Reading for Pleasure

Destruction that wasteth at noonday

PHILIP MARKMAN

His poet's eye, sensitivity, and imagination belie the formidable aspect that prognathism imparts to his face. George Mackay Brown, the Orkney poet, was 50 when he wrote *Greenvoe*, his first novel. I saw it displayed in the window of an Edinburgh bookshop, whose bright illumination blacked out a murky afternoon. Having some acquaintance with his poetry, I bought the book at once, without any preliminary skimming or even a glance at the blurb.

I was not disappointed, for Brown is as fine a novelist as he is a poet. *Greenvoe* is a tiny village on the imaginary island of Hellya. The proprietor of *Greenvoe Hotel* is also its porter, waiter, cook, and chambermaid; the shopkeeper is postmaster as well as councillor and justice of the peace. A typical day in the life of the village is described in each of the first five chapters of the novel. In the sixth and last chapter the pace of the action accelerates and the village is destroyed, for a technological project—Operation Black Star—demands the use of the island.

Community at risk

Inhabitants of the village appear in quick succession. Puritanical Samuel Whaness comes perilously close to death when his boat is swamped during a fog; another fisherman, known as The Skarf, neglects his work in order to write a history of the island from remote antiquity to the present time; Simon McKee, the minister, is an alcoholic, whose mother is so tormented by guilt that she blames herself for her son's moral weakness; and Miss Inverary is teacher at the village school, where mindless chanting of multiplication tables is heard. There are many other characters, inhabitants of both *Greenvoe* and neighbouring farms, often vividly depicted in a few short sentences.

The sequence of brief episodes—which constitutes most of the novel—is interrupted by the voices of two men. The Skarf reads part of his chronicle on four occasions; his words meet an indifferent audience but give the book its indispensable elements of time past and spiritual heritage. And in Mrs McKee's recurring hallucinatory experiences a court prosecutor gives evidence of her various delusional misdemeanours. One of his speeches, which continues for 26 pages, is a movingly sympathetic account of Simon's need to relieve his emotional distress by drinking; another contains a delightfully amusing description of a holiday on the west coast of Scotland. A link between past and present is provided by a ritual initiation ceremony, which is enacted by members of a society, the Ancient Mystery of the Horsemen. Each of the six stages in the ceremony is dramatised at the end of successive chapters: the rite of the plough is followed by that of the seed, the green corn, the yellow corn,

and the dead. Finally, at the end of the novel, when Operation Black Star has been abandoned and the island left deserted for 10 years, the society's members return to perform the last rite, that of resurrection. So the book ends on an optimistic note: renewal is possible and human life will survive.

Brown is a literary descendant of D H Lawrence. He invites the comparison, for a character in *Greenvoe* has read Lawrence's novel, *Women in Love*, and his short story, *Sun*. While Lawrence could be needlessly unrestrained in deploring the consequences of technological progress, Brown hardly attributes the destruction of his village to Black Star: it was "moribund in any case." But the two novelists accord in their belief that without art, compassion, and concern for the heritage of the past a community is doomed; and they share an abhorrence of any force that inhibits individuality. A key passage occurs in chapter 3. Uninvited, an Indian pedlar has entered the hotel bedroom of a strange visitor, who speaks to nobody and whose signature in the guest book is an illegible squiggle. Later we learn that the visitor represents Black Star, but here is part of the Indian's reaction: "For our worship is erected now, all over the world, in place of the Word, the Number . . . face by face by face comes from the same precise mould and gazes, a rigid unseeing mask, into the golden future."

Brown's view is a religious one and we feel, as we do when reading any good religious book, the unobtrusive, unifying emotional pressure that conceived it. (*The English Book of Common Prayer* is a fine piece of literature and Thomas Cranmer, the author of most of it, was a remarkable writer. Whether or not we share the beliefs implicit in the book is irrelevant. What matters is that we enter into the emotion that inspired it, which unites us in our common humanity, astonishment at the mystery of the universe, and knowledge of the dreadful inevitability of death.)

Humiliating war

Reading Thomas Pakenham's *The Boer War* immediately after *Greenvoe*, I was struck by what the books had in common. For the destruction of the village is akin to the disruption of the Boer republics, even though the fiction is disturbing, readily believable, and restricted while the truth is horrifying, scarcely credible, and of such magnitude that Pakenham regards it as the longest, costliest, and most humiliating war for Britain between 1815 and 1914. Moreover, Pakenham has borrowed part of the novelist's method by referring to individual men and women not because they represent groups or determine public issues, but because they have unique personal reactions.

Even professional historians will need to revise many of their concepts when they have read this brilliant book. After the retrocession of Transvaal to the Boers in 1881, the republic's drift towards bankruptcy was dramatically reversed by the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand. Johannesburg was founded and became a magnet that attracted thousands from many parts of the world. Pakenham's sympathetic portrait of

Paul Kruger, Transvaal's president, clearly shows why Kruger could not conceive of integrating the newcomers, the so-called Uitlanders, into a South African nation. Their period of residence to qualify for citizenship was raised from five years in 1882 to 14 years in 1894. Responsible for the bulk of taxes and justifiably aggrieved, they established a reform movement, whose attempt to enlist British sympathy by dramatic action led to the ill-fated Jameson Raid. In May 1899, after Kruger had concluded an alliance with the neighbouring Boer republic—the Orange Free State—he met Alfred Milner, the British high commissioner, at an abortive conference. Milner subsequently appealed for strengthening of the South African garrison, and

in October 1899 Kruger demanded withdrawal of all troops from the republic's border. Britain ignored the ultimatum and war was declared.

That is an outline of what, through Thomas Pakenham's deep knowledge and consummate skill, becomes an engrossing sequence of events. By his extraordinary grasp of complex social and political issues, his impartial insight into the interplay of personalities, and his memorable and detailed description of the war, he has provided a marvellously enriching and exhilarating experience. For, despite the sombre content of most of its 600-odd pages, a reading of his book is nothing less than that.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Auctions

Since I last wrote (3 November 1979, p 1131), my collection of silver teaspoons—now something of a conversation piece—has grown from 7 to 12. In addition to meeting antique dealers I have now been introduced to the fascinating world of the auction room. Although I have attended only a few, I have come to enjoy the atmosphere of the sales: the apparently casual disarray of the objects on view; the order among seeming chaos; and the concealed authority of those in charge as they watch the crowds coming and going, touching and testing, feeling and ferreting through a myriad of wares on display. In a peculiar sort of way it reminds me of a busy outpatient department under the control of an efficient sister.

Yet the allure of the auction room is undoubted. The speed, the drama, the open competition, the unabashed and unashamed use of money, loudly declared, to achieve an objective. Such is rarely seen anywhere else in life. In addition, naked drama is never far away. This happened at a charity auction I attended recently. Various *objects d'art* of varying degrees of worthiness had been handed in by the local community. Among the gifts were a wide selection of prints, paintings, and pen sketches. To me they seemed to range from the average to the uninspired and, indeed, most went for small but respectable sums. One oil painting, however, to which I had given but a passing glance, caused a small furore. Three men, obviously dealers, started to bid in earnest and, in a matter of seconds, the price rose into the hundreds. The final successful bid was for a sum that amazed us all. Two distinct sounds followed this. A round of applause for the victor of the battle and a loud crash from the back of the hall. This last was caused by a lady fainting. She was the donor of the painting. She had thought it of little value.—WILLIAM THOMSON (chief administrative medical officer, Lanarkshire).

Hospital Christmas shows

The planning of the hospital show starts at a low key with the appointment of show director and script writers in October. This usually requires a certain amount of forceful persuasion but Christmas always seems so far distant in October that some poor soul eventually agrees to the job. Usually the director is a junior hospital doctor in neurosurgery or psychiatry, persuaded that (a) he does not do much hospital work anyway so has plenty of time to collect his thoughts and plan the show and (b) to be in neurosurgery or psychiatry he must be an intellectual with a degree of artistic temperament looking for an outlet in such a venture. Nothing much happens till late November. At this stage the director proves his worth by forcing people to late-night sittings in the hospital bar where ideas are forced out and assembled into a script. In the past the hospital show was the only occasion at which junior doctors could criticise their seniors' actions. Now, of course, there are an ever-increasing number of representative committees for this, and as such the shows have lost much of their satirical bite and tend to caricature rather than condemn. Several years ago one whole show at one teaching hospital was used to criticise the unpopular appointment of a professor of surgery. However, such "wall writing" is no longer the main function of the show and targets tend to be broader.

As the final two weeks approach there is sudden renewed enthusiasm in the hospital mess and everybody strives to be part of the show in one form or other. All doctors are actors manqués so that once doubts are

shed the most amazing talents are revealed. The hospital show unites the mess as few other occasions do. Another sad feature of our times is that most junior doctors live away from the hospital on their nights off so there is not the esprit de corps of former times. In previous years the hospital Christmas show was really the medical Christmas show but now everybody is welcome to participate, and in one Birmingham Hospital Christmas Show last year the performers included—apart from doctors, nurses, and paramedical practitioners—porters, and administrators.

Eventually dress rehearsal comes round. It is usually a complete disaster with the director threatening to commit suicide, or worse, resign. But it all comes right on the night. In Birmingham the different hospital shows do not run concurrently so that one can visit rival hospital shows to make sure they have not used one's best sketches and confirm impressions that their shows are definitely inferior.

Then it's all over bar the celebration parties, and the few patients still remaining in hospital can once again enjoy the undivided attention of their houseman.

After all this, one's consultant's opinion of the show is that "It was all right, but of course when I directed the hospital Christmas show back in. . . ."—A R E BLACKLOCK (senior registrar in urology, Coventry).

Garden robins

One icy January day, when the ground was hard-frozen, I paid a visit to a retired farmworker, then aged well over 80 years. To my surprise, his daughter told me he was out on his garden where he was "turning a sod for his robin." At the garden the old man explained that robins wanted their grub as much as ourselves. Happily, he had his reward as a robin was already pecking at the newly exposed soil, dug deeply and with difficulty.

This story indicates the affection which many people have for their garden robins, to be expected, perhaps, as the cheerfully coloured birds accompany us so often as we tend the ground. In the garden, we see them facing each other, puffing and swaying their red breasts as winter territories are marked out; later, as winter merges into early spring, the posturing is even more intense as the nesting territory is staked out and a mate selected. Certainly red is all-important for a robin, and I have seen a robin displaying at a ripe tomato and also at the red handle of a wheelbarrow.

We also enjoy the robin's song, the autumn song being so different in quality from that of the spring. Some individuals develop lively and melodious song phrases while others are more languid and melancholy in their presentation. Robins often sing at night in the presence of street lighting; many a presumed nightingale has proved to be a robin. The other utterance of the robin is its ticking alarm call, readily given when young are about and a cat, so often an enemy, walks over the lawn.

There is something about the characteristic stance of a robin, viewed as it perches on a spade or on a row of pea sticks, which endears the bird to the gardener. To this must be added the appearance of the keen, bright eye and the bird's inquisitive nature. It is curious regarding our garden activities yet, nevertheless, is always wary. If a new type of food is put on a bird table it is nearly always a robin which investigates it first, though suspiciously, and usually well before the house sparrows, which take a surprising length of time to get used to a new food source. Without a robin, is a garden really a garden?—PHILIP RADFORD (general practitioner, Brewtry, Bristol).