

ANOTHER ANGLE OF VISION: SOME PARTICULARITIES OF ORKNEY CULTURE

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In 1957, a small volume of poems was issued by The Kirkwall Press, the imprint under which *The Orcadian* newspaper occasionally published books of local interest. Entitled *Shore Poems*, it was written by Robert Rendall and, I imagine, was published at the author's expense, as poetry often was at the time. Rendall had been born in Glasgow, in 1898, but his parents were from Westray and he lived in Kirkwall from the age of seven. At thirteen he left the Grammar School to work in the family drapery business, which was situated in a rather fine building at the angle of Bridge Street and Albert Street.

Although his formal education was short, Robert Rendall never stopped learning. In adulthood he was, like many Orcadians, something of a polymath, publishing on literature, natural history, archaeology and theology as well as being a painter, a fisherman and a successful businessman. *Shore Poems* was Rendall's third collection and though Edinburgh and London critics may have neglected it, the book was appreciated in Orkney, where the author was held in high regard. And rightly so, as this poem shows:

Angle of Vision

*But, John, have you seen the world, said he,
Trains and tramcars and sixty-seaters,
Cities in lands across the sea –
Giotto's tower and the dome of St. Peter's?*

*No, but I've seen the arc of the earth,
From the Birsay shore, like the edge of a planet,
And the lifeboat plunge through the Pentland Firth*

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To a cosmic tide with the men that man it.¹

How much work can a poet get sixty-eight words to do? With his tramcars and domes and lifeboats, Rendall reverses the old saw about a picture being worth a thousand words: these few lines conjure up image upon image. But the poem goes further than word painting, to explore the choice of living in mid 20th century Orkney and the underlying existential tension of human beings in a vast world. We can only be in one place, though we have always sensed in the stars what we now know from exploration, that the universe is immense, completely beyond imagination. Accepting the immeasurable difference in scale between him and the cosmos, Rendall seems to say that the Birsay shore is as good a point as any from which to observe the wonder of existence.

As someone who lived his whole life in Orkney, Robert Rendall must have been used to explaining to outsiders why it is a mistake to think that the Northern Isles are remote. Remoteness is an idea, not a fact, since it implies a distant centre: Edinburgh, perhaps, London, or even Oslo. But to those who live in Orkney, it is those cities that are distant, as Rendall implies. The centre is here. The centre is where you are. Learn to look about you.

But remoteness has an emotional register too: it can suggest feelings of isolation. It is true that there are fewer people in Orkney than in Glasgow, but there are still far more than anyone can know, remember or count as a friend. The anthropologist Robin Dunbar argues that, for biological reasons, human beings cannot maintain more than about 150 stable relationships—which, as a point of reference, is about the number of people who live in Eday. Most of us, whether we stay in Victoria Street, Edinburgh or Victoria Street, Stromness, would struggle to maintain as many. Isolation, like remoteness, is a state of mind and as such it exists in people, not places. It's true that there are no 'trains and tramcars and sixty-seaters' here, but Glasgow and Paris are sadly lacking in standing stones, seals and or 'sea shells on the Brough'.² Robert Rendall is a visionary poet, in the tradition of William Blake, and knew how

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour³*

What I most like in *Angle of Vision*, though, and the reason it seems both a product and a microcosm of Orkney culture, is that Rendall holds both his worlds in balance. They complement one another; they need one another; they are not whole, one without the other. It is not that everything needful for a good life is in Orkney, though it is, nor that there aren't other places equally fit for human thriving, though there are. It is that by knowing where we are,

and still being open to where we are not, we can learn to know ourselves, others and perhaps even something of the cosmic tide on which we plunge.

It was this particularly Orcadian balancing of here and there that struck me most deeply when I came to the county for the first time in June 2011 to undertake a study of its cultural life, commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise with support from Creative Scotland and Orkney Islands Council.⁴ I'd first become aware of Orkney as a teenager, through George Mackay Brown's novel, *Magnus*. It was a heady introduction, not just to a place, like the church in Egilsay, that you could actually see, but to an imaginative world unlike any I'd yet met—not quite Scottish (I already knew *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* and *Kidnapped*) nor yet foreign (though I knew nothing about Norway, Brown wrote in English) but Orcadian. While that literary experience sparked my desire to see Orkney, it also contributed to my sense of its remoteness. Forty years later, when I began to see the arc of the earth from here, I was able to reassess my perspective and ask myself what was different and what was the same.

Being here, I quickly saw how these islands have always been at the centre of a world in which the sea is as important as the land. A child who had grown up as far from the shore as is possible in England and in France, I had acquired a sense of the land as what is, with the sea as a sort of negative space serving mainly to define it. The people who settled Orkney, the Picts and the Vikings who came after, to say nothing of today's fishermen and energy workers, all know how absurd that is. It's like the famous Rorschach inkblot test: do you see black or white? Orkney has been a marine crossroads since human beings first made their way to the northern seas, as its rich archaeology—including the Broch of Gurness, whose discovery is something else we owe to Robert Rendall—famously shows. But I hadn't realised how that traffic has continued to the present day, from the Roman navy to the German navy, bringing often very large numbers of outsiders to the islands for periods of time: sailors, soldiers and prisoners of war, whalers, herring girls and oil workers, have come and gone, leaving their mark not only on the islands and the sea bed but also on the society, culture and imagination of the islanders.

Throughout that time, Orkney's people have been equally intrepid travellers, in Viking longboats and the square-riggers of the Hudson's Bay Company, in Royal Navy ironclads and support service helicopters. It's very moving to realise that the ship just found in shallow waters of the Canadian Arctic is either HMS Terror or HMS Erebus, which lay in Stromness Harbour during May 1845. The dinner held for their captains by Margaret Rae at Hall of Clestrain is typical of Orcadian hospitality to travellers. It is remembered in Pam Beasant's St Magnus Festival community play for John Rae's bicentenary last year, in which the narrator says:

*Mrs Rae knows a thing or two about giving a good send off to the captains of ships passing into the North. She is polite and hospitable to all. The grand, and the humble, she treats them all the same.*⁵

As I met people involved in the Orkney's cultural life today, I was continually struck by how often that life was, like the Franklin Expedition dinner, the result of interaction between Orcadians and outsiders. More than that, the character of that interaction enacts a belief in equality held by a society confident in its own values and culture and therefore interested in and even welcoming of the other: 'polite and hospitable to all, the grand, and the humble, she treats them all the same'.

Take for example, the St Magnus International Festival, perhaps the most celebrated aspect of Orkney culture today, at least outwith Orkney. It was the creation of local people including Norman Mitchell, Archie Bevan and—in an inspirational if not always a practical sense—George MacKay Brown, working with incomers, among whom the figure of Peter Maxwell Davies is dominant partly because his involvement was the key to unlocking the participation of so many exceptional visiting artists over the years. A generation later, the Festival continues both to depend on and to embody that cooperation, as local people work alongside international artists as performers, guides, administrators, stage crew, singers and hosts. The effort that visitors make in getting to Orkney—that apparent remoteness—is why, once here, they invest themselves so wholeheartedly in what the Festival, the islanders and the place itself have to offer.

The Festival has succeeded only because Orcadians embraced the opportunity to meet and work with outsiders, only because enough of them are willing to be open to, if not necessarily engaged in, current trends in classical music. I don't wish to exaggerate either the size of the local audience for contemporary art or the smoothness of the road travelled since the late 1970s, when the Festival was established, but neither is the critical point. What impresses me about Orkney is that spirit of openness to other ways of being—in this case modern classical music—allied with a commitment to contributing to community activities. There is self-interest, of course, but its character is broad and engaged with the interests of others.

What is true of the St Magnus International Festival is also true, in different ways, of many of the events and institutions that make up Orkney's cultural life, from the Folk Festival to Stromness Shopping Week. Their character, scale and intent varies hugely. I am still astonished that the same quite small community accommodates fishing competitions and blues weekends, the Ba' game and the Papay Gyro Nights, agricultural shows, amateur drama and choirs, to mention just a few of Orkney's living cultural assets. The older and more traditional of these have not depended on the contribution of incomers

as much as some of the arts activities, but all have been sustained by their presence and interest, and by the economic vitality that has come with being the only Scottish island group whose population has risen in the past 30 years. Indeed Orkney, which saw its population increase from 18,419 in 1981 to 21,570 in 2013, has grown at more than three times the rate of Scotland as a whole. The reasons why Orkney attracts and retains more people than comparable areas are complex (and important to its future) but they must be connected, at least in part, with Orcadians' historic openness to the world.

While the interaction between islanders and outsiders (including outsiders who become islanders) is obvious in the performing arts and festivals, it is also evident in the visual arts, crafts and literature. The story of the Pier Arts Centre is exactly parallel to that of the St Magnus Festival. It was created in the late 1970s from the friendship between Margaret Gardiner, an English writer and activist in the arts (she disliked being described as a collector), and some of her peers in Orkney, such as Ernest Marwick and the painter, Sylvia Wishart. Her affection for Orkney led Gardiner to donate her personal collection of English modernist art to its people, and an old warehouse in Stromness harbour was bought to be its home. Much has changed since 1979, not least the transformation of the building into a fine contemporary gallery in 2007 and the migration to the town of a number of younger artists, but both trends have only strengthened the relationship between Orkney's own artists and those from elsewhere who visit or exhibit at the Pier.

One final instance of this interaction is worth noting: the exposure of Orkney's creative children to other ways of being and doing and thinking in the world. Robert Rendall lived in Orkney but was widely travelled: his evocation of Giotto's tower and the dome of St. Peter's are based in personal experience, and they are not unusual references in his poetry. Belonging to a generation who fought in the First World War, he was, like most Orcadians until after the Second, an autodidact. That is not so much admired nowadays but, with the help of the first public libraries and bodies like the Workers' Educational Association, it was how working people won a place in the intellectual and cultural life of Scotland before the advent of the Welfare State. That Randall's work on sea shells should have been published by the Royal Society of Edinburgh shows the intellectual achievement possible in Orkney to someone whose formal education had ended at such an early age.⁶ The next generation did benefit from Higher Education and left Orkney to do so. Far from being something to regret, though, it gave them new angles on the world. George Mackay Brown, Margaret Tait, Ola Gorie and Sylvia Wishart are just a few of the post-war artists who, in different ways, brought home to Orkney a vision honed elsewhere.

There is a series of paintings by Sylvia Wishart that I particularly like. Dating from the later part of her life, when she lived in a house with a view over Hoy Sound, they also take another angle of vision, gazing out to sea in a more southerly direction than Robert Rendall in Birsay.⁷ In these works, the artist looks across the sea towards the cliffs of Hoy and the sky beyond, but what makes the paintings so original and unsettling is that she also includes what she sees reflected in the glass through which she is looking. So the landscape is seen through, past and with household objects, the window frame, a glowing light bulb, a doorway. By day and by night the wild world outside lives with the domestic world within. On the windowsill, a ship in a bottle seems to symbolise home and away. These paintings are among the most accomplished, intellectually fascinating and simply beautiful things I know to have been created in Orkney, and in their way, they seem to share that balanced vision Robert Rendall spoke about—here and there.

I am struck by the deeply original character of the Orkney artists I have mentioned, each completely his or her own person, but sharing also an elusive independence of spirit that, for want of a better explanation, one might attribute to the formative experience of growing up in Orkney. In saying that, I don't want to fall into a kind of elemental nationalism, dividing those with long roots in Orcadian peat from those who have transplanted themselves from other soils. Part of Orkney's success in attracting and accommodating incomers lies in a cultural identity in which others can find a place. Gunnie Moberg was born in Sweden and lived in Edinburgh before making her home in Stromness at the age of 35.⁸ But her photographs seem wholly in their place alongside Sylvia Wishart's paintings, Margaret Tait's films or George Mackay Brown's poems. I know, from my conversations with younger generations of artists who have made their home and sometimes their names in Orkney, that the particular combination of land, sea, sky, people, weather, nature, art, history and culture they found here continues to be fertile ground for new arrivals. Orkney's culture is alive and evolving in a distinctive dialogue of people and place, in which the past, and the legacy of earlier generations of artists, is easily heard.

This interaction between inner and outer worlds is not the only factor to have shaped the character or the achievement of Orkney's culture, but it may be the most unusual, the most particular. In 2011, as I listened to people, travelled across Mainland and other islands, visited museums and historic sites, read council reports, poems and folk tales, I thought of other influences.

The fertile land is one, since it supported farmers rather than crofters and its surplus could be channelled into social, educational and cultural activity. The long nights are another. I was captivated by the accounts I heard from those who'd been young then of social life in the countryside before the

advent of television and cheap cars. Gathering of an evening to keep company in storytelling, singing and music, people had to provide their own entertainment or be dull. With its peat fire under a smoke hole, Kirbuster Farm Museum seems a huge leap back in time, but it was a home in the 1960s. Many aspects of Orkney's culture today—from community theatre to the folk festival— have their roots in that dispersed, egalitarian creativity in which everyone was assumed to have a voice and expected to use it. Perhaps this tradition has also encouraged Orkney to have high expectations of its young people, which, with the commitment to education characteristic of Scots culture, it is capable of cultivating. In a small community, access to people can be easy, whether they are decision makers, teachers, experts or mentors; and a small community's expectations can also be felt quite easily.

In my report, I also touched on a sense of difference nurtured by a people who are proud of their ties with Norway and the linguistic and cultural legacy it has given them. Orkney dialect and even Norn mark a distinction from speakers of Doric, Gaelic and Scots. But again, Robert Rendall, who wrote some of his most appreciated verse in dialect, offers a typically balanced view of the matter:

*The margin between superlative use of the vernacular and excessive sentimentality is so thin ... that few seem able always to keep on the safe side of the line.*⁹

In this, I hear the measured tone so characteristic of Orkney's culture: confident of itself but wary also of unnecessarily excluding the other and so becoming rigid and entrenched, because one has ceased to be open and to allow change. The independence of islanders, for whom help might arrive too late if it is available at all, is strong but there is an equally inescapable interdependence. There's little value in an abundance of fish, beef or poetry unless there are also people who want the surplus; and sometimes external expertise is needed to make the most of local resources like oil marine energy or music.

In sketching this portrait of some particularities in Orkney's culture, I am aware of some obvious dangers, to which an outsider such as myself, may be especially vulnerable. Like Prospero's island, evoked in the 2011 St Magnus Festival, Orkney can bewitch the unwary traveller and the risk of idealisation is real. The grass in Orkney can look very green at certain times of the year. But my intention is not to make comparisons, which would be invidious and rather pointless. It is simply to understand what is here and celebrate how local people have created a culture that enriches not just themselves but tens of thousands of visitors and others, like my teenage self, who encounter it through the books, music, paintings, poems and films that have been loosed into the world from here.

Of course, similar traits or conditions exist in other islands, in other rural areas or in other parts of Scotland. It is their particular combination in a particular place, that has given Orkney its own history, society, economic life and culture and makes setting foot here different to doing so in Barra, Banff or Brae. What value we place on each of those experiences is naturally personal; their particularity is easier to agree upon.

Today, with a little distance from my work in 2011, it seems to me that it is that particular Orcadian openness to the world, that level-headed acceptance of local and global qualities, that has allowed the island's people to make as much of their human, natural and cultural assets as they have. Robert Rendall, a man of Orkney as much in his love of home as in his travelling and correspondence with the world, wrote for here *and* for there, the universal in the local. It was, after all, in Philip Larkin's *Oxford Book of English Verse* that I read *Angle of Vision*.

Simon Hall, author of a prizewinning *History of Orkney Literature*—and how many communities of 20,000 souls could justify such a volume?—passes on a good story about Robert Rendall, told to him by Bertie Harvey of Birsay:

Rendall and his friend the QC Harald Leslie, Lord Birsay, were standing looking out to sea beside a drystone dyke somewhere near the Palace. Rendall invited his friend to rest his hand on the top of the dyke and look out towards the western horizon, saying to him: 'Now you've got your hand on history, and your eye on eternity'.¹⁰

A hand here, an eye there; a body standing on the ground, as it must, a mind wandering and wondering where it will—what better image could there be for Orcadian culture, so rooted in the physical nature of these islands and the society it supports, and still so open, so interested in what lies beyond, in who might come and where one might go.

Everywhere is not the same and the people who live there are not the same either. The culture of Orkney is the unique creation of interaction between people and place, coming and going, over centuries. The angle of vision from the Birsay shore does not offer a better view than you can get from elsewhere, but what you can see from here, you can only see from here: a unique perspective on life. Beyond that, it is the character and qualities of the people who have reported it that make it special. Some of their names have great renown; others are less well known. But each has added a stone to the five thousand year old edifice of Orkney's culture and its unique view of the world. It is, for me at least a very precious angle of vision.

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- ¹ Robert Rendall, 2013, *Collected Poems*, edited by John Flett Brown and Brian Murray, p.124
 - ² From 'Train Journey', in Robert Rendall, *Collected Poems*, p.136
 - ³ William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172906> (18.09.14)
 - ⁴ François Matarasso, 2012, *Stories and Fables, Reflections on culture development in Orkney*, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, available from <http://www.hie.co.uk/about-hie/news-and-media/archive/scottish-communities-share-in-lessons-from-orkney-s-culture.html#sthash.un2WJQlg.dpbs> (accessed 18.09.14)
 - ⁵ Pamela Beasant, 2013, *Long Strides* (sc.3), commissioned by the St Magnus International Festival, 2013
 - ⁶ Robert Rendall, 1956, *Mollusca Orcadensia*, in *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, Volume 66 / Issue 2, January 1956, pp. 131-201
 - ⁷ Pier Arts Centre, 2012, *Sylvia Wishart, A Study*, Stromness
 - ⁸ See The Gunnie Moberg Archive, <http://gunniemobergarchive.wordpress.com>
 - ⁹ From the Introduction to *Collected Poems*, p.15
 - ¹⁰ Simon Hall, 2013, 'Rediscovering Robert Rendall', on *Writing the North*, <http://www.writingthenorth.com/rediscovering-robert-rendall/> (accessed 15.09.14)