

***Beàrnaraigh na Hearadh: 'Tis Fifty Years Since. A Study of Life in a Hebridean Island Community.* Susanne Barding; trans. John Holmes. Balallan, Isle of Lewis: Islands Book Trust, 2023. Pp. 606. Maps; illus. ISBN 9781907443831.**

This book is a time capsule. As a young anthropology student from Copenhagen, Susanne Barding came to Berneray in 1970 to study crofting – she completed her thesis on the island’s economic development in 1973 – and ended up studying the islanders, their history, their character and their community at a time of transformative social, economic and linguistic change. In publishing her research fifty years later, she has produced a book that will interest not only anthropologists and scholars, but anyone – islanders, ‘ex-isles’, summer visitors, incomers – who experienced the Outer Hebrides in the latter part of the twentieth century, as well as those curious about Berneray’s recent past. Written in an accessible and engaging style, the work provides a detailed picture of what today is a largely vanished way of life.

The first three chapters trace the history of settlement in Berneray, examine the relationships between clan chiefs, landowners and tenants, and describe the evolution, legalisation, and eventual institutionalisation of what has been called ‘the crofting way of life’ beginning in the nineteenth century. While all Hebridean islands share similar history, Barding traces specific upheavals in Berneray – famine, clearances, emigration, the collapse of the kelp market, the re-settlement of Borge as a crofting township in 1901 – to show how memory of these events coloured attitudes and relationships among islanders well into the 1970s.

Following this overview, the account becomes personal, as three of Barding’s informants speak for themselves: Iain Ferguson (1921–1988) and two of his sisters, Rebecca Ferguson (1928–2011) and Mary (Ferguson) MacAskill (1920–2019), all of Borge township. Barding refers to these three ‘life histories’ throughout the book, helping readers to grasp the personal ramifications of lives lived in a ‘high-context’ community in which social roles are determined by birth and gender, and where the need to keep track – of family commitments, of favours owed, of other people’s behaviour – is ingrained in its members from childhood. Barding acknowledges the bravery of these informants and others who, in allowing an outsider to record their recollections and use their real names, bucked the norms of a society where personal details and emotions were never publicly discussed. In sharing these stories as well as biographical data and familial relationships of many other individuals, Barding has ensured that those with family roots in Berneray can grasp where their own histories fit into the community matrix she describes.

While these ‘life histories’ cannot tell the whole story, Barding observes that ‘the social construction of the storyteller can be supplemented by social constructions made by the anthropologist’ (193). Storytelling is, of course, a well-known aspect of Gaelic culture, and in a later chapter she reminds readers of how the recounting of traditional tales had once commonly occupied the long winter evenings – the *ceilidhs* described over a century ago by the likes of Alexander Carmichael and J. F. Campbell. By the 1970s, however, the dominant narrative form was the anecdote: a short, often humorous account, usually told by a man, about an adventure (or misadventure) experienced by (usually) another man – often a ‘great character’ or someone known to the local community.¹³ Actual historical events were often fictionalised in ways that aligned with the conventions of more traditional narratives (203). Unlike the hero tales, however, anecdotes very often functioned as a form of social commentary and indirect social control – cautionary tales that, by ‘smuggling the social message in through the back door’ (201), reinforced the community’s values in a manner that avoided embarrassment. But while historical facts often lay behind such stories, Iain Ferguson, a master teller of anecdotes (202–209), was unable to recall anecdotes concerning traumatic events such as evictions, and the author correctly observes that such topics, while often explored in

¹³ While she says that women did not generally tell anecdotes, Barding acknowledges that tradition bearer Kate Dix (*Cèit an Tàilleir*), from whom hundreds of items are held in the School of Scottish Studies Archives, was an exception (210, 441). Dix was extensively recorded by the late Ian Paterson, a native of Berneray, who is himself the subject of an article by Liam Alastair Crouse in the present volume of *Scottish Studies*.

REVIEWS

Gaelic song and poetry, would likely have been considered unsuitable for ‘the humorous storytelling form of the anecdote genre’ (212).

Part 3 of the book – comprising over 300 pages of its total length – describes the Berneray communities in extraordinary detail. After placing the island’s loss of population – from 524 in 1901 to 131 in the 1970s – in its historical and geographical context, Barding devotes the next several chapters to geography, land use, and material culture: the allocation of communal resources (seaweed, grazing land); the style, construction and maintenance of dwellings; farming practices and livestock management; boats, fishing and navigation; and the other sorts of work (lobster fishing, wool working, and newer economic opportunities) which both crofters and other islanders pursued in order to make ends meet. The fact that Barding is female was itself significant, because while her outsider status rendered her immune to criticism while observing and participating in what would normally be all-male activities, she was also well-placed to explore the lives of women, whose indoor lives could proceed naturally enough in her presence.

An important topic throughout the book is that of balance: the importance of ensuring that one did not aspire to – much less attain – greater prosperity or prominence than one’s neighbours. It did not do to stand out. Those who did – the shopkeeper, say, who did not till the land but earned his living from others in the community – got little respect (444). Barding describes one occasion when village men met to appoint members of the grazing committee. Repeated exhortation by the township clerk failed to elicit a single volunteer, so loath were those present to put themselves forward ahead of others. Barding, observing from a seat at the back, describes the scene in keen detail (388–91). This concept, so foreign to those living in ‘low-context’ environments where nobody cares what you aspire to, actually has a name in Gaelic: *coimhearp*, defined by Fr Allan McDonald as ‘an emulation to be no better than my neighbours, a hateful characteristic of many crofters’.¹⁴

Essential to maintaining this balance was the principle of reciprocity. While romantic notions may have portrayed Hebridean islanders as unfailingly generous and happy to work together for the common good, the situation was more nuanced than it appeared. In ‘high-context’ communities it is important to keep up and to keep score: when one man does a favour for another, both parties know that the favour will one day be repaid in kind. When communal work requires many hands, someone’s absence – even for a good reason – will be noted, and he might get a reputation for slacking off, or for putting his own needs first (444). As Iain Ferguson put it to the author, ‘nothing is forgotten’ (394) and ‘there is nothing like a free gift’ (408).

A well-functioning community, particularly one in which economic precarity is a constant threat, relies on a complex network of relationships. The principal network is that of family, and includes not only those who live in the island but those who have left, especially those who have stayed in contact. Being a family member brings obligations that cannot be denied or ignored: Rebecca Ferguson returned to the island from working in Oban when her mother fell ill, because it was expected of her. In Berneray, relationships between the two crofting townships, Borve and Ruisgarry, could be strained, as Ruisgarry felt that some of its arable land had been taken when Borve was resettled in 1900. Church relationships were important, because membership of one or the other congregation – the Church of Scotland and the Free Church – implied different sets of distinctions, particularly regarding interpretations of Scripture and of moral standards (419).

Like codes of reciprocity in secular matters, the acknowledgement of moral codes was fundamental. Transgressing these brought shame, and the fact that one’s transgression was discussed behind one’s back probably made it worse. Inevitably, women were hypervigilant about matters such as being seen in public: one Borve woman told Barding that when returning home from visiting an aunt in Backhill she preferred to walk across the hills rather than past the houses, for fear that her unescorted presence out-of-doors would provoke gossip (456–7). But while keeping up appearances was essential, the calculation required to do so could wear thin for some: Iain Ferguson told Barding

¹⁴ Fr Allan McDonald, *Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist and Eriskay*, ed. J. L. Campbell (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1958), 78.

REVIEWS

how he had valued the quality of sincerity in a man he had known, someone who spoke his mind, whose ‘opinions were not hidden under layer upon layer of social consideration’. Barding understood that such ‘authenticity’ had value in a community where ‘most social conduct is staged’ and one is constantly being judged by others (438).

As modern communications gradually enlarged islanders’ field of vision, questions of ‘identity’ became more important, just as they have done everywhere in our own day. Family identity – one’s patrilineal ancestry, its history, and its obligations – had always been essential; but now there were other sorts of identity to be considered. Just as there are discussions today of whether the word ‘community’ should retain its geographically-bounded meaning or include what Barding calls ‘floating networks’, the idea of ‘identity’ must now consider those who choose it as well as those who have inherited it (489–91). Relationships and networks of obligation have had to adapt to acknowledge those who, living away from Berneray, nonetheless identify as members of the island community. As Barding discusses in chapter 16, islanders’ nuanced distinction between a ‘ceilidh’ and a ‘visit’ perfectly illustrated their response to the increasingly-fluid notion of ‘identity’ and its implications for their values of hospitality, reciprocity, and balance.

Barding’s final chapter examines islanders’ traditions, customs and beliefs. She describes how dancing, long prohibited by Free Church, made a comeback around the time of the First World War and continued to allow people to let off steam during her stay in Berneray. She also surveys traditions associated with the ‘old new year’ – *Oidhche Chaluinn* – and other calendar customs, based on accounts shared by her informants. While these are traditions Berneray observed in common with other Hebridean communities, such personal accounts allow us to see past generic descriptions and taste the gaiety of these occasions.

When Barding began her work in the 1970s, academic anthropology had only recently come to approve the study of living communities, to acknowledge that change was constant, and to recognise that communities in the North Atlantic shared much in common (557–8). In the fifty years since, advances in the interpretation of fieldwork like hers undoubtedly helped Barding describe her findings in terms that today’s discipline would understand. Her findings, moreover, are remarkable in their depth, her understanding informed by layers of historical study and reinforced by the personal accounts of her informants. In describing her own adventures, she herself demonstrates considerable gifts as a raconteur, her accounts full of keen observation, lively characterisation and telling detail – gifts which must have made her many friends in Berneray. Some Scottish readers may wonder, however, why Barding felt the need to recap well-known historical background, or why comparisons between Gaelic culture and that of the Faroe Islands crop up so often. Others may lament that occasional stanzas of Gaelic poetry are quoted only in translation, or wonder how Barding’s understanding of the community might have been more nuanced if she knew Gaelic. We must remind ourselves that this work was first written in Danish, for readers less familiar with Scottish history, unlikely to know any Gaelic, and for whom references to Faroese language and culture might offer a useful touchstone. There is no doubt, however, that her book fulfils what Barding has always considered an important responsibility (559):

...[T]here was a widespread perception among younger anthropologists that their research result should, one way or the other, be shared with the people who had kindly supplied the information. Ideally you should give something back to ‘the field’. I am sorry it took me so long. That is why I have attempted to present my material in the most accessible way possible, such as including descriptions of activities and applying an approach I have chosen to call ‘anthropology light’.

Barding’s study shows how an outsider’s perspective can illuminate details that an emic observer might take for granted. This is a very important work in which both anthropologists and Scottish readers generally will find material to enrich their understanding of a way of life that, for many, remains vividly alive in memory.

VIRGINIA BLANKENHORN