TWO NORTHERN PORTS

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Caithness and Orkney in the eighteenth century were areas with a fairly similar economy; backward in their farming methods yet often producing corn surpluses, particularly in bear. The bear grew well on the low lands near the sea. With oats it formed the bulk of landlords' rents, and would be stored by them in granaries for two or three years until the price was good, and then shipped away. In 1762 William Sinclair of Freswick was offering for sale 3,000 bolls of bear of four different crops, from the years 1758-1761, and 1,500 bolls of oatmeal from three years, 1759-1761.[1] North country bear was considered of poor quality and not easy to sell.[2] Landowners found they got the best price by insisting on selling it together with their oatmeal. The merchants liked best to get equal quantities of the two commodities, but the landowners preferred to do as Freswick did and sell two of bear to one of meal. Even so there was usually a surplus of bear which Edinburgh merchants did not want. This might go west to meet Highland grain shortages, or be exported to Norway, Ireland or Portugal. Thurso and Kirkwall figure regularly in the list of ports receiving bounties for corn export.[3] Though they never handled the large sums in four figures which might go to Aberdeen or Montrose in a favourable year, yet together they often received a sixth or more of the total issued in Scotland, and in the years 1754-6 they together collected over £1,700, nearly half the payments for the whole country. In 1763-6 Thurso alone obtained £1,470, just over a quarter of the total. The bounties for these ports seem more regular than for other places with corn growing hinterlands, and the sums involved must have been large in the economy of small towns. It is possible that they do not correspond to the actual amounts of corn shipped, for Orkney traders in the early part of the eighteenth century practised a good deal of fraud in this matter (Marwick 1939:60-2).

Both Orkney and Caithness had fishing resources not yet fully exploited, the herring off the Orkneys and the salmon

in the Caithness rivers which could be salted down and sent overseas. After 1773 herring exports began from Caithness as well as Orkney, but they were more irregular than those from Orkney. Orkney in the later eighteenth century also developed a kelp industry. It was the richer of the two counties with a slightly larger population[4] and a better port.

The Customs Accounts for these two ports, Kirkwall and Thurso, in the Register House at Edinburgh, give something of this picture.[5] The corn ships to Norway would return with timber products, deals and balks, hazel cuts and harrowbills, barrel staves and handspikes, tar and birch bark. They would sometimes bring in salt too for the fish curing, Spanish salt which reached Scotland after a roundabout journey. From Gothenburg they would bring iron as well as timber, from Russia canvas and after 1748 flax and iron. The relative activity of the economy of the two counties is shown by the fact that Orkney could absorb more timber cargoes than Caithness. The indifference with which the North Sea crossing was contemplated is shown by the arrival on 6 May 1743 of an open boat at Kirkwall from Norway with a cargo of tar and timber, but such hardiness was dying out.[6] Ireland presented traders with a problem: there was little that could be brought back from there and ships to Ireland, if they returned direct to the north, would usually do so in ballast, though they sometimes carried hides. In June 1751 one brought five horses to Thurso. From Portugal in August 1774 came a cargo of salt to Thurso, with 1,250 lemons as well, and in April 1780 the *Happy Jean* of Wick from Bergen to Thurso added to her cargo of birch bark, timber and iron, two casks of port. In 1788 the *Jean* of Dunbar left Thurso for Venice with 230 barrels of salt cod and 6964 "Haberdeens, 14 inches and upwards" weighing 57½ tons. The exceptional nature of this journey into the Mediterranean can be deduced from the fact that the customs officials, dealing with something unfamiliar, recorded the ship's victualling bill in their accounts, the Irish beef in barrels, biscuit, pot barley, oatmeal, pease, flour and butter, the sixteen cheeses and the six casks of strong beer. In 1748 a cargo of flax and iron was delivered from St. Petersburg at Kirkwall, inaugurating a steady minor trade—imports of raw flax and exports of finished linen. Caithness was much slower in developing a linen industry. The other regular item in the Customs Accounts was the coastwise shipping of coal from the Forth and Fife ports. Here again much

more went to Orkney than to Caithness. For both ports this was only an occasional item in the forties and fifties, but by the seventies it had become frequent and more regular, Thurso using about forty tons a year, Kirkwall from three to five times this amount.

Some of the ships trading to these northern ports stuck fairly regularly to their business, but others would turn over to coastal work or follow the trade to other Scottish ports. The *Margaret* of Dundee, which left Thurso on 1 June 1751 for Belfast, arrived in Aberdeen on 10 July with a cargo of cork from Oporto, and on 28 August was back in Aberdeen from Norway. The *Providence* of Burnt Island, which took 298 quarters of bear and 42 of meal from Thurso to Bergen on 28 June 1749, left Kirkwall for Bergen again on 31 July with malt. The *Jean Francis* of Wick came into Thurso on 26 June 1750 with timber and Spanish salt from Bergen, and on 21 July she left Kirkwall for Cadiz with salted salmon.

Variety from the settled pattern of trade was introduced into Kirkwall mainly by shipwreck. The notorious dangers of the coasts of North and South Ronaldshay accounted for a lot of shipping. In 1761 the Swedish *Aurora*, from Gothenburg for Lisbon, stranded on South Ronaldshay with a cargo of iron, timber, tea and china. The tea and china, salvaged, were sent on to the Isle of Man after paying duty of nearly £1,500. An earlier wreck in 1740, said to have meant a loss of £150,000, had nearly broken the Swedish East India Company.[7] There were two other cargoes salvaged in 1761, one of wheat from Hamburg, and the other of wood ash. In 1769 the North Ronaldshay rocks accounted for a Swedish ship with timber and iron from Stockholm. In 1746 the *Two Brothers* of Boston stranded in Orkney with a cargo of furs, rum, indigo, rice, sugar and snuff, which all passed through the customs three years later.

In spite of the similar nature of the two districts, the main impressions given by the customs books of the two ports differ widely. Those for Caithness, starting in 1743, show a customs branch which rarely paid its way. By the middle of the century its establishment had risen from the cost of £45 sterling just before the Union to £155. This meant a Collector at £40, a Comptroller and a Surveyor at £30 each, a Landwaiter at £25 and two Tidesmen at £15 each. It was one of the smallest branches in the country. Yet only three times between 1743 and 1785 did the return in the duties make three figures there—in

1754 it stood at £218 of which over £80 was levied on a salvaged cargo of wood ash. In 1751 £188 came in, £80 of it from a single cargo of port, and in 1774 £106. In 1745 and the first half of 1746 no customable trade was reported. This may have been the result of political disturbances, but in the first three quarters of 1762 there was a similar blank, and the total sum levied in 1761 was under £2. In most years the total lay between twenty and thirty pounds. If it was worth having this customs branch at all its value lay in administering the corn bounties or in preventing smuggling.

The Orkney accounts are very different. In 1744, the first complete year available in Edinburgh, the total return was £2,033. This was higher than some other years of the period. In 1748 the Lady Day quarter (usually the period of least activity) is missing, and the rest of the year comes to £921. In 1753 the figure is down to £431. But in the forties it usually stood round about £1,000 and was higher in the next decade, reaching £5,850 for 1756. It did not drop below £1,000 for the next ten years, and in 1759 it reached the record height of £9,634. Since Kirkwall at this time kept much the same official establishment as Thurso it was clearly a profitable port to the revenue.

The explanation of these figures lies in the Navigation Laws. Ships from the American colonies with "enumerated" articles had to put in at a British port and pay their customs, even if the goods were eventually destined for a continental port. American traders on their way to Amsterdam, Hamburg or Rotterdam, or even to St. Petersburg or Riga, found it convenient to take a northern passage, and for them Kirkwall was the most convenient place for these formalities. So in April 1744 the *Yucatan* of Boston, on her way home from Amsterdam, called in and paid a duty of over £200 on a cargo of cable yarn, bottle cases, linseed oil, looking glasses, water glasses, screw bottles, hair brushes, earthenware, canvas and a parcel of old junk. German linens of various kinds, "Ozenbrigs" and "Ticklenbrigs", figured heavily in this trade, as did metals, steel and brass, as well as dye stuffs and painters' colours, bricks, paper, salted smelts, lemons and dried fruits, drugs, books and goose quills. Unexpected items that often occur are children's toys, skates, violins, and lots and lots of barbers' aprons. From St. Petersburg the trade would be in skins and furs, canvas, cordage and flax, iron and honey. In 1760 this trade extended northwards and the *Dublin* of New

York passed through Kirkwall on her way home from Archangel with iron, cordage and canvas. This American trade by the northern route was exclusively through Kirkwall. Thurso had none of it, and the customs of Lerwick deal solely with salt imports and fish exports.

The incoming cargoes were less varied than the outgoing. Carolina rice was the staple of the trade. In the Midsummer quarter of 1761 six rice ships docked in Orkney, three each for Hamburg and Amsterdam. In the same quarter of the next year there were four, two for Amsterdam, one for Hamburg and one for Rotterdam. Other products from the southern colonies also found a market this way: logwood, sassafras and brazil-wood. In the Midsummer quarter of 1755 the *Industry* of Leith came in from Charlestown with 3,084 hundredweight of rice, but also carrying turpentine, cotton wool, indigo, myrtle wax and reeds, and left a week later with the whole of this cargo for Bremen. Ships of this tonnage could not have used the port of Thurso even if they had wanted to.[8] Not all the colonial cargoes came in American ships or from the thirteen colonies. For instance, the *Hull* of Hull, for St. Eustatia, came in the Midsummer quarter of 1747 with cable yarn, red and white lead, paper, tea, brimstone, linseed oil, window glass, wine, brushes, olive oil and tea tables, all for the white minority of the island. But mostly it was the Americans that made the Kirkwall customs profitable. They were not only individually more valuable as cargoes, but more regular in their visits than the rest of Orkney's trade. Here are the percentage, of ships from the Americas among those bringing in foreign cargoes, and of the American share in the duties of the ports in five-yearly blocks:

Years	American percentage of ships	American percentage of customs
1745-9	47	94·4
1750-4	47	95·9
1755-9	70	98·9
1760-4	77	97·9
1765-9	21	88·3
1770-4	14	84·5
1775-9	0	0
1780-5	0	0

Usually it took the American ships from three to seven days to clear their formalities and collect any extra victual they may have needed before sailing away again, but in the summer of 1763 business grew so great that there is every appearance of a traffic jam. The *Catherine* of New York entered on 2 September

and did not leave till the 12th: the *York* of New York took from the 7th to the 22nd, and the brigantine *Recovery* of Boston from the 7th to the 27th. Four more ships were slow in clearing, the snow *Johnson* of New York being delayed a whole month. Three years later this problem was met by a large increase of staff; Orkney was henceforward to have two landwaiters instead of one, a tide surveyor, six tidesmen instead of two, and four boatmen. The dating suggests that this was the result of representations about the bottleneck in American business, but it may also have been an attempt to prevent the notorious smuggling that took place in the islands.

In any case the improvement came too late for the American trade of the port which was killed by the quarrel with the colonies. Even before non-importation and the closure of Boston the Americans saw very little reason to go out of their way to obey the Navigation Laws. The American business going through Orkney shrank rapidly after 1764, and was mostly carried on in ships of the mother country. For instance in the Midsummer quarter of 1766 the only ship on this trade was the *London* packet of London, on her way from Charleston to Hamburg with rice. In 1767 there was one rice ship, the *Belvidere* of New York, but the next year the only one was the *Chichester* of Belfast. In 1771 two rice ships came in, one American and one English, but these were the last. The annual totals of the Kirkwall customs show the story.

	£		£
1763	488	1768	535
1764	5,275	1769	71
1765	1,032	1770	532
1766	1,262	1771	3,122
1767	717	1772	70

The start of actual war with the colonies had little effect here. The trade had already ceased. Artificial only, created by the coincidence of geography and law, it rested on no real economic basis. Kirkwall was not able to do as Glasgow did and develop new manufacturing lines to replace the profits from American callers.

Yet while it lasted the trade must have had its effect on the town of Kirkwall. There would be the unrecorded profits from the sale of gear or provisions to the ships. Besides, all the valuable cargoes had to pass, even if only nominally, through the hands of local merchants. The handling of such large

scale business not only brought in money but must have made contacts for overseas trade easy for these men. Not quite all the American cargoes went through the port untouched. In 1744 some 30 casks and 10 barrels of rice appear to have been left behind at Kirkwall, presumably for shipment to other Scottish ports, for this would have been enough to have kept Orkney in rice pudding for several years. In 1766 another two barrels were left by the *London* packet. In 1764 the Boston brigantine *Fly* from Amsterdam left at Kirkwall

3 quarters of pearl barley
3 quarters of raisins
3 quarters 14 pounds, of currants
1 hundredweight of prunes
12 pounds of ginger
16 pounds of coffee
1 pound of saltpetre for dyers
14 sugar loaves
a canister of brown candy
1½ reams of foolscap
½ ream of post paper
4 reams of brown paper
1 quarter 21 pounds of caraway seeds
1 quarter 21 pounds of aniseed
1 hundredweight of liquorice
a parcel of one box of candy, 4 pounds of painters' colours, 1 pound of pepper and 1 pound of ginger
a bag with 1 quarter 21 pounds of pearl barley
a bag with 21 pounds of raisins
a bag with 21 pounds of currants
a bag with 12 pounds of coffee
8 pounds of cotton wool.

The whole of this paid duty of £17 17s. 9½d. But this was an exceptional transaction. In the great majority of cases the American ships handled only material between America and the continent of Europe.

The Orkney merchants were already importing groceries of this sort on their own (Marwick 1939:90-1), though usually through other British ports and not direct, and it is not suggested that they needed the American ships to handle it for them. But it still seems likely that the contacts made in the American trade helped other business. Kirkwall seems to have been a more lively shopping centre than Thurso in the eighteenth century, and the Caithness lairds made use of it. William Sinclair of Freswick left the money from his victual

sales in the hands of his Edinburgh agent, and so could buy his luxuries in Edinburgh. But the more impecunious Sinclairs of Mey, who had to sell their corn quickly for what they could get locally, bought their wines and other comforts, their gloves, playing cards, lemons and writing paper, and all the luxuries for which they usually failed to pay, across the Pentland Firth.[9] Perhaps they simply hoped to get better credit there than nearer home, but it seems to have been the habit of Caithness to look to the more thriving mercantile life of Kirkwall for wider trade connections.

NOTES

[1] National Library of Scotland, MS. 1460 (Mackenzie of Delvine papers), f 78. The Caithness boll measured just over three quarters of an English quarter.

[2] "Your County Barley is not a saleable commodity here, and is seldom or ever disposed of without Meal," wrote David Lothian, lawyer in Edinburgh, to Sir John Sinclair of Mey, 13 May 1765. H.M. Register House, Edinburgh, Mey papers Box xix.

[3] H.M. Register House, Edinburgh, Customs Cash Books.

[4] Dr Webster made the total for the Orkney parishes 23,302 to Caithness's 22,215, in 1755. See Kyd 1952:77.

[5] These accounts are the basis of this paper, and except where stated all the information in it comes from them. As they are not paginated the reference by port, date and quarter, and name of ship is all that can be given.

[6] Marwick (1939: 71) gives examples of similar open boat journeys in the early part of the century.

[7] *O.S.A.* VII (1793) 475-6, parish of Cross and Burness. The writer lists 16 ships, a tonnage of 4,880, lost between 1773 and 1788 in this district.

[8] The largest corn cargoes using Thurso were about 750 quarters, but the usual size was between 300 and 500. This suggests a burthen of 40 tons as the maximum convenient for the river mouth.

[9] e.g. Mey papers Box xii, account with John Dunnet.

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