Book Reviews

The Ring-Net Fishermen by Angus Martin. John Donald Publishers, Edinburgh 1981. xi + 263 pp + illustrations and photographs. £12.00.

This is a volume based on five years of intensive field-work among ring-net fishermen (chiefly in Loch Fyne) in the 1970s—taped, transcribed and lodged in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies, and now published as a substantive and reflective study. Yet this is not so straightforward as it appears, for Angus Martin has also a moral conviction to record. This comes out intermittently throughout the book, and strongly in the *Conclusion*: 'Western society . . . has brought itself to the edge of an ecological and moral crisis' (p. 243). It also appears, as a predicament, in the dedication: 'This book is dedicated, with love, to the non-human creatures of Earth, especially to those trees whose regrettable deaths have made possible its production.'

Angus Martin, then, is a passionate and involved field-worker—'perhaps too passionate' he tells us in the *Preface*. There is, certainly, a type of field-work (common enough in the Scottish experience) which turns out to be a rather breathless essay to catch the last words of the last possible informant. And so it is here. The opening words of the *Introduction* only add to the author's already complicated involvement when he records that 'the evolution of the Scottish ring-net . . . took 120 years to complete. Ironically, with the attainment of maximum development, a rapid decline began, which, within the past decade signifies the unmistakeable, and probably irreversible, end of that method of herring fishing.'

This being so, it is clear that before the decade was out, Angus Martin was determined to get everything down and to get it right. And if his book is packed with facts like herrings in a barrel, it is because it is not just a book about the ring-net fishing, but explicitly about the ring-net fishermen. Indeed—so copious is the oral information—it might be said to be *by* the ring-net fishermen. And therein lies the passion—and the predicament. For, having done the field-work, there came a 'current of unease', and a realisation 'that the final product of that wonderful flourishing of skill and knowledge has been the eradication not only of the communities of drift-net fishermen from Loch Fyne to Loch Ryan, and from the Butt of Lewis to Bara, but finally, of the ring-net fishermen themselves' (p. 243).

So, first, the drift-net fishermen—and *finally* the ring-net fishermen. The implication is that in Loch Fyne the sins of the fathers have been visited upon the children, ever since the first, and fatal, beginnings of the Scottish ring-net—'the irregular use of the traditional drift-net in the 1830s', where several pieces of drift-net were brought together 'to create a crude beach-seine for surrounding the herring in shallow bays' (p. 136). This for the beginning. The tragic inevitability of the end

seems gradually to have overwhelmed Angus Martin as he pursued his field-work and his investigation into the evolution of the ring-net. The uneasy apprehension that such a simple historical origin could contain within itself the seeds of its own annihilation persists to the end throughout the book. Even the very habits of the herring seem to be doom-laden. An informant—David McFarlane of Tarbert—reflecting on the evolution of the ring-net, is quoted: 'In a year or so the herrin' got wary; it wisna comin' in just as low—it shows ye how it adapts itself.' ('Low in' is fisher terminology for the presence of herring in the shallow bays. The opposite is 'high off'.) So some sort of new method of capture (eventually the fully developed ring-net operating 'high off') had to be devised.

This historic development of the ring-net is set out clearly and systematically (p. 136). There were four stages: a shore-based operation with improvised drift-nets; a specifically designed net, still, however, hauled to the shore; an even better and deeper net, with no shore-contact, but still hauling into shallow water; and finally, the motor-boat, the mechanical winch, and operation in deep, off-shore, waters.

Angus Martin emphasises, several times, that *only* with the coming of motor power could the whole potential of the ring-net be realised. And (so it turns out) in this sort of *dénouement*, it is a very devil which appears out of the machine. For, finally, there was the 'irreversible' end of it all—the nemesis of an 'indiscriminately-destructive' method of mid-water trawling in the 1970s, only made possible by power, and yet more power, in the motor vessels. 'And so change succeeds change, efficiency begets greater efficiency, until progressive ideals, by their very fulfilment are all undone' (p. 238).

This pessimism darkens the book. However, between the *Historical Introduction* and the *New Age* (the chapters which chronicle efficiency and yet greater efficiency) lies the other half of the book, the oral history and the results of the field-work. This lightens the pessimism marvellously, and it can and should be read for its own worth, leaving aside the imponderable matters of impending judgement. So read, it is a unique record of that 'wonderful flourishing of skill and knowledge', or what Angus Martin also calls 'fishing lore . . . present substantially throughout this book'. It has all been taken from the lips of informants, a formidable list of them, including some of his own forbears—fishermen out of Dalintober—which was the calling he also followed on leaving school. There is, therefore, hardly a page without a quotation drawn from a transcription of living speech and experience. This is why the detail is so prodigious—factual, linguistic (both Kintyre Scots and Gaelic) and anecdotal. Nothing escapes the net. There is, of course, detailed technical discussion of the boats and the nets, but there is also something of peat-cutting and thatching, on how to choose the best wood for fashioning a netting-needle (p. 123), on how to repair a clay pipe with a little blood drawn from a pin-prick (p. 106), and on how to repair a broken lamp glass 'with a strip of newspaper moistened with condensed milk' (p. 107). And much more besides. It is all here.

Inevitably, the technical and nautical material presents a considerable problem for description. The techniques of net assembly and repair, for instance, which are given in some detail, are complicated and will not always be understood even by those who know a netting-needle when they see one. Only those seafarers who can use this simple and subtle instrument will be completely at home. However, it is all very carefully explained and it is here for the record. Above all, it is all very carefully glossed. Lexicographers and dialectologists, at all stages, will be grateful for this, and if their word-hoard covers only one coast of Scotland they will find material here for comprehension and comparison. Always remembering that the progenitor of the ring-net was the drift-net, they will find that 'deepen', 'back rope', 'sole rope' are here. So is 'flow' (a necessary slackness in the net). 'Ra' corresponds to east coast 'gairdin' or 'grofe' (the especially strong and thick twine at the edges). Gaelic *mogal-ghoid* ('stolen mesh') corresponds to Buckie or Cullen 'stowen mask', or Crail or St Monance 'stelt mask', and so on. Line-fishing is discussed in the chapter on *Seasonal Alternatives* and here the lexical correspondences are even closer for west and east.

As for the boats—the sailing Loch Fyne Skiffs at least—the description is equally careful and with much word-material. Even so, there are significant gaps and significant difficulties. And there is not really very much here to satisfy the student of Scottish craft who wishes to understand the evolution of the type. No doubt, this was not the especial business of the chapter *The Skiffs*, but Scotland is still awaiting a history of its fishing craft and all particular and local contributions might well be judged accordingly. (It was Peter Anson himself who, fifty years ago, noted that 'the history of the Scottish craft has yet to be written'). Angus Martin tells us, correctly, of the introduction of the Loch Fyne Skiff (double-ended and with a standing lug) in the 1880s, 'which replaced the open boats traditionally employed at trawling' (p. 76). But where did the skiff come from? And what were these open boats like? Were they even double-ended? Illustration No. 24 in the book shows nets being hauled to the shore, and 'moored inshore is a trawl-skiff'. This small vessel has a square stern and a dipping lug. Are we to understand that this is how it was? No source is given for the illustration. (The whole matter of illustration is confusing. The drawings by Will Maclean and the photographs are numbered serially without classification. There is no formal table of illustrations. And when, in the *Preface*, Nos. 21 and 22, for example, are credited to Will Maclean, they turn out to be photographs and by someone else.)

So we still do not know much about the antecedents of the Loch Fyne Skiff and nothing at all about the model of the open boats which preceded them. Angus Martin ackowledges the particular technical assistance 'for sailing and ballasting' of Robert Smith of the Museum of Country Life, Auchindrain. There was—six or seven years ago, at least—a very small skiff lying in the open air at the Museum, old and in bad condition, but due to be renovated. This appeared to be an important example, and perhaps it is to the Museum that the student will have to go to supplement the information in the book.

For, doubtless in his desire to be plain and not impossibly nautical, Angus Martin is sometimes less than plainly nautical. (He has occasionally a nice salty phrase, though. Without overdoing anything, 'at some time long adrift of human memory', for example, is delightfully tangy.) He is splendid on details like bending a sail to a yard with 'roobans' [*sc.* 'rae-bands, *i.e.* 'yard-bands'], or on lug-sheet arrangements (very nicely illustrated). But on something fundamental like the characteristic rake of the mast on a Loch Fyne Skiff he misses a point. Simply to say that if the boat was to be good to windward 'the sail required to come back towards the stern . . . by keeping the foot of the mast forward, but letting the head back', *without*, at the same time, saying something of the underwater form of the Loch Fyne Skiff, is not to say very much. Students of Scottish craft will wish it to be stated plainly that the skiff is very deep aft (see photograph No. 15) and with fine lines forward, and the rake is deliberately done to bring the centre of effort and the centre of resistance nearer to each other. Angus Martin is perfectly capable of this sort of description. And it helps, because it can be a significant denominator for the organisation of our thinking on the relationship of the skiff to other Scottish craft like the *Sgoth* of Lewis, or the *Zulu* of the Moray Firth, for example.

But this is no more than asking for that history of Scottish fishing craft. Angus Martin's immediate and particular question remains: what of the fishing lore in Loch Fyne? The answer he gives is that it has gone, and the dramatic opposition between lore and non-lore is very sternly and categorically presented.

> Deep knowledge and appreciation of fishing lore continued unbroken to the generation of fishermen born in the final decade of last century, and the first of the present century . . . thereafter silence. Folklorists researching all traditional industries are familiar with the prime cause of that break: industrial mechanisation . . . . Sailing and rowing, manual hauling of nets, line-fishing and drift-netting and natural lore have become incomprehensible, and even ridiculous, to a generation which understands (but imperfectly) only the mechanics of engines, winches, and electronic equipment (p. 109).

This is to make very heavy weather of it. Fishermen, when faced with this sort of weather, have a familiar word to describe the correct seamanlike procedure. It is 'dodging'. And Angus should dodge a bit too, for nothing, probably, is quite so categorical as he thinks. Indeed, he himself shows, from the first 'irregular' use of the drift-net, that the evolution of the ring-net has been from one 'mechanical' advantage to another, and 'the transition from drift-netting to trawling forced the fishermen to acquire a new range of skills and knowledge' (p. 140). Just so—and 'new range of skills and knowledge' can hardly be much different from (new) 'lore'. So, hauling a seine to the shore gave way to ringing in deep water. The collecting of the herring from the 'ring' by basket, gave way to a 'brailer' with a tackle and derrick. Even in the new motor-boats, steering by wheel rather than by tiller, eventually meant 'a better ring . . . as we can make any curve accurate all round' (p. 212). And when it comes to something 'only marginally associated with [such] practicalities'

(but still defined as 'fishing lore'), namely, *humour*, it would be strange if the much-criticised modern fishermen could not do better than the two or three not very good stories which are presented (p. 110), especially that forlorn old gag about the sun and moon going wrong, 'but my watch never'. Angus Martin's apology is that 'the best of them can only be told [*sc.* orally] and these have been excluded'. That is a pity.

Then there is the complicated lore of a net assembly, so traditionally fixed in the men's minds that even the accompanying beer and whisky had no obvious effect. 'Some o' them' said Hugh McFarlane 'wir *smok'd* (drunk), but damn the bit o't—they winna go an inch wrong.' Now, there was a conservative Tarbert method, and there was also a newer Ayrshire method introduced by certain fishing families, notably from The Maidens. 'The great success of the families which practised it testifies to its efficiency, but there can be little doubt that the meticulous and tradition-conscious older generation of Tarbert fishermen would have disapproved of it' (p. 121).

But is it really a question of approval or disapproval? At what point does new skill and knowledge and efficiency cease to be 'lore'? In short, what is to *count* as 'fishing lore'? It is here that Angus Martin dodges without seeming to notice. He takes, for example, a great innovator in the history of ring-netting, Robert Robertson, and singles him out for great attention in the chapter *The New Age*. It was Robertson who, in 1907, was skipper of the *Brothers*, a Campbeltown skiff with a paraffin engine—the first fishing vessel on the West Coast of Scotland to receive motor power. In 1922 he had two motor craft built, the *Falcon* and the *Frigate Bird*, to work as a ring-netting pair. Immediately, he was obliged to record: 'Like all things new, these boats were looked upon as money lost.' Nevertheless, they were an eventual success and they changed the history of ring-netting. Robert Robertson died in 1940: 'He was pre-eminent among ring-net fishermen, and if tradition proves just, will be so remembered.'

So Angus Martin's predicament remains. He finds himself sympathetic to Robert Robertson, he accords to him an honoured place in the tradition, yet he is caught between conservative regret for lost 'lore' and seamanlike admiration for a fellow fisherman. It is the inevitability of the predicament that we have to notice. As Robertson himself is quoted as saying (p.211): 'If it's got tae be, that's it—it's got tae be.'

Where, then, does all this leave us? Not, perhaps—for all the inevitability—permanently in the predicament where it seems to have left Angus Martin. Field-work may begin with passion and end with pessimism. It is certain that it will also be maddeningly paradoxical throughout. It never really gets you anywhere (it has obviously depressed Angus Martin) because the real predicament is that it is always the *next* retrieval of information, the *next* questionnaire which is the important one, that is, the 'lore' you didn't ask about, or didn't even know existed, or didn't trouble to define, and wouldn't know about anyway until you had recollected your present retrieval in something like tranquillity.

Just seventy years ago, the French dialectologist Jules Gillièron wrote his celebrated paradox, which might be directed at all field-workers: 'Le questionnaire . . . pour être sensiblement meilleur, aurait dû être fait après l'enquête.' So, having read and enjoyed Angus Martin's splendid book, what we now have to do is to settle down, in such good spirits as may be granted to us, to consider *le questionnaire* . . . .

J. Y. MATHER

Books Received

Some of these books may be reviewed later in *Scottish Studies*

A Folklore Sampler from the Maritimes, with a Bibliographical Essay on the Folktale in English, edited by Herbert Hulpert. Memorial Univerisity of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications, St. John's 1982. 273 pp. [N.P.]

Scottish Gaelic Studies, edited by Donald MacAulay, Vol. XIV Part 1. University of Aberdeen, 1983. 142 pp. £7.

Études Celtiques XXI, fondees par J. Vendryes. Éditions du Centre National de la Récherche Scientifique, Paris 1984. 386 pp. [N.P.]

Isles of Home: *Sixty Years of Shetland* by Gordon Donaldson. Paul Harris, Edinburgh 1984. 188 pp. + 60 black & white photographs. £8.95.

Highland Songs of the Forty-Five, edited by John Lorne Campbell. Scottish Academic Press, for The Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, Edinburgh 1984. 347 pp. £9.95. Revised edn. [First published 1933.]

Architects and Architecture on Tayside by Bruce Walker. Dundee Institute of Architects 1984. 206 pp. including 179 photographs and drawings. £15.

Population Change in Contemporary Scotland, edited by H. Jones. Royal Scottish Geographical Society Series. Geo Books, Norwich 1984. 83 pp. including 25 figures and 13 tables. [N.P.]

'That Important and Necessary Article': *The Salt Industry and its Trade in Fife and Tayside c. 1570–1850* by C. A. Whatley. Abertay Historical Society Publication No. 22, Dundee 1984. 68 pp. £2.50.

'To My Pocket': *A Personal Cash Book of an 18th Century Scottish Laird*, edited by S. F. Macdonald Lockhart. The Pentland Press, Edinburgh 1984. 112 pp. £12.

Scottish Tradition. A Collection of Scottish Folk Literature edited by David Buchan. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley 1984. 265 pp. £11.95.

Mons Meg: A Royal Cannon by Peter Lead. Mennock Publishing, Holmes Chapel, Cheshire 1984. 48 pp., most pages illustrated. [N.P.]

Bealoideas Vol. 53. Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society, Dublin 1985. 354 pp. £10 (annual subscription rate).

Focus on Fishing. Arbroath and Gourdon by Edna R. Hay and Bruce Waker. Abertay Historical Society no. 23, Dundee 1985. 96 pp. including 12 photographs and drawings. £4.

The Letters of Robert Burns Vol. I 1780–1789, Vol II 1790–1796, edited by J. De Lancey Ferguson. Second edition by G. Ross Roy. Oxford University Press 1985. 494 pp. and 521 pp. £45 each. [1st edn. 1931].

Traditional Dancing in Scotland by J. P. Flett & J. M. Flett; with an Appendix by Frank Rhodes on 'Dancing in Cape Breton Island'. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley 1985. 313 pp. paperback £4.95. [First published 1964].

John Galt by P. H. Scott. Scottish Writers Series, editor David Daiches. Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1985. 130 pp. £4.50.

Lewis Grassic Gibbon by Ian Campbell. Scottish Writers Series [as above].

Alexander Montgomerie by R. D. S. Jack. Scottish Writers Series [as above, but 140 pp.]

Ardler—A Village History. The Planned Railway Village of Washington by Christopher H. Dingwall. Abertay Historical Society No. 24. Dundee 1985. 64 pp. + 8 plates. £2.25.

Poems by Allan Ramsay & Robert Fergusson, edited by Alexander Manson Kinghorn and Alexander Law. The Scottish Classics Series No. 1, general editor Douglas S. Mack. Scot-

tish Academic Press in conjunction with The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Edinburgh 1985. 225 pp. [N.P.]

The Member: An Autobiography by John Galt, edited by Ian A. Gordon. The Scottish Classics Series No. 2, general editor Douglas S. Mack. Scottish Academic Press in conjunction with The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Edinburgh 1985. 128 pp. [N.P.; paperback; first published 1975.]

John Galt: Ringan Gilhaize or The Covenanters, edited by Patricia J. Wilson. The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, general editor Douglas Mack. Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1985. 370 pp. £8.50.

Selected Short Stories of the Supernatural by Margaret Oliphant, edited by Margaret K. Gray. The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, general editor Douglas S. Mack. Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1985. 256 pp. £8.50.

Perspectives of the Scottish City, edited by George Gordon. Aberdeen University Press, 1985. 224 pp. £17.50.

Commonplace and Creativity: The Role of Formulaic Diction in Anglo-Scottish Traditional Balladry by Flemming G. Andersen. Odense University Press, 1985. 404 pp. Dan. kr. 250.

The Jacobites by Frank McLynn. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley 1985. 228 pp. £15.95.

Memoire of Frances Lady Douglas, by Lady Louisa Stuart, edited and introduced by Jill Rubenstein, with a Preface by J. Steven Watson. Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh & London 1985. 106 pp. £9.50. ['Offers a superb view of late 18th and early 19th century aristocratic society'.]

Highland Communities in Dundee and Perth 1787–1891: A Study in the Social History of Migrant Highlanders by Charles W. J. Withers. Abertay Historical Society No. 25, Dundee 1986. 75 pp. £4.75.

The Beatons: A Medical Kindred in the Classical Gaelic Tradition by John Bannerman. John Donald. Edinburgh 1986. 161 pp. £20.

The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect. The Problem of Generalism and Specialisation in Twentieth-Century Scotland by George Davie. Polygon, Edinburgh 1986. 283 pp. £17.95.

Scottish Church History by Gordon Donaldson. Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1986. 245 pp. + 26 black & white plates [N.P.]

Wade in Atholl by John Kerr. Reprinted from *The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* vol. VIII. Atholl Arms Hotel, Blair Atholl 1986. 59 pp. including 4 photographs.

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: The Ardnamurchan Years by Ronald Black. The Society of West Highland & Island Historical Research, 1986. 44 pp.

The Road to Revolution: Scotland Under Charles I, 1625–37 by Maurice Lee, Jr. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1986, distributed by Harper & Row, London. 259 pp. £19.75.

Narrative of a Residence in South Africa vol. I by Thomas Pringle, to which is prefixed *A Biographical Sketch of the Author* by Josiah Conder. Empire Books. Brentwood, Essex 1986. 168 pp. £14.50. [First published 1834]

Biography of Irish Linguistics and Literature 1942–71 by Rolph Baumgarten, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1986. xxiii + 776 pp. £35.

The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death Mesenger by Patricia Lysaght. Glendale Press, Dublin 1986.

Folksongs & Folklore of South Uist by Margaret Fay Shaw. Third Edition. Aberdeen University Press, 1986. 306 pp. + 32 illustrations. [N.P.; 1st edn. 1955]

Scottish Local Studies Resources: A Directory of Publications from Scottish Public Libraries, edited by Brian Osborne. Scottish Library Association, Motherwell 1986. 56 pp. £2.50.