

I don't know when you will receive this letter. I am writing it in the schoolroom on the Shetland island of Foula in the interval between the end of afternoon school and the mid-week service which we hold every Thursday at 8 p.m., to lighten at least one of the long winter evenings with some hearty singing. The date is December 2nd, which ought to be in plenty of time to bring you my Christmas greetings and my good wishes for 1955. Ought to be - but in Foula you never can tell. At the moment the gales, which have been blown from the south for ten days without a break, have veered to the west and are sweeping down off the hill in furious gusts. Imagine a sheer cliff two miles long and ranging in height from 511 to 1,220 feet set some fifteen miles off the west coast of Shetland straight in the path of any westerly gale which has blown unchecked across the wastes of the Atlantic. Behind the cliff the hills rise to a maximum of 1373 feet and then drop with startling suddenness to the low-lying plateau which is the crofting area of the island, the strip of peat moor and tiny fields where we live. Imaginé living in the lee of such a barrier and you will realise why our 5-ton mail boat is lying up the slipway out of reach of the green swell which is now breaking over the pier. You will understand too why we only had two mails in November; and why we were so thankful that the fierce November weather came to us over the low-lying slopes of the South Ness and not like tonight's turbulent gusts - "flans" as we call them - whirling round the hills on either side and lifting sheets of spray off the surface of the Mill Loch as they pass. It reminds me of the gusts round the corners of an Edinburgh street enlarged to an almost frightening scale.

All this will explain why I don't know when you will receive this letter. But presuming that you do, and I hope in time for the festive season, let me apologise for having to resort to this impersonal method of communication for such a personal affair as a Christmas greeting. I can only hope that you will find some use for it even if only to light the candles on your Christmas tree. Much of my news may be no news to you especially if you read my article in the Edinburgh Evening News for 10th and 11th November. That was, as this is, an attempt to answer many letters at once in a situation where individual answers are quite out of the question. You see it is all a matter of time and labour. Both cost money and are commodities which can normally be bought. And most school teachers and many who work for the church reckon to be provided

with a salary, as indeed I am, which enables them to buy plumber's time or the results of the miner's labour, baker's or greengrocer's or bus-driver's time and perhaps even a gardener's work. Of course if you have a wife's time and labour to call on as well then everything in the garden is probably lovely enough to do without the gardener. But when one lives alone in a six-roomed house in a community with neither tradesmen nor coalman nor shops nor transport, a community of crofters whose time is all taken up with animals and crops, and peat and fishing, and running the mail-boat, who are mostly ageing and some disabled, who are usually busy and often overworked, who are always willing but never free, then it becomes a full-time job to run one's own house and garden, one's fuel and food, and the island school with its five pupils. With the church work in addition and the attempt to establish an ornithological observation station as a mere afterthought, full-time soon becomes overtime. But this is written in no spirit of complaint. I chose life in Foula and I do not regret it. It is as refreshing as it is exhausting, as full of interest as it is lacking in variety except the endless variety of sea and sky.

In these days when normal life is a complex round of engagements and social activities, when the necessities of life are technical and superficial, a place like Foula is in the news. Here 'normal' is a synonym not an antonym of 'natural', and life is free and untroubled in a way that is rare today. Here the clock is the servant not the master and British Summer Time passes unobserved. Here the cows and the sheep, the wind and the rain, the fishing and the harvest are the daily round. The necessities of life become necessary, the luxuries mostly remain outside except the white flour which now takes the place of the old barley meal, the paraffin which burns in our Tilley lamps instead of fish-oil or candles, the tinned food which brings variety to our tables and the tobacco which gives contentment to the young after work and to the old who spend their pensions on it. Here on "the edge of the world" it is easier to see life clearly for here life is real.

Yes Foula is in the news alright. 'Teacher-Missionary-Bird watcher' was what one newspaper report called me when I left John Watson's School and Edinburgh in April this year for the north. As far as hours spent on the job go the emphasis is about right. They might have added 'gardener-housekeeper-bachelor' to the labels. In fact my work is officially two-fold, unofficially a hundred-fold.

I am responsible for the education of the youth of the island up to the age of twelve, and for the moral and spiritual welfare of the community of 65 souls up to the age of ninety. My job with the bairns is easily assessed and generally a pleasure to perform. Running what is perhaps the smallest school in Scotland could scarcely be described as arduous and it is in fact often a tonic when the weather is depressing to enter the school with its cheerful, boisterous atmosphere each morning. My job as missionary might be described as that of keeping a declining population cheerful by visiting their homes and conducting their public worship - as worthwhile a task as one could seek, but not always easy in the face of a sense of depression and even decay at dwindling numbers and crofts going to ruin on all sides. My attempts to record the avifauna of the island, breeding birds and migrants alike, has been squeezed in somehow. The results are a list of 119 species since my arrival seven months ago, a total of 546 birds ringed so far, and a small Heligoland trap ready for the spring migrants of 1955.

But these three aspects are not all that make up the daily round of work and pleasure. It is rather an assortment of jobs to be done which can only be described in detail and which cannot be categorised except under the heading of 'life'. All the shopping has to be done by post, all the transport by wheelbarrow, especially peat, all the work by Joe Soap - it's just life. There are boots to be oiled and a sermon prepared - remember to feed the dog and that lavatory cistern needs cleaning this weekend - a brood of young wheatears to be ringed - "Peter, will you play the organ at tonight's service, please" - must mend that window before the next gale - "What's that bird on the peat stack, teacher?" - 5 eggs a day from 5 hens; good going - those arithmetic books to be corrected must visit old Betty this evening; and where are those books for the North end? - 24 birds in one drive of the trap, mostly starlings - "Another two dozen 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ d stamps, please Harry" - a row of carrots to be dug - "The Women's Guild will meet in the Manse on Tuesday at 8 p.m. as usual" - will it be a mail day to-morrow? - "There are gale warnings for the sea areas Faeroes, Fair Isle....." must mend those socks before Sunday - now who might help me sweep my kitchen chimney? - a dead merlin to be skinned - the bread should be about ready by now - "Dear Sir, With reference to your letter about the new tractor for the isle of Foula'....." - just enough apples for the children's Hallowe'en party - a neighbour's wireless to be repaired - note: paraffin and methylated from the shop to-

morrow - better get down to the boat with my box for Walls - definitely too big for a garden warbler; must be an immature Barred - a puncture in my bicycle; these roads! - "Coming out fishing tonight?" - a leg of mutton to be cooked; it'll make good soup for the weekend - time to order a new lot of Library books - "the wrens of Foula appear to belong to the Shetland subspecies" - what on earth can I give the children for handwork tomorrow? - "The funeral will be on Tuesday, Mr. Mylne, at the usual time" - several blackcaps in with the S.E. wind and a number of ectoparasites taken off a blackbird today - must get the school record of work up to date this week - this East wind always floods the kitchen floor - "You must see my new batch of colour film; some good shots of young Bonxies" - a lovely display by the 'pretty dancers' in the North sky tonight - "Hymn number 165 in the Sankey book: 'Let us with a gladsome mind Praise the Lord for He is kind'.

Yes, not a bad idea; it's a good life after all and Christmas comes but once a year

CHRISTOPHER K. MYLNE.

The Manse, Foula, Shetland.