

AN ORKNEY TAPESTRY is the poet George Mackay Brown's imaginative celebration of the roots of a community, a rich mixture of history, drama, legend and folklore. He explores the dark mysterious corners, as well as the quiet beautiful fertile places, in his search for the still point of Orkney history, the true face of the Orkney Fable.

Cover photograph by John Bulmer

George Mackay Brown

An Orkney Tapestry

with drawings by Sylvia Wishart

LITERATURE / TRAVEL

ISBN 0 704 31007 4

United Kingdom 50p

Canada \$1.95 Australia & New Zealand \$1.65

South Africa R1.20

*Recommended price only



THE MIDSUMMER MUSIC

IN ORNKEY, one summer midnight, two fiddlers were walking home together from a wedding. In a field at the roadside was a mound – a howe, a knoll, a knowe – one of those artificial green humps that we now know to be burial chambers of the neolithic people. One of the fiddlers turned to answer his companion's half-finished sentence. He was not there. The lonely fiddler on the road knew then that the other fiddler had been taken down into the darkness. He was entombed, alive and enchanted, in the howe.

Some time later – none of the legends agrees as to exactly how long; some say a year, some ten years, some forty years – the unenchanted fiddler was walking along that same road with the knowe at the verge of it when he heard a lithe step beside him. He turned and saw that the howe-taken fiddler was once more on the road, walking home with him, his fiddle in his hand, in his mouth the end of the sentence he had not managed to complete. He was not an hour older than the day he disappeared, his beard was still black and curly and his eye bright. But time had happened to the workaday

fiddler; there was grey in his hair and labour had worn his hands closer to the brightness of the bone.

On they walked together.

It is perhaps an attempt to explain what used to be called 'the timeless quality' of art. But the myth goes deeper than that; it shows how, in the minds of the peasantry, art is interwoven with death and fruition. The fiddle, the skull, and the cornstalk yield their full significance only when they are seen in relation to each other.

The fiddler had been stolen by the earth people; not by the winter trows, who are all famine and deformity, but by the good trows, the potent energies of the earth that quicken grass and corn. They had stolen the fiddle so that its music would make the corn tall and golden under the sun that summer.

(It is interesting to know that the parents of Washington Irving belonged to the island of Shapinsay in Orkney. His story *Rip Van Winkle* shifts the Orkney folk tale to an American setting. *Rip Van Winkle* is an accomplished but rootless story – the power and urgency and meaning of the myth have vanished.)

In the centre of Orkney, between the two lochs of Stenness and Harray, on a stretch of moor, stands the Ring of Brodgar – a circle of huge monoliths. We will never know what kind of neolithic ceremonies – hymn and procession and sacrifice – went on there, at midsummer, to make the animals breed and the corn grow. The phallic element is present in the huge erect stones. The circle itself is the black sun of winter. The offered throat of a bullock, a chant, a stone knife – these instruments and elements were required before the ceremony was complete and the honey-dripping lord of summer walked in power through the sky.

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For weeks before midsummer the young men and of every island gathered fuel, anything at all that would be bundles of heather, dry cow droppings, sea-warped boards – and carried them to the summit of the highest hill. Just before the torch was brought an animal bone was carefully inserted into the heart of the pyre – a remnant of the sacrifice of an entire beast. The torch was thrust in. Fire answered fire from the hill-tops, till all Orkney was a dapple of flame and shadow in the midsummer midnight. It was the great Johnsmas Fire, that would ensure fertility to the whole community that year.

Every peasant had his private torch of dry heather. He lit it at the fire on the hilltop and brought it carefully down to his own croft. Then, slowly and solemnly, he carried the small flame round the bounds of his field, round house and byre and barn. So he claimed a share of the sun's bounty for his family and stock. The blessing had been brought to the furrows.

At the fire on the hilltop the young men and women danced among the flames till morning. They had a part in this rite of fertility also. What is the dance but a stylised masque of coupling? The fire, symbol of all their unrequited lusts, ensured that there would be a new strong generation of islanders, new furrows, new hearth stones. The fiddles ranted on. The ale-cog went from mouth to mouth. The feet rose and fell.

Down below the fields of Orkney were green with the first shoots.

In August the fields would be yellow, as if the sun had stamped its own image on the furrows. The benign fire in the sky had sealed a blessing on the labour of men and beasts.

In all these primitive ceremonies music and the dance have an important place. The trows – embodiments of the dark potent earth energies, both good and evil – loved music and

dancing. Time and again in the folk tales the fiddler is dragged down under the furrows, among roots and skulls.

Nowadays our western art is autonomous, private, a cold lonely kingdom. It presents us with the human condition but makes no claim to do anything about it; being cut off from labours and hungers; being the preserve of sophisticated people, a small priesthood who can appreciate and understand, they alone.

'Art must be of *use*,' says Storm Kolson, the old blind Orkney fiddler – 'a coercive rhyme, to strand a whale on the rock, a scratch on stone to make the corn grow. What are all these statues and violins and calf-bound editions for?'

And he remembered, as an example of true art, 'a stone between field and beach. Some fisherman with a plough had scratched on it a fish and a cornstalk – wind and wave going through both in a single wavering fruitful line.'

The ancient magical ceremonial quality of art makes it profoundly suspect to all puritans, hedonists, humanists, democrats, pragmatists, rationalists, progressives; and nowadays nearly everyone fits into one or other of these categories. The medieval Church had the wisdom to make music and art handmaidens of the faith. The Calvinists looked on beauty as a lure of the devil, and but that King David had harped before the Lord and sung psalms, one guesses there would have been no singing in their kirks. They kept the visual arts severely in check; their kirks and meeting houses were plain, severe, unadorned.

But music, dancing, poetry were too deeply woven into the nature of country people to be easily eradicated. They saw the dance as the essence of all their labour; all their goings and comings with plough and sickle and quern-stone were gathered into the fiddler's reel.

Storm Kolson said to the astonished harvesters in the oatfield of Skail: 'The dance is a rising and falling of feet

like unto your labour, a good circling, and from this pure source, the Dance (that was in the beginning with God), issue all the slow laborious necessary diurnal rounds whereby men earn with pain their bread. The dance is but a quintessence of all your work. To the dance your toil returns again, as weariness goeth to the well for refreshment . . . Let not your boat be sent down the beach unless a fiddle be there to make good its going. Let not plough be put to acre except a fiddle cross first the furrow. Let not those new married seek their bed before the chamber that they purpose to lie in be purified with music . . .'

Dance was their difficult labour turned into a gay ritual. Bread and ale were the fruits of their labour. There was a connection, therefore, between music and bread; they recognised that they were in the presence of a mystery and that they themselves were a part of it. The rhythms of art were closely related to the seasonal rhythms, to a dark potent chthonic energy that raised cornstalk and rose from their roots underground. Grave and womb deepened the mystery; in those darknesses, too, new life quickened and burgeoned. Ploughing and love have always been linked in the imagination of farmers.

As I was ploughing in my field
The hungriest furrow ever torn
Followed my plough and she did cry
'Have you seen my mate John Barleycorn?'

Says I, 'Has he got a yellow beard?
Is he always whispering night and morn?
Does he up and dance when the wind is high?'
Says she, 'That's my John Barleycorn.'

One day they took a cruel knife
(O, I am weary and forlorn!)

They struck him at his golden prayer.
They killed my priest, John Barleycorn.

They laid him on a wooden cart,
Of all his summer glory shorn,
And threshers broke with stick and stave
The shining bones of Barleycorn.

The miller's stone went round and round.
They rolled him underneath with scorn.
The miller filled a hundred sacks
With the crushed pride of Barleycorn.

A baker came by and bought his dust.
That was a madman, I'll be sworn.
He burned my hero in a rage
Of twisting flames, John Barleycorn.

A brewer came by and stole his heart.
Alas, that ever I was born!
He thrust it in a brimming vat
And drowned my dear John Barleycorn.

And now I travel narrow roads,
My hungry feet are dark and worn,
But no one in this winter world
Has seen my dancer Barleycorn'.

I took a bannock from my bag.
Lord, how her empty mouth did yawn!
Says I, 'Your starving days are done
For here's your lost John Barleycorn.'

I took a bottle from my pouch,
I poured out whisky in a horn.
Says I, 'Put by your grief, for here
Is the merry blood of Barleycorn.'

She ate, she drank, she laughed, she danced,
And home with me she did return.
By candle light in my old straw bed
She wept no more for Barleycorn.

Death was the third part of this trinity; and all three were gathered up into the crowning idea of resurrection. The crofter could not fail to be impressed by this. For him life and death were not stark opposites but woven the one into the other, a seamless garment. He ate his bread and drank his ale in the depths of winter. Every April ditch, though half full of snow, teemed with re-birth. He lived in his fathers who had ploughed the acre before him and in his sons who would reap it after him; he was beyond the reach of destruction.

These profound frightening mysterious energies lay deep in the earth the crofter tilled. The same energies were present to him in a delightful way in fiddle music and ballad. He was a part of the earth, he was a part of the dance.

So, at midsummer, the music disappears into the earth for the tryst of light and darkness; and the artist returns again, strong, transfigured, timeless. The mediocre musician goes home alone.

'Darst thu gang b' the black furrow
This night, thee and thy song?' . . .
'Wet me mooth wi' the Lenten ale,
I'll go along'.

They spied him near the black furrow
B' the glim o' the wolf star.
Slow the dance was in his feet,
Dark the fiddle he bore.

There stood three men at the black furrow
And one was clad in grey.
No mortal hand had woven that claiith
B' the sweet light o' day.

There stood three men at the black furrow
And one was clad in green.
They're taen the fiddler b' the hand
Where he was no more seen.

There stood three men at the black furrow
And one was clad in yellow.
They've led the fiddler through a door
Where never a bird could follow.

They've put the gowd cup in his hand,
Elfin bread on his tongue.
There he bade a hunder years,
Him and his lawless song.

'Darst thou gang through the black furrow
On a mirk night, alone?' . . .
'I'd rather sleep wi' Christen folk
Under a kirkyard stone'.

THE MIDWINTER MUSIC

IN THE northern islands December is a dark month. The lamps are burning when people go to their work. Light thickens again in the early afternoon. The weather, more often than not, is cold and stormy. There are also calm clear nights when the hemisphere of sky is hung with stars and in the north the Aurora Borealis rustles like curtains of heavy yellow silk.

It is the season of The Nativity. It is also the time of trows. To the islanders the earth they tilled was an element of dark dangerous contending energies. The good energy of the earth raised their crops into the sun and rain and wind; but there were other earth energies bent on famine, sickness, death. These energies were active always; especially in the dark cold time of the year when nothing grew, the earth seemed to belong to them entirely. The island farmers knew this evil brood as trows, and the trows were more than vague abstract energies, they had shape and substance; they could dance, they could speak, they could travel between the hill and the ploughed field, they were often seen (but only by people who had the gift). The trows belonged to the under-