

# Turning back time to recall George Mackay Brown

**T**HE clocks have gone back an hour. If it was possible to turn them back even further what would we find? Or change?

A few weeks ago it was the 100th anniversary of the birth of George Mackay Brown. If I could travel back in time I would love to be one of the many people who followed the well-worn pathway to his humble home in Stromness. Just a cup of tea, a few minutes, a little chat.

A novelist and a musician, friends of mine from the US, spoke glowingly of such a brief experience. They were inspired.

I have walked that road in the historic Orkney fishing town past his flat on many occasions in recent years.

For those of us living on the mainland, it is easy to forget the middle part of his name - 'Mackay' - the surname of his mother, who came from Sutherland. He would have seen the outline of the landscape from the



## Northern Drift

By Monique Sliedrecht



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islands on a clear day.

I am grateful to learn more about him through his writings, and the writings of others who had the privilege of knowing him.

My friend Joanna Ramsey, who knew GMB very well in the last 10 years of his life, is an author and poet. She wrote a moving book about her friendship with George called *The Seed Beneath The Snow - Remembering George Mackay Brown*, which also sensitively describes the community and life of Stromness where she lives.

The Dark Horse journal has recently published a centenary issue about George Mackay Brown. Joanna Ramsey's poem, *The Road to the Shore*, is featured in the magazine. She imagines herself



Stromness in Orkney, where George Mackay Brown spent most of his life.

placing a jar of crocuses at the place where he is buried and she waits in silence.

She writes: *'But what did I think I would find?*

*The grave split asunder and you standing tall, the Hoy hills behind you, the mountains of Sutherland pale as a mirage where ocean meets sky? — Ben Hope and Ben Loyall 'Like saw-teeth' you said. I hear your voice still, and the loss is no less.'*

I love the way she connects Sutherland with Orkney.

In the last 10 years I've gone to Orkney many times, especially in the last five. I've had exhibitions in Stromness and most recently in St Margaret's Hope, and have developed friendships with a number

of people there, including Joanna.

There is a delight in store for anyone that goes over to Orkney. Just the trip across the Pentland Firth is invigorating and is like arriving in a different world.

The islands evoke a feeling of mystery, a profound history which includes incredible ancient sites like Skara Brae, Maes Howe, and the Ring of Brodgar, alongside the equally inspiring life and culture of the islands.

The combination of sea and sky lends itself as a backdrop to the wonderful descriptions and stories in GMB's writings.

Except for periods as a mature student in mainland Scotland, Brown lived all his life in Stromness. Despite that, his words suggest a

large and expansive world. How powerful the human imagination is to extend beyond boundary and time!

Rosemary Goring writes about GMB in the Herald, suggesting that "Though he did not travel often or far..., Brown had a vast aesthetic and moral map in his head. As the poem *Places To Visit*, concludes, 'Thorfinn, you will learn more in Orkney/ Than Mansie did/ Who made seven salt circles of the globe!'

"Brown believed it and lived accordingly. Stromness contains just a couple of thousand people, but for him they represented all."

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