

LAURENCE WILLIAMSON

L. G. Johnson

In the following Mr. L. G. Johnson, of Mid Yell, gives a short documented account of a remarkable native of Shetland, Laurence Williamson. Williamson was a self-trained recorder of uncommon skill who found his own way to the basic principles and method of folklore and folklore research. He realised that in one sense the past never dies, that history is a continuum of cause and effect and that a thing is the sum of all the events in time that went to create it—a piece of imaginative insight that every real historian and folklorist needs to have. He understood too how his own generation was in the transition between the indigenous traditional culture and the synthetic imposition of ideas through centralised media, and that what remained must be recorded as a matter of urgency.

From his own background in an isolated and economically simple community he understood what many historians never learn, that *all* information is relevant to their job and that in such a place it is the oral tradition that must of necessity form the bulk of the historian's raw material. He also saw what some folklorists never appreciate, that language is a vital ingredient in all this and that nomenclature and speech idiom may be as important as the objects and practices themselves.

It is on these principles that his methods were devised, and these are models of correctness for field-workers in avoiding the pitfalls of many investigators' subjective impressionism and interpretation. Briefly this was to note down everything he himself knew or heard in full detail and where information came orally from another source than himself to put it down exactly as it was said, even to the extent of naming the informant, adding the time of day and devising a kind of script to cope with the phonetics of Shetland dialect. Thus his collection is invaluable to the dialectologist as well as the folklorist, and much of it has already found its way into Jakobsen's *Dictionary of Shetland Norn*. It is only to be regretted that one so far-seeing, so passionately interested in his own community and yet so detached and exact in his method should have died a generation before his work could be properly used and appreciated. How much more he could have collected and much more we should have learned if he had been living to-day when the study of folklore is rapidly becoming a scientific discipline in its own right and there are trained research scholars with whom he might have worked.

EDITOR

Laurence Williamson lived at Mid Yell, a township near the centre of one of the North Isles of Shetland, and was born there in 1855. His parents, James, a merchant, then aged 54, and Mary Gardner, 36, belonged to, and in their younger years had dwelt in the neighbouring Isle of Fetlar. Laurence died in 1936.

When about 8 and already a good reader and counter, he began attending the parochial school, about 3 miles distant. The teacher, Mr. A. D. Mathewson, born in 1799, added to good scholastic attainments an interest in the lore, genealogy, and history of the North. Laurence early showed exceptional ability and his characteristic bent. He was soon a first favourite with Mathewson who was said to acclaim him as "my best ever pupil". He continued at school until he was 17, when on the death of his father, he took over the office of local post-master.

Interest in his favourite subjects began early. He once remarked that by the time he was 14 or so he had noted down most dialect words, and that before he left school he had had long talks with Mr. Mathewson on genealogy and kindred subjects. Sometimes, when referring to a person who was old in his youth, he would say, "I talked with him or her".

From papers, notes, word lists it would appear that Laurence had at one time envisaged some comprehensive work comprising dialect, proverbs, legends, superstitions, picturesque stories, historical matter and details of life and work. Lists exist amounting to perhaps ten or twelve thousand words and phrases. They are written in small hand, mostly on separate sheets, 8 inches by 5. Though the writing is generally neat some words are difficult to make out, due to his tendency to cram. As a rule meanings are not given.

To the end of his life he retained a close observation of speech. Once in his later years when referring to changes taking place, he related somewhat as follows, "I was going down to the shore one breezy morning. First I met an old man and to my remark on the strong wind, he answered, 'Yah, dat it is'. Farther down the way I met a woman a little over middle age. She answered, 'Yea, it is dat'. Lastly near the shore I met a girl a year or so out of school. Her answer was, 'Ye-es it is'."

His first source of information would have been his parents and teacher who were people that grew up in the early years of the nineteenth century, then customers to the shop and

post office, with now and again a visit in the locality or to Fetlar. That coupled to an eager ear and a phenomenal memory was largely his field.

In a letter to a friend requesting him to query someone on a genealogical matter, he said, "Put down the very words of the answer just as they say it. I always find that best", and so far as he noted down that appears to have been his method. Some of his notes are copied out in a neat hand. Others are in pencil, appear as hurriedly written and in his abbreviated system, and to decipher them familiarity with the dialect, his handwriting and system would be necessary.

As an example of his method, here is a picturesque incident.

"Jarom Manson of Stivler was at Arthur Scollay of Uttrabister one night. They talked of trows and the like all night. Arthur at last stole out and put on a white shirt and another on a rake, and waited for Jarom to go home at the burn of Uttrabister, and when Jarom came he rose up slowly to his full height. Jarom said, "Who are you in God's name". No answer. "Then who are you in the Devil's name". No answer. "When then you answer in neither's name I will see if you be flesh and blood or not". So Jarom sprang on him, and both being very strong and equally so they struggled till they were breathless, and had to let go and stood looking at each other. Both shirts were in shreds. (ADM)." Laurence usually added the initials of the relater, in this case those of Mr. Mathewson.

Laurence recorded many expressions or sentences as actually spoken in the dialect. Many of them refer to the work in hand or to the weather. The initials of the speaker, the date, often the time of day are nearly always added. Many or most are by M.G., his mother, and those may be held to exemplify the Shetland dialect, with any Fetlar variation, as spoken in the early nineteenth century.

Here are two examples:—

Da skelvi sna, hit wis layin dun a great body o it, bit dis fogbirt-sna is far worse; hit sifts in trow everything; hits awful.

MG 1.43 p.m. 6 Jr. 95.

Da geese is just runin da muda; der lyin vevlin trow da bank in da muda day-dayly.

MG 4.10 p.m. 96.

In this last example the *u* in *muda* would have the sound much as *ew* in *dew*. *Lyin* is used in the sense of resting, continuing. *Vevlin* a word connected with weave, in this case used

to denote wandering, zigzagging, messing. *Day-dayly* is a form to imply emphasis. It means every day or every day without exception. Mrs. Williamson is really informing that the geese are making the meadow unfit for mowing.

But Laurence Williamson was much more than a folklorist. Rather might he be described as scholar and philosopher. His grasp and range were wide. His ready detail pertaining to the history and growth of thought, of literature, and of philosophy was impressive. If any celebrity, ancient or modern were named, he would generally add details of his position in thought and time. He lived as it were with the great minds of the ages.

Man bounded by the present strains to the future. He hopes, plans, works for the next moment, hour, day or year. Yet as each chance event or planned scheme materialises it is at once fixed and begins to recede and grow dim in the irrevocable past.

Laurence was deeply interested in that past, and in the life and history of the Northern people, and saw his own people as a connected or derived part. He occasionally used the term "the living past", as if distinguishing such from a dead past. He appeared to see the past as a great reality woven in the texture of time. A community warm with human impulses, its origins, racial elements; its families, individuals, genealogy, inheritance; their loves, endeavours, fortunes and misfortunes, and results; here were matters of high interest, both of science and philosophy: to gain wisdom, to understand better.

His approach may be described as strongly historical and philosophical. "My mind tends to the ideal and philosophical", he once remarked. "How do you define philosophical?", I asked. "The philosophical mind", he replied, "seeks to trace from cause to effect".

In a discussion as to the use of history, he quoted Mr. Mathewson. "To understand anything is to know its history. If you know about something but do not know its history, you cannot be said to understand it. Everything has a history. Every word has its history if we but knew it".

While having a wealth of detail concerning the nearer past and present he referred to history in the broad sequence of eras and ages. He would explain that we were in a transition period when a new age had come on the world, and he appeared to see the new age not so much in the technical contrivances being perfected as in a new questioning attitude in people's minds.

This new age might be variously named, but from a folklore point of view a distinguishing feature is that of an oral age being finally superseded by a reading age.

Youth began to disregard the old oral as school and a variety of publications came into existence and became accepted as true knowledge. Laurence considered that much newspaper reading impaired or destroyed the memory. He likened it to a person going through a shop tasting one sweet or tit-bit after another hoping thereby to get a satisfactory dinner.

Laurence had much respect and liking for many of the old people he knew. In a note he wrote, "The vast oral literature of the old folk of Shetland now fast disappearing included many a long story, and many an incident of human interest and vivid description, which mirrored clearly the life and circumstances of bygone times, and are a means of comparing them with our own".

In a letter written in 1892, he said, "More generally I would say that it ever more broods over my mind and heart that such mass of lore belonging to our native Isles, folklore, linguistic matter, traditions, living historical matter, enough in the hands of some genius to form a small literature or wealth of poetry, should be year by year slipping into the grave.

This is a transition time such as never was before. The old Northern civilisation is now in full strife with the new and Southern one, and traditions, customs which have come down from hoary antiquity, are now dying for ever. The young don't care for their fathers' ways. I mean what was estimable in them. The folklore and family traditions and picturesque stories yield fast to the *People's Journal*, *Glasgow Mail*, *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* and such like."

Now when everyone has by ten or so years of school acquired the habit of reading and lives in an inundation of newspapers and books, besides other media, all of which entertain, inform, and influence thought and conduct, it needs a little stretch of the imagination to envisage an age when the written word, far less the printed one, hardly existed.

Now the individual may be regarded as a unit in a nation-wide economy. In past times he was more confined to and dependent on the resources of his own district. Land, weather and the circle of the year had a more intimate quality, and various imagined supernatural powers appear as if more or less brooding over all.

In the following we quote from manuscripts left by Laurence Williamson. The excerpts relate, as he would have pointed out, to a passing or former age, or ages, but they also provide a very vivid picture of the way in which he looked at that past and put facts about it on record for future generations; first some notes about the Shetland year and some of the calendar customs: "Calendar. The hely days of Yule were Thomasmus een and day, 5 days before Yule. This verse is preserved:—a bern i da midirs wuum dus wip an mak grit dul for da kyilin o Sant Tamas, feiyf niyts afoir Yul. Tolyisa een and day, 2 days before Yule. Yule een and day. (the 25th of December and the name Christmas being only used lately) second day, third day, fourth day, New Year een and day, 13th. day; and the last one variously named four and twenty day, Sant Antony's day, Antonmas and uphely day.

Yule day was a day of feasting. The Yule ewe had been taken home and killed. All in the house were up at 3 or 4 in the morning preparing the breakfast which was taken before daylight; plenty of boiled mutton and pork, skons and bursten baken, then two families would perhaps have an anker keg between them. Sometimes they would travel many miles across dangerous sounds in bad weather to get it; always fish and potatoes for dinner; afternoon, the remainder of the breakfast or something similar, only on a lesser scale; supper knocked bere or anything handy.

The supper on Yule een was sowens. The other days were also observed by feasting and spirits especially fourth day.

Newermas next to Yule, the 13th. day. On Newer day folk say to anyone, the first one they see that year, My New Years gift (my News gift) or my handsel but do not expect ought. Lastly Antonys day, amoses of food were laid to Sant Antony and if won were eaten on his day.

On hely night or Saturday night any time of year, no spinning, winding or knitting was allowed at night after the cows were meated. It would be thrown in the fire. And at one place that was kept up from Hallowmas to Candlemas.

On hely night all the old people would meet in some house, where the people would prepare food for them, and next night in some other house, and so on. They would even go half a dozen miles in this way.

Rants were held from Yule to Fasterns een on hely or other nights, especially the former, and the young people from 5 or 6 miles around came to them. The but end of a house was

cleared and often sids strewn on the floor. A fiddler was brought to play. Women stood on a plank, and the young men came and took them by the hand to the dance. Often the young men brought spirits which were often served around, but sometimes there was only swats to drink. Thus the rant continued far into the night, when they went each to his home.

Candlesmas day, the 2nd. February, was not kept with feasting, but the young lads and lasses would each chase a crow often long distances, and they would marry someone in the first house on which it settled.

Fasterns een was the first Tuesday after the first new moon after Candlesmas and was observed by having brose for supper. Bena Sunday, the one before Yule, was kept by brose for supper.

Bogle day is the 17th. March. Each family should then have sown as much seed as would grow the next year's bogles. The supper was flesh and bogles, that is large thick bursten brunies.

The borrowing days were the three last days of March said to be borrowed by March from February [*sic*]. Summermal is the 14th April. Beltane is the 2nd May.

Easter (a word not used) was 7 weeks after Fasterns een, and consists of Skuir Fuirsdag, Gjud Friday, Pes Saturday and Pes Sunday. No farm work was allowed after 3 p.m., 9 a.m., 4 p.m. respectively. On these days boys went around with a mitten begging eggs, and would get one or two from each family; only one or two boys were together. On Sunday a number of them lit a fire in the hills near some plain green and boiled their eggs then threw them up to see which ones would remain longest unbroken, and then ate them.

On the 1st April, people old or young were sent April errands to see some one who had not sent for them or the like, to seek something not to be found or the like.

Johnsmas day, the 24th June was a great festival. The haaf men had a feast in their lodge and each man got a kjit of mil gruel from home. It was generally made with groats and put in a kjit with a cloth under the lid and another around all, and hung to a horse klibber with butter etc. on the other side, and though it had to be taken perhaps from the West Isle to Funzie it would still be warm. Then the young people would set up in some house or barn all night and have their "barfull" of the best food they could get. They would lay up pairs, that is, each one would take her flowers, one for herself, one for the sweetheart, and pluck away the stamens and lay them aside

overnight, when if the stamens had grown again they would be married; but I never heard of them doing so. They would often also close up the lums and windows of a house to keep out the daylight, or fasten the doors from within, or draw boats often long distances up before the doors, or hang clothes which might be out drying up as flags, or other tricks. Offence was seldom taken at these tricks.

Corsmas was the 3rd May. Lammas was the 1st August. Laurencemas was 10 days after Lammas. No one was allowed to strike teck till then, when each one struck a circle around the piece he intended to take. Martin o Bulyins day was the 4th of July. Mikalsmas was the 29th September. It is said that "the trouts are then as high as any ram in the hill". Matsymas was the 22nd September. People then took home the sheep intended for killing.

Summer begins at midnight before Simmermal day, the first day of Summer, and winter begins at mid day of the 14th October, the first night of winter. The next Saturday and Sunday are Winter-Sunday and Winter-Sunday-Saturday. On this Saturday a few would go in "skaklein", and the young folk on the "winter stin". Each went and stood on an earth-fast stone or rock alone and said (.....). According as the sweet-heart's face or back next sight was towards they would marry or not.

Hallowmas or Halluday was a great festival with the young folk. Bands of boys went in skakling, from house to house, from village to village, but never mixed bands. Each skakler wore a straw cap. The lower edge was laid up on a string like the lip of a "kiyshi", then drawn together above the head and prolonged in a stalk with two or three successive rows or three loops branching therefrom, and a top loop. To every loop was fastened long ribbons borrowed from the lasses. The cap was drawn over the face, or a piece of thin fabric veiled it. A thick cloak of straw and a petticoat of the time were each strung on a single string at the top, and the one tied around the neck, the other around the waist; the straw otherwise hang loose. A staff in the hand completed the custom.

Afterwards first a white shirt replaced the cloak; next a long white shirt with a belt replaced both cloak and petticoat. The straw cap gave way to a white one covered with ribbons. In the latter case they became guizards. These often add a woman's white petticoat.

They walked in file. The foremost was called skuster and

had a band of ribbons about his middle and one round his right upper arm. The hind carried a bogie in a budie on his back, often a bowl within the bogie. They disguised their voices by speaking while drawing their breath. Their chief phrases were, "Gie me something i me bogie, a penny o money, a bit o flesh". They got more or less according to the ability or willingness of the family, often a "tee" of mutton, a big brunie, a lump of butter. This is put in the bogie, and the butter in the bowl. It was only in later times and in shops that they got money. When refused they often took flesh, etc. by force.

It often took two or three days to go their rounds. The last night they sat up all night and feasted upon what they had got. The girls and those who had not been in skakling often did so too. They strolled about seeing others who were sitting up and often committing practical jokes as at Johnsmas. They gave a sneeze when they came into a house. Certain gaieties were often observed. They go into the kailyard hand in hand, with shut eyes, and pluck the first kailstock they find. Its size, straightness, and the earth sticking thereto and the taste of the "castak" show respectively the size, shape, fortune and character of the future spouse".

As is to be expected from a keen folklorist, Laurence Williamson did not neglect to make enquiries about the fairies, and here are some of his observations:

"Trows, Elfs or Fairies were a race of diminutive beings of human appearance, who dwelt in certain knolls and stone heaps. They spent much of their time in dancing to music, usually within their dwellings, but often on fine nights in the open air. They were cunning and vindictive but often kind and honourable. Births are recorded among them but no deaths. Midwives are often taken in to help at a birth. Individuals of the human or bovine race of any age or sex are often taken by them to their abodes and a changeling left instead who is stupid and sick. These individuals are said to be in the hills or elf shot. This especially happens to persons who have stumbled over a fairy rant or slept in the open air. Certain persons can restore them by certain spells.

Whoever meets a trow should draw a circle around him and bid, "Gjud be about me" or lie down and stick a knife in the ground at his head. When spoken about they are called "Gjud" folk lest some of them should be present and take offence.

Belief in them is almost extinct. Some say that the reason

why they are never seen now is that the gospel is more powerful and keeps them down, or that many of them emigrated to Faroe. Certain plants are called Trows Cards, Trow Bura, Trolyi Wair. There are some legends about the Trows."

"The story is substantially the same in different districts, but with different scenes in the neighbourhood of each and dramatis personae, from generations on the borderland of authentic tradition and oblivion. Some of these stories were current in Scandinavia and in Scotland. Doubtless these nigh well forgotten generations assigned them to a still more remote antiquity. The stone age dwellers in Scandinavia were dwarfish and buried in mounds and cairns. The Norse successors probably thought that their sepulchres were inhabited by the spirits of this hostile race, and as the mystery and ignorance shrouded their history every knoll and stone heap was infested with trolls or trows. Contact with the superstition of other lands and a rude Christianity perhaps confounded them with fairies and fallen angels. This shows their vast age".

Some fairy or trow legends from a manuscript by L. W. were published in the Shetland Folk Book, Vol. III. Here are one or two more from his records.

"Hiyltadance, or the Fidlers Kru is a circle of grey stones with one in the centre in a plain in Fetlar. There were Four and Twenty dancing round their fidler one night when the daylight out prized them and turned them into grey stones".

"The Trowi Wife. Two Fetlar lasses on Hallow night had wet their shirt sleeve and gone to bed. One heard a noise and looked out and saw a trowi wife bearing a child coming in. Finding no water in the "daffocks" she filled a plate of "swat" from the churn, set it on the floor, washed the child in it, and poured it back into the churn, saying, "Tak ye dat, Ye sud a hed water in." This they took care to do ever after, and it is a proverb that "hits no gjud to leave no water in a night".

A midwife one afternoon had taken the kit in her hand to milk the cows when a horseman came and asked her to come to his wife. She said that the men of the house were at the sea and she had to milk the cows and bake the bread. But he persuaded her and she went with him till they came to a fairy knoll without the town dykes. They went in through a door into a room where she saw several there she knew that were in the hills. She was put ben to the wife, and when the child was born she got ointment to smear its eyes with. By chance or some say by advice from one of the persons that she knew she

smear'd one of her own eyes, and at once saw that the room was full of people which the other eye did not see. She got for her wages [*blank in Ms. Ed.*]. When she came home the milk was in the kit and the bread baken and on the fire. She laid her gift in a chest but saw it no more. Afterwards she saw the man who fetch'd her in a throng of folk met at a roup or like occasion, and asked him about the woman and child. He asked her with what eye she saw him, and she unwittingly told him. He half spat, half blew in it, and she was blind to her dying day (MP MJ).

A Samphrey lad said it was his grandmother. Sir Walter Scott tells a similar story in his note to the *Lady of the Lake*'.

The following seems similar to an episode in the Beowulf epic. "Windhouse was haunted by a trow every Yule een, and the family always flit to Reafirth all night. One Yule een when they were about to go a stranger came in and said that a ship had wrecked at the Daal o Lumbister and he alone had been saved, asked for lodgings. They said they could not lodge themselves that night and told him why. He said that if they would let him remain, he was not afraid for that. At last they consented. Next morning he was not to be found, till peering into the "gjudman's" bed, they found him sound asleep. When he awoke he related that he sat at the fire till he heard a noise as if a monster was straining the roof and waxing ever louder. He went outside and before him was a black lump, and above was a streak of light. The lump began to move and he followed it down the Byarky park and towards Mid-Yell voe. When it was near the sea, he concluded that it was a sea-trow and would soon escape him, so he threw his battle axe at it, and down it came a shapeless mass. After telling this he went alone and recovered his axe and buried the trow. Stones were taken out of it when building a boathouse (ADM)."