

# In the footsteps of Governor Pløyen: a Danish-Faroese visit to Shetland in 1899

by *Steffen Stummann Hansen*

On 15 July 1899 the Shetland newspapers told their readers that a ‘Danish commission on agriculture’ had arrived from the Faroes. The object of the visit was ‘to see what progress has been made in agriculture in Shetland since the islands were visited by Amtmand Pløyen in 1839, and if possible to get hints which might be of use in the Faroe Islands, where the conditions and difficulties to be encountered are somewhat similar’. The commission consisted of the Dane Peter Berend Feilberg and the Faroese Rasmus Christoffer Effersøe.

Peter Berend Feilberg was born the son of a priest in south-western Denmark on 20 November 1835. He and two others, in 1856, were the first in Denmark to begin a two-year education in agriculture at the College of Advanced Technology in Copenhagen. This subsequently led to further education at various dairy farms in Holsten (then a Danish duchy) and Denmark, and became the initial step in a long career as an agronomist. Feilberg became involved with large-scale drainage projects turning bogs and lakes into arable land. From 1883 he was a leading member of the Royal Agricultural Society of Denmark.

Feilberg was not unfamiliar with the North Atlantic. On behalf of the Danish Home Office he had travelled to Iceland in 1876-1877, to study the local conditions for agriculture. On his way to Iceland he had also had the chance to visit the Faroes. He had visited Iceland again in 1897, and now in 1899 the turn had come to pay yet another visit to the Faroes, and – for the first time – a visit to Shetland.

Rasmus Christoffer Effersøe was born on Suðuroy, the most southerly of the Faroe Islands, on 30 May 1857, the son of a regional sheriff (Danish *sysselmand*). In the 1870s Effersøe had studied agriculture in Denmark, and later sheep-breeding in Scotland. In 1877 he had attended the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Copenhagen, and graduated in agriculture in 1879. In 1885 he had founded the Agricultural Society of the Faroe Islands (*Føroya bunadarfelag*).

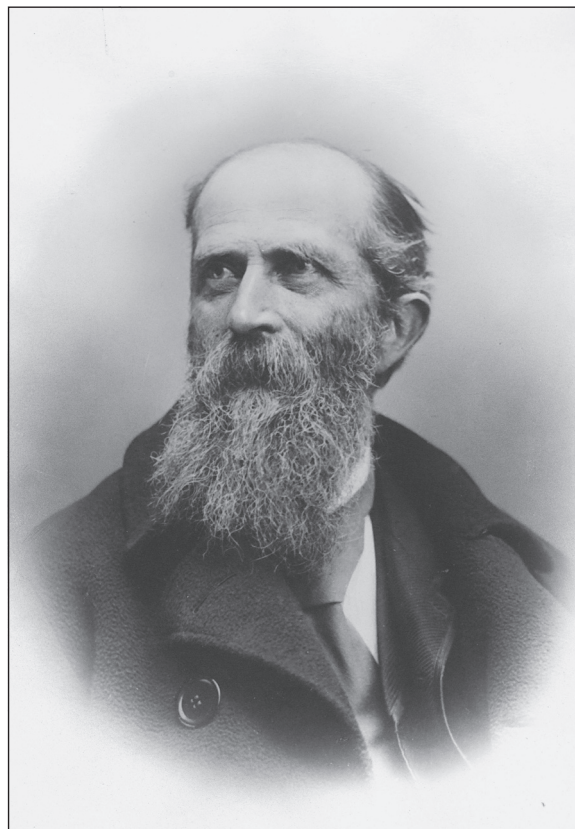
In 1900 Feilberg published his notes and letters. His book forms the basis for the following description of their visit.

## The visit to Shetland

Feilberg arrived via Leith at Tórshavn in mid-June, and spent the following 2-3 weeks in Faroe,

mainly studying vegetation, agriculture and farming. On Friday 7 July he and Effersøe left Trongisvágur on Suðuroy onboard the steamer *Smyril*.

After a difficult landing at Scatness the following morning, the two men were taken to the home of John Goudie (1832-1920) in Toab, Dunrossness, who served them ‘good tea in a tea pot with cosy and fresh-churned butter’. Feilberg and Effersøe immediately began studying the vegetation on parts of the Bruce estate, before they went on to Cunningsburgh, where Mr. Malcolmson gave them a warm welcome and ‘ham



Feilberg, photographed around the time he visited Shetland. Feilberg created for himself a rather unique position in his time, and was awarded royal decorations in 1883 and 1902. He retired in 1910 and died in Elsinore on 12 January 1925. He was buried in the village of Søborg in Northern Sealand, where he had his residence for a number of years. A memorial stone there commemorates what is regarded as his prime work in life – the drainage of the entire Søborg lake.

and egg'. In the afternoon they asked Malcolmson to organise a visit to the famous broch at Mousa, so that they could study the vegetation of the uninhabited island.

On Monday 10 July Feilberg and Effersøe arrived at Lerwick, where they took lodgings at the Queens Hotel. Its comfortable bathrooms and library clearly impressed and pleased Feilberg. In a letter from the Queens, he mentioned another, almost inevitable, travel companion of his: 'In front of me I have a book, whose English title is *Reminiscences of a voyage to Shetland, Orkney & Scotland* by Christian Pløyen – a lively and splendid description of the conditions precisely sixty years ago, which I have read in Danish on my way, and here find in an English translation. Although the report was written sixty years ago, it is still so fresh, pleasant and in many ways instructive, that one would wish to see it reprinted and distributed to the present Faroese generation'.

On Wednesday 12 July Feilberg and Effersøe were invited to Scalloway by Mr Alexander Cunningham Hay (1845-1920), a landowner, merchant and the Danish Consul in Shetland, to see his estate there. Feilberg gave a detailed description of the farming and agriculture, and was again clearly pleased with what he saw. Later that day they travelled to the valley of Tingwall, where they conducted further botanical studies.

Thursday was spent on Foula, and then on Friday 14 the two men embarked on the steamer *Earl of Zetland* in Lerwick, heading for Baltasound in Unst. Again Feilberg, in a lyrical tone, referred to Pløyen: 'Sixty years ago (the 24 July 1839) Governor Pløyen made the same excursion by boat in company with Captain Cameron-Mouatt to his manor of Belmont near Baltasound; the weather was cold and foggy, and the 10½ hours boat-trip exhausting; how much more easy and pleasant today – like a panorama the landscapes glide by – we land at a number of small harbours; view Whalsey, Fetland [*sic*] and in the distance Out Skerries – everywhere busy activity in connection with the herring fishing'. At Baltasound they found lodgings with a Mr Sinclair.

The following day the two men strolled around Baltasound and studied vegetation, agriculture and farming. They were met with great hospitality and were invited into the homes of David Deans (1854-1914), Free Church minister at Hillside, and Dr John R. Kennedy and his artist painter wife. According to Feilberg, Kennedy, who apparently was in Unst for a few years, was a great ornithologist and had several cupboards filled with stuffed birds.

Later that day they went across to Cullivoe in Yell, where they had arranged accommodation in the

private home of the schoolteacher, John C. Clubb. Before sleeping that night Feilberg made a sort of preliminary summing-up of their trip to date: 'We have now seen the southerly island (Mainland) from Sumburghhead, and we now get a quick glimpse of the northern isles; yesterday Unst, now Yell, and we plan to finish with the environs of Lerwick – a very quick glimpse of it all, but I hope that my travel companion, even in such a short visit, is able to find something which may be of importance to his homeland'.

They arrived at Mid Yell in the evening of Monday 17th and found accommodation with Mrs Elizabeth Pole (1844-1901), a merchant's wife at Reafirth. After Yell the two men split up. While Feilberg left Mid Yell on Tuesday 18 July onboard the *Earl of Zetland*, bound for Lerwick, Effersøe went across to the Mainland to continue his travel over land. Feilberg's wish to travel by ship was partly influenced by the fact that he had



**Effersøe worked as an agricultural adviser from 1889 until his death in 1916 (he officially retired in 1915). He was present at the founding meeting of the separatist party in Tórshavn in 1888. Effersøe was throughout his career the editor of three Faroese newspapers and magazines – *Dimmalætting*, *Føringatíðindi* (the first newspaper exclusively in the Faroese language), and *Dúgván*, the magazine of the temperance movement. He died unmarried in Tórshavn on 23 March 1916 and was buried here. A statue of him was raised in front of the Faroese parliament in central Tórshavn in 1933.**

hurt his knee a couple of days earlier during a visit to the Veensgarth farm at Tingwall.

On the way back to Lerwick the ship was going to make a stop at North Roe. Feilberg requested to be put ashore for some hours in order to conduct botanical surveys. Walking around Sandvoe he was invited into a crofter's home, which gave him the opportunity for another interview about the conditions for agriculture and farming. Returning to the ship Feilberg told the others onboard where he had been, and praised the efforts made by the Crofters Commission, established by the Crofters Act in 1886 to give fair rents to crofters in Scotland. To his surprise one of his fellow passengers then presented himself to him as Mr Peter B. Macintyre (c.1863-1933), a member of the Commission and involved in its work in Shetland. Feilberg was very pleased by this chance to get a detailed insight into the Commission's work. Impressed, he listened to Macintyre, and wrote: 'The Crofters Commission shows ... what a practical nation and practical men can achieve in improving unfortunate conditions, when authority and means of an appropriate scale are put at their disposal'. But Feilberg also felt ashamed as he reflected that Danish governments had not followed up on crucial advice given by various Danish governors in the Faroes, including Pløyen, concerning those islands.

In the afternoon of Friday 21st Feilberg and Effersøe were invited to Consul Hay's home in Lerwick. After the lunch the host took them to his estate Hayfield outside the town and showed them his garden there. Feilberg was clearly impressed by the many gardens and facilities for sport he observed everywhere in and around Lerwick – football, tennis, and 'a droll game called "golf"'.

Later that evening Effersøe and Feilberg sailed out of Lerwick harbour, bound for the Faroes. There Feilberg spent another couple of weeks, visiting various settlements and continuing his studies, before he returned to Denmark.

## Feilberg's view of Shetland

Feilberg was in many respects deeply impressed by what he saw in Shetland: 'that public constructions, roads, harbours, towns, buildings etc. are a half or full century ahead of Faroe, one notices immediately on one's first day here; but whether these advantages have been bought at a too high price, by sacrificing a part of the independent life of the inhabitants, is difficult to judge without a deeper study than our short visit allows'.

Feilberg noted how great the change had been in Shetland since the days of Pløyen's visit, and he

asked himself how all this progress had been possible within such a short period, and with such magnificent results? His answer to this was: 'I gather that the strongly minimized distance in time and space plays an important role here, as *distance* does also for the mental development, which after all at the end of the day form the basis for the material development, become an important factor; by minimizing distance through improved transport connections, by common school education, common language, and in a hundred of other ways, *social life grows*'. Thus to Feilberg, it was a question of the distance, physically or socially, between cultural centres and rather remote places like Shetland and Faroe – if close, like Shetland to mainland Britain, 'existence could maintain its freshness like a constantly running stream'; if distant, like Faroe to Denmark, 'mental life could become a marshland'.

The only major problem in Shetland, which worried Feilberg, was the fact that the ownership of the land was concentrated in rather few hands, and the small farmers had no ownership of land. He concluded, however, that 'Much has surely changed within the latest years, thanks to the efforts of Crofters Commission, and at least the conditions are not so unfortunate any longer as Governor Pløyen found them 60 years ago'.

This observation, however, did not affect the positive impression Feilberg got of Shetland. In fact he even found that wild life had a more pleasant and relaxed life in Shetland. Thus Feilberg at a couple of places in his book describes how tame the birds appeared to be, compared with those in the Faroes, which he believed was because the Shetlanders did not hunt them down so intensely as the Faroese did. He also noted how the seabirds in some places had been protected by Shetland landowners.

It should, of course, be noted that Feilberg visited a Shetland which was almost at the height of her pre-First World War herring fishing boom. The place was full of money, there was full employment, and in summertime the place was bursting with incomers. That kind of economic success made the place look and feel lively! That was commercial and not cultural success, of course; but it may be that the money and the 'buzz' assisted in cultural affairs. There was a lively local press in Shetland in 1899, and a school of fine local writers.

But even disregarding this, there is no doubt that Feilberg during his visit to Shetland experienced progress and civilisation much more organised and advanced than what he saw in the Faroes. The Faroes for Feilberg appeared to be a cultural backwater, which led him to suggest the following strategy for getting them out of that position: 'A reorganisation

of the ownership of cultivated land is the first step, the education of the population the next, just as in Denmark [i.e. teachers educated in Denmark, and common language with Denmark: S.S.H.]; when this foundation is in place, agriculture in Faroe will gain the important role as indispensable support for the fishing, which it rightly can and should be’.

But Feilberg’s optimism for Faroe’s future had its reservations: ‘Three generations are needed to create a gentleman, the English say – God knows, how many are needed to create a farmer?’

However, for Feilberg popular support was a necessary precondition for cultural-technical projects. In his opinion, agronomists like himself were, as other experts, servants of society, and not its rulers. Feilberg had now accomplished his mission and suggested the measures whose implementation he found to be necessary preconditions for material and cultural progress in Faroe. Whether the Faroese would follow the suggested way forward or not, was not up to him to decide. His position is clearly reflected in one of his final statements: ‘And if the population and its leading representatives are happy with the existing way of life, it is not other people’s business – at the end of the day it is up to themselves to decide, whether they will keep up with the times or remain where they are’.

## Notes

This article is based on the book *Fra Lier og Fjelde*, with the subtitle *Breve til Hjemmet 1899 (From Slopes and Mountains. Letters for home, 1899)*, which Feilberg published in 1900 in Copenhagen. Feilberg published a number of other books and articles during his career, including ‘Some notes on the agriculture of the Faroes’ (in E. Warming, ed., *Botany of the Færøes (based upon Danish investigations)*, vol. III, Copenhagen-Christania-London 1908), and two reports on agriculture and farming in Iceland: *Om Forholdene paa Island: Confidential Meddelelse til det Kongl. Landhusholdningsselskab* (Copenhagen 1878), and *Græsbrug paa Island* (1897).

Effersøe in 1886 published a report on farming and agriculture in Faroe: *Landbruget og Husdyrbruget paa Færøerne samt Midlerne til Husdyrbrugets Fremme* (Ministry of Justice, Copenhagen).

Pløyen’s visit to Shetland in 1839 and his subsequent maintenance of the contact he had established with Captain Cameron Mouat of Garth is described in the author’s article ‘Governor Pløyen and Captain Cameron Mouat’, *New Shetlander*, no. 257, 2011, pp.13-23.

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All quotations in the text are translated from Danish by the author.



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