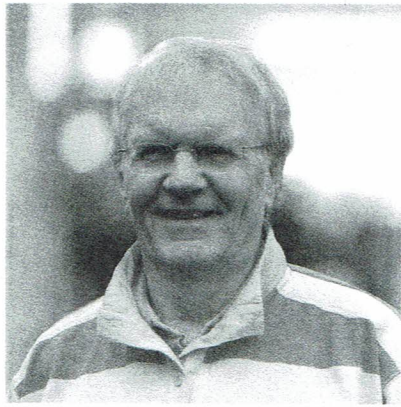


A Reflection in the Church of Scotland magazine 'Life and Work'
by Rev Ron Ferguson, Minister & Journalist



The mystery of grace

Ron Ferguson considers the spiritual influence of an Orcadian poet.

WHEN people talk about 'Orkney's Bard', they are most often referring to the late George Mackay Brown.

GMB was certainly one of Scotland's greatest poets. He was a good friend and encourager to me. His influence was such that I wrote a book about his spiritual journey. This in turn led me to study the work of another great Orcadian poet, Edwin Muir, who had been a mentor for Brown. His spiritual journey was equally fascinating: an eminent literary critic with a Europe-wide reputation, he was a man in search of a higher purpose for his life.

The Calvinism he had known in the little island of Wyre did not satisfy his spiritual longings. This comes out in his marvellous poem, *The Incarnate One*, which includes this breath-taking stanza that is best read aloud:

*An ideological instrument here is made
word again,*

*A word made word in flourish and arrogant
crook.*

*See there King Calvin with his iron pen,
And God three angry letters in a book,
And there the logical hook
on which the Mystery is impaled and bent
Into an ideological instrument.*

What Muir was rebelling against was a narrow Protestantism which reduced Mystery to words, which tried to explain too much, which turned the mystery of the

Incarnate Word into a set of wordy creeds and confessions. This sophisticated wordsmith was searching for a simplicity which is almost beyond words.

In St Andrews, not long before the outbreak of the Second World War, Muir had a very profound religious experience.

Last night, going to bed alone, I suddenly found myself – I was taking off my waistcoat – reciting the Lord's Prayer in a loud, emphatic voice – a thing I had not done for many years – with deep urgency and profound disturbed emotion. While I went on I grew more composed; as if it had been empty and craving and were being replenished, my soul grew still; every word had a strange fullness of meaning which astonished and delighted me. It was late; I had sat up reading; I was sleepy; but as I stood in the middle of the floor half-undressed, saying the prayer over and over, meaning after meaning sprang from it, overcoming me again with joyful surprise; and I realised that this simple petition was always universal and always inexhaustible, and day by day sanctified human life... Now I realised that, quite without knowing it, I was a Christian, no matter how bad a one.

I love the writing of these two Orkney bards. It nourishes me. I love the beauty of the Christian faith even when – especially when – it has redemptive disfigurement at its liberating core.

Orkney breathes poetry, and poetry is the

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native language of theology – right from the beginning of the Old Testament to the last words of the book of Revelation. Let Edwin Muir have the last word:

As I look back on the part of the mystery which is my own life, my own fable, what I am most aware of is that we receive more than we can ever give; we receive it from the past, on which we draw with every breath, but also – and this is the point of faith – from the Source of the mystery itself, by the means which religious people call Grace. ▣