An Orkney Estate
Improvements at Graemeshall
1827-1888
By Gilbert Schrank.
Tuckwell Press, East Linton: 1995
131 pages. £8.99

Through the eyes of an agricultural historian Gilbert Schrank presents an admirable account of the Orkney Estate at Graemeshall during the nineteenth century. This comprehensive study examines the processes of change and the complex interaction of a number of factors: soil, population, geographical position, weather and economic fluctuations and the extent these contributed to agricultural improvements.

Schrank’s work not only provides a distinctly Scottish character but triumphs in preventing the alienation of readers unfamiliar with this particular era. By tracing ownership of the estate through the various lairds and frequent references to the social relations of the Petrie and Graeme family, the author consciously injects the valuable human input which made the improvements a reality. This added a unique perspective as the reader better comprehends inchoate aspirations and the quest for successful implementation of technology on a nineteenth century estate in Scotland.
An obvious drawback emanating from *An Orkney Estate* has been the unbalanced treatment of the underlying causes of agricultural change in the post-1850 period. The study failed to provide sufficient insight into the three decades preceding 1888. The book’s focus could have been confined to a time frame of twenty to thirty years; which would have allowed for an intense study of the agricultural changes and would have prompted more emphasis on the causes and effects of the pivotal transition from “Old-Style” to “New-Style” farming methods.

Despite this setback, the book’s goal is admirably achieved by the painstaking effort of placing events in context. This is evident in the inclusion of events as the agricultural recession, initial resistance of tenants to change, the use of available technology and the subsequent effects on the Orkney economy during the mid-nineteenth century.

Schrank’s objective use of estate correspondence and statistics during this era of agricultural metamorphosis presents a formidable account of nature’s response to the changes and limitations of human will and technology. Overall, *An Orkney Estate* is a refreshing study with a revisionist twist of agricultural improvements on a Scottish estate. It is a noteworthy contribution to social, economic, cultural and agricultural historians desiring to understand the complex intricacies leading to change.

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