

NOTE: This is the present state of a draft book chapter, about the Faeroe Islands. I'm wrestling with how to combine description, episodes, adventures, opinions and lessons learned.

[Chapter] The Faeroe Islands

In 1988 Eunice's resume was in the right place at the right time, and the people hired me as well to get her to come.

The Faeroe Islands are a string of eighteen islands in the Mid-Atlantic Ridge between Iceland and central Norway, well north of the Shetlands. These small steep rocky outcroppings with about 45,000 people are owned by Denmark, but seemed to us to be less closely tied to Denmark in terms of language, religion, and culture than Puerto Rico is to the United States. Young people who went to the Danish mainland to university often dropped out quickly due to the large cultural change, so in the early 1980's an undergraduate school was established in the Faeroes. By 1987 it had grown to 56 students, and four of them decided they wanted to be computer science majors. A visiting Danish professor told them they needed a course in Computer Organization, which roughly traces how the electricity travels from when you push a button through the computer circuits until something is computed. No Danish faculty member would come for the five weeks needed to teach this, but the Danish visitor knew that Eunice was available (we were on sabbatical) and enjoyed teaching this course. She taught Computer Organization, I taught Data Structures, and we worked with the faculty to plan the rest of the program. One of our students there eventually went on to a Ph.D. in Computer Science at the University of Copenhagen, and even came to give a lecture at our home institution, the University of Memphis, to celebrate.

When we were arrived in March 1988, there was a short landing strip that had been built by British occupation forces in World War Two, with daily flights from Copenhagen. The Icelandic Airlines flights between Reykjavik and Glasgow also land in the Faeroes a few times a week, making them accessible from the United States for a reasonable price. So far north that trees grow only if sheltered from the wind, the islands had no native mammals when the first humans arrived. There were apparently a few Irish monks early on, but the first permanent settlers were Vikings probably around 900 A.D. About 1100 A.D. the Norwegian King sent a Bishop, who attempted to build a small stone cathedral. The local farmers, unhappy at the Bishop's effort to levy taxes to pay for the cathedral, apparently chased him to the top of an unfinished stone wall from which he fell to his death. The cathedral, never finished, is a principal tourist attraction. Near it is an old stone house that is still lived in. Here one can see both the one-room architecture of the early settlers, with a smoke hole in the center of the roof, and the evolution of the house as extra space was added. When we asked the owner about the age of the house, he replied, "The house is over 900 years old, but my family has lived in it for only 450 years."

As that line suggests, the Faeroese have a strong sense of place and strong identification with their roots. They have their own currency and postage stamps, although they use Danish coins, and the culture has remarkable features, a mixture of traditional and European. You may find a four-bedroom house with all the standard electrical appliances, but the outside is often painted a primary color and the roof may be covered with growing grass, with a sheep being hoisted onto the roof every few months to trim the grass. The banks and shops are modern, but if a school of whales is spotted nearby, a bell is rung and everyone leaves their offices to go out in a fleet of small boats and try to herd the whales into the harbor where they can be run aground and slaughtered. A local official rides out with the boats to certify that the whales are not a

protected species before they are captured; this official has an ancient Old Norse title, the “Lawman” (that is actually the word - it is not translated.) The meat is not sold but is divided among the residents of the town or of the island, depending on the size of the local population. We watched after a school of pilot whales was slaughtered in the village of Hvalba (“Whale Bay.”) The meat was cut into chunks that looked like beef and a pickup truck drove around the village flinging a piece of meat into each front yard.

“How is it divided?” we asked one of the locals.

“Today we have enough for five pounds for each person on the north half of the island,” he told us, “even for the newborn babies.”

Families that did not have a freezer sliced the meat into thin slices and hung it on the clothesline to dry, often along with fish and their washing.

A man can earn a living in the Faeroes by fishing in the ocean from a one-man boat, using as many as eight or ten fishing rods each operated by a calculator-sized computer mounted above the reel; the computer lets out line as needed and whistles when it needs the attention of the fisherman. But many of the men work as sailors on large trawlers, which spend two weeks at a time at sea, and many women work in the factories that use modern computerized equipment to process the fish into the frozen blocks and fillets you see in the supermarket.

In the Faeroes themselves, of course, the stores didn’t sell fish. When almost everyone is a fisherman, people bring fish home from the boat. When we wanted fish, a friend brought us some. Travelers, of course, get fish in restaurants.

Until the 1960’s, the main means of travel on the islands was by small boats; almost all the villages are directly on the coast. Only after that did they start building roads, bridges between the islands, and an extensive system of tunnels. The tunnels are necessary due to the

extreme steepness of the islands. Picture yourself standing on top of an Alp, at the timber line; flood the surrounding country to the timber line, and establish ferry service to the next mountain peak. Many of the islands are very irregular in shape, but one that is easy to describe is five miles long, 500 yards wide, and 800 yards high. A tunnel runs the length of the island to connect the towns, and the island is jokingly called “the flute” due to the air vents cut to provide air in the tunnel.

The capitol city is Torshavn, “Thor’s Harbor,” population 15,000. It has an art museum open all year, and a natural history museum open in the summer or by special request. The parliament building is the size of a two-room schoolhouse, with a growing grass roof and the lawn graced by a bust of a local poet. There is a “national” brass marching band, very much in evidence as the locals take any excuse to organize a parade. In the mid-1980's the Faeroes acquired their first helicopter, which meant that for the first time sick or injured people could be easily transferred to the hospital in Torshavn. This substantially increased the need for nurses, and the new nursing school had a graduation while we were there. The entire graduating class was loaded on an industrial truck usually used for unloading ships in the harbor, and it drove up and down the streets of the capital as residents applauded the dozen or so new graduates.

[Section on our teaching goes here?, not written yet]

At home in the Igloo.

No, we did not live in a house built of ice. We were employed by The Academy of The Faroes, the best translation I can give of Frodskaparsetur Føroyar which is not spelled correctly since the correct form has one letter and several accents absent from English. The main operations of the academy were housed in a large government building of a sort you could find almost anywhere. Since the main organization that building contained was the agency that

ensured the quality of the fish exported by the Faeroes, the building was commonly called “The Fish Inspectors.” A few blocks away on a street with mixed shops and residences was a former residence where the ground floor facing on the street was now a shop selling “Igloo” brand knitting yarn. Like many Faeroese houses, it was built on the side of a hill, so the second floor of the building could be entered from behind without interior stairs. The Mathematics and Computer Science department was housed in the second floor of this house, hence said by the students to be “in the Igloo.”

When we arrived, we discovered the school had planned to put us in a hotel for five weeks. Eunice was unenthusiastic about eating in restaurants for that length of time, and we pointed out that the new computer science program would require enough visiting faculty in the next few years that an alternative to a hotel should be available. The Igloo had a residential kitchen and bathroom on the second floor, and a large unfinished attic. Carpenters were hired to divide the attic into three rooms, with a stair to the center room. The left room was our two-person office, the right room was our bedroom, and the center was furnished as a sitting room equipped with a television. So that room served as our living room at night and the student lounge during the day. The kitchen was our kitchen at mealtimes and the student/facult coffee and snack room during the day, and the bathroom served the students during the school day but we could have showers in the early morning or after the computer lab closed at night.

It took most of our first week in the Faroese for the carpentry to be done, and then the school’s Rector, Petur Zachariasson, took us shopping for furniture and kitchen supplies. The bed was delivered as at about nine in the evening, in pieces requiring tools for assembly. The Rector had to return and bring us over to the Fish Inspectors building, where in the workroom of the Academy’s Physics Laboratory we found the hammer, pliers, and screwdrivers we needed to

assemble our bed.

In the following years, we've enjoyed telling students and colleagues about the time we used government grant money to install a double bed for ourselves, upstairs from the computer lab in a school building.

Yarn, incidentally, justifies having stores devoted to it since the Faeroes, like Iceland, have a strong tradition of hand knitted sweaters in traditional local patterns. The sweaters are a very practical matter for the local fishermen, although the climate is nowhere near as cold as we had feared. The Faeroes, it turns out, are located almost in the middle of the Gulf Stream, making for a warmer but wetter climate than otherwise. We came to say that the weather in the Spring was highly predictable: in each hour you could count on ten minutes of bright sunshine, ten minutes of rain, ten minutes of fog, ten minutes of snow, ten minutes of high winds, leaving only ten minutes when the weather might be something unexpected. When we arrived in mid-March the early daffodil buds were peeking up through a light sprinkling of snow, and there were still daffodil buds peeking through snow when we left in late April.

Easter, Taxes, and Politics

Our stay in the Faeroes included the Easter season. This was deliberate on our part. We felt that so close to the Arctic Circle, we'd function better if we had days with a period of daylight we were used to. It also meant that there was a one-week break from our intense teaching schedule, which we hoped to use for sightseeing. The latter idea was not as successful as we'd hoped. He began to get the flavor the weekend before Easter, when we spent several hours on a succession of buses and ferries to get to the town of Klaksvik on one of the northern islands, Bordoy. Klaksvik is one of the larger cities in the Faeroes, with nearly 5000 people. The view from downtown is striking: you look across the harbor to the mountainous island of

Kunoy, whose south end rises from the sea as an almost perfect triangle. At Christmas the people string giant Christmas lights on the mountain to make it look like a giant Christmas tree.

Everything was fine until we decided to look for a restaurant. Each shop that looked like it might be a restaurant was closed. We finally found a passerby who spoke English.

“Of course all the restaurants are closed today. This is Palm Sunday weekend, everyone is getting ready for Confirmation feasts, and all the people who run restaurants are preparing for that.”

We had to ask quite a few more people before we were directed to the one establishment that was open. It was The Seaman’s Home, and institution rather like a YMCA which served as a place to sleep and eat for sailors who could not get home. So we ate and spent the night there, enjoying that institution’s Palm Sunday feast of roasted lamb. The platter put before us looked immense until we realized that so much of it was fat that the amount of meat worked out just about right for a meal for the two of us.

Even our local sightseeing around Streymoy, the island containing Torshavn, presented some problems as Easter approached. On one occasion we waited for over thirty minutes at a bus stop in a small village before I laboriously deciphered the Faroese footnote on the printed bus schedule to read “This service will operate fifteen minutes earlier on the Thursday before Easter Sunday.” We’d missed our bus, but luckily were able to hitchhike back to Torshavn.

Shortly before Easter we received our first paychecks – for half the amounts we had expected. It developed that we were the first American visitors the Academy had employed. Their previous visitors had been Scandinavians, and the tax treaties worked as expected. But, unforeseen by us or the Academy, their treaties didn’t apply to Americans. One of the things that make it feasible for teachers to travel back and forth between countries is a particularly favorable

provision in the tax treaties between many developed countries. Loosely, if an American goes to teach in Europe for less than two years, we do not have to pay income taxes in the country we are visiting. We do have to pay American taxes, but those are usually much lower. Further, if one remains out of the United States for most of twelve consecutive months, much of the overseas earnings are not taxed in the United States. The result may be enough tax savings to pay for the travel and help with the extra housing costs of being on the road for a year. This worked well for us in Denmark and in France, but the treaty between Denmark and the United States had a strange footnote which excluded Alaska and the Faeroe Islands from provisions of the treaty. The government of the Faeroes was charging us the full income tax rate for temporary workers from a country with no tax treaty, a rate designed to be high enough to prevent local firms from hiring foreigners.

“We’ll find some solution,” the Rector’s secretary assured us. But we were deeply troubled by this as school closed for the Easter recess.

During Easter week, sightseeing was extremely difficult. Almost all bus and ferry service was suspended, and even the restaurants and hotels were mainly closed. “Everyone stays at Grandmother’s house for the entire week,” locals explained to us, “so no one is going anywhere and there is no need for restaurants.”

Luckily, we were able to do some local exploring, much of it on foot, and the Rector and his secretary each invited us for dinners. While they hadn’t solved the tax problem yet, they could fill us in on details of local politics and the local economy. With a population of only 45,000 including children, the Faeroes managed to support seven local newspapers. The reason was that each political party needed its own newspaper, and most educated people felt a need to read several of them. The party lineup was at least two-dimensional as a party could be liberal

or conservative, in favor of independence from Denmark or opposed to independence, and several other issues also served to separate parties. I'll mention a few major political issues. On top of the tallest mountain on Streymoy, a few miles from Torshavn, was a huge radar installation to watch "over the pole" for Soviet missiles. This was an important part of Denmark's contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but it made Torshavn an obvious nuclear target with no benefit being seen locally. In exchange for this, and to maintain its hold on the Faeroes, Denmark generously subsidized Faerose education, including our salaries and computer laboratory. But in consequence of that, Denmark could insist that the schools teach Danish as everyone's second language, leaving English and other languages as later options.

The Faeroes were largely self-governing, but most foreign affairs were managed by Denmark. This was highly controversial in the late 1980's as the European Community, of which Denmark was a member, drew closer together. The Faroese felt strongly that with an economy so different from that of Denmark, this was not in their interests. What rules would the European Community impose on who could fish where? So the Faroese were beginning to develop foreign policy initiatives on their own. However, which countries were prepared to talk with them? At that time there was still great controversy over the status of the South African protectorate, Southwest Africa (later Namibia.) Few countries would talk with Southwest Africa, either. The Faroese parliament was considering a treaty with Southwest Africa by which the Faroese would obtain fishing rights off Southwest Africa in exchange for helping that country build a modern fish processing and freezing plant.

The Rector's secretary, who in many ways actually seemed to run the academy on a day-to-day basis, had a husband who was a full-time author. That meant she was the real financial

support of the family, since books in Faroese did not have large enough sales to produce much income. Many books were subsidized by the government directly or through the schools or the teacher's union, so that there would be schoolbooks in Faroese and enough other books to justify learning to read the language. Like many small countries, the Faroese took great pride in preserving their language. One of our interesting activities was meeting with the chairman of the committee that was devising a Faroese vocabulary for computer science. This was, it seemed to us, a highly political project. To take a very simple example, some computer languages have a command of a form such as "Go to line 300." In English, such a command is called a "jump." That wouldn't work in Faroese, which has no such "j". In Danish the command is a "hop", which would be a fine word in Faroese, but heaven forbid that a Danish word be allowed into Faroese if there is a choice. So the Icelandic and Faroese sagas were studied to determine what the hero might do if he needed to get elsewhere in a hurry, and such a computer instruction is now called by an ancient Faroese word: it is a "leyp."

Those who share my penchant for attempting to learn to read foreign languages by reading the comic books will be happy to hear that the Franco-Belgian comic *Asterix* has been translated into Faroese. I'm not aware that Donald Duck has yet been admitted to that select company.

A few days after Easter vacation, we were told that the tax problem had been solved. They could not get the government to agree to an exception on the tax rule. However, we had been living in the Igloo, which cost less than the hotel room and restaurant meals that had originally been budgeted. They could reimburse us for "living costs" at the rate originally expected for hotel guests, and that would make up for the amount being withheld as taxes.

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Stranded on a small island

One of the things we wanted to do, of course, was to explore the islands. So one afternoon after class we took a small ferry boat two islands south to the island of Skopun, with a population somewhat under 500 divided into five villages. The water was rough during the crossing. We watched a similar ferry bound for the island of Hestur travel near us for awhile, but photographing it was not easy as the waves seemed to suddenly lift us ten feet up as we watched the other boat plunge ten feet just as rapidly. There were twenty people or so in the boat, but we found no one who spoke English and the water was too rough to try very hard anyway. The first language in the Faeroes is Faroese, somewhat similar to Icelandic. Danish is the second language, and so only those with considerable education speak English.

The bus schedule in Skopun showed a bus to the village of Sandur, across the island, which would return to the ferry landing just in time to catch the last ferry of the day back to Torshavn. So we rode across to see the shape of the island, walked through the small village while the bus driver had his cup of coffee, and then rode back to the landing. The ferry pulled in, and people got off carrying huge armloads of flowers. "For the funeral," someone explained.

We tried to board the ferry, but were pushed back off by the crew. No one else was boarding. With gestures, we pointed out the time, and the schedule. "No," was all the information we could get from the crew. We tried to find someone with whom we had a language in common. Eventually one of the crew led us to a man who wore something looking like a yachtsman's cap, and we gathered that he was the harbormaster. He spoke limited English.

The boat had been cancelled, he explained, due to rough seas. This had been announced on the radio, but, of course, we foreigners had not known.

"When is the next boat?" we asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“Is there a hotel here?”

“No.”

We were in the largest town on the island, also called Skopun, population maybe 150.

“Is there a hotel anywhere on the island?”

“Maybe in Sandur. Maybe only summer.”

This was late March.

“Is there another bus to Sandur?”

“All gone. Tomorrow.”

The last bus of the day had left, carrying the ferry passengers, while we had been looking for someone who spoke English. The harbormaster shrugged his shoulders and wandered off.

We walked into the village to see what we could find.

It was early evening, but the street was so empty as to suggest a ghost town. The few shops were closed. In the absence of a common language – I can read Danish but can’t easily understand or pronounce it and my ability to write it is very limited – knocking on doors of darkened houses at random did not seem promising. We found the small village church. It was unlocked. There seemed to be no hint of how to find the priest, and while the church would keep us out of the wind and the visibly approaching rain, the narrow wooden pews did not look very attractive as a place to sleep. The yellow pads on them, narrower than the benches themselves, might have served as kneelers or seat pads but would not work as mattresses. We wandered out on the street again to see what we could find.

We found a postbox. A place to drop letters. The sign on it indicated that there would be one more mail collection. Was there any chance that the postman would be able to help us?

We waited, and the postman arrived on schedule. He didn't speak English, but between my few words of Danish, a few words of French we had in common, and a lot of gestures, he understood the problem.

Two pedestrians arrived, to hand letters to the postman. He talked with them but we could see negative answers in their gestures and faces. He flagged down two passing automobiles with no result. But when the third car stopped, he spoke with the lady driving it for awhile and gestured for us to get in.

With no conversation but a brief hello, she drove us zigzag through the narrow streets, up the hill and to what seemed like the far side of town. How, my wife wondered, would we ever find our way back? The Faeroes have very little flat land and this village, like many others, clung to a steep and irregular hillside leading down to the water. The coast was too irregular for following it to seem like a possible way back. Our driver pulled up in front of a small house, gestured to us to stay put, and went in for what seemed to us like a least half an hour. She emerged from the house with another lady. As I don't recall her name, I'll call her Ruth.

Ruth said, in good English, "Yes, you can stay." To us it seemed the end of an adventure. In fact it was our entry into another adventure, but this time one in which we were only bit players.

Leaving home

We were greeted by Ruth in impeccable English. "You can stay." Ruth was Black. She took us in to an apartment with two small bedrooms, and tried to figure out what we needed. We had not brought any overnight supplies. We helped Ruth rearrange the bedding so her two sons, aged ten and eight, could sleep in the living room while we slept in the boys' room. Her sons and husband, she explained, were "with everyone else in the village, at the funeral." Then she

poured coffee, sat down, and her life story poured out.

Ruth was from Trinidad, the huge island off the northeast corner of South America. Ten years ago, she had been a young woman growing up on Trinidad, and she met a sailor. She did not say that she had fallen in love. The man was a sailor on a fishing boat, they had been together, and she had gotten pregnant.

Would he marry her? He had laid down strict conditions. She would come to live on his island and the children would learn his language. If she ever left him, he had insisted, she would leave with only the clothes on her back and he would keep any children. She had felt, she explained, no choice. Would she have been shamed, had she stayed on Trinidad? Would her family have rejected her? There were questions we longed to ask but we could not interrupt her rapid-fire narration to do so. She had agreed to the man's conditions.

"I'd always lived on an island," she said. "He said he liked islands. That reassured me. How different could his island be? I had absolutely no idea, until I got here."

It was far more different than she had imagined possible. Trinidad is a fertile tropical island with a population of well over a million. Skopun, with 456 people at a recent count, is so near the Arctic Circle that there were no native trees and no native mammals. She was probably the only person on the island not born in the Faeroes, certainly the only Black, and the only woman on the island who did not speak the language. The only job available would have been an unattractive job in a fish freezing plant, the modern equivalent of a fish cannery. The main social event for the women was a church sewing circle where she was clearly an outsider. She couldn't speak the language and didn't know the people they gossiped about. She was probably more a subject of the gossip, she felt, than someone who might be interested in it. She had pleaded with her husband to move. Not only would he not consider leaving the Faeroes, he would not consider

even leaving the village. His family had lived there for over 500 years, this was his home, and her agreeing to live on his island was part of her marriage agreement.

After ten years, Ruth still felt shunned in the village and felt her two sons were increasingly discriminated against. Would her husband compromise in any way? No, she said. He was going to enforce that marriage agreement, completely.

She had sought a lifeline, outside contacts. She had written to the Tourist Bureau in Torshavn. Did they have tourists who would like to stay at a bed and breakfast on the island of Skopun? What facilities did she need to have to qualify as a bed and breakfast? Was sleeping in her children's room acceptable? The postman, she said, must have seen those letters going to and from the Tourist Bureau. That must have been why he had decided to send us to her, even if it wasn't the tourist season.

During the summer there had actually been a few tourists. They had said that her knowledge of English might get her a job in Torshavn. Ruth had visited Torshavn and knew it had a real business district and several schools including the small one in which we taught, a normal school and a nursing school. We could confirm for her that Torshavn did have some non-Danish tourists, as we had seen tourists from Germany and a few from England. We had even seen a few Black tourists in Torshavn, coming from Germany.

Her husband and the boys came home late that evening. My wife and I found games we could play on the floor with the boys, while Ruth and her husband had a very long talk. Was it an easier talk for Ruth to have, while there were strangers in the house who did not hear the conversation, strangers distracting her boys? We don't know. When they finished talking, Ruth came to us.

"I'll drive you to the ferry in the morning. Let's get up early and have breakfast early, in

time for the first boat.”

We left the house early the next morning, before her husband emerged. At the wharf Ruth boarded the ferry to Torshavn with us, carrying a small overnight bag. Was it our presence that made this possible? It looked that way to us.

“If I can find a job in Torshavn,” she said, “I can stay there during the week. I’ll be close enough to visit my sons on the weekend, and I can save the money I earn and have some money of my own put away where it will be my money, not his. Maybe I can go to the nursing school, and come out of this with a real education. I don’t know how long it will take, but if I have some money of my own, and some education, I think I can work out a solution.” It seemed clear to us that Ruth wanted to leave the Faeroes. My wife and I wondered to ourselves what would become of her children. It was not the first or the last time we engaged in what we have come to think of as the sacrament of listening. We have often found ourselves with people who simply need to have someone to listen to their story, to be able to talk something out before they can go on with the rest of their lives.

In Torshavn, we got off the ferry and parted. We hurried to our first class of the morning, and Ruth went off in search of the rest of her life.

The Sacrament of Listening (does this section go here? It isn’t travel.)

I think we learned the phrase, “the sacrament of listening,” from a former pastor in Memphis who is a teacher of prospective hospital chaplains. [listening to widows. Listening to people in terminal illness. Eunice as mediator in the Memphis courts, and as a volunteer in the YWCA shelter for abused women.]