CHAPTER 5

The Mackenzie and the Dutch, 1628–1631

Introduction

Many studies involving Scotland and Europe and the early modern period in recent decades have focused on the extensive Scottish emigration to Europe, and on the success of the Scots on interacting and assimilating with host communities and markets in Europe. This has mostly focused on the contribution of the southern and eastern half of Scotland, rather than the north west. The north west of Scotland has, as was outlined in previous chapters, typically been portrayed by contemporary (southern) Scotsmen, James VI downwards as backwards, barbarous (and/or Gaelic) to varying degrees in contrast to the more urban, civil and commercial south. Such backward people were, it was often thought, unable to develop commerce. The corollary of this was that the Highlanders or Gaels being economically (and, perhaps, culturally) disadvantaged were in need of ‘civilitie’ and, of course, ‘civilised’ people to set them an example.1 These contemporary attitudes have, arguably, permeated much subsequent historical writing and continue to do so due to the necessary reliance on unsympathetic source material. This chapter, while bearing these issues in mind, will examine the efforts the Mackenzie clan in north western Scotland to develop and consolidate their fishery through their use of external European links, with the Netherlands in particular, 1628–31, and their attempts at using these external connections within a Scottish context.

Northern and western Scotland contained some of the wealthiest fishing grounds in Europe in the early modern period. The Isle of Lewis with its natural harbour at Stornoway, half way between the Shetlands and Ireland located beside the migratory route of the herring, was as a result economically and strategically important. Dutch fishermen and traders were active, at least towards the northern end of these waters, from the 1540s in substantial numbers.2 Shetland, not formally annexed to the Scottish Crown until 1614, remained the main focus for the Dutch fishing effort in Scottish waters,

throughout the seventeenth century. However, the Dutch may also have ranged further south into the North Minch and into the waters around Lewis. The Scots, while seemingly content to tolerate a Dutch presence in Shetland sought to keep Hebridean fisheries firmly under domestic control by the later 1590s with the attempted plantation of Lowlanders at Stornoway.

As was seen in the last chapter, the Mackenzies successfully took over the failed plantation based at Stornoway and exerted a strong influence on the fishing effort of the North Minch region from around 1610–1611 onwards. While most of the fishing vessels working in the area came from east coast Scottish burghs, the Mackenzies themselves sought to develop the locally based fishing effort. A thriving, although small, mercantile community became established at Stornoway in the decades after 1611, very much focused on the fishery with a regular trade emerging between Stornoway to Leith, often via Aberdeen. Although the Mackenzies subsequently continued to try to develop their fishing industry in the following decades, the number of boats and catching power remained relatively low. By 1628, Cailean Mackenzie the first Earl of Seaforth, well aware of Dutch expertise in this area, and possibly frustrated by Scottish burghal intransigence, sought help from the continent in order to develop this activity on his lands (and seas). The Dutch were not only leading their competitors in terms of catching and processing herring, they also dominated the carrying trade to the Baltic, one of the main, and growing markets.

Many of the individuals discussed here were from Zealand in the southern United Provinces in what is now the Netherlands.

3 Bremen and Hamburg merchants also had a strong presence on, and connections with Shetland. See Shaw, The Northern and Western Isles of Scotland: Their Economy and Society in the Seventeenth Century, 7, 37, 117–124, 173–182. K. Zickermann, Across the German Sea. Early Modern Scottish Connections with the wider Elbe-Weser Region (Brill, Leiden, 2013), 83–87, 129–133. The long term importance of the Shetlands relative to Lewis throughout the 17th Century is reflected in the catalogue of the Rotterdam notarial archive, Geementarchief Rotterdam, Oud Notarieel Archief (GAR, ONA), with over 50 references to ‘Hitland,’ or Shetland, in comparison to one for ‘Leeuwis’ (Lewis) <http://www.gemeentearchief.rotterdam.nl/>.
