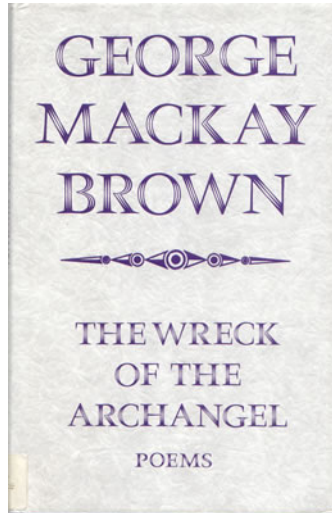


## On *The Wreck of the Archangel* (1989) by George Mackay Brown

Ken Cockburn



### Preface

This essay was one of eight written for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, offering an introduction to 20th century Scottish poetry by considering the work of the eight poets represented in the painting [Poets' Pub](#) (1980) by Alexander Moffat. Covering the decades from the 1920s to the 1990s, a collection by each poet is considered in detail under the headings The Book, The Title, The Decade, A Contemporary Reading and Further Reading.

1920s, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Sangschaw*

1930s, Sorley MacLean, *17 Poems for 6d: in Gaelic, Scots and English*  
(with Robert Garioch)

1940s, Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Under the Eildon Tree*

1950s, Norman MacCaig, *The Sinai Sort*

1960s, Edwin Morgan, *The Second Life*

1970s, Robert Garioch, *Doktor Faust in Rose Street*

1980s, George Mackay Brown, *The Wreck of the Archangel*

1990s, Iain Crichton Smith, *Ends and Beginnings*

The essays were written in 2003 by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, where they were available from 2004 until c.2010. They are presented here with some abridgements, corrections and amendments.

## The Book

Brown, George Mackay

*The Wreck of the Archangel: Poems*

(London: John Murray, 1989)

222x145mm, hardback with dustjacket, 116 pages, plus 10 preliminary pages

The book is dedicated to Archie and Elizabeth Bevan, and includes an introduction signed 'G.M.B.' and dated 'February 1989'. It contains 44 individual poems, plus four short sequences, or extracts from sequences, comprising an additional 24 poems.

## The Title

The title poem is the first in the book. It is set on Orkney, like the great majority of Brown's work, at an unspecified date in the past, probably the late 19th century. It tells the story of the wreck of an emigrant ship bound, presumably, for America, off the Orkney island of Westray; of all those on board, the only survivor is a baby, somehow rescued from the night sea. In the poem Brown focuses first on the islanders' activities that evening: having tied up the fishing-boats, the men attend to their animals; the women are at work in their houses; stories are told; the children fall asleep. Typically he encapsulates the life of a small but integrated and self-sufficient community in just a few lines. When they realise a ship has been wrecked, they head for the shore, hoping to rescue something of its cargo, and find only the drowned. But not all will be wasted: on this treeless island, they are glad to salvage

... spars and planks enough to keep  
An island in roofbeams, tables, coffins, doors  
A century long.

And then the baby is found, though its being saved, the gift of life itself, seems to be a mixed blessing. The poem concludes with the lines

His feet in thrall always  
To the bounteous terrible harp.

If the poem's emblematic title suggests the collapse of religious faith, the baby's survival is a kind of miracle which might serve to restore such faith, but there is no rejoicing, as might be expected at such a rescue: Brown

emphasises the existential 'thrall' to death which life is in. The image of the saved baby is one he returns to in 'Eagle': a mother rescues her baby from the eagle's nest, only for its grandfather to mutter,

Better for the boy, maybe,  
That freedom of rock and cloud...  
Not what must come,  
Ten thousand brutish days  
Yoked with clay and sea-slime.

Such a tension runs as an undercurrent through the book: an affirmation of religious faith which offers a sense of completeness and necessary meaning to life is tested by an awareness of an insuperable existential void at the heart of life.

### **The Decade – 1980s**

Orkney has always been somewhat separate from the rest of Scotland, and even the discovery of oil in the North Sea and its commercial exploitation affected the islands less than it did mainland Scotland, particularly Aberdeen and the area around the Moray Firth, and the Shetland Islands to the north.

### **A contemporary reading**

Almost all the poems in the collection are set on Orkney. Many feature real, named people, and are based on historical incidents, although Brown rarely gives dates within the poems, and tends to treat all 'time zones' or historical eras more or less equally, emphasising similarities rather than differences. These eras range from Roman times ('Ships of Julius Agricola sail into the Pentland Firth'), through the medieval period ('Songs for St Magnus Day', about the 12th century martyrdom of Earl Magnus), and on through the centuries to the present day. He is interested in continuity: while recognising the fragility of life on the islands and, within a wider context, the impermanence of all things, he celebrates the integrated, self-sufficient, communal way of life which, of necessity, persisted in Orkney right into Brown's own lifetime. The people live from the land and the sea: the title of an earlier collection of poems, *Fishermen with Ploughs*, could stand as a subtitle or motto for many poems here.

The island community is portrayed most fully and formally in 'St Magnus Day in the Island', a litany of all its members coming together in church for a religious ceremony. Initially 'a disorder of voices,/a babble', they are instructed to 'Enter silently and in order', though this latter command means in an orderly fashion, rather than according to rank, for 'there is room for all', as equals. The laird is set 'not far from the very poor', for 'all are grass and flowers of grass'. The ploughmen arrive late because their work has taken longer than expected, Here the church, it is implied, does not seek to establish its authority by insisting on taking precedence over such work. The ceremony must accommodate their lateness because the work is necessary. Other than the bishop, the ceremony is for and by the members of the community: it is 'the boys from the hill' who sing the mass. A more secular gathering is celebrated in 'The Horse Fair'. The main part of the poem is a child's description of his day at the fair, written as a school exercise. Again, a broad range of figures are portrayed. Authority in the form of the schoolteacher, the aptly named 'Miss Instone', is less beneficent here. Dissatisfied with 'spelling and punctuation', she takes no interest in the content of the children's writing, and uses the exercise simply as a means of enforcing her rules.

The element of performance inherent in church ritual is also present elsewhere, with Brown's concept of performance more related to the procession and the masque than to the modern theatre's drama of conflict. 'Songs for St Magnus Day' has an operatic feel to it, particularly given its 'soundtrack' of extracts from the Latin mass. There is a strong yet static visual contrast within the poem, with Magnus, and indeed his executioner, presented as individual human beings moving through the world; his enemies however are 'eight hawk-masks... on the hill'. 'Feast of Candles' presents another church ceremony, again attended by all, but here Brown uses darkness and candlelight to great effect, transforming the congregation from their everyday to their blessed selves in a series of delicate vignettes:

And girls from the big farm, leaving their empty mirth outside...  
...beautifully lighted about the eyes and the hushed mouths

In 'An Old Actor in Athens', untypical in having no reference to Orkney, the speaker tells of his famous roles, and his declining status as he ages. Here Brown seems to acknowledge the performer's, and the writer's, ability to inhabit, albeit briefly, various roles and stories distant from him in time and space, and that when successful their work can relieve the existential void at the heart of life. Ceremony, performance, poetry and art are acknowledged as artificial and illusory yet potentially transformative and thus sacred:

...our mimes, every now and again  
Distil to one  
Pure lucent drop of benison  
The fogs that rot the heart with each breath drawn.

Rather than using established poetic forms (whether stanza forms, metrical patterns or rhyme schemes) Brown tends to structure his poems using non-literary patterns: the twelve months of the calendar, the stations of the cross, or the twelve days of Christmas. The calendar offers a circular form, an eternal return; but this is not (as in Garioch) a closed circle but an open one, the recurrent pattern offering both multiplicity and repetitiveness, predictability and a new space for action. Brown uses these forms to emphasise the connectedness of human beings to natural and sacred cycles: in 'Voyage: The Months', the sailors are dependent on the contingencies of the weather, and their voyage is presented as both a real journey through space, as well as a life-journey. 'The House' connects the story of an Orkney couple building a house with the story of the crucifixion, making the completion of the house a kind of resurrection, a promise of new life. Brown's Christian vision as expressed in these poems is not a teleological one, that is a move towards, or a welcoming of, apocalypse and the Last Judgement, but one in which revealed, established and endlessly repeated patterns give life meaning. This connectedness of man, nature and God is also revealed in his language. Orkney is known as 'the whale islands'; the Viking poet has a 'harp of whalebone'; a church is described as a 'stone ship'; a ship 'went like a stallion over the grey field of the sea white-flowered'.

Brown also uses the life-cycle as a structural and narrative device: a human life in 'The Jars', a plant in 'John Barleycorn'. As well as continuity, in both these poems Brown highlights the fact of transformation within a single life-cycle, transformation which is neither willed nor necessarily understood by its subject, but which is necessary to the continuity of that life, and the lives that will follow. 'The Jars' has Brown at his most abstract: although the setting is realistic, 'a house on the mist-shrouded moor', the events which the unnamed male visitor to the 'HOUSE OF WOMEN' experiences are deliberately mysterious, and time passes in a dream-like way. 'John Barleycorn' is written, unusually for Brown, in rhyming couplets, though the rhymes are often near- or half-rhymes rather than full rhymes, and the lines are of uneven length. With the seed made, at the end of the poem, into 'wassails of corn', the poem allows Brown to look at the idea of continuity after death. There is a deliberate resonance with Christ's resurrection:

salvation through Christ, in Brown's eyes, does not lead to man's superiority to, but his deeper integration within, nature.

Brown is aware of the islands' Norse past, and that the sea has always served as a means of leaving the islands, as well as a barrier. His Orkney men sail through the centuries in all directions: east to Norway, west to Vinland (North America), and south to the Mediterranean. His sea poems are never less than atmospheric, but also capture the mix of consolation and bewilderment the open sea brings, the sailors navigating according to their knowledge, but never being certain that the changing conditions of the sea will let them reach their destination. His voyagers are often Viking adventurers sailing hopefully in search of plunder, even if under the guise of a pilgrimage. If there is a weakness to a poem such as 'Pilgrimage', it is that these crusaders are shorn of the 'berserk' fierceness which made them so feared in the Holy Land and Byzantium, among Christians who happened to be in the way just as much among their putative Muslim enemies. Brown erases 'the will to power' in such poems, placing his characters in a wider divine context as an apologia for any excesses, which the poem simply glosses over.

Despite the religious faith which underpins many of the poems, and the stressed continuity of communal life over the centuries, there is a vein of pessimism in Brown's work. Here it is expressed most strongly in the poem 'Greenpeace': the first part tells of the wanderings around western and northern Scotland of a bard of the early Christian era, who has a role to play in the various communities he passes through. The second part, however, cuts to the present, and describes the breaking of the tradition, and pollution - 'a rotted shoreline... the death of the sea', though even here the possibility of return and rebirth is kept open. 'Rackwick: A Child's Scrapbook' tells of a once-flourishing village which is now deserted, but instead of lingering on images of loss and desolation, the poem celebrates the flourishing of nature in the ruins, and ends indeed with an image of ecstasy:

Oh, bee to die in the heart of that rose...

The final pages of the book contain poems about Christmas, then (briefly) Candlemas and Easter. The kings and the shepherds are repeatedly invoked, the latter often on the former's tails, and Brown is sensitive to those travelling at this time of year, as the holy family were in the story of the nativity, because of the census which had been called. The traveller seeking refuge, whether a main character in the drama or a tiny figure in the background, is seen as a necessary, integral part of the story - the journey of life, the refuge of religion.

## Further Reading

Brown, George Mackay

Selected Poems

New enlarged edition. With a cover photograph of the author.

(London : John Murray, 1996)

Brown, George Mackay

The Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown reads his poems and a story

LP and audio cassette

(Dublin : Claddagh Records, 1971)

Spear, Hilda D. (ed)

George Mackay Brown: A Survey of his Work and a Full Bibliography

Includes an essay by Douglas Dunn, 'The Poetry: 'Finished Fragrance''

(Lewiston, New York; Queenston, Ontario; Lampeter, Wales: The Edward Mellon Press, 2000)

Times Literary Supplement

17.05.1991

'Island voices': review of George Mackay Brown's *The Wreck of the Archangel* by Glyn Maxwell

Poetry Review

vol.80, no.1, Spring 1990, pp.44-5

'Orcadian in Eden': review of George Mackay Brown's *The Wreck of the Archangel* and *The Masked Fisherman* and other stories by Dennis O'Driscoll