2

The Length of the Land

There were few areas of Scotland (the Borders?) which Seton Gordon had not frequently visited and described, authoritatively, because he used his feet, and interestingly, because he searched out the background lore and history. This selection is, proportionately, the least represented because of this abundance. The two 'Highways and Byways' *books could have been used in their entirety and remain invaluable companions for the curious traveller. His diary for 1945, given later, shows how far he ranged throughout his long life.*

In Glen Canisp.

Looking to Suilven and Canisp.

FARTHEST NORTH IN BRITAIN

The voyager from Aberdeen or Leith to the Shetland Islands perhaps notices, while yet that island group is invisible, that a strange bird joins the seagulls following the steamer. The newcomer is a large, dark brown bird, with an area of white on either wing, and its flight is undistinguished, and apparently aimless, until a seagull swoops down and picks up a scrap of meat which has been dropped overboard by the cook. The great skua—for this is the name of the dark brown bird—which has been idly following the ship then shoots forward, like a racing car suddenly accelerated by its driver, overtakes the gull, and very soon forces it to drop or disgorge its prize.

There is something remarkable in the sudden speeding-up of the great skua's flight and the impression is given of most formidable power in reserve. The great skua, or bonxie, as it is almost universally named in Shetland, is so powerful that even the greater black-backed gull is afraid of it. A light-keeper of the Out Skerries light told me that he watched one day a bonxie deliberately murdering a greater black back on the rocks below the lighthouse, and I heard of a great skua which, on seeing a greater black-backed gull snatch a herring from the deck of a drifter in Lerwick Sound, swooped down, killed the great gull with a single blow, swallowed the herring, then flew unperturbed away, as though slaying greater black backs was an everyday affair.

On the water below the great cliffs of Noss I saw another bird tragedy. East of Lerwick, chief port of Shetland, is Bressay Isle, and east of Bressay is the grassy isle of Noss, inhabited only by a shepherd. On its east face Noss is a sheer precipice, and the cliffs, 600 feet high, appear even higher when viewed from the sea immediately below them.

It was on a July morning that my friend and I left Lerwick in a small open motor boat. In Lerwick harbour hundreds of herring drifters were moored to the quays and to one another. Boats from Yarmouth and Lowestoft rubbed shoulders with Scottish craft from Peterhead, Fraserburgh and ports of the Moray Firth. Out in the Sound were anchored fishing craft from Holland and Norway, and there were fish-carriers from Germany and the Balkan States.

We steered north through the entrance to the Sound, where many fulmars were resting on the deep blue water or flying gracefully above the sea, and felt

the lift of the north-easterly swell which broke white against Beosetter Holm and Score Head. Soon we had left Bressay astern and were sailing along the north coast of Noss. As we approached the great cliffs on the east side of that island we saw many birds ahead of us and it was here that I realized first the reprehensible habits of the bonxie.

On the sea beneath the great precipice of Noss a bonxie was deliberately murdering a kittiwake. Like a winged stoat, the great skua had attached itself to the victim's back and was eating away the flesh at the back of the neck while the kittiwake flapped its wings despairingly, and attempted to rise from the water and throw off the deadly grip of its implacable enemy. We rescued the kittiwake, but too late to save its life.

In most parts of Britain the gannet has no enemy, and fishes in peace. But we soon realized that the gannet's life on Noss is not one of peace or ease. During the hour that we were in sight of the cliffs of Noss, a former haunt of the sea eagle, we saw gannets often chased and attacked and sometimes forced to disgorge their fish. Kittiwakes, fragile and delightful birds, are the bonxie's easy victims, but the gannet is made of sterner stuff. Yet a gannet singled out for attack by a great skua fled in peril of its life, and its outraged, astonished expression was comical. The bonxies, wheeling high above the cliffs, seemed to know, after a short pursuit, whether the gannet was 'travelling light', or whether it was bringing back fish to its young on the cliffs. If the pursued bird was thought to have fish it was relentlessly pursued and chivvied until it disgorged its herring, which the bonxie skilfully caught and swallowed in mid-air. On one occasion a great skua actually alighted on the back of a gannet in full flight and maintained its footing, like a skilled equestrian, until the gannet in despair dropped to the water. On another occasion a bonxie seized a gannet's tail, and tugged so hard that the gannet shrieked in terror. It may be that this gannet-baiting is a recent habit of the bonxie, and that its increasing numbers have given it greater boldness—at all events the gannet does not at first appear to realize the skua's intentions, and when, too late, it discovers that it is to be the victim of an assault it wheels and swerves, but to no purpose, for the hooligan will not be denied.

The bonxies of Hermaness were much better behaved. It was as though I had gone suddenly from Whitechapel to Mayfair. For several days I watched the bonxies of Hermaness and I rarely saw a gannet or indeed any bird molested by them. As I sat quietly on the hillside watching a pair of great skuas which had young near me I became impressed by the behaviour of the pair when a third bonxie flew over them, as it did many times. When the flying bonxie was immediately above them, the pair on the ground raised their wings in greeting with a quick, simultaneous motion, and held them with the tips

pointing skyward as they gave their friend the Fascist salute. The sudden glint of white on the upraised wings of the saluting birds was striking, and the precision with which they gave this greeting was remarkable. Sometimes, when in full flight, a great skua would raise its wings and soar a little way with wings held almost vertically, like a butterfly.

The herring gull, another bird which upon occasion attacks the human intruder near its nest or young, swoops at him from the rear but the great skua attacks from either front or rear. There is something grand in the way this great bird flies rapidly towards the object of its attack, and as it lowers itself with wings held motionless and slightly upraised for the final rush its deep 'keel' and firmly held wings recall a flying-boat gliding to the water. Sometimes during the attack the skua utters a short raven-like croak, or a cry somewhat resembling that of a greater black-backed gull.

Close to the Hermaness nesting ground of the great skuas is a small loch where a pair of red-throated divers have in recent years nested. The watcher told me that the diver is the only bird the skua fears. Before the divers took up their nesting station on the loch the great skuas were in the habit of bathing here but the divers lost no time in driving them away. If any great skua still has the temerity to bathe the diver submerges, swims below water to it, then with its strong, sharp bill seizes and pulls out a mouthful of feathers and sends the aerial buccaneer into the air in a panic. The Hermaness skuas now go for their bathing parade to Loch of Cliff, about three miles away.

Here they have their bathing place at a special part of the loch, near the centre. At the north end is the kittiwakes' bathing place, and midway between the kittiwakes and the great skuas the Arctic skuas bathe themselves. I watched for some time the bathing of the great skuas, and never have I seen birds so greatly revelling in their dip. They threw the water over themselves; they saturated their wings by flapping them violently in the water, then actually lay on their backs, their feet sticking straight into the air, as though they were dead birds. I have seen no other bird deliberately lie on its back while bathing although the black-throated diver when preening its feathers sometimes approaches that position. After bathing, the great skuas flew to a heathery slope above the loch, where they dried their feathers, standing in the breeze until the moisture had evaporated from their plumage.

During the summer when I visited the skua colony upon Hermaness two tame skuas were often near the watcher's hut. One of these birds, an Arctic skua, was tamed by an earlier watcher as long ago as 1911, and at the time of my visit was 26 years old. This skua flies to the door of the hut for any scraps the watcher may give him. His nesting-place is near the hut, and when he

returns to his nesting territory his mate at once flies up to him, to share the food he has brought from what to her is a danger zone.

The other tame bird is a great skua, but its visits to the hut are discouraged because the Arctic skua hates and fears the bonxie and he is the greater pet of the two. One evening when I was in the watcher's hut the great skua arrived outside the door and was evidently rather doubtful of its reception. The watcher threw it some scraps from his dinner and the skua stood, with bill open, and with a worried look, before picking up the food. A few evenings later I was eating a sandwich on the grass outside the hut when I saw the tame Arctic skua standing near me. I threw a crust of bread towards him. At once the bird took wing, and after hovering over the crust and inspecting it carefully, swooped down, snatched it in his bill, and flew away. His mate then flew up to inspect the booty and perhaps the family were fed on it, but my view-point was too low for me to see this. I then threw down another crust, and the Arctic skua was about to carry it off when he uttered a shrill chirping cry of rage and flew at speed almost vertically into the air. Looking up, I saw that the object of his wrath was a passing great skua.

But this Arctic skua was only partially tame where I was concerned for he knew very well that I was not his friend the watcher, who fed him each year during his nesting. Perhaps patrolling the seas off the African coast in winter, he gave a thought to that human friend on his northern mist-hidden isle.

It was on a Sunday afternoon that I embarked at Lerwick on the small ship *Earl of Zetland* as she raised steam for her passage to the North Isles. Her deck was crowded with isles folk, dressed in their Sunday best. The tourists and hikers who in summer form a large proportion of the passengers on the Isle of Skye mail boat were absent for the long and often stormy passage from the mainland of Scotland to Lerwick must be a deterrent to all but the most enthusiastic travellers.

My friend and I were voyaging to Unst, a rock-girt isle lying almost 150 miles to the north-east of Duncansby Head in Caithness. Unst, the most northerly island of the Shetland group, is indeed remote but is not isolated in the sense that Fair Isle or Foula are isolated.

It is 12 miles long and 6 broad. Its main port is Baltasound, where there was at one time a whaling station, and where formerly great quantities of herrings were landed. But now whales are scarce, the herrings are landed at Lerwick, and ruinous sheds are all that remain to tell of these earlier industries. Unst was a Norse island for centuries after Norway ceded the Hebrides to Scotland, and indeed it lies nearer to Norway than to the mainland of Scotland. Most of the old island names are Norse.

Our first call was off the island of Whalsay, from which a ferry boat put out to meet us; then we very slowly made our way toward the north, entering Balta Sound late in the evening. The illusion of having at last reached a foreign land was heightened by the Swedish and Norwegian mackerel craft which lay at the pier and by the Swedish fish-curing schooner anchored in the voe. Shortly after our arrival a Swedish gunboat entered the sound, and at once the foreign fishing fleet hoisted their ensigns, so that the port was gay with bunting.

Unst is a wind-swept island and in appearance is even more storm-swept than the Outer Hebrides. The only trees I saw were in Dr. Saxby's garden. These trees, after a life of over 100 years, remain stunted by the almost continuous winds but give shelter to the garden where, the doctor told me, fulmars sometimes alight and have to be helped into the air again by human hand. For many years Dr. Saxby has been weather observer at the meteorological station of Baltasound and each morning at nine o'clock by Greenwich Time he makes a record of wind, rainfall and temperature. The instruments are in the garden, and he told me (this was in 1937) that he reckoned he had walked 3000 miles in making these island observations. He told me that the glass ball of the sunshine recorder had originally been in use at the summit observatory on Ben Nevis (4400 feet above the sea) and had thus the unique record of use at the highest, and also at the most northerly, British station.

At the entrance to Balta Sound is Balta Island, a pleasant, grassy island that ends in a cliff on the ocean side. On a quiet, sunless day we rowed across during an expedition after sea trout (sea trout are caught here in the sea as well as in the fresh-water lochs) and landed beside a derelict pier where fulmars were sitting tamely on the low rocks. On a spit of sand and shingle a colony of Arctic terns were nesting: they now rose and flew overhead, calling angrily. We climbed the grassy slope and looked over the cliff, where fulmars were brooding their young chicks. The sea was calm, but suddenly at one place the water's surface was agitated by countless tiny waves and there was a loud sighing, as though a phantom wind-squall off the rocks had suddenly stirred the sleeping sea. The mackerel shoal—for it was this which had broken the ocean's calm—moved forward quickly on the top of the water, then disappeared towards the depths. Farther out to sea the dorsal fins of two basking sharks broke the surface, and from the highest part of the island a raven flew furtively away.

The traveller who alights from the steamer on the pier at Baltasound and walks up to the small village sees fulmars wheel and glide over the land as they do but rarely on the Scottish mainland. Above the village road they swoop, circle round the houses, and sometimes alight on some wall or ruined

house, where they chatter excitedly in fulmar language. In a few years I am convinced that the fulmar will be found breeding inland on Unst. My memories of Spitsbergen, where the fulmar is seen far from the salt water, were revived one misty evening when my friend and I were crossing one of the inland hills of Unst. Near this hilltop is an old disused quarry, and a pair of fulmar petrels were soaring in play here, gliding in and out of our vision on that mist-filled hilltop. Sometimes a great skua would emerge from the mist, banking and gliding not unlike a great shearwater.

On Unst crofts are small; in some of the houses Shetland tweed is woven and Shetland shawls are made. To one arriving from the Hebrides it was surprising to be told that there was no lobster fishing off the island shores. The hills of Unst are wide and rolling and resemble the Border Country. The heather and hill grass are grazed very closely by Shetland sheep and Shetland ponies.

The most northerly promontory of Unst is Hermaness. According to tradition Hermaness received its name from a giant called Herma. He and another giant, Saxa, both lost their hearts to a beautiful mermaid. Saxa's home was on the hill of Saxavord on the east side of the Burra Firth, and the mermaid said that she would give her love to the giant who should follow her to the North Pole without touching land. As she dived gracefully beneath the waves Herma and Saxa plunged with a great turmoil after her. Thus the three set out on their long, cold swim, and were never again heard of.

To bird lovers, Hermaness is of special interest since the great skua nests on the promontory. In 1861 Saxby found only five or six pairs of great skuas here, and believed that the extermination of the race was near. Richard Kearton in one of his books mentions that when he visited Hermaness about the year 1897 there were thirteen pairs; when my friend and I saw the colony in 1937 it consisted of no less than ninety pairs. That the great skua was not exterminated on Hermaness is due to the family of Edmondston of Buness, who owned the land. They built a hut and appointed a man to keep watch on the colony and prevent egg collectors and 'men with guns' visiting it. The pioneer work of this Unst family has since been carried on by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

To the hilltop above Hermaness a footpath leads from the end of the road, and along this track a lighthouse-keeper in times of peace daily climbed to signal to the lighthouse on Muckle Flugga, an outlying stack washed by the Atlantic swell. Near the hilltop is the birdwatcher's hut, where the guardian of the colony had his home during spring and summer, surrounded by skuas.

Below Hermaness, on its landward side, is a long and narrow fresh-water loch named Loch of Cliff. On this loch is to be seen a great flock of kittiwakes

fluttering on white, black-tipped wings above the water or bathing happily. A continuous stream of these graceful birds is seen, hour after hour, arriving at or leaving the loch; as they return seaward to their nesting cliffs they pause for an instant in full flight to shake out their feathers. Thousands upon thousands of kittiwakes must bathe in the fresh water daily.

The shores of the Burra Firth are bright sands and green links where ringed plovers call but as one climbs to Hermaness one enters a country of hill vegetation where, among the peat hags, small golden flowers of the tormentil grow close to the ground and in the sunlit air is the scent of crowberry.

During the whole of the two miles' walk from Burra Firth to Hermaness the climber is in skua country. The lower slopes are tenanted mainly by Arctic skuas, of which there were more than a hundred pairs present. In July, when the young are hatched and are hiding in the heather, the parent skuas on the approach of their enemy, man, stand in prominent positions with open beaks, fluttering their wings as though injured. This trick is played in the hopes of distracting attention from the defenceless young.

We walked past successive pairs of acting Arctic skuas until we reached, near a small tarn, the great skua colony and were attacked fiercely by one after another of these large birds which at times call to mind the buzzard in their easy flight and graceful soaring. But the buzzard's wing primaries when soaring are sometimes open; those of the great skua are always tightly closed. It is hard to avoid ducking one's head at the swoop of a great skua: the bird with a rush of wings approaches relentlessly at the height of one's head and at the speed of an express train.

As we watched the skuas on the most northerly cape of Britain a cloud approached from the Atlantic and Hermaness for a brief space was shrouded in thin mist; but when the cloud passed the day became even clearer than before. Surrounding us was an immense sea horizon. Only to the south was land visible, and here the Shetland Isles lay beneath the summer sun. Beyond the island of Yell was what is called the mainland of Shetland. The isle of Bressay, near Lerwick and almost 50 miles distant, was plainly seen. Beneath us were Muckle Flugga and the neighbouring Vesta Skerry, snow-white in the sun. This whiteness was from the great gannet colony which nests here. The birds are comparatively recent comers, for they first arrived here in 1920, and each year since then have increased.

We descended the seaward grassy slopes of Hermaness, with Bruce the bird-watcher as our guide, and found ourselves at the edge of a formidable cliff, down which led a narrow sheep track. Considerable care was necessary to descend this track, and as we crept warily from ledge to ledge, with the waves sparkling in the sun far beneath us, rows and groups of puffins standing beside

their burrows eyed us with curiosity. Fulmars sailed past so near that they almost touched us and on the rocks below grey Atlantic seals slept. The climber when he has descended with relief to the cliff foot finds himself in a country as grand and majestic as any to be found in Britain. Not even in the Hebrides or on St. Kilda have I found cliff scenery to equal that of Hermaness.

On St. Kilda the cliffs are on too vast a scale to be appreciated. On Hermaness they are small in comparison, yet have more character. We had reached the foot of the cliff opposite a magnificent stack named Burra Stack. Through a natural arch in this great stack the Atlantic swell flowed snow-white; the whole scene was instinct with life and motion. To the north of Burra Stack with its numerous kittiwake population rose Humbla Stack and its spur Humbla Houll where clustered gannets made loud, harsh music. We ventured out on to Humbla Stack, past crowded guillemot ledges, and stood beside the gannets on their nests. Some of the solans took flight, but others remained to guard their white, downy young. As we looked back, the narrow path by which we had descended now appeared more formidable; nor were we cheered by the watcher's tales of climbers who, half-way down that track, had turned back, or crofters who, when the time had come to gather the sheep which had strayed to the cliff foot lacked the nerve to follow them. It was with a feeling of relief after a testing return climb we found ourselves at last safe on the grassy slopes above the cliff. Here we rested in glorious evening sunshine with many puffins as our close companions. Along the face of the cliff flight after flight of kittiwakes passed; as they flew they seemed like a long, white pennant slowly shaken by the breeze. Below them gannets fished, plunging meteor-like into the blue sea, and a great skua made half-hearted dives at a passing raven.

That evening at a quarter-past nine the sun was still hot. Great skuas soared majestically high overhead, tier upon tier, the low sun shining on the white markings on their wings. The blue of the sea became more intense. The spirit of ocean was at rest, and for a brief space Hermaness forgot the rain-laden tempests which even in spring and summer often vex her, and her wild beauty increased as the sun at last dipped towards the sea horizon and long hours of sunset and afterglow replaced the heat of the day.

ISNB-41