



Editorial

THE EDITOR OF A LITTLE MAGAZINE is invested in all its issues, of course, even when printing things they may not wholly agree with—one role of such a journal being to provide a forum for different viewpoints, the main proviso in which is to make everything, as *writing*, as good as possible. But I am unusually invested in this issue of *The Dark Horse* for reasons which my own contribution to its pages will make clear. The centenary of George Mackay Brown falls on 17 October 2021. I feel an indebted tenderness towards the memory of the ‘ancient bard’—as he jocularly described himself to me—of Orkney not only for his role in my own early development but also indirectly in this magazine, founded on the rickety leaf of a kitchen table in an Ayrshire caravan in the winter of 1994 with an old Mac SE monoscreen computer and—*mirabile dictu!*—a small Apple printer. After a decade of writing poems I had applied for an SAC—the Scottish Arts Council, now Creative Scotland—Writer’s Bursary. Unexpectedly—in those days I was used to many knockbacks—I was awarded one. Back then, you needed a written reference. George had agreed to provide one. It was quite unconventional—I still have a copy, which he sent me afterwards—and made few concessions to the putative expectations of a large cultural institution. Handwritten, in his distinctive prose—careful, as he once described an older speech in the islands, as an islander placing stones in a drystone dyke—it must have appeared as strange and distinctive as a crofter at a committee meeting. With just under one sixth of the money, I set up this magazine, which was only a year old and had produced two issues when he died in April 1996.

George was a great man for quoting the bible story of the talents. He believed in a poetic ‘gift’—understandably, perhaps, as his own was so marked—and preparing this issue over quarter of a century later has been a retrospective process. Have I justified whatever faith he placed in me? There are no real answers to such questions, I suppose, with an ongoing life but, particularly as I am now only a little younger than George was in the year I first met him, they do come up.

My own emotional investment aside, it has been a real pleasure gathering this group of essays and poems. There are pieces here by poets and figures whose admiration is purely based on encounters with the work; by writers who knew George for many years, such as Stewart Conn; several contributors live full time in Orkney and were born there; another, the poet G. B. Clarkson, only began reading him properly in July and produces keen insights into the monastic tradition—monks being frequent characters in George’s poems—based on Clarkson’s own direct experience of such matters. There are contributions from poet-critics as far away as Tasmania, via Colorado (David Mason) and from Greece by way of Georgia (A. E. Stallings); unusual and unexpected memories and connections have come to light: D. M. Black’s account of George’s contributions to Black’s own poetry magazine, published in his early twenties in Edinburgh, turned up a poem and a standalone six sections of a seven-part sequence which doesn’t appear in the big *Collected Poems* of 2005; as far as can be ascertained, these have never appeared

anywhere else. They are characteristic of his work from the sixties—highly individual in tone and subject, with a grittiness and a certain iconoclasm which tended to be smoothed off in George's later poetry when his increasing devotionism tempered the poetic virtues of salt vigour and directness. At the same time, I have made space for the light, fresh fragments he wrote at the other end of his career, the year before he died, for a collaboration with the artist and sculptor Helen Denerley, a collaboration which came to light only because of the great Irish poet Michael Longley's ongoing work with this artist. Hannah McGill has written a characteristically witty and brilliant account of the matter of Orkney and George's place in it by someone who as a small child knew him and has strong Orkney family connections while also being a perpetual outsider; apt, as so much of George's writing featured outsiders, in his case the tinkers, monks, poets 'touched with unlucky fire' that appear frequently in his work. Linden Bicket, a religious and literary scholar, provides a wonderful detailing of the evolving versions of one of George's most popular poems, 'Beachcomber', a poem applicable to a wide range of creative endeavours of course, not least writing poetry. (Interestingly, Thomas Hardy, a poet George revered—'magnificent poetry, all severely structured in the old way' was how he described it once in a letter to me—also has a poem which uses the days of the week, though to chart a lover's vacillations, as an organising principle.)

While I tend to favour prose in a dedicated issue such as this I am also delighted to include a small group of poems all with a Mackay Brown connection; among their authors, Zaffar Kunial, a poet of extraordinary delicacy and subtlety, contributes two poems exploring his Orcadian links, which I first heard of some years ago in a conversation over coffee outside the British Library.

Lastly, George's official biographer Maggie Fergusson contributes a retrospective account of writing *The Life* which will form a fine introduction to her excellent biography itself for readers unfamiliar with it. I re-read this recently—the first time since 2006—and was particularly struck afresh by the account of the unsettlement of Orkney's wartime years and George's place in it all, amused both by the descriptions of his deadpan tomfoolery in the Home Guard and by his polemical views as the 'Islandman' of his early newspaper columns which rained down opprobrium on his head from locals in outraged letters. So unlike the dignified mature poet! I like to imagine, then, that he would have enjoyed Edna Longley's rigorous 'pedantic argument' on poetic line in this issue, written by a major critic at the height of her powers.

To return to retrospection: when inviting people to participate in this special issue I contacted Surinder Punjya, one of George's closest friends, helpmeet and personal assistant in the last several years of his life, now living in Hong Kong. While he did not feel able to contribute to the issue, we have promised to meet, the Fates willing, before we are seventy, in Stromness again—as did on Papa Westray the two venerable characters after numerous vicissitudes at the end of George's marvellous 'The Story of Jorkel Hayforks'—and, like them, 'crinkling [our] old eyes'.

All GMB's uncollected poems, extracts from letters to Stewart Conn and Gerry Cambridge, and all quotations from George's work in Maggie Fergusson's essay, are published here by permission of the literary estate of George Mackay Brown, to which my thanks.