

## Grain and the Gospel: The Shetland Mission

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Most people think of Scotland with Presbyterian roots, but if you travel far north to the Shetland Islands, you'll find Methodist chapels everywhere. In fact, today there are thirteen Methodist congregations in Shetland, which comprise a District of the Methodist Church of Great Britain. Though the Shetland Isles measure a mere 567 square miles (less than the size of London) and boast only a population of 23,000, Methodists are their largest denomination.

A twelve-hour ferry takes passengers from the city of Aberdeen in Northern Scotland to Lerwick, a town on the island called Mainland of the Shetland Islands. Shetland is so far north, that it does not appear on most maps of Great Britain, unless in a small inset box. With sixteen habitable islands, Shetland is the farthest north bit of land in the United Kingdom.

Haroldswick Methodist Church on the island of Unst is the most northern of all Methodist Churches. This beautiful Norwegian stave kirk reflects the proximity of Norway and the Norse influences in language and culture on Shetland. At the winter solstice, the people of Unst enjoy only five and a half hours of daylight. In every season, this part of the world is windy, cold, and remote.

Setting has always been an important aspect of mission work. First, the *location* of the Shetland Islands made them distant and hard to get to. And second, *time* in history meant that the 1800s with great social change made nineteenth-century Shetland ripe for mission.

Irish Catholic monks had arrived at St. Ninian's Isle in the fourth century, the first to bring Christianity to the Northern Islands. St. Ninian built a chapel on a grassy island connected to Mainland, Shetland by a narrow tombolo, a natural sand causeway with sea on either side.

Only seabirds and sometimes sheep inhabit the island today, that is, when a shepherd walks his flock across the sandy strip. Otherwise, only an occasional tourist enjoys the peaceful walk and spectacular view.

In the sixteenth century, Scotland became Presbyterian, influenced by John Knox, the Reformer from East Lothian, Scotland. What is today the Church of Scotland was then called the Established Church, or the “Kirk,” founded in 1560. In general, the Kirk supported Scottish landowners, called “lairds,” who leased land to Shetland “crofters.”

The life of John Wesley, the father of Methodism, spanned the eighteenth century, 1703-1791. Itinerant ministry took Wesley by horseback to villages throughout England, Wales, Ireland, and, in 1751, into parts of Scotland, but not as far north as Shetland.

After Wesley’s death, the Wesleyan Movement sent Methodist ministers from England to Australia, Canada, India, Antigua, Jamaica, Sierra Leone, China, and Shetland by its Missionary Society established in 1818. The poor tenant families of the Shetland Islands opened their hearts to Methodist missionaries who brought grain and the gospel by ship from England.

The nineteenth century was a period of great upheaval throughout the British Isles. The linen industry led; then cotton, jute, and woolen mills followed. The first steam engines came to Scotland in 1831, and engineering and shipbuilding grew rapidly. Industrialization caused cities to grow, resulting in increased urban poverty and conditions of poor sanitation and disease. The effects of urbanization hit Glasgow and Edinburgh in Scotland first. Shetland, in the far north, remained agrarian longer, but poverty burgeoned nonetheless, due to an unjust system where the wealthy lairds held their tenants beholden to them. The impoverished crofters fished, produced meager crops, and knit for the laird. They were required to pay their tithe, or else they were cleared from the land.

In 2018, my husband and I visited the very crofthouse where my great-great-grandparents lived in the hamlet of Exnaboe in South Mainland, Shetland. With my father's genealogical records I have constructed a timeline of the lives of Ann and Robert Leslie and their nine children from 1829 to 1873. Using their birth and death dates, as well as the causes of their deaths, I have written a historical novel, called *Shetland Mist: A Shetland Family in the Methodist Movement*, available from Wipf & Stock Publishers and on Amazon.com.<sup>i</sup>

My family's story is typical of the plight of crofting families in Shetland in the nineteenth century. Ann and Robert Leslie lived in a two-room stone crofthouse with attached byre for the animals and barn for the grain. The children came along every two to three years. They were home-schooled and they shared the chores. Robert was a fisherman on a sixareen, an open sailboat with six oars. He fished in the deep waters most days and nights, and he gave his catch to the laird as required payment for the rent. While he was away, Ann tended the fields of barley and oats, cared for the cow and sheep, cooked, taught the children their lessons, and kept a garden. In every free moment she knitted. Knitwear brought in money from traders in Lerwick and went to pay the laird a portion of the crofter's tithe.

The first Methodist to preach in Shetland was a layman by the name of John Nicholson. Born in 1790, Nicholson had grown up in Shetland in a crofthouse and in his teens went to serve in His Majesty's Royal Artillery Company. At the Tower of London he met a Methodist who led him to worship at Wesley's Chapel in City Road. He attended class meetings and became an exhorter in the London East Circuit. Then in about 1819, Nicholson took the model of Wesleyan discipleship back to Shetland and developed class meetings with Bible study, prayer, and mutual support for the people on the west side of Shetland's Mainland.

Nicholson met a Scottish Methodist preacher, the Reverend Daniel M'Allum, MD, born in Inverness in 1794, who promoted the idea of raising funds and sending missionaries to the Northern Islands. The Reverend Adam Clarke, a scholarly Scot from Ireland, was elected President of the Wesleyan Conference in 1822. At the age of fourteen Clarke had been personally invited by John Wesley to attend a Methodist seminary. Clarke became a leading theologian and three-time Conference President, as well as the most instrumental missionary leading the effort to bring Methodism to Shetland. To demonstrate his commitment, Clarke gave ten guineas toward the erection of a Methodist chapel in Lerwick, the main town.<sup>ii</sup>

In 1821 the Conference appointed the Reverends John Raby and Samuel Dunn, young English ministers, to the Shetland mission. After serving there two years, Adam Clarke recruited two more missionaries, John and Mary Lewis, who arrived in Lerwick in 1823.

John Lewis kept a journal, which has been edited by Harold R. Bowes and titled *Two Calves in the House: Being the Shetland Journal of the Reverend John Lewis 1823-1825*. The journal details the life of a nineteenth-century island preacher, walking through the bogs and rain, preaching in chapels and homes, traveling on open boats in stormy weather, and sleeping in crofthouses—even with calves and sheep in the same room. Almost every day, John Lewis led a two-or-three-hour worship service. His wife led bands and counseled with the Shetland women, whose grief was great when their husbands and sons were lost at sea and babies died of typhus or cholera.<sup>iii</sup>

Samuel Dunn formed the Lerwick Society and purchased land for a chapel and mission house in Lerwick in 1824. By 1827, Adam Clarke claimed that “the Shetland mission was the most important and successful of all missions, either foreign or domestic.” Methodism could boast 1,435 members out of a population of 30,000 in 1831. In 1860 the Lerwick church was

rebuilt with a manse, and by 1866, two-fifths of Scottish Methodists were Shetlanders. The people of Lerwick celebrated a Methodist Jubilee in 1872. Today the Shetland Museum Archives describe the close connection between Shetland and Methodism. The roles of the laity in class meetings, serving as trustees, stewards, class leaders and local preachers, reveal much about the daily life of Shetlanders during the 1800s.<sup>iv</sup>

Why was the Methodist mission so successful in Shetland? The answer is grain and the gospel. Methodism brought needed “meal roads”—grain during times of famine—and roads to deliver it by pony-drawn cart. It brought preachers—clergy and lay—to speak not about sin and damnation, as the Established Church preached, but about serving God and one’s neighbor. People supported each other in bands and societies and met regularly for Bible study in class meetings. The Methodists were Arminian, focused on free will, rather than on Calvinism and predestination. The ministers and Shetlanders built chapels of local stone with imported wood from Norway for benches, for there were no trees on the island. A great religious revival swept through the British Isles, and in 1843 the “Great Disruption” created a turning point when Free Churches broke away from the Established Church, and people walked out of their churches and found new ways to live faithfully. Whereas the Church of Scotland supported the lairds and trucking system, the Methodists did not. Methodist congregations grew and provided hope to people who often had barely enough to eat. The people in this remote place were hungry for grain to eat and spiritual food to nourish their souls.

In 1886 the Crofters Holdings Act eliminated the system of crofters paying tithes to landowners and instead granted the people land tenure. By then the lairds had cleared many crofters from their land and created large profitable sheep farms. My great-grandfather emigrated by steamship to America before that in 1873.

Robert Leslie, settled in Tolono, Illinois and worked as station agent at the railway depot where two great railroads crossed. He married another Scottish immigrant, Mary Campbell. Their children all attended the University of Illinois just up the tracks in Urbana, and two earned advanced degrees at Boston University School of Theology. William Leslie served as pastor of St. Mark's Methodist Church in Brookline, MA for many years, and Elmer Leslie taught Old Testament at B.U.S.T. Elmer's son was my father, Robert Campbell Leslie, who taught pastoral psychology and counseling at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA. His brother, James Stewart Leslie, another Methodist minister, served in campus ministry at Ohio Wesleyan in Delaware, OH. His daughter, Kristen Leslie, teaches pastoral care at Eden Seminary in St. Louis, MO., and I am a United Methodist minister in Livermore, CA, grateful for my Shetland roots.

Today in Shetland there are jobs because oil was discovered at Sullom Voe in the North Sea in 1979, and life changed for the people of the northern islands. Planes fly into Sumburgh Airport daily with products from around the world. We all know that the Shetlanders have their cell phones, because we've watched Detective Jimmy Perez on the BBC series, "Shetland," based on books by Ann Cleeves. Although there are some patches of remote land where there is poor reception, Shetland is now well connected with the world. Cruise ships stop at the Lerwick harbor every summer, and the Methodist Church serves sandwiches to the visiting tourists.<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Heather Leslie Hammer, *Shetland Mist: A Shetland Family in the Methodist Movement* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2022).

<sup>ii</sup> Adam Clarke, *The Life and Labours of Adam Clarke*, (London: Longman & Company, 1842), Chapter XIII, pp. 210-225.  
<https://books.google.com/books?id=GERfAAAAcAAJ&pg=PR9&lpg=PR9&dq=Adam+Clarke+in+Shetland&source=bl&ots=l7DTzC7tWq&sig=mvGcon0Ei5Yet2pIl5b4Uxo8Yw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiyvJCNgYfVAhVL6GMKHYrRARkQ6AEIPzAF#v=onepage&q=Adam%20Clarke%20in%20Shetland&f=false>).

<sup>iii</sup> Harold R. Bowes, *Two Calves in the House: Being the Shetland Journal of the Reverend John Lewis 1823-1825*, (Lerwick, UK: Shetland Amenity Trust, 2005).

<sup>iv</sup> Shetland Museum Archives, [info@shetlandmuseumarchives.org.uk](mailto:info@shetlandmuseumarchives.org.uk).

<sup>v</sup> The Rev. Dr. Andrew Fox is the Superintendent Minister of the Shetland District of the Methodist Church of Great Britain, and minister of the Adam Clarke Memorial Methodist Church in Lerwick, as well as churches in Scalloway, Fair Isle, Whiteness, and Ireland (Shetland). For more information: <https://www.shetlandmethodistdistrict.org.uk/who-we-are>  
<https://www.mywesleyanmethodists.org.uk/content/chapels/scotland/adam-clarke-memorial-chapel-lerwick>