

FAITH FROM THE ASHES:
CULTURAL MEANING IN THE MAJOR PROSE
OF GEORGE MACKAY BROWN (1921-1996).

Marie Hlavac.

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Masters of Arts (Honours)
of the University of New England
January 1997.

CONTENTS.

Introduction: pp. (i) to (viii)

Chapter One. *Greenvoe*: pp.1-59.
Footnotes: pp.60-64.

Chapter Two. *Magnus*: pp.65-100
Footnotes: pp.101-106.

Chapter Three. *Time in a Red Coat*: pp.107-153.
Footnotes: pp.154-156.

Chapter Four. *Stories and Tales*: pp.157-191.
Footnotes: pp.192-197.

Chapter Five. *Vinland and Beside the Ocean of Time*: pp.198-219.
Footnotes: pp.220-222.

Conclusion: pp.223-229.

Bibliography.

Primary sources. Texts by G.M. Brown: pp. 230-231.

Critical works which specifically assess Brown's writing: pp.231-233.

References which are specifically concerned with Orkney: pp.233-234.

Fiction: pp. 234-235.

Plays: p. 235.

Articles: pp.235-236.

Obituaries: p.236.

Word Dictionaries: p. 236.

Personal letters: p.236.

Books: pp.237-242.

Appendix: Copies of two letters from George Mackay Brown. (p. 243 - 247)

Preface.

Initially in the reading for my thesis, and due to my background of studying medieval texts (in translation), I had attempted to evaluate George Mackay Brown as a (neo-)medieval writer, but quickly realised that this label was inadequate. Brown was an historian of the culture of the people, and many of his insights are both modern in their recognition of contemporary society's despair, and eternally Catholic in their faith in man's destiny and the possibility of his redemption, both in this world and in the next.

* * * * *

I owe particular debt to the following people:
George Mackay Brown for his kindness in writing to me;
the staff at both *Stromness Books and Prints* in Orkney and *Antiquariat* near Bowral, N.S.W., for their time and trouble in supplying me with both primary and secondary texts; the *Society for the Study of Scottish Literature* for supplying articles; the Department of English and Communication Studies at the University of New England, whose teachers and clerical staff were unfailingly considerate and helpful; and the staff at Dixson Library, who obtained references from far afield.

My greatest debt is to my supervisor, Professor J.S.

Ryan, for giving (considerable) time, patience, the lending of many books, wise counsel and constructive criticism. His wide scholarship and personal interest in and appreciation of Brown's writing was inspirational.

Introduction.

This thesis seeks to examine, define and categorise if possible, the major prose texts, Greenvoe, Magnus, Time in a Red Coat, Vinland and Beside the Ocean of Time and to canvas the short stories and tales written by the Scottish (Orkadian) author, George Mackay Brown. To date, little careful scholarship would seem to have been published about him in the mainstream, international recognition and praise occurring only recently, from 1994 when Beside the Ocean of Time was short-listed for the Booker Prize. His seemingly very limited material and preoccupation with religious themes had set him far outside the literary norm for most of his productive life, so that any widespread appreciation of his literary talents only came late. The sources which I have used, however, are fully acknowledged in the footnotes and bibliography.

This thesis will use those assessments to explore the conflicting attitudes towards Brown's work and to show that much of the appraisal of him to date is slightly patronising, rather shallow, bland but only narrowly focused. Also, occasionally, the criticism is unnecessarily bitter, Brown's anti-Presbyterianism and essential Catholicism offending some reviewers to such an extent that they lose objectivity.

In the main, Brown has been seen, mistakenly, as this

thesis will argue, as a quirky regional writer, religious and folkloric, interesting certainly and giving pleasure, but out of the main stream and of little note on any wider literary scene. This thesis rejects that view and aims to show, by focusing mainly on his longer prose texts on which his real status depends, that his writings are distinctive, have universal application and are made more interesting and meaningful and ecathological as they are built on European and Scottish - especially Orkney - history, traditions and texts, but also that they need to be digested slowly to be fully savoured. It is perhaps now, after his death in 1996, to attempt some form of serious overview of his work.

This thesis is also a product of my previous studies for a Master of Letters (Medieval Background) in English, in the course of which I explored the movement forward in time in medieval perceptions and values, in the study of J.R.R. Tolkien's major prose. History, historiography, Catholic Christianity and folk, legend and fairy-tale were also relevant to that study, and have all provided further valuable insights into an understanding and appreciation of Brown's work.

George Mackay Brown was born on October 17, 1921 in Stromness, Orkney and he died in hospital in Kirkwall on April 13, 1996, aged 74, being buried three days later on St Magnus' Day. His autobiography is due to be published by John Murray in 1997.¹ He was the youngest of five children of John Brown, a postman and part-time tailor, and Mary (Mhairi Mackay) Brown,² a Gaelic speaker from the Scottish mainland. 'He always attributed the mystical element in his work ... to her.'³ She and her eight brothers and sisters were brought up in a croft house, now in ruins, in the Braal district on the north coast of Sutherland, her father a crofter-fisherman called Hugh Mackay, and her mother, Georgina Mackay, 'after whom I was named'.⁴ He never knew his father's parents who had died before he was born: 'all I know about my grandfather was that he was a shoemaker, or cobbler.'⁵

Growing up in Stromness, all the children, including George Mackay Brown, loved 'everything about Scotland and its history',⁶ were proud of Orkney's Norse inheritance and thought of themselves as ' "sons of the Vikings" which was true to a very limited extent, if at all.'⁷

He went to Stromness Academy. He was always shy but writing came naturally from an early age. "I didn't enjoy school," he said, "but every week when the teacher handed back our compositions she would say: 'George Brown has written the best essay again.'⁸

(IV)

His health was never good and he contracted tuberculosis which left him with chronic bronchitis and unable to work for long periods, although for a while he was Orkney correspondent for a number of mainland papers. Even so, he kept writing, poetry for the most part, but recognition as a talented poet was achieved only with the encouragement of Edwin Muir, Warden of Newbattle Abbey College, near Edinburgh, where Brown was a student on and off between 1951 and 1956: 'But for him (Muir) I think I'd never have had the courage to send any of my poems anywhere.'⁹ Muir was a friend, and Brown frequently mentioned him in his column in the *Orcadian*,¹⁰ often on his birthday, and was aware of and saddened by the death of his son, Gavin, in 1991.¹¹

With Muir's support, Brown gained the qualifications for entry to Edinburgh University, where, between 1956 and 1960 he completed an honours degree in English Literature. In 1961, and highly significantly in that it had a major impact on his writing, Brown converted to Catholicism, and between 1962 and 1964 he did post-graduate study on the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins, whom he saw as having 'an endless thirst for the sensuous beauty swarming everywhere in nature',¹² and as one who 'brought a startling new vision into the world'.¹³ Consequently, Hopkins became a major influence on his writing. Eric Linklater was another forceful impact, as his books made 'living in Orkney an exciting

and rich thing',¹⁴ enabling many Orcadians to really love their islands.

Subsequently, Brown rarely left Orkney, living in the family home until 1963, a year after his mother's death, and then moving to 3 Mayburn Court, Stromness, a Council flat which he rented for over twenty years and which he eventually purchased in November, 1989. As a child, from the age of eight, he travelled once a year, fifteen miles by bus to Kirkwall, and occasionally the family had a holiday in an Orkney farmhouse.¹⁵ The Society of Authors Travel Award (1967) took him to Ireland in 1968, but otherwise, except for shortish trips,¹⁶ he seemed disinclined to travel far, and being a Scottish nationalist, was proud of the fact that he had never been to England.¹⁷ Brown's life experience, therefore, like his writing, reflects and confirms the depth of his attachment to Orkney, and to Scotland, particularly its northern regions.

A feature in Brown's writing is his rejection of the twentieth century, of its values and its technology. This attitude is reflected somewhat in his lifestyle, but Brown was more pragmatic in real life than he was in his fiction. He had all the comforts of modern existence, and, reluctantly, appreciated their convenience, explaining:

I had exchanged ancient tranquility for gold and tinsel. But most of us have come so far away from that poor earth-rooted beautiful way of life that to go back

would be more painful than to struggle on into the age of the AtomWhat is important is never to forget the unique place where we started.¹⁸

Brown's weekly column in *The Orcadian*¹⁹ was dominated by reminiscence and contains much evidence that its author did 'not feel entirely at ease in modern progressive Orkney',²⁰ that he was interested in and has many fond memories of the past,²¹ and that he was deeply concerned about the effects of pollution, mining and the drilling and transporting of oil.²² It is obvious, in perusing these columns, that Orkney and thus Brown, came very late to twentieth century technology. In Stromness in the 1920's paraffin lamps provided light.²³ Brown did not use a telephone until he was in his twenties,²⁴ did not have his own telephone installed until the seventies,²⁵ bought his first refrigerator in 1981,²⁶ wrote in longhand rather than use a typewriter, and did not like crowds, noise or too much traffic.

Brown won many literary awards and recognitions, including an OBE in 1974 for his services to literature, but in the main he thought little of them: 'Booker prize - Nobel prize - what a song and dance about such baubles!',²⁷ as only time, he thought, proves an author's stature. His life continued to be lived in Orkney, although not as quietly as he would have wished, as he had to deal with many visitors and a huge correspondence. He tried to write every morning, six

days a week, this being accomplished at the breakfast table, after pushing the marmalade out of the way. He was driven to write, he said, 'by the necessity to eat, drink and pay the rent',²⁸ and believed that even if 'some mornings you have no idea what to write about',²⁹ a writer should be patient and eventually an image will present itself.

Rackwick valley on Hoy was always a special place to Brown and he visited it at least once every year, envisaging it as the kind of place where, after a nuclear holocaust, survivors could find succour. Its depopulation, which began last century, Brown felt very deeply, seeing the accidental drowning of the last two children in Rackwick in 1952 as 'like the old Fate uttering final sentence over Rackwick.'³⁰ Yet things were changing. In April, 1996, just days before Brown died, the first baby in more than fifty years was born in Rackwick.³¹

It is likely that it was Brown's chronic illness 'that provided both the initial incentive and the time to develop his writing gift.'³² It certainly meant that he had to spend long periods in hospital, in Kirkwall and in Aberdeen, and it prevented him from serving in WWII and holding down a 'normal' job. Yet, even if poor health explains why he rarely travelled far, his deep and abiding love of Crkney and the unending inspiration he gained in being there, cannot be questioned.

Brown's own words best answer those critics who carp at his narrowness:

Writers that have been born and nurtured in a small community invariably want to break the circle and to reach a wider audience. It is not necessary, to try to achieve 'universality' (though that is too grand a phrase for the work of writers), to break away from the native roots and sources. Thomas Hardy wrote about Wessex and William Faulkner about one small county in the deep south of the U.S.A.³³

Brown was a humble man, kind,³⁴ and he had many friends, both local and international. His life interconnected significantly with his work, the passing of the last remnants of traditional Orkney being within his own experience, and his scholarship invested his writing with remarkable cultural depth and authenticity, and, his faith, conviction.

* * * * *