



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

George Mackay Brown's Marian Apocrypha

Citation for published version:

Bicket, L 2013, 'George Mackay Brown's Marian Apocrypha: Iconography and enculturation in *Time in a Red Coat*', *Scottish Literary Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 81-96.
<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/slr/summary/v005/5.2.bicket.html>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Scottish Literary Review

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Bicket, L. (2013). George Mackay Brown's Marian Apocrypha: Iconography and Enculturation in Time in a Red Coat. *Scottish Literary Review* [formerly *Scottish Studies Review*], 5(2), 81-96.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



LINDEN BICKET

**George Mackay Brown's Marian Apocrypha: Iconography
and Enculturation in *Time in a Red Coat***

Abstract

This essay seeks to establish the influence of Mariology and Marian iconography on the works of George Mackay Brown, with particular reference to his late novel *Time in a Red Coat*. It discusses Marian devotion in Brown's Orcadian context, and notes in particular chapel dedications, place names and folk song, before examining the enculturation of Mary and her place in global culture and Catholic history. Some of Brown's other unpublished, or 'apocryphal' writings on Mary are also discussed, as these pave the way for his longer prose meditation on Mariology in the novel. The essay brings these observations to bear on *Time and a Red Coat* – the high point of Brown's Marian *oeuvre*, which has not yet been read by critics in terms of Brown's Catholic imagination. The essay ends by examining the intertextual links between the Book of Revelation and *Time in a Red Coat*.

Mrs McKee peered into the gloom, and her heart nearly missed a beat, for it was a Roman Catholic church. There were two plaster statues, one against each side wall, and at the feet of the larger one – probably the Virgin Mary – three candles were lighted. A little red flame shone like a ruby at the side of the altar. Along three of the walls ran a sequence of paintings showing the Lord on his way to Calvary. It was all very lurid, Mrs McKee thought, a bit distasteful, like a sideshow at a fair.¹

To date, there has been no real engagement with Mariology in the writings of George Mackay Brown (1921-1996). The 'plaster statues' that Mrs McKee looks at in Brown's first novel, *Greenvoe* (1972) are indicative of an ancient legacy of devotion to the Virgin Mary in Scotland (and particularly

in Brown's Orcadian context), that is either mentioned in passing by Brown's reviewers, or considered unworthy of real critical engagement. This is not because Brown rarely writes of Mary. She is mentioned often in his corpus, if sometimes fleetingly, but this mirrors her own part in the Gospels, where she also plays an almost marginal role.² Until now, Brown's novel *Time in a Red Coat* (1984) has been read, as Timothy C. Baker notes, 'most frequently [. . .] as allegory or fairy tale: it appears to be a collection of universal truths about the nature of human life presented through diverse myths and stories.'³ The novel has been discussed most extensively by Baker and Berthold Schoene in their critical studies on Brown, and while both agree that it is a complex departure for Brown in its use of European and Asian settings, neither are especially eager to trace the text's engagement with Catholicism, and more particularly with Mariology. Despite Roderick Dunnett's observation that the novel's heroine 'is herself a kind of Marian figure', critics have failed to negotiate a place for a Marian reading of the text at all.⁴ However, Brown's novel is filled with hints, signs and symbols that suggest the influence of Mary's place in global culture, as well as from the Book of Revelation and from another aspect of the Virgin's cult: the rosary. Moreover, there is a wealth of manuscript work by Brown that includes Mary as a central figure, but which remains unpublished and 'non-canonical' in terms of his opus. This neatly mirrors the apocryphal materials on the Virgin, from which a large number of her devotional titles and much of her iconography derive. This work feeds into *Time in a Red Coat* – arguably the high point of Brown's Marian oeuvre – and with the recent creation of the new George Mackay Brown archival collection for Orkney Library and Archive, the scope of this oeuvre has been extended still further.⁵

Mark A. Hall writes that prior to the Reformation, 'Marian devotion seems to have been as popular [in Scotland] as throughout Europe. Its local uniqueness comes in its particular physical and religious setting and encompassed both genders and probably all social classes.'⁶ This is an important entry point into discussion of Brown's iconographical depictions of the Virgin in his Orcadian literary landscape.⁷ 'Local uniqueness' is a key term for Brown's writing with an Orkney setting, but it is especially important when looking at the veneration of the very distinctively Orcadian Virgin Mary that his early work proposes. Jocelyn Rendall's research into the ecclesiastical history of Orkney has shown that, 'by the time of the twelfth-

century building boom, by far the most popular dedication was to the Virgin Mary. There are thirty-three parish kirks and chapels dedicated in her name in Orkney.⁸ Indeed, Ernest Marwick's *Anthology of Orkney Verse* (1949) – one of the collections in which Brown's poetry first appeared – reproduces early Orcadian folk poetry, including 'New Year Song', a folk song of fifty stanzas that displays Marian roots, in which references to Mary become the constant refrain in the second and fourth lines:

Guid be tae this buirdly bigging!
 We're a' St. Mary's men,
 Fae the steethe stane tae the rigging,
 'Fore wur Lady.⁹

While Marwick notes that the song 'is not, in any strict sense, an indigenous work', he makes a point of stressing that 'the first singers of this quaint old rhyme were doubtless good Catholics', and it is this element of the song, coupled with its Orkney connections, that the Catholic convert Brown latched onto very firmly in *An Orkney Tapestry*, published twenty years later.¹⁰ In this text, Brown reproduces several verses of 'New Year Song' in the chapter 'The Midwinter Music', to illustrate how pagan customs and Christian traditions have developed and intermingled in Orkney. He claims that 'Secular and holy link hands in the dance' and '[t]he Virgin Mary, Our Lady, Queen of heaven, is also invited to be present' through the song's refrain.¹¹ Brown's narrative becomes assimilated into a kind of communal folk-voice, which says that 'In the eye of Our Lady of Heaven, who presides over the song, the good man and the good-wife are as worthy as King Henry and Rosamund [. . .] it is hard to tell what Lady is being praised – Rosamund or Mary crowned with stars – so mixed are secular and divine in the song'.¹² Here we see Mary as the 'Maria Regina' of the fifth and sixth centuries, whom Maurice Vloberg points out, 'evolved at the very centre of the faith and was especially favoured by popes', due to her expression of 'their faith and authority'.¹³ Mary is a glittering, crowned queen in this description; the idea of her as a regal being is a fundamental feature of her cult in the early and high Middle Ages.

However, earlier in *An Orkney Tapestry*, we see a very different type of Mary. In the 'Rackwick' section of the text, Brown depicts early Norse-inflected iconography of the Virgin in the valley of Rackwick on Hoy:

Frik, who was the best stoneworker of the valley, found a long blue stone in the ebb. He squared one end of the stone so that it stood upright. He carved with chisel and hammer dove eyes in the stone. He carried Our Lady of Rackwick into the chapel. That night the statue of Our Lady stood in a corner of the chapel, her feet dappled with seven candle flames. Next morning she was placed in the open air, on the hill, between fields and sea; it seemed her dove eyes kept watch over the labours of fishermen and ploughmen, Our Lady of Furrows.¹⁴

Mary is explicitly connected with the Orcadian agricultural realm in this passage. She is assumed into a fishing and ploughing community and becomes the guardian of the very ordinary workaday world of ‘furrows’. Brown’s images of Mary in these descriptions are hewn from stone, making iconography in the Orcadian context something intimately connected with organic, natural materials. Mary is not just part of the landscape here; she is the landscape itself. No longer the Queen of Heaven, glittering with gold and jewels, her stone image still fulfils the role of the icon, which according to George Weigel, ‘is intended to be another border place between the divine and the human, a window into the mystery that it pictorially conveys’; so Brown’s islanders are closely in tune with the mother of God within their locally unique landscape.¹⁵ Brown then heaps up the Virgin’s imagery in the form of short verses of poetry that punctuate the narrative. These take on the quality of a litany, listing the agricultural titles of the Virgin’s cults, or her personifications, before asking for her intercession:

Our Lady of Cornstalks
Our Lady of the Flail
Our Lady of Winnowing
Our Lady of Quernstones
Our Lady of the Oven
Blue Tabernacle
Our Lady of the Five Loaves
Take the ploughmen home from
the ale-house sober.¹⁶

An Orkney Tapestry contains three of these verses, which were later repro-

duced and augmented under the title 'The Statue in the Hills' in Brown's fifth poetry collection, *Fishermen with Ploughs* (1971), along with four other verses which connect the Virgin with mourners, washer women, tinkers and married couples, as well as crofters and fishermen. In this way, Brown's depictions of Mary mean that she enters 'into dialogue with the time, space, culture, problems and actual people who relate to her' in the text, rather being a coldly abstract Goddess-figure.¹⁷ Instead of the dazzling Queen of Heaven, Mary is patroness of all the estates of Orkney, and guardian of their labours, endeavours and relationships. Brown's imaginatively recreated pre-Reformation landscape, in which all the inhabitants of the valley of Rackwick are united by devotion to the Virgin, ties in with Mark A. Hall's observation that Marian veneration encompassed both genders and all social classes in Scotland during this period. This unity played on Brown's imagination so much that he created several of these short litanies to Mary – many of which did not make the final draft of 'The Statue in the Hills' and survive as manuscript drafts in the National Library of Scotland.¹⁸

There are in fact several other manuscripts which display Brown's early attempts to infuse his work with Marian iconography and subject matter. The National Library of Scotland also contains several unpublished poems by Brown where he depicts the Annunciation in the manner of Edwin Muir, as well as a play, *Our Lady of the Fishing Boats* (1964), in which 'Hamnavoe' (Brown's fictional Stromness) becomes a kind of futuristic, bureaucratic Bethlehem.¹⁹ In much of this work, Mary is presented as a scared girl, but one whose complete assent to God's will means that she is a channel of grace and an antidote to the supposedly improving qualities of the myth of progress that in the twentieth century brings so much mechanised death. Orkney Library and Archive also holds the manuscript for 'Magnificat' (1994), a short story in which Mary is neither a historical figure of veneration, implored by fishermen and monks for aid, nor the young mother who sweeps the floor and cradles her bairn. In this short story she is a poignant symbol of grief:

'She is a woman of sorrows,' they said. 'No-one has had to endure as much as that woman. Every now and again the sword enters her soul. She was there when they took her son down from the death tree. She held him in her arms, with his death wounds on him. The wonder is, she is still alive.'²⁰

Brown taps into another version of Mary in this short story, then. She is no longer ‘a partner in prayer’, the Virgin of early medieval Europe, but is instead ‘the figure of the suffering mother – *mater dolorosa*’, whose cult flourished in the late eleventh century.²¹ In the description above we see the image of the *Pietà*, and Bernard of Clairvaux’s description of Mary seems appropriate: ‘She was more tortured than if she was suffering torture in herself, since she loved infinitely more than herself the source of her grief.’²² In ‘Magnificat’ Mary’s pain is a key focus, so that Christ’s death is not presented as the triumphant conquering of sin, but the very real and heart-breaking loss of a child.

However, in Brown’s third novel, *Time in a Red Coat* (1984), instead of a woman explicitly put forward as the mother of Christ, we have a strange, often-silent girl: a Chinese princess born under the sign of water who follows the ‘dragon of war’, offering healing and consolation to the characters who populate the text. This is a notable role already associated with the Virgin, as Marina Warner suggests:

The Virgin, like Athene, presides over peace and over war. She exists on earth and through the places and things she has consecrated by her touch, and gives those things the right to victory. [. . .] In the ninth century the defenders of Chartres against the Norsemen had flown the Virgin’s tunic from the staff of their bishop, and in local legend the wonder-working relic single-handedly turned back and defeated the invaders.²³

The Virgin’s tunic in this text is the ‘red coat’ of the title, beginning as a dress that has the young princess ‘swathed in white silk’ and cloistered under the watchful eye of Mistress Poppysseed, her guardian, before the blood and turmoil of war throughout history stain it a deeper red.²⁴ The white tunic takes on the role of wonder-working relic and as well as giving the novel its title, shows the progress of centuries in its increased shabbiness and its symbolic change in colour, from innocence to experience.

The Chinese princess marks a significant shift in Brown’s approach to Marian subject matter. Catherine O’Brien identifies Mary as ‘an iconic figure without a complete biographical history’, meaning that ‘she has been pressed into a variety of cultural schema’.²⁵ While she has been seen variously as a Roman virgin queen, a sorrowing *mater dolorosa*, and a tender peasant

mother by Brown, he also 'encultures' her as the Catholic Church has (traditionally by missionaries and priests), so that she is subtly woven into the very fabric of culture and takes on the attributes and features of her new locality.

Baker argues that to read the novel as a Christian allegory would be 'reductive' and while he nods to Brown's claim in the novel that the Mass is 'so perdurable that the world-girding fire or flood was nothing in comparison' (p.178), he claims that Christian symbolism comprises 'only brief elements in a complicated narrative'.²⁶ He acknowledges Schoene's claim that, in the novel, '... it is young people of the next generation who, self-confidently brushing aside the bleak disillusion of old age, make sure that communal life will continue and repeat itself', but neither critic looks closely at children and their sense of perception in the text.²⁷ It is children (as in so much of Brown's work) who recognise something spiritual in the princess. It is adults who drastically misread her:

'Here's an angel coming,' said the child.

A young woman was coming up between the fields, in a gown that had lately been white, but now the dusts and flower-juices of a hundred miles had stained it. Birds had passed over it. Thorns had torn it here and there.

'Angel!' said the woman. 'I'll give you angel. Bring the other bucket here. The only angel that'll be coming to this village soon will be the Angel of Death, and it looks to me *he'll* get a good harvest, at least. You listen to too many stories. The only angels are over there painted on the walls of the church.' (pp.24-5)

The woman's reproach betrays her failure to see the possibility of divine presence manifested on earth. Her religious view is limited – the painted angels that she sees on the church walls are meant to be a reminder of religious beauty – not the one and only source of it. The young 'simpleton' Saul of Brown's early play *Our Lady of the Fishing Boats* sees angels, while the play's older fishermen see snowflakes: in this novel the child sees an angel while her mother grimly predicts the oncoming threat of war and death. Again Warner has noted the European basis for such visionary qualities:

As the idea of the innocence of childhood grew up in Europe, the Virgin's youth became the visible sign of her purity, and her

visionaries were often children themselves, particularly in nineteenth-century France, where a sentimental view of both children and religion was rampant.²⁸

Brown knowingly taps into this idea and admitted, as Baker acknowledges, that the role of children in *Time in a Red Coat* is to make 'a pure sweet promise that indeed all shall be well'.²⁹ The princess recognises the connection between the purity of childhood that Brown foregrounds in the text and children's untarnished vision of her, when she says, dreamily, 'There's always a child. In every winter place, a child. In every broken and burnt place. They come, they drink round me like spring butterflies. I don't know why that should be. It happens.' (p.108). Even descriptions of the young princess's face and clothing mirror the recorded experiences of child visionaries and saints. Before the princess sets out on her quest to slay the dragon of war, she sits, captured in Mistress Poppyseed's house: 'At first glance, it could have been an ivory doll sitting erect in the tall chair, a doll swathed in white silk and carefully carved from ivory by a master. Then the doll gave a yawn, and it was a girl.' (p.16). St Teresa of Avila claimed that on the Feast of the Assumption she received a vision of the Virgin, who cloaked her 'in a great white robe of shimmering light'.³⁰ She continued:

Even though I could not make out many details, I could see that the beauty of our Lady was extraordinary. I was able to perceive the general form of her face and the amazing splendour of her garment. It was not a blinding white but rather a soft luminosity. [. . .] Our Lady appeared to me as a very young girl.³¹

It is possible that this renowned saint's vision influenced the depiction of Brown's heroine, who is surrounded by descriptions of dreaming and visions throughout the novel, including: 'It was all like a beautiful dream' and 'To many she seemed the image of some girl they had admired or even been in love with, long ago, a thousand miles away [. . .] or a marvellous figure that entered their dreams sometimes, so beautiful and good that they awoke resentful of the grey light of morning'. (pp.79; 94). The girl becomes the Madonna of the rosary in these mystical and visionary descriptions, offering salvation and protection. The rosary's mystic origins have been attributed to the vision of St Dominic during the Cathar wars:

Dominic claiming to have been given the rosary by Mary so that humanity could use it to implore her for aid.³² Thus, she is intimately connected with protection in times of war and instability. Sarah Jane Boss identifies that 'promotion of the rosary has come to be a mainstay of devotions associated with modern Marian apparitions', while Trevor Johnson writes that the Madonna of the rosary 'was figurehead of the militant (and militaristic) Counter-Reformation'.³³ Notably, during the travels of Brown's heroine, she finds herself in a Germanic-sounding countryside, where churches have been burnt to the ground and a blacksmith's wife tells her: 'Fat Luther and the fat Pope, they're not getting on with each other, that's what it's all about as far as I can gather . . .' (p.83).

While Brian and Rowena Murray's idea that 'the heroine is not celebrating war, but takes the wider view, noting all the damage to people, property and values' is a legitimate and factually accurate one, it does not note that Brown shapes his princess in the image of the Madonna of the rosary, who appears to people as though a dream.³⁴ This strange girl can be read convincingly as a religious vision in the novel, as well as a character informed by fairy tale and myth, and, like visions of the Madonna of the rosary, she represents the victory of Christian belief over falsely-improving notions of 'progress' through bloodshed. The girl explicitly rejects the myth of progress from the offset. At the beginning of the tale she is to marry Mr Tengis, who has benefited from war (Mistress Poppyseed tells her, 'Isn't it wonderful? – Mr Tengis began as a baker of pies and got on so well that he now owns the whole village') but she escapes to stalk the dragon of war, to appear in troubled places, and to offer protection in the manner of Christ's mother (p.19).

As well as physical descriptions of the princess, she is moreover surrounded by mariological symbolism. At her birth, the Palace Masquer announces, 'The child has come to us in the sign of water. She will be a water princess.' (p.14). Schoene notes the clear Christian association here and argues that 'Brown makes water, often referred to as the source of all life on earth, assume the role of redeemer in his story of suffering and violence', and he claims:

our 'water princess', all dressed in white, is represented by the fish, a traditional symbol of Christianity. She is everyman featuring as main protagonist in a universal narrative in which the whole story is to resolve itself once and for all.³⁵

But is water really the story's major 'redeemer'? Water functions mainly as the richly descriptive iconography of the princess, who is no 'everyman' but a Marian construct. Water is also of course primarily an image of nourishment and, under a Christian lens, grace. It is the symbol of the sacrament of baptism and of Mary herself, whom Warner calls, 'the eternal mistress of the waters'.³⁶ Perhaps, instead of representing, 'an anonymous symbolic figure of mythic extraction, embodying The Redeemer for the whole of mankind', Brown's heroine represents, as in his unpublished play and short story, the mother of this Redeemer.³⁷ She is a mediating maternal focus for the war-weary inhabitants of the continents through which she travels.

The role of mediatrix and mother is most clearly displayed in chapter five, 'The Inn'; this is a key stage in the heroine's development within the novel, where she becomes less the angelic child and more the image of a consoling mother. Baker identifies Brown's heroine as being subject to several different interpretations at this point in the text: 'she is Mitzi, the inn-keeper's dead wife; she is the snow princess of a child's fairy tale; she is a ghost; she is an external observer of events.'³⁸ However, her character is also conflated with images of the mother of God. Critics have been slow to respond to the explicit references to Mary in this chapter, where the grief-stricken innkeeper's thoughts are focalised for the reader. When he awakes from sleep:

Through the window, six opaque green whorls in an oak frame, an unearthly light was flooding into the inn, as if it was sunk in the sea. He squinnied at the icon on the wall, the Blessed Virgin and the Child. So: an inn too, an inn in midwinter, and in a crib in that inn had begun the true history of man, after the false start in Eden. Yes, with that sleeping infant the world had woken to full knowledge of itself. There, on the Virgin's arm, silent, reposed The Word that was to flood the whole universe with meaning. (pp.47-8)

This chapter is hallucinatory: the inn-keeper confuses his grandchild for his dead wife, his thoughts wander to other wars and his memories swarm into the text so that the reader cannot be certain that the focalised narration is reliable. It is certainly less than lucid and the watery image of the Virgin serves to heighten the dreamlike atmosphere, where liminality and uncertainty is everything. The inn is even built at the foot of crossroads, perhaps reminding us of Mary's weeping at the foot of the cross. This icon, though,

is deeply significant and no mere scenic backdrop or cursory detail for traditionally '[a] sacred image [is] not an illusion but the possessor of reality itself, and the beneficent forces that flow through icons and relics of a holy personage like the Virgin bring them to life'.³⁹ It is no surprise, then, that the princess appears shortly after the innkeeper studies the icon of the Virgin and Child. Before this, though, his musings travel back to the story of the nativity. He becomes for a while the inn-keeper who greets Mary and Joseph and 'he saw with a start that the girl was with child, and far gone too, so far indeed that the event was imminent; a first low sweet moan was on her lips. The purity of the girl's face touched him, as he held the lantern high . . .' (p.48). Through the icon, the nativity is really made present for the man, so that he becomes, momentarily, the innkeeper who is present just before the birth of Christ. Mary becomes the 'tremulous girl' in this description, to whom he says, consolingly: 'There, my dear, it'll soon be all over. Then think how happy you'll be with the little new-born one in your arms.' (p.19). Notably, these words are almost identical to those of old Willag's, in *Our Lady of the Fishing Boats*, written around twenty years previously.

Narrative voice cuts through the imaginings of the man where we are told, 'Our old inn-keeper thought all these thoughts, as he looked at the icon on the wall, in the green underseas glow of deepest winter flooding through his six whorled panes.' (p.49). Warner reminds us that, '[t]he Virgin's help has long been sought through relics and images' and that '[t]he dynamic holiness of icons and relics did not just stir the soul to contemplation of higher things' but 'also physically communicated the properties of their subject or owner. Images were alive, and so they could breathe life into the dying.'⁴⁰ At this point in the text the old man finishes contemplating the icon and though he has indeed been thinking of higher things, the girl soon appears and in effect saves him, and his granddaughter. The child who (of course) possesses untarnished spiritual vision, gives 'a cry like a little bell' (p.51) and offers the princess a bed, while the old man remains unsure of her. Several references are made to her white gown, the effective battle talisman of the text, which may remind us of the Virgin's relics (including, according to tradition, the tunic she wore during the Annunciation, which, as with saints' relics, would have been holy by virtue of its coming into physical contact with the Virgin).

When asked what brings her to an inn in the middle of winter, during

‘Terrible times. Bandits and cut-throats everywhere’, the princess reiterates her mission: ‘The girl said wearily, “To kill the Dragon.”’ (p.52). The dust jacket of the novel’s 1991 reprint explains succinctly that the task of the girl is ‘to slay the burgeoning dragon of war before it destroys the world that she loves . . .’, but to date critical reception of the novel has rather taken this for granted.⁴¹ Critics have noted neither the connection with Brown’s 1971 poetry collection, *Fisbermen with Ploughs*, which is based on the premise of a ninth-century Norwegian tribe fleeing ‘starvation, pestilence, turbulent neighbours (what the poet calls, in the shorthand of myth, the Dragon)’,⁴² nor the novel’s connection with the Book of Revelation, where ‘a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns’ (Rev. 12: 3) attacks a woman, often read as Mary herself, or a Marian figure.

In Revelation, amid scenes of chaos, darkness and turmoil, John the Apostle, traditionally identified by the Church as the author, tells us:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars:

And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.

And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as it was born.

And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.

And the woman fled into the wilderness . . . (Rev. 12: 1-6)

Of course, the princess of *Time in a Red Coat* is born at the start of the novel – not her son, but she too is born after ‘a long labour, full of pain’ that mirrors these scriptural pangs of childbirth (p.11). She also utters ‘after a silence, one thin lost cry’ and as we have seen, she too is a Marian figure, like the woman combating the dragon of Revelation (p.13). Revelation tells us: ‘when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child. And to the woman were given

two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness' (Rev. 12: 13-14). Brown's novel relays that at the birth of the princess, 'Very far off, an eagle (a throbbing needle point) rose above the mountains and wheeled north, and soon was nothingness in the veils of mist.' (p.2). This first chapter closes dramatically: 'Hooves splashed through the goldfish ponds. Scent of trodden roses was everywhere. Hooves broke the branches. Hooves reared against the first stars.' (p.15). The four references to hooves point to the four horsemen of the Apocalypse in Revelation and signal the destruction to come. Indeed, the last sentence of this chapter tells us, 'It is now the time of the dragon.' (p.15).

The language, texture and imagery of Revelation continue to underpin the novel throughout. Where Revelation relates, 'the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood' (Rev.12: 15), in Brown's novel we see the princess almost submerged and drowned in chapter four, 'River', where a soldier's corpse collides with her small boat. When asked by her ferryman where she is going, the girl replies, 'to the war and the wounds' (p.37), while in Revelation we are told, 'the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed' (Rev. 12: 17). Brown uses the imagery and character of Revelation to underline his novel about war and to reinforce the Marian aspects of his heroine, but perhaps he suggests more broadly that a loss of faith in the consolation that the Virgin can offer may bring about wider sorrow. Indeed, arguably, the loss of Marian veneration and a lack of recognition of its beauty are more serious and even demonic, as signalled by the dragon.

This novel is ultimately the high point of Brown's Marian oeuvre – most of which is, ironically 'apocryphal' – like many of the early legends of the Virgin herself. Critical opinion has expressed dissatisfaction with a Catholic reading of the novel, and, as has been noted, has even seen this type of analysis as reductive. Taken as a whole, Brown's unpublished poetry, play and short story all feed into the depiction of the princess in *Time in a Red Coat*. His apocryphal works on Mary, particularly his play, are perhaps early structuring devices in which Brown can test out the recurrent imagery and depiction of the Virgin. They are windows into Brown's creative process – one rich with symbolism and a long historical legacy of Marian devotion. Trevor Johnson argues that 'Mary's regal status can [. . .] be read as a sign of her supereminent position among the saints of the Church – a position

of such central importance that she [holds] the office of highest authority after that of Christ.⁴³ Brown affords her this authority, even in her most humble and vernacular depictions.

Notes

- 1 George Mackay Brown, *Greenwoe* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p.143-4.
- 2 Mention of Mary is mostly confined to the Gospel of St Luke, where she speaks four times.
- 3 Timothy C. Baker, *George Mackay Brown and the Philosophy of Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.96.
- 4 Roderick Dunnnett, 'George Mackay Brown at Seventy', *Poetry Now Review*, 18.3 (1992), 7-8 (p.7).
- 5 'George Mackay Brown': A Literary Executor's Archive' was a project based at the University of Glasgow and funded by a British Academy Small Grant. The PI for this project was Dr Kirsteen McCue and the RA was Dr Linden Bicket. In October 2011 the Research Assistant spent six weeks in Orkney in order to collate and catalogue the first single collection of Brown's manuscripts for Orkney Library and Archive. A full catalogue for the new collection can be found at www.orkneylibrary.org.uk/html/archive.htm. More details about the project can be found at www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/research/fundedresearchprojects/georgemackaybrownproject/.
- 6 Mark A. Hall, 'Wo/men only? Marian devotion in medieval Perth', in *The Cult of Saints and the Virgin Mary in Medieval Scotland*, ed. by Steve Boardman and Eila Williamson (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), pp.105-24 (p.124).
- 7 'Iconography' is used in this essay to refer to the recurrent religious imagery, symbolism and motifs, in art and printed text, which refer to the Virgin Mary.
- 8 Jocelyn Rendall, *Steering the Stone Ships: The Story of Orkney Kirks and People* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2009), p.46.
- 9 Anonymous, 'New Year's Song', in *An Anthology of Orkney Verse*, ed. by Ernest Marwick (Kirkwall: W. R. Mackintosh, 1949), p.47.
- 10 Ibid, p.45, p.46. Some verses of the folk song seem once to have belonged to a ballad about Henry II and his mistress and some of the lexicon is Middle English, rather than Norse. In *An Orkney Tapestry* Brown also reproduces a protective poem 'uttered in the north three and a half centuries after the Reformation' in which children were committed to the care of the Virgin Mary on Helya's Night, the twentieth of December. The short poem ends: 'Mary Midder, had de haund / Roond da infants o' oor laund'. *An Orkney Tapestry* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1972), p.127.
- 11 Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p.130.
- 12 Ibid., pp.131-2.
- 13 Maurice Vloberg, 'The Iconographic Types of the Virgin in Western Art', in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. by Sarah Jane Boss (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), pp.537-585 (p.550).

- 14 Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p.35.
- 15 George Weigel, *Letters to a Young Catholic* (Hertfordshire: Gracewing, 2004), p.36.
- 16 Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p.38.
- 17 Catherine O'Brien, 'Mary in Modern European Literature', in Boss, *Mary: The Complete Resource*, pp.521-53 (p.529).
- 18 Alternative verses are included in NLS Acc. 4864.3. In these verses Mary's titles range from the ethereally beautiful 'Our Lady of Violets among Green and Gold' to the domestic 'Our Lady of Kirn and Rolling Pin'.
- 19 G. M. Brown, *Our Lady of the Fishing Boats* (1964), two manuscripts (MS 1 and MS 2), NLS Acc.4864.9.
- 20 George Mackay Brown, 'Magnificat' (June/July 1994), ms, Orkney Library and Archive D124/18/2/6.
- 21 Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).p. 109.
- 22 Bernard of Clairvaux, quoted in Eva De Visscher, 'Marian Devotion in the Latin West in the Later Middle Ages', in Boss, pp.177-201 (p.183).
- 23 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Pan Books, 1985), p.304.
- 24 George Mackay Brown, *Time in a Red Coat* (London: Grafton Books, 1991/1984), p.16. All subsequent references to this text will appear parenthetically in the essay.
- 25 O'Brien, p.521.
- 26 Baker, *The Philosophy of Community*, p.101.
- 27 Berthold Schoene, *The Making of Orcadia: Narrative Identity in the Prose Work of George Mackay Brown* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), p.251.
- 28 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p.302.
- 29 Brown, quoted in *George Mackay Brown and the Philosophy of Community*, p.98. This echoes a phrase that Brown was fond of quoting: 'All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.' Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century mystic, claimed that these were the words spoken to her by God during a vision.
- 30 Teresa of Avila, *The Book of My Life*, trans. by Mirabai Starr (Boston: New Seeds Books, 2007), p.267.
- 31 Ibid., p.268.
- 32 Miri Rubin notes: 'A devotion designed for religious women in German-speaking lands formed the basis of a new form: the rosary designed by a Carthusian monk, Dominic of Prussia (1384-1460), of the Charterhouse of Trier. In his rosary Mary's and Jesus' lives were intertwined. This new monastic devotion spread quickly to other houses of the Carthusian order throughout Europe.' *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*, p.333.
- 33 Sarah Jane Boss, 'Telling the Beads: The Practice and Symbolism of the Rosary', in Boss pp.385-394 (p.391), and Trevor Johnson, 'Mary in Early Modern Europe', in Boss pp.363-384 (p.366).
- 34 Brian and Rowena Murray, *Interrogation of Silence: The Writings of George Mackay Brown* (London: John Murray, 2004), p.195.
- 35 Schoene, *The Making of Orcadia*, p.250, p.249.
- 36 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p.262.
- 37 Schoene, *The Making of Orcadia*, p.254.
- 38 Baker, *The Philosophy of Community*, p.99.
- 39 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p.292.

LINDEN BICKET

40 Ibid., p.293.

41 Dustjacket for *Time in a Red Coat* (London: Grafton Books, 1991).

42 George Mackay Brown, *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, ed. by Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (London: John Murray, 2005), p.89.

43 Trevor Johnson, 'Mary in Early Modern Europe', in Boss, p.159.

University of Edinburgh