

**Greenness in Every Line:
The Drama of George Mackay Brown**

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In 1990, I had a brief correspondence with George Mackay Brown on the subject of *Olaf Isbister*, a short play he had contributed to *The Highlander's Umbrella*, a multi-author show that I was editing at the time. This ill-fated project - which also featured the talents of Tom McGrath, Meg Bateman, Jessie Kesson, Iain Crichton Smith and Aonghas MacNeacail - had been set up as a joint venture by Eden Court Theatre and the Battlefield Band, the intention being to open the show in a tent on Glasgow Green during the City of Culture celebrations before setting out on an extended Highland tour. Due to insufficient funding - an all-too-common difficulty where Scottish theatre is concerned - the production did not get off the ground, but I have always remembered the opening speech of George's piece.

Orkney. That's me. That's where I come from. And I'm a sailor. Half the Orkneymen are sailors. What for? Because they have sea instead of blood in their veins.

They pick their teeth with fish-bones. And poor. Poverty sits with them at the table. The laird's man's forever knocking at the door, wanting rent. So what's a young strong man to do, once he's out of short breeks?

He signs on in Hamnavoe for a sailor ¹.

Olaf Isbister, the central character, is a lustful and licentious layabout, whose weakness for alcohol and the pleasures of sex continually thwart his best intentions. Yet there is something extremely attractive about him, too. As he travels the world, finding good and bad fortune in more or less equal measure, he retains our sympathy in his efforts to return to Orkney and his wife and children. Somehow, however, we know that he will never get there and it comes as no surprise when the play leaves Olaf in Glasgow, pre-occupied with thoughts of Islay whisky and a ship that is taking on hands.

It is such a pity that *Olaf Isbister* has never been produced for, although a minor piece, it does mark something of a new departure in George Mackay Brown's work. As a dramatist, one is inclined to think of him as primarily a folk-playwright, albeit one of prolific energy and prodigious imagination. If it does nothing else, *Olaf Isbister* demonstrates that there was more to his dramatic writing than that.

Apart from anything else, this play is a comedy, revealing a strong vein of satirical humour which, although certainly present, is not always obvious in George Mackay Brown's other plays. The comedy, moreover, is not to be discovered in the dialogue, but rather in the situations that the playwright creates. There is, in other words, recognition that, to be effective, the comedy must be played effectively. This tends to confirm the suspicion that any shortcomings George Mackay Brown may have had as a dramatist were to do with inclination rather than competence.

His writing, of course, has often lent itself to dramatic treatment. Apart from five published plays, plus several which survive only in manuscript, many of his short stories and even some of his poems have been adapted successfully - either by himself or others - for stage, screen and radio. Television, for instance, has often mined the riches of his writing to fine effect. Although he has rarely written for the medium himself - one single play for general transmission, *Miss Baraclough*, plus a number of schools scripts - in 1971 James McTaggart created a superb Play for Today from three stories from *A Time to Keep*, and ten years later, in 1981, Bill Forsyth made a no less impressive version of the title story of *Andrina*². At the time of writing, there is news that Alan Plater has been preparing a script based on George Mackay Brown's novel, *Greenvoe*³, and there is little doubt that other productions will take place in the future.

On the other hand, George Mackay Brown did not really write drama as such. His gifts were those of the poet, the storyteller, the renovator of myth and the re-creator of ancient legend. Conflict, irony, the reflection and development of character, all customary concerns of the dramatist, are matters that do not appear to have interested him. Taken at face value, his plays give the impression of a closet dramatist, whose work might be pleasant enough to read, but not always practical to play. A good example of this can be seen in one of the last of his published works, *The Sea-King's Daughter*⁴ - about the ill-fated voyage of the Maid of Norway - which, although written as a 'play for voices' is really a work of prose fiction.

Most of George Mackay Brown's drama, in fact, would appear to be open to the criticism made of his poetry by David Black in 1975.

It doesn't need me to say that he writes extraordinary beautifully: he has marked out his own distinctive subject-matter, and seldom puts a foot wrong in deploying it. But I continue to feel a reservation, for all its perfection. How interested is one in this enamelled peasantry, these heraldic sentiments? He has created a world a little like one of those glass toys called 'Snowstorms'; very pretty, with its own vitality, somehow poignant - yet one is disinclined, I think, to be very long detained by it⁵.

While there may be some validity in this criticism, it strikes one as being slightly unfair; to the extent that he suggests that style is subservient to content, Black rather misses the point. In George Mackay Brown, style is everything; his work fascinates precisely *because* it is written so beautifully.

His dramatic work, however, suffers from a certain technical deficiency, arising from his apparent lack of interest in - or, indeed, awareness of - the requirements of the professional stage. By this, I do not simply mean that his plays pay no heed to the restrictions of professional production - although this is certainly true - but rather I am thinking of his stagecraft, which is no more than elementary.

In most of his plays, for instance, narrative takes priority over character and although he usually writes a multitude of speaking parts, these have a statuesque, almost inert quality, allowing the actors few opportunities to develop a performance. 'Timelessness' is a characteristic which has often been noted in respect of George Mackay Brown's writing, but his plays are often timeless in a more negative and altogether less praiseworthy sense. Neither influenced by nor exerting any influence upon the narrative of the play, all too

often his characters make no dramatic journey and simply serve as ciphers by which the story is told.

In his autobiography, he tells us that his best-known play, *A Spell for Green Corn* (1970), was directly influenced by reading Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, but this is less significant than it might appear. Apart from the episodic structure - the so-called 'epic theatre' technique - there is little sign of Brecht's dramatic method in this play.

Set in the seventeenth century, *A Spell for Green Corn* is described as a 'chronicle in six scenes' telling the story of a young Orkney girl called Sigrid Tomson, her seduction by a wanton fiddler, Storm Kolson, and her subsequent execution by burning for the crime of witchcraft.

When the farmers have done everything and failed, it's time for poet
and witch to begin their spells ⁶.

These words, featured in "Storm Kolson's Notebook" (a kind of appendix to the published version of the play), may be regarded as the premise upon which *A Spell for Green Corn* is based. Using a host of characters to depict a society which has undergone a significant social change - turning from the sea to the land for sustenance - the play draws a parallel between this economic change and the spiritual change created by the Reformation. As so often in George Mackay Brown, the old religion is equated with cultural value and the new with social corruption.

Although *A Spell for Green Corn* had its first outing on the stage in a quasi-professional production - in 1967 by the Strathclyde Theatre Group, a university company, under the direction of Hugo Gifford - it reads as if it had been written for an ambitious community project, involving the entire population of Orkney. As a matter of fact, most of George's dramatic output was written for just such a purpose, no fewer than four plays - *The Well* (1981), *Island of the Saints* (1982), *Bessie Millie's Wind Shop* (1983) and *The Road to Colonus* (1991) - being commissioned for the St. Magnus Festival over the years of its existence.

The value of this kind of drama is not, of course, to be underestimated. Apart from anything else, the language these plays employ - which incorporates the rhythms, cadences and idioms of indigenous, living speech within a clear, accessible English - provides, to my mind, an object lesson that all Scottish playwrights would do well to follow. Moreover, in writing plays for local people to perform, the author is not only serving his own community, but also following a theatrical tradition that is as ancient as time itself. Although it would be difficult to imagine any of these plays featuring in the seasons of any of our repertory companies - which lack both the financial resources and necessary level of commitment as well as the depth of talent to do such drama justice - their very nature suggests continued revival in the context for which they were written. I have no doubt that they will, in time, become an integral part of the culture of the Orkney Islands.

In addition to the plays already mentioned, *The Loom of Light* was staged in Kirkwall in 1972 as part of a fund-raising exercise for the preservation of St. Magnus Cathedral. Directed by David Birch with a largely amateur cast, this is, from an historical point of view at least, possibly the most interesting play of all, being the precursor of two more developed works - George Mackay Brown's own novel *Magnus* ⁷ and Peter Maxwell

Davies's chamber opera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Magnus*, the libretto of which was based on this text. In the novel, we are told that "to celebrate the mystery properly, the storyteller must give way to a ritual voice"⁸ and *The Loom of Light* - which is rather more Brechtian in its execution than *A Spell for Green Corn* - certainly attempts to do this. Its seven scenes are woven together by the skilful use of a chorus, employing both verse and prose to create the appropriate atmosphere of epic ritual.

A few months pass - a time for nails to be forged, thorns to be woven, vinegar brewed.

In Norway, the king goes north to the ice, after walrus. In Orkney, red earl and black earl are powerless: the wounded chessmen seek their own disordered places. The islands are full of widows. The monks in the green holm celebrate, in a surge of sorrow, the passion of Christ. They wear long black coats.

The peasants have broken the last barley crust⁹.

Perhaps, however, the most typical of these community plays is *The Well*, written for the St. Magnus Festival of 1981 and produced by Ernie Donaldson with a cast of local amateurs. The central image is the well around which generation after generation of Orcadians gather, relating to and gathering sustenance from each other. It is a very potent image - which inspired another Maxwell Davies composition, *Into the Labyrinth* - but the total effect is somewhat disappointing, adding up to nothing much more than a kind of superior pageant. There is one splendid scene, however, which so skilfully unlocks the meaning of the piece that it is worth quoting in full.

Three modern women arrive at the well for the last time.

Marilyn: This is the last time I trudge from end to end of the island for a pail of water.

Rita: Tomorrow, is it? Is tomorrow the day?

Paulette: Tomorrow. At 12 noon the island councillor, Mr Skerry, will turn the tap on in the kitchen of The Bu. The laird, the doctor, the schoolmaster, the engineer, they'll all be there. Out it'll gush, the water, piped and filtered from the new tank on the hill.

Marilyn: It is high time.

Rita: What'll come of this well?

Paulette: It won't be needed. It'll be a ruckle of stones. It'll fill with all the rubbish of the island.

Marilyn: A good thing, too. We could never depend on this well. Sometimes it dried up. Sometimes it tasted of roots and iron.

Rita: And yet, what things happened round this well! A thousand years old, they say. Think of all the women who'd come here and meet and go away. Think of the gossip and the quarrels and the fun.

Marilyn: No more. We turn a tap in the kitchen, and that's that. Kettles full, tub full, bath brimming. No trouble.

Rita: I think there'll always be ghosts around the well. The folk are leaving

the island so fast, soon there'll be nothing left but gravestones and ghosts.

The stage darkens. The voice of Mr Skerry, the island councillor.

'So, friends, we have reached today another milestone on the long road of Progress. Much of the drudgery is now removed from our days. I'm sure the women appreciate that. No more trek, three times a day and more, in all weathers. to the old well above the beach. No more aching arms, no more heavy splashing buckets. The old well has had its day. I declare the reservoir open. I turn on the tap....

Applause

The light goes up. The well is abandoned and half ruinous ¹⁰.

The ageless nature of human values as discerned in the history of the people of Orkney is, of course, the recurrent theme of all George Mackay Brown's writing, yet there is more to this than simply the celebration of a particular community. Underlying everything, initiating and informing the writing, is a profoundly spiritual vision, based on the enduring worth of community values.

This is the key to the efficacy of George Mackay Brown's writing as well as, I believe, to its popularity. In an age which seems obsessed with the contemplation of all that is vile and tawdry in human society, the imagination of George Mackay Brown may often seem romantic, if not downright sentimental, but it is one which will always find a ready response. It serves as an antidote to the corrupt, essentially negative reflections of the human condition that feature so prominently in much contemporary literature.

This aspect of George Mackay Brown's work was, perhaps, never given better expression than in *Edwin Muir and the Labyrinth*, a solo play he wrote in 1987 for his old friend John Broom to perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. As friend and teacher, fellow-Orkadian and fellow-poet, Edwin Muir obviously had an important influence on George Mackay Brown and was probably something of a role-model for him. *Edwin Muir and the Labyrinth*, therefore, tells us as much about its author as it does about its subject.

Set in the Warden's study at Newbattle Abbey College in 1952 - at the time, that is, when Muir was Warden and George Mackay Brown was one of his students - the play finds Edwin preparing for a lecture on *King Lear* and musing on the experience of his own life. At one point, he receives a telephone call from a member of the College committee who complains that Newbattle is not paying for itself. He responds in the following manner

Look here, I don't know you. But I know your kind. One of the gray faceless ones. No imagination, no delight. One of Calvin's men. Haven't you done enough? A nation brought to ruin and servitude. Your nation and mine. Scotland. Newbattle not paying for itself?... You poor gray-faced man, you abstract calamity... Listen. No, don't interrupt. Here, at Newbattle, we are trying to breathe life into Scotland. Here is a nucleus, a new beginning. We are trying to restore a lost kingdom. And we will succeed, in spite of creatures like you... tell that to your committee ¹¹.

At another point in the play, Muir notices some students in the garden.

There's Bob from the tube works in Airdrie, he can't have enough of Milton and Herman Melville. And Tom from Larbert...has written that good short story: workmen in a high wind - the B.B.C. in Edinburgh to broadcast it soon. Vera from Yugoslavia, much taken up with Ezra Pound. Dr Chabria from India. Spike the ex-soldier. Ian from Stornoway, postal worker. Helen from Montrose. Bill from Whitburn, a miner, wonderful insight into the mind of Kant...Literature is food and drink to them. And here they are, not to get a degree or a diploma. No, they've left their jobs - given a year of their young lives for the love of literature, history, philosophy. Like bees gathering nectar.

Newbattle - the books - the music - the companionship - garden and trees and river - incense of old sanctity...old ceremony.

Sero Sed Serio : the Newbattle motto. 'Late but in earnest'. Strange, that. Very apposite....Applies to us all here. Cut in the heraldry centuries ago [12](#).

The value of the above speeches resides, to my mind, in their sense of dramatic voice, a certain awareness on the part of the playwright that someone is going to have to speak these words, someone is going to have to give them life and meaning, to make them real. Unfortunately, this is a quality that is all too frequently absent in George Mackay Brown's dialogue - which seems a curious defect to find in a writer who treasures the magic of language as much as he did.

It is no accident, I think, that George Mackay Brown's finest dramatic endeavour should have been made in the context of a radio play. Radio, thriving as it does on the spoken word, will always provide a natural home for his talent. In this respect, George Mackay Brown's relationship with Stewart Conn has been extremely important. Apart from his production of *A Spell for Green Corn* (for the old Third Programme in 1967) Stewart Conn has been responsible for the adaptation and production of many of George Mackay Brown's stories. His most recent work in this respect was a radio adaptation of *Greenvoe* (1998).

Somewhere in the archives of the B.B.C. there is a recording of the play that is, without a doubt, George's finest achievement in any dramatic form. Also produced by Stewart Conn - this time for Radio 4 - with music by Thomas Wilson and featuring the great Irish actor Cyril Cusack in the title role, *The Voyage of Saint Brandon* was first transmitted at Easter 1984. It is a poetic, moving, funny, profound and beguiling play which tells the story of the sixth-century Irish Saint Brandon (or Brendan as he is sometimes known) and his companions on their epic voyage to the 'island of the blessed'.

Brandon, like Edwin Muir, is a man who is held in thrall by a spiritual vision. His followers, on the other hand, are simple men who understand only what their eyes and ears tell them. As the story unfolds, Brandon's vision is shown to be capable of folly as well as wisdom, but derives its ultimate power from the influence it exerts on his followers. When one of these followers is drowned, Brandon temporarily loses his vision, but is rescued from despair by the remaining brothers, who have become affected by its influence. In setting up a conflict between imagination and common sense, this powerful and imaginative drama speaks eloquently of the function of imagination itself. In the final scene, the dying Brandon, his journey completed, gives the scribe Brian some advice on how the story should be told.

There are people in the castles and counting-houses - very clever men, too - who have a different view of the world from you writers. When they read your manuscript, they'll sneer. They'll say, *The Voyage of Brandon* indeed - a few seedless men in a salt waste - no cargo or bill of lading or profit (...) Never mind them. Imagine, say, a couple of country children on a roadside on a spring day. Tell the story of the voyage as if it was for their ears only. Tell it so the children will clap their hands, and laugh, and go dancing away on the wind. (...) There should be dew - and greenness - in every line... ¹³

Greenness in every line. These words may be regarded as summing up the approach of a writer who, while seeking to express the values of 'the good society', had the good sense to realise that such values, although eternal, are not fixed and immutable but must be continually re-discovered and renewed. The legend, if it is to retain its force, requires constant re-telling -and this is the task, one might almost say the duty - that the writer must perform. This guiding principle - which is just as applicable to his drama as it is to his fiction and to his poetry - lies behind everything that George Mackay Brown ever wrote.

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Footnotes

¹ George Mackay Brown, *Olaf Isbister* (typescript, 1990), p. 1. [[Return to Text](#)]

² George Mackay Brown, *Andrina: and other stories* (London: Chatto and Windus, Hogarth Press, 1983). [[Return to Text](#)]

³ George Mackay Brown, *Greenvoe* (London: Hogarth Press, 1972). [[Return to Text](#)]

⁴ George Mackay Brown, *The Sea-King's Daughter; [&] Eureka!* (Nairn: Balnain, 1991). [[Return to Text](#)]

⁵ David Black, 'Scottish Poetry of the Sixties' in *Akros*, 10.28 (August 1975), p. 94. [[Return to Text](#)]

⁶ George Mackay Brown, *A Spell for Green Corn* (London: Hogarth Press, 1970), p. 87. [[Return to Text](#)]

⁷ George Mackay Brown, *Magnus* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973) [[Return to Text](#)]

⁸ George Mackay Brown, *Magnus* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 25. [[Return to Text](#)]

⁹ George Mackay Brown, *The Loom of Light* in *Three Plays by George Mackay Brown: The Loom of Light, The Well and The Voyage of Saint Brandon* (London: Chatto and Windus,

Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 27. [[Return to Text](#)]

¹⁰ George Mackay Brown, *The Well in Three Plays by George Mackay Brown: The Loom of Light, The Well and The Voyage of Saint Brandon* (London: Chatto and Windus, Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 73. [[Return to Text](#)]

¹¹ George Mackay Brown, *Edwin Muir and the Labyrinth* (typescript, 1987), p. 29. [[Return to Text](#)]

¹² George Mackay Brown, *Edwin Muir and the Labyrinth* (typescript, 1987), pp. 27-28. [[Return to Text](#)]

¹³ George Mackay Brown, *The Voyage of Saint Brandon in Three Plays by George Mackay Brown: The Loom of Light, The Well and The Voyage of Saint Brandon* (London: Chatto and Windus, Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 149. [[Return to Text](#)]