

THE GEORGE MACKAY BROWN FELLOWSHIP



George Mackay Brown: The Sea and the Story  
*Morag MacInnes*

George Mackay Brown Memorial Lecture 2009

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in the Pier Arts Centre, Stromness

# The Sea and the Story

*Morag MacInnes*

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A kind of holy solemnity can descend upon us when we lecture – and attend lectures – on poets. This is not a good thing for either party, and we will not be going down that road today. George is not some sort of saintly presence. The idea that he might be revered would have sent him straight to the pub in alarm.

You will have seen and enjoyed a vivid filmic evocation of George Mackay Brown's poetic journey, from Victoria Street via the Flattie Bar to Mayburn Court, childhood to maturity, bound by the Stromness street. But there will be Orcadians who view such evocations and say – 'but that's no wur George at aal! He wis jist – Georgie Broom!' That phrase – Just George – has been deftly used to headline the little exhibition about him running now in the Museum. Deftly because it defines precisely the slightly bemused relationship islanders have with GMB's life, works and international renown. Deep down there is a voice muttering 'but he just went doon the street wi his messages in a bag ... he jist had a yarn wi the Pierheid Parliament ... he jist asked after the bairns by name ... he jist ...'

And yet. Every morning that note on the door – Do Not Disturb. He said to himself, 'now Mr Brown, what story shall we tell today?' Then he entered his own inner Orkney landscape, where time doesn't always tick forwards but goes in a circle, skips generations, where ancient worlds overlap and interlock with the present. Preserved, and sometimes exposed, by the surrounding sea. He excavated our history, as surely as Gordon Childe did Skara Brae. There's a duality here. He lived with, and through Orkney – yet his writing separated him from us. Paradoxically, however, being separate freed him to see clearly.

In the silence of his kitchen, like his guild-haunted favourite character, Mrs McKee in *Greenvoe*, he became his own judge and jury, confronting Calvinism, presenting himself for Catholic forgiveness. We all have a parental voice in our ear, reproving, sighing, mocking. George loved his father; but it was his complicated relationship with his mother which caused these silent inquisitions. She was cheerful, selfless, funny, with a lovely laugh – all those things. But her work ethic, and that very selflessness which meant she scrimped to get him his morning egg, nagged at him as he put sentences together and stroked them out with his blue biro.

The morning task finished, where was the ascetic, the anchorite, the reclusive hermit then? Don't buy into that powerful myth, the poet on a crag musing about eternal verities and throwing rocks at strangers, much as it may play well to tired urban sensibilities. I remember the stories he told me. Lighting his pipe was a ritual, using many Swan Vestas matches. Matches is an Orkney name. As each match burnt out, he'd name it and lay it on the chair arm. 'This is Wattie, an awful bad boy ... and this is Grandpa, he's bent with sciatica.' I remember his quavering rendition of:

*I love a cookie, a Cooperative cookie  
ye cannae get near it for the smell  
if you spread it wi butter  
you can hear the butter mutter  
Mary ma Scots bluebell.*

That was his party piece on convivial evenings, where he would also ‘take off’ local worthies and characters – he was a great mimic. He loved company and yarning. He loved to participate in the life around him, whether in the pub with the fishermen, in the doctor’s house or in the queue at the paper shop.

What made him separate himself and write an Orkney subtly different from the safe haven he found himself in? Necessity. It’s as simple as that.

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First think of where, and how he grew up. When we bought our house, which overlooks Skara Brae, the farmer next door said, ‘what do you make of this? I just picked it up in the field.’ It was a Neolithic hand tool, shaped to accommodate Stone Age fingers. I hefted it, and placed fingers in those ancient dimples – left-handed, like me. Suddenly I was in two worlds – mobile phone here, grain grinder or shell crusher there. I appreciated the way my island telescopes time in that moment. But that appreciation was made a hundred times richer because of what Georgie Broon had taught me. He said:

*A place like Orkney is a microcosm of the inhabited globe. Here meet and mingle most of the types that compose the human race... we have knowledge of their roots in the past. We have stories of their origin and ancestry and kin...<sup>1</sup>*

His best gift to Orcadians is to remind them that they live ‘beside the ocean of time.’

Do you know your neighbours? How well? Can you picture living in the same street, in the same town, seeing the same people work, drink, get sick get pregnant, get rich, die... seeing the same family face recur – the red hair, gap teeth, cross eyes? Seeing misers hand down miserliness, fighters hand down hard knuckles, singers hand down songs? All the while knowing these folk are observing you just as keenly? That’s what it was like for GMB and his family – and for my family, my nana – in Stromness in the 1920s. Around 2000 people lived there. George’s family were called the Duckie Broons, because they lived near a duck pond. They’d been in the town for generations. The nicknames were generations old too. There was silence, remember – no TV, radio, no gramophones. Plenty of space for singing – sometimes Gaelic, but mostly Scots ballads and hymns – dancing, within reason and never on Sunday, and storytelling. Perhaps folk tales, but mostly gossip, a bit exaggerated, but with a kernel of truth. Stories handed down, embroidered, filled with mimicry and recognition.

To give you an idea of the closeness, the intimacy of such a life, my nana, like George’s mother Mhairi Brown, was Gaelic-speaking. Like Mhairi, she was poor but fiercely ambitious for her big family. You would think they would have things in common. But no. Nana was from Oban, Mhairi from Caithness. Nana thought Mhairi’s Gaelic was inferior to her own, so she kept a dignified distance!

Stromness – busy beyond belief, cluttered with butchers bakers and fishermen – had three areas; North End, Middle Toon and Sooth End. Each had its own character. To leave the Khyber Pass and bike to the other end of town to work in J I Shearer’s shop (‘keep an eye on him, he’ll cheat you on the tatties’) was like crossing the border to England. It hummed with life, miraculous escapes from illness, storm, ruin, amazing strokes of fortune

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<sup>1</sup> Rowena and Brian Murray, eds. *The Interrogation of Silence* (John Murray, Edinburgh 2004) p. 191

in love or business – domestic heroism abounded. There was little time for romancing or dreaming, but ample time for stories.

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GMB's best early poems – 'Hamnavoe', 'The Death of Peter Esson' and 'The Old Women' – explore themes which remain dominant throughout his writing and reflect his life experience in Stromness. He celebrates the arduous journey towards death – and what lies beyond – with respectively, a postie (his father) tailor, and a fisherman. Simple trades. Present too is the choral voice, the commentary – in this case, the old women with their 'terrible holy joy.' Labour, love, death and the hereafter – big themes seen through simple lives.

'When I came at last to work as a writer it was these heroic and primeval occupations that provided the richest imagery, the most exciting symbolism,' he said.<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically, grim toil fascinated him because he couldn't participate in it. My father Ian and he were in the same class. They played football together, dived off flatties, hung about the pier for a fry of fish, truanted from the school they both chafed at, to leave their shoes at the foot of Brinkies Brae, set fire to the heather and steal neeps.<sup>3</sup>

But by fourteen, GMB couldn't get up the steep lanes without coughing. TB was beginning its work. He was already hooked on Woodbine cigarettes to boot. So he had to become an observer. Dad and he spent hours sitting quietly under the counter in Peter Esson's tailor shop. If the boys stayed quiet long enough, the old men who gathered there for a smoke and a political argument forgot they were there. The talk would turn to scandal, bankruptcies, fights over honour. GMB preferred this version of the town's history to the red map of Empire, the lists of Kings and Queens and the battle dates he was introduced to in Stromness Academy. In later life he would quote Shakespeare with great relish:

*And then the whining schoolboy with his satchel  
And shining morning face creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school.*<sup>4</sup>

He was no scholar – but the contents of *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*, committed so unwillingly to memory in Primary School, stayed with him. Mrs Heman's 'The boy stood on the burning deck'<sup>5</sup> belted out between sups of homebrew, was a special favourite. But that's to jump ahead.

When he writes about the agonies and ecstasies of boyhood he's both funny and tender, as close to autobiographical as he ever got in his fiction, as this extract from 'Five Green Waves', from his first collection, *A Calendar of Love*, illustrates. Willie has been sent home for not learning 'the theorem of Pythagoras.' He comes to the croft of Myers, where he's offered strong beer. (Few people have commented yet on the accuracy with which

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<sup>2</sup> George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing* (John Murray, Edinburgh, 1997) p. 54

<sup>3</sup> Turnips

<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* Act 2, Scene vii

<sup>5</sup> Felicia Hemans, (1793-1835), 'Casabianca': poem (based on a true story) popular in Victorian times; better known by its first line.

GMB caught the rhythms of Orcadian, which he described as being 'like water lapping on rocks . . . slow and full of silences,' but you will hear this in the extract:

*I took a deep gulp of ale, till my teeth and tongue and palate were awash in a dark seething wave.*

*'And tell me,' said Peter, 'what will you be when you're big?'*

*'A sailor,' I said.*

*'If that wasn't a splendid answer!' cried Peter. 'A sailor. Think of that.'*

*'My grandfather was a gunner on the Victory,' said Sophie. He was at Trafalgar. He came home with a wooden leg.'*

*'That was great days at sea,' said Peter. 'Do you know the Ballad of Andrew Ross?'*

*'No,' I said.*

*A hen, shaped like a galleon, entered from the road outside. She dipped and swayed round the sleeping dog, and went out again into the sunlight.*

*'Woman,' said Peter, 'get the squeeze box.'*

*Sophie brought a black dumpy cylinder from under the bed, and blew a spurt of dust from it. Peter opened the box, and took out a melodeon.*

*'Listen,' he said. A few preliminary notes as sharp as spray scattered out of the instrument. Then he cleared his throat and began to sing:*

*Andrew Ross an Orkney sailor  
Whose sufferings now I will explain  
While on a voyage to Barbados,  
On board the good ship Martha Jane.*

*'That was the name of the ship,' said Sophie, the Martha Jane.'*

*'Shut up,' said Peter.*

*The mates and captain daily flogged him  
With whips and ropes, I tell you true  
Then on his mangled bleeding body  
Water mixed with salt they threw.*

*'That's what they used to do in the old days, the blackguards,' said Sophie. 'They would beat the naked backs of the sailors till they were as red as seaweed.'*

*'Damn it,' said Peter, 'is it you that's reciting this ballad or is it me?'*

As the awful details mount up, Sophie sees the boy's discomfort.

*'Mercy, I doubt the boy's too young for a coarse ballad like that . . .'*

*But she was too late. Three strong convulsions went through me . . . then the cottage slowly settled on an even keel and I was sitting in the straw chair, my eyes wet with shame and distress. Not even Andrew Ross's sorrow was like unto my sorrow.*

*Peter patted me on the shoulder. 'Don't you worry, he said. You're not the first sailor who's been sick on his maiden voyage.'*<sup>6</sup>

George said, 'the drunk and the tinker move through nearly all my stories . . . symbolical figures who come and go at their own sweet will.' In this same story we meet the tinker girl, 'eyes as restless as tadpoles,' a wild ragged lass who attacks him for whispering in her ear, and threatens to sit beside him in school, causing him delicious adolescent confusion. She's an early incarnation of a persistent thread – the lords of misrule who upset the tidy appercarts of the unco guid. The Calvinist side of George, the 'be a good boy' inheritance from his mother, which abhorred and feared spontaneous disruption, was also, of course, fascinated by it. His later intoxication – I use the word advisedly – with Stella Cartwright, is understandable when you view it in this light.

It's clear too from a brief look at any of the *Calendar of Love* stories, that GMB had no problem with the vexed question of how to represent dialect forms in his writing. Mhairi Brown bequeathed a precision of language which is the inheritance of those for whom English is a second language, to be treated with respect and formality. Once he found his voice, he strove to keep it clear, as he said in a letter to my father: 'It must be clean and crisp or I will disown it.' This simplicity meant it was accessible to everybody.

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Rites of passage. Sea and sand. Rumbustious old men, reproving wives, out of reach girls, outcasts. So a day off school becomes a journey towards adulthood. As George and my dad grew up, in poverty, scraping pennies here and there, the outer world began to impinge.

*A single sea drop has wandered through a certain man's life, signing the supreme moments, a symbol and a leitmotif; as if the notes of his existence were to be purity and pain. Especially near the great moments, salt water stung him – war, love, death (and of course birth also . . .)*<sup>7</sup>

This is about St Magnus; but it's about his own life too. The sea is in him. For his mentor Edwin Muir, Orkney was Eden, a timeless bubble of tranquillity – but GMB's vision of it was more visceral and dynamic. There is always the ocean to be conquered. It is impossible to stay put. To participate in the life of the islands his heroes must taste the big world and return drenched in foreign smells, back to harbour with sagas to tell over the fire. They travelled because he couldn't. Imagine the frustration of growing up in the shadow of Nazism yet being barred from active service, from doing something worthwhile! My father joined the Navy – most Orcadians did.

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<sup>6</sup> George Mackay Brown, 'Five Green Waves' from *A Calendar of Love* (The Hogarth Press, London, 1966) pp. 44-7

<sup>7</sup> George Mackay Brown, *Magnus* (The Hogarth Press, London 1973) p. 204.

By default, George became a journalist. It was his only option. The war – the boom that was Scapa Flow, an excitement of officers, a gum packet of black markets, and excitement of seamed stockings – gave him plenty to work on. He learned economy – but his accuracy was often suspect. The stories got in the way. The Orkney Herald was a mouthpiece which allowed him to vent his frustration at being left behind whilst the world marched on. He inveighed against progress, against the fashion for cosmetics in young Orkney girls. He was truculent and sarcastic. He lashed out.

Then – famously – in the forties he read the *Orkneyinga Saga*, dating back to c1100. He found there the story which haunted him for the rest of his life and the perfect form in which to express his life's work. It's a simple tale. Hakon and Magnus fight over the earldom of Orkney. Hakon deceives Magnus – he brings eight ships full of warriors to a peace conference and has Magnus killed by his cook. Hakon becomes a great Earl. Magnus becomes a saint.

The saga, part of an oral tradition, encourages economy, simple imagery and a fast cut to the action. It was designed for all to hear – children and adults could listen, for the tales had a fabulous, fairytale quality. No subject – sex, death, betrayal, revenge, and miracle – was out of bounds, and all subjects lived together happily. Saga writers took history and talked through it with familiarity, as if it was now – precisely because they had this oral tradition which stretched far into the past. Those lengthy genealogies, who begat whom, in the Bible – admit it, you skipped them. But if you inhabit them, as the saga makers did, as George and Ian did every afternoon under Peter Esson's tailoring table – you hold living people in your head. That old cliché, history comes alive, becomes true. Perhaps you've never stood at the bottom of Dundas Street itching to get to the paper shop for the Orcadian, but held up by a body yarning through a complicated chronology for your benefit. 'That would be Attie Peace's father, the man that had that red bicycle do you no mind his older sister married a Comlaquoy and they geed to America and when she came back no man three bairns and just one leg...'

In the sagas George caught a glimpse of something he called 'rare and strange and new.' He found a context for his poetic purpose.

Crucially – some critics would say fatally, for the breadth and variety of his opus, he found also an invitation into a spiritual world view which dominated his view of the meaning of life, suffering, and death, and directed his interpretation of Orkney's history. Such critics might also say that to write a saga one must go forth and kill Vikings, rape women and burn ricks, not sit looking out of a window. It's a strange position to take. Homer had no problem writing about the world in his blindness. They might take issue with the Catholicism. Again, a strange position. GMB needed Catholicism. It was the antidote to his perception of a stunted Scotland, a 'Knox ruined nation.'<sup>8</sup> A debate can be had, certainly about the merit of the later poems and some later editing decisions; but where there is George there is Magnus and Mary, Stations and seasons. It is his spiritual calendar and well-spring, and we must pay attention to it.

He had barely formed his religious views in 1945, however, and his early poems are leaden and derivative. The first typescript of 'A Rousay Girl in Heather Blether', which my family have, is a straight lift from *The Lady of Shalott*, overwrought and overblown. There was work needed.

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<sup>8</sup> George Mackay Brown, 'The Prologue' in *The Collected Poems* (John Murray, Edinburgh, 2005) p. 1

How to get confidence to be a poet in post-war Orkney? Where to get published? How to beat the 'black dog' of depression, which made him feel like a ne'er-do-weel drunk, unfit for much more than sitting in bed waiting for cups of tea and his weekly Assistance money? He depended upon the crotchety but enthusiastic Peter Jamieson, who published his first poetry in the *New Shetlander*. He corresponded eagerly with that gentlest of Orkney's cultural giants, Ernest Marwick, who was putting together an anthology of Orkney verse. Marwick introduced him to Robert Rendall. They exchanged poems. George's letters to Robert are masterly in their tact – Robert's lyrics could be excruciatingly mannered – so when George found things worth commending – the dialect poems which are Rendall's lasting gift to Orkney – he was unstinting in his praise. George began to review poetry, and discovers a critical voice he can apply to his own work.

Orkney in the late 40s and early 50s was an optimistic place, a supportive place for such shy, cerebral men. The duffel-wearing cigar-smoking Gerry Meyer was editing *The Orcadian*. GMB said of him: 'he loves music and art and literature . . . he loves to listen to the gramophone and he will discuss *Clochemerle*<sup>9</sup> or *Cakes and Ale*<sup>10</sup> far into the night . . .' In our house there were Penguin Specials,<sup>11</sup> *The Studio*,<sup>12</sup> *Under Milk Wood* or *The Waste Land* on the turntable, cultural programmes from Aberdeen and Edinburgh on the radio, and paintings everywhere. And stories, always stories about weel kent folk. Everyone had their own party piece – the man who overcooked the Christmas goose – 'it geed in a goose and cam oot a redshank!' The man who made obeisance to the new red phone booth in the Post Office because 'you never can tell.' There were songs, hymns, ballads, Eartha Kitt and Paul Robeson. These are young people, not yet thirty, remember, who have come through something cataclysmic. They want to change things, to make the world safe again, and better. Those who think GMB naïve, or apolitical or anti-progressive should know that the events of the thirties stayed with him and darkened his world view; as did the war, all the more poignantly because he was the eternal chronicler, the bystander.

Jim Robertson's café, The Noust, was the place to hang out. Teachers, lawyers, doctors, drank coffee and smoked. According to a cartoon of my father's, George 'smokes a pipe for decoration but rolls his own with Rizla papers for pleasure.' Discussion was far ranging. Archaeology – Childe was excavating. Politics – the town was newly wet, no more bus to the Golden Slipper in Stenness for a half bottle in a brown paper bag. The Provost was a Communist who was building a democratic golf course. Local entrepreneurs were planning a celebration of commerce – a Shopping Week! And of course the live issue for anyone involved in Scottish writing – could dialect ever be a vital literary force? Or must one write in English to be taken seriously? GMB said of this period, 'despite the fact that kailyard comedy is the essence of drama and Scots accordion jigs the essence of music, these are rich and promising times for poets and artists in Orkney and Shetland.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Clochemerle*: novel by Gabriel Chevallier published in 1934; a satire on the confrontation of secular and religious forces in a small wine-growing village in Beaujolais.

<sup>10</sup> *Cakes and Ale*: novel by Somerset Maugham published in 1930; a satire on literary society in London between the Wars.

<sup>11</sup> From 1937 onwards Penguin published well over 300 'specials'. These engaged with topical issues of the time. Politically, the series' stance was centre-left and was cited as having an impact on public and political opinion.

<sup>12</sup> *The Studio*: an illustrated arts magazine published in London from 1893 until 1964. It was popular in Europe and promoted the idea of peace and harmonious international relationships developing through awareness of visual culture.

<sup>13</sup> *The New Shetlander* Issue 7 p. 10

God Bless the Orcadian network for a would-be writer who could twist his legs around each other in an agony of shyness! It took him from hand to hand, to the feet of Edwin Muir. Muir and his wife Willa picked him up, dusted him down and Newbattle made a makar of him.

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In a way, there you have it. By the time he leaves Newbattle all the major themes of his work were present. His experience of life in a small working community at the mercy of the elements and chance was enough for a lifetime. But he would have been merely parochial, a kind of Gilbert Selbourne of island life, had he not focused his writing on the simple truths which gave his work universal appeal. Nothing is more important than work, love, loss, and what survives beyond human concerns. Be you Japanese, Senegalese, Inuit or a dodgy car dealer from East London, these are the things which wake you in the watches of the night.

He worked and worked on form. Cut cut cut. Pare it down. A writer of fables like Aesop, Borges, Ishiguro, GMB is barely present. He suggests and allows you to fill in the detail. Simplicity is hard won, but immensely rewarding. There he is, getting to the essence of the human condition – at his kitchen table.

Perhaps it pained him that there were so few Catholics in Orkney, and that his friends didn't follow him on this spiritual journey, indeed, would have made fun of it if they hadn't been much too fond of him. Knox had, he thought, done his work very thoroughly and spread grayness instead of gaiety. But – perhaps not. He was ever the outsider, and even his religion was idiosyncratic, to do with words and cycles. It was not a social thing. As an atheist myself, I find his Catholicism interestingly pagan – still emerging from sunworshippers at Maeshowe and Brodgar – a million miles from Rome.

'Image, contrast, symbol, are the life of literature,' he said. 'I want continuous waves of suggestion . . . every word and line must have significance . . . A really great short story should have a mingling of myth and legend.' Poems poured out. He betrays a fascination with the number seven – he called it a 'mysterious beautiful number,' making up the days of the week, Stations of the Cross, deadly sins, cardinal virtues, colours of the spectrum, sacraments, seventh waves, seven sorrows of the Virgin – you get the drift. He was fond of three, and twelve, and of triangles and stepped patterns, like Scots baronial buildings or the shape of a moving wave. He loved acrostics, syllabic counting, and he uses cyclical patterns, like the shift of seasons. His imagery is carefully limited and all the stuff of the natural world – larks, hawks, daffodils, and the thorny red rose. There are flames and snowflakes, stars and shining nets full of fish. Ritual, litany, the solemn incantations of his church become more and more part of his poetry, and bleed into his prose, counterpointing the robust characters he favours, the tramps, stoical crofters, stoical women, drunks. Orcadians would say, 'but we arena really like that,' – and at the same time, in rural communities everywhere he was read, people were doing the same thing – recognising themselves but half denying it, because somehow GMB made them seem heroic.

You need go no further, if you want to see this universality in his work, than to read the poem 'A Child's Calendar', and the poem which follows it, 'Beachcomber', in the *Collected Poems*.<sup>14</sup> Or here's a taste – from 'Sea Runes'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Archie Bevan and Brian Murray, eds. *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown* (John Murray, Edinburgh, 2005) pp. 122-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* p. 121.

Elder

*Charlag who has read the prophets  
A score of times  
Has thumbed the salt book also, wave after wave.*

Crofter-Fisherman

*Sea-plough, fish-plough, provider  
Make orderly furrows,  
The herring will jostle like August corn.*

Shopkeeper

*Twine, sea stockings still to pay  
And Howie trading cod for rum in the ale-house.*

It's no surprise that this asexual, sensitive soul, a natural anchorite in his later years, would take such sustenance from the Magnus story. He said: 'There are many ways of entering a fold – the beauty of the parables were irresistible.' How could they fail to be, when so many of them concern ploughing, seedcorn and harvest and his listeners were most of them fishermen?

*To lose one's own will in the will of God should be the true occupation of every man's time on earth. Only a few of us, the saints, are capable of that simplicity.*<sup>16</sup>

He fuses the idea of Magnus the martyr, the gentle redeemer, with Magnus the life force, the quickener. He took the rituals and litanies on as one would a lover – adopting their world, no matter what his friends thought, entering into an all-consuming relationship, using poetry to try and express how it enriched him and his mythic vision of Orkney's crucial place 'beside the ocean of time.'

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The island was his fable: a place where heroic deeds were done by everyday folk who found beauty in the simple business of wresting a living from sea and shore. He did fight hard, in *Greenvoe* particularly, to accept the idea that every step forward – a new tractor, a wireless – is accompanied by the loss of something, perhaps innocence. He feared what he called The Black Pentecost – a kind of nameless ecological horror lurking behind Stromness, to do with profit, greed, and man's inhumanity to man. But because he believed in a circle of renewal, purification and resurrection, he had to accept that he shouldn't fear progress. The Magnus story gave him that comfort, and he expresses it best, this hope for good out of dislocating change, at the end of his novel about the Orkney saint. Magnus has just been murdered. In the Birsay kirk, Jock the tinker's blind wife Mary recovers her sight. You might expect devotions, or prostrations, after a miracle. But no.

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<sup>16</sup> *For the Islands I Sing*, p. 53.

– *It's me you're looking at, Mary.*

– *So. You had black curly hair last time I saw you.*

– *She plucked a white hair out of her own head and looked at it and gave it to the wind.*

– *God keep me from pools. God keep me from stones that shine in the rain . . . I'm supposed to be grateful am I? Well I'm not. There's one place I do want to see though, more than any other place, and that's the Birsay alehouse.*<sup>17</sup>

The everyday humanity of the tinkers saves the miracle from triteness. Ale is on a par with a marvellous event. Life goes on.

I want the last words from GMB to celebrate, not saints and mysteries, but the timelessness of sea and stone, to share with you how well he gave a voice to them, and to us, as we live around them.

#### The Twentieth Stone

*Today, the young men, a score,  
Levered from Vestrafiold  
The tallest stone, a star raker. Aleskins were dry  
Before the arrival of the stone-dresser.*

#### The Twenty-eighth Stone

*Curlew-cry  
Across a clean stone face.  
The old stones have lichen beards.*

#### The Thirty-second Stone

*She who threw marigolds over you, stone,  
A child,  
She is a crone now with cindery breath.  
You, stone,  
Two younger stones curve beyond you.*<sup>18</sup>

That's his real gift to us – letting us see time turn.

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<sup>17</sup> *Magnus* pp. 205-6.

<sup>18</sup> 'Brodgar Poems' from *The Collected Poems* pp. 309-311.