

## Up-Helly-Aa: Custom, Culture and Community in Shetland

**Review Number:**

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**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 January, 2000

**Author:**

Callum Brown

**Date of Publication:**

1998

**Pages:**

219pp.

**Publisher:**

Manchester University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Manchester

**Reviewer:**

Doreen Waugh

Callum Browns excellent book on the historical origins and contemporary significance of Up-helly-aa, Shetlands winter fire festival, has recently won The Frank Watson Prize awarded by the University of Guelph, Canada, for being the best book of its year on Scottish history and no comment here will detract in any way from that impressive achievement; superlatives come to the reviewers mind throughout. *UP-HELLY-AA: Custom, Culture and Community in Shetland* is a book which will appeal to a wide range of readers but, although presenting his work in such a way as to guarantee popularity, particularly among Shetlanders at home and abroad, the writer makes no sacrifices in terms of academic rigour. Sources cited at the end of the book (pp. 201-209) demonstrate that, in addition to reading very widely on the subject of calendar customs, Brown worked closely with knowledgeable people in the Shetland community and made thorough use of primary sources housed in the Shetland Archives in Lerwick, guided, as he generously recognises, by the local archivist, Brian Smith, who has always had a great interest in Up-helly-aa. Brown, takes the subject beyond the merely local, however, and uses the topic of Up-helly-aa to guide his reader towards a wider understanding of calendar customs and their significance. At times, he seems to be historian, anthropologist and sociologist rolled into one.

Brown is, however, principally a historian and it is the role of the historian to interpret and translate for the non-historians among us and he does that admirably. In fact, even the Shetlanders among Browns readers (and I speak as one of them) will find, after reading the book, that their understanding of their local community and of the place of Up-helly-aa in Shetlands social and historical scheme of things is vastly enhanced. It is the kind of book which often provokes surprised recognition of the validity of the writers point about something which has been so much part of ones existence that it has been neglected at the cogitative level. Other points made by Brown may have been made before but are sharply articulated and brought to the readers attention afresh, as in the Preface to the book where the author states: But tradition is a slippery eel of a concept, for it is an innately contemporary thing. Tradition is only tradition if it has resonance in the present day.

How true and what good justification for opening the book with a chapter entitled The festival of Up-helly-aa in the 1990s and having as its penultimate chapter a wider look at the Twentieth-century festival. In between these two studies of the contemporary festival(s), there are four further chapters with the headings: Understanding custom; Misrule without custom: Lerwick 1625-1800; Mischief and misrule at Yule, 1800-72; The birth of Up-helly-aa, 1873-1906. The deliberate verbal links, here underlined, between the first three of these chapter headings direct the reader towards an understanding that the symbolic birth of Up-helly-aa which took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, could only have happened after the lengthy period of gestation described in the preceding chapters, although it should be remembered that the newly born infant is never an exact replica of its cultural antecedents. In the final, summative chapter of the book, Brown returns to his recurrent theme, placed in central position in the final chapter heading: Community, custom and history.

The argument in each of these chapters is backed up by usefully detailed notes and references which, to this reviewer's satisfaction, appear at the end of each chapter rather than as footnotes or endnotes to the book as a whole. Before turning to the content of the chapters, readers should turn to the start of the book where there is both a clear map of Shetland on which the various locations where Up-helly-aa festivals now take place are shown and, also greatly to this reviewer's satisfaction, a small inset showing locations of other fire festivals and placing Shetland in its true geographical position in the North Atlantic; a small point, but significant as far as Shetland readers are concerned. (The typographical convenience of placing Shetland in a box in the Moray Firth rankles with Shetlanders and one can imagine that people living on the Moray Firth littoral may feel the same.) Also at the start of the book is some information on the Julian and Gregorian calendars which is essential to an understanding of Shetland's winter festivals in a wider sense, speaking as someone who had the childhood advantage of celebrating Christmas twice in Sand, Shetland, in the late 1950s: New Christmas (December 25<sup>th</sup>) and Old Christmas (January 5<sup>th</sup>). Brown suggests that celebration of Old Christmas had died out by the 1930s and that would certainly have been true of Lerwick, but old customs lingered in some families on the west side of Shetland.

One comment which jarred slightly on first reading was made in the opening sentences of Chapter 1, where Brown is setting the Up-helly-aa scene as follows:

A night-time army of a thousand men march in lavish costumes of masquerade with huge flaming torches, singing praise to medieval Norse heroes as they draw a Viking ship to its ceremonial funeral pyre. This pageant takes place in the 1990s in a highly sophisticated modern society, but it is a moving tableau of a world we have lost.

He returns to the same point on p. 16, where he phrases it thus:

The Lerwick Up-helly-aa, the Kirkwall Ba game, and the summer Common Ridings of the Border towns of Scotland join a rich variety of similar events in England and Wales as icons of a world we have lost. For those not within these communities, responses and reactions may be extremely varied.

It was only on reading the last sentence in the second extract above that I realised that the we of these statements does not include Shetlanders for whom Up-helly-aa does not symbolise a world we have lost, in spite of the apparent contradiction inherent in the antiquarian Norse pageantry of the Jarls squad.

The remainder of the book leads the general reader towards the intuitively understood position of the Shetland reader and Brown weaves his argument throughout the text, arriving, at the end of the first chapter, at the conclusion that to describe Up-helly-aa as a winter fire festival is to diminish its year-round symbolism. Indeed, to describe Up-helly-aa as a calendar custom lends it an inappropriate air, because it is not merely an event but a permanent community institution in some very modern ways (p. 17). At the end of the book, Browns conclusion is that It (the calendar custom) is not a window onto the past, but a window on the present which hides within it the kernel of the community (p.198), which is exactly what I would have said to counter his two opening statements underlined above, but would not have had Browns depth of knowledge on the subject to substantiate the argument.

In describing the permanence of the institution as part of the Shetland yearly calendar, Brown is certainly correct because, as he points out, preparations for the nens conclusion.

Brown scrutinises the work of folklorists such as Jessie Saxby in Shetland and rightly advises caution in the use of her material. The historian clearly distrusts the late 19<sup>th</sup> century folklorist who does not give fact and figure of the collecting situation, which makes the material collected less useful to the historian, but even Saxby and F. Marion McNeill, who used her work as a basis for her own commentary, as Brown points out, make clear that the actual activities of boat-burning and the songs that were sung were recent creations in Lerwicks Up-helly-aa (pp. 37-38). This cautious approach to the work of the folklorist is made all the more convincing because it is combined with a similarly cautious approach to the methodology used in the work of some historians who have examined calendar customs and Up-helly-aa in particular. I would praise Browns sensible conclusion that Continuities and discontinuities in the evolution of rituals emerge best from in-depth study on *individual* customs and its corollary that by far the best research on Up-helly-aa has been by Brian Smith (p.44), the local archivist, but would also say that Brown, the academic historian, in taking forward into this book the scholarly work of the local historian and by using the skills of the academic historian, has added a further dimension which is why this is such a successful study. If co-operation of this nature could happen more frequently many superb community studies would emerge.

The approach of the social anthropologist is also considered by Brown, with particular reference to the symbolic anthropological approach of Anthony Cohen whose 1987 study of Whalsay in Shetland is a masterly work. The argument that the importance of symbolic expression of community increases as the actual geo-social boundaries of the community are undermined, blurred or otherwise weakened (p. 53) is relevant in the context of Shetlands recent oil developments. Up-helly-aa is, undoubtedly, a form of symbolic expression, but the teasing out of what it symbolises is a complex matter, ably addressed by Brown. He gives sympathetic consideration to the idea propounded by Bronwen Cohen and Peter Worsley that Up-helly-aa, with its racially-based Norse romanticism, promotes Shetland nationalism and encourages Shetlanders to feel that they are different from the outside world, but ultimately dismisses it, too, as being only part of the story and, from this reviewers perspective, a very unconvincing part.

It is in the third chapter that attention is focused on Lerwicks past, as part of the process of understanding its present. Borrowing no doubt from Jakobsen, Brown gives the accurate etymology *Leir-vík* (albeit without the acute accent!), from Norn mud bay as his subtitle, but makes no further comment, which seems a little odd from the perspective of an onomastician who would have liked to read more about why Brown thought it important enough to cite an etymology as a chapter sub-heading but then failed to justify its prominence. The inhabitants of Lerwick, after all, were probably operating in a Scots-speaking linguistic environment and the topographical name must have been coined at an earlier period.

Lerwick, as Brown points out, started life as a trading settlement in the seventeenth century with a seasonally fluctuating population but Browns speculation that, in winter, while population was low and restricted to full-time inhabitants of Lerwick, there might have been some form of celebration in traditional island ways to lighten the dark hours must remain as a question, without any evidence to support it. We are pointed towards one of the first references to Lerwick in 1625, in the context of a complaint by Church of Scotland ministers to the wickednes of the place (p. 67) and this dichotomy bgh I rather like the image of a

cram (p. 159) of herring, I think it should be replaced by cran. These very small quibbles apart, however, Browns analysis of the development towards the present-day Up-helly-aa is admirable in its acuity and his description of the twentieth-century festival is detailed and accurate. It is fascinating to read a reconstruction of ones own past and to experience, as was said earlier, moments of startled recognition of buried memories of a spectacular scene observed some time ago.

It is, however, difficult to be appropriately neutral in commenting on historical reconstruction of ones own past and it is particularly difficult to adopt the global rather than the particular stance in response to comments made. For instance, it is irritating to hear that ones happy, clean and comfortable 1950s childhood was spent in a house unfit for human habitation, from the point of view of the 1990s historian (p. 160). All that can be said is that it did not seem so at the time. Reading this book about Up-helly-aa has, very occasionally, made me wonder whether history particularly social history is really about the past at all. Does the historian, in his reconstruction of the past, not have just as much to tell us about the time in which he lives, as about the past events which he is ostensibly describing? The question is, of course, asked by a reviewer whose own perceptions are coloured, among other things, by not being a historian by profession.

One further aspect of Up-helly-aa, emphasised by Brown, deserves mention in conclusion, because it is central to Browns presentation, and that is the aspect of cocking a snook, still evident in the Up-helly-aa Bill which is eagerly anticipated each year and which verges on the scurrilous but is generally taken in good part, although some must quail before reading its text. It is, however, almost an honour to be decried in the Bill, although sometimes the comments seem more than usually vitriolic. As already said, earlier in this review, one could argue that the most telling statement made by Brown is his comment that it is important to perceive that the calendar custom is an important phenomenon of industrial and post-industrial society and not just a hangover from a world we have lost. It is not a window onto the past, but a window on the present which hides within it the kernel of the community (p.198).

*Up-helly-aa: Custom, Culture and Community in Shetland* is an impressively scholarly work which, as stated at the start of this review, takes the subject of calendar customs beyond the merely local and if, in this review, concentration has been on the local, that is because the book has so much to say on the local level. All readers, interested in the wider topic of calendar customs and of Up-helly-aa as an example of these, will find this book both immensely informative and pleasurable to read.

The author declined to respond on this occasion.

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