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**Helen Lloyd**

**Witness to a Century: The Autobiographical Writings  
of Naomi Mitchison**

**In fulfilment of the degree of Ph.D.  
Department of Scottish Literature  
University of Glasgow  
2005**

## Abstract

This thesis is a study of the autobiographical writings of Naomi Mitchison, a prolific writer of exceptional versatility who was born in the last years of the Victorian period and is now best known as a writer of fiction, and as part of the 'Scottish literary Renaissance' of the first half of the twentieth century. In her late seventies, towards the end of a highly productive literary career, Mitchison published three volumes of autobiography, *Small Talk: Memoirs of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973), *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (1975) and *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (1979). Unusually for retrospective memoir, however, these texts cover less than half of her hundred and one years, leading the reader to question the location and mode of her complete autobiographical writings.

Working extensively with archival material, much of which has been previously unavailable, this thesis sets out to demonstrate that Mitchison's personal writings are far more extensive than have been previously acknowledged, and are to be found through a wide range of out-of-print and unpublished material which include diaries, travel writing, personal correspondence, and, in few instances, poetry and prose fiction. In the course of this research I have compiled two substantial volumes of source materials which have been lodged in the Department of Scottish Literature Library. A contribution to Mitchison studies in themselves, I here draw attention to their existence and availability.

While at first sight many of the texts on which this study focuses are minor writings in relation to the major achievements of Mitchison's literary career, this thesis argues that as a collected body of work, they form an autobiographical corpus which documents and bears witness to an extraordinary twentieth-century life, and constitutes a substantial literary achievement.

Autobiographical- and life-writings often escape strict generic boundaries, and this study employs genre theory to interrogate the categorisation of literary genre. Central to this focus on traditionally marginalised non-fictional writings are questions of the changing position of memoir, the diary, epistolary and travel writings to the canon, and recent theoretical approaches are examined.

## Acknowledgements

To my parents, Dr Heather and Robert Lloyd

I would like to thank my research supervisor, Professor Douglas Gifford, for his invaluable guidance; Lois Godfrey, Mitchison's daughter and literary executor for permission to reproduce private papers from the Mitchison estate; Doris Lessing for permission to reproduce her correspondence with Mitchison; Jenni Calder, Mitchison's biographer, for allowing me to read and quote from her correspondence with Mitchison, and for talking to me about the process of writing *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*; Robin Smith and the staff of the National Library of Scotland; Dorothy Sheridan and the staff of the Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex, and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Glasgow for a number of research grants.

I would also like to thank Andrew 'Rat' Sinclair for reading and commenting on the final draft of this thesis; the girls of the Scottish Literature Department Postgraduate Room for lots of interesting discussions when we should have been working, and finally The Amphetameanies for many memorable nights.



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A writer should be able to wear a hundred masks; I hope modestly that I can wear at least a dozen and, while I am wearing each, I shall be able to play the appropriate ritual games.

Naomi Mitchison  
*Hide and Seek*



*Figure One: Frontispiece to *The Bull Calves* (1947)*

## Introduction

### *i: Witness to a Century*

Naomi Mitchison was born in 1897 as the Victorian era drew to its close. In the hundred and one years that followed, she lived through virtually the whole of the twentieth century, documenting in her fiction, poetry, drama, journalism and autobiography what she saw and experienced. A prolific writer of exceptional versatility, she is of major significance to Scotland's twentieth century in both life and letters. Moreover, as a dedicated internationalist, her vision was unconstrained by loyalty to one country alone, and the personal and literary legacy she left to Botswana in Southern Africa was the achievement of which she was most proud, and which she wished to stand as her epitaph.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps because of the sheer volume of published and unpublished material she left, there has been little attempt to date to assess her literary achievement, while her relatively recent death in 1999 has provided insufficient time so far for retrospective appraisal of many of the diverse branches of her oeuvre. This thesis is a study of Mitchison's many forms of autobiographical writing, a surprisingly rich seam of a century of writing, and attempts to draw together and examine her own representations of her life. It is, perhaps, a fitting study since this woman's place in the contemporary national and international consciousness is due as much to her personal history and actions as to her literary achievements. The aim of this thesis, then, is to highlight a collection of out-of-print texts to which too little attention has been previously given, in addition to the substantial holdings of unpublished manuscripts and personal papers held in the National Library of Scotland and elsewhere. While at first sight many of these are minor texts and writings, seemingly marginalia to the major achievements of her literary career or hitherto simply unknown, this thesis sets out to demonstrate that as a collected body of writings they form an autobiographical

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<sup>1</sup> Jenni Calder, Mitchison's biographer, in conversation with Helen Lloyd, 17 November 2003. This wish is also apparent in Mitchison's letters to Calder, as seen in the following extract, which although undated, can be positively dated to 1994, after Calder's visit to the Bakgatla.

'Dear Jenni, I am very anxious to know how things were in Botswana: I still go there in my dreams, but that doesn't help. I hope you will come over and tell perhaps I have some messages from some of them. Presumably I saw everyone. Do remember I spent a lot [of time] there and had love. Do they remember as I do? I did so much that i[t] was the best part of my life. I want to know exactly who you talked with and how there was water. Perhaps I remember better than the people there. But I can't bear to wait much longer.' (Calder, Private Collection).

corpus which documents and bears witness to an extraordinary twentieth-century life and constitutes a substantial literary achievement.

Autobiography is identified and most often understood as a retrospective portrait of a life lived, yet, as is set out in Chapter One, the three volumes of autobiography published by Mitchison do not follow this pattern, covering only the period from her earliest memories to 1940 with the outbreak of war and death of her last-born child, Clemency Ealasaid. Where then, in written form, is her life from 1940 to the 1970s (the 1970s being the decade in which her three volumes of memoir appeared), and the two decades from then until her death in 1999? It is possible that Mitchison's creative writing energies were poured elsewhere, into fiction and politics, yet exploration of her many published and unpublished non-fictional writings reveal much that is written in the first person and, it is argued here, ought to be recognized as life-writings to be considered with her previously known autobiographical texts.

Chapter One of this study sets out to examine Mitchison's published memoirs, exploring her own interrogation of the methods of personal retrospective writing and her processes of remembering, before going on to consider these texts alongside a fourth, unpublished volume of autobiographical family memoir. The chapter concludes by placing these texts within the longer time frame of the autobiographical writings of her mother and grandmother. Following this, Chapter Two looks at diaries, a form of writing which, while clearly autobiographical, differs in its daily creation and immediacy from the retrospective tendencies of the traditional memoir considered in Chapter One. Taking three significant examples of Mitchison's many surviving diaries (one in manuscript form, one published, and one heavily abridged), this chapter considers issues surrounding the preparation of an ostensibly private document for the public domain, as well as discussing the influence of Mitchison's position as an established writer and public figure on the production of the private 'artless' diary. Chapter Three moves outwards to consider three published travel narratives, all of which are now out-of-print and have to date received no critical analysis, to show how considerable periods of Mitchison's life, not covered by her autobiographies or diaries, are to be found represented in accounts of her overseas travels. Following on from the more direct forms of identity-construction in the memoir and diary, this chapter aims to interrogate the portrayal of authorial identity in relation to the otherness of abroad, and the ways in which Mitchison's literary representation of self changed, in particular with regard to her growing ties to

Botswana, its culture and people. Chapter Four also considers the problems of self-projection to others, this time from the more immediate medium of Mitchison's letters, often written from abroad. Mitchison's extensive correspondence is scattered throughout a number of archives (see Range of Archive Material below), and is explored in this thesis for the first time. This chapter argues that when taken together, Mitchison's epistolary writings supplement the literary narrative of her life, and are a substantial, albeit overlooked element of her collected writings. In its fifth and final chapter, this study moves away from the non-fiction on which it has hitherto focused, to consider selected poetry and three fictional texts. These, it argues, are consciously self-reflexive, complementary fictional representations of her life. As such, they can be grouped alongside the autobiographical non-fiction examined in other chapters. With reference to the last of these texts, *The Big House* (1960), Chapter Five ends with an exploratory look at the role of the 'Big House' in Scottish fiction, a central, recurring theme in Mitchison's Scottish texts and more widely throughout the Scottish canon, although it has to date received little attention in Scottish critical studies. It is hoped that the span of material examined in this thesis, from Mitchison's childhood letters to the travel writing published in her seventies and eighties, will underline the lifelong compulsion to write her experiences, and the existence of a wealth of autobiographical writings beyond the published volumes.

By its nature this thesis, surveying as it does, a collection of previously scattered or unknown writings, is to some degree an archival research project. However, the decision to arrange texts and manuscripts by genre raises questions of categorisation. Autobiographical and life writings generally slip between strict generic boundaries, appearing as fusion of memoir, diary, journal and the like as the author seeks multiple sources and outlets for self expression and, in the case of memoir, for 'the process of finding one's way back in time'.<sup>2</sup> Exemplifying this difficulty, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* (1935), while diary in name, is both a travelogue detailing an overseas journey, and a highly personal document of a period of her life, potentially allowing for its inclusion in each of the first three chapters of this thesis. Mitchison's wartime journal *Among You Taking Notes* (1985) is to be found in Chapter Two which focuses on the diary, while it has been used (in preference to

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<sup>2</sup> Mitchison, N., *All Change Here*, published with *Small Talk as As It Was* (Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1988), pp. 9-10.

Mitchison's more formal memoirs) in the teaching of the Department of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow as an introduction to theoretical approaches to Autobiography. Again, the first pages of *Among You Taking Notes* lists Mitchison's last collection of travel essays *Mucking Around* (1980) alongside her memoirs (*Small Talk*, *All Change Here* and *You May Well Ask*), although it is here considered in relation to her other travel narratives in Chapter Three, and so on. The ongoing debate which surrounds autobiographical interpretation of fiction further blurs questions of categorisation, particularly in the case of Mitchison who, as I argue in Chapter Five, sets out explicitly to the reader her decision to fictionalise her life. Therefore, in an effort to interrogate the issues raised by the distribution of texts throughout the chapters of this thesis, in the first part of each chapter I focus on aspects of genre theory.

Inescapably, any study of life-writing by a woman writer must also address the notion of a feminist literary perspective, the critical position from which women's personal writings are so often approached. Within this study, these questions are addressed primarily in Chapter One which focuses on memoir, although similar issues reappear throughout in relation to the genre writings of Mitchison's diaries, travel writing and letters. However, while this study does not wish to challenge the validity of feminist readings of autobiographical texts in the broader context, it will, I hope, become clear that I do not see a primarily feminist approach as that most usefully applied to Mitchison's personal writings. Feminist readings of women's personal and autobiographical writings from earlier periods, focusing on their private nature, often highlight the social censure associated with more public forms of authorship, and personal writing is often recognised as having been an outlet where none other was available. Mitchison, however, though a woman and a writer, did not suffer under such proscriptive circumstances, and she actively sought the public gaze, not only as a successful and well-regarded writer of fiction but also in pursuit of several political and social causes. Furthermore, socially she was very much at the top of the tree, a chance of birth that gave her a confidence and sense of place which, arguably overrides questions of gender for Mitchison in the majority of instances. Nevertheless, I hope it remains apparent that this thesis retains both an empathy with these traditional feminist readings, together with the broadly sympathetic aim of recovering forgotten or unknown writing by women. Finally, because of its largely non-fiction focus, this thesis makes only passing reference to many of the main prose fiction works for

which Mitchison was best known. Primarily associated with the 'Scottish Renaissance' of the inter-war years through *The Bull Calves* (1947 but written earlier), Mitchison's influence and scope extends far beyond this period, with almost one publication per year between 1923 (with the appearance of her first novel *The Conquered*) and 1991 (with her final two novellas *Sea Green Ribbons* and *The Oath Takers*). This study acknowledges the extensive research that remains to be undertaken on the literary career of a major and prolific writer whose varied work and personal writings deserve extensive re-publication. Finally, and closest to the spirit of this thesis, would be the publication of a volume of collected correspondence.

## **ii: Range of Archival Material**

In a thesis as firmly grounded in out of print and unpublished material as this is, it has been necessary to identify, research and in some instances catalogue archive material wherever it is held. Mercifully, much of this is annotated typescript, a fact that has greatly eased the research process, Mitchison herself admitting, 'my ordinary writing is like a drunk spider'.<sup>3</sup> While a substantial proportion of this material has not ultimately fitted with the parameters of this study, it is hoped that providing a brief survey of the archival materials relating to Mitchison will emphasise the extent of literary papers from which this study draws its form, and may be of use to later researchers.

The majority of Mitchison's personal papers and manuscripts are held by the **National Library of Scotland**. Mitchison herself deposited a large body of material over a period of nearly thirty years leading up to her death in 1999. These papers can be found in the Accessions Catalogue of NLS, although they have not, to date, been catalogued in detail. In 2000 Mitchison's long-term home, Carradale House (and its contents) was sold.<sup>4</sup> Following this, in 2003, Lois Godfrey, Mitchison's daughter and literary executor, bequeathed a further substantial collection of manuscripts, correspondence and other personal papers to NLS. At time of writing, these uncatalogued and largely unexamined materials are classified as 'Temporary Deposits', and referenced as 'TD' in my footnotes. It should be noted that the NLS

<sup>3</sup> NM to Henry Treece, 'January 1964', Mitchison Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas. Examples of autograph and typescript manuscripts appear as Appendix C to this thesis.

<sup>4</sup> See Auction Catalogue in Bibliography.



plans to reclassify all Mitchison's TDs as Accessions, and items referenced in the following footnotes may in the future only be identified through the Accessions Catalogue. Ultimately, both sets of material will be included in the main Manuscripts Catalogue.

The second of the three substantial deposits of Mitchison's papers and manuscripts is to be found at the **Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre** at the University of Texas in the USA. On a number of occasions in her correspondence, Mitchison makes reference to the welcome income from selling manuscripts and personal papers to American archives.<sup>5</sup> Details of the HRHRC's Mitchison Collection can be found on their catalogue cards. There are over three hundred of these and they can be copied on request. While some of this material comprises duplicate copies of manuscripts also to be found at NLS, there is also a good deal of correspondence with well-known figures of the twentieth century and a wide range of writing relating to Africa.

A collection of central importance to those researching Mitchison is the **Mass-Observation Archive** at the University of Sussex. Mitchison's million-word diary for Mass-Observation, written throughout the Second World War (and abridged by M-O Archive Director Dorothy Sheridan as *Among You Taking Notes* in 1985) is available for consultation on microfiche, although the original typescript is no longer open to public access.<sup>6</sup> In addition to this, the M-O Archive holds several boxes of correspondence and assorted personal papers which detail Mitchison's later involvement with and support for the movement. Also at the University of Sussex, the Monks House Papers (papers of Virginia and Leonard Woolf) include a small correspondence to and from Mitchison, dating from the mid-twentieth century.

A number of university libraries around the UK and further afield hold correspondence from (and to) Mitchison in their **Special Collections**. In Scotland, the largest of these, with fifteen letters, is the University of Glasgow. It is worth noting that while Glasgow University Library's holdings of Mitchison's published texts are surprisingly small, it owns an unrivalled collection of texts written by members of the

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<sup>5</sup> 'I almost always type or else write things illegibly in notebooks (which, later, I flog to the Americans)' NM to Mr Huggett (post-marked 4 January 1978), NLS, Acc 10358.

<sup>6</sup> A second typescript copy of this diary is held by the National Library of Scotland, TD2980 2/0.

Haldane family from whom she was descended, dating back to the eighteenth century. A more detailed list of archive material is listed as Appendix A of this thesis. Transcripts and copies of correspondence collected in the course of this research have been deposited in the Department of Scottish Literature Departmental Library, University of Glasgow. It should be noted, however, that copyright of material resides with the Mitchison estate, and, in the case of HRHRC holdings, copies remain the property of HRHRC.

### **iii: Critical Background**

The height of Mitchison's critical and popular success occurred in the interwar years, starting with the publication of her first novel, *The Conquered* (1923), when she was a relatively young writer. Interest in her work began to wane throughout the 1940s, and the completion of her pre-eminent Scottish novel *The Bull Calves* in 1947 did little to revive interest at the time, although this text has latterly provided the focal point for renewed awareness. Following this point, public attention moved elsewhere, and her acceptance by publishers, once achieved without difficulty, became increasingly less certain. Then, throughout the 1980s, after two decades of personal and authorial dedication to Africa, her status as grand old woman of Scottish letters began to gather momentum, and critical interest re-emerged in the form of a number of articles, biographical retrospectives, and three PhD theses. This said, critical response to Mitchison's writing is as yet limited. With the paucity of examination of the autobiographical texts on which this thesis focuses, the aim here is to provide a brief survey of the extant material, constructing a portrait of the critical background from which this study extends.

The first of the three theses completed in the 1980s, Donald Smith's *Possible Worlds: The Fiction of Naomi Mitchison* (Edinburgh: 1982), aimed for the first time to place Mitchison's prose fiction in a context that (with reference to her Haldane ancestry and interest in the mythic focus of Frazer and Jung) was both familial and contemporary. Smith followed this study with two articles, 'You May Well Ask: Nine Decades of Naomi Mitchison' and 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn: A Highland Friendship' both in *Cencrastus* 13 (Summer 1983).

Evidence of renewed interest in Mitchison's fiction (although it had by no means ever wholly ceased) was marked in 1985 by the Glasgow publisher Richard Drew's decision to re-issue her Scottish masterpiece *The Bull Calves* for the first time

since its appearance in 1947. Following this was the significant first publication of *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*, an abridged version of her Mass-Observation diary, edited and introduced by Mass-Observation Archive Director Dorothy Sheridan. Appearing in 1985, this included a foreword by Mitchison and is an invaluable resource for those working with Mitchison's Scottish texts.

1986 saw the completion of a second thesis, *Historical Representation in the Fiction of Naomi Mitchison* (California) by Jill Benton, a study that, despite the suggested breadth of its title, focuses primarily on three texts dating from the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> A new selection of Mitchison's shorter fiction, entitled *Beyond This Limit*, also appeared in the same year, edited by Isobel Murray, whose introduction was a brief but ground-breaking attempt to sketch the scope, phases and recurring themes of Mitchison's literary achievements.

Mitchison's ninetieth birthday was celebrated with a special edition of *Chapman Magazine* in the summer of 1987, in which two key articles appeared; one, Alison Smith's 'The Woman From the Big House: The Autobiographical Writings of Naomi Mitchison' examined her three published volumes of autobiography in addition to her war-time diary *Among You Taking Notes*, and in many ways provided the inspiration for the current study. Also in *Chapman* 50-51, Beth Dickson's 'From Personal to Global: The Fiction of Naomi Mitchison' explored the close links between Mitchison's writing and life, a topic again closely related to the focus of this thesis.

Re-publication of Mitchison's work continued in 1988 with the Canongate Press's re-issue of *The Blood of the Martyrs*, prefaced with a critical introduction by Donald Smith, while, in 1989, Beth Dickson went on to complete a thesis, *Division and Wholeness: The Scottish Novel 1896-1947* (Strathclyde) placing Mitchison within a larger study of the Scottish Renaissance and taking, significantly, 1947, the publication date of *The Bull Calves*, as the outer reaches of Scottish modernism. Also published the same year, the fourth volume of the Aberdeen University Press *The History of Scottish Literature* (edited by Cairns Craig) included two chapters, Isobel Murray's 'Novelists of the Renaissance', and Joy Hendry's 'Twentieth-century Women's Writing: The Nest of Singing Birds' which have worked to confirm Mitchison's place within the twentieth-century Scottish canon.

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<sup>7</sup> There are *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), *The Delicate Fire* (1933) and *We Have Been Warned* (1935).

This growing critical and readerly interest gathered pace throughout the 1990s, and the decade began with two important articles: Isobel Murray's 'Human Relations: An Outline of Some Major Themes in Naomi Mitchison's Adult Fiction', in the *Scottish Studies Journal* (Volume 10, 1990) built on the overview of Mitchison's fiction from her introduction to *Beyond this Limit*, while Douglas Gifford's 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*', originally planned as foreword to the 1985 Drew edition and obstructed by Mitchison on the grounds that it too openly articulated the novel's personal subtext, appeared in the same volume.<sup>8</sup> Another significant point that year was the publication of *Naomi Mitchison: A Century of Experiment in Life and Letters*, a critical biography by Jill Benton who had completed her thesis four years earlier. Written with the co-operation of the subject, there is some evidence in Mitchison's correspondence that she later came to dispute certain aspects of Benton's portrait.<sup>9</sup>

Following this, in 1992, Colin Nicolson, published an analysis of Mitchison's extended poem cycle *The Cleansing of the Knife*, a text with close thematic relation to *The Bull Calves*. Entitled 'For the Sake of Alba: Naomi Mitchison', it is found in Nicolson's book *Poem, Purpose and Place: Shaping Identity in Contemporary Scottish Verse*. A fourth PhD thesis, Gill Plain's *Strategies for Survival: Fiction and Reality in British Women's Writing of the Second World War* did not focus exclusively on Mitchison's work, but examined her literary responses to war within a study of five British women writers. Similarly, C. E. Gittings' 1993 thesis, *'Sounds in the Empty Spaces': Re-placing Canadian and Scottish Literatures* (Edinburgh), placed Mitchison within a number of other writers from Scotland and Canada to explore their negotiation of post-colonial life.

Previously little considered, Mitchison's early 'Classical' fiction of the 1920s and 30s was the subject of 'Men, Women and Comrades', a chapter by Jenni Calder (who would later produce Mitchison's authorised biography), which appeared in Christopher Whyte's 1995 collection *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature*. Also in 1995, Mitchison's enduringly popular science fiction novel *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* was the subject of Susan Squier's 'From Guinea Pigs

<sup>8</sup> Mitchison wrote to Gifford, 'On the personal side I wonder whether this is the place to write about the people I might have used as models [...] it seems interesting enough and has been done to a good many important writers but it is usual to wait till they are dead! (n.d., Gifford, Private Collection).

<sup>9</sup> NM to Jenni Calder (Calder, Private Collection). See also correspondence from Mitchison to Benton regarding the proposed 1992 reissue of Benton's biography in NLS TD2980 2/9.

to Clone Mums: Naomi Mitchison's Parables of Feminist Science' in her *Babies in Bottles: Twentieth-Century Visions of Reproductive Technology*. Following this, a further book chapter, 'Naomi Mitchison' in Julian D'Arcy's *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature* appeared in 1996 and pulled together for the first time her fictional writings inspired by the Norse world, a collection of texts which span a seventy-year period. One further publication appeared the same year, Gill Plain's 'Constructing the Future Through the Past: Naomi Mitchison's Brave New World' in her *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance*, a thorough analysis of *The Bull Calves* from a feminist, theoretical perspective.

Mitchison's hundredth year was celebrated in 1997 with Jenni Calder's *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, a biography written with close co-operation from Mitchison herself, and with access to personal papers now held by the National Library of Scotland. Also re-issued was Mitchison's novel of Highland life, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, with an introduction by Isobel Murray, underlining her once-again expanding readership. A landmark publication in Scottish literary studies of the same year, Gifford and McMillan's *A History of Scottish Woman's Writing* further canonised Mitchison with inclusion of 'More Than Merely Ourselves: Naomi Mitchison' also by Jenni Calder, in addition to Margery Palmer McCulloch's 'Fictions of Development 1920-1970' and references throughout the *History*. In recognition of Mitchison's birthday and achievements, the University of Glasgow held a day long 'Centenary Celebration' Conference, which took place in March 1998.

In the wake of these tributes, 1999 saw the publication of a further three book chapters to deal with various aspects of Mitchison's literary career; Kirsten Stirling's 'The Roots of the Present: Naomi Mitchison, Agnes Mure Mackenzie and the Construction of History' in *The Polar Twins*, edited by Gifford and Cowan, Jane Dowson's 'Women Poets and the Political Voice' in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics, History*, and Elizabeth Maslen's 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction' in the same publication. Finally in that year, Mitchison's futuristic novel, *Solution Three*, was examined as part of a doctoral thesis, Jo Myers-Dickinson's *Fashionable Straitjackets and Wooden Men: The Creation and Maintenance of the Moi Commun and the Totalitarian state in Dystopian Literature* (Toledo). Mitchison died on the eleventh of January 1999, prompting a number of critical and biographical retrospectives in academic journals and the wider media.

In the new decade, research interest in Mitchison's work has grown exponentially, with a book chapter by Margaret Elphinstone, 'The Location of Magic in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*' in Anderson and Christianson's *Scottish Women's Fiction, 1920s to 1960s: Journeys into Being* in 2000, Kirsten Stirling's Ph.D thesis *The Image of the Nation as a Woman in Twentieth Century Scottish Literature*, which looks at the close ties between Mitchison's decision to embrace a Scottish identity, and her conception of *The Bull Calves* and poem sequence *The Cleansing of the Knife*, and an M.Litt, *The Treatment of Gender in Twentieth-Century Scottish Women's Historical Fiction* by Amanda McLeod which considers Mitchison's fiction to 1947 (both Glasgow: 2001).

In 2002 there were two further theses, Sarah Shaw's post-colonial study *Traces of Empire, Seeds of Desire: Africa and Women in the Novels of Naomi Mitchison* (Essex) which addressed a very under-examined area of her fiction, and Nattie Golubov's *British Women Writers and the Public Sphere Between the Wars: Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison and Rebecca West* (London) focusing primarily on her controversial 1935 novel *We Have Been Warned*. Continued interest in Mitchison's work seems confirmed through the inauguration in 2000 of the Annual Naomi Mitchison Lecture, established by Scottish PEN and the University of Glasgow and, in 2004, her inclusion in the *Scotnote* Series, *Naomi Mitchison's Early in Orcadia, The Big House and Travel Light*, a study by Moira Burgess, published by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies.

And yet, for all the welcome and growing critical interest in her fiction, as critics begin to assess her full value and place within the Scottish tradition, scant attention has been drawn to her vibrant and extensive body of autobiographical writing, to be found through all periods and styles of her writing career. Yet where critical interest has to date passed over this grouping of texts, the general reader has not. Exemplifying this, examination of Mitchison's Public Lending Rights for the period 1992-3 reveal that, of her many fictional and non-fictional texts to be found in public libraries, only eight titles reached over one thousand loans. Of these eight, five (*As It Was*; *All Change Here*; *You May Well Ask*; *Among You Taking Notes* and *Mucking Around*) may be classified as autobiography, and are central texts to this thesis.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Also achieving over 1000 loans were *Images of Africa*, *Travel Light*, and *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*. A full print out of Mitchison's Public Lending Rights for 1992-3 can be found in NLS TD2980 2/7.

There are, to add to this review of secondary material, a number of recordings for television and radio included in the bibliography to this thesis. Four print interviews which may be of interest to the critical reader are Mitchison's 'A Self-Interview' in *Studies in Scottish Literature* XIV (1979), Leonie Caldercott's 'Naomi Mitchison' in a book from the BBC's 'Women of Our Century' Series (1984), 'Naomi Mitchison talking to Alison Hennegan' in Mary Chamberlain's *Writing Lives: Conversations Between Women Writers* (1988), and Isobel Murray's 'Naomi Mitchison' in *Scottish Writers Talking* 2 (2002).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> While re-publication of her major texts have been included in this background, it should be noted that some of Mitchison's novels, primarily those of interest to the science-fiction and fantasy markets have remained in print, and dates of their publication have not been listed here.

## Chapter One

### *You May Well Ask: Naomi Mitchison and Personal Memoir*

In the museums, libraries, archives and what not there are quantities of professionals, joyfully hording material for historians [...] But perhaps it will not be historians: more probably writers of PhDs. [...] A girl doing a postgraduate year, two generations on, if PhDs still go on and I'm terribly afraid they will. How are she and I going to play hide and seek with one another?

Naomi Mitchison  
*Hide and Seek*

In her late seventies, Naomi Mitchison wrote three volumes of autobiography, *Small Talk: Memoirs of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973); *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (1975), and *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (1979). Dedicated to 'grand-daughters, who ask questions',<sup>1</sup> these volumes trace the pattern of her life from the conventions of a strict Edwardian childhood, through a war wedding and large family, to her career as a successful writer, political campaigner and public figure. Mitchison died in 1999 aged 101, and as a body of autobiographical writing, these volumes immediately strike the reader as unusual in that they cover less than half of her life; the third volume, *You May Well Ask* ending abruptly in 1940 with the outbreak of the Second War.

Divided into four sections, this chapter first examines the historical position of autobiographical writing within the canon, and interrogates its shifting definition and growing recognition as a literary genre, especially in relation to women's studies. In this section I draw on recent feminist reinterpretations of autobiography and genre studies which have done much to increase awareness of modes of writing not traditionally regarded as serious literary forms.

In Section Two, I consider Mitchison's three autobiographical texts in detail, and interrogate the process of recalling and representing a life. I also suggest that her writing fits in many ways with newly established notions of 'female' autobiography through her focus on personal identification with the community rather than on individual achievement. However, I suggest that a primarily gender-based interpretation of Mitchison's autobiographical writing is a very limiting approach, and propose that issues of class inform her work and are as important to her representation of self within these texts as are questions of gender.

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<sup>1</sup> See frontispiece of *As It Was: An Autobiography 1897-1918* (London: Richard Drew, 1988). This volume is a collection of the first two volumes of autobiography, *Small Talk* and *All Change Here*.



In Section Three I widen the field to include *Hide and Seek* (nd), a full length, unpublished volume of autobiography held by the National Library of Scotland. Mitchison was born into the ancient Haldane family, and while this manuscript may ostensibly appear to be a volume of ancestral history, I argue that she consciously uses this familial knowledge as a vehicle for interpreting both contemporary events, and the forces instrumental to the construction of personal identity.

The chapter closes with a section on two further autobiographical texts, *Friends and Kindred: Memoirs* (1961) by Louisa K Haldane, Mitchison's mother, and *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years: 1825-1925* (1925) by Mitchison's paternal grandmother.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of these texts places Mitchison's writing within a larger familial and historical context, highlighting the rare existence in print of a continuity of female written experience, and the importance of ancestral ties to a full understanding of Mitchison's autobiographical writing.

### **i: Autobiography as a Literary Genre**

Rising to popularity in the early nineteenth century, the autobiography has proved an unstable genre, problematic to define, and in many ways it remains a subject of critical contention. Simple and apparently satisfactory definitions such as 'an account of a person's life by him- or herself',<sup>3</sup> do not adequately encompass the variety of styles and purpose with which autobiographical writing can be said to exist. It has, therefore, a tendency to out-step proposed critical boundaries making it at once difficult to classify, and rich with possibility.

The progressive attempt to define autobiographical writing is further complicated by the existence of both 'memoirs', generally understood to be a less strictly chronological form of traditional autobiography, and 'life-writing', a term which also encompasses diaries, journals and other personal writings, and is often applied to autobiographical writing by women. These definitions, however, remain relatively loose, and within this thesis they are treated as interchangeable.

The difficulties surrounding the classification of autobiography have provoked a certain reluctance to acknowledge it as a legitimate literary form. In his 1980 essay

<sup>2</sup> Haldane, Louisa Kathleen, *Friends and Kindred: Memoirs* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961); Haldane, Mary Elizabeth, *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years 1825-1925 Compiled and Edited by her Daughter, Elizabeth Haldane* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925).

<sup>3</sup> Cuddon, J.A., *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 68.

'The Law of Genre', the post-structuralist Jacques Derrida argued that for a genre to be recognisably itself, it must exhibit certain clearly defined parameters:

As soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity.<sup>4</sup>

Discussing this view, Derek Attridge has further suggested that:

The question of genre [...] brings with it the question of law, since it implies an institutional classification, an enforceable principle of non-contamination and non-contradiction.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these perspectives, emphasising as they do the need for critical boundaries and parameters, do not sit well with the breadth and vagaries that autobiography is understood to contain. There is a widespread effect of cross-fertilisation between autobiographical writing and other literary modes, in particular fiction, as discussed in Chapter Five, and it is this tendency that has led to its image as a fluid and 'slightly disreputable' genre.<sup>6</sup>

The underlying principle of this interweaving of literary styles, and the propensity of autobiography to borrow and mix with other genres stems, in part, from the fact that all autobiography is, of necessity, selective. The inability of life-writing to write all of life emphasises, therefore, the link between it and fictional modes of literature; Sidonie Smith, who has written extensively on autobiography, has commented on the 'increasing novelisation of the genre',<sup>7</sup> suggesting that this hybridising effect is not only an identifiable but also a growing phenomenon. Discussing the forces that combine to produce the fictional tendencies of autobiography, J. A. Cuddon has argued:

Memory may be unreliable. Few can recall clear details of their early life and are therefore dependent on other people's impressions, of necessity equally unreliable. Moreover, everyone tends to remember

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<sup>4</sup> Derrida, J., 'Law of Genre', *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 224-5.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, L., *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, S., 'Constructing Truth in Lying Mouths', *Women and Autobiography*, eds. Brownley and Kimmish (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1999), p. 35.

what he wants to remember. Disagreeable facts are sometimes glossed over or repressed, truth may be distorted for the sake of convenience or harmony and the occlusions of time may obscure as much as they reveal.<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, it may be argued that the relationship between author and text means that autobiographical content may be present in any work of fiction, a view which, although frequently controversial, is extremely pertinent to the period of Mitchison's 'Scottish' fiction, and is addressed further in Chapter Five of this thesis.

In addition to the problematic interaction of fiction and autobiography, the status of autobiography as a definable genre has been further obscured by questions surrounding the relationship between author and protagonist - developing the issue of representation raised by Cuddon - and by the fact that for autobiography to be successful, the reader must believe the (selective and debatably fictional) portrait being presented. This, as Linda Anderson has argued, creates a circular model in which the extent to which the author is seen as 'truthful' is dependent on their ability to construct a 'believable' self-portrait for their readers.<sup>9</sup>

However, as debate surrounding the classification of autobiography often focuses on its lack of consistent traits, it is necessary also to identify the characteristics which it can be said to embody, and within this, a recognition of the people by whom it has been produced. Historically, the autobiography is a form predominantly employed by male writers of the upper-classes. Additionally, the tendency of the West to privilege the individual makes it possible to identify an emphasis within this group towards white and western writers. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule; women and non-European cultures have produced alternative forms of autobiographical writing, but when viewed within a Western or British context, the emphasis of its early incarnation was clearly towards the accounts of 'great men'. Furthermore, the focus of these texts on personal action, often of political, religious or military life, was one of individual achievement which did not prioritise interaction or identification with family or the larger surrounding

<sup>8</sup> Cuddon, J. A., *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, Linda, *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 2-3. Cuddon similarly argues: 'An autobiography may be largely fictional. [...] They are unreliable as literal truth; they have a different literary value.', *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, p. 68-9.

community. This notion of autobiography as the end product of a culture which valued the experience of the individual above all can be seen as the legacy of Renaissance thought, and later, the individualism of the industrial age. Influencing the decision of certain male writers to write a 'life' must have been the knowledge that, due to the authoritative position of their class and gender, they were people whose lives and opinions mattered enough to be recorded in print. This cultural precondition for the development of autobiography has been described by George Gusdorf as 'the curiosity of the individual about himself, [and] the wonder he feels before the mystery of his own destiny'.<sup>10</sup>

Gusdorf, in his influential article, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' (1956) was one of the first theorists to suggest these parameters highlighted above, arguing that autobiography was therefore a fully developed and identifiable genre.

Autobiography is a solidly established literary genre, its history traceable in a series of masterpieces [...] Many great men, and even some not so great - heads of government or generals, ministers of state, explorers, businessmen - have devoted the leisure time of their old age to editing 'memoirs', which have found an attentive reading public from generation to generation. Autobiography exists, unquestionably and in fine state [...] so that calling it into question might well seem rather foolish.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is now possible to view Gusdorf's proposed definition as somewhat limited in scope through its focus on the isolated achievement and individualism prevalent in autobiographical texts by many male writers, and its inevitable marginalisation of the work of women, and of less dominant cultures and social classes. The work of these groups can be said to take alternative, often less public written forms not included in narrower definitions of the genre (diaries being one example), and to focus less on the individual and more on the interaction between self and community. In the past twenty years, therefore, Gusdorf's classification has been challenged by a growing body of gender theory which argues that traditional notions

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<sup>10</sup> Gusdorf, G., 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney, p. 28.

of autobiography have worked to exclude the work of women through disregard for the importance of the group and the community to the construction of written female identity.

Before Gusdorf, one of the earliest writers to highlight the problematic relationship between autobiography (as it had traditionally been recognised) and autobiographical writing by women was Virginia Woolf who, in *A Room of One's Own* discussed the need to document the 'lives of the obscure'.<sup>12</sup> These, she argued, were the lives of those who, because of gender or class, had traditionally not seemed worthy of being recorded.

In addition to pointing out the elitist nature of the genre, Woolf highlighted the financial and spatial considerations behind the production of autobiography, the necessity of 'a room of one's own' in which to write, to which women, situated largely in public sitting rooms and fulfilling roles defined in relation to the community rather than in Gusdorf's splendid isolation, did not have access. Woolf's theory is, of course, applicable to all forms of writing by women, but the lack of privacy, leisure and financial freedom needed to write one's life (in addition to the low status afforded women's experience and use of alternative forms of life-writing), proved particularly restrictive.

Central to the modernist period in which Woolf was writing was an awareness of the fragmentation of absolutes, such as the certainty of a knowable self. This newly developed sense of uncertainty, influenced by developments in psychoanalysis, photography, means of travel and production, as well as the effects of the First World War, to an extent, challenged the subjectivity through which male autobiographers defined themselves, and consequently excluded writing by women. An increasingly fluid sense of the personality and social structures allowed women writers the opportunity to begin defining themselves in literary models which, outwith the parameters later defined by Gusdorf and focusing on a community consciousness rather than an exclusively individual one, had been previously unavailable to them.

More recently, gender theory has begun to consider Gusdorf's 'conditions and limits' and examine the ways in which it has worked to exclude autobiographical writing by women. Writers such as Allison B. Kimmich, Julia Watson and above all Sidonie Smith have written extensively about autobiographical writing from a gendered viewpoint. Theirs is a critical perspective from which the genre had not

previously been considered, partly because of the relatively recent rise in women's studies in literature but also because, as Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom suggest in their study *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography and Gender*:

Men rarely make an issue of their gender because the generic masculine has been the norm in Western society for at least three millennia, with women conceptualized as derivative from and secondary to man.<sup>13</sup>

This recent theoretical approach to autobiography studies, criticising the bias of previously accepted definitions of the genre, has offered new perspectives on the forms in which female autobiographical writing can be identified. As noted earlier, it also emphasises the inter-relation with others as central to the production of female self-representation that, together with post-structuralist ideas of language and identity, have challenged previous assumptions about the primacy of the individual in the setting-down of a life.

While this critical view has worked to include many autobiographical texts by women previously not considered worthy of serious study, perhaps one of the most influential shifts gender theory has proposed has been the inclusion of other forms of writing by women, specifically diaries, letters, and travel writing, as creditable autobiographical documents. This recognition, while new to literary studies, has long been accepted within historical research that often uses these texts as legitimate source materials. As will be discussed in the following chapters, both diaries and letters have to some extent been viewed as areas of female literary endeavour, and their historical production by women can be attributed in part to their greater accessibility. Once more socially acceptable for women to write than other 'serious' literary undertakings, they are now an important addition to attaining the most broad and inclusive view of the genre.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf considers the background to this convention in writing by women, proposing that a letter or diary can be more easily produced in a public room, and through regular interruptions, than can the continuous and carefully

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<sup>12</sup> Woolf, V., 'Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown', *Collected Essays* Vol 3 (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 384.

<sup>13</sup> Bell, S.G. and Yalom, M., *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography and Gender* (New York: State University of New York, 1990), p. 7.

crafted prose of a novel or autobiography requiring long stretches of quiet and concentration only available in a private room or study:

General material circumstances are against [writing]. Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down [...] But for women [...] these difficulties were infinitely more formidable. In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the addition of letters, diaries and other personal writings in a definition of what constitutes the autobiographical has forced a re-consideration of previous assumptions about whom autobiography is written by. The inclusion of women's experience and previously low-status models has worked to lessen belief in the social and literary superiority of the 'great men' whose lives have been documented in traditionally-privileged forms, and opens the door to new recognition about the written lives of women, previously unacknowledged by the critical establishment. Diaries, it should be noted, have long been accepted as scholarly forms of writing, but only those that included significant historical events or of those who lived exceptional public lives.<sup>15</sup> This has tended to exclude the diaries of women, confined largely to domestic spheres and without the confidence to publish afforded male writers born into the security of an authorial tradition. The re-assessment of women's diaries as a serious autobiographical form is particularly significant when considered in relation to Naomi Mitchison who wrote several extensive diaries, most notably through the Second World War, discussed in the following chapter.

Echoing Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own*, Judy Nolte Lensink discusses the move to re-interpret the diary as an acceptable autobiographical form, arguing that while it may superficially appear less complete or structured than traditional forms of autobiography, the diary was a product of the material and cultural conditions in which women wrote. Not having the time or space to construct a retrospective 'life', women documented their lives in a more immediate fashion

<sup>14</sup> Woolf, V., *A Room of One's Own* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 67-8.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Highlands* (1785), and those of Winston Churchill.

which, as explored in Chapter Five, included the art of letter-writing as well as personal diaries and journals.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the material considerations already discussed, it may also be argued, in line with modernist thinking, that the simple chronology of a beginning, middle and end could no longer be seen as truly representative of life, and that freer, less regimented forms were therefore closer in style to an 'authentic' portrayal of lived experience.

By challenging accepted notions of what constitutes autobiography, gender theory has, over the past two decades, highlighted ways in which autobiography by women can differ from traditional models and defy canonical definitions and readers' expectations. As well as widening genre boundaries and bringing many previously unconsidered texts to critical attention, gender theory has highlighted the ways in which women have used the alternative forms of life-writing open to them. By employing these literary vehicles, women writers can be seen to have found a voice by which to write themselves into existence despite the restrictions of time, space and an uncertain position within the public sphere of literary endeavour. Finally, as Woolf (and many others since) have argued, any writing by women, especially autobiographical writing, is subject to the pitfalls inherent in a move from the private to public spheres (a particular issue in relation to the publication of private diaries). The following section examines Mitchison's three published volumes of autobiography, and the ways in which they reflect this move from private, domestic spheres, in ever widening circles of public influence and personal experience.

## ***ii: As It Was: Mitchison's Published Autobiographies***

In the years leading up to her eightieth birthday, Mitchison published three volumes of autobiography, *Small Talk: Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973); *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (1975) and *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (1979). As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, although autobiographical in nature, the trilogy was not intended as an all-inclusive portrait of a life, covering only the period 1897 to 1940. What the volumes do chronicle are her earliest childhood memories, her marriage and family life and growing success as a writer, up to her move to Scotland and the outbreak of the Second World War.

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<sup>16</sup> See Lensink, J. N., 'Expanding the Boundaries of Criticism: The Diary as Female Autobiography' in *Women and Autobiography*, eds. Brownley and Kimmich (Wilmington: SR Books, 1999), p. 151-62.



The final volume, *You May Well Ask* ends abruptly, and shockingly, with the death of her last-born child 'Clemency Ealasaid' in July 1940.

The period leading up to 1940 marked a major turning point in Mitchison's life that may well explain the unusual decision to leave her memoirs so apparently unfinished. The encroaching realisation of war, as well as a growing disillusion with the Oxford and London literary scenes, influenced Mitchison's decision to move permanently to the family's holiday home at Carradale in the Western Scottish Highlands. Once there, the death of her one-day old child forced the realisation that, in her mid-forties, her childbearing years were over. The baby would not, as planned, act as a tie or bond between herself, and her new-found home and community.

There has long been interest in Mitchison's autobiographical writings by the general reader, by her biographers, Jill Benton and Jenni Calder, and by critics looking for illumination of her fictional and other writings. However, this substantial body of work has never previously been considered at length in its own right. In 1987, a short (and to date only) introduction to the autobiographies, written by Alison Smith, appeared as 'The Woman from the Big House' in an edition of *Chapman Magazine*, produced to celebrate Mitchison's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Following this, Isobel Murray, who has done much to promote Mitchison's writing, in a discussion of her adult fiction has argued:

The most interesting and voluminous commentator on Mitchison's fiction is Mitchison herself. She has published three volumes of autobiography [...] I have no room here for condensed appreciation of these. I can only make an enthusiastic gesture towards [them].<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* highlights her autobiographical work as a notable example of the genre in the post-war period.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Murray Isobel, 'Human Relations: An Outline of Some Major Themes in Naomi Mitchison's Adult Fiction', *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Twentieth Century*, eds. J Schwend and H Drescher (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 243. See also, Smith, Alison, 'The Woman from the Big House', *Chapman Magazine* 50 (1987), pp. 10-17.

<sup>18</sup> Cuddon J.A., *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 72. It could be argued that the choice of Mitchison's work within this volume is also significant in terms of her positioning within the Scottish and English literary traditions as, although she is largely read as a 'Scottish' writer, the Penguin dictionary has clear leanings towards an English canon, emphasising the often underestimated duality of her literary career and inheritance.

Interest in these texts has, therefore, highlighted, however briefly, their importance within both Mitchison's collected writings and as outstanding examples of the genre. To date, however, this interest has not extended to consider the ways in which the texts can be seen to echo the new, inclusive definitions of the genre, outlined earlier in this chapter. Throughout the trilogy, Mitchison is clearly aware of the problematic nature of retrospective interpretation of a life, and its essentially fictional elements. In *Small Talk*, the first volume, she considers the construction of the text, and discusses the various sources she has used in the process of remembering. Her consideration is interesting because of her open acknowledgement of the unreliable and subjective nature of memory. Writing at such a distance in time from the events as they happened, she makes use of childhood diaries and letters to jog her memory, aware, nevertheless, that these are themselves selective, having excluded 'the ghosts and terrors'<sup>19</sup> of her childhood imagination. In a chapter entitled 'The Evidence' she questions this route into the past:

The content of the diaries? Can I fairly use these for checking my own memories or should they be set down straight without passing through the memory sieve? Clearly the memories, as they come into consciousness sixty or sixty-five years later (sometimes more), have been distorted and censored. There is an element of subconscious choice. But equally there is an element of choice in the diaries.<sup>20</sup>

'The fairest thing to do', she concludes, 'is to add the diaries' comments separately'. Similarly, in the second volume, *All Change Here*, which details her adolescence, the awakening of a political consciousness, and her war wedding to Dick Mitchison, she also questions the accuracy of recalling and documenting long-past events. From the first line of this memoir, Mitchison is straightforward about the limits of truth in autobiography, warning the reader that its content will be 'less factual and more self-centred than its predecessor, *Small Talk*'. She continues to draw attention to the contortions of memory through time:

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<sup>19</sup> Mitchison, N., *Small Talk: Memories of an Edwardian Childhood*, published with *All Change Here* as *As It Was* (Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1988), p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Mitchison, *Small Talk*, p. 26.

If I am to be honest about a book of 'memories', I ought only to put in what I can actually remember [...] But let us look for a moment at the process of finding one's way back in time. Apart from the memories, what evidence have I for what I am going to write?<sup>21</sup>

In *All Change Here*, Mitchison has less access to the diaries of her schooldays, and relies more on letters and photographs to jog a memory or recapture a feeling or event. Overwhelmingly, however, she believes that she cannot remember much of the minutiae of daily life, writing:

I only remember accurately and in any detail the times in my life when there has been this tension of delight, of fear, of pain, of action, when I have been most clearly myself.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, even these moments, she suggests, when found in early written sources have lost their epiphanic quality, having been 'put into words, [are] externalised and lost'.<sup>23</sup>

By addressing the problems inherent in the creation and presentation of autobiography, Mitchison engages with the impression of subjectivity traditionally associated with the genre, and only recently viewed in a positive light. Through this, her work can be seen to move towards a more fluid, and hopefully therefore more authentic portrayal of personality. This move can also be detected in the structure of the texts which deviate from the notion of a fixed temporal chronology to produce an almost scrap-book effect of people, events and impressions. While the period 1897 to 1940 is clearly covered within the three texts, individual chapters are arranged by theme and subject ('Books & Plays', 'Politics & People', 'Celebrations and Shows') rather than by a strict ordering of dates. This liberated approach to the structure of autobiographical writing marks a shift away from canonical standards and produces an arguably more realistic representation than would a generic 'life-by-numbers'.

However, while Mitchison avoids a straight-forward year-by-year approach to the presentation of her life, an overview of the three volumes does reveal a general

<sup>21</sup> Mitchison, *All Change Here*, published with *Small Talk* as *As It Was* (Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1988), pp. 9-10.

<sup>22</sup> Mitchison, *All Change Here*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchison, *All Change Here*, pp. 26-7.

pattern of movement from the closed orthodox and private world of the upper-class Edwardian household with its servants and late-nineteenth century formality, through the social upheaval of the First World War, into the more liberal and socially-experimental interwar period. As such, Mitchison's volumes of autobiography can be read as much as a social history of the early twentieth century as personal memoir. *Small Talk* in particular paints a detailed picture of daily life for an 'upper-middle-class family from Oxford'.<sup>24</sup> The book describes the conventions of the time; the pecking order of house staff, the gas lighting, the (lack of) bathrooms and formalities of dress and neighbourly visits. The impression is of a young girl growing up with the 'incalculable advantages' of moneyed respectability and status.<sup>25</sup> Illustrative of these advantages, Mitchison's father, J. S. Haldane was a physiologist and member of New College, Oxford; her uncle Richard had been both Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for War. Family holidays were spent at the large estate of Cloan in Perthshire where the family gathered nightly for prayers.<sup>26</sup>

In *All Change Here*, the second volume of the group, Mitchison continues to document the process of growing up in a class and society with clearly defined rules of conduct, and a regimented understanding of what were and were not respectable modes of behaviour. One had, for example minimal contact with "trades-people", and it was very unusual to wear ready-made or shop-bought dresses. Similarly, 'no lady wore anything but "real" lace. Or real pearls'.<sup>27</sup> This focus on the minutiae of upper-class daily life is also clear in *You May Well Ask* in which Mitchison wonders, 'What did we buy? What did we wear, what did we eat? What was our taste in china, pictures, decoration, books, everything?'<sup>28</sup>

At the beginning of *All Change Here*, however, Mitchison proposes to move away from this detailing of past-life, claiming that:

This book is not so much social history [as is *Small Talk*], those taken-for-granted differences which are so curious now; there is much more about the development of a writer.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Mitchison, *Small Talk*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Brittain, V., *Testament of Youth*, quoted in Smith, A., 'The Woman from the Big House', *Chapman* 50 (1987), p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Between 1941 and 1948 Cloan was used by Barnardos as a children's evacuation centre.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchison, *All Change Here*, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Mitchison, *All Change Here*, p. 9.

While Mitchison's personal and literary development is a central focus of this volume, the overall effect of the three volumes is to mirror the shift in society in relation to major social issues including class, gender and the politics of Empire. This shift in authorial perspective becomes most apparent in *You May Well Ask*, which covers the period 1920-1940. In this third volume, the newly-married Mitchison begins to make a life for herself outside the constraints of chaperones and expectations of the previous generation. She benefits greatly from the social freedoms made necessary by the First World War (such as her training as a VAD nurse) and constructs a life of children, writing and politics surrounded by a large group of like-minded people. Many of these, such as Aldous Huxley and Stevie Smith, are now household names of literary modernism.

The societal shift in the first half of the twentieth century, influenced as much by war as by the affluence of Empire, was a movement towards greater liberalisation. Within this current of public opinion, one of the groups who benefited most (and indeed influenced and directed it) were women who had much to gain from social equalities previously thought inadvisable. Considered from this background, it is possible to view Mitchison's autobiographical writing as something different from a social history of privileged childhood (such as Christian Miller's *A Childhood in Scotland* (1981)). Her life, as presented through these volumes, can be seen to mirror and trace the feminist movement from the first stirrings of suffrage to, by the end of *You May Well Ask*, the achievement of a social and political independence that we would begin to recognise today. This is not to argue that by 1940 Britain offered the equality it did after the feminist revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, but that a change in public opinion and assumptions had opened spheres of influence and possibility to women like Mitchison and her contemporaries.

Mitchison had been aware from early on of the politics of female emancipation through the activities of the suffragettes. Writing of her mother Maya, she noted:

Her feminism was very real. She always supported women in the professions, went to a woman doctor when possible and encouraged me to think of medicine as a career. But this was somewhat marred by the counterforce of being a lady. Thus, it was wrong that women

should not have the vote, but suffragettes had behaved in a deeply unladylike way. She was therefore a *suffragist*.<sup>30</sup>

A previously unpublished letter held in the Mitchison Archive of the National Library of Scotland further establishes her early awareness of these issues. Dated 1<sup>st</sup> June 1912, the letter discusses the conditions of suffragettes in the notorious Holloway Prison and is signed by Edith Hudson, one of Emily Pankhurst's contemporaries. As the letter is addressed to 'Dear Girls', it is not possible to prove conclusively that it was addressed to Mitchison (or her mother), but the fact that Mitchison deposited it in the National Library with a selection of her own early letters, allows us to speculate that she was aware of it at the time of writing.<sup>31</sup>

Such close proximity to iconoclastic people and events must have made a strong impression on her. In the first two volumes of autobiography, it is clear that, from an early age, Mitchison has an instinctive sense of injustice that she is not permitted to engage in certain activities that her brother Jack (known often as 'Boy') is. The two shared a fiercely competitive nature; Mitchison had gone with Jack to be the only girl at the progressive Dragon School in Oxford, and it was only when he progressed to Eton that she became aware of the extent to which she could not follow through the doors that were opening for her brother. Writing in *Small Talk* of her and Jack's early scientific curiosity, she wonders:

whether certain avenues of understanding were closed to me by what was considered suitable or unsuitable for a little girl. Not definitely closed, I think, since both my parents believed in feminine emancipation, but - there is a difference between theory and practice.<sup>32</sup>

Mitchison's involvement in the early movement for women's rights, particularly in terms of reproductive issues, becomes increasingly apparent in *You May Well Ask* through her (albeit half-hearted) membership of the 'International Women's League' and the Birth Control Research Committee which championed early methods of

<sup>30</sup> Mitchison, *Small Talk*, p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> This letter can be found in NLS Acc. 5885. Edith Hudson is listed on the *Roll of Honour of Suffragette Prisoners*, held by the British Library. In addition to this item, Acc. 5885 contains a letter addressed to Mitchison's uncle, Lord Haldane, dated 1914 which discusses the right to public protest and the unacceptability of forced feeding of suffragette prisoners, and is signed 'Oxford Suffragette'.

<sup>32</sup> Mitchison, *Small Talk*, p.30.

contraception.<sup>33</sup> She openly recommended Marie Stopes's groundbreaking guide *Married Love* (1918), and embraced socially permissive attitudes to sexual politics, including an open marriage with her husband.<sup>34</sup> Her fiction would also prove provocative for contemporary tastes through its straightforward portrayal of sexual liberation and use of 'off-limits' subjects such as abortion, specifically in her 1935 novel *We Have Been Warned*, discussed in the following chapter. Battles with Jonathan Cape and other publishers arose from her determination to retain in her books what she saw as a realistic reflection of women's experience in relation to these issues.

While Mitchison does not discuss her feminist beliefs in detail in her memoirs, the overall impression is of a young woman growing up into a new century which increasingly offers experiential opportunities for talented and adventurous young women like herself. In *Hide and Seek*, an unpublished manuscript, now held by the National Library of Scotland and discussed later in this chapter, she writes:

I managed to break away from the repressions of my girlhood and the mere fact of breaking away was educative [...] In a way this was part of a sometimes admirable feminism. My mother certainly had a vision of me as one of the first generation of women to be liberated [...] and become as intellectually free as - university professors, politicians, viceroys of India.<sup>35</sup>

With perhaps a nod to her chosen motto, 'Adventure to the Adventurous', Mitchison embraces the freedoms of her age, approaches the world with the assumption that she is as capable as any to fulfil a task and, perhaps what is crucial, that she has an equal *right* to at least try.<sup>36</sup>

As attitudes to the involvement of women in politics and public life altered throughout the 1930s, Mitchison took an increasing active role. She campaigned for the early Labour Party, standing unsuccessfully for the Scottish Universities in 1935, and had periods of involvement with both Scottish nationalism and the Communist

<sup>33</sup> See Mitchison, *Comments on Birth Control* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930).

<sup>34</sup> For details of the Mitchison's open marriage see letters: NM to Stella Benson, 1.10.26, NLS, Acc. 7644; NM to Olaf Stapledon, 'Monday', NM to Mr Withers, 'March 30<sup>th</sup>' NM to Walter Greenwood, '23<sup>rd</sup>', all , NLS, TD2980 2/3. A large correspondence tracing Mitchison's relationship with 'Widig' (Wade Gery) is to be found in NLS, TD2980 2/4.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchison, 'The Middle Drawer of the Bureau', *Hide and Seek*, NLS, Acc. 9914.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchison, *All Change Here*, p. 12.

Party.<sup>37</sup> In addition, she wrote journalism for a wide variety of publications, such as the (initially left-leaning) *Time and Tide*, and *The New Statesman*, as well as for the British daily press. As her circle of influence widened, Mitchison was surrounded by a broad selection of like-minded friends and contemporaries. In *You May Well Ask*, she describes the liberal salon of writers, politicians and artists that flourished at River Court, the substantial London house she and Dick had bought in 1923. 'The garden wall', she writes, in characteristic mood of the era:

had an outer brick wall on Rivercourt Road, on which in the Thirties I used to chalk slogans largely for the pleasure of telling the police who came to reprimand me that the wall was my property and I could do what I chose with it.<sup>38</sup>

The remoteness of this action from the formality of the Edwardian household so vividly described in *Small Talk* and *All Change Here* is evidence of the distance that she had travelled through her life depicted in her autobiographies and of her move in personal and feminist terms from private life to public interaction.

When considered in relation to the theoretical perspectives on women's autobiographical writing discussed earlier in this chapter, Mitchison's work can be seen to demonstrate many of the proposed aspects and tendencies. She is a woman writing her own experience, yet she does not feel herself bound to traditional constructions of the genre, choosing instead to present her life through a subject- and theme-based approach rather than through a chronological one. By subverting accepted structures of autobiography, Mitchison places herself in line with a more fluid 'female' tradition that defines itself as part of a greater whole, rather than through isolated achievement. As Brownley and Kimmich argue, 'The typical woman writer acknowledges that her life is part of a larger social fabric'.<sup>39</sup>

While this awareness of the familial and social structures into which she fits is apparent from early on in *Small Talk* and *All Change Here* through her focus on the

<sup>37</sup> Copies of Mitchison's 1935 parliamentary address can be found in NLS, TD2980 2/8.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 23. A short news item in *The Star*, entitled 'An Unlucky House' reports: 'Among the people who have suffered in the gales is Mrs Naomi Mitchison, the authoress. A 30 ft garden wall at her lovely old house in the Upper Mall, Hammersmith, has been blown down [...] River Court, where Mrs Mitchison does most of her writing, is in many ways an unfortunate house, for it was there that the big Thames flood in January, 1928, drowned two of the servants. (9 December 1929) NLS, Acc. 8503. This incident is also alluded to by Mitchison in *You May Well Ask*, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> Brownley, M.W. and Kimmich, A.B., *Women and Autobiography* (Delaware: SR Books, 1999), p. 1.



day-to-day activities surrounding her, it is her extraordinary decision in *You May Well Ask* to devote much of the text to the lives of those around her which is most strikingly divergent from the norm. The second half of *You May Well Ask* is a collection of 'Portraits in Letters' in which, through letters and memories, Mitchison characterises Aldous Huxley, Stevie Smith, E. M. Forster, Gerald Heard and others, in the 'hope that these letters I have put in will give a picture of the writers themselves and of the world in which they and I lived.'<sup>40</sup> It is surely the ultimate illustration of feminist theories of women's life-writing that Mitchison identifies herself as bound to and (at least partially) defined by the community in which she lives - a principle which, as discussed in Chapter Five, becomes increasingly apparent throughout her 'Scottish' fiction. The import of this decision in terms of personal identity is fully realised when compared to Gusdorf's definition of man as an 'individual unity'.<sup>41</sup> As Susan Stanford Friedman argues:

Individualistic paradigms do not take into account the central role collective consciousness of self plays in the lives of women and minorities. They do not recognise the significance of interpersonal relationships and community in women's self-definition.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, Shari Benstock has noted that, 'the self that would reside at the textual centre is decentred - often absent altogether - in women's autobiographical texts',<sup>43</sup> a description which fits well with the focus of *You May Well Ask*.

It is clear, therefore, that Mitchison's work does fit, in many ways, with contemporary theories of a female autobiographical form. However, to argue that she was primarily defined by her gender, and that her work should be principally examined from a gendered perspective would, I believe, be to propose an oversimplified and reductive portrait of a complex person and body of work. Gender theory often runs the risk of biological determinism and it would be ironic to apply such a philosophy to a writer who strove to escape the very limitations that such boundaries imply. Watson and Smith have recently argued that the privileging of

<sup>40</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 85.

<sup>41</sup> Gusdorf, G., 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 38.

<sup>42</sup> Friedman, S.S., 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice', *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. S. Smith and J. Watson (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Benstock, S., 'The Female Self-Engendered', *Women and Autobiography* (Delaware: SR Books, 1999), p. 9.

gender opposition over other aspects of character 'effectively erases the complex and often contradictory positionings of the subject.'<sup>44</sup> While some writers appear to favour one particular cultural model in their representation of self, most would cite a range of influences in their make-up. This holds true for Mitchison and, while I do not deny that her gender played an important role in her identity, and therefore the way in which she portrayed herself within her autobiographical writings, I would argue that notions of class played at least as great a role in her sense of self-knowledge and her identification with a particular social grouping.

Mitchison's notably privileged background, raised earlier, provided her with a tradition and a sense of belonging and 'right' not available to many contemporary women writers. Discussing her contribution to and involvement with the early feminist movement, Mitchison's most recent biographer, Jenni Calder, has suggested that:

Perhaps because she did not have to fight for outlets and from the beginning wrote from a secure social and economic base, she was never associated with the avant-garde feminist writing of an older generation of women writers, such as Dorothy Richardson or Catherine Carswell.<sup>45</sup>

Mitchison's social background, both in terms of financial security and status dramatically alters (even outweighs) assumptions that can often be made about the position of women writers. While her choice to depict her experiences in autobiography is as legitimate as any others, it must be acknowledged that she did not suffer from many of the explicit or implicit boundaries within which women have historically worked. On a simple level, Mitchison never lacked the 'room of her own' articulated by Woolf, and, for much of her life, had a private income which allowed her to focus on her writing and other interests and commitments without the need to earn money. Her five surviving children all attended boarding schools, and the running of a large household, while she remained closely involved, was the responsibility of a number of house-staff who she employed throughout her life, unwilling to acknowledge the contradictions between this and her long-articulated

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Anderson, L., *Autobiography: The Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> Calder, J., *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London: Virago, 1997), p. 108.

socialist beliefs. On a less tangible level, Mitchison's class gave her the benefits of tradition and the fundamental security implicit in that. Through a long lineage of influential ancestors, and the more immediate access to political power and landed affluence of living family members, the need to write one's self into a tradition must have been less strong an impulse than for the majority of women writers who wrote without the security of the past or access to contemporary influence.<sup>46</sup> While it can be argued that this lack of tradition is relevant to all women within a patriarchal culture, it is particularly pertinent to women writers who by 'attempting the pen' are working without the safety net of a predominantly masculine canon, enjoyed by other writers. When considered in relation to the overwhelmingly male autobiographical tradition, the effect of this position is clearly appreciable with, for many women writers (if not for Mitchison) the production of a female 'life' read as a step into debatable land.

The acknowledgement that Mitchison was never truly marginalised, and that the benefits of class outweighed the disadvantages brought by her status as a woman writer does not, however, undermine her attempts or her need to write herself into her own tradition, or to document her life. For all her privileges, Mitchison was not in as secure a position as her class would have allowed her had she been born a boy. The clearest indication of this can be found in *Friends and Kindred: The Memoirs of Louisa Kathleen Haldane*, her mother's autobiography which was published in 1961, and is discussed in detail later in this chapter. For while Louisa Haldane (or 'Maya') reserves a chapter exclusively for Mitchison's brother Jack, entitled 'My Son', in which she details his early childhood, school successes and adult achievements, she does not feel it necessary to similarly document the existence of her equally successful daughter, Naomi. This absence, in what is an otherwise carefully constructed *Life*, seems a glaring and value-filled decision and, as such supports Mitchison's determination to write her life into this space.

### **iii: *Hide and Seek***

There is a clear objective within Mitchison's autobiographical writing to place her life in relation to both contemporary society, as she does in *You May Well Ask*, and in

<sup>46</sup> Early reviewers of Mitchison's work are quick to allude to her familial pedigree. *The News of the World*, no less, reviewing her *When the Bough Breaks* notes that: 'The Haldanes are always trotted out as examples of heredity ability. The latest item is Mrs Naomi Mitchison, Lord Haldane's niece, who has perpetrated two clever novels.' (?1925), while *The Yorkshire Post* remarks: 'Always interested in eugenics and heredity and the right environment for babies, she took the trouble herself to be born into the right family.' (?1928/9). Both NLS, Acc. 8503.

relation to family and familial inheritance. In *Small Talk* and *All Change Here*, Mitchison describes life with her parents and their conflicting political views, holidays at Cloan with 'Granniema', and the awe inspired by Uncle Richard's trappings of state office. These portraits, however, reveal only a child's perspective on those around her, and in the three volumes she does not explore in great detail the influence of ancestral family on her development of character. This she does in a fourth volume of autobiography entitled *Hide and Seek* which, although completed, was never published and exists as heavily-annotated typescript in the archives of the National Library of Scotland. This full length text is previously unexplored apart from a passing mention by Jenni Calder in *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, in which she notes that Mitchison used the text to '[weave] together reminiscence, history, and her own thoughts on the nature of inheritance.'<sup>47</sup>

*Hide and Seek* is an illuminating and sometimes poignant text in which Mitchison explores, through the letters, furniture, china and *objet d'art* left by her forebears, whatever fragments of character and personality she can discern, so as to understand herself and her actions in a wider, historical context. 'In exploring my ancestors', she writes:

I explore myself and for this reason I shall come into the book more than perhaps a nice modest female should do. Our ancestors should give us confidence and a measure of courage, but they also warn us of what we have inside us, the scared rabbits and the ravening wolves. If we know what our genes are we may be able to direct them. So I look for myself and my own descendants.<sup>48</sup>

This text, which Mitchison ostensibly describes as 'social history', centres round the life of James Stuart, the brother of her maternal grandfather, and while the National Library Accessions paper catalogue mentions it as having been published under the alternative title 'Cousin James', the only supporting evidence for this is one copy of the typescript of entitled 'Cousin James' in NLS TD2980 2/15. The manuscript is also undated, although a reference to the eternal clutter of her writing desk 'at Mochudi in

<sup>47</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 274.

<sup>48</sup> Mitchison, 'The Middle Drawer of the Bureau', *Hide and Seek*, NLS, Acc. 9914.

the middle of Botswana' allows us to positively date the manuscript after 1962 when, as discussed in Chapter Three, she first visited the African subcontinent.<sup>49</sup>

From the successes, mistakes and fates of her ancestors, Mitchison considers her own actions and achievements, and questions the way in which the inheritance of family traits can help or hinder future generations. 'I ask this', she writes towards the end of the text:

both for myself and my dead brother. And then I ask, can we be sure of the Daimon? Can we know when a voice speaks so strongly that we have to discard all the natural loyalties of class, family, country, what you will?<sup>50</sup>

Out of the driftwood that she gathers through time, Mitchison appears most conscious of the missed opportunities of her female antecedents who, for all the access to social status and affluent living associated with their class, were denied the right to the intellectual freedoms she has enjoyed. She sees herself, therefore, at a pivotal point in a long family history, as the first woman to break away and live life on her own terms. This is clear from the following passage, in which she also makes reference to her 1947 novel *The Bull Calves*, a text that drew closely on her genealogy, and is further discussed in Chapter Five.

Among the Trotters, Stuarts and Stranges, it looks as through the women had been the strong-minded, those who were comparatively certain of themselves and their abilities. And cannot one also see some of the basic stupidity that often lies behind strong-mindedness? None of them ever quite broke out. My mother never won her early battle to be educated and become a doctor, nor her other battle to go to India. The social setting was always too much for her - that and the inability to be ruthless, to give pain to the Loved Ones.

<sup>49</sup> Mitchison had been to Africa prior to this date, visiting Egypt, Ghana and Nigeria in the late 1950s, but first went to Botswana in 1962. *Hide and Seek* can also be dated to after 1964 by the following quotation which refers to her 'dead brother', JBS Haldane.

<sup>50</sup> Mitchison, *Hide and Seek*, p. 221. Daimon (or daemon) can be defined as 'an attendant or indwelling spirit. One's genius'. The image of the bull calf was a recurring one throughout Mitchison's writings. 'Poor little bull calf' she remarks in her Mass-Observation diary, on being told her first grand-child is expected, *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945* ed. Dorothy Sheridan (London: Gollancz, 1985; Phoenix Press, 2000), p. 197, while a letter to Zita Crossland, dated Feb/March ?1935 is signed by Mitchison, 'All my love, Your Bull-Calf'. NLS, TD2980 1/4.

I was the first female of the family to get over that one, but by then we had Burden Sanderson and Haldane blood as well; we were the bull calves. And we poked our noses into the future.<sup>51</sup>

The perspective of *Hide and Seek*, in which Mitchison examines her life and personality through the nature of inherited characteristics, is of interest on two levels. Firstly, as in her three published volumes of autobiography, Mitchison attempts to illuminate herself through a focus on others. The fact that these characters are part of her ancestral community rather than the contemporary one which surrounds her, reveals yet another imaginative and personal adaptation of the process of autobiographical writing. Secondly, by following Mitchison's lead, and considering her autobiographical work in the light of previous family writing, a pattern emerges, which is the focus of the following discussion.

#### ***iv: Friends and Kindred and A Record of a Hundred Years***

Mitchison's four volumes of autobiography, part self-exploration, part social history, are a fascinating body of work in themselves, but looked at in a wider, familial context they become even more unusual. For Mitchison was the third generation of Haldane women to produce autobiographical writing, which, taken together, reveal an unbroken continuity of life writing covering the lives of women living between 1825 and 1999. The existence of women's autobiography from three generations of one family would be rare in itself, but the early nature of this work makes it all the more remarkable. In addition to Mitchison's volumes, the texts in question here are, *Friends and Kindred: The Memoirs of Louisa Kathleen Haldane* (1961), written by Mitchison's mother 'Maya' at the instigation of Mitchison and her daughter Lois, and mentioned earlier, and *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years, 1825-1925* (1925), written by Mitchison's paternal grandmother 'Granniema' of Cloan, and edited and compiled on her death by her daughter Elizabeth (Mitchison's 'Aunt Bay').<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Mitchison, *Hide and Seek*, p. 219.

<sup>52</sup> Included in *Friends and Kindred* is a family tree, compiled by Mitchison with a note: 'This family tree shows only part of the Scottish Lowlands. Nor, in most cases, does it show the full family, and perhaps step-family, with the ten or a dozen children who were often born, though not all came to maturity. There were many more cousin marriages than I have shown; it would have been too complicated to put in the full Abercromby, Portal, Horner and other relations. [...] In addition to cousin marriages, there were also marriages to heiresses – that is to say, only daughters, denoting usually, a strain of infertility. Nobody so far has worked out the genetic effects of all this, but at fifteen I made up my mind to marry someone completely unrelated.'

As important players through the centuries in politics, the church, the military and the arts, the Haldane family have been prolific writers and polemicists. The works they produced cover a wide range of subjects, which as well as a number of autobiographies, include biography, science, philosophy, sermons, economics, translation and literature. Taken together, these can be seen to reflect the extent of influence and ability of Mitchison's forebears. Described by her as 'the hell of an intellectual heredity',<sup>53</sup> over two hundred titles by direct ancestors are held in Glasgow University Library alone, dating back to the early eighteenth century. As seen in *Hide and Seek*, Mitchison was very much aware of this legacy, and this is evident in her description of a visit to the National Library of Scotland in 1941:

Meikle [the librarian] saw me as part of Scottish history, descendant and representative of the Haldanes and indeed of all the great families whose blood is mixed in mine – for indeed there is scarcely one of them that isn't represented, Highland and Lowland. And I felt in turn the pride and responsibility.<sup>54</sup>

Having therefore established the existence of three generations of women's autobiographical writing from one family, it is possible to trace within these texts the development of personal beliefs, character traits and social attitudes, as attempted by Mitchison in *Hide and Seek*. While this is a relatively easy objective within the male autobiographical canon, the rarity of documented female experience – Woolf's 'Lives of the obscure' – makes this example exceptional.<sup>55</sup> A comparison of Mitchison's four volumes of autobiographical writing, and those of Louisa Kathleen and Mary Elizabeth Haldane reveal two major themes that echo through the female family line, to do with issues of gender and class.

The natural sense of injustice Mitchison feels at the inequality of women's rights, discussed in *Small Talk* and *All Change Here*, is similarly perceived by her grandmother as a young child. Where (as previously highlighted) Maya writes her

<sup>53</sup> Mitchison, N., *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*, ed. Dorothy Sheridan (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), p. 179. Mitchison was clearly conscious of her ancestry, noting earlier in the diary that her Glasgow dentist 'reveres me as a Haldane!', p. 81.

<sup>54</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, pp. 169-70. This quotation also appears in Chapter Five in relation to *The Bull Calves*. While it is not the purpose of this chapter to explore in detail the wider implications of Mitchison's Haldane legacy, its sheer extent, and the context it gives both Mitchison's work and the autobiographical writing of her mother and grandmother makes it noteworthy.

<sup>55</sup> Woolf, V., 'Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown', *Collected Essays Vol III* (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 384.

daughter Naomi out of her autobiography, so Mary Haldane's name is left off the foundation stone of her father's colliery, while her brother's is inscribed for posterity. 'From that time forward', she writes:

the fact of being merely a daughter rankled in my mind, and during my childhood, and for years afterwards, I used to feel as if I was nothing to anybody.<sup>56</sup>

An awareness of the social inequalities of women, and a nascent form of the feminist ideology fully developed in Mitchison two generations later, is also apparent in Mary Haldane's complaint that:

In my youth a married woman had no more position than a cat, and it was my intention to be a missionary and devote my life to the care of the heathen.<sup>57</sup>

Mitchison's mother is equally conscious of the disadvantages of marriage for independently-minded young women and admits in *Friends and Kindred*, 'I strongly objected to the farce of being 'given away'', while later complaining, 'I [...] found my change of name irritating and inconvenient'.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, discussing her mother's progressive belief in women's rights, Mary Haldane's daughter Elizabeth writes:

I think it was partly her feeling for the unfortunate of her sex that made her sensitive to the position of women generally and anxious that their interests should be guarded by law; she felt very keenly about the inequalities that then existed, and she was a supporter of granting the suffrage to women very much for this reason.<sup>59</sup>

Mitchison's grandmother lived to the age of one hundred, and at eighty-four was still writing letters to *The Times* in support of suffrage, revealing a fundamental belief in

<sup>56</sup> Haldane, M. E., *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years, 1825-1925* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925), p. 47.

<sup>57</sup> Haldane, M.E., *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years, 1825-1925*, p. 157.

<sup>58</sup> Haldane, L. K., *Friends and Kindred: The Memoirs of Louisa Kathleen Haldane* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 152 and p. 184.

<sup>59</sup> Haldane, M.E., *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years*, p. 101.



equality and a spirited character which find clear echoes in Mitchison's own life and work.<sup>60</sup>

The second theme to emerge in a comparison of the autobiographical writings of the three women, is that of class. From an aristocratic line, all were aware of the social and community responsibilities that accompanied the privileges of their class. Although Mitchison would argue at times that she wished to challenge the Scottish class system, her role as Highland Laird, and her vision of local kinship and personal responsibility had much in common with the notions of duty exhibited by her older female relatives.

For Mitchison's mother, the responsibilities of class manifested themselves largely in terms of Empire, organising political meetings, and entertaining students from 'the colonies', dedication to which later brought her an OBE.<sup>61</sup> In *Hide and Seek*, Mitchison outlines her mother's belief in the *noblesse oblige* of class:

One merited one's place because of services to society, but one was free to choose them and one must accept the discipline that went with them. One could, for example, go out and govern (for their own good) the lesser breeds of the British Empire which was a great testing ground of service and discipline and of the loyalties both to one's own kind and class and of those served, whether the latter wanted it or not.

When she saw my father in service to mankind, to miners, divers, above all soldiers in World War One, she whole-heartedly supported him [...] she did everything possible to help, which meant for example, tearing up dress after dress to make into experimental gas masks. The dresses were not replaced; this was part of the service.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, in *A Record of a Hundred Years*, Mary Haldane's daughter describes her mother's 'deepest concern' for the inhabitants of Auchterarder near her Cloan estate. Thus, with an instinctive duty of care to the surrounding community mirrored a hundred years later by Mitchison at Carradale, Mary Haldane hosted parties at the

<sup>60</sup> See example in Haldane, M.E., *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years*, pp. 101-3.

<sup>61</sup> In a letter dated 30.4.18, Aldous Huxley, a close family friend, notes that 'Mrs H. performs the duties of gardener, war-worker, grandmother, farmer and marraine to some thousands of soldiers with her usual fabulous energy'. *The Letters of Aldous Huxley* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969).

<sup>62</sup> Mitchison, *Hide and Seek*, NLS Acc. 9914.

'Big House' for the local people, and constructed a village hall which was subsequently 'used by many different sorts of gatherings.'<sup>63</sup>

The reciprocal nature of this relationship was manifested in the respect and gratitude exhibited by the local community to Mary Haldane, a balance which Mitchison, living in a less deferential age, would frequently find elusive. At Mary Haldane's death in 1925, the Provost of Auchterarder summed up her understanding of the responsibilities of class which once again provide a template for the actions of her grand-daughter in her own adopted community of Carradale. 'Tonight', he said,

we are mourning her loss - a loss which we all feel as a community, and which will find an echo throughout our whole country. Mrs Haldane was a remarkable personality. Possessed of rare talents, she used them for the highest ends. Noblesse Oblige had no idle meaning for Mrs Haldane. All her gifts were laid out to usury. She was a great example to every rank and condition of the people.<sup>64</sup>

The examples of these texts highlight the shared sense of social inequality and class responsibility felt by these three women and transmitted through their joint autobiographical writings. While each is a product of its own time, collectively, they offer a rare written insight into the experiences of three women from one family. In addition, the texts provide a very personal context in which to view Mitchison's own autobiographical work. *A Record of a Hundred Years* includes a tribute to Mary Haldane by an old friend which reads:

She was unique. The charm and graciousness of her old age adorned, but did not hide, her massive intellect and personality. No woman has ever given me so great an impression of strength.<sup>65</sup>

What is notable about this eulogy is its applicability to each of the three generations as they represent themselves in print. Through the autobiographical writings of Mary, Louisa and Naomi can be traced the lives of three generations of exceptional, highly literate women. In addition to this personal perspective, their words and actions are significant as representation of a larger movement by women from the private,

<sup>63</sup> Haldane, M. E., *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years*, p. 104 and p. 105.

<sup>64</sup> Haldane, M. E., *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years*, p. 150.

<sup>65</sup> Haldane, M. E., *Mary Elizabeth Haldane: A Record of a Hundred Years*, p. 154.

domestic world of the nineteenth century 'spiritual autobiography', through the first cautious moves into public life, and finally towards full political and social involvement as Mitchison, the first of the 'bull calves', embraced the opportunities of her time.

The four volumes of autobiography by Mitchison discussed in this chapter take the reader through her life from her earliest childhood experiences to the outbreak of the Second World War. Until her death in 1999, Mitchison's need to document her life continued unabated, and in the following chapter, I will consider her use of the diary as an autobiographical form, detailing the years which fall outwith the period of *Small Talk*, *All Change Here*, *You May Well Ask* and *Hide and Seek*.

## Chapter Two

### 'It is always a bore being ahead of one's time': The Diaries of Naomi Mitchison

I look at this account of my life so many years back. Some of this comes new to me though I must have written it. It is odd that events or sights that I remember most vividly don't seem to have made it to the diary [...] There was so much more, but the seasons repeat themselves, the branches break.

Naomi Mitchison

Foreword, *Among You Taking Notes*

The forms of autobiographical and self-reflexive writing which are the focus of this thesis often fall within genres traditionally seen as comprising 'women's texts' and have, as so often with writing by women, been viewed as less prestigious forms, marginalised within the literary canon. Following on from the previous chapter's discussion of personal memoir, this chapter explores Mitchison's use of the diary as a vehicle for self-representation and the influence that her position as an established writer and public figure had on the production of these texts. In addition, this chapter also examines the implications of the diary as an ostensibly private document, written as, or becoming, a public text.

Divided into three sections, the chapter first examines the evolution of critical recognition of the diary as a literary genre in recent decades, and the problems inherent in the discussion of an often very personal and diverse form of writing. Within this, I consider the influence of feminist re-interpretations of women's autobiographical writings in bringing about a renewed interest in these texts.

Section Two looks at the character and purpose of two diaries by Mitchison, published and unpublished, which date from the nineteen-thirties. An untitled, full-length manuscript held by the National Library of Scotland documents her trip to Communist Russia with the Fabian Society in 1932 and is referred to in this chapter as the *Russian Diary*.<sup>1</sup>

\* Mitchison, Naomi, *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison, 1939-1945* ed. Dorothy Sheridan (London: Gollancz, 1985; Phoenix Press, 2000), p. 181 (Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1942).

<sup>1</sup> Extracts from this diary were published in 1932 as 'Pages from a Russian Diary', *Modern Scot* 3:3 (Autumn 1932), pp. 229-36 and, more recently in *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939* ed. Margery Palmer McCulloch (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004), pp. 209-12.

Written and published two years later, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* (1934) is an account of her time as a Socialist supporter of 'Red Vienna' in the period leading up to the Dollfuss Affair.<sup>2</sup> As these diaries are largely political in theme and content, the aim is to consider the ways in which they negotiate the dichotomy between a traditionally private form of writing as opposed to its focus on external themes and its publication.

Section Three introduces Mitchison's most extensive autobiographical undertaking, a million-word diary for the Mass-Observation movement, which covers the period 1939-1945. Originally written anonymously for an anthropological project, an abridged version was published in 1985 as *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*. The publication of this shortened version of the text raises questions about the editorial decisions implicit in the process of preparing a private diary for the public domain. Throughout this study, page references to Mitchison's Mass-Observation diary are to the published version, except where noted otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that this chapter does not attempt to provide an all-encompassing survey of Mitchison's diary writing. Many fragments exist in the archives of the National Library of Scotland in notebooks, often hand-written in pencil and in a fragile state of preservation.<sup>4</sup> Mitchison wrote notebooks extensively throughout her life. They are a mixture of diaries, book plans, poems, addresses and shopping lists, always in her familiar scrawl, and of mixed use to the researcher. In a letter to Tom Harrisson, the founder of Mass-Observation, Mitchison remarked:

I don't know what of my papers would interest Mass Obs. I gave a certain number of Scottish interest ones to the Edinburgh National

<sup>2</sup> The 'Dollfuss Affair' was the attempt, in 1933, of the fascist Austrian Chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuss, to govern Austria by dictatorship. Encouraged by Mussolini, Dollfuss's aim was to oppose 'Anschluss' the proposed political union between Austria and Germany in the wake of the Great Depression. Hostile to both the Nazis and Communists, Dollfuss declared a fascist constitution in May 1934 and was murdered by Nazis in July of that year. Having removed Dollfuss and secured Mussolini's acquiescence, Hitler completed the unification in March 1938, largely unopposed by the Austrian people.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank the Trustees of the Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex, for the use of M-O A material in this chapter. A second typescript copy of this diary is held by the National Library of Scotland, TD2980 2/0.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchison's diaries, some of which are discussed in this chapter, can be found in the National Library of Scotland in Accessions 9201, 10753, 10807, 10899, 10840 and 10888. Diaries are also to be found in the papers deposited at NLS in 2003. See TD2980 1/3, 2/0 and 2/7.

Library [...] and god help the poor bastards who try and turn them into PhD theses!<sup>5</sup>

Others diaries and notebooks are alluded to by Mitchison in interviews and writing, but are lost, or not yet within the public domain.<sup>6</sup> These diaries are, perhaps, the ones which remain truly private, and this chapter is therefore, of necessity, selective.

### **i: The Diary as Autobiography**

From its inception, the diary, and its close relative the journal, has been a mode of writing produced by both men and women. However, the historical tendency of women to employ the diary as a vehicle for self-expression, in preference to alternative forms of writing, was governed by discernible socio-economic conditions similar to those which influenced the production of autobiography, as discussed in the previous chapter. All forms of self-reflexive or confessional literature, autobiography, diaries, journals and letters, can be written in public spaces through short bursts of concentration, without the space and time needed for the production of prose fiction or prolonged narrative. The economic and social proscription of Woolf's 'room of one's own' can again be seen coming into play in the historical preponderance of the diary as a workable genre for the female writer. In addition to practical concerns, the essentially private nature of the diary provided a socially acceptable means of writing which, like the 'spiritual autobiography', did not risk transgressing the boundaries of the domestic to intrude upon the public sphere of publishing and its associated impropriety.<sup>7</sup>

While both diaries and autobiography share characteristics familiar to life-writing such as the correspondence of author and protagonist, and have both been marginalised literary forms, they differ when considered in terms of temporal perspective. Autobiography, typically written towards the end of a life, benefits from

<sup>5</sup> NM to TH, 15<sup>th</sup> September 197[1], Box 5, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex. I am inclined to agree, although on one such notebook, Mitchison has tantalisingly scrawled 'Essential to anyone doing a book about me' on the front. National Library of Scotland, TD2980 2/9.

<sup>6</sup> NM: '...I have written at various times. I've written diaries over periods of stress, periods of public interest and once I did another whole year.'

CF: 'Just for fun?'

NM: 'Yes, just to see what it would be like. It was a vague idea that Penguin wanted to do but it wasn't certain.' [Extract from unpublished interview with NM by Angus Calder and Christine Fitton, September 1982, in Carradale, Scotland. Box 5, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex.]

<sup>7</sup> Harriet Blodgett, discussing the historical development of the diary in relation to spiritual concerns writes: 'The diary of conscience was the ancestor of the secular diary preoccupied with the inner life, that was to emerge in less religious times.' *'Capacious Hold-All': An Anthology of English Women's Diary Writing* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1991), pp. 3-4.

the revisionary possibilities of retrospect. The diary, however, written daily or soon after an event, does not allow for the clarity of hindsight and can therefore be seen to provide a fluctuating, and potentially less unified projection of self. Additionally, the diarist, living and writing from day to day, unlike the autobiographer or omniscient novelist, is unaware as to the conclusion of their text, granting them less control over its production.

It is, however, naive to view the diary (as critical opinion has long done) as an essentially artless form, written for the moment and with little literary or critical merit. For while it is true that the diary lacks the polished retrospective viewpoint of other literary modes, its content, descriptions and characterisation are still controlled by, and subject to, the subjective interpretations of its author. Discussing this, Judy Simons argues that:

As in all autobiographical writing, the diary constructs a fictional persona, a version of the self that the diarist wishes to project, however unconsciously.<sup>8</sup>

This view is particularly pertinent when discussing the diaries of professional writers like Mitchison. While not subject to the same level of revision and professional concern as their other work, the writer's diary remains a document that is written with an ear for language and an awareness of descriptive possibility. In respect of this, Simons writes:

It is unfortunate that even today, when their work is being granted a critical attention it was often originally denied, the diaries of women writers are still seen merely as a footnote to their main oeuvre, offering biographical insights but ignored as important literary documents.<sup>9</sup>

A distinction must also be drawn between the diaries of 'ordinary' women for whom the diary was their only available mode of autobiographical writing, and experienced writers such as Mitchison (or Virginia Woolf) who wrote extensively in many genres, some of which provided self-reflexive opportunities and alternative vehicles for literary identity-construction.

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<sup>8</sup> Simons, Judy, 'Secret Exhibitionists: Women and their Diaries'. *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf* (London: MacMillan, 1990), p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Simons, Judy, 'Conclusion', *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women*, p. 204.

The self-reflexive element of the diary, often seen as a fundamental component of the genre, is however challenged by the texts on which this chapter focuses. While Mitchison uses her diaries to construct and to re-affirm her personal and national identity, – an argument that I explore in more detail in reference to the texts below – the initial purpose of these diaries is to observe and document surrounding events and people, rather than to act as a mirror to the author. It is not possible to determine the extent to which the alternative forms of writing open to Mitchison lessened her need to use the diary explicitly as a means of self-reflection, but it was a literary distinction of which she was aware. Explaining the conception of her *Vienna Diary*, Mitchison describes herself primarily as an 'observer' of public events, (as she would later be for the Mass-Observation movement), rather than a diarist of private thoughts and feelings. She later qualifies this description, emphasising the personal nature of the text, by adding:

Well then, I'm an observer. I'm also a Socialist, and my observations will be the observations of a Socialist, just as they'll be the observations of a woman of thirty-six, of someone brought up before the war, partly scientist, partly historian, nothing complete, the usual set of odds and ends that my social class and circumstances are likely to produce. So I shan't be objective. But, then, nobody is, so that doesn't matter.<sup>10</sup>

Yet while this and other diaries by Mitchison are perhaps less explicitly focused on the self than the genre norm, their creation remained of fundamental importance for her negotiation of national, political and personal identities at various times of her life.

As mentioned above, a diary written by a previously published author also raises questions over the features that distinguish texts initially intended as private documents from those created for the public domain. Discussing this, Lynn Z. Bloom argues that:

For the professional writer there are no private writings [...] The writer's mind is invariably alert to the concerns of an audience and shapes the text, even diaries and letters, to accommodate these. The

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<sup>10</sup> Mitchison, N., *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* (London: Gollancz, 1934), pp. 10-1.



private performance may be less polished than the manuscript destined for publication from the outset, but once a writer, like an actor, is audience-oriented, such considerations as telling a good story, getting the sounds and rhythm right, supplying sufficient detail for another's understanding, can never be excluded [...] The professional writer is never off-duty.<sup>11</sup>

Mitchison also blurs the distinction between private and public in her diaries through the inclusion of sensitive information in work which she knows is destined to be read by others. Interviewing Mitchison about the publication of her often very personal Mass-Observation diary, Dorothy Sheridan raised this issue and received a typically candid response:

DS: Did it ever bother you that you were writing a lot of personal things down and that other people were going to read them?

NM: No that's never bothered me much, I'm a terrible extrovert! And I couldn't care less what people think about me, which I suppose is in some ways a good idea at any rate from the point of view of history.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, irrespective of the disclosure of personal detail, the public diary can arguably be differentiated from its private incarnation through the extent to which it is a self-contained text, internally coherent, and without the need for external or editorial clarification. This definition of a public text is consistent with Mitchison's work, in particular *Among You Taking Notes*, the published version of her Mass-Observation diary, edited by Dorothy Sheridan, which even without its introduction, list of main characters, and occasional editorial intervention, would have remained a well-developed, self-explanatory document.

It can be argued that, apart from the most coded of private diaries, all are written with an audience in mind, even if that audience is only the author herself. The diarist has also historically assumed the job of documenting domestic life, a role which conjures images of the diary written for and read to a family or local audience.

<sup>11</sup> Bloom, Lynn Z., "'I Write for Myself and Strangers': Private Diaries as Public Documents', *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts, 1996), pp. 24-5.

<sup>12</sup> Extract of DS interviewing NM for *Stranger than Fiction*, a BFI production screened on Channel 4 in 1987. Mitchison interview was not used in the final cut. Video NBM1, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

Aboard the 'Morvern' in February 1940, Denny MacIntosh, a Carradale fisherman, writes to Mitchison:

Naomi Dear,

It is a revelation to me to read your diary it is so interesting. I am now past the place where you tussle with the Russians. O yes, I will have a chat with you about it again. You are just splendid my lass.<sup>13</sup>

While Mitchison herself makes only one reference to reading publicly the diaries under discussion in this chapter (quoted below), she regularly notes the use of friends and relatives as sounding boards for her other writing. This, along with her willingness to share the details of her private life, seen in the quotations above, allows us to speculate that this method was also employed in the production of her diaries.

The nature of the assumed audience is an influential factor in determining the tone and content of any text, and is central to the diaries written by Mitchison during the mid nineteen-thirties, and explored in the following section. Through the largely political character of these texts, it is also possible to discern a tendency for an observational, descriptive authorial perspective (rather than a fundamentally self-referential one) which pre-dates the aims and methods of the Mass-Observation movement, explored in Section Three of this chapter.

## **ii: Mitchison's Political Diaries**

As highlighted above, many of Mitchison's diaries, in particular those which date from the inter-war period, were not employed primarily as vehicles for literary self-reflection. Rather, they can be read as semi-public documents, created not as an exploration of inner existence, but as a portrait of surrounding life and events. Responding to questions over the extent to which texts such as these can be positioned within the diary genre, Harriet Blodgett argues:

All diarists pursue an interest in self, even those who keep public diaries, which may not focus on the writer herself, but still record only her choice of subjects. Diaries support and reinforce the sense of being an important entity, someone whose perceptions matter.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Denny MacIntosh to NM, 18<sup>th</sup> February 1940 'Morvern', NLS, TD2980 2/1.

<sup>14</sup> Blodgett, 'Introduction', *Capacious Hold-All: An Anthology of Englishwomen's Diary Writing*, p. 8.

By recording her reactions to the changing nature of society in these texts, Mitchison can be seen to articulate to herself (and to other potential readers), the emergence of a political and social awareness by means of which she would move beyond the expected bounds of her class and gender. As such, the developing world-view of the diaries discussed in this chapter *can* be read as reflexive, tracing the negotiation of Mitchison's personal route through the rapidly changing first half of the twentieth century.

The first extended example of this use of the genre is Mitchison's diary of her visit to the USSR in 1932. Travelling as part of a delegation organised by the Fabian Society, Mitchison visited the Soviet Union with a group of left-wing intellectuals and artists. Although she was by this time a well-established writer of fiction, she was slightly uneasy at being surrounded by those she saw as 'professionals', and when asked what her specialist research interest was, she announced she would be investigating 'Archaeology and Abortion. Two A's'.<sup>15</sup> The choice of subject is significant, reflecting an already established interest in the promotion of birth control methods, and her use of ancient artefacts as inspiration for her historical fiction. Her investigation of these topics is seen throughout the diary as she visited (and was often critical of) both museums and health clinics. More generally throughout the trip, Mitchison also used her diary to explore the possibilities for social equality offered by communism, and the role of class and feminism within this context.

Now held in manuscript by the National Library of Scotland, this diary was never published and is therefore untitled, but is referred to here as the *Russian Diary*. Although the diary is a very personal response to life in Soviet Russia, Mitchison used it the following year as the basis for a chapter on 'Archaeology and the Intellectual Worker' in *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, edited by Margaret Cole, and published by the New Fabian Research Bureau.<sup>16</sup> In later years, she also used the diary as a source for piecing together memories for her final volume of autobiography, *You May Well Ask: 1920-1940* (1986). Coming back to the diary retrospectively, she writes:

The book-length diary I kept of the trip has excellent portraits of some of my fellow voyagers: Pethick Lawrence, Weldon and Opie, Kitty

<sup>15</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (London: Gollancz, 1979; Flamingo, 1986), p. 187.

<sup>16</sup> Mitchison, N., 'Archaeology and the Intellectual Worker', *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, ed. Margaret Cole (London: New Fabian Research Bureau, 1933), pp. 249-64.

Muggeridge, Christina Foyle [...] and above all my cousin Graeme [...] It was clearly an emotional experience, not only for me, but for most of the people who started off from Tower Bridge, across the North Sea, along the Kiel canal [...] and on to Leningrad, whether they were members of the SSIP or others, enquirers or devotees.<sup>17</sup>

Handling the diary after many years, she also notes its physical condition, writing, 'The paper of the diary is dry and brown and brittle. The first and last pages are gone. Like me it nears its end.'<sup>18</sup> This was written in 1979, and while the last pages remain lost, I have located the initial page in the archives of the National Library of Scotland.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, even without its final words, the 252 surviving typescript pages of the diary are a substantial record of her exploration of socialist and communist theory in practice, and of her evolving political, social and feminist awareness in the early 1930s.

It is clear from the diary that Mitchison, and those with whom she travelled, saw communism's emphasis on the group and the decreasing significance of the individual, as a possible social model for the West. It was a time when many, including Mitchison, were beginning to acknowledge the need to approach the future from a radically new perspective. In this, Mitchison had been influenced by her friend Gerald Heard whose zeitgeist-capturing work *The Ascent of Humanity: An Essay on the Evolution of Civilisation from Group Consciousness through Individuality to Super-consciousness* had been published in 1929. In the decades after the First World War, as previous social and moral certainties collapsed, the Soviet Union appeared, for many British socialists, to offer communality and collective living as a viable and necessary form of social organisation.

Yet Mitchison was by no means a whole-hearted convert to communism. Her political instinct would always be socialist rather than communist. This was in contrast to her brother JBS Haldane, who was actively involved in the Communist Party of Great Britain and who, arguably, was more rigorous in his acknowledgement of the contradictions inherent in playing the role of the aristocratic socialist.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchison, 'Archaeology and the Intellectual Worker', *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, p. 188. The SSIP was the Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> The main MS is stored in NLS Acc. 10899, while another copy of the opening sequence, including the lost first page can be found in Acc. 10753. Additional pages are in Acc. 10888/7.

Discussing the opposition of class and the political left in her third volume of autobiography, Mitchison wrote:

I was in two minds, partly because of my brother. He was for some years a card-carrying member, assuaging no doubt the guilt of being born into the upper classes; this doubtless increased the tension between him and me, since I had not sufficiently recognised my guilt.<sup>20</sup>

Unwilling, therefore, to embrace unconditionally the ideological beliefs of her brother, Mitchison approached the diary as a means of analysing the dystopian reality of communism in practice. Leaving London for Leningrad, she writes:

I wonder what we all think we shall get in Russia, apart from the technical things. I talked to Ridley, the architect, for a long time and I think he hopes to find what I hope for – that people will look at one differently, that there will be real happiness and freedom – not presumably political freedom, but a real *liberte des moeurs* [...] I am in such a state of compromise! Sometimes London has seemed quite unreal, going about among the advertisements and little shops and people hurrying each on their own errand, each trying to undo what another has done, and this thing I am going to see alone seems real.<sup>21</sup>

While Mitchison views the trip as an opportunity to witness a socio-political alternative, it is also a very personal journey, and this again is reflected in the diary. Throughout the text, she attempts to assess honestly the influence of class background on her interpretation of society. Travelling to Russia with passengers who largely comprise 'second or third generation intelligentsia [in] an atmosphere of birth-control and high-browism',<sup>22</sup> Mitchison is moved to discuss this issue with others, and in her diary she reports:

I ask [Valentino] if he still felt himself instinctively a member of the ruling classes, rationalising the fact that he had all these rights and

<sup>20</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 191.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, *Russian Diary*, NLS Acc. 10899, p. 4 and 8.

<sup>22</sup> Mitchison, *Russian Diary*, p. 2.

privileges by saying that he was a specially intelligent and sensitive person, and he said he thought that was true. So much for education. I know I am like that myself.<sup>23</sup>

Later, however, having experienced the realities of the theoretically classless state, she becomes excited about the application of equality, and confident of her ability to join with the masses. Her diary entry reads:

I did like [Soviet Russia] so much. I felt it was in a way what I had wanted, what I have waited for; I didn't feel I should be embarrassed or bothered walking by myself, and, walking with G[raeme], I didn't feel that either he or I were by blood or by upbringing or even by praxis so far removed from the workers that we couldn't fit in with this or feel a brotherhood with the people.<sup>24</sup>

It could be argued, therefore, that the *Russian Diary* provides an invaluable record of the formation of Mitchison's personal and political beliefs by which she would live and be known for the rest of her life. The desire to be part of the group, on an equal footing regardless of class difference, is a pattern, which, although present in the themes of conflicting loyalty within her early classical novels, is first expressed as a personal aspiration within this text.

Mitchison's first visit to Russia, and her record of it in the diary, can also be seen to have influenced her fiction of this period. On returning from the Soviet Union, Mitchison wrote her first 'modern' novel, published in 1935 as *We Have Been Warned*.<sup>25</sup> The novel, which openly tackles the sexual and political taboos of the period, was published only after much wrangling with publishers over the obscenity laws, and questions about what constituted acceptable language in print. As Mitchison would later wryly remark:

<sup>23</sup> Mitchison, *Russian Diary*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Mitchison, *Russian Diary*, p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> For a synopsis and discussion of this text see Elizabeth Maslen's 'Sizing up: women, politics and parties', *Image and Power: Women's Fiction in the Twentieth Century* eds. Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 200-202 and Phyllis Lassner's 'A Cold Shabby Purgatory': Naomi Mitchison's Vision of British Fascism', *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1998), pp. 72-85.

In some of the stories of *The Delicate Fire* there is, I would have thought, far more overt sex than in *We Have Been Warned*, but apparently it's all right when people wear wolfskins and togas.<sup>26</sup>

*We Have Been Warned* is both a highly political and a personal novel. Many of its passages can be seen to reflect Mitchison's direct experience of life in Oxford, Scotland, Russia, and the English Labour heartlands. Introducing the notion of writing as a form of identity-construction (on which this thesis focuses), Isobel Murray has argued that:

A new and very personal element also marks out *We Have Been Warned*. While there was no doubt an element of self-projection in Erif Der [protagonist of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*], there is something very close to identity between the author and her two main female characters in the modern novel, in spite of obvious circumstantial differences. Indeed the whole book clearly and openly reflects the author's own experience, milieux and friends...the Russian interlude is based, often quite closely, on Naomi's diaries for her trip to Russia in 1932.<sup>27</sup>

After much revision, the novel was finally published by Constable rather than Jonathan Cape or Victor Gollancz, both of whom, as established left-wing publishers, Mitchison could have expected to take on the text. Of primary concern to these publishers was the novel's description of an abortion carried out in an early birth control clinic in Moscow. This incident has direct relevance to an analysis of the *Russian Diary* as Mitchison took the scene straight from an experience she had previously recorded in the diary. This leads us to speculate that even if Mitchison had attempted to have the *Russian Diary* published in its original form, rather than using it as the basis for alternative writing projects, she would have run into similar difficulties of censorship. In *You May Well Ask*, Mitchison recalls the diary being read by Edward Garnett, a close friend, and at that time reader for Jonathan Cape.

<sup>26</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 179.

<sup>27</sup> Murray, Isobel, Introduction to *Beyond This Limit: Selected Shorter Fiction of Naomi Mitchison* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), p. xi.

Edward had been reading my Russian diary and says firmly how much better it is than the novel. He may well have been right there but the general idea of asking for a complete re-write was not acceptable.<sup>28</sup>

The suggestion that the diary may have been written with publication in mind also strengthens a reading of the text as a public rather than private document. Jenni Calder, Mitchison's biographer, strengthens this interpretation, noting that a major event of the trip, Mitchison's affair with one of the Fabian group aboard the ship, goes entirely unrecorded, suggesting a form of self-censorship guarding against the possibility of other readers - a less likely aspect of the private diary.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, Mitchison's *Russian Diary* can be read as a literary vehicle through which she reflected on the experiences of visiting the Soviet Union, and of seeing a form of socialism in practice. While it is clearly written in diary form, Mitchison did not use it to express explicitly her inner life. Its value lies in the un-self-conscious identity-construction of its author feeling her way through aspects of social and political thought that would come to represent what she stood for as a private person, as a public figure, and especially as a writer. Within the *Russian Diary*, therefore, the need for absolute disclosure and honesty was not a paramount concern, as the text was, at least in part, a vehicle for political deliberation. Within her next diary, however, although also political in tone and content, the need for truth became an essential aspect of creation, and is the text to which this chapter now turns.

*Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* was written as a testimony of six weeks spent among the Socialist workers of Vienna in the politically turbulent period of early 1934, a period she would later describe as 'the liquidation of Red Vienna'.<sup>30</sup> Mitchison became increasingly politically aware throughout the 1930s, influenced by her visit to Russia in 1932 with the Fabian Society, and involved in the growing British Labour movement. Like many on the left, she became progressively worried about the burgeoning power of the European right-wing.

Mitchison arrived in Austria in February, having responded to calls from the international Left to help in the aftermath of the brutal suppression of Socialist dissent by the fascist forces of Engelbert Dollfuss. As Austrian Chancellor, Dollfuss came to

<sup>28</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 173.

<sup>29</sup> The record of this incident, alluded to by Calder but left out of both her biography, and of the original diary manuscript, has since been deposited in NLS by Mitchison's daughter Lois Godfrey, and is to be found in TD2980 2/5.

<sup>30</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 193.



prominence during the fascist advance of the 'thirties in central Europe. Having gained political control, he dissolved democratic rule. He crucially opposed 'Anschluss', the proposed political union between Austria and Germany. Yet, while Dollfuss objected to the union on nationalist grounds, many Austrians (being of Germanic extraction) saw the Anschluss as a shrewd pooling of resources. Others in Europe, however, remembering the Great War, saw the re-strengthening of Germany as a potential threat. Among these was Italy's fascist leader Benito Mussolini who, recognising the danger to his own rule, supported Dollfuss in his opposition of German take-over.

Mitchison smuggled papers and money through the Austrian border, and, with the help of sympathetic contacts, spent her time in Vienna providing emotional and financial support for the families of workers who had been murdered, or arrested without trial, by the Dollfuss regime. For Mitchison, the help she was able to give represented praxis, her need for action, whether that be the quantifiable support of Austrian Schillings, or the documentation of socialist suppression in her diary. Discussing this period, Mitchison's biographer, Jenni Calder suggests that:

Writing fiction was one way of articulating a commentary on social, political and personal relations [as discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to *We Have Been Warned*], but for Naomi it did not take the place of practical involvement. Driving the urge to act, to be involved, was a strengthening belief in communality.<sup>31</sup>

Mitchison's actions often put her in danger from government forces (although if she had been arrested, her British passport would undoubtedly have provided her some protection) and visits to Socialist safe houses were often covert. The need for caution and trust between sympathisers was paramount, yet despite, or indeed perhaps because of the risks involved, the *Vienna Diary* clearly reveals a feeling of integration that is absent from the *Russian Diary*. This reflects perhaps both the greater ease Mitchison felt in the company of socialists and also a tendency to romanticise her surroundings, also apparent in her later portraits of Kintyre. Looking back on her time in Austria, she wrote:

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<sup>31</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 92.

What I remember is the constant feeling that I was deeply one of the Second, Socialist Democrat, International, a European in brotherhood with European socialists: *Freundschaft und Freiheit* [friendship and freedom], we whispered to one another in the hurrying, anxious streets.<sup>32</sup>

Mitchison's diary ends on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 1934, after which she continued to promote the plight of the Austrian Socialist workers to a largely uninterested British public. In May, Dollfuss proclaimed a fascist constitution, and in July he was murdered by Nazis for his opposition to Austro-German union.

Of all Mitchison's diaries under discussion in this chapter, her *Vienna Diary* is her most clearly 'public' text. Mitchison's trip to Austria was funded by an advance from the left-wing publisher Victor Gollancz (with whom she had a long publishing relationship despite his refusal to handle *We Have Been Warned*) and the diary was therefore written with publication in mind. She makes this clear to the reader from the outset, writing:

I rang up V. G. on Monday evening, and asked if he'd give me an advance on a - very hypothetical - book about it. He said he would, and I'm going on that. I couldn't have otherwise.<sup>33</sup>

From its inception therefore, Mitchison has a clear image of her intended audience - a politically aware, left-wing, reading public - and the diary is addressed to them rather than to an inner voice or self. Through publication of this work, Mitchison hoped to raise the profile of the Austrian Socialists who were living under increasingly violent and authoritarian political control and to encourage her readers to contribute to the 'fighting fund' necessary to keep the Socialist resistance active.<sup>34</sup>

Aware, therefore, of her audience, and of the seriousness of her undertaking, Mitchison is conscious of maintaining the diary's image as a 'truthful', immediate and unedited version of what she witnesses. She addresses this in the Foreword to the text, writing:

<sup>32</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 193-4. 'Friendship and Freedom' is also used as the closing epigraph of the diary.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary*, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> In the Afterword to the text, Mitchison appeals directly to the reader for donations, writing, 'If anyone who has read my diary feels that they would like to let me have any money - whatever amount they

For reasons which will become plain in the course of the book, I have, in general, altered names and occasionally cut something out altogether. But otherwise, except for the altering of a word here and there, it is exactly as I wrote it, usually within twelve hours of the events described.<sup>35</sup>

More than the *Russian Diary*, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* has a clearly defined purpose. Mitchison knows she is dealing with fast-moving current events, and realises that what she writes can literally mean life or death to the Viennese Socialists she has met.

I do not know for certain how I can help. I can write things down clearly and truthfully, and I will do so. I promise now that this diary will contain nothing but the truth. It will not be the whole truth, partly because no man or woman can ever know that, and partly because I shall probably be unable to say certain things, so as not to endanger other people. I will do nothing which my conscience, as a lover of mankind and as a practical woman, forbids me to do.<sup>36</sup>

As well as the need for a faithful reproduction of events expected by readers of the genre, Mitchison is also aware of the influence of her position as a public figure and well-known writer on both the production and interpretation of the diary. The influence her public profile has on the text is most clearly seen in the use of her name in the title. By its inclusion, Mitchison simultaneously emphasises the personal nature of the text, as opposed to more objective political reportage, reveals the extent to which she hoped her association could be used to highlight the Socialist cause, and underpins in the reader's mind the reliability of the diary's sources. Her public profile (and by association her social class) also provide her with a level of security in addition to that provided by her British passport. 'I've probably got a certain snob value', she admits:

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can afford – will they send it to me, care of the publishers? I will see that it gets out to Austria, and the best possible use is made of it', Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary*, p. 285

<sup>35</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary*, pp. 31-2.

I'd make a good headline if I got imprisoned – probably [...] I might be useful at impressing people; I take it one may conceivably be used to tell whoever happens to be in power that the attitude of England is this or that. My name's still some use. I don't suppose I've been definitely ticked off as a left-winger...I may look odd, but at least I look fairly distinguished. And I can easily feel like an aristocrat, which is what makes one behave like one.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to her public identity, Mitchison's role as a writer can also be seen as a significant factor in the construction of the diary. She acknowledges the impact of her occupation on the text, admitting that very few people 'have both money and leisure - and the will - to do this. I've got this because of my profession',<sup>38</sup> although it could be argued that her social background would have allowed her to travel, career or not. As discussed in the previous section, a writer's diary differs from others, benefiting from authorial ability to control imagery and characterisation, and this remains true for Mitchison's *Vienna Diary* despite her initial assertion that it wasn't subsequently altered. However, while her ability to write was necessary for the production of the text, it was not entirely beneficial to its reception. Unable to get advance articles published in newspapers back home, Mitchison bemoaned the capricious attitude of the British press towards writing and writers:

These little papers that are willing to call one a genius when one's writing fiction – words that they don't need to take action about – but won't have anything to do with one when one's writing something that really matters! One sees this highbrow fame for the hollow, tinny thing it is, when I can't even get an article of first-rate topical interest published in a London weekly. Well I must take them to the others. I'm ashamed that I couldn't help. Damn!<sup>39</sup>

Despite the obstacles surrounding the project, the fear of arrest, of endangering the lives of others, the lack of press interest, and the transitory nature of political comment, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* remains an absorbing and at times

<sup>37</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary*, pp. 11-2.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary*, p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary*, p. 218.

moving diary. Most striking among its events is the description of Mitchison's meeting with the widow of the recently executed figurehead of the Socialist resistance, Koloman Wallisch. It is also the only point within the text, that, for Mitchison, the diary process breaks down. After visiting Paula Wallisch, and visiting the unmarked grave of the woman's husband, Mitchison finds herself unable to document the day, breaking away from the format of writing close after the time of experience. This she admits to the reader:

This is a bad gap, but the two days since I wrote – no, just about three days – have perhaps settled in my memory. There were moments that I don't think I could have put down immediately after they happened; one was too much part of them to be able to stand away and be even mildly objective as a diarist must be. Now they have settled in my mind, and I have full pencil notes to work from.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these events, and the political abuses and hardship that Mitchison witnessed, the diary concludes on a positive note. Through a mixture of writing skill and praxis, Mitchison feels she has made a difference to the lives of the 'Genossen', her socialist comrades in Austria. Within this text, therefore, she can be seen to have achieved a degree of the group assimilation for which she first expressed a desire in the *Russian Diary*.<sup>41</sup>

The search for community, and the need to identify with political, social or national groupings is a theme that can be seen to be woven throughout Mitchison's autobiographical writings, and is of paramount importance to a reading of her most extensive and self-reflexive diary, written for the Mass-Observation movement, and the focus of the following section.

### **iii: 'We the plain folk of Scotland': Mitchison and Mass-Observation**

Mitchison's involvement in the Mass-Observation movement, which continued intermittently from 1937 to the mid 1990s, stemmed from her friendship with a young self-styled anthropologist called Tom Harrisson. Harrisson, along with Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, aimed, through the relatively new discipline of sociology, to

<sup>40</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary*, pp. 218-9.

<sup>41</sup> Mitchison's photographs of Koloman Wallisch's grave and of Vienna's bullet-marked buildings survive, and can be found in NLS, TD2980 2/5.

study the habits of the British public using observational methods traditionally employed by the sciences. The Mass-Observation movement was billed 'A Science of Ourselves', and, from 1937, participants known as 'observers' were encouraged to document (preferably un-noticed) the lives, likes and dislikes of those around them. It was a revolutionary exercise, and was an early expression of the now well-established socio-historical viewpoint that 'ordinary' people could be worthy of academic study.<sup>42</sup> Discussing her friendship with Harrison, Mitchison later wrote:

I joined up with Mass Observation. This was due to Tom Harrison, whom I met first in his young days, when he was an undergraduate beginning to rebel against the accepted norms in a way that became more usual twenty years later. Nobody had yet invented the terms 'hippie', 'drop-out' and all that. Not that Tom Harrison dropped; he jumped very hard and the bottom came out – as he intended it to. I tried to help this young man, sometimes wondering if it was worthwhile. It was.<sup>43</sup>

As the Mass-Observation project grew (due partly to press advertisements), 'observers' were asked to reply to monthly 'directives' in which they were to put their opinions on a range of issues proposed by the researchers. Questions such as 'What is the contents of your medicine cupboard?' and 'What are your present feelings about the British Empire?' allowed the researchers to build up a picture of daily life in Britain.<sup>44</sup> Harrison also wished to discover why thousands of people throughout the country chose to participate in the movement. Asked 'Why did you join Mass-Observation?' in a 1937 directive, Mitchison replied:

Because Tom Harrison is one of the few persons of genius whom I have come across and something is likely to come of anything he is interested in.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> The Mass-Observation Movement ran from 1937 until the early 1950s. The archive found a permanent home in the Special Collections of the University of Sussex in 1970 and was revived again in 1981. While no definitive history of the archive exists, a number of Mass-Observation related texts are listed in the bibliography.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 201. Harrison visited Mitchison during the war in Carradale. See *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*, p. 164.

<sup>44</sup> These example directives date from December and February 1942.

<sup>45</sup> DR1534, Day Diary: Why Join Mass-Observation?, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

Central to the use of directive replies was the notion of anonymity. To this end, each respondent was provided with a number (Mitchison's being R1534), preventing personal information being used for anything but the analysis of trends and statistical information. Reflecting this aim, directive replies were archived by month and year, allowing for comparative study, rather than the accumulation of personal information. The growing threat of war through 1939 appears to have discouraged respondents from posting regular replies to Mass-Observation, and it was decided that participants would instead write diaries of their war experience. These diaries could be posted less frequently, while still retaining the domestic and social observational aims of the directive replies.

Following these instructions, on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939, Mitchison began a diary which she would write almost daily until 12<sup>th</sup> August 1945. For a complex mixture of personal, familial and literary reasons, in particular the threat of war, and a growing feeling of rejection by the London literary circles, she had moved the previous year to Carradale House, the 'big house' of Carradale, a fishing village in the Western Scottish Highlands, and her Mass-Observation diary can be read both as a detailed account of war-time experience, and as a personal record of her growing relationship with Carradale, its people, and ultimately Scotland itself. As Mitchison documents everyday life in the diary, certain themes can be seen to develop: the problems of rationing, farming issues, worry about the progress of the war, involvement in politics and in local events.

Most pervasive, however, is Mitchison's negotiation of her newly-acquired position as Laird, and the relationship between her role in the Big House, and her desire to be accepted by the people of Carradale. A central concern of this aspiration, however, was the inescapable class divide which, as discussed previously, had dogged Mitchison through her association with the political left of Russia and Austria, and now, on her move to Scotland, would again be the origin of much troubled negotiation. As she would write in her diary, 'I knew lots of people, but I was apart.'<sup>46</sup>

Despite this fluctuating sense of being marked out by her class and social position, Mitchison became much involved with the life of Carradale and its people, and the diary documents her efforts to provide facilities for the community - a village hall, harbour, and events such as local dramatics - all of which, she hoped, would work to strengthen the community against the threat of external influences.

During the war Mitchison produced no other extensive written work, although she worked periodically on the text of what would become *The Bull Calves* (finally published in 1947), and continued to produce regular journalism. The Mass-Observation diary, therefore, is the primary (non-fictional) source for reading Mitchison's negotiation of the position she claimed within Carradale, and within Scotland. Bunkers and Huff discuss this use of the diary as a means of identity construction, arguing:

Whether the diarist is a famous writer like Virginia Woolf or a woman known primarily within her community, the diary she keeps is often a testing ground for constructions of identity and narrativity; as such the diary is simultaneously a subservice tool and *an aid to cultural reinforcement* [my italics].<sup>47</sup>

In addition to questions of personal identity, Mitchison also uses the diary to explore Scotland's role in the wider world through the upheaval of a world war and, through this, to articulate a growing sense of her own Scottish national identity. This combined view of local and global is encapsulated within Mitchison's diary entry for Thursday 14 March 1940 in which, after a break for the 'phoney' war, she writes:

It seems appropriate to re-begin this diary on the day that the Finns accepted the Soviet peace terms, and the day that the boats came in after winter fishing.<sup>48</sup>

Begun as a way round the problems of posting Mass-Observation directives during war-time, Mitchison's diary was not initially envisaged with publication in mind. Indeed, intended as it was for gathering information through the 'observational' techniques of the social sciences, neither was it planned as a personal document. However, with reference to Harriet Blodgett's argument, quoted earlier in this chapter, it must be acknowledged that, as a successful writer and well-known public figure, Mitchison must have been aware of 'the sense of being an important entity, someone whose perceptions matter' and that therefore the diary was written with the conscious

<sup>46</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes* (Sunday-Tuesday, 26-28 April, 1942), p. 196.

<sup>47</sup> Bunkers, S. and Huff, C., 'Issues in Studying Women's Diaries: A Theoretical and Critical Introduction', *Inscribing the Daily*, p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 55.



or unconscious awareness of a potential audience. This, in addition to the skill she brought to the text as a writer, sets her diary apart from those of hundreds of other 'Mass-observers' who produced similar (if less extensive) records of war-time experience for the Mass-Observation movement.<sup>49</sup>

The question of audience is more problematic than in other examples of the diary genre, as 'Mass-Observers' knew that each instalment of their work would be read by Harrison and his team for the collation and analysis of national trends and beliefs.<sup>50</sup> Hence, although Mitchison's Mass-Observation diary is clearly the most 'personal' of the diaries on which this chapter focuses, paradoxically, it cannot rightly be described as 'private'.<sup>51</sup> Mitchison occasionally addresses her audience directly within the text, highlighting important issues of rationing or farming with '(*Mass-Obs please note*)',<sup>52</sup> and elsewhere, follows a candid passage on sex and relationships with the coda, 'Well let's hope nobody reads this who won't try to understand it.'<sup>53</sup> In addition to the diary's known audience, war-time censorship played a part in what could and could not be written, limiting the intended role of the 'Mass-ObsERVER', as seen in this entry from February 1941:

I talked mostly to Mary, and a little to Judy. She says that the censor's dept got hold of parts of my letters and diary, which were copied (with dashes in places – but I don't think I said anything worse than bloody!)

<sup>49</sup> Several anonymous collections of themed directive replies have been published by Mass-Observation. These include: Sheridan, D. (ed.), *Wartime Women: A Mass-Observation Anthology* (London: Heinemann, 1990); Calder, A. & Sheridan, D. (eds): *Speak For Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology 1937-49* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), and Richards, J. & Sheridan, D. (eds.), *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1987). However, in terms of length, the only other Mass-ObsERVER to have produced diary replies of a comparable length to Mitchison was Nella Last, a housewife from Barrow-on-Furness, whose diary was published as *Nella Last's War* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1981), edited by R. Broad and S. Fleming. It may also be of interest to note that in the small community of Carradale, there was one other Mass-ObsERVER beside Mitchison. This was Dorothy Melville (Diarist 5374), a local schoolteacher, known to Mitchison, who wrote diaries between April and November 1941.

<sup>50</sup> The question of imagined audience was one which greatly interested Mass-Observation. In a directive on 'The Uses of Reading and Writing' in Spring 1991, this issue was again raised: 'Lastly, we have had the honour of receiving your photographs but most of you have never seen us. Can you put into words what you imagine we are like at the Mass-Observation archive? What do you think the archive is like? When you write do you have a reader in mind? If so, what is it?' Mitchison replied: 'I have been to the archive and, I hope, gave you some help. But that was a few years back. Of course I know some of you and can imagine you chugging around and eating sandwiches. Mass-Observation Project [Directive Replies since 1981], 380F, Spring 1991, Part Two, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

<sup>51</sup> Discussing this issue, Judy Simons has noted: 'The dividing line between degrees of privacy is a delicate one, and the nature of the implied audience inevitably determines the tone and context of the text', 'Secret Exhibitionists: Women and their Diaries', *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf* (London: MacMillan, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 167.

<sup>53</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 182.

and came to her; what I had said about not getting anti-dip serum was passed on to the Min of Health, so let's hope our MO gets a kick in the pants. Judy says she has had a certain amount of struggle about getting war diaries through. I think Mass-Obs ought to get on to this and make their position clear with the censor's office: *please note*. In the mean time I shall try as far as possible to send my diary to people returning or [sic] boat. Shall remember that anything I say shall be noted. I may be able to do a certain amount that way.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the need for an element of self-censorship, Mitchison found the ritual of the diary, and contact with Mass-Observation, very therapeutic, and recommended it to others, writing, in July 1941:

Earlier Rosemary had been writing to a friend who is very unhappy; I suggested Mass-Obs. Of course, one realises that Mass-Obs is a kind of God-Figure – one confesses, one is taken an interest in, encouraged. Will Mass-Obs supersede psychiatry? I always recommend it myself.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout the war, Mitchison was often isolated from her family, as Dick Mitchison, her husband, worked in London and her children were away at school. Separated also from the social and intellectual class she was accustomed to in the south ('I am dropping out of the life of the mind'),<sup>56</sup> Mitchison used the diary as an alternative vehicle for airing her thoughts and feelings about the war and her developing friendships and frustrations with the local fishing community.

Written, therefore, from day to day for Mass-Observation, and largely without revision or editing, the diary is not viewed by Mitchison as an important piece of literary work. As Dorothy Sheridan has noted:

The diary was first and foremost a social record written expressly for Mass-Observation to be used in purely anonymous forms as background information. It was never designed for public consumption. It lacks the coherent professionalism of the polemical

<sup>54</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 122.

<sup>55</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 154.

<sup>56</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 293.

articles which she wrote for various periodicals during the same period even though it covered many of the same themes.<sup>57</sup>

It is only towards the end of the war that, looking back on the events of the previous four years, she becomes aware of the diary's significance as a personal record of experience, and as an extensive body of work. Once again highlighting the question of audience, Mitchison writes:

We went on reading the diary in the evening, Joan and Jimmie [Rendel] reading the times when they'd been here. It was queer re-reading it. I was rather impressed. I felt for the first time that it was worth doing for itself, not just because it was a kind of thing to hold on to, a kind of standard for myself.<sup>58</sup>

In total, Mitchison's Mass-Observation diary extends to a million words, and now is stored at the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex.<sup>59</sup> However, an edited version was published in 1985 as *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*. The task of reducing this large document for publication (to one-tenth its original length) was undertaken by Dorothy Sheridan, who has held the position of Mass-Observation Archivist since the death of Tom Harrisson in 1976.

The existence of full and abridged versions of the text again raises questions over the intended audience of the diary. While the original text was not written for a public audience, or with publication as a primary objective, the edited version was produced specifically with a view to an unrestricted readership. Aware that she is turning an ostensibly 'private' text into a 'public' one, Sheridan discusses the editing process in the introduction to the text:

My main concern has been to reduce the manuscript in size while still retaining as much of the original pace and flavour as possible.

<sup>57</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 19. While it may be reasonable for Sheridan to argue that Mitchison's Mass-Observation diary 'lacks the coherent professionalism' of her contemporaneous journalism, having been produced without the same careful revision, it must be read in light of my earlier argument that as a professional writer, all of Mitchison's works were still subject to her editorial control, and skill as a writer.

<sup>58</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 283-4.

<sup>59</sup> The original manuscript is no longer open access at Sussex, and is available only on microfiche, however, a paper copy is held by NLS in TD2980 2/0.

Approximately nine-tenths of the whole diary have been cut out but I hope that by excluding detail and repetition, the inevitable losses will be offset by a gain in clarity and readability.<sup>60</sup>

This sets *Among You Taking Notes* apart from the norm of published diaries which, while always subject to the control of the editorial perspective, are not usually reduced by so great an extent. Despite Sheridan's assurances that her editorial decisions have not altered the general tone of the text, the unavoidable decisions implicit in the removal of nine-tenths of this (or any) text raise questions over the extent to which the abridged diary's controlling force can be said to be Mitchison or Sheridan. Reinforcing this argument in the introduction to other Mass-Observation diaries, Sheridan has admitted:

During our discussions, one important issue has recurred: the subjective nature of our relations to specific diarists [...] we quickly realised we all had our own particular ideas about what was interesting and important.<sup>61</sup>

Additionally, in conversation about *Among You Taking Notes*, Sheridan has acknowledged her tendency to remove passages on farming and family relationships, preferring to emphasise the Scottish aspects of the text.<sup>62</sup> While Mitchison's position within Scotland and its literary tradition allows for the assumption that her developing sense of place and relationship with Scotland would be of greatest interest to a projected readership of the diary, it is an editorial decision that is important nevertheless for the reader to bear in mind.

A further issue surrounding the transformation of the Mass-Observation diary into *Among You Taking Notes* is the limited involvement of its original author in the editorial process (although Mitchison gave Sheridan permission to edit the manuscript, and access to her house at Carradale) and the effect that this again may have had on the image of self Mitchison had originally intended to project through the diary. In conversation, Sheridan has noted the degree to which she was guided by Mitchison, observing that, while no subjects were off-limits, (including her traumatic

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<sup>60</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 21-2.

<sup>61</sup> Sheridan, D., *The Mass-Observation Diaries: An Introduction* (The Mass-Observation Archive and the Centre for Continuing Education: University of Sussex, 1991), p. 5.

loss of her last child in July 1940), some editing decisions were influenced by respect for the feelings of the Carradale people.<sup>63</sup>

Mitchison's main input to the published version of the text is a brief Foreword in which she acknowledges the need to shorten the text, writing, 'The diary...runs to a million words: who is going to read all that? Not me.'<sup>64</sup> She continues:

I look at this account of my life so many years back. Some of this comes new to me, though I must have written it. It is odd that events or sights that I remember most vividly don't seem to have made it to the diary, or were not well enough expressed to go in. There was so much more, but the seasons repeat themselves, the branches break. Many people are dead or, like me, grown old. Was I as I appear in the diary? I rather hope not as I don't like myself much, but with any luck the book will be read less for the diarist than for what we at the time thought was happening and how we acted. It reads sadly, at least I think so, because it is full of hope for a new kind of world, for something different, happier, more honest, for a new relationship between people who had been cut off from one another by money, power and class structure. It was the same kind of vision that people have had all over the world, whenever they began to question the morality of the system they happen to live under. But the bright vision fades, always, always.<sup>65</sup>

The question of retrospect which Mitchison raises in this passage is also pertinent to a study of *Among You Taking Notes*. While Mitchison herself placed no barriers to the diary's journey into the public domain, Sheridan reports that during the period in which she edited the text, Mitchison's adult children were unwilling to accept the text as an accurate portrait of the period. Their attitude highlights once again the nature of the diarist as a selective and artistic portrayer of personal identity, and of surrounding

<sup>62</sup> Dorothy Sheridan in conversation with Helen Lloyd, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex, 8 May 2003.

<sup>63</sup> Dorothy Sheridan, in conversation with Helen Lloyd, related how, while Sheridan was visiting Carradale, Mitchison asked Lila MacIntosh, (in private), whether she gave her permission for passages on her later husband, Denny, to be included in the text. Lila agreed, although it is interesting to note that the question over Denny's passages were to do with his drinking, rather than Mitchison's documentation of a close relationship with him throughout the war.

<sup>64</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, pp. 12-3.

events.<sup>66</sup> Underlining this view in *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women*, Judy Simons has argued:

The more we read others' diaries, the more we become aware of the diary's fictive quality, and of the creation of a central character, established through an act of imagination as powerful as those responsible for stimulating writers' published works.<sup>67</sup>

Interviewed in the 1980s about her Mass-Observation involvement, Mitchison was asked about the problems inherent in the retrospective interpretation of autobiographical writing:

Q: Do you think that everybody who is in that diary agrees with you about how you saw these times?

NM: O, indeed not...My family was very cross with me because I had got it all wrong. I said "Well I did write this at the time and you are remembering it forty years later"...but you can't please everybody.<sup>68</sup>

Mitchison's Mass-Observation diary ends on 12 August 1945. Although she would continue to live and work in Carradale until her death in 1999, the period 1939-1945 represented in the diary is notable, among other things, for the changing perspective she presents of the village and her place within it. Initially eager to be accepted by the community through a socialist reworking of the role of laird, by the end of the diary Mitchison knows she is less able to achieve the cleansing of historical wrongs between the classes of Scotland. Partially refuting the political beliefs expressed in her earlier diaries, Mitchison's final diary entry reads:

Well, here is the end of the war, and the end of this diary, with some of the same people in the house as were here at the beginning. But all older and tired. I feel far more suspicious of the Carradale people that I

<sup>66</sup> It should be acknowledged, that despite these concerns, after Mitchison's death, the family gave permission for a reprint of the diary in 2000. However, portraits of the characters of Kirsty and William from the first edition of *The Bull Calves*, drawn by Lousie Annand, and unmistakably resembling Mitchison and Denny McIntosh, were not approved for subsequent publication. Annand has confirmed this, writing, 'I think it is the case that the family asked for the drawing to go'. Annand to Helen Lloyd, 26 November 2004.

<sup>67</sup> Simons, J., 'Conclusion', *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women*, p. 196.

<sup>68</sup> National Library of Scotland, Acc. 11307/21-30, p. 52. Transcript of an interview with unknown interviewer. Undated, except for reference to the Falklands War.

did; I know them less capable of either thought or generosity [...] I think we are in for a civilisation based on communism with its new system of classes. It may be unpleasant and its immediate values not those I care for. However I think that if we accept it and work from within the sphere of values (and bloody well see that we and our children are in the ruling class – technocrats and commissars) the new civilisation will have a pretty good chance.<sup>69</sup>

This inability to belong completely to Carradale in some respects mirrors Mitchison's involvement in Mass-Observation itself, as, although designed as a form of collective autobiography, Mitchison's contribution to the movement is set apart from that of the many other participants by her demographic status and writing ability, as well as the length of her diary and its subsequent publication.

After a number of inactive years, the Mass-Observation Project (again constructed of directives replies and diaries) was revived in 1977 for the Silver Jubilee of Elizabeth II, and continues under the direction of Dorothy Sheridan. Mitchison continued to participate periodically from this date until her mid-90s, when she wrote to Sheridan, admitting:

I'm afraid I can't go on with the Mass Obs directions. It is all very sad but nowadays I get so tangled up with words which I know perfectly but – somewhere else. It is just too much. I find it difficult enough to go on with any typing and I find myself unable to write the silliest things, I just can't get the typewriter to make the words, but it's in the brain. I wish you all well and sometimes I find myself all right but cannot remember what I had planned to write when I was.

Best of luck to you all, Naomi.<sup>70</sup>

The diversity of the three diaries on which this chapter focuses, highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of the diary as a literary genre. Further complicating a reading of these works are questions over their intended audience, and the

<sup>69</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 338. Discussing Mitchison's failure to truly integrate with Carradale, Elizabeth Dickson comments, 'Paternalism does not preclude inter-class friendship but it does ensure that the friendship remains inter-class. *Division and Wholeness: The Scottish Novel, 1896-1947* (Ph.D thesis, University of Strathclyde, 1989), p. 280.

<sup>70</sup> NM to DS, 7 July 1992, Box 5, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

re-structuring of private diaries for the public market. Filmed in 1987 for a Channel 4 production, *Stranger than Fiction*, Mitchison was asked about the value of the diary as a form of life-writing, recording the small aspects of daily life, often deemed unworthy of literary representation. 'Diaries', she replied:

I think are probably quite important. How much we value the diaries that have been written in earlier centuries. They're one of the most interesting and popular things, apart from the fact that you get the odd historical thing out which has been overlooked and I'm sure this will happen with these wartime diaries and they all will accidentally so to speak answer some quite important questions. I think they will be increasingly useful as the years go by.<sup>71</sup>

After the Second World War, Mitchison continued periodically to keep diaries, although none to the extent of the Mass-Observation diary, nor with the clear political aims of the *Russian Diary* or *Vienna Diary*. Held by the National Library of Scotland are several diaries of her visits to Africa in the 1960s and beyond, and, although none have been published, some of them can be seen as the foundation of her travel narratives, which, read as a form of life-writing, are the focus of the following chapter.

Mitchison's long involvement in Africa is foreshadowed in her Mass-Observation diary in a passage, which, while clearly light-hearted, highlights once more the desire for community integration and the search for identity present in so many of her actions. Recording an early evening spent among the Carradale people, and full of the hope for acceptance that would later diminish, Mitchison writes:

I thought it was rather a triumph, and for me an honour; it must have been easily the first time that anyone from the Big House came there, like that...it's hard to reproduce the quality of the long evening we spent, ceilidhing. Of course I felt a little like an explorer who has at

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<sup>71</sup> Extract of DS interviewing NM for *Stranger than Fiction*, a BFI production screened on Channel 4 in 1987. Mitchison's interview was not used in the final cut. Video NBM1, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex.



last been made a member of a secret society among the bongo-bongos, the same kind of pride.<sup>72</sup>

The language of this diary entry, when compared to her later travel narratives, emphasises the extent to which Mitchison would move from the imperial instincts of her class background, to belief in, and praxis of, cross-cultural relationships, and to the unifying liberalism of her later years.

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<sup>72</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 182. Mitchison will not use such phrases later, as her relationship to Africa develops and takes root.

### Chapter Three

#### 'Adventure to the Adventurous': Naomi Mitchison's Travel Narratives

And when I got there I found that after all I wasn't really a white any longer. I am dangled between two worlds.

Naomi Mitchison  
Correspondence, NLS Acc 10888

Naomi Mitchison travelled extensively throughout her life, the journeying instinct becoming apparently stronger with age, and her personal experience and knowledge of diverse cultures and peoples exerting a significant influence on her ever-shifting sense of identity and belonging, and by correlation, to her work as a writer. In all periods of her work, the inspiration of real life experiences can be seen to have a bearing on the production of her narratives, both fictive and actual; Mitchison, wrote Jenni Calder, 'lived the lives she wrote about and wrote about the lives she lived'.<sup>1</sup> Following from the previous discussion of Mitchison's diaries and autobiographical texts - arguably the most explicit forms of identity-construction - this chapter focuses on three other non-fictional texts, *Other People's Worlds* (1958), *Return to the Fairy Hill* (1966), and *Mucking Around: Five Continents over Fifty Years* (1981). While these texts represent Mitchison's main body of travel writing,<sup>2</sup> they can also be seen to share many of the previously identified aspects of life-writing, and to raise similar questions in relation to the definition of genre, and the processes of identity-formation.

The construction of this thesis by genre rather than from a chronological perspective is complicated by the fact that Mitchison's non-fictional texts tend to fall within rather blurred generic boundaries, being neither fully one thing nor another. Many of the texts to be discussed seem to drift freely in the space between definitions of autobiography and memoir, diaries, travelogues and essays, the interplay between fact and fiction providing another layer of potential uncertainty for the commentator. For example, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* (1935), while diary in name, is both a travelogue detailing an overseas journey, and a highly personal document of a period

\* 'At a jumble sale I bought a small jug for a penny. It had 'Adventure to the Adventurous' written on it. That, some day, was to be my motto.' Mitchison, *All Change Here* (London: The Bodley Head, 1975), p. 12.

<sup>1</sup> Calder, J., *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London: Virago, 1997), p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> As explored in the following chapter, Mitchison also wrote extensive correspondence from abroad which raises many similar issues.

of her life, potentially allowing for its inclusion in each of the first three chapters of this thesis. Whilst acknowledging these difficulties and the functional convenience of categorising texts according to their dominant generic features, it is hoped that a reader with direct knowledge of the texts in question will agree with the overall grouping. In addition, this hybridisation of genre can be seen in a positive light, with the fluidity of text allowing for the production of innovative and revealing material, free from potentially constrictive parameters. In light of its ability to embody multiple literary styles, it is worth here considering the position of travel writing within genre studies, before going on to explore the texts themselves.

### **i: Travel Writing as Autobiography**

In terms of the loosely-associated collection of travelogues, journals, diaries and essays that constitute 'travel-writing', there seems to be, perhaps unsurprisingly, little critical agreement as to definition, purpose, effect, or literary worth of this extensive and yet inconsistent body of writing. It is a genre which, it has been noted, 'accommodates the private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the rough note and polished table talk with indiscriminate hospitality'.<sup>3</sup> If it can be said to hold a position within the canon it is certainly a hazy one, often viewed as a genre of which 'anyone can have a go and usually does',<sup>4</sup> 'unlimited in its forms of expression',<sup>5</sup> and the 'most hybrid and unassailable of genres'.<sup>6</sup>

The recent re-evaluation of travel writing in terms of post-colonial theory has also done much to renew interest in it, while paradoxically highlighting an uneasy and potentially suspect relationship with colonial and imperialist discourses - a subject which will be considered throughout this chapter, and which holds specific relevance to the role Mitchison played in the communities she visited, as represented in her texts. The relationship between travel writing and imperialism is further complicated by the much debated position of the woman travel writer. Among its objectives, this chapter aims to assess the influence of gender roles in Mitchison's work in relation to her position of privilege as western, aristocratic, and educated.

<sup>3</sup> Raban, J., *For Love and Money: Writing, Reading, Travelling* (London: Collins Harvill, 1987), p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> Clark, S. (ed.), *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit* (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> von Martels, Z. (ed.), *Travel Fact and Travel Fiction: Studies on Fiction, Literary Tradition, Scholarly Discovery, and Observation in Travel Writing* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), p. xi.

Travel writing generally shares many aspects of autobiographical writing. The greater or lesser extent to which this can apply being shown by the three texts on which this chapter focuses. In *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (1980), a stimulating study of the travel genre (despite its exclusive concern with male writers), Paul Fussell provides a good working definition which encompasses its autobiographical features, a definition which has met with the approval of subsequent writers of studies in the same field. Travel writing is, he writes:

a sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker's encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative - unlike that in a novel or a romance - claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality.<sup>7</sup>

However, having foregrounded the real-life basis to these texts, Fussell goes on to highlight the fictive element present in all forms of life-writing by choosing to 'distinguish them from guide books, which are not autobiographical and are not sustained by a narrative exploiting the devices of fiction' [my italics].<sup>8</sup> Concurring with Fussell's description as a basis for definition, in *Tourists with Typewriters* (1998), Holland and Huggan state that the travel narratives which concern them are 'designed, by and large, as literary artefacts, mediating between fact and fiction, autobiography and ethnography'.<sup>9</sup> These three descriptions, with their emphasis on autobiography, provide the basis by which the subject of this chapter can be seen within the body of non-fictional life writing which forms the focus of this thesis.

Central to the autobiographical principle in travel writing is authorial representation of self, and the questions of literary identity-formation that that process implies. While all genres of life writing involve an element of self-exploration, travel writing offers a further dimension, as the self that is portrayed is set against a background of cultural difference. Once one accepts the notion that the self is not a stable entity, it becomes clear that an authorial conception of self in familiar, home surroundings may not be the same as that which is portrayed in a travel narrative

<sup>6</sup> Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Fussell, P., *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*, p. 202-3.

where authors must also consider themselves in relation to their environment. 'In travel narratives', write Holland and Huggan, 'the self is writ large in its alien surroundings'.<sup>10</sup> The processes of identity-construction in these texts, however, differs from that of the more standard autobiographical forms in that travel narratives can rarely be read as *Bildungsroman*, encompassing usually a period of travel in adulthood rather than a chronological account of life from early childhood: 'There is little detail of the early domestic setting:' writes Steve Clark in *Travel Writing and Empire* (1999), 'the performative utterance that opens the narrative is "I went"'.<sup>11</sup> When considered in the context of Mitchison's travel texts, the idea of a double perspective in which authorial-identity is reflected both through an established conception of self, and in relation to a new-found community and place, and to the whole strange nature of 'abroad', is borne out. In *Return to the Fairy Hill*, the third of the three texts under discussion, Mitchison explores her shifting and sometimes uncertain sense of identity and belonging through her relationship to the Bakgatla tribe of Botswana, yet the perspective is split again by her continual reference back to her relationship with her Scottish 'tribe' at Carradale, in the Western Highlands. Thus, each environment provides an opportunity for a different personal conception of self which continually refers back to and informs the other.

Additionally, in terms of its connection to autobiography, Mitchison's highly personal travel narratives can be seen to pick up the thread of her life, exploring outwards where her autobiographies have searched inside. *You May Well Ask* (1979), the final published volume of autobiography, breaks off abruptly in 1940 with the death of her last child and the outbreak of war, and the travel texts in question do not re-establish her personal narrative until the late 1950s. This break would seem to reflect the non-creative depression of the events of these years,<sup>12</sup> and, on a more positive note, her dedication to Scottish politics and to the hard physical labour of her Carradale farm. These missing years are in part filled by the Mass Observation diary, published in 1985 as *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi*

<sup>9</sup> Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire: Post-colonial Theory in Transit*, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> After the death of her baby, Clemency Eleasaid, in July 1940, NM is conscious of the link between biological and literary creativity. Her doctor, she notes, 'says I should start writing a book. As though one could turn on the tap. But I think I must consider it, even if nothing comes of it...If only I had a baby I wouldn't need to write a book that probably nobody wants to read.' *Among You Taking Notes*:

*Mitchison, 1939-1945*. Publication dates can be misleading, for although her three volumes of autobiography, *Small Talk* (1973), *All Change Here* (1975) and *You May Well Ask* (1979) were written between the publication dates of the travel books with which this chapter is concerned (1958-1981), viewed together with *Among You Taking Notes*, and in chronological terms, they provide an almost unbroken arc in Mitchison's personal account of her own eventful life, and the shifting sense of self reflected through her experiences both at home and abroad.

As perhaps is to be expected in a genre of such hybrid influences, Mitchison produced three very different travel narratives. Although all are to an extent inter-related, each reflects her feeling towards specific places in time. Taken as a whole, the reader discerns within them a developing sense of belonging to community and place, and inevitably within that, an evolving sense of identity. Again, however, looked at in terms of publication dates, the texts obscure the natural chronology of experience, with the last text published, *Mucking Around* (1981) portraying the earliest period of travel (1920). On account of this, and the unusual scope and time-span of the text (its subtitle being '*Five Continents over Fifty Years*'), this chapter will consider it first before turning to Mitchison's two 'African' travel narratives, *Other People's Worlds* and *Return to the Fairy Hill*. These two texts, although quite different in style and outlook, can be seen together to trace the development of Mitchison's interest in the African spirit, and her later adoption of and by the Botswanan tribe with whom she lived. As such, they not only detail change in herself, but also document the influence this experience had on her impressions of colonial politics and on her responses to the Scottish community into which she had previously moulded her identity, and to which she would ultimately return.

## ***ii: Mucking Around: Five Continents over Fifty Years***

Unlike many travel narratives which document a single journey or period of travel, *Mucking Around* is unusual in that it brings together a life-time of travel, detailing Mitchison's experience of many parts of the world.<sup>13</sup> Yet, written when Mitchison was in her mid-eighties, the book can also be seen as a life-in-progress as

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*The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945* (London: Phoenix Press, 1985), p. 73. Mitchison's next publication would be *The Bull Calves* (1947), after a break of seven years.

<sup>13</sup> As noted in the introduction to this study, the close relation of travel writing to autobiography is again highlighted by the fact that the frontispiece of the 2000 Phoenix Press edition of *Among You Taking*

the authorial voice discusses each place as somewhere to which, unbowed by increasing years, she will return. 'I always like Stockholm very much whenever I revisit'<sup>14</sup> she writes, and indeed this vision of travel as a continuing part of life was exemplified by her journeys to Africa into extreme old age. Discussing the continued urge to travel, Jenni Calder comments that 'Naomi had reached an age when most men and women are thinking of retiring, or slowing down, if they have not already done so. She was about to embark on another new life'.<sup>15</sup>

The temporal distance from which many of these journeys are seen raises similar issues to that of Mitchison's autobiographies in which she considers 'the process of finding one's way back in time'.<sup>16</sup> 'Clearly', she acknowledges, 'the memories, as they come into consciousness sixty or sixty-five years later (or more) have been distorted and censored. There is an element of subconscious choice'.<sup>17</sup> As in the autobiographies, Mitchison pieces together the elements of *Mucking Around* from the many notebooks, diaries and letters she wrote as she travelled, as well as from her own recollections. The result (as examined below) is a loosely structured text, and although there are moments of great emotion and real anger, such as her hauling-down of the British flag in newly independent Botswana, the overall effect is of a light, conversational tour through a life of travel.<sup>18</sup>

What *Mucking Around* lacks in structure, however, it repays through the extended perspective it offers on the changing nature of travel for a privileged minority throughout the twentieth century. Early in the text is the description of a driving trip through the Baltic States in the years after the Great War, and the various border-negotiations which arise from the newly-reintroduced passports and travel papers.<sup>19</sup> The difference between this early trip and the later almost routine jumbo jet flights to America and Sub-Saharan Africa only really becomes apparent when it is made clear that the driving is done by a 'driver', paid for by her husband's family and

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*Notes*, (the published version of Mitchison's Mass-Observation diary, edited by Dorothy Sheridan, discussed in the previous chapter) lists *Mucking Around* under the heading 'Autobiography'.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchison, N., *Mucking Around: Five Continents over Fifty Years* (London: Gollancz, 1981), p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 265.

<sup>16</sup> Mitchison, *All Change Here*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchison, N., *Small Talk: Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (London: The Bodley Head, 1973), p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Donald Smith has described this text, I think somewhat unfairly, as 'a rushed volume of travel essays'. See 'You May Well Ask: Nine Decades of Naomi Mitchison', *Cencrastus* 13 (1983), p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> See discussion in Fussell, 'The Passport Nuisance', *Abroad*, p. 24-31.

'not terribly expensive in those days'.<sup>20</sup> In between these two extremes, the text documents the various methods of travel: trains through India, cruise liners to America and Communist Russia, the slow ferry to the Shetland Islands, a small government plane across the Zambezi flood plain, and on the back of a motorbike through the Khyber Pass! It is also possible to trace in the text indications of increasing accessibility, as developments in the speed and comfort of transportation make the possibilities of distant travel ever easier. While the early chapters focus on trips to Scotland and Europe, the text spreads outwards, in ever increasing circles, as, for those with the inclination and economic freedom, the world opened up to provide ever more recreational opportunities.

In some ways, however, the title, *Mucking Around* could not be more misleading, since, through her many travels abroad, Mitchison could seldom be described as 'mucking around', or rarely even, as simply having a holiday. Her travel is not, for the most part, tourism, which is a significant point for many of the critical responses to travel writing, where much debate (and disagreement) surrounds the hierarchy of 'explorers', 'travellers' and 'tourists'. While the acceptance of such a hierarchy appears to be a highly questionable tool for assessing the validity of journeys and the worth of their subsequent incarnation in text, it is true that Mitchison's travel is not presented as the idle voyaging that her social class and economic freedom might have led us to expect. Coming clearly from the work is the impression that Mitchison was often 'on a mission', travelling to foreign lands as part of an official fact-finding party (as in her visit to Russia in the early 30s, organised by the Fabian Society<sup>21</sup>), or with the intention of exchanging political and practical ideas, helping or organising wherever there was a need for her wide-ranging abilities, a tendency best illustrated by her long-term association with Botswana. Perhaps in this light, 'Mucking In' would have been a more appropriate title. The notion of travel with a purpose is raised by Jenni Calder who, discussing Mitchison's tribal identity in Africa writes, 'There is a hint of the missionary in this characterisation of Naomi, and some have placed her in the tradition of the enlightened female missionary, of which Scotland produced several.'<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> This trip is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>22</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 250.



Individual chapters are arranged within sections, and the titles of these sections can also be seen to offer an insight into Mitchison's attitude to overseas travel, and her sense of place and belonging in Britain, and later specifically Scotland. Each title provides a compass bearing, 'South-West-By-North', 'West-By-East' and so on, which highlights the orientation of her travel from a fixed point of reference. While many of her writing contemporaries left Britain for more liberal, warmer climes after the travel embargo of the First World War,<sup>23</sup> and again after the Second, Mitchison's bearings remained intact. Her increasing identification with Africa, and her family's traditional orientation towards India<sup>24</sup> did nothing to weaken her understanding that 'home' remained in the Western Highlands. This split perspective again highlights the ways in which travel writing forces the multiplication of authorial identity to embody simultaneously many versions of self.

Discussing Mitchison's compulsion to travel, Jill Benton, her first biographer, writes that 'while continuing her life in Scotland, she turned...her adventuring eye to the reaches of what had been the British Empire.'<sup>25</sup> This quotation is significant in that, along with the evidence of the section titles, it reinforces the view that while she travelled, she remained intrinsically rooted in the British Isles. Both this feeling and the sense of political purpose or 'mission' which surrounded Mitchison's journeys lead to an analysis of the inter-relationship between travel texts such as *Mucking Around* and politics of colonial rule. While Britain's force as an imperial power in the mid-twentieth century portrayed in Mitchison's texts may have been a shadow of its nineteenth-century manifestation, it remained a dominant influence in the areas of local-governmental organisation with which Mitchison took a special interest, particularly in certain parts of Africa, and in India. The relationship between travel writing and Empire is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, but it is worth here briefly exploring Mitchison's attitudes to Empire in *Mucking Around*. A consideration of this aspect of her writing is applicable only to those parts of the text which focus on colonial or post-colonial regions, and it should be noted that many

<sup>23</sup> See list of literary diaspora in Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> For a sense of the colonial travel of Mitchison's ancestors, see her mother's autobiography, Haldane, Louisa Kathleen, *Friends and Kindred: Memoirs of Louisa Kathleen Haldane* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961). This tradition was continued into the twentieth century by Mitchison's brother JBS Haldane, and by her son Denny Mitchison, who both spent many years in India. Haldane died there of cancer in November 1964.

<sup>25</sup> Benton, J., *Naomi Mitchison: A Biography* (London: Pandora Press, 1990), p. 133.

chapters of this text focus primarily on travels in Britain and Europe, and therefore fall outwith the parameters of this discussion.

'There I stayed with friends in the diplomatic service',<sup>26</sup> Mitchison writes; and while this sentence actually describes a trip to Baghdad in the early 'fifties, it gives a flavour of much of her experience of travel in *Mucking Around*. One advantage of her social position and connections, both through family ties and her husband's political career, was immediate access to and friendship with the ruling class of the places she visited. In Pakistan she stays with the Pakistani High Commissioner for Britain, in Delhi as guest of the Indian Civil Service, and in Nigeria she stays with the District Commissioner in 'the old world of [...] colonialism, perhaps at its best'.<sup>27</sup> In India she walks round the garden with Pandit (Jawaharlal) Nehru, India's first post-independence Prime Minister and is introduced to his pandas. 'We had I suppose talked politics', she writes, as if this were naturally what one did when abroad.<sup>28</sup>

What is striking about the picture that builds up of these travels is the ease with which her social background and familial history of colonial travel, allows her to move through these powerful circles both during the time of colonial rule and, (as exhibited by her contact with Nehru) after. While familiarity with and easy access to a governing or colonial class does not however mean that Mitchison was complicit in its founding ideology, or anxious for its continued survival – the energy she poured into African independence in her later years is evidence enough of her acceptance of the need for change – yet her unalterable position as a white European aristocrat abroad, descended from a long line who similarly 'went out', whatever the motives, cannot be ignored.<sup>29</sup> Participation in the lifestyle of the dying days of Empire implies

<sup>26</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 115.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 101. Mitchison's brother JBS Haldane, who had earlier moved to India to pursue his scientific work enjoyed similar access to power. Mitchison writes: 'For a time [Jack] was very happy in India. He had direct access to the Head of State, one of the few politicians I did really admire – but probably for the wrong reasons. Like Nye Bevan, Nehru had tremendous S.A. He could make one feel young and beautiful. But equally, he encouraged Jack, who hated being called that; by now he was Prof to everyone including me. 'The Haldanes: Personal Notes and Historical Lessons', *Proceedings of the Royal Institution of Great Britain* 47 (1974), p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Mitchison was interviewed by Tom Steel for a television programme, *Naomi Mitchison: Spring Queen*, commissioned to celebrate her eightieth birthday. In this interview, Steel raises the thorny question of the links between class and colonialism – a subject which, while arguably of central importance to an interpretation of her role in Africa, was largely avoided by interviewers and commentators. This avoidance is perhaps understandable in that the largely positive pieces produced on Mitchison in her old age wished to celebrate her life, rather than to confront an increasingly elderly 'grand dame' of literature with any difficult questions. Nevertheless, in conversation with Steel, Mitchison's reply to this most important of questions is hardly satisfactory:

a certain necessary acceptance of the structures of colonial rule that still hold. Hence, Mitchison, although writing in the 1980s, does not think to question the presence of Indian servants who live in the garden of the Indian Civil Service buildings<sup>30</sup> – indeed her life-long assistance by a body of 'house-staff' in Britain must have made this seem utterly natural. Equally unremarkable to her are the bells which hang from trees in the Indian High Commission garden to ring for drinks – a colonial image if ever there was one. Inevitably, a certain nostalgia creeps in for the bad old days this lifestyle represents, and Mitchison wonders if it 'would still be so fifteen years on?'.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, however, knowledge of the governing classes produces a certain healthy disrespect for the authority they represent and, in India in 1950s during the festival of Holi, Mitchison is moved to shower the bemused diplomats of the Russian Embassy with coloured powder shouting 'Comrades, you are not keeping correct contact with the masses!'.<sup>32</sup> In conversation with Isobel Murray, Mitchison later remarked that 'one of the pleasures in life is making things awkward for the top people'.<sup>33</sup>

Mitchison does occasionally acknowledge the position of privilege she holds within the communities she visits. Talking to a group of Indian administrators about African tribal culture, she admits, 'It must have been a little muddling for my audience, since I was speaking both as a member of a tribe and as one of the Raj'.<sup>34</sup> Although she chooses not to explore the problematic nature of this dual identity in detail within *Mucking Around*, she is clearly aware of its potency. Carrying on the custom of his social background, Denny, Mitchison's eldest son, followed his uncle JBS Haldane into Indian academia in the 1950s. Visiting him there in the wake of independence she notes that relations are 'sometimes understandably touchy' between the local people and themselves as 'members of the ex-Raj'.<sup>35</sup> It is also possible to detect an occasional note of naivety in Mitchison's presumption of acceptance within the colonised nations she visits, largely, one suspects, because of her certainty that she is on the side of the oppressed. In Ghana, Mitchison's response to street banners

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TS: 'Naomi, I wonder whether your role in Africa though, isn't that upper-class, aristocrat, paternalism rearing its head again?' [sic].

NM: 'Well I don't think so, partly because in order to really become the 'mother' one has to go through a period of humiliation, which indeed I did, in which I was being shot down for both being white and being a woman. And I had to go through this'.

<sup>30</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 92.

<sup>33</sup> Murray, I. (ed.), *Scottish Writers Talking 2* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002), p. 96.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 110.

bearing the message 'Down with Colonialism' is to state 'I don't think many people any longer seriously considered the British as oppressors'.<sup>36</sup> The fact that this scene took place in the wake of Ghanaian independence suggests that anti-colonialism may have been more of an issue than she concedes. Similarly, her tearing down of the British flag at the Botswanan independence ceremony, while apparently a powerful symbol of her rejection of imperialist ideology, is more problematic than it at first appears. In that a central feature of independence is one of self-determination, and the freedom to learn from one's own actions rather than retaining a child-like dependency on Empire, it would have seemed symbolically apt for the flag to be lowered by a Botswanan.<sup>37</sup> Mitchison herself makes this point in reference to Ghanaian Independence when she writes, 'Is your freedom really necessary? Yes. Yes. Until people have freedom they cannot even make their own mistakes.'<sup>38</sup> In addition, Mitchison's description of the moment, 'So there was the flag lying in the dust at my feet and I wondered if I minded and I remembered the many tyrannies and deaths of *lesser breeds* over which the Union Jack had floated'<sup>39</sup> [my italics], while consciously echoing Kipling, is perhaps an unfortunate choice of words in her endeavour towards integration and understanding within ex-colonial territories.

The presentation of this event is also interesting in terms of Mitchison's shifting sense of identity towards different cultures, in that it raises the question of her Scottish self. Viewing the lowered flag in the dust she wonders if it would have been more painful if it had been the St Andrew's Cross alone, rather than the Union flag, highlighting her simultaneous identification with Britain, Scotland and Botswana, and the divided loyalties inherent in that position.

While this exploration of Mitchison's relationship with colonial agendas may seem critical, it must be set against and seen in proportion to a background of sympathetic concern for Africa as it emerged into the modern political world, and

<sup>35</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 119.

<sup>37</sup> This point is muddled somewhat by questions over the extent to which Mitchison saw herself as a legitimate and true Botswanan. Nevertheless, as the Botswanan independence celebrations took place in 1965, this incident still took place early on in Mitchison's association with the country and tribe, and any claim to being Botswanan was therefore not as strong as it may have later become.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958), p. 44.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 120. More recently, Calder has depicted this incident, writing: 'Impatient at the slowness with which the Union flag made way for the new flag of Botswana, she snatched it and flung it at the feet of the British officials, declaiming, "Stand not upon the order of your going/But go at once". Had she planned this? Quite possibly, but it could equally have been a spontaneous gesture. Thirty years later it was remembered amid gales of laughter.' 'Deep in Over Africa', *The Drouth* 8 (Summer 2003), p. 14. The Kipling poem Mitchison echoes here is 'Recessional'.

decades of dedicated involvement with the Bakgatla tribe of Botswana into which she was adopted as 'Mmarona' or tribal mother. *Other People's Worlds*, Mitchison's first extended piece of travel writing, shows her initial involvement with this world, and is the focus of the following discussion.

### *iii: Other People's Worlds*

Part anthropological survey, part philosophical treatise, *Other People's Worlds*, published in 1958, is the least directly autobiographical example of Mitchison's travel writings.<sup>40</sup> Yet, while she plays a smaller personal role in it than in *Mucking Around* or *Return to the Fairy Hill*, it is an important text in terms of constructing the widest possible picture of Mitchison's relationship with 'abroad' (and by implication with her sense of 'home' and belonging). This being so, it is surprising to note that as a text it has received almost no critical attention to date. It does not appear in the index to Jill Benton's biography, and the small sections of it that she quotes are sourced from *Mucking Around*, which Mitchison constructed using many sources including previously published material. Jenni Calder does mention it briefly in relation to the continued strength of Mitchison's Highland identity (discussed below), but it has otherwise been overlooked, and not seen as a significant part of her corpus.

The reason for this oversight is most likely due to its decreasing relevance over time, as many of her more political and philosophical works have proved. The text focuses ostensibly on the 1957 Independence celebrations of Ghana which Mitchison was covering on behalf of *The Manchester Guardian* and a trip to Nigeria,<sup>41</sup> and, as she notes herself in the introductory chapter, 'by the time this book is published, we shall be taking [its contents] completely for granted'.<sup>42</sup> Political characters and parties prosper and fade with predictable regularity within most political systems, and more so within emerging democracies such as those portrayed in the text. Hence, only a few names such as Kwame Nkrumah's remain familiar, and the various political parties of the period immediately post-independence are obsolete within the unstable reality of contemporary West Africa. Nevertheless, while its representation of political structures is dated, the text contains three major aspects

<sup>40</sup> The autograph MS of this text is now held by the Bodleian Library, Oxford (MS.Eng.misc.d.538).

<sup>41</sup> Ghanaian Independence took place on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1957.

which ensure its continued relevance. Within it is detailed Mitchison's initial responses to the African *Zeitgeist*, paving the way for a fuller, more personal response in *Return to the Fairy Hill*; an early reassessment of her relationship with Scotland in the years surrounding her disenchantment with the effectiveness of her ability to help the community; and the use of the travel form as a vehicle for the polemical essay.

This third aspect is most clearly visible in the chapter titles, which Mitchison organises thematically into 'class', 'language', 'history', 'religion', 'morals', 'education' and 'politics', each with the prefix 'other people's', thereby framing her thoughts within the unknown quality of African culture. In 'Other People's Morals', for example, after some introductory remarks about Ghanaian society she goes on to present her personal thoughts on marriage, the church, democracy, local government and the education of women. The phenomenon of the essay disguised as or contained within the travel narrative is highlighted by Fussell who notes, in *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*, that 'a fact of modern publishing is the virtual disappearance of the essay as a saleable commodity'.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, he argues, writers with a natural inclination to the structure of the single-issue treatise or essay (excepting the presence of articles in newspapers) were (and are still) obliged to disguise their thoughts within a more marketable form. Discussing Aldous Huxley – both a literary contemporary and close friend of Mitchison – Fussell notes that travel writing for Huxley was 'a way of presenting learned essays which without exotic narrative support would find no audience'.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, drawing attention to Rebecca West, the doyenne of twentieth-century women's travel writing, he argues:

if one approached a publisher in 1940 with a collection of assorted ethical and historical essays one would have less chance of success than if one arranged them as 'A Journey Through Yugoslavia' and titled the whole immense work *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds*, p. 13-4.

<sup>43</sup> Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 204.

<sup>44</sup> Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 204.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206. On closer inspection, a comparison of Mitchison and Rebecca West reveals a productive number of shared reference points. Both from bourgeois, Anglo-Scots families, with Irish military backgrounds, they were born within a few years of each other, into similarly privileged, left-thinking households. As such it was perhaps inevitable that Mitchison and West would move at times within related social groups, brought together by mutual friends and by joint feminist, socialist and literary interests.

While there is little evidence to suggest they were close friends, the two writers sat together on the editorial board of *The Realist*, a 'short-lived literary journal' (J. Benton, *Naomi Mitchison: A Biography*,

While we do not know whether Mitchison consciously exploited travel writing as a vehicle for her thoughts, it clearly provides the dominant structure to the text. In addition, the choice of 'Other People's Class' for her first discussion after an introductory piece on the question of 'Seeing Other People', is itself revealing for what it discloses of her own preoccupations.

The chapter titles of this text are also telling in the assumed position of the authorial voice as an outsider to what is observed. This is markedly different from *Mucking Around* and *Return to the Fairy Hill* in which Mitchison consciously portrays her involvement with and understanding of the communities she visits. As Jenni Calder has suggested, 'the very title of [*Other People's Worlds*] [...] suggests a position on the outside looking in'.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, in the introductory chapter Mitchison personifies herself as an observer of an unknown, if sometimes analogous,

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p. 61-2) in 1929, and West is reported to have come to Mitchison's defence over the publication of her controversial book *The Outline* (J. Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 106). In addition, the Mitchison archive at the National Library of Scotland contains letters from H.G. Wells around the period in which he had an affair with West, again revealing a direct link between the two women (NLS, Acc. 6610). West's biographer Victoria Glendinning relates that Mitchison recommended a liberal school for Anthony, the illegitimate son of Wells and West when his parentage became the subject of bullying (V. Glendinning, *Rebecca West: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), p. 107). Comparisons continue when the focus shifts from the lives of these writers to their work. Introducing the 1993 Canongate edition of *Black Lamb and Gray Falcon*, Trevor Royle describes a travel book applicable to Mitchison's *Other People's Worlds* as much as to *Black Lamb and Gray Falcon*.

Structurally the book is seamless, even though the writing was based on the evidence and experience of three different journeys. Even then, it is difficult to discover any distinct narrative line binding the whole together, so sprawling is West's style and so disparate her thoughts about subjects as various as history, folklore, myth, archaeology and, of course, politics. What gives this book its significance and its sense of grandeur is West's commitment. (R. West, *Black Lamb and Gray Falcon* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1993), pxiii).

Looking beyond the travel writing genre, Mitchison and West produced very similar forms of ancestral history in their later years. Mitchison's unpublished family history *Hide and Seek* (held by the National Library of Scotland) is explored in Chapter One of this thesis, and can be compared to West's posthumously published memoir *Family Memories*. As discussed in Chapter One, Mitchison uses her family history to explore herself and the origin of her ideas and beliefs. In the introduction to West's text, Faith Evans writes:

*Family Memories* is not only about Rebecca West's ancestors: it is about herself. Always an imposing narrator, she is never more so than when writing about members of her family, and she uses them to express her own feelings and ideas. Indeed, her very identity seems at times to fuse with theirs. (R. West, *Family Memories* (London: Lime Tree, 1987; 1992) p.1.)

Unlike Mitchison, West never produced a clearly-definable autobiography, and instead uses this text to produce a picture of the rich family background into which she was born, and the parents who provided her earliest influences. Faith Evans notes:

[West] never tired of looking into people's backgrounds as a means of comprehending their behaviour, and it was a tendency that was bound to surface when writing about her own family and, by extension, herself. The personal nature of her subject simultaneously fuelled and legitimized her search. (Ibid, p. 7).

<sup>46</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 262.

civilisation, rather than one of which she is part.<sup>47</sup> A similar viewpoint can be detected in the photographs which accompany the text, as Mitchison does not appear once in them, staying, as it were, behind the lens. This, again, is in sharp contrast to the accompanying pictures of her two other travel narratives in which she is very definitely visible within exotic cultural surroundings.<sup>48</sup>

*Other People's Worlds* was written at a difficult period for Mitchison, in that, throughout the 1950s, her relationship with Scotland was being tested. Increasingly, she felt that her seat on Argyll County Council was ineffective, and that little good (or gratitude) ever came from the hard work she poured into the surrounding community.<sup>49</sup> As laird, her instinctive desire was to help, but her influence was limited both by bureaucracy, and by the stubborn refusal of locals gratefully to receive that support. Nevertheless, although disillusioned with Scotland and with 'her' people, and setting her sights further afield, Mitchison continued to use the Highlands as a reference point by which all other places would be measured. Calder maintains that in the text, 'her Highland identity is communicated with firmness and conviction'.<sup>50</sup> In the opening passage of the narrative, she sets out her reasons for travel, forging a clear link in the mind of the reader between Africa and Scotland:

'Why do I write [this book]? I went to West Africa, one of the problem areas and growing points of the world, in later winter, 1957. I came from another problem area, the Western Highlands; but it is not a growing point. I wish it was. I grope a little uncertainly at the kind of conditions which make it so, but see little chance of getting them.'<sup>51</sup>

This perspective can be seen to frame the whole text, as Mitchison continues throughout the book to find correspondences between the two cultures, particularly within the still-vital tribal structures of Africa, and the historical clan network of the

<sup>47</sup> Partly contradicting this position, Mitchison also argues, 'As a writer, as an intellectual, one is engagé. One must be part of the change one writes about. There is no completely external unbiased attitude possible. I am not unbiased about West Africa. I liked it too much.' *Other People's Worlds*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> Most explicit of these photographs pictures Mitchison on horseback in Botswana, surrounded by tribal members. It carries the caption 'I have been claimed by the tribe'. Mitchison, N., *Return to the Fairy Hill* (London: Heinemann, 1966), p. 167.

<sup>49</sup> Mitchison failed to regain her council seat in the elections of May 1964. In all, she was County Councillor for the Kintyre (East) electoral division for the years 1945-49 and 1952-64. She was also, therefore, a County Council member of the Kintyre District Council.

<sup>50</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 210.

<sup>51</sup> Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds*, p. 9.



Scottish Highlands. In addition to these shared forms of social organisation, Mitchison portrays many parallels which she sees as arising from a sense of injustice created by the colonisation of one country by another. Writing about the replacement of Gaelic cultures by Anglicised models, she notes:

In the Highlands of Scotland there was one kind of culture. Another more successful one was thrust upon it. Observing that, one may have great sympathy with the peoples of Africa to whom the same thing has happened.<sup>52</sup>

Discussing the insidious nature of cultural and political imperialism, Mitchison also draws parallels between diverse aspects of community life, including the production of music, the symbolic importance of tribal cloth, (such as the tartan), the position of the tribal chief to his people,<sup>53</sup> and the difficulties of obtaining agricultural subsidies. Of particular concern to her is the influence of educational practices and language-use within each culture. Seeing the danger of promoting western languages and cultural references to the detriment of the native traditions in Africa, she remarks:

We have seen the same thing in the Highlands; the school break with the mother tongue. Here an education was forced on us in the eighteenth century in aid of the Anglicising Whigs; the schools taught habits of industry and docility: and English. The moral education of children, the customs and the music and the stories, was all looked on as deplorable. Now that another point of view comes to the fore, it is too late: like the mother, the mother-tongue is sentimentalised over and despised.<sup>54</sup>

Through her identification with Scotland, therefore, Mitchison is able to see herself in relation to the colonised peoples of Africa, the 'other' of her title. Her critique of the imperialist practices she sees there is, however, tempered by a more acquiescent, albeit possibly unconscious, acceptance of the traditional roles of the coloniser. To some extent, much travel writing can be interpreted as imperialist in that the relative

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<sup>52</sup> Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds*, p. 17.

<sup>53</sup> 'What happens in Africa? - Your chief becomes Chairman of your Urban District or County Council, as indeed happens in Scotland'. Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds*, p. 85.

economics of the participants mean that the text will always be controlled by the dominant half.<sup>55</sup> This remains true of Mitchison's work, despite her vocal condemnation of the more obvious barbarities of historical imperialism. Echoing the tendency seen in *Mucking Around*, Mitchison, although documenting Independence celebrations, moves within an older colonial order. In Nigeria she stays with the Assistant District Officer (who is of Scottish ancestry) and worries about the time when 'Nigeria gets her Independence and gets rid of her Colonial Service'.<sup>56</sup> She recognises the passing of a way of life, and the anti-colonial feeling that is evident in the new Africa: 'It looks as though about half the world would make things unpleasant for [ex-colonialists]. I write this book partly out of anger that this should be so'.<sup>57</sup> Her implied hope that the whole business of Empire can be simply put aside in a new era of human understanding and friendship, as in *Mucking Around*, may be judged as more than a little naïve. Essentially in favour of the Independence movements she is reporting, and the implied end to colonialist practices, she also fails to remark on the African house boys of the Colonial Service who continue to address their white employer as 'Master'.<sup>58</sup>

These, however, are relatively specific points in an analysis of the links between the text and colonialism. Less immediately apparent, but more pervasive, is her aim, stated on the first page of the text, that 'one excuse for writing this book is that it might be able to help'.<sup>59</sup> Mitchison's aristocratic sense of obligation to the community has been much discussed,<sup>60</sup> and her role as the (humanist) missionary in Africa, is highlighted above. Within Scotland, this tendency to serve can be seen as a fulfilment of her position as laird, and not, therefore, unusually problematic. Within the context of Empire, however, it gains new significance, as it assumes a hierarchical framework in which the inhabitants of 'abroad' must be given access to one's superior

<sup>54</sup> Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds*, p. 105.

<sup>55</sup> Steve Clark makes this point in *Travel Writing and Empire*, writing; 'To a certain extent, [...] travel writing is inevitably one-way traffic, because the Europeans mapped the world rather than the world mapping them. Travellers, merely through their greater access to the technology of transportation, implicitly belong to a more developed culture, and the strong historical connection of exploration with exploitation and occupation, justifiably make them figures to be feared and shunned.' p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds*, p. 10-1.

<sup>57</sup> Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds*, p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds*, p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> Mitchison, *Other People's Worlds*, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> See discussions in Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, and Benton, *Naomi Mitchison: A Biography*.

knowledge and help, regardless of whether they have actually asked for it. Discussing this tendency, Steve Clark argues in *Travel Writing and Empire* that:

what is so striking is the sense of mission, of entitlement combined with self-denial. The most flagrant ethnocentrism is inseparable from what was strongest and arguably most honourable in the imperial ideal: commitment to collective endeavour, asceticism, resilience and practicality.<sup>61</sup>

All of these qualities can be seen as aspects of Mitchison's inherited sense of 'noblesse oblige', whether at home or, as in *Other People's Worlds* and (to a greater extent) in *Return to the Fairy Hill*, abroad.

An exploration of *Mucking Around* and *Other People's Worlds* reveals that it is typical of the contradiction that surrounds Mitchison that she manages simultaneously to identify herself with the colonised, while at the same time, being inextricably linked to the forces of colonialism. While she does not explore this contradiction in any depth in either of these texts, her increasing involvement with the Botswanan people in the 1960s forces a recognition of the paradoxical nature of her position, and she confronts this bravely and with clarity in her final piece of travel writing, *Return to the Fairy Hill*.

#### ***iv: Return to the Fairy Hill***

Published in 1966, *Return to the Fairy Hill* can be seen as following on from *Other People's Worlds* in its exploration of Mitchison's relationship with Africa and of the correspondences which she observed between this newly discovered culture, and an older Scottish way of life. As a text, it has received more attention than *Other People's Worlds*, almost certainly because it contains fewer (although still many) references to contemporary African politics, and is generally a far more personal book. Its autobiographical nature has been highlighted by Calder who comments 'It is

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<sup>61</sup> Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire*, p. 10.

a book about Naomi at a turning point in her life, rather than a book about Botswana'.<sup>62</sup> While Mitchison's position as the outsider in African society (so close to the surface in *Other People's Worlds*) would, to an extent, always remain, the text traces its lessening impact, as she believes herself becoming integrated into the Bakgatla tribe of Botswana. Within the text Mitchison presents the beginnings of a cross-cultural relationship between herself and the tribe which would last the decades until her ashes were split and scattered in her two spiritual homelands, the villages of Carradale and Mochudi.<sup>63</sup>

Bechuanaland, as Botswana was then known, was still a British Protectorate in the early 'sixties when Mitchison first visited. It shares landlocked borders with South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Angola in the south-east of Africa. The Bakgatla tribe of whom Mitchison became a part, are found in the south-east of the country. Colonial nation-carving along straight, simplistic lines had cut their traditional tribal land in two, splitting the area between Botswanan control and the racial segregation of the Republic of South Africa, a fact that caused many political tensions and was particularly problematic for Mitchison who had been deemed (much to her delight<sup>64</sup>) a 'proscribed person' by the South African authorities for vocal opposition to the strict apartheid of the period.

Mitchison's unlikely involvement in this region stemmed from a British Council project in 1960 to invite foreign students to Britain. As part of her annual British Council party, she arranged for the students to visit her in Carradale where she met the young Chief-designate of the Bakgatla, Linchwe, who would become her primary reference point throughout her many visits to Botswana. A friendship ensued at this first meeting, and two years later, Linchwe invited Mitchison on a visit of

<sup>62</sup> Around this time, Mitchison's mother had died, aged 98, leaving her more free to travel. She also failed to regain her seat on the Argyll County Council. Both her new-found freedom and her increasing disillusion with Carradale encouraged her to look for new challenges, further afield. See Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 260.

<sup>63</sup> See 'Mitchison's tribal home beckons her ashes to Africa', *The Sunday Times*, 17 January 1999. The strength of Mitchison's bond with Africa is made clear in this passage from *Return to the Fairy Hill*, in which she makes known her wish to remain in Africa after death: '[I]f I die here in Mochudi I want to be buried in the great kraal where Chief Molefi was buried, and let the cattle trample out all marks of where my body lies. And I do not want any religious service, nor yet to have my body put into any coffin, but into the skin on some beast; I would like best for it to be a lion skin. So I am writing this now for Linchwe to know.' (p. 212).

<sup>64</sup> 'I have this funny little document from the Government of the Republic of South Africa which will stop me going even as far as Mafeking; I take it as a compliment', Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 34. Two letters informing Mitchison of this can be found in NLS TD2980 2/10.

return hospitality in which she would be present at his inauguration as Paramount Chief of the tribe.

Meeting Linchwe again, this time on his home territory, she writes, 'The enchantment began'.<sup>65</sup> Yet while this enchantment (and at times frustration) with Africa, inspired by her earlier visit to Ghana and Nigeria, was immediate, her practical involvement with, and understanding of, the problems and needs of Africa, and in particular of 'her' tribe, would develop more slowly:

I had not thrown my imagination towards Bechuanaland. I had too much else to think about, especially perhaps the County Council and Highland Panel problems, and nuclear disarmament [...] The common experience was not there yet, still less the common cause.<sup>66</sup>

When Linchwe requests that she stay longer at the end of her first visit, she explains that she really cannot, as she must get back for the Glasgow Rhododendron Show, exemplifying her primary identification with Western Scotland at this early point. Moreover, the juxtaposition of this event with the sub-Saharan African veldt highlights the cultural leap which she took in becoming, later, truly part of the tribe.

In the young Linchwe, Mitchison saw the personification of a figure that had appeared repeatedly throughout her fiction; the prince or chief who suffers for his people.<sup>67</sup> Closely related to the aristocratic sense of social responsibility and leadership which Mitchison herself felt (the Haldane family motto was 'Suffer'<sup>68</sup>), this symbolic character finds its most poignant and elemental incarnation in the shape of Charles Edward Stewart, 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', and his role in the Jacobite Rebellion of Scotland's mid-eighteenth century. In her linking of these two characters, Mitchison is clearly projecting part of Scotland's mythology onto the young African chief, yet her ideals are merely based on a romantic view of the past. Linchwe recognises in her a shared desire to work for the good of the people, and

<sup>65</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 28.

<sup>66</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 25.

<sup>67</sup> Of Linchwe's installation as Paramount Chief she writes, 'Already it was the hundred per cent romantic situation of the heir, the young prince about to take his rightful place at last, a stock situation, no doubt, but played absolutely straight'. Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 30. Mitchison discusses the recurrence of this theme in an interview with Isobel Murray in 1984 in which she argues: 'This is what happens to political leaders [...] I think that was so impressive about Lenin's tomb. There is obviously someone who died for the people.' Murray (ed.) *Scottish Writers Talking*, p. 78.

<sup>68</sup> The full Haldane crest is the frontispiece plate in, Haldane, General Sir J Aylmer L., *The Haldanes of Gleneagles* (Edinburgh: Blackwoods, 1929).

behind that a more fundamental search for the just society.<sup>69</sup> While Mitchison would find this a sometimes difficult and frustrating relationship, it was also a trusting, productive partnership which, sealed in blood (as she describes<sup>70</sup>), did much to aide Botswana's emergence through Independence and into the modern world.

The symbolic importance of Linchwe is not, however the only parallel Mitchison draws between the Botswanan nation and the Scotland of her cultural associations. As in *Other People's Worlds* she paints explicit correspondences between the two cultures, again centred on the striking similarities between the tribal structures of the community she has joined, and the one she has left behind. Entering Mochudi for the first time, she writes, 'I realized almost at once from the lockless doors, the unbolted windows, that this was like a Highland village'.<sup>71</sup> Using this analogy once again she later remarks, 'If one wants to imagine what it was like in an eighteenth-century Highland clan, one would do better to look at modern Africa than at any coeval European society'.<sup>72</sup> Linchwe's driver is cast as a character from this lost Highland world; 'he was completely trustworthy, basically intelligent, interesting to talk with and a fully responsible person. He would have fitted perfectly'.<sup>73</sup>

As in Ghana and Nigeria in the 1950s, Mitchison recognises the African tribal singing as 'exactly parallel to the great music in the Gaeltachd [sic]'.<sup>74</sup> and worries about the corresponding devaluation of local culture by outside influences. More so than in her visits to Western Africa, identifying correspondences between the two diverse cultures allows Mitchison to understand, and see herself as part of the community she visits. Helping with the minutes for a local meeting she notes their similarity to the Kintyre District Council, remarking, 'Having typed them, one

<sup>69</sup> Mitchison's influence on Linchwe is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the tone of his inaugural speech as tribal leader. See Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 62-4.

<sup>70</sup> 'Linchwe began to talk about Afro-Asian solidarity, how he and Asians were closer than ever he could be to Europeans, how they had the numbers, and would in time be stronger, how there would be a war - I said, 'You know which side I would be on.' He looked at me unbelievably, his head chucked back. I thought this is the time I had waited for, the time of my own solidarity. I said, 'Have you a knife?' he gave me a clasp knife, casually, not seeing what I was after. I opened it and slashed my hand; at first it did not bleed and I gave it another cut and he stared and said 'What is happening?' I took his hand and put it down over mine, and now blood dripped between us. I said 'Now do you believe me?' and I looked in his eyes and he had tears filming the clear agate and then he said very softly 'There will be no war.' Ibid, p. 54. Mitchison later wrote a poem called 'Blood Promise' which drew both on this incident, and on an earlier similar promise to a Carradale fisherman. See *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 232.

<sup>71</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 78.

<sup>73</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 114.

<sup>74</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 51.

couldn't any longer think of these people as being in any way 'different' [...] the motives were the same, the loyalties and the jealousies'.<sup>75</sup>

Having begun to coalesce with the tribe, (whose acceptance of her is strengthened by their chief's bond) it is possible to trace through the text a gradual weakening of her identification with the Europeans of the Colonial Service with whom she was culturally and historically oriented, and with whom she had stayed on her previous visits into the unknown. The extent of this alienation is only seen when compared to the previously-discussed associations of *Mucking Around* and *Other People's Worlds*. From the outset, Mitchison chooses not to stay in the official residences open to her, although she acknowledges 'I was an M.P.'s wife, and the Colonial Office was keeping a fatherly eye on me'.<sup>76</sup> Her position within the tribe as 'mother' of the chief, and her place within one of the 'mophato' or age-related tribal groupings helped to give her a real sense of belonging within the community - a feeling which had in some ways eluded her in Carradale - and in the text she is able to write with conviction, 'I have been claimed by the tribe and have accepted'.<sup>77</sup>

However, Mitchison being a white, upper-class intellectual in a largely illiterate subsistence area of Southern Africa, questions of her identity and of her motives, however benevolent her intent, are again unavoidable. In *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel*, within the textual representation of overseas travel, Inderpal Grewal discusses 'the need to merge with the "native" culture and not be seen as a visitor'.<sup>78</sup> This tendency is clearly noticeable in Mitchison's text through statements of association, and comments such as 'One gradually learns that people who live in 'primitive' conditions are not 'them' but 'us',<sup>79</sup> and her portrayal of 'the tribe, the savages, of whom I felt myself intensely to be one'.<sup>80</sup> Her shift in identification from the white western world she has come from, to the African tribal self she claims, is so marked that a form of reverse racism begins to creep into her writing, as she articulates a rejection of any contact with the 'whites' who would question the wisdom of her presence within the basic conditions of the tribal village. Continuing a life-long inclination to rock the establishment boat,

<sup>75</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>76</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 26.

<sup>77</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 118.

<sup>78</sup> Grewal, I., *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 156.

Mitchison takes pleasure in shocking the colonials she no longer sees as her own, who are moved to ask, 'Are you not being rather tribal, Lady Mitchison?', a question which perfectly encapsulates the paradox of her position.<sup>81</sup> In *Return to the Fairy Hill*, as she moves further from the colonial world, she articulates her critical stance towards it more clearly than in the two previous texts, admitting, 'I knew now what it was to be anti-Colonialist, the guilt and the solidarity'.<sup>82</sup>

Yet while Mitchison distances herself from the colonial administrative class, she enters further into the equivalent stratum of African society. Invited as she was into this new life by a tribal chief, her social position remained as one of the 'top people'; the position she had always known. She herself recognised this situation, admitting, 'It is clear that my real contact in the tribe is with the elite, the educated'.<sup>83</sup> Even so, as a natural leader of people, Mitchison engages with the needs of the tribe, in particular the problem of drought and the lack of reservoirs and piping to afflicted areas. Interviewed by Leonie Caldercott in 1984 for the television series 'Women of our Century' Mitchison discusses this position, explaining: I was going to have a new role in life which meant more obligations as well as everything else [...] I am a one man citizens' advice bureau'.<sup>84</sup> As she had previously campaigned for agricultural subsidies, a village hall and a harbour for the Carradale community, she now used her contacts, her ability to write and to negotiate with governmental officialdom, and crucially, her financial reserves, to help the tribe, raising once more the double-edged role of the benign colonialist. Mitchison discusses this within her text, highlighting once more the link between the two cultures:

Much of what I see happening [in Botswana] is what has happened in the Highlands (remembering that here also the effects of the missionaries of a conquering country did most to destroy Gaelic culture, and that the attempts of An Commun Gaidheilach [sic], the body designed to encourage Highland culture, and other sympathisers

<sup>80</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 60.

<sup>81</sup> This incident is also related in Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 135.

<sup>82</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 78.

<sup>83</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 120.

<sup>84</sup> 'Women of our Century', (Broadcast on BBC2, 6 July 1984). A sound recording for this television programme can be found in the British Library, National Sound Archive, T6993/01 TRI. The series was also turned into a book, published as *Women of our Century*, ed. Leonie Caldercott (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984).



can do nothing to stop the rot). I could do nothing there. I don't suppose I can do anything here.<sup>85</sup>

Yet of this new mission, Calder writes, 'In some respects, her role in Botswana was more effective than her role in the Highlands'.<sup>86</sup> Bruised by what she saw as the rejection of her good works by the Carradale people, Mitchison is aware that she is embarking on a similar project, with, potentially, similar results:

I knew quite well that I felt myself at one time committed to Scotland, to the dream of Alba. The reality of working for Scotland had got rid of most of that, though occasionally I still got a breath of it. Possibly the same thing would happen here. Reality of Africans might kill the dream of Africa.<sup>87</sup>

The sense of social responsibility, the fight for the 'common cause', is revived in Mitchison in her contact with the people of the Bakgatla, yet, as she herself highlights, she moves in the privileged ranks, provided for by servants, and at the hub of the decision-making processes which will affect the future of the tribe. While she pours her energies into improving the lot of the majority, her education, class and language keep her from natural assimilation, just as it did with the fishing community of Carradale.

It is a painful paradox of Mitchison's position that while she wishes to be integrated into the tribe, it is her unassailable differences, her colour, culture and wealth (and through these, her ability to help) that make her presence there possible in the first place. In *Abroad*, Fussell notes, 'the traveller is almost always richer and freer than those he's among',<sup>88</sup> while in relation to Mitchison, Calder argues that 'It was precisely the fact that she was white and well-connected that enhanced her value to Botswana'.<sup>89</sup> These issues of money appear throughout *Return to the Fairy Hill* as Mitchison periodically raises doubts about the real dynamics of her presence within the tribe. Following one of her early arguments with Linchwe she writes, 'I suddenly

<sup>85</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 22.

<sup>86</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 255.

<sup>87</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 69.

<sup>88</sup> Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 210.

<sup>89</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 251.

felt that things had gone wrong between us, that all they wanted out of me was money, practical advice, contact on the level where it could be forgotten and discarded later on'.<sup>90</sup> Later, she draws a further parallel between Scotland and Botswana in this context:

Sometimes, looking back on my tribe from London or Scotland, I think angrily that all they want, all their apparent solidarity with me, is only that they are after certain kinds of material help which I am likely to get for them as long as they are, so to speak, kidding me on.<sup>91</sup>

Mitchison later qualifies this statement,<sup>92</sup> but the fact that she chose to leave it in her final text reveals the extent to which it exercised her, in Scotland, and in Africa. No matter which tribe she became a part of, she would always be set apart, different, because of the money (and education) which at once, made it all possible, and was a burden.<sup>93</sup>

Doubts aside, this money was often useful to the tribe, willingly given, and gratefully received.<sup>94</sup> It allowed her to have a say in the running of the community, which in turn made possible the tribal identity she craved. Thus, her tribal identity is inseparable from her role of benevolent colonialist, discussed earlier. It was a role of which Mitchison was aware, and in the text she admits, 'I can quite imagine that any African gets fed up with so many whites telling them what they ought to do; no doubt

<sup>90</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 185.

<sup>91</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, pp. 192-3. Mitchison sent the manuscript of this text to Doris Lessing, a friend from earlier days, who, having grown up in Africa, was in a good position to comment on it. Lessing's long and highly critical reply, included as an appendix to this thesis, contains the following extract: 'It seems to me wrong of you to put this weight on these people [...] to write in a book for all to read that after so much trust and personal love has been shown you, that you sit around in London thinking that they are using you for what you can do for them, and your money, well this seems to me a really bad disloyalty. [...] We are the fortunate of the world, and therefore the unfortunate use us. But one doesn't complain about it, or not outside personal friendship or among people who understand. Of course on one level with the tribe, they "use" you. Why not? You have asked for it and invited it. But on another level they love you.' (28 May 65) NLS, TD2980 2/8.

<sup>92</sup> She writes: 'In fact it is just not so. If I put it in it is because I want to be truthful. I don't want to hide from my people that I have thought this, hateful as it is to have even let it touch my mind. But honestly this is what I sometimes thought.' Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 193.

<sup>93</sup> Writing in the *New Statesman and Nation*, Calder suggests, 'Naomi could not *be* African, nor could she ally herself with the conventional British presence. One can sense her frustration: a vivid synergy led her into territory that reality sometimes denied her.' (16/30 December 1994), p. 58.

<sup>94</sup> 'I was at least providing the means for others to open and change. I was providing the means for more mobility and opportunity. There had been one lucky thing. I had inherited some quite valuable furniture and china; the Sotheby cheque just added up to the cost of the library building.', Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 88.

with the best intentions but not doing it themselves',<sup>95</sup> a statement only undermined by questions over the extent to which she fully saw herself as one of these 'whites'.

To try to label the ways Mitchison constructed her identity within the text as either colonial or anti-colonial would be too simplistic. Her life in Africa was a constant negotiation between her conflicting loyalties, the inextricable links of her cultural background, and the tribe which claimed her as mother, and accepted her as their own. As such, *Return to the Fairy Hill* is a complicated mediation between these two poles, pivoting, as did her whole life, on her one 'unresolvable contradiction'.<sup>96</sup> Steve Clark advances this need for cultural mediation in travel writing of the post-colonial era, suggesting that:

to repudiate the legacy of colonialism would involve not merely a self-indictment but a self-annulment; instead, there is a therapeutic rite of playing the roles through with nonchalant detachment. The chief fascination of the contemporary travel genre lies in this project of formulating an acceptable, or perhaps less culpable, post-imperial voice.<sup>97</sup>

This concept of a more benign, less culpable incarnation of the colonial role is apt for interpreting Mitchison's involvement with the Bakgatla. While her presence in the tribe and the financial and educational resources she had at her disposal have shades of an older missionary zeal, the self-doubt of her effectiveness and entitlement to be there undermines the suggestion of traditional colonial intent. Such doubts are woven through the text of *Return to the Fairy Hill* in a way not seen in *Mucking Around* or *Other People's Worlds*, most clearly in the following passage:

I had brought a Pibroch record with me [...] and suddenly in the middle of the trembling I said to myself, what am I doing here? I don't think I would have thought that if I could have been utterly certain that

<sup>95</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 186.

<sup>96</sup> Benton, *Naomi Mitchison*, p. 153.

<sup>97</sup> Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire*, p. 10.

what I was doing was really useful and valuable, but I didn't really know.<sup>98</sup>

Viewed together as a single body of writing, these three travel narratives can be seen to trace the transformation of Mitchison's representation of self in relation to the otherness of 'abroad', and to document her shifting views on the politics of Empire, in periods of her life not covered by her memoirs or diary writing. Yet while her growing disillusion with the Highlands encouraged orientation to new cultures and peoples, which in turn altered her projection of self in her texts, her continued identification with Scotland remained of primary importance, and is clearly visible within the texts.

Having considered the influence of colonial culture and class on the construction of Mitchison's identity abroad, this chapter now turns to consider the other main facet of her representation of self, as a women traveller, and the effect this had on the negotiation of her role within alternative communities, and as a writer of travel texts.

## v: Travel Writing by Women

While the question of gendered travel writing has been much discussed,<sup>99</sup> it is usually in the context of women's experiences of the nineteenth century and earlier, focusing on the work of pioneers such as Mary Kingsley whose journeys are narrated in *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and Isabella Bird, another Scot, whose works include *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880) and *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879). Within this analysis there has been much debate about the role of women travellers as colonialist and, through that, about their representation of 'abroad' in travel texts. Of primary focus has been the capacity of foreign travel for escape from the restrictions on female agency in Victorian Britain, and the 'desire to reinvent [oneself] in a place where [...] gender would play a secondary role to questions of class and race'.<sup>100</sup> This has been viewed in a largely unfavourable critical light in that, while escaping the

<sup>98</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 165.

<sup>99</sup> See, for example, D. McMillan's *The Scotswoman at Home and Abroad: Non-Fictional Writing 1700-1900*. (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1999); K. Lawrence's *Penelope Voyages, Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) and S. Mills's *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991).

European confinements of gender, these women can be seen to have upheld and strengthened colonial discourses through their emphasis on a hierarchical structure of whites and non-whites in an attempt to downplay the perceived limitations of their gender.<sup>101</sup> Inderpal Grewal suggests it was:

Englishwomen, mainly bourgeois women, who participated in the discourses of imperialism in order to insert themselves into a selfhood that gave them the rights denied by a patriarchal order.<sup>102</sup>

As such, travel writing by women can be seen to offer an alternative to the pre-twentieth-century narratives of confinement articulated by Gilbert and Gubar.<sup>103</sup> Complicating this relationship further, however, is the position, shared by women and the colonised, as 'other' within the patriarchal hierarchy of western culture. Yet although this parallel may superficially appear valid, it is easily destabilised by reference to the other influencing factors of travel discourse, such as race and class, raised above.

While Mitchison was a woman travel writer, and may be classified as coming from a similar social background as earlier women travellers such as Kingsley and Bird, the evidence of her texts does not support the notion that she can be seen solely within the parameters of gendered discourse. Neither the social limitations of home, nor the need to assert one's own self through repression of others is applicable to Mitchison, who, writing in the second half of the twentieth century was not subject to comparable restrictions or the fear of transgressing boundaries, either national or social. An early pioneer of women's political and biological rights, Mitchison did not suffer from a sense of gendered inferiority, and her famously open marriage and familial structures could hardly be described as conventional. Placing her firmly outside the subjected position of 'other' is also Mitchison's class perspective, the

<sup>100</sup> Allcock and Young, *Black Lambs and Grey Falcons: Women Travelling in the Balkans* (Oxford: Berghan Books, 2000), p. 91

<sup>101</sup> In *Penelope Voyages*, Lawrence writes that women's 'identity derived from their white skins rather than their female bodies. But at the same time, the legacy of sexual oppression paradoxically fostered these women's identification with the subjugated Africans whose lower station facilitated their own liberation in Africa. p. 103.

<sup>102</sup> Grewal, *Home and Harem*, p. 85.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Lawrence, Karen, *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. xi.

confidently affirmed notion that she is one of the 'élite', 'the intelligentsia'.<sup>104</sup> This awareness offered her a sense of mobility and responsibility which largely over-rides questions of gender, while simultaneously reinforcing evidence for the class-based hierarchy of British colonial travel.

Within the African context of *Return to the Fairy Hill*, Mitchison's gendered self is actually obscured by her identification with the male leaders and by her instinctive form of benevolent paternalism. Involvement in tribal organisation and development forces Mitchison increasingly to identify with men, as women take little part in the decision-making process, a fact that causes her European feminist values to come into conflict with the traditional androcentric framework of Botswanan society. While she was initiated into a 'mophato', a group of similarly-aged women, she clearly did not see herself as one of them, preferring to invest her energies with the Chief, and concern herself with the dealings of the male tribal council. She remarks:

I was not at ease with any of these shy, rather inarticulate women, and I doubt if this was entirely a question of language. We had a certain amount of common experience that I did not share with the men, but the critical experiences of marriage, housekeeping, child-bearing and bringing up children, have moved over quickly in Europe at least, out of instinct and into technology.<sup>105</sup>

In the text, Mitchison's interest in women appears to stem less from a desire for friendship and more from a detached wish to improve their position through increased access to education and contraception, a fact which, (while her efforts were largely supported by Linchwe), brought the cultural differences she was negotiating into sharp focus. Questioning the legitimacy of her enthusiasm to normalise the use of contraception and reduce the 'ethos of female suffering' in childbirth in a less advanced society, Mitchison herself admits 'I am almost sure that my European-type feminism made me misjudge the situation to some extent.'<sup>106</sup> Considering the nature of Mitchison's identification with the Bakgatla women, and the benefits and trouble her feminism brought to the community, Calder argues:

<sup>104</sup> Jill Benton remarks, 'Naomi would be proud to call herself a highbrow all of her life', Benton, *Naomi Mitchison*, p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 114.

She saw herself as their champion, but it was a championing that must have seemed irrelevant to many women's lives and perhaps came too soon to do more than prepare the ground for later development...The actions of even the best intentioned whites had often brought complications with which they were not equipped to deal.<sup>107</sup>

Another aspect of foreign travel often highlighted by critics of travel writing is the question of personal safety, and the differing implications of this for male and female travellers. Through fear of attack in unfamiliar regions of the world, cross-dressing, a culturally transgressive activity in the period before women's liberation, was used as a form of disguise and as such of protection. As with other aspects of gendered travel, Mitchison's late twentieth century context largely eliminates the problem of dress codes, but the question of personal safety remains, and her exploration of this issue in the text can be seen to have implications for our reading of her participation in colonial discourse.

Throughout *Return to the Fairy Hill*, and to a lesser extent in her other travel narratives, Mitchison emphasises her feeling of security in the places she visits. Discussing the area around the Bakgatla village she writes, 'On moonlight nights I could see my way back...It was nice though to feel that I could always walk anywhere in Mochudi by day or night in absolute safety'.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, she later explains:

I didn't think I was likely to be murdered or raped but might be robbed or kidnapped. To meet these contingencies I took a torch, pencil and notebook, a little money (always better to have a little on you if people are intent on stealing it), put on knickers, started off.<sup>109</sup>

Regardless of her respected position as mother of the tribal chief, and the associated safety this may have offered her, this attitude appears somewhat naïve, as does her

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<sup>106</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 168.

<sup>107</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 241.

<sup>108</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 173.

<sup>109</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 180.

cheerful analysis of a near-rape she experienced in a kibbutz in *Mucking Around*.<sup>110</sup> While this sense of being unassailable may be related to her primary identification with masculine roles in Africa, it can also be interpreted as a remnant of a colonial perspective which viewed the colonised as children of a paternalistic empire, and therefore not a threat. Steve Clark argues that this tendency:

poses an immediate question of comparative privilege - even 'travelling without protection signifies colonial control of territory' - and also a more general problem of complicity with imperial ideology. What is most ingratiating ('humour, self-depreciation, statements of affiliation'<sup>111</sup> and descriptions of relationships') is most insidious in so far as it successfully deflects attention from underlying structures of domination.<sup>112</sup>

This colonial notion of a child-like Empire has echoes both in Mitchison's symbolically-charged intervention with the Union flag at the Botswanan independence ceremony portrayed in *Mucking Around*, and, more generally, in her instinctive form of benevolent paternalism, reinterpreted in a foreign context. It should be stressed, however, that the implications of colonialist sympathy in these acts can largely be read in the context of Mitchison's compassionate sense of social responsibility, visible in many forms throughout her life, and informed by her social background. Her belief in egalitarianism and the search for the just society emerge as having been the primary forces which influenced her roles abroad, and she may be said to have tried with an impressive degree of honesty and courage to negotiate the contradictions inherent in these beliefs and the reality of her aristocratic privilege.

Mitchison's three travel narratives are clearly part of a larger body of autobiographical writing, and must be taken in relation to the previous chapters on memoirs and diaries. Together these works portray Mitchison's negotiation of identity

<sup>110</sup> See Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>111</sup> This idea can be related to Mitchison's over-enthusiastic desire to emphasise kinship and belonging with the Botswanans: 'Sometimes Naomi over-reacted and made others uncomfortable [...]. [Some] have commented on her exaggerated gestures in the symbolic juxtaposition of black and white skin, her hand on an African hand.', Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 251.



throughout her life, and in relation to experiences at home and abroad. It is a collection of autobiographical writings that provides an unusually full portrayal of self-representation through the life of a complex, often contradictory writer.

Chapters One to Three of this thesis have focused on Mitchison's non-fictional autobiographical and personal writings, in the following section I wish to expand the parameters of this study to examine her projection of identity throughout the substantial surviving collection of her personal correspondence.

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<sup>112</sup> Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire*, p. 22. This is the layout of Clark's text, with the internal quotations taken from Mills, *Discourses of Discovery*.

## Chapter Four

### Hiding and Seeking: Personal Correspondence and Public Readership

Good letters are like pearls: they are admirable in themselves, but their value is infinitely enhanced when there is a string of them. Therefore, to be a really great letter writer it is not enough to write an occasional excellent letter; it is necessary to write constantly, indefatigably, with ever-recurring zest. It is almost necessary to live to a good old age. What makes correspondence fascinating is the cumulative effect of slow, gradual, day-to-day development – the long leisurely unfolding of a character and a life.

Lytton Strachey  
*Characters and Commentaries*

#### i: Introduction

In a letter to her husband, Dick Mitchison, written from Botswana in the mid 1960s, Mitchison describes the events of the day just past:

Hot, hot afternoon, then suddenly a tremendous gust of wind, blowing dust all over everything, black clouds, thunder and lightening. I was scared because L[inchwe] was out on the bay horse (he was having to persuade a family to bury a corpse instead of waiting for the relations to turn up) but he came running in out of the storm and into my arms and then the rain came crashing down.<sup>1</sup>

An extract from personal correspondence, this passage would be hard to distinguish from a piece of literary fiction, and is a good example of the tightly-controlled descriptive passages and characterisation present throughout Mitchison's letters. Indeed, the definition of what constitutes literature is notoriously mutable, governed by changing readerly fashions, and the influence of shifting canonical weightings. In the centuries preceding the rise of the novel, literary fashions allowed for a far more inclusive view of what constituted 'literature', one that included essays, sermons, philosophical and scientific treatises, in addition to a wide range of autobiographical writings (and including private correspondence) than has been enjoyed for the greater part of the twentieth century, in which prose fiction has held sway to the detriment of other forms. Now, the liberal, all-embracing characteristics of post-modernism have forced a reconsideration of previously held assumptions, including the reassessment of writings hitherto excluded from canonical attention as a result of their identification as 'feminine' or women's texts.

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<sup>1</sup> NM to GRM [Gilbert Richard 'Dick' Mitchison], '29<sup>th</sup> January, Mochudi' [?1964] NLS, TD2980 1/4.

The addition of letters to a literature study therefore goes right to the heart of the question 'What is literature?', a question posed by Terry Eagleton in 1983 who, arguing for a more inclusive view, suggested:

Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or 'imaginative', but because it uses language in peculiar ways. [...] Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech.<sup>2</sup>

It is an argument that, applied to many forms of non-fiction and autobiographical writing, could be seen as an undercurrent throughout this thesis, but is particularly apt in the consideration of epistolary writing which, as yet, has received limited critical attention. While the notion of private correspondence as an artistic and stylised medium has gained a certain amount of credence, interest to date has been largely confined to the earlier medieval periods in which questions of literacy, gender roles and a burgeoning sense of the individual predominate.<sup>3</sup>

An interest in correspondence has also arisen in examination of eighteenth and nineteenth century women writers whose literary opportunities, while greater than for those of the medieval period, still risked the transgression of social norms in the move from domestic, private forms of writing (such as the letter) to public forms of address, publication or openly-acknowledged authorship. Discussing the role of correspondence pre-twentieth century, Julia Epstein suggests that 'the letter's peripheral or paraliterary status made it available to writers who otherwise might not have entered the literary marketplace so aggressively.'<sup>4</sup> Linda Bergmann also assesses the changing fortunes of the genre in terms of its critical reception in the contemporary period, and notes, in 'The Contemporary Letter as Literature: Issues of Self-reflexivity, Audience and Closure':

Many recent studies of women's private writing focus on resurrecting and decoding voices from the past and assume, quite justly, that these voices were not heard publicly because they could not be. Public

<sup>2</sup> Eagleton Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, eds. Karen Cherewatuk & Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), and *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945*, ed. Rebecca Earle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Epstein, J., *The Iron Pen: Fanny Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), p. 48.

writing was seldom an option for women of the times and classes these writings represent, and even private writing was heavily self-censored. Because so much effort has been exerted to recover what has been lost, most recent American studies of women's private writings focus either on content - overt or covert - or on pedagogical usefulness of private writing.<sup>5</sup>

What makes Mitchison's letters unusual when examined from this position is that she was not denied public forms, and her letters do not, therefore, as so often in pre-twentieth-century examples, stand as the author's only vehicle of literary expression. Rather than confirming its marginality, this fact, it could be argued, raises the value of her epistolary writing as it was a form she *chose* to employ (rather than resorting to as a rare legitimate form) and one which, it may be extrapolated, she saw, as a writer, to have merit beyond its basic and most apparent uses of conveying information and maintaining personal contact.

It is important, however, to note from the outset of this discussion that, while the majority of criticism relating to epistolary writing has to date focused on its existence as 'female text', a form deemed somehow inherently suited to the women writer, this chapter does not concur. While I acknowledge the historical connection between women and non-canonical texts for reasons of socio-cultural imperative, I strongly reject the notion of epistolarity (or any genre) as 'naturally' female, an argument borne out, surely, from the evidence of the many outstanding male letter writers, diarists and autobiographers.

The overall result of this critical reassessment of epistolary writings has been the reclamation of (predominantly, although not exclusively, women) writers who, because of their choice of private forms of writing, little regarded by modern approaches, have sunk beneath the parapet of literary awareness. Discussing the late-eighteenth-century writer Fanny Burney, for example, Epstein argues:

[she] took the same care with [her letters] as she did with her novels. She demonstrates a lively, purposeful sense of audience in her epistolary writings, and she viewed these manuscripts as an important part of her literary *oeuvre*. The rhetorical and narrative sophistication

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<sup>5</sup> Bergmann, Linda S., 'The Contemporary Letter as Literature: Issues of Self-reflexivity, Audience and Closure', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 3/4 (1989), pp. 128-39.

of her long complexly structured journal-letters shows that Burney practised the art of letter writing as a literary form akin both to the essay and to the novel.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, Aileen Christianson, joint editor of the Jane Welsh Carlyle letters, has done much to promote this view, arguing for a reassessment of Welsh Carlyle's extensive correspondence, a body of writing which in her view should be viewed as literature deserving of serious critical consideration. She writes:

In the 1990s there was something of a sea change in the world of literary criticism, a return to a more eighteenth-century inclusiveness in the concept of what literature can be. Letters were once more considered as literature, and their analysis for technique and skill was endorsed.<sup>7</sup>

It is from this background that the current chapter comes to consider Mitchison's personal correspondence and epistolary writings as a form of autobiographical text and, through that, as literature.

Chapter One of this thesis focuses in part on Mitchison's decision to devote the second half of her memoirs, *You May Well Ask* (1979), to the recollection of friends, seen through the letters they wrote. Her aim in using often casual correspondence is to give a sense of the individuals, and of the times in which they were living. Mitchison precedes the section in question, entitled 'Portraits in Letters', with an account and rationalisation of the letters she has selected from the hundreds received. In a typescript proof of the text in the National Library of Scotland, she argues for the inclusion or exclusion of certain letters (dependant on the particular sensitivities or relevance of each), and continues:

Those who wrote these letters were all in some sense professional writers, even if they did other things such as teaching as well. They are a special race. A professional writer, even scribbling something off or bashing a few lines on the typewriter, always in some underneath way hopes to be read not merely by the person they are actually writing to

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<sup>6</sup> Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Fanny Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Christianson, Aileen, 'Living with Jane Welsh Carlyle: Editing and Insights', *Folio 7* (Newsletter of the National Library of Scotland) Autumn 2003, p. 14.

but the big shadow power, the public. We are aware of an audience even if it never exists. We have none of the real decencies - we are always partly exhibitionist. So I think that by putting them in a book I am doing some of them at least a favour. I could almost hear Morgan Forster giggling quietly over his letters in print.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, in proposing that Mitchison's letters be read within the larger oeuvre of her life-writing, as carefully-constructed literary artefacts, I am, at least in part, taking a lead from Mitchison herself.

## **ii: The Letter as Autobiographical Text**

While it is clearly self-reflexive 'personal' writing, the letter differs somewhat from the other forms of life-writing with which this thesis is concerned. As indicated in the preceding section, it is the literary form which has received least attention in a range of already marginal genres, with consideration of its literary characteristics limited to a small number of monographs and periodicals. One such work, Rebecca Earle's *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers 1600-1945*, addresses the lack of accord in critical thought, noting:

There continues to be little agreement on precisely what a letter is. For some scholars, letters are formal structures, conforming to an approved rhetorical format and leaving little room for individual expressiveness [...] For other scholars, the letter form is a protean, all-inclusive genre, whose very shapelessness is its strength, allowing it to adapt to any expressive requirement [...] The boundaries around this nebulous genre are faint. Letters may merge imperceptibly into other forms of written expression.<sup>9</sup>

What does seem clear is the close relation of personal correspondence to the diary, both of which offer self-portraits governed primarily by present-tense impressions,

<sup>8</sup> NLS, Acc 7129, Foreword, p. 2. In its final, published version, this passage was altered and shortened, but retains the same gist. See Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 85. This view is shared by Lytton Strachey, who, in a discussion on the art of letter-writing, argues: 'instead of assuming interest, great letter-writers create it: details are pruned and inflections calibrated according to the identity and interests of the recipient. The finest letters are always correspondent-specific: they play to a particular audience.' *Characters and Commentaries* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1933), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Earle, Rebecca (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 8.

and by nature forward-looking, as opposed to the retrospective tendencies of autobiography and much travel-writing. Where the forms diverge is over their intended readership, with the diary assumed often (although not always, as discussed in Chapter Two in the case of Mitchison's public diaries) to be a private document, distinct from the letter which is assured an audience of one and, in some instances, potentially more. Furthermore, there is a distinction to be drawn between the image of the diary entry as part of a greater whole, and that of the letter, which, more fluidly, can be read as an individual, stand-alone piece or as part of a 'correspondence'. Nevertheless, if the presence of a letter almost always assumes the possibility at some point of a correspondence (or at least a reply), it is rare for an entire, unbroken body of correspondence to endure or come down to the general reader. This tendency for only partial survival of manuscripts is borne out in the case of Mitchison's epistolary writings, with those to her mother 'Maya' and husband 'Dick' comprising her largest continuous narratives of foreign travel, while many of the replies are lost, or not within the public domain. Indeed, writing in the mid-1990s to her future biographer, Jenni Calder, Mitchison admits to destroying such letters, writing, 'I am reading and usually burning up, the letters from my husband', leaving the reader with an incomplete vision of the original correspondence.<sup>10</sup> Aware of the biographical importance of letters for her project, Calder writes, in the *Nine Lives*, of her worry that Mitchison had been discarding correspondence in an effort to put her papers in order, although Dorothy Sheridan of the Mass-Observation Archive suggests that this may be untrue, merely evidence of Mitchison's undiminished 'sense of theatre'.<sup>11</sup>

In line with traditional treatment, previous use of Mitchison's letters has been confined to the biographical; the notes to both the Calder and Benton biographies reveal correspondence as a major source of personal and historical detail. Assisting Calder's research, Mitchison wrote to her in her nineties noting:

I am sending you these which I have had in a great lump of letters to and from Botswana, mostly unreadable now because ink doesn't last for ever. [...] Half the letters I have kept are now unreadable, especially if typed. Early letters from my grandmother survived - better

<sup>10</sup> NM to Jenni Calder, June 27<sup>th</sup> [Probably mid-1990s] (Calder, Private Collection).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in, Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 297.

ink? You can see from this letter the state I am in. And writing was my life!<sup>12</sup>

Calder's use of correspondence, and worry over its survival is typical of the biographer for whom personal correspondence is often the most solid evidence of where their subject was and when. Yet, while these letters undoubtedly provide fascinating personal and contextual detail, this historical treatment has been to the detriment of the development of a critical position on what is a huge body of writing by an established and well-received author. Why should we presume that a career writer, whose bibliography can be counted in hundreds of novels, stories, articles, poems and such like, should in one medium alone, abandon all linguistic skill and literary consideration?

If Mitchison's collected memoirs, diaries and travel-narratives offer a comprehensive panorama of her life from the retrospective portrait of her earliest memories in *Small Talk* to her dedication to Botswana in defiance of increasing age in *Return to the Fairy Hill* and *Mucking Around*, then her letters are a category which can be both seen within this grouping, and simultaneously set apart. For while they are analogously personal writings, they can also be seen to exist in parallel, covering a greater swathe of time than even the collected autobiographical work, documenting as they do the period from at least 1906 to 1993, although the prevalence of undated letters may make this even longer. Even discounting the writings into which Mitchison is previously recognised to have written her life, the breadth and volume of the surviving correspondence more than adequately reads as a 'life in letters', a witness-document to the whole of the twentieth century. Reinforcing this view, Robin Smith, Archivist of the Scottish Authors' Collections at the National Library of Scotland, comments that Mitchison's letters to her husband Dick (a substantial part, but by no means the sum of the library's holdings in this area) 'read like a narrative of her life'.<sup>13</sup>

Seeking to promote the notion of the letter as autobiographical text, Linda S. Bergmann argues that the letter is a form which may be actively chosen as an autobiographical vehicle because:

<sup>12</sup> NM to Jenni Calder, dated '19<sup>th</sup>' [?1994/5], (Calder, Private Collection).

<sup>13</sup> Robin Smith in conversation with Helen Lloyd, NLS, 17 November 2003.



[I]t offers an intense but accessible means of imparting some of the order of literature onto the chaos of life, not in the retrospective manner of the autobiography, which looks back to find ultimate meaning, but in a personal and contingent manner appropriate to a genre in which closure is always tentative and resolution is left for the future. Letters offer not retrospection, resolution, and closure of a life and its experiences, but projection, speculation, and creation of a life in the making.<sup>14</sup>

Once the validity of reading Mitchison's correspondence as autobiographical text is established, the question of their value as literary texts remains. The debate surrounding 'epistolary literature' while markedly under-examined, is addressed in detail in the *Yale French Studies* volume, 'Men/Women of Letters', which, highlighting the growing critical interest, proposes the rather horrible coinage 'letterary critics'. Charles A. Porter pinpoints the problem of literary readings of the epistolary form, noting that:

there is always an 'internal contradiction' between the letter's implied 'spontaneity, naturalness, originality' and the inevitable artifice of its form.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed there is evidence that Mitchison herself was aware of 'artifice', of her letters as a form of autobiographical 'literary' narrative. The very fact that she asked some correspondents to retain letters (while there is evidence of her destroying those of others), that she sometimes wrote draft replies or kept carbon copies,<sup>16</sup> and that she chose to deposit her correspondence in the National Library of Scotland along with other literary manuscripts (with more sold to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre at the University of Texas), strongly indicates an awareness that the letters were constructed pieces of work, on a par with other writings. She explicitly acknowledges potential interest in her epistolary writings in her unpublished fourth volume of autobiography, *Hide and Seek*, in which she wonders about:

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<sup>14</sup> Bergmann, Linda S., 'The Contemporary Letter as Literature: Issues of Self-reflexivity, Audience and Closure', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 3/4 (1989), pp. 137-8.

<sup>15</sup> Porter, Charles, A., 'Foreword', *Yale French Studies*, No. 71, Men/Women of Letters (1986), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> For example of draft replies, see NLS, Acc. 9186/1.

letters and papers, things which may be of interest to another generation or which I am keeping in case I suddenly find I need the information in them? Am I doing much better than the horders [sic] from whom I am descended? Everytime I tear up a good batch, clear a drawer or a box, I congratulate myself. Till I look at my writing table. And now I have an entirely new squirreling [sic] place, undremt [sic] of in Dreghorn: a desk at Mochudi in the middle of Botswana. Well, well, that will be a treat for someone! However in the museums, libraries, archives and what not there are quantities of professionals joyfully hoarding material for historians who are going to get madly fed up with it. [...] But perhaps it will not be historians: more probably writers of PhDs. They will be one's own daughters and grand-daughters for this purpose [...] if PhDs still go on and I'm dreadfully afraid they will. How are she and I going to play hide and seek with one another?<sup>17</sup>

This then, is the aim of this chapter, to play hide and seek with Mitchison through the voices, carefully-fashioned descriptions, characterisation and *dramatis personae* she constructed (of herself and others) across almost one hundred years of epistolary writings.

Faced with a life-time's extensive and wide-ranging correspondence, how should we approach such writing? By date, correspondent or subject matter? Should letters to family be considered a different category from that to friends, politicians or fellow writers, and should correspondence to newspapers and those letters aimed explicitly at the public sphere be viewed as journalism rather than the personal correspondence on which this chapter aims primarily to focus? Any attempt at categorisation is bound to be in some sense artificial; I propose to analyse the corpus according to what I perceive to be the most clearly identifiable groupings of surviving correspondence - early letters from childhood; letters to writers (and including those to her biographer, Jenni Calder); those with a specifically Scottish focus (often

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<sup>17</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, *Hide and Seek*, NLS Acc. 9914, Chapter XVII.

political in nature); and travel letters, which make up the bulk of the later material, and are addressed primarily to Dick and Maya.<sup>18</sup>

In approaching this material, a further question raised by the public consideration of correspondence is the violation of its essentially private nature. Mitchison to some extent deals with this issue in *You May Well Ask* (quoted above) in which she argues that all letter writers imagine (even aspire to) a wider audience, albeit sub-consciously. In Mitchison's case, the issue of the possible invasion of privacy is somewhat further alleviated by the fact that she herself, never one to avoid the public gaze, deposited many letters in the National Library of Scotland (and at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre) over a period of nearly thirty years from 1969 until her death in 1999. This action is clear indication that she was untroubled with the knowledge that her letters may one day be made public. Moreover, in 2003, her daughter and literary executor, Lois Godfrey, bequeathed a further substantial collection of correspondence and personal papers to NLS, an action which, once again, can be seen to acquiesce to, indeed invite, public scrutiny. Our reading and analysis of Mitchison's letters is therefore 'authorised' in a way that the use of many writers' correspondence, further back in time, is not.

### **iii: The Early Letters**

A surprisingly large number of letters survive from Mitchison's childhood, carefully preserved by her mother, Maya - many still in their original envelopes, a detail which greatly facilitates their dating in the absence of the internal evidence (travel details, political comment, and so on) so vital for the later writing.<sup>19</sup> These early letters are addressed not only to Maya, but also to 'Uffer' (Mitchison's father), to her paternal Cloan grandparents, 'Grannie and Grandpapa', 'Aunt Bay' and to her brother JBS Haldane, known as 'boy' or 'boydie'. Using a fountain pen on headed paper, she paints, in a large, elaborate hand, cameos of events and people, 'It was great fun having the little French girls; their eyes sparkled with delight when I fetched the crackers'; 'There is a parrot here, a gray one with red tail, I have never seen one like it before; It would not speak to us but muttered something as soon as we turned our backs' (both from

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that all letters quoted in this chapter have survived in the original or a photocopy. It has not been possible to trace many of the letters from which Mitchison quotes in her memoirs, and these have not been used. Many of the letters which do survive are part of often fascinating correspondences. Unfortunately however, considerations of space and focus do not allow for their inclusion in this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> See the example letter in Appendix C.

age 7). This period of letters often reveal an interest in botanics which reappears throughout Mitchison's life and work, and include descriptions of planting, flowers from her garden, and in one instance, the original seed packets,<sup>20</sup> 'Some of the strawberrys [sic] from my tub are eaten already, there is such a wopper that is nearly ripe and a whole branch of ripe ones. My mustard and cress is growing nicely'; 'Some of the rose trees on my arch are flowering. I would send you some if it hadn't been raining so badly'.<sup>21</sup>

While these childish letters are by no means comparable to the complex narrative correspondence of her later years, they are interesting and valuable as early examples of Mitchison's careful and assured use of language. Even from a young age, her writing displays a self-consciousness of description and turn of phrase ('There are a huge lot of snowflakes as big as feathers. I do hope they will last'<sup>22</sup>) which hint at both a developing ability and an interest in writing and language. Seen within the greater body of her personal writings, they allow us to observe the development of a recognisable writerly voice which would continue throughout her work, and make for a span of writing rarely available to the critical reader.

#### **iv: Letters on Writing and to Other Writers**

While her letters to others do not always survive, it is possible, from the examples we do have and the replies she kept, to build up a picture of a vibrant and wide-ranging group of correspondents many of whom were, in Mitchison's words, 'men and women who seemed to me perhaps to matter not only to me but to my civilisation'.<sup>23</sup> The archives of the National Library of Scotland and the HRHRC reveal friendship and discussions on personal, literary and contemporary matters with a wide range of notable twentieth-century writers who include George Bernard Shaw, HG Wells, EM Forster, Aldous Huxley, Charles Trevelyan, Margaret Drabble, Robert Graves, George Orwell, Henry Treece, Storm Jameson, WH Auden, Evelyn Waugh, Rebecca West, Olaf Stapledon, TE Lawrence, Stevie Smith, George Mackay Brown, Doris Lessing, Virginia Woolf, HJ Laski, Bernard Mac Laverty and JRR Tolkien among many others. Furthermore, Mitchison's growing involvement with Scottish life and culture from the 1930s onwards have left us with correspondences that read like a

<sup>20</sup> NLS, Acc. 4549/3.

<sup>21</sup> NM's early letters are to be found in NLS, Acc. 4549/3, Acc. 4549/4 and Acc. 9201.

<sup>22</sup> [1906] NLS, Acc. 4549/3.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 85.

roll-call for the Scottish Renaissance, with letters between herself and Hugh MacDiarmid (writing as Christopher Murray Grieve), Neil Gunn, Agnes Mure MacKenzie, Eric Linklater, Sidney Goodsir Smith, Lewis Grassie Gibbon (as James Leslie Mitchell), Sorley MacLean and Compton MacKenzie. There are, in addition, letters to some of the major publishers of the day, AR Orage, John Murray, Jonathan Cape, Julius Deutsch and Victor Gollancz, while her political life is portrayed through her correspondence with Beatrice Webb, Douglas Young, Marie Stopes, Sylvia Pankhurst, Margaret Cole, Arnold Toynbee, Shirley Williams, Tom Johnston and others from the left of the political spectrum who shared her belief in socialist democracy, interest in Scottish nationalism, and in the possibilities of an egalitarian future. Involvement in the visual arts is clear through letters between herself and Eric Kennington (war artist and illustrator of T.E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*), Wyndham Lewis (whose striking 1939 portrait of Mitchison writing *The Blood of the Martyrs* remains one of her best known images) and Joan Eardley. Letters from yet more notable correspondents are alluded to in *You May Well Ask* but have not survived or entered the public arena.<sup>24</sup>

The scope and dynamism of this letter collection is clear and has meaning on a number of levels, beyond its value as autobiographical text, for in addition to offering insights into personal attitudes and events, Mitchison's collected correspondence can be seen as providing additional, unfitted pieces to the literary and political jigsaw of the Modern Movement and beyond. While the collected letters of many of those with whom she corresponded have been published, Mitchison's letters remain as yet unexplored, available in archives, but not in the wider public domain. Collected, they would provide a volume which, fascinating in its own right, would further our knowledge and understanding of a great many writers, interlocking with the collections already in print.<sup>25</sup>

By no means all writers chose to discuss their writing with others, considering it perhaps a private process, but Mitchison often did, as in this long extract to an unknown correspondent from towards the end of her life, which allows us insight into her method and thoughts on the relationship of writing to life:

<sup>24</sup> For example, Margery Spring-Rice and GDH Cole, mentioned in *You May Well Ask*, p. 85. Wyndham Lewis's portraits of Mitchison and of her children Murdoch and Valentine can be found in Michel, Walter, *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1971).

<sup>25</sup> For a list of archives holding Mitchison's correspondence, see Appendix A.

[...] a long time ago I fell off my pony, broke my leg and some ribs and nearly dislocated my neck – I had to lie without moving for months, so I know what it is like. But I think that was the time when I began to think about telling myself stories. And so came, after a few years to writing them. Unless we go through a period of pain and misery, we are not whole people, we have missed something which we can use, with luck for good. [...] As to your questions. One never knows about ideas (I take it you mean ideas for books, not ideas about what to plant in the garden or who to vote for!) Sometimes one may wake up with what looks like a good idea but when one comes to turn it over, it isn't so good, And sometimes a scene comes and one has to fill it up and think who is to be in it. Dreams can be a help.

I don't write anything down until I am fairly sure of it. Then I tend to write in one of several notebooks (several because I am always leaving one of them somewhere silly and want to get something down before I can find it.) But I never just make notes. If I am in the mood I can write anywhere at any time. I never had a "room of my own" but always wrote with the children rushing around – they knew not to interrupt badly – if they did I used to throw the telephone book at them, but always missed. I used to write pushing a pram. I quite like writing in trains or waiting for a plane. At home I often take my typewriter into the kitchen, as otherwise I may go on and on writing and something boils over.

I usually write late but remember finishing a book in the very early morning in my grandmother's house and taking it with me and running up the hill into the sunrise.<sup>26</sup>

Mitchison often used letters to critique her work and meditate on her role as a writer, for example in a letter to her mother telling of Penguin's decision to publish editions of *Cloud Cuckoo Land* and *Black Sparta* in which she notes, '*Black Sparta* is one of my best.'<sup>27</sup> Writing to Maya in 1939, she again sounds upbeat, remarking, 'I have still three chapter of my big book to do [most probably *The Blood of the Martyrs*]; I can't

<sup>26</sup> NM to 'Pauline', 'Oct 28<sup>th</sup> [c.1980], NLS, Acc. 9634.

<sup>27</sup> NM to LKH, 'Sunday', NLS, Acc. 4549/4.

help thinking it's pretty good, probably the best thing I have done.<sup>28</sup> Her letters often reveal this self-assurance in her ability as a writer, even when nervous publishers and declining sales raised the spectre of fading popularity. Writing to one publisher in the early 1930s she defiantly states:

I am, after all, about as good a story-teller as anyone now writing (this seems a frightfully big claim, but the really first-rate writers, like Wyndham Lewis and, in his way, Joyce, are unintelligible, and I do rank intelligibility pretty high!).<sup>29</sup>

Letters to other writers discuss the process of a book's evolution, as well as including praise or amiable criticism of her correspondent's latest publication. Writing to Stella Benson, for example, a writer for whom Mitchison had great admiration yet whose work is now rarely read, she discusses the progress of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*:

I'm slowly getting on with my big book, but I've just got to the place where I've got to kill most of my people (and I can't get away from it, because there it all is in Plutarch), and I just can't bear to! – which shows I'm not impersonal or historical enough. But I've known them for so long now. The wretched book is well over 200,000 now, but the publishers are quite excited about it.<sup>30</sup>

This sense of personal involvement with her characters and the telling assumption that writing fiction involves historical research as much as it does the imagination, find echoes in a letter written to the poet Robert Graves around twenty years later, while writing her reworking of Arthurian legend, *To The Chapel Perilous* (1955):

This Grail business becomes more and more tangled the further one goes into it. All the people who write have some special theory that they must prove. I feel somewhat drawn to the sea-born-Morgause-

<sup>28</sup> NM to LKH (1939), NLS, Acc. 4549/4.

<sup>29</sup> NM to Ronald Boswell, 'Sunday' (nd), NLS, TD 2980 2/8.

<sup>30</sup> NM to Stella Benson, '6<sup>th</sup> April' (nd) but probably 1929, NLS, Acc. 7644. Benson was a novelist of the 1920s and 30s whose work is now largely forgotten. Born in the West Midlands in 1892, she was friends with the novelists Winifred Holtby and Vera Britton. She spent many years living in China and died of pneumonia in 1933 aged 41. A life, *Stella Benson: A Biography* by Joy Grant, was published in 1987.

Anna-Lot's wife-Arthur's sister. The mere fact that she has such a bad press later is something of a clue. However goodness knows when or if I shall get any of it written. We have a mass of cup-marked stones in Argyll. You, however, will know well the difficulty of working some distance from a reference library and the temptation to make it all up oneself instead.<sup>31</sup>

Writing to Graves around the same period, she considers in more depth the problems encountered by writers who, as she did, attempt to re-fashion old stories:

I think there is one major difficulty about it all, which is that the human mind is only capable of producing a certain number of shapes and colours, which are all that exist, or appear to us to exist, in the external world. Apart from the scientific elaboration of the very large and the very small, there are really relatively few of these shapes and colours and one is in danger of equating them wherever they turn up in what is after all only a very brief human history. It may be that we are right to do so and that a great many of them are shadows of one another and the whole thing perhaps a house of spirals. But I think one has to remember, for instance, that it is fairly easy to hammer metal into some kind of cup or bowl, but they aren't necessarily all the same.<sup>32</sup>

Conscious of the issues involved in re-writing ancient history in a way that will be meaningful and relevant to the modern world (a practice at which Mitchison excelled), she writes to Graves about his recently published mythological study *The White Goddess* (1948):

In the old world of a materially simpler civilisation it was possible to be a complete person, but we have now, I think, to take in an enormous amount of knowledge which they had not got; and it is wrong and

<sup>31</sup> NM to Robert Graves, '1<sup>st</sup> June', (n.d.), NLS, Acc. 9198. Graves was a poet, novelist and classical scholar who came to public attention in 1948 with the production of *The White Goddess*, a study of mythological sources in poetry, and is best known for *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* (1934), a two-volume fictional autobiography of the Roman emperor. He lived much of his life in Majorca, and died in 1985, aged 90.

<sup>32</sup> NM to Robert Graves, 'April 8<sup>th</sup> 1952', NLS, Acc. 9198.



dangerous to turn one's back on this knowledge on the grounds that it doesn't fit in, or rather to see how it does fit. [...] I don't mean the profusion of consumer goods, but the basic scientific stuff. I'm not sure that one ought not to rewrite the fairy stories in terms of modern physics and biochemistry.<sup>33</sup>

In-depth conversations about the process of writing are to be found in letters to writers who were similarly involved in negotiating current ideas, as in this extract, again to Graves and from 1948, in which she is obviously grappling, like many of her generation, with questions of the subconscious, archetypes, and the psychoanalytic. 'The difficulty is,' she writes:

I think, that a good writer thinks - I mean celebrates with the conscious parts of one's brain - too much about all this. One may lose the deeper contact, and the older one gets, the more one becomes intelligently conscious about what was originally dark and warm and easy to bathe in. On the other hand, Yeats never seems to have lost the correct contact.<sup>34</sup>

While she engaged with the process of writing and discussed the influence of prevailing themes in letters to her contemporaries, Mitchison's own publishing career was not without incident, the most well-documented of which being Jonathan Cape's refusal to publish her brave first attempt at a 'modern' novel, *We Have Been Warned* (finally published 1935), for fear of the obscenity laws and prevailing social niceties, an incident discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. Writing to Ronald Boswell at John Lane Publishers who subsequently considered the manuscript, she details the situation, allowing us insight into both her views of herself as a writer, and the contemporary literary scene:

As far as Cape are concerned, the situation is that they will only print it with such alterations as I cannot bring myself to make. [...] and there comes a point where one can't let one's stuff - written, as it is, in a prose-rhythm - be indefinitely bitched up. [...] I believe this is

<sup>33</sup> NM to Robert Graves, '16/11/48', NLS, Acc. 5836.

<sup>34</sup> NM to Robert Graves, '16/11/48', NLS, Acc. 5836.

essentially a women's book - of the people who have read it, the women have been much the most enthusiastic. The whole business of contraception is done from the women's point of view, which is, of course, a new thing in writing. But it's darned important. [...] The question would be, what you would want cut. I quite see that you can't print "fuck", for instance, and perhaps "balls" and "bugger", though of course in the Midlands, everyone says bugger about everything. But I wonder what else need go to avoid a police prosecution? [...] At the moment my husband has the manuscript - I want to know what he thinks the constituency will stand. Obviously, rather than bitch up his chances in any way, I must drop the whole idea of publishing the novel [...] Naturally, a good deal of it is a portrait of him and me (and I can't help thinking it's even more the picture of a good sort of marriage than most novels produce!) and even the part that isn't will be supposed to be.<sup>35</sup>

Another very interesting correspondence related to publishing survives between Mitchison and Victor Gollancz, concerning the preparation of *An Outline for Boys and Girls and their Parents* (1932), an ambitious, beautifully illustrated and sometimes radical general knowledge compendium which Mitchison edited, commissioning pieces from friends and suitably left-field contemporaries. Proposing that Mitchison aim advance copies of the book at those most likely to give it a favourable review (a seemingly rational strategy for a publishing house or author), Gollancz raises Mitchison to a fit of pique, furious that friendship with reviewers may compromise the integrity of the production. 'Now what is all this about?' she writes to Gollancz in a long, idealistic letter which provides a critique of the flawed capitalist nature of publishing:

It really has shocked me profoundly. I have never, with my own books, had any idea of exactly who was going to do reviews, though lately, I have known that I could trust to getting good reviews from a small group of papers, though I had stupidly thought to myself that this was

<sup>35</sup> NM to Ronald Boswell, 'Sunday' (nd), NLS, TD2980 2/8. For full transcript, see Appendix C. Mitchison also corresponded with Aldous Huxley about these problems. See *The Letters of Aldous Huxley* (London: Catto & Windus, 1969), p. 372.

probably because my books were good. I console myself, over this book, by saying that I am doing it not for myself but for the contributors, poor angels; but of course I know that this is really dope. [...] I know my soul is in danger. That being so, what about yours? I wouldn't say this to any other publisher, but you've got a daimon [sic], and if you don't look out, you may kill it. [...] I believe that you have a passion for power. Take care: you may think that it is only power for a cause that you want, but the more power you have, the more personal you become about it. I know the danger, because it is my own; I have had this devil of personal ambition biting at me, and I know I haven't got him down yet. [...] At any rate I shall know and hope I shall remember that any review of this book is not for its merit, and I hope I shall be correspondingly humble.<sup>36</sup>

Mitchison's eventful relationship with the world of publishing did not ease through time: a series of letters held by Glasgow University Library Special Collections illuminates the growing difficulties she had getting published in later years. Writing to JF Hendry in her seventies she declares, 'What hell this publishing is!'. Discussing the possible inclusion of a short story by her in a collection edited by Hendry had raised her ire previously, as seen in this extract from 1968:

I am rather puzzled by your letter of May 26<sup>th</sup>. You wrote to me earlier, asking for a story - I cannot at the moment lay my hands on your letter - and I sent you two stories, to choose from. These both had Scots backgrounds. I am less keen to have earlier stuff reprinted. I think *The Heart and the Head* is a story that still seems all right but I don't want people to think I am no longer writing, and if one reprints something from a book published long pre-war, one does retreat into ancient history!<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> NM to Victor Gollancz, [September 1932]. Replying to this impassioned diatribe, Gollancz calmly makes the point: 'It is disgusting that I should be making private profits in publishing, and that Dick should be taking private fees at the Bar, and that we should have large houses, and chauffeurs, and servants: but there it is. It seems to me simply a question, therefore, as to whether we should operate the Capitalist machine as decently as possible, or quite indecently. I think we should do so as decently as possible, mainly from a desire to touch as little pitch as possible.' Both NLS, Acc. 9152.

<sup>37</sup> NM to JF Hendry, Glasgow University Library, MS Gen. 549/757.

Hendry appears to repeat his request, as Mitchison's following letter says:

I become less and less keen on having old stuff reprinted. Can't you see, it is bloody depressing not being able to get any of one's new stuff printed (I get them onto radio sometimes) because everyone thinks of me as a has-been. Neil Gunn, I fear, has stopped writing altogether.<sup>38</sup> I haven't. If you want to use *The Heart and the Head*, no doubt *Black Sparta* is in your library. I suppose free libraries exist in Canada. The book is long out of print and I am not sending anyone my only copy. [...] I have other things to do than copy out my old stories. I don't even want to see them again. I could try sending you another new one [...] but maybe that also would be "mechanically morbid".<sup>39</sup>

More than a decade later, Mitchison is still battling with the perceived interference of others. An editor employed by Richard Drew in the preparation for *Early in Orcadia* (1987) is told:

You know, the only times when I have had anything to do with an editor was in my autobiography work, where it was very useful, especially when pieces had to be cut for length. Editing has come in from America, where of course it is rife, and perhaps necessary but it only recently started in this country. Now I have written some seventy books, which you may or may not have read. Books which have been reprinted and apparently well thought of [...] they were never interfered with after the final draft. [...] What you have to remember (and I blush slightly at writing it) is that people are interested in me as a thinker and reconstructor as well as a writer of fiction. [...] It is not as though I were writing a first book – or even a tenth. I have a reputation and that is why I use the first person. [...] I very much doubt if your suggestions would make my book more saleable. I have a great many regular readers – though clearly many prefer to borrow. And I

<sup>38</sup> This proved to be right. Gunn's final publication was his spiritual autobiography, *The Atom of Delight* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956). He died in 1973.

<sup>39</sup> NM to JF Hendry, GUL, MS Gen. 549/758. This collection appeared as *The Penguin Book of Scottish Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1970). Mitchison's contribution was 'Mithras, My Saviour', a tale introduced by Hendry as one 'which is unpublished, throws a useful light on the Roman occupation of Britain, as well as on the historical nature of our religious occupation.', pp. 7-8.

am not used to this type of criticism, I'm afraid. Editing is a new thing in the UK and probably I am too old for it.<sup>40</sup>

There are many such letters in which Mitchison highlights the trials of publishing; 'It's as if one was dead'<sup>41</sup> she complains to Douglas Young in 1957, while in her nineties, she writes defiantly to Angus Calder:

I am feeling rather cross because I have written two stories which between them make up a book length, but no publisher wants them so far. The thing is they are really good history.<sup>42</sup>

Despite such setbacks, her letters reveal not only a desire to discuss her own writing and to negotiate changing literary currents, but a great enthusiasm for the work of many of her contemporaries. One such letter to Stella Benson, probably written in 1929, is of interest for its startling prescience:

...I read a paper at Oxford with some of your verse in it (among a lot of others, including much of my own, all in scraps and anonymous) and the one single one of the young ones who is really a poet was fearfully interested in yours [...] He is a young man called Auden, aged 22, and, with any luck, the real thing. He uses new and exciting forms, and is sometimes difficult to follow. But he has an Elizabethan sense of verbal beauty, and I am really rather ridiculously excited about him. He is not beautiful in himself, because he has the sort of light-coloured eye brows that don't show at all, but he is very charming [...] If his poems are published - and I am trying to persuade Faber what a good man he is - I will send them to you.<sup>43</sup>

Twenty years later, and firmly established within the Scottish tradition, her interest in and concern for other writers, most of whom were without the financial safety-net she enjoyed, continues. She writes to Douglas Young about the possibility of securing a

<sup>40</sup> NM to Jenny Carter (4th June 1986), reproduced in Dick, Eddie, *Bookmaking: 'A Case Study in Publishing': Early in Orcadia* (Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1987), pp. 50-1.

<sup>41</sup> NM to Douglas Young, '20 May 1957', NLS, Acc. 6419, Box 38b.

<sup>42</sup> NM to Angus Calder, [1990] NLS, Acc. 10391/2. These two stories are most probably *The Oath-Takers* and *Sea Green Ribbons*, published by Balnain Books in 1991. For a sense of Mitchison's declining readership (and therefore sales) see TD2980 2/7 which details her Public Lending Rights for 1992-3 as totalling £358.38.

<sup>43</sup> NM to Stella Benson, '6<sup>th</sup> April' (n.d. but probably 1929), NLS, Acc. 7644.

civil list pension for Hugh MacDiarmid, an extract which ends with the title of her 1982 collection of short stories:

I spoke to [Willy Darling] about the permission for Hugh MacDiarmid and he said the difficulty was that one or two people were afraid that if he got it he would immediately write a poem denouncing the English king or do something equally embarrassing. I said it was not a possibility which I had envisaged, nor did I think it at all likely, but that I would ask one or two people who were seeing more of him and knew more about him than I do. What do you think yourself?<sup>44</sup>

### v: Letters from Scotland

Mitchison's move to Scotland and subsequent involvement in the latter stages of its literary renaissance were prompted, at least in part, by the cooling reception given to her fiction by the metropolitan elite who had lauded her early work. Ensconced in Argyll, she continued to discuss literary matters, and the business of writing, with a wide-range of correspondents, some from her days in the South, as well as with new acquaintances from Scotland's vibrant literary scene.

A correspondence of particular interest for its Scottish themes, is that between Mitchison and Neil Gunn from the 1940s, a group of letters which has been the subject of a short commentary by Donald Smith, 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn: A Highland Friendship', published in *Cencrastus* in 1983.<sup>45</sup> Through it can be traced Mitchison's growing feeling for, and subsequent disillusion with, Highland culture and people, as well as the development of both writers as they encourage and critique each other's work. Writing in her 1986 self-portrait for the Saltire Society, she reminisces:

I had begun to exchange letters with Neil Gunn. I felt he had the same

<sup>44</sup> NM to DY, '28.3.49', NLS, Acc. 6419, Box 38b. MacDiarmid was awarded a civil list pension in 1950. Worry that MacDiarmid might denounce the king was not without foundation. For examples of his anti-royalist poetry see 'In the Children's Hospital' from *Selected Poems* ed. Alan Riach (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 199 and, more recently rediscovered, 'On the Imminent Destruction of London, June 1940' from *The Revolutionary Art of the Future* ed. Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 42. For more on Mitchison's view of MacDiarmid see her 'MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance' in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Man and Poet* ed. Nancy Gish (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 39-41.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, Donald, 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn and Highland Friendship', *Cencrastus* 13 (Summer 1983), pp. 17-20.

quality of wonderful encouraging light-heartedness mixed with spasms of deep gloom which I had found in some of my fishermen friends; he had a deeply poetic way of looking at things, but with sharp knife-thrusts of understanding which could lead to action. I hope he valued my letters as much as I did his.<sup>46</sup>

However, the enduring friendship between Mitchison and Gunn was one based originally on shared political aspirations for Scotland, rather than on their literary connections. Writing to Gunn in the early days of Carradale, and full of affection and hope for the Highlands, Mitchison debates the best method of political organisation:

The thing is, you've got to have something as strong as the Communist party to stand up to the other side, even in the Highlands. Here are all your grand anarchists, the civilised peasants, the men like my \*\*\*\*\*<sup>47</sup> who have a kind of gentleness and nobility that makes one feel one would die to defend it, and they are at the mercy of capitalism and are quite incapable of not being crushed, for the old shifts won't serve.<sup>48</sup>

Although she notes in the same letter, 'I suppose I must remind you again that I'm not a Communist'<sup>49</sup> she goes on in a later correspondence to propose:

If we could organise Carradale with a Soviet (or call it anything else, the name doesn't matter), making people take responsibility and run their own lives which is the beginning of democracy, and discussing every kind of thing with some chance of being effective, then the place would come alive.<sup>50</sup>

To her mother, Maya, she writes:

<sup>46</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison: A Saltire Self-Portrait* (Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 1986), p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> The concealed name here is most probably that of Denny McIntosh, the Carradale fisherman who also features on the title-page drawing of the first edition of *The Bull Calves*, further discussed in Chapter Five. The transcript of the letter appears in this form in Donald Smith's *Cenchrastus* article, 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn and Highland Friendship', although Smith does not believe he personally removed the name. While the article, written in 1983, states that the original letter is held by NLS, it has not been possible to trace it.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, Donald, 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn and Highland Friendship', p18.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, Donald, 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn and Highland Friendship', p19.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, Donald, 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn and Highland Friendship', p19

I am getting to know a great deal about this place, and about the people in it; I had never thought I would be talked to so openly and it is extremely interesting, to say the least. I hate the idea of leaving.<sup>51</sup>

These same enthusiastic notes are sounded again in a letter to Maya of around this time, revealing both her belief in her ability to affect Highland life for the good, and an enthusiasm to link herself to the Carradale community by ancestry, ironically the very aspect which would prove her unconquerable hurdle:

There wasn't a day when some of the fishermen weren't up at the house: This is their slack time, between seasons, and they can read books, and talk; I find that in talking with me now, they are much less careful to use "English" and they produce the most lively and poetic phrases and words which I knew in books; they remind me very much of some of the miners whom Uffer used to bring back. I seem to have been told so much about Carradale now that I might have been there for a generation. Oddly enough, there is probably a very remote family connection, for the castle on the golf course was built by a Lennox who is, I think, the Lennox who comes into the Haldane family tree, and, knowing the habits of fifteenth century earls, it seems highly likely that he has descendants in Carradale.<sup>52</sup>

Expressing this same sense of optimism and assimilation, she wrote to Eric Simons,<sup>53</sup> clearly eager to emphasise the sense of easy community between Carradale and herself, its new laird:

I feel strange in the south all the same, now. My friends are farmers and fishermen and foresters. We dance reels on Saturday night and sing the local songs and sometimes I write them a song about something that's been happening and someone gives it a tune. I have become increasingly keen on Scottish self government. It's fantastic that so many decisions have to be sent down to London, where they

<sup>51</sup> NM to LKH (?1939), NLS, Acc. 4549/4.

<sup>52</sup> NM to Maya, 1939, NLS, Acc. 4549/4.

<sup>53</sup> Simons was a theatre director, based in Sheffield, who staged a (seemingly not very successful) production of *The Price of Freedom* (1931), co-written by Mitchison and Lewis Gielgud.



simply don't know the conditions. And only two days a year in Parliament for Scottish affairs!<sup>54</sup>

This positive feeling for Carradale and for the possibilities of Scottish self-rule are, however, dampened as Mitchison becomes aware of the complexity of undoing centuries of inter-dependent but uneasy relations between community and laird. Her hurt is evident in the following extract, again a letter to Gunn, written after discovering the river has been poached, despite her open-handed approach to the natural wealth of the Tigh Mor:

But how could they have done this to me...? It's all very well saying it was a traditional pattern, but I broke it from my side. You can't then go on acting by the old rules. It may be a kind of game. But they should have known how miserable it was going to make me, how affronted. If they were fond of me (and I think they probably still are) how could they have done this on me? I suppose they weren't as fond of me as I was of them. But if that's so why should I break myself trying to work for them and their like.<sup>55</sup>

A further letter to Gunn, headed 'Midsummer Eve 1946', shows her increasing anger with Carradale and despair for her role within it. 'To hell with the village anyway' she writes:

I am getting so sick of these bloody narrow respectable Highlanders [...] At the moment I feel further from the community than I ever have and what's more I don't even want to be in it for it is so obviously not a worthwhile one [...] Neil, is there anything to be made of it?<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> NM to Eric Simons (n.d.), NLS, Acc 8374. Equally illuminating are the replies Mitchison received to these portraits of Highland idyll. Gunn writes to her on 4.2.47, 'How can I help reflecting [...] that I'm writing [to] a landlord who is keener on, and knows more about, the reclamation of the highland hills than any lads in any glens', NLS, Acc. 5813. Similarly, Gordon Bottomley, a poet and dramatist of the Renaissance period, writes lyrically of, 'you there, in full bloom in Carradale, could give us a whole radiant Summer of those [folk-tales] [...] Highland communities have legends among themselves that they will never acknowledge to a visiting bard such as I; but they would let them flow to you just as a cow does its milk to the hand it knows and trusts.' (27 July 1941), NLS, Acc. 5869.

<sup>55</sup> Smith, Donald, 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn and Highland Friendship', p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> NM to NG, 'Midsummer Eve 1946', Smith, Donald, 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn and Highland Friendship', p. 20.

What becomes apparent from the Mitchison-Gunn correspondence, and her letters to other notable Scottish figures, is the inseparability of Scottish literary culture and political activity during the height of the Renaissance period. As Mitchison juggled her standing within the County Council and her waning position as a writer of fiction, there is evidence that she often felt frustrated and isolated as a writer in Carradale. This would increase after the high point of *The Bull Calves* (1947), and be most clearly expressed in her 1952 novel *Lobsters on the Agenda*. Writing to Douglas Young, a fellow Classicist and old political ally, active in PEN and Scottish Convention, she complains:

You know, Douglas, I am feeling too tired and depressed to do any editing. I want to finish a book I am writing before the next election. I really want to talk it over with someone, but nobody is really interested in my writing another book, at least not enough to let me talk about it to them. It's horrible being at Carradale and feeling the hate and suspicion all round. They'd have burnt me as a witch three hundred years back. And it's so beautiful.<sup>57</sup>

The National Library of Scotland holds a correspondence of over eighty letters between Mitchison and Young, spanning the period 1948-1959. Their chief interest lies in this tension between Scottish politics and literature and Mitchison's portrayal of her self-conscious negotiation between the two. As early as 1949 she is writing:

I haven't been in touch with [Scottish] Convention lately; somehow the general world situation is so awfully worrying. And the Argyll County Council only a bit less so! My constituents have now come over and told me they think I'm unpopular in the council, and they want someone else who will get the harbour for them quicker. I told them that anyone who was prepared to stick out for things and wasn't afraid would be unpopular. But it isn't reasonable. And of course there is the Scottish prejudice against a woman as such. It is a bit shattering, they were all people whom I had supposed were my friends, and so in a way they are. But quite unreliable [...] I am feeling a bit depressed about all this. I'd been writing a book, but you want a bit more encouragement. I

<sup>57</sup> NM to DY, '7/3/50', NLS, Acc. 6419, Box 38b.

am going south for a few days after the next meetings to breathe the non Highland air for a little.<sup>58</sup>

The following year, in a damning (and rather superstitious) characterisation of those she had aimed to nurture, she writes to Young:

The Highlands get worse and worse, and in general the only people who remain are the crooks or the softies. The cold war against me here goes on, and against my friends. It is extraordinarily unpleasant living in a place under these conditions and I begin to wonder whether this illness mayn't be partly wished on me. I find myself unable to write, can only read history and get more and more depressed by it.<sup>59</sup>

Almost a decade later, Mitchison's involvement in Scottish politics continues through her position on the Highland Panel. Her frustration, and her continued periodic reluctance to identify herself as one of the ruling class, is made clear to Young in a letter in which she comments:

I get awfully dis-spirited with the Highland Panel; ideas keep going out but so little is done. This is partly owing to a plethora of lairds, mostly the elected representatives of the people god help us.<sup>60</sup>

Her belief in Scottish home rule is sorely tried by the experience of trying to turn her own efforts, and the words of the elected representatives, into tangible improvements for Scotland. She writes to R.E. Muirhead, a prominent nationalist and Chairman of the Young Nationalist Association, a political movement preceding the Scottish National Party:

I find it very hard to know what is the relative scale of importance and immediacy of all the things which one ought to think about. [...] And I get very discouraged after working for some years with Scottish

<sup>58</sup> NM to DY, '14 Feb 1949', NLS, Acc. 6419, Box 38b.

<sup>59</sup> NM to DY, '3/4/50', NLS, Acc. 6419, Box 38b. These quotations can also be compared to the earlier sentiments expressed by Mitchison in her Mass-Observation diary, for example from 1941 when a Carradale boy, Jim MacKinven, is killed in the Glasgow Blitz. Visiting the wrecked house, she writes, 'They all kept on holding me and calling me Naomi, with the accent on the middle syllable; I felt I was bound to them for ever with blood and tears; I felt that this perhaps was being a laird. If so, I must be it well.' *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 133.

<sup>60</sup> NM to DY, '10/7/58', NLS, Acc. 6419, Box 38b.

Convention. Still more after my local government experiences. It seems to me that you are bound to assume that a self-governing Scotland is going to be immediately morally better and I don't see it, unless there has also been a revolution. I can't see how the people who are likely to govern Scotland under any democratic system are going to be different from the undoubted Scots who are now in positions of local power. They have mostly been voted in by those who are ignorant or are cynical about their [illegible]. I can't see them not going on being elected. The betrayal of Scots by Scots is what is so depressing and I cannot follow your act of faith in thinking that they are bound to become better off with self government. [...] Politics is hideously depressing!<sup>61</sup>

Mitchison would promote this doctrine of revolution in her letters to others, including one example, now held by the Imperial War Museum Archives. Addressing 'Dear Comrade' (John B Torrance, Secretary of the Dundee Labour Party), Mitchison rejects the proposed nomination as Dundee parliamentary candidate, explaining:

I've had enough ordinary electoral experience to know that damn few Labour people are revolutionary. They are afraid of change. I'm not. They want a regular divi from the Co-op and a peaceful old age by the fireside. I don't! I want to make people take responsibility, and the important word is "make". Most people are too lazy and timid. But democracy must start in the home - with responsibility, choice and freedom of thought for the children - must go on to the school, the factory and the village. Then build up if you like. But it's not good enough to have a central plan and delegating small things to small bodies; that's the wrong way round. Yet the other way of it will only come after a break up, a revolution.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> NM to R.E. Muirhead, (Marked 'recd 27/4/53') NLS, Acc. 3721/Box 19/File 519.

<sup>62</sup> NM to John B Torrance, 'Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup>' [April 1944] Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, Mitchison Papers. This notion of Scotland (and indeed Britain) being in need of a Soviet-style revolution finds echoes in a 'Housing Diary' Mitchison wrote in 1934 in preparation for a book which was never completed. Shown round housing estates and examples of council housing, she writes naively (but I believe with total sincerity) that she will be happy to live there 'when the revolution comes'. NLS Acc. 10840. Writing in her Mass-Observation diary, in 1941, she also comments, 'The bore is that any "New Order" will mean that I have to do much more washing up and mending and shall then have *no* time to write!' *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 114.

Mitchison's official involvement with the Argyll County Council ended in May 1964 when she failed to regain her seat. She remained a member of the Highland Panel until 1965 and, while not formally affiliated with either the Labour or Communist parties, remained a committed and staunch Socialist. Her letters dating from the years in which she devoted herself to the cultural and political life of Scotland closely mirror the nature of her war-time diary, published as *Among You Taking Notes* (1985).

Taken as a whole, Mitchison's life-story is one of a woman with grand visions and with an undiminishing need for new experiences and challenges, as echoed in the title of Calder's biography, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*. While her loyalty to Scotland, seen in the preceding letters, would remain, from the 1960s she turned increasingly towards foreign travel. Her letters from abroad, primarily Africa but also a great many other places, comprise perhaps the largest identifiable collection of personal correspondence, and chart her changing ideas about personal identity and analysis of the contexts in which she placed herself. It is to these letters that this chapter now turns.

#### **vi: Letters from Abroad**

Introducing her volume of selected travel memoirs, *Mucking Around: Five Continents over Fifty Years* (1981), Mitchison notes that when writing of her travels, 'the best recall is often from my own letters'. She continues:

My husband, Dick Mitchison, and I used to write almost every day while we were away from one another. [...] When I came to look at those letters of mine which Dick had kept, they reminded me sharply of what I had seen and experienced and what was going on at the same time in the rest of the world. [...] In this way the view of travel comes through the eyes and mind of someone who was in her late twenties in the earliest pieces in this book, half a century older in the latest.<sup>63</sup>

Highlighted by this quotation is the way in which Mitchison used her letters to give shape and meaning to her experiences, some of which were then translated into other forms of writing. As a result of this, it is sometimes possible, especially in her writing

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<sup>63</sup> Mitchison, 'Author's Note', *Mucking Around*, p. 9.

from Africa, to identify passages of text, fictional or documentary which echo very closely the words she used in the more immediate expression of her daily correspondence to her husband and others. One striking example of this is found in a letter Mitchison wrote to Dick, dated 'Easter Monday, 1966':

L[inchwe] can be bloody maddening, as always, and yet say things that make one's heart turn over. He said You don't know what you are doing for my people. I said, bitterly aware of it 'I have managed to do so little' But he said You don't understand, and then 'I was thinking, if you were to die, I would have to die too, because you are making me' and then 'You must live for twenty more years, promise you will live, then I will give you leave to die' I said 'My grandmother lived to be a hundred, my mother to be 98'. And then I think, but how long can I be with them really? I get more easily tired. I find things a bit more uncomfortable. And then he whispered We are one person. And this I think is important. Thirty thousand people. Of course, the Highlands would have been a million. But they are self sufficient really; one would have broken one's heart if one had really given oneself to them. Here? I think I shall end by knowing what being African is: but only through Linchwe directly, and indirectly through observation. I think that for me, a person of the heart, this is a highly important piece of communication, I think I am the only person who can do it and communicate it.<sup>64</sup>

This then translates into, and must be compared against, a diary entry from April 10<sup>th</sup> which reads:

In the evening I rubbed Lebsebe's ankle with some menthol stuff which Martha had and her silent shy sister from Johannesburg was shocked to see a white doing this to a black. She might have been more shocked if she had seen, a bit later, L coming in, holding me in his arms saying You make me, how can I do without you. And again I was thinking what would happen if you were to die? I would have to die myself.

<sup>64</sup> NM to GRM, 'Easter Monday, Gaberones' [1966], NLS, Acc. 10888. Easter Monday was 11 April 1966. Mitchison's propensity to romanticise, seen so frequently in previous chapters, is again apparent in the portrayal of this incident with Linchwe.

Please go on living for twenty years. Even for ten years. Then I shall give you leave to die. I said My grandmother lived to be a hundred, my mother to 98. I shall go on. But I began to wonder - how long can I come back? Dick was saying "When you stop going out there..." as though it were bound to happen. Earlier someone in Mochudi had said "I thought this time she would surely be old, but no" Only - ten years? How long does one go on? With modern medicine and common sense? I said I have three books in my head that I must write. But a year goes so fast now, and I am so overwhelmed with little things. All this went through my mind which he held and kissed me, rubbing his soft nose against me, his lovely mouth, and I licked the skin of his neck as I used to do with my babies. And then he said Do you know what you do for all my people? And I said, meaning it, thinking of all I hadn't managed to do "I do so little" and then he went back to what I had done for him, saying "We are one person".<sup>65</sup>

While the parameters of this chapter do not allow for further like examples, Mitchison's published and unpublished texts often echo senses and descriptions which are to be found, and which were first written, in her personal correspondence.

The bulk of the surviving letters from 'abroad', the final category into which Mitchison's letters are here divided, are addressed to Dick and written from around Africa in the 1960s and beyond. However, letters to her mother exist as far back as her time in France as a VAD nurse during the 1914-19 War, from the Middle East, from her first visit to Russia in the 1930s, 'I think women are on a complete and real equality with men [...] There's no staring. One's just a person, not a woman; that's what comes of taking away the barriers that make the stresses and strains.'<sup>66</sup> and from her trip with Zita Baker to America in support of the southern sharecroppers, of which she writes:

I need a holiday as my heart is getting a little cock-eyed again, and I also need to get a perspective on Europe and present-day events. Whether it's a good thing or not, I am one of the leaders now, and I

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<sup>65</sup> NLS, Acc. 10888/9, p 12.

<sup>66</sup> NM to Maya, (written from Leningrad, ?1932). NLS, Acc. 4549/4.

have to keep my mind supple and review my own thought processes from time to time.<sup>67</sup>

However, as noted, the most extensive surviving correspondence, held by the National Library of Scotland, is from Mitchison to her husband, detailing her growing feeling for and impression of newly-independent Botswana, and the Bakgatla tribe into which she was initiated. Many of these letters are marked in sequence, ('March 18<sup>th</sup>, Letter 5') highlighting the fact that Mitchison saw her letters as part of a larger narrative, rather than individual pieces of writing. The importance of this numbering system is seen in a letter to Dick which starts with the exclamation, 'I wrote two un-numbered letters one from Francistown, the other from Swaneng. Forgot to number!'<sup>68</sup> It becomes clear that a further reason for the sequencing of correspondence is an attempt to combat the vagaries of an often unreliable airmail system. As such, the majority of Mitchison's letters to Dick begin with acknowledgement of his letters ('Yours of 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>'; 'Two letters from you - they don't necessarily come in sequence'<sup>69</sup>) or comments on the lack of post ('Nothing from you or from anyone in the U.K. It seems to me that a lot of letters have gone astray one way or another. People are still surprised that I haven't got their letters.'<sup>70</sup>).

As in her letters from Scotland, it is possible to trace through her African correspondence, her representation of experience as an arc, beginning with whole-hearted, self-sacrifice for the tribe and the culture, often depicted in romantic terms, which normalises as she feels herself integrated, and then clouds as uncertainty and disappointment builds. New to Africa, she is eager to emphasise and experiment with her new-found persona. Arriving in New Delhi from Nairobi after the death of JBS Haldane, her brother Jack, Mitchison recounts a number of conversations she has had with street traders, before continuing:

The third was a Malawi whom I had been talking to because - well, because he was an African too. [...] He certainly accepted me as a friend and a fellow African with no reservations.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> NM to Maya, (Before setting out for America with Zita Baker in February 1935), NLS, Acc. 4549/4.

<sup>68</sup> NM to GRM, 'Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> Letter 12 I think' (April 1967) NLS, TD2980 1/4.

<sup>69</sup> NM to GRM, NLS, TD2980 1/4.

<sup>70</sup> NM to GRM, NLS, TD2980 1/4.

<sup>71</sup> NM to GRM, 'New Delhi, Saturday' (n.d. - ?November 1964) NLS, TD2980 1/4.



Mitchison was secure in her African self, and her letters to Dick contain often beautifully evocative and tightly-controlled descriptions of her experiences there, such as the extract with which this chapter begins, and with a letter from March 1967:

I had a marvellous time at Greek's farm [...] It was so beautiful I can hardly write about it. I slept in a grove of morukhui trees, elegant small leaved branches through which the stars shone. Then we went round the farm and I looked for water, apparently agreeing within a few feet with the Government geology crowd. The whole place was full of marvellous wild flowers. Then later, I went for a walk by myself, wading through three foot meadow grass. It was all like an uncut meadow, but not with only three kinds of grass; there are a dozen kinds, some so lovely one was almost in tears and through them flowers of all kinds, predominantly a pink, branching aloe, and in the trees every kind of dawn chorus [...] I saw a gorgeous rock hyrax yesterday, but it gave me such a disapproving look. But that walk through meadow and woodland at Bodumgwane was like going into an earthly paradise.<sup>72</sup>

The correspondence to Dick is not, however, all so affirmative, as Mitchison works to negotiate and describe the often complex realities of tribal life. Writing in 1965, she admits:

At the weekend I felt very cross as nothing seemed to be as it had been supposed to be. In fact at one point I wept with frustration, and was charmingly comforted by the sweet refugee who is sharing this house. [...] There were lots of People's Parties meetings and a procession with banners saying no doubt out with the whites but all cheered me!

before concluding tentatively, 'Yes, I think one is doing something.'<sup>73</sup> A similar sense of uncertainty is evident in a letter (probably written even earlier), in which she writes:

<sup>72</sup> NM to GRM, 'Letter 6' (21<sup>st</sup> March, 1967) NLS, TD2980 1/4.

<sup>73</sup> NM to GRM, '22<sup>nd</sup> Mochudi' (April 1965) NLS, TD2980 1/4.

I feel awful about leaving and only comforted by the idea of coming back in ten months. I'm afraid really I feel just like an old fashioned missionary! I don't think it's just that I like power and that I'm treating people as children. I feel a bit maternal, no doubt, but I do respect someone like Norman [Molomo] as a man and a politician. Oh well, probably I'm kidding myself.<sup>74</sup>

Yet another letter, from 1966, in which she admits:

[T]he externals get one down, the bad light, the absence of water; I get tired and angry. So I have hopped off to Gaberones, to the Grants. Yet here I feel a stranger, among all these whites. Not that everyone isn't being nice to me. But it is not repeat NOT a multiracial society.<sup>75</sup>

is altogether missing the idealism of her initial letters home. When not in Africa, Mitchison relied heavily on letters from the tribe to keep in touch, and emphasise the sense that her absence was only temporary. Jenni Calder has remarked that, for all their close bond, Mitchison found Linchwe a frustratingly reluctant and wooden letter writer.<sup>76</sup> While a number of letters from him to her survive from his time as Botswanan Ambassador in Washington in the early 1970s, her feelings are made clear in an undated letter which begins:

My dear Linchwe,

I am sending you this cutting in the hope that it may interest you enough to send me a line, even if it means coming back half an hour earlier from the bar or wherever!<sup>77</sup>

This reveals once again the importance to Mitchison of personal correspondence as a way of living lives in both Mochudi and Carradale, of autobiographising her experiences and, to return to Linda Bergmann's quotation from the beginning of this chapter, to offer 'an intense but accessible means of imparting some of the order of literature onto the chaos of life.'<sup>78</sup>

<sup>74</sup> NM to GRM, '19<sup>th</sup> Lobatsi' (?Early 1964) NLS, TD2980 1/4.

<sup>75</sup> NM to GRM, 'Easter Monday, Gaberones' (1966).

<sup>76</sup> Calder in conversation with Helen Lloyd, 17 November 2003.

<sup>77</sup> NM to Chief Linchwe II, NLS, TD2980 2/8.

<sup>78</sup> Bergmann, Linda S., 'The Contemporary Letter as Literature: Issues of Self-reflexivity, Audience and Closure', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 3/4 (1989), pp. 137-8.

As explored throughout the chapters of this thesis, Mitchison wrote her life story compulsively through a wide range of genres, to which her letters, or epistolary writing, considered as serious literary achievement, must now be included. Viewed as a whole, this surprisingly large collection of manuscripts, in fading type or spidery pencil, contains controlled use of language, deftly-constructed descriptions of self and recreation of events, characterisation and often lively, passionately-felt vignettes of life which leap from the page, bringing her experiences to the reader as successfully as her other autobiographical writings. In short, Mitchison's life-story is never better told than by herself, and the number of surviving letters allows us to trace her development as a person and as a writer from her first, childish attempts at letter-writing, through a hundred years to the 1990s in which her enthusiasm for words and 'sense of theatre' appears undiminished: she turns down an invitation a few months hence with the explanation, 'I am loath to make promises. I am getting a bit shaky and can really not guarantee being alive at any special date in the future.'<sup>79</sup> In an essay entitled 'Letters as Literature', one of the few critical works which to date deals directly with the autobiographical nature of letters and position of epistolary literature to the canon, Virginia Walcott Beauchamp encapsulates the role of the form, writing:

To tell us what [letter writers] did in the past - that is history. But to evoke the past or the present, to stir our imaginations and enrapture us - that is literature.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> NM to Angus Calder, (1990), NLS, Acc. 10391/2.

<sup>80</sup> Virginia Walcott Beauchamp, 'Letters as Literature', *Women's Personal Narratives*, eds. Hoffmann and Culley (New York, MLAA, 1985), p. 39.

## Chapter Five

### 'We the plain folk of Scotland': Mitchison and the Fiction of Identity

It is never possible to know how much rearrangement takes place in the transition from 'fact' to 'fiction' [...] but in Naomi's writing it is sometimes possible to see the process at work.

Jenni Calder

*The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*

This final chapter takes a step away from the memoirs, diaries, correspondence and travel writing (or autobiographical non-fiction) of the previous four chapters, to focus on a selection of Mitchison's poetry and fictional writing. Within this extensive body of work, I will examine a small number of texts in which, I suggest, Mitchison consciously uses poetry, fiction and her story-telling abilities to explore and strengthen her own sense of identity. The fictional texts under discussion are her first two explicitly 'Scottish' novels, *The Bull Calves*, written throughout the Second World War and published in 1947, and *Lobsters on the Agenda*, published in 1952. This chapter goes on to consider Mitchison's use of the 'Big House' novel, a literary sub-genre which, while extensively documented in Irish studies, has been largely overlooked in the Scottish tradition. Both of these texts are examined in reference to this genre along with a novel for children, *The Big House* (1950).<sup>1</sup>

Often associated with this grouping of 'Scottish' texts, Mitchison's extended poem sequence, 'The Cleansing of the Knife', published in 1978 as *The Cleansing of the Knife and Other Poems*, was written contemporaneously with *The Bull Calves* and explores many of the same very personal themes, reflecting on her relationship to the Carradale people, and the communal effort needed to construct a unified future for Scotland. Its place within Mitchison's autobiographical writings, and the significance of this and other selected poems, is considered in the initial sections of this chapter.

Through the three very different novels noted above (and with varying degrees of success) Mitchison can be seen to write herself into her adopted

\* Mitchison, Naomi, Transcript of interview with unknown interviewer. Undated except for reference to Falklands War. NLS, Acc 11307/21-30, pp. 62-3.

<sup>1</sup> In total Mitchison wrote nine works of fiction and one play, primarily concerned with and set in Scotland. In addition to the three texts on which this chapter focuses is: *Men and Herring* (1949) with Denny Macintosh; *Spindrift* (1951), a play again co-written with Denny Macintosh; *The Swan's Road* (1954) and *The Land the Ravens Found* (1955), both tales which draw on Scotland's Viking History; *The Far Harbour* (1957) a children's novel which has been interpreted as a reworking of *Lobsters on the Agenda*; and, *A Fishing Village on the Clyde* (1961), again for younger readers. *Early in Orcadia* (1987), her final Scottish novel looks back to prehistoric times. Two late collections of short stories, *What Do You Think Yourself* (London: P Harris, 1982) and *Beyond this Limit: Selected Shorter Fiction of Naomi Mitchison* ed. Isobel Murray (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986) also include Scottish themes.

community, claiming an authentic Scottish voice and self. In writing her Jacobite narrative, *The Bull Calves*, she depicts an affirmative vision of Scotland, drawing heavily on her ancestral Haldane family which, she felt, could provide her with a sense of rootedness in Scottish history. *Lobsters on the Agenda*, coming some years later, is a contemporary portrait of village life and details the challenging actuality of a small Highland community. Finally, *The Big House* is in part a socialist fairy tale, and has been interpreted as a reworking of the major themes of *The Bull Calves*. This chapter discusses the search for national and cultural definition within these texts, drawing on the self-reflexive possibilities of writing one's self into fiction.

As previously detailed, in her early forties Mitchison moved with her family from London to Carradale, a fishing village in the Western Highlands, where she remained until her death some sixty years later. Influencing the decision for so radical a move was the growing threat of war, as well as number of more personal factors, in particular the unexpected and tragically young death of her eldest son Geoff from spinal meningitis at the age of nine,<sup>2</sup> and a growing disenchantment with literary life as her early publishing success began to wane. This move was to set the scene for the fiction with which this chapter is concerned as it charts her developing relationship with people and place: a pattern which, as discussed in Chapter Three, would later similarly resonate through her life in Africa.

The attempt to demonstrate correspondence between a writer's work and life is a critical path strewn with pitfalls. The risk of over-interpretation or just straightforward misinterpretation, besides consideration of the contemporary preference for purely textual readings free from authorial detail, makes this a critical approach often best avoided. Conscious of this danger, I introduce this chapter with a quotation from Jenni Calder's biography, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, the thrust of which has been echoed by many of those who have undertaken critical appraisal of Mitchison's literary output. Mitchison, states Calder:

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<sup>2</sup> Geoff died in 1927, pre-dating, as Jill Benton has noted, the knowledge of Penicillin that would have saved him. The following year, to Mitchison's horror and upset, Aldous Huxley, a close family friend, wrote the incident somewhat transparently into his novel *Point Counter Point* (1928); see Chapter XXXV. In the weeks following the death, Mitchison received many letters of condolence, and these are now held by the National Library of Scotland in Acc. 7345. See also Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, p. 30.

wrote herself into her plays and fiction, but was inseparable from invention. She lived the lives she wrote about and wrote about the lives she lived.<sup>3</sup>

It is from this standpoint therefore, that I will examine these texts and consider the ways, differing through time and subject, that Mitchison uses them both to fictionalise her life, and, simultaneously, to effect change in her own life through plot, characterisation and thematic considerations. With mindful disregard for the aforementioned dangers of assuming coherence between authorial life and work, this chapter proposes that, somewhat unusually, some of Mitchison's fictional output *can* be viewed as 'lifewriting' (despite their lack of the first person which characterises all previously discussed texts) and therefore considered within the wider parameters of this thesis.

### **i: Mitchison and Scotland**

In the opening to her 1986 self-portrait written for the Saltire Society, Mitchison writes, 'All my young life I was taken for some of the holidays to Scotland'.<sup>4</sup> The country was, therefore, not unfamiliar to Mitchison on her move to Carradale in 1938. Born in Edinburgh of Scottish parents, she often visited the family estate of Cloan; the extensive Haldane clan, there and elsewhere, would provided a permanent link, helping to ease her transition into Scottish society. Nevertheless, Mitchison's first forty years had been lived mainly in the south of England: in what she called her 'approach to Scotland'<sup>5</sup> she felt strongly the need to find a place within her chosen community, conscious of the role of laird she assumed through her acquisition of Carradale House. Equally she wished to confirm herself as a Scot, through residence, good works and by building on the complex genealogical ties of the Scottish aristocracy. Yet as Douglas Gifford has asked:

[H]ow did an Oxford-educated London intellectual, aristocrat and wife of a London lawyer and MP come to discover that her vocation was to

<sup>3</sup> Calder, Jenni, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London: Virago, 1997), p. xi. A similar argument is made by Nicola Beauman who writes, 'Naomi Mitchison tried to describe in her fiction some of what she experienced in life', *A Very Great Profession: The Women's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, *Naomi Mitchison: A Saltire Self-Portrait* (Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison: A Saltire Self-Portrait*, p. 1.

join the Scottish political and cultural renaissance of the period 1920-1950?<sup>6</sup>

The criteria (parentage, birth, residence, narrative setting, thematic tradition, formative literary influence) by which a writer can be linked to a particular national grouping is frequently problematic within the literature of Scotland. The historic tendency of English literary studies to enlist writers, such as Scott, Carlyle and Spark, into an English or European canon, dismissing appropriately contextualised readings from within a Scottish perspective, has worked to blur questions of national identity in the mind of readers and critics. This mis-appropriation, and conversely the reluctance of some 'Scottish' authors to be read primarily within the Scottish canon, preferring a British context (famously Lord Byron; Joanna Baillie; and more recently Ian McEwan, Candia McWilliam and Carol Ann Duffy) has highlighted the mutable qualities of national literary-identity. These issues are highly pertinent to Mitchison, whose firmly ensured place within the Scottish canon owes much to the authorial expression of national alignment expressed in the novels on which this chapter focuses. This literary commitment to Scotland is evident in letters of the time, for example one written shortly after the start of the Second World War, to Alyse Gregory, the widow of the poet Llewelyn Powys in which she writes, 'I'm up here most of the time now, largely occupied in agriculture, and village affairs, writing for them rather than for the mad world.'<sup>7</sup> A further indication of this aim is found in an untitled, undated typescript on Scottish nationalism and language, in which Mitchison argues:

In the mean time it appears essential – and indeed it is essential on the short view – for the Scot who wants to be a success, to become as English as possible. And that is bad for people; it means that they can have no genuine pride and self-confidence. Everything must be measured by an alien standard. Nor can they probably even arrive at the best of what they are aiming at. The Scot will still find himself slightly outside, out of tune with, English culture; he will never have the finest, the most unerring, right taste. London is not his Capital. I

<sup>6</sup> Gifford, Douglas, 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*', *Scottish Studies* 10 (Germany: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> NM to Alyse Gregory, 'Jan 29<sup>th</sup>' [?1940], Mitchison Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas.

felt that myself, although, god knows I was anglicised enough. But there was always something about my writing that the English did not care for; it was always slightly foreign; now that I can look back with rather more perspective, I begin to think that always, whether I knew it or not, whether I called my book-people Greeks or Scythians, bond or free, I was writing about and for Scots. I was always trying "to write for my own race", as Yeats did. A heart-breaking business, as he also found.<sup>8</sup>

Mitchison's desire to ally herself with a national literary tradition was central to her aim of 'becoming' Scottish. By using the criteria suggested above, it is, however, possible to construct a case for Mitchison as an author of Scottish association long before her self-conscious use of fiction to fashion a national persona and role. Mitchison certainly grew up reading Scottish authors, and arguably her writing is therefore informed by the Scottish tradition. Interviewed by Isobel Murray in 1984, Mitchison discusses her literary influences, pointing out that, while she didn't read or meet any of her Scottish contemporaries until she was herself an established author, she had always read within the Scottish canon:

Of course I'd been brought up on Scott and Stevenson. I found most Scott deeply boring, but when my father read it aloud, when I had scarlet fever, and I wasn't really allowed to read, he read me things like *The Heart of Midlothian*, with a lot of dialogue, which he read very well. And then Stevenson I've always liked.<sup>9</sup>

There are, however, many authors positioned within the English tradition who similarly grew up reading the Scottish greats (not surprising when one considers the European pre-eminence of the works of Scott and Stevenson), so this fact alone is not sufficient to support a re-appraisal.

Mitchison neither claimed nor was claimed by a Scottish tradition until she was in her forties - certainly not until her first flush of literary success was over - yet there is evidence that her birth and parentage, which she would later use herself in *The Bull Calves*, identified her as a 'Scottish writer' long before her move to Carradale. As

<sup>8</sup> Mitchison, typescript beginning 'This business of language', Mitchison Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas, n.d.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, Isobel (ed.) *Scottish Writers Talking 2* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002), p. 79.



early as 1931, Mitchison was, through the Haldane connection, being discussed as part of the new Scottish tradition to which she would later actively seek admission. Writing in the *Glasgow Evening News*, one commentator mused:

Whether there really is such a thing as a Scottish literary renaissance, who shall decide dogmatically? And if, considering the names which are pressed upon us are those of writers who are bringing a new life into Scottish literature, we decide that some sort of renaissance must be going on, what are we to make of a writer like Naomi Mitchison? Here is a young woman indubitably Scottish if birth and parentage can make one Scottish [...] On the other hand, her books have no relation whatever to Scotland, and it is perfectly certain that they will never be popular in Scotland. That is not the fault of the books. They are extraordinarily good, and for certain readers intensely fascinating.<sup>10</sup>

Writing in *Scottish Scene* a few years later, Lewis Grassie Gibbon echoed this view of Mitchison's position in Scotland. Gibbon surveyed the contemporary literary landscape and, bemoaned what he considered to be the dearth of a vibrant national literature, discerning instead only the anglicised vowel sounds of a provincial literary force.

The chief Literary Lights which modern Scotland claims to light up the scene of her night are in reality no more than the commendable writers of the interesting English county of Scotshire.

Let us consider Mrs Naomi Mitchison. She is the one writer of the 'historical' novel in modern English who commands respect and enthusiasm. Her pages are aglow with a fine essence of apprehended light. *The Conquered* and *Black Sparta* light up the human spirit very vividly and truly. And they are in no sense Scots books though written

<sup>10</sup> 'The Corn King and the Spring Queen: A Brilliant Scottish Woman Novelist' by Godfrey Sinclair, in *News and Reviews*, *Glasgow Evening News*, 11 June 1931. This is just one of a number of similar articles dating from the publication of *The Corn King and Spring Queen* and gathered together in NLS Acc. 8503/1. Others include the 'The Scottish Women's Club Burns Supper', which featured both NM and Catherine Carswell (*Daily Record*, 26 Jan 1932); 'Scottish Women Writers of Today' (*Bulletin*, 26 March 1931); and a number of brief society portraits: 'Mrs Mitchison is pale, has brown hair, uses no make-up, and wears rather expensive clothes' (*Home Notes*, 23 June 1932) and 'There was a fashionable crowd at the private view of the National Society of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers and Potters at the Grafton Galleries [...] Others I saw touring the galleries were [...] Miss Naomi Mitchison, the novelist, in a strange flowing cape. (*Daily Sketch*, 10 May 1930).

by a Scotswoman. Their author once wrote that had she had the command of Scots speech possessed by Lewis Grassie Gibbon she would have written her Spartan books (at least) in Scots. Had she done so they would undoubtedly have been worse novels - but they would have been Scots books by a Scots writer.<sup>11</sup>

Mitchison had also used Scotland as a setting for several pieces of writing before her move north. Primary among these is *We Have Been Warned* (1935), the first 'modern' novel after the fiction set in the early Classical period, for which Mitchison drew on holidays in Scotland, and which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. Furthermore, in representing Dione, the central figure of the text, Mitchison took from her own life in Oxford, London, her 1932 visit to Communist Russia, and her experiences as an MP's wife in the depressed Northern-English Labour heartlands.

Highlighting Mitchison's tendency to fictionalise her own experience, Isobel Murray describes 'a very personal element'<sup>12</sup> which characterises the text, a fact that was readily acknowledged by Mitchison in a later interview:

IM: You have a note at the beginning disclaiming any relationship to any living people and any political situations, and I think it is a bit of flannel, isn't it?

NM: Well, yes, I have the people to whom it's dedicated for...

IM: And they are strangely similar to the people in the book!

NM: Exactly.

IM: So it was hardly a real pretence that there isn't an awful lot of Naomi Mitchison in the book. And indeed not so much of your life's *plot*, but your life's situation as you have described it elsewhere.

NM: Yes.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gibbon, Lewis Grassie, 'Literary Lights', *Scottish Scene, or, The Intelligent Man's Guide to Albyn* (with Hugh MacDiarmid) (London & Melbourne: Hutchison & Co., 1934), p. 168; reproduced in Gibbon, Lewis Grassie, *Smeddum* ed. V. Bold (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> Murray I., Introduction, *Beyond this Limit* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), p. xi. Similarly, Calder criticises it as 'a ragged tale, too rawly based on personal experience', *A History of Scottish Women Writers*, ed Gifford and McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 445.

<sup>13</sup> Murray, *Scottish Writers Talking 2*, p. 90. Furthermore, in her third volume of memoir, *You May Well Ask*, Mitchison admits, 'Before [WHBW] I had started two or three modern novels, but as I was completely without direct experience of the emotional or social situations I had got into my plots, they were very bad and the main characters were *all versions of myself* [my italics], a common enough fault in young writers.' Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, pp. 161-2.

The propensity to take directly from life has been identified by critics through much of Mitchison's fictional writings. Jenni Calder suggests that the novel is ultimately unsuccessful because 'Mitchison has too personal an involvement in the characterisation'<sup>14</sup> while Janet Montefiore writes that 'the heroine of Naomi Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned* is [...] transparently the author's self-portrait.'<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Erif Der, protagonist of Mitchison's major Jungian novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931) has been interpreted as a self-portrait,<sup>16</sup> while reviewing her 1981 short story collection *What Do You Think Yourself?* Douglas Gifford remarks that 'one can't help but see the figure as spokeswoman for the author',<sup>17</sup> and in the introduction to the collaborative novella *Beyond this Limit* (1935), Murray has written that:

The major characters were so clearly in some sense [Wyndham] Lewis and Mitchison themselves that she did not bother to say.<sup>18</sup>

Such comparisons are legion throughout the critical material, with the suggestion of quasi-autobiographical subject matter stated nowhere more clearly than in the cover synopsis to the Canongate edition of *The Blood of the Martyrs* (1939; 1988) where it is noted that the text is 'the least autobiographical of Naomi Mitchison's major works of fiction', a description which implicitly assumes the autobiographical tendency in her work.<sup>19</sup> In the concluding pages of her biography, Calder again makes reference to this trend, highlighting the cross-pollination of lived and written experience suggested at the beginning of this chapter:

Naomi makes no secret of the fact that she wrote her life into her fiction, and I have suggested that there are moments when she may have borrowed her actions from her own books. For the story-teller,

<sup>14</sup> Calder, Jenni, 'More than Merely Ourselves', *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, eds. Gifford and McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 446.

<sup>15</sup> Montefiore, Janet, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> 'There was no doubt an element of self-projection in Erif Der' Isobel Murray, 'Introduction', *Beyond this Limit: Selected Shorter Fiction of Naomi Mitchison*, p. xi.

<sup>17</sup> Gifford, Douglas, 'Recent Fiction', *Books in Scotland* 12 (Spring 1983), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Murray, Isobel, 'Introduction', *Beyond this Limit: Selected Shorter Fiction of Naomi Mitchison*, p. xviii. See also Murray, *Scottish Writers Talking* 2, pp. 93-4.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchison, *The Blood of the Martyrs* (ed. Donald Smith), (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1988), back cover. Donald Smith also authored the first complete PhD thesis on Mitchison's fiction, completed in 1984, details listed in the bibliography.

the boundaries between fact and fiction are nebulous and probably not relevant.<sup>20</sup>

However, while it is necessary here to highlight this critical accord, the main point to note is that these texts (*The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, *We Have Been Warned*, *Beyond This Limit*, and *The Blood of the Martyrs*) while they clearly draw upon the personal experiences of the author, they are not explicitly self-referential and therefore do not fall within the autobiographical focus of this chapter. Furthermore, they predate Mitchison's self-conscious determination to re-position herself within a Scottish context. This aim of 'writing herself' into a national identity through poetry and fiction is the subject of the following discussion.

## ***ii: The Cleansing of the Knife and Other Poems***

Writing in the 1987 *The History of Scottish Literature*, Joy Hendry comments that Mitchison, while valued as a novelist has been 'largely ignored' as a poet, and continues:

Much of her poetry remains unpublished [...] In conversation recently, Mitchison said that she felt her poetry comes from a deeper source inside herself than her other writing, even the best of the novels. [...] often her own voice is heard, sometimes in the background, sometimes speaking directly. [...] The time is ripe for the re-evaluation of [...] her poetry.<sup>21</sup>

While, as this quotation suggests, much of Mitchison's poetry was never published, it would be a fairly complex task to ascertain which of the many typescript poems held by the National Library of Scotland and elsewhere have appeared in public at some point in time, and which have remained truly private writings. Nevertheless, throughout the poetry there is a clear sense of Mitchison using poetic forms to explore and negotiate personal experiences or feelings, and she draws parallels between local, personal events and the more universal meanings which they reflect. The narrative voice is therefore often openly and transparently her own, and it is for this reason that

<sup>20</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 303.

<sup>21</sup> Hendry, Joy, 'Twentieth-century Women's Writing: The Nest of Singing Birds', *The History of Scottish Literature* Vol 4 (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), pp. 291-309.

this chapter briefly turns to them, before going on to consider the major autobiographical fictions.

In the critical literature, *The Cleansing of the Knife* (written during the second world war but not published until 1978) is commonly assumed to be Mitchison's only poetry collection. However, an earlier volume, *The Laburnum Branch*, was published by Cape in 1926 and, like *The Cleansing of the Knife*, contains much that stems from personal experience. Retaining much of its original freshness, this previously undiscussed collection gives the reader an insight into the young Mitchison's development as a poet, and can be productively considered alongside her later poetry. Divided into a number of themed sections, *The Laburnum Branch* opens with a series of poems concerned with the classical world, reflecting her interest in this historical period which was also the subject of her early novels, including *The Conquered* (1923) and *The Blood of the Martyrs* (1939). Other poems are meditations on love and relationships with those around her; the title poem itself being a dedication to friendship with Margery and Dominick Spring-Rice. The death and funeral in 1925 of Mitchison's paternal grandmother Elizabeth Mary Haldane (whose autobiography is discussed in Chapter One), is the subject of 'Mrs Haldane of Cloan'. Its lines portray an instinctive deference for the Big House, for which *The Cleansing of the Knife* some years later, would act as both deconstructor and elegy.

In the Scottish houses, the blinds are all down;  
You go like a Queen through the whole long town.  
They have seen you and known you, in your works and  
Your ways.<sup>22</sup>

The Great War is another significant theme of the collection (as the Second World War would be to her later poetry), and poems such as *In London* with its clear reference to Dick Mitchison:

Now and again I glance across my book,  
To think, if you were sitting in that chair  
[...]  
Only you're out in Flanders, and I'm here.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, 'Mrs Haldane of Cloan', *The Laburnum Branch* (London: Cape, 1926), p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchison, 'In London', *The Laburnum Branch*, p. 60.

and *Green Boughs* which opens 'My young, dear friends are dead, / All my own generation', and ends with palpable personal anger and political criticisms:

But the old, the stupid had rule  
Over that eager nation,  
All all my own generation  
They have cast into the fire.<sup>24</sup>

For a writer as prolific as Mitchison was across a wide range of genres, the fact that she published only two small poetry collections, is in itself of significance. Furthermore, that many of the poems from *The Cleansing of the Knife*, including the major poem sequence of the same name, were published several decades after they were written, may also be an indication of the personal meaning they continued to have for her. A written engagement with Scotland, they reflect a major turning point in her life.

The central image of the later collection, of 'cleansing the knife', which runs through the poem of that name, and less literally through many of the others, comes directly from Mitchison's desire to right, through praxis, the wrongs she perceives to have been inflicted on the people of Scotland by her class and by history. Talking to an unknown interviewer in the 1980s, Mitchison comments:

The hours of the working day are so few to clear the blood from the knife, maybe the only way. Scraping away the grime and tears of centuries and blood and treacherous killings and little time.<sup>25</sup>

Always focused on the practical, this desire to act, and an almost sacrificial desire to give herself bodily and spiritually to 'her' people can be seen in 'Adoption of a Parliamentary Candidate, Lochgilphead: 1939', one of the earliest and most striking poems of the collection. While Mitchison was not the candidate herself,<sup>26</sup> the sentiments expressed reflect her conception of her role in Carradale in these initial years. Constructed in the form of a dialogue between a collective community voice

<sup>24</sup> Mitchison, 'The Green Boughs', *The Laburnum Branch*, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Mitchison, N., Transcript of an interview, undated except for reference to the Falklands War. NLS, Acc. 11307/21-30, Tape 22.

<sup>26</sup> The candidate was William Power who stood for the Nationalists in the 1940 Argyll by-election after the death of the incumbent Conservative, and in contradiction of the wartime agreement between the main parties not to contest seats.

and their proposed political figurehead, the poem is a list of the many, arduous demands and expectations placed upon the one who, like Mitchison, aims be their representative:

You shall be worked hard. You must help us and stand by us,  
 Compose our quarrels, go over our balance sheets,  
     find out the law for us  
 [...]  
 We will worry you, suck your heart's blood, we will take  
     your rest from you,  
 Come between you and your girl's lips  
     or the page of the book you are reading.<sup>27</sup>

Italicised to distinguish the voice, the Candidate replies, in a series of short, quasi-religious sounding statements which emphasise the sincerity of their approach, *I will be true to you. [...] I give myself to you. [...] I would die for you if it comes to that.*<sup>28</sup> Reminiscent in language and dialogic style to the question and response of the catechism, and suggestive of Christian sacrifice, the poem nevertheless ends on an affirmative and unmistakably non-religious note, with the community's acceptance of their new leader:

Yes, we will have you, Comrade.<sup>29</sup>

Other poems from the collection, including 'The Farm Woman: 1942' and 'On a Highland Farm', directly document the practical realities and frequent hardships of Mitchison's new found life, while in 'Then' she contrasts the gentle, forgiving life of her forebears in the Big House, 'They could lie in their beds and blether' [...] 'Oh the evenings of songs and dancing' with her own, more prosaic existence of war-time and farming, 'I must get up and milk the cows, / I must go out to the autumn weather.'<sup>30</sup> Two further poems, which demonstrate the sometimes ambiguous nature of Mitchison's acceptance in Carradale, are 'Living in a Village' which she describes as 'walking / Among snare wire [...] being / The big stag, the twelve-pointer, / Watched

<sup>27</sup> Mitchison, N., *The Cleansing of the Knife and Other Poems* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978), pp. 12-3.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife and Other Poems*, pp. 12-3.

<sup>29</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife and Other Poems*, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife and Other Poems*, p. 21.

on, edible, spied and lied to'<sup>31</sup> and 'The Alban Goes Out: 1939', a lengthy poem which portrays a night at sea with the Carradale fishing fleet, and, while it does not attempt to disguise the harsh conditions and relentless labour, is lyrical in its portrayal of community strength. The poem is almost documentary in quality, and in lines such as:

When all our hands are as net-cut, and our eyes  
as sore from the spray  
How can we think of our neighbours except  
in a neighbourly way<sup>32</sup>

Mitchison encapsulates an older sense of collective self-help, which she herself is trying to reawaken by example.

At this point in her life, in which Gordon Bottomley describes her as being 'thirled to Kintyre',<sup>33</sup> Mitchison is clearly attempting to negotiate a position for herself within (and accepted by) the community, while problematically retaining a paternalistic position outside, from which she can look in and see with clarity what Scotland needs. The poetry of this period is, as a result, written for the Carradale people and for herself, rather than for a wider audience she would at one time have addressed, and she is conscious of, and slightly smarts at this knowledge, writing:

I think that this body of poems I have written about Scotland are adding up into something pretty good, though the highbrows won't think so, and it is in a way hard to go on without encouragement from one's fellow writers.<sup>34</sup>

Also commenting in her Mass-Observation diary:

Robin says [The Albyn Goes Out] is getting too technical for most people; I don't think that matters. It's not written for them, but for these people, to make something for them, to be with them.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife and Other Poems*, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife and Other Poems*, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> 'And now I must warstle with Naomi Mitchison. She is now thirled to Kintyre, and has written a fine poem to the intent that now is the grand time for being done with King Searsa [?] and raising the red flag on the Braes of Mar, and going Out in the Forty-Three and firing all the heather irrespective of whose it is. Man, she would be another Helen Macgregor out of Scott in no time if she got started: and I've got to do my best to persuade her to sit down and be as douce as her own weans until we have Hitler in a bottle in spirits of wine, and not get Kintyre into trouble.' Gordon Bottomley to David McKemmie (9 July 1943), Glasgow University Library, Scottish Theatre Archive, 2Bb 11d/6.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 145.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 40.



Later in her wartime diary, she writes of trying the poems out on the Carradale people, careful to get the technical detail right, and is gratified to be told that she has done so:

I took Archie and Lachie to Brackley and myself called at the farm to ask Jemima whether she minded being in the poem. I had tea with her and her mother and read it to them; they laughed and moved about while I read it – one of the boys is fishing – and then said it was "just great", and I must have been out all a season to have written it, and Jemima said it was a compliment to be in it herself. So that was all right.<sup>36</sup>

The knife, in addition to this metaphorical meaning had a physical incarnation, as a sgian dhu presented to Mitchison by the some of the Carradale people, after they had performed *A Matter Between Macdonalds*, a play written by her in these early, hopeful stages of her integration into Scotland and the community. Mitchison recounts the incident in her diary:

I had an idea the cast had something up their sleeve and they all whispered, finally collected me, and Donald Jackson made one of those queer formal speeches and gave me a little knife, a sgian dhu. I said I thought they meant to trust me, they wouldn't give the sgian to someone who might use it against them. I said if I ever did that, might it turn on me. I said Might it cut the jealousies and quarrels and divisions in Carradale.<sup>37</sup>

Jenni Calder has noted the significance of this moment, writing that on being

presented with the knife, Mitchison 'at once invested talismanic importance'<sup>38</sup> in it, and slept with it under her pillow – a detail that becomes the opening lines of 'The

<sup>36</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 106.

<sup>38</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 171. 'Shortly after Christmas came *A Matter between Macdonalds*, two performances on the same day. Naomi put a huge effort into making it all work, in the face of Duncan's inebriation, general nervousness, an overloaded generator and a variety of technical hitches. The performances accomplished, more or less successfully, Naomi was presented with a sgian dhu, a small, black-hilted Highland knife.'

Cleansing of the Knife', 'The thoughts stream up from the knife / That lies under my head'.<sup>39</sup>

'The Cleansing of the Knife' is a thirteen-part poem sequence in which Mitchison identifies Scotland's historical problems and, after considering possible solutions, comes to a hopeful vision of the nation's future. Moreover, as one of her earliest extended pieces of writing on Scotland, the poem also functions as a vehicle for her to explore her own often ambivalent position within Scotland, and, through her unorthodox refashioning of the role of laird, to assuage the historical guilt she carries of the actions of her aristocratic forebears.

In the opening sequence, Mitchison stresses her Scottish inheritance; 'I am a woman of Scotland, / I have read my history through'. Yet, despite this attempt at identification with Scotland, also seen in the convergence of the (manifestly personal) narrative voice<sup>40</sup> with that of 'Alba, our mother', there remains an admonitory tone and, as in her travel narratives, there is a clear, paternalistic sense that she believes she knows what is best for community and nation. This separation is further exhibited by the distinction between the narrative voice and the 'Men and Women of Scotland' and 'you and your like' of Carradale in which she clearly does not include herself.

The first poem of the sequence, 'Why do we lift the glass?', is a sweeping view of Scotland's history. Invoking Wallace and Bruce, the poem traces the oppression, misfortune and hardships of Scotland's past. Citing the inequities of the class system, the clearances, repressive religion, expatriation, Darien, the Union and the sentimentalisation of culture, Mitchison asks if it is any wonder the Scots drink to forget; shifting forms of 'We lift the glass and we drink' acting as the closing refrain to each stanza. As ever though, Mitchison's vision for Scotland is one based on action and hope rather than mere theorising or lament, and this approach is clearly stated, even if she is unsure of how to communicate her message:

How will I make you hear  
The echo out of your heart  
Put into words of my own? –

<sup>39</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife*, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> Writing on 'The Cleansing of the Knife', in her 2001 PhD thesis *The Image of the Nation as a Woman in Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature: Hugh MacDiarmid, Naomi Mitchison and Alisdair Gray*, Kirsten Stirling addresses this, writing, 'I am calling the narrative voice of the poem 'Naomi Mitchison' for ease of reading; the correspondences between this poem and Mitchison's own biography make the use of any convoluted turns of phrase to get around this seem unnecessary, even through her poetic persona may be slightly fictionalised.', Chapter 5, footnote 14.

Make action from an old chart,  
 Strike land from a cold chart,  
 Grow flesh on an old bone?<sup>41</sup>

In part a meditation on the state of Scotland, the poem is also a challenge, addressed to Duncan Munro, a Carradale fisherman befriended by Mitchison. Rabble-rousing, and provocative, the poem taunts Scotland to turn from the glass and work together for the future.

Will you dare to turn your face  
 Back to the common way  
 Of forgetting and disgrace?<sup>42</sup>

Spoken to throughout in the Gaelic of 'Donnachadh Ban' or 'Duncan the Fairhaired', the poem is at once a direct address to Duncan Munro, to Duncan as representative of the Scottish people, and an allusion to Duncan Ban Macintyre, the eighteenth-century Gaelic poet, a reference which works to place Mitchison in an older Scottish context.

'Why do we lift the glass?' ends with two short stanzas on whisky,

When a thing is used for life  
 At fixed and life-giving seasons,  
 [...]
 Then it is water of life.  
 It is not that today.

and the irony that the 'water of life' is no longer life-giving, but the root of many problems.

Having set out the historical context, Mitchison asks what the people of Scotland can do. She explicitly places herself and others in a continuum of those who have come before 'Ourselves in the stream of the dead', noting that they too didn't know what the future held, or the outcome of their actions, but nevertheless worked on. Once again invoking Donnachadh Ban, Mitchison argues that to move forward together, Scotland's people must no longer dwell in historical wrongs, hopeless in the face of historical oppression:

<sup>41</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife*, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife*, p. 40.

If we are Scots indeed,  
 Such tears should not be wept,  
 [...]  
 Remember what we should  
 And let the lave go by.<sup>43</sup>

Not yet achieving the emotional and cultural concord with the Carradale people she desires, Mitchison is then physically separated by a trip to London. In Part Three, 'Carradale to London: Blood Promise', before heading South, she makes a pact to work for Scotland, sealed in blood between herself and Duncan.<sup>44</sup> Away from the community, she wonders what he is doing - watching over Carradale, drinking with friends, or turning his back on her, on the blood promise and on Scotland:

Thinking in anger: yon woman,  
 Her from the Big House,  
 Why must she interfere?  
 Time that thing ends.  
 Empty the glass, let the bright whirl-pool hum  
 See: she will disappear!<sup>45</sup>

This mid point in the poem, in which Mitchison has herself disappear, marks a turning point, and the poem ceases to look back to history, and begins to grapple with resolution. It is a turning point too for Mitchison in that she is able to acknowledge her role as representative of the ruling class, and the guilt implicit in that, 'Mine was the laird's hand, / The cool hand of the writer', locating herself in Scotland's past, and, simultaneously in its future through the commitment she has shown, 'I have planned and written for Scotland'. It is not one person, however, who can lead Scotland, but many working together, a conviction stated in the fifth poem 'Blitz on Clydebank

<sup>43</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife*, p. 46.

<sup>44</sup> The original blood promise was an effort to stop Duncan's drinking, although it is not clearly delineated in the poem. It is documented in the Mass-Observation diary: 'I took out my knife and opened it and said promise on the knife, so he said yes, and he would not break his promise to me. [...] So I cut my hand across twice with the knife. It was sharp and I must have cut a fairly deep scratch and he put his lips down on it and must have got enough of a mouthful of blood to count. He said You did this for me, why did you do it? I said I could do more for you if I knew what to do. [...] and he said I am seeing a plan for my life in your blood. Then he picked up the knife and shut it and gave it back to me and said The Knife will remain clean to us. Quote in Benton, J. *Naomi Mitchison*, p. 124. A comparison may be drawn between this and a later blood promise quoted in Chapter Three, footnote 70.

<sup>45</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife*, p. 49.

1941' in which Mitchison, finding a local boy dead in a house in Partick, grows more sure of her ties to the Carradale people,

[...] I am thirled to trust  
 The kindness of my friends.  
 I know there is one thing true:  
 Even at most alone  
 We are more than merely ourselves;  
 Our souls are not our own.<sup>46</sup>

After this bonding incident, time passes and Mitchison is involved in work on the farm and for the war. The Sgian ceases to be a symbol alone, and becomes a practical tool. Spring and a wedding are further signs of hope, and through the poem, Mitchison encourages the people of Scotland to look beyond their current hardships to a vision which will be achieved by political action and local organisation. Communist Russia is considered as a model, as well as the Highland Panel and the nationalist movement.

The concluding poem, 'Work and Love', acknowledges that much has been achieved,

And you, Donnachadh Ban,  
 For her green and comely veil,  
 Have planned and planted a forest.  
 And myself, the laird and writer,  
 Neither did I fail  
 Over building of roads and houses  
 And a harbour for Carradale.<sup>47</sup>

The concluding lines,

At last and at long last  
 There will be getting and spending  
 For the sake of Alba, our mother,  
 [...]

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<sup>46</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife*, p. 51.

And I see my poem's ending  
And the cleansing of the knife.<sup>48</sup>

reveal the distance Mitchison has travelled into Scotland in the confident separation of 'Alba' and the narrative 'I'. The poem's conclusion expresses Mitchison's hopes for Scotland's future as well as the belief that she can, through practical action, compensate for the historical actions of the Big House and effectively integrate with Carradale.

Mitchison's reinvention of herself as Scottish in *The Cleansing of the Knife* is echoed in *The Bull Calves*, a novel written in the same period, and the later breakdown of this early optimism is explored in her 1952 novel *Lobsters on the Agenda*. It is to these texts that this chapter now turns.

### iii: *The Bull Calves*

Mitchison's initial written response to her life in Scotland came in the form of her Mass-Observation diary (explored in depth in Chapter Two of this thesis) written between 1939 and 1945. Throughout the war, however, and in addition to the poetry of *The Cleansing of the Knife*, she also began a historical novel based on her ancestral family, initially entitled *The Roots of the Present* but later published as *The Bull Calves* (1947). Written during her first decade at Carradale, this text was Mitchison's earliest sustained attempt to reinforce her adopted national identity through fiction and history, to write herself into Scotland. It was largely successful. The rapidity with which the publication of this text confirmed Mitchison's position can be seen in Kurt Wittig's *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*. Published in 1958, Wittig's text was one of the first critical works to attempt a coherent survey of the national literature.<sup>49</sup> In its final chapter, he discusses the main works and figures of the modern movement, with *The Bull Calves* flagged prominently as an example of the recent literary developments.<sup>50</sup> Republished by Virago in 1997 to coincide with Mitchison's 100<sup>th</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife*, p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> Mitchison, *The Cleansing of the Knife*, p. 72.

<sup>49</sup> The only major survey of the national literature to pre-date Wittig was G. Gregory Smith's *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919).

<sup>50</sup> Wittig, Kurt, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1958), p. 324. Throughout the 1920s and 30s Mitchison is almost universally described as an English novelist in book reviews and profiles, the earliest known reference to her Scottish ancestry being a 1929 review of her play 'My Ain Sel' in which the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* reviewer queried the ability of the average Scot to understand her Scots language use! (24th December 1929). A further early reference is a report of her attendance at the Scottish Women's Club Burns Night of 1932 in the *Edinburgh Weekly Scotsman* which notes: 'Naomi Mitchison's books are so mysterious, so "different", that we cannot

birthday and Calder's accompanying biography, *The Bull Calves* is now her best known work, remaining in print where so many of her novels have disappeared from the literary landscape. Cairns Craig has called it 'one of the most powerful historical novels of the century'<sup>51</sup> while, discussing its place within the Scottish Renaissance, Margery Palmer McCulloch has argued that it displays an 'intellectual and sophisticated self-consciousness in the manipulation of [...] material which marks Mitchison as outstanding in any account of Scottish fiction.'<sup>52</sup> In light of this, there is, to date, surprisingly little critical material on the novel, although Douglas Gifford has published an article entitled 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*' in which he argues:

*The Bull Calves* is [Mitchison's] deepest exploration of her roots, ideological as well as genealogical. It is her own favourite novel, and holds the key to her entire development as novelist *and person* [my italics].<sup>53</sup>

The narrative is set over just two days on the Haldane estate of Gleneagles in 1747, close enough to the Jacobite rebellion of '45 for its reverberations to echo round the walls and strain family loyalties. The Haldane family, gathered for mid-summer, learn of a Jacobite of minor importance hidden in the attic by one of the young Haldane men in acknowledgement of an old friendship. In the wake of a civil war and the strict imposition of Whig law, this knowledge forces the family to negotiate conflicting loyalties between family and state; as so often in her fiction, instinct for natural 'right' is seen to be in opposition to the law of the statute-book. Seen in terms of characterisation, the tale centres on the experience of Kirsty Haldane, who, after a long, destructive marriage to a zealous Presbyterian minister, Andrew Shaw of Bargarran, is married with a Highland laird and soldier, Black William McIntosh of Borlum, recently returned to reclaim his estate after many years on the American frontier. Lately joined, their union embodies the fate of a divided Scotland, prompting

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expect to be able to "size" her up in a few minutes' conversation [...] She was challenged to prove her nationality by taking part in a Scottish reel, and with such enthusiasm did she dance it, that it brought her beautiful hair streaming about her shoulders'. Mitchison was present at the event as a speaker, and is reported to have spoken with enthusiasm about the 'Scottish Renaissance' as a movement of which Burns would have approved (30 January 1932). Both NLS, Acc. 5803.

<sup>51</sup> Craig, Cairns, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 164.

<sup>52</sup> Palmer McCulloch, Margery, 'Fictions of Development 1920-1970', *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, eds. Gifford and McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 370.

one critic to describe the novel as 'a unionist myth, but the partners in union no longer include England'.<sup>54</sup> The marriage of Kirsty and William offers a hopeful model for the future through the alliance of Highland and Lowland, despite a cautious welcome by the Haldane family, still wary of past Highland betrayal.

*The Bull Calves* can be said to question the ways in which we construct history, and while the novel is set in the eighteenth century, Mitchison identifies corresponding aspects with the contemporary period. In both 1747 and 1947 (the year of publication), Scotland is recovering from years of conflict which have brought hardship and loss to families and serve to highlight already problematic relationships between conflicting ideologies. Prefixing the novel is a poem, 'Clemency Ealasaid, July 1940' which clearly positions the events of the text within the modern period, prompting the reader to sustain a dual temporal perspective on the thematic concerns of the narrative. History is, in Wittig's terms, understood to be the 'matrix of the present'.<sup>55</sup>

The act of illuminating the events of the present through a historical plot was not a new device for Mitchison; the attempt to universalise experience through time appears in her first novel, *The Conquered* (1923), in which the 'Question of Ireland' is seen through the lens of the Roman invasion of Britain. A recurring method through much of her early 'classical' fiction, this device is most clearly seen in *The Blood of the Martyrs* (1935) wherein she parallels her fears on the growth of European fascism

with a plot centred around Nero's persecution of Christians in first-century Rome.<sup>56</sup>

The poem 'Clemency Ealasaid, July 1940', like much of the novel, discusses the need to rebuild Scotland, destabilised by internal division in religion and politics, its identity weakened through union with England. However, woven through this concern for the state of the nation and Europe's recovery from war, the poem's core is personal, a lament for Mitchison's last born child, Clemency Ealasaid, who died at

<sup>53</sup> Gifford, Douglas, 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*', *Scottish Studies* 10 (Germany: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 240.

<sup>54</sup> Hart, Francis, *The Scottish Novel* (London: J. Murray, 1978), p. 183.

<sup>55</sup> Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*, p. 324.

<sup>56</sup> This reading of Mitchison's early texts is further strengthened by her own introduction to the 1990 Virago reprint of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. Allowing for no ambiguity of interpretation, she writes: 'So, readers, remember that my account of what was happening in Sparta or Athens or even Egypt, is all based on real history, but the view was moulded by what I - and many another person - was thinking in the Europe of those days with Mussolini and his fascists in Italy and already the shadow of Hitler in Germany.' (Edinburgh: Virago, 1990), p. x.



one day old in July 1940. This child, Mitchison's seventh and last, had great symbolic importance for her as she viewed the birth as a sign of renewal in the face of war, as well as a bond with Carradale itself. Articulating this in her Mass-Observation diary in the days following the death she writes, 'this was meant to be a kind of binding between me and Carradale, and now that's smashed', a phrase that is echoed almost exactly in the text of 'Clemency Ealasaid'.<sup>57</sup>

The inclusion in the poem of this experience is a central factor in identifying the links between *The Bull Calves* as a work of fiction and Mitchison's own life in Carradale, as it was the major impetus behind her initial conception of the book. Again in the diary, Mitchison spells out the links between the child and the book, echoing traditionally-assumed associations between biological and literary creativity:

Dr Cameron says I should start writing a book. As though one could turn on the tap. But I think I must consider it, even if nothing comes of it. I might write a history of Kintyre: that is a very small-scale history, but with implications taking in outside political and economics movements. Ending, not with vague statements about evictions, but definite family histories; and so on. I think there is a lot of material [...] If only I had my baby I wouldn't need to write a book that probably nobody wants to read.<sup>58</sup>

From the starting point of 'Clemency Ealasaid' it is possible to unravel the ways in which Mitchison writes herself and her experiences directly into the text. Eager as she was to integrate into Carradale and do the best for Scotland, it is impossible for the reader to disentangle the communal and national aspirations expressed in the text from Mitchison's own personal fears and desires.

In the figure of Kirsty, Mitchison constructs a fictional and in some ways idealised self-portrait: Douglas Gifford comments, 'Kirsty of course derives mainly from Naomi Mitchison and the responsive reader will not miss the many correspondences', later arguing, 'So important is [Kirsty's] role that to examine its narrative development is [...] to understand Naomi Mitchison's own feelings of the

<sup>57</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 73. Repeated in the poem, the line reads 'This was to have been a binding between me and Carradale'.

<sup>58</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 73.

'forties'.<sup>59</sup> Uppermost of these, when viewed in light of the prefixed poem, is the fact that both women have experienced the death of young children; Kirsty's surviving child is named Elizabeth corresponding to the Gaelic 'Ealasaid' of the poem's title. By fictional means, therefore, Mitchison is able to restore to her alter-ego the child she herself has recently lost. In addition, *The Bull Calves* was illustrated by Louise Richard Annand, the Scottish artist, who portrayed the principal characters and objects in delicate line drawings taken from contemporary portraits at Gleneagles and from the Glasgow Art Galleries. A portrait of Kirsty and William appears as frontispiece to the first edition in which there is an unambiguous likeness to Mitchison herself with local fisherman and friend Denny Macintosh at her side.<sup>60</sup> Curiously, all subsequent editions of the text have appeared without this portrait (while Annand's other drawings remain), possibly on the wishes of the Mitchison estate who sought to minimise awareness of the close relationship between Mitchison and Macintosh through the years in which the text was written.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, through Kirsty (and other characters), Mitchison presents a vision of the contribution she felt duty-bound to offer to the reincarnation of Scotland, foregrounding again the parallels between personal recovery, and political and national renewal. At a number of points throughout the text Kirsty is personified as 'Caledonia', her cousin Kyllachy saying of her:

"Ah, poor lassie, poor wee lassie", and then: "she is fast in her trap as poor Scotland herself, and as fully eager to bide there"<sup>62</sup>

Black William further highlights the entwined fate of self and nation when he tells Kirsty:

"lassie, you were like poor Scotland herself, and one more betrayal would have spoilt you clean".<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Gifford, Douglas, 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*', *Scottish Studies* 10 (Germany: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 222 and 224.

<sup>60</sup> This drawing is reproduced on p. v of this thesis. The similarity was noted by Mitchison's friend Douglas Young who wrote to her on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1947: 'I read the first 150 pages of you Bull Calves, very interesting. I shall write more when I am done with it. Dick [sic] Annand has caught your likeness in the frontispiece!', NLS, Acc. 6419, Box 38b.

<sup>61</sup> Louise Annand confirms this, writing, 'I think it is the case that the family asked for the drawing to go.', Postcard, Annand to Helen Lloyd, 26 November 2004.

<sup>62</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, *The Bull Calves* (London: Cape, 1947; Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1985; London: Virago, 1997), p. 106.

<sup>63</sup> Mitchison, *The Bull Calves*, p. 170.

Mitchison's intention here is two-fold. For as well as making explicit the links between herself/Kirsty and the future of nation, she is also strengthening her own position in modern-day Scotland through intertextual reference to Scott's Jeanie Deans, and to Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Scots Quair* heroine, Chris Guthrie, characters who have similarly been seen to embody the Caledonian archetype, and texts of which Mitchison would certainly have been aware.<sup>64</sup> Published in 1932 some years before Mitchison's move north, *A Scots Quair* stands as a signpost to the questions of national reconstruction which would permeate Scotland's literary renaissance. Prefiguring Mitchison's vision, it is also a novel in which the Highland-Lowland divide is bridged by a marriage of the principle characters. By positioning herself in relation to other Scottish authors, Mitchison is, as previously suggested, consciously attempting to carve a place for herself within the new expressions of a national literary awareness and style. The use of female character as symbolic representation of the Scottish nation has been examined by Kirsten Stirling in her thesis 'The Image of the Nation as a Woman in Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature'.<sup>65</sup> Noting that the image is absent from the earlier canon, Stirling traces its appearance in the twentieth century, elucidating links to the reawakening of nationalist feeling with which the literary renaissance was associated.

Mitchison was aware of the nationalist movement although she did not wholeheartedly identify herself with its political aspects, in contrast to many of the (predominantly male) writers of the renaissance.<sup>66</sup> Most notable of these was Hugh MacDiarmid, with whom she had corresponded during the 1930s. Her involvement in nationalism, as expressed through *The Bull Calves*, was less party-political and more concerned with the personal effort and politico-cultural will needed to improve the collective lot. Writing in her diary for 24<sup>th</sup> August 1941 she noted:

<sup>64</sup> '...he felt he was stared at by Scotland herself', Gibbon, Lewis Grassie, *Cloud Howe* (1933; Edinburgh: Canongate, 1995), p. 105. Scott, Sir Walter, *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818).

<sup>65</sup> Stirling, Kirsten, 'The Image of the Nation as a Woman in Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature: Hugh MacDiarmid, Naomi Mitchison, Alisdair Gray' (University of Glasgow, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> Nationalism gained a poor reputation in inter-war Europe and Mitchison preferred to see herself as an internationalist, arguing that there was no inherent contradiction between support for internationalism and pride in one's own nation. In an undated letter (probably from the late 1920s), Mitchison addresses this, writing: 'I am also much interested in the Scottish Renaissance people, and attempt to understand Hugh M'Diarmid [sic] [...] I am rather doubtful about the political side of Scottish Nationalism, as I think there are more important and urgent things which need doing', NLS Acc. 26190. Donald Smith writes, 'She championed Hugh MacDiarmid at a time when he had more critics than admirers, read Neil Gunn's novels and corresponded with Leslie Mitchell [...] the idea of regeneration for Scotland, urban and rural, had taken root in Mitchison's mind.' Smith, *Possible Worlds: The Fiction of Naomi Mitchison* (Ph.D thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 187-9. An example of Mitchison's views on Scottish Nationalism can be found in a typescript beginning 'While I was in the south this month', Mitchison Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas, n.d.

...In the afternoon talked about nationalism and about the kind of books I want to write, about the language I want to use for them, about the tradition of writing, and so on. I feel nervous about it; there is something deep down, I feel defensive and passionate, as I do about being a woman. Not quite reasonable. I feel I don't care about being in the same tradition as Shakespeare and Beethoven if only I can do something for my own people in Scotland.<sup>67</sup>

Coming after only three years of residence in Scotland, this comment is revealing for its clear expression of personal alignment to nation. Additionally, the possessive use of 'my own' in relation to the people, whether of Scotland or Carradale, illustrates an underlying consciousness of the responsibilities she inherited as Laird, and the expectation to serve that, as we have seen, was her class inheritance.<sup>68</sup>

Calder delineates the underlying motivations which characterised Mitchison's work and life, commenting:

Naomi continued to make efforts to place herself in a continuum of her inheritance and successors.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, the influence of family bears weightily on any reading of *The Bull Calves* through Mitchison's having populated the novel with her own Haldane and Strange ancestors. Between 'Clemency Ealasaid' and the novel-proper, the reader is presented with a genealogical tree, detailing the interlinked branches of several prominent Scottish families, leading through the generations to Mitchison's immediate kin, with herself and brother Jack at the end point. If the reader were in any doubt as to the autobiographical subtext of the novel, the author's inclusion of and appearance in this family tree makes the point explicit.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, in the extensive notes that follow

<sup>67</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 159. The diary does not relate whom Mitchison was having this conversation with.

<sup>68</sup> In relation to this, see discussion of the autobiographical writings of mother and grandmother in Chapter One.

<sup>69</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 304.

<sup>70</sup> This reading of the text is supported by Douglas Gifford who argues: 'It is important to accept the apparatus of the book as organically part of it. The family trees at the beginning draw the connections between Kirstie [sic] and Naomi; they illustrate the novel's point that all the families of Scotland are interwoven with each other.' 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*' *Scottish Studies* 10 (Germany: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 222.

the novel, Mitchison discusses her use of family history, once again emphasising the links between Kirsty's child Elizabeth, and her own:

I will say at once that the book is very thoroughly documented and that almost all the characters are real people. But, in real life; [sic] Kirsty and Black William, my hero and heroine, are only names in two family trees. They died young. I have given them the lives they might have had, the child they might have had.<sup>71</sup>

Eager to emphasise how little time separates her from this past, she also notes that, 'A few lifetimes will cover the stretch between now and then. I remember well my old 'cousin Annie', grand-daughter of Mr Robert Strange in this book.'<sup>72</sup> It is clear from her Mass-Observation diary that Mitchison spent much time researching her family history during the years in which she was writing *The Bull Calves*.<sup>73</sup> The knowledge she acquired provided the background detail to the novel, and can be seen in the notes which make up the final third of the text. She describes the process in a diary entry, dated November 1941:

Later I read in the National Library too, being equally well received by the librarian there, Meikle, who was immersed in documents, but came out to get me things, to show me how I could get books for myself. [...] Meikle saw me as part of Scottish history, descendant and representative of the Haldanes and indeed of all the great families whose blood is mixed with mine - for indeed there is scarcely one of them that isn't represented, Highland and Lowland. And I felt in turn the pride and responsibility, immediately, that I had to write the hell of a good book, that I had to explain something very important, that it was laid on me.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Mitchison, *The Bull Calves*, p. 407. This comment is all the more poignant when one considers that the child Mitchison is able to bestow on her fictional incarnation may be not only Clemency or Geoff (who had died some years earlier), but the child she will never have with Denny McIntosh, the Carradale fisherman, with whom she was in love for many years, and who is pictured (as Black William) with her on Annand's frontispiece drawing.

<sup>72</sup> Mitchison, *The Bull Calves*, p. 419.

<sup>73</sup> A central source book for Mitchison's genealogical searches was *The Haldanes of Gleneagles* (Edinburgh: Blackwoods, 1929) by General Sir J. Aylmer L. Haldane. This text includes extensive interlinked family trees extending back to 1100, and a chapter on 'The Heredity of the Gleneagles Family' by Mitchison's father, J.S.Haldane.

<sup>74</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, pp. 169-70. The National Library of Scotland was established in 1925 and Henry Meikle was the first 'Keeper of Manuscripts' for the Department of Manuscripts.

The bond Mitchison felt, in addition to an interest in the genetic side of inheritance, was in what she saw as the shared aims for Scotland (crucially on both a personal and non-party-political level) between herself and those who populated the landscape of her past and her text. In the novel, William and Kirsty take an interest in new methods of farming, the management of crop cycles and agricultural planning as she herself does on the Carradale parklands. Beyond personal gain, both author and characters understand the benefit to crofts and small-holders that these developments can have, and through these, the cumulative potential for Scotland itself. Written directly into her novel is a text on agricultural improvement by the father of Black William, published anonymously in Edinburgh in 1729 and entitled *An Essay on Ways and Means for Inclosing, Fallowing, Planting by a lover of his country*.<sup>75</sup> Mitchison's response to this text and its author, and knowledge of the shared purpose between it and her own life in Scotland, is again documented in the war diary:

I settled down with Macintosh of Borlum's *Enclosure and Fallowing* written from prison, from some place not half a mile from where I was sitting, written without malice or anger or anything but generous acceptance of events, the work of a good Fabian and oh such a damned nice man and so near one in time. By and bye [sic] I found myself sitting crying over my books in the Signet Library, because he was so nice and I could never tell him so, never give him back kindness, only two hundred years away in time, one could get at what he was and what he wanted. If only one could tell him one was on his side, one was trying to do the same kind of thing with the countryside, I at least, was trying to be the same kind of laird he had in mind. That I too loved Scotland, and, like himself, knew that Scotland needed changing and was determined to do it.<sup>76</sup>

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appointed in August 1927. In 1931 he was promoted to Librarian. For more on Meikle and the NLS see Cadell and Matheson (eds.), *For The Encouragement of Learning: Scotland's National Library 1689-1989* (Edinburgh: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1989), pp. 139-42.

<sup>75</sup> This text is held by the British Library and by Glasgow University Library Special Collections (Mu53-f.30). Mitchison's personal copy, containing marginalia relating to the writing of *The Bull Calves*, is held by the National Library of Scotland.

<sup>76</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 169. This sentiment is echoed twice in *The Bull Calves*, first by the character of Margaret who comments, "There was no breath nor hint of politics or bitterness. The old man had accepted, in meekness and charity, all that his enemies had done to him, and then had written his books out of pure love for Scotland and the poor folk of Scotland." Again her eyes filled with tears and she wiped them with a corner of her shawl. 'Amn't I a silly besom to be crying over an old dead Tory, Catherine?', and again by Mitchison herself in the extensive end notes, who writes, 'I

This sentiment exemplifies Mitchison's attachment to nation, and the corresponding aims she identified between the eighteenth century improvers and her own desires for Scotland's future. Furthermore, encapsulated within the title of the novel and its dedication (below) is another clear indication of Mitchison's exploration of identity through ancestral inheritance, and through this her attempt to position herself within Scotland's history, and so to its present. As suggested in Chapter One, the figure of the 'bull calves' represented for Mitchison the head-strong, hard-working, principle of which she was so consciously an inheritor. Alluding to these traits in her unpublished manuscript *Hide and Seek*, also a text in which she explores herself and the construction of identity through genealogical history, she writes, 'We were the bull calves. And we poked our noses into the future.',<sup>77</sup> emphasising the courage and determination with which she too would be associated. Likewise, the dedication of the novel which reads:

*Dedicated to the other Bull Calves, living and dead, and  
to the Highlanders they may have loved. But  
most of all to those who are only  
names in a family tree,  
and, of those,  
my one.*

memorialises both her daughter, Clemency Ealasaid, and the bull calves who inhabit her text and who, by fictional means, have become more than 'only names in a family tree'.

#### *iv: Lobsters on the Agenda*

Coming just five years later, *Lobsters on the Agenda* (1952) was Mitchison's second self-consciously reflexive Scottish novel. In the text she moves the narrative action from the past of *The Bull Calves* to the present day, depicting daily life and work in Port Sonas, a west-coast fishing village which is clearly both a portrait of her local

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first read the book myself, in the Signet Library in Edinburgh, and of a sudden I found myself in tears, thinking of the way it was written, only a few hundred yards away in space [...] but too far off in time for me ever to speak with the man who had written it and tell him how some of us are yet working his way. [...] So I, just the same as Margaret in my book, was crying over an old, dead Tory, and that at a time when there was plenty more to cry about.' Mitchison, *The Bull Calves*, p. 189 and pp. 478-9.

<sup>77</sup> Mitchison, *Hide and Seek*, p. 219.

Carradale people and symbol of the many Highland communities attempting to negotiate the rapidly-changing landscape of the mid-twentieth century. Although it was written close in time to *The Bull Calves*, when viewed in terms of Mitchison's overall output, *Lobsters on the Agenda* marks a clear shift in her perception and representation of people and place. Taken together, the two novels can be seen to trace the arc of her developing relationship with Scotland, its community, and her sense of belonging.

If *The Bull Calves* was Mitchison's manifesto, her vision of the future seen through a prism of past experience, *Lobsters on the Agenda* is a far more prosaic depiction of the reality she encountered of life in Scotland. Throughout the text she is openly critical of many aspects of Highland life, focusing her ire particularly on the constricting and often hypocritical hold of the factional churches. Also lamented in the novel is the lack of social cohesion she saw as so necessary for the continued survival of small communities in the modern world, and the money and time wasted by many local men in heavy drinking when not at sea. These problems are voiced early in the novel by a fisherman who exclaims:

This is a kind of divided community here and we all know that; and we're not the only Highland place to be afflicted the same way. We're divided over the question of a bridge or a ferry, and there's some for the drink and some against, and there are Established and Wee Frees and Free Presbyterians, and on top of that, the Episcopalians at Kinlochbannag. And the Glen will fight with Osnish and both the two of them with the village, and there's one thing and another and all of us pulling every which way.<sup>78</sup>

As in *The Bull Calves*, the novel's action takes place over a short period of time, in this case seven days in the life of Port Sonas (a framework which later finds echos in the work of George Mackay Brown who similarly portrayed his Orcadian town of Stromness in *Greenvoe* (1972)). The central character is Kate Snow, an English doctor who comes to live in Port Sonas after the death of her husband in the Blitz. Working as a locum, she is also a District Councillor and keen to help the community negotiate the maze of post-war governmental bureaucracy in an attempt to

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<sup>78</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, *Lobsters on the Agenda* (Colonsay: House of Lochar, 1997), p. 42.



provide and improve services necessary for the community to thrive in the future. With fishing the life-blood of the village, she recognises the need for a new harbour wall, a bridge, and improved roads and houses, as well as a communal meeting place - a village hall - free from the influence of the churches. To this end, the novel is divided into chapters which take their names from the many Council, Rural, fishing and church committee meetings arranged to discuss these shared aspirations and make them a reality.

As the narrative action moves from one meeting to another, the reader may initially be left with the impression that there is little of consequence in this portrait of rural life. Yet, Mitchison skilfully weaves many small plot lines together to produce an authentic tapestry of personal lived experience. In addition to attending meetings, the local people discuss the theft of some lobsters (an action which, if proved, would be indicative of a wider breakdown of trust and community loyalty); further disruption is caused by the mistreatment of some evacuee children; there is a false paternity charge, a visit by The Highland Panel and the usual infighting between branches of the Presbyterian churches.

It is possible, from this synopsis, to trace the aspects of her own life that Mitchison fictionalised into *Lobsters on the Agenda*. Primary among these is her identification with Kate, a woman whose English background, education, inclination towards local government, as well as her ability with language, are aspects of a double-edged sword that both allows her to work for the community, and, ironically, sets her apart, limiting the integration she craves. Introducing the House of Lochar reprint of the novel, Isobel Murray notes, 'we sense that Kate's opinions are near those of her author'.<sup>79</sup> Set as it is in the post-war period, the novel's principal female character, Kate, while not as outspoken or political as the author, is viewed as slightly unorthodox for living alone and exhibiting a fierce independence, as was Mitchison who spent long periods at Carradale alone through her husband's commitments to the House of Commons. Furthermore, in keeping with the instinct of their class background, both women choose to live without their children, who spend term-time at southern boarding schools.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Murray, Isobel, 'Human Relations: An Outline of Some Major Themes in Naomi Mitchison's Adult Fiction', *Scottish Studies* 10 (Germany: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 253. Elizabeth Dickson also suggests, 'Kate is closely related to the author herself in *Division and Wholeness: The Scottish Novel, 1896-1947* (Ph.D thesis, University of Strathclyde, 1989), p. 292.

<sup>80</sup> Calder suggests that Mitchison's decision to send her children to boarding school was the contradiction of which she was least aware. Her lifelong employment of servants was, Mitchison felt, repaid in part

Although they welcome Kate to the community, the locals recognise the class distinction between them, as again was Mitchison's experience. Mitchison knew that many were wary of her, and places an expression of this in the thoughts of another fisherman, Roddy, who articulates his feelings towards 'Mistress Snow':

[...] you'd not know how the gentry would be thinking. And she was gentry right enough [...] She had the education and the manners. And there were those that said she could be going to the Castle if she played her cards right.

In the novel, the community attempt to encourage a match between Kate and Sandy, the local Laird, and, while neither character wishes to marry, this plot line subtly underlines to the reader Kate's association with the Big House, and through that, the links between character and author. Furthermore, the fact that Kate's lives in a house known locally as the 'Bee' House could be seen to provide an additional phonetic association with 'Big'.

On a more tangible level, the novel documents Mitchison's long and increasingly testing involvement with both the District Council and the Highland Panel, a body which, although it may not have proved terribly effective, was established in the years after the Second World War to consult on issues of Highland regeneration.<sup>81</sup> While the novel's title can be seen to refer to the theft of some lobsters in Port Sonas mentioned above, it is also clearly a satirical comment on the often small-minded and frustrating progress of these bodies. Discussing these years in her *Saltire Self-Portrait*, Mitchison explains, 'I felt, perhaps wrongly that we (I?) could do something about Scottish fisheries and agriculture.' Further, she writes:

As soon as the post-war County Council elections turned up, I stood for Kintyre East and was elected. In those days only the Burgh

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through her socialist works in Carradale, but private education remained a class reflex which she didn't address. Calder in conversation with Helen Lloyd, 17 November 2003.

<sup>81</sup> The Highland Panel which was set up in 1947 as an advisory body to the Secretary of State, and was the precursor of the Highlands and Islands Development Board, set up in 1964. Through the Highland Panel, and her interest in Highland regeneration, Mitchison wrote, or was involved in the production of several political publications. These include: *Oil For the Highlands ?* (Fabian Society, Research Series 315, 1974); 'Rural Reconstruction', *The New Scotland: 17 Chapters on Scottish Reconstruction*, ed. Norrie Fraiser (London: London Sists Self-government Committee, 1942); *Re-Educating Scotland: Being a Statement of what is wrong with Scottish Education*, eds. Mitchison, Britton and Kilgour (Glasgow: Scoop Books, 1944). See also Mitchison's journalism in *New Statesman and Nation* including, 'On the Council' (31 August 1957); 'Highland Committees' (16 November 1957), and 'Remote Areas' (7 December 1957).

candidates stood for a political party. Landward candidates were genuinely non-political; over local issues it was usually possible to get men or, often, women of good will to get the vote through when it was for the general good. Of course there was also the game of you vote for my harbour and I'll vote for your road.<sup>82</sup>

Reflecting this local-governmental involvement, the novel's central theme (and the project closest to Kate's heart) is the plan to build a village hall for Port Sonas, providing the community with a secular meeting place. It is hoped by Kate and others that this communal space, free from the divisive and limiting authority of the churches, will be used for meetings and entertainments, thereby strengthening community bonds. This in turn, it is hoped, will stem the tide of young people who drift south to the cities, bestowing, in the words of Kate, 'the means of making a new pattern for the community'.<sup>83</sup> However, in addition to the problems of funding and council approval, the hall's future hangs in the balance as the church authorities pressure their congregations to reject what they see as an ungodly scheme. Opposition also comes from those who view the planned entertainments as a threat to traditional Highland ways of life, an objection which is contested by the familiar argument that, left alone, there would be no tradition to protect and that therefore some change must be embraced.

Mitchison herself fought for a village hall in Carradale by means of just such an argument, and was eventually successful – the hall opened in 1940 with a play *A Matter Between MacDonalds*, written by her, and performed by local fishermen and crofters. This process (of which the novel is closely reminiscent) is documented in her war time diary for Mass-Observation. Even after the construction of the Village Hall, she felt her desire to help constrained by petty local argument. Writing in the diary after a particularly bad meeting of the Village Hall Management Committee, she writes: 'I was now half inclined to say why should anyone like me with a world reputation, have to submit to being bullied by a lot of villagers.'<sup>84</sup> Another particularly unproductive (and drunken) meeting in Campbeltown prompts the angry entry, 'I felt they were a damned ungrateful lot and deserved to be run by a lot of bloody Tories.'<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison: A Saltire Self-Portrait*, p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, p. 120.

<sup>84</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 243.

<sup>85</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, p. 233.

This real-life lack of recognition of her work is again reflected in the novel in relation to Mitchison's alter-ego Kate when another character speaks of:

Katie who was always doing so much, who was thinking and working for others and never for herself! Katie who might get tired of the stupidity and ingratitude of Port Sonas – and who could blame her – and go away back to the south.<sup>86</sup>

Nevertheless, the village hall was one of Mitchison's most durable achievements at Carradale; 'Spring Queen', a Channel 4 television programme filmed in 1984, profiles her life and work, with specific reference to both hall and harbour.<sup>87</sup>

Awareness of the motivations behind the text should not, however, detract from its creative significance. To this end, introducing the text, Isobel Murray emphasises that while 'the experience of many years is fed into *Lobsters*' it 'is *not* a tract or a political mission-statement: it is a very strongly imagined, intricate, many-charactered novel.'<sup>88</sup> That said, the text is also explicitly self-referential in a way that exceeds the genealogical and pictorial approaches of *The Bull Calves*; for in *Lobsters on the Agenda*, the author actually steps, undisguised, onto the set of her own stage.

The main event of the week on which the novel focuses is a visit by the Highland Panel to consider the development needs and economic priorities of the village and surrounding community. As previously noted, Mitchison was an active member of this panel, travelling around outlying Scottish communities and, it should therefore not be a surprise to the reader that she is also one of the group who arrive on the Port Sonas ferry. The community's initial impression of 'Mrs Mitchison', a 'ring-netter from Carradale'<sup>89</sup> is, as in life, one of suspicion – what, they ask, can a woman know of fishing? Mitchison's part in her own novel is a small but satirical one, which weaves through the events of the text: fact and fiction collide as her fictional incarnation addresses the issues which affect life in both Port Sonas and Carradale. Furthermore, as author, Mitchison light-heartedly parodies herself and the reaction of others, including Kate, her other textual 'self':

<sup>86</sup> Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, p. 216.

<sup>87</sup> Steel, Tom, *Spring Queen* (Tom Steel Productions, 1984).

<sup>88</sup> Murray, I., 'Introduction' to Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, pp. 1 and 4.

<sup>89</sup> Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, p. 173.

"You'll know these Highland Panel folk yourself?" Janet asked, "is it true there is one of them a woman?"

"Yes, Mrs Mitchison from Carradale; she writes books." [...] "I think they're historical novels, but I've never read them myself. I've read some of her articles in papers and I think she lives in a small kind of a place something after this style."<sup>90</sup>

'Mrs Mitchison' is by no means an idealised self-portrait. She is 'a woman with a dark handkerchief over her head and her hands deep in the pockets of a huge old leather coat.'<sup>91</sup> who swears 'like a medical student'<sup>92</sup> at the ignorance of (church) Ministers. Furthermore, invited to the Bee House by Kate for tea, the reader learns, 'Mrs Mitchison fished in her bag for a rather dirty lump of sugar. "I always take an odd lump from the House of Commons. No, it's only ink on it."<sup>93</sup> 'Mrs Mitchison' also gets involved in a meeting, called to discuss the proposed village hall for Port Sonas:

And here didn't Mrs Mitchison get to her feet, and Kate could see she was an angry woman, and say "Of course we all agree that the young people should stay in the Highlands, but they'll not stay unless we do something to encourage them. I hope you have got a village hall here?"

There was a moment's stillness as the rings spread by the dropped brick made contact with the minds of the audience.

[...] Mr Mackintosh rose again, his smile as sticky as black treacle: "There has been talk of such a thing, but the morals of the young people must be protected, and we cannot countenance any occasion for sin."

"Are you opposed to village halls?" said Mrs Mitchison, and the touch of Edinburgh that had softened her voice earlier had given place to a cold English accent.<sup>94</sup>

The most significant collision of worlds comes, perhaps, at the meeting where Kate and 'Mrs Mitchison' discuss their attempts to serve the community, Highland ingratitude, *and* the representation of this in a novel:

<sup>90</sup> Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, p. 164.

<sup>91</sup> Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, p. 167.

<sup>92</sup> Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, p. 178.

<sup>93</sup> Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, p. 196.

"If I was writing a book about the Highlands, I'd try and make people mixed, the way they are. My own crowd at Carradale were dirty enough, when they put me out of the County Council in May. But I see why they did it."

"Why did they, then?"

"Oh, by and large, I was a witch, a stranger. I did things out of pattern. I upset people. I wore the wrong kind of hat. Let's not talk about it."

"Yes," said Kate, "one's got to go slow about changing the pattern. Even when one's got something new and good to give. Like a Village Hall."<sup>95</sup>

By fictionalising her experience in this way, Mitchison also hoped to affect it, forcing change through recognition: or, to return to the words of Jenni Calder, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, 'I have suggested that there are moments when [Mitchison] may have borrowed her actions from her own books.'<sup>96</sup>

*Lobsters on the Agenda* is a satirical and engaging critique of the life Mitchison found in Carradale and of a pattern that she saw replicated throughout Highland society. It is also tempered with anger as she railed against what she saw as the ultimately destructive limitations of belief and an insular and sometimes parochial tradition, as well as the reluctance of the community to accept the (often parental) role she felt she had to offer.<sup>97</sup> The motivations of this role are to be found in her class background, and the responsibility she understood to come with inhabitation of the 'Tigh Mór', or Big House, a subject which is the focus of the following discussion.

### v: *The Big House*

As already noted, *The Bull Calves* and, to a lesser extent *Lobsters on the Agenda*, are both novels set in or around the Big House, the home of the local laird or landowner.

<sup>94</sup> Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, p. 177.

<sup>95</sup> Mitchison, *Lobsters on the Agenda*, p. 205. This sentiment is also expressed by Mitchison in a letter to Douglas Young, dated 29 May 1949: 'I've been down here [Edinburgh] trying to recover from the election. It was pure hell, with the people in whose houses I had been so often and, I thought, in amity, turning on me. I know exactly how a witch feels, when the once friendly neighbours come along with faggots.' NLS Acc. 6419, Box 38b.

<sup>96</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 303.

<sup>97</sup> Discussing this, Elizabeth Dickson argues that 'While Mitchison was a fervent supporter of democracy and giving people the rights to control their own affairs, and while she felt keenly and wished to purge her ancestral guilt on this issue, she never came to terms fully with the complexities of dissent, which

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, they were both written *from* the Big House, and can therefore be seen to be influenced by and to address its significance within, and the relation of its inhabitants to, the surrounding community. Historically, and doubtless still in some areas of Scotland, the Big House was understood to have a duty of care to the people of the locality, offering protection in times of hardship and demanding respect or fealty in return. In practice, the equity of this understanding depended on the humanity of the incumbent, and liberties taken on one side, for example poaching from the estate parks, could be either blithely overlooked, or result in communal admonition. In *The Bull Calves*, Kirsty and Black William see a new model for their (historically) feudal ownership of Borlum, as does Mungo Haldane at Gleneagles. By providing crofters with long leases, and encouraging innovative methods of crop rotation and the planting of forests, the Haldanes understand that they will benefit both estate and commonality, which in turn will be of benefit to Scotland itself. *Lobsters on the Agenda*, while not primarily set within the Big House, explores many associated themes, as Kate (and the Laird), through their education and class, are understood to have a duty of service towards the local community which is expressed through the organisation of meetings and the negotiation of bureaucracy. Mutual expectation of advice and help from the Big House, or at least from the top end of the social hierarchy, prompts Roddy, a fisherman, to turn to Kate when issued with a legal summons on a paternity charge of which he is innocent. Unfazed by the legalisms of the letter, Kate is able to draft a reply which, copied out in Roddy's hand, marks the end of the matter.

On moving to Carradale House, Mitchison recognised that with the laird's house she inherited both the laird's responsibility towards the Carradale community and the guilt of many centuries' abuses perpetrated by her class. While she readily embraced the *noblesse oblige* aspect of her position (her upbringing in many ways preparing her for this role), her socialist principles led her to envision a reincarnation of the Big House's *raison d'être*. This re-working, which would repay its sins, washing clean the slate of the past, could, she believed, be achieved through openness and welcome, the house becoming a positive focal-point for the community. As the village lacked a hall, they could gather in the Big House, use its facilities, and in the process strengthen bonds of trust and kinship, an image which in both sentiment and

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meant that quite often what the people wanted was not what she thought they should have.' *Division and Wholeness: The Scottish Novel, 1896-1947* (Ph.D thesis, University of Strathclyde, 1989), p. 281.

praxis is echoed in her later self-description from Africa as 'a one man citizens' advice bureau'.<sup>98</sup> Mitchison publicly proposed this agenda in 1943, in an article entitled 'What to do with the Big House', written for *SMT Magazine*. In it, she directly addresses the historical burden of guilt that surrounds the Big House, and proposes new approaches which contemporary inhabitants could take in an effort to make amends; or, in her own words, to 'cleanse the knife'.

[T]he big house has seldom been genuinely neighbourly. It has been in a different layer of culture, centred, as often as not, on London. And - it has had that money to spare which its neighbours didn't have. Things are different now, and the folk in the Big House have come to understand that, not everywhere, but wherever they have any roots, native or acquired. Yet, to be neighbourly, they have to overcome the fear and distrust of two hundred years.<sup>99</sup>

Although slow, her early attempts at neighbourliness, or *agape*, were successful. Her war-time diary documents her delight as she is invited to the homes of the local people; addressed as Naomi (or Nou) by fishermen instead of the more formal title befitting her position, and taken out under cover of darkness poaching for fish or game.<sup>100</sup> A diary entry from September 1940 captures these mutual feelings of warmth:

[P]oor Mrs Galbraith got more and more worried as the evening wore on and Sandy got more and more cheerful and began calling me Naomi and suggesting that we should sing a duet or that he himself would play the pipes as he felt it in him to be a great player. She felt that Sandy was demeaning her at the Big House, but I don't think many of

<sup>98</sup> 'Women of our Century', (Broadcast on BBC2, 6 July 1984). A sound recording for this television programme can be found in the British Library, National Sound Archive, T6993/01 TRI. The series was also turned into a book, published as *Women of our Century*, ed. Leonie Caldercot (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984) p. 30.

<sup>99</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, 'What to do with the Big House', *SMT Magazine* Vol 31, No 2 (February 1943), p. 33.

<sup>100</sup> See Mitchison's diary entry for Friday 11<sup>th</sup> July 1941, Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, pp. 155-8. Mitchison's attempt to recast the position of the big house included acquiescence towards poaching on the Carradale parklands. Writing to Compton MacKenzie on the resurgence of local political activism, she explains, 'Here there is a queer sort of thing happening, that the wild ones, the poachers, are turning more and more to politics. They know that if it is sport they are after they can have it as well with me as against, and when we all come back up to the house it is I myself will cook them the sea trout for breakfast while they are dividing the rest, or whatever it may be; - so the thing that is thwarted or in



them felt class-conscious; they were out for a good time and they got it. Baillie Ramsay put a great paw on my shoulder and said My dear lassie, there was never anything like this before in Carradale House; they all love you.<sup>101</sup>

However, as time progresses, the hierarchical nature of the relationship between Big House and community reveals itself to be more insidious, and, as the following diary extract shows, Mitchison increasingly recognised that her attempts to integrate in the life of Carradale were up against older instincts:

Meanwhile I had started a Labour Party branch at Carradale. Word, so to speak, had come from the Big House, so there were twenty or thirty anxious to join. I would suppose that about four may have had genuine Labour sympathies; the rest were following an old custom that could be counted on to second a motion.<sup>102</sup>

For all Mitchison's desire to harmonise the lives of the Big House and surrounding community, her class, wealth and education created contradiction in her thoughts and feelings that would ultimately prove insurmountable, and would contribute, at least in part, to her decision in the mid 1960s to turn from Scotland towards Africa. Additionally, as represented in *Lobsters on the Agenda*, the Carradale people were not as ready as she had hoped to accept her as one of them; the mistrust of class division proving unexpectedly resilient. Her awareness of this tension (and an example of the contradiction that informed so much of her life and work) is also seen at play in 'What to do with the Big House':

The main thing is the personal attitude. If I consider myself superior, then at once I cut myself off. Even if I consider myself different. Honestly, I know I am more intelligent than most of my neighbours, but what is that intelligence for if not to be at their service, to be used

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another sense expressed and liberated, must turn to the politics.' '26<sup>th</sup>', Mitchison Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas.

<sup>101</sup> Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, pp. 91-2. These sentiments are also reflected in the following diary entry, dated 17 October 1939: 'I kept on wondering whether I was double-crossing myself, whether this meal at which I was so happy, was really in some ways bogus, whether I was just taking refuge among these people out of a romantic or sentimental feeling and possibly out of pique at being criticised by the London highbrows or of being the intellectual inferior of various people. Yet I couldn't make out at what point the sacrament was not genuine; I couldn't see myself not loving these people or not being at ease with them.'

by those whose native intelligence has been crushed and stunted by poverty and anxiety?<sup>103</sup>

Despite these contradictions and setbacks, Mitchison retained her belief in the possibilities of a new, enlightened role for the Big House, which she expressed both through her life and her writing. In 1950, between the two other texts at which this chapter looks, she published a novel, simply called *The Big House*, which was aimed at younger readers, and explored the hierarchical structure of Scottish communities, and the Big House as symbol of both tyranny and protection throughout the ages. The novel centres on two characters, Su, daughter of the Big House (named after Mitchison's first grand-child)<sup>104</sup> and her friend Winkie, son of a local fisherman. Out guising at Hallowe'en, Su is set upon by some children from the local school, and, battered and bruised, is found by Winkie. Both understand the historical significance of the children's decision to pick on Su:

[S]he was from the Big House, and in times past the Big House ones had been hard and cruel to the fathers and grandfathers of the ones at the school, and kept them in fear and, maybe, put them out of their houses, but now the thing had turned round and they had revenged themselves. And it was all as senseless as could be, but there is the way things are.<sup>105</sup>

Being Hallowe'en, a time of liminal activity, the children encounter a piper, Donul Beg. Dressed in the Highland garb of one hundred and forty years previously, he recounts his escape from imprisonment inside the fairy hill, and imposes on Su, as daughter of the Big House, the responsibility for his protection from 'Those Ones' who would have him back. Aided by the Big House brownie, a benevolent but mischievous character, the children are required to travel back in time, first to recover Su's shadow, stolen at an encounter with the Fairy King, and then Donul Beg's soul, again stolen by the fairy people, and replaced with that of a changeling.

The inclusion of the fairy hill is significant in *The Big House* as it is a recurring motif in Mitchison's work, explored in Chapter Three of this thesis in

<sup>102</sup> Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison: A Saltire Self-Portrait*, p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, 'What to do with the Big House', *SMT Magazine* Vol 31, No 2 (February 1943), p. 33.

<sup>104</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 214.

relation to her 1966 text, *Return to the Fairy Hill*. Also of particular interest is the novel's use of time, for, while in *The Bull Calves* Mitchison demands that the reader retain a simultaneous awareness of past and present, in *The Big House* the characters themselves are moved through different time periods, highlighting correspondences and contradictions within them, and back to the 1940s in which they live. These travels allow Su and Winkie to see alterations in the seemingly static social rank of the Big House. As Su's diminishes, Winkie's ancestral family slowly rise to a position second only to the Lord of the Isles himself; his castle standing on land which will one day carry the 'Tigh Mór':

"Winkie-" She hesitated, then came out with it. "You have come up in the world, haven't you? I mean, it sounds as if your folk were some of the head ones."

"That will have been so, I am thinking. But, after all, it would be a queer world if the same ones were aye up or aye down. It isna that way that things go, and if it were there would be nothing to keep us from the terrible great sin of pride. It could be, Su, that in such times my folks were big and your folks were wee. Or that they were the same."<sup>106</sup>

Mitchison's intentions here are clear. By suggesting a dynamic principle to the ownership and responsibility of the Big House, she could, in her fiction at least, ease the breach that separated her from the people she would be among. The influence this could have on lived experience, however, was limited by the economic realities of her position, and she recognised, that her ability to be of service to the ordinary people of Carradale depended on the wealth, education and access to power that simultaneously set her apart from them.

Further to these themes, *The Bull Calves*, *Lobsters on the Agenda* and *The Big House* can all be seen as examples of a literary sub-genre, the Big House novel, prevalent in both the Irish and Scottish traditions. While this form in Irish Literature has been extensively documented,<sup>107</sup> the Big House novel is still to be properly

<sup>105</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, *The Big House* (London: Faber, 1950; Edinburgh: Canongate, 1987), p. 10.

<sup>106</sup> Mitchison, *The Big House*, pp. 123-4.

<sup>107</sup> See Kreilkamp, V., *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse: SUP, 1998); Genet, J. (ed.) *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation* (London: Barnes & Nobel, 1991); Rauchbauer,

examined in a Scottish context: a comprehensive survey of the Scottish Big House tradition is clearly not possible within the focus of this chapter, but the aim here is to nod in its direction, and to highlight the dearth of critical material in what would likely prove a rewarding area of investigation.

In Ireland, the Big House novel, which came to critical attention in the 1970s, is largely agreed to have originated with Maria Edgeworth's ironic, self-aware *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and continues in the modern period with the work of Molly Keane, William Trevor, and Jennifer Johnstone, among others. Centring on the decaying house, isolated by geography, religion and culture from the surrounding Catholic community, the Big House novel depicts the death-throes of the Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. This once wealthy class are unable to comprehend the outdated and colonial nature of their presence in Ireland and their approaching extinction. It is of interest to note that production of the Big House novel only began in the final days of the Ascendancy, and, what is more, was largely written from within the decaying walls of the demesne itself, giving the form a bitter, ironic self-awareness.

Although it lacks the religious aspect which is an important feature of its Irish incarnation, the Scottish Big House novel nevertheless tackles many similar issues of class responsibility, community ties, historical guilt, and a growing realisation of the inability of the Big House to survive unchanged in the modern world. Furthermore, it could be argued that the Protestant/Catholic dynamic in Irish Literature is replaced in the Scottish novel by a tension between the Scottish tenantry and its English Laird, (replicating the colonialism of the Irish position), or the historical opposition of Highland and Lowland.

Most notable of the contemporary Big House novelists is Allan Massie, whose exploration of loyalty and Scottish history find correspondences throughout Mitchison's fiction, set in Scotland and elsewhere. Additionally, the work of Emma Tennant (of the Tennant brewing dynasty), Christian Millar, Elspeth Barker and Ronald Frame also centres on the life of the Big House and associated questions of class and belonging.

In exploring literary attitudes to the Big House in Scotland and Ireland, it is productive to consider Mitchison in relation to the Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen. Bowen, a daughter of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, spent her life at the family estate

of Bowen Court in County Cork and is best known for her Big House novel *The Last September* (1929) and her memoirs *Bowen's Court* (1942). In addition to sharing similar class background and dates (Mitchison, 1897-1997; Bowen, 1899-1973) both writers were concerned with justifying the continued existence of the Big House in which they spent much of their lives, and understood the requisite transformation of established social structure. Indeed, Mitchison's links to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy may be closer than initially apparent through blood-ties, on her mother's side, to the Keating(e)s, a military land-owning family, at the height of their powers in nineteenth-century Ireland.<sup>108</sup>

Furthermore, like Mitchison, Bowen also explored the position of the Big House outside of her fiction. In an article entitled 'The Big House' (published in *The Bell* magazine in 1942, just months before Mitchison's article 'What to do with the Big House') Bowen proposes a means of approaching the future:

The Big House has much to learn - and it must learn if it is to survive at all. But it also has much to give. The young people who are taking on these big houses, who accept the burden and continue the struggle are not content, now, to live for themselves only; they will not be content, either, to live 'just for the house' [...] From inside many big houses (and these will be the survivors) barriers are being impatiently attacked. But it must be seen that a barrier has two sides.<sup>109</sup>

For all this enlightened self-awareness however, both women can be seen to retain and exhibit in their work, a certain class myopia: Bowen, for example, in the same article, discusses the economic hardship of the owners of Big Houses before going on, in the following sentence to write:

To the keeping afloat of the household not only the family *but the servants* [my italics] contribute ingenuity and goodwill. As on a ship out at sea, there is a sense of community.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>108</sup> For details of this see 'Chapter IV: Irish Background' in the autobiography of Mitchison's mother, Haldane, Louisa Kathleen, *Friends and Kindred: Memoirs of Louisa Kathleen Haldane* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), pp. 49-57.

<sup>109</sup> Reproduced in, Bowen, Elizabeth, 'The Big House' (1942), *Collected Impressions* (London: Longmans, 1950), p. 200. I'm not suggesting that Mitchison read this article (I can't prove that) or that she was influenced by it, only that both women were thinking about very similar issues at the same time.

<sup>110</sup> Bowen, *Collected Impressions*, p. 198.

a statement which is as similarly unthinking as Mitchison's romanticisation of 'the good old days when everyone was poor together'.<sup>111</sup> Otto Rauchbauer, writing in *Ancestral Voices: The Big House in Anglo-Irish Literature* (1992), considers the position of Bowen to her family estate, highlighting once more the inconsistent thread which appears throughout her work. His comment can be equally well applied to the inconsistencies in Mitchison's own attitudes to Carradale House, and through that, to her position at the head of the community. Bowen's work, he writes:

displays a multiplicity of stances, often contradictory and difficult to reconcile on a rational level [...] Elizabeth Bowen faced up to the fact that the foundations of Bowen Court were based on "an inherent wrong" [...] yet there are other passages which show her passionate attachment to the house and to the family myth.<sup>112</sup>

A similar tendency for contradiction is also noted by Douglas Gifford when he argues, in relation to *The Bull Calves*, that:

at times a feeling comes over that not only is Scotland run by a few families, but it's right that it should be so; and sometimes I feel the statements that speak of the need to remedy the plight of the common folk come from a mixture of guilt and patronage and condescension which isn't whole in the way the book argues it should be.<sup>113</sup>

While both writers are essentially coming from the same direction, and despite these qualifications, Mitchison is ultimately more progressive than Bowen (and the genre norm) in her approach to, and fictional application of, the Big House. The genre's role as a chronicle of the end of a social class and, often, through that, of a family line is particularly of interest when considered in relation to the genealogical apparatus of *The Bull Calves*. For while she explores the position of an outdated class from within the estate walls and considers new models as a means of reparation, Mitchison, in contrast to the genre's *Ur*-plot, seems to be using her fiction to shore up her familial background rather than produce an elegy to its passing. Furthermore,

<sup>111</sup> Mitchison, 'What to do with the Big House', p. 34.

<sup>112</sup> Rauchbauer, *Ancestral Voices*, p. 9.

<sup>113</sup> Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*', *Scottish Studies* 10 (Germany: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 235.

while the viewpoint of the classic Big House novel is retrospective, concentrating on the processes of memory, Mitchison can be seen to re-work the genre by demanding that the reader of *The Bull Calves* look simultaneously back and forward.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to establish both the extent and value of Mitchison's autobiographical writings which, despite the fact that they trace the development of an individual and a writer, have thus far been overlooked in the overgrown, less accessible areas of a long and complex literary career. The study has also sought to examine the shifting position of the autobiographical genre to literary studies, and has attempted to highlight the creative selectivity and propensity to fictionalise which are inescapable aspects of any written portrayal of life. A thesis such as this, which attempts to survey a body of writings does not, by its nature, come to any definitive conclusion, and its original premise – of Mitchison's ineluctable need to write her own life through a wide range of previously under-examined or unidentified texts and manuscripts - is demonstrated through the cumulative evidence of the preceding chapters.

Mitchison's predisposition to document and dramatise her own life begins early, with letters, such as those discussed in Chapter Four of this study and the manuscript example in Appendix C. Additionally, she wrote many childhood diaries, some of which, many decades later, were used as evidence for her three-volume memoir. As a young woman, the increasing possibility for travel and a growing political consciousness provided further opportunities for literary self-exploration, as in the unpublished *Russian Diary* of Chapter Two, and the writings which became the early chapters of *Mucking Around: Five Continents over Fifty Years*, published when she was in her 80s, and discussed in Chapter Three. Mitchison's natural inclination to write was strengthened by a sense that her opinions and beliefs mattered, an inherited surety reinforced by 'the hell of an intellectual heredity'<sup>1</sup> she explores in the manuscript to *Hide and Seek* and seen in the autobiographical writings of grandmother and, later, mother, all in Chapter One.

With the exception, however, of a vast correspondence which spans the century and runs to many hundreds of letters, the majority of Mitchison's personal writings date from her later years; from the war diary for Mass-Observation and *The Bull Calves* written in the 1940s and discussed in Chapters Two and Five, to her formal memoirs and travel writing undertaken when she was in her sixties and



seventies. She is not, however, an island, and a recurring trait throughout this work is her tendency to view herself in relation to others, whether they be her African tribe of *Return to the Fairy Hill*; the Austrian Socialists she portrays as her comrades in *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary*; the people of Carradale in *Lobsters on the Agenda*, *The Big House* and in what became *Among You Taking Notes*, or her ancestral community, portrayed in *Hide and Seek* and her first volume of memoir, *Small Talk*. Her best-known text, *The Bull Calves* is of interest for its fusion of herself, contemporary Carradale, and of those 'who are only names in a family tree'<sup>2</sup>.

Researching a writer's personal papers is an inexact art, governed by the manuscripts that survive the years, by authorial and estate decisions as to which typescripts should be deposited in the public domain, and by the letters which, despite their apparently ephemeral nature, correspondents have retained and passed on. It is also interesting to speculate on what is lost: of all the many fascinating correspondences which have not come down to us, one with unquestionable interest to twentieth century literature must have been that between Mitchison and Aldous Huxley, a childhood friend and literary contemporary, which, it must be assumed due to their almost total absence, went up with many other papers in the 1961 fire which destroyed Huxley's Los Angeles home.

Taking such chances of fate into account, as well as less dramatic personal actions such as the clearing of a drawer of old letters, what is striking about Mitchison's work is the sheer volume of paper and words which do survive. Here is a woman whose deepest instincts were to write and write. The holdings of the National Library of Scotland alone is more than the researchers of many authors could hope for, and yet, as is demonstrated by Appendix A, her writings and letters continue to come to light in libraries across the world. A great deal of what survives is, of course, not of an autobiographical nature and much of the fiction, poetry and journalism for which she is best known is not suited to the parameters of this thesis - but it is hoped that this study will additionally stand as a signpost to the many rich research possibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchison, N., *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*, ed. Dorothy Sheridan (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchison, dedication to *The Bull Calves* (London: Virago, 1997).

The conscious construction of a life should, I believe, never be underestimated in the personal writings of Mitchison. She was first and foremost a writer of fiction, and while her letters, diaries and memoirs may be honest, heart-felt portrayals of what she was documenting, the novelist and poet does not so simply switch off the narrative, dramatic instinct. Writing of Mitchison's Mass-Observation diary, Jenni Calder notes that it 'gave her a splendid opportunity to write the script of her life'<sup>3</sup>, a critical position which may be usefully applied to many of the writings explored in this thesis.

In the wake of the 1973 publication of her first volume of memoirs, *Small Talk*, Mitchison's cousins Archie, Graeme and Elsie Haldane each write to her to praise and to take issue with aspects of the shared history as they remember. Archie, most critical of the three, writes:

When I heard (from Murdoch) that your book was out, I felt that much of it would interest and please me, while some of it would anger me. In the event, my feelings have been much like this. [...] Through it all I can almost hear you speaking the lines of print [...] forceful and characteristic writing and especially suitable for this kind of book.

In a critique which summarises the many perspectives of memory, and highlights the subjective presentation of the past characteristic of all autobiographical writings, he continues:

Now unless this is to be regarded largely as a work of imagination, and clearly anything autobiographical can hardly be – there are quite a few matters of fact which are just not right [...] Just a few of these could have been avoided with the use of a map of these parts and a little more research [...] Uncle Richard was not Richard Burdon Sanderson Haldane – only RBH [...] The Ochils are so spelt, not 'Ochills' [and] the Black Swelch should be Swealth. [...] Bog Myrtle never grew here to our knowledge [and] it was quite impossible for you as a child to talk with the Chinnery-Haldanes at Gleneagles. They did not move there til about 1928. I'm glad you handled the 'servant' question with a

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<sup>3</sup> Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 151.

fairly light touch. I was rather apprehensive of this [...] My mother always came to the New Year prayers. This really must be put straight – at least with you.<sup>4</sup>

The question of whether or not Mitchison's Aunt Bay did or did not attend family prayers is, revealingly, also raised by Graeme who notes:

Mother was at all of [the formal New Year prayers], without I think any exception, during her whole married life. The Cloan 'book' records this as well as my own recollections.<sup>5</sup>

While this does not in any way undermine the literary achievement of Mitchison's autobiographical writings, it does foreground the unreliable remembrance of time past, in addition to highlighting the essentially artistic and selective processes inherent in any writing. Rather than destabilising or raising questions over the (still tentative) canonical legitimacy of autobiography as a genre, my hope is that this thesis emphasizes the ways in which this makes it all the more interesting a literature with which to engage.

Towards the end of her life, Mitchison continued to write, often using poetry as a vehicle with which to explore her life and personal feelings. The increasing loneliness of extreme age, and, ultimately, the limitation of letters, paintings and personal belongings to recapture those who are gone is evident in a poem, now held by the National Library of Scotland, and with which this thesis closes.

### Is There Anything Left?

Between a nothing and nothing  
In a bag full of twiddly bits,  
Almost full, almost almost.

The reaching back to Then, fixing it,  
But forward? No, can't do.

Deep then, cram full of pictures, ancestors,  
These we are sure of possession, have their letters,  
Pictures, works, works, the sizzling sea of remembrance.

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<sup>4</sup> Archie Haldane to NM, '28<sup>th</sup> June', NLS TD2980 2/12.

<sup>5</sup> Graeme Haldane to NM, 'June 9<sup>th</sup> 1973', NLS TD2980 2/12.

But not in me, not there, not real. Far loosing,  
 My brother, my dead son, my dead baby daughter.  
 All part of nothing, the nothing behind me:  
 My baby who might have lived, yet more nothing,  
 Where is there room in me for all this nothing?

As I look all slither away, not one photograph,  
 Not one recording.  
 Not one dropped handkerchief, not one warm bed,  
 Nothing behind everything.  
 Must I jump into you, nothing?  
 Yes. Yes.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> NLS TD2980 2/9. An additional version of this poem reads:

So this is me, living in a nest of dull pain, inevitable,  
 Clinging to book people, pictures, ancestors,  
 More pictures, letters, published works. But only inside  
 My dead brother my dead son, my dead baby daughter,  
 All part of nothing, though they should have lived.

When my man died, in London, bits of me  
 Certainly went with him, but what remained with me  
 Was still full of things ready to write, to do, yes, to be itself,  
 Now those things too have gone, almost, almost,  
 Can I see anything left?

## **Appendix A**

### **Archive Material**

In addition to the main sources of archive material relating to Mitchison, noted in the introduction to this thesis, there are a number of smaller collections, listed below. Further details of some of these holdings and other related material can be found on pages 649-51 of the *Location Register of Twentieth-Century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters*, Volume II, published by The British Library (1988), and through a range of on-line archive databases available via the British Library website.

#### **1) Argyll and Bute Council Archives**

Council Minutes

Papers and correspondence relating to the construction of the Carradale Harbour

Regular contributions by Mitchison to the *Argyll Advertiser* and the *Campbelltown Courier*

#### **2) BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading**

Reference: Radio Contributors. Talks, file 1

Correspondence between Mitchison and members of staff of the BBC (1942-1962)

Reference: Radio Contributors. Scriptwriters, file 1 & Copyright, file 1

Correspondence between Mitchison and members of staff of the BBC (1934-1962)

#### **3) University of Birmingham**

Special Collections

*Masterman Papers*

Reference: CFGM/28/2/7/1, CFGM/24/6/42/1.

Two letters from Mitchison, n.d

#### **4) British Library, London**

*National Sound Archive*

While it primarily holds copies of Mitchison's published texts, the British Library also holds a number of interesting recordings in its National Sound Archive. In some of these Mitchison talks directly of her own work and life, while in others she appears as a speaker in programmes focusing on other topics. (12 items)

*Department of Manuscripts*

Reference: Add. Ms. 58421

Letter from Mitchison to Frances Cornford (1954)

Reference: Add. Ms. 59501, f. 59

Postcard from Mitchison to Vernon Bartlett (1931)

## **5) British Library of Political and Economic Science, London**

Reference: Lansbury 11.235; 14.261

Two letters from Naomi Mitchison to George Lansbury

Reference: Malinowski Collection

Three letters from Mitchison to Bronislaw Malinowski

## **6) University of Cambridge, University Library**

*Department of Manuscripts and University Archives*

Reference: Add. 8768/10

Letter from Mitchison to Mrs Eton, undated

Reference: Add. 9251

Two letters to from Mitchison to Frank Kendon, 1942

Reference: Add. 8367/309

Letter from Mitchison to Stella Benson

Reference: Dep. Bridges 8, fol. 47

Letter from Mitchison to Robert Bridges (1926)

*Papers of the Royal Society of Literature*

Reference: Royal Society of Literature papers

Three letters from Mitchison

## **7) University of Cambridge, Kings College Archive**

Reference: WJHS/71

Handwritten postcard from Mitchison to William J.H. Sprott (1935)

Reference: EMF/18/381

Fourteen postcards and letters from E.M. Forster to Mitchison (copies)

## **8) University of Cambridge, Trinity College Library**

Reference: Julian Trevelyan papers, 23/63; 42/13

Letters from Mitchison to Julian Trevelyan

Reference: Julian Trevelyan papers, 1/53

Letter from Mitchison to Elisabeth Wiskemann

## **9) University of Columbia, New York State**

Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Reference: NYCR89-A260

Correspondence between Mitchison and Havelock Ellis

Reference: Vanguard Press Records, Editorial Files Box 104

Misc. items of Mitchison relating to publishing

**10) Cornell University Library, New York State**  
Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections

Wyndham Lewis collection, 1877-1975  
Correspondence between Mitchison and Wyndham Lewis

**11) Dartington Hall Trust Archive, South Devon**

Reference: LKE general 23  
Four letters from Mitchison to Leonard Elmhirst

**12) Edinburgh University Library**  
Special Collections

Reference: Special Collections  
Six letters and a postcard from Naomi Mitchison to Hugh MacDiarmid

Reference: Gen.1875, no. 95  
Postcard from Naomi Mitchison to the Leicester Secular Society

**13) University of Exeter**

Reference: Ms 113  
Letter from Mitchison to A.L. Rowse

**14) University of Glasgow Library**  
Special Collections

Reference: MS Gen 549/749-763  
Correspondence between Mitchison and J.F. Hendry (fifteen items)

Reference: Scottish Theatre Archive  
Thirteen items of correspondence and manuscripts

**15) Hertfordshire County Record Office**  
Reference: D/ERv F161/20  
'Arrow-struck': poem by Mitchison

**16) University of Hull, Brynmor Jones Library**

Reference: DCL/30/5  
Letter from Mitchison in the files of the National Council for Civil Liberties (1952)

Reference: Winifred Holtby Collection, 2.42-2.44  
Letters in the correspondence files of Winifred Holtby

**17) Huntington Library Manuscripts Department, San Marino, CA**

Reference: Aldous Huxley Oral History Papers 1985-1990  
Mitchison listed within 'Other Authors'

### **18) Imperial War Museum, London**

In 1989, Mitchison deposited a small collection of personal and family correspondence, mostly written to her and relating to the First and Second World Wars, to the Imperial War Museum in London. A detailed catalogue of these letters and their contents is available from the Department of Documents.

#### *Mitchison Papers*

Letter from Mitchison to John B. Torrance, Secretary of the Dundee Labour Party, 1944

### **19) National Library of Ireland**

Reference: Ms. 8184

Letter from Mitchison to Joseph O'Neill

### **20) Leeds University Library** Special Collections

Reference: BC MS 20c (45 items)

Correspondence from Mitchison relating to the Authors' World Peace Appeal

Reference: BC MS 19c Moulton

Correspondence between Mitchison and Thomas Moulton

Reference: SC MS 666

Correspondence between Mitchison and Professor C.L. Oakley

Reference: London Magazine Archive

Letter from Mitchison (1970s)

Reference: Liddle Collection

Nine letters from Mitchison to Peter Liddle about the deposit of her papers (1970s)

Also twenty-three items in the Letters Database

### **21) University of Liverpool Library**

#### *Special Collections and Archives*

Reference: The Olaf Stapledon Collection, c. 1890-1973

Correspondence between Mitchison and Olaf Stapledon

### **22) Manchester University, John Rylands University Library**

#### *Archive of the Communist Party of Great Britain*

Reference: CO/IND/DUTT/29/03

Letter from Winifred Horrabin to Mitchison (1932)



Reference: CP/IIND/MONT/4/12 (1934)

Witness reports of Fascist rally at Olympia. Correspondents include Mitchison.

Reference: CP/ORG/MISC/3/9

Correspondence, minutes and papers re Authors' World Peace Appeal of Mitchison

Reference: CP/ORG/MISC/8/1

'Women Against War' correspondents, including Mitchison (1963-4)

*National Museum of Labour History*

Reference: LP/JSM/MISC/158

Letter of Mitchison

*Manchester Guardian Archives*

Twelve items of correspondence between the Manchester Guardian and Mitchison 1949-1954, mainly dealing with copy or proposed copy supplied by Mitchison to the paper.

*Samuel Alexander Papers*

Reference: ALEX/A/1/1/191

Forty-four letters from Mitchison to Alexander, 1932-1936 and n.d

Reference: ALEX/B/4/28

Bundle of letters and reminiscences from Mitchison recalling her relationship with Alexander (10 Oct 1938 – 12 Nov ?1938)

## **23) University of Melbourne Library, Australia**

*Archives Department*

Reference: Acc. 78 / 71

Notebooks on articles and stories written on Mitchison on 1978 Australian tour; transcripts of some articles; copies of the published articles; biographical material

## **24) The Mitchell Library, Glasgow**

*Archives Department*

Reference: Manuscripts Catalogue

Handwritten letter (1924) and three typescript letters (1940, ?1977 and 1982) from Mitchison

Poem 'Highland Farm' (n.d.)

*Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* (Loosely inserted is questionnaire for The Directory of British and American Writers, 1970)

Article, 'The Gun Culture'

Short stories, 'Baillies', 'Interview', 'The Pond' and 'Take Over'

Letter from Mitchison to Mr McKinnon, inserted in *The Alban Goes Out* (Edwin Morgan Collection).

Reference: 898053

Letter from Mitchison to Catherine Carswell (1938)

## **25) Northamptonshire Record Office**

Reference: ZB/365/2 & 6

Letters from Mitchison in the records of the Northampton Arts Association (Literature Group) 1950-1961

## **26) University of Oxford: Bodleian Library**

*Papers of George Ivan Smith*

Reference: MS. Eng. c. 6499

Correspondence between Mitchison and George Ivan Smith

*Haldane Papers*

Reference: Haldane Papers

Letter from Mitchison to Louisa Kathleen Haldane (1961)

*Special Collections and Western Manuscripts*

Reference: MS Eng misc d 538

MS of *Other People's World*

Reference: Mss.Myres 27, fols.74-108 & 131, fol.1

Correspondence between Mitchison and J. L. Myres (1937-1942). With typescript of 'The talking oats' by Mitchison

Reference: Mss. Eng. lett. c. 458, fols. 44 & 72

Letters from Mitchison to Frank Hardie (1934)

Reference: Ms.Pollard 120, fols. 219-227

Correspondence between Mitchison and Birrell & Garnett Ltd (1928-1933)

Reference: MSS. Gilbert Murray

Correspondence between Mitchison and Gilbert Murray (1926-1934)

Reference: MSS. Sidgwick & Jackson

Correspondence between Mitchison and Messrs Sidgwick & Jackson (1921-1923)

Reference: MS. Eng. lett. d. 279, fol.210

Letter from Mitchison to Evelyn Sharp

## **27) University of Oxford: History of Neuroscience Library**

*Papers and correspondence of Claude Gordon Douglas*

Reference: NCUACS 1.87/C.8 - C12

Correspondence between Mitchison and C. G. Douglas

## **28) University of Oxford: Christ Church Library**

Reference: Driberg Collection M18

Letters and Christmas Cards from Mitchison to Tom Driberg

**29) University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA**  
Van Pelt Library

*Special Collections*

Reference: PAUR92-A2243

Correspondence with Theodore Dreiser, 1935

**30) Perth and Kinross Council Archive**

Reference: MS36, bundle 1

Two letters from Mitchison to Helen B. Cruickshank

**31) University of Reading Library**  
Archives and Manuscripts

Reference: MS1089

Letter from Mitchison to Macmillan & Co. Ltd

Reference: Jonathan Cape A files

Correspondence of Naomi Mitchison (c 90 items)

*Papers of Herberth Herlitschka*

Reference: MS 1409

Letter from Mitchison to Herberth Herlitschka

*Papers of The Bodley Head*

Reference: MS2606/1/1006, 1031 & 1055

Four letters from Mitchison in the Bodley Head "Adult Editorial" files

Reference: Bodley Head Children's Editorial files

Twelve letters from Mitchison (1976)

Reference: Bodley Head Adult Publicity files: Books 227

Letter from Mitchison (1973)

Reference: MS2606

Four letters from Mitchison in the early correspondence files of the Bodley Head Ltd

*Papers of the Hogarth Press*

Reference: MS2750/76 & 283

Twelve letters from Mitchison

**32) Rice University, Houston, Texas**  
Woodson Research Centre

*Papers of Julian S Huxley*

Reference: NRA 27261 Huxley

Correspondence with Sir Julian Huxley 1917-64 (62 items)

### **33) School of Oriental and African Studies, London**

*Archives, Manuscripts and Rare Books Division*

Reference: MS 380702

Proctor, J.H., 'Naomi Mitchison, Chief Linchwe II, and Modernisation in Botswana'

Unpublished manuscript, 37pp

Reference: PP.MS.9.LB11.2

Letter from Mitchison to Leonard Barnes

Reference: MS.English 361017

Papers of Mitchison concerning Botswana: correspondence, minutes and reports

### **34) State University of New York Library, Buffalo**

*Poetry Collection*

Reference: RLIN Database

Eight letters and one postcard from Mitchison

Eight other literary notebooks and typescripts

### **35) University of Stirling Library**

*Special Collections*

Reference: MS 6

First draft of short story, *Call Me*, and correspondence between Mitchison and P.G. Peacock

### **36) University of Sussex Library**

*Special Collections*

*Monks House Papers*

Reference: Letters III Correspondence of Virginia Woolf

Two letters from Mitchison to Virginia Woolf, 1938

Reference: SxMs13.III

Four letters from Mitchison to Leonard Woolf

*Charles Madge Archive*

Reference: Correspondence 1932-35

Correspondents include Mitchison

*New Statesman Archive*

Reference: Review Correspondence c. 1956 - 1988 (Boxes 24 – 39)

Mitchison, Naomi (5) 30.12.82 - 23.1.86 + NS (4) 5.1.83 - 8.10.84

*Common Wealth Party Archive I*

Reference: Personal Papers of Sir Richard Acland Bt., M.P. 1938-45

Letter from Mitchison to Sir Richard Acland, 15.03.43

Reference: SxMs11/14/2

Three letters from Mitchison to Kingsley Martin

### **37) Teesside Archives, Middlesbrough**

*Pennyman Family of Ormesby Hall*

Reference: U.PEN (2)/23

Envelope containing mainly printed verses (on Christmas cards) by Mitchison.

### **38) University College, London**

*Arnold Bennett Papers*

Two letters (one handwritten) from Mitchison to Arnold Bennett (n.d., c1928)

*Orwell Collection*

Reference: Orwell Collection

Letter from Mitchison to George Orwell (1938)

*Alex Comfort Papers*

Reference: Alex Comfort Papers, 2/5

Letter from Mitchison to Alex Comfort

### **39) National Library of Wales**

Reference: Lord Elwyn-Jones papers, D2

Letters from Naomi Mitchison to Lord Elwyn-Jones

### **40) University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre**

*Richard Crossman Collection*

Reference: MSS. 154

Six handwritten letters from Mitchison

*Papers of Victor Gollancz*

Reference: MSS. 157A/4/1-128

Correspondence between Mitchison and Victor Gollancz

Reference: Ms. 157A/4/68

Letter from Mitchison to Lady Gollancz

### **41) The Wellcome Trust, London**

Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine

*Western Archives and Manuscripts*

Reference: PP/PRE/J.1/24

Interview with Mitchison, and associated materials

Reference: 1PP/PRE/J.1/22/17

Tape Cassette of interview, 11 January 1982

Reference: SA/FPA/A13/5M[I]  
Correspondence

Reference: SA/FPA/SR12  
Annotated typescript of article relating to Eugenics Society

Reference: PP/CJS/A.1/12  
Correspondence with Charles Singer and Dorothea Singer

**42) University of York**  
Borthwick Institute of Historical Research

Reference: MIT  
Botswana papers, diaries and writings, 1955-1972

## Appendix B

### Mitchison's Other African Non-fiction

In addition to the three volumes of travel writing discussed in Chapter Three, and the nine volumes of African fiction which fall outwith the scope of this thesis,<sup>1</sup> Mitchison wrote two further works of non-fiction which focused on Africa; *The Africans: From the Earliest Times to the Present* (London: Anthony Blond, 1970; Panther, 1971) and *A Life for Africa: The Story of Bram Fischer* (London: Merlin Press, 1973). While neither of these is directly autobiographical, or can be described as 'travel writing', both provide useful perspectives for developing as wide as possible a picture of Mitchison's relationship with Africa, its people, and the legacy of Empire.

Mitchison's stated purpose in *The Africans* is to write a history of the continent from an African perspective. The fact that although she is white and British, she also feels herself sufficiently Botswanan and therefore qualified to undertake this task, is interesting itself for what it reveals of the national and cultural identity of her later years. The book is an ambitious and historically wide-ranging vision of Africa, yet as so often with Mitchison's writing, it is also a very personal text. As in *Return to the Fairy Hill*, published four years before *The Africans*, Mitchison explores the conflicts and parallels she experiences between her two adopted homelands of Scotland and Botswana, and considers the ways in which the multiplicity of identity informs her world view.

I too remember that I am both a Scot and a Mokgatla [collective noun for the Botswanan tribe in which she was invested]; two loyalties keep me on my toes and make me, I believe, more interested in the United Nations and more convinced of the necessity for practical and universal human brotherhood that I would be if I had less close loyalties.<sup>2</sup>

Underpinning what she saw as the links between the two cultures, Mitchison compares the slaughter of Zulus at the hands of the British with the fate of Charles

<sup>1</sup> These are: *Ketse and the Chief* (London: Nelson, 1965); *When We Become Men* (London: Collins, 1965); *Friends and Enemies* (London: Collins, 1966); *The Big Surprise* (London: Kaye & Ward, 1967); *African Heroes* (London: Bodley Head, 1968); *The Family at Dittlaberg* (1969); *Don't Look Back* (London: Kaye & Ward, 1969); *Sunrise Tomorrow* (London: Collins, 1973); *Images of Africa* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Mitchison, Naomi, *The Africans* (London: Panther Books, 1971), p. 56.

Edward Stuart ('Bonnie Prince Charlie') and the 'rebels' of Glencoe - an analogy she employed in *Return to the Fairy Hill* to describe Chief Linchwe of the Bakgatla. Further fixing such ties in the mind of the reader, she later prefixes a chapter on Africa's future with a quotation from Burns.<sup>3</sup>

Questions of class are also an inescapable aspect of Mitchison's relationship with Africa, and early in the text she emphasises the influence of her social and familial background as a second lens through which she views African history and culture.

There is a special reason why I can do [that]. I come from a great Scottish family, the Haldanes, who have known, encouraged and accepted great changes. Even in my lifetime there has been change from a society based strictly on class in which my family were near the top, to something approaching classlessness. But also I have considerable experience of the Highlands and of fairly recent Highland history, including the destruction of the class system. There are many analogies between Highland and African people and history; I think these may be helpful and illuminating so they will be found in several places in this book.<sup>4</sup>

While the twentieth century has seen a great shift in attitudes towards class, this confidently affirmed notion of British or Scottish society moving to 'something approaching classlessness' is not one which would be recognised by the majority of people and is perhaps a little wishful on Mitchison's part. Though rarely stated as explicitly as in *The Africans*, the search for the just or classless society is a recurring theme in Mitchison's life and work, and has been discussed in more detail throughout this thesis.

As the text is partly a socio-cultural history, Mitchison also addresses the influence and legacy of Empire more directly than in her other African non-fiction. While appropriately critical of the traders and 'trekkers' who practised slavery and sought to exploit African resources, she paints a largely positive portrait of missionaries whom she characterises as Scots of a 'radical and largely working-class

<sup>3</sup> See 'For a' that and a' that', Mitchison, *The Africans.*, p. 212.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchison, *The Africans*, pp. 13-4.



background';<sup>5</sup> people who tried to understand and befriend rather than merely exploit. This profile is contrasted with English colonisers from the 'public school and upper-class segment',<sup>6</sup> although her attitude towards comparable ancestors is not addressed. While there may be a certain amount of truth in this optimistic vision of the motivations of European missionaries of the nineteenth century and earlier, it is perhaps a little too lenient. Missionaries were, one must remember, in Africa primarily to bring Christianity to the heathen, and her portrayal of them perhaps reveals more of her own desire to integrate and be accepted by the Botswanan tribe with whom she lived during the period in which this book was written, and often over much of the last thirty years of her life.

As discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, there are aspects of a benevolent colonialism in much of Mitchison's travel writing, and this tendency also extends to *The Africans*. Discussing models of democratic social organisation (and again drawing parallels between Scottish and African tribal structures) Mitchison argues that she can use her knowledge and influence to help the tribes she comes into contact with:

Scots like myself can say; we made this and that mistake over our clan lands and organisation; you can easily avoid these mistakes.<sup>7</sup>

Mitchison aims in the text to envision a political and social re-structuring of Africa's future through a culturally sympathetic understanding of its history. In light of this, it is possible to argue (as in respect of her travel writing) that her very involvement, and the assumption that she has a right to contribute to the debate, reveals a paternalistic (albeit not fully colonial) attitude towards the continent of Africa which may be closer to the aspirations of earlier travellers that she is aware.

Written two years later, and also from a consciously African perspective, *A Life for Africa: The Story of Bram Fischer* is a biography of a prominent South African lawyer from a well-known political Afrikaner family. Born into a privileged white background, Fischer was unusual in rejecting the traditional apartheid system of South Africa and campaigned, through the highly controversial (and later illegal) Communist Party and African National Congress (or ANC), for democratic race

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<sup>5</sup> Mitchison, *The Africans*, p. 165.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchison, *The Africans*, p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchison, *The Africans*, p. 214.

relations. Arrested by the South African Government in 1964 for his Communist activities, he went underground until 1965 and was imprisoned for life in 1966. Mitchison's biography, published in 1973, was part of a growing call from liberals against his sentence. He was finally released in 1975 on compassionate grounds, and died of cancer a few weeks later.

As well as a biography, *A Life for Africa* is also a history of Southern Africa which ranges from its earliest tribes and first European settlers, to the contemporaneous apartheid struggle. After a preliminary chapter on 'Afrikanerdom and the Africans', Mitchison portrays Fischer's childhood and education leading to his years as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford in the early 1930s. Unlike her own autobiographies, (the first of which was published the same year as *A Life for Africa*), Mitchison is careful to contextualise Fischer's formative years with contemporary social and political events as a way of explaining his later political motivations. *A Life for Africa* is Mitchison's only modern biographical text<sup>8</sup>, and this narrative method, while unremarkable in itself, highlights the differing perspectives Mitchison brings to biography and autobiography. Whereas 'Growing Up', her chapter on Fischer's early life emphasises external influences, *Small Talk*, (her initial volume of autobiography discussed in Chapter One of this thesis) while covering the same period, is notable for its concentration on the domestic detail to the exclusion of public events and influence.

Mitchison never met Fischer personally, although she clearly felt an affinity with him both through her adopted African persona and the fight for racial equality, and through a recognition in Fischer of a deep-rooted notion of service for the good of others, seen in so many of her actions in Africa and elsewhere. Both from a privileged governing class, Mitchison and Fischer found themselves campaigning for the oppressed, when a less-acute moral awareness might have lead them to less unusual or controversial paths.

Mitchison also had a personal connection to Fischer through her mother's compassionate Imperialism in the early decades of the twentieth century. As described in her autobiography *Friends and Kindred* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), Mitchison's mother Maya would entertain young students from the reaches of the Empire at her homes in Edinburgh and Oxford. New College, which Fischer entered

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<sup>8</sup> Mitchison also produced short historical portraits: *Socrates: A Biography* (with RHS Crossman) (London, 1937) and *Alexander the Great* (with illustrations by Rosemary Grimble) (London, 1964).

as a Rhodes Scholar in 1932, was the college of JS Haldane, Mitchison's father, and in the text she relates a meeting between Fischer and her parents.

The Victoria League organised tea parties for the Rhodes scholars. Young Mr Fischer brought his sister Ada one Sunday to tea with my father and mother, no doubt with the silver tea-set and the usual heaped plates of scones and cakes. There was conversation about South African conditions and Ada, trying to be helpful, said that a new method had been evolved to prevent pthisis in the gold mines. "Yes," said my father gently, "I suggested it." In fact, one of his pupils had gone out there to work on mine diseases. But I never met Bram myself; I was married and living in London, becoming increasingly involved in British politics, not to speak of the Spanish Civil War and the further threat we were beginning to reckon with.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to having European links to her subject, Mitchison could also relate to the problems of South Africa and Fischer's political involvement on a more regional level. As discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, Bechuanaland (now Botswana), became a British protectorate in 1885. This newly-drawn national boundary cut across older tribal lands, splitting the Bakgatla Tribe to which Mitchison belonged between Bechuanaland in the north, and the Cape Colony (modern-day South Africa) to the south. The fact that some of Mitchison's extended tribe were therefore subject to the control of an apartheid government highlighted to her the injustices of the South African political system and she was deemed a 'PI' or Proscribed Individual in both South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) for her vocal support of the campaigns for democratic reform to which Fischer would dedicate his life. Discussing this in *Return to the Fairy Hill*, Mitchison remarked:

I have this funny little document from the Government of the Republic of South Africa which will stop me going even as far as Mafeking; I take it as a compliment.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Mitchison, N., *A Life for Africa* (London: Merlin Press, 1973), p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchison, *Return to the Fairy Hill*, p. 34. See also Mitchison, *Mucking Around*, p. 129.

Africa is a large dynamic continent, and any attempt to encapsulate its political and cultural complexities within one book is bound to have limitations. Both *The Africans* and *A Life for Africa* are clearly written, engaging portraits of Africa, but, as with Mitchison's other social history of the continent, *Other People's Worlds* which focuses mainly on West Africa, their primary worth are now as snapshots in time. Certain names from *A Life for Africa* such as Nelson Mandela's and Walter Sisulu's remain familiar today, but South Africa has evolved dramatically, and the unfolding events of the book are now history. Today the chief merit of the texts is contextual and personal as they document Mitchison's growing bond with Africa and her reinterpretation of the 'search for the just society' in terms of racial equality and self-representation for colonial territories.

Both Mitchison and Fischer were aware that individuals could make a significant contribution to this aim, and the parallels between herself and Fischer as whites who supported and embraced black African culture, in opposition to the colonialism of their cultural history, was not lost on her. Acknowledging the importance of Fischer's contribution, yet still with hope of his release, she wrote:

I used to think of Bram Fischer in Botswana with anger and frustration, and yet knowing that because of him the white image in black eyes was a better one. Nothing had been in vain.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mitchison, *A Life for Africa*, p. 181.

## Appendix C

### Example Source Materials

Many of the texts on which this thesis focuses are unpublished typescript or handwritten manuscript items, held by a number of archives and not in the public domain. In light of this, this appendix comprises a small number of example texts with particular interest or significance to this thesis, to give a sense of the source materials on which it is based.

i. Naomi Mitchison to Kathleen Louisa 'Maya' Haldane, (n.d.), NLS, Acc. 4549/4.....	203
ii. Naomi Mitchison to Olaf Stapledon (nd) NLS, TD2980 2/3.....	205
iii. Mitchison, Naomi, <i>Russian Diary</i> , NLS, Acc. 10899, pp. 246-252.....	209
iv. Naomi Mitchison to Ronald Boswell ('Sunday') NLS, TD2980 2/8.....	216
v. Naomi Mitchison to John B Torrance, 'Sunday 23 <sup>rd</sup> ' [April 1944], Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, Mitchison Papers.....	218
vi. Naomi Mitchison to Neil Gunn (31 May 1944) NLS Acc. 5813.....	220
vii. Doris Lessing to Naomi Mitchison (28 May 65) NLS TD2980 2/8.....	223
viii. Doris Lessing to Helen Lloyd (11 April 2005) Private Collection.....	229
ix. Mitchison, Naomi, Page from handwritten notebook (?1962-3) Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas, 'Scotland: notes, Ams 26pp in notebook'.....	230
x. Mitchison, Naomi, Directive reply 27.2.90 (M380), Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex <sup>1</sup> .....	231

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<sup>1</sup>The Mass-Observation Archive is a social research organisation which gathers information on an anonymous basis, and does not normally release materials of named writers. In this instance, and in light of Mitchison's public profile, this protection has been waived at the discretion of Mass-Observation Archive Director, Dorothy Sheridan.

**BEST COPY**

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Variable print quality

Naomi Mitchison to Kathleen Louisa 'Maya' Haldane, (n.d.) NLS, Acc. 4549/4.

Dear Maya  
When I went to

tea with Frank I saw his cater-  
-pillar which was green striped with  
yellow & an awfully nice little dor-  
-mouse that did not stink. We had  
a lovely bonfire & we roasted  
potatoes & had a feast on an old box,  
we could eat the whole of the <sup>first</sup>  
one, about half of the second, I had  
an orange for tea.

The next day I went to  
tea with Aunt Alice & we sorted all her  
buttons. Adrian was there & we took  
him home & Aunt Alice sends her

love. Stook her some flower~~om~~.  
 We had water-cress salt for  
 tea. When we were sorting  
 buttons we found aset with pictures  
 on them of houses, each different, for,  
 they were **Roman**.

We had a drawing exam, I  
 think mine was one of the best  
 we had to draw a wastepaperbasket  
 from memory. We are going

on the river today, it is lovely, I  
 was making mud syrup in the  
 garden before dinner. I am awfully  
 sorry Grammie not well, love to her  
 Grandpapa & you from ~~you~~  
 Now

P.S. The gardener has been planting  
 alot of things (seeds) & he found

something ("a mystery") in the  
 garden which I am going to show  
 you when you come back. Thank  
 you for the P.P.C.s.



## Naomi Mitchison to Olaf Stapledon, on writing and relationships

Monday, (nd) NLS, TD2980 2/3.

River Court  
Hammersmith

Dear Olaf

It was awfully nice of you to write - I liked it. But I don't think you need worry, as far as I am concerned. You got me at a bad moment that lunch-time (and anyhow itx wasn't you, but Gerald!).

As a matter of fact I've been feeling pretty well ever since, and this week-end we went down to Abbotsholme and saw Denny looking magnificently well and serious and confident. You ought to go over again; I do think it's pretty good.

You see, all this action business is partly, I suppose, because I think I ought to, but it's partly like the research I've always done for my writing: only instead of hunting for material in museums and books I'm hunting in real people's minds and actions. God knows if I'm a sincere socialist or not - but I am a sincere chronicler of events. Sometimes I think half the reason I do it is because it's such fun working with Dick, but I don't know. And also I'm beginning to be able to do it better; I can make a speech that sounds quite like a real speech and it is exciting to learn to do any new thing! And I like the people. And I like seeing what I can do with them. And when Gerald says it's no use thinking of revolution, I can't help thinking that sincere and well-wishing people must have said that so often before, to Oliver Cromwell with his little army of untrained farm labourers against the King's well trained and well equipped forces, to Lenin and his friends in the time between 1905 and 1917. I know also that it will never come as we see it or would plan it in our own minds. We can never see the whole of circumstances.

However that's probably all a long time ahead, and, I agree, we've got to do the hell of a lot better than Russia. And as to me, at the moment, while I'm trying to be an instrument to catch the breath of the wind of the future, I have to become hellishly sensitive to all that's going on, and, because every sort of wind wants to blow through me I am always being caught at wrong angles and having discords made in me. I don't agree with the English communist party, but, because I want to understand them, I have got to let them get at me to some extent. All this is very wearing, especially as sympathy, in this kind of case, must mean action of some sort too. Perhaps in a few years I shall want to write a book about something else, and then I shall cease being interested in politics! But I must be whole-hearted and not consider that yet.

Also, of course it all gets mixed up with the emotions. You see, being a historian, I have got into the habit of being rather truthful, and it seems almost impossible to run relationships between men and women on a basis of truth - at least, not yet. Dick and I find it more possible, because we have grown up together and lived together so long, and besides, if we have a row we both of us know that there's plenty of time to make it up; one gets to realise from experience that sooner or later we shall find ourselves in the country together, and a sunny day and no hurry, and everything is perfectly all right again; one has to learn to trust to those times which are more likely to be right than the times when one is worried and hurried and over-tired and everything seems wrong. But with other people, one can never be sure that the good time will recur; if one quarrels it may be for ever.

I should really rather like to write to you about all this, to get it clear in my own mind, if it won't bother you. It will explain why I was so silly at lunch. - You see, for about ten years after the war, neither Dick nor I knew many people; most of our friends had been killed, and we held onto one another and were afraid of thinking or feeling too much. Then we both came awake, and both began falling in love very romantically and idealistically (and telling each other all about it and feeling rather grand). I fell in love with a Greats don (Panteus in the Corn King), a fine scholar and bit of a poet, and we wandered about and picked cowslips and talked about ancient history, "Love and Fine Thinking", and it was all very chaste and very romantic. I was very happy. Then my eldest boy died, pretty horribly, of meningitis, and both Dick and I felt everything go smash all round us for a bit. Things went badly with him and his lover, and my man suddenly married another archaeologist. I tried to transfer my affections, so as to include them both, and for a time it seemed to work, then she wouldn't have it (probably I was an awful nuisance really) and, after various attempts at readjustment, I had to realise that it was no good. Two of the Delicate Fire poems (Since there's no help, and Ars Amoris)

are about that time). I had a pretty miserable time, and was certainly a rather gloomy companion. Dick, in the mean time, was falling in love again - and again with someone whom I like and respect, to say the least. Then I fell suddenly in love with a quite young man, an economist and rather a notorious charmer; we ought of course to have slept together and got it over but I was still all romantic and Dick had still not quite got over the traditional attitude, though he was trying to. Anyhow the young man got bored with me, I muddled the whole thing, he was rather unkind and I was very unhappy again (and again had written a number of poems!)

By that time I had started work on the Outline and had also gone through a general election, so I was coming into touch with the new kind of ideas. I was enjoying it in a way, especially working with Victor Gollancz, about the only man I've ever worked with and not fallen in love with! And all the time I was seeing a good deal of Gerald. I'm very, very fond of him, as he knows; he's been very kind to me, and I think I've helped him.

Then, while still rather miserable about my young economist, I began to fall in love again, this time - as, indeed, you may have guessed, with John Pilley. I am telling you because that makes it easier to explain, only I know you won't repeat it. It was partly that he was a scientist, and I so loved getting in touch with all that again - my brother had rather turned against me since his marriage - and partly that he is a man of great charm and ability and a kind of queer kindness; and partly that his political ideas were continuing my own, and a great deal that we were working together, and finally, I suppose, that he came to the boat race party last year and danced with me and he was wearing a Russian linen shirt. Then I wrote the Plowing Eye poem in the Delicate Fire. He was then in process of becoming a communist, always, I suppose, lagging a little behind Angela, who is the really fiery one, the real spear head. I was almost dead tired after finishing the Outline proofs, and I went down and stayed with him; he drove me out into the Welsh hills and I stayed there two days and we slept together out on the hills among the sheep. That, you see, was the first time for me, and it was very exciting and wonderful, and for the rest of that summer, till I went to Russia I was very happy and very revolutionary. I wrote The Bonny Brae and Quiet the Clock, and finished the Outline proofs. Also, I think I annoyed Gerald, who (though I didn't tell him what had happened) saw that I was under a violent influence and was acting irrationally and sticking my head into a snare again.

I realised intellectually that John Pilley wasn't in love with me, and I didn't want him to be; I knew he was only acting as a good communist; I thought I wasn't entangled with him. But of course I was. It was partly due to the fact that I had got sexually depressed, after the other two fiascos, and had thought that I must be abnormal, and now that seemed all right - I felt set free. Yet in the setting free I had entangled myself more than I knew. We wrote to one another a lot - not of course love letters, for that would have been bourgeois and unideological! - No, I don't see why I should laugh at it now; it was all rather good really, and I'm grateful to him. But he didn't really like Gerald's ideas; perhaps they were in a way jealous of one another - each wanted me to be the instrument for transmitting their ideas to the world, the mother of their spiritual children.

Then I went to Russia. I came into contact with someone who was in the hell of a sexual tangle, a man of my own age who had never slept with a woman, thought himself hopelessly abnormal and was frightfully worried. He was a well-wisher but not a socialist. He was a man I liked, good at his job; I thought it was up to me as a socialist to disentangle him. With my heart in my mouth, I seduced him and at the same time made him a socialist. Physically I found it damned difficult, but it worked completely for him, and has left a very pleasant and happy friendship between us now; he never knew how much I disliked it - I lied successfully that time. I came back, feeling I'd been a good socialist, and badly wanting praise for it - or even love - from John Pilley. He came and stayed with us in Scotland; like a fool, I rushed at him, making him think that I was claiming him. He reacted violently and we had the hell of a quarrel, which I (still being a fool) supposed to be what it ostensibly was - a political quarrel. He told me I was no socialist and no good. I supposed that the best way to make it up was to prove to him



that I was a good socialist, so I made up my mind I would work harder than ever at practical work and show him I was a good socialist, and then we could kiss and be friends. This, I suppose, was very unfeminine of me. Also, Victor wrote to me, asking if I would join with him in editing an Outline of Science for boys and girls. I wanted to do this, for I thought that working together I could show myself to be a good comrade, but I decided not to on the grounds that I didn't know enough science and that he would over-stress the physics against the biology. However I talked to him and I talked to Victor, and was at least one of the instruments for the starting of the idea of this book that he is at present writing for Victor.

Well then, the next autumn, I was down at King's Norton a lot, and writing articles. I was trying to be a socialist, but my way, through the Labour Movement. Even to sleep with him again - and I wanted that pretty badly - I wasn't going to become a communist. During the summer I had read him a bit of my new book and he had got very angry with it, because it was Labour, but I wasn't going to alter that either (though my own real point of view had been to some extent altered by Russia - as, equally, Dick's had been - we'd both moved a good bit to the left). We wrote to one another but there was always an under-current of bitterness, which I thought was purely political, but which must have been emotional too. All this was setting up a physical strain in me; I stopped sleeping. Obermer, himself an ex-communist, told me I had 15 years more at the most, as things were, and warned me to do less. I tried to cut things down - I was then writing the two last Mantinea stories - but it's not too easy. I arranged to go away and rest in February. John and Angela were getting married; I didn't see that this made much difference really, but I did want to know how I stood - I wanted to know before I left England, so as to be able to adjust myself. I couldn't find out from John. He was frightfully over-worked and obviously couldn't face it. He wanted just to be friends with me, I suppose. But he wouldn't even say that in so many words. And I wanted to sleep with him; I didn't want to own him or even see him very much, but I was getting desperate to touch him, just because he was always ~~xxxxxx~~ out of reach. It's an old and well-known problem! I went away still uncertain and, instead of resting, I wrote the rest of this modern book. I wrote twice to Gerald, who didn't answer, and tried to see him afterwards, but he was just off to Greece.

I wanted badly to read this new book, or parts of it, to John. I saw him at the boat race, and the day after. We went to Kew and sat about on the grass; he was sunburnt. I felt half mad at seeing him there within reach and not being able to touch him; I couldn't just go on with a conversation. I told him I was badly in love with him. This of course was all against his ideology, it was an individualist thing to say and he reacted. Yet if I'd said instead that I was hungry he would have hated me. He said that I had misunderstood everything and that we could never have been friends. That hurt so badly that I couldn't explain all I meant; as usual there wasn't time. I began to laugh and he said what a good thing I was laughing, he had been so fed up with my being gloomy all that winter! He also said that he was less interested in politics than he had been, and that was funny too.

Since then, I don't know what's been happening to him. It was very painful at first - it was being beastly when I wrote to you in April. I saw Gerald a couple of times, but somehow it was awfully like going to a busy consultant - he could see me from 10 till 11. I felt he didn't want to see me at all. In the meanz time I got involved with a rather awful little East end communist Jew-boy, who very much wanted to sleep with me, but whom I have deterred - he's really got a kind of maternal fixation on me. Poor dear, he's had a bloody time and lives in a ghastly slum, and he can't help it. He pulls me about too. Also, I've been a lot at King's Norton.

At the time when we lunched I was feeling all this pretty badly. I was feeling, as you may have seen, rather anti-male. I also felt that my best way of laying J.P.'s ghost, was to sleep with someone else, but it didn't seem possible. However, since then I have, and it was great fun and restored my sense of confidence. He's a man I hardly know, an I.L.P.er this time; he's a nice man, I think, but this time I'm quite sure I'm not the least bit in love with him - and

if he falls in love with me, I shall, I hope, be kinder and more tactful than John - but I'm damned if I shall let him entangle me. It will be good for him, anyhow, and it has certainly been good for me. Now what I should really like would be to start again being friends with John, for I feel I can, without frightening him. Perhaps the occasion will arise.

Well, this is the hell of a long letter. But you're a sociologist, and perhaps you'll find it interesting. Do you? You see, it upset me when you and Gerald said I was abnormal, for I feel I've behaved in a normally silly way over all this - if I was really abnormal I would be able to be more sensible. The only thing I have done abnormally is a certain amount of analysis.

It was so odd at Abbotsholme seeing all these other parents; Denny introduced me to the mother of the boy he is rather in love with, an extremely nice and understanding woman. There are so many good sort of people - people who really try. It was encouraging in a way seeing all those boys, much less entangled than most of us. About October; I shall be at King's Norton then, and I think it would be rather fun to come over. In fact I should probably enjoy it quite a lot! - And I should like seeing you.

Mitchison, Naomi, *Russian Diary* [closing thoughts],  
NLS, Acc. 10899, pp. 246-52.

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And now, can I, especially in the light of my diary, read as a whole, sum up at all what my conclusions are? I will try to put them down in cons and pros. I am sure that material conditions are worse than I thought at first. It may be partly the economic world changes which have made the Russian exports worth less, and partly a mistaken agricultural policy, hastened by fear - the thought that they had to hurry desperately if they were to get their state in order and prepared to defend itself against the rest of the world before they fell on it - but the result is that in general there is a food shortage, and that those who are in any way misfits - who want to work not for the common good but for their own or their family's good: and this is typical of the peasant attitude - get less food than the others and are in constant danger of actual starvation. Things are hard for anyone who is not definitely in some kind of an organisation, for the children or whom there are not yet enough creches and kindergartens, for the quite unskilled worker, for women who are not working, for old people who are not pensioned and not in rest homes, for people who used to do some kind of job which is now, in the present state of society, valueless. It comes down to the hard fact, which one finds a little hard to think of, that they haven't enough to eat, and that some people are actually, now, dying of starvation.

Even for the workers, material conditions are often difficult. There are temporary shortages. Many improvements which will be certainly made in the next few years, are over-due. In most towns there is bad over-crowding. There is a definite shortage of clothing, furniture and domestic utensils (and what there are usually badly designed and ugly), though this is already remedying itself to some extent. There has been a definite lowering of the standard of life for the professional classes, such as remain, if they are good workers they are treated as good workers: i.e. as well as the state

can afford.

Against this, what? That before the Revolution a great part of the agricultural population was also at the mercy of bad seasons, and often starved. That the standards of life of the town workers were incredibly far below those in western countries, and that, in general, their standard has risen considerably since the Revolution. That, taking things on the kind of standards which one wants to see, and which the Government of the USSR wants to see, they have enough material things to ensure their efficiency now even. That they have complete SECURITY about their work; no-one who can work is out of work. No-one is suddenly dismissed. No-one is turned out of his dwelling for economic reasons. That they have a larger SOCIAL WAGE than workers in any other country. Their health is looked after freely by the State, in some ways better than in the most advanced other countries. Their rent is usually proportional to their wages. Their education is free and goes on for longer than in any other country. In certain directions they can get almost unlimited higher education. Their sports, games, amusements and facilities for any kind of leisure, are either free or made so cheap that any worker can afford them. They can get their food cheaper than anyone else, and often need not trouble to cook it as this is done for them in their factory or other organisation. More workers' dwellings are being built than in any other country, and they will in a few years catch up with the housing shortage. These workers' flats will not for some time come up to the standards of the British or American skilled worker, though they are already beyond the pre-Revolutionary Russian workers' standards. However, a great deal of what is being built now is admittedly temporary and must in practice be, as it will not last for many years. Apart from schools, a very large percentage of the workers' children



are very well looked after, from babyhood, in creches, kindergartens, etc. and are given the chance of holidays with good food among other children. If they become pioneers, and later, comsomols, they have to live up to certain ideals - for children very much like boy-scout ideals, *mutatis mutandis* - but they have special holiday camps and probably other privileges. Workers, especially valuable workers, and workers who are run-down or ill, have holiday provisions which are undreamt of in other countries. Not only do they have a much longer holiday than in other countries, on full pay, but they have a choice of beautiful and healthy places to go to, with all kinds of facilities for play and for building up their strength. These places are at present over-crowded by western standards (though they don't seem to mind) but new ones will be built and taken over. If men or women join the Army or the Navy they are exceptionally well treated, have excellent food, chances of rising in the service which are quite unlike anything else in any other country, and a discipline which is not shaming or servile. Finally, all factories and working places are run not merely for efficiency of production, but for the safety and happiness of the workers in them and owning them. There are no doubt, many other advantages (for instance free and rapid justice), but perhaps I have enumerated the chief material ones.

In the professional classes, the same things hold. There is room and work for all skilled men and women, so that a young person in training need not fear for the future. They are given special facilities for their work, and sometimes (for instance among writers and skilled technicians) special housing conditions. They have their own clubs and organisations. Most of the Social Wage advantages which the workers have, the professional classes have too, though sometimes they get less food. But their working hours are shorter (doctors have probably a much shorter working day than in England).

Their holiday provisions are excellent. They are at present handicapped for want of foreign books and foreign travel, but that will be remedied as soon as possible. As far as books are concerned it can be remedied at once by a system of exchange. All museums, laboratories, etc. are state supported, and do not have to beg for money or economise below efficiency point, as many of them in other countries have to. Best of all, perhaps (though this is a matter of opinion, and, strictly, comes into the next section) the brain workers are in no way cut off from the manual workers or the social and political life of their country.

I now want to pass to the non-material side of life. Here the criticism, very roughly expressed and compressed, is that the whole country is being run on one rigid system of doctrine, as expounded by a German two generations ago, when scientific knowledge was not as far advanced as it is now, and modified by another German and a Russian, all three of whom have been as far deified as is possible in modern conditions. This doctrine admits no fundamental or philosophical criticism. It admits no real deviation. It admits no point of view other than its own. It suppresses "Freedom of thought", "open-mindedness" and various other qualities which are usually valued by intelligent people. It suppresses individualism, which has, up to now, produced much of the best of our ideas and actions, and which some people hold is supremely important. It insists that the individual shall give himself or herself up completely to a larger whole. It is a religious system, but it will not admit that it is.

The answer, equally roughly, and as I am a non-Marxian - see it, is that our criticisms are from the outside. So long as we are outside it, we cannot apprehend its value. For those who believe in it, it appears to be completely satisfying; through this system of belief, death and hardship lose



their terrors, there is no such thing as boredom or individual fear, general love is made possible and happiness such as is very rare in other countries becomes a matter of course. A good Communist at work on something with Communist value cannot be bothered by individual preoccupations, as an ordinary, unco-ordinated individual is. At present only a minority believe in this intensity, but with every year of propaganda and education, more and more come to believe, and to find it completely satisfying. On the point of the suppression of individualism: small individuals are unsatisfactory in themselves and to their community; it is for their and for everyone's happiness that they should be taken into the common cause. Big individuals, if they really have the daimon, will probably be able to fulfill the dictates of the daimon best in this kind of community. But they will not be individuals in quite the old sense. Personal ambition will be out of the picture. They will still be essentially part of the community, only, as it were, special senses belonging to it, special instruments. They will never get so far from it as to feel the loneliness which is common and heartbreaking for those with the daimon in ordinary civilisations.

The present rigid system is essentially based on the proletarian dictatorship. This has meant bloodshed and the elimination of a great many people who might have been doing good and useful work, simply from class bias.

The answer, I think, is that this was a historical necessity in Russia as it was. It is waste and a pity, and need not necessarily be repeated in other countries, though if the ruling classes in other countries behave as they did in Russia, it will be repeated.

The system is imperfect in many ways, and perhaps these imperfections are a necessary part of it. They have already broken down over the original theory of complete equality. The state loans are the thin edge of the

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Wedge. They cannot get rid of certain human characteristics, especially the longing for power, which is the worst sort of individualism. There is terrible bureaucracy everywhere.

This I find harder to answer; I don't know how serious the break-down really is or whether it cuts at the roots of Communism, or how long it has been going on. I think they see the danger, especially the danger of bureaucracy and are trying to deal with it. But I find it very bothering myself.

They are inefficient, muddlers, dirty, unpunctual, to some extent liars

This is true of a decreasing majority and is partly due to ignorance which is being dealt with, and partly to being half way to the east, where standards are different. We westerners probably put too much value on dealing with time, so that we wear ourselves out being punctual, and logically it all ends up with the American civilisation, where hurry has killed happiness.

That the USSR is a dangerous trade rival.

It certainly isn't yet and looks unlikely to be for some years, When it has got all the machinery, etc. that it needs from the West, it will be able to absorb all that it produces.

That its system is a dangerous rival to our system.

Yes, thank goodness!

There is one thing which I have left out so far, though I think it is very important, and this is the question of men and women. I feel they have solved, or nearly solved, the sex question which has preoccupied us for so many years, simply by giving women complete economic freedom and equality. It remains to be seen what will happen when a higher standard is possible, whether the return of sex appeal and complexes will come with

the return of silk stockings. But just now there is wonderfully little work for the psychiatrist in the USSR. At present I have certain criticisms which I would express in practical terms by saying: why no anaesthetics for child-birth or abortion? I believe the answer really is that this is part of the equality business: having babies (or not having them) is a woman's job, just as she might have a job in a factory or just as a man might. She ought to be able to do her job herself, with the minimum of outside assistance, if she is a competent worker. I believe women now refuse to have the anaesthetics which would probably be good for them, just to prove that they are competent workers and the equals of men on this highly specialised job. I feel that this is a temporary attitude, which will pass, as the general standard of hardship is lowered.

I also feel Lawrence's criticism may apply - that men and women must be polarised, that if they are always doing things together, the polarisation is incomplete; there is a constant small exchange which is no good to anyone, and the great exchange, which is lifegiving to both, can never happen. If this criticism is valid, it may mean that men and women, boys and girls should play together less, spend their leisure less together, when they are really being men and women in the fullest and most functional sense; but I do not think that it need in any way interfere with their working together, since in working hours they are functioning not as "men" and "women" but as fellow-workers. At present, no doubt, the over-crowding makes it particularly difficult to have any kind of segregation especially what I think may be perhaps even more important than the segregation of the sexes - namely, the segregation of parents and children. But this again is a temporary condition.

At any rate in the USSR there is no gossip, no sexual shame or slanders.

Naomi Mitchison to Ronald Boswell, writing about publication of *We Have Been Warned* (1935) ('Sunday') NLS, TD2980 2/8

TD 2980 2/8

Cloan  
Auchterarder  
Perthshire

Sunday

Dear Ronald Boswell

As far as Cape are concerned, the situation is that they will only print it with such alterations as I cannot bring myself to make. I am, after all, about as good a story-teller as any-one now writing (this seems a frightfully big claim, but the really first-rate writers, like Wyndham Lewis and, in his way, Joyce, are unintelligible, and I do rank intelligibility pretty high!) and there comes a point where one can't let one's stuff - written, as it is, in a prose-rhythm - be indefinitely bitched up. Also, they aren't politically in sympathy, and wouldn't; I think, back me in a row, as, for instance, Victor Gollancz did over the O tline. You aren't completely in sympathy either, for this book is Labour Party left, not "correct" communism - and I suppose I'm right in thinking that if you aren't actually in the C.P. you have at least got an understanding with them. The end, with the counter-revolution (by the way, I should want to take all real names out in the Election scene, and put "Specials" instead of "White Guards" which is much too romantic) is really correct, I think. But it's written for the Labour movement, not for the C.P. - and also for Liberals, to who one has to say that the only way for liberalism is beyond communism.

If you only knew how proper it is compared with what I wanted to start with! The whole of the first part is completely re-written, so as to take out a homo-sexual complication, which was, I thought, un-necessary and perhaps indecent. The Russian part has all been read and passed by the Malaks. I am constantly being shocked by books which I see and consider indecent and which seem to have no difficulty in getting past, just because they aren't honestly written or thought out. I believe this is essentially a woman's book - of the people who have read it, the women have been much the most enthusiastic. The whole business of contraception is done from the woman's point of view, which is, of course, a new thing in writing. But it's damned important.

I don't want to tie myself over future novels (I take it this would include short stories - for all I know, I shan't want ever to do another full-length novel: they pull one to bits - you should have seen me when I got home after writing this 10+16 hours a day!) Yet I'd consider that so as to get this book published. The question ~~what~~ would be, what you would want cut. I quite see that you can't print "fuck", for instance, and perhaps "balls" and "bugger", though of course in the Midlands, everyone says bugger about everything. But



I wonder what else need go to avoid a police prosecution? The Russian scene, which I read aloud to an audience including my own two boys of 11 and 13, seems to me to be essential. It has also been read to a mixed working-class audience, who were, I think, astonished, but not really shocked. The other is meant to be horrible, just to show how the present system makes it so. I wish to goodness there was some system by which books could be read by adults only! - though it isn't really that: decently brought up children can read them, but this is a book for people who are, at least, on the way to freedom.

I wish I could talk this over with you - and the manuscript - but here I am in the jolly old feudal atmosphere, with my aunt and my father and all the children - and I shall be lucky if I'm not forcibly taken to kirk tomorrow! At the moment my husband has the manuscript - I want to know what he thinks the constituency will stand. Obviously, rather than bitch up his chances in any way, I must drop the whole idea of publishing the novel. Hence I can't decide definitely any more than you can. Naturally, a good deal of it is a portrait of him and me (and I can't help thinking it's much more the picture of a good sort of marriage than most novels produce!) and even the part that isn't will be supposed to be.

I can't, that's to say, make you a definite offer of the book, but I thought you'd like to know how matters stand. I should like to know the sort of amount you would think it necessary to cut, but probably you can't very well tell me. Anyhow, there it's got to be for the moment.

Naomi Mitchison to John B Torrance, on Carradale and politics, 'Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup>' [April 1944] Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, Mitchison Papers

Sunday 23rd (April 1944)

Carradale House  
Carradale  
Campbeltown

Dear Comrade

When you rang up asking me to stand it was terribly hard not to say Yes at once. For my own sake as much as for your's, I am trying to write and say honestly why I have to say no.

First: politically I am not sure whether I would ever be a good orthodox Labour Party woman. You see, I think a lot of our Party leaders are dreadfully stupid and unconvincing; I just don't feel that I could love, honour and obey them in the way that an M.P. who accepts the Party whip must do. I don't think that the same things are fundamentally important. The thing that I suppose I care about really is democracy: people running their own lives in their own way. I very much doubt whether parliamentary representation within a very large area which is actually run by a combination of capitalists and bureaucrats, is anything near democracy. In fact I doubt whether democracy is possible except in a much smaller area and after the complete break-up, both of the capitalism and of the bureaucracy. I don't think democracy is compatible either with efficiency or with punctuality and saving of time. Equally I don't think either of these things matter very much. But the Labour Party would be horrified at the thought that it might stand for an inefficient and unpunctual world, which is what I want - in the interests of human happiness. Equally I am quite sure it doesn't really want to break bureaucracy, whatever it may say about capitalism. I've had enough ordinary electoral experience to know that damn few Labour people are revolutionary. They are afraid of change. I'm not. They want a regular divi from the Co-op and a peaceful old age by the fireside. I don't! I want to make people take responsibility, and the important word is "make". Most people are too lazy and timid. But democracy must start in the home - with responsibility, choice and freedom of thought for the children - must go on to the school, the factory and the village. Then build up if you like. But it's not good enough having a central plan and delegating small things to small bodies; that's the wrong way round. Yet the other way of it will only come after a break up, a revolution.

Again, and on the same grounds, I am a nationalist. I think Scotland is just not too large for certain kinds of organisation. Great Britain is too large. The Labour Party really thinks in terms of the industrial midlands and north and London. Their policy about Scotland is as unconvincing as their policy about revolution because equally they don't believe in it. In a way, Tom Johnston is one of the very few Labour Party high-ups I have any use for, because at least he appears to believe in Scotland.

Secondly: I don't know anything about Dundee industries. I do know, and at first hand, about two industries (neither of which interest the Labour Party much!), farming and fishing - and ring-net fishing at that. I can mind of my father, when he was working on sewer gases, saying that he could always tell a Dundee sewer from any other by the smell of oranges. My experience of industry is really only from Birmingham, and that not first hand, as my farming is.

These then are two reasons why I don't think you would want me. I would only add that I am quite a good platform liar, but really I'm too old for large-scale lying; one doesn't only too easily in politics, but it's not good for oneself or anyone else. And very awkward when a thing gets too much for one and out one comes with the truth!

Then there is perhaps another set of reasons; if someone is a Member of Parliament the only really useful thing they do, as far as I can see, is committee work. For this, and with the paper complications which make all

legislation so difficult for the ordinary person and so baffling - more especially on the financial side - you have to be someone who is good at dealing with things on paper and understanding at once what they are about. The fact that this is so, is another argument against centralisation and for genuine (inefficient and time-wasting) democracy. Now I know quite well that I'm no good at this; when I see statistics I simply bristle. I can deal with people; I am beginning to be able to deal with land. But I can't deal with paper! The other Parliamentary business of making speeches and all that, is comparatively easy but not very important really. Though the thought of sitting on one's backside in Westminster listening to the average speech is something which fills me with horror.

I just don't think that I should be an asset to socialism if I tried to do something which I know I couldn't do well. On the other hand, my husband, who is a barrister and has done a great deal of paper work for various planning and socialist purposes, is extremely good at dealing with these things. I feel that I should be doing more for socialism in helping to get him ~~under~~ Parliament if, as I think, he is going to stand again, than by standing myself. You will know, I'm sure, that most constituencies need both a husband and wife kicking them in the pants - or skirt! - before they will wake up sufficiently to go to the poll. This isn't mere female timidity and dependence on my part, for I love a fight and I love doing things on my own, but it is socialist realism.

The other reason at the moment is sheer lack of time. I am doing anything from thirty to sixty hours a week, depending on the season and weather, of arduous and fairly skilled manual work, varied by bouts of form filling, telephoning and making do, which war-time farming necessitates. Sometimes I come in from work and have to go straight to the kitchen and cook. At the end of the war things will be easier, but we shall still have to keep up our acreage of arable land for food growing. It all means that I have little time to read or even write and cannot keep abreast of affairs in the way that a prospective candidate should. I have also, for the last year and a quarter, kept open house for the Fred French; this has been extremely interesting and has put me into possession of a lot of information about Gaullist and revolutionary France, but it takes a lot of time and energy. Of course on the top of this I have five children, and a grand-child whom I am temporarily looking after, not to speak of a number of Highland friends who look to me and to the "Big House" for help and counsel now, and take me for granted as their comrade, just as I would take it for granted that if I had committed a murder, say, any one of them would shelter me and lie for me, and that with success.

In conclusion, I would only say that I thank you for asking me and feel it a great honour. Please remember me very kindly to John Strachey, who is an old friend. Wishing you all success.

Naomi Mitchison to Neil Gunn, on his novel *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (1944)  
(31 May 1944), transcript, NLS Acc. 5813

You are a queer devil, Neil, you're the only writer I know of that never writes the same book twice. When everyone is saying, why don't you write another nice book like your last or your last but one, you say yess ... in that maddening Highland way and pay no attention at all. Who at all would have guessed that this was in the next layer to the *Serpent*? This isn't to say that I don't see why you shouldn't, in fact you're dead right for the moment one repeats the thing is dead. But one starts with having to readjust towards this whatever it is, Neil Gunn. Which in a way is great fun, but – Do you ever feel with a book, sometimes by an author you've never met or even heard of before, this book was written for me? I feel awfully with the Green Land and I keep wondering how many people are going to get it. It certainly isn't for the same audience that you appear to have been writing for earlier (I say appear advisedly, because the most unexpected do read you). I don't expect I've got it entirely on a first reading, indeed that's not likely, and I don't know whether, for instance, Merk and Axle – Axel? – are other people. And I don't know if your girl is a girl I met at a party at the Soviet Embassy and she looked at us all the time as if we weren't real but rather frightening kind of images. But you've laid down a challenge which I feel bound to take up. I think first, all the same, I ought to say what you no doubt know already, that it's a damn good piece of writing. You are amazingly good at describing the pleasures of the senses, particularly eating. It wouldn't surprise me, though if you thought eating as slightly wicked – somewhere far back in your mind no doubt, And it's full of the loveliest winged bits.

But is it in effect the anarchist case. Now in so far as it is saying: power corrupts, that's fine. I think it also says purely intellectual power corrupts, the worst thing is the power of the bureaucrat, the planner at the head quarters. And you are completely contemptuous of the idea that anything can be planned "from the bottom up". Well, it seems to me that it's got to be, and very largely has been, and where the Communist party has failed, the thing should not be a secret society but open prodders – liable to be bumped off if they annoy people too much. And all the big people, especially Lenin, knew that they themselves couldn't plan alone or with an elite, they had to have the "correct contact with the masses!" which is as real a thing as direct contact with the mystic – or the electric cable. There is a good deal of this in a recent Penguin *Soviet Light on the Colonies*, some of it very applicable to Scotland. You



won't read it I suppose? In war this bloody centralising is probably inevitable, but you don't get a Red Army made up of people whose souls have been killed or are in process of being killed.

I think they probably have killed the soul considerably in Germany and town people go, for the reasons you suggest, more easily than country people. But I think we'd better all go to Russia after the war and have a look at some fishing co-operatives.

The thing is, you've got to have something as strong as the Communist Party to stand up to the other side, even in the Highlands. Here are all your grand anarchists, the civilised peasants, the men like my Denny Macintosh here who have a kind of gentleness and nobility that makes one feel one would die to defend it, and they are at the mercy of capitalism and are quite incapable of not being crushed, for the old shifts won't serve.

The economic basis would be changed under them, while they are busy poaching a salmon and they won't be able to evade change, and the old delights will cease to seem worthwhile. Here now is Carradale which is a step nearer Glasgow than Clachdrum – but that only a matter of a generation or so. Now it is all disintegrating, not because of the pressure of totalitarian war (the boys would probably have left anyhow as there are no houses for them, and in general they are rather prosperous) but because of the pressure of the values of good old Liberal competitive capitalist – of course turning rapidly towards monopoly capitalism, as they'll find a few more of them have sold their boats (I saw you had a bit about that in the *Record*). Their women aren't like Highland Mary, at least ninety per cent of them aren't, They don't have generous impulses, they are out to grab every little advantage like the girls who get the boys in the strip advertisements.

Underneath, but getting increasingly deep under, there is the remains of the other standard of value, but I see no change Neil, none, of that surviving without a revolution. If we could organise Carradale with a soviet (or call it anything else the name doesn't matter), making people take responsibility and run their own lives which is the beginning of democracy, and discussing every kind of thing with some chance of being effective, then the place would come alive. Just now the farmers are all co-operating more or less – more since we had the big thresher which meant working in a team – but after the war are we to go back to bargaining and cheating and struggling for points? Can't we be allowed to be the servants of the community, giving the best

we can grow, not having to think of everything in cash terms? We can't be as things are. There's been a correspondence in the *Scottish Farmer* lately, about how lovely it is to be a crofter, such a good life for the children and all that – fine so long as crafting is subsidised! But it isn't real. We've got to get capitalism off our backs, and I don't see how we can do it by just being anarchists. The individual may, but what's the good of being free if our neighbours whom we love aren't free? And how can we defeat capitalism except by some weapon such as the communist party.

I suppose I must remind you again that I'm not a communist. I may be yet, but I don't for various reasons care for the party in this country. Perhaps I'm wrong though, I take it that most paradises have taken sides, according to the general condition of things, and have put in God (those that did) on the side they held with. The Republic. The Paradiso. That place of Kilmenny's [sic]. Brave New World. The Castle. The Wild Goose Chase. Oh well, you've put yourself in for it!

Does this letter mean anything at all? I've had time to write at length because I've had a dose of the kind of gastric flu that has been going about here, but equally I feel as if I'd been put through the mangle or maybe I'm writing extra stupidly. I don't suppose for a moment you'll be in Glasgow between 24<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of this month?

I've had rather to stop writing for the moment. There is the hell and all of a lot to do on the farm and I'm very shorthanded in the house too, and it's hard to use the mind at all when one has had both outside and inside manual work to do. And with it all I seem to have lost contact in the place rather badly. If I was a man I could go and have a drink with the other men but it is no solace to me at all to go to an evening service with the women. Quite the opposite in fact!

Doris Lessing to Naomi Mitchison on *Return to the Fairy Hill* (1966)  
(28 May 65) NLS TD2980 2/8

60 Charrington St.

N.W. 1

28th May. 65

Dearest Naomi,

Well, I've now read your book.

I'm going to say what I really think, because what else can one do, but my dear Naomi, it seems to me perhaps you shouldn't have given it to me, because I don't believe what I think is what you want to hear.

Look: If one has a deep personal experience, and writes about it, one can <sup>do</sup> one of two things: write the truth, or make up a novel, which latter course has the advantage of making it possible to use "truth" as one likes. But one can't write a personal book, and the whole point and essence of this one is that it is about a deep personal experience, and begin it with a protestation (page one of foreword) about trying to write only the truth, when you know quite well you have not.

My advice to you is to put this away for five years, by which time you will understand what really happened to you, and <sup>then</sup> write the real truth. Really personal and true, as you really felt it. The deepest and most personal emotions become impersonal, and therefore true and <sup>valuable</sup> for other people, because we are not as unlike each other as we like to think; we are not these unique and remarkable individuals; and we can be quite sure that our deepest and most powerful emotions are not ours alone, but other peoples', too, for whom we express them: particularly if we are

writers and by definition tuned in to other people. |

If you wrote a really truthful book about your emotions for the tribe, Linchwe, Africa, it might be painful for yourself and other people but at least you would be learning about yourself, other people would be learning about themselves, and you would be doing your job as "clerc". You brought in this word, and forgive me, but it seems to me intolerably hypocritical that you should, in the circumstances.

Which leads me on to: of course you are not hypocritical. But this book gives an impression of hypocrisy or naivety, because you are a woman of 67, ~~af~~ mother many times, grandmother, wife, town councillor, and much experienced - I'm saying this deliberately, spelling it out, because you want to have it both ways. You aren't a "bull calf". If you have a soft naive nose, then you have no business to have one. I repeat that you are all the things I've nastily listed above; and you have had the most extensive and expensive education available anywhere in the world; and you have been all your life a member of the British ruling class.

You have written a book which can only strike people as dishonest or naive? Which?

To take an example: page 34 of Return to Fairy Hill, the paragraph about Linche ~~xxxxx~~ and his girl, ending "Surely it is right to want that?"

Please read it again. You are defending yourself against something. What?

People reading this book will put it down thinking: this is a woman in love with a young man who apparently is not aware that she is. Because any one of the little "dangerous" remarks taken separately mean nothing, but put together, and taken with the emotionalism of the book, they add up to

that.

A few people will read it and say: this is a woman who has had a deep religious experience and is not aware that she has had one.

My dear Naomi, if you have a deep need to worship, which clearly you have, you should not be worshipping a young man, Chief or no Chief, Prince or No prince. "The word made flesh?" "The word made God" "The City of God."? To whom are you really writing this love letter?

If you reply, that you are aware that it has been, is, a religious experience, witness your references to the state of grace etc., then please ask yourself, and perhaps not only on your behalf but others, what is the state of grace that follows on being in love? And who is one in love with?

In your case, it ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> a highly-gifted and unusual young man, who happens to be chief of an African tribe. But my dear Naomi, ~~xxxx~~ he is not anything more. And it seems to me bad for you and bad for him too, to do this to him.

Which brings me on to: it seems to me wrong of you to put this weight on these people. Face to face yes; "eye to eye" yes; in letters yes. But to write in a book for all to read that after so much trust and personal love has been shown you, that you sit around in London thinking that they are using you for what you can do for them, and your money, well this seems to me a really bad disloyalty. I'd feel it badly.

You know as well as I do, that in any relations between white and black people this is there and has to be - they use us. Of course. We are the fortunate of the world, and therefore the unfortunate use us. But one doesn't complain about it, or not outside personal friendship or among people

who understand. Of course on one level with ~~relationships~~ the tribe, they "use" you. Why not? You have asked for it and invited it. But on another level they love you. Surely one shouldn't write this kind of thing unless one is being truthful about everything else, when it becomes explicable. This whole passage, and others like it, are written by a woman in love whose lover hasn't written to her. You shouldn't get the two things confused.

If you don't want to put the book aside, then I really do think you ought to go through and cut very drastically all the personal bits. The parts about the tribe, about Bechuanaland, all the practical parts, are marvellous and useful. Only you are in a position to write them. And they would do good for Africa and for the tribe. But I really do think that these parts, the useful and practical and explaining bits, will be badly damaged by the others.

In detail: suggestions.

You don't explain what is very confusing to people who don't know Africa, the different uses of words like Bakgatla, Kglatla etc. etc. Its like Barotseland: Losi, Silosi, Malosi, etc. But this should be explained. A footnote perhaps?

page 29. (I'm now going through notes I made as I read the book) "totally committed to this young man." You aren't totally committed. You have a life in England and Scotland. If you had to make a choice between Linche and one of your children's being ill or dying, what would you do?

(Anyway, that word commitment is a very silly word. It doesn't mean anything.

All through the book, words like "madly" "madly in love" "madly irritating." These are dated "terribly"

slang words, and always accompanies emotions; like "lovely old sex". You can't write an emotional book like this and then disinfect emotional words.

All through the book personal references that mean nothing to the general reader. ~~xxxxxx~~ page 87. "talked to Joan." References to your children that the reader won't ~~know~~. Either explain who they are, or leave them out. "Sotheby cheque".

What Sotheby cheque? Why? In British museum reference to some old love affair. What its doing there anyway? If its going to be in, explain it, if not, cut it out.

Page 101. "one of the best straight writers" etc. Look, we should ~~xx~~ leave it to other people to say this sort of thing. If we find ourselves thinking: "I'm the best" then it seems to me not a thought we should be proud of. This whole thing is a product of this nasty competitive society which we say we don't like and a product of the in-and-out game which is much better ignored. If one has written good books, sooner~~er~~ or later one will get the credit for them. If not, not. And I think you should leave out references to the other book, the novel too. It sounds as if you are selling it. This is the job of <sup>your</sup> ~~xxx~~ publisher's sales department.

About the poems: I think you should have second thoughts about them. Particularly the personal ones.

The trouble with this book that is full of very good stuff which no one else could write, nor is any one else likely to, because they haven't had your experience.

Which is why you shouldn't put it aside altogether.

Couldn't you possibly bring yourself to see it as two books? One written from the point of



6

view of a woman who has been accepted as the mother of a tribe, with all the information in it about the tribe that is there, and all your practical knowledge in it? And the other, put ~~xxxx~~ aside to write when you can be honest?

If I were your spiritual adviser, dearest Naomi, I'd tell you to put your personal responsibilities and your household and your husband and your children and everything else aside; and to go up into a high mountain; and to ask yourself what in fact has happened to you over the past two or three years. Because it is not that you have fallen in love with a nice, intelligent, gifted young black man.

Much love.

Forgive me if this hurts.

Love from Peter who has just blown in <sup>q</sup> out. And from Jenny.

Dais

When do you want me  
to send the MS?



Doris Lessing to Helen Lloyd, on *Return to the Fairy Hill* correspondence  
(11 April 2005), Private Collection

24 Gondar Gardens, London N W 6 1HG

11th April 2005

Dear Helen Lloyd

Yes do use it.

I have to say that after all this time it is hard to remember what it was all about. I am somewhat troubled by my telling Naomi that she had a religious experience. It does sound somewhat pretentious. She was in love with Linche<sup>w</sup> for years. Fair enough. We all know that when we are in love we believe - and are - in sometimes amazing states of mind. But Naomi was of that generation when not to be an ~~atheist~~ <sup>atheist</sup> was letting the side down. What side? The good, the right, the true. I am now pretty amazed at telling this ~~atheist~~ <sup>atheist</sup>-on-principle that she had a religious experience.

Good wishes

Doris Lessing

*D a Lessing*

Mitchison, Naomi, Page from handwritten notebook (?1962-3)  
Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas  
'Scotland: notes, Ams 26pp in notebook'

Kullervo

In the Highlands of Scotland, where I find myself on various official  
bodies many of the problems are not unlike those of Bahamas, including a lack  
of confidence among the "natives". This is because, in the last couple of hundred years  
the land there has been expropriated. For many years the pick of the men went into  
the Highland regiments. Then by and by there were no jobs to do at home, (some time  
half joined in their <sup>and London</sup> ~~due to~~ fighting a quarter of a / over return, special

When the landlords made people from the comparatively fertile valleys to settle  
-ments by the sea where they were supposed to learn to be fishermen. Yet many are not even  
well in Scotland. The landlords wanted the ~~villages~~ townships and for sheep & turned  
out the people miserably. Many of the best went to Canada, & in the time the  
process has gone on. The best that went to the States & now come home except  
in holidays. The rebels were encouraged & are even forced to emigrate.

During 2 was young men left & crowded at home they are completely isolated, many died of measles & similar diseases. This has left a population which is very often unwilling to take risks & try anything new. Yet there are always a few with ideas & general kindness. The policy has been to encourage them with loans & grants or other special treatment which in effect gives them protection against outside influences, perhaps, more substantial. We fail in this

● Big idea that we must help our people & gain their confidence; then they will be on our feet.

~~Confidence~~ Confidence is to me a notion showing a weight lifted: is Scotland the weight of landfords & to some extent of English economic dominance. We haven't got it right yet - hence the difficulty of imitation & emigration from one of the most beautiful countries into England. In Africa the weight of weight has to be lifted, the weight of the people's dominance. So long as this is felt the people underneath are not only unable to do it but over economic, but are also apt to be less unreasonably & violently. In the 40's.

Mitchison, Naomi, Directive reply 27.2.90 (M380),  
Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex

27.2.90 ♀  
M380

*Part One*

*change to number*  
~~2975~~

I have two environments, one London, another country. I am actually writing a book about the "gentry" tuning to "trade" in the eighteenth century. The class idea perhaps exists in the very top (though maybe some royal weddings are pulling it about) and the very bottom at the stage when people have lost hope of any change. My mother would never have accepted being "middle class". My father was very un-class (though there were little tags of upper classishness hanging on) I suppose my family would call themselves middle class, except in the moments when they call themselves (politically) working class. When I am in the country I tend to be the "good landlord", who can be asked for things, help with local affairs and can be bothered at any hour of the day. Class isn't quite the word. Perhaps the old word intelligentsia might help?

The people I like best have various accents. My grand children started with unpleasant London accents from school, but I think London is ugly sounding, though the voices I hear when I am buying food in the market, are mostly nice, with quite a bit of west Indian accent. I like Birmingham and Welsh and indeed most of the real dialects, especially the north country ones. The problem about school London which most of my grandchildren started with is a kind of whine in it.

I don't really fuss much over social status. It would be inappropriate for a writer, as it would be for a painter.

I don't find that sort of thing embarrassing, or insecure. I don't cross streets. What kind of teacher? What lawyer? (I have known top teachers in Eaton, lawyers at all stages, A few of my most loved friends <sup>and relations</sup> have been journalists. A good journalist is tops and far from class. Same with doctors) Am more doubtful about pop stars and accountants . . . I like anyone who is doing a good job; we are equals.

Into the bus - I quite often deliberately sit next to someone who is "coloured" and try for a conversation or even an exchange of greeting. I would avoid a smoker or a drinker or two children under three . . .

I regularly see Batswana, often see friends from India or Bangla Desh or Jordan. I think I adapt myself a bit with all of them, but so one does when meeting with the whitest of whites. I feel a difficulty with Germans, which I try to get rid of, also with Israelites, though not with Jews as such. I am all for mixed marriages.

Hand C 2095

All the churches I know about are v ry good and non racist. So is the clinic an the doctors in it.

British society does not give equal opportunities. That is one reason why I ax t a I do. I think that at this moment monarchy is a useful thing, and I think most of the royals do a good job. A great pity they don't always do so. The bad ones need to be abolished.

Of course I am against uniformity. After all I am a Scot. I don't feel British. But I think that labelling sets of people with virtues and vices is rather silly. As a writer, of course, I like to swim i~~n~~ as many pools as possible. I think most artists, whatever their art, are bound to move all over the social institutions and customs.

No, ther is not equal opportunity. But I think a few sensible Royals are quite a useful thing to have, especially as a balance against poli~~y~~ifians and the very rich minority.

I don't think one should have too many uniformities in any society, including lanuage. We don't all want to spe~~a~~k like televion people. You know, I could argue on both sides over most of yo~~u~~r suggestions! It must have been good fun to set and I hope to read!

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