

### Eagle Bairn: Version in Shetland Times

In about 1700 Mary's parents were shearing their corn at their croft of Stutaft near Baltasound, Unst, and Mary was lying in her shawl close by, at the side of the rig. After they had shorn a certain number of sheaves they proceeded to set them up in stooks. In so doing they moved a short distance from their infant who was fast asleep. To their horror a sea-eagle or erne, swooped down, clutched the bairn in the shawl in its talons, and flew off to the south.

With some neighbours, they followed the flight of the eagle, which on reaching Colvadale, altered course for the Blue-Banks of Fetlar. The men went on to the south-east corner of Unst where at Ramnagio they procured a boat and went to Fetlar, landing at Colbinstoft. On informing the inhabitants there of their mission, they were informed that the eagle had her eyrie at Busta-Pund, at the East Neaps. A number of Fetlar men now joined them and went with ropes to the top of the cliffs above the eyrie situated under an overhang on the cliff face.

Among the Fetlar men was a 12 year old boy, the son of Nicol Peterson of Crosbister, his name owing to the patronymic surnames in use, being Robert Nicolson. He volunteered to make the descent on the rope to the nest and was lowered over the cliff. To his amazement on reaching the nest, he found the child fast asleep along with two eaglets in the nest. He carefully disentangled the shawl from the nest, and was hauled up the cliff with his precious bundle to the safety of the cliff top and the crowd of men waiting there. Amongst the profuse congratulations extended to young Robert for his courageous deed was one from an elderly Unst man who said that he would maybe get her for a wife yet.

Several years later some men from Fetlar had occasion to go to Unst and Robert taking the opportunity to go with them made a visit to the home of the young woman whom he had carried up the cliff face of Busta-Pund as an infant.

The meeting proved to fulfil the old man's prophecy for it ended as a good fairy tale should with the marriage of Robert Nicolson and Mary Anderson. They settled for a short time at Fetlar, but later moved their home to Kirkabister, on the north side of Mid Yell Voe where they raised their family.

Abridged from:- Shetland Life, August 1981 page 14, by Robert L. Johnson

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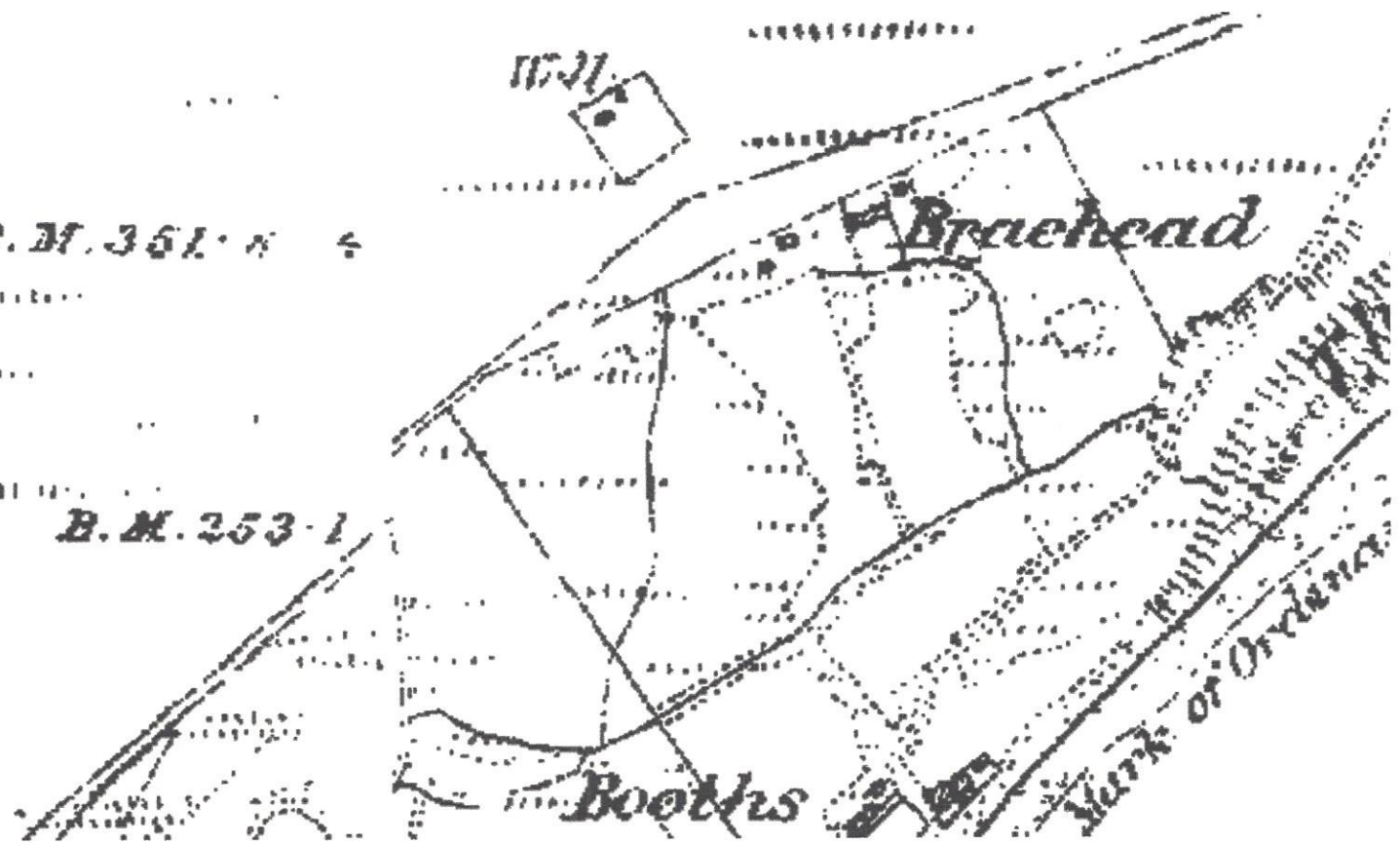
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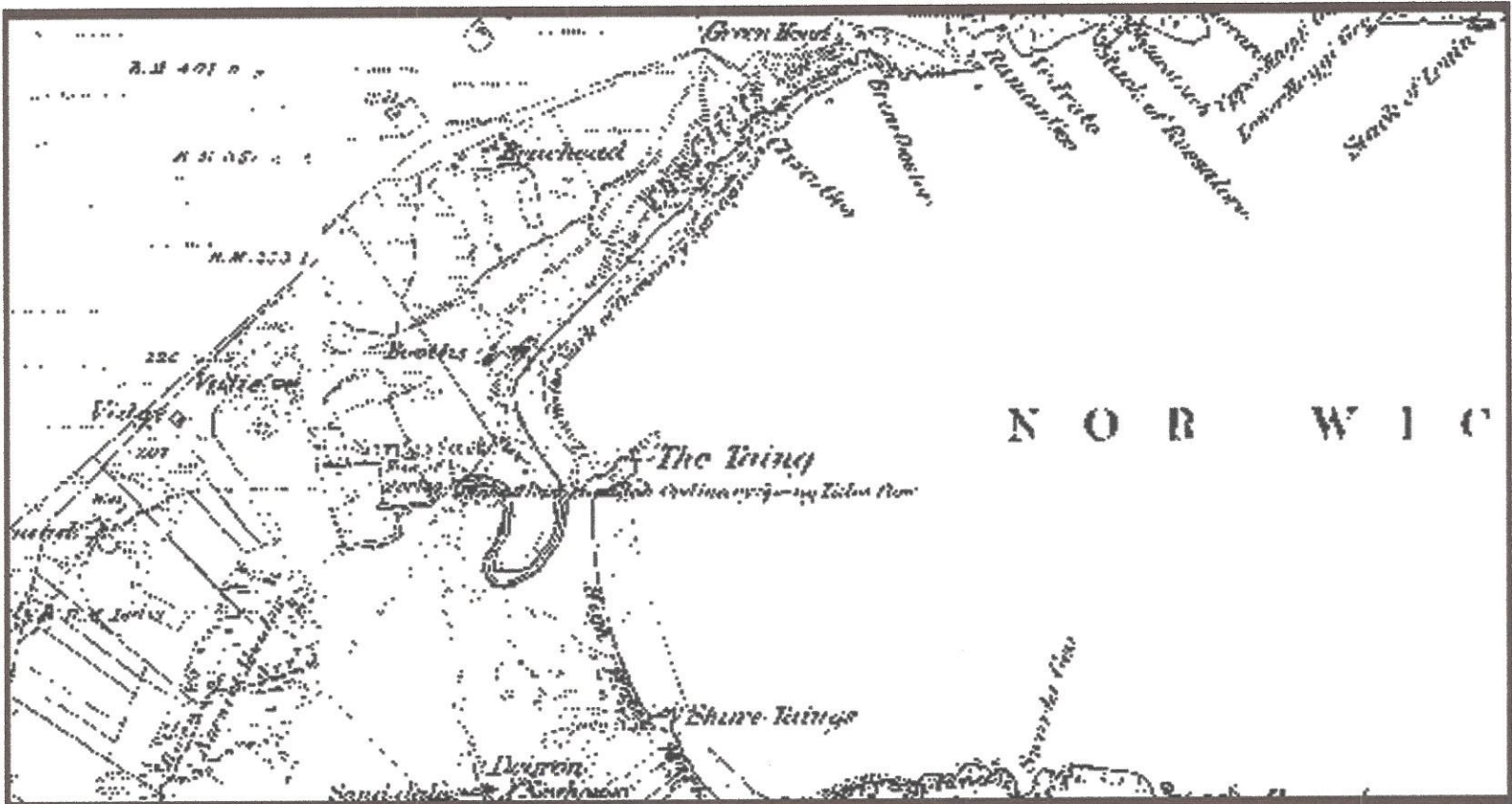
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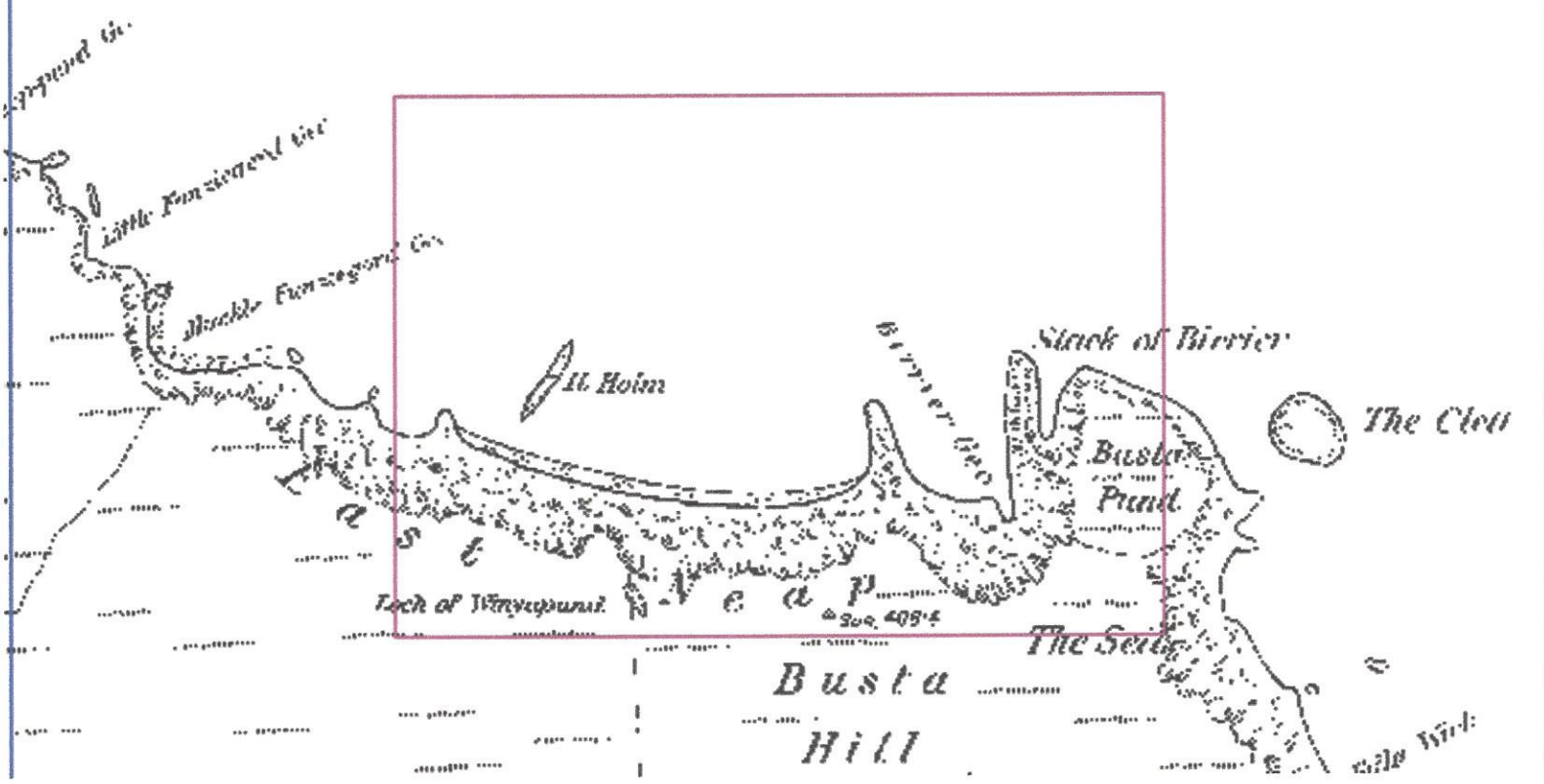
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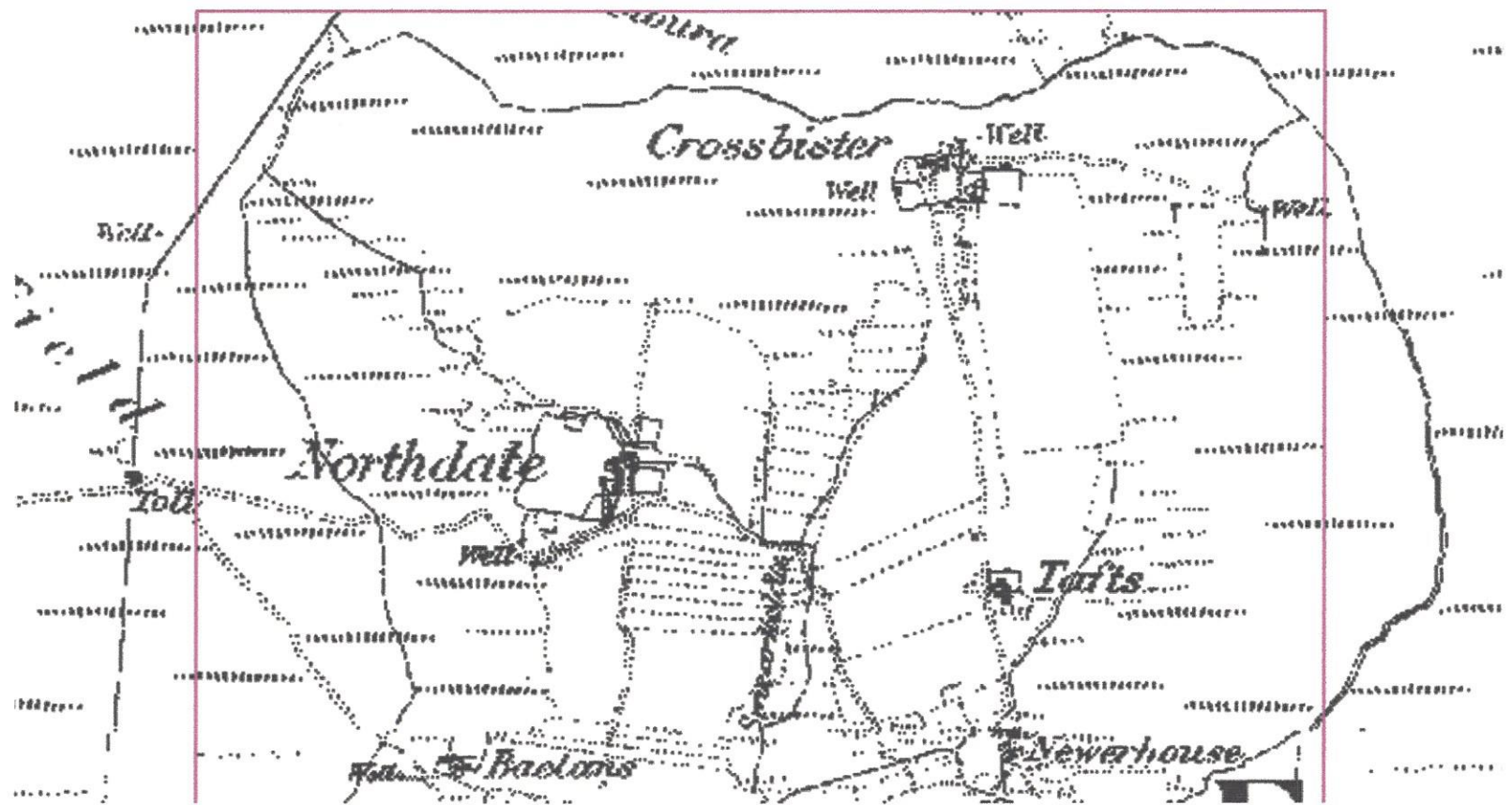
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## Children's Stories

by Margo Fallis  
**The Eagle Bairn**

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In the early 1700's there lived a young lad named Robert Nicolson. He lived on the island of Fetlar with his parents. Fetlar is one of 100 islands that make up the Shetland Islands, which belong to Scotland. They are actually closer to Norway than Scotland. They lie in the North Atlantic and were once used as a stop over for Vikings, on their way to or home from pillaging the people of Great Britain.

Shetland is a cold, windswept group of island. There is hardly a tree growing there; mostly just low growing shrubs and wildflowers. Birdlife is abundant though and many birds, such as puffins, make the island their permanent home.

One sunny day, which is a rare thing in Shetland, as it always seems to rain, Robert and his father climbed into their sixern, a small wooden fishing boat. They began the difficult task of rowing in the mostly-choppy sea, out to where they would find their daily catch of cod, ling or haddock. The men were the fishermen and the women stayed home, tending to the garden and the animals.

Mrs. Anderson was outside in her vegetable garden. She had rows of huge cabbages growing, potatoes and turnips too. Not much else grew in Shetland's rocky soil. Not much else can withstand the harsh weather. She had her little baby, Mary, wrapped up tightly in a blanket, lying in her wooden cradle, not far from where her mother worked. Mrs. Anderson took her shovel and turned the ground over, taking the weeds away from the cabbages. As she bent over to dig, she saw a huge shadow coming from above her.

To her horror, the huge eagle swooped down and stuck its talons out in front. As Mrs. Anderson screamed and began to run towards her baby, the eagle picked up the tightly-wrapped, sleeping infant, and carried it off towards the nest. It held the baby carefully and flapped its wings until it was out of sight.

Mrs. Anderson, in hysterics, ran down to the beach. She happened to see Robert and his father in the sea fishing. She waved at them, trying to get their attention. The waves pounded in around her, carrying in pieces of flotsam from passing ships, or things that had been carried in the current of the ocean from as far away as the Caribbean.

Robert saw Mrs. Anderson waving and pointed her out to his father. They rowed towards her. They pulled the sixern up onto the beach. Mrs. Anderson was soaking wet. Robert's father, Nicol, put his arms around her and they walked up towards the small croft. Inside he stirred the fire and sat her down in a chair, wrapped a woolen blanket around her and asked what had happened.

Mrs. Anderson, now somewhat composed, told the two men of the eagle. She was very upset; terrified that Mary would become dinner for the eaglets that were surely in the nest, since it was late spring.

Nicol asked Mrs. Anderson to go and get some help from some of her neighbors. He

and Roberts searched for some rope, found a coil, and ran off towards the cliffs, hoping to find the eagle and little Mary.

They climbed to the top, following a steep path cut into the cliff's face. The waves pounded against the bottom of the cliff, sending spray up over them. The noise was almost deafening. At last they made it to the top. They walked along, looking down. At last they came to the nest. It was about fifteen feet down, lying on a ledge that jutted out from the cliff. There were 3 eaglets in the nest and the baby, who seemed to be unharmed. The little eagles weren't bothering her. The adult eagles were nowhere to be seen.

Nicol and Robert were soon joined by some of the neighboring men and their wives, and Mrs. Anderson. She ran over to the edge and gazed over at her baby. Mrs. Spence came and pulled her away, taking her back a few feet.

The men came up with a plan. They would tie a rope around one of them and lower him over the edge, where he would grab the baby and bring her up to safety. They knew they had to hurry before the eagles came back. Robert volunteered. He was the lightest of them all. Nicol, being proud of his son, saw no other choice. A rope was tied securely around his waists and shoulders and he was lowered down, slowly.

The wind hurled around him, biting at him with its cold ferociousness. The eaglets began to chirp wildly, calling for their parents. Nicol looked up and saw, off in the distance, one of the huge eagles headed towards them. He called to his son to hurry. They lowered him a little quicker. He reached the nest. It was made of bits of hedge and scrub. Little Mary was sound asleep, still wrapped in her blanket, like a cocoon. She seemed alive to Robert.

He reached down and grabbed her, holding her tightly. She opened her eyes as soon as he held her safely. She looked up at him and smiled. The men pulled the rope and raised the boy and the baby up to the edge. Mrs. Anderson ran over and took Mary from Robert's arms. She hugged her so tightly, glad her baby was safe. She then hugged Robert and thanked him for being a hero. He'd saved her baby's life. Just then the two eagles came back. The group watched as they soared in the updraft of the cliff, then landed in the nest.

His father walked over and patted him on the back, as did the other men, then all went back to Mrs. Anderson's croft. The others soon left. Robert took Mary from her cradle and held her. He gazed into her eyes, then reached down and kissed her cheek.

The two of them, seeing all was well, left mother and daughter in the croft and went back to the beach. They pushed the boat into the waves and climbed in. They rowed back out to sea and caught what they needed.

The years passed by. Robert spent a lot of time at Mrs. Anderson's croft. Though he was ten years older, he loved Mary. Her mother made sure she knew the story of her hero, Robert, and how he'd saved her life.

When they grew into adulthood, Robert Nicolson married Mary Anderson, who was



known as 'The Eagle Bairn'. All descendants of this loving marriage are also known as 'Eagle Bairns'. We should be proud of our Shetland heritage and the brave men who worked hard fishing and built homes for their families. We should be grateful for the women who toiled in their gardens, tended to the sheep, spun wool, then knitted the wool into sweaters, socks, gloves, scarves and hats. They cut peat from the ground, using it for fuel. They had no modern conveniences, forced to cook over a fire in a big black kettle. Life was not easy for them. The weather was unmerciful and by the sweat of their brow they worked all their days. Be proud to be an 'Eagle Bairn'.

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## *Epilogue*

### *The Sea Eagle and the Baby*

Our old school stood in a fairly isolated position, the only other inhabited building within half a mile being the Old Schoolhouse nearby, which was occupied by an old lady called Annie Matthewson. Living near the school meant that she was occasionally subject to pranks played by the more mischievous element. Invariably - but not always justly - blame was laid on the boys, but as the mischief was usually of a minor nature, relationships were fairly peaceable.

Annie's house-companion was a fat old Shetland collie she called 'Shaila', who, though prone to yapping, had no aggressive qualities. This could not be said of Annie's moorit ram. Moorit denotes the rich brown colour of the wool characteristic of some of the Shetland breed of sheep. This animal had a magnificent set of curly horns which it knew how to use to good effect. At playtime the children used to feed the ram with bits of bread, making sure they were on the other side of the playground fence. But it happened from time to time that someone left the gate open, and there the trouble would start.

I suspect this animal had been brought up as a bottle-fed pet, because it feared neither dog nor man, far less a woman teacher and a bunch of kids. I vividly recall one afternoon when the classroom was quiet and peaceful: the only sounds were the occasional squeak of a slate pencil or the shuffle of feet, and our teacher was sitting behind her pedestal desk reading. Suddenly there was a bang. The door swung open and in marched the moorit ram. Now I don't doubt that all the animal wanted was a bit of bread to eat, but the teacher wasn't having any of it. 'Get out!' she shouted. 'Shoo, shoo.' The ram took one look at her waving arms and didn't like what it saw. Down went its head . . . crash! The front of the desk took the first blow and the wood splintered. Crash! The desk toppled over, teacher and all. The class was in pandemonium. The smaller children were screaming and yelling and climbing on to desks, while many of the older pupils were convulsed with laughter. Peace was restored when a few of the older boys grabbed the ram by the horns and steered it out of the door and back to its own domain. This happened shortly after Annie had complained that some of the boys had been up to mischief, and I am sure there was a glint of satisfaction in the old lady's eye when she was told how her ram had invaded the school classroom.

We often ran messages for old Annie, or helped her on the croft, and when she was in good humour she would reward us with a small spoon of sugar, or tell us stories. One of her stories fascinated me. It concerned a close encounter with a pair of eagles up on the hill beyond the croft.

The white-tailed sea eagle or erne lived in the more remote parts of north and west Britain until shortly after the turn of the century, when as a result of man's persecution it became extinct. The eyries were usually built in inaccessible places on the sea-cliffs, often on a bold headland from which the birds could see for many miles. Their young were mainly fed on fish or carrion which the parents scrounged along the shores. But they were also accused of more serious offences such as killing and carrying off young lambs - and even young babies.

Ernes were quite numerous in Shetland at one time, but by the time Annie Matthewson was a young girl there were probably only about half a dozen pairs left. The last pair to nest had their eyrie at the Neeps of Graveland on the west side of Yell, which was only six miles or so from the croft on which Annie lived.

She told us how, as a girl, she had been sent up into the hills beyond the croft to look for a lost sheep, and finally found the poor thing dead in a bog, with two huge eagles ripping and tearing at the carcass. She described how the startled birds took flight, their huge wings beating the heather as they tried to get airborne. As she watched them fly away over the moor, she had seen a quill come loose from one of the great wings and slowly spiral back to earth. At this point in her story Annie would reach up to a shelf above the fire and take down a roll of faded newspaper tied with a bit of wool. Carefully unwrapping the paper she would bring out a foot-long primary feather with a shaft as thick as a pencil. 'And that', she would say, 'is the feather which I have kept to this day.'

Annie also told us how a baby had been rescued from an erne's nest unharmed, after being carried from Unst to Fetlar. She would add in a matter of fact way that 'some of us are descended from that same bairn.'

Many years later, Charlie Inkster told me that when he was a boy he could remember watching eagles soaring in the sky and 'yelping like dogs'. He also knew the story of the eagle and the baby, but it was not until I talked with the late Jamesie Laurenson of Fetlar that I got at the details.

Jamesie was a noted local historian, a great character and a man of such physical strength that he was truly a legend in his lifetime. One spring day I was over in Fetlar and found Jamesie working at his boat. Securely fastened down in her winter 'noost' she showed signs of long usage with her line-grooved gunwale and evident repairs. 'She was a good boat,' said Jamesie, 'but I doubt if she will last another season.' As he talked it was difficult to believe that this tall, powerful man would soon be celebrating his eightieth birthday.

'Yes' he said in answer to my question, 'I can certainly tell you the story about the eagle and the baby, and what's more, I can tell you exactly as it was told to me by Willa-May Brown, the greatest historian who ever lived in Fetlar.' He laid aside his tar-brush and we wandered over to his house where we settled down by the fire, while his sister put on the kettle and Jamesie began his story.

'It happened in the year 1690, the year they rebuilt the Established church in Fetlar. A man called William Anderson lived with his wife and infant daughter Mary in the croft of Braehead at Norwick in Unst.

'One day in late summer they were out in the field near the'Yes/ he said in answer to my question, 'I can certainly tell you the story about the eagle and the baby, and what's more, I can tell it to you exactly as it was told to me by Willa-May Brown, the greatest historian who house cutting bere [a type of barley] and, as was the custom, they had taken their baby daughter with them. She was wrapped in a warm shawl, sleeping peacefully and tucked in the lee of a stock of sheaves where they could keep an eye on her.

'The ground slopes steeply down towards the sea below the croft, and although an onshore breeze was blowing, it was warm and thirsty work. William's wife suggested they could do with a cup of tea so, laying aside her sickle and checking that the baby was still sleeping, she went off to the cottage to put on the kettle.

'After she had gone, William went up to the end of the field to set up some of the sheaves and was busy at the task when he was alerted either by a sound or a movement. He looked round and was horrified to see an eagle labouring off into the wind, a shawl-clad bundle in its talons.

'He shouted and ran and a neighbour who had heard him also joined in the chase, but the erne gradually gained height and headed off in a southerly direction, still with the tiny figure of his

baby daughter in its talons. The men ran until they were exhausted. Other neighbours were alerted and took up the chase, keeping the bird in sight. When they reached the coast the eagle had disappeared out over the sea in the direction of Fetlar, some three miles distant. There, at a place called Bustapund, near the Blue Banks, eagles had had their eyrie since time immemorial.

'At Ramnageo, the point nearest Fetlar, the runners found that all the good boats were out fishing, leaving only an old, leaking boat on the beach. But the situation was desperate, and, taking an extra man to bale, they launched the boat and made speed towards Fetlar.

'Arriving at Fetlar below the croft of Colbinstoft, they explained their mission to the people there, and were told that the eagle's eyrie was under an overhang in an inaccessible part of the cliffs.

'An attempt had to be made, however, and quickly. Ropes were the answer, but again there were problems. With all the boats away the only ropes available were some highly suspect discarded halyards. The best bits were knotted together and the party set out with all haste along the clifftop to the spot above the eagle's nest.

'The would-be rescuers couldn't see directly into the nest but they could just see part of the baby's shawl, so at least this was the right place. Serious doubts were expressed about the ability of the old ropes to support the weight of a man, but a young Fetlar lad called Robert Nicholson, who had joined in to see the fun, immediately volunteered. There was some argument about whether a young boy should be entrusted with such an important task, but he was a wiry chap, well used to cliff climbing, and so he was tied to the rope and lowered over the edge.

'Now then . . .' Jamesie paused. There is a slight difference in the story here. One old person told me that tar was rubbed on Robert's soles so that he could get a better grip on the smooth rock, but other historians deny that. Anyway, the boy was carefully lowered down and when he got to the eyrie he saw an amazing sight, one which he often told during his lifetime. There was the baby Mary fast asleep in the eagle's nest with a well-grown young eagle crouched at each side. One even had its beak caught up in the baby's shawl. Robert carefully disentangled the shawl and, with the precious bundle safely in his arms, was hauled back up to the clifftop.

'It was said that amid the congratulations from the helpers, the elderly man taken on to bale the boat, who had by then caught up with the rest, said, "Well done boy, you'll maybe get her for your wife yet!"

'Mary was taken quickly to the croft at Colbinstoft where a nursing mother fed her while preparations were made for the trip back to Unst.

'The amazing thing was that there wasn't a scratch on the baby. The thick shawl had protected her from the talons of the eagle. When the boat reached Unst once more, they were met by the baby's mother, weeping tears of joy at the safe return of her infant.

'Now then/ Jamesie went on, 'we come to an interesting part.

'There is no suitable kind of stone in Fetlar for the manufacture of millstones and, as they were essential household equipment in those days, they had to be imported from the neighbouring islands of Unst and Yell.

'There came a time some years later when a party of Fetlar men were preparing to take a boat across to Unst to collect a consignment of millstones. When Robert Nicholson's mother learned about the trip she encouraged him to go along, saying "Here's a chance for you to go and see the

lass you rescued." When they reached Unst, Robert was directed to the croft of Braehead where he made himself known. He was greeted with delight by the family, including Mary who by this time had grown into a pretty young girl.

'It was a case of love at first sight, although,' said Jamesie with a chuckle, 'in his case it was second sight! Eventually the two were married, and came to live in Fetlar.'

Jamesie paused for a moment's thought. 'Now we come to the ancestry. Mary Anderson, who was rescued, was the great-grandmother of James Andrew Jamieson, who lived at Houbie in Fetlar. He had a daughter who married a man called Petrie . . .' He went on to list all the people still living in Fetlar, including my own relatives, who were directly descended from Mary Anderson. Each step of the ancestry was stressed by a tap on the table from a great gnarled forefinger, still smeared with tar from the boat. Any thoughts of arguing with the plausibility of the tale evaporated as he transferred the tapping to my knee and said with a steely glint in his eye, 'Don't let anyone tell you the story is a fable - for I know it to be true.'

Saxby in his *Birds of Shetland* (1874) offers an interesting insight into the habits and character of sea eagles. Writing of a pair which were a 'great annoyance' to the neighbourhood of Baltasound on Unst, he notes ' . . .so bold did they become at last, they would carry off poultry from the cottage doors when the men were at fishing, treating the women and children with the utmost contempt.' While this shows that the erne was probably bold enough to attack a young child, it leaves unanswered the question of whether an eagle would be capable of carrying even the tiniest of babies into the air. Many people will doubt that it ever happened, and there is little possibility of proving that it did.

But the genealogy is impeccable and can be verified by parish records as far back as the baptism of Mary Anderson's grandchildren. So who knows? Had Mary been killed by the eagle this book might never have been written.

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From, "Bobby Tulloch's Shetland: An Islander, His Islands and Their Wildlife", by Bobby Tulloch, 1988, MacMillan, London, pages 155 – 159 (Out of print).



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