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Reviews

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Lynn Abrams, *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World: Shetland, 1800–2000*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2005. xii + 252 pp. £49.99. 0 7190 6592 5.

In 1841, scientist James Wilson came to Shetland and found 'droves of women proceeding on their never-ending journey to the mosses in the hills for peats, with their cassies or straw baskets on their backs, and knitting eagerly with both hands' (54). Visitors, shocked to see women labouring in public, claimed either that they were enslaved, constant exposure to peat-fire smoke and the elements having transformed 'fresh supple girls' into 'listless, leathery old crones' (57), or that their presence in Lerwick's streets indicated sexual promiscuity. Such accounts ramify two dominant narratives: first, the 'otherness' of Shetland as an exotic, 'backward' archipelago; second, the historiography of women in Europe, 'of separate spheres and of domesticity, the centrality of marriage and motherhood, the gendered division of labour' (viii). Abrams's challenge is to argue that Shetland was indeed different but that its uniqueness cannot be understood by recourse to either interpretation; rather, it has to be constructed using personal testimonies that reflect generalised past culture. Her explanation is the more convincing for being drawn from a rich combination of locally available sources including both documentary material and life histories.

Informed by feminist historical anthropology, Abrams emphasises agency. Although Shetland history is presently dominated by masculine symbols of fishing, farming, oil and Up-helly-aa, its identity was unusually feminine. It was a culture of female rules, narratives and understandings, fuelling the myth of 'women's past having included a woman's world' (226) comprising the complementary archetypes of the tragic woman, the heroic woman and, perhaps most significantly, the crofting woman. Like all myths this is founded on material reality. Men were absent at sea for most of the time, fishing, whaling or in the merchant marine. The related high death rate, together with a far higher male propensity to migrate, led to extraordinarily unbalanced sex ratios, peaking in 1861with 230 women for every 100 men in the twenty to twenty-nine cohort. Associated low marriage prospects did not encourage extra-marital sex. Shetland recorded the lowest illegitimacy ratios, mistakenly referred to as 'rates', in Scotland. These, however, are no more useful a guide to morals than the views of outsiders about 'sexually promiscuous husband hunters' (158). Instead, examination of concealment and infanticide cases reveals the coexistence of an early modern discourse stressing control of unruly female sexuality in the kirk sessions, alongside a modern code of maternal virtue in the sheriff courts. Treading the threshold between these ideologies, women apparently 'sought to use the system and needed no invitation' (187).

Yet, with a long history as autonomous traders, the women of these islands were perhaps more distinctive in Western Europe for privileging economic over sexual reputations. Here was a place where lone women could live and work independently and, with the exception of herring gutting which employed mainly outsiders, most women made a living within a makeshift, non-cash economy dominated by agriculture and hosiery production. They formed multi-generational, often female-dominated households in which their economic contribution was the crucial marker of status. Knitting was 'a non-negotiable part of croft life' (99). It was also fundamental to a system of barter through which women were involved in complex non-domestic negotiations as revealed in evidence to the 1872 Truck Commission. For instance, Mary Coutts from Scalloway knitted shawls and veils for Lerwick merchants who paid her chiefly in tea and dry goods, which she then had to exchange with farmers to obtain meal and potatoes.

The stories women tell and those that may be told about them have gained enhanced salience with the dramatic socio-economic shifts since the 1970s oil boom, 'tradition' now being mined to bolster cultural survival in times of change. 'Crofting' has become symbolic shorthand for a nineteenth-century way of life, a collective memory through which individuals might identify themselves while legitimating pride in lost skills and 'a frame for interpreting the experience of previous generations of women' (37). Abrams's deft handling of the archive renders this frame both analytically meaningful and theoretically persuasive.

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John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006. xv + 278 pp. £50.00. 0 19 928120 3.

At first glance one might wonder what the London Corresponding Society, the seaside resort of Weymouth and Pitt's Hair Powder Tax had in common. The subjects of the essays collected in this volume may indeed be diverse, but as Barrell skilfully reveals, they all represent different aspects of a highly significant change which took place in the political culture of the 1790s. Vicesimus Knox, from whose 1795 pamphlet attacking the growth of corruption and suppression of liberty the title of this book has been taken, was particularly concerned by the apparent disintegration of the public and its boundaries with the private. He saw a society where private pleasures and private interest took precedence over public responsibilities and obligations, and where the spirit of despotism had invaded family life and social intercourse. Private speech became subject to state surveillance; family life became politicised; matters of personal sartorial preference were transformed into hotly contested political issues.