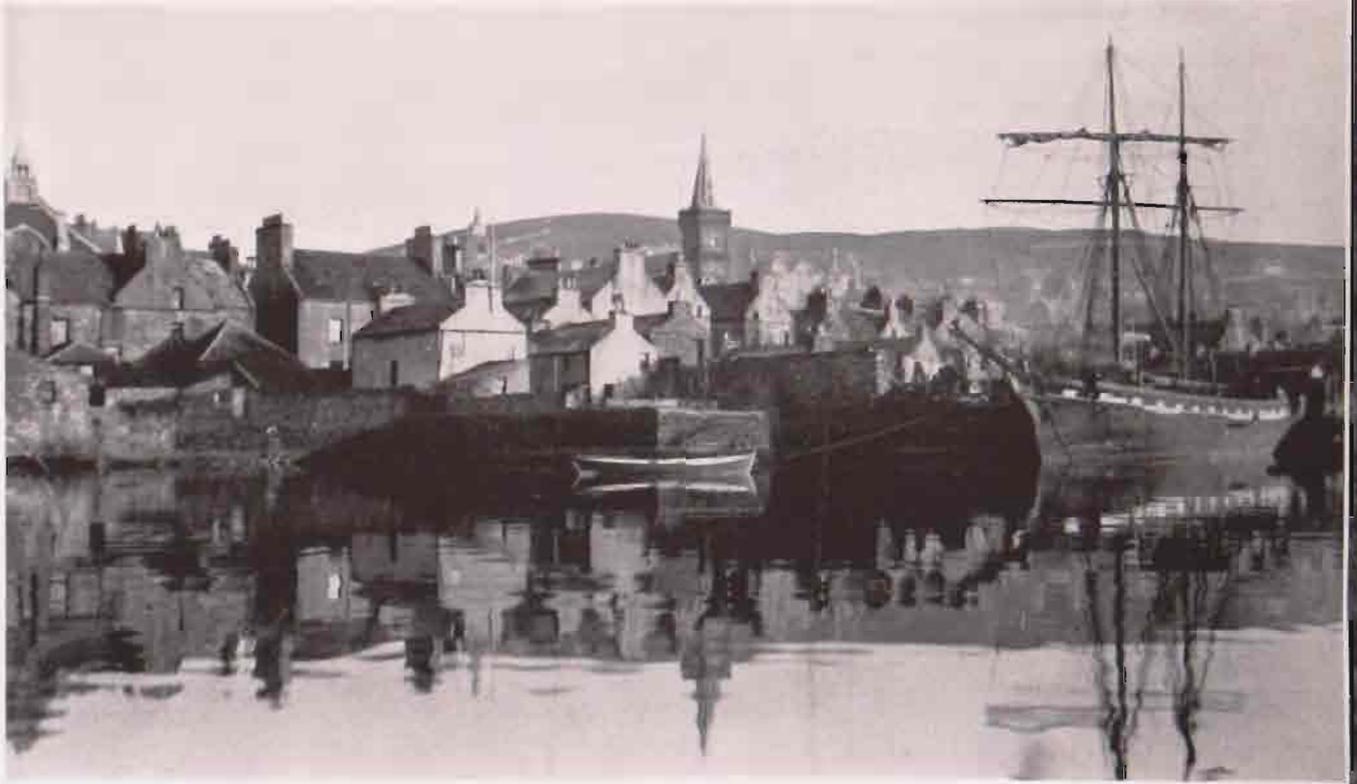


Orkney and the Hudson's Bay Company



Stromness Harbour

An Old Ciose, Stromness

IN the year 1795 the minister of the united parishes of Sandwick and Stromness in Orkney, writing his contribution to the "Old" Statistical Account of Scotland, says of the Hudson's Bay Company: "They have about 400 or 500 men in these settlements, of whom it is presumed three fourths are Orknese (*sic*), as they find them more sober and tractable than the Irish, and they engage for lower wages than either the English or the Irish."

Three quarters seemed a surprisingly high proportion and, lest it might be an exaggerated estimate, it seemed well to have it checked from official records. Replying to my enquiries the secretary of the Hudson's Bay Company in London informs me, "in the year 1799 about five hundred and thirty persons were employed by the Hudson's Bay Company, at their fur trade posts in North America, of whom four hundred and sixteen, or approximately seventy-eight and

a half percent of the total, were Orkneymen." The minister's estimate was thus actually under the mark, and it will be seen that the editor of *The Beaver* had good grounds for seeking some account of those far off islands and their sober and tractable inhabitants who played so remarkable a part in the business of the historic Company.

To begin with the islands. Writing this paper in one of them, you can see to the southward from the window six more, all inhabited, besides three or four smaller green or brown fragments of land, all grouped about the wide salt basin of Scapa Flow, where at regular intervals the German high seas fleet rises ship by ship from the depths to be towed away ignominiously bottom upwards and make the fortunes of a number of

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Mr. Clouston, who is internationally famous for his series of popular novels, is without doubt the greatest authority on the history of the Orkney Islands, a subject to which he has devoted life long study. At the request of "The Beaver" he has written the following account of those "far off islands and their sober and tractable inhabitants who played so remarkable a part in the business of the historic Company"

business gentlemen considerably more enterprising than the high seas fleet ever was in its mast-upward days. Except to the southwest, the whole company of isles are low lying, gently undulating in contour, treeless, and for the most part spread with well cultivated green fields. The island of Hoy alone rises, with one heathery range after another, to the steep sided, round topped Ward Hill, nearly sixteen hundred feet high, and looking higher than that and as imposing as many a much greater mountain owing to its sheer fall nearly down to the water's edge. The Mainland—as we call the largest, much the largest— island forms the whole north shore of the flow and stretches some thirty miles in length and about thirteen in breadth at its maximum between this smaller group of South Isles and the much larger and more numerous group of North Isles beyond the hills at the back of the house. Altogether there are nearly seventy of them, of which some thirty are inhabited.

The picture of the South Isles applies in the main to all: a general roundness of contour, a gentle ripple of the surface, whether the land be a long ridge of heather hills (or some more isolated height) or the cultivated lower ground—no jagged edges against the sky—a country neither flat nor mountainous, with its most dramatic features the hills of Hoy and the seaward cliffs all along the west shattering the surge of the Atlantic. If one adds everywhere—especially in the West Mainland—a host of lochs grey as wet granite under wintry clouds and the most brilliant sapphire blue beneath summer skies, paints heather hills and marshes and roadsides every colour in the paint box in the heather-bell and wild flower season, and imagines such a space of heavens over all as is only seen on prairies and at sea, one has a picture of the Orkneys sufficiently distinct to give at least some idea of the land from whence the seventy-eight and a half percent of Company's servants hailed in the latter years of the eighteenth century. And, it may be added, they continued for long after that to form the mainstay of the personnel in what old men called the "Nor'wast."

There are in the islands just two towns, both in the

Mainland, unless one is to count the half town half village of St. Margaret's Hope in South Ronaldsay as a third. Kirkwall, the capital—with its glorious unspoilt Norman cathedral, ready next year (1937) to celebrate its octocentenary; the ruinous but still mostly extant Earls' Palace, the finest building in Scotland of its period (*circa* 1600); the venerable remains of the far older Bishops' Palace; and the quaint narrow winding streets with their older houses gable-on to the causeway—can fairly claim to be one of the most picturesque, ancient and interesting little cities in the British Isles. (For it has a cathedral, and so is a city, even if its population is now under the four thousand mark.)

But it is with Stromness in the southwest corner of the Mainland, fifteen miles west of Kirkwall, that the Hudson's Bay Company is associated. There the gun was fired that announced the coming of the Company's ships. There its agent lived and handled its monies and engaged its servants. There the flag with the red cross and the four beavers was flown; there the belles of the town danced till all hours of the morning with the Company's officers; and there the tradition of Arctic winters, the trapper's perils, and the coming and going between the settlements in the Nor'west and the quaint little town curling round its land-locked bay, are still vividly remembered.

Though a child in years compared with Kirkwall—no older than the early part of the seventeenth century—Stromness has quite as ancient an appearance, and in situation is an easy first. So far as I have been able to discover, none of the very earliest houses now survive, but these were few in number. It was not till the beginning of the eighteenth century that the town began to grow rapidly, and to all appearances what was built from that time onward still for the most part stands today. There was just room for a single narrow street between the foot of a high steep slope and the water of the little bay, and as the hill-face curved this way and that the street followed the curves, twisting, rising, and falling along the water's edge. On either hand crow-stepped gables line this tortuous lane styled by courtesy a street, with, on one side, picturesque little courtyards and alleys every now and then mounting the hill as high as they can climb, and, on the other, a row of small piers behind the houses, and between them glimpses of green translucent water. This goes on for a mile or more, and the result is Stromness, sometime headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company in Orkney.

A little way behind the south end of the town, separated by a ten-knot tideway, the Ward Hill of Hoy towers up through a cloud of sea gulls floating and crying above the chimney cans and the boats in the harbour. In front of the town a tangle of

hills, green fields and sounds winding their way towards Scapa Flow stretches eastwards, and for the rest of the circumference of the compass the steep slope shelters the basin like a wall. From this haven sailed year after year, during the space of two centuries, a sober and tractable contingent through the racing tideway out into the Atlantic.

2

And what sort of people were these islanders that they should be chosen above all others to do the Company's spadework in the frozen latitudes of Hudson Bay? One who lives among the up-to-date Orkneymen of today, those stalwart agriculturalists learned, from large farmer to small crofter, in the latest lore concerning seeds, top dressings, and breeds of live stock, with a wireless mast before each subsidy-built house, and daughters who go to the local balls looking as if they had walked out of the *Tatler*, can scarcely hope to realize the very different people who lived a century and a half ago. Fortunately there are extant more than one picture of them painted by a contemporary pen. One of the shrewdest of these, true in its essentials still, is *Murdoch Mackenzie's account written in 1750.

"The commonalty," he says, "are healthy, hardy, well shaped, subject to few diseases, and capable of an abstemious and laborious life at the same time, but, for want of



profitable employment, slow at work, and many of them inclined to idleness. In sagacity and natural understanding they are inferior to few of the commons in Britain; sparing of their words, reserved in their sentiments, especially of what seems to have a connection with their interests; apt to aggravate or magnify their losses, and studious to conceal or diminish their gains; tenacious of old customs tho' never so inconvenient, averse to new till recommended by some successful examples among their own rank or acquaintance and then universally keen to imitate; honest in their dealings with one another, but not so scrupulous with respect to the master of the ground; often running deeply in arrears to him, while they punctually clear credit with everyone else. These and some other singularities may be ascribed to the absurd

*He was a grandson of Murdoch Mackenzie, Bishop of Orkney from 1676 to 1688, and himself master of the grammar school of Kirkwall for a short time, and afterwards a skilful and enterprising geographer.



Above left: The Isle of Hoy from the Stromness side. On the left is Ward Hill; on the right Cuilags Hill.

Above right: An Orkney harvest field; Stromness beyond, with Cuilags Hill, Hoy, in the background; the Kairn on the extreme right.

Right: The Old Man of Hoy, 450 feet high, on the western (Atlantic) coast of Hoy.



and unpolitick custom of short leases, racked rents and high entries, which prevail in other parts of Scotland as well as here. Theft and other crimes are often concealed, even by those who have sustained the injury, from the opinion that it is a degree of guilt in a private person to become the voluntary instrument in another's sufferings; and that the imprecations of the afflicted, tho' suffered

by the hand of justice, are followed by visible judgements. They are dexterous with the oar and the management of boats, and when they betake themselves to the sea, make sober, honest, and industrious sailors. Tho' in the neighbourhood of the Highlands of Scotland, yet they have neither the language, dress, custom of wearing arms, clanish adherence and subjection to their masters,

or violence of resentments for which the Highlanders are remarkable; their manners and customs resemble those of the southern rather than of the northern parts of the kingdom, their traffic and correspondence being with the former only. . . . The language is English in the Scotch dialect, with more of the Norwegian than any other accent, these islands having formerly been a province of Norway, of which they still retain some of the customs and a little of the language, which they call *Noren*, much the same with what is presently spoken in Iceland and the Faro Islands."

To complete this picture one may add a couple of extracts from the Old Statistical Account, written in the 1790's by two of the ablest and most scholarly of the Orkney ministers. The Rev. William Clouston, minister of Stromness and Sandwick, writes:

"The people are industrious, and attentive to their interests, and this last is a leading feature in their character. They may still be considered as economical, although in this they are far short of the past age. Among a body of 3000 people (his own two parishes) it may be presumed that there are some of vicious character and depraved manners; but, in general, they are decent in their behaviour, respectful to their superiors, and modest in their carriage and conversation, especially the women. In a seaport such as Stromness, to which there is a great resort of shipping, it might be conjectured that immoralities and a depravity of manners might prevail, but it is to be observed to their honour that there has been only one bastard child to a stranger for ten years past. . . . They are fond of dress, the most venial of all modern luxuries, but their regard to their interest keeps them from excess in this. They live pretty close and quietly at home. Their habits of life leading them to affairs of interest, there are few inclined to reading, and their genius is not turned to poetry. They are fond of music and dancing, and a dancing-master is sure to meet with encouragement at the village of Stromness. They excel in the knowledge of sea affairs and what respects shipping, and their genius seems turned this way. . . . They have no turn to the military line and there is rarely an instance of anyone enlisting as a soldier. They prefer the rigour of the severe climate of Hudson Bay to the idleness and showy appearance of a soldier."

On the whole an exemplary sort of people, one perceives, so far as their general conduct went; and yet this was certainly not for lack of physical vigour, as the next brief extract shows. This time it is the Rev. George Low, minister of Birsay and Harray, a naturalist and observer of real originality and acumen, who writes:

"The people in this parish are good, honest, manly, decent men. The general sizes of the people are thus: My clerk, the writer of this paper, is six feet one inch high; we have many six feet high; and, in general, they are very strong men, being hard wrought."

Yet, tough the muscles might be, there were things that shook even the hardiest.

"Within these last seven years," writes the Rev. James Watson, of South Ronaldsay and

Burray, in the same Statistical Account, "the minister has been twice interrupted in administering baptism to a female child before the male child, who was baptised immediately after. When the service was over, he was gravely told that he had done very wrong, for as the female child was first baptised, she would, on her coming to years of discretion, most certainly have a strong beard, and the boy would have none. No couple chuses to marry except with a growing moon, and some even wish for a flowing tide. The existence of fairies and witches is seriously believed by some, who, in order to protect themselves from their attacks, draw imaginary circles, and place knives in the walls of houses."

Also, from the report of the Rev. George Barry, minister of Kirkwall and St. Ola, we learn that: "In many days of the year they will neither go to sea in search of fish, nor perform any sort of work at home. In the time of sickness or danger, they often make vows to this or the other favourite saint, at whose church or chapel in the place they lodge a piece of money, as a reward for their protection, and they imagine that if any person steals or carries off that money, he will instantly fall into the same danger from which they, by their pious offering, have been so lately delivered. On going to sea, they would reckon themselves in the most imminent danger, were they by accident to turn their boat in opposition to the sun's course."

Of such a type, physically and mentally, were the "commonalty" of Orkney who built the cabins and dragged the sledges and trapped the beaver in the settlements round Hudson Bay. Among the Orkney contingents, as we shall see, were a few of higher social rank and better education who held commissions in the Company's service, but a list of sixty-three names, with parishes and occupations attached, joining up at Stromness in the year 1798, includes but one man, Alexander Kennedy from South Ronaldsay, "writer" (*i.e.* lawyer or clerk), who followed a learned calling, and in fact was later appointed chief factor. The rest were composed of forty-five "labourers," three "smiths"—one of these having the curiously medieval designation "smith and armourer"—six "sailors," two "steersmen," and one each of the following occupations: bricklayer, "craft master," tailor, shipwright, boat-builder and sawyer.

To understand how these men, very far from being born in the purple—some of them still apprehensive of a bearded daughter if she were baptized out of her turn, and dependent on an "imaginary circle" for keeping the witches at bay—exhibited such marked qualities of responsibility and self-control (which are not the characteristics of a "commonalty" everywhere) and yet were content with the modest ambition of saving their wages and making more comfortable their later years, one must look into the islands' history.

(In the next issue Mr. Clouston tells how peculiar circumstances of Orkney land tenure tended to produce men ideally suited for service in Hudson Bay, and quotes two interesting extracts from the Old Statistical Account, the one containing a wealth of information, the other being an amusing diatribe against the Company by a divine of 1797.)