

REVIEW: THE EYEMOUTH DISASTER

Christopher Harvie

Peter Aitchison, **Children of the Sea: the Story of the Eyemouth Disaster**,
Phantassie: Tuckwell Press, 2001, 258pp, £12.99, ISBN 1 86232 240 6.

On 14 October 1881 the Eyemouth fishing fleet set out for the haddock grounds on a flat calm day. The conditions were deceptive, as a plummeting barometer would have shown. In the street an old man, drunken and senile, muttered about an earthquake coming. In the late morning a wind of hurricane force hit the boats: those survivors who did not manage to ride it out headed for harbour, only to hit rocks exposed by the ebb-tide and be pulverised within sight of the folk on shore. Nineteen boats were sunk and nearly 190 fishermen, out of a total crew of 300, were drowned. The prosperity of the village ended. Its climb back would be a slow one and although successful by the late twentieth century it is still threatened, like all Scots fishing communities, by the exhaustion of fish stocks.

Peter Aitchison is from an Eyemouth fisher family, and **Children of the Sea** is a labour of love, but one by a fastidious and sensitive historian, in which the horror of the disaster becomes a way into the place, just as the records of the inquisitors into the Cathar heresy acted as Le Roi Ladurie's key to the village of Montaillou. The result is a tour de force, a local epic whose documentary accuracy does not detract from its readability – at least, I started on it as the GNER train was roaring along the Burnmouth cliffs and was still reading it at King's Cross.

Aitchison is absorbed by his community – **Children of the Sea**, though not footnoted, is meticulously composed of facts combed out of local records, parochial documents, government inquiries, and oral tradition – but he is this

Christopher Harvie is professor of British and Irish History at the University of Tübingen.

Scottish Affairs

side of idolatrous. Cramped, smoky, reeking of rotting bait and fish-guts, Eyemouth was a tough proposition. It was a frontier town, inheriting much of the trade once handled by Berwick when it was Scotland's biggest urban community. The frontier was a fact, even when it was unmarked, and the history of the little community in its deep gulch on the Berwickshire coast was complex and inturnd. The area underwent several spasms of witchcraft trials in the seventeenth century: old women examined, tortured, throttled and burned. Right through the eighteenth century it was a centre of smuggling, centred on the wynds of the old town and the ramifying cellars of grand palladian Gunsgreen House. After this, drift-net fishing for herring and line fishing for haddock – using as bait thousands of tons of shellfish shipped up from the Wash or across from the Clyde – took over. Its energy in adaptation outran, though sometimes only just outran, a cramped, horribly unhealthy site (it was a cholera deathtrap in 1849) and its chronically inadequate harbour. 'Haimooth' folk, the offspring of several ramifying families – Aitchison, Spears, Burgon, Windram, Lough, Collin – were quite detached from the 'muckle fermers' of the Merse, and until the end of the 1850s were notably secular by the standards of the Scotland of the Disruption. Time unspent in fishing was drunk away in the pubs or enjoyed in houghmagandie, in and out of marriage.

Yet a religious issue was to contribute to the 1881 tragedy. The established church minister of the parish, which was very small, virtually restricted to the immediate environs of the town, believed himself entitled to a tithe based on the landings of fish. This was a peculiarity of Scots burgh law like the 'Annuity Tax' in Edinburgh, and as hotly contested. The champion of the fisherfolk was the dotard who prophesied doom on the October morning: William Spears, called 'the Kingfisher', who ingeniously organised them against kirk and laird in successive campaigns, some of which had the Eyemouth folk in pitched battles against kirk and laird, as well as some canny political lobbying, until in 1864 the tithe was given up. The consequences of this, however, were that the authorities believed that Eyemouth could improve its harbour out of its own resources, and the 'harbour of refuge', accessible in all tidal conditions, which the locals wanted, remained a *fata morgana*. When the government decided to build one, it was at Peterhead. The configuration of the approaches to the Eye was always hazardous, and the fishers, launching bigger boats and operating over greater distances, seemed to take the risk as a fact of life. On 14 October 1881 it became a fact of death.

Review: The Eyemouth Disaster

What comes out of this remarkable account – which must set new and demanding standards for the writing of community history – is the regional and occupational specificity of Scottish towns: structures of identity, hierarchy and loyalty which, in the era before mass-communications, made for an intense localism. This was, of course, inherent in the tradition of the Scots novel, in Scott and Galt, and it is worth comparing Aitchison's Eyemouth with its fictionalised contemporary, the Ardrishaig of John MacDougall Hay's **Gillespie** (1914), in which the use of steamships to get the fish to market revolutionises the trade. Eyemouth's disaster – and Aitchison's graphs show the collapse of its fleet, from being worth £23,000 in 1881 to a pitiful £7,000 in 1895 – was, evidently, the great chance for the West Coast. William Spears the Kingfisher's liking for a drink killed him in 1885; he had already died in spirit in 1881 when his friend and lodger James Paterson and his teenage son William went down in the 'Industry'. The village he had once led let him be buried in the unmarked grave of a pauper, and roused what remained of his goods. If this reads like the death of Michael Henchard, the bleak ending of Hardy's **The Mayor of Casterbridge**, then the comparison is a worthwhile one. If tragedy can ennoble and instruct, as the ancients thought, Aitchison has served his community, and us, well.

John Bellany, perhaps Scotland's greatest painter, who has contributed striking cover-plates, calls the book enthralling. He is right. Aitchison's feel for his thravn, brave people catches the reader in a net of unforgettable impressions: the pamphlets clanking off the local press ... Spears' parliaments on Friday nights: politics and whisky-breath ... the vennels and wynds reeking of tar, smoke and fish-guts ... the skipper of the 'Radiant', oldest man in the fleet, struggling in the surf of the Harkur rocks, then felled by a broken mast within grasp of his rescuers: 'John Windram's body never reappeared. It was never found' ... Aitchison works for the BBC. There was a time when someone there would read a book like this and think 'Peter Watkins' or 'John McGrath!' But TV has discovered 'the new rock 'n roll' and gives us – at a cost of millions – Simon Schama and David Starkey instead.

March 2002