Á fjall in the Faroe Islands

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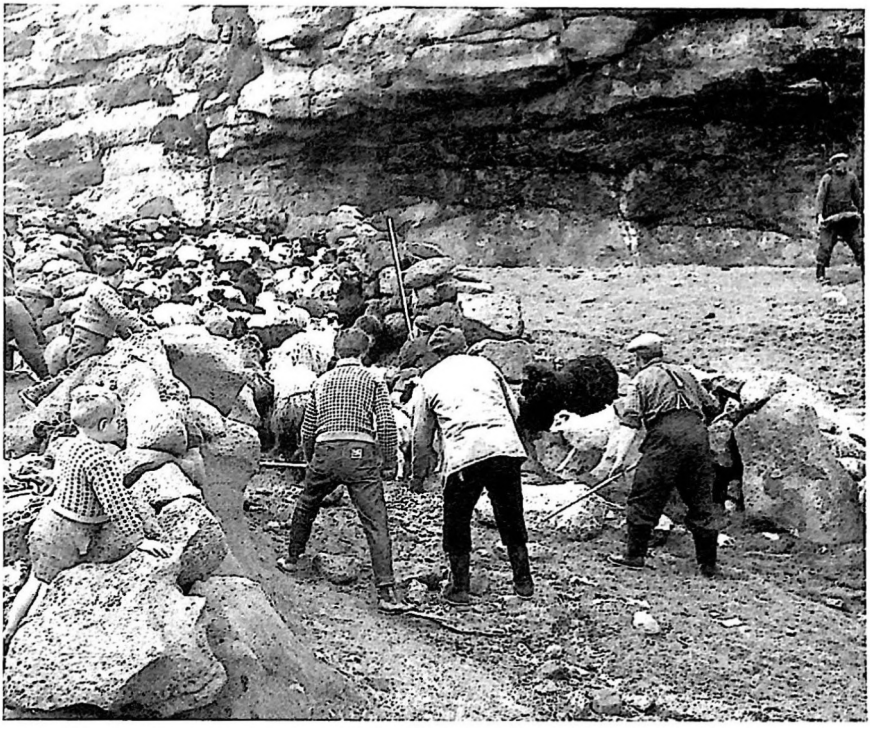

Fig. 1 The village children look on from the stone wall as the men of Kirkja drive the sheep into the fold at Skarðsvik on Fugloy. Photo 1959.

From the most ancient times, the fish-landing-stage and the sheepfold have been factors exerting the most crucial influence on Faroese village life. People born and bred in a *bygd* have among their most vivid and cherished memories their experiences at the landing-stage and sheepfold — Both landing-stage and sheepfold were places from which the village children drew spiritual strength and understanding of the values of the Faroese community, when they watched the boats returning from the fishing grounds and the sheep being driven into the fold near the settlement.

So writes Robert Joensen in his major work on sheep-farming in the Faroe Islands.[1] This article will deal with one of these two central elements of the older Faroese peasant culture: the sheepfold (Faroese *rætt*). It is based on field-research material in the form of notes and photographs that I collected on trips to the Faroes for Sorgenfri Open Air Museum in 1959 and 1961. The bulk of the material concerns two small villages, both in the northernmost island group of Norðuroyar: Múli, at the north point of the biggest of the islands, Borðoy; and Kirkja, one of the two villages on the small island of Fugloy.[2] In the following account I have also relied on the extensive material presented by Robert Joensen — which, incidentally, also comes mainly from Norðuroyar.

To understand the significance of the sheepfold and the activities associated with it, it is first necessary to give an outline of the classic Faroese peasant economy. The composite occupational pattern involves the resources of both land and sea, and the Faroese *bygdir* or villages are therefore almost all along the coast. Sailing among the rocky grey-green islands, one sees from afar the villages marked off as sharply-bounded lighter areas at the foot of the fell slopes. What one is seeing is the village's cultivated infield or *bøur*. Here it is first and foremost hay that is grown, as winter fodder for the cattle. Today some potatoes are also planted; and formerly there were a few fields of barley, used for making small unleavened loaves (*dýlar*) which were baked in the ashes of the hearth. Probably equally important was its role in crop rotation: interspersing a barley crop at regular intervals improved the hay crop.

In the outfield or *hagi* there is a distinction between the lowest, nearest, part, called the *húshagi* or *undirhagi*, and the highest, most remote, the *fjallhagi* or *yvirhagi*. The sheep graze in summer in the *fjallhagi* while the cattle use the pastures in the *húshagi*. In winter, when the cattle are stall-fed, the sheep come down from the fell and graze in the *húshagi* as well as inside the *bøur* or infield itself. While every man has his own particular part of the infield, the outfield is used by the community as a whole. The *hagi* of a village always borders directly on the neighbouring village: there is no no-man's land in the Faroes.

Since ancient times an individual property-owner's share in the village land has been measured in *merkur*. Each *mørk* is made up of sixteen *gyllin*, and each of these in turn of twenty *skinn*. The value of the *merkur*, however, varies from village to village. The number of a farmer's *merkur* determines his area of infield, and the rights in the outfield connected with these holdings. His rights to most of the natural resources that were made use of in the composite Faroese economy were limited by his *mørk* figure: the summer pastures, for instance, for grazing his cattle; the turf in the outfield, for cutting; and the wild birds on the fell, that he could catch — in fact, the only unrestricted resource was the sea, for fishing.

The most important of the rights tied to the *mørk* figure, however, was that of keeping sheep in the outfield. Sheep-breeding played such a central role in the economy: sheep's wool is Faroe gold, runs an old adage. Sheep products such as mutton, tallow,

wool and skin, met a number of the villagers' own needs; and knitted woollen goods were their most important export, until the development of the fishing industry after the middle of the last century.

The rest of this paper will look more closely at how sheep farming was organised in one of the small villages in Norðuroyar - Múli on Borðoy. This village consisted, in about 1950, of five families with the disposition of land assessed at ten *merkur*. Each *mørk* carried the right to keep twenty ewes in the outfield. Here, as in most places, the sheep were owned in common: that is, no farmer had his own flock of sheep, but his *mørk* figure specified how large a share of the total yield of mutton and wool could go to him. From Múli's outfield between ten and twelve sheep could be slaughtered per *mørk* every year. A large portion of the yield, however, went to people outside the settlement who had inherited land in Múli, and who paid those living on the land to tend the sheep.

Fig. 2 Seyðaból, the shelter-fold for the sheep, in Múli's winter outfield. Photo 1961.

Muli's outfield consists of four, not particularly deep, bowl-shaped valleys surrounded on three sides by steep fells whose peaks reach a height of 750 metres. To the east the valleys open out into a slope (*brekka*) running down towards the sea. The sheer fell-sides (*hamrar*) are broken by horizontal bands of less steeply-sloping ground (*røkur*) where men can move along the hill face. The fells in Múli's outfield have three of these *røkur*, continuing from valley to valley. Here, and at the top of the slopes, the sheep graze in summer; this is their *summarhagi*. In the winter they migrate down the slope towards the sea, where they have their *veturhagi* or winter outfield, with the horseshoe-shaped *seyðaból*, open sheltered sheep folds, where they can seek respite from snow storms (Fig. 2). In about 1960, these sheltered folds were to some extent replaced by proper sheep-cots with roofs – at the time a fairly new phenomenon. Múli's 'summer outfield' was then considered good, despite its inaccessibility: on the other hand, it had a bad 'winter outfield', often plagued with snow.

With the *mørk* figure, Faroese peasant society had a means of regulating the ecological balance.[3] The point was to keep the optimum number of sheep in all parts of the outfield area, so that the pasture resources were husbanded as efficiently as possible without being over-exploited. From ancient times Múli's sheep were divided into four *gongur*, each with its own pasture area (Fig. 3):

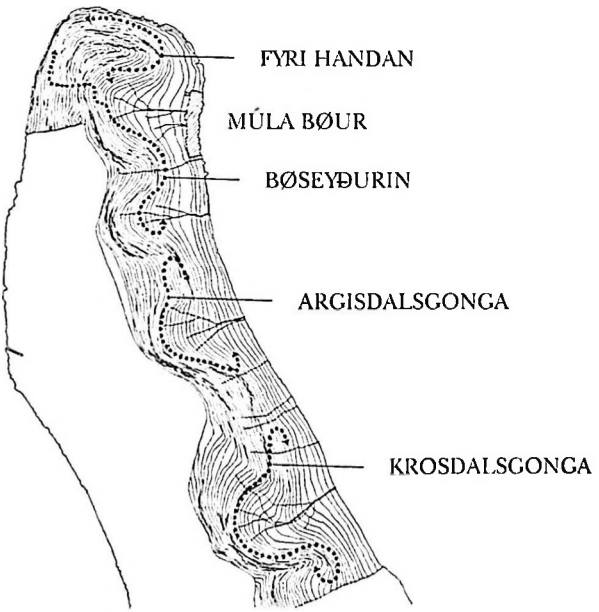

Fig. 3 Sketch map of Múli's outfield. The broken lines mark where the four sheep *gongur* have their grazing areas.

(1) The *Fyri handan* flock of about fifty sheep grazed in the valley behind the village on the north side of the *Matar* stream. As they grazed, they might move up to the north side of the steep Múla fell quite safely, but if they went as far as the western side, they could not normally get back.

(2) The flock called *Bøseyðurin*, about eighty sheep, had its place in the remaining part of the valley behind the village, and in the adjacent Klivsdal to the south. The sheep from this *gonga* also grazed on the part of Múli's outfield lying on the western side of the fell.

(3) The *Argisdalsgonga* consisted of about fifty sheep, and belonged, as the name suggests, in the Argisdalur valley.

(4) The southernmost flock was called the *Krosdalsgonga*, after its grazing area. It numbered about eighty sheep, but from about 1960, no longer existed as an independent flock, since the southernmost part of the Krosdal valley had been exchanged for land elsewhere.

Each of the four *gongur* was in turn divided into two or three *fylgir*, and these too were called after their particular part of the area occupied by their *gonga*. The whole system thus looked as follows:

(1) *Fyri handan*
- (a) *Yviri í Múlanum*
- (b) *Í vatneseyðanum*
- (c) *Uppi í fjalli*

(2) *Bøseyðurin*
- (a) *Teir á bønum*
- (b) *Teir á klivjum or skipaleitiseyðurin* (this *fylgi* however is not very old)
- (c) *Í innara bøseyður*

(3) *Argisdalsgonga*
- (a) *Í Krosdalsseyðanum*
- (b) *Millum áirna*

The main responsibility for tending the sheep in the outfield lay with the *seyðamaður* or shepherd chosen. By frequent visits to the outfield throughout the year he was able to keep a watch on the sheep, not least during the critical lambing period in the spring. He was expected to be familiar with the individual *fylgir* and their pastures – preferably, in fact, to know every sheep in the outfield.[4] In the summer he had to make sure that the sheep and their lambs grazed high upon the fell, so that the 'winter

outfield' was preserved. Both in summer and winter he had to see that the sheep from each flock stayed in their own pastures. It was his task, too, to see to practical matters in the outfield such as the draining of particularly damp stretches of ground.

One of his most important responsibilities was to organise and supervise the rounding-up of the sheep into one of the village's main folds. There were sheep-gatherings in the early summer for ear-marking the new lambs and plucking the wool from the sheep, and also in the autumn when sheep were to be taken out of the flock for slaughtering. These tasks used to be spread over five or six gatherings, partly so that with each gathering the men would have the opportunity of taming the half-wild sheep and getting them used to the gathering-fold. Never more than one *gonga* was driven into the fold at a time. Usually, about ten men took part in the gathering, forming a chain high up on the fell and driving the flock in front of them down to the shore, over terrain that was often steep and trackless (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13 As the mist rises over the steep fell slope, the line of the fell men appears, driving sheep in front of them towards Skarðsvik. Photo 1959.

The village of Múli formerly had three such gathering folds or *rættir*. One lay in the infield itself and was used to round up the two *gongur* (*Fyri handan* and *Bøseyðurin*) that grazed closest to the village. The other two folds lay in Argisdal and Krosdalur and were used for gathering the two flocks that grazed in these more remote parts of the Múli outfield.

The gathering fold in the infield was called *Niðri á rætt* and was considered the village's oldest. It was difficult to see, because it was sunk so that its 1–1½ m high side walls did not project above the surrounding fields, and the bedrock itself formed the bottom of the fold. On their last stretch before being caught, the sheep only had a narrow passage between a guide wall and the sheer drop to the sea (Fig. 4). In the

Fig. 4 The wall which, during the round-up, guides the sheep into the fold in Múli's infield. The wall is built with a 'chest' and 'back': a steep, stone side out towards the sheep and a sloping, grassy bank on the other side. Photo 1961.

middle of the century the passage had to be widened a little, since some of the sheep had plunged over the edge during a round-up. On the same occasion the 8-9m long entrance to the fold itself was widened to between 1 and 1½ m. The irregularly-shaped fold is 9 m long, with a width of 4m at the widest point (Figs 5–6).

A remarkable feature of this old fold is the large, worn boulder, about 1½m wide at its base and ½ m high, which lies a little to the side of the central line of the fold and about a third of the way in. This is a *gandasteinn*, or magic stone, they said in Múli. Stones like this were once found in other folds, for example in the neighbouring

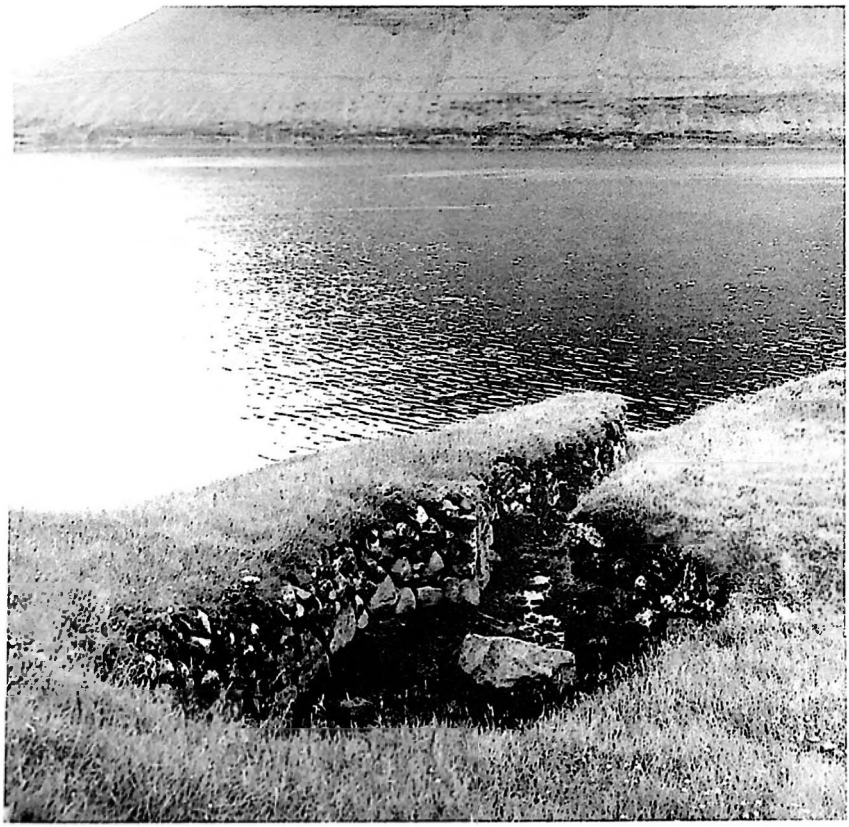

Fig. 5 The old gathering-fold in Múli's infield is sunk below ground level, so the stone walls do not project above the surrounding meadow land. (At the front is the fold itself; and to the back, the narrow entrance.)

villages of Viðareiði and Skálatoftir, but in most places they had been removed to make more room in the fold.

When the shepherd ear-marked the lambs, he always sat on this stone – it was thought in Múli that one could thereby be sure of getting sheep that were ear-marked here back to the fold again. However the stone also had a more practical function connected with the autumn gatherings: if the sheep were driven close together and they just filled the space in front of the stone (about two thirds of the fold), this was a sign that enough animals had been taken out for slaughtering.

In his book on sheep-farming, Robert Joensen mentions similar stones from other folds in the Norðuroyar, but without being able to given any certain explanation of

Fig. 6 The fold in Múli's infield. The bedrock forms the bottom, and in the middle lies the big boulder from which the ear-marking was done. Photo 1961.

their significance.[5] As a rule they are not, like this one, completely free-standing stones, but project from one side-wall out into the fold, dividing it into two sections. The shepherd sits on a similar stone while ear-marking the lambs in the fold at Skarðsvik on Fugloy (See Figs. 15–16).

Formerly, the old fold in Múli's infield was used for sheep-gathering all the year round; but as it damaged the hay crop when the fold was used in summer, a new *rætt* was built in 1955 south of the infield. This was then used when the two *gongir* nearest the village were to be rounded up and the wool plucked.

The Krosdalur fold had disappeared by about 1960: it became superfluous when the *Krosdalsgonga* ceased to exist as a separate unit. Like so many other folds in the

Fig. 15 The shepherd, seated on a boulder in the fold at Skarðsvik, ear-marks the new lambs. Other men guard the entrance to the fold so that the restless sheep cannot get out. Photo 1959.

Fig. 16 The shepherd takes his knife to ear-mark a lamb. Sheep are taken out of the fold, and in the background, more men are busy plucking the wool. Photo 1959.

outfield, it lay right down on the shore, and in fact could only be used at ebb tide. Its walls, made entirely of stones, were often knocked down by the surf in the winter and had to be piled up again.

At the Argisdalur fold, which was also built with stones all the way round, there was a feature that was present in many other folds in the area. This was the *smoga*, a small, square opening in the end wall of the fold, just being enough for a single sheep to pass through (Fig. 7). In Múli it was said that the hole had been made to prevent sheep-stealing. It was blocked up when the fold was in use, but otherwise was left open

Fig. 7 The gathering fold in Argisdalur. At the end can be seen the small opening called the *smoga*. Photo 1961.

so that the sheep illicitly driven into the fold could get out again. Such a safety precaution, however, was not needed at the fold in the infield.

The same explanation of the phenomenon was given to Robert Joensen. But he was also given other explanations, for instance that an opening like this was useful for counting the sheep, because they could be let out of the fold one at a time. Others say that it was important when taming the sheep and getting them used to the fold. If the *smoga* was left open at this time, they could escape again quickly, and so would go into the fold more readily on a later occasion.[6]

When taking part in the fell-gathering, it was important to have the proper clothing and equipment. In former times the men wore the characteristic hide shoes which were ideal for keeping a firm foothold on the fell. Now these have been replaced by plimsolls (see Fig. 17). A fell-man would bring a rope, knife and provisions, but the most important item of equipment was the *fjallstavur*, fell-crook. The old fell-crook was at least as long as its owner was tall; and it had to be strong enough to bear his weight if, for instance, it was laid across a fissure in the rocks for him to cross over. At the bottom the fell-crook ended in an iron spike, and just above this were four upward-

Fig. 17 Two men plucking the wool from a sheep outside the fold at Skardsvik. Note the plimsolls, which have replaced the traditional hide shoes. Photo 1959.

pointing hooks which could be twisted into the wool of a sheep that was hard to catch. As a man moved down a steep fell-side, he would hold the crook horizontally in towards the fell, partly supporting himself, partly breaking his speed (see Fig. 13).

By the mid-century this special tool had fallen into disuse, in most places, but one still took a staff or stick on a fell drive. The photographs from Skarðsvik on Fugloy in 1959 show that those taking part had either a long staff, which was used in the same way as the proper fell-crook, or a short walking stick, the hooked handle of which could be used in catching the sheep (see Figs. 12 and 14).

Fig. 12 Two men from Kirkja on Fugloy on their way through the mist towards Skarðsvik on the morning of 23 June 1959.

Fig. 14 The last stage of the sheep gathering at Skarðsvik on Fugloy: the last sheep are driven into the stone-built shelter-fold. Photo 1959.

Among the fell-man's regular equipment were also a number of thick, woollen cords, about a metre long, called *seyðband* in the Norðuroyar, but elsewhere in the Faroes, *hafl*. These woollen cords were used to bind the sheep's legs if it was taken out of the flock for slaughtering, or when its wool was to be plucked (Fig. 8).

Since ancient times there had been definite rules for the colour the woollen cords should be. In the photograph the sheep's legs were being tied with a black cord, but black was avoided in many places, as it was an omen of death among the sheep. At Skarðsvik, though, it was dark brown cords that had to be avoided. In Múli and many other villages grey ones would never be used, as grey was the colour of the *huldufólk*, the supernatural beings who played an important role in Faroese popular belief. Once, in about 1913, it was noted that a grey sheep that lay with bound legs disappeared without trace, although a man was standing by keeping an eye on it.

In the 1930s woollen cords were still being made in Múli in the old-fashioned way, with a hand spindle (*hand-snælda*). In the autumn, when the slaughtering season was

Fig. 8 The four legs of the sheep that is to have its wool plucked off are tied together with a thick woollen cord. In the background lies the wool from another sheep. Skarðsvik, Fugloy 1959.

at hand the *kongsbonde*, the King's yeoman, in Múli (who is demonstrating the procedure (Figs 9–11)), used to make about fifty cords. A thick woollen thread was spun on the spindle, and six of these threads were twisted together — still using the spindle — into a woollen cord of suitable thickness. The length of the cord was double the distance between the foot and the hand at knee height (see Fig. 10). New cords were always used in fell drives, but the old ones could be used again for other purposes: they were useful, for instance, for tying round hide shoes in the winter to give a better grip on the fell-side.

Figs. 9–11
'The King's yeoman' in Múli shows how to make a *seyðband* on a hand spindle. Fig. 9: Spinning the thick woollen thread. Fig. 10: the cord is formed from six of the thick hand-spun woollen threads. The length should be double the distance between foot and hand at knee height. Fig. 11: With the hand-spindle spinning, the six threads are twisted into a woollen cord. Photos 1961.

As mentioned above, the sheep used to be rounded up at least five times a year, and since only one *gonga* was taken at a time, this meant that the Múli men were on the fell rounding up sheep about twenty times a year. It is therefore not surprising that this important and demanding work came to play a very prominent role in the consciousness of Faroese villages. The work is called *á fjall*, which simply means 'to the fell', but always implies 'to round up sheep'.

In the summer the men went *á seyðaroyting*, when the business was to pluck the wool from the sheep and ear-mark (Figs 15–16) the new lambs; but they might also do the ear-marking separately on an earlier drive – they were then said to *reka til smáum*. Each *gonga* was driven into the *rætt* twice for wool-plucking. The first gathering would usually take place about Midsummer and the next a few weeks later. (The Faroese sheep are not sheared: the wool is plucked or pulled off with the hands (Fig. 17)). In the first instance only the loosest wool was taken: the rest was left until the next time of going *á seyðaroyting*. Thus, by doing the plucking twice, they would ensure that no loose wool was lost.

The photographs of the sheep-gathering were taken on the island of Fugloy in June 1959, when fell men from the village of Kirkja were *á fjall* to round up the sheep on the steep northern side of the island at Skarðsvik, where there is a *hagi* which the villagers of Kirkja and Hattarvik share. The object was to do the first wool-plucking and to ear-mark the new lambs. The ear-marking was done by the shepherd, seated on a large boulder in the front section of the fold.

On that occasion we walked over the fell from Kirkja in a thick mist, but when we reached the steep north coast at Skarðsvik, the sun broke through. The banks of mist slid like glaciers down the fell slope, and for the rest of the day there was clear, bright sunshine. Although a summer fell drive could thus take place in ideal excursion weather, as a rule it was far rougher when gathering sheep for the slaughter in the autumn and early winter. Then the days were short, and the weather changeable, cold and windy.

The first fell drive of the autumn was called *á skurð*, when the male lambs and the smallest ewe lambs were separated out for slaughtering. One by one they were taken out of the fold and laid outside with a woollen cord tied round all four legs. On the next fell drive, called *á klipping*, it was the turn of the other ewe lambs when those that were to be used for breeding were selected. It was called *á klipping* because the lambs kept for breeding were marked by clipping the wool on their foreheads. Every single lamb was closely scrutinised to be sure that only the best were selected to perpetuate the stock. At the same time the ewes that were too old – their age was assessed by looking at their teeth – were separated out.

What was left now was the hardest task of all for the fell men, if this was a *rætt* that lay far from the village: transporting the animals to be slaughtered back home. The men might do this by carrying them on their backs, by driving them, hobbled, or sailing them home in boats. When the Múli men rounded up the flock from the remote

Krosdalur for the slaughter, they would normally use the *rætt* that is in Argisdalur, because it was closer to the village. Besides the two slaughter drives mentioned, there was a third, called *á jólasseyðin*. This took place in December, when animals were taken out of the flock for Christmas slaughtering.

This material, in the form of notes and pictures from two small villages in the Faroese Norðuroyar in the years 1959 and 1961, documents a side of Faroese working life that was even then very much on the decline, and which has today become history. The sheep still play a role, but the tending of them, and the working procedures, have been simplified. The old stone gathering folds have in most places given way to more modern ones cast in cement, with several chambers, and a dip to rid the sheep of parasites in their fleece. The sheep are fed in the new sheep-cots in winter, and the careful tending in the outfield has ceased; and, finally the enclosing of individual outfield plots has begun to undermine the very foundations of traditional sheep-farming in the Faroese outfield.

Translated by James Manley

NOTES

1 *Fåreavl på Færøerne* by Robert Joensen (*Færoensia* vol. XII, Copenhagen 1979, ed Susanne Barding and Holger Rasmussen), p. 37. *Fåreavl på Færøerne* is a collected edition in Danish (with a summary in English) of the four Faroese books on the subject: *Royvið* (1958), *Greivabitin* (1960), *Býta seyð og fletta* (1968) and *Vambarkonan* (1972).
A detailed account of sheep-farming from the point of view of legal history has been given by E. A. Bjørk in *Færøsk Bygderet I. Husdyrbruget* (Tórshavn 1956/57, photo repr Tórshavn 1984).
Jóan Pauli Joensen gives, in *Færøisk folkkultur* (Lund 1980), a survey of working life in connection with sheep-farming, with detailed bibliographical references. The book, originally published in Swedish, is also available in a Faroese edition with updated references: *Fólk og mentan* (Tórshavn 1987).

2 The trips were made in connection with the acquisition of a Faroese house, and moving it to the Open Air Museum. The house came from the small village of Múli where we stayed for a couple of months in 1961 to arrange the dismantling and shipping of the various parts of the building. In Kirkja, although I only had a short stay there in 1959, I had the opportunity of taking part in the fell drive at Skarðsvík that is documented in a series of photographs.

3 An ecological view of sheep-farming has been given by the geographer Jesper Brandt in 'Det færøske landbrugssamfund' in *Om økologi. En introduktionsbog*, by Peter Agger & Jesper Brandt. 2nd ed., Copenhagen 1978, 64ff.

4 The division into *fylgir* is based on notes kindly made available to me by the philologist Jóhannes av Skarði.

5 Robert Joensen, *op. cit.*, 39

6 *Op cit.*, 40.