

# The Personal Impact of Jakobsen in Shetland and Orkney

By *T. M. Y. Manson*

The fact that I never met Dr Jakobsen personally, yet grew up as a youth aware of him like someone I knew well is itself one proof of the strong impact of his personality on people in Shetland.

I should explain that my father, Thomas Manson, who only died in 1941, and my uncle James Manson, whom I do not remember as he died in 1907 when I was three years old, were the printers and publishers of the first two lectures which Jakobsen delivered in Lerwick before 1897 — lectures on the Dialect and Place-names of Shetland, the first fruits of his three years' intensive research in Shetland between 1893 and 1895.

Publishers naturally have contact with the authors whose works they publish, but obviously there was here a strong element of friendship and affection for this author. My father and mother often spoke of Jakobsen's homely simplicity, and of how in speech and manner he seemed to everybody in Shetland to be actually a Shetlander, an attribute which helped him enormously to gain the confidence of the people he visited in the rural districts, and enabled him to draw them out fully on the subject of their familiar speech. My parents also vividly described the delight of

the audiences at the two lectures mentioned above, as they listened to the perfect Shetlandic pronunciation of the lecturer while he discussed numerous Shetland words and place-names.

It is fascinating now to look back to these two lectures as the first outlines of the monumental work which Jakobsen later carried out over a period of years, and which happily is in permanent form in his great »Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Speech in Shetland.« I am glad to possess the complete copy of the original Danish edition in paper covers, the first volume inscribed by Jakobsen himself to my uncle. I do not possess the translation in English by Jakobsen's sister, Mrs Horsbøl, to whom I was introduced in Lerwick many years ago. I was often told by my father and others that Jakobsen himself would have preferred to publish the dictionary in English from the beginning, but that under the conditions of the Carlsberg Foundation, which was financing the work, it had to be published in Danish. There is therefore a great debt of gratitude due to Mrs Horsbøl for having carried out her brother's wish, thus making the work intelligible to those, the majority in this country, unable to read Danish. It is a pity that the English translation is now out of print. Quite recently, as every now and again, I heard someone asking for it, but unable to get it.

The only person I know who knew Jakobsen personally is Miss Beatrice Hunter, Irvine's Gord, Lerwick, a niece of the late John Irvine and the late Miss Katherine Irvine, both of whom were deeply interested in etymology. Miss Hunter was on the verge of young womanhood at the time, and she has vivid memories of Mr Jakobsen, as he was then, frequently visiting her uncle and aunt in the same house in which she still lives. She says he was made welcome to come as often as he wished, and she listened to many conversations about Shetland words, noting Mr Jakobsen's perfect Shetland pronunciation. She adds

that he came originally for three months, but found so much material that he stayed three years.

As I grew up I always encountered affectionate remembrance of Jakobsen among all who mentioned him. One of the Shetland men with whom he had most to do was the blind scholar and author J. J. Haldane Burgess, whom I knew well, and who died in 1926. Burgess told me himself that Jakobsen's death was to him a great personal blow, quite apart from considerations of the loss to scholarship, because, as Burgess put it, »he was such a fine soul.«

I would like here to recount a little incident told to me by Burgess which reveals Jakobsen's sense of humour, a side of his nature which is too seldom mentioned.

I have already said that Burgess was blind — he actually went blind during his student days. As often happens with blind people, his other senses became developed to an extraordinary degree, and his ability to walk about unaided and yet know exactly where he was, often puzzled people, including Jakobsen.

One day Jakobsen resolved to see if he could take Burgess past the limit of his sense of locality. He took Burgess a long, circuitous walk around Lerwick, and when they had reached the extremity of the town furthest away from where Burgess lived, Jakobsen suddenly asked him where they were. To Jakobsen's astonishment Burgess gave an absolutely correct reply. The explanation was that Jakobsen had unwittingly led the way to the vicinity of a particular oil store, and Burgess recognised his whereabouts by the smell!

Next to Burgess, the two most outstanding Scandinavian scholars in Lerwick in my time were William W. Ratter, and John Nicolson, poet and writer, who both outlived Burgess by about 20 years. They both told me themselves that they owed their interest in and knowledge of Scandinavian language initially to Jakobsen, who taught them as young men. Both spoke of him with great affection.

Mr Nicolson told me that it was while giving him one of his first lessons that Jakobsen realised for the first time the big difference there is between the East and West sides of Shetland in the pronunciation of the vowel  $\text{ø}$ . Jakobsen was surprised to find Nicolson perfectly able to pronounce  $\text{y}$  in the Scandinavian way, instead of finding it difficult, and yet not only quite unable to pronounce  $\text{ø}$  properly (instead of finding it easy), but steadily pronouncing it like  $\text{y}$ . Yet Jakobsen knew that plenty of other Shetlanders pronounced  $\text{ø}$  quite naturally in their own speech. The explanation was that Nicolson belonged to the West Side. This difference in pronunciation still prevails today.

When in 1929 and 1930 under the inspiration of Poul Niclasen contact between Faroe and Shetland was renewed socially and in sport, a group of young men, of whom I was one, resolved to take up the study of Danish in order to foster the contact as much as possible. The man we went to for help was William Ratter, mentioned above, who for several winters in his home coached us first in Danish, then in Norwegian.

This proved to be an unconscious preparation for the teaching of Norwegian in the Lerwick night school to meet a local demand created by the Second World War and greatly increased contact with Norwegians. I was the first teacher of Norwegian, for one winter, in the Lerwick night school, and in my class were two British Army security men whose duty it was to deal with Norwegian refugees.

Norwegian has been a regular subject in the Lerwick night school ever since, usually taught by a Norwegian, as at present.

One of the two Army security men who started to learn Norwegian as described above, an Englishman named Ronald Popperwell, continued to study it to such purpose that he is now Lecturer in Norwegian in Cambridge University.

All this may appear to be a digression, but I put it on

record to show that the present-day teaching of Norwegian in Lerwick and Cambridge, on their different levels, can both be traced back to the influence of Jakobsen.

In Shetland of course it was not only scholarly people who got to know Jakobsen — the mass of people came to know him. Only a few weeks ago a country woman told me she could remember him in her old home.

In Orkney, where he spent much less time, he could not have met and spoken to so many people, but those who did meet him formed the same kind of impression of him as all did in Shetland. In 1937, while in Kirkwall for the celebrations of the octocentenary of St. Magnus Cathedral, I got to know John Mooney, the biographer of St. Magnus and the father of Scout Mooney, one of two British Scouts chosen by Sir Ernest Shackleton for an Antarctic expedition. Mr Mooney had been visited by Jakobsen in connection with the Orkney speech, and he had the same fond and happy recollections of Jakobsen as those I have referred to in Shetland.

Finally I wish to say how interested and glad I was, while in Thorshavn in June, 1962, to observe that a street in the town has been named after Jakob Jakobsen.

#### ÚRTAK

Sjálvur havi eg ongantið hitt *dr. Jakobsen*, men faðir mín, Thomas Manson, og farbróðir mín, James Manson, prentaðu tveir teir fyrstu fyrirlestrarar, sum *dr. Jakobsen* helt í Lerwick fyri 1897 um mál og staðarnøvn í Hetlandi, fyrstu úrslit av rannsóknnum hansara her í oyggunum 1893—1895.

Enn minnast fólk her í Hetlandi *dr. Jakobsen*, ið var sera væl dámdur av øllum. Gamalur blindur frásøgumaður lýsti hann fyri mær við orðunum: Hann var ein aðalborin sál.

Umframt vísindaligu úrslit hansara eigur ikki at verða gloymt, at tað var hann, ið kveikti áhugan fyri hetlendskum máli, og at honum er eisini fyri at takka hin vaxandi áhugin í Hetlandi fyri norðurlendskum málum.