

ISLAND PATHS

Divergent fisheries in the Shetland Islands

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Abstract

This paper offers a case study in a methodology of island analysis drawn from Pope's concept of maritime cultural landscapes (2008). It analyses the different responses of two islands to the arrival of new fishing technology. These two islands are part of the Shetland archipelago whose population has relied on fisheries for centuries. The peak of the islands' fish production was in the early 1900s, when the herring industry was at its height. It then entered a period of long decline, during which time the catching sector concentrated into two islands: Burra and Whalsay. In 1965 a new method of herring fishing was introduced from Scandinavia that revolutionised the industry. While Burra did not adopt this technology, Whalsay did, and experienced great success thereafter. The islands continued down very different paths, and remain in stark contrast today. It is argued that the main reasons for the divergent paths lay in the particular historical, social and geographical makeup of the two isles.

Keywords

Shetland, herring, drift net, maritime cultural landscape, technological diffusion

Introduction

In 2011 Stratford et al made a timely call for new "ontologies, epistemologies and methods" appropriate to the analysis of archipelagos within the field of Island Studies (2011: 113). Hayward's response, the concept of the aquapelago (and aquapelagic assemblages) (2012a and 2012b) has generated some debate. The former he defined as "the marine and terrestrial spaces of groups of islands and their adjacent waters that are generated by human habitation" (2012b: 1). While Hayward's contribution to the debate on conceptualising island spaces and his emphasis on human interactivity in a terrestrial and aquatic space is valuable, the author of this article contests that the historical dimension is not ascribed proper prominence within his new framework. Hayward considers history as a detached and non-cumulative actant: aquapelagos address "the manner in which assemblages are constituted at particular historical points" (2012b:1). The closest he comes to considering history as a vigorous and independent force can be seen in the claim that aquapelagos "wax and wane" (ibid: 6) and in the statement: "traces and impacts of former interactions and former actants can be deployed to evoke what has been and gone and what may be in the future" (ibid: 12). In this regard, it might be argued that instead of inventing new ontologies, epistemologies and frameworks, it

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is perhaps more beneficial to build upon existing concepts. With this in mind, Pope's concept of the maritime cultural landscape (2008) will be adopted and adapted to discuss the dynamic interaction of geographical, sociological and historical factors, rather than, Hayward's aquapelagic discourse. In doing so it is suggested that the latter discourse could ascribe a more robust role to history as an actant.

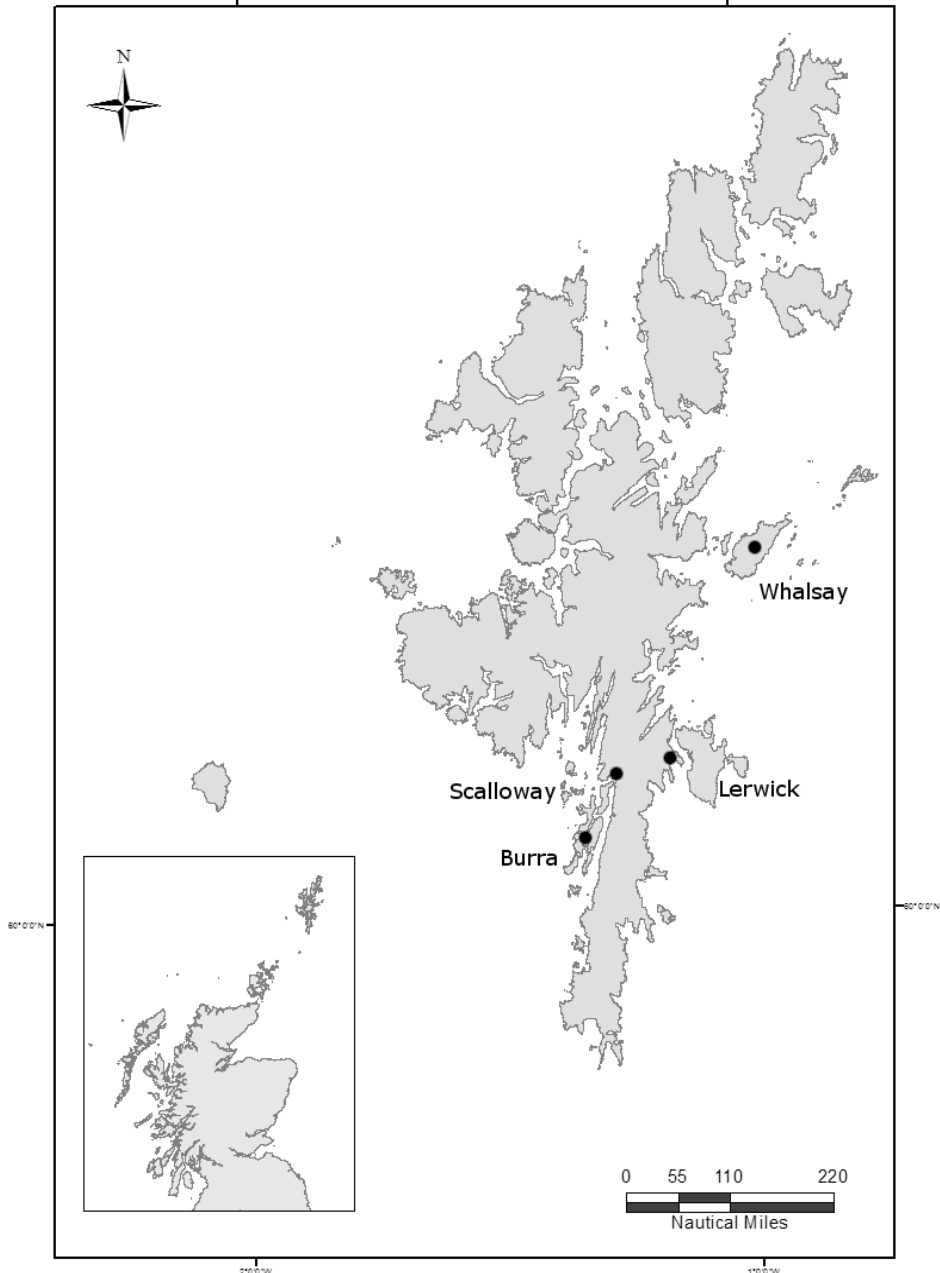


Figure 1. Map of Shetland and places mentioned in the text

Two of the islands in the Shetland archipelago - Burra and Whalsay - followed very different paths after the mid-1960s. The basic concept of the “maritime cultural landscape,” that is the interaction of environment, society and history in a maritime context, will be adopted to examine this divergence. This builds on the work of Pope (2008) who borrowed the phrase from maritime archaeology and uses it as a holistic framework through which to analyse the coastal communities of Atlantic Canada. He in turn draws on the work of Zedeño who argued that landmarks (areas where human interactions and activities occur) are “pages in the history of land use.” She continues, “The whole chapter, to pursue the metaphor, is the landscape which incorporates the social webs that link people and landmarks over time” (Zedeño, 2000: 99). This paper will apply this framework to Shetland’s recent past, specifically to the adoption of new fishing technology in the late 1960s and 1970s.

I . Context

Shetland (Figure 1) lies at a crossroads in the North Atlantic and is roughly equidistant between mainland Scotland, Faroe and Norway. Four main geographical factors have traditionally worked against an integrated and diverse economy within the Shetland Islands, which has created a dependence on fisheries. The first is its physical setting. Remoteness and insularity are relative concepts (and common tropes) but an archipelago with a total area of 567 square kilometres in the North Atlantic, over 100 miles from the nearest major landmass and with nothing due north but the Arctic is objectively isolated. Although historically there have been intricate economic links with Scotland, Norway, and the wider continent, by the mid 20th Century “changes in politics, communications and economic-geographical inter-relationship... left... Shetland on the fringe.”(Fenton, 1997: 1). Indeed by the mid 20th Century the shipment of herring to the European continent was practically the only export link Shetland had with the UK. The second geographical factor that has traditionally worked against Shetland’s economy was the poor agricultural conditions. Of foremost importance was the lack of arable land. In 1931 just 3.4% of Shetland’s total landmass was arable, only a tenth of the equivalent area in Orkney (Fenton, 1997: 2). The climatic conditions, namely long winters and short cool summers, further hampered agriculture. The third factor is the paucity of land-based natural resources. Small quantities of minerals can be found, and there have been sporadic and remunerative attempts to mine them (Senften, 2009). Peat, kelp and eggs have all been exported, but in small quantities and for short periods of time, mostly during the mid-19th Century. Unsurprisingly, the islands have only ever supported a relatively small population, between 15,000 and 30,000 people. This small workforce and limited domestic market is the fourth factor that has hampered its economy. What has made the islands habitable is the fecundity of the surrounding seas. Shetland waters have been claimed to be some of the most productive in the world, and fishing for both subsistence and commercial purposes has been fundamental to island life. The position of the archipelago, in relatively shallow waters, on the Continental shelf and positively influenced by the North Atlantic Drift has created an excellent habitat for marine life. In short, the Shetland archipelago, the ‘Auld Rock’ as it sometimes known, can be seen as a catching base in the midst of highly productive seas.

In the archipelago there developed a “maritime economy, based on fishing, gardening and gathering,” and as Löfgren continues, this was common “in most coastal regions along the North Atlantic Fringe” (1982: 157). Significant change came through the herring fishery of the late 19th Century, alongside the decline of the ‘truck’ system and

'haaf' fishing tenures. Complex processes of rationalisation (of the labour force) and industrialisation and capitalisation (especially in the fishing fleet) were evident during the following decades. However, despite these socio-economic changes, by the 1930s Shetland was still generally a pluralistic subsistence economy. Most people, outside the main population centres, remained fishers and small-scale farmers. Fishing, primarily for herring, earned Shetlanders some cash, as did hosiery, allowing goods to be bought from local shops. In the inter-war period, it seemed clear that the conclusion of a 1912 report was justified, in the rural areas at least: "these islands do not lend themselves to the organisation of life in specialised callings" (Departmental Committee on North Sea Fishing, 1914: 31). The Second World War brought immense changes to Shetland. Given its strategic position, the isles were fortified by an influx of soldiers and improved infrastructure. After 1945 the economy continued to diversify, and the new pro-active, interventionist government greatly benefitted the isles. There was some investment in new vessels and new technologies but in general, as Tunstall noted, the fishing sector remained "Britain's most antiquated industry" (1968: passim). In Shetland the 1950s were an especially difficult time, for both the fishing sector and the wider economy. The contracted fishing industry in Shetland had concentrated mainly in Whalsay and Burra.

Since the post-War period, Shetland's system of governance has undergone major changes. In the immediate years after 1945 Shetland was governed directly from Westminster, while the local authority was the Zetland County Council. In 1973 the UK joined the EEC (later EU). Two years later, in 1975, the ZCC was transformed into the Shetland Islands Council (SIC), which benefitted from the revenues of the recent oil boom. In 1999 the Scottish Government added another layer of governance to Shetland's political scene so that by the year 2000 Shetland was subject to four concentric levels of governance: in Lerwick, Edinburgh, London and Brussels.

New technology

In the summer of 1965 around two hundred fishing vessels from Norway, Iceland and Faroe began fishing in sight of Shetland. This fleet had rapidly increased over the preceding few years and were searching further east in search of more herring. They used a new method of fishing known as 'purse seining.' This involved a large circular net being set around a shoal by a smaller vessel, then a line along the bottom was drawn tight (pursed) to trap the fish and herd them towards the larger vessel. There were a number of important differences between the new purse seine and the existing drift net. First, the scale of the gear and catches was a huge step change. Goodlad quotes figures of 50-300 tons (45-272 tonnes) per season for a traditional drifter, compared with 1000-20,000 tons (907-18,144 tonnes) per annum for an early purser (Goodlad, 1972: 66). Second, the physical labour involved was much less with the purse net given that it was hydraulically drawn in. Third, the new vessels introduced a superior type of fish finding equipment, the sonar, which greatly increased the efficiency of the vessels.

The influx of Scandinavian pursers during the 1960s is the central fact around which the development of Shetland's modern pelagic industry revolves. Shetland's position in the North Atlantic meant it acted as the entry point for this new technology into the UK. Being the first British area to come into direct contact and competition with the purse seiners from Norway, Iceland and Faroe arguably gave Shetland an advantage over the rest of the country. In the adoption of the technology, geographical, social and historical factors both retarded and encouraged the process. The negative factors are seen in

Shetland in general, and will be discussed first before the specific examples of Burra and Whalsay are examined.

Initially, two socio-cultural factors worked against the adoption of the new purse seine technology. Various sources, especially recent fieldwork, have highlighted these latent attitudes. Firstly, Shetland's peripheral setting, marginal land and inclement weather have helped create a pessimistic culture. While strong pessimism can be said to be a feature of many coastal and especially island communities, evidence suggests that this is a particular strong feature in the Shetland psyche. The economic difficulties of the 1950s seem to have perpetuated the attitude, and despite signs of recovery in the late 1950s and early 1960s, an editorial in a local magazine in 1963 still asked the question "Is pessimism the curse of Shetland?" (Unattributed, 1963: 3). Indeed, Goodlad referring to the purse seine cites two "stumbling blocks" to its adoption: a lack of capital, and what he tactfully calls "suspicious caution". He noted that at the time among the fishermen a common attitude was: "It could not work here" (Goodlad, 1971: 237). Goodlad and others led the way with positivity, an attitude that vied with the pessimism throughout the late 1960s and 1970s.

Second an aversion to greed and waste has been apparent in Shetland culture, no doubt fed by the traditional scarcity of resources and close-interdependence of islanders. This too worked against the idea of purse seining, as the Norwegian-caught herring had been used almost exclusively for reduction to oil and meal. One fisherman I interviewed during fieldwork in 2009 reflected on his decision not to invest in the pursing method thus:

I was kinda interested in it [pursing], in fact I did even consider it. One of the things that hindered that development in my own mind was this inward opposition to it, I didn't like the idea of it. I didn't like the... massive fishmeal fishing by the Norwegians.

Further, the experience of dumping large quantities of herring during gluts in the 1950s was a strong and bitter memory; some could even remember similar problems in the 1930s (Butcher, 1987: 29,47).

More explicit economic factors also put off investment in purse seining: good earnings were being made by the drift net during the 1960s, the expense of a new vessel and nets was a disincentive, and the majority of the dual purpose vessels had only recently been paid off. As a result of these factors, most of the older experienced men were reticent to even consider investing in the new equipment.

However, there was a flip side to the Shetland brand of pessimism: as a Burra skipper interviewed in the late 1970s stated, "Shetland men are very cautious... they want to wait until a thing is proved"². Further, as Byron noted, "there is no stigma attached to independent experimentation that fails, but there is a stigma attached to following others habitually" (Byron, 1975:154). The positive example of the first purser, 'Adalla', does seem to have encouraged Shetlanders to purchase purse net vessels. The 'Adalla's' example, and other factors like competition and available subvention encouraged investment and two new bespoke pursers were built in the late 1960s: 'Wavecrest' (Figure 2) for a predominantly Scalloway/Burra partnership and Serene for a Whalsay partnership. After the 'Wavecrest' there were no more pelagic vessels for Burra, whereas Whalsay fostered every future pelagic vessel, bar two successions of

vessels for another area called Ollaberry. This raises a key question: why did Whalsay invest in the new fishery, whereas her sister isle, Burra, did not? Some significant reasons for the divergence during this era can be found by comparing the different maritime cultural landscapes of the two isles.

II. Burra and Whalsay - Maritime Cultural Landscapes and their effects

Hayward recognises that some people interact with the terrestrial and aquatic space more than others, or in other words, they inhabit aquapelagos “more aquapelagically than others” (2012b: 2). Indeed, this point merits further exploration, in particular, how it manifests itself in whole communities and how general industrialisation and the move towards a service economy influenced disengagement with the land and sea. In Shetland during the post-War period this process was markedly seen in the mainland – but not in the outlying islands of Burra and Whalsay. By the late 1960s, Burra and Whalsay were the leading herring fishing districts and the islands that were most dependent on fisheries. These islands were effectively old Shetland in microcosm. As a Burra skipper said:

It was isolation, and nothing but isolation that kept Burra [and] Whalsay fishing for the simple reason that if you wanted to have any other employment than fishing you had to leave the islands.³



Figure 2. Wavecrest LK 276, 1970s. Source: Shetland Museum and Archives, HU10580.

Burra and Whalsay had all but one of the Shetland herring vessels in 1968, with twelve based in the former and eight in the latter. They were also roughly similar in terms of area and population; in 1966 Burra had 609 inhabitants while Whalsay had 923 (Shetland in Statistics, 1972). They also shared social links, with marriages common

between the islands in the immediate post-War period due to contacts between women gutters and fishermen.

It was the opportunity (or threat) afforded by the new purse seine technology that saw the fisheries of the two islands diverge. It is important to note when the process of divergence actually occurred. There was only a window of opportunity to enter the pelagic industry of about 17 years. This was the period of time between 1967, which was the first feasible point at which a Shetland crew could enter the pelagic industry and the point at which regulations prohibited the entrance of new vessels (1984). Investigating the maritime cultural landscapes of the two islands during this key period will explain the different paths they took.

a. Burra

Burra, incorporating the west and east islands, is located on the west of Shetland, and along with the neighbouring island of Trondra and many smaller islets, shelters Scalloway harbour (Figure 1). Burra covers an area of approximately 5 square miles. Agriculturally the island is similar to most of Shetland but poorer in comparison to its neighbour Trondra. Burra has benefitted from its close proximity to excellent whitefish grounds. Smith classes the Burra grounds as “undoubtedly the most important” of Shetland’s inshore fishing areas (Smith, 1973: 14).

The recent history of Burra is fairly typical of other communities in Shetland. Like most of Shetland it was largely owned by a family of wealthy Scottish landlords, and in common with the rest of Shetland, the 18th Century saw an increasing emphasis on fisheries. The estate was leased to a local business for a time but this did nothing to ameliorate the economic conditions; Burra people consistently suffered from crippling debt, unfair terms and the constant threat of eviction. Significant change came in the late 19th Century with the Crofters Act and Burra led the way in the emergent herring industry. At this time crofters left their smallholdings in the south of the island (while crofters in other areas were purchasing theirs) and established the fishing village of Hamnavoe. They built tightly packed fishing cottages that were owned outright (increasingly their vessels were too) allowing the ready accumulation of capital. Indeed, Hance Smith recognises that in Burra at this time the proportion of shore owners was lower than elsewhere (1973: 23). This was unlike any other maritime cultural landscape in Shetland. Whalsay fishermen remained tied to the land, and still effectively under the paternalism of their Laird until the start of the 20th Century. A Burra skipper shrewdly commented:

The Burra men... were fishermen, they had no crofts and that drove them on. A lot of Whalsay fishermen had crofts so they could fish for so long and they could live for so long on their crofts. But if you were a fisherman.. you had to be a fisherman... you had to go ahead.⁴

This focus on fisheries meant that by the 1930s Smith claims that the Burra fishing fleet had “reached the peak of its development” (Smith, 1966: 31). Although these were years of depression, Burra weathered the difficulties fairly well. By 1938 it fostered around 25 first class (over 45ft keel) herring vessels of which five were steam drifters. During the immediate post war years in common with the rest of Shetland, Burra experienced a boom in investment in new vessels and although the industry as a whole contracted, investment continued throughout the 1950s.

Purse seining

During the 1960s and 1970s Burra did not invest in the new purse seine technology and this was for one primary reason: the maritime cultural landscape fundamentally changed in 1971 through the building of a bridge. Suddenly Burra no longer relied so heavily on the sea for transport and livelihood. People could easily commute to Shetland's main island and increasingly took advantage of the opportunity for different types of employment. The bridge coincided with the beginning of oil operations as construction began on a very large oil terminal in the north of Shetland in 1973. Well-paid jobs, often those which required fishermen's skills like engineering and tug-boat work, were thereafter available. In 1971, 107 of Burra's 180 men of working age depended on fishing as their main occupation. By 1978, the number had fallen to 87, while the number of men of working age had increased to 280 (Byron, 1986:35). Thus the percentage of fishermen as part of the total male working population had fallen from around 60% to 30% in just seven years.

It would be simplistic to entirely attribute the decline in fisheries to the fixed link to the Shetland mainland. Socio-economic factors also dissuaded fishermen from the industry and from investing in purse seining. Burra fishermen at the time were following a strategy of "minimum risk" (Byron 1986: 36). Byron highlights poor whitefish prices that had negatively affected the industry, and significantly, precluded re-investment in vessels. Further, the abandonment of fishing was encouraged by the existing vessel ownership structures. As Goodlad writes the "locus of power and authority" was vested in the older generation, who have been keen to retain the drift net (Goodlad, 1975: 81). Further, it would have been the younger generation, according to Rogers' model of technological diffusion, who would have been the most likely to be the early adopters of new technology (Rogers, 2003). This generation was however mostly stuck in a queue for shares, waiting for older fishermen to drop out, and reluctant to buy a new boat outright (Byron, 1987). Being excluded from vessel ownership gave few assets to invest and fewer ties to the fishing industry, meaning that shore-based work was all the more attractive. Another social factor was the lack of a successful local pattern or model for the Burra fishermen to follow. 'Adalla' was generally seen as a failure, while 'Wavecrest' fared much better, it is fair to say she was not a runaway success. In contrast, the first Whalsay purser, 'Serene', was highly successful. In addition, Burra did not have a strong history of education for fishermen. Larger vessels would need higher 'tickets' and ticketed men were not particularly numerous in Burra at the time (see Figure 4).

Historical factors also played a role. As shown above, Burra had traditionally been the leading area in the drift net industry of Shetland; the method had served the area well and helped to make it a relatively prosperous place. It did not share with Whalsay an equally dismal memory of the 1930s herring fishery. By 1968 Burra still had twelve large dual purpose vessels. The size, success and esoteric nature of the fishery (typified by patrilineal inheritance of shares and nets) discouraged adoption of a new technology. The second historical factor is the strong tradition of summer (herring) and winter (demersal) fisheries; this gave two strings to the Burra fishermen's bow. Should one not be especially remunerative, the other might compensate. Thus the natural reaction when faced with ever-declining yields from herring, as they experienced after 1970, was to focus wholly on whitefish. In contrast, Whalsay had a much stronger tradition of summer herring fishing and winter agriculture, given that they were more usually tied to the land. For all these reasons, the Burra fishers did not widely adopt the purse seining technique. Instead Burra fishers persevered with the drift net the longest. Thereafter

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there was a focus on demersal fishing, due in part to the close proximity of the Burra haaf whitefish grounds. When a new Highland and Islands Development Board (HIDB) grant and loan scheme was introduced during the 1970s four new whitefish vessels were ordered within months of its inception (Byron, 1987). This was a decisive step as Burra thereafter invested in whitefish vessels exclusively, albeit in a contracted fishing industry given the link to the mainland.

b Whalsay

Whalsay is an island off the east coast of the Mainland of Shetland (see Figure 1). It covers an area of 7.6 square miles, and is the sixth largest of the Shetland Islands. Its position, on the east coast of Shetland puts it central to the movements of the herring shoals around the isles. While there are good demersal grounds nearby, the west coast Burra grounds are more prolific. The landscape is typical of Shetland; a peaty upland with arable land found near the coast. Unlike the rest of Shetland there are no real inlets meaning that there are only two harbours, neither of which offer excellent anchorages. However, these proved adequate until the major expansion of the fishing fleet fairly recently. Fishing activity, especially pelagic fishing, has been central to making life on Whalsay viable, and this has been re-enforced by historical factors.



Figure 3. Men carrying Mrs Anne Bruce, wife of Laird Robert Bruce of Symbister, on a sedan chair. c. 1890s. (Source: Shetland Museum and Archives, NE02983)

While the whole of Shetland had been at one time or another under the distinctive system of land tenure and debt bondage mentioned above, the Whalsay example was a microcosm; an extreme and enduring example of almost complete dominance of the tenantry by the landowners. Central in Whalsay's history are the Bruces of Symbister. Remarkably, Whalsay was under the same family's direct ascendancy for some 340 years (c. 1570s-1910s). This family owned most of the island for the majority of this period, plus many lands elsewhere. The Bruces' of Symbister were thus one of the most

enduring and notorious dynasties in Shetland history. By all accounts the Bruces' reign was absolute (see Figure 3.) Naturally fishing activity was exclusively organised by the Laird himself and any disobedience or disagreement often led to banishment from the isle. Significant change came in 1886 with the Crofters Act, which gave security of tenure and the right to rent assessments. When around 1922 the Symbister estate went bankrupt some Whalsay people bought their crofts outright but Whalsay did not immediately prosper. Cohen highlights the fact that crofts granted by the Lairds were "too small to yield their entire subsistence needs, rendering [Whalsay inhabitants] dependent upon local employment" (1989: 69). The largest employer was the herring industry, however the fleet had fallen from 30 large herring boats employing 210 men to just 7 large boats and 49 men by 1935 (Manson's Almanac, 1935). As well as the 49 fishers, at least 20 men were employed in the combined ancillary trades for the herring fishing: flitters, labourers and coopers. In addition there were 75 gutters. Thus, out of the total population of 950, only 146 were employed in the herring fishery and it should be emphasised that this only gave employment for a short summer season. Further, the contracted industry did not necessarily concentrate earnings in fewer vessels. Onshore investors still played a prominent role during the 1930s; in 1934 Hay and Co still owned two first class vessels outright, and held a share in another (Manson's Almanac, 1936). Of the 30-45 ft keel class, three more vessels were owned wholly by Hay and Co. This stands in sharp contrast to Burra where onshore investors were rarer; only one vessel over 30 ft had an onshore investor in 1934. To make matters worse, the herring fishing during the 1930s was generally poor. One man remembered, probably apocryphally, that one boat caught just three baskets of herring for an entire summer season (SMAA, SA 3/4/3). Unlike Burra, Whalsay had a very small whitefish industry, and practically no other local industries. This being the case, many men went away to the merchant navy, either for the winter or often more permanently. In summation, Whalsay during the 1930s was in a severely depressed economic state and still very reliant on minimally remunerative summer herring fishing.

The twin pillars of fishing and crofting remained of paramount importance into the post World War Two period, both as economic realities, and what Cohen classifies as symbols on Whalsay's boundaries. The very depressed state of the fishing during the 1930s began to be turned around in the post-War period. The same forces still impelled men to fish; lack of alternative employment, the paucity and poverty of the land, and tradition. New local and national subvention encouraged the industry too. By 1965 Whalsay had eight large fishing vessels and significantly, one vessel still only fished in summer, leaving the winter clear for other activities especially croft work. This again underlines the different maritime cultural landscapes of the two islands, with a greater emphasis on crofting in Whalsay. Indeed, even in 1968 40% of Whalsay fishermen had crofts or crofting connections, compared with 25% in Burra (SMAA, D28/13/6/1/4).

Purse seining/pelagic trawling

Examining the maritime cultural landscape of Whalsay from the 1960s onwards illustrates how it impacted the development of the emergent pelagic industry. At the outset, it should be emphasised that Whalsay had a very distinctive culture, shaped by centuries of utter economic dependence. There was very little out-migration, and local endogamy was high. 'Insular' would not be an unfair label. Cohen, even in the 1980s wrote of "a sense of rootedness, of belonging, as if people were as immovably and inherently part of the island as the very features of the landscape" (1989:3). It should also be re-iterated that fishing was key to the Whalsay identity. As Cohen comments, "da fishin' is an essential referent of collective identity in Whalsay and therefore, a

prominent landmark on its boundary” (ibid: 149). He goes on to call it “an historical anchor, now immersed in volatile water, whose line is attached to the past” (ibid: 116). Apostle et al. expand on this idea: ‘fisheries are cultural “containers” carrying and protecting specific technologies, organisational forms, institutional knowledge and identities with strong roots in history’ (Apostle et al, 1998: 7). Further, the ‘boundary’ of fishing was also strengthened by the fact that once a fishing career was embarked upon, it was unusual to leave it. Indeed, the Whalsay men would not have had much experience or qualifications to do so. A 1968 survey found that only 12% of Whalsay fishermen had ever had shore-based employment. The same survey found that none of Whalsay’s 150 fishermen had pursued education past the age of 14, which could only be done in Lerwick. Should the fishing fail, it was a very real possibility that people would be forced to leave the island. Thus, the cessation of commercial fishing would both erode the Whalsay identity, and moreover threaten the very survival of the community. In short, the knock-on effect of a failed fishing industry would erode all that was ‘Whalsay.’

Two possible threats to the Whalsay identity and community became apparent in the 1960s and 1970s. First, in a similar vein to the Burra bridge, a ‘ro-ro’ (ie ‘roll on, roll off’) ferry began operating to Whalsay in 1975. Obviously the change in Whalsay was much less dramatic; it remained an island. However, the ferry did allow Whalsay people to commute to work on the mainland, usually either in the Sullom Voe Oil Terminal or in Lerwick. Although it is difficult to quantify, Cohen remarks that as distance and remoteness declines, ‘symbolic fortifications’ are re-enforced. As he writes “this process must have logically intensified in the years since the 1970s” (Cohen, 1989:11). People did leave the fishing, despite the limitations mentioned above, but it is suggested that the fishing took on an even more prominent role in the Whalsay psyche.

The purse seine method introduced in the 1960s was a threat to the Whalsay community due to the inherent competition that the method brought to the established drift net fishing. Especially after 1970, the method certainly adversely affected the local drift net fleet. However, the new fishery was also an opportunity to bring longevity and prosperity to the island. As well as this fortifying effect on the Whalsay identity and community, there were a number of reasons why Whalsay fishermen took this opportunity and thereafter were so successful.

Firstly, investment in new fishing technology was in keeping with the mood of optimism and pragmatism apparent in Whalsay during the 1970s. The local economy had been boosted by public works schemes like the construction of mains water during the 1950s and a breakwater and roads in the 1960s. Good earnings through both the herring fishery, and tripping whitefish to Aberdeen had also benefitted the Whalsay community. By the 1970s Thomson called Whalsay, “one of the most progressive places’ with its own local Development Council, a co-operative store, golf course, yacht slipway, fish factories, net factory and crofting co-operative” (Thomson, 1983: 332). This stands in sharp contrast to Burra, where the fishermen were described as ‘more diffident and conservative’ compared to the ‘dynamism and confidence that pervades the community of Whalsay’ (Goodlad, 1979: 109). Linked to this point is the idea that Whalsay did not regard the past with such reverence as other fishing communities. To qualify, this does not mean the islanders disregarded their heritage; rather they shared an eagerness to progress rather than persevere with an outdated practice or technology. A prime example of this would be the willingness to invest in new vessels rather than stick with an old technique (drift netting) out of a sense of duty to tradition or to the past. This also

links into the theme set out above, of the importance of the survival of the community as emphasised by Cohen.

Second, it is suggested that a greater degree of self-reliance was evident in Whalsay; the islanders being suspicious of outside involvement and reluctant to invite it. Historical factors have informed this, indeed Cohen directly links this suspicion of the external to the past:

[Whalsay's] folk history is largely the history of oppression; by the Scots lairds; by the press gang; by the fishing merchants; and now that ruthlessness has given way to incompetence, by the 'authorities' - outside agencies of all kinds. (Cohen, 1989: 35).

A prime example of this 'incompetence' was the bitter experience of the 'hungry thirties.' The Council was heavily criticised, and when in 1939 their rates were to be increased it was noted:

There is no place in Great Britain where they got as little in return for their money as in Whalsay. They had no lighting, sewage, scavenging or other public services. The roads were often in a disgraceful state. (Unattributed, 1939: 5).

This 'boundary' in the Whalsay psyche remained evident in the fishing industry. Despite some outside subvention, such as grants and loans, local initiative and drive remained of prime importance during the investment in the new pursuing technology. It is illuminating to compare this attitude to the immediate post-War milieu in Shetland. In 1946 an editorial in *The Shetland Times* referring to the herring industry read:

We seek the Kingdom of Heaven from without, not from within ourselves... If Shetland wants a real share in 'Scotland's greatest enclave' we should have to work for it. It won't come from the outside. (Unattributed, 1945: 2)

This emphasises the position of Whalsay as 'Old Shetland' in microcosm. The same themes and questions of isolation, outside involvement and local drive are all apparent. Investment in new fishing technology was pragmatic, forward-looking and self-relying - all prevailing attitudes at the time.

Third, a factor which allowed investment in the new vessels, and an advantage which Whalsay had over Burra, was the high number of men with fishing qualifications which were required for larger fishing vessels. This has been almost totally attributed to the influence of a teacher named Jeanette Williamson. She began night classes in 1965 and her first small group significantly included D. Hutchison, a prominent pelagic skipper. During her years teaching, Williamson helped around 80 fishermen gain tickets, and although men from other areas did lodge in Whalsay to study, the local fishers were certainly the main beneficiaries. The years she taught between 1965 and 1973 could not have been better placed to create a group of well-educated and ticketed men to enter the emergent pelagic industry. This linked into a greater emphasis on seamanship training in Whalsay. For example in 1968 it was written that navigation was 'studied by everyone who has gone through the school in the last 20 years' (SMAA, D28/13/6/1/4). In Burra the same report noted: "navigation seems to have been studied intermittently at Hamnavoe... [and] it seems to have been taught rather perfunctorily." The effect is

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highlighted in a comparison of the number of ‘ticketed’ men in Whalsay and Burra (Figure 4). In Whalsay, 37 fishermen, representing 25% of the total fishermen had some type of certificate, which the report notes is “an unusually high” figure. Significantly, there were seven men with full skippers’ tickets. In comparison the figure for Burra - probably skewed due to only a representative sample being used - came in at 18%. The divergence continued after this survey was taken, as Mrs Williamson continued to teach for another five years. This difference goes some way to explain the different paths the islands took.

| | Burra | Whalsay |
|-----------------------------|-------|---------|
| Skipper (full) | 4 | 7 |
| Skipper (limited) | 2 | 0 |
| 2nd hand (full and special) | 5 | 4 |
| 2nd hand (special) | 6 | 25 |
| B.o.T radar | 0 | 1 |
| No qualification | 77 | 113 |

Figure 4. Fishermen’s qualifications, Burra and Whalsay c. 1968. Source: Shetland Museum and Archives, D28/13/6/1/4

Fourth, a desire to invest in pursers would have remained unfulfilled had the Whalsay fishermen not been in an economically strong position. Whalsay had a higher number of fishermen with an investment in the fishing operation. As shown in figure 5, 82 fishermen had shares in the fishing operation, compared with 56 in Burra. While proportionally this is roughly 50% in each, the higher figure for Whalsay gave more chance of investment by at least some of the fishermen.

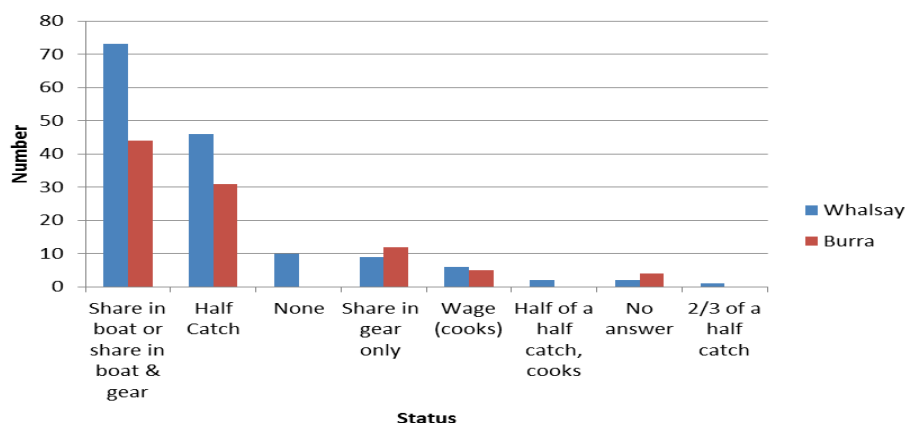


Figure 5. Whalsay fishermen by ownership/employment status, c. 1968. Source: SMAA, D28/13/6/1/4

In summation, there were five specific features of Whalsay’s maritime cultural landscape which encouraged the adoption of purse seining: the importance of fishing as a symbol and economic reality, a spirit of development and pragmatism, a self-reliant mentality,

the high number of ticketed men and the high number of men with investments in the fishing operation. The new technique was to a certain extent self-perpetuating. Whalsay men's early entrance into the pelagic sector, and their success, gave impetus and an example for others to follow. Good returns led to new vessels, there was a stock of men experienced in purse seining there, and it soon became engrained in the social fabric of the island.

In summation, an analysis of the maritime cultural landscapes of Burra and Whalsay illustrates some of the primary reasons why the former did not invest in the purse seining technology, while the latter did, and experienced great success.

Conclusion

Pope's maritime cultural landscape has been used as a holistic framework in which to describe the geographical, historical and social drivers of fisheries development in two islands of the Shetland archipelago. The reasons for the development of the pelagic industry in Whalsay, and the concentration on demersal fisheries in Burra have been highlighted with reference to their maritime cultural landscapes. Despite appearing very similar at the end of the 1960s, the maritime cultural landscapes of the two islands were in actual fact different, and these differences became stronger during the coming decades, not least due to building of the bridge to Burra. In combination with other socio-economic factors, the Burra fishing industry then contracted. In contrast, Whalsay became effectively a microcosm of the immediate post-War Shetland economy, heavily reliant on fisheries. The importance of fishing was intensified further by being both a bearer of Whalsay identity and a facilitator of the community's continued existence. Linked to this, Whalsay appeared pragmatic and united during the 1970s and eager to develop her fisheries. The high number of ticketed men in Whalsay, many with investments in the fishing operations, invested in the new purse seine technology. In sum, this case study provides another contribution to the debate on new "ontologies, epistemologies and methods" in island studies. It recognises the validity of the existing maritime cultural landscape framework whilst integrating some of the rhetoric from Hayward's aquapelagic assemblage literature. It is suggested that the aquapelago concept would do well to place a greater emphasis on history as a dynamic and cumulative force in its own right.

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End Notes:

¹ Map contains Ordnance Surey data – Crown copyright and database right 2012.

² E. Simpson, interview with P. Thomson c1977, transcript in Shetland Museum and Archives (ref SA 3/4/3).

³ G. Hunter, interview with P. Thomson c1977, transcript in Shetland Museum and Archives (ref SA 3/4/13).

⁴ G. Hunter op cit.

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