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Hugh Miller on fisherfolk

Mike Taylor* reports on what Sara Stevenson, David Alston and Mike have been reading

One great advantage of the internet is the increasing number of old books and journals that have been scanned and put on the net, some even accessible for free. One of the most valuable websites of this kind is www.archive.org and amongst its many treasures is an unpromising-sounding piece by Hugh Miller from 1844, a review entitled Report by the Commissioners for the British Fisheries of their Proceedings, 1842.

Printed in pursuance of the Acts 48th Geo. III, c.110, s.7, and 55th Geo. III, c. 94, s.4 in the first volume of the North British Review, pages 326 to 365*. The North British Review was one of those weighty review quarterlies of the time. It was founded by Scottish evangelicals to give their views an airing, and no doubt Miller
had been asked to rally round and submit something.

The essay turns out to be, not a review of some boring Parliamentary report, but a completely off-topic but fascinating essay on Miller’s own perceptions of the fisherfolk of Scotland, especially but not only of Cromarty, and how their way of life had marked them physically and morally. It is one of those Millerian pieces which I for one had never got round to reading, though it is listed in Michael Shortland’s bibliography of 1996, until Sara Stevenson pointed it out to me.

Sara, formerly the Scottish National Portrait Gallery’s chief curator of photography, was partly interested in Miller’s portrayal of the fisherfolk, as set beside the photos which D. O. Hill and R. Adamson took of the Newhaven fisherfolk, and because of the famous Hill/Adamson calotype portraits of Miller himself.

Formally the essay is anonymous but the authorship of such things was fairly thinly disguised, and at least one reference book gives its authorship as Miller’s. But there can hardly be any doubt about the authorship of this one – it contains so many references to Millerian themes such as the evils of the bothy system, the spectre ships of the Maolbuie (the moor on the Black Isle hogback), and so on, right down to the reference to the sea-pen and its ancient fossil equivalent the graptolite.

Sara, Cromarty historian David Alston and I have been discussing this little find, which is important for local history. Miller has moved on from his earlier 1820s Letters on the Herring Fishery, and his portrait of the East Coast fisherfolk, while sympathetic, is now noticeably more critical.

This perhaps reflects his increasing maturity (rather than his being now a safe distance away from Cromarty in his new Edinburgh base, given that he came back regularly to Cromarty). He is particularly interesting on the effects of the herring fishing trade on fisher families by comparison with landward families. Its all-demanding nature made for a great emphasis on marriage and family life, as the women and children played an integral role in supporting their menfolk’s work. But fishing could be a trap, not just because it was a risky trade where it was hard to make a consistent living, and where both men and gear could be lost at once.

School took second fiddle to the needs of the fishing, while further education was not well valued – mathematics, for instance, was valued by deep-water sailors for navigation but irrelevant to such coasting fishermen. But it is startling to find Miller asserting, on the Cromarty draper’s evidence, that the local fisherfolk had smaller heads than other Easter Ross folk – presumably on the then theory of use and disuse of physical features (though, as always with Miller, one wonders if he is having his little joke). Well recommended!

* Go to www.archive.org, enter “North British Review” in the search box and then look for volume 1 for 1844 in the results.

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* We hope to print Miller’s essay, or extracts from it, in a future edition.