

THROUGH NORTHERN EYES: SCOTO-SCANDINAVIAN LITERARY PARALLELS.

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In the May 1975 number of "Northern Studies", Ian Campbell gave us a thought-provoking analysis of George Mackay Brown's short story "The Wireless Set", from the collection *A Time to Keep*. "The whole collection", he concluded, "...shows that the North, remote, half-Scandinavianised, can be a mirror for a distant, impossibly complex urbanised culture in which can perhaps be seen some forgotten or overlooked truth."¹ This nicely understated judgement provides, in my opinion, a fruitful point of departure for the study, not only of Scots, but also of Scandinavian literature. In the first place, Scandinavia as a whole is geographically, and, at least in recent times, politically, on the periphery of Europe. Secondly, the individual Scandinavian countries – in particular Norway and Sweden – have to a greater extent than any other advanced Western country resisted the trend towards political, economic and most of all cultural centralisation, with the result that their provinces have not become "provincial" in the usual English sense of the word. The implication of this for literature is that Scandinavian writers need not feel constrained, like the majority of their opposite numbers in the other European countries, to draw their subject-matter from middle-class metropolitan life; indeed, many of the finest Scandinavian writers have consciously set out to prove that a regional setting is no barrier to universality of theme. In Denmark, S.S. Blicher, Hans Kirk and Johannes V. Jensen have written classic works of fiction set in the moors and hills of Jutland. In Norway, Knut Hamsun, Tarjei Vesaas and Olav Duun are literary giants who drew their inspiration from rural life (in Northern Norway, Telemark and Trøndelag respectively.) In Sweden, there are few major literary figures in the past century or so whose works have not had a pronounced regional bias, from Erik Axel Karlfeldt (Dalarna) and Selma Lagerlöf (Värmland) down to Eyvind Johnson, Sara Lidman and Per-Olof Sundman (Norrland). A recurrent theme for many of these writers is the moral and spiritual integrity of the traditional rural way of life, and the threat to it posed by the outside world, in the shape of materialistic "progress". My contention in this article is that the Scottish and Scandinavian literary traditions show a remarkable similarity in this respect, and by way of

proving my theory I should like to compare two works of fiction which seem to me to have a demonstratable kinship with each other:—George Mackay Brown's *Greenvœ*, and *Atómstöðin* (*The Atom Station*), by Halldór Kiljan Laxness. This example is of course carefully chosen to prove my point, but I suggest that many other such comparisons can be made by anyone with a knowledge of the literatures in question.

The Atom Station, first published in 1948, is a ferocious satire on politics, big business, and the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of the Icelandic "Establishment" in general. The scene is Iceland at the end of the Second World War, and the issue which dominates the book is the request by "a Great Power" for land on which to build an atomic war base. Here Laxness is concerned with the post-war debate as to whether the Americans, who had been in Iceland since 1941, should be allowed to maintain military bases there in peacetime. Like Hans Christian Andersen in the tale of "The Emperor's New Clothes", Laxness inserts into his story an unimpressible neutral observer; in this case, a seemingly innocent but in fact eminently commonsensical serving-girl from the North of the country, called Ugla (Owl). Like her avian namesake, Ugla approaches life with a coldly practical, slightly incredulous stare, which cuts effortlessly through the hypocrisy, affectation and deceitfulness of life in the decadent South.

When Ugla first hears of the rumour that Iceland is to be "sold", she cannot bring herself to believe it: "He asked whether I did not read the newspapers, but I laughed and said that I was from the north. Then he showed me an article in the evening paper which said that a request had been received from one of the Great Powers that Iceland should sell, lend or give it her capital city, Reykjavík, otherwise named Smoky Bay, or some other bay equally suitable for attack or defence in an atomic war. I was speechless at such nonsense and asked in my innocence if this were not the same as everything else one read in newspapers: one of the first things I had been taught as a child was never to believe a single word that was written in newspapers."²

Ugla's "innocence", however, must be taken with a pinch of salt. In an earlier section of the novel we have seen her being interrogated by her employer's wife, an appalling snob and convinced reactionary:

"All right, my girl, that's fine," she said. "And not one of those who

wallow in books, I hope?"

"I have lain awake many a night with a book."

"God in Heaven help you," said the woman, and looked at me aghast.

"What were you reading?"

"Everything."

"Everything?"

"In the country everything is read," I said, "beginning with the Icelandic Sagas; and then everything."

"But not the Communist paper?"

"We read whatever papers we can get for nothing out in the country", I replied."³

Throughout the novel, Uglá's pragmatism and Northern broad-mindedness are set against the extravagant ideologies and prejudices of middle-class Reykjavík, with devastating effect, and this reference to the Sagas is only the first of many. In Chapter 6, for example, she meets the young policeman who later becomes her lover:

"But have you a vocation?" he asked.

"A vocation?" I said. "What's that?"

"Have you not read in the papers that country people have to have a vocation?" he asked. "The papers are always saying so."

"I was taught never to believe a single word that is written in the papers, and nothing except what is written in the Icelandic Sagas," I replied."⁴

She compares the policeman to her employer:

"Both of them had in generous measure that Icelandic talent, straight from the Sagas, of speaking mockingly of what was nearest to their hearts – this one about his vocation, the other about his children."⁵

The Sagas symbolize Truth, Honour, Integrity – the capital letters are unavoidable here – and fulfil the same function, at least in Uglá's case, as the Bible does for devout Christians: they demonstrate how one should live. In Chapter 8, this theme is interwoven with that of another topical controversy in post-war Iceland – the return from Denmark of the bones of Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-45), Iceland's national poet. After their arrival in Reykjavík, the poet's remains were stolen and taken to his birthplace in the north, before being retrieved and buried at Thingvellir. In *The Atom Station*, Uglá happens to come from the same Northern valley as "The Nation's

Darling”, but amid the heated debate which surrounds the disposal of the sacred bones, it is another image which comes into Uglá’s mind – that of her father:

“...I mean rather his spiritual image, the Saga, the one thing he acknowledged unreservedly with a sword in place of a scythe, ocean in place of land, a hero in place of a farmer –and after having seen the pale necromancers who in that room with its many forgeries of Nature had talked longwindedly about mildewed bones to him who dwells inaccessible in the mountaintops, that fairy person deepest in our own breasts, I was refreshed and comforted by the memory of this rugged image of my origin.”⁶

The impact of the Sagas on the country people also has a personal, emotional dimension:

“In *Njál’s Saga* there is no mention of the soul, not in *Grettir’s Saga* either, still less in *Egil’s Saga*, and these three are the greatest of the Sagas; and least of all in the *Edda*. One could talk endlessly about the weather one could talk about dry spells, but not about sunshine. Likewise, one could talk about the Sagas, but not criticize them; one could trace ancestries, but never one’s own mind: only the mind knows what is next the heart, says the *Edda*.”⁷

Not surprisingly, Uglá is at first taken aback by the tantrums, insults and sheer boorishness she witnesses in her employer’s house, and of which she is often the victim; and the garrulosity of her Bohemian acquaintances in the capital fills her with good-natured contempt. Similarly, in *Greenvoe*, George Mackay Brown makes a subtle observation on the linguistic behaviour of his characters:

“(Miss Fortin-Bell) spoke as if she were shouting into a gale. (The islanders would never understand why the gentry spoke in such heroic voices – their own speech was slow and wondering, like water lapping among stones.) The village watched with sardonic awe as the grand folk greeted each other with shouts and kisses. (Their own greeting, even after a decade of absence, was a murmur and a dropping of eyes.)”⁸

Restraint in language, as in behaviour, so both writers imply, is paradoxically a sign of deep-felt emotion, whereas the uninhibited

emotionalism of the Fortin-Bells and the Icelandic counterpart betrays their shallow superficiality.

Meanwhile, Ugly discovers that she is pregnant, and even here there is a linguistic dimension: she feels herself “tortured by the sort of love-sorrow which one thinks there can be no word for except in Danish, but which it is possible to establish and analyse with a simple urine-test.”⁹ Danish, with its overtones of cultural superiority, may have a word to express Ugly’s condition, but the reality needs no fancy linguistic label. Scottish literature, of course, abounds in episodes where Scots dialect and standard English clash, usually to the latter’s discomfiture – Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *Sunset Song*, for example, has many such instances – and a number of Scandinavian authors have used the dialect/standard language dichotomy in their own native languages to highlight class-cum-sociocultural differences.

When, in *The Atom Station*, the scene shifts to Ugly’s home in the North, we very soon realize what she has been talking about. The local worthies have splendid names like Bard-Jón and Geiri of Midhouse, in contrast to the scornfully-nicknamed “Fruit-Blood”, “Cleopatra”, “Brilliantine”, “Two Hundred Thousand Pliers”, and all the other frenetic Bohemian set in the capital, and “For most of the day they would discuss the Saga heroes over their carpentry.”¹⁰ Bard-Jón favours a scaldic turn of phrase: “Bard-Jón never called a church anything but “God’s window-horse”, nor the pastor anything but “the stallion of the soul-stud”, and Geiri is a fervent admirer of the saga-hero Thorgerir Hávarsson. Ugly’s father quotes from *Njáls Saga*, just like his daughter, and is steeped in *Egil’s Saga*. To these people, the sordid squabbling of the political leaders corresponds to “Saga-tales of throat-biting, vomit-squirting and the gouging out of eyes”,¹¹ in other words, the less edifying passages of the Sagas.

When Ugly’s former lover turns up at her home with his newfound wealth, she is not tempted to go away with him. True to her principles, she refuses both him and her even richer former employer. But she no longer views her own home in the same way as before; her country-bred acceptance of Nature and of the simple rhythms of life has not survived her exposure to city life:

“When the peace of autumn has become poetic instead of being taken for granted ... the last day of the plover become a matter of personal

regret ... the pony become associated with the history of art and mythology ... then the time has come to say goodbye. The world-bacteria has overcome you, the countryside has turned into literature, poetry and art; and you no longer belong there."¹² She returns to the capital, and to her lover, now languishing in jail.

If *The Atom Station* shows us modern urban civilization through the eyes of a country girl, *Greenvoe* does well-nigh the opposite. The setting here is a thinly-disguised Stromness, but we seem to breathe the languid air of *Under Milk Wood*. Like Dylan Thomas's Llaregub, Greenvoe, despite its mixed population of saints and sinners, seem to have a kind of spiritual and emotional unity. Tensions, even hatreds, exist, but the inhabitants have a definite corporate identity. Into this enclosed world comes the mysterious Stranger who signals the impending doom of the community. Whereas *The Atom Station* uses an innocent girl, with the help of several cynical acquaintances, to comment on contemporary civilization, Mackay Brown employs a much more varied repertoire of commentators: all the inhabitants of the village – intelligent, imbecilic, envious, drunken or sober, God-fearing or atheistic, are allowed at some time or other to have their say, and sometimes, as in the extract already quoted, the whole village acts as a Greek chorus. In *The Atom Station*, people like Uglia's employer and his brother-in-law the Prime Minister, though native Icelanders, are quite unrepresentative of the feelings of the people, and are indeed the very people who smooth the way for the Americans. Similarly, in *Greenvoe*, the Fortin-Bells represent a resident but non-native middle-class, with no commitment to island life: a species familiar to us from the Hebridean comedies of Compton Mackenzie. When the "Black Star" project destroys the community: "The Fortin-Bells, grown rich once more with compensation, stalked deer in the west."¹³

There is no single character in *Greenvoe* who can be said to correspond to Uglia, but the closest parallel both to her and to her cynical friend the organist is perhaps "The Skarf", the fisherman-poet and chronicler, who sits at his writing-desk in oilskin and thigh-boots. The structure of the novel is episodic, and at intervals we are treated to extracts from The Skarf's unfinished epic chronicle of Hellya – the island on which Greenvoe is situated – tracing its history from the first settlers, the "children of darkness". As the story of *Greenvoe* proceeds, so The Skarf's chronicle unfolds, and the two intertwine harmoniously to stress the continuity of life on the island. Ivan

Westray the ferryman reads *The Orkneyinga Saga* at night in his bed, while Samuel and Rachel Whanesss equally devotedly read their Bible – each of the stronger, more positive characters in the story has this love for the printed word at its best, and a reverence for the past which their reading (or writing) opens up to them. The comparison with the Saga-reading Icelanders is obvious. When, on page 43, the “Stranger” appears, he is carrying “a suitcase, a briefcase, a typewriter and a tape-recorder” – the apparatus both of bureaucracy and of technology. He is nameless, and even his signature in the hotel register is eerily indecipherable:

“It was not a name, it was more a strange involuted squiggle, a sign or a hieroglyph out of the remote past or the remote future.”¹⁴

The Indian pedlar, who is the first person to see him at close quarters, find him ghost-like and inhuman, and his remarks bear out my point about the importance of the “word”:

“This creature and I, indeed live on different stars. I have known for some time that the mysterious omnipotent life-giving word has grown very old. Yet men must dance to some music, answer to some utterance. ... I shake with supernatural dread.”¹⁵

The evil-minded and malicious Mrs. Evie, on the other hand, has only admiration for the “outside world”, and spiteful contempt for her fellow-islanders. To her, the Stranger is an avenging angel:

“If you ask me”, said Mrs. Olive Evie, “it is to clean up this island. That’s why he’s here. Nothing else. Oh, they know all about us in the south, the authorities. They’re not fools. They know what’s going on, the drinking and the bad debts and the false tax returns and the unpaid car licences and the malingering and wrong claims for subsidies. The man is here for no other purpose than to put this island to rights.”¹⁶ It comes as no surprise to us when the impersonal Stranger is seen entering Mr. Fortin-Bell’s car:

“A hat and coat and scarf and brief-case – one thrusting fluent articulation – went from hotel to car and relaxed into the seat beside the laird.”¹⁷

The first appearance of the Americans in *The Atom Station* has the

same rapid, almost hallucinatory quality:

“At last they arrived. Their car sped up to the front gate and was speeding away again almost at once, and they on the doorstep with a finger on the bell; I opened the door and let them in.”¹⁸

In Chapter 5 of *Greenvoe*, the Stranger – now in the role of recording angel – perambulates the village:

“The guest stood at Timmy Folster’s burnt door. ... The guest made a mark in his notebook. ... The guest stood at the door of the Kerstons. ... The guest wrote a sign on the white paper ...;” and all the villagers are coldly assessed in terms of their potential usefulness to “Operation Black Star”.

In the next chapter, the workmen move in, following the earth-moving equipment, and Greenvoe begins to crumble into history: “Piecemeal thereafter the village died.”¹⁹ Some of the locals adapt to the upheaval better than others: even the Skarf becomes a clerk in the Black Star office, wearing “a blue suit and a grey tie”, and putting his pen to hitherto undreamed-of uses. But, like Uгла, his political views lead to his dismissal, and, filling his pockets with stones, he sails in his leaky boat out into the ocean.

After fifteen months of frenetic activity, the project is suddenly called off, the workmen depart, and Hellya becomes a deserted Orcadian St. Kilda. But after a further lapse of ten years, a little boatload of former inhabitants – reminiscent of those first immigrants in the dawn of the island’s history – return to the island to enact the final rite of the Ancient Mystery of the Horsemen, another potent theme which has formed a strand in the story. When the miracle has occurred, and the hallowed horseshoe is transmuted into whisky and bread, then we know that the ancient community will rise again, like the new green world promised in *Völuspá*.

Summary

To give an exhaustive account of the two books I have been writing about here would necessitate the writing of a third book; in this article I can only hope to indicate some of the richness of theme and incident which they contain. Obviously, there are striking dissimilarities

between the two authors, as between the products of their imaginations: Laxness, the cosmopolitan intellectual, man of many creeds, Catholic and Communist in turn; and Mackay Brown, the Catholic mystic, fascinated by man's need for ritual and a sense of historical continuity, himself enclosed within the self-imposed confines of his island home and reputed never even to have crossed the Cheviots. The following extract from an article on the Norwegian novelist Olav Duun seems to me to fit his Orcadian counterpart rather neatly: "He had himself chosen isolation in order to be able to create. Nearly all his books draw their subject-matter from his native district [Trøndelag] – But in fact these works bear witness to a richness of mind which is seemingly inexhaustible."²⁰ It is typical of the similar preoccupations but different emphases of the two men that Mackay Brown seems to value the very antiquity of the Sagas, with their power to conjure up the whole mediaeval world for us – a world of both savagery and solemn ritual – whereas Laxness was the first Iclander to render some of the best-known Sagas into racy, modern Icelandic – making them even more relevant to the present day. Yet both men are first and foremost products of their native soil, and their creative talents are indelibly moulded by the fact of their having roots in particular – to most of us – remote, parts of the world. It would, I think, be hard to find an English writer of the first rank about whom the same could be said. Since Hardy who himself was something of an exception in English literary circles of the time, English writers, like many of their colleagues in the other advanced states of the Western world, have looked to urban/suburban middle-class life for their material. Not even the rather hackneyed "gritty realism" school of Northern writers such as Stan Barstow, John Braine and David Storey, and certainly not the Brangwens and Birkins and Criches of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, with their ultra-20th-century sensibilities, share the Scoto-Scandinavian sense of rootedness in a particular place and historico-cultural tradition. The spectre of *Cold Comfort Farm* haunts the serious "provincial" English novelist, threatening anti-climactic doom, and is only warded off by recourse to bucolic frivolity, as in H.E. Bates' lighthearted comedies of the Larkin family. But as the outside world encroaches more and more on the former "periphery", whether in the shape of Great Power nuclear politics, oil exploration, or any other apocalyptic menace, there is going to be ample scope for writers able and willing to face that challenge and defend the values of civilization, and it is my belief that Scottish writers, with their cultural inheritance of moral earnestness and sense of tradition – qualities

shared by their Scandinavian counterparts – are particularly well-suited to this role. In their “manipulation of the “provincial” response”,²¹ such writers as Neil Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon, in the past, and George Mackay Brown, Iain Crichton Smith, Sorley Maclean and Fionn MacColla, in more recent times, sound a Northern note, and it is to Scandinavia that we must look for their literary analogues.

References:

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8. George Mackay Brown. *Greenvoe* (Penguin, 1976), 13.
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