Lovereading.co.uk

George Mackay Brown

The Life

Maggie Fergusson

Published by John Murray

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

Click here to buy this book and read more

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

© Maggie Fergusson 2006

First published in Great Britain in 2006 by John Murray (Publishers)
A division of Hodder Headline

The right of Maggie Fergusson to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

1

All rights reserved. Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7195 5659 7

Typeset in 11.5/14 Monotype Bembo by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Manchester

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder Headline policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

John Murray (Publishers)
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

Preface

In the autumn of 1991, I started working for one of the strangest and most beguiling organizations in London. The Royal Society of Literature, in those days, occupied gracious, dilapidated premises north of Hyde Park in what had once been the home of General Sir Ian Hamilton, leader of the Gallipoli expedition. The general as a young man, in full fencing fig, gazed down from two life-size portraits on the stairs over the ballroom where he and his wife had held parties between the wars – parties, Compton Mackenzie wrote, where 'decade met decade as gracefully as dancers meet in a quadrille'; where 'the present and the past were always in urbane accord'.

The Royal Society of Literature held its lectures in this ballroom, and in the Hamiltons' panelled dining-room John Mortimer presided over monthly meetings of the Society's Council. From here, french doors led on to a terrace garden, overgrown with roses, where there were parties and book launches in the summer. The first floor, however, was used only by the staff. There was an office roughly the size and shape of a tennis court, and a library of similar dimensions. Off this was an archive room – 'the arcades', Frank, the cleaner, called it – filled with shelves labelled PAST FELLOWS, on which sat lever arch files stuffed with yellowing correspondence. The files were alphabetically arranged, and their spines read like a register of literary ghosts: Barrie, Beckett, Beerbohm, Blunden, Brooke . . .

Not all the Fellows were 'past', of course, and it was in the lists of the Society's existing Fellows that I first came across the name George Mackay Brown. A friend pointed it out to me: this man's work, he said, had meant more to him than that of any other living writer, and he gave me some of his poetry. It was not quite like anything I had read before. The imagery was dazzling: fresh and spontaneous, and yet so natural as

to seem almost inevitable. Lovers at harvest-time lay under the 'buttered bannock of the moon'; sunset drove 'a butcher blade in the day's throat'; in April, a lark splurged through 'galilees of sky', and, as a man drowned, the sea 'turned a salt key in his last door of light'. Behind these images was a poet both absent and present: absent in so far as he practically never used the word 'I', yet at the same time passionately present in every word he wrote. One of Brown's closest friends once commented on his gift for writing with 'involved detachment'. She put it perfectly.

In the odd way of these things, once I had become aware of George Mackay Brown, his name cropped up again and again. At a party following one of the Society's lectures, I overheard two writers discussing his work. One of them, John Heath-Stubbs, argued that Brown would have made the perfect Poet Laureate after the death of Betjeman in 1984; and, as I later discovered, Betjeman's actual successor, Ted Hughes, agreed with him. 'It has to be said, George – how marvellously you would produce exactly the right poems for this job,' Hughes wrote just after his appointment. 'Roll up the whole historic pageant into a beautiful, dignified, private moment.'

Among his fellow poets, it seemed, George Mackay Brown's standing could hardly have been higher. Seamus Heaney had first come across his work in 1965, in *The Year of the Whale*, and his colleagues at Queen's University in Belfast remembered him bursting into the common room with a copy, waving it, shouting with excitement. 'The encounter with that stuff gave me what the good stuff always gives,' Heaney says, looking back, 'a feeling of being newly wakened, of the lens widening – you have been brought beyond the usual and found the *terra* still *firma* as it were.' Every succeeding collection of Brown's work 'sweetened and deepened' that first experience for Heaney. 'George strikes me as one who followed his true course,' he reflects. 'He didn't fail himself.'

Following his true course was often painful for George Mackay Brown. It meant being regarded by some in the south, and in the 'literary world', as eccentric or, worse, quaint. It meant, in Heaney's words, 'martyring himself to modernity'. He had been born to poor parents in Orkney in 1921, and had barely left the islands. He had never taken part in a book signing, or a public performance of his work; he had only once been to London. In his late thirties, he had studied English as a mature student at Edinburgh University, and here he had

got to know the extraordinary generation of Scottish poets who followed Hugh MacDiarmid: Norman MacCaig, Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith, Sydney Goodsir Smith. In Alexander Moffat's painting *Poets' Pub*, in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, he sits among them, central and lantern-jawed. But, if these poets were a group, Brown was not really a part of it. He found himself unable to write in Edinburgh and, after six years, he returned to Orkney. And there he remained, a poet as rooted in his landscape as Barnes or Clare, Herrick or Herbert, in an age of Intercity trains and Concorde travel.

There were practical reasons for his staying put. He suffered from agoraphobia; leaving home was an ordeal for him. But his stability had its roots in something more profound than a dislike of travel. By drawing his boundaries closely about him, he believed, he had freed his imagination to travel through space and time. He had reached an understanding of the Orkney islands, and of the generations who had inhabited them for over five thousand years, that hurtling about in the modern world would have denied him.

It intrigued me, this idea of a trade-off between travel and depth of understanding. Just down the road from the RSL headquarters in Hyde Park Gardens, hard on Marble Arch, is a community of enclosed Benedictine nuns. Their convent stands by what once was the site of Tyburn Tree, a gallows where, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men and women were hanged for their Catholic faith. One afternoon, an elderly nun showed me the relics in the convent basement, and told me the stories of some of the martyrs – Blessed Philip Powel, Blessed Thomas Maxfield, Saint Edmund Campion. She had lived in the convent for more than forty years, she explained, and, because she never ventured into the wider world, these characters had become quite as real to her as her sisters in the community. Past and present had fused. Was this what had happened for George Mackay Brown? In the summer of 1992, his novel *Vinland* was published, and *The Times* agreed to let me travel north to interview him.

I arrived in Orkney in mid-June, and the islands were bright with wild flowers and young crops, and spilling over with light. It was 10 p.m. by the time I reached the harbour town of Stromness and, although colours were becoming less distinct and shapes more blurred, it was not dark. At midnight, birds were still wide awake and singing

outside the windows of my B&B. I was wide awake too, turning the pages of Brown's *An Orkney Tapestry*, gripped. We had arranged to meet the following afternoon. I could hardly wait.

But that first meeting was a disaster. 'I instinctively shrink from journalists,' George Mackay Brown once wrote to a friend. Lilting and generous in his writing, he was so sparing in response to my questions as to be almost monosyllabic. Within minutes, I had run out of things to ask. Brown sat back in his rocking-chair, folded his legs, rested his chin on long, tapering hands, gazed into the middle distance and hummed.

Fortunately, I did not have to fly straight home, and the next day I bumped into Brown in Stromness. He had some friends dropping by in the late afternoon, he said: would I join them? In familiar company, he was transformed – witty, vivacious, a brilliant raconteur and an attentive host. He offered to boil each of us an egg for tea, and, before we left, showed us something that had arrived in the post that morning. A friend had sent him a copy of the letter written by Mary Queen of Scots to her cousin the King of France the night before her execution. Mary Queen of Scots had been a childhood heroine of Brown's, and he drew our attention to the firmness of her script in the face of death.

I returned to London enthralled by George Mackay Brown, by his work, and by the islands that had inspired it. Orkney was such a different world as to seem almost unreal in the hard light of a Battersea day, and for most of that first morning back I kept my curtains tightly drawn in an attempt to seal in the memories. A week or so later, an envelope arrived with a Stromness postmark, addressed in Brown's neat, deliberate hand. Tucked in among comments about the weather, and the progress of the annual St Magnus Festival, were two sentences that pleased me very much: 'I hope you'll come back often, Maggie, and enjoy a walk to the kirkyard and Warbeth. I feel you belong here in Orkney.'

I did go back, as often as I could, not only to visit George, and to explore 'mainland' Orkney, but also to get to know some of the smaller islands. On Papa Westray I interviewed Christine Hopkins, voted Scottish Teacher of the Year for 1996, in charge of just three pupils in a large, bright schoolroom overlooking the sea. On this island are the oldest standing houses in Europe, and the seventy islanders dance a reel – the Queen Victoria – unknown in any other part of Scotland.

Eynhallow, 'the holy island', is surrounded by ferocious tides – or 'roosts'. It has been uninhabited for nearly a hundred years, but in the centre of the island are what some believe to be the remains of a twelfth-century monastery. Fishermen dropped me there with a friend late one summer afternoon and, as we walked around the shore, we came upon an expanse of warm, shelving rocks carpeted with seals. They flopped into the sea as we approached, and bobbed about staring back at us, a congregation of several hundred. In Orkney legend, seals are the key to the inextricable unity of sea and land. 'Selkies' swim ashore at night, throw off their pelts, and dance like humans on the sand. One wet August evening, on skerries off the island of Hoy, I heard for the first time the sound of seals singing – a high, plangent moan like a musical *memento mori*.

Two or three times, friends and I rented a house on one of the small tidal islands in Stromness harbour, and in the mornings we made our way across the water to the town in a flimsy fibreglass dinghy. 'It was so pleasant those few autumn days, knowing that you and your friends were nearby, over on the Inner Holm,' George wrote on 12 October 1994. Pleasant for us, too, picking out his rooftop as we rowed towards Stromness, knowing that he was sitting at the Formica surface in his kitchen, with a block of Basildon Bond paper and a Bic pen, working his magic.

It was Hugo Brunner, George's editor at John Murray, who suggested I write this biography, and it was he, one morning, who put the idea to George. So long as nothing was published in his lifetime, the answer came back, George would help in any way he could. I was staying on the Holms at the time, and in the afternoon George and I went for a walk. Sitting on a bench looking out over Scapa Flow, he spoke about his childhood, without prompting or interruption, for more than an hour. He then sent me back to London with a draft copy of an autobiography, written in 1985 and awaiting posthumous publication.

For the Islands I Sing, as it was to be titled, is a book that yields more on every reading, but it is written within a tight constraint. In one early passage, George expresses his unease at the modern tendency to exaggerate the importance and interest of writers' lives: 'In fact,' he states, 'the lives of writers are not greatly different from the lives of plumbers.' It is almost as if, to prove his point, he then feels obliged to downplay

the interest of his own life, skating over whole decades, and inserting occasional baffling statements. 'One of the great experiences of most lives never happened to me,' he writes. 'I never fell in love with anybody, and no woman ever fell in love with me.' It is possible, given the context in which it appears, that this claim should be understood to apply only to George's youth; but it is a claim he repeated well into middle age. 'I have never been in love in my life,' he wrote to a friend in 1975, when he was fifty-four. This, as I was to discover, was not true.

Early in 1996, we arranged that I should spend the month of May in Stromness, visiting George to talk to him in the evenings. On 13 April, quite suddenly, he died. As a result, I spent most of May not in Stromness but in Edinburgh, looking through the George Mackay Brown archives in the National Library of Scotland and in Edinburgh University Library. In the latter, in a reading room overlooking the Pentland Hills, the librarian presented me with a large package, as yet unsealed, containing hundreds of letters from George Mackay Brown to Stella Cartwright, the woman known in Edinburgh in the sixties as the 'Rose Street Muse'. The letters spanned more than twenty years and, together with Stella's to George in the National Library, they told an extraordinary love story.

It was a strange feeling reading those letters, and not altogether a comfortable one. I felt sure that, had George lived, he would never have spoken to me about Stella Cartwright. Yet the anxiety that I was trespassing was eased, as I read on, by occasional hints that George had wanted his feelings for Stella one day to come to light. 'Some day we must print all Stella's Birthday poems in a little book and launch it upon the world,' he writes on 7 June 1984. 'Everyone will say, "They Liked Each Other More Than a Little" . . . They sure did.'

I believe that this sentiment can be applied more generally, to the rest of George's life: that, in a part of himself at least, he was content that some of his secrets should eventually be known. 'We move from silence into silence,' he once wrote, 'and there is a brief stir between, every person's attempt to make a meaning of life and time.' His own attempt was so unusual and brave and fruitful that his story deserves to be set down, before the silence subsumes it.

I

A Place of Vision

Orkney – 'orcs' – the school of sleeping whales,
To those who glimpsed it first,
Hills half-sunk in the sea.
GMB, 'Haiku: for The Holy Places'

A POET IS born, not made – that was George Mackay Brown's belief; and his gifts might either flourish or wither, depending on circumstance. In his own case, he suspected that, had he grown up in a city, he might never have written a word. As it was, he spent his childhood in Orkney, and the islands became for him 'a place of order, a place of remembrance, a place of vision' which sustained him in his writing for the rest of his life.

But if it was Orkney that nurtured George's talents, he thought that the talents themselves probably had their roots in his Celtic, Highland ancestry – a maternal inheritance, not Orcadian at all. His mother, Mhairi Sheena Mackay, was sixteen when she boarded the mail-boat *St Ola* on the north coast of Scotland, and sailed further north still to make a life for herself in the Orkney seaport of Stromness. Born in 1891, Mhairi had spent her childhood on a croft in Strathy, on the Sutherland coast, with her parents and eight siblings. She had not left home before. Yet she had reason to hope that her new surroundings would not be entirely unfamiliar. The man for whom she was to work was a distant cousin, John Mackay, who had done well for himself and built a hotel in Stromness; and, although she had never set foot in Orkney, she had, in a sense, known it all her life. From Strathy Point, on a fine day, the Orkney islands are clearly visible across the water:

the mountainous form of Hoy and, beyond it, an archipelago of low, bluish humps on the horizon.

But that 25-mile journey across the Pentland Firth carries the traveller into a new world. It is the vividness of Orkney that surprises one first. On the Sutherland coast, where Mhairi Mackay had grown up, the soil is thin and stony; there are expanses of brown moorland, pitted with peat-bogs, where only sheep thrive; much of the land is unenclosed. 'Mainland' Orkney, by contrast, looks like a Hopkins landscape – 'plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough'. The soil is fertile, and the island neatly patchworked with fields, often running right down to the sea. In April and May, in the ditches and along the roadsides, there is a profusion of daffodils. In June and July, brown beef cattle and milking cows graze knee-deep in clover and buttercups, and the rocks are speckled with sea-pinks.

'Hrossey' – 'island of the horse' – was what the Norsemen called the largest of the seventy-odd Orkney islands and, when Mhairi Mackay arrived, Hrossey would have seemed still an apt name. Further south, farmers were beginning to work their land with tractors, but in Orkney the crofters remained entirely reliant on their horses, yoked in tandem for ploughing in the spring, and, in the autumn, for harvesting crops of oats, bere,* turnips, kale. These crofters worked their small, stone-dyked fields against a backdrop of overwhelming space. Apart from Hoy – the 'high island' – the Orkney islands are low and undulating, and, because of the wind, they are almost treeless. Without trees or mountains to interrupt the view, your eyes are carried constantly to the curve of the horizon: you can see that you are on a globe. At midsummer, when the sun barely sets, and there is a superabundance of light, you feel you are standing on top of the world.

The vastness of space is matched by an awareness of a great sweep of time, stretching back well beyond the scope of history, and even of legend. Little is known about the first men and women who lived in Orkney over five thousand years ago, yet, if they were to return today, they would find the islands still strewn with their creations – their cairns, standing stones and burial mounds, even their domestic possessions. In a field by the road that runs between Stromness and the

*A kind of barley, used in Orkney for making bannocks.

Orkney capital, Kirkwall, is Maeshowe, a grassy hillock that seems to swell like a breast out of the earth. Sheep graze on its surface, but inside it is a chambered tomb where Orcadians laid their dead long before the first pyramid was built in Egypt. Crude in appearance, it is sophisticated in construction. As darkness falls on the shortest day of the year, the setting sun points a finger of light into the centre of the tomb: a promise of renewal after death. A few fields away, on a neck of land between two lochs, is the Ring of Brodgar, a circle of twenty-seven massive slabs of stone, quarried at Vestrafiold, pointing sunwards and enclosing a grassy disc. A place of worship? Of sacrifice? Nobody knows. In Orkney lore, the stones are darkness-loving giants who came down one night to the lochs to drink and dance, lingered too long, and were petrified by the rising sun.

Archaeologists have picked and combed over these sites; but the most spectacular discoveries are yielded up by the islands themselves, in their own time. One night in the winter of 1850, Orkney was swept by a wild storm. The wind ripped the grass from a high dune by the Bay of Skaill on the west coast, revealing an almost perfectly preserved Neolithic village. The interiors of the small, round houses of Skara Brae were immediately familiar to the Orkney crofters: there were stone box-beds, stone dressers, stone cupboards let into the walls. Laid out across a stone surface was jewellery made of bone; but of the owner of the jewellery, and of the other villagers, there was not a trace. It was like a scene from a Stone Age *Mary Celeste*.

It is not known quite when the Vikings made their first raids on Orkney, but by the end of the ninth century the islands were ruled by Norse earls. In theory, these earls were vassals of the Norwegian kings; in practice, the strongest of them were independent rulers, as powerful at least as the kings of Scotland. From the Brough of Birsay, a tidal promontory on the north-west Orkney mainland, an eleventh-century earl, Thorfinn the Mighty, ruled nine Scottish earldoms, the Hebrides, and great tracts of Ireland. Towards the end of a life of ruthlessness, Thorfinn is said to have ridden with his regicide cousin Macbeth over the Alps to Rome, where he was granted absolution by Pope Leo IX. He returned to Orkney and devoted the last fifteen years of his life to good and peaceful government. The islands prospered.

No wonder that after Orkney passed to Scottish rule in 1468, and the islanders became little better than serfs under Stuart earls, Orcadians looked back on their Norse days as a golden age, and clung to romantic notions of Viking descent. Well into the eighteenth century, Norn, a mixture of old Norse and Icelandic, was still spoken in the remoter parts of the islands; and even today Orcadians have a lilting, sing-song accent more Scandinavian than Scots in intonation.

Such were the voices that Mhairi Mackay heard around her as she stepped for the first time on to the quay at Stromness, and they were strange to her. Her own first language was Gaelic. When she had started school at the age of five she had known only two words of English, and to her dying day she would sing in Gaelic as she went about her housework. Her ancestors had come from the green glens of Strathnaver and Strathalladale, where the clan Mackay had lived for centuries in long, stone, sod-roofed huts, raising goats and black cattle, and growing potatoes and oats. When required, the clansmen had banded together and fought bravely for their chiefs; but most of the time they had lived insulated from the outside world by the lack of a single road.

In the early nineteenth century, however, their landlord, the Countess of Sutherland, with her husband, the Marquess of Stafford,* initiated ambitious 'improvements' that turned much of the vast Sutherland estate over to large sheep farms, and the indigenous crofters were 'cleared', with some brutality, out of the straths. Mhairi's grandfather, Angus Mackay, passed down his own grandfather's description of leaving his home in flames when his family were forced out of Strathnaver. Some of those who were cleared left on ships for North America. Most, like Mhairi's family, moved north and north-east to eke out a difficult and dangerous existence as crofter-fishermen on the coast. Hundreds of them had probably never seen the sea before, let alone built boats or fished, and many drowned; and the arable soil on the rocky headlands was so thin that, in a dispute over ownership, it was said that any man could have carried away his share in a lobster creel.

Mhairi Mackay's ancestors seem to have fared better than many of their fellow clansmen. At Braal, on a rocky headland above the sea,

*Created Duke of Sutherland in 1833.

stand the ruins of the small croft that her great-great-grandparents built after leaving Strathnaver. Mhairi was born in this croft, and as a child she visited it often from her parents' home two miles away in Strathy. Her niece, now an old lady living along the coast at Reay, remembers it as a place of warmth and celebration where Angus Mackay made wooden toys for his grandchildren, and where at any excuse the fiddle was taken down from the wall and used to accompany dancing and the Gaelic songs handed down from generation to generation. Mhairi inherited this spirit of celebration. She was a buoyant character, and no setback ever floored her for long.

Her cheerfulness stood her in good stead as she got to grips with her new life as a waitress-chambermaid in Mackay's Stromness Hotel. John Mackay and his wife were good to the girls who worked for them, but the work was quite new to Mhairi. She had been used to spending much of her time out of doors, helping on her father's croft; now she was immured in a monstrous modern edifice with forty bedrooms, waiting on southern tourists who had come to Orkney to explore the archaeological sites and to fish for trout. Her hours were long and, after her strict Free Presbyterian upbringing, she was so shocked to discover that she was required to work on the Sabbath that she considered heading straight back home. She was equally shocked by the behaviour of some of the hotel guests. Mhairi was an attractive girl, tall, blue-eyed, black-haired, with a slightly snub nose and a bright, open expression. One day, a visiting clergyman turned the key of his bedroom and began to make advances. She kept her nerve, ordered him to unlock the door, and refused to serve him again.

Outside the hotel, too, she found herself warding off unwelcome attention. On one of her rare free evenings, probably at a dance, she met a local postman, John Brown. He was stoutish and handsome, with a waxed moustache and a wry, witty expression, and at the end of the evening, after walking her home, he kissed her. Mhairi thought this unacceptably forward, and she made up her mind not to see him again. Somehow, however, he won her round; and she found herself falling in love with this man several inches shorter than herself, and fifteen years her senior.

John Brown could not claim Viking descent, but he was an Orkneyman through and through. His ancestors had almost certainly

come over from Scotland as servants and retainers under the Stuart earls, and the Session Book of St Peter's Church in Stromness records Browns baptized, married, and ordered to repent for fornication and other misdemeanours from the late seventeenth century onwards. They had large families, and they made their mark. On the outskirts of Stromness is a farm called Brownstown, and, when Mhairi Mackay arrived, a whole area south of the town was called Brownsquoy. John Brown himself had grown up in Brown's Close, where his father worked as a cobbler.

John Brown had no interest at all in his ancestry, and almost nothing is known even of his parents. It has come down by word of mouth, however, that his father, the cobbler, had a weakness for alcohol. He did not drink regularly, but periodically he would dress up in his best clothes and tour around the alehouses.* Often these sprees lasted several days, until his money ran out, and then he returned home to his cobbler's bench and broken boots. It seems probable that this drinking was brought on by melancholy; certainly, among the cobbler's eight children, there was a strain of depression and even mental instability. One of his sons, Jimmy, was so unstable as to be unable to work or live normally. He believed in the existence of fairies – they often seemed more real to him than human beings – and he saw apparitions of ships' masts emerging from Stromness harbour. Then there was a daughter, Kitty, severely depressive and possibly schizophrenic. In late middle age she suffered a crippling breakdown, was certified, and was sent south to Edinburgh to live out the remaining thirteen years of her life in a Morningside asylum, Craighouse.

By the time Kitty Brown arrived in Edinburgh, Craighouse had such a large proportion of Orcadian patients that it had been christened 'Little Orkney' by visiting relations, and chronic depression was so rife in the islands that it had come to be known as *Morbus orcadensis*. Just before the First World War, an Edinburgh professor, Sir

*In the Revd Peter Learmonth's Statistical Account of 1842, there is mention of over forty places in Stromness where alcohol could be bought. Most of these would not have been full-blown pubs, but private houses where ale was brewed on the premises. 'There would have been 40 different varieties of ale to choose from along the street,' George reflects in the *Orcadian*, 30 May 1974. 'Also there would have been a complete scale of quality of house from Login's Inn at the top to some unspeakable grogshop up some filthy close.'

Thomas Clouston, had made a study of mental weakness in the Orkney parish of Harray in which he had been born and spent his childhood. Clouston concluded that though these were 'country people, decent folks for the most part, hard working, thrifty, few very poor, healthily money-loving' and strangers to 'vice in its grossest forms', excessive intermarriage over many generations was responsible for half the families in the parish betraying clear symptoms of idiocy, congenital imbecility, epilepsy, or what he termed 'ordinary unsoundness of mind'. George Mackay Brown would later offer a less categorical, but more haunting, description of the malaise in a short story, 'The Drowned Rose':

> There is a trouble in the islands that is called *Morbus orcadensis*. It is a darkening of the mind, a progressive flawing and thickening of the clear lens of the spirit. It is said to be induced in sensitive people by the long black overhang of winter; the howl and sob of the wind over the moors that goes on sometimes for days on end; the perpetual rain that makes of tilth and pasture one indiscriminate bog; the unending gnaw of the sea at the crags.

To his friends and neighbours, John Brown appeared mercifully free of the *morbus*. He had been apprenticed to a tailor in the last years of the nineteenth century, when Stromness tailors ran a thriving trade exporting moleskin trousers to Orcadians working in the Canadian outposts of the Hudson's Bay Company. In the early years of the twentieth century, however, ready-made clothes from the south had begun to make tailoring a lean trade, and he had been forced to take on two other part-time jobs. The Glaitness Laundry Company in Kirkwall employed him to collect and deliver the Stromness laundry, and he worked as a postman.

Stromness housewives looked forward to seeing John Brown on his rounds. There are still many in the town who remember him well, and they describe him as clever and quick-witted, with a gift for mimicry, and a dry, ironic sense of humour. He made people laugh as he passed down the street – 'Ah, Jack Broon, it does me good to hear thee' – and, in his spare time, he cut a dash in Stromness amateur dramatics.

Perhaps it was this wit and flair that won over Mhairi Mackay; perhaps she was drawn to something more complex beneath the larky

exterior. The couple were married in June 1910, in Strathy, and a band of passing tinkers danced at their wedding. For their journey home to Stromness, the *St Ola* was dressed in flags. They settled down in a small house by the pier, and here, ten months after the wedding, Mhairi gave birth to a daughter, Ruby. Sons followed in quick succession: Hugh in 1913; John, known as Jackie, in 1915; Harold, who would die of measles in infancy, in 1917; Richard, known as Norrie, in 1919. When, in the spring of 1921, Mhairi found herself expecting her sixth, and last, child, she hoped very much for another girl, whom she planned to name after her mother, Georgina Mackay. On 17 October she gave birth to a boy, George Mackay Brown.