ISLANDNESS, NATIONS AND '*PEERIE* PLACES': SHETLAND AND IRELAND AS ARCHIPELAGIC NEIGHBOURS

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Abstract: This article considers Shetland and Ireland with their different relationships to nationhood, in terms of 'islandness' and as archipelagic neighbours. The islands relate through shared labour networks and migratory routes: in the 20th century, coastal workers post-'herring boom' and Irish labourers during Shetland's 'oil boom' intersected. In 1981, amid Ireland's divided status and Shetland's rapid change, an IRA bombing attempt targeted the Sullom Voe oil terminal, symbolising a collision of historical events. 'Islandness' as discussed in this article, challenges the idea of nationality as natural or simple, and offers a new perspective on mobility and interrelationship between Britain and Ireland.

Keywords: Shetland; Ireland; islandness; mobility; oil industry; archipelagic.

Introduction

Highlighting the 'islandness' of places as different in scale and statehood as Shetland and Ireland, demonstrates the 'organically fluid, socio-culturally and economically meaningful relationships that individuals and communities have with, in and through places as they are imagined in all their diversity and multi-scalar imbrications' (Williams 2013: 26). While 'islandness' is a salient factor in how both Shetland and Ireland are understood and experienced, these are places of different scales and relationships to nationhood. Shetland is a local authority area including about 100 small islands in the far north-east of Scotland, UK, about 200 miles north of Aberdeen. Of these islands 16 are permanently inhabited, with a total population of around 23,000; the bulk of the population live on the biggest island, which, in an example of the fractal nature of island/mainland dynamics, is called 'Mainland' (Promote Shetland n.d.). The 'island of Ireland' includes roughly 2 million people above and 5 million below the border separating the Republic of Ireland from the six counties which became Northern Ireland and remained a contested part of the UK after the island was partitioned by the Government of Ireland Act (1920) (Hayward 2018: 242).

As Royle (2013: 119) outlines: 'Ireland is not a small island; at 84,421 km^2, it is the world's 20th largest island by area, 19th by population size. However, it is small compared with Great Britain as close as 21 km to its east'. The criteria for a 'small island' have been much debated, but Péron (2004: 328) argues these are islands 'small enough to render to their inhabitants the permanent consciousness of being on an island'. Royle (2015: 5) suggests Belfast functions as an 'island city', as its: 'activities are carried out with a quotidian consciousness that they are performed within an insular setting'. The concept of islandness as a question of 'consciousness', whether 'quotidian' or 'permanent', is a way of understanding its different forms in Shetland and Ireland.

Shetland fulfils Peron's 'small island' criterion of frequently reminding inhabitants of its islandness. With long *voes* (inlets) and mostly treeless islands, you are never far from the sight, sound or smell of the sea. From grocery shopping (when weather might stop the freight boat) to internet access (vulnerable to undersea cable mishaps) or payslips (many of which include Distant Island Allowance), routines of daily life put the inhabitant in mind of their 'islander' position, besides travelling anywhere. Shetland's distance from mainland Scotland, roughly halfway between it and Norway, is commonly underestimated. Shetland is sometimes represented as closer to shore to fit conveniently on maps, which underlines 'for quite a few people in the islands […] just how far away they are from everywhere else – and how far removed they are from the rest of the UK in particular' (Malm 2013: 70).[1]

Shetland is electorally distinctive within Scotland, having elected Liberal Democrat Ministers to the Scottish Parliament since that institution was established in 1999, notably resisting the Scottish National Party (see Cohen 1999: 154). Greater autonomy for Shetland has been proposed by a variety of groups with different aims, including the Shetland Movement of the 1980-90s (Goodlad 1988), Wir Shetland in the 2010s and others (Grydehøj 2014). In 2022, Shetland Islands Council voted to explore options 'for achieving political and financial self-determination' (John 2020). The Faroe Islands, which have a high degree of self-government while maintaining their relationship to Denmark, offer a nearby model of island autonomy some view as aspirational. Arguments for Shetland autonomy echo those for Scottish independence, with Scotland's urban Central Belt cast as the problematically remote seat of power rather than

[1] This practice has been reduced since 2018, when public bodies were required to accurately represent Shetland's location by an amendment to the Islands Bill proposed by Liberal Democrat MSP for the Northern Isles Tavish Scott, following a campaign to get Shetland out of 'the box' (BBC News 2018; see Malm 2013: 67-72).

Westminster (Cohen 1999: 148; Cartrite 2012).

For Ireland, by contrast, islandness wavers in and out of view, called into public consciousness at particular moments and within certain layers of discourse. Hayward (2009) examines the 'redefinition of the island of Ireland' through the Irish state's official discourse, in relation to 'Irish nationalism and European integration'. In this context, Hayward (ibid: 153) argues: 'the persistent identification of the Irish nation as "the island" has helped to facilitate policy (and constitutional) change regarding Northern Ireland and even to lend credence to the international role of the state'. While Ireland includes its own small islands, using the common phrase 'the island of Ireland' to refer to the Irish mainland has paradoxical implications in terms of Ireland/UK relations, simultaneously framing the north and south of Ireland as a single, 'natural' entity and implicitly reinforcing the idea of Great Britain as a mainland and Ireland as a periphery. This makes 'the island of Ireland' a useful phrase both in Irish nationalist discourse, as Hayward (2009) shows, and within the 'creative ambiguity' (Dixon 2018: 155) of the peace process which ended the thirty years of political conflict often called the 'Troubles'.

To give one example of the 'islandness' of Ireland springing into the forefront of consciousness across these islands, the UK's Brexit vote took place when I was mid-way through moving house from Belfast to Shetland, pausing on the Scottish mainland, watching the idea of a 'sea border' erupt, at last, from Northern Irish political discourse into the UK media. Islandness as a trope is resorted to with ease – whether the idea of Britain, as David Cameron called it, an 'island nation' (see Wodak 2018); the small island as synecdoche for Ireland in Martin McDonagh's (2022) film *The Banshees of Inisherin*; or escapist fantasies of island holidays and property offered by colour supplements both sides of the Irish Sea. This contrasts with the apparent difficulty of remembering the complexity of our interrelationship as an 'Atlantic Archipelago' of 'England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales and more than six thousand smaller islands' (Miguel and Stephens 2020: 22).

As an Irish person in Shetland, I hear stories about connections between the two places. While there are well-known links between Ireland and other parts of Scotland, like the shared linguistic heritage of Ireland's *Gaeltacht* and the Scottish *Gàidhealtachd,* Ireland and Shetland are not so obviously bound together and these little stories do not much feature in grander narratives of the Atlantic archipelago (such as the Ireland/UK constitutional question, Shetland's Norse/Scottish history, or Scottish nationalism). Material connections between

Shetland and Ireland include labour networks and migratory routes. Although the sea is crucial to inter-island relations, as seen in Shetland and Ireland's historically intertwined herring processing industry, these islands also have earthier connections. Workers from north and south of the Irish border played an important role in Shetland's late 20th century oil boom and the waves of construction which followed it. The journeys of these transient labourers make the different 'islandnesses' of Shetland and Ireland stand out in comparison to each other. While North Sea oil was bringing rapid social change to the small islands of Shetland, the status of Ireland as a geopolitically divided island was the focus of violent ethno-national conflict. In 1981 these two things came together, with an IRA bombing attempt during Queen Elizabeth II's visit to a new oil terminal in Shetland.

To highlight these interrelations, this article combines archival material (primarily from the Shetland Museum and Archives), observations from my experience as an anthropologist from County Down who has lived in Shetland since 2016 and conducted research there on and through creative activity, and an interview with a Shetlander who experienced at close hand the 1970s arrival of Irish construction workers. Simultaneously holding in mind that one place characterised as a 'divided island', and another one that falls into the 'small island' category, draws attention to the ways islandness itself is conceived. Before discussing the relationship between Shetland and Ireland, therefore, I will outline some ideas about 'divided islands', 'small islands' and archipelagos.

Islands: Divided, Small and 'Connected Below'

Baldacchino (2013:2) notes: 'There are today only ten inhabited islands whose territory is divided amongst two or more countries', mainland Ireland being one of them. While divided islands have not always been so rare, he suggests: 'The elimination of divided islands in recent centuries has […] proceeded hand in hand with the march of the richly imagined nation state as the default jurisdiction of choice' (Baldacchino 2013:3). The tangibility of island edges lends itself to the nation-state's ideal unity of polity and territory, or the conflation of what Pries (2005: 171) calls 'societal' and 'geographic' spaces. Island geography presents a compelling 'spatial container' (Williams 2013: 26) for the 'territorial theory of identity' which Beck (2006: 6) calls 'a bloody error'. As well as the potential for island shores, where they coincide with state borders, to lend those borders an appearance of 'naturalness' (Haller and Donnan 2000: 9; Eriksen 2020: 143), the boundedness of small islands within larger nations sometimes sees them treated as an inner sanctum of national identity. Scotland's small islands, including Shetland,

are enlisted into imagery and narratives of Scottishness, while Ireland's small islands have been viewed as windows into a pre-urban, essentialised Irishness and as synecdoches of Irish nationhood (Beatty 2019).

Taylor (1996: 216) argues 'as Ireland is to England, so are the islands of its western shore to Ireland', representing for early anthropologists an exoticized window into an imagined ancestral authenticity (Ketonen-Keating 2021: 21). Anthropological inquiry into Ireland took the form of 'a late Victorian search for primitive survivals on the western edge of the island' (Taylor 1996: 216), such as Haddon and Browne's 1891-2 expedition to Inis Mór to 'take the measure of the islanders […] to chart the islanders' place in an evolutionary chain of civilizations' (Egan and Murphy 2015: 135; see also Jones 1998: 195; Ashley 2001: 8). By this point, Jones (1998: 202) suggests, the Aran Islands 'had already become a place where anthropological theories were tested, the most important anthropological laboratory – as it were – available in Ireland and possibly Europe'.

Like Ireland's small islands, Shetland has been 'subject to copious folkloric, archaeological, historical, and ethnographic scrutiny' (Giraldo Herrera 2022: 1143), including work by Shetlander James Teit, who assisted Franz Boas in Canada (Teit 1918; Wickwire 2019). From the late 19th century, while Ireland's small islands were being framed as remnants of earlier varieties of Irishness and such constructs were feeding the literary 'Celtic Revival' (Fitzpatrick 2011; Brannigan 2017; Hewitt 2021), Shetland's small island identity was being defined in opposition to the Gaelic world. As Burnett et al. (2021: 14) suggest:

> *From the 1880s and through the early part of the twentieth century, as the promotion of a Celtic and Gaelic profile of national identity emerged in Scottish politics and culture (Gifford and Riach 2004), a 'Norse – Celtic' debate developed with some unattractive racial undertones (D'Arcy 1996) […] it polarised the Gaelic Hebrides against the Nordic Northern Isles.*

Orkney and Shetland were part of Norway until they were 'formally passed over to Scotland in 1468 and 1469, respectively, yet it was only with the coming to power of the Stewart earls in 1581 that the islands truly fell under Scottish administration' (Grydehøj 2013a: 41). Linguistically, 'Shaetlan is the autonym for the indigenous language which pre-dates English in Shetland […] with Norn and Scots as its main input languages' (Velupillai, in press). Norn is

an ‘extinct Scandinavian’ language, ‘once spoken by the Viking settlers’ (Velupillai and Mullay 2022: 12). Scholars with a late 19th-early 20th century interest in cultural survivals tended to ‘to overlay the landscape and people of Shetland with a heroic Old Norse/Viking past’ (Grydehøj 2013b: 107; see Cohen 1989: 91).

Later studies of small island communities in both Ireland and Shetland explore change rather than continuity, though this takes different forms. Mid-late 20th century studies of small Irish islands often characterise social change as incremental decline, with islands as exemplars of what Peace (1989: 89) calls anthropologists’ ‘caricature [of] Ireland as a dying society, a culture in demise’. Decline takes the form of diminishing populations (e.g. Fox 1978: 18-19 on Tory Island), weakening of the Irish language (e.g. Messenger 1983[1969]: 6 on ‘Inis Beag’/Inisheer; see Ketonen-Keating 2021: 24, Wilson and Donnan 2006: 170), and challenges for residual inhabitants in maintaining local cultural practices and economic viability (e.g. Aalen and Brody 1969 on Gola; Kearns 1976 on the Aran Islands). By contrast, change in Shetland is connected to abrupt growth and transformation in its economy from the 1970s, following the discovery of North Sea oil. Shetland’s oil boom brought many accounts of this new industry’s effect on Shetland’s ‘way of life’ (e.g. Nicolson 1975; Byron and MacFarlane 1980; Cohen 1980; Byron 1983; Seyfrit 1988; Seyfrit and Hamilton 1992).

The degree to which ‘islandness’ is considered in studies of island life varies widely. Goffman’s (1959: 9 & 232) ‘dramaturgical approach’ in his study of ‘The Shetland Hotel’, in ‘a crofting (subsistence farming) community’ aims to create ‘a framework that can be applied to any concrete social establishment, be it domestic, industrial, or commercial’, with the island nature of this example accorded little relevance (Goffman 1959: 9). Cohen (1999: 5) argues that Goffman’s approach ‘understates culture’. Cohen’s long-term work on the Shetland island of Whalsay more frequently relates aspects of ‘community’ to the conditions of living on a small island, while resisting an essential difference between how the boundaries of community are constructed in island and other places: ‘The sea may divide one island from another, just as the parish border may mark the beginning and end of a settlement. But these boundaries are symbolic receptacles filled with the meanings the members impute to and perceive in them’ (Cohen 2013[1985]: 19; see also Cohen 1989; Cohen 2002; Cohen 2017).

With growth in Island Studies driven in part by efforts to present islands ‘on their own terms’ (Baldacchino 2008: 37), small islands have been viewed as part of global island networks, not

just in relation to their neighbouring mainland metropolises, and as places to speak *from* as well as about. Outside academia, initiatives like the Island Innovation Network share island perspectives on challenges including climate change (Island Innovation 2022). Political groupings like the Alliance of Small Island States, as Hughes (2013: 578) describes, 'sound the alarm' about rising seas. Pugh (2018: 105) suggests the 'vulnerable' and/or 'resilient' island as 'one of the most emblematic figures of the Anthropocene'. Countering this symbolic role, small islands like Trinidad and Shetland also benefit from fossil fuel production (Hughes 2013: 574-8; Sindico 2022: 120-3).

Another focus of Island Studies is to problematise 'islandness' (Foley et al. 2023); in this field it is commonplace to challenge the boundedness of islands. As Pugh (2018: 94) points out, many scholars aim to 'decentre notions of the static island and instead emphasize mobile, multiple and interconnected relational forms' (Eriksen 1993; Skinner 2002). Glissant's concept of 'archipelagic thought', rooted in Caribbean experiences of creolisation and postcolonial cultural politics but proposed as a way of viewing relationality more globally, suggests that '[l]inguistic regions, cultural regions, beyond the barriers of nationhood, are islands – but open islands, this being their main condition for survival' (Glissant and Joris 1999: 120). This 'archipelagic lens' (Miguel and Stephens 2020: 20) is applied to the study of islands as a counterweight, simultaneously, to 'methodological nationalism' (Beck 2016) and to mainland views of islands as remote and peripheral. Archipelagic approaches highlight webs of connection between islands rather than centre/periphery relationships. Miguel and Stephens (2020: 14) borrow a metaphor from the TV show *Sens8*, writing that '[a]rchipelagos, like many islands, are rhizomatically "[i]solated above, but connected below"'.

Distance and Points of Contact: Shetland and Ireland

Relations between islands are, however, shaped by their respective island/mainland dynamics as well as by direct connections between themselves. Markers of Shetland identity are somewhat at odds with Scottish national symbolism. Norse connections are much celebrated, from the Viking-flavoured Up Helly Aa fire festivals in winter, to the nordic-influenced Shetland flag (Jennings 2021: 6). References to 'Norseness' are ubiquitous in iconography and branding, from the helmeted Viking painted on the side of the Aberdeen ferry to the name of a Lerwick restaurant, 'The Dowry', recalling how Shetland was forfeited by Norway as payment for an unpaid marriage debt. Jennings (2021: 3) observes that: 'Shetlanders use the Norse part of their heritage to bolster, support and provide a boundary around their local, unique

identity'. Reeploeg (2012: 214) calls Shetland's Nordic heritage 'a continuous chorographic activity that resists, or subverts, being a British or Scottish "national outpost"'.

A side-effect of this Norse identity-construction is renunciation of associations with Gaelic language and culture. Jennings (2021: 6) notes that 'a number of communities in Shetland have requested bilingual road signs with their name, not in Gaelic as happens on the Mainland, and which would cause consternation in a non-Gaelic speaking territory, but in Old Norse'. In my experience, 'consternation' aroused by Gaelic in public space in Shetland is a reaction to mistaken outside assumptions that Shetland is part of Scotland's Gàidhealtachd (its Gaelic-speaking area, similar to Ireland's Gaeltacht), like many of the islands off Scotland's west coast. Much like Shetland being misplaced on the map[2], being mixed up with distant and different islands underlines how little is known about Shetland in the urban centres of UK and Scottish power from which it is governed. Articulating an internal Shetland sense of 'islandness' therefore involves emphasising Shetland's cultural distance from Scotland's Gaelic-speaking highlands and islands, and by extension Ireland.

Although Ireland and Shetland do not relate to each other as part of a transnational Gaelic or Celtic 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006), as might be said of Ireland and Scotland's Western Isles/*Na h-Eileanan Siar*, they remain archipelagic neighbours. From debated archaeological and linguistic evidence of 'Irish monks or anchorites, the Papar, who inhabited the Northern and Western isles of Scotland together with the Picts at the beginning of the Viking Age' (Gammeltoft 2004: 38; Ahronson 2015: 63; Caseldine 2017) to contemporary travel within the 'fuzzy' Common Travel Area spanning Ireland and the UK (Hayward 2018: 241-2), people move between these islands. During the 20th century, two industrial 'booms' brought Irish workers to Shetland: first, the coastal mobility of herring gutting in the 1930s-40s, after the high point of the 'herring boom' before World War I; and second, the more earth-bound construction work which attracted Irish workers to Shetland during its 'oil boom' in the 1970s.

Following the Fishing: *Aa Da Different Peerie Places*

In the early 20th century, herring 'thronged the North Atlantic' and 'stitched together a patchwork of places that seemed – at first sight – quite different and distinct, giving these localities similarities in their ways of life' (Murray 2022: 19). Within this industry connecting 'places as far apart as Iceland, the Netherlands, Ireland, the United States and Southern Greenland'

[2] Or referred to as 'The Shetlands', a frequent irritant.

(Murray 2022: 19), Ireland and Shetland formed part of an annual circuit for workers who followed the fishing. As several Shetland friends have informed me, Ireland has Shetland's role in this to thank for singer Daniel O'Donnell. His mother Julia (born on a small island off the coast of Donegal, called Owey) was one of the 'herring girls' who gutted and packed fish in Lerwick, Shetland in the 1940s. Julia O'Donnell met her husband, who was also from Donegal, while he was doing similar work in Lerwick (O'Donnell 2007: 131-3). Banffshire fisherman George Murray, quoted in Taylor (2021: 432), reports 'The Irish [men] followed boats gutting. They did same as girls.' Former herring girl Christina Jackman, quoted in Telford (1998: 25), confirms this was unusual and suggests economic hardship as a factor:

> *[In Great Yarmouth] Dey wir never ony Scotch men gutters or packers. Da Irish men wis gutters and packers…I suppose dey couldna get ony work in Ireland so dey cam owre wi a curer. But da Irishmen were handy ta lift da barrels wi da coopers an help da coopers. Dey never mixed wi onybody. Dey wir on der ane. I suppose dey wir Catholics. Whan da claes wir rationed efter da War, dey never spent ders. Dey sowld dem ta fock.*[3]

The mobility of this work brought many configurations of island and coastal communities together. Jackman (Telford 1998: 25) recalls that in Great Yarmouth '[d]ey wir ever such a lock of fishergirls. About a thousand I suppose…Dey cam fae da islands, fae Barra or Uist, da west islands, an aa Scotland, an aa da different peerie places'[4]. Accounts of this way of life suggest both solidarity (as in strikes for better pay) and a degree of incomprehension among these migrant workers from the '*peerie'* (little) places of the northern coasts of Britain and Ireland. Herring gutting brought together Irish Gaelic (*Gaeilge*) speakers from different parts of Ireland, Scottish Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*) speakers from different parts of Scotland, and Shetland, Scots and English speakers from all along the east coast of Britain. Interviewed on BBC Radio Shetland in 1989, Julia O'Donnell spoke as if even Ireland's Tory Island was a world away from her home island of Owey in Donegal:

[3] 'There never were any Scottish men gutters or packers. The Irish men were gutters and packers. There were two crews: six men. I suppose they couldn't get any work in Ireland so they came over with a curer. But the Irishmen were handy to lift the barrels with the coopers and help the coopers. They never mixed with anybody. They were on their own. I suppose they were Catholics. When the clothes were rationed after the War, they never spent theirs. They sold them to folk.'

[4] 'There was such a lot of fishergirls. About a thousand I suppose. All the fishergirls knew one another really, because they just lived amongst themselves. They came from the islands, from Barra or Uist, the Western Isles, and all over Scotland, and all the different little places.'

> *There was so many people from home [in Lerwick…] you're meeting people that you never met before and they're still from home. You know, as we call home 'home', all over Ireland. You know, there was Donegal and there was Downings and there was […] even Tory Island, there was people out here from Tory Island. And that was away, God knows how many miles from where I lived, way out in an island. And they came here and they were talking Gaelic and we didn't know what they were talking about.*

By Julia O'Donnell's time in Lerwick, the herring industry was in decline. By the 1960s there was little left of its mobile workforce. Photographer Craig Easton's project 'Fisherwomen' captures their contemporary counterparts on Britain's east coast, 'found behind closed doors, working unseen' (Easton 2020: 1). In 2023 Easton's photographs were exhibited in Shetland Museum, which filled with people eager to listen to local ex-'herring girls' talk about their experiences. One, Rita McNab, gutted and packed a box of fish with great show-womanship, a sharp knife and hands that shook but moved with the speed of ingrained muscle memory.
Fishing-related practices and networks spanning Shetland and Ireland's coastal areas continue to create everyday connections. During a research trip to Donegal as part of a study of 'aran' and 'fair isle' knitting (Carden 2022a; 2022b), a resident of the fishing village of Killybegs realised where I'd travelled from and surprised me by rhyming off the names of several pubs in Lerwick. These small and distant places have a prosaic familiarity because of the sea between them and the working lives it supports. I notice an occasional stray plastic fish box marked 'Kilkeel' (County Down) in Shetland; a neighbour from my hometown commuted for weeks at a time to work on Shetland's fish farms. While being linked by the sea is a staple of archipelagic or 'aquapelagic' relations (Nash 2016; Hayfield and Nielsen 2022), Shetland and Ireland's islandnesses were also brought into contact on land in the early years of North Sea Oil.

'Us Muckshifters': Irish Workers and Shetland's Oil Boom

The oil industry brought rapid social change to Shetland (Byron and MacFarlane 1980). The epicentre of this seismic change was a peat-covered peninsula on the shores of a deep inlet called Sullom Voe, towards the north of Shetland's Mainland, which became Europe's largest oil terminal. Irish labourers played an important role in this physical and social transformation. Speaking to me in her current home about ten miles from Sullom Voe, 'M', who when she was twenty became the first woman employed at the site, remembers 'how it all began. […] We

knew about this impending oil boom. We heard […] it was these wild Irish men that were coming'. In November 1974, from M's home in the hamlet of Graven, 'the first we were aware of any movement was muckshifting machines[…]All these yellow dots coming in over the hill towards where we lived. They had to drive them over the hill from Toft. There were no roads'. The plant machinery had been shipped to Toft 'from Belfast'. The first labourers on site were from a civil engineering company called JMJ[5], based in Carryduff (later Banbridge).

JMJ men, the so-called 'muckshifters' (Sullom Voe Scene 1979: 7), came from both sides of the Irish border though M remembers 'most were from the North'. There were 'lots of Newry men' and the 'poor boys from Donegal' who took 'as long to get home and get back again as they had time off', as well as workers from Waterford and elsewhere in the south. Like elsewhere in Britain, workers from either side of the Irish border and of any ethnosectarian identity were usually known as 'Irish' in Shetland. People from both Irish nationalist and unionist community backgrounds were present, but M confirms 'they were largely Catholic men'. A Shetland-based priest, Father Rory Geogeghan, told the site newsletter *Sullom Voe Scene*[6] (1980: 6) that '[w]e had about a thousand at the four weekend masses when the JMJ boys were here - they follow the Irish Catholic tradition of the civils trade'.

The prospect of large numbers of Irish men arriving in Shetland's small communities caused some anxiety. M remembers '[w]hat we'd heard at that time was "lock your doors, lock your cars, lock up your daughters". I thought, I'm not going to apply to work with those rough men!' However, her uncle advised her to apply for an administrative job because 'he'd already started meeting the Irish men and they were OK'. M found them to be 'sociable guys' who 'mixed well…they'd meet chambermaids, cleaners, local people…we'd have them come down and visit the house. They'd come to country dances. They learned the Shetland dances.' She laughs at how reality jarred with initial fears: 'after us hearing about all this "wild Irish", coming to quiet little rural Shetland!' Another woman of the same generation once told me that the Irish workers' willingness to dance with Shetland women contrasted with reluctance to dance among local men at the time, and that this enthusiasm caused occasional resentment. However, tensions seem to have been minimal. When a Catholic Bishop visited Shetland in 1977 and held a special Mass, '[c]ouncillor Edward Thomason spoke of the fears of fights and disaster

[5] The Irishness of the JMJ men led to jokes the abbreviation stood for 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph'. JMJ later merged with two other companies to become LJK, the biggest contractor at Sullom Voe.

[6] As well as *Sullom Voe Scene*, the official works newsletter which was published 1977-1994, a more DIY and scurrilous publication called *Staney Hill Free Press*, by Bill Jardine, was in circulation 1978-1989 and offers a window into the national stereotypes of the time.

in Shetland before work started at Sullom Voe and of how the arrival of the first workers – J.M.J. men from Ireland – had soon shown such worries to be groundless' (Sullom Voe Scene 1977: 8).

The impact of transient workers on the general population was limited because the workers lived apart, in 'camps' which themselves had to be built. The first of these temporary accommodation clusters was called the 'Pioneer Camp', a construction industry term which casts Shetland as an empty frontier. Irish workers lived at a more comfortable camp at Firth from 1976. These longer-term accommodation sites included what M calls 'the best facilities, entertainment, food', so although 'some did go to Lerwick at the weekends', men working long days at Sullom Voe mostly stayed in the area. Camp amenities (e.g. bars, shops, a cinema, sports spaces and cabaret shows) were important because of the distance from any other facilities.

As much of the workers' day-to-day lives were spent in this isolated area, some local people got to know them well. Friendships developed, particularly with M's uncle, who owned the Mossbank Post Office, with its public telephone box. In the early days, an Irish worker called Gerry Monaghan commented (Sullom Voe Scene 1979: 7-9), '[t]hey had the only telephone and we all met down there. They did more for the Irish blokes than anybody else'. M's uncle would invite the men to use the telephone in his own house, which led to frequent social visits. A keen photographer, he took hundreds of slides of the construction and the workers. Some show men in his home; in a typical shot, a man who worked for Belfast building firm Knockbreda sits in an easy chair wearing a Shetland-style fair isle yoke pullover, with an 'Irish blessing' wall hanging and a framed postcard from the 'Antrim coast' behind him (unpublished photograph by Gilbert Murray, 1977).

The role of these workers in the brand-new North Sea oil industry was notable enough on the 'island of Ireland' for Ulster Television to film an episode of current affairs programme *Counterpoint* at Sullom Voe. On the programme, an unnamed interviewee says that 'in terms of money, what [Sullom Voe] meant to Northern Ireland was as much as about £35 million in 1976 and we're expecting this to be more in 1977' (UTV 1978). The 1970s saw rising unemployment in Northern Ireland (Osborne and Cormack 1986: 216) and the opportunities afforded by Shetland's oil boom were keenly felt. The site was visited by the UK Minister of State for Northern Ireland, to greet 'the muckshifters' (Sullom Voe Scene 1978: 2).

As we drive between the old 'camps', few of whose buildings remain, M points out well-kept houses that Knockbreda built 'for incomers' during the oil boom. In 1976 Knockbreda's founder, Martin McCambridge, told the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* that 'work in the islands […] has earned his company a name in Northern Ireland', attracting more contracts at home and fuelling his aspirations 'to 'break into the building and civil engineering market' in the Middle East (Mutch 1976: 10). With 100 employees in Shetland of whom '90% (were) Irish', McCambridge claimed to have 'a waiting list of more than 300 in Northern Ireland wanting jobs with the company – and all want to work in Shetland' (Mutch 1976: 10). There were both pull and push factors encouraging people to make the journey in the 1970s: 'Part of the attraction of working in Shetland is obviously the money – they can earn £200 a week. But McCambridge said another reason was "the peace and quiet" – something which he admitted was a sad comment on the situation in Northern Ireland' (Mutch 1976: 10).

M remembers two of the JMJ men, 'one from Kilkeel, one from Omagh, one Protestant and one Catholic'. Holding two fingers close together, she says 'they were like that when they were here'. When they went home, however, 'they could phone each other but they couldn't meet up with their wives for drinks or anything like that' because of sectarian division. M experienced the commonly so-called 'situation in Northern Ireland' herself in the summer of 1975, when 'a fitter said why not go and stay' with his relatives on the Derry/Donegal border. At one point in the holiday they 'got a phonecall – don't come out of the house, they're hijacking cars'. Another day, '[they] came back into Derry through the Bogside. People were hijacking cars, burning them […] because it was such-and-such a date.'[7] She remembers the town centre's security checkpoints: 'We went through one, me last. They hadn't told me [soldiers would] search our handbags - all of a sudden there was a big gun held in front of me.' M nonetheless enjoyed her trip, thought that 'seeing it helped that connection' with the JMJ men, and has been back to 'Ireland about five times, different places, since'.

A Small Explosion

In 1974, when the first accommodation camp for workers building Sullom Voe was under construction, the 'situation in Northern Ireland' was spilling across the Irish Sea, as the Provisional IRA's bombing campaign in so-called 'mainland Britain' was underway. Although Hickman and Ryan (2020: 104) remark that 'the IRA campaign in England…was not pursued

[7] Possibly 9th August, the anniversary of the introduction of internment in 1971.

in Scotland or Wales', it was pursued in Shetland. Sullom Voe became the scene of the most northerly bombing attempt in that IRA campaign in 1981. 1974 was the year of the Birmingham pub bombings and the UK's Prevention of Terrorism Act, with Irish populations in Britain a focus of suspicion (Hickman and Ryan 2020: 110). The official historian of MI5 states '[i]t was later discovered that the large construction team at Sullum [sic] Voe, many of them Irish, had included a number of known or suspected Republicans' (Andrew 2009: 694).

On 9 May 1981[8], Shetland's oil terminal was officially opened by the UK's Queen Elizabeth II. She was accompanied by both Prince Philip and, in a nod to Shetland's historically layered national allegiances, the King of Norway. M recalls hearing that 'if the hierarchy knew that any of the guys had an IRA connection, they were sent home that weekend.' However, a small explosion took place, 'all but drowned out by the band as it played first the Norwegian, then the British national anthems' (Taylor 2016: 32). The fact that there had been a bomb was not immediately publicised, although 'the air was thick with rumours after Irish Republican sources issued two bomb warnings…after the explosion had happened' (Shetland Times 1981: 27).

While the IRA quickly and repeatedly claimed responsibility for breaching 'the English Queen's security' with the bomb, which had failed to detonate completely, it was not immediately clear what had happened. 'Newspaper enquiries to BP and the police drew a blank until eight o'clock [next] evening', when police confirmed there had been an explosion (The Shetland Times 1981: 27). BP (the oil company in charge of the site) suggested at first that the explosion had been due to faulty equipment. The bomb was briefly acknowledged by Scottish Secretary George Younger in the House of Commons a few days later, in response to a question by an Aberdeen MP (HC Deb 1981). Interviewed in 1999, a Shetland CID officer remembered a 'very interesting enquiry' which was not completely resolved (BBC Radio Shetland 1999).

With the eventual emergence of classified information it appeared that the bomber, a worker at Sullom Voe, had received the device in the post, and fled before a second device arrived in Shetland; this second parcel was intercepted on its way to the bomber's address in Northern Ireland (Andrew 2009: 694). Failing to blow up an oil terminal has an absurd quality, bringing to mind the colloquialism 'couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery'. However, the downplaying of the incident by authorities at the time, alongside the IRA's eagerness to claim responsibility, demonstrates the significance of the act. Sullom Voe represented both the height of British

[8] This was a time of heightened tension, just four days after the death of republican hunger striker Bobby Sands in Belfast.

industrial progress and the farthest-flung reaches of the United Kingdom. An attempt on the life of the British monarch in these small islands, however unsuccessful, showed that no part of the 'Atlantic Archipelago' was insulated from conflict over the 'island of Ireland'.

Conclusion

Considering Shetland and Ireland as two island places – two collections of islands in fact – highlights the overlapping 'imbrications', endlessly fragmenting 'fractals' and 'fuzzy borders' that characterise islandness (Williams 2013: 26; Riquet 2019: 177) and the 'Atlantic Archipelago' in particular. While the small islands of Scotland and Ireland play a role in their respective national imaginaries as conveniently bounded containers for cultural heritage, places where the symbolic repertoire of national identity can be visited and left behind, islands can also act as nationality's ragged edge, as seen in Shetland's Norse 'chorographic activity' (Reeploeg 2012:214). In the convulsions of Brexit and the movement for Scottish independence, 'islandness', whether that of the island of Ireland or of Shetland, is a disruption to as well as an 'ideal embodiment of the state's relationship to the nation' (Baldacchino 2013: 3).

Islandness is brought into consciousness through quotidian mobilities, whether of post-Brexit goods crossing the Irish Sea or of workers following well-worn routes between 'home' islands. The intermittent presence of visiting Irish construction workers in Shetland long outlasted the building of Sullom Voe. When the Total Gas Plant was built in the 2010s, for example, groundwork was done by an Irish company called RoadBridge. Today, while a large and locally controversial windfarm is being built in Shetland by a firm with the resonant name 'Viking Energy' (Cope 2023) and a new undersea cable is being laid to connect Shetland to the UK's National Grid, contractors from across the 'Atlantic Archipelago' are on the move again. The transience of some kinds of labour makes its impact easy to overlook, but by bringing different 'islandnesses' into juxtaposition (whether the divided island of Ireland and the rapidly industrialising small islands of 1970s Shetland, or the plethora of 'peerie places' represented by the travelling herring gutters) such networks construct the islandness of Britain and Ireland figuratively as well as literally.

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