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Shetland's coastal geographies and amphibious writing

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Eels, Words and Water: Shetland's Coastal Geographies and Amphibious Writing.

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The Shetland Islands lie 170 km off the North East coast of Scotland—the most northerly part of the United Kingdom. No part of the Shetland archipelago is more than 5 km away from the ocean. Its coastlines are sculpted by waves into inlets known as *voes*, sea caves, and *geos* (gulleys cut into cliffs by waves) that bring the ocean into the landmass. For centuries the sea was the principal medium for transporting people and goods, and Shetland had almost no made roads until the 1840s (O'Dell 1939, 182). The peaty soil holds reserves of water, and the islands' economy, culture and literature have been bound up for generations in a complex set of relations between land and sea, or earth and water. Travel to Shetland was difficult in the early nineteenth century, and, even if visitors succeeded in getting there, they complained about the problem of getting around such an apparently water-logged place: “The hills here are excessively wet and swampy, and to travel but a few miles over them becomes very fatiguing. We had frequently to fetch circuits around stagnant pools or deceitful marshes” (Neill 1805, 85). The fierce currents around the islands have shaped and continue to shape the coastlines into archipelagic patterns that render the northern limits of the nation porous and fragmented. As nineteenth-century Britain was defining itself as a singular island with power over its imperial island subjects, the example of Shetland—which looked north to Scandinavia as much as south to Britain—challenges the national geographic imaginary. To most of the rest of nineteenth-century Britain, Shetland was a distant, wet, isolated and unproductive outpost. But looked at internally, the islands took their identity—socially and culturally—from their archipelagic position. A closer study of the literature produced there in the nineteenth century reveals how Shetlanders understood and expressed the condition of their coastal world.

To tell the story of nineteenth-century Shetland is to trace its terraqueous condition, both in the ways that it was seen to be a problem, and how it was explored, acknowledged and celebrated in the literature of the islands. My account of the relation of Shetland writers to their coastal environment will be broadly chronological, but will draw on three related modes intertwined throughout my argument. First is the role of literature as social critique—the ways in which writers responded to the meeting of land and sea in agriculture, land-ownership, trade and politics, and their effects on the people of Shetland. Secondly, I will consider the status of literature. The islands' small population, as well as the difficulty of arranging for publication, restricted opportunities for local writing in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the arrival of the printing press in the islands in the 1860s offers a fascinating test case for the role of publishing in the development of a local literature. Finally, I will think about language itself and explore how Shetland authors have reflected their terraqueous world in the discourse of poetry—how landscape is evoked and discussed in literature, and how poetic language can become fluid in its movement between the literal and the figurative, the descriptive and the performative. In a recent formulation of “archipelagic thinking,” Jonathan Pugh (2013, 10) writes that “island movements are generative and inter-connective spaces of metamorphosis, of material practices, culture and politics.” It is this kind of fluidity, not only of geography but also of the material, the linguistic and the cultural, that characterizes Shetland's writing.

The Shetland Islands take their place in the emergence of coastal history as an approach to the meeting of human communities and the sea in ways that reflect their mutual impact. A recent collection of essays on the idea of *New Coastal History* has brought together a complex range of approaches that demonstrates the need to modify a growing body of work on oceanic history with a recognition of the specific place of coasts. Its editor asks: “How have communities engaged with the more introspective coastal environments carved out and encouraged by geological, glacial, fluvial, tidal and other physical factors?” (Worthington

2017, 7). This “introspective” quality of coasts, the intimate interaction of water and land, and exchange between sea and shore, gives them a reflective character that is helpful for tracing not only the human presence in the non-human world, but also the way literature can respond to such a meeting point. Through Shetland literature we can understand how the mobile relation between the archipelago’s coasts and the humans and animals that lived there was imagined in the nineteenth century.

Although Scotland in general is a very useful starting point for considering coastal histories, there are some specific features of the Shetland Islands that differ from those of other Scottish islands. No archipelago is perfectly fractal—there will always be local differences and idiosyncrasies. The geographical position of Shetland gives it an economic and geographic profile unlike that of Scotland’s Highlands and Western Islands. Shetland has no great glens in which populations could be concentrated, as they were in the west of Scotland, and the archipelago’s location in the North Sea integrated Shetlanders into the North Atlantic fishing and whaling communities that fostered trading relations with Northern European fleets. The islands’ nineteenth-century economy was coastal in another important way: it crossed the border of land and sea as land tenancies depended on the Shetlanders’ ability both to farm and to fish. One of the earliest commentaries on this dual system came from Adam Smith, who pointed to the unusual circumstances in which tenant farmers paid rent to their landlords in the form of fish:

The sea in the neighbourhood of the islands of Shetland is more than commonly abundant in fish, which makes a great part of the subsistence of their inhabitants. But in order to profit by the produce of the water, they must have a habitation upon the neighbouring land. The rent of the landlord is in proportion, not to what the farmer can make by the land, but to what he can make both by the land and by the water. It is partly paid in sea-fish; and one of the very few instances in which rent makes a part of the price of that commodity is to be found in that country. (A. Smith 1999, 248)

Smith's observation came to be repeated, and the hybrid economy was typically seen as an impediment to the development of Shetland's material progress. In 1814, Walter Scott visited the islands while accompanying the lighthouse engineer Robert Stevenson on his inspection tour of the lighthouses of Scotland and the north of Ireland. Scott worried about a perceived lack of prosperity in the islands, which he ascribes to the same hybrid economy earlier perceived by Smith. If only farmers would farm, and fishers would fish, Scott thought, food could be produced on a larger scale and the economic condition of the islanders would improve:

The improvement of the arable land ... would soon set them beyond the terrors of famine with which the islanders are at present occasionally visited; and, combined with fisheries, carried on not by farmers, but by real fishers, would amply supply the inhabitants, without diminishing the export of dried fish. This separation of trades will in time take place, and then the prosperous days of Zetland will begin. (Scott 1837, 154)

Scott sees the islands through the nineteenth-century lens of "improvement" that required the separation of earth and water to create a more fertile, manageable soil—a vision that was not to come to fruition.¹ Some small-scale drainage schemes were enacted from the 1830s (Fenton 1997, 106-7) but the cost made larger systems impractical. Until the Crofters Act of 1886, which gave small farmers secure tenancy, there was no incentive for tenants to drain the land they worked beyond the basic open ditch system (Coull 2003, 87). For the greater part of the nineteenth century, life on Shetland remained, to borrow a term from Scott, "amphibious" (153).

The amphibious quality of Shetland's economy and social practices gave the archipelago a specific history that calls for careful and specific delineation. The history of the attempts of Scottish landowners to improve their land and its economic yield is generally told as a story about the Highlands and Western Islands. To think about nineteenth-century Shetland

we will need to make some distinctions, both historically and geographically. The more familiar narrative is of the Highland clearances, a demographic process that started long before its arrival in the Northern Islands. From the 1750s, Scottish Highlanders were evicted from their crofts in inland glens and forced to the coast, where, without fishing skills, they either starved or emigrated. The Shetland clearances are much less well understood as a cultural phenomenon, in part because they do not easily fit the narrative of workers of the land unwillingly becoming workers of the sea, summed up here by Tom Devine (2018, 227): “Those who had worked the land and grazed cattle for a living could not suddenly become expert fishermen.” In Shetland, the sea was already more profitable than the land, and its people had long been expert fishermen. It was from this skill that Shetland landowners sought to profit, giving rise to the economic conditions noted by Adam Smith and Walter Scott. “Fishing tenures,” dating from the seventeenth century, were a quasi-feudal arrangement whereby tenants paid their rents in fish. In return, they received housing and land (most of it very poor quality in agricultural terms) and they were often compelled to pay for shares in the boats and fishing equipment. Because fishing in the deep seas around Shetland (the *haaf*) was only possible in the summer months, tenants were obliged to balance their fishing/farming activities as best as they could. The sea itself offered the only real alternative—men could enlist in the merchant navy or join the arctic whaling industry, which, after the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, offered work for skilled sailors. By the 1870s Greenland whaling was an important employer of Shetland men, despite landowners’ attempts to fine their tenants for joining whaling vessels because it depleted their own profits (Fenton 1997, 550-510; H. Smith 1984, 158).

The fishing tenancies, somewhat paradoxically, bound Shetlanders to the land they lived on. To a certain extent, the dual system protected them from the forced evictions seen in Highland Scotland, of which there were comparatively few in Shetland in the early years of the

nineteenth century. Yet the land itself was becoming increasingly unprofitable as landowners subdivided it to encourage more families and more fishermen and, inevitably, the question arose of the improvement of farm land at the expense of tenant farmers. Shetland clearances were on a smaller scale than those in the Highlands, but they did occur in two significant waves: the first in the 1820s, which received little comment at the time, and the second in the 1860s and 1870s, when land was enclosed for sheep farming and new breeds of sheep were introduced (B. Smith 2000, 45-57).

The history of Shetland literature is imbricated in this history of land use. Very little literature was published by Shetland authors in the first half of the nineteenth century. Communications with the main publishing centers of Edinburgh and London were difficult and—as we will see—there was no local press until the 1860s. But the small scale of early-nineteenth-century Shetland literature is itself instructive for tracing the preoccupations of its authors. The earliest printed examples are by two women: Margaret Chalmers, a poet, and Dorothea Primrose Campbell, whose volume of poetry was followed in 1821 by the first Shetland novel, *Harley Radington*.² Both these writers, although in different modes, are interested in the coastal, archipelagic identity of their home, in a way that prefigures the editors of a recent collection of essays on Atlantic coastal identities: “the exploration of places locally grounded but at the same time involved in a network of cultural relationships, the intricate coastlines becoming interfaces of social and cultural exchange, becoming sites of replotting and reconfiguration” (Allen, Groom, and Smith 2018, 12).

Margaret Chalmers’s poetry is highly localized, but it also embraces Shetland’s position in a wider North Atlantic sphere. Her work reminds us of more recent archipelagic theories of the limits of nationalism but also, and more specifically, that the “four nations” theory that dominates archipelagic thinking in British literary history, has tended to be cut off Britain’s northern archipelagos at the limits of its Celtic islands on the West. The Shetland islands had

been a part of Norway until 1472, and throughout their history they retained cultural, social and economic ties with the Baltic states. Chalmers's poems are highly patriotic in an explicit move to establish Shetland as part of Britain. But, at the same time, they break down models of center and periphery in ways that draw on the islands' archipelagic topography. Chalmers's geographical imagination situates Shetland within a Northern Atlantic spatiality that is defined by coastal positions and mountain views. In "The Rose of the Rock" she looks out from the top of a hill onto a circular panorama linking Norway, Shetland (here including the Scandinavian names for Shetland's hills), the Faroe Islands, and Iceland:

Eastward, beyond where keenest sight can pierce,
The German Ocean rolls his frequent wave
To Berga's coast remote. Far in the north,
Rise Vaalifield's high ridge and Saxaford;
In yonder space, that points to Faro's Isles
And Iceland's lasting snows, towers Rona's Hill. (Chalmers 1813, 21-2)

This expansive Atlantic geography is woven into social and economic ties. Chalmers's two-part poem "The Sufferings of Faro" describes the provisioning in Lerwick, Shetland's capital, of a boat from the famine-struck Faroe Islands (then part of the Kalmar Union of Scandinavian states). Other poems detail economic exchanges between Shetlanders and Northern Europeans. The Shetland fishing industry grew rapidly after techniques for curing fish were passed on from Germany's Baltic fleets (Coull 2003, 75) and vessels from other Northern European nations regularly put into Lerwick, the capital and main port of Shetland, to trade with local people. As Lynn Abrams (2005, 57) has meticulously examined, visitors to Shetland were struck by the presence of women workers, particularly outside the home, and the lack of specifically gendered forms of labor. Even the household activity of knitting, commonly (though not exclusively) female, allowed women to enter the public economy. Abrams's account of the long-lived knitting industry in Shetland shows us how nineteenth-

century women participated in a “vast and complicated web of economic and cultural transactions” (100).

Chalmers’s poetry expresses a world that crosses earth and water economically, aesthetically, and phenomenologically. The long poem “Johnsmas” describes the visits of European fishing fleets—principally Dutch, but also Danish and Prussian—to Lerwick, and the sale of knitted goods to the sailors in what Chalmers calls the “circulating benefit” of an economy that links female workers to sailors, and Shetland to a maritime economy. The sea generates wealth that is fed into the land-based labor of Shetland women as the sailors buy their woollen goods:

Now busy traffic animates the scene,
Quickly the new imported cash wheels round;
From the Dutch purse it slowly drawn is given
In lieu of articles spun from the fleece[.] (Chalmers 1813, 54)

Not only Chalmers’s social vision, but also her aesthetic sense of her world explores the conjunction of earth and water in an amphibious poetic language. We are often made aware in her poetry that we find ourselves in an archipelago. “The Rose of the Rock” describes a day’s outing from Lerwick, on Shetland’s main island, to the smaller island of Noss via the island of Bressay. A journey through Shetland means crossing both land and water, and the party “twice must cross the sea, / And o’er two islands must retrace our steps” (25). We are given the sense that the islands are capable of endlessly reproducing their archipelagic structure as the sea carves out stacks and islets. Each island can give birth to further islands as, in this instance, the power of the sea “Had, from the parent island, wide disjoin'd/A craggy cliff” (23). The potentially endless generation of islands in the archipelago disrupts any confidence in the distinction between mainland and periphery. It is on this apparently marginal sea stack birthed from the “parent isle” that the speaker discovers the extraordinary rose of the poem’s title, as if each new radiation out from the origin can become of central importance.

Chalmers's Shetland is a place where land and water are omnipresent. Shetland is "Where partial hidden water flows beneath" the visible ground, and her poems are full of the imagery of mirrors in which land and sea reflect each other. The waters around the islands form a "wat'ry mirror" or a "liquid mirror" in which things and events are imaged (64, 84). She writes about a display of fireworks in Lerwick harbor, to celebrate the Jubilee of George III in 1805, as a contest between Cynthia, goddess of the moon, and Neptune, god of the sea, with a firework display reflected in the water of the harbor. Elsewhere, land and sea take on each other's forms, and sometimes the sea gives the land a spectral identity. The reflection of the masts of the Dutch fleet in Lerwick are like a "floating forest" that can compensate for Shetland's own lack of trees. The sunset at time of war seems to cast the "flaming altars" of the deities of battle, Mars and Bellona, into the harbor as fiery reflections of the sky:

A partial horrid reign extending round,
From darkening columns of ascending smoke
That 'clips'd the vivid, ruddy evening sky
Mars and Bellona hovering o'er the scene,
Their floating flaming altars view'd with joy. (65)

Shetland, however, has an underlying history of land use that we do not find in Chalmers. Despite her acknowledgement of women's work and the details of trade, Chalmers treats the Shetland landscape with an idealizing pastoralism that glosses over other social realities, particularly the relation of land to labor. For her, the laboring class is expected to take solace in nature and to accept the material poverty of their houses:

Ye who inhabit yonder humble cots,
If Art in sparing measure lend her aid
To grace your dwellings, Nature makes amends,
By pouring beauty lavishly around. (104)

The pastoral scene depicted here lies in the vicinity of the summer home of Arthur Nicolson, a major Shetland landowner who had acquired the island of Fetlar in 1805. Chalmers, whose financial conditions were oppressive following the deaths of her father and brother, leaving her surviving family with considerable debt for which she had to take responsibility, seems to have hoped for patronage from Nicholson. Her unpublished poem, encouraging him not to leave Shetland, celebrates Nicholson's philanthropic zeal for Enlightenment:

And let our Boreal Isles apace gain ground
Nor Lagging in Improvements path be found.
Her cultivating torch bid knowledge light
Scattering the gloom of Intellectual night. (Chalmers 1823)

Arthur Nicolson himself, at the time that Chalmers was preparing her volume of poems for publication, was an irresolute improver. In a letter of 1813, he complains about the lack of a clear way forward for agricultural change on the islands (including the now familiar question of the farming fishermen):

Every writer on the political economy of these islands has a theory of his own for their agricultural improvement. One taking the hint of Smith's theory proposes the separation of the professions of Farming & fishing; a second advises emancipation and long leases; while a third projects the building of dykes & the extraction of weeds. (Nicolson, 1813)

None of these options for improvement seemed attractive to Nicolson—the lack of a more closely located market, the poverty of the soil, and the scarcity of capital among tenants were enough for him to rule out all these potential solutions to Shetland's apparent agricultural backwardness. And this apparent resistance of Shetland's land to the advantages of improvement is caught by the islands' second nineteenth-century writer, Dorothea Campbell, who explores the difficulty of developing Shetland in her only novel, *Harley Radington*, published in London in 1821. Harley, the London-born son of a Shetland woman, is

shipwrecked on the islands and meets his Shetland relatives for the first time. The novel makes full use of Shetland's coastal geography, with dramatic scenes of smuggling, whaling and shipwrecks (Harley survives no fewer than three of the latter). Campbell's novel sets out two opposed improvement schemes. In the first, the virtuous Edenborg family seems to have created a perfect scene of agrarian progress and picturesque beauty on the island of Mora, where land and sea reflect each other harmoniously as the agricultural is bound up in the aesthetic, described here with self-conscious spectatorship:

A cluster of peaceful cots, with their small patches of cultivated ground; on the left lie the meadows and fields, neatly laid out, belonging to the Lodge; behind rises a very lofty hill, and behind this hill you now mark the full moon, first shewing her silver rim then rising in all her splendour; you see the hill, the Lodge, and every object, distinctly reflected on the ocean. (Campbell 1821, I 252-3)

A second island, known locally as "Otters' Island," has been "refined" by its socially-ambitious owner, Mr. Lovegold, and renamed "Groveley Island" (1, 236). Lovegold is a bad improver who abuses his tenants and makes "preposterous alterations in the house and gardens under the name of improvements" (I, 249). But by the end of the novel each one of these projects has fallen away. Harley returns briefly to Shetland to discover that the Edenborgs have died out, Lovegold's projects have failed and Groveley Island has reverted to its natural state as Otters' Island, evoking an animal equally at home on land and sea. The improvement schemes, which would have required the artificial separation of earth and water, have come to nothing.

Both Chalmers and Campbell are distinctive in the way they respond to environment. But they are also part of much wider formal and conceptual movements with their roots in the eighteenth century. Chalmers's poetry is often intensely phenomenological and reflects on the way the natural world presents itself within the consciousness, but it is underpinned by a deistic,

Enlightenment vision of a created universe or a distinct body of “nature.” Chalmers frequently incorporates quotations from Thomas Gray and James Thomson: hers is a poetic world that reveals itself to the eye to instruct about human nature and its place in the landscape. Campbell’s *Harley Radington*, although it is quite a negative example, still follows the National Tale’s model of aestheticizing the landscape in order to assimilate it within a national framework. The possibility of lived social and cultural difference is absorbed into an aesthetic gaze that is assumed to be common to all readers, even when those readers are likely to be interpolated by a metropolitan publishing market. Both Campbell and Chalmers are also rooted in an early nineteenth-century agricultural economy and assume a Shetland where land development is either marginal or futile. We can map this onto the public response (or lack thereof) to changes in land use. Tenants were evicted in the 1820s and land was enclosed, but there was little public commentary and Shetland literature persisted with Arthur Nicolson’s 1813 view that the land was unimprovable, Chalmers’s position that it needed no improvement, or Dorothea Campbell’s fictional representation in which any scheme for improvement was doomed to failure. Nevertheless, clearances and evictions did take place on Shetland, and one of the most sweeping was at the instigation of Arthur Nicolson himself, who, unhappy at the number of men joining the whaling industry instead of fishing for him, evicted around 300 people from the island of Fetlar to make room for new breeds of sheep (B. Smith, 48). By the 1860s, evictions were becoming harder to ignore. The second phase of clearances elicited much more commentary within Shetland, made possible by a hugely significant development in the cultural history of the islands.

The 1860s brought to the Shetland Islands its own printing press. Newspapers for Shetland readers had been published in Edinburgh and London, and an early attempt to set one up in Lerwick—*The Shetland Advertiser*—had lasted fifteen months in 1862-63 (Hulme 2003, 3-4). In 1872 the *Shetland Times* inaugurated an influential print culture in Shetland. The

arrival of the press in Lerwick redistributes cultural authority in ways that reveal an archipelagic structure--one that challenges insular or singular notions of Britain. The new press and newspaper constitute an editorial voice that could both recenter political voices to address local issues and act as a focal point for national news. From the start, the new paper gave a voice to Shetlandic authors and to debates and polemics about land use, and it published letters and editorials on the question of the treatment of tenant farmers. A representative editorial asks if the “tide of emigration” from the islands is a result of “the desire of many Shetland landlords to convert the small farms of the crofters into large sheep walks,” and the editor had been receiving letters from Shetlanders living in England “who are strongly opposed to the movement—we shall hear a good deal about this by-and-by” (*Shetland Times*, May 18, 1774).

As well as offering social and political commentary, the *Shetland Times* had a very significant effect on the development of the islands’ literature. As we know from the work of William Donaldson (1996, 35), the local press in Scotland was central to the development of regional forms of nineteenth-century Scots language: “One of the most striking things about the popular press in Victorian Scotland was its readiness to use the language of the people.” The press came late to Shetland (and is often left out of histories of the newspaper in Scotland), but when it arrived it brought a new medium for writing in Shetlandic and a very significant change in the cultural expression of the islands. From its early issues, the *Shetland Times* and its publishing business printed local stories and poetry, often in dialect. In 1874 Campbell’s *Harley Radington*, with its representations of Shetland speech, was serialized anew in the newspaper. The press published posthumously Basil Anderson’s collection *Broken Lights*, including one of the most influential Shetland poems of the nineteenth century, “Auld Mansie’s Crü.” The poem, in dialect, reclaims the traditional form of sheep farming as it traces the building and eventual return to nature of a crü, a stone enclosure for sheep, that acts as a focal point for the community when they are farming, or when they go out to the deep-sea *haaf*

fishing. By 1897, the *Times* had been joined by the *Shetland News* which published James Inkster's very long-running series *Mansie's Rüd*, which provided in dialect a seamless flow of Shetland life: "tarring boats, tending sheep, planting crops, mending roofs, cutting peats" (M. Smith 2014, 293).

The work on which all these opportunities for social comment, political protest and dialect writing as a legitimate cultural expression condense is the poem "Eels" by James Stout Angus, published in *The Shetland Times* on 22 December 1877. This extraordinary poem thinks about land use not only from a subject position that gauges how land may benefit humans, but also from a place within the land itself—a space in which the processes of earth, water and animals take on forms that cannot always be encompassed by agricultural practice or by the language of nineteenth-century nature poetry. "Eels" is then a test case for my three modes of inquiry into Shetland's nineteenth-century literature, and I will discuss its context in the newspaper, its relevance for the Shetland clearances, and its remarkable use of dialect as a kind of amphibious language.

To understand the force and agency of this poem, we need first to consider the medium in which it appeared. The coming of the printing press to Lerwick, at a time when most other provincial towns had had a newspaper for some time, pinpoints the conjunction of poetry, geography, and politics in a particularly concentrated example. Local newspapers constitute a meeting point that establishes the criteria for cultural capital and identifies the individual act of reading with a sense of communality. The *Shetland Times*, for example, had a mission to regulate public order, with articles admonishing those accused of antisocial behavior, and gave a yearly synopsis of the orderliness (or otherwise) of the Christmas festivities in the islands' towns. Not only social life, but also language and cultural expression are authorized; the Shetland newspapers set consumerist aspirations, and created their own literary market, while at the same time drawing on the forms of cultural expression that preceeded it, in this case the

use of Shetlandic dialect. In these ways, the coming of the newspaper to Shetland both created an outlet for local language and culture and began to regulate that market, giving a new authority to dialect writing by drawing on forms of language that were common to its readers, yet relatively new in print. The introduction of print culture into Shetland organizes a field of social orthodoxy and cultural capital, and at the same time introduces a language new in print to its readers, though familiar to them orally. *The Shetland Times* is, then, a multiple, heterogeneous space, but also a highly concentrated one that brought a range of ideas about science, politics and language into close proximity with each other.

James Stout Angus, poet and linguist, draws together these conditions. Born in 1830, Angus worked both as a housewright and a ship's carpenter. He lived until 1923 and most of his published work—further poems and glossaries of Shetland place names and dialect words—came much later. In fact, there had been very little study of Shetland vocabulary at this point. An *Etymological Glossary of the Shetland & Orkney Dialect*, by Thomas Edmonston, had been published in Edinburgh in 1866 for the Philological Society, and Dorothea Campbell's *Harley Radington* had its own glossary (which included a great many Scots terms as well as some more specifically Shetlandic ones). Angus's "Eels", a poem in dialect, addresses issues more usually discussed in standard English. "Eels" was born from a controversy in the pages of the *Shetland Times* about the spontaneous generation of eels from horsehair, which gave rise to a lively debate and a spate of further letters to the newspaper, most of them in support of the idea, to the consternation of the editor who "had thought such a belief had long ago been relegated to the limbo of exploded superstitions" (*Shetland Times*, February 16, 1878). Angus heads his poem with the hope that it will be read by those interested in "our fine old Norn language," but also that it will be taken as an example of "our modern vernacular dialect."³ "Eels" is thus poised between an antiquarian tradition of recovery, and a new cultural context for a living, modern language.⁴ Angus takes full advantage of this fulcrum.

He positions himself between a modern, urbane response to a question about biology in general and its specific relevance to the linguistic traditions and environmental conditions of Shetland.

As a poem published in the new newspaper, “Eels” is highly conscious of its status as literature. The *Times* was advertising itself as a printer with access to cultural capital. Christopher Sandison, who had bought the paper in 1875, was at the time running a front-page advertisement for his newly refitted press which put him “in a position to turn out work in a much better style” and boasted “several New and Elegant Founts of Type” (figure1). Sandison also acted as a bookseller and he printed another regular advertisement for schoolbooks written by “the foremost scientific and literary men of the day.” Angus laces his poem with a kind of ironic self-consciousness that gives a literary take on science. His very deflection from seriousness—his poem is a mere “bagatelle” without “poetical merit” —is itself, in its phrasing, a gesture towards literary discourse, and he builds this pose into the poem. A seal, or *selkie*, is observed in the surf, but at once disappears: “He fleets awa’ as saft an’ smuid / As J— A—’s rhymes.”⁵ The poem’s formal combination of dialect and literary awareness will form part of my discussion, but these lines also introduce a key theme. Angus’s “soft and smooth” appearance in the poem is an urbane joke, but it also introduces a focus on metamorphic conditions of being. In this case, the selkie is a creature well known in Scottish folklore for its transformation between seal and human form. And just as the poet is imagined here as a point of transition between human and animal, so the poem encompasses a fluid world in which ways of being are variable.

Figure 1 Advertisement for *Shetland Times* printing business, 1877 (*Shetland Library*)

This returns us to Shetland’s amphibious geography. “Eels” revisits the familiar complaint that Shetland’s progress was held back by its economic dependence on the convergence of farming and fishing, and that its agriculture could only prosper with the separation of these trades and the drainage and enclosure of the land. The story told in the poem is of a dead *grice*, a native Shetland pig, that has been thrown away by a crofter into a peat bog.

Three weeks later the crofter returns to see that “every hair was an eel.” During a torrential rainstorm, the eels are swept out to sea. The next day a pastoral calm spreads over the landscape as the sun rises and the crofter and a boy go fishing. Among their catch are eels, seemingly the same ones that had been generated from the grice, and in the final section these are cooked and eaten by the crofter and his wife.

Angus renews a Scottish literary tradition that extends from Allan Ramsay to Robert Burns as it unapologetically combines Scots and Shetlandic with English forms of vocabulary. His unabashed use of Shetland words combines with Latinate terms from standard English to establish the poem’s lexical environment. Each of these registers requires a different kind of knowledge. The second stanza describes the way the grice’s *birse*, or bristles, begin to swell in the heat of the sun:

An’ dere she lay. An’ da sovereign sun
Look’d doon wi’ his glorious e’e,
Till da tick skin swalled an’ da raum peeled aff,
An’ da birse began to swee.

Raum is, in Angus’s 1914 glossary (1914, 105), “the film of congealed grease by which the roots of the hairs of wool are held together, so that the wool, in ruing, comes off in flakes.” This requires the knowledge that the *raum* is a layer of fat, and that Shetland sheep were traditionally plucked (*rooed*) and not shorn.⁶ Angus’s semantic world is bound up in socio-linguistic practices and local terms of Shetland. But the word *sovereign* is from a different register—one that invokes power relations in the political world. The sun is the only sovereign force in the poem and here nature takes precedence over social forms of ownership. The natural order is cyclical, self-sustaining, and organic matter is self-generative, without the need of formal “improvement.” As the poem progresses, the natural world reveals complexities and contradictions bound up in Angus’s use of language. The process that turns the pig’s hairs into eels is a “ferment”—ambiguously placed as both a scientific process of fermentation while

leaving open the possibility of “ferment” as upheaval or revolution. Either way, whatever is happening in the peat bog is both inevitable in its natural order and disruptive of what we expect from that order. “Eels” speaks to the concerns of current environmental theory and ecological literary criticism, especially in the ways in which it imagines a “nature” that we cannot observe from a neutral position. As Timothy Morton puts it: “Environments coevolve with organisms. The world looks the way it does because of life forms. The ‘environment’ does not exist without them” (2010, 51). But I want to set this idea of “life” as a primal, shaping force against Angus’s understanding of Shetland’s specific environmental history, and the way it is also political, and explore how Angus uses his carefully-calibrated linguistic register to fuse Shetland’s coastal geography with the social implications of its economy.

Mark Ryan Smith (2014, 51) rightly describes “Eels” as “a poem of different moods and modes, oscillating between lyricism and surrealism” as it tests the limits and plays with the opportunities afforded by its own literary status. The poem includes sections of strange, dreamlike metamorphoses, of lyrical pastoralism, and of social comedy when the crofter and his wife cook and eat the eels. These poetic transformations act as the formal expression of the poem’s interest in the shifting boundaries between matter and signification, animal and human, earth and water. In its first lines the poem confronts us with the unsignifying, abject body, thrown away “to be out of sight”:

Wir auld grice de’ed – for want o’ breath –

An’ her banes, sae laen and lank,

We hurled awa’, ta be oot o’ sight,

Ta da graef o’ da nearest bank.

Right at the start of the poem, the reader is confronted with the question of categorisation in the natural world. It opens with a problem for signification itself: the grice has died “for want o’ breath” or, to put it another way, she has died of death and her death has no obvious meaning. The poem simultaneously encourages and resists allegory as it reduces

the once-living body to pure matter and invites us to follow the various stories to which the dead grice gives rise. The grice is a non-object that troubles the discourse of land, progress, and modernity on Shetland. The opening act of the poem—the discarding of the dead pig—asks about what can and cannot be assimilated into human concepts of nature, and at the same time raises societal questions, bound up in the Shetland clearances, about what can and cannot be evicted from the world. First, we can see the grice as a beast unable to keep pace with modern agricultural demands (Fenton 1997, 496-595). Most crofts would keep a single pig for meat, but grice were lean and bristly, and they were almost extinct by the end of the nineteenth century. The grice also introduces the poem’s habit of dissolving boundaries between species. A contemporary article comments that its meat tasted like fish: “The Shetland native pig is not an attractive specimen of its kind, and its flesh is not the best of pork, the quality by no means being improved by the feeding, which almost always imports to it a fishy taste” (Willins 1873, 212). Grice were not only amphibious to the taste, they were also an irritant to the improvement of the land and prone to escape from the crofts that kept them. According to the antiquarian Samuel Hibbert (1822, 427), “The swine are too often suffered to roam abroad, and to root up turnips, potatoes, corn, and other herbage, so that they are scarcely a profit, or rather they are an absolute loss to the country.” We could, then, read the poem as a social allegory of the Clearances and modern agriculture: the old animal is discarded to make way for the new-born eels. But it resists these direct correspondences as it moves through poetic and narrative forms to explore different ways of responding to the natural world. It is both the story of the grice and the eels, and a poem about the possibilities of poetry and storytelling in Shetland, and it rejects a single narrative of improvement, or the supplanting of one system with another where contradictory things can exist in the same time and space.

“Eels” moves between the human and non-human contexts of the biosphere. The very first word, “wir” (our), seems to claim it for a human perspective as a creature of husbandry.

The grice lies in a *graef*, a watery pit left by the digging-out of peats. The poem acknowledges a landscape marked by human activity, while at the same time conjuring processes that cannot be fully understood by the human imagination. The environment of “Eels” is one in which human and animal are not easily separated—the grice is “wir auld grice” not just because “we” own it, but because we are also part of it. It is not clear who, or what, the “we” of the poem’s narrative voice are, as the anthropocentric speaking subject is diluted. The landscape quickly changes from the familiar agricultural world to a wild field of imagery when an oncoming rainstorm inaugurates the fermentation. In this natural apocalypse there is no separation between land and sea: the eels weave their amphibious way between both elements; some cling to the land and others are swept into the ocean. The flood is described in language that is both highly specific and difficult to pin down as the poem’s amphibious world is bound up in a lexis that continually merges earth and water. Here is a stanza that describes the effects of the rainstorm on the peaty land as it becomes furrowed with watery channels:

Da burns a’ raise abun da braes,
For stanks and stripes were tümed in;
Till every lyoag, whaar an eel could oag,
A neesick might have swümed in.

A *stank* is a water-filled trench and a *stripe* is a small stream. A *lyoag* is a “depression in a hillside where water settles” (Angus 1914, 86) and to *oag* is to wriggle. “Tümed in” here means filled in with rain. Other terms in the poem—*clods*, *brugs*—refer to tufts or small patches of dry ground in a peaty landscape in which earth and water are always on the verge of becoming each other. A “lipperin’, sulpin’ muddy pow” is a pool that is trembling on the verge of overflowing. And this is a good metatext for the poem itself, as all its terms for natural phenomena crowd into each other so that the specific and multiple taxonomies for dry and wet land flow in a process of mutual exchange.

For Angus, the condition of poetry enters into the environment in ways that are neither strictly literal nor wholly metaphorical. Words repeat, break, run into each other, retreat, and reform. The poem's ideas merge with its language of fluidity, confluence and change as words and things merge with each other. Internal rhymes function in this way. In the line "Till every lyoag, whaar an eel could oag" the wriggling of the eels and the saturated landscape merge as *oag* and *lyoag* overlap orthographically. And to add to this complex linguistic world, the vocabulary has a social dimension. Shetland fishermen were well aware of the porous boundary between earth and water and reinforced it in their vocabulary with taboo terms that introduced a separation of land and sea by fishermen (Knooihuizen 2008). They maintained a distinction between words that could be spoken on land but not at sea, or words that have a different meaning on land and sea. *Lyoag* here is a swampy hollow on the land, but when spoken at sea it means the sea floor. Taboo words are a way of managing a society culturally, cognitively, and linguistically-- one that acknowledges the force of what they seek to separate. Taboos make, rather than describe, distinctions—they keep apart conditions that would otherwise flow into each other, with linguistic signs that introduce borders into a continuum or sameness.

For Shetlanders the sea was both dangerous and abundant, and its perils could be addressed by a respectful use of vocabulary. Spaces that threatened to blur the land/sea border required particularly careful linguistic management. The compilers of the most recent Shetland dictionary give an intriguing instantiation of the taboo word (one that shows the Norn origins of many such words) *sjusamillabakka*, meaning a space between land and sea: "If a man had been gathering bait at low tide and was asked where he'd been, he would be unwilling to give a straightforward answer as it may spoil his luck, thus he'd evasively say 'sjusamillabakka'—between the sea and the shore" (Christie-Johnson 2010, 100). If some words named troublesome borders, others sought to locate themselves on either side of that border. A large category of taboo words comprised words to be used at sea for land animals, and one of these

occurs in “Eels.” In the line “the birse began to swee” I earlier translated *birse* as “bristles,” but it was also a euphemistic metonym for the whole pig itself (Christie-Johnson 2010, 95). As the water enters into and transforms the body of the land animal, the poem reaches for a word that marks the crossing of the material border.

In his glossary Angus sometimes provides detailed definitions that show how earth is shaped by water, and vice versa. Here is his definition of *brug* (1914, 26): “a stump of earth standing with the sward intact in a place where the ground has been broken by the continued action of the weather.” Animal life in the poem also blurs taxonomic categorisation in a process of constant mutation that defies settled biological categories. Here again the poem maps systems of linguistic categorization onto geographical ones and explodes both of them together. The taxonomic or Linnean invention of species in the Enlightenment is swamped by a local language that resists such separations in the natural world. Pigs spawn eels—a mammal births a fish—but the fish is also *wirmy* like a worm, an invertebrate. The rain opens channels in the peat that “a neesick might have swümed in.” A *neesick* is a porpoise—a mammal that looks like a fish, or a creature of the sea that is now at home on the land. As I noted earlier, the poet compares himself to a *selkie*, a seal that can also be a human. Angus uses a specialized vocabulary that merges the poem’s linguistic range with the way the fishermen understand and negotiate Shetland’s terraqueous world. The more expansive entries in his 1914 *Glossary* reveal the complex spectrum of Shetlandic words as they parse the intricate relations of the shoreline. There is a spectrum of vocabulary for the interaction of waves on sand and rocks that encompasses some precise yet mobile meeting points. That is to say, we can only understand the meaning of a word when we know the multiple circumstances that converge to give it its significance. *Brust* is “the first subsidence of the water at the shore at the beginning of the ebb tide.” *Saatbrak* is “the foam and spray of the surge,” and the verb to *swittel* is “to lap and lave, as little waves on the shore.” Similarly, the *Glossary* discriminates between

several different kinds of seaweed, not as scientific species (although the taxonomic names are sometimes given in parentheses) but in terms of their position between land and sea. Among these, *tang* is seaweed that grows in calm inlets, while *bruk* has been broken from rocks and washed up on the shore. Seaweed moves fluidly across coastal spaces and between human usefulness (*dilse* is an edible seaweed) and a sea world that is dangerous to humans (27, 113, 138).

These watery rocks and the semi-aquatic plants that grow on them are built into the poem's epistemic possibilities. An old man (who turns out to be the original owner of the grice) and a boy row out to check the fishing lines, which have been set up "At da rüt o' da waary baa"—at the base of a rock covered in seaweed. A *baa* is, in the *Glossary* (14), "an elevation of the sea-bottom so near the surface that the sea breaks on it with bad weather," and *waar* (152) is "the large, broad-leaved seaweed which grows under water." As they approach the waary rock, man and boy see signs of another on-coming storm: "It's an ill sign when da lünabrak / Flees ta da girse lack snaw." These lines are only really "translatable" within their own semantic field. Angus's *Glossary* calls on further precise, detailed, Shetlandic terms for the interaction of rock and wave. *Lünabrak* (88) is "an extraordinary jumping and sparkling of the shore-bretsh in calm weather, which is a sign of approaching bad weather," where *bretsh* (25) is "the breaking of waves on a rocky shore." The foam is like snow (itself a solidification of water) and the *girse* is the shore-grass that marks the limit of what can grow on land. We are in a semantic/linguistic world that summons up boundaries only to show the proximity of the material states they conditionally separate. And Angus's amphibious lexis does more than trace Shetland's cultural history—it also acts as a linguistic archaeology for the future in ways that the modern understanding of the environment recognises. The contemporary poet Nancy Campbell (2012), for example, describes her work in Greenland in preparation for her poetry that draws on the cultural meanings of the very diverse Greenlandic vocabulary used to

describe water in its various states of matter: “Each word, like a time capsule, contains precise inherited knowledge that can help climate scientists to chart the nuances of the ice.”⁷ In this way, we can think of Angus’s vocabulary as a repository of knowledge about biological life not only in its relation to human history and use, but also in the meeting points of water and land that form, rather than a fixed boundary, a constant interaction of elements that fosters the growth of plant and animal life and records these phenomena in sedimented language.

“Eels” acknowledges the provisionality and necessary context of categories, especially when it comes to making distinctions between land and sea, or human and animal. The morning after the storm, for example, all life-forms take advantage of the fine day to eat, listed in no hierarchical order: “An’ bace [beasts], an’ birds, an’ folk come oot / Ta seek der mornin’ fūd.” As the twentieth-century Shetland poet Lollie Graham said of this line (1996, 55), it is “a seamless garment of living things.” The eels themselves have no fixed identity—they are both a strange life-force and an element in the social organisation of the Shetlanders when the crofter/fisherman and his wife discuss whether they are “burn [stream] eels” (which are “very nice” to eat) or conger eels (which had a bad reputation in Shetland for fouling up fishing lines and were rarely eaten). They are a little like the sea-snakes encountered by Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, in that they lack any fixed ontological status—they are both species and poetic image, and of both the animal and the supernatural worlds.⁸ The eels move between the scientific, the somatic, and the social as the poem plays with ideas of gestation and the maternal body—as they pass through their watery environment, the eels separate from one female body (the grice) to be consumed by another (the crofter’s wife). And the poem kaleidoscopically moves round all its elements to create patterns that bring together the human and the non-human, the political and the literary. True to its ductile forms, the poem never enforces hierarchies or clear boundaries. All its literary modes are juxtaposed, rather than being classified or ordered, to enact the interplay between poetic language and the environment. “Eels” shows how poetry

can arrange the biological world in narrative forms, yet, conversely, how it can enter into the biosphere to demonstrate the interdependence of language and the material world in our understanding of “nature” as a category.

Shetland’s maritime landscape and economy, the small scale of its literature, and the late arrival of the printing press and newspaper, all come together in a form of political eco-poetics. The public presence of the press gives literature a new voice into which the politics of the clearances introduce ethical questions about land that, in turn, form part of Shetland’s amphibious condition. Or to put it another way, the archipelagic geography of the islands brings together this re-centering of the authority of print with new opportunities for an eco-poetics of the local environment. The writers I have looked at all find different ways of tracing these ideas in literature. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries would see a new focus on Shetland’s environment, with the discovery of oil and then increasing investment in renewable energy, and poets and novelists such as Robert Alan Jamieson and Jen Hadfield have drawn on these themes and woven them into the islands’ archipelagic geography. Their work has had international influence. But Shetland’s amphibious writing has a longer history, and the much-neglected writers of the nineteenth century are of key importance if we are to understand how the terraqueous environment of Britain’s most northerly archipelago has worked its way through literary history and across the space of the northern Atlantic.

Notes

- [1] Scott would go on to address the “problem” of Shetland agriculture and its apparent irresolvability in his 1820 novel *The Pirate*. See Fielding 2017.
- [2] For Chalmers see Fielding 2006, 141-60; for Campbell see Fielding 2014. For an overview of both writers and their context see M. R. Smith 2014, 13-40. Smith’s history of Shetland literature is an indispensable resource for all the texts discussed in this essay.
- [3] Norn was a Scandinavian language (as opposed to the Scots-based Shetlandic) spoken in Shetland that had died out by the time of the poem’s publication.
- [4] Angus’s language does not easily “translate” into standard English. I will gloss some Shetlandic terms but not all those that are common in Scots. In 1914 Angus produced his own *Glossary of the Shetland Dialect* (which occasionally quotes from his own poems for examples) and I will

- make use of this where appropriate. In general, I will minimize the direct translation of Shetlandic words to respect Angus's own mixed poetic register.
- [5] After its appearance in *The Shetland Times* in 1877 the poem went unpublished until Angus included it, with some changes, in the second edition of his collection *Echoes from Klingrahoole* (1920). In 2004, Brian Smith reprinted the original version, with a helpful introduction, in *The New Shetlander* magazine and my quotations are taken from this text. All quotations are on B. Smith 2004, 30-31.
- [6] The wool that went into the knitted socks in Margaret Chalmers's "Johnsmas" would have been "rooded" or plucked from a native Shetland sheep, which were never shorn; but by the 1860s new lowland breeds had been introduced to increase the production of wool, and these would be sheared (Fenton 1997, 446-48).
- [7] Campbell's poem "Proverbs of Water" is an interesting recent continuation of Angus's bio-cultural poetry. It draws on and reinvents the experience of the Jutland people as they experience a changing climate in the face of rising sea water. As amphibious creatures' habitats are altered, so the cultural memory of them changes (Campbell 2015, 53): "Where have the eels gone? There is a hint of net in the water, a line of floats and a black flag."
- [8] Angus may have been directly influenced by Coleridge—not only the sea-snakes, but also the man and boy in "The Ancient Mariner" who row out to meet the mariner have echoes in "Eels." The poem also shares a metaphor with "Kubla Khan." Coleridge's image of the water of the fountain returning to earth like "chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail" (Coleridge 1997, 251) has a parallel in Angus's description of the torrential rain falling as "flugit aits / abun a flacky lauin'" (winnowed oats onto a straw mat).

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