

## Seven Short Sails.

*It's not down on any map or chart: true places never are.*

The northern waters meet at the Brough of Birsay off the mainland of Orkney in one fixed ripple, a constant fold, a fault-line where the Atlantic becomes the North Sea. This scarcely-visible join is the axis of *Seven Short Sails*. Observations of voyages off the west coast of Scotland, beautiful and compelling in themselves, are the point of departure for seven strands of images, seven sets of Chinese whispers, variation-sets on seven voyages, all made by artists working in the north. Perhaps it is because nearly all of them are working from places on the shores of northern waters that the finished work, for all its range and variety, has attained such a sense of a shared mood, a shared range of references. Scotland, Northern Europe, Iceland, Canada, the Northern Isles – and those who live further south are still working with dreams of northern voyages. Nearly all of the linked works in *Seven Short Sails* are preoccupied with place and every element in the whole contains some reflection, however subtle, of the north.

Perhaps the harmony is not surprising, but rather a heartening contemporary manifestation of an old, lived geography which transcends national boundaries. The sea unites us, never divides us. A paradox, but a truth: the waters of the northern seas may lie between the shores of the countries which have taken part in this collaboration, but those same waters were and are a well-travelled and ancient highway linking the lands which border its shores with centuries of shared culture, language, experience and knowledge.

There is a sixteenth-century map in the Royal Library at The Hague which expresses this exactly. Rather than showing that kind of geography which is an unreflecting scale-model of reality, it shows the geography of daily experience. The North Sea is represented as a disc, almost completely surrounded by land, with the names of all the fishing and trading ports prominently marked. And the water at the centre is full of ships under sail, linking the harbour-towns, connecting the shores. A further dimension of the imagination of the north is illustrated by the maps in the early sixteenth-century editions of the *Cosmology* of Ptolemy. There, in the waters between Scotland and Iceland, Orkney and Shetland share the seaway with *The Islands of the Blessed* and the great *Sea of Ice* begins just on the far side of Iceland. This gives visible form to a sense that the north is a region which includes places of unearthly wonder, places which partake of the nature both of this world and of an otherworld, places which can, most often, only be reached by sea.

The sea explains so much to us: last summer I was sailing north out of Whitehills on the northern coast of Aberdeenshire, on a friend's wooden boat. It was a flawless high-summer day, with the hills of Sutherland – which name itself is the old 'South Land' of the Scandinavians – clear on the northern horizon. I asked the experienced man who was steering the boat how long it would take us to get to Bergen. On that bright day, on that quiet sea, any journey seemed possible. He said that it wouldn't take long at all: a day or so if all went well.

This brought to focus for me the reality of the northern seas as a highway, as the medium if you like, which brings Scotland so close to the Netherlands, to Iceland and Scandinavia, linking these countries into a complex of relations so intense and so ancient that we might justly think of all our shorelines as a single environment, with a shared sea-going history.

Beyond this, the northern shores are all sharers to some degree of an identity: countries which can be described as 'the northlands'. 'North' is of course a relative term, shifting in relation to subjective perception, but it is also the term which unites us all. As the north is perceived (from inside, from outside) the northern sea and the northern light (present and absent) are constants of the environment. Light and darkness over northern coasts, islands in mist, sea-caves in the rain, leading lights, the masthead light reflected in dark water: these are the shared elements from which the seven strands of *Seven Short Sails* take their departure.

There are elements of a shared northness which are casual: birch trees in snow in the three o'clock evenings of winter, the lingering cobalt twilight over the water in summer. There are deeper elements which are historical and environmental: habits of agriculture and seafaring enforced by climate. Northern architectural heritages have deep and subtle links at all levels: the towers and roofs of Stockholm or Copenhagen are so like the old representations of the skyline of Aberdeen when it still had its gilded spheres and onion-domes as well as its crown spire. The interiors of many old Scottish houses have painted panelling made of Scandinavian timber and the blue or manganese tiles of the Netherlands around their hearths. The paintings of Wilhelm Hammershøi, those interiors of Copenhagen apartments painted by the slowly fading light of winter afternoons, resonate to an extraordinary degree with the nocturnes and shadow-rooms of the Scottish painters of the turn of the twentieth century.

When I lived in the Netherlands, I used to reflect almost every day that the Town Hall in Leiden, a magnificent building taking up a whole block of the main street, was built entirely of stone shipped over from the east coast of Scotland. Think of how many ships that would have taken, each carrying its load of stone as ballast. When I returned to Scotland

after that, I began to see that there were buildings, especially in the coastal towns in Fife, which must have been built by Dutch architects: the church at Burntisland, the Town House at Crail. The connections go on and on: a lifetime could be spent, and not without profit and delight, in tracing them without ever coming to an end.

It is the northern sea which frames this project, but the north as a whole brings it together in a more profound way, in shared history, heritage and aesthetics. For *Seven Short Sails*, ideas and images have travelled electronically between the countries bordering the northern seas. Let us remember all the ships which have crossed those waters in the past and think for a moment of their freights: of the stone and lime from Scotland which went to build the fine buildings of the Netherlands when the United Provinces were a young country, of the roof tiles which came back as ballast to roof the houses of Scotland, of the great trees from Norway and Sweden of which were made the roof trees and panelling of the old houses of Scotland. Let us remember the passengers on those ships which crossed and re-crossed northern waters through the centuries. Those passengers carried the most vital cargo of all: ideas, technologies and information. The northmen of Denmark brought into Scotland intricate skills in sculpture and shipcraft. The clergy of the great Norwegian cathedral of Nidaros in the early middle ages travelled southwards to administer their daughter dioceses in the Northern and Western Isles. The Shetland woodcarver Andrew Smith crossed the northern sea to carve the great pulpit and grave monuments in the Cathedral at Stavanger. Many journeyman painters whose names are now lost to us travelled between all the countries around the North sea, giving them all an inheritance of related and yet subtly differenced traditions in decorative painting. The searoads connect the painted beams of a Scottish renaissance ceiling with the painted woodwork of a country church on the western shores of Norway, and the 'rose-painting' in the wooden farmhouses of Telemark. Traditions of vernacular violin playing stretch across the seas, from Scotland to Friesland, and round Scandinavia and back — listening to the finely-played Hardanger violin in *Seven Short Sails*, we should remember that one of the most perfect of Robert Burns's songs — *The Gallant Weaver* — is made to a Scandinavian tune.

Movement of ideas and energies around the northern waters have always been circular, mutual exchanges. Many Scots received their higher educations in medicine and justice in the Universities of the Netherlands over the centuries. Shared traditions of architecture unite the northern classicism of Stockholm or Edinburgh with the wooden triglyphs of the oxide-red farmhouse by the Tromsø fjord. From a later time, we should think of those educated travellers who went north from Britain almost in a spirit of pilgrimage to Iceland as to the cradle of democracy itself, as well as those who went to find consolation in the still air of the mountains and the forests along the remoter shores of the North Sea.

I have written of this tissue of seaborne connections at such length, because *Seven Short Sails* consistently astonishes by the harmony which brings so many diverse artists in different media together. This convergence is in itself a contemporary manifestation of the old connections made by the ship-routes which cross and re-cross the North seas, those ancient and ever-renewed patterns which shaped and shape the north.

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As the chains of transmission which make up *Seven Short Sails* develop, what emerges is divergence but also a unanimous return to common ground, to shared northern places of memory. The images of the first stage of the project, from which the seven chains of variations take their departure, are themselves ingenious and beautiful. The front screen, the very first visual manifestation of the project, shows a treeless, misted island seen through the boat's rigging, with the sound of an Icelandic traditional song: it is an image at once general and specific. It could be almost anywhere in the waters encompassed by *Seven Short Sails*, but it could only be an image from northern waters. The territory defined by the juxtaposition of music and image is that within which almost all the artists involved in the project are working.

The first stage, the seven images from the *Short Sails* of the title, are considered, evocative and distinctively northern. It is remarkable how faithfully most of the sets of variations develop the moods of these seven initial images.

*Logbook, water, lighthouse, boat; the view from the mouth of a sea-cave with a text about the blue men of the Minch; a lashed tiller fretting against a background of mist and choppy water; a dreamcatcher in front of a porthole; the text quoted as epigraph to this essay with moon reflections, cobalt gloaming, reeds on a shoreline; patterns of water around the anchor chain; a looming weather forecast and a frayed rope chafing in reflection.*

In the subsequent sets of variations, the distinct atmospheres defined by these initial images are maintained with remarkable consistency: the last of them (*weather forecast and frayed rope*) brings forth seven considerations of the darker aspects of northern travel, the uncontrollable aspects of northern weather and the northern winter. Boats that never come to harbour; drawings for sculptural structures which have aspects of both port and fortification; an elegy for Eric Ravilious, the war-artist lost in storm off Iceland; a visual record of the Icelandic shore with a complex soundscape to counterpoint it; waves stirring and heaving; fragile talismans of the far north held in cupped hands — a gull's egg, fluorspar; clouded water, an allusion to explorers lost on the search for the north-west passage.

A fantastical character marks the linked works which follow the *dreamcatcher in front of a porthole*: a dream-song about the beginnings of things

There came a foal  
And she appeared in gloaming grey,  
As white as bone  
And black as coal;

a shadow-guardian patrolling the shore between high and low water; a wonder-tale about a dragon; a magical tree, hung with geometrical figures and winter suns; a bristling jewel of circuits and electrical elements, like an insect's eye; a great steel mask like a giant version of the speaking bronze head of legend; a soundscape of the far reaches of the world.

Landfall, seven stages later, the seven works which constitute the final stage of the project, is an amplification of the territory defined at the outset. We return to the noise of the sea, to gently-moving images of cobalt-blue waters, to a boy riding his bicycle on the cliffs of Shetland, to delicate watercolour patterns of shoreline and sand, to ink clouds over a level beach, to cloud in profundity of water, to the saddest memory-place of the far north, the traces of Franklin's vanished, poisoned expedition.

There are many felicitous echoes and counterpoints along the way. *Silent fog on still deep water* at the outset; a boat outlined against dark and against clouded grey; an explosion of gulls in seamist and spray. More echoes: the reddened waves under a white sky are transformed in the next stage into a photograph of the white Mer de Glace with a climber in red, echoing across to the memoir of Ravilious as painter of the northern waters whose fascination with ice and the shores of the north began with the eighteenth-century painter Francis Towne's renderings of the Mer de Glace in the Alps.

There are moments in the project which bring out the intrinsic poetry and melancholy of navigation: all departures, all lit craft moving away and out to sea. The masthead light against the darkened sky. A perfectly-paced film tracing a day of a Thames landing-stage is as lovely as Whistler's etching *Rotherhithe*, and as unexpected in its transformative record of the quotidian. Boat and landing lights fading out with dawn, fading in with nightfall: a sense of time passing, sustained by the idea of the Thames as a waterway which still leads out to the sea, to all the seas. By contrast, there are moment of sunlight and morning wind: a beached boat recovers its use and rows out into the clear waters off the island. In a moment of idiosyncratic enchantment, the yellow toy submarine much loved by a generation of citizens of Scotland and Naboland, sits quietly amongst a group of lively seals. The overwhelming sea is seen metaphorically as navigable through love:

As though a dark we feared had  
been made real and cold and  
tidal, and the lifted green black ragged face of its  
hand to pull us, pull us down, and what  
chance would you say we had, so  
small, only the two, my love. Just me.  
Just you. But give us a leaf for a sail,  
and suddenly, somehow or other,  
everywhere's possible.

Time and memory combine in *Summer by the Sea* (the short, northern summer whose days are mostly lived in memory): shadows in shallow, sunlit water — a woman cycling, then children leaping, then the cyclist's shadow again. Nothing is laboured, but the little film is eloquent about nostalgia and time, about generations watching each other grow, about the passing-down of childhood memory.

But there are also absences and memorials, losses on the northern shores. Rain at the window of the harbour-side bar, evening coming on slowly, the water darkening by degrees below the darkening sky, until sky and water and rain on the window turn to one deep blue. The leading lights at the mouth of the harbour marking the slowed passage of time, green and red, red and green. Until the lights are reflected in black water and still no boat comes home.

The imaginary, believed geography of the mediaeval north encompassed bridges between the known world and otherworldly territories. The Islands of the Blessed in the waters between Shetland and Iceland, the shadow-land of dying giants beyond the frozen sea. The places in *Seven Short Sails* are, in some degree, at once wordly and otherworldly, imaginary and real, imaginative projections of real journeys. And so this project, rooted in places of northern memory, comes to define or encompass an intensely-shared imagination of the north and the northern waters.