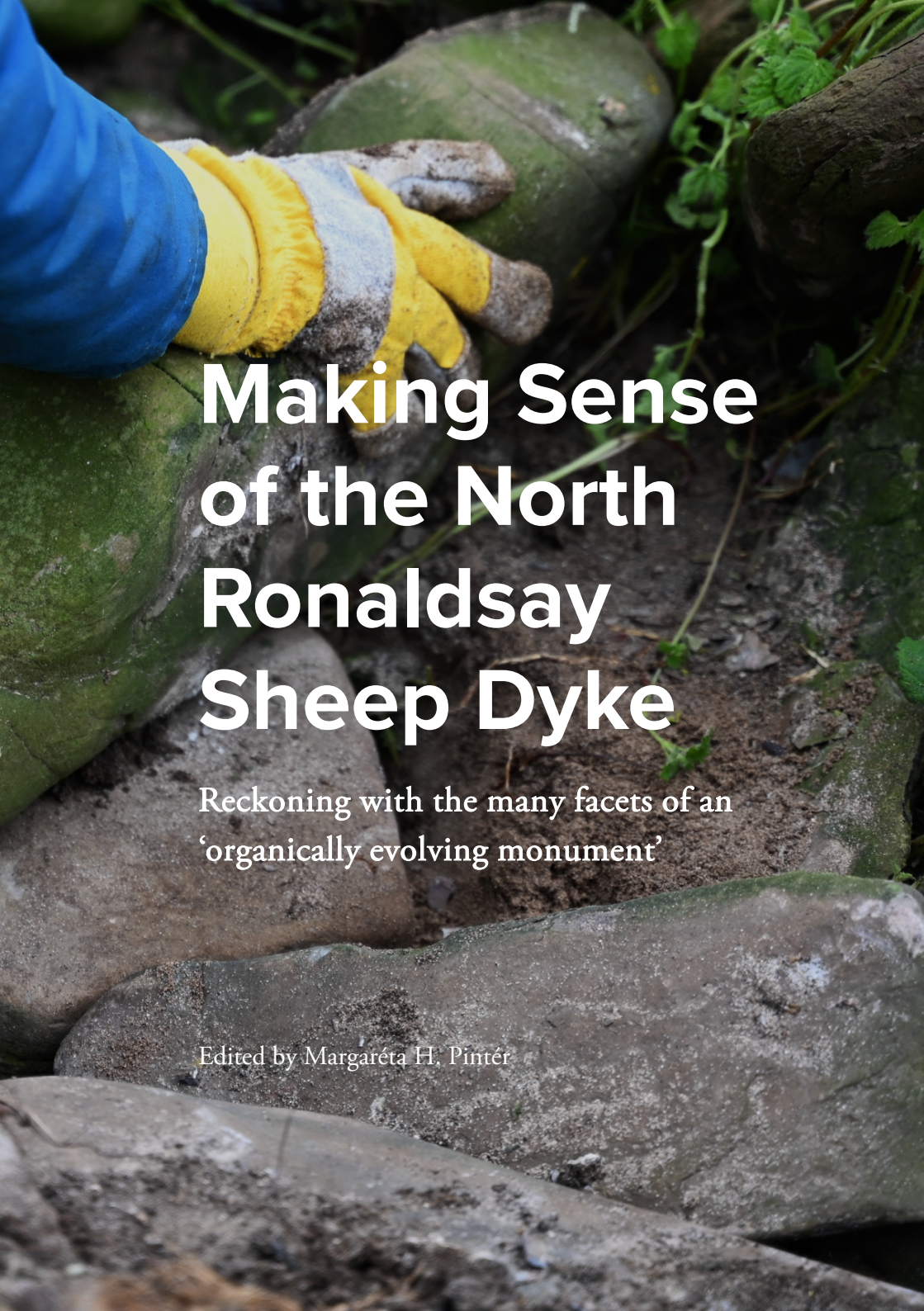

Making Sense of the North Ronaldsay Sheep Dyke

Reckoning with the many facets of an 'organically evolving monument'

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A slightly unconventional map of North Ronaldsay. An alternative visualisation of the island landscape using only aggregated data from all the itineraries walked by Margaréta Pintér during fieldwork conducted in the period of June 5-August 12, 2024. 796 km walked.

Dedicated to the community of North Ronaldsay—past, present and future. Without you, this work would simply not exist.

♥♥♥

Thank you to the volunteers of the North Ronaldsay Sheep Festival—for contributing to the history and heritage of the North Ronaldsay Sheep Dyke through their work.

Festival volunteers pose for a photo in 2016.

A significantly grown festival evidenced by a crowd of returning and new volunteers in 2023.

A Sheep Dyke-specific lexicon

Bigging (v.) The practice of building dyke.

Coping (n.) Capstones that lie on top of a drystone structure as a mostly decorative element. On North Ronaldsay capstones traditionally lie flat.

Hearting (n.) Small stones used to fill in gaps. The use of hearting is rare on North Ronaldsay.

March (n.) Vertically placed stones in the landscape. Some can be found around the footprint of the Sheep Dyke as markers that indicated the boundaries of responsibility in maintenance in the past.

Planticrue/Crue (n.) Referring to drystone enclosures for growing cabbages, often circular in form.

Pund (n.) Rectangular drystone sheep-pen built as an accessory to the outside of the Sheep Dyke, to facilitate punding—seasonal and collective rounding up of sheep.

Slap (n.) The term for 'gate' in local dialect.

Steeth (n.) Referring to the foundation of a drystone structure.

Stile (n.) Structural feature designed to facilitate crossing a drystane structure. On North Ronaldsay, stiles are long, horizontally placed stones placed into the Dyke to create a built-in stepping aid for climbing over onto the other side.

Through-stones (n.) Large stones that tie the external and internal sides of the Dyke together to strengthen the overall structure.

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the Wall

Introductions

The coastline of the island of North Ronaldsay is in large part defined by the pervasive traces of a drystane dyke known to most as the Sheep Dyke, although it does go by other names as well: the Ness Dyke (Headland Dyke) or Banks Dyke (Beach Dyke).

Completed in 1832 by those living on North Ronaldsay at the time as a way to restrict the island's flock of native sheep to the foreshore, the Dyke has since become an iconic component of island life and landscape, without which North Ronaldsay wouldn't quite be *North Ronaldsay.*

At an estimated 13-miles, the precise length of this structure is unstable and unknown. The Dyke has undergone a vast amount of repair-work over the course of its existence, which has at times changed its length, shape and form, and even its materiality. Its adaptive capacities make it both vulnerable to being changed, and at the same time open to the possibility of persisting in spite of it. This flexibility enables the Dyke to remain relevant in a continually changing social-, cultural-, and ecological landscape.

When queried about what the Sheep Dyke is, the response of islanders was never the same, despite the overall simplicity of the question at hand. Answers ranged from the Dyke being considered as a national treasure to being described along the lines of a predicament. The inherent

tensions both within and between answers point to the observation that it is difficult, if not impossible to capture the Sheep Dyke in full, much less boil it down into simple truths or uncomplicated essences.

Rather, the Sheep Dyke is a multifaceted and complex structure that needs to be approached with diversity in mind. As something that touches the lives of many in differential ways, the Sheep Dyke goes well beyond its intended purpose as a sheep-proof boundary, by implicating and activating a community that is itself fabulously varied.

This booklet is the result of an ongoing dialogue between the co-directors of the 2025 Sheep Festival –Tim Ross and Heather Woodbridge–, and Margaréta Pintér, a PhD fellow at the University of Copenhagen whose research examines the ways in which the Sheep Dyke has been lived with in the past, experienced in the present, and made sense of for the future. The booklet marks the 10th anniversary of the event now known and loved as the North Ronaldsay Sheep Festival and aims to provide some context to the structure that takes centre-stage during the festivities. Most of what you see written (unless otherwise specified) puts Margaréta's ethnographic fieldwork conducted on North Ronaldsay to good use by highlighting some of the key facets of the Sheep Dyke that she has identified through her research process. In addition, you will read a contribution from Niamh

Mackenzie, a postgraduate researcher at the University of Highlands and Islands who studies the cultural significance of drystane dyking in a Scottish context, specifically in terms of its status as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and traditional craft.

This booklet is not necessarily meant to be read in one sitting, instead we hope that you occasionally return to it when the need for inspiration strikes. We have included a table of contents at the beginning in order to facilitate the process of browsing freely, and according to interest. Each short entry serves as a way to briefly contextualise particular aspects of the North Ronaldsay Sheep Dyke, and bring up some food for thought, which will hopefully nuance what you see before you when you encounter the structure yourself. Overall, these short sketches aim equip you to meet the Sheep Dyke on your own accord, and at your own pace—to notice and appreciate its complexities, which go well beyond what is described in these pages.

As a final directive before you dive in, we encourage you to treat this booklet as your own field diary while you're here: write in the margins, doodle in the blank spaces, or add to the photographs between entries to document your thoughts, ideas or questions. Perhaps, to start off, ask yourself the well-worn question:

If walls could talk, what would they say?

Drystane structure

On a fundamental level, the Sheep Dyke is considered a drystone wall. More precisely, in Orkney and other parts of Scotland, it would be referred to as a drystane dyke.

Drystone is an unbelievably adaptable way of building and a craft tradition that stretches back all the way to the Neolithic, if not earlier. Drystone spans time but also place. Once one knows what to look for, drystone begins to appear everywhere. Drystone structures shape the profile of rural Scotland; are the backbone for the matrices of olive groves on the Spanish island of Mallorca; feature as the foundations for housing built for elite members of the ancestral Shona speakers in Zimbabwe; and organise the terraced retaining walls built by the Incas in Machu Picchu, to name a few examples.

In essence, drystone could be defined as a mode of construction that produces structures which make use of the interlocking weight of stacked stone and friction to maintain their integrity, thus forgoing the need for mortar. Yet, drystone is also much more than a pile of stones stacked on top of each other. Drystone structures are the result of continuing traditions and crafts in a particular place. Because drystone is fairly vulnerable to decay over time, a long-standing drystone wall is testament to the ongoing maintenance –and care– that a particular community pours into it. This does not mean that a

drystone structure is not changed over the time of its existence. On the contrary, the flexibility of drystone makes it particularly adaptable to accommodate edits to its shape or form, something which allows it to stay relevant and adaptable.

Deeply grounded, drystone is both literally from the land, as it is generally composed of stones found in the close vicinity of the area where it is built, but also within the landscape, often as defining features of places.

The Sheep Dyke is by now an important component to the coastline of North Ronaldsay. Imagining the island without this characteristic structure hugging the foreshore is almost impossible as the structure becomes increasingly naturalised into the landscape. *'Like the wallpaper encircling the room, it is just such a big part of what I think of [when I think of] a coastline. People think of beautiful beaches […] but in my mind, when I'm picturing [a coastline] I'm seeing the Sheep Dyke,'* muses one islander.

Today, the Sheep Dyke contains much more than stone: it is patched up with concrete, gabions (wire-baskets filled with stone), cinderblocks and wood. Perhaps rather than see these additions as material discontinuities we could regard them as important additions that tell us something about the stakes of continuing tradition in times of change.

The question is then not only about what the Sheep Dyke is, but also, what the extent of drystone is in the first place.

Historical enclosure

1832 was a pivotal year in the history of North Ronaldsay.

The kelp industry, which had kept the economy of the island afloat for the better part of a century was in rapid decline and the promise of agricultural reform was in the air. The Laird[i] of the island was John Traill of Woodwick, but perhaps more importantly, the Factor[ii] was Robert Scarth, a budding improver of land who was ready to put the 'enlightened' tenets of Scottish Improvement to the test. '*The spirit of improvement is now aroused all around me'* writes Scarth, a conviction that fed into his eventual decision to experiment with the 'improvement' one of the islands that he was charged with managing.[iii] This island was none other than North Ronaldsay, and the primary tool to effect agricultural improvement was the Sheep Dyke.

Let us briefly return to the topic of kelp. Kelp (the substance) was made from the ashes of seaweed collected in and around the shorelines of the highlands and islands, which produced a natural alkali. The kelp industry was introduced to Orkney in the early 18th century and quickly gained footing in an archipelago where most lands were owned by absentee landlords, who saw it as the prime opportunity to maximise their profits. Over the course of a century, kelp was shipped in increasingly large quantities to mainland Britian as an essential ingredient to soap, glass,

and ceramics production. The sudden growth of kelp-making created an overreliance on its continued success for the communities of entire islands; tenanted crofters who could not own the land that they lived and worked on, a population that was thus made especially vulnerable to the winds of change.

In the heyday of kelp-making, North Ronaldsay was one of the most productive islands for the production of kelp in Orkney. However, the kelp trade eventually declined for a number of economic, political, and practical reasons—and rapidly so. Within a matter of years in the early 1830s, the kelp-industry became a shadow of its former self.

The community of North Ronaldsay had to reinvent itself, *and fast.* A return to agriculture was deemed the most viable option by those managing the lands. Those who made the rules advocated for a strict departure from the more collaborative methods of old, which they deemed 'immoral' and 'ineffective' at best. On North Ronaldsay, the most salient materialisation of land 'improvement' is encased in stone rather than earth: an enclosure that circumscribed all of the arable lands in the center of the island, and in doing so protected crops destined for human consumption from the unruly and unherded sheep roaming the land. This structure is the Sheep Dyke—the result of an innovative amalgamation of local labour, traditional craft knowledge, domestic materials, and quick thinking.

However, with development comes sacrifice. The question of whether implemented change leads to a state of actual enrichment or instead catalyses deterioration is perhaps more a matter of perspective than anything else. As the spirit of improvement swept across Orkney and Scotland at large, not only land but people were restructured and reorganised, which lead to the dissolution of entire communities, the most notable example now known as the Highland Clearances. Indeed, enclosures, in the project of making farming more efficient, equally served to demarcate property and bind people into unequal power dynamics by restricting access to land previously lying in common.

If we sift through the layers of history, the Sheep Dyke reveals itself as a structure that likely did not go uncontested at the time of its construction. Yet, today, this structure is remembered less in terms of its historical role in a divisive experiment of agricultural improvement and more as the continued legacy of those islanders whose hands built and subsequently cared for it over several generations.

Can these two identities, –these two intertwined stories– exist simultaneously, or must we choose one over the other?

What happens if we choose both?

Utilitarian boundary

There's a saying on North Ronaldsay that there are three topics that you should avoid bringing up at the dinner table: '*religion, politics, and sheep*.' For nearly two-hundred years, the practice of keeping sheep on the shoreline has patterned life on the island, weaving a complex web of interdependency between the lives of humans and sheep through lithic encounter.

By and large, the Sheep Dyke's continued existence is locally attributed to its continued functionality as a stock-proof barrier, which limits the habitat of the native flock of sheep to the foreshore. Today, these sheep are well-known for their unique diet of almost exclusively seaweed, an evolutionary quirk that has caused a metabolic resistance to salt and arsenic on one hand, and an extreme sensitivity to copper on the other.[iv] The well-being of these sheep now rests in part on the at-times questionable sheep-proofing capacities of the Dyke, as they are prone to developing copper toxicosis if they ingest too much grass after giving in to instincts that drive them to think that the grass is always greener on the other side.

The lives of the sheep and the Sheep Dyke affect each other bidirectionally. In the succinct words of a sheep farmer: '*basically, no Sheep Dyke—no sheep.*' Equally however, one could say: *no sheep—no Sheep Dyke.* This co-dependency is spelled out by the North Ronaldsay Sheep

Regulations, an iterative document which has outlined the rules by which native sheep should be taken care of since 1839, a responsibility that invariably includes the collective maintenance of what is now known as the Sheep Dyke.

Over the course of history, both Dyke maintenance and sheep keeping has been drastically altered to fit the needs of a community which itself is continually changing. In the past, allocation of Dyke-work happened according to Toonships,[v] where each croft was responsible for keeping an eye on specific stretches of Dyke, the length of which was calculated according to how many sheep each croft owned. Little remains from this sophisticated system of maintenance today however, mostly due to the drastic depopulation of the island of late.

Despite the demographic challenges, Dyke maintenance, – and sheep keeping for that matter–, remain a deeply communal affair in spirit. Taking part in seasonal punding (the collective exercise of rounding up sheep), or the annual Sheep Festival present some of the closest ways to contribute to long-standing traditions of collaborative care-taking; now sprinkled with a twist of innovation in order to remain viable.

Ecological habitat

Over the course of their existence, drystone structures often end up being repurposed in ways that extend well beyond their intended purpose. Certainly, though the Sheep Dyke serves as a boundary, it has also become significant as shelter, habitat and ecology.

As notoriously fierce Orkney gales sweep across the flat island landscape, the shadow of the Dyke provides a welcome break from the relentless wind for any living being, not only the sheep. Migratory birds, flying from far flung corners of the globe arrive to rest on this small outcrop on the edge of the North Sea before continuing their journey, or staying a while to nest. In a landscape void of trees, these birds make sense of the Dyke as a lithic hedge: delicate flycatchers perch on the top row of stone as a lookout, insectivorous warblers and night-feeding storm petrels flit in and around the mid-section to help themselves to quivering clouds of small flies that seem to congregate in the relative stillness of the structure, whilst militant fulmars nesting at the foot of the Dyke spit at anyone who dare to come near.

This cavalcade of birds cohabits the seaward side of the Dyke with other hardy species that can withstand a high level of disturbance: bushels of nettles, crowds of puffball mushrooms, masses of woodlice, and constellations of lichen. Life flanking the interior sides presents a very

different ecological reality from the exterior, one which showcases the material impact of boundaries in shaping a landscape.

It is also worth observing life on both sides of the Dyke. Doing so gives us an indication as to what flora and fauna could perhaps learn to flourish in areas that are currently too affected by sheep footfall to grow: more delicate species, such as pink bushels of thrift (*Armeria maritima)* or the elusive oysterplant (*Mertensia maritima).*

If we take the concept of an ecology seriously, –as a system of interrelated organisms within a broader environment–, it becomes clear that an ecology is never established on perfectly neutral grounds, nor does it necessarily foster equal opportunities of survival. As landscapes change (or are made to change), those living in it are also required to unsettle and reconfigure their relations with each other in order to live as well as possible in the conditions that are created.

Thinking of the Sheep Dyke as ecology extends its reach into a world that is uneasily shared, yet inextricably linked nonetheless. There is a critical responsibility then to think about how the creation of one specific life-world has the potential to erase another.


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Traditional craft

A contribution from Niamh Mackenzie

The process of drystane dyking can be referred to by many names and is characterised differently by different people; some calling it a skill, a trade, simply work, or as on-lookers occasionally say, 'a dying art'. Whilst there has certainly been changes in the way drystane dyking is practiced, organisations such as The Heritage Craft Association do not currently consider it to be at risk of dying out, with enough people practicing the craft for it to have a hopeful and viable future. It is appropriate and befitting to refer to the building of the dyke as craft and those who build it as craftspeople.

Most crafts share the characteristics of being a manual skill closely tied to a creative process that requires synergy between the craftsperson, their material and in many cases, the environment in which it is practiced. In the case of traditional crafts, elements of this process have been passed down from generation to generation.

Many traditional crafts can be regarded as examples of intangible cultural heritage. Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) can take many forms but centres on the wide-ranging practices and customs which give communities - geographical or otherwise- their distinct cultural identity. Whilst these are often closely tied to the built

environment, objects and artifacts, ICH highlights the significance of the evolving intangible knowledge that is transmitted between people to allow the continuation of these traditions.

Drystane dyking falls within these bounds as it is a traditional craft which is now practiced in a contemporary setting. Much of the knowledge and the techniques which were used by previous generations have been retained and are just as essential today as they were in the past but vast changes in the necessity of dykes mean that it is now practiced under different circumstances and for a wide range of motivations. It is an example of living heritage that has undergone many processes of adaptation and continues to evolve and take on new meaning both for craftspeople and those who encounter their work.

Just as knitting patterns, festive traditions, recipes and songs will change from island to island and country to country, so too does the knowledge surrounding drystane dyking. The building techniques understood and passed on by dykers in rural Aberdeenshire working with solid coarse granite, or in Caithness with its distinctive flagstone, cannot easily be replicated in other parts of the country with differing geology and nor should they be, for the right wall in one landscape can be out of place in another.

The North Ronaldsay Sheep Dyke is a distinctive structure not only in its historical significance but in the way that it

is built. In many parts it stands much taller than an average field dyke and whilst many dykes on mainland Scotland are built to taper as they reach the top, the Sheep Dyke does not, on account of the nimble, hardy nature of the North Ronaldsay sheep and their determination to overcome the obstacle and reach the coveted grass on the other side. Whilst many dykes are tightly packed with smaller stones and rubble, typically referred to as 'hearting', this is not strictly the case in North Ronaldsay as those who maintain the dyke understand how vulnerable it is to strong winds. In this setting, leaving gaps for wind and sand to push through the stone leads to less drastic damage than a long, tightly packed section of wall.

These examples show how intrinsically the processual nature of traditional craft is tied to the landscape and the community who practice and pass it from generation to generation and from neighbour to neighbour.

Listed building

In 1999, the Sheep Dyke was designated as a Category A listed building by Historic Environment Scotland, the highest level of interest afforded in Scotland today. The reception of this nationally-relevant title invites this structure to be interpreted in terms of heritage, which opens it up to a host of opportunities, and also a number of challenges.

Though anything that is passed down through the ages either consciously or by accident could be considered in terms of inheritance and therefore heritage, when things enter the realm of 'official' heritage, it is because they are picked out as being particularly representative of a past that should be remembered. Heritage is continually *made* rather than something that simply *is.* In these terms, the project of recognising something as heritage therefore could be interpreted as a process of selective valorization rather than an object of inalienable worth.

Heritage is a powerful tool; often it becomes the cultural glue, an educating force, or a source of vitally important income for a given community. In this sense, the task of preserving heritage for future generations is seen as the responsibility, and in fact*, the privilege* of the present.

However, to care for heritage is often a mixed blessing, especially when it has been inscribed onto an official list. The underlying assumption of heritage management is that

to care well for heritage means to preserve heritage in its most 'authentic' form. Though the concept of preservation has many different definitions, it often carries many prescriptive connotations that aim to regulate and standardise. Safeguarding against damage, decay, or destruction is often distinguished as a key feature in keeping something as intact as possible. This brings to mind the question of who holds the right to decide what the acceptable threshold of intactness is. In this light, the official recognition of the Sheep Dyke as a listed building locks the structure into a certain way of being in theory, which is at times at odds with the realities of maintenance in practice.

It is important to recognise that heritage does not exist in a vacuum: it reflects a world in emergence. The dynamic properties of heritage cannot be curbed beyond a certain point, and to try and do so in the name of preservation would be to not only constrain the evolving nature of heritage, but to potentially ask those taking care of it to sustain the illusion of a reality that may only rest in imagination or memory.

Does authenticity rest in form or function? This is a question that has long divided philosophers, intellectuals, and heritage practitioners. This potentially unsolvable dilemma fragments the interpretation of authenticity and in doing so divides policy and practice. Those concerned with an aesthetics of authenticity would argue that each

time the Sheep Dyke is thrown open, each stone should ideally be salvaged and rebuilt exactly the way it was. Others value the functionality of this structure more, citing that as long as it continues to serve its defined purpose, it is able to satisfy the criteria of what they see as the core essence of the Sheep Dyke's heritage.

Ultimately, both perspectives have merit. It is futile to try and separate between the tangible elements and the immaterial aspects of what makes heritage feel authentic at its core. The tangled nature of these vantage points generates a plethora of attitudes towards what it means to maintain heritage the 'right' way: a diversity that is consequential but also challenging to honour in totality.

How does the way in which we define heritage shape the ways in which it is taken care of? What happens when only one perspective is taken into consideration? Whose perspectives are made to matter more than others and what does that do? These interrogatives are not really meant to be answered. Instead, they represent merely a fraction of questions that we should challenge ourselves with when we encounter anything that is defined in terms of heritage.

Organically evolving monument

How do we acknowledge the complexity of something while recognising the limits in our ability to confront this diversity in its entirety? The task of reckoning with the Sheep Dyke is perhaps as ongoing and perennial as the care for the structure itself.

The Sheep Dyke has been described as an 'organically evolving monument,'[vi] a term that I have found to be the most befitting way to put a finger on the inherent contradictions that seem to emerge in this structure. As a monument it is called to stand still, yet the properties of organic evolution compel a dynamic of momentum, movement, and change.

Looking at the world through a lens that acknowledges and attends to the inevitable effects of time allows one to recognise that nothing is truly static. The question is not *if* something changes but *when*…and perhaps more importantly, *how and why* it does. Observing the way in which change is negotiated in the context of the Sheep Dyke gives us the possibility to think about the consequential impact of change, not only in terms of the local, but the global as well. Islands are rarely as isolated as we think. The recognition that scales of cause and effect are nested construes this small island in the North Sea as critically interlinked with a wider world in flux.

The Sheep Dyke is a particularly salient example of heritage that is highly resilient, yet one that is certainly not immune to the disruptive effects of climate change, cultural dilution, and depopulation. It is therefore worthwhile to celebrate not only the successful survival of this structure but also be critical about the broader circumstances that put increasing pressure on this structure and the community that cares for it, to keep shifting in order to keep up with the volatile and uncertain conditions of today and tomorrow.

This booklet attempts to address the open-ended nature of the Sheep Dyke in-kind. As such, (perhaps unsatisfactorily for some) it poses more questions than provides answers. Often, there is not one 'right' or fundamentally truthful answer anyway, at least not when it comes to dealing with heritage. Nevertheless, I hope that these vignettes have offered you enough context to feel ready to embark on your own journey of discovery of-, and with the Sheep Dyke of North Ronaldsay.

If walls could talk, what would they say?

There is more than one way to listen to a wall— the possibilities are endless, once you begin to take time to notice.

References and Notes

[i] The title of 'Laird' is the Scottish term for a landed proprietor of an estate, akin to the English term 'Lord'.

[ii] A Factor is an administrative title given to those who superintend or manage property in Scotland. In the case of North Ronaldsay, a Factor oversaw the general management of the Laird's estate.

[iii] Pringle, Robert Oliphant. "On the Agriculture of the Islands of Orkney." In *Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland*. Edinburgh: Niell and Company, 1874.

[iv] Balasse, Marie, Anne Tresset, Keith Dobney, and Stanley H. Ambrose. "The Use of Isotope Ratios to Test for Seaweed Eating in Sheep." *Journal of Zoology* 266 (2005): 283–91.

[v] Toonships (eng. townships) refer to a group of agricultural smallholdings (crofts) that historically held common access to the same area 'unimproved' land that was only used for grazing. Each township was a legal and social unit, that implicated crofters in collective agricultural responsibilities, a way of living that is still felt to some degree in certain places.

[vi] North Ronaldsay Sheep Festival. "SheepFest'22 Highlights." https://www.nrsheepfestival.com/highlights2022.