

Ernest Marwick the folklorist

Public talk by Dr Ragnhild Ljosland, presented at the Orkney Science Festival 8/9/2015.

I have been asked to speak about Ernest Marwick's work as a folklorist. Not to be confused, of course, with Hugh Marwick, who also collected a lot of Orkney folklore, some decades prior to Ernest's work.

We have already heard a bit about Ernest Marwick's life and that he worked for the two Orkney newspapers, The Orkney Herald where he was on the editorial staff, and The Orcadian, and wrote as a columnist and feature writer. And in these capacities he found an outlet for his personal research on Orkney and Shetland folklore, customs and traditions.

As part of his work for the Orkney Herald he ran a column which he called Sooan Sids. If you are wondering what that name means, it refers to a type of foodstuff that was common on Orkney farms in the past: When you had made your flour, you were left with the husks – or sids – and inside these husks there was still a little bit of food which could be utilised by soaking the husks in water until you got a thick liquid a bit like pancake-mixture at the bottom. The remaining shells of husk were sieved out and the result was a thick and yoghurt-like substance that could be eaten or used in baking. This stuff was called Sooans. So by the name of the column, Ernest Marwick implied that his bits and pieces of stories and folky ways were perhaps like sooan sids: Not regarded as very valuable in general but when you choose to value them they can become something good. You could say that he made gold rings out of scattered gold dust. In the Sooan Sids column he wrote about all sorts of things that he was thinking about and interested in, including little pieces of information about traditional life in Orkney, which might not seem much when you see them one at a time but as a collection is of immense value and very enjoyable to read.

Later, Ernest Marwick also went into radio broadcasting, where he was popular with audiences in Orkney, Shetland and Caithness and sometimes even on national broadcasts in Scotland.

Ernest Marwick also wrote many pamphlets and a great number of articles and talks as a freelance writer and lecturer, and we can now enjoy a collection of these in the edited volumes An Orkney Anthology volumes one and two.

In his work, you can really see the genuine interest, commitment and love he has for the isles and for his material. He spent a lifetime looking for these "sids" of information. And I know how difficult it sometimes is, because I've just spent some weeks this summer travelling around in Orkney speaking to folk and trying to persuade them to share local stories and memories with me as part of a short project we are doing at the Centre for Nordic Studies. Some people I have met have absolutely loved it and are brimming with stories and memories to share, while others don't believe that their knowledge or memories are important. Their response is: "But you don't want to hear about that, surely." I am sure that Ernest Marwick was met with quite a lot of "But you don't want to hear about that, surely" in his lifetime! But he didn't let that put him off. He wanted to hear it, and he persevered until people understood that he was actually interested in hearing what they had to say.

He was not the man for a quick visit to an island over a few days or weeks, either – as in a kind of in-data gathering – out – write it up sort of way. No, he kept collecting through his entire life. It was truly a lifetime commitment and something to look up to for us younger researchers.

In addition to his years and years of speaking with people and listening to their stories, Ernest Marwick also went through tons of archive material with a skilled eye and an enormous patience. It's

the sort of thing which professors have had many years of training in, but Ernest Marwick had learnt himself because interest led him to it.

In this way, he revived sources that could easily have been sitting in archive files untouched for many more years if it hadn't been for him. For example, he edited the work of the 19th century self-taught gentleman folklorist Walter Traill Dennison from Sanday, which was published in 1961 as *Orkney Folklore and Traditions*. Ernest Marwick's successor Tom Muir has continued this work, and also published more of Traill Dennison's material in a way that is friendly to a modern reader.

Ernest Marwick's most important book on folklore, I think, is "The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland", which was published in 1975, two years before he died. In it, he systematises what a lifetime of research had taught him and presents it beautifully, systematically and in a lively and enjoyable way. He was also in correspondence with folklorists outside of the UK, so he could compare the stories and motifs he found here with those for example of Scandinavia, and this comparative element makes his research especially exciting.

I am now going to share with you some of the folklore that he presented in this work.

First he describes the kingdoms of the sea. For people living in an archipelago, the sea is what dark forests and wild mountains are to people on the mainland: An unchartered kingdom which we only visit the outskirts of, containing beasts and beings unexplained by the science of zoology.

The Stoor Worm is one of these. This is an enormous sea serpent, whose dead body and teeth formed the North Atlantic Isles, including Orkney, in the story of Assipattle and his defeat of the Stoor Worm, as I'm sure many of you have heard. The Vikings had a tendency to call snake-like creatures of any size a "worm", including dragons and sea serpents, so the name Stoor Worm means "great serpent". There are several stories of dragons and other "worms" in Norse mythology, but Ernest Marwick connected the Stoor Worm with the Midgardsorm, or World Serpent, which in Norse mythology lives in the ocean at the end of the world, surrounding the world like a big circle. When it starts stirring, Ragnarok the end of the world is near. The Orcadian sea serpent was last seen in Swanbister Bay in the 1830s, and again in the Shapinsay Sound in August 1910 – sadly, an attempt by my husband and sons to fish for the Stoorworm in the Shapinsay Sound last year was unsuccessful, although one of our boys observed that something had eaten the bait of chicken.

Another dangerous beast is the Nuckelavee. Ernest Marwick, quite correctly I think, connects this being with Nøkk which is believed to haunt the dark deep lakes of Norway. It can take the form of a horse and tempt people to ride it, in which case it dives back in the water with the rider. This story is known in lots of versions in other parts of Scotland and Britain as well, as the water horse or kelpie, and I've also heard names resembling Nøkk in dialects of English. In Shetland it is called a Njuggle. In Orkney, the Nuckelavee's human-like and horse-like appearances were combined into a grotesque horse-man hybrid, where the horse and rider were joined like conjoined twins, and skinless! I would be very frightened if I met this thing!

Other folklore creatures of the sea include the Finn Folk, who reign in the glorious undersea kingdom of Finkolkaheem and on enchanted islands, and the selkies or seal people – sometimes these two categories are not clearly distinguished, it depends who you ask, but Ernest Marwick maintains they are different breeds.

The Finfolk can sometimes appear on land in Orkney and take people with them to a magical island. The selkie women come ashore and dance, shedding their skins. If a man is quick enough to hide a sealskin, he may marry a selkie wife, although she is ultimately destined to leave her husband and

children when she finds the hidden sealskin. This story is common all along the coasts of Ireland and Scotland, but not so common in Scandinavia.

Orkney and Shetland have something that the other selkie areas don't have, though, and that is the male shape-shifter selkie, the Great Selkie, also known as the Great Selkie of Sule Skerry. He seduces island women and fathers children on land, but will not be domesticated in the way that selkie wives are.

At the bottom of the Pentland Firth there are two ogresses, called Fenia and Menia, turning a great rotary quern named Grotti, grinding out salt for the ocean and thereby creating the great swelkie as the sea runs through the hole in the quern. This story is recorded already in the Edda by the medieval folklorist Snorri Sturluson from Iceland, but Ernest Marwick managed to find a local version surviving in Fair Isle, where the ogresses are known as Grotti Finni and Grotti Minnie.

Giants and trolls also roam on land in the isles, and especially from Shetland Ernest Marwick collected many troll-related place-names and stories and local beliefs. There were large giants such as Cubbie Roo from Wyre, and small hill-trows like the ones that lived in a mound at Huip in Stronsay. He even recorded names for these smaller trolls, like Peesteraleeti, Tuna Tivla, Gimp, Kork and Tring. They could be helpful if you were friendly to them, but also cause chaos and illness, such as through trow-shot, or by swapping a healthy child for a sick trow child. Even today if we are feeling a bit unwell we can say we are feeling trowy.

Again, we can connect Orkney beliefs with Scandinavian folklore, and of course with Scottish mound-lore as well. The "hogboon" who lived in Hellihowe and the "Hug Boy" in Maeshowe, for example, have developed from the "haugbúi" that medieval Scandinavians believed in, which originated from an ancestor cult at burial mounds.

Orkney folklore had "gyrekarlings", "gyres" and "gyros", all from the Old Norse name for giantess: Gýgr – according to Marwick she was a "dark repellent monster with many horns and several tails".

In between the world of the supernatural and the human are the witches – humans who through folk belief had taken on supernatural qualities. Ernest Marwick did a great job not only in documenting folk belief about witchcraft, but also the individual fates of around 70 people accused and brought to trial for practicing this craft. One of these cases, now in the Marwick Collection in the Orkney Archive, is the case of James Knarstoun (a male witch) who was brought to trial because he had "used three hot stones (one for the ebb, one for the hill and one for the kirk yard) and placed them in the lintel of the door then said words as a cure. Water taken from St. Mary's well at midnight. Used molten lead or wax put in cold water to divine. Used an oil made from meiklewort (deadly nightshade) to cure." So we can actually learn quite a lot about folk beliefs and practices from studying these witchcraft trials.

Some of these were the victims of pure malign intentions from other members of the community. But what I find interesting in addition to the individual cases, is also how the community thought about magical and medicinal practices. Even people who did not think of themselves as practicing witchcraft as such still had magical thinking, so that things had to be done in a certain way. For example, you always had to turn your plough and your boat sunwise, as turning it the other way, widdershins, would be very bad luck.

In the 19th century, there were Orkney "witches" who ran a fine business selling good weather to sailors. Others were practicing what we might now call folk medicine: Ernest Marwick records, for example, some cures for common ailments which to a modern eye seem quite comical: If you have a

bleeding nose, plug it with fresh pig dung. A bruise? Cow dung. Smallpox? Try boiling sheep dung in milk. So these seem funny, but as Marwick remarks, there were also herbal remedies with a genuine effect, and a great knowledge among people of plants and what they can be used for.

Did you know that there's a water spring in Stronsay which cures all illness except the Black Death? According to Marwick you can find it welling up among the rocks at Mill Bay, and its name is Kildinguie. Are there any Stronsay folk here today, who could tell me exactly where it is? I was looking at this map of Stronsay, and there is one well marked at Mill Bay, just here, but it has no name marked on the map. It is on the shore, below a chapel and the proximity to the chapel makes me suspect that it might be the right one. The name Kildinguie says it all, really: It is Old Norse and means "the good spring". Marwick records that pilgrims came to it from Scandinavia – but he doesn't say anything about a connection with any saint as for example we have with Manswell in Birsay taking its healing powers from St Magnus. However, again the nearby chapel makes me suspect that what folklore here records is a distant memory of an old pagan site which has then been a Christian spring associated with a saint or the chapel, and is now remembered as a healing spring. Marwick says that if you drank the water along with eating some dulse growing at nearby Geo Odin it would cure every malady – except, as I said, the Black Death.

So folklore was, and to a certain extent still is, a big part of Orkney life and the daily routines of people through their work and through their life. Ernest Marwick in his book lays out a beautiful chapter he calls Island Calendar, running through the cycle of the Orkney year from January to December, with all its rituals, great and small. For the month of September, he writes:

"September was the harvest month. All the more picturesque customs connected with it have been forgotten, and have to be searched for in old books and newspaper files. If the weather was good, farmers hoped to have all their corn cut by Michaelmas (Old Style). At the aff-shearing (end of the reaping) the Orkney heuk-hands (reapers) were given a simple little feast known as the heuk butter or cutting butter. In Shetland they had to wait until the ensuing Sunday for their reward – the aff-shearing mill gruel. At Michaelmas, all those who had sheep selected a Mickalmas ram" from the flock. The mutton was eaten with burstin (parched corn) and 'black' oatmeal puddings, made with blood. Herding bannocks were prepared at the end of harvest (S). If there was not a large "Norway timmer" plate in the house, then a kettle was used instead to bake the bannocks in, and they were so large that each bannock served its owner for breakfast for several days. At all large farms there was a harvest home, called in Orkney Muckle Supper."

I have given you a tiny taste from the rich treasury of folklore collected by Ernest Marwick and I am very honoured to have been asked to come here today to celebrate his work.