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Elizabeth Huberman

George Mackay Brown's *Magnus*

It is a remarkable fact that although the Orkney poet, short story writer, and novelist, George Mackay Brown, has for some time been recognized as one of Britain's foremost contemporary writers, much of his work has not received the critical attention his standing warrants. Yet the reason is not far to seek. He has preferred to follow his own vision rather than literary fashion; and what does not conform to fashion is not discussed. On the other hand, it is precisely his adherence to his own vision that is a major source of his strength as a writer.

His second novel, *Magnus*, published by the Hogarth Press in 1974, is a case in point. For this book transgresses against current literary taste in at least two ways. First, it belongs to a genre presently regarded as frivolous. It is an historical novel, set in Brown's native Orkney Islands, in the twelfth century. Second, and harder for late twentieth-century readers to feel comfortable with, it is the story of a saint, since it chronicles the life of the Orkney earl, Magnus, who shared his earldom with his cousin Hakon, submitted to death at the hands of Hakon's agent, and finally became the islands' patron saint. But because Brown builds a solid medieval society, instead of exploiting the remoteness of his time and place for the sake of a superficial exoticism, he succeeds in avoiding any suspicion of frivolity. And because he emphasizes the

ambiguities of Magnus's character--his hesitations and evasions in the face of his calling--Brown makes him a human being as well as a saint, an Everyman confronted by a difficult moral decision, with whose predicament the reader can easily sympathize.

Yet at the same time, Brown does not give up the opportunity his departure from fashion allows him, to go beyond the solid and comfortable. By abrupt shifts in chronology, tone, and point of view, for example, he extends the events of twelfth century Orkney backward and forward in time, until they transcend the merely local, to become a universal pattern, repeated through history. By similar devices, too, he enlarges the significance of Magnus's life and death, until the martyrdom is finally seen as far more than an ethical act. It is an instance of an eternally recurring, eternally necessary, sacrificial rite.

But Brown does not make these larger dimensions of the novel immediately evident. Rather, he begins by building that solid medieval society I have mentioned; and because peasant labor was of course the basis on which the feudal structure depended, it is with a scene of peasant labor that the first section of *Magnus*, called "The Plough," opens. A man and a woman, Mans and Hild, are ploughing a hillside field. Since theirs is in many ways a timeless occupation, and since Brown is intimately familiar with the ways and talk of Orkney people, the rhythms of the seasons, and the shapes of the landscape, he is naturally able, with only a few brief touches, to give this scene the quality of living experience. The two laborers struggle with the stones and sucking clay, exchange jokes and threats with fellow workers and passing tinkers, and complain about working conditions, much as farm laborers have always done. Yet with equal economy, Brown also makes it clear that the two are not contemporary, but part of the feudal system. The land they plough is not theirs; it belongs to the bishop; and because their ox is lame and the bishop has ordered the ploughing done on a certain day, Mans has harnassed Hild to pull the plough. No detail could more effectively illustrate the whole hierarchy of feudalism, nor more justify Mans's continual grumbling, that persists through the entire book, against the whole unfair arrangement.

Meanwhile, across a narrow strip of water, on the Brough of Birsay, Mans and Hild can catch glimpses of life at the other extreme of their feudal world. There on the Brough excited comings and goings tell of another sort of ploughing, equally necessary to the maintenance of the feudal structure. To insure the continuation of the dynasty, Erlend, the Earl's younger son, is to marry the Lady Thora, and it is with the ceremonies of such a ploughing that the remainder of the novel's

opening section is concerned. As convincingly and economically as he evoked the earlier scene of peasant labor, Brown now suggests the traditional marriage ritual, the crowd of good-humored guests, the slightly bawdy jokes, the appropriately shy groom, and the cold, quiet bride surrounded by all the servant girls of the Hall, who take off her wedding garments and prepare her for the bridal chamber. Like Mans and Hild on their hillside, these members of a wedding have a certain timelessness, since the rituals of mating, equally with those of planting, "go onward the same." But like Mans and Hild, too, they are unmistakably rooted in their medieval setting. Small, simple details like the single candles flickering in the dark of the long Hall corridors; the honeyed bread and spiced wine served at the tables; the harper at the feast; the peat fire by which Thora stands to be undressed, all function unobtrusively to convey the look, feel, even taste and smell, of a long past world.

Thus throughout the novel, in scene after scene of labor in the fields, prayer in the church, terror and brutality in war, and political maneuvers in palaces, Brown achieves a sense of the actual living quality of a whole functioning social order, like ours in many of its universal qualities, yet enormously different in its particulars. And by this achievement, as I have indicated, he disarms the natural wariness of any reader accustomed to the flimsy canvas backdrops so often used as settings in historical novels. But of course there is in *Magnus*, as I have also indicated, still another obstacle to the assent of many contemporary readers, and that is the heart of the novel: its story. For *Magnus* is, after all, not just a panorama of twelfth-century Orkney. It is the story of Magnus, the son who was born of that marriage of Erlend to Thora, and who, according both to legend and to Brown's principal written source, *The Orkneyinga Saga*,[1] became not only an Earl, as was to be expected, but also a martyr and saint, at whose shrine miracles were performed. And how many novel readers today are willing to believe in either sanctity or miracles?

Out of this nettle of difficulty, however, Brown has plucked the flower of success. For to persuade reluctant readers to believe in a saint, he has been forced to adopt strategies which have strengthened the novel and enlarged its meaning. As I suggested earlier, he has emphasized and developed that very trait in the man that gave the Saga-teller most trouble: his ambiguity, his vacillations between his two roles of Saint and Earl. For the thirteenth century compiler and writer of this Saga obviously had very little experience with ambiguity. In chronicling the history of all the Earls of Orkney, he generally had a straightforward tale to tell. His Earls were Vikings, who behaved as Vikings, without a thought of con-

science, remorse, or forgiveness. As for saints, on the other hand, they too behaved according to a conventional model. A saint was invariably a man of peace and a paragon of virtue; and in certain pages of Magnus's life in the *Saga*--pages undoubtedly borrowed from a *Latin Saint's Life* written by pious monks--this is the character given to Magnus. But there are other pages where Magnus does not fit this mold, where the facts of his career refute the image of sanctity; and by these discrepancies the Saga-teller was baffled.

What was he to do, for instance, with the King of Norway's words during a sea battle with the Welsh at Menai Strait, where Magnus, saying he had no quarrel with any man there, refused to take part in the fighting? The incident testified to Magnus's holiness, except that the King did not believe it. Magnus "durst not fight,"[2] the King said in the *Saga*, where accordingly his judgment counteracts Magnus's deed. Similarly, Magnus's coming to claim his half of the Earldom from his cousin Hakon, after he had apparently resigned it, and his taking up the sword against Hakon, when the two could not share the rule in peace, all tend to cast doubt on the pacific and compassionate nature attributed to him elsewhere in the *Saga*. Clearly, Magnus was a puzzle the Saga-writer could not solve. Because the various incidents of his life fitted neatly into neither of the customary patterns, warrior or saint, the writer was unable to give them any acceptable shape. Instead, he let the disparate pieces stand as they were.

What for him was a puzzle, however, for Brown was the pattern he needed. For Brown, this man who suited the part neither of warrior nor holy man but was torn between both; who knew the right but hesitated until the end to choose it, was a far more accurate exemplar than any stereotyped Viking Earl or Saint of what it means to be both a saint and a human being--in whatever age, and particularly in ours. When he chose this confused and divided aspect of the original Magnus as the pattern on which to develop his own figure, therefore, Brown chose a model that a contemporary audience could easily understand and, through understanding, believe it.

Thus he keeps us continually aware of Magnus's divided character, first by reminding us of his special destiny as a saint, then by recording his weaknesses and failures. On the night of his conception, Erlend's and Thora's wedding night, for instance, the harper leaves the feast early, to go to his own hut to compose "Three Sacred Bridal Songs;" and the riddling terms of these Songs--wounded harp, planted seed, the soul's life-woven garment: terms that will be repeated throughout the book--foreshadow the child's elected future. Similarly throughout the book, in sleep and in waking dreams, a keeper of the loom who is Magnus's guardian spirit appears to him, to

remind him that in weaving this garment for his soul, he must keep it pure and white, to be ready for the wedding to which he is bidden, as in Matthew's parable. But as Brown develops Magnus's story, these periodic reminders of his calling are always either paired with, or contain within themselves, images of the opposite possibilities to which he is equally called. Just as Eliot's St. Thomas in *Murder in the Cathedral* is visited by various tempters, so Magnus has his tempter, the loom-keeper's "dark opposite,"[3] who seeks to lure him first to war and power; then when he has chosen what he believes is righteous war, to a withdrawal into a monastery that would mean an abdication of responsibility and an evasion of his necessary martyrdom.

Even in the more realistic, waking scenes of Magnus's life there is always, more or less openly, this double pull in two opposite directions. It is present in the book's particularly charming second section, "A Boy and A Seal," where Brown describes an episode of his own invention from Magnus's boyhood. For here Magnus does at first seem a little different from the other boys with whom he crosses over to Birsay to attend the monastery school. He is worried, for instance, by the fact that his name means "great, powerful," (p. 46) and he does not want to be great and powerful. Similarly, he is the only one of the group to be concerned by the cry of a wounded seal. Still, when the boys finally gather for their evening Latin class, Magnus has blood on his hands. Whether the blood is there because he bound up the seal's wound or because he killed it in mercy is not clear, but the stain nevertheless marks him too as a son of Cain. He too, like the other boys, will seek greatness even though he does not want it, and will take up the sword to win it.

True, in the next section, "Song of Battle," where Brown retells the *Saga* account of the battle at Menai Strait, Magnus does not take up the sword. He seems to have no trouble acting out his principles. Nor does the King, as in the *Saga*, accuse him of cowardice, although one of his old schoolfellows does. The King shouts at him, but since his words are lost in the noise of battle and his face is hidden by his helmet, neither what he says nor how he looks detracts from the astonishing character of what Magnus is doing. He is standing in the bow of the boat, unarmed, serenely reading his Psalter in the midst of a marvelously rendered hail of spears and arrows, a welter of bleeding, dying men. He seems unmoved by any rivalry with his cousin Hakon, who of course is fighting enthusiastically, and untorn by any urge towards that worldly power signified by his name. His only concession to his surroundings is to go among the injured after the battle and bind up an oarsman's wound, as he once presumably tended to the hurt

seal. But this singleness of mind is only apparent. To achieve it, we learn in the following section, "The Temptations," Magnus had to wrestle with the tempter in the person of the King's chamberlain, who commanded him to attend the King on his war-cruise and earn the glory befitting a warrior and a future Earl. Thus it is only after resisting both the King's orders to fight and a young man's instinctive urge to prove himself in combat that he is able to appear so completely committed to a belief in non-violence. That commitment was won only through struggle.

So too, as the rest of the novel demonstrates, there were always new conflicts for Magnus, with every step towards his predestined sainthood. Even though he appears as an actor only for a brief moment in the next section, "Scarecrow," for instance, still that section provides another scene in his long ordeal. For what we see in "Scarecrow," where Brown returns to Mans and Hild, to continue their story, is the devastation which the strife that has now broken out between Magnus and Hakon has brought to Orkney: trampled fields, burned barns, stolen livestock, murdered men and women. But when at the end of the section Brown gives us one glimpse of a solitary horseman coming at night to a burnt-out mill, to utter "a single cry of grief in the darkness" (p. 103) and leave behind him a broken sword, he also lets us know that Magnus has witnessed all the suffering and destruction we have seen. And that cry of grief, that broken sword, are his response to the realization that once again his best intentions have gone wrong. For the rule he intended to share peacefully with Hakon has led instead to war. The arms he took up to maintain what he thought was right have been turned against his own people, and his hands are once more red.

But what went wrong? Throughout the book there have been intimations that precisely because of his other worldly leanings, Magnus was somewhat deficient, at least according to a number of his followers, in administrative ability and sheer common sense. Such a deficiency was not enough of itself, however, to account for the enormity of his failure. It is only in the next section, "Prelude to the Invocation of the Dove," that the answer begins to take shape, when the five chief landowners of the islands, since they too are suffering from burned barns and ruined crops, come to the Bishop to ask him to join them in arranging a peace conference of the two Earls on Easter Monday on the tiny island of Egilsay. They take it for granted that they, "the magnates of Orkney," (p. 118) as they call themselves, can compel both Earls to settle their differences. Yet although the Bishop is a landowner too, he refuses to take part. Peace and compulsion, he points out, cannot co-exist; "all you can do is hold the door open

and invite peace to enter." (p. 117) The five peace-makers of course dismiss his objection as the typical super-subtlety of a churchman, to which sensible men of affairs need pay no attention. But what the Bishop is saying is actually intensely practical--that the practical is not always enough, as all the failed "peace conferences" of history certainly prove. That other dimension of human experience, the dimension of the heart or spirit, must be involved before any real and lasting peace can be achieved; and it is the absence of any awareness of this dimension which the Bishop realizes dooms the peace-makers' plans in advance, just as, it now becomes plain, it has been an insufficiency of commitment to this dimension that has always frustrated Magnus's best intentions. Wanting to belong to two worlds, he has bungled his performance in both, because in the world of the spirit, at least, only full commitment matters.

No wonder, then, that Magnus has vacillated so long. For the price of full commitment is high, "costing not less than everything." Yet certainly throughout these two sections of *Magnus*, "Scarecrow" and "Prelude," where Magnus has been dominant even in his absence, it has become increasingly evident that in the end he will pay, whatever the expense. When he comes to the burnt-out mill in the dark and breaks his sword, he is not only expressing remorse, but showing that he means finally to seek another way. When the Bishop suggests to the uncomprehending peace-makers the necessity of invoking the spirit of reconciliation as well as the politics of compulsion for their peace conference, this surely is an indication that Magnus will have a catalytic role in that meeting, since only in him, of all the personages to attend, could any breath of such a spirit be expected. And when, at the end of "Prelude," the Bishop tells an old monk, after the delegation has left, that for any true peace "what is needed in Orkney is something more in the nature of a sacrifice, the immaculate death of the dove," (p. 119) this is the surest sign of all. This is simultaneously the measure of just how high the cost will be for Magnus, and the cue for him to enter the final scene of his passion play, where that cost will be exacted.

Accordingly, when Magnus reappears as an actor in "The Killing," his role is more clearly defined than ever before: he is the necessary sacrifice. Not that he ceases to be the inwardly torn human being he has been from the start; in fact he is even more human now, because his suffering is greater, and the extremes between which he is torn involve life or death. But he assumes larger dimensions. As a man, he becomes an exemplar, the image of what all of us would want to be, if cut off at last from all evasions and forced to choose between right and wrong. As an historic figure, he becomes the pro-

tagonist in an event that transcends history, since his martyrdom now appears as but a single instance in an endlessly recurring pattern. And as a saint, he is the embodiment of a profound spiritual meaning: that the rite of sacrifice not only recurs eternally, but is eternally required.

For in this section, to a much greater extent than in the earlier portion of *Magnus*, Brown takes advantage of his departure from literary fashion to expand the scope and significance of the novel. True, he has scattered hints and flashes of this coming expansion through the book from the first, but it is not until "The Killing" that he makes the consequences of his use of what proves to be the timeless story of a twelfth-century saint fully apparent. In the opening pages of the section, for example, he at once lifts the whole narrative out of its accustomed chronological frame by reporting the same incident in three voices, each from a different point in time. The first and briefest connects the incident most closely to Magnus's actual period by reciting in the language of some twelfth-century clerk the *Saga*'s account of the ominous wave that broke over Magnus on his way to the agreed-on peace meeting on Egilsay, and of Hakon's treachery in bringing eight armed ships rather than the stipulated unarmed two. The second repeats the story of the wave, but in the more standardized speech, marked by faintly Biblical diction and rhythms, of the dominant narrative voice of the novel. The third, however, uses today's journalese. It is a series of interviews with representative "locals" who have encountered either one of the Earls or members of their entourage; and with the shock of reading this we are propelled into our own times. A peace conference is still in process; the stakes are still the same; but the event, instead of being long ago and far away, is now. The terms are those of twentieth-century diplomacy, as the conclusion of this report establishes: the settlement, if there is one, will be "dictated by Hakon Paulson, who arrived in Egilsay...with an impressive backing of boats and men with guns." (p. 136)

From this sudden excursion into the present, the narrative drops back again into a continuation, on the customary level, of Magnus's struggle with himself. But it cannot drop back altogether. Whatever happens now must carry with it either the echo of that brash voice or at least some sense of the world where that voice belongs. Past and present are interfused, and they remain so even in the cold darkness of the little church on Egilsay where Magnus, as the *Saga* records, spends the night before his martyrdom praying. For although, because we are admitted here into Magnus's inmost thoughts and allowed to suffer with him, our attention is primarily occupied by what he realizes is his immediately impending death,

still neither his thoughts nor ours are confined to that time and place.

When his mind wanders, in a kind of vision, from some primitive sacrificial rite where he himself, "in the mask of a beast," (p. 141) is being dragged to an altar stone, to our own end of history, where in a glaringly lighted concrete cell he again faces execution, we experience with him a momentary insight into the recurrence of pattern within the flux of time. And when, cold with terror and uncomforted by the ceremony of the mass, he slips into a dream which he has had many times before, of searching for a weaver whom he once commissioned to make a new garment for him, to wear to a king's wedding, this dream transports us through time again. Time, in fact, dissolves into that eternity where the keeper of the loom and his dark opposite wrestle forever for every human soul. Only now--and here time intersects with eternity and determines its patterns--Magnus suddenly understands which opposite to choose. As the priest rings the bell before the elevation of the host, the symbol of sacrifice, Magnus sees at last what he must do to find the weaver and the robe prepared for him. He must be the sacrifice. With his life, voluntarily given, he must purchase the otherwise unobtainable peace of the Orkneys. With his death, he can make amends for all his lapses and wash the blood of his people from his hands.

Then, in another abrupt transition from this intersection of the timeless with time, Brown takes us back once more to the Middle Ages. Hakon's and Magnus's men, the peace-makers who visited the Bishop, have met at a central point of the island, by a convenient "large stone embedded in the earth," (p. 148) to negotiate their "peace" settlement, although since Hakon's men have made up their minds that only one Earl will leave the island alive, and they have eight boats and arms to Magnus's unarmed two, there is really very little to negotiate. Yet even now, in this specifically twelfth-century setting, other time levels are present. The large stone is the sacrificial stone of Magnus's vision of the prehistoric past, while something in the tone of the talk between the two groups of men--a simultaneous shamelessness and banality--belongs to the twentieth century. The Saga-teller, throughout his account of Magnus's life, took pains to blacken the characters of Hakon and his attendant "mischief-mongers,"[4] in order to emphasize Magnus's relative purity of motive by contrast. But here none of these negotiators, not even Hakon himself, is either hero or villain. They are ordinary, average men, like most of us, some of them mean, all preoccupied with small concerns. And all, again like most of us, because they are not tuned to any intimations of the transcendent, unaware of the magnitude of the act in which they are participating.

Yet Brown makes us, as readers, aware of that magnitude. For when Hakon commands his officer in charge of ritual and ceremony, the herald Ofeig, to kill Magnus, Ofeig, as in the *Saga*, refuses. When, again as in the *Saga*, Hakon turns to Lifolf, the cook, who cannot refuse, Lifolf weeps. Clearly now, in some strange way no one present understands, this will be no ordinary execution. And as Magnus at noon of Easter Monday comes voluntarily to the stone in the center of the island, where he sees "against the sun eleven men and a boy and a man with an axe in his hand who...is weeping," (p. 170) the real nature of the death which is about to take place becomes plain to the reader, if not to the actual witnesses of the event. This is a repetition of an eternally requisite act of propitiation. It is the sacrifice of a victim for the welfare of the tribe. It is an image of the Crucifixion.

Brown does not let us see the actual killing, however. With an enormous gain in mystery and suggestiveness, he omits all the details given in the *Saga*. Instead, he takes us once more to our own times, where a first-person narrator who does not immediately identify himself resumes the story. This narrator, it seems, is a man of average decency who works as a cook for an army camp somewhere. Then little by little we recognize him. He is Lifolf the cook, reborn as Herr Lifolf, and now chef in the administrative wing of a Nazi concentration camp. What goes on in the camp he prefers not to ask, not even to think, until he is summoned one night to the office of the camp commander, who wants him to do a special job of "hanging a carcase" (p. 175). But the "carcase," he learns from the commander and his officers--who are the same commonplace men, unaware of the moral significance of their actions, whom we met on Egilsay--is not that of some stag the officers have shot. It is a man not yet dead, an inconvenient preacher of peace and brotherhood, who is regarded by the authorities as an enemy of the state. Herr Lifolf must be the hangman.

Like the Lifolf of the *Saga*, this one is reluctant to obey. But also like that original Lifolf, he has no option. He is led down a long corridor to a brightly lighted, whitewashed cell, the same that Magnus saw in his waking dream in the Egilsay church; and in the cell he sees of course another Magnus. Actually, the prisoner here is never named, but because he is referred to as a Lutheran pastor, and because Lifolf, when he sees the man's face, remembers reading in the papers of his books being burned and his voice being silenced, presumably by imprisonment, it is reasonable to infer that he is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or a composite of the few men and women in Nazi Germany who dared to resist Hitler. In any event, he is the modern counterpart of Magnus, the chooser between good and evil; and his serenity, his gaiety even, as he comforts

Lifolf, leave no doubt that like Magnus after his night of fear in the church, he has accepted the need to pay with his life for his choice of good. What is more, although Lifolf carries out his orders--mercifully he cannot recall the process itself--he has the grace to recognize the extraordinary importance of the drama in which he has been forced to play a part. Like his prototype, he has been an actor in a sacred and immemorial rite.

Thus a novel that seemed to begin as a simple reconstruction of the past has been transformed before our eyes, yet without our full awareness until now, into a novel of contemporary events. It is a rather dazzling feat of prestidigitation. But even more important than the skill involved in this feat is the result; what was remote has been made near; what was strange, familiar; and what was alien, us. The choices presented in archaic terms to the twelfth-century Magnus are suddenly the choices presented to us in the conflicts of conscience of this century. In his hesitations, as I have already suggested, we recognize our own, just as we must recognize our own moral blindness in that of Hakon and the "peacemakers." If, in his ultimate decision to give his life to resist wrong, we do not see our own firmness, it is because most of us lack that fortitude. Still, we wish we had it; and when we find it in some of our legendary contemporaries such as Bonhoeffer or Weil, we admire in them the unrealized ideal in ourselves. That is the admiration we give to Magnus.

The novel does not end on this contemporary note, however. Having established its relation to our age, it turns in its concluding section, "Harvest," back to the scene of its beginning--the hillside fields where Mans and Hild were working. But it is not these two, cutting the rich barley harvest that the end of the war has made possible, whom we now follow. Rather, it is another two, who have wandered in and out of the novel from the first--the tinker or gypsy couple, Jock and Mary. When Mans and Hild were ploughing the Bishop's land, while the wedding of Thora and Erlend was being celebrated on Birsay, Mary was a bright-eyed, impudent girl who deliberately ran across Mans's new furrows. By the time Magnus was a schoolboy on Birsay, her eyes were already darkening and she was coming to the monks for what little treatment they could give. When civil war between Magnus and Hakon was ravaging the islands, it was the now half-blind Mary and her man who in addition to begging and stealing, carried the news of the latest atrocities from farm to farm. Then when the peacemakers came to Birsay to try to make an alliance with the Bishop, she was in the church too, somewhat truculently praying the Virgin for the return of her sight. "Old blind ragbag," as the Bishop called her, she was, he said, "a fitting

symbol" of "what Orkney had been reduced to;" (p. 117) and accordingly what happens to her and Jock now is an equally fitting symbol of Orkney's rebirth, of the harvest of peace, good will, and renewed faith, as well as grain, won by Magnus's death.

For Mary's sight is restored through Jock's prayers at Magnus's grave. With great daring, Brown ends his account of Magnus's life, as the *Saga* does, with miracle. But where the *Saga* lists pages of incredible and often trivial interventions in the order of nature, Brown focuses on a single miracle of his own invention which is not only credible, at least in the context of the novel, but particularly meaningful. It is meaningful because, as I have just said, it is the perfect symbol for the renewal of all Orkney after Magnus's sacrifice, and because restoration of physical sight suggests a similar restoration of spiritual sight. It is credible because of the couple to whom it happens: the thieving beggars who have never spared a thought for piety or virtue, and whose only use for prayer has been Mary's occasional effort to wheedle the gift of new sight out of the Virgin or Saint Olaf. Both of them are wholly earthy, and apparently the least likely characters in the book to be vehicles of grace. Even when Mary's sight does return in a burst of salt spray that strikes her eyes after Jock, more in the spirit of a desperate gamble than of true belief, prays at the Birsay church where Magnus is buried, neither one of them is changed. Mary is barely grateful--she resents the lost dark years too much--while Jock's initial reaction is the simple thrill of being first to acknowledge "Saint Magnus the Martyr." But this very matter-of-factness, coupled with their seeming inappropriateness for the role they are playing, is more convincing testimony to the reality of miracle than a chorus of hallelujahs. If this could happen to them, it could happen to anyone.

This miracle, furthermore, implies a corollary: if a similar act of sacrifice or of determined resistance to wrong occurs at any time, then in some way the forces of good, wherever they are, are strengthened. Jock and Mary, those twelfth-century vagrants, are guarantors for the twentieth century that the choice of right over wrong is ultimately effective. And *Magnus*, as becomes increasingly clear during the development of the book, is a novel which transforms a suspect genre and an unfashionable subject into a true and timeless work of the imagination.

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NOTES

[1] Alexander Burt Taylor, trans. and ed., *The Orkneyinga Saga* (Edinburgh, 1938).

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 199.

[3] George Mackay Brown, *Magnus* (London, 1974), p. 67. Henceforth, references will be given in the text.

[4] *Saga*, p. 206.