

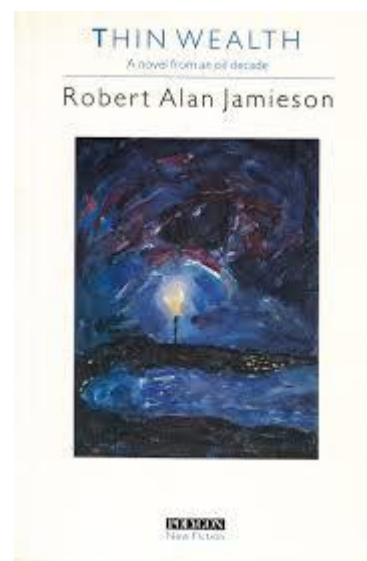


## Shetland Museum and Archives - Writing The North -

### *Thin Wealth* by Robert Alan Jamieson

Shetland Museum and Archives are searching for a group of young people who could form a small film company to make a short film about the life of Robert Alan Jamieson, the well-known Shetland author, and his dramatic novel *Thin Wealth*, based on the impact of the oil boom in Shetland.

The purpose of the film is to bring Robert Alan Jamieson's work to the notice of a much wider audience, particularly young people many of whom have never had the chance to read and respond to the events described in the novel *Thin Wealth*.



## Activity 1

Working in pairs or groups of 4, complete the following activities. These activities are designed to get you thinking about events described in the novel *Thin Wealth*.

1. Talk about what you know about what life was like in Shetland before the arrival of the oil industry. Make a note of your ideas.

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.....

2. In what ways do you think people's lives might have changed by the arrival of the oil industry? Make a note of your ideas.

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3. Talk about what you think makes a community. Think about how you would feel if your community was threatened with change. Make notes of your ideas.

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4. Nominate a spokesperson for your group. Share your answers with the rest of the class.

You may want to take a note of ideas from others in the class in the space below:

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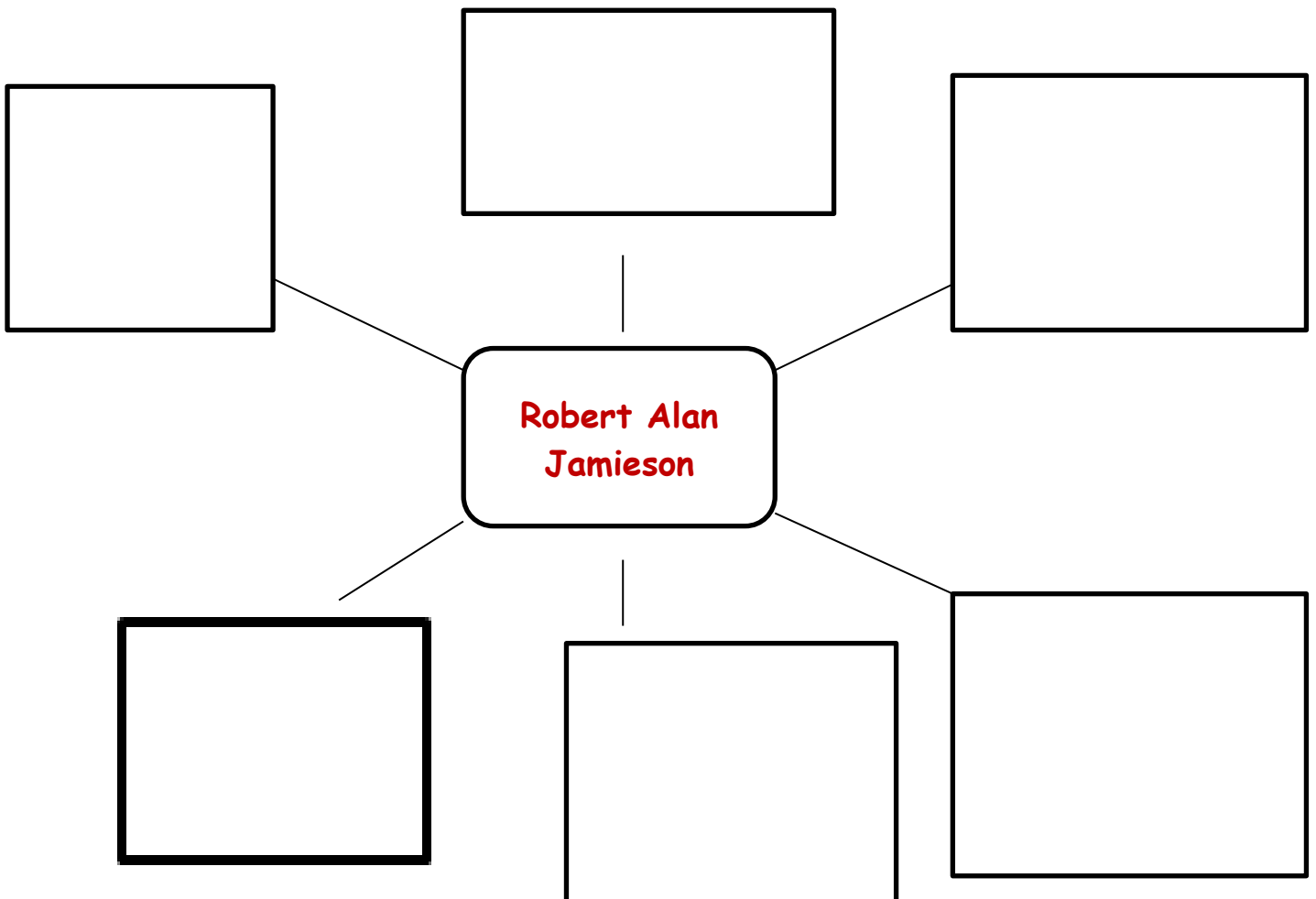
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## Activity 2

You need to get to know Robert Alan Jamieson and find out about his interest in Shetland and the advent of oil. Complete tasks 1-3

### Task 1:

Find out some of the facts about his life. (See biographical details). Use the mind map below to detail all the information you find - this could help you share all the things you discover.



## Task 2:

Find out about what life in Shetland was like before the arrival of the oil industry. (For this, you might want to arrange short interviews with older people in your community). Make notes of your findings and feed back to whole group.

**I found out:**



### Task 3:

4. Now feedback your ideas to the whole group. You should have some very good reasons why your group should be chosen to make a film about Robert Alan Jamieson and his novel *Thin Wealth*, eg 'We live in an area which has seen many changes as a result of the oil boom'.

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for students to write their feedback on the group's ideas.

## **Robert Alan Jamieson biographical details**

Robert Alan Jamieson was born in 1958 and grew up in the crofting community of Sandness on the Westside of Shetland. He worked at various jobs across Scotland, including a long spell at Sullom Voe Oil Terminal at the height of the oil boom.

In the 1980s he published two novels *Soor Hearts* & *Thin Wealth* and a collection of poems. He then went to Edinburgh University where he now works as a lecturer in Creative Writing. His work has been translated into more than twenty languages. His book *A Day at the Office* published in 1991 was ranked as one of the 100 Best Scottish Books of all Time.

## Activity 3

NOW you need to discover some of the vivid storytelling skills of Robert Alan Jamieson. Your study will focus on the novel *Thin Wealth*, first published in 1986.

### Section A: *Thin Wealth*: Texts 1, 2 and 3 - Culture Clash

(Share out these three texts among the members of your group. Read these texts more than once.)

#### Text 1:

#### Step 1:

Make a chart to list Jamieson's use of imagery suggesting changes to the Shetland way of life, eg

Street - alive with a new electricity	Suggests a surge of energy

#### Step 2:

Talk about how people in the local community might have felt about the changes. Who might have welcomed the changes, who might have resisted them?

#### Step 3:

Using a variety of voices, prepare a reading of the text to present to the whole group. Think about how you can stand/sit/group yourselves; think about how you can introduce a sense of the pace of events.



**Text 2:**

**Step 1:**

Jamieson writes that 'The work camps were abuzz'. Talk about how he gives the reader that sense of 'buzz' through the way he constructs sentences in this passage. (You might want to read it out loud to get a sense of this).

**Step 2:**

Focussing on the second paragraph of your text, make a chart to list the images (extended metaphor) used by Jamieson in his description of the force of change, eg

Boom time - in full flood	Like a fast-rising river

**Step 3:**

Using a variety of voices, prepare a reading of the text to present to the whole group. Think about how you can stand/sit/group yourselves; think about how you can introduce a sense of the pace of events.

### Text 3:

#### Step 1:

- Talk about the young people who arrived:
- What reasons did they have for coming?
- How did their arrival change the atmosphere?
- How would they have been viewed by local people?
- Which three words are used by Jamieson to describe the process of integration of the younger generation? In what way do you think this might be typical of any major process of change?
- How does Jamieson contrast this with the attitude of many older people?

#### Step 2:

EITHER make a word splat of words and phrases used in this passage to describe the experience of culture clash OR develop a short dance sequence to demonstrate culture clash - you might want to use this in your film.

#### Step 3:

Prepare a reading of the text and present it to the whole group - perhaps supported by the work you did in Step 2.

## **Thin Wealth: Text 1 - Culture Clash**

By 1977, the winding main street of Lerwick was alive with a new electricity. Shorefront pubs were packed with a new clientele. Unfamiliar accents could be heard through the clinking of glasses. The building of the oil terminal was well under way, pulsing out a new heartbeat through the islands, transforming lives. The hotels were full of company reps on expense account stays and skilled tradesmen who were in the islands to perform their specialist tasks.

Accommodation was becoming harder to find. Vacant cottages became valuable assets. Caravans appeared in the oddest of places, rented out for extortionate rates which were met by the big money now flowing from Sullom Voe.

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## **Thin Wealth: Text 2 - Culture Clash**

The workcamps were abuzz - huge complexes fitted with every convenience, money no object, full of men recruited from the mainland of Britain and beyond, employed on a month on, week off basis, flown in and out on chartered planes. Their feet barely touched the soil of the islands except that of the terminal - time off was a luxury which was mostly avoided. There was nothing to do anyway. The camps were stationed in the middle of nowhere - the surrounding country was barren. But they were well paid for their efforts. Money abounded, the camp bars were packed every night, illicit gambling sessions commonplace.

Boom time was in full flood, a great river in spate, carrying people along in its furious race downstream. Shetland swelled and threatened to burst under its strain.

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## **Thin Wealth: Text 3 - Culture Clash**

Hearing of the well-paid casual work, young people arrived on the *St Clair* steamer, eager to escape the deepening recession, bringing with them a new street energy, a taste of the punk explosion in the cities. Indigenous youth, reaching out to the new youth culture of the wider world, met them head on. Two cultures clashed, meshed and intermingled. The young began the process of integration, unnoticed by their elders who remained divided for the most part, incomers and locals, separated by an abyss of mistrust.

## **Section B: Thin Wealth: Text 4 – Lowrie a'Wurlie**

### **Step 1:**

In pairs or small groups, read the text Lowrie a'Wurlie more than once.

- Talk about the kind of man Lowrie a' Wurlie seems to be.
- Underline or highlight the words and phrases Robert Alan Jamieson has used to give you an insight into his character. (You could draw a picture of Lowrie and surround it with those words and phrases, then display it for the whole group).
- Re-read the final paragraph and talk about how he dealt with the arrival of the 'invader'.

### **Step 2:**

Work in pairs or small groups to produce some of the following:

- An interview with Lowrie a'Wurlie for a TV programme 'What's Important To Me'
- A song, sung by Lowrie a'Wurlie at a local concert, in celebration of Shetland
- A picture or collage of the things that are important to Lowrie - perhaps surrounded by images of the 'invader'
- Some poems inspired by Robert Alan Jamieson's writing - perhaps on a general theme of 'My Shetland'

## Thin Wealth: Text 4 - Lowrie a Wurlie

Lowrie a'Wurlie leaned heavily on his tushkar. He lit a roll-up and paused a while in the midst of cutting the year's supply of peat. The metal blade of his home-made cutter glistened with moisture from within the peat hill, was smeared with fragments of decaying vegetation. Behind him stretched a wall of fresh-cut fuel stacked in brick-like uniformity on the edge of the peat bank, soon to dry in the summer sun, to be carried to the settlement below, and burned in the Rayburn stove at Wurlie.

The bank he was cutting had been in the Manson family as long as they had lived at Wurlie. It was tied to the house with unwritten legality, and contained the kind of peat most highly prized - the bluish variety which would burn as fiercely as any coal.

Each year he cut another two feet of turf to allow extraction. Each year the peat bank moved two feet further from the distant green land below, deeper into the territory of the hare and the curlew. Into the silent high ground, the moors.

Lowrie's inner voice spoke intimately here. Above the immediate world he knew so well, time swung in circles and stopped anywhere he desired - back in the age of the Pict and the Broch, the Celtic time before time.

He was not a religious man. He had no patience with ministers or churches, no love of people when they dressed up in self-importance. But he was a spiritual man, in touch with the rhythmic pulse of his environment, a Celtic man himself.

His inner voice was a murmured one, speaking not with words but with the tiny sounds of nature: the bleating call of a new-born lamb, the bell-tinkling flow of freshwater streams, the rustle of the rising sea wind.

Yet Lowrie had known the full force of the Atlantic blow all his life, had stooped his back in order to continue working through it. He had grasped the soil of Glimmerwick in leathery hands and had kissed it. He was a man made of earth, grown out of it, dependent on it for life.

Like his Pictish ancestors, he saw the invader coming from across the ocean. And like his Pictish ancestors, he was unable, by nature, to resist. He was no warrior. He went on, practising the rituals of his faith, working the land and cutting his peats high above, slow and wise: the rituals of antiquity.

**Shetland Museum and Archives**  
**- Writing The North -**

Application Form

Application for the rights and funding to make and produce a short film on the following subject:

.....Thin Wealth by Robert Alan Jamieson.....

Name of Film Company:

.....  
.....

Address:

.....  
.....

Reasons why this film company should be chosen: (Make sure you read and discuss the ideas on the attached sheet before completing this section):

- .....

- .....
- .....
- .....

What skills could your company bring to this important project?  
(See attached sheet for ideas)

.....  
.....  
.....

Give one key reason why your film company would produce the best results:

.....  
.....

**Signed (all group members):**

**Date:**

Shetland Museum and Archives  
- Writing the North -

## CONGRATULATIONS!

Your film company has won the rights and funding to make a short film about the life of Robert Alan Jamieson, the well-known Shetland author, and his novel *Thin Wealth*.

The purpose of the film will be to bring Robert Alan Jamieson's work to the notice of a much wider audience, particularly young people who may never have had the chance to read and respond to the events described in the novel *Thin Wealth*.

Your film must aim to arouse the interest of a young audience in this important writer and his compelling story of the changes brought about by the oil boom in Shetland.

Your film **MUST** include:

- Biographical information about Robert Alan Jamieson
- Background material about life in Shetland before, and since, the arrival of oil
- Some extracts from the book *Thin Wealth* to show how powerfully descriptive and evocative his writing can be
- Soundtrack or soundscape to reflect the mood of the time or to emphasise the contrasts depicted by Jamieson



On the next page you will find some suggestions of features your film **MIGHT** include - but your group will probably have some very creative ideas of your own. Your film **MIGHT** include some of the following:

- Location shots of old crofts, peat banks, images of "old" Shetland - contrasted with new houses, Sullom Voe, oil-related ships in Lerwick
- Some interviews with older people who remember the way of life before oil, perhaps from different viewpoints
- Dramatic headlines announcing major oil discoveries - perhaps with conflicting views
- A soundscape for the "buzz" of Lerwick - using instruments, voices - and another for the peace of the peat bank
- A dance inspired by the arrival of a new influx of workers - perhaps with appropriate music or voices
- Some poems inspired by the changes brought by oil to the Shetland way of life - perhaps some in dialect
- A song or two telling some of the story of Shetland and oil
- A series of pictures, with captions, depicting the benefits brought about in Shetland by oil
- Some storytelling, perhaps in character, eg Lowrie a'Wurlie, telling how life has been changed
- A map of the area where the story of *Thin Wealth* is set
- An interview with the author himself - (by videolink?)

**NOW YOU HAVE A LOT OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS ABOUT ROBERT ALAN JAMIESON AND HIS WRITING - IT'S TIME TO GET DOWN TO SOME FILMING.**

REMEMBER YOUR TASK: To bring Robert Alan Jamieson's work to the notice of a much wider audience, particularly young people who may never had the chance to read and respond to the events that are described in *Thin Wealth*.

**It's time to be creative!**