

## ***Dis Quiet* – A Film in Shetland dialect**

### **Reflections on the use of an endangered variety**

**An essay written and presented by Bruce Eunson**

I would like to begin this lecture by giving you some background details on Shetland, Scotland, and some of the unique qualities that I'm sure will be of interest to you. Shetland is the sharpest and farthest reaching point of the Scottish thistle that grows from the present United Kingdom. The most northern place on the Scottish mainland is John o Groats, which is seven miles and a 40 minute ferry journey south of the Orkney Islands. Orkney is some 50 miles south of mainland Shetland. An Orcadian can go on a boat and be on mainland Scotland within the hour; by boat, a Shetlander must travel over night for 12 hours before docking in Aberdeen. The 202 nautical miles that separate Shetland from Aberdeen, is slightly more than the 198 that lies between Shetland and Bergen. The East and West shores of Shetland must perpetually survive the simultaneously arriving swells and sprays of the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean. The sands of time, and the pull of political and economic sway, means that Shetland has literally changed hands, history and nationality across the centuries – all contributing to the unique linguistic history that brings the language of Shetland to where it is today. In this lecture, and discussion of my film *Dis Quiet*, I will detail some of these factors – and feel I should begin immediately by saying, the language spoken in Shetland today is one that has been sculpted by a great many influences, so much so, that Shetlanders refer to the language of the isles under a variety of titles, and that outside of the isles the language sits within a number classifications. Most commonly today people will use the term “Shetland dialect” and most accept that it is one of the many dialects that make up the “Scots language” (henceforth referred to as Scots). Within Shetland it is not unusual for islanders to have no affinity with the idea of Scots – or even with the idea that the isles are even part of the Scottish nation, and thus many drop the word dialect from the title and simply say “I spaek Shetland” or, sometimes, when the person is more linguistically aware, you will hear someone say “I spaek Shetlandic.” As someone who is both a Shetland resident, and someone who has a knowledge of what Scots is, as well as why the title “Shetlandic” has a certain appeal – I use all of these, depending upon who I am speaking to and in what context. This essay has not been written to develop this debate any further, and my film was never made with that intention. Instead, the details I include in this essay are here to share with you the background of why and how the narration of my film sounds the way it does, as well as the

contributing factors that brought the vocabulary and grammar used in the film's narration to this point in Shetland's linguistic history.

Shetland was colonised by Norsemen in the 9th century, and as the Norse settlers consolidated their position, Shetland became the northern third of the great earldom that was based in Orkney during the Viking golden age. The *Orkneyinga Saga* tells tales of that period and contains numerous references to Shetland. Norse control at one point extended to much of the Scottish west coast and the Hebrides, but within three years of the battle at Largs in 1263, Norse rule was confined to Orkney and Shetland. The Norse held sway in Shetland for another 200 years. Their rule ended, randomly as it may sound, as the result of a marriage treaty in 1468 between James III of Scotland and Margaret, a Danish princess - because by then the Danes controlled much of Norway at the time. The Danish struggled to raise the funds for Margaret's dowry, so first Orkney, then Shetland, were mortgaged to Scotland. Shetland was annexed to Scotland in 1471 and, although the Danish repeatedly tried to have the islands returned to them, the Privy Council in Edinburgh didn't agree to the requests.

The effect of this is discussed by Ernest W. Marwick in the 1975 Introduction to his book *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland*, where he describes "the Shetlander" and "the Orcadian" and their relationship to language, as well as to imagination and character. I quote:

It might be said that these northern isles came gradually into history out of a haze of romantic tradition. They lay in dragon-green and serpent-haunted seas; indeed the oldest stories say they were the teeth that fell from the greatest of all serpents, the Stoor Worm, in his agony. [... The islands] have a common history distinct from that of Scotland, but politically they have been part of Scotland for 500 years. Certain things, however, make these island groups different from one another. Orkney, with gentle slopes and fertile fields, is a land of farmers, on whom tradition has less influence than it has on the men and women who wrest a living from the hills and moors of Shetland and from its neighbouring seas. The Shetland tongue, as a vehicle of story and lore, has greater range and vitality than the Orkney dialect as now spoken. In general, the temperament of the Shetlander is less sceptical than that of the Orcadian and more easily impressed with the numinous in nature and the part played by the supernatural in everyday life.

There are a great many details here in this Marwick musing that I feel links to and helps to illuminate my film *Dis Quiet* and I will return to discuss these in more detail later, but first, I will linger on some historical details and share more remote "nyooks" or cobwebbed-corners of Shetland's past with you.

Also published in 1975, *Words, Phrases and Recollections from Fair Isle* is a very short book written and published by Jerry Eunson, my grandfather's brother. It is illustrated with line drawings

done by hand by my father, Ronald Bruce Eunson. Picking up directly where we left off in Shetland's on-again-off-again relationships with Scotland and Scandinavian, Eunson writes and quotes:

Five centuries of Scottish rule has not obliterated the preceding five centuries when the Norse were around. The old German poet Wilhelm Jensen wrote:

*Then changed itself the language of these isles  
A melange of the Norse, the old home tongue,  
And England's speech and accent it became,  
Still show the peoples height, their eyes and hair,  
They sprang from Borlands stock.*

As referenced in its title, my Great Uncle Jerry's book has a great many recollections from local folk within it, all of which are included because they link to stories told and repeated amongst families and communities, where language miss-communication is present, often told with great hilarity. In one such recollection - like with the Jensen quote - we again touch on a detail that links to German history. During the Second World War, British military intelligence was suspicious that there could be an invasion through the north, coming from Scandinavia into Shetland and Scotland instead of from France into England. To prepare for any such attack, Shetland and its people were duly involved. Jerry Eunson's book retells the story of a British Lieutenant who is sent to the remote Shetland island of Fetlar to inspect the defenses. The Shetland word for cattle, which is "kye", is central to why the ensuing exchange with a local Shetland man, became a popular local story:

[The British officer] crossed to Fetlar to inspect the defences. He came upon one gun emplacement where everything looked a mess, the earth wall round the site was all laid waste. The Lieutenant asked the cause of all the disorder and the local man in charge said: "It's the kye, sir". To which the Lieutenant's reply was: "The Kaiser? *Kaiser*? How the hell did he get here!"

While this lecture, and my film, are very much concerned with modern Shetland dialect, I think it will be helpful to offer a few more details about Shetland dialect's relationship with Scots, the English language as well as the decline and demise of Norn in the Shetland Isles. I quote now from Michael Barnes' book *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland*:

There are today no speakers of Norn. At some point the language was replaced by Scots in both Orkney and Shetland. The ultimate cause is beyond doubt: the immigration of large numbers of Scots speakers into the islands [...] and the impignoration of 1468-9 which transferred political power from the Danish to the Scottish crown. [...] Jakob Jakobsen, the late nineteenth-century scholar of Shetland Norn, seems to accept its demise more or less as a natural consequence of the arrival of Scots. [...] He apparently considered the idiom concerned to have been a form of Scots that was hard for the younger generation to understand because it contained a good number of Norn words they were unfamiliar with.

I will pause for a moment to summarize the points I have shared with you thus far, and explain why they relate to my film *Dis Quiet*. Shetland is an incredibly remote and difficult place to live - far more so than its nearest neighbours, the Orkney Islands. The history of Shetland is one of adoption and rejection, the isles themselves never move, and the strength of the seas never eases, but the idea of what the place is, in a very much intangible way, is thrown from opposite to opposite as easily as turning on a light or blowing out a candle. Whichever nation or empire might have included Shetland within its borders, the language spoken by the people was always one where the speakers wished to be understood - using the accent and vocabulary they had learned, either naturally from life at home, or which had been acquired through the new engagements and relationships necessary when living their lives in the modern world, both within and beyond the Shetland Isles.

The approach of Shetlanders from across previous centuries is no different to myself and my peers of today, as we use language to be understood and to communicate in whatever way we wish with those who we meet. Today, Shetland dialect speakers such as myself, use our mother tongue as well as the ever globalising language of English together in all communication. We speak a mixture of English and Shetland, we write a mixture of Shetland and English, we create art which explores and delves within the present and past of both. Just like Jerry Eunson, I made a film because I wanted to draw a line in the sand in terms of how I spoke and to share what I had heard others say during my life thus far. What was always in my mind when writing, making and editing *Dis Quiet* was the idea that the Shetland dialect around me and within me was worth sharing with others. If, for any reason the words, accents, pronunciations or grammar recorded in *Dis Quiet* were to no longer be used by future Shetlanders, it was my intention to capture my generation's linguistic moment in time, and for the film to be an example of how we expressed ourselves.

For those of you who have already seen my film, you will not be surprised to hear that this was not my only intention behind making a film in Shetland dialect. Whilst I was – and still am – interested in language, I am also a poet. And the most personal part of *Dis Quiet* for me, was – and always will be – the philosophical journey I attempt to take the viewer on, as my character, Samuel Laurence, considers the existential quality of life that the lone individual faces, when everything around you turns darker and darker. This personal aspect links again to Jerry Eunson, as well as the romanticism discussed by Marwick, and how so many Shetlanders across history – be it in relation to language or not – have no real regard for scale. The community of Fair Isle, which ties together all the words, phrases and recollections of Jerry's book, is a tiny island only 3 miles long and less than 2 miles wide. It is mostly surrounded by cliffs and, in the past 100 years, has rarely had more than 100 residents. Similarly, the setting for my film was kept exclusively to the hills and shorelines of Uradale,

a family run croft owned by my father Ronald Eunson – a man in his fifties now who once upon a time would spend his school holidays residing with Fair Isle-based relatives. The name *Uradale* is itself from Old Norse, meaning the valley with the winding stream. It is, to me, the most beautiful place in the world and that personal connection with something – even when it is small in scale, difficult to reach, perpetually open to the violence of the elements and harsh climate – the personal connection to something intangible, not only in your past, but also in your future, makes the place become its own little universe – its ain peerie paradise. To properly discuss this side of the film, I will now share with you the inspiration behind my *Dis Quiet*.

It began when reading an English translation of Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa's peculiar text *The Book of Disquiet*. Translating literature into Shetland dialect had been an interest of mine for some time prior to this. I had translated Kafka, Chekhov, Nabokov, Strindberg, Rimbaud... many diverse and different types of literature, each one providing its own unique challenges. These challenges varied from text to text and author to author. I attempted (and like to think I will attempt again) to translate Rimbaud's poem *The Drunken Boat*, but found my knowledge of Shetland dialect too limited – perhaps I will go onto find Shetland vocabulary is simply unable to express what Rimbaud captures in his monumental poem? Time will tell. Either way, it was when reading Wyatt Mason's translation of Rimbaud's prose poem *The sun was still hot...* that I could immediately hear a Shetland version and fulfil my desire to share Arthur Rimbaud in a unique Shetland style. Possibly because it was a very early work of Rimbaud's, I felt the tone was manageable for translation into Shetland dialect. The content of the text is an apocalyptic vision, one where everyday details of the French countryside appear to a young man, both as if for the first time and the last. There is a surreal edge to the descriptions and to the premise. A lyrical quality runs with the words and a romantic tone plays throughout, seeking to communicate simply and clearly delicate details which the narrator is aware of around him. I felt all of this could be expressed in Shetland dialect, and that the characteristics of the young man were akin to those of many Shetlanders. What appeared to me as obvious when reading the text was that the details could be changed so that the text itself was not only in Shetland dialect, but the scene was taking place in an imaginable Shetland. A universally used language such as English is supposed to remain neutral in translations and keep as close to the original French, or German, or Russian... as is possible. I agree with this. When reading an English translation of another language I want to read the closest possible equivalent to the original text. What I was finding more and more as I tried my hand at translating from existing English translations into Shetland dialect, was there may be an audience of readers for these "classic" works of European fiction to not only be told in a minority language, but also to elaborate upon the details the author chose within their original text, so to make full use of admired elements of the dialect as well as

Shetland the place. This is what many writers in lower parts of Scotland have been doing for Scots – but as discussed above, while Shetland dialect may be one of the jewels in the crown of Scots, it's unique features, particularly the links with Norn and Scandanavia, make Shetland dialect distinct from Scots both to hear and to read – as well as Shetland the place carrying with it immense personal significance for me in a way that mainland Scotland never will. It was translation exercises and thoughts such as these that were landing and lifting within my mind when I came across Fernando Pessoa's immense, episodic and almost-anonymous diary.

*The Book of Disquiet* is in many ways my favourite piece of literature ever written. I struggle to imagine a future for myself where the book is not close by, if not permanently open and to-hand. For me, the central charm of the text is the polarity of how scale structures the book. It is a giant work, a monumental challenge for a reader, that is – in my opinion – impossible to ever truly conquer. Perhaps in 20, 30, 40 years my opinion will change: but today, after having the concept of the book in my life for 5 years and journeying into the ideas of the text continually, I don't see the end getting closer, instead, the ideas grow and stretch further into a new universe that fills further with humanity and colour the more I visit it. Couple this unquantifiable effect with the notion of what it means to write under a 'heteronym', and its associated imagination illuminations, then ordinary ideas of *what literature is* suddenly disappears, like people you forget ever existed. A 'heteronym' is a concept invented by Pessoa and refers to one or more imaginary character(s) created by a writer to write in different styles. More than just false names, when Pessoa writes as one of his many heteronyms, he is writing as a character who has their own supposed physique, biography, as well as writing style. This literary concept is central to the second spell that Pessoa casts over me and one that I explored within my film resulting in the character of Samuel Laurence being presented also as a woman. *The Book of Disquiet* is credited as being written by a man named Bernardo Soares, one of Pessoa's most important and most used heteronyms. The book begins very much like a journal: the entries are very short, they begin with small details of where this character/author Bernardo Soares is and what he sees in the things around him. Where he is and what he sees are exactly as the reader might imagine Pessoa to be, and what he saw in his home of Lisbon in the early 1900s. As the reader, once you are about 50 or 60 entries into the text, the notion that this is any ordinary journal has faded and blossomed into a much grander and infectious idea; that this text is becoming something essentially important and unique to the relationship between art and reality; between an artist and the canvass. For me, as I read on and on into the seemingly infinite and endless entries that Pessoa had Soares detail, the charm of the book was suddenly an immense and inspirational concept – it became an obsession of mine that – as an artist, consistently looking for the unobtainably perfect way to express and frame my art – of course, it was now in my

mind whenever pen and paper were in my hands. I began translating and resetting the entries in an imagined Shetland. I began to reimagine the initial sequence of entries at the beginning of the text being set in a fictitious Shetland (specifically set in Shetland's capital, Lerwick) and a character called Samuel Laurence was born. Laurence existed in a place somewhere between myself and Bernardo Soares, somewhere between Lerwick as it is today and Lisbon as it was 100 years ago.

But the text didn't work. I have never returned to my attempts to write this new text, which I imagined would be a mirror of Pessoa's in terms of scale, but written in a Shetland dialect prose that would be my own with the specific details in the text changing, but the conclusions and the reflections staying as they are. I was a few thousand words into writing my version of the text when I realised that I was attempting something that I would not succeed in. I abandoned the book, but, could not escape the mirage that hovered above me where I could see a Shetland version of this Portuguese monument. That was the key: I could *see* this place, this piece of art. For others to see what I was imagining, it didn't need to be a book that I wrote for others to read, it could be a film that I would make for others to see – and, importantly – that others could hear. It was then that my *Dis Quiet*, a film made in Shetland dialect began, and, unlike the text I had tried to write; the images and necessary narration came effortlessly and endlessly.

My film would be set in the place that I had lived on and off for 15 years; my father's farm of Uradale. The scale that Pessoa had created for *The Book of Disquiet* was suddenly so obtainable to me as I wrote sequence after sequence set in a variety of lights and weathers, angles and atmospheres... The relationship between filming a place that I lived in and loved, together with telling an audience my thoughts, in my natural voice, came together in a way that created hours of possibilities for what my film could be. There was a point when I was sure the film could be no shorter than an hour long: I imagined this despite there only being one character, no real story or plot and no actual speech from the single character – just a voice set to music coupled with imagery. Of course, I had to come back from this point. The film exists today in two versions, a longer 30 minute version and a more concise 20 minute version which you have watched. In terms of someone making their first film, as I was, this was still regarded as a hefty undertaking that would require considerable care and attention to connect with an audience or viewer. This is where I began to focus specifically not just on what the film was going to say, but, importantly, how I was going to say it.

The film is narrated by myself and a friend of mine called Ria Moncrieff. We are roughly the same age, from the same part of Shetland with a similar relationship to speaking Shetland dialect mixed with English. As you will have heard when watching the film, the content of what we are

saying is forever trying to capture a romantic, at points philosophical, series of reflections on living in Shetland. In terms of Shetland literature, this is quite new territory in terms of theme – something that I wanted to pursue so to try and attract a younger audience and bring my peers something that was also obviously in Shetland dialect, but also different and new. Ria and I narrate and play the role of Samuel Laurence in a style that was always attempting to be very natural. I wanted the voice and the character to be as close to who we were in reality as possible. This means that the voice of the film is a constant mix of Shetland dialect and English. Like other Shetland dialect writers I wanted to use specific Shetland dialect vocabulary, finding places in the narration for words like “voe” and “gyo”, “hidmaest” and “peerie”, “uncan” and “dwam”, “mirken” and “veeve”, “flukkra” and “gowster”, “aest” and “wast”, “nyook” and “lift”.

But just as important as the presence of all these Shetland words was that there should be a constant mix of Shetland dialect and English through endless code-switching in a way that would never work on the page in a piece of literature, but could do in a film. Ria and I read lines such as:

“I gaze inta da sky. I kaen da stars will be comin oot again, laek dir ay done. A story aa o dir ain, dere tae be raed ivery night.”

“Da streen, laet on, I wrott dat: A’m dreamt an aaful lot, an dat I wis tired - fae hivin dreamt - but dat I wis no yit tired o dreamin.”

“Dhese ir my confessions, an I should tell you noo, dat if I dinna say onything o ony wirt, hit’s becis I hae nithin o ony wirt ta say. But onywey, whit is dir dat I could possibly write, dat wid be wirt ony idder body readin?”

“Niver leet, dat you ir noo awaar o aa da times dat yir turnt awa fae dis, an let yirsel brood alane in da darkness.”

This constant interchange between English and Shetland dialect would also be reflected in how words were shown on screen, with scenes showing Laurence writing, where the handwriting is in Shetland dialect, then the titles and inter-titles appear on screen in English.

In my conversations with Viveka we have discussed some of these points. She has pointed to many things that I never actually noticed, such as, how Ria and I alternate between “I” and “A” for 1<sup>st</sup> person singular; that we alternate between “it” and “hit” for 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular neutral. I am sure that the random appearance of these examples in the film mirrors how Ria and I use all four and alternate between them in our day-to-day speech. Viveka and I also explored the full circle effect of translating the *Dis Quiet* narration back into English for the subtitled version of the film, where – to



me – seemingly simple, everyday utterances like “niver leet” became linguistic points of interest as we discussed how a Shetland speaker uses “niver leet” in conversation. In translation it does not simply become “never worry” in English, in fact, “don’t worry” is closer to what an English speaker with no knowledge of Shetland dialect would say, and that while it is not uncommon in colloquial varieties of English to use “never” in this way, Shetland has an interesting relationship whereby one can use it for the present too, rather than just negation in the past and has more to do with the perspective of the negation than the time. At this point in our correspondence Viveka and I discussed how just because English and Shetland are very closely related languages, this doesn’t mean that there aren’t real differences between the languages. In fact, the use of ‘niver’ as a negator is only one example of the kinds of so-called “false-friends” that exists between the two languages. “False friends” being words or expressions that sound alike but mean different things. However accidental or intentional the examples are, I am glad a film has been made that captures how Ria and I speak - at this time, in this place – something that I hope has been useful and interesting to yourselves here today, in Giessen, at a Department of English in Germany 2016.

The most important thing about making *Dis Quiet* to me, was – and still is – that I make the viewer feel something, causing the person watching and listening to feel that they have been especially close to this character of Samuel Laurence and his imaginary idea of what Shetland can be. I wanted to make a piece of art that was enjoyed by others because of the feeling that it gave them, from something obviously intangible – just like what I share with Pessoa – and I hope that yourselves here today feel that, and have enjoyed hearing me discuss my film, discussing my personal relationship with Shetland’s language, the cultural and political history of Shetland and its place between Scotland and Norway. I welcome any questions on anything I have touched on today :-)