George Mackay Brown and the disenchantment of Orkney

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In Act One of George Mackay Brown’s play *A Spell for Green Corn* (1970), a group of ‘shore people’ fix their eyes on the sea. The action takes place on the fictional island of Hellya, in an imagined medieval past that Brown’s stage directions describe as ‘the age of saints and fish and miracles’. The famished islanders train their gaze on the boat of their best fisherman, Erik, but soon a wave consumes him and he perishes. Into this crowd comes a monk, Brother Cormac, who admonishes the islanders gently for their reliance on the sea’s scarce reward. Calling the sea ‘a miser and a murderer’, the monk implores the islanders to ‘take part in the good dance of agriculture [...] That is God’s will for you’ (p. 11). When the islanders refuse his gift of stones gathered from the shoreline, Brother Cormac mutters ruefully: ‘you’re not all saints and poets, I suppose’, before blessing the stones and transforming them miraculously into fresh haddock (p. 12). This austere scene ends with the recitation of ‘The Ballad of John Barleycorn’—a rural song of agricultural ritual in which Brown draws parallels between Christ’s sacrificial death and fruitfulness of God’s kingdom. In this way, the opening act of *A Spell for Green Corn* introduces its audience to a drama in which cycles of famine and feast recur over centuries, from the spiritual hunger of pre-Christian times to the bounty of the medieval ‘age of saints and fish and miracles’, and from the darkness of Reformation Orkney (‘a time of witches and ploughs and kirk sessions’) to the mechanised, secular, post-industrial present—an ‘age of machines and numbers and official forms’ (pp. 16, 54).

*A Spell for Green Corn* offers a starting point for an exploration of Brown’s enduring preoccupation with patterns of devotion and doubt throughout the sweep of Orcadian history.
In particular, this study of Brown’s place as a Scottish Catholic writer will consider the significance of his post-Enlightenment, potentially Weberian notion of the Protestant Reformation as ‘a milestone on the road towards modernity and secularization, a landmark in the narrative of progress’ and the scourge of ‘magical and supernatural forces in the world’.\(^2\)

In his first poetry collection, *The Storm* (1954), Brown announced that it was the task of ‘poet and saint’ to re-spiritualize a disenchanted, ‘Knox-ruined’ Scotland.\(^3\) This refrain is echoed by Brother Colm in his admonishment of the sceptical ‘shore people’, and indeed it reverberates and evolves in much of Brown’s subsequent short fiction and poetry, before finally appearing afresh, though matured, in his valedictory last novel, *Beside the Ocean of Time* (1994). This chapter’s ensuing discussion will trace the evolution of Brown’s Catholic thought about Orkney’s ‘disenchantment’ though a diachronic survey of key moments in his poetry, short fiction, a mid-career play, and final novel. Recurring characters, patterns of sacred imagery and ritual, and pre-Reformation ruins all feature in Brown’s depiction of the effects of Scottish religious change over centuries. These creative leitmotifs demonstrate not only the evolution of Brown’s thought about the ‘disenchantment’ of Orkney, but also reveal the relationship between Brown’s writing with other works of Scottish and Catholic fiction more broadly.

In her recent, highly valuable overview of the ‘desacralization’ thesis, Alexandra Walsham outlines Max Weber’s description of the Reformation as ‘the disenchantment of the world’:

Weber argued that, especially in its more ascetic forms, Protestantism fostered a fundamental rejection of sacramental magic as a mechanism for aiding salvation and prompted the evolution of a transcendental and intellectualised religion in which numinous forces were removed from the sphere of everyday life.\(^4\)

Yet Walsham rightly observes that any notion of the Reformation as a swift and decisive break between a medieval Catholic, ‘superstitious’ understanding of the world, and a ‘Protestant ethic’ of rationalism, fails to do justice to patterns of devotion and supernatural
belief throughout what is increasingly recognised by historians as the ‘Long Reformation’. Similarly, historian Andrew Keitt has pointed out that ‘the Weberian model approximates at face value many of the same polemical categories used by the sixteenth-century reformers themselves’ even as it ‘projects nineteenth-century confessional stereotypes about the “rationality” of Protestantism back onto the Reformation era.’

The Weberian thesis of disenchantment is a powerful feature of the output—both critical and artistic—of the so-called twentieth-century Scottish Cultural ‘Renaissance’. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the writings of Edwin Muir, whose resentment of the Reformation is an intensely prevalent strand within both his poetry and literary criticism. Muir’s derision for ‘King Calvin with his iron pen / And God three angry letters in a book’ in ‘The Incarnate One’ (1956) denounces the word-centred Scottish Reformation’s swift obliteration of the sacralised world. As discussed fully elsewhere, Muir’s view was eagerly adopted by his student, the Catholic convert and fellow-Orcadian George Mackay Brown, and it is a powerful driver in Brown’s own work about sixteenth-century religious change in Orkney. In An Orkney Tapestry (1969), Brown writes that ‘[t]he Orkney imagination is haunted by time; it is Edwin Muir’s great theme, and in this matter he is the poet who speaks for all of us.’ The notion of the Scottish Reformation as spiritual and cultural affliction is a consistent theme in much of Brown’s early poetry and prose. Muir notes in Scottish Journey (1935) that in Scotland ‘one has to dig for history beneath a layer of debris left by the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution’. In Brown’s work too the excavation and retrieval of ancient faith is a key priority, and he signals this through repeated invocation of ‘the remains of pre-Reformation chapel and monastery’ and ‘the rose-red Cathedral of Saint Magnus the Martyr in Kirkwall’ in his poetry and prose. Brown’s frequent criticism of what he calls ‘the new religion, Progress, in which we all devoutly believe’ is often noted by critics as a sign of his conservatism—particularly given his rural location—but in fact it might be
better understood as part of the Weberian historiography of Protestant disenchantment that he inherited from Muir.¹³

The 1950s–1960s: Poetry and Short Fiction

‘Chapel Between Cornfield and Shore’, a poem included in Brown’s second collection *Loaves and Fishes* (1959), traces the time-haunted Orcadian landscape to the religious turmoil of the sixteenth century. Musing on the ruins of a pre-Reformation chapel, the speaker reflects on the ‘ascetic forms’ of (Scottish) Protestantism identified by Weber as removing the numinous from everyday life:

> Above the ebb, that gray uprooted wall
> Was arch and chancel, choir and sanctuary,
> A solid round of stone and ritual.
> Knox brought all down in his wild Hogmanay. (lines 1–4)¹⁴

These lines identify the ruin as an Orcadian Tintern Abbey—a permanent reminder of the medieval past in the landscape of the present, and a catalyst for internal reflection on the lost devotions of Catholic Orkney. But unlike the titular abbey of Wordsworth’s poem, this ruin was not created by the dissolution of the monasteries; rather, the architect of the chapel’s demolition is the Reformer Knox, his ‘wild Hogmanay’ a specifically Scottish form of iconoclasm akin to the ‘carnivalesque rituals of defilement and desecration’ of early modern Europe.¹⁵ The sudden end-stop of the poem’s fourth line subdues the speaker’s imaginative leap into the chapel’s lost liturgical life. But the inertia threatened by this pause is overcome in the next stanza by Brown’s hopeful description of ‘new ceremonies’, which will transform the chapel’s barren resting place (its ‘thrawn acre’) and catalyse resurrection ‘after the crucifixion of the seed’ (lines 6, 8). By the close of the poem, the speaker imagines a future in which the chapel surges with new life, and a ‘fisher priest’ offers the body of Christ as ‘spindrift bread’ (line 13). In this poem, the loss of ritual and the Eucharistic sacrifice is
presented as merely a historical anomaly. Eventually, suggests Brown, after many centuries of liturgical and devotional famine, God’s grace will completely re-enchant the world.

The ‘fisher priest’ of ‘Chapel Between Cornfield and Shore’ appears again, much fleshed out, as the narrator of ‘Master Halcrow, Priest’, a tale included within Brown’s first short story collection, *A Calendar of Love* (1967). This character clearly appealed to Brown, as this is the first of two short stories in which he appears. ‘Master Halcrow, Priest’ is a first-hand testimony of the Orcadian Reformation, written ‘on a harvest evening in the year of Our Lord 1561’. Despite Brown’s claim that ‘realism is the enemy of the creative imagination’, Halcrow’s account of the ‘stripping’ of his Orcadian altar does, at first glance, seem to comply reasonably well with what we know of the Reformation in Orkney (though a comprehensive study of this has yet to be attempted). The old priest Halcrow makes a careful note that the day’s events have been the culmination of ‘things that have come upon us this ten years and more’ (p. 124)—a statement which reflects the fact that the move towards Reform in Orkney and elsewhere ‘was not a single event but a long and acrimonious process of transition’, as Jocelyn Rendall asserts.

However, the description of Orcadian religious change at grassroots level is perhaps more open to question given the charismatic timbre of the new street preaching witnessed by the islanders. Master Halcrow recalls ‘a man come to the town of Kirkwall that preached under the sky like a friar, his texts the Scarlet Woman and Anti-Christ and the Whore of Babylon out of the Apocalypse’ (p. 126). The new preaching raises the spectres of ‘shrieking, babbling, seeing of visions and speaking in tongues’, and men respond by ‘sobb[ing] and declar[ing] their sins openly in the streets’ (p. 126). This ‘blasphemous clowning’ disturbs Halcrow, and rightly so, as it proves to be a precursor to the story’s crisis, in which he is cast out of his chapel by the new Protestants and returns to rescue the blessed sacrament amid iconoclasm carried out by ‘powerful and angry men’ (p. 128).
The hysterical evangelism and cold ferocity of the Reformation in this story has, arguably, a much more literary than historical basis. The street preaching and frenzied conversions described by the old priest are strikingly reminiscent of the late nineteenth-century evangelical revivals in Orkney that Muir describes in *An Autobiography* (1954), in which he describes a Revivalist preacher (‘a thin, tense young man called Macpherson’) and a ‘conspicuous groaner’ who ‘burst into a loud and rapid prayer, as if he were already resolved to make a record in the world of the saved.’ Muir notes that his mother attended a revival as a young woman, at which ‘people fell down in fits in the church and rolled on the floor.’ The strangely modern quality of the Reformation in Halcrow’s Orkney might have its roots in the revivals recounted by Muir, who himself saw them as ‘communal orgies, such as were probably known long before Christianity came to these islands’, which he thought had ‘very little to do with religion.’

Indeed, Brown’s imaginative recreation of religious change in Orkney did not rely on meticulous historical research. The later stages of the Reformation in seventeenth-century Orkney did witness ‘scarred walls and ravished [church] interiors’, and ‘[t]he Kirkwall Presbytery ordered the statue of St Peter in St Peter’s Kirk in South Ronaldsay to be burnt’, but Brown’s depiction of thrown-down statues, a broken crucifix, and smashed candles in ‘Master Halcrow, Priest’ (and the ‘blows and smashing and dilapidation’ he describes in *An Orkney Tapestry*) were the polemical devices of an eager convert. As Brown himself admitted in his posthumous autobiography, ‘[a]t the Reformation there was none of the violence and burning in Orkney that afflicted shrines in other parts of Scotland; St Magnus’ Cathedral sailed intact through the tempest.’ Indeed, Rendall writes that Orcadian Reform was directed by the ‘frail, cultured, intellectual bishop, Adam Bothwell’, who ensured the Cathedral’s safety, and met with only moderate popular resistance. She notes:

Resistance did not last long, however. The “commonis” do not seem to have given trouble for long, and although there is no evidence that there was any great fervour in
Orkney for “reforming” religion, the landowners enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to enrich themselves and their families with property confiscated from the Church. [...] In fact, there was a surprising degree of continuity, because most of the Orkney clergy “conformed” to Protestantism and remained in their parishes.24

Grasping landowners do not receive the wrath of Halcrow’s pen in Brown’s short story. His troubled priest lays the blame for religious change squarely at the door of the Reformers, and at Catholic clergy weak enough (in Halcrow’s view) to conform, accept positions as ministers, take wives, and read ‘German and Swiss books’ (p. 127). The religious ‘continuity’ described by Rendall agrees broadly with recent accounts of the age of Reformations in Europe, which counteract Weber’s ‘disenchantment’ narrative by stressing ‘continuities and homologies between medieval and Protestant mentalities’.25 And although Brown’s fictional Reformation is dramatic and brutal in ‘Master Halcrow, Priest’, he makes sure to hint at these continuities too, not least when an apostatised priest, Master Anderson, saves the blessed sacrament from destruction, and agrees to deliver the last rites to Halcrow in secret at the hour of his death.

However, the most powerful and effective element of ‘Master Halcrow, Priest’ is not Brown’s attempt to manufacture a historically accurate voice, though Halcrow is a compelling narrator. Nor is it broader historical authenticity which, as noted above, Brown was not wholly committed to, writing that ‘the reality of history and the reality of literature are quite different, each being one facet of the truth’.26 The richest component of the story is the collision between the new, ‘improved’ and de-sacralised world and Halcrow’s sacramental universe, in which every created thing is a visible sign of God’s presence.

Halcrow confesses that he is a sinner. He admits, ‘I fish too long at the rock, I pray only a little, I drink too much of the dark ale that they brew on the hill’ (p. 124). And yet, he is content to accept his fallenness. Indeed, Halcrow’s appeal as narrator stems from his very human combination of frailty and strength, and in this he reflects something of the characters of Brown’s fellow literary convert, Graham Greene. J.C. Whitehouse points out that in
Greene’s work, ‘holiness and faith are of greater importance to human beings than piety’; and the same might be claimed of Brown, whose Halcrow can be read as an Orcadian echo of Greene’s ‘whisky priest’—the hero of The Power and the Glory (1940), described by Brown in his autobiography as ‘a hunted and driven priest, and in many ways a worthless one, who nevertheless kept faith to the end, as better martyrs had done in other places.’ Thus Brown transplants the persecution of the clergy in 1930s Mexico to an Orcadian early modern milieu in this short story. In Greene’s novel, the anticlerical secular state pursues a renegade padre. In Brown’s text, the flawed but heroic, determined priest is persecuted as part of the Orcadian stripping of the altars—the process of ‘disenchantment’ that, according to Enlightenment thinking, ‘interpreted the Reformation as part of a long-term process of rationalization and secularization, an interpretation further reworked by the historiography of the nineteenth century until it constructed our modern view of the Reformation.’

Halcrow earns our sympathy because he sees the world in beautiful ways, and he is redeemed by his imaginative gifts—poignant indicators of an older, magical universe. The old priest’s frequent similes speak of his defiant understanding of the world as enchanted by the divine: he holds ‘nine haddocks […], a cold silver bunch like a silent bell’ and views his beleaguered kirk ‘like a foundering ship in long windy surges of corn’ (pp. 126, 129). The stones of his chapel, taken from the shore, ‘shine with wetness like dark mirrors’ for ‘these stones (as it seems) remember the element of water out of which they have been taken’ (p. 131). Halcrow’s lyrical language expresses his trust in God’s active participation in human life through the sacraments of the Church (and especially through the sacrament of the Eucharist) but also through her sacramentals—candles, statues, the kirk’s crucifix, its gleaming stones, and Orkney’s surging cornfields—materials noted by Scribner to have ‘earned the designation of “the magic of the late-medieval church”’ and which ‘attracted the scorn and hostility of the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century.’ Brown’s narrator is
regarded as drunken, idle, idolatrous, and blasphemous by the men who invade his kirk and hurl down its statues, but his vulnerability, bravery, and appreciation of the celestial qualities of the everyday both rouse the reader’s compassion and pit imagination against the severity of disenchantment. By the end, Halcrow, ‘like an old wounded beast, hard beset, that groaned and laboured under the yoke’ is a frail, but heroic narrator (p. 133).

The reference to Halcrow’s ‘yoke’—perhaps deliberately referencing Christ’s utterance ‘my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’ in Matthew 11.30—chimes with other references in Brown’s work to the ‘yoke’ as an agricultural implement as well as a metaphor for Christ’s cross. The Reformation comes to Orkney, then, as the old priest’s Passion play. As with the Biblical Passion, this story suggests that death is not the end; resurrection, or re-enchantment, will overcome it. Gavin Miller argues persuasively that this story proposes that faith ‘can be driven underground by institutional religion’, but older forms of belief might survive, ‘preserved and maintained in a covert religious life of the folk.’ Halcrow’s testimony is the first of many of Brown’s works which insist that pre-Reformation Catholicism cannot be fully erased from communal life, making this text a rather more nuanced appreciation of religious change than we might expect from Edwin Muir’s early student. In this text, the beauty of Catholic ritual and places of worship are deeply inscribed into the psyche of the people, and the history and landscape, of Orkney. God continues to disclose his presence through land, sea, and other matter.

Of course, during the long Reformation, ‘Protestantism, in no sense, rejected the notion that the sacred could intervene in the world’, as Walsham rightly asserts. She adds, ‘In the guise of the doctrine of providence, it placed fresh emphasis on the power and omnipotence of God and defended vigorously the precept that he interceded to warn, punish, chastise, try, and reward individuals and communities alike.’ This is an idea that is dramatized—arguably somewhat polemically, again—in the second of Brown’s ‘Father
Halcrow’ stories, ‘The Treading of Grapes’. This tale appears in his second collection, *A Time to Keep* (1969), and it presents the reader with three historical sermons preached on the wedding at Cana (from John 2.1–12) in the kirk of St Peter’s, Orkney—the same church which features in ‘Master Halcrow, Priest’. The first sermon is delivered by the Rev. Garry Watters, a modern-day Presbyterian minister, whose homespun preaching style and matter-of-fact exegesis are wholly lacking in mysticism. Watters understands the miracle of water into wine as an act of thrifty expediency in which Jesus smooths over a foolish administrative error: ‘the foresight of Jesus more than compensated for the steward’s blundering. […] Think, in the wider sphere, what a brilliant business executive, what a wise ambassador, what a competent minister of state [Jesus] would have made!’34 The sermon reaches its ironic climax with Watters’ announcement that a ballot will be taken to decide whether the congregation would prefer a non-alcoholic wine for future sacraments, ‘in keeping’, he suggests, ‘with the seemliness of our devotions’ (p. 67). In this way, Brown suggests, the miracles of Jesus and the wonder of the incarnation have been entirely neutralised in the present day. Watters’s sermon lays bare his rather trite interpretation of the miracles and person of Jesus and exposes worship in modern-day St Peter’s to be a polite and rather douce obligation.

There is no such neutrality in the next sermon, a crude and thunderous rant delivered by the Rev. Dr Thomas Fortheringhame, St Peters’ eighteenth-century minister, who warns his parishioners darkly against taking John’s account as an excuse to make ‘drunken beasts’ of themselves. ‘It is the devil of hell that has put such a thought into your minds’, he rages, before announcing the formal process of public rebuke for the father of a ‘bastard child’ and reminding one man, James Drever, to deliver a keg of brandy to the manse (pp. 67, 70). Fortheringhame is of course a hypocritical ‘justified sinner’ in the tradition of Robert Burns’s Holy Willie and James Hogg’s Robert Wringhim. As his sermon takes shape, the Cana
narrative functions merely as a prompt for the preacher’s punitive warnings and chastisements. Fortheringham robs Jesus’ miracle of its joy and uses it as an instrument with which to amplify his congregation’s fear of eternal punishment (p. 69).

The final sermon, delivered by Master John Halcrow, is from ‘the second Sunday after Epiphany in the year 1548’ (p. 64). It is, therefore, a pre-Reformation reflection on the miracle at Cana, which takes place thirteen years before the events of ‘Master Halcrow, Priest’. Halcrow’s homily takes the form of a series of ‘stations’, all of which lead his listeners through the miracle described in the Gospel of John. But Halcrow’s exegesis expands the contours of the wedding at Cana. Not only does he situate the beginning of his reflection long before the wedding takes place, he sees the story as one which is continually revealed in the lives of his parishioners through their celebration of the sacraments. Halcrow’s congregants hear him speak of ‘the vine’, the beginning of the life of the grape, which is nurtured by ‘the quick merry blood of the earth’, before becoming, through the processes of cultivation (and transubstantiation) ‘the miracle’—the blood of Christ which nourishes the faithful (p. 70). Halcrow understands the wedding at Cana as a prefiguration of ‘the marriage of Christ with His Church’ in the Eucharist. He exclaims:

And where will this marriage be? you ask. Everywhere, I answer, but in particular, lords and princes, in this small kirk beside the sea where you sit. And when is it to be, this wedding? you ask me. Always, I answer, but in particular within this hour, now, at the very moment when I bow over this bread of your offering, the food, princes and lords, that you have won with such hard toil from the furrows, at once when I utter upon it five words HIC [sic] EST ENIM CORPUS MEUM. (p. 74)

With these words (‘this is my body’), Halcrow situates the eternal sacrifice of Christ within the temporal lives of his Orcadian flock, and he exhorts them to rejoice in their Eucharistic celebration. This transforms them from ordinary men and women into ‘dear children’ and revelling ‘princes and ladies’, beloved by God (pp. 73, 74). Moreover, the body of Christ—the Eucharist—nourishes the people of God, who themselves become the body of Christ in the Pauline metaphor of 1 Corinthians 12.12–14. This is the spiritually sublime reflection of a
more assured Father Halcrow than we saw in Brown’s earlier short story. In Brown’s earlier
description, the old priest is troubled and apprehensive, a lone voice of dissent in the face of
bigger and more powerful historical forces. In ‘A Treading of Grapes’, published two years
later, Halcrow acts in persona Christi as a fluent and ecstatic messenger who glorifies God
through lyrical agricultural analogy. The Reformation has not yet taken hold and desacralized
the world, as per Weber’s paradigm, and the sacramental system of the medieval church
nourishes the body and souls of the faithful.

Brown’s theme of eternal life through Eucharistic encounter is reinforced by the
story’s coda, in which a present-day narrator tells us ‘[t]he sea shattered and shattered on the
beach’ (p. 75). As in ‘Chapel Between Cornfield and Shore’, where resurrection is hinted at
through the line, ‘The Wave turns round’, Brown uses the sea as a metaphor which suggests
eternally recurring patterns of goodness and salvation (line 5). And it is no accident that the
prompt for reflection on the three sermons of ‘A Treading of Grapes’ is the ruined chapel of
St Peter’s, first mentioned in ‘Master Halcrow, Priest’. As in Brown’s earlier work, ‘older
anonymous stones’ again function as a catalyst for imaginative journeying into the past in this
short story (p. 63). Brown’s modern narrator introduces the story’s frame tale by gazing at the
parish church of St Peter’s, built in 1826. He muses, ‘there were churches there before the
present church was erected’, and he goes on to describe the medieval remains of an older
kirk: ‘Among the clustering tombstones is a piece of wall with a weathered hole in it that
looks as though it might have been an arched window, and slightly to one side an abrupt
squint arrangement of dressed stones that suggest an altar’ (p. 63). Once again, the scattered
remains of pre-Reformation material culture and architecture—specifically, the ruined
chapel—is a literary device that allows Brown to travel backwards in time and reflect on the
past riches of Orcadian popular devotion and ritual.
In this second collection of short fiction, then, Brown demonstrates his continued preoccupation with cyclical patterns of spiritual erosion, renewal, and Catholic re-enchantment. The Rev. Dr Thomas Fortheringhame is used by Brown as the (rather blunt) agent of erosion in ‘A Treading of Grapes’. Our narrator tells us that he ‘says curtly’,

There is in the vicinity of the Kirk remnants of a popish chapel, where the ignorant yet resort in time of sickness and dearth to leave offerings, in the vain hope that such superstition will alleviate their sufferings; the which Romish embers I have exerted myself to stamp out with all severity during the period of my ministry. (pp. 63–64).

Of course, Fortheringhame’s efforts to subdue residual ex-voto offerings are shown to be largely fruitless, as despite their dilapidated state these Catholic ruins possess a palpable spiritual and imaginative power for parishioners, from the eighteenth century to the present-day narrator of Brown’s text. But Brown’s depiction of the lingering popular appeal of old Catholic rites, prayers, and practices in the post-Reformation era is, as already noted, historically grounded, as are Fortheringhame’s attempts to rid his parish of such practices. Rendall notes that ‘[o]n the surface, Orcadians were turned into Protestants with remarkably little resistance, but old beliefs endured, underground, and survived generations of ministers’ attempts to extirpate the “dregs of popery” from the isles.’35 This endurance of belief provided rich fodder for Brown’s imaginative exploration of religious change. Although Reformation desacralization has ushered in clerical narratives of both eighteenth-century hellfire and brimstone and benign modern uniformity in Brown’s text, the holy can never be entirely erased from the world, and it broods, waiting and ready to re-enchant the hearts and imaginations of those who seek it.

The 1970s: Drama

The survival of deep-rooted ritual and belief is also the haunting theme of Brown’s already-mentioned, mid-career play *A Spell for Green Corn* (1970). In this play, Brown suggests a correlation between the blighted crops and the by now completely Calvinist, disenchanted
landscape of mid seventeenth-century Orkney. In the midst of looming famine, a young woman, Sigrid, and a fiddle player, Storm Kolson, secure the fecundity of the land through a ‘spell’: they make love in the Laird’s cornfield. Soon afterwards, a group of crofters dance ritually around a bonfire to Storm’s fiddle music. His airs ‘A Spell for Water’, ‘A Rune for Ripeness’, and ‘A Prayer for Good Ale’ provide the musical accompaniment for their mysterious, liturgical-sounding chants which take place in secret, away from the prying eyes of the Kirk Session. These acts function as fertility charms, and suggest that Brown knew of and understood concepts such as the medieval ‘charming of the fields’ or Rogationtide processions with banners and bells, which were, according to Eamon Duffy, ‘designed to bring good weather and blessing and fertility to the fields.’

Indeed, these customs lingered long after Reform began, and Scribner notes that in Lutheran and Calvinist parts of early modern Germany, ‘The inability of Protestant authorities to prevent rogation day processions which sought divine protection for ripening crops against pests or damaging storms led to the creation of a distinctively Protestant form of the Hagelfeier (‘hail ceremony’), a procession around the fields with hymns and prayers instead of a Eucharistic procession.’ Brown’s Eucharistic ‘spell’ for green corn is not so fanciful as it might then initially appear; this ‘cold act of beauty (in default of sanctity)’ to ‘flush the hill with ripeness’ refers directly to the idea that Catholic enchantment could not be fully erased from an Orcadian collective unconsciousness even when Catholicism was no longer officially practiced (p. 62). This is also another instance of Brown’s frequent pairing of agricultural fertility and human sexuality in his work. Both are seen to stem from God’s hands as gifts to be cherished.

The Reformed kirk responds to Sigrid and Storm’s ‘spell’ with bitter fury in Brown’s play, in keeping with Brown’s frequent depiction of Reformation-era clergy as fundamentalist, domineering and cruel. In the play’s fourth act, we find that unmarried Sigrid
is pregnant and appears before the Kirk Session to answer for her ‘sin’. Through the cunning of one of the Session’s elders, Sigrid is found guilty not only of fornication, ‘a most serious crime against God and his kirk’, but also witchcraft, due to magical associations of the ‘spell’ and the subsequent disappearance of Storm Kolson (p. 38). The factor and elder, John Rosey, seethes:

Who put the blight on the oats at the start of summer?—so that, until the prayers of God’s elect revived them, we were faced with stark famine this present winter. You ken well what she did on mid-summer night, on the summit of Kierfea, you were all there. Men, I’m saying now that this entire parish is enchanted with witchcraft. In the centre of the web stands this woman. The yeast of hell is working strong in her. […] Dare you deny it, witch? (p. 41)

Again, Brown’s depiction of the Session and its equation of the fertility ‘spell’ with witchcraft has much historical grounding, though this complicates Weberian thought about ‘desacralization’. As Scribner points out, ‘Far from further desacralizing the world, Calvin and the reformed religion intensified to an even higher degree the cosmic struggle between the divine and the diabolical.’ Notably, the Kirk Session’s interrogation of Sigrid and first accusation of witchcraft comes in Act 4, ‘The Wrong Word’. Earlier, Storm Kolson declares that Hellya’s crop failure occurs because ‘the word is lost, it’s forgotten’ (p. 29). Here, Storm clearly refers to the lost Logos—or body of Christ—and the hunger for sacramental nourishment in a desacralized Orkney. The Kirk Session, by comparison, focuses exclusively on the word of scripture, to the neglect, Brown suggests, of true and full communion with the divine.

Perhaps Brown’s depiction of the Kirk Session in a disenchanted Orkney veers rather near to caricature in this play. While Reformation-era Sessions were certainly an important instrument of church discipline and punishment, as David Fergusson points out: ‘in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the best friend to an unmarried pregnant woman was often the Kirk Session. It was they who would ensure that errant fathers would make provision for the maintenance of mother and child.’ The ‘poor fund’ is mentioned briefly.
during the elders’ interrogation of Sigrid during the Session. Nevertheless, one of Brown’s elders, Manson, says uncharitably, ‘Bad enough it’ll be to feed her bastard, without the expense of burning her at the Market Cross of Kirkwall’ (p 40). And although one of the others, Corrigall, shows Sigrid some sympathy, he does not defend her, and so the young woman is killed in the next act. Her death in front of a jeering crowd in Kirkwall recalls Calvary, and her final walk towards the hangman becomes Sigrid’s via crucis. As she faces her death like Christ, she chants words from the Song of Solomon, revealing her firm knowledge of scripture and her trust in a just and loving God. Notably, the next and final act is called ‘Resurrection’—signalling that Sigrid and Storm’s Eucharistic ‘spell’ has brought fecundity back to the land, and Sigrid’s death has in some way atoned for the sinfulness of the barren Calvinism of seventeenth-century Orkney. Despite her wordless horror when she is first accused of witchcraft in the Kirk Session, Sigrid recognises early on that in order to prevent the island’s crops from dying ‘there must be a sacrifice’ (p. 28). Her death is thus a re-enactment of Christ’s original sacrifice, and in this way, Sigrid restores the Logos to the famished Orcadian landscape.

*A Spell for Green Corn* is not regarded as one of the most successful or sophisticated of Brown’s works; Donald Campbell writes that ‘it reads as if it had been written for an ambitious community project’. Brown’s small corpus of plays were often performed by community groups, but this is hardly a weakness, given that Brown was eager for Orcadians to act in his stage dramas. *A Spell for Green Corn*’s appendix is written mainly in prose, and its detailed, rather literary stage directions indicate that Brown was more creatively at home with prose than with drama. But the play does mark a milestone in Brown’s thinking about ritual, sacrifice, and time—themes that he went on to perfect in his novel *Magnus* (1973), published three years later. Sigrid functions, then, as a significant precursor to the figure of Orkney’s patron saint in Brown’s later novel, which he regarded as his best work. Unlike St
Magnus, Sigrid is not a pre-Reformation character who signals the riches of Orkney’s Catholic past. Instead, she actively resists the Calvinist landscape of Orkney in the age of Reformations and is offered as a sacrificial antidote to disenchantment. And she does not disappear entirely from Brown’s oeuvre at the close of the play.

The 1990s: Brown’s final novel

Sigrid is in fact an important forerunner of Sophie, the female protagonist of Brown’s final, Booker-Prize nominated novel, *Beside the Ocean of Time* (1994). Although the novel’s central character is Thorfinn Ragnarson, the dreamy boy turned novelist (who is often read as proxy for Brown himself), Sophie is an important literary descendant of Sigrid and she highlights Brown’s interest in resurrecting existing characters, like Father Halcrow, for further development and augmentation in later works. Unlike the other texts discussed here, this novel is not entirely historical. Though it travels back in time through the daydreams of its protagonist, Thorfinn, its main time setting is an Orkney of the 1920s up until the end of the Second World War. However, despite Brown’s dispensing with Reformation-era Orkney as a backdrop in this last novel, religious disenchantment is once more an important, though subtle, undercurrent within the text, and one that is irrevocably wound up with the forward march of ‘progress’.

Sophie is not introduced into *Beside the Ocean of Time* until relatively late, but she is the main focus of ‘The Muse’, a chapter which focuses largely on the island of Norday’s Presbyterian minister, Rev. Hector Drummond, and Sophie, his half-sister. The attentive reader of Brown might by now expect Drummond to be either a hellfire preacher, a drunken hypocrite, or a common-sense but rather uninspired churchman. Certainly, the Norday community has experienced its share of ‘strict and puritanical’ ministers, but in general the parish has been led by ‘kindly indulgent men, well loved by most of the islanders’. We are
told that ‘if a nod and a wink might pass between a minister and the innkeeper, concerning the nocturnal delivery at the back door of the Manse of a case of brandy […] nobody minded’.43 The community is a harmonious one then, and Drummond is portrayed as a slightly eccentric bachelor who is looked upon fondly by his parishioners. He counsels them wisely, listens with empathy, and exhibits a deep and moving faith. His face ‘shone with joy’ at Christenings. At funerals, writes Brown, ‘it was as if their minister was sending the dead person out on the last voyage into timelessness, with a blessing on him or her […] In the kirkyard, at a funeral, even the coarsest islander was touched with a certain awe or wonderment’ (p. 100). Through Drummond, Brown might be said to be quietly promoting a celibate priesthood as the Christian ideal, and, in a moment of delicate satire focalised through the perspective of the rather gossipy island community, we are told that the minister chats amiably with travellers, ‘even though [they] were Catholics who had come originally from Ireland at the time of the great potato famine’ (p. 98). Religious rigidity (and prejudice) seems to come more from the islanders themselves, rather than travelling top-down from the clergy in this novel.

Indeed, Norday seems at first glance to be far removed from the ‘Knox-ruined nation’ that Brown diagnosed in his first collection of poetry. The Reformation has not been a complete cultural or spiritual calamity for the island, robbing the islanders of mystery and miracle. And the sacramental principle of worship does not seem to have been lost entirely, as the kindly, celibate Drummond, with his ‘ascetic face’, functions as the island’s Halcrow-esque priest (p. 99). However, there is a certain religious torpor in Norday, and this is— Brown hints again—the ultimate consequence of Reformation disenchantment. One of the ‘rationalists and agnostics in the smithy’, Ben Hoy, declares: ‘it’s all nonsense, of course, no need of kirks or ministers at all, the time’s not far off when the human race’ll rid itself of superstition once and for all, and that time can’t come soon enough’ (p. 96). Ben’s contempt
for ‘superstition’ lays bare modern Norday’s potentially fatal separation from the numinous, his modern rationalism and secularism a sign of Ben’s own estrangement from Brown’s immanent, Catholic God.

As in Brown’s first novel of environmental disaster, *Greenvoe* (1972), the threat of apocalypse looms over the narrative, as the island is eventually cleared of its inhabitants so that it can be used as an air force base. In an echo of the hysteria-inducing Reformation preaching in ‘Master Halcrow, Priest’, one old wife exclaims that ‘it was all prophesied long ago in Revelations, and in the book of Daniel too’ (p. 166). Brown hints once more that the ultimate consequence of desacralization is sterility—even war. In parallel with another Catholic writer, J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973), whose fiction notably ‘link[s] mechanization and the exultation of technology generally with environmental degradation and politically tyranny is one of the hallmarks of his fiction’, Brown’s apocalyptic focus is not simply a sign that he is ‘a reactionary writer, in the deepest sense of the word’. Instead, the recycled theme of environmental and spiritual collapse signals that Brown is a Catholic artist who finds humanity’s dislocation from nature the sign of a much wider spiritual alienation.

Into this setting comes Drummond’s sister, Sophie, who arrives with great fanfare and immediately signals a kind of renewal of the spirit. It is she who must restore Norday’s sacramental magic. Like Sigrid, Sophie bestows fecundity on the island. She is referred to by her brother as Persephone, as ‘it always seems to be springtime where she is’, and indeed she brings new life and fruitfulness in the manner of the queen of the underworld escaped from Hades (p. 115). She delivers daffodils to sick parishioners, swims in the sea, and delights in watching the island’s birdlife. She also resurrects the minister’s garden so that it is full of butterflies, hums with bees, and is—in a nod to Christ’s radiance upon the mountain in the gospels—‘transfigured’ (p. 110). But Sophie is not simply a spring goddess. She is attracted to ‘a very old ruin on the side of the hill […] that seemed to have some religious roots; the
remains of a round arched window could be seen. And two indecipherable tombstones were sunk in the floor’ (p. 110). The ruins of ‘Chapel Between Cornfield and Shore’ and ‘A Treading of Grapes’ thus meet strikingly with the spell-maker of Brown’s *A Spell for Green Corn* in this chapter of his final novel.

As with Sigrid, Sophie’s unconscious recusancy allows her to re-enchant Norday with the spell of ripeness and fertility. However, while agricultural rebirth and renewal were secured by Sigrid’s sacrifice in *A Spell for Green Corn*, there seems to be no requirement for a sacrificial victim in *Beside the Ocean of Time*. Instead of typologically re-enacting Christ’s saving passion through execution and death, Sophie’s presence in the novel functions instead as midrashic exposition on the moment of Christ’s birth. In a clear suggestion of the nativity, she is happened upon ‘under the first star’, by a shepherd (p. 110). She is not found in a stable, but within the island’s ruined chapel:

It was a windless night. The lappings of ebb on shore, the hush in the shallows, the distant Atlantic sonorities, rounded out the silence. The sun was down, every hollow was brimming now with shadows. The light in the ruin shone like a ruby. William looked carefully inside. A candle was burning in a niche. A shadow stood in the near corner, turned away, folded in silence.

A new sound came from the sea, like a struck harp. The ebb-tide had reached its mark, some time ago, and made a pause. And now, with this harp stroke, the flood-tide was beginning. (pp. 110–11).

This is a key episode in Brown’s novel, and one which nicely draws together and embodies the tropes and motifs of dis- and re-enchantment found in Brown’s earlier works. William has stumbled upon a moment of sacramental re-enchantment, which, in its visual and aural symbolism, indicates the closest thing to the celebration of the Mass that the island can offer. The candle shining ‘like a ruby’ in the niche acts as a red altar lamp, indicating the presence of Christ in the tabernacle. Meanwhile, the sudden, harp-like sound of the sea, which interrupts the hush and congregation-like whisperings of the Atlantic, sounds in place of an altar bell in the moments before the consecration of the host. The ruined chapel is situated, like its literary antecedents, by the sea, Brown’s great symbol of time and consolation. Given
the presence of the shepherd, Will Simpson, the ruin is also likely to be near to the cornfield, the place of threshing and sacrifice, or ‘Bethlehem’, Hebrew for ‘house of Bread’. And the shepherd is led ‘under the first star’ to a most surprising Christ Child—a young woman who brings new life and the promise of rejuvenation. The ‘flood-tide’, Brown hints, is the beginning of the island’s re-enchantment, just as ‘Chapel Between Cornfield and Shore’ promised, with its description of ‘new ceremonies’, ‘when the flood / Sounds all her lucent strings, its ocean dance.’ This moment of re-sacralization has been set in motion by Sophie, who is both the babe in the manger and the chapel’s effective ‘fisher-priest’. It is striking just how deeply Brown mines his own creative corpus in this episode. Here, he draws on the vocabulary and symbolism of a poem from his first poetry collection, recalls his short fiction of disenchantment from the 1960s, and recycles elements of a play from 1970 in which the promise of spiritual replenishment came with a young woman’s sacrifice. In Beside the Ocean of Time, decades of thought on the disenchantment of the world swarm together and coalesce in one spiritually sublime moment.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, any assessment of Brown’s poetry, fiction, and drama as it evolved and matured over the decades would find that his engagement with the Weberian notion of ‘disenchantment’ is far from straightforward. On the one hand, Brown’s work seems to find powerful stimulus in Edwin Muir’s gloomy indictment of a disenchanted, de-spiritualized modern Scotland, which has its roots in a destructive religious revolution. Brown’s work proposes that the stripping of Orcadian altars was spiritually harmful and led to a de-sacralised world where humanity became increasingly estranged from the sacramental potential of ordinary matter.
Brown’s disenchantment narratives interpolate history with a wide range of intertextual literary references, allusions and influences. In an inflection of Vatican II, his work focuses specifically on place, and on the religious history of that place, but his reference points take in a broader body of Catholic literary works which transcend national boundaries, and which share an incarnational focus. Like Tolkien, he did not believe that ‘God’s creative activity is something that happened a long time ago and then ceased.’ His view is much more hopeful than that, and indeed it chimes with modern historical reassessments of disenchantment. In ‘A Treading of Grapes’, the dour Rev. Dr Thomas Fotheringham identifies ‘remnants of a popish chapel, where the ignorant yet resort in time of sickness and dearth to leave offerings’—a pilgrimage site that he was very much determined to obliterate (p. 63). Brown’s writing, with its fondness for cycles, seasons, and patterns throughout history, offers the suggestion that such iconoclastic efforts have been in vain.

Notes


4 Walsham, p. 498.

5 Walsham, p. 501.


14 George Mackay Brown, ‘Chapel Between Cornfield and Shore’, *Collected Poems*, p. 35. Further citations given in the text.

15 Walsham, p. 507.


22 Rendall, p. 75; Brown, An Orkney Tapestry, p. 42.
23 Brown, For the Islands I Sing, p. 49.
24 Rendall, p. 69, pp. 70–72.
25 Walsham, p. 499.
26 Brown, For the Islands I Sing, p. 179.
28 Brown, For the Islands I Sing, pp. 54-5. See Linden Bicket, Scotnote: The Short Stories of George Mackay Brown (Glasgow: ASLS, 2014) for more comparisons between Halcrow and Greene’s ‘whisky priest’ (p. 11).
31 See ‘Stations of the Cross’, from Winterfold (1976), which states, in its second stanza (‘Cross’): ‘Lord, it is time. Take our yoke / And sunwards turn.’ Collected Poems, p. 178.
33 Walsham, p. 508.
35 Rendall, p.72.
40 Brown, A Spell for Green Corn, p. 40.


Smith, p. 75.