Tuckwell’s offering is essentially a photo reprint of Fenton’s original 1978 study. Given this, it might be difficult to justify reprinting such a book. Yet according to the author, there is plenty good reason for reissuing *The Northern Isles*: ‘This book has been long out of print. Nevertheless it appears to have become something of a classic, and there is a continued demand for it’ (p. vi). Certainly many would concur, as *The Northern Isles* was the recipient of Sweden’s Däg Strömback Award.

Other reasons lend support to Tuckwell’s decision to reprint Fenton’s book, not the least being that the comparatively stark, denuded Northern Isles have often been overshadowed in print by Scotland’s more ‘glamorous’ locales. Thus books on the Highlands, Western Isles, and Lowland burghs and towns like Glasgow, Stirling, and Edinburgh may abound, but the same cannot be said for the Northern Isles. Perhaps adding to the prejudice is the fact that Orkney and Shetland are only part of Scotland by default. A decision to formally annex the two island chains came in 1472, after Christian I of Denmark and Norway pledged them temporarily in lieu of dowry payment for his daughter, who was betrothed to James III. Because Christian never secured the needed funds, the Northern Isles ever since have remained part of Scotland. Theoretically, however, ‘the deal is still good’, and according to Fenton (p.1) the islands’ return to the Scandinavian fold is occasionally mooted. (But would Orkney and Shetland be returned to Denmark, or to Norway?)

Being peripheral regions, Orkney and Shetland, as the subjects of critical writing, were perhaps a little too easily overlooked.
This has been somewhat mitigated by the current fascination with the alluring Picts and Vikings. As a spin-off of this preoccupation, the Northern Isles’ prehistoric and Norse ages have received ample attention, producing useful modern studies like those by Anna Ritchie, Colin Renfrew, Barbara Crawford, Chris Morris and Colleen Batey. Yet up-to-date writing going beyond the Viking period is rarer – William Thomson’s *History of Orkney* being one of the few. Within this category of far-reaching study, is also where Fenton’s tome might be found.

Unlike Thomson’s book, with its mainly chronological approach, *The Northern Isles* adopts primarily a thematic stance. The two studies differ on another level, as Fenton’s book is essentially a people’s history. In undertaking such an endeavour, the author adopts a wholly appropriate anthropological slant. When coupled with the extensive sources at his disposal, Fenton’s approach produces a full picture of life in the Isles from earliest times to the modern era. Scant are the usual topics discussed by historians, when considering these isles’ history. This volume is not the source to consult when seeking new insight into the Sinclair earls, the Hudson’s Bay Company, or Scapa Flow as berth to the Royal Navy’s Home Fleet. Similarly, readers curious about such elusive, and highly speculative, topics as the nature of Pictish life in these northern archipelagos, might not find full satisfaction. In fact, the Picts themselves warrant relatively slight attention in *The Northern Isles*, which is actually a bit of a relief, as studies devoted to them are not exactly rare these days.

Fenton prefers to deal with the readily discernible, and only rarely entertains speculation, such as when he suggests a peaceful co-existence between native Pict and incoming Viking (p.12). Still, ancient settlement does receive full consideration when certain issues are discussed. When contemplating the Isles’ grain and livestock types over the ages, Fenton relates that at Skara Brae, barley was grown (p. 332), while ‘rams and ewes of a breed not unlike the Soay sheep’ were also present (p.446).

Obviously, the main thrust of *The Northern Isles* is settlement and subsistence over a protracted period. Detailed discussion of major political events associated with the Northern Isles’ history

The Northern Isles is filled with the type of anecdotal evidence that brings to life the people of bygone Orkney and Shetland. For example in chapter 64, ‘Fishing Boats from Norway’, Fenton points out that owing to a scarcity of native wood, the Northern Isles long depended upon Norway not only for timber, but also such finished items as boats. Orkney was a little less dependent, since the handful of native trees there constituted a veritable forest, compared to Shetland. But this did not stop a rudimentary early modern boat building trade in Shetland, as unassembled vessels from Norway were finished locally. Orcadians were building boats as well, and on this subject, Fenton introduces a gem by relating the story of Patrick Fea of Sanday. According to his diary, partially reproduced in The Northern Isles, on 2 June 1770, Fea ‘Went to Savill and got wood for a Keel, Stern and Stem to my Boat’; while on 31 July ‘At the Smidie and got the last of my Ironwork made for my boat’ (p. 557). Truly, this is a remarkable window into a little studied aspect of northern culture, captured by Fenton.

Assessing change versus continuity over the ages is another strength of The Northern Isles. This is evident in the author’s discussion of the frequency of the longhouse, a specialised building combining dwellings for both human, and herd animal. Hence, certain Pictish homes at Buckquoy appear to incorporate a barn. But curiously, at Jarlshof, the earliest Norse dwellings did not adjoin a byre. Combined dwellings there only begin to appear in the eleventh century (p. 113). Interesting as this is,
Fenton broadens the discussion by introducing comparative material from other parts of the Norse North Atlantic community, including the Faeroes, Iceland, Greenland, and even L’Anse aux Meadows. He further speculates that longhouse development in the Northern Isles was furthered as much through Scottish influence, as through Norwegian. The longhouse disappears from the historical record shortly after the Norse period, largely because it became such a regular feature of the countryside (p.114). It reappears early in the nineteenth century, thanks to Rev. J. Hall, his Shetland travel accounts described in *The Northern Isles*.

Fenton’s book is filled with many similar offerings gleaned from everyday northern life, certain to provide fascination for both student, scholar, and general reader alike. Much of his knowledge concerning Orkney and Shetland is purportedly the result of personal communications with the people themselves. This is augmented by what must be virtually every period account, document, and recent study applicable to the topic. Hence, *The Northern Isles*’ bibliography is as extensive as it could be, and of great value to all those interested in furthering Fenton’s work. Also included are many of the raw statistics scholars especially find useful, such as both human and domestic animal populations. Fenton certainly was justified in underscoring his book’s ‘classic’ status. Written with economy and precision, *The Northern Isles* is highly accessible and unencumbered with excessive levels of jargon, though by necessity, interspersed is some Old Norse and Norn. (The latter being the native Norse-based languages of the Northern Isles.) Therefore, this book can be recommended to all those desiring insight into the lives of ordinary people, native to the extraordinary lands of Orkney and Shetland.

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