



A Letter from North Ronaldsay • Ian Scott

A trip to Kirkwall for the Science Festival

Here I am, sitting at home on a wet day. The east-facing window is sprinkled with a myriad of little beads of rain and water drips from the 'aisans'.

I thought, now that the nights are dark and the back-end of the year well upon us, I might try another *Letter from North Ronaldsay*.

Last month, I spent a few days in Kirkwall attending some talks given at this year's Orkney International Science Festival.

This event of Howie Firth's is such a great yearly occasion, bringing folk together and promoting Orkney as it surely does.

How very enjoyable to wander idly along the streets of Kirkwall; attend talks on subjects of one's choosing; visit exhibitions; meet up with old friends and acquaintances and have lunch in the Peedie Kirk hall (the Guild ladies of the Kirk, with Jack and Helen Muir, provide a grand little repast over the seven-day period of the festival) and listen to a toast given for individuals who have contributed greatly to Orkney's history in one way or another.

One such person was Ernest Walker Marwick (1915 - 2015). Ernest would have been 100 this year. The 'One O' Clock Toast' to Ernest (written by John D.M. Robertson) was read by Gladys Leslie.

Two anthologies (selected works of Ernest Walker Marwick) have been published: The first in 1991, edited by John D. M. Robertson, and the second, in 2012, edited by John D.M. Robertson, James M. Irvine and Marie E. Sutherland.

John Robertson writes about Ernest: "Ernest told me in his modest way it was pleasant to reflect that when he departed this life he might perhaps leave some work of value and interest.

"His pamphlets, articles, recordings, broadcasts and books are evidence of an astonishing fecundity, and in them Ernest Walker Marwick has bequeathed to Orkney a legacy of inestimable value."

Two very special talks were given about Ernest: one in Evie where he was born, and the second in Kirkwall.



The late Ernest Walker Marwick.
(Picture courtesy of Orkney Library Photographic Archive)

The first was readings from an unpublished work of Ernest's — *The Sufficient Place* — which is a wonderfully written autobiography of his youth.

The second talk, in Kirkwall — *A light that shines on Orkney's past* — gave an account of his life and work.

As there was a small exhibition in the Orkney library, I went along one morning and was able to access details of all of Ernest's works deposited in the Orkney Library's Archives: articles, photographs, papers, recordings, talks.

It was there that I became even more aware of the vast amount of work that Ernest had accomplished before his untimely death in a car crash, when he was only 62.

I was also able to look through some of Ernest's black and white photographs, where he beautifully captures Orkney's landscape; records archaeological sites; Orkney houses; the isles steamers; fishing boats, etc, and one can also see many photographs of folk of his era.

One other science festival talk I should mention attracted attention and, with its follow up (after the talk), generated hope for North Ronaldsay residents.

The illustrated presentation was by archaeozoologist Dr Marie Balasse, of the French Natural History Museum, held in the King Street Halls.

The title of the talk was *The Sheep on the Shore*, in which it was explained, as a result of isotope analysis from Orkney Neolithic sites, how the native sheep of Orkney, 6,000 years ago, ate seaweed, contributing to their winter diet as in the native North Ronaldsay foreshore-living sheep (direct descendants of those ancient sheep), whose food source today is, by contrast, predominately seaweed.

The talk was followed in the lower room by a most pleasant get-together with a great assortment of refreshments (including samples of the island's native sheep mutton) where a number of North Ronaldsay folk (and many others of the public) were to participate in the launch of a charitable Trust — The Orkney Sheep Foundation (OSF).

Their mission is, as explained by Trust Foundation trustees attending, to "secure the native seaweed-eating sheep on the foreshore of North Ronaldsay".

Those interested should access the trust's excellent website — www.orkneysheepfoundation.org.uk.

The foundation hopes to help the island rebuild damaged, or non-existent, sheep-dyke, obliterated by storms, by working initially to raise funds. And, as they say, with the help, knowledge, and cooperation of islanders, to meet their mission — "Conserving an island heritage".

The other unique event I must mention, when on my visit to the Orkney Mainland, was a short flight in the De Havilland Dragon Rapide, G-AHAG (built 1944) — a plane so synonymous with Captain E.E. Fresson OBE — up in Orkney for the Orkney Aviation Festival.

Captain E.E. Fresson was an outstanding pioneer aviator who established Highland Airways, which inaugurated in 1933, a passenger service between Inverness, Wick and Kirkwall, and, in 1934, began flying the Royal Mail from Inverness to Kirkwall.

Anyone interested in Fresson should read his book, *Air Road to the Isles*, first published 1966. A second edition was published in 2008.

Just before my homecoming flight, providence intervened, and so I climbed up into this iconic plane and off we flew south in blue skies and brilliant sunshine over Holm, the barriers, South Ronaldsay, Kirkwall and back.

I have taken the liberty of including a photograph shot by the photographer, Selena



Top: Ian Scott prepares to board the De Havilland Dragon Rapide, G-AHAG.
Above: Looking over Kirkwall from the aircraft.

(Selena Kuzman)

Kuzman, showing me before boarding the plane.

I do so for I suppose it was appropriate that a North Ronaldsay person should fly in the type of plane that first landed in North Ronaldsay away back in 1934, subsequently providing an air passenger service — twice daily services, early morning and late afternoon — and, on 1st August 1939 first carried the Royal Mail to the island. The Second World War ended this venture and also the North Isle's air passenger service.

It was a privilege, and indeed a pleasure, to fly in one of those planes of over 70 years ago that had most likely once flown to North Ronaldsay — the island that Captain Fresson had described as: "Undoubtedly the outstanding air conscious island was North Ronaldsay, the most northerly and isolated island of the North Isle group".

Mentioning earlier the Orkney International Science Festival, North Ronaldsay's Science Festival's event, on September 5, in the New Community Centre, run by the North Ronaldsay Community Association, was *The Thorfinn and the Hurricane*.

Sandy Firth BEM, Professor Tom Stevenson and Dorothy Brankin were the presenters.

The weather systems that had created the 1953 storm; and the primitive and delayed communications systems that the *Thorfinn* and the passenger ferry, *Princess Victoria*, had on board in those days, were explained, with an account of the loss of the *Princess Victoria* and the epic voyage of the ss *Thorfinn*.

Present-day sea communications were also explained (a digital display system being used throughout). There was a great attendance, with a grand assortment of refreshments to round off the evening.

In the same venue, at a public meeting the following evening, two trustees of the Orkney International Science Festival further explained the purpose of the foundation and answered questions from the floor.

I'll finish, I think, by praising the folk that conceived the Orkney Sheep Foundation and their commendable intention of, as they say, "conserving an Island Heritage".

This is no doubt a challenge of some proportion, but the greater challenge will be conserving the island's human population, which the OSF are very aware of and will help if they can.

The sheep, I believe, will survive one way or another, but the residents and the island will not, unless organisations such as the OIC and whoever else who should/could be concerned can also make as much of an effort as those OSF friends of North Ronaldsay are positively doing.

Without some solution, and additional help, North Ronaldsay could become, like the Great Blasket — the largest of a group of islands three miles off the West Kerry Coast — abandoned, as it was the year of the ss *Thorfinn*'s epic voyage in 1953, "to sheep, seagulls and silence".

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