

GEORGE MACKAY BROWN: POET AND STORY TELLER

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Prologue

For the islands I sing
and for a few friends;
not to foster means
or be midwife to ends.

. . .

For Scotland I sing,
the Knox-ruined nation
that poet and saint
must rebuild with their passion.

For workers in field
and mill and mine
who break earth's bread
and crush her wine

Go, good my songs,
be as gay as you can.
Weep if you have to,
the old tears of man.

Praise tinker and saint,
and the rose that takes
its fill of sunlight
though a world breaks.¹

Those of you who have read his autobiography² will recognise the opening line of this early poem by George Mackay Brown. The title, by the way, was not given to the book by the poet, though I like to think that George would have approved. He wrote the poem in Newbattle in 1952, and it appeared as the prologue to his first small collection of verse: *The Storm and Other Poems*.

There are three things to be said about this slim little volume. Firstly, it was printed by the local newspaper, the long defunct *Orkney Herald*, for which George had worked as Stromness correspondent and also as a weekly columnist. This was presumably a labour of love on their part, for they certainly had no great expectations of a bumper sale for the book. They printed only 200 copies, and when it sold out just a fortnight later, they had already dismantled the type

1. *The Storm and Other Poems*. Orkney Press, 1954: 9.

2. *For the Islands I Sing*. John Murray, 1997.

and there was therefore no possibility of a reprint. So, if you are lucky enough to possess a copy, look after it well!

Secondly, and more importantly, the book contained a foreword by George's friend and mentor Edwin Muir. George had recently studied under him at Newbattle Abbey College, of which Muir was then Warden. In this introduction Muir speaks glowingly of his fellow poet, and fellow Orkneyman. Here is part of what he says:

His main theme is Orkney, past and present, and, if only for that reason, this book should be in every Orkney house. But it is as a poet, not only as an Orkney poet that I admire him. He has the gift of imagination and the gift of words: the poet's endowment. I read these poems first when Mr. Brown was at Newbattle Abbey, and what struck me then was their fresh and spontaneous beauty. Now, after reading them again, I am impressed as well by something which I can only call grace. Grace is what breathes warmth into beauty and tenderness into comedy. Grace is what I find in all these poems, both the serious and the lighter ones. Orkney should be proud of this book celebrating its life, and proud above all that it has produced a young poet of such high gifts.

And finally, one of the revelations of this little book is the extent to which the poet, all these years ago, had already mapped out his territory. We can hear it in these verses from the prologue, which constitute no less than a poetic manifesto. Here are the themes he was to explore during the next four decades with increasing depth and technical mastery: a celebration of the place and people of Orkney, their long history reaching back into the Stone Age, their great treasure-house of lore and legend. Here too is the celebration of tinker and saint. And when we read the title poem, 'The Storm', we see it pointing the way ahead in its religious symbolism. The narrator, sailing in his skiff, gets caught in a sudden storm and is washed ashore on Eynhallow, the 'holy island' of Orkney, where he is rescued by the brothers from the island monastery, and where he settles down to become one of them. This is all very symbolic, and told — appropriately enough — in the somewhat unassimilated style of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet for whom George already had a very high regard. Two or three verses will give you the flavour:

Rousay before me, the stout mast
Snapped, billowing down helpless sail.
What evil joy the storm
Seized us! plunged and spun!

And flung us, skiff and man (wave-crossed, God-lost)
On a rasp of rock! . . . The shore breakers,
Stained chancel lights,
Cluster of mellow bells,

Crossed hands, scent of holy water . . .
The storm danced over all that night,
Loud with demons, but I
Safe in Brother Colm's cell.³

A distinctive voice

It was five years after *The Storm* that George's poetry found a national publisher. The initiative came from Edwin Muir, who sent a number of Mackay Brown's poems to the Hogarth Press. These were published in 1959 under the significant title of *Loaves and Fishes*. The volume contains a reworking of the best poems from *The Storm*. And although some of the other poems still show the influence of fellow poets such as Yeats and Dylan Thomas and Muir himself, it is an influence which has been almost wholly assimilated. We have a poet speaking in his own distinctive voice.

We can hear this in 'Hamnavoe', the great elegiac poem in memory of his father, the town postman, who died in 1940. It is also a celebration of his native town Stromness, the 'Hamnavoe' of his poetry and stories. Hamnavoe — Haven Bay — was the old Viking name for the harbour. George wrote six versions of this poem. The one quoted here is the fifth — and probably still the best. It was published by the poet in the early 1970s. Twenty years later he revised it yet again for inclusion in the new *Selected Poems*. Here are the opening and closing verses of 'Hamnavoe' (5):

My father passed with his penny letters
Through closes opening and shutting like legends
When barbarous with gulls
Hamnavoe's morning broke

On the salt and tar steps. Herring boats,
Puffing red sails, the tillers
Of cold horizons, leaned
Down the gull-gaunt tide

And threw dark nets on sudden silver harvests.
A stallion at the sweet fountain
Dredged water, and touched
Fire from steel-kissed cobbles

. . .

The kirk, in a gale of psalms, went heaving through
A tumult of roofs, freighted for heaven. And lovers
Unblessed by steeples, lay under
The buttered bannock of the moon.

3. *Selected Poems 1954-92*. John Murray, 1996: 2.

He quenched his lantern, leaving the last door.
 Because of his gay poverty that kept
 My seapink innocence
 From the worm and black wind;
 And because, under equality's sun,
 All things wear now to a common soiling,
 In the fire of images
 Gladly I put my hand
 To save that day for him.⁴

Loaves and Fishes contains two sonnets of quite remarkable quality. 'The Old Women' paints an unflattering picture of those kill-joys of the community who 'fix on you from every close and pier / An acid look to make your veins run sour'. In sharp contrast to this bleak picture is the fine elegiac sonnet commemorating the death of Peter Esson (Tailor, Librarian, Free Kirk Elder). Many years later George wrote a short explanatory essay on this poem and its subject, which is included in his new posthumous collection of poems, stories and essays, *Northern Lights*.

Undoubtedly, however, the finest poem in *Loaves and Fishes* is the poet's 'Elegy' for a young friend who died in childbirth — herself a poet of high promise and a beautiful singer. The conjunction of the Agricultural and Christian cycles and rituals was to become a strong and increasingly familiar element in the poet's work. The parable of the sower and the seed provided him with a universal image which he said 'seemed to illuminate the whole of life for me. It included within itself everything from the most primitive breaking of the soil to Christ himself with his parables of agriculture and the majestic symbolism of his passion, and death, and resurrection. You will find it at the heart of many of my stories and poems.'⁵

It is undoubtedly given powerful expression in this early poem. The word 'Magnustide' in the opening line is used to signify Spring, and much more. St Magnus Day, the anniversary of the Saint's martyrdom, is on 16th April — the day on which the poet himself was buried more than 40 years later:

The Magnustide long swords of rain
 Quickened the dust. The ploughman turns
 Furrow by holy furrow
 The liturgy of April.
 What rock of sorrow
 Checks the seed's throb and flow
 Now the lark's skein is thrown
 About the burning sacrificial hill?

4. *Collected Poems*. John Murray, 2003.

5. Mackay Brown, George, 1976: 'Writer's Shop'. *Chapman* 16, Edinburgh, 23.

Cold exiles from that ravished tree
 (Fables and animals guard it now)
 Whose reconciling leaves
 Fold stone, cornstalk and lark.
 Our first blood grieves
 That never again her lips
 Flowering with song we'll see,
 Who winged and bright, speeds down into the dark.

 Now let those risers from the dead,
 Cornstalks, golden conspirators,
 Cry on the careless wind
 Ripeness and resurrection;
 How the calm wound
 Of the girl entering earth's side
 Gives back immortal bread
 For this year's dust and rain that shall be man.⁶

Common themes in Mackay Brown's poetry

George Mackay Brown's third volume of poems, *The Year of the Whale*, was published in 1965. By this time George had returned to Orkney from his university sojourn in Edinburgh. He had taken an honours degree in English, and had pursued some years of post-graduate study on Gerard Manley Hopkins. Also, over these years he had suffered a recurrence of the TB which had afflicted him intermittently since the age of 20, and which required fairly lengthy hospital treatment.

The Year of the Whale is an impressive achievement. Much of it is concerned with mortality and death — death by shipwreck, the death of the fisherman Ally Flett, the death of Ward the farm labourer, the death of a community in the title poem, and even the death of a hawk in one of the first and finest of his many animal poems. And where life still lingers, as in his studies of Halcro and the old fisherman with guitar, it has to be said that the ambience is distinctly geriatric.

This is equally true of the next poem, as we turn from sea to soil — 'from gray furrow to black furrow' as George would put it — and listen to Ward the farm labourer on his deathbed:

'God, am I not dead yet?' said Ward, his ear
 Meeting another dawn.
 A blackbird, lost in leaves, began to throb
 And on the pier
 The gulls stretched barbarous throats
 Over the creels, the haddock lines, the boats,
 His mortal pain
 All day hung tangled in that lyrical web.

6. *Selected Poems 1954-92*. John Murray, 1996: 11.

‘Seventy years I’ve had of this,’ said Ward,
‘Going in winter dark
To feed the horse, a lantern in my fist,
Snow in my beard,
Then thresh in the long barn
Bread and ale out of the skinflint corn,
And such-like work!’
And a lark flashed its needle down the west.⁷

Despite the apparent morbidity of the subject matter in these poems, the overall effect is life-affirming and elegiac — and there is no sentimentality.

By the time this book was published, George’s talents had been recognised by another distinguished Orkney writer, Eric Linklater. And Eric was not stinting in his praise:

George Mackay Brown has become a recognised feature of Orkney’s landscape — and that eminence has been fairly won by poetry of a quite individual distinction, in which he has translated his sharp-sighted vision into language of a marvellous and ringing felicity. His genius has been recognised and rewarded — but more important to the islands of his birth is the fact that George Mackay Brown is a good poet, a true poet, and essentially a poet of Orkney. Orkney is his persistent theme and constant inspiration.⁸

Eric Linklater also comments on a characteristic poetic mode which he encounters frequently in Mackay Brown’s poetry, and to which he gives the name ‘processional’, where:

the poet watches in imagination the passers by at a wedding, a funeral, a country fair — solemn or riotous, but apprehended with a visionary understanding.⁹

Linklater’s point is well made, and it serves to remind us of just how much of George’s poetry has this strong narrative impulse, this sense of movement through time or space. We have already encountered the processional in ‘Hamnavoe’, where we move in time from daybreak and the early morning postal round, through a typical day in the life of the town, to nightfall and the quenching of John Brown the postman’s lantern. Eric Linklater chose another Hamnavoe poem to illustrate his point. ‘Hamnavoe Market’ is the story of seven countrymen who visit the town on market day, experience all the fun of the fair, and return under the stars, leaving one of their number in a ditch — ‘his mouth full of dying fires’. George Mackay Brown has himself described this piece as ‘a highly condensed short story’.¹⁰ It is indeed a small miracle of compression.

7. *Selected Poems 1954-92*. John Murray, 1996: 25.

8. Linklater, Eric, 1971: *Orkney and Shetland*. Robert Hale Ltd., London, 256.

9. *ibid.*, 256.

10. BBC Scotland, 1972: *George Mackay Brown — the Orkney Saga Man*.

Over the next thirty years George Mackay Brown was to publish five new volumes of verse, the last of which, *Following a Lark*, appeared just a few days after his death. There were also three volumes of selected poems, and a number of poem sequences for special publication, such as *Stone*, in which he collaborated with Gunnie Moberg, and *The Scottish Bestiary*, in collaboration with a number of distinguished artists. Also there were *The Brodgar Poems*, *The Tryst on Egilsay*, *Songs for St Magnus* and, posthumously, *Stained Glass Windows*. There are fine poems in all these collections, and many of the best are to be found in the *Selected Poems*. I say many, but sadly not all, because George was a ruthless critic of his own work, and he jettisoned poems which I would most certainly have retained. Those who are familiar with his work will also find that the reviser's pen has been busy, altering a word here, a phrase there, even in well known poems which have appeared in anthologies for 30 or more years.

To bring the poetic record up to date, I must mention the extraordinary poetic/photographic collaboration with Gunnie Moberg which occupied George in the final winter of his life.

Poet and composer in harmony

It is now nearly 30 years since an encounter with one of George's books, *An Orkney Tapestry*, led Peter Maxwell Davies to visit Hoy one bleak Sunday in the summer of 1970. And it was there in Rackwick that the avant-garde composer first met the island poet. It was a meeting which fired the composer's imagination, and began a lifelong friendship and a fruitful collaboration, which still continues on what might be called a unilateral basis. Three of Davies' most recent works have been inspired by George's texts.

The first of Mackay Brown's poems to be set to music by Davies was 'Stations of the Cross', later retitled 'From Stone to Thorn'. This is a spiky, atonal piece which requires several hearings to reveal the full measure of its undoubted quality. The most celebrated collaboration of that period was Davies' adaptation of Mackay Brown's novel *Magnus* into the chamber opera *The Martyrdom of St Magnus* which launched the St Magnus Festival in 1977. In the following poem, however, we have an example of their collaboration at its simplest and most hauntingly beautiful. Lucy Rendall was born in 1981, the first Rackwick child in many years. George celebrated her arrival with a lovely acrostic, to which Max responded with music of great tenderness, using only 'the white notes' to produce a sublimely simple cradle song:

Let all creatures of the valley now
Unite
Calling a new
Young one to join the celebration

Rowan and lamb and waters salt and sweet
Entreat the
New child to the brimming
Dance of the valley,
A pledge and a promise.
Lonely they were long, the creatures of Rackwick, till
Lucy came among them, all brightness and light.¹¹

What can one say in a few sentences about all that later body of work? The Orcadian themes still predominate, though the treatment is perhaps more archetypal than before. Religious themes become increasingly dominant; and the processional poems focus on our swift progress from birth to death, as in 'Countryman':

Come soon. Break from the pure ring of silence,
A swaddled wail
You venture
With jotter and book and pencil to school
An ox man, you turn
Black pages on the hill
Make your vow
To the long white sweetness under blessing and bell
A full harvest
Utterings of gold at the mill
Old yarns, old malt, near the hearthstone,
A breaking of ice at the well
Be silent, story, soon.
You did not take long to tell¹²

That poem also reminds us of the poet's long love affair (which lasted till his death) with the mystical number seven. In earlier days he used it to beautiful effect in lovely miniatures like 'Country Girl':

I make seven circles, my love
For your good breaking.
I make the gray circle of bread
And the circle of ale
And I drive the butter round in a golden ring
And I dance when you fiddle
And I turn my face with the turning sun till your
feet come in from the field.
My lamp throws a circle of light,

11. *For the Islands I Sing*. John Murray, 1997: 89.

12. *Selected Poems 1954-92*. John Murray, 1996: 142.

Then you lie for an hour in the hot unbroken
circle of my arms.¹³

It appeared also in ‘Taxman’, which is perhaps the shortest of all George’s ‘short stories in verse’:

Seven scythes leaned at the wall,
Beard upon golden beard
The last barley load
Swayed through the yard.
The girls uncorked the ale.
Fiddle and feet moved together.
Then between stubble and heather
A horseman rode.¹⁴

But as the years pass, George’s attachment to the number seven as a poetic device is matched by a growing preoccupation with the seven ages of man. And despite the lighthearted moments and the many flashes of humour, the overriding impression of his later poetry is one of gravitas.

A poet in control of his medium

What is never in doubt is Mackay Brown’s supreme control of his medium. He was a consummate wordsmith, and remained so throughout his life. But as his style matured, it became honed down, stripped of all spare verbiage. The images are no longer something to savour, like a good sauce; they become an integral part of the message, as we can see from this short poem, entitled ‘Shroud’, unaccountably missing from the *Selected Poems*:

Seven threads make the shroud,
The white thread,
A green corn thread,
A blue fish thread,
A red stitch, rut and rieving and wrath
A gray thread
(All winter failing hand falleth on wheel)
The black thread,
And a thread too bright for the eye.¹⁵

The poet’s attachment to what he called the ‘heptahedron’ — ‘the seven-faceted poem or story’ — can be seen at its most compelling in some of the finest pieces in his posthumous collection *Northern Lights*, especially in his celebration of Robert Burns, Willie Farquhar, St Magnus, ‘All Souls’, and — autobiographically — ‘An Old Man in July’.

13. *The Year of the Whale*. Chatto and Windus, 1965: 30.

14. *Selected Poems 1954-92*. John Murray, 1996: 51.

15. *Fishermen with Ploughs*. Hogarth Press, 1971: 29.

George Mackay Brown's reputation as a saga man is justified up to a point; but to categorise him in this way is to over-simplify. George certainly learned things from the sagas — and indeed from the old Scottish ballads — about economy of expression and the importance of uncluttered narrative, about how to combine a laconic Viking style with some dead-pan Viking humour. But, as we have already seen from this small sample of his poetry, George Mackay Brown has much more to offer.

Poet and story teller

His first collection of short stories, *A Calendar of Love*, was published in 1967, and it marked a turning point in his career. Up till then he had been known to a comparatively small circle of readers; now he was opening up a rich narrative seam which was to produce eight books of short stories, six novels, several children's books of rare quality, and several plays and collections of essays. It also attracted a large and appreciative reading public, far beyond the borders of Scotland; and it attracted film and TV directors of the calibre of Bill Forsyth and the late, great James MacTaggart.

In a short article like this it is not possible to dwell on more than one or two of the qualities in his work which make Mackay Brown such a superb story teller. I have already spoken of the saga influence in relation to his poetry. The same is true of his prose — laconic, stripped down, deploying mostly short sentences, concentrating on the narrative without a running commentary. This might seem like the recipe for a very impersonal, uninvolved treatment of his subject, but the reality is very different. In fact his prose carries a powerful emotional charge. Far from being impersonal, it is often deeply moving; it articulates the joy and grief, the suffering and endurance of his characters, many of whom are people of few words when it comes to voicing their feelings. And the writer's prose can at times blossom into passages of rare beauty, particularly in what we might call the coda to some of his most powerful stories.

Take for example those closing lines from 'Celia', the story of an alcoholic who has prostituted herself for drink. As the story unfolds, she is revealed as a sensitive and deeply vulnerable human being, totally unable to cope with the realities of a suffering world, who finally begins to emerge from her dark night of the soul:

The rain had stopped, as it often does before dawn, Celia closed the door of the shoemaker's room softly and unbarred the outer door and went out on to the pier. The first seagulls were screaming along the street, scavenging in the bins. She breathed the clean air of early morning. She stood at the pier wall and watched the sea moving darkly against the weeded steps and slipways. A rat in the seaweed squinned at her and twitched its whiskers and went into the water with a soft plop. The sun had not yet risen, but light was assembling in broken colours over

the Orphir hills. The first blackbird in the fuchsia bush under the watchmaker's wall faltered into song and then was silent again. Celia could see the boats in the harbour now and at the farm across the harbour black ploughed squares among green grass and brown heather. It would be a beautiful morning.

Then the sun rose clear of the Orphir hills and folded the girl in the light of a new day.¹⁶

The symbolism is of course apparent in that passage. And we are made powerfully aware that characters like Celia are working out their destiny, not just in this remote local setting, but *sub specie æternitatis*. And while many of these stories depict loss and suffering and despair, they are imbued nevertheless with a sense of ultimate serenity, the assurance that 'all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well'. Indeed, I can only sum it up by saying that George's prose, like his poetry, is suffused with that quality which Edwin Muir identified all these years ago—the quality of grace.

Perhaps the most frequently voiced criticism of George's work is that he is stuck in a time warp, that he neglects or deliberately ignores the realities of life here and now. I think this betrays a profound misunderstanding of what the writer is actually trying to do. It implies that he cannot pass a valid comment on the present day unless he deals with the immediate problems and issues of our time, and sets his stories and novels in that kind of context. George sees the human situation, the basic challenges of our life, as being relevant to any age — whether now, or a century past, or 800 years ago. He was not pursuing an artistic gimmick when he set the martyrdom of St Magnus in a Nazi concentration camp. The novel *Time in a Red Coat* is supremely relevant to our own day. Meantime, I rest my case with just one more example: *Greenvoe*.

Far from being backward-looking, this novel turned out to be not just topical but positively prophetic. It was written before the oil age came to Orkney, and before the great uranium controversy of 20 years ago — an event which alerted local people to the dangers they faced from alien forces threatening to devastate the community in the name of progress and the national interest. But what makes *Greenvoe* an unquestioned masterpiece is not its ephemeral topicality, but the truth which it has to tell about human nature and human society. And of course the fact that it is a fine literary achievement, with its rich narrative texture and stylistic virtuosity. George greatly enjoyed writing *Greenvoe*. But soon after its completion — and especially when it became very successful — he started to 'grow cold'¹⁷ to what he had written, and expressed a preference for his second novel, *Magnus*, which understandably was his great labour of love.

16. *A Time to Keep*. John Murray, 2000: 37.

17. *For the Islands I Sing*. John Murray, 1997: 177.

Poet as interpreter

George had a deep sense of community. It permeated nearly everything he wrote. It shows in that weekly essay which he contributed to the local newspaper for more than quarter of a century. It shows in his repeated contention that the poet is essentially a craftsman like the joiner and the plumber. But he recognised also that the poet has a larger, deeper, and essentially solitary function, to which he gave memorable expression in these lines, which some of you may remember seeing in the London Underground a couple of years ago:

The Poet

Therefore he no more troubled the pool of silence
But put on mask and cloak,
Strung a guitar
and moved among the folk.
Dancing they cried,
'Ah, how our sober islands
Are gay again, since this blind lyrical tramp
Invaded the Fair!'

Under the last dead lamp
When all the dancers and masks had gone inside
His cold stare
Returned to its true task, interrogation of silence.¹⁸

Then, towards the end of his autobiography, *For the Islands I Sing*, he says this:

A mystery abides. We move from silence into silence, and there is a brief stir between, every person's attempt to make a meaning of life and time . . . It may be that the dust of good men and women lies more richly in the earth than that of the unjust; between the silences they may be touched, however briefly, with the music of the spheres.¹⁹

And finally, in the last years of his life, there is the stark but superbly resonant poem which was to provide the poet's own epitaph:

A Work for Poets

To have carved on the days of our vanity
A sun
A ship
A star
A cornstalk
Also a few marks

18. *Selected Poems 1954-92*. John Murray, 1996: 24.

19. *For the Islands I Sing*. John Murray, 1996: 181.

From an ancient forgotten time
A child may read
That not far from the stone
A well
Might open for wayfarers
Here is a work for poets —
Carve the runes
Then be content with silence²⁰

George Mackay Brown
1921–1996

Books in print

Poems

Mackay Brown, George

- 1989; 1995: *Wreck of the Archangel*. London.
1996: *Following a Lark*. London.
1996: *Selected Poems 1954-1992*. London.
1998: *Orkney: Pictures & Poems*. Grantown-on-Spey.
2001: *Travellers*. London.
2003: *Collected Poems*. London.

Novels

- 1976; 2002: *Greenvoe*. London.
1994; 1995: *Beside the Ocean of Time*. London.
1995: *Vinland*. London.
1998: *Magnus*. Edinburgh.

Short Stories

- 1989: *The Masked Fisherman*. London.
1995; 1996: *Winter Tales*. London.
1998; 2000: *A Calendar of Love*. London.
1998; 2000: *A Time to Keep*. London.
1998; 2000: *The Island of the Women*. London.

Essays

- 1992: *Rockpools and Daffodils*. Edinburgh.
1999: *Northern Lights: A Poet's Sources*. London.

Autobiography

- 1997; 1998: *For the Islands I Sing*. London.

For Children

- 1990: *Pictures in the Cave*. Edinburgh.

20. *Following a Lark*. John Murray, 1996: 86.