



The Looms of History in George Mackay Brown's Literary Landscape

Author(s): J. Linden Bicket

Source: *eSharp*, Special Issue: Spinning Scotland: Exploring Literary and Cultural Perspectives (2009), pp. 5-17

URL: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/esharp>

ISSN: 1742-4542

Copyright in this work remains with the author.

eSharp is an international online journal for postgraduate research in the arts, humanities, social sciences and education. Based at the University of Glasgow and run by graduate students, it aims to provide a critical but supportive entry to academic publishing for emerging academics, including postgraduates and recent postdoctoral students.

esharp@gla.ac.uk

The Looms of History in George Mackay Brown's Literary Landscape

J. Linden Bicket (University of Glasgow)

My paper deals with the metaphor of spinning and weaving in the work of the Orcadian writer George Mackay Brown; a man obsessed with what he calls 'the looms of history' (Brown, 1972, p.77). It looks particularly at Mackay Brown's work, *An Orkney Tapestry*, first published in 1969, which is a text that weaves together Orcadian, Scandinavian, and Scottish culture by virtue of the extended metaphor of spinning. *An Orkney Tapestry* is filled with references such as, 'the great looms began to hum' (1972, p.64), and 'History has other looms, where a Seamless Garment is being worked on' (1972, p.69), and 'From that green sanctuary Brodir watched the clashing of the great looms and the crimson growing web' (1972, p.65). This paper offers a comprehensive look at the ways in which looms and spinning in Brown's work weave a seamless garment that takes in all the estates of Orkney in a way that is historical and social. Brown talks of real battles and the ordinary men who fought in them, but his approach is also spiritual, because his weaving imagery is most comprehensively and strikingly used to depict the life and martyrdom of the islands' patron Saint, Magnus. The two battles described in *An Orkney Tapestry* show the different strands this imagery forms. They also demonstrate that despite the 'mingled weave' of Orcadian identity and the Orkney islands' fractured and multi-faceted past, Brown's view of all the estates of Orkney as 'stitched together in a single garment' (1972, pp.76-77) is harmonious and all-encompassing.

Mackay Brown was born in 1921, and died in 1996. He wrote prolifically in poetry and prose (short stories especially), and his first major publication, *The Storm and Other Poems*, in 1954, instantly situated him as part of the twentieth century ‘Scottish Cultural Renaissance’. Douglas Gifford and Alan Riach have identified the movement this way:

The Great War changed poets’ perspectives utterly and fundamentally. Simmering national awareness became urgent questioning, exacerbating curiosity about what Scotland might be. Roots, tradition, the recovery of older languages as a means of recovering lost national consciousness and character, and an underlying belief in an ancient golden age were the hallmarks of this movement.
(2004, p.xxvi)

This summation is particularly appropriate for *An Orkney Tapestry*, which is a rich fusion, or weaving together of poetry, prose, drama, ballad, and personal polemic, that travels back in time to before the Vikings. Brown claims near the start of the book that ‘The Orkney imagination is haunted by time’ (1972, p.26). His artistic manifesto is made clear when he writes:

I will attempt to get back to the roots and sources of the community, from which it draws its continuing life, from which it cuts itself off at its peril. With the help of the old stories, the old scrolls, the gathered legends, and the individual earth-rooted imagination, I will try to discover a line or two of the ancient life-giving heraldry.
(1972, p.30)

This is exactly what Mackay Brown does in *An Orkney Tapestry*. The recurrent imagery of spinning, weaving and looms stitch together the different genres that make up the book’s patch-work texture, and this imagery – although dealing with Vikings, saints, selkie-ballads and a play about a guardian angel – is harmonious and unifying.

Brown commissioned local artist Sylvia Wishart to provide line drawings for the book, which eventually culminated in his creation of a much later play, the beautiful, almost illuminated, *The Loom of Light*, another text that takes up spinning imagery as its central motif, and includes photography and painting in its pages.

As mentioned earlier, Brown uses his spinning imagery to permeate both the historical and spiritual agendas of his literary tapestry, mainly through two battle scenes. The first of these is from the section, ‘Warrior’, of the chapter Brown has on Vikings. We hear about the Battle of Clontarf of 1014, a product of what has been called Ireland’s golden age, and at first glance, not immediately recognisable as Orcadian history. Sigurd, the pagan Earl of Orkney, makes an alliance with Sigtrygg, King of Dublin, against the Christian King Brian Boru, the High King of Ireland, and Brown tells us that although Earl Sigurd knows the Irish crown was too impossible to be true,

the high honour of the battle-centre was quite another thing; once offered, it could not be withdrawn, it was a genuine tribute to Sigurd’s battle-wit and bravery, and to the rare magic of his mother’s weaving. (Brown 1972, p.62)

The weaving in question refers to a magic banner also mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga*, an Icelandic 13th century text that captured Brown’s imagination throughout his life. He re-creates the saga tale of the magic banner Earl Sigurd and his army took to Ireland, and writes:

Into the riddling region where gods and men negotiated only an elite could trespass – men who had made a long study of the black arts, professional enchanter and spell-binders, they were permitted to look into the seeds of fate and to see which would wither and which would flourish. Earl Sigurd’s mother was a priestess of these mysteries. For her son she had made a banner that, borne

in battle, would bring him victory. Woven into the flag was a raven, symbol of Odin – the bird of memory and foresight, that knew what had happened and what is to happen. The banner had one drawback; whoever carried it would himself be cut down in battle. (1972, p.61)

Perhaps predictably, Earl Sigurd ends up carrying the magic banner himself and so is killed in the battle. The impression given by Brown is that Sigurd longs to avoid dying in his bed as an old man, and instead ensures a glorious death that will lead to everlasting banqueting in Valhalla. He utters what Brown calls the witty death-utterance of the sagas, where a hero or warrior meets death with a jest, and when instructed by one of his troops to ‘carry your own devil!’ he says, ‘Certainly the beggar should carry his own bag’ (Brown 1972, p.65). Soon afterwards, Brown tells us, ‘a spear transfixes the Earl’. However, it is not Earl Sigurd, but his witch-mother Eithne, the banner-weaver, who is allowed the best last word. She says, ‘I would have brought you up in my wool-basket if I had known you expected to live forever’ (Brown 1972, p.61).

This leads us to the other women who are tied up in all this wool and spinning and battle imagery. Brown writes:

There have never been women in history like the Norse women of the sagas; they seem more like savage sea-birds than women; once the cold glaucous eye fell on son or lover or husband, these heroes ran meekly to obey their smallest whim. These women stirred the cauldrons of hatred generation by generation, when men would have let the fires die. (1972, p.61)

So far (we could argue) so sexist, but this is a good rebuff to those critics who would accuse Brown’s women of being merely passive bearers of children. The strangest, most savage, and most supernatural element of the Battle of Clontarf that Brown imaginatively recreates in *An Orkney Tapestry*, are the Valkyries.

At this point we might consider two modern representations of Valkyries – Odin’s handmaidens – who take stricken warriors from the battlefield to glory in Valhalla. *The Valkyrie’s Vigil*, by Edward Robert Hughes (1906) is a rather pretty pre-Raphaelite representation, while Peter Nicolai Arbo’s *Wild Hunt of Odin* (1872) depicts Valkyries that are probably far closer to the horrors that appear in the sagas. Perhaps Arbo’s painting best fits Brown’s descriptions of Valkyries in *An Orkney Tapestry*, too. Brown tells us that Clontarf was ‘one of the bloodiest battles in history’, and writes:

In Caithness that day a man called Darraud saw twelve horsewomen riding into a hillside. He followed where they seemed to go, and saw through a rock-cleft twelve women setting up a loom, and singing. The song shuttles on for eleven verses, a lengthening tissue of ghastliness. (1972, p.66)

The source texts for Brown’s version of their song are *Njal’s Saga*, and the songs *The Woof of War*, and *The Fatal Sisters* – all of which Brown read. In his introduction to Sir George Webbe Dasent’s translation of *The Woof of War*, Orkney historian Ernest Marwick tells us that the Valkyries had set up a loom, and:

Men’s heads were the weights, but men’s entrails were the warp and weft. A sword served for a shuttle, and the reels were arrows. When the woof was complete the witches tore it apart, and, each retaining a portion, rode six to the south, and the other six to the north. Similar things happened in Faroe, in Iceland, and in Orkney, where an apparition of Earl Sigurd was seen by a man named Hareck. (Marwick, 1949, p.23)

Here is Brown’s translation of the first two verses, and last verse, of the song:

The warp is stretched
 For warriors' death.
 The weft in the loom
 Drips with blood
 The battle darkens.
 Under our fingers
 The tapestry grows,
 Red as heart's blood
 Blue as corpses,
 The web of battle.

What is this woof?
 The guts of men.
 The weights on the warp
 Their slaughtered heads.
 These are our spindles,
 Blood splashed-spears.
 An iron loom-frame;
 And the reels, arrows;
 With swords for shuttles
 This war-web we weave,
 Valkyries weaving
 The web of victory [...](1972, p.67)

Horror cover all the heath,
 Clouds of carnage blot the sun.
 Sisters, weave the web of death;
 Sisters, cease, the work is done [...](1972, p.69)

This is all rather grisly. Spinning imagery weaves together horrific mythological figures with a real battle and takes in Orkney, Ireland, Iceland, and Faroe, but we soon realise in *An Orkney Tapestry*, that Brown moves seamlessly from pagan mythology to Christianity. He writes that 'the real battle was fought out by supernatural beings, the heavenly legions against the principalities and powers of darkness' (1972, p.54) and 'the battle was between Christ and Odin for the soul of Ireland' (1972, p.54). Brian Boru the Christian King wins Clontarf, but is killed. Brown tells us that:

We must think of King Brian Boru's head and heart as being exempt from the Valkyries' hands. History has other looms, where a Seamless Garment is being worked on. The shuttles fly perpetually, secretly, silently, in little islands where the brothers plough and fish and pray; in lonely oratories; in great churches from Galway to Byzantium. (1972, p. 70)

An Orkney Tapestry moves from talking about Earl Sigurd the warrior, to another man, Earl Magnus, or St. Magnus, the martyr. At first glance, the imaginatively recreated hagiography of a Saint might not bear much resemblance to the depiction of a bloodthirsty battle, and Brown is careful to Christianise St. Magnus as much as possible, so that his life in *An Orkney Tapestry* is probably more pious, and his death more freely accepted, than it is in its original saga version, but comparisons with the previous discussion of Vikings are stitched into the text. Brown writes:

The battle of Clontarf and the Martyrdom of St. Magnus are both set in the season of The Passion and Easter. The actors move about under the cross. The fearful song of the Valkyries after the battle, about the garment of war woven from entrails, is not unlike the medieval hymns that picture Christ in his Passion, clothed in wounds and blood. (1972, p. 83)

Certainly, Brown goes to some lengths to knit the prior battle between a Christian king and pagan, Viking warriors, together with the story of the martyrdom of St. Magnus.

In brief, Magnus was the cousin of Hakon, and both were Earls of Orkney in the 12th century. *Orkneyinga Saga* tells us that they got on reasonably well early on in life, but soon had rival armies that trampled over Orkney, causing disharmony, bloodshed and misrule. A peace treaty was called on the island of Egilsay on Easter Monday in 1117 (the Battle of Clontarf was on Good Friday, a century

earlier) but Magnus was cheated, as Hakon brought eight ships instead of the agreed two. Magnus offered himself as a sacrifice and was killed, and from then on several miracles took place, with peace restored to the Orkney Islands. Magnus's nephew Rognvald Kolson, himself made a saint, commissioned the building of the magnificent St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, popularly known as 'the wonder and glory of all the north'.

Brown was fascinated by the story of St. Magnus. Reading about Magnus's martyrdom in the sagas inspired him early on, and he re-wrote the story in a variety of genres including opera libretto, play, poetry and novel. However, in *An Orkney Tapestry*, and *The Loom of Light*, his St. Magnus play, he defines Magnus's life and death meticulously through the spinning metaphor, and through the image of Christ's seamless garment, taken from John's Gospel.

Like Brian Boru during the Battle of Clontarf, Brown's Magnus does not fight in battle. In his depictions of Clontarf, Brown has Brian Boru praying, and surrounded, armourless, by his soldiers. St. Magnus is even less protected in the second battle this paper will discuss: the Battle of Menai Straits in Anglesey. The sagas tell us that Magnus was taken there on the side of the Norwegian King, but that he refused to fight and instead read aloud from his Psalter. Brown recognised that body and soul both matter in this story, and tells us, in *An Orkney Tapestry*, that 'In the web of being, spiritual and corporeal are close-woven' (1972, p.85). In *The Loom of Light*, Brown has Magnus recite psalms during the battle that mention clothing specifically. In the face of flying arrows Magnus recites:

The King's daughter is all glorious within. Her clothing is of wrought gold. She shall be brought in to the King in raiment of needlework. (1984, p.18) [Magnus recites this from psalm 45:13]

[and] Who is this that commeth from Edom, with dyed garments from Bosra, this beautiful one in his robe, walking in the greatness of his strength? (1984, p.19)
[Magnus recites this from Isaiah 63:1]

[and] The coat that Israel gave to his beloved son, Joseph, a beautiful garment of many colours, was taken from him. Steeped in the blood of beasts it became one colour... (1984, p.19) [Magnus recites this from Genesis 37:23]

Instead of a magic woven banner as a symbol of fate, magic, and Norse folklore and mythology, Brown presents us with Magnus reading aloud from his Psalter, sitting unarmoured, refusing to fight, and curiously he is left completely unharmed. Instead of a gruesome litany by Valkyries, we hear excerpts of beautiful psalms. The images that populate this text swarm together at this point and I would suggest that the raven on the pagan magic banner foreshadows Christ, with its divine knowledge and powers of protection and salvation, while the Psalter (a book of psalms) is used almost as a battle talisman. An especially pertinent piece of scripture (used elsewhere, famously, by Iain Crichton Smith) comes with Magnus reading aloud from Matthew (6:28):

Why take ye thought of raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They toil not neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (1984, p.16)

Magnus is happy not to worry about his fate – he allows God to decide, and whether he wears a red coat of sacrifice or a seamless garment like Christ, he commits his soul to God.

In fact the mention of the Gospel according to Matthew and the seamless garment in John's Gospel become even more pertinent as *An Orkney Tapestry*, and also the play *The Loom of Light*, and novel

Magnus (1977), progress. After the battle in which Magnus refuses to fight, increased conflict arises between himself and his cousin Hakon, as both want to rule Orkney singly. The bishop in *The Loom of Light* notes that Orkney is coming apart at the seams, and says:

To make peace, the ‘pax Christi’, is to weave the seamless garment. But to make peace as politicians understand it – that is simply to patch an old scarecrow over and over again [...] What is desperately needed in Orkney this Easter is something more in the nature of a sacrifice: the true immaculate death of a dove’. (1984, p. 32)

Underlying scripture here points to John 19:23:

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic, now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top.

And as Alan Bold points out, Magnus:

is being guided by an angel called the Keeper of the Loom who tells him he is to take the loom of the spirit and weave upon it an immaculate garment – the Seamless Garment of sanctity. (Bold 1978, p.104)

Brown reminds us in his novel *Magnus*, about ‘that parable [Matthew 22] in which Christ compares the celestial kingdom to a marriage feast, and how it is good for a guest to wear to the feast his wedding garment lest, having some inferior garment on, he is shamed and put out into darkness.’ (1977, p.137) So, Brown adds layers and layers to the spiritual aspect of his literary tapestry. His source texts for the constant symbolism of garments and weaving are now biblical, rather than mythological, or folkloric. The only problem is whether his constant reinforcing of the weaving and spinning imagery through psalms and scripture sounds unconvincing, and even dogmatic.

Alan Bold has been fairly critical of Brown in this respect: he claims he cannot see anything especially saintly in a man being murdered, and writes that Brown owes it to non-Catholic readers ‘to explore the man Magnus instead of dogmatically accepting his sanctity’ (1978 p.109). However, Brown’s hagiography of St. Magnus does not concentrate wholly on one saintly man. Although *An Orkney Tapestry* describes the lives of Earls like Sigurd, Magnus and Hakon, as the sagas do, Brown also injects a new emphasis into his hagiography and descriptions of battle scenes, one that takes the common man into account. For Brown, the whole community is important, as well as those outsiders, like the tinkers, who wander through his literary landscape. In fact it is a tinker, or vagrant, who recognises Magnus’s sainthood before Orkney or Rome or anyone else. Brown writes:

In a wholesome society the different estates are stitched together in a single garment: the warmth and comfort and well-being of the people, a symbol too of their identity and their ethos. Their language, their work, their customs, all they think and do and say, decide the cut and style of the coat [...] There was another coat; very precious and inviolable, their fathers and their grandfathers before them had imagined it and had given it to the looms of history; and this heavy heraldic ceremonial coat was not finished [...] There was a third coat; as yet only the monks in the lonely islands wore it – the long white weave of innocence that they must have ready for the bridal feast of Christ... (1972, pp. 76-77)

Therefore, although St. Magnus is concerned with attaining the last long white weave of innocence, his martyrdom ensures that the heraldic coat of state does not have to be shared between two earls, like ‘rich shameful beggars’ (1984, p.11), and the common weal is clothed in a comforting symbolic coat. Magnus’s death is

characterised by a symbolic handing over of garments to his executioner. In the end, in Brown's words:

Magnus gave his clothes to Lifolf and knelt on the stone and went naked (it seemed) into the ecstasies of death. Yet all through history the shuttles are flying perpetually, secretly, silently. The wedding garment, the shirt of invisible fire, is being woven.

[...] Alone, as he was meant to do, Hakon Paulson wore the refashioned coat-of-state with authority and charity. In peace the crofters and fishermen broke their furrows of clay and salt, and on small islands the long bright robes chanted their litanies; into which an expected name had not yet been gathered. (1972, pp. 84-85)

There is nothing narrow and dogmatic about this writing. The spinning and weaving imagery is not inflexible and unbending throughout Brown's historical tour of medieval Orkney in *An Orkney Tapestry* – it takes in paganism, Christianity, Norse mythology, martyrdom, and sainthood – and moves from a bloody battle to the idea of the redemption of society. But it is not preaching; the impression given is that far more it is a writer taking pleasure mostly in re-creating history that is sometimes sidelined and marginalized in a Scottish context. As well as that, Brown's weaving together of *An Orkney Tapestry* takes sagas as its central inspiration, and it is worth questioning how often we concentrate on those in the Scottish canon. In Brown's later work for children, *Pictures In the Cave*, we see Robert the Bruce watching the legendary spider in a cave in Orkney, and soon, 'at the end of that famous day, King Robert finished the web-spinning, and his kingdom was established' (1977, p.53). It might be said that Brown's *An Orkney Tapestry* does something similar: it's an act of cultural retrieval that weaves Orcadian hagiography, legend and mythology into the looms of history, and not just Icelandic, Norwegian and Irish history, but Scottish history too.

Bibliography

- Bold, Alan. 1978. *George Mackay Brown*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd.
- Brown, George Mackay. 1949. *Let's See the Orkney Islands*. Fort William: William S. Thomson.
- Brown, George Mackay. 1977. *Magnus*. London: Quartet Books Limited.
- Brown, George Mackay. 1972. *An Orkney Tapestry*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Brown, George Mackay. 1977. *Pictures in the Cave*. London: Pan Books Ltd.
- Brown, George Mackay. 1984. *Three Plays: The Loom of Light, The Well and The Voyage of Saint Brandon*. London: Chatto & Windus The Hogarth Press.
- Gifford, Douglas & Alan Riach. 2004. *Scotlands, Poets and the Nation*. Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited.
- Marwick, Ernest W. 1949. *An Anthology of Orkney Verse*. Kirkwall: W. R. Mackintosh, The Kirkwall Press.