

Crossroad of the North: Proto-Industrialization in the Orkney Islands, 1730-1840

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One essential task for social historians, according to Charles Tilly, is to uncover the "links between small-scale experience and large-scale processes".¹ This study explores the proto-industries in the Orkney Islands of Scotland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Orkney's history has never been approached from this perspective, nor has Scotland itself been much studied by those seeking to explore proto-industrialization. We thus gain a valuable comparative vantage point, for such a focus helps reveal the variegated developmental patterns among regions in northern Scotland. By employing a proto-industrial formulation, we can unite into a single historical pattern diverse elements that had previously been studied as isolated epiphenomena. Finally, we succeed in placing the history of these islands within the broader context of merchant capitalism, thereby benefitting from the excellent historical insights offered in recent studies.

Orkney was well suited for proto-industrial development in the eighteenth century because of an interplay of several factors: local social structure, the availability of an essential raw material (kelp), a geographical location that narrowed the range of employment alternatives for the local population, producing a labour surplus, and a crucial shift in the spatial location of capitalist development within Europe. Since Orkney's economy and society clearly experienced a more fully developed and varied proto-industrialization

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¹ CHARLES TILLY, "Retrieving European Lives", in Olivier Zunz (ed.), *Reliving the Past: The World of Social History*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, p. 15.

than did such regions of Scotland as the Hebrides or Shetland, its economic history was to follow a different course. Finally, this paper explores how fully Orkney fits the proto-industrial model as established by Franklin F. Mendels, et al. As I hope to show, the pattern fits most agreed-upon definitions, but with one notable exception.

Proto-industrialization

In crafting the concept of proto-industrialization in 1972, Franklin Mendels challenged European historians to recast their thinking about rural industries in early modern Europe. Historical literature is full of the substance of the debate surrounding this concept, but space permits mention of but the most essential elements.²

Drawing on earlier studies of rural or cottage industry by such historians as Eric L. Jones, Joan Thirsk, Rudolf Braun and Herbert Kisch, Mendels broadened the concept and deployed it in ways that enhanced its historical utility. Dubbed 'proto-industrialization', and made historically quite specific, Mendels' depicted a "traditionally organized but market-oriented, principally rural industry" emerging in direct response to the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries' steady growth in world trade.³ He distinguished this mode of industrial production from traditional cottage industry by noting its *integration* into networks of interregional trade, not its *organization*. Other preconditions included: 1) an agricultural slack season, in regions of temperate climate, low labour costs, little fixed merchant capital. 2) a market located beyond the region, or outside the country. 3) a region of poor soil, small peasant plots, and subsistence agriculture in a symbiotic relationship with one of surplus commercial agricultural production.⁴ Orkney diverged from the model in this latter respect since it was *both* a proto-industrial region *and* one normally producing an agricultural surplus. Consequences of proto-industrialization were population growth, monetization of a peasant econo-

² FRANKLIN F. MENDELS, *Industrialization and Population Pressure in Eighteenth-Century Flanders*. New York: Arno Press, 1981. pp. 5-6. Mendels, "Proto-Industrialization: The First Phase of the Industrialization Process", *Journal of Economic History*, xxxii, 1972, p. 241. A recent fine discussion of the state of the debate: JEAN H. QUATAERT, "A New View of Industrialization: 'Protoindustry' or the Role of Small-Scale, Labor-Intensive Manufacture in the Capitalist Environment", *International Labor and Working-Class History*. # 33, Spring, 1988, pp. 3-22.

³ MENDELS, 1972, p. 241.

⁴ FRANKLIN F. MENDELS, "Seasons and Regions in Agriculture and Industry during the Process of Industrialization", in Sidney Pollard (ed.), *Region und Industrialisierung*. Göttingen: 1980. pp. 177-195. See also, Mendels, "Agriculture and Peasant Industry in Eighteenth-Century Flanders", in W.N. PARKER AND E.L. JONES, *European Peasants and their Markets*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975. pp. 179-220.

my and, in some cases, full-fledged industrialization. However, Mendels was quick to recognize that the process also lent itself to de-industrialization. As we shall see, Orkney became an industrial dead-end.

Three German historians, Peter Kriedte, Hans Medick and Jürgen Schlumbohm, in a pathbreaking work, apply the concept within a marxist framework, thus moving the argument squarely into the long debate over the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but when they argue that proto-industry was a "new system of production" and a "unique mode of enterprise", they begin to part company with Mendels.⁵ A critical point for these three authors is that capital moved beyond its accustomed spheres of *circulation* and *exchange* into the realm of *production* only within the proto-industrial formation. Consequently, relations of production among peasant households increasingly came to be dominated by the laws of the market, to the detriment of custom, tradition and community.⁶

Hans Medick, in this book and elsewhere, has extended our understanding of the "Proto-Industrial Family Economy", particularly its tendency toward population increase, self-exploitation and immiseration of an entirely new type.⁷ Dependency upon proto-industries for these rural families could be a dual-edged sword since they would be subject to *both* feudal *and* capitalist forms of domination, at the point of *both* production *and* exchange. These peasants might have lessened their dependence on their land for sustenance, but dependence grew on a distant, rapidly fluctuating market.⁸ During periods of high demand, proto-industrial families enjoyed moments of relative prosperity, but long-term, it was an impoverishing process.⁹

When de-industrialization was accompanied by agricultural improvement and the enclosure of the common lands, peasant society lost access to the last productive system that could absorb its surplus population. Pauperization and emigration followed.¹⁰ Three recent studies shed light on elements of proto-industry relevant to Orkney's experience. Brenda Collins' work on

⁵ PETER KRIEDTE, HANS MEDICK and JURGEN SCHLUMBOHM, *Industrialization before Industrialization: Rural Industry in the Genesis of Capitalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. p. 3, 8. Mendels, "Industrialization and Population...", Postface, p. 280.

⁶ PETER KRIEDTE et al. p. 94.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 38-93 and H. MEDICK, "The Proto-Industrial Family Economy: The Structural Function of Household and Family during the Transition from Peasant Society to Industrial Capitalism". *Social History*, 3, 1976. See also, DAVID LEVINE, *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism*. New York: Academic Press, 1977.

⁸ C. LIS and H. SOLY, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979. p. 151.

⁹ KRIEDTE et al., pp. 45-49. Peter Kriedte, *Peasants, Landlords and Merchant Capitalists: Europe and the World, Economy, 1500-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 13.

¹⁰ KRIEDTE et al. p. 155.

Ireland describes a de-industrialization process that eliminated the livelihood of a peasantry, and thus contributed to emigration, a full generation before the famine of the 1840's.¹¹ Similar conditions prevailed in the Orkneys and much of the rest of Scotland. In a different vein, Gay L. Gullickson, in her painstaking study of the Pays de Caux in Normandy, demonstrates that proto-industrialization need *not* be confined to regions of marginal fertility and subsistence agriculture.¹²

Finally, Charles Tilly convincingly argues that de-industrialization was the *norm*, not the exception in peasant societies, followed by an entirely new development he dubs "peasantization". Since the industrial revolution was but a rare phenomenon, much of Europe entered the twentieth century more rural than it had been in the nineteenth.¹³

Thus proto-industrialization spread steadily throughout Europe. Peter Kriedte perhaps best described its apogee: "Dense rural manufacturing industries which produced for supra-regional markets covered eighteenth-century Europe like a veil. Regions, which had hitherto depended upon agriculture alone, were transformed into mixed zones in which agriculture and rural manufacture existed side by side".¹⁴

Thus, proto-industrialization offered clear advantages to the nascent capitalists. There were few fixed labour costs, a very low remuneration rate for the producers, who were members of a dominated group, and the ready expansibility and contractibility of the work force in a widely fluctuating global market.¹⁵

Physical description of Orkney - Climate and geology

The second most northerly land mass of Great Britain, the Orkney Islands consist of 240,847 fertile acres (376 square miles) distributed over some sixty islands between the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea.¹⁶ The principal island, Mainland, occupies over one half of the total land area. Geo-

¹¹ BRENDA COLLINS, "Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Famine Irish Emigration", *Social History*. Vol. 7 # 2, 1982, pp. 127-146.

¹² GAY L. GULLICKSON, "Agriculture and Cottage Industry: Redefining the Causes of Proto-Industrialization". *Journal of Economic History*. December, 1983. pp. 831-850 and GULLICKSON, *The Spinners and Weavers of Auffay: Rural Industry and the Sexual Division of Labor in a French Village, 1750-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

¹³ CHARLES TILLY, "Flows of Capital and Forms of Industry in Europe, 1500-1900". *Theory and Society*, vol. 12, # 2, March, 1983. pp. 135-36.

¹⁴ KRIEDTE, *Peasants, Landlords...*, p. 133.

¹⁵ L.A. CLARKSON, *Proto-Industrialization: The First Phase of Industrialization?* London: Mcmillan Publishers, Ltd. 1985, is a very helpful recent study.

¹⁶ PATRICK BAILEY, *Orkney*. London: Newton Abbot, 1971. p. 14. A.C. O'DELL, *The Land of Britain: The Report of the Land Utilisation Survey of Britain*. Part 4, *Orkney*. London: Geographical Publishers, Ltd., 1939. p. 194.

logy and climate have been generally kind to the inhabitants of this land. Unlike the mountainous Hebrides or the Shetlands, Orkney's landscape is characterized by smoothly rolling hills and a high potential fertility, provided the inhabitants undertake the necessary improvements.¹⁷

A generally mild climate and long growing season, a consequence of the neighbouring Gulf Stream, enable Orkney to stand out "like a fertile jewel amongst these northern lands".¹⁸ Nor has Orkney endured the isolation that one might expect. Fenton notes that "Isolation and remoteness are relative concepts... and in terms of ebb and flow and intermixture of culture, these islands have been more like busy crossroads than remote backwater areas..."¹⁹

For well over 500 years the Orkney and Shetland Islands were invaded, settled, administered and owned by the Norse.²⁰ Norse sovereignty was a legal fact from 872 until 1468, during which time Orkney functioned as both a political and ecclesiastical centre. Thus, as so often in its history, Orkney was a vital linchpin in a sprawling political, cultural and trade network encompassing widely diverse regions and economies.²¹

For centuries the Norse cultural and political influence, which partly took the form of the *udal* freehold land tenure system, endured Scottish competition from the south. Consequently, by 1468, the year Orkney and Shetland formally passed to the control by the Scottish Crown, the islands were being "Scotticized".²² Thereafter, the Norse population suffered a steady, relentless displacement and absorption.²³ But while "backwardness" and "remoteness" were undeniable impediments to "progress", important segments of Orkadian society were always in contact with the wider world. During the era of European global expansion, Orkney's maritime exposure, situated along a critical geographical juncture, the gateway between the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea, enabled it to play a large role and would draw it into the emerging world economy.

A recent comparative study by Frances J. Shaw is illuminating for it per-

¹⁷ GORDON THOMSON, *The Other Orkney Book*. Edinburgh: Northabout Publishers, 1980. p. 33. RONALD MILLER, *Orkney*. London: B.T. BATSFORD, 1976. p. 27. A.C. O'DELL and K. WALTON, *The Highlands and Islands of Scotland*. 1962, p. 38.

¹⁸ BAILEY, p. 42. THOMSON, p. 16. ALEXANDER FENTON, *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, Ltd., 1978. p. 2.

¹⁹ FENTON.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ THOMSON, p. 25. *Orkney Heritage*, vol. ii, *Birsay: A Centre of Political and Ecclesiastical Power*. Kirkwall: Orkney Heritage Society, 1983.

²² GORDON DONALDSON, "The Scots Settlement in Shetland", in D.J. WITHRINGTON, *Shetland and the outside world, 1469-1969*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. p. 8-9. Fenton, p. 9. Bailey, p. 96.

²³ MILLER, p. 13. See also, PETER D. ANDERSON, *Robert Stewart: Earl of Orkney, Lord of Shetland, 1533-1593*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, Ltd., 1982.

mits us to observe this island community evolve and adapt to changing circumstances, in comparison with the neighbouring Shetlands and Hebrides.²⁴ The marked contrast between the Northern Isles (Orkney and Shetland) and the Western Isles (the Hebrides) are most striking. Shaw noted:

Historically, the differences between the northern and western islands are large and obvious. In the Western Isles the ancient Celtic form of social organisation built around the kin-group had continued to exercise a major influence. Society had taken shape in what is usually known as the clan system... In Orkney and Shetland, on the other hand, the pattern of society had been strongly influenced by Norse and not Celtic forms.²⁵

The clan-dominated Western Isles were, in brief, patriarchal polities characterized by huge compact feudal estates, accompanied by a militarily enforced system of surplus extraction.²⁶ But the Northern Isles, reflecting Norse cultural influence, maintained more of a balance between freehold tenure (udal) and a growing number of smaller landed estates, though the latter were frequently scattered among several islands.²⁷ Most lands were let out to *tacks-men*, individuals who held the original lease but then sublet the land to tenants.²⁸ Scottish forms of feudalism began moving north to Orkney with the arrival of Scottish landowners.²⁹ Udal-held lands gradually receded and apparently many small farmers became tenants.

Orkney's new landowning class was dynamic and interesting. An immigrant elite, of common background, they busied themselves with amassing land, assembling large estates, and acquiring ecclesiastical, judicial or political appointments. Embued with a distinctly entrepreneurial outlook, they operated quite well within a feudal framework. While they lacked the paternalistic proclivities of the Western lords, they did press on with their primary concern, amassing income from rents and land sales.³⁰

Farming methods in Orkney during this period were primitive. The land was almost totally unenclosed and was divided into a series of intermingled strips that were called rigs. The system itself, known as *runrig*, came to dominate the agriculture of the islands, along with a good part of the rest of

²⁴ FRANCIS J. SHAW, *The Northern and Western Isles of Scotland: Their Economy and Society in the Seventeenth Century*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, Ltd. 1980.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 185. PERRY ANDERSON, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. London: Verso Editions, 1974. p. 137.

²⁷ Shaw, pp. 26-27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34. WILLIAM P. L. THOMSON, *History of Orkney*. Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1987. p. 149.

³⁰ Shaw, p. 74.

Scotland.³¹ Most of the land was held in common, and was used for grazing animals, digging peat, or as a source of flagstones for building. Agricultural yields in Orkney on the two staple grains, oats and bere, were "pitifully low" by most European standards, while local animal husbandry methods precluded any improvement in livestock unless the commons were enclosed.³²

Despite this barebones system of cultivation, Orkney was successful, during normal years, in producing a grain surplus. Yet periodic harvest failures occurred with dismaying regularity. W.P.L. Thomson describes the dearth during the years 1628-36 when some 3,000-4,000 people were reported to have perished. Yet Orkney fared considerably better than did its neighbours in Shetland or in the Highlands.³³

When famines returned to Orkney (and Scotland) in the eighteenth century, with 1739-41 and 1782-85 being years of want, fewer Orcadians perished, chiefly because the proto-industries provided them with alternative sources of income. All of Orkney's grain surplus was exported, chiefly to two nearby regions of deficit, Shetland and Norway, though some quantities were sent to the Scottish mainland. Thus Orkney looked to its neighbours to the north and to the south from a position of relative prosperity.³⁴ Merchants and tradesmen, most of whom were also estate owners, benefited from this surplus. It is quite remarkable that trading activities reached so far down the social scale and "it is evident that large numbers of humble people engaged in it"³⁵ Orcadians were thus far less oriented toward the sea than were their Shetland neighbours to the north.³⁶

Orkney's geographical position astride an important trade route facilitated a lively import trade. Ships from England, Norway, the Netherlands, the Hanseatic cities, and France regularly visited the Orcadian ports of Kirkwall and Stromness. Orcadians imported raw materials such as wood, tar and iron, as well as finished consumer goods.

Thus eighteenth-century estate owners were partially able to transform the role they played in society at large. While in the seventeenth century they

³¹ FENTON, p. 41. Shaw defines runrig as a "System of cultivation in which the separate ridges in a field were cultivated by different occupiers". p. 212. J. STORER CLOUSTON, *Records of the Earldom of Orkney*. Edinburgh: 1914. pp. 92-94.

³² SHAW, p. 98. On the general state of European agriculture, see Jan de Vries, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600-1750*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975. pp. 35-36.

³³ WILLIAM P. L. THOMSON, "Introduction", *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, Wakefield: EP Publishers, Ltd., 1978. pp. xi-xii. For Shetland, SUSAN A. KNOX, *The Making of the Shetland Landscape*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, Ltd., 1985.

³⁴ SHAW, p. 104.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³⁶ Shaw, p. 159. For another comparative perspective with Shetland, see the fine study by Hance D. Smith, *Shetland Life and Trade, 1550-1914*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, Ltd., 1984.

were content to function as collectors of feu and skat payments, during the eighteenth they became merchant lairds. Their estates were no longer simply sources of rent and repositories of cheap labour, but were also producers of commodities to be traded. In addition, an estate could represent the foundation from which one could reach for social position. The merchant lairds proved to be greedy acquirers of political patronage, military commissions or positions and offices in the overseas colonies, especially India.³⁷

By the early eighteenth century the pinnacle of society in Orkney was occupied by a group of merchant capitalists who were economically prominent as a landed elite. They formed a distinct and coherent social group. Shaw noted that "not only were they the wealthiest members of society, but it was men of this class who generally held the key office of parish bailie and occasionally managed to secure a tack of the Crown or bishopric lands".³⁸ Peter Kriedte shrewdly noted that merchant capital "operated within the 'skin' of feudal society..."³⁹ In view of the fact that grain was acquired through traditional feudal methods, and yet disposed of in a world of capitalist exchange, it is clear that we are observing the articulation of two modes of production.

Orkney's insular location prevented the local lairds from benefiting from the steady rise in Scottish cattle prices after 1740. Nor was commercial agriculture yet an option. Yet the lairds made the best of the agricultural resources at hand, while simultaneously profiting from the emerging Baltic and Atlantic trade, not to mention their growing family and commercial connections in Edinburgh and London.

When Frances J. Shaw ends her study in the early eighteenth century, she had no cause to mention proto-industries in Orkney.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, as has been seen, these islands were being drawn ever more deeply into global trade networks. The net effect was invariably to pull young men toward a life at sea. The Hudson's Bay Company used the Orcadian port of Stromness as an important outpost and drew the overwhelming bulk of its Canadian workforce from the Orkneys during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴¹ The British whaling industry competed with Hudson's Bay for the same human resources, as did the Royal Navy. Roving Navy press gangs

³⁷ Shaw, p. 165. HUGH MARWICK, *Merchant Lairds of Long Ago*. Kirkwall: 1956.

³⁸ MARWICK, p. 50. SHAW, p. 184.

³⁹ KRIEDTE, *Peasants, Landlords...* p. 1.

⁴⁰ SHAW, pp. 184-89.

⁴¹ FENTON, pp. 596-97. THOMSON, *History of Orkney*. p. 218. J. Storer Clouston, "Orkney and the Hudson's Bay Company", *The Beaver*. Dec., 1936. p. 4, March, 1937. Rev. WILLIAM CLOUSTON, for Sandwick and Stromness parishes, *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, Hereafter referred to as the *Old Statistical Account* or the *OSA*. Rev. Peter Learmonth, for Stromness parish, *The Statistical Account of the Orkney Islands by the Ministers of the Respective Parishes*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1842. Hereafter, referred to as the *New Statistical Account*, or *NSA*.

were a constant menace to the young men of Orkney during periods of international warfare.⁴²

The net effects of this steady loss of young men were both serious and chronic, resulting in a permanent sexual disparity of between 18-20% during the eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries.⁴³ Since their opportunities for emigration were fewer, at least until the late nineteenth century growth in the numbers of female servants in Britain, the women were, in effect, stranded. This factor decisively affected the receptivity of this island community to the rise of proto-industries. To a large extent these women were compelled to spin linen yarn, gather kelp, and to weave straw hats, not in order to buy luxuries, but to survive.

Proto-industrialization in the Orkney Islands

Three proto-industries were for a time established in Orkney and came to occupy overlapping yet distinct roles in the regional economy and society. Kelp-making, linen spinning and straw-plaiting, each emerged as a response to externally generated demand, experienced an exogeneously determined product cycle, each came to induce a high level of dependency upon it, and each declined and passed away, leaving in its wake a swollen population, far too large for the Islands' agricultural resources to support. One legacy of proto-industrialization was a further monetization of an economy in which most payments were still in goods and services. Another was an extension of the wealth and power of the local lairds, who frequently served as regional agents for extra-regional merchants. They opened Orkney even further to the wider world, altered the culture of the inhabitants, and caused the decline of much that was still insular in this community.⁴⁴

1. The Kelp-making Industry in Orkney

Of all the proto-industries in Orkney, we know the most about kelp-making, thanks to the efforts of historians such as William P.L. Thomson and Malcolm Gray, as well the keen critical observations of several contemporaries. Readers interested in a fuller account of this subject should consult Thomson's informed recent study, *Kelp-Making in Orkney*, which supplants all previous work.⁴⁵

Any observer who glances into the clear waters surrounding the Orkneys immediately notices the seemingly endless strands of different varieties of

⁴² THOMSON, *OSA*, xxvi.

⁴³ CLOUSTON, *OSA*, pp. 445-446. Learmonth, *NSA*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 443. FENTON, p. 550.

⁴⁵ WILLIAM P.L. THOMPSON, *Kelp-Making in Orkney*. Stromness: The Orkney Press, 1983. See also MALCOM GRAY, "The Kelp Industry in the Highlands and Islands", *The Economic History Review*, vol. iv, #2, 1951, pp. 197-209 and, MALCOM GRAY, *The Highland Economy, 1750-1850*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957.

seaweed. Orcadians had gathered these weeds for centuries and carried them inland for use as fertilizer in their fields and, less frequently, as a source of fuel. Seaweed varieties are collectively known as kelp. This was the only industry for which Orkney supplied the raw materials, and not simply the cheap labour, to further the industrial expansion to the south.⁴⁶

All accounts agree that the Scottish kelp industry began in Orkney, at the initiative of a local laird, James Fea of Whitehall, Stronsay, who journeyed to Newcastle in order to market the product. In 1722 he sold the alkali, the by-product of the burnt sea-weed, to English glassmakers, primarily for use in the making of crown glass.⁴⁷

The kelp economy demanded that entire families spend their summer months waist-deep in water, cutting and gathering weeds, bringing them ashore for drying in the sun and wind, and then burning them in crude stone kilns until they reached the consistency of a "pasty mess".⁴⁸ The kelping season fitted in nicely with the old-style farming year in Orkney, for it demanded intense labour only from early July until mid to late August. Thus the local tenants, following the sowing of their bere (barley) crop in May and the cutting and drying of peat, were relatively free until the hay-making season in late August or early September. Kelp-making, therefore, occupied what Mendels called the "slack period". Once institutionalized, and demanding the sustained labour of thousands of producers, kelp acted as a bar to further innovation in farming techniques, particularly those requiring year-long labour. Nor did kelping inspire the proprietor to make improvements in his property, since he could earn greater profits with much less labour, investment or risk. Many contemporary writers explicitly indicted kelping as a prime cause for the persistence of Orkney's agricultural backwardness.⁴⁹

The industry took hold and grew steadily. Thomson illuminates the factors favouring its reception:

the Orkney seas provided enormous quantities of seaweed; there was well-established class of merchant lairds accustomed to trading throughout northern Europe and seeking out new markets; there was a social structure within which lairds could exert a fair degree of pressure on a large peasant population (and kelp-making always required that kind of pushing). It involved almost no capital outlay... The product was of high value in relation to its bulk and was fairly easily transportable.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ THOMSON, *Kelp-Making*., p. 19. GRAY, *The Highland...*, p. 124.

⁴⁷ THOMSON, p. 40. GRAY, "The Kelp Industry...", p. 198. Thomson discusses the sales outlets for Orkney kelp, *History of Orkney*., p. 210. MARWICK, p. 23.

⁴⁸ GRAY, p. 197. See THOMSON, *Kelp-Making...*, for a fuller description of the techniques and mechanics of kelp gathering and burning, pp. 27-33.

⁴⁹ MARWICK, p. 9. See JOHN SHIRREFF, *General View of the Agriculture of the Orkney Islands*. Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1814, p. 167. THOMSON recently discussed this important issue in *History of Orkney*., p. 205.

⁵⁰ THOMSON, *Kelp-Making...*, p. 14.

Kelp-making in Orkney was organized simultaneously through two different modes of production and exchange. To produce the kelp, proprietors relied upon essentially feudal means. Tenants and cottars were compelled to work the shores to fulfill the terms of unwritten short-term leases. The lairds, on the other hand, marketed this commodity outside the islands, making use of the most up-to-date capitalist methods and thus reaped the largest rewards of all. The peasant producers, as Hans Medick has observed in a larger context, were in the least advantageous position. Remote from the product's ultimate market, geographically dispersed, legally disadvantaged, and compelled to market the kelp through the laird's hands, they received the least rewards. Gray aptly likens the system to that of a West Indian Sugar plantation.⁵¹

The dimensions and impact of this new export industry grew steadily in the years 1730-1780, as an ever increasing number of lairds looked to their coasts rather than to their fields for livelihood. Orkney kelp production was greater in volume at this time than in all of the Western Isles. Clouds of rising smoke became a familiar sight on many Orkney shores. However, it was not until the boom years, 1780-1830, referred to by the Rev. Charles Clouston as the "palmy days of kelp-making", that this industry came to truly dominate the economy of the islands, employ a total of some 3,000 people, including entire families, and account for about two-thirds of Orkney's exports.⁵² Orkney kelp enjoyed an excellent reputation in the Tyneside region, along the Firth of Forth and in Hull. It remained in strong demand and frequently permitted the lairds to pit one buyer against another.

However, few contemporaries paid attention to the fact that the boom existed because of temporary conditions. Demand for kelp was high because foreign sources of alkali, many of which were superior and less expensive, were excluded from Britain by high tariffs and the American and French Wars, 1776-1815. Kelp's strongest competitor was barilla, made from the ash residue of glasswort, *Salicornia*, a product of Spain, which had a far higher alkali content, yet was easier to use. During the era of tariff reforms, 1822-1830, duties on barilla dropped steadily and the product gained access to the British market.⁵³

The kelp boom collapsed in the year 1830. "Kelp-making", according to Thomson, "survived the end of the Napoleonic Wars, but it was a casualty of the free-trade movement and the transfer of political power from the old landed classes to the new industrialists".⁵⁴ The year 1826 saw the apogee of Orkney kelp production, with 3,500 tons being shipped south, but by 1833, total production had plummeted to a mere 500 tons!

⁵¹ GRAY, *Highland Economy...*, p. 129.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 125. REV. CHARLES CLOUSTON, Prefatory Chapter to REV. GEORGE BARRY, *The History of the Orkney Islands*. (2nd Edition), Kirkwall: William Peace, 1867. xii.

⁵³ Sutherland-Graeme Papers, Orkney County Archives, D5/2/25.

⁵⁴ THOMSON, *Kelp-Making...*, p. 90-92.

The price a laird could obtain during the boom years varied greatly with the state of the market and his ability to market the product directly, without mediation. The papers of John Taylor, an early nineteenth-century Kirkwall merchant, contain a price list for all commodities exportable from Orkney, including malt, oatmeal, bere, butter, oil, flesh, poultry and kelp, generally during the years 1800-1822. An entry dated 18, January 1823, states:

The Following are the Prices of Orkney
Kelp for the last twenty-three Years,
per Tonne received

1800 - £ 9.9	1806 - £ 9.9
1801 - 9.9	1807 - 9.15
1802 - 7	1808 - 14.14
1803 - 9.9	1809 - 18. 7. 6
1804 - 9.9	1810 - 13
1805 - 10	1811 - 9.9
1812 - £ 9	1818 - £ 10.10
1813 - 9.9	1819 - 12.12
1814 - 12	1820 - 10.10
1815 - 11	1821 - 10
1816 - 10	1822 - 8.8
1817 - 9	

And not saleable after the Barilla Act at £5.
The Average of which is £10.9 7p. Tonne.⁵⁵

Since production costs were much lower, varying between £2-3 per ton, Thomson suggests that an enterprising proprietor, after paying production costs, transport and insurance, could retain perhaps 77% of the sale price of a ton of kelp!⁵⁶

Orkney estates were almost always let out to tenants who were awarded tacks that enabled them to lease out parcels, along with the rights to the commons, to sub-tenants, called crofters or cottars. Since few cottars had land sufficient for subsistence farming, some form of ancillary employment was necessary. By the eighteenth century, kelp production was becoming a requirement for fulfillment of terms of the lease or the tack, and the lairds possessed enough leverage to ensure compliance. For example, two written tacks

⁵⁵ TAYLOR PAPERS, Orkney County Archives, D9/14/8.

⁵⁶ THOMSON, p. 81. ADAM SMITH deplored the fact that the Scottish kelp boom resulted in inflated rentals that neither agriculture nor productive improvements could support. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. New York: The Modern Library, 1937. p. 145.

have been found in the Taylor Papers in the Orkney County Archives. One was signed in Kirkwall on 31, May 1791, and was to be in effect for nine years. The tack is the "Land of Cleat" on the fertile island of Stronsay. It required most of the usual payment in kind, in the form of grain, butter and poultry. However, it did stipulate money payments and labour services as well. Most important, however, is that the tack specified quite clearly that the tacksman was to gather and burn kelp along a specified stretch of shoreline and to yield up the finished product at an agreed upon price. The consequences for failure to live up to these terms were forfeiture of all lease rights. It is significant this tack also required 72 hanks of linen yarn to be spun and delivered.⁵⁷

The second tack, dated 12, November 1801, applied to the Keiger area of Deerness Parish, in east Mainland. Also for a nine-year term, it similarly demanded production of both kelp and linen yarn in partial fulfillment of its terms. However, the Deerness tack is important, for it stipulated the amount of payment: "for each Tonne of twenty four hundred weight, good and sufficient Kelp,... You shall receive the Sum of one Guinea Sterling".⁵⁸ Thus, at a time when the retail price of kelp was £9.9, it was inevitable that the laird would profit handsomely.

The Sutherland-Graeme estate in the Parish of Holm in east Mainland is noted in part for the completeness of its surviving records. The collection contains several Kelp Books for the years 1779-1831 that enable scholars to determine the amount of payment each tenant received per ton of kelp, the amount each produced, the precise methods of payment, gender relations among producers and, through extrapolation, methods of domination. These books are quite specific, containing a full account for each tenant, and become more complete with time.⁵⁹ The entries terminate abruptly in the year 1831, reflecting the kelp crash, re-appear briefly in 1836 to reveal the fitful efforts of three tenants to produce kelp, but the rest of the book is left totally blank. These books obviously call for their own detailed study, but important points do emerge from preliminary examination.

What strikes the reader almost immediately is how little money the kelping families actually received for the efforts of a summer. A typical case was that of the tenant Magnus Gadie who, on 26, August 1779, was paid a mere £2.2.6 for more than seventeen *tons* of kelp. The bulk of the payment to Gadie was in kind, consisting of deliveries of bere and oats to sustain his cottars on the shores. The landlord obviously had the power to set the cash value of this grain. The total amount of kelp produced at Graemeshall in 1779 was 51 tons. It might be fruitful to speculate whether a form of debt peonage was being perpetrated upon the kelp workers and their cottars.

⁵⁷ TAYLOR PAPERS, D9/14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ SUTHERLAND-GRAEME PAPERS, D5/11/5.

The Kelp Books reveal that large numbers of women were granted sections of shoreline to work. Some managed their shores alone, a few in partnership with men, while others were partners with other women. We can trace several individuals in the records over the course of the years. For example, one tenant, Sibla Flett, worked the kelp shores of Holm from 1789-1812 without a break, either alone, in partnership with different men, or with other women, as did Madie Crear, from 1791-1812. There is no record to indicate the existence of either husband or child. Given the sexual disparities in Orkney during these years, one can safely assume that many of the women engaged in kelping, or in other proto-industries, were not working in their spare time during the slack season. This was their primary occupation.⁶⁰

A chronic labour shortage necessitated compulsion, but also limited production of kelp in Orkney, especially during the war years. For example, in 1805, David Petrie, the factor for Admiral Alexander Graeme, the absentee laird of Graemeshall, wrote:

I daresay it will be very difficult this year to burn kelp throughout Orkney, there is so great a demand for men to the Davis Straits and Greenland. A great number of ships is giving high wages and there is a great strawplaiting gone on in Kirkwall, and so great encouragement that all the girls are flocking to it.⁶¹

Though the bulk of the kelp profits was appropriated by the landowning class, the industry still decisively affected the kelpers' standard of living. Contemporary observers noted significant changes in consumption patterns. For example, the Rev. George Low, reporting for Birsay parish, remarked that young men wore hats, decent Sunday clothes, with cotton waistcoats, cordoroy britches, and buckles on their shoes. Women were neatly dressed on Sundays and holidays in calicoes, covered with gray or brown cloaks and many beautiful scarlet plaids.⁶² Tea, once a luxury reserved for the rich, had now become a staple in the Orkney diet. On a more vital level, Thomson has shown that the kelp industry provided a cushion against the harvest failures of 1778-9, 1782-3, 1802-3 and 1807. Shetland, which lacked the local economic diversity, suffered horribly during these years.⁶³

The best estimate of the proprietors' aggregate earnings during the kelp years is over £1,000,000, a figure that is about *three times* the sum earned from land rentals.⁶⁴ The lairds all too often used their kelp profits to adopt

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, D5/3.

⁶¹ THOMSON, *Kelp-Making...*, p. 49.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Rev. GEORGE LOW, Birsay parish, p. 325.

⁶³ THOMSON, p. 102. HANCE SMITH, p. 137.

⁶⁴ THOMSON, p. 102. More recently, Thomson noted that Thomas Balfour's kelp income was nearly four times that from rentals. *History of Orkney.*, p. 203.

sumptuous lifestyles that included townhouses in Kirkwall and all of the accoutrements of a more civil society, though Thomson discusses numerous instances of conspicuous consumption, gambling and bankruptcy.⁶⁵

The effects proto-industry had on population growth is central to many scholars' concerns, and both Gray and Thomson address this topic. Gray, in describing the West Highlands, depicted a high rate of population increase in the second half of the eighteenth century for which he clearly posits the role of kelp as central. The incessant need for more hands along the kelp shores led to the process of land subdivision.⁶⁶

Thomson likewise discovers connections between kelp and the rise in Orkney's population, albeit, weaker ones. Heavy emigration rates further complicated the picture. For example, Thomson, relying on the *Old Statistical Account*, detects a higher growth rate in the kelp-making north isles, where emigration was much less, than in Orkney as a whole. He concluded:

There is, therefore, clear evidence that kelp in Orkney was establishing the same tendencies as resulted in the population explosion in the Western Isles, but in a more muted form. The big difference was the landlords' ability to keep the increased labour force at home by preventing emigration. They succeeded in the Western Isles, but in Orkney the tradition of emigration was already too well established to be broken. Lairds and ministers, affected by the shortage of labour, might fulminate against the evils of emigration, but there was little they could do to prevent it.⁶⁷

Thus Orkney's peasants were able to employ such passive options as emigration, the Royal Navy, joining the whaling fleets, etc. However, these options were available to men, not women. The only success achieved by the landed class in controlling emigration was to secure a written agreement limiting naval impressment to specific numbers of men⁶⁸.

Robert Barclay who studied Orkney population trends for a period of over two hundred years, 1755-1961 has observed that natural increase greatly exceeded the continued loss by emigration until the year 1861, at which point

⁶⁵ THOMSON, *Kelp-Making...*, p. 102.

⁶⁶ GRAY, "The Kelp Industry...", p. 204.

⁶⁷ THOMSON, *Kelp-Making...*, p. 100.

⁶⁸ Sutherland-Graeme papers, D5/2/6. For example, the Admiralty signed this agreement in 1779 "with the Gentlemen of the Islands of Orkney to receive One Hundred Seamen or Fishers". Above that number, impressment officers were directed "on no account to Impress or molest any of the Fishers or Seamen of the said Island provided they really belong to it and are employed in its trade as you shall answer it at your peril". This was sent to Patrick Graeme, Esq., Sheriff of Orkney.

Orkney's population commenced a century-long decline. The population of these islands during these years was as follows:

Time	Person	Males	Females	Per cent	
1755	23,381	?	?		
1790s	23,654	?	?		
1801	24,445	10,848	13,597	M 44.4%	F 55.6%
1811	23,238	10,127	13,111	M 43.6%	F 56.4%
1821	26,979	12,269	14,710	M 45.5%	F 54.5%
1831	28,847	13,105	15,742	M 45.4%	F 54.6%
1841	30,451	13,775	16,676	M 45.3%	F 54.7%
1851	31,318	14,213	17,105	M 45.4%	F 54.6%
1861	32,225	14,820	17,405	M 45.9%	F 54.1%
1871	31,256	14,337	16,919	M 45.8%	F 54.2%

From the above figures it is clear that the peak year for Orkney's population was 1861, from which it began its decline. This downward slide was not to be reversed until the late 1970s. However, Barclay disaggregates his data and shown that different Orkney parishes peaked at different times. For example, the parishes of West Mainland, which were most subject to emigration, reached their demographic high tide earliest: Stromness, 1821, Evie, 1841, Rendall, 1851. However, the figures for the most isolated, kelp-making North Isles, show a later peak: North Ronaldsay, 1881, Sanday, 1881, Stronsay, 1871, Westray, 1881. The figures do suggest that kelp-making indeed gave powerful impetus to population growth and could succeed best where the people could be kept in place⁷⁰.

The collapse of the kelp boom after 1830 was a blow to the entire Orkney economy. The value of landed property fell abruptly, some proprietors went bankrupt, but for the peasant producers the blow was much worse. The owner of the island of North Ronaldsay dispossessed 32 families, a total of some 80 persons, and removed them to undeveloped land on the island of Eday. In another island, Rousay, the proprietor cleared the entire community of Quandale to make room for sheep, thus behaving in a manner more typical of the Highlands than of Orkney⁷¹.

In general, Orkney's economy experienced a deep slump following the

⁶⁹ ROBERT S. BARCLAY, *The Population of Orkney, 1755-1961*. Kirkwall: The Kirkwall Press, 1965, pp. 8-10.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16, p. 20.

⁷¹ THOMSON, p. 96. For more information on these two incidents, see PETER A. TULLOCH, *A Window on North Ronaldsay*. Kirkwall: The Kirkwall Press, 1974. And WILLIAM P.L. THOMSON, *The Little General and the Rousay Crofters: Crisis and Conflict on an Orkney Estate*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, Ltd., 1981.

almost total disappearance of kelp. As Thomson has noted, "the 1830s was a difficult time for Orkney. It was a decade of hardship between the past prosperity of kelp-making and the new future which agriculture was eventually to bring"⁷². However, the "new future" did not arrive for at least a decade and could not aid as many Orcadians.

2. Linen

The other proto-industries in Orkney, linen and straw-plaiting, have not yet found their historians. Consequently their treatment will be much briefer. The linen spinning industry seems to have attracted the least interest or attention by either contemporaries or on the part of historians, though a few of the latter, such as Alexander Fenton and Douglas P. Willis, do offer adequate summary discussions. William Thomson, in his recent *History of Orkney*, corrects much of this oversight. However, staple general histories, written by Patrick Bailey and Ronald Miller, contain scarcely any mention of the subject. Nonetheless, linen production was a vital source of rural household employment for thousands of women throughout the islands, especially during the latter half of the eighteenth century. For linen, Orkney's attraction to the merchants was not its raw material supply, which was marginal at best, but rather the availability, tractability and low cost of its labour power.

The impetus for the establishment of a rural linen-spinning industry in the north of Scotland appeared when government policy, private commercial interests and landlord needs converged. The London government, alarmed by the insurrectionary events of 1745, attempted to integrate northern Scotland economically with the rest of Britain. Acting on an initial request from the Earl of Morton in Orkney, the newly-founded British Linen Company dispatched instructors to such regions as Ross, Cromarty, Sutherland, Caithness and Orkney (but not Shetland), to introduce young women to the art of spinning.⁷³ The government's mercantile policy met with success, for the low cost of female labour in these regions offset the costs of sending the flax north and returning the spun yarn south for the final phases of manufacture.⁷⁴

Durie has shown that the interests of the Company coincided quite well with those of the local proprietors whose support was absolutely essential.⁷⁵

⁷² THOMSON, *Kelp-Making...*, p. 97.

⁷³ DOUGLAS P. WILLIS, *The Changing Cultural Landscape of Orkney, 1750-1900*. Thesis: University of Aberdeen, 1967, p. 107. ALASTAIR J. DURIE, "Linen-Spinning in the North of Scotland, 1746-1773". *Northern Scotland*, vol. 2, #1, 1974-75, pp. 13-36. ALASTAIR DURIE, *The Scottish Linen Industry*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, Ltd. 1979.

⁷⁴ DURIE, "Linen-Spinning...", p. 31. For another account of the Scottish linen industry, see MAXINE BERG, *The Age of Manufactures: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain, 1700-1820*. TOTOWA N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1985.

⁷⁵ DURIE, p. 18. However, the Rev. GEORGE BARRY has noted in 1795 that "The shopkeepers of Kirkwall and Stromness, and also some of those in the islands, give almost all of them out linen to spin..." OSA., p. 122.

As with kelp, the lairds resorted to traditional methods in employing female yarn spinners. Thomson recently remarked that "Essentially linen involved the same kind of manipulation of a captive labour force as did kelp-making".⁷⁶ The lairds marketed the yarn either through the Company, its agents, or directly on their own. The larger landlords, such as the Watts, the Graemes, the Balfours and some of the Traills, usually retained the services of an agent, often a close relative, in Edinburgh or Glasgow who sought the best markets and the highest prices for the linen (or kelp).⁷⁷

Linen spinning was winter work for the women who engaged in it. The flax was distributed to the women by local Orkney merchants and the yarn was ultimately destined for manufacturers in Edinburgh, Glasgow or Newcastle.

By the 1780s on the Sutherland-Graeme estate in Holm parish, annual linen sales were already greater than the value of the yearly rentals.⁷⁸

After frequent fluctuations in demand, the Orkney linen industry entered a steep decline in 1805-1806. Two factors strongly contributed to this. On the one hand, improved techniques in linen manufacturing in England and in the Forth region of Scotland, including use of machinery, placed Orkney and the north of Scotland, at a severe cost disadvantage.⁷⁹ Secondly, time revealed that Orkney's soil was rapidly depleted by flax growing, which could best be borne by deep alluvial soil. The final flax crop in Holm parish failed totally in 1808, followed by widespread distress.⁸⁰ The compilers of the *New Statistical Account* in 1842, therefore, looked back upon the linen spinning industry as but a distant memory.

The ministers' reports in the late eighteenth-century *Old Statistical Account* clearly indicate that the linen industry was important in the lives of the producers in Orkney. The Rev. Hugh Ross, for example, reporting on the joint parishes of Evie and Rendall on the west Mainland in the year 1797, described a female-dominated industry in which "...a very considerable quantity is spun for sale... for annual exportation to Shetland, Newcastle, etc."⁸¹ Of greater importance is the account of the Rev. William Clouston reporting on the west Mainland parishes of Sandwick and Stromness. As always a sensitive and precise observer, Clouston tallied up the exports from these parishes for the year 1792, and thus permits us a clear view of linen's importance. The principal measurable exports were: linen yarn £ 956, beef (salted) £ 360, hides (salted) £ 182, feathers £ 258. Minor exports included

⁷⁶ *History of Orkney*, p. 215.

⁷⁷ Watt of Breckness papers, D3/12, D3/88, D3/11, D3/110, D3/177, D3/201, D3/208, Orkney County Archives.

⁷⁸ Sutherland-Graeme Papers, D5/3, File 1788, and File 1789.

⁷⁹ WILLIS, p. 108.

⁸⁰ Sutherland-Graeme Papers, D5/3, Shirreff.

⁸¹ Rev. HUGH ROSS, Evie and Rendall Parishes, OSA, p. 252.

such products as rabbit skins, stockings, fish, and linen cloth (£ 100). Thus, out of a total export value of £ 2,371, linen yarn accounted for 40.3%. It must be noted that Clouston does not list kelp among the export items because it was the property of the local proprietors.⁸²

3. Straw-plaiting

The third and final proto-industry in Orkney was straw-plaiting, the splitting and weaving of straw into bonnets and hats worn by fashion-prone women of various classes. There was a long history in Orkney, born of the absence of wood locally, for the inhabitants to work with straw in making items for local consumption, i.e. baskets, bonnets, chairs, creels (baskets for transportation use, particularly on horseback), and they took pride in their art and ingenuity. The basic feeling was that if an item could be made from straw, Orcadians would make it. However, virtually none of this production had been destined for sale in southern markets, nor had the work been organized on a proto-industrial basis. This situation changed in 1805, about the same time the linen industry was leaving Orkney, when an English firm brought instructors to Orkney to teach local women how to manufacture straw-plait for commercial purposes. A sudden change in fashion, resulting in a burgeoning demand for women's hats and bonnets, was the inducement. Previously this industry had been centred in Bedfordshire and dominated the economies of such towns as Luton and Dunstable. But new markets compelled the manufacturer to seek an expanded productivity in areas of very low labour costs. In the wake of linen's decline, Orkney proved suitable, and in a few years straw was being worked in every parish in the islands. Shetland also hosted this industry, but to a far much lesser degree.⁸³

At first, the raw material, straw made from rye, was all imported from either England or Italy (Leghorn), but soon an enterprising local proprietor, William Watt of Skail, procured seed and cultivated nine acres of rye for himself and his tenants. Orkney straw proved to be durable and not much inferior in appearance from the imported product, if first boiled and bleached.⁸⁴ During this industry's height, 1815-1835, it employed well over 6,000 women, nearly all of those who were capable of doing the work. The earnings from straw work brought in the large sum of £ 30,000 annually into the islands. It is clear from available evidence that local merchants, not the lairds, controlled the straw trade.⁸⁵

⁸² Rev. WILLIAM CLOUSTON, *Stromness and Sandwick Parishes, OSA*, p. 447.

⁸³ WILLIS, p. 108. HANCE SMITH, p. 119. Smith reports on a factory-based industry, lasting from 1802 until about 1820, "employing about 200 girls in... Lerwick and Dunrossness". Susan KNOX makes no mention of it.

⁸⁴ FENTON, pp. 270-71. JOHN FIRTH, *Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish*, (1920). Stromness: Orkney Natural History Society, 1974. p. 48. Clouston, xxiii.

⁸⁵ FENTON, FIRTH, p. 39. WILLIS, p. 110.

Deposited in the Orkney County Archives are straw-plait Account Books of Robert Mainland's firm for the years 1823, 1833, 1835 and for 1838. Another Account Book, for the year 1834, was examined in Edinburgh by Alexander Fenton. These books indicate that the industry was very widespread yet was highly profitable for the plait master, and that Mainland could deal directly with each plaiter, without mediation of the lairds. A preliminary perusal of these books tells us much.⁸⁶

In observing the growth and decline of Mainland's enterprise, a student can see that in 1823 he employed 674 plaiters, of whom 29 were men, in 11 separate communities all over Orkney. Though the plaiters were scattered throughout the islands, most were concentrated near Kirkwall. By the year 1833, Mainland had on his books some 1,612 plaiters in 17 communities, and he was then reaching out into the northern isles for new workers. One year later, in 1834, Mainland employed 1,707 plaiters, about 5% of whom were male, in 17 localities, while in 1835, perhaps the height of his enterprise, he listed 1,842 plaiters in 19 locations. Book do not exist for 1836 or 1837, but in 1838, it is quite clear that Mainland and his plaiting operation were in decline. He then employed only 1,022 plaiters, in 15 communities. The records by then were much less complete, with clear signs of sloppiness, and the final sums were not totalled.

Evidence derived from these books indicates that Mainland's profits were enormous, and it contains strong evidence that debt bondage was commonplace. The impression is confirmed by the Rev. Charles Clouston who noted that "The wages of the workers were not very high, skill and diligence being required to make 9d per day."⁸⁷

Several sources demonstrate that there was a vital social element to the work process. Female workers utilized the opportunity for some relief from winter isolation. James Omond, writing about the parish of Evie, describes young women undertaking a strenuous thirty mile round trip journey to the towns to pick up the straw, in addition to the complimentary candles provided by the merchants. But the preferred workplace, in Omond's description, were certain designated private homes, called the "gathering hooses" where women could experiment with and share varieties of plait styles and techniques.⁸⁸

John Firth also discussed the social nature of this work and provided us with a glimpse into Orkney culture around the year 1830. One can readily

⁸⁶ TAYLOR PAPERS, Orkney County Archives, D9, 3's 2, 3, 4, 5. See also letters in D9/6.

⁸⁷ CLOUSTON.

⁸⁸ JAMES OMOND, *Orkney 80 Years Ago* (with special reference to Evie), reprinted from *The Orcadian*, 1911. Kirkwall: The Kirkwall Press, 1980, p. 22.

imagine a social scientist present, armed with note-pad, camera and micro-cassette recorder:

In every township a chaumer was set apart as a plaiting house, where youth and beauty of the district gathered in the winter evenings, not necessarily to further the industry – for plaiting could just as well be done at home – but chiefly for the pleasure of social intercourse. It was interesting to compare one's work with that of a neighbor; then the intricacies of a new style of plait could be learned from the plaiting master or mistress i' the toon; often there was kemping (competition) to add zest to the work; and further, the tedium of the work was relieved by local gossip or story-telling, and by the singing of ballads. The only light was that of a single cruizie (candle) hung from the cupple – balks, and the blinking of a peat-fire – no great illumination to be shared by from half a dozen to a score of workers. Nevertheless, the plaiting house was a favorite rendezvous of all young people for there was good cheer there, and sometimes a dance to wind up with, if any young man had with him his fiddle or his trump. As may be imagined, the plaiting house was a place to which young men, some of them home from the "Nor-West" or the "Straits", delighted to resort, and where they were nothing loth to carry on their courtships, which otherwise were done in the most clandestine manner, and, like Romeo's, under cover of night.⁸⁹

This delightful description reveals that the plaiting industry had much more than economic importance to the people, sitting astride as it did so many social conjunctures. Its demise left a gap not very easily filled. As the Rev. Charles Clouston observed with undisguised lament in 1867, "No other industry has yet taken the place of straw-plaiting, and considerable numbers of young Orcadians, male and female, now leave for the south in search of employment."⁹⁰

The straw-plait industry entered a decline in the 1840s, and was never to recover. It was partly the victim, along with kelp, of the free-trade movement, which permitted free importation of superior quality foreign straw plait, a rather abrupt change in women's fashions, and the consequent retrenchment of what was left of the industry back to its original base in England. However, as John Firth has related, a story current in Orkney and widely believed, held that H.M. Queen Victoria, upon being presented with a fine bonnet, laughed at it derisively, and promptly placed it on the head of her pet dog.⁹¹ Nevertheless, Orkney was to lose its last proto-industry.

⁸⁹ FIRTH, p. 50. Compare this description with HANS MEDICK "Village Spinning Bees: Sexual Culture and Free Time among Rural Youths in Early Modern Germany", In H. MEDICK and DAVID SABEAN (eds.), *Interest and Emotion: Essays on the Study of Family and Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

⁹⁰ CLOUSTON.

⁹¹ FIRTH, p. 50.

Conclusions

Without overestimating the explanatory value of any single intellectual construct, a clear understanding of the proto-industrial process in Orkney enables us to apply a single operational concept to a series of disparate events for the period 1730-1840. Hitherto, these particular industries, i.e. kelp, linen and straw-plait, were studied individually, if at all, and their interactive impact on the course of history was ignored. Nor had any attempt been made to situate the history of these islands within the larger matrix of merchant capitalism. A proto-industrial perspective permits the historian to perceive events in these islands as a ripple in a much broader stream, and thus to avoid the romantic antiquarianism that colours so much local history. All too often 'micro-mini' local histories lack that critical sense of meaningful 'connectedness'.

This study is also illustrative of the essentially conservative nature of merchant capitalism, its articulation with feudalism and its ambiguous role in the long-standing dialogue concerning the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Recent contributors to the "transition debate" have concurred with the judgment of Robert S. DuPlessis in noting that "...the old mode of production proved remarkably resilient..." but, at the same time, merchant capitalism provided the economic foundation for the "...continuation of traditional relations of domination and subordination."⁹² Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in their recent study of merchant capital, have been struck by its conservative role in history, noting that "it fed off existing modes of production, however backward", and that merchants "normally lived as parasites on the old order."⁹³ Thus Orkney's experience highlights a convergence of interest, or identity, between the merchant and feudal classes.⁹⁴

Orkney's proto-industrialization underlines the crucial importance of local social structure in partially determining the pattern of economic development, as well as the ways in which social structure is able to interact with extra-regional trends. There is little doubt that proto-industrialization, which served *both* as a system of *domination* and *production*, was but one means by which the elites consolidated and maintained hegemony. However, when the

⁹² ROBERT S. DUPLESSIS, "From Demesne to World System: A Critical Review of the Literature on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism". *Radical History Review*, vol. 4, #1, Fall, 1976, p. 21.

⁹³ ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE and EUGENE GENOVESE, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7. For other views of merchant capital, see RODNEY HILTON, "Feudalism in Europe: Problems for Historical Materialists". *New Left Review*. #147. September/October, 1984, pp. 90-91, and TOM BOTTOMORE (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 333.

dramatic growth of a world economy opened up new, lucrative markets for such products as kelp, linen and straw-plait, the social structure permitted a response.⁹⁵

Orkney's age of proto-industrialization endured for more than a century. Yet each industry, in its turn, declined and died. Thus, we encounter in Orkney another example of *deindustrialization*. But the Orkney lairds, on the whole, survived with their control over their lands intact, and retained their position in Orcadian society for several more decades. However, the peasants of Orkney did not fare so well with the next shift in direction.

Orkney's economy once again changed course, beginning in the 1840s, moving toward large-scale commercial agriculture. A conjuncture of events made this possible:

1. The decline of proto-industrialization and the consequent freeing of capital and labour resources.

2. The appearance of regular and reliable sea transport to the south, especially the use of fast steamships after 1833.

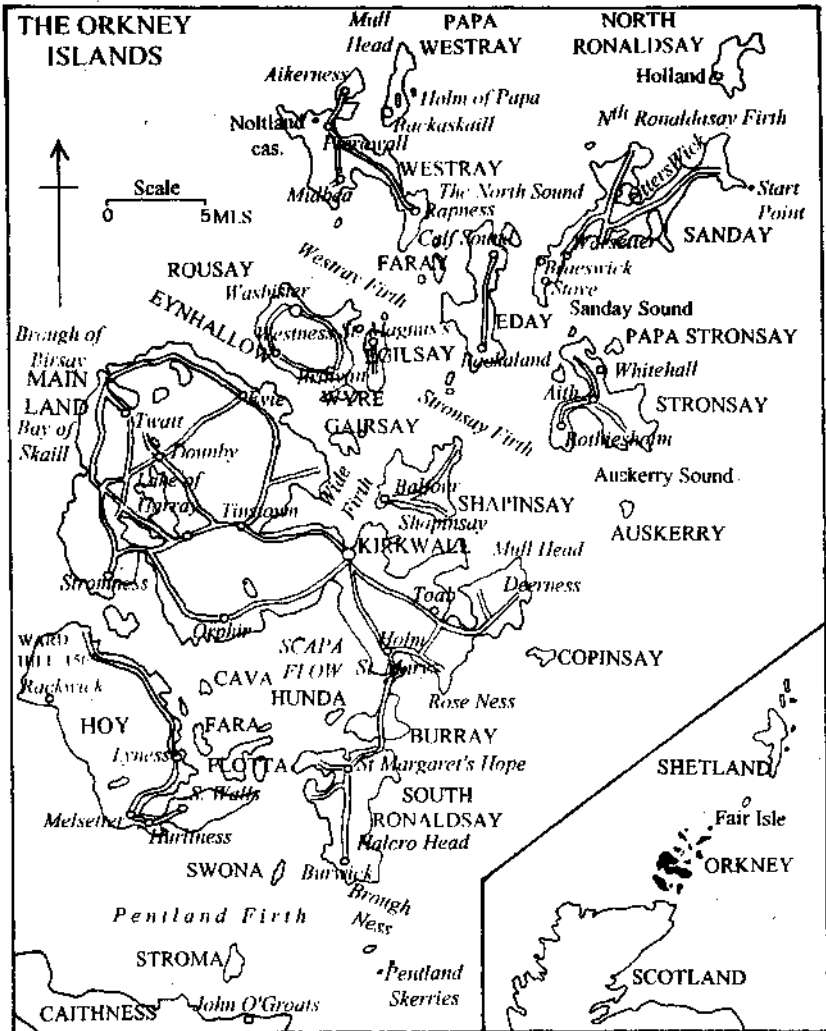
3. The pull factor of a strong market for high-priced agriculture products, most particularly live beef cattle which these islands raised (and still raise) exceedingly well. However, this age of improvement had room within it for only a portion of Orkney's peasantry. When de-industrialization forced Orkney back onto its agricultural base, without the income from industrial by-employment, only a segment of the peasantry was favoured. Those excluded from the subsequent era of agricultural prosperity faced a narrowing range of options, a weaker social leverage, and a diminishing economic base. Their small agricultural crofts were unable to support their increased numbers. As part of a labour surplus, they could play only a marginal role in the agricultural revolution being born. Thus, Orkney's rising prosperity from the 1840s until the late 1870s took place amidst a large-scale emigration movement, involving both single individuals and entire families. Contemporary opinion was well expressed in an 1855 editorial in the *Orcadian*, the local newspaper:

The improvements in agriculture — the division of common lands — the extent of recent emigration, the entire extinction of the kelp trade and the almost entire suppression of the once remunerative employment of straw-plaiting, have entirely changed matters in Orkney. The crofts are now not only a drag on agricultural improvements, but a source of weakness and poverty to their poor occupants, and for the interest of all ought to be removed.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ See MAXINE BERG, p. 218, on the importance of local social structure in the causal pattern of proto-industry.

⁹⁶ *Orcadian*, vol. ii, #14, 10 November 1855. For an excellent recent account of agricultural improvement, see THOMSON, *The Little General...* On the impact of steam transportation, see ALASTAIR and ANN CORMACK, *The Days of Orkney Steam*. Kirkwall: The Kirkwall Press, 1971.

Readers perusing the pages of the *Orkadian* during the 1850s cannot help be struck by the ironic juxtaposition of government sponsored advertisements urging the *emigration* of Orkney's citizens with commercial ones promoting agricultural implements and *imported* Peruvian guano! Emigration inevitably had its effects upon the total population base of these islands. From 1861, the peak year of population, the Orkneys were home to 32,225 persons. Exactly one century later, the population of Orkney County stood at 18,650, or 58% of the previous figure.⁹⁷ As one walks or drives through Orkney today, one is greeted everywhere by the remains of ruined and abandoned crofts.



⁹⁷ Barclay, p. 8.