussion of the Norn-Scots language shift Marwick is happy to quote the Faroese scholar's views verbatim (1929:xxvii-xxviii – an English translation of Jakobsen 1897:13-14). He does concede, though, that “the change was something more than a steady inflation of Norn with Scots words until it became more Scots than Norn” (1929:xvii).

The idea that Norn slowly changed into Scots received strong support from the Norwegian-American scholar, George Flom. Indeed, Flom goes so far as to postulate a steadily declining ratio of Norn to Scots words; he even gives precise figures: 12:5 in 1850 and 1:1 in 1900 (1928-9:150). He does not, however, consider the implications of these figures for earlier or later periods. A modern scholar, the Dane Laurits Rendboe, has extended the graph experimentally in either direction, resulting in a Norn around 1790 that was pure Scandinavian, at least in its word-stock, and a Scots around 1950, some 25% of whose vocabulary would still have been of Norse origin (Rendboe 1984:55). The latter figure we know is wrong, and there seems little reason to believe in the 100% Norn word-stock of 1790 either. In fairness to Flom, it must be stressed that he nowhere advocates the even decline shown in Rendboe's graph, but it is a conclusion his presentation does nothing to disturb. Flom tends to view the shift from Norn to Scots chiefly in terms of vocabulary. He has rather little to say about the inflexional system, and still less about pronunciation and syntax. Vocabulary looms large in Jakobsen and Marwick's work too, as we have seen, but these scholars do pay due attention to pronunciation and inflexions, if not syntax.

8. 1981 to the present: the controversy surrounding the death of Norn

Following Flom and Marwick's contributions, the study of Norn rested a while. We have Grüner-Nielsen's 1939 article on the *Hildina* ballad, but that was in part based on

earlier material, as already noted. 1971 saw the publication of John Geipel's *The Viking Legacy*, which devotes many pages to Norn. However, the author is heavily indebted to Jakobsen and Marwick, and his own contribution is largely limited to selecting and organising the material.

It is in the 1980s we see a reawakening of interest in Norn, and this takes a number of forms. At the start of the decade, a project was launched with participants from the universities of Trondheim and Stockholm, entitled *Norn. The Scandinavian Element in Shetland Dialect*. The aim of the project was not only to look at what remained of the one-time Scandinavian idiom of Shetland almost ninety years after Jakobsen made his principal survey but also to probe linguistic attitudes in Shetland. One of the participants, the Swedish scholar Gunnel Melchers, initiated a series of publications with an article characteristically entitled 'The Norn element in Shetland dialect today – a case of "never accepted" language death' (1981). A not unreasonable criticism of the project concerns its employment of the term "Norn". The object of the study is the Scandinavian sub-stratum in modern Shetland dialect, and to call this "Norn" hardly aids the cause of clarity – unless we are to give the spoken Scandinavian of Orkney and Shetland some other name.

It is with Norn in the sense of a Scandinavian idiom once spoken in the Northern Isles that Laurits Rendboe is concerned. Beginning in 1984 he has written extensively on the Shetland variety. His work consists in part in the presentation and analysis of preserved Norn texts (e.g. 1987; 1988-9; 1996), in part in promotion of the view that Norn continued to be spoken in Shetland in unadulterated form until it finally expired late in the nineteenth century (e.g. 1984; 1987:5-7, 97-9). These are two prongs of a single attack, it turns out, for the analysis of the Norn texts is designed to show they are effectively free from Scots influence. Indeed, in his very first foray into the subject Rendboe is able to conclude (1984:80): "As far as the available evidence shows, Norn stood firm to the end." This is clearly at complete variance with the Jakobsen-Flom-Marwick understanding of the language shift, whereby Norn under

the influence of Scots gradually became a hybrid tongue and eventually emerged as modern Shetland or Orkney dialect.

The three earlier scholars do not, it must be said, argue a serious case for their interpretation of events. Rather, they present it as more or less self-evident. There is a danger in criticising them for this that we forget the scholarly situation and climate in which they operated. Nevertheless, one cannot avoid a tinge of exasperation at the lack of analysis and the unwillingness to search for different possible explanations of the data. There is the added problem that crucial terms such as “Norn”, “Scots”, “dialect”, “language”, etc. are used in so disconcertingly vague a manner that one sometimes wonders whether the writers themselves understood precisely what they had in mind.

Rendboe, in contrast, works diligently to make his interpretation of the language shift plausible. As well as attempting to show that the extant Shetland Norn texts point to a pure form of Scandinavian, he sketches a picture of Shetland history in which the Scots incomers are colonial masters cruelly oppressing the native population. Instead of buckling under, however, the Shetlanders resisted, and one of the manifestations of the resistance was an unwillingness to adopt Scots features in their speech (1984; 1987:1-5).

It is certainly true that the *Hildina* ballad exhibits scant evidence of Scots influence, and that is also largely the case with Low’s word-list. The Shetland and Orkney versions of the *Lord’s Prayer*, on the other hand, do have a conspicuous Scots or English element. Be that as it may, we are entitled to wonder how much these three pieces of material from 1774 can tell us about the state of the spoken language at the time. Neither a traditional ballad nor the *Lord’s Prayer* is likely to have been very close to everyday conversation in structure or vocabulary, while the word-list arose from Low’s prompting for Norn equivalents of various English words he proposed.

Rendboe’s method of dealing with the late nineteenth-century material, it does not seem unfair to say, is to render it into putative Norn and declare the result pure Norse. One of Jakobsen’s “fragments of conversation”, collected on Foula, runs: *Jarta, bodena komena rontena Komba* (I ignore the special characters Jakobsen

deploys), glossed by him “‘My heart’ (my dear), the boat (a boat) has come round ‘de Kaim’ [a hill in Foula near the coast]’ (1928-32:xcii). On the face of it we have here a text in which the inflexional endings are neither Norn nor Scots, but have been levelled to *-(en)a*, a feature characteristic of many of the so-called Norn fragments collected by Jakobsen. Rendboe corrects the text to read “*jarta boden e komen ronten komba*” (again special characters are ignored), where *boden* consists of the word for ‘boat’ to which is suffixed the definite article in Scandinavian fashion, *e* represents the copula (Norse *er*), *komen* is the past participle of the verb ‘[to] come’, and *ronten* is said to be a preposition corresponding to Norwegian and Danish *rundten* ‘round about’. While the final *-a* of *bodena* contains the copula, those of *komena* and *rontena* are “added by analogy” (1984:67-8). In actual fact the text as we have it exhibits neither Scandinavian nor Scots grammar. It might at one time have had the form Rendboe invests it with – if we can believe such an unmemorable exclamation was repeated over the years – but that is not the point. As collected by Jakobsen this “fragment of conversation” is not a specimen of pure Norn, but a sequence of Scandinavian words with no discernible grammatical system.

Rendboe’s understanding of Shetland history has been challenged by Brian Smith, the Shetland Archivist. In a 1993 paper (Smith 1996) he denies that the post-impignoration situation was one of cruel oppression of the Shetlanders by Scots. Instead he paints a picture of a thriving entrepreneurial society run chiefly by locals – people of both Scots and Norse descent. Smith’s conception of post-impignoration Shetland – based on a thorough and detailed study of the primary sources – leads him to conclude that a form of Scots speech became established as a stable linguistic medium in the islands as early as the sixteenth century. In this and the following century, he argues, Shetlanders spoke a variety of languages (Scots, Norn, Low German, Dutch) – whatever was required to safeguard their many commercial interests. During the seventeenth century Shetlanders’ contacts with countries other than Scotland diminished, and this, Smith maintains, had an effect on their linguistic proficiency. By the eighteenth century local merchant-lairds controlled commerce with

the Continent, and the only language most Shetlanders would have had their attention directed to was Scots. In that situation Norn must have seemed of little relevance, and more and more people – being equally at home in Scots and Norn – stopped using the Scandinavian tongue.

We have, then, three rival interpretations of the death of Norn – chiefly Shetland Norn, it must be stressed. My own view, which I have arrived at from repeated consideration of the sources, is very much in line with Smith's. In my 1998 book, *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland*, I reject the Jakobsen-Flom-Marwick scenario chiefly on the grounds that “the imperceptible melting of one language into another they envisage seems to be without parallel” (p. 23). This claim has been challenged, examples of mixed languages offered, and the term “creoloid” introduced into the discussion (Wiggen 2002:24-6). But none of the examples adduced is of a Language A, which under the influence of a Language B gradually turns into B. Nor is a creoloid, as I understand the term, such a language. Rather, “creoloid” refers to a form of speech which has distanced itself from its origins under the influence of another language but which exists side-by-side with the mother tongue. Even were a development of the kind envisaged, from Language A to Language B, documented elsewhere, it would not absolve those advocating a similar shift in Orkney and Shetland from arguing a plausible case. No such case, as I see it, has so far been presented.

Rendboe's belief in a pure Norn that lasted well beyond the middle of the nineteenth century must also, I am convinced, be rejected. I have already adduced evidence to suggest there is little warrant for such a conclusion. I further note it is common for languages in terminal decline to lose both functions and features and to suffer extensive interference from the dominant tongue (cf., e.g., Weinreich 1953; Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter 1977; Dorian 1981; Schmidt 1985). Although there are counter-examples to this, and there are certainly dangers in basing conclusions about what happened in a given linguistic situation on the outcomes of analogous situations elsewhere, such evidence of interference cannot be ignored. As for Rendboe's

nineteenth-century Norn speakers, these owe their existence chiefly to certain remarks by Jakobsen. He relates (1928-32:xix):

The last man in Unst who is said to have been able to speak Norn, Walter Sutherland from Skaw, died about 1850. In Foula, on the other hand, men who were living much later than the middle of the present (19th) century are said to have been able to speak Norn.

But Jakobsen himself casts serious doubt on the validity of these statements:

The Norn spoken towards the middle of the century and later can hardly have been of much account. The difference between it and the dialect of the oldest people of the present generation probably consisted in little more than the fact that the former contained a greater sprinkling of Norn words which the younger people did not understand. Moreover, the persons mentioned had probably a certain reputation because they could recite fragments of songs, rhymes and modes of expression, etc. in Norn, things that others had forgotten.

Notwithstanding the difficulties attending his interpretation of the death of Norn, Rendboe receives solid support from the Norwegian scholar, Geirr Wiggen (2002). Wiggen is also sympathetically disposed to the Jakobsen-Flom-Marwick view. Unlike Rendboe, he allows for considerable Scots influence on Norn, but joins the Dane in believing Norn continued as a living language far into the nineteenth century, perhaps in fairly pure form among some speakers. Wiggen's principal thesis is that it was not until the advent of regular schooling in the early nineteenth century that Norn finally succumbed to Scots, and in accordance with this he looks for and claims to find socio-historical evidence that would support the supposition of a goodly body of Norn speakers as late as the 1820s, some of whom will have survived until the middle of the century and beyond (2002:68-76 *et passim*). In adopting this interpretation of events, Wiggen is necessarily critical of both Smith and me. Indeed, in his account I can appear as something of a muddle-head, espousing now this view, now that. What Wiggen does not always appreciate is the contexts in which my different contributions to the study of Norn appeared. The initial 1984 foray, for example, as befitted the

volume in which it appeared, was intended primarily as a statement of what was then generally accepted – accompanied by a few critical remarks along the way. Further research led me little by little to modify certain of my conclusions. But Wiggen does not easily see this. He casts a critical eye on statements I and others have made, and conclusions we have reached, and discovers sundry contradictions. But these are not – in my case at least – the result of carelessness or perversity. They reflect rather a developing understanding of the data.

It is not possible within the confines of the present discussion to examine Wiggen’s socio-historical arguments in favour of a nineteenth-century survival of both Orkney and Shetland Norn. It is worth noting, however, that Remco Knooihuizen in a recent article (2005), having concluded that the majority of Orcadians and Shetlanders had abandoned Norn for Scots “shortly after 1700 at the latest”, provides several socio-historical reasons why the language shift might have happened at such a relatively early period. These come under the headings: ‘the use of Scots in administration and law’, ‘the use of Scots in religious contexts’, ‘the spread of Scots and English through (formal) education’, ‘the loss of language contact with Scandinavia’, and ‘increasing language contact with Scots’. Knooihuizen agrees with Smith and me that the prominence of Scots in the public domain, diminishing contact with Scandinavian, and increasing contact with Scots are all important factors. As regards education, it is enough to cite his principal conclusion: “if we accept *c.* 1700 as the date for the primary language shift, it would be impossible for an education campaign that started in 1713 to have been a cause of the shift” (2005:111). 1713 is said to be the year the first Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge school was launched in Shetland (but cf. Wiggen 2002:41, who advocates a later date). However, as Knooihuizen stresses – and Wiggen too for that matter – the amount and quality of education provided by these schools was to begin with extremely limited, and we have to go forward a good hundred years to find general education becoming an important factor in Northern-Isles life. Thus, if schooling is to be its nemesis, Norn still has to be alive and well in the early 1800s.

It is legitimate to enquire why Smith, Knooihuizen and I are convinced Norn died out a century earlier than Rendboe and Wiggen hold. For me, at least, there are three main reasons. The contemporary literary references to Norn taken cumulatively indicate that by 1800 at the latest the language had ceased to be spoken. When Norn is mentioned after that date it is as a language of the past. This evidence is confirmed by the testimony of the Shetlander, Thomas Irvine, discussed above. Writing in 1814 and thereafter, it is clear he knew of no one who could speak Norn. Some ten years earlier there had been but one or two. Ability to speak the language thus seems to have been an extreme rarity in Shetland at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Finally there are the words of George Low, who procured three samples of Norn on Foula in 1774. Elsewhere I have described his account of the linguistic situation on Foula and the West Side as “ambiguous” (1998:26). Smith’s conclusion is more brutal: “Low didn’t describe a living language; he described a dead one” (1996: 34). After much reconsideration of the evidence, I have come to agree with Smith. It is true Low claims: “None of them can write their ancient language, and but very few speak it.” But he also notes: “there are some who know a few words of it [Norn]”, and further: “nothing remains but a few names of things and two or three remnants of songs which one old man can repeat, and that but indistinctly” (1879:105). The deciding factor, however, must be the actual material Low collected. Despite repeated enquiry he was only able to obtain a total of thirty words (“These few words are what I could pick up; many others I proposed, but without effect”, 1879:107). As for the *Hildina* ballad, he observes: “A literal translation of the above I could not procure, but the substance is this.” There follows a description of the contents, which does not in all respects agree with the text, insofar as this is understood. On the basis of Low’s comments and in accordance with Nancy Dorian’s three-level gradation of language proficiency in cases of language death (1981:32), Knooihuizen deems Low’s informant, William Henry, “at best a very poor semi-speaker”, but more likely no more than a “rememberer” (2005:106-7). A “rememberer” is one who knows words and phrases but has no real command of the language.

We may of course wonder, if Henry was no better than a rememberer in 1774, how it was so much was still available to be collected when Jakobsen arrived in Shetland in 1893. To this I have no clear answer. Much, I suppose, will have had to do with the importance attached to things Norse among those who perpetuated the snatches of Norn Jakobsen was able to pick up. Here I would simply draw attention to an analogous situation in Cornwall, where pieces of Cornish could be found for over a hundred years after the death of Dorothy Pentreath in 1777 or 1778, reputedly the last native speaker (Beresford Ellis 1974:125-46). Reasons for the perpetuation of Norn after it ceased to be spoken, both in the form of words, phrases and snatches of text and as a substratum in the emerging Scots of Shetland, are considered in two recent articles, Millar (2008) and Knooihuizen (2009). However, these contributions are concerned with the origin of Shetland Scots, which is analysed within the theoretical framework of new-dialect formation. They thus essentially fall outside the scope of the present paper. It would certainly lead too far to discuss their implications here.

9. Conclusion

By way of conclusion we may consider what the study of Norn has so far achieved. I would summarise as follows. First, material has been collected, examined, and published. Second, the changing status of Norse/Norn in the Northern Isles has been charted, as far as the scarcity of data permits. Third, the language has been analysed, its structure clarified (again within the limits set by the data), and its relationship with other forms of Scandinavian reasonably clearly established. Fourth, the interaction of Norse/Norn with other languages, first and foremost Pictish and Scots, has been considered. Fifth, the time and manner of Norn's demise have been extensively discussed, and views have changed as understanding of Orkney and Shetland history and knowledge of language shift and language death have increased. Sixth,

terminological vagueness has slowly given way to greater precision, which both reflects and allows greater clarity of thought.

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