



## Reviews



*George Mackay Brown: The Wound and the Gift*, Ron Ferguson, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2011, pp. 448, hardback ISBN 978-0715209356 £19.99; paperback ISBN 978-0715209622 £14.99

As Chaplain to the University of St Andrews, I had the privilege most weeks of being able to welcome distinguished guest preachers from any part of the UK. The downside was when they missed their connections. One visitor was retimed to arrive after the service had begun but early enough for the sermon, except that come the moment the beadle entered alone. What the congregation heard that day was therefore a sermon that Orcadian writer George Mackay Brown had put in the mouth of a pre-Reformation Orkney priest, Father Halcro. The reaction in the cloister afterwards surpassed the usual. They had never heard anything so beautiful from St Salvator's pulpit.

The 'sermon' was from *A Treading of Grapes* and was one of three on the marriage at Cana as might have been heard in different centuries in the same small Orkney church. The writer's ear, not least in the last of these (contemporary Presbyterian) was frighteningly accurate, and the sequence was used in the preaching class at St Mary's College – as well as carried about for Chaplain's emergencies!

The contrast between Father Halcro's strong pastoral engagement with the lives of his people and the Presbyterian platitudes of the twentieth-century parish minister reflects Mackay Brown's journey from 'the pale watery Calvinism' of his upbringing to his embracing of Catholicism at the age of 40. Ron Ferguson, the author of *The Wound and the Gift*, a study of George Mackay Brown's spiritual journey, suggests that Brown was comparing uncritically the best of Catholicism with the worse of Presbyterianism. Nevertheless, Ferguson sympathises with the qualities in Catholic practice that would have attracted the poet: its more generous spiritual rituals, a stronger sense of being together in human fragility instead of exposed

as an individual, its provision for fallen people, the greater sense of the sacramental. This last, allied with a strong sense of the divine in nature, meant that the spiritual was never far away from Mackay Brown's writing. As the composer Peter Maxwell Davies puts it in the book, the patterns of the agricultural and the fishing year are married with the Christian Year, and the simplest actions – feeding cattle or going out to set creels – become rituals which have enormous significance.

Ferguson, as well as being a Church of Scotland minister (lately St Machar's Cathedral, Kirkwall), is by profession a journalist, and one of the things that distinguishes this book is that he is able to make use of the journalist's well-stocked armoury. Chief among these is that a story is found in the telling of others. In his pages he gives generous hospitality to other commentators, chiefly Scottish (including Orkney) writers and poets. (The number of these is in itself remarkable and a spur to the reader to move outside the narrower world of the well-publicised best seller). Ferguson gets people to talk, and often at length, not as grist for the author's mill but giving them their own place. The result of this chorus of different voices is that it allows his subject to be heard, as the many viewpoints add up to a more complete portrayal and the reader is brought into the circle round the subject. Coupled with carefully chosen extracts from Mackay Brown's own poetry, novels and, yes, journalism too, the result is a compelling introduction to the Orcadian writer's output. Quotations are artfully placed in that part of the narrative which illuminates both the context and the works themselves: these are not mere snippets but are long enough to dwell in.

Ron Ferguson has already done a great service to Scottish culture with his biographies of modern saints: George MacLeod, Father Roland Walls, and Geoff Shaw. Given that they were pioneers in the church, it is inevitable that matters of the spirit would feature. However, even in his treatment of these, Ferguson had redefined the meaning of spirituality, and, in now widening the net beyond church and society to the nation's literary life, he gives an account of a spiritual journey that is far more than his subject's conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism. As in the case of MacLeod et al., Ferguson does not narrate so much as interrogate, and in so doing can work down into people's motivations and character: the faults

which make them great as well as the qualities. The musicologist Victor Zuckerkandl, in seeking the essence of music (and we may extend this to poetry and other artistic media), rejects the division of human experience into the material and the spiritual, preferring the distinction between the world of the person and the world to which the person relates. These two worlds do not interface ‘vertically’: it is not that I am here and the world is out there, but rather that my world and that world have the same ‘depth’, and what (in his case) music enables is the crossing of the frontier between my materiality and the world’s materiality as well as at the same time between my depth and the world’s depth. In Ferguson’s probing narrative, the customarily weak and limited interpretation of the spiritual is rescued and recast.

As part of the interrogation, Ferguson explores the relationship of the ‘woundedness’ of this artist with the gift that enabled Mackay Brown, as one interviewee puts it, to enlarge our sense of what a sad and joyful and wondrous business it is, this being alive. This is one of the book’s climaxes, and draws on newly-discovered letters. Does creativity have to be tied to suffering? Ferguson asks. Or is it, as two other writers he interviewed put it, that pain is part of human life: artists train themselves to be more attentive, see more in a circumstance, and can identify the positive in the negative, although it means stepping out of the stream of life in order to look at it and articulate it in ways that make it bearable. But more than that: one of Ferguson’s interlocutors put it this way, that George Mackay Brown took the traumas of ordinary life, and found in them fragments to make altars, and made harvest meals out of crumbs of love and grace.

There is another welcome aspect to this engrossing book. Ferguson is a patient teacher, and breaks off frequently to explain some of the terms, circumstances and events that form ‘the theological back story’, from Scottish religious history to the thought of leading philosophers. Some might be discomfited by such journalistic keep-you-reading devices as characterising Presbyterian denominations according to brands of coffee, or wish for a more nuanced explanation of Christian doctrines (priesthood of all believers, for example). However, there is surely a belief being expressed here, that this history, this quest for religious understanding, is properly in the public domain. There are no arcane secrets, no insiders or outsiders in this view of the church.

In these times, when the carpet is pulled from under authorities and certainties, the church must broaden the discussion, and humbly hear from all who are willing to engage with it at many different levels. We talk today of the need for ‘fresh expressions’, casting church and faith in different shapes to capture the attention of those who do not recognise themselves in the traditional structures. This book is in itself a fresh expression, in old-fashioned terms an act of missionary outreach, but different in that it approaches the centre from the periphery and includes all comers.

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*Speaking Christian: Recovering the Lost Meaning of Christian Words*, Marcus J. Borg, London: SPCK Publishing, 2011, pp. 248, ISBN 978-0281065080. £9.99

If one accepts first of all a Christian theological spectrum that ranges from ultra-conservative through to ultra-liberal positions, then the American Episcopalian theologian Marcus Borg has long occupied an honoured place as theologian to the liberals.

Of course, such a simplistic idea of a spectrum does not do Borg’s theology justice. As this book demonstrates, he is deeply rooted in Christian tradition and speaks very much to the mainstream churches. Nevertheless, anyone picking up Borg should be aware of the themes which have characterised his more academic work, among them the humanity, and not divinity, of ‘the pre-Easter Jesus’ (90); the metaphorical, and not literal, nature of the resurrection; and a vision of salvation that rejects hope for an afterlife and posits instead the transformation of lives on earth. This book contains all the above, and more.

The liberally-inclined Christian will therefore embrace this book, and rightly so. In a world where Christian bookshops are replete with popular theology of a conservative bent, Borg offers here a rare liberal version of the same. *Speaking Christian* is highly suitable for