

## **FOULA – THE TIME OF MY LIFE**

Christopher Mylne

The Islands Book Trust

### REVIEW BY CHRISTIE WILLIAMSON

*Foula – Time of my Life* by Chris Mylne is a fascinating memoir of the short but life changing time he spent on the remote island off the west coast of Shetland. In 1954, he moved there from Edinburgh to take up the dual posts of teacher and lay missionary – the first time both offices had been held by the same person. What brought him from Midlothian to mid-Atlantic, and what he brings to us in this book is his love of islands and of birds.

Foula is without question one of the most “island” islands there are. Anyone who knows the west coast of Shetland knows Foula’s striking profile, but the majority of those (myself included) have never done what Mylne did – clambered aboard the mailboat at Walls and faced the three “hour crossing towards Ham Voe.

When he got there, he found a way of life so far removed from his own that he felt like he had stepped back in time. In the Foula of the 1950s, there were no motorised vehicles and no mains electricity, and a limited telephone connection which was reserved for emergencies. He also found a welcoming committee waiting for the mailboat at 11.30 pm, fires lit for him in the Manse that would be his home and a refresher course in Tilly lamp lighting.

The books twenty two chapters are full of these kinds of stories. In a community of 65 islanders whose only connection to the outside world was a 35 ft boat which could be stuck for weeks on end, people relied on themselves, each other and the natural resources around them.

One population with much freer movements were the wild seabirds. Mylne conducted some study into migratory birds on Foula during his stay, as well as standing up for a new conservation law which contradicted centuries of tradition of taking Bonxie (Great Skua) eggs. His bird spotting diaries were habitual enough to provide a picture of everyday avian life on the isle of birds.

As well as his recollections of the bird life, the reader is treated to some excellent photography. The author went on to become a professional photographer, and he was rarely without his camera during his eighteen months on Foula. There are

exceptional landscapes which are fascinating to me for two reasons – they convey the drama of Foula’s topography up close and also they offer the reverse view of Foula’s iconic profile from Shetland. Also very valuable are the portraits of family and croft life on the island, especially of Robbie Isbister in his ‘black house’ at Breckans, sitting before a peat fire in an open hearth which had not been allowed to go out for at least eighty years.

Another rich resource for Mylne is the correspondence which he sent to friends and family. These letters were a crucial connection to his life and the world outside Foula. During his stay attempts were made to install a phonebox, but the engineering challenges had not been overcome by the time he left. The rhythm of the ‘weekly’ mailboat, the art of predicting whether or not the ‘Island Lass’ would sail the next day imbue his portraits of island life to his contemporaries. One wonders what records the Facebook generation will leave to posterity.

The great strengths of *Foula – The Time of My Life* are warmth and honesty. The portraits of Foula life and the Foula folk are endearing and generous without exception. Often the best eyes to see what a place is like are those of an outsider, and in the pages of this book Mylne shares his journey from knowing nothing about Foula to describing it as the closest thing to home he has ever known before or since. This is surely testament to the tireless contributions he made in his time there, the friendliness of the people and the unique qualities of an island which really is the edge of the world.

**Christie Williamson** is a poet from Shetland, a father of two, and author of *Arc o Möns*, joint winner of the 2010 Calum MacDonald Memorial Award.