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## RECOVERING THE REFORMATION HERITAGE IN GEORGE MACKAY BROWN'S *GREENVOE*

*Richard Rankin Russell*

The Orcadian writer George Mackay Brown posited in his 1970 essay, "The Broken Heraldry," written while he was drafting his best novel, *Greenvoe* (1972), that the Reformation shattered

irremediably ... the fullness of life of a community, its single interwoven identity. In earlier times the temporal and the eternal, the story and the fable, were not divorced, as they came to be after Knox: they used the same language and imagery, so that the whole of life was illuminated. Crofters and fishermen knew what Christ was talking about ... because they bore the stigmata of labour on their bodies—the net let down into the sea, the sower going forth to sow, the fields white towards harvest.<sup>1</sup>

This close connection of the Orkney islanders to the land enabled them to fully understand and apply Christ's often agrarian sayings and stories to their own lives. In his autobiography, Brown similarly argues that, for Orcadians,

The beauty of Christ's parables was irresistible. How could they fail to be, when so many of them concern ploughing and seedtime and harvest, and his listeners were most of them fishermen?<sup>2</sup>

This image of a pre-Reformation Orkney, and Brown's desire to return to it, recur throughout his non-fiction, yet, as Linden Bicket has pointed out, the relative critical neglect of his (and indeed other Scottish writers') Catholicism is of a piece with a similar trajectory in general

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<sup>1</sup> George Mackay Brown, "The Broken Heraldry," *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland*, ed. Karl Miller (London: Faber, 1970), 136-150 (145); henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing: An Autobiography* (London: John Murray, 1997), 53; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

accounts of Scottish literary history: “Scottish literary criticism,” Bicket argues, “is notably quiet on the subject of the Catholic imagination.”<sup>3</sup> But if so, comment on the subject of Reformed theology and its manifestations in Scotland, while much more common, is not significantly more helpful as criticism. Much Scottish literary discussion stigmatizes the Scottish Reformation heritage as stunted, bleak, and life-denying, abstracting it into a faceless, sinister force and neglecting its varying permutations throughout Scottish history and literature and its crucial importance in them. Donald MacLeod, writing from within the conservative Free Church, has even argued that among the countries of the British archipelago, “Scotland has been unique in the ferocity with which its literature has turned on its religion.”<sup>4</sup> Within MacLeod’s statement, true enough on its face, lies the assumption that Calvinism has always been the religion of Scotland, while, of course it was pre-dated by Catholicism. Calvinism’s displacement of Catholicism has helped generate this “ferocity,” but certainly Calvinism alone cannot be blamed for a subsequent decline of literature in Scotland after the Reformation began.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, many of Scottish Calvinism’s adherents discriminated against Catholics in various ways during their long dominance,<sup>6</sup> but this treatment then resulted in a counter-narrative about Scots Calvinism that attempted to jettison its more positive influences or reduce it to a position of simple sectarianism, sometimes with these two aspects existing in a synergy with each other.

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<sup>3</sup> Linden Bicket, “George Mackay Brown’s ‘Celia’: The Creative Conversion of a Catholic Heroine,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 40 (2014): 167-182 (181).

<sup>4</sup> Donald MacLeod, “Scottish Calvinism: A Dark, Repressive Force?,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 19:2 (Autumn 2001): 195-225 (195).

<sup>5</sup> See MacLeod, 215-225, for a thorough critique of this position.

<sup>6</sup> William Storrar, “Three Portraits of Scottish Calvinism,” in *The Realm of Reform: Presbyterianism and Calvinism in a Changing Scotland*, ed. Robert D. Kernohan (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1999), 17-30 (19), suggested that a particular low point came in 1923 when “the Kirk made a shameful pact with its most intolerant and anti-Catholic traits” in a report titled *The Menace of the Irish Race to our Scottish Nationality* calling for deportation of the “Catholic section of the Scottish population which had originally emigrated from Ireland.” Sectarianism on both sides has a long and ugly history; in the late seventeenth century, Episcopalians and Catholics persecuted and killed many Scottish Calvinists (the Covenanters).

Crawford Gribben has offered perhaps the most astringent articulation and critique of this tendency, promulgated by the Orcadian author Edwin Muir with disastrous effects:

Edwin Muir's dismissal of the Scottish Reformation as a significant cultural movement has proved to be one of the most enduring and crippling misconstructions in Scottish studies, however sensitive it was to contemporary inequalities. In the 1920s and 1930s, Muir and other leading Scottish intellectuals were repelled by the anti-Catholic ethos of the Scottish establishment, and set about re-examining the literary impact of the prevailing theological consensus. Muir pointed to the Reformation as the moment in which the richly vibrant culture of the Renaissance Scottish court suddenly ceased. In the appendix to his *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (1929), Muir dismissed Calvinism as a culturally bankrupt ideology, a system of thought which had nothing to offer Scottish culture. The paradigm was established. With ignorance excused by Muir's polemic, scholars set about studying one of literature's most systematically theological canons by ignoring, or dismissing, the theoretical implications of the philosophical system at the Scottish canon's heart.<sup>7</sup>

George Mackay Brown himself was led into such a position by reading Muir's biography of Knox. Muir's strictures against Knoxian Calvinism bias Brown's essay, "The Broken Heraldry" and parts of his

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<sup>7</sup> Crawford Gribben, "James Hogg, Scottish Calvinism, and Literary Theory," *Scottish Studies Review*, 5:2 (Autumn 2002): 9-26 (10). Gribben develops this argument much more thoroughly in "The Literary Cultures of the Scottish Reformation," *Review of English Studies*, 57 (Feb. 2006): 64-82. For a thorough exploration of this tendency as manifested in the eight-volume *Voice of Scotland* series, edited by Lewis Grassic Gibbon, and contributed to by a series of Scottish writers including Muir during the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s, see Hanne Tange, "Cooking and Calvinism: History in the *Voice of Scotland* Books," *Scottish Studies Review*, 3:1 (Spring 2002): 72-85. Tange is especially helpful in showing how the contributors to this series constructed a picture of a golden-age Scotland reaching its apotheosis in the fifteenth century, before an alleged decline in culture and spirituality was introduced by the Reformation. For another incisive rejection of this critical tendency to view the Reformation as stunting Scottish literary and cultural development, see Gerard Carruthers, "'Creation Festers in Me': Calvinism and Cosmopolitanism in Jenkins, Spark, and Gray," in *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature*, ed. Gerard Carruthers, Alastair Renfrew, and David Goldie (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 167-184.

autobiography, but not, I would argue, Brown's fiction. Maggie Fergusson makes clear that Muir's rejection of Scottish Presbyterianism, as represented by his portrait of John Knox, resonated with Mackay Brown; for Brown, Fergusson suggests,

Knox emerges as a terrifying, almost lunatic figure—arrogant, immoral, stupid, vengeful, cowardly, and dishonest. Muir shared George's belief that Knox's chief legacy had been to "rob Scotland of all the benefits of the Renaissance," and to leave the country in the grip of a cold, joyless, life-denying religion—a travesty of Christianity....<sup>8</sup>

One of the major historians of the Reformation, however, Diarmaid MacCulloch, describes Knox as "the anglicized and comparatively moderate Calvinist." After Knox's death, McCulloch argues, two tendencies in Scottish Calvinism emerged: "a broadly based Protestantism that accepted the institution of bishops or superintendents and a strong role for the secular government in church affairs," and the other, a "more doctrinaire presbyterianism, determined to assert equality among ministers in the Kirk and also the Kirk's independence of Crown interference, just as [John] Calvin or [Theodore] Beza would wish."<sup>9</sup> It is this "more doctrinaire presbyterianism" that both Muir and Brown wrongly link to Knox.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, Brown grew up in a less traditionally Calvinist church than Muir's caricature of Knox represents and, though admittedly biased against Catholics as a child, saw little evidence of their persecution by Calvinists on Orkney. Simon Hall has even argued that "the Reformation in Orkney was less traumatic than elsewhere in Scotland and, in post-

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<sup>8</sup> Maggie Fergusson, *George Mackay Brown: The Life* (London: John Murray, 2006), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2003), 369.

<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, David F. Wright, "The Scottish Reformation: Theology and Theologians," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, eds. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 174-193 (175), terms the "theological temper" of Knox's writings as "variously prophetic, pastoral, polemical, controversial, and practical rather than dogmatic, systematic, or expository." Moreover, the so-called "Scots Confession," approved by Parliament in 1560, and compiled in part by Knox, "illustrates the characteristically kerygmatic and pastoral tone that, through Knox, informed Scottish Reformation theology" and reflects the "corporate or even ecclesial nature" of the Scottish Reformation, in contrast to the stereotype of it as individualist and non-corporate.

Reformation times, Roman Catholicism has suffered less from prejudice or sectarianism in Orkney than it has elsewhere in Britain.”<sup>11</sup> Somewhere between Muir’s terrifying figure of Knox and the liberalized Presbyterianism of Brown’s childhood Presbyterian church lies Brown’s recovery of the best aspects of Scottish Presbyterianism, nowhere more realized than in *Greenvoe*.

*Greenvoe*’s portrayals of the Whaness family, of the minister’s mother, Mrs. McKee, of earlier, pre-Reformation invaders, of the catechetical dramatic rituals that conclude each chapter, and of its final scene of something like the Christian sacrament of communion, departs from Scottish literary criticism’s dismissal of Calvinism’s supposed austerity and bleakness and from Brown’s own sweeping dismissal of Calvinism in “The Broken Heraldry” as pernicious harbinger of modernism. In a seminal article surveying Scottish fiction in 1978, Douglas Gifford makes what can only be called a sectarian argument against all three of the faiths represented in Brown’s fiction—Catholicism, paganism, and Calvinism. Gifford posits that in his novels, Mackay Brown’s

Catholicism—a strange Orkney hybrid of pagan celebration and reaction to the bleakness of the Reformation—compels him to a predictable denouement, and increasingly in the later work—as with the explicit miracle that ends *Magnus*—an artless obviousness and repetitiveness of situation and image. Tentatively I suggest that his case is the sad one of a truly great writer who has chosen to live in a room with only one view from its single window.<sup>12</sup>

Here, Gifford conveniently leaves out Brown’s portrayal in *Magnus* of the German Lutheran minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s murder at the hands of the Nazis, another instance of Brown’s positive portrayals of Reformed characters in his fiction. Gifford’s denigration of these elements of Brown’s faith suggests a critical blind spot toward the Orkneyman’s

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<sup>11</sup> Simon Hall, *The History of Orkney Literature*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow, 2004: <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2365/01/2004HallSimonphd-1.pdf>, 112.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Gifford, “Modern Scottish Fiction,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 13:1 (1978): 250-273 (258-59). Interestingly, Gifford’s anti-Calvinist attitude already seemed to other commentators out of step with 1970s Scottish cultural change; Storrar, “Three Portraits,” as in n. 6 above, observes (21) that by the end of the decade, “the rhetoric of anti-Calvinism no longer resonated with most Scots’ cultural or historical experience. The Calvinist bogeyman was fast becoming a figure of straw.”

religion more generally, but this pejorative judgment also further flattens Brown's "hybrid" Catholicism, making it paradoxically more reductive, particularly by rejecting the continued influence of both paganism and, more important for my purposes here, the Reformation on Brown's faith and fiction.<sup>13</sup>

Since Gifford's comments, scholarship, including that done by Linden Bicket, has greatly advanced understanding of Brown's Catholicism.<sup>14</sup> But now, for a fuller sense of this great writer's faith and how he conveys it in his best novel, we need to also recapture Brown's complex, vacillating attitude toward Reformed theology and not simply reject it out of hand as Gifford and many other Scottish critics and writers have done—even as Brown himself did in "The Broken Heraldry" about the version of it he mistakenly thought was promulgated in Scotland by John Knox. My reclamation project here accords specifically with Robert Crawford's plea:

I contend that there have been and continue to exist in Scotland links between Presbyterianism and imaginative production that are fruitful, that may have produced rewarding cultural patterns, and that should be seen as usefully complementing and supplementing the rich image-making faculty traditionally associated with the arts in a Catholic culture.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Much more critical work remains to be done on Brown's incorporation of paganism into his admixture of Calvinism and Catholicism. He privileges it often in the various genres in which he wrote, including the occasional weekly pieces for the islands' newspaper, *The Orcadian*. In an entry from January of 1977, for instance, he muses about the origins of Hogmanay, speculating that after Calvinism took root in Scotland, "attempts were made to stamp out Christmas altogether, as being an occasion for gluttony and sloth, a lurid papish remnant," nonetheless, he imagines Scots thinking, "'if they want to abolish Christmas, let them.... But we, the people, are halfway through a hard winter. The darkness has worked itself into us, flesh and spirit. Dance and drink and sing we will, whatever they say. It is a token of both thankfulness and hope. What about in a week's time—We dimly remember a pagan feast round about then—it was called Hogmanay, or some Pictish name like that....' So the winter feast took place after all, in the dark vennels and the straths and isles of Scotland." See George Mackay Brown, "Hogmanay," in *Under Brinkie's Brae* (Edinburgh: Gordon Wright, 1979; repr. London: Steve Savage, 2003), 65-66 (66).

<sup>14</sup> See Bicket, "George Mackay Brown's 'Celia,'" as in n. 3 above.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Crawford, "Presbyterianism and Imagination in Modern Scotland," in Tom Devine, ed., *Scotland's Shame?: Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2000), 187-196 (196).

And my project comports more generally with the view of Scottish literature and urged upon Scottish literary criticism by Gerard Carruthers, Alastair Renfrew, and David Goldie when they argue that Scottish literature “has found its ‘proper ground’ in heterogeneity and *inter-dependence*” rather than the “over-determined, self-defeating essentialism” that characterized twentieth-century Scottish literary criticism up until the late 1950s and still persists in certain quarters.<sup>16</sup> By recuperating particular aspects of Reformed theology that he both knew and found lacking in his own relatively liberal Presbyterian upbringing in Orkney, Brown offers in *Greenvoe* a version of a timeless, unifying Christianity that incorporates elements of paganism, Catholicism, and Calvinism.

In her biography of Brown, Maggie Fergusson notes that Brown’s Scots-Gaelic speaking mother, Mhairi Mackay, who grew up on the northern coast of mainland Scotland, had a “strict Free Presbyterian upbringing” that led her to consider returning home when she realized her new job as a “waitress-chambermaid” at the Stromness Hotel required her to work on the Sabbath.<sup>17</sup> The ironically named Free Presbyterian Church still requires written permission from church elders for communion at least a week in advance of a service; it is rife with rules and regulations, and surely something of its restrictions must have lingered and been manifested to George in his formative years, even though the family attended the Victoria Street Church in Stromness, which was part of the United Presbyterian Church denomination and then the United Free Church, born out of the union of the Free Church and the United Presbyterians in 1900. By 1929 the vast majority of the United Free Church re-united with the Church of Scotland. Something of the flavor of this denomination that was much more liberal than the Free Presbyterian Church is captured by Ron Ferguson in his study of Brown when he suggests, “The Church of Scotland represents the decaffeinated version of Presbyterianism. It is a bit bland, worthy, and generally kindly: a broad church, with all the strengths and weaknesses that the term implies.” As he further holds, “Even by the nineteenth century, much of the fire of mainstream Presbyterianism in Orkney had gone

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<sup>16</sup> Gerard Carruthers, Alastair Renfrew, and David Goldie, “Introduction,” in *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature*, eds. Carruthers, Renfrew, and Goldie (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004): 11-15 (14).

<sup>17</sup> Maggie Fergusson, as in n. 8 above, 5.

out.”<sup>18</sup> Strangely, as Maggie Fergusson tells us, John Brown, George’s father, “refused to have his children baptized, and he made his contempt for some of the Stromness ministers and elders quite plain,” yet one of the children remembered “that his father often wore an ivory crucifix suspended from his watch chain, and John Brown would brook no argument from his children about Sunday worship.”<sup>19</sup> Forced to attend a church in which he was not even baptized and to listen to criticism of local Presbyterian ministers, George likely acquired a jaundiced view of this more liberal brand of Scottish Presbyterianism early in his life. Oddly, John Brown’s devotion to the crucifix may prefigure his son’s conversion to Catholicism. Yet even this more liberal manifestation of Calvinism was hostile to Catholicism, alertly against its trafficking in mysteries beyond the islanders’ ken. Mackay Brown has admitted that

there was something sinister in the very word Catholic; all the words that clustered about it—rosary, pope, confession, relics, purgatory, monks, penance—had the same sinister connotations. ... Catholicism and its mysteries lay outside our pale, and it was better so. We Presbyterians, so it was implied, were enlightened by comparison, and had travelled on, far beyond medieval idolatry and superstition (*For the Islands I Sing*, 49).

The iron Calvinism Brown criticized in “The Broken Heraldry” and which he found epitomized by John Knox was the opposite of its early and mid-twentieth century “enlightened” representation in Orkney: Brown came to reject both these strains of Scottish Calvinism. By the late 1940s, when he was in his twenties, he would write a letter to his friend Ernest Marwick complaining about the “pale watery Calvinism of present day Orkney”:

I grow more and more sick of the Church of Scotland. By nature I am interested in religion (if not strictly speaking a religious person) and the pale watery Calvinism of present day Orkney frankly disgusts me.... I could live cheerfully in a Catholic country, or in pre Reformation Orkney if that were possible. The present day organised religious life here is shocking; much worse than atheism.<sup>20</sup>

His complaint here seems to be that the Presbyterian version of Christianity on Orkney is watered down, not sufficiently robust. In the

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<sup>18</sup> Ron Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown: The Wound and the Gift* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2011), 29.

<sup>19</sup> Maggie Fergusson, as in n. 8 above, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Qtd. in Bicket, 172.

early Reformed church in Scotland, David George Mullan has observed that

It would be difficult to overstate the place of the communion meal in Scottish Puritan and (after 1660) evangelical Presbyterian piety. Many writers note its significance in leading them into self-examination, personal covenanting, and ultimately into writing their narratives.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, by Brown's time, as Mullan also notes, communion's importance in the Reformed church had been overshadowed by the dominance of preaching.<sup>22</sup> The more modernizing, "pale and watery" Scottish Calvinism of the twentieth century certainly did not hold as high a view of the communion elements as John Calvin had and tended to downplay communion's importance and anything mysterious or miraculous in Christianity, embracing science and progress instead. By this time, Mackay Brown had long ceased attending Victoria Street Church and was a regular at the local Episcopal church from the age of sixteen. As Ron Ferguson suggests, after the "arid preaching" George had heard in Victoria Street, the more "aesthetically pleasing" Episcopal Church with its "candles, robes, incense, beautiful language, a sense of mystery, open displays of devotion, and above all, weekly celebration of communion appealed to the young man."<sup>23</sup> As Simon Hall has pointed out, neither Brown and Muir had "encountered the distorted excesses of sanctimoniousness, institutionalized abuse, or sectarian violence that have been perpetrated in the name of Catholicism in Ireland or mainland Scotland." Instead, they grew up "amidst the respectable austerity" of the Presbyterian church in Scotland, but their imaginative visions may have needed the iconography and images found in Catholicism to flourish.<sup>24</sup>

In *Greenvoe*, Brown clearly tries to recuperate and recover a richer sense of Reformed Christianity than that he had grown up with in Victoria Street Church, something more akin to what was the original practice of the Reformers, especially Calvin. Rather than the "arid preaching" he had experienced as a child, he sought to convey the way

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<sup>21</sup> David George Mullan, "A Hotter Sort of Protestantism? Comparisons between French and Scottish Calvinisms," *Sixteenth-Century Journal: Journal of Early Modern Studies*, 39.1 (Spring 2008): 45-69 (63).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* MacLeod, "Scottish Calvinism," simply states in this regard, "Nothing was more characteristic of Scottish Calvinism than its stress on preaching" (203).

<sup>23</sup> Ferguson, as in n. 18, 33-34.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Hall, as in n. 11, 112.

the Word of God lived on the tongue of Reformed believers who read their Bible daily and chanted it to each other, as for instance, he does with Samuel and Rachel Whaness's simple, earthy Scottish Presbyterian faith, even though they are clearly anti-Catholic in their disposition. Moreover, he offers a thoroughly sympathetic portrait of Mrs. McKee, the mother of the local, alcoholic Presbyterian minister. Somewhat surprisingly, he links early Scots Catholics (not Knox and his fellow Scottish reformers) to a rapacious invasion of Hellya through Skarf's oral history, a narrative that shows how Blackstar's incursion mirrors that late 1400s invasion, but finally becomes even more destructive. Finally, he also tries to recover Knox's and Calvin's high view of the communion elements, particularly in the novel's conclusion, in the process pointing us toward a timeless, non-sectarian Christianity.

Thus, on the first page of the novel, the narrator tells us that "From the second door came a mild chant. Samuel Whaness the fisherman was reading scripture with his wife Rachel." After he reads this passage about the Lord's control over the sea, Whaness prays, "'Lord . . . protect us in our goings this day and always, and be thou merciful unto us. Amen.'"<sup>25</sup> When Samuel returns later that day with a bountiful catch, Rachel immediately gives a haddock to the local alcoholic, Timmy Folster, and three to the promiscuous, unmarried Alice Voar and her many children. While Samuel takes a tone of "mild reproach" with Rachel (*Greenvoe* 23), Rachel quickly answers him, "'The miracle of the loaves and fishes is never finished, Samuel'" (24). The ongoing power of the miracle of the five loaves and two fish is carried out by the communal, caring attitude of the Whanesses, especially Rachel.<sup>26</sup> There is no doubt that they are Scots Calvinists. We are told, for example, after Samuel's first narrow escape from the sea in the novel, that the Whanesses read together nightly, "a chapter from one of the books in the window's ledge: *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, *Grace Abiding*, *Meditations among the Tombs*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*" (49). All of these books, of course, have been

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<sup>25</sup> George Mackay Brown, *Greenvoe* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 7; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>26</sup> Brown mentions the communal life of the Orcadians in his autobiography and their closeness to nature by specifically invoking this New Testament miracle in the context of his growing attraction to Catholicism, noting, "The elements of earth and sea, that we thought so dull and ordinary, held a bounteousness and a mystery not of this world. Now I looked with another eye at those providers of our bread and fish. . ." (*For the Islands I Sing*, 54).

favorites, first among Puritans, and later among Presbyterians. Mackay Brown has even agreed with an interviewer's statement that his portrayal of Whaness was "a most interestingly sympathetic picture of a deeply Calvinistic man."<sup>27</sup>

The two near-death experiences Whaness has in the novel (45-47 and 154-56, 190-99) together may suggest symbolically not just his own death and resurrection, but also the way in which Mackay Brown "resurrects" Calvinism in the novel and incorporates it into his perennial Christianity. In the second incident, Whaness is given "the kiss of life" by his enemy Bert Kerston, during which we are told that "The kiss transformed everything; for the body seemed to mingle with his, to rise up and through him, to stand high above him; and his own body fell through the drowning with an amazed cry" (199). Whaness, who is also the local gravedigger (200), has essentially drowned but been revived by a man with whom he has often quarreled. Might Brown be suggesting that Scottish Calvinism can be cleansed and purified of what he saw as its excesses and then re-incorporated into a timeless Christianity in which all believers are welcomed?

Brown noted in his autobiography that the Church of Scotland minister's mother in *Greenvoe*, Mrs. McKee, became his favorite fictional creation, and his sympathy, even empathy with her against her fictional accusers in her mind demonstrates his relative ecumenism in the novel and embrace of an perennial Christianity, flavored by what he may have seen as more positive aspects of Presbyterianism. In *For the Islands I Sing*, he recalls that "Elizabeth McKee and I have had more joy and understanding of each other than any other character I have imagined" (175). In fact, he became so taken with her in the course of writing the novel that he admitted later in an interview that "Mrs. McKee unbalances the whole thing. . . . She assumes too big proportions really for the shape of the whole book, but . . . I wouldn't unwrite it anyway or cut her out in any way."<sup>28</sup> The way in which Mrs. McKee "unbalances" the novel may

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<sup>27</sup> Brown, "A Sequence of Images: George Mackay Brown" [interview with Isobel Murray and Bob Tait], in Isobel Murray, ed., *Scottish Writers Talking* (East Linton, UK: Tuckwell Press, 1996), 1-54 (38).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. One of Mackay Brown's most thoughtful critics, Berthold Schoene, *The Making of Orcadia: Narrative Identity in the Prose Work of George Mackay Brown* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 179, has even argued that Mrs. McKee's fate and the fate of Hellya are paralleled to the degree that she is eventually

be an unconscious admission by Brown of the lingering, outsized importance of Calvinism on Scottish culture, history, and literature, much as he rejected what he pejoratively viewed as its life-denying aspects in "The Broken Heraldry." It is difficult to square her spiraling, closed narrative of guilt about introducing her preacher son to alcohol when he was young with Brown's reductive account in "The Broken Heraldry" of the damage that the Reformation wrought in Scotland: "It was then that the old heraldry began to crack, that the idea of 'progress' took root in men's minds" (145). The traditionalist Whanesses, who utterly reject progress both before and after the relentlessly "progressive" Blackstar takes over the island also contradict Brown's narrative in that essay. Moreover, despite her isolation, Mrs. McKee enjoys a whole community of people in her mind, while the Whanesses are thoroughly integrated into the local community and help sustain others in their repetitive gifts of food to those less fortunate.

Later, in chapter three, in the course of the local historian Skarf's account of the island's history, Brown makes it even clearer that Calvinism did not usher in the island's eventual destruction, a reversal of his position in "The Broken Heraldry" when he argued that Calvinism broke the continuity of Catholic culture on the island.<sup>29</sup> According to the Skarf, a major sea-change in the island's history occurred in the late 1400s when "Orkney passed into the keeping of Scotland. The glory of the Norse earldom...was *shorn away*. The new Scottish earls were incomers; *they looked on the islands as a mine with thin veins of gold branching through it*. The islanders, so that a planned spoliation could take place, were degraded to the status of beasts of burden" (*Greenvoe*, 76; my emphases). When this early passage in the novel is compared to the abrupt beginning of chapter six that brutally portrays the arrival of Black Star on the island, the similarity between the acquisitive mindsets of the Scots and the company is revealed: "The cone of Korfsea was *shorn off*. The loch of Warston was drained; red-throated divers and eiders and swans had to seek other waters. Hellya was *probed and tunneled to the roots*" (214; my emphases). Black Star's technological

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rendered "not only a mere symbol but in fact a startling likeness of the Orkney community" (see his discussion on 177-83).

<sup>29</sup> In fact, the Skarf's running history in the novel gives the lie to an unbroken thread of Catholic continuity because he begins with proto-history and suggests the existence of Hellya, and by extension, Orkney, long before its islanders became Catholic.

pro prowess and sheer force are certainly more advanced than that of the Scots, but the narrator links both of them together in their joint view of the island as a resource to be exploited, particularly through the use of the past tense of the verb “shear” and through their similar efforts to literally penetrate and tunnel through the island.

The connection the novel makes between the first Scots on Hellya in the late 1400s and Black Star at least modifies, if not contradicts, Brown’s own statements in “The Broken Heraldry” about the Reformation’s destructive power because Scottish Calvinism did not make its way to the Scotland until 1559-60, when it then, as historian Michael Lynch notes, became seen as “the fundamental fact of Scottish history” because “it marked a decisive rejection of Rome, the Latin mass, papal jurisdiction, sacerdotalism and much else.”<sup>30</sup> And yet there were varying shades of Calvinism in Scotland and many signs of the vitality of Catholicism by the later 1500s: Knox, Brown’s whipping boy in “The Broken Heraldry,” was generally regarded as a moderate Calvinist, while as late as 1566 there was nearly a Catholic revival in Scotland; according to Lynch, outside of Edinburgh, “Catholicism continued and even flourished in the provinces, but with little leadership or co-ordination” (*ibid.*, 218). If we take, then, Brown’s history of the Orkneys as expressed by the Skarf, the destructive Scots pioneers of the late 1400s must have been Catholic, which contradicts his monolithic history of Calvinism’s rapaciousness in “The Broken Heraldry” and in his autobiography.

Taking our cues on this issue from “The Broken Heraldry,” for example, it is tempting to read the advent of Black Star in the novel as an allegory of Calvinism’s entrance into the Orkneys in the way the company violently and suddenly bursts upon the villagers and quickly subdues the island in the passage I cite above from the beginning of chapter six that implicitly links the rapacious behavior of Black Star with that of the first Scots on the islands. Compare the abrupt destruction inherent in the language of the beginning of chapter six in Brown’s description of the advent of Calvinism to the Orkneys in “The Broken Heraldry”:

Suddenly the violent change to Calvinism was thrust on them. Their sacraments were forbidden and squandered; their altars and images put down; *black* preachers solemnly impressed on them that their strivings towards the consummation of heaven would avail them nothing, since either their salvation or their damnation

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 186.

was sealed before the beginning of the world.... Innocence gave place to a *dark*, brooding awareness.... Poets followed priests into the *darkness* (146; my emphases).

Undoubtedly, Brown's emphasis on Calvinism's "black preachers" and thus the presumed "darkness" they brought to the Orkneys in this essay is expressed in his name of "Black Star," a connection no commentator writing on the novel has made before. Other works by Brown of the period, however, make his bias against the inception of Scottish Calvinism through using images of blackness clear. Joseph Pearce, for example, points out that Brown's 1970 play, *A Spell for Green Corn*, blames the Reformation for "eliminating the old faith of the island folk in the name of a rootless 'Progress,'" and, in his account of Brown's conversion to Catholicism, Pearce cites a passage from this play about how "The Word was imprisoned between *black* boards, and chained and padlocked, in the pulpit of the kirk."<sup>31</sup>

But beyond the issue of his portrayal in *Greenvoe* of early Scots Catholics as invaders who sundered Orkney from its Norse roots, of course, like all historical processes, the Orkneys' gradual conversion to a Calvinistic theology was considerably more complicated than Brown allows, although it no doubt may have had violent adherents on the islands who sought to overthrow all the trappings of Catholicism they saw around them. As Brown himself admits in "The Broken Heraldry," there are

Many recorded instances [that] survive of men, six or seven generations later, taking their troubles and sickness to the ruins of some pre-Reformation chapel, praying there, and leaving offerings among the stones. Parish ministers inveighed against this so often and so sternly that the practice must have been common right up to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (146).

He gives us a glimpse of his own ability to believe in a non-sectarian Christianity, closer to that given in *Greenvoe*, towards the end of this essay, when he describes the "stark fundamentalism" of a poem called "The Transfiguration" by his mentor, the Orkney poet Edwin Muir, then, after citing the poem, notes that "This is how the world must have looked to the elect kneeling at the penitent form," adding immediately that "one guesses that St Francis among the birds and St Magnus among the swords were touched by the same glory. 'The Transfiguration' is more than

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Pearce, *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1999), 433; my emphasis.

Calvinist or Catholic: it is perennial Christianity” (147). This “perennial Christianity” may also reflect Calvin’s high view of communion, a belief captured in *Greenvoe*’s communal conclusion where something very like the Eucharist is celebrated.

A startling example of the lingering influence, even privileged position that Brown gives Scottish Calvinism in the novel can be found in the catechetical structure of the concluding dramatic rituals for each chapter. Despite Victoria Street Church’s more liberal theology, Brown nonetheless would likely have been catechized by his mother and at church through the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, still the guiding doctrine for many Scottish Calvinist and other reformed Presbyterian churches in America and elsewhere. In these crucial rituals, the Lord of the Harvest character assumes the position of the questioner in the Westminster Confession of Faith, while the initiate, variously portrayed as Novice, Ploughman, Sower, Reaper, Harvester, and risen Harvester, answers and goes through a series of acts culminating in figurative death and resurrection. While this ceremony certainly borrows from ancient, likely pagan agricultural rites along with, perhaps, Masonic rites, Brown would almost certainly have known the catechetical “call and response” from long familiarity with the *Westminster Confession*. This ceremony is so central to the movement and theme of the entire novel, whereby the island moves from something like summer into fall and the nuclear winter threatened by Black Star back into the midsummer resurrection in its conclusion that the employment of the catechism, the central device of Calvinistic education, at the least bespeaks Brown’s respect for the method, if not for the theological content elucidated.

In the final scene of the novel, which is replete with resurrection energies, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>32</sup> the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the whisky by the former inhabitants of Hellya who have returned to the island after the Blackstar operation has ceased, might be thought of as a manifestation of this timeless Christianity articulated by Brown in his reading of Muir’s “The Transfiguration.” The communal act in the closing ceremony seems at first simultaneously Catholic and pagan, until we realize that although it is not rendered as dramatic dialogue as in the earlier sections, the catechetical movement common to the earlier enactments of the ritual remains. Communion was central to the

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<sup>32</sup> See my essay, “‘There Lives the Dearest Freshness Deep down Things’: The Intertextual Relationship of George Mackay Brown’s *Greenvoe* and Hopkins’s ‘God’s Grandeur,’” *Renascence*, 66:1 (Winter 2014): 57-76 (71-3).

Reformation, at least in its origins: We might recall that one of the reasons that John Calvin broke with the Catholic Church was that they did not have communion often enough for him. Calvin himself took communion daily. When Timothy Baker argues about this scene that “For Brown, existence as it should be is understood through community, through a pre-Reformation understanding of the universe in which God, land and community are all understood as a totality,” he misunderstands Brown’s embrace of a non-sectarian Christianity, flavored in part by Calvin’s insistence on Christ’s spiritual presence in the elements.<sup>33</sup> The representatives of the new Hellyan community that come back to the island to celebrate their Christian harvest ritual (248) are heterogeneous and include the elderly Mansie Anderson (with his Norwegian heritage); Tom Kerston, the son of the thief Bert Kerston; young Skarf, the bastard son of Skarf, the novel’s amateur historian; Sidney Fortin-Bell, the son of the island’s former laird; Johnny Corrigan; and Gino Manson, who earlier in the novel has been persecuted and submerged into a mud puddle by local schoolchildren ((*Greenvoe* 48).

Once we realize that both Calvin and Knox held a very high view of the elements and insisted upon the importance of taking weekly communion even though they were never able to institute that practice in the early Reformed Church,<sup>34</sup> we apprehend that this final scene, peopled with these diverse exiles, most of whom were associated with outsiders while Hellya was still a viable community, blends a recovered and proper

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<sup>33</sup> Timothy Baker, “George Mackay Brown’s *Greenvoe* as Impossible Community,” *Scottish Studies Review*, 8:1 (Spring 2007): 53-56 (64).

<sup>34</sup> Frank C. Senn, “The Reform of the Mass: Evangelical, but Still Catholic,” in *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 35-52 (46), points out that Calvin “was never able to institute a weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper in Geneva. The city council preferred to remain in uniformity with other Swiss Reformed cities by celebrating the Lord’s Supper four times a year. . . . Calvin demonstrates that the full service required Word and Sacrament by using the ante-communion for the typical Sunday service.” Knox’s *Book of Common Prayer* “directed that holy communion be celebrated once a month, but in practice it was celebrated four times a year as in Geneva and Zurich.” James Edward McGoldrick, *Luther’s Scottish Connection* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), 72, cites Knox’s view in the Scots Confession, “We utterly damn the vanity of those who affirm the sacraments to be nothing else but naked and bare signs,” observing that this Confession’s “strong emphasis upon the role of the Eucharist probably reflects the ongoing influence of Luther’s teaching.”

view of two crucial elements in Reformation theology, the privileged treatment of the catechism and communion, along with Catholic and pagan elements.

This recovery, along with his positive, fairly sympathetic portraits of the Whanesses and Elizabeth McKee and his critique of the Catholic Scots invaders of the island in the late 1400s, thus suggests that a rich view of Reformed theology and its practitioners continued to be part of George Mackay Brown's thinking and fiction well into his adulthood, despite his revulsion at what he wrongly believed was John Knox's severe, individualist Calvinist theology and the more liberal, watered-down Presbyterianism of his childhood. In so doing, Brown nonetheless privileges Calvin's intensely localized, community-oriented, and finally mysterious view of communion in the conclusion of his novel.

Since the first six chapters of the novel correspond to succeeding days of the week beginning on Monday, this last short section of the novel, separated with a space from the bulk of chapter six, almost certainly takes place on the seventh day, a Sunday in June—the narrator describes it as “One midsummer evening” (246). Brown comments elsewhere that “the number seven has extraordinary power,” instancing the “seven days of the week (the seven-syllabled Word of Creation),” and the pattern here, like the presence of seven men who arrive on the island, accords with his statement about the crucial importance of the seven-sided figure, or “heptahedron,” for his art.<sup>35</sup> This event thus occurs fairly close in time to one of the four days during which communion Sundays had been fixed on the Scottish Presbyterian church calendar: “the first Sundays of March, June, September, and December.”<sup>36</sup> This lovely communal meal, in its imagining of a heterogeneous, mixed-class community returning to Hellya, points toward a universal, timeless Christianity drawing on elements that are pagan, Catholic, and also Calvinist.

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<sup>35</sup> *For the Islands I Sing*, as in n. 2 above, 168-69.

<sup>36</sup> Senn, “The Reform of the Mass,” 46.