The Treatment of Gender in Twentieth-century Scottish Women's Historical Fiction

Amanda J. McLeod

University of Glasgow
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Contents

Abstract

This study focuses on the treatment of gender in historical fiction written by three twentieth-century Scottish women - Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone. Each writer has used history as a base from which to examine the construction of gender. By fore grounding the female and by shifting the focus of history onto the private, domestic sphere, these women move toward the restoration of the female voice, both within the historical context of their fiction, and within their contemporary societies.

Chapter 1 analyses the wider literary context of Scottish women's historical fiction, touching on early exponents of the genre, and on the more recent writers who have focused on popular historical romance. Male writers in the field are discussed in relation to their own uses of history, and their comparatively scant attention to issues of gender. Chapter 2 moves into discussion of Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999). Mitchison's early work in the historical genre, between publication of *The Conquered* in 1923 and the appearance of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* in 1931, represents a radical approach to the examination of gender within fiction in the early part of the twentieth-century. Set predominantly in the ancient world, Mitchison's novels and stories exploit the distance offered by ancient history to examine a range of gender-related issues, such as the economic independence of the female within society, sexual expression, and same-sex relationships. In Chapter 3, which discusses Mitchison's epic Scottish novel, *The Bull Calves* (1947), many of these issues are treated again, yet the change in Mitchison's own social and political situation and her strengthening identification with Scotland, inform a less radical approach to the female role than is evident in the first phase of her writing. Further, a move toward the more recent historical setting of 1747 in *The Bull Calves* is partially responsible for curtailing the more overt feminism of her early work.

Chapter 4 discusses three novels by the contemporary writer Sian Hayton (1933-). *Cells of Knowledge* (1989), *Hidden Daughters* (1992) and *The Last Flight* (1993), comprise a Dark-Age trilogy in which female identity is explored. Hayton's texts set up a system of oppositions between Christian and pagan and male and female, which Hayton then attempts to deconstruct, and in many ways, her strong supernatural heroines provide a positive female image in relation to the monks they encounter. I argue, however, that she is not entirely successful in this, and that the trilogy's feminism is undermined, to a degree, by a deep-rooted patriarchal framework.

Chapter 5 concludes this study with an examination of Margaret Elphinstone's *Islanders* (1994). Elphinstone (1948-) moves away from the supernatural elements found in Hayton's trilogy, toward a more realist portrayal of the way in which women in Old Norse society may have lived. My discussion focuses on the strategies of resistance Elphinstone provides for her female characters in response to the restrictions of their patriarchal community, and asks whether the ultimate failure of her heroine to find fulfilment is influenced by contemporary gender structures. This study argues that the portrayal of the female within Scottish women's historical fiction is reflective of continuing inequality in the contemporary socio-political environment.

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List of Abbreviations

All primary works quoted in this thesis are identified by abbreviation as follows:

D.K. Broster:	*The Dark Mile* (*DM*)
Catherine Carswell:	*Lying Awake* (*LA*)
	Open the Door (*OD*)
Dorothy Dunnett:	*The Game of Kings* (*GK*)
	Queen's Play (*QP*)
Margaret Elphinstone:	*Islanders* (*I*)
	The Sea Road (*SR*)
	Outside Eden (*OE*)
Jane Findlater:	*The Green Graves of Balgowrie* (*GG*)
Neil Gunn:	*Sun Circle* (*SC*)
Sian Hayton:	*Cells of Knowledge* (*C*)
	Hidden Daughters (*HD*)
	The Last Flight (*LF*)
Margaret Irwin:	*The Gay Galliard* (*GG*)
Jane Lane:	*He Stooped to Conquer* (*STC*)
Naomi Mitchison:	*All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (*AC*)
	Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison (*D*)
	As It Was: An Autobiography 1897-1918 (*AIW*)
	Barbarian Stories (*BS*)
	Beyond this Limit: Selected Shorter Fiction of Naomi Mitchison (*BTL*)
	The Big House (*BH*)
	Black Sparta and other Stories (*BSS*)
	The Bull Calves (*BC*)
	Cleopatra's People (*CP*)
	Cloud Cuckoo Land (*CCL*)
	The Conquered (*C*)
	The Corn King and the Spring Queen (*CK*)
	Early in Orcadia (*EO*)
	Five Men and a Swan (*FM*)
	The Oath-Takers (*OT*)
	Sea-Green Ribbons (*SGR*)
	Small Talk: Memories of an Edwardian Childhood (*ST*)
	You May Well Ask (*YMWA*)
Nancy Brysson Morrison:	*The Gowk Storm* (*GS*)
Willa Muir:	*Imagined Corners* (*IC*)
Margaret Oliphant:	*Autobiography and Letters* (*AL*)
	Kirsteen (*K*)

Introduction

Women's Historical Fiction: a Contradiction in Terms?

The aim of this thesis is to discuss the ways in which three Scottish women writers, Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone, have successfully examined issues of gender through their historical fiction. The thesis describes the socio-cultural and literary context of their work and attempts to show where and why they are successful. My assertion that all three writers have produced feminist historical fiction is based on the application of Pam Morris's definition of 'feminism' as an understanding of 'the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality'[1] and a commitment to changing them. I would argue that all three of these female authors highlight these social and psychic mechanisms through their fictionalised historical societies, and that in exposing gender inequality within the changing conceptualisation of twentieth-century Scottish society, they each endeavour to challenge it. It is the similarity with which each employs strategies of resistance within their historical writing, which directs the focus of this thesis toward fiction published by Naomi Mitchison between 1923 and 1947, and by Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone between 1989 and 1994. I have not neglected the historical fiction which was published in the years intervening and my introductory chapter analyses the wider literary and social context of women's historical fiction. What I would argue, however, is that in the years between 1947 and 1989, Scottish women's historical fiction was characterised more by an identification with conventional patriarchal structures that characterise generic fiction in the historical romance tradition than by any real attempt to challenge gender stereotypes. Although the fictions of Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone embody a range of historical settings and a variety of narrative methods, in each case characters are shown to exercise resistive strategies within a patriarchal discourse, not only challenging the immediate gender structure within which they operate, but also highlighting the inequalities of gender identity in the writer's own society.

Each writer meets the challenges presented with variable success, and this partially accounts for the imbalance in critical attention given here to analyses of Elphinstone's *Islanders* (1994), compared with Hayton's *Cells* trilogy (which includes *Cells of Knowledge* (1989), *Hidden Daughters* (1992), and *The Last Flight* (1993)). Although only a single text, *Islanders* provides as much material for the discussion of gender issues as Hayton's novels do as a unit. Similarly, Mitchison's *The Bull Calves* (1947) receives only slightly less attention than her combined early work, which may prompt the accusation that

this thesis does not do justice to the scope of her writing pre-World War II. Yet in both instances, I have responded not only to the necessity of imposing limits on my investigation, but also to a desire to examine that which has been least criticised by other academics. There is in fact a general lack in criticism where these three novelists are concerned. Even Mitchison, by far the most prolific and widely known, continues to suffer from neglect. Furthermore, published criticism of her work has concentrated on *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931); therefore another reason for my engaging this investigation more fully with *The Bull Calves* is in order to try and even the balance. Likewise *Islanders* (although inspiring much recent academic interest) has to my knowledge prompted almost no published criticism compared with Hayton's trilogy, which although far from receiving the attention deserved, has been discussed at various points by Douglas Gifford and Christopher Whyte, as well as by Margaret Elphinstone herself.[2]

Elphinstone, in fact, functions on one level as a link between Mitchison and Hayton, as in her role as literary critic she has published work on both writers.[3] Her own standing as both critic and creative writer, in fact, places her in a position similar to Mitchison, who also wrote critically and creatively. Her contemporary female perspective, however, links her more closely to Hayton, and both women, in fact, share an interest in contemporary fantasy as well as historical fiction.[4] The similarities in biographical circumstance between these writers are enlightening in ascertaining the possible reasons for similarities in their work, yet the place of biographical detail in any critical work is not straightforward. Many critics have highlighted the problematic nature of biographical writing, in that although it purports to offer truth, the subjective nature of biography means that it should not be trusted as an indicator of authorial intention. As Richard Holmes reports in his essay 'Biography and Death',

> [b]y basing itself on the shifting sands of letters, diaries, memoirs, interviews - all fatally subjective forms - [biography] has no solid foundation in historical fact. It can claim to produce the bare skeleton chronology of a life [...] But beyond that, it is essentially fraudulent.[5]

It might be argued, therefore, that reference made to biographies and autobiographies no more provides the factual information to support the analyses of fictional texts, than do the fictions themselves. In defence of biography, however, this thesis deals with the changing response to the female role within society, and it is both valuable and informative for my purposes to consider the information - biographical and autobiographical - which might contribute to the analysis of these changes.

With specific regard to this thesis, the nature and accessibility of biographical information available for these three writers varies. Regarding Mitchison, her life is well-documented by her own efforts. She has produced four autobiographies: *Small Talk: Memoirs of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973), *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (1975), *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (1979), and *Mucking Around: Five Continents Over Fifty Years* (1981) and to these are added the diaries, *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-45* (1985), and *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* (1934). There are also biographies by Jill Benton (1990) and Jenni Calder (1997). Through study of these, alongside her various essays, articles, and the mentions made of her by many other recognised literary figures of the time, it is possible to construct a clear picture of Mitchison, and to discern the thoughts, emotions and beliefs which drove her in life and in fiction.

By comparison, the biographical information available for Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone is slight. In view of this lack, perhaps, particularly in Hayton's case, general criticism has focused on the texts themselves, and does not tend to offer personal or sociological readings, nor to assert the motivation of the authors for their approach to historical fiction. In this respect, however, I have gone some way toward making up the ground, through interviews and correspondence with these two women, both of whom have been extremely helpful and forthcoming regarding their respective backgrounds.[6] Given the basic inconsistency in information available, however, it has been difficult to offer readings of fiction by all three women which utilise biography to the same degree, therefore I have ultimately endeavoured to exploit whatever information I have come by in the case of all three writers. In defence of this, I would point out that the autobiographical writing of Mitchison, in any case, is itself historical, and provides the contemporary reader of her fiction with useful insight into her socio-cultural context. The context in which the later writers operate, however, is far closer to the contemporary reader's own, therefore it might be expected that he or she may have greater intuitive awareness of, if not their deeply personal, then at least their social motivations.

One feature linking all three writers is a complex relationship with the issue of national identity. Scottish nationhood is problematic, and this is compounded for these women by the quest for female identity within a patriarchal nation ordered so as to give power and prestige to men. As Joy Hendry suggests, Scottish women writers are doubly disadvantaged by 'being firstly Scottish and secondly female',[7] and these women are still further disadvantaged as they are excluded not only from history and from the literary

canon by their gender, but also through an unresolved relationship with Scottish national identity: all three are arguably 'English' to a greater or lesser degree. It is significant, therefore, that these three women effectively *chose* Scotland. Growing up in England, their relationship to Scotland is arguably a relationship between their conscious adoption of a nation on the periphery, and their struggle with their own peripheral gender identity. Might this be because Scottish literature is peripheral itself to the English literary canon? Perhaps this accounts in part for the choice. More likely is that each of these women saw in Scotland and Scottish culture the image of the remote community, and of the borders and peripheries with which they identified as women in a male society. Repeatedly throughout these texts, this identification with borders and peripheries can be traced. Alongside common preoccupations with issues such as motherhood, sexual expression and economic independence, there is also a recurring preoccupation with communities defined by their 'otherness', and by association, with the 'self' as defined by what it is not. The success with which Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone strategically identify with, and then resist this opposition through their fiction, is an aspect of their writing which unifies them as writers of feminist historical fiction.

Although I have identified Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone as 'feminist' writers, however, I have only loosely applied a more specific feminist theory to the thesis as a whole: that of post-structuralism. More frequently, the term 'feminism' is used to acknowledge a shared preoccupation with gender inequality among these women. The way in which they provide strategies of resistance, through the subversion of patriarchal histories and the historical genre, varies, and depends, as might be expected, on the settings they have chosen, on the gender roles they have themselves occupied within the twentieth-century, and on the relationship each has had with history. In a sense, however, the application of a post-structural mode of thought is appropriate given that this thesis is based on a deconstruction of the hierarchised differences between history and literature. Basing their arguments on the theories of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, post-structuralists suggest that meaning is not inherent in words, and depends instead on the mutual relationships of words within a language system based on *différence*. French philosopher Jacques Derrida was instrumental in developing the post-structural idea that words can only derive meaning by their difference from other words.[8] For example, white is only conceivable in that it is not black, darkness gives meaning to light, and within each set of oppositional terms there is an implied positive, the most obvious examples being 'good' and 'evil', in which 'good' occupies the positive, 'evil' the negative. Derrida aims, however, in using a strategy of deconstruction, to 'undo' the way in which these opposites

are hierarchised, by exposing the fact that the positive element within each set of binary oppositions, relies on the existence of the negative element for its meaning. There can be no concept of good, in other words, without the notion of evil.

This is a crude summary, yet it indicates the aspect of post-structural thought which has appealed to feminists, who wish to challenge hierarchised language structures. In particular, French feminists Hélène Cîxous, Luce Irigary and Julia Kristeva have been heavily influenced by Derrida, and work on the assumption that the hegemonic hierarchy privileges 'male' as 'good', 'rational', 'active' and 'true', whilst the female is associated with evil, irrationality, passivity and falsehood. The female is always ascribed the less desirable element in the linguistic pair, and with an awareness that language is always implicit in value systems, therefore, comes the acknowledgement that it is never a neutral transmitter of experience. As Pam Morris explains:

> Language is the means of imposing unitary definition on things and people, denying the continuum multiple potential of actuality. So, too, our socially gendered identity is constricted and fixed as we are 'put into our place' within the conceptual order.[9]

The woman's 'place' then, is as the sex of lack, of absence and of negation. Women are non-male, non-rational and by association, therefore, *non-historical* beings, which has obvious implications for writers whose focus is history. History occupies the male side of the linguistic binary opposition, identifiable by association with what it is not - namely myth. The complex relationship between women and history is one which I shall address shortly, but for the purpose of outlining the feminist perspective which frames this thesis, I would argue that the way in which each writer utilises history and the fictional use of history is post-structural in that they enact feminist attempt at deconstructing the oppositions which favour male/history and truth, in an attempt to undermine the negative associations of 'female' within the Western patriarchal conceptual order. In short, where history is male, writing history as a woman embodies itself embodies a resistance, and where history is associated with 'truth', the fictionalising of this ''truth' further undermines the hierarchy in which 'male' and 'truth' are privileged. Finally, where history has revolved around male figures and achievements, the placing of female characters at its centre disrupts the order that has rendered women invisible. In these ways, the historical fiction with which this thesis deals challenges the patriarchal order through deconstructing the binary oppositions inherent in language, and thereby creates a significant space for the female voice.

That the historical genre itself was long a patriarchal domain is demonstrated by the nature of the criticism and theorising of the genre, found in works such as George Lukács' *The Historical Novel* (1937). Lukács argues that historical fiction developed following the French Revolution as a direct response to the way in which people came to view history in a European context. The upheaval Europe witnessed as a result of the French Revolution and the wave of continental unrest it inspired altered attitudes to history, which became 'a mass experience'.[10] Wars were no longer civilised, mass armies had been created, and victory was now connected to possibilities for national development.

This transformation of consciousness throughout Europe, both economic and ideological, was, Lukács asserts, the basis for the historical novels of the Scottish writer, Sir Walter Scott, often hailed as the founding father of the historical novel. Prior to Scott, Lukács explains, what was lacking in novels which claimed to be historical, was 'precisely the specifically historical, that is, the derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age'.[11] In *The Rise of the Historical Novel* (1989), John MacQueen agrees with Lukács, asserting that Scott's achievement was 'to introduce into the fabric of [his] works the quality which, regardless of period, makes a particular stretch of time unique to itself'.[12] For the first time, these critics agree, historical fiction tackled the manners of the age in which it was set, rather than imposing contemporary manners.

Scott's fiction resulted, then, according to Lukács, from a specific historical climate: that of post-Revolutionary Europe. Yet it is significant that although Lukács does refer to Scott as a Scottish novelist, he discusses his work more generally in terms of the development of the English novel, arguing that

> He seeks the 'middle way' between the extremes and endeavours to demonstrate artistically the historical reality of this way by means of his portrayal of the great crises in English history.[13]

To an extent this is justified. It is true, for example, that even Edward Waverley, namesake of what is arguably Scott's pivotal Scottish novel, is an Englishman. Yet Lukács all but ignores the implications of Scottish history in Scott's fiction, and his concern with Scott's 'way of presenting the totality of certain transitional stages of history',[14] refers to English, rather than Scottish (or even British) history. Questions concerning the invisibility of Scotland are certainly raised when a study of such depth apparently neglects Scott's identity, not only as a Unionist perhaps, but also as a Scot. This is particularly interesting in light of Lukács's assertion that Scott's form of historical fiction was only made possible by the awakening of national sensibility which was a consequence of the French Revolution. As he explains,

> The appeal to national independence and national character is necessarily connected with a re-awakening of national history, with memories of the past, of past greatness, of moments of national dishonour, whether this results in a progressive or reactionary ideology.[15]

Ironically, it seems, Lukács remains either unaware or uninterested in the fact that it was a combination of Scott's desire to fictionalise both the positive and negative aspects of Scottish national character, along with his desire for the progress offered to Scotland by the Union of 1707, which inspired his creation of *Waverley*'s Waverley and Fergus MacIvor, and *Old Mortality*'s Henry Morton. Lukács concentrates, instead, on the way in which Scott shaped the historical genre, providing historians and novelists alike with a means of approaching history from the perspective of semi-historical or entirely non-historical persons:

> For the being of an age can only appear as a broad and many-sided picture if the everyday life of the people, the joys and sorrows, crises and confusions of average human beings are portrayed.[16]

For this reason, it has been suggested that the historical novel as it was produced by Scott gave a more honest representation of the past than historiography which focused on the portrayal of prominent public figures, and that on a more general level this new relationship between history and fiction was more accessible to readers, prompting historians to emulate Scott to a degree. As Marinell Ash says, Scott's fiction inspired historians to try and 'recreate similarly convincing pictures of the past'.[17]

The relationship between history and fiction is an important thread running throughout this thesis, and Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone have taken various approaches to the representation of history in fiction. Since Scott, the separation of historiographical narrative and historico-fictional narrative has become increasingly complex. As Ann Rigney argues in 'Adapting History to the Novel':

> Nowadays [...] the theoretical and historical relationship between the two discursive genres seems to call for rethinking in the light of the recognition that historians themselves never simply 'respect', i.e. 'reproduce', facts in the discursive representations of them; in light of the recognition that even historians do not produce a message inscribed once and for all in the past, but *a posteriori* give form and meaning to the past through their choice of historical subject and selection of relevant facts, and through their subsequent representation and articulation of those facts in discourse.[18]

This is the same activity engaged in by writers of fiction, and the form and emphasis given to aspects of the past by Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone, I argue, depends on their own *a posteriori* view of history, and more specifically of the woman's role in history.

Hayden White takes Rigney's argument further, suggesting that 'the literary activity of the historian constitutes a "fictionalization" of history [sic]',[19] and this said, asks whether 'history' can only be set over against 'literature' by virtue of its interest in the 'actual' rather than the 'possible'.[20] History proper, in other words, is:

> the real world as it evolves in time - [it] is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it, i.e., by endowing what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognisable, because it is familiar, form. It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same.[21]

The function of White's argument here is not only to emphasise the dialectal relationship between history and fiction. It also highlights the process by which historical artefacts *become* history, and suggests that the selection involved in the construction of history, as with fiction, is dependent on authorial agenda:

> Histories are not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure. These sets of relationships are not, however, immanent in the events themselves; they exist only in the mind of the historian reflecting on them.[22]

It is assumed that accuracy is a historian's function. Yet although there are raw materials belonging to all historians, these are not history itself. 'History' is effectively a narrative arrangement of these materials, and in a sense the writer of historical fiction performs the same action as the historian, fore-grounding or sidelining raw materials at will. As Jean Kennard points out, 'One of the most, if not the most powerful constructions of history, the making of a past, is in the activity of writing'.[23] The writer is involved in the filtering process, whether that writer is a historian or a novelist, and the filter itself is variable, compounded of the author's personal experience and interest, social experience and political motivations.

In Scotland, the relationship between historical and fictional narrative is further complicated by Scotland's status as what Cairns Craig terms a 'historyless' nation:

> There is no more problematic legacy from nineteenth-century to twentieth-century Scottish culture than the genre of the historical novel. With *Waverley* in 1814, and the subsequent Waverley novels, Sir Walter Scott provided the model by which nineteenth-century writers in Europe and America would come to terms with those new forms of society and new processes of development that had been unleashed, almost simultaneously [...] by the economic consequences of what we have come to call the Industrial Revolution.[24]

Craig goes on to point out that the same Scott novels which initiated the rest of the world's engagement with history, have been attacked for thirty years regarding the political and

cultural consequences of their 'falsification' of Scotland's history, the result of which is that

> Scotland is a place with a past but a place without a history - without a history both in the sense of there being no serious need to write histories about that past, and in the sense that the narrative of its past has no relevance to the condition of its present, to the nature of its contemporary historical experience.

'Scott', he asserts, 'carries the burden of having invented a Scotland which displaced the real Scotland in favour of his romantic illusions',[25] and this is supported by critics and theorists such as Edwin Muir in *Scott and Scotland* (1936) and Marinell Ash in *The Strange Death of Scottish History* (1980), both of whom discuss at length the 'de-historicisation' of Scotland, which began with the Union of the Crowns in 1603, and resulted in the Union of 1707. Scottish history thereafter, they agree, became subsumed by British history, and Edinburgh as Scotland's cultural centre enthusiastically aspired to 'Britishness' in fashion and education. As Muir points out, one of the main problems with Scottish history post 1707 was that it became associated with parochial concerns, whilst Scots were fuelled by the desire to identify with Britain and with the wider concerns of a more powerful nation. Scott himself, Muir continues

> spent most of his days in a hiatus, in a country, that is to say, which was neither a nation nor a province, and had, instead of a centre, a blank, an Edinburgh, in the middle of it.

He concludes that 'Scott, in other words, lived in a community which was not a community, and set himself to carry on a tradition which was not a tradition'.[26] His fiction represented a desire for some meaningful past, undiluted by post 1707 British history.

Craig argues that many modern Scottish novels, too, are characterised by the fact that, like Scott's, they search for a place in which history is still significant, whether that means they return to Scottish pre-history, and here he cites Neil Gunn's *Sun Circle* (1933), or whether they reconstruct the ancient world, as James Leslie Mitchell does, for example, in *Spartacus* (1933). In both cases, it is made possible for the writer to explore an aspect of society which the twentieth-century failed to provide - 'a world of significant conflict and a place where history can be witnessed in the making'.[27] Scott himself consistently chose a neutral character who becomes caught up in this process of history-making. In *Waverley* (1814) Edward Waverley enters Scotland during a time of civil strife between Highlands and Lowlands, and witnesses for himself the narrow-mindedness of the Lowlanders as well as the civility; the dishonesty of Highlanders as well as their hospitality. Similarly for other nineteenth-century novelists, the appeal of history was as an arena in which meaningful activity might take place.

The historical fiction produced by writers embodies several aspects of the genre which are indicative of a direct development from Scott, which began in nineteenth-century Scottish literature with James Hogg and Robert Louis Stevenson. Primarily, as Craig suggests, Scottish historical novelists consistently return to settings in which 'history can be witnessed in the making', and although it is not my intention to provide detailed analysis of historical novels by male writers, it is worth mentioning the general motivations behind the historical fiction of literary figures such as James Hogg, Robert Louis Stevenson, John Buchan, and Neil Gunn in the context of the development of the Scottish historical novel.[28] Further, in glancing at the concerns with which these male writers are preoccupied in their fiction, it becomes clear that the focus and viewpoint are male. A brief investigation of their exploitation of history is strategic, therefore, in identifying the adoption, modification and subversion of male constructions, in historical fiction by women, and more specifically by Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone.

In spite of their range of fictional locations and the changing nature of their contemporary societies, it is significant that the above-named male writers share a similar approach to gender identity within historical settings, as this reveals an implicit desire to reinforce patriarchal encodings which privilege male characters as central to historical development. Scott himself did move tentatively toward a subversion of traditional gender stereotypes in his fiction, and although his novels largely revolve around male figures, female figures such as Flora MacIvor and Di Vernon are stronger than their male counterparts. Yet these women are nevertheless at the mercy of patriarchal gender roles, and cannot in the end choose their own destiny.

The main exception to this, however, is Jeanie Deans, heroine of *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818). Jeanie, whose refusal to lie for her condemned sister precipitates her epic journey to see the King of England, has long been hailed as the honest peasant voice of Scotland - the real 'Heart of Midlothian'. Although critics such as John O. Hayden have argued that her integrity is subtly undermined through a series of 'lesser' untruths, she in greatest part remains a pillar of Christian morality and virtue, and initially, the contemporary reader may be forgiven for thinking that she offers little in the way of feminist resistance to the patriarchal gender structures of her society.[29] Indeed, she almost refuses to marry her sweetheart because she does not want to shame him through association with her sister. Nevertheless, the existence of Jeanie is in itself a bold move by Scott. The majority of nineteenth-century novelists portrayed women of social standing, whilst Jeanie is no more than a cow-feeder's daughter, and what is more, she is made of much stronger stuff than her male counterparts: her father Davie and fiancé Ruben Butler.

It becomes clear, however, that in *The Heart of Midlothian* and in much of Scott's fiction, the female characters who are perhaps of more interest in gender terms occupy minor roles in the narrative, such as Madge Wildfire in *The Heart of Midlothian*. Characterisation of Madge comprises an odd mixture of villain and victim. She is complicit in kidnapping Jeanie, yet appears to be used as a pawn by her mother, who, it transpires, was responsible for the abduction of Jeanie's sister's baby. Subversive though characters like Madge may be, however, they represent the patriarchal tendency to polarise women into angels or monsters, and as monsters, of course, they must not survive. Madge is stoned to death in the street.

Many of Scott's novels portray what have come to be known as a series of 'light' and 'dark' heroines. Flora MacIvor is dark opposite to fair Rose Bradwardine in *Waverley*, for example, whilst Rebecca is dark and mysterious opposite to the open Rowena, blonde heroine of *Ivanhoe* (1819). The dark female of each pair, it is notable, is most often the stronger, more intricately drawn character in each case, and these female characters often display greater strength and integrity than the male characters with whom they are associated. Yet ultimately, the female role is subservient to the male. Male characters are allowed to fill the active roles required for history-making. Strong female characters are not allowed to come to the fore, therefore they are condemned to marriage, as with Di Vernon in *Rob Roy*, or to life in a convent, as with Flora MacIvor.

Like their predecessor, writers such as Hogg and Stevenson demonstrate a similar unwillingness, or lack of interest, in investigating female characters within their historical fiction. James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), for example, is set over a century earlier in late seventeenth century Scotland, and initially constructs the more intimate conflict between brothers George Colwan and Robert Wringhim in terms of the political tensions between Whig and Tory Edinburgh. More significantly, however, history gives way to the diabolical and psychological dichotomy in the novel, which, as Francis Hart explains, 'is a reality of folk legend and traditional Scottish culture... Hogg speaks as an enlightened and distanced sceptic; he also speaks from within his traditional culture as the transmitter of legendary truth'.[30] Hogg's *Confessions* employs history as a way of distancing the reader from the battle between good and evil with which the narrative is occupied. History provides the comfort of distance, therefore, and yet it also implies that only within history might a series of events such as this take place.

Female characters in the novel, however, are restricted to the background presence of Wringhim's fanatical and adulterous mother, whom he later murders, and to Arabella Logan and Bell Calvert. A housekeeper and prostitute respectively, although they undertake the role of private investigators, they perform the function of providing a rather less intellectual response to events than the Editor's Narrative, or than that of the sinner, Robert Wringhim. When Arabella believes she sees the devil-figure Gil Martin, for example, in the appearance of the dead George Colwan, she swoons, and the association between her frailty and her femininity here is compounded by the reaction of her female companions:

> An old woman who kept the lodging-house, having been called in before when Mrs Logan was faintish, chanced to enter at this crisis with some cordial; and, seeing the state of her lodgers, she caught the infection, and fell into the same rigid and statue-like appearance.... 'It is he, I believe,' said [Mrs Calvert]...
>
> 'It *is* he!' cried Mrs. Logan, hysterically.
>
> 'Yes, yes, it *is* he!' cried the landlady, in unison.[31]

Unable to cope with the emotional strain, the women become hysterical.

This employment of hegemonic gender stereotyping is common to many male novelists of the nineteenth-century, although in Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), the frailty of Alison Durie is both mental and physical. *The Master of Ballantrae* is only one of Stevenson's novels which might be considered historical, yet I have chosen it due to the fact that it echoes the fraternal struggle of Hogg's *Confessions*. Set in the aftermath of the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, the action revolves around the antagonism existing between two brothers, James and Henry Durie. Again, like Hogg, Stevenson involves his narrative with Scotland's political divisions, and as with Wringhim in *Confessions*, a diabolical element is allowed as a possibility in *The Master of Ballantrae* in the form of James, who is the nominal 'Master'. With regard to characterisation of the novel's one female character, however, Stevenson fails to develop Alison, and the relationship between the two brothers is the main narrative focus. Where she does appear, Alison is a dull, uninsightful character, believing in Jacobitism more because it appeals to her idea of romance than because she has any understanding of its political implications. In this way women are dismissed from Stevenson's glimpse of history, marginalised through lack of intelligence and agency. Alison is representative of the sex which only operates on the periphery of the story.

John Buchan's *Witch Wood* (1927), is yet another historical novel in the tradition of Scott. The protagonist, Reverend David Sempill, stands amidst the opposing political factions existing in England in the 1640s. The political implications of civil war are mirrored by a

deeper, less rational aspect of society which 'civilisation' has failed to suppress, and which survives in Sempill's community in the shape of the wood, with all its associations with darkness and the pagan supernatural. As Cairns Craig explains, 'Buchan's historical novel confronts precisely the failure of history to have abolished the depths of the past, all the unforgotten things of memory...',[32] reinforcing his earlier claims that the failure of Scottish history precipitates a return to the pre-historical, primitive consciousness of Scottish myth and legend. The difference between *Witch Wood* and Neil Gunn's *Sun Circle* (1933), however, is that primitive Scotland is the focus of the later novel. It is not only the uncivilised threat lurking beneath the surface of society. Furthermore, where Katrine in *Witch Wood* is defined primarily by her embodiment of the heathenish wild wood in relation to David's rational Christianity, the male-female relationships in *Sun Circle* show at least some sign of recognising the female presence in history.

Although *Sun Circle* revolves around the male activity of war, there are women belonging to the Celto-Pictish tribe under attack who exercise a degree of power over their men-folk. Silis, wife of the leader Drust, is Christian, and although her attempt to fully convert her husband is in vain, her strength of will in refusing to renounce her new faith is apparent. Further, Breeta and Nessa, the novel's two main female characters, are restricted by their possible roles within a primitive society. Nevertheless their presence is necessary, and in many ways they are complicit in the progress of history. Breeta is the only fitting mate for the dark pagan, Aniel, both of whom represent their tribal past. Nessa, fair daughter of the chief, is symbolic of the future, never more so than when she mates with the Norseman Haakon, conqueror of her tribe. Gunn, however, does not present any serious challenge to male supremacy in *Sun Circle*, nor is this a primary concern of *Butcher's Broom* (1934) or *The Silver Darlings* (1941) which were to follow. Breeta and Nessa in *Sun Circle* are motivated by powerful sexual desire, yet the urgency they exhibit is less concerned with recognition of the limitations they experience as female characters, than with the mythical role they play as embodiments of specific racial characteristics. Gunn's interest lies in the patterns of darkness and light at the heart of his own history, and in the spiritual simplicity of the ancient peoples of Scotland, more than in the female experience of that history.

The development of Scottish historical fiction by male writers in the twentieth-century, in fact, has followed the ideology of *Sun Circle* to a degree. Colin MacKay's *The Song of the Forest* (1986) deals again with the primitive tribe, divided between the old pagan ways and the new Christian religion, whilst George Mackay Brown's *Vinland* (1992) explores the lives of those Northerners who made the first voyage from Iceland, to what became known

as the American Continent. Two novels which move away from these historical concerns, however, and toward examination of gender identity through history, are Christopher Whyte's *The Warlock of Strathearn* (1997), and Simon Taylor's *Mortimer's Deep* (1992). Both these novelists deal with gender: Christopher Whyte's eighteenth-century hero becomes a heroine, whilst Simon Taylor focuses on male-male relationships within St Columba's Priory on twelfth century Inchcolm. Yet although these novels are exceptions, I would argue that they indicate an interest among oppressed groups within society, in approaching historical fiction with a subversive revisionism which dislocates contemporary power structures by deconstructing their foundational principles. Just as the majority of those writers who have challenged gender stereotypes through historical fiction have been female, therefore, it is notable that examinations of same sex relationships in Scottish literature have also occasionally turned to history, as there is need for historical redress, and for establishing the existence of male-male sexual and emotional relationships in the past.

George Lukács, although providing a detailed evaluation of the social conditions which engendered the development of the historical novel, and tracing this development in a European context, fails to deal with female texts in *The Historical Novel* so completely that the reader might be forgiven for assuming that women had written no historical fiction at all. The relationship between women and history, of course, has been fraught with difficulty. In the hands of predominantly male historians, women have been either neglected, denigrated, or in the case of exceptional women, such as Catherine the Great of Russia or Joan of Arc, for example, made to fit male characteristics.[33] In most cases, the women who managed to infiltrate history books were not 'ordinary' women, and the women of which half of the human race has consisted have been relegated to the undervalued private, personal sphere, whilst the male dominated political arena has dominated historical narrative. Only in the latter half of the twentieth-century did historians, in fact, begin to fully appreciate and redress this gender imbalance, hitherto accepted and often unnoticed, within traditional histories. 'The earliest women's history', explains Judith Lowder Newton, 'sought to challenge traditional masculinist, "objective" "history" by making women visible, and by writing women into "history" '.[34] Newton argues that in writing women's history, 'traditional definitions of "history" itself would have to change',[35] and this is reiterated by Judith Zinsser's study of the impact of feminism on the study and construction of history, *History and Feminism: A Glass Half Full*. Zinsser explains, 'it was the new found feminism of the 1960s that inspired people to give form to women's past',[36] and to attempt the reassessment of histories which excluded half the

human race and concerned themselves mainly with those who 'achieved' within the male dominated political power sphere.[37] Joy Hendry discusses this in her essay 'Snug in the Asylum of Taciturnity: Women's History in Scotland', where she explains:

> In Scotland, the anthropologist/historian has come in with his notebook, right enough, but being a male person, he will unthinkingly record what is important according to masculine values: the affairs of state, 'intellectual' discourse, great inventions - the things obviously of public domain,[38]

and one casualty of this is that the sources for history have themselves been selectively discarded by male historians who recorded the lives of public figures, the majority of whom were male.

In rethinking the gendered focus of history, therefore, female historians are faced with the task of carefully reconsidering the male biased 'half-histories' they have been taught, and it is easy to imagine that female histories should record the achievements of powerful women, just as traditional historiography studies society from the point of view of powerful men. This would prove a false antidote, however, given that political power has not been exercised by women to the extent to which it has been by men.[39] There is little point in creating what Gerda Lerner calls 'compensatory history';[40] history which focuses on the few powerful women history offers such as Elizabeth I or Joan of Arc, in order to validate women's contributions to the past, as this ignores the reality and function of lives which were largely confined to domestic environments. Instead, the painstaking task must be undertaken to locate the snippets incidentally included in source material, and to reconstruct a picture of ordinary women's lives through the recovery of more personal primary sources and domestic artefacts, such as diaries, letters, and personal possessions.[41] This type of reconstruction is by necessity subjective, yet it is only as a result of it that 'the exclusive definition of history as the political experience of male elites'[42] is discarded.

In the same way as 'history' constructed by women can undermine notions of patriarchy, so too can historical fiction by women, and fiction has the added advantage of freedom with regard to the accuracy, and also to the realism, of women's representation; hence the varying uses of history in the fiction I am about to examine. In Naomi Mitchison's earlier fiction, as in Sian Hayton's, for instance, magical realism infiltrates a historical basis, subverting the restrictions of Ancient Greece and of tenth century Scotland. In Mitchison's Scottish novel, *The Bull Calves*, however, and in Margaret Elphinstone's *Islanders*, a more 'solid', realist attitude toward history is exemplified, and this time subversion occurs in the authors' fore-grounding of the domestic female sphere. Narrative recreation of the past with a female focus, whether historiography or fiction, embodies the same threat to

hegemonic discourse, displacing the central male values which previously constituted history, and destabilising the hierarchically opposed 'male'/'female' dichotomy. Further, by its very nature historical fiction poses a threat to the patriarchy, as fictionalising 'factual' elements undermines the supposed 'truth' and reliability of solid history.

The reasons which female purveyors of historical fiction may have for choosing a specific setting, or for choosing history at all, may vary, and an element of personal interest in a particular period must be acknowledged as a contributing factor. What seems more significant, however, is that irrespective of conscious choice, the three writers with whom I am engaging have based their fictional female characters within eras generally identified as patriarchal, and have then offered them opportunities to resist their marginalisation, and to articulate their own experiences. All three writers have realised their own position in relation to a past in which the female has been subjugated by society, which has viewed the male as 'the norm'. Each is aware of herself as the end result of a chain of historical events and desires to reinterpret the process from which she has resulted. This end result, suggests Hayden White, is where history and literature meet, and he explains that histories 'are present as the modes of relationships conceptualised in the myth, fable and folklore, scientific knowledge, religion, and literary art, of the historian's own culture'.[43] White views the present as the constantly evolving product of history. The contemporary cultural experience of a historian, therefore, or of a historical novelist, informs the way history is interpreted as the process by which this culture resulted. Necessarily, therefore, women are bound to form a different view of history from men, and having become aware of this, they may be inspired to revise the (male) perspective presented as 'the norm' by religious, social and educational patriarchal institutions. In looking to the past to trace the development which ends with themselves, women have encountered invisibility, and to create historical fiction, to imagine *female* voices within a revised past, provides women with a powerful way to redress the literary balance.

In this sense, therefore, the engagement made with history by Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone arguably exemplifies the New Historicist theory of history, which comprises amongst other things the belief that 'no historical scholar can be impartial; all investigators are influenced by their own backgrounds and circumstances'.[44] The texts with which I am to deal in this study attempt specifically to recreate history from a female perspective. Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone are aware of historical subjectivity, and aim to utilise this in order to examine the female role. New Historicism

itself did not appear until the 1980s, however, and feminist historians had already become aware of the partiality of hegemonic histories.

The way in which women have turned to revisionist history to discern the pasts from which they have developed, is also echoed, to an extent, by their exploitation of the fantasy genre. Like history, fantasy provides a similar opportunity to redress the imbalance in attention given to women, and that the writers I am focusing on have all produced fantasy fiction supports this. Fantasy and history offer similar opportunities to write the literature of estrangement; literature that allows writers to imagine situations in which women's lives can be divorced from the 'norms' of modern patriarchal civilisation, and in which gender roles are easier to revise. Both Naomi Mitchison and Sian Hayton, in fact, fuse the history and fantasy genres in their fiction, whilst all three writers have produced fantasy novels with contemporary or futuristic settings. What I am primarily concerned with, however, is their use of historical fantasy, and Mitchison's fiction in particular is invaluable, as throughout her prolific early career can be traced a dual development in her use of the two genres. Initially, she does not utilise fantasy to any real degree, yet neither does she seem able to place female characters actively in solid, realist history. As she moves towards her epic novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), however, her increased use of fantasy and magic allows her to examine the female role centre stage, prior to which she could only indulge her own desire for adventure through male characters.

Similarly, Sian Hayton's *Cells* trilogy introduces magic into Christian history, challenging the beliefs of the monks in each novel by bringing them face to face with supernatural women: anti-historical figures who undermine the realist nature of the monks' way of life. Again, the use of magic here is as a means of resistance to a history from which women have been excluded, from a tenth-century perspective, as well as from Hayton's own position at the twentieth-century 'end of history'. Hayton's own approach to history within *Cells* is of particular interest here, as in her 'Glossary' she urges the reader to delay enlightening themselves as to the banalities of the Scottish geography which are mapped on to the magical kingdom, until they have read the rest of the novel. The later engagement of mythological goddess figures with the twentieth-century realities of Strathclyde, provides a kind of 'shock value' for the reader, and cleverly illustrates the contrasting natures of this mythical, female-centred history, and the male history which recognisably ends with the post-industrial present.

This makes more significant the different approach which Mitchison takes in *The Bull Calves*, her Scottish novel of 1947. Here, witchcraft is explained psychologically, just as it is in Margaret Elphinstone's *Islanders* (1994). Supernatural agency is not required in either case to resist the constraints of history for female characters. Rather, both writers wish to challenge history on its own grounds; to disrupt it by acknowledging the boundaries it imposes and then by providing heroines who transgress these boundaries - without the aid of the supernatural.

This said, therefore, there is a discernible link between the early novels of Mitchison (Chapter 2), and Hayton's *Cells* trilogy (Chapter 4), and between *The Bull Calves* (Chapter 3), and *Islanders* (Chapter 5). The similarities between the fantastic and 'realist' models offered by these texts, as well as their fundamental differences, will be discussed in the coming chapters. Although contemporary society figures less obviously in historical settings than in, for example, urban fiction, my argument will proceed with an eye to the social and political developments affecting women within twentieth-century Scotland and will consider possible reasons for the continuing preoccupation with issues of gender in Scottish women's historical fiction.

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[1] Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (London: Blackwood, 1993), p. 1.

[2] Criticism of *Islanders* is limited to the following: Douglas Gifford, 'Contemporary Women Writers II: Seven Writers in Scotland', *A History of Scottish Women Writers* ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) pp. 604-629; Amanda J. McLeod, 'Redressing the Boundaries: Two Twelfth Century Fictional Communities', in *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 41 (November 2000), pp. 155-168;,Lisa Babinec, 'Between the Boundaries: An Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', *Edinburgh Review* 93 (1995), pp. 51-60. For criticism of Hayton's trilogy see Margaret Elphinstone, 'Contemporary Feminist Fantasy in the Scottish Literary Tradition' in *Tea and Leg Irons*, ed. by Caroline Gonda (London. Open Letters, 1992), pp. 62-83; 'Four Pioneering Scottish Novels', in *Chapman* 74-75, 'The Woman's Forum: Women in Scottish Literature' (Autumn/Winter 1993), pp. 23 -39; 'The Quest: Two Contemporary Adventures', in *Gendering the Nation*, ed. by Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 107-136.

[3] As noted above. See also 'The Location of Magic in Naomi Mitchison's *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*', in *Scottish Women's Fiction 1920s to 1960s: Journeys into Being*, ed. by Carol Anderson and Aileen Christianson. (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 2000), pp. 72-83.

[4] Margaret Elphinstone has written a number of contemporary short stories in the fantasy genre, such as 'The Green Man', and 'Conditions of Employment', both of which can be found in the collection of short stories, *An Apple from a Tree and Other Visions* (London: The Womens' Press, 1991). Sian Hayton's novel, *The Governors* (Nairn: Balnain Books, 1994) examines one woman's contemporary war with her body through her escape into a subterranean dream-world.

[5] Richard Holmes, 'Biography and Death', in Kennedy, A. L. and Fowles, J. eds., *New Writing 9 (*London. Vintage, 2000), pp. 387-410 (p. 390).

[6] For transcripts of interviews and correspondence, please see Appendices 1-4.

[7] Joy Hendry, 'Twentieth-century Scottish Women's Writing: The Nest of Singing Birds', *The History of Scottish Literature*, ed. by Cairns Craig, 4 vols (Aberdeen. Aberdeen University Press, 1987), IV , pp. 291-308 (p. 291).

[8] See in particular: Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture Et La Différence* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), and *Monolingualisom of the other*, or, *The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. By Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)

[9] Morris, p. 138.

[10] George Lukács, *The Historical Novel.* 1937. trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: The Merlin Press, 1989), p. 25.

[11] Lukács, p. 33.
[12] John MacQueen, *The Rise of the Historical Novel* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1989), p. 1. It should be noted, however, that MacQueen does not entirely agree with Lukács, suggesting that his account of Scott 'unfortunately combines occasional brilliant insights with a profound ignorance of Scottish literary and historical circumstances', p. 7.
[13] Lukács, p. 33.
[14] Lukács, p. 35.
[15] Lukács, p. 25.
[16] Lukács, p. 39.
[17] Marinell Ash, *The Strange Death of Scottish History* (Edinburgh: The Ramsay Head Press, 1980), p. 9.
[18] Ann Rigney, 'Adapting History to the Novel', *New Comparison: A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies*, 8: Beyond Translation. ed. by Susan Bassnett (Norwich: University of East Anglia, Autumn 1989), pp. 127-143. (p. 127).
[19] Rigney, p. 30.
[20] Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore and London. The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 89.
[21] White, *Tropics*, p. 98.
[22] White, *Tropics*, p. 94.
[23] Alison Light, 'Writing Fictions: Femininity and the 1950's', in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. by Jean Radford. (London. Kegan Paul, 1986), pp.139-165 (p. 139).
[24] Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*, (Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 117.
[25] Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, p. 118.
[26] Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer*, (London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd., 1936), p. 11-12.
[27] Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, p. 135.
[28] For further reading, see for example *The Polar Twins*, ed. by Edward J. Cowan and Douglas Gifford. (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1999), and *Neil Gunn's Country: Essays in Celebration of Neil Gunn*, ed. by Dairmid Gunn and Isobel Murray (Edinburgh: W & R Chambers Ltd., 1992).
[29] John O. Hayden, 'Jeanie Deans: The Big Lie (and a few small ones)', *SLJ*, vol. 1. no. 1 (May 1979), pp. 34-44.
[30] Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel: from Smollett to Spark*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 24.
[31] James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justufied Sinner*, 1824. (London: Everyman, 1992), p. 83.
[32] Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, p. 143.
[33] Judith P. Zinsser, *History and Feminism – A Glass Half Full* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 3.
[34] Judith Lowder Newton, 'History as Usual? Feminism and the "New Historicism" ', in *The New Historicism* ed. by H. Aram Veeser (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 152-167 (p. 154).
[35] Newton, p. 154.
[36] Zinsser, p. 17.
[37] Edward H. Carr, *What Is History?* 1961 (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 168.
[38] Joy Hendry, 'Snug in the Asylum of Taciturnity: Women's History in Scotland', in *The Manufacture of Scottish History*, ed. by Ian Donachie and Christopher Whatley (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), pp. 125-142 (p. 136).
[39] That the exceptions, such as Bodicea, or Cleopatra, are notable, is evidence itself.
[40] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 13.
[41] To a certain degree, fiction itself may contribute to this, but publishing restrictions meant that in the main, women who were fortunate enough to become writers had to exercise restraint.
[42] Zinsser, p. 18.
[43] White, *Tropics*, p. 94.
[44] Robert D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford. Oxford UP, 1999), p. 5.

Chapter 1

Unchallenging Histories: Early Historical Fiction and Later Historical Romance by Scottish Women.

Although I would argue that Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone engage with issues of gender in similarly challenging ways in their historical fiction, they have by no means been the sole female proponents of the historical genre in Scotland. Scottish women have produced novels which exploit a wide variety of historical settings, and from the late thirteenth-century exploits of William Wallace in Jane Porter's *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810), many of these novels have attempted a serious treatment of history. Yet where there is a distinction to be made between the pursuit of historical plausibility and a visible concern with the role of women in society, the majority of these novels has not offered any sustained challenge to hegemonic notions of gender, thus separating their authors from the three writers with whom this study is predominantly concerned.

This chapter concentrates specifically on three groups of historical novelists. The first group, Jane Porter, D. K. Broster, Margaret Irwin, Jane Lane, Eona Macnicol and Dorothy Dunnett, offer the reader Historical Romance at its best. Among a plethora of romance writers, these novelists provide well-crafted, often meticulously researched historical fiction, which offers the female reader a selection of spirited heroines. Ultimately, however, for each strong female character, a central male figure restores the balance of hegemony, and whether he comes in the form of dashing hero or brutal soldier, the female is necessarily subjugated by his power.

In the second group I have identified, the boldness of feminist expression found in the work of Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone is missing, yet writers quietly subvert the patriarchal structures of the societies in which their characters move; resisting strategies are more concrete, and novels such as Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen* (1890), Jane Findlater's *The Green Graves of Balgowrie* (1896), Violet Jacob's *Flemington* (1911) and Nancy Brysson Morrison's *The Gowk Storm* (1933) offer a less romantic, much more critical view of the past. These four novels vary in subject matter and in approach: the heroine of *Kirsteen*, for example, is far more successful in securing independence than are Lucie and Henrietta Marjoribanks in *The Green Graves*. Yet what makes them a cohesive group is the way in which they diverge from the genre of pasteboard romance, and the step they represent in the path toward a more overtly 'feminist' historical fiction.

Finally, the third group of novels addressed by this chapter is representative of a tendency toward the incorporation of fantasy into twentieth-century women's historical fiction. Mary Stewart, Marion Campbell and Dorothy K. Haynes do not successfully subvert history as Mitchison and Hayton do in using fantasy. Yet they move toward a more anthropological vision of history, in which the beliefs of ancient peoples are treated as significant motivating factors behind the structure of society.

With each of these three groups, my purpose has been to discuss novels that best represent those sub-genres falling under the umbrella term of 'popular historical fiction', and the co-existence, or at least the overlap, of these sub-genres in the development of Scottish women's writing defies absolute chronological separation. Some of the earlier novels dealt with here, such as Oliphant's *Kirsteen*, offer arguably more feminist interpretations of past situations than are the novels of Dorothy Dunnett, whose latest novel *Gemini*, was published in 2000. Labels are not fixed, nor am I attesting that Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone completely discard elements of romance in their fiction. The limits of this thesis, however, mean that I am unable to do justice to the ever-increasing mass of popular historical fiction, some of which is undoubtedly worthy of analysis, and this survey is far from exhaustive. What I am attempting here, therefore, is an analysis of the development of women's historical fiction as the crucial generic context from which Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone diverge, in structure, form and content.

In its earlier form, the historical novel was one of adventure. With English novelist Georgette Heyer, however, who began writing in the 1920s, historical fiction gradually moved toward the social comedy and the love story, and from this time forward was largely marketed by publishers such as Harlequin and Mills and Boon, as romance fiction for women. Historical romance is, as William Scheick explains, 'a loosely definable genre, incorporating history, the supernatural, adventure, mystery and science fiction',[1] and according to Helen Hughes in *The Historical Romance* (1993), recent critical attention to the historical romance genre has been divided into two camps regarding the question of whether the genre has provided positive female role models. There are those who believe, like Hughes herself, that a historical setting 'allowed a return in imagination to a time when sexual morality was strict and gender roles clearly defined',[2] and others who argue that historical settings in fact allow female characters to take on a 'male' role. Certainly, narratives are often male-centred both in terms of character and inspiration, and although the heroines of many historical romance novels do assert their ability to fulfil the active role normally reserved for the male, she is inevitably forced to modify her strength 'if she

is to be fully socialised'.[3] The generic romantic heroine remains spirited, but dominated: clever, perhaps, but expected to use this to further the hero's cause rather than to her own advantage. Whilst he may engage in sexual relationships with a number of women, the status of heroine disallows her from pursuit of her own sexual fulfilment: she must be chaste above all. Therefore whilst a survey of selected historical fiction reveals a degree of challenge to gender stereotypes, the dominant male ideology remains, on the whole, intact.

In Scotland in particular the historical branch of popular fiction has flourished, largely owing to cultural phenomena surrounding the appeal of the largely mythical Scottish past. As Francis Russell Hart explains, in the years following the publication of Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves* (1947),

> there have been few signs in station bookracks or druggists' paperback shelves that Scotland has lost its unique position as the stereotypical land of popular romance. Perhaps only a social anthropologist could hope to interpret the current hunger for the Gothic, but it persists...[4]

The prolific output of popular historical romance, particularly by a school of women writing around the time of the Second World War and extending into the 1970's and 80's, explains Moira Burgess, arguably reflects a culture ripe for the flourishing of literature which offered high drama and entertainment. Producing epic and detailed narratives based broadly on Scottish myth and history, many of the writers within this group took pride in their attention to history proper, and in most cases the rich fabric of history is woven for the reader in order to create an authentic backdrop against which characters indulge in fictional adventures.

One reason for the positive reception of the popular romance, which has in Scotland most often been historical, is that the production of literary texts in the 1950s, 60s and 70s was controlled by a mass market which had not been in place during the earlier decades of the century. As Janice Radway explains in her study of romance fiction,[5] critics tend to assume that sociological explanations, textual features or generic popularity must be the result of ideological shifts in the surrounding culture, when in fact popularity owes a great deal to distribution and accessibility. If this is true, we must recognise the possibility that the demand for historical, as for other romance fiction, can be partially attributed to artificial augmentation by publishers, rather than to the specific desires of female audiences. Media and mass marketing strategies are powerful tools, and this has undoubtedly contributed to the success of the genre. Nevertheless, there must be a receptive audience in any such case, and considering the massive amount of historical romance actually produced by writers

like Dorothy Dunnett, Jane Oliver, Jean Plaidy and so on, there must have been a winning formula which kept the female public buying the books.

An important point to consider is that few other writers, particularly in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, were writing about history. Fictional subject matter had in the main shifted away from the historical as a genre. In England, the most notable fiction produced over this long period came from writers like Graham Greene and Alan Sillitoe, whilst in Scotland, novelists such as George Mackay Brown, Muriel Spark and Robin Jenkins dominated the literary scene. When George Mackay Brown published *Magnus* in 1973, this represented a different approach to historical fiction from that taken in the early part of the century. The novel shifted away from romance in form and tone, toward a view of the past as intrinsically connected to the present. By 1970, literature in general had emerged from modernism and struggled with postmodernism, and the writing style exhibited by many authors, broadly speaking, had altered fiction to an extent probably unimagined by pre-war writers. Alternatives to the realist form can be found in much of the new writing originating between 1947 and 1987, which became increasingly varied. Nevertheless, a parallel to this emerges as we look at historical fiction.

In the main, I am concerned here with writers, almost all of whom are female (or posing as female) and almost all of whom have written historical fiction with an outlook which sets their fiction apart from writers like Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone.[6] Writers such as D. K. Broster, Margaret Irwin, Jane Lane, Eona Macnicol, and Dorothy Dunnett, were not using the historical novel to explore serious issues which affected their own lives as women in Scotland or the role of women in society. Rather, they viewed the fictionalisation of history either as 'colour and backcloth'[7] for love and adventure stories, or with the intention of fictionalising history from the point of view most readily accepted: the male. Remaining true to fact wherever possible, these writers did not endeavour to bring history to life for any subversive purpose, and often the results are consequently excerpts from history, rewritten for the masses in a digestible fictionalised form. Their continuing popularity and availability testify to the narrative skill of these women, yet with regard to the portrayal of gender structures, popular historical romance reveals - perhaps unwittingly - the mass perception of male-female roles in contemporary Scottish society which still codes male as active, female as passive.

In 'Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different', Ann Barr suggests that romance is a literary form in which 'pleasure for women is men',[8] and although this

simplifies the genre too extremely, there is an element of truth in the assertion. Despite providing an elaborately woven historical backdrop for characters and events, popular historical romance novels provide readers with a comfortingly stereotypical image of male-female relationships. This image, of active, strong-willed heroes, and virtuous, supportive heroines, was established long before the twentieth-century 'school' became identifiable, and in fact the earliest Scottish female writer to claim that her novels were truly 'historical' was Jane Porter, whose 1810 novel, *The Scottish Chiefs* pre-dates Scott's *Waverley* by four years. The second of her two most widely known historical novels,[9] *The Scottish Chiefs* was the book which confirmed Porter as a novelist, and is the only one to deal exclusively with Scottish affairs. *The Scottish Chiefs* concentrates on the life and loves of William Wallace, and follows history to Robert the Bruce's success at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. The narrative is laden with romantic rhetoric, and Porter spares nothing in her glorification of Wallace's heroic deeds. Although the novel is a self-professed romance, however, Porter insisted on its factual historical basis, and even if some of the sources from which this 'fact' is supposed to come are not entirely dependable, such as Blind Harry's *The Wallace*,[10] even the most severe critic is loathe to deny the academic rigour with which Porter engages her narrative with historical detail in footnote form, covering numerous references from the location of historical buildings, to documents catalogued by historians of her age.

Admittedly, the heroics of Wallace are romantic in the extreme. By comparison with the villainous English king, for example, Wallace's commission

> was, not to destroy, but to save; and though he carried his victorious army to feed on the Southren plains, and sent the harvests of England, to restore the wasted fields of Scotland, yet he did no more. No fire, blasted his path; no innocent blood, cried against him from the ground!' (*SC* 13)[11]

He urges the more reckless of his followers to considers themselves 'soldiers of the All-powerful God', and convinces them that they are fighting only for the wealth of their country, and not to avenge blood. Ironically, his own desire to avenge the murder of his wife Marion is the driving force behind his heroism. Yet the personal injury is made national. Marion's death becomes one injury too many, not only for Wallace, but for Scotland herself, and thus Wallace's personal revenge is translated into noble nationalist cause.

There is little serious attention paid to female characters in the novel, yet Carol Anderson and Aileen Riddell have argued that the portrayal of the youthful Lady Joanna Mar in the novel is complex and that her tragic end, a direct consequence of Wallace's rejection, pre-

figures the madwoman of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847).[12] Although Joanna is undoubtedly an interesting character, however, the over-riding image Porter ascribes to her is more akin to earthly, romantic woman than it is to saint, a position that is adequately filled both by Wallace's first virgin bride, Marion, and later again by his second, Helen. Having fallen from grace early, on the other hand, Joanna Mar is forced to quickly marry her ageing husband, and upon declaring her love for Wallace whilst her husband is still alive, she is rejected with all the moral seriousness of an era - Porter's own nineteenth-century - which upheld the sanctity of marriage. Joanna's indifferent moral values are greeted with disapproval by Wallace, and, we might assume, from the author herself. As Joanna is reminded by her nephew, her active pursuit of Wallace is doomed when the immorality of her appeal is compared with the virtue of the hero himself:

> "Could he approve affections, which a wife transferred to him from her husband; and that husband his friend?... Ah! my aunt! what could you look for as the consequence of this? My uncle yet lived, when you did this! and that act, were you youthful as Hebe, and more tender than ever was fabled of the queen of love, I am sure the virtue of Wallace would never pardon. He never could pledge his faith, to one, whose passions has so far silenced her sense of duty..." (*SC* 122)

Wallace, in fact, can only find love again with Joanna's step-daughter Helen, a woman in whom the image of the noble and virtuous Scotland can reside. A woman such as Joanna who realises the power of her own sexuality, is unworthy, and even the marital consummation which takes place between Wallace and Helen is a strangely chaste affair; spiritual consummation is set above physical intimacy in Porter's representation of Wallace's death at the hands of his English executioner:

> as one who believed herself standing on the brink of eternity, she longed to share also that mark of death... "I will follow him," cried she, starting from her knees, "into the grave itself!"
>
> What was said, what was done, she knew not, till she found herself on the scaffold... Wallace stood before her, with his hands bound across, and his noble head uncovered. His eyes were turned upwards, with a martyr's confidence in the power he serves... The executioner approached, to throw the rope over the neck of his victim. At this sight, Helen, with a cry... rushed to his bosom. Wallace, with a mighty strength, burst the bands asunder which confined his arms, and clasping her to him with a force that seemed to make her touch his very heart; his breast heaved, as if his soul were breaking from its outraged tenement... (*SC* 362)

Helen, in every sense, represents the generic romantic heroine; spirited, yet emotional, fiercely loyal, yet chaste, and whose function is as the support of a great man. Her strength is suitably challenged by physical and emotional exertion, and her acceptance of Wallace's constant references to his former wife are positively saintly.

The assertion made by critics such as Ian Dennis,[13] therefore, that *The Scottish Chiefs* bears all the marks of stereotypical romance, is upheld. The historical novel provides opportunity for the past to take on the appeal of the legendary, allowing the reader to vicariously enjoy the pleasures of national glory, embodied by the character of Wallace. Yet Jane Porter demonstrates the fine line often walked between 'popular' historical fiction, and the type of historical fiction created shortly afterwards by Walter Scott, and lauded by George Lukács, in which 'important figures' were allowed to 'grow out of the being of the age'. Scott, Lukács argues, 'never explains the age from the position of its great representatives, as do the Romantic hero-worshippers'. Instead, in the historical novel as 'created' by Scott,

> the being of the age can only appear as a broad and many-sided picture if the everyday life of the people, the joys and the sorrows, crises and confusions of average human beings are portrayed.[14]

Porter, in investing the progress of history in the hands of William Wallace, has not approached history in this way. Nor, as it transpired, did many of the twentieth-century female writers who were to follow her in creating what came to be identified by literary critics as 'Popular Historical Romance'.

The progress of history in novels such as D. K. Broster's *The Dark Mile* (1929) or Margaret Irwin's *The Gay Galliard* (1941), is again represented as the prerogative of male heroes. Broster's novel is in the tradition of the best Jacobite romances, in which two young lovers, Iain and Olivia, are sworn enemies who therefore cannot marry; a Stewart and a Campbell respectively. The novel is not devoid of historical interest, and characters are drawn in some psychological depth. Nevertheless, its focus rests on the sentimental aspects of political division, and the love dilemma is eventually resolved when Iain discovers that Olivia is only an adopted Campbell, intelligence she does not command herself. In any case, the political enmity which separates the two, although known to both, is seen to proffer a more serious hindrance to the hero than it does to the heroine, and the novel concludes with Olivia's acceptance of the news that they can marry after all, without demanding to ascertain the cause of this happy turn of events. Whatever Olivia actually thinks of the news that her father was not in fact her father is left undisclosed, as the reader witnesses her reaction only through Iain's eyes. Her meek response firmly establishes her as conventional romance heroine, willing to sacrifice whatever necessary - in this case the security of her belief in her false paternity - in order to be united with her lover, as the following extract shows:

> ... his love [was] not as other women. She had a soul as nobly clear as the water by which she stood, and gallant as any paladins. She did not even wait to learn the price required of her.
>
> "I think I would come across yonder loch to you - and that with no

> bridge at all! Only tell me the way quickly... I will be as brave as I can."[sic] (*DM* 362)[15]

This example of male agency in contrast with female passivity is more obvious still in Irwin's *The Gay Galliard: The Love Story of Mary Queen of Scots*. Here, the novel approaches the topic of its subheading, not with the voice of Mary herself, but instead from the point of view of her gallant courtier, and later husband, the Earl of Bothwell. The historical fabric of the novel is richly woven, and the narrative itself well crafted. Irwin's exploitation of historical data is admirable, and she succeeds in providing a largely accurate representation of the politics of Mary's court. Yet Mary herself is not central; instead she provides the novel with a romantic figurehead around whom men struggle in their attempts to overthrow, protect, support or even marry her. The main player, Bothwell, bears all the markings of a Byronic hero: well bred yet constantly battling with poverty; courageous yet misunderstood, and of course, loved by women, though much less so by their husbands. At their first meeting it is Mary's sexual characteristics which Bothwell immediately appraises, and in noting her boyish figure, he makes a quick and dismissive analysis: 'She was not of a stock he'd care to breed from' (*GG* 58).[16] He shrewdly perceives her strengths and weaknesses, and unlike the other men she charms, Bothwell is portrayed as one of few men who can identify her faults. Naturally, these turn out to be 'feminine', such as her ability to forgive:

> He was baffled by that odd ignorance of human nature which he had always noticed in her, in spite of her grasp of affairs that so impressed the politicians, and, just now, himself. (*GG* 135)

Although she is Queen, she is portrayed as inexpert at appreciating and using the power she has, wishing instead that she could be more like Bothwell, who is after all the real hero of Irwin's historical romance. 'I have always wished to be a man' (*GG* 156), says Mary, and ironically enough, it is only apparently a male perspective that can give form to her own love story. A woman in power cannot be allowed agency in this novel, and this problem is notable in many Scottish women's historical novels, particularly in Mitchison's own early work, which I will return to.

In spite of the criticisms that can be levelled at Irwin's novel, however, it is worth noting that in contrast with a male treatment of the topic of Mary, *The Gay Galliard* does compare favourably. Nigel Tranter's *The Queen's Grace* (1953), although not attempting such epic coverage of Mary's life, nevertheless portrays many of the same characters and events as *The Gay Galliard*. Again, the focus rests on a male character, this time a relatively undistinguished member of the Clan Gordon. Yet although the political picture is painted

in detail, the plight of Mary merely provides a back-cloth for Patrick Gordon's romantic pursuit of one of her ladies-in-waiting, Mary Mackintosh, who displays all the traits of another stock heroine.

A novel in which this insistence on the male-centred movement of history is disrupted, at least in part, is Jane Lane's *He Stooped to Conquer* (1944). In this novel, which tells of the Massacre of Glencoe (1692), historical activity revolves around the hierarchical chain of male soldiers, who are set against the clansmen of Glencoe. Although remaining as close to historical report as she can, Lane foregrounds the significance of Fiona, daughter-in-law of the Chief, who ultimately saves his people. Fiona's part in history is acknowledged by her husband in the following extract:

> Alasdair [...] knew that, by the mercy of God and the courage of a beloved woman, and the fundamental decency of common soldiers [...] victory might yet be snatched from this inferno of treachery and blood.[17] (*HSC* 229)

Alasdair describes Fiona as 'his race personified' at one point, 'answering the challenge of treachery and oppression with the determination to survive, to hit back, to go down fighting' (*HSC*, 221), and in this Lane subverts the passivity usually allocated to female characters whose role is traditionally a supportive one. Returning to historian Gerda Lerner's insistence that it is unhelpful to challenge male history by replacing male public figures with female, here, Lane appears to be moving in a positive direction regarding the female role in history. Fiona is portrayed as an 'ordinary' wife and mother, and yet her remarkable courage secures her a pivotal role in the events surrounding the Glencoe Massacre.

This is reinforced by Lane's characterisation of another female figure in the novel, Morag, who, we become aware, is at the mercy of her unchannelled sexuality. With little opportunity to exercise her romantic and physical desire, she fixates on the cold-hearted Sergeant Berber, to whom she eventually surrenders her pent up passion. Yet almost as soon as she has done so she regrets her decision, hating herself for her actions, but, significantly, hating him more. Latterly, added to personal betrayal is his guilt in betraying the clan itself, and Morag's lust turns to equally violent hatred as she fights him for her life. Far from embodying the image of meek, passive victim, here, Morag's single-minded savagery subverts Berber's notions of her desire to be mastered, and in the end, he is emasculated:

> He was fighting in the dark now, and the thought of that she-devil hovering over him with her dirk stole from him the last shreds of his pride. He screamed, he positively screamed, for help. (*HSC* 177)

At first glance, Morag is not an attractive character. Her overwhelming battle with lust makes her selfish and anti-social, and her blatant attempts to attract Berber's attention make her appear slightly pathetic. What Lane foregrounds in an unusual way, however, is the existence of female desire, and Morag's demands for sexual fulfilment. In generic romance novels, sexual desire is portrayed euphemistically. The heroine may seek the attentions of her lover, and may enjoy what she receives, but sexuality is never associated with negative, violent, frustration as it is here. Morag is a victim of a patriarchal community which fails to provide her with choices; she is unable to experience the distractions a city might offer, and her betrothal is made by her father without consideration for her own preference. She is neither 'good', nor meek, nor beloved of God, and in giving vent to her sexuality she unleashes the violence and hatred which leads to her attack on Berber. She is not allowed to survive; ultimately history can find no place for violence and lust within the female. Nevertheless, her successful attempt to leave Berber with a scar suggests that Lane appreciates the unfairness of stereotypical sexual roles which associates sexually active males with virility, whilst females are expected to provide passive access.

In contrast, however, Eona Macnicol's *Lamp in the Night Wind* (1965) pays almost no attention to women at all. Concerned with the arrival of Colum (who will later become St. Columba) in Scotland in the sixth century (or 'Dalriada' as it was then known), the novel focuses on the political and religious situations which arise. Colum encounters the occasional woman, such as the King's aunt, Lluan, and the young slave girl Muirne. Yet they are no more than catalysts, precipitating the reaction of various male figures of authority in the text, and providing Colum with the opportunity to teach someone a lesson about God. The slave girl, therefore, has no voice in the text. She is there to be rescued and no more. The novel maintains an entirely male perspective on history, and Macnicol is more successful in promoting the virtues of Christianity than in discussing issues relating to gender.

Very few writers of popular romance fiction, historical, fantastic or otherwise, are credited with a mention in works of literary criticism. Yet the one name mentioned by Francis Hart in *The Scottish Novel*, by Moira Burgess in 'The Modern Historical Tradition',[18] and by Alan Bold in *Modern Scottish Literature*, is Dorothy Dunnett. Dunnett's historical output began with *The Game of Kings* in 1961, and this was followed by five other novels in the same series: *Queen's Play* (1964), *The Disorderly Knights* (1966), *Pawn in Frankincense* (1969), *The Ringed Castle* (1971) and *Checkmate* (1975). This sequence, known as the

'Lymond Series' after the name of its central character, Francis Crawford of Lymond, was joined by a second series entitled *The House of Niccolo,* beginning with *Niccolo Rising* in 1986 and yet to reach its conclusion, the most recent addition being *Gemini* (2000). Significantly, Dunnett is discussed by all of the aforementioned critics, alongside Naomi Mitchison. Both women are viewed by Hart as writers who helped liberate Scottish Romance from the bonds of realism, and Burgess asserts that their writing similarly parallels a 'deepening interest in women's history on a wider scale'.[19] Whilst the former claim is to some degree justified, the latter, I would argue, is not. Although retracing women's history has become recognised by feminists increasingly as a necessary step in the process of attaining social recognition of what women have contributed to the shaping of the past, there is little evidence to suggest that writers of historical romance were interested in celebrating aspects of female identity which rebelled against patriarchal hegemony. Dunnett's heroines, therefore, whilst displaying varying combinations of 'spirit', 'courage' and 'loyalty', also embody the requisite amount of decorum. As Douglas Gifford points out, 'characters seem "modern", their love stories the most important element',[20] and at no point do women benefit from stepping outwith the boundaries of generic etiquette.

In all Dunnett's novels, women are given traditional roles, and both her *Niccolo* and *Lymond* series revolve around the activities of male heroes. Francis Crawford of Lymond is, in the tradition of many historical heroes, 'an adventurer, a charismatic hero, frequently battered by physical, mental and emotional assaults but never quite destroyed',[21] and as Francis Hart points out with regard to the series:

> It is difficult to recall a single romantic or mythic topos that is not included: the hero's mysterious birth and lineage; his love-hate struggles with his civil, prudent brother; his odyssey in quest of his bastard son, twin to the son of his archenemy... his miraculous victories, betrayals, survivals.[22]

Lymond is a superhumanly clever and athletic character, and frequently displays an incredible acting ability. In the second novel of the series *Queen's Play* (1964), he spends a good part of the novel disguised as a drunken Irish 'olaf' or manservant, and punishes his body by maintaining intoxicating levels of alcohol intake for months at a time, in order to cloak his function as part of the royal household of Mary Queen of Scots. He is strong, agile, and beautiful, and indeed Dunnett draws for us a portrait of effeminate beauty, rather than one of rugged masculinity, for all his masculine pursuits, which identifies his characterisation further with those found in the popular romantic novel. Janice Radway explains:

> Although the romance's mimetic effect can be traced to several linguistic devices, one of the most crucial is the genre's careful attention to the style,

> colour, and detail of women's fashions. Extended descriptions of apparel figure repeatedly in all variations of the form, but they are especially prominent in gothics and long historicals.[23]

One of the pleasures of escapist literature is that it offers readers a glamorous alternative to reality, and the historic period of the Middle Ages provides adequate material. Certainly Francis, along with his mother and sister-in-law, is described on countless occasions in terms of his lacy cuffs and golden hair.

Effeminate beauty aside, however, there is little similarity between the gender coding of Lymond himself, and the coding of the novels' female characters. Moira Burgess argues that,

> if there are strongly traditional elements in Dunnett's historical fiction, there is also a strand which may be seen as something fairly unusual in the conventional historical novel... It is the presence, centre stage but not necessarily in the role of heroine, of a strong woman...[24]

She claims that although the women take no direct part in the action of Dunnett's novels, they are an intelligent and independent set of characters who 'are seen to form a powerful and plausible force behind the men who do.' Yet the evidence Burgess uses to support this is unconvincing. Characters like Sybilla in Dunnett's Lymond Series may well have a mind of their own, but Burgess's claim that Sybilla's lack of action is due to Dunnett's fear of anachronism is surely an invalid defence in light of the action Christian Stewart in *The Game of Kings* (1961) takes, galloping cross-country although she is blind, in order to save the hero. If this degree of action is acceptable why not have more of the same? Further, Dunnett freely imagines unlikely meetings between historical and non-historical characters in her fiction, and as Burgess herself notes in relation to dialogue:

> Dunnett's dialogue... is essentially her own, a stylised mode of speech which suits the flamboyance of the books, though once again it is hard to believe that anyone, then or now, ever talked in quite this way.[25]

In any case, the likelihood of any fictional work being free of anachronism is slight. Writers may attempt to portray the historical setting within which characters move as accurately as possible, and with regard to Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone, the observance of and deviation from history are often an indication of the type of historical fiction they are producing. Mitchison's early novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931) and Hayton's *Cells* trilogy (1989-93), for example, challenge history through the introduction of supernatural agency, whilst Mitchison's *The Bull Calves* (1947) and Elphinstone's *Islanders* (1994) take history and fictionalise it from a more realist perspective, but replace the phallocentric view of history with a more female-focused, domestic examination of a specific historical era. In all of these cases, the necessity of anachronism serves to highlight the difficulties of approaching history from a

female point of view, whereas in Dunnett's case, the unlikely events which occur do nothing but reinforce the hegemonic relationship between the sexes.

There is no doubt that individual female characters are afforded some respect in Dunnett's novels. Nevertheless women in general are quite definitely typecast by their relationship to men. For example, in the following episode, Lymond and his men have just won a wrestling contest against the locals at an inn, in which the prize is whatever 'kitty' (women) presently 'belong' to their opponents:

> Lymond, released, flung his head back and, viewing his winnings, gave them solemn dispensation to descend for the space of the dance. He asked for and obtained some chalk, and set to marking his and Mat's property where the cross was most obvious and the whim most appreciated. (*GK* 201)

There is no challenge to this assertion of masculinity. In fact, the girls involved squeal 'in flattered excitement' (*GK* 201) in their role as the acquisitions which reassert the masculinity of the winning group of men. There are definite distinctions made, too, between those who are considered to be respectable (and therefore 'good') women, and those deemed morally reprehensible in some way. Lymond himself 'performs actions which outrage the civilised society of his day... but he is basically good - we have no doubt of that',[26] therefore whilst it is perfectly acceptable for him to play flirtatious games with Margaret Erskine in an attempt to make her feel uncomfortable, it is a different story when Margaret Douglas tries to use the same tactics, at which point Lymond rejects her invitation with a flippant, 'Shall I come? God, no darling, I like my sluts honest' (*GK* 306). Whilst Douglas is awarded the title of 'slut', Lymond's own sexual exploits only contribute to his attractions as a 'loveable rogue'.

In spite of the dramatic changes taking place during this period, Dunnett's novels return to a moral code predating Mitchison's. Stereotypical gender roles are reinforced and celebrated in Dunnett's fiction where Mitchison challenged male supremacy, and the reasons for this difference in outlook are relevant in attempting to assess the relationship between female writers of the period in which Dunnett was writing, and the gendered world in which they found themselves. Until 1939, domestic service had been the single biggest employment outlet for women,[27] and just as in World War I, the Second World War gave many women opportunities to learn new skills and to complete training in different trades. As there had been following World War I, however, there was again a reassertion of the status quo following World War II which tried to re-establish men in the professions in which women had been active during wartime. Nevertheless, post 1945, the shift away from Scotland's heavy industrial economy toward professions such as teaching,

nursing and retailing, meant a demand for women's labour previously non-existent, and the standard pattern of domestic service, followed by marriage and childbearing, was replaced by a new generation of women who were aware that there were other possibilities. The recovery of the Western European economy in the 1950s reinforced this, creating new types of consumer demand for previously undeveloped trade in luxurious commodities and retailing. Women, with their new affluence, were able for the first time to direct markets and challenge the establishment in doing so.

The 'Swinging sixties' took this a step further, with the transformation of sexual attitudes and behaviour, aided by the widened availability of contraception, the Abortion Act and the Family Planning Act, both passed in 1967. With this new wave of feminism it might be expected, therefore, that the female book-readers would be less willing to accept literature which reinforced the stereotypical notions of gender identity from which they were becoming slowly liberated by processes of social and political change. Yet in spite of these positive changes, life was not instantly more liberated for many women - particularly in Scotland. True, there were new icons such as Germaine Greer, but for a lot of Scottish women throughout the 1960s and 70s, everyday morality remained largely unchanged; and indeed for every feminist icon, a non-feminist figure such as Marilyn Monroe evened the balance. Of course, it is difficult not to generalise. There *were* rebels who were unwilling to conform, and statistics reporting increasing divorce rates do suggest a move away from the social stigma attached to failed marriages. Nevertheless, as Arthur McIvor notes,

> The vacuous nature and ineffectiveness of the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination legislation of the 1970's proved how deep-rooted patriarchal values are within British society. Scottish women continued to be confined to less responsible, low status and low paid jobs within almost all sectors...[28]

Moreover, the notion of 'bad' and 'good' girls still existed – acceptability effectively still hinged on sexual repression, and this did not alter significantly until the 1980s. Therefore although there were changes in lifestyles, living standards and opportunities between the 1950s and 60s,

> the phrase 'cultural revolution'... may or may not be an appropriate one. It is clearly contentious... From the left it is contended that no fundamental shifts in the structure of power, no serious attacks on the deprivations suffered by substantial minorities [e.g., women], took place, and that those features of 1960's culture which hit the headlines were shallow, commercial and sexist. From the right, it is argued that the steady abandonment since the war of older disciplines and older values escalated into an orgy of self-indulgence supported on income which had not been earned.[29]

To this situation was added a substantial increase in the emigration rate which also affected the way Scottish society and gender roles were perceived. Economically, Britain experienced hardship as a result both of World War II, and of the fact that, whilst the Gross National Profit for Britain as a whole was improving, Scottish industry had seen its heyday in the nineteenth-century. Between 1945 and 1960, unemployment rose, and by 1960 the country's staple industries: shipbuilding, engineering, specialised steel manufacture and coal mining, were continuing to grind down,[30] resulting in a substantial increase in the rate of migration from Scotland as the population moved south of the border, or overseas, in search of employment.

This was not a new trend. The second half of the nineteenth-century, following the clearances, had seen a similarly massive rate of emigration west to the United States and Canada, resulting in the flourishing of what came to be known as 'kailyard' fiction, particularly popular amongst those overseas who romanticised their homeland. Emigration reached new and greater heights, however, in the 1950s and still harsher 1960s, and undoubtedly this accounts at least in part for the flourish of popular historical romance, which, it could be argued, provided the new wave of emigrants with a similarly rose-tinted view of Scotland, and appealed to a sense of stereotypical national identity trampled by the depression of the post-war years. As T. C. Smout explains in his essay 'Patterns of Culture', 'One of the themes of Scottish History since the Union of Parliaments of 1707, has been the erosion of the distinctive culture and identity of an ancient nation';[31] that said, he suggests that following World War I, the pattern of Anglicisation gave way to such striking political assertions of Scotland's consciousness as an independent nation, and that the nation as a whole became more self-consciously 'Scottish'. Although this national consciousness may appear to be positive, the media's increased grip on the population, both at home and abroad, means that

> [m]uch anxious consideration has been afforded to the question of what Tom Nairn has called 'cultural sub-nationalism', that is to say the attachment of Scots to such trivial symbols of distinction as tartan kilts, shortbread and Granny's hieland hame,[32]

and the fact that Scottish literature (both poetry and fiction) has been critically acclaimed throughout the twentieth-century, has, Nairn says,

> made little impact on popular consciousness, which would indeed identify the television series 'Dr Finlay's Casebook' as more quintessentially Scottish than MacDiarmid's great poems in 'A Drunk Man Looks At The Thistle'.[33]

Whether or not we accept this as a problem, it was a fact that particularly following World War II there was the need within Scotland for national images; even if for Scotlands which did not exist outside the imagination, and which were therefore as much imaginary

creations as the Scotland remembered by ex-patriots. Consequently, if we take 'Romance' to provide an 'exceptional interlude in the reality of mundane life',[34] conditions for the flourishing of popular historical romance would seem to be ripe. Historical Romance was *necessary* to popular culture as a focal point for the meeting between an ideal, and historical Scotland. As Francis Hart says, 'In Scottish fiction the prose romance and the historical novel came into being together, and Scottish romance since then has carried the ironic burden of the national past'.[35]

The image of 'Scottish national character' which was consequently created in Scotland with its wild fighters and comely lassies, was not, and is not, congenial to gender equality. Female characters in these historical romance novels, therefore, such as Christian Stewart in Dunnett's *Game of Kings*, who take an active part in the fight to save Scotland from the English, are rewarded for their bravery by 'death in the line of duty'. In Christian's case, moreover, this turns out to be unsuccessful duty, as the crucial papers she believes she is carrying turn out to be blank sheets; she has no part to play after all. When the bulk of women's readership pick up a historical romance, therefore, it is likely that they do not expect to be presented with ideological or gender challenges. The expectation is of a celebration of hegemonic discourse with which the reader can feel comfortable. The excitement of an adventure is anticipated, and of a hero whom one can forgive for his misogyny because he is representative of an accurately depicted patriarchal society. Feminism need not apply, and it is not inconceivable that historical romance could in this way function as a sort of comfort zone; a backlash in effect, against the tide of relative independence and challenge which the women's movement of the 1960s afforded.[36] Traditionalists were not all men after all; not every woman was ready to fight for equality and greater sexual freedom, and not all approved of the 'permissiveness' which was becoming a byword for the 1960s.[37]

Perhaps the popularity of popular romance fiction, therefore, is not as strange as it may first appear, and given that as Marwick points out, 'Not all women writers were feminists',[38] it may seem unfair to criticise those women who resisted feminism, if challenge to the status quo was not their intention. It is perhaps all too easy to point out stereotyping and lack of psychological dimension in popular historical romance novels, and to criticise romancers for producing what George Lukács has described as 'mere costumery', interested only in 'the curiosities and oddities of the milieu'.[39] Nevertheless, it must be remembered that these writers had little pretension to do anything other than entertain - albeit in a way which was as true to the standard male histories as they could

make it - and with inevitable distortions as a result. Part of the reason for this, however, was that many writers attempted to emulate Scott's complex political motivations in a way that Mitchison and the later writers did not, yet unlike Scott, they are accused of creating characters who lack development. There are heroes and villains, friends and foes, with a substantial amount of intermittent melodrama. Dunnett and her contemporaries are all greatly indebted to Scott, and Jane Oliver in fact fictionalised his life in the novel *The Blue Heaven Bends Over All* (1971). Yet in their reverence for Scott's attention to detail and formulae, they lose something indeterminate. Scott, after all, based his historical novels on the principle that history should be viewed through the eyes of men not manners, and although not all of his writing matches the achievement of *Waverley* or *Old Mortality*, his manipulation of history is convincing, anachronisms notwithstanding.

Dorothy Dunnett's fiction uses Scott's fictional blueprint in a way which, although colourful, is often more mechanical than fluent, and his flair for vivid and balanced description often reads as lists of adjectives in her hands. She romanticises characters and location in order to create a Scotland apparently long forgotten, and, more realistically, a Scotland that never existed. Amidst the fighting and brutality of *The Game of Kings*, for example, we are left with the enduring reassurance that the hero's bravery rests on the fact that he is Scottish, that the glens and rivers of Scotland are the world's most beautiful, and that the ability to endure the hardships of such uncompromising terrain is a shared heritage to be proud of.

We are also assured, however, of his male supremacy in this ability to endure. Moira Burgess's assertion that the women in these novels are strong, therefore, is difficult to justify, particularly as female characters are often so little scrutinised that development is difficult to trace. The difference between Mitchison and Dunnett - between 'popular' and what is deemed simply 'historical' fiction, therefore, is not one of intellect, but rather one of intent. Where Mitchison's fictional accounts of the ancient world transpose and challenge the moral structure of the British Empire in the 1920s, with all its associated gender restrictions, for example, Dunnett's sixteenth-century France, it could be argued, is almost the opposite: a fictional site in which the patriarchal values of the British Empire are celebrated and maintained. Dunnett provides detailed accounts of fictional events based around real historical figures in which the characters' lives follow certain 'medieval' codes of conduct, without any challenge to those (strikingly similar) codes, either in historical or contemporary terms. Her novels may be well-researched, therefore, but they are primarily pasteboard romance, maintaining a formula which identifies them as belonging to the

popular romance genre; separate from the more challenging historical fiction produced by Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone.

Not all historical fiction, of course, can be categorised as popular historical romance in this sense of dashing heroes, frivolous heroines, and the second group of novels I have identified include Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen* (1890), Jane Findlater's *The Green Graves of Balgowrie* (1896), Violet Jacob's *Flemington* (1911) and Nancy Brysson Morrison's *The Gowk Storm* (1933). In particular both *Kirsteen* and *The Green Graves* offer the earliest 'historical' novels which resist the formula common to popular fiction, and signal instead a move toward a more resisting type of historical fiction.

Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen* portrays a young woman whose exceptional strength of character allows her to make good her economic independence, and thereby to acquire a degree of freedom. *Kirsteen* has been described by Beth Dickson as one of Oliphant's 'novels of Scottish life and character',[40] and as in much of Oliphant's fiction, the central paradox with which she is concerned is that of the girl-woman who struggles to separate herself on one hand from repressive Victorian notions of servitude, and on the other from the alternative feminine exploitation and manipulation of men through womanly wiles.

Kirsteen, in fact, like many of Oliphant's heroines, is not provided with the powers of physical attraction which might allow her to manipulate men. 'Kirsteen was not considered a pretty girl' (*K* 3) we are told, and instead she is described as

> a daughter of the hills, strongly built, not slim but trim, with red hair and brown eyes and a wonderful complexion, the pure whiteness like milk which so often goes with those ruddy locks, and the colour of health and fine air on her cheeks. (*K* 3)

She does not fit the requirements of her age, and Oliphant thus makes visual Kirsteen's subversive role as something 'other' than the perfect heroine who would in nineteenth-century terms, have been slight, smooth-haired and fragile. Kirsteen's life is initially ordered by her domineering father, yet his attempt to force her into a 'suitable' marriage with the elderly Glendochart provides the catalyst for her decision to leave home. Without the benefits of conventional beauty, Kirsteen is forced to succeed independently, through her skill as a dressmaker. This she manages, first in London and later in Edinburgh, until she has acquired economic independence sufficient to return home occasionally without fear of her father, and without the necessity of marriage.

The novel offers no qualified transformation for Kirsteen. Although her individualism strengthens, Oliphant refuses to pretend that a woman who strays so far from the preferred female path (which had changed relatively slightly in the hundred years separating author and character) might achieve happiness. What Kirsteen does represent, however, is a woman strong enough to achieve professional success and economic independence, without the help of a man. She is not forced to marry - which was the fate of so many heroines of nineteenth-century fiction - nor does she remain dependent on the men in her family, and that writers were producing such strong female characters reflects a growing challenge in Scottish fiction which was to influence the next generation of writers, including Mitchison.

A slightly more typical approach to subversive characterisation is taken by a novel published shortly after *Kirsteen*, Jane Findlater's *The Green Graves of Balgowrie* (1896). Of Mary and Jane Findlater, both authors, Douglas Gifford remarks,

> They exemplify the profound and paralysing internal debate concerning sexual and gender freedoms more strongly than any other woman writer in Scotland from the period of Margaret Oliphant to that of the modern 'Scottish Renaissance',[41]

and there is a recurring concern with repression and denial of opportunity in the lives of their heroines which betrays a deep dissatisfaction in their own lives. Although little of their fiction is historical, *The Green Graves of Balgowrie* is set in the eighteenth century, and the narrator ostensibly recounts for the reader a true story, communicated to her by her grandmother. The tale is of a time long past, yet the visibility of old graves links that past to the present in the novel, just as the tale of two wasted young lives was one which was close to the author's heart.

The restrictions endured by the main characters, Henrietta and Lucie Marjoribanks, are physical and psychological. With only one another and later their tutor, the 'elderly' Dr. Hallijohn for company, they develop in isolation from society, becoming two young women of very varied abilities and interests, to whom fulfilment is denied. Lucie is clearly artistic, yet her musical ability is tested only during 'Thursday evenings', when the sisters must enact make-believe receptions with their monstrous mother, during which they are introduced to, and must converse with, imaginary people of note. The hopeless diligence with which they pursue this fantastic social ritual is powerfully portrayed, and never more so than toward the end of the novel, when with Lucie already dead of consumption, it becomes apparent that Henrietta is to suffer the same fate. Restricted to the draughty

house, and in spite of Henrietta's near-inability to walk, her mother insists that she goes through the motions of the 'Thursday evening' ritual, with tragic consequence:

> Henrietta started, and began to cough violently. Then, making an effort to continue the conversation, she remarked on the bitter weather. The ottoman considered that this was the season when the gentle exercise of the dance was especially agreeable, and begged Miss Marjoribanks to join him in the minuet. Henrietta politely signified her refusal, but an imperious gesture on the part of the ottoman - otherwise Mrs Marjoribanks - constrained her to make the attempt. They paced it solemnly together, in silence, and then returned to the pleasures of conversation... toward eleven o'clock, Henrietta, after bidding a ceremonious goodnight to her hostess, crept off upstairs, supported by Hester.
>
> " 'Tis for the last time, Hester," she said, and smiled.

The pathos of the activity is conveyed to the modern reader by the image of the dying girl, and is surely emblematic of the inimical falsity of social rigmarole.

Numerous references to 'those days' in the novel signify Findlater's perception of a social era in which middle-class women could expect very little freedom to experience life outwith the immediate confines of rural society. More than a portrayal of history, however, the author's examination of the tragically unfulfilled lives of Lucie and Henrietta can be read as an exaggerated symbol of thwarted female talent and desire. In this way, *The Green Graves* subverts the standard nineteenth-century model, as did *Kirsteen*, which inevitably presented readers with strong female characters whose individuality is latterly 'subordinated by the necessity of taking a husband', which, as Jean E. Kennard explains, 'indicates the adjustment of the protagonist to society's values, a condition which is equated with her maturity'.[42] Although Lucie and Henrietta resist this patriarchal necessity, however, their deaths are, in the tradition of George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver and Hardy's Tess, symptomatic of the restricted alternatives available to writers who do not want to involve themselves in stereotypical scenarios.

Furthermore, behind the central figures on whom the tragedy of the novel focuses, stands the omnipresent and foreboding Mrs Marjoribanks herself, a character whose unalterable selfishness and intractability is made clear by her actions in forcing her daughters to endure the extreme discomfort which eventually proves fatal to both. The image of the abusive, domineering, parent and the long-suffering child is hardly an unfamiliar one in Scottish fiction. From Robert Louis Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston* (1896) to George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901) and John MacDougall Hay's *Gillespie* (1914), Scottish literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century had borne witness to the struggle of will between parent and child. What is arresting about *The Green Graves of Balgowrie* in this sense, however, is that in this case, the parent accused of

cruelty and neglect is the mother, totally subverting the traditional brutal father/sensitive son pattern common to the other novels mentioned above. That a woman might occupy this role in *The Green Graves* suggests that Jane Findlater was prepared to acknowledge the female capacity for evil - even toward her children - and to condemn it.

Findlater was not the only novelist to subvert the image of evil patriarch, and another historical novel in which the malevolent power of the female can be found is Violet Jacob's *Flemington,* published in 1911. Set during the second Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, *Flemington* is a tragic romance, which recreates the heightened emotion surrounding a crucial moment in history. At the centre of the novel is the clash between private and political loyalties experienced by the central protagonist, Archie Flemington, when he comes into contact with James Logie, a known Jacobite rebel, and like Stevenson's *Master of Ballantrae, Flemington* focuses on the relationship between two men who are on opposing sides of late eighteenth-century Scottish politics. Unsurprisingly, therefore, women do not contribute greatly to the novel's active movement toward the triumph of friendship over politics. Yet it is the influence of Archie's unsympathetic grandmother Christian which prompts his great dilemma regarding the true meaning of loyalty, and her matriarchal presence looms large over the novel as the malevolent centre of Archie's life.

Archie and James are thrown together when Archie is instructed by King George to spy on James, and thus introduced, the key to the novel lies in the relationship of trust which quickly develops between them, the result of which is that Archie feels unable to betray his friend. His loyalty to King George, however, is entwined with his loyalty toward his grandmother, a staunch supporter of the ruling monarch. Widow to one of King James's courtiers, Christian Flemington finds herself and her son ill-used by the exiled monarch, and consequently dissociates herself and her child from the Jacobite party out of hurt pride. Following the death of her son and his wife, she determines to raise her young grandson to become her tool of revenge on the Stuart dynasty, and his own happiness is sidelined in her selfish quest to indoctrinate him with her views.

Christian Flemington, therefore, is ironically named. She is not driven by any noble or abstract notion of right and wrong, but rather by vanity, and although she may be textually marginal, she is nevertheless ubiquitous. Archie has been forced to identify desertion from the political cause she supports, as desertion from her, his only parent, and she makes clear the fact that such betrayal should expect no forgiveness.

Archie, however, refuses in spite of his grandmother, to betray his friend, and pays for his innate nobility with his life. Jacob portrays him as a noble character; a tragic hero for

whom causes in the end do not outweigh trust and respect. Therefore whilst Christian's presence is certainly powerful, her power is nonetheless limited to her influence over Archie, and when this influence is compromised by his own integrity, she is left with very little. She is manipulative, consumed by destructive passion stemming from feelings of betrayal, and her strength can only exist in the void which in others might be replaced by selflessness, or by unconditional love for her grandchild. As such, Christian does not win the reader's sympathy, because even her passionate love for Archie barely survives his rejection of her desires, in spite of the humanity he displays in sacrificing himself to save James.

The only glimpse we have of Christian Flemington's own humanity comes towards the conclusion of the novel, when, finally distraught, she appeals to the Duke of Cumberland for Archie's life. In spite of herself, she cannot in the end allow her pride to outweigh her love for Archie, yet by this point his fate is decided, and she is left only with regret at her own selfishness: 'She felt herself helpless, and her force ineffective. Life was breaking up around her' (*F* 225).

Jacob's intention was not, primarily, to recreate history in *Flemington*, in the sense that none of her central characters are historically prominent, although she does use real events - such as the capturing of the King's ship - in her story. As Carol Anderson says:

> In this sense she is unlike novelists such as Galt or Scott, who revelled, amongst other things, in the minutiae of the past for their own sake. But clearly the novel does make use of history, and it is perhaps Jacob's deep knowledge of, and involvement with, places, events and people that lends the novel some of its emotional power and air of veracity.[43]

Jacob utilises family history. Her own ancestor David Erskine of Dun provides the basis for the lawman, David Balnillo, and experts on Jacob suggest that there is much of the writer herself in the character of Archie Flemington - including his gifted artistic qualities. Archie certainly has a 'feminine' refinement that distinguishes him from the more brutal Logie. Could it be, therefore, that Jacob is using a male protagonist here where she could not use a female, for action and adventure? It is arguable that it may have proven difficult for her, as it would initially for Naomi Mitchison, to imagine a more active role for the female in the context of the eighteenth century, or even of the early years of the twentieth.

The early years of the twentieth-century, in fact, offered women very little opportunity for personal expression, and just as Jacob was limited by the constraints of generic fiction, so too was Mitchison's contemporary, Nancy Brysson Morrison. Morrison had published her first novel *The Gowk Storm* (1933) just after Naomi Mitchison's *The Corn King and the*

Spring Queen (1931) appeared, and initially Brysson Morrison showed promise as a purveyor of a similar type of essentially 'feminist' literature as her contemporary. Based in the mid-nineteenth-century, *The Gowk Storm* does not make use of the same historical distancing as *The Corn King*, which is partially set in Ancient Helene. Nevertheless, with the three daughters of a clergyman, Morrison recreates a credible situation in which ordinary women are stifled by convention, in a way which recalls Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen* (1898) or, even earlier, *Salem Chapel* (1863), and the narrow cross-section of life examined by *The Gowk Storm* provides a powerful insight into the limitations imposed on the lives of the characters involved, echoed in the metaphorical description of the countryside: 'everything grew a little wildly in that muffled, breathless place' (*GS* 1).[44]

The character through whom we become party to the unfolding fate of the three sisters in *The Gowk Storm* is the youngest, Lizbet, who is sensitive to the plights of her siblings without playing much of an active part herself. Both her elder sisters are victims of the patriarchy. Both fall in love with people who are less than acceptable to their pretentious father, and they are therefore compelled to follow alternative paths, in the younger sister Emmy's case, to death. Julia, the eldest, challenges her allotted role by maintaining the appearance of the perfect daughter, whose semblance of duty and servitude gains her the trust and even the intellectual respect of her father. Yet when she falls in love with a Catholic, she is reduced simply and violently to the position of a woman who has overstepped the mark. Her opinion is no longer of value to her father and she is no longer identified as an individual with choice and freedom:

> 'You say it will be disastrous if we marry', she flamed at him. 'I say it will be disastrous if we don't. You live your own life, papa and would permit no one else to live it for you. What right has anyone, even you, to attempt to change and map out my life for me against my will? It is I who am living it, I who will make the disastrous marriage, I who will bear the consequences'. (*GS* 72)

What she does not reckon on, however, is her lover's inability to make the social sacrifice required for a cross-religious marriage, and in the end it is his tragic inability to match her strength and conviction that lets her down.

Emmy is immediately different, as Lizbet informs us:

> Emmy made no effort to enslave anyone. She always was what she thought. If she felt disapproving, she made her disapproval clear; people had either to take her or leave her for what she was - herself, (*GS* 106)

and the dilemma Morrison places this female character in is not a simple one in any context, particularly not in the patriarchal environment of mid-nineteenth-century Scotland. Emmy falls in love with her best friend's fiancé, Stephen, a reciprocated

misfortune which distresses all parties. Ironically, Emmy has had no intention of marrying, whereas her friend has planned for nothing else; therefore it is no surprise when Stephen's rejection drives the jilted girl to commit suicide. The resulting situation for Emmy is far from positive. Her love for Stephen cannot overcome the morality of a society which values form and convention above the heart, and her attempts to go to him are foiled by the appearance of another minister, who, like her father, represents the embodiment of patriarchal hypocrisy. Men in the novel are in fact depicted as the weaker sex both mentally and morally; their inability to cope with any deviation from accepted male discourse is compared unfavourably with the reserves of strength which are called upon frequently in the thwarted ambitions of the women. Tragically, however, the only way out for Emmy is death, and this comes as a grim judgement on the choices she has been denied.

The Gowk Storm is a work of art, a tightly-woven tragedy; it is disappointing, therefore, when we look to Brysson Morrison for development of the challenges she presents in this first novel, and are presented instead with *The Winnowing Years* (1949) and *The Hidden Fairing* (1953). Although *The Winnowing Years* is broadly historical in its attention to four periods ranging from the mid-sixteenth century to World War II, the strong feminism of *The Gowk Storm* is much less in evidence, and is entirely absent from *The Hidden Fairing.* Following *The Gowk Storm*, in fact, very little historical fiction was produced by Scottish women which used history in the way that Morrison, Jacob, or Oliphant had done.

Perhaps the only exception to this, however, might be a small group of writers who incorporate elements of fantasy into their historical writing, and it is with them that this contextual study will conclude. Dorothy K. Haynes, Marion Campbell, and Mary Stewart have all produced fiction which is, broadly speaking, historical. To this, however they bring fantasy and the supernatural, and as such, might be said to be working in the same tradition as Naomi Mitchison, whose 1931 novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, blends a fictional, mythological society with historical Ancient Greece. Of these three, Dorothy K. Haynes' *Thou Shalt not Suffer a Witch* (1949) offers the greatest sense of history. Repeatedly, stories return to social outcasts and dark communities in which witchcraft and superstition flourish, untamed and often brutal. Stories such as 'The Head' and 'Changeling' offer an attempt to resist the restrictions imposed by narrow-minded medieval communities. Yet this resistance is often savage, and meets with a bitter end.

Rarely, in fact, do such histories exhibit subversive feminist undercurrents. Mary Stewart's *Crystal Cave* trilogy (1970-9), for example, revolves around male characters, focusing on the legendary figure of Merlin the magician. Although Merlin's mother refuses to disclose the name of her son's father, and would rather retire to a convent than marry someone she does not love, she is peripheral to the development of Merlin himself, and women in general remain shadowy. More optimistically, Marion Campbell's *The Dark Twin* returns once again to the Scotland evoked by Neil Gunn's *Sun Circle* (1933) and by Eona Macnicol's *Lamp in the Night Wind* (1965). This time, however, her recreation of Druid-Christian history is fused with fantasy; in response, perhaps, to the beliefs of the society on which the text is focused. The central characters in *The Dark Twin* are two young boys. Drost is blond 'twin' to Aillil, King of the Boars, and much of the immediate action concentrates on the relationship between the two, who become increasingly separate.

Although the novel does not discuss the role of women directly, religious antagonisms are represented as conflict between the 'New Way' and a specifically female centred form of 'Mother worship', headed by Drost's mother Malda. This draws on the traditional perception of Ancient Celtic society as female centred, and challenges the role of the Druid priests who also form part of the social structure. Malda's power exceeds the power of the male priests, and her strong female presence allows the novel a more positive female focus than may initially be obvious.

Ultimately, however, neither *The Dark Twin* nor *The Crystal Cave* trilogy offer any solid resistance to standard gender roles. Rather, their significance lies in the attempt made by Campbell and Stewart, to imagine the type of societies in which belief in the mythical and the supernatural was part of life. Although Campbell's novel, in particular, pre-empts Sian Hayton's symbolic use of Drust and Essullt in *The Last Flight* (1993), with the introduction of Yssa as Drost's mate, *The Dark Twin* neither acknowledges nor exploits the challenge involved in fusing male ordered history with 'feminine' mythology, an approach common to both Mitchison and Hayton.

For the remainder of this thesis, therefore, discussion will centre on the way in which Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone differ in their approach to historical fiction from each of the groups discussed above, and from one another. I will address the ways in which they subvert history from a female perspective; the strategies of resistance they employ, and their success in doing so. In the main, the suggestion will be that these writers examine female sexuality in resistance to generic gender structures. Generic gender structures recognise women only as either angels or monsters, and these

women writers subvert history through fiction in order to envision a more positive role for women in the past. These three writers are very different, yet the next four chapters will endeavour to demonstrate their superiority in handling fictional history, and to discuss the specific qualities which identify them as part of a definite development in Scottish women's historical fiction.

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[1] William J. Schieck, *The American Historical Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 2.
[2] Helen Hughes, *The Historical Romance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 116.
[3] Hughes, p. 118.
[4] Francis Hart, *The Scottish Novel: from Smollett to Spark* (Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard UP, 1978), p. 192.
[5] Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London. University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 19.
[6] Jessica Stirling and Emma Blair are the pen names of male writers Hugh Ray and Iain Blair. Nigel Tranter is the most obvious male exception, and is joined by John Prebble (an adoptive Scot) and George Macdonald Fraser, whose subversively comic 'Flashman' novels have well-researched and detailed Victorian settings.
[7] Douglas Gifford, 'Recent Scottish Fiction', in *Books in Scotland* 1 (1978), pp. 9-11 (p. 10).
[8] Anne Barr Smitow, 'Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different', in *Radical HistoryReview*, 20 (Spring/Summer, 1979), pp. 141-61, (p. 150).
[9] Jane Porter's first novel was *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803; London : Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831).
[10] Blind Harry is a semi-legendary figure who lived in the 15th century, and who was supposedly responsible for the writing of the epic poem about William Wallace, entitled *The Wallace.*
[11] Jane Porter, *The Scottish Chiefs* (London. Richard Bentley, 1839).
[12] See Carol Anderson and Aileen M. Riddell, 'The Other Great Unknowns: Women's Fiction Writers of the Early Nineteenth-century', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy MacMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) pp. 179-195. (p. 185).
[13] See Ian Dennis, *Nationalism and Desire in Early Historical Fiction* (London: MacMillan Press, 1997).
[14] George Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 1937 (London. Merlin Press, 1963), p. 39.
[15] D. K. Broster, *The Dark Mile* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1929).
[16] Margaret Irwin, *The Gay Galliard* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973).
[17] Jane Lane, *He Stooped to Conquer* (London: Andrew Dakers Limited, 1944).
[18] Moira Burgess, 'The Modern Historical Tradition' in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy MacMillan (Edinburgh University Press, 1997) pp. 456-467.
[19] Burgess, p. 457.
[20] Douglas Gifford, 'Recent Scottish Fiction', in *Books in Scotland* 1 (1978), pp. 9-11 (p. 10).
[21] Burgess, p. 463.
[22] Hart, p. 195.
[23] Radway, p. 193.
[24] Burgess, p. 464.
[25] Burgess, p. 463.
[26] Burgess, p. 463.
[27] See *People and Society in Scotland: III, 1914-1990*, ed. by Tony Dickson and James. H. Treble, (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers in association with The Economic and Social History Society of Scotland, 1992), p. 5.
[28] See Arthur J. McIvor, 'Women and Work in Twentieth-century Scotland', in Dickson and Treble, pp. 138-173, (p. 161).
[29] Arthur Marwick, *Culture in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 67.
[30] See Dickson and Treble, pp. 3-4.
[31] See T.C. Smout, 'Patterns of Culture', in Dickson and Treble, pp. 261-281 (p. 261).
[32] Smout, p. 266.
[33] Smout, p. 266.
[34] Hart, p. 143.
[35] Hart, p. 146.
[36] See Ann Douglas, 'Soft Porn Culture', in *New Republic* (August 1980), pp. 25-29.
[37] "Permissiveness' was the word brought into use to describe a whole complex of developments within the sexual arena. Yet in characterizing the social legislation of the period a better heading might be that of *fairness towards*, and *freedom for* each individual', Marwick, p. 69.
[38] Marwick, p. 176.
[39] Lukács, p. 19.

[40] Beth Dickson, 'Margaret Oliphant', in *A Guide to Scottish Literature*, forthcoming 2001.
[41] Douglas Gifford, 'Caught Between Worlds: the Fiction of Mary and Jane Findlater', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy MacMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 291-308 (p. 291).
[42] Jean E. Kennard, *Victims of Convention* (Hamden, conn.: Archon Books, 1978), p. 164.
[43] Carol Anderson, introduction to Violet Jacob, *Flemington*, (Aberdeen: Association of Scottish Literary Studies, 1994), p. v.
[44] Nancy Brysson Morrison, *The Gowk Storm*, 1933 (Edinburgh, Canongate, 1989).

Chapter 2

A Time and a Place: The Relocation of Gender Identity in the Early Historical Fiction of Naomi Mitchison.

Primarily, the quality which distinguishes Naomi Mitchison's historical fiction from the Scottish women's fiction discussed in the previous chapter is an identifiable commitment to the specific examination of the female, and to the subversion of those patriarchal institutions and social structures which suppress women. Although the ways in which a number of female writers have touched upon these concerns have been outlined above, this chapter will suggest that although they may have provided women such as Mitchison with role models for positive female agency, they offer only the beginnings of resistance. I shall suggest here, therefore, that Mitchison, through her creation and treatment of female characters in fictional historical situations, was able to further contest the constraining gender boundaries which prevented women from realising their intellectual, economic and sexual potential, both within their fictional contexts, and in her own contemporary society.

In her third autobiographical account *You May Well Ask: a Memoir 1920-1940* (1979), Mitchison explains that her own sensitivity had left her more open both to positive experiences and to pain, and suggests that this was a characteristic common to many working in the arts :

> Presumably this is true for everyone in the arts; we swim much more in the emotions. In order to observe we have to be thin-skinned, easy to hurt, and perhaps we observe too much for comfort (*YMWA* 70).[1]

What fiction offers to writers is an opportunity for writers to deal with the experiences they have lived within a particular political and social framework, and throughout her long and prolific writing life, Mitchison's fiction was always a vehicle of expression for her observation of the relationships and conflicts between the individual, and the social and political. In a discussion of gender, there is necessarily an overlap between the individual and society with its associated institutions, and it is revealing to assess Mitchison's treatment of the relationships between the public and private spheres in order to reveal the complexity of her historical fiction in its relation to her own personal, social and political circumstances. Within the framework of history, her challenge to contemporary society was realised as she endeavoured to explore the need for change.

From 1923, the year in which Mitchison published her first novel, *The Conquered*, until 1991 when she produced her twin novellas, *The Oath Takers* and *Sea-Green Ribbons*,

Mitchison wrote and published political essays, short stories, novels, plays, and books for children, with a subject matter ranging from ancient societies to Martian expeditions, herring fishing to African history and society. Throughout much of this widely varied work, however, recurring concerns are visible, and although there has been invaluable research done by academics such as her biographer, Jenni Calder, by Douglas Gifford, Isobel Murray and by Ruth Hoberman, there remains much to be studied and assessed in her writing, something of which I have attempted to rectify here by building and expanding on the groundwork already in place. In particular, this study is concerned with the innovative nature of Mitchison's approach to the treatment of gender in historical fiction. Although often radical in her portrayal of female sexuality, she was nonetheless limited both by the constraints of history and by those of her own contemporary society.

Mitchison's historical writing was one of the most substantial and important strands of her fiction, particularly during the earlier years of her career, and a vital clue to her approach to the treatment of gender therein is given by Jenni Calder in her 1997 biography *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, where she suggests that as a developing young woman,

> [Mitchison]wanted her own world, and at the same time a place in the real, adult world. She wanted authority herself, and also to be beyond the authority of conventional structures and arrangements. She was caught in contradictions, a situation that, though the details changed, remained with her all her life.[2]

The importance of these contradictions cannot be overestimated. Caught between the elevated social status of her aristocratic Haldane family and the egalitarianism of her own socialist tendencies, and frustrated by the restrictions placed upon her by her gender whilst deeply interested in the experience of being a woman, Mitchison found expression through fiction from an early age, and history provided a variety of ways in which her concerns could be examined.

Distant from the stifling patriarchal conventions present in British society in the 1920s and 30s, ancient civilisations offered the opportunity to fictionalise alternative social structures in which economic and gender equality might be imagined. History too, of course, contributed its contradictions. On the one hand, history offered liberation from the constraints of the present. On the other, the freedom Mitchison found in historical fiction for sexual experiment and examination was offset by the repressive nature of her chosen historical eras which had their own constraints. What is important to note, however, is that although Mitchison's feminism was very real, it was a complex feminism which continued to develop as her own circumstances changed, and this development was reflected by the changing role she created for female characters as her fiction progressed.

During the 1920s and 30s Mitchison published several novels and collections of short stories, the majority of which were set in Ancient Rome, Greece or Gaul. Not all that originated in this early period of her fiction was accomplished literary work. Her early short stories in particular occasionally lack satisfactory conclusions,[3] although her first novel *The Conquered* (1923) was a best seller, and the culmination of this early phase - referred to by Isobel Murray as the 'classical phase'[4] - was *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), one of Mitchison's greatest literary achievements. What was significant, however, was the way in which Mitchison used historical fiction to challenge standard modes of discourse, challenging the patriarchal structures of history and of society, and this chapter will argue that she managed to transcend the limitations imposed by the patriarchal structures of history and historical societies in two ways. In the first instance, she subverted the construction and focus of history itself by treating disempowered 'non-historical' groups, more normally peripheral to mainstream history: the enslaved, the female, the sexually transgressive or the heretical. By focusing on these peripheries, Mitchison asserts their involvement in history, and throws standard interpretations of history into relief. Secondly, through the introduction of a mythical, supernatural element, Mitchison challenges the notion of history as 'truth', and in so doing, creates a space for those previously peripheral groups.

Even in shifting the focus of history onto the disempowered, however, Mitchison faced the imposition of constraints relative to the time in which her fictions were set. In Ancient Helene for example, which serves as the setting for *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (1925), *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* and her numerous short stories, women were restricted by a male-dominated society in which they were expected to fulfil purely domestic roles as wives and mothers. Nevertheless, a progression in Mitchison's approach to tackling these constraints is discernible. Initially, she favours male central characters as the more active agents for change, a point I will address in the discussion which follows. As her fiction progressed through the 1920s and 30s, however, a development culminating in the creation of *The Corn King*'s Erif Der in 1931, female agency and power increase, inching back the boundaries of constraint. In *The Corn King*, moreover, Mitchison's previously vague ideas about magic are fully realised, allowing her to transcend the patriarchal suppressions of the Ancient World by providing the individual with the ability to push past politics and institutions (an approach taken again by Sian Hayton in her *Cells of Knowledge* (1989-93) trilogy fifty years later).

Often, Mitchison's historical societies were direct parallels to her contemporary environment, and she used them to examine the problems she encountered in her own life, both as a woman struggling to find intellectual and sexual expression, and as a political creature for whom economic equality was the stepping stone for gender equality. It can be argued, therefore, that specific concerns inform Mitchison's work in any given period, and that in addressing gender issues, the personal and political aspects of her life and writing overlap. The period associated with her early writing - from the 1920s until the early 1930s – was in any case clearly delineated in terms of major historical events, which were to make a lasting impression on both the personal and the political areas of Mitchison's experience.

When Mitchison published her first novel, *The Conquered*, in 1923, Britain, like the rest of Europe, was only just beginning to assess the damage which had resulted from World War One. Society was dislocated by the losses and horrors endured, and Isobel Murray suggests that the strong trend toward historical literature among Scottish writers of the time such as Naomi Mitchison, Eric Linklater and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, came partly from the desire to create a more solid version of historical experience with fiction, amidst the shifting ground of reality. As Mitchison herself put it to Murray, 'I think in a sense we were making something to stand on',[5] and at a time in which many of the old values had been destroyed, history provided some framework and meaning for contemporary life.

History provided a form of certainty, then, yet this in itself was problematic in that each time a 'fact', or historical truth, is related, it necessarily comes dressed to some degree in the prejudice and experience of the teller. Therefore whilst writers may well have looked back to a historical period distant from the inhumanity of World War I, each approached it from an individual perspective, which in Mitchison's case was specifically female. Together with a preoccupation with social injustice was entwined a commitment to exploring and revisioning the role of gender identity within her fiction. Based as this was on her own rather non-conformist experience of British society, it did little to establish calm, and much to rock the boat.

With this in mind, Jenni Calder's claim in her essay 'Men, Women and Comrades' that 'Mitchison is able to lift her characters out of the boxes social conditioning has provided'[6] seems justified, and in discussing this it is worth considering the specific nature of Mitchison's own social conditioning as well as the social conditioning of those historical

eras examined in her fiction. From a specifically female point of view, British women had been 'conditioned' by Victorian social mores which emphasised chastity and servitude, and this conditioning was challenged by the 'feminist' political activity which had taken place around the turn of the century (and which I will discuss below). Mitchison's own contact with the repressive sexual climate of Victorian and Edwardian Britain was the basis for her preoccupation with gender, and in the period between the publication of *The Conquered* in 1923, and *The Delicate Fire* in 1933, in which her work was dominated by novels and short stories centred around the societies of the ancient world, her exploration of gender issues can in many cases be read as expressions of her own personal conflict with society. Projecting this conflict onto characters in historical settings allowed her the freedom to examine different ways of dealing with the constraints of social conditioning, in a time when female experience was still disregarded.

The nineteenth-century has been termed 'The Age of the Female Novelist'[7] by Elaine Showalter in light of the substantial contributions made by writers such as George Eliot, Margaret Oliphant, the Brontës and Jane Austen. Nevertheless, this was also an era when to be female and to write novels 'seemed out of keeping with properly feminine aspirations',[8] hence George Eliot's pseudonym and Margaret Oliphant's respectable use of 'Mrs' on her books. The nineteenth-century Victorian values into which Mitchison had been born, lived on into the Edwardian age in which she grew up, during which time society insisted on 'women's frailer creative powers in keeping with their frailer bodies'.[9] Therefore although female writers could express aspects of identity and experience through literature, they were in the main unhelpfully constrained by a society in which women's sexuality was stifled by a patriarchal moral code to which they had to adhere if their work was ever to see the printed page.

Perhaps for this reason among others, many Victorian writers had dissociated themselves from the political growth of the Women's Suffrage Movement, which Oliphant referred to as 'the mad notion of the franchise for women' (*AL* 211),[10] in an attempt to conform to an acceptable degree. George Eliot, for example, was actively opposed to the suffrage movement on the grounds that although feminism itself was desirable in theory, she did not think Victorian women were ready 'to assume the responsibility of social equality'.[11] Along with many of her generation, Eliot believed that the woman's role should not be greatly altered, and that instead men should show a greater generosity toward women within the existing gender parameters. Yet female writers like Eliot and her contemporary Charlotte Brontë - another anti-suffragist - represented a minority who, having achieved

success, were content to enjoy their detached superiority. Many ordinary women of the time, however, were not so well satisfied, and political agitation continued to increase toward the end of the nineteenth-century, creating a sense of expectation for women, even for those not directly involved.

In 1889 a ground-breaking Act was passed which allowed Scottish Universities to admit women to degree courses, yet seventeen years later the process of female emancipation did not appear to be progressing quickly enough for those heading campaign for suffrage, and in 1906 Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst launched a militant movement in Manchester, sanctioning the use of extreme methods in an attempt to attract publicity. Unfortunately, further problems arose when in 1908 Henry Campbell-Bannerman was replaced as Prime Minister by Herbert Asquith, who had taken his first parliamentary stand against women's suffrage as early as 1892. This called for the most extreme militancy yet exercised by many of the suffragettes, and action such as heckling at council meetings and damage to public property led to many arrests and imprisonments, causing exactly the kind of commotion the women were looking for.

Once in prison, the women's recourse to starving themselves for quick release proved to be so effective that in 1913 the government retaliated with *The Cat and Mouse Act*, which allowed fasting prisoners to serve sentences broken by home trips for recovery time. Success was short-lived, however; the authorities knew they were being mocked, and force feeding soon replaced broken sentences as standard practice - a fate which weakened the resolve of many of the staunchest militants. Nonetheless, the campaign continued, and perhaps the most famous martyr to the cause was Emily Wilding Davison, who died after throwing herself in front of King Edward's horse at the Derby in June 1913, during the peak of militant activity.

Although there is no disputing the recklessness of endangering her own life and the lives of the jockeys, Davison's act, which was in fact a form of suicide, demonstrates the conviction with which these women pursued their goal. For a time after this tragedy, however, the movement became necessarily subordinate to the war, as women concentrated on munitions work and general survival in the absence of the money earners. When the war ended, however, the campaign for suffrage resumed, although this was an entirely 'different era, with none of the drama of the Edwardian struggle',[12] and women eventually won enfranchisement for all over twenty-ones through more peaceful

demonstration in 1928, only three years before Mitchison's *The Corn King and The Spring Queen* was published.

Mitchison herself admitted that she knew relatively little about the Suffragettes cause as it progressed, in spite of the fact that it would have been, as she said, 'very much up my street' (*AIW* 40).[13] Yet if she had been uninvolved with the direct challenge which the 'suffragettes' presented to patriarchal institutions, she had nevertheless been born into an era when women had become more aware of the possibility of change, and from an early age she had been conscious of the discrepancies between male and female opportunity. She was angry when a typically lackadaisical approach to women's education had meant her removal from the Dragon School (which she attended with her brother) at the onset of puberty. This was denial not only of education but also of the freedom she had grown accustomed to as 'one of the boys', and the major figure responsible for this was her mother, of whom she said retrospectively:

> Her feminism was very real. She always supported women in the professions, went to a woman doctor whenever 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*. (*AIW* 87) [my italics]

Katherine Louisa Trotter Haldane, or 'Maya' as her children called her, was a very powerful influence on the young author, and although both Naomi's parents believed in female emancipation, there was a difference between theory and practice. She admitted, 'I doubt if the Pankhursts would have been received either at Cherwell or Cloan' (*AIW* 40), due to their 'unladylike' behaviour, and the expectations she was encouraged to foster herself were paradoxically liberating and imprisoning. As Calder notes,

> She shared an environment with boys who were destined to achieve, at the same time as breathing an atmosphere of denial to women which could not be dispelled by her mother's beliefs.[14]

Not even her marriage to Dick Mitchison in 1916 provided her with the freedom she sought, and it was not until the War had ended and she had become a mother herself that she could begin to exercise more control over her life. By this time, familial influence meant that Mitchison's developing feminist (and later socialist) sympathies sat uneasily alongside a contradictory concern for breeding, and this was something which continued to express itself even as she endeavoured to reject hierarchical structures which favoured male power. Ironically, it was these contradictions which provided the fuel for much of the fiction she was to produce.

Along with Mitchison's own children, then, came a degree of liberation from the constraint synonymous with the Haldane family name, and the fiction Mitchison began to produce at this time takes its place among a wave of post-war British women's fiction. After World War I, women writers began to openly react against Victorian and Edwardian patriarchal values, and to turn inwards, questioning and challenging in the search for individual identity. The fiction this gave rise to was in many cases much more candid in its treatment of female experience than had been standard in early twentieth-century women's writing. For example, in Storm Jameson's *A Day Off* (1933), emotional and economic reliance on men is examined through a protagonist who is referred to only as 'her' until she is married, and the subject matter of novels also began to reflect a more assertive attitude. Many British writers in the 1930s dealt with the threat of fascism, and both *In the Second Year* (1935) by Jameson, and Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia in 1937*, for example, offer politically motivated narratives, an approach more usually taken by men.

Within Scotland, more particularly, the fiction being published by writers like Catherine Carswell and Willa Muir, was preoccupied with the female quest for identity, and with the questioning of religious repression. Catherine Carswell's first novel, *Open the Door!* was published in 1920, and was by her own admission autobiographical, exploring her own female identity through characterisation of the young Joanna Bannerman in a way which would have undoubtedly shocked her Victorian forebears. 'Profoundly romantic and with an exalted idea of fidelity' (*LA* 125),[15] Joanna begins with a blueprint for life and love which involve her in a quest alternating between the desire for self sacrifice and a need to remain in control. As she moves through an unsatisfactory relationship with Bob, whom she can control completely, to a marriage with Mario in which she is completely subjugated, her need to open the door becomes 'more and more a search solely for sexual fulfilment',[16] and she struggles to find an equality which will allow her this. She is fully aware of her powers of attraction and is not above exploiting her femininity, yet she remains suspended between the desire for 'the sensual gratification of... inferiority' (*OD* 98),[17] and the need to retain control of her own life.

This desire for control emerges again, and more strongly, in Willa Muir's *Imagined Corners* (1931), a novel within which can be discerned a degree of hindsight, from an author who had experienced the transition between the latter end of the Victorian era and an environment in which feminism was more established. In *Imagined Corners*, the fictional town of Calderwick turns its back on the sea; a metaphor for the repression of

spiritual freedom endured by the main character, Elizabeth Shand. Town life revolves around a moral structure which places its greatest value on social prestige, and the newly-wed Elizabeth finds herself appointed moral guardian of her drinking, gambling husband; a role she is ultimately incapable of supporting. Like Joanna, she demands strength in a mate, yet consistently finds that Hector's strength does not match her own, and it takes only a few of his lengthy, unburdening confessions to make her feel stifled. Like Carswell's heroine, she wills herself to desire subjugation, but simply cannot suppress her own nature in her bid to 'learn to be a wife' (*IC* 66).[18] She makes an effort to lose herself in Hector, to negate herself, but she cannot change the fact that first consciousness brings her 'in the ultimate resort... simply herself' (*IC* 65). The romantic need to immolate oneself to love cannot find expression within the stark narrative of Calderwick, and Elizabeth is forced to admit in the end that her love for Hector has been based on a natural sensuality, which 'was only nature. It wasn't anything else' - that she 'fell in love with his body and pretended to love his mind' (*IC* 164).

What is new and progressive about *Imagined Corners* is the self-consciousness with which the author approaches female sexuality. The purely physical side of Elizabeth is revealed and validated in what must be viewed as a positive step forward for female writers, and the issue of sexuality, of female agency and control, was one that Mitchison herself took up in much of her fiction of the 1920s and 30s. Indeed, Mitchison's exploration of the female in fiction was extremely radical and forward-looking. She never ceased to examine the gender dynamic of any given situation, either in fiction, or from what can be gauged from her diaries and autobiographical writings, in life. However, her later historical fiction, particularly *The Bull Calves* (1947) which is discussed in depth in Chapter 3, shows a significant shift in focus, in which the politics of relationships between characters are not sexually based to the same degree. For most of her 'classical phase', however, Mitchison's fictional societies embodied a challenge to gender roles which made much of her writing radically feminist.

Bound closely to Mitchison's feminism from this early stage was her socialism, yet ironically she had no real experience of what it meant to go without material wealth, and as a child had been extremely privileged; her Haldane heritage requiring her to acknowledge 'good breeding' even whilst she campaigned for social equality. Whilst she had experienced no economic deprivation, however, the same could not be said with regard to the opportunities denied to her because of her gender, and although she had not perhaps worked out how to combat this in her earliest work, her anger is discernible. She was of

the belief, too, that economic equality was a pre-requisite of gender equality, and frequently examined the individual's relationship with the realities of social and political values. Although egalitarian society was not in the end to provide the gender equality she desired, her conviction that the two must be equated grew throughout the 1920s in conjunction with a growing identification with Scotland, the country of her birth.

Of Scotland itself, however, there is virtually no mention in Mitchison's early work, and raised in Oxford she had not been subject to substantial influence from the Scottish Church against which contemporary writers such as Carswell and Muir, rebelled. It is difficult to know precisely how relevant the social and political changes in 1920s and 30s Scotland were to her before her move to Carradale in 1938. Although she certainly spent a significant amount of time in Scotland as a child and was conscious of her Scottish heritage, her early memories were negative:

> I went with my father J. S. Haldane to the Gifford lectures in Glasgow... Between lectures I looked at the grim streets of 1927 Glasgow, and the Saturday drunks lying in the gutters.

Yet she continues, 'in those and the following years I became aware of something Stirring and met some picturesque characters in the early Nationalist movement'[19]. There is, nevertheless, very little Scottish association in the early novels and short stories. Her education, formal and informal, had focused on the classical languages and histories; a common British approach in the first half of the twentieth-century, and the outrage at the injustice of the master-slave relationship which came to be a central theme in her early novels and stories was a general response to human values, rather than the result of any English-Scottish preoccupation. Jenni Calder has suggested that Mitchison's first novel, *The Conquered* (1923), for example, was inspired by the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland, and concentrates on the master-slave relationship between the conquered and the conqueror[20].

What was significant, however, was her identification with the Labour Party and with what was termed the Scottish Literary 'Renaissance', a movement which gave literary expression to a rejuvenated desire for Independence. The National Party of Scotland (which later became the Scottish National Party) was formed during this time, in 1928, providing the arena for discussion of Scottish political issues and social problems with a new sense of optimism for change; something the writers and poets of the time reflected in their writing. Internationally, Scotland's most commercially successful literary efforts at the turn of the century had been romanticised and localised images of Scotland which became associated with the 'kailyard' school of writers, led by J. M. Barrie, Ian MacLaren and Samuel Crockett. The new novelists, including Neil Gunn, Eric Linklater and Lewis

Grassic Gibbon, wanted to turn away from this sentimentalised and insular projection of Scotland towards a more realistic representation and outward looking society. As Gunn explained,

> The Renascent Scot is – must be – intolerant of the Kailyarder, that is, of the parochial, sentimental, local-associative way of treating Scotland and the Scots. He wants to treat of Scotland as rock and sea and land [...] and he wants to treat of Scotsmen as real projections of homo sapiens (rather than as kirk-elderish grannies), and he wants to complete his picture in a way that will not only make self-satisfied Scotsmen sit up but will make the cultured take notice.[21]

Scotland was taking stock, as a nation which in the past could have been quite justly accused of being insular, but which now desired to reject the feudal romanticism which had been prevalent in a bid to create something more forward-looking.

Based as the Renaissance was on a revival of the Scots language and a desire to return to the pre-Union significance of the Scottish past, there are arguments surrounding the application of the term 'Renaissance' to the twentieth-century movement which it is not my purpose to consider in depth, and I use it here only because it is useful and recognisable. Nevertheless, in making specific reference to Mitchison it is worth noting that one of the arguments against the use of the term Renaissance, is that many of the myths and legends used by writers at this time were Celtic; the myths and legends of Scotland itself, and that the wider classical associations of the term Renaissance are therefore over-written or ignored in the desire to provide a suitable label for the new literary activity. With Mitchison, however, as with James Leslie Mitchell and poet Edwin Muir, there *is* a focus on the classical.[22] Much of Mitchison's early work is based on Ancient Greece, and although this ostensibly had more to do with her education than with Scotland initially, by 1931 *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* would seem to demonstrate her sympathy with specifically Scottish Renaissance values, and this from a more classical perspective than was standard amongst Scottish writers of the time.

At this time, the influence of a massive anthropological work was discernible in Britain. Sir James Frazer's twelve-volume study of barbarian societies, entitled *The Golden Bough*, had been completed in 1915, [23] and Mitchison acknowledges that Frazer's account provided her with her main source of material in the creation of symbolic icons of fertility in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931). Mitchison was not the only writer to engage with *The Golden Bough*, a work which was to shape British and American literature. Among British fiction, D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915) drew on Frazer's discussion of mythic archetypes in his creation of the Brangwens, and in Scotland in

particular Neil Gunn's *Sun Circle* (1933) portrays the coming of the Norsemen from the point of view of tribal Scotland, suggesting that in spite of the barbaric nature of the native inhabitants, there were many positive aspects of their belief and way of life, such as their humour, identification with nature, and their pleasure in communality, touched on in the following extract:

> only the young or the violent-without sense would raise heat enough to spill blood. For mostly they were a social pastoral people, lifting, above their private distinctions or dissensions, the chief's emblem of the Raven, which sometimes among themselves they called the Blackbird [...] On this evening the mood of the people was clear as the sky and curled over like the sea-wave. It was a happy mood, with sparkles in its hollows and froth on its crest. There was also in it the being slow movement of the water which is a movement full of memory, and will alter as the fates decide.... The waves would smash. The Northmen would come.... But now the lazy curl-over on the shingle and the receding sound as of wind in a patch of ripe grain.[24] (*SC* 75)

Their ignorance of strategic warfare and lack of weaponry ensures their defeat by the Vikings, and yet racial endurance is symbolised by Breeta and Aniel, the survivors of the tribe, and the vessels of Pictish tradition.

Partially, this identification with racial archetypes was a consequence of World War One, after which many writers in Britain responded to the notion articulated by T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), that having demonstrated the ability to destroy, humanity would be doomed unless it could, as Douglas Gifford puts it, 'salvage a higher self'.[25] This higher self, it seemed, came from a spiritual link with the past, something that appealed to Western writers in general, and to Scottish writers in particular. In the introduction to his study entitled *Gunn and Gibbon*, Gifford focuses on the significant impact of this appeal to man's spiritual past on the work of Neil Gunn and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, both of whom make use of myth, and of the idea of what psychologist C.G. Jung described as a 'blood consciousness': an intrinsic bond between the land and its people, in their fiction. The points Gifford raises, however, inform a more general assessment of the Scottish Literary Renaissance movement with which Mitchison identified herself in part, and many of the main figures in which shared the belief that there existed

> an inherent sense in modern man of a lost and better time, when direct appreciation of the basic relationships with Nature and Self was a better state of being than that which has come about in our civilised society. This is the Golden Age consciousness.[26]

There has in fact been very little written about the specific influence of *The Golden Bough* on Scottish Renaissance writers. In the standard study, Vickery's *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough* (1973), only Mitchison herself is referred to, and no mention at all is

made of her contemporaries, Gunn, Linklater and Gibbon. In a second book of collected essays on the subject, *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination: Essays on Affinity and Influence* (1990), the general focus is on writers most often associated with Frazer, such as D. H. Lawrence, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot, and the Scottish aspect is largely ignored. In an essay entitled ' "For gods are kittle cattle": Frazer and John Buchan', however, Christopher Harvie touches on this subject, and points out that the ideology behind the Scottish Renaissance is strongly linked to the anthropological findings of *The Golden Bough*. A salient feature of Renaissance literature 'was a preoccupation with the socialising functions of myths and archetypes',[27] therefore the relationship is actually explicit rather than merely implicit or notional. In agreement with one another, Renaissance writers believed that 'what we are suffering from is an utter lack of tradition',[28] and they viewed Scotland as a land in which history was connected to the present through the continuation of an innate bond between the land and its people. This blood consciousness carried within it the bond with a more primitive Golden Age, linking the prehistoric root of national consciousness with the present, in order that identification with national and mythic origins might enable regeneration.

The preoccupation with archetypal characters so common to Renaissance literature was also evident in England to an extent, as some of the underlying causes for the interest were the same. Industrialisation, war and economic depression all forced people to look for something positive in history. Yet in Scotland there was a reaction to the Great War which came from a specific sense of historical nationhood. Since the Union of the Crowns in 1603, Scottish history had become increasingly dominated by British Imperial history, and by missing out the previous four hundred years in what might be called 'imaginative history', the past Scotland that remained open to writers in 1920 was necessarily older and perhaps more archetypal than U.K. history was as a whole. As Douglas Gifford says, the approach to history taken by Scottish writers in the 1930s

> breaks company with the English movement in the fiction of Forster, Woolf, Lawrence and Joyce in that the Scots were aided by a sense of living tradition in legend and folklore stronger and deeper than their English contemporaries. The Scots suggest a clearer outline to their vision of the way back to the lost Eden.[29]

As a result, Renaissance writers reveal through their characters a 'respect for primitive practices',[30] and in this way, it is possible to interpret, for example, Chris Guthrie's return to the standing stones in Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932), or Kenn's battle with the symbolic salmon in Gunn's *Highland River* (1937) as part of this ongoing vision, whereas Tom Brangwen in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915) is pessimistically carried off down the river to meet fulfilment in death. A character embodying the mythic archetypal

features illustrated by Frazer cannot survive the industrial revolution in English literature, and Tom's death signals the end of man's bond with nature and with that essential blood consciousness linking the human being to the past.

Although Mitchison was still based in London and was not therefore directly involved in Scottish affairs, she nevertheless identified strongly with her Haldane family, and even in her earliest work an identifiably Scottish response to mythic archetypes is in evidence. Her first novel *The Conquered* (1923), ends with the main character's return to a totemic animal-state, and as her work progressed to *The Corn King* in 1931, the mythical aspect became more explicit. What is more significant in assessing this, however, is that Mitchison's return to the uncivilised 'Golden Age' society of Marob in *The Corn King* functioned not only as an escape from post-war Britain and a celebration of regenerative social structures. It also provided a point of comparison when examined in relation to the centralised, more civilised power of Hellenic Sparta.

As she was firmly rooted in the upper classes, it may seem ironic that Mitchison should be concerned with the quest for a just society, and she is not always entirely convincing, occasionally betraying a decidedly patrician world view in her diaries and letters. Nevertheless, she approaches socialism with conviction, and one reason for her strong identification with Scotland as a vital alternative to English social and political power was her belief that her position as a female in a male dominated civilisation bore striking resemblance to that of Scotland in relation to its economically more powerful neighbour. Her gender was the 'poorer' alternative, and from an early age she was acutely aware of the difference in treatment between girls and boys, boys having had access to a broader, more structured system of education, naturally resulting in greater opportunity. Even within a family where female emancipation was approved she wondered whether 'certain avenues of understanding were closed to me by what was considered suitable or unsuitable for a little girl' (*ST* 24),[31] and she was aware that whilst her father, the famous scientist J. S. Haldane, encouraged her brother's active participation in his research, her presence in the laboratory was merely tolerated. As Jenni Calder explains: 'For a girl who had been growing up a boy and encouraged by her spirited mother to be spirited herself, it was particularly hard'.[32]

Her time as one of the boys at the Dragon school, however, had not been wasted, providing her with a taste for the adventure she discovered in historical novels such as Scottish novelist George Whyte-Melville's *The Gladiators* (1863), and G.A. Henty's *Beric the*

Briton (1892). Yet history proper, for all its attempt at fairness in treatment of gender, supported the patriarchy. Scholars - boys - were encouraged to define history as war, wealth, governments and science,[33] from which women were excluded. Yet this was never going to be easy for a girl as questioning as Mitchison to accept. Although she did read the popular historical novels of the day, therefore, she refused to accept the 'prescriptive images... that supported the social and moral values of the traditional British elites.'[34]

In Ruth Hoberman's *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women's Historical Fiction* (1997), in which Mitchison's early work is discussed, the author remarks that 'reading and responding to history is one of the ways in which young women figure out who they can be',[35] and fascination with ancient civilisations did not mean that Mitchison was ready to accept the way in which power structures were presented by traditional history. These, she realised, were taught in school by men, for men, and the resisting (female) reader was bound to try and look past the facts presented, penetrating the surface to uncover the voices silenced by selective historical representation. Mitchison certainly thought of herself as a historian, at least in part. As well as a specific interest in historiographical discovery, however, she was driven to examine - and as far as possible to redress - the gender imbalance of history through the creation of women within fictional historical narratives. Why, after all, must ancient Greek and Roman history serve only to reinforce the patriarchal values perpetuated by the British establishment, which, according to Hoberman, offered only the narrowest possible version of male sexual identity, and seemed blissfully unaware that women had any identity whatsoever? For Mitchison, women were not to be kept hidden, intellectually or sexually, and she determined to exploit the narrative power offered by writing history, or rather re-writing history, in order to explore what she described as the 'specifically female experience of touch, desire, need and fulfilment'.[36] The ability to find a voice that can articulate 'specifically female' history even within the historical genre was a struggle, and as my treatment of the early novels shows, at times the only way to articulate 'touch, desire, need and fulfilment' was to adopt a male disguise.

The historical genre worked to Mitchison's advantage here, as within a society not far removed from the Victorian era, the setting of much of her fiction in Ancient Greece or Rome made it 'safe' in the eyes of the publishers and of the public. As she observed, 'all forms of sexual loving become acceptable if the lovers are wearing togas or wolf skins',[37] and a historical forum, seemingly reinforcing the patriarchy, made her societies acceptable whilst she effectively subverted history by exploring the past from her own female point of

view, and eventually with a female voice. By comparison, contemporary settings which dealt with similar issues - sexuality, equality and the dangers of fascism - upset people to the extent that she struggled to find a publisher for her mid 1930s novel *We Have Been Warned*, due to its matter of fact references to contraception, rape and abortion. Publisher Victor Gollancz explained he could not publish it due to 'the fear that my efficiency as a publisher of socialist books would be seriously damaged by my association with the publication of a book which will undoubtedly be widely described as 'filthy' (*YMWA* 177), and Jonathan Cape only agreed to publish following substantial revision.

The historical genre, then, gave Mitchison freedom of expression concerning gender and sexuality in a time when the social conditioning of her own society would not allow such frank discussion. It may be surmised, too, that temporal and geographical locations were selected for a reason, as within many of her novels and short stories it is possible to find a parallel between aspects of the civilisation under study and the Britain (and Ireland) of the 1920s and 30s.

As a first foray into the historical, however, *The Conquered* is not as straightforward in terms of representing female experience as some of her later work. Based on contemporary events in Ireland and the 1916 Easter Rising, which Mitchison 'reacted to with considerable emotion but not a great deal of knowledge',[38] *The Conquered* sets up a juxtaposition between slavery and freedom within which gender identity can also be explored. Set in Gaul from 58 to 46 BC, the novel takes the children of a Gallic chief and constructs their wild totemic power as 'wolves' against what is apparently the more 'civilised' power of Caesar's Rome. Fiommar and Meromic are used to freedom both intellectually and physically; and having survived the actual battle in which their people are defeated, the choice remains as to whether they should die free or live in slavery. For Fiommar there is no alternative. She realises that to give herself up to the Romans would be to surrender her soul as well as her body, and she chooses suicide rather than face life in captivity: 'I'm quite sure it'll be better for me than living as a slave, even if it's black sleep' (*C* 82).[39]

Meromic, on the other hand, is not ready to die as yet, and when his sister urges 'You're a man: life may hold something for you still' (*C* 82), he concedes that in spite of the prospect of slavery he

> still felt intensely alive, conscious of his strong, unused body [...] There was something in oneself that went on through it all, something that would make even suffering more worth while than death. (*C* 82)

As a woman, however, there is little choice for Fiommar. There is no active place for her in the male war which becomes the centre of the novel; and contradictory levels of freedom are called into question which have distinct echoes of the freedom - and the limits of that freedom - available to men and women in Mitchison's own society.

This first novel followed close on the heels of World War I, Mitchison's own experience of which was still excruciatingly fresh. She could not know, of course, the horror experienced directly in combat by her husband and brother, yet the loss of so many well loved friends had had a profound effect. She explained,

> becoming acquainted with all that pain did something so drastic that I had to write about it, to externalise it on to paper, in order to get it out of my mind: hence the blood and pain in *The Conquered* and my earlier stories. (*AC* 127-8)

She was a woman on the Home Front, frustrated by an impotence enforced all the more strongly by the polarisation of gender that the war entailed. The closest she could come to playing an active part was in nursing, a stereotypically female role, and this was perhaps part of the reason that she chose to place a male figure at the centre of *The Conquered*, as a way, historically, of exercising a little control over something she had been powerless to prevent in reality. As a woman, Fiommar painfully and nobly takes the only way out. But this was not the freedom Mitchison wished to opt for, and although Meromic's slavery prevents his absolute freedom, his status as a strong young man allows Mitchison to explore her own restricted strength within a patriarchal society.

Violence and power go hand in hand in *The Conquered*. Fiommar's suicide is the first of many instances of violence, and pain is often the product of one man's power over another, a recurring concern throughout Mitchison's work, both historical and contemporary. Yet it is not simply that Mitchison was unsure at this stage of how to resolve the question of a spirited woman's place in a male world. Fiommar's suicide is an act which, whilst ending a life, liberates and in a sense empowers Meromic, who is then released from the only personal attachment he had formed.

The bond between the siblings, like that between Naomi and her own brother Jack, is very close; stemming naturally from a life of shared ideals and activities. Fiommar worries that her intended marriage would take her too far from a brother she adores: 'she had never seen a man to compare with her brother in looks'(*C* 24), and it is almost a relief when her husband fails to materialise and she can once more freely plan a future which includes only Meromic:

> After the war, we'll run away together and find an island all by itself

> somewhere, and make a house out of stones, and thatch it with whin,
> and have a fire in the middle and heaps of fern to lie on and tell stories;
> and you'll be king there and I'll be queen - (*C* 68-9)

Mitchison presents them here as free of conventional categorisation, and the hints of incest in descriptions of their physical closeness such as 'Fiommar slid her hand down [his] back and side, admiring the faint ripple of movement that followed her under the smooth skin'(*C* 13), are handled in such a way as to make them seem wholly innocent and acceptable, just as Mitchison viewed her own equivocal experience with Jack, related in *You May Well Ask*:

> Once we came down hungry to a village, ate well, washed it down with red wine and staggered into an old quarry full of wildflowers to sleep it off. And turned dizzily towards one another. And suddenly Jack was shocked to his respectable Haldane soul. I wasn't. But that was all. (*YMWA* 62)

Sexuality is assimilated into genuine love and admiration, which makes the degree of physicality slightly ambiguous and certainly does not offer it up for criticism, whilst it remains significantly beyond the control of the patriarchy.

After Fiommar's death, Meromic is no longer interested in forming emotional ties, and the hope of avenging his people becomes his only passion. His fierce nationalism and hatred for his Roman captors, therefore, make it all the more painful when the one real bond he does form is with his Roman master, and Jenni Calder suggests that the relationship between Titus and Meromic has a 'sympathetic physicality' with homosexual undertones.[40] Nevertheless, although Meromic attributes his loyalty to Titus to an incident in which the Roman saves his life, his conversation with fellow slave Dith sheds more light on the nature of his relationship with his master than Meromic will admit even to himself. Dith says:

> 'You can be grateful for that, but you needn't like him,
> you needn't come back after you're free!'
> 'That was an oath.'
> 'Oath! You wouldn't have come back if it had been nothing
> but that. And when you did you went jumping about and
> kissing his knees like a dog-...'(*C* 158-9)

Even Titus is unconvinced by Meromic's explanation, and in their argument a more open sexual tension is uncovered which was directly opposed to the conventions of the 1920s, and which it is therefore useful to quote in full:

> 'I suppose you want to be free?'
> 'Want! I do want.'
> 'To go away and leave me.'
> 'I've not seen my country for three years. I can't be the
> Wolf here.'
> 'Well, I don't choose to free you!'
> 'I've served you well, sir, haven't I? I used to have slaves

> of my own. And a great ship, and my sword, and friends.'
> 'Aren't I your friend?'
> 'I don't know sir.'
> 'If I'm not, why did you come back twice when you might have got away?'
> 'I suppose... because of my oath.'
> 'You don't mind very much about keeping oaths Meromic.'
> 'That's what Dith said.'
> 'Well?'
> 'Of course I can't tell what's been happening at home; I expect some one else will have taken our land. And I wouldn't like not being with you - in a lot of ways.'
> 'If you'll stay, I'ld as soon have you free as slave. But will you hate me for keeping you?'
> 'Never.'
> 'Well then, I'll free you. Now, I'm going to ride. Come on, Wolf.' (*C* 180)

The mutual feeling is clear, but creates a real problem for Meromic who is constantly struggling with the claims of his heart against those of his roots. The tension between the personal and the political is never far from the surface; and conflicting loyalties place a dual strain on his conscience which cannot be sustained. The novel concludes with Meromic's return to his natural condition as 'wolf', unable and unwilling to conform to the civilised structures of Roman life, so idealised by 1920s Britain.

In her discussion of Mitchison and Rome, Hoberman interprets the traditional use of Rome versus barbaric peoples like the Gauls as the conflict between the civilised patriarchy and a potentially matriarchal society which must be brought to heel, an approach established by novels like *Beric the Briton*, in which the heroic young barbarian, Beric, stands up to, and is defeated by, Rome. Rome is, here, the Christian patriarch, strong enough to benevolently incorporate the primitive and effeminate British boy, provided he embraces masculine values. To an extent, it could be argued that Mitchison's depiction of the relationship between Titus and Meromic supports this interpretation, apparently juxtaposing civilised Roman society with the wild, uncivilised and feminised barbarian. Yet Mitchison refuses to allow convention to triumph, and Meromic repeatedly defies the conventionality which traditionally endorses the Roman value system. His relationships are non-conformist to say the least; suggestively incestuous love for his sister is followed by an erotically charged love for his master: 'I'ld give my life for him, I would truly; he's all I've got, he's wife and child and home and everything' (*C* 202), and this interpretation of Meromic's sexuality could be furthered by the suggestion that his legal slavery may be interpreted on one level as a metaphor for his unconventional feelings toward Titus, whilst his repeatedly failed attempts to break away from these may be attempts to distance himself from the guilt of a love which prevents him from fighting for his people.

Although the homosexuality here is not explicit, therefore, it is close to the surface, and most significantly, it is without acknowledgement; a love relationship which only happens to be male-male. This represented a challenge to the moral hierarchy of her time which was a daring approach indeed by the young Mitchison in homophobic 1920s Britain, and one which was to recur without ceremony in later writing, between women as naturally as men. In *Black Sparta: Greek Stories* (1928), for example, the short story 'O Lucky Thessaly!' is a frank tale of first love which is only incidentally homosexual and is without a hint that this was in any way unusual, whilst 'Who will you have for Nuts in May' is a story of the desire for peace and friendship that is independent of any sexual connotation. Later in *Barbarian Stories* (1929), 'A Matter of no Importance' imagines a situation very similar to that of Titus and Meromic in *The Conquered*. Here a Gaelic slave, Rudd, is taken by the Roman Marcus Trebius, and befriended. When Marcus is betrothed to the irritating Decima, she becomes jealous of his affection for his slave, and he is coerced into giving her Rudd as a present, which she quickly tires of. She sells him with the result that Marcus cannot track him down, and although again nothing explicitly sexual occurs in the story, the strength of the bond between the two men across social boundaries is exceptional in a society in which one race are intent on 'civilising' the other. Here, we touch on the essential premise that Mitchison believed should be the foundation of any relationship: kindness, mutual respect and equality. This kindness was often independent of sex, yet she frequently referred to sex as a *form* of kindness, and clearly the boundaries between the two are blurred.

The overriding feature common to all the *Barbarian Stories* is a preoccupation with fairness and equality. The collection runs chronologically, from 'The Barley Field: Dorset Coast', set in the Early Bronze Age, to 'The Goat: Cardiff', set in 1935, which was then six years in the future. Many stories focus on the relationship between slave and master, the oppressed and the authoritarian, and more often than not an attempt is made to bridge the gap. Significantly, the majority of these stories focus on men, and although there are occasionally female protagonists, women, in fact, are often completely absent from Mitchison's early stories, possibly in part because most of her early friendships were with her brother's male school friends. Where women do appear, interested as she was in exploring the intellect and emotions of her own sex, she often could not rely on their historical position to provide an adequate starting point for her contemporary social enquiries. As she explains, therefore,

> It is odd that I was not put off by the undoubted fact that all Plato's Guardians were male and that he said many unpleasant things about the

> inferiority of women. But in my inside stories I don't suppose I was ever a Greek woman. (*AC* 40)

Many of Mitchison's short stories deal with the clash between, as Jenni Calder puts it 'personal imperatives and social norms',[41] and the ancient world was a fertile playing field on which to project these contests. Societies such 'socialist' Sparta provided environments conditioned by authoritarian governments in which 'the individual was subservient to the collective need',[42] and the questions regarding gender which arose from this were frequently similar to those of 1930s Britain. The Greece of the late centuries BC, for example, had very set ideas about the position of a woman in society, which even in the heyday of Athens did not equal a man's. Women were expected to be economical home makers, whilst men had to be warriors, cultivating a group ethic amongst themselves which nurtured their shared ideals and beliefs. Politically, men held the reins, although paradoxically it was the women who in many instances were economically the more powerful. The British situation was not all that distant from this in the years between the two World Wars, and even political recognition of women did not automatically change the mindset of a nation which was inherently patriarchal.

All of the above cultural and personal reasons dictate Mitchison's identification with Meromic in *The Conquered*, therefore, and place her in a similar position regarding Alxenor, the main character of her second novel, *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (1925).[43] Here, the scope for female heroism was restricted both by Mitchison's own society and by the ancient Hellenic societies in which the novel is located. Mitchison relied on the histories written by Xenophon and Alfred Zimmern for her factual information, both of whom wrote history from a perspective which virtually excluded women.[44] Thus, whilst her own craving for adventure and her interest in contemporary British socialist politics were intensifying, action or open discussion would have been in opposition to her culturally defined role. After all, the views of a disenfranchised woman were of limited importance, and as with the Gallic Fiommar, the Greek women of *Cloud Cuckoo Land* would realistically have been unable to take any part in the political upheaval of the Peloponnesian Wars. Mitchison's identification with Moiro, Kleora and Nikodike in the novel, therefore, is subsumed by her identification with Alxenor, through whom she could exercise a desire for action and expression which would have been anachronistic, and which would have been considered highly unfeminine, in a female character.

Alxenor leaves his own small island of Poeissa to escape from a conflict of ideologies: would the culturally rich Athenian, or the more 'socialist'[45] Spartan principles make for a

better life? Effectively, however, he moves from one extreme situation to another as he finds himself first in Athens and later Sparta with his teenage wife Moiro, which gives him first hand experience of the pleasures and pitfalls of both ideologies. Ready to compromise, and unwilling to turn his back on either, Alxenor is in some ways similar to Meromic in his constant struggle to decide on the best course, yet he is not gifted with the same strength of character as his predecessor, and is certainly not 'heroic' in the traditional sense. The point is, however, that as a male he is able to experiment with his destiny; choice is not removed for him as it is for his wife, and although his decisions may not be particularly worthy of note (he is not one of the great historical figures who appear in the novel), an alternative is offered to him by his gender which allows Mitchison, through her identification with him, to choose, where Moiro as a woman can only follow his lead.

Gender roles in Athenian and Spartan societies are very clearly delineated, and Moiro, Nikodike and Kleora represent the first of Mitchison's examinations of the restrictions imposed by fiercely traditional roles for women, in this case Athenian, compared with the relative respect afforded every Spartan.[46] In this way, *Cloud Cuckoo Land* exemplifies one of the most common problems faced by a feminist historical novelist, and the women Mitchison does portray in any depth gradually lose their influence as the novel continues. Despite exposure to both Athens and Sparta, Moiro's character barely progresses beyond that of the '[y]oung, inexperienced, appealing but hopelessly passive'[47] and fundamentally superficial female figure, craving the frivolous pleasures of a successful marriage. She is little more than a stereotype of all that is 'feminine', and her attempts at resisting Alxenor's demands for sex whilst she is still breastfeeding their first child, are tinged with guilt and low self-esteem:

> 'I do love you and I will do anything you want, but it did hurt me so!'
> Alxenor stared at her: 'You don't know what you're saying. Here am I, just home, come out of danger and hardship and toil, back to you, and you keep me off as if I was a mad dog! [...]
> But instead of being an obedient wife, she rocked herself about, clinging to Timas: 'Oh I know, and I'm a worthless creature, but do wait!' (*CCL* 130)

Mitchison's attitude is unclear. Perhaps her more ready identification with the active male figure meant she created Moiro with a mixture of condescension and pity. She does not empathise with her character, portraying her as a victim of circumstance, and this situation in which the female was expected to be passive and accessible was not restricted to Ancient Hellenic society. In 1920s Britain, too, ignorance of contraception exposed women to repeated pregnancies, particularly among the lower classes where gender division was more rigid, and Mitchison worked actively at the North Kensington Women's Welfare

Centre to help educate women about their options, and thus to gain more control over their lives.

In the novel, however, Alxenor is an unusual male character in that his patriarchal subjugation of his wife is examined through the eyes of his female creator, and like Moiro, Alxenor is to an extent a victim of circumstance and of history. His Hellenic upbringing has led him to expect an obedience from his wife that his nature now and again recoils from. His response to her refusal to sleep with him is to actively seek sex elsewhere, but there is a feeling that this is largely bravado, and his desire for mastery over her transfers itself to a prostitute, with whom, 'he found he hadn't got to be gentle... she seemed to like whatever he did, and made him feel magnificently her master, which was all he wanted now' (*CCL* 133).

In the novel, Moiro's fate is predetermined by her conditioning. Guilt at refusing Alxenor persuades her to resume sexual relations, and she reasons that 'he wasn't asking for more than his rights - what had he married her for?' (*CCL* 139). She identifies herself as sexual object, and it is she and the other women who are forced to expose to the elements the baby born of her second - unwanted - pregnancy, because a girl-child is an unnecessary burden. The way in which the women handle this situation is telling. Although distraught, they know that this is not an uncommon fate for new-borns, and attempt to be practical:

> Stratyllis took it through to the next room. 'Have you got the things ready, Thrassa?' She wrapped it in the oldest set of swaddling clothes and Thrassa brought a big earthenware jar, and held it, sobbing and sniffling, for the baby to be put in, the little dark, mouse-soft head showing in the jar's neck. 'It's no use waiting too long,' said Stratyllis, 'it'll die soon, and you've got plenty to do here.' (*CCL* 166)

Visible beneath the surface practicality, however, is the sheer brutality of the act, and the agony experienced by the mother:

> [Moiro] couldn't somehow explain that it gave her a pain now every time to see the one child alive and fat and happy, while his sister lay dead and rotting in some corner. (*CCL* 168)

Although Mitchison identifies with the maternal anguish Moiro experiences here, however, there is otherwise little to suggest that Mitchison is sympathetic toward her character. Moiro is two-dimensional compared with Alxenor. She is trapped in his failures long after she stops loving him, yet she is without the ability to forge her own success. Even the pleasure she finds in her affair with the Spartan Leon depends on her giving herself up to someone stronger. We are told: 'And now she felt a kind of power in her that glowed out and kept away the terrible things: she belonged to Leon, not to them' (*CCL* 260). The power she feels can only come from her association with him: 'I want you to do what you

choose always, kill father, kill anyone, kill me! No, don't kill me, hurt me, beat me -', and in the end, her lack of self respect disgusts him, causing him to reject her: 'he found himself shocked, sick to the very depths of his body: the woman had no decency at all!' (*CCL* 263).

Like Fiommar, Moiro is condemned from birth by her lack of opportunity to play any other role, and like Fiommar, her fate is to die. Brother-sister relationships are portrayed with Moiro and Cromon, Nikodike and Hagnon in *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, yet as with Fiommar and Meromic, the similarities between siblings reveal the harshness of the female fate compared with the male. In one sense, the female child is denied life - both Moiro and her second baby are killed by circumstances engendered by patriarchal society, and Nikodike, although she lives, must be content with the role of wife and mother. Poisoned by the unsafe abortion of her lover's child, Moiro is less noble than Fiommar, and less sympathetic, yet the real prognosis remains the same, and Mitchison recognises that criticism of Moiro's weakness must be tempered by the acknowledgement that she is an ordinary, and a very young, Greek woman. The chance to pursue a different course was reserved for only the most exceptional.

Mitchison allows herself one such exception in creating the Athenian Nikodike, who desperately wants to join her brother Hagnon in the fight to save democracy. 'I know I'm only a woman; but it's my Athens too!' (*CCL* 227), she states, but when her husband catches her attempting to join the fight she is beaten for her trouble, learning at last and to her despair 'the utter baseness of being a woman' (*CCL* 229). An intelligent girl, loved and respected by her father and brother, Nikodike is arguably closest of all the female characters in the novel to Mitchison herself, and the contradictory nature of her situation has echoes of Mitchison's struggle with the desire for expression versus the social necessity of being 'ladylike': Nikodike 'thought about things perhaps three times as much as any of the other women, which was unfortunate for her, being a respectable Athenian' (*CCL* 103). Yet whilst Hagnon recognises his sister's spirit and intelligence, he nevertheless fails to defend her against her abusive husband:

> 'But about my wife; she's cured now, don't you think?' 'Yes,' said Hagnon, 'or at least she will be when there are two babies to look after!' 'Best cure by a long way! And two won't be all!'
>
> They both laughed, coming out into the sunshine [...] And then in the middle of it all, Hagnon saw in his mind's eye a little picture of his sister shut up there in her house, sitting disconsolate with her hands in her lap, and her heart closed against him for ever. (*CCL* 237)

Nikodike is barred by her gender from participating in the great movement of history, and as with Meromic and Fiommar, gender roles dictate that whilst Hagnon plays an active part, his sister is confined to the more domestic situation, nursing her bruises. This imbalance in prospects clearly angered Mitchison in her own life, restricted as she was in comparison to Jack. In their respective societies, therefore, the voices of both Nikodike and of Mitchison herself were accorded only limited authority, yet at this early stage, Mitchison had not discovered a way of allocating power and agency to her female protagonists.

In *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, the women who theoretically come closer to equality are the Spartans, Kleora and Dionassa, and indeed they do enjoy greater freedom and respect than their Athenian counterparts. Certainly Moiro's Hellenic concern with clothes, scent and general domesticity is conveyed as less worthy than the Spartan respect for physical strength and plain beauty. Yet this is another indication of Mitchison's contrary nature: while resisting the constraints of ladylike behaviour, she refused to equate 'feminine' attention to appearance with weakness, and her autobiographical writings often make note of just such feminine preoccupations as what she wore on a certain occasion.

A further contradiction of greater significance is signalled by Mitchison's attitude to Sparta. She believed that economic repression was the ultimate means of subjugating women, and initially seems to explore the alternative through Sparta, in which women are given the same by the State as men. Athenian emphasis on meekness and delicacy are replaced in Sparta by strength and willingness to work actively for the welfare of this state, and in finding female issues less separate from male, Moiro struggles in Sparta to remain a 'good Greek girl', and is shocked by Dionassa's 'quite dreadfully immodest' (*CCL* 242) short dresses. She complains:

> Kleora never seemed to want to talk about the ordinary things of life, details of marriage and children, what to do with one's slaves, dresses and scents, marketing, charms and cures - or at least she did talk about them, but not, somehow, as if she took any interest in the things themselves, but as if they all had to be made to fit into some scheme of life, and were only worth thinking of in as far as they did. (*CCL* 242)

Extravagance is frowned upon, and Moiro is horrified to discover that men are not even favoured with better food or clothing than women. Mitchison, with her socialist tendencies, believed that the emphasis placed on sharing and leadership created a more positive environment for women's equality. Yet in spite of this, she was forced to contradict herself in acknowledging that what these women gain in equality, they sacrifice in individuality. Sparta encourages every citizen to put State before family; essentially,

before self, and in doing so, critic Ruth Hoberman suggests, both women and men are ultimately identifying with a male ideal.[48] Women are not free to express themselves; instead they are complicit in the process which grants universality to the male - they have become 'immasculated'[49] as opposed to emasculated. The women, therefore, require no separate history of their own, and Mitchison ultimately rejects this, albeit through her use of a male character.

At once attracted to and in awe of the Spartan State, Alxenor is for a time convinced that this way of life is the way forward. In the end, however, he is warned off leaving his son in Sparta by a youth, Kratis, who explains to him that Spartans are trained 'to think through oneself for Sparta' (*CCL* 296), and that

> [t]hey make nothing beautiful themselves.'
> 'Except their lives, and their State.'
> 'Oh, I give you that, but is it enough?; (*CCL* 297)

Alxenor is forced to realise that it is not enough, and he returns to Poiessa with his son Timas. The attack Mitchison makes here is not specifically gendered; yet it demonstrates her awareness that, in the end, economic equality was not enough in itself enough to ensure gender equality if the state is allowed to crush individuality, particularly when that state is fundamentally patriarchal. Further, although Alxenor, like Meromic, allowed Mitchison to actively participate in a historical society where it was difficult to fictionalise a positive role for women, a male protagonist could only allow her a certain degree of feminist expression.

There are, however, short stories in which women are the central vehicles through which Mitchison examines her concerns, and in some cases the result is more assertively feminist. One attempt to escape from convention is found in the title story from the collection *When The Bough Breaks* (1924), where Mitchison explores her own desires for the freedom of adventure stories through a young Scandinavian girl, Gersemi, who travels disguised as a boy. Following a raid in which she has taken part, she comes across a young Roman woman, Innocentia, a casualty of war whom she pities for her weakness, and she asks herself,

> what else had ever happened to women in war? She thanked all her Gods that she herself had got away from it and was almost the equal of a man. (*WBB* 178)[50]

Gersemi has little fellow feeling for women when she meets Innocentia, but gradually her resistance to her own sexual identity wears down and she finds herself disturbingly attracted to Innocentia's brother Flavius, by whom she eventually becomes pregnant. With this, she becomes identified with an image of femininity to which she had been previously

unable to relate; freedom is lost, and Gersemi's fate indicates again Mitchison's frustration with the inability of many women in the 1920s to choose their destiny. With Gersemi's baby comes 'a kind of mental helplessness... as if she were going slowly towards a dark wall' (*WBB* 224), and she moves from being a strong warrior to a frightened and bullied woman. Essentially, choice has been removed, and this is reinforced by her eventual fate - marriage to one of her old fighting comrades - because she cannot return to her old individualistic way of life.

In the biography, Jenni Calder suggests that 'Gersemi fights alongside men, has her adventures and gets her man and marriage too',[51] yet this is almost too glib, and fails to acknowledge that Gersemi is imprisoned by her pregnancy, the child's father dies, and she rather ends up with the man she marries than sets out to 'get him'. Mitchison seems to be suggesting, in fact, that a woman's possibilities are tied to her body to an unacceptable degree rather than that Gersemi is lucky.

Gersemi does not represent an entirely positive image for women in 'When the Bough Breaks', then, yet her creation arguably signals a development in that she is the central focus of the story. The fact that the happiness she experiences as a warrior cannot be sustained once she has moved into occupation of a generic female role, only serves to emphasise the limited possibilities offered by the patriarchal societies in which she is placed.

In his book *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature,* Julian D'Arcy devotes a chapter to the specifics of the Norse influence on Mitchison's work, and although his emphasis is not on gender, he draws attention to the mythic significance of Gersemi's cloak, ostensibly 'made of a great white bear-pelt from the north, a fairy bear that once had strange dealings with the Finn wizards' (*WBB* 162). The cloak represents Gersemi's freedom, dignity and identity,[52] and without it she suffers from misfortune, manifested in gender terms in her ill-fated relationship with Flavius. Further, D'Arcy's study suggests that Gersemi is just one representation of a very specific gender type in many of her Norse stories. Often, male characters are arrogant, possessing an 'almost childlike pursuit of wealth, sensual pleasure and success',[53] and often, as in the case of Sveneld and Theophano in 'The Konung of White Walls', or of Harald and Maria Anastasia in 'Oh, Gay are the Garlands' (both in *Barbarian Stories*), Norse male characters treat women with contempt and cynicism. In particular Harald in 'Gay are the Garlands' is an example of this stereotype in his treatment of the Greek woman, Maria Anastasia, who

in turn fulfils the stereotyped gender expectation that the female should take narcissistic pleasure in male subjugation when Harald captures her:

> 'I have you now', and she murmured yes, shivering in lovely fear of his cold voice, his strength, his power. She thought he would soon begin to kiss her, she thought he might tear her dress off, gripping the stuff between his two hands; down from her throat she began to be conscious of her body waiting for him under the hot weight of its silk and linen. (*BBS* 268-9)

Mitchison makes no comment on the eroticising of Maria Anastasia's passivity. To Harald, in fact, possession of her sexually is less important than his ability to reject her is, as a symbol of his superiority over the Greeks, and this is illustrative of Mitchison's criticism of women's weakness. Maria's rejection by Harald might be interpreted as Mitchison's warning to women who indulge in a narcissistic approach to sexual relationships.

Mitchison, then, is not afraid to criticise women where criticism is due, and stories such as 'The Story of Myrto', and 'The Lamb Misused' in *Black Sparta* also concentrate on the dangers of women's naiveté and consequent abuse at male hands. In the former, a narrator recounts the story of one of her fellow prostitutes, Myrto, to a new girl, laughing at the way in which Myrto is duped into giving up her fortune to a man she never sees again. In 'The Lamb Misused' a young Greek slave girl falls in love with a man held prisoner by her brother-in-law. The young man responds to her. Yet after using her to get out of captivity, he is quickly bored and arranges for her marriage to another slave. This is tidily done for him as her marriage absolves him of any responsibility, yet for her it is only another form of slavery, so different from her imagined destiny. As the narrator of 'The Story of Myrto' muses, 'It just shows what a girl can do if she gets silly on a man' (*BBS* 157),[54] and Mitchison appears to be slightly disdainful of women who fail to recognise when they are being used.

One story in which the female character placed at the centre is more assertively feminist, however, is 'The Wife of Aglaos', first published in *The Delicate Fire* (1933), in which the heroine, Kleta, is also a slave, but becomes a new person in her attempt to break free. Previously a 'lady', Kleta finds herself sold as a slave when the Macedonians conquer her city state, and she is forced to make the physical and moral sacrifice of enduring repeated rape by her new master, Koenos, to keep her baby son alive. Previously used to a strict moral code, she has to readjust to her new circumstances, and whilst she continues to identify herself as wife of her husband Aglaos, the social meaning of this is lost, and she is forced to change her opinion as to which values are most important. As she explains to a young companion:

> You are young now and I am not so young. You can look back

> continuously on your life and see it as a gradual change, a gradual drawing out and flowering... But sudden and frightening things happened to me, so now I find it very hard to remember - to remember, that is, with my blood and body, for I can remember well enough with my mind - what I was like before they happened... (*BTL* 106)[55]

Kleta's rape means that sex is no longer identified only with love and security, yet to protect her child she must accept this and learn from it. She realises, too, that she will not be able to resist her slavery forever, and is faced with the difficult choice between giving in and escaping, which will inevitably mean leaving the baby she has borne Koenos: 'I knew I couldn't face this business of keeping myself apart from him while it went on; if it began again I knew I should give in this time' (*BTL* 117). Yet, she is determined to free herself, stronger now for her experience. She reflects; 'it seems to me that perhaps, if these sudden and frightening things do not happen, it is very hard to grow up, very hard to become a wise man or woman' (*BTL* 106).

Despite the fact that her story revolves around children, Kleta is no 'Mother Earth', and she abandons her second child in order to save both the first and herself. In this, she is an unconventional mother figure, revealing a rational element in behaviour generally accepted as totally instinctive, and moving away from the constraints placed automatically on women due to unwanted pregnancy. Mitchison herself as I have noted previously, was very active on this issue, campaigning vigorously to educate women about the contraceptive options open to them. Not only did she work in the North Kensington Clinic, she also published her essay, 'Comments on Birth Control',[56] and contributed to the *World League for Sexual Reforms Congress* in 1929. These avenues, however, are not open to Kleta, and her abandonment of a child is the only available alternative to remaining a slave. In the earlier short story 'Niempsor Kar' (*Barbarian Stories*) abandoning a child who is not the product of a loving relationship is also offered as a solution, this time to two sisters escaping from imprisonment. Mitchison was perfectly aware of the selfishness of this act, and yet she reveals something of her own relationship to motherhood in allowing the preservation of the self to prevail. There is no doubt that she loved her children, but as her biographer Jenni Calder candidly remarks, 'Naomi did not put her children first'.[57]

In 'The Wife of Aglaos', motherhood is a central theme. After her escape from Keonos, Kleta is taken in by a mountain gang and enters another stage of her learning process. She quite willingly has sex with every member and is happy to bear them two children, as she finds among them a sense of familial equality within which she feels needed. In one way, this 'sexual communism' seems to be a very feminist approach to sex, combating the sexual hypocrisy of British society in the 1930s which covertly allowed men to have as many

partners as they liked, whilst women had to remain virgins for their husbands. Kleta feels that she is returning the kindness they are showing her by their welcoming her to live with them, and by disregarding conventional morality, sex for her loses its conventional taboos:

> I was glad to know I was bearing a child that had started from one of them,
> I was glad to feel myself as closely mixed with them as that. (*BTL* 126)

That this is a completely open sexual exchange, however, does not necessarily mean it is an equal one. Despite the fact that she retains ownership of herself in the gang, she is treated not as an equal, but as a woman whom each man may use. This sexual currency troubles the pseudo-communal waters. She may well not mind sleeping with the men, and she may not be physically forced as she was with her Macedonian master, but neither is she given a real choice, and the gang will not allow her personal preference to restrict their access to her. When Ophioneos joins the gang, however, he brings youth, beauty and an educated mind, which draws Kleta toward him and away from the others. The gang punish her as a result, and finally, the reality of the role she has adopted is brought home to her. Ownership exists here, only in a more subtle form, and this is reinforced by the return of Aglaos himself, at which point Kleta admits:

> I was prepared to go anywhere he said and do anything he wanted me to do; he was my husband, and besides, I loved him. There'd never been any doubt in my mind that if he came back he'd tell me what to do next and I should do it; I knew I wasn't wise that way... (*BTL* 133)

To return to Jenni Calder's statement, lifting Kleta 'out of the box' which her social conditioning provided for her (that of monogamous wife and mother, respectable by Macedonian standards), gives her the opportunity to experience life on another level. She realises that many of the class related beliefs she previously held are unimportant, a change in ideology which is irrevocable. Nonetheless, in the context of gender, Mitchison has only taken her so far, yet not as far as she might have done, and this may again be illustrative of the limits imposed on the author by society.

In her most ambitious novel, *The Corn King and The Spring Queen* (1931), many of Mitchison's concerns with the conflict between the explicitly gendered individual and society culminate in the creation of Marob. Set between 228 BC and 187 BC, Marob is an imaginary community which exists on the shores of the Black Sea, and on the edge of the historical Hellenic world. Marob is structured around magic and ritual, in contrast to the reason and rationale of Spartan society under King Kleomenes, which is also examined in the text. Within both social structures parallels with Mitchison's contemporary situation are discernible, and she uses the meeting between the two very different societies in the novel to examine a range of issues: social, sexual and political.

The Corn King and the Spring Queen is an epic novel in many senses. Arranged in eight parts plus an epilogue, the action spans forty-one years, and characters travel from the Black Sea shores to Sparta, and eventually to Egypt. Further, it is also epic in the way in which Mitchison deals with history. Although Marob itself is fictional, it represents Mitchison's interpretation of the type of barbarian society that might once have existed, and is contrasted with Sparta in the time of Kleomenes, a historical epoch in which magnificent ideals of social equality struggled amidst battles for possession of the Hellenic world. The movement of the novel itself, therefore, is epic, and in the final sense, *The Corn King*'s involvement with 'the myths and legends of nationhood'[58] connect it strongly with the common features of original epic poetry.

Perhaps more than ever before, owing to its epic nature this novel for Mitchison 'absorbed and accommodated the life she was living',[59] and the period in which she was writing *The Corn King* - she began in 1925 - was characterised for her by deepening political commitment as well as broadening emotional horizons. 1925 was the year that she and husband Dick agreed that they were both open to the possibility of extra-marital relationships, and Naomi developed her relationship with Theodore Wade Gray, a friend and historian who encouraged her interest in classical Greece[60].

Of equal importance, however, the novel was in many ways Mitchison's comment on her contemporary society. In her depiction of Egypt under Ptolemy IV Philopator, her disgust at greed is visible, and although Marob appears primitive in its ritualistic barbarity, the positive value of a strong sense of community and a living bond with myth is in evidence which harks back to her identification with the ideology of the Scottish Renaissance. With Sparta, the third society in the novel, Mitchison again sets out to examine an ideal, one which in this case was in line with her own growing desire for socialism. The quest is personal, then, as much as it is political, and the novel's central characters react to these three societies, examining the conflicts between their own individuality, and the ideology which has shaped them, accepting and rejecting as they develop. Here as elsewhere, characters are involved in the quest for a just society. Mitchison had already shown a commitment to this repeatedly in her earlier novels and stories, and in *The Corn King* as never before, she confronts the injustice of the extreme social systems that determine lives. As Julian D'Arcy notes in *Skalds and Sagamen*, 'the question of racial origins and loyalties, especially involving Celts and Norsemen or Saxons, was a subject of particular interest to a number of Scottish writers at this time',[61] and Gunn's *Sun Circle* is an example of this with its destructive meeting of Norse and Druid peoples. Whilst D'Arcy

indicates Mitchison's bond with the Scottish Literary Renaissance through this feature of her writing, however, he also points out that unlike some of her contemporaries, Mitchison champions neither side. As with the Roman-Gaulish relationships, the positive and negative aspects of each ideology are uncovered, and it becomes clear

> that concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture' are often very superficial [...] so-called barbarian societies or races have in fact very subtle and important contributions to make to human understanding, not least in establishing influential mythical archetypes.[62]

Although she did not return to permanent residence in Scotland until 1938, Mitchison insisted that by 1930 she was very clear about the Renaissance, sharing particularly its socialist views. She explains: 'for me Scotland and its Renaissance is very much mixed up with left wing politics including the Labour party',[63] her involvement with which began in the 1920s and became increasingly important to her. In her early fiction Mitchison reflects the importance of left wing ideology repeatedly, in her treatment of the small society set up against those which are larger and more powerful, as with Marob and Sparta in *The Corn King*, and with Rome and Gaul in *The Conquered* and a number of the short stories in *When the Bough Breaks*, *Black Sparta: Greek Stories*, and *Barbarian Stories*. In *The Corn King*, Marob is a small and marginalised country, similar to Scotland, whose inhabitants, like the Scots, view their immediate environment as the centre of the earth. Therefore when Kleomemes King of Sparta inquires as to Marob's geographical position, Marob's Corn King, Tarrik, 'found it hard to explain; he had never exactly thought of this; Marob had always been, as it were, here, in the middle...' (*CK* 121)[64] Marob embodies the mythical element of the past, which was in keeping with the Golden Age vision of the Scottish Renaissance. It is a barbarian community, lacking the refinement of Spartan civilisation, and yet Marob's virtue is in its communality and in a sense of spiritual balance which is linked closely to nature and the seasons. As Francis Hart explains:

> The book fluctuates between mythic and historic phases of human time; and while it suggests that the birth of history is irreversible, it also suggests that the mythic will outlast or replace the historic, that the prehistoric will be reborn as the posthistoric.[65]

This is not to suggest, however, that Marob should not attempt to progress; it must if it is to survive, and the embodiment of this development led by the town's ritualistic leaders forms the core of the narrative. The barbarian Scythians have many more worthwhile elements existing within their primitive structure than the more civilised Spartans, or the more developed and consequently more corrupt Egypt, yet there is also an element of stagnation in its parochialism which suggests that Mitchison is dealing covertly with Scotland's own situation. The only physical manifestation of progress in Marob is a road

which remains incomplete, and it might be argued that Scotland, too, was suspended and unable to move forward, an issue which had to be addressed if Independence was to be a realistic goal. Marob is not in search of Independence. Nevertheless, it is separate from a focal point of power in the same way as Scotland, and it has its own contribution to make in the quest for a fair society. The problem Marob has is that as a society it must undergo a course of redefinition. Barbarianism must progress to incorporate other ideologies, and when the Corn King Tarrik, and his Spring Queen, Erif Der, make the journey away from Marob by sea, it might be argued that in their role as fertility monarchs they are representative of the collective community; Marob itself is being forced to embrace the wider world.

More significantly, however, the position of Scotland compared with England, in relation to Marob compared with Greece, is to an extent paralleled by the position of women compared to men in British society, and Mitchison moves toward the specifically female narrative point of view in a subversion of standard male oriented historical narratives. Mitchison's earlier work challenged standard stereotypes: Meromic and Fiommar, Gersemi and Kleta, are all characters who implicitly reject the male histories that would refute their existence. For the first time in *The Corn King*, however, the narrative is centred on the experience of female characters in each social system. In both Marob and Sparta male figures are crucial, yet for the first time in a sustained piece of work, narrative focus is reserved for two female characters. Primarily Erif Der, Marob's Spring Queen, is central. Later, as Erif's development takes her away from Marob to Greece, Philylla, maid to the Spartan Queen, provides the main narrative perspective for Mitchison's depiction of Spartan society. *The Corn King* represents a significant development in Mitchison's fiction, therefore, and more significantly in historical fiction as a genre. For the first time, the female experience of history is central; the challenge to history and to male agency implicit.

Mitchison had previously found difficulty in imagining a positive role for women within a series of historical settings which were deeply patriarchal. In *The Corn King*, she changes this by creating Erif Der, whose *bildungsroman* forms the central strand in a complex narrative. Erif can be viewed, in one way, as the essence of all Mitchison's characters; the embodiment of attributes within a female which Mitchison previously only dealt with through her exploitation of male protagonists. Erif is a tomboy-figure, exhibiting none of the vacuous sensitivity of Moiro in *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, and yet divorced from the male-identified image of Gersemi, the fighting heroine of 'When the Bough Breaks'. Rather,

Erif is formed of the same mould as Fiommar, but this time like Meromic, she is allowed not only to develop, but to take centre stage.

In *The Corn King,* life in Marob is structured around fertility monarchs and deities, whose social, religious and agricultural functions are specifically gendered as Corn King and Spring Queen. To ensure the well-being of the agricultural cycle, they employ what James Frazer referred to in *The Golden Bough* as 'sympathetic magic', which

> assumes that in nature one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency... The magician does not doubt that the same causes will always produce the same effects, that the performance of the proper ceremony, accompanied by the appropriate spell, will inevitably be attended by the desired result, unless, indeed, his incantations should chance to be thwarted and foiled by the more potent charms of another sorcerer.[66]

Their powers depend on strict conformity to the rules of magic, therefore, neglect of which would incur failure and potential disaster in the life of the community. Many of the peoples Frazer encountered genuinely believed that nature would not serve them if the agencies of male and female were destabilised by physical or emotional disharmony, and it was therefore in their best interests that Corn King and Spring Queen should be in perfect accord, both within themselves and with one another, as the welfare of society depended on their successful performance of specific rituals enacted at definite times throughout the agricultural year.[67] In primitive times, bad seasons were a respected enemy, and the people of barbarian societies believed that their gods were their link to the land and their key to prosperity.

In Mitchison's Marob, Tarrik the Chief is the latest in a long line of Corn Kings. He is the centre of the community, and is free to choose his Spring Queen from the village women in order to enact the 'sacred marriage' of ancient ritual. Although the Spring Queen's role is not as securely fixed as the Corn King's, however, the power Erif Der possesses as Spring Queen is not confined to her public role as Tarrik's is, deviating significantly from the relationship between male-female deities studied by Frazer. Erif is not only Spring Queen, therefore, she is also a witch, and Mitchison was 'fascinated with witchcraft', which was 'by implication, at least, a reserve of female power quite separate from physical strength'.[68] Her use of witchcraft within historical fiction, in fact, was highly original.[69] In the earlier short story, 'The Konung of White Walls' (*Barbarian Stories*), Mitchison had dabbled briefly with the idea of witchcraft, and the story ends with one female conjuring a boat out of water so that she and her lover might escape from her husband. Yet Mitchison does not develop her interest in magic here, which occurs only at the very end of the story. By

comparison, magic in *The Corn King* is central to her characterisation of Erif, and provides her with immense power, not only in her role as Spring Queen, but also over men and over her own fate.

Erif's powers are not a dark secret. She is one of several witches in Marob, and in the initial introduction to her, the very intimate relationship she enjoys with the physical world through her use of magic is revealing:

> she threw two more pebbles into the sea,... then walked back towards Marob harbour till she came to the high stone breakwater; instead of going round with the road, she climbed up it, by way of a chain and ring and some wave-worn places in the stone; she was always fond of doing elaborate and unnecessary things. On the other side, she jumped down twelve feet onto another shingle bank, but she was not at all an easy person to hurt; air and water at least knew too much about her. (*CK* 3)

Her witchcraft is an accepted part of society and although the notion that this form of female power constitutes a threat to male characters is touched on when Erif is tryng to injure Tarrik, it is nonetheless accepted. Erif and the other Marob witches are shown to benefit from the power it gives them, and even when Erif travels to Sparta, where magic is not practised or particularly esteemed, it remains an unquestioned capability that ultimately allows women to operate beyond normal limits.

Tarrik's magic, by comparison, is confined to his role as Corn King and to the fertility rituals of Marob, during which he opens himself to 'the godhead'. His godhead is explicitly sexual; the power of Corn King is projected through his virility, and during the elaborately depicted Plowing Eve the rites culminate in ritualised sex between himself as Corn King, and Erif as Spring Queen:

> The dance became the climax of the courting between Corn and Spring. He leapt at her. She gave at the knees and all along her body and fell on the floor of the booth, not painfully, for she was all slack to it. Then before the eyes of all Marob he jerked the strips of stuff sideways and away from himself. For one moment all the growers of corn could look on the hard and upright sign of the godhead on their Chief and Corn King. Then, still to the squealing of pipes he threw his hands up like a diver and all his body curved and shot downward towards her. She did not feel his weight because of the tension in her own skin from head to heels. In the convention of the dance and in a solid noise of drums the Corn King opened the Furrow, broke into the Spring, and started the Year. (*CK* 213-4)

He is described as 'a god making plain his power' (*CK* 214), and this is directly linked to his strength and sexual prowess. Father of numerous children in the village, his fertility is the human embodiment of the agricultural sowing of seed, and failure to impregnate Erif would be taken as an unlucky sign that the people are going to starve. That his magic is so

entwined with his masculinity, however, is ultimately restrictive for Tarrik, as there must come a significant point when his strength begins to fail. This is a concern for any such deity as James Frazer explains:

> if the course of nature is dependent on the man-god's life, what catastrophes may not be expected from the gradual enfeeblement of his powers and their final extinction in death? [70]

In keeping with Frazer's account, Tarrik's future fate is to be killed and eaten by his son before his body becomes physically impaired, in order that the godhead can be transferred unscathed. Although he occupies the role of god, however, Tarrik is also a man, and this unwelcome prospect eventually preys on his mind to such an extent that he becomes unbalanced, dissociated from Marob, and eventually he loses sight of his purpose as leader of his close knit community. As he explains to Erif,

> I am satisfied for Marob, and that is what I am Corn King for. But I am not satisfied for myself. You know that, Erif. And perhaps the people of Marob will come soon to want each his own satisfaction too. The seasons will not be enough. Then the Corn King will not be enough either. (*CK* 285)

That the Corn King, representative of a ritualistic way of life, may not be enough, ultimately threatens Tarrik's sexual identity, and Mitchison demonstrates here that her concern with gender extends to male as well as female roles. In Marob, she portrays the effect on individuals of a society in transition, struggling to incorporate new ideas, and this arguably echoes her contemporary Britain, where the pre-war hegemony was beginning to be dismantled. For Tarrik, the idea that the old way is not the only way threatens his position as Corn King, and by association, his gender identity.

The catalyst for this change in Tarrik's mental state and thus in Marob comes in the form of a Greek philosopher Sphaeros, who brings with him a speculative challenge to the unintellectual way of life in Marob. Initially, Tarrik eagerly absorbs the notion that nothing is certain; degrees of unreality must be filtered until one comes down to certain appearances so undistorted that they can be taken as sure, possessing visions which the Greek calls the Kataleptike Phantasia. This gives him a feeling of freedom and release previously unexperienced. Yet slowly he becomes aware that with this freedom comes uncertainty and chaos. He no longer believes in the role he must occupy, and this is a realisation that terrifies him: 'Tarrik lay quite still and astonished, almost afraid to move in case everything disappeared. If this went on there was no meaning in being Chief of Marob' (*CK* 80). His whole identity is defined by the role of Corn King, fertility monarch. His deification is identified with fertility. Without it his masculinity is called into question; virility becomes sterility, and the point of his existence, centred on the physical, is lost.

Sigmund Freud touches on this in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), an outstandingly influential essay in Mitchison's time which she almost certainly read, in which he writes:

> It may be said that in primitive men the process of thinking is still to a great extent sexualised. This is the origin of their belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, their unshakeable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world and their inaccessibility to the explanations, so easily obtainable, which could teach them man's true position in the universe.[71]

Tarrik's function has been to do just this - to control the world in a sense - and his encounter with the logic Sphaeros brings to Marob, is his first indication of man's true impotence amidst chaos. Tarrik's own assurance that the seasons are controlled has been destroyed, and leaving this environment is the only way in which he can expand his psychological horizons, therefore he travels to Greece in the hope that the example of the method of government of Kleomenes will help him to form one of his own which can incorporate both Greek logical and barbarian cyclical ideas. Meeting the Spartan king, however, he realises that this will not be a simple task, as Kleomenes looks down on the Scythians and their ritualistic ways as inferior:

> He could feel that they could never be friends, he and Kleomenes, they would never talk together about kingship and all the things he had learnt from Sphaeros... and that he had come all this way to know more of. So far, he was angry and rather hurt. He was prepared, at least he had thought so, to be looked down upon by these true Hellenes; but only for ideas imperfectly worked out or concepts scarcely realised - something that could be remedied; not, certainly, like this, as a simple matter of course. (*CK* 126)

Kleomenes evaluates Tarrik in terms of his primitive, unintellectual origins, yet although this prevents the Chief of Marob from pursuing friendship and co-operation with Kleomenes, Tarrik finds healing in Greece in other forms. He has left his 'supernatural' role behind him, and can concentrate solely on his role as Chief, which makes less relevant 'the blighting and unlucky things that had happened to the magic part of him, the God in him'. Instead, away from Marob '[h]e was a man here like the rest of them, governing them through the force of that manhood' (*CK* 127). This allows him to go some way toward a redefinition of self, independent of his role as deity; to use his body for other pursuits than Marob, and to ground his mind inside the reality of that body, from which it has become frighteningly dissociated. He must establish an identity independent of his sexuality to survive the introduction of intellectual logic which has shattered the safety of his insular community, and become a more complete person in the process.

Although the ritualistic activities in the novel are based on a belief in magic, they are easily read as an allegory for contemporary society. The community of Marob might be seen, in effect, as a microcosm of Mitchison's own, relying on a strong male for leadership, and

largely ignorant of the significance of the female role. During World War I, however, out of necessity women had taken over a great deal of the work previously done by men, and by the end of the war so many men had been killed that there was a physical as well as a psychical alteration in society. Mitchison, along with countless others, had been jolted from her upper class cocoon by the war years. Society could not go back, and as mentioned above, it is significant that universal suffrage was attained within ten years of the conclusion of World War I without a fraction of the violence which had failed to achieve the franchise prior to 1914.

Not only did women make substantial contribution to war work during World War I, they stepped in to positions usually occupied by their absent men folk, who did not find this shift in the power balance easy to cope with on their return. This is reflected by the gender conflict in *The Corn King*, as primarily, the magic wielded by the Corn King is about control: man's desire to control the mechanisms of life. The introduction of logical thought into this male orientated belief structure to some extent depletes the value of Tarrik's male-identified magic. Tarrik's magic is not lost; Mitchison still asks us to believe in it, but its power decreases, and simultaneously the power of the female grows.

There is no easy way to resolve the problem of the burgeoning individuality within Tarrik's Divine Kingship. In social terms he must become less of a stereotypically brutal, unthinking male, unable to sustain a relationship of mutual respect with Erif rather than one of demand and inequality. He is unable to reject his sexually aggressive role as Corn King, but modifies the pure physicality of it, and this is as far as Mitchison is able to take him. His plight cannot be resolved completely, and for the author to do so would be to falsify the likely nature of this type of society to too great an extent. Men in Marob, like men in Mitchison's own era, are too deeply embedded in a set of values which uphold the patriarchal fabric. Whilst Erif is away, for example, Tarrik takes her cousin as Spring Queen in her place and has a child by her. Society demands that he continue to demonstrate his sexual potency.

Significantly, however, no amount of individual male strength can overshadow the role Erif Der plays as Spring Queen. As Tarrik's emotional and intellectual strength drains, Erif's increases, and Mitchison examines her development from immature, 'tomboyish' girl, into a woman whose strength provides a critical balance for Tarrik. In *The Corn King* as in *The Conquered*, the female is a sacrificial figure, yet Erif represents a development in that she survives, moving into the centre of the novel. Tarrik occupies an essential role, and

as with Meromic and Alxenor, there is little doubt that Mitchison writes herself into his character as well as Erif's. What is significant, here, however, is that the male protagonist becomes secondary to the female. Mitchison brings power to the female where in typically portrayed barbarian societies it was confined to the male, and she takes it one step further by giving Erif powers beyond those particular to her status as goddess. Although men dominate Marob, women with magical powers cannot be reduced to biological functions, and Erif's power earns her status and freedom among the men, none of whom have magical powers, and none of whom are immune to the magic of their witch wives. Even Tarrik is affected by Erif's magic, and this enhances her appeal:

> He was not in the least sure what were his feelings for Erif Der, except that he wanted to get possession of her; he knew that she was somehow dangerous.' (*CK* 24)

The type of powers shared by Erif and the other witches can only be inherited by female children from their mothers, a fact that makes her enigmatic and attractive to Tarrik. Freudian influence is discernible once again in Tarrik's desire to gain control over what is in many ways the externalisation of a specifically female agency, and his own assertion of power culminates in the incident in which he rapes Erif:

> All down one side she was sore and bruised; She was being treated as a thing, not a person!... Her teeth closed on saltish linen and skin and muscle, and she threw herself sideways with a kick against the side of the saddle. They hit the ground both together, rolled over half a dozen times. After that she was almost too done to struggle or fight him any more. (*CK* 37)

This act is not only telling from the point of view of Mitchison's characterisation of Tarrik, however. It is also interesting in the reaction it prompts from Erif herself. Although it initially suggests psychological violation: 'She didn't think she could ever mind anything after this - he seemed to have broken all the clean, sharp edges of her feeling forever' (*CK* 38), nevertheless, it seems to move quickly to acceptance:

> with a certain pleasant relaxing of all her muscles. She had been hurt: that was all cured. By Tarrik: who cared what Tarrik did? - he would not be Chief much longer. (*CK* 41)

This is an uneasy kind of satisfaction for the contemporary reader. Tarrik's actions are not condoned, but his brutality is apparently accepted in light of his role, and in her defence, the society she has created is one in which sexual roles and relations carry their own significance. Tarrik as Corn King is entitled to whatever woman he chooses. Yet on the other hand, Mitchison's approach seems somewhat light-handed, and the 'certain pleasant relaxing of all her muscles' hints at a degree of gratification in Erif's response which is contradictory to an otherwise feminist characterisation. Once Erif's bruises have been

treated, she is largely unmoved, and accepts Tarrik's action as part of the social context of Marob. What is good for Tarrik is good for Marob, and the offence we might expect Erif to display is subverted by the non-individualist nature of her society. In spite of her own strength, she submits to male structures of power she has never been taught to reject, and in this she bears direct resemblance to Mitchison, who did not always react against the powerful influence of her seniors which repressed her female identity and ambition, and whose attitudes toward feminism proved, at times, to be contradictory.

Marob has expectations of male strength and of female subservience and domesticity which reflect those of British society in the 1930s, and while Erif's magic allows her to evade complete identification with Mitchison's contemporaries, she is tied to patriarchal society in gender and in function. Although she is in a position of some strength, she is not equal, and initially allows her own power to be used manipulatively against Tarrik for her father's ends. Harn Der wants Tarrik's destruction, and marries Erif to him so that she can 'magik' him, making him appear unlucky to the people, who consequently lose faith in him as their fertility god. She does not consider her own feelings as she carries out her father's requests, nor does she question his right to implicate her in his bid for power, and Mitchison here demonstrates the conflict between familial loyalty and individual feeling: 'There she was, Harn Der's daughter and a witch; so of course she would do everything she could for her father and brothers' (*CK* 16).

Not only is Erif used by her father, however, she is also subverted by her role as Spring Queen. The sexualised rituals in which she plays an essential role, not only display the vital influence of the female in ensuring the well-being of the crops, but also reveal her limitations and the reinforcing of gender stereotypes. Indicative of this is the difference in the ceremonial costumes worn by Corn King and Spring Queen. Tarrik wears a colourful, flimsy garment which opens easily to reveal his naked body as he moves. He is driven by his senses, in tune with the land which is his to fertilise, and although Erif is an essential symbol of this land, her function is not as active participant, reflected by the stiff, shapeless gown that she wears. Where Tarrik is 'the warmth and force of growth' (*CK* 210), pliable and fluid, she remains motionless, shivering and rigid: 'Erif was the hard, fallow field; the cold, reluctant spring' (*CK* 212). She is like the earth in Spring, an unwilling virgin who must be coerced into sexuality and fertility by the plough. She must submit for the ritual to be complete and the corn to grow, and this she does gladly at the last moment, embracing Tarrik's virility:

> She saw the Corn King's eyes over the backs of the beasts. The plow came at her. The singing stopped. At the last moment she leapt to her

> feet, ran under the horns of the oxen, between their panting flanks, and leapt the plowshare itself as it made the last furrow right through the centre of the fallow field, tearing apart the warm, flattened grass where she had been sitting. (*CK* 212)

As Spring Queen, she must receive the Corn King; as Erif, she must receive Tarrik. She is instrumental and yet her role is one of compliance. Nevertheless when Tarrik's role begins to irritate him, Erif too comes alive to a new sense of her individuality within the godhead, and to an awareness that the strength of her own female sexuality, embodied by her power as a witch, sets her apart from the restrictions of her role as Spring Queen. Initially, she tries to absolve herself of the new, frighteningly personal responsibility this brings by immersing herself in her community and in a growing love for Tarrik: 'It's better to be one of the others, just one of Marob, not separated. Things wouldn't matter; Marob goes on. If we are witches, we are ourselves, standing all alone...' (*CK* 220). Yet this proves impossible, and she must travel alone, both literally and metaphorically, in order to identify herself within her social context.

The journey which Erif subsequently embarks on, therefore, signals a development in Mitchison's treatment of women in her fiction. Already the central protagonist, Erif embodies significant movement away from Mitchison's previous reliance on male character to provide agency. As I have shown, this centralising of the female does not completely dissolve the problems inherent in a generic social construct such as that operating in Marob. What Mitchison then proceeds to *do* with Erif, however, is to take her further; away from Marob and toward a greater realisation of her own desires, independent of her role as sexualised deity.

In a sense, too, the characterisation of Erif throws the historical genre itself into relief, as with *The Corn King* Mitchison breaks the tradition of subtle heroines. Erif is not subtle; her female power manifests itself physically within a classical period in history which reserved power for men, and Mitchison unselfconsciously allows her heroine centre stage and page in exploring generally taboo subjects such as sex as kindness and communal sex as an aid to agricultural prosperity. Not only are many of Mitchison's passages - such as those describing Plowing Eve - erotically charged in a highly unconventional way, they also demonstrate the initial illustration of her belief that sexual relations should be essentially non-possessive; a topic previously explored through Kleta in 'The Wife of Aglaos'. This conviction was to strengthen as Mitchison developed as a writer, but is already evident in her characterisation of Erif, and more particularly of the Spartans, who provide Mitchison

with the advantage of historical as well as fictional distance, cloaking her extremely radical approach to sexual relations in the 1930s.

With Erif, Mitchison was intent on exploring the idea that as part of the regenerative process, the female must not be allowed to become her husband's subordinate. For real regeneration to occur, she must develop equally, facing her confusing individuality irrespective of the pain this entails. Erif's function is, in effect, to break the mould of history. In Marob, as Tarrik explains, no other Corn King or Spring Queen have expanded their horizons sufficiently to be offset with the problems they now face, and by killing her father during the corn play, Erif Der breaks a suffocating tie both with his influence, and with her community, who become terrified that she has brought real death into the seasons in place of regeneration. In keeping with Frazer's account of the result of such a violation of custom,[72] Tarrik explains to her that she must 'get clean' of her father's blood or die, although neither of then know how she is to do so:

> 'Is there no way that seems likely? Has it never happened in the past? Surely other men and women have found that they could not always be gods!' Tarrik said: 'They have never thought about it before, so it has never happened. We two are different from any Corn King and Spring Queen that Marob has ever had.' (*CK* 284)

To leave Marob completely is the only option. Mitchison makes use of a physical distance for Erif, from obligations both ritualistic and familial, to allow her time to discover her own identity as a woman for whom sexuality consists of more than bearing Tarrik's sons. Like Kleta in 'The Wife of Aglaos', Erif becomes another unconventional mother-figure when she sets out on her journey. Although she does not abandon her child as Kleta does, she leaves him when he is only a baby in order to find *herself,* a reassertion of her own identity within a role which expects her to embody the fertility she asks of the earth. The accepted notions both of her own society, and of Mitchison's, are challenged by her individuality, and male superiority is questioned as she enters the historic Hellenic world.

Erif's development independently of Marob is centred, like Tarrik's, in the Sparta of 223 BC. Added to the lack of respect the Greeks have for barbarians, however, Erif is faced with the difference in the way women are treated in general. Ironically, many women were actually historically wealthier than the land-owning men in Sparta when Kleomenes came to power, themselves owning two fifths of the land.[73] Biographies of Kleomenes and of his predecessor Agis make many references to the wealth of Spartan women, and both the king's wife Agiatis and his mother Krateseklia were wealthy, propertied women. As a result, woman in this period had more to lose from the class revolution that is imminent as Erif reaches Sparta, as economically they were giving away a great deal. Material wealth

had not guaranteed them social equality; status was still reserved for male occupations such as fighting and hunting. Nevertheless it did give them some subtle command of their power to attract men by adorning themselves with jewellery and fine clothes, as Agiatis explains: 'When things turn simple, women have to give up much more than men. Because they live in shadow, by mystery' (*CK* 107).

The main character through whom Mitchison examines Sparta is not the Queen, however, but the Queen's hand-maid, Philylla. Philylla develops the embryonic role played in *Cloud Cuckoo Land* by women like Kleora; women who grow up determined to serve the state by whatever means. In her youth Philylla plays boys' games, hoping to become a soldier for Sparta. As a result, Mitchison's Spartan heroine places no value in extravagance, and with Philylla as with Erif, there is strong resemblance between character and creator. Philylla refuses the stereotypically passive role often reserved for women, and as a child she is taught to shoot, ride and fight along with all the other children who are viewed by the government as the future of the New State. She welcomes this, desiring nothing more than, '[a] spear and a horse', and asserting that 'I won't marry... the Queen won't want me to' (*CK* 102). She does not want 'men making love to her like all the other sillies of maids of honour!' (*CK* 103), and like Mitchison, Philylla makes a conscious decision to adopt the 'socialist' ideology. Her family are part of the upper strata of society and her parents disapprove of the form of proto-socialism proposed by Kleomenes which strips them of much of their wealth and status. Yet Philylla strikes out for herself, embodying Mitchison's own dream of a mutually supportive, economically balanced way of life.

Philylla's female agency, however, to some degree implies the adoption of male norms: she longs to perform men's work in the public sphere, yet women cannot be soldiers or make a physical contribution to the New Sparta other than through producing children. Philylla, therefore, denied the possibility of valorisation in the military sphere, refuses to identify herself with women; 'I'm not a girl!... You shan't call me that! I'm a soldier! I'm a Spartan!' (*CK* 102). This was not dissimilar to the frustration that Mitchison herself felt when all her male friends and relations went to fight in World War I, and which drove her in 1917 to become an auxiliary nurse in St Thomas's hospital in London. In her initial phase of development, Philylla is directly constrained by gender as Mitchison was, as within both societies women were ultimately confined to the domestic sphere, disabled from becoming active instruments of change, and expected instead to provide emotional support for their men, and to maintain an economically run home. Philylla's energy and spirit are surplus to the requirements of her sex. She must be subdued if she is to occupy an

appropriate space in society, and Queen Agiatis articulates the patterns of Sparta which women must conform to when she tells Philylla that the youthful power she feels 'never lasts, sweet; not if one lives a full woman's life. One's giving too much all the time' (*CK* 184).

Marriage is 'a necessary prop of the social fabric',[74] in both Mitchison's historical and contemporary societies, and Phylilla compensates for her own inability to fight by marrying the king's war leader, Panteus. This securely binds her to the king and queen, whom she idolises, yet beyond her anger at not being allowed to fight, she fails to see the negative aspects of marriage for women, as she has become socialised instead to accept that marriage and children are a vital contribution to the 'new times'.

That Panteus is the lover of Kleomenes is apparently immaterial. Philylla has no control over it, or any right to make demands; indeed it is a relationship encouraged by Spartans, who see it as, 'their own Spartan flower, the sign of the new times' (*CK* 113). The actual fact of homosexuality, too, is itself irrelevant, which leads the reader to question instead, the idea that Philylla is prepared to share her lover with anyone at all. In the context of her own society, Mitchison was outstandingly innovative in her approach to this subject. Homosexual love was still condemned in the main as 'unnatural', whereas the affair between Kleomenes and Panteus is constructed without comment or affectation alongside the heterosexual relationships within Sparta, defying question or the label of 'other' in any specifically sexual context. Here, Mitchison presents a potentially 'shocking' relationship as unexceptional, in the expectation that her readers must also find it unexceptional. She employs the strategy of indirect persuasion, therefore, by constructing a reader position and inviting readers to fill it.

Love between women is also common, although it is not as sexually explicit, and the most common contemporary reaction to same-sex relationships is explored through Erif Der's reaction to Philylla. Philylla is predisposed to admire Erif for her abilities as a witch, and her tendency to form close attachments with women is evident in the love she feels for Agiatis, which compensates in a way for Panteus's love for Kleomenes:

> 'through him I have a share in the King and in new Sparta. And again: I love others besides him. I love Agiatis. Ah, how I do love her, Erif!' (*CK* 347)

When Agiatis is dying, however, Philylla turns to Erif in a bid to try and maintain the balance of love in her life. Yet this makes the Scythian uneasy. Erif has never encountered

this kind of love in her own society and is uncomfortable with the responsibility of the love Philylla feels for her:

> 'Don't love me like that, Philylla!... Let,s love one another now, Philylla, but lightly, oh lightly, not for the future, not with a grip on each other's hearts. I'm not in your world. And I am not sure that I believe in your image of love.' (*CK* 347)

Erif represents Mitchison's liberal nature here, in that in encountering an 'image of love' which was seen as sexually transgressive in Mitchison's Britain, she is not opposed to it, although she does find it strange and frightening - even threatening - and would rather not initially become involved. Erif's deepening friendship with Philylla, however, begins to change this. She gradually becomes more open to the idea, and when a girl at the Egyptian court makes advances, her retrospective response exposes the basis of Mitchison's attitude to sex as a form of kindness, irrespective of orientation:

> She was annoyed with herself afterwards, thinking: why not? why be unkind? Yet she could not imagine she would have enjoyed the experience. And then suddenly it occurred to her: if it had been Philylla who had made love to her? Well, yes, she thought honestly that might have been different. (*CK* 507)

Erif must initially open her mind, yet once she does she reflects that there is no reason to reject someone simply because they are female. Attraction and affection are dependent on the person involved, regardless of their gender. Homosexual relationships are neither special nor wrong; there is no tokenism involved. Therefore whilst the love between Panteus and Kleomenes does have positive strength and value, they are ultimately human, and less than fair in their treatment of Philylla, whose reductive function, for Panteus, is as a wife; a woman who must produce children for the new state that his lover is creating:

> 'I'll marry Philylla when the time comes, but if you think I shall let her come between us two for good or for evil! - ... I can be in love with her for a time, and I shall give her all she need want, but you're as much part of me as my head and heart are. Nothing's going to alter that, Kleomenes.' (*CK* 329)

There is very little here to suggest that Philylla's love for Panteus is justified. His feelings for her are reduced to practicalities, and the harshness of his concession to 'be in love with her for a time' ultimately reveals the demerits of Sparta's vision. Whilst socialist ideology offered many positive aspects, Mitchison hints at a growing awareness here that egalitarianism, whilst perhaps fostering same sex relationships as part of a system of kindness and equality, denies female agency and expression in other ways, and continues to use women in a patriarchal way. Both Agiatis and Philylla play second fiddle to the love relationship existing between their husbands, and although they may be treated equally to a degree, they are primarily childbearers; reduced to bodily function to such a degree as to

negate their ability to contribute to the New State in other ways. Conflict between Mitchison's individualism and her socialist ideals, then, come to light with her depiction of Sparta, and only in compromising slightly by contrasting Sparta's political equality with the ritualistic hierarchy of Marob, is Mitchison able to resolve the tensions between male and female, both of whom must be active in maintaining social harmony.

Whilst Erif bears Tarrik's children, therefore, Philylla does not, ironically, bear Panteus any. Both are dead before they have the chance, and ultimately Mitchison appears to be suggesting that a marriage based so politically on the need to reproduce is destined for sterility. Is this then an admission of the failure of her own ideology? A more likely explanation is that she was never entirely happy with the extremism of the Spartan view. As with Kleta in 'The Wife of Aglaos', there is a suggestion that in Sparta, as perhaps in Mitchison's own life, having more than one partner makes it difficult to be fair or even kind, and Philylla's superficial acceptance of Kleomenes and Panteus does not ring true. Mitchison's ego may not have desired the possession of the body, but these relationships were not purely physical, and in her own love affairs there was an acknowledged risk that someone might get hurt. As Calder notes, the Mitchisons' decision to take lovers

> was not as cool or straightforward, nor as mutually comfortable, as it appears in Naomi's later writings and interviews. Its political 'correctness' in the context of the radical milieu of the 1920s did not mean that it was emotionally either correct or painless... [75]

Perhaps the point, however, was not that the course of action is at fault in Sparta, but rather the reason behind taking it, highlighting another aspect of the subversion of self in favour of the state. Philylla has been raised to serve the state, but ultimately she is female, and thus only able to get as close to power as she can in marrying Panteus. For Erif, exposure to this different model of relationships within society helps liberate her from the constraints of her own, and her interaction with Philylla demonstrates the comparison between her own confinement within tradition, and Philylla's within Sparta. Free from the physical bondage of Spring Queen, Erif releases herself from the entanglements of traditional morality which are incompatible with the desire for freedom. She does this sexually, by taking lovers other than Tarrik, and releasing herself (as Mitchison released herself) from the constraint of taboos associating female adultery with lack of moral substance and uncontrolled sexuality (as opposed to male adultery, which was expected and condoned). Emotionally, in sleeping with various men during the Spartan helots midsummer festival, she attempts to fuse her individual and specifically female need for sexual fulfilment together with the partially submissive role she occupies at home.

For Philylla, however, the choices are more limited. She cannot reject the ideals of New Sparta with which she has identified since childhood, and instead of breaking away from the society which constrains her, she follows it to Egypt and to death. She becomes another of Mitchison's tragic heroines, unable to survive, because as Calder explains, in challenging the definition of her life, 'she is challenging the patriarchal authority that controls it, and is destroyed'.[76] Sparta does not allow for individual female identity, effectively making Philylla a 'non-person' who cannot survive without the state, and who is condemned to die unacknowledged alongside her precious husband and their king. Her instinctive challenge to the patriarchy is crushed as soon as she becomes old enough to bear children in the name of Sparta. It is impossible for her to exist independently of the State or outwith the relationship she has with Panteus, which for her is the embodiment of Sparta. Her ambition and her life are too deeply embroiled, and although Mitchison believed that socialism and equality for women went hand in hand, she was equally keen to point out the dangers of state-mentality which ultimately crushes the life from Philylla. With Erif, however, the message is different. Her native society is more primitive than Philylla's, and the role she plays within it ties her more strongly to the female biological cycle: fertility, growth, birth, and regeneration. In the end, however, these were not aspects of the female that Mitchison wished to deny. To be less than sexual creature, wife, and mother, was unfulfilling to Erif's creator, who demonstrated instead that to be all these things one need not be these things exclusively. Erif is irked by the weight and symbolic meaning of her regenerative gender role, but Mitchison empowers her to leave it; the first Spring Queen in Marob's history to do so. Erif re-writes Marob's 'history', therefore, journeying alone to discover her true potential, and to fuse her humanity with her role, before returning to take up her responsibilities.

She does, however, return to take up the responsibilities of this sexually coded role; the Spring Queen remains subservient to the Corn King, and this pattern of life remains necessary for the health of their community. Within these roles, however, the man and woman, Erif and Tarrik, become more evenly balanced in relation to one another. Tarrik learns that the intellect must play a part in his identity alongside the physical, and he learns to accept Erif's power without needing to control it. They have found a space for themselves independent of their ritualistic responsibilities, and yet which can accommodate them. There is room for such manoeuvre in Marob where there is none in Sparta, and to return to Francis Hart's analysis, what Mitchison seems to be suggesting is that Marob, for all its barbarity, offers a more positive, integrated environment; an

enduring, necessary bond with nature, from which Sparta has divorced itself and is thus unable to survive. '[T]he mythic will outlast or replace the historic... the prehistoric will be reborn as the posthistoric', says Hart (see page 33), and the death of Kleomenes reveals that this is Mitchison's vision. Sparta becomes so far removed from the essentially balanced nature of ritualistic society that, in contrast with Erif and Tarrik, Kleomenes is shown to have lost sight, to a degree, of what a 'socialist' revolution means, and becomes embroiled in his ambition to take control of Egypt as well as Sparta. As a result, his death comes only after he has lost all that he gained, and when the Egyptian emperor hangs his body in public, the alternative power embodied by Erif allows her to send her 'khu' or spirit in the form of a snake, to protect him from scavengers. The snake was a symbol of fecundity, healing and regeneration in Romano-Celtic Europe,[77] and Erif's action functions not only in a practical sense, it also ensures that the death of Kleomenes acquires a symbolic aspect; he becomes, like Agis before him, one of the 'Kings Who Die for their People'. He assumes in death the mythic significance negated by his power-hunger in life.

Most significantly, of course, the ability to create the myth resides not only with a barbarian, but also with a female. Erif's own healing process is completed by the temporary sacrifice of her soul which is involved in entering the body of the snake, and her return is symbolic of her return to wholeness as woman, mother, lover and finally Spring Queen. As Jenni Calder puts it, 'the essence of her magic survives and is reaffirmed. The intellect cannot control the future, which lies with Marob, Erif's homeland',[78] and although this homeland offers a system which is in itself patriarchal, it becomes clear that the female role is equally necessary for the survival of society's bond with nature and the seasons. As Erif says, '[a]fter I come back, there will be a good season in Marob [...] and dancing and marriages and new songs and new things made. Everything will go on again' (*CK* 637).

With this concluding speech, Mitchison's creation of a successful female heroine is fully realised. Erif is constrained by historical patriarchy in the way that each of Mitchison's heroines had been, and yet she embodies a significant step forward in that it is the fulfilment of her personal quest for self which brings harmony to her society. Throughout her early writing, Mitchison had endeavoured to utilise societies such as Ancient Rome and Sparta in her examination of gender. Environments conditioned by governments whose structures British society had used as exemplars, provided models for analysis of contemporary inequality, and Mitchison was able to relocate these in history, giving her the opportunity to subtly subvert them. With Erif, it becomes clear that success and equality for Mitchison lay not only with economic equality. Although this was without

doubt important to her, what also emerges is an understanding of the power inherent in the female psyche, made manifest through Erif's ability to alter the course of her own life, and of Tarrik's. Through Erif's experiences in Sparta, too, Mitchison explores the development of the sexual self, which Erif reclaims during the helots festival, and this extra-marital activity becomes as accepted in this context as Tarrik's active sexual role has always been within Marob.

Erif's role is not without unresolved issues of subjugation. As Spring Queen she remains the more passive and subservient deity even after her journey to Sparta. Much more positively, however, Erif has become the first heroine in Scottish women's historical fiction to celebrate the woman; to occupy a central and challenging role in history, and to examine sexual desire and fulfilment openly and without judgement.

As a young, articulate woman in the 1920s and 30s, Mitchison was able to question the merits of the accepted historical discourse which repressed this celebration of the female. She did this by approaching history indirectly from a female point of view, and by blending it with magic and ritual, in spite of social conditions which largely rejected the non-rational, and by association the female. As such, Erif Der is a figure of manifest importance in the development not only of Mitchison's historical fiction, but of historical fiction in general. Particularly in the context of Scottish literature, Mitchison adds to the Renaissance ideology a positive association between the irrational and the specifically female voice.

As she moved closer, geographically, to the home of the Scottish Renaissance, her attitude toward gender roles was to undergo further development, the results of which would not always have similarly positive feminist implications. In the coming chapter I will discuss this in detail. Irrespective of new dilemmas which would later arise, however, *The Corn King* remains a novel which provided a radically feminist examination of generic social structures in the 1930s, unparalleled by any other Scottish women of Mitchison's generation.

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[1] Naomi Mitchison, *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (London: Fontana, 1986).
[2] Jenni Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London: Virago, 1997) p. 57.
[3] See in particular 'Mascaret' and 'Maiden Castle' in *Barbarian Stories*. In both these stories can be seen Mitchison's talent for characterisation, yet in each, themes are underdeveloped and the endings rushed.
[4] Isobel Murray, 'Human Relations: An Outline of Some Major Themes in Naomi Mitchison's Adult Fiction' *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Twentieth-century* (Frankfurt etc, 1990), pp. 243-256 (p. 245).
[5] Isobel Murray, 'Novelists of the Renaissance', in *The History of Scottish Literature* ed. by Cairns Craig, 4 vols, (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), IV, pp. 103-118, (p. 104).
[6] Jenni Calder, 'Men, Women and Comrades', in *Gendering the Nation* ed. by Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 69-84, (p. 73).

[7] Showalter, Elaine 'The Female Tradition', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (London: Routledge 1989), pp. 269-288, (p. 269).
[8] Judith Lowder Newton, 'Power and the Ideology of "Woman's Sphere", *Feminisms*, pp. 152-167, (p. 769).
[9] Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (London: Blackwell, 1993) p. 66.
[10] Margaret Oliphant, *Autobiography and Letters*, ed. by Mrs Harry Coghill (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1899; reprinted Leicester UP, 1974).
[11] Showalter, Elaine, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton University Press, 1977) p. 216.
[12] Leah Lenneman, *A Guid Cause: The Woman's Suffrage Movement in Scotland* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1991), p. 216.
[13] Naomi Mitchison, *As It Was: An Autobiography 1897-1918* (Glasgow: Richard Drew Publishing Ltd, 1988).
[14] Calder, *Nine Lives*, p. 15.
[15] Catherine Carswell, *Lying Awake* (London: Secker and Warburg 1950; reprinted Canongate 1997) All references are to the reprint.
[16] Annette Kolodny, 'Dancing Through the Minefield: some observations on the theory, practice and politics of a feminist literary criticism', *Feminisms*, pp. 97-116, (p. 98).
[17] Catherine Carswell, *Open the Door!* (London: Virago, 1986).
[18] Willa Muir, *Imagined Corners* (London: Martin Secker, 1931; reprinted Edinburgh: Canongate, 1989). All references are to the reprint.
[19] Naomi Mitchison, *Saltire Self—Portraits* 2 (Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 1986), p. 1.
[20] See Calder, p. 60.
[21] Neil M. Gunn, 'The Scottish Literary Renaissance Movement', in *Scottish Literary Journal* vol. 4, no. 2 (December 1977), pp. 58-61, (p. 60).
[22] Edwin Muir's collection *The Labyrinth*, and James Leslie Mitchell's novel *Spartacus* both focus on classical civilisations and respond to classical mythology and legend.
[23] The first edition of *The Golden Bough* was published in 1890, but Frazer published a further two editions, expanding the first to twelve volumes. The final version appeared in 1915.
[24] Neil M. Gunn, *Sun Circle* (Faber and Faber Ltd, 1933; reprinted Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1996) All references are to the reprint.
[25] Douglas Gifford, *Gunn and Gibbon* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1983), p. 2.
[26] Gifford, *Gunn and Gibbon*, p. 10-11.
[27] Harvie, Christopher ' "For gods are kittle cattle": Frazer and John Buchan', in *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination: Essays in Affinity and Influence* Ed. Robert Fraser (London: MacMillan, 1990), pp. 253-269, (p. 254).
[28] Gifford, *Gunn and Gibbon*, p. 8.
[29] Gifford, *Gunn and Gibbon*, p. 10.
[30] Gifford, *Gunn and Gibbon*, p. 2.
[31] Naomi Mitchison, *Small Talk: Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (London. Jonathan Cape, 1973), p. 24.
[32] Calder, *Nine Lives*, p. 21.
[33] Ruth Hoberman, *Gendering Classicism: the Ancient World in Twentieth-century Historical Fiction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 5.
[34] Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian* Britain (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981) p. 448.
[35] Hoberman, p. 1.
[36] Naomi Mitchison talking with Alison Hennegan, in *Writing Lives: Conversations between Women Writers*, ed. by Mary Chamberlain (London: Virago, 1988), pp. 170-180, (p. 172).
[37] Hennegan, p. 172.
[38] Calder, *Nine Lives*,p. 60.
[39] Naomi Mitchison, *The Conquered*, (London: Cape 1923; reprinted 1929). All references are to the reprint.
[40] Calder, 'Men, Women and Comrades,' p. 74.
[41] Calder, 'Men, Women and Comrades,' p. 72.
[42] Calder, 'Men, Women and Comrades,' p. 74.
[43] Naomi Mitchison, *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1925; reprinted 1929). All references are to the reprint.
[44] See Alfred E. Zimmern, *The Greek Commonwealth: Politics and Economics in Fifth Century Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1914).
[45] In using the term 'socialist', I intend to make clear the relationship Mitchison has with such principles, living as she is in the Britain of the 1920s.
[46] This is an issue Mitchison pursues at greater length in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* eight years later.
[47] Hoberman, p. 28.
[48] Hoberman, p. 31
[49] Hoberman, p. 5.

[50] Naomi Mitchison, *When the Bough Breaks,* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924).
[51]Calder, *Nine Lives*, p. 57.
[52] Julian D'Arcy, *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature*, (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 1996), p. 159.
[53] D'Arcy, p. 160.
[54] Naomi Mitchison, *Black Sparta: Greek Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931).
[55] Naomi Mitchison, 'The Wife of Aglaos', first published in *The Delicate Fire* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933; reprinted in *Beyond This Limit* (Scottish Academic Press, 1986). All references are to the reprint.
[56] Mitchison, Naomi, *Comments on Birth Control* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930).
[57] Calder *Nine Lives*, p. 81.
[58] Martin Gray, *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Essex: Longman, York Press, 1992), p. 103.
[59] Calder *Nine Lives*, p. 97.
[60] See Calder, p. 79-82.
[61] D'Arcy, p. 161-2.
[62] D'Arcy, p. 162.
[63] Naomi Mitchison, 'A Self Interview', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, vol XIV, ed. by G. Ross Roy (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press), pp. 37-51, (p. 38).
[64] Naomi Mitchison, *The Corn King and The Spring Queen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931; reprinted Edinburgh: Canongate, 1988). All references are to the reprint.
[65] Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel: from Smollett to Spark* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 187.
[66] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 12 vols. 1907-1915. Abridged Edition (London: MacMillan and Co. Ltd., 1993) p. 48.
[67] As Frazer informs us, the magician can wield his power 'only so long as he strictly conforms to the rules of his art... To neglect these rules, to break these laws even in the smallest particular, is to incur failure, and may even expose the unskilful practitioner himself to the utmost peril'. Frazer, p. 48.
[68] Calder, *Nine Lives*, p. 97.
[69] Her lead would be followed by Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone, both of whom shall be dealt with in detail in the latter sections of this thesis, and both of whom suggest supernatural power was a means of granting women power and freedom.
[70] Frazer, p. 265.
[71] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), p. 89.
[72] See note 66.
[73] Ephraim David, *Sparta Between Empire and Revolution 404-243: Internal Problems and their Impact on Contemporary Greek Consciousness* (New York: Arno Press, 1981), p. 150.
[74] Calder, *Nine Lives*, p. 73.
[75] Calder, *Nine Lives*, p. 77.
[76] Calder, *Nine Lives*, p. 99.
[77] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers* (London. British Museum Press, 1995) p. 169.
[78] Calder, 'More Than Merely Ourselves', p. 445.

Chapter 3

Jacobites and Gender: Self-reflection in Naomi Mitchison's epic Scottish historical novel *The Bull Calves* (1947).

Following the publication of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), Naomi Mitchison continued to produce novels and short stories, some of which were historical. In none of these, however, did she address gender in the same way as she had in some work of her 'classical phase',[1] and it was not until the arrival of *The Bull Calves*[2] in 1947 that her return to concern with issues of gender in historical fiction is discernible. This chapter will consider the way in which Mitchison's approach to gender roles had developed as a consequence of changes in her personal life, ambitions, and social environment.

During the years between the publication of *The Corn King* in 1931, and the writing of *The Bull Calves* in the first half of the 1940s, the changes which occurred both within Naomi Mitchison's immediate environment and in the wider world, had a profound and lasting effect on her writing. After the horror of World War I, it seemed unthinkable that Europe should engage again in total war. Yet throughout the nineteen thirties European fascist leaders became increasingly antagonistic towards their neighbours, and as the end of the decade approached it became clear that war was once again inevitable. For this reason among others, Mitchison chose this time to move to Scotland permanently, distancing her family from the more immediate threat presented by air raids on London. This move to the fishing village of Carradale in Kintyre was to have a profound effect on her life, and as ever, this is reflected in her writing, nowhere more so than in *The Bull Calves*. Set in Jacobite Scotland in 1747, this novel signalled the move away from the allegorical mythologising of *The Corn King*, and made visible Mitchison's emerging social and political concerns, which were better expressed within a more naturalist text.

Throughout the 1930s, Mitchison's novels and short stories had been influenced by the worsening European climate, and in 1935, the increasing threat of fascism led her to produce the controversial contemporary novel *We Have Been Warned*, considered too indecent to be published in light of its references to rape and abortion.[3] She enjoyed greater success with her next novel, *The Blood of the Martyrs* (1939), which returned to the historical genre. Published as World War II broke out, *The Blood of the Martyrs* treats the subject of the suppression and annihilation of 'undesirable minorities', from the point of view of early Christians in Rome. Like the Jews in Nazi-dominated Europe, hatred of whom was a modern manifestation of age-old anti-semitism, these groups, feared for their potentially disruptive

effect on state-rule, were sought out and destroyed. Mitchison was not a Christian in any practising sense. She disapproved of the repressive hypocrisy of organised religion, therefore her novel reveals no specific doctrine, and is entirely devoid of any sense of authorial piety.[4] Instead, the focus is on sharing and the communal aspects of the lives of a group of ordinary people who become martyrs to their faith. The result is an emphasis on how complex, how significant, each individual character is, within a body of Christians who are persecuted for what is essentially their sense of inner peace. There is no mention of God's wrath; rather his love is emphasised as representative of human compassion, empathy and mutual help, an ideology close to Mitchison's own heart, albeit that she was suspicious of doctrinal Christianity.

Although *The Blood of the Martyrs* was successful commercially, however - far more so than *We Have Been Warned*, - it did not enjoy the degree of success which Mitchison had achieved with *The Corn King*, and for the next eight years she published very little, producing no historical fiction at all. The greatest cause of this cessation was of course the War, yet it may also be partially attributed to her growing alienation from the London elite in whose circles she had moved for well over a decade. This group appeared to her to have been disappointingly narrow-minded in their reception of *We Have Been Warned*, and she had begun to question her own identity within this cultural circle a decade earlier, both in terms of her relationship with Scotland and her position as a woman within it. This is visible in her treatment of Marob and Sparta in *The Corn King*, where the position of the female within marginalised, ritualistic culture is evaluated in relation to classical intellectual culture. Always aware of her background, therefore, she became increasingly drawn to Scotland as a society which seemed to offer a greater opportunity to embrace her socialist ideals, distanced from the capitalist hub of central government.

Whilst the 1930s were a transitional time in Mitchison's personal life, however, more significant was the onslaught of another World War which threatened to be as vicious as the first. Having endured the losses and horrors of World War I, the Mitchisons were sickened, and it was clear that with the technological advances within the armed forces, this war had the potential for an even greater brutality. Armies now had the ability to wage war on the Home Front by air, and the carnage of battle was brought to British doorsteps. The country was no longer in splendid isolation; air raids on London were frequent, and for this reason the Mitchison family thought it expedient to take up full time residence in Carradale, Kintyre, an estate which they had bought in 1937.

The move to Carradale promised an infinitely safer environment, to such a degree that Mitchison recorded in her diary that her life in Carradale seemed 'so ridiculously and abnormally safe' (*D* 144). This diary, commissioned by the Home Office as part of a Mass Observation experiment, was in fact one of the few pieces of writing she did throughout the War years, during which *The Bull Calves* itself was gestating. Published in 1985 as *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*, it provides an invaluable insight into her preoccupations during the period, and reveals the extent to which the novel itself 'occupies a crucial stage in ... [her] ... emotional, political and artistic development',[5] all of which relate to her feelings about the War; to her identification with Scotland, and more particularly to her position as a woman within her new situation. As Jenni Calder notes, the move to Carradale 'offered Naomi - whether or not this was what she was looking for - potential for another role'.[6]

Described by Douglas Gifford as 'one of the finest and most ambitious of Scottish historical novels',[7] *The Bull Calves* is in fact Mitchison's first entirely 'Scottish' novel, set in 1747, exactly two hundred years before its publication, and in the aftermath of the last Jacobite rebellion. An exceptionally complex novel, *The Bull Calves* blends the epic nature of *The Corn King* with a form of historical writing new to Mitchison, and signals a move away from what Isobel Murray terms 'the classical phase' of Mitchison's London years. Although the novel has been described as 'psychological Romance',[8] its setting over only two days - June 16th and 17th, 1747, - ironically subverts a traditionally romantic moment in Scottish history, by approaching it from an unglamorous domestic point of view. Rather than involving characters in any direct action, it is a novel of aftermath; of the domestic fallout resulting from socio-political strife, and of the questions inevitably surrounding the future which clearly parallel Mitchison's own questions in wartime Scotland.

In *The Bull Calves*, Mitchison's preoccupations with sexual equality and liberation are handled with greater subtlety than she had previously shown, reflecting her more complex position in a society divorced in many ways from the liberal circles she had moved in in London, and during a time of turbulence. Gender roles had not changed drastically since *The Corn King* was published in 1931, and although women had acquired some political influence from their enfranchisement in 1928, in practice this did not alter life for the majority of women in the United Kingdom. Economically, working women were paid less than men for similar jobs, with very little prospect of advancement, and within the upper classes the situation was not much better. As Virginia Woolf pointed out in her essay *Three Guineas* (1952),

> Not only are we incomparably weaker than the men of our own class, we are weaker than the women of the working class. If the working women of the country were to say: "If you go to war, we will refuse to make munitions or to help in the production of goods", the difficulty of war making would be seriously increased. But if all the daughters of educated men were to down tools tomorrow, nothing essential either to the life or to the war-making of the community would be embarrassed. Our class is the weakest of all the classes in the state. We have no weapon with which to enforce our will.[9]

Women like Mitchison, therefore, experienced feelings of impotence, and although feminist historians assert that the two wars were not entirely male enterprises,[10] Woolf's essay highlights the fact that in war, as in peace, there was a significant difference between the status of men and women in every sphere. The predominant ideology of war, of course, compelled men 'to go forth and fight in order to protect their women, who remain passive and secure at home with the children'.[11] Despite the necessity which brought women very much into the home front side of the campaign, therefore, propaganda in World War II

> did much to underline the idea that fascism directly threatened women... [and] a series of posters entitled 'Who Is The Enemy?' even more graphically presented the enemy as he who would rape and murder 'our' women.[12]

Mitchison, therefore, along with countless other British women who contributed to the war effort, was nonetheless viewed by the government as part of an ideal of domestic bliss which was being threatened by 'the enemy'.

Most countries involved in the war had experienced an increase in feminist activity prior to its outbreak. As John Costello notes in his book *Love, Sex and* War:

> As a result of the dramatic improvements World War I brought to their social and economic status, many women began to expect equality in other areas as well [...] In most Western countries, except France, the female population received the right to vote. Women celebrated their freedom with liberated fashions and liberal behaviour.[13]

He goes on to say, however, that in Britain there was only a 'mild moral thaw' compared with the United States, and that the Depression of the thirties effected a retrenching of moral values in response to the economic necessity of 'sticking together'. Despite this, changes in women's attitudes had occurred which could not be reversed, and more commonly in the second war than the first, women were granted circumstantial liberation as they filled gaps in the labour force themselves in their men's absence. In some cases these women were earning their own money for the first time, and for many a new feeling of satisfaction resulted from the move away from the domestic environment, and the allotted roles of wife and mother. As Costello explains:

> The mobilization of the female population in the United States and Britain

> to fight a 'total war' shattered resistance to the employment of married women and the old notions of women's work.[14]

Wartime propaganda, however, continued to divide women, distinguishing between those who waited patiently for loved ones to return, and those who did not. Such was the emphasis placed on the image of 'home fires burning', that the women who chose not to wait were effectively labelled as traitors to their country, as well as betrayers of the loved one, in their disregard for the servicemen abroad who had only the thought of home for consolation.

With regard to the new working lives of women, the government policy was one of reassurance. The end of war promised reintegration into the community and workplace for returning heroes, and assumed that women's willingness to fill the male role in wartime was nothing more than 'an exceptional and valiant effort from which women would thankfully sink away in peacetime.'[15] In many cases this is exactly what happened. According to Janet Higonnet *et al* in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (1989), female gender roles cannot be examined in a vacuum, but 'must always be analysed as part of a system that also defines masculine ones'.[16] The gender binaries in operation during wartime, which identified men as fighters, women as homemakers, served only to reinforce traditional gender relations. Woman represented nurture and stability, and the Second World War eroticised this image in order that men might identify women as the sexual possessions they were fighting for. This effectively made women 'bounty',[17] and patriotism maintained control by allowing women an unusual freedom and responsibility they could not refuse, whilst discouraging them from appreciating their achievements as individual successes. Instead, images such as 'Rosie the Riveter' encouraged women to take pride in their ability to 'hold the fort' for workers, who were deemed to be more skilled simply because of their gender. Higonnet *et al* explain:

> If men gather and women fish, gathering will be thought of as more important than fishing; in another society where men fish and women gather, fishing will be more prestigious. The actual nature of the social activity is not as critical as the cultural perception of its relative value in a gender-linked structure of subordination.[18]

In effect, a crisis of masculinity resulted from an experience of war in which men discovered that they were uncomfortable with the male characteristics of violence and aggression. The function of women at such times was to provide access, both maternally and sexually, and loyalty to those who strove to protect them. The horror of war had to be validated. Publicly, men needed a renewed sense of the masculinity which they previously took for granted, and deviation was frowned upon so that in many instances women

themselves sacrificed their new found fulfilment in order that their men folk did not have to deal with any further upset to their familiar ideas of gender roles. John Costello cites many specific examples of female infidelity during war, after which nothing was said, and family life resumed following the husband's safe return home.[19]

In an artistic sense, the literature of World War II exemplified the varying experiences to which men and women were exposed. In Jessie Kesson's *Another Time, Another Place*, for example, the young woman at the centre of the novel feels so far removed from the fighting that she welcomes the idea of foreign infiltration into her mundane life, and Kesson does not deal with the war directly because as a woman she played no part in it. Similarly, Mitchison played no direct part in Carradale, and neither Kesson's novel nor *The Bull Calves* discusses war in the same way as Sorley MacLean's 'Death Valley', or, in World War I, Wilfred Owen's renowned 'Dulce et decorum est'. Traditionally, war literature (and song) privileged front line description and the love relationships between couples who do not know whether they will meet again. Government desires to maintain the image of the waiting girl at home led to the suppression of war-songs deemed likely to upset this. The popularity of Vera Lynn, whose songs 'Faithful For Ever' and 'We'll Meet Again' received more airplay than America's popular crooner Bing Crosby, serves to show that amongst the British people as well as the politicians, war culture allowed little room for the examination and re-evaluation of male/female gender identity. As we have seen, even Mitchison herself in *The Conquered* had responded to this, writing herself into the male character, Meromic, as a means of sanctioning her right to discuss the direct experience of battle.

In *The Bull Calves*, however, the approach is different. The central character, Kirstie Haldane, is female, and the aftermath of conflict is experienced from her point of view. 1747, like 1947, provided Mitchison with a comparably troubled Scotland, struggling in the wake of a violent and disruptive political period. Historically, the links between 1747 and 1947 are numerous, and on a personal level, we are made aware of the similarity between Kirstie and Naomi - both of whom are Haldanes - and both of whom are women struggling to come to terms with the complexities and difficulties of marriage and the loss of children, as well as with the wider national concerns of a war-torn country.

Perhaps it is the complexity of Mitchison's vision for *The Bull Calves* which ultimately causes the novel to fall short of the radical feminist analysis of gender offered by *The Corn King*. Mitchison is intent on engaging in an exploration of Scottish history, into which she

attempts to 'write herself'. Yet in this, she is arguably engaging in a form of therapy which is both personal and political, and which causes a shift in her approach to female agency within hegemonic discourse. What remains significant in her characterisation of Kirstie Haldane, however, is that Kirstie not only continues the trend of female-centred treatment of history. She also moves this history away from the epic, and into the domestic sphere, in which Kirstie's role as wife and mother is acknowledged, thus signalling a developing confidence in Mitchison's treatment of the female role in society.

The accuracy of social history in *The Bull Calves* is something Mitchison took seriously, and although she was ultimately producing a work of fiction, she studied history as carefully as always, and includes her findings - and to a degree her justifications for the way in which history is presented - in the extensive notes which follow the novel. She explains:

> Just as a house must be convenient as well as beautiful, so should a historical novel be not only a work of art but also accurate, or rather... a historically truthful interpretation of another time which will enable the modern reader to see again and revalue such times with reference to his own. (*BC* 407)

These notes are a useful source of reference for the reader, therefore, and they are also an indication of Mitchison's views on the many contemporary issues which she fictionalises in historical terms in the novel. That *The Bull Calves* was written amidst the turbulence of 1940-46 allows it to function as an accurate instrument of assessment regarding her contemporary situation, and there is little doubt that in utilising her own family history in the novel, she is writing herself into Scottish history. Her aim is a personal one, therefore, and she merges the personal histories in the novel with political history in order to more fully identify herself with the Scottish past. In *The Bull Calves* more than anywhere else, therefore, the blurring of what history actually is, is made explicit by the cross-referencing of fiction and personal history. Whilst the novel functions as an indication of Mitchison's personal concerns, the historical notes provide useful access to the social, political, and historical aspects of the novel, enabling an evaluation of her relationship to Scotland, past and present.

Born in Edinburgh, Mitchison already felt very much a part of Scotland before her move to Carradale. She had spent many summer months at her grandmother's house in nearby Cloan as a child, and visited Edinburgh regularly. Nevertheless, the extent to which her 'homecoming' to Scotland influenced her life and work, particularly in the early years, cannot be overestimated. Most significantly, her return to and identification with the

country of her parents was a choice, and the years which were to follow increased this feeling of belonging , expressed in her long poem, 'The Cleansing of the Knife', where she declares, 'I am a woman of Scotland'.[20] Familiarity and an innate sense of belonging, however, did not prepare her for the Highlanders of Kintyre, nor did she bargain for the change in attitude which she was to experience as a woman accustomed to a degree of sexual liberation. As she reflected: 'It is always a bore being ahead of one's time, and coming up here I move back fifty years from, say, London or Birmingham' (*D* 181). The people of rural Scotland were far removed from the liberal London elite, and the much altered role she had to adopt in order to 'fit in' in Carradale is reflected by *The Bull Calves*, which was in many ways a response to her process of reintegration into Scotland. The years 1931 to 1940 had seen a development in Mitchison's political awareness, both nationally and locally, yet her increased identification with her ancestral nation' her hopes for Scotland's future and her desire to articulate these hopes through fiction, were bound together with the question of her identity as a woman within the specific community of Carradale.

Mitchison's work had always dealt with large and complex issues. Throughout her early fiction, there is evidence of a recurring preoccupation with the quest for a just society, both in material and in gender terms. Whilst she remained in London, however, the issue of economic equality at least, was largely theoretical. She had travelled to Russia, strongly sympathetic to Soviet ideology as representing hope for a new way forward. She did not, however, formally identify with the Communist Party in Britain, placing greater faith in Labour's socialist ideology, and throughout all this, she remained a member of the privileged classes. Her socialism was untempered by direct experience of the people whom she wished would rise against capitalism, and in spite of her desire for a classless society, she continued to believe that the educated among her own class were in a better position to direct and educate others than the 'prolets' (*D* 289).

Coming to Carradale, however, brought her into contact with these so-called 'prolets', and her identification with Scotland became largely based on her relationships with the people of the village, some of which are traced in *The Bull Calves*. In many ways fascinated by the social structure of this Highland fishing community, she projected onto it her desire for social, and sexual, equality. Within Carradale, she visualised the prospects for a just society so long harboured, and as Laird of 'Tigh Mhor' or The Big House, she found herself in a position from which she might try to influence the way in which the village presently operated. The *literary* quest for a just society had begun much earlier, yet Mitchison

fastened on the idea that Carradale was real, raw material; the basis for a kind of socialist community in which the working of land and sea breathed life into previously undefined notions of, as Douglas Gifford puts it, 'a living sense of legend and the supernatural',[21] or of establishing a sense of national and personal renewal. In a letter to fellow novelist Neil Gunn, Mitchison explains: 'If we could organise Carradale with a Soviet... making people take responsibility and run their own lives with some chance of being effective, then the place would come alive'.[22] Earlier novels had established Mitchison's belief in the principles of a socialist state, but both the failure of Kleomenes and the death of Phylilla in *The Corn King* demonstrate her scepticism regarding egalitarianism as a male model, which is ultimately subject to the threat of a power-hungry leader. She had yet to achieve, either fictionally or in reality, the construction of a society in which equality embraced the individual. With Carradale, this end seemed attainable, and with *The Bull Calves*, she was able to indulge both nationally and personally in the creation of a situation which was therapeutic.

Mitchison's search for renewal and regeneration was the product of several things, the most influential of which was the loss of her new-born baby daughter in July 1940. This affected her very deeply, and inspired the poem which prefaces *The Bull Calves*, entitled 'Clemency Ealasaid' (meaning 'Forgiveness Elizabeth'). Written soon after the baby's death, the poem indicates the close relationship between the death of Mitchison's baby and her approach to Agnes Mure MacKenzie's history of Scotland, which she began reading at this traumatic time.[23] In an essay entitled 'The Roots of the Present: Naomi Mitchison, Agnes Mure MacKenzie and the Construction of History', Kirsten Stirling examines this relationship in detail, and suggests that

> The co-existence of her baby and Agnes Mure MacKenzie's history book at this point serves as an indication of the link between the relative impersonality of history and Mitchison's personal grief.[24]

Certainly, 'Clemency Ealasaid' vividly exposes Mitchison's grief in the context of the world wide grief experienced as a result of World War II, and also suggests her bewilderment that this short life should take its place in a kind of non-history, together with the nameless casualties of war:

> In a hundred years
> The French sailors at Oran, the Scottish dead at Abbeville,
> The tortured in the concentration camps and all the leaders,
> The ones who thought themselves godlike, forgetting the
> Boyg,
> And I, and my children, and all the people of Carradale,
> We shall be dead, at last out of the running of events and
> hours. The page will have been turned,

> The history written, and we, anonymous,
> Shall be condemned or not condemned, gently upbraided
> For folly of not forseeing, for dithered watching of hours
> While the roughest day runs by.

In her *War Diary*, Mitchison also makes reference to the war and to her loss, revealing that part of her grief is associated with Carradale itself and the negation of the bond which she had hoped her baby would provide. As she says:

> I began to realise how all this small scale life here would have been tolerable with the baby which was to have tied it all together, but now - ? ... To some extent, too, I had used this as an excuse to be out of the war, out of destruction, still on the side of creation; now that's over... I realise perfectly that much worse things are happening at this moment to thousands of people... but one cannot generalise as simply as that. I at least cannot change pain into love. And all the little things hurt, hurt, hurt, and there is nothing to be done... she was part of me, and wanted, all those months, and warm, and one said what a nuisance, but lovingly, and now the whole thing is ended: the love has no object... All this was meant to be a kind of binding between me and Carradale, and now that's smashed. (*D* 72)

As Mitchison is denied the ability to bond through procreation, therefore, *The Bull Calves* might be viewed as a surrogate child of her bond with Carradale. Certainly, retrieving a history from that which she has lost with her daughter's death becomes an essential part of the healing process. The past must be retrieved and confronted in order that the future might be faced, and this is a recurring theme in *The Bull Calves*.

The desire for regeneration, for self and for country, results in an entirely new type of historical fiction when compared with Mitchison's earlier classically located work, and with her earlier London attitudes and values. In form and tone, *The Bull Calves* bears a stronger relationship to Walter Scott's historical fiction than any of Mitchison's previous novels, as the narrative deals with opposing forces within history, and the meeting of Highland and Lowland at Gleneagles is reminiscent of the meeting of Highland and Lowland at Tully Veolan in *Waverley* (1814). As in *Waverley*, dramatically opposed opinions are brought together in the symbolic persona of the main character in *The Bull Calves*. As Edward Waverley responds empathetically to the Highlands whilst retaining his bond with Lowland 'civilisation' and the crown, Kirstie Haldane embodies her own Lowland Haldane roots, and brings them into contact with the Highlands through her marriage to a 'Black' Highlander. The difference is, however, that where Edward Waverley is initially misguided by his romantic image of the Highlands, Kirstie Haldane is little beguiled by their reality. As a woman, moreover, Kirstie is barred by her sex from any active role in the fighting, and consequently she is more intent on reconstruction than

destruction, as Mitchison was herself. Most significantly, in feminist terms, her voice is the domestic voice of history. As Margery Palmer McCulloch argues,

> the quasi-autobiographical narrative form, drawing on family papers and life stories, is the kind of personal record usually treated with caution by professional historians, but one increasingly relevant in the reporting of unrecorded women's experience,[25]

and here, Kirstie stands as a figure of great significance in the development of Scottish women's historical fiction. In a novel based on such a momentous era in Scottish history, Mitchison redirects the grand sweep of historical movement and subverts standard hegemony by centring on the articulation of female concerns.

Violet Jacob's challenge to the male dominated nature of Jacobite history in *Flemington* (1912) is discussed in Chapter 1, yet whilst Christian Flemington looms over the novel as cruel parent in a position usually reserved for a male figure, the main focus of the novel is reserved for the central male, her grandson Archie. Whilst Jacob begins the challenge, therefore, Mitchison takes it further with Kirstie Haldane, challenging the traditional face of Jacobite history by placing a female character at the centre of the novel as principal narrative voice. Given the difficulties of challenging the patriarchal ideology of Carradale, the significance of this should not be underestimated, and the way Mitchison was received by her contemporary Highlanders was quite different from her reception in cultured society. Although she remained in a superior social position, she desperately desired integration, declaring herself 'a traitor to my class and my instincts' (*D* 148). The history she wrote to initiate this integration, therefore, was Scottish, and much more recent than her studies of the ancient world had been. 1747 was a historical date that her new Scottish community had knowledge of and could relate to.

In Carradale, however, much suspicion and dislike was reserved for the Laird, something which comes across as a barrier in her relationship with her close friend Denny MacIntosh (Denny M) in the *Diary*, where she writes,

> I waited for Denny M to get up and we walked up to the house together, he telling me... how he'd come up to the Big House once to ask for another cottage, but hadn't got it; there's a good deal to make up, but it must be made up to everyone, not to one person. I keep telling myself that. (*D* 45)

Viewing herself as 'classless', she did not find it easy to accept that Denny might treat her with suspicion. Her intentions to 'make up' for the damage done by previous lairds were good, yet for all her willingness to work with the community (and this she did quite literally) for the 'common good', she met with increasing resistance. In spite of her efforts

as Laird to compromise, regarding game-keeping, for example, certain of the villagers continued to poach salmon, which hurt her deeply:

> 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.[26]

In her 1950 novel, *The Big House*, Mitchison's attempts to heal the rift between the people of Carradale and herself as lady of 'The Big House' operate on the more simplistic level of a children's story. The rhythm of Carradale speech is convincingly portrayed through Winkie, a fisherman's son who befriends Sue, daughter of the laird. As a novel written primarily for children, the story reveals the problems which beset Winkie and Sue's friendship, an attachment considered unorthodox by the other villagers who view the Big House as something separate from themselves. That the clever, educated Sue and the honest, kind Winkie in the novel are Naomi and Denny is obvious, yet what is doubly interesting is that this more simplistic portrayal is more convincing than the more complex portrayal of Mitchison and Denny found in Kirstie and William in *The Bull Calves*. Winkie, for example, talks very little, and the trouble he has articulating his feelings of friendship for Sue are much more akin to Denny's natural reticence (recorded in Mitchison's *Diary*) than are the philosophical speculations of Black William, Denny's fictional embodiment in *The Bull Calves*.

Furthermore, the introduction of a fantasy element into *The Big House* allows Mitchison to take the children back in time, in order that they might aquire a better understanding of the history which separates them, and the simplicity of childish relationships makes it easier for Mitchison to overcome centuries of grievance. Yet she is also intent on conveying the essential message that there is no difference between laird and villager in the end, and that the bonds of friendship and trust should be strong enough to overcome the difficulties. Although characterisation of Sue and Winkie is detailed and convincing, therefore, Mitchison's idealism and naivety concerning Carradale are revealed all the more visibly by the novel. For Mitchison, a working relationship with the society of which she became self-designated organiser, was insufficient without acceptance, and as her relationship with the people fluctuated and later deteriorated, she faced impossible odds in achieving her notions of regeneration, politically, socially and sexually.

Community mentality held to a typically Calvinist notion of sex as sin, and as a liberal minded middle-class intellectual, she found this framework difficult to comprehend. These notions of regeneration, therefore, did not end with Mitchison's desire to re-educate the

locals in new methods of farming. More than this, she wished to alter Carradale's gender structures and sexual codes, which led her into increasingly uncharted territory. In her favour was that Carradale as elsewhere was in a state of flux during the War, and although the actual fighting seemed distant, the changes necessary to accommodate city refugees and to fill the shoes of those men who had gone to war, unsettled the regular pattern of village life: farming, fishing and the Church. Mitchison seized the opportunity which this upheaval presented to try and imagine a more positive, less repressed way forward, in which increased social equality would initiate gender equality, and a more liberated approach to sex and sexuality.

One way in which she attempted to further this was through writing *The Bull Calves*. By focusing on a period in Scottish history with which Carradale was familiar, and through the use of speech patterns corresponding to their own, Mitchison drew her Highland audience into a novel which also seemed at first to offer the reassurance of hegemonic discourse. Once they began reading, however, she cleverly, though very subtly, subverted this discourse through her focus on Kirstie Haldane. Kirstie is not given unrealistic political agency: main players such as the Duke of Cumberland and Duncan Forbes of Culloden are still visibly more active. Nonetheless, Kirstie is the central voice of Mitchison's narrative, and through her she is able to articulate her ideas about Scotland, and the possibilities for change in Carradale.

In *The Bull Calves*, Mitchison constructed a series of oppositions for the reader, which are identifiably relevant to divisions within her contemporary environment, politically and sexually. The division between Whigs and Jacobites in 1745 was not only a division of loyalties. It was also a division of Highland and Lowland Scotland, in which Highlanders were generally more sympathetic to the Stuart dynasty. The nature of this division is approached through the narrative structure of *The Bull Calves,* which is appropriate to the preoccupations of the novel and its histories. A series of opposites is set up, between Whig and Jacobite, Lowland and Highland, and finally between male and female, and throughout the course of the novel, the political, national and gender binaries are, if not resolved, then certainly realigned to form a mutually enhancing dialectic of trust, or, in the case of male and female, of love. In the novel, Kirstie belongs to and symbolises the Lowlands, yet brings together Lowlands and Highlands through her marriage to the Highlander, Black William MacIntosh of Borlum. The joining of the two for the progress of Scotland was a marrying of ideologies which Mitchison very much believed in in contemporary terms. In her opinion, the Highlands retained the basic element of communal living on which a

socialist society might be built, but there was also much to be learned from the Lowlands, particularly regarding the relative curtailment of personal relationships within Highland Presbyterianism. By embodying this within Kirstie and William, therefore, the bond is not only ideological; it is geographical, and it is male and female.

The relationship between Kirstie and William is the central bond around which all others revolve. Throughout the first part of the novel (ironically entitled 'The Smooth Mid-century'), it becomes clear that this marriage represents a meeting of opposites during the difficult years post-'45, and that in spite of William and Kirstie's candid expressions of love for one another, tensions remain unresolved. Mitchison's careful embedding of characterisation reveals the history underlying the beliefs of each side, and although both William and his Haldane brothers-in-law, Mungo, Robert and Patrick, have mellowed politically, it is clear that old wounds are easily re-opened:

> Captain Robert leant forward a little: 'You will doubtless be related to our own cousins of Kyllachy?'
> Black William stiffened, no longer leaning at all against his Haldane wife. 'They are in the Clan Chattan,' he said.
> 'Kyllachy was out in the '15, and his old father with him,' said Robert amiably.
> 'That did not stop him from being the worst kind of a laird,' Black William said.
> 'Aye,' said Mungo, 'I mind he was for ever trying to raise money on his lands.'
> 'You do not raise money out of lands,' Black William said, 'but out of men and women, out of their sore labour and pain...' (*BC* 30)

The idealistic and even romantic nature of the Jacobite side is embodied by William. He is the archetypal Highlander, inspired by Mitchison's close friendship with Denny M, and yet just as his positive attributes are highlighted, Mitchison undercuts them by hinting that he may not be utterly trustworthy. He has secrets of which he has never spoken, and repeated references to him as childlike engender further doubt concerning his reliability. In Part Two, for example, William lies to Kirstie's brothers with regard to a gun, to which Kirstie responds: 'I'm no' scolding you... but I am asking myself, will I ever get to the bottom of the devilment that's in you' (*BC* 152). Furthermore, William is representative of the Highlands which are 'feminised' by comparison with the maleness of the Lowland Haldane stock. Similarly, however, Mungo and Patrick elicit little reader sympathy on behalf of the male coded Whig party. Patrick in particular is a very complex and unknowable character, unwilling to relinquish his principles, whilst Mungo's complacent condescension to Kirstie prevents the reader - certainly the female reader - from identifying with him:

> Mungo patted her shoulder; he minded then on Kirstie's own bairn, or was it two of them, that had died. That was the way things were, but the women aye took it hard, poor bitches. (*BC* 27)

In portraying the weaknesses and faults of both Whig and Jacobite characters, therefore, Mitchison consciously tries to avoid romanticising either side.

In reporting periods of conflict, the sympathies of the historian inevitably influence the selection of information. Yet in highlighting the various narrative points of view possible within one historical situation, Mitchison presents a challenge to the accepted way in which history has been produced by men, for men. She subverts this by offering Kirstie as the character best able to view the situation both from the side of her ancestral Lowland family, as well as from the perspective of her new Highland one. Mitchison's own situation is implicit here. A Haldane, an Oxford-raised Scot - who better to appreciate diverse ways of life and thinking in her contemporary situation? 1947, like 1747, follows a period of conflict in which there were two points of view, and on a more personal level this was important, as Mitchison was torn between her desire to be accepted into Highland life, and the desire to bring something of her own cultural awareness to that life: her education, her politics, and her sexual liberation.

This approach to Carradale brought with it an occasionally confused idea of Scotland and Scottishness. For all that Kirstie Haldane functions as a meeting point between two ideologies, Mitchison, however impartial and practical she tries to be, betrays a contradiction in her attitude which moves uneasily between romanticisation and reduction. In his article 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*', Douglas Gifford refutes this, noting that the reference Mitchison makes in the historical notes to a meeting between one of her ancestors and Rob Roy 'sets the cateran in a light which yields the understanding reader much more insight into the genuine tragedies of Scottish civil war'.[27] Certainly, she does not portray Rob Roy traditionally as the romantic Robin Hood figure, instead suggesting that he and his gang would have been 'plotting some ploy against decent folks, no doubt' (*BC* 437). More specifically, there is 'no nonsense about the Prince' in the novel.[28] For reasons of historical accuracy he could not have made an appearance, given that by 1747 he had returned to France. Yet since 1747 functions as the narrative strand in the novel from which stem several other narratives revealing the past, it is significant that this most romantic figure does not even enter the retrospective stories of the various characters. Mitchison comments in the notes that for Highlanders,

> it seems that the Prince has taken on some of the qualities of the Kings who Die for the People, the queer company of those who are

> Thought likely, or worthy, to rise again and come back to their people in times of difficulty and distress... (*BC* 493)

Yet this is not the view of history she aims to portray.

She consciously tried to avoid stereotyped Highland romance in *The Bull Calves*, and the historical notes illustrate her consideration and rejection of myths of Bonnie Prince Charlie and clichés of tartanry. Her concern with documentary realism, in fact, is evidenced by her discussion of historical issues such as the Clearances, stultifying Presbyterianism, and the moral hypocrisy of Highland life. Yet beneath this, clearly visible in *The Bull Calves*, is an inclination toward another kind of romanticisation. That Mitchison's relationship with Carradale and its people is of immense importance to her is evident time and again in the historical notes, and she states quite plainly that one function of the novel was to act as a bond between herself and her community:

> After all what is this book of mine going to be but service to Scotland, or rather, to the dumb Scots, the ones who need to be given pride and assurance and kindness. (*D* 179)

Although this conveys her concern, it also conveys a somewhat patronising attitude, as well as a romantic idealism. She saw Carradale and its people as something to be rescued, and her own role as that of heroic rescuer. As Gifford notes, there is 'an odd note of pride in intellect and breeding which sits awkwardly with the theme of support for the common people', and this is something which in the end the characters 'articulate on Naomi Mitchison's behalf' in *The Bull Calves*.[29]

In addition to her relationship with Carradale in general, Mitchison experienced her greatest love affair during her early years here. The object of her affection was Denny M, whom she refers to in the *Diary* as 'my boy-friend' (*D* 45), and much of the grief she felt toward Carradale during this period was engendered by her relationship with him: 'he is hurting me so much... To hell with Carradale and the soft speech of the twisting Highlands'(*D* 286). In an important sense, Denny embodied for her the essence of the Highlands, and one of her letters to Neil Gunn reveals the relationship between Denny, and what the Highlands meant to her:

> Here are all your grand anarchists. The civilised peasants, the men like my ******* here who have a kind of gentleness and nobility that makes one feel one would die to defend it...[30]

This quote illustrates perfectly the oscillation between dedication and distancing, as Mitchison struggled to build a bridge between the folk and the Big House. The *Diary* often refers to the people of Carradale in a way that implies a sense of togetherness, particularly during the early days of World War II, and Mitchison is guilty of attributing to this a

sacramental symbolism and significance. She believed that it was possible for her to become 'one of the gang' (*D* 52) across the class barrier, and the *Diary* reads:

> I kept on wondering whether I was double-crossing myself, whether this meal at which I was so happy, was really in some way bogus, whether I was just taking refuge among these people out of a romantic or sentimental feeling.

Yet she obviously believed that this was not the case, continuing, 'I couldn't make out at what point the sacrament was not genuine'(*D* 46).

Mitchison's romantic nationalism is arguably a contributing element to *The Bull Calves*. Nevertheless she insists that she does not view history from the point of view of 'national patriotism'(*D* 75). In her diary, she explains that her mission is to reach a specifically Scottish audience, for whom she has never written:

> 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... I want the small group. I want to write history for two or three dozen people who may or mayn't read what I write... (*D* 159)

She adopted Scotland and its people as her own, yet she evidently found much to infuriate her in Carradale, making it more difficult, and less romantic, to create the kind of communal ideal she found so appealing. To write herself into Scotland, therefore, not only provided her with an opportunity to write something for her community, but also with the chance to bond more successfully with Scotland through Kirstie, whose problems are largely divorced from issues of class. Although Kirstie is a member of the ruling class, a Haldane and mistress of Borlum, the influence she has over her tenants is not obviously tainted by their suspicion of 'The Big House', and this was perhaps Mitchison's way of demonstrating to the villagers, through fiction, that someone in her position could be trusted.

In creating Kirstie, Mitchison was undoubtedly creating a version of herself in a parallel situation two hundred years earlier; an ancestral female figure who shares similar ideas regarding Scotland's progress and the method of teaching her fellows by example. Just as Mitchison discusses, in the notes and in the *Diary*, ideas for 'raising the standard of croft cattle' (*D* 422), and the benefits of horse over tractor ploughs, so too Kirstie discusses her work at Borlum with her niece Catherine:

> 'What do you think of all the time, Aunt Kirstie?'
> 'The turnips, surely, my soul!'
> 'But I am sure a person of culture cannot think about turnips, Aunt Kirstie. Turnips havena to do with the mind and the soul. If one sets

> one's face to the earth, one becomes like the things of the earth, the way the cottars and their wives do!'[...]
> 'Truly, my dear, one is thinking about the men that are working, and one's own man most, and the weather and the wee looks of growth or shrivelling, and the great plans we have..., Of better ways of feeding and droving.' (*BC* 92)

Kirstie echoes Mitchison's own relationship with the land and farming here, whilst Catherine's attitude illustrates her snobbery, and it is not unlikely that Mitchison intended the whole conversation to parody the kind of discussion she might have with a member of the upper class circle she left behind in London, whilst allying herself more strongly with Carradale.

Only a few paragraphs later, however, Mitchison betrays her own intellectual elitism and superiority in the value Kirstie places on upper class leadership: 'the planning of the Highlands is not at Borlum alone, but all over, yet there must be a wee kind of centre here and there' (*BC* 93). This centre, Borlum in the novel, was certainly the position Mitchison saw her own estate as holding in Carradale, and her interest in what she saw as the unfortunate way in which men and women conducted their relationships is articulated by Kirstie, who takes it upon herself to dispense advice:

> And forby,... one will be thinking of wee, near-by plans, something that needs sorted here or there: the fine confused tangle of love and hate and jealousy and resentment that's aye drifting around like the peat reek itself, in any clachan or wee township, and how can one get dealing with it. (*BC* 92-3)

This role of Earth Mother, friend and helper to the community, is one Mitchison herself adopted. She was unable to continue with the openness which had previously characterised her sexual life, therefore in her determination to challenge the restrictive patriarchal moral structure she adopted the more subtle approach: the role of educator. Her belief that a fair society should promote women's needs and desires as it did men's was unwelcome in Carradale, but she felt this would be beneficial to the harmony of the community, and of the fishermen she comments:

> So long as I think of them without resentment and anger and possessiveness I know there's nothing wrong. I hope they think of me with the same vividness and love, the same admission that it's sexual and the same absence of guilt. The latter is the difficulty. So long as the convention is to think of these things guiltily, then people will make a mess of them. (*D* 180)

This relationship, essentially between Mitchison's feminism and her socialism, is complicated. As with the political commentary underlying the depiction of Kleomenes' Sparta in *The Corn King*, the political conflict of *The Bull Calves* is a subsidiary plot

running alongside the central focus of the novel, which is the relationship between Kirstie and William. Although the social, political issues are integral, they are primarily experienced by both Mitchison and by her character Kirstie as women. She explains, 'my feminism is deeper in me than, say, nationalism or socialism: it is more irrational, harder to argue about, nearer the hurting core' (*D* 172). Nationalist *and* socialist issues in *The Bull Calves*, therefore, are addressed through the relationship between Kirstie as a woman, and her socio-political environment. Politically, Mitchison allows Kirstie no commitment either to the Whig or Tory factions of the day, preferring to concentrate more on the moral rather than the political values of her female character. She felt that women were 'less certain of themselves, less arrogant, more able to see two sides to any question' (*D* 65), and the Jacobite plot, therefore, is used as a catalyst which brings personal disharmony to the surface, much as World War II had done in Carradale.

The Haldane family in the novel were not of the common people (even Mitchison could not take her identification with Scottish socialism that far!), yet in many ways they represent the same structure of taboo and restraint familiar to Carradale society, in which men were active, women passive, and in which the emphasis is placed 'on personal rather than on social sin' (*D* 466). Throughout her earlier historical fiction, an ideology emerged which equated social equality and communal living with sexual loving. In 'The Wife of Aglaos', Kleta believes that her decision to sleep with each member of her 'gang-family' is one which promotes kindness and giving, and prevents the intrusion of jealousy or possessiveness within the group (although this does not ultimately work). Erif Der echoes this, too, in *The Corn King*, when she joins in a ritualistic mating game in Sparta, described as follows:

> He picked her up and swung her down, rough and quick and impersonal. She did not for a moment let go the touch of his body. So that's all right, she thought, relaxing all over from tension into pleasure... and, putting out her hand, suddenly touched the still, naked flesh of a second couple in the same bed. As night went on the couples got rather discontinuous. Erif Der made half of several. She was thinking that in this rite of helots there was a constant stream of death and life; the dead corn was never reborn, but the new took its place. (*CK* 338)

This attitude toward sexual relationships is one Mitchison did her best to emulate in her own life, determined as she was that the body should not be treated as a possession. Whilst she could do this among her own circle within the London gentry, however, the realities of religious adherence in Carradale made this kind of lifestyle highly inappropriate, and she was angered by this, as she explains in a letter to Neil Gunn:

> I am getting sick of these bloody narrow respectable Highlanders. No good will come to the country till it stops being so bloody respectable and the small amount of furtive fornication that goes on is no use at all. [31]

Her attempt to educate the people of Carradale met with little success in the face of 'this god-awful church that thinks of sex as sin'(*D* 123). Yet she believed that sex was important, provided people maintained 'an attitude of non-attachment about the body', and a resistance to ownership comes through in her fiction of the period, most particularly in the short story 'Five Men and a Swan', which was written for Denny M in 1940. She explained:

> I wrote a love story... It is pretty indecent; it would have passed all right a few years ago, but although the highbrows would take it, I'm doubtful about my present audience. (*D* 101)

Not published until 1958, this is a tale concerned with attitudes to women and their rights within sexual relationships. Each crew member of a fishing boat has a sexual encounter with the Swan girl, whose desirability is heightened by her elusiveness as a creature of beauty and freedom. Each man exemplifies a different male reaction to the girl in his need to take possession of her: the skipper, Hat, appears to be humbled by the fact that he is unable to control himself, whereas Black Rob expresses his self hatred at his own lust for the Swan, by brutally raping her: 'the more the Swan cried out, the more Rob was not caring at all what he did with her'.[32] Johnnie the Ghost's reaction to the sexual conquest is similarly mean and aggressive, and indeed the only crew member with a slightly different attitude is Alec, who decides to marry the Swan girl: 'You will all be taking her the wrong way. How were you not saying you would marry her? It is this marrying that the lasses are always after' (*BTL* 147). Within Carradale, the moral code dictated that sexual relationships are only sanctioned by marriage, yet simply marrying the Swan does not atone for Alec's treatment of her as his sexual possession. Mitchison uses Alec to demonstrate that it is of equal importance that he respect her sexual rights as an individual, and her assumption that he has the right to immediate consummation of the marriage is thwarted by his inability to get the swan's dress off, which results in violence:

> it seemed to him that she must be within the feather shape, and all at once he pulled out his knife and opened it with one hand and his teeth, holding all the time with the other hand onto the bird's wing where it joined the shoulder, and he struck with the knife to open a hole in the feather dress and tear it away from her... (*FM* 105)

The swan's dress 'symbolises the dignity of female humanity: neither must be forcibly removed',[33] and Alec is forced to realise that his is a rape no more legitimate inside than outside marriage.

The symbolic use of the Swan's dress, here, may also indicate Mitchison's expression of the female sexual cycle. Only when the moon is full is the Swan able to undress, and Mitchison may well be suggesting here that within sexual relationships, the hormonal cycle of women, which determines desire, should be acknowledged and respected by the male. In her story, the men do not acknowledge the Swan's rights, and almost every one suffers ill luck because of the way they treat her. Even Alec's crime is only atoned for years later. It is war-time, and when his ship is bombed, he is thrown into the sea. The Swan rescues him, and in an image of role reversal, it is he who finds himself naked as she makes him take off his wet clothes. Only then does he appreciate the link between the nakedness of the body and the vulnerability of the soul, and only then is he given the opportunity to ask forgiveness.

'Five Men and a Swan' is not the first attempt Mitchison made to tackle the inequality of sexual relationships. Nevertheless, it was her first literary presentation to Carradale of what she believed to be a more positive sexual code. Even her favourite, Denny M, did not 'really see the point of equality of sexes... though he pretends to, but says there must be a hair's breadth of difference between them...' (*D* 68). She was determined to act as an agent for change, therefore, in spite of the fact that much of the resistance she experienced came from women as well as men, as this consoling comment from Neil Gunn suggests: 'you cannot blame the women for not feeling all at once at home in your mould of thought and action'.[34] This historical conditioning of the Carradale people undoubtedly presented her with problems, therefore, yet she tackled this by constructing William and Kirstie's relationship along hegemonic lines. In the *Diary* she explains her reasons for doing this in detail:

> ... because I am working here, trying to give people other ideas of human relationships, starting with the simplest form of it, my own relations, first towards my family, then towards my friends, I must not jeopardise that. If they condemn me in one thing they will condemn me in everything. And I couldn't blame them considering their historical conditioning and this God-awful church that thinks of sex as sin.
>
> It is much more important that I should be able to change people's minds about one another in this other way, to try and show them non-possessive, generous human relations in other ways. If I can do that, the other thing will follow in time, in a hundred years, say. (*D* 181)

She is willing to allow for the existing social mores, and accepts that they cannot be tackled through direct confrontation. Due to this reason as well as to historical constraint, therefore, Kirstie Haldane is a less aggressively feminist heroine than Erif Der was in *The Corn King*, and in many ways suffers by direct comparison.

The respective historical situations of these two characters nevertheless do have a part to play, and in bringing epic national history together with the domestic and personal in *The Bull Calves*, Mitchison shifts the focus of traditional history, alerting the reader to the way in which patriarchal gender ideology is undermined. The joining of domestic and national history provides a link between past and present, fiction and fact, as although some of the peripheral characters are well-known (for example, Duncan Forbes of Culloden, who makes an appearance in the final part of the novel), the main characters are based on Mitchison's own Haldane ancestors, whose names appear plotted on the family trees prefacing the novel. Some of these people went on to live well-documented lives, and a substantial amount of the history Mitchison referred to in researching the period was in the form of family documents.

Where family members have provided her with some basis for her characterisation, however, others such as William and Kirstie are given the names of children who died young. Mitchison writes, 'I have given them the lives they might have had, the child they might have had' (*BC* 407), providing an important link between past and present. Her own daughter had become one such name on the family tree to whom little documentation would be attributed, and in choosing these two names, therefore, Mitchison is allowing herself, in a way, to bring life to her baby. Her *Diary* records: 'Dr Cameron says I should start writing a book... I think I must consider it' (*D* 73). Yet more than allowing her to imagine a life for the baby, Kirstie Haldane and the other 'bull calves' provided Mitchison with another creative outlet, and with the opportunity to bond with Carradale that she felt her baby's death had deprived her of. As Jenni Calder suggests, *The Bull Calves* was 'quite consciously conceived as part of the process of reiterating, if not reinventing'[35] Mitchison's Scottish identity within the 1940s, and as Mitchison says poignantly, 'If only I had my baby I wouldn't need to write a book that probably nobody wants to read'(*D* 73). She moved away, therefore, from the mythical, magical approach to historical fiction which she had taken in *The Corn King*, toward a type of fiction in which her own will was imposed onto the raw material of history, bending it to her desires for regeneration. By writing her dead child into *The Bull Calves*, she uses realism and then subverts it, and as may be imagined, this strategy has many implications for the representation of the female. Kirstie Haldane is a character who occupied real history, and who is yet empowered through fiction with a life she never had.

The plot of *The Bull Calves* is relayed to the reader by characters who recount their stories to one another. The events related in most of these stories have long since taken place, and in a sense, represent histories within history; 'History' is constituted by personal histories which form the basis for comparison between a predominantly middle class picture of the early eighteenth century and Mitchison's own 1940s. [36] As Kirsten Stirling comments:

> The past is [...] to a certain extent seen through the eyes of the present; at the same time, she distances herself from the events of the twentieth century by writing them into a 'history book'.[37]

The initial section of the story is related in conversation between Kirstie Haldane and her young niece Catherine; a relationship based on 'storytelling' which links past to present. Although Kirstie is happy to recount many details of her past, there are moments when her silence is equally telling. There are things she will not articulate, due to a combination of her inability to lie, and a deep inner conviction that Catherine should be protected from the knowledge of her aunt's misdemeanours until such times as Kirstie herself has come to terms with her guilt. Her husband William is the only person who can assuage this guilt, and conversation with him accounts for another substantial part of the narrative, in which she holds back nothing.

It is much harder to get to the root of William's story. A relationship of mistrust is immediately set up between himself and his wife's family, as he is effectively a Jacobite among Whigs. Kirstie's brother Captain Robert describes him as

> 'an Episcopalian Highlander who has had no discipline, no year by year ruling of his life and searching out of sins, no family worship and close examination, but every kind of independence and wildness and temptation!'(*BC* 160),

and beneath the superficial attempt to accept him, most members of the family feel the same way. Mistrust creates mistrust; William lies not only to Mungo, but to Kirstie herself, and we only discover the secret which is persistently hinted at in Part Three, through Patrick, who has known it all along.

William is a bigamist and a murderer. His past, in which he was husband to an American Indian Queen, is divorced from his civilised present. Nevertheless, from a feminist point of view, Kirstie's willingness to absolve him of his guilt, without even knowing the extent of his crime, leaves the reader uneasy. By comparison, his rage in discovering that Kirstie has let her frightening old nursemaid into the house is presented ironically, and Kirstie's reaction is telling: 'For a moment he stood over her, black angry like the Father, aye a jealous God', to whom 'she acknowledged sin and would have welcomed the blow' (*BC* 326). The double standards in operation appear to be accepted in the microcosmic society

operating within the novel, just as they were likely to have been accepted in Carradale, and this begs the question of just how much Mitchison was prepared to sacrifice, in order to write her way into the hearts and minds of her Scottish community.

To a certain degree, however, what William embodies is an almost noble savagery; a simultaneously negative and yet romantic figure who finds in the American Indian mentality something reminiscent of his own Highland life and psyche. He identifies with their exploited state as with that of his own country, and with their love of the land:

> Land was all men's; it was only the crops you had cultivated or the game you had killed or the Lodges you had built which could be property.'
> 'You, being a Highlander, will have had your understanding of that', observed Patrick. 'For it is the same with you...' (*BC* 277)

William represents the Highland character and landscape; strength and beauty are combined with vulnerability, and an almost animalistic savagery which is both natural and cruel, attractive and repulsive.

The duality of the Highland identity was something that Mitchison had identified in her own Highlanders, who seemed to embody the practical and the romantic, idealism and defeatism in equal measure, contradictions which often frustrated her own ideas about the importance of Labour Party activity in Carradale. Just as her folk were open-hearted, they were also petty and narrow-minded, something she expresses in William. This approach to the Highland psyche was also taken by novelist Neil Gunn, and was a preoccupation of the Scottish Literary Renaissance movement of the 1930s.

Although the Scottish Renaissance is generally accepted as originating in the period between the two World Wars (1920-1939), most critics agree that Mitchison's *Bull Calves* belongs to the Renaissance movement in spite of its late publication date. The novel exhibits clear signs of sympathy with what Douglas Gifford describes as '[a] shared belief in a kind of pre-historic Golden Age'.[38] The difference was that, unlike Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassic Gibbon or Eric Linklater, Mitchison did not write specifically about Scotland during the inter-war years. Her focus on 'varieties of extra-sensory perception and magical experience',[39] which Gifford highlights as common to her contemporaries, was until the 1940s based within ancient civilisations. Her examinations of past societies had placed similar value on historical continuity, and on human consciousness and, as previously referred to, some form of 'animal-linked identity'.[40] Meromic in *The Conquered*, for example, becomes his totem animal, the wolf, at the end of the novel, whilst toward the end of *The Corn King*, Erif Der allows her soul to inhabit the body of a snake in order to

protect the body of Kleomenes. Given that Mitchison favoured ancient societies largely in order to avoid the gender constraints of her own, it can be seen that she shared Renaissance values, and had long identified with the Scottish movement prior to the publication of *The Bull Calves* in 1947.

In the notes to *The Bull Calves*, Mitchison writes that in 1943 she began reading a translation of Jung's *The Integration of the Personality* (a translation was published by Kegan Paul in 1940), by which time the bulk of her novel was planned (*BC* 511). Jung had been an acknowledged influence on many other major Renaissance writers such as Edwin Muir and Neil Gunn, and Mitchison found that his ideas in many ways served to 'crystallise',[41] to affirm and articulate her own regarding the workings of the subconscious. Indeed, she comments that the Egyptian psychology she examined in part eight of *The Corn King* resembled Jungian thought quite strongly, and may even have developed such ideas more clearly than Jung himself.

The basis of the relationship between the Scottish Renaissance and Jung rested on Jung's probing beyond reason and science to a subconscious level of humanity, at which reason and the rational consciousness become redundant. Instead, Jung argues for the existence of an unconscious level of the human mind on which are imprinted collective racial memories of primordial origin. In the work of writers like Gunn, Jung's ideas of the collective unconscious were examined in relation to the positive communal values of the author's own Highlands, which in this sense links him to Naomi Mitchison. Both saw within the Highlands something that Gunn associated with 'our concept of the brotherhood of man'.[42]

In Gunn's *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (1944), for example, Young Art and Old Hector embody the tradition of the Highlands, and the sense of continuity between past and present: 'Art entered into his heritage and he loved Old Hector and the presence of all those who had been before, alive or dead'.[43] As their names clearly suggest, these two characters are symbolic of ideal Highland culture. The young Art learns about his culture from Old Hector, and the society suggested is simple and cohesive; the relationship between self and society mutually beneficial. The existence of such a society was in Gunn's time under threat from a lack of opportunity for the younger generation in the Highlands, who were drawn south to the cities for better employment prospects. Yet although both Gunn and Mitchison admit the reality of this, they were keen to demonstrate the value of a new direction for Scotland which incorporated a shared sense of community and tradition, as well as a new positive way of looking ahead. Part of Jung's theory was

that the collective unconscious included in each sex 'the eternal image' of the other. Relations between male and female rest on the premise that:

> Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that woman, but a definite feminine image. This image is fundamentally unconscious, an hereditary factor of primordial origin,

and that 'Woman is compensated by a masculine element and therefore her unconscious has, so to speak, a masculine imprint'.[44] These imprints, which he terms the *anima* in men and the *animus* in women, form the feminine aspect of the male and the masculine aspect of the female, which function as a pair of opposites in the unconscious of both and have a profound effect on the way in which each identifies with the other. To unite, male and female must identify their own image within the corresponding *anima* or *animus* of a potential mate. Only in doing so does emotional and physical union become possible, and the person can become whole.

In *The Bull Calves*, it is Kirstie and William who must identify and respond to this unconscious element within the psyche. When they are brought together, Kirstie is on the brink of what is essentially a nervous breakdown. The death of her first husband Andrew has left her wracked with guilt, convinced that in willing him to die she killed him. She believes herself to be a witch, incapable of resisting the claim of Satan; 'I was alone then, and, because I could not get the thoughts of goodness and love to come to me, there was room for every kind of evil thought' (*BC* 130). Mitchison uses this religious interpretation to provide her intended local audience with a recognisable discourse - they too understand life in terms of Good versus Evil in a specifically Christian sense. Yet with Andrew Shaw, Kirstie clearly finds no identification of her self within his *anima*. Instead she finds only darkness, and when he dies the darkness within her own subconscious becomes so powerful that she is ready to submit to a projection of that darkness, in whatever form it takes:

> There came a soft chap on the door and I wanted wild to pray, but no word of it would come. If I could have reached to the shelf and the Book that was on it, I might have kept yon door from opening, but I couldna move, and it came to me that in a short minute I would be saying Yes to my own shame and destruction, to the fire of my own damnation and my eternal separation from all those I had loved. Yet I saw that in a cold way and accepted it... (*BC* 167-8)

This is the crux of Kirstie's story - and that of William's, we later find. Had William, newly arrived from America, allowed his own dark side to prevail, he might have indulged his instinctive urge to have sex with Kirstie, and the moment of redemption, articulated in Christian terms but equally relevant in psychological terms, would have been missed for both. Kirstie in that moment is equally likely to surrender, yet William's morality saves

them both so that for Kirstie 'the bottom of my sin and misery in the moment of my accepting it and drowning, turned to the very fullness of my joy...' (*BC* 329)

As the author notes, Kirstie and William cannot 'know themselves and their problem in terms of analytical psychology. Instead they need to put the thing as it might have appeared to them in the words and ideas of their own time' (*BC* 514). Nevertheless, the archetypes which feature in Jung's discussion of the collective unconscious are recognisable in 1747 as they are in the twentieth-century, and Mitchison uses their own words and ideas to convey Jung's notion that to become a complete individual, there must be some form of personal surrender. She explains

> Submission is an essential part of integration: there appears always to be a period or moment of crisis during which it is disastrous to be proud or to insist on being a wholly conscious individual (a very arrogant as well as false thing to suppose one is) ' (*BC* 513)

whilst in novelistic terms William tells Kirstie, quite simply, that 'you are the image and opposite and equal in my own dark waters, o' m'eudail, Kirstie Haldane, my breath, my soul!'(*BC* 329)

Submission, in the darkness of Kirstie's own mind, is identified in terms of what she perceives as coming from that darkness: Satan. She prepares to accept this, and even when William enters the room she believes he is Satan in one of his many forms. 'And I kept my eyes on the Horny, considering the shape he had, for I wanted to keep my own thoughts to the last, before I gave way to a master's!' (*BC* 169). She reveals her vulnerability here, in her submission to subordination, and the idea of 'Evil' which is conveyed is of a force which denies Kirstie the capacity to control her own thoughts, thereby partially exonerating her from responsibility. Despite the fact that criticism of *The Bull Calves*, therefore, has focused on the idea of Kirstie as the female voice of history (see Gifford), this indicates that the sex of the voice does not necessarily guarantee a particularly enlightened attitude. As it happens, what she expects to be the Devil turns out to be William, a spirit of a different kind, linked with her own, and who asks her to marry him. As Mitchison explains:

> But at the moment of her crisis, the animus was projected on to a real person, William, who thus became her soul, her breath, and in whom she was bound to have the utmost faith since he represented something stronger than her conscious self... (*BC* 513)

The movement toward personal unity and reconciliation of the masculine and feminine within the self is visible, but this is not supported by a vigorously feminist characterisation of Kirstie.

On the surface Mitchison appears to have been fairly radical. A woman running an estate was an unusual situation in Scotland in 1940, shared with Mitchison by Kirstie in 1747, who tells Catherine, ' we farmers must be at our work early - ach, there is no grandeur to it, Catherine, I ken fine, and you couldna make up any kind of romance or song about yon kind of life' (*BC* 93). Mitchison, like Kirstie, faced the barrier of class between herself and those she wanted to educate about communal values. Yet through Kirstie, Mitchison imagined overcoming the class division which persistently thwarted her in Carradale, and in order to do so, it might be suggested, she was willing to curtail Kirstie's freedom within her first marriage, her sexuality (which manifests itself in ritualistic 'witchcraft'), and her right to equal gender status within her family. Mitchison often complained to Neil Gunn of the disappointments she experienced regarding Carradale's attitude toward her:

> 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...[45]

Yet although extremely fond of Mitchison, Gunn had a greater awareness of the Highland mentality, and of the problem in changing it:

> There's nothing for you but to gang yer ain gait. Complicated personal relations are the devil at any time, but when social class relations are added, the old Cretan maze has nothing on 'em. Being as you fondly believe (and truly are in spirit) a classless human, you may forget, from your social point of vantage how subconscious social elements do their work in eager hearts.[46]

Gunn gently pokes fun, here, at Mitchison's 'fond beliefs', and hints at the existence of 'subconscious social elements' within the make-up of his spiritually classless friend, who nevertheless saw herself as 'descendant and representative of the Haldanes and indeed of all the great families whose blood is mixed in mine' (*D* 169).

Class and gender problems were both relevant. Yet equally, placing Kirstie in a similar situation to her own allowed Mitchison to explore the possibility of a different relationship between Denny M and herself. She could not in reality treat their friendship as she had done her earlier affairs, because, she complains, 'all round there are men and women waiting to catch me out'(*D* 58), and she laments the lack of privacy afforded by a small village, continuing, 'if I were to have love affairs, that would countenance other people in having them, who might quite well not be disciplined about it at all' (*D* 82). Her creation of William, therefore, a character closely modelled on Denny M, provided her with a degree of fictional freedom. William and Kirstie can become lovers, acting out her own fantasies in which her profound feeling for Denny M takes on a physical aspect.

Even within this fictional context, however, a new set of restrictions comes into operation for both Kirstie and William prompted by the moral code of eighteenth century Scotland. Kirstie is bound by a Christian-based moral code which insisted on the damnable nature of non-marital sexual relationships. Hence when William returns from America his potential to destroy her is explicitly sexual. Kirstie recalls:

> I began to feel a wild kind of impatience, for if tonight were to be the night of my damnation, let it come quick [...] and I stood there in my short shift, expecting anything, anything at all - wanting it - asking it - (*BC* 169)

Standing in her short nightgown, she obviously recognises her inclination to have sex with him, and it is only his restraint that saves them both from eternal damnation (which is roughly equated to sexual intercourse). Whilst Kirstie's attitude toward sexual relationships immediately suffers by comparison with Erif Der in *The Corn King*, however, it must be acknowledged that the eighteenth-century setting of *The Bull Calves* imposes a very different code of morality to that of tribal Marob, and an obvious breach of this would be anachronistic. Where Erif is free to leave her husband to travel, for example, Kirstie is only released from her first marriage by her husband's death. Therefore whilst Kirstie is based in many ways on Mitchison herself, and although like Erif, she enjoys the consciousness and ability to self-analyse which is reserved for the educated of her era, the mythical and superstitious world of Marob is replaced in Christian and Calvinist culture with a God whom there is no sure way of pleasing. Erif Der's rebellion is articulated through her control of magic in *The Corn King*, a vehicle of expression unavailable within *The Bull Calves*, which no longer incorporates magic per se. Magic of a sort is evident, and Kirstie's rebellion is evident in her identification with witchcraft, yet here the involvement is unacceptable, guilty and secretive, where Erif's was positive and creative. Magic is examined more as a psychological phenomenon, and used less as explicit physical manifestation of female power.

Kirstie feels that her experience of witchcraft is an evil which can only be spoken of during the hours of darkness. It is to her an infiltration of the Devil himself into the soul of a woman who has let her vigilance slip, demonstrating to the reader the negative influence of patriarchal religion on the female psyche. When Catherine asks her aunt whether or not she believes in witches, Kirstie denounces the superstitious element surrounding witchcraft by modifying it with a liberal but still very Christian explanation:

> Ach no, it is the evil in folks turning against themselves and others. Whether it is there by original sin or put there by the De'il when folks lives get so that he can edge himself among them and spoil the good that should be there. (*BC* 91)

The structure to life offered by religion, originally attractive to Kirstie in her need to make sense of her sister's death, becomes the only stable thing in her life throughout her marriage to a physically and psychologically abusive minister. Believing that her marriage 'was on the credit side of my bargain and covenant with the Lord' (*BC* 84), she forces herself to subordinate her own needs and desires to the requirements of the marital institution, although this never entirely convinces her. She realises almost immediately that she has made a mistake in marrying Andrew Shaw, yet respects the vows to such a degree that she cannot renege. Consequently, she suffers years of rape and mental torture, which gradually destroy her self esteem:

> he left me sitting on the creepie-stool by the hearth, greeting and yowling like a bairn, the way I would be, times, in the bed, after he had left me and gone to his study to write about hell-fire. I was choking with my need to answer him back, to justify myself against him, but I knew by then it was no use... (*BC* 90)

This calls to mind again the issue of women's rights in marriage examined in 'Five Men and a Swan', although here, by contrast, Mitchison has her heroine endure the torture for a time, and Kirstie's story does not have a moral other than that 'there were things that must just be tholed' (*BC* 131). She is unable to wrap herself in the symbolic swan's dress when her husband accuses her of being a harlot, and the fact that her brother Mungo writes to her 'not even questioning the thing, but believing ae word that another man wrote against a woman' (*BC* 130-1), serves to reinforce her inability to make a different choice. She explains: 'there was no remedy for a bad marriage' (*BC* 131).

Kirstie struggles to retain her identity under the constant attack of twisted doctrine by a man who takes his own sexual guilt out on his wife, miscalling her 'by the names of all the most notorious whores in the Old Testament', whilst she clings to 'the thin knowledge that I was Kirstie Haldane and no whore' (*BC* 130). Society dictates that she must remain with Andrew Shaw, and this reveals Mitchison's willingness to create a version of herself with an alternative frame of mind from her own, as a means of demonstrating her acceptance of the patriarchal values of her contemporary community. Where Erif Der leaves husband and child in order to find herself, Kirstie suffers, enduring the painful death of her two children, and when she is driven to breaking point 'by great personal unhappiness combined with the shattering of ... religious symbols' (*BC* 513), this can only be explained within the context of the book as witchcraft. Kirstie herself, however, has a vague notion that what she did with the other women who formed the coven, was in some way about taking control:

> 'Yet times I had a feeling that we were near to understanding in the heart of things that could have been turned to good, yet not a kind of good that would have been recognised by the respectable and the

members of the congregation. Least of all, maybe, by the men...' (*BC* 166)

but Mitchison cannot explore this, and only allows her heroine to escape further trauma by bringing William back into her life to 'save' her.

Kirstie cannot function without her William - her 'soul' without whom she feels unsafe. More positively, however, they have an unusually equal relationship in terms of the exchange of ideas and advice. William likens her to the women of the American frontier:

> 'They were free women, Kirstie; not kept by a city husband as playthings to be hung about with kerchiefs and necklaces. They were equals, trusted. The frontier has to be that way!... You would have been one for the frontier, my lassie!' (*BC* 185)

Yet her reply '... Being equals', she asked, 'did they no' get terrible bold?', does not seem to justify his faith, and adoration overcomes any imperfections in him which are brought to her attention:

> She knew that it was not possible for her, if she found a fault in him, not immediately to find an excuse or opposite for it. All she could do was to think away from him and to herself to a Goodness and Love that made the both of them small and bairnlike: that showed no human virtue as of any account save as an effort of free will, but all shrivelled to nothing under the great light of Redemption.' (*BC* 152)

Her relationship with William is almost religious, and it explains in terms of Christianity, Mitchison's relationship with Denny M and the other Highlanders. She felt there was something sacred about this relationship, something beyond class and beyond the rational, that linked past to present in a personal way for Mitchison and Kirstie, Denny and William. For Mitchison, this is an irrational, innate spiritual bond between Scotland's past and present, between 1747 and 1947, and between Highland and Lowland Scotland. Kirstie as a symbol of the meeting point for these binaries calls to mind Chris Guthrie in Grassic Gibbon's *Scots Quair* here. As with Gibbon's character, Kirstie *is* Scotland in a sense; the feminised 'other' to the mainstream maleness of England. She is the divided soul; romantic and tragic, proud and downtrodden. She identifies with the land and with the people, and has the propensity equally toward good and evil when William comes for her. He responds to her vulnerability honourably, however, and relates her state of uncertainty to the condition of Scotland herself: '... maybe, lassie, you were like poor Scotland herself, and one more betrayal would have spoilt you clean' (*BC* 170). Within this role as symbol of Scotland, however, Kirstie in a sense personifies 'Mother Alba', ultimately protecting and nurturing in her attempt to initiate progress for her own divided family and for Scotland.

The Earth-Mother role Mitchison herself had adopted was supported by her position as Laird and nominal leader of the community, and her ambition to become a matriarchal

figure is evident in the novel through Kirstie's relationship with William, as she shows him the same unconditional love she might a child. Mitchison herself did this with the people of Carradale, holding parties, providing employment, and at various points typing or reading for them. During World War II, Carradale was a centre for city children who were removed from the danger of city bombings, and Mitchison took several children into her home, further fulfilling the maternal role. Her own baby was to have been a symbol of hope for the future during a time of impending apocalypse, and the loss left her with a font of untapped maternal affection which she channelled into her relationship with Carradale, and conveyed by Kirstie's maternal feeling for William in *The Bull Calves*. She attributes to him child-like qualities which she believes endow him with a greater honesty and goodness than she has herself. To Catherine she says:

> 'Men, ach! They're but bairns. Good bairns aye, surely, and who's to say that a bairnie's no away better than a grown woman?... with a better idea of heaven and more will to get there.' (*BC* 37-8)

Just as this inspires Kirstie to protect William, however, she desires his protection equally, and identifies herself as the weaker half of the partnership, physically and mentally. She is incapable of judging his misdemeanours as a result, however, and the double standards in operation throughout his sojourns in America are easily justified as 'a Highlander's promise'. Instead, she blames the women he lied to for their foolishness in believing him:

> 'I promised', he said, 'and I neither held to my promises nor ever meant to.'
> 'But did they even think you meant to?' she asked. 'Was it no' a Highland promise from beginning to end?' (*BC* 182)

Ironically, however, Kirstie, too, believes what William chooses to tell her, and this would appear to absolve her of the responsibility of confronting either William's past or her own. This does not display great strength of character, and the fragility of her own conviction is revealed when her brother asks her what part she played in her husband's death, to which she replies, 'William, my man, has said to me that I am in no way responsible for the death of Andrew Shaw. And I believe him in all he tells me' (*BC* 352). Her trust in William is absolute, and she admits 'it is so terrible nice to feel safe that I am letting myself get feared of things!' (*BC* 304). This reinforces once again the stereotypical relationship between the strong man and the weaker female which was the essence both of eighteenth century ideology and that of modern Carradale.

The crucial thing which prevents the traditional gender binary from becoming absolute, however, is William, whose nature is revealed to the reader through his conversations with Kirstie, and with her brothers Mungo and Patrick, all of whom uncover something of his

dark past. Politically he is their opposite, having been 'out' in the Jacobite rebellion of 1715. Yet it is a moral rather than a political issue that initiates conflict between William and the Haldanes. To his knowledge, William is still married to an American Indian, making his marriage to Kirstie unlawful, and their daughter illegitimate. He does not deny this to her brother Patrick, and the bond between them over his secret excludes Kirstie, yet the significance of his first marriage extends beyond the physical nature of his sin, into an earlier brush with the collective unconscious, and with his opposite *anima*.

Just as Kirstie identified her *animus* in William, William identified one aspect of his *anima* in his first wife, Ohnawiyo, the daughter of an Indian chief. He explains:

> 'I have a thought that Kirstie's imaginings on the Horny were, some way, yon same part of her soul got loose and become a person on its own. I met this in the flesh with Ohnawiyo and gave it power, and Kirstie met hers for a moment and would have given it power over her, but in the instant of her surrender it became me.' (*BC* 279)

He recognises a part of himself in the pre-Christian, and in spite of the negativity of the image, he finds within Ohnawiyo 'an ancestral memory of a Highland innocence; perhaps a false memory, but potent as an archetype'.[47] She is wild and shamelessly cruel, yet the standard rules of morality are not applicable to her way of life. This is the attraction for William, yet in surrendering to his *anima* in this instance, he surrenders to the dark side of his soul, which in Jungian terms was called the 'shadow'; the darkness which we struggle to conceal, but which must ultimately be confronted in order to achieve a whole self. William tells Kirstie:

> 'There is a deep part of ourselves that we canna rightly know and that might be some way the natural man and woman before the Fall and also before Redemption. And whiles it is close to God's love and innocent and full of the bonniest colours and sweet sounds and scents. But whiles it is equally close to the Pit and the things of the Pit. Yet we must come to terms with it before we are whole and can be saved. But it will send its messengers in the shape of dreams and visions and if we are feared of them they will become real on us and we will worship them.' (*BC* 327)

William is sensitive in spite of the meaningless cruelty which leads him to join in murderous Indian raids, yet the 'breeches-wearing Bull Calves' (*BC* 514), Mungo and Patrick, are not particularly accommodating to the gentler side of William's nature. As a Highlander, he is disadvantaged. Government measures to allay the risk of further rebellion following the '45, prevented Highlanders from wearing tartan or carrying a sword, and William has therefore been stripped of the symbols of his power and identity. His frustration is evident when he argues with Kyllachy, the dark and morally suspect figure of the novel:

> He stamped and shuddered and did not know clearly who or where he was, and he wished wild for his sword, for his plaid, for his own tartan, his own manhood, his own Kirstie. (*BC* 201)

When Patrick threatens him with expulsion from Kirstie and their daughter, therefore, William fails to react in a controlled manner,

> and sudden he was on the ground at Patrick's feet, twisted with a blow of pain... Patrick was interested, and then all at once disgusted and abashed with the Highlands, with this kind of naked surrender. (*BC* 263)

William is wild, and Patrick feels the need to assert power over him to show that he is able to do so, although he has no real intention of banishing him. William's exposée of his sensitivity, however, is too alarming for the older man, and Patrick is uncomfortable with the display of 'feminine' characteristics which signal William's strong identification with his *anima*.

Although William is in some ways the subordinator in his relationship with Kirstie, it is also evident in his reaction to Patrick's threat that he is as much in need of her as she is of him. Although Ohnawiyo was a necessary part of the process of his developing self-awareness, the reality of what he became capable of frightens him, and his return to Kirstie signifies his identification with a safer, more childlike side of his personality. He needs her to soothe the horror of what he did, and in many ways they are equally insecure. Kirstie describes him as 'over proud and over open to hurts, touchy as a blood horse in summer', which is 'the other side of the quality in him which made him also so gentle and kind... . Because he could be hurt, so also could he love' (*BC* 154).

Kirstie too is strong. She has endured a great deal of emotional hardship. Yet she is also dependent on William. He can feel like a man in protecting her, at the same time as he mirrors her need for protection. When she is plagued by dreams of evil spirits, for example, he acknowledges the need to

> meet this nightmare of his wife's with kindness and sense.
> 'Well', he said, and he happed her up warm in his arms and sudden he was thinking of her, not as his wife and counsellor, but as his bairn, 'they just canna have you, Kirstie, not ever any more, for you belong to me now and for all eternity'. (*BC* 162)

It is also notable that all their significant discussion takes place in bed; the reconciliation between man and woman is manifested sexually, and each talk which brings them closer together ends in a sexual union.

Kirstie and William's relationship as lovers, and their spiritual identification of each within the soul of the other represents a hegemonic gender construct unsupportive of a feminist

reading of *The Bull Calves*. Jungian thought was fundamentally masculine, something which Mitchison acknowledged when she began to read Jung seriously in 1943:

> the whole thing is (perhaps inevitably) written so much from the male point of view that it is sometimes quite disconcertingly difficult for a woman to follow it sympathetically. The man is the individual; women are a lump. It is not very pleasant to read a book in which you are considered as part of a lump. (*BC* 512)

The Jungian interpretation of the subconscious demanded the acceptance of the existence of a 'feminine' set of traits and of a 'masculine' set, which are accurate in a timeless sense,[48] and Mitchison did find this problematic, believing as she did in gender equality and in the transcendence of gender stereotypes. It must be acknowledged, nevertheless, that not only is Kirstie constrained by the eighteenth century, Mitchison too is restricted by her willingness to write a book for Carradale. Already faced with opposition to her way of thinking from the Church, and various members of the community, it would have done very little good if she had strayed too far from the idea of male-female relations with which they were comfortable, and her challenge to the patriarchy is more subtly pitched as a result. It may be argued, in fact, that Mitchison was seduced here, by an attractive psychological theory that in some way mirrored her own mythic explorations, and which caused her to set aside her own magical preoccupations, and to write instead a realist narrative using Jungian symbolism as a substitute. Where Erif Der was not armed with the protection of her own 'animus', Kirstie is guaranteed one, and this may account for the regressive domestication she embodies.

Although Kirstie does embody a less ardently feminist attitude than Erif, however, she portrays in her relationship with William a sense of equality and mutual respect involving various roles. Kirstie is William's 'playmate' and 'counsellor'; he is her little boy, and also her protector. Their relationship, in this sense, undermines stereotypes, and it is arguable that Mitchison is simply altering her tactics to adapt to a changed environment. Certain social relationships are taken for granted in Carradale, and Mitchison 'buys into' them, in order to make her writing more accessible to her intended audience. With her characterisation of Kirstie's niece Catherine, however, the nature of the change that occurs within the two short days of the novel prompts the question of whether perhaps Mitchison was prepared to sacrifice her feminism.

At various points in the *Diary*, Mitchison records the advice she dispenses to young women, and in each case she urges her young friends to actively pursue their ambitions, to take control of their lives. At one point she even finds herself giving advice about birth

control to a girl who is about to marry a Catholic (*D* 44), therefore it seems out of keeping with this attitude, that Catherine in *The Bull Calves* should move so quickly from 'this feeling of being young, of being fit to leap out of her body, almost, with the delight of all one might be seeing and doing on a summer's day' (*BC* 24), to entering into an engagement with her cousin James.

Catherine is a naïve character, with her feet firmly planted in upper class society. She has no real idea of the world, and

> [s]he had never to her knowledge seen a manufactory, still less a colliery. It was altogether too much like talk about savages, and not even the black ones who had at least a different and romantic look on them. (*BC* 125)

She looks on her own class as 'the true community and body of the state', as opposed to 'the cast off parings' (*BC* 190), and her detachment from reality is demonstrated by her belief that '[n]obody goes hungry these days... unless they are idle' (*BC* 392). Catherine is not forced to analyse her own consciousness until she is confronted with the delicate situation of harbouring a Jacobite rebel. This compels her to examine what she believes, and shocks her into articulating her own thoughts, where before she had been made to do little other than amuse herself by engaging in what were considered the appropriate feminine pursuits,

> [I]t seemed to her that her life had been gey easy and without choices and temptations, so that maybe up to now it had been over simple to keep to the right ways. (*BC* 320)

The 'right ways' are typical of her time. An upper class young lady in the eighteenth century would be expected to study music, languages and needlework. Ultimately, she would be expected to marry, and Catherine ruminates on

> some later day when she would be a wife and a mother, ordering her household and bringing up her bairns in fear and love of the Lord, for she had strict and certain ideas about some things, and this was how her life was to be when she was rightly a woman. (*BC* 24)

Ironically, she has no notion of this happening for some time, and yet finds herself engaged within forty-eight hours!

The language of her brief courtship with Cousin James reveals the extent of her naivety, as her first experience of physical closeness literally revolutionises her belief system. She discovers that the close proximity of James's body creates 'such a great, blind tossing and tumbling of thoughts and wonders and questionings over him that she felt half dizzy...' (*BC* 395-6), and significantly, when he moves to kiss her, the language is of submission rather than choice:

> Young James reached out towards the other hand and it seemed to her that she could feel it coming as though the dusky candle-flickered

> air around her were but an extension and continuance of her own body, prickling to the touch as now her skin prickled, and now he was touching her truly, had hold of the hand, was drawing it to him. For a moment she tried to speak, feebly, of the supper tray, of the adventure they had been in together, but none of her sentences ended right and he paying no attention to them, and now she was in his arms and her mouth under his and as the kiss came down on her she could smell the brandy on his breath but it did not seem worth bothering with.
>
> 'Good sakes, Catherine', he murmured, 'good sakes, if I had but you in bed with me!'
>
> She felt she should have protested, have cried out; maybe it was better to let on she hadna heard. It wasna the James she knew and respected, the lad of virtue and principle, walking in the way of the Lord. But it was a lad she liked awful well, that set a warm humming through her body of a kind she had never known. (*BC* 396)

She almost disowns her body, externalising her inner being as though she is watching events and relinquishing control over them. This language is echoed by Kirstie as she describes an early meeting with William while she is still married to Andrew. Here, she too appears to play no active role and can only submit:

> But still he held my hand and he began to draw me close to him, and for a moment I gave in, Catherine, my principles let go of me and I was wild happy from top to toe. I was free, my soul, and his mouth on my own. (*BC* 114)

This dynamic between the sexes quite clearly echoes the acceptable relationships in Mitchison's contemporary society. At Halloween in 1939, for example, the *Diary* describes the physical aspect of guessing one another beneath the disguise, as a ritual in which men tried to establish contact, women to evade it (although of course in the novel's context, they submit rather than evade). Note:

> ... Then to Alec's, where we had a good roughhouse; Willie had pulled me down on to his knee and was pretending to make love to me and Lilla was doing a turn; Alec was determined to know who we were, especially the women... [and] Anna spotted a ring, so that set Alec off and he began to pull my dress off. (*D* 82)

This would seem to support the assertion that Mitchison is trying to write her way into the mindset of her community, so that they would accept the dynamic between William and Kirsty, Catherine and James, unquestioningly. From a feminist point of view, however, it undermines Mitchison's belief in the woman's right to actively desire, and exemplifies what Mary Wollstonecraft referred to in 1792 as 'excessive sensuality'. Wollstonecraft argued that potential and independence in a woman 'were initially stifled and broken by an apprenticeship to pleasure, which induced psychic and social dependency',[49] and certainly from a feeling of youth and freedom, Catherine quickly reassesses her situation, and begins to consider the

> settlements to be drawn up and clothes and gear and household plenishings to be bought and certain kinds of behaviour expected of herself and of James and an end to one part of her life of which she was not yet tired... Now she must take responsibility. She must have deep thoughts upon virtuous living. (*BC* 397-8)

She is 'not yet tired' of her independence, but her apparent inability to resist physical desire persuades her that she must sacrifice this to fulfil the role as wife and mother. Marriage is the only available course of action in 1747, and indeed, in 1940s Scotland. Nevertheless, it is unusual for Mitchison to take such a regressive step in the portrayal of gender identity, and there is little hope for the future whilst the young woman of the novel follows directly in the footsteps of her aunt with still less compunction to upset the equilibrium. Mitchison may have chosen to fictionalise Presbyterian values in order that her new acquaintances may better identify with the message she is attempting to convey concerning her own position as a working woman in a male community, but she does not appear to challenge the belief system, in its historical translation. Or at least, contrary to what she does in *The Corn King*, she does not construct a female character powerful enough to transcend the gender constraints of the lived present or the imagined past. Furthermore, within the realist narrative of *The Bull Calves*, there was no place for the magical elements which offered escape to Erif in *The Corn King*. Kirstie is constrained too greatly by the repressive climate of the eighteenth century, and Mitchison accurately portrays the negative view of witchcraft taken by what would have been Kirstie's contemporary society, disallowing her the freedom given to Erif through her powers. Instead, history serves only to reinforce a restrictive gender dialectic where before it was manipulated to challenge accepted notions of male dominance, and as a result, the phallocentricism of the historical text in this instance prevents it from attaining the disruptive force of *The Corn King* and other earlier fiction.

The Bull Calves, I would argue, suffers at the hands of Mitchison's complexity of vision. Certainly within the context of eighteenth-century history, this positioning and celebration of the woman's role attacks the foundations of patriarchal discourse. The problem arises, however, with Mitchison's dual purpose in engaging with history, and simultaneously in a form of creation therapy as compensation for her baby's death. As a symbol of the child's life, and as a symbol of new life for Scotland, a bond between Highland and Lowland, Jacobite and Whig, Kirstie cannot sustain the burden of both personal and national placed upon her. Mitchison required comfort from this novel, and from the people for whom it was written, and her over-willingness to accommodate them, perhaps, prevented her from maintaining her previous stand against inequality, and that instead she took a

disappointingly regressive step. In the words of her character Patrick, 'It was a human thing to sell oneself. Mostly everyone did it, whether they knew or not' (*BC* 260).

This is not to suggest that in *The Bull Calves* Mitchison does not examine the female role in an enlightening and original way. As I have argued, the novel employs various strategies of resistance to the hierarchised structures of history, and subverts the genre itself by eliding the personal and the political. The privileging of the domestic means that characters like Kirstie and Catherine are denied the magical agency offered to Erif Der, yet if Mitchison accepts that women are only granted qualified agency in a man's world within this eighteenth century context, she also enacts a desire to re-evaluate the female domain and to celebrate it. Yet Mitchison's dual purpose in writing the novel, partly as a form of 'therapy' to compensate for the loss of her child, partly as wish fulfilment in her relationship with Denny M and the Carradale community, means that the novel is in danger of fragmenting beneath the burden of meaning which she packs into her characterisation of Kirstie Haldane. That Kirstie represents much of Mitchison's own attitudes and beliefs means that, in the context of the novel, her feminism is undermined by her historical and domestic situation, just as Mitchison's was undermined by her desire for acceptance.

Acknowledgement of the regressive aspects of *The Bull Calves*, therefore, must be allowed, and it may be significant that Mitchison moved away from history following *The Bull Calves*, returning to the genre only after twenty five years with *Cleopatra's People* in 1972. In the interim, the subject matter of her novels continued to expand, and ranged from stories for children such as *The Big House* (1950), mentioned above, and *Graeme and the Dragon* (1954), to the entertaining *Lobsters on the Agenda* (1952), which was based on her experiences on the Highland Council. Her increasing devotion to Africa instigated many novels and stories, and a developing interest in science fiction inspired *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) and *Solution Three* (1973). Of these, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* is particularly relevant in tracing Mitchison's developing views regarding gender. In this imaginative and witty novel, the main character is an explorer who journeys from planet to planet, observing the behaviour of different life forms. In many cases, the focus is on alien reproductive behaviour, and Mitchison uses the opportunity offered by distancing here, as she does in her historical fiction, to dispense with the taboos which operate in her own society.

One instance in particular is worth mentioning here, as an example of her exploitation of this distance. The narrator recounts an incident in which there is an explosion on board her spacecraft, in which she is travelling with a Martian communications expert, Vly:

> The blast which deafened me for some days does not exist in my memory. I can only begin to recollect clearly when Vly was in contact with me, communicating reassurance and affection with all that was in him [...] Dear Vly was communicating all over with his tongue, fingers, toes and sexual organs. I felt so grateful; it was so kind, so kind of him.[50]

The heroine's apparent 'gratitude' toward Vly for his 'kindness' presents the reader with a radical view, which would doubtless have been considered extremely risqué in the early years of the 1960s, and demonstrates Mitchison's continuing desire to disrupt hegemonic discourse and to liberate readers from inbuilt prejudices regarding sexuality and sexual behaviour. Further, that her intrinsic belief in sexual intercourse as a form of kindness remains central is indicated by Vly's use of touch to provide comfort, and the casual acceptance of human-Martian relations allows no room for disapproval. Mitchison deals with inter-race relationships in the future in her science fiction just as she dealt with same-sex relationships in the past in her historical fiction, and indeed her next real return to the historical genre signalled a return to the frank approach to sexuality taken by *The Corn King.*

Cleopatra's People, published in 1972, focuses on several female characters, all of whom are in some way related to, or affected by, Cleopatra VII. The novel oscillates between Cleopatra's narrative, running from BC 44 until her death in BC 30, and the narratives of her various descendants, and supporters of her vision of an Egypt in which the common people are accorded respect. Cleopatra herself is portrayed as a strong, intelligent and highly sexualised woman in her prime, and as the only female player amidst male politicians, she is careful to utilise every power she has at her disposal, including her power to attract lovers, such as Roman leaders Julius Caesar and Marc Antony.

Cleopatra's attitude toward the political implications of sex are made clear by her decision to marry Rome's Marc Antony, as part of a plan to counteract the destructiveness of Roman rule under his rival, Octavian. She admits to her maid:

> If [...] in order to destroy the rule of Rome, I had to buttress the weaker, I would not care to have Octavian in my bed. And yet I would do it. He may not think so now, but it would happen nevertheless. And he would not know that he had been trapped. Yes, I would do even that for Egypt. (*CP* 51)[51]

This sexual sacrifice may not appear to be an ideal method of solving political problems, yet in context it would have been highly probable. Although male politicians were

expected to use sex politically - to glean information or financial gain, perhaps - women were condemned for similar behaviour, and Cleopatra thus presents a threat to the masculine image of Roman power. It is revealed through the narratives of various characters that Cleopatra's fairness, tact and skilled leadership are overwritten by the Romans. Instead, they depict her as a witch-figure, whose approach to sex was excessive and perverse, in an attempt to reduce her popularity:

> Out they came with horror stories and naturally the most powerful punch was at the foreign woman, the witch [...] The fouler the story, the more readily it was taken up. Women with power were bad enough, but this one was the worst yet [...] Rome, lift your head, you have a noble leader, crush Antony, crush the foreign she-monster! (*CP* 60)

In spite of Roman attempts to blacken her character, however, Cleopatra becomes a god-figure in Egypt following her death, and Mitchison takes care to highlight the dangers of historical bias in illustrating the one-sided nature of the Roman propaganda machine.

Cleopatra's People is a provocative, well-written novel, which recalls in some ways Mitchison's early preoccupation with the ancient world, recreated from a female point of view. Although it lacks the depth of novels such as *Cloud Cuckoo Land* or *The Corn King*, however, it is significant that a return to ancient history so many years after her so-called 'classical phase' had ended, also heralded a return to open discussion of sexuality within the historical genre. This was not again to be articulated in the same way. In 1987, *Early In Orcadia* returns to history, but moves away from the body of Mitchison's historical fiction, both in form and tone, toward what I would tentatively call 'speculative' historical fiction. In this significant sub-genre of historical fiction, writers utilise historical eras of which very little is known, and 'speculate' as to the type of existence people may have enjoyed, creating from the information they can gather, a mindset alien to our own and which often extends to an imagined rhetoric. This sub-genre includes, at its best, novels such as William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955) Neil Gunn's *Sun Circle* (1933), Colin Mackay's *The Song of the Forest* (1986), and George Mackay Brown's *Vinland* (1992).

Each of these novels depends on taking a leap of imagination, and William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955) is one of the most accomplished literary attempts at making this leap. His lone Neanderthal tribe are followed on their final nomadic journey to eventual extinction, and rather than attempting to overlay their experience with modern psychology and analysis, Golding tries to imagine the world in their own terms, to the point of creating an alternative rhetoric, and an alternative way of creating meaning. Instead of using sophisticated ways of articulation, the tribe understand the world in terms of pictures.

Instead of relying only on sight and sound, they rely heavily on a highly developed sense of smell. Their perceptions are often more identifiably animal than human, and yet it is the sheer strangeness of their relationship with a world recognisably ours, which ensures the potency of Golding's vision.

Mitchison's *Early in Orcadia* is set, as the title suggests, in Orkney, at the time of the first settlers. Compared with the history of Ancient Egypt or Rome, little is known of Orkney's earliest history, and Mitchison pays close attention to details such as what people ate, how they hunted, and how they might have communicated with one another in the absence of a developed linguistic system.

The Early Orcadians of Mitchison's novel use language economically, and personal names, for example, such as Lovelove and Metoo, are tribal and simplistic. In an authorial comment which is placed between two sections of the novel, Mitchison explains, '[a] storyteller today cannot reproduce the kind of talking that must have gone on' (*EO* 115),[52] and as a result the novel is constructed as though the narrator is committing to paper an oral narrative. 'So' is used to begin new sections, and the reader is drawn into the story as s/he is addressed as 'you', for example: 'So what happened? Well, the other boat got over safely and poor Sweetlips got her Catcho back' (*EO* 86).

It is important to note in this novel that Mitchison is imagining a developing society, and that in recreating tiny communities in which life focused around the basic necessities of food, shelter, and reproduction, gender roles were likely to have been based on necessity rather than on a repressive male regime. Women, it can be assumed, were unlikely to initiate or take part in exploration whilst involved in the critical activity of nursing children. What Mitchison takes care to illustrate, however, is that women are respected for their own skills, and that these skills are recognised as being just as essential as male accomplishments. This is demonstrated during an incident in which the men are called upon to help with a particular stage in the process of making pots, at which time '[t]he men knew themselves honoured to be chosen for this women's skill, which men had never taken part in, not having been given the right knowledge' (*EO* 96-7). Few women's historical novels have attempted to tackle this sub-genre, although Margaret Elphinstone moves toward it with her attempt to speculate regarding the undocumented lives of women in *Islanders* (1994), discussed in Chapter Five. Mitchison herself, however, never returned to it, and although both the novels which followed *Early in Orcadia* were historical, they returned to a more realist representation of history.

The Oath-Takers and *Sea-Green Ribbons*, published in 1991, were Mitchison's last, and in their historical focus indicate a full circle in her substantial body of work. Although twin volumes, the two novels are unconnected in subject matter. *The Oath-Takers* focuses on the ninth century Frankish Empire, and is narrated from the perspective of a young boy, Drogo, who is struggling to come to terms with issues of loyalty and the abuse of power. Many of Mitchison's old concerns are touched on here. Drogo follows his father to pledge alliegance to Charles, grandson of the great Charlemagne, and his journey brings him into contact with other boys of different race, class and background, which teaches him the importance of tolerance, and to mistrust those in power. There is, however, little specific concern with gender in this short novel, and although Sarah's adventures in *Sea-Green Ribbons* are instigated by her flight from an abusive husband, the role of gender in the novel is far less critical than the emphasis which is placed on religious tolerance.

When Mitchison's literary development after *The Bull Calves* is viewed retrospectively in this way, it is arguable that not only did her concentration on historical fiction diminish in the face of other interests and experiences, her use of the historical genre as a forum for debate regarding gender and sexuality was also no longer a priority, particularly after *Cleopatra's People*. Surely too, however, it must be taken into account that Mitchison was ninety four years old when she published *The Oath-takers* and *Sea-Green Ribbons*, and it might be surmised that she no longer prioritised sexual expression in her work for the simple reason that her interest in other things had overtaken her interest in gender and sexuality by this time.

The sum total of Mitchison's achievement in examining gender through historical fiction, however, cannot be underestimated, and it is significant that the work of Sian Hayton parallels her early magical realist approach to the genre, whilst Margaret Elphinstone's novel *Islanders* (1994) exemplifies the more domestic type of historical fiction offered by *The Bull Calves*. The following chapters will discuss the ways in which these modern authors drew on and developed historical fiction in the later years of the twentieth-century. In both instances, there are similarities that suggest the existence of a common purpose between generations. Nevertheless, differences both in the form and content of the modern novels indicate a development in the historical genre, and a development in the way in which female writers utilise history in order to address specifically female concerns.

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[1] Isobel Murray, 'Human Relations: An Outline of Some Major Themes in Naomi Mitchison's Adult Fiction', in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Twentieth-century*, ed. by Joachim Schwend / Horst W. Drescher

(Scottish Studies Publications of the Scottish Studies Centre of the Johannes Gutenberg Universitat Mainz in Germersheim. Peter Lang. Frankfurt am Main: 1990), pp. 243-256, (p. 245).
[2] Naomi Mitchison, *The Bull Calves* (London. Victor Gollancz 1947; reprinted Glasgow. Richard Drew Publishing Ltd Glasgow 1985). All references are to the reprint.
[3] This is noted in Chapter 2, pp. 64-65.
[4] Naomi Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*, ed. by Dorothy Sheridan (London, Victor Gollancz 1985; reprinted Oxford Paperbacks 1986) All references are to the reprint. Mitchison's *War Diary* makes several references to the Church, and her tone is usually indifferent. In one entry, however, she records her feelings more directly in a discussion of one of the village girls: '.... and she went to Church twice, why on earth can anyone bear to do that?' (*D* 126).
[5] Douglas Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past: Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*', in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Twentieth-century*, ed. by Joachim Schwend / Horst W. Drescher (Scottish Studies Publications of the Scottish Studies Centre of the Johannes Gutenberg Universitat Mainz in Germersheim (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990), vol 10, pp. 219-241, (p. 219).
[6] Jenni Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London: Virago, 1997), p. 144.
[7] Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 219.
[8] Donald Smith, 'You May Well Ask: Nine Decades of Naomi Mitchison', in *Cencrastus* 13 (Summer 1983), pp. 14-17, p. 15.
[9] Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938; London: The Hogarth Press, 1952) 4th impression, p. 24.
[10] See *Behind the Lines:Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. by Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michael and Margaret Collins Weitz (New York; London: Yale University Press 1987), p. 3.
[11] Higonnet *et al*, p. 1.
[12] Higonnet *et al*, p. 231.
[13] John Costello, *Love, Sex and War: Changing Attitudes 1939 - 1945* (London: Pan Books, 1986), p. 11.
[14] Costello, p. 12.
[15] Higonnet *et al*, p. 261.
[16] Higonnet *et al*, p. 4.
[17] Higonnet *et al*, p. 231.
[18] Higonnet *et al*, p. 34.
[19] See Costello, pp. 23-34.
[20] Naomi Mitchison, 'The Cleansing of the Knife', in *The Cleansing of the Knife and Other Poems* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978), p. 39.
[21] Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 231.
[22] Letter to Neil Gunn, cited in Donald Smith, 'Naomi Mitchison and Neil Gunn: A Highland Friendship', in *Cencrastus* 13 (Summer, 1983), pp. 17-20, (p. 19).
[23] Agnes Mure Mackenzie wrote a series of histories of Scotland. *The Kingdom of Scotland* (1940) is likely to have been the book Mitchison was reading in 1940.
[24] Kirsten Stirling, 'The Roots of the Present: Naomi Mitchison, Agnes Mure MacKenzie and the Construction of History', in *The Polar Twins*, ed. by Edward J. Cowan and Douglas Gifford (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1999), pp. 254-269, (p. 254).
[25] Margery Palmer McCulloch, 'Fictions of Development', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dororthy MacMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 306-372, (p. 369).
[26] Letter from Naomi Mitchison to Neil Gunn, cited in Smith, 'Highland Friendship', p. 20.
[27] Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 238.
[28] Naomi Mitchison, Introduction to *Beyond this Limit: Selected Shorter Fiction of Naomi Mitchison*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), p. xv.
[29] Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 235.
[30] Letter from Naomi Mitchison to Neil Gunn, cited in Smith, 'Highland Friendship', p. 18.
[31] Letter from Naomi Mitchison to Neil Gunn, cited in Smith, 'Highland Friendship, p. 20.
[32] Naomi Mitchison, 'Five Men and a Swan', in *Five Men and A Swan* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1957), pp. 93 – 110, (p. 97).
[33] Beth Dickson, 'From Personal to Global: The Fiction of Naomi Mitchison', in *Chapman* 50 (Summer 1987), vol. 10, no's 1 and 2, pp. 34-40. (p. 38).
[34] Letter from Neil Gunn to Naomi Mitchison, cited in Smith, 'Highland Friendship', p. 19
[35] Calder, Jenni, 'More than Merely Ourselves: Naomi Mitchison' *History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dororthy MacMillan (Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 444-455, (p. 448).
[36] Stirling, p. 268.
[37] Stirling, p. 255.
[38] Douglas Gifford, 'Imagining Scotlands: The Return to Mythology in Modern Scottish Fiction', in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present*, ed. by Susanne Hagemann (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 17-49, (p. 18).
[39] Gifford, 'Imagining Scotlands', p. 18.

[40] Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 221.
[41] Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 230.
[42] Margery Palmer McCulloch, *The Novels of Neil M. Gunn: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press,1987), p. 97.
[43] Neil M Gunn, *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (Edinburgh. Souvenir Press, 1975), p. 24.
[44] Jung, C.G. *The Collected Works*, ed. by Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler, 20 vols (London: Routledge, 1953-78), vol 17. para 338.
[45] Letter from Naomi Mitchison to Neil Gunn, cited in Smith, 'Highland Friendship', p. 18.
[46] Letter from Neil Gunn to Naomi Mitchison, cited in Smith, 'Highland Friendship', p. 18.
[47] Gifford, 'Forgiving the Past', p. 230.
[48] In the notes to *The Bull Calves*, Mitchison refers to the difficulty pointed out by Jung that 'traditional symbolism is chiefly product of the masculine psyche and is therefore not a suitable object of imitation for women...' (p. 512).
[49] Cora Caplan, 'Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexulaity in Socialist and Feminist Criticism', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R and Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 857-877, (p. 864).
[50] Naomi Mitchison, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (London. The Woman's Science Fiction Press, 1962) pp. 58-9, cited by John Corbett, *Language and Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 140.
[51] Naomi Mitchison, *Cleopatra's People* (London. Heinemann, 1972).
[52] Naomi Mitchison, *Early in Orcadia* (Glasgow: Richard Drew Publishing, 1987).

Chapter 4

Celtic Goddess, Whore of Babylon: Sian Hayton's *Cells of Knowledge* Trilogy (1989-1993).

Between the publication of Mitchison's *The Bull Calves* in 1947, and the appearance of Sian Hayton's *Cells of Knowledge* (1989), *Hidden Daughters* (1992), and *The Last Flight* (1993),[1] women's historical fiction in Scotland was most readily associated with the popular romance genre. Although popular romance occasionally touched on fantasy, the genre on the whole did not explore the magical themes evident in Mitchison's *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931). Sian Hayton's *Cells* trilogy, however, returns to the domain of the supernatural, and in doing so, exhibits the complexity of vision of Mitchison's work. As I argued in Chapter 2, Mitchison's use of magic in the historical genre strategically undermines the concept of history in its patriarchal form, and allows for female agency and for the examination of specific gender issues. As this chapter will demonstrate, Hayton's heterogeneous engagement with tenth-century history heralds a return to similar examinations. Just as ritualistic Marob meets rational Sparta in Mitchison's *Corn King*, elements of fantasy and pagan folk-tale disrupt Christian history in *Cells*, *Hidden Daughters* and *The Last Flight*, and once again, the resulting challenge creates a space inside the discourse of historical fiction, where the female can be examined and accorded agency.

Commenting on her work, Hayton is explicit about the motivations driving the novels. She suggests that fiction may provide women with an opportunity to re-define the history they had been taught in school. The Scottish education system had privileged the male at the expense of the female in history, she argues, owing to its focus on the public rather than the domestic sphere, and in her own experience, she explains, 'we were given what I can only describe as ''blokish'' history with dates and battles and monarchs and power struggles'. Fiction, therefore, was a way of producing an alternative ' ''chickish'' history, looking at the way ordinary people lived their day to day lives and what influenced their attitudes to other people'.[2] This is a view that supports the traditional feminist argument that history operates within a politicised hierarchical structure, in which female experience is viewed as secondary to male experience, and reiterates the desire to shift the focus away from the public sphere.

Between the publication of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* and the *Cells* trilogy, however, the very concept of male/female came under critical scrutiny. There is much in

the *Cells* trilogy which questions the traditional polarisations that characterise earlier feminist fictions. Rather than using magic simply in order to redress the imbalance in power and to find a space for the female, Hayton uses magic and myth to interrogate the very basis of these polarisations. The climate for feminism had clearly changed considerably between 1931 (when *The Corn King* was published), and 1989 and the appearance of *Cells of Knowledge*. Whilst women in the 1980s had achieved significantly more freedom than was available in the 1930s, there was nevertheless a crisis in feminism which Hayton's novel addresses, and where Mitchison's use of magic helps to create a space for the female, Hayton's also allows her to question the very basis of socially constructed gender hierarchies. She does this through constructing meetings between other oppositional concepts such as history and myth, Christianity and paganism, and then by systematically deconstructing these, she is able to undermine the efficacy of each privileged signifier. In doing this, the socially constructed hierarchy which also privileges male over female is challenged, and through the examination of three different gendered possibilities for the female: motherhood, celibacy and sexual fulfilment, Hayton interrogates what it means to be male and what it means to be female, within a male orientated social system. In each instance she does this with a female character who in some way subverts the role she has been allocated. Marighal's entry into motherhood is a choice rather than an inevitability; Barve's celibacy is self-imposed rather than enforced, and Essullt's incestuous sexual fulfilment defies taboo.

As Margaret Elphinstone has argued in her essay 'The Quest: Two Contemporary Adventures',[3] Hayton's trilogy revolves around journeys or 'quests' in which Christian monks, representing the patriarchy, are brought into contact with pagan women who are possessed of supernatural power. In each case, an actual physical journey forms part of a larger metaphorical quest in search of a more positive encoding for female identity, both in historical and contemporary terms. Each monk and his antithetical female character encounter in one another aspects of an alien ideology, and the opposing system becomes personalised by the progression of their relationships toward an understanding which breaks down the hierarchical oppositions of Christian/pagan, history/myth and male/female in favour of friendship and mutual respect.

In each of the three novels, these hierarchies are challenged by the nature of Hayton's supernatural pagan heroines. Marighal in *Cells*, Barve in *Hidden Daughters* and Essullt in *The Last Flight*, are semi-mortal daughters of the giant and wood-demon Usbathaden (Yspaddadn in Celtic mythology[4]), able to change shape and cast spells, and in possession

of immense strength, both mental and physical. The male figures in the trilogy, on the other hand, represent a fundamentally anti-female Christian ideology, and Hayton uses the sisters to challenge male convictions about the nature of woman and her associated evil. Christianity forms the ideological basis of Western patriarchal culture, and Hayton is anxious to challenge the misogynist idea of God in the monks' minds, which is internalised as 'the moral law within'.[5] She does this by bringing the monkish narrators of the trilogy into contact with the other world in the shadowy tenth century. Selyf, Hw and Josia, must, as Margaret Elphinstone explains, 'go beyond the bounds of the Christian world, and investigate the pagan, supernatural, dangerous world that lies beyond the pale of Christian society'.[6] When Marighal and Barve, in particular, meet Selyf and Hw, this symbolises a meeting between the concepts associated with the female: magic, myth, paganism, and deviant sexuality, and those associated with the male: realism, history, Christianity, and 'normal' sexuality. An analysis of both the construction and the content of the texts reinforces the feminist implications of this meeting, as the dissolving of oppositions is intrinsic to Hayton's method of disrupting hegemonic discourse, and ensuring the recognition of the female, with all her associations, as of equal importance to the male.

Hayton's physically and mentally powerful heroines provide the novels with a strong feminist undercurrent, and the trilogy examines their relationships with male representatives of the Christian world in a context where power relations and ideologies are mutually challenged. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the majority of published criticism of the trilogy centres around feminist readings, supported by post-structural analysis of the novels. Critics including Elphinstone, mentioned above, and Douglas Gifford, agree that with this series of binary oppositions, between history and myth, Christianity and paganism, and male and female, Hayton employs the main characters in each novel to dissolve these binaries, thereby challenging the presuppositions upon which gender and sexuality are based. As Gifford says, '[t]he confrontations between Celtic and Christian, magic and physical strength are delineated as gendered concerns. There is, however, no simplistic male/female schema to the trilogy',[7] and in 'The Quest', Elphinstone agrees, arguing that Hayton uses the theme of the quest to examine and to challenge the way in which 'assumptions about gender and sexuality dictate a world picture'.[8]

The assumptions Elphinstone refers to regarding gender and sexuality can be related to the structure of language as discussed, for example, by Jacques Lacan.[9] Lacan's theory focuses on the idea that we can only understand the meaning of words by application of their

opposing concepts. For example, east is only recognisably east because it is not north, south, or west. Alone, the term 'east' means very little, and can only be recognised through its distinction from other words. Similarly, the meaning of 'good' can only be understood in its oppositional relation to 'evil', and it follows from this that the meaning of 'male' is dependent on the meaning of 'female', and vice versa. Lacan argues that as a result of this, social identity in a patriarchal world is constructed on the premise that 'good' is opposed to 'evil', which is intrinsically negative, and likewise that 'male' is opposed to 'female' and 'Christian' to 'pagan', with female and pagan occupying the position of negative concept.

Lacan is easy to criticise from a feminist perspective, as he proclaims the phallus as the privileged signifier, and in support of this criticism, Elphinstone refers to French critic Hélène Cîxous, herself influenced by Lacan. Cîxous asserts that '[t]hought has always worked by opposition',[10] and that

> Theory of culture, theory of society, the ensemble of symbolic systems - art, religion, family, language, - everything elaborates the same systems. And the movement by which each opposition is set up to produce meaning is the movement by which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time war breaks out. Death is at work... And we perceive that the "victory" always amounts to the same thing: it is hierarchised.[11]

In order to reinstate the female in writing, this hierarchical opposition between male and female must be dissolved: 'the stability of the masculine edifice which passed itself off as eternal-natural' must be threatened, and Elphinstone argues that in each novel in the *Cells* trilogy, Hayton is challenging hegemony by setting up the Christian world alongside the mythological, pagan one. [12] Christian monk meets pagan woman, and the relationship which forms between them initiates a dialectic, calling into question what is apparently good, and what is apparently evil; challenging, dissolving and breaking down gender binaries as the trilogy progresses.

Ultimately, however, Hayton encounters a problem, in that the linguistically inscribed separators offered to us by this constructionist view as Christian/pagan, good/evil and male/female, imply the existence of a further set of binary oppositions based on the relationship between creativity (of the male) and procreativity (of the female).[13] To be coded female, perhaps, is a social construction and can be contested. To be biologically female, however, is irreversible, and this essentialist view is, in the end, where Hayton's feminism founders. In spite of the various binaries which Hayton attempts to dissolve, this last hierarchical opposition, referred to by critics as 'The Childbirth Metaphor' is upheld, and convincingly undermines, however unintentionally, the feminism of the trilogy. What I would argue, however, is that Hayton's attempt is valuable in spite of her failure, and that

the successes and shortfalls of her trilogy are indicative of a development in feminism, and of her own contemporary female experience.

In asserting this, it is worth noting that if *Cells*, *Hidden Daughters* and *The Last Flight* are a series of historical novels which reflect contemporary society as Mitchison's do, then the degree of resistance to male domination they embody should only be judged in relation to what was considered socially acceptable for women and women writers at the time of writing. In comparing the articulation of feminist feeling by writers from opposite ends of the century, through their characterisation of heroines from vastly different historical epochs, the relativity of the challenge to patriarchal strictures must be acknowledged. In her early writing, Naomi Mitchison was radical in her frank discussions of sexuality. She used history to cloak examinations of gender deemed highly unacceptable topics for discussion. The society from which Sian Hayton comes, however, is one in which such frank discussion is not seen as nearly so outrageous.

With the political gains made by the women's movement came a new sense of sexual liberation, supported by the availability of the oral contraceptive. This liberation, well established by the 1980s, meant that recourse to a historical setting was not necessary to enable frank discussion of sexuality within a disapproving society. The famous court case in which D.H. Lawrence defended the explicit nature of his 1928 novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* marked a turning point in what was accepted within literature, and paved the way for an alteration in social attitudes with regard to sexual representation in literature.[14] Discussions of abortion or rape in a contemporary setting would not deny Hayton the opportunity to publish her fiction as it almost did for Mitchison with *You Have Been Warned* in 1935. Notwithstanding that the sexual revolution arguably left many things wanting, by the time *Cells* was published, the accomplishments of the women's movement and the acknowledgement of female desire had given writers freedom to relate sexual experience through fiction without fear of critical retaliation. What was radical for Mitchison's society was not so for Hayton's. Although both challenge traditional gender structures through their work, therefore, comparisons between them are relative, and indeed, historical settings function differently for each writer.

Unsurprisingly, a difference in focus is immediately obvious. Although Hayton's texts deal with women's issues, they do not focus exclusively on women. Whilst Mitchison develops several of her male characters: Meromic in *The Conquered*, Tarrik in *The Corn King*, and Alxenor in *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, these figures are most often vehicles for the exploration of

sides of herself which she could not examine through a female character, in any realistic historical sense. Hayton, however, specifically examines the position of the women in tenth-century society, and yet she does so almost exclusively from the male point of view. Although the female characters she creates are physically and mentally impressive, they are not encountered directly. Rather, their remarkable natures are illuminated by stark contrast with the Christian men who interpret their stories, particularly in *Cells* and *Hidden Daughters*,[15] where monkish narrators report back in letter form to the Church regarding their encounters with the giant's daughters. In utilising the male viewpoint, Hayton not only highlights the power of the literate monks to control narrative, but also contrasts their intolerance with the open-mindedness of Marighal and Barve, revealing the Church as a narrow-minded, woman-hating institution.

Moreover, the three separate male voices through whom these stories are narrated represent three slightly varying forms of Christianity. Although they are both Culdee monks, Selyf in *Cells* is less dogmatic than Hw in *Hidden Daughters*, and Josia in *The Last Flight* is more liberal-minded than either of his seniors. Further, with Josia the mutability of the 'true' Church itself is demonstrated by his change in spiritual identity from the Culdee order, to the order of Benedictines. All three monks interpret God's word in support of their own beliefs, and as Hw in *Hidden Daughters* ironically explains: 'Not all Christians think alike, but they who dissent are vile heretics who do not enjoy the protection of the church. They will be damned when God's kingdom comes' (*HD* 124). Hw's accusations of heresy are a fierce, intellectualised rejection of difference, and in drawing attention to this variety of male perspectives, Hayton goes some way toward undermining the monotheistic authority of the monkish narratives. Her own antagonism towards the particular form of Protestantism encountered in the Free Church of Scotland is reflected in this antagonistic representation; and this was a suspicion which was fuelled by family tragedy.

In 1922, her grandmother miscarried her sixth child, after which she sank into a deep depression. Her husband was not at home at this time, and Hayton explains:

> The elders of the Kirk, her father included in their number, came to her house and, so far from offering solace and support, they rebuked her for incontinently grieving over her dead child. The next morning she took my mother and her younger brother to her mother's house, went back home and hanged herself.

Hayton did not witness this directly, of course, yet that the incident influenced her negative view of the Church is unsurprising. More significantly, however, it also reveals that the anger this raises is based on the way in which a *woman* was treated by Church

representatives. The mother's grief in this instance was seen as over-emotional and self-indulgent, and in her contemporary situation, Hayton is able to challenge the institution that failed her grandmother. As Barbara Hill Rigney argues:

> Women writers have perhaps never before been so free to challenge the sacred, to revise and reinterpret the traditional, or to exercise the mythopoetic function in creating new symbols for spiritual transcendence.[16]

Women are now aware that political freedom is dependent on freedom from repressive religious ethical codes. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hayton's heroines in the *Cells* trilogy are mentally and physically strong anti-Christian female figures, or that the Christian monks are threatened by this alternative supernatural power.

Historical fiction itself, as I have discussed, was hitherto a male dominated genre in Scotland, and with the exception of the few women writers mentioned in Chapter 1, little challenging historical fiction was published by women prior to that produced by Naomi Mitchison. Margaret Elphinstone suggests, therefore, that unlike the romance writers of previous decades, Hayton's use of the genre is ironic, as 'the historical novel has, on the whole, worked within a convention of a determined structure of right and wrong, good action and bad, heroes and villains, males and females',[17] and that Hayton, like Mitchison, subverts this by placing female figures at the centre. Although the novels reject the constraints of a realist narrative both in form and in content, however, they do not deal with women in any straightforward sense, which complicates the argument for Hayton's subversion of the historical form. What Elphinstone also argues much more convincingly, however, is the point that history *itself* is undermined as a male construct, not only through the introduction of supernatural agency, but also through the inclusion of varying perspectives.

Just as revealing a variety of monkish viewpoints with Selyf, Hw and Josia, undermines the sacrosanct nature of Christianity, varied viewpoints also subvert the supposed objectivity of history, calling the validity of historical records into question. This disruption of hegemonic discourse is a popular feminist approach to history, and is readily incorporated into fiction, which offers more opportunity to present different interpretations of a particular era within one text. As Hayton herself reiterates, 'history is another country'. Yet the reverse side of the coin was that without the constraints imposed on the fantastic elements of her trilogy *by* history, she explains, 'there were no limits to make the operation interesting. Once I insisted on including our cultural history it became more of a challenge'. Hayton, like Mitchison, therefore, constructs her text to an extent within the

constraints of history proper, and references to specific people and places are given in the Glossary, which states: 'All the places named in this book are real, and the people named in the peripheral action are historical figures' (*C* 198). Yet although this provides a backdrop, Hayton stresses that they are included in order to avoid unnecessary obscurity, rather than because exact locations are crucial to plot:

> This Glossary is intended to explain some of the basic facts, since I see no point in mystification for its own sake, but if the reader were to read this later rather than sooner he might be better entertained. (*C* 198)

Hayton's use of the word 'entertainment' here playfully links the mythological to the everyday, and like Mitchison, she begins with a strict social model and then rejects the constraints of the old, male historiography. For both, history is a study of 'human understanding, passions and morals as these [are]... shaped and directed into action by circumstances, particular beliefs, family, companions or surroundings'.[18] In other words, history can only be interpreted through the lives which people it, and Hayton intentionally chose a little-documented era, in order to freely introduce the mythical aspects of her characterisation. In *Cells of Knowledge*, a historically recognisable Scotland is bound to the ancient Celtic pagan world; legend is fused with accurate historical detail, and Hayton comments ironically: 'I note in advance the impatience of historians with my treating as fact that which is only interpretation' (*C* 198). She is well aware of the fact that historical discourse is itself an arrangement of interpreted information. What her comment also serves to acknowledge however, is the contingent nature of any such interpretation.

Historically, Scotland (or Alban) in the tenth-century was a land of constantly varying boundaries and several different rulers under one high king. At the time in which the trilogy is set, the high throne of what was essentially a warrior-clan society continued to alternate violently between the two royal lines of Dubh and Culen, both of whom are referred to in *The Last Flight*. The instability of the country's rule contributed to a time of dissension and unrest between warrior Clans, and this parallels an era in which the Christian Church, too, was struggling to resolve inner conflict and to establish a unified belief system. Historian A. A. M. Duncan comments: '... it is very difficult to resist the conclusion that this was a church truly on the edge of Christendom',[19] and this is echoed in the trilogy by the variety of Christian perspectives glimpsed through the monkish commentary.

That historians know relatively little about tenth-century Scotland is due in part to the correspondent dearth of written records in existence, and in a time when few people were literate or well travelled, ignorance of the wider world could easily be imagined to fuel fear

and superstition. In one way, then, Hayton has chosen a moment in history when upheaval might well have given rise to uncertainty. In another, she rejects the constraints of history altogether by integrating the mythical and the symbolic; creating room for the Celtic giant Usbathaden and his daughters alongside dwarves, warriors and monks. Within this framework, it is easy for Hayton to weave a mixture of Celtic and European myth. Legendary figures such as Culhuch, Olwen, Tristan and Isolde people the trilogy alongside historical figures, and in bringing myth into contact with history in this way, argues Douglas Gifford, Hayton's 'overall attempt is to create an equality of space for her Celtic female alongside the male, a space which conventional histories would not allow'.[20] This supports the argument that Hayton aims to deconstruct the socially constructed hierarchy which privileges history over myth, and that in doing so she also dissolves the male/female schema in which male relates to history and thus to 'fact', and female to myth; an irrational, less credible alternative.

The nature of the supernatural power at the disposal of Hayton's heroines is different to that used by Erif Der in Mitchison's *Corn King.* In *The Corn King*, supernatural power is ritualistic and nature based; Erif is a human channel for the power necessary to maintain the cycle of the seasons. In *Cells*, however, the powers embodied by the giant's daughters are personal rather than communal. They do not involve the seasons, nor do they work in harmony with the land or for the community, and in fact by comparison with Mitchison's consistently socialist outlook, there is little sense of community in any of Hayton's novels, which favour a far more individualist approach. Although each monk is attached to a religious community, he leaves this for the greater part. So too each of the very small proportion of giant's daughters, who in spite of their attachment to their sisters, leave home early in each novel to travel into the world of man.

With this in mind, it is possible to read each novel as a separate journey in search of a positive female role, and Hayton's use of a more individualist form of supernatural agency supports an interpretation of her texts as assertively feminist. Where Erif in *The Corn King* is a fertility goddess, her strength tied to her role and to her body, Marighal's power in *Cells* comes from her independence, physical strength, and control over her reproductive capabilities. Although Mitchison's inclusion of magical powers in Erif Der's makeup can be read as physical manifestations of female power, she is bound to a 'correct' (patriarchal) balance of society in a way that Hayton's heroines are not. Instead, Marighal, Barve and Essullt, challenge the 'correct' construction of society through their physical strength,

ability to control animals, to change shape, and to cast spells, all of which offer a direct and terrifying challenge to the clearly delineated hierarchy represented by Selyf, Hw, and Josia.

This hierarchy is challenged in the text as it comes into contact with the 'Celtic twilight': the legendary, mythological aspect of Celtic society, which is often described as more female centred than Christianity, and as historian Miranda Green explains, spirits were 'perceived as belonging to both genders'. Female goddesses 'were central to Celtic perceptions of the divine world',[21] and as with characters like Titus and Meromic who people Mitchison's early work, the Celts in Scotland are often depicted as wild and unruly when compared with their Christian counterparts. The *irrational female* is set against the *rational male* ideology, and Boudicea, legendary leader of the Iceni against Nero's Roman army in AD 61, is one of history's most famous examples of rebellious Celtic women. It is clear, therefore, that any meeting between Celtic and Christian carries ideological connotations which challenge the very core of the alternative discourse.

A further aspect of each novel which supports the deconstruction of the opposition between history and myth, is narrative structure. Both *Cells of Knowledge* and *Hidden Daughters* consolidate an alliance between history and myth by opening with a short, impersonally narrated chapter. Entitled 'Scene' in *Cells*, and untitled in *Hidden Daughters*, this is contrasted with the personal epistolary style of the main text, and as a result assumes the same authenticity as an anonymous magical folk-tale.[22] These tales introduce the supernatural, undermining the historical authority lent to the main text by the voice of the Church, and simultaneously deconstructing the binary between the idea of a polytheistic supernatural belief system, and that of a singular Deity.

The two initial chapters are not only contrasted with the main body of the text, but also with one another. Revealing two versions of the same story, first by a boy Kilidh, and then by the girl Kigva whom he betrays, they are a structural reminder of the subjectivity of history. The straightforward account provided by Kilidh in *Cells* of his meeting with Kigva, is undermined by Kigva's narrative in *Hidden Daughters*, where it becomes obvious that Kilidh's lack of serious intention toward her has been ignored in the first novel. The initial record of their meeting has been influenced by Kilidh's own preoccupations. Only latterly is Kigva herself granted the opportunity to articulate her own reaction to the gross injustice she feels at being left pregnant and destitute. This reveals one way in which the personal agenda of the narrator affects historical bias, and by purposely omitting Kigva's story until much later, Hayton draws attention to the omission of the

female perspective from history. She demonstrates that what is omitted is as important as what is included, and her use of varying narrative voices throughout the main body of the texts augments this.

Not only are first scenes separate from the main body of the novel in *Cells of Knowledge* and *Hidden Daughters*, the main text of *Cells* itself contains narratives by one monk, one warrior, and two of the giant's daughters. *Hidden Daughters* comprises narratives by Hw, Barve, Olwen and Merthun, and in *The Last Flight*, although this lacks an introductory chapter, the text is divided into five separate narratives by the novel's main players. In all three novels, individual tales are found to be incomplete, and the missing sections are contributed by other characters. Again, therefore, we are constantly reminded that historical truth is not absolute, a recurrent theme in feminist interpretations of history such as Zinsser's *History and Feminism*.[23]

The main narrative of *Cells* but less so of *Hidden Daughters* and *The Last Flight*, is further complicated by the presence of a commentator. In *Cells of Knowledge*, Hw reads and responds to Selyf's narrative. In *Hidden Daughters* and *The Last Flight*, the commentary is provided by Josia. However, particularly in *Cells*, the commentary is written in the margins of the main text, and it has been suggested by Gifford that this represents an attempt to contain the main narrative, which focuses on Marighal, within the boundaries of Christian patriarchy; a marginalised male voice struggling to control the female. He argues:

> In a sense the marginalia suggests that in Hayton's re-vision of the past it is the male voice and text which is marginalised, with the female action for once holding centre stage and page.[24]

This is plausible. Given that the marginal notes, which decrease as the trilogy progresses, do represent the Christian patriarchy, Gifford's suggestion that this decrease 'may be meant to carry the implication that the daughters have finally broken free from the confines of the strict dogma of ordered Christianity and history',[25] is logical. One response to this, however, might be to point out that although Marighal's narrative is challenging to Hw, it is Selyf rather than Hw who is altered by it. That said, Selyf's direct contact with Marighal is challenge enough. Not until Hw meets Barve in *Hidden Daughters* are alterations in his own belief system visible, and the way in which his comments are marginalised in *Cells* enables the reader to appreciate the irony of the comments he makes in ignorance. Furthermore, if Hw's commentary struggles to control the narrative, it must be acknowledged that this narrative is not simply Marighal's. Rather, it is Selyf's *record* of her narrative, and includes narratives by the warrior Kynan, the dwarf Grig, and by Evabyth, one of Marighal's sisters. The subversive narratives which Hw's marginal

comments may be intended to control are not solely female, although they are all outwith the church.

Possibly a more relevant point to make in support of a feminist reading of the trilogy, is to move from the deconstruction of history and myth, to the deconstruction of Christian and pagan systems. This is something which has necessarily been touched upon in relation to history and myth, as paganism and mythology occupy a similarly negative space in relation to history and Christianity, and therefore to the male.

This is not difficult to prove, whether in Christian history proper, or within Hayton's fictional portrayal of the Christian Church, and again, the monks in each novel symbolically support this, equating male with rational, enlightened Christianity; female with irrational, ignorant paganism. In this way, the developing relationship between male and female protagonist is the key factor in dissolving these binaries, and the narrative inverts these oppositions through portrayal of the *monks* as ignorant, and consequently irrational in their fear of the giant's daughters. Selyf and Marighal, Hw and Barve, and Drust and Essullt are faced with defining themselves as gendered beings in relation to one another and to the world. Given the opposing standpoints from which they come, this is a challenge, and the world is distinctively the middle ground between them.

Brought up under the auspices of the misogynistic church patriarchy, Selyf in *Cells* is instilled with the notion of woman as descendent of Eve, prototypical sinner. Marighal is beautiful, strong, intelligent, and shows herself capable of tasks which men would struggle to complete. The symbolic implications of these traits, both natural and supernatural, are obvious. They challenge the core of Selyf's belief in the 'natural' inferiority of women, and his fellow monks react with even greater disbelief and horror: 'I knew from the first nothing would come but evil, for it is through woman that evil came into the world, and so it will always be' (*C* 74). One monk, Cienach, explains to his fellows the reason for his self castration:

> Do you not know that all womankind, save only the virgin saints and sisters are inhabited by demons? You are foolish men and impure if you think otherwise. I can tell you what I know to be a fact, indisputable, for I have seen it in a vision. In the womb there sits a grinning devil, nor is the woman free of it unless she takes monastic vows. (*C* 73)

This extremely negative aspect of Christian belief indicates that physical strength and intellectual ability are incongruous with the Judeo-Christian image of woman, and yet faced with an increasing awareness of Marighal's beauty, knowledge and strength, the

safety of Selyf's faith is challenged. In embarking on a journey of discovery with regard to Marighal's true nature, he is consequently forced to re-evaluate his preconceptions.

Ironically, it is safety which Marighal seeks. Usbathaden's death is recent as the trilogy opens, and although the removal of his essentially malignant influence allows Marighal to embark upon her journey, her own immortality has ended with his death, and she is therefore bound to the flesh in a new and terrifying way. Less cynical than her older sisters with regard to Christianity, she seeks solace from the Church which she has encountered briefly as a child. With Usbathaden, however, although physically confined to his stronghold, she has been credited with creativity and intelligence, and her eagerness to join the Christian community, on the other hand, is greeted with suspicion. In moving from her father's form of patriarchy to the Christian Church, therefore, she seems to be sacrificing a degree of respect, for greater subservience.

Her 'Will to Grace', and her desire to gain a replacement for the centre she has lost through the death of her father, however, are not enough. Humility and virtue cannot compensate for her pagan past in the eyes of the Christian men, and the crux comes when she uses her superhuman strength in order to help the monks mend the oratory. Selyf laments:

> blame me, wretch that I am, for I have always encouraged this
> creature to stay among us in spite of her strange ways. Behold
> her now, Babylon the great, mother of harlots and the abominations
> of the earth. (*C* 72)

In spite of this, growing friendship forces Selyf to view Marighal's strength as essentially distinct from her female attributes, rather than as the magnified embodiments of evil femininity. The initial purpose of his relationship with her, and later with her sisters, is to root out evil and to bring them to God, yet by the end of *Cells* he finds himself admitting that

> it is only a slight grief to me that since I came here I found nothing
> as I anticipated.... I have not found evil. Though people here are more
> wise and skilful than any I have ever met, and there are great wonders,
> I have not found any heart laden with malice, nor a body glutted with
> greed and lust. (*C* 188)

That an inherent moral structure propounding ethical values similar to those found within Christianity may exist outwith Christian instruction, is unexpected. Yet Selyf is not so narrow-minded that he refuses to acknowledge the positive aspects of the giant's household.

In *Cells of Knowledge*, the journey which brings Selyf to this conclusion, physically and emotionally, is paralleled by Marighal's. Both are 'first children' to leave a secluded form

of patriarchal society - Selyf the monastery, Marighal her father's stronghold - and to confront the wider world. The differences between them, however, are many. Much of Marighal's story revolves around inexplicable supernatural events, including a mythological parody of Christianity which exemplifies Hayton's feminist defiance of Christian doctrine, and which has crucial implications for the breaking down of gender oppositions.

The similarities between Christian and pagan systems are recalled in both of the first two novels, where comparison is made between the giant himself and the Norse demon Othin on more than one occasion. Usbathaden's death is in fact almost identical to Othin's as both are killed by a weapon of their own devising. Othin and Christ can also be compared: Othin was dubbed Lord of the Gallows as he was hanged from a tree, which like Christ's cross, had no roots, and as Norse historian Gabriele Turville Petre explains,

> If the myth of the hanging Othin did not derive from the legend of the dying Christ, the two scenes resembled each other so closely that they came to be confused in popular tradition.[26]

In both *Cells of Knowledge* and *Hidden Daughters*, Hayton not only encourages the comparison between male deities, she also challenges the figure of the male Christ by endowing her heroines with symbolic characteristics such as the bloody tears they cry. As Barbara Hill Rigney explains:

> In the works of a number of contemporary women the figure of Jesus... becomes not only feminine but a symbol of the female political and social condition. That Christ was persecuted and suffered as a martyr, that he performed the social function as scapegoat and bled for the salvation of humanity, are qualities which lend themselves as literary symbols for the personal and political suffering of women,[27]

and indeed, physical sacrifice is made by Marighal in a reworking of the traditional tale, 'The Battle of the Birds'.[28] Here, she preserves the safety of her being while her body is dismantled to assist her betrothed, Kynan, in tasks set him by the giant as the price of her hand, and she is later magically restored to wholeness. This is the first of several links in the trilogy between the daughters and Christ, and reading Selyf's account of this, Hw is beside himself at such an overt parody of the resurrection: '*a blasphemous mockery of our Lord's death... Am I to believe that by her death and resurrection this creature hopes to redeem her mate?*' Yet while he reassures himself that woman '*could not hope to emulate the purity of the Lamb, for by her nature and her heritage from Eve every woman is contaminated*' (*C* 119), he struggles to reject Selyf's account of Marighal's story, which is later verified by Kynan. Hayton continues to assert these possibilities in defiance of Christianity. If Marighal is capable of resurrection, Christ is no longer alone, and without the safety of time or distance offered Hw by the printed

page, this burden becomes unbearable for Selyf himself as he faces evidence that undermines all he trusts:

> For the blinking of an eye it seemed to me then that the ways of God are so mysterious and inscrutable, that for a man of understanding to find hope in them requires more faith than anyone could muster. (*C* 132)

This painful realisation is one which was to recur for Hw in *Hidden Daughters*, and yet Selyf himself is challenged still further in *Cells* by the existence of the dwarf Grig.

Grig is an miner and an ironmonger, and drawing on his knowledge of the earth's makeup, he explains to Selyf his belief that within the structure of all things there must be an invisible mixture of 'seed substances' or atoms, recalling Jung's concept of *anima* and *animus*. Grig's only explanation for the similarities between man and woman, like Jung's, is that 'each gender, male and female, must carry the seed-substance of the other in it' (*C* 179). Selyf is horrified by this challenge to the root of his belief in the polarity of gender identity, and he argues that to confuse them is blasphemy against God's order. Nevertheless, he is forced to realise that what he once accepted as the only truth is subject to revision in the face of empirical evidence. The assumptions regarding gender binaries which are approved by the Church cannot withstand his findings regarding the nature of Marighal and her sisters, however blasphemous that might be.

Narrative structure reinforces the challenge to the male hierarchy on many levels. *Cells of Knowledge* is essentially an epistolary novel, and the creation of meaning in the text 'derives from the structures and potential specific to the letter form'.[29] Although he does not reply to Selyf, Hw reads and annotates his letters. He is not the specifically intended recipient of these, but he represents the constructed ideology of the Christian Church to which Selyf is answerable. As such, this influences the way in which Selyf writes, and what he writes. In each of the three letters which form the body of *Cells*, the interpretation Selyf gives of his journeys, and of his attempts to persuade his seniors that Marighal does not pose a threat to the Christian Order, is necessarily tempered by the fact that the Church is his witness. In his opening letter he explains:

> When the woman came to us I saw neither demon nor succubus, but only a troubled soul thirsting for the truth it had glimpsed once in childhood. No one would have turned her away. You see I am not ashamed of my conduct, for I willingly give you a full account of her stay here so that you can treat this case with justice. (*C* 16-17)

This makes clear the function of his account, and anticipates the response of the letters' recipient. Hw's voice is that of the Church which stands in judgement, and visually, the form of the letter novel immediately influences the reader's relationship to him as

recipient, as well as to Selyf as sender. Hw introduces Selyf's letters in the first person, immediately exposing the reader to his own opinion on the narrative. He is the brother who has been chosen '*to prove that there is no heresy among my seniors*' (*C* 15). Selyf, therefore, is on trial, and the formal tone of his letters contrasts with the more personal tone of Hw's detailed annotation of them. Even whilst the reader may identify more strongly with Selyf as he reads on, s/he is brought into closer contact with Hw, who is apparently reading Selyf's narrative at the same time, and is invited to judge Selyf as Hw does. This functions to position the reader 'either to accept or to resist the values which are being presented as shared' between him or herself and Hw; values which relate to medieval, non-magical Christianity.[30] Yet as the reader undoubtedly cannot fill this position, he or she becomes resistant, and Hayton ensures that Hw's contribution to the narrative consequently becomes ironic.

The role of letter recipient in the trilogy changes throughout its course, and with this, a shift in the role of the patriarchy is visible. In *Cells of Knowledge*, Hw represents what could be described as the novel's 'external patriarchy'. In trying to assess the degree of Selyf's misdemeanour, Hw as inadvertent (or non-specific) addressee (the letters are not intended for him), functions as a symbolic structural force in the text. He represents strict adherence to Church doctrine, and although less formal than Selyf, it is quickly evident that he follows the Rule of his Order to the letter. Less open minded and more dogmatic, the patriarch Hw represents *contains* Selyf typographically, whose text, in the centre of the page, in turn forms a separate 'internal patriarchy'. This internal patriarchy operates in direct relation to the opposing system within the text - that of the pagan giant and his supernatural daughters. Selyf is still representative of the Christian Church. However, Christian doctrine is not operating in isolation, as it is with Hw. Hw encounters events related by Selyf second hand in *Cells*, and his strict beliefs are not challenged by direct contact with Marighal, as Selyf's are. As a consequence, Selyf's version of patriarchal order is more liberal than Hw's; the internal is more liberal than the external, and the vociferousness of Hw's complaints regarding Selyf's actions, demonstrates the inflexibility of the Christian framework when it is imposed in isolation from actual people and situations.

The third narrative, which is Marighal's, might be termed the 'subversive counter-text' owing to its opposition to the framework of the Christian world represented by Hayton through the main body of the text. Marighal is an immediate threat to the Christian patriarchy for many reasons. Even without her supernatural powers, she is a beautiful

woman, feared by monks who refuse to acknowledge their own physicality. They would rather blame the temptation than accept their own tendency to be tempted. As one monk, Edern warns: 'It is well known that women can cast spells to charm even the most vigorous saint, and the greater his spirituality, the harder the wicked creatures try to seduce him' (*C* 70). The fact that Marighal is possessed of enormous power presents an even greater challenge to the monks' belief system, and her conversation with Cadui demonstrates his conviction that woman must not attempt to emulate man. Her gender traits are immutable, however repressive they may be:

> 'the women's lives I have seen I would find almost too humiliating to bear. But what if this is not the way of a woman's life? What if she is strong and clever and free? Will God's loving kindness be taken from her?'
> 'Most certainly', said Cadui, 'for then she would not be womanly, and God would turn his face from such a creature'. (*C* 20)

Strength and cleverness here are coded male, in other words, and Cadui's words explicitly recognise the gendered oppositions which are ironically asserted by the title. *Cells of Knowledge* implies an association between monks' cells and knowledge, and yet the acknowledgement must be that genetically, the female embodies greater knowledge than the narrow-minded males.

Marighal's ability to convince Selyf of her goodness, in spite of such misgivings as Cadui expresses, brings the two worlds together, and allows for the challenge she presents to Christian notions of gender identity. The contact Selyf has with her, therefore, not only brings her closer to his God, it also brings him closer to her and her pagan ancestry. This pushes back the boundaries of his faith, and the contrast between his reaction, and Hw's reaction as secondary recipient of Marighal's story, demonstrates the importance of the separate spaces occupied in the narrative by sender and recipient. As Janet Gurkin Altman remarks in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*,

> Given the letter's function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasise either the distance or the bridge.[31]

In *Cells*, the letters Selyf writes home bridge the gap between him and Hw to an extent. Yet paradoxically, they also serve to emphasise the ideological distance between them. This distance is bridged only retrospectively, when Hw moves from recipient to sender, and into direct contact with the pagan world, in *Hidden Daughters*.

In her first novel, Hayton involves her characters in a complex metaphorical journey, toward an examination of female agency within a male environment. She does this through the introduction of a supernatural element, embodied by Marighal, which facilitates the

deconstruction of history, and of Christianity, both male constructs. In the second novel, *Hidden Daughters*, similar questions regarding the certainty of hegemonic discourse are addressed, and new ones raised. Again, Hayton utilises the meeting between Christian male and pagan female. Yet the characters themselves are different, and the encoding examined in this case is celibacy.

In *Hidden Daughters*, Hw and Barve are less trusting and less willing to compromise. Hw has been revealed as son of Selyf at the end of *Cells of Knowledge,* and it is obvious from his commentary therein that he is a much more dogmatic and intolerant character, whilst Marighal's sister Barve is uninterested in discovering the benefits of Christianity. Both Hw and Barve have already travelled and seen more of the world than their antecedents, and their resulting scepticism makes mutual acceptance more problematic. That they eventually do accept one another, however, reinforces the notion that even the meaning Selyf and Marighal find in one another's belief structure is not absolute. Meaning is continually contested, as are the fixed nature of gender roles, and neither pair is allowed to resolve the question of male/female polarity.

In Barve, Hayton presents us with a character very different from Marighal. Where Marighal left her family to seek the monastery, Barve seeks the monastery in order to trace the sisters - the 'Hidden Daughters' of the trilogy - who scatter following Usbathaden's death. Again, the female presents a subversive challenge to the male. Although her moral values do not vary greatly from Hw's, she has no respect for the Church, and just as Selyf feared Marighal's paganism, Hw fears Barve's. In this case, however, the female character is not interested in conciliation.

More so than with Marighal, the sexual nature of this pagan woman is of great interest to the monk, and Barve responds cynically to the fact that her feminine sexuality undermines Hw's sense of control:

> Then the woman's temptation came upon me and I looked into her face and I saw that she was beautiful.... Then I knew how much I had been mistaken to think that I was proof against her female wiles. I blessed myself against her and said a short prayer of protection. A smile twisted her face and she covered it with her kerchief.
> 'I will not trouble your weak flesh,' she said. (*HD* 88)

It is significant that Barve has had more time in the world of men than Marighal, as consequently she is neither as open nor as trusting as her sister as a result. Nor is she in search of Christian salvation. Her experience of the world causes Barve to bitterly reject

God; the atrocities she encounters in the world of man, she says, 'fit no pattern that we had learned of God's justice or loving kindness' (*HD* 69), and she challenges God directly:

> 'Master of the Universe... whom mankind in his folly has called Almighty and Merciful, in this pyre I send to you the last mortal remains of our hopes and good wishes for humanity. Take them and reflect that you have brought to destruction those who have wished for nothing but peace of mind. When the time comes for me to leave this flesh, I will meet you at deathgate, and when that happens you will need to have many witnesses prepared'. (*HD* 82)

There is no acceptance here, no mention of any personal concern that she may be invoking God's wrath, nor is she afraid to challenge Him. As daughters of an immortal themselves, they do not question God's existence, but they are not in awe of His nature, and their attitude is summed up at the end of *Cells*, when Selyf explains the Resurrection of Christ to Essullt, who replies, 'Oh, indeed,... and I was hoping he might be kindred to us, for I have not heard of another family who could open the gates of death before today' (*C* 176). Their father himself was a kind of god, and although geographically limited to his lands, his power is bound to alter the sisters' expectations in their search for an alternative source of comfort. Usbathaden had been a tangible, if malignant, presence in his daughters' lives, and a physically absent God struggles to compete with this.

Barve's journey with Hw, therefore, is full of oppositions existing between them in everything from religious belief to sex. She has no desire to explain her own actions; nor is she interested in his. Her opinion has been formed by an interaction between experience and a mind not naturally given to subservience, and she asks '... after a long life and much learning who could find it in his heart to praise God?' (*HD* 88).

Hw's attitude to women, on the other hand, is made clear by his explanation for rape: 'The first cause is the perniciousness of women themselves. They tempt men to lust by the clothes they wear and the sweet perfumes they use on their skin' (*HD* 121). Nevertheless, although Barve is uninterested in his approval, the novel becomes one of debate between them, and Hw quickly finds himself drawn into her logical arguments. They disagree on fundamentals such as the nature of God, and Hayton reiterates the age-old scepticism regarding the anomaly of God's goodness and the suffering of mankind, as Barve cannot understand Hw's blind faith:

> The deity, if He is omnipotent as you say, might easily intervene to prevent all this, but He does not. Thus suffering goes on from generation to generation when a moment's reason might prevent it, nor can I detect the slightest purpose in it. (*HD* 90)

For his part, Hw has no answer as his faith has never before been challenged in this way. He is not equipped to defend himself against Barve's logic, and Hayton's own scorn is evident for the beliefs which Hw only clings to in order to avoid the abyss heralded by the horror and loneliness of the perception of a universe *without* God.

As a result of this, he translates his physical attraction to Barve into fear of her femininity, and Hayton concentrates again on the male perception of the woman as Eve, and the inability of the monks to separate 'woman' from the physical body:

> 'There are few things to be sure of in this life, but I have not the faintest doubt that there is no sin equal to coitus... In men it drains his vital spirits into his manly parts so that his vigour is impaired. In women it distracts them from the contemplation of their duty to God, for it is well known that once a woman has experienced copulation she can think of nothing else/. (*HD* 98)

Hw desperately clings on to the notion that sex is a sin because it makes men less than complete *as men*, and he is terrified by what Barve's sisters described as 'an exchange of gifts' (*HD* 99), believing that anything which makes a man less manly, makes him by deduction more womanly, blurring the hierarchical oppositions and taking him further from the grace of God. Ironically, it is his obvious attraction to Barve which prompts him to return to discussions of 'coitus' repeatedly, in a bid to reassure himself aloud that he would never dream of it. Barve and Hw reason differently, therefore, but the basis is the same. Neither wish to lose control, nor to unleash what the dwarf Grig refers to in *Cells* as the 'seed substance of the other' (*C* 179), therefore both are destined to die 'intact'.

Sacrifice, for Barve and Hw, is a mutually familiar concept, and both ultimately deny their sexuality. Their reasons differ: Hw has taken a vow of celibacy as a youth; Barve does not feel much desire. Yet their mutual fascination is obvious as arguments on the topic recur. Observing the positive nature of her sisters' sexual relationships Barve cannot see the harm in their happiness, admitting, 'My only regret is that I did not take the opportunity to share the pleasures of the flesh when it came my way' (*HD* 98). She is not pious in her chastity, therefore, nor is she man-hating, but she chooses not to relinquish the power of semi-mortality which loss of virginity would symbolically involve. For her, loss of virginity would quite literally mean loss of the semi-mortality she has enjoyed for generations, and she is not prepared to make the sacrifice.

The nature and morality of virginity is a central theme in the trilogy, and is approached by Hayton with far more reverence than is found in Mitchison's fiction, or later in

Elphinstone's. Mitchison's heroines often lose their virginity in the course of their story, yet there is little symbolic value attached to this alteration of state. Female characters frequently day-dream about the prospect of their first sexual encounter, yet the issue is often approached somewhat romantically, and, excepting Erif Der's rape in *The Corn King*, is rarely examined in great depth, or with much sense of ceremony. Even Hayton's immediate successor, Margaret Elphinstone, does not approach virginity in the same way. As I will discuss in Chapter Five, Elphinstone's characters are often curious about sex, and demonstrate their concern at the prospect of becoming pregnant. The practicalities of sexual activity are more of an issue than the moral implications of the virgin state, and Hayton's concentration on the symbolic nature of virginity reveals an attitude which is strangely at odds with her championing of the strong, independent woman.

In each novel, Hayton takes a different approach to the virgin state, working through three options before the trilogy reaches its denouement. Virginity for all of the sisters is important in the sense that their father's life, and their own immortality, depends on its maintenance. This is a source of power which reflects mythologically the twentieth-century Christian-based interpretation of virginity as something precious which must only be submitted to the one legally significant other. In Barve's case (and in Hw's), celibacy is the chosen path, whereas in *Cells*, Marighal's decision to surrender her virginity for the purpose of procreation is examined. In keeping with Marighal's greater desire for Christian salvation, she occupies the role of Christian wife, for whom sexual desire does not exist as an object in itself. Emulating Selyf here, who supposedly also engages in sex only for procreational purposes, Marighal does find a degree of fulfilment in motherhood, and she is not depicted as left wanting in the absence of actual physical enjoyment. Nevertheless, this does not offer a particularly positive approach to the celebration of the female as sexual being; again denied to Barve in *Hidden Daughters*.

That the sexual element in the nature of both Barve and Hw remains unaltered, however, is not to suggest that they do not change at all throughout their journey. Like Selyf, Hw has set himself the task of uncovering the nature of these semi-mortal women, and as Selyf's prejudices are gradually broken down, so too are Hw's as he discovers that Barve's nature is one of unusual integrity and endurance. Ironically, as his nature responds to hers, it moves farther away from God, and the suffering he witnesses toward the end of the novel shakes his faith utterly: 'I am the man that has

seen affliction by the rod of His wrath. He has led me and brought me into darkness, but not into light' (*HD* 220). God no longer seems real enough to provide comfort. He cannot rejoice in the suffering of real people, and the night before Barve's death, the disintegration of the boundary between them is complete: 'I found Barve sitting shackled to the fireside by a short chain. I went to her side and embraced her and our tears mixed as they fell to the ground' (*HD* 225). Opposition has been overcome through human contact, and the spiritual boundaries between man and woman are transcended in human suffering, all the more symbolic as Barve's death is of her own choosing. She tells Hw, 'When I die it will be no more than every creature under the sun will do in time. I am happy that now I can call the human race my kindred' (*HD* 231), and with this new found humanity her self sacrifice, the second martyrdom of the trilogy, takes place, specifically, at Easter. Although Barve is not resurrected as Marighal is in *Cells*, Hw regrets that she 'will be venerated before the next new moon' (*HD* 247). Comparing her to Christ, he brings the separate systems into close contact, and undermines the sanctity of the Christian Easter story.

As Hw moves into the position of letter writer in *Hidden Daughters*, the balance of the patriarch shifts, and a new insecurity influences his own relationship to the Church and to the giant's daughters. The switch in status offered to Hw by the second novel, further highlights the importance of the space occupied by sender and recipient, and in *Hidden Daughters*, the gradual development of Hw's character is unveiled.

In *Hidden Daughters*, Josia occupies the role of annotator. In many ways he differs from Hw, and unlike his predecessor, his job is not to find fault or to prove his senior monk's innocence. Josia's commentary, therefore, offers less judgement, and he notes that he is unlikely to be consecrated owing to his fascination for the scientific study of medicine. His attitude as external patriarch, therefore, is more lenient and open minded than Hw's. Significantly, Hw now represents the internal rather than the external patriarchy. Again less tolerant in this role than Selyf, his letters initially demonstrate a continued adherence to his own orthodox faith, and a strong attachment to the monastery. Yet as his journey with Barve progresses, the increasing distance between his immediate environment and the nuclear focus of his patriarchal belief system, is aggravated by a growing recognition of Barve's innate, non-Christian, goodness. The longer he remains in contact with her, and the more they endure together, the less confidence he has in the durability of his faith. Finally at the end of the novel he admits:

> Perhaps... authority is a tree which can be bent. A constant wind or the will of man can both turn the trunk and shape it for their purposes.

Then where shall we look for our salvation? (*HD* 220)

This distancing is intensified by the fact that although as readers we are party to Josia's reaction to Hw's letters, Hw himself is completely isolated and without support. His letters to his spiritual home are unanswered. As reader sympathy for Hw grows over the course of the novel, however, we also encounter Josia's less condemnatory approach to what he reads regarding the sisters. Although he is still representative of the Christian patriarchy, Hw's inflexibility irritates him, and he admits: 'I must confess that sometimes I did fan the flames out of ill-humour, for he provoked me by the narrowness of his vision' (*HD* 249). Josia's narrative does maintain the same position with regard to the reader as Hw's did in *Cells*. Nevertheless, his annotations provide a less uncompromising framework than Hw does even internally in *Hidden Daughters*. Barve's subversion of the patriarchy embodied by Hw, therefore, necessarily involves a rejection of that which is embodied by Josia.

As a possible encoding for both woman and man, however, Hayton's second choice of journey is on the whole dysfunctional. Denial of sexuality is pointless as it is an essential part of the human makeup and gendered hierarchies can only be broken down by characters whose sexuality is recognised as a valid part of the whole person. The physical must be joined to the psychological, and although Barve's decision to die a virgin resists the construction of woman as sexual object, it remains unhelpful in her failure to acknowledge sexual desire as part of the female. In an attempt to resolve this, Hayton looks to *The Last Flight*. Here, the hierarchical relationships which are challenged are again between Christian and pagan, history and myth, and ultimately, male and female. In this novel, these oppositions are challenged in a slightly different way from *Cells* and *Hidden Daughters*, which are in many ways very closely connected; therefore the criticism *The Last Flight* has received for failing to solve the problems which arose in the first two novels is not entirely fair.[32] Individually, each novel explores a different approach to deconstructing gender binaries.

In *Cells*, Marighal broke away from one patriarchy in favour of another, whilst in *Hidden Daughters*, Barve travelled deep into the world of men without indulging in the physical. Both strong female characters, these earlier heroines are nevertheless constrained by an unwillingness to embrace the sexual self, whereas Hayton's last heroine, Essullt, does so. Rather than offering this as a solution, however, Hayton simply offers it as another alternative, and that this carries with it its own problems does not necessarily mean that she has failed to solve the quest for a suitably positive

encoding for women. On the contrary, it might be argued that this is not a realistic possibility, either in the tenth century or in the late twentieth.

A pastiche of the legend of Tristan and Isolde, *The Last Flight* sees King March (King Mark) send his favourite warrior Drust (Tristan), to fetch his future wife, Essullt (Isolde) from overseas. Through misadventure in the original tale, and due to fate in Hayton's reworking, Essullt falls in love with Drust before she reaches March. This triggers a chain of events which leads, here, to an incestuous union between aunt and nephew, which is nonetheless the only sexual union which offers each of them fulfilment.

The Last Flight no longer offers a parallel between male monks and powerful female heroines, as the men around whom the action revolves are ex-monks who have re-entered the world, and who are themselves struggling to find a relationship with God as well as with women. Of the male characters who have a hand in recounting the tale, only Guaire does not have a monastic background, and he both sets the scene and acts as a relatively impartial witness. March is a warrior, yet his years spent as a monk provide some continuity between the two extremes exemplified by the monks of the previous novels and by Marighal's son Drust, the main male character in *The Last Flight.*

Although brought up in a religious community, Drust is taught 'the love of God, not the dread of Him' (*LF* 92). Therefore he draws a distinguishing line between that which he believes to be of God, and that which he believes to be of man's invention. As a result, his attitude to women lacks condemnation:

> I cannot understand why the fathers of the church tell us lust is wicked. Two people meet in a room, and each needs the comfort of the other, which it costs neither anything to give. Why, then, did the monks tell me that this simple exchange is the greatest sin of all? Women are not wicked, nor do they wish to corrupt men. They need the strength of a man's arms around them, and the pleasure of his body inside them. They need to bring children into the world. Why should not these needs be satisfied? (*LF* 144)

He views sex as an positive exchange, and whilst the overcoming of mutual prejudice has been examined in the previous two novels, the deconstruction Drust precipitates is of a much more physical nature. Although he maintains standard biological perceptions of gender division, - women 'need to bring children into the world' - with Essullt his confidence in the submissive nature of woman is challenged, allowing him to experience actual love: 'She is the one who has enthralled me as not other woman could, and every day I do not spend in her company is a day wasted' (*LF* 144).

Margaret Elphinstone has argued that 'Drust cannot quite carry the weight of symbolism demanded of him... which makes the conclusion of the quest anti-climactic'[33], yet his struggle with sexuality as a young monk brings a welcome perspective to the underlying struggles of Hw and Selyf. A tactile, physical creature, it is only a matter of time before his desires emerge, and his first encounter with the 'female', in the shape of a tree, is a projection of his vibrant sexual nature. The 'wood-man' in the novel (a shadowy figure whom we later discover to be Merthun, contributing narrator in *Hidden Daughters*), has led Drust into temptation as it were, by showing him the sexual image of woman. The struggle between mind and body results quickly in his return to the clearing in a dream, in which he copulates with the tree/woman, resulting in climax:

> I tried to take my hands away, but it seemed that the tree pushed herself against me. The cleft was the same height as my groin. I pulled away, but my manly parts had grown and were buried in the cleft. Arms surrounded me and pulled me against the tree again. And again.
>
> I woke with a shout, and found wetness on the bed beside me. (*LF* 132)

Essullt's sexual awakening follows the same pattern as Drust's, although in her case the encounter with the woodman and tree appear quite literally to be the occasion on which her hymen is broken. This introduces the contested nature of virginity into the trilogy once more. In this instance the concept itself is challenged by the doubt Essullt feels concerning which stage in the sexual journey actually alters her virgin state, and again therefore, the traditional signifiers representative of the virgin/sinner opposition is blurred. During her testimony, March asks Essullt if Drust has taken her by force, to which she replies,

> Of course I told March I was inviolate, but what did that mean? My hymen was intact and no man, human or part-human, had penetrated me. Yet I could not look him in the eye and say I was a virgin, for lust had invaded me to the core... That is not chastity. (*LF* 228-9)

She feels the change has taken place prior to physical penetration, and it could be argued that Hayton uses her here to mock the traditional mores concerning virginity, which have restricted both her earlier heroines. Hayton is, in a sense, proposing that virginity is rather a state of mind that a physical condition, and this metaphysical aspect is made manifest when one of Essullt's twins to March looks like Drust, the curiosity which sparks Josia's inquest into her story.

Essullt breaks the moral mould cast by Marighal and Barve, and significantly, the first man to become her lover is her nephew; the only other being with whom the daughter of

such a powerful line can achieve sexual fulfilment. It is not sufficient that she should lose her maiden state. She must also experience the sexual freedom which is the right of all women, allowing her the same autonomy as men:

> If I were to live a thousand more lives and each one full of lust and abandon I would never forget that first time. I will never forget
> the smell of sweat and salt and honey. And his skin like silk under
> my fingers. Like velvet on antlers. And his shout of triumph. (*LF* 244)

Neither Essullt nor Drust see their desire as a sin. Its power must in the end be given its place. Yet under no system is incest considered morally acceptable, nor is it an ideal way of introducing the possibility of sexual fulfilment for the giant's daughters. What Hayton *does* seem to be suggesting, however, is that if sexual fulfilment is to be achieved by one of these strong women, it must be with someone who shares their strength, and Drust is the giant's only male descendant. Essullt comes further toward humanity than either of her sisters, and in humanity, the sexual union is not flawless. To accept humanity is to accept imperfection, and in order to experience the ultimate nature of her sexuality, Essullt must pay a price without which humanity would be incomplete. Essullt admits,

> I had surrounded myself with indifference and called it wisdom;
> I had imprisoned myself and called it freedom. Around me were
> walls as thick as any in my father's stronghold, and the stones of
> this prison were called Ignorance, Denial and Loneliness. (*LF* 227)

It is not entirely fair to say, as Elphinstone does, that Essullt has failed, losing both power and stature with her virginity. Denial of the sexual self is unrealistic. Her self-delusion is no more likely to provide her with happiness, and the idea of celibacy is one which Hayton examined and rejected with Barve in *Hidden Daughters*. Further, the incest motif alludes directly to the Greek tragedy of *Oedipus*, whose sexual union with his mother precipitates tragedy. In *Oedipus*, however, the incest is inadvertent and the couple remain unaware of it for some time. With Drust and Essullt, on the other hand, Essullt recognises Drust's birthmark immediately following their first sexual union, and although deeply troubled by the discovery, the two do continue to meet infrequently. The myth of Oedipus is subverted, therefore, as the breaking of taboos does not result in tragedy here; only unhappiness. Furthermore, whereas Oedipus and his mother have children, the union between aunt and nephew is sterile. This sterility might signal judgement, of course: their relationship cannot be blessed with offspring because it is damned by Christian and pagan moral codes. Yet it should not be overlooked that although Drust and Essullt do continue to meet and to have a physical relationship, Essullt ensures that there will be no child of their union. Her knowledge of Drust allows her control over her fate, and her decision to have a child with March may be out of 'duty' (*LF* 252), yet it is indicative of the ability she has to make her own decisions

regarding her body. She is not trapped in her body through unwanted pregnancy, and this must be acknowledged as a form of strength.

With Essullt, too, Hayton examines a necessary part of female identity. Nonetheless, Elphinstone's argument is not completely unfounded. Even accepting the flawed nature of the sexual union, and the necessity of joining Essullt with Drust, it becomes abundantly clear that Essullt's strength is superseded by Drust's in almost every way. It is also evident that irrespective of March's apparent veneration of her, she is still pressurised into marrying him against her better judgement, and then put on trial for her actions. For the first time in the trilogy, the heroine is not portrayed as the stronger character, and in submitting to the patriarchy, she becomes a victim of it.

The Tristan and Isolde story is resonant with the edicts of courtly love. A love potion causes Isolde and Tristan to fall for one another, King Mark discovers the truth, and the two are forced into hiding until King Mark forgives them, unable to condemn such a love. Not so, however, with Drust and Essullt. Drust wins Essullt in combat. However, contrary to the courtly love motif, he does not fight a male champion to win her. Instead, Essullt fights him herself, subverting the weak damsel, strong warrior stereotype, and this functions in two ways. On one level, the subversion might be read as feminist. Hayton gives Essullt the physical power to compete with a warrior, and opportunity to take control of her own destiny. What she gives with one hand, however, she takes away with the other, as whilst Essullt's strength makes her master of ordinary men, she cannot win against Drust, because he too represents the giant's family and being male he has greater physical strength. He is the only suitable mate for her, and this serves to restore the hegemonic discourse that Marighal and Barve struggle against in the previous novels. Marighal and Barve are flawed feminist heroines, yet they remain aloof from their physicality, retaining something of their power in doing so. Essullt, in acknowledging her sexual being, is no longer allowed to be stronger. The sexual attraction she feels for Drust is shown to undermine her ability to exercise her strength against him. Branwen warns:

> I've seen you looking at the coxcomb, as you call him, and I know more than you about the workings between men and women. You won't win against him. Your body likes the man, even if your mind doesn't. (*LF* 223)

Thus, her sexual nature fails her. Her intellectual capabilities are undermined by desire, and the fight is lost before it begins, clearly reiterating stereotypical gender divisions. The only man worthy of Essullt is Drust, and yet in meeting her equal, she desires

submission: 'There was no denying it; if my conqueror had taken me I would have rejoiced' (*LF* 229).

Hayton's portrayal of gender roles is more pessimistic here, as the link between Essullt's sexual fulfilment, and her subsequent loss of power, is clear: the final flight from an essentialist identification with the female body fails. Gender polarities resume their normative role in her relationships with both Drust and March, and Essullt is completely contained by the warrior culture they represent, as well as by the Christian patriarchy by which she is investigated.

In *The Last Flight*, the relationship between the different strands in the narrative changes once again. This is not an epistolary novel. Again, there is a confessor figure, but in this case, the narrative is simply divided into five accounts of Essullt and Drust's story. Here, internal and external patriarchies are less clear cut. Internally, both Drust and March have rejected the Christian communities in which they have been raised, in favour of the warrior culture. Although neither suffers from the same fear of women, the patriarchal nature of the teaching they have received forms the basis for their concepts of male/female gender identity. The internal patriarchy is now a variation on that of the previous novels. Notions of masculinity and femininity are no longer entirely based on Christian fear of women. March, and Drust in particular, however, demonstrate similarly embedded beliefs which hint at a biologically essentialist view of woman, and both lack respect for women. Drust comments '[w]hat good are wisdom and learning to a woman... if she cannot bear children?' (*LF* 220), whilst March, initially incredulous that his concubine has feelings, reflects: 'Even a pack of dogs has a ranking order, so why should it not be so with women?' (*LF* 178-9).

Externally, Josia is quite simply a confessor, and he refers to Essullt's testimony in particular as a confession, immediately alerting the reader to the idea that her actions, like Selyf's in *Cells*, are subject to the governing laws of the Christian church. As confessor, however, Josia exercises little influence over the characters, and although the church is still witness through him, he is actually employed by a secular figure, the High King, to investigate the paternity of Essullt's children. Furthermore, Josia does not appear to fear Essullt's powers. In his introduction to her testimony he admits:

> I have questioned her for many hours about her learning, and it is true that her knowledge is so wide and deep that it might have been acquired over many lifetimes. More than that I will not say at this point. (*LF* 200)

He is less willing to doubt the plausibility of her story than Hw was Marighal's and Barve's. The sense of threat common to Hw and to Selyf is largely absent from Josia's comments, and his role as formal patriarch is subsumed by the more active internal patriarchy represented by March and Drust.

Essullt, therefore, again the female figure representative of the subversive counter text, is not contained by the Christian structures of society represented by Josia. She is, however, contained within the boundaries which limit women in a warrior culture. Granted, she is still powerful. She demands and receives respect. Nevertheless, she is the first of the three heroines to actually identify with her own sexuality, and Hayton appears to punish her for this, granting her lover greater strength, and forcing her into an unsatisfactory marriage. Consequently, *The Last Flight* might *well* perhaps be criticised for its failure to resolve for the reader the questions of gender identity which have been raised by *Cells* and by *Hidden Daughters*. Yet a closer look reveals that the 'failure' in many ways rests with all three novels, and ironically the post-structuralist reading upon which feminist arguments rest is pivotal in highlighting the satiric nature of Hayton's texts, as the following section illustrates.

As discussed above, Hayton is successful in dissolving a series of binary oppositions, which ultimately pave the way for the deconstruction of restrictive male and female gender binaries set up by the Christian patriarchy and the powerful pagan heroines. Nevertheless, if the post-structural argument is followed through, there are 'multiple meanings and intentions' within texts, not all of which are consciously intended by the author. [34] Unconscious desire must be acknowledged as informing the text on one level, as must the social implications of both the society represented in the novel and the society the writer belongs to. Hayton, we must allow, is author of all of these textual levels, and some do not appear to support the reading of the trilogy as feminist.[35]

Idiosyncrasies such as Marighal's desire for the support of the Church leap out initially. The symbolic value of such an apparently strong feminist character is undercut by her desire to exchange one form of patriarchy for another. Miranda Green's suggestion that Christianity offered 'ordinary' women 'an alternative to the status quo',[36] and that celibacy within that status quo was preferable to repetitive childbearing, is one way of defending both Marighal, and also Barve. However, these are not ordinary women. They have supernatural powers. Therefore it is questionable that Hayton should feel constrained by the fate of ordinary, after she has gone to the trouble to create supernatural, women.

Marighal renounces her power, becoming meek and passive, and living up to everything the Church expects of a respectable woman. This is not an ideal alternative, even given the historical constraints of the time; and of course these need not apply, since by her very nature she subverts realistic historical discourse.

Barve, too, represents a mixed attempt to create a positive female character. Most significantly, she dies a virgin in spite of her sexual curiosity; again a deeply patriarchal encoding reserved for women by both pagan and Christian societies. Olwen, on the other hand, not a central character, but a sister whose story we become familiar with in *Hidden Daughters*, is the only sister whose story embraces wife-hood and motherhood, and she suffers enormously for her decision, losing all three of her children. In the end she too becomes a saintly figure, fasting until she loses all her femininity, and becoming 'almost a man'; the only type of woman whom according to Hw, can have 'ceased to be a daughter of Eve' (*HD* 121).

Furthermore, although the trilogy focuses on women, and specifically on sisters, there is little sense of 'community' between women, and little respect for mortal women, who appear to be stereotyped by the daughters as well as by male characters. Monks and warriors differentiate between the sisters, and the human women they encounter. The whole structure of the trilogy rests upon the fact that Marighal and her sisters are powerful goddess figures. They are educated, beautiful women, shown in many ways to be superior to 'average' women. The 'average' woman still exists, then, and her mental and moral attributes appear to give Hayton little cause for celebration.

The monks respect the sisters for their chastity. Barve, for example, does not intend to win Hw over, and that she does is largely due to her adherence to a rule very like the church's, regarding 'good' women. In *Cells*, Marighal's decision to bear a child is kept as distant from any erotic intent as possible. Her husband is indignant when Selyf assumes that he and Marighal are about to resume sexual relations:

> 'Well, sir,' I began again, 'if you are sharing the lady's bed, that is the end of it.
>
> 'What are you saying, monk?' exclaimed the king, his face red now with anger, 'Do you take my lady for a whore? Do you think she takes a man to bed for pleasure?' (*C* 185)

Intercourse is purely procreational, and offers no consideration for the fact that sex might involve enjoyment.

In *The Last Flight* again, differentiation between ordinary women and the giant's daughters is evident in Drust and Guaire's discussion about Guaire's foster-mothers, three of the giant's daughters:

> '... you think well of some women,' Guaire reminded him. 'You must. Don't you remember my mothers?'
> 'I remember them well, and it is an injustice to describe them as women. They are more, much more than that.'
> 'That's true. They're far greater than the women you meet every day, but they are women, none the less.' (*LF* 220-1)

The daughters are not perceived as 'ordinary' women. They are, according to Drust, 'much more than that'; and the attributes they are valued for - their strength and their education - may in one sense support their feminism. Nevertheless, there is little which is specifically and unapologetically female about them, and they are in a way more of an embodiment of archetypally 'masculine' values than the monks, detracting from their success as powerful female icons.

As the only non-supernatural female figure in the novels, Kigva reinforces the division between the giant's daughters and 'ordinary' women. Kigva is a naive aboriginal queen, beguiled by the arrogant young Kilidh, and rather than treating this with sympathy, Hayton appears to despise Kigva's ignorance. Although the second novel introduces the same story from Kigva's point of view, she is depicted as gullible: ''In his eyes I am nothing,' she said, too wretched to weep, 'and when he marries this other woman I will lose all face before my people'' (*HD* 19). Loss of virginity is classed by Kigva's tribe as a marital bond, and its loss to a man already betrothed brings dishonour.

Whilst Hayton appears to treat Kigva with little sympathy, however, the virginity of the giant's daughters is given much consideration by comparison. Kigva is the only female character in the trilogy who does not have control of her own body. She is pregnant quickly, and although in some way this would have been a likely fate for a woman in a warrior society, it is notable that she is the only woman who succumbs to this fate. Sexuality and procreation for the more genteel Marighal and Barve in particular, are subjects for debate, whilst Kigva is forced to flee her tribe, and to bring up her son among crude swineherds. In a way, there appear to be class hierarchical elements to the polarised female identities of Kigva and the daughters. Kigva is a poor 'mouse queen'. The giant's daughters are effectively noblewomen, and it is this difference which accounts for the gulf between their experiences. The mother-in-law/wife relationship between Kigva and Olwen is the culmination of this construction of Mouse-Queen and giant's daughter as antithetical pair: good woman/evil woman, and Hayton appears to challenge and manipulate

patriarchal expectations of feminine behaviour here, by exposing the divisions between women. Kigva's treatment of Olwen is appalling. She shows herself to be utterly lacking in compassion, and Hayton herself explains that with Kigva, 'it is not simple revenge. She wants to be part of something bigger than herself, even if it is inimical'. In seeking revenge, however, she becomes the only powerful mother figure in the trilogy, manipulating her power over her son for negative ends, to try and destroy the giant's family.

Kigva and Olwen are only two of the trilogy's mother figures, and the experience of both is indicative of a general lack of positive maternal celebration in Hayton's writing. This is not in keeping with Celtic mythic traditions, which gave mothers and their associations with fertility and prosperity, high status.[37] In fact, motherhood is awarded little respect, and the only positive aspect of motherhood in the trilogy is that Marighal's decision to bear a child is her own. She is not tied to Kynan, and will not be subject to repeated pregnancies:

> Please believe that my union with Kynan is not one of the flesh. It was only in obedience to my father's wishes... that I married him, but now it is my intention to bear a child, and so our marriage must at last be consummated. (*C* 188)

Despite Marighal's exercising of control, however, Hayton's attitude to motherhood is consistently negative in the trilogy, and the giant, the warriors and even Selyf, to an extent, offer greater continuity and creativity than the female characters. Male lineage is the axis on which all the action pivots, and characters in the trilogy are descended from powerful fathers in the absence of positive maternal images.

It is difficult to explain why motherhood might be so negatively treated in a trilogy so obviously committed to the deconstruction of gender coding. The problem lies, however, in this same commitment to deconstructing socially constructed opposites. In acknowledging this hierarchical language system, Hayton is ultimately faced with the association of the male with intellect and therefore with creativity, whilst the creativity of the female is bound to her body and to the ability to procreate, a problem identified by French feminists Hélène Cîxous, Luce Irigary and Julia Kristeva, and discussed by Susan Stanford Friedman in her essay, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse'.[38] Here, Friedman notes the linguistically inscribed separators listed below as demonstration of this dichotomy:

creation *procreation*

production	*reproduction*
conceived idea	*conceived baby*
pregnant mind	*pregnant body*
= mental province of genius	*= necessarily female*
confinement	*confinement*
= indignities to, not the fulfilment of, manhood	*= final stages of pregnancy*
delivery	*delivery*
= restoration of autonomy	*= delivery of mother into bonds of motherhood* [39]

Creation is the act of the mind that brings something new into existence: hence, a man *creates* an idea in his brain. *Procreation* is the act of the body that reproduces the species: hence a woman *conceives* a baby in her womb. The pregnant body is necessarily female, and the pregnant mind – the mental province of genius – is understood as inherently masculine. The female anatomy is taken as a model for procreativity in sharp contrast with the equally commonly used Phallic model, which associates the male anatomy with pen or paintbrush in metaphors of creativity. The result of this, for the woman, is what has been called 'anxiety of authorship'. If wielding a pen is a masculine act, then this 'puts woman at war with her body',[40] should she choose to write.

French feminists tackle this problem through development of the concept of '*l'écriture féminine*'. Hélène Cîxous, for example, celebrates a poetic of the female body and the relationship between the gestation drive and the desire to write, in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in which she calls on women to 'Write yourself. Your body must be heard', and insists that the woman 'writes in white ink'.[41] Cîxous, therefore, attempts to deconstruct the creative/procreative opposition, and to bring together the female mind and body, creating an essentially female aesthetic based on intimate and exclusive female experience and biology. This may provide a positive solution in some ways, to the problems imposed by a hierarchised system of language. And although it has also been criticised for its essentialism, and for the over-insistence on a woman's identification with her biological capabilities, it arguably provides Hayton's trilogy with a solution regarding the consistent dissolving of binary structures, in bringing together 'mind and body, word and womb'.[42]

In the trilogy, however, Hayton's use of childbirth imagery does nothing to support Cîxous' validation. The sisters themselves can procreate, or create, but not both. The ideology behind the novels means that the sisters are immortal and powerful as long as they

maintain a virgin state. To have sex, and to have children, is to lose power and stature, not only in the eyes of the church, but also in terms of the capabilities of the women themselves. They are powerful, and they lose that strength; immortal, and they lose that immortality, trapped within the flesh by intercourse in a way which physically embodies tenth-century Christian ideology. At this time, Western fathers of Christianity held the reins on sexuality throughout Europe, deploring erotic pleasure as an end in itself, and non-procreational sex was sinful even within wedlock. Paradoxically in an apparently anti-Christian trilogy, the maintenance of virginity is similarly associated with power. Even for Usbathaden, loss of virginity in his daughters eventually leads to his own death, and this indicates the necessity of virgin women in the upholding of hegemonic discourse: if women are allowed to indulge in the pleasures of sexual intercourse, male dominance is symbolically threatened. In this case, their father loses his ability to direct their activities, as his death leaves them free to investigate alternative ways of life.

This provides yet another link between the negative patriarchal discourse and the apparently more liberal world in which powerful daughters are allowed to flourish. Loss of virginity undermines the giant's agency, just as it is feared by the church. Under neither system is the sexual activity and fulfilment of women celebrated. The dualism of mind and body has long been a key component in Western patriarchal thought, and if the daughters are to fulfil their biological potential, enjoying intercourse and motherhood, they must fully embrace the trappings of male discourse which disallows their ability to create intellectually. Either the ability to create, or the experience of procreation lies open to them. Not both. Women's 'natural' creativity is childbirth, and in the trilogy, creativity through childbirth means loss of power, and entry into the 'natural' world, stripped of their symbolic, 'supernatural' powers. Procreation equals mortality: the death of the mind, and the control of the body. 'Mother' in Marighal's case does not allow for her as a sexual woman. Her identity is entirely limited to mother, without the fullness of sexuality which should be celebrated by a writer who otherwise arguably deconstructs standard linguistic separators. This reinforces the notion that '[i]n a phallocentric culture woman is defined by reference to the body and sexual reproduction, along with their polluting ailments, desires or pains'.[43]

Procreation is Marighal's chosen destiny, and she is in most other ways bound to Christianity. She finds pleasure in studying the Word, and the Word is male. The Gospel of John says: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was

God'. It is the power of the Word which became the paradigm of male creativity, indeed the foundation of Western patriarchal ideology. As Adrienne Rich says:

> Monotheism posits a god whose essential attribute is that he [sic] is all-*powerful*: he can raze Babylon or Ninevah, bring plague and fire to Egypt, and part the sea. But his power is most devastatingly that of an *idea* in people's minds, which leads them to obey him out of fear of punishment... His word is law and the idea of his power becomes more important than any demonstration of it; *it becomes internalised as 'conscience', 'tradition', 'the moral law within'...* [44] [my italics]

and this masculine appropriation of the creative Word attempts to reduce women to the processes of their bodies.

This not only applies to Marighal in the trilogy, but also to the women who give birth to the giant's daughters in their repeated incarnations, all of whom die. These women are entirely bereft of meaning, other than as procreators, and even in this role, they are denied fulfilment of their function, as each desires to be the woman who can produce a longed-for son for the Giant. When Selyf points out to Kynan: 'The giant took women and destroyed them at his whim. Is this not a crime against humankind, and therefore against God?', Kynan replies that 'He was never known to take a woman who was not eager and happy to be with him. Do you deny him the right to fatherhood when you did not deny it to yourself?' (*C* 186), and again this reinforces the idea that the women were grateful vessels of the giant's seed, compounding the notion of the giant as rightful progenitor. These women choose to be wholly identified as procreators. They are tied to their bodies and once childbirth has been endured, they have no further function to fulfil. Hence, they die. One of them explains to Selyf:

> Once the giant had taken me and torn me, and he was sure that I was with child he locked me in this room and has not come near me since. In all that time I have not seen daylight. This is a comfortable prison, and I have had some of the daughters for company, but they would not let me out for fear that I would lose the baby. This is the worst part - the child is born and I am dying and I will never see him. My other children will have learned to curse my name. I am sure only those in Hellfire know what I am suffering. (*C* 170)

Nor are they even respected by the children they bear, who only pity them, and do not have time to engage with them in a mother-daughter relationship.

There are mothers in the trilogy who do not die. In many cases, however, their children do. Marighal is not the first of the giant's daughters to give birth. Olwen, whose story we hear in *Hidden Daughters*, has three children. Again, however, there is no positive outcome for her as mother figure. Her mother-in-law steals each of her children in their infancy,

accusing Olwen of their murders, and in spite of the fact that none of her children is murdered, only the youngest survives, and Olwen is never reunited with her.

Branwen, Essullt's helpmate in *The Last Flight*, provides yet another example of negative images of motherhood. Although a skilled midwife, she cannot carry many of her own children to term, and each one she does give birth to dies through illness or accident as a baby. Admittedly, this would have been a likely outcome for many women in the tenth-century. Nonetheless, Branwen's misfortune only serves to compound the negative view of motherhood which operates throughout Hayton's narratives.

Aside from the problems of motherhood associated with the sisters themselves, the family of dwarves in the trilogy raises questions regarding the attributes of stereotypical gender hegemony, as Grig and his brothers are without exception male, and yet do not have a father:

> There have been many generations of men since my brothers and I were born, and since that time there have been no others born into our family. It is said that we were not born of woman, but that the earth herself bore us as seeds in her body. Our gestation took many years, nor is there a mention of a father in our begetting. When the time came for us to see the light of day my mother tore herself open in the same way she does in the south. In those places she sometimes twists and writhes and gaping holes appear in her body, and trees fall like blades of wheat. One time we were flung out of her womb, not as infants, but as stones which turned soft over a period of years, and turned into ourselves. (*C* 165-6)

Their relationship with their 'mother' sits uneasily, as they seem to have been born directly from the earth, which then requires their services if she is to take part in anything creative herself. The most illuminating passage, below, demonstrates this idea that Mother Earth is useless without her sons:

> Even the Alfather who made her shuns her and hates her. He leaves her alone here in darkness and misery and it is only by the hands of her loyal sons that anything good is made. Alone she can do nothing - she cannot bring them to birth unassisted. Sometimes in southern lands she tries to bring herself to fulfilment and then great fires pour out of her belly, and the rocks she would smelt gush down her flanks. But she cannot do it alone. All she can make is destruction and pain, and she must damp her rages down again before she tears herself apart. (*C* 167)

This is obviously negative, reinforcing the image of female as procreative, but unable to *create* due to her wild nature. This must be controlled by the *male* dwarves if her fertility is to be brought to bear, and they metaphorically mine iron ore from her 'womb', in order to create weapons and jewellery from it. She does not have the ability to create anything from the raw material within herself, or, symbolically, to achieve fulfilment. Without sons, she would only be *destructive* rather than *constructive*. Creativity is reserved for Grig and

his brothers, who must enter the 'womb' to mine what is good. Penetration of the womb here, by the male, is necessary to draw out power, and to give Mother Earth her form and meaning. Earth is feminised in terms of the male - rational/ female - non-rational inscription, thus upholding the patriarchal law as universally true.

In terms of the other male figures in the novels, paternity is not necessarily the obverse, and is not generally viewed as positive. The giant himself is evidently a virile figure, consistently impregnating women with children who are so strong that they kill the mother during childbirth. Similarly, the giant's grandson, Drust, sleeps with a multitude of women prior to his affair with Essullt. Nevertheless, Usbathaden is unable to produce a male heir, and his own power is utterly dependent on the maintenance of his daughters' virginity. This resembles Christianity here, as loss of virginity, and relaxation of sexual restriction, means loss of control for both the Giant and for his opposite churchmen. Drust's union with Essullt must remain sterile because of who they are; Kynan is portrayed as the giant's dupe, only providing Marighal with his seed rather than with his support, and he is killed soon after Drust is born, unable to fulfil the role set out for him as protector.

The childbirth metaphor is very controversial in itself, and there are therefore arguments for and against its application to literary texts. On one hand theorists like Cîxous insist that 'women must write through their bodies', and use the metaphor to describe 'the gestation drive' as 'just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for a swollen belly, for language, for blood',[45] which is in many ways very tempting as an alternative to the system which sublimates women and their creativity. That the metaphor draws together word and womb/ mind and body, can be viewed positively, and by using metaphors of childbirth (consciously or not), a woman writer such as Hayton may well be trying to join her biologically creative power together with her intellectual creativity.

The sheer weight of meaning inherent in childbirth imagery, however, makes it difficult to validate a woman's cause, and many feminists consider the metaphor to be biologically deterministic, too exclusively female, and therefore regressive, rather than as a step toward gender equality. Simone de Beauvoir was notably wary of the concept, warning that it develops a 'counter-penis', effectively marginalising the male from the creative process which is essentially as unhelpful as a system that seeks to marginalise female creativity.

Furthermore, the childbirth metaphor also evokes the sexual division of labour, and the dualism of mind and body upon which Western patriarchy is founded. The vehicle of the metaphor (*procreation*) acts in opposition to the tenor it serves (*creation*) because it inevitably reminds the reader of the historical realities which prevent the comparison being made. It is possible in this case, that Hayton is simply unaware of her own inscribed beliefs. Again, Susan Stanford Friedman explains: 'In women's texts, the reader knows the author has capacity to birth both books and babies, and also that the author's analogy defies the cultural prescription of separated creativities', which in turn 'makes the reader aware that the woman's reclamation of the pregnant Word is itself a transcendence of historical prescription'.[46] Given that it is possible to defend Hayton's ability, therefore, and given that she is a mother herself, it is strange that she does not use the image of childbirth as a positive one in her writing. Her heroines have not 'furiously inhabited these sumptuous bodies' as Cîxous suggests women should, alerting the reader to the possibility that in Hayton's case, perhaps, childbirth is associated with control of the body in some irreconcilable sense. [47] As Pam Morris says

> Within the present patriarchal culture, 'motherhood' is allowed only a diminished meaning, denied social and economic status. Creativity is preserved as a godlike and male domain, and motherhood is reduced to the function of nurture and care,[48]

and perhaps Hayton has not been able to overcome the cultural associations which motherhood has in her own society.

The question as to what Hayton aims to achieve through the development of her heroines, remains partially unresolved. A surface reading of the *Cells* trilogy reveals three strong pagan women, who challenge Christian discourse in many ways which might be interpreted as feminist. In addition, each heroine is involved in a quest for enlightenment. Each novel examines a different possibility for woman: motherhood, celibacy or sexual fulfilment, and in each case, the relationship between the heroine and her opposite male character is seen to develop toward mutual understanding.

Regardless of how one might illustrate to good effect a feminist reading of these texts, however, it must be acknowledged that there are aspects which pose real problems. In denying her heroines fulfilment, Hayton is avoiding the sexual identity of the sisters, and, paradoxically, this limits them to sexual dilemmas. Acknowledging desire is shown to demote Essullt, and Hayton's attempt to avoid equating 'woman' with 'the body' might be considered too exteme, as Essullt, although the least successful heroine in narrative terms, at least demonstrates a human desire which *is* necessarily part of her identity as a woman.

When she embraces sexuality, however, and admits the power of sex, Hayton's whole text loosens, and the intricately woven 'torc of many wires' becomes a tangled web.

In the novels, Hayton brings Christian and supernatural pagan systems into contact in order to throw standard gender constructions into relief. Nevertheless, if this is followed through to its logical conclusion, the feminism is confused when recurring images of childbirth suggest that the creativity/procreativity - an existing opposition - is still intact. In realist historical fiction, it may be possible to attribute the continued imposition of gender binaries to historical constraint, but Hayton's use of the supernatural counters this, and given the evidence, it is tempting to suggest that Hayton's underlying approach to gender equality is marred by her own pessimistic experience of being a woman. Issues are not cut and dried in the texts because they are not so in life. Female sexuality is not yet celebrated; the role of mother at the turn of the twenty-first century is not yet accorded the support it deserves. The irony of course, is that Hayton herself is a woman who has given birth to these texts, and it is possible, therefore, that she may be suggesting that dissolving gender polarities is ultimately an impossibility.

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[1] All texts originally published by Polygon, Edinburgh, 1989, 1992, and 1993 respectively. Editions used here are as follows: *Cells of Knowledge* (New York: New Amsterdam Press, 1990), *Hidden Daughters* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), *The Last Flight* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1993).

[2] All biographical information referred to is taken from correspondence I had with Sian Hayton in September 1999. This is included here as Appendix 1.

[3] Margaret Elphinstone, 'The Quest: Two Contemporary Adventures', in *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. by Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 107-136.

[4] Peter Berresford Ellis, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (London: Constable, 1992). Yspaddaden Pencawr is a figure from Welsh myth, in which he is father of Olwen, as he is in the trilogy.

[5] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York. Bantam, 1972), p. 51.

[6] Elphinstone, 'The Quest', p. 122.

[7] Douglas Gifford, 'Contemporary Women's Fiction II: Seven Writers in Scotland', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy MacMillan (Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 604-629, (p. 613).

[8] Elphinstone, 'The Quest', p. 107.

[9] See Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', in *Ecrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1977).

[10] Hélène Cîxous, 'Sorties' in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981), 90. Originally from "Sorties" in *La jeune nee* [The newly born woman] (Union Generale d'Editions, 10/18, 1975)

[11] Cîxous, 'Sorties', p. 91.

[12] Cîxous, 'Sorties', p. 92.

[13] By this I mean that Elphinstone refers to Lacanian arguments for the existence of binary oppositions within language, and Helene Cîxous' insistence that these must be deconstructed. This, Elphinstone suggests, is what Hayton does in her trilogy.

[14] For publishing *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Penguin Books were prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act, 1959, in 1960.

[15] Elphinstone, 'The Quest', p. 124.

[16] Barbara Hill Rigney, *Lilith's Daughters: Women and Religion in Contemporary Fiction* (Madison; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 3.

[17] Elphinstone, 'The Quest', p. 111.

[18] John MacQueen, *The Rise of the Historical Novel* (Edinburgh. Scottish Academic Press, 1989), p. 33-4.

[19] A. A. M. Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh: The Merkat Press, 1992), p. 106.

[20] Gifford, 'Contemporary Fiction II', p. 613.

[21] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors and Virgin Mothers* (London. British Museum Press, 1995), p. 9.
[22] See Elphinstone, 'The Quest', p. 123.
[23] See Introduction.
[24] Gifford, 'Contemporary Women's Fiction II', p. 613.
[25] Gifford, 'Contemporary Women's Fiction II', p. 614.
[26] E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *History of Religion: Myth and Religion of the North* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), p. 43.
[27] Rigney, p. 7.
[28] 'Battle of the Birds' is published in *The Oxford Book of Scottish Short Stories* ed. by Douglas Dunn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). In the tale, a giant's daughter (Olwen) aids her prospective husband (Culhuch) in overcoming her father, so that they might marry. Hayton takes the nature of the tasks verbatim from the tale. However, the dismantling and remantling of Marighal's body is her own addition.
[29] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 4.
[30] John Corbett, *Language and Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 131.
[31] Altman, p. 13.
[32] Elphinstone, 'The Quest'.
[33] Elphinstone, 'The Quest', p. 134.
[34] Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 138.
[35] 'feminist' in the sense that they do not offer representations of female equality within society.
[36] Green, p. 189.
[37] Green, p. 90.
[38] Susan Stanford Freidman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 371-396.
[39] See Friedman, p. 373.
[40] Friedman, p. 371.
[41] Hélène Cîxous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Sussex. The Harvester Press, 1981), p. 257.
[42] Friedman, p. 373.
[43] Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. .25.
[44] Rich, p. 50.
[45] Cîxous, 'Sorties' p. 261.
[46] Friedman, p. 377.
[47] Cîxous, p. 257.
[48] Morris, p. 129.

Chapter 5

Redressing the Boundaries: the challenge to gender identity in Margaret Elphinstone's *Islanders* (1994).

In Margaret Elphinstone's *Islanders* (1994), the examination of the female within historical fiction moves away from the use of magic which was common to Sian Hayton's *Cells* trilogy and to Naomi Mitchison's *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931).[1] Set in the Old Norse world of twelfth century Fair Isle, *Islanders* returns instead to the more domestic interpretation of history favoured by Mitchison in *The Bull Calves* (1947). Where Mitchison subverted the male view of Jacobite history in placing Kirstie Haldane at its centre, Elphinstone attempts to redress the gender imbalance in Viking history by imagining the roles played by women in an Old Norse community. As this chapter will argue, however, *Islanders* does this more successfully than *The Bull Calves*.

In both novels, female characters are subject to the constraints of their historical environment. Yet in *The Bull Calves*, Kirstie Haldane is further restricted by Mitchison's attempt to win the approval of Carradale, and consequently the novel is far less radical in feminist terms, than her early historical fiction. In *Islanders*, on the other hand, Elphinstone develops the domestic female role. Through Astrid and various other female characters, Elphinstone attempts to imagine a community in which they are active participants, and in which they are given power to subvert the hegemonic discourse of their society, through a variety of strategies of resistance.

Like Sian Hayton, Margaret Elphinstone is the product of a younger generation than Mitchison, and of a society in which the female commands greater equality and respect. In examining the treatment of gender in *Islanders*, issues addressed by Mitchison such as motherhood, sexual desire and economic dependence become visible once more. Yet the development indicated by this novel is discerned in the way in which Elphinstone addresses and resolves these issues. *Islanders* was not Elphinstone's first novel. Born in Cornwall in 1948, she began writing in earnest in 1985, and *Islanders* follows two fantasy novels, *The Incomer* (1987), and *The Sparrow's Flight* (1989), the short story collection *An Apple From A Tree* (1991), and a collection of poems *Outside Eden* (1990). Like Mitchison, Elphinstone reveals herself through a range of form and style as a multi-faceted talent. Unlike Mitchison, however, she is also an academic, fully aware of the traditions in Scottish women's fiction within which she identifies her own work:

> I think it's very hidden. I would include myself in a Scottish female literary

> tradition. I think it's very interesting how much of it has been about borderline situations.[2]

Her writing reflects this preoccupation with borderlines, and frequently her fictional societies examine juxtapositions, whether between past and present, as in *The Incomer* and *The Sparrow's Flight*, or between centre and periphery, as in *Islanders*. In each instance, ideological divisions provide the backdrop to the examination of the recurrent concern in all her work with gender identity, and with the inequality of possibilities offered to men and women.

Elphinstone identifies herself as a product of 1960s feminism. For many, the Women's Movement brought welcome relief, and opportunities appeared for the taking. As I discussed in Chapter One, various legislative and social changes combined to create this era - which became known as 'The Swinging Sixties' - and the positive impact of legislation such as the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) contributed to positive developments in female writing. In discussing the female tradition in literature, Elaine Showalter explains:

> since the 1960's, and especially since the re-emergence of a Women's Liberation Movement... around 1965, there has been a renewed enthusiasm for the idea that "a specifically female self-awareness emerges through literature in every period",[3]

and like Hayton, Elphinstone was in her early twenties during the late sixties, the most intense period of political activity surrounding the Women's Liberation Movement. Although she did not become interested in the Movement until studying as a postgraduate at Glasgow University between 1970 and 1972, Elphinstone had been a member of CND since the 1960s, and welcomed change to a patriarchal system she had felt opposed to long before she became aware of the political struggle, explaining, '[m]y annoyance with inequality goes back much further than all that. Probably to Day 1 at primary school'.[4] She explains that she is feminist

> in terms of what I think about, where I come from, what my life's been like. I would say that feminism means what I mean it to mean, which goes back to the 1960's charter of women's liberation. I remember when that happened and it was important to me, and the gradual realisation of what oppression is and what it meant not to be 'I', you're 'other', you're object not subject.[5]

This awareness of the self as 'other' in society, is shared by all three writers discussed, and it is significant that Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone express their dissatisfaction with this through the historical genre. Whilst this motivation contributes to their exploitation of history, however, it may be assumed that, like Hayton, Elphinstone's recourse to history was not a necessary cloak to cover radical expressions of female sexuality. Rather,

Elphinstone was determined to recreate an area of history in which women were traditionally sidelined, and to bring them into the centre of historical construction.

On the one hand, it is possible to suggest, as Douglas Gifford does, that unlike Mitchison's fiction *Islanders* is not 'a stagesetting for modern psychology and romantic dilemmas',[6] and Elphinstone may not be looking to history as the only acceptable way of examining contemporary gender issues, by transposing them onto the past. Therefore to approach *Islanders* from the same point of view as we approach *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* or *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, which do offer direct parallels to Mitchison's society, may seem false and unnecessary; although a historical setting is no longer a partial necessity as it was in Mitchison's case, parallels can be drawn between issues of gender raised by Elphinstone's *Islanders*, and the issues of gender she considers worthy of contest in her own society. Elphinstone is not making virtue of a necessity. Rather, she accepts history for its own sake, and is interested in the way in which the social attitudes of the past affected women.

Mitchison's choice of historical moment, for example, whether Ancient Greece, Rome or even the Jacobite Rebellion, reveals a consistent interest in societies in which the structure is similar to early twentieth-century Britain. As discussed in Chapter Two, Britain in the nineteenth-century had modelled itself on the Imperialist ideology of the Roman Empire, and Mitchison herself in her formative years was very much a part of the bourgeois society which perpetuated the values of such social organisation - and benefited by them. The Edwardian childhood she discusses in *Small Talk*, for all its rebellion and resistance to feminine social mores, reveals the young Mitchison as a member of the social elite in an era in which nineteenth-century ideology remained predominant. After World War One she spent a further twenty years at the hub of upper class London society, and even her Scottish historical novel, *The Bull Calves*, focuses on the gentry. Her own experience is therefore easily discernible in its historical guises. Likewise, Elphinstone's very different social experience can be identified through *Islanders*.

Nevertheless, the fictional society created by Elphinstone in this novel is, on the surface, far removed from Scotland in the 1990s, and in contrast to historical novels like *The Corn King* or *Cells of Knowledge*, *Islanders* examines the construction of women's lives as part of a realistic working community. It does not incorporate the fantastical elements of Mitchison and Hayton's work which, I have argued, undermine the efficacy of history. The supernatural exists only in the myth and legend which form the history of Norse society

subscribed to by the characters themselves, and this was a conscious decision on Elphinstone's part as her aim was to create an environment in which history and fiction could exist side by side as realistically as possible.[7]

Islanders does not concentrate solely on the role of women. Men are as much a part of the social make-up as their wives and daughters. What Elphinstone focuses on, however, is the female experience of this community. As with her predecessors, she examines through fiction, the various strategies of resistance women employ in order to withstand the repression enforced upon them by a male dominated society, and a closer look reveals that many of the areas of inequality targeted remain in contemporary society, although they may be less clearly defined or less easily accepted than they are in a historical context. The idea that the 1990s are in any way post feminist is an 'irritating concept' to Elphinstone, and an environment freed from contemporary gender constraints may have enabled her to address her dissatisfaction with the options open to women toward the close of this 'century of progress'.[8] Without the disruption of history provided by the supernatural element in Hayton's work, twelfth century Fair Isle does *not* provide an opportunity for more liberal discourse, but the more clearly defined gender binaries in operation allow Elphinstone to target explicitly, the ways in which women are stultified by their environment.

Like Mitchison and Hayton, Elphinstone is aware of gender inequality and of the fact that the traditional construction of history itself has fallen victim to the patriarchy until recent years. Elphinstone is not a historian, strictly speaking, yet she is, she admits, a product of the 1960s feminism which, as mentioned above, 'inspired people to give form to women's past'.[9] Rather than using history as a cloak for contemporary debate, her fiction contributes to the process of revision. Women have contributed significantly to the past, if not perhaps, in the public sphere, and their strengths and weaknesses are fictionalised by Elphinstone in *Islanders*. As Douglas Gifford remarks, *Islanders* offers 'a genuine historical recreation of times and their agents',[10] and through detailed research which included visits to Fair Isle to learn about tides and farming, Elphinstone fashions a fictional model that allows the contemporary reader a glimpse into what life in the Middle Ages may well have been like for women in such a community.

Elphinstone's desire to imagine an alternative history for Old Norse society arose whilst she was living in Shetland between 1979 and 1984, during which time she participated in

the Papa Stour Viking dig. In discussing *Islanders* in an interview with Lisa Babinec, she explains her motivations:

> It's a necessity, I think, in terms of history. It seems to be that women in Scotland have almost no acknowledged history and it has got to be discovered, because of course women have existed... *Islanders*, is about Norse Shetland and it's very much about women. There are a lot of men in it too. But I think certainly with the Vikings, you read the historical accounts and they occasionally give you an account of brooches that have been dug up and you think, 'oh, they were worn by a woman, they existed'. But you'd think from historians that the Vikings were a society that was 99% male and obviously it wasn't, *so I thought about rewriting that history, going back and filling in the gaps between the very fragmented evidence we have.*[11] [my italics]

The story of the 'ordinary' women's lives in the twelfth century has been gendered anonymous, and with this 'rewriting' of history, Elphinstone attempts to bring them to life, challenging through fictional reconstruction the traditionally male histories of Old Norse society. She writes from a contemporary point of view, aware of the concurrent feminist issues, and it is as a result of this that she is interested in how society worked in the past. *Islanders* is history, therefore, in the sense that it is based on a collection of 'facts' which are as reliable as possible at a distance of eight hundred years. The fictional organisation of these facts represents a personal, contemporary interpretation, of course, but all history is influenced by the social environment in which the historian operates, and is therefore biased to some degree. This is not to suggest, however, that Elphinstone's work of fiction can be approached in the same way as a reader might approach a historical text. Fictional characters and their individual stories are superimposed onto historical detail in *Islanders*. Nevertheless, the beliefs and attitudes of these characters, in this fictional work as in history, are selectively portrayed in order that a specific aspect of twelfth-century life can be recreated, just as they would be in a history which approached Old Norse society from an agricultural, or from a purely religious standpoint.

Like Mitchison and Hayton, Elphinstone is bringing to history a new type of subjectivity; an alternative to standard historical narrative in which the focus rests almost entirely on women. She has not chosen to fictionalise an era rich in documented facts surrounding women's history. In the last decade of the twentieth-century, two historians in particular sought to investigate the role of women in Old Norse society. Judith Jesch published *Women in the Viking Age* (1991), whilst Jenny Jochens is author of *Old Norse Images of Women* (1995) and *Women in Old Norse Society* (1996), and both historians were faced with the problem that source material relating to women in this male dominated Old Norse culture is scarce.

Elphinstone, however, is able to utilise the freedom provided by this lack of information in her creation of Fair Isle characters; to imagine history from the point of view of the domestic and the familial, and which Sian Hayton refers to as 'chickish' history.[12] Very little happens in the novel that might constitute 'history' in the patriarchal sense. There are no battles, and political life is peripheral, including only a brief mention of the annual journey to the Shetland 'thing' or parliament. Work, sleep, sickness, sex, birth and death comprise the main 'action', and there are no major historical events, but this is exactly the point. The novel explores what it might have been like to be a woman in Old Norse society, and in the sense that they had very little economic or political power, women were not traditionally history makers. They were unlikely to be able to write, and were therefore unlikely to be recorders of events. Their role was consigned to family life and household economics, yet as Gerda Lerner explains, 'Women... are the majority now and always have been at least half of mankind'. A new exploration of their lives was necessary which

> often involved a species of "cross cultural montage" in which (once) untraditional sources, women's letters and diaries, women's manuals, women's novels, even seances were juxtaposed with more traditional and public texts, Parliamentary debate, sociological writing, medical literature, news reports, and medical journals.[13]

Elphinstone is limited by the unavailability of even those sources. Women who could not read or write had fewer opportunities for providing future historians with personal records. What Lerner is suggesting, however, is that the way into discovering what life was like for women is through study of written materials that deal with women's lives as they operated on a daily basis. By piecing together the scattered, incidental information about Old Norse women, historians have constructed a more three-dimensional idea of what ordinary women were like, and Elphinstone reinforces this through fiction in *Islanders*. She looks at the roles and responses of women in the family environment, and whilst acknowledging the undeniable fact that the female function was as wife and mother, she asserts that this too, is worth recording as history.

The fact that original sources for Old Norse history are themselves biased makes the reconstruction of women's lives very difficult, and Elphinstone was interested in the fact that most of the subject matter of sagas and Skaldic poetry was phallocentric, concentrating on battle, raiding and sea-faring, and that '[a]s Southern victims of Viking raiders, we only experience the war, rape and pillage of pirates, none of whom were women.'[14]

The historicity of the sagas has been often debated. In spite of the fact that the period known as the "saga age" dates from c.930 to c.1030, sagas were not written down until the

thirteenth-century, and it is impossible to say for sure when and where they were written, or to what extent they derive from oral tradition as opposed to the imagination of literary authors.[15] Even before we acknowledge the predominance of male figures, therefore, there are obvious difficulties involved in using the sagas to determine the nature of women's lives. *The Orkneyinga Saga*, for example, believed to be 'for a period of three centuries and a half, the principal authority for the history of Northern Scotland', was written by a man, whose sources were skaldic poetry and song composed by men, and in which verifiable political events only occasionally involve women. [16]

Writers in the thirteenth-century still identified to some degree with their pagan forebears, therefore their poetry and mythology 'presents divine female figures and identifies images of human women: the warrior, the prophetess/sorceress, the revenger, and the inciter'.[17] Where women are positively appreciated, they are credited for displaying male characteristics, and frequently they are rather passive and decorative; their power negative compared with the power exhibited by masculine gods.[18] Nevertheless, it was this literature which provided Elphinstone with her main source of information, and like many historians interested in women's lives in Old Norse society, she was faced with the task of piecing together the incidental information given about 'ordinary' women, that she might construct a historical setting for her novel with a degree of accuracy.

Sources hinder Elphinstone here, then, but the structure and narrative point of view of her text undermines the male bias of Old Norse history, using its literary basis to advantage. The novel is structured in sections, each comprising the perspective of one or two characters; varying stories within the framework of a larger historical paradigm. Not only does this episodic structure highlight the subjectivity of history by offering a variety of points of view, it also provides a narrative pattern suggestive of the formulaic structure of the saga stories which form what is widely accepted as a traditional source for Old Norse history.

Acknowledgement that history is constructed by the retelling of stories is evident in *Islanders* on several occasions, and a variety of characters convey information via formal storytelling, just as they do in Mitchison's *Bull Calves*. Women undermine the male basis of this by actively contributing their own voices to the circle of male storytellers. This operates on several textual levels, both within the narrative when, for example, Astrid finds Einar and Bjarni hanging on her every word (*I* 25), and through the narrative, as

Elphinstone constructs characters who challenge standard gender roles by revealing female concerns and strategies of empowerment and resistance.

During the midsummer feast, for example, both men and women sitting around the fire tell stories of love, which reveal more about the islanders themselves than is initially apparent. When Einar tells a story of unrequited love from the point of view of the man involved, his niece Gudrun questions the emphasis, demanding to know what the woman in the tale thought of the situation:

> 'But what about her?', said Gudrun, when Einar had finished. 'Didn't she mind being married to the wrong brother? Was she forced? She had no king to listen to her troubles, had she?'
>
> 'It's not her story... If she was fool enough to take the wrong brother, she doesn't deserve sympathy. It was probably all the same to her.'
>
> 'You don't know that! What choice did she have?'
>
> 'If you don't like that story, Gudrun, give us another.' (*I* 140)

The story she tells, about Gudrun Osvifsdottir, is from the Icelandic *Laxdœla Saga*, notably the only saga story to be told from a woman's point of view and to have a woman as its main character. Gudrun Osvifsdottir's story is not entirely trouble-free. As a widow, she is not legally beholden to her male relatives regarding the matter of her remarriage, yet the following excerpt demonstrates a perfect example of the male relative forcing the hand of the female:

> So Osvif went to have a talk with Gudrun and told her that Bolli Thorleiksson had come there - "and he is asking for your hand. Now it is up to you to answer his proposal, but I will be quick in making my wish in this matter clear. Bolli is not to be turned down if I am to have anything to say about it." Gudrun replied: "You are very hasty in making up your mind about this. Besides, Bolli once took this up with me, and I chose to refuse, and I am still of the same mind." Then Osvif said: "Many people will say you speak more out of prideful stubbornness than careful forethought if you say 'no' to such a man as Bolli. But as long as I am still alive, I shall see to guiding you children of mine in those things where I am the better judge." Seeing that Osvif was so set on the match, Gudrun did not refuse outright, but nonetheless showed her unwillingness on every hand... Be all that as it may, the long and short of it was that the terms and the pledges were settled and the date of the wedding feast fixed...[19]

On one level, Gudrun's reaction to the initial story mirrors her own dissatisfaction at her marriage to Rolf, and on another, it is significant that the story she chooses may not be able to alter the woman's fate, but significantly it reclaims the female narrative voice and her articulation of discontent. Although Gudrun too has had no choice in life, and has also been made to marry the brother she did not love, she finds expression through narration of another woman's story, in this case her namesake, thus challenging Bjarni's dismissive, 'It was probably all the same to her' (*I* 140).

In Old Norse literature, vocabulary associated with warfare in poems and stories suggests that biological characteristics disqualified women from success in the male arena. Women are most often represented, particularly in heroic poems, as tearful, faithful lovers. For example in *Helgi Hjorvardsson*, Helgi's widow mourns,

> In the world of love,
> when Helgi
> chose bracelets for me,
> I had declared that,
> after the king was dead,
> I would not willingly
> enfold a strange prince
> in my arms.[20]

In other words, 'biology *was* destiny in the Nordic perception of gender', endowing men with the physical qualities 'women lacked - for leadership in war and society.'[21] It is significant, therefore, that the only skaldic panegyric in praise of a woman is about Astriðr, a bold woman who gave good advice, and that this is the name Elphinstone has chosen for her heroine. The names of many of her characters, in fact, bear direct relation to characters in the sagas, and the significance of those chosen specifically, in order to bring an extra dimension to the way in which they resist the subjugation of the patriarchy are noted in due course.

Predominantly, however, this twelfth century world is envisaged for the reader by Astrid, only survivor of the shipwreck which brings her to Fair Isle. An alien within this isolated community, she observes it, as does the reader, through new eyes. As a Christian, she is partially resistant to Fair Isle's religious and moral code, which she finds frightening because it is not as orthodox as the one she has been accustomed to in Dublin. Most significantly, however, these new eyes view Fair Isle society from a specifically female perspective; a new history is attempted in which Astrid's voice meets other female voices in a subversion of male centred historiographies.

For Astrid, the journey to the outward boundaries of Christian civilisation represented by her shipwreck is in a way symbolic of the peripheralising of her gender as a valid historical perspective. Interestingly, however, this periphery becomes the centre, and reinforcing this dual notion of island as both periphery and centre, the opening page of the novel presents us with an upside down map, which locates the rest of Europe from the perspective of Fair Islanders who perceive their island as the centre of the earth. By coming into that centre, Astrid in turn brings history in the wider sense into the female realm, and subverting history as male, Elphinstone places a female voice at the centre of its construction. Again,

the author's preoccupation with borderlines is evident, not only between male and female, but also between North and South. For Elphinstone, as for Naomi Mitchison and Sian Hayton, the relationship with Scotland is itself complicated, and contributes an important element toward the desire to search for identity. Mitchison spent most of her early life in Oxford; Hayton was born in Liverpool, and here again Elphinstone reveals an interesting link.

Born in the South of England, she grew up in Cornwall, studied in Durham, and, like Mitchison, came to Scotland only to visit her family for holidays. Although she returned when she was twenty one, experiencing at the time 'a sense of coming home', the question this poses in relation to how 'Scottish' she is, is one she finds herself asked much too often. The debate as to what makes a person Scottish in the 1990s is not the purpose of this study, yet as Elphinstone herself explains:

> My father's family is Scottish and as a child growing up I was always told I was partly Scottish. Of course, when I arrived here, I'm English. So it's being caught between two boundaries, I think, which has been very important. Belonging and not belonging. Being outside and inside at the same time. I think it's a very familiar position for a lot of people, on the edge of things and not knowing quite what they are. It can be quite uncomfortable and quite creative.[22]

Her inability to make recourse to a fixed national identity is clearly important to her, and in terms of gender, her being *female* is further complicated by her unclear relationship with Scotland. As an English sounding person, identification with 'Scottishness' is not quickly accepted by a nation suspicious of 'Englishness':

> every time I open my mouth it's perfectly clear that I'm from the south of England. I'm quite happy to be from the south of England, but it leaves you in a very tenuous situation to be writing in terms of any particular culture when you know you come from several.[23]

This is reflected in the novel when Astrid arrives on Fair Isle, and feels isolated by the different patterns of speech: 'Only Ingrid made sense. Her accent was strange, but she had taken the trouble to speak clearly' (*I* 15).

For Elphinstone, this is compounded by the fact that as a woman, expression of sexuality is deemed suspect by a traditionally working class, patriarchal society, and North or South, she has experienced socialisation influenced by religion. Whether Catholic or Presbyterian, British society has renounced expression of the sexual body, placing limitations on the possibilities for self expression, particularly in women. This is nowhere more evident than in Scotland, where the legacy of John Calvin survives sufficiently to discourage celebration of sexuality, and when an English identified voice such as Elphinstone's,

attempts to make audible that expression within a Scottish context, the anti-English stigma that voice invokes limits its representational value.

Elphinstone does, nevertheless, identify herself with Scotland, and it is interesting that like Mitchison and Hayton, she is 'other' in terms of her association with English identity in Scotland, and yet explores the identity of 'other' in gender terms, through Scottish history. It is worth noting that Scottish identity for all three writers is, to a greater or lesser extent, a choice, and this conscious identification with 'Scottishness' thus provides a motivation and a common base from which they examine the polarisation of male and female identity. They are not 'Anglo-Scots' in the same way as writers such as Emma Tennant, who carry some sense of Scottishness outside Scotland. These women came *to* Scotland, and reveal a conscious identification with Scotland through their historical fiction.

The historical society Elphinstone creates in *Islanders* is both geographically and temporally significant. As a result of its isolated position between Orkney and Shetland, Fair Isle finds itself on the periphery both of Old Norse civilisation and of twelfth century Christendom, each presenting its own version of 'history' and its own form of patriarchy. Germanic conversion to Christianity began at the close of the fourth century, and although most of the Scandinavian settlers in the British Isles had become Christian by the fifth century, the more northerly, less densely populated areas took longer to convert from paganism,[24] demonstrated by the fact that the Icelandic alþingi[25] held an emergency meeting in the year 1000 to resist the zeal of the new Christian converts.

In *Islanders*, therefore, Fair Isle is in a state of flux within the transition from pagan to Christian owing to its peripheral location, and for women, the new belief system brought with it ideals which were paradoxically restrictive and liberating. As Jenny Jochens states, 'the impact of Christianity on the female half of the human race [is] one of the most controversial issues in women's history'.[26] Christian histories suggest, unsurprisingly, that Christianity benefited women. Yet no Norse sources, literary or legal, were committed to writing until the thirteenth-century, by which time authors, in any case male, were suitably indoctrinated as to want 'to project back into pagan times the Christian program of sexual morality preached by Church leaders in their own time'.[27]

Further, Fair Isle (or Friðarey, to use its Norse name) translates as 'truce isle' in *The Orkneyinga Saga*, and this is intrinsic to the island's role in the narrative.[28] Astrid leaves

behind her a society in Dublin in which Christian belief structures have been fully implemented, yet she quickly finds her own religious conviction challenged by the unorthodox nature of this fledgling Christian outpost. Although nominally Catholic, Fair Islanders view the new religion as a set of beliefs which they have been instructed to follow, rather than as a way of thinking. This is initially alarming to Astrid, yet is shown to be positive to a degree, as isolated from the rest of the world, women experience two ideologies, and combine the elements of each which offer them most freedom and empowerment.

The novel's setting on an isolated island, therefore, carries a great deal of symbolic weight throughout the text, and not least because the sea itself operates as a metaphor on several levels. Paradoxical images of the sea as both restrictive and liberating occur throughout *Islanders*, and significantly, whilst it acts as a barrier to women, against freedom and adventure, it offers male characters opportunities to acquire knowledge and wealth.

From the novel's opening, we are exposed to the possible destructiveness of the sea, during the episode which leads to Astrid's shipwreck on Fair Isle. This is indicative of the difficult nature of life on such an isolated island, and provides an early indication as to the treacherous part the sea is to play in directing Astrid's fate:

> The line of grey loomed larger. Neither sky nor sea. Solid. All they could do was keep her prow into the waves.
>
> A heavy sea broke over them. When Astrid could see again there was chaos. No mast. Figures clinging. A rock like a needle, a handsbreadth away...
>
> 'Up!' Kol was shouting at her, pushing her. For a second she fought him. He was trying to thrust her overboard, into that sea. She hit out, then understood. 'Up! Up!'
>
> She let him push her then, and was half flung over the side. She had her feet on the gunwale, then she was on her hands and knees among rock and weed and water. She scrabbled for a hold. A sea caught her, but she clung like a limpet while the water swirled back. Wedged in a crack in the rock, she looked round for Kol to follow.
>
> No ship. Only broken sea, hungry waves. Wood. An oar. She dragged herself into a crevice slippery with weed. The world spun, the darkness at the edge of the world. (*I* 8-9)

The powerlessness of human beings and the frailty of human construction in the face of nature is highlighted here. The ship and her passengers are entirely subject to the elements, and Astrid encounters her own powerlessness for the first time, remarking 'When they had embarked the ship had not seemed small' (*I* 4). Here, the power of the ocean is juxtaposed with the strength of her father, which has been sapped by sea-sickness. Astrid is evidently distressed by his condition, which leaves her unprotected in a new and frightening way:

'She turned back to the sea, as if the sight of his weakness were something forbidden' (*I* 5), and she is faced for the first time with a controlling force which is stronger than he can be.

The community Elphinstone creates to receive Astrid on Fair Isle reflects the nature of the island itself in its characterisation. The novel is unusually spare and unpretentious, reflecting the starkness of geography. A barely fertile rock in the sea, without shelter and seldom warm, provides the setting for *Islanders*. In such a climate the land does not yield easily, and this is echoed both by Elphinstone's characterisation of the islanders, and by the tone of the narrative itself. Characters are fiercely proud of their island, and their defiance of the harsh environment echoes the defiant rock upon which they live; at once a jagged precipice, challenging the elements, and at the same time a symbol of human bravado, a tiny rock amidst a wild North Sea. The islanders farm the fertile areas of land, struggling against the harmful salt winds, and fish the coast in constant battle with the raging seas and dangerous cliffs around their own shores. They are proud, therefore, but without artifice; strong, and yet beneath this aware of the fragility of their community and of their precarious position at 'the edge of the world' (*I* 9). Paradoxically, to those who have never left (in particular the women) this is the centre of their earth just as Marob is to Tarrik in Mitchison's *Corn King*, and they are proud of their legal infrastructure and success in forming trade links just as Tarrik takes pride in the positive aspects of his community. In the case both of Tarrik and Elphinstone's islanders, life is subject to the elements. Yet where Mitchison allows Tarrik to master sun and rain to ensure a good harvest, Elphinstone's community is subject to the forces of land, sea and ill-fortune. The present generation lives in the shadow of the loss of several islandmen to the sea, and they therefore acknowledge and respect the value of each individual; something which is absent from Mitchison's text, which focuses on community figureheads rather than ordinary people.

The tone of *Islanders* reflects the difficulty of day to day life, as by comparison with Mitchison, and to an extent with Hayton, the reader is held at arm's length by the methods used by Elphinstone to present the thoughts and feelings of her characters. The reader rarely sees the thought processes behind the spare dialogue, and the underlying tensions are often conveyed in an impersonal 'story-telling'. Although the characters are articulate, none are garrulous. Language is used economically and without rhetoric, just as every natural resource is carefully and sparingly utilised, and in this Elphinstone arguably moves further toward the creation of the type of 'speculative' historical fiction mentioned in Chapter One. Unlike William Golding's *The Inheritors* or even Mitchison's *Early in*

Orcadia, Elphinstone does not attempt to recreate the historical linguistic patterns of her community. She does, however, attempt to reflect the way in which language might be used by a largely inarticulate community with a limited sphere of reference. Characters address one another with informality as all must work together if the community is to survive, and it follows that the hierarchy is always treated with respectful silence, as Astrid immediately realises:

> 'It seems you are our guest at Shirva,' said Einar at last. He spoke as if he were giving a judgement, and Astrid remembered that Ingrid had said that he was also the lawman. 'You are welcome to our house.'
> 'Thank you.'
> 'You have nothing to thank me for,' said Einar...
> 'You saved my life.'
> 'I was there.'
> Their conversation seemed to be over. She wasn't sure whether to go or wait. (*I* 27)

Astrid herself may have travelled further than the island girls, yet this incident reveals the fact that she is still relatively inexperienced, and lacking in an education that might have allowed her to articulate her feelings and responses to new situations. Initially, of course, this inarticulacy is compounded by grief at the loss of her father, and she answers the initial questions put to her by Einar and Bjarni without allowing emotion to infiltrate her words:

> She heard herself say the words as if they were quite normal. There seemed to be two of her: one calm and aloof, functioning in this world in which she did not belong; the other huddled inside her, knotted under her ribs. Dead. (*I* 24)

The 'other huddled inside her' is withheld from the reader as it is from these men. The result is that we gain little insight into her character beyond what she chooses to allow, and there is little intimacy established between character and reader.

In spite of this slight distancing which in some way reflects the relative geographical adversity experienced by the community in *Islanders*, Elphinstone's characters are spirited, particularly the women, who refuse to passively accept an imposition of suffering as destiny. Few willingly accept their stifled lives, subtly thwarting convention to create diversions and possibilities for themselves which are not socially sanctioned, and thus revealing strategies of empowerment and resistance in operation beneath the deeply patriarchal social exterior.

Demonstrating her own commitment to the ideology behind women's community, Elphinstone introduces the reader to the island through women's conversations. These are not free from division and disagreement: Ingebjorg does not wholly approve of her friend

Gunnhild's adulterous relationship, whilst Gudrun remains affronted by Ingebjorg's demonstrations of independence. Yet in the main, the island community is shown to be held together by women, and this arrangement reveals that Elphinstone's aims include a specifically contemporary feminist agenda.

In *Islanders*, Elphinstone is determined to resist platitudes about any essential female nature in her characterisation. Individuality is not submerged, and she takes care not to make assertions about 'woman', the collective, avoiding categorisations which might result in 'something that is too homogeneous'.[29] Consequently, Astrid's is the first of several female voices in the text who challenge accepted notions of feminine behaviour, and the significance of varying narrative voices is of primary importance in the novel when the islanders are confronted by a new threat: their ancient charms are named witchcraft by the visiting priest.

Like Neil Gunn in *Sun Circle* (1933), Elphinstone appears to assert the superiority of paganism over Christianity here, as even Astrid, a practising Christian, appreciates the importance of maintaining superstitions that award some feeling of control to the female:

> 'It seems to me now there are certain kinds of knowledge that have to be kept secret. People can't do without them. They needed them in Dyflin just as they do here. I think they managed by just keeping everything in its right place. Some things belong to the church, and can be talked about to the priests. Other things don't; they have to be kept quiet, but they still have to happen. People do what they can.' (*I* 408)

This could be interpreted as a way of discussing the entire history of a woman's power, driven underground by a prevailing patriarchy which relegates the female. Elphinstone's revision of history through women's contributions enforces the idea that history represents in each case a varying point of view, and the women in the novel appreciate the benefit of presenting one version of a story according to what is most appropriate. One character, Gunnhild, comments:

> 'Life's not so simple that you can tell the same story to everyone. Each of us has many stories, they're all true, but we have to tell the right one to the right person. There's no use pretending that there's only one tale which takes account of everything.' (*I* 408)

They are not dishonest, but as Gunnhild says, 'We just have to know what face to show' (*I* 409), and it is this variety of 'faces'; the way in which women's lives diverge from the roles offered them, which Elphinstone successfully portrays. In women's conversation throughout *Islanders*, it is possible to perceive a sense of communality which goes some way to resist the patriarchal influence that negatively affects their lives, whether Christian

or pagan, and we are presented with a community in which it becomes obvious that the main agents of social organisation are women.

This necessarily operates beneath the surface, however, and in many cases resistance is difficult. Immediately, for example, Astrid's orphaned condition leaves her poverty stricken, and in the patriarchal medieval world this divests her of any power to control her destiny. She has no way of retrieving what she has lost, or of retaining the respect she commanded whilst her father was alive, therefore although she is the only actively practising convert to Christianity in the novel, a religion intended to herald the 'progress' of the medieval world from paganism to salvation, her fate remains dependent on men. She is vulnerable to sexual abuse, as physical ownership of a woman by her guardian was widely accepted in all societies where 'women were highly valued for their sexual and reproductive services'.[30] The only fortunate aspect, therefore, is that at thirteen, Astrid is considered too young to be claimed as a sexual slave, and she reasons that '[i]f being a child would save her from what they did to women, a child she would remain' (*I* 21).

Significantly, however, a thirteen year old is neither adult nor child, and the year long span of the novel chronicles her transition between childhood and sexual awakening, during which time her place in society is coded female in a new way. Relative wealth and social status contributed considerably to the environment in which a female child was raised in the twelfth century. Financial security could defer the necessity for early marriage, and this shift away from marriage as a focal point for a girl's existence could contribute to a greater degree of freedom. Daughter of a well respected Irish shipbuilder, Astrid's social class has provided her with a degree of freedom unimagined by the Fair Isle women she meets, and she is at odds with what is effectively a peasant society. Her expectations regarding personal choice and occupation differ widely from those of the women in her new community. Therefore she exhibits a primitive anger at her inability to follow through her own ambitions, and is tomboyish in the same way as Mitchison's Erif Der. The narrator comments: 'Always so tough, Astrid, tough as a boy. She should have been a boy, then she would have been apprenticed to succeed her father' (*I* 6). Yet with dependence comes an end to this freedom, and landing in autumn, she finds herself in an isolated situation both mentally and physically. There are to be no further voyages made by the island trading boats until spring, and emotionally, this physical containment functions as a metaphor for her own stifled identity. Astrid is bordering womanhood when she arrives on Fair Isle, heralding her entry into the intrinsic bondage of the patriarchal world. She must face limitation personally as she faces it geographically. Determination and strength of

character can only be exercised within her new, materially dependent context, and to a reduced degree, as she finds herself identified almost entirely by her gender.

Christian doctrine was not solely responsible for this, of course. Norse pagan society was similarly deeply patriarchal. Since pagan society was based on the acquisition of wealth, there could be no hope of equality when women were raising children and working in the home, whilst men were seafarers with an opportunity to acquire money or possessions:

> Among the warrior peoples the acquisition of wealth became a powerful factor depressing the position of women. For the spoils of war, won through the sweat of battle, could hardly belong other than to men.[31]

Yet this paganism did offer women the chance to take some control of their own lives. Fate was still left to the gods, but there were ways of averting their wrath, and most importantly, women could still feel as though they exercised some control over destiny. They did not have to yield their lives up to a single male God.

In *Islanders*, Fair Isle is nominally Christian, an ideology supposedly less restrictive for women in the twelfth century. Yet it is clear that in practice, the Church made few changes and would still have allowed Astrid to be made a slave, belonging to the man who found her: 'they all say the precedent is the same. Free-born or not, if the sea gives them to us they belong to us' (*I* 31). Christianity, therefore, is seen to have limited benefits, and Elphinstone subtly reveals through her female voices an alternative to abiding by the restrictive ideologies of either belief system. Strategies of resistance and opposition to male power come in different forms for various female characters, and include personal initiative, practical use of herbal remedies, sexual expression and experimentation, and in the case of the Christian woman, denial: Astrid does not want to become a woman at all.

For women, the unsettled relationship between Christianity and surviving pagan social mores provides on one hand a patriarchal society, and on the other, an amalgamation of belief which in many ways turns out to offer a more liberal gender possibilities than that available in the fully Christian south. In spite of the isolation she encounters, therefore, both in her geographical prison, and, metaphorically, within the impending imprisonment of womanhood, Astrid recognises the value in the society of the island women, each of whom represents an individual struggle against patriarchal restrictions:

> In Dyflin the women crowded round the wells and stopped to talk each morning. Astrid had always avoided women's work before she came to the island. Now, she was glad to be treated as if she belonged. (*I* 80)

The relative liberality of the Fair Isle discourse, however, recurrently gives way to constant reminders of the basic oppressive structure of society, and the preoccupations of the male

characters in the novel centre around expressions of sexuality and power that might be expected in a novel dealing specifically with a patriarchally orientated community.

One such area of power is marriage, and I have previously discussed the negative effects of marriage on women in my earlier chapters. In *The Corn King*, Erif's marriage to Tarrik is not her choice, instigated as this is by her father, for his own political ends, whilst marriage for characters such as Kleta in 'The Wife of Aglaos', and Moiro in *Cloud Cuckoo Land* offers women little aside from inequality, economic dependence, and subjugation. For Kirstie Haldane in *The Bull Calves*, marriage to her first husband involves years of psychological abuse, endured for the sake of God, and for two out of Hayton's three heroines, marriage is a necessary step toward having children. Again in *Islanders*, a novel based around the lives of Old Norse women, marriage is a key issue. Under both pagan and Christian systems, marriage was in effect a dominant male institution, and

> [i]n the traditional genealogy, a wife was simply the instrument through which a man acquired a child. This fact is expressed in the verb kvángask (to marry), used only about a man and indicating that he took a wife (kván), thereby becoming a "wifed man."[32]

One of the hallmarks of pagan society was that women were married as part of a commercial contract, the *Khaufehe*, arranged between the groom and the bride's father with no consideration for the woman's approval - and even at times without her knowledge. One of the positive reforms made by Christianity, on the other hand, was the doctrine of female consent, which, although the proposed union might be equally commercial, insisted that a marriage could not be blessed unless the woman agreed to enter into what now became less of a contract and more a bond of mystical union. Although this obviously worked in favour of women in theory, in the majority of cases the decision of the male relatives overrode female wishes, and early on, Astrid is made aware of the fact that whether, and whom, she marries, will have little to do with personal choice:

> Married. Not married. Land. No land. A man. No man. She kicked a stone off the track into the heather.
>
> 'I know Einar's thought of it,' pursued Ingrid. 'When you turned fourteen he said, "She's of age now, we should be thinking of the future." My father said, "Time enough, we'll see them all settled yet."...'
>
> ... So they had talked about that, had they, without even telling her? Well, they were right, she was of age, and no one was going to order her life without even asking her. (*I* 121)

Regardless of her indignation, however, these men maintain the right to direct her future. In spite of the doctrine of consent, it remained usual for women in medieval Christian society to be married as part of a trade bargain, as is the case with Ragna in *Islanders*.

Ragna is another of the younger women on the island, and her betrothal to a man she has never seen is arranged by her brother Rolf without consulting her. She has little choice in a decision made to secure a trading deal - an opportunity which as pioneer businessman of the community, Rolf cannot afford to refuse - thus revealing the inability of the Christian Church to completely eradicate pagan disregard for a girl's acquiescence. Ragna does not readily accept her fate, convincing Astrid that if she does not choose to marry this man, Rolf will have to live with it: 'He'll look like a fool, won't he? I'm not marrying against my will, not for anybody', and Astrid admires her confidence: 'Did Ragna ever experience a moment's doubt? It must be a fine way to live'. Nevertheless, it remains that Ragna must do Rolf's bidding with as much dignity as she can muster, and this single exercise in male dominance removes her freedom to choose and direct her own destiny. Astrid concedes that even for a wilful girl, 'it can be difficult though, when men start making their plans all around you' (*I* 383).

Christian circumscription not only reduced a woman's choice as to whom she could marry, it also brought with it a widening of the extant pagan laws concerning incest. Pagan law forbade as incest relationships within the immediate nuclear family, whereas under Christianity, the circle of incest was extended to a vast network of relatives and friends. In a society as small as Fair Isle, these prohibitions obviously reduced women's freedom further, unlikely as they were to leave the confines of their community:

> 'The problem is', remarked Ingrid peaceably, 'there isn't anybody. Not eligible to marry anyway. Not on the island.' She turned to Ragna. 'Seriously, you must have thought about that?'
>
> 'Have I not? And yet they blame my brother for bringing in more men. Well, what do they want? There are only about three men on this island who aren't fourth cousins or something closer. So what happens? They go away to sea and marry. And where do we end up?' (*I* 82)

As women, their choices and opportunity to achieve fulfilment are already limited. Marriage may not appear by contemporary standards to offer much freedom either, yet the alternative must be viewed from the woman in Old Norse society's point of view. Land was often given as part of a woman's dowry, becoming as much hers as it was her husband's. If she did not marry, the land remained the property of her father; she had nothing of her own, and no family of her own to enjoy.

Restricted by incest laws, even marriage is not a dependable source of movement and variety on so small an island, yet one young woman, Ingrid, actively pursues change. Significantly, Ingrid's name comes from the components, *Ing* the name of an Old Norse fertility god, and *friðr* meaning 'fair', therefore it is fitting that she chooses pregnancy as a

way of acquiring some form of freedom. Astrid's arrival, with all its suggestion of the unknown wider world, forces Ingrid's own dissatisfaction to the surface, and stifled by the stagnant nature of her life she muses:

> I wish I could leave home... Gudrun is herself, at Byrstada. Astrid is herself. She's lucky. That's a wicked thing to say. She's lost everything. Ingrid crossed her fingers. But I want something to happen to me. I hope that's not wicked... Please, thought Ingrid, let it be my turn. Let something happen to me. (*I* 114)

By employing a tactic traditionally cast as imprisoning, Ingrid seduces Arne, the first potential suitor she meets, and becomes pregnant as a way of procuring a modicum of freedom in an uneventful life. In discussion with Astrid, she addresses the prospect of union logically:

> 'Do you realise, I have never in my life before met a man the same age as me, whom I had not known all my life?'...
> 'You could marry him, you mean?'
> 'I want to marry somebody.'
> 'Of course', said Astrid. 'I don't see why you shouldn't. But if not, you can always find someone else.'
> 'Find someone else? Who? Where? Don't you see, a chance like this may never come again?' (*I* 120)

Ingrid successfully manipulates, not only the boy himself, here, but also her father Bjarni. Bjarni disapproves of her choice, yet she knows he must hastily arrange the marriage of a pregnant daughter lest she disgrace the honour of the family. 'She had got exactly what she wanted, and her father would have to accept it', and from her present stultified perspective, she is only conscious of the positive consequences of her actions:

> '... what have I lost? I wouldn't be the first on this island. My father might never forgive, but he'd stand by me. If Arne goes away I don't much care what happens. What choice had I? I'd rather suffer from having had something, than live my whole life without so much as a crumb.' (*I* 160)

When this opportunity arises for Ingrid to actively change her life, the relationship she forms is completely outwith male control, thus suggesting possibilities of female resistance against the hegemonic society. Ingrid is restricted in that she cannot travel and has very little opportunity to direct her life. Meanwhile, she changes things by her own design, by manipulating the fact that Arne has no land of his own, and is therefore unlikely to refuse the land which would become his through their marriage:

> I never meant to make love, not the first time. I thought she'd say no. Anyway there've been enough times since. I bet she is pregnant. Was it worth it? She has land. If I marry her we can sleep together as much as we like. (*I* 154-5)

Arne's financial weakness is easily managed, and Elphinstone highlights a subtle role reversal, as well as a counter productive and exploitable aspect of male dominance. Ingrid knows that Arne needs a woman to obtain a livelihood:

> 'Even if he didn't care about me he'd come back. He needs land. He's looking for a place in the world and that's what I can give. He knows that' (*I* 168),

and the traditional code operates here in order that Elphinstone can demonstrate its subtle undermining. Ingrid becomes Arne's security, and where in reality 'society normally functioned with a binary of aggressive males and passive females',[33] *Islanders* subverts this by creating relationships in which males only exercise a relatively surface control of events whilst women like Ingrid manipulate situations to suit themselves.

Norse women were expected to be mothers as well as wives; yet another part of day to day existence which has been little documented by standard histories, and Elphinstone's commitment to envisioning the female experience of Old Norse society necessarily includes mention of the difficulties of motherhood, and of the relationship between parents who have suffered the loss of children. In this epoch, infant mortality rates and the risks of miscarriage were high, and were made higher by the heavy work women were expected to continue around the homestead, particularly during the summer season when the men went to sea. Through Gudrun, Elphinstone examines the pain and grief of a mother whose babies have died, and records this as a desperately unhappy aspect of humanity rather than as a statistic. Women in history are likely to have suffered just as women do today in similar circumstances, and this is something which Elphinstone feels links contemporary women to the women of the past. Gudrun is eaten up with pain at her loss, and feels anger toward her husband whom she perceives to care less than she does:

> 'You care, do you? But you can go to sea and forget all about it. I've got to stay here. He should be here, and he's not. Nor are you. All summer. You won't have to give it a thought, you won't miss him. Any more than you did the other. I had them both baptised too. There was time for that. You never even asked. Never even asked what their names were.' (*I* 66)

His physical ability to leave is not an option for Gudrun, and this physical restriction becomes a metaphor for her feelings of isolation from the rest of the world.

Gudrun displays the profound grief of a mother who has lost a child, and we are presented with an unsentimental view of motherhood here, as she seems with each pregnancy to have the life sucked out of her. This again marks an era in which the husband maintained sexual ownership of his wife under both Christian and pagan systems, so that whether or not she was ready to resume sexual relations, she had little choice. Rolf is shown in many ways to

care a great deal for Gudrun, yet as his sister is quick to point out, 'If you care that much, how come she keeps getting pregnant?' (*I* 68).

With miscarried pregnancies and the fear of losing a husband at sea, Gudrun is subjected to agents outwith her control. The only response she can make to this is to reject a society in which these unwelcome horrors must be endured. The balance still rests heavily on the superstitious belief that pleasing the gods protects the people, and to try and thwart the course of good fortune empowers her fleetingly:

> 'I wish they'd go to sea and drown themselves!'
> Ingrid stopped, petrified. Astrid's sticky hands went to her cheeks,
> and she gasped. They both crossed their fingers, and stared at Gudrun.
> Gudrun stared back defiantly, her hands behind her back. (*I* 72)

Ill wishing a ship, it was believed, could cost the sailors their lives, and here Gudrun demonstrates her defiance of a social structure that offers her no support. Elphinstone's attention to detail is evident here once again, as Gudrun, which comes from *guth* - god + *run* - secret, was the name of the wife of Sigurd in the *Laxdœla saga* who brought about her husband's destruction. Elphinstone identifies Gudrun's maternal dilemma as one interpretation of possible female experience, and one attempt to find fulfilment within the restricted space of the island.

Another character, Gudrun's aunt, takes this further, and is better illustrative of the way in which women in the novel employ strategies of resistance. Ingebjorg, whose name comprises the name of the fertility god '*Ing*' + '*borg*' meaning fortification, is representative of these elements. The death of her husband leaves her, according to pagan law, entitled to his property, yet as property was generally managed by a man in this society, Ingebjorg contravenes expectation when she chooses to exercise the power her property gives her, raising her sons alone. Such a strike for independence provokes anger amongst the family, and Gudrun complains, 'You'd think after Eirik died Ingebjorg would have the decency not to quarrel with his family' (*I* 33), reinforcing the assumption that families should be headed by men. The word 'decency' implies that Gudrun views Ingebjorg's strength as indecent or unfeminine in a woman: 'for a woman to take the matter to the Thing! It was a family matter, and she should never have opposed her husband's brothers in public' (*I* 34). Ingebjorg has simply used her landowning rights to maintain control of her life, a step unwelcomed by her brothers-in-law who feel that as men, land belonging to their brother should return to male members of the family. Here, Elphinstone has deployed the figure of the widow from the sagas, the woman whose situation leaves her

> best able to embody masculine ideals... The narrative corpus contains several examples of independent, older widows who confirm that a woman at this stage of life enjoyed her greatest power.[34]

The power of widowhood emerges again and again throughout literature, two more notable examples being Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, and William Dunbar's 'Wedo'. Widows have always been available as symbols of power, and whether the female has been actually widowed, or released from marriage in some other way, she is 'allowed' to be single as other women are not. Ingebjorg therefore exploits this power to resist male institutions and encodings which she will not now be drawn into, possessing as she does the economic land-power to organise her own life.

Land owning, however, is not the only aspect of life in which men assume control. In medieval society, male adulterers were not allowed to recognise as heir any issue resulting from extra-marital sexual relations, though no real punishment was dealt - at most a fine. In any case it was fully expected and socially accepted that sailors would not be monogamous - indeed, one character in *Islanders* is mocked 'for his stolid faithfulness to his wife at home' (*I* 105). Adulterous encounters made by women, on the other hand, were construed as crimes against an entire family rather than against an individual. As punishment, they might be killed, and the misogyny of churchmen is exemplified by their denying adulterous women the last rites.

In *Islanders*, Elphinstone examines adultery from a female perspective, through Gunnhild. Comprised of *'gunnr'*, meaning 'strife' + *'hildr'*, meaning 'battle', Gunnhild was a favourite hate-figure in Norse mythology,[35] accused of nymphomania, witchcraft and adultery, and it is clear that Elphinstone has chosen the name specifically. She does not invite judgement of Gunnhild's sexual activities, reversing the standard gender divisions which required women to be monogamous, because here, as elsewhere, she is attempting to give her characters the voice they might have had, nowhere more obviously than in the following conversation:

> Ingebjorg looked at her friend. 'Why go on, if it's that difficult? Are you just sorry for Bjarni?'
> 'No'. Gunnhild sat up. 'No, that would be an insult. I tell you, you don't know Bjarni'.
> 'I believe you. But you still don't need to get cold and wet, making love to him among the peats.'
> 'I'd rather do it in a bed.'
> 'Why do it at all? You've got Snorri haven't you?'
> 'Yes, but with Snorri it's all over in two minutes flat.'
> 'Is it really that much better with Bjarni?'
> 'Oh yes, he can go on for hours. At least he could if we only had a bed.' (*I* 109-10)

This is not 1990s feminism, forced onto twelfth century characters to avoid the political fallout of biological determinism. Rather, Elphinstone was interested in depicting conversations which she believes might quite feasibly have occurred, explaining: 'Sexuality is very direct and not a transgressive tool'.[36] However grounded in the late twentieth-century her narrative style may be, she maintains that the practicality necessary for life in such an isolated community would make for a direct approach to every aspect of life, be it fishing, farming, or sex and reproduction. Although this may have the effect of echoing a late twentieth-century approach to life, therefore, it should be remembered that it was only much later that both men and women became increasingly coy regarding these realities, and that rather than being post-Victorian, Elphinstone may well be justified in imagining that a greater degree of candour would have been likely in such a fragile community. Gunnhild represents an unrestrained, confident female sexuality which, morality aside, requires physical satisfaction; something women were only traditionally expected to provide, but that they were as likely to desire in the Middle Ages as they are today. In one sense, therefore, Elphinstone argues that this is just a direct acknowledgement of the female need for sexual fulfilment. Yet on the other hand, all social and communal acts are saturated with social encodings, including gender encodings, and Gunnhild *is* a transgressive figure as her sexual appetites subvert the hegemonic discourse in which men have sexual agency.

This contradictory and rebellious aspect of female sexuality is reinforced, too, by Ragna. Although women were expected to be virgin brides, Ragna is not prepared to postpone her enjoyment until someone suitable appears for her to marry. Ragna's sexual freedom identifies her as a young woman determined to ignore propriety rather than to remain frustrated by her isolated predicament, and sailors are one of the few sources of distraction life has to offer. Ragna's behaviour is open and uninhibited in her casual affairs, and Astrid admires the way Ragna behaves: 'Ragna spoke to the men of Shirva with an offhand equality which Astrid would never have attempted' (*I* 192).

Sex is an issue of power, and through Ragna, and also through Ingrid, Elphinstone thwarts convention by developing female control. Ingrid, as previously discussed, is a character who manipulates her lover using sex. The young man has been conditioned not to expect it, and the ability to withhold or to grant sexual love as an unmarried girl is an area in which women have some control. Ingrid, in taking an active lead, puts this to good use:

> Dimly he was aware that she was supposed at some point to stop him, as every girl had done before. But she didn't stop him, she encouraged him, and touched him just as he had wanted. He hadn't thought she would

> be so fearless. He pressed himself against her, skin to skin. She rolled over so he was on top, fumbling, scared, aware of his own clumsiness.
> But she was not clumsy. With one hand she guided him, and then he was inside her... (*I* 149)

Power is also an issue for Ragna in her relationship with Thorvald, in which sexuality mixes with friendship. Here, roles are reversed in terms of the expectations and restrictions placed on the relationship, usually the male prerogative:

> 'Where do you think you're taking me?'
> 'Nowhere you don't want to go.' He faced her to him. 'Be friends, Ragna! Haven't we always been?'
> 'Of course, before you changed it all at Candlemas.'
> 'Not against your will, I didn't.'
> 'I'm not going to marry you, Thorvald.'
> He was so startled his arm dropped. 'I should think not! Whatever made you think of that?' (*I* 143)

That the man involved has no ultimate plan to marry the girl does not stretch the imagination, but Ragna, too, feels she has to make clear her position This is indicative of this woman's ability to make decisions for herself, and to engage in a sexual relationship entirely for pleasure, which signals a development away from the repression of Hayton's trilogy, and a return to the freedom exhibited by Mitchison's Erif Der.

In a recently Christianised society, the choices Ragna is able to make are increasingly limited, however, and Elphinstone exhibits through her character 'a very primitive anger' at the legacy of sexual repression in her own society, of which this is undoubtedly an echo. As she says: 'I have very negative feelings about Christianity, especially regarding Calvinism and its autocratic restrictiveness',[37] and although Calvinist Protestantism is not the form of Christianity operating in the novel, she writes from the position of a Scottish-identified woman, who understands what this autocracy has meant in repressing sexual expression. Like Hayton, she finds the guilt associated with sex in Scottish society a difficult obstacle to overcome. In one sense, therefore, a character such as Ragna may be read as representative of the modern woman, for whom choice is free and for whom sexuality is a source of strength and enjoyment. As far as possible, Ragna rejects Christian morality, yet in the end, it intrudes, as it does too, in modern society. Although sexual freedom is now viewed as the responsibility of each individual, this is more apparent among a younger generation, who are encouraged by powerful female role models to make sexual responses and requests on their own terms. In recent years, the Church of Scotland has encouraged women's equality, and women have been ordained as ministers in the Church of Scotland for over twenty-five years.[38] Nevertheless this has not countered the four hundred year repression wrought by Calvinism, either within the Church, or within a

secular society through which this morality has diffused, and a plethora of Scottish novels such as James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), John Buchan's *Witchwood* (1927), and Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), are testimony to this Scottish preoccupation.

Elphinstone's real criticism of the patriarchal nature of Christianity, however, is that a male Christian God is fundamentally exclusive. Women are not created in the image of this God, are merely helpmates to men, and are regarded as dangerous lest they attempt to usurp male power with devious feminine artifice. The bedrock of Christianity is the belief that there is only one Deity and one director of fate, and in the face of this omnipotence, women are deprived of any practical control they were previously able to exercise within the pagan system which offered female goddesses with whom women could identify, and to whom they might turn for consolation. Within Christianity, the only female image women are encouraged to believe in is the Virgin Mary, and this is a woman so remote and so supernaturally pure that she becomes a mother without the contamination of sexual experience. For many who can never hope to achieve this unrealistic ideal, the symbol functions as a constant reminder of how 'contaminated' they are by comparison, and although inequality was also apparent in pre-Christian society, this could largely be attributed to practicality; the mother *had* to stay home and feed the baby. Virginity was highly prized in pagan society, too, of course, but again this was more due to the practical necessity of ensuring that the family a man provided for was to be his own. In light of this, it is easy to imagine why women may have felt that praying to a female goddess about problems in pregnancy or childbirth might be more rewarding, and in *Islanders*, Gunnhild the witch-figure is associated with exactly this, rather than with supernatural powers. She belongs entirely to this world and the power she embodies is an understanding of nature and healing, coupled with superstitious belief in chants and spells, all of which terrify the priest.

In the novel, the arrival of the priest casts a shadow over the charms used by women, who believe in their ability to elicit supernatural assistance to cure and protect. To aid a healthy pregnancy, pagan women used the knowledge of basic medicine, which they mixed to the accompaniment of invocations thought to elicit the goodness from the ingredients. In Gunnhild's case, these reveal a strange mixture of paganism and Christianity;

> She dropped her hands into the mixture, and invoked the blessings of the three wise women, Sunniva, Mary, Bride. May Gudrun Bjarnadottir bear a live child at last. Free her from this curse, I beseech you. From this cruel fate, wise ones deliver her. Amen (*I* 135)

The biological problem Gudrun has is that she has previously been unable to carry a child to term, and the novel suggests ways in which women might have attempted to combat this through the use of natural herbs and remedies. What it also suggests, however, is the negative influence of the Christian Church, which is unable to accept the women's skills as natural. To the priest, only God is powerful enough to intervene on Gudrun's behalf, therefore he concludes that any alternative power must be evil. The gods Gudrun invokes are not God, which is blasphemous, and we see the ease with which connections are made and evil looked for, where there is in fact only knowledge accompanied by the harmless superstition people used, to create an illusion of control over events.

It is similarly easy to suggest that prayer to the Christian God contributes to a similar illusion of control, and Elphinstone is intent on bringing this to light. Again it must be remembered that Scandinavians were the last to embrace European Christendom, a process which in both Celtic and Norse society often involved the replacement of existing pagan festivals with Christian figures and moral values. Time enough has not passed in the novel for old pagan ideas to be completely eradicated, and by examining the ease with which paganism and Christianity can be transposed, Elphinstone endorses the view that 'A good part of religious thought is nothing but an elaborately disguised pursuit of magic',[39] the adherence to a set of rules in order to safeguard important things like home and family. Magic, in its pagan construction, is simply a threat to Christianity's own patriarchal form of 'magic', as most aspects of medieval Celtic, Norse and Anglo-Saxon magic were associated with female control over events.

The female witch-figure occurs repeatedly in Scottish fiction. Mitchison examined the psyche of a character accused of witchcraft in *The Bull Calves*, and symbolised the power of the female protagonist in *The Corn King* through the medium of her supernatural abilities. Hayton, too, capitalised on the use of symbolic magic in her *Cells* trilogy, and other writers such as Dorothy K. Haynes in *Thou Shalt not Suffer a Witch* (1949) and Christopher Whyte in *The Warlock of Strathearn* (1995) subvert the realist focus of their narratives by involving the supernatural. In *Islanders* as in *The Bull Calves*, the use of magic relates more to the psychological needs of the female, who finds it difficult to take control of her life. Elphinstone does not suggest that Gudrun's success in having a full-term pregnancy is related to magical intervention. As Hans Sebald points out, 'Emotional needs have a way of inventing superentities believed to help and protect humanity. This is another way of saying that mankind engages in wishful thinking'.[40] Yet significantly, the problems she needs help with are essentially female. Women and nature come together

through Gunnhild's pagan 'prayer', and this constitutes a direct threat to twelfth-century Christianity.

It is, of course, a short leap between the pagan construction of superentities and the Christian God, highlighting the logical conclusion that Christianity, too, might be similarly deconstructed; instead of appealing to Sunniva, Christian believers place all their faith in God. Elphinstone herself does not assume that early Catholicism was as restrictive to women as Christianity later became, yet her belief in an alternative female-centred power recurs in much of her work, and is exemplified particularly well by her poem 'Her Spell', the first verse of which reads:

> Make a spell
> With such resources as there are.
> Find power
> In stones, water, flames, plants...
> Be curious -
> Eat the fruits of tradition.
> Remember,
> The spells of forgotten women
> Are our kind of imagery,
> In which we clothe
> Naked power.[41]

This poem reinforces the idea that women have a capacity to tap the power provided by nature; not to control the universe, but to use what nature offers for the good. The 'fruits of tradition' relate to knowledge of nature's resources, passed down through generations of women, just as Gunnhild in *Islanders* collects a selection of herbs in order to make the cake which is intended to bring Gudrun luck with her pregnancy. 'Our kind of imagery' could be interpreted as involving the rejection of a male God, and most certainly bears out interpretation as a rejection of the patriarchal imagery which would condemn Gunnhild's methods. A female interpretation of the world uses nature to clothe the power inherent in womanhood. In terms of the novel, Elphinstone implies in any case that to imagine women have a modicum of control over their lives is not something it is easy to relinquish, especially for women for whom this constitutes a large part of what little power they have been allocated, as was the case in Old Norse society. This power is of necessity 'clothed', and this becomes all the more relevant following the arrival of the priest and his suspicions of evil. As a whole, the poem implies a strong sense of women's community as we find it in the novel, where Gunnhild collects an ingredient for the cake from every house on the island, pooling together 'such resources as there are' to create 'our kind of imagery' in order to benefit Gudrun.

Nevertheless, 'any challenge to the authority of the church was, in medieval terms, a challenge to the order of society and to the majesty of God himself', to which authority responded 'with repressive measures',[42] and the correlation between witchcraft and evil, therefore, must be considered a politically gendered issue. Many ordinary women who posed a threat to the established authority were rooted out, and in the novel, Elphinstone relates Gunnhild's argument with the priest regarding the evil of her incantations, from his perspective, in order that we may see the futility of her attempts to reason with him. Gunnhild explains:

> 'No.... It was never sorcery, not the way you mean. Who is the Prince of Darkness anyway? Is that the Devil? No one ever used spells like that here. No, no', she seemed deeply distressed. 'I never heard of any of that. I'm talking about herbs and charms, small things we need in order to protect ourselves.' (*I* 370)

Her naiveté at the suggestion of evil, reverses for the reader the 'natural' perception of the priest as good, as he can only upset the delicate balance of such a small community by looking for evil where there is none. Gunnhild, confused, is prepared to do penance for what she is told is a sin against God. She recognises Christianity as the operational religious framework and accepts that there must also be ways of protecting oneself within this structure.

Even so, she refuses to promise that she will never use her charms again. She is unwilling to abandon what she believes to be a practical way of helping people, not offered by Christianity: 'All she would say was that healing knowledge was a gift that could not be withheld from the needy, not even at the price of the giver's soul' (*I* 370). She quickly becomes wise to the situation, perceiving that '[p]eople will say anything when something happens they don't understand. They look for someone to blame' (*I* 406), and the problem with the priest, she points out, is that looking for evil is his job. Forewarning of a tragedy which continued for centuries after she explains, 'We have knowledge and skills among ourselves that we can't do without. That's not a sin, but it seems it might become one' (*I* 408).

In the meantime, all the women recognise the grave consequences of relinquishing their 'knowledge and skills', and rather than accept defeat, they determine to continue their own appeals to supernatural sources in silence, resisting the restrictions imposed by a patriarchal religious system. In many ways, then, it is evident that the female characters Elphinstone has constructed have a contribution to make to the development of her fictionalised Old Norse society, and that in spite of dominant gender binaries, they maintain power, albeit hidden or 'clothed', to the best of their ability.

Taking this challenge to hegemonic binaries one step further, Elphinstone also examines a homosexual relationship in *Islanders*, subject to many of the same prejudices and restrictions imposed on women as 'other' to the patriarchy. The treatment of same sex love in the historical novel is not, of course, a new point for discussion in this thesis,[43] and Mitchison's acceptance of homosexual relationships in her early fiction has been discussed previously. Elphinstone herself explored certain aspects of homosexual identity in *The Sparrow's Flight*. Yet medieval Norse history presents a very different value system from the liberated example offered to Mitchison by pre-Christian Hellenic culture, or to the fantasy culture of science fiction. Instead of liberating discussion from contemporary constraints, twelfth-century ideology imposes further restrictions. The boundaries of acceptable gender constructs in operation which are so restrictive for women are equally so for same sex lovers. In this way, we may be justified in reading the incorporation of homosexuality into *Islanders*, not as merely incidental, but as another facet of the novel's dual purpose: to imagine the lives of historical 'others' and to react against contemporary social tenets of acceptability.

It may appear initially, in terms of the feminist implications of *Islanders*, that an examination of, or even the *inclusion* of, the relationship between Leif and Dagfin, is unnecessary; perhaps even a token gesture. I would argue in response, however, that although this may not be in the best interests of a novel already intent on exposing one area of society which lacks historical representation, Elphinstone is genuinely interested in examining the problems of sexual 'otherness' which affects homosexual relationships as they do the expression of female desire. Just as women in the novel are examinable through their isolated position, so too are Leif and Dagfin. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out: 'Suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality... is... a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women',[44] and the demand for silence, the negation of self, carries the same problems for both groups. In the same way as Astrid finds that she is unable to communicate her sexual needs to Thorvald, homosexual love is rendered inarticulate by the threat it poses to a male infrastructure. Elphinstone is aware of this, and constructs the relationship within her fictional paradigm as another incidence in which the *challenge* to gender binaries reveals the restrictive oppositions in place.

She is not entirely successful in this perhaps, and admitted during an interview, conducted in August 1998, her worry that critics might condemn her for attempting authorship of a

text which has so many contemporary political connotations.[45] Part of the argument one might postulate in criticism of Elphinstone's 'tokenism' in fact, might be that, if we take her preoccupation with homosexuality as influenced by contemporary society and its fashionable insistence on acknowledgement of homosexual love, then surely Leif and Dagfin are unnecessary, and seem likely to become clichéd stereotypes. However, what they also constitute by their inclusion, is a further reaction against repressive Christian based social structures. Furthermore, the reaction of characters who represent mainstream patriarchal ideology to a homosexual couple, demonstrates again the benefit of Fair Isle's position as a meeting point for two ideologies, and the space this creates for compromise and individuality among people not fully indoctrinated into either religious structure. In this sense, Leif and Dagfin offer an extension to the resistance tendered by the female characters. Their characterisation is not, perhaps, as effective. There is very little development of Dagfin in particular. Yet coming from the south, and with a sexual identity which is problematic in twelfth century terms, Leif is another of Elphinstone's outsiders.

It is possible to determine an affinity among groups of people who are made 'outsiders' due to their non-conformity, and Elphinstone does this as a woman for whom the relationship to Scotland her 'home', is problematic. She knows what it is like to be on the periphery, and as a woman identified by others as English, within an anti-English male-dominated society, the subconscious parallel and the idea of coming from something 'other', is easy to discern. In this way, Elphinstone's treatment of homosexual relationships is different from Mitchison's, as Mitchison treats same-sex love as she does heterosexual love in her early fiction. Instead, Elphinstone's illustration of 'otherness' through Lief and Dagfin relates more nearly to the way in which non-standard sexual relationships are addressed by contemporary male novelist Simon Taylor, in *Mortimer's Deep* (1991).

Mortimer's Deep is set, like *Islanders*, in the Middle Ages, and like *Islanders*, too, the novel focuses on an isolated, peripheral community: St Columba's Priory on Inchcolm Island. Homosexual relationships are the focus of *Mortimer's Deep* rather than a secondary issue. The development of the main character, Michael, portrays the struggle between his love for another monk, Edgar, and his determination to be faithful to God. As with Leif and Dagfin, Michael and Edgar's relationship is condemned by their society, the rules of which ensure that not only women, but everything that might be coded female (such as attraction toward the male), is condemned.

In terms of the Old Norse pagan society in *Islanders*, there is very little evidence which might enable us to construct a clear picture of homosexual behaviour and the associated social attitudes. Like the sexuality and desires of women, those of same sex lovers went uncharted prior to the introduction of Christianity (to some degree and in some societies such as Ancient Greece this was because such relationships were unexceptional; in others, similar restrictions to those reflected in the novel applied), and only by advent of increased censure by the Christian Church toward the end of the twelfth century, are we enlightened as to the attitudes toward homosexual activity and, thereby, of the profile and prevalence of same sex relationships. This was, in part, to a development in the role of 'confession' in Christian society. As Foucault explains, 'from 'the Christian penance to the present day, sex was a privileged theme of confession',[46] and by this method of articulating the 'deviant' aspects of sexual behaviour, 'the isolation, intensification and consolidation' of peripheral sexualities occurred. [47] In other words, as intolerance grew, so too did the articulation of proscribed activity.

The Middle Ages are renowned for their misogyny and intolerance of minorities. It is no surprise that the growth of the church, an inherently male oriented institution, in many instances paralleled the growth of intolerance toward both women and homosexual behaviour as minority deviation from the masculine norm.[48] In the twelfth century, the word 'homosexuality' had not yet been coined, but the homosexual act is identifiable in religious doctrine which condemns sexual love between monks, an offence which gradually became the single definition of 'sodomy', and an issue addressed by Taylor in *Mortimer's Deep*. Homosexual behaviour changed in public perception from the accepted preference of a minority 'to a dangerous, anti-social and severely sinful aberration'.[49] The idea of a man's sexual desire for another man went against the Roman Catholic ideal of sex only for procreational purposes within marriage, and in the novel, Thorvald echoes the view that homosexual love should be condemned in explaining to Astrid that 'it's against nature' (*I* 444).

In *Islanders*, Elphinstone subverts this notion, allowing her characters to decide freely whether same sex love should be damned. This applies to the homosexual characters themselves as much as to the other islanders, and like Michael in *Mortimer's Deep*, Leif provides a timeless example of a young man caught between his religious values and his love for another man. He asks the priest,

> 'But sin isn't all black, is it? Not if there's love too. It can be more confusing than that... There is a sin... There has been a sin... I prayed that it might not come my way, that I'd find a way out, and not even

> wish to be tempted anymore. Because when it's confused with what's good, it becomes harder to resist.' (*I* 372)

Elphinstone is aware that for a Christian, brought up to reject homosexual activity, self acceptance is as difficult as social acceptance, and Leif becomes repressed and unhappy, a by-product of the same suppression applied to women:

> The burden of guilt was almost more than he could bear. If Thorvald could only guess what demons Leif had to wrestle with, he would never have dared to call him lucky. Thorvald's life must be so simple. Leif wasn't sure whether he despised or envied him, but suddenly he felt desperately weary of his loneliness. (*I* 186)

This loneliness is essentially rendered inarticulate. Several characters are aware of the situation, but choose to ignore, rather than to openly reject, what they see. Thorvald himself reiterates the standard formula 'it's against nature', but cannot bring himself to reject the lovers, looking past this supposed sin at the men themselves: 'Dagfin has always been a friend to me, and now Leif is my friend too. I'm bound to give them my support, and in this case that means avoiding the law' (*I* 444). With his acceptance, Elphinstone is rejecting the negative restrictions imposed by Christian guilt, and once again she liberates a voice hitherto silent or silenced, in acknowledging sexual possibilities uncharted by history.

Furthermore, in recognising the existence of homosexual activity in a social context that rejects it, Elphinstone is arguably subverting history by her inclusion of Lief and Dagfin in a way that Mitchison's casual acceptance did not. Where community response in Mitchison's Sparta was entirely positive, the Fair Isle community must first face the difficulty of accepting a relationship they believe, in abstract, to be wrong. That they do accept it, however, reveals a development not shown in Mitchison's work, and which is more obviously related to Elphinstone's contemporary society, in which alternative sexuality has become increasingly politicised in the past two decades.[50]

In *Islanders*, the only male character developed aside from Leif and Dagfin is Thorvald, and his liberal attitude toward Leif and Dagfin makes him a positive representative of the structures which govern Fair Isle. During the journey he makes with Astrid to Shetland, the narrative point of view shifts away from the female to an extent, and the reader acquires a more specific picture of the male 'norm'.

I have previously discussed the significance of Erif Der's journey in *The Corn King*, and the journeys made by Hayton's protagonists in the *Cells* trilogy. The journey in *Islanders* is not epic in the same sense as Erif Der's, in that it does not operate over a large period in

time, or cover great distances. As with Marighal and Selyf in Sian Hayton's trilogy, however, the journey made by Astrid and Thorvald to Papa Stour (Papey Stoura in the novel) is the first journey either character makes as an adult, and significantly, unlike Erif and Tarrik, they make the journey together. As Astrid observes when they arrive in Shetland: 'Now they were set ashore together in a strange country' (*I* 244), and this draws them together in opposition to the dangers they encounter. Shetland becomes the 'strange country' in which their journey to adulthood is made; a journey of discovery which represents a distance measurable by their mutual enlightenment, rather than geographically.

The end result of the journey is Astrid's betrothal to Thorvald, and that arranged marriage was a fact of life for Old Norse women is indisputable. Yet Elphinstone is interested in creating a fictional situation in which women do not comply unquestioningly; Astrid does not willingly surrender her right to decide whom, or whether, she will marry. Just as Mitchison does with Erif Der in *The Corn King*, therefore, Elphinstone takes her character out of the immediate confines of Fair Isle society, which is too insular to be understood from within, and allows Astrid the freedom to examine her position within this society from an external viewpoint.

Astrid believes that with geographical relocation, she may regain control of her life. She is determined to reach her father's friends in Shetland, and persuades an unwilling Thorvald to take her with him, little realising that leaving Fair Isle may provide no more liberation than staying. For a young woman, the move is bold. She entrusts herself to Thorvald's protection more for propriety's sake than because she realises what she must be protected from. She can think only of the freedom life away from Fair Isle has to offer. She tells Thorvald:

> 'try to imagine. This isn't my island. My father was drowned here... I don't want to be here. It's like a prison. I feel as though I'm hammering at the walls. I've a place to go. I've friends. But I can't get out. I won't trouble you, I know how to look after myself... This one journey with you would give me back my freedom, and you need never think any more about me.' (*I* 239-40)

She knows she wants to be free from the restrictions which are geographically represented by the small island on which she finds herself. She knows that her only opportunity to forge another fate is to seek her relatives. Nevertheless, although the scale of the journey in *Islanders* is more akin to the scale of the journeys made by Hayton's heroines, the meaning of Astrid's journey resembles that of Erif Der's. Both heroines leave the confines of a society they find restrictive, and both do so in order to find the 'something else' they are

missing. Erif loses sight of the meaning of being Spring Queen. Logic enters ritual and upsets her identification with her role as fertility god. For Astrid, the action of leaving is entirely personal and less confused in many ways, yet like Erif, her journey is in search of her identity as a woman. She is in search of a different space than the one she has been allowed to occupy, and like Mitchison's heroine, distancing herself from her own society allows her a perspective impossible from within.

She discovers almost immediately that her safety depends on male guardianship, and consequently, that the hope that geographical freedom from the island might provide freedom, is illusory; fate is against her, and the most her new guardian will do is provide her with a dowry:

> She wasn't sure now why she'd been so furious... Wherever she went, she would have to accept authority from someone else. She'd never fully understood that before. If Kol had lived to arrange her marriage, he'd certainly have asked her opinion. But no one else was going to care that much. Astrid began to realise for the first time how powerless her orphaned condition had left her. (*I* 280-1)

The power she had counted on exercising had been that of only daughter over father. She commands no power of her own, and without her father's wealth, she has nothing to bargain with.

Astrid is depicted by Elphinstone as a strong, independent young woman, and Thorvald observes her with a mixture of amusement and growing respect as she encounters strangers with ease, and refuses to be cowed by the wealth and status of her prospective guardian: 'Astrid looked so small in front of Amundi, but she wasn't scared of him at all' (*I* 259). Thorvald is at first impressed, and then somewhat condescendingly amused by her decisiveness during their journey back toward Fair Isle:

> 'I think we should stop at Vagr tonight, and go back to the helmsman's house. I'd rather do that the first night than knock on a strange door. Do you agree?'
> 'Very well', said Thorvald, smiling and reaching for his flask. 'We'll do just as you say.' (*I* 298)

Whilst they are travelling overland on foot, Astrid appreciates the freedom she experiences:

> 'You must admit it's good', said Astrid suddenly, 'not being dependent on anything or anybody. You can go where you want to go, just yourself. You don't have to ask for anything'. (*I* 299)

Thorvald's reply: 'What?', demonstrates perfectly his incomprehension at Astrid's enjoyment of this apparent independence. This is one journey of many he intends to make as a trader, and the ability to 'go where you want to go' is already his.

Astrid's tendency toward taking the lead and making decisions, however, becomes irritating to him when she challenges his own masculine wilfulness and self importance, and he demonstrates typically prejudiced assumptions about her gender identity during the brawl which follows a whale hunt:

> 'You shouldn't be here. It's dangerous. You'd better go home.'
> 'Are you going home?' Her voice was challenging, even angry. He couldn't see her face. He'd been sure she was frightened
> 'Of course I'm not!' he said. 'I'm not a coward.'
> 'So you think I am?'
> 'It's not safe for you.'
> 'Yet it is for you?'
> 'You're a woman.'
> 'There are women there!'
> He was exasperated. It seemed as if she wanted to be in a fight. 'I tell you it's not safe. Off you go home!'
> 'You can't tell me where to go!'
> 'It's a fight, girl! Don't be stupider than you can help!' He was so annoyed that he shook her arm hard, to show that he meant what he said.
> His wrist was wrenched round so that he had to let go. Her fist came out of the darkness, and landed a sharp blow on his chin.
> Furious, he lunged at her, but she was gone. (*I* 269)

He demonstrates intolerance for a woman who challenges traditional gender roles. This poses a threat to his own masculinity, and after their betrothal he begins to interpret her openness as a personal slight, raging at her for drawing attention to herself by playing a pipe: 'Do you realise every man in the place was staring at you? You shouldn't be here, anyway. It's no place for a woman. And then you do that!' (*I* 322).

Clearly Thorvald becomes fond of Astrid. Yet the necessity of asserting himself means that the development of their physical relationship is problematic, and Elphinstone examines in detail the dialectic between male and female desire and expectation. As Astrid is becoming a woman, Thorvald is struggling with his own maturation, and he is faced with the expectations inherent in his own gender construction that disallow acceptance of Astrid's will. She is resistant, but her self expression cannot be legitimised within the dominant frame of reference, and a further facet of the woman's problematic sexuality is examined through the sexual relationship which is eventually consummated by the two.

The prospect of a sexual relationship has never presented a physical reality for Astrid:

> He'd have to make love to her, of course. The thought was so embarrassing that she squirmed. She'd seen Thorvald share his cloak with Ragna and disappear across the hillside on midsummer night. His eyes were very blue, just like Olaf's. One day it would have to be somebody... (*I* 281)

and her approach reveals an innocent curiosity which alerts Thorvald to the responsibility he must assume for this very young woman. Whilst Astrid knows that she wants *something* from him, she has no idea what it is or how to get it, and his touch leaves her 'full of unexpected emotion that seemed about to choke her' (*I* 305). Elphinstone constructs for us here the significance of a girl's first sexual encounter, and in conveying Astrid's delicacy and inexperience she drives home the emotional brutality of Thorvald's subsequent abuse:

> He rolled over on top of her, pushing her down into the heather. 'Would you then? Would you?' His breath was warm on her face. She tried to wriggle away, but he pressed still closer. His hands seemed to be everywhere. He felt under her tunic, pulling at her dress. She pushed him away as hard as she could.
> 'What's the matter?'
> 'I don't like it!'
> Thorvald's eyes were hard and unfocussed, like Einar's the night of the Byrstada feast. Suddenly she was struggling, and in panic she fought him off. She'd wanted something from him, but not this. (*I* 316)

In social terms, Thorvald's betrothed is for him already his sexual possession. Astrid's role as a woman is to provide him with sexual pleasure regardless of whether this is reciprocal, and as Catherine MacKinnon explains,

> Each element of the female *gender* stereotype is revealed as, in fact, *sexual.* Vulnerability means the appearance/ reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance... softness means pregnability by something hard... Narcissism insures that woman identifies with that image of herself that man holds up. Masochism means that pleasure in violation becomes her sexuality.[51]

Nevertheless, Thorvald is not insensitive to Astrid's fear, and reassuring himself that he can have her if and when he wants, fails to convince him that this is the right thing to do: 'It would have been fair if he'd forced her, but he saw no pleasure in that, even if he could do it easily' (*I* 317). Astrid exists in a society not too difficult for the contemporary mind to imagine, in which it is considered wrong to 'tease' a man, yet she has not intended to do so, and her instinctive response to the lack of sympathy in his action is to panic and push him away. Rape is a grievous intrusion from which a woman may never fully recover, and Elphinstone draws attention here to the fear of such abuse of power. Her treatment of this issue is sensitive, and she does not allow near-rape to become acceptable even in a fiction set so long ago.

For Astrid, sexual union is a problematic issue. Like many of the women in Elphinstone's fictional society, she finds herself unable to give up her identity and lose herself in her lover:

> She wasn't sure what she felt, but she loved him, she'd give him anything.

> She felt wet and sticky; she wanted him, but she felt bereft too. There was something that still eluded her. They were together now, as they had never been before, but what confronted her in the growing dark was a loneliness she didn't want to face.
>
> 'I love you,' whispered Thorvald, for the first time in his life.
>
> 'Yes,' she said, knowing that she had to shield him from the dark into which she stared with eyes wide open, looking up over his shoulder into nothing at all. (*I* 342-3)

In looking back through the novels of Hayton and Mitchison, it would appear that this is a perennial problem. Excepting the relationship of Erif Der and Tarrik in *The Corn King*, which eventually arrives at a position of equity, sex inevitably involves possession for female characters, and a loss of self which is not endured by their male counterparts, and which ultimately distances them from the role they are intended to occupy as home-maker. Like Ingrid in *Islanders*, Astrid is far more perceptive and far-sighted than her mate, but she has retained some inarticulate hope that sex will connect her to something outside herself, and that she will find security in becoming a part of something else. This is not to be. Sexual fulfilment is not enough, and, like Hayton, Elphinstone does not allow it to provide a solution. Astrid desires for the sexual union to drown all her other dashed hopes, and to immerse the self she cannot explore, into another person, compensating for the loss. This is not something sex can provide, and she is forced to realise that she remains alone, separate, and unfulfilled. She is, ultimately, a woman who cannot look to a male to alter the restrictions of her life:

> In that hut, an illusion had died at last. Tough as a boy, she'd been. She should have been a boy, a shipbuilder's apprentice, allowed to know things, to run as fast as Olaf, to leap over the flames of a Johnsmass fire. She'd realised long ago that such things were impossible, and yet something in her had still resisted, until now. (*I* 344-5)

The 'something in her' which had resisted the reality of womanhood, cannot withstand sexual maturation. The abstract realisation that women do not build ships, and are not well educated outwith the domestic sphere, is not enough to utterly convince her of the futility of her own ambitions, yet this is brought home when she realises that she might be pregnant, which makes her feel utterly trapped. It is impossible for things to be otherwise, but her angry desperation at the fate awaiting her is expressed by her scattering of a group of seals on the shore, which represent the freedom denied her:

> There might even be a child now too. It seemed impossible that such momentous results could ensue from so small a cause. Today she should be closer to him than ever, but instead she felt quite separate, irritated by the thought of being attached to anyone or anything. Astrid suddenly broke into a run, and at once the seals slithered into the sea and swam away in a surge of white water. (*I* 346-7)

Astrid's growing awareness of what it means to be a woman is paralleled by Thorvald's struggle to take on the responsibilities of becoming a man in Old Norse society. His betrothal to Astrid is no more his decision than it is hers. It is arranged by others for the benefit of peace and economic settlement on his island, and although he must assume responsibility of being eldest brother, behaving in the correct manner is often a struggle: 'Thorvald was only fifteen. What had he let them do to him?' (*I* 275). Astrid realises that he too is a pawn in a political situation: 'Thorvald should have spoken to her first. These horrible old men had probably thrown their plot at him, just as they had casually sent word to her' (*I* 281), and Elphinstone portrays them both as children, naively assuming the new roles forced upon them, as future husband and wife:

> '...Astrid?'
> 'Yes?'
> 'You don't mind marrying me?'
> Another gust of wind funnelled through, bringing rain with it. 'Do you mind marrying me?' she asked him.
> 'I should quite like it. I've been thinking about it all day. I think we'd get on.'
> The wind swept along the gutter above, showering them with water.
> Astrid giggled. 'I don't mind either, then.' (*I* 283)

This has greater implications for Astrid, of course. Thorvald will not be prevented from following his dream to be a successful trader, yet Astrid must relinquish any last hope she had of freedom. With female characters such as Gunnhild, Ingebjorg, and even Ingrid, Elphinstone exploits the possibilities of new endings and opportunities for women, constructing new encodings, yet in turning to the past, this freedom is limited; old frameworks deny new endings, and from a feminist point of view, it may be difficult to envisage the positivity of Astrid's arranged marriage and return to Fair Isle, particularly as Astrid herself eventually reconciles herself to the prospect. Really, they are both frightened children, struggling to cope with the roles enforced upon them, and for this reason Astrid is torn between finding some comfort in returning to Fair Isle, and horror at the confinement she feels as soon as she sees the shore.

Ultimately, however, it must be remembered that within the limitations of historical context, a more readily identifiable 'feminist' conclusion would push back the boundaries to an unrealistic degree. With no land or money to recommend her, a woman in Astrid's position would have been highly unlikely to secure independence, and she knows that 'Thorvald would never have to think, as she had had to, what was the likely fate of a girl without a dowry' (*I* 283). Generally speaking,

> [f]eminist critics have analysed marriage as the plot available to woman, her sole means of success or survival, the quest and vocation that absorbs

> all possible *Bildung* and defines her transition to adulthood: marriage symbolises her integration into society...,[52]

and in *Islanders,* Elphinstone does not attempt to take Astrid away from marriage, as acknowledging the reality of history, physical independence would be implausible, and Astrid becomes integrated into society through her marriage

Nevertheless, this should not be judged as failure in a feminist sense, not only because physical independence would be unrealistic, but also because despite the fact that Astrid does indeed become socially integrated, she remains alone within this marriage and within this society, fully conscious of the enforced forfeiture her return to Fair Isle involves. Distance and experience of the wider world allow her to appreciate the predatory nature of Shetland when contrasted with the stability offered by Fair Isle,[53] but this does not cushion the fact that after only the briefest glimpse of the outside world, return is likely to mean forever, and the sea once more symbolises the restrictive life she is about to assume:

> Ahead lay the shore of the island... Astrid had returned. Her own people, now, waited for her here. The island seemed to reach out to her, reassuring, but threatening too, about to enclose her, perhaps forever. She looked back across the sea, to the distant peaks at Svinborg, faint beyond the endless swell that cut off this island and every other island, an endless barrier between her and the world outside. (*I* 350)

Fair Isle is in one way more prison than sanctuary,

> The other women knew nothing of the kind of life Astrid had left behind, and the men who had been abroad had no idea what it would be like to be forced to stay here, perhaps for ever' (*I* 98),

and geographical isolation functions as a metaphor for the young girl, washed up on this twelfth century island as onto the shores of womanhood, and as unlikely to divert the physical development which has changed her from child to woman, as to alter the patriarchal nature of society and the way in which women are expected to live. The attempt to create physical space between herself and Fair Isle, with its embodiment of all that womanhood means; sex, marriage, children, and lack of control, is thwarted by a patriarchy which forces her back into her female role, and the shores of this island symbolise the isolation and containment faced by the great majority of women in Old Norse society.

To address this is not to suggest that Elphinstone intended to offer an entirely bleak ending for Astrid. As with heroines of English Literature such as Thomas Hardy's *Tess* or Richardson's *Clarissa*, Astrid achieves status by enduring rather than acting, and Fair Isle also represents a degree of freedom and individuality only possible within such an isolated community, separated by geography and by a sustained ideology, from the most negative

aspects of the Christian and pagan patriarchies. That Astrid is received into the community more completely as Thorvald's wife is indicated by the inclusion of her voice among the other female voices which form the collective in the novel. Each of these voices is equally individual, and in one sense, her return to Fair Isle, even with its restrictions, is a return to a society in which women enjoy far more equality than they might have done on more fully Christianised areas of the British Isles.

More positively, too, Thorvald does not seem intent on restricting Astrid's development, such as it might be, and he respects her identity as a woman more than he need do given the male supremacy in society. This is evident in the way he symbolically writes her name for her in the dirt, granting her an external manifestation of her identity; an abstraction which confirms her being, which she has never possessed:

> He took a handful of cold ash from the edge of the hearth and spread it over the earth floor, smoothing it with his fingers. Then he stopped to think. Astrid waited, willing him to know the right signs. She'd never thought of it before, but suddenly it felt important. She wanted to see her name.
> 'ᚪ', wrote Thorvald.
> He bent over the ashes, his tongue sticking out as he concentrated. Four more signs followed the first one. 'I think that's right'. He looked at his work critically. 'I'll ask Bjarni when I see him, just to make sure.'
> She was crouching beside him, her spindle abandoned on the bench, looking at his handiwork with awe. 'Is that me?' (*I* 436-7)

Astrid's search for identity is not resolved through her relationship with Thorvald. It is still within his power to form her identity for her, yet in this instance, Thorvald is not categorised as entirely obstructive to Astrid's personal fulfilment

Elphinstone is to a degree influenced by Naomi Mitchison, revealing similar preoccupations with identity. Therefore if we assess the younger writer similarly as a product of her society, it follows that certain aspects of social inequality are common to Mitchison's 1920s and to the 1990s, in spite of the progress made. Astrid does not write her own name; it is inscribed for her by Thorvald. The structures are not in place for self articulation to be a possibility for her. She cannot create intellectual meaning which is reserved for the male.

In another way, however, also attributable to the different social situations in which they operate, these two women and their reasons for making recourse to historical fiction are very different. Elphinstone, as discussed above, has no need for temporal distance in order to examine contemporary gender concerns, and this is demonstrated in part by her choice

of historical location within a more, rather than less, repressed society than her own. Those societies, of Ancient Greece and Rome, which were chosen by Mitchison, offered the protection of distance to subversive ideas about women and power, which Elphinstone did not need. Mitchison utilised history to remove discussions of women and power from the 1920s in *The Corn King* and her other early work, and like Hayton, dissolved the hierarchised relationship between history and myth through the exploitation of magic. Elphinstone, on the other hand, chose to base her characters in a more rather than less restrictive environment than that offered by her contemporary society, and without the use of the supernatural as a subversive tool, they are more restricted by the boundaries of that society than Mitchison's or Hayton's characters were.

One reason, perhaps, for Elphinstone's realist setting in *Islanders*, was the fact that in history, these limitations are in place; the boundary between freedom and subjection is more easily recognised. The boundaries in *Islanders* are clearly defined; the basic precepts by which community life in Old Norse society conducted itself cannot be altered, and Elphinstone does not offer a Utopian fictional reconstruction which would not correlate to reality. In the end, however, there are evident similarities between Mitchison's contemporary society, and Hayton and Elphinstone's. Both perceive a continued need for strategies of resistance to a patriarchal infrastructure in Scotland. For both, women are not yet in a position to choose what may be the ultimate fulfilment for them, because society does not support the career orientated mother who wishes to spend time with a new baby. As Astrid herself comments in *Islanders*, 'there might even be a child now' (*I* 346), subconsciously acknowledging the enormous change that that would bring.

The main difference between Mitchison and Elphinstone is in their choice of setting. Mitchison was drawn to ancient history in her early work; to a society less repressed in many ways than her own, whereas Elphinstone has picked a more repressed society in twelfth-century Fair Isle, and the case of both writers, the choice of historical society reveals close links to the author's own historical context. Both writers write out of a fairly similar desire to carve out a family history of sorts from the silences of patriarchal tradition, although the fact that Elphinstone's society is from a remote part of history means that the relationship is only superficial. Nevertheless, if Hayton's *Cells* relates most obviously to *The Corn King*, then *Islanders* shares the same motivations as *The Bull Calves*. The former is mythical history; the other documentary-style 'solid' history. These two types of historical fiction have overlapping concerns, but offer different ways of solving gender problems. In the former case, female subjugation is mitigated by offering

women magical powers, whilst in the latter, wish fulfillment arises out of giving voice to the silenced, by imagining an alternative history where women's experiences, however tragic and oppressed, is valued and celebrated.

One suggestion for their interest in these societies might be that the past is easier to control. Within contemporary society, the prospect of examining the multitude of gender encodings, both positive and negative, now available to women (wife, mother, business woman, whore, artist, politician), may be daunting, and the twelfth century could therefore be interpreted as an easy option provided by history, to avoid confrontation of an uncontrollable present. Again the poem 'Her Spell', referred to above, supports this:

> (I dare not look upon myself,
> Will not believe
> That what I choose will come to pass.
> I make spells
> Secretly, and in the world,
> I watch them work.
> I say nothing.
> I dare not know
> Who I am,
> For that is forbidden, on pain of torture:
> Threats dead, and still to come.
> Our mothers went through fire,
> So I am afraid
> They will call me mad, and break me
> When I say
> I have more power in these two hands
> Than they have ever dreamed of.)
>
> Because I am afraid
> I do not use it.
> Yet still the earth cries out to me
> For mercy, begs me
> To use my strength
> To save. And still I am afraid
> And pretend
> That I am
> Merely
> Woman.

'[S]till I am afraid' she says, and the witchcraft metaphor explicitly relates the idea of woman's power to her fear of the consequences of using it. To pretend that she is 'merely woman' implies her willingness to pretend that she is as incapable as patriarchal society would have her be, and this may echo the basic reluctance of a late twentieth-century writer to take on a present society offering more varied and unstable optional encodings which are less easy to control.

Is Margaret Elphinstone admitting, then, that with empowerment comes fear of failure, or even of success? In *Making it Work: Women, Change and Challenge in the 1990's* Sue Innes argues that, '[t]he dilemma of managing change faces most women in Britain today', and that this is compounded by the 'dilemmas created by partial change and by apparent change which becomes elusive when you reach out your hands for it'.[54] This implies that it might in some cases seem easier to return to a patriarchal code, rather than to take a risk on one's own ability, and Rosalind K. Marshall is careful to point out that this fear of empowerment in the 1990s could not be blamed on anyone but women themselves in many cases:

> It might be tempting to suppose that this unhappy state of affairs is the result of direct masculine prejudice, but the reasons are much more complex. Feminist writers have tended to perceive in the employment situation a crucial exploitation of cheap, dispensable female labour by unscrupulous employers, but most have recognised that women's own attitudes have also played their part. For many thousands of women, matrimony and motherhood do remain the principal aims in life.[55]

Women are to some extent responsible for the situation, and Elphinstone alerts the reader to the danger in a relaxation of feminist thought and activity through her fiction, when women's problems remain unresolved.

In light of Elphinstone's genuine desire to explain and sympathise with those whom history negated, however, it is unlikely that fear of empowerment was the most significant reason for her creation of the community on twelfth century Fair Isle. It is of greater consequence that within this historical novel, Elphinstone has presented us with a female perspective on life in a patriarchal society. In the end, this is similar to the contemporary situation, and thus Elphinstone focuses on the drawbacks of life as part of the financial and social minority, and gives women a voice. It is not necessarily easy to reconstruct. Elphinstone cannot alter the basic gender divisions, which prevent Astrid from becoming a ship-builder's apprentice, Ingrid from leaving home, or Ragna from having a real choice about whom she will marry. Nevertheless it becomes obvious as we study the underlying dynamic of this society, that women maintain and exercise a certain amount of control over their lives, and although there is no suggestion that the 'others' here are completely validated, Elphinstone does go some way toward a reconstruction of history by deconstructing standard historical narratives.

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[1] Margaret Elphinstone, *Islanders* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994). All references are to this edition.
[2] Lisa Babinec, ' 'Between the Boundaries': An Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', in *Edinburgh Review* 93 (1995), pp. 51-60, (p. 54).
[3] Elaine Showalter, 'The Female Tradition', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press: 1991), pp. 269-288, (p. 271).

[4] This quotation is taken from unofficial email correspondence I had with Margaret Elphinstone, dated 2/2/1999. This is included here as Appendix 4.
[5] Babinec, p. 57.
[6] Douglas Gifford, 'Contemporary Scottish Women Writers II: Seven Writers in Scotland', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy MacMillan (Edinburgh University Press 1997), pp. 604-629, (p. 607).
[7] From an unpublished interview I had with Margaret Elphinstone, Germersheim 1998. This is included here as Appendix 3.
[8] Germersheim, 1998.
[9] Judith P. Zinsser, *History and Feminism: A Glass Half Full* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 17.
[10] Gifford, p. 607.
[11] Babinec, p. 56.
[12] See Chapter 4.
[13] Gerda Lerner, 'Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges', in *Feminist Studies* 3, no.12 (Fall 1975), pp. 8 - 13. Cited by Judith Lowder Newton, 'History as Usual? Feminism and the "New Historicism"', in *The New Historicism*, ed. by H. Aram Veeser (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), p. 154.
[14] Germersheim, 1998.
[15] Jónas Kristjánsson *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*, trans. by Peter Foote (Reyjavík. Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag. 1988), p. 202.
[16] Preface to *The Orkneyinga Saga* ed. by Jospeh Anderson (Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1991).
[17] Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 3.
[18] Jochens, p. 213.
[19] *The Laxdoela Saga*, trans. by A. Margaret Arent (Seattle. University of Washington Press, 1964), p. 112.
[20] Taken from Helgason's edition of *Eddedigte* I-III.
[21] Jochens, *Norse Images*, pp. 109-110.
[22] Babinec, p. 53.
[23] Babinec, p. 53.
[24] Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The boydell Press, 1991), p. 36.
[25] The alþingi was an annual government body.
[26] Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca and London: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 2.
[27] Jochens, *Old Norse Society*, p. 6.
[28] Valerie M Thom *Fair Isle: An Island Saga* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1989), p. 3.
[29] Sue Innes, *Making it Work: Women, Change and Challenge in the 1990's* (Chatto and Windus: London 1995), p. 25.
[30] Jochens, *Old Norse Society*, p. 86.
[31] Evelyn Acworth, *The New Matriarchy*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1965), p. 32.
[32] Jochens, *Old Norse Society*, p. 30.
[33] Jochens, *Norse Images*, p. 213.
[34] Jochens, *Old Norse Society*, p. 62.
[35] Gunnhild appears particularly frequently in the Icelandic sagas.
[36] Germersheim, 1998.
[37] Germersheim, 1998.
[38] Alice Brown, *Equality Issues in Scotland: A Research Review* (Glasgow: Equal Opportunities Commission, 1994), p. 9.
[39] Hans Sebald, *Witchcraft : The Heritage of a Heresy* (Elsevier: New York 1978), p. 148.
[40] Sebald, p. 147.
[41] Margaret Elphinstone, 'Her Spell', in *Outside Eden: The Poetry of Margaret Elphinstone* (The Sundial Press. Gloucestershire 1990).
[42] Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 3.
[43] Many writers have used history to explore same sex relationships. Umberto Echo's *The Name of the Rose*, Simon Taylor's *Mortimer's Deep* and Christopher Whyte's *The Warlock of Strathearn* are examples.
[44] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York; Guilford: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 3.
[45] Germersheim, 1998.
[46] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (1976; London: Penguin, 1990), p. 61.
[47] Foucault, p. 48.
[48] For in depth discussion of the relationship between homosexuality and misogyny within Christian doctrine, see John Boswell, *Christianity, Homosexuality and Social Tolerance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
[49] Boswell, p. 295.

[50] For further reading, see in particular Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990). Butler discusses compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentricism, and attempts to disrupt the categories of sex, gender and sexuality.
[51] Catherine McKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory', in *Signs* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1982) pp. 515-44, cited by Sedgwick, p. 7.
[52] Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 12.
[53] Gifford, p. 607.
[54] Sue Innes, *Making it Work: Women, Change and Challenge in the 1990's* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995), p. xii.
[55] Rosalind K. Marshall, *Virgins and Viragos: A History of Women in Scotland from 1080 to 1980* (London: Collins, 1983), p. 310.

Conclusion

Pasts and Present: the Development in Scottish Women's Historical Fiction in the Twentieth-century.

As this study approaches its conclusion, it becomes possible to review the contribution to the historical genre offered by Scottish women in the twentieth-century, and also to assess the direction in which the genre is headed. Within the Scottish literary canon, history has always been visible, and at the turn of the new century, this shows little signs of change. From the age of Walter Scott, Scottish writers have been preoccupied with the historical novel, and throughout the nineteenth-century, the genre developed many facets or sub-genres, which were exploited by writers for a variety of ends. The attraction of history for male writers has been in the materials it provides for examining the cultural, religious and political forces that have shaped Scotland, and the concerns examined by writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, John Buchan and Neil Gunn have been discussed briefly in the introduction. For female writers, however, I have argued that history has provided a base from which to examine the construction of gender, and to subvert this using a variety of means, in a move toward the reinstating of the female voice.

The historical construction of Scotland, and the problems associated with this, have been debated numerously by Edwin Muir in *Scott and Scotland* (1936), Marinell Ash in *The Strange Death of Scottish History* (1980), Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull in *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (1989), and by Cairns Craig in *Out of History* (1996), all of whom discuss the cultural effects of the Union of 1707 and Scotland's consequent return to a more mythical vision of history which championed national heroes such as William Wallace and Mary Queen of Scots. The attachment of Scottish culture to these mythical 'Bravehearts' of the country's past has perhaps created a history for Scotland which is divorced from reality. Yet equally, a Scotland has been created which provides colour for the imagination, and for the fictional reconstruction of that history.

As historical fiction has developed, however, recourse to the Scottish past has taken many forms, and from the early realist narrative of Scott's *Waverley* (1814), grew a movement that eventually progressed to incorporate the 'speculative' approach of Colin MacKay's *The Song of the Forest* (1986), and the sparse, 'saga-like' structure of George Mackay Brown's *Vinland* (1992). Directly from the early historical novels of Scott, however, there also evolved a tradition of Historical Romance that flourished amidst the historical climate peculiar to Scotland. Scotland has long been associated with the battle of opposing forces;

whether this be pagan and Christian, Jacobite and Whig, or Highland and Lowland, and this has given rise to a plethora of novels of action, adventure, and love stories.

Historical romance by female writers would appear to have been unaffected by the feminism of the 1960s and 70s, and it returns instead to a safer, more stereotypical structure of gender absolutes. This genre, as Chapter 1 discusses, offered occasional glimpses of resistance to patriarchal structures. Yet resistance was largely inconsistent; tempered by the romantic appeal of stereotypical plot and hegemonic male-female relationships. Pre-figuring Naomi Mitchison, however, I have identified a group of writers who represent the beginning of resistance to patriarchal discourse, through history. As I have argued, novels such as Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen* (1898) and Violet Jacob's *Flemington* (1911), begin to demonstrate an acknowledgement of the female hitherto ignored or made peripheral by male historical fiction. They only go so far, however, and fall short of the positive female representation found in the novels of Naomi Mitchison, Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone.

These women have all tackled history in different ways. During the early part of her career, Naomi Mitchison concentrated entirely on non-Scottish history. Ancient Greece and Rome formed the basis for her work between 1923 and 1931, and she used the distanced this offered to engage in an examination of female identity and desire which would have been impossible in a contemporary setting. With *The Bull Calves*, however, Mitchison's work became more identifiably Scottish, and both Hayton and Elphinstone focus on medieval Scottish settings, in which notions of gender identity and hegemonic discourse might be challenged.

These three women have all written historical fiction which is identifiably Scottish. Yet it remains that of the three, only Mitchison was born in Scotland, and all experienced early life elsewhere. This begs the question of why they effectively chose this society. Why, in the end, did they come back? Partially, of course, the answer is to be found in their personal histories. Each came from Scottish families, and for Mitchison and Elphinstone, early holidays spent in Scotland consolidated a feeling of belonging which might otherwise have been absent. More than this, however, it must be acknowledged that Scotland has offered these women a privileged site of negotiation for gender concerns. As a peripheral nation, cast as politically inferior and culturally barbaric compared with England as civilised administrative centre, Scotland offers herself as a historical culture, and as a nation on the borderlines, just as the female has been peripheral to the male.

What links these writers is their conscious adoption of Scotland, therefore, and also a commitment to reinstating the female role in the development of the society in which they found themselves. Women have made a contribution, they are aware, and as women, these writers are at pains to imagine the contribution made by their forebears, in a previously male-dominated past. In this sense, their historical novels have contemporary relevance, and can therefore be analysed as past of the developing recognition of women in Scottish society (and indeed Western society in general): the progress, and the failures.

Mitchison, Hayton and Elphinstone approach history in a variety of ways, yet they share a preoccupation with inherently female issues such as marriage, motherhood, sexual desire, the nature and symbolic meaning of virginity, and witchcraft. All three authors touch upon these questions, and in each case their female characters challenge the construction of a history which has ignored their importance, and relegated them to the uncharted private, domestic sphere. They do this, I have argued, in two ways. Firstly, as with Mitchison's *The Corn King*, and Hayton's *Cells* trilogy, history is subverted through the introduction of magic. Secondly, as in *The Bull Calves* and *Islanders*, the domestic is brought from the periphery into the centre of history, and a female narrative focus becomes the perspective from which history is constructed.

Naomi Mitchison stands alone in early twentieth-century Scottish literature as the most radical, liberated and challenging voice to address the issue of female sexual identity and desire through the historical genre. In her earliest novels and stories, she engaged with a visible struggle to reinstate the female, and consequently novels such as *The Conquered* (1924) and *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (1924) are centred on male figures, as she worked toward a more confident assertion of the female voice. With characters such as Gersemi in 'When the Bough Breaks' (1924) and Nikodike in *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, Mitchison touched on this. Yet it was with Erif Der in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), that she eventually realised her own potential to articulate female agency, an approach to sexual expression and fulfilment which was extremely radical in the 1930s.

In *The Bull Calves*, Mitchison's attitude toward female identity and expression altered visibly as a consequence of her own changed circumstances. In moving north to Carradale, she became deeply involved with the community there, and the history of Jacobite turmoil which she represents in this story, reflects a more domestic vision of female identity. *The Bull Calves* offers a more 'solid' history, in a sense, and in this case, subversion occurs

with the shift in narrative focus away from male historical figures, and onto the female figure of Kirstie Haldane.

Notwithstanding the subversive stance Mitchison takes in placing a woman at the centre of history, however, it remains that Kirstie falls short of the radical development represented by *The Corn King's* Erif Der, and I have argued that this was a direct result of Mitchison's attempt to try and accomplish too many things with *The Bull Calves*. Her own feminism may not have lessened. Yet she was nonetheless prepared to sacrifice it for the acceptance of a community in which her liberal view of sexual behaviour would not have been tolerated.

Like Mitchison in *The Corn King*, Hayton returns to a more mythological 'fantastic' type of history. In *Cells of Knowledge* (1989), *Hidden Daughters* (1992), and *The Last Flight* (1993), Christianity meets paganism much as the mythical met the historical in Mitchison's novel, and Hayton uses this as the basis for deconstructing a series of binaries: Christian/pagan, history/myth, real/supernatural, and, ultimately, male/female. Hayton challenges stereotypical notions of the female as weak and passive through her strong, intelligent female heroines, and as with Erif Der, their supernatural powers present a physical challenge to patriarchal social structures. As I have argued, this is problematic, and it is with the issue of motherhood, the relationship between the creativity and the procreativity of her heroines, that the contemporary debate as to whether the female is biologically or socially constructed comes into play.

All three women focus on motherhood to a degree. In Mitchison's work, motherhood is tackled in various ways. Moiro in *Cloud Cuckoo Land* is her earliest mother, and her inability to decide herself when she is ready to have another child echoes Mitchison's contemporary concern with inadequate education regarding birth control. Mothers, such as Moiro, Erif Der and Kirstie Haldane, often lose children in Mitchison's fiction, a direct response to her own experience of the deaths of her own eldest and youngest, and the presence of a new generation is often visible (for example, with Klint-Tisamenos, son of Erif in *The Corn King*) which evokes a feeling of optimism and continuation.

This is not the case with Hayton and Elphinstone, however. Motherhood remains a crucial element in the construction of female identity (to become a mother or not to become a mother) in the novels of both. Yet in this case, each investigates the idea of motherhood more problematically as a dual embodiment of fulfilment and entrapment. Marighal in

Hayton's *Cells* chooses to experience motherhood, and enjoys the experience, although she inevitably loses her immortal power as a result. Astrid in *Islanders*, on the other hand, equates pregnancy with the limitations of her opportunities, although having children is a prospect over which she ultimately has no control.

As I have discussed, the role of the female as tied to the act of procreation and to the body has been frequently discussed, both by French feminists and their followers. In a recent article entitled 'Maternal Histories' Amanda Gilroy continues this trend, in examining the continued attention paid to the issues surrounding motherhood by critics and theorists. Motherhood, she asserts, has been subject to analyses on the grounds that 'even something as 'natural' as motherhood is seen as socially, culturally constructed'.[1] This may well be true. Yet what appears to be missing is a corresponding change in social structures which allows for the mother – the 'everyday' mother rather than the intellectual theorist – to embrace the positive experience of motherhood within a socially supportive context. In short, inadequate childcare provision still prevents women from escaping the role of prime nurturer, and this remains a visible preoccupation in the historical fiction of Hayton and Elphinstone.

The comparison of the historical fiction produced by these writers, with an in-depth study of their exploitation of non-historical fantasy, would most certainly result in a wider understanding of the personal motivations and contemporary social ideologies behind their work.[2] The mixture of freedom and constraint which appears to draw writers to history functions in a similar way with regard to fantasy, whether this be contemporary or futuristic, and arguably this stems from a similar dissociation from reality. Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Space Woman* (1962), Sian Hayton's *The Governors* (1994), and Margaret Elphinstone's *The Incomer* (1987) and *The Sparrow's Flight* (1990), each attempts to examine alternative methods of social organisation which offer freedom from the constraints of hegemonic gender roles – much in the same way as history.

Again, similar issues arise. Mitchison examine the idea of sexual intimacy as an exchange of sympathy and comfort, whilst Elphinstone's matriarchs assert control over their reproductive capabilities by choosing the father of their children according to the specific needs of the community they control. In Hayton's *Governors*, Hester is trapped by her role as wife and mother, and her pregnancy causes her to become depressed and introverted, entering a fantasy world in which her sexuality is explored as a separate element to her reproductive function.

There is nothing to suggest that writers move specifically in one direction, from fantasy to history or vice versa. Mitchison returned to historical fiction after producing several science fiction novels, whilst Hayton's *Governors* has been followed by no other fiction to indicate a preference either way. Only with Margaret Elphinstone does fantasy appear to have been supplanted in favour of history, and in addressing the remaining question as to where Scottish women's historical fiction will go from here, her latest novel *The Sea Road* indicates a continued movement toward the same type of historical fiction which has been produced by Scottish male writers toward the end of the twentieth-century.

Published in August 2000, *The Sea Road* returns once more to the Viking Age. This time, Elphinstone takes the famous story of Leif Eiriksson, the first Icelander to land on the American continent. This is not the first Scottish novel to tackle this momentous event. George MacKay's *Vinland* (1992) recreates the journey from the point of view of the fictional character, Rognvald Eiriksson , a young Orkney stowaway. Again, Elphinstone subverts the tale for feminist ends. No longer in keeping with the traditional construct of this 'historical' saga tale, *The Sea Road* is narrated by Gudrid, wife of Leif's younger brother, and the first woman to travel from Iceland to 'Vinland'.

Structurally, *The Sea Road* recalls Hayton's *Cells of Knowledge*. Again, a monk is responsible for recording the story as it is recounted by Gudrid, now an old woman. After the initial 'Praefatio', however, Agnar does not interrupt Gudrid's narrative, and his job is simply to write down what she tells him, rather than to judge her. What his presence in the narrative serves to do instead, in fact, is to undermine the male bias of history further, because he effectively records events as they were experienced from a female perspective, one hundred years before the first acknowledged record of these events, which prefigured the male point of view, was made.

Throughout Gudrid's story, issues which specifically relate to the female experience of Viking society are touched upon, such as childbirth, sexual fulfilment and, again, witchcraft. With regard to this last issue, *The Sea Road* reaches back even further into the history of a partially Christianised society, and many of the characters are shown to be suspicious of the new religion, rather than accepting as the characters of *Islanders* are. Elphinstone's endows Gudrid with the second sight, and in so doing moves the novel's supernatural element on from Gunnhild's strictly practical use of magic in *Islanders*.

Although the late publication date combined with limitations of space, mean that I am unable to do justice to *The Sea Road*, I would like to acknowledge its position in the continuing development of Scottish women's engagement with a history from which they have been excluded, and also within a general movement within Scottish historical fiction, away from the image of Scotland as the land of William Wallace and of Mary Queen of Scots. As we move forward into the twenty-first century, the history with which writers have become increasingly preoccupied, is the shadowy history of the long forgotten past; the Norse and Celtic cultures which have gone into the make-up of Scotland. Novels such as Colin MacKay's *The Song of the Forest* (1986) and Mackay Brown's *Vinland* (1992) have created a type of history, which, developing Neil Gunn's *Sun Circle* (1933), speculates as to the way in which people lived, and the rhetoric they commanded. Elphinstone does this too, to a degree. In *The Sea Road* as in *Islanders*, the interference of contemporary expression and analyses is minimal, and she concentrates on recreating a historical era as it might have been. Where she departs from her male counterparts, and so moves into a tradition of specifically feminist interpretations of that history, occupied by both Hayton and Mitchison before her, is in her use of a subversive focal point, to disrupt the standard male view of Scottish history. This work endeavoured to explore the strategies of subversion that have been deployed by those novelists intent on shifting the focus of history from male to female experience.

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[1] Amanda Gilroy, 'Maternal Histories', in *The European English Messenger*, IX/2, (2000), pp. 41-46, (p. 41).

[2] I have touched on this in a paper presented at the ESSE 2000 conference, entitled 'Ethical Unrealities: The Move Toward History and Fantasy in Contemporary Scottish Women's Fiction'.

Appendix 1

Interview with Sian Hayton, Glasgow, February 5th 1997.

1. Q: How do you see yourself in relation to the Scottish literary tradition?
   A: I try to find things out by writing. That's why I do it. I like the history and I probably like that more than I do reading fiction. I do like Walter Scott, but other than that, I wouldn't know where to place myself because I don't read much fiction, - mainly because I spend so much time researching history for my own stuff. I do come from a very Scottish family, though, and I believe that as a Scot in exile I have extra-strong Scottish identifications, literary or not.

2. Q: Where did your own interest in myth begin?
   A: With my childhood in Scotland. My Uncle Roddie, who was my favourite uncle, used to tell me all the ballad and folk stories he knew, which I loved.

3. Q: In the *Cells* trilogy, Christianity is set up against paganism, and Christianity comes out negatively for both sexes. What are your own views on Christianity?
   A: Women in history are always there for men to react against, so I wanted to have women at the centre of this one, with the men reacting against them, which is why there are stereotypical warriors, and women-hating monks.

4. Q: In what way, if any, do you see the daughters' dependency on their father as a failure in female strength?
   A: There's always a limit to power. There has to be.

5. Q: Why did you choose to make an intact hymen the price of immortality?
   A: There always has to be a limit to power, and virginity is not only heralded as the right thing by the Christian patriarchy, but by other systems as well. Virginity is powerful within matriarchies too.

6. Q: Have you consciously examined contemporary society through the trilogy in any way?
   A: Yes, in that the sisters face moral and ethical dilemmas whilst they are in the stronghold [in *Hidden Daughters*], which is intended to be a convent-like set-up. In there the sisters don't have to face life, and when they do, they're faced with the same

moral and ethical dilemmas as we are today. They have to work out if it's best to be charitable, when to give food to the poor, and how much contact to have with the outside world. It's about how selfish people are, and how scared they are. How they view what's right through the rules they live by.

7. Q: How religious was your upbringing?
   A: My upbringing was not religious at all really, but I saw it all around me and I loathe the patriarchal nature of the Church.

8. Q: Margaret Elphinstone has criticised Drust for failing to live up to his symbolic weight in *The Last Flight*. What is your response to this?
   A: I was more interested in the male characters in *The Last Flight*, in March as well as Drust. Maybe March more so, in fact – how he was feeling and so on. He has had time to reflect, and isn't a typical warrior or monk as he has been both. As has Drust, which makes them more complex characters, I suppose, and easier to criticise maybe.

Appendix 2

The following represents the contents of a letter dated September 1999, in which Sian Hayton responded to a number of questions I had asked her in the form of a letter. I have preserved the original formatting.

Where did you do most of your 'growing up'?

I've never really stopped growing up. That is to say I've never become a 'grown up' because being such always seemed to me a form of death - consequently I can be a terrible pain in the something or other because I won't take anything for granted.

In straight biographical terms I was born in Liverpool but left it at age seven. I have few pleasant memories of the city. We went to live in the Lake District for a while and that was when I first began to live. Everything was brilliantly coloured after the uniform grey of the city, everything smelled better, sounds were meaningful, even school was pleasant. The next stop was Yorkshire where I just lived like a normal child, falling out of trees, scrumping apples, collecting frogspawn and so on. We came to Scotland when I was about ten and I was keen to get here because my mother's family were proud of their Scottishness. I was disappointed. In Yorkshire I had been taught in a liberal atmosphere where encouragement was the keynote; when I came to Scotland, in addition to the strangeness of the secondary system I found discouragement at every turn. I 'grew up' being slapped down.

Were you part of a large family?

I am an only child.

What stands out as the greatest influence on your life as you were growing up?

The struggle between my maternal family's depressive tendencies and my paternal family's boundless optimism.

You mentioned before your Uncle Roddie, who used to tell you about myths and legends. What appealed to you about that sort of story?

The escape into another world where anything was possible.

How did becoming a mother affect your life?

I did some growing up.

In the nineties, many women are forced to return to work very soon after having children. In your own experience, have you ever felt that motherhood is not awarded the status and support it deserves within society?

You can't study the roles within a society separate from that society. I, personally, wish that I had known more about developmental psychology before I started raising children. I would, I hope, have been more patient with them and prepared them better for the life ahead. This being the case, I think it would be better for both men and women to receive more information about child-rearing as part of the educational process. However, having seen in operation people who take parenting very seriously I think they are too 'child-centred' and the children they nurture are tyrannical, undisciplined and a menace to all about them.

Society gets what society moulds.

It has been suggested that women in contemporary society are expected, unrealistically, to do everything - career, motherhood, wife, etc. Do you think it is difficult for modern women to feel fulfilled in a social sense, if they fail to achieve all these things?

Probably. The mistake modern women make is in thinking that their struggles are anything new. For a brief period in the first half of this century it is true that most women were not required to work outside the home after marriage. The man was the provider; the woman kept the home. Keeping the home in that period was hard work and required talent, skill and strength and a woman described as 'a good manager' was a figure of respect. Then came World War II and women were compelled to go back to the factories they had left with a sigh of relief because if housekeeping was tough, life in the factories had been a lot tougher. But change had begun. First, in the fifties, came labour-saving devices and housekeeping was down-graded and the housewife was bored, so the workplace looked more attractive. Then women remembered they could earn their own money and the workplace looked even more attractive. Now a woman expects to go out to work, keep a house and raise children just like her great-great-grandmother and generations previous. What's different today is that if she's middle-class or aspiring to it she thinks she has to do all of them creatively and successfully, but that's an affliction she shares with her man. 'Getting by', helping the community and enjoying what is to be enjoyed are no longer acceptable criteria for the good life by either sex. The curse of the modern woman - and man - is grinding ambition. For those still enjoying the ancestral affliction of grinding poverty, of course, it would be a source of delight to have a house to keep and a job to go to. Their children will have their own agenda.

In our previous discussion in '97, you said that you felt very strongly about the negative influence of Calvinism in Scotland. In what ways do you feel this has affected you personally?

I've been looking more closely at the sixteenth century over the last year or so and I am not sure if it is correct to call the Church of Scotland 'Calvinist'. I doubt if Calvin, Zwingli, Beza and so forth would wish to be identified with it. Scotland has produced a form of Protestantism which is unique to it. Having picked that particular nit, I must add that the negative aspects of the Kirk have been a powerful influence on me personally for the following reason. In I922 my grandfather was an engineering officer in the merchant navy. In those days a man left on voyage and his family would have neither sight nor word of him for years. My grandmother miscarried her sixth child and there were some rather nasty money troubles, a terrible disgrace to the petit-bourgeoise. She was congenitally cyclothymic so, isolated, she sank into a deep depression. The elders of the Kirk, her father included in their number, came to her house and, so far from offering solace and support, they rebuked her for incontinently grieving over her dead child. The next morning she took my mother and her younger brother to her mother's house, went back home and hanged herself. My mother passed on her subsequent anger and depression to me. I was raised to despise and ignore all kinds of religion which meant that when I came to my later teens I found the subject fascinating. I've worked through all that and have learned everyone is at once a victim and product of the time they are born, and to apportion blame is futile. Sadly I see signs that, particularly in the rural Highlands, the Kirk can still be the highly normative and ungenerous institution it has been for the last two centuries.

In *The Last Flight,* the mention of Allah enters a Christian world. How do you feel about other religions or approaches to Christianity? Do you feel that within Christianity itself, there are more and less restrictive ideologies?

I raised the topic of Islam in the *Last Flight* partly to demonstrate how diverse our culture could be at that time, and to show that, before the Mullahs got to it, Islam had a face arguably more benign than Christianity. As to my views on other religions, I must repeat my main thesis for today; everyone is influenced by the time, the place and the society they are born into. Someone once told me that religion is a way of getting in touch with our ancestors. Note though, that I use the word religion specifically in its oldest sense as something which binds people and this is not to be confused with mysticism, which is personal and has very little to do with the form of religion. By keeping ancestral traditions and adding judicious amounts of our own inspiration for posterity to join with in worship

we gain a sense of continuity with our past. At its best religion of any kind gives comfort and support to its members, and if they need it, it can give them moral guidance also. Christianity and Islam, the heirs of Judaism, are heavy on the moral guidance.

I must confess it exasperates me to see how nowadays the Christian church is bending over backwards to prove it is 'relevant'. It seems to me to be grovelling to the younger members in society saying 'Look, look, we're ace people, you've got to like us, please!' The response of 'youth' is to sneer and switch on the television and I don't blame them. If the Church had more confidence in its message and its role in the social order it wouldn't feel the need to behave like a solicitous lover. As it is we see a monstrous diversity, people are twanging guitars and bashing tambourines, lifting their arms to pray, dancing round the communion table, boring the Sunday school children, and yet the membership continues to drop. Those teenagers who feel the stirring of devotion make their own way to God. At the same time the elderly, who have very little time left, are ignored. The Church they grew up in and which should be a source of comfort to them in their last years is not interested in them and the form of service they have come to love is being dismantled before their startled gaze. Ambitious young ministers can't wait to leave the parishes and get a job at 'head office'. All in all the picture is so like that in northern Europe just before the Reformation I find myself looking around for John Knox.

Meanwhile the members of Islam, feeling persecuted by all those around them, bind their children to religion with fear of the unknown. In this case the religious organisation has relevance for the society it serves. It might not be the ideal foundation for a Godly community, but at least they have discipline. The demands of the global community will break in and change it at last, and its inner tensions will finally destroy it, but for the meantime it stands as something to be studied by all who want to see the Christian religion flourish.

A society without ideology is not a society, but a collection of individuals. Christian ideology was the principle one informing Western Civilisation- it tamed the 'blond beast' (at least it did so until the Crusades when the blond beast used Christianity as an excuse to go forth and be beastlier than ever.) I suspect that without Christianity the world would be even more chaotic than it is, or else he would be more rigid than it is. Of all the world religions I have had a look at, I have found Christianity is most tolerant of novelty. It's had to be, in some ways, because it has dealt with the most ferociously individualistic peoples. Buddhism is far more pacific, but it operates in East Asian cultures where the community always takes precedence over the individual. I've gone on far too long over this, but it is a subject which has always intrigued me.

In *Cells of Knowledge,* Marighal appears to represent a strong woman, both mentally and physically, and yet she craves the security of the Christian church. In *Hidden Daughters,* however, Barve is quite openly hostile to Christianity. Was this a conscious progression?

Marighal craved the security of the Christian church because she saw it as a way to get away from the other, more sinister patriarchy at home. This was her first incarnation as you will recall and she proved to be over-optimistic. Barve had been incarnated more than once before and was not so naive. Yes it was a conscious progression.

To what degree would you agree that there is a link between Christianity and sexual repression?

I suggest, if you haven't done so, you should read Karen Armstrong - *The Gospel According to Woman.* It helped to clear up quite a lot of confusion in my mind but I will go somewhat further than her for the following reason. Men have resented the power women have over their fives for millenia. In its initial centuries Christianity was a radical movement and as such prosletysed among the 'second class' citizens, in this case women and slaves. When Constantine made it the established religion it began to take on board the current norms and practices which were anti-feminist. In the later days of he Roman Empire women had been growing more powerful and independent and terrified a lot of the men so that when the Christians produced the writings of the desert fathers it had the tools to justify despatching the feminine back into the shadows.

I don't think at its heart Christianity is any more or less repressive of sexuality than any other religion which seeks to civilise its members. When it first came to Britain it was basically monastic and many of the communities founded at that time supported both sexes. These were often founded by women an Anglo Saxon women enjoyed high status in that society. The misogyny didn't start until after the Vikings destroyed the monasteries in Britain and the Hibernian monks came over to help restore religious orders. Their principal focus was on denying the flesh in any form. In Ireland the Roman conquest had had no effect, and the people were still basically Celtic. In this society women were socially powerful and had trained as warriors. They held property in their own right and were prepared to back their claims with force if need be. Their men-folk resented this and so were delighted to adopt the repressions of Christianity and the Roman experience repeated itself. This made women socially and morally inferior and so sexuality became not just one among many forms of fleshly indulgence but a surrender to a dark force and inherently sinful.

Do you think there is an element within this which is particularly 'Scottish'?

I think it is particularly Northern European. It might simply have to do the amount of clothing we have to wear in a colder climate.

How would you describe your own relationship with Scotland?

It's pride mixed with distrust - a very Scottish condition.

Between I950 and I980 the majority of Scottish Historical fiction published has been populist romance. Can you identify any reason why women like yourself in the late twentieth-century have returned to writing 'serious' historical fiction?

I didn't start out to write historical fiction, I started to write fantasy and found it unsatisfying because there were no limits to make the operation interesting. Once I insisted on including our cultural history it became more of a challenge.

If women have started writing serious historical fiction rather than bodice rippers it is probably more to do with the way history was taught to us in secondary school. We were given what I can only describe as 'blokish' history with dates and battles and monarchs and power struggles; fiction was a way of producing 'chickish' history, looking at the way ordinary people lived their day to day lives and what influenced their attitudes to other people etc. Latterly a number of women have started writing this sort of real history -Jenny Wormald, Margaret Sanderson, Alison Plowden and their like - telling us about the structure of grass roots society. This is very popular with the general reader *of* history because it produces something they can relate to. Fiction may well become redundant.

Do you find that historical situations provide liberation for female characters?

'History is another country,' and so forth. It can be a playground, but there are limits. As I said before I like the limits, they are a challenge which produce creative thinking. It is a delight to invent authentic characters, both female mid male, and to describe the world that shapes their actions.

How do you feel about women's exclusion from history, and did you consciously attempt to combat this in writing the Cells trilogy?

As I said there are now women historians who are redressing the balance and putting the domestic back on the stage. If women have been excluded from history it is a tragedy for and men, both.

Would you say that you are aware of being a woman writer, or would you define yourself simply as a writer, or perhaps even as a feminist writer?

I only think of myself as a writer. The Feminist movement is a symptom of change, not a prime mover.

In *Cells* the main narrative is annotated quite heavily, less so *in Hidden Daughters,* and in *The Last Flight*, Josia offers little opinion on events. To what degree is this representative of the weakening hold of the Church?

The annotations dwindle partly because I hate repeating myself and partly because the production staff of Polygon moaned so much about them I felt obliged to cut them down. I justified it to myself by saying that Josia and his brethren had been side-lined as part of the process of destroying the Celtic Christian church. The Roman Christian church was just getting into its stride.

As a female figure, how does Kigva relate to the Giant's daughters? Do you see her as a less positive image of womanhood?

Kigva was the aboriginal princess who got seduced by Kynan at the beginning of Cells; Culhuch is the offspring of their brief union. She had already fallen under the giant's influence and been betrayed by him. I enjoyed producing a plot as complex and involuted as any written by a Celtic bard. Part of the plotting of the trilogy is her revenge on the giant and his progeny but it is not simply revenge. She wants to be part of something bigger than herself even if it is inimical. She is like those people nowadays who run after tornadoes and hang over the edges of volcanoes.

Where do see your own work within a genre which began with Walter Scott, and which is traditionally male dominated?

I haven't the faintest idea. That is all for posterity to judge, if I have one.

Appendix 3

Interview with Margaret Elphinstone, Germersheim, August 3rd, 1998.

1. Q: Why did you choose to move from fantasy fiction into historical fiction?
   A: Well, my interest in this historical era began whilst living in Shetland from 1972 until 1980. I worked on the Papa Stour dig and became interested in Vikings. So I visited Fair Isle to collect as much historically accurate information as possible, though they didn't definitely have a 'thing' there. As Southerners, though, we only get the victim's perspective when you read about the Vikings; the rape and pillage side, which doesn't really include women.

2. Q: How do you see yourself in relation to the feminist concerns of the 1980s and 90s?
   A: I see myself as a Sixties generation feminist.

3. Q: Do you see yourself as being in a position in which feminism need not play a part?
   A: Absolutely not. I find the term 'post-feminist' an irritating concept.

4. Q: How do you see yourself in relation to Naomi Mitchison, in terms of what you are trying to do with historical fiction?
   A: I am a disciple of Mitchison in a sense, but my islanders stem rather from a similar interest in women and in history, rather than from a conscious effort to imitate her work. Her work is after all very different. I am influenced by it though, of course.

5. Q: Do you think, then, that you're more interested in recreating actual historical situations than Mitchison, rather than creating a space within which to deal with contemporary issues?
   A: It wasn't something I really thought about, but I think that's true and not true at once.

6. Q: Was it your intention that the islanders in the novel would create an underlying matriarchy within what is, on the surface, a fiercely patriarchal society?
   A: Yes, I wanted to show that the women are actually the main agents of social organisation.

7. Q: In the novel *Islanders*, Christianity is seen as a destructive force. Is that an echo of your own views on Christianity?
   A: Yes, very much so. I have very negative feelings about Christianity, especially regarding Calvinism and its autocratic restrictiveness. I feel quite primitive anger where that's concerned.

8. Q: Why did you choose Fair Isle for *Islanders*?
   A: Because of its position; a bit because it was a clean slate. It's very hard to obtain histories of it as there haven't been many written down. I wasn't going for an anagram of Scotland, but of course if you live in a nation always struggling with its identity, it's going to keep recurring. The island is both a home and a prison, so it has two functions. There are issues of not belonging. I'm a mixture of Scots, English, Irish and Jewish myself, and all my fiction seems to revert unconsciously to debating this feeling.

9. Q: Why did you choose the twelfth century? What issues were you trying to raise, and could they relate in any way to the twentieth-century?
   A: Yes. I was attempting here to discuss women in an understated way though – it's not flag waving feminism. It's recreating feminism.

10. Q: How do you see yourself as a writer in relation to the tradition of historical fiction in Scotland in particular?
    A: I don't write self-consciously whilst I'm writing, but I do perhaps think more later than someone who isn't also a critic would. I am of course, a little bit in all of my characters and I'm aware of that.

11. Q: Astrid is both confident and easy to shock. What part did you want her Christianity to play?
    A: Astrid's Christianity is a comfort to her as well as everything else. The type of Christianity she's involved with is not as patriarchal as Protestant Scotland later became. I was trying to provide these characters with their won methods of resistance to what was imposed from the outside, and what was influencing them from each direction. They are able to resist the bits of stories which don't work for them.

12. Q: Thorhalla is said to be perfect for the convent life in the novel. Is this a criticism of the roles offered to women by Christianity here?

A: Yes, but it's also a way out for her. She is in the most pathetic position among the island women, being related to everyone at a time when incest laws extended so widely. Lots of people must have been in that position, which is pretty bad.

13. Q: What did you hope to achieve though characterisation of Gunnhild?
    A: Gunnhild as witch figure completely demystifies witches through the practicality of her superstition. Magic is the woman's belief but I wanted to avoid magical occurrences.

14. Q: Did you want to offer magic as an alternative to the patriarchal nature of Christianity then?
    A: Yes, but again I don't think the form of Catholicism in operation in the twelfth century was as negative as the Presbyterianism which came later.

15. Q: Do you see the idea of journeys to find a self as a link between Astrid and Erif Der in Mitchison's *Corn King*?
    A: Yes, although I hadn't really thought of it before. Travelling provides temporary freedom, temporary alliance, and water can act as a barrier and as an escape route, which is why the journey by sea is so important for Astrid and Thorvald. Thorvald sees the water as welcome, and thinks it holds promise of adventure. Astrid sees a wall of water fencing her into Fridarey.
16. Q: You have published criticism of Sian Hayton's *Cells* trilogy. Do you think that her approach to sexuality in the end undermined her feminism?
    A: Yes, in a way she lost where she was going.

Appendix 4

The following is an extract from email correspondence dated Tuesday, February 22nd, 1999. Margaret Elphinstone responds here to the question, 'In Germersheim, you told me you identified yourself specifically with 60's feminism. Were you politically active in any way? And did you feel annoyed by the inequality you encountered?'

As for my political career: Pretty minimal on the whole. I got interested in the women's movement when a postgraduate in Glasgow 1970-1972. That's when I really started reading the 60s books on the subject. I was (predictably) in a consciousness raising group, and in fact have almost always been involved in a woman's group of one kind or another ever since. I have also been in CND since the 60s, and got into the women's peace movement from there, as well as through feminism. I was on Peace March Scotland 1981 (?) and from there and various other demonstrations got to Greenham Common quite a few times which was a huge influence on my life and writing in the first part of the 80s. I remember worrying about whether writing fiction was a cop-out when one should be on the front line cutting holes in fences. Maybe it is a cop-out; I am more frightened of policemen than sitting in front of my computer, but the fact is I haven't taken part in any direct action since 1985, which was my first major break in fiction. Are these facts related? I think so.

My annoyance with inequality goes back much further than all that. Probably to Day 1 at primary school. It also extends into the present. But again, I was more political between 1870 and 1987 than I have been before or since. I wrote some bits for magazines like *Spare Rib* and *Trouble and Strife*. Now I only write lit crit (apart from fiction of course).

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