



BROWSE



Kindred Spirits: Kathleen Raine and Margaret Fay Shaw

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Kindred Spirits **Kathleen Raine and Margaret Fay Shaw**

Ann E. Berthoff (bio)

The Isle of Canna is the most fertile of the Western Isles and, by many

accounts over the centuries, the most beautiful. Gales prevented Boswell and Dr. Johnson from visiting Canna, but other visitors have braved wind and weather to stop for a few days—or centuries: Norse marauders, clansmen from other Hebridean islands, and, according to tradition, St. Columba, who'd been sent by the Irish king (and God) to convert the Gaels. The National Trust for Scotland now owns the island, which is open to campers and hillwalkers and those who rent the refurbished croft houses for a week or a weekend. Day-trippers take the huge new ferry out from Mallaig as it brings visitors and supplies to the residents of Canna and its Small Isles siblings: Rum, Eigg, and Muck. Even those who don't go ashore can enjoy the sight of Canna slowly emerging from behind Rum, very like a slumbering green whale. And they can watch the huge steel ramp as it slowly descends amidst hooters and clanging bells to meet and join the concrete ramp leading to the enormous pier, required by the European Union in the deal whereby the Hebrides receives grants to encourage tourism.

Fifty years ago, long before the enormous ferry and the new pier, before the day-trippers and the holiday visitors, the island was a very different sort of place, an outpost on the edge of the world. Canna was then a privately owned estate with no place for strangers to stay or to shop; the merely curious, unwelcome, and pseudo-antiquarians, like hunters, were forbidden. The laird was a Gaelic scholar, John Lorne Campbell, and his American wife, Margaret Fay Shaw, had collected songs and folklore in the Outer Hebrides and had amassed the finest private library of Celtic studies in Scotland.

Canna House hospitality was extended to friends near and far. Gavin Maxwell was one; he'd lived for a time on the neighboring island of Soay where he was attempting to establish a basking **[End Page 91]** shark fishery—for oil, not eating. One day in the mid-fifties he came ashore, bringing Kathleen Raine with him. That visit marked the beginning of a friendship between the islander, Margaret Campbell, and the poet, Kathleen Raine, that lasted more than fifty years. The two women visited each other on Canna and in London, but the friendship was

sustained chiefly through letters.

In her first letter to “Mrs. Campbell” Kathleen expressed her gratitude for the chance of visiting so extraordinary a place and then asked a question of, perhaps, some urgency: “How ought carogene be bleached?” Milk pudding thickened with seaweed, one of Margaret’s favorite offerings, should obviously not remind diners of algae! Subsequent letters would seldom concern domestic matters, though at least a third of the correspondence (now housed in the Canna House archives) does concern cats—their names and antics, injuries and progeny, but most of all their role as beast-companions.

These women were different in countless ways. Margaret Fay Shaw, Pennsylvania-born and bred, was a capable woman, well organized and practical, fearless and independent, and usually impatient with anyone whose head was in the clouds. She was a born musician, trained with the thought of being a concert pianist. She had never managed school, but with a terrier’s persistence had learned to hear the modes of folk songs and to notate them, a skill which eventuated in the collection of songs that won her international acclaim. She often declared: “I do not have even a Sunday school certificate, but I have four honorary degrees. It’s preposterous!” She was known throughout the Western Isles for her distinctly American outspokenness.

Kathleen Raine had published her *Collected Poems* by 1956 and would soon undertake the research that led to *Blake and Tradition* and other scholarly disquisitions on what she always referred to as the “Perennial Philosophy.” Margaret had an affectionate disdain for Kathleen’s sobriety and saw her in many ways as an innocent—too trusting and impulsive in love; self-aware, but not in time to be saved from...

KINDRED SPIRITS

KATHLEEN RAINE AND MARGARET FAY SHAW

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