

The Scots in Shetland and the English in Scotland as a Construction and as Individuals

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Abstract

The article reconsiders some of the issues presented in the author's doctoral dissertation and reflects on the ways in which the uses of history have created different meanings depending on political changes at national and regional levels in Scottish and wider British contexts. For example, the meaning of 'the Scots in Shetland' has changed in recent decades as a result of changes in political and economic circumstances. The English in Scotland have often been omitted from historiography in Scotland and it is only now, against the background of growing nationalism, that the case has been reconsidered. This has raised questions regarding the structural invisibility and homogeneity of such groups. The article shows the complexity of making use of nationality as a criterion to explain ethno-cultural perceptions in British contexts and suggests an emphasis on distinctions between individual experiences and constructed images of national and regional identities.

In Shetland we have perhaps traditionally viewed ourselves as being not quite Scottish. (Did our more distant ancestors feel the same about Norway?) Ironically, it could be argued that we are Scotland in a kind of microcosm. Like the bigger version, over the centuries, our islands have become home to a wide and varied selection of peoples, a true melting pot. The last 20 years of oil-driven immigration are but the latest chapter in a long running saga. And in many Shetland communities it is people who started life in England who are now seeking to make this their home. ('Da Wadder Eye' 1998, 27)

The above statement of a local commentator in Shetland remarks that although Shetlanders have traditionally viewed themselves as 'not quite Scottish', it could be argued that Shetland is 'Scotland in a kind of microcosm'. Further in the article the author comments on the relation between England and Scotland by remarking that 'Scotland must forget England as an adversary' and that the best advice is to 'treat people as individuals and value them for their qualities'. The present article is partly based on my doctoral dissertation *Ambivalent Self-Understanding? Change, language and boundaries in the Shetland Islands (1970–present)*. In my doctoral dissertation I examined nationalism and regional consciousness in Shetland with a main focus on the uses of history and language as creators of

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boundaries of difference and belonging in relation to mainland Scotland. Regional consciousness (or regional identity), as opposed to region's identity, was defined as referring to the ways in which the inhabitants of a region experience the history of the region, its specific characteristics and relations to all other areas of society (see e.g. Paasi 1996). Region's identity, on the other hand, is defined as referring to the historical construction of a region. Furthermore, individual's identification is dependent on situation and context. How one sees oneself and is seen by others is a process which interacts with the way in which regional and national identities are constructed and understood.

Another question which should be taken into consideration when examining the above groups from the perspective of nationalism is that nineteenth-century nationalism in most European countries was different from the nationalist discourses in British contexts. Graeme Morton (Morton 1999, 9) has argued, through the concept of unionist nationalism, that in nineteenth-century Scotland civil society replaced the absence of parliamentary and governmental independence. In history writing Scottish nationalism was seen as weak or non-existent because of the equation of nations and nation-states. In other words, Scotland the nation had not become Scotland the nation-state and, although there was debate around a Scottish Parliament in the 1880s and 1890s, the prevailing context was British and imperial.

Nineteenth-century unionist nationalism and the role of the British Empire have shaped the relationship between England and Scotland in a way which has been increasingly reassessed since the 1970s. During the last four decades both the relation between England and Scotland, and between regions within Scotland, have been affected by the discovery and impact of North Sea oil, the development of oil industries in the region and the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament. Apart from questions such as the relationship between England and Scotland, and between mainland Britain and the Northern Isles, also various ways of 'being English' and 'being Scottish' have been constructed and mobilised by different political and social forces. As put by David McCrone, 'Scotland' is not simply what you want it to mean, and the same applies to regions as Shetland, for example. There is a complex interaction between social processes and cultural meanings (McCrone 2001, 3).

The present article considers some of the ways in which historians and sociologists (including also sociologists of language) have contributed to the cultural construction of difference in Scottish contexts. The first three sections discuss the changing meaning of 'the Scots in Shetland' as connected to socio-political change and the reassessment of language history. As the question of 'the English in Scotland' has been also recently reconsidered and includes regions such as Shetland, its inclusion in the fourth section highlights the complexity of defining such groups. The subject is much wider than can be presented in one article. For

that reason, I have focused here on the main issues which could also be a subject for further investigation and discussion.

The changing meaning of ‘the Scots in Shetland’

Shetland’s insularity and geographical remoteness have influenced both the ways in which Shetlanders have viewed themselves and have been viewed by others. At present, Shetland is part of Scotland and the United Kingdom. During the medieval period, however, the isles were governed by Norway although they were also closely connected to the Scottish kingdom (Øien 2005, 80). In 1469 Shetland was pledged by King Christian I of Denmark and Norway to King James III of Scotland as part of a wedding dowry and the islands were never redeemed. Norwegian interest in the Northern Isles gradually weakened and during the Scottish rule contacts with Scandinavia diminished whereas those with mainland Scotland grew in importance. Since the fifteenth century Shetland was incorporated in the Scottish kingdom and joined the political entity of Great Britain in 1707 together with the rest of Scotland.

The cultural characteristics of the Shetlanders as a somewhat separate group of people developed during the nineteenth century but this took place within both Scottish and wider British contexts. The origins of images and perceptions of distinctiveness can be found in the emergence of the Udal League, created by London-based Orcadian Alfred W. Johnson (see e.g. Seibert 2008, 128). The term ‘Udal’ refers to Udal Law, the Norse legal system. Central to the philosophy of the cultural movement was the idealisation of Norse legal and governmental structures and the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Norse. Connected from the very beginning to issues such as land ownership, its ideology entailed both class issues and ethnic overtones. Ethnicity was a central element of differentiation from the landowners, most of whom were Scots (see e.g. Renwanz 1980, 334). Resentment of landlordism was combined with idealisation of ‘the old times’—Orkney’s and, respectively, Shetland’s Norse past—and led to increasing search for cultural roots.

The spread of ideas had become wider in the second half of the nineteenth century and the writings of Shetland intellectuals received extensive coverage in the press: they were both written by Shetlanders and intended for Shetland audiences. Shetland’s first newspaper, *Shetland Journal*, was produced in London in 1862, and this was followed by the *Shetland Times*, which took a strong position on the need for Land Reform. The year of the Crofter Holdings Act, 1886, saw the publication of another weekly paper, the *Shetland News*. The fascination with the Norse was racially-based romanticism, without serious impact on political life (see e.g. Brown 1998, 58). Its ideas were nevertheless intertwined with a tendency to ignore or reject the Scottish contribution to Shetland society (e.g. Cohen 1983, 491). The end of the nineteenth century was a period of social and economic

change as well as of general atmosphere of freedom from earlier practices. In 1889 the Local Government (Scotland) Act established Zetland County Council as representative body to be elected by the Shetland population itself. Apart from the cultural construction of Shetland as Norse, from the 1880s new streets and housing estates in Lerwick were given Norse names.

Apart from the end of the nineteenth century when distinctiveness was connected to ideas of racial and ethnic separation, the emphasis on Shetland culture was above all cultural, but Shetland intellectuals continued to perceive Shetland as a culturally distinct entity. In the 1970s, a new economic and political situation in the isles stimulated the use of Norse history and historical links with Norway to a greater extent than ever before. Already in the 1960s Shetland's economic situation looked relatively bright (Donald 1983, 203); yet the discovery of oil in the 1970s was followed by even greater prosperity and the isles were thriving in comparison to most of their twentieth century history. The Zetland County Council Act was passed by parliament in 1974, handing over to the local council full control over all developments around the isles and enabling the development of considerable oil funds over the following years.

In the 1960s Shetland was considering examples of island communities which had been successful in receiving autonomous status. The rise of perceptions of difference from mainland Scotland became part of the official rhetoric in the isles in the 1970s. A new question was raised: if Scotland does not need England, does Shetland need Scotland? (Editorial 1976, 5). When Shetland decided to organise herself by obtaining special powers from Westminster, during meetings in England it was assumed that Shetland wanted to become part of England, that Shetlanders were laying claim to the whole oil wealth and that the inhabitants of the isles were Scandinavians with 'no cultural links with Scotland at all' (Mitchison 1980, 418). Shetlanders came to define themselves increasingly in contrast to the Scots. Scots living in Shetland had, in turn, become more inflexible, questioning Shetlanders' claim to uniqueness, saying that Shetlanders had inherited a great deal of Scottish culture. At the beginning of the oil era arriving in Shetland from the mainland and making Shetland one's new home meant realising and accepting the importance of difference to local people:

Like a lot of south folk coming to Shetland, I didn't realise I was coming abroad—that I'd suddenly become a foreigner. I thought Shetland was just another corner of Scotland... So what was different then? The dialect, of course. That took me a while to work out. Then there was the history, and historical links. The affinities, or so I was told by many people, were eastwards, with Norway. The defining moments were Norse-linked: the arrival of the Vikings, the pledging of Shetland. Glencoe and Culloden, those two Scottish moments, were irrelevant here. And I was disconcerted to find the Scots were regarded as

the traditional villains of the piece, the way the Scots traditionally regard the English (Taylor 2007, 27).

The above comment shows the extent to which constructed images of Scotland influenced inhabitants' perceptions of the differences between (mainland) Scotland and the isles. Whereas England had been constructed as opposite to Scotland regardless regional differences within Britain as whole, Shetland's historical links with Norway had been used to strengthen perceptions of Shetland as different from other Scottish regions (e.g. the Highlands) and Scotland as a whole. Moreover, it is significant that in the perceptions of this individual it was moving from mainland Scotland to the isles (in other words, technically taken, not only within the borders of the nation-state but also within the borders of Scotland) made her see herself as a foreigner.

More recently, however, with the change of Shetland communities, the need for inclusion of the new Shetlanders has become an important characteristic of official discourses and civil society. As commented by the local commentator at the beginning of this article, although Shetlanders have traditionally viewed themselves as 'not quite Scottish', it could be argued that Shetland is 'Scotland in a kind of microcosm' ('Da Wadder Eye' 1998, 27). In broad terms, whereas 'the Scots in Shetland' would have been incomers from lowland Scotland at the beginning of the oil era, it is now more common for Shetlanders to be seen or see themselves as Scottish as well. In 1971 approximately 87% of islanders had been born locally, while 8% had been born in mainland Scotland and 2% in England. In 2001, an estimated 25–30% of the people living in the Northern Isles were newcomers, about half of them from England (estimate based on Scottish Census figures for 2001, Nihtinen 2011, 107).

From constructing dialect as 'mainly Norn' to mainly Scots

The Scots settlers who came to Orkney and Shetland were from all walks of life and from all the airts of Scotland. They brought with them divergencies in pronunciation and in vocabulary which were assimilated into the Scots dialect used as *lingua franca* in Orkney and Shetland and which would have cross fertilised with the extant Norn substrate. Therefore the Scots itself was under siege from the indigenous dialects and later on from the Standard English taught in schools and the modern usage of transatlantic English by the younger generation. So the indigenous dialects were not completely subsumed by an all-conquering dominant language variant—because there wasn't one extant. (Hedde 2010, 52)

The above view of Orkney-based academic Donna Hedde describes the relationship between Shetland dialect and Scots in terms of language varieties which were not completely subsumed by a dominant language because of the

absence of a single dominant language variant. The contemporary Shetland dialect is a dialect of Scots, distinguished by its Scandinavian elements: some scholars have described it as ‘a conservative variety of Lowland Scots with a substantial Scandinavian substratum’ (e.g. van Leyden 2004); others have pointed out that the dialect contains ‘a small Scandinavian element, and one that is steadily diminishing’ (Barnes 2010, 27).

Nevertheless, because of the importance of Norse symbol-myth elements for region’s identity as a construction it has been common to emphasise the significance of Norse elements in the modern Shetland dialect. In reality, there is a continuum of unfixated varieties. The ways in which these are presented and described interact both with historical facts (it was Scotland that Shetland became part of, after its governing by Norway) and the present recognition of Scots as a minority language (within the framework of recognition of minority and lesser used languages and UK’s ratification of the document in 2001). Even within Shetland there are dialectal differences and the Scottish and British contexts multiply perceptions of regional and social differences further.

Among the most recent academic accounts of the story of Norn (as the language of the Norse inhabitants in Shetland during Shetland’s Norse period) are those of Barnes, Millar and Knooihuizen. The accounts are equally interesting as a source of information about historical processes and as an insight into the ways in which these are constructed. Records of later Norn suggest close connection both with the dialects of western and south-western Norway and the Faeroes and Iceland (Barnes 1998, 13–16; Millar 2007, 166). Norn declined as a result of the transfer of rule to, and growing influence from, mainland Scotland. Evidence suggest that Scots was used in writing consistently from c. 1520 onwards (Knooihuizen 2005, 108). Speaking Scots and later English was connected to wider societal changes in the isles and became desirable and associated with advancement. By the eighteenth century Norn was beginning to lose ground and at the end of the century only poems or fragments of Norn existed. Fragments of Norn were recorded in 1774 by the Rev. Georg Low, a minister from Orkney, and by the Faroese scholar Jakob Jakobsen during his fieldwork in Shetland in the 1890s. At that time the spoken language was Shetland dialect, but it was still possible to witness the ‘half-life’ of Norn in the form of half-understood but well-remembered phrases (Millar 2007, 177).

In recent decades the Danish linguist Laurits Rendboe has developed the view that language shift from Norn to Scots was a consequence of a rather violent takeover by Scots speakers and that there were speakers of Norn in the late seventeenth and even eighteenth century who were hiding their language from landlords and ministers. This view has been dismissed in both scholarly works and history writing in Shetland in the 1990s as an example of myth-building. There has been no evidence to suggest any kind of conscious imposition of Scots. Norn is

still seen to exist, among others, in the linguistic landscape of the Northern Isles: the vast majority of place names are of Norse origin: e.g. Kirkwall (Kirkjuvágr ‘kirk on the bay’) and Lerwick (Leirvík ‘mud bay’). In addition to the general acceptance of the view that the modern dialects spoken in the Northern Isles are essentially Scots, Norn has been sometimes considered to still have an important political and cultural role for the modern dialects of Orkney and Shetland. By placing a particular emphasis on Norn, Heddle is in favour of regarding the issue of language a political matter for the Northern Isles (Heddle 2010, 48-52).

Construction and rejection of the idea of language status

Shetlanders, insofar as they may now admit to being Scots, tend to do so reluctantly rather than enthusiastically. In other words, they have been deprived of their traditional concept of their own identity without a concept of Scots identity to fall back on. The perception of Shetlandic in Shetland reflects this ambivalent attitude to identity. (Tait 2008)

Another example demonstrating changes in constructed images and perceptions concerns the emergence of a language status debate in the isles and its firm rejection by the majority of writers and cultural figures. The view quoted above is connected to arguments in favour of expansion and official use of Shetland dialect (or Shetlandic)—an opinion, which has not received wider popularity in Shetland. This viewpoint can be summed up as follows. Prior to recent economic changes Shetlanders spoke Shaetlan (a local term denoting Shetland dialect) and the name itself was associated with the place (Tait 2004, 10). The name had been an unselfconscious recognition of Shetlanders seeing themselves as a separate group. Nevertheless, in recent years, most Shetlanders had abandoned this concept. Furthermore, Tait has compared the case of Shetland to other cases in Europe, thereby arguing that what is considered progressive language policy elsewhere is defined in Scottish contexts as ‘narrow activism’ (Tait 2004, 32).

The majority of Shetland intellectuals and supporters of Shetland dialect as a dialect have nevertheless emphasised the existence of a separate literary-cultural tradition and stressed that dialect change should be seen in terms of evolution rather than decline. The development of Shetland dialect for official purposes as a language has been condemned by local historian and archivist Brian Smith as an example of useless resurrectionism, which is more likely to discourage rather than encourage dialect use (Smith 2004, 15). In an article on the development of literature in Shetland, by contrasting the Shetland dialect with Faroese, Smith elaborated that Shetland dialect is by definition a dialect, not a language. This is a social definition, but, in Smith’s view a well-established one:

Shetlanders don't write, as Faroese writers have done, whole newspapers, liturgies, botanical texts or bank's articles of incorporation in dialect. The reason is simple: Shetland dialect is by definition (a social definition, but a formidably well-established one) a dialect, not a language. It does not have, and in my opinion never will have, sufficient status to be used in every walk of life and for every type of communication (Smith 1991, 18).

The above views of Brian Smith ally with the reconsideration of language history in the isles by academics and local authors. These show that reconsideration of history does not concern language per se or real or perceived linguistic differences but highlights the somewhat changing concept of Shetland history. As dialects become languages only when there is a political need for it, rejecting the idea of a language status shows the similarity of language discourses in the isles and mainland.

The emergence of a dialect (not language) movement in 2004 has been part of broader transformation of images, issues of modernisation and social inclusion. Explicit emphasis in reconsidering the role of dialect has been put on its use in dialect literature, place names, marketing and tourism (see Henderson 2005). Within literary production, it has been argued that the more serious written work is produced, the more acceptable the language variety becomes as a literary medium (Smith 2008, 27). Extensive examination of the views produced by cultural figures in, or from, Shetland shows that the majority opinion has been supportive of the continuation of tradition and opposition to cultural homogenisation. Whereas the idea of the use of dialect in literature is widely supported and based on a relatively long tradition since the early nineteenth century, the thought of a language status has been firmly opposed (see e.g. Cluness 2004, 9, quoted in Nihtinen 2011, 243).

The English in Scotland as a construction and as individuals

Another example of the same set of issues arising in examination of turn-of-the-century Shetland is the reassessment of the role of English-born migrants in Scotland as a whole. The factors that have affected Englishness and 'being English' in recent times are, similarly to the case of Scotland, the demise of the British Empire, the emergence of the European Community, the impact of a globalised economy and the rise of nationalism and devolution. It is not only that Scottish nationalism has had an influence on both English identity and regional identities within Scotland, however. The seeking of a devolved national assembly in London and regional assemblies have similar implications for Scotland. A study by Murray Watson, published in 2003, elaborates an interesting paradox: while the relationship between England and Scotland has been one of the dominant themes in Scottish, English and British history, the English migrants in Scotland have been often ignored in historical research, in contrast to the wide attention given to other migrant groups.

For example, the historians of Scotland have tended to include chapters or remarks on the New Scots (e.g. Devine 1999; 2006) whereas the English have been, in Watson's words, the invisible diaspora—one conclusion to which he arrives is that the English are invisible because of their structural invisibility and a high level of integration. Their omission from historiography has been a rule rather than exception. Census data suggested that English-born migrants came from all over England throughout the second half of the twentieth century and formed the largest migrant group. At the level of individual experiences of being English in Scotland, also in this case language has played a role, as expressed, for example, by an English migrant to the Borders:

I felt odd simply because I felt English. I just felt that my voice was embarrassingly English and to have to speak up and ask for something in a shop, felt quite awkward. I felt I was wanting to actually say to people, 'Look I live here. I am not a tourist'. (Isobel Murray, quoted in Watson 2003, 93)

The above description is interesting in two ways: first of all, it interacts with perceptions of differences between regional varieties within countries which are part of the same nation-state; second, it could be taken as significant that this individual perception is reflected on in 2003, which, in theory at least, could interact with strengthening perceptions of differences after Scottish devolution.

By examining the views of well-known historians such as T. C. Smout, Tom Devine, Rosalind Mitchison and Christopher Harvie, to mention just a few, Watson shows that the topic of English migration has been almost completely ignored in historiography. When English migration was discussed by historians, this had been, in his view, part of a superficial debate. More attention to the English in Scotland had been paid by sociologists and scholars from other disciplines rather than history, who have tended to use the concept of nationality to make sense of migration within Britain. It can be argued that in subjects concerning migration, historians have been more cautious probably because of the awareness of historical diversity of regions, language varieties and peoples. Another reason might be that the purposes of historical examination and analysis differ from these of disciplines which attempt to research societal change through Census data and other statistical methodology.

Nevertheless, the question of the use of national rather than, for example, regional categorisation has been debated in sociology as well. For example, Scottish sociologist David McCrone has noted that 'English' is undoubtedly a shorthand for some complex and contradictory terms. He has also asked the question of why nationality had been used to make sense of social change instead of 'townspeople/rural dwellers, lowlanders/highlanders or working class/middle class?' The answer lies, in his views, in the fact that whereas these social categories are probably included in the Scottish/English divide, they are deemed of less significance. One

discourse is chosen over all the other possible explanations, although the others are also possible. As social scientists' findings about English-born migrants in Scotland were largely rural-based and not representative of an essentially urban-based migration, the terms 'English' and 'Scottish' did not reflect their complexity and contradictory nature (Watson 2003, 21). In his study, the group of migrants proved to be a heterogeneous group, differing in many respects from Scotland's other migrant communities. The vast majority of the English merged into Scottish society. Contributing to their invisibility was the extent to which a significant proportion perceived themselves as adopting a sense of Scottish national identity, especially in terms of their appreciation of the Scottish sense of civil society.

What makes the general picture more complicated, however, is that sometimes matters of administrative character (e.g. Shetland being part of Scotland) leads to inclusion in the Scottish/English divide of areas such as Shetland. At the level of individuals, a number of studies has found that in economic and social terms English and Scottish incomers were similar, with incomers from the Central Belt of Scotland often incorrectly designated 'English' by other rural residents (e.g. Dickson 1994, 112–34; Watson 2003, 19). This is another example of an attempt to categorise; it can be debated what are the criteria for defining the above groups and individuals on the basis of nationality in cases where social and regional dimensions are equally important. Moreover, individuals differ in terms of their life histories.

Conclusions

During the last four decades both the relation between England and Scotland, and between regions within Scotland, have been affected by the discovery and impact of North Sea oil, the development of oil industries in the region and the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The present article reflected on some of the ways in which historians and sociologists (including also sociologists of language) have contributed to the construction of cultural difference in the cases of the Scots in Shetland and the English in Scotland. The cultural attributes of Shetlanders as a separate group of people developed during the age of nineteenth century nationalism within Scottish and British contexts. In the process of societal change the differentiation from mainland Scotland became a main element of Shetlanders' self-understanding. Furthermore, the reluctance to be known as Scottish was transmitted selectively through images of it as recollected in social memory and folklore. Shetland, together with Orkney, remained until 1468–9 under Norwegian rule. Growing attention to Norse history and the history of Norn was paid since the late nineteenth century; nevertheless, it was not until the 1970s that this interest appeared to be connected to political aims.

The desire for autonomy was paralleled by other economic and social consequences of the emergence of oil industries and funds in the isles. These included, among other things, increasing numbers of newcomers from the mainland, growth in prosperity and services and more funding for cultural promotion. Within this new socio-political situation Shetland was constructed by activist groups and local authorities as different from (mainland) Scotland. Towards the turn of the century the oil prizes had moderated, and boundaries between locals and newcomers had started to ease. Shetland was increasingly constructed as a region within Scotland also as a consequence of the re-establishment of the Scottish parliament. It can be argued that whereas at the beginning of the oil era 'the Scots in Shetland' referred to incomers from mainland Scotland, at the beginning of the new century 'the Scots in Shetland' could refer to Shetlanders as a whole. This was also noticeable, as demonstrated in the present article, in the reconsideration of language history and the construction of Shetland dialect as Scots rather than a separate language.

The question of 'being English in Scotland', also recently reconsidered and including regions such as Shetland, was used in the article to highlight the complexity of defining such groups. Not only the meanings given to the past change with time but also the relationship between regional and national identities as constructions and the life histories of the inhabitants of geographical spaces is complex and dynamic. Migration from both Scotland and England has led to reassessment of the role played by Scots in Shetland and has shed light on the diversity of migration from mainland Scotland. Furthermore, examination of English-born migration to Scotland has evoked questions such as what were the reasons for their absence in historical works. One of the main questions the article raised was the suitability of defining groups such as the Scots in Shetland or the English in Scotland: the fact that nationality is often used to define different individuals and experiences shows the significance still given to nations and nation-states in comparison to regions and to other categories of personal identification. Further examination of individual case studies could contribute to a better understanding of the complex processes of interaction between the construction of national and regional identities in British contexts and the relations between individuals and society.

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