

George Mackay Brown in *Facts on File Companion to British Poetry 1900 to the Present*

BROWN, GEORGE MACKAY (1921–1996)

To understand George Mackay Brown's art, the reader must appreciate its deep rootedness in the poet's place of birth. Orkney looms large in all of his writings, its lore, language, history, and myth, providing Brown with most of the material he used in his 50 years as a professional writer. Brown was born and lived all his life in Stromness, a small town on Mainland, the largest of the Orkney Islands, situated off the northern coast of Scotland. Except for his student years at Newbattle Abbey and Edinburgh University, as a protégé of EDWIN MUIR, Brown rarely left Orkney. He returned time and again to the matter of Orkney as inspiration for his work, often evoking its Viking heritage and the influence of the mysterious Neolithic settlers who predated the Norsemen. The other abiding influence on his work is his Roman Catholicism—he converted at the age of 40, after years of reflection.

Brown's background was poor. His father, John Brown, was a postman, and his mother, Mhairi Mackay Brown, worked in a hotel. Brown attended the local school, Stromness Academy, where he discovered his talent for writing in the weekly "compositions" set by his English teacher. A bout of tuberculosis ended his schooling and led to his becoming a writer, since he was scarcely fit for a regular job. From the early 1940s, he earned a living as a professional writer, often publishing his work in the local newspaper, for which he continued to write until a week before his death.

Brown's first verse publication, *Loaves and Fishes*, appeared in 1959. It set the tone for the volumes that followed at regular intervals for the next 35 years. He considers, in traditional verse forms, the lives of the islanders, focusing on the rituals and rhythms of the seasons as experienced by the Orcadian farmers and fishermen among whom he made his living. A later volume celebrates them explicitly in its title, *Fishermen with Ploughs*. Just as Brown saw himself in the traditional mold of the "maker," the poet who was an intrinsic part of the community, so his vision of the world celebrated the timeless nature of rural life on Orkney's islands in poetry untouched by the influence of his more experimental contemporaries.

A typical poem from this early collection is "Elegy," in which Brown interweaves the rituals of the agricultural calendar with those of the Christian faith. The opening stanza illustrates much of the essence of Brown's art:

The Magnustide long swords of rain
Quicken 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?

The use of *Magnustide* for “spring” not only locates the poem in Orkney, where the medieval cathedral of St. Magnus dominates the capital town of Kirkwall, but also evokes the peculiarly Scandinavian ambience of the place. The ploughman's work is expressed in religious terms, and the reference to the seed introduces a central image in Brown's work. The sower and the seed, with its obvious Christian connotations, was a defining concept in Brown's work. As he said himself, it “seemed to illuminate the whole of life for me . . . from the most primitive breaking of the soil to Christ himself with his parables of agriculture and the majestic symbolism of his passion, death and resurrection.”

The rich Viking heritage of the Orkney islands—which were in Norway's possession until 1470—is a constant presence in Brown's work. The raw material offered by the medieval *Orkneyinga Saga* is sensitively exploited by Brown in many of his best poems, and at greater length in his novel *Magnus*. One of his later poems, “Tryst on Egilsay,” demonstrates his narrative gift and his ability to evoke the harsh world of the ancient earls. The poem uses first-person voices to retell the story of the martyrdom of Magnus at the hands of his cousin Hakon. Here Hakon reveals his ambition:

This can never be good, a cloven earldom.
Bad governance, the folk
Fallen into faction, insolence, orisons.
I too would have a sheaf carved on the lintel.
Therefore to Egilsay we have sailed,
The prows of my eight ships beaked like falcons.

This shows a mature Brown, no longer reliant on rhyme, but still strongly attached to the powerfully rhythmic and alliterative tradition of the ancient bards. To read George Mackay Brown is to experience an uncompromising vision of island life. His autobiography is entitled *For the Islands I Sing*, and although he will always be associated with his beloved Orkney, his work has a quiet authority that will ensure it is appreciated far beyond those shores.

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