

The History of Orkney Literature

Thesis submitted for degree of Ph.D.

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Synopsis:

The History of Orkney Literature is the first full survey of the literature of the Orkney Islands. It examines fiction, non-fiction and poetry that is uncomplicatedly Orcadian, as well as that which has been written about Orkney by authors from outside the islands. Necessarily, the work begins with the great Icelandic chronicle *Orkneyinga Saga*. Literary aspects of the saga are examined, as well as its place within the wider sphere of saga writing. Most significantly, this study examines how the saga imposes itself on the work of the subsequent writers. The book goes on to focus on the significance of Orkney and Orkney history in the work of a number of key nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures, including Sir Walter Scott, Edwin Muir, Eric Linklater, Robert Rendall and George Mackay Brown. The Victorian folklorist and short story writer Walter Traill Dennison is re-evaluated: *The History of Orkney Literature* demonstrates his central significance to the Orcadian tradition and argues for the relevance of his work to the wider Scottish canon. A fixation with Orkney history is common to all the writers considered herein. This preoccupation necessitates a detailed consideration of the core historiography of J. Storer Clouston. Other non-fiction works which are significant in the creation of this distinctly Orcadian literary identity include Samuel Laing's translation of *Heimskringla*; the polemical writings of David Balfour; and the historical and folklore studies of Ernest Walker Marwick. The study welcomes many writers into the fold, seeking to map and define a distinctly Orcadian tradition. This tradition can be considered a cousin of Scottish Literature. Although the writing of Orkney is a significant component of Scottish Literature at various historical stages, it nevertheless follows a divergent course. Both the eighteenth century Vernacular Revival and the twentieth century Literary Renaissance facilitate literary work in the islands which nevertheless remains distinctly independent in character. Indigenous Orcadian writers consider themselves to be Orcadians first and Scots or Britons second. Regardless of what they view as their national or political identity, their sense of insular cultural belonging is uniformly and pervasively Orcadian. What emerges is a robust, distinctive and very tight-knit minor literature.

INTRODUCTION

From the middle ages onwards, the small north Atlantic island community of Orkney has produced or drawn to itself a remarkable number of highly successful literary writers of the first calibre. While indigenous Orcadian culture undoubtedly finds its fullest expression through the islands' prolific literary art, there have also been visitors to Orkney who have found themselves compelled to write about the archipelago. Although many of the key local figures who have enjoyed critical acclaim and commercial success furth of Orkney have themselves been the objects of extensive study, the continuities, progressions and reactions which exist within this community of writers have not been considered before. This, the first full survey of the literature of Orkney, sets out to consider their collective work and to chart the development of an independent island literature which begins in the twelfth century and continues into the present.

Orcadian writing inhabits the intersection of three spheres - those of English Literature, of Scottish Literature, and of medieval Norse Literature. Orkney's position as a medieval Norse principality or minor nation state poised at the epicentre of the viking sea routes has proved a durable element in the definition of her quasi-national cultural self image. Geographical distance from the centres of political power and a dividing line at 1468 - when Orkney ceased to come under Scandanavian jursidiction and was handed over to Scotland - have enabled a cultural identity which is neither entirely Nordic nor wholly Scots. In the period following 1707, Orcadian literary and cultural history follows a similar pattern to that of mainland Scotland. There is a slightly later "vernacular revival" of sorts in Orkney. This is followed by vigorous Orcadian participation in the twentieth century Scottish Literary Renaissance. There are also significant contributions to the literature of post-modern, post-war Scotland. The prose and poetry covered in this study comes from various stages of Orkney's fragmentory history and there are certainly lengthy periods where literary output is scant or altogether non-existent. It is likely that a great deal has also been lost. The tradition described herein is not the product of a single language community. The language of Orkney's early medieval literature is Old Norse and the great Icelandic chronicle *Orkneyinga Saga* belongs rightly in the Scandinavian tradition. It is included here, however, because of its central significance to the work of later, uncomplicatedly Orcadian writers. Indigenous oral material and some writing from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is in Orcadian Scots (which has a significant Scandinavian dimension). Most of the best known writing to come out of Orkney in the twentieth century, however, is in English. Despite these considerable discontinuities in history and language, unique and clearly identifiable trends and themes become apparent when this literature is granted the dignity of being considered as a minor tradition in its own right.

If Orkney's history has been characterised by turmoil and fragmentation, her insular geography has provided a stable and permanently defined local environment enabling her literature to thrive. While some of the writers considered in the present work are active at very different historical periods - in complete temporal isolation from one another, sometimes centuries apart - each artist is clearly and keenly aware of his or her predecessors in the islands. Close, insular, spatial proximity is the key to cross-fertilisation in this tradition. Continuities in theme and subject matter abound. Reactionary and revisionary approaches to material used by earlier writers are also

apparent. Cairns Craig has argued recently that “the nation need not be the defining boundary of significant tradition, even if we continue to use ‘tradition’ as a central concept in our critical vocabulary”¹. It is but a short step from this statement to the hypothesis that a sea-girt island group like Orkney can become the locus for a literature of its own distinct character which looks simultaneously northwards to Scandinavia and southwards to Scotland and England. Centripetal connections across different historical periods and centripetal influences from three discrete traditions result in a literature which is independent in character and resists being drawn in by the powerful centrifugal forces of the Scottish Central Belt or the London/Oxbridge literary hegemony. The movement toward pluralism and literary devolution should allow this argument a fair hearing, and the degree of intertextuality between the writers considered herein confirms the existence of the tradition.

There is no Orcadian drama as such. In a small community unable to provide large audiences, let alone sustain a professional theatre, this is to be expected. We cannot simply say that because there is so little Orcadian drama that an Orcadian literary tradition does not exist: this would be a pointless and defeatist exercise, measuring Orkney Literature against English Literature. This study focuses accordingly on poetry and prose.

As well as presenting readings of all of Orkney’s major indigenous writers - Walter Traill Dennison, Edwin Muir, Eric Linklater, Robert Rendall and George Mackay Brown - and a number of less well-known figures, the work is unapologetic in drawing in literary texts composed outside Orkney, but which use Orkney as subject matter. *Orkneyinga Saga* is the prime example of this. Sir Walter Scott’s *The Pirate* (1821) is the second such text and is included here because it is the first novel to be written about the northern isles and, as such, has a pervasive influence on subsequent writings in Orkney. Margaret Elphinstone’s novel *Islanders* (1994) has arguably the most fragile Orcadian connection of all. Elphinstone is originally from Kent and her novel is set in Fair Isle, which is now part of Shetland. *Islanders* is also set in the twelfth century, however, when Fair Isle was a part of the Orkney Earldom, and the novel exhibits the influences of both *Orkneyinga Saga* and George Mackay Brown to a considerable extent, as well being at the same time a reaction to these predecessors. In our inclusive critical age, these texts have to be considered alongside those written from within the archipelago. The discussion of all writers focuses on those aspects of their work illustrating continuity or reaction within the community.

Rarely has such a small place been so thoroughly written. Orkney deserves to be recognised as a driving force and a key locus within Scottish Literature and, indeed, the wider literature of the north Atlantic rim. Situated at the centre of this vast maritime area, an area rich in legend, lore, and the narrative and poetic traditions, lie these sixty-five or so small, fertile islands so beloved to their indigenous writers. A broad study of these Orcadian writings from an Orcadian standpoint is long overdue and should lead to a fuller understanding of the community of writers and the semi-national consciousness which drives this small but robust island literary tradition.

¹Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and British Culture* (Edinburgh, 1994), p. 28.

1) NORSE PAST, VICTORIAN PRESENT: INTRODUCING *ORKNEYINGA SAGA*

The great Icelandic prose chronicle *Orkneyinga Saga*, written *circa* 1200, is the bedrock underlying all subsequent literature in the Orkney islands. Lumbering out of the Dark Ages and bristling with the myths of Orcadian origin and the exploits of pagan, viking earls, its first full translation into English appeared in 1873². As well as providing Orkney with a vivid and mostly historical account of its early medieval past, the saga has proven itself to be a deeply compelling and identity-bearing narrative. For nineteenth and twentieth century Orcadian readers and writers, *Orkneyinga Saga* would come to be regarded as a “national” epic. The saga is at once a chronicle and a fantasy, a Christian book of bloodshed that celebrates saints alongside murderers. Rich in paradox, invention and literary embellishment, it has enjoyed enduring popularity in English translation since the late nineteenth century.

The current definitive text of the saga in its original Old Norse is Finnbogi Gudmundsson’s 1965 edition³. There are four English translations, two from the Victorian era, and two from the twentieth century: Joseph Anderson’s edition of 1873, translated by Jon A. Hjaltalin and Gilbert Goudie, and entitled *The Orkneyinga Saga*⁴; George Webbe Dasent’s 1894 translation, entitled *The Orkneyingers’ Saga*⁵; A. B. Taylor’s translation of 1938, also entitled *The Orkneyinga Saga*⁶; and Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards’ translation, called *Orkneyinga Saga*⁷, which was first published in 1978. The translations differ in style according to their period, but all bear the distinctive hallmarks of medieval Iceland in terms of terseness and pace. The names chosen for the text by each translator, or pair of translators, follow Anderson’s lead - *The Orkneyinga Saga* - and suggest a certain unity, as well as stressing the insular, Orkney provenance of the material of the story. This impression of unity, and the concept of the text’s belonging to Orkney – the sense of *Orkneyinga Saga*’s existence as a single Orcadian monolith – is in actual fact very much a Victorian construct. Contemporary historians prefer as a title the more neutral *Jarla Saga* or *Sögur*, the *Saga* or *Sagas of the Earls* (where ‘sagas’ in the plural arguably reflects more accurately the plurality of the source material of the modern “text”, and *Jarla* stresses the focus of the material on a dynasty, rather than geography, or a slippery quasi-nationality). Literary writers, though, (as well as creative historiographers and translators) have continued always to apply the more emotive epithet, *Orkneyinga Saga*.

A total of at least twenty-one distinct textual sources are incorporated into the saga: it is very much an anthology of Norse literature pertaining to Orkney. In this sense the

²Jon A. Hjaltalin and Gilbert Goudie (trans.) and Joseph Anderson (ed.), *The Orkneyinga Saga*, (Edinburgh, 1873, and reprinted, Edinburgh, 1973).

³Finnbogi Gudmundsson (ed), *Orkneyinga Saga* (Islendzk Fornrit XXXIV, Reykjavik, 1965).

⁴Anderson, (ibid).

⁵G. W. Dasent, *The Orkneyingers’ Saga*, (London, 1894).

⁶A. B. Taylor, *The Orkneyinga Saga*, (Edinburgh, 1938).

⁷Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Orkneyinga Saga*, (Hogarth Press, 1978 and Penguin Books, 1981). All subsequent references are to Pálsson and Edwards’ translation in the Penguin edition.

saga might be viewed as the first in a line of self-conscious, identity-making, “Orkney Anthologies” stretching down to Ernest Marwick’s *Anthology of Orkney Verse* (1949) and George Mackay Brown’s *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969). This considered, it is still possible to refer to the author of *Orkneyinga Saga*, for a great deal of the prose material is written - or compiled - by the same individual, and the text exhibits an often remarkable literary unity.

Mythological beginnings

The saga begins with a fabulous opening sequence giving a mythological description of the origins of the Orkney earls in northern Norway, and suggesting to medieval and modern readers a sense of independent Scandinavian Orkney identity - a confirmation of Orkney’s affinity with the far north. The opening words of the first chapter, “There was a king called Fornjot...” might give us the feeling that we are entering the realm of folk tale, rather than a saga of flesh and blood characters, and this is borne out as we read on to discover the exploits of Fornjot’s descendants. Fornjot’s great-great grandson is Thorri. Thorri’s customary midwinter feast is blighted by the disappearance of his daughter, Goi. The narrative proper commences as Goi’s brothers Nor (who is arguably the saga’s first “character”, and the first character in Orcadian literature) and Gor set out to try to discover Goi’s whereabouts. A pan-Scandinavian winter quest ensues. Gor navigates the Baltic, while Nor subdues the magical Lapps – the uncanny “Finn Folk” of later Orkney folklore - with his own powerful magic. Nor then travels westward over mountain and round fjord, making short work of various combatants (“like tares through a field of wheat” (OS, ch.1)), eventually locating his sister, the lost princess. The guttural, monosyllabic names given to these early nobles, and the elemental denotations of some of these names, enhance the impression that we may be dealing with magical beings, pagan demigods perhaps⁸. It is Nor who is credited with the establishment of the kingdom of Norway, while a genealogical pedigree is declaimed demonstrating how Rognvald of More, the first Earl of Orkney, was descended from Gor. Over the course of these three short introductory chapters we move from the frozen half-light of this Nordic Dream Time to the (fictional) establishment of the medieval kingdom of Norway, complete with references to real locations such as Sognefjord and Trondheim Fjord, and the introduction of Rognvald of More, a real historical figure. The mythical introduction serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it establishes a wild, warlike, elemental and outlandish genealogical pedigree for the real Orkney earls, who are aligned with, and yet distinctly independent from, the kings of Norway; this is an early literary exercise in the creation of identity. Secondly, it is clear that these opening chapters are calculated to appeal to the aesthetic sensibility, to the *imagination* of the audience. The saga commences with this richly imaginative prelude, paving the way for the literary presentation of the more closely historical sections that follow. As readers, we can be in no doubt that we are, at this stage of the saga, very firmly within the realm of literary art.

While historians have found little that is useful in the mythological introduction to

⁸ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, “The Sea, the Flame and the Wind: The Legendary Ancestors of the Earls of Orkney”, in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch and Christopher D. Morris (eds.) *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1993, pp. 212 - 221).

Orkneyinga Saga, this introduction can certainly enhance our appreciation of the saga as a literary work. The deliberately hazy, legendary beginning eases the audience into the body of epic narrative, and suggests certain themes and motifs that will recur as we move on through the rest of the story. Nor and Gor's division of Norway, and the subsequent divisions into districts by their descendants, suggest the relentless and difficult fragmentations of the Orkney earldom (between rival brothers, cousins, nephews and uncles) which follow. Indeed, the warfare between the sons of Nor and Gor prefigures the warfare between cousins and brothers which dominates the remaining three centuries' worth of narrative. The specifics of how Nor and Gor divide their property (Nor claims the mainland of Norway, while Gor takes all the islands and skerries where a ship with a fixed rudder can pass between them and the mainland) are echoed later in the saga when King Magnus Barelegs claims the Hebrides from King Malcolm Duncansson of Scotland in a similar way. (Both of the sea kings demonstrate guile and dishonesty in equal measure by having their ships carried over narrow isthmuses in order to increase their territory – a parallel between different sections of the narrative that has clearly been inserted as a literary device.)

Moving on from the introductory section – this book of Orcadian literary genesis - the main body of the saga begins to emerge, detailing the lives and times of the historical Norse rulers of the medieval Orkney Earldom. It moves swiftly to the conquest of Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides by King Harald Fine-Hair of Norway, and Harald's handing over of the earldom to Earl Rognvald of More as compensation for the loss of his son during the campaign. The saga then goes on to relate the deeds of subsequent earls as far as the end of the twelfth century. Its predominant themes are violence and power struggle: between rival earls - cousins, brothers, uncles and nephews; between the Orkney earls and Scots chieftains or Kings; and between the earls and their overlords, the Kings of Norway. The saga is epic in its scale and depicts a vast and sometimes bewildering array of personalities. However, some of the more significant characters to hold the title of Earl of Orkney are Torf Einar, Sigurd the Stout, Rognvald Brusason, Thorfinn Sigurdarson, Thorfinn's grandsons Hakon Paulsson and Magnus Erlendsson, and Magnus' nephew Rognvald Kolsson. Although he is not an earl, the picaresque exploits of the viking Svein Asleifarson occupy a large proportion of the story. The saga closes with an account of the long reign of Earl Harald Maddadarson.

The early earldom and Earl Turf-Einar

We might be forgiven for assuming that the saga is progressing into more reliable historical territory when, following the mythical Scandinavian preamble, in the fourth chapter, we encounter Harald Fine-Hair, a historical King of Norway:

One summer Harald Fine-Hair sailed west over the North Sea in order to teach a lesson to certain Vikings whose plundering he could no longer tolerate. These Vikings used to raid in Norway over summer and had Shetland and Orkney as their winter base. Harald conquered Shetland, Orkney and the Hebrides, then sailed all the way to the Isle of Man where he laid its settlements in ruins. During his campaign he fought a number of battles, winning himself territories further west than any King of Norway has done since. (OS, ch. 4)

This sweeping, authoritative action has seemed to recent historians to be too tidy to represent reality.⁹ The great westward campaign, during the course of which Harald subdues these large territories, is very likely an invented attempt on the author's part to demonstrate early - and continuing - Norwegian authority over Orkney and the other island groups. Harald's journey is a fiction, but not so much a literary fiction as a fiction forged for the purposes of political propaganda at the time of the saga's composition around about 1200. When we come to the gifting of Orkney to Earl Rognvald of More, and the descriptions of his son, Earl Turf-Einar, the narrative bears further marks of literary invention, but here these are purely for the purpose of entertainment of the audience.

When the question of who should succeed to the earldom arises, the three contenders are Rognvald's sons; Thorir, Hrollaug and Einar. Rognvald decides that Thorir and Hrollaug's destinies lie elsewhere. The following intriguing discussion then takes place:

After that the Earl's youngest son, Einar, came forward.

"Do you want me to go to the islands?" he asked. "I can promise you the greatest favour you could wish for, and that's never to have to see me again. There's little enough here to hold me, and I don't see myself as being any more of a failure elsewhere."

"Considering the kind of mother you have," said the Earl, "slave born on each side of her family, you're not likely to make much of a ruler. But I agree; the sooner you leave and the later you return, the happier I'll be."

Rognvald gave Einar a fully equipped ship of twenty benches and King Harald conferred on him the title of earl. (OS, ch. 6)

A student of Scottish Literature might view this as a perverse display of affection, a kind of familial "flyting" (as James Hogg has put it, "nipping and scarting is Scots folk's wooing"¹⁰). Alternatively, this might be read as a variation on the ubiquitous "goading" scene of the Icelandic Family Sagas. Despite his apparent slander, and the seeming coldness towards his son, Rognvald does want Einar to succeed. The insult is different from those in the stock scenes of the Family Sagas in that it refers to the fact of Einar's illegitimate parentage, rather than a deficiency in his courage.

Having set up our ironic anticipation of his failure, the author proceeds to present Turf-Einar as perhaps the most colourful and successful character of the first quarter of the saga. Turf-Einar is a skald and a warrior, a slave-born noble and the first saga personality to live out his life and exploits as an earl in Orkney. The sections of the saga pertaining to him demonstrate the rich patchwork quality of much of the text where the author is working from a framework of skaldic strophes that punctuate his fleshed-out prose narrative. Turf-Einar's own tenth century skaldic verse is the very earliest literature of Orkney, and typifies the ugly combination of elaborate kennings, sarcastic mockery and bloodthirsty boasting that constitutes the poetry of the early Viking Age:

⁹ Thomson, William, 'Harald Fairhair, Torf Einar and Orkneyinga Saga', in Olwyn Owen (ed.) *The World of Orkneyinga Saga – The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip* (Kirkwall, 2005)

¹⁰ James Hogg, "The Brownie of the Black Hags" in *The Tales of the Ettrick Shepherd* (London, 1884), p.148.

Of no mean mettle,
Men come from many
a country, keen to do
combat with me, to kill:
but, till they fell me, few
know what is fated, know
who will tumble, torn
by the eagles talon.¹¹

In a twist that smacks again of literary contrivance, it is the slave-descended Einar, rather than one of his more promising brothers, who later succeeds in avenging his father's murder by killing Halfdan Long-Legs. In one of the most memorable incidents of *Orkneyinga Saga*, the prose relates how Einar offers the victim to Odin by carving a "blood eagle" of his corpse, drawing his lungs out through slits made in his back. As William Thomson has put it, this lends the chapter "the thrill of horror"¹², but is much more likely to be invented than historical. Meanwhile, in a sophisticated, enriching allusion, the saga author's prose embellishment chooses to align Einar with the one-eyed poet-god Odin: "Einar was tall and ugly, and though he was one-eyed, he was still the most keen-sighted of men."¹³ Indeed, like Odin – who is known as "Allfather" in the Norse myths – Turf-Einar is the patriarch, the father of all the subsequent Orkney earls. Colourful, anecdotal detail surrounding the (unlikely) reason behind his derogatory nickname ensures Turf-Einar stands out among the wide cast of saga characters: because wood was scarce for fuel in the islands, he was the first to dig peat for fuel, at Tarbart Ness in Scotland. It is difficult to see how, if this is not another invented story, the inhabitants of the islands managed to keep themselves warm before the arrival in the west of Turf-Einar.

Earl Thorfinn Sigurdarson "The Mighty" and Earl Rognvald Brusason

As the saga progresses into the eleventh century and the joint era of earls Thorfinn Sigurdarson "The Mighty" and his nephew Rognvald Brusason, the quality of the prose is arguably at its finest. For these sections, the author draws again on skaldic verses, now those of Arnor Thordarson, the Earl's Poet or "Jarlaskald". And again, the prose material elaborates on the verse sources in ways that enliven the narrative. The physical descriptions given of the two earls provide a sharp distinction, enabling the audience to differentiate visually between them; while Rognvald is handsome with golden hair, Thorfinn is "an ugly looking man with a black head of hair, sharp features, a big nose and bushy eyebrows..." (OS, ch. 20). In terms of physical presence, both are described as being tall and strong. The saga has less to say about the early years of their joint rule, where they are allies, until the earls disagree and gather forces before the high drama of their pitched sea battle at Roberry, in the Pentland Firth. Although they may be at odds with the ruthlessness he shows his enemies, instances of Thorfinn's magnanimity and human compassion are selected for emphasis. After the first bout of fighting, where the battle goes badly for

¹¹ *Orkneyinga Saga*, chapter 8.

¹² Thomson, (ibid. p. 9)

¹³ *Orkneyinga Saga*, chapter 7. See Thomson (ibid.) for a fuller discussion of the Odin subtext in this section.

Thorfinn, he goes ashore to offload seventy dead and numerous wounded, insisting also that Arnor the Skald remains ashore, “for he was very fond of him” (OS, ch. 26). It is tempting to speculate that, without this insistence from Thorfinn, *Orkneyinga Saga* might have been a slighter and a duller account, given the centrality of Arnor’s verses to the chapters describing Thorfinn’s reign.

In some respects, it seems difficult for either Arnor or the saga author to know what to say about the Battle of Roberry; the skald and the sagaman are admirers of both earls, and an uncharacteristic, even-handed neutrality pervades the narrative here. Arnor’s verses on the battle are a curious mixture of celebration of Thorfinn’s eventual victory and lament that the earls’ previously good relationship should have come to this pass. A novel note of personal sadness enters the poetry. Arnor is clearly torn:

awkward our choice
when Earls are eager
to fight – friendship
is far from easy.¹⁴

Thorfinn wins the Battle of Roberry, going ashore afterwards to resume command of all Orkney, while Rognvald escapes to Norway. Following this defeat - with its large concomitant loss of life - Rognvald remains focused on regaining the earldom, and now sets out from Norway for Orkney in the middle of winter in a single ship. In a low-key, covert operation, he surrounds the house where Thorfinn is staying with a small bodyguard, intending to assassinate his uncle in the traditional Viking manner, by burning him alive in the house. Thorfinn, however, is portrayed as a heroic survivor:

Earl Thorfinn broke out through a wooden partition-wall and escaped carrying his wife Ingibjorg in his arms. The night was pitch dark and he got clear under cover of smoke without Rognvald’s men suspecting anything. That same night Thorfinn rowed over to Caithness in a small boat. (OS, ch. 28)

In a patriarchal society renowned for its misogyny, and in a saga where women are more often ignored as irrelevant, or represented as scheming, evil sorceresses, this action again emphasises Thorfinn’s paradoxical capacity for love as well as brutality.¹⁵ To row from mainland Orkney to Caithness single-handedly in absolute darkness is a feat of almost supernatural ability and endurance; but of course this is in so many ways a literary text.

Thorfinn’s later revenge for this attack follows a satisfying parallel as he in turn arrives swiftly under cover of darkness to set light to a farmhouse in Papa Stronsay where Rognvald and his companions have gone to collect malt to brew ale for Christmas, the ironic time of more than one violent killing in *Orkneyinga Saga*. These

¹⁴ *Orkneyinga Saga*, chapter 26.

¹⁵ This evocative episode of the saga is selected for retelling – re-fictionalised - by George Mackay Brown in his story “The Fires of Christmas” in *Hawkfall* (London, 1974) and by Margaret Elphinstone’s in her novel *Islanders* (Edinburgh, 1994).

consecutive chapters unfold following a virtually identical pattern. In each instance the attacker arrives undetected, at night and with a small force. Where Thorfinn and Ingebjorg escape undetected in the smoke, Rognvald appears at the door disguised as a priest seeking quarter, before leaping over the fire and into the darkness beyond. It is Thorfinn himself who is said to praise this feat of strength: “He’s the only man capable of doing that...” (OS, ch. 29). The attackers set off to search for Rognvald and again a small detail is added, a mildly incongruous touch of human tenderness in the midst of this brutality: “Suddenly they heard a dog bark among the rocks down by the sea. Rognvald was carrying his lap-dog with him and it was this that betrayed him. They killed him on the spot among the rocks.” (OS, ch. 29)

All that remains for Thorfinn to do now to consolidate his power is to make peace with Rognvald’s patron, Magnus Olafsson, the King of Norway. The dramatic descriptions of the violence of the Battle of Robery, the attempted burning of Thorfinn, and the killing of Rognvald are arranged consecutively in the narrative and follow one another with relentless energy. By contrast, the following chapter, where Thorfinn attempts to make his peace with the king, is handled in an altogether different way. The narrative point of view and the setting shift to King Magnus at anchor aboard ship in the Sel Isles in the south of Norway. There is a cinematic quality to the narrative, an enigmatic, pregnant stillness, as two unidentified longships glide into the harbour towards Magnus’ ship and an anonymous white-hooded character steps quietly yet audaciously aboard the king’s ship, making his way to the poop-deck where he gently tears a piece of bread from the king’s loaf. The figure, of course, is Thorfinn. According to the ritual of an ancient custom, he has ensured his impunity by breaking bread with the king.

Thorfinn Sigurdarson remains one of the saga’s outstanding personalities, or “characters”. The achievements of the latter years of his reign revolve around lawmaking, a pilgrimage to Rome where he receives absolution from the Pope, the erection of a minster and the establishment of a bishopric in Birsay. Although the saga author is less sure of geography in Scotland than he is when on Orcadian soil, there is no doubt that Thorfinn held a great deal of territory south in Scotland, and his pithy epitaph declares that he was “the most powerful of all the Earls of Orkney” (OS, ch. 32). It is the combination of these facts, along with the survival of Arnor’s verses, and the manifest skill in the telling of the tale that has ensured Thorfinn’s notoriety and his appeal to a host of subsequent writers in Orkney, including J. Storer-Clouston, Eric Linklater, George Mackay Brown and Margaret Elphinstone.

The Women of Orkneyinga Saga

If the above list of writers who have been inspired or influenced by *Orkneyinga Saga* seems male-dominated, this is very likely because the world of *Orkneyinga Saga* is - almost exclusively - a man’s world. When, at the end of his legendary quest, Nor finds his sister Goi alive, he soon agrees to allowing her kidnapper, Hrolf, to keep her. In return, Nor claims Hrolf’s sister. Thorfinn Sigurdarson’s wife Ingibjorg is nicknamed, defined as “the Earls’-Mother”. Women are generally the property of men, and are therefore usually marginalised. Although the women of *Orkneyinga Saga* are relatively few in number (female characters are much more prevalent in the later Family Sagas) and receive limited attention, some of these women are nevertheless among the most memorable of its personalities.

There has been a great deal of academic discussion surrounding what critic Rolf Heller¹⁶ dubbed the *Hetzerin* or “incitress” of the Icelandic Family Sagas. She is a stock character who initiates revenge action from her male relatives with taunts of effeminacy or other insults. She is ruthless in her desire for restoration of family honour through the redress of the balance of killings in the saga. The incitress is epitomised in Hallgerd Long-Legs, who features in *Laxdæla Saga* and, more extensively, in *Njal’s Saga*, where she is responsible for inciting many killings, among them those of her three husbands. (Bjarne Fidjestøl has suggested that these dreadful characters may have their origins in the legend of the Valkyries, and illustrates how women are sometimes shown as being instrumental behind battle descriptions in Norse literature¹⁷.) When considered alongside the predominant assumption of male authorship, the presence of the incitress seems to suggest that the sagas comprise a patriarchal and decidedly misogynist discourse. With sophisticated literacy arriving in Iceland with Christianity, and the subsequent ecclesiastic production of texts, it is thought that the authorship of many of the sagas can be attributed to churchmen. (The author of *Orkneyinga Saga* may well have been a priest.) Seeking a Biblical precedent, some commentators remember Eve’s initiatory role in the Fall, suggesting this as the origin of the sagas’ tendency to depict the interference of women behind the trouble suffered by men. Needless to say, the portrait of the saga woman has hardly been considered by feminist criticism to be a complimentary one.

Jenny M. Jochens is one critic who subscribes to the school of thought that the incitress originates in part with the story of the Fall. Jochens draws together evidence from contemporary historical sources to show how this saga heroine has no real historical counterpart and should therefore “be consigned to the realm of male fiction”¹⁸. Judith Jesch follows this lead, making the comment that “The female inciters of the sagas ... were a useful and colourful myth that accounted for the horrors of violence while removing the blame for it from male shoulders”¹⁹. Consensus holds that the figure is indeed a literary motif, and therefore a construct. Jesch develops her argument with reference to *Laxdæla Saga* and focuses on the anonymity of the author: “it has been suggested that *Laxdæla Saga*, if not written by a woman, was at

¹⁶ Rolf Heller, *Die Literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas* (Halle, 1958).

¹⁷ “*Out they will look, the lovely ladies* -Views of women in Norse Literature” in *Bjarne Fidjestøl - Selected Papers* (Odense, 1997). Fidjestøl makes this point by relating Jarl Finn Arnason’s comment (recorded in *Heimskringla*) to his captor Harald Fine-Hair after a battle at Halland in Norway: “Now it’s no wonder you bit well today when you have the mare with you!” This is a crude reference to Harald’s wife, and alludes to the Norse pastime of horsefighting and the hormonal impetus provided to the fighting stallions by the proximity of a mare. Fidjestøl also makes a noteworthy reference to the Valkyries of *Njal’s Saga*, witnessed in Caithness weaving a battle standard of men’s intestines at the same time as the Battle of Clontarf took place: the women are supernaturally generating the violence.

¹⁸ Jenny M. Jochens, “The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction” in John Tucker (ed.), *Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York, 1989).

¹⁹ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Suffolk, 1991).

least produced for a predominantly female audience”²⁰. Whether or not a woman wrote *Laxdæla Saga*, women are significant as its intended audience, for here is a saga which has a rich diversity of female characters who are by turns intellectual, noble in the broadest sense, attractive and, above all, take an active part in the saga. Jesch demonstrates that there is “a certain amount of feminine wish-fulfilment in the saga, with slaves turning out to be princesses, wives who get the better of their husbands and so on”²¹. She also suggests that *Laxdæla Saga* might more appropriately be named *Gudrun’s Saga*, after its central character.

We might conclude that this incitress is more than simply a manifestation of a misogynist or masculine/Christian outlook: she is a literary construct, and therefore does not truly represent Norse women. Perhaps she is there to give women more of a role in the narrative, when the structure of Norse society precluded them from taking part in direct action. This would imply that women constituted a significant proportion of the audience of the sagas. Perhaps, rather than representing the dark fabrication of a misogynist mind, these women have a less sinister and more lighthearted purpose. Modern readers and critics have certainly found the scenes fascinating and entertaining. Could the comments made by the incitresses and the interplay between gender expectations be meant to be amusing? It is quite possible to imagine men and women laughing together at these scenes in something similar to the response that may have been elicited by the more sophisticated anti-feminist satire of, say, William Dunbar at the court of James IV in Scotland.

Returning, then, to *Orkneyinga Saga*, there is one extraordinarily complex and bloody chapter where Ragnhild, daughter of Eirik Blood-Axe, plots the murder of her first husband Earl Arnfinn, going on to marry his brother Earl Havard. She then enters a pact with Havard’s nephew Einar Buttered-Bread, agreeing to marry him if he will murder Havard. When Havard is out of the way, she refuses to marry Einar, sending rather for another of Havard’s nephews, Einar Hard-Mouth, and persuading him to kill Einar Buttered-Bread in return for her hand in marriage. Then, on top of all of this, after he has killed Einar Buttered-Bread, Ragnhild refuses Einar Hard-Mouth, marrying instead Ljot, the brother of her previous husbands Arnfinn and Havard. It may come as less of a surprise when at this stage Ljot decides to kill Einar Hard-Mouth. Something of a stretch of the imagination is required to read much of this as historical fact. Although she very likely existed, Ragnhild is easier to come to terms with if we consider her portrayal as a literary invention: she is clearly an earlier example in the “incitress” mould of Hallgerd Long-Legs.

Another woman who will remain etched in the memory of any reader is Eithne, the Irish sorceress mother of Earl Sigurd the Stout:

One summer it happened that a Scottish earl called Finnleik challenged Sigurd to fight him on a particular day at Skitten. Sigurd’s mother was a sorceress so he went to consult her, telling her that the odds against him were heavy, at least seven to one.

“Had I thought you might live forever,” she said, “I’d have reared you in my wool-basket. But lifetimes are shaped by what will be, not by where

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

you are. Now, take this banner. I've made it for you with all the skill I have, and my belief is this: that it will bring victory to the man it's carried before, but death to the one who carries it."

It was a finely made banner, very cleverly embroidered with the figure of a raven, and when the banner fluttered in the breeze, the raven seemed to be flying ahead. (OS, ch. 11)

This banner - reminiscent of the "fairy flags" of Celtic tradition - must have been cleverly embroidered indeed, for although he loses three standard bearers in the battle, Sigurd bears the gree. The banner may bring victory to the army following it, but only in return for the sacrifice of the bearer, or however many bearers the old gods desire before bestowing victory. Perhaps as significant here as the fact that Eithne is a woman are the facts that she is a sorceress and a pagan. The scene is an example of the standard pattern; the mother incites son to violent action through insult, her son rises to the challenge and is successful. (This is similar to the aforementioned scene with Rognvald of More and Turf-Einar.) However, Eithne does seem to have an innate evil going beyond the harshness of her reprimand to Sigurd. This much is borne out when Sigurd himself dies carrying the same banner - this time before the losing army - at the Battle of Clontarf. Rules apply; the pagan gods are true to their word, and the pattern does not follow twice. Eithne is a pagan, a sorceress who promises only what Fate will bring for her son, and in so doing fixes his fate.

Consider the sorceresses Helga and Frakkok, important characters in the middle stages of the saga. The pair are sisters, mother and aunt of the joint rulers Earls Harald and Paul. During preparations for a Yule feast, Earl Harald discovers the two sitting in an anteroom with their needlework, an ornately beautiful and newly completed linen shirt lying between them. When they tell him the garment is for his brother Paul, he flies into a jealous rage and refuses to hear their entreaties for him not to put the gold-embroidered treasure on. The narrative is stylized and formulaic, again with the feel of a folk-tale. Within three short sentence, the earl is dead:

Though they were both in tears he didn't let that stop him, but no sooner was the garment upon his back than his flesh started to quiver and he began to suffer terrible agony. He had to go to bed and not long after that he died. (OS, ch. 54)

Motherly love, indeed. Note, however, that the garment does not kill the son it was intended for. Again, an evil, pagan scheme goes awry. While it is true that needlework - the province of women - provides the instruments of the demise of both Sigurd and Harald, the gender of Eithne, Helga or Frakkok is not the only issue: other characters in *Orkneyinga Saga* who are not women, but who are evil and heathen, also seem to suffer for their beliefs.

At a slightly later stage, Earl Paul has a retainer and forecastleman by the name of Svein Breast-Rope. The first description of Svein is as follows; "He was a tall, well built man, rather dark and with an unlucky look about him. He was keen on the old practices and spent many a night in the open with the spirits." (OS, ch. 65) The audience of the saga would have understood that this man represents trouble. Physical appearance reflects character in the sagas, and a swarthy or an ugly man tends to be an evil man. The "outsittings" at which he "spent many a night" are indicative that he

communicated with trolls or pagan gods in order to know the future. Therefore, Svein Breast-Rope is an outsider. In another ironically timed incident, Svein disrupts the peace at Paul's Yule feast by deliberately provoking his namesake, the young Svein Asleifarson²². In a strikingly ironic juxtaposition, bringing the violation of the Christian festival to the fore, Svein Asleifarson pre-empts Svein Breast-Rope by murdering him as the Earl and his party go into the church for Vespers. It is the pagan Svein Breast-Rope who is seen as guilty, however. Svein Asleifarson is eventually reconciled with the earl, but not before the bishop has delivered his famous, shocking one-line comment on what we might think of as decidedly un-Christian behaviour; "The bishop thanked him for killing Svein Breast-Rope and called it good riddance" (OS, ch. 66). The killing of this troublesome, evil pagan is seemingly not a problem to the Church. It is unlikely that worship of heathen gods would really have been practised at the earl's residence at this relatively late stage, and the way the episode is presented gives us another insight into the literary construction of the saga. Firstly, the reference to Svein Breast-Rope spending the previous night "out in the open, as he often did" (OS, ch. 66) and the accompanying implication that he was communicating with the old gods is likely to an embellishment (as is the significance of the earlier physical description of him). History may provide an explanation for this, for it is thought likely that at this stage the bishop had already forged links with the young contender to the earldom, Rognvald Kali Kolsson²³ - hence his ready acceptance of Svein Asleifarson's un-Christian deed. (Svein Asleifarson later becomes a vital ally of Rognvald's.) The association of Svein Breast-Rope with paganism is a literary technique that blackens his character somewhat, and to some extent excuses the bishop's willingness in letting his murder pass.

Dabbling in pagan magic has unpredictable and often fatal consequences for men and women alike. By contrast, in later stages the (nominally) Christian projects of Earl Rognvald Kolsson (his bid for the earldom in the name of his uncle St. Magnus, the building of St. Magnus Cathedral, and his pilgrimage to the Holy Land) are resounding successes. Where Earl Rognvald Kolson enjoys a golden era of achievement in the second half of the saga, Christian women contrast with the heathen sorceresses of the early stages. Thora, the mother of St. Magnus, makes a successful appeal to a weeping Earl Hakon, her nephew and Magnus's murderer, to allow her to bury her son in consecrated ground. This is a brief episode, but one that nevertheless demonstrates her faith, and her influence over the earl: the tears of a Christian woman prompt the beginnings of his repentance and redemption. (Hakon has previously consulted a heathen soothsayer who promises him great success, but mocks the Christian God.) Brief but pertinent scenes give us a glimpse of another female figure of nobility and independent means in Ragna, who farms in North Ronaldsay. Unlike Thora, Ragna is certainly not closely related to the Earls, and this makes her voice all the more remarkable. She is without a husband. Nevertheless, she holds considerable sway with Earl Paul, trying to persuade him to give quarter Svein Asleifarson following the murder of Svein Breast-Rope. Paul disregards her advice and Svein Asleifarson later returns to Orkney, kidnapping Paul and (very probably)

²² Svein Asleifarson occupies nearly as much space in the narrative as any of the Orkney earls. A charismatic maverick, he seems to have crossed the line from history into legend even before the composition of the saga.

²³ Barbara Crawford, "St. Magnus and St. Rognvald - The Two Orkney Saints", in *Scottish Church History Society Records*, Vol. 28.

arranging his murder. Later, Ragna demonstrates her influence over Earl Rognvald Kolsson, meeting with him and persuading him to accept a friend of hers, an Icelandic poet whom he has rejected, into his coterie. Although there are very few Christian women in the story, and their utterances are briefly recorded, the earls listen to them.

The Martyrdom of Earl Magnus

George Mackay Brown would write of *Orkneyinga Saga*, with typical celebratory reverence, “out of the waste-land of fire and revenge, the story of the martyrdom of Earl Magnus shines like a precious stone”²⁴. However we choose to interpret it, the martyrdom of Magnus is the centerpiece and the defining moment of *Orkneyinga Saga*.

The cousins Hakon Paulsson and Magnus Erlendsson share the earldom in what becomes an increasingly strained alliance. Eventually they agree to a peace summit on the island of Egilsay. The arrangement is that each earl will bring two ships and an equal number of men. However, in a typical saga betrayal, Hakon arrives with eight ships. Magnus offers to go on a pilgrimage and to leave the islands forever, to be sent to Scotland and kept under guard for the rest of his life, or to be maimed and thrown in a dungeon. Hakon accepts the third option, but warlike chieftains – who stir up trouble and at the same time seem to remove some of the responsibility from Hakon - insist on the killing of one earl. Needless to say, Magnus is executed. None of the warriors present will agree to carrying out the deed, however, and Hakon’s cook, Lifolf, is ordered to execute the Earl: “‘Stand in front of me and strike me hard on the head,’ said Magnus, ‘it’s not fitting for a chieftain to be beheaded like a thief. Take heart, poor fellow, I’ve prayed that God grant you his mercy.’” (OS, ch. 50)

There then follow a number of the standard topoi of medieval saints’ lives. (A Latin “Life of St. Magnus” existed previous to the composition of *Orkneyinga Saga*, and is one of the many sources incorporated in the saga. It is possible that this *Vita* was written in Orkney.) The previously barren scene of the martyrdom transforms into a green sward, a heavenly light is seen at the martyr’s grave, there is a sweet fragrance at the graveside, and miracles occur, with people travelling from far and wide to be cured of all manner of afflictions. The tone throughout this description is heavily pious, the language conspicuously Latinate and elaborate in comparison to the blunt, northern diction of the bulk of the narrative. The end of the miracle book in particular brings together subject, reader, writer and, interestingly, teller of the tale in an emotional benediction;

(May) he who wrote this record, he who has told it, and all who listen to it enjoy from that holy knight of God, Earl Magnus, blessings and the answer to their prayers for the remission of their sins and for everlasting joy. (OS, ch. 57)

George Mackay Brown would return often to his sense of the saga moving from darkness into light at the point of the martyrdom of Magnus. We might agree that, on a stylistic level, there are differences in tone between early chapters such as those describing Nor’s journey across the frozen wastes of Lapland, or the pagan sacrifice

²⁴ *For the Islands I Sing*, (London, 1997), p. 52.

carried out by Turf-Einar, or the sorcery associated with Sigurd Hlodversson's Raven Banner, when these are compared to the heavenly light over Magnus' grave, the miraculous cures associated with his shrine, the later pilgrimage of Magnus' nephew Rognvald Kolson in the sunbright Mediterranean, or, indeed, the vivid colour provided by Rognvald's charismatic personality. (Although these differences in tone might equally be ascribed to the wide variety of source material incorporated into the text as we read it today). The story of the martyrdom of Magnus has provoked very different reactions in the work of the various writers who have revisited or revised the saga account. For the historian Joseph Storer Clouston or his friend and contemporary the novelist Eric Linklater, he is a pacifist peculiarity in a warrior's saga, a holy fool who refuses to fight at the Battle of the Menai Strait, chanting psalms and enduring the ridicule of King Magnus Barelegs before his ignominious escape from the clutches of the king, running through the English forest barefoot and in his underwear. While George Mackay Brown would appreciate the way in which the saga author invests in Magnus the grace of the Norse god Balder²⁵, Clouston would wonder at the peculiar asexual piety of the earl who plunged himself in cold water "whenever the urge of temptation came upon him" (OS, ch 45.). For Clouston, the saint whose cranial capacity was discovered, on the analysis of his relics, to be rather small²⁶, was quite clearly "deficient in ordinary workaday common sense"²⁷. Conversely, as we shall see, Magnus was to become a foundation stone both of George Mackay Brown's personal faith, and his literary art.

Earl Rognvald Kolson

If Magnus has seemed to some commentators to be more of an idea than a reality, then his nephew Earl Rognvald Kali Kolson is far and away the most vividly drawn character of the saga. Indeed, by the time we reach the chapters of the saga pertaining to Rognvald, the experience is that of reading an altogether different story. The rich detail of the narrative in these sections is due in part to the fact that Rognvald was himself a prolific and accomplished skald, and that some thirty or so of his verses are embedded in the section of the saga pertaining to him, along with various other poems composed by the poets of his court and coterie. Indeed, the poetry of Rognvald's court has been celebrated as evidence of a "learned and literary milieu in twelfth century Orkney"²⁸. Rognvald's exploits are also closer in time to the point of composition of the saga at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and this may account for some of the enhanced detail in these chapters.

The young Kali Kolson is a Norwegian nobleman who has a claim to the Orkney

²⁵ W.P.L.Thomson, "St. Magnus: An Exploration of his Sainthood", in Doreen J. Waugh (ed.), "The Faces of Orkney: Stones, Skalds and Saints", (Edinburgh, 2003).

²⁶ Bones discovered in a pillar during repairs to St. Magnus Cathedral in 1919 are assumed to be the relics of Magnus. These were in all likelihood placed in the pillar to avoid their destruction at the Reformation. The skull exhibited a large cleft consistent with the saga account of Magnus' killing. R.W. Reid, 'Remains of St. Magnus and St. Rognvald entombed in St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney', *Biometrica* 18, 1 & 2, 118-50.

²⁷ Clouston, *A History of Orkney*, (Kirkwall, 1932), p. 68.

²⁸ Judith Jesch, "Literature in Medieval Orkney" in Olwyn Owen (ed.) *The World of Orkneyinga Saga – 'The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip'* (Kirkwall, 2005, p.15).

Earldom through his mother Gunnhild, the sister of Earl Magnus. Kali later adopts the name Rognvald, styling himself in the mould of Rognvald of More or Rognvald Brusason, powerful figures of the early saga. A good deal of slightly extraneous material relating to Kali's early career is included, lending a lively ebullience to these chapters. In Bergen: "Kali and his shipmates started having a good time round about the taverns. Kali was something of a dandy and was stylishly dressed..." (OS, ch. 60) Customarily, the saga narrative confines itself to action and terse dialogue, and this, the first of two references to Rognvald's sartorial elegance, is a surprising and, we might agree, an enlivening departure. Rognvald Kali's own verses, too, represent a distinct development from the strophes of earlier skalds such as Turf-Einar or Arnor Thordarson that are embedded in the saga prose. Here, for the first time, we encounter the truly self-referential "I" of the renaissance lyric:

At nine skills I challenge –
 a champion at chess:
 runes I rarely spoil,
 I read books and write:
 I'm skilled at skiing
 and shooting and sculling
 and more! I've mastered
 music and verse.²⁹

In this early self-portrait, Rognvald emerges as as much of a renaissance man as a viking warrior; he is cultured, learned and artistic, a player and sportsman skilled in the physical and manly arts.

Rognvald's first attempt to win the earldom from Earl Paul, where he enlists the aid of the sorceress Frakkok and her grandson Olvir Brawl, is a failure and an embarrassment: Paul defeats Rognvald and confiscates his ships, leaving him stranded in Shetland. However, when Rognvald makes his second bid for the earldom, he does so in the name of his uncle, St. Magnus. In the medieval world the saints were viewed as still among the living, in the sense that they could be appealed to for intervention in temporal affairs. Rognvald's campaign gathers weight behind his promise that, if successful, he will erect a magnificent minster in his uncle's name. This, of course, is another episode of the saga that resonates with archaeological or architectural evidence, in the form of St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall³⁰. Rognvald's campaign is an especially colourful section of the saga text. Rognvald's father, Kol, the brother in law of Earl Magnus, is traditionally remembered as the architect of St. Magnus Cathedral. In the saga, Kol is also the architect and chief strategist of Rognvald's campaign. In a cunning trick, Kol sails a group of ships from Norway towards Fair

²⁹ *Orkneyinga Saga*, chapter 58. For a detailed commentary on Rognvald's poetry as represented in the saga see Paul Bibire, "The Poetry of Earl Rognvaldr's Court" in Barbara Crawford (ed.), *St. Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth Century Renaissance* (Aberdeen, 1988) and Judith Jesch, *ibid.*

³⁰ Some inshore mariners believe that St. Magnus Cathedral may have been deliberately positioned so that it could serve an additional, secular purpose as a navigational aid. When approaching Kirkwall from the North, vessels line up the cathedral spire above the point of Stromberry on Shapinsay, allowing a shortcut through the deep but very narrow channel between the island and Vasa Skerry.

Isle with their sails at half-mast. Then, by rowing backwards while hoisting the sails to full height, Kol's sailors fool Paul's men on the island into lighting a warning beacon, sowing great discord in Orkney while the ships return to Norway. Kol later installs agents in Fair Isle who pour water on a new beacon, paving the way for Rognvald's invasion from his power base north in Shetland. (In another folk-tale style chapter, Rognvald abandons his elegant garments to appear disguised in fishing clothes, before setting out anonymously to assist a poor Shetland fisherman. The chapter has the quality of parable, and is similar to various folk-tales across Scotland, one of which takes place in Orkney, where James V appears dressed as a commoner and mingles anonymously with his subjects.) Although he has appealed for the assistance of God, it is ultimately the help of the renegade chieftain Svein Asleifarson that ensures Rognvald's success. Arriving home in Orkney having commandeered a cargo boat, Svein surprises Earl Paul when he is out with a small group of followers hunting otters on the shore at Westness, in Rousay. The men are swiftly killed, and Earl Paul is kidnapped and out of the story, very likely murdered.

Filling in gaps in the Christian master-narrative of *Orkneyinga Saga*, historians tend now to view the Cult of St. Magnus as a political tool. Paul Bibire's quiet observation that "the Cult of St. Magnus must already have existed in order to have been put to political ends"³¹ is very much a minority view. It seems logical that Rognvald should have wished to promote his uncle's sanctity as a reflection of his own qualities and capabilities, and as a way of furthering his own ambitions. It has also been pointed out that most of the miracles that were performed at St. Magnus' shrine happened to people from Shetland, where the Erlend line traditionally held its powerbase and had many allies³². Shetland is where Rognvald launches his successful bid for the earldom. Moving further north again, it has been noted that an attempt was made to exploit the Cult of St. Magnus for political ends in Iceland.³³

Having completed the first phase of the erection of his cathedral, Rognvald then gathers around him a group of the finest skippers, warriors and poets he can muster, to assemble a fleet and join him on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Bishop William of Orkney, who had studied in Paris, is persuaded to accompany the fleet and act as interpreter, proving himself later to be a skilled military tactician, seaman and advisor. (It is often emphasised that Rognvald consults and listens.) The account of the pilgrimage is studded with skaldic strophes from Rognvald and the other poets with whom the earl surrounds himself, many of these are written in praise of Ermingarde, the princess of Narbonne, with whom it seems Rognvald falls in love:

I'll swear, clever sweetheart,
 you're a slender delight
 to grasp and to cuddle,
 my golden-locked girl.
 Ravenous the hawk, crimson
 -clawed, flesh-crammed-

³¹Paul Bibire, "The Poetry of Earl Rognvaldr's Court" in Barbara Crawford (ed.), *St. Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth Century Renaissance* (Aberdeen, 1988).

³²Crawford, *Ibid.*

³³George M. Brunnsden, "Politics and Local Tradition within the Cult of St. Magnus of Orkney" in *Northern Studies*, Vol. 32.

but now, heavily hangs
the silken hair.³⁴

What might seem an incongruity between the imagery of courtly love and the bloodthirsty kennings owes to the fact that Rognvald's verses mark a transition point in skaldic poetry. Rognvald is a viking by ancestry, by tradition, and in his choice of verse form. Some lines of these verses resemble those of his ancestor, Turf-Einar. But Rognvald also shows an awareness of the preoccupations of the troubadour in these pilgrimage lyrics of love and war. Despite reportedly being offered Ermingarde's hand in marriage, Rognvald remains intent on the purpose of his quest, just as the earlier Mediterranean traveller Aeneas' sense of *pietas* compels him to abandon Dido in Carthage.

The presence of Ermingarde pervades the subsequent verses in terms of reference and dedication, as the pilgrims go on to lay siege to a castle and destroy an "infidel" vessel before the consummation of the pilgrimage when Rognvald swims across the River Jordan to tie a knot in the brushwood on the far side. So, this viking earl successfully completes both of the ultimate acts of medieval Christian worship; the erection of a minster, and a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. A cosmopolitan, pan-European homeward journey across Christendom ensues, with Rognvald passing through Byzantium, Bulgaria, Puglia, Rome and then northwards to Denmark and Norway. Eventually, Rognvald, too, is canonized. But, as readers, we might feel that he is as much a worldly as a spiritual character, and no miracle book exists to justify his subsequent elevation to the status of saint.

Orkneyinga Saga: A "National" Epic?

The publication in 1873 of Anderson's translation entitled *Orkneyinga Saga* (however chequered the history, and however plural the sources of this "text" actually were) would excite the wildest atavistic dreams of those who would seek to forge national or quasi-national identities in the north (British, Scottish and/or Orcadian) through the next two centuries' worth of literature and historiography. Where *Ossian* had been invented to satisfy the longings of a particular Jacobite enclave, *Orkneyinga Saga* had simply to be translated - and assembled, anthologised - to supply a unique and often historical record of a "primitive", "heroic" and, perhaps, seemingly proto-Imperial warrior dynasty for Victorian and Edwardian readers. Antiquarians in Orkney would, of course, have more success in corroborating the prose of the saga than those who sought likewise to verify the *Poems of Ossian*: St. Magnus Cathedral was the defining architectural symbol of Orkney; the carved runes of Maeshowe confirmed that the Vikings had indeed been there; the broken bones of the saints were unearthed, hidden within the cathedral masonry; the Skaild hoard, too, would reveal the former presence of the Vikings. There could be little argument with the provenance or the authenticity of *Orkneyinga Saga*.

So what of "national" ownership of the text? Is this, then, the Scottish saga? We might agree that there is something absurd in attempting to assign a "nationality" to this nebulous collection of pre-national medieval texts. Aside from its natural dwelling place among the literature of medieval Iceland, attempts have been made to

³⁴ *Orkneyinga Saga*, chapter 86.

draw *Orkneyinga Saga* towards a Scottish canon, through the identification of Celtic lexical items and literary motifs in its prose.³⁵ Anthologists, specialists in the early poetry of what is now Scottish territory, have garnered the strophes of Turf-Einar, Arnor Jarlaskald and Rognvald Kolson for a collection of the early poetry of Scotland³⁶. But even a tentative designation of *Orkneyinga Saga* as *ur*-Scottish might seem somehow ill fitting and anachronistically nationalistic. Initial enquiries into the identity of the author zealously sought him across late-twelfth and early-thirteenth century Iceland and Orkney. The twelfth century bishop and skald, Bjarni Kolbeinson was erroneously suggested as a possible “Orcadian” author. Pálsson and Edwards concur that the author’s identity remains unknown, although he was very likely a cleric associated with Oddi in the south of Iceland. Confirming, or suggesting continued identification of the text in the Orkney imagination, their 1978 introduction invests in the saga a thrilling, emotive authority: “for the people of Orkney it has a special significance, having become, since its first appearance in an English translation ... what might be called their secular scripture, inculcating in them a keener sense of their remote forbears and sharpening their awareness of a special identity.”³⁷ This is a heady and emotional description indeed, suggesting that Orcadians might identify, over a stretch of eight centuries, with the primordially distant characters/personalities of “their” saga.

Onomastics and geography have added their own enhancing dimensions to the saga for these readers in Orkney. It is easier to argue that *Orkneyinga Saga* belongs to an archipelago than that it belongs to a nation. If the Orkney landscape is everywhere littered with the stone and metal evidence of past peoples - the vikings among them - then the map of Orkney, and the Orkney imagination, are dominated by the place-name legacy of the Norse. The topography of *Orkneyinga Saga* is instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with the modern names – Norse loan words into Scots – of the Orkney landscape³⁸. For Orkney readers, the saga enlivens this landscape imaginatively, and gives the impression of political and/or violent action taking place in small and (arguably) peripheral places (some of them uninhabited) such as Birsay, Damsay, Deerness, Egilsay, Eynhallow, North Ronaldsay, Papa Stronsay, Rousay, South Walls, or Swona; places which the metropolitan mindset – or the Central Belt mindset - might dismiss as being far from the centre of things. While many of the locations of the saga action would have been instantly

³⁵ O.D. Macrae Gibson, “The Other Scottish Language - Orkneyinga Saga”, in J. Derrick McClure and Michael R.G. Spiller, (eds.) *Brycht Lanternis - Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1989). Macrae-Gibson makes the case for “Scottish Norse” authorship of some of the saga. As is inferred by the title, the paper suggests that parts of *Orkneyinga Saga* represent the work of “Scottish Norse” storytellers and that the saga constitutes a “special corner of the medieval Scottish literary tradition”. The saga is not part of a straightforward linear tradition ending in modern Scottish or Orcadian literature: its influence on modern literature comes only after its rediscovery, translation and assembly, it can only be said to be “national” in the modern sense of nineteenth century nation-imagining.

³⁶ Thomas Owen Clancy (ed.), *The Triumph Tree – Scotland’s Earliest Poetry A.D. 550 – 1350*, (Edinburgh, 1998).

³⁷ Pálsson and Edwards, *ibid.*, (p.9).

³⁸ All of the island names in Orkney are Norse in origin. Only the name of the Orkney archipelago in its collective entirety predates the Viking Age.

recognizable to Victorian readers in Orkney, the later appearance of work such as Hugh Marwick's *The Orkney Norn* in 1929, or *Orkney Farm Names* in 1952, has facilitated widespread deeper understanding of the ubiquitous Norse names of the archipelago. Details of stormy weather, accurate tidal knowledge, and evocative snatches of domestic agricultural detail combine with place-names and the unchanged geography of the archipelago to enhance, for Orkney people, the sense of home setting, of this being an early "Orkney Book".

So accustomed have we become to the categorizations of genre that there is a difficulty, for our historical standpoint, in coming to terms with a text which bridges historiography and literature in this way. But *Orkneyinga Saga* can really only be fully appreciated when we accept that it is a paradoxical combination of literature, history, anthology and embellished historiography. While historians have occasionally expressed impatience with the saga (Michael Lynch has characterized it as being "at once verbose and sparing with the facts"³⁹) its existence has nevertheless supplied us with a great deal of our knowledge of the Viking Age in Scotland. While the case for reading the saga as history was once encouraged, corroborated by a wealth of archaeological evidence, Thomson and Crawford, working in the late twentieth century, have broadened our understanding of the material, embracing its literariness and working from there to show how early thirteenth century ideological templates shaped the way in which the story is narrated. The ideological project underlying the material of the saga is taken up again when writers such as Eric Linklater, J. Storer Clouston or George Mackay Brown promote the saga as the essential narrative of Orcadian identity, while others, most notably Margaret Elphinstone, will use it in ironic and subversive ways to adjust our view of the Norse past. Perhaps the enduring appeal of the saga lies in its very amorphousness, the fact that it lies somewhere between history and fiction. It has *doubill pleasance*, to paraphrase Barbour, both in its *carpyng* and its *suthfastnes*. *Orkneyinga Saga* cannot be completely dismissed as a fiction, nor can it be entirely trusted as a history. It is therefore a perpetually fascinating text, and - whether or not we buy into the primordial, quasi-national appeal that many have found in it - it would be difficult not to agree that this saga is one of the greatest tales ever told in the north.

³⁹ Michael Lynch, *Scotland - A New History*, (London, 1991), p. 46.

2) NORSE REVIVAL AND BARDIC ASSERTION

Unearthing Viking Graves - The Loss and Recovery of Old Norse Literature in Orkney

From the six hundred odd years between the composition of *Orkneyinga Saga* and Sir Walter Scott's passage to Orkney in 1814, there is no surviving written literature. Political and economic turbulence and the accompanying linguistic shift are the reasons for the dearth of literary activity in this period. Orkney had been pawned to the Scottish crown in 1468 and Scots Earls installed. Orkney's remaining Udal laws were abolished in 1611 and the Orkney Norn (the variety of Old Norse spoken in the isles) was gradually supplanted by the language of the incoming Scots speakers. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the political upheaval and inevitable "Scottification" during the centuries subsequent to the period covered by *Orkneyinga Saga* had had the effect of eroding local awareness of Orkney's Norse background. The Cult of St. Magnus survived at least as long as the Battle of Summerdale in 1529⁴⁰ and, correspondingly, the name Magnus has endured popularly throughout the centuries. The Norse place names also remained, of course, and there is a record of the discovery in early eighteenth century North Ronaldsay of an oral tradition of Norse ballad singing⁴¹. Other fragments of indigenous oral tradition collected in the nineteenth and twentieth century are in Orcadian Scots. By and large, knowledge of Norse Orkney disappeared and the story of the Norse Earls remained effectively mothballed in a collection of various manuscripts in the Royal and University libraries of Copenhagen, physically and linguistically inaccessible to scholars or writers in Orkney, Scotland or Britain. The mainstream of Scottish literature - at least during the first four centuries of what seems to have been for Orkney a fallow period - was confined to the geographically and linguistically distant coterie of the monarchical court and had, therefore, little relevance to the northern islands⁴².

⁴⁰St. Magnus is said to have appeared on the battlefield, urging the Orkney side on against their Caithness adversaries.

⁴¹In a note to *The Pirate* (1821), Sir Walter Scott records being told "A clergyman, who was not long deceased, remembered well when some remnants of the Norse were still spoken in the island called North Ronaldshaw. When Gray's Ode, entitled the "Fatal Sisters," was first published, or at least first reached that remote island, the reverend gentleman had the well-judged curiosity to read it to some of the old persons of the isle, as a poem which regarded the history of their own country [...] they interrupted the reader, telling him they knew the song well in the Norse language, and had often sung it to him when he asked them for an old song. They called it the Magicians, or the Enchantresses. It would have been singular news to the elegant translator, when executing his version from the text of Bartholine, to have learned that the Norse original was still preserved by tradition in a remote corner of the British dominions." This event, said to have occurred at the beginning of the eighteenth century, is not corroborated. Another version of the same ballad appears in *Njal's Saga*.

⁴²One writer from Orkney did, however, make a significant contribution to the poetry of medieval Scotland. Sir Richard Holland, author of the fifteenth century Scots allegory the *Buke of the Howlat*, came originally from Orkney, and the language of his poem is said to contain certain elements that can be traced to Orkney.

Ironically, it is the case that in terms of the “dominance” of the larger neighbour/partner over the smaller, the historical and cultural relationship between Orkney and Scotland and that between Scotland and England are very similar. In *Scott and Scotland* (1936), Edwin Muir proposed his thesis that Scotland had suffered a series of hammer blows - many of them dealt by England - each one corrupting a theoretically pure and indigenous Scottish culture, eventually distorting it beyond all recognition. Muir’s book expanded, controversially, the idea that Scotland had suffered a dissociation of sensibility in its division of languages from the Reformation onwards. The approach to Scottish cultural history taken by Muir in *Scott and Scotland* could also have been applied to the history of his own islands. For instead of (or as well as) Flodden, The Reformation, The Union of the Crowns and the Act of Union, Orkney had suffered the aforementioned annexation to Scotland and the installation of Scots Earls, as well as the abolition of its Udal Laws and the dilution and eventual extinction of its Nordic language. Orkney’s “hammer blows” were dealt by Scotland, a fact which Orcadian intellectuals in the nineteenth century were happy to point out. Scots who complained about English hegemony might, they suggested, do well to look North across the Pentland Firth and consider their own actions and those of their ancestors. The Orkney Norn was elbowed out by Scots (in much the same way as English supplanted Scots in the wake of the Reformation, and the unions of Crown and Parliament), a degree of (Norse) political autonomy had been removed, udal laws had been abolished, and the islands, it was perceived, had been systematically fleeced by Scots incomers. Into this arena is born a semi-mythical, Norse-rooted Orcadian identity, set firmly apart from the mainland of Scotland.

Muir’s view that Scottish culture had been in a state of perpetual decline since the high Middle Ages has not stood up. It can be said without a shadow of doubt that Scottish literary achievements alone in the period subsequent to *Scott and Scotland* have negated his arguments declaring the death of Scottish culture. As Cairns Craig has argued:

[...] fragmentation, disunity, the lack of a continuous history, might represent more truly both the typical condition of human culture and the foundations of originality than the ‘unities’ and ‘maturities’ that are part of the ideology of cultural domination.⁴³

Somewhat ironically, Muir’s own poetry (a significant proportion of which emerges in response to Scottish history) forms part of the large body of classic Scottish writing generated by the disparate school of the Scottish Renaissance during the nineteen twenties and thirties. A reading of the later poem “One Foot in Eden” which interprets its positive organic imagery in mythic/historical rather than, or as well as, personal terms allows the poem to develop from Muir’s early “hammer-blow” theory of Scottish history toward a more positive statement, a recognition of a comforting timeless truth: *But famished field and blackened tree/ Bear flowers in Eden never known./ Blossoms of grief and charity/ Bloom in these darkened fields alone.*⁴⁴ More positively, and more recently, Alasdair Gray has illustrated the postscript of his novel *A History Maker* (1994) with a sketch of the stump of a heavy Scots Pine that has been sawed through close to the ground, yet sprouts fresh new foliage. Cultural

⁴³Cairns Craig, *Out of History* (Edinburgh, 1996), p118.

⁴⁴Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London, 1960), p227.

“development” may have been stalled, its “progress” diverted, but it can reshape itself and grow into new, previously unimagined forms. These images of regeneration might allow us in turn to adopt a more positive perspective on the Scoto-Orcadian cultural-historical continuum - albeit that we allow for a considerably longer *interregnum*. The lengthy - but temporary - disappearance of *Orkneyinga Saga* and the interim rise of the Scots and the British result ultimately in the powerfully fertile, cross-cultural, dialectical literary environment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The first written references to the Norse past after *Orkneyinga Saga* were, however, slightly earlier than this, in the closing years of the seventeenth century. The first historian of Orkney was the Reverend James Wallace, a minister of St. Magnus Cathedral. While Wallace was by no means ignorant of the fact that there was a Scandinavian dimension to the islands’ past, his knowledge seems decidedly patchy now that we have access to translations of *Orkneyinga Saga*. Wallace refers, for instance, to Magnus Erlendson as a king, rather than an earl⁴⁵. The first writer to work from the manuscripts containing the various constituent parts of *Orkneyinga Saga* was a Dane, Bartholinus Torfæus, who translated an amalgam of various sagas and poems from their Norse manuscripts in the Copenhagen libraries into Latin⁴⁶. The first scholarly edition of the saga was published in Copenhagen in 1780, edited and supplied with a Latin translation by Jon Jonsson. Once *Orkneyinga Saga* had been rendered in the *lingua franca*, historians such as the Reverend George Barry⁴⁷ and Samuel Hibbert⁴⁸ began to draw heavily on the newly available and extraordinarily rich source. Large sections of these - and other subsequent histories - are more or less straightforward re-workings of *Orkneyinga Saga*, following its author in an act of blind faith (modern developments in saga studies having taught historians to tread much more carefully when using saga as source material). An Orcadian, Samuel Laing of Papdale, published the first English translation of *Heimskringla*, the sagas of the Kings of Norway, in 1844. This contained various sections pertaining closely to Orkney and the Orkney Earls, many of which are common to *Heimskringla* and to *Orkneyinga Saga*. Slightly later, the Reverend Alexander Pope, a Caithness minister, translated Toræfus into English. His work was published posthumously, but was corrupted with Pope’s notes becoming confused with the text itself.

Andrew Wawn has described Pope wryly as the “flamboyant scourge of his Scottish parishioners’ weekday lechery and Sabbatical intoxication, whose motives in laying the Nordic past of Caithness and the Orkneys in front of Enlightenment antiquarians seem not to have been wholly those of a disinterested humanist and scholar”⁴⁹. The following passage from Pope’s introduction to the translation illustrates Wawn’s point:

⁴⁵Reverend James Wallace, *A Description of Orkney* (Edinburgh, 1693).

⁴⁶Tormodus Torfæus, *Orcades se rerum Orcadensium historiae* (Havniae: Justini Hog, 1697).

⁴⁷Reverend George Barry, *The History of the Orkney Islands* (Edinburgh, 1805).

⁴⁸Samuel Hibbert, *Description of the Shetland Islands* (Edinburgh, 1822).

⁴⁹Wawn, Andrew “Shrieks at the Stones: The Vikings, the Orkneys and the Scottish Enlightenment”, in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch and Christopher D. Morris, (eds.) *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic* (Edinburgh, 1993), p.143.

I would recommend the perusal of these sheets to all classes [...] wickedness and daring villainy seldom pass unpunished even in this world [...] they will be convinced that they live in happy times, compared with those mentioned in this history, when murders, massacres, pyracies, invasions and intestine divisions were so common. Who takes this view of it will see good cause to fall prostrate before God, and praise His name for the happy and quiet time in which we live.⁵⁰

This is the significant first example in a long tradition of agenda-driven translation, appropriation or adaptation of saga in the north of Scotland. This partisan literary archaeology metamorphosed gradually in Orkney and has continued into the present. Sir Walter Scott, Samuel Laing, Joseph Storer Clouston, Eric Linklater, George Mackay Brown, Margaret Elphinstone and Gregor Lamb have all utilised saga, each at different points on a fictional/historical scale and each with his or her own particular angle of approach. All step various distances over the line of straightforward translation or paraphrase, choosing rather to pursue their own diverse literary agendas, be these Hanoverian Unionist (Scott), Victorian Imperialist (Laing, and, perhaps, Clouston and Linklater), Orcadian “nationalist” (Clouston, Linklater, Brown and Lamb), Scottish Nationalist (Linklater), Christian (Brown) or Feminist (Elphinstone).

Although Pope was one of many who would publish or paraphrase sections of the saga, a full English translation was not to materialize for a further ninety years after his time of writing. The Icelandic philologist Torleifur Repp, who worked as Assistant Keeper at the Advocates Library in Edinburgh during the early to mid nineteenth century, made two unsuccessful approaches to the Bannatyne Club for funding to publish a new English translation⁵¹. Consequently, the first complete translation of *Orkneyinga Saga* into English did not appear until Joseph Anderson’s edition of 1873.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, between the first references to *Orkneyinga Saga* and its eventual English translation, there was a growing romantic and antiquarian interest in the Norseness of the Northern Isles. This interest was first brought directly to the wider popular imagination through the somewhat unlikely intermediary figure of Sir Walter Scott.

Sir Walter Scott and the Northern Isles

It was in his capacity as County Sheriff of Selkirkshire that Scott was invited, in 1814, on a cruise round the coast of Scotland, taking in Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles, in the company of a party of Commissioners for the Northern Lighthouse service. The cruise served the purpose of enabling Robert Stevenson - the lighthouse engineer and grandfather of Robert Louis Stevenson - to inspect existing lights and to survey potential locations for new beacons. Scott’s presence on the voyage was completely extraneous. Unlike those under the jurisdiction of the other

⁵⁰Pope, Alexander, *The Ancient History of Orkney, Caithness and the North* (Wick, 1862), pp.5-6.

⁵¹Wawn, *Ibid*, p.420.

gentlemen on board, his sheriffdom was landlocked and therefore had no requirement for lighthouses. The trip did, however, stir the imagination of the emergent writer with ideas for a new novel.

The resultant *The Pirate* (1821) is the first specifically literary post-medieval work to contain any developed reference to the Northern Isles and their Norse background. The criticism most often directed at the novel is that it is insufficiently researched, with Scott having taken, as his biographer John Sutherland puts it, a mere “day trip to the culture” of the Northern Isles.⁵² While accusations of superficial engagement or hasty research will inevitably ring true to readers who have any more than a passing knowledge of Orkney and Shetland, to focus on these shortcomings is to misunderstand the design behind *The Pirate*. It is too easy to say that because the book does not do its setting and subjects accurate descriptive justice it is entirely unsuccessful. Scott’s aim was perhaps not primarily to write a novel about the Northern Isles, but rather to tell a story that would enable him to explore his literary interests within a previously unexploited geographical location and cultural context. *The Pirate* belongs within the sub-genre of local-colour fiction that emerged in the early nineteenth century, and says more about contemporary Britain and Scott’s progressive view of history than it does about the Shetland or Orkney islands where it is set a century or so earlier.

The young Mordaunt Mertoun grows up in the wilds of late seventeenth century Shetland, where he lives with his father, a surly and enigmatic recluse. Young Mertoun is the companion of the beautiful sisters Minna and Brenda Troil, daughters of local laird Magnus Troil, who is the latter day personification of all things Norse. Mertoun’s warm but platonic relationship with the sisters is threatened when he risks his life to bring ashore a drowning stranger. The stranger - who turns out to be Clement Cleveland, a notorious pirate - proceeds to make advances on Minna and poison the Troil family against Mertoun. The action proceeds south to Orkney where - amidst overpowering supernatural intrigue and the Gothic darkness of ancient monuments - Mertoun reclaims his good favour with the family, in a stirring but unlikely dénouement.

Scott draws on an eclectic variety of sources. His interest in *Eyrbyggja Saga* has been documented⁵³. The novel could be said to owe some of its macabre tone and supernatural content to this saga which - perhaps more than any other - is characterised by witches, spells and the walking dead. Although there are few direct allusions to the events of *Eyrbyggja Saga* (apart from some superficial borrowings of plot and one reference in a footnote), Scott adopts its supernatural aspect as a starting point for what becomes a supernaturally-charged Gothic-Romantic novel.

The influence of *Eyrbyggja Saga* is apparent in the character Norna of Fitful Head, a Shetlandic-Nordic sorceress who is closely aligned with the supernatural and haunts the periphery of the novel, casting spells to control the weather, reciting pseudo runic/skaldic verses, predicting the future and generally unsettling other more

⁵²John Sutherland, *The Life of Walter Scott : A Critical Biography* (Oxford 1995), pp.250-2.

⁵³Wolf, Kirsten and D’Arcy, Julian, “Sir Walter Scott and *Eyrbyggja Saga*”, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, vol. 22, pp.30-43.

conventional, enlightened characters. Norna is the descendant of women such as the sorceresses of Gray's aforementioned *The Fatal Sisters* as well as the witches Geirrid of Mavahlid or Katla of Holt in *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Scott's use of saga is superficial, however, and may seem less than satisfactory to the modern reader nurtured on the numerous vivid, accurate translations now available, or the more successfully imagined and reworked narratives of other, subsequent literary writers. The overall impression is that Scott has used *Eyrbyggja Saga* to lend colour to his novel: his preoccupations with contemporary literary mores, philosophical trends and political concerns are more important to him than the stylistic possibility of the direct, laconic and understated strength of the Icelandic texts.

That Scott had access to the histories of Orkney and Shetland written by Wallace, Hibbert and Barry is clear from his footnotes. We might, therefore, anticipate a more comprehensive historical backdrop than that with which *The Pirate* is furnished. Apart from ubiquitous but vague hints at the bloody and belligerent aspects of the islands' history, and despite the fact that oaths to St. Magnus and St. Rognvald trip off characters' tongues at every available opportunity, there is scant reference to the facts of Orkney and Shetland history. Scott's stated intention to "go a generation or two further back, to find materials from which I might trace the features of the old Norwegian Udaller"⁵⁴ is inaccurate and a little disingenuous (two generations might take him back to the mid eighteenth century, whereas Orkney's Udal laws were abolished in 1611). There are no allusions to the events of *Orkneyinga Saga*. This is surprising for a number of reasons. Scott is, after all, the inventor of the Historical Novel and *The Pirate* follows on relatively closely from *Waverley*, the first example in the genre. It might be expected that - even if he did not go as far as to set his novel within an Old Norse context, that is at a significantly earlier date - he would provide more credible historical furniture. In addition to the sometimes inaccurate but nevertheless fairly detailed Norse histories mentioned above, he would certainly have been able to access the Latin of Jön Jönsson's 1780 Copenhagen edition of *Orkneyinga Saga*, had he wished to do so. Andrew Wawn has suggested that Scott was also acquainted with Torleifur Repp at the Advocates Library⁵⁵. Is it conceivable that he could have remained unaware of the existence of *Orkneyinga Saga* while Repp repeatedly petitioned the Bannatyne Club for funding to translate it into English? Scott's interest in Old Norse literature, while genuine, was not so keen as to compel him to take time to study *Orkneyinga Saga* before writing his novel about Orkney and Shetland.

The fact is that *The Pirate* is not really a novel about Orkney or Shetland: it is a vehicle for British unionist political discourse and a showcase in which Scott parades contemporary literary fashions. The influence of Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* (1765) is much more apparent than that of *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Scott's novel does not share the deliberately mischievous or misleading purpose behind Macpherson's collection. *The Pirate* is more the work of a creative, ranging, literary mind than the record of any genuine and extant Norse culture discovered in the islands it ostensibly describes. Pathetic fallacy and the heavily symbolic use of landscape are common to *The Pirate* and *Ossian*. There are also linguistic similarities. The syntax in both texts is complex and - in places - contorted and far removed from the cool, lucid prose of

⁵⁴*The Pirate*, Shetland Times edition (Lerwick, 1996), (Introduction, p.3).

⁵⁵*Ibid.* p.419.

the sagas. Dramatic, rhetorical imperatives and exaggerated panegyric epithets (which do appear in skaldic verse, but never in saga) pervade both. Similising description (which is virtually non-existent in saga) merges the comically-heroic Norse-aligned character Magnus Troil with his natural environment, and Scott states that Magnus has a voice: “(to use an Ossianic phrase), like a wave on a rock” (TP, p.116). Both texts are imagined, recreated bardic/heroic projects.

Magnus’ two stunningly beautiful daughters are the products of a marriage between himself - a latter day Norse lord - and the daughter of a Highland Chief from Sutherland. This marriage represents a larger pattern in the novel: the blurring of distinctions between the two heroic civilisations. It is as if Scott cannot resist including at least some reference to the Gaeltacht in his “Norse” novel, some Highland element has to be present in the background. This is an early example of the misguided conflation of the cultures of the Gaeltacht and the Scottish Northern Isles, the by-product of a mentality that coins convenient blanket terms like “Celtic fringe”. The Highlands and Islands (Northern or Western) are used and confused because they suit the vague romantic purposes of distant writers and markets. The Norse culture and history of the Northern Isles had yet to be clearly redefined - and Scott certainly played some part in the early stages of this process - before cultural differences between the two areas would be clearly delineated. It is mildly ironic, however, that he should have turned to *Ossian* for a model, when he had at his fingertips - in *Orkneyinga Saga* and the histories he had consulted - the detailed and often historical record of a genuine, “primitive”, heroic Norse society.

It is probable that Scott would have read and remembered the scene from the *Ossian* poem *Carric-Thura*, which takes place at the Ring of Brodgar (Macpherson, it seems, never visited this treeless place, which he describes in the poem as being surrounded by forest)⁵⁶. The climax of *The Pirate* is also enacted at this same specific and evocative location. It may also be more than a coincidence that one of the Kirkwall gentlemen visited by Scott on his 1814 tour was Malcolm Laing⁵⁷ (1762-1818), the Orcadian historian who had at one time had access to the inner circle of Edinburgh Enlightenment intellectuals and who had published his own edition of *Ossian* with a critical introduction⁵⁸. Scott refers to Laing as the “acute and ingenious historian of Scotland during the seventeenth century” (TP p.5). The magical allure of *Ossian*, which is so crucially central to the romantic depiction of life beyond the Highland line in *Waverley*, proved too much to resist.

Romanticism pervades the novel in more than the influence of *Ossian*. Scott’s penchant for investing his landscapes with symbolic detail is also in keeping with contemporary Romantic writing, and is apparent in the opening descriptions of the dark and storm-lashed Shetland coast:

Sumburgh Head ... presents its naked scalp and bare sides to the weight of a tremendous surge ... constantly exposed to the current of a strong and furious

⁵⁶Wawn, *Ibid.*, pp.410-11.

⁵⁷See William F. Laughlan (Ed.), *Northern Lights or a Voyage in the Lighthouse Yacht to Nova Zembla and the Lord Knows Where in the Summer of 1814* (Hawick 1982), p.57.

⁵⁸Malcolm Laing, *The Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1805).

tide ... what is now a cape will become a lonely mountain islet, severed from the mainland, of which it is at present the terminating extremity (TP, p.7).

Pathetic fallacy and lonely locations - staples of Romantic poetry - co-exist fittingly with Norna and her witchcraft. Her clifftop home is also described in rich symbolic detail:

This singular habitation, built out of the loose stones which lay scattered around, and exposed for ages to the vicissitudes of the elements, was as grey, weatherbeaten, and wasted as the rock on which it was founded and from which it could not easily be distinguished, so completely did it resemble in colour and so little did it differ in regularity of shape from, a pinnacle or fragment of the cliff. (TP, p.224)

We might agree that the allure of the wild and lonely location, more than any professed desire to penetrate the psyche of the “old Norwegian Udaller”, is what prompted Scott’s choice of location. The anti-urban literary urge of the time meant that while Wordsworth set up home in the Lakes and Goethe toured the Alps to find inspiration in the landscape, Scott could find similarly stirring scenery in the northern extremities of what he considered to be his own country⁵⁹. The romantic longing (the *romantische Sehnsucht* of German romanticism) which seeks a simple, unadulterated, clear spring of primeval, primitive cultural expression against the backdrop of a wild and lonely region is a reactionary response to increasing industrialisation and urbanisation and the complexities of enlightened thought. This trend begins with *Ossian* and is discernible throughout the subsequent work of Wordsworth, Goethe, Scott and others of the era.⁶⁰

The contemporary vogue for Gothic detail is also apparent in the novel. Early descriptions of Mordaunt Mertoun’s father, who “would wrap himself in a dark sea-cloak and wander out along the stormy beach ... indulging in his own gloomy and wayward reveries under the inclement sky ...” (TP, p.17), present a typically tortured mind on the symbolic borderline between two elements. Young Mordant’s quest to discover his true parentage is of course the key element of the Gothic plot. Gothic preoccupations continue through the ubiquitous pseudo-skaldic verses (some of which seem to owe more to Shakespeare’s lyrics than anything Norse: “Fathoms deep beneath the wave,/ Stringing beads of glistening pearl,/ Singing the achievements brave/ Of many an old Norwegian earl ...” (TP, p.129)) to later scenes which are enacted within the crepuscular stillness of St. Magnus Cathedral or the evocative

⁵⁹Editions of the novel are often adorned with contemporary engravings or paintings exaggerating the topographical and geological features of the isles. This is connected to the use of landscape in Romanticism generally. The best known set of nineteenth century illustrations are those made by William Daniell during his 1813 visit to Orkney. Daniell chooses, among other subjects, the Ring of Brodgar and The Old Man of Hoy, both of which appear to be significantly larger in relation to their surroundings than they are in reality.

⁶⁰Goethe’s “Wandrer’s Nachtlied” - a lyric the poet claimed to have discovered carved on the interior wall of a lonely alpine travellers’ lodge - is a successful example of a continental attempt to fabricate art that seems spontaneous, vernacular and unlearned.

ruins of the Earls' Palace in Kirkwall. The Gothic darkness pervading *The Pirate* might seem peculiar to the visitor who travels to the Northern Isles, as Scott did, in the long, bright days of July and August. The novelist, however, is following a literary agenda and literary fashions, and allows himself licence.

As well as echoes of *Eyrbyggja Saga*, *Ossian*, and the wider Romantic movement, the enlightened cadences of those earlier travellers in northern Scotland - Johnson and Boswell - echo through *The Pirate*. While his tour took a different route from that of his famous predecessors (going further north initially and taking in only some of the same Hebridean islands), Scott was drawn to Orkney and Shetland by the same curiosity that brought Johnson and Boswell to the Highlands. He consequently focuses on certain issues common to *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* (1775) and *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1786).

Both of the Eighteenth Century writers devote a good deal of their attention to the primitive state of farming and the potential for agricultural improvement in what they survey. The urge towards scientific improvement is also apparent in the journal which Scott kept during his northern journey and, more humorously, in *The Pirate*. Scott was unimpressed by what he saw as the retarded state of agriculture in the Northern Isles. He records how the arable areas of Shetland he found were "mere patches" (NL p.28) and dismisses Orkney in a derisive summary where he chooses to focus on the inadequacies of the islands in terms of agricultural improvement. His utter abhorrence, on Fair Isle, on witnessing the waste of leftover porridge (NL p.52) may seem farcical. This, however, is exactly the kind of enlightened thrift and common economic sense which are proposed in Robert Fergusson's poem "The Farmer's Ingle", where cats and dogs finish off table scraps. Fergusson's ideas - and Scott's - have their roots in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), which advocates the use of by-products or leftovers to feed smaller animals⁶¹. Thus is Enlightenment thought applied to the far-flung microcosmic economies of these northern islands.

Likewise, in *The Pirate*, Triptolemus Yellowley is a Yorkshire factor employed by Magnus Troil to manage his estate in Shetland. Yellowley is a larger than life character who seems to be on a personal mission to drag a truculent Shetland into the Age of Improvement. Although he is thoroughly satirised, Yellowley is paradoxically a symbol of British-led agricultural improvement in the remoter regions of the land. His recommendations for drainage, endorsement of new implements, ideas for the expansion of the inadequate mills and contempt for the antique Shetland plough set him against Magnus, who is a traditionalist and perceives any threatened change as an aggressive and unnecessary anti-Norse tactic from his English factor. But - in keeping with Scott's Hanoverian and Unionist convictions and his enlightened view of history - Yellowley is nevertheless presented as being right. However, Magnus is allowed to maintain his Norse identity and his (comical) dignity throughout. Native Shetland cynicism towards improvement lends the novel a flavour of mild satire towards the indigenous population, which is borne out in Scott's journal, where he reveals in more detail his feelings towards the real islanders.

⁶¹This observation on Fergusson's poem is made by F.W. Freeman in "Robert Fergusson: Pastoral and Politics at Mid Century", in Andrew Hook, (ed.) *The History of Scottish Literature, Volume Two, 1660-1800*, (Aberdeen, 1987), p.144.

Scott demonstrates an astute entrepreneurial eye in suggesting that sheep might thrive in Shetland, but reveals also that he is concerned that the change of land use: “would tend to diminish a population invaluable for the supply of our navy” (NL, 35). This anxiety over the availability of common seamen is indicative of his somewhat dismissive feelings towards the ordinary islanders in general, with whom he seems to have had little contact, his interaction with the local populations of Orkney and Shetland seeming to have been confined to visits to the dining rooms of local dignitaries.

While he is familiar with vernacular bird names, there is little more to suggest that Scott experienced any sustained exposure to the language of either island group. The speech of his lesser characters in *The Pirate* is an ill-fitting lowland Scots, without so much as an attempt to recreate the ubiquitous Nordic *du* and *dee* pronouns that remain the shibboleths of Shetlandic speech today. (This reinforces David Hewitt’s argument that Scots and English are used primarily as markers of class in Scott’s novels, rather than being an attempt to create faithful phonetic transcript.⁶²) The tone with which Scott describes the inhabitants of Orkney is thoroughly derisive, detailing their “slovenly labour” (NL, 75) and the “inferiority in husbandry” as well as deeming the people “peasants of the lowest order” (NL, 76). These prejudices, with their implications of laziness, are similar to common centralised Eighteenth and Nineteenth century perceptions of the inhabitants of the Highlands and Western Isles. Agriculture in Orkney, however, was less significant at the time than the production of kelp, the price of which soared during the American War of Independence. Orcadian lairds were anxious to preserve the flexible labour force that the cottar system provided for the kelp harvest: the modernisation of agriculture would have meant the removal of these labourers. So husbandry was retarded, deliberately “inferior” in order to maintain a standard of living provided from the more profitable industry. Scott mentions “wigwams” in the island of Hoy in his journal (NL, 74) and continues his theme of the savagery of the local population in his novel. Their berserker ancestors are compared to “Indian warriors” (TP, 16), the locals are ironically called “Zetland savages” by Magnus Troil (TP, 26) and a beach inhabited by fishermen appears “like an Indian town” (TP, 181). Similar comparisons between the Gaels and the native Americans are ubiquitous in the records of Boswell and Johnson’s tour. While it would be anachronistic to claim that this is a manifestation of racism aimed at the northern islanders (the prejudice stems from class-consciousness and the progressive view of history rather than an aversion to the racial origins of the ordinary islanders), it is true to say that most of Scott’s fictional savages in *The Pirate* are something less than noble.

The sentimental Jacobitism which was one of the main impulses behind Johnson and Boswell’s northward journey also finds its way into Scott’s novel, but in a warped form. The quasi-fictional descriptions of the disruptive, anti-Unionist and anti-Hanoverian forces that had been key to the success of *Waverley* are utilised once again in *The Pirate*. Here, however, the Jacobite recipe was less likely to prove successful. Orkney and Shetland had played only a restricted role in the rebellions⁶³. For this reason and, presumably, because he had already written a “Jacobite” novel,

⁶² “Walter Scott”, in Douglas Gifford, (ed.) *The History of Scottish Literature, Volume Three, Nineteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1988), p.74.

⁶³ See Ray Fereday, *Orkney Feuds and the '45*, (Kirkwall, 1980).

Scott toys instead with the scenario of a Norse-rooted, anti-British uprising which has as its aim the restoration of the former political autonomy of the Northern Isles.

Three characters in particular feel drawn towards a violent insurrection: Minna, daughter of Magnus Troil; Claud Halcro, a belligerent Shetland bard; and the ironically named Clement Cleveland, the pirate of the novel's title. During a late night drinking session in Shetland, Claud Halcro advocates the resurrection of the Norse customs of raiding and pillaging in mainland Scotland, while later Minna is idealistically attracted to the prospect of a full-blown armed rebellion. Cleveland shares their sentiments, but has practical misgivings about their chances of success against the British navy and feels that the enterprise, however noble it may seem, would be hampered by local apathy: "In these islands the love of independence has been suppressed by a long term of subjection, or shows itself but in a few muttered growls over bowl and bottle" (TP, 186). Throughout his career as a pirate, however, Cleveland has conducted his own personal, avaricious quest against the Union of Great Britain and her navy. For all his undoubted strength of character and courage, he remains the villain of the novel and the unequivocal enemy of state and stability. In these respects he is a complex figure, a pre-Byronic hero variant in the cast of Marmion. The conflict between Cleveland and Mertoun is an example of what Gifford has described as the "patterning of opposites" which "symbolises a divided Scotland, in which the outlawed romantic claim of the past represents an over-emotional imaginative and destructive throwback to an older national identity"⁶⁴. Cleveland belongs in this instance with characters like Fergus MacIvor and Balfour of Burley, whereas Mertoun, along with Richard Waverley or Colonel Gardiner, stands "for a prudential, if unromantic, progressive realism".

Magnus Troil occupies the middle ground in this idealistic conflict, remaining comfortable with Britishness without being seen to lose any of his Norse identity. He promotes Scott's Unionist agenda; he is the moderate who suppresses Claud Halcro's romantic fantasies of a return to medieval violence, whilst at the same time referring to himself as an "old Berserker" (TP, 124) and invoking St. Magnus to preserve the Shetland way of life. Troil remains an appealing and amusing character throughout. His mission is to convince us that entry into the Union was by no means the beginning of any process of cultural amalgam or annihilation, and hints, perhaps, that the survival of indigenous culture and identity in the face of change may be easier in the most peripheral areas of Great Britain: "when I think of the wooden walls, I almost think myself an Englishman; only it would be becoming too like my Scottish neighbours" (TP, 178).

The closing chapters in Orkney are where the novel begins to unravel, however, with Cleveland going through an unbelievable personality change. Gone is the evil, disruptive antagonist of the early stages of the novel, the dangerous enemy of state, the murderer and thief responsible for the rejection and misery of his rescuer Mordant Mertoun. He emerges transformed, with "sparks of honour about him" (TP, 305). Cleveland now tires of the vulgar, villainous ways of his pirate crew, who carry him through the streets of Kirkwall (symbolically diminishing his responsibility in his

⁶⁴ "Myth, Parody and Dissociation: Scottish Fiction 1814-1914" in Douglas Gifford, (ed.) *The History of Scottish Literature, Volume Three, Nineteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1988), p 243.

return to piracy) towards his ship “Revenge”. On his eventual arrest, the sometime enemy of the country is spared from execution in order to go (like so many former Highland rebels) into voluntary exile to fight for the most improbable of institutions, the British navy. In the final stages he eventually redeems himself, falling in combat “leading the way in a gallant and honourable enterprise” (TP, 343). The historical Orkney pirate John Gow, whose story was told to Scott in the islands and which was the germ behind the novel, was actually hanged at Wapping, shortly after his capture by the authorities⁶⁵.

The idea of an armed insurrection stems entirely from the Jacobite rebellions, rather than any genuine sentiment Scott encountered in Shetland or Orkney. The rebellious insurrection seeming to have failed before it has even started has a more significant meaning, however. Gifford writes of “Scott’s attempt to forge a new kind of mythic pattern for Scottish history, in which reasonable compromise is to replace perpetual polarization”⁶⁶. Gifford has shown how Scott repeatedly seeks to reconcile past and present or order and disorder, using *Waverley*, among other novels, to illustrate his point. It is clear that *The Pirate* follows a formulaic pattern common to *Waverley* and also seeks to achieve this aim of “mythic regeneration”. Many of the characters have obvious counterparts in the earlier novel: Mordaunt Mertoun displays Edward Waverley’s insipid passivity throughout much of the narrative; Claud Halcro is a fervent and fanatical follower of what is ultimately a lost cause in much the same way as Fergus McIvor is in *Waverley*; Magnus Troil is the comically eccentric, nostalgic and anachronistic parallel to Baron Bradwardine, while the sisters Brenda and Minna Troil bear a striking resemblance to Rose Bradwardine and Flora McIvor respectively: one is beautiful yet safely civilised, the other has more sex appeal but is just a little too wild and exotic for marriage to the sensibly polite protagonist. The archipelagos of Shetland and Orkney serve the same purposes in *The Pirate* as the respective landscapes of the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands do in *Waverley*. Shetland (like the Highlands) is the wildest country - in terms of scenery and the passions of its inhabitants - while Orkney, as well as being topographically flatter and greener and closer in proximity to the mainland of Britain, is home to islanders of a more moderate disposition. Hence Minna’s comment that the Orcadians lack sufficient vigour or courage to break away from the Scottish yoke⁶⁷. It is in Orkney, therefore, that civilisation gains its hold on Clement Cleveland.

While a good deal of *Waverley* can be described as historical, *The Pirate* lacks its

⁶⁵John Gow grew up in Stromness before commencing his career as a pirate in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. He was captured in Eday in Orkney in 1726 and taken to Wapping, where he was executed. Local lore has it that, shortly beforehand, Gow and a Miss Gordon had pledged their troth at the neolithic “Odin Stone” in Stenness. The promise was made as the couple clasped hands through a hole in the standing stone. Miss Gordon reputedly travelled to London after the execution and redeemed her pledge whilst holding the hand of Gow’s corpse. Daniel Defoe was the journalist who recorded the trial and subsequently wrote a book about Gow (*The Pirate Gow*, London 1725). Scott was also clearly enthralled by the story and, more recently, George Mackay Brown used it as the subject of various poems and short stories.

⁶⁶Ibid. pp.217-59.

⁶⁷See Andrew Wawn’s introduction to the 1996 edition of the novel.

predecessor's historical backdrop. The imaginatively fabricated idea of a Norse insurrection is perhaps too easy a way for Scott to follow *Waverley*, and *The Pirate* suffers from the absence of the convincing, confident and encyclopedic historical understanding that is the foundation of its predecessor. Scott goes beyond the limits of his knowledge. At the time of the novel's publication, fear of Highlanders and the Jacobite uprisings were still present in the minds of Scott's readers in England and the Lowlands. Those same readers would, however, have been unaware of the fact that parts of modern Great Britain had once belonged to Scandinavia, let alone have been sufficiently knowledgeable of the history of the islands to be critical of the novel's ahistorical plot. Modern readers will bring an altogether different knowledge and experience to these novels and the ultimate assessment of *The Pirate* must be that it remains less cohesive and less successful than *Waverley*: Scott's regenerative mythology is less convincing at this distance from real history.

In work such as *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*⁶⁸ and *Out of History*⁶⁹, Cairns Craig has repeatedly described the relationship between history and literature in Scotland in terms of the fictional obfuscation of "true" history. He has stated that: "Overwhelmed by its fictional versions, the real Scotland has disappeared and become invisible to modern eyes ..."⁷⁰. *The Pirate* is perhaps closer to the crux of Craig's hypothesis than *Waverley*, with its neglect of the "real" history and culture of Shetland and Orkney in favour of Romantic and Gothic embellishment, Enlightenment-driven descriptions of the urge towards agricultural improvement, the idea of the Noble Savage and the overarching "Mythic Regenerative" project. Scott sketches a Norse identity that is really little more than a recycled version of the Highland culture described in *Waverley*. The resultant impact of *The Pirate* - which was an enormous popular success in its day - was twofold. Awareness that the culture of the Northern isles owed something to a Norse past grew, while the sharper delineations of that culture remained decidedly vague. Scott was never to fully explore or define Norseness in the Northern isles, but he can be credited with the initiation of a process that began in earnest after the publication of *The Pirate*.

Samuel Laing of Papdale

Arguably the most significant figure in the process of the mapping and popularisation of the Norse past in nineteenth century Britain was an Orcadian, Samuel Laing of Papdale (1780-1868). Laing - brother of the aforementioned Malcolm Laing - was the youngest son of a genteel and prosperous Kirkwall family. In his autobiography⁷¹ he appears in a colourful variety of guises: as a soldier in the Napoleonic Wars; an industrialist and venture capitalist in England and Scotland; Provost of Kirkwall and Orcadian merchant laird; and latterly as a travel writer and translator of saga in Scandinavia. The autobiography, although originally written for Laing's children, contains much that is of interest with regard to contemporary Orcadian, British and

⁶⁸(Edinburgh, 1999).

⁶⁹(Edinburgh, 1996).

⁷⁰ Cairns Craig, "The Fratricidal Twins" in Edward J. Cowan and Douglas Gifford, (eds.) *The Polar Twins* (Edinburgh, 1999), p.28.

⁷¹R.P. Fereday (ed.), *The Autobiography of Samuel Laing of Papdale 1780 - 1868*, (Kirkwall, 2000).

European history and, at the same time, allows a glimpse of Laing's sometimes eccentric but always endearing personality.

Laing became intrigued with the war in Europe at an early age and details how, as a young scholar, he travelled through England to the continent, observing at first hand the exiled French population in Hamburg, then the epicentre of European trade. Later, while working in occupied Holland, he orchestrated the rescue of three stranded British seamen, concealing them from the authorities and accompanying them overland into neutral territory, risking his own life in the process. Further tales of adventure and courage on the writer's part as a soldier on campaign in Portugal are also modestly underplayed. He recalls how, during a perilous and gruelling cross-country retreat, he awoke on horseback only to realise that his exhausted animal was asleep beneath him. Another horse was killed while carrying him, the musket shot passing between Laing's stirrup leather and his leg.

Towards the end of the war, Laing borrowed heavily in order to make purchases overseas in the hope that his speculation would pay off once wartime trade embargoes were lifted: unfortunately too many others thought similarly and prices collapsed, leaving him heavily in debt. He retreated to Orkney and, in a bold move, initiated a fledgling herring fleet in the island of Stronsay. The venture was initially a great success. Laing's story is one of cyclical rise and fall, however, and no sooner was his fleet established than the market collapsed. There is an irony as he preaches financial prudence to his progeny whilst detailing his own heavy losses. He makes mistakes and sometimes deludes himself as he rationalises after the event. His naïveté is all the more endearing because of the essential generosity of his spirit and his utter irrepressibility. Paradoxically, these financial failures were to lead eventually to his most significant and lasting achievement.

As an Orcadian, Laing was well aware of the Scottish/Norse duality of his islands' cultural history. A decidedly British pragmatic liberal of Calvinist stock, he had his doubts over the merits of art, seeing fine art in particular as an effeminate and irrelevant luxury. Nevertheless, he possessed a great admiration for the medieval Norsemen, which extended to an appreciation of their literature. Despite financial ruin in Orkney, he managed in later life to accumulate the means to travel to Norway and live there in some degree of comfort, reinventing himself yet again and embarking on a highly successful third career as a travel writer and translator. He is best remembered for his vivid translation - the first into English - of the central prose work of medieval vernacular Scandinavian literature, Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*⁷², which remained in print until the nineteen nineties.

Laing's translation was published in London in 1844. Its significance for Britain was primarily rooted in the fact that, as well as being a history of the Norwegian medieval kings, it described the reigns of the Danish kings of England and their interactions with Norway. It also illustrates the Norse ancestry of William the Conqueror, thus stressing the Scandinavian origins of the English monarchy both before and after the Battle of Hastings. Laing's decision to translate the text seems to have owed as much to its place within British history as to his own Orcadian origins. The decision to

⁷²*The Heimskringla or Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Samuel Laing, (London, 1844).

translate the panegyric history of an ancient heroic society with direct links to the histories of pre-union Scotland and pre-union England does seem a particularly British choice of project. The belligerent ethos and patrician heroes of *Heimskringla* are not unlike those of the Classical epics so popular in the public schools that had groomed the young aristocrats of Hanoverian Britain for imperial service. Like ancient Greek or Roman civilisation, medieval Scandinavia remained safely in the distant past and could be admired from this distance in time, posing as it did no threat whatever to British interests in the nineteenth century. Laing's translation was, and still is, also of particular interest to Orkney. There are lengthy sections dealing with the earls Turf Einar and Magnus Erlendsson as well as numerous other references to the islands and their earls. When these appeared - prior to translations of *Orkneyinga Saga* - they would have been the first substantial extracts of Orkney saga to be translated directly into English.

Peter Foote has said that Laing could "write English that is plain, spirited, natural and confident, and in vigour and clarity he thus comes near to doing justice to Snorri's style"⁷³. The prose of his translation is indeed particularly vivid, although his rendering of the ubiquitous skaldic strophes into couplets of singsong iambic tetrameter does lose something of the coarse quality of the originals, emerging with a slightly comical-sounding and jaunty end-rhyme. The following is Laing's translation of a strophe describing the battle of Robery in the Pentland Firth:

Thy cutters, dashing through the tide,
Brought aid to Earl Torfinn's side,
Finn's son-in-law, and people say
Thy aid made Brusi's son give way.
Kalv, thou art fond of warlike toil,
Gay in the strife and bloody broil;
But here 'twas hate made thee contend
Against Earl Rognvald, the king's friend.⁷⁴

The translation - which itself runs to some six hundred pages, plus a lengthy preliminary dissertation and various appendices - is testament to Laing's effervescent enthusiasm for the Norse kings, their laws and lifestyle. The delight with which he describes military experiences during the Iberian conflict in his own autobiography ("It is not easy to give an idea of the cheerful, exhilarating life of a soldier in the field. Every hour has its novelty and its occupation. One has the same joyous feeling as at a fox chase" (ASL, 113)) might give us some indication of how he brought his own experiences to bear on the work of translating these sagas, which are saturated with detailed yet racy descriptions of battle. Saga lends itself well to translation into English and Laing's *Heimskringla* travels light with direct, minimalistic language that succeeds in bringing action to the fore and characterises through action.

More revealing than the translation itself is Laing's "Preliminary Dissertation", which ranges far and wide through the Norse world, demonstrating Victorian perceptions of

⁷³Introduction to Samuel Laing (trans.), *Heimskringla*, Volume Two (London, 1961), p.XXX.

⁷⁴From the Everyman edition of Laing's translation of *Heimskringla* (London, 1930), p.158.

the Norse in general and Laing's personal views in particular. Despite his insistence on the term "literature" to describe the work he translates, Laing is convinced of the historicity of most of *Heimskringla*, and uses the work as evidence of the highly advanced (and, as he sees it, superior to Anglo-Saxon) state of Norse civilisation in the period described. In recent years, saga scholars have taken more consideration of evidence external to the text, bringing this to bear on the written material⁷⁵. Analysis of contemporary political situations at the time of writing and their shaping influence on the way past events are described has demonstrated that saga - even in the case of the mighty *Heimskringla* - is often less than trustworthy as historical source material. Amongst a great deal of sensible and interesting discussion, Laing makes a number of rather romantic and far-fetched generalisations regarding the impact of the Norsemen and their institutions on all subsequent British history. Despite these shortcomings, the unbridled enthusiasm for all things Norse displayed in Laing's dissertation has had the long term effect of popularising the Norse period for historians and literary writers alike in Orkney and further afield, from the mid nineteenth century to the present day.

The rhetoric of the dissertation is vibrant, stirring even. Laing displays something approaching the Calvinist reformers' attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church, as well as an ironically British insistence on freedom in his claim that, without the Norsemen, "Europe would have been ... one vast den of slaves, with a few rows in its amphitheatre of kings, nobles and churchmen" (HKD, 7). With subjective enthusiasm, he traces in Old Norse society the roots of the Reformation, as well as the liberty of the press and trial by jury in Britain. In an image that might have come from *Heimskringla* itself, he describes how "all that is or has been of value to man as a member of society ... may be traced to the spark left burning upon our shores by these northern barbarians" (HKD, 7). Laing's incendiary language reveals again his appreciation of verve and energy and his absolute approval of violent action when it is necessary for the progress of "civilization".

A necessary prerequisite of Britishness in the eighteenth century, Laing's dislike of the Catholic Church must have sat uneasily with the descriptions he translated in *Heimskringla* of his Norse kings attending Mass. This distaste may be at the root of Laing's contempt for Latin and his feeling that, in Ray Fereday's words, the "dead language ... hindered freedom and progress"⁷⁶. Laing saw vernacular literature, such as that of the English tradition or the Norse sagas, as uniting across class barriers and nurturing intellectual thought among the lower orders, hence the occurrence of "proverbial sayings (from Burns, Shakespeare etc.) among our totally uneducated classes, who certainly never read those authors" (HKD, 35). While Germany suffered a national dissociation of sensibility ("the circulation of ideas there stops at a certain class" (HKD, 37)) he was in no doubt about the opposite having been the case in medieval Norway. Laing is astute in his perception of how reading literature may have affected an early understanding of nationhood: "The literature of the Northmen in their own tongue undoubtedly kept alive that common feeling and mind..." (HKD, 37). His manifest anti-German and pro-Norwegian prejudices cloud an argument that could originally have held some water in promoting minority vernacular literatures

⁷⁵See Diana Whaley, 'The Kings Sagas', in Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins, (eds.), *Viking Revaluations* (London, 1993), pp.55-6.

⁷⁶Fereday, *Ibid.* (p. 254).

such as Scots in the nineteenth century. Laing voices a suspicion of the rise of German nationalism in his autobiography, but his retrospective prejudices in the dissertation - which extend backwards as far as Anglo-Saxon times – will seem anachronistic and subjective:

Our civil, religious and political rights, the principles, spirit and forms of legislation through which they work in our social union, are the legitimate offspring of the Things of the northmen, not of the Wittenagemoth of the Anglo-Saxons - of the independent Norse viking, not the abject Saxon monk. (HKD, 106)

The contemptuous put-down of the Anglo-Saxon expressed so directly here in Laing resurfaces regularly in the work his contemporaries. George Webbe Dasent, the second translator of *Orkneyinga Saga*, was another eminent intellectual of the Victorian literary establishment who was excited by notions of Teutonic race and the Teutonic “origins” of “Britishness”. Dasent was a man of no small influence in the second half of the nineteenth century. A friend of Thomas Carlyle, he was a well-known translator of Norse literature and assistant editor of *The Times*. The translator’s introduction Dasent’s single volume edition of *The Story of Burnt Njal*⁷⁷ describes the Saxons as having become “a sluggish and sensual race”⁷⁸ whilst hailing Harald Fairhair’s suppression of Norway as a positive step in “the great march of civilisation and progress.”⁷⁹ Carlyle and Longfellow were both also influenced by Laing’s translation. The nineteenth century Orcadian folklorist, short story writer and versifier Walter Traill Dennison was also to pen anti-Saxon doggerel before the century’s end⁸⁰. The ideas contained in Laing’s dissertation clearly held sway for some considerable time.

Despite, or perhaps because of his Orcadian background, Laing has little empathy for the nation of Scotland, and locates this Norse prowess rather at the root of British or English history and society, making no distinction between Scotland and Britain. Although he was clearly a skilled translator and linguist, he fails to recognise or chooses to ignore the kinship between Scots and the Scandinavian languages. He does not grant Scots the status of being a language in its own right (contemporary Icelandic scholars working in Scotland had been among the first to designate it as such) but conflates it with regional varieties of English. Thus the “Scotch, Yorkshire, Somerset dialects differ from English” (HKD, 34). Laing feels compelled to align himself with England in particular in his translator’s preface:

It is of importance to English history to have in the English language, the means of judging of the social and intellectual state [...] of a people who [...] bore an important part [...] in the legislation of England.⁸¹

When Laing describes Bede as “our” earliest historian (HKD, 26), he is clearly

⁷⁷Sir George Webbe Dasent, (trans.) *The Story of Burnt Njal*, (London, 1900).

⁷⁸Ibid. (p.18).

⁷⁹Ibid. (p.1).

⁸⁰“The Sons of Orkney” in *The Orcadian Sketch Book*, (Kirkwall, 1880), declaims: “Your modern numskull loudly raves/ of Celt and Saxon - boorish slaves ...”

⁸¹Translator’s Preface, *Heimskringla*, Volume One (London, 1961).

asserting his Britishness and his adherence to the English tradition. Cairns Craig's hypothesis regarding the relationship of the regional writer to the core culture is pertinent in consideration of Laing:

... writers from the peripheries [...] offer the core culture an image of itself which, in its flattery, will act as a mask for the writer's own unease about his place and his acceptability within it. Organic England is not a simple expression of English culture: it is the creation of its peripheries in search of a power and completeness denied to their own cultural development.⁸²

Thus Laing renders *Heimskringla* in the English language and shoehorns it into English History and, by extension, English Literature. This perspective is understandable in a man of his class and generation who had lived in England and had served with such relish in the British army. To describe him as an Anglo-Scot, or, perhaps more accurately, an Anglo-Orkadian, might be appropriate designation. His perception of Scotland, we might surmise from his chosen references to literary figures in the dissertation, is as a region, but nevertheless an influential and significant region, of Great Britain. He seats Snorri on a bench of Valhalla with "Scott"⁸³, Carlyle" and "Shakespeare" (HKD, p.3) and, indeed, mentions more writers of Scottish origin than any other. Any difference existing between Scotland and England does not really concern him, however, and his interest in Norseness is focused on how it can be measured in contemporary Great Britain. He labours the point of William the Conqueror's descent from Hrolf Ganger, the son of Rognvald, Earl of More, in order to stress the top-down hierarchy of Norse blood in England, choosing not to dwell on the fact that Rognvald of More was also the first earl of Orkney and the progenitor of all the subsequent Orkney Earls. It is, however, likely that these Orkadian references contained within *Heimskringla* - which occupy, incidentally, as much space in the narrative as the combined sections dealing with England - were what first kindled this Kirkwall man's interest in the Sagas of the Kings of Norway. Laing's tendency to worship the Norsemen, which very likely began with an early awareness of the Norse dimension to his home islands' history, expressed itself in his adult vision which idealistically placed these men at the heart of the Great Britain that he loved. Their Golden Age was to Laing the root of all that was good in nineteenth century Britain. His perception of them could not have been further removed from the vituperative descriptions written earlier in the century by Alexander Pope, and quoted previously in this chapter.

Laing's was a highly cultured family. He relates in his autobiography how, as a boy, his brother Malcolm sometimes sat at an elderly uncle's table in Edinburgh alongside Enlightenment figures such as Hume, Smith and Ferguson, listening intently to their conversation. It is curious to note how, following the transition from Enlightenment to Sensibility, one brother was clearly fascinated by Macpherson's pseudo-Celtic poetry (Malcolm Laing did however go to lengths as an editor and essayist to prove that *Ossian* was a fake) while the other rendered robust and stoical Norse saga into racy English, raising the profile of Old Norse literature among nineteenth century

⁸²Craig, *Ibid.*, (p.26).

⁸³It is likely that Laing was an admirer of *The Pirate*. His son, Samuel Laing the Younger, was later to use "Magnus Troil" as a pen name during an election campaign.

intellectuals immeasurably. Laing's work, and the general Victorian enthusiasm for Teutonism, and all things Norse, were to pave the way for J. Storer Clouston's 1932 *History of Orkney*, which dwells long on the twelfth century and is dismissive of previous and subsequent eras. Clouston in turn is important to the development of Nordic themes in the work of Eric Linklater, George Mackay Brown and other subsequent novelists. Samuel Laing ought really to be recognised as a seminal force in the development of the distinctly Orcadian strand within Scottish and British Literature.

David Balfour of Balfour and Trenaby

Another nineteenth century figure worthy of a footnote - not so much perhaps for the quality of his work as for its embodiment of an extremist view of the Norse era in Orkney which was also to prove pervasive - is David Balfour of Balfour and Trenaby (1811-1887). Balfour was the most important Orkney landowner of the century and one of the leading agricultural improvers of his age. He had wide cultural interests, including writing. His *Odal Rights and Feudal Wrongs – A Memorial for Orkney*⁸⁴ is, as its title suggests, a polemical rather than a primarily historical document, detailing what he perceived to be the grievances suffered by Orkney at the hands, firstly, of Scotland and, subsequently, Great Britain.

While it is possible to imagine Scott smiling wryly as he penned the chapters of *The Pirate* where his characters hark back to the good old Norse days, Balfour makes his vociferous complaint about the abuses suffered by Orkney in deadly seriousness. He follows Laing's Teutonic lead, but focuses on what he perceives as the ill usage of Orkney subsequent to the annexation to Scotland, rather than the prowess of the previous Norse rulers. Thus:

When Scotland writhes under her subjection to her "auld enemies of England", and complains of the jealous removal or destruction of every historical record or monument of independence, Orkney in its turn may smile to trace, in every mortification of its first oppressor, a retributory transcript of its own. (p. 12)

Balfour brings Laing's ideology home to Orkney and initiates the dubious thesis that the islands' Norse period was a Golden Age of unqualified egalitarianism and prosperity that was a function of the supposed political autonomy of the isles at the time. In Balfour's view, the democratic principle of the Althing and Odal tenure which insisted on the rights of the descendants of primal occupants were fair systems which were swept away by the encroaching Scots earls, who delivered land directly into the hands of the Kirk or whoever they favoured. He describes the "sapping process of Scotcizing every Orkneyan institution" (p. 49) and "the fleecing of the islands" (p. 60) before reaching his climax:

... no misrule has yet exhausted the fertility of the soil, or crushed the energy, or worn out the patience of a people still struggling against an evil destiny, but still amenable as ever even to the semblance of lawful authority. Even though Scotland may have reduced Orkney to "the skeleton of a departed country",

⁸⁴David Balfour of Balfour and Trenaby, *Odal Rights and Feudal Wrongs - A Memorial for Orkney*, (Edinburgh, 1860).

Britain has still found profit in gnawing the bones.” (p.77)

Within the space of fifty years, following on from the rhetoric of Samuel Laing, the rebellious bardic incendiaries of Scott’s fiction in *The Pirate* have found in Balfour their flesh and blood counterpart. His binary division - Scots is bad, Norse is good - was to persist well into the next century, in historical and literary writing. This early postcolonial and reactionary stance, invoking the myth of a Norse Golden Age, is instrumental in furthering the idea that Orkney exists as a self-contained cultural and formerly political entity. Balfour’s fire is directed primarily towards a Scottish centre of power, and is therefore by 1860 something of an anachronism. Katie Trumpener has described how:

Only through the forcible, often violent, entry into history does the feudal folk community become a nation, and only through dislocation and collective suffering is a new national identity forged.⁸⁵

If we read “udal” for “feudal” and maintain an open mind regarding the possibility of an Orcadian “nationalism”, then this describes very well the forging (with all the associated connotations of struggle and of falseness) of an Orcadian “national” consciousness in the nineteenth century which is based on the imagined former political and cultural autonomy of the archipelago. Just as tartanry and Highland romanticism become badges of Scottish identity, so a reconstructed Norse identity emerges to assert Orcadian difference from and marginality to the core Scottish or British culture. The very process of colonisation by Scotland is sufficient to engender a feeling of “national” unity. The prior existence of such a unity is, however, impossible to determine at this distance in time from the moment of impignoration.

Walter Traill Dennison

An altogether different nineteenth century writer who nevertheless made a profound impact on the development of a literary culture in Orkney was the youngest child of a well-to-do Sanday family, Walter Traill Dennison (1825-1894). In most respects, Dennison could not be further removed from Laing or Balfour. He was a minor poet, whose primary and significant talent is revealed in a small number of highly accomplished short stories published in Orkney during his lifetime. The distinction between the roles of the folklorist and the literary artist is not easy to make with Dennison. These stories, most of which are collected in *The Orcadian Sketch Book*⁸⁶, merge with or encapsulate a great deal of folklore which he recorded in his native Sanday, to the extent that it is difficult to tell where folk tradition gives way to literary creation. Where Laing and Balfour had unearthed saga and begun to probe the implications of Orkney’s Norse history, *The Orcadian Sketch Book* is not only a collection of genuine, living lore which has been shaped and enhanced by an intelligent and individual artistic mind, but also the first longer literary publication of any sort in which Orkney Scots language is legitimised through the authoritative medium of print.

⁸⁵Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (New Jersey, 1997), p142.

⁸⁶*The Orcadian Sketch-Book - Being Traits of Old Orkney Life, Written Partly in the Orkney Dialect* (Kirkwall, 1880).

In many ways, Dennison is to the polite Orkney families and intellectual establishment of the second half of the nineteenth century what James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, had been to the Edinburgh *literati* of some half a century earlier: an eccentric vernacular genius who was closer to the ordinary country folk than he was to the learned establishment, who drew on these folk roots and whose significance as a recorder of tradition is equaled only by his importance as a literary talent. He serves a crucial bardic function at a juncture in Orcadian cultural history where vernacular language might easily not have graduated into the world of print, given the intense anglicisation and southward orientation of many of Dennison's contemporaries among the Orkney gentry.

Dennison conforms closely to Katie Trumpener's definition of the bard: "a figure who represents the resistance of vernacular oral traditions to the historical pressures of English imperialism"⁸⁷. A dedicated antiquarian who accumulated an extensive collection of historical Orkney artefacts, Dennison also relied almost exclusively on the peasantry of his native island for the raw materials of his literary work. As Ernest Marwick has put it:

The whole of Dennison's life was spent in Sanday. This was for posterity a fortunate circumstance, for the island was particularly rich in its recollections of folk tradition. He was also an "in-between" man as far as social position went, having some slight connection with the county families, and a natural unrestrained affinity with the common people. He developed into what might be called a "gentleman farmer", but he had a foot in both ha' and cottar house.⁸⁸

To commentators such as Marwick and J. Storer Clouston⁸⁹, Dennison's use of dialect has been perceived as a surmountable difficulty which nevertheless hindered the progress of the stories furth of Orkney. Marwick asserts that "Two examples, "The Heuld-Horn Rumpis" and "The Stown Windin' Sheet" would doubtless have found their way into the national literature but for their unfamiliar medium."⁹⁰ Given the ever-deepening level of interest in peripheral literatures, and the increased widespread appreciation of Scots language, a detailed re-evaluation of Dennison's work is long overdue.

Although his book commences with a preamble in which Dennison pledges allegiance to many of David Balfour's views regarding Orkney's Norse past and Scottish oppression, he concedes that the language used by everyday people in Orkney by the early part of the nineteenth century owed little to the islands' Norse background, being almost wholly Scots. Nevertheless, his mission is to preserve intact not only the lore but also the "dialect" in which it is couched:

The author's principal object has been to preserve the dialect of his native islands from that oblivion to which all unwritten dialects are doomed; and at the

⁸⁷Ibid., (p. 33).

⁸⁸Ernest Marwick, introduction to *Orkney Folklore and Traditions* (Kirkwall, 1961), p. xiv.

⁸⁹J. Storer Clouston, introduction to *Orcadian Sketches* (Kirkwall 1904).

⁹⁰Marwick, Ibid., p.xiii.

same time to present a part of our great human nature as it really existed, unsophisticated by the rules of polite society, unelevated by education and unpolished by art. (p. vii)

Most of the material contained within *The Orcadian Sketch Book* belies this, Dennison's humble apologia, in which he disregards his role as creator, casting himself rather as the diligent recorder of folklore. The prose tales of the first half of the volume cover a remarkably broad spectrum and in their literary sophistication, educated elevation and polish they certainly exceed the modest aims set out in the introduction. To Joseph Storer Clouston, his literary merits include "humour, close fidelity to nature, quick sympathy with his fellows, a fine racy gusto in telling a story, and a perfect understanding of his country's history and its bearing upon his countrymen's circumstances ..." ⁹¹. (Note Clouston's dogmatic insistence on the term "country" when referring to Orkney.)

"Why the Hoose O' Hellsness was Brunt" ⁹² is a description of reprisals carried out by Government forces on local Jacobite gentry during the aftermath of the '45, while "Why Brockie was Pitten in the Mary Kirk Joggs" and "The Awber Flytin" are comical tales with a distinctly satirical, anticlerical bent. "The Stown Windin' Sheet" is a gripping kirkyard ghost story and "The Heuld-Horn Rumpis" continues in this vein, with Satan making a late night appearance at the dinner table of some local gentry. In addition to the relentless pace singled out by Clouston, the tales are characterised by the sharp creation of literary personalities, poetic language, a widely allusive frame of reference, by narrative economy, striking irony, satire and ambiguity and by imagery which owes its aptness to the fact that it draws on close observation of the outdoor environment of Orkney. The next few pages focus on these five stories in order to illustrate the literary worth of Dennison's short fiction.

"Why the Hoose o' Hellsness was Brunt"

"Why the Hoose o' Hellsness was Brunt" is a combination of three anecdotes. The first tells of how a young Jacobite, Fea O' Ayrie, takes refuge in a sea cave, "The Gentleman's Geo", in Westray for some three weeks while awaiting a Government pardon. Then the narrative shifts to the Laird of Hellsness, who makes his way home disguised in a woman's clothes, only to have to set out again when he discovers that soldiers are on their way to burn the ha' in reprisal for his siding with the Jacobites. The third anecdote describes how the Laird's mother and his wife make a stand against the Government forces as they set fire to the property.

⁹¹Clouston, *Ibid.*, (p.v).

⁹²Given Dennison's defence of the Orkney "dialect"/Orcadian Scots language, it seems impertinent to paraphrase every potentially difficult word or phrase. I have however listed the following terms: **awber** to thrash corn partially, leaving about half the grain in the straw, or a half threshed sheaf, **baest** beast, **birr** energy or pith, **brunt** burnt, **brunsteen** brimstone, **flachterin** fluttering, **flytin** scolding, **geo** a sea ravine or cave, **gluff** a sudden fright, **heuld-horn** a drinking horn which was taken round guests' chambers at midnight, **joggs** an iron collar fixed to a church wall, **lavrock** the skylark, **lundered** pounded, **nort'** north, **sooan sids** oat husks, **stown** stolen, **w'ather** to set to windward of, or, in a metaphorical sense, to overcome.

Despite detailing the desperate measures taken by fugitive Jacobites and the violence of government retributions, the tale remains a lively comedy, largely because of a mocking and detached narrative voice and a slapstick turn to events. The chief combatants of the conflict are referred to by the reductive diminutives “Geordie” and “Charlie”, while the civil war itself is shrunk to “quarrelin about the Croon” (OSB. p.1). Dennison’s narrator says of George: “He was a peerie German Laird, sae the sang says.” (p.2). Further reductive asides (“Hinehover, a droll neem I tink” (p.2)) seem to suggest a Jacobite allegiance on the part of the storyteller, but the events of the war are doubly distanced from the voice of Dennison’s book. On the northern side of the Pentland Firth, Orkney was geographically removed from the rebellion and, although the Orkney gentry were involved, the peasantry in whose language the tale is told played a much more restricted role. A prejudice against Highlanders, similar to that which pervades so much Lowland Scottish literature, is also therefore apparent, with the defeat of the Jacobite forces at Culloden being ascribed to “Heeland pride” (p.3). The narrative refuses to identify with either side and is therefore able to gently mock both.

As the Government soldiers advance towards Hellsness, a small group of inept servant men make a disorderly attempt to defend the house. After a turbulent but harmless skirmish, at one stage of which a bull is loosed into the courtyard to scatter the redcoats, the soldiers set fire to the house. It transpires that the Laird’s mother is still inside, having refused to leave her home, and she has to be physically carried out. She makes an interesting reference in her subsequent derision of the soldiers to a tradition that Cromwell’s soldiers, during their seventeenth century occupation of St. Magnus Cathedral, destroyed an effigy of St. Magnus and states that “gin Cromwell’s men hed no’ brak’n the eemage o’ St. Manse, Cromwell’s hoose micht hae been rulan’ tae this day.” (p. 23). This seems a pertinent parable for the redcoats regarding the likely fate of imperial militia who perpetrate un-Christian deeds in Orkney. If we accept the terminology insisted on by Balfour and Clouston and agree to consider Orkney a “country”, Dennison can be considered to be working in this particular story towards a small-scale variety of what Katie Trumpener has termed “Bardic Nationalism”:

bardic performance binds the nation together across time and across social divides ; it reanimates a national landscape made desolate [...] by conquest [...] infusing it with historical memory [...]⁹³

For Dennison re-writes and re-places (in the imagination of his readers) the violently destroyed seat of a significant local family on his island map, couching the tale in the language of his island forefathers.

As well as illustrating clearly the disorderly pluckiness of the peasantry, the obdurate pride of the gentry and the remorseless brutality of the government soldiers, the tale allows us the first glimpses of an anticlerical satire which surfaces with spiky regularity in *The Orcadian Sketch Book*. At one stage the narrator emphasises how, when news arrived of the Stewart successes during the early months of the rebellion, all the ministers in the North Isles of Orkney bar one “gae ap prayan for Geordie” (p.2). Sometimes the satire is less direct, taking the form of an ironic, community-

⁹³Ibid., (pp.xii).

voiced aside: “An’ abeun de yett was a bonnie square free-steen wi’ letters cuttid on him ‘at nee bodie could read - maybe the minister could : I ken no’.” (p.12). The throw-away “I ken no’” here carries a good deal of possible meaning: the minister is set apart from his flock; his learning is obsolete and useless, perhaps he does not even have sufficient education to interpret the inscription. This ironic, astute narrative persona, with his or her studied ingenuousness, bears the marks of sophisticated literary creation, suggesting that this narrative is more than simple word for word transcription of a local tradition.

“Why Brockie wus Pitten i’ the Mary Kirk Joggs” and “The Awber Flytin”

This satire comes to the fore in the stories “Why Brockie wus Pitten I’ the Mary Kirk Joggs” and “The Awber Flytin”. Brockie is a simple character who makes the mistake of offending a gentlewoman by blowing his nose onto her family’s pew in the Kirk. The satire is directed at the conceit of the gentry and the power they hold over the clergy when he ends up suffering the disproportionate punishment of being bound by a fixed iron collar to the Kirk wall for the duration of the following week’s sermon. The powerful Brockie breaks free, however, making his way swiftly to the nearest ale house with the collar round his neck. On his arrival, he encounters - on the Sabbath - an elder of the very Kirk he has offended. Brockie’s collar becomes a symbol of the Kirk’s oppression, restricting his neck movements and causing him to spill his ale. Conversation in the alehouse continues the theme through an ironic complaint regarding the growing power of the Kirk and the restrictions it is beginning to place on Sunday activities.

Eventually a Kirk officer tracks Brockie down and offers to free him, wary all the time because of a tradition which allows a man who has been in “the joggs” one kick at the man who releases him. The tale ends in a riotous Lord-of-Misrule, carnival type chase where Brockie leads the drinkers in pursuit of the Kirk officer all the way across the island before kicking him so powerfully that he falls in the sea. The chase, it seems, is a symbolic inversion or levelling of the social order and a re-affirmation of the rights of the peasantry. Brockie eventually consolidates his moral superiority by retrieving the drowning officer from the water.

“The Awber Flytin” describes a domestic dispute between a man and his wife which escalates to the point where they are summoned before the session, who decide that the two should spend an hour in the repenting stool the following Sunday. The Gudewife vows to appeal to the Bishop and begins by sending him gifts. By chance, the Bishop arrives in Sanday on business, where she meets him on the road and proceeds to make her appeal. The Bishop, angered by this impudence, passes on her the sterner punishment of a day in the “joggs”. “This is me t’ank for the twa secks o’ sooan sids, an’ the t’ree cheese, an’ the sax geese”, she protests. Dennison’s narrative dryly continues “They say that the Bishop coughed a good deal while Maggie expatiated on the gifts she had sent him.” (p.46). The minister and elders then reduce the sentence to an hour on the stool, but when the Sabbath comes the congregation descends into a bizarre brawl, resulting in a handful of blood from a nosebleed being flung by one character into the mouth of another. This passage of bodily fluid (which is reminiscent of Brockie’s offence) places this tale again within the age-old European tradition of carnival literature, where such scatological description is characteristic. So, religious corruption is publicly exposed and religious control once

again overturned and thoroughly satirised in a boisterous, Rabelaisian outcome.

But these tales are not profane and the aim is not to satirise Christianity, only to check the excesses and hypocrisies of some of its professed adherents whilst revelling in the carnivalisation of a staid atmosphere. Dennison himself was a devoted and quietly fervent Christian. There is clear authorial disapproval of the atheist views of the elderly laird in the story “Charlie’s Recital”, which appears later in the collection. But in these stories he demonstrates also that he did not consider overzealous clerics or elders to be beyond reproach. In an ambiguous twist, the ministers themselves in both “Why Brockie wus Pitten i’ the Mary Kirk Joggs” and “The Awber Flytin” are actually portrayed as being ultimately less narrow than the elders and less conceited or vindictive than the gentry. The tales in general are played out against a broad Christian frame of reference. Thus, “auld Bessie Cormo” refuses “tae play the part o’ a Judas” and reveal the hiding place of her Jacobite Laird (p. 13). The narrator comments that it is “Seurley a kind providence” which supplies the fugitive Fea O’ Ayrie with the ship’s nail on which he suspends himself in a geo as the encroaching tide threatens to drown him (p.4). (Perhaps he is a Christ figure, tormented by evil soldiers, and suspended in a mock crucifixion.) The semi-nonsensical piece “Deem Lavrock” alludes, through a pre-reformation folk memory, to the Orkney tradition that the skylark is “wur Lady’s Hen”, because of the three dark spots on its tongue said to represent the Holy Trinity⁹⁴. The unpopular protagonist of this tale is punished for swearing by the lark to a lie. In spite of the disrespect they might show to kirk officers, elders, ministers or even the bishop, the peasants of Dennison’s tales are essentially a genuinely pious and God-fearing people.

Dennison is at pains to point out that he has endeavoured to record the tales as accurately as possible; “the aim is to give a photograph, not a painting” (p. xiv). But a photographer’s very presence and how he chooses to position himself in relation to his subject will influence the final picture. Thus, Dennison cannot help but intrude upon his text. He is a Christian and his opinion of the atheist laird, for instance, has been noted. His egalitarian sympathies lie with the commoners of his stories rather than with the gentry, the clergy or the leaders of armies. If a story deals with Jacobite gentry and Hanoverian military power, he will side with the Jacobite gentry, because in this instance they are the underdogs. He also regularly adds footnotes which - either by describing some antiquarian artifact in his possession which is also referred to in the tale, or detailing the relationship between the person who first told him the tale and a character involved in the action - aim to establish the veracity of the tale and, by extension, of the most far fetched, supernatural happenings. This, too, is a literary technique and these tales exhibit a good deal more literary shape than their would-be editor would have us believe.

“The Stown Windin’ Sheet”

The first of the two stories which Marwick considered worthy of a place in “the national literature” is “The Stown Windin’ Sheet”. Running to only six pages, it is a short burst of exhilarating third person narrative, written entirely in Orkney dialect.

⁹⁴Compare with Dunbar’s “The Goldyn Targe”, where the lark is the “hevyns menstrale fine” or the work of the Catholic Orcadian George Mackay Brown, for whom the lark is a motif for beauty, freedom, joy, or the spirit.

An old woman, Baubie Skithawa, knowing that she is near to death, purchases a winding sheet of the finest cloth. The witch Black Jock covets the shroud at the burial and subsequently exhumes the corpse to steal the garment. One evening shortly afterwards, Andrew Meudie is sent on an errand which takes him past the kirkyard. He is terrified to see the spirits of all the dead swaying above the graveyard on enormous pillars of fire. Baubie Skithawa's spirit is naked. Andrew takes flight and arrives at Black Jock's house: the spirits follow and the ghost of Baubie Skithawa makes her way inside, retrieving her winding sheet and murdering Black Jock.

The tale resembles "Tam O' Shanter" in that it describes how a night time traveller observes supernatural beings and is then pursued by them. But where the pace and the tension in Burns' poem owe largely to the galloping couplets, Dennison uses a different technique. He achieves a calculated, almost hysterical tone, building gripping suspense through a parenthetical, stalling technique, without ever failing to detail the shocking point. Just as the narrator is about to arrive at a particularly macabre and significant juncture, he will interject a prayer. So, as Black Jock exhumes the corpse: "Sheu apened Baubie Skithawa's grave ; sheu breuk apen the coffin lid ; an' - tak' a care o' is a' ! - the regairdless sinner teuk the sheet aff o' the deid body ..." (p. 36). Or, as the spirits are being described in the kirkyard, he interjects "- Lord keep them i' their ain piece ! -" (p.37). In contrast to that of the satirical stories discussed above, the narrative voice becomes remarkably pious at these times of crisis.

In places, Dennison's narrative economy approaches the level of condensed meaning we might expect in saga. Thus, we are given a snatch of detail about Black Jock's behaviour which speaks volumes about the irreverent and gluttonous nature of her character, she "drank like a baest at de burial." (p. 36) There is also an onomatopoeic strength inherent in the language and Dennison carefully selects words which add verve to the telling of the story, hence "He *lundered* on de door wi' feet an' han's, an' wi' a' the *birr* that f'are hed left i' him" (italics added). Likewise, his imagery, though no doubt drawn from a stock of age-old country simile, is utilised to enhance the pathetic fallacy during Andrew Meudie's evening journey: "the lift grew as black as the bothom o' a pot"; or to breathe awesome alliterative and onomatopoeic life into the spirits as they leave Black Jock's dwelling: "flachterin' i' the lift, like a flock o' swans risin' I' a gluff." (p. 39) It can be seen from these short excerpts that Dennison's Scots is particularly dense, and that he makes little or no concession to a southern market: it seems that his projected audience may exist solely within Orkney. The quality of the writing is such, however, that he deserves also to be read further afield.

"The Heuld-Horn Rumpis"

The evangelical enthusiasm for Orkney Scots is clearly apparent at various stages of *The Orcadian Sketch Book*. Dennison makes a fairly detailed justification of his use of the language in his introduction by referring to lexical overlaps with early English and Elizabethan literature. As well as his going to considerable lengths to legitimise the language that he uses in this way, the content of "The Heuld-Horn Rumpis" makes a developed comment on the same theme. This is perhaps the best of the stories in the book and tells of a dinner party at the house of Aikerness in the parish of Evie. The guests become inebriated and, one at a time, fall asleep under the table until

only two, Wessness and Vellyan, remain. Vellyan, now very drunk, proceeds to tell Wessness of a previous encounter with “the mester deevil himsel” (p.69) at a similar party in the neighbouring island of Rousay. Vellyan’s framed narrative relates how the Devil murders his drinking partners and how Vellyan exploits the Devil’s own vanity, challenging him to return the mens’ souls to their bodies. The task takes longer than expected when the Devil mistakenly tries to put the soul of one man into the body of another and Vellyan uses the opportunity to stuff the leaf of a psalm book into a keg of gin which is standing on the table. Vellyan then throws the keg at the Devil, bursting it on one of his horns. The Devil takes flight up the chimney, soaked in gin, with the psalm leaf stuck to his nose.

When Vellyan explains to his companions what has happened, one of them highlights the irony: “Th’u’re no’ only w’athered, but th’u’re bapteezed the De’il i’ gin, saesoned wi’ a psalm beuk” (p.70). In addition to the disarming use of the framed narrative, there is, of course, the distinct ambiguous possibility that this entire episode is an alcoholic hallucination. The alcoholic motif is concentrated and takes on deeper irony as the holy essence of the psalm leaf diffuses through the gin, for shouldn’t gin belong to the Devil? It is this incongruous concoction of alcohol and Christianity that in turn baptises and banishes Satan.

Dennison’s Satan is very much the product of the Scottish folk tradition, an ordinary character with extraordinary power. He is typically ugly, dirty and sooty and sits down to sup punch with Vellyan as an equal. His very human, petty pride in rising to Vellyan’s challenge of his ability is his downfall. No one who has spent any length of time in Orkney could fail to appreciate the poetry and striking aptness of the simile used to describe the Devil’s angry expression: “He luckid as door as a nort’ wind sky” (p.69). It is the “mester deevil’s” use of language, however, that is most fascinating. Vellyan reprimands him in a toast as they begin to drink:

“Less English and mair grace;
Mair manners, and a bonnier face.” (p.68)

For the Devil does not speak Scots like the other characters in the tale, but “high English; it’s a’ the tongue they ken whar he cam’ fae.” (p. 68). He greets Vellyan with a haughty “How dare you speak to me? Do you know who I am?” which has the ring of received pronunciation, the dialect of the English patrician class (p.68). But it transpires that the Devil reverts to Scots, which seems to be his natural language, when he is under the pressure of his forced baptism: “Vellyan, gin I ever get thee, th’u’s boil i’ brunsteen!” (p.70). Vellyan finds this diglossia highly amusing. The Devil is, and always has been, the same as the other characters of the tale. He has been pretending to be English, because he believes that this would make him seem in some way superior. As things transpire, he is evidently Vellyan’s inferior. The only seeming incongruity which remains is in the fact that Vellyan’s vibrant Orcadian narrative is framed by an authorial introduction and conclusion, both of which are written in lucid, formal English. Dennison makes English his tool because he really has no objection to its proper use. What he will not abide - and this is in keeping with his egalitarian principles - is the appropriation of English to suggest social superiority. The tale has a considered socio-linguistic theme: Dennison perceives and seeks to puncture the prestige value attached to spoken “High English” at this relatively early date.

So Dennison's work succeeds on a variety of fronts. He legitimises Orkney Scots by devolving it from a Standard English norm, using it as his vehicle and advocating it as a valid language through the narrative progress of his tales. (This same variety of Scots is then used for literary purposes by Robert Rendall in the twentieth century.) Dennison succeeds in drawing a vibrant folk tradition - distinct and separate from the Norse interests of Laing and Balfour - into the arena of academic or scholarly literature. Indeed, the energy of this Orkney folk tradition coupled with Dennison's literary skill threatens at times to make the parallel and more prominent nineteenth century obsession with the study of older saga texts and Norse history seem retrospective, staid and rather stereotypically Victorian in the negative sense. Through his use of irony, satire and ambiguity, his sharp characterisation, the pace of his narratives, the poetry of his description and the socio-linguistic and class-conscious themes of his texts, Dennison deserves to be recognised as a literary writer of considerable stature.

J. Storer Clouston

One final, more recent writer, the historian and minor novelist Joseph Storer Clouston (1870-1944) also belongs in this chapter. Clouston was the Cumberland-born son of an Orkney family who was educated at Oxford and called to the Bar in 1895. He subsequently returned to Orkney, working in local government and writing history. *A History of Orkney*⁹⁵ (1932) is the first full-length, modern history of the islands and was to remain their definitive history for more than fifty years. It is a highly significant work in that it re-establishes the idea of Orkney as a cultural entity - a former principality or minor medieval nation state - at a stage in the twentieth century when Scottish nationalism was at the forefront of intellectual consciousness. Clouston is regarded as a capable and important historian whose work has nevertheless inevitably been superseded, particularly by developments in the approach taken by historians to saga material⁹⁶. *A History of Orkney* is a substantial yet very readable volume focussing on the Norse era in Orkney history to the virtual exclusion of later centuries. Although Clouston's history is chronologically a good deal later than the work of other writers discussed in this chapter, his relevance within a survey of literary writers such as this lies in his closeness to the Victorians coupled with the influence he exerts on Eric Linklater and subsequent literary writers who work with Norse-inspired subject matter in the Twentieth Century.

A History of Orkney is unequivocally and unapologetically pro-Norse in its bias. Clouston dwells only very briefly on prehistory and the pre-Norse period (historians of Orkney have always struggled to make the Pictish stones speak) before commencing his meticulous study of the Norse period with this fanfare:

High above their subjects towered the Earls; strong warlike men in themselves, and raised by their birth, their rank (they were the only hereditary earls in the Norse dominions), and their authority, on to a different plane to all others.
(p.31)

⁹⁵J. Storer Clouston, *A History of Orkney* (Kirkwall, 1932).

⁹⁶William P.L. Thomson, introduction to *History of Orkney* (Edinburgh, 1987).

This kind of lingering, romantic hero-worship is heavily reminiscent of the tone of the Victorians Laing, Balfour, Traill Dennison and Dasent. Clouston goes further in comparing the Norse period in Orkney history to the Golden Ages of cultural fertility in ancient Attica or Elizabethan England. His greatest respect is reserved for the Earl who was later to become of central significance to Eric Linklater, Thorfinn the Mighty⁹⁷.

Although large sections of his later text are devoted to polemical derision of the Scots, his early discussion of Thorfinn romantically ascribes “that touch of genius which distinguished him from the greatest of his forebears” to “the admixture of his mother’s Celtic blood ...”. Later, however, Clouston clearly relishes the thought of Thorfinn’s bloody campaign march through Scotland, embellishing and bolstering the saga author’s already panegyric portrait of the earl:

The tables had been turned with a vengeance! Instead of a rebellious vassal defying his liege lord, it was now a triumphant conqueror selecting at his leisure the parts of his suzerain’s realm he proposed to annexe. (p. 37)

Elsewhere, Thorfinn’s military prowess is seen as being complemented by a commendable noble savagery. Clouston selects for emphasis the anecdote that he “loved” his skald Arnor “so much that he insisted on sending him ashore” (p.49) at the battle of Robery in the Pentland Firth. In his selection of detail, his exclamatory tone, his romantic narrative and in his generally manifest enthusiasm for Thorfinn - who was certainly among the most powerful of the Norse earls - Clouston allows himself to be carried from the centre of objective history. Thorfinn’s later achievements in providing stable government in Orkney, church building, establishing a bishopric and generally consolidating Christianity in the islands are recorded, but occupy comparatively little space. To Clouston, Thorfinn the Mighty is quite simply an Orcadian super-hero, a proto-imperial, virile and violent embodiment of Orcadian independence who would submit to no-one, Norwegian or Scottish, and who had admirably laid waste to extensive tracts of early medieval Scotland.

Clouston is equally enthusiastic about Sweyn Asleifson, to the extent that he devotes a short chapter of *A History of Orkney* to him. Sweyn becomes for Clouston “the hero ... who kept the clash of the steel and the whistle of the sea-wind sounding through chapter after chapter” of *Orkneyinga Saga* (p.119). His midnight cross-country ride following the murder of Sweyn Breast-Rope is rendered in full atmospheric detail:

Eyvind had already arranged his flight. His son with a saddled horse was waiting outside the window through which Sweyn squirmed the instant his man had fallen, and in the course of the night the fugitive had ridden by the old road at the back of the townships, over the ridge and past the end of the Groundwater loch, and then across the hills to Firth. (p.85)

No translation of the saga details the precise route taken by Sweyn the way Clouston

⁹⁷Thorfinn assumes a central role in the work of Clouston, Linklater, Brown and also Dorothy Dunnett, whose novel *King Hereafter* (London, 1982) revolves around Thorfinn and his cousin Macbeth. Dunnett’s book plays with the fiction that the cousins were one and the same.

does here, nor does any translation suggest his active movement through the window, the saga states rather that he was pulled through. This is typical of a good deal of Clouston's history in that it is vividly, yet romantically and imaginatively reconstructed. These particular sections of his book belong rightly somewhere between saga translation and the historical novel, rather than within the pages of a sober history.

Clouston's enthusiasm for the bellicose, dynamic figures of Thorfinn and Sweyn is in contrast to his attitude towards the "Holy" Earl Magnus Erlendson and his cultured poet nephew Rognvald Kolson. He is particularly sceptical with regard to Magnus' sanctity ("simple tradition became overlaid at once with an embroidery of religious legend" (p.65)) and goes on to write a speculative character assassination which deduces somehow that Magnus was "probably lacking humour and certainly deficient in ordinary workaday commonsense ..." (p.68). Like Samuel Laing before him, Clouston greatly admires men of action. This prejudices him against Magnus, whose role in the saga is largely passive, or downright evasive at times of conflict. Although he seems to prefer Earl Rognvald Kolson to his uncle (perhaps because he displays more prowess as a warrior than Magnus does), the truth of his sanctity is also called into doubt. Far and away, however, Clouston's greatest respect is reserved for the early, violently daring Earl Thorfinn and the anachronistic, maverick pirate of the progressively mercantile twelfth century, Sweyn Asleifson.⁹⁸

If Clouston is a little guilty of oversimplifying the personalities of the Norse era, viewing them too starkly in black or white, he makes a more significant error in his respective treatments of the Norse and Scottish eras of Orkney history. David Balfour's polemical derision of the Scots and Scots rule detailed earlier continues unabated in Clouston. As far as he is concerned, the history of Orkney had been in a state of perpetual decline from the end of the twelfth century onwards. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are dismissed in a summary a mere twelve pages long (about the same amount of space which is devoted to Sweyn Asleifson), but not before Clouston has carried out a thorough vilification of the Scots earls of the interim period.

The traditional villains of Orkney and Shetland history, father and son earls Robert and Patrick Stewart, are treated with cutting sarcasm and contempt. Thus Robert "permitted" his well born wife to "share his favours along with numerous mistresses" (p.300), while his son is described as a "megalomaniac on the borderland of sanity" (p.309). While there is little doubt that these earls were indeed immoral monsters, the subjectivity which pervades the book here is remarkable. Clouston moves from these personal attacks to sweeping generalisations regarding the Scots period. Of the lengthy transitional stage (between 1200 to 1400) he states:

⁹⁸Some later writers follow Clouston's lead, while others are drawn towards the saintly Norse. Eric Linklater focuses, in *The Men of Ness*, on male characters who feud, fight and raid, rather than those who cultivate art, worship Christ and trade. Linklater was also, some twenty-three years later, to write the book crowning Sweyn with the rather sensational epithet *The Ultimate Viking* (London, 1955). On the other hand, Magnus and Rognvald were later to become by far the most significant Norse personalities in the work of George Mackay Brown.

In the course of that dark period the islands shrank from a semi-independent principality, ruled by a line of vigorous native earls, down to an out of the way archipelago whose nominal rulers were Scottish nobles, only occasionally residing in the isles and considerably more apprehensive of angering their southern than their northern liege-lord. (p.215)

The later installation of Scots Earls and abolition of Orkney's Udal laws in 1611 are viewed very much as the final nails in Orkney's coffin: "It was the history of the Country of Orkney which ended here and the annals of a Scottish county which began instead." (p.317). This binary division between the positive portrayal of all things Norse and the vituperative derision of all things Scots is too simple to reflect reality. William Thomson's 1987 *History of Orkney* was to revise Clouston's treatment of the Scottish earls, showing that there were indeed some significant saving graces amid the turbulence and oppression which characterise the Scots era. The view expressed by Clouston in *A History of Orkney* is that history is necessarily political, and that the history of Orkney therefore comes to an end with the execution of the last Scottish Earl, Patrick Stewart, in 1615. The only good that he sees as having come from Orkney's association with Scotland is her eventual entry into Great Britain. In this respect he can be seen as shifting away slightly from the point of view of David Balfour, but continuing to stand alongside Samuel Laing. Although both Storer Clouston and David Balfour resent the Scots, Balfour saw British rule as a simple continuation of the Scottish precedent of the use and abuse of Orkney. Clouston is content that Orkney should remain part of the United Kingdom and comfortable with what he saw as a dual "national" identity, Orcadian and British. It is because Orkney as a political entity had been subsumed by Britain, however, that Clouston closes *A History of Orkney* on the bleak note that "there is not likely to be much in the way of history ahead" (p. 370). Writing less than twenty years after the Grand Fleet had set sail from Scapa Flow to the Battle of Jutland, and only seven years before the outbreak of World War Two and the monumental changes that that war was to entail for Orkney, Clouston's prediction seems ironic in retrospect. Nevertheless, he becomes for subsequent writers a vital component in the myth-making process behind the creation of "Viking" Orkney.

3) EDWIN MUIR

Of all the writers who belong in a study of the literature of the Orkney Islands, the work of Edwin Muir (1887-1959) might seem the most likely to represent the archetypal island experience. For, unlike that of his upper middle-class contemporary Eric Linklater, who would playfully refer to himself in later life as “an old peasant with a pen”, Muir’s was indeed a peasant background. The facts of his early life are well known. Both his parents came from farming families, and his father was a tenant farmer who rented a succession of different holdings in Orkney during the course of the writer’s childhood. The most famous of these, and the crucial location in Muir’s retrospective writings, is the Bu of Wyre. Economic pressures compelled the family eventually to leave Orkney for industrial Glasgow just after the turn of the century. This was the beginning of a deeply traumatic stage in Muir’s life. The culture shock of the vast, squalid city and a succession of unfulfilling and degrading clerical jobs, coupled with the relentlessly close deaths of his father, two of his brothers and his mother, left him in the grip of a profound depression and, as he implies in his autobiography, close to suicide. Nevertheless, Muir demonstrated an extraordinary resilience, recovering and going on to educate himself in philosophy, politics, economics and literature. He moved eventually to London - where he began to establish his reputation as a writer and critic - and married the writer Willa Anderson, who came originally from Shetland, in 1919.

Muir is unique among the major Scottish Modernists in that he publicly and unequivocally distanced himself from MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance with the publication in 1936 of *Scott and Scotland*⁹⁹, the controversial critical study which arrives at two provocative conclusions: that Scottish literature effectively expired with the Reformation; and that the resuscitation of Scots as a literary language remained therefore a complete impossibility. Muir is best known for his poetry, which, in keeping with his conviction that Scottish writers should attach themselves to the English tradition, almost completely eschews Scottish language and contemporary Scottish themes. His medium is a restrained and archaic English through which he works in a symbolic mode over recurrent thematic matter, transcending the merely local or political: time, good and evil, the fabulous pattern which is the life of Man; childhood, the Fall, spiritual exile and the elusive possibility of return. Many of the poems draw symbolic material tangentially from Muir’s Orkney childhood, sometimes superimposing adult perceptions on the Orkney of the writer’s childhood. As a significant writer of Orcadian or quasi-Scottish birth who nevertheless fits comfortably and deliberately into the core English tradition - he would not label himself a “Scottish writer” - Muir has been the object of extensive research from the points of view of both English and Scottish criticism. Published studies of his work include those by James Aitchison, Peter Butter and Margery Palmer McCulloch¹⁰⁰. Of greatest relevance to this study, however, which seeks to examine the relationship between Orcadian and Scottish writing and to establish continuities between writers who write from or about the Orkney islands, is George

⁹⁹Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland - The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London, 1936).

¹⁰⁰James Aitchison, *The Golden Harvester: The Vision of Edwin Muir* (Aberdeen, 1988); Peter Butter, *Edwin Muir - Man and Poet* (Edinburgh, 1966); Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Edwin Muir: Poet, Critic and Novelist* (Edinburgh, 1993).

Marshall's *In a Distant Isle - The Orkney Background of Edwin Muir*¹⁰¹, which gives detailed consideration to the Orkney elements in Muir's poetry. Marshall builds a highly convincing case for the centrality to his adult work of Muir's early childhood experience in Wyre, and thus reclaims Muir as an Orcadian or a Scottish writer. Extensive historical research in Orkney allows Marshall also to demonstrate that Wyre is sometimes nostalgically or distortedly remembered in Muir's writing. Marshall goes on to develop the idea that Muir's classic prose work - *An Autobiography*¹⁰² - can therefore be considered a work of art as well as being a work of non-fiction.

Marshall's work facilitates a useful comparison between Edwin Muir and Eric Linklater. Being born in the islands and leaving them, Muir returns in thought, in retrospective contemplation, to achieve an understanding of the patterns of human life and spiritual progression. Conversely, Linklater, being born outside the islands, "returns" to them physically as well as in his work - to colour his writing, for political purposes and for the purposes of establishing and verifying local ethnic roots during his flirtation in the Thirties with Scottish Nationalism and the Scottish Renaissance. Where Linklater goes to flamboyant lengths in *Fanfare for a Tin Hat* to establish his viking credentials and his connection with Earl Thorfinn the Mighty, Muir opens *An Autobiography* with a quietly stated, frank and plausible suggestion that he may be the distant descendant of an early Christian saint of the eighth or ninth century, Cormack the Sailor. This missionary shared Muir's mother's surname and his chapel was located within a few miles of the farm in Deerness where Muir's mother was born. Where Linklater chooses a viking superhero as his ancestor and obscures his precise genealogy behind a playful smokescreen (claiming that the historian J. Storer Clouston had established the connection), Muir finds the possibility that he may be the descendent of a saint appealing and plausible, and justifies his conjecture with evidence - that of genuine geographical proximity within Orkney and a shared name. Muir's Orkney roots are not in question, and he feels no particular compulsion to declare racial or national credentials. Muir returns to Orkney in *An Autobiography*, but not exactly to write about himself. Personality is of limited interest to him - he views it as the distortion of an original and pure spiritual state. It is therefore inconceivable that, like Linklater, Muir should choose to entitle his autobiography a "fanfare". He seeks a truth, the Fable behind the life of every human being, rather than attempting to record for posterity his own individual Story. It is emphatically "an" autobiography, rather than "my" autobiography, introduced by the indefinite article and therefore to some extent, he hopes, articulate with every human life.

Wyre

Although he was born in the Orkney Mainland parish of Deerness, it is in the tiny island of Wyre where Muir's earliest memories exist and it is here that his autobiography commences. The initial chapter of the book, simply entitled "Wyre", is one of the richest descriptions of Orkney anywhere in literature, and deserves some detailed consideration here. Although it portrays what Muir saw as an essentially

¹⁰¹George Marshall, (Edinburgh, 1987).

¹⁰²Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography*, (London, 1954). *An Autobiography* first appeared as *The Story and the Fable*, (London, 1940). The revised version contains various amendments as well as seven additional chapters.

cooperative, pre-industrial and pre-capitalist agrarian order, the impulse behind the chapter (and that behind the autobiography as a whole) is neither an antiquarian nor a political one. While many of the unique peculiarities of the place emerge, Muir's concern is to focus rather on those particular memories that enable him to describe the archetypal, timeless childhood and the fall from innocence that he saw as necessary and inevitable stages of human life. While its primary purpose is to convey this universal truth, the chapter is nevertheless also of central significance within the literature of Orkney.

In particular, the way in which Muir places the farm at the centre of the universe is a distinctly Orcadian understanding. The islands have been cultivated and animals reared on them since the Iron Age. In Muir's time and in the present, agriculture has been Orkney's economic mainstay and also its predominant way of life. When he writes "... at the heart of human civilisation is the byre, the barn and the midden" (AA p.26), Muir suggests that aspects of life beyond the farmstead are mere paraphernalia. The brutal facts of existence cannot be disguised from the child who grows up on a farm, and he understands birth, reproduction and death in a way that his urban counterpart never could. The violence and harshness of what goes on around him - the use of a red-hot iron to place a ring in the bull's nose or the cutting of a pig's throat - are rituals sanctioned in their timeless repetition, cruel yet absolutely necessary:

When my father led out the bull to serve a cow brought by one of our neighbours it was a ritual act of the tradition in which we have lived for thousands of years, possessing the obviousness of a long dream from which there is no awaking. When a neighbour came to stick the pig it was a ceremony as objective as the rising and setting of the sun; and though the thought never entered his mind that without that act civilisation, with its fabric of customs and ideas and faiths, could not exist - the church, the school, the council chamber, the library, the city - he did it as a thing that had always been done, and done in a certain way. There was a necessity in the copulation and the killing which took away the sin, or at least, by the ritual act, transformed it into a sad, sanctioned duty. (AA p26)

Although, because they too write of Orkney, Eric Linklater and Gregor Lamb locate a good deal of the narrative of their novels at farms (Linklater in *White-Maa's Saga*, *The Men of Ness* and *Magnus Merriman* and Lamb in *Langskail*), it is in the work of Muir's protégé George Mackay Brown that this reassuring faith in a central, affirmative ritual, whereby our actions and those of our ancestors become one, is most clearly adopted and adapted. Brown, who studied under Edwin Muir at Newbattle Abbey College between 1951 and 1952, extends the philosophy to articulate it more closely with his Roman Catholicism. The byre assumes particular significance throughout Brown's writing as well, not only in its function as birthplace and winter shelter for animals, but also representing as it does the birthplace of Christ. Although Brown writes as often of the sea as he does of the land (perhaps because he lived in the port of Stromness, rather than in the agricultural hinterland of Orkney), he nevertheless repeatedly echoes Muir's insistence on the centrality of the farmstead: the miraculous cycle of the agricultural year is one of Brown's central themes. Muir dwells on the contrast between the long dark evenings of the northern winter, when "lamps were lit at three or four in the afternoon" (AA, p21) and springtime, when

“the world opened, the sky grew higher, the sea deeper”. This awareness of seasonal change and exceptional seasonal variation is a product of life in northern latitudes and will also be familiar to Brown’s readers. Where Brown would later celebrate the springtime sowing of crop in his own unique form of literary worship, which is part pagan and part Christian, Muir recognises its significance in terms which rejoice, without investing quite the same enhanced level of significance in the act:

The sun shone, the black field glittered, my father strode on, his arms slowly swinging, the fan shaped cast of grain gleamed as it fell and fell again; the row of meal-coloured sacks stood like squat monuments on the field. (AA, p22)

Nevertheless, the emphasis is on the repetition of the movement and the sacks of seed corn become imposing “monuments”, perhaps to previous harvests stretching back through millenia. In these opening stages of *An Autobiography*, Muir suggests the everyday rituals of life in Orkney that Brown would later seize upon. Although he touches here on ritual, this should not be read as the suggestion of racial memory or the politically-conceived soil-rootedness of the writing of the Scottish Renaissance, Muir’s concern is with the intersections between the life of man and the life of Man. The significance of the sowing is as a station in the Fable. More suggestive of Christian meaning is the description of new-born lambs at the Bu:

Everything looked soft and new - the sky, the sea, the grass, the two lambs, which seemed to have been cast up on the turf; their eyes still had a bruised look, and their hooves were freshly laquered. They payed no attention to me when I went up to pat them, but kept turning their heads with sudden gentle movements which belonged to some other place. (AA, p21)

This reverence for the commonplace, the description of everyday events on the farm suggesting Heaven (“some other place”) and Christ, the Lamb of God, is at once the foundation of Muir’s adult faith and a cornerstone of the later writings of George Mackay Brown or Robert Rendall.

Other elements which emerge in *An Autobiography* and embed themselves in Orcadian writing include a passing but deeply resonant reference to the ruined St. Magnus Kirk on Wyre’s neighbouring island of Egilsay - “It was the most beautiful thing in sight, and it rose every day against the sky until it seemed to become a sign in the fable of our lives.” (AA, p6). The reverence here for the monument, and the implication of longing for a lost beauty and celebration in local worship anticipate not only Muir’s later spiritual awakening in Rome, where his experiences of religious art and architecture precipitate his realisation that “Christ had walked on the earth” (AA, p276), but also the more overtly religious writings of George Mackay Brown, for whom Magnus becomes at once a northern Christ figure and the vital intermediary between the Orcadian Christian and God, a true saint in the medieval tradition. Muir’s respect for the folklore of the islands is also apparent in the opening pages of *An Autobiography*, where he records some of the stories of fairies and witches, of ghost ships and mermaids which were told by his credulous ancestors. Muir’s now famous comment that “The Orkney I was born into was a place where there was no great distinction between the ordinary and the fabulous ...” (AA, p4) places him on the great cusp between antiquity and modernity. Although he himself does not believe the surface detail of the folk tales, he recognises in them - as Walter Traill Dennison did

before, and as Eric Linklater, Ernest Marwick, George Mackay Brown, Gregor Lamb and Margaret Elphinstone were all later to do - the fascination and wealth of human truth contained in these fabulous narratives.

Reflecting on very earliest memories - until the precise age of seven in his case - Muir maintains emphatically that as children we do not enter time. Time exists, but the child remains untouched by it. So a ship on the horizon appears to him to be entirely stationary, its deception becoming apparent only when he looks again to see that it has moved (AA, p22). Likewise - in a characteristically heraldic image - time becomes a hooded falcon, "for time sat on the wrist of each day with its wings folded" (p15); its potential for deadly and swift movement as yet unrealised. The prelapsarian stage before our entry into time is a blissful one, "Our first childhood is the only time in our lives when we exist within immortality" (p15). The childhood existence outside time is absolutely real to him and represents proof of the immortality of the soul. Thus, adult reflection on his Orkney childhood leads him to his emphatic conclusion regarding the ultimate question of human existence: that the human soul is immortal.

This early stage is brought to a dramatic end in what Muir describes in overtly Christian terminology as "the Fall". Although, in general terms, his time on Wyre is a happy one, and his subsequent years in Glasgow are by contrast almost impenetrably dark, it would be wrong to equate Wyre with Eden. The Fall is a stage in life which happens independently of place. Muir's expulsion from his childhood Eden comes before he leaves Wyre. As Butter has put it, "It is important to remember that the shades of the prison house began to fall around the growing boy on Wyre itself ..." ¹⁰³. The Fall coincides for him with the feelings of intense and irrational guilt he experiences after his father tells him that he must under no circumstances go near or touch a sack of poisonous sheep dip which is brought to the farm. After the sheep are dipped, the child experiences a traumatic panic. He does not think that he has touched the sack, but cannot be certain. Terror of the consequences of touching the sack consumes him. He feels intense guilt, but his greatest fear is for his own life. He describes the boy as "quite unable to stay his hand in that other time and that other place" (AA p24), the use of the third person suggesting the child's dawning awareness of chronological progression and of other, previous selves, his realisation of the existence of separate, earlier temporal stages which are no longer within his control. He describes how, for a period of weeks, or perhaps months, he inhabited "a sort of parallel world divided by an endless, unbreakable sheet of glass from the actual world" (AA p25), a world of separation which would recur at points of stress throughout his life. His feelings of isolation are accompanied by a phase of compulsive handwashing, by which means he seeks to cleanse himself of his contact with the contaminating substance. Muir's choice of the term "the Fall" for his experience suggests a parallel to the taking of forbidden fruit - as God forbade Adam to touch the fruit, so too has Muir's father forbidden him to touch the sack. With the incident comes his first intimation, his first knowledge of his own mortality. As he realises time moves, so too does he realise that he moves on with it. The fear of death that he associates with touching the sheep dip is the first such fear he has experienced. This comes at much the same time as he hears of the death of a neighbour, the first person known personally to him to die. It is here, as he becomes aware of the fact of

¹⁰³Butter, *Ibid.* (p.12).

his own mortality, rather than with the successive deaths of his family members in Glasgow, that Muir's childhood comes to an end.

Muir, Industrial Capitalism and Scottish Culture

Eventually, his feelings of fear and guilt subside and the illusion of the glass barrier between himself and the world dissolves, but not without leaving a profound impression on Muir which was to shape his subsequent adult outlook on both human economic and Scottish cultural history. With his move to Glasgow, Muir became fully aware for the first time that he lived in a world governed and corrupted by market forces. Although these were essentially the same forces that had driven his family from one farm to another in Orkney and eventually into Kirkwall and southwards to Glasgow, it was only once he was actually resident in Glasgow that these negative aspects of the capitalist system became fully apparent to him. The squalor of the city slums through which he walked to work, the brutality of people he encountered, the disease, the film of filth that lay everywhere, the soul-destroying unemployment and poverty that he saw around him and the demoralising absence of prospects and comforts that he experienced on a personal level led him to the belief that industrial capitalism was an evil system, its advent a macrocosmic Fall which had corrupted the world.

Muir's description in his 1935 intellectual travelogue, *Scottish Journey*¹⁰⁴, of the soup of man made filth and refuse which envelops an industrial town - in this case it is Glasgow again - suggests the perspective of one who has been dislocated from a rural to an urban area:

One finds [in the streets] a miscellaneous and yet representative collection which is very revealing, though it can have little resemblance to the franker contents of medieval or Renaissance streets. [...] To this soup must be added an ubiquitous dry synthetic dust, the siftings of the factories, which is capable under rain of turning into a greasy paste resembling mud, but has no other likeness to the natural mire of a country road; for that, however unpleasant underneath one's feet, breathes freshness and has a sweet smell. [...] In this soup it is considered a perfectly natural thing for human beings to live. (SJ p.115)

These key oppositional concepts - unnatural and natural, synthetic and organic, counterfeit and genuine - permeate Muir's writing on a variety of subjects. The tendency to look back to an uncorrupted medieval or Renaissance period is also highly characteristic. The Renaissance streets, although also dirty, are soiled with "franker" filth - straightforward biodegradable waste rather than the insoluble, man-made, chemical by-products of industry. The squalor of modern industrialisation, which Muir returns to often, is most vividly conveyed in the horrific chapter of *An Autobiography* ironically entitled "Fairport", which describes the clerical job Muir held in a factory in Greenock.

This factory rendered down the bones of slaughtered livestock in order to extract chemicals that were then sold on. Although he worked in the factory office, the filth

¹⁰⁴Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (London, 1935).

of the decaying flesh and the process of rendering down the bones had a profoundly disturbing effect on him, and the chapter has a distinctly nightmarish flavour. Although he was physically disgusted with the factory to the extent that he imagined the insidious stench of the bones following him when he was not at work, it also shaped some of his early negative impressions of the capitalist system, which to Muir is inherently corrupt. The factory ground out profit from the bones of dead animals. This profit, however, was never sufficient for the head office in Glasgow. Consequently he and the other officials at the factory would lie to cover up inefficiencies and errors. The evil stench of the bones and the corrupting influence of the capitalist system merge symbolically in what becomes the most dismal chapter of the book.

His considered response to industrial Glasgow in economic, rather than personal terms, appears in *Scottish Journey*, where he offers the following definition of industrialism, suggesting “competition” is a simple euphemism for “greed”:

By industrialism I mean the distinctively modern form of capitalist production and exchange which was set going over a century ago by a generally sanctioned greed such as the world had never seen before, called competition, and went on perpetuating itself in security once that greed had achieved the logical infallibility of a law. (SJ p.103)

The proximity of the slums and wealthy areas of Glasgow is, for him, the simple illustration of the fact that the rich enjoy their lifestyle at the expense of the poor. The ability of the individual to determine his own destiny within the economic system is a myth: “... men who have risen to wealth “by their own efforts,” as the popular but misleading saying goes” (p.160). The movement of the poor away from the slums is a complete impossibility, they exist in “... a sort of invisible cage, whose bars are as strong as iron” (p.117) and “... see no prospect for themselves or their descendants but the slums” (p.118).

These Marxist convictions have at their root Muir’s early life in Wyre. Glasgow - and the industrial world - operated on a principle of “competition, not co-operation, as it had been in Orkney.” (AA p.84) An unfavourable comparison is made between an insecure job and a little money in the bank and a farm, which Muir claims is “a responsive, adaptable thing” (AA p.84). Indeed, the Marxism to which Muir finds himself drawn is the product of his Orcadian perspective on the city surrounding him. His island mind reaches socialist conclusions about the way forward from the evil results of industrial capitalism. Typically, Muir is uneasy in the present, hankering after the stillness and content of his childhood in Wyre, where he was largely unaware of divisions of wealth, the only clear class or economic division being between the islanders as a group and their laird.

As well as informing these early political views, an unease and discontent with the present were to shape his mature views on Scottish culture. Two often quoted, condemnatory poems – “Scotland’s Winter” and “Scotland 1941” - encapsulate Muir’s ambivalent negativity towards the contemporary state of the nation in the thirties and early forties. “Scotland’s Winter” is a poignant lament, nationalistic in spite of itself and its derision of what Scotland has become. The only Scotland which can appear in Muir’s creative *oeuvre* is the mummified, medieval nation of ballad and

folk tale, freed by the heroic warriors of independence only to be struck dead at the Reformation by Knox and Melville and maintained in a permafrost grip by the ignorance and weakness of modern Scots:

... common heels that do not know
Whence they come or where they go
And are content
With their poor frozen life and shallow banishment.¹⁰⁵

An Orcadian ambivalence to the neighbouring southern nation is apparent here, for why should a writer like Muir, who does not consider himself to be fully Scottish, rally to MacDiarmid's standard of rebirth in Scottish culture and nation? Scotland, urges the Orcadian traveller and critic of European Literature, may as well be forgotten. Scotland, by 1941, has become a nonentity, no more than a medieval manuscript, "the folio of our fable"¹⁰⁶. Yet there is a hint of chastisement in these poems, something of a bitter spur against the greed and cultural inertia Muir perceives in the industrial Central Belt and also a paradoxical sense of mutual culpability and complicity in the crime that is contemporary Scotland:

We watch our cities burning in their pit,
To salve our souls grinding dull lucre out,
We, fanatics of the frustrate and the half,
Who once set Purgatory hill in doubt.
Now smoke and dearth and money everywhere,
Mean heirlooms of each fainter generation,
And mummied housegods in their musty niches,
Burns and Scott, sham bards of a sham nation,
And spiritual defeat wrapped warm in riches,
No pride but pride of pelf.¹⁰⁷

This attitude is born of Orkney. In *Scottish Journey*, before concluding his Scottish tour in Orkney, Muir arrives in the Sutherland village of Durness. He sees his home islands across the Pentland Firth for the first time after a long absence and now from an altered southern perspective, this time as an outsider. The Hoy hills seem familiar to him from his new vantage point, but he fails to recognise them at first. So, too, has his mature perspective on the economic life of the islands shifted. After his experiences of industrial Scotland, Orkney has lost its early enchantment. Muir sees modern Orcadian life as an anomalous backwater, and he has clearly moved on to the point where a return is impossible for him:

The life on these little farms in the Orkneys is humanly desirable and good [...] But it is a life quite eccentric to the economic life of modern civilisation; an erratic fruition; an end; not a factor which can be taken into account in the painful and vital processes through which society is passing at present. I draw attention to it for quite a different reason: because it represented the only desirable form of life that I found in all my journey through Scotland. It has

¹⁰⁵ "Scotland's Winter", (*Collected Poems*, p.229).

¹⁰⁶ "Scotland 1941", (*Collected poems*, p.97).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

achieved this, one might almost say, by a happy series of drawbacks, or what might at first seem to be drawbacks: by its isolation for centuries from the rest of Scotland and Great Britain, an isolation which has allowed it to preserve its traditional ways of life, so that until to-day it has scarcely been touched by the competitive spirit of Industrialism, and has remained largely co-operative. [...] It has been saved by being just outside the circumference of the industrial world, near enough to know about it, but too far off to be drawn into it. (SJ, p. 240-241)

Orkney, Muir's model of co-operation, is set apart from Scotland, and here (if rarely elsewhere) Muir stands alongside the Linklater of the novels *White Maa's Saga* and *Magnus Merriman* or the short story *Sealskin Trousers*. Although offering little hope for anywhere else, the Orcadian way of life is the only acceptable and desirable way of life remaining in the western world. The dissociation of Orkney and Scotland in Muir's work is peculiar. Where other Orcadian writers like Eric Linklater and Robert Rendall were willingly inspired by the Scottish Renaissance and discovered that it could facilitate their art, Muir resists what he sees as an alien Scottish influence. He denies the efficacy of Scottish language and feels that Scott and Burns, the "sham bards of a sham nation", offer only a counterfeit of a lost, genuine, medieval Scottishness. This attitude to Scotland, and his sense of the inadequacy of Scottish language in particular, is perplexing in a writer who states in *An Autobiography* that, as children in Wyre, he and his siblings sang the Scots ballads "with your full voice, as if you had always been entitled to sing them" (AA, p.20). Despite his peripatetic existence, Muir was never to lose his Orkney accent. Reading his poetry in formal recordings, he has a pronounced Orkney accent; the gentle intonation of an old Orkney farmer. Throughout their marriage, Edwin and Willa Muir continued always to use the affectionate familiar Orcadian and Shetlandic pronouns of address *thu* and *du* when talking to one another. While Scots language – or Orcadian language - was once part of Muir's Orkney and something very real - the indigenous and right language of the family home - it becomes for the adult Muir an anachronism in the modern world. Just as the Orcadian way of life - however wholesome and content it may be - is eccentric to modern macroeconomics, so too does he feel that the language of his childhood home has been left behind by forward-marching history.

These rather bleak conclusions regarding the Fall of the individual, the Fall of the macroeconomic world and the Fall from medieval and renaissance grace of Scottish literature, culture and identity, form a three way parallel which suggests their genesis in Muir's mind, rather than in the world itself. We ought not to gloss over the culture shock, degradation and intense trauma of grief that made up his early experience of Glasgow and which are described with such candour and yet without self-pity in *An Autobiography*. Muir emphatically does not want his readers' sympathy, though it would be a hard reader indeed who failed to be moved by the book. It is only an inner core of personal strength that enables Muir to survive. His subsequent perception of fracture and decline in all things cannot but have been influenced by the horrific events of his personal life and the degrading circumstances of his life in Glasgow and Greenock. Yet two factors - his marriage and a difficult journey towards faith - sustain him and ensure that the eventual conclusions of *An Autobiography* are liberating and uplifting.

After chapters which describe Muir's work with the British Council in various

European locations, *An Autobiography* concludes briefly with his reflections on his time as director of the British Institute in Rome. The focus is on the profound reassurance he experiences in the iconography and artistic manifestations of Christ and Christianity surrounding him in the Italian capital. As it was to become for Muriel Spark and George Mackay Brown, Catholicism proves to be the only religion capable of convincing the Orcadian writer of the existence of Christ and the truth of His suffering on Earth. There is no bitterness in the description of how the methods of the Church of Scotland had failed for Muir, only reverence and wonder at the Mediterranean variety of religion and its complete difference to predominant Scottish forms of worship:

During the time when as a boy I attended the United Presbyterian Church in Orkney, I was aware of religion chiefly as the sacred Word, and the church itself, severe and decent, with its touching bareness and austerity, seemed to cut off religion from the rest of life and from all the week-day world, as if it were a quite specific thing shut within itself, almost jealously, by its white washed walls, furnished with its bare brown benches unlike any others in the whole world, and filled with the odour of ancient Bibles. (AA p.273)

But in Italy, the image of Christ:

... was to be seen everywhere, not only in churches, cut on the walls of houses, at cross-roads in the suburbs, in wayside shrines in the parks, and in private rooms. [...] A religion that dared to show forth such a mystery for everyone to see would have shocked the congregations of the north, would have seemed a sort of blasphemy, perhaps even an indecency. But here it was publicly shown, as Christ had showed himself on the earth. (AA p.275)

So Muir's spiritual pergrination reaches its final destination far from the shores of Orkney, but not without some residual memory of his Orkney childhood. The logical successor to Muir, we might suggest, would be a Christian and a Catholic who returned to Orkney in his or her literary work. The work of George Mackay Brown can in this respect be viewed as following on from that begun by the older poet, describing a vibrant localised world from his own unique and Catholic spiritual point of view. Muir himself, however, was only to return to Orkney for fleeting periods, whether in a physical or a spiritual sense or in his literary art.

4) ERIC LINKLATER

Although he was born later than Muir, the self-styled Orcadian novelist Eric Linklater (1899-1974) was the first literary artist to emerge from the isles into the world of international publishing. His fiction oeuvre comprises a curiously hybrid mix, ranging from picaresque adventure novels located within Scotland or abroad, through pastiche saga, crime novels and comedies, to war literature which is wildly comic in some books and deadly serious in others. He also published three volumes of eclectically ranging short fiction and alternated throughout his career between writing fiction and biography or history. His history is sometimes eccentric but proved highly popular, perhaps because of Linklater's innate ability to create a gripping narrative.

Throughout his rise to prominence as a novelist, occasional broadcaster and journalist, and for almost his entire life, Linklater happily allowed a misconception to circulate that he had been born in Orkney. In actual fact, he was born in South Wales, where his father was based as a ship's master. Although the family visited the islands often throughout the writer's childhood, Linklater did not become a permanent resident until he was thirty-five years old. Prior to his return to his ancestral home, he had attended schools in Cardiff and Aberdeen, fought in the Great War, graduated from the University of Aberdeen, travelled in India and North America and stood as a prospective parliamentary candidate for the National Party of Scotland in Fife.

His overwhelming desire to be considered "Orcadian" in the fullest sense of the word is a useful starting point from which to consider Linklater's work, much of which insists on the uniqueness and Scottish/Norse duality of this identity, and seeks to explore it in more depth. Linklater's "Orcadian" novels are *White-maa's Saga* (1929), *The Men of Ness* (1932), and *Magnus Merriman* (1934) while *The Ultimate Viking* (1955) takes a historical focus as a starting point for a fairly wide-ranging discussion of life in some of the North Atlantic Norse colonies. Two later short stories of outstanding quality – "The Goose Girl" and "Sealskin Trousers" – are also set in Orkney, "Sealskin Trousers" being a free adaptation and modernisation of an Orkney folk tale.

White-Maa's Saga

Although it appears midway between MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) and Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932), at what is arguably the zenith of the Scottish Renaissance, Linklater's debut - *White-Maa's Saga*¹⁰⁸ - is essentially an apprentice piece, preparing the ground for the later, more highly polished *Magnus Merriman*, which rests more comfortably among the work of the other writers of the Scottish Renaissance. By the time he wrote *White-Maa's Saga*, Linklater had - like so many of his generation - already accumulated a broad and traumatic experience of the world disproportionate to his young age. Despite having been a sniper in the trenches during W.W.I, being badly wounded and working subsequently as a professional journalist in India, Linklater largely eschews all of these potentially fertile areas for literary exploration: it is toward Orkney that the novel gravitates.

¹⁰⁸ "White-maa" is the Orcadian vernacular term for a seagull. An early edition of the novel appeared with an unfortunate typographical error, reading "White-Man's Saga".

The picaresque hero, former soldier Peter Flett, makes his northward way home to Orkney, having broken free from what he feels is a soul-destroying course in Medicine at the University of Inverdoon (a thinly veiled University of Aberdeen, the traditionally preferred destination of Orkney students, and Linklater's own chosen place of study on his return from the Great War). Flett's return to the agricultural hinterland of his childhood allows Linklater the opportunity to draw on his own experience to produce some accurate description of the people and landscapes of Orkney. Like Thomas Mann's Tonio Kröger in Lübeck, Flett undergoes something of a Romantic revitalisation on returning to the rural north, having been smothered and depressed by life in a southern city. The rest of the novel describes how Flett returns to his roots: falling in love with an Orcadian girl called Norna Sabiston, solving a local mystery, and settling a feud with Isaac Skea, an enemy from his days in the army. Finally, he takes the slightly unlikely decision (given his love for Orkney) to emigrate with Norna to Vancouver.

As the first literary text of any real import since *The Pirate* to use Orkney as a setting, the novel was naturally excitedly received in the islands. Ernest Marwick described contemporary responses to *White-Maa's Saga* in a later article in *The Orcadian*:

We tried to decide who were the prototypes of the Fletts and the Sabistons, and whether the story about "auld John Corrigan wha bade in the upper hoose o' Dykeside" was really taken from life. There was no doubt that it was, for some of the old men could cap it with stories quite as fantastic and many times more Rabelaisian.¹⁰⁹

Marwick's assertion that the truth of the story lies in the fact that "some of the old men could cap it" is testimony to Linklater's ability to recreate the Orcadian sense of humour. (In *White-Maa's Saga*, Linklater has an overprotective father locked in an outbuilding while his resourceful young jailer spends a night with both his beautiful daughters). George Mackay Brown, too, has written of his delight in seeing Orkney fictionalised for the first time in over a century in *White-Maa's Saga*:

We never thought that there could be writers in our islands. The islands were for farmers and fishermen and shopkeepers ...
Then the name of a new writer was mentioned: Eric Linklater. *Whitemaa's Saga* gripped my imagination at once; so, soon, did *The Men of Ness* and *Magnus Merriman*. Here were fields and shores that we actually knew, our feet had walked on them. Recognisable people came to life, and suffered and laughed out of the pages. It was a marvellous experience, reading the early Linklater; it was as if at once the common landscapes and seascapes became precious to us. That richness has never been lost.
But then Eric Linklater began to set his scenes in the great world - America, China - and that did not mean so much. But still, again and again, he gave a short story or essay or fragment of autobiography an Orkney setting, and the magic was astir again.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Ernest Marwick, "Looking Around", *The Orcadian*, 8/4/1972.

¹¹⁰ *Envoi: Edwin Muir at Newbattle*, by G.M. Brown in G.M. Brown (ed.), *Edwin Muir Selected Prose* (London, 1987), p.203.

White-Maa's Saga can certainly be considered significant inasmuch as it clearly suggested to Brown some of the latent fictional possibilities of Orkney which he was later to exploit; it marks, perhaps, the beginning of an imaginative construction of Orkney beginning in Linklater and working through Brown. Brown quite rightly emphasises Linklater's special talent for writing landscape; the best passages of the novel are those describing the uniquely beautiful outdoor environment and capricious weather of Orkney. Brown himself was to go on to write a great deal of similar description, both in his literary work and also, particularly, in his weekly column in *The Orcadian*, where his penchant for the apt meteorological metaphor was often reminiscent of "the early Linklater". The tinkers who wander the roads of *White-Maa's Saga* also find their way into Brown's writing as recurrent figures, representative in both writers of a freedom and sensibility lying outwith the marches of ordinary society. In more general terms, however, and most significantly, *White-Maa's Saga* had shown Brown that Orkney's soil could be fertile ground indeed for literature.

While these are real and clearly inspirational strengths, the novel does throw up a slight difficulty in its presentation of dialogue. The problem lies in the fact that - although the written representations of Orkney Scots (like those of Orkney humour) are faithful representations of the idiom - none of Linklater's *thinking* characters speak in Orkney Scots and, as is the case with *The Pirate* and others of Scott's novels, divisions exist between Scots dialogue and English description and, perhaps more problematically, between the register of language used by characters according to their class and/or degree of centrality to the novel¹¹¹. The protagonist is supposedly as rooted in the community as the farmers with whom he mingles and yet, in his use of formal, Latinate English, he speaks an altogether different language from theirs. Dialogue between lesser characters in farmhouse kitchens is conducted in a vivid, vibrant Orkney Scots, while Peter Flett's internal thoughts or his conversations with Norna or his university friends have a formal, Latinate, anglophone flavour: "Anyway, this superstitious terror is nonsense" (WMS 254). While the humour associated with the local farmers is certainly deftly written, it is striking that these characters have no serious conversations (apart from when they discuss their primitive superstition regarding the mysterious slaughters of livestock which take place at the Standing Stones of Stenness) and hence are in no way connected to any serious theme. They live in a kailyardish Orkney, and in this respect *White-Maa's Saga* can be said to resemble some of the later work of Linklater's close friend (and fellow Scotsman by adoption) Compton Mackenzie. The premise upon which the progression of the novel depends is that Peter Flett is an integral part of this community, yet he is presented as being educated, articulate and intelligent to the extent that he is distanced from his fellow islanders.

The sacrificial offerings transpire to have a rational explanation when Flett disturbs a local "daftie", Sammy of Hallbreck, as he melodramatically re-enacts a pagan ritual. The real darkness, the serious theme which stands out in the novel, and which is associated exclusively with Flett and his university friends, however, is the Great War. The early chapters describe the generation who returned from the war to

¹¹¹David Drever has commented that Linklater's heroes "seem to belong to an unacknowledged but potentially exclusive club that refuses entry to the ruck of humankind...", in Donald Omand, (ed.) *The Orkney Book* (Edinburgh, 2003), p.263.

recommence their young lives at university in Aberdeen. These provide a valid commentary, unique within inter-war Scottish literature, on the difficulties experienced by battle-hardened soldiers in their struggle to readjust to civilian life. Peter Flett and his fellow students play out a seemingly eternal youth in the pubs of Aberdeen with a hollow *joie de vivre*. The macabre detail of the trenches is omitted: discussion of the war is largely oblique. The entire hoop-jumping process of study and examination seems juvenile and false to Flett after his experience of war. Restlessness and boredom are his reasons for drinking heavily and yearning for an active, physical life, either in Orkney or at sea:

This life doesn't take enough out of us. France did. You lived on the edge of nothing there, and had all that you could stand. You had no superfluity left, no spare energy. But here we have, and we don't know what to do with it. (p. 31)

Later, there are moments of genuine gravitas where Flett and a friend, Joyce MacRae, ponder the aftermath of the carnage:

“The world is full of broken things,” said Peter slowly.
“We're not really young, are we? We only have a kind of hard, make-believe youth that's lasting longer than the real thing would.”(p. 203)

Where his contemporary Lewis Grassie Gibbon had set out, in *Sunset Song* (1932), to chart the demise of a community of Northeast smallholders and tenant farmers as its life blood drained into the trenches of the Somme, Linklater touches here on the aftermath of psychological disorientation, the disruption of the normal, chronological life-pattern amongst the middle classes returned from war to the nearby city of Aberdeen. The final repercussion for Flett is that he is unable to complete his degree and returns to Orkney. This outcome, however, is presented in the most positive of terms, a celebratory conclusion to a period of personal trauma which contrasts starkly with the lament for Long Rob, Chae Strachan and Ewan Tavendale and their way of life in the closing pages of *Sunset Song*.

If, in terms of his class, language, education, cultural background and the fact that he has survived and returned from the war, Peter Flett is an altogether different character from the men of *Sunset Song*, his sister Martin bears in many ways a close resemblance to Gibbon's symbol of Scotland, Chris Guthrie¹¹². She is a strong and resourceful woman who has survived both her parents and continues to run the family farm in Orkney. Martin shares Chris's love of book learning (her library ranges eclectically from the likes of *Orkneyinga Saga* to Melville, Conrad and books of veterinary science) and she clearly anticipates some of the anthropomorphic connections made by Gibbon between Chris and the Kinraddie soil:

Martin heard idly and without discomfort their talk of voyaging. Her farm prospered. She had plans to improve it, to breed more and better pigs, to sell them more wisely. She had thrust the roots of her being into the soil and daily the roots were spreading and multiplying. (p. 258)

The symbolic connection is not made as explicitly or repeatedly here as it is in

¹¹²Linklater was to review *Sunset Song* enthusiastically for *The Listener* in 1932.

Gibbon, nor does it contain Gibbon's extended implication of a connection between his characters and the soils of the *nation* of Scotland: Linklater's point is not yet a political or nationalist one. He insists, however, that only the soils of Orkney can provide his characters with nourishment, and that they cannot thrive anywhere else.

The desire to bring Scotland to life in female form - the *Dame Scotia* personification, through which the male writers of the Scottish Renaissance so often expressed their allegiance with their counterparts in the eighteenth century vernacular revival - also finds a similar parallel in *White-Maa's Saga*. Unlike MacDiarmid's "silken leddy", Gibbon's "Chris Caledonia", or Fergusson or Burns's "Scotia", however, the beautiful Norna represents not Scotland but Orkney. Her forename (for it isn't strictly speaking a Christian name) echoes that of her predecessor in *The Pirate*, Norna of Fitful Head, and epitomises the Norse identity associated with the northern extremities of Scotland. Her surname (like Flett's) is one of a handful of ancient Orcadian names which pre-date the influx of Scots following the impignoration. In the movement of the novel significantly entitled *Green Earth*, Flett specifically identifies her as *being* Orkney:

"I'm in love," Peter said abruptly. "With you and all these people and your mother and the bride and the Bride's cog and the fiddlers and the wind; the taste of everything and the smell of everything. With Orkney. By God, I am." ...
"With me because I am me, or because I'm part of Orkney?" Norna asked. ...
"I don't know," said Peter. "Both, I suppose. Because you are you and because you are Orkney. Because -" (p. 250)

This kind of personification has traditionally taken the form of an alignment of the nation with a symbolic female figure. Norna is a woman who represents something resembling a nation: a compelling, identity bearing and nourishing locus, an imagined community with borders which are granted definition by the sea, a community which, it is suggested, is essential in some way to the well-being of all those belonging to it.

Also linked to the Scottish Renaissance in general is Linklater's treatment of neolithic monuments in *White-maa's Saga*. Parts of the book are located specifically at the Ring of Brodgar and the Standing Stones of Stenness, where characters discover the mutilated corpses of lambs that have been killed in a "pagan" sacrifice. The standing stones here are more closely connected to the Macpherson/Scott tradition of *Ossian* and *The Pirate* than the use of such monuments in the work of Linklater's Scottish Renaissance contemporaries. To Gibbon and Gunn these are places where characters become keenly, supernaturally aware of the prehistoric past and can tune in to the Jungian "collective unconscious". Linklater prefers the simpler Gothic drama which appealed to Macpherson and Scott and has Flett arrive at the standing stones at a suitably atmospheric moonlit midnight and proceed to solve the mystery of the sacrifices. Linklater advances from the eighteenth century misconception that these were Norse monuments, but nevertheless has a Norse cross carved on one of the stones. Although the Norse have Christianised the pagan site, lightning has struck one of the stones and erased the cross. Flett carves on another, following the same design as the original. Thus, he re-Christianises the monument at the same time as aligning himself specifically with the Norsemen - a thousand or so years distant in time from him - as opposed to the earlier, prehistoric stone raisers who are a greater source of fascination for Gunn and Gibbon. In Linklater, the standing stones have a negative,

superstitious connotation. Their resonance is restricted, taking Flett back in his mind only as far as Turf Einar, the first ruler of Orkney to appear in written history.

As Julian D'Arcy has shown, the deliberate and selfconscious use of the term "saga" in the title identifies this central Nordic element from the outset¹¹³. "White-Maa", on the other hand, is the Orkney dialect name for the Herring Gull and is the nickname given to Peter Flett when he is at home in Orkney. Linklater's choice of this obscure and exotic vernacular name for his title adds more than a little local colour to the novel. He is tentatively beginning here to bring Orkney into the wider world of Scottish Literature in an attempt to ensure that an Orkney accent is audible within the Renaissance movement afoot. By using the name "White-maa", which is neither Norse nor Scots, he establishes that although Orkney is culturally part Norse and part Scots, it remains distinct and different from both.

D'Arcy's discussion of the Norse aspects of *White-Maa's Saga* is thorough and comprehensive, covering "Viking" themes such as Flett's restless energy and his dislike of Celts or Highlanders as well as detailing the Norse-aligned supernatural aspects of the novel. It is worth adding a brief note about the kind of characters and the aspects of Norseness which appeal to Linklater and have a bearing on subsequent novels both by him and other writers. The saga personalities Linklater focuses on are invariably the belligerent and traditionally masculine central characters such as Sweyn Asliefarson, who was to be the main subject of his later study *The Ultimate Viking* (1955). As D'Arcy has noted, Linklater's protagonist Peter Flett might remind us of a viking such as Sweyn in that Orkney is his home but he makes regular southward excursions by sea. His sworn enemy, Isaac Skea (an ironic combination of the Old Testament son of Abraham and a Norse Orkney name with its Scandinavian *sk* shibboleth) resembles a typical saga villain: "A ruffian, black bearded, tall and strong, foul mouthed and vindictive." (p. 131). He is an unlucky man in the saga sense that he is always in the thick of violent action, and the ill luck that surrounds him is likely to fall on others near to him. Skea's prototype may be the swarthy villain of the middle stages of *Orkneyinga Saga*, Sweyn Breast-Rope. Their respective physical descriptions are very similar: Sweyn Breast Rope is "a tall well built man, rather dark and with an unlucky look about him"¹¹⁴ Where Flett kills Skea at the close of the novel, it is not impossible that Linklater may be re-enacting Sweyn Asliefarson's murder of Sweyn Breast-Rope in *Orkneyinga Saga*.

The sagas' appeal lies for Linklater in the traditional machismo of their central characters. Peter Flett is the descendant not of one the Norse saints of Orkney, but of one of the murderers of St. Magnus, the good Christian earl in whom Linklater seems less interested in this book and elsewhere. The early, pagan, warlike earls who capture his imagination, and as time went on he would increasingly identify with them.

Considered as a whole, and quite fittingly for the first "Orkney" novel of the twentieth century, *White Maa's Saga* clearly lies somewhere between the literary Renaissance in contemporary Scotland - with its interest in racial origin, community,

¹¹³This aspect of *White-Maa's Saga* is discussed in detail in Julian D'Arcy, *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen* (East Linton, 1996), pp.217-22.

¹¹⁴*Orkneyinga Saga*, ch.65, p120.

history and the anthropomorphic connection between characters and the soil they tread on - and the belligerent, virile aspects of the saga heritage of Orkney. Peter Flett may be a traditionally masculine hero in the mould of Sweyn Asliefson, yet he is also the first character of a type more closely associated with twentieth century Scotland which might be termed Linklater's "Questing Orcadian", seeking through an exploration of ancestral lineage and character-building adventure a masculine identity which is rooted in a specific northern location. (Gunn's later young protagonists such as Finn of *The Silver Darlings* or Kenn in *Highland River* go through a similar process.) White-Maa discovers his true identity to be Orcadian. He finally sets off to seek his destiny furth of Orkney in Canada - where a large Orcadian diaspora exists - but with the symbolic representative of Orkney, Norna Sabiston, by his side.

Juan in America

After *White-maa's Saga*, Linklater was to leave Scotland for his next two novels. *Poet's Pub* (1928) is set in England and sees him working in a comedic mode which he was to refine in his subsequent study of the USA during the prohibition years, *Juan in America* (1931). The latter novel is worth some brief consideration here as the book which brought Linklater fully into the public domain, becoming one of the best sellers of the season in the UK. It is an extended satire on the United States, seen through the eyes of Juan Motley, a wandering descendent of Byron's Don Juan. The book contains no reference to Orkney but it can be said to belong in certain respects within the Scottish tradition and therefore merits some brief discussion.

The satire begins sharply. Juan becomes fascinated with the Mafia only to be wounded in a shoot-out. University professors who have shown great interest in his obvious academic potential shun him after he blunders on the football field. This pattern of the repeated puncturing of aspirations, the reductive idiom, is one which emerges in Scottish fiction with the hopes and romantic fantasies of Scott's Edward Waverley and is a technique to which Linklater would return in *Magnus Merriman*. In broader terms, Linklater clearly revels in his satirisation of America: indistinguishable presidential candidates spread apocryphal sleaze about each other while swagbellied senators drink a toast of bootleg whiskey to the virtues of prohibition. In the fondness for satire and links with Byron and Scott, it can be argued that the novel belongs somewhere within a Scottish tradition, although it bears little resemblance to the fiction of Linklater's contemporaries in inter-war Scotland. Kurt Wittig sees the grotesque comedy that permeates Linklater's novels as being quintessentially Scottish, going back to "Christis Kirk", "The Jolly Beggars" and Dunbar's "The Dance of the seven deidly Synnis"¹¹⁵. Indeed, the riotousness of *Juan in America* might be said to resemble parts of MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at The Thistle*, a contemporary poetic descendant of these.

Juan in America does also occasionally address more serious historical and political issues. At one startling point, in the midst of the presidential inauguration parade, a climax of sentimental national feeling, a lone Indian in the rain, naked and on horseback, silences the crowd with the words; "I am America ... It is my blood that paints the maples red and glorifies the crimson sumach" (Book 4, Chapter 3). Elsewhere, Linklater touches on themes such as the treatment of African Americans

¹¹⁵Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh 1958), p.329.

in the South, and the irony of the justification of the brutalities of British Imperialism in terms of its “civilizing” influence. These philosophical moments demonstrate that Linklater is not afraid to criticise aspects of empire, and they elevate his novel beyond the level of a straightforward, reductive satire.

The Men of Ness

Linklater resisted pressure from his publisher to return to Juan Motley for an immediate sequel in 1933. The follow up, *Juan in China*, was shelved for a further five years, a period which saw Linklater return to Orcadian themes in *The Men of Ness* and reach what is arguably the summit of his creative achievement with *Magnus Merriman*. The former is a historical novel. It is the tale of a Norse family who live at the farm of Ness on the island of Rousay in the early days of Norse colonisation in Orkney. The book spans a period beginning just before the establishment of the Earldom - that is in the late ninth century - and ending during the rule of Turf-Einar. Linklater quite deliberately avoids what is generally held to be the prime historical period of Christian Norse Orkney - the eleventh and twelfth centuries - because the earlier, brutal, and unregenerate pagan Norsemen hold for him an inexhaustible fascination.

Signy, Thorleif and their warrior sons Kol and Skallagrim are the central characters in Linklater’s reconstruction of saga. Signy’s first husband Bui is murdered and usurped by Ivar the Boneless (a historical figure, though the story is fictional). Ivar subsequently deserts Signy and relocates in Northumbria, whereupon she marries his brother, the wise but unadventurous sage Thorleif Coalbiter (so called for his tendency to sit at home by the fire). The rest of the plot is driven by Signy’s desire for revenge on Ivar for the murder of Bui. A true incitress, she mocks and cajoles her sons relentlessly to spur them into action, but Thorleif’s wise counsel against violence always prevails, until a combination of Fate and Signy’s supernatural powers intervene. In a gale raised by Signy, Kol and Skallagrim are blown off course on a southward viking expedition. They are wrecked in Northumbria, virtually on Ivar’s doorstep, where they are captured and eventually executed by him.

As well as constructing a sprawling and coherent plot worthy of the saga templates which inspired his novel, Linklater achieves great success in recreating the distinct style of the originals. Characters communicate in a pithy dialogue, making extensive use of simple, proverbial wisdom lifted directly from the sagas. Phrases such as “bare is the back that has no brother” (p.17) or “But a little while are hands fain of fighting ...” (p.10) are saga commonplaces. Characterisation is achieved with minimal description. Hence, a brief snapshot of Thorleif Coal-Biter’s behaviour says a great deal about his character: “And he stretched out his legs to the fire.” (p.16). With the exception of one passage which describes a ship being driven through the Pentland Firth by a storm, the novel is largely free of adjectival description and imagery. Linklater even apes the narrative markers which make saga texts appear to lean towards history and a limitless reality as opposed to their being unified “works” in the Aristotelian sense, with authorially defined boundaries. Hence, “They do not come into this story” (p.8) and “No viking was ever more famous than Ragnar Hairybreeks, and now he is out of the story” (p.31). The short piece of embedded “skaldic” poetry, the “death song” of Ragnar Hairybreeks, successfully avoids the pitfalls of comical-sounding jauntiness and cheerily chiming end-rhyme which had dogged the attempts

of Walter Scott and Samuel Laing. In keeping with nineteenth and some contemporary early twentieth century translations of saga into English, Linklater even adopts the peculiar sounding historic present for the effect of immediacy of narration as action livens up. So, as a group of his vikings raid a neolithic tomb "... the kings come out of their howe again ..." (p.19). Linklater was clearly an alert and appreciative reader of sagas. Julian D'Arcy acknowledges his skill in recreating the medium, yet argues that all *The Men of Ness* does is *recreate* saga, as opposed to developing or reinventing it in any progressive way: "The success of the form may thus be seen, ironically, as detracting from the integrity of the content"¹¹⁶. So, Linklater may have crafted a reconstructed longship faithfully to the original specifications, but how well does his vessel sail in the contemporary waters of the Scottish Renaissance?

Wittig, writing in the fifties, regarded Linklater (alongside Gunn and Gibbon) as among the three finest novelists in Scotland. He describes Linklater and Gunn's respective projects in *The Men of Ness* and *Sun Circle* (1933) as "groping towards a mythology of the events which made the forefathers of their race"¹¹⁷. This seems a perceptive description of what Linklater in particular is attempting to do here, but while Wittig implies that Linklater would have considered himself as belonging to the same "race" as Gunn, the race whose mythology he half-blindly seeks is not uncomplicatedly Scottish. The reason that *The Men of Ness* may seem a peculiar departure at this juncture not only in Linklater's career but also within the wider arena of Scottish Literature is because he is actually revisiting in a slightly different way the quest for Orcadian identity he began three years earlier in *White-Maa's Saga* with Peter Flett. The key to explaining the motivation behind the choice of subject matter for the novel lies partially in the close friendship Linklater enjoyed with Joseph Storer Clouston. Clouston's *A History of Orkney* appeared, significantly, in 1932, the same year in which Linklater published *The Men of Ness*.

It was Clouston who had first made the slightly bizarre suggestion, recorded later in Linklater's third volume of autobiography, *Fanfare for a Tin Hat* (1970), that Linklater might be a direct descendent of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty:

For several centuries the Linklaters owned parcels of land in the northerly parish of Sandwick, and by some association of ownership or inheritance which I have long forgotten he presumed their descent from a redoubtable man, conspicuously alive in 1136, called Sigurd of Westness, whose wife Ingibjorg was a great-granddaughter of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty, whose mother was a daughter of Malcolm II, King of Scots. There is nothing unlikely in that presumption; in a community so small and isolated as that of Orkney it is probable that everyone except recent arrivals - incomers of the last two or three hundred years - is descended from Thorfinn and the terrible earls who preceded him.¹¹⁸

We might conclude that there is a good deal that is unlikely in the presumption. The above is introduced with the caveat that Clouston, although "a most erudite historian"

¹¹⁶Ibid., p.212.

¹¹⁷Wittig, Ibid., p.326.

¹¹⁸*Fanfare for a Tin Hat* (London, 1970), p. 14.

is also a “romantic genealogist”. The humorous way in which Linklater shrinks time in Orkney’s vast history so as to dismiss the previous two or three centuries as “recent” should not put us off the scent of a serious point here. Linklater is as romantic as his friend when he conveniently forgets the exact details of the relevant “ownership or inheritance” which supposedly prove his descent from Sigurd. Here, as with his decision not to correct the error of presumption of his Orkney birthplace, he is quite happy to be genealogically associated not only with the Earls of Orkney, but also - through them - with the Scottish monarchy. Were it credible, Linklater’s description of his ancestry here might represent a microcosm of Orkney’s dual cultural identity. Most significant is the fact that the link to Thorfinn is through the figure of Sigurd of Westness. Westness, a farm in the dramatically picturesque south-west corner of the island of Rousay, is abbreviated to “Ness” and becomes part of the title and the central location of Linklater’s viking novel. Linklater’s surname (like Clouston’s, incidentally) is indeed an ancient Orcadian name dating back to before the impignoration of the islands to Scotland. To return to Wittig, Linklater is clearly seeking, with some romantic stretch of the imagination, to mythologise his own Norse forefathers.

Points of comparison between Clouston’s history and Linklater’s exploration of Orkney’s Norse past in *The Men of Ness* are numerous. As we have seen, *A History of Orkney*, like Linklater’s novel, is characterised by an irrepressible, panegyric enthusiasm for the early Norse which derives from the sentiments of Samuel Laing, David Balfour and Walter Traill Dennison. Belief in a primordial Golden Age of the past is, of course, one of the fundamental premises of the Scottish Renaissance movement, and this is one facet of *The Men of Ness* that might seem to align it more closely with contemporary Scotland. To Linklater and to Clouston, however, the Golden Age is located not in Scotland’s history or prehistory, but specifically in Norse medieval Orkney. This is contrary to the broader neolithic primitivism expounded in the works of Gunn, Gibbon or Mitchison. Where critics have struggled to place *The Men of Ness* in the contemporary Scottish context in the past, it should be recognised that the novel is the fruit not only of Linklater’s connection to the Scottish Renaissance, but of his friendship with Storer Clouston and his Orcadian residence and family origins.

Much of *A History of Orkney* can be read as a non-fiction counterpart to *The Men of Ness*. Regrettably, no correspondence exists between Clouston and Linklater to determine the extent to which their collaboration was calculated or deliberate¹¹⁹. This is perhaps because the two were in such close proximity during the early thirties, both being resident in Orkney. Nevertheless, Clouston should be recognised as a catalytic presence in Scottish and Orcadian literature. Through his infectious enthusiasm and partial interpretation of *Orkneyinga Saga* he can be seen as the connection linking Laing and Balfour in the nineteenth century to Linklater and subsequent but revisionary writers of the twentieth century. To Clouston, Orcadian identity is purely and exclusively Norse. He chooses to ignore the massive influence of Scotland in the

¹¹⁹Linklater does, however, make one explicit reference to J. Storer Clouston’s treatment of the Scots earls, in *The Lion and The Unicorn*, (London 1935): “Mr Storer Clouston, the historian of Orkney, has truly said that Orkney never derived any benefit from its association with Scotland till Scottish authority was swallowed by England.” (p.19)

islands which manifested itself in terms of the absorption of language, folklore and oral tradition, the adoption of the Scottish administrative systems of Kirk, Law and Education, of economic cooperation between Orkney and Scotland and, primarily, of straightforward demographic influx. Linklater's later flirtation in the politics of Scottish Nationalism as represented in *Magnus Merriman* demonstrates that he may not have concurred entirely with Clouston's opinions, but the historian's influence on the novelist is nevertheless clearly apparent in Linklater's enthusiasm for Norse subject matter at this specific time.

Where *Orkneyinga Saga* is Clouston's primary source, and lengthy sections of his history are taken almost verbatim from the saga translations, Linklater skirts *Orkneyinga Saga*, easing a small number of particularly gripping episodes into *The Men of Ness*. The macabre "blood eagle" sacrifice carried out by Ivar the Boneless on his enemy King Aella is heavily reminiscent of the same pagan punishment dealt to the rivals of Turf-Einar in the early stages of *Orkneyinga Saga*. The midwinter breaching of the neolithic burial mound of Maeshowe in search of treasure which is carried out by Halfdan and Ivar in *The Men of Ness* is also clearly developed from the later chapter of *Orkneyinga Saga* which tells how Earl Harald and his men took shelter from a blizzard in the howe during an attempt to murder Harald's rival Erlend the Young. The central location of *The Men of Ness* is a highly significant place in *Orkneyinga Saga* also: it is at Westness that Sweyn Asleifson kidnaps Earl Paul, thus clearing the way for Rognvald Kolson to procure the Earldom.

In the best tradition of Scottish historical fiction, Linklater's characters' lives intersect with those of real historical figures. Characters from the formative period of Norse history such as Harald Fine-Hair and Rognvald of More, or the earls of Orkney Turf-Einar and Sigurd the Powerful, are all introduced in *The Men of Ness*, but Linklater does not allow his novel to lapse into lengthy repetition of saga history. The areas which do intersect connect usually to characters and events which appear in both *Heimskringla* and *Orkneyinga Saga*. It is therefore difficult to say which source was actually used by Linklater. The inclusion of the Maeshowe anecdote seems to point to *Orkneyinga Saga*, whereas the precise choice of historical characters brings us closer to *Heimskringla*. What is more significant than Linklater's specific source is the simple fact that he has chosen to seek his inspiration in these early texts. *Orkneyinga Saga* inhabits only the very furthest fringes of what might be associated with Scottish literature and *Heimskringla*, although it contains a substantial amount of narrative located in Orkney, belongs at the heart of Scandinavian prose literature. If Snorri Sturluson, as author of *Heimskringla*, can be considered by Norwegian nationalists as the "father" of Norwegian independence, then the anonymous Icelandic author of *Orkneyinga Saga* can be seen, through intermediaries like Samuel Laing, Clouston, Linklater and subsequent writers, as the father of a pervasive, independently imagining literary mindset in Orkney. This mindset, in turn, represents a significant and distinct area within the literature of modern Scotland.

Linklater differs from Clouston, however, in that he arrives at the conclusion that Orkney's identity does not rest solely on the islands' Norse heritage. *The Men of Ness* begins in the more fluid early days of Norse settlement, before the establishment of the Norse administrative system of the earldom, and includes a comic central character - the cowardly Gauk of Calfskin - who represents Orkney in an altogether different way from the likes of Kol or Skallagrim, Thorfinn the Mighty or Svein

Asleifarson. Gauk travels with Signy's sons on their ill-starred trip to Northumbria, playing a profoundly meek but nevertheless significant role in the action. We are invited to notice that Gauk is essentially more Orcadian than the other characters¹²⁰. Unlike the viking warriors, who have arrived relatively recently from mainland Scandinavia, Gauk's family have been in Orkney for as long as anyone can remember. His name is the Scots term for a fool (and, by extension, the cuckoo, which fools other birds). The word survives locally in Orkney in the tradition of "goaking day"¹²¹. Gauk's farm, named "Calfskin" to suggest its small acreage, nestles like an anachronistic cottar house in the hill at the opposite side of Rousay from the homestead of the affluent Norse colonial nobility at Ness, but is nevertheless a fertile place. Gauk is very much an ordinary peasant Orcadian drawn in contrast to the warring ruling classes. His relationship to the nobles is not unlike that of the mischievous Loki to the more serious and staid Gods of Norse mythology. Gauk is a foil to Kol and Skallagrim who demonstrates that they may be braver than he is, but they are more foolish when their fearlessness leads ironically to their deaths.

Aspects of Gauk are drawn from altogether different sources than the sagas which supply the inspiration for the warrior characters of Linklater's novel. One scene in particular - where an ox falls through the turf roof of Calfskin, killing Gauk's wife Geira - can be traced to a volume which George Mackay Brown described as "one of the finest Orkney books of this century"¹²², John T. Firth's *Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish*¹²³. While Firth's book is also quintessentially Orcadian, it could not be further removed from the bellicose ethos of *Heimskringla* or *Orkneyinga Saga*. It was published in 1920, not very long before *The Men of Ness*, and is a charming and vivid description of life and lore in the rural Orkney parish of Firth during the nineteenth century. It describes the rooftop incident as follows:

One of the houses in this district was built so near to a brae that the roof was easily accessible to four footed animals. On one occasion a neighbour's ox, being tempted by the numerous tufts of growing corn, ventured on the roof to secure a bite, with the result that he plunged right through the thatch, and the cupples being wide apart, there was nothing to stay his fall, which resulted in a broken back and ultimate death. (ROP p.7)

In Linklater, Gauk relates how:

... two days ago my cow was feeding on the bank and saw good grass on the top of my house, where indeed it grows well enough, for the turf I roofed it with is now thick and the hens drop their dung on it. So the cow came off the bank, and

¹²⁰Marjorie Linklater has said of Gauk: "He survives to this day in Orkney".

Introduction to *The Men of Ness*, Orkney press edition (Kirkwall, 1983), p.2.

¹²¹See John D.M. Robertson, (ed.) Ernest Walker Marwick, *An Orkney Anthology - Selected Works* (Edinburgh 1991), p. 133: "Young folk in Orkney, as in other places, love the first of April, "goaking day". Here is not a time for freshly invented humour, but a day on which the hoary traditional jokes are once more trotted out."

¹²²"Firth's Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish: A Discovery", *Orkney Herald*, 31st August 1948, p.3.

¹²³John T. Firth, *Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish together with old Orkney Words, Riddles and Proverbs* (Stromness, 1920).

that is the same height as the house, and walked on the roof. But its feet went through and there it stuck athwart the roof-tree ... [Geira] sat straddle-wise on the roof-tree and heaved at the cow's rump end, and the roof-tree broke and down they both fell. The cow came uppermost and broke its legs, but Geira was undermost and her breastbone cracked and so did her ribs. (MON pp. 48-9)

The two descriptions are really too close in content, location and time of publication to be unrelated. Linklater couches Firth's story in blunt, deliberate, Anglo-Saxon diction so as to lend it the flavour of saga translation and also to draw together medieval saga and more recent oral tradition to create his reductive idiom. He has seized on *Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish* in order to place Gauk closer to an authentic, living Orcadian tradition than the fossilised saga templates might otherwise allow him to.

Gauk's predilection for survival before honour - he is farmer at heart, not a warrior - advocates a peaceful life and introduces a serious point about the futility of conflict which is salient indeed, given the novel's inter-war context¹²⁴. Gauk is the archetypal peaceful Orkney peasant and the first character of a type to whom Linklater would return repeatedly. Like the "battered bag" beast of Muir's later poem "The Combat"¹²⁵, he keeps his head down and preserves himself through all time while the big men around him create turmoil - be they the berserk warriors of *The Men of Ness*, the aspiring nationalists of *Magnus Merriman* or the megalomaniac fascists who drive the war machine in Linklater's comedy of the World War Two Italian campaign, *Private Angelo*. Calfskin, at the back of the hill on Rousay, from where Gauk sets out on his tour of the wider world and to where he returns, is secluded, small and insignificant but is, above all, a safe retreat. This fertile and sufficient place represents Orkney in microcosm and is ultimately more important than the larger farms of the novel at Ragnarshall and Ness. Gauk is clearly the ancestor not only of the later, supposedly cowardly Private Angelo, but in a different way also of Linklater's next protagonist, Magnus Merriman, whose life follows a strikingly similar pattern of tasting the nectar of the outside world briefly before deciding unequivocally that Orkney is indeed the most comfortable and sensible place to remain.

Ultimately, then, *The Men of Ness* cannot be placed within the mainstream fiction of the Scottish Renaissance. It belongs rather within an Orkney tradition going back not only to *Orkneyinga Saga* and *Heimskringla*, but also to Samuel Laing and David Balfour in the nineteenth century. When the novel is read in conjunction with *A History of Orkney*, it becomes apparent that it is the product also of Linklater and Clouston's shared effervescent enthusiasm for the Norsemen. The two writers collaborated to commemorate and celebrate the Orkney Norse in literature and historiography respectively. Both seek also to verify their Orcadian roots, without necessarily making any particular point regarding the present. Linklater is perhaps the more broad minded of the two, however, in that he was prepared subsequently to

¹²⁴This point is borne out also in a comment made by a minor character, Deaf Gyfli, as he draws his final breath: "But tell me this, Kol, before I die: against whom have I been fighting and to what purpose?" (p.188). Gyfli has been unable to hear the names of those he has been fighting, nor has he been able to hear why he should fight, but he fights nevertheless.

¹²⁵*Collected Poems* (London, 1960), p. 179.

embrace Scotland, shortly afterwards making an attempt to represent her politically in the East Fife by-election of 1933 and going on to write - in *Magnus Merriman* - an integral part of her classic modern literature. It may be that he felt the need to establish his Orcadian identity, to pay his respects to his ancestors, before becoming fully immersed in the Scottish political and literary scene. Linklater was also anxious to point out in *The Men of Ness* that there is more to Orcadian identity than simple Norse descent, hence the centrality and endurance of his character Gauk, who represents an altogether different Orkney which is outside time. Essentially rustic and un-heroic, older in his ancestry yet paradoxically more contemporary than his warrior associates, Gauk survives the turbulence of the Norse era to make his way through more recent lore like *Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish*, steadily carrying his comical but prudent banner into the literature of the twentieth century.

Magnus Merriman

Although because of their diversity in style and apparent diversity in subject matter they have not been recognised as such, *The Men of Ness* and Linklater's next novel, *Magnus Merriman*, are closely related in a number of ways. Both might be said to revolve around a core idea of simple rusticity versus the world of important men and big events, both involve comical central characters who pursue fame in southern locations before retiring at an early age to an agricultural life in Orkney. Both emphasise the cultural singularity of the islands. However, the novels might at the same time be viewed as two sides of the Orcadian cultural coin, in that where *The Men of Ness* focuses primarily on the historical Norseness of Orkney, *Magnus Merriman* examines rather the contemporary world of Scottish politics and culture and their relationship - or their irrelevance - to Orkney in the thirties.

Magnus Merriman is another questing Orcadian, now set in the mould of both Peter Flett and Gauk of Calfskin. A restless former soldier and journalist who makes his way home to Scotland via London to participate in the embryonic nationalist movement afoot in Edinburgh, Merriman seizes each arising opportunity - whether it be in politics, poetry, journalism, farming or fatherhood - with an admirable and endearing zeal. He invariably fails to realise his lofty ideals, quickly becoming consumed by his next preoccupation. The first half of the novel focuses critically and comically on the Scottish literary and political "renaissance" of the first part of the last century. However we choose to interpret the satirical barbs of *Magnus Merriman* - which is an introspective and often autobiographical piece - Linklater was already a figure in this Renaissance, both as author of *White-maa's Saga* and *The Men of Ness* and having been the prospective parliamentary candidate for the embryonic National Party of Scotland in the East Fife by-election in 1933. Failing even to win the sufficient number of votes to allow him to reclaim his deposit, Linklater abandoned further political aspirations, resolving instead to write this comic novel about his experiences.

Magnus Merriman is usually, and quite correctly, considered to be first and foremost a satire. This might seem a predictable reaction from Linklater to his demoralising experience among the nationalists in Edinburgh and East Fife. We might argue, though, that his considered response to the Renaissance movement as detailed in the novel shows a great deal of respect for the literary aspects of the movement. It is certainly true that political nationalism is presented as a lost cause from the outset as

Magnus fails to realise that he is being manipulated, however gently, by his friend, the party activist Francis Meiklejohn, who assures him that all Scotland is talking about independence. Magnus is steered round the social circuit of Edinburgh so that he will encounter only the most fervent supporters of “the Party” and when it does finally dawn on him that the general populace could not be less interested, he feels that he can persuade them to convert. His idealism is apparent in the fact that he knows nothing of the movement’s existence, let alone the practical arguments for “home rule”. On accepting his nomination as candidate for the by-election he finds it difficult to muster any enthusiasm for the nuts and bolts of politics and relies rather on a dubious and ethereal romantic appeal of independence, as opposed to solid economic argument.

The general public of Scotland, and particularly the contented middle classes of Edinburgh, endure thorough derision, being presented as intellectually destitute and comfortably apathetic, but so too do the partisan members of the Nationalist Party who, with their various specialist interests and agendas, fail miserably to agree on policy. A generous donation from a business tycoon - which seems about to salvage the flagging campaign - is cancelled at the last minute when Magnus offends him by urging a meeting to “join the poets and vote for the independence of Scotland!” (MM p171). The electorate in “Kinluce” eventually speak for themselves and Magnus is downtrodden and humiliated, polling a meagre six hundred and eight votes. He returns to Orkney where he has a brief liaison with the young and beautiful Rose, a farmer’s daughter, before taking a final short sojourn as a political journalist in London. A letter from Rose, informing him of her pregnancy, necessitates his immediate return to a farming life in Orkney.

So Linklater satirises nearly everything and everyone he encounters, including himself. But there is also an ebullient and celebratory streak running through the novel. One of the most colourful characters of the first half is Hugh Skene, who is quite clearly modelled on Hugh MacDiarmid. While MacDiarmid’s portrait is highly comical, it is not unflattering and, as Douglas Gifford has pointed out, “Skene is allowed the glow of real genius, and it’s only his excesses which are mocked.”¹²⁶ The discussion of Skene must be considered alongside Linklater’s conservative outlook on language and what he saw as the sacrilegious disruption of English at the hands of the high modernists. Linklater adheres to what Cairns Craig has termed the “English” view of modernism - which views modernist experiment as an “intrusion into, perhaps even a hijacking of, the true traditions of English poetry”¹²⁷. Linklater vents his feelings towards Eliot in particular in the following passage:

The poets of the post-war world were fairly united in their belief that poetry, to be poetical, must be unrythmical, unrhymed and unintelligible: and by these standards their output was of a high order. Their leader was the American Eliot ... (p.56)

The tone adopted is that of a disapproving colonial overlord. (A love of the British

¹²⁶Douglas Gifford, introduction to *Magnus Merriman*, Canongate Classics edition (Edinburgh 1990), p.X.

¹²⁷Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and British Culture* (Edinburgh, 1996), p.180.

Empire and mainstream establishment English Literature were stumbling blocks of incompatibility for both Eric Linklater and Magnus Merriman in their respective parliamentary campaigns. Linklater, it is worth remembering, had taken a first in English literature from Aberdeen University.) Linklater shifts his fire to Joyce:

... Joyce, with the genius of his people for destruction, had treated the English language as Irish tenants had not seldom treated the cattle, fields and houses of an absentee English landlord, and built on the ruins an edifice far beyond normal comprehension and incomprehensibly charming. (p.56)

These criticisms, and particularly the former derision of Modernist poetry, are demonstrably not directed at *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). On a superficial level, for all its intellectual and lexical ambition, MacDiarmid's poem is couched for the greater part in traditionally rhythmical rhyming stanzas. *Magnus Merriman* touches also on the more serious philosophical concerns of MacDiarmid's epic. Like *A Drunk Man*, Linklater's novel is a deeply antiszygical text, plunging throughout from high ideals to low comedy. The theme of the apathy and intellectual inertia of the majority of Scotland's inhabitants and the satirisation of this inertia are also common to both texts. Magnus's own projected national epic poem, "The Returning Sun", commences, like *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, with a lengthy vitriolic passage designed to startle the Scottish people out of their apathy. Magnus falls short of MacDiarmid, however, in that he is unable to carry his criticism of the status quo through with any constructive programme for future regeneration. The failure of "The Returning Sun" is perhaps a humbly self-aware comment regarding Linklater's own inability to plan a way forward out of a cultural situation which he is nevertheless happy to satirise. Magnus also drinks regularly and copiously. He lacks the Drunk Man's vision, however, and usually experiences "crapula", rather than epiphany, in direct proportion to his alcoholic elation.

Linklater's genuine admiration for MacDiarmid's art is plain to see in a slightly later, straight-faced essay on "The Question of Culture":

A more interesting and a much more intelligent attitude to the drowned Atlantis of Scots is that of Mr C.M. Grieve. Mr Grieve, very sensibly, is more interested in the classical tongue than its surviving dialects. Rightly or wrongly he believes that current English is somewhat pale, flaccid and nerveless ... Returning for strength, therefore, to his native rock, Mr Grieve has quarried some fine granitic words out of the makars; and his earlier poetry had a power that completely over-rode its necessary slight obscurity.

He goes on to describe his view of MacDiarmid's progression as a poet, presumably in the early 'thirties:

...as his later work has grown philosophical rather than lyrical, he has been compelled to use English, the fully developed language, with a stiffening, not only of Scots words, but of German. His literary Scots, despite its power and ingenuity was insufficient for any purpose larger than the expression of fairly simple emotions ... when Mr Grieve was impelled to present ideas instead of images, to argue rather than to sing, to describe not a tree but a concept, he had

to write in English.¹²⁸

Edwin Muir would have found much to agree with in this assessment of the limitations of Scots as a modern literary language, and Linklater aligns himself again with the core English culture in his view of English as “the fully developed language”. No doubt MacDiarmid would have taken issue with the rather reductive description of his early poetry as well as the assertion that Scots - having been submerged at some distant point in time - is somehow limited in its capabilities. It should be noted, however, that Linklater does voice his approval of MacDiarmid’s polyglot technique. He mimics MacDiarmid’s poetry in *Magnus Merriman*, in a mixture of respectful pastiche and gentle parody:

The fleggaring fleichours moregeown in our manheid,
And jaipit fenyours wap our bandaged eyes:
Progress! they skirle with sempiternë gluderie -
The sowkand myten papingyes!

But Lenin’s corp ligs I’ the Kremlin still,
Though Wallace’s was quartered like the mune
By the Crankand English for their coclinkis’ gam -
Kennst du das land wo die citronen blühn? (p56-7.)

Of course these playful verses verge on complete nonsense, but they do succeed in capturing the combative stance of some of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. The references to Lenin, the lunar imagery, the anglophobic slant and the appended German combine to create a flattering caricature of MacDiarmid. Linklater is a little wide of the mark in his implication that MacDiarmid’s particular variety of Scots was simply an attempt to resuscitate the language of the Makars through the resurrection of lexical items, and he fails to recognise the pervasive influence of contemporary, rural language which permeates MacDiarmid’s Scots poetry of the twenties and thirties. This minor misinterpretation aside, it is clear that Linklater’s natural conservatism and distaste for Modernist experimentalism does not necessarily extend to MacDiarmid. Linklater understands him, empathises with him and may hold him in higher regard than he does Eliot or Joyce. Where he was able, in *The Men of Ness*, to parrot the sagamen he so admired, so too is he capable of assuming the voice of MacDiarmid, whom he sees as a poet worthy of flattery, through gently comical but nevertheless accurate imitation. The satire is directed not at Hugh Skene, but at Magnus (and, by extension, at Linklater himself) who finds the poetry “extremely difficult” and “would need to be very discreet in giving his opinion of it” (MM p57).

Also connected to Renaissance writing is the alluring symbolism whereby characters become one with the soils of Orkney, and with which Linklater had first experimented in *White-Maa’s Saga*. This gradually finds fuller expression as Magnus becomes more content on his return to Orkney in the second half of the book. Again, these passages are in some respects highly reminiscent of the descriptions of Gibbon’s characters, ankle deep in the red soils of the Mearns so that they seem to be growing from them. Magnus climbs a hill to survey the landscape of Orkney and promptly falls asleep:

¹²⁸*The Lion and the Unicorn*, p.117.

Now he dreamed that the heather was growing into his armpits and overgrowing his legs, that the moss was yielding and the hillside making him its own, one soil with its soil, till the wild bees found honey in his hair and whaups made a nest in his navel. (p.212)

But Linklater is suppressing a sceptical smile - this much might be obvious from the comical choice of body parts - and quickly undercuts the anthropomorphic suggestion he has just made, as if in embarrassment at the pretentiousness of his conceit:

The sun was far down in the sky and a cold wind blew when he woke again. He stretched himself slowly and scratched his armpits, that felt itchy when he remembered his second dream. (p.212)

Through the use here of reductive idiom, Linklater postpones the admission that he does, in fact, give credence to the efficacy of Gibbon's theory that there is a deep-rooted psychological or spiritual connection between man and land until towards the close of the novel.

It is not too simple a reduction to say that *Magnus Merriman* is a book which celebrates great literature and satirises poor politics. The satire is by no means reserved for the Scottish Nationalists, however, and the Westminster government of Melvin McMaster (Ramsay MacDonald) is unequivocally condemned for listening to the right and abandoning its electoral promises. Likewise, the celebration of literary achievement goes beyond contemporary Scotland. Critics have noted how Linklater acknowledges MacDiarmid - who is portrayed as the brilliant luminary of the Scottish Literary Renaissance - and connections to Gibbon are also clear, but the deeper reverberations of earlier Scottish literature which sound through the book have not been described in detail.

On Magnus's arrival in Edinburgh Linklater indulges in some evocatively lyrical, symbolic and rousing description of the city. The prose is heavily romantic and, as well as detailing Magnus's excited perceptions, is calculated to prompt an emotional response in the reader: "To the left, towering blackly, like iron upon the indomitable rock, was the Castle ... the wind ... slackened for a moment to sing a dirge in the chimney-tops, and cry in a stony coign the dolorous rhyme of Flodden and Culloden." (p.28) Linklater's serious presentation of the symbolic cityscape here is in contrast to the comic flavour elsewhere in the novel. Magnus's northward journey into surroundings which are presented in highly symbolic terms, the way he suppresses his love of the British Empire to fervently embrace Scottish Nationalism and his inability to remain constant to any particular cause, woman or vocation are all heavily reminiscent of Scott's indecisive hero Edward Waverley and his overnight conversion to the Jacobite cause. Could it be more than coincidence that Magnus Merriman and Edward Waverley both conclude their adventures with the promise of unadventurous domesticity through marriage to Rose? Magnus takes his place in a long line of hypersensitive, imaginative, dubious Scottish heroes such as young John Gourlay, Archie Weir of Hermiston or Sentimental Tommy, for whom the propensity to dwell on romance prohibits entry into the real world.

Burns, 'that sweet singer, that boisterous satirist' (p.164), is alluded to directly. Rose

transpires to be anything but the shy, tender bride Magnus hopes for, and, in a final pathetic attempt to escape boredom and her iron domestic rule, he sets out to become deliberately, magnificently drunk with his friend, the shoemaker Johnnie Peace. This drinking session is modelled on that indulged in by Tam O' Shanter and "Souter Johnny", and Rose's reaction ("Like the storm of the preceding night, Rose's temper gathered strength in the darkness ..." (p.300)) is identical to that of the waiting "sulky sullen dame" of Burns' poem, "Gathering her brows like gathering storm,/ Nursing her wrath to keep it warm." But it is the homeward footsteps of MacDiarmid's Drunk Man, rather than Tam O' Shanter, that Magnus follows in the crucial penultimate chapter describing his inebriated passage across the frozen, midwinter landscape of Orkney:

He stopped to rest a while and saw beneath him a starlit maiden land [...] the white map of Orkney. And now a new drunkenness came to Magnus, but whether of his belly or his soul he did not know. Tears sprang to his eyes to see such loveliness, and perception like a bird in his breast sang that this land was his and he was one with it. As though his tears had flooded it his mind was filled with knowledge and he knew that his life was kin to all the life around him, even to the beasts that grazed in the fields, and to the very fields themselves. [...] This soil was his own flesh and time passed over him and it like a stream that ran in one bed. Here indeed he was immortal, for death would but take him back to his other self, and this other self was so lovely a thing, in its cloak of snow, in the bright hues of spring, in the dyes of the westering sun, that to lie in it was surely beatitude. (p.299)

To Gifford, this is Magnus's "equivalent of MacDiarmid's Drunk Man's Epiphany [...] which this time the sceptical author does not contradict."¹²⁹ Tam O' Shanter's hellish fantasy is not pursued. Instead Magnus experiences a quasi-religious vision of beauty and serenity. Linklater finally nails his colours to the mast, rejoining the ranks of his counterpart Renaissance writers. His description of Magnus's distinctly pagan and Orcadian homecoming is, however, divorced from the idea of Scotland as a nation or political entity, aligning the protagonist rather with the landscape of his island home. As it is to Peter Flett or Gauk of Calfskin, Magnus's Orkney – "the little acres of one's birth" – represents the very "navel-string to life" (p.299). Yet again, a character finds ultimate definition and profound peace on a small farm in Orkney, far from the world of large events and safe from the predatory forces that have almost consumed him. Linklater's final comment is yet again that modern intellectual or political life is destitute, and should be abandoned in favour of the deeper, spiritual happiness available in Orkney.

"Sealskin Trousers" and "The Goose Girl"

Although none of his subsequent novels were to prove as successful as his early work, Linklater enjoyed an Indian summer of creativity with the publication in 1947 of the collection of short stories *Sealskin Trousers and other Stories*¹³⁰. Two outstanding pieces, the title story and the slightly longer "The Goose Girl", are both set in Orkney, yet draw on different roots and arrive at completely different

¹²⁹Gifford, *ibid.*, pp. XI-II.

¹³⁰*Sealskin Trousers and other stories* (London, 1947).

conclusions to those of the three Orkney novels.

As the first piece of short fiction of truly outstanding calibre to come out of Orkney since the time of Walter Traill Dennison, it is an appropriate coincidence that the title story “Sealskin Trousers” draws its initial inspiration from an ancient ballad collected and re-constructed by Dennison in the nineteenth century, “The Play o’ de Laithie Odivere”. In short, the ballad is the story of a Norwegian crusader who takes an oath to Odin to enable him to win the heart of a woman. The woman agrees to marry him, but she is seduced by a seal man, or a “selkie”, while her husband is abroad on a crusade. She bears the selkie a child, which he takes back with him to the sea. The crusader returns and sets out on a hunting trip, where, by coincidence, he kills the young selkie and discovers that it is wearing a gold chain which he recognises as having belonged to his wife. Realising what has happened, he sentences his wife to death by burning. The selkie man returns and releases her from her cell, taking her with him to sea. The crusader’s oath to Odin has been successful initially, but brings him bad luck in the end. “The Play O’ de Laithie Odivere” was published by Dennison in *Scottish Antiquary*¹³¹. The Orcadian folklorist and historian Ernest Marwick published it again, along with two other shorter versions from different sources, in his *An Anthology of Orkney Verse*¹³². Three of Linklater’s own poems were published in this anthology and he wrote to Marwick prior to its publication: “The ‘Lady Odivere’ [sic.] ballad is first-class, and you have done justice to Dennison by resurrecting it.”¹³³ The ballad is used again by George Mackay Brown in various pieces, most notably in the later short story “The Island of the Women”.

Linklater is clearly drawing on the ballad - he embeds a paraphrased stanza from it in his tale - and his story is also one of the seduction of a mortal woman by a selkie. “Sealskin Trousers”, however, has a distinctly contemporary twentieth century, post war setting which is unusual in a piece of Orcadian writing. A young woman, engaged to be married, encounters a peculiar man on a clifftop on an Orkney island whom she recognises from Edinburgh university, where they were both students. They begin to talk, but he frightens her with his semi-nakedness, the strange appearance of his body and his dangerously athletic behaviour as he launches himself from the cliff into the sea to catch a lobster, returning by climbing the rock face. After he forces a magical kiss on her, she succumbs to his seduction, returning with him to the sea and transforming into a selkie. The story is told by a hysterical first person narrator, her fiancée Charles Sellin, who, having arrived at the scene shortly after her disappearance, has “by a conscious intellectual effort, seen and heard what happened” (p. 108).

During the early stages the tone is subtly sardonic as the mortal couple and their relationship are described. There is a quaintness to the euphemism of “Their relations were already marital ...”, yet the essential listlessness of their relationship is borne out as the description continues “... not because their mutual passion could brook no pause, but rather out of fear lest their friends might despise them for chastity” (p. 108). A prudishness is implied – “They did not regard the seclusion of the cliffs as an

¹³¹Vol 8, pp.53-8.

¹³²*An Anthology of Orkney Verse* (Kirkwall, 1949). Marwick considered the ballad to date back at least as far as the twelfth century (note on p.190).

¹³³Letter from Linklater to Marwick, Orkney Archives, D31/34/4.

opportunity for secret embracing” - and this, again, is reiterated as Elizabeth finds the appearance of the selkie, Roger Fairfield, “most embarrassing” (p. 109). Her recollections of Fairfield continue in this staid, Victorian descriptive style: “everybody knew that he and some friends had been lunching, too well for caution, before the bet was made ...” (p. 110) and, in a brief flash of humour, the impression of the dullness of the human world is confirmed as she remembers he was fined two pounds for swimming in the Forth “without a regulation costume” (p.110).

This prudishness is in marked contrast to the energetic virility and frankness which surround the selkie, and we are encouraged to feel that Elizabeth’s abandonment of her fiancée is almost completely acceptable. Although he disregards her polite feelings and forgets her name, the selkie can remember the precise note of Elizabeth’s voice. His life is “a life of sensation” (p. 122) and the prose takes on an erotic flavour as the seduction progresses. Thus, she becomes “timorously conscious of his hand upon her side so close beneath her breast” (p. 117). Her fear and revulsion towards him give way and she allows him to touch her more intimately: “He took her in his arms, and expertly, with a strong, caressing hand, stroked her hair, stroked the roundness of her head and the back of her neck and her shoulders, feeling her muscles moving to his touch, and down the hollow of her back to her waist and hips.” (p. 122) The sexual subtext becomes progressively more apparent as the narrative approaches the point just before Elizabeth actually becomes a selkie: “She stood up and with quick fingers put off her clothes” and “He, laughing softly, loosened the leather thong that tied his trousers” (p. 125). Her urgency and his enjoyment in undressing underline the parallel between her imminent metamorphosis and their sexual union. There is no authorial disapproval of their actions whatsoever, indeed it is implied that Elizabeth has been right to obey her instincts.

Linklater’s comment seems to be that we should seek to restore a lost, primal energy. This is similar to a repeatedly expressed sentiment in MacDiarmid’s Renaissance poetry¹³⁴. Linklater presents his delayed anti-Victorian, Modernist liberation in terms of Orcadian shape-shifting mythology. Where he had sought this primal energy in the violence and daring of the Norse world in *The Men of Ness*, this time he looks for the elusive, revitalising impulse - which will rescue the modern world from its torpor - in the dangerous sexual allure of folklore creatures. “Sealskin Trousers” is a pointed critique of modern humanity. Human science is scoffed at and mocked as Fairfield stifles a yawn while reading from Elizabeth’s text book, *Studies in Biology*. He despises work, which is romantically set in direct opposition to the sensual, physical life he represents. Humanity, he points out, has lost sight of its noble aims:

“...And in their hard-won leisure, our teachers said, men cultivated wisdom and charity and the fine arts; and became aware of God. - But that’s not a true description of the world, is it?”

‘No,’ she said, ‘That’s not the truth.’” (p.124)

Rather than using the solution advocated in *White-maa’s Saga*, *The Men of Ness* or *Magnus Merriman* where his characters retreat to the islands, here Linklater has

¹³⁴See, for instance, “Sea Serpent” or “Bombinations of a Chimaera”, in *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken, (eds.) (London, 1978), pp.48-51 and pp.60-64.

Elizabeth Barford take the ultimate step of retreating from humanity altogether. In a reversal, or an extension of Darwinian theory, she makes her way to the sea. This might seem a retrograde movement in that she is returning to the element from which life emerged, but it is presented as evolution. Mankind has chosen the wrong path, and Elizabeth Barford finds the courage to move outside human society and the sterility of the human imagination in what is the most romantic and escapist of all of Linklater's conclusions. She mysteriously, but consciously and quite deliberately evolves into a selkie. She escapes also the trap of marriage to Charles Sellin, but where the cuckold of "The Play O' de Laithie Odivere" is punished by supernatural forces for taking an oath to Odin, Sellin is punished by the selkie for worshipping false but very modern Gods: work, ambition and the opinions of polite society.

"The Goose Girl" is a similar piece, inasmuch as the supernatural intervenes once more within a contemporary Orkney setting. Again, Linklater chooses to use a first person narrator, this time a soldier and former schoolteacher. Robert Tindall comes to Orkney after W.W.II to describe to the family of a comrade in arms the exact circumstances of his death. He settles in Orkney, falling in love with and marrying a mysteriously aloof but irresistibly attractive local girl, Lydia Manson. As the story progresses he becomes uneasily aware that he has taken the place of his dead friend, Jim Norquoy. Norquoy had been Lydia's mother's favourite among the local boys and was to have been her choice of husband for Lydia.

Tindall's first sight of Lydia is described in an arresting opening. An astonished voyeur, he watches as she struggles to evict an enormous gander from her cottage. She is completely naked, and Linklater again achieves a mischievous eroticism through discreet simile:

[...] I had never seen a woman's body like hers, so firm and long of limb, like a young reed in firmness and round as an apple where it should be, and white as a pearl [...] She was naked as the sky, and the sky, at four o'clock in the morning, was bare of cloud except for a little twist of wool low down in the west. (p. 9)

The sexual theme and turn of events of the story are very similar to those of "Sealskin Trousers". A mortal woman is united with a supernatural creature while her cuckolded lover is powerless to intervene. The gander represents the reincarnated spirit of Jim Norquoy and when Lydia gives birth to what Tindall thinks is his daughter, it transpires that she has conceived Norquoy's child. Tindall's suspicions are confirmed when he discovers outside the house the broken shell of an egg large enough to contain a new-born infant. Lydia and her mother have conspired, like saga sorceresses working pagan magic, to conceal the true origin of the child from him. The sterility of all human pursuits as described in "Sealskin Trousers" is focused here on Tindall's impotence: only a supernatural being can father Lydia's child. But the story alludes this time to the classical myth where Zeus comes to earth disguised as a swan and fathers on a mortal woman the child who grows up to become Helen of Troy.

The narrators of both pieces are of particular interest. Although neither story is explicitly located in Orkney (because this would be to disturb the suspension of disbelief required by the reader to absorb their supernatural aspects) it is clear that Orkney is the location. The maritime landscapes of both stories are clearly Orcadian

and references in “The Goose Girl” to a red cathedral and in “Sealskin Trousers” to “The Play O’ de Laithie Odivere” confirm that they are set in Orkney. Neither narrator comes from Orkney (unlike the protagonists of the novels). Both arrive there from elsewhere, only to be deeply disturbed and tormented at the hands of local supernatural forces. So Orkney is a vital location, as it is in the novels. But it is by no means the safe and benevolent retreat described in the novels, but a dangerous, uncertain environment where accepted values are subverted and nothing is as it seems. Linklater has gone back to Dennison’s eldritch Orkney, where supernatural beings are a violently animate and threatening presence, the Orkney of which Muir wrote “there was no distinction between the ordinary and the fabulous”. The possibility of illusion or hallucination is not ruled out in either story. Neither narrator is fully aware of the ironies inherent in their account of events. Thus, Robert Tindall describes his child as looking as if she has been carved by “some dead sculptor - a sculptor too great to be alive in the world” (p. 35). Sellin’s opening “I am not mad!” sets up a particularly Scottish widening of possibility through creatively ambiguous divergent readings. He does little to bolster our confidence in his reliability as he confesses: “To begin with, I admit, I was badly shaken, but gradually my mind cleared and my vision improved ...” (p. 108). Both narrators are cuckolded, both are mocked, yet, perhaps refreshingly in Linklater, there is no flippancy and very little comedy in either tale.

Wittig was perhaps wrong to suggest that Linklater had dabbled in a kind of mythology with *The Men of Ness*: the novel draws on saga rather than myth. These two short stories, however, represent a mature and considered integration of what might paradoxically be called “genuine” myth, in order to make more fully realised philosophical observations about the present, or to open out ambiguous possibilities. Linklater touches on some of the traditional key subject matter of the Scottish Renaissance through references to Orcadian folklore and Classical mythology, but long after the beginning of World War Two, the point at which it is generally held that the Scottish Renaissance drew to a close. In their ambiguity, the stories go back through Stevenson and Hogg to Scott. As Gifford has described the tradition in the Scottish novel: “the readings could either be those of modern psychological materialism or those of traditional religious, folk and supernatural belief.”¹³⁵ It was Dennison, rather than Linklater, who was the first to integrate folklore and print literature in Orkney. It is fair to say that Linklater’s use of lore in these pieces develops the ideas expressed during the Renaissance, by criticising what he saw as a fundamental insipidity in modern society, at the same time as representing another direct attempt to verify “folk” roots.

¹³⁵Ibid. p.245.

5) ERNEST MARWICK AND ROBERT RENDALL

Ernest Marwick's An Anthology of Orkney Verse

While Eric Linklater had made his central and energising contribution to the prose literature of the Scottish Renaissance in the thirties with *Magnus Merriman*, the establishment of Orkney's place in twentieth century Scottish poetry (leaving aside Muir's contribution, which is distanced somewhat from Orkney) was a gradual process with a longer period of germination. Here again, although he was never to become a published writer of fiction or poetry, the figure of the folklorist, anthologist and historian Ernest Marwick is nevertheless a highly significant one.

Marwick had written to Hugh MacDiarmid in 1935 to offer his congratulations on the publication of the poet's *Selected Poems*. MacDiarmid's reply homes in on a particular point raised in Marwick's letter regarding the state of contemporary Scottish culture:

... I am interested too to know that you have been following the recent developments in Scottish matters and share that weariness and dislike of the smug conventional stuff which has been so long approved of in Scottish taste (or want of taste) alike in verse and, I think, in all the departments of our national life ... If headway is to be made it is only by enlisting the interest up and down the country of individuals like yourself, and that way it would seem an adequate public, in quantity and in quality, is now emerging. It is as one other welcome little sign of this reorientation that I am pleased to receive a letter like yours.¹³⁶

This was written on Whalsay in Shetland in April 1935 and sent to Marwick in his home parish of Evie in Orkney, where the young Orcadian was a farm worker at the time. It seems remarkable that correspondence regarding key issues pertaining to Scottish literature and culture should exist between two such seemingly remote locations and personalities: a poet in Shetland and farm labourer in Orkney. MacDiarmid was clearly of the opinion that intellectual life did not necessarily require an urban setting to thrive, and the letter typifies his irrepressibility while "exiled" from the world of letters in Whalsay.

The care and the courtesy with which he addresses the enthusiastic young Marwick (who can only have been about twenty years old at the time) demonstrates his commitment to the restoration of a vigorous "national life". MacDiarmid's encouragement seems to have been invaluable to the young Orcadian, who was by this time clearly nurturing an embryonic interest in cultural matters. Marwick was to prove instrumental - through his publications and later studies in Orkney history, folklore and culture, as well as through his friendship with the writers George Mackay Brown, Christina Costie and Robert Rendall - in the resurgence of poetry which began to flourish for the first time in Orkney since the Norse era in the late forties and fifties.

¹³⁶Orkney Archives, D31/61/6.

Marwick was to publish his *An Anthology of Orkney Verse*¹³⁷ in 1949. The book contains translations of skaldic verse by both the Orkney Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinson and Earl Rognvald Kolson, fragments of folk poetry and a selection of verse from Orkney poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The inclusion of translations of medieval Norse verse alongside later and contemporary poets indicates a desire to create a continuous tradition, rather than reflecting any genuine and extant continuity between the writers included. Again at this stage, the wider sphere of Scottish literature - and perhaps the particular difficulties experienced by Scottish literature - impinge on that which emerges from Orkney, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth century section of the anthology. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no poetry of any lasting significance among the nineteenth century verse. Two light and inconsequential pieces written in Orkney Scots by Walter Traill Dennison and a selection of imitative and uninspired anglicised verses are all Orkney has to show in terms of nineteenth century poetry.

Alan Riach has summed up the backdrop behind that which is significant in nineteenth century Scottish literature as “a context of literary leafmould, generations of populists and sentimentalists whose inherited forms assumed and enhanced an Anglocentric hegemony”, going on to describe how in the postcolonial situation “The suppression of native languages is followed by the transplantation of inappropriate modes of cultural expression, the recognition of political and psychic disruption and the transformation of that condition into one of regenerative possibility.”¹³⁸ This is a description of the background to MacDiarmid’s achievement in Scotland which can equally be applied to the Orcadian situation.

Fourteen years after his correspondence with MacDiarmid, Marwick was to write in the introduction to the section of *An Anthology of Orkney Verse* dedicated to *Orkney Poets of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* the following guarded and somewhat apologetic anticipation of criticism, which demonstrates an awareness that many of the poets he has included are working through a “transplanted” mode of expression:

The first complaint which can be foreseen is that most of the following poems, even those dealing with local subjects, are singularly devoid of native inspiration and that their authors have been greatly influenced by English, and therefore alien, models.¹³⁹

Marwick has arrived - and here he can be aligned with Dennison - at the stage Riach calls the “recognition of political and psychic disruption”. But in the Orcadian situation the memories of historians and other commentators are longer, going back to the fifteenth century and the impignoration, when a disruption had been caused by Scottish expansion long before the Union of the Crowns. Marwick seems to stand alongside Muir in the belief that full artistic and intellectual expression can be achieved through mastery of English. If “psychic disruption” has been caused by Scotland in Orkney, then Scots offers little regenerative possibility and the only way forward is through English. He shares Muir’s feeling of possessing a quasi-Scandinavian identity, and embraces English as a foreign language to be harnessed

¹³⁷Kirkwall, 1949.

¹³⁸Introduction to *Hugh MacDiarmid - Selected Poetry* (Manchester, 1992), p.xii.

¹³⁹*An Anthology of Orkney Verse*, (p. 77).

and put to use in the full expression of localised themes. Marwick places as much distance between Orkney and Scotland as he does between Orkney and England:

Again, since Scots has never been readily intelligible to people living north of the Pentland Firth, and has no literary (despite the ubiquitous Burns cult), and certainly no sentimental associations for them, they have turned for the most part to English literature. It is for certain that educated Orkneymen have always been better acquainted with English authors than with Scots. The cultural ties which united Orkney to Scandinavia were severed long ago, and our speech is rapidly losing the Norse elements which once made it so distinctive. In short, our language in the Twentieth Century is English; we think in that language and a few - Edwin Muir and Eric Linklater are conspicuous examples - have become masters of it.¹⁴⁰

We might contest the way Marwick dissociates Orkney from Scotland and Scottish Literature here. Scots is actually very easily intelligible to the speaker of Orkney dialect, which is itself in fact a variety of Scots (albeit with a larger proportion of Norse influence than is found in mainland Scots). The fact that Scots has no literary association for the nineteenth century writers Marwick describes would be due rather to their ignorance of poetry in Scots, or their feeling that such writing is inferior to that in English. The closer affinity between “educated Orkneymen” and English literature is the result of the anglocentric hegemony and the circles in which these aspiring poet-lairds of the nineteenth century moved. The most obvious case in point among those represented in Marwick’s anthology is that of David Vedder, who, in the early part of the century was on the staff of the anglicised and anglocentric *Blackwoods Magazine* in Edinburgh and who published much of his verse there. Many of these versifiers who came from Orkney or had Orkney connections were gentry who wrote in English. John Malcolm was a lieutenant in the Peninsular War whose themes are wistfully sentimental. Henry Duff Traill lived in “the South” (Marwick’s phrase) and contributed mediocre verse to metropolitan English periodicals such as *St. James’s Gazette* and *Pall Mall Gazette*. Although some of it describes Orkney, their poetry - and Marwick is very aware of this - aspires to an anglocentric and culturally distant norm. They are remembered only as profoundly minor representatives of the core English tradition, as opposed to pertinent writers representing their own locality through its own language.

We are unlikely to disagree that in the twentieth century Muir and Linklater use English so well that they can be considered “masters” of that language. But as well as being great writers of English, both held a deep affinity with Scottish literature - we need only think, for instance, of Muir’s crystalline critical elucidation of Henryson or Linklater’s rendering into modern English of “The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo”. Marwick’s view reflects the contemporary Orkney situation up to a point, in that no *poetry* of any great literary worth had appeared in Orkney dialect prior to 1949 and that some English verse which was perhaps technically satisfactory had been written by men from Orkney “families”. Although some of Walter Traill Dennison’s comic verse is included in the anthology, because Marwick is restricted to poetry he must neglect the solitary vernacular voice which speaks with such integrity, verve and literary intelligence through the prose of Dennison’s short fiction.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 77.

Marwick sets out, however, with deliberate and commendable aims. His broader ambition in *An Anthology of Orkney Verse* is nothing less than to kick-start a more relevant and more locally-rooted poetic tradition in the islands. He understands the shortcomings of the nineteenth century versifiers and recognises precisely the reasons behind their shortcomings. He justifies his inclusion of them by referring to “many things that are pleasing and some few that are memorable” among their poems and closes his introduction with the following quietly-voiced rallying cry:

Finally, this book may have some slight value in fostering the local interest in poetry which is so essential to writers who want to use their talent in the islands of their birth [...] Perhaps it is not too much to hope that local patriotism, of which Orkney undoubtedly has its share, may help to overcome the absence of enthusiasm with which poets and poetry have always had to contend.¹⁴¹

It must have been with great satisfaction, therefore, that Marwick watched the subsequent progress of the young George Mackay Brown, whose poetry was published for the first time in his anthology. One other highly significant contribution, however, (apart from those from the already well established figures of Muir and Linklater) was that of four poems from the aspiring Robert Rendall. Two of these poems belie Marwick’s own suggestion that “our language in the Twentieth Century is English”, being vibrant lyrics written in Orcadian Scots.

Robert Rendall, Orkney and the Scottish Poetic Tradition

Emerging in the wake of the achievement of MacDiarmid, the poetry of Robert Rendall (1898-1967) represents the eventual regenerative reaction to the transplanted, anglicised expression which had prevented Orkney from producing any significant or lasting poetry during the nineteenth century. But unlike MacDiarmid’s, Rendall’s is not a political poetry, nor does it reflect a Humanist world view. The work represents a cultured fusion of Orcadian vernacular, philosophical Christian content and refined form. Rendall worked in a family drapery business in Kirkwall and remained a bachelor all his life, this combination providing him with income and sufficient leisure time to enable him to immerse himself in an impressive variety of disciplines. As well as being a poet, he painted and published theological articles. The details of archaeological surveys he carried out in Orkney were published locally through the “Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society”, and he achieved the recognition of the wider scientific community in his favoured field of conchology (the study of sea shells and the creatures which inhabit them). He published his *Mollusca Orcadensia* in the “Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh” in 1956. All his studies - whether scientific, archaeological, theological or literary - were rooted in Orkney, and a love of the islands drove the rigour which he applied to each of his chosen areas. His archaeological surveys were carried out in Orkney locations, while his theological interest stemmed from his family roots in the Plymouth Brethren stronghold of the island of Westray. His scientific studies, too, belong within a local Orkney tradition, and the title of his *Mollusca Orcadensia* is perhaps a deliberate echo of *Flora Orcadensis*, the definitive flora of Orkney published in 1914 by Magnus Spence, a local botanist who belonged to an older generation of Orkney scientists and who had

¹⁴¹Ibid., p.12.

encouraged the young Rendall's interest in natural history. Just as Rendall sought out the conchological gap to be filled in the natural history of Orkney, so too did he come to the realisation that literature in the islands required an injection of new energy in the particular area of vernacular poetry. Orkney was for him a microcosmic world awaiting scientific discovery and artistic exploration.

Country Sonnets and Other Poems

Three of the poems by Rendall collected in Marwick's anthology had already been published locally, in *Country Sonnets and Other Poems*¹⁴² in 1946. Among these, "The Shepherds" and "Birsay" are typical of the romantic and escapist sentiment permeating this collection. Rendall was heavily influenced by classical models, and *Country Sonnets* is prefaced with an exclamatory verse opening: "I sing the virtue of country living ...". Rendall echoes Virgil's infamous "ar-me virumque cano" in construction, if not in subject matter, and anticipates George Mackay Brown's credo "For the islands I sing ...", the prelude which was to set the patriotic island agenda for his first collection *The Storm and other Poems*¹⁴³ ten years later. The bardic insistence on "singing" is significant, although, because of the linguistic dissociation of the English verses, Rendall cannot be said to be truly representative of his community and its history in this, his first collection of poems. These early sonnets combine traditional classical pastoral subject matter with an imitative neo-Georgian English. The negative sentiments expressed toward towns and trade ("Thrice ten reluctant years have I endured/ The tyranny of towns and shops and streets ...") and the romanticisation of rural life ("men move slow, of tranquil lives assured") in "Longing for a Country Life", for instance, show Rendall adopting an already outdated English idiom to dwell on subject matter which might be described as sentimental and escapist.

There is, however, a glimmer of real originality among the English poems in the collection, with "Siberian Spring". Here, Rendall celebrates April (which was also to become a time of central significance to George Mackay Brown) and the miracle of the regeneration of the natural world. The sylvan setting of the poem is clearly not modelled on Orkney, but Rendall's language becomes less archaic and rhetorical than the typically Georgian idiom ("O look!" and "Hark! Hear ye") which impairs many of these early poems. "Siberian Spring" was suggested by Dostoyevski's "House of the Dead". The piece closes with the impressive thrust of a final couplet which is markedly less histrionic in its quiet, Muirish contemplation of man's fallen state as the forest awakens:

But shackled here 'mid shameful things and rotten
God's noblest work, sin-laden, lies forgotten.

Once he begins to write in Orcadian Scots, Rendall progresses to the full and vivid realisation of subject matter which is manifestly alive for him and which is conveyed in an easy, natural voice. His poetry emerges clean and fresh. "The Fisherman"¹⁴⁴ was

¹⁴²Kirkwall, 1946.

¹⁴³Kirkwall, 1956.

¹⁴⁴The following brief glossary is provided for the poems contained in this chapter: **besprent** sprinkled, **congles** boulders, **craigs** sea cliffs, **cruisie** fish-oil lamp, **erst**

the third poem from *Country Sonnets* to be anthologised by Marwick and represents a moment of liberation in Orkney poetry, the point of transition from a transplanted, anglicised language to the full realisation of the true and the local:

Aald Jeems o' Quoys, wha erst wi' leid and line
Keen as a whitemaa, reaped the Rousay soond,
And in his weathered yawl a twalmonth syne
Set lapster-creels the Westness craigs aroond,
Nae stroke o' fortune cloured wi' bluidy claa,
Nor glow'ring daith wi' sudden tempest mocked,
But in his wee thatched croft he wore awa'
E'en as a cruisie flickers oot unslockt.
Nae kinsman raised, nor wife, nor weeping w'ain,
But we, his yamils, this memorial stane.

Rendall had begun to speak, to borrow Patrick Kavanagh's term, from the parish to the universe. The poem is an adaptation of Andrew Lang's translation of Leonidas of Tarentum, and was the first published experiment of a type Rendall was soon to term the "Orkney Variant". The personalities and the lifestyle described in the lyrics of ancient Greece and Rome appealed to him immensely - he could see the Orkney character and pre-industrial existence in the classical verses - and he sought to transpose these poems into an Orkney setting. The translations are not literal, but take from the classical originals the germ of an idea which is then freely and creatively adapted.

"The Fisherman" expresses emotion with a dignified and reserved power, avoiding the slide into sentimentality which impairs so many of Rendall's early poems in English. Simple similes drawn, like Walter Traill Dennison's, from the local environment give a distinct impression of the fisherman's energy and freedom in life - "Keen as a whitemaa" - and convey the corresponding pathos of his gradual decline - "E'en as a cruisie flickers oot unslockt". The alliterative verve of the lyric, too, owes to the Scots and animates the same rural themes Rendall had worked over with less success in English. Understatement has replaced the overblown dramatic rhetoric of the English poems: the pathos in the fact that no family survives the fisherman is merely implied. His lack of descendants suggests also the quintessentially romantic idea of "lastness" contained famously, for instance, in Scott's "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" and points to Rendall's romantic and antiquarian desire to preserve a passing language, lifestyle and character. "The Fisherman" may be a museum piece, a fragment of language which synechdoically represents a diminishing culture, but it is one which nonetheless belongs firmly within the contemporary world of Scottish vernacular poetry.

Rendall's use of Scots is in one respect closer to that of Robert Garioch than it is to Hugh MacDiarmid. Although some of the lexis would have already seemed increasingly archaic by Rendall's time, he uses only language which maintains at least some limited currency. While Garioch wrote in the Edinburgh Scots which was

formerly, **fleep** coward, **gyte** daft, **krugglan** crouching, **lift** sky, **mallimacks** fulmars, **ruggan** striving, **syne** since, **tent** notice, **tullye** skirmish, **tullymentan** glittering, **vaigan** wandering, **whitemaa** gull, **yamils** contemporaries.

used in his childhood family home, employing words he had learned from his parents but which were disappearing among his own generation, Rendall records occasional items (such as “yamils”) he would very likely have encountered, but which have subsequently all but disappeared from use. (At no point would any of the Orkney writers adopt Lallans, perhaps because their local variety of Scots remained sufficiently rich to suit their purposes.) The framework of non-lexical items used in Rendall’s Orcadian poetry remains intact today, however, and the poems have a ring of linguistic reality that is lacking in his English verse. They also reflect the poet’s preferred spoken language, which was Orkney dialect.

Orkney Variants and Other Poems

While “The Fisherman” had been the only poem in Scots to appear in *Country Sonnets*, Rendall’s next collection, *Orkney Variants*¹⁴⁵, contains alongside a comparable number of English poems fifteen exquisite Scots lyrics and one longer narrative poem, “Mansie’s Threshing”. “Cragman’s Widow” was the second piece in Scots to be anthologised by Marwick and reappeared in *Orkney Variants*. The poem refers to the once popular tradition of climbing down from the tops of the towering Orkney cliffs to catch seabirds by means of a net fixed to the end of a long bamboo “wand”, a sturdy cane:

“He was aye vaigan b’ the shore,
An’ climman among the craigs,
Swappan the mallimaks,
Or takkan whitemaa aiggs.

“It’s six year bye come Lammas,
Sin’ he gaed afore the face,
An’ nane but an aald dune wife
Was left tae work the place.

“Yet the sun shines down on a’ thing,
The links are bonny and green,
An’ the sea keeps ebban an’ flowan
As though it had never been.”

The tragic inevitability of the death, the loosely iambic quatrains, the voice coming from within the community, and even the vivid green of the links are all heavily suggestive of the Scots ballads. This is the first obvious respect in which the poem resembles MacDiarmid’s early lyrics from *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*¹⁴⁶. MacDiarmid is arguably the central influence on the Orkney poet, and it is reasonable to suggest these lyrics be viewed as the eventual fruit of Ernest Marwick’s interest in and correspondence with the great poet some fifteen years beforehand. But Rendall’s verse maintains its own distinct perspective. Where poems like “Empty Vessel” or “In the Hedge Back” make a cosmic leap in order to assert the inestimable value of human emotions which cry out against the implacably cold, infinite spaces of the universe, Rendall presents us with a clifftop view looking down over a reassuringly

¹⁴⁵Kirkwall, 1951.

¹⁴⁶1925, 1926.

sun-warmed island and its surrounding waters to suggest that grief can be assuaged by a natural order and the regenerative, cosmic tidal rhythm. Where the planets and their satellites appear coldly aloof in a poem like “The Bonny Broukit Bairn”, the sun and moon are presented in Rendall’s piece as benevolent forces, lending light and heat and generating a healing tidal movement respectively. Like a pre-Darwinian amateur naturalist, Rendall saw God’s hand at work in the miniscule geometry of the sea shells he collected for study. This same Rendall felt an affinity with the universe around him that the Humanist MacDiarmid did not¹⁴⁷. It is this affinity which lies at the heart of the Zen-like lyric “Celestial Kinsmen”:

The winter lift is glintan doun
Wi’ tullimentan stars besprent,
As were the very heavens abune
Clean gyte wi’ frosty merriment,
Their lowan e’en are taakan tent
O’ cheils like Mansie o’ the Bu’
Whase days upon the land are spent
Ruggan wi Taurus and the Pleugh.

The strength of the bond implied by “kin” in the title develops into the mirroring of these two particular constellations in terrestrial Orkney. Neil Dickson articulates the essential difference between this poem and MacDiarmid’s early work:

MacDiarmid’s universe was that of Pascal’s eternal silence of infinite spaces. But Rendall, following earlier models, had in these poems a pre-Copernican world where the mythology expressed the kinship of the heavens with man.¹⁴⁸

The whole of mankind is represented by Mansie, who is for Rendall (as he was for Linklater¹⁴⁹) the Orcadian Everyman. Correspondingly, the Bu’ is the archetypal Orkney homestead. A Bu exists in nearly every parish and island in Orkney: Edwin Muir’s family home was the Bu of Wyre; Linklater’s Magnus Merriman is drawn towards another Bu on his return to Orkney. The poem demonstrates a romantic impulse, turning its back on the advances of modern physics and astronomy in its use of Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy, rendering the stars “clean gyte wi frosty merriment”. The metrical pattern is again reminiscent of the ballads. The coarse, energetic and imitative qualities of the word “ruggan” - meaning to pull or tear vigorously - in the final line ensure that Mansie becomes at this instant a real and very human character; a participant in the necessary, perpetual struggle with the soil.

¹⁴⁷An anecdote surviving locally illustrates precisely how the Orkney seascape and Rendall’s poetic interests in history and religion rested together. Rendall’s friend the Q.C. Lord Birsay, Harald Leslie, visited him once at his summer cottage in Birsay. Rendall invited his friend to lay his hand on a ragstone on top of the dyke at the end of the garden and look west to the horizon, before saying to him: “Now you’ve got your hand on history and your eye on eternity.”

¹⁴⁸“Robert Rendall: A Life” in Neil Dickson, (ed.) *An Island Shore: The Life and Work of Robert Rendall* (Kirkwall, 1990), p.34-5.

¹⁴⁹“Mansie” is an affectionate diminutive of the name Magnus, which remains popular in Orkney. Linklater’s Magnus Merriman is also called “Mansie” when he returns to Orkney.

“Celestial Kinsmen” is another “Orkney Variant”, an adaptation this time of a poem by Marcus Argentarius. These prestige translations align Rendall with a host of Scottish writers representing contemporary and earlier stages of Scottish Literature. Looking further, we need only think of Gavin Douglas’s Scots rendering of Virgil’s “Aeneid”, the multitudinous translation projects of the Castalian poets, MacDiarmid’s utilisation of European models for adaptation, Garioch’s translations from the Roman dialect sonnets of Guiseppe Belli, or W.L. Lorimer’s *The New Testament in Scots* (1983). The translation work of Douglas Young was one particular contemporaneous influence. Rendall advances Walter Traill Dennison’s efforts to legitimise the peripheral and - until this point - almost exclusively oral Orcadian language, by further exploring potential written representations. The creation of a peripheral literature from an oral form draws strength from the use of templates adapted from a classical canon. For, in contrast to poetry in a little known island variety of a minority language like Scots, the legitimacy, gravitas and value of the classical poetry of ancient Greece and Rome is without question.

While he approaches one innovative aspect of modernism in his poetic use of a non-standard variety of language, Rendall remains an essentially conservative poet, fond of traditional forms and anxious to attach himself to the Scottish literary tradition. This is evident not only in his affinities with MacDiarmid and the Scottish ballads or his interest in prestige translation, but also in his love of the sonnet. An unpublished paper – “The Sonnet in Scotland”¹⁵⁰ - shows a sensitive awareness to the poetry of James VI and the various other individual figures within James’s “Castalian Band”. The Petrarchan sonnet, which was the preferred vehicle of the Castalian poets, is put to excellent use in Rendall’s “Renewal”, which, for Neil Dickson, exhibits “the unfolding logic of the true sonnet,”¹⁵¹ emerging complete with a Petrarchan oxymoron describing leaves burning in a “frosty fire”. As well as demonstrating that he was aware of the necessity for a new cultural energy in Scotland, “The Sonnet in Scotland” articulates the motivation behind Rendall’s use of Scots within a formal framework as stemming from something of a distaste for modernist experiment. The feelings expressed in the essay are similar in sentiment to the satirisation of modernist poetry discussed earlier in Linklater’s *Magnus Merriman*:

The alternative to Kailyardism, however, is not brutal realism or pretentious obscurity, which today are in danger of becoming as mannered as any other form of excessive revolt, but in a return to the courtliness of the old Makars.

Uncomfortable with the difficult content and bewildering forms of high modernism, Rendall has as his primary interest the re-vivification - within traditional poetic frameworks - of his native language. He thus asserts the potentialities of a peripheral culture distinct from English:

... colloquial Scots has come to be associated with the jingles of popular versification, and is rarely thought of for serious ends - not, at least, until recently. Why should not our native speech be used with that same respect for those metrical forms and prosodic fictions that English is considered worthy of

¹⁵⁰Orkney Archive D27/2/4

¹⁵¹Ibid., p.44.

...

A solitary experimental poem seeks, however, to attach itself to a tradition other than the Scottish. “Shore Tullye” borrows from the skaldic past, as represented within *Orkneyinga Saga*:

Crofters few but crafty,
Krugglan doun b’ moonlight,
Hidan near the headland,
Hint great congles waited.
Swiftly rude sea-raiders
Stranded, evil-handed:
Scythe blades soon were bleedan,
Skulls crackt in the tullye.

Stretched the battle beachward;
Bravely back we drave them.
Een fleep fleean hinmost
Fand we makkan landward:
Him apae the hillside
Hewed we doun in feud fight -
Never cam sea-rovers
Seekan back tae Rackwick.

This piece is written in *Drottkvætt*, or “Court-metre”, the skaldic form which appears throughout *Orkneyinga Saga* and which is used by most of the skalds represented there, including Turf-Einar, Thorfinn the Mighty’s skald Arnor, and Earl Rognvald Kolson. Rendall may have come across the detailed description of this highly intricate verse in the introduction to Taylor’s 1938 translation of the saga. The Norse stanza consists of eight lines of loosely trochaic trimeter, within which the last word of every line is a rigid trochaic foot. The first of each pair of lines contains two alliterative sounds and the second line contains a further echo of this same alliteration. Every second line also contains an additional internal rhyme. This represents a uniquely challenging metrical, alliterative and rhyming pattern, and Rendall finds the necessary sounds and syllables to accommodate these demands in a poem which carries the strain lightly.

Additionally, he succeeds in recreating the arrogant, bragging voice of the skaldic poems, so many of which commemorate victory in armed combat. The traditional premise of the skaldic model is reversed here, though, in that the “sea-raiders” we might normally expect to be the singers of such poetry are vanquished by “crofters”. “Shore Tullye” remains as a highly accomplished piece in technical terms, and represents the Orkney writer’s by now obligatory badge of allegiance to the Scandinavian tradition, an assertion of cultural difference. The poem is, however, eccentric within Rendall’s oeuvre and represents no more than an inclination towards a centrifugal and transnational cultural movement. It is the centrepetal force of the Scottish poetic tradition towards which Rendall gravitates and it is this tradition which facilitates, through him, the emergence of the first real Orkney poetry of the twentieth century.

6) GEORGE MACKAY BROWN

Although all of his literary work belongs to a period spanning between 1949 and 1996, Rendall's younger contemporary George Mackay Brown has too often been seen as a relic of the slightly more distant past of Scottish Literature, marooned on his northerly island home after the high water mark of the Scottish Renaissance of the twenties and thirties. With his intense preoccupation with history and manifest fondness for pre-Reformation and pre-industrial subject matter, Brown appears, superficially at least, to have more in common with Scottish predecessors like Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Neil Gunn and Naomi Mitchison than with his contemporaries in the post-war era.

This however is only a part of the picture. Although it is certainly true that in some ways he makes less of a break with tradition than his Scottish contemporaries, it can nevertheless be fairly straightforwardly argued that Brown occupies a progressive position in the literature of his own islands, while at the same time establishing a relevant place for himself within Scottish and international fiction and poetry which advances significantly from the ideals of the writers of the Scottish Renaissance. Where others such as Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, George Friel, Robin Jenkins and, more recently, James Kelman would disown, discard or contradict the romantic, mythical, nationalist and racial ideology of the essentially rural Renaissance movement, Brown was to inherit this ideology willingly but also to adapt it extensively both for his personal purposes and to articulate it to post-war Orkney and beyond. The charge that Brown is anachronistically locked-in to Orkney history is a false one, stemming no doubt in part from the preoccupation with post-industrial urban wasteland that gripped Scottish fiction during the final quarter of the last century. Thus, from a purely Scottish point of view, Brown's work may be considered at best somewhat eccentric, at worst completely irrelevant to modern Scotland. However, from the perspective of his own islands, and indeed from furth of Scotland, his contribution is of immense value.

This chapter shall consider four aspects of George Mackay Brown's Orkney: Orcadian folk literature; Norse Orkney; Orkney in relation to the writer's Roman Catholicism and Orkney under threat from external pressures. The following pages seek, by examining these facets, to contextualise Brown's work in poetry and prose, locating him at a specific point in the development of Orcadian letters, while at the same time drawing some preliminary conclusions about his place in Scottish and international writing.

Messages and Bottles - The Orkney Folk Tale and the role of the artist

A seemingly playful early sketch from 1954, "The Last Trow", collected in the posthumous anthology *Northern Lights: A Poet's Sources*¹⁵², sets out very clearly Brown's arguments for the primacy of the Orcadian folk tale and his warning to us should we neglect the ancient wisdom contained therein. In this piece, the writer describes the visit to his fireside on a summer evening of a trow or troll, once the commonest of Orkney folk-tale creatures. The trow informs him that it is, in fact, the last of its species. The piece goes on to record the dialogue between trow and writer:

¹⁵²London, 1999.

‘The trows,’ he continued, ‘haven’t the power they used to have in olden times, nothing like it, because people no longer believe in them. People in Orkney no longer believe in the dark and beautiful powers of the earth. It is pitiful ...

‘We’ve seen it coming,’ he said, ‘for years, for decades, this spiritual death of Orkney which means our exile, harder for us to bear than death. You know as well as I do what the reason is – it’s because Orkney is prosperous, everyone is well off. They think, with their few hundreds in the bank, that they can safely ignore us. Poor fools!’ (pp.232-233)

This early passage epitomises so much of what Brown was to stand for throughout his career. Firstly, there is his romantic longing for the past and the lament for the passing of an aspect of an older Orkney. A despairing antiquarian, he records what he sees in order to rescue it from oblivion: in this instance it is the sketch of the last trow. This narrator is the only individual who can see the trow and the implication is that he is the only living person who continues to believe in trows. Thus Brown fashions himself as an Orkney bard and lone tradition bearer, a role he was to return to with great regularity. The trow’s warning against the dangers of worshipping false idols – “their few hundreds in the bank” - is curious indeed. Everywhere in Brown’s writings exists this strange synthesis of the Christian and the Pagan, so that he sees nothing incongruous in having a subterranean, pagan earth creature give a warning against venal sin, the like of which we might expect from the Christian God. Although we might assume the “dark and beautiful powers of the earth” to be the subject of pagan worship, these nevertheless remain deeply sacred to this Christian writer who is also, of course, a representative of his agriculturally rooted community. The pursuit of wealth beyond that required for simple survival is always suspect to Brown and already here we see the beginnings of the proto-anticapitalism which is another recurrent concern in his work. Real things - the mysterious earth-locked, heaven-sent sources of bread - he urges continually, are infinitely more important than money in the bank. These Orcadian folk myths are not used the way myths are by the writers of the Scottish Renaissance, to suggest communal racial identity and common political purpose, but rather to remind us of the potent earth forces on which we depend. Despite the nostalgic tone of the passage, there is nevertheless, as always in Brown, the promise of a rebirth or resurrection. The trows, we are reassured, will not disappear:

‘You all think perhaps,’ he intoned, ‘that the trows are vanished for ever, and will never appear in the cheap light of Progress and Security and Prosperity - never again. But you’re wrong. For we never die, and we’re waiting to appear again on the Earth in our surging legions. It may be a hundred years, it may be a thousand, but make no mistake, when men have learned humility and returned to Nature as the source of all being, we’ll appear again!’ (p.235)

Thus does the ancient folk wisdom maintain a relevant potential, even if it has been unduly neglected for a time.

It is often the case that Brown returns recurrently to a particular type of material. The Orcadian folk tale is a core element which he would revisit regularly. His first

extended prose work, the 1969 non-fiction classic *An Orkney Tapestry*¹⁵³, dedicates a good deal of space to discussion of trows, selkies and the like. It is here that Brown considers the myth where a fiddler on his road home is kidnapped by trows and taken underground to play for them. On his return, he discovers that although he is no older, time has moved on without him. His music, however, has ensured the fertility of the land in the meantime and, as Brown puts it, “Art is interwoven with death and fruition ... The fiddle, the skull and the cornstalk yield their full significance only when they are seen in relation to each other.” (119) Already here we see him developing his theory on the significance of folklore, reading in it profound intellectual meaning. Deeply complex short fiction represented thirty or so years later in *The Island of the Women and Other Stories*¹⁵⁴ wrestles with the same Orcadian lore.

The folk tale appeals to Brown’s sense of himself as a bardic representative of his community, allowing him to move away from a position as an individual writer towards the role of a tradition bearer who will offer his own humble - yet sometimes unorthodox and often startlingly fresh - interpretation of local legend and lore. Brown’s sense of himself as a local community representative should not be underestimated. His weekly column in *The Orcadian* appeared virtually uninterrupted for a period of some twenty-five years and is testimony to his affinity with his local audience and his sense of responsibility to this audience. The longevity of the column also gives some indication of the writer’s popularity within his community. Indeed Brown’s books - more so perhaps than those of any other writer considered in this study - have a place in most Orkney households. His rootedness goes deeper than this, though. As well as maintaining links with his contemporary audience, Brown inserts himself into an already well-established Orcadian tradition of the scholarly collection of folklore and its literary adaptation.

The seminal influence of Ernest Marwick must be recognised in any consideration of Brown’s literary work. It was Marwick who, in 1949, had first published three of Brown’s poems in *An Anthology of Orkney Verse*, a defining moment in Orcadian poetry. After lending Brown this initial impetus, Marwick was to remain a profound and lasting influence. Both men studied under Edwin Muir at Newbattle Abbey College. As well as being a local correspondent for the BBC, Marwick was a diligent and tireless recorder of oral history and folklore. A sensitive perfectionist in all his academic pursuits, Marwick’s tragic early death in a road accident in 1977 meant that a large amount of his work remained unpublished at the time.

His *Folklore of Orkney and Shetland*¹⁵⁵ did however appear in 1975 and remains in print. The extensive discussion and collection of lore contained in the book ranges over land and sea, dealing with trows, selkies, standing stones, witches, and rituals surrounding the agricultural year. The book also includes re-tellings of some of the core Orkney and Shetland folk tales, such as “Assipattle and the muckle mester Stoor Worm”. This is the origin myth (alluded to in Brown’s *Vinland*¹⁵⁶) which explains how Orkney, Shetland, the Faroes and parts of mainland Scandinavia are the remains of a colossal sea monster which is slain by an Orcadian boy. The material of *Folklore*

¹⁵³London, 1969.

¹⁵⁴London, 1998.

¹⁵⁵London, 1975.

¹⁵⁶London, 1992.

of Orkney and Shetland has re-entered the Orcadian consciousness since 1975. The Stoor Worm tale is now widely known, and is used regularly in primary schools. This particular origin myth is a colourful counterpoint to the mythological introductory sections of *Orkneyinga Saga*, and has been revived as an important aspect of Orkney's imaginative identity. Folk material collected by Marwick was utilised extensively by George Mackay Brown and, through his friendship with Marwick, he would have been familiar with this material well in advance of its relatively late publication in the seventies.

Further work of Marwick's became accessible in 1991 when John D. M. Robertson published *An Orkney Anthology: The Selected Works of Ernest Walker Marwick*, a rich and extensive collection of hitherto unpublished Marwick material that is broad in scope and a delight to read. Here again, readers of George Mackay Brown will find much common ground between the two writers. For although Marwick's work is non-fiction and provides a scholarly and academic perspective on folklore and historical topics, there are passages on witches, the horseman's word, the lore of harvest, the Stone of Odin and a piece entitled "Portrait of a Vagabond" (about a local tramp called "Skatehorn") which bring to mind respectively the short story "Witch", the novel *Greenvoe*, the poem "John Barleycorn", Brown's treatment of the Pirate Gow and, finally, his beloved tinker Ikey Faa, the archetypal traveller who appears at regular intervals throughout his work. It is regrettable that Ernest Marwick's autobiography, *The Sufficient Place*, has not been published. The title of the autobiography is borrowed from Edwin Muir's poem of the same name, the "sufficient place" being, of course, Orkney. Marwick's autobiography details his early years growing up on a farm in Evie and is a unique first-hand record of an Orcadian childhood in a country parish. The prose is vivid and captures sharply the emotions felt by the boy who, like Edwin Muir on nearby Wyre, had not yet entered the destructive adult world of time. Marwick also edited *Orkney Folklore and Traditions*¹⁵⁷ by Walter Traill Dennison. A tribute to Ernest Marwick which gives a flavour of the friendship between George Mackay Brown and the folklorist, as well as demonstrating some measure of the respect in which Brown held Marwick's work, is collected in *Northern Lights*.

But the most obvious instance in which Brown builds on work initiated by Marwick is in the case of the great ballad "The Play o' de Laithie Odivere". The ballad is the only substantial piece of Orcadian literature surviving from the six century interregnum between *Orkneyinga Saga* in the thirteenth century and Scott's *The Pirate* in the nineteenth. It was collected in fragmentary form by Walter Traill Dennison over a period of some forty years and assembled by him into the ninety-three stanza poem which appears in Marwick's *An Anthology of Orkney Verse*. The language of the piece is Orcadian Scots and the setting is pan-Scandinavian. Most of the action takes place in Norway, yet there are also references to Sule Skerry, the Atlantic rock-island some forty miles to the west of Orkney, which represents here a mysterious and distant outpost somewhere between the world of men and the world of the supernatural. As the first truly indigenous fragment of Orkney literature, the ballad has had an enchanting appeal for Orcadian writers from Dennison through Marwick and Linklater ("Sealskin Trousers" being a loose adaptation) to George Mackay Brown, who worked most extensively, freely and creatively with the material

¹⁵⁷Kirkwall, 1961.

of the original.

In brief, the narrative is as follows. A beautiful Norwegian refuses to marry any of the numerous suitors who visit her. Eventually she agrees to marry Odivere, unaware that he has entered a pact with Odin to win her hand. Odivere then joins a crusade to the Holy Land, but on his road home he delays among the brothels of Constantinople. Meanwhile, the Lady makes love to a selkie man, Imravoe, with whom she was in love before Odivere took his vow to Odin. She bears Imravoe's child and the child returns to the sea with his father. Odivere returns and, by coincidence, slays the young selkie. In her grief, the Lady Odivere's infidelity is disclosed. She is locked in a high tower and sentenced to death by burning. Imravoe calls on his fellow selkies to herd all the whales in the North Sea and drive them towards Norway, where Odivere sees them and sets out to hunt them. While he is at sea, the Lady Odivere escapes.

Brown includes a transcription of the piece in *An Orkney Tapestry*. In the section of the book entitled "Poets", he dedicates one chapter to Robert Rendall and another to an anonymous singer who recites the ballad at the recreated court of Earl Patrick Stuart, (thus aligning Rendall with an ancient oral tradition and elevating his poetry to the level of "The Play ...", which Brown calls the "great unknown ballad" (p.13)). The ballad itself is interspersed with the reactions of various members of this Renaissance and post-Reformation audience: the Earl's concubine, the Earl himself, the Canon, the housekeeper and the Sheriff. The insistence on the singer's insignificance is telling – "He himself was a person of no consequence ..." (p.141) - for everywhere in Brown it is the song rather than the singer which really matters.

And the song is of immense communal import to the listeners as a group. Yet each listener has a different and individual response to the text. In the most emotional reaction, the concubine, Alysoun, empathises with the Lady Odivere's passions and predicament, for she too is bound to a nobleman but in love with another, not a selkie in her case but a fisherman (who also represents freedom, when compared to the Earl). The Earl is lecherous and corrupt but in spite of his gluttonous sensuality he remains sensitive to art and culture, identifying with Odivere. He wishes the mother of a girl he has abused in Caithness could express herself as succinctly as the ballad: "Her red and white grows white and grey. ... Then truly he might have given the old hag and the young hag a pension to have seen them through ..." (p147). While the Canon and Sheriff respond intellectually in their own ways, the emotive impact of the piece is lost on them. The Canon is mocked gently for his philistinism. He despises the ballad singer and fears the anarchic disorder he perceives in the content of the ballad, particularly in the sexual union of woman and seal-man. The darkest, most sinister interpretation is reserved, however, for the Sheriff, who warns of the dangers of meddling with black magic and abhors Odivere's oath to Odin. He sees the Lady Odivere, in particular, as the embodiment of evil and warns the Earl to be vigilant for similar witchcraft in Orkney, citing other examples of similar stories from within the community, in Birsay or Stromness. The Sheriff's sympathies lie firmly with the Reformers of the Kirk. He despises art – "Plato did well to shut the door of his city state against that perverter of true order, the poet" (p161) - and moves seamlessly from his anti-Catholic and anti-artistic position to voice a hymn to Brown's great theme and dread, the March of Progress. The critique culminates in this dire, ironically-voiced warning of the dangers of turning our backs on communal art:

“The light of science will grow. Our children will unlock the secrets of atom and planet (as much as humanity can bear); and at the end of all it may be that we will be able to stand among the purest sources of power, and control them, and so endow ourselves with material splendour that as yet we can hardly conceive of. And all this power and glory achieved not by Mephistophelian means, but by ways acceptable to God.

“But first there must be an entire uprooting of image and fable from our minds. Until that is done the seeds of the new knowledge have no room to sprout and to flourish.

“Let the poets reform themselves. Let them speak plain, godly sense, like honest men, from now on.” (p161)

Thus are the emotive strengths and intellectual dimensions of the ballad teased out and placed before us for our consideration. Taking “The Play o’ de Laithie Odivere” as a starting point, Brown cuts a swathe through history which begins in an Edenic, pre-Reformation setting where the artist, or more correctly *art*, has a central place in the community, nourishing and sustaining everyone from Earl to cup-bearer. He then moves through the ravages of reformation and the subsequent austerity of Scottish religious life before looking forward to a scientific and industrial revolution which results ultimately in our perilous nuclear age. Each historical movement becomes progressively more distant from the art which, he stresses, ought to be at life’s centre. Brown provides a dramatic critical commentary which embellishes and illuminates “The Play o’ de Laithie Odivere”, showing that our primal, instinctive emotional responses (represented by the concubine and the Earl) are healthy and good, whereas coldly scientific intellectuals (the Sheriff) will manipulate art to their own dangerous ends before eventually jettisoning it altogether.

The explicit coupling of the Reformation and the nuclear age is typical of the antipathy towards Calvinism which permeates Brown’s work during the fifties and sixties. He would see nothing tenuous in the link between the two. Other pieces such as the “Prologue” to *The Storm and other Poems*¹⁵⁸, “Chapel between Cornfield and Shore” (a poem from *Loaves and Fishes*¹⁵⁹) or “Master Halcrow, Priest” (a short story from *A Calendar of Love*¹⁶⁰) also exhibit this same antipathy. The sentiments expressed in these pieces are influenced by those articulated earlier in the century by Muir in work such as *Scottish Journey*, “Scotland 1941”, “Scotland’s Winter” or “The Incarnate One”, which also lament the supplanting of song and image and a general medieval harmony with Calvinist austerity. In later years the severity of Brown’s anti-Calvinist feelings seems to have mellowed, so that when he returns to “The Play o’ de Laithie Odivere” in the short story “The Island of the Women” it is with a different purpose which nevertheless continues to stress the centrality of art in Christian life.

More than any other, “The Play o’ de Laithie Odivere” was the Orkney myth which was to haunt Brown. The story sings of love and sexuality (legitimate and forbidden) in the fraught triangle between Odivere, the Lady and Imravoe. It describes the lady’s youthful beauty and the withering of her beauty as she pines for her husband

¹⁵⁸Kirkwall, 1954.

¹⁵⁹London, 1959.

¹⁶⁰London, 1967.

overseas. Odivere's league with Odin/Satan and his attempt at Christian atonement through the crusade, his further lapse as he delays in the brothels of Constantinople and the lady's sexual union with Imravoe introduce the pagan/Christian interplay and develop the themes of human frailty and fickleness. In the end, fury and violence erupt in the murder of the selkie child and the threatened execution of the lady by burning. (She is sentenced to this ultimate punishment, which was reserved for witches, to ensure the absolute destruction of earthly remains and therefore deny the victim an afterlife.) The eerie shape-shifting throughout, the uncontrollably surfacing violent and sexual urges, the supernatural power held over the whales in the perplexing, ambiguous conclusion of the tale and Imravoe's distant, enigmatic realm of Sule Skerry all hint towards an incomprehensible other and the existence of mysterious forces beyond our ken. The vague, non-specific settings in time and place, the chivalric Romance elements and the names Odivere and Imravoe - outlandish and exotic yet vaguely suggestive of nobility and Norse identity - all enhance the enigmatic appeal of the ballad.

When, in "The Island of the Women", Brown finally comes to re-tell the entire story, his prose takes on a heightened lustre. His embellished version is an ambitious piece, running to some sixty-six pages and remaining largely faithful to the narrative of the original, with the exception of occasional fleshings-out and a perplexing epilogue. The story is, however, developed and enhanced without disrupting the integrity of the original. Brown is sensitive to the way in which our sympathies ought to lie with the Lady herself and he is careful to remain true to this aspect of the original. For, while she has cuckolded Odivere and committed a sin of sexual perversion by lying with the seal-man, we are reminded that Odivere (whose name resembles that of the one-eyed God with whom he communes) has committed the first transgression in summoning Odin to help him to win her hand. As is the case with Sigurd the Stout's raven banner in *Orkneyinga Saga*, the pagan gods seem initially to help their worshippers, but inevitably, disaster comes to those who meddle in pagan magic. The Lady succumbs to her sexual desire not for a seal, but for a seal in the form of a *man*, and we therefore do not feel she is altogether guilty of bestiality. Her actions are excusable because Odivere has resorted to sorcery in order to marry her and then abandons her to join the crusade. He, on the other hand, is lecherous and promiscuous throughout. He is the true perverter of the natural order in his calling on Odin, his unsuccessful attempt at atonement through the failed crusade, his bestial behaviour in the Byzantine brothels and, most obviously, in the violent debauchery of his return to his estates in Orkney (Brown localises the story, setting it in his home islands rather than in its original Norwegian setting). It is during these scenes where Brown most obviously begins to make the material his own.

Initially, Odivere betrays his northern roots by wishing that his island could be dragged south to warmer climes by ships with grappling irons (p.30). His fellow crusaders, who were once innocent and gentle farm boys, upset the island girls with their newly learned "unnatural desires" (p.30). The crusaders refuse to return to work, indulging rather in debauchery, music and gambling. After Odivere's killing of the seal boy - the offspring of Imravoe and the Lady Odivere - the Lady is sentenced to death and the island descends into hellish chaos.

The crimes which follow are of the most odious variety imaginable to Brown, upsetting as they do the sacred natural order and agricultural rhythms of the island.

Odivere and his retinue refuse to work in the fields. They disrupt the God-ordained pattern of day and night by sleeping in daylight and drinking all night. They trample the growing corn under the hooves of their horses and, in a bloody climax of utterly wicked perversion, they slay Odivere's bull:

Triumph turned tormented eyes on his master Odivere, who had fed him out of his hand and cherished him when he was a small bull-calf. Now his great hulk was laced through and through with pain. Odivere stood in front of him with a sword. There was a flash in the sunlight. Triumph, the famous bull, sire of hundreds, died of that skull wound. (p.44)

Odivere has sold his soul to Odin/Satan and is no longer the same person he was when, as a boy, he fed the calf. The wanton and meaningless act of destruction is at once a twisted pagan sacrifice and an anti-Christian fracturing of the holy, natural order. The men take part in a satanic carnival. Their festival of blood tears rents in the seamless garment of Christian harmony.

It is from this point onwards that Brown's telling of the story spirals into increasing strangeness. Soon afterwards, the whales appear and the men set off in a further frenzy of blood lust to hunt them, abandoning the Lady in her high tower. One by one their boats are sunk in a vast, apocalyptic storm in the ocean to the west of Orkney: Brown's recurrent symbol for turbulence in the soul. But unlike the storm which delivers the speaker of his early poem "The Storm" safely ashore among the monks of Eynhallow, this is not a storm of spiritual crisis in the individual, but a collective threat and darkness in which the megalomaniac and bloodthirsty Odivere becomes Everyman, the lone survivor, blindly and continually seeking with only the tiniest, glimmering suggestion of faith, symbolised here by "the faintest luminosity" of the disappearing day, or a single star:

There was no distinction between land or sea or sky. The faintest luminosity showed, between surges, where west was. Once, momentarily, the sky tore itself apart and showed a single star; then closed again
Odivere said, "I'm alone then at last. The boat can take me wherever it wants."
The steering oar, untended, fluctuated madly.
Fatalism more than sleep settled about him where he sprawled in the stern. He abandoned himself to the night and the storm. (pp48-49)

Alone, with no heavenly guiding hand at the tiller of his vessel, Odivere is a soul without God. "Fatalism" overwhelms faith and peace, and when, on the following day, he finds himself ashore in the island of Rousay, he has become a ghost in the limbo of his pagan faithlessness. The people cannot see him – "(it was as if for them Odivere did not exist)" (p.49) - and the laird of Rousay has no recollection of the recent trial of the Lady in Odivere's nearby island. Odivere and his life have become an allegory, unknowable and incomprehensible among the solid hills of Rousay. To the laird's bemusement, Odivere sets off on the ocean again, seeking to return to his imaginary island. A glimmer of folk memory surfaces then in the laird's mind:

But the strange thing is that there was an island out there that sometimes broke the horizon. I've never seen it myself. The old men used to speak about it. But always when they rowed towards the island it melted like a dream. They called

it The Island of the Women ... (p.52)

This island is suggestive of Tir-Nan-Og (which is also sought by Randal Sigmundson in the novel *Vinland*). For after their unholy desecration of the island, the men have all been lost at sea, drowned or, in Odivere's case, endlessly drifting and unable to return in what seems a punishment for the violation of the holy place, an exile from Eden. This goes some way also to explaining the name - The Island of the Women - for only the women remain. The isle is also reminiscent of two ephemeral islands which were said in Orcadian lore to appear in the western ocean, "Hildaland" and "Hether Blether". Hildaland was the summer residence of the Fin Folk, a race of mysterious sea creatures, while Hether Blether simply appeared on the horizon, but could never be reached in a boat¹⁶¹.

In the perplexing "Epilogue", written by Serenus, the Abbot of Eynhallow, the ageing monk describes the arrival of a ballad singer who recites the ballad to the monks. He then goes on to relate how the story resembles an incident which happened between a simple crofter and his wife in Orkney (thus stressing the relevance of the story to all, whatever their social station), before relating the hazy memory of the arrival of a traveller - presumably Odivere - at the monastery, seeking the help of the abbot. The traveller's life has become a nightmare of living shadows. But Serenus is unable to help him to escape his labyrinth. Odivere is unable to make his peace with God or unable to find faith, he is a lost soul. The piece becomes uncharacteristically and impenetrably dark at this stage. We might conjecture that the darkness which permeates these central stages of "The Island of the Women" reflects the troughs of intense depression experienced by the writer throughout his life and which are detailed in his autobiography, "For the Islands I Sing"¹⁶². The point of view eventually shifts back, however, to Serenus. His final thoughts concern a message in a bottle discovered by a wanderer on the shores of Time, which, it seems, is an island in eternity ("A vast circling magnificence, endless surge and gleam, frets always about the shores of time" (p.66)). As Serenus muses over the contents of the message, Brown makes a final oblique reference to the ballad and the meaning contained therein:

The parchment, being indecipherable, means nothing, and has endless possibilities of meaning. Some hand, somewhere wrote it, for some eye, somewhere, to read. Since we are all part of the great web of creation the message in the bottle - whatever it is - has something to say to that wanderer on the shore (who is you, and me, and Everyman); but what, we will never know. There is only the beautiful antique script, fading fast now in the wind and sun, to pause and wonder over. [...]
Seeking correspondences, we wonder, and try to connect, and lose our sleep.
(p.66)

The bottle, the vessel carrying the text is by extension the storyteller, insignificant in himself apart from his mystic ability. A communication from eternity, the work of folk art is cast on the shores of time, a fragment of the great music. In the moment of understanding, when art serves its divine purpose, deity, human creator and reader are

¹⁶¹See Ernest Marwick, *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland* (London, 1975), p.26.

¹⁶²London, 1997. See, for instance, p.184.

united. “The beautiful, antique script” may represent the words of any visionary artist stirred by God’s grace, but “the script” is also suggestive of “scripture”. Thus is the folk tale dignified and invested with a primal and crucial significance which Brown takes upon himself to transmit to his modern audience. Indeed, as Serenus muses on the place of the skald or the artist in the community, he reaches the conclusion that the poet’s work is indeed the work of God:

Yet I think that a skald like Jocelyn helps men to endure wretched vain lives;
and indeed Heaven must have ordained the trades of musician and artist and
poet for this very work. (pp57-58)

This, Brown’s credo, marries pagan folk literature with his Christianity and his personal role as a community artist, necessarily and gladly close to his audience, almost as a pastor is to his flock. His extension of this sole fragment of indigenous Orcadian folk art brings him eventually to these conclusions regarding the nature of art, its divine origins and the responsibilities of the artist. Where the writers of the Renaissance gathered in Scottish myth and folk tale in order to stress racial community for political and nationalist reasons, Brown’s utilisation and Christian extension of the myths of his immediate island community may seem both natural and spontaneous.

Skerries and The Rock - Norse Orkney and Roman Catholicism

The way in which Brown presents himself not as a singer but rather as part of the song is part and parcel of his faith and his conviction that art - or his gift as an artist - comes from God. We are reminded continually that the bards, the minstrels and the skalds who appear throughout his work are but the vessels of art. The simultaneous celebration and downplay of the artist is a sophisticated humility topos which links Brown with the writers of the medieval period, Scottish makars and Icelandic sagamen. His insistence on the communal genesis of art and his adaptations of “The Play o’ de Laithie Odivere”, of *Orkneyinga Saga* or of innumerable other episodes from the Orcadian past demonstrate his conviction (and here again he resembles a medieval writer to a point) that the production of literature is a corporate process, issuing originally, as Brown sees it, from God, but being refined collectively by various human hands down through history. The anonymity of the authors of “The Play o’ de Laithie Odivere” or *Orkneyinga Saga* suggests the collective production of these works and the relative insignificance of the author who finally fixes meaning in the written text. Berthold Schoene has argued that Brown works deliberately in medieval literary forms (hagiography in “Magnus” and allegory “Time in a Red Coat”¹⁶³). For Brown, setting in time and place are of as little significance as contemporary literary fashions or genre. All times and all places will demonstrate the same essential human nature and, as he puts it in “For the Islands I Sing”, “The whole world gathers about the parish pump” (p.180). Thus can Brown’s penchant for writing historical fiction be seen as the natural product of Muir’s theory of the endlessly repeated Fable that is the “Life of Man”.

It follows logically that the historical period to which he is drawn most frequently is

¹⁶³Berthold Schoene, *The Making Of Orcadia: Narrative Identity in the Prose of George Mackay Brown* (Frankfurt Am Main, 1995), p254.

the medieval Orkney of *Orkneyinga Saga*. The saga, along with the *New Testament*, is one of two great intertextual influences on Brown's writing. This seemingly incompatible pair suggest again the incongruous yoking together of war and peace, hawks and doves, pagan and Christian. Indeed it is the journey from paganism to Christianity taken by the Norsemen which draws him recurrently to their particular period. Although Orkney's conversion to Christianity is sometimes dated as occurring in 995, with Olaf Trygvesson's enforced baptism of Earl Sigurd the Stout, it is likely that the conversion was not so much a moment as a process. This process of Christianisation is examined throughout Brown's work, but comes to the fore in the novels *Magnus* (1973) and *Vinland* (1992) and in short stories such as "The Fires of Christmas", from *Hawkfall* (1974), or "The Nativity Bell and the Falconer" from *The Masked Fisherman and Other Stories* (1989), as well as in a host of poems dealing with the recurrent themes of sin, conversion and atonement. There are also numerous poems - many of them published posthumously or in special, limited-edition hand-bound volumes- in celebration of St. Magnus, who becomes for Brown a local Christ-figure.

Brown's last, and in many ways his most influential "Norse" work is the novel *Vinland*, which appeared in 1992. *Vinland* is a resounding success in terms of narrative, pace and event. In telling the story of his central character, Ranald Sigmundson, from boyhood to death, Brown synthesises a number of the defining events of the Norse era in the North Atlantic. The novel comprises Ranald's Orkney childhood, a passage (via Iceland and Greenland) to Vinland (North America), a visit to the court of Olaf Trygvesson in Bergen, successful trading voyages in the North Sea and around the British Isles, the Battle of Clontarf in Ireland and Ranald's eventual settled old age on a farm in the Orcadian West Mainland. *Vinland* is a "saga novel" in scope and style, ranging across the Norse North Atlantic. Brown employs stylistic conventions and stock phrases of saga literature in much the same way as Linklater had done with *The Men of Ness*. The picaresque central figure of Ranald, however, ensures that *Vinland* reads like a novel, as opposed to saga proper. Brown follows Linklater in what has become the typical pattern of the Orcadian novel, having his central traveller return home from a young life of adventure to the basic untrammelled contentment of farming his home acres in Orkney.

Vinland draws briefly on the slim and enigmatic *Vinland Sagas* (the story of the Norse discovery of North America, over which Samuel Laing enthuses in his introduction to *Heimskringla*), before moving on to the beginnings of Norse Christianity in Orkney with the baptism of Earl Sigurd the Stout. *Vinland* marks a belated return for Brown to this particular stage of *Orkneyinga Saga*. He had first examined Sigurd's forced baptism in *An Orkney Tapestry*. Although Christianity in Orkney preceded Sigurd (in the sanctuaries of the various Celtic monasteries in Deerness, Eynhallow, Papay and elsewhere) and paganism outlived him, he remains an intriguing figure at the hub of the great drawn-out movement of conversion. *Orkneyinga Saga* relates how Olaf Trygvesson threatened to ravage Orkney with "fire and steel" (OS, p.37), if Sigurd was unwilling to convert, and how Olaf brought Sigurd's son back to Bergen as a hostage to ensure his loyalty and continued adherence to Christ. After the boy's death in Norway, however, Sigurd was to end his days wrapped in the famous Raven Banner of Odin, a casualty at the Battle of Clontarf (which is presented in *Njal's Saga* as a symbolic struggle between paganism and Christianity, with Christianity becoming the eventual winner). The eventual

consolidation of Christianity among the ruling Norse classes in Orkney comes with the reign of Sigurd's son, Thorfinn the Mighty, who, after an exceptionally bloody and violent career, established the bishopric in Birsay.

As Orkney wheels round to this eventual widespread and historical consolidation of Christianity, so too does Ranald Sigmundson become increasingly pious in his old age. Christianity is once again at the core of the work. After a life caught in the maelstrom of violence that was the Norse world of the tenth and eleventh centuries, Ranald spends his twilight years in meditation, seeking his peace with God. Ranald's retreat, a hovel overlooking a beach called Billiacroo, is located in a specific area to the west of Stromness known as Outertown. The area commands an elevated position overlooking Hoy Sound, the North Atlantic and the western horizon. It is the location of the Stromness cemetery at Warbeth and a place of central spiritual and symbolic significance to Brown¹⁶⁴. In a childhood visit to the cemetery, the poet was told by his father that "There are more Stromness folk lying there than there are living noo in the toon" (NL, p.67). Something of the cemetery's atmosphere and Brown's response to it are captured in "Kirkyard", from *Poems New and Selected* (1971):

A silent conquering army,
The island dead,
Column on column each with a stone banner
Raised over his head

A green wave full of fish
Drifted far
In wavering westering ebb-drawn shoals beyond
Sinkers or stars.

A labyrinth of celled
And waxen pain.
Yet I come to the honeycomb often, to sip the finished
Fragrance of men.

The irreversible, macabre march of death is an inescapable element and the dominant theme of Brown's work. The martial imagery of this first verse gives way in the second to description which is more ambiguously suggestive of the afterlife. The "green wave" of the sward becomes a wave of the sea. From Warbeth, the ebb tide does indeed move through Hoy Sound in a dark, awe-inspiring, westward stream towards the horizon (which is suggestive here, as it is in the work of Robert Rendall, of eternity). There is an enriching ambiguity in the second stanza. The phrase "Drifted far", which refers to the wave freighted with human souls, can be read in the past tense (suggesting fatality and extinction) or the pluperfect tense (suggesting continuing transition, perhaps in Purgatory, or in the memories of those still living). Although Brown likens human souls here to a shoal of fish, as in the Gospels, this uncertainty regarding the afterlife is nevertheless the same doubt felt by Odivere as he sails in "The Island of the Women" towards his faint glimmer on the western horizon.

¹⁶⁴George Mackay Brown and his mother, Mary Jane Mackay (1891-1967), are buried together in this cemetery. Brown chose to include his middle name (her maiden name) in all his publications.

The “wavering” of the shoal suggests uncertainty regarding its ultimate destination, and the fears that can accompany faith. Brown’s faith as expressed in his literary work, although dominant, seems never to have enabled him to completely escape these struggles and fears. In many ways, the troubled Ranald Sigmundson meditating in the latter stages of *Vinland* on his own afterlife, seeking Tir-Nan-Og (the mysterious western island of Celtic tradition which is described to him by the Celtic monks at Warbeth), bears a close resemblance to the writer himself.

By the time he reaches his old age, Ranald Sigmundson has borne witness to the adventure of voyages of exploration in the Atlantic, to the pageantry and splendour of Norse Royal houses, and to the shocking brutality of viking warfare. He has been an adviser to the Earl of Orkney and he has become a successful farmer. He has led a rich, colourful and, as he comes to see it, a blessed life. Having been a wide ranging participant and a witness to all the richnesses and the horrors of viking life, Ranald becomes another Everyman figure. His eventual full acceptance of Christianity among the monks of Warbeth is part of the recurrent pattern that represents Brown’s interpretation of the evolution of the viking ethos:

But Ingerth’s children could not have enough of their grandfather’s stories: how he had stowed away in Iceland on Leif Ericson’s ship; [...] how he had sat at the King’s table in Bergen [...] how he had played chess with the sons of Earl Sigurd at Birsay [...] how he had sailed with hundreds of young men to the terrible battle at Clontarf in Ireland one Good Friday, and escaped from that warp-and-weft of war with only a scratch on his knuckle [...] how he had ridden to the assemblies at Tingvøe year after year, and listened to the open debates and the secret intrigues, and a deep disgust had entered his heart at human folly and cruelty, his own included; and how he had seen that power drives men mad [...] and how he had decided to wash his hands of politics and violence [...] and of how an Irish monk who had stayed for a while with the brothers at Warbeth had told him the marvellous tale of the voyages of Saint Brandon who had sailed out to find the Island of the Blessed in the western sea; and how, at last, he had thought it best to come occasionally and live in this hut by himself, so that he could solve the riddle of fate and freedom; and so make preparations for his last voyage upon the waters of the end. (pp.226-227)

Ranald’s journey towards Christianity represents Brown’s personal reflection on the bloody history of the era and advocates the wisdom of conversion to Christianity, especially for those who have led violent lives. Ranald’s decision to become more Christ-like is the only way forward for him, given his participation in the carnage of Clontarf. But Ranald does not arrive at these conclusions alone in his hermitage. Instead, he is convinced of the truth through his interactions with the Celtic monks of Warbeth. Thus does the bedrock of early Christianity in Orkney resurface in the Norse era, purifying the sins of the viking age. Time and again, Brown presents the pairing of the early semi-indigenous Christians and the unregenerate, belligerent Norse. The result - whether in the poems “Horsemen and Seals, Birsay” and “The Abbot”, in *Vinland*, in “The Nativity Bell and the Falconer”, or in *Magnus* - is the inevitable purification of Norse sin and the creation of a new, harmonious Christian order where the lion lies down with the lamb. Thus, during the process of conversion, Brown’s Norse Orkney becomes a parable land for regions suffering through the destructive conflicts of faiths or races.

Brown's view of the Norse era as not so much an age of admirable and violent daring but one of Christianisation and spiritual progression is deeply influenced by *Orkneyinga Saga* and the Christian master-narrative thereof. Not only does he advance the Christian presentation of Orkney history by recasting saga personalities in an even more pious light than that of the saga¹⁶⁵, but he creates entirely fictional characters like Ranald Sigmundson who live out their lives on the periphery of saga events, allowing his Christian authorial perspective to emerge. The ecclesiastic Icelandic saga author of the twelfth century was anxious to demonstrate the faith and the settled rules of various Christian viking earls, most notably those of Thorfinn the Mighty and Hakon Paulson, the slayer of St. Magnus, and Brown carries on this same tradition. Thorfinn's historical pilgrimage to Rome, where he sought absolution from Pope Leo IX, is discussed in the closing stages of *Vinland*, as well as in the poem "Crossing the Alps", from the collection *Following a Lark* (1996). When Ranald's daughter tells him of the Earl's intended pilgrimage (with his cousin, Macbeth, King of Scotland) there is a rare flash of ironic humour in her description of the famously ugly Earl and the bloody King: "It'll take the Pope the best part of a day to hear the confession of that pair of beauties" (VL, p227). The irony of the Christianisation of men like these is clear to Brown, but his ultimate comment is that their conversion is all the more sincere and meaningful when seen alongside the carnage they have been responsible for in their lives before finding Christ. "Crossing the Alps" invests historical and religious symbolism in the cousins' attainment of the highest mountain pass on the road of their pilgrimage. Macbeth is the speaker here:

A gap of blue between the mountains.
The groom goads the mule no more.
Shall we halt beside this torrent?
The road winds down to orchards and vineyards.

In this instance (and in many respects the piece resembles Eliot's "Journey of the Magi") the poet uses landscape rather than seascape to symbolise a spiritual turning point at the stage of the pilgrimage which is physically most demanding. Halting beside the torrent suggests again an end to violence, while the road winding down "to orchards and vineyards" certainly points to cornucopian comfort in the remainder of the pilgrims' lives, and may even hint - if we consider the road to represent history - at the embryonic stirrings of the Renaissance, south of the Alps in Florence during the high middle ages. Such are the positive benefits of a heartfelt confession and repentance.

We have seen how a younger Thorfinn became an iconic figure of masculine power and identity to Joseph Storer Clouston and Eric Linklater and how these two were influenced by Samuel Laing's admiration for the military prowess of the Norse. Although Brown does not avoid Thorfinn's early career, he has a markedly different focus, detailing rather Thorfinn's escape from Earl Rognvald Brusason's burning of his Orphir home and his subsequent revenge killing of Rognvald and the slaughter of his elite Norwegian bodyguard both in *Vinland* and in "The Fires of Christmas" from *Hawkfall*. In the latter, Brown focuses on Earl Rognvald's fateful slip of the tongue,

¹⁶⁵See D'Arcy pp. 267-270 for discussion of how Brown presents the Earls Magnus and Rognvald in a favourable light.

which is described in the saga as follows:

Then the earl made a slip of the tongue and this is what he said: “We shall have aged enough when this fire burns out”. What he meant to say was that they would have baked enough. He realised his mistake immediately.

“I’ve never made a slip of the tongue before,” he said, “and now I remember what my foster-father King Olaf said when I pointed out a mistake of his, that I’d not have long to live if ever my own tongue made a slip. Perhaps my uncle Thorfinn is still alive after all.” (OS. p.70)

Brown offers the following explanation to the above in “The Fires of Christmas”:

In those doom-ridden days a slip of the tongue was a portent. What does it signify, if you mean to say one thing and you actually say something quite different? It means that your own intentions are being overset by the master-workings of fate; the fallible tongue has become an oracular instrument.

The “doom-ridden” days of the early, pagan stages of *Orkneyinga Saga* are truly the Dark Ages for Brown, when souls were lost and the lives of men governed by cruel gods and chance forces. Not even Thorfinn’s establishment of the bishopric is sufficient to banish the darkness of these early saga days, as Brown sees them. What was required was a sacrifice of the highest order: the martyrdom of Saint Magnus. “The Fires of Christmas” details two incidents, which are separated by about a century: the murder of Earl Rognvald Brusason by Thorfinn the Mighty and the murder of Svein Breast-rope by Svein Asleifarson. In the following epilogue, Brown explains his juxtaposition of these two events in the story:

These two Yuletide happenings, as recorded in the Saga of the Orkney Earls, are separated by almost a century. The second event is as violent and bloody as the first. Men’s lives still issue from the inexorable hands of fate. But in the meantime the blood of St. Magnus had been shed. The second drama is not so dark and hopeless as the first. Fate had given way, to some extent at least, to grace. (HF, p.57)

It is this – Brown’s unique and eccentric relationship with St. Magnus - which sets him apart from predecessors like Laing, Clouston and Linklater, who were so deeply impressed by the warrior earls, but less enamoured with the pious Magnus and his nephew Rognvald Kolson, who was also canonised.

As a practising Roman Catholic from the early fifties until his death in 1996, Brown was by no means typically Orcadian in his religion. The islands are predominantly Church of Scotland in their denomination (St. Magnus Cathedral, for instance, has been a Protestant church since Reformation times). There is a small Roman Catholic community, but the congregation of the chapel in Kirkwall (where Brown worshipped occasionally) consists mostly of Catholics who moved into the islands during the second half of the twentieth century. Herein lies a seeming paradox between Brown’s religion and his Orcadian identity. Roman Catholicism had been the historical religion of Orkney for centuries prior to the Reformation and is in this respect deeply embedded in Orcadian history. Although the Reformation in Orkney was less traumatic than elsewhere in Scotland and, in post-Reformation times, Roman

Catholicism has suffered less from prejudice or sectarianism in Orkney than it has elsewhere in Britain, it is nevertheless a marginal, eccentric aspect of modern Orcadian religious practice. Most Catholic families in Orkney are those who have moved in, usually during the last half century, and generally from the West of Scotland or from Ireland. Thus Brown's particular choice of religion is distinctly un-Orcadian in one respect, while it nevertheless rests very comfortably with his deep interest in medieval Orkney. His fascination with the Norse stems in part from their Catholicism. Brown follows the pro-Norse and anti-Scots stance adopted by David Balfour and Joseph Storer Clouston to an extent, but with a significant difference. Where Clouston objected to what he saw as Scots political misrule in Orkney, Brown resented the root and branch Reformation of Norse Catholicism which came within a century of the beginnings of Scots rule in the islands.

It is understandable, on one level, that Roman Catholicism should appeal to Orcadian writers like Brown or, indeed, Edwin Muir. Unlike Irish or West coast Scottish counterparts or successors such as Joyce, Heaney, Paul Muldoon or Carol Ann Duffy, neither Muir nor Brown had encountered the distorted excesses of sanctimoniousness, institutionalised abuse, or sectarian violence that have been perpetrated in the name of Catholicism in Ireland or mainland Scotland. They have grown up instead amidst the respectable austerity of the Orcadian Church of Scotland, but all the while harbouring their longings for art, image, decoration and iconography in religious practice whilst making their personal journeys towards faith. So much so that when Muir finally walks the streets of Rome it is there, among religious painting, sculpture and architecture, that he realises "that Christ had walked on the Earth" (AA, p.276). This realisation of a link between the tangible and the word of God is also part of what convinces Brown to become a Christian, albeit in a slightly different way. Brown's complete conversion (Muir was never to become a member of any organised church) owes more to Orkney and to literature than it does to travel or the visual or architectural arts.

The landscape, seascape and inhabitants of Orkney represent one of three key influences in the process of Brown's conversion. He describes in "For the Islands I Sing" how the dawning realisation came to him that Christ's parables could refer to Orkney, simply and directly:

The elements of earth and sea, that we thought so dull and ordinary, held a bounteousness and a mystery not of this world. Now I looked with another eye at those providers of our bread and fish [the farmers and fishermen]. That the toil of the earthworker should become, in the Mass, Corpus Christi, was a wonder beyond words, and still is. (p. 54)

The second element in the process of conversion is literature itself, and again the writer explains how the process worked in him: "From every age and airt of literature poems and prose swarmed in to increase the beauty and mystery I had wandered into, it seemed by accident, so long ago" (p. 55). Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, however, comes the figure of Magnus (again from literature, but this time from saga, that strange and amorphous fusion of the literary and the historical):

The Orcadians, if they thought about Magnus Erlendson, considered him to be a queer fish, one of those medieval figures, clustered about with mortifications

and miracles, that have no real place in our enlightened progressive society. For me, Magnus was at once a solid convincing flesh-and-blood man, from whom pure spirit flashed from time to time - and never more brightly than at the hour of his death by an axe-stroke, in Egilsay island on Easter Monday, 1117. Was this Magnus a Catholic or not? In western Europe in the twelfth century there were only Catholics. And the Cathedral in Kirkwall had been built by Catholic masons for the offering of Catholic Mass. It seemed a thing of the utmost simplicity and wonder to me. (pp. 52-53)

Brown was clearly keenly aware of the eccentricity of his position and the attitude of the general populace towards Magnus. The scepticism Brown sensed is discernible in the work of Clouston and Linklater. Later writers such as the historians William Thomson and Barbara Crawford have gone further, examining in detail possible political reasons governing Magnus' seemingly pacifist behaviour as described in *Orkneyinga Saga*, and the likely ulterior motives of those involved in his subsequent canonisation¹⁶⁶. These writers are thus somewhat at odds with Brown's unequivocal faith in the saint. In the second half of the twentieth century, only Paul Bibire's argument that the cult of Magnus must have genuinely existed in order for it to be put to political ends seems to corroborate Brown's point of view¹⁶⁷. But, as Brown has said of his conversion to Catholicism, "the way of argument and reason were not for me" (p.55). An Orcadian whose acquaintance Brown made during his visits to the Kirkwall home of Ernest Marwick in the late nineteen-forties, the historian John Mooney, may also be worthy of a footnote at this point. Mooney's biography of Magnus - *St. Magnus: Earl of Orkney* (1935) - is contemporaneous with Clouston's *History of Orkney* and was well known to Brown. Mooney was a devout Christian, who was in no doubt whatsoever regarding the truth of Magnus' sanctity. Mooney's book might be considered a counterbalance to Clouston's secular hagiography of Thorfinn and Svein, and provided the alternative perspective Brown required to enable him to reach his own conclusions regarding the Orcadian saint.

Brown's sense that Magnus has no place in an "enlightened, progressive society" marries with his unorthodox wider view on history. He would consider the attitude which dismisses Magnus to be typical of the self-centred humanist conceit of the scientific age, a conceit which is the product of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution and which pours patronising scorn on the credulous middle ages. The writer himself, however, does not believe in this predominant western view that sees history as a continuing forward movement from the primordial slime. He bears witness in Orkney to the endless pattern of the seasons and the providence of soil and sea. He therefore views history also as a cycle, a Fable, a perpetually repeated pattern of lives. Thus, rather than being distant in time, Magnus is omnipresent. Again, in a distinctly medieval way, Brown considers Magnus to be among the living in spirit,

¹⁶⁶See Barbara Crawford, "St. Magnus and St. Rognvald - The Two Orkney Saints", in *Scottish Church History Society Records*, Vol. 28 or William P.L. Thomson, *History of Orkney* (Edinburgh, 1987), chapter six, "The Martyrdom of St. Magnus; its Political and Religious Background".

¹⁶⁷Paul Bibire, *Ibid.*, "The Poetry of Earl Rognvaldr's Court" in Barbara Crawford, (ed.) *St. Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth Century Renaissance* (Aberdeen, 1988).

accessible and benevolent, an intermediary between the Orcadian and God. While Humanism might see eye to eye with the glassy stare of the historian, Brown would no more dismiss Magnus' sanctity than he would Christ's miracles. Brown's last literary words, in the final sentence of "For the Islands I Sing", are: "I say once a day at least, 'Saint Magnus, pray for us ...'."

Parallels between Magnus and Christ, or between *Orkneyinga Saga* and the *New Testament*, certainly existed before Brown began his adaptive work with the material of the saga. There is the fact that Magnus' martyrdom occurs at Easter. Depending on our point of view, this can be considered a coincidence or a heaven-ordained pattern demonstrating Magnus' sanctity. Both Magnus and Christ pray fervently in the evening before their respective deaths. When Magnus is apprehended by Hakon and his men in Egilsay, the capture resembles Christ's arrest by the priests at the Hill of Olives. Both Magnus' supporters and Jesus' disciples offer to take up arms to defend their patrons, but both groups are then dissuaded by those patrons. Pilate and Hakon, who have ultimate control over the respective situations, are both recorded as being reluctant to sanction the executions and are therefore dissociated from the killings, which are initiated by a group of largely anonymous priests or chieftains. Both Magnus and Christ are abandon their wills to the will of God, going to execution and crucifixion. Finally, the clothes of both victims are passed on to their killers.¹⁶⁸

Thus can it be seen that the representation of Magnus as a Christ figure goes much further back than George Mackay Brown. When, in his novel *Magnus* and in the various poems on St. Magnus, he explores the parallels between Magnus and Christ, he is continuing in the tradition of the author of *Orkneyinga Saga* or the author of the original Latin *vita* thought to be the source used by the saga for the description of the martyrdom. *Magnus* has been dealt with fairly extensively by other critics¹⁶⁹ and this study shall therefore focus primarily on Brown's depiction of Magnus in verse, other than to make some cursory observations about the novel. *Magnus* is at once deeply embedded in Orcadian literature and at the same time a synthesis of saga and scripture which is begun by the saga author and extended by Brown. All previous commentators, including D'Arcy, Huberman and Spier, comment on the disruptive narrative techniques used in the novel, where Brown deliberately shifts time and linguistic register in what seems a first an unsettling fragmentation but which proves to be a commentary on the cyclical natures of violence and history. *Magnus* utilises linguistic styles as diverse as those of the Authorised Version, English translations of *Orkneyinga Saga* and contemporary seventies journalistic prose. The settings of the novel shift from twelfth century Orkney to central Europe in the mid twentieth century.

In terms of these fragmentary and experimental shifts in register and setting, *Magnus* is perhaps as close as the Orkney novel comes to the postmodern *zeitgeist* and answers the criticism that Brown is somehow locked in to history and unable to offer art which has a meaning for us in the present.

¹⁶⁸See *Luke*, chapters 22-24 and *Orkneyinga Saga* chapters 46-50.

¹⁶⁹See Julian D'Arcy, *ibid.*, (pp. 262-72); Elizabeth Huberman, "George Mackay Brown's "Magnus"" , *Studies in Scottish Literature* 16, 1981, pp.122-34; Hilda D. Spear, (ed.) *George Mackay Brown - A Survey of his Work and a Full Bibliography* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter, 2000), pp. 75-94.

A shorter and more sharply-focused literary response to St. Magnus than the novel itself comes with the group of later poems, “Songs for St. Magnus - The Seven Jars of Sorrow and Comfort”. These first appeared in 1988 as a limited edition of 150 copies with wood engravings by John Lawrence, and were subsequently collected in *The Wreck of the Archangel* (1989). The “Songs for St. Magnus” are arguably the core text in George Mackay Brown’s work, and represent the consummation of his poetic development and his five decade long meditation on the critical Orcadian martyrdom.

The piece makes a typically septahedron form of a selection of saga episodes. These are: the portent of the great wave which breaks over Magnus’ ship on its way to Egilsay; Magnus’ premonition of his death; his sorrows on this realisation; his final night, spent in church on the island; his willing surrender; Hakon’s order to his cook, Lifolf, to carry out the execution; and, finally, the miracles which were said to have occurred at the saint’s tomb. Each event is described in an italicised introduction to the subsequent verse, which then examines the event in detail. Stanzas four and five illustrate the pattern:

4 Magnus passes a night in the church, and a Mass is said for him in the morning

So cold it is in the kirk
 So dark this April night, in cell and choir
 His hands dovetail
 Like the one stone that locks an arch
 To hold his shaken spirit still.
 So cold it is, so dark.
 Then, soon, the opening rose of dawn.
Calix sanguinis mei
 One hand unfolds like a bird
 And makes, at matin-time, a cross in the air.

5 Magnus comes out of the church and stands among his enemies

Ite: the voyage is over. The skipper steps out of the stone ship
 With a blank bill-of-lading.
 A daffodil keeps a crumb of snow.
 A lark
 Soaks the “isle-of-the-kirk” in a shower of lyrics.
 He offers his clay to wheel and kiln once more.
 Below a ploughman
 Follows, with a drift of gulls, his dithering share.

The subtle alliterations and quiet assonances of this, Brown’s later verse, are a world apart from the rhetorical Hopkinsean gusto of earlier pieces such as the title poem (“What blinding storm there was! ...”) or the Prologue (“For Scotland I sing, that Knox ruined nation ...”) of *The Storm and Other Poems*. While Hopkins’ “The Wreck of the Deutschland” or “Hurrahing in Harvest” seem to have initiated some of the early poetic impulses, the “Songs for St. Magnus Day” represent the mature verse Douglas Dunn identifies as arriving with Brown’s 1965 collection, *The Year of the*

Whale: “By then Brown had succeeded in sorting the excessively rhetorical to an idiom closer to linguistic reality”¹⁷⁰. The above verses from “Songs for St. Magnus Day” combine the epic saga-narrative, the mysteriously beautiful and alienating free-verse plainchant effect of the medieval Latin mass (“*Calix sanguinis mei*”) and the haiku poet’s concern with the naturally transient and fragile (“A daffodil keeps a crumb of snow”). The ornithological imagery is at once traditional (for peace, the martyr’s hands dovetail in prayer) and indigenously Orcadian (skylarks are everywhere in Orkney, and everywhere in Brown the lark is representative of joy and freedom). April is the pivotal time of year, not only because it includes Easter and is therefore suggestive of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, but also because even in a pagan sense April is the time of resurrection in the natural cycle, hence the references to ploughing and daffodils. Transubstantiation is alluded to directly in the Latin excerpts, however the repeated and continual oscillation between the earthly and the heavenly is Brown’s own entirely, so that in one verse we have “*Calix sanguinis mei*” followed by the ploughman making ready the soil for a rebirth in the seed and crop in the next verse. It is as if Magnus’ martyrdom will ensure continued fertility *and* peace on earth - his death is at once a pagan blood sacrifice and a Christian martyrdom. The skipper with “blank bill of lading”, Magnus offers his bodily clay “to wheel and kiln once more”, laying down his life to become a transformed vessel of another sort, capable, as a medieval saint, of carrying confession or prayer to God. Throughout the piece, the imagery is of the linked opposites of land and sea, of departure and arrival. Brown’s strange Biblical/Saga synthesis comes to the fore in the final two verses:

6 The cook, Lifolf, is summoned by Earl Hakon to execute Earl Magnus in a stony place

Lifolf the cook had killed a lamb
 And a brace of pigeons.
 A shore-stone flowered with flames.
 Lifolf gave the stewpot a stir.
 Eight hawk-masks stood on the hill.
 ‘Lifolf,’ they sang, ‘here’s better butchering -
 Come up, come up!’ ...
 ‘The lords get hungry after a hunt,’ said Lifolf.
 He washed his hands in the burn.
 He went in a slow dance
 Up to the blank stone in the barren moor.

7 Invocation of the blind and the infirm at the tomb of Magnus

Saint Magnus keep for us a jar of light
 Beyond sun and star.

It is perhaps Lifolf, washing his hands, rather than Hakon himself who is the most reminiscent of Pilate here. Maybe in his slaughter of the lamb (of God) and the doves (of peace), Lifolf reminds us of the recurrence of timeless evil perpetrated once by Pilate and continuing here. A single word – “burn” - re-localises or Scotticises the

¹⁷⁰Douglas Dunn, “Finished Fragrance”, in Hilda D. Spear, *Ibid.* (p26).

story at this point before finally shifting the poem's focus to the potentially healing effects of the martyrdom and a return to the "vessel" imagery and the concept of the saint present among the living. Magnus' death, the moment of his transition from earth to heaven, is written out, and we are left with the final impression that death is of little importance when considered alongside the everlasting life promised here not in Christ's resurrection, but in Magnus' continued eternal life.

Thus does Brown place Magnus at the centre of his work and life. In his preoccupation with the martyrdom and his insistence on focusing on the Christian aspects of the Norse period, Brown may be just as selective in his reading and reworking of *Orkneyinga Saga* as his predecessors in Orkney. But he succeeds in restoring the balance of saints alongside sinners, re-evaluating the saga subsequent to the interpretations of Laing, Clouston and Linklater. Brown's outlook is in no way influenced by the military or Imperialist backgrounds of these predecessors, and his perspective is therefore different, recognising the terrible evils and simultaneously celebrating the apparently Christ-like virtues of at least some of the medieval Orcadian Norse.

The Orkney landscape in an apocalyptic light

Brown's spiritual voyages inevitably lead to the other side and back again. The narrator of "The Storm" comes ashore on Eynhallow; Odivere finds his way back to Rousay; Ranald Sigmundson returns from the uncanny shores of Vinland to his boyhood Orkney; the "wavering westering ebb-drawn shoal" in "Kirkyard" gives way to the poet's temporal considerations in the cemetery; Magnus' prayers hallow the earthly work of the ploughman. The land, the temporal world, Orkney, is always there. A rare personal tribute "Attie Campbell - 1900-1967" from Brown's final book of verse *Following A Lark* (1996) ponders the mystery of the death of a friend some thirty years previously, postulating that perhaps a familiar Orkney is better than an unknown heaven:

For that far glim you'd crank your aged car,
But that the faint bell-cry
Of tide changing in Hoy Sound,
The corn surges that salve the deep plough wound,
Would draw you home to where you are
At Warbeth, among the dead who do not die.

The tolling bell is reversed in its usual purpose, calling the dead back to an Orcadian utopia. The ebb tide, which draws souls westward into eternity in "Kirkyard", turning here brings them home again on the flood. The resurrection of corn, it is suggested this time, might bring the paradoxically undying dead back once more to Warbeth. The life of earth is as difficult to resist as death itself, the salve of the "corn surges" implying a reversed, earthly salvation. The reassuring yet troubling continuum described here and elsewhere in Brown is inevitably linked to nature and is reminiscent of Robert Rendall in "Cragman's Widow".

Brown's use of place names (Hoy Sound and Warbeth) both here and throughout his verse is significant indeed. The place names are forceful affirmations of his Orkney identity and assertions of the difference of this identity from the central and dominant

English linguistic culture which he nevertheless draws on for his language. Brown writes Orkney in English, which has arguably not been the predominant language of the islands. In complete contrast to Walter Traill Dennison or Robert Rendall, Brown was only very rarely to write in Orcadian Scots. A sole poem – an assured and very natural-sounding piece called “Stars” from *Loaves and Fishes* (1959) - exists in Orcadian Scots. Scots language was evidently not a medium in which Brown felt comfortable working. The writing nevertheless maintains a distinct Orkney accent which owes to more than its Orkney setting. He would certainly have been aware of Hugh Marwick’s work on Norse Orcadian onomastics in *The Orkney Norn*¹⁷¹. Occasional Orcadian words make their way in (cuithe, forbye, hoast, skerry, whitemaa) but Brown’s language remains predominantly English. Orcadian place names assert difference with more regularity, however, so that we encounter Bigging, Birsay, Braga, Dounby, Hamnavoe, Hrossey, Hoy, Tormiston, Warbeth, Yesnaby, Orkney itself, in a robust, Nordic onomastic litany which includes farm names, skerry names, settlement names, parish names, district names and island names. (The books themselves often contain a frontispiece depicting a map of Orkney, from *An Orkney Tapestry* in 1969 to *Following A Lark* in 1996 - the map enhances the rich geography of the writing.) As Robert Crawford has written of Seamus Heaney:

Heaney may employ occasional dialect words like “clabber” in his poems, but his work is written almost entirely in standard English. Explicitly and implicitly, though, Irish subject-matter stresses the culture from which the verse originates, making the poems’ cultural origins a necessary part of their meaning. Heaney likes to use distinctively Irish place names – “Glanmore Sonnets”, “A Lough Neagh Sequence”, “Anahorish” - because local place-names (frequently employed by writers such as Dunn, Harrison, Norman MacCaig and Les A. Murray) are a way of asserting a local identity. Place names may function as dialect, asserting the bond between a particular culture and its soil; at the same time, as Burns knew, the celebration of place names in poetry is a celebration of the often denigrated provincial, an assertion that any and every place is good enough for literature ...¹⁷²

This geographical and rural aspect of Brown’s poetry connects him to postmodern contemporaries outwith Orkney in Scotland, Ireland, England and even, in the case of Les Murray, in Australia, thus giving the lie to any accusation of provincialism or isolation in his writing. While Murray happily describes his project as a “Boetian” reaction to urban self-centredness, Douglas Dunn has dubbed these poets (along with Ted Hughes and Norman MacCaig) the “Barbarians”, with a playful irony that is a poke in the eye to a London/Oxbridge focussed mentality¹⁷³. “Agricultural Show: Dounby”¹⁷⁴ is another such piece of Brown’s where a place name specifies geographical and cultural location. An older poet considers the end of his life in Orkney and the lives of the young still to be lived there:

Turn at the gate. Bless his urgency,
This new word in the story of Orc.

¹⁷¹Hugh Marwick, *The Orkney Norn* (Oxford 1929).

¹⁷²Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Edinburgh, 1992), p.289.

¹⁷³Dunn, *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴From *Following a Lark*, (London, 1996).

Bless the supplanter.
Lay sunset lingerings on

That hill of blond surges, they hallow
Tomorrow's harvester. And see,
The horse we banished from our hills
Drifts delicately to his handful of grass.

In these verses there is an ambiguity as to whether it is Orkney or life itself which is being gladly passed on to this representative of the next generation. The horse symbolises the land and a wholesome and natural continuity in much the same way as it does in Muir's "The Horses", the "story of Orc" also suggests Muir's "Story", the life of the individual which is counterpoint to the fabulous life of mankind.

Ideas of return to Orkney and continuity in its way of life are central also to all three of Brown's remaining longer works: *Greenvoe* (1972), *Time in a Red Coat* (1984) and *Beside the Ocean of Time* (1994). These novels exhibit marked similarities and can be considered together as the expression of Brown's pacifism, what might be termed his anti-capitalism and his general wider suspicion of science and "progress". *Time in a Red Coat* is perhaps the most ambitious of the three, adopting an unconventional allegorical form whereby the central character, a girl identifiable by her symbolic red coat, travels from the Far East to Orkney in a centuries-long journey. The device of the red coat is rich in connotation. As a coincidentally identical emblem does in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, the coat suggests military uniform, blood-staining, the vitality of the child, hope, or the European folk tale. The girl's quest is to defeat the dragon of war, her only weapons are a bag of coins and a flute. Thus is art presented as having the potential to overcome war. Her folktale origins (like Little Red Riding Hood she makes her journey through a landscape fraught with danger) set her simply against the complex barbaric minds of the military generals and strategists of the Napoleonic Wars and, later, the scientist architects of modern warfare. Eventually she makes her way northwards and westwards through England to Orkney, where the fable culminates.

The statement of Cold War anxiety and romantic longing for a simple and contentedly isolated post-apocalyptic island existence expressed first in Muir's "The Horses" is at the core of a great deal of Brown's writing. Muir's poem describes the supernatural return of work horses to a post-apocalyptic island setting. The suggestion of reversion to a pre-industrial way of life is common to many of Brown's central works (see especially *Fishermen with Ploughs*, *Greenvoe*, *Beside the Ocean of Time*), but it is not until the relatively late *Time in a Red Coat* that Muir surfaces most prominently. It is as if Brown has arrived at a stage of maturity and confidence in his own voice, which enables him to exhibit his debt to Muir without detracting from his own achievement. Where MacDiarmid's influence had initiated Rendall's poetry, it is Muir more than any other who is the shaping influence in the work of George Mackay Brown. The very chapter headings of *Time in a Red Coat* suggest Muir's non-specific yet all-encompassing archetypal and allegorical settings and situations - The Masque, The Well, The Inn, The Taken Town, The Longest Journey. The chapter describing the siege of a central European city is particularly reminiscent of Muir's "The Good Town", showing how the anarchy unleashed by war corrupts every citizen. Asian and continental European journeying ensures, as Muir's widely-

travelled autobiography also does, that *Time in a Red Coat* speaks for a broader-than-Orcadian humanity. Despite this pervasive influence of Muir, we are left with the impression that the novel represents something very personal. Authorial intrusions (“How shall a writer who has never seen shot fired in anger describe what followed?” (p.137)) disrupt any semblance of realism, disarming the reader. The point is again Brechtian, a *Verfremdungseffekt* where the textual illusion breaks down and author addresses reader directly, drawing attention to his pacifist purpose in describing the battle. Coming from a writer like Brown, for whom it is not natural to inhabit his own text, these addresses provide an air of frank directness.

In England, the story approaches a climax as the girl lodges in the stately home of a retired general. The general’s macabre, Abbotsfordish antiquarian museum of military memorabilia becomes progressively more disturbing and surreal as she moves from one gallery to another, viewing artefacts from the Classical, Medieval, Industrial and Modern periods of warfare in a movement which arches through time towards a desperately bleak future. A servant is the narrator who records the happenings:

One case in this gallery seemed out of place, in that there was nothing there with any war connotation. There was a crystal vial, or flagon, filled almost to the neck with a grey liquor. She murmured, “Women’s tears to water a little field” [...] Between the crystal and the clay lay a gold medallion, of ancient Chinese minting, and it made the girl pause and cry out; it depicted round the circumference a dragon, a dove, a fish, and a horse, all circling in a kind of dance (except that the head of the dragon was turned somewhat against the stream of stillness), and in the middle of this ballet was minted a shrouded figure playing on a kind of primitive harp ... From this priceless coin she could not be moved for fully ten minutes [...] In the last case lay a lump of uranium ore. (p. 215)

The grave and awesome image of tears sufficient to water a little field brings us directly to Muir’s poem “Reading in Wartime”¹⁷⁵: “Though the world has bled/ For four and a half years./ And wives and mother’s tears/ Collected would be able/ To water a little field ...”. (Another echo is in the phrase “the narrow place” (p. 220), the title of one of Muir’s poems, suggesting a narrowing of life in its closing stage.) The medallion itself demonstrates just how effective the unconventional poetic-allegorical mode proves for Brown and the symbolism is powerfully suggestive. The dragon swimming against the harmonious stream is war, the dove is peace, each representing an aspect of human nature. The fish is the human soul or the symbol of Christ, while the horse, Muir’s emblem, is again the earth spirit of pagan resurrection from soil to bread. Between them the symbols encompass the elements: the dragon is fire, the dove air, the fish is water and the horse is earth. The monosyllabic and syntactical punch of the final brief sentence, which reveals finally the contents of the last case, suggests that here we have reached an impenetrably black conclusion, the unknown ore with the potential to break the hallowed circle of the medallion forever.

Uranium is anathema to this writer. Proposals in the seventies to mine uranium in the Orcadian West Mainland prompted uncharacteristic protest poems (“Uranium 1” and

¹⁷⁵ *Collected Poems* (London, 1960), p.148.

“Uranium 2”, collected in the posthumous *Travellers*¹⁷⁶) exhibiting an unprecedented strength of feeling. (Ernest Marwick and Marjorie Linklater were two prominent anti-uranium protesters at the time). The threat to the Orkney landscape and environment, coupled with Brown’s ideological opposition to what he saw as science’s final step too far, resulted in occasional later work with an urgent sense of anti-nuclear purpose. The closing stages of *Time in a Red Coat*, therefore, introduce uranium prospectors to Ottervoe, the fictional Orcadian island which is the girl’s final destination, seeking ore in the hills. The ambiguous closing stages suggest indeed that art can overcome and heal, that the music of her flute can banish the dragon:

It was a pastoral, a country blessing, a song of peace without end.
It drew strength from the island noises - it put a fleeting beauty upon them - and then returned to itself, completing the pure lyric circle. (p. 244)

So Brown’s allegorical world-book returns, of course, to Orkney. Unlike Muir’s post-Edenic quest, which sought an impossible return from spiritual exile, the perambulations or peregrinations of Brown’s protagonists (like Linklater’s) always reach this island end point. The novels invariably close on the point of healing. *Time in a Red Coat* ends with a bright “The kettle’ll soon be singing” (249). The ravages of war cannot prevent Thorfinn Ragnarson’s return to Norday in *Beside the Ocean of Time*. Nor is a gargantuan, sinister, non-specific construction project able to obliterate the life of Hellya in *Greenvoe*, and the islanders here make their inevitable ceremonial return.

Greenvoe and *Beside the Ocean of Time* might be considered too close in content for some readers, particularly in their latter stages where both island cultures are virtually annihilated by alien, scientifically-driven forces. Gathering pace in their conclusions, the novels describe respectively the emptying of Hellya to make way for what seems like a Cold War installation “essential to the security of the western world” (GV. p.272) and the emptying of Norday to make way for a World War Two military airfield. Both novels bring a symbolic industrial revolution to the pastoral, agrarian, feudal order of Orkney. The massive mobilisations of construction plant and the influx of large numbers of alien Scots and Irish migrant workers result in the break up of a timeless equilibrium. As well as the islands witnessing their first ever small-scale industrial disputes, the influx corrupts locals of weaker spirit who sell-out or cash-in on the easy money available in the short term. The venal sins of these petty entrepreneurs who sell their culture and way of life are shown to be utterly shameful. *Greenvoe*’s shopkeeper Joseph Evie feathers his personal nest and receives his British Empire Medal in the process, before moving from his home island to Kirkwall. It would appear that Brown objects to the impositions of Empire and is wary of its potential detrimental effect on local cultures. Cold War anxieties and a suspicion of globalisation result in a novel which is a warning and a reminder to Orcadians that their islands and their culture are delicate.

The figure of Mansie Anderson of the Bu is central to *Greenvoe* in this respect. He and the other farmers of the island interior stand for a continuity stronger than that of the villagers who are the novel’s central subjects but who “sell up” to the operation. Brown uses Old Testament allusion to convey the tenacity of Mansie Anderson and

¹⁷⁶London, 2001.

his family in the face of virtual obliteration. The Indian peddler Johnny Singh is the first to compare the Bu, with its evident fertility in the number of children and the variety of animals to “Noah’s Ark” (P. 105). Later, after the obliterating flood which is Operation Dark Star, it is Mansie Anderson, the archetypal Orcadian (and the third Mansie o’ the Bu to be considered in this study, following Linklater’s Magnus Merriman and the Mansie of Rendall’s “Celestial Kinsmen”) who returns to the island, like Noah, with his sons, to make offerings of appeasement and thanksgiving here in the form of whisky and bread, promising a resurrected and ongoing island life. He is God’s chosen survivor and tradition bearer. Likewise, the anarchic closing chapters of *Beside the Ocean of Time* are assuaged in a coda where the island artist Thorfinn Ragnarson returns to bear a scorched and distorted but enduring island identity on through to the next generation. The fear of annihilation is always overcome by the promise of return. The characters, location, language, or patterning of Brown’s fiction could not be further removed from the work of Scottish contemporaries such as George Friel or Robin Jenkins, let alone the respective realist and fantasised Central Belt wastelands of James Kelman or Alasdair Gray. This is not to deny Brown his contemporary significance, for he ensures the safe continuity of Orkney’s cultural place and otherness on the map of literary Scotland.

In George Mackay Brown, Orkney finds perhaps its most accomplished writer so far. Through his fiction of spiritual and miraculous agricultural regeneration, he offers a deeply held assurance of the spiritual and cultural survival of the way of life of his islands in the face of danger at the hands of modern scientific, industrial and imperial forces. His intensely felt responsibility to his contemporary community as skald or bard is matched by his awareness that he works within a historical and insular literary tradition encompassing *Orkneyinga Saga*, Walter Traill Dennison, Eric Linklater, Edwin Muir, Robert Rendall and Ernest Marwick as well as the innumerable anonymous singers of songs and tellers of tales. If we couple with this the fact that the settings and subjects of his work are almost exclusively Orcadian, it becomes apparent that here is a writer who is an archetypal islander. Nevertheless, in an increasingly secular Orkney, he adopts in Roman Catholicism a minority religion, setting himself apart from most of his fellow Orcadians. His unusual choice of religion then moves into myth of an increasingly complex nature. His work is given initial impetus by the epic fiction of rural community of the Scottish Renaissance. Although they are born in the mists of prehistory, Brown nevertheless brings his novels swiftly to a close in post-war Orkney in order to make his pacifist and anti-capitalist stance clear for the modern age. Although written in the post-war period, his work makes only occasional (but significant) forays into the modern epoch. His concerns are political only in the very broadest sense of the word, and religious throughout. Amidst his considerable successes in the international world of literature, Brown’s warnings of the dangers of abandonment of history and local tradition suggest that his small home audience remained at the forefront of his consciousness throughout his career.

7) SAGA AS A MODERN MEDIUM : TWO CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

This final chapter considers two strikingly similar yet independent contemporary historical novels, Margaret Elphinstone's *Islanders*¹⁷⁷ and Gregor Lamb's *Langskail*¹⁷⁸, both of which approach saga material from a distinctly modern point of view, while at the same time being acutely conscious of the work of many of the above writers. Kent-born Elphinstone is an "outsider", a professional writer and academic who chooses in *Islanders* to write a novel set in twelfth century Fair Isle, while Gregor Lamb is well known locally in his various capacities as folklorist, historian, lexicographer and authority on the place names of his native Orkney.

Margaret Elphinstone's Islanders

Islanders (1994) tells the story of a child, Astrid, who is shipwrecked on Fair Isle in the twelfth century. The narrative moves to the Shetland island of Papa Stour (where Elphinstone worked for a time at the excavation of a Norse archaeological site and where her initial ideas for the novel took shape) before returning to Fair Isle at its conclusion. The novel is deliberately saga-esque in some ways and owes a good deal to *Orkneyinga Saga*. However, it also includes a number of significant challenges to or reversals of what we might expect in saga and redefines the form in order to foreground issues of gender and sexuality which, for a variety of reasons, are not present in the medieval originals.

Astrid, her father and the crew of his ship are making passage to Norway, fleeing a pirate raid in their home city of Dublin, when a storm drives them ashore on Fair Isle. All are drowned except Astrid, who manages to scramble up a rock face as the ship is broken up. The following morning she is discovered - close to death - by Einar Thorvaldsson, a local farmer who takes her to Shirva, his home, provides for her and subsequently adopts her. Other significant characters include Einar's brother Bjarni and his daughter Ingrid; Einar and Bjarni's sister-in-law Ingebjorg; Ingebjorg's sons Thorvald and Olaf; Rolf and Dagfinn, brothers at the neighbouring farm of Byrstada and Snorri, the blacksmith. The novel details the events of the year following the shipwreck as Astrid gradually becomes a part of the community she has been so violently cast among. Elphinstone's next book - *The Sea Road* (Edinburgh 2000) - also draws on saga templates, dealing with the Norse colonies in North America, while her later adventure *Hy Brasil* (Edinburgh 2002) is set in a fictional North Atlantic island

Islanders is primarily and compellingly narrative-driven, and is not governed by any particular feminist or gay agenda. However, Norse society is convincingly and unequivocally presented as being severely detrimental to the fulfilment of both female and homosexual male characters. This theme of peripheralisation, of characters being forced to occupy a position on the edge of a society dominated by heterosexual males, is hinted at in the choice of geographical setting even before the characters themselves have been fully introduced. Fridarey (the medieval name for Fair Isle is used throughout) is an island of some eight square kilometres lying midway between Orkney and Shetland. It is visible from the respective northern and

¹⁷⁷Edinburgh, 1994.

¹⁷⁸Kirkwall, 1998.

southern extremities of each, when conditions are good. The map on the frontispiece showing the relative positions of Scandinavia, Shetland, Fair Isle, Orkney and Scotland, has been deliberately turned through 180 degrees so that our perspective looks south towards Scotland, suggesting the altered perspectives which are so important a preoccupation of the novel, identifying the northern territory and hinting that we may be expected to look at it differently¹⁷⁹. Archaeological and geographical study shows what was desirable, or necessary, for human existence on a North Atlantic island in the middle ages:

... a set of simple criteria ... encapsulate the main requirements of a subsistence economy set within a North Atlantic environment. The fundamentals are well-established; they require sea access, a safe bay, level ground for a farmstead, and adjacent well-drained arable land and suitable pasture.¹⁸⁰

Although benefiting from many of the above, where Fair Isle is lacking in this simple set of criteria is clear:

... the sea access fell short of that deemed optimum in mainland Shetland.¹⁸¹

The difficulties of sea access to the island become apparent to Astrid from the outset. Insularity of setting extends into insularity as theme as she realises she is completely cut off from the rest of the world: the shipwreck occurs late in the year and therefore no sea journeys will be made until the following summer. There is an added irony in the fact that although Fridarey lies directly on the main shipping route between the two thriving Norse colonies of Orkney and Shetland, as well as being at the centre of the great trade routes between Scandinavia and all of the western lands, it has a dangerous, inadequate harbour as well as insufficient resources to attract trading ships and therefore seems to offer little hope of a passage to Norway, Astrid's original destination and the home of her only remaining kinsfolk. The claustrophobia of her situation is compounded by the contrast between her affluent and cosmopolitan upbringing in Dyflin (Dublin) and the relative poverty and primitivism she encounters in Fridarey. In an extended analogy, the isolated geographical situation of the island mirrors Astrid's peripheral position within her new community where she suffers a reduction of status on three counts: the fact that she is an outsider, the fact she is a child and the fact that she is female.

The isolation and insignificance of the island in terms of the Norse world is ironically emphasised by the islanders' descriptions of the bit-parts played by their ancestors in the sagas. Saga heroes like Kari Solmundarsson take on celebrity status and their fleeting visits to Fridarey are magnified in order, it seems, to convince Astrid that the island has some worth after all. It becomes clear that Ragna, one of the island girls, has a chip on her shoulder as she tells Astrid:

¹⁷⁹This point is made by Douglas Gifford in "Contemporary Fiction II: Seven Writers in Scotland" in Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan, (eds.) *The History of Scottish Women's Writing* (Edinburgh, 1997), p.606.

¹⁸⁰J.R. Hunter, *Fair Isle - The Archaeology of an Island Community* (Edinburgh, 1996), p.109.

¹⁸¹*Ibid.*

‘Kari Njal’s son-in-law was here, you know. He stayed a whole winter at Byrstada with David, my ancestor. ... The name Kari has been common here ever since.’ (p.125)

The inferiority complex felt by the islanders is apparent in their keenness to be associated with the saga character. Snorri is anxious to make it clear that he has sailed with Svein Asleifarson and puffs up at the very mention of the great viking’s name, missing the irony in the fact that he was crippled as a result of his pirate voyaging, his choice of career being subsequently restricted to the smithy. The embarrassment of the costly blunders made by the people of his island while trying to support Earl Paul of Orkney against the aggression of Rognvald Kolsson does not suppress Thorvald’s need to reiterate Fridarey’s small role in *Orkneyinga Saga* to the new priest:

‘... Rognvald was always devious. He sent spies here in a fishing boat, a man called Unn, who brought three Hjaltnlanders with him. ... He went to Shirva and we - my family - we treated him well and gave him a place to live ...’ (pp.387-8)

Points of contact with existing sagas narratives, then, are restricted and usually serve the purpose of emphasising the parochialism of both setting and characters. This represents a deliberate change of perspective from the tendency among other authors (such as Linklater or Brown) to rework existing saga narrative in a more direct and straightforward manner. The choice of Fair Isle as the location of the novel has been carefully considered. The connections detailed above are based on the genuine but scant links the island has with the sagas. As Hunter puts it, Njal’s saga uses Fair Isle in a purely “locational capacity”¹⁸². In *Orkneyinga Saga* the island is referred to only as a strategic military outpost and, as such, merits little of the saga author’s attention. *Islanders* is a story of isolated characters in an out of the way place and Astrid’s awareness, after the shipwreck, of the “darkness at the edge of the world” (p.9) sets the dominant theme with grim foreboding.

Islanders is very much a historical novel which utilises and exploits certain aspects of the saga tradition rather than working within that tradition. Where Linklater’s *The Men of Ness* or Lamb’s *Langskail* can be thought of more as evolutionary descendants in the genre, *Islanders* refers only in passing to the various stylistic conventions of saga writing. The opening pages include a genealogical tree that illustrates the relationships between the various characters, a common feature of modern saga translations. The syntactical formula “There was a man called ... who farmed the lands of ...”, which is so common in saga, appears from time to time. During formalised story telling, characters will make statements such as “This isn’t an important part of the story ...”. The selfconscious awareness of digression from an almost arbitrarily selective narrative is also commonplace in saga, where the narrators believed themselves to some extent to be enforcing limits on a potentially limitless reality¹⁸³. (The effect is disarming to the modern reader who is used to imagined texts

¹⁸²Hunter, p103.

¹⁸³Carol Clover encapsulates this idea, suggesting that “...every saga represents an individual solution to the fundamental problem of where to draw the line.” Carol Clover, “Open Composition: The Atlantic Interlude in *Njal’s Saga*” in John Tucker, (ed.) *Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York, 1989), p.281.

which have been created without extraneous detail and aiming - after the Aristotelian model - at artistic unity). Like their saga counterparts, many of the characters are typically laconic in their speech. The quasi-Scandinavian northern setting, the use of Norse names, the tense, intricate lawsuits and the description of certain Norse customs are reminiscent of saga, too. Beyond this, however, there is little of the traditional stuff of the genre. Violence is minimal, erupting and passing quickly without much comment, there is no central blood-feud, there are no battles and the lawsuits result in peaceful resolutions as opposed to the bloodshed we would expect in saga proper. There are lengthy and detailed descriptions of characters' subjective feelings and a large amount of space is taken up in the lyrical evocation of natural surroundings. Female characters command as much of the narrative as male characters do and there are gay characters. All of this is a far cry from anything written in thirteenth century Iceland.

Elphinstone has said in discussion of *Islanders* that historical fiction has no real purpose unless it is connected in some way to the present¹⁸⁴, making the implicit suggestion that Astrid's struggle within and against the patriarchal island society is representative in some way of the lives of modern women. When Snorri comments, in the midst of the storytelling after a feast, that "We should think about the old stories ... they tell us what kind of people we once were" (p.199), he seems to be making his point directly to the reader. Old stories, such as this one, can tell us how we were and also, to some extent, how we are. The extent of male domination in Elphinstone's twelfth century Fridarey is, I would venture, greater than any gender inequality that exists in modern industrial society. However, parallels and contrasts could certainly be drawn between the two ages. Astrid's reactions to the confines of her situation are invariably spirited, but inevitably decisions made on her behalf overwhelm any personal preferences she may have.

The first hint at the structure of this society comes in the opening sections where Astrid emphatically refers to herself as "Astrid Kolsdottir". She stresses her family name in order to establish her credentials as a free individual (as opposed to being a thrall) but the patronymic emphasises to the modern, English speaking reader both Astrid's identification with and her belonging to Kol, her father. After Kol's drowning, Einar goes to the Thing - which is almost exclusively the province of the island men - to determine that Astrid will be free and will become his responsibility as a member of his household. Einar and his brother Bjarni dominate the female inhabitants of Shirva: this much is clear from details such as seating arrangements which place them at the head of the table¹⁸⁵ and the fact that the men are always served food before the women eat. The marriages of both Astrid and Ragna are arranged by men, without consultation. Some of the female characters appear to lend their approval to these misogynistic arrangements. When Einar's niece Gudrun suggests to Astrid that Einar might have a sexual interest in her Astrid replies that Einar is old enough to be her grandfather, only to be silenced by the question "Why should that stop him?" (p.32). The relative positions of women and men in the island as a whole are symbolised in the following discussion of the fishing grounds:

¹⁸⁴Seminar at Glasgow University, December 17th, 1998.

¹⁸⁵Crawford notes that "The significance of seating arrangements round the table [...] is symbolic of the hierarchical nature of such heroic societies". Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester, 1987), p.193.

When the men began to talk about fishing medes Astrid could never understand what they were referring to. Ingrid had explained to her that they were obscure on purpose, but there was not much Astrid could do with such knowledge. At first their secret language had made her feel indignant, but now she accepted it. (p.191)

Astrid's indignation giving way to quiet acceptance is a recurrent pattern as she is forced time and again to accept the inevitability of the situations in which she finds herself. In the initial stages some of the women suggest that Einar wants Astrid as a concubine. However, although there is a distinct sexual inequality and the women are largely controlled by the men, these characters are not drawn in black and white. The men are not monsters: there is no physical abuse on their part. Nor is there any straightforward, overly simple, binary opposition between the sexes. Einar, it transpires, has Astrid's best interests at heart and when she voices her desire to travel to Papey Stora (Papa Stour) to meet Amundi Palsson, a powerful chieftain and former trading acquaintance of her father's who she feels might help her, Einar "couldn't in all conscience send a child like that into the unknown" (p.112). It is the society which would legally permit the enslavement of young girls into concubinage which is being criticised, rather than Einar as an individual.

Nevertheless, Astrid exercises a paradoxical and dangerous control over her guardian. Einar believes that Astrid is a "fate" sent to him by the sea. This is the reason he argues for her freedom at the Thing. As well as Einar's lingering belief in Fate, superstitions regarding folklore creatures such as Trows and Selkies are current within the predominantly but superficially Christian context of the island. The locals regard Astrid as something uncanny to begin with ("So it's the selkie, is it? ... Who's this? Einar's nixie is it?", p.32). When Olaf later tells Astrid the story of the Selkie, he clearly fantasises that the beautiful naked creature is her: it looks like Astrid, with unusual long brown hair and freckles. What is significant in Olaf's version of the tale is the fact that, after being captured by a man, being kept ashore as his wife and finally escaping, the selkie returns to have its revenge. The creature's alluring sex appeal, it transpires, has lethal results and the young men of the island are cursed, destined for evermore to die at sea.

So it is with Astrid. After a night's drinking at the Byrstada feast, Einar realises at last that she has become a woman. As his protective insistence that she is a child finally gives way to a physical impulse towards her, he begins to call her an "Irish selkie". Astrid is shocked and terrified:

She was scared into a lie. 'I'm going with Olaf.'

'And what shall I do, then?' He laughed, and swayed on his feet. 'Go fishing? That's cold and comfortless, on a night as wild as this.' His arm tightened suddenly, and he reached to kiss her. He missed her mouth, but his lips smeared wetly on her cheek.

She pushed his arm from her shoulders and struggled to get away. 'Yes, if you like,' she said desperately. 'Go fishing!'

'A hard fate,' he murmured, as she fled. (p.202)

In something resembling an ugly parody of the fairy tale of the frog prince, Einar's

clumsy kiss releases a torrent of negative emotion which, ultimately, results in tragedy. It is unclear whether he is referring to Astrid or to the fishing itself when he talks, in skaldic diction, of his “hard fate”. He chooses to set off directly, however, into the dark and the gale. Neither Einar nor his small boat are seen again. In an ironic exchange, the sea which has given Astrid to the island takes Einar in return. As in so many folk tales in the Scottish tradition, including that of the selkie wife, female eldritch creatures have a dangerous allure. Linklater used the theme in his Orkney short story *Sealskin Trousers*¹⁸⁶ where the selkie is a male seducer. Similarly, sexual union between mortals and gods is a common motif in Norse mythology¹⁸⁷. Astrid is aligned with the supernatural. In spite of the patriarchal structure around her, her sexuality is dangerous and inadvertently drives Einar - whether through feelings of unfulfilled desire, rejection or guilt - to his death. Although the tragic outcome is by no means what Astrid would have wished for him (up to this point she has looked on him as a surrogate father) it does seem that it is only in supernatural terms that women can truly overwhelm the structure of male control in the island.

Further examples of this control arise during social gatherings where much of the entertainment after the feasting consists of the narration of saga tales from Iceland or Orkney. Barbara Crawford has described the contemporary reception of saga, with particular regard to chapter nine of *Orkneyinga Saga* (which she chooses to call Jarl’s Saga), in the following terms:

... the only women portrayed in *Jarl’s Saga* are playing a very stereotyped role, and it is quite clear they are only being mentioned because of their contribution to the dramatic incidents being recounted. ... The only thing this chapter of the saga tells us is that the saga writer knew well what a thirteenth-century audience liked to hear about the female sex.¹⁸⁸

The point is that *Orkneyinga Saga* presents stereotypically violent, cunning and one-dimensional female characters, as discussed in chapter one. This comment, however, leads us into how Elphinstone explores further what the reception of saga narratives and contemporary tales would have been like among members of the audience of both genders. The gender of the listener predetermines his or her response to the tale, as in the following discussion between the characters Bjarni and Gudrun:

‘But what about her?’ said Gudrun, when Einar had finished. ‘Didn’t she mind being married to the wrong brother? Was she forced? She had no king to listen to her troubles, had she?’

‘It’s not her story,’ said Bjarni. ‘If she was fool enough to take the wrong brother, she doesn’t deserve sympathy. It was probably all the same to her.’
(p.140)

Women are of secondary significance in the saga tales. The narratives do not belong to them and minimal identification with female characters is demanded of the listener. The questions their roles raise are not worth answering. The peripheral position of

¹⁸⁶Eric Linklater, *Sealskin Trousers and Other Stories* (London, 1947).

¹⁸⁷See Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths* (Harmondsworth 1982).

¹⁸⁸Crawford, p.218.

women in *Orkneyinga Saga* in particular is also mentioned by Crawford:

The one passage in *Jarl's Saga* giving any hint of an intimate relationship between a man and a woman relates to Thorfinn and Ingebjorg escaping from the blazing homestead set on fire by Rognvald Brusisson, when the earl broke through a wooden dividing wall and leapt out carrying his wife in his arms.¹⁸⁹

It is no coincidence, then, that Elphinstone chooses to embed this same tale within her story of Astrid and the other women in Fridarey, pointing up the same differences in the reception of this story as we have seen in the previous example:

'I'd support Thorfinn,' said Astrid to Olaf.
'Because he won?' asked Olaf, smiling at her very warmly.
'Because whatever else he did he saved his wife.'
'Leaving all his men to burn to death?' (p.198)

Olaf first misunderstands the reasoning behind Astrid's allegiance with Thorfinn and then fails to see why Thorfinn's wife should be more important to him than his retainers are. As well as illustrating very clearly the male-centred traditions of narration and the prejudicial reception women characters might have received in the Norse world, these carefully selected passages might remind us also that women occupy only a very restricted proportion of the saga narratives, especially in that of *Orkneyinga Saga*, the most prominent saga in *Islanders*. Part of what Elphinstone is seeking to do, I would argue, is to create a fleshed out narrative for marginalised female characters from the landscape and period of *Orkneyinga Saga*. *Islanders* redresses the imbalance by choosing a young woman as its central character and dwelling on themes - such as the inner lives, the struggle against oppression and the sexuality of women in Fridarey - the like of which would never have occurred to the saga authors.

Astrid's character is carefully drawn. She demonstrates great determination and spirit in the face of adversity and soon comes to terms with the loss of her parents and the culture shock of her arrival in Fridarey, quickly earning the friendship and respect of the island women. When she is forbidden by Bjarni to travel to Hjaltland (Shetland) she goes against his will and behind his back, persuading Thorvald to take her with him on business he has there. Their arrival in Papey Stora - which seems like the land of milk and honey in comparison to Fridarey - and her meeting with Amundi Palsson are the climax of the novel. Amundi's enormous physical size and intimidating manner are matched by the power he commands as the most influential chieftain in his island. Astrid maintains a strong calm in his presence and impresses the cowering Thorvald by addressing Amundi directly and attempting to negotiate with him to provide her with a passage to Norway. Despite her manifest courage in this situation, Amundi sees her as just another trifling matter to be attended to and subsequently arranges her betrothal to Thorvald in order to remedy things. Marriage to Thorvald and a return to Fridarey are the complete opposites of the life Astrid would have chosen for herself, but she is not part of the decision making process. Despite her outstanding strength and individuality, Astrid is at the mercy of powerful men throughout.

¹⁸⁹Crawford, p.158.

The one truly independent woman on Fridarey is the widow Ingebjorg, sister-in-law to Einar and Bjarni and the mother of Thorvald, Olaf and Eirik. She has a calm dignity and quiet confidence which stem in part from her early upbringing in the prosperous home of her father, a retainer of Earl Paul in Orkney. Ingebjorg has a degree of status in the island because of the illustrious connections her family has with the Earls. Unlike the indigenous islanders, who boast of what are at best tentative connections to the sagas, Ingebjorg does not bother to discuss her past. This earns her the resentment of the others who feel that she is aloof. More significantly, the islanders think that by refusing to return from her farm at Setr to neighbouring Shirva after the death of her husband, Ingebjorg is shaming his kin. Her desire to earn an independent living from her own land with her own sons is beyond the comprehension of the islanders who, operating only within the most rigid social constraints, feel that she ought to return to Shirva and re-unify the two farms. Ingebjorg's decision to participate in the Thing to argue with Einar and Bjarni for her rights is unprecedented, a demonstration of great courage. Gudrun finds it particularly shocking: "But for a woman to take the matter to the Thing! It was a family matter, and she should never have opposed her husband's brothers in public" (p.34). Why not, we might ask, if she is unable to realise her simple wish any other way? Ingebjorg, however, is the exception to the rule, seeming more like the self-determining Icelander Aud the Deep Minded of *Laxdale Saga* than any of the women of *Orkneyinga Saga*. As Crawford has shown¹⁹⁰, the fluidity of the colonial situation in Iceland where they could claim newly discovered land allowed women to exercise more control over their families and personal circumstances than the structure of the more rigidly patriarchal old lands, to which Fridarey belongs. Ingebjorg and her situation are plausibly presented in the novel, and she certainly shows that Einar and Bjarni do not rule the island or their family entirely, but she and Astrid remain the exceptions to the patriarchal rule.

So Elphinstone presents us with a proto-feminism imagined from a background of saga literature and other historical and archaeological evidence. This feminism is represented through a small number of spirited and independent female characters. But readers will be keenly aware that this is ultimately destined to remain underground for another eight hundred odd years. Her interest in marginality is in keeping with Alexander Trocchi's view that boundaries are simply utilitarian¹⁹¹. She uses Fridarey, a location at the hub of various boundaries between oceans, early nation states and cultures, and explores the boundaries that exist between the genders on the island. Similarly, her historical period is very specifically and precisely fixed between two clearly defined ages in order to examine attitudes towards the viking ethos. (Elphinstone uses the term "pirate" rather than "Viking", presumably to disarm our preconceptions of what a viking is: "pirate" has accumulated less of the sensational semantic baggage associated with Vikings, and is a decidedly more derogatory term).

The events of the novel take place in the last quarter of the twelfth century, in the year of the final and famously ill-starred viking cruise of Svein Asleifarson. This trip took

¹⁹⁰Crawford, p.216.

¹⁹¹See Andrew Murray Scott, *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of a Monster* (Edinburgh, 1991), p.42.

him from Orkney down the west coast of Scotland to Ireland. He stormed Dublin and assumed command of the city, only to be tricked and slaughtered there along with his men¹⁹². Svein's last cruise is widely regarded as the symbolic final end of the viking age in northern Europe, as piracy gave way to trade and the cultivation of the arts. (This is exemplified in the cultural renaissance that took place around the Earl's court in Orkney during the twelfth century¹⁹³). The cruise forms a central part of Elphinstone's narrative also, with Dagfinn of Byrstada becoming one of Svein's crew.

Dagfinn and his younger brother Rolf are cast as the polarised representatives of the old and new orders of raiding and trading. Dagfinn is the daring seaman and risk taker who is bored by Byrstada and life ashore during the winter months, going to sea as much for the thrill as out of economic necessity. Rolf, on the other hand, farms seriously and considers sea journeys in purely functional and economic terms. The way Elphinstone incorporates Svein Asleifarson and events from *Orkneyinga Saga* into the novel is in the best tradition of Scottish historical fiction. Real historical events and characters are placed occasionally within this narrative of the lives of lesser fictional characters. Thus, Svein captures the "Sula", Rolf and Dagfinn's trading ship, somewhere in the Minches, kidnapping the less than reluctant Dagfinn and commandeering him as a member of his crew. Svein bursts energetically into the narrative, drawn in broad strokes, a white haired but agile viking. We might be reminded of Peter Foote's argument that the author of *Orkneyinga Saga* admires Svein's colourful bravado and Robin Hood style exploits, without actually approving of him¹⁹⁴. Elphinstone, I think, shares the saga author's feelings. Svein is the ideal historical character to include to bring colour to the narrative, but *Islanders* makes it clear that his way of life is fundamentally wrong. On Sula's release, Rolf assumes command of the family ship for the first time (Dagfinn, as the older sibling, has been skipper until this point) and proceeds to make the most successful trading voyage ever out of Fridarey. Meanwhile, "off camera" as it were, Dagfinn takes part in the theft of a valuable cargo of broadcloth from an English ship and the raid on Dublin, both genuine historical events recorded in *Orkneyinga Saga*.

Dagfinn is a conspicuous character from the outset, a colourful maverick whose vanity cannot diminish his sex appeal to the island women. Rolf's trading successes - while undoubtedly honourable and advantageous to all on the island - seem pedestrian and are forgotten as the islanders listen spellbound to tales of Dagfinn's daring at sea. Dagfinn epitomises the viking ethos, but this ethos is already beginning to wane. When Snorri comments that Dagfinn's part in the theft of the broadcloth will "bring honour to the island", his words make him seem foolishly anachronistic for (as was historically the case) robbery at sea is beginning to give way to trade. The quantitative theory of honour so common to the Family Sagas (whereby a young Norseman could acquire more honour within his community by travelling abroad) is carefully developed in *Islanders* so that the adolescent Thorvald does eventually realise his dream of going to sea, but he gains his independence as a merchant rather

¹⁹² *Orkneyinga Saga*, chs.107-8.

¹⁹³ Barbara Crawford, (ed.) *St. Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth Century Renaissance* discusses this "renaissance" comprehensively.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Foote, "Observations on *Orkneyinga Saga*" in Barbara Crawford, (ed.) *St. Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth Century Renaissance*, pp.196-7.

than a viking warrior. Larger and better-organised armies were able to offer a safe environment for mercantile life and traditional, sea-raiding vikings had to conform or perish. Parallels with the healing, reconciliatory historical narratives of Walter Scott are not far away as the island moves towards a conformity of opinion that trade is indeed the only way forward from the bloody and violent history of the Dark Ages.

Dagfinn returns from the rout in Dublin badly wounded and all but broken in spirit. He is particularly distressed at losing his looks and beautiful hair, having been wounded in the face and scalp. The illusory glamour of piracy is undercut. The scene where he distributes the lavish spoils of his campaign is blighted by his frailty and delirium. Given the centrality of the feminine point of view in the novel, the squalid end of Svein's campaign can be read as a reminder of the disastrous consequences of glory-seeking machismo. Astrid flinches at the very mention of pirates, who inevitably remind her of those who sacked Dublin, killing her mother and ultimately driving her and her father onto the rocks of Fridarey. As Dagfinn relates his experiences to them, the community, too, are aware that their newest addition has been the victim of those who live his lifestyle:

(Astrid) was looking at the fire, her face white and pinched. Olaf watched her helplessly, his hands clasped on his knees. She must still have friends in Dyflin, kin perhaps. (p.415)

Typically, Elphinstone uses an old story to draw our attention to one of its (fictional) peripheral characters, in this case Astrid. The "heroics", the traditional masculine central point of the narrative, are of less significance than Astrid's feelings. This is no Viking Romance, but the sad story of a damaged little girl.

The most startling reversal of perspectives and examination of peripheralisation, however, is yet to come. It transpires that Dagfinn is homosexual. Towards the close of the novel we discover that he and Leif Asbjornsson, a young member of his crew from Bergen, have maintained a longstanding clandestine relationship. Various suggestions from earlier in the narrative begin to make sense: Dagfinn's sister's guarded and defensive responses to questions about Dagfinn or Leif; enigmatic suggestions that Dagfinn has brought something home from Bergen for himself; and Leif's melancholy while Dagfinn is at sea with Svein. Sodomy was punishable by death under Norse law. We can safely infer, therefore, that homosexuality was a severe crime. Here, of course, Elphinstone is again reminding us that the process involved in making history is a subjective one, an interplay between perception and selection which writes out, or fails to write in certain salient details. Part of her project in *Islanders* is to write fuller history, describing aspects of Norse life the saga authors were unable, or chose not to write about.

Orkneyinga Saga itself, which is probably the single greatest influence on *Islanders*, is virtually devoid of sexual content or theme. Ursula Dronke has argued¹⁹⁵ that the abundance of sexual theme in the later *Njal's Saga* makes it the exception to the rule that sagas generally eschew sex. Dronke concludes that the author of this particular saga is an innovator, impatient with stock plots and themes, who expands into what

¹⁹⁵Ursula Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njal's Saga*, Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture, Viking Society for Northern Research (London, 1981).

was previously taboo territory. Some of the points made in her paper can help to illuminate Norse attitudes towards homosexuality. She notes how (as is often the case in other sagas) “effeminacy was the sharpest gibe to cast at any man”, explaining how, within the context of the Norse ethos, effeminacy embraced the notions of both cowardice and homosexuality. Characters are creatively derisive to one another in the insults they coin during flytings, sometimes accusing their opponents of participating in homosexual acts with supernatural creatures. (Reminding us again of folk tales and Norse mythology). Thus, in an attempt to goad him into violence, Skarp-Hedin Njalsson says to Flosi Thordarson “you are ... the mistress of the Svinafell Troll, who uses you as a woman every ninth night”¹⁹⁶. For a man to allow himself to be “used” like a woman was specifically forbidden by the Norse laws. Although the law remains omnipotent, this conglomerate equation of effeminacy, cowardice and homosexuality is carefully dismantled in Elphinstone’s novel.

Our surprise in the revelation that Dagfinn is gay may stem partially from the fact that, statistically, the likelihood is that he would be heterosexual. However, this same surprise will inevitably also make most readers aware that they are inclined to equate the machismo and daring of the viking pirates or chieftains with heterosexuality (particularly because there is no hint in the sagas that their heroes are anything other than heterosexual) and lump together effeminacy, cowardice and homosexuality as their polarised opposites. Dagfinn crosses these boundaries and assures us of the fluidity of identity in the real world. He has pride and wanderlust, he is daring to the point of recklessness at sea, he is unafraid of violent confrontation, and he is gay. As with the map on the frontispiece, we are forced again to see things from another point of view and to re-examine our preconceptions, our tendency to stereotype the Norsemen. The irony of Dagfinn’s situation is that, despite his being the jewel in Fridarey’s crown and the manifest pride the other islanders have in him, he cannot be legitimised and recognised for what he is because the law forbids it.

Throughout this novel, then, Elphinstone is exploring peripheral regions of geography and experience: beginning in the long dark days of a northern winter on the insular edge of the known Norse world, detailing through narrative the banishment of women’s rights to a dark periphery and touching also, through reference to folklore, on the seeming dangers posed to patriarchal rule by female sexuality. Pressing the Northern Isles into her service, the latter end of the Dark Ages and the decline of the heroic Norse ethos are charted, drawing ironic attention to our preconceptions about the Norsemen and highlighting the absolute oppression of homosexuality in the Norse world. Her project is to re-write and subvert existing saga narratives, giving prominence to marginalised elements, whilst showing the inequality of modern day society by mirroring and magnifying its restrictions in her recreation of twelfth century Fridarey. If history is no more than a version of events on which we have agreed to settle, Margaret Elphinstone has set out in *Islanders* to deliberately challenge and disrupt this version of events.

Gregor Lamb’s Langskail

Gregor Lamb’s novel touches on folklore, history, language and onomastics and grows from a lifetime’s intimacy with the Orcadian West Mainland district of

¹⁹⁶*Njal’s Saga*, ch.123.

Marwick. The book is saturated with authentic historical and local detail. Lamb's method is similar to that of the author of *Orkneyinga Saga* in that he pieces together from a wide variety of sources - both written and oral - what remains a highly individual work of literary art. There is much more going on in *Langskaill*¹⁹⁷ than a straightforward "recreation" or "evocation" of the Norse era. Lamb's interests lie also to some extent in the rehearsal or circular patterning of history (what Edwin Muir or George Mackay Brown would have called the "Fable") and, particularly, in the revitalisation and adaptation of the ancient genre of saga.

Narrator Erlend Erlendsson is an Icelandic mercenary soldier who breaks his sea journey home in Norse Kirkwall from the Hundred Years' War, in order to establish whether a former friend and comrade in arms, Harald Moar, has survived the war. He journeys westward overland to Marwick - becoming aware *en route* of growing political tensions in the islands - and finds his friend alive and well at the farm of Langskaill (the "long hall"). But Erlend quickly discovers that Harald's family is threatened by destructive inter-sibling rivalry and difficult circumstances. Harald's sister Geira has been raped by pirates, who have also murdered her husband, and remains deeply traumatised. His younger identical twin brother, Thorolf, resents Harald's assumption of control of the farm on his return from the war. Bad weather, poor yields and soaring taxes only exacerbate their problems. Erlend remains in Orkney to do what he can to help the family. *Langskaill* gathers momentum and sets off on a narrative course reminiscent of the great Icelandic sagas. If anything, events in the novel are even more complex than those of many of the Family Sagas which, although highly intricate, often begin to exhibit something of a pendulum effect as killing after killing is carried out in an ever-widening circle of revenge.

The story begins with a seemingly insignificant altercation between two of the guests at Harald's father's funeral; Skarth Sigurdsson, a family friend, and Rognvald Isbister, a neighbour and known troublemaker. Later, while some of the remaining guests are indoors drinking, Skarth's mare is mortally wounded and suspicion naturally falls on Rognvald. The distraught Skarth then takes his ruined horse to back her off a cliff, becomes entangled in the lead rope and is pulled to his death. Skarth has previously pledged to buy a horse from Thorolf and his death seems to spell the end of Thorolf's dreams of going to the war in France until Erlend agrees to buy a house from him, affording him the fare to the continent. Meanwhile, the animals at Langskaill are on the brink of starvation and so Harald persuades Erlend to buy some land from the farm. This deal goes ahead, Erlend is established in Orkney and Langskaill's stock is saved.

This pattern of conflict, suspense and temporary resolution, which is so similar to patterning in the plots of the Icelandic sagas, continues throughout. The second major similarity in terms of plot between *Langskaill* and its predecessors is the way in which a small event (the brawl between Skarth and Rognvald) sparks off further events which eventually culminate in a highly dramatic conclusion. Magnus Magnusson has remarked that Hrut's visit to Norway at the outset of *Njal's Saga* is "the spark that lights the powder-trail to the burning of Njal"¹⁹⁸. Similarly, events in

¹⁹⁷Gregor Lamb, *Langskaill* (Birsay, 1998).

¹⁹⁸M. Magnusson, introduction to *Njal's Saga*, M. Magnusson and H. Pálsson, (trans.), (Harmondsworth, 1960), p.12.

Langskaill lead on from the brawl and Erlend's purchases in the following manner. The extra capital allows Harald to buy winter fodder from Finna, a widow on a neighbouring farm. This marks the beginning of a clandestine sexual relationship which eventually results in Finna arriving at Langskaill, revealing that she is pregnant and demanding that Harald should marry her. Harald, now unsure whether he is in fact the father and fearing for his position as community lawrikman, must comply. Eventually, Thorolf arrives home from France having made some money, but *Langskaill* is overcrowded and an uneasy atmosphere surrounds the abrasive and ill-tempered Finna. So Thorolf buys her farm, Skorn. When Finna and the child die in the late stages of her pregnancy it seems as if things are working - however tragically - towards a more harmonious solution for the family until Thorolf, finding it difficult to readjust to civilian life, commits a serious crime by assaulting a man in the kirkyard. Thorolf escapes to sea and it is at this point that the wider political situation begins to affect the family. In an utterly disproportionate punishment, the avaricious and southward-looking Earl confiscates Skorn from the absent Thorolf and installs a family of Scots incomers. Thorolf is enraged when he returns to discover what has happened and aggressively confronts the Scotsman living in his former home. In the culmination of events which began at the funeral, Harald takes the blame for his identical brother's second transgression, giving the Earl a convenient excuse to confiscate the lands and buildings of Langskaill, evicting Harald, his aged mother, both of his sisters and Erlend and forcing them into exile. Clearly, Lamb is working on a broad canvas. The fist fight between Skarh and Rognvald sets off a trail of happenings which result ultimately in eviction and displacement. As well as following this extraordinarily complex course, leading to an eventual harmonious conclusion in Iceland, the narrative contains the sub-plots of Geira's recovery from her ordeal, her son Suki's journey to adulthood, Geira and Erlend's marriage and the lives of other farmers in the district, particularly those next door at Netherskaill: the structure and the scale are worthy of the classical Icelandic sagas.

Lamb has quite deliberately and selfconsciously placed his novel firmly within the saga tradition. His preface refers to it as "This Saga". Like that of the *Poetic Edda*, the manuscript is discovered in an Icelandic farmhouse. The schoolmaster who first reads the re-discovered vellum informs its owner that it is a "family saga" (LS, 319), a more explicit definition and indication of the sub-category to which the book belongs: that of the Family Saga as opposed to the Kings' Saga. Here we have a family, not particularly belligerent by the standards of their time but essentially peace loving and good, who, due to circumstances largely outwith their control, find themselves in a desperate and life-threatening situation - this is a familiar scenario to readers of the Icelandic sagas. Further points of similarity abound.

In the first instance, there are a number of scenes or anecdotes that are reminiscent of earlier sagas. These lend *Langskaill* the flavour of saga and also enhance its historical credibility, describing as they do contemporary customs. The emotionally charged description of stallion fighting and horse racing which spills over into violence among riders and onlookers at Voy has a probable precedent in *Njal's Saga*¹⁹⁹ where Gunnar and Skarp-Hedin brawl with Thorgeir and Kol, the owners of an opposing stallion. Both incidents verge on serious violence which does not quite erupt on the day in question but is sufficiently bitter to build up tension in the narrative, suggesting

¹⁹⁹*Njal's Saga*, pp.142-44.

further violence. The underwater competition where Suki eventually outwits his friend Erik by swimming into the submerged entrance of a cave is not unlike a contest described in *Laxdæla Saga*²⁰⁰ between Kjartan Olafsson and King Olaf Tryggvason in the river Nid in Norway. This could have come to Lamb via Eric Linklater's *The Men of Ness*²⁰¹. The game of strength which the men of Marwick play with the hide of a horse on the last day of Yule is modelled on a game described in *Sturlunga Saga* - Lamb provides this information in a footnote. While the burning of an enemy in his own home was a Norse commonplace and can be found in more than one chapter of *Orkneyinga Saga*, the burning of Hucheon Louttit in *Langskail* is particularly similar to the destruction of the protagonist of *Njal's Saga*. Like Njal and Bergthora, the essentially innocent Louttit and his family take refuge together in their dwelling while an angry crowd congregates outside and proceed to set fire to the roof.

As we might expect in any genuine saga, there are various supernatural portents. Like Njal, Earl Magnus or Svein Asleifarson before him, Rognvald Isbister has a reliable "second sense" and is able to call off a fishing trip, averting disaster, while a freak wave destroys boats from a neighbouring district (LS, 113). When a beggar woman, Matti Blakk, tells Erlend that he will "get what he came for" he is as yet unaware that she refers to Geira's hand in marriage (LS, 65). Having seen a raven, she also successfully predicts a death before Harald's father Augmund perishes (LS, 65). In her communicative role, Matti is similar to the beggar women of *Njal's Saga*, who accelerate action by spreading news from one farm to the next. Harald sees a horse's hoof-print in the ashes of the straw in which his father's body has lain overnight, correctly foretelling the imminent death of Skarh's mare (LS, 71). The use of the supernatural in *Langskail* serves exactly the same purpose as it does in the sagas: a prediction gives the reader a suggestion of events to come and therefore enhances suspense. What *is* the purpose of Erlend's visit? Why did Matti see a raven on her way to Langskail? Why a horse's hoof print, rather than a human footprint? As Magnus Magnusson writes of the author of *Njal's Saga*:

By means of prophesy and visions, he could adumbrate future events without compromising his suspense effect or the conventional chronological presentation of the narrative.²⁰²

The more significant female characters of *Langskail* also bear some resemblance to their saga counterparts. Osla, the wise and dignified mother and grandmother of the family might remind us of the matriarch of *Laxdæla Saga*, Aud the Deep Minded. The fractious and ill-tempered Finna is not quite a full-blown *Hetzerin*, but her sexual confidence and capacity to create strife are reminiscent of the archetype, Hallgerd Long-Legs.

Aside from these direct influences, there are also a number of stylistic connections with the Icelandic sagas which are apparent on a more subtle, textural level. Firstly, a number of gnomic or proverbial sayings are uttered by characters over the course of

²⁰⁰*Laxdæla Saga*, M. Magnusson and H. Pálsson, (trans.) (Harmondsworth, 1969), pp. 144-45.

²⁰¹See J. D'Arcy, *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen* (East Linton, 1996), p205-14, for a comprehensive description of the influences of saga on *The Men of Ness*.

²⁰²Magnus Magnusson, introduction to *Njal's Saga*, p.17.

the story. These are conspicuous for their rhymes and alliteration. Lars Lönnroth explains the function of such sayings in saga:

The wise community spokesmen within the narrative have a tendency to state their views in the form of brief but succinct speeches, where they can make use of legal quotations, proverbs and other kinds of generalised statements ... In a confrontation scene with his adversaries at the Althing, for example, Njáll makes effective use of a well-known Norse *sententia*: “Our land must be built with law or laid waste with lawlessness” (Ch. 70). In this case, the reference to a generally acknowledged and respected principle lends credibility to the speaker’s cause.²⁰³

Lamb’s proverbs are also uttered by his wise characters and are pithy and poetic (Njal’s statement above is alliterative in Old Norse as well as in translation). The priest, Sir Helgi, quotes the deceased Augmund and the wisdom of both men is clear in the warning to would-be seafarers: “the King says “sail” but “wait” says the wind or widows may wail” (LS, 265). Harald, too, is a prudent and sensible character who advises, also in this alliterative vein, that his brother should “Remember wrath will not help right a wrong” (LS, 273). This is very similar in essence to the saga truism “the hand that struck is soon sorry”. Other stylistic threads connecting *Langskaill* to the Icelandic sagas include the representation of time, which in *Langskaill* tends to be measured in terms of natural rather than numerical increments. During the day, the time is told by the position of the sun on a hill: “The sun had barely gone a cock-stride along the hill when Erik came running ...”; “Sometimes the sun would be over the Eversty before (Thorolf) got up” (LS, 242; 277). The time of night is measured by the position of the Pleiades: “I knew by the star that the night was far spent” (LS, 173). Erlend measures his own life not in terms of years, but in terms of Yule nights: “I have seen seventy Yule nights” (LS, 9). Similarly, the measurement of time in winters rather than years is commonplace in saga: numbers, dates or hours are less relevant than the simple fact that time is passing. The measurement of time in this way illustrates also the island writer’s enhanced sensitivity - so apparent in writers like Edwin Muir or George Mackay Brown - to his outside environment. Imagery, too, is drawn appropriately from these natural surrounds so that a body buried in the French forest is covered in a simply effective “cold blanket of leaves” (LS, 62). Metaphor is not common, though, and it is worth remembering that the classical sagas also contain only a very limited amount of imagery. The language of the novel is very close to the simple saga style rendered so effectively in English in modern translations by scholars such as Edwards, Magnusson and Pálsson. Latinate diction is kept to a minimum, expression is direct and largely unadorned, with description generally giving way to action.

The pre-fifteenth century history of Orkney is also touched upon. Lamb’s characters reveal their perceptions of themselves and their place in that history, as in the following speech which Harald delivers to two arrogant and heavy-handed Danish tax collectors:

Let me tell you that we are a proud people who fled here from tyranny. Our

²⁰³Lars Lönnroth, “Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas”, in John Tucker, (ed.) *Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York, 1989), p.85.

rights were respected under the King of Norway. Last year you needed an armed guard and I can understand why. If you talk to the lawrikmenn like this how do you conduct your business with a poor bondi? Pay up? Of course I shall pay up. To do otherwise is against the law. (LS, 139-40)

The folk memory alluded to by Harold of the original Norse settlers' flight from the tyranny of Harald Fairhair is the likely truth, albeit a significantly different story from that told in *Orkneyinga Saga*²⁰⁴. This idea of island independence or of Orkney as a small nation or commonwealth (the locals are "Orkneyingar", not Norwegians or Danes, and run their own law courts) is reminiscent of the political system of medieval Iceland, although what Harald is describing seems to have been more of an independent mindset or a situation where affluent "bondar" enjoyed a large measure of self-determination, as opposed to the complete independence of the Icelandic commonwealth. Yet, the flight from tyranny westward from mainland Scandinavia and the enjoyment of at least some measure of political autonomy as well as the maintenance of a legal system worthy of Harald's respect (think again of Njal's comments, which are likely to be representative of the author's views, on the necessity of the law in Iceland) were common chapters in the history of both Iceland and Orkney. An attempt to describe a passing Golden Age before political encroachment from Norway and the resultant anarchic disruption is a driving force behind much of the saga writing of thirteenth century Iceland and extends here into *Langskail* as Scotland begins to take interest in the Orkney earldom.

Despite these fairly conspicuous and frequent parallels with the Icelandic sagas, direct connections between *Langskail* and *Orkneyinga Saga* are curiously scant. *Orkneyinga Saga* is unique in its non-conformity to one or other strand of saga writing: similarities to the Icelandic sagas are in many respects similarities to *Orkneyinga Saga*, particularly in the stylistic terms outlined above. But we might expect this Orkney novel to draw more heavily on the saga which takes place in the same islands: Linklater and Brown both make extensive use of *Orkneyinga Saga*. Lamb, however, seems to be aware of the pitfalls of recycling material, and while he acknowledges the influence of the Icelandic sagas, he points out that he consciously avoided *Orkneyinga Saga* while writing *Langskail*²⁰⁵. There are really only a few tentative links. The character of Sir Helgi, the priest, might seem reminiscent of Bishop William the Old, an influential historical figure who features in *Orkneyinga Saga*. Even by medieval standards, Bishop William is a remarkably worldly character for a spiritual man. He intervenes and offers counsel in political situations; harbours Svein Asleifarson, successfully pleading his case to Earl Paul after the killing of Svein Breast-Rope; and he accompanies Earl Rognvald, advising on the best way to attack an enemy ship during the pilgrimage-cum-viking cruise in the Mediterranean. In his advice to Harald following the burning of Huchean Louttit, Sir Helgi's superior grasp of the legal and political situation and his similarity to his influential and astute predecessor come to the fore:

... it is my Christian duty to defend the rights and liberties of every man, for we are all the same under the eyes of God. To that end I urged you to pursue with

²⁰⁴The saga postulates that the islands were held in fief from the kings of Norway, who were their original conquerors.

²⁰⁵Interview with Gregor Lamb, Waird, Marwick, Orkney, October 3rd, 1999.

all vigour the death of Hucheon Louttit and to bring the perpetrators to justice. At the same time it behoves me to alert you and others like you to a clever conspiracy to drive us further and further into the Scotch domain. (LS, 224)

Sir Helgi has an intelligence of matters in the world of men and an understanding of politics denied to many around him. He differs from William the Old only in the respect that his Christianity - more than any political affiliation - seems to be the predominant influence behind his counsel. The similarity between these two might, of course, stem simply from the central role of the church in mediaeval politics and may not be a true intertextual link. Further echoes of *Orkneyinga Saga* certainly include Skarth's promise to hang Rognvald Isbister's head from his stirrup (LS, 82), which can only remind us of the vivid image of Earl Sigurd the Powerful riding north for Orkney with the head of the Scots chieftain Mælbrigte Tusk swinging from his saddle²⁰⁶. Like Skarth, Sigurd is fast approaching his own death at this point. Also, the Cult of St. Magnus is shown to be alive and well in fifteenth century Orkney. Although Lamb deliberately avoids using Magnus's name for any of his central characters, some of them make a pilgrimage to Kirkwall to visit his shrine and pray that the saint will restore a neighbour's power of speech (LS, 247). This duly happens, and we might also suspect that Suki's private prayer to Magnus is what returns his uncle Thorolf home safely from sea after the family hear his ship has gone down. The madman seen by the pilgrims in the cathedral may have been suggested by Thorbjorn, son of Gyrd, "who was insane, but when he was taken to (the shrine of) Earl Magnus he was cured immediately"²⁰⁷. Thorbjorn is one of three cured of insanity at the saint's shrine in *Orkneyinga Saga*. The reputed efficacy of St. Magnus spans centuries, seas and the Norse world. As we have seen, he is central to the writing of George Mackay Brown, whose novel *Magnus* culminates in a similar pilgrimage to the shrine. But of course Magnus's story in extant written form begins with *Orkneyinga Saga* and these references to his cult can be considered a further tentative connection between *Langskail* and that saga.

This method of drawing together material from diverse sources and shaping it into an effective aesthetic form is, as mentioned earlier, similar to that used by the author of *Orkneyinga Saga*. Another source which was used by the saga authors was Scandinavian folklore. As well as its saga influences, *Langskail* draws heavily on traditional Orkney folk tales and superstitions. The Christian/pagan dichotomy of the medieval Norse colonies and the Orkney folk tale looms large, with pagan practices very much in evidence, albeit on an underground level. Thorolf bleeds his pony on St. Stephen's day and while he is being chastised by the priest he thinks of the irony in the fact that pagan games are being played by children all over Orkney at that same time of year (LS, 264-5). Characters refer to Ran, the sea god (LS, 127) and Odin worship (LS, 95) as well as Thor and his eight footed steed, Sleipnir (LS, 123), but live their lives within an essentially Christian framework. It is when they put their lives at the mercy of the elements and go to sea that their faith in the Christian God is tested to its limits: Rognvald takes the snagging of his fishing hook on the door jamb to be an omen of bad luck and stays ashore (LS, 115), while other boats are lost on the day. When his superstition, or fear of the old sea Goddess, is proven correct, he

²⁰⁶ *Orkneyinga Saga*, H. Pálsson and Paul Edwards, (tr.), (Harmondsworth, 1978), ch. 5, p.27.

²⁰⁷ *Orkneyinga Saga*, p.105.

thanks the Holy Virgin for his second sight! As well as references to the Norse Gods, specific Orkney folk tales or customs are incorporated. Harald is able to transfer Margrit's multiple sclerosis to another person by means of an intricate spell involving a cog full of her urine which is emptied at a boundary gate. Rognvald Isbister is the first to pass over the ground and dies shortly afterwards: Margrit recovers from the incurable illness. A strikingly similar motif is recorded by Ernest Marwick:

... water in which an invalid had been washed would be poured on the ground at one of the *slaps* or gateways of the toonship: the next person who passed through would become ill and the sick one well.²⁰⁸

Likewise, Suki's distress, while ploughing, at the loss of the *dian stane* (LS, 205) can also be traced when we look to Marwick:

No one is sure whether the *dian stane*, a piece of stone, frequently dark red or brown in colour, which was hung on the beam of the old Orkney plough and spoken of as a luck stone, ought to be regarded as a sun symbol ... the Norwegian *dynestein* was regarded as a missile thrown by Thor, the thunder-God, at the trolls.²⁰⁹

The loss of the stone results, or seems to result, in the beginning of the ebb of the family's run of good luck and coincides with the first disagreement with their new neighbour, Hucheon Louttit. Like the aforementioned portents, these folk charms or spells are shown to be highly effective. What is predicted always turns out in some shape or form. Although the inclusion of these Orkney myths certainly gives them a renewed currency and the characters of the novel undoubtedly believe in them, this cannot really be considered magic realism. In *Langskaill*, the results of portents or spells can always be ascribed to coincidence: ultimately, interpretation is open to the reader and remains ambiguous. We might feel that, because events so consistently work out as predicted, that the magic is there, but a scientific explanation (i.e. coincidence) always remains possible. A closer definition of magic might be that which cannot be explained by science as coincidence. Lamb cites Norwegian Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter* as the major influence behind *Langskaill*²¹⁰. Undset's novel of 1927 tells the story of a girl growing up in medieval Norway and draws on similar saga and folk tale roots. As a child, Kristin encounters the fairy queen in the forest and narrowly escapes being drawn into the eldritch realm. This early encounter reverberates through the novel. *Kristin Lavransdatter* provides an interesting contrast to the use of the supernatural in *Langskaill*, however, where no eldritch characters actually appear, let alone interact with the "real" characters. *Langskaill* remains somewhere between realism and magic. It does seem uncanny that every prediction should come true and every spell should work. Erlend is a convincing 15th century sceptic, rather than a post-enlightenment anachronism, when he tells of the dangerous spirits which inhabited border zones:

I had often been told of spirits haunting boundaries in the grimlings but I

²⁰⁸E. Marwick, *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland* (London, 1975) p.136.

²⁰⁹E. Marwick, p.65.

²¹⁰*Ibid.*, interview with Gregor Lamb. Sigrid Undset visited Dr. Hugh Marwick in Orkney in 1937.

had scoffed at such tales. The narrow track offered no escape for us; we had to approach this ghoulish monster and pass if we dared ... (LS, 29)

On this occasion, his scepticism serves him correctly, and a rational explanation emerges. But later he is deeply unsettled by Rognvald's death after he has passed through the enchanted gate: "But what I now have to say is like a real fairy story" (LS, 160). The narrative voice carries authority and we are inclined to believe the supernatural *is* at work.

A number of more current, modern anecdotes, which might be termed "twentieth century lore", are also incorporated into the narrative. The stories are characteristically short and humorous and provide comic relief in what is sometimes a dark novel. For instance, two rabbits are placed by an uncle in a boy's snare: the boy then places three in his uncle's snare to show he has not been fooled (LS, 276). A cow coughs, spraying an immaculately dressed bystander with excrement (LS, 140). A boy's grandmother tells him they will have spiced cakes on Christmas day "if (they) are spared"; the boy asks if they will have plain bannocks as usual "If (they) are not spared" (LS, 256). All of these anecdotes are based on living anecdotes²¹¹ and may be significant on a level deeper than straightforward humour. Lamb's method here would have appealed to Muir or Brown, for it demonstrates that human nature remains essentially the same from century to century. Brown's poem *To A Hamnavoe Poet of 2093* expresses this idea clearly:

Do your folk laugh and cry
With gentle ups-and-downs

Not so different, I think
From talk in Skarabrae doors²¹²

These events are just as likely to have happened five hundred or five thousand years ago as today. What appeals to us naturally appealed to them, and the enjoyment of humour is integral to the Fable.

The most significant piece of "lore" in *Langskail*, however, belongs firmly in the category of folklore. Erlend passes on to Suki an Icelandic folk tale which was told to him by his grandmother. The story occupies a framed and central position within the narrative, taking up three pages at precisely the mid-point of the novel. It runs along the following lines: A stranger arrives in the district and sets up a simple dwelling in the mountains above the valley farms. The locals do not trust him, suspecting him of stealing their sheep. One day a group of farmers go into the mountains to investigate and find his home empty but for a solitary raven. They discover the man outside, leaning over a crag, trying to rescue one of their sheep from a ledge below. He becomes their friend. At this point in the telling of the tale Suki falls asleep, but Erlend tells the remainder of the story to Geira. The man is a hunter who nevertheless treats animals well, looking after creatures in danger. He has saved the raven, which had caught its leg in a crevice. He releases the raven and time passes. One day he is out hunting when a raven passes overhead and begins to harass him, stealing his cap

²¹¹The above are recorded elsewhere in Gregor Lamb, *Lamb's Tales* (Birsay, 1997).

²¹²George Mackay Brown, *Following a Lark* (London, 1996), p.13.

and dropping it further along the hillside. As he retrieves the cap, there is a violent rockfall on the part of the mountainside where he had been standing: the raven has saved his life. He notices the bird is dangling one leg. It is, of course, the raven he rescued. Geira then remarks that the tale is similar to one told about a quarry in Orkney. Marwick records the quarry tale as follows:

The quarrymen observed that a crow had built her nest close to where they were working. It seemed to some of them that it would be an excellent joke to boil the crow's eggs and subsequently replace them, in order to see how long the crow would sit on them in an attempt to hatch them. Although one man objected strongly, the scheme was carried out. The eggs were taken when the crow was absent and were back on the nest when she returned.

Events took a different course from what the quarrymen had anticipated. The crow appeared to realise that something had happened to her eggs. She even seemed to know who had been responsible for the trick. She was restless and acted strangely. One day, when the men were working in the quarry, she swooped down and snatched away the cap of the workman who had tried to befriend her. She did not go far, and the man, hoping to retrieve his cap, pursued her. She led him a tantalising chase, dropping his cap and picking it up again, until he was a considerable distance from the cliffs. At last she let it go and flew off. When the man returned to the quarry, he found that part of the cliff had fallen in, killing all his workmates.²¹³

As well as illustrating the shared cultural heritage of the Orkneyingar and the Icelanders, the tale as told in *Langskaill* includes a significant differential in that the man whom the raven saves is a stranger who has fallen under suspicion but is eventually proven to be moral and upright. This is also the part of the tale which is told to Suki, in order, it seems, to teach him to reserve judgement and to accept incomers - something which becomes a central concern of the novel. Placing it in the very middle of his story, Lamb invests a parable-like teaching in the depths of this ancient folk-tale. The lesson survives through the medieval genre of saga in order to make a simple and directly relevant point to modern readers: strangers can integrate.

Because *Langskaill* describes the twilight years of politically Norse Orkney before the islands changed hands from Denmark to Scotland, the strangers here are of course the Scots, who are present in the consciousness of the Orkneyingar from the outset and who begin to appear physically in the second half of the book, following the tale of the stranger and the raven. J. Storer Clouston embodied the once popular view that the Norse era was a Golden Age of self-determination and political autonomy in Orkney and that the islands later slid into a permanent decline stemming from the beginning of Scots rule. More recently, William Thomson has shown that the situation was in fact much more complex than this and that the Scots earls were not always the villains of popular belief. However, Thomson remains in no doubt about the turbulence and difficulties surrounding the changeover, as well as the incompetence and unfortunate circumstances behind the shift of power:

The pawning of the islands in 1468 by a Danish king short of ready cash to

²¹³Ernest Marwick, p.147.

provide an adequate dowry for his daughter on the occasion of her marriage to James III of Scotland marks a decisive point in the history of Orkney. But, however important, this sordid transaction was only a step in the very lengthy process of Scottish penetration, beginning long before 1468 ...²¹⁴

This Scottish penetration, or connection, goes back as far as the reigns of rulers such as Thorfinn the Mighty or St. Magnus, both of whom had extensive connections in Scotland, but it is true to say that the handing over of the islands to Scotland opened a watershed of incomers. The beginnings of this process are described in *Langskail*, but before this there is a good deal of discussion of the previous overlords, the Danes. The effects of Denmark's shortage of "ready cash" are manifest in Orkney, as the locals Erlend meets are quick to point out. The people he encounters in Kirkwall will not entertain him until they discover he is not Danish, but Icelandic, telling him:

"You know we don't like the Danes. What have the Danes ever done for us but collect taxes? Higher taxes year after year after year. We think the Danes are bad but wait till the Scots really come in they say." (LS, 13)

Not only are levels of taxation crippling, but the methods of collection are antagonistic and overbearing. The Danish taxmen are archetypal bureaucrats, rude and arrogant, with "fine clothes and haughty airs", who talk down to the locals and commandeer horses already hired to Erlend and Skarh (LS, 26). Thorolf's decision to leave Langskail for the war in France stems partly from his desire for adventure but is ultimately forced by the burden of taxation on the farm (LS, 43). Worst of all, the islanders live in fear of pirates such as those who have terrorised Geira, and receive little or no protection from the government to whom they pay skat (LS, 39). Bureaucracy and the rulings, impositions or taxes of centralised government are concerns of many peripheral European communities today, and this is another level on which *Langskail* begins to take on a contemporary resonance.

Then the Scots begin to arrive. Inter-racial tension is the central concern of *Langskail* and one aspect of the book which is particularly relevant to the present. Demographic change is a constant in Orkney history. From Pictish times there have been successive influxes of people: Norse, Scots and, particularly within the last century, English. Although no official figures are available which can reveal the extent of this population shift, there is no question that a significant number of people have moved into the islands - particularly from urban areas of England - since World War Two. The process of integration between the indigenous and migrant populations is generally relaxed and almost entirely without animosity. So Lamb's fifteenth century Scots incomers and his indigenous Norse population have their modern counterparts.

In the first half of the story, the Scots have a benign or benevolent influence and are represented only as neighbours from whom Laren Myreman has learned the skills of surgery and medicine (LS, 167). Occasional Gaelic beggars or peddlers appear and Erlend makes the derogatory remark at one stage that Harald looks like a "Scotch tramp" (LS, 179). Because the Scots, or the Gaels, are represented only by those on the margins of society they seem like second class citizens to the Orkneyingars who refer to "Scotch lice" brought by the peddlers (LS, 168). There is a sinister hint,

²¹⁴W.P.L. Thomson, *History of Orkney* (Edinburgh, 1987), p.107.

however, at the reason behind the vagrancy: “many ... were fleeing Scotland after harsh laws had been brought in against them” (LS, 168): the Orkneyingar are soon to discover the force of these “harsh laws” for themselves.

Hucheon Louttit is the first of two Scots characters to appear in the community. In a further demonstration of the increasing centralisation of power, the earl circumvents Harald’s authority as lawrikman by moving Louttit - under cover of darkness - into a vacant property. Louttit quickly proves himself to be an abrasive character who will not respect Norse law, who lacks interest in essential communal maintenance work and goads Erlend into assaulting him by criticising Suki and making remarks about his illegitimate parentage (LS, 206, 209). These unpleasant aspects of his character might seem all the less excusable when we consider that he has a keen intelligence, quickly picking up Norn and developing new farming methods. Locals suspect him of spying for the Scots. Resentment towards him grows when he is suspected of the arson of Langskaill’s barn. Eventually he is burned under his own roof. However, in the cold light of dawn, when Erlend assesses the punishment alongside Louttit’s crimes, he can only conclude that he had done nothing worse than Rognvald Isbister, the local troublemaker who was patiently tolerated. He asks himself “had Louttit been treated like that merely because he spoke a different language?” (LS, 213). The ugliness of the racist crime is apparent to Erlend, the thoughtful and morally just narrator. It is noteworthy that Louttit’s abrasive character is carefully tempered by the good nature and popularity of his wife and children, the deadly animosity towards him is shown to be mindless racism following no logic.

The second individual representative of Scotland to appear is Gawain Spence who, with his family, moves into Skorn, formerly Thorolf’s farm. In an echo of Erlend’s folk tale, Spence is referred to on his arrival as “the stranger” (LS, 243). In another similarity to the tale, the locals are initially suspicious of him, but eventually agree that his woven cloth and cash purchases of wool can only be beneficial to the community. Suki seems not to remember the teachings of the folk tale and is openly resentful towards Spence: “tell him to go back where he came from!” (LS, 244). The Scotsman does not have his troubles to seek and when Thorolf returns, enraged at the appropriation of Skorn in his absence, he takes the first opportunity to question Spence’s honesty in dealings over cloth, resulting in the assault which leads to the loss of Langskaill. Thorolf’s grudge, fuelled by feelings of racial resentment, results in disaster. It is never clear whether Spence has indeed been dishonest or whether the language barrier or cultural differences are to blame for a simple misunderstanding. Like Louttit’s wife and children, Spence seems to integrate well and there is definite courtesy between him and the bonder of the district, he shows his willingness to assimilate by greeting them warmly in Norn: “Góðan dag, bóendr” (LS, 279). Harald and Erlend sensibly accept him with goodwilled amusement, but Thorolf’s rash judgement and actions have dire consequences for everyone.

Scotland as an encroaching medieval political superpower might seem a particularly novel concept for modern readers. Here, a nation which might prefer to dissociate itself from unjust or belligerent aspects of the British Empire is shown - more than a century before even the union of the crowns - to harbour its own imperialist hunger:

For long the Scots had cast their covetous eyes on the thriving stockfish trade with Norway and Iceland and buying land was a simple way in which to get

round the monopoly ... Some land, it was said, had been gained by dubious means, the lawrikmen conniving at the entry of the Scots and feathering their own nests. (LS, 224-225)

The blame is balanced though, and there are corrupt Orkneyingar as well as avaricious Scots. Lamb goes on to show how, gradually, Scotland assumes control of Kirk and Law and the Norse way of life begins to change forever. Thomson describes the process which followed in outlying districts such as Marwick in the following terms:

The word “scottification” has been invented to describe the process of Scottish penetration, but there was at work an equally powerful process of “orknification” by which incomers not only conformed in an outward way, but were completely assimilated to Orkney society. ... Those who adopt a racial view of Orkney history and endeavour to measure the extent of Scottish blood in the veins of the earls are likely to over-simplify the highly complex interaction between Norse and Scottish culture ... The Norseness of Orkney survived, not in its earls and clergy, but in its peasant culture.²¹⁵

This is hardly the cultural annihilation we might expect. The eventual handing over of Orkney to Scotland marked a change in the cultural and demographic make-up of Orkney which has never resulted in complete “scottification”, as Lamb’s choice of saga as a medium would seem to demonstrate.

Why then, to conclude, does Lamb return to this genre and place his work directly within this deepest of northern European traditions? I would suggest that because Orkney is once again experiencing a large scale demographic change he feels a compulsion to return to the islands’ literary roots and to stamp an Orcadian identity on his writing, perpetuating tradition while at the same time embracing change and advocating the peaceful integration of incomers. Diana Whaley has postulated that the narratives of saga “were often shaped by ... ideological templates derived from more recent Norwegian history”²¹⁶ as much as by any compulsion to accurately detail the earlier historical happenings they ostensibly record. She is describing the “real” sagas of the high middle ages, but *Langskail* fits the criterion very neatly in making its point about present day demographic change within the context of historical fiction. Like Earl Rognvald Kolson or Eric Linklater²¹⁷ before him, Lamb values tradition and seeks at once to celebrate and remould it. Where he surpasses his predecessors, though, is in making a relevant statement about the present.

²¹⁵Thomson, p.108.

²¹⁶Diana Whaley, “The Kings’ Sagas”, in *Viking Revaluations* (London, 1993), pp.55 - 56.

²¹⁷Earl Rognvald revitalised already ancient skaldic verse forms in the twelfth century (see Ole Bruhn, “Earl Rognvald and the Rise of Saga Literature”, in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch and Christopher D. Morrison (eds.) *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp.240-47) while Linklater returned to saga during the Scottish Renaissance in the 1930s with *The Men of Ness*.

CONCLUSION

So here is a literature founded on dense Old Norse bedrock overlaid by the upper strata of the writings of Scotland, England and, occasionally, modern Scandinavia. *Orkneyinga Saga* is the literary/historical narrative of the medieval rulers of these islands and emphasises the archipelago's midway position between Norway, Norse Scotland and Iceland. At the same time, the saga inhabits a unique generic position between the Sagas of the Kings of Norway and the Icelandic Family Sagas. Scottish Literature also has its own marginal claim on *Orkneyinga Saga*. Orkney's Old Norse literary heritage sets it apart from much of the rest of Britain after 1707. During the nineteenth century, this heritage is used by Scott to provide local colour in his "Norse" novel *The Pirate*. *The Pirate* is instrumental in sparking off a later, widespread Victorian interest in the medieval Norse, who are enthusiastically credited with the initiation of many of the fundamental tenets and characteristics of Britishness by Samuel Laing, George Webbe Dasent and various others. This imperial admiration for a distant, historical warrior race continues into the twentieth century in the indigenously Orcadian history and literary prose of Joseph Storer Clouston and Eric Linklater respectively, before being subverted in George Mackay Brown's pacifist and spiritual re-reading and reworking of *Orkneyinga Saga*. Margaret Elphinstone and Gregor Lamb make further revisionary amendments in their historical fictions of Norse Fair Isle and Orkney. Elphinstone's *Islanders* introduces feminist and gay perspectives for the first time, while Lamb touches on up-to-date, modern Orcadian demographic concerns in *Langskail*.

Orcadian writing has an ambivalent relationship with her southern cousin, Scottish Literature. Orkney's indigenous language became Scots in a gradual process following the impignoration in 1468. To this day, a significant Norse influence means that Orcadian Scots remains distinctly different to any mainland variety of the language. Accordingly, the language of the remnant of Orkney's lost oral tradition - *The Play o' de Laithie Odivere* - is Orcadian Scots, but this piece exhibits marked similarities to the Scottish oral tradition. Walter Traill Dennison is the first writer to use Orcadian Scots for literary purposes at his relatively late position in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Dennison is the eventual Orcadian heir to both the eighteenth century Scottish vernacular revival and the vibrantly intellectual and vernacular short fiction of James Hogg in the early nineteenth century. Scottish literature facilitates further Orcadian writing in the twentieth century as Robert Rendall responds to the dual influences of the Castalian sonneteers and MacDiarmid's early Scots lyrics. A small fraction of Eric Linklater's entire *oeuvre* - three novels and two short stories - becomes at once a significant Orcadian dimension to the Scottish Renaissance and a larger, highly influential and energising contribution within the Orcadian tradition. George Mackay Brown, too, is undoubtedly motivated by his acquaintance with Scottish poetic talent during his Edinburgh residence in the nineteen-sixties, and Brown is also influenced at a deep level by the prose of the Scottish Renaissance. Typically, literary developments in Orkney occur at a later date than they do in Scotland. This is not to say that Orcadian writers are by any means helplessly imitative or reliant on their southern counterparts. The situation is rather one of the Scottish community facilitating events in an independent kindred northern archipelago. Orkney reactions may be delayed, but the results are unquestionably impressive.

There is no “anglophobia” or cultural inferiority complex to speak of in Orcadian writing. Nor is there a marked, awe-struck, deferential imitation of a dominant English culture. The relationship with English Literature is, rather, a curious exploration, both permissible and productive for Orkney writers who consider themselves to be only partially Scottish anyhow. The imitative, anglicised efforts of nineteenth century versifiers such as David Vedder continue in the early “Georgian” poetry of Robert Rendall, but this insipid stream runs quickly dry. Other, seminal English influences (including, amongst others, Hopkins in Brown, the Authorised Version in both Muir and Brown and the broader, exuberant anglophone grandeur of Linklater’s prose) are invigorating and enhancing elements which are at the same time thoroughly localised in Orkney. The fuller influence of the English tradition in Orkney is, however, less pervasive than that of the Scottish and lies beyond the scope of the present study.

So much for outside influences on the islands’ literary culture. We might ask, then, how this Orkney literature can be mapped on its own thematic and stylistic terms? War and peace, anarchy and law, paganism and Christianity are linked pairs which exist within the work of most of the individual writers considered above. The movement from the first of the elements of each these pairings to the second is also a movement within the tradition as a whole. The Christian faith unites Muir, Rendall and Brown, in the personal and artistic lives of all three. While the language of worship is one stylistic similarity across the work of these writers, it is Orcadian language which binds Dennison and Rendall together. Closely related vernacular and folk traditions enter the literature of print through all of the writers, to a greater or lesser degree. This Orkney literature is rural and insular, but its scope and aims are neither insular nor straightforwardly nationalistic. What emerges everywhere is a quasi-national island identity, neither an insularity nor a nationalism but an “insularism” of the “Country” of Orkney. Onomastics, landscape and, importantly, seascape are constants which assert Orcadian difference from neighbouring literatures and geographies. Although there is no overt nature poetry, the island writers’ sensitivities to weather and the outside environment in general are also central features. History in its widest sense is a compulsion and an obsession for all of the writers and Norse history in particular provides them with an un-Scottish or an ur-Scottish identity, when they choose. Skaldic and saga stylistic devices appear perhaps more often in Orcadian writing than in any other tradition outside modern Scandinavia. An eldritch world peripheral to normal experience is another common feature in the writings of indigenous Orcadians and in the work of those who write of Orkney from outside. These “outsider” artists (and we might consider the Linklater of the later short fiction to belong in this category) can use Orkney to represent a weird, dangerous and peripheral locus where the rules of the centre no longer apply and where the willing suspension of disbelief is more easily achieved by distant, southern audiences. The later themes of Orcadian writing have their genesis in Linklater and Muir and reach eventual fruition in the quiet but assertive anti-urban, anti-capitalist, anti-technological and anti-nuclear agenda of George Mackay Brown. Indeed, Brown’s work is a meeting place for all of the writers who precede him in Orkney. The tradition is, in some respects, a conservative one. It has taken an outside writer, in Margaret Elphinstone, to assert the place of marginalised gay and feminist experience within this predominantly masculine community. Some of the features of what an older mindset might have termed a “homogenous” or an “organic” tradition are also present: there is a “national” epic; there are individual literary “greats”; there

is participation in wider movements and there are writers who can be considered to belong to particular schools.

Writing recently about Shetland, Tom Morton has stated that “lacking Orkney’s settled, landed bourgeoisie, the conditions were never right for the emergence of a real literature”²¹⁸. While making the point that Orkney possesses a “real” literature, the comment suggests that the literature of Orkney arises solely from a fertile situation of middle or upper class comfort and wealth. While Morton is surely correct in his analysis of the Shetland situation, the actual reasons for the emergence of Orcadian literature are multiple and have little to do with economics or class. Although Orkney today is indeed a prosperous community with an enviable standard of living, Muir and Marwick, for instance, were the sons of peasant farmers, while George Mackay Brown’s childhood in the home of his nineteen-twenties Stromness postman father was one of “gay poverty”²¹⁹. Only Linklater and Rendall came from families which could be considered affluent, and Linklater is the only writer considered in this study who approaches anything resembling “bourgeoisie”. The definition of class has always been less apparent in Orkney than elsewhere in Scotland. The smallholders of Orkney may be “landed”, but they are not “bourgeoisie”, and they speak the same language and share the same cultural world as their employees.

The literature of Orkney owes its existence rather to a variety of factors. In a small island group which is hundreds of miles distant by land and sea from the nearest university in Aberdeen, the level of literacy and scholarly ambition in Orkney has always been remarkable. Neither Dennison, Muir, Marwick or Rendall attended a university, yet all four educated themselves, going on to publish successfully across a broad variety of disciplines. The combination of a forceful, initial medieval impetus, coupled with vibrant oral, folk and vernacular traditions has proved sufficient to propel this tradition into the closing years of the twentieth century with the death of George Mackay Brown in 1996. A keen sense of tradition and awareness of their forebears informs the writing of each figure in this study. A plucky local publishing industry, a keenly supportive local audience and an awareness and sensitivity to this audience on the part of the writers themselves are other highly significant factors. Dennison, Rendall, Brown and Lamb were all to publish locally at different stages. A patriotic sense of allegiance to one another and to their fellow Orcadians on behalf of all the writers has helped to ensure their collective survival. In the cases of Dennison and Rendall, the literary writers of Orcadian Scots, we are left with the distinct feeling that neither would have been particularly concerned had their work remained unread furth of their home islands. There are parallels with the great writers of the Gaeltacht such as Sorley MacLean, for whom the miniscule home audience was everything.

Orkney writing stalls at the outbreak of World War Two. Of course there are writers active in the post war period, but only rarely is a piece of fiction set in a recognisably modern Orkney. Because abhorrence of Nazism led to the abandonment of ideals of Scottish race, and because World War Two revived feelings of British as opposed to Scottish national identity, Eric Linklater abandons the islands in the late thirties, returning only for the briefest of fictional visits. Robert Rendall’s poetic instincts are

²¹⁸Tom Morton, in “Northwords”, Spring 2003 (p24).

²¹⁹“Hamnavoe”, *Selected Poems*.

conservative and antiquarian, admirably so. George Mackay Brown is deeply reluctant to write about modernity and does so only in order to damn technology and human greed. Further on, we find Elphinstone and Lamb delving deeper into saga archaeology. Orkney runs the risk of becoming entangled in and immobilised by her history. A rich and romantic past is alluring and sometimes dangerous for literature and could be damaging to the continuing indigenous cultural life and identity of the community. In Shetland, by contrast, the recent contemporary situation has been more progressive. Robert Allan Jamieson's *Thin Wealth*²²⁰ fictionalises the advent of the oil industry in Shetland, while Frank Renwick's *Noust*²²¹ is a sharp and pertinent comedy asserting the tenacity of indigenous Shetlandic culture alongside up-to-the-minute technology and modernity in seventies Unst. While Brown joined Seamus Heaney and Les Murray among the world players of late twentieth century poetry, Orkney awaits a truly postmodern novelist who will describe life in the islands after the wars, perhaps eschewing their older history.

²²⁰Robert Allan Jamieson, *Thin Wealth* (Edinburgh, 1986).

²²¹Frank Renwick, *Noust* (Edinburgh, 1978).

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