

Culture



Reginald BYRON, *Sea Change: A Shetland Society, 1970-1979*, St. John's : Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1986. 161 pages. \$12.00

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Reginald BYRON, *Sea Change: A Shetland Society, 1970-1979*, St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1986. 161 pages. \$12.00.

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It is good to read about a peripheral locality which is not in the final stages of terminal incorporation or marginalisation with all its attendant symptoms—massive emigration, mental illness/alcoholism, bachelor households, demoralised people, growing poverty, etc. I suspect, however, that Burra—an island of the Shetlands which only since 1971 has been connected to mainland Shetland by a new road bridge—was different not simply because it was a unique ethnographic situation, but because the researcher/author had a sophisticated view of historical process and the role which particular localities play within their particular, as well as their macro, histories. Because of this, Byron has written a solid ethnography about a locality in which continuous change keeps reproducing, in new ways and novel forms, local society and culture. He does not fall into any of the theoretical pitfalls of dependency theory when analysing the local level; thus, although a periphery, Burra is not a culture or society of victims, just of vibrant people making real decisions and making do, and often, with the right socio-political and economic conjunctures, doing it well—just as they always have done. There is no dying tradition, just its continuous re-creation at various times: “change has always been part of their society” (p. 155). It is this description of change which, through five chapters, forms the basis for a final analysis of the most recent changes wrought by the bridge and North Sea oil.

In the Introduction, Byron gives a brief outline of his theoretical perspective. It is not a heavily-laden treatise but a straightforward, easy to read statement of his view of change and the individual's role within it, the nature of locality and how he has bounded it, and the relation between agency, society and culture. In Chapter 2, he describes the physical setting and the dominance of fishing as a mode of livelihood. He provides the historical background to fishing. He concentrates on the period after 1890 and on the continuous changes which have occurred in its technology and its social organisation, in demography and in the decline of crofting—all through the economic ups and downs of the twentieth century. He stops in 1970 to describe the population structure and livelihood at that time; he uses household income data to analyse the possible livelihood combinations available (fishing, crofting, knitting, sale of labour) according to life cycle criteria.

In Chapter 3, “Burra and Beyond,” he describes Burra's wider social context: how “the institutions of the state are represented in Burra” and “how this has changed in the 1970s” (p. 49). He covers local politics, education, health and social welfare, the law, housing and planning, public works and services, taxes and the rules and subsidies affecting crofting and fishing. His conclusion: “Bureaucratic institutions enter into many spheres of social life in Burra, yet there is no single, uniform boundary between ... Burra and ‘the state’ ” (p. 67). Ultimately, “Burra society has been homogenised into a sort of generalised British rural culture” (p. 68).

In Chapter 4, he describes for the 1970s, fishing (shipboard roles, relations within the crew and between crews), boat ownership and its basis in kinship, the “family crew” and the transmission of “patrimonies.” All these, in the 1970s, were the response to post war conditions: technological change and the system of government grants. Chapter 5 continues with a description of leadership and decision-making in the fishing crew, the role of the “skipper,” technological innovation and the nature of “luck”—all linked to the corporate basis of boat ownership and kin based crews. He uses comparative materials from other fishing studies in Newfoundland, Norway, other Shetland Islands, and Scotland to illustrate; and this is extremely helpful in highlighting the points he makes.

In Chapter 6, Byron discusses “A Society Transformed” since the bridge and the oil—changes in fishing and its social organisation (family crews are finished), in social preferences and economic strategies which households have available, in demographic factors (newcomers and returned migrants) and, as a result, in “the conceptual basis of community.”

In all, it is a very good book. It reads well and its theoretical base of continuous process and growth makes it ideal for courses in Introductory Anthropology, Western Europe and fishing localities. However, as an anthropologist working in the same theoretical vein, I wish Byron had written a more “scholarly account” by providing more detailed analyses of such important issues as inheritance, decision-making patterns, the recruitment of crews, the nature of social networks, etc. For example, it would have been useful if he had provided details on precisely how inheritance of fishing patrimonies worked (or didn't) and on the nature of socio-economic cleavages in the early 1970s which he too often ignored by linking somewhat mechanistically residence, crew membership, kinship and shared norms. Although these problems make the book less useful for the “professional,” the book is still worth a read for those working in Byron's ethnographic and/or theoretical area(s).