

REVIEW:

George Mackay Brown, *Portrait of Orkney*: with photographs by Werner Forman. (The Hogarth Press, 1981. Hardback, 127 pp., £8.50.)

This is an attractive book. We are well-accustomed to George Mackay Brown's verbal and intellectual creativity, interwoven with considerable skill to present facets of Orkney's richly cultural past. In alliance with Werner Forman, he sets his visually verbal impressions beside those of a photographer for whom mood and a sense of history and environment have also a real value.

Together they explore an Orkney landscape of sea and cliff, farmland and moorland; they seek the inter-relationships of man, his environment, his achievements. It may be the material legacies – a commonplace farm-steading, tombstone or hearth, or an architectural glorification of St. Magnus; or it may be man's thoughts and feelings and beliefs diverted variously into religion or aggression, intellectual byways or musical merriment.

Time and again George Mackay Brown is drawn back to that Viking age of stimulus and activity; the symbol as it would seem of Orcadian self-discovery and maturity. There has been no saga, he reminds us, of the everyday Orcadian, and for all that *Portrait of Orkney* relates to many lives and ways from later times, it is perhaps, in part or in spirit at least, as much a retrospective saga of work-a-day life in 'Scandinavian' Orkney as *Orkneyinga Saga* is a retrospective celebration of an errant feuding and an aristocratic past.

Word and image lap, sometimes shatter, at the the foot of Orkney's past. Strange and happy is the result – more of a painter's canvas than a page or a print. Mood, impression, record and inclination glint and glower and shine forth in a personal, curiously timeless, reflection.

The volume is aimed in the main at those with a general interest and enthusiasm for Orkney. It will serve equally for those less fortunate as a rare, evocative introduction to Orkney's distinctively Scoto-Scandinavian past. For those with a specialist concern for Orcadian

history or prehistory it should still be a delight – a welcome diversion from prosaically factual monographs!

It is good to see the appearance of this kind of volume, and the Scottish Society for Northern Studies in particular is well-placed to appreciate and commend the generous commercial sponsorship of such a publication. To the oil companies, as well as to the artists, full credit should be given.

John R. Baldwin