

Chapter Five: *Vinland* and *Beside the Ocean of Time*.

This chapter is concerned with examining, in briefer compass, George Mackay Brown's two most recent novels, Vinland, 1992, and Beside the Ocean of Time, 1994.<sup>1</sup> Content and style are both vintage Brown, the Viking world being the main focus, the narrative composed of an intermingling of history, legend and story, and the hero in each being an Orkneyman with a Christian view of the world. Vinland's timespan encompasses only one lifetime, but these are the years of Viking glory, empire and enterprise, when Christianity was first introduced but had only gradually impacted on the traditional Viking outlook, and those in power were ruthlessly exploiting the common people. Beside the Ocean of Time is episodic in nature and spans a thousand years of Viking, European, Scottish and Orkney history, its ending a warning of the consequences of greed and materialism. Both novels are vehemently anti-war and see adherence to (Catholic) Christianity as offering hope for renewal.

Arguably, both Vinland and Beside the Ocean of Time are less deserving of detailed comment, when compared to Brown's first three novels, Greenvoe, Magnus and Time in a Red Coat. Greenvoe is especially important as it was

Brown's first novel, evolved from his earlier story writing experience and so an important advance for him. Magnus contains an intriguing mixture of material derived from many sources. In it are elements of saga, history, theology, homily, philosophy, hagiography, pageant and ritual. Its text is dense, complex, multi-layered and one which challenges the reader's intellect and imagination. Time in a Red Coat, in this writer's considered opinion, is the finest example of Brown's major novels. It successfully combines many diverse elements to produce a unified whole. Its anti-war message has universal application in the post-modern world. It effectively uses symbol and displays scholarship in its drawing on literary tradition. All three novels were considered efforts, in that each took at least a year to write.

In comparison, Vinland and Beside the Ocean of Time appear rushed, less polished, atmospheric certainly, but lacking the philosophical and religious depth apparent in the other three. They seem, despite their length, to be, at core, impressionistic chronicles, and so lack the complexity, diversity, and sometimes very beautiful writing found in Greenvoe, Magnus and Time in a Red Coat. This is not to say, as this chapter will show, that they are unworthy of serious critical attention, or that they lack both interest and merit. Yet there is some truth, with reference to Vinland and Beside the

Ocean of Time, that in some critics' view Brown is a writer who goes too often to the same well<sup>2</sup>. The challenge was to present the same or similar material at least as effectively as he did in his first three novels. Given that they were, each in its own way, brilliant pieces of work, it was a challenge which a tired, older man failed to meet.

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Vinland is an arresting title, linking, as it does, to the Vinland Sagas and the Viking discovery of North America. Many have pondered on the historical accuracy of this story, and various attempts have been made to offer conclusive proof<sup>2</sup> that the Vikings did indeed reach the American continent, but it was not until the 1960's that archaeological evidence was found to be definitive.<sup>3</sup> In all its aspects Vinland is rooted in historical fact. The action moves within those lands which were, in the eleventh century, Norwegian in culture and language and its central character, Ranald, appears in a number of sagas. Ranald is Brown's own creation, but many of those who surround him are figures found in the sagas and other historical sources.<sup>4</sup>

The significance of the novel's title lies in the

symbolism with which Vinland has been invested.<sup>5</sup> It is a kind of paradise, unpolluted, fertile, rich and untouched and it is holy, the first ashore, Leif Ericson, 'went on his knees and kissed the new land.'<sup>6</sup> In reality, as depicted while the Viking travellers were actually there, Vinland, although environmentally pristine, is a place of bloodshed, enmity and insecurity. As Ranald says: 'I saw greed and murder and treachery enough in Vinland.'(p.181) Yet he dreams of returning, to make peace with the Skraelings(p.56) and because he has a hunger to be in a place which is 'in complete harmony with nature'(p.96). When he speaks of it he is filled with a deep longing to return(p.119), a desire which remains with him all his life(p.230).<sup>7</sup>

However, it is made clear to the reader that Vinland is not an Eden<sup>8</sup> as 'the Fall operates there too'(p.181). Facing death, the voyage Ranald wishes, indeed expects to make, is to an island beyond Vinland(p.230), to Tir-nan-og (the title of Chapter VI), 'The land in the western ocean ... the island of the immortals (where) live the people who have endured their lives worthily on earth'(p.116). It is a land of plenty, a place where no work has to be done, where the orchards are always full of fruit and the crops ready to be harvested. Saint Brandon also visited these islands, and landed in the place 'Adam had lived in before the Fall'(p.180), although he and his party did not reach heaven itself.

In Vinland Brown has, unusually, drawn heavily on Celtic tradition, especially in regard to the afterlife. Vinland itself has been invested with aspects of the 'otherworld' atmosphere of Irish mythology. Ranald's journey there reflects the *imrama* or Voyages stories, in which the hero sets out on a journey across the western sea and finds himself in fairyland.<sup>9</sup> The magical quality and strange loveliness of these Irish stories are deep within Vinland, emerging at intervals in the text and investing it with a mystical spirituality. Irish monks are adrift on the Viking sea in 'two ox-hide boats heading for Iceland'(p.35) and the one word they speak is 'Pax'. The candles of Christ were lit on the altars of Orkney'(p.51) by Celtic monks and priests long before Christianity became the official faith. Ranald, toward the end of his life, becomes a kind of monk, a hermit who studies and prays, explores Christian philosophy and abhors war, bloodshed and worldly struggles for power.

Celtic mythology also underlies Ranald's relationship with the sea. As he gets older the spell of the sea upon him grows so strong that 'a yearning like madness'(p.134) stirs him to put to sea again. He tells the monks that he almost ordered the building of a ship 'that would unlock the western horizon for him'(p.184), the image of this ship seemingly more real and solid than any he had ever sailed in. In Irish mythology the

voyage west was the last voyage, the journey from life into death. Ranald's whole life has been a preparation for this, a voyage which 'a few old Orkney folk might be eager to sail with him' (p.230), but one which would be filled with sorrow if accompanied by a young man or a child. For Ranald it is a joyous event, even if those left behind feel grief and loss. Tolkien's trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, depicts death in a similar fashion,<sup>10</sup> and in Buchan's writing, as in Vinland, the sea is the pathway to Tir-nan-og.<sup>11</sup>

While one of the literary qualities found in Vinland is definitely Celtic, the strongest and most colourful is indisputedly Norse. Vinland incorporates much material from The Vinland Sagas<sup>12</sup> and The Orkneyinga Saga, and has some of the atmosphere and bloodthirstiness of Hrafnkel's Saga and Njal's Saga. Kingship and politics in Vinland also reflect some of the material in Heimskringla, 'The Lives of the Norse Kings'. Brown gives Ranald a central role in the story of the discovery and attempted settlement in North America. As regards the history of Orkney, as recorded in The Orkneyinga Saga, Ranald's role is more that of observer and commentator.

In his re-interpretation of The Vinland Sagas Brown has acknowledged Leif Ericson's heroic qualities, but has made him into a modern hero, a leader certainly, but a man who is kind, tolerant, even-tempered and has a

vision of a future 'perpetual peace between us Norsemen and the Vinlanders' (p.22). He foresees that the Greenland settlement will be affected by climatic change and that the environment and its preservation will become an issue. However, his most redeeming 'modern' quality is his appreciation of the Skraelings' reverence for nature, which makes them 'wiser than us in this respect' (p.24). Presented in this guise, Leif Ericson is thus a hero entirely acceptable to the modern day reader.<sup>13</sup>

As recorded in The Orkneyinga Saga, Ranald's life spans some of the most stirring events of Orkney history. In Vinland Brown does little more than retell them, in more detail certainly, but unemotionally and factually. What is important is Ranald's reaction, his gradual eschewing of politics and powerplay, his disgust of the inevitable corruption and intrigue and his horror at a system of government which he sees as evil.<sup>14</sup> "I want nothing to do with those men of blood" (p.171). In common with most Orcadians he is at the mercy of those in power and can do little more than deplore a system which makes it convenient for the King of Norway to have more than one Earl ruling Orkney, causing civil war and so hardship and suffering for the 'little' people of Orkney.

Interestingly, Earl Thorfinn, ruthless and unscrupulous as he undoubtedly was, is not, like Einar,

presented entirely in the negative. He possessed 'a rare wisdom and foresight'(p.175), was 'an able and an honest leader(p.176) and it was agreed at Tingvøe that it was better 'to have one strong earl in charge of affairs, rather than two or three earls perpetually bickering'(p.175). Yet to be a strong leader Thorfinn had to kill and fight, actions which Ranald regarded as 'evil'(p.214). Brown, despite his obvious pacifist convictions, has not judged Thorfinn, or condemned him.

In Vinland Brown has 'married' Orkney and Norway. In terms of culture, language, economy and oral and literary traditions they are seen as one. Historically, Orkney was a Norwegian colony: 'Earl Thorfinn and Earl Brus are his (the King of Norway's) playthings'(p.156). Trade and travel between the two flourished, alliances were common and an Orcadian and a Norwegian were equally accepted anywhere in the Viking world. Brown has elevated an ordinary Orkney man, Ranald, to a status the equal of any Viking hero and in presenting Orkney and Norway as indivisible has emphasised the importance of his own island home as the centre of the Viking world, and enhanced its place in history.

Vinland contains familiar poetic and scholarly images which give it depth. The sons of Earl Sigurd are Einar, Sumerlid, Brus and Thorfinn; the raven, peacock, pigeon and hawk(p.79) respectively, symbols which reflect their disposition and character. Gold is a metaphor for greed



and materialism(pp.32&66), real 'gold'(p.153) being the harvested corn. The 'ripening cornstalk'(p.95) is an image of peace, and biblical allusions include: 'Men are made of the dust they labour at, and in the end they go back to the same dust.'(p.153)

The 'coat' image is prevalent, the croft being a 'thick coat that keeps the farmfolk warm and secure'(p.153), the 'white coat'(p.188) of St Magnus associated with Christian goodness and peace, and Orkney needs a 'coat of life'(p.195), its own saint to give it true spirituality. Images of harmony with nature include the plough and the cornstalk, and a girl sewing a patch on a homespun coat, which was, for Randal, 'a sword touching his spirit' p.96). Christ is depicted as the greatest poet(p.117) and heaven is a garden(p.188). The death of the child, Randal's youngest daughter Margaret, has the same tragic quality as that of Margaret, 'The Maid of Norway'. The 'hammer ringing'(p.215) is an image of war, and 'the red coat (p.223) one of violence and bloodshed.<sup>15</sup>

Vinland's historical foundations invest it with mythic qualities, allowing the reader to enter medieval time and to feel that the events depicted are real. The use of poetic images underscores the novel's moral Christian intent which is to promote peace and goodness in the world, to regard the 'little' person as possessing true spirituality and to promise that

Christianity will change things for the better.

Vinland also has some of the literary qualities of Hrafnkel's Saga. In both texts the course of events is not determined by fate, the narrative is based on fact but the events described are fictitious, murder and pride are seen to be Christian, not just pagan faults, and, like Randal, Hrafnkel is seen to be a true to life character who has both positive and negative characteristics. Both are Christian moral tales intended for their contemporary readers.

Tim Severin's The Brendan Voyage and Farley Mowat's West-Viking contain a spirit similar to that found in Vinland. Unlike Brown, of course, both Severin and Mowat value a 'hands on' approach, sailing across the Atlantic, recreating and reimagining the voyages of those Celtic and Viking travellers who, so long ago, went before them. Their motives, though, are similar to Brown's. They seek to fill in the gaps of recorded history, to demonstrate that the past is relevant to the present, to show the power of the sagas, even today, to inspire men and make them wonder, and to dispel any lingering doubt as to their veracity. Mowat and Severin, like Brown, see the medieval mind 'as an intermeshing of the practical and the imaginative'<sup>16</sup> and wish to draw their readers' attention to the great achievements and the heritage such heroes bequeathed to history.

Vinland, then, is the depiction of a secular life of

a medieval man, a hero who lived at a time and who visited countries where he would encounter Christianity, and who chose to embrace it; a seeming extrovert who became introspective, an active man who felt the need to withdraw from the world and who strove for a meaning in life. Its themes revolve around history, education, exploration and travel, the environment, Christianity and Christian values, change, traditional life, hardship, loss and exploitation. Its style is a blend of poetry, philosophy and saga, its tone descends gradually into sadness and the ending appears pessimistic, as if fate, rather than free choice, is still the ruling force. Vinland isn't really about Vinland at all. It is a saga-novel by a post-medieval writer about earthly access to paradise.<sup>17</sup>

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Beside the Ocean of Time is episodic in nature, has a central character/narrator, a thousand year time span and is concerned with the grand themes of external intrusion, political suppression, nationalism and war. Brown is writing historical moralities, the tone becoming less optimistic as we near the present, the future bleak. The novel restates Brown's conviction that

small things are beautiful and ordinary people are important. Security and happiness are grounded in local society and in belonging to a particular place, the traditions and heritage attached to it evoking the numinous, essential for spiritual fulfillment.

The language is subtly modelled to fit the characters, reflects local dialect, and is narrative in tone but also contains elements of poetry, lyric and mysticism. The central character is Thorfinn Ragnarson, a motherless Orkney boy, a dreamer who must come to terms with the world and be in it, even if he does not like all of its ways. He needs to understand the world or be crushed by it and his journey to adulthood is an important concern in the novel.

The setting is the island of Norday in the 1930's, home to a small, basically self-sufficient crofting community, upon which the outside world is only slowly impinging. The reader enters past time through Thorfinn's dreams, as he travels with the Vikings to Byzantium, with a knight to Bannockburn, and back in time to when the Celtic broch builders on the island repelled Viking settlers. Familiar Christian heroes and symbols appear.

In 'The Road to Byzantium' Earl Rognvald and Thorfinn are bonded in their love for Orkney,<sup>18</sup> and the Earl is Christian enough to be concerned about a 'little' person, intervening with the Emperor to allow Thorfinn

to return home. In 'Eannockburn' the monks read aloud the story of St Magnus (p.29), their war being against the 'power of darkness' (p.29). The shepherd represents innocent goodness and Christian hospitality (p.35), and a 'quiet country death' (p.41) in Norday contrasts with the 'terrible, ominous and dangerous' (p.41) atmosphere of war. 'Broch' concludes with Norwegian land seekers being peacefully redirected to 'the islands of the west' (p.89), a fable-like destination linked to newly acquired Christian faith.

'A Man's Life' begins in the present with the death, while working on his boat at the noust, of eighty year old Jacob Olafson, 'a good way for him to go' (p.68), a natural end to a long and productive life. The story then moves into the past, beginning with Jacob's birth in the family croft house. Jacob has no heroic qualities, and although he had adventure in his life, his character was never above the ordinary, and in old age he was irascible and selfish. This story is satisfying in its use of beautiful metaphors, and in its depiction of Jacob's wife, a Cree Indian from far northern Canada, who is at first 'confused and frightened' (p.59), but who responds to the spirit of the island and the friendliness of its people, the crofting life proving to be as natural and as satisfying as the one she has left behind.

The central metaphor in this story is that of life as

a voyage beginning at dawn and ending at sunset, 'the little day of man's life on earth.' (p.54) Jacob's coffin is 'a box shaped like a boat' (p.52), his cradle 'his little ship of time' (p.52). When the 'sun takes one golden step up the east' (p.53) Jacob is a boy 'running and laughing among the sheep on his father's hill.' (p.53) 'Such a short day is the life of man' (p.59, but round Norday island, 'the great ocean music goes on and on, everlastingly.' (p.59) 'A Man's Life' expresses a very Viking view of life and death.

'The Muse' is light-hearted in its depiction of the Laird and the Minister and his guest as engagingly eccentric, and humorous in its description of the islanders' response. The Laird, Mr Harcourt-Smithers, is inoffensive, inarticulate, elderly, and not rich, and he feels 'great joy ... at being home again' (p.98). 'For an hour or two, coming back home, I know what it feels like, being a poet' (pp.98-9). Despite his genuine love for Norday the Laird is an outsider, spending only a few months each year on the island, a lonely and somewhat sad figure, a remnant of an earlier time when such as he were wealthy and powerful, a person the locals view with cynical detachment, his crumbling Hall symbolic of a system in decay.

From the perspective of an ex-Presbyterian turned Catholic who believes that the Reformation ruined Scotland,<sup>19</sup> Brown has whimsically depicted the Reverend

Hector Drummond as the ideal Presbyterian Minister. He is unmarried (like a Catholic priest), ascetic, in that he eats little and employs no servants, kind, spending time with tramps and tinkers, 'even though the tinkers were Catholics who had come originally from Ireland at the time of the great potato famine'(p.108),<sup>20</sup> tolerant of drinking yet himself an abstainer, and uncritical of those who do not attend church. On his quarterly visits to the farm-folk he 'seemed always like a messenger who had come to visit the crofts from a far country, bringing pleasant tidings'(p.109), and at island funerals there were 'no masks of woe'(p.110), everyone being 'touched with a certain awe and wonderment.'(p.110) Unlike Simon McKee in Greenvoe, the Reverend has not sought refuge in Norday. Rather, he is a kind of free spirit, unshackled by Presbyterianism, serving the faith he was born into certainly, but his Celtic spirit untainted.

The Reverend's half-sister is a beautiful child of nature, who loves walking and riding on the hills and shore. Like Maurya in Time in a Red Coat she is invested with a certain mysteriousness, her identity not being revealed until the end, and she makes happier the lives of all she meets. Sophie shares characteristics with many of the women in Greenvoe. As is Alice Voar, she is a symbol of fertility, arriving in spring time and filling church and Nanse with flowers, and like Bella

Budge she is houseproud and tends the sick. She swims in the sea with the same sensuous enjoyment as Inga Fortin-Bell, and, as Winnie did, she came from mainland Scotland, has a 'bit of Gaelic enchantment in her' (p.126) and 'had been born a Presbyterian' (p.118), in adulthood embracing Catholicism. Sophie predicts that Thorfinn will be a poet, thus sealing his future, and before summer comes she leaves the island as abruptly as she came.

'The Press-Gang and The Seal Dance' begins with an authorial intrusion, explaining that 'every man's life-story is a unique event' (p.129), that life is meaningless 'unless we predicate another self, a *real* self, a soul, that is seeking life-long for a true treasure, the grail' (p.130) and that this is why the story of Thorfinn Ragnarson should be told.

There are changes, even on quiet Norday. Thorfinn finishes school, the first wireless set arrives, Reverend Drummond leaves, the laird is too ill to come anymore, Matthew Ragnarson announces he is remarrying, and three government officials arrive and survey six farms. Thorfinn dreams and the action moves backwards in time to the reign of George III and the attempts by recruiting officers to press-gang twelve young islanders into the navy to fight the French. All evade 'recruitment', including one Thorfinn Ragnarson of Ingle. The story then, uses an ancient Celtic



folktale,<sup>21</sup> anchoring it in a particular time, Thorfinn acquiring a seal-wife, a selkie, who cannot return to the sea as he has stolen her skin. They have five children and are happy, yet, inevitably, Mara one day finds her coat and returns to her people. This legend underscores the islanders close relationship with the sea, and connects historically with those who survived shipwreck and found succour in a Orkney croft.

In 'Aerodrome', in the late 1930's, Norday becomes a fighter plane base, most of the island being destroyed in the process, the islanders feeling 'as if a piece of themselves had died. (p.184) This Armageddon was 'prophesied long ago in Revelations and in the book of Daniel too'(pp. 182-3) and for Norday it is the end, the Swinhurst grannie and granddaughter seemingly the only ones unaffected: 'It seemed those two might have arrived soon after the first thunderous fracturing of the ice-cap, ten thousand years before, keepers of the first green shoots'(p.190).

'Fisherman and Croftwoman' concludes the novel, its powerful, dense and lyrical prose expressing, as does Greenvoe and Fishermen With Ploughs, Brown's eschatology. In one sense, Beside the Ocean of Time expresses a very much modified view of the end of the world, as it seems that Norday only has been affected, its people scattered and its land concreted over. Yet Norday is symbolic of all places affected by war and the

interests of national security, and especially of small island communities which, because of their size and isolation, are too fragile to recover easily, if at all.<sup>22</sup>

It is now half a century after the fictional events depicted, yet they remind the reader of the effects of war on ordinary civilians, the dislocation, the anguish and loss, the dispersal of a community into rootlessness and spiritual vacuum. Thorfinn returns to Norday after being imprisoned in a German P.O.W. camp, his incarceration having been made easier by the decision of a kindly Commandant, who thinks there are too few poets in the world, (p.202) to allow him to write a novel. Spiritually, he is sustained by remembering 'the barleyfields of Ingle and Glebe and Westvoe undulating in an August sea wind' (p.199). Back in Norday he writes about 'the mythical past of the islands' (p.209), having had success with a novel about 'the impact on a primitive simple society .. of a massive modern technology' (p.214). He is home 'to make something of what was left' (p.215) and walks with Sophie 'beside the ocean of the end and the beginning' (p.217).

The main theme then, in Beside the Ocean of Time, is that you cannot replace natural order once it has been destroyed by progress. A very few, like Thorfinn and Sophie, will attempt to retrieve what is left and begin again, but for most this is impossible. Thorfinn is the

vehicle which Brown uses to explain something about why he writes and the source of his motivation. This novel is a lucid, elegant and poignant reminder of what has been irretrievably lost as a result of modern warfare, nationalist principles and advanced technology.

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Brown's last two novels, then, have many fine points to commend them, but it is still the present writer's view that neither can compare, in quality and depth, to Greenvoe, to Magnus and or to Time in a Red Coat. Although critical material concerning Vinland and Beside the Ocean of Time is limited, it seems, from a perusal of what does exist, that my viewpoint may still be a minority one. Although some critics express reservations about certain aspects of the novels, no critic has yet compared one closely or unfavourably with any of the preceding three. It may be, of course, that in reviewing, assessing or otherwise evaluating Vinland or Beside the Ocean of Time,<sup>23</sup> they have not seen a need for comparison, preferring to assess each on its own merits, perhaps to be expected when a newly released novel is reviewed in a newspaper or magazine. It is more likely, of course, that none take the view that these

novels are lacking in power when compared with the others.

David Profumo, in his review of Beside the Ocean of Time, comments that the author 'has produced what may be his finest novel,'<sup>24</sup> conceding that Brown 'does not exactly sport the hallmarks of post-modernism', but otherwise noting that 'the novel succeeds through the finesse of its descriptions', and holding the view that 'we are reading this author at the height of his emotional powers.'

Morag Fraser is more judicious and probing in her response:

*Beside the Ocean of Time* has its whimsies and occasional lapses into moody sentiment—the kind of confessional excess I'd expect on New Year's Day from a Glaswegian, or an Orkney islander with a hangover. But it is an honest book, with its language and<sup>25</sup> experience intimately bound together.

Bernard O'Donoghue describes it, somewhat breathily, as one of 'typical lucency',<sup>26</sup> 'a novel with a message for our time', seeing the rightness of Brown's language 'as triumphant as ever', and the environment, though controlled, as nevertheless a real one.

Vinland reviewers are no less generous. D'Arcy is not uncritical,<sup>27</sup> but his assessment is generally positive. He sees Ranald's character as 'one of Mackay Brown's most appealing representatives of his Christian faith',<sup>28</sup> and Vinland as 'a gripping, thought-provoking, and ultimately moving piece of fiction.'<sup>29</sup>

Arguably, Beside the Ocean of Time, despite the unifying of the whole by the continuous presence of the hero, Thorfinn, is disjointed, a collection of stories rather than a novel.<sup>30</sup> The device by which Thorfinn is transported in time, his dreaming, is transparently contrived, and that much unconvincing. The 'Bannockburn' chronicle is Scottish drear, and irritating in the way the action often switches abruptly between the fourteenth and the twentieth centuries. The theme of outside threat, the 'invasion' (p.179) and destruction of Norday, and, in 'Fisherman and Croftwoman', the new beginning, are all well worn scenarios for Brown readers, and, in this instance, lack feeling and total reader credibility.<sup>31</sup>

There is less to question in Vinland, which is structurally whole and casts fresh (historical) perspectives on Viking culture and outlook. Yet it lacks the many voices of Greenvoe, the inspirational tone and sheer prose beauty of Magnus, and the mysteriousness, the poetry and the density of Time in a Red Coat.<sup>32</sup> A novel should stand on its own merits, and, certainly Vinland and Beside the Ocean of Time have much to commend them to the reader,<sup>33</sup> but in a thesis which principally aims to examine the prose texts of George Mackay Brown, some comment on development in his (prose) writing is justified. Even though he built his reputation as a writer on his short stories and

continued to publish prolifically in this mode up to the time of his death, it is in his longer prose (novel) writing the critic must examine for traces of 'development'.

Greenvoe was his initial novel and so it constituted a major development in his writing. Magnus was the culmination of decades of Brown's thinking and writing about and of studying the Orkney saint, and it is distinguished in its application of Brechtian Verfremdungseffekte. Time in a Red Coat, this thesis would argue, was the pinnacle of Brown's achievement, the universality of its setting and themes distinguishing it from all his other novels, and the poetic beauty of its style and its many layered text giving it literary depth enough to interest even the most discerning reader. In comparison, both Vinland and Beside the Ocean of Time, though already well received, and of much literary merit, do not match those that went before.

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Footnotes for Chapter Five: *Vinland* and *Beside the Ocean of Time*.

1. *Beside the Ocean of Time* was shortlisted for the 1994 Booker Prize.
2. G. Jones, *A History of the Vikings* Oxford, 1984, pp.300-6, discusses the evidence, both real and fabricated, for the existence of Viking settlement in North America. Also see T. Erlingsson, 'Ruins of the Saga-Time in Iceland', originally published in London, 1899, and reprinted by the *Viking Society: Extra Series*, Volume II, London, 1982. The latter is a fascinating account by Erlingsson, who travelled from Copenhagen to Iceland in the summer of 1895 to study old Icelandic farmhouses (or their ruined foundations as it mostly turned out), at the request of Miss Cornelia Horsford, daughter of the deceased Professor E.N. Horsford, in order to throw light on the origin of certain antiquarian remains on the Charles River, Massachusetts and elsewhere in America, which the Professor had discovered and believed to be relics of tenth century Norse settlement. Erlingsson's account, brief and entirely devoid of emotion, describes the trials and tribulations of his research in a very laconic style.
3. The archaeological discoveries made by Dr Helge Ingstad and his wife at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, have been identified as being proof of a Norse settlement around 1000 A.D.
4. J. D'Arcy, 'George Mackay Brown and Orkneyinga Saga', in A. Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, Middlesex, 1994, stresses that, in *Vinland*, Brown has not simply retold or re-formulated the saga, but presented Rannald as 'a fictional hero whose story interweaves with, or runs parallel to specific saga events'(p.319).
5. J. D'Arcy, op. cit., p.324, sees *Vinland* as an important and unifying symbol, representing all of Rannald's beliefs and aspirations, and standing for harmony between man and nature.
6. G.M. Brown, *Vinland*, London, 1992 p.11. The page number of subsequent references to *Vinland* will be given in brackets after the quotation.
7. J. D'Arcy, op. cit., p.325, explains the significance of Rannald's desire to return to *Vinland* as representing all he has learnt and valued in his life, but in *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen*, East Linton, 1996, p.271, qualifies this statement by saying that it may be evidence of Rannald's senility. A. Wawn, 'Access to Eden', *Times Literary Supplement*, August 28, 1992, p.18, also refers to Rannald reaching a 'visionary and rheumatic senility.' Rannald's vision/delusion that he can return to *Vinland* reflects either his saintliness or his common humanity, or both, depending upon one's point of view. Wawn's statement, loc. cit., that 'Rannald's youthful voyage to *Vinland* provided a crucial reference point for the rest of his life', is less controversial.
8. A. Wawn, 'Access to Eden', *Times Literary Supplement*, August, 1992, p.18. Wawn, in titling his review 'Access to Eden', has captured the essence of *Vinland*.
9. For further information see M. Dillon & N. Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms*, London, 1967, pp.143-243.
10. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Vol.III, Sydney, 1981, Frodo, Gandalf, Elrond and Galadriel and many other elves sail from the Grey Havens into the west, never to return to Middle earth. They sailed until 'Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance in the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water.'(p.378) They leave sadness behind them but also the knowledge that in this heavenly place there is no pain, sadness or

suffering.

11. Scottish history, legend and landscape characterises John Buchan's writing, but amongst his most Celtic are two stories found in his Four Tales, Edinburgh and London, 1942. The third 'tale' is made up of four stories and two of these, 'No-Man's-Land' and 'The Far Islands' resound with many of the same echoes found in Vinland. In 'No-Man's-Land' the narrator relates how he stumbled on a small community of Picts, relics of a time long past. In 'The Far Islands' the hero, Colin, is a direct descendant of Bran the Blessed (and so connected to the Bran of early Irish mythology). From childhood he has visions of the Otherworld, which is accessible by boat, but it is a world which he never quite reaches, until, on the battlefields of WWI, death claims him and with 'a passionate joy he leapt (from his boat) on the beach, his arms outstretched to this new earth..' (p.292)

12. The Vinland Sagas actually comprise two sagas, 'Graenlendinga Saga' and 'Eirik the Red's Saga' both about the settlement of Greenland and the Vinland voyages. As noted by J. D'Arcy, 'George Mackay Brown and Orkneyinga Saga', in A Wawn (ed.), Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga, Middlesex, 1994, p.321, Orkneyinga Saga is the source for most of the historical events of the novel and Brown only uses the Vinland sagas very briefly, faithfully for the most part, 'though he does conflate the various versions of the discovery of Vinland into one simplified story' (p.321). D'Arcy proceeds to list those events in the Vinland Sagas which, in Vinland, have been modified.

13. Walt Disney's film Pocahontas represents John Smith in much the same light. J. D'Arcy, Scottish Skalds and Sagamen, is critical of Brown's depiction of Leif, as he 'comes across, bizarrely, as more of a modern-day Greenpeace spokesman (complete with anti-whaling comments) than a Viking leader' (p.273).

14. In D'Arcy's view ('George Mackay Brown and Orkneyinga Saga', p.321) Randal thus becomes, in Brown's judgement, a true Norse hero, rejecting the Viking ethos and all its associated status, to live a simple, honest, Christian life. Also, central to Vinland, in D'Arcy's view, is the question of Norse fate, that Randal refuses to conform, that he 'takes fate into his own hands and makes what he wants of his life' (p.323), exercising the available free will. Brown's portrayal of him is that of a 'fictional secular saint' (p.321). A.Wawn, op. cit., also sees fate and free choice as important in Vinland, 'the dilemmas of Viking life following him (Randal) like porpoises.'

15. A. Wawn, op. cit., also comments on Brown's literary technique, stating that the 'specialist reader is much more likely to enjoy identifying the provenance of the one-liners, the gnomic saws, the motifs and the incidents with which the narrative is flecked.' Specifically commenting on images, Wawn says that 'the narrative generates consolatory images of permanence - poetry, memory and religion.'

16. G.M. Brown, Portrait of Orkney, London, 1981, p.41.

17. A. Wawn, op. cit., refers to Vinland, as it is portrayed in the novel, as 'an earthly emanation of some divine harmony.'

18. G.M. Brown, Beside the Ocean of Time, London, 1994, p. 18. The page number of subsequent references to Beside the Ocean of Time will be given in brackets after the quotation.

19. See G.M. Brown, An Orkney Tapestry, pp.37-9. Brown unequivocally denounces the Reformation as 'a terrible thing' (p.37), the people 'poor people indeed' (p.38), Presbyterianism 'a creed now of terror and hellfire' (p.38), the 'green peace'



broken(p.39).

20. Brown possibly intends the reader to be aware that, ironically, it was Protestant invasion and greed which was responsible for much of the suffering associated with the famine, so causing the emigration of Irish Catholics.

21. J. Saxby, Shetland Traditional Lore, Edinburgh, 1932, pp. 138-142, and H. Waddell, 'The Woman of the Sea', pp. 39-42, in K. Crossley-Holland (ed.), Folk-Tales of the British Isles, London, 1985, both retell this traditional story.

22. Kastellorizon (Magisti), a small, remote Greek island, was turned into a British sea-plane base during WWII, its people forcibly evacuated to Palestine. From a peak population of ten thousand in 1910, the island today has less than three hundred permanent inhabitants. St Kilda is another, sadder, example. The impact of the outside world destroyed a community which had been totally self-sufficient for centuries, WWI the final blow which led, in 1930, to the few dozen people remaining being voluntarily evacuated to the mainland. See E. Richards, 'St Kilda and Australia: Emigrants at Peril 1852-3), in The Scottish Historical Review, Volume LXI, October, 1992, pp.129-55, for an account of the experiences of those who emigrated and the impact on the community they left behind.

23. Nowhere, in the criticisms available to me, have Vinland and Beside the Ocean of Time been discussed together, in the same critical evaluations.

24. David Profumo, The Weekly Telegraph, Issue No. 166, Britain, 1994, p.20.

25. Morag Fraser, 'No cardboard fools in this salty Nordic elegy', Sydney Morning Herald, 22.10.94.

26. Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Orkney Idylls', Times Literary Supplement, April 1, 1994, p.20.

27. J. D'Arcy, 'George Mackay Brown and Orkneyinga Saga', in A. Wawn(ed.), Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga, Middlesex, 1994, pp.305-27, and J. D'Arcy, Scottish Skalds and Sagamen, East Linton, 1996, provide two principal sources on Vinland. D'Arcy is primarily concerned with examining the influence of Norse history and literature on Brown's writing, in the process also assessing, fairly and convincingly, Vinland's literary merit. Many of his observations have already been referred to in this chapter.

28. J. D'Arcy, Scottish Skalds and Sagamen, p. 279.

29. op. cit., pp.274-5.

30. B. O'Donoghue, 'Orkney Idylls', Times Literary Supplement, April 1, 1994, p. 20, admits being tempted, when referring to 'the best chapter' to say 'the best story'.

31. Would it be possible that Brown's reputation, as well as his previous contributions to Scottish literature, and possibly his age, were contributing factors in the decision to nominate Beside the Ocean of Time for the 1994 Booker Prize?

32. Alone, 'The Magus' chapter in Time in a Red Coat is, on its own, more intriguing and challenging than all of Vinland.

33. As discussed earlier in this chapter.

Conclusion.

This thesis has argued, both by implication and at various points, that George Mackay Brown was, and indeed should, be viewed as one of Europe's major contemporary moralist writers. Easily identifiable features of his very considerable production of work include: his use of highly successful social satire; his selective yet powerful historicism; his poetic style, even in (topographic) prose; and his central and persuasive notions of rebirth, of resurrection, of cyclic pattern and of there being an abiding religion of great solace and personal inspiration. He wrote about what he considered to be important to mankind, and not about what is fashionable or popular.

Brown particularly employed his larger scale social satire in his criticism of the effects of Presbyterianism upon the people of Northern Scotland. It was, for the most part, serious censure of, what was in Brown's opinion, the hypocrisy, intolerance and soul-destroying nature of a religion which had for so long killed laughter, music and dance, and valued status and respectability more highly than joy, family and all the identity-giving traditions of earlier times.

Hypocritical attitudes toward the consumption of alcohol are a particular target, the 'private' drinking of some Ministers and Elders of the Church, being

derisively depicted. This perhaps discordant feature of his writing has concerned many readers who see it as too biased or too severe an indictment of Scotland's predominant religious persuasion. It is, however, complemented by a noticeable Chaucerian sort of affection for sinners, a distinct medieval (Catholic?) tolerance of the bawdy, and the zestful enjoyment of human sexuality.

Brown's satiric writing also unequivocally condemns modern societies for their greed, materialistic values, and meek acceptance of government-encouraged exploitative economic policies which both destroy the environment and impact so negatively on remote and vulnerable rural communities.

Brown gave vitality to past ages by focusing on key personalities and hagiographically significant places in his great tapestry of prose. Magnus, Vinland and Beside the Ocean of Time all contain a key figure who functions to retell and/or remake for us otherwise blurred historical events. Brown often adds to known history, or occasionally alters it for his own purposes, a notable feature being his deliberate inclusion of the 'little' person's point of view and place in history. A neo-medieval writer (as well as a post-modernist), like Eric Linklater, he drew heavily on the already highly stylized Norse sagas for his (antecedent) historical material, a feature which makes his work particularly

interesting to scholars of Old Norse history and of Orkney and Icelandic literature.

In Brown's work there is a movement away from the more traditional idea of history, a focus on the social rather than the political, and Brown is also unusual in that he has managed to include, in his tapestry, some three thousand years of history, events in his stories stretching back to the Celtic migrations and the Iron Age. His writing also displays a very tangible sense of place, the dimension of landscape given an extraordinary immediacy, the setting being so very real, the writer seemingly strongly influenced by ruins and an environment which has not been significantly disturbed by subsequent use of man. His depiction of land and seascape is so illuminating that it 'talks' to his readers, and so infinitely the more successfully evokes its past. The reader does not question the idea that the landscapes, like saga steads, are timeless and unchanging, so effectively are they presented. The numinous is evoked, engendering a feeling of wonder and an understanding of the historical richness of the setting, and, as in Hrafinkel's Saga, a sense that one is actually there. Thus the geographical narrowness of his setting is enriched by its historical depth.

Another distinctive feature of Brown's writing is his poetic tone, arguably one which is peculiarly his. The style is very similar to that employed by English (and

Welsh) verse dramatists in the nineteen fifties and sixties, his work being often compared to that of Dylan Thomas. He is also ir/of a literary tradition similar to that occupied in various measures by Gerald Manley Hopkins, Edwin Muir and Eric Linklater, by the fact that his deep (Catholic) personal faith inspired him to write and in the value that he put on traditional rural island culture and its rich Viking heritage. Also, like two other deeply spiritual modern Christians, J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams his stories are always powerful moral fables.

Brown has developed, from almost anthropological studies, his own notions of rebirth, of resurrection and of a new moral and worshipping cycle, concepts which are always expressed thematically in his work. The Christian spirit, which emanates from the birth of Christ, is reborn time and again in a saint or martyr such as Magnus or Bonhoeffer, or in the fisher boy become soldier in Time in a Red Coat, and so is constantly renewed for his own community. Brown, in his larger societal plots, ever seemed to depict western civilisation as moving inevitably toward annihilation, but ceremony, the ultimate expression of which is the indestructible Mass, is linked to hope, to the Resurrection, to a new beginning, and so to faith in the future for the micro-community and so for all men.

This cyclic view of religious and social, as well as

of personal history, and of the depicting of events as recurring patterns, must view (western) civilisation's current position as being at low ebb, indeed, as poised on the edge of the abyss, an image which has strong links to the Voluspa-like prophecies of doom associated with the ending of a millenium. This pessimism might seem to permeate much of Brown's prose writings, but is alleviated by his specific rebuttal of such (millennial) despair, in the expressed conviction that, always, a few will survive and begin a new cycle, far away from 'history', in a place of refuge and rebirth, such as Orkney.

Brown's nomination for the 1994 Booker Prize was a significant achievement, signalling his being accepted as a writer of great merit. Like many another post-modern writer, he uses a mixture of styles and explores the dilemmas of being an all too vulnerable human being in an age of doubt and despair, lacking any recognition of authority. Brown constructed in his many works a total moral universe for his readers, one which presents an holistic model for life.

Despite his neo-medieval style, Brown's achievement is one of much richness, which appeals strongly to humankind's need for story. Utilising the microfocus on Orkney, and in being its most important recent Orcadian, he has integrated the farming past, the Catholic religious heritage and the technological present,

providing examples of people, ever present in a harsh world, who have faith, humility and whose experience of the world has been fortified by the extraordinary richness of their heritage. His writing expresses a full awareness of pre and post Reformation cataclysmic events in Europe both in peace and war, despite the fact that he always lived at its extremity. His major prose texts have, in fact, examined the religious and military upheavals of the last four hundred years and showed how sadly they have diminished us.

To date, such few who have tried to interpret Brown's writings, have tended to treat it unfairly and very selectively, seeing it as 'folksy' and largely parochial. In fact, his work provides the reader with a view and a diagnosis of Europe which reach out to embrace all the Western world, particularly for those (older?) people who are more deeply raised in the English cultural tradition. Everything significant that has happened to Western man since the Reformation has been brought together in writings that might seem to be 'out of time'.

His seemingly central treatment of the Vikings and of the confrontations, political and monastic, surrounding the life of Magnus, should not blur for us his central theme - the practice of true Christianity in a godless and greedy (post-modern) world. While the late twentieth century is obsessed with development and the management

of change, and an earlier generation had been concerned to survive the Cold War, these were never Brown's preoccupations at even the most superficial level.

His great themes ever were: the folly and honour of war; the integrity of the 'folk'; the importance of regions retaining their historically evolved personalities; and the importance of synthesising the available wealth of tradition and love. His was and is a unique perspective-from the perimeter of the 'cauldron'-one that placed faith in man's Maker far above the folly of living in serial time to please the hollow men in the Ministry or besmirching oneself with modern greed and nihilistic cynicism. Quite simply, our author produced work of epic significance in his charting of the events of our time, their yesterdays and their future, but with a core of faith and hope amidst the ashes of millennial Western Europe.

\* \* \* \* \*



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23 April 1994

Dear Marie Perle

Thank you for your long & interesting letter. I must re-read it carefully before scaling this.

First, to try to answer your questions:

- 1 Peter Maxwell Davies. I know nothing about music, so PMD takes what he wants from my books for his music. I have known him since 1970 or so. We get on together well.
- 2 Catholicism. It would take half a book to deal adequately with my conversion. The more I studied the matter, over 20 years, the more its position seemed unassailable - "the rock". R.C. has attacked my work a great deal.
3. ... think any small place is a kind of microcosm, a symbol for the whole world: especially Orkney, which has such a rich history and pre-history.
4. The greatest influence is The Orkneyinga Saga, the Scottish ballads, Orkney history and legend, Old Testament stories... I try to keep myself out of my work.
5. The same events occur over and over in time, only the people (the masquers) wear different motley. The variations interest me.
6. Some wise person said there are only 7 basic plots in story and drama. I often use the same themes, but try as cunningly as

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possible to approach the theme each  
new time from a different angle. The  
Ork. Saga is a deep enough quarry.

7. I think my novel Magnus contains my  
best work, and my Selected Poems (1954-83)

8. Knox ruined many great shrines and  
monastic houses. He abolished the Mass,  
the greatest of all ~~ceremonies~~ <sup>ceremonies</sup>. The medieval  
great poetry of Scotland, and its  
budding drama, he and his followers  
choked at the source. He left open the  
door to English domination.

9. It would be a great advantage to you to  
see and experience Orkney. Otherwise you  
would be writing about a place  
hidden in a sea-fog.

10. I have written an autobiography but it  
won't be published in my life-time. However,  
I could give you some salient facts —  
rather briefly, because an old man like  
me gets tired quickly.

\*

26/4/91-

I have just re-read your  
letter and found it very  
interesting and well-written.

Yours has been such a  
different life from my own.

Many Scots, and Orkadians,  
emigrated to Australia, New Zealand,  
Canada, and Africa, in the 19th  
century. ~~It~~ <sup>Australia</sup> must be now a very  
international society: no bad  
thing, I'm sure.

The British have been confined  
to their little island for too long,  
and are an inward-looking  
people, and some kind of creaken

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is gnawing away at it. However, there may be life in the old dog yet.

Gordon Hughes had a 2nd hand bookshop in Stromness a while ago: a well-stocked place.

I will of course try to help you in any way I can, but don't expect floods of words. I am a bit "old & gray & full of sleep" these days, and have to ration my energy carefully.

I'm glad that you got to Orkney at last. Did you visit Stromness? A woman well-known in Australian history - Eliza Fensen - lived in Stromness; she was shipwrecked and lived among Aborigines for a time.

It's interesting what you say about Catholicism: it seems to me to be the fullest flowering of Christianity.

Presbyterianism in Scotland is only a shadow of what it used to be. Only about one in twenty go to the Kirk.

May your thesis go well. There is a good little bookshop in Stromness that stocks all of my books in print. A new novel came out a month ago called Beside the Ocean of Time; it has been well enough reviewed.

With all good wishes.

Yours sincerely,  
George Mackay Brown

Address of bookshop:

Stromness Books & Prints  
1 Graham Place  
Stromness, Orkney



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25 June 1994

Dear Marie

Thank you for your letter.

I am sorry for having got you involved in the toils of Greenvoe — you are not the only student to be so put upon, I assure you. And I'm glad I don't ~~to~~ have to write a thesis about it. When journalists & literary people ask me what it's about, I say 'Pass'.

I know every decent work comes out of the deep unconscious, and out of history, and out of the writer's own personal experience: I know it, but I block these things out when I come to put pen to paper.

I'm sure Orkney was no place of pastoral innocence at the beginning of the novel, or ever; there has always been change, sometimes slow & gradual, sometimes catastrophic as in Greenvoe.

I have the Catholic belief in resurrection. Out of the ashes the phoenix rises, with a beauty and a terror we can't imagine.

I've heard of Hesiod but never read him.

By all means call and see me

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When you get your grant to come to Orkney — I hope it comes through in the end.

I am trying to put a group of recently-written poems in order, and a group of stories.

This summer I am whelmed with visitors, journalists, radio people. Alas, my energy is limited. A man is coming at noon today: he won't be encouraged to linger.

Don't worry about your thesis. Try to enjoy the book — it is out of enjoyment that patterns emerge. I was not a good student of literature myself, at Edinburgh, so long ago. But I'm sure you are.

Sincerely

George Mackay Brown

They're wanting to make a TV film of Greenvoe now. I've shown very luke-warm interest thus far.