

MY UNCLE GEORGE

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Many trees have been felled to produce the words written by and about my uncle, George Mackay Brown. He would have been 100 years old this year and, to mark this auspicious event, many more words will flow from the keyboards of literary giants across the globe. This pencil sketch of the man I knew as my uncle is no literary masterpiece, but a collection of fond memories recalled by me of a time during the 1950s and early 60s when George was a student in Edinburgh and, later, when he came visiting us.

My family was made up of Dad, Norrie (George's older brother), Mum, Hazel and two older sisters, Allison and Pamela. We had moved to Edinburgh from Orkney in 1954 in order for Dad to take up a teaching post as a teacher of English and History. I was four years old then and my sisters six and ten. Two years later, we finally settled in a brand new council house in a new housing estate called Oxgangs. In that modest little house we spent many happy years. Mum was a talented baker and she would produce shortbread, sponge cakes, Christmas cakes as well as dainty sandwiches and treats for visitors who were always welcomed.

One visitor we all looked forward to was Uncle George. While studying at Newbattle Abbey College and Edinburgh University he found his way every Sunday to relax with us all and to enjoy our mother's culinary treats. Perhaps, Dad and he talked of literary matters but that would all have gone above my head. I suspect the talk was more about football and politics and maybe the latest news from Orkney. He took a lively interest in his three nieces and I think our polite Edinburgh accents amused him.

From the perspective of a little six-year-old, as I was in 1956, he was a tall, gangly, curly-haired man with a large chin and smiling blue eyes. I was fascinated by his long fingers which seemed so expressive as he told us 'yarns' about people and events. I believed implicitly in all the stories he told us and it was years later when I realised that George was a born teller of tales

with a playful taste for exaggeration.

The Hollywood and Oscar-nominated actress, Greer Garson, had Orcadian parents. According to George, Greer's mother and his were friends. He told me he remembered vividly being in his pram, side by side with the infant Greer while the ladies gossiped. He and Greer spent some time whacking each other over the head with their respective rattles, to their mothers' horror once they realised what was happening. According to George, Miss Garson had a splendid head of curls which, her mother feared, might never recover from such savage assault. It might even prevent her from becoming a film star. All this, I took in with wide-eyed innocence, delighting in the thrill of early celebrity scandal. It was many years later that I discovered the actress would have been 17 when George was an infant and that she had never lived in Orkney. (Despite their age difference and location, they died within a week of each other in 1996.)

A lot has been written about George's beliefs and his conversion to Catholicism. None of this concerned my sister, Pam, and me. We were oblivious to his religious persuasion as he solemnly officiated over the marriages of our various dolls. How lucky we were to have such a wonderful uncle who was so willing to participate in our games.

At one time, George was in lodgings in a flat in Marchmont, just along from where I attended Brownie meetings. I thought nothing of bringing along a friend to visit George after a trying hour or so tying knots and making Brownie promises. How his heart must have sunk when he heard us asking the landlady if my uncle was in. He always seemed happy to see us and listened intently as we told him of the evening's excitement. Best of all were the stories he told us which caused great hilarity. It never occurred to me that we may have interrupted his evening for half an hour or so.

While on holiday in Orkney in 1958, we were having a little tour of the mainland. Dad was driving and George sat in the front with his brother while we sat in the back, transfixed by the stories he told us of the places and the people. We passed the Brig o'Waithe, the place

where the first civilian fatality of the Second World War took place as German planes jettisoned their remaining bombs on returning from their attack on Scapa Flow. In order that we did not dwell on this sad story, George pointed to a little stone cottage at the side of the road. ‘You’ve no idea of the goings-on that took place over there,’ he said. We were agog for some scandal. ‘That wee house was once a den of iniquity, a drinking house a place where the men of Stromness walked to get away from their nagging wives and whining children. It was called The Golden Slipper and no decent man would be seen going near the place’. We thought this was thrilling and the story was embellished each time we passed the innocent cottage. By the end of our holiday, we knew the names of some of the scoundrels and misfits who frequented The Golden Slipper, those who’d been found in the ditch and those who’d lost all their money on a card game. Even we began to wonder when he told us that the illuminated sign above the front door could be seen for miles.

He was adored by us all. As a child, I had no idea that he was a writer and was very excited when *Loaves and Fishes* was published in 1959. The TB he had suffered from as a very young man had left its mark and he was hospitalised in Edinburgh with severe bronchitis. I remember going with my mother to visit him. She warned me beforehand not to kiss him as he might be infectious. The fear of TB still lingered in the family throughout my childhood. His gaunt face was grey and his bony frame could be seen under his pyjamas. He struggled to speak without wheezing and coughing and there was a sputum cup on the bedside table. I remember feeling guilty at the relief I felt when visiting hour was over.

He recovered from this and other lung infections and we were delighted when he went to Moray House to retrain as a teacher. Unlike our father and their sister, Ruby, teaching was not to be his calling. I had no idea how much he hated it. I just enjoyed his tales of naughty pupils and how they ran wild when the real teacher left the room.

As I became a teenager, I developed a crush on the Beatles, but my parents were somewhat disapproving. How wonderful, then, to have an uncle who showed an interest in them, however

feigned, and even took my side when begging to be allowed to stay up late to watch them on television. Every Sunday he would turn up with newspaper clippings about them and I would stick them in my Beatles scrapbook.

My father had to retire early from teaching because of a heart problem. His sudden death at the age of 44 rocked our family. Granny Brown was staying with us for her annual holiday in Edinburgh and she was distraught. I was alarmed to see my beautiful, happy granny so stricken. We were all in shock and when George turned up later that day in a state of acute distress, I was further alarmed to see him sobbing. At 14, I had never seen a man cry before and it was a sight I shall never forget. How our brave, heartbroken mum coped with all this grief, I will never know.

Of course, I continued to have a relationship with George as we grew older. I had many holidays in Orkney, often staying with my granny and Uncle George and he continued to visit us in Edinburgh whenever he came south. My husband and three sons all loved George for his gentle sense of humour and, as he became more acclaimed in the literary world, his complete lack of self-importance.

I still wish I could have had a peep inside *The Golden Slipper*!

Ros Taylor lived her very early years in the parish of St Margaret's Hope in Orkney. Her father, the brother of George Mackay Brown, was a school teacher there until the family moved to Edinburgh where she remained until leaving to become a student teacher. After qualifying, she taught in various schools until finally settling in the Borders with her her husband, Paul, and three young sons. She went on to specialise in deaf education and was a campaigner for British Sign Language to be used in mainstream schools. She has a lifelong interest in drama and helped found Tweed Theatre in Peebles.

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