

Sacred Heart Church, Lauriston

George Mackay Brown



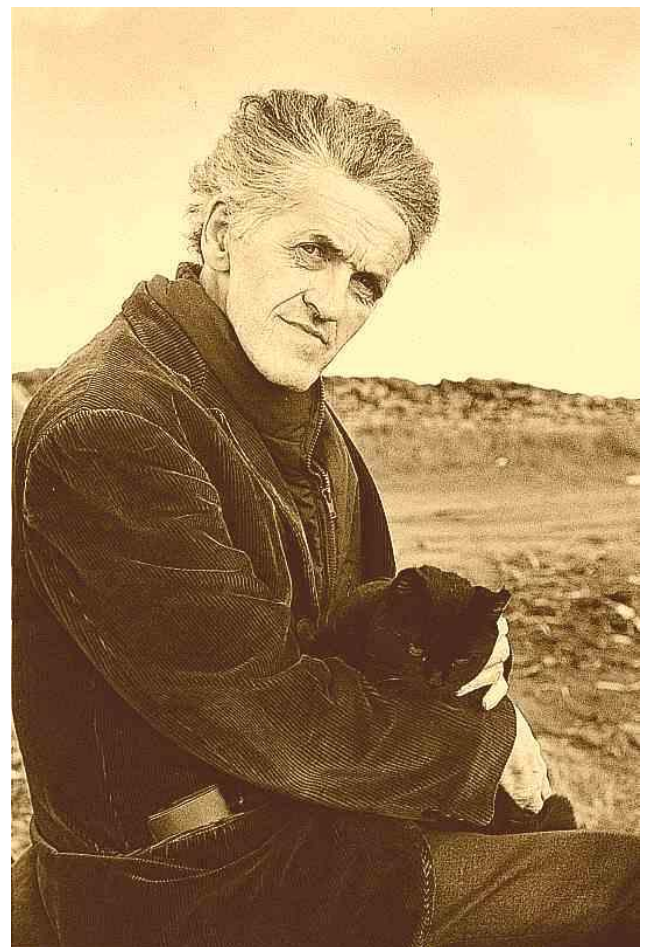
Saga of a Saint *and*
A Light In The North

Essays by
George Mackay Brown
and Mary Cherry



*The East Window of St Magnus
Cathedral, Kirkwall*

Photograph © Martin Hornby



George Mackay Brown

Photograph © Gunnie Moberg

INTRODUCTION

Few figures in the story of modern Scottish literature can match George Mackay Brown. He is best known as a poet, but his novels, plays, short stories, essays and children's writing have all made a deep impression on Scottish literary and cultural life.

In turn, his religious faith left an indelible mark on a great deal of those writings. In this booklet, to mark what would have been his 90th birthday in October 2011, and the 50th anniversary of his becoming a Catholic, we explore the role that the Sacred Heart Church and the Jesuits had on Brown.

Received into the Catholic Church by a Jesuit in Orkney at Christmas 1961, he had already been given instruction by Jesuits in Edinburgh, during his years living in Marchmont. The year after becoming a Catholic he chose for his Masters degree to study the work of the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet he admired very much. Recognising Brown's burgeoning writing talent, Fr James Quinn SJ asked Brown to contribute to the Jesuit magazine '*The Mercat Cross*', resulting in the essay we now reprint here, courtesy of the George Mackay Brown Estate. Dealing with the story of the 12th Century Earl's of Orkney, Magnus and Haakon, it introduces themes and characters Brown would continue to develop over the next ten years, culminating in his most famous novel 'Magnus'.

Mary Cherry's essay, which follows Brown's, considers the influence that the Sacred Heart Church and the Jesuits had on his faith and his writings, and, among other things, speculates on the effect our splendid 'Stations of the Cross' might have had on him.

Both are excellent pieces, and the Jesuit community are delighted to make them available here to mark this anniversary year. We thank Mary very specially, and dedicate the booklet to Fr James Quinn, last editor of '*The Mercat Cross*', in thanksgiving for his 55 years in the Edinburgh Jesuit Community.

Fr Chris Boles SJ
Superior of the Jesuit Community
31 July 2011 ~ Feast of St Ignatius Loyola

SAGA OF A SAINT - Magnus the Martyr

by GEORGE MACKAY BROWN

There is an island in Orkney called Egilsay. The church there has a high round tower. No one knows for certain whether the name Egilsay means "church island" or "island of Egil" .

A Quiet Place

Nowadays it is a quiet place of a few farmers, a shopkeeper, a fisherman or two. But eight and a half centuries ago it was the scene of an event that transformed the whole life of the North.

The Orkneys rise low out of the sea. Round Egilsay the islands are green fields set in the ocean. Here and there a hill raises a brown crest.

Over-arching Sky

But the chief feature of the landscape is the enormous over-arching sky: that and the sea that eternally responds to it. Sea and sky mingle their different lights, and on an April morning this double radiance showers upon the islands, so that they appear transfigured, as bright and hard as jewels.

An April Morning

On an April morning so long ago a group of men stood waiting on a small eminence. Out of the church came a man, alone. He walked towards the group. For a short while there was an exchange of words, angry and threatening from the waiting men, mild from the solitary man.

Then the time for words was past. He knelt down. An axe flashed in the sunlight, and so, the Saga says, Earl Magnus of Orkney "passed from this world to the repose of Paradise" ...

The Two Earls

Orkney was at that time a powerful Earldom that owed allegiance to the King of Norway. Lest it decide to strike for independence, the policy of Norway had always been to keep two (sometimes more) Earls in Orkney. The mutual rivalry engendered kept the islands

effectively under Norwegian control, for always one or other of the Orkney Earls (usually the weaker) became the Norwegian King's man in order to maintain his position.

This state of affairs had gone on for generations, but now the men of Orkney were beginning to chafe under it. It was hard for them to trade and to farm effectively when always their leaders were at each other's throats. The landowners were determined that eventually, and soon, there must be one Earl only in Orkney.

That was the political situation.

Christian Orkney

Meantime, Orkney had officially become Christian. This had been affected a generation or two before in the following crude fashion. King Olaf of Norway, newly converted, surprised Sigurd, Earl of Orkney, in a quiet bay, and forced him to become baptized at the point of the sword ...

A few years later, Sigurd died at the battle of Clontarf, fighting in the hosts of the pagans against King Brian Boru, the Christian King of Ireland .

Dark Fate

Orkney remained Christian, though there was little sign of it in the lives of the Orkneymen. Their days were ruled by a blind and dark Fate. All a man could hope to do was to live honourably and die bravely, if possible not in his bed. The rest was silence.

At the end of the eleventh century there were, as usual, two Earls in Orkney, Paul and Erlend. The son of Paul was called Haakon. The younger son of Erlend (his elder son had died in battle) was called Magnus.

In due course these two succeeded to the Earldom. So began the most famous joint rule in the history of the North, of Earl Haakon and Earl Magnus. So began the most beautiful and terrible story in all the Sagas.

Contrasting Characters

The characters of those two Earls were strikingly different. Haakon was a Norseman of the pure heroic tradition: brave, a skilful statesman and diplomat, and anxious (as far as one can judge) for the

welfare of his people. Men like him were the finest characters that the pagan North ever produced.

Magnus was a new type. Besides being strikingly tall and handsome, he had other qualities emphasised by the Saga: chivalry, gentleness, sweetness, chastity, devoutness. He was the first Orkneyman of rank to take the new religion seriously, to essay a pure imitation of Christ. He was, too, utterly deficient in all the arts and guiles of statecraft, those prime requisites of the high position into which he had been born.

Winds of the North

The two Earls (they were first cousins) began their rule harmoniously enough. The fields were ploughed and sown, year by year. They ripened in the blue winds of the North. They produced abundant harvests. The men of Orkney experienced prosperity and justice. All, it seemed, might yet be well.

Ancestral Flaw

But the old ancestral flaw was there, and with the years it widened. Out of small matters portentous quarrels grew. The leading men in the island adhered to this Earl or that. Horsemen rode over the ploughed fields, soldiers trampled the green corn, bitter harvests were reaped. The two rival Earls remained in separate parts of Orkney. Their wars - burning farm and broken boat - were the only contact between them.

At this point the landowners asserted themselves for the first time. There must be order and peace in the islands, or all they stood for was lost. For once they would dominate their lords, and impose from below a new kind of political solution to the age-old problem. What the precise solution would be no man could say for certain, but behind all their actions and arguments loomed one unspoken conviction: that there must be one Earl only in Orkney.

Peace-Meeting

A great peace-meeting was arranged for Easter week, 1116 A.D., in the island of Egilsay. To this conference each Earl was to bring two ships and an agreed number of soldiers. So the stage was set.

Magnus with his two ships arrived first in Egilsay. Presently the lookout reported that Haakon's force was in sight, and he reported something besides that chilled the blood of those waiting below. There were eight ships approaching, crammed with arms and warriors. Magnus and his men had walked into a trap.

Magnus Chooses

There was still time for Magnus to turn and flee . His men urged him to do so. He chose to remain where he was . He walked slowly into the stone church of Egilsay.

The men came ashore from Haakon's ships, and at once began to search the island for their victim. Magnus was nowhere to be found, and Magnus' men would tell them nothing. ...

Murmur of the Mass

From the small stone church came the steady murmur of the Mass. This was the only place they had not ransacked. They knew then that the Earl was inside waiting on the will of God.

Presently came the *Ite, missa est*. Magnus came out. He reproached Haakon mildly for his treachery. He offered to exile himself from Orkney for ever or to be maimed and imprisoned; not, as he explained, from any fear of death but to save Earl Haakon from committing a great crime.

But by now Haakon himself was powerless. Both these Earls were in the hands of the landowners, and the landowners had decided that henceforth there would be one Earl in Orkney, and one only. It was perhaps only natural that most of them preferred the ruthless ability of Haakon to the saintliness of Magnus. Magnus was to be the victim.

Gentleness and Courage

Yet none of them was willing to strike at the man who was kneeling now among them and offering himself to God. They would kill a man as easily as an otter, and yet they were moved by such gentleness and courage.

Finally Haakon summoned his cook, a man called Lifolf. and put the sacrificial axe in his hand. Lifolf began to weep bitterly. Magnus comforted him. He said he would pray for him. He promised him the fine clothes he was wearing, only Lifolf must not strike off his head

like a thief but “hew him a great wound on the forehead”, because after all he was a chieftain .

Sign of the Cross

Then, after Magnus had prayed again for his friends and enemies, and had implored the angels to meet and convoy his soul, he made the sign of the cross, and Lifolf gave him his death-wound.

With that blow, it seemed, a centuries old knot had been unravelled, a brilliant political solution put into effect. Now at last Orkney was united under one able Earl.

A New Meaning

As always. it was the poor people who first saw that the death of Magnus held another meaning altogether, one that had nothing to do with politics and statecraft.

Why, they wondered, was the stony place where Magnus died covered suddenly that summer with a rush of grass and wild flowers? Why had it overnight become a little acre of sweetness?

And in the church at Birsay, where Magnus had been brought for burial, why in the darkness of night did men see a light shining over the tomb? A blind man went there and prayed, and came out again cured. A cripple man left his sticks at the church door. The fame of those miracles spread. From all over, sick people flocked to the grey, austere building beside the Atlantic breakers. The common people had no doubt that a saint had lived and died among them.

The Wonder of the North

It would take too long to tell how the saintliness of Magnus grew from those humble beginnings to its final consummation in the building of the great Cathedral of St Magnus in Kirkwall, Orkney's capital, by Earl Rognvald, Magnus' nephew, soon afterwards. This church, which still remains in all its pristine beauty, was called by the Sagaman “the wonder and glory of all the North”.

Happy Ending

Is there a villain in the story? No: the sanctity of Magnus cancelled out even what had been treacherous and murderous. Earl Haakon lived to be a great ruler. Orkney prospered under him. The

consciousness of his black crime drove him on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Rome where he received absolution from the Pope himself.

Orkney still had its political struggles and upheavals. There came a time when all its power was stripped away, and the islands were robbed and plundered. There was the change of religion, and the deliberate extirpation of ballads and histories, the people's delight. There was grinding poverty, and stark oppression, that lasted for centuries.

A Light still Burns

Yet through all this the light that had been kindled that April morning in Egilsay continued to burn, often hidden and obscured but always there, until today the people of Orkney can see the death of Magnus as the most precious event in their history.

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A LIGHT IN THE NORTH

by MARY CHERRY

Between the years 1950 and 1962 the parish magazine entitled *The Mercat Cross* enjoyed a wide and popular circulation. Writing in *The Innes Review*, Autumn 1978, a Catholic publication founded at the same time, the distinguished historian Owen Dudley Edwards, in an article entitled The Catholic Press in Scotland since the Restoration of the Hierarchy, described *The Mercat Cross* as a significant Catholic journal and stated that it had been ‘founded to give a Scottish Catholic perspective on anything and everything’.¹ This proved to be a most insightful statement.

The *Mercat Cross* was the inspiration of a well-loved parish priest of the period, Fr James Christie SJ. Edited in the early years by Fr Ronald Moffat SJ it was published at the Jesuit house in Lauriston Street under the direction of the Society of Jesus. A broadly-based journal catering for all tastes rather than purely aesthetic and scholarly ones, contributions were received from well-known authors from many different disciplines over the years. It provided information and entertainment for a wide and enthusiastic audience. Yet the *Mercat Cross* was not without its critics and an early female commentator sardonically congratulated Fr Moffat ‘on the things you didn’t do’. She listed five salient points, the second of which was his felicity in not providing a ‘market for the usual struggling nearly drowning, poet’. Yet twelve years later in the dying embers of this journal, now edited by Fr James Quinn SJ, a lyrical and moving short story appeared, written by a young Orkney man who was arguably to become one of the greatest Scottish poets of the 20th century.

Headed Saga of a Saint, the story of Magnus the Martyr by George Mackay Brown was published in the June 1962 issue of *The Mercat Cross*. Already a published poet and journalist in his native Orkney this was his first publication of the story of Magnus in prose. A story that was to exercise his faith and imagination for the rest of his life and form the basis for the extraordinary and prolific output that

followed. Written in short episodic, titled sections, the simplicity of the narration makes an instant yet timeless impression on the reader.

George Mackay Brown, born on the 17th of October, 1921, was no stranger to the Sacred Heart Church in Edinburgh. Educated at Stromness Academy he came to Edinburgh, a mature student, to study at Newbattle Abbey College in 1951, then under the wardenship of a fellow Orkney poet, Edwin Muir. His education was interrupted by illness in 1953 and he eventually returned to Newbattle to complete the summer term in 1956. This was followed by an Honours Degree in English language and literature at Edinburgh University in July 1960.² During this period his attraction to the Catholic faith which had endured for nearly twenty-five years came to fruition. Writing movingly about his conversion in The way of literature, June 1982³ he describes how he was brought up as a Presbyterian and attended the kirk with his parents and four siblings 'every Sabbath'. The story of George's conversion is very relevant to the Sacred Heart Church at Lauriston. As an undergraduate he attended Mass at the Catholic Chaplaincy in George Square with his fellow students and met with Fr. Hugh Barrett SJ at Lauriston for instruction in the Catholic faith.⁴ He was baptized in the church of St Mary and St Joseph in Kirkwall on the 23rd of December 1961 and received his first Holy Communion at Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Fr Francis Cairns SJ was then the parish priest.

In the autumn and winter of 1941/42 convalescing at his mother's home in Stromness, following the initial bout of tuberculosis, George encountered *The Orkneyinga Saga* for the first time.⁵ Aged 21 it affected him deeply. Described by George in The way of literature as 'an anthology of deeds of heroism and vaunt and derring-do' it was based upon stories and ballads from the oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation until it was first recorded about the 13th century by the Sagaman. The narrator of this history of Viking times has remained anonymous. George described Orkney's medieval literature as 'a realm of gold'. From this source he gleaned the story of Magnus the Martyr. The beauty and clarity of this short story

rings with the truth and it bears all the freshness and certainty he was to find in the fusion of his faith and literary endeavours which he was later to describe as ‘The way’, his way, ‘The way of literature’

In the late summer of 1941 while George was still a patient at the sanatorium near Kirkwall he was exploring the town and made his first visit to St Magnus Cathedral. The 800 year old cathedral, the foundations of which had been laid in 1137 at the behest of Rognvald Kolson, earl of Orkney and nephew of Magnus, made a profound impression on him. It has been described as ‘rather like stepping into a rose-pink forest.’ The Durham masons had succeeded in creating a magnificent Romanesque cathedral out of Orcadian red sandstone. ‘The thrill George experienced as he stepped into the cathedral for the first time was not just aesthetic but visceral’ and he knew that when he died this was where he would wish to be buried.⁶ George said in his *Apologia* that years were to pass before he knew that the cathedral had been a place of Catholic worship. It was just that Catholicism never entered his world. During the Reformation he said that ‘St Magnus Cathedral sailed intact through the tempest’.⁷ In 1969, writing in *An Orkney Tapestry* in a story called ‘Crusader’, George made a more ambitious exploration of the theme of St Magnus in prose, using the Viking ship as a metaphor, he describes the cathedral as a ship of stone but its voyage was through history, ‘the long nave was Christ-orientated like the brief ships’⁸ He was to explore in depth the image of the church and the journey of faith as a voyage through life, a voyage for him which was the fusion of his Catholic faith with literature.

In *The Mercat Cross* the story of the feud between Magnus Erlendson (1075-1116) and his cousin Haakon Paulsson, earls of Orkney, was described by George Mackay Brown as the most intriguing part of *The Orkneyinga Saga*. It revolves around the struggle between the two cousins for control of Orkney after years of bloody conflict. This forms the basis of the story of Magnus the Martyr. On the island of Egilsay, on an April morning the two cousins had arranged a meeting to conduct a peace conference. Orkney, the story says, owed

its allegiance to the king of Norway whose policy it was to keep two, 'sometimes more', earls in Orkney to prevent a bid for independence. This rule by division had gone on for generations but the acrimony between the two earls prevented the men of Orkney from going about their daily business. Their political solution was that one, and one only, and soon, one Earl only, would rule in Orkney. Nominally Christian there was little sign of it in the Orkney men. Their lives were still ruled by 'a blind and dark fate'.

The story contrasts the characters of the cousins. Haakon was 'a Norseman of the pure heroic tradition', a product of the pagan north. The *Saga* describes Magnus as chivalrous, chaste, gentle and devout and he took the new religion seriously. He was markedly free of the 'guiles of statecraft'. At Eastertide 1116 Magnus was betrayed. The conditions of the peace agreement were broken when Haakon arrived with eight ships and many warriors while Magnus had presented himself with two ships and the agreed number of soldiers. His men begged him to 'turn and flee' but 'Magnus chose to remain where he was'. Magnus accepted his inevitable death willingly to spare the people from further war and bloodshed. The inference throughout this story is that he courageously accepted that it was better that 'one man should die for the people'. Before his death he bequeathed his rich garments to his weeping executioner Lifolf, comforted him, and said he would pray for him.

George Mackay Brown says that 'such a villainous piece of work should have suffered nemesis' in the Greek tradition, but Earl Haakon seems to have ruled wisely and well and was much loved and popular with islanders. In the words of the story it seems that with the axeman's blow a centuries old knot had been unravelled and a brilliant political solution put into effect. While writing his novel *Magnus* (1973), a retelling of this story in greater depth, he says it had occurred to him that the truth about such incidents is that they are not 'casual happenings' isolated in time, but they are repetitions of some archetypal pattern. Magnus appears in the novel as Pastor Bonhoeffer in a concentration camp in central Europe in the spring of 1945 and he is executed in a manner more akin to the slaughter-house

rather than the Viking killing which happened with ‘a ritualistic inevitability’.⁹

But that was not the end of the story of Magnus on Egilsay, ‘for as always’ the story goes on to say that it was the poor people who first saw that the death of Magnus had another meaning which had nothing to do with politics or statecraft. The place of stones or Golgotha where Magnus died had become ‘a little acre of sweetness’ covered with ‘a rush of grass and wild flowers’. Sick people came from far and wide to the little stone church of Birsay where Magnus had awaited burial. The news of the miracles spread and the common people had no doubt about the sanctity of Magnus. His relics, the cloven skull and bones, are preserved to this day in the cathedral at Kirkwall, where they were discovered in 1919. The story relates that ‘the great Cathedral of St Magnus’ was described by the Sagaman as ‘the wonder and glory of all the north’

But what of George’s long road to conversion? He deliberated on the question ‘was Magnus a Catholic or not?’. In the Europe of the 12th century the Catholic faith was universal and St Magnus Cathedral had been built ‘for the offering of the Catholic Mass’ and he said that for him Magnus was ‘a solid convincing flesh and blood man, from whom pure spirit flashed from time to time’. In his mid teens he had read Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*, particularly his essay on Cardinal Manning which he contrasted with his work on John Henry Newman. Unabashed by Strachey’s controversies George mused as the whole pageant ‘unfolded’ before him and he said that it had given him one of the great thrills of literature. Newman ‘had been fatally lured and fascinated by the enormous claims of Rome’. The Apostolic Succession that went back eighteen and a half centuries to St Peter the Fisherman, on whom the rock of the Church had been founded, could only have been preserved by ‘some mysterious power ... against the assaults and erosions of time’. In the early 1950s while studying at Newbattle Abbey College he attended Mass in the nearby town of Dalkeith on two or three occasions and was disappointed. He said that he had got lost in the Missal ‘among the long silences and the whispers’. This experience emerges in the story of Magnus

the Martyr in a poignant line when Magnus completes a night of vigil in the small stone church on Egilsay and hears the early morning Mass on the day of his martyrdom, in the section entitled 'Murmur of the Mass'. Yet in the Dalkeith church he was moved by the devotion of the working-class women where they seemed to find beauty and peace in the midst of their drab lives. He said of himself that 'no Scotsman takes precipitate action', he acknowledged Catholicism but did nothing about it for another ten years. Yet the *Orkneyinga Saga* continued to work on his imagination and he said that for him 'out of the waste-land of fire and revenge, the story of the martyrdom of Earl Magnus shines like a precious stone'¹⁰

While studying in Edinburgh George was open to other influences. He tells in his *Autobiography*¹¹ of an occasion when he heard a speaker, well-known for his anti-Catholic views, who commanded attention at the Mound on a Sunday afternoon, a stance then comparable to Speakers' Corner in London. John Cormack's vitriol was aimed on this occasion at a young Edinburgh girl, Margaret Sinclair, a Poor Clare nun whose early death and short devout life 'had put wonderment on the Catholics of Scotland.'¹² His open air Sunday sermon was 'one long bitter sneer' at the now Venerable Margaret Sinclair on the grounds that her father was 'a scaffy'. George had never experienced any anti-Catholic feeling in Orkney or Edinburgh and he said that dreadful sentence had remained in his mind. Once again overt criticism, comparable to Strachey's, had the opposite effect on George. He became fascinated by the story of this dustman's daughter who had died in obscurity in 1925 and she became for him 'a heroine'. He prayed for her intercession for the rest of his life. At a deeper level, perhaps, George read in this 'casual happening' the re-emergence of the old 'ancestral flaw', a repetition of the old archetypal pattern, a slanderous destructive attack on an innocent girl, which for him was redeemed by grace.

By the end of the 1950s there were ecumenical stirrings in Edinburgh. Some of the old inhibitions of the city of John Knox were beginning to crumble and give way to a more open dialogue between the Christian churches. These were for many young people heady

days in the build-up to the Second Vatican Council which opened in 1962. There were other influences on the young George Mackay Brown. He was deeply interested in the growing literary renaissance especially in poetry which had been founded by Hugh MacDiarmid, whom George regarded as ‘the great king of Scottish letters’.¹³ This renaissance centred on a group of poets who regularly met in the bohemian taverns of Edinburgh’s Rose Street. This was a counter-culture that appealed to the rather reclusive and shy young Orkney man, here he was much influenced by the talk of those who were to become famous Scottish poets of the 20th century. But always the pull of the Catholic faith was as strong as his literary leanings and he said in his *Tablet* ‘Apologia’ that it was ‘literature that finally broke down’ his defences. By the spring of 1961 tuberculosis had once again caught up with George and he found himself back in a sanatorium, this time on Deeside near Aberdeen.

George was no stranger to suffering, recurrent bouts of physical illness alternated with depressions, what he chose to call ‘Wordsworthian hauntings’ and ‘Hopkinsesque angsts’ troubled him for the rest of his life. He was haunted too by the unnecessary suffering wrought on ‘others’ by the War of 1939-45 and especially by the stories of the Holocaust and the barbarism of the concentration camps. Towards the end of his life he learned to share what he called his transient sufferings with the Aids patients, or ‘a child lying with a bloody stump of a leg in some shell-broken hospital in Sarajevo’. This he regarded ‘as a kind of justice ... that we should be glad to bear’ in a unison with Christ’s suffering ‘rejection, pain and desolation’. George said ‘the simplest Mass is the most beautiful event imaginable’. In this sacrifice Golgotha is repeated and the sufferings of the people as they journey on their way are absorbed in this mystery.¹⁴ Of the Orkney Italian chapel, built by Italian prisoners of war out of scraps of metal, paint and corrugated iron on the island of Lamb Holm in 1941, a sunless, desolate and windswept place converted into a piece of Italy, he said ‘the faith that created this thing will endure to the end of time’.¹⁵ In 1960 under the paternal guidance of Father Francis Cairns SJ this chapel was restored by one

of its original creators who had been traced to his home in Italy. Mass is still celebrated there regularly and the little church receives thousands of visitors every year.

In the autumn of 1962 George returned to Edinburgh to embark on a course of postgraduate study. This work on the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ was never completed but it provided him with a rich stream for his musings on 'the dark night of the soul'. He said that he had always loved Hopkins' poetry and wanted to know more about how 'he forged and hammered and welded those resounding marvels'. The verse of any time faithfully 'reflects the spirit of the time'¹⁶ but what of the Hopkins of the 'dark sonnets'? Hopkins' desolation and brave encounter with darkness was a comfort to George which he likened to the condition of Job. God exists 'even when he appears to be absent ... one does not dispute with emptiness and silence'. Words remained even in the dark sonnets, it was the Word that called creation into being. In his 'Apologia' George said 'there are many ways of entering a fold; it was the beauty of words that opened the door to me'.¹⁷ In the Word there is an end to the dark night when light and joy will return. On the 'inscape' technique devised by Hopkins George believed that this inscape is inside the man, it is the sweep, range, mind and spirit in a unity. In the course of this study he understood that his creative work involved fixing on an idea or an image rather than the pursuit of conclusions through academic research.

By the mid 1960s he had returned to Orkney where he was to remain for the rest of his life. He was beginning to sense the purpose of his own work and somehow the vocation to writing which had been growing in him since childhood was intrinsically wedded to Orkney. His sister had recited to him the stories and ballads handed down for centuries in the oral tradition and he said that the reading of Old Testament stories had filled him with delight. By the age of fifteen poetry had 'swam into my ken' ... a new planet 'with depths of meaning' to be discovered later. The *Orkneyinga Saga* had fuelled in him an Orkney of the mind - his inscape? George had begun to accept

a gift which would result in a prolific output of poetry, prose and play, where he would rework the themes he had made his own. Many academic accolades were to follow throughout his life including an OBE and invitations to attend literary gatherings worldwide, but always, George chose to stay where he was.

Religious symbolism became the cornerstone of his literary work, Orkney was the source of inspiration and he was to remain wed to this union for the rest of his life. He began to understand what he had sensed during his Edinburgh years that for him urban life had infected much of the culture with a sickness and despair. His task was to celebrate old ways of island life and therein to sound a clear note of hope for the future. George said in his 'Apologia' that he found 'the beauty of Christ's parables irresistible'.¹⁸ Surrounded as he was by farmers and fishermen he mused on the wonder in the cycle of the seasons, ploughing, seed-time and harvest, 'except a seed fall into the ground, and die ...'. These words, he said, were both a delight and a revelation when first he understood them. In Orkney fishing boats were tied up at every island pier and mooring, George compared the 'horizon-eyed salt-tongued fishermen' to Christ's listeners. Farming and fishing in his lifetime were as much the concern of the islanders as they were in the time of St Magnus the Martyr. This continuity informs much of his writing which voyages through the centuries with all the assurance of a Viking longship 'the elements of earth and sea, that we thought so dull and ordinary, held a bounteousness and a mystery not of this world'.¹⁹

George was concerned to work on his 'overmastering' images, he used religious symbols combined with the cycles of the seasons and even the pagan inheritance of the past in an effort to merge old ways of island life as an inspiration for the present. He said that when 'Christ speaks of man's life as a seed cast into a furrow ... unless the seed die in darkness and in silence a new life cannot spring from it'.²⁰ True to the theme of St Magnus the Martyr and the Way of the Cross, the death of the seed gives rise to the green shoot of the Resurrection.

In *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969), in an essay entitled 'Rackwick', George describes this valley on the island of Hoy as 'a green bowl tilted gently between the hills and the ocean', a metaphor for a microcosm of his Orkney world. He uses this place to explore the history of island life from the Viking period to the present day. In the earliest days of settlement a priest would celebrate Mass two or three times a year and 'the mason made Stations of the Cross for the chapel ... shallow scratchings of fourteen stones' so that the crofters could relate their 'year-long labour ... from furrow to loaf-and-ale'²¹ to the Way of Christ. The relationship between men and women is often explored in the work of George Mackay Brown. Women are associated with endless waiting, patience and consolation. Veronica and the women of Jerusalem have their place on the Way of the Cross. Down through the centuries the women wait for the fishermen to come back, often their only reward is 'a broken oar in the ebb, or bright hair meshed in the seaweed'.²² Their depiction in Stations six and eight is movingly expressed in two verses of a poem quoted in *An Orkney Tapestry*: -

Veronica

Foldings of women. Your harrow sweat
Darkens her yarn.

Women of Jerusalem

You are bound for the Kingdom of Death. The enfolded
Women mourn.

Patrick Reilly sounded a critical note on the writing of George Mackay Brown when he said that he 'skirts perilously close to identifying religion with a specific social order ... while the Catholic finds God's grace flowing just as surely through St John Ogilvie in Easterhouse as through St Magnus in Kirkwall'.²³

It is tempting to speculate that the extraordinary visual and spiritual impact of the fourteen large Stations of the Cross which line two walls of the Sacred Heart church in Edinburgh may have influenced George Mackay Brown in the early years of his conversion to the Catholic faith. The work of a Bavarian artist, Peter Rauth, the

paintings were blessed and erected on the 9th of May 1875. The church is an adaptation of the Roman Basilica/Hall style of architecture considered suitable for parish churches in the early Christian Church. A narrow porch or narthex leads into the main building which extends on a long nave to a semi-circular apse where the central altar is raised on a small platform. Lit by four cupola in the barrel-vaulted roof space, the Stations line both walls from the narthex to the apse. When viewed from the central aisle, the large painted figures in each depiction appear life-size and three-dimensional. A recent restoration was completed in 2002 and the Stations continue to make a profound impact on both parishioners and visitors alike.

In the concluding sections of his short story of Magnus in *The Mercat Cross* George describes how this story continued to have an impact right down through the centuries, through political upheavals, robbery and pillage, change of religion and ‘the deliberate extirpation of ballads and histories, the people’s delight’ which together with poverty and oppression lasted for centuries. This is the theme of his essay entitled ‘Rackwick’ in *An Orkney Tapestry* ‘Yet through all this the light that had been kindled that April morning in Egilsay continued to burn, often hidden and obscured but always there, until today the people of Orkney can see the death of Magnus as the most precious event in their history’. The final line in George Mackay Brown’s autobiography reads ‘I say, once a day at least, Saint Magnus pray for us’. In the summer of 1977 the St Magnus Festival of the Arts was founded in Kirkwall, an annual event now, it flourishes and attracts a world-wide audience, a reminder that the music has returned to Orkney.

On the third of April 1996 George wrote his usual column for the *Orcadian* newspaper. Entitled ‘The First Wash of Spring’ it was published on the 11th of April, and was to be his last literary work. April, he wrote ‘is such a beautiful word that even to utter it lightens the heart’ and he went on to exhort his readers ‘to relish each one of the thirty days of April ... Easter, too, often falls in April, and 16 April is that wonderful day in the Orkney calendar, the martyrdom of

St Magnus in Egilsay'.²⁴ Gradually during the early days of April George's health deteriorated and he died peacefully at the Balfour Hospital in Kirkwall on the 13th of April 1996. On the feast day of St Magnus, his funeral took place in St Magnus Cathedral, the first Requiem Mass to be celebrated by a Catholic priest in the Cathedral since the Reformation. George Mackay Brown lies with his parents in the kirkyard at Warbeth near Stromness overlooking the Sound to the hills of Hoy. There his body awaits the green shoot of the Resurrection.

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13. *Autobiography*. (note 2), p.126
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