Politics and the problem of speaking for others in the work of Naomi Mitchison

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PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED WORKS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the political influences that shaped the life and writing of Naomi Mitchison (1897–1999). Mitchison was a polymath who published extensively in a wide range of genres, and whose left-wing political interests informed many of her works. I explore the view that in her roles as author and social activist she aimed to represent "the people who have not spoken yet" (Calder 1997: ix), and I interrogate the potential difficulties in representing those marginal voices.

Examining texts from the 1910s through to the 1970s, this thesis traces Mitchison's political development to show how her socialist outlook emerged, shifted and directly responded to socio-historical contexts throughout the twentieth century. An evaluation of her extensive corpus, including fictional and non-fictional texts, archival material and unpublished letters, will be employed to show how she repeatedly campaigned, examined and documented the political and social issues of her time. Her role as an author not only enabled her to represent silenced groups, but also provided an opportunity to write through and explore her own, often contradictory, stance.

Drawing upon theoretical frameworks, including Linda Alcoff's 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', I contend that throughout Mitchison's career she repeatedly seeks to 'know' and explain others, and justify her right to speak for them. Mitchison's endeavours were grounded in altruism, but she was consciously aware of her paradoxical position as a privileged upper-middle-class author and socialist champion, and her writing pivots around this contradictory struggle. In representing marginal groups, she aimed to give agency to those who had been silenced, but her works also served to validate her place as spokesperson for such groups.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The Samuel Alexander Papers. Courtesy of the University of Manchester Library. Abbreviated to ‘Alex’ throughout.

Naomi Mitchison papers 1909–1979. Courtesy of Columbia University Library. Abbreviated to ‘Columbia’ throughout.

Naomi Mitchison Collection. Courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas in Austin. Abbreviated to ‘HRC’ throughout.

Naomi Mitchison Papers. Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland. Abbreviated to ‘NLS’ throughout.

The Kenneth Wiggins Porter Papers. Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library. Abbreviated to ‘Porter’ throughout.

Eugenics Society Archive at the Wellcome Library. Abbreviated to ‘Wellcome’ throughout.

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INTRODUCTION

> [Naomi Mitchison's] unique literary career would present problems to the reader even if [her] books were all in print and easily available (which is sadly far from the case), because it is on an unprecedented scale: has any serious writer ever published so much, over so many years? I think the most important – or at least the most immediate – problem is that readers are liable to be baffled, confused, even rather lost, as, gradually, a few of the most important novels are brought back into print […] It is hard to get any notion of this literary career; we don't have even the crudest sketch map indicating the ground at various times covered. And it is hard, under these circumstances, to approach any individual work with full confidence (Murray 1986: vii).

> To do justice to the achievements of a writer with over seventy books to her credit […] and whose interventions and interests outside the literary world have been global, humanitarian, feminist and environmental, is impossible (Joannou 1998: 293).

Naomi Mitchison (1897–1999) was a polymath and one of the most prolific authors of the twentieth century. She published her first novel in 1923 and her last in 1991, amassing over forty novels in the course of her career. The volume of Mitchison's writing is matched by its variety; her corpus not only consists of novels that experiment with various genres from historical fiction to science fiction but also includes poetry, plays, three autobiographies, diaries (including one written for Mass-Observation), reportage, journal articles and letters. It is understandable, then, that Maroula Joannou should consider any attempt at a complete or comprehensive analysis of Mitchison's life and all her works to be an 'impossible' task.

For all of Mitchison's accomplishments, many of her works were at risk of being overlooked until relatively recently. Certainly, some of the concerns raised by Isobel Murray remain, but in the past thirty years there has been a growing

discussion of Mitchison's writing.[1] As Helen Lloyd notes, the revived interest might be traced to the publication of Mitchison's three autobiographies during the 1970s, followed by her Second World War diary published in 1985, all of which gave insight into a fascinating life and brought renewed recognition of a career worthy of study (2005: 11).[2] Since her death, Mitchison's legacy has been commemorated by Scottish PEN and the University of Glasgow through their Naomi Mitchison Memorial Lecture. Held annually in November, the lecture has been presented by Lesley Riddoch, Janice Galloway, Val McDermid, and Zoë Wicomb, to name a few. Delivered by leading female writers presenting on a topic of their choice, the lecture honours Mitchison as a pioneer for whom feminism was an enduring facet of her life and work, and who strove to give a voice to groups who were silenced or oppressed: principles central to Scottish PEN's ethos.

With regards to academic research, Mitchison's historical fiction, the genre for which she is perhaps best known, has generated important studies led by Ruth Hoberman (1997) and Diana Wallace (2005) who have persuasively argued that the genre enabled Mitchison to write herself into male historiographies giving her agency as a woman and disenfranchised citizen as she began her professional career during the 1920s. Her fictions manipulate the patriarchal worlds drawn in these historiographies set in classical worlds and instead attend to the stories of women

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[1] Prof Isobel Murray has been instrumental in bringing some of Mitchison's works back into print; along with Dr Moira Burgess, she serves as editor of the Naomi Mitchison Library published by Kennedy and Boyd.

[2] Mitchison's autobiographies are: *Small Talk: Memoirs of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973), *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (1975) and *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920–1940* (1979). The first two autobiographies have also been published together under the title *As It Was: An Autobiography 1897–1918* (1988), which I have used for this thesis. The diary Mitchison kept for Mass-Observation was edited by Dorothy Sheridan and was published as *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison* (1985).
Helen Lloyd's research for her thesis unearthed a manuscript of an unpublished fourth autobiography called *Hide and Seek,* held at the National Library of Scotland.

and disenfranchised groups, giving their voices credence. Revisionist readings of women's writing from the interwar period has been a particularly fruitful area of study which has been central in reclaiming Mitchison and other female writers of her generation from obscurity, reinstating them as important contributors to this period in literary history. This invaluable corrective research led by Janet Montefiore (1996) Jane Dowson (1996), Maroula Joannou (1998), Phyllis Lassner (1998) Elizabeth Maslen (1999) and Kristen Bluemel (2009) has served to challenge androcentric studies which have dominated literary analysis of the interwar period – particularly the Thirties – to reinstate Mitchison and her female peers as important contributors to the literature and politics of the time. While a positive shift, it remains that analysis of Mitchison's writing is, perhaps inevitably, disproportionately limited in comparison to the extensive material she published. There is currently only one monograph detailing Mitchison's work: Moira Burgess's *Mitchison's Ghosts: supernatural elements in the Scottish fiction of Naomi Mitchison* (2008). In contrast, the publication of two biographies by Jill Benton (1990) and Jenni Calder (1997) (on top of Mitchison's existing three autobiographies and diaries) is indicative of how Mitchison's fascinating life has arguably become her best-known narrative.

In addition to her career as an author, Mitchison contributed to a myriad of 'causes and campaigns' throughout her long life (Calder 1997: 91). As the niece of Richard Burdon Haldane (the Liberal and Labour MP and Lord Chancellor) and as the wife of Labour MP Gilbert Richard (Dick) Mitchison, she was closely tied to politics throughout her life and achieved prominence in her own right as a social activist. Amongst other endeavours, she contributed to the establishment of birth control clinics during the 1920s; challenged fascism during the 1930s; worked on the

Highland Panel in Scotland during the 1950s; campaigned for Nuclear Disarmament; and railed against apartheid in South Africa when living in neighbouring Botswana. Mitchison's political views were broadly socialist and Alexander Reid described her ethos as stemming 'from her humanistic ethical values' which were 'nearer to that of Morris than to that of Marx' (1961: 50).[3]

Evidently, Mitchison had an exceptional life. Among her accolades she received an CBE in 1981; her image is captured in various portraits held by the National Galleries of Scotland; while James D. Watson, one of the co-discoverers of the structure of DNA, dedicated his book *The Double Helix* (1968) to her.[4] As an author from an upper-middle-class background, and mother to seven children, Mitchison's path in life can seem remarkable in comparison to the sheltered life she could have easily led. But rather than taking her status in society for granted, Mitchison actively sought to challenge inequality and repeatedly strove to write about, and actively campaign for, an egalitarian society. It is this facet of her life that forms the central focus of this work.

The Problem of Speaking for Others

Jenni Calder's observation perhaps encapsulates Mitchison best: 'if there is one single impulse' in Mitchison's life 'it is the urge to speak for "the people who have not spoken yet"' (1997: ix). This statement serves as a useful starting point to begin

[3] Press cutting can be found at NLS Acc. 8503/13

[4] Mitchison's father, brother and three sons were all eminent scientists, and she also had a wealth of knowledge and interest in the field. Watson's book recounts visits to stay at Mitchison's Carradale home while he wrote his book.
With regard to portraits see https://www.nationalgalleries.org/search?search=Naomi%20mitchison and http://www.murdophoto.com/Site_2/Port_Gnuis.html#5
Mitchison also featured on the BBC's *Desert Island Discs* in 1991 choosing an eclectic mix of songs to match her character, including: 'You Canny Shove Yer Granny' alongside works by Jean Sibelius and Igor Stravinsky https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0093z9q

to understand Mitchison's varied life and works. This thesis is concerned with exploring the nexus between Mitchison's writing and her politics to consider the extent to which her works repeatedly strove to speak out for groups who faced inequality, examining the way in which the protagonists in her novels explore the dilemma of asserting their rights within an unjust society, and how Mitchison addressed these issues directly in her non-fiction. My thesis complements existing studies by the aforementioned critics, all of whom have read Mitchison's works against the socio-historical context of the interwar era and positioned her as a writer who directly responded to the social and political issues of her day. These studies have offered an invaluable foundation upon which to build my research but they have primarily attended to Mitchison's writing from the interwar period and have adopted a comparative model by reading her writing alongside other female authors' works from that time.[5] My research aims to widen the analysis to offer a sustained evaluation of her political journey by drawing upon texts from each decade from the 1910s through to the 1970s. This comprehensive approach will allow for a more thorough examination of Mitchison's complex political life and views. The texts I have chosen to punctuate each chapter are: *The Conquered* (1923), *We Have Been Warned* (1935b), *The Bull Calves* (1947) and *When We Become Men* (1965). All four novels focus on protagonists placed in a liminal and turbulent period in history, living in an unjust society where they have been disenfranchised, marginalised or oppressed. The novels pivot around recurring questions: how can groups assert self-determination; what is the best form of egalitarianism and can it accommodate and value the individual and nationalism; and finally, who can speak for others? Each

[5] See theses written by Golubov (2002) and Sponenberg (2002) which read Mitchison's writing alongside the works of Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson and Rebecca West.

novel responds to a different socio-historical context: two of the novels are historical fictions (*The Conquered* and *The Bull Calves*) and two are set in contemporary society (*We Have Been Warned* and *When We Become Men*). All four novels have a Janus-faced quality in that they consciously look back to try and make sense of the uncertainty of their future. Positioned on a border in time, the Janus-face is inherent in the characters themselves as they are pulled between opposing loyalties; Isobel Murray helpfully surmises that Mitchison's adult fictions, written in various genres, are connected thematically through a focus on divided loyalties:

> If we say that she is absorbed in questions of loyalty, in creating loyalties of the widest kind, and in conserving or creating the loyalties that unite smaller groups, we will have a fair start. And if we add that her fiction is often involved in the clash between personal loyalty and group loyalty, or loyalty to an idea, I think she will not disagree (Murray 1990: 245).

Each chapter will frame Mitchison's political journey by drawing upon biographical material and socio-historical contexts since Mitchison's own life and her writing were intrinsically linked. Echoing the ambivalence and dilemma her characters faced in her fiction, Mitchison's non-fiction was often a means for her to work through her own uncertainty but typically her non-fiction reflected her pragmatic outlook which endeavoured to instigate change through persuasive and didactic rhetoric. Throughout Mitchison's writing she repeatedly seeks to 'know' and explain others, and to justify her right to speak for them. Mitchison's endeavours were grounded in altruism but she was consciously aware of her paradoxical position as a privileged upper-middle-class author and socialist champion; ultimately, her writing pivots around this contradictory struggle which represented marginal groups and aimed to give agency to those who had been silenced, but which also served to validate her place as spokesperson for such groups.

Undoubtedly, Mitchison's literary output was at its pinnacle during the interwar years, and the Thirties especially, but I want to demonstrate that her interest in social and political progress in her pursuit for an egalitarian society was unyielding and continued throughout her life. Broadening the analysis to look beyond the parameters of the interwar period enables Mitchison's work on Scottish affairs during the 1940s and 1950s, as well as her role as advisor to the Bakgatla tribe in Botswana during the 1960s and 1970s, to be considered more fully: these were two formative stages in her political and literary career which remain underrepresented in scholarly research. The latter stage, in particular, is almost completely ignored in literary criticism, despite the fact that this was a significant period in Mitchison's life. One exception to this is Helen Lloyd's thesis which explores Mitchison's autobiographical writing and takes into consideration Mitchison's travel writing which encompassed some of her time spent in Botswana. [6] As Lloyd emphasises, out of all of Mitchison's endeavours, 'the personal and literary legacy she left to Botswana […] was the achievement of which she was most proud' (2005: 1). It is surprising, then, that this period has not merited more discussion.

Indeed, one of Mitchison's most interesting works, *Return to the Fairy Hill* (1966) which details the early years she had spent living among the Bakgatla tribe has garnered little academic analysis. This non-fictional work, a blend of travel diary and anthropological study, is arguably one of the most interesting of Mitchison's writing career; in it the pertinent problem of speaking for others is strikingly evident. Mitchison was bestowed the role as adopted mother and advisor to the Bakgatla tribe

[6] Sarah Shaw (2002a) has published a thesis focusing on Mitchison's African works, but I have been unable to access it.

in Botswana (then the Bechuanaland Protectorate) by Linchwe II when he became Chief in 1963, after having met him as a student in the late 1950s. It was during this time that she poignantly reflected back on her forty-year career and considered the purpose of her place in this tribal community and questioned her contribution to a society whose country was on the cusp of post-colonial independence. Mitchison considered whether the 'helots' who had featured in her 1931 novel, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (set in the ancient fictional world of Marob) 'were Africans' and wondered if her drive to repeatedly write about enslaved and oppressed characters in her adult fiction, coupled with her seemingly immeasurable commitment to serve groups and communities in her personal life, was an emotive reaction against her privilege: 'I began to wonder […] whether I take sides, not for reason but because of something in myself, something in childhood, perhaps a revenge on my mother' (1966: 79). This thesis is an attempt to respond to Mitchison's questioning of her life's work, to explore the contradictions this led to, to set her vast output against complex political climates, to reflect on her motivations as a writer and map her journey as an activist who consciously resisted becoming a 'complacent imperialist' (Wallace 2005: 45).

Mitchison's role as an adopted mother to a tribe in Botswana is just one of many examples of her intriguing life. But this period seems to have, for the most part, avoided evaluation, not only in terms of the literature she produced during this time, but with regards to her personal role: how did a white British upper-middle-class author living in Scotland contribute as an advisor to a Botswana tribe during the formative early years of post-colonial independence? It seems to have been overlooked as one of Mitchison's many idiosyncrasies, just as it has become a truism

within scholarly research to reference Mitchison's contradictory identity. Moira Burgess explores this dynamic where she presents Mitchison as both rational and irrational: a woman with an advanced scientific mind, who was also curious about the supernatural (2006: 3). Detailing the 'multi-faceted quality' of Mitchison's life, Burgess explains that 'ambiguities and ambivalences can be seen in several spheres of Mitchison's life and work', adding that 'she was able to occupy more than one role at any time, even when they were apparently incompatible – for instance, a committed socialist who maintained a near-feudal lifestyle' (2). Living with the Bakgatla tribe brought into focus an enduring feature of her writing regarding the tension in speaking for others from her privileged position and the dichotomy of her upper-middle class life and the socialist politics she championed. Mitchison was acutely aware of her background, her status, and her privilege, and worked to reconcile the apparent gulf between the opportunities she was afforded and the political views that she advocated.[7] Rather than denying her background and comfortable lifestyle, she worked tirelessly to invest in improving the lives of the communities with whom she was involved.

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[7] Indeed, it is acknowledged by Mitchison herself in her autobiography, *You May Well Ask*: 'You may well ask how people like us – and there was a good many – came to call ourselves socialists and to join the Labour Party but without altering our way of life very much. We did alter it to some extent but we still took holidays, still had a big house with a staff to run it as we expected them to do, still gave parties, were still recognisably ourselves' (1979a: 182).
Sheila Murnaghan captures this paradox: 'Mitchison can only make sense of her past self through ambivalence – a confident embrace of the advantages of education and culture associated with Plato, a tension with egalitarian sympathies derived from her gender. As an adult, Mitchison presents herself as never free of this ambivalence, which is permanently fostered by the association of privilege with the arts and the intellectual traditions symbolised by Plato, and which becomes a constituent feature of her identity. This can be seen in a passage from a later volume of her autobiography that is concerned with her adult life and is entitled *You May Well Ask*, in an allusion to that fact that people did often ask her how she could reconcile her progressive political views and her comfortable way of life. There she records her awareness, during the period in which she was writing her classical novels, that her life as the mother […] and a prolific writer and activist was made possible by a large household of servants – a passage that veers between self-accusation and self-defence' (2007: 135).

Throughout this thesis I demonstrate that during Mitchison's long career there was an acute awareness on her part about who has the authority to speak, and this applies both to her fiction and non-fiction. Her politics and her writing are therefore often engaged in finding a place for Mitchison herself to speak out, and as a means to represent others who are subjugated in some way. There is a clear motivation to research, to 'know', and to show solidarity to the communities with whom she was involved; Mitchison drew upon these personal experiences to inform her writing, both fictional and non-fictional, as a means of asserting her 'authenticity'. Lauded for her historical novels, a genre for which research is an inherent feature, Mitchison applied her scientific curiosity to understand people and societies and her anthropological approach emerges in many of her works to substantiate her right to speak for and through various characters.

Her time in Botswana may have acted as the catalyst for this issue and caused Mitchison to reflect on her life's politics and writing but it is evident that from a young age she was fascinated with the dynamic between groups of opposing sides, as the next chapter will show. This thesis aims to carve a path through her long life and vast corpus to trace her political development and approach in representing marginalised groups living in conflict with dominant or oppressive rule. Specifically, I reflect on the way in which Mitchison also strove to authenticate her right to speak for them by examining not only her fictional output but also unpublished materials such as personal letters.

Mitchison's sense of social responsibility, which could be categorised as a form of *noblesse oblige,* grounded in her upper-middle-class background, results in writing that can be read as both didactic and dialectic. Specifically, her work not only

enables silenced groups to be represented, but at times borders on speaking for them, offering instruction to them, all of which is grounded in her enthusiasm and best intentions to instigate change. But bound to her sense of responsibility and desire to speak out for groups, is an awareness of her status, and her works continually grapple with this duality and ambivalence. Mitchison's work could be viewed as problematic in this respect, however, rather than being limited by this, Mitchison's writing is seemingly enriched by it. Several of her works continually reflect upon these paradoxes and the four novels chosen for consideration in this thesis offer congruence to thematically explore the politics of divided loyalties.

Shape-shifting socialist: Mitchison's political stance

It has been argued eloquently elsewhere that Mitchison's political outlook adhered to the principles of ethical socialism; a very suitable categorisation of her political philosophy (Golubov 2002: 12). Adhering to this classification, but looking beyond the interwar period to include an analysis of Mitchison's political engagement in Scotland and Botswana, this thesis will demonstrate that Mitchison's political ideology was principally socialist but that she valued the individual and would promote nationalism as a means to resist centralisation and value localism. Therefore, Mitchison's curiosity to investigate political and social progress in the pursuit of a fairer society meant that she resisted being limited by one fixed political ideology or Party. It may seem odd to make this claim, given that she was a member of the Labour Party since 1930 and was married to a Labour MP, but it will be argued throughout this thesis that Mitchison's political views were flexible and adapted to the changing social and geographical contexts she faced across the

twentieth century. Therefore, throughout this thesis terms such as ‘left-wing’, ‘socialist’ and ‘liberal’ will be used to encompass her broad socialist outlook which advocated the promotion of equality for all people, all of which was grounded in the idea of a shared community that valued the individual.

Given her privileged life and her socialist sympathies, it is perhaps not surprising that representations of class differences have become one of the main areas of discussion of her work. My thesis elaborates on this strand but also explores national identity as an important feature which influenced the political and social issues which Mitchison addressed. It is for this reason that Mitchison’s identity as a socialist is somewhat problematic, given that she would advocate individualism and nationalism as part of her malleable political outlook, concepts at odds with socialism ‘proper’. Instead, Mitchison’s brand of socialism valued individualism and autonomy both at a personal level and national level and viewed these as important components to build a fairer society.

There have been fewer critical readings of her later writings despite these offering an interesting perspective on Mitchison’s political development and her continuous drive to ‘speak for those who have not yet been heard’. Beyond issues of class, Mitchison also struggled with belonging and speaking for others with regard to national identity in Scotland and Botswana. Travels to slums in Britain during the Thirties, for example, might have been grounded in good intentions to help those in need, but they were arguably voyeuristic journeys that an upper-class member of the Oxford literati could indulge in. In contrast, the relocation to Carradale (Mitchison’s family home in Scotland) at the onset of the Second World War was isolating and Mitchison had to work to fit in to a community where she was conspicuously an

outsider (an agnostic, middle-class woman with a received pronunciation accent) even though by birth and parentage she was Scottish, she had to adapt to life in the small fishing village. This period in her career opens up an interesting debate about national identity and the political implications of speaking for others which I discuss in Chapter Three. It was here that her socialism took into consideration the value of Scottish nationalism. This issue was compounded further when she became adopted 'mother' – Mmarona – to the Bakgatla tribe during the 1960s. In this community Mitchison had to negotiate a space to be heard, particularly given the racial tensions exacerbated by apartheid in neighbouring South Africa; she was visibly and inexorably an outsider. Therefore, the implications of representing groups and authenticating her right to speak for them was laden with national and racial issues during this time.

This thesis is therefore a journey through Mitchison's life and career to explore her shifting political development. As Isobel Murray and Maroula Joannou identify, Mitchison's *oeuvre* is at times baffling and seemingly impossible to track. There is no simple or single trajectory on which to map a fixed political position or to pin point her literary output neatly against it. Mitchison's work is expansive and she is, as many have noted, contradictory: but here lies the appeal of investigating Mitchison's life and career. This thesis aims to achieve several things; first, to contribute to the growing scholarly discussion of Mitchison's works and, by employing archival material which has previously been unpublished, to offer new insights into her vast corpus. It will necessarily be a biographical study as it aims to show some of the personal views Mitchison held and to plot her development across several decades. This investigation intends to show that across decades and

seemingly disparate genres and contexts Mitchison often addressed the same enduring thematic concerns. I highlight this by choosing one novel from roughly each decade of her career in which to demonstrate the similarities and repetition in her sprawling *oeuvre*. It will also support my thesis by demonstrating that political issues, speaking for others and having the right to speak, were prevailing issues that Mitchison continually explored.

Linda Alcoff's 'The Problem of Speaking for Others' (1991/1992) has been a particularly useful paper to consider in relation to this tension. Alcoff considers the sensitivity of speaking for those typically silenced and at the margins of society, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Alcoff's study raises questions which resonate with the concerns of this thesis, most obviously during Mitchison's period working in Botswana, but questions about authorial responsibility aligned with speaking for others are also applicable when looking at Mitchison's earlier works as she seeks to engage with communities and give a voice to their concerns. As Alcoff astutely concludes:

> We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others. If the dangers of speaking for others result from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one's own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual, then speaking with and to can lessen these dangers (1991/1992: 23).

While Mitchison's works are grounded in hard work and good intentions, she is not just 'speaking for those who have not yet been heard', as Jenni Calder points out, but, I argue, she consciously works to authenticate her right to speak for others. Mitchison's politically-aware works occupy an interesting space whereby Mitchison herself attempts to be heard – a place to showcase her authority and knowledge – while she endeavours to represent groups who are engaging in resistance of some

kind. Mitchison used her skill as a writer to vocalise the need for resistance and change even when her own experience could have fostered an environment whereby she remained distanced from such issues and protected by her privilege. Instead, Mitchison's work encompasses this dual perspective and presents works which raise questions about how groups can assert themselves and who has the right to speak in solidarity with them.

Mapping Mitchison's political journey over six decades

This thesis builds upon the important research contributed in the past thirty years which has reclaimed Mitchison as a writer of importance. This research project recognises the difficulty of trying to classify all of Mitchison's works not least because they offer a multitude of avenues to explore. Inevitably, it is not possible to fully engage with every text Mitchison produced here but I will reference writing from the 1910s through to the 1970s. Each of my four chapters will focus on one novel from each period and I will attempt to plot the broad developments in Mitchison's thinking within the specifics of her key fictional texts to demonstrate a thematic coherence across several decades in different political and social contexts. Crucially, each chapter will also draw upon previously unpublished letters and archival material and non-fictional texts which offer insight into Mitchison's personal political progression and outlook.

Chapter One spans the 1910s and 1920s drawing upon archival material and biographical contexts to plot Mitchison's shift from the conservative views fostered in her youth towards a gradual liberal outlook. The chapter focuses on Mitchison's debut novel *The Conquered* (1923) to consider the way it challenged imperialism and

began the start of a career which represented communities asserting themselves against autocratic rule and explored how nationalism could unite groups to assert self-determination. I examine existing literary studies of the novel and build upon readings which show how Mitchison uses the historical novel as a means to intervene in male historiographies enabling her to assert her own critical position. I also look at Mitchison's non-fiction focusing on feminist issues, specifically motherhood and birth control.

The Thirties is the focus of Chapter Two where I emphasise the importance of reading Mitchison not just as a forgotten female author but an author engaging with the literary concerns of the period which followed a similar trajectory to her male peers. I follow Mitchison's literal and metaphorical journeys in her writing and evaluate the semi-autobiographical novel *We Have Been Warned* (1935b) as exemplifying Mitchison's own ambivalent political stance at the time, which questioned the totalitarian regimes of communism and fascism and women's place within society. Latterly, I reflect on Mitchison's anxiety of how socialist politics could work without diminishing the individual and consider that Christianity offered Mitchison a model from which she might form her political outlook. In *The Kingdom of Heaven* (1939), for instance, Mitchison employs her own form of catechism to explore the dilemma people face when pulled between these conflicting loyalties and emphasises the value of community. So too, *The Moral Basis of Politics* (1938) considers the value of 'goodness' in motivating people to work for themselves to the benefit of wider society.

In Chapter Three, I examine the impact of Mitchison's move to Carradale in Scotland on her writing. I demonstrate the way in which the move to the small

fishing village at the onset of the Second World War brought Scottish concerns and politics into focus, particularly at a local level which was, in part, a result of being disillusioned by the 'revolutionary' politics of the Thirties and, of course, the impact of the Second World War. The focus is on Mitchison's only novel of the Forties, and what is considered her seminal Scottish novel, *The Bull Calves* (1947). I suggest that the presence of doubling in the novel repeats tropes from her earlier novels in which her protagonists are situated in periods of transition and uncertainty, being pulled between divided loyalties. More overtly than in her earlier fiction, in this Forties novel Mitchison consciously sets out to show her 'right', her heritage, and her credentials to speak on such matters, by 'reinventing' her Scottish identity. Arguably due to her location, decentralisation and nationalism became political issues which concerned her at this time and which are evident in her writing. While she remained a member of the Labour Party, her non-fiction explored the importance of devolution for Scotland, politically, socially and culturally. An examination of her lesser-known writing from this period supports this view and shows the important contribution she made to Scottish politics and culture.

The fourth and final chapter focuses on Mitchison's involvement with the Bakgatla tribe in Botswana during the country's transitional years from being British Protectorate to independent country during the 1960s. Focusing on the novel, *When We Become Men* (1965), Mitchison again presents a narrative in which the protagonist chooses between 'sides' and deliberates on how political and social change might be achieved, this time in the climate of apartheid and independence movements in Africa. It was a period that encapsulated Mitchison's cosmopolitanism; as Kwame Anthony Appiah describes 'cosmopolitanism' it 'is the

idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship […] People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences' (2007: xiii). In Botswana Mitchison considers how the tribal community could maintain its relevance in a rapidly changing society and her socialist outlook here, like Scotland, valued the importance of smaller communities working within larger groups. Speaking for others could be problematic in Botswana with Mitchison's frequent downplaying of the differences between herself and the tribe but ultimately, she worked tirelessly to support the community.

The thesis follows the trajectory of Mitchison's political and literary career, drawing on examples from her published works to provide an inclusive evaluation of her progression and principles spanning several decades. The addition of unpublished texts found during archival research are a significant part of this work. I detail how Mitchison's life and writing was driven by a desire to speak for silenced and marginalised groups but as Jenni Calder notes, Mitchison's writing was also about 'speaking for herself' (1997: ix). In its exploration of Mitchison's personal writings, many of which are unpublished, this thesis will consider the importance of her writing as a space to articulate and form her own views and find a place to be heard. The thesis recognises Mitchison's politics as essentially grounded in socialist ethics that reacted to various social and historical conditions. Of course, Mitchison was privileged and need not have challenged inequality to the extent she did. There have been numerous texts which have outlined the incredible life Mitchison led, particularly Jenni Calder's biography, and throughout this thesis I aim to capture the

influences from her family and peer group in shaping her political outlook which impacted on her own development.

CHAPTER ONE

Brotherhood and Motherhood, Nationalism and Women in Mitchison's 1920s writing

Having sought permission from Mitchison to bring some of her stories back into print, Isobel Murray recalled that the author advised her: '"go no further back than 1930 – 'I wasn't me, then'" (Murray 2012: vi). It is a sentiment recounted in Mitchison's autobiography, *You May Well Ask: a memoir 1920-1940* (1979), where she distances the 'child' living in the years after First World War from the 'woman [she] was when the next war came' (1979a: 12–14).[1] Adding that her third memoir 'will be about a family and the friends and acquaintances, *fellow workers and fellow voters* who shaped us as we in turn shaped them' Mitchison reveals how she viewed her personal experiences and development from this time through a prism of political engagement (1979a: 12, my emphasis).[2] Undoubtedly, the interwar period was a formative stage in Mitchison's development as she shifted from holding 'childish' beliefs to establish herself as a writer and activist for whom socialist principles became central.

This chapter and the next covers the same era to track her political engagement and progression and I begin by focusing principally on the 1920s (aware that analysis will blend into the 1910s and 1930s). Given Mitchison's disclaimer to go no further back than 1930, it is perhaps necessary to establish why it is important

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[1] Mitchison had three children by 1922 (aged 25) but claimed: 'I still in a way felt myself more child than mother' (1979a: 14).

[2] Mitchison references a constellation of literary and political thinkers reminding the reader of the peer group who influenced her outlook. There are too many to mention but the people Mitchison and her husband socialised with during the interwar period inevitably shaped their own political engagement and, of course, led to Mitchison's husband to become a Labour MP in the Thirties. The chapter 'The Green Book' relates to the log she kept, which noted the social occasions held at her home and fascinating list of invitees: 'all lefties, from the Communist Party through to right-wing Labour or Liberal left' (1979a: 58).

to consider Mitchison's work from before this time. The majority of studies focusing on Mitchison's overtly political texts have been contained to the latter stage of the interwar years, and justifiably so: Mitchison was most discernibly a left-wing activist in the Thirties; she was most prolific as an author during these years; and her works are definably a product of the left-wing political interests synonymous with that decade, as the next chapter will show.[3] Undeniably, by contrast, Mitchison's social activism was in its nascent stages in the 1920s, where she was 'cautiously investigating politics' and was only beginning to carve out a space to voice her burgeoning liberal views (Mitchison 1979a: 110).[4] Although she may have infantilised the person she was in the early years of the Twenties, viewing that person as someone else, it was not to diminish her literary achievements but rather, I think, to indicate that she had not yet established her own assured voice and views in these earlier works.[5] In truth, Mitchison was always a politically-conscious writer and at this time was negotiating a space to be heard. As such, her life and writing during the 1920s is important to fully understand her overall political progression.

From the First World War, through the early years of the interwar period, Mitchison's political stance began to waiver, as she comments, she began to 'sidle over from [her] mother's Tory side to [her] father's Haldane Liberalism' taking an interest in local left-wing societies, including the League of Nations as well as

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[3] Perhaps the view that there was a definable zeitgeist associated with the Thirties informed Mitchison's own recollection of her life, one embedded in the 'collective memory' of a period that has been repeatedly documented. As Janet Montefiore considers in her study of the period: 'much of the writing of and about the 1930s is a self-conscious literature of personal memory' (1996: 2).

[4] It is worth remembering that the Labour Party only became established as an opposition Party in 1924 and Mitchison and her husband would join the Party around 1930.

[5] This point is supported by Mitchison in an interview with Isobel Murray as they discussed *The Conquered* (1923): 'You said there are lots of historical details wrong in the book. Do you think that matters?' 'Yes. It worries me now. But I've said to myself, will I rewrite this book, and then I just couldn't, and I couldn't muck up a book by somebody else, and really at that time I *was* somebody else' (Murray 2002: 73).

associating with groups such as the Fabian Society (Mitchison 1975: 52). Resultantly, Mitchison's writing vocalises some of the left-wing political campaigns being championed, including anti-imperialism, as well as women's rights, particularly the advocacy of birth control for women's health and well-being. Tracing Mitchison's political journey from her youth through the 1920s, this chapter will reflect on her shift away from the Conservative political stance encouraged in her upbringing, to her gradual alignment with left-wing socialist political groups as an adult. Opening this chapter with such biographical contextualisation serves as an important reminder that Mitchison did not initially identify as a feminist or a socialist, as is often extolled, but that the First World War was a catalyst which encouraged her to move towards left-wing politics and that in these early years she was cautious in asserting her political views for fear of sounding 'silly' and 'feminine': only gradually did she become an outspoken campaigner for feminist and socialist matters (Mitchison 1979a: 52). A study of these early years allows for a greater understanding of the tensions which pervade Mitchison's writing, which is informed throughout her life by conservativism, a sense of *noblesse oblige,* as well as a growing socialism.

Broadly, Mitchison's writing from the 1920s can be divided into historical fictions which Diana Wallace has usefully defined as 'anti-imperialist fictions' (2005: 43) and non-fiction which addresses issues of birth control and women's role in society, particularly their role as mothers. In terms of her fiction, all her works are set against the ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome and Mitchison's singular focus on 'classical' worlds makes the 1920s the most consistent period of her career in terms of genre (Murray 1990: 245). Mitchison published her debut novel, *The*

Conquered, in 1923 to widespread critical acclaim, establishing her reputation as a revered historical novelist.[6] Diana Wallace's seminal study of women's historical fiction has contextualised Mitchison's works within a wider trend by female authors at the time:

> A few women were writing historical novels in the early years of the twentieth century […] However, it was after the First World War that British women, entering history as enfranchised citizens for the first time, turned to the historical novel in substantial numbers and reshaped it into forms which expressed and answered their needs and desires (Wallace 2005: 25).

So too, Ruth Hoberman's study has persuasively argued that Mitchison and other contemporaneous female authors were drawn to classical worlds which were simultaneously appealing and isolating: they could imagine themselves in positions of power, whilst also sympathising with the women and slaves who were oppressed in these narratives. Hoberman explains that for Mitchison: 'the ancient world – Roman as well as Greek – was a lifelong preoccupation, but inseparable from the problems posed for her by her identity as a woman' (1997: 25). Mitchison's historical fiction, therefore, used traditional narratives but subverted these histories to give credence to voices often elided in imperialist texts – such as slaves and women – and began a career where her literature intervened in the political present. Some scholarly studies have, therefore, considered that her focus on representing narratives of slavery act as a 'palimpsest' through which to read a critique of the subjugation of women in a patriarchal society (Elphinstone 1993: 28–29).[7] However, there has been

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[6] Her debut novel, *The Conquered* (1923), received critical acclaim and resulted in Mitchison receiving the prestigious 'Palmes de L'Académie Française' (Benton 1990: 45).

[7] 'Gilbert and Gubar explain how an overtly patriarchal text by a woman may contain a palimpsest, a way of reading between the lines, of making subversive connections, which express a reality that cannot be explicitly stated. Mitchison, in this first novel, avoids making women her central characters. Instead, she shows what it is to be a particular kind of slave – the kind that has known freedom, who has belonged to a world outside the imperialist authority of Rome, who knows his own people and where his allegiance lies, but who is bound by ties of love and domestic closeness to one of his

a tendency to try to map a feminist reading onto all of Mitchison's works including her debut novel, *The Conquered* (1923), which seems somewhat contrived, particularly given the fact that this novel focuses on male protagonists and features virtually no women.

Arguably, in order to gain a deeper appreciation of the insightful and nuanced nature of Mitchison's writing it is prudent to separate out these issues. I begin with an analysis of her debut novel, *The Conquered* (1923) to consider its engagement with anti-imperialism, specifically its support of Irish nationalism and self-determination. In the latter half of the chapter, I then consider how Mitchison engages with feminist politics in her non-fiction. The demarcation of these subjects - war and motherhood - serves to highlight two central political issues which Mitchison engaged with during the 1920s. The separation, I argue, is also reflective of the way in which Mitchison chose to highlight the two issues through two deliberately different literary approaches in a manner which was cognisant of who could speak for certain groups. Hence, Mitchison's historical fiction used allegory to comment on contemporary issues surrounding war and imperialism in a way that denotes that these 'male' worlds were closed off. Thus, she could only comment through the veil of fiction, a view concurrent with the studies of Ruth Hoberman (1997) and Diana Wallace (2005). Hoberman insightfully considers this in terms of the opportunities and limitations that classical historiographies could offer to Mitchison: Hoberman points out that Mitchison often portrays hostages in her novels

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oppressors. Once the connection is made between the containment of women and the situation of the slaves, this ceases to be a novel about a remote time and long-ago events, but becomes a pertinent, political fiction. When we read with this meaning in mind, the novel becomes radically explicit' (Elphinstone 1993: 28-29).

to explore an unusual dynamic between the hostage and the host where the former is both dependent and detached from their host. By writing texts set within these established histories Mitchison was herself a hostage:

> If, as storyteller, Mitchison is an effective host, welcoming her readers into a story she controls as narrator, she is also her story's hostage imprisoned by previous narratives that disempower her as a woman and leave her little leeway to reinvent the past. In depicting hostages Mitchison is also depicting herself, a rebellious woman enmeshed in British life, hostage to her desire for power and cultural authority […] Certainly as a female writer of historical fiction it is one of her main problems. As a writer, she aspires to the power of male historians to shape the past, even as she recognizes that power instantly marginalizes women (1997: 121).

Despite becoming best known for her historical fiction, the limitations of that genre, or at least the classical worlds, meant that she would eventually depart from it, albeit briefly, as the next chapter will attest.

In contrast, she spoke frankly on birth control in her non-fiction, where it was initially motivated by a sense of *noblesse oblige* to support working-class women who had little to no representation. Only later did Mitchison consider the opportunity for women to have more autonomy and sexual freedom, although this is often limited to a middle-class audience, and she faced censorship when trying to address this in later fictional texts such as *We Have Been Warned* (1935b). This chapter will discuss the non-fictional texts engaging with these matters to consider their place within the contemporary politics of the period. In the next chapter, I consider that the basis of her interest in women's rights and birth control became more transgressive as Mitchison worked to bridge the gap between her life and the working-classes she wanted to support as part of her socialist ethos. The sexual politics of

'giving' herself to 'comrades' became a problematic way of overcoming these class differences.[8]

Significantly, the separation of these issues will allow me to explore the way in which birth control and motherhood exposed factions amongst women at the time reminding us that feminism was not a singular political movement in which all women were united.[9] The Twenties is often lauded as a progressive period for women, catalysed by the First World War and their involvement in male jobs, and of course the suffrage movement, both of which led to women becoming enfranchised citizens. In short, the First World War instigated a change in the social and political landscape of Britain but as a disenfranchised citizen until 1927, Mitchison still had to work to negotiate a space to be heard.[10]

This chapter reflects on Mitchison's debut novel *The Conquered* (1923) to consider the way it challenged imperialism and began the start of a career that represented communities asserting themselves against autocratic rule, in particular, the value of cultural nationalism and myth as means of unifying such groups. Violence is not a theme readily associated with Mitchison's *oeuvre* but in *The Conquered* she considers whether militant action is an inevitable stage in asserting self-determination. Set during the Roman conquest

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[8] Sponenberg (2002) explores the problematic nature of Mitchison's sexual politics in her thesis.

[9] 'Although this was the full period of suffragette militancy, some of it, I would have thought, very much up my street, it did not affect me at all, and this must have meant that I didn't hear it talked about […]Yet both my mother and Aunt Bay were keen feminists and certainly believed the vote was important. But both were anti-militant, deeply shocked by behaviour which they considered both unwomanly and unladylike […] I doubt if the Pankhursts would have been received either at Cherwell or Cloan [family homes]' (Mitchison 1979a: 80)

[10] Seemingly representing contrasting viewpoints - with war primarily viewed as the public male sphere and the family as the private female sphere - the First World War was pivotal in shaping women's experiences and establishing them as an important demographic and as vocal contributors to British politics and society, thus the two issues were intrinsically linked.

of Gaul in the first century AD *The Conquered* explores the futility of war focalised through the defeated Gallic leader, Meromic, and his subsequent enslavement by a Roman officer, Titus Barrus. The characters represent opposing powers but the novel illustrates that the dynamic between the two characters is one of ambivalence, complicity and conflict, and undermines simplistic notions of 'sides' during war. *The Conquered* challenges imperialism by questioning the dominant historical narratives which had typically lauded the victors. Instead, it considers the devastating physical and psychological damage inflicted on Meromic from the perspective of the conquered: he is not only enslaved but loses a hand as punishment for his support of the Gauls as they try to resist Caesar's rule. The novel is focalised through its oppressed protagonist, yet it also attends to the motivation of Barrus who, as a Roman soldier, believes that the Romans are civilising Gaul. The tragedy in the novel is compounded by the fact that Meromic comes to an acceptance of his fate as a slave, even becoming grateful that he is alive and relatively well-looked after. At the end of the novel, when Meromic learns that the Gallic leader Vercingetorix has been executed, he considers avenging his death by killing Barrus but the novel ends with his transformation/reincarnation into a wolf, the totem of his Gallic tribe.

The novel's ending has divided readers: some have read the mythical ending as an 'easy' resolution (Benton 1990: 42), while others consider the use of myth as consistent with Mitchison's use of supernatural iconography in her writing (Burgess 2006: 33). My reading argues that the novel's mythical ending is apt when read alongside the inclusion of epigraphs (which head each of the thirteen chapters) many

of which are derived from Irish nationalist poems and songs. The epigraphs have served to give the novel an allegorical meaning and have been read as a comment on Britain's imperialist relationship to Ireland and the political unrest which existed around the time of the novel's publication. Thus far, existing research has only briefly acknowledged that the epigraphs champion a pro-nationalist stance in favour of Ireland, and in this chapter I pause to consider the implications of their inclusion to the novel, specifically Mitchison's employment of the verse of W.B. Yeats and how this shapes the novel's ending. Ireland's campaign for Home Rule by nationalists, and independence by republicans, was a significant issue that served to align Mitchison with the left-wing politics of the day, particularly in support of Home Rule, and which distanced her from the Conservative pro-Union views fostered by her upbringing. Ireland, as viewed through Yeats's perspective, also appealed to Mitchison's romantic side and her interest in myth and cultural nationalism, particularly the way literature could serve a political purpose. The novel established themes she would return to throughout her career, specifically how self-determination could be achieved by marginal groups. But beyond the romanticism of championing 'the conquered', Mitchison's novel raises difficult questions about whether 'blood sacrifice' could be justified.[11] The novel's ending, I argue, is symbolic of the martyrdom associated with this ideology of blood sacrifice where the deaths of those willing to die for their country left legacies that gained mythical and cultural status and functioned to unite and strengthen communities in their plight for

[11] This issue has been identified but not fully explored by Jenni Calder who states 'the suicide of Fiommar [the protagonist Meromic's sister] can be seen […] as blood sacrifice – one of the themes that recur in Mitchison's work – which liberates Meromic' (1995: 70).

liberation. Mitchison admitted that she responded to the events in Ireland with 'considerable emotion but not a great deal of knowledge' (Benton 1990: 60).

The dichotomy explored in the novel is focalised through Meromic and Barrus who show both perspectives of war and the way imperialism benefitted from complicity by the colonised. In contrast, the epigraphs advocate a more resolute nationalist stance to suggest violence is a justifiable stage of resistance movements for oppressed groups to instate liberation when all other peaceable methods have been exhausted. I consider that the narrative's duality and ambivalence was reflective of Mitchison's own shift away from her pro-imperialist upbringing to her left-wing outlook, and that the promotion of blood sacrifice was a means to intervene in contemporary politics to show her solidarity for those dying for the cause they believed in. *The Conquered* is the first in a series of novels where Mitchison places protagonists in seemingly hopeless and transitional periods in history, thereby challenging readers to question whether violence can ever be justified.

My chapter builds upon the seminal studies of Ruth Hoberman (1997) and Diana Wallace (2005) who have established the ways in which Mitchison wrote herself into male worlds. Certainly, I agree that her novel is a product of her gendered experiences and I frame this as a problem of speaking out, not for others, but herself. I posit that her debut novel's inclusion of a preface and epigraphs written by men is a strategy that served to validate Mitchison's work and whereby political solidarity with Ireland was voiced by them, not her. While the novel is a product of her gendered experiences, I depart from the analysis that reads the book as thematically feminist to argue that it is a text primarily concerned with representing fraternal relationships. In this regard, my study echoes Jenni Calder's observation in

her article 'Men, Women and Comrades' which argues that the novel explores 'complex issues […] of sibling attachment, choice, different levels of freedom and captivity, which move into an examination of relations between men' (Calder 1995: 70). Ultimately, this chapter argues that Mitchison was, by her own admission, not 'very much interested' in women, at least not in her debut novel.[12] The novel does not attempt to affect change to patriarchal discourses or redress the absent narrative voices of women but crucially depicts male protagonists against a backdrop of war. Therefore, the novel is concerned with showing an understanding of the male worlds of war. It considers the politics of nationalism and its value in gathering a community together to stand against imperialism rather than espousing a specifically female political agenda.

In contrast to the concern with the male voice in *The Conquered,* in the latter part of the 1920s Mitchison establishes a place to speak openly for herself in terms of personal female experiences by publishing non-fiction to address women and birth control. Although she promoted birth control and supported women's autonomy, Mitchison's initial writings about birth control were, first and foremost, aimed at encouraging working class women to limit the size of their families, albeit for their health and well-being. Conversely, birth control in her own life was not only relevant for health but as a means to practise an open marriage and this sexual freedom was arguably permissible based on her class and affluence. As a wife and mother, and crucially a person of middle-class standing, Mitchison was an acceptable and

[12] Indeed, in an interview with Mitchison, Isobel Murray asked: 'For people who know you as a feminist and socialist, it may seem strange that almost all the main characters [in *The Conquered*] are men'. To which Mitchison responded: 'I don't think I really felt myself very much interested in women' (Murray 2002: 72).

authoritative voice on this matter and her writing highlights the way in which certain groups felt that they could speak for others.[13]

Before an analysis of her writing from the 1920s it is helpful to look back on the personal and socio-historical contexts which impacted on Mitchison's development into a writer and activist who became sympathetic to left-wing politics. It is a useful reminder that Mitchison who is often eulogised as a feminist and socialist was not immediately defined by these categories; rather they were markers of her identity which she grew into, and even then they were not fixed but malleable concepts that she applied in different ways to different political and social settings. Much of this has been mapped by Mitchison as well as her biographers, but I draw upon unpublished personal letters and archival material to emphasise that she was preoccupied with finding a means to assert herself during these years. She was conscious of gaining experience and using research as a means to impose her authority through her writing, which was a product of her own uncertainty. As suggested previously, Mitchison had shown an aptitude as a writer and political thinker from a young age and was already engaging with political ideas long before her debut novel was published in 1923.

Mitchison's Conservative Childhood

Mitchison's parents came from Scottish land-owning families. Her father was John Scott Haldane the eminent physiologist whose notable achievements included creating the gas-mask, a task which involved him working closely with miners and putting his own life at risk during experiments. His brother Richard was the Liberal

[13] Only gradually did Mitchison become vocal in asserting the value of birth control as a means for women to have more sexual freedom.

politician perhaps best known for his role as Secretary of State for War 1905-1912 and who later became Lord Chancellor of the first Labour Party. John and Richard's sister, Elizabeth, was the first female Justice of the Peace in Scotland. All three siblings published extensively in their respective fields of expertise and beyond, and even their mother, who lived to be a centenarian, published an autobiography that depicted a life conscious of her privilege and responsibility to her community.[14]

Arguably, the biggest influence in shaping her early political viewpoint was her own mother. Mitchison's mother, Louisa, did not have a career as was typical for a woman of her class and of the period but she, like the Haldane family, had an interest in the society and politics of her time. In contrast to her in-laws, Louisa aligned with the Conservative Party with Mitchison describing her mother as 'Oxford's staunchest pillar of the Victoria League' (Mitchison 1973: 85).[15] The importance of politics to Louisa is evidenced by the claims she makes in her autobiography, *Friends and Kindred* (1961). She recalls her reluctance to marry Mitchison's father, John, and the proviso she issued to him:

> Before we were engaged […] I made John understand, as clearly as I could do, that I could not and would not alter my political faith. For the moment, Home Rule was the burning question. Other things might follow into the limelight, but allegiance to the United Kingdom was a fundamental tenet with which there could be no tampering […] For his part John said that he was not really actively interested in politics, that he would certainly never take an active part in them, and never try to interfere in any way with anything I felt called upon to do. This I understood to be a definite pledge (Haldane 1961: 152).

[14] Helen Lloyd looks in detail at the three generations of autobiography from Elizabeth Haldane (neé Sanderson), Louisa Haldane and Mitchison. She emphasises that 'all were aware of the social and community responsibilities that accompanied the privileges of their class' (2005: 38).
[15] Kathleen Haldane, 'was a Tory and imperialist' who 'immersed herself in the Victoria League, an organisation devoted to promotion of the British Empire' (Benton 1990: 3).

It was not just that politics were central to Louisa but that her views seemed to clash with the liberalism of her husband and his family. She reflects with some disapproval that

> The Haldane family was, in the parlance of the day 'pro-Boer', that is to say, it greeted our disasters with 'serve them right' or 'what else did you expect?' When the troubles in the concentration camps were reported, John refused to listen to reasons why the camps were created. It seemed as if he were deliberately closing his mind to any reasoning on that matter, and could only talk about 'inhumanity' and 'starving women and children' (Haldane 1961: 195).

It is an interesting dynamic portrayed between Mitchison's parents here in which the typical masculine and feminine views we might expect, particularly during this period in history, are inverted. Where we might presume that Louisa as a mother might empathise with the 'starving women and children' we instead find these emotions attributed to her husband, while she maintains a rather callous and detached view of the victims of war. Louisa's tenacity and myopic loyalty to the British Empire helps to explain why Mitchison would question later in life whether her political choices had been a continued reaction against this imperialist stance. On looking back on her childhood Mitchison reflected: 'I took it for granted that my mother's views on everything were right, including her great worship of the British Empire' (1973: 84).

The unquestioning devotion to the Empire can be found in writing Mitchison produced for her school's journal, *The Draconian,* where these pro-imperial views were aired.[16] They reveal Mitchison's skill as a writer even from a young age and, startlingly, they present views that Mitchison's would fight against in her adult life and work. At 13 years old she published an essay titled 'England, mother of nations'

[16] Thanks to Roger Robinson from Beccon Publications who provided copies of these articles.

(Haldane 1911: 1223–1224). The essay begins with a quote from Rudyard Kipling's poem 'England's Answer' ('Sons, I have borne many sons, but my dugs are not dry') and adopts his metaphor of a mother and child as representative of the British Empire and her colonies. Mitchison's essay argues that, 'without pressure, our colonies swear allegiance to our King, and make friends in England', and because 'we put no bonds on our colonies' they 'do what they like, not always very wisely'. Cautioning that 'mother' is in danger of becoming too passive due to her fear that her 'children' might rebel against her (as they did in America in 1776) Mitchison warns against granting independence to the colonies too quickly, before they are 'fit to look after themselves'. For Mitchison, in order to be a good mother, discipline must be enforced alongside kindness.

But the depiction of a maternal relationship between Britain and her colonies falters when Mitchison argues that it is better to 'punish sedition now' than 'kill hundreds for rebellion'. The essay ends by advising: 'do not then put on too much velvet glove over the firm hand lest we have to strike it off again suddenly'. The depiction of the relationship between the British Empire and its colonies in the opening paragraphs as familial and fair is undermined in these final, telling, lines. That these views were ever commonplace makes for uncomfortable reading in itself, but that these opinions are expressed from a child highlights the innate prejudices which were fostered at the time. So too, the metaphor of the mother presents a seemingly innocuous figure which enables Mitchison (and Kipling) to hide the brutal reality of how the punishment for 'sedition' would actually be enforced. By using this figurative language the reality of violence, and the lack of agency that the colonies have in this supposed reciprocal relationship, is thus evaded.

The influence of Kipling on Mitchison and her admiration of the British Empire and Unionism was echoed in the school's journal the following year, in 1912, when she printed her poem titled, 'Ulster'. The poem alluded to Kipling's poem of the same name which had been published earlier that year and was a response to the passing of the Third Home Rule for Ireland Bill. Specifically, it responded to the establishment of armed resistance, in the form of the Ulster Volunteers led by Sir Edward Carson, to the imposition of Home Rule. For Kipling, who was a staunch Unionist and Imperialist, the idea that Ireland would gain autonomy was a threat to the United Kingdom and to the wider Empire. His poem opens at 'the dark eleventh hour' and speaks of the 'traitor' standing 'before an Empire's eyes'. The speaker makes an impassioned plea, warning: 'we perish if we yield'; to concede Home Rule for Ireland, and to allow the Irish Nationalists to gain autonomy, would be the beginning of the end for the Union and, by extension, the Empire. Kipling's final lines emphasise the Unionist stance: 'One Law, one Land, one Throne/If England drive us forth/We shall not fall alone!'

In Mitchison's poem the speaker echoes this sentiment about unifying Britain:

> Come and help us, Oh Britons, against Britain's foes, -
> The joint in her harness our Empire still shows.
> Rise and help us, 'gainst foemen most base and most vile,
> Who have entered your councils by intrigue and guile.
> Come and help us, e'er the day dawn your children shall
> rue,
> Oh, to Ulster be loyal, as she is to you.

Kipling's poem makes a reference to 'the rule of Rome' which was a slight against the Catholic majority in Ireland, many of whom were on the side of Home Rule and Nationalism; Home Rule had been used interchangeably with the phrase 'Rome Rule' by the Unionists in order to suggest that the Bill would be a threat to the

existing Protestant hegemony. Where Kipling's poem subtly hints at this threat, Mitchison's goes further and voices a strong anti-Catholic message:

> Come and save us, your kinsmen, as English as ye,
> From a new Inquisition from which we must flee […]
> We will not be bondmen or bend before Rome
> Come and save us, as your souls shall answer for ours,
> From the hate of the priests and their death-dealing powers.

In this early poem, the wider context surrounding Home Rule or the validity of the democratic vote for Ireland is overlooked and in the essay India's attempts to distance itself from British rule is viewed as sedition rather than a justified movement towards decolonisation. Here, rebellion is viewed as the action of an uneducated and ungrateful few, too foolish to govern themselves.

Mitchison's poem, like her essay, is surprising for the way in which it endorses violence to ensure British rule is maintained at all costs and for the way in which attempts at self-determination and independence are viewed with derision; opinions which run counter to those associated with Mitchison's adult life and work. These texts reveal how engrained the pro-imperialist view was in Mitchison's young mind. Poignantly, Mitchison's debut novel, *The Conquered* (1923), would redress these views taking a diametrically opposed stance that actively challenged imperialism and promoted nationalism. It was to Mitchison's credit as a writer that she would draw upon this duality in her identity and feed it into her fiction, and her ability to see both sides of the political argument encouraged her to write literature that repeatedly explored ambivalence and conflict.

Evidently, Mitchison was influenced by her mother but in contrast to the value Louisa attributed to her promotion of pro-Unionist views, and the importance she placed on expressing them and being heard, Mitchison remembers that:

> My father never spoke of his views – or not till many years later – but I did know that my parroting of [my mother's] political slogans annoyed him, making him frown and shake one foot. It was many years afterwards and my own political views were then not hers; we were talking up the glen at Cloan together, and he said, 'You can imagine what was said when I married an Edinburgh Tory' (Mitchison 1973: 84).

For all the seeming rigidity of Louisa's politics and the apparent passivity of her father, Mitchison later considered the nuances and shared interests within these oppositional political positions, and explains that her mother had been

> very keen on the Empire and all that, but with a sense of duty towards other people, and a genuine compassion and feeling towards, for instance, the miners who came to the house because of [her] father's work. It was a kind of Toryism which […] is a little bit rare nowadays (Caldecott 1984: 13).[17]

In this recollection we can see some of the hallmarks and contradictions which were to be found in Mitchison's own life. Jenni Calder claimed that Mitchison's 'mother seemed to both oppose and reinforce the social status quo. She was a feminist, a modern woman, but maintained a highly traditional code of behaviour' (Calder 1997: 13–15).[18] Mitchison cautioned that her representation of her mother might have been 'unfair; she was never quite as *simpliste* as I have made out' (1973: 114–115).

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[17] For Mitchison, the rare Toryism she describes above could be seen in Louisa's desire to help groups she saw as less fortunate, although she qualifies this to say that support was only for those with a willingness to 'show courage in a difficult situation' (Mitchison 1973: 115). This statement captures a Conservative view that people must support themselves: 'The desire to avoid dependence and the erosion of personal responsibility remains a characteristic Conservative theme in both theory and practice' (Barnes 2011: 332).
'It is difficult to reconstruct the standards and fine distinctions of the society in which I grew up. One was supposed to know them all in some subconscious way […] Maya [her mother's nickname] had a great covering word: "undesirable"' (Mitchison 1979a: 83).
'Mitchison's peers including Aldous, Trev and Gervas Huxley along with Lewis Gielgud who frequented the Haldane home, viewed Louisa as warm, friendly and adored, and remembered her as being tolerant and understanding of young people' (Benton 1990: 25–26).

[18] David Smith states: 'The total influence of parents and relations on Naomi Mitchison left her with a rich but often contradictory legacy. From her grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Haldane, she inherited the religious impulse to define oneself in relation to a universal "sum of things", and, somewhat incongruously given the elder Mrs. Haldane's deep-set evangelical piety, a taste for the anthropology of J.G.Frazer. In her aunt, Elizabeth Haldane, Naomi Mitchison had a model of local social involvement and, along with her grandmother, a source of information about the part-Highland, part-Lowland environment of Cloan, the family house. Yet despite the strong emotional and domestic influence of her mother in particular, it was with the male members of the family that Mitchison

The contradictions in Mitchison's background are revealed in *Small Talk* (1973) where she reminiscences about the time her mother who took her to see George Lansbury, the socialist politician, and James Larkin, the Irish trade unionist, speak in Oxford. In Mitchison's view, her mother's motivation for doing so was a form of paternalism: 'I am sure she felt that these were people who were being unfairly treated and whom we ought to 'help', the more so perhaps as it showed that the poor Irish must continue to be looked after by the good English' (1973: 114–115). Mitchison reflects on this event again in a later autobiography to explain that she was 'much shaken' having heard Larkin and Lansbury speak and noted that 'something was happening. But I was still a young lady and I had not even come out, so it would have been inappropriate for me to air my views' (Mitchison 1975: 52). The two differing perspectives of this one event – one viewing Ireland as in need of guidance and the other viewing it as the socialist struggle for equality is indicative of the issues Mitchison confronted in her life and writing. Mitchison distanced herself from Conservative politics but in many ways she retained some conservative values: there is an undercurrent throughout her life and writings where this paternalism and view that there were people in society, such as herself, best placed to lead those less fortunate. Although Mitchison would champion socialism the positive values instilled by her mother, as evidenced in her sense of social responsibility, resulted in her maintaining some of the conservative values throughout her life. Mitchison, I will show, at times considers herself best placed to speak for groups that she believes

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identified herself most deeply. Figuring large in the background was Richard Haldane, John's elder brother, who was to become Liberal War Minister and Lord Chancellor. For Mitchison he embodied certain family ideals of progressive social leadership which were in their turn bound up with his devotion to the tenets of Idealist philosophy beginning with Plato and the Guardian of The Republic, and extending to the thought of Hegel and his German followers' (1982: 2).

cannot speak for themselves and ironically in her efforts to offer agency and value, she actually undermines the right for them to assert themselves.

Throughout her life and career Mitchison wrestled with her background and this undoubtedly resulted in fictions that explored this tension to great effect; indeed, *The Conquered* pivots on this dialectic. The value of social responsibility and sense of *noblesse oblige* instilled by her mother which was a product of her privileged role in society, remained a central feature in Mitchison's life as her intervention in working-class women's health will show. Nonetheless, Mitchison had to work to establish her own voice, not just to distance herself from her mother's pro-imperialist views but to assert herself as a woman in a man's world.

Becoming useful: writing herself into male worlds

Mitchison was sixteen years old when the First World War began. It was around this time that she began to have 'slightly disturbing doubts about the Imperialist Conservative background to which [her mother] had accustomed [her]' (Mitchison 1979a: 52). Unmarried and living with her parents in an affluent household she started her studies in science as a home student at the University of Oxford, while her brother and their male peers left to serve in the Army (Caldecott 1984: 16). Having followed her brother Jack to the prestigious Dragon School for boys as a child, she was forced to pursue a different educational route during her adolescent years, so while he advanced to Eton she was educated at home.[19] Clearly the opportunities

[19] Mitchison recalled: 'I had enjoyed myself very much at the Dragon School. I was for all practical purposes a boy until the awful thing happened [menstruation…] I was quickly pulled out of school and I never went back' (1975: 11). It has been noted by Hoberman (1997: 25) and Wallace (2005: 46) that Mitchison aligned with boys through her experiences of being educated with male peers and that at this stage in her life she was forced to confront the realities of the impact of her gender on her life.

afforded to Mitchison were exceptional and indicative of her privilege but nonetheless being female imposed limitations on the choices available to her.[20] The war compounded the differences between the siblings further by reinforcing the roles expected of them based on their gender, distancing them both literally and figuratively. At home, Mitchison was eager to contribute in a meaningful way to the war effort which was no doubt heightened by her family's close involvement in the conflict: her Uncle Richard Haldane the Liberal Party politician had been 'appointed secretary of state for war' in 1905 and had 'effectively created the army with which Britain entered the Great War' through his series of reforms (Johnson 2013: 133).[21] Mitchison's father also played an important role during the war with the government enlisting his expertise following the use of chlorine gas by the German army in Ypres in April 1915. John Scott Haldane's pioneering work was instrumental in the creation of respiration devices which developed into the first gas masks (Sturdy 1987: 297).

Archives held at the National Library of Scotland contain unpublished letters between Mitchison and her future husband, Dick Mitchison, written during their

[20] Notably, the University of Oxford did not officially grant women degrees or allow them to graduate until 1920. Even if Mitchison had completed her studies she would not have gained the same formal recognition as her male counterparts at this time https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/oua/enquiries/first-woman-graduate

[21] See Richard Burdon Haldane's autobiography Chapter VIII 'As Lord Chancellor 1912-1915' which documents how he was forced to leave office in 1914 on misinformed views that he was a German sympathiser during the war: 'Every kind of ridiculous legend about me was circulated. I had a German wife; I was the illegitimate brother of the Kaiser; I had been in secret correspondence with the German government; I had been aware that they intended war and withheld my knowledge of this from my colleagues; I had delayed the mobilisation and despatch of the Expeditionary Force. All these and many other things were circulated' (1929: 282). Tellingly he notes: 'Looking back, I can find nothing but advantage in the extent to which I acquired something of an "international mind" […] I have always thought our own people were at least as capable as those of any other nation. But I liked to study what other nations had accomplished and to appreciate sympathetically the reasons why they had accomplished it. I am not sure that this spirit, good as it is for tolerance, is equally good as a training ground for getting the confidence of the British public' (1929: 284-285). This internationalist outlook and sympathy to understand other nations was mirrored in Mitchison.

courtship. Mitchison's husband remains a somewhat elusive figure in comparison to his well-documented wife but he clearly had a profound influence on her. The letters offer a revealing insight not only into the admiration and respect Dick had for Naomi but crucially the way in which his advice and views shaped Mitchison's.[22] Writing to her future husband in 1915 Mitchison asked for advice on how she might contribute to the war effort, to which he responded:

> As to how you are to use yourself, I don't know what to answer. Women's work at present and their position is a problem that makes me shudder, whenever I face it fairly. I think the hospitals are quite right not to take people at 17, nor do I think you would make a good woman doctor (NLS Acc. 12578. Box 2. Folder 2. Letter dated 1 July 1915).

Countering the somewhat negative start to his self-proclaimed '"hideously elder-brotherly" letter', aware that his response might be construed as patronising, he admitted that his view 'implies that you can't yet go out and use your education, because there's not enough of it. It certainly contains almost insulting remarks about your age'. Unable to propose a specific path for Mitchison in terms of the war effort he instead encouraged her to write, adding: 'I know you won't like what I'm writing and you'll think I'm recommending more uselessness – but I don't see a better alternative'. Justifying his views, he reasoned:

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[22] Dick challenged Mitchison's mother's views regarding imperialism arguing that from his perspective patriotism was 'a barren emotion', and that 'collective ideals' amount to little more than 'collective oppression' (NLS Acc. 12578, Box 1, Folder 3, 28 July 1914). He wrote to Louisa to question her support of the British Empire contending: 'Now you, I think, when you talk about the Empire, imagine a collective life transcending that of the individual - one founded on common glories and nurtured in common traditions, a life the very thought of which is an ideal and an inspiration. That I don't understand. […] Take Ulster for instance. […] what […] do they mean by this enthusiasm for the Empire […] What, precisely, is it that you think one camp of politicians have been destroying for 8 years? And what are the ideals, the loss of which would be worse than civil war?' (NLS Acc. 12578, Box 1, Folder 3, 28 July 1914). Dick conceded a week later in a letter to Mitchison that 'it's at this sort of time that one values an irrational love of one's country, and see that that is a good thing and something to be counted valuable even against the material progress of the world or the conveniences of government' (NLS Acc 12578, Box 1, Folder 3, letter, 4 August 1914). But the insistence on supporting imperialism or British rule blindly above valuing the individual was fanatical in his view and this became a view shared by Mitchison. Dick's warning to Louisa about the advent of Civil War in Ireland if Britain continued to evade the calls for Home Rule was prophetic.

> I think you want three things – 1. To compare your ideas of people, which are pretty rigorous, with what books you have to tell you about human nature and the way it fits in to the conditions under which *men* live. 2. I think you want to study one subject fairly thoroughly and learn to collect and use facts. 3 I think you want to learn to write about things set before you, and to use your insight and imagination to help and illuminate the conclusions you reason out – and not to just run riot on what you observe (ibid. my emphasis).

Dick's advice was to be of profound importance and prophetically he identifies the hallmarks which would come to define much of Mitchison's writing: to research others, to use facts, and to use her imagination to understand the conditions of humanity. However, Mitchison was nothing if not tenacious and did find a way to be 'useful' by becoming a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse serving in St Thomas' hospital in London. It is testament to her altruism and desire to offer her own time to help others which would continue throughout her life. It is also indicative of her scientific curiosity and lends itself to the way she sought to 'know' about the political world around her and she regularly used her personal experiences to inform her writing. Subsequently, it was an experience that she could draw upon to authentically represent the horrors of conflict in her debut novel:

> Seeing things like gas and gangrene and people in great pain made a deep impression on me. In fact I fainted at my first bad dressing, but that was only because I had to look on and wasn't actually doing something. I think this is probably why my first novel, *The Conquered*, was so full of blood and gore – I was trying to exorcise it all (Caldecott 1984: 17).

Notably, the VADs formed a branch of nursing which was also linked to her family having been devised as part of her Uncle's Army Reforms. It was an organisation supported by her Aunt, Elizabeth Haldane, who became 'vice-chairman of a new Territorial Nursing Council' which later developed into VAD nursing. Elizabeth Haldane promoted the service explaining that 'we woman can do work for our Army as really as if we shouldered the musket and handled the sword' (Johnson 2013:

149).[23] Archaic language aside, Elizabeth Haldane's plea encouraged women to contribute to the war effort and placed value on the role of VAD nursing, equating it to the important role of those serving in combat.[24]

In reality, women's experiences of the war, ranging from those who witnessed the conflict first hand to those who remained at home, would be elided by the dominant narratives of men who had suffered in trench warfare. Claire Buck in her reading of British women's writing of the Great War explains that 'combatant experience, particularly trench experience on the Western Front, swiftly became a guarantee of the authenticity of war writing' (Buck 2005: 87). Leonie Caldecott notes that during the war years 'Naomi started taking an interest in politics, stirring up local interest in the League of Nations' and she began to write to the *Oxford Times* but chose to conceal her identity: '"I did not think it sensible to sign my own name; everyone would know I was only a girl even if I was married. So I signed them 'Mother of Seven', 'Returned Serviceman', and so on"' (Caldecott 1984: 19). Caldecott reflects it is 'a revealing choice of roles when it comes to the issue of who has the right to express an opinion about how the world should be run!' (ibid.). It is a profound reflection on this time in Mitchison's life where she clearly understood the correlation between knowledge and experience in justifying the right to speak. Moreover, she was acutely aware of the lack of parity between men and women and recognised that the gender divide did not just impact on the choices afforded to men and women (which therefore shaped their different experiences) but that Britain's

[23] Johnson is citing Summers (1988) *Angels and Citizens: British Women as Military Nurses, 1854–1914*, pp. 237–70.
[24] Both men and women worked as VADs, although women made up two thirds of the grouping (Johnson 2013: 149).

patriarchal society conferred authority not only on who should speak but also on who should be heard.

Mitchison took her husband's advice and studied history and she recalled the impact it had on her first book: 'I had been deeply moved about Ireland, partly by Yeats's poems, but without much political understanding; it only seemed to be a situation which fitted in with and illuminated Caesar's conquest of Gaul' (1979a: 183). In her readings of the ancient worlds Mitchison recognised the parallels with Rome's conquest of Gaul and the tempestuous relationship between Britain and Ireland (Wallace 2005: 47–48). It has been argued persuasively by Hoberman that Mitchison was drawn into these worlds where she simultaneously desired the power of Rome, but as a woman she sympathised with the barbarians. However, I consider that the duality played out in *The Conquered* was not primarily driven by her feminism but rather as a means to contribute to contemporary political issues and thus it mirrored her shift from pro-imperialist to left-wing sympathiser. It resulted in a novel that explored the complexity and ambivalence of political allegiances and negotiated various techniques to speak out and to try and be heard.

I want to consider the way in which this genre was used by Mitchison to authenticate and justify her right to speak. The historical novel by its very definition draws attention to its authority by using historical facts as a basis for the narrative. By listing the works she used to research her novel at the end of the book, Mitchison let her reader know that she, like her male peers, was well-versed in these classics. The preface to the novel written by Ernest Barker serves an interesting function whereby his status gives credence to the novel as he, as an Oxford don, confers his approval of the text. Furthermore, Barker explains to the reader that the 'the true

home of lost causes was the Celtic stock' and overtly identified the way Mitchison's novel about the Gauls evoked parallels to the contemporary Gaels, should any of her readers miss the comparison (Mitchison 1923: 5).[25] Having someone else write a preface is a feature that is not adopted in any of Mitchison's other books, and I regard it as an indication of her need to be validated and to assure readers of her right to speak on these issues at this point in her literary career. In addition, having Barker explain the contemporary political relevance of the novel to the situation in Ireland, and by using epigraphs, arguably distanced Mitchison herself from the contentious issue and allowed others to speak for her.

Nonetheless, although *The Conquered* used veiled allegory to comment on the political present, it was radical in many ways. Mitchison took traditional narratives of the Roman Empire which had been used to 'validate British imperialism' and 'in shifting from the point of view of the victors to that of the conquered, it marked a seismic shift in the genre of the historical novel' (Wallace 2005: 45; 43–45). It was also a shift in Mitchison's own thinking whereby the views purported in her youth, albeit those parroting her mother, were reversed to consider the opinions of those who did not value loyalty to Britain or the Empire.

Muddles and the Liberal Dilemma in *The Conquered*

Ambivalence is at the heart of the *The Conquered* as explored through the relationship between Barrus and Meromic and their slave-master relationship. The Roman solider Barrus is described as 'shy and had very few friends of his own age;

[25] Barker had published *Ireland in the Last Fifty Years (1866–1916)* where he reviewed the political landscape that had affected the country and asserted that: 'Ireland desires something more – something different in quality – something beyond an infinity of Land Acts, and above and beyond recurrent Home Rule Bills which come to nothing: she desires to possess her own soul' (1916: 169).

they found him a little dull, a little too full of the early Roman virtues' (Mitchison 1923: 27). His desire to go to Gaul is not driven by brutality but by a seemingly educated, albeit naive, judgement that the role of the soldier was part of a noble and civilising campaign:

> [His grandfather] had visions of his grandson reforming society, reviving the citizen spirit, putting back the aristocracy into its right place, restoring order and stability, the good old days…But Titus wanted to go soldiering, just as his father had done; and he wanted to go somewhere where there was a real war […] in fact, he wanted to go to Gaul […] It was to be hoped that his admirable upbringing would counteract the evil influences he was sure to meet with in Gaul (Mitchison 1923: 28).

In this statement there are clear echoes of the paternalism that came to define and justify the Empire's 'civilising mission'. It is perhaps useful to offer a brief synopsis of the novel here. Barrus becomes a soldier, travels to Gaul and attempts to learn the language and show kindness to the people there, but is ambushed and captured by Meromic's father. Fiommar (Meromic's sister) shows him compassion and treats Barrus and the other prisoners with respect, but despite their small victory against the Romans Gaul is invaded: 'It was all over by sunset; here, as everywhere, Caesar was the conqueror' (76). Meromic's father is then killed, and his sister Fiommar choses suicide over slavery, though she encourages her brother to surrender himself: 'I'm quite sure it'll be better for me than living as a slave […] But you're a man: life may hold something for you still' (82).[26] Meromic and another man are held as slaves and

[26] 'As a woman, however, there is little choice for Fiommar – no active place for her in the male war which becomes the centre of the novel; and this reflects Mitchison's own experience of World War One, the memory of which was still excruciatingly fresh. She did not envy, of course, the horror experienced directly in combat by her husband and brother […] She was a woman on the Home Front, frustrated by the 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 to nurse, 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' (McLeod 2000: 391–392).
'Once she is eliminated from the story, there is no further place for women as subject. Fiommar's banishment from the world of the novel necessarily makes that world a masculine one […] We are, in

punished by Barrus's Grandfather, and when Barrus learns of their brutal mistreatment he claims ownership of them. On returning to Gaul, Barrus asks that the slaves stay 'faithful', to which Meromic replies: 'I'll take it gladly, and keep it. Our lives are in your hands from this day!' (120). The men later travel to Britain, the country which failed to help the Gaels fight the Romans, and Meromic seeks his revenge upon them. He asks that Barrus let him leave for a week on the promise he will return and Barrus agrees. Meromic successfully tricks the Britons into believing that he is an ally and manages to lure them into being captured by the Romans. But on returning faithfully to Barrus, proud of his loyalty to him, and at his own attempt at retribution, he is soon filled with anger on learning that 'he saw his enemy, [Gandoc the Briton] not suffering […] but well-housed and well-fed' (140). Once again Meromic leaves, this time without permission, and kills Gandoc the British leader in a 'fair fight' (146–147) but returns to Barrus once more. Meromic encounters Molhir, a leader fighting for the remaining Gaels. Although Meromic had justified his continued loyalty to Barrus because he had saved his life, his knowledge of those still fighting for the Gallic people made him '[feel] the shame of his slavery like [never] before' (164). This time, rather than returning with Molhir as a prize for the Romans he stays with him until he dies and then returns to Barrus, who is annoyed at his lack of loyalty. The ambivalence which Meromic feels is expressed as he explains that 'there's half of me aching to get off, to be fighting on my own side, the side I ought to be on; and there's the other half – […] I'd give my life for [Titus], I would truly; he's all I've got' (202). Ultimately the remaining Gaels and Romans

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fact, encouraged as the soldiers are, to distance ourselves from her as a human subject. It is a long way from here to the women characters in *The Blood of the Martyrs'* (Elphinstone 1993: 30).

enter a bloody battle, and Meromic flees to join his countrymen, but it is a lost cause. Barrus finds Meromic, a weakened and tortured man, and once again he convinces him to return to him. In the final chapter, Meromic is living in relative peace with Titus and his wife and children, during which time he learns that the leader of the remaining Gaels, Vercingetorix, has been killed. On hearing the news Meromic retires to his room and considers killing himself, but then a mystical story-teller, who had appeared in the first chapter of the novel singing songs of the Gaels, emerges followed by wolves and Meromic begs him to take him too: 'The story-teller laid his hand on the bowed head. Meromic's room stood empty; his knife lay on the window-sill, rust beginning to gather in the dew spots; on the paths and under the bushes there were tracks of wolves' (318).

Within the novel Meromic moves through various emotional states: from his privileged life in Gaul, to the acceptance of his role as a slave, to the realisation that Gallic leaders and his culture are being erased. The shift between Meromic accepting his fate and then coming to the realisation that the injustices he faces do not simply mean his identity is sacrificed but that his whole culture will gradually be eradicated, is the dilemma upon which the novel pivots. Meromic is conditioned to feel loyalty to Titus for saving his life, while resenting him for being one of the Romans whose colonisation has resulted in his slavery and need for rescue in the first place. In a letter to Mitchison, E.M. Forster praised Mitchison's debut:

> I venture to write you a line of thanks for *The Conquered*. I found it so moving and beautiful, and the character of Meromic holding together from first to last. He made me realise what life was – and is – for the half-slave: the muddle of it, the ceaseless corrosion. I suppose we all view the past through our local interests, and while reading your book I often thought of India and the Meromics I have seen there, who suffer not of course with his intensity, yet in the same way. – The end seemed to me beyond all praise (NLS Acc.6610, 23 December 1923).

His review captures one of the novel's central tenets, namely that the relentless suffering Meromic has to endure was a 'ceaseless corrosion' of his life and culture. The novel hinges on this 'muddle' between the realisation that to live as a slave might be better than to not live at all, only later to choose death. In the dynamic between the two characters who represent two opposing 'sides' Mitchison instead shows complicity, passivity and fear as integral to the colonial relationship. In many ways the novel shared similarities with Forster's *A Passage to India* which was published the following year. As Peter Childs notes:

> *A Passage to India* is partly about what Forster and others have called the liberal dilemma: the opposition to political extremism and intolerance combined with a refusal to use force. It was generally argued that the British Empire was split between paternalists who thought that Britain had moral and cultural supremacy over its colonies, and liberals such as Forster, who believed it right to spread values of understanding and education but disagreed with the Empire's military and commercial exploits (Childs 2008: 202).

Mitchison's novel is such a contrast to the writing from her youth which extolled a solipsistic view that the British Empire was entirely justified in all its actions. Here, Mitchison gives credence to the other voices and questions the values instilled in her education and brings them under scrutiny. As Diana Wallace and Ruth Hoberman have noted, Mitchison uses male historiographies and subverts them so the parallels between the two Empires would also reveal their weaknesses.[27] Mitchison's engagement with thinkers such as Gilbert Murray at this time no doubt influenced this shift:

> Murray spoke of himself as an Irish Nationalist who sympathised with Indian Nationalism […] Murray indeed believed that the British were the

[27] 'Intellectuals in Victorian and Edwardian England returned obsessively to such comparisons [between Britain and Rome]. An astounding range of writers, teachers, administrators, and politicians refer to the parallel between the two empires. A full list of figures would have to include Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone, Rudyard Kipling, Lord Curzon, Arthur Balfour, and Robert Baden-Powell, to give just a few of the famous names' (Vasunia 2005: 38).

> only people in the world who attempted to be really just towards inferior races; but he was haunted by the lessons of Greek history and the memory of how Athens had forsaken democracy, had become corrupted by Imperialism, and gone to its friendless doom. He feared that Britain too would be overcome by hubris' (Symonds 1992: 92–93).[28]

Mitchison's debut directly confronts the political concerns regarding imperialism and the way in which this was being increasingly challenged at this time. Her stance in the novel is one which does not simply invert the narrative to laud the conquered but rather explores the way in which complicity enabled the imperial project to survive. This dynamic and feeling of hopelessness is most aptly captured in Forster's reference to the 'muddle'; it is ubiquitous in Forster's writing particularly in reference to *A Passage to India* (1924). Zadie Smith, amongst others, have noted that 'Forster's folk are famously always in a muddle' which might be understood as

> a deliberate ethical strategy, and expression of the belief that the true motivations of human agents are far from rational in character. Forster wanted his people to be in a muddle; his was a study of the emotional, erratic and unreasonable in human life [….] He felt his infamous muddle had value, and the more controlled, clear, Austen-like elements of his style were ethically problematic (2003).[29]

This view is equally applicable to Mitchison and her willingness to confront the messy realities of life, and it is one of the strengths of this novel and later works, as further chapters will show. In Mitchison's novel, she valorises Meromic's story but resists inverting the narrative to simply depict the imperial project as a reductive binary dynamic, instead she blurs the division between the sides and her characters are shown to possess both good and bad traits. As Yeats would attest:

> It is one of the great troubles of life that we cannot have any unmixed emotions. There is always something in our enemy that we like, and

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[28] Gilbert Murray 'brought his classical expertise to the anti-imperialist cause, comparing forced labour in Rhodesia with that in Ancient Greece […] The Helots in Greece, Murray pointed out, were in fact an indigenous primitive agricultural community held down by outlanders' (Symonds 1992: 92–93).

[29] http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/nov/01/classics.zadiesmith

> something in our sweetheart that we dislike. It is this entanglement of moods which makes us old, and puckers our brows and deepens the furrows about our eyes (Brown 1999: 84).

However, in contrast to the dilemma and ambivalence throughout the novel, the epigraphs which Mitchison used throughout her novel, many taken from Yeats's verse, served to draw parallels between Rome and Gaul/Britain and Ireland and presented a more resolute advocacy of nationalism and sacrifice as a way to assert self-determination. The novel's ending, where Meromic metamorphoses into a wolf as a seeming escape from his hopeless situation, has left readers divided. Through the epigraphs Mitchison's novel confronts, in a more defiant tone, the possible value of nationalism as a means to assert self-determination, and as a means to resist imperialism.

'Little Rhymes': the importance of epigraphs to *The Conquered*

> Mrs. Mitchison has the experience of twenty centuries and, not least, the last seven years, to draw upon, but she wisely refrains from clinching the argument. The little rhymes, however, with which she heads her chapters seem to show that if her sentiment and sympathy are with the Celt, her logical part goes with the conqueror. Is there not, she seems to say in her drawing of Barrus, who can see beyond his country, something wider and wiser than nationalism, its hatred and its fears? (NLS Acc. 8503/2).

This review, initially published in 1923, undermines the importance of the epigraphs to the *The Conquered* by patronisingly referring to them as 'little rhymes'. As a consequence, it misinterprets the novel to argue that the Roman solider Barrus is held as the voice of reason against the apparently reductive nationalist view propagated by the protagonist, the defeated Gallic leader, Meromic. Revealingly, in the above review it is Barrus who is 'wiser' than Meromic because he is apparently not limited by nationalism. Yet, Barrus is representative of this very myopic view: he is willing

to enslave Meromic and participate in the colonisation of Gaul because he views it as the Roman Empire's civilising mission and believes in the superiority of his country over theirs. One need not look to the epigraphs to grasp this reading but to overlook the epigraphs is to lessen its potency: the epigraphs are absolute in their nationalist stance, even if the novel explores the nuances and dichotomy of the master slave relationship.

The above review was not the only paper to downplay the allusions to Irish Nationalism, with the *Northern Whig* choosing to overlook the relevance of the epigraphs to contemporary politics and instead recognise the merits of *The Conquered* purely as a historical novel:

> the employment of excerpts from Irish verse writers of Nationalist and Sinn Fein sympathies suggest it is meant to illustrate the Gael's undying love of liberty, and his oppression by stronger races. Few readers, however, will trouble themselves very much about the symbolic significance of a story which is quite a good specimen of its class (NLS Acc. 8503/1).[30]

The belittling tone in the reviews regarding the epigraphs diminishes the comparisons between the Roman Empire and Gaul, and the British Empire and Ireland which Mitchison deliberately draws upon in the novel. Meromic is faced with two hopeless choices: being complicit and compliant – which means he risks losing

[30] *The Northern Whig* was associated with Unionism which may be one reason why the Nationalist references were downplayed https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/northern-whig
A review in *The Weekly Westminster Gazette*, May 12 1923 reads: 'When Caesar says that the Gauls possessed certain marked characteristics which we recognise again in Celtic peoples at the present day, it is not unreasonable to assume that other characteristics which appear in these existing Celtic peoples were found in the Gauls of Caesar's time. That, at any rate, is the presumption on which Mrs. Mitchison has written "The Conquered". In the Irish people and in Irish history she finds analogues with the Gauls for the history of the Gallic conquest and rebellions was marred by the same instability and unsteadiness, the same readiness to rise and dejection after defeat which have been noticed among Celtic peoples of more recent times. But it is not with the political or military parts of the history that Mrs. Mitchison is chiefly concerned. It is rather the romantic side of the people that she endeavours to envisage, as that expresses itself in the loves and hates, their devotion to the leader of the hour, their close sympathy with nature, their sense of the wonder of life, their reaction to the charms of poetry and song, their belief in magic and miracles; she does not overlook either their cruelty or disregard for human life and mutual treachery' (NLS Acc. 8503/2).

his land and culture - or embracing violence and rebellion – through which he risks both his security and his life. In this regard, Meromic's plight seems like a 'lost cause': to accept his fate or to fight offers no solace but a loss of life.

All thirteen chapters in *The Conquered* are headed by an epigraph ranging from a soldier's song from the First World War ('The Bells of Hell'),[31] a Scottish phrase ('He that will to Cupar maun to Cupar')[32] and a nursery rhyme.[33] Amongst this eclectic selection is the recurrence of extracts taken from Irish verse and poetry which account for the majority of the epigraphs. They include extracts from a poem by Joseph Campbell;[34] 'The Stars Stand Up in the Air' by Thomas MacDonagh;[35] an extract from 'The Memory of the Dead' by John Kells Ingram.[36] These poets were closely aligned with the Irish nationalist cause but the poet whose work recurs most is, perhaps unsurprisingly, W.B. Yeats. His work including lines from his play 'Cathleen Ní Houlihan' as well as his poems 'The Rose Tree', and 'Sixteen Dead Men' are all included in the novel. Each of these works convey the theme of blood sacrifice, where men give their lives for their country.

The long and complex history between Ireland and Britain had become increasingly divisive during the First World War. Indeed, W.B. Yeats wrote to

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[31] https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/bells-hell See Brophy, John and Eric Partridge. 1930. *Songs and Slang of the British Soldier: 1914–1918.*

[32] 'Applied to foolish or reckless persons who persist in carrying on projects in the face of certain failure, of which they have been duly advised' http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/cupar

[33] One epigraph appears to be a version of the 'go in and out the window' circle game.

[34] Joseph Campbell is attributed to the verse but I have been unable to locate the title of the work used in the novel. Campbell 'worked on the organisation of several Sinn Féin election campaigns in the years 1917-19'. He was a supporter of those involved in the Easter Rising: 'Campbell's reverence for the leader of the Rising led to a refusal to see their Republican ideal compromised in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 […] he regarded the signing of the Treaty […] as a betrayal' (Ní Chuilleanáin 2001: 4).

[35] MacDonagh was executed for his role in the Easter Rising. He is memorialised in W.B. Yeats's 'Easter 1916'

[36] The poem laments those who fought in the Irish Rebellion in 1798 against British rule.

Mitchison's Uncle, Lord Haldane, to warn him about the implications of delaying Home Rule and asking Irish men to fight for Britain in the First World War:

> I have no part in politics and no liking for politics, but there are moments when one cannot keep out of them […] it seems to me a strangely wanton thing that England, for the sake of fifty thousand Irish soldiers, is prepared to hollow another trench between the countries and fill it with blood. If that is done England will only suffer in reputation, but Ireland will suffer in her characters, and all the work of my life-time and that of my fellow-workers, all our effort to clarify and sweeten the popular mind, will be destroyed and Ireland, for another hundred years, will live in the sterility of her bitterness (Foster 2001: 71).

The repercussions of postponing Home Rule exacerbated tensions and the Easter Rising in 1916 sent a clear message that the First World War would not quieten Irish nationalists' endeavours, and that the British government should take cognisance of the republican agenda. However, once Home Rule was eventually granted and the Anglo-Irish Treaty signed, the civil war which broke out between the Irish republicans and the Irish nationalists demonstrated the intense difficulties in resolving the political issue peaceably. It was never, of course, a simple division between Ireland and Britain, but was a conflict fuelled by internal factions with competing agendas for the future of Ireland. Within these groups were those who felt that the Treaty had come too late and that only Irish independence from Britain would be a satisfactory outcome. The complexity of the Irish situation, then and since, remains a site of contention and it would be inaccurate to claim that Mitchison neatly mapped her allegorical novel on the situation in Ireland, for the complexities inherent in the political relationship both between Ireland and Britain and within Ireland itself were beyond a simple parallel. Rather, Mitchison extracts similarities between a nation being denied its right to autonomy by another. While this is not the forum to delve into the political and cultural debates in Ireland, it is worth noting that while 'it was mainly the Irish Home Rule

question, for which Empire became virtually a synonym' Stephen Howe reminds us that 'in speaking of Home Rule as threatening the Empire, its opponents did not assimilate the status of Ireland to that of Britain's transoceanic colonies. Quite the reverse: they associated it with the integrity of the British state itself […] breaking the Union with Ireland would destroy the entire state and social order' (Howe 2011: 66).

As Mitchison admitted, the appeal of Ireland was, in part, encouraged by her admiration of Yeats and his work, who notably encapsulated the dilemma of a writer who was initially resistant to engage in politics, and who wrote about the Easter Rising with ambivalence and uncertainty. Only in 1921 did Yeats advocate a more resolute stance in poems such as 'The Rose Tree' and 'Sixteen Dead Men' – two poems used by Mitchison in her novel. Unlike 'Easter 1916' with its ambivalent tone encapsulated by the refrain 'a terrible beauty is born', these later works seem to have shifted to an acceptance, and even promotion, of 'blood sacrifice' as an inevitable stage in Ireland's struggle for self-determination. In 'The Rose Tree' and 'Sixteen Dead Men' Yeats's earlier reservations which are played out in 'Easter 1916' are replaced by a cynicism which seems directed at those who may have doubted the validity of the rebels' actions. The opening lines of 'The Rose Tree' and 'Sixteen Dead Men' parallel each other, representing a voice of weary experience which seems to undermine those who are still caught up in the hopes of the past, and those who express a view that change might come through democracy and reasoning: 'O but we talked at large'; 'O words are lightly spoken'. Elizabeth Cullingford explains that in 'The Rose Tree' Yeats dismissed English promises of Home Rule as trickery: no more than 'a breath of politic words' (1981: 99). Revealingly, Mitchison does not cite 'Easter 1916' despite the novel itself grappling with themes of ambivalence as represented by Meromic who

literally goes back and forth from his ties with Barrus. Instead, the epigraphs used in the novel are resolute in their support of nationalism and martyrdom associated with men willing to die for their cause.

Jill Benton claims that 'there are no easy answers for Meromic' and that Mitchison avoids the difficultly in resolving the 'novel's dilemma by invoking a magical resolution' for the ending as the protagonist metamorphoses into a wolf (1990: 42). This view is echoed by Beth Dickson who similarly asserts that: 'by using myth […] Meromic does not have to live with the aftermath of a lost cause. Such resolutions are possible in fiction but are not resolutions at all because they do not take account of the harsh consequences of historical events' (Dickson 1987: 34–35). Contrastingly, Moira Burgess defends Mitchison's use of myth and invocation of the supernatural in the novel, noting that 'the scenario of a community or society operating within a structure of myth appears again and again in her fiction' (2006: 33). Likewise, Ruth Hoberman persuasively demonstrates the significance of the hostage dynamic suggesting that 'throughout Mitchison's work, magic and ritual and myth are a refuge against defeat' (1997: 134). Even although Hoberman understands Mitchison's ending she notes some of the problems inherent with the use of myth:

> If, as historical novelist, she cannot undo the past and describe the victories of those with whom she sympathizes, she can, as mythmaker, describe their defeats as victories, auguring a future of apocalyptic social change. There are two problems with such use of myth. First rather than instigating social change, myth is likely, in Angela Carter's words, by "dealing in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances". […] Second, once mythic sacrifice is seen as sacred, it is hard to limit the uses to which it may be put (1997: 134–135).

I agree with Burgess and Hoberman and push this further to argue that the inclusion of Irish verse shapes the interpretation the novel's ending, as one in which sacrifice and martyrdom are a deliberate end, in a way that is promoted in the epigraphs. What

becomes problematic is the way in which 'blood sacrifice' as romanticised by Yeats justifies violence, and the reader questions in what circumstances can this ever be permissible. In the final pages of the novel, Barrus tells Meromic that one of the Gallic leaders, Vercingetorix, has been killed by the Romans. Meromic reflects: 'He had not realised before that it made any difference to him that Vercingetorix was still alive; he had thought all that was past, but he knew now that he had forgotten and forgiven nothing' (Mitchison 1923: 317). Meromic picks up a blade and contemplates vengeance against Barrus. But instead, Meromic consecrates himself with the knife across his hand, before being visited by the wolves and fleeing into the woods. Meromic resists succumbing to vengeance and violence against Barrus, and the final pages of the novel become layered with the symbolism of 'blood sacrifice' whereby it is his sacrifice and martyrdom that serves to undermine the Roman Empire's control.

But it is not just the Irish epigraphs that influence how the ending might be interpreted. At the beginning of the novel Mitchison writes: 'Victrix causa diis placuit sed victa puellis' which translates as 'The victorious cause is pleasing to the gods, but the conquered cause to girls'. It has been noted by several feminist critics and has served to 'foreground the special relevance of [the novel] to women' (Wallace 2005: 43–44). However, it is an adaptation of a quote taken from Lucan's *Pharsalia* also known as 'Bellum Civile' – the Civil War – which dramatised the war between Caesar and Pompey. The line in Lucan's texts reads: 'Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni' which translates as: 'The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato' (Tassin 2007: 1109). Cato was a Stoic thinker and moral representative who upholds the ideals of the Republic and is set in contrast to Caesar:

> whereas everyone else is simply fighting to determine which man, Caesar or Pompey, will establish a *regnum,* Cato alone is fighting to maintain the laws of the state. As such, Cato claims to be the only participant in the civil war interested in defending the laws that ensure a Roman citizen's libertas against either of the would-be dynasts. Cato is under no illusion about Pompey. In his view, if Pompey is victorious he will be as autocratic as Caesar […] Cato will join Pompey's side, but he enters the fight not in order to support Pompey's autocratic agenda, like all the others. Rather, he enters the fray in order to defend the ideal of libertas against anyone who would assault its foundations. Cato's decision to enter the war thus imparts a moral dimension to the conflict that would otherwise be wholly lacking. His involvement means that what is at stake in the civil war is more than simply a personal rivalry to determine which general will establish himself as tyrant. As long as Cato is in the mix, the civil war can be construed in much grander terms as a struggle between tyranny and freedom (Stover 2008: 574-575).[37]

After Pompey's defeat Cato commits suicide rather than succumb to Caesar's rule, in a manner which is echoed in Meromic's life.[38]

In addition, Mitchison's novel ends with a poem written by her brother (to whom the novel was dedicated) entitled 'Amor Mortis Conturbat Me' meaning the 'love of death disturbs me'. The poem alludes to 'Timor Mortis Conturbat Me' – 'the fear of death disturbs me' – which was a refrain used in William Dunbar's poem, 'Lament for the Makars'. In Dunbar's poem, the speaker laments on the fate of everyone from young to old, poor or rich, saint or sinner, that death comes to take everyone. In J.B.S. Haldane's poem the title indicates that it is a 'love' of death which is troubling. In this poem death is a woman who reassures those facing death:

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[37] 'Pompeian soldiers wrongly interpret Pompey's death as the *finis,* since in their view his death has removed nay reason for continued fighting. Cato, however, rightly sees Pompey's death not as the *finis* at all, but rather as a new beginning: the removal of Pompey has created the opportunity for the war to be about something grander than the dynastic ambitions of two powerful generals […] They no longer struggle to champion the claims of an individual (Pompey); rather they now join Cato in fighting for a good cause (*libertas*)' (Stover 2008: 575).

[38] 'After the battle of Pharsalia, which saw the downfall of Pompey's armies, Cato the Young reunited what was left of the republican army to continue the fight in Africa beside Metellus Scipio. Having learned that Metellus Scipio had also been defeated at Thapsus, Cato chose suicide […] Cato was a stoic. Before killing himself, he read again […] Plato's *Phaedo* […] A reader of Plato, he prefers death to servitude' (Tassin 2007: 1110).

'Your friends have known me, I have not failed/ them' […] I drew them close in my arms and haled them/ Home to my everlasting rest'. The uncertainty and fear of death seems to be substituted by relief in contrast to the horror of war: 'Their shells and frosts and unending trouble/Are ceased and vanished like a bubble, /And lo, I have rewarded them double/For all their labour and all their pain'. It is a sentiment echoed in Yeats's *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* where the old mother implores that the people of Ireland willingly send their sons off to war. [39] Meromic's ending is thus recast in relation to this poem where his suffering and death are viewed as a worthwhile sacrifice.

Blood sacrifice as a means to achieve martyrdom reconfigures the ending from being understood simply as a neat conclusion to the narrative. The romanticism of sacrifice for one's country and the belief in a unification of people grounded in a shared nationality is symbolic of a need for a form of 'strategic essentialism' in resisting oppression.[40] Mitchison, like Yeats, hoped there could be a unification of the country and culture through the use of symbols and archetypes - a means to find a common history. Yeats was 'strategically essentialist about Irish and British cultures [and] argued that all Irish writers should write about indigenous places and subjects: he himself rooted his imagination in the landscapes of Sligo and the West' and this would be something which Mitchison echoed in her works, attending to the communities and

[39] In relation to the Roman setting of the novel, the phrase 'amor mortis' is also associated with gladiators who were liminal figures in that they were often slaves who then achieved heroic status in their willingness to confront death: 'the despised gladiators (often condemned criminals or slaves) were "glamour figures, culture heroes". The moment they took a solemn oath of violence and death […] their fate became a point of honor […] given they would fight to death with contempt of life and intense "love of death" (*amor mortis*) they could gain glory from the crowd' (Rhee 2005: 94).
[40] The term associated with Gayatri Spivak proposes 'that in different periods the employment of essentialist ideas may be a necessary part of the process by which the colonized achieve a renewed sense of the value and dignity of their pre-colonial cultures, and through which the newly emergent post-colonial nation asserts itself' (Ashcroft et al 2007: 75).

groups with whom she was associated (Allison 2006: 185).[41] Although Meromic's end is not realistic, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for the need to return to essentialist forms to defeat oppressive rule; returning to an archetypal symbol of his community Meromic has complied with the coloniser in order to survive and the novel has avoided binary divisions of us/them but, nonetheless, although Meromic is able to sacrifice his own freedom, it is the awareness that if everyone were to do so, there would be no culture left. In order to redress the imbalance there has to be a return to an essential state to signify a collective acceptance of a community's right to exist and this is represented in the return to the wolf, his tribe's totem.

Although myth may seem escapist, it was a means to try and unite cultures conscious of the heterogeneity and division which inevitably existed with nations.[42] Mitchison, like Yeats, repeatedly returned to this noting: 'We need this myth for a right attachment to community, and in its core is the king who dies for the people. We are willing to twist history indefinitely to get at this satisfying thing' (1949, unpaginated). [43] In Mitchison's debut novel she examined this dichotomy and played out the complicated relationship between Meromic and Barrus in a way that represented the ambivalence and complicity inherent in the colonial relationship. It would be this tension, this muddle, that Mitchison repeatedly explored in her fiction.

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[41] Helen Lloyd cites a typescript entitled 'This business of language' where Mitchison claimed: 'I was always writing about and for Scots. I was always trying to 'write for my own race', as Yeats did. A heart-breaking business, as he also found' (2005: 141).

[42] 'I have no hope seeing Ireland united in my time, or seeing Ulster won in my time; but I believe it will be won in the end, not because we fight it but because we govern this country well. We can do that, if I may be permitted as an artist and writer to say so, by creating a system of culture which will represent the whole of this country' (Maley 2007: 174).

[43] Mitchison would often use myth in her fiction. See Moira Burgess's 2008 monograph for details of how this emerges in her Scottish fiction during 1940–1960.

Press cutting from the *Scotsman* can be found at (NLS Acc 5836).

Women and Motherhood in the 1920s

By the time the First World War had ended, Mitchison had become a wife and mother but not yet an enfranchised citizen.[44] The Representation of the People Act (1918) had given some women over the age of thirty suffrage but Mitchison would need to wait for almost another decade before she was eligible to vote. Mitchison's experience as a wife and mother encouraged her to contribute to political developments with regards to women's rights, and particularly the advocacy of birth control during the 1920s, although this was mainly as a means to support working class women's health. In this context, Mitchison could draw upon direct experience to speak out for women. This section considers that it is not until the latter part of the decade that Mitchison establishes a place to speak for herself in terms of personal female experiences by publishing non-fiction to address women and birth control. I propose that although she was a burgeoning socialist and feminist, this period of Mitchison's political engagement was in its nascent stages. Moreover, she was aware of who had the right to speak at this time and negotiated to find ways in which she, as a disenfranchised citizen, could contribute. Although she promoted birth control and supported women's autonomy, Mitchison's initial writings about birth control were closely related to eugenicists debates and were first and foremost aimed at encouraging working class women to limit the size of their families. Only gradually did Mitchison become vocal in the value of birth control as a means for women to have more sexual freedom. By contrast, later in the decade and into the 1930s Mitchison became increasingly outspoken. Mitchison could speak directly and

[44] Writing to her Godfather, Samuel Alexander, about her marriage she explained 'I am going to be married to Dick Mitchison […] I don't suppose it will be until after the war is over and, indeed, it was because of the war that the thing happened at all' (Alex/A/1/1/191/10).

frankly on this social issue without the veil of fiction or allegory, in texts which were motivated by a sense of *noblesse oblige*. As a wife and mother, and crucially a person of middle-class standing, Mitchison was an acceptable and authoritative voice on this matter. Conversely birth control in her own life was not only relevant for health but as a means to practise an open marriage, though this sexual freedom was arguably permissible based on her class and affluence.

Birth/Control

Birth control was the first major political and social issue with which Mitchison personally engaged during the 1920s. The subject had been brought to her attention by Marie Stopes and her book, *Married Love* (1918), which had helped Mitchison and her husband during the early years of their marriage in fostering a liberated sexual relationship and open marriage. Unsurprisingly, birth control and sexology were taboo subjects at the time; these were private matters but they also had repercussions which could affect the public sphere. Jane Dowson has noted that in 1931 '*The Listener* […] ran a series on 'The Present Crisis of Marriage' which was subtitled 'one of the most debatable questions of our time' (1996: 6). According to Dowson, 'The key elements responsible for the "crisis" in marriage and the changing nature of family life were the emancipation of women and the increasing spread of birth control' which were '"seen as a threat to the institution of marriage, and thus to social order itself"' (Dowson 1996: 65). The loss of men in the War also contributed to the disruption of the family. Hence, birth control and the family became not only a private issue for Mitchison, but a public one.

Marie Stopes was responsible for opening 'London's first birth control clinic in Holloway in 1921' and it was in 'November 1924 [that] the North Kensington Women's Welfare Centre was opened' by Mitchison who 'regularly helped out at the clinic as well as serving on the committee. It brought her into direct contact with lives very distant from her own' (Calder 1997: 93).[45] For those living in poverty, the lack of adequate birth control added to the financial and health burdens they already faced. Writing in the *Women's Leader* in 1924 she depicted the life of people living on low wages struggling to raise families in cramped living conditions and she challenged those who opposed the efforts to help such women claiming, 'the opposition to this work of civilisation seems to me incredible' (1924: 249–250).

As Stephen Brooke highlights, the involvement of middle and upper-class women in the advocacy of birth control, and particularly in their promotion for working-class women, was an altruistic endeavour which was tinged with element of manipulation:

> We should not forget that [birth control] was also an exercise, though a well-intentioned one, in middle-class authority. Middle-class views dominated the birth control and sex reform movements. Middle-class women claimed the power of representing the intimate sexual lives of working-class women. This is not to say that these voices were not raised on behalf of working-class women, but, of course, that act of advocacy was in itself an act of class distinction (Brooke 2006: 110–111).

'Well-intentioned' is a term which encapsulates the endeavours of writers at the time who became increasingly interested in engaging with working-class communities. From 1918 to 1939 Mitchison gave birth to seven children and practised an open marriage, demonstrating that while birth control was championed as an important

[45] Notably Margery Spring-Rice who had been an early acquaintance who promoted politics to the Mitchison's was 'a leading light' in this venture. Margery and Dick had a long-term relationship as part of his and Naomi's open marriage (Calder 1997: 93)

issue for working-class women to lessen their financial burden and minimise health issues, these concerns were less of a worry for the well-off Mitchison.[46] For all birth control was a radical subject and a progressive political agenda, as an 'exercise […] in middle class authority' it had close associations with eugenics. David Bradshaw explains that 'while it is easy for us to deplore eugenics and to feel abhorrence for what it degenerated to under the Nazis, it is important not to lose sight of its 'radical and forward-looking' origins and its largely progressive constituency, especially in the 1930s' (2003: chapter two, e-book, unpaginated). Bradshaw cites Lesley Hall who reminds the reader that there were various '"uses made of eugenic concepts by specific women when talking about motherhood, health and women's place and role within society generally'" and therefore eugenics did not evoke the same negative connotations which became prominent during the rise of Nazism (ibid.).[47] Yet, Mitchison was apparently aware of the growing move towards this stance and the way science was being used as a means of control to achieve the aims of pogroms. On 13 July 1925 Mitchison was sent a letter informing her that she was 'elected a Fellow of [the] Society' but on 29 May 1933, Mitchison wrote to the Eugenics Society stating:

> I should like to resign from the Eugenics Education Society […] I find myself more and more out of sympathy with the general trend of opinion. I cannot help feeling that, to most of the members and council of the society, eugenics means merely conservation of those virtues which have made people into successful members of society as it is. I […] think that their ideal must imply the kind of qualities which have been regarded for the last several hundred years as valuable. I can't therefore feel it consistent with my position as one who wants to see the present state of society completely altered, and new sets of social and individual values

[46] Only five of Mitchison's children survived – an indication of the limitations of health care even for the wealthy in society. Mitchison reflected that with antibiotics her first child who died aged nine might have survived meningitis (1979a: 30).

[47] Bradshaw citing Hall, Lesley. 1998. 'Women, Feminism and Eugenics', in *Essays in the History of Eugenics*, ed. by Robert A. Peel (London: Galton Institute), 36–37.

> substituted for the old ones, to continue as a member of your society. I also feel very doubtful about some measures such as the sterilisation of the unfit. They put a terrible power into the hands of a government and bureaucracy which may yet prove tyrannous (Wellcome SA/EUG/C.391: Box 151)

Mitchison's prophetic view of the devastation which scientific advances could have, and the pogroms it could support, came only months after Hitler became Chancellor in 1933: the year which was arguably the watershed in the Nazi movement and their rise to power. For Mitchison, eugenics conflicted with her liberal socialism and hope for political progress. Her modernist and revolutionary viewpoint was in direct opposition to the principles of eugenics which seemed to want to maintain a perceived ideology of elitism and purity.[48]

In an unpublished document entitled, 'In favour of our right as women to have babies proudly and gayly [sic]', Mitchison attacks the control and judgement imposed upon women of all classes in their decision to have children. Mitchison reflected that 'feminists should reconsider the birth control situation' since there

> is the constant danger of modern life, the danger of being regimented, of being bullied into doing a thing because everyone says that everyone else is doing it and that it is a capital thing to do, or being told that one is un-civilised and un-scientific if one ventures a feeble protest (Wellcome SA/FPA/SR12: Box 664).

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[48] Mitchison had actually written about eugenics when she was fifteen in her play *Saunes Bairos: a study in recurrence*. Mitchison explains that the play 'was about an imaginary country […] in the Andes under a vaguely Mayan culture […] the population was kept firmly down by a hierarchy of priests and the plot involved the birth of twins (one too many) to an important personage in the state' (1975: 44). Reflecting back on that text she considers: 'there are some curious bits in the modern prologue […] "things like the Mental Deficiency Bill, which is supposed to be charitable and really succeeds in being grossly unjust to the poor" – an echo from my brother perhaps?' (1975: 45). The headteacher of the Dragon School wrote to Mitchison to praise her for the play: 'many people seem to think that the chief idea was the eugenic one [...] it seemed to me that the motto of the play was "Religions, how many evils have been done in they name?" [...] I think that if the ladies of Oxford who were shocked by the very mention of breeding, had twigged the real thought of the play, they would have been still more shocked' (NLS Acc. 4549, letter from Skipper, 14 May 1913). As Susan M. Squier notes, the play 'anticipates *Solution Three* in its critique of the political uses of such eugenic programs of reproductive control' (1995 [1975]: 167).

For Mitchison, contraception should not be a regarded simply as a means to control birth for health issues, but rather an option for women to gain autonomy and to be able to 'say when they were going to have their babies and organise their lives on a […] much more certain basis' (ibid). Phyllis Lassner notes this potential for conflict between feminism and socialism in the period in her work on Mitchison and Storm Jameson:

> the politics of Jameson and Mitchison are marked by their ambivalence towards prevailing socialist and feminist politics. The feminist book Mitchison could never complete and the sarcasm that Jameson aims at her fictional feminists express mixed feelings about the feminist movement. They applauded the change in consciousness that rescued the ambitions of middle-class women, but rebuked feminists for ignoring the fates of impoverished women and men. Mitchison always felt tensions between feminism and socialism, and only rarely found outlets that supported both, as when she joined the Women's International League in the 1920s and publicly advocated birth control for women of all classes (1998: 66).

Women of all classes shared the implied sole burden to preserve 'the family' and birth control was often pitted against this. Mitchison valued women's rights and their choice to raise a family, but also recognised their entitlement to birth control to support health and well-being. Her 'Comments on Birth Control' (1930) provocatively challenged 'the notion of marriage as possession' and went so far as to call it 'domestic prostitution' (Calder 1997: 94). Extreme as such a phrase was, Mitchison was being transgressive in order to open up and challenge those who sought to keep women in their place.

This was further developed in *The Home and a Changing Civilisation* (1934) which argued for 'a more open approach to marriage and the home' (Calder 1997: 133). Mitchison's sister-in-law, Charlotte Haldane, was one of the feminists she found herself opposing. Charlotte Haldane caused a major divide between Mitchison

and the once very close relationship she had with her brother, J.B.S. Haldane, when she published a book entitled *Motherhood and its Enemies* (1927) which argued that motherhood must come before all else (Calder 1997: 81). Charlotte had a successful career as a foreign correspondent and writer and was therefore not against women living beyond the confines of the home. It was, however, an attack on women like Mitchison, well-off enough to leave their children in other people's care and in order to put their careers and personal lives first (Calder 1997: 81). Mitchison's *An Outline for Boys, Girls and Their Parents* (1932) and *The Home and a Changing Civilisation* (1934) can be seen as a rebuttal of Charlotte Haldane's book, as well as the wider scare-mongering against women's freedom and sexual liberation. Birth control was therefore a familial and political matter, dividing as well as uniting women.

Conclusion: Leaving the Past Behind

In an unpublished letter to her godfather, the philosopher Samuel Alexander, Mitchison reflected on writing historical fiction during the interwar period when politics had become an increasingly imposing and important subject:

> At present I am feeling very muddled about what I am going to do next. I'm thinking that historical novels are all wrong […] one never can really get at earlier people, particularly not by my own method of making them fundamentally moderns, and the better one does it and the more one convinces people, the wronger [sic] one is, if one is telling lies. So, I do want to do something new – not a novel at all. I'm drawn between philosophy and politics, but it's all rather inchoate still, and I don't want to do anything for about a year. In the meantime my big novel is coming out, but that is very largely un-historical, and meant to be taken symbolically. I believe it's good, but of course one can't tell (Alex, n.d).[49]

[49] In the preface to the renewed edition of Mitchison's selection of short stories and poetry, *The Delicate Fire* (1933), Isobel Murray argues that the historical world which Mitchison had explored in the 1920s was fostered both by her husband who gave her works of Edward Gibbon to read, and by the influence of her lover Theodore 'Widg' Gery, an Oxford scholar in Ancient History. The end of the relationship with Widg, it is suggested, marked a shift away from the ancient worlds which

Mitchison's 'big novel', *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), would be a success and was significant as it moved beyond male-dominated historiographies, and invented a world where a strong female protagonist could be realised. In this novel, Mitchison was able to blend her skill as a writer of historical fiction and apply her feminist concerns. In this context, sensitive subjects such as sexuality and fertility were depicted with little censure. In contrast, the retribution Mitchison faced when trying to depict motherhood and birth control in fiction set in contemporary society proved far more difficult, as a discussion of her novel *We Have Been Warned* (1935b) in the next chapter will show. [50] Despite the success of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* she wanted to depart from ancient history, albeit briefly, to engage with contemporary politics.[51]

Although she had been concerned with sounding 'feminine' and 'silly' in the early years of her career, Mitchison had become an outspoken voice as the 1920s

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Mitchison associated with him. Instead, 'for most of the Thirties she would attempt [a] more modern subject matter'. While the 1930s did mark a shift to different modes of writing, fictional texts like *The Delicate Fire* (1933) and *Blood of the Martyrs* (1939a) proved that she 'wasn't finished with the [ancient world] yet' (Murray 2012: v–vi).

[50] The criticism of the text led her to retort that sex in fiction was 'all right when people wear wolfskins and togas' (1979a: 179).

[51] As the interwar period drew to a close Mitchison published another historical novel, *The Blood of the Martyrs* (1939a), which shared similarities with *The Conquered* in that it used ancient Rome as a backdrop to highlight contemporary political issues. The novel depicted the persecution of the Christians under Nero's rule, and as Europe faced the threat of totalitarian regimes and Nazism it offered a timely parallel. In this regard, we can trace an arc from Mitchison's debut to this novel with both using classical worlds to function as an allegory for the political and social issues of the present day. The Christian backdrop in *The Blood of the Martyrs* was an appropriate setting for Mitchison to draw parallels between Nero and Hitler, but it also marked her own interest in Christian theology by the end of the decade. Mitchison was agnostic and would never convert to a religion but was encouraged to reflect on what she valued for society after being disillusioned by revolutionary politics and the brutal realities of totalitarian regime which both Fascism and Communism nurtured. Instead, Mitchison came to value the principles which encouraged people to be good, and use their moral judgement, not just for themselves but for their community. Mitchison's grand ideas for a revolution in politics on a global scale were replaced with more modest hopes based on individuals working within smaller groups to build communities that were part of a wider network. It was a stance that chimed with her realisation that another World War was inevitable and that shared values and coalition served the greater good. Albeit reluctant to revoke her pacifist stance, in the face of Nazism she understood that differences were to be set aside to find common ground on which to fight a shared enemy.

progressed, and particularly during the 1930s where she, like many of her peers, were not just recovering from the First World War and the impact it had on society, but anticipating the Second World War and negotiating their roles as authors and political thinkers.

CHAPTER TWO

Fellow Traveller: Mitchison's political interwar journeys

Mitchison's political trajectory during the formative years of the interwar period and the works which came in-between her historical novels are the focus of this chapter. In the 1930s alone, Mitchison published over fifty articles, short stories and poems in journals such as the *Left Review* and *Time and Tide*, which promoted Left-wing, liberal, feminist and anti-fascist views; three books for children, three books of short stories and poetry, and two plays.[1] The scale of Mitchison's corpus was fuelled by her curiosity and interest in politics and was very much a product of the era. Peter Marks explains that 'the literary culture of the thirties sometimes suggests an anarchic Speakers' Corner: any writer able to put pen to paper appears to have had musings, complaints and analyses readily published' (Marks 1997: 23).[2] Indeed, Mitchison's contribution to journals is indicative of the urgency to comment on the

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[1] Joannou cites 'Branson and Heinemann' and 'their social history of the Thirties' which places Mitchison and Winifred Holtby 'among the anti-fascist writers involved in the *Left Review*' (1999: 54).

[2] 'Opinions, it seems, were as regularly produced as poems. The preferred (and certainly the most accessible) soapboxes for such pronouncements were periodicals and weeklies, some already established, others worked up in response to the decade's literary and political imperatives. These journals provided swift access to sometimes small, but often well-defined audiences, enabling vigorous consideration of the interplay between literature and politics. Periodicals allowed for rapid debate on crucial matters of the moment, matters which might develop in ways unforeseen by critics and writers. Free from the revisions of hindsight, positions put forward in periodicals offer valuable contemporary records with which to consider important, though often short-lived, disputes' (Marks 1997: 23).

Peter Marks identifies that the periodicals 'reflected [the] biases' of those who edited and contributed to them who were often 'middle-class, male, university-educated and London-based' and that this needs to be recognised despite the fact the periodicals 'aspired to eclecticism' (24) *Cambridge Left,* a platform now little remembered, was constructed in the summer of 1933. Though it survived only five issues, *Cambridge Left* could boast J.D. Bernal, Naomi Mitchison and W.H. Auden among its contributors. The periodical's political commitment was clear, 'A Note on Poetry (26) and Politics' in the first number stating that '[t]he motives for writing, and the motives for those writing for this paper, have changed, along with the motives for doing anything. It is not so much an intellectual choice, as the forcible intrusion of social issues […] Naturally, not all periodicals were as politically orientated as *Cambridge Left* (26–27) *Left Review* [was] the most politically engaged of the decade's literary periodicals […] As with *Cambridge Left, Left Review* from the outset championed the Soviet Union' (1997: 28).

political and social issues of the day, and her motivation to depart, temporarily, from historical fiction.

It is not easy to trace a linear development through Mitchison's literary output during this period because her works so often overlapped and her political interests and causes were so wide-ranging. I am consciously delaying discussing Mitchison's involvement in Scottish politics during this time; I will focus on this in Chapter Three to coincide with her relocation to Carradale in Scotland at the onset of the Second World War. I recognise that although she did not move there until the late 1930s, her writing and political outlook was being influenced by the Scottish Literary Renaissance throughout the Thirties.

Despite the difficulties in neatly categorising Mitchison's work, I aim to track her political development and broadly map out her progress throughout the 1930s. As established in the introduction, this prolific period in Mitchison's career has garnered the most critical attention and it would be prudent to pause to acknowledge the existing research to show where my work engages with existing studies and where it departs. I want to situate Mitchison as a writer who has much in common with her male peers in addition to providing a feminist perspective on the politics of the time, which influenced the issues she spoke out on and the people she spoke out for. I argue that the relationship between genders was far more fluid than these seminal works on the period suggest, and that Mitchison's political engagement and literary output shared similarities with that of her male peers, perhaps more than some of her female contemporaries.[3] This chapter will follow the literal journeys

[3] Auden was a friend but was dismissive of her poetry which Mitchison believed was based on the grounds of gender. 'Auden and co. […] wouldn't accept females as verse writers, at least that is how I remember them (not so much Auden himself, but his followers, few of whom were that good). Everything is made more difficult for women' (Dowson 1996: 17).

Mitchison made, and connect these to the works she published. It will also consider the metaphorical journey Mitchison made during this time with regard to her political and social outlook.

Gender and the Thirties literary divide

Julian Symons's *The Thirties: A Dream Revolved* (1975), Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation* (1976), and Bernard Bergonzi's *Reading the Thirties* (1978), have been influential in shaping the discourse of Thirties literary studies. These seminal texts have offered an invaluable insight into the decade but have arguably perpetuated a problematic myth that the Thirties was a literary period dominated by male Oxbridge writers. Bergonzi defines the influential writers of the decade as:

> sons of the English or Anglo-Irish professional administrative class, very conscious of the First World War but too young to fight in it; educated at boarding schools and, in nearly all cases, at Oxford and Cambridge. This common experience seems to me more important if less noticeable than the left-wing political views attributed to the 'Auden Group'; it also characterised writers who were apolitical or right-wing, like Graham Greene, Anthony Powell and Evelyn Waugh (1978: 2–3).

Bergonzi's androcentric analysis is evidenced by a chapter entitled, 'Men Among Boys, Boys Among Men', where the upper-class public-school education of writers such as 'Spender, Day Lewis, Betjeman, Lehmann and MacNeice […] Isherwood, Upward, Waugh, Greene [and] Orwell', is used to demonstrate the ubiquity of

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On the BBC's *Desert Island Discs*, Mitchison repeats this point. She chose Auden's 'Night Mail' as one of her discs, and remembered him with affection. She recollects how she helped promote Auden before he became well-known, and how she gave him work as a tutor for her son. She recalled that she always had cake for him as he liked it so much, but that Auden in many ways viewed that as the woman's role – to serve him. Auden dented Mitchison's confidence as a poet by saying of her work 'I don't think it is very good – but doubt that matters much'. Dowson has analysed Mitchison's works and shown the Audenesque qualities of it 'in blending personal and public registers' (2002: 232). Mitchison also published a poem ' To Some Young Communists from an Older Socialist' in 1933 which was 'of course, a direct reply to her friend Auden's 'A Communist to Others' and imitates his blend of personal and public speech' (Dowson 1999: 54–55).

themes of schooling and the 'ambivalent schoolmaster-schoolboy' relationship in the writing of the period (1978: 37).

While the works of Bergonzi, Hynes and Symons have made significant contributions to the study of the period, they have undoubtedly shaped and created a gender bias within it. Janet Montefiore states in her introduction to *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: the dangerous flood of history* (1996) that her book is written, in part, as a response to a question posed by her students: 'Were there any women writing then?' (1). Maroula Joannou overtly criticised both Symons and Hynes for perpetuating the myth that women were 'private creatures' by simply ignoring them in their works (1999: 23). So too, Jane Dowson echoed this concern as late as 2002 claiming that there was a 'scarcity' of women's books from the period and an 'absence of literary criticism' (vii).

Janet Montefiore's study recognises the important work undertaken to reclaim women's writing but identifies that such projects often focus on 'women's writing primarily for its representation of women's lives and stories, [and] they have relatively little to say about women as historic subjects, and nothing about the political role of women writers between the wars, except in terms of their feminism' (1996: 20). This thesis follows Montefiore's lead in recognising and focusing on the overlap between Mitchison's work and that of her male contemporaries who have, more than women, been read in terms of their politics.[4] It is worth noting how closely Mitchison's life and works align with Samuel Hynes's account of the decade in *The Auden Generation*, for instance. To begin, Mitchison was part of a generation

[4] Montefiore's title suggests, her position is one which attempts to view male and female writers of the period alongside one another, particularly when writers such as 'Nancy Cunard, Stevie Smith and Naomi Mitchison all have more in common in terms of theme and style with their 'Audenesque' male contemporaries than they do with, say, Elizabeth Daryush or Laura Riding' (1996: 2).

trying to assert itself against the older generation in the hope that another war could be avoided. Like many of her male contemporaries in *The Auden Generation*, she travels widely and looks to document the problems within society and reflects on the potential for socialism and collectivism to build a fairer society. Hynes notes that there is a tension between the private and the public sphere, a tension that places a constant strain on writers and intellectuals. For a privileged writer such as Mitchison who endorsed socialism this dichotomy remained close to the surface of her works, and in this case her role as a woman and mother also gave her insight into the issue between the public and private sphere. Hynes identifies 1936 as the year in which writers who were pacifists shifted to align against Fascism – Mitchison declared her pacifism in this year but would renege her stance when war broke out. Hynes' recognition of a literary trend which moved away from politics towards Christianity and moral rearmament at the end of the decade also mirrored in Mitchison's decision to publish her *The Moral Basis of Politics* (1938) and *The Kingdom of Heaven* (1939), with her works engaging with these very themes.

Gender is one reason why female writers such as Mitchison have been overlooked. But there is also an assumption that the politically motivated writing found in the 1930s was 'anti-modernist' or of a lesser value than the highbrow aesthetic experimentation associated with the Modernists. For Elizabeth Maslen, the 'accessible idiom' which Mitchison used in her writing may have caused readers to 'underestimate' its value (1999: 141).[5] In *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and*

[5] Maslen suggests that middlebrow 'is backward looking' and that it raises definitions about classes formed in the nineteenth century and 'drags [them] into the twentieth century' making them outdated. The result is that writers classified as 'highbrow [are] seen as innovative, experimental' in contrast to the 'middlebrow who, while serious-minded, [are] seen as unadventurous in style, content with old-fashioned ways, worthy but plodding' (2009: 21). In actuality, writers categorised under the umbrella term of middlebrow were 'passionately involved with their modernity, the issues of their time and

After (1997), Williams and Matthews argue that the 'outdated cultural maps of the time' which 'polarised relations between aesthetics and politics, or between difficulty and accessibility, textuality and content' are no longer helpful. They suggest that

> the thirties are more accurately a troubled but symptomatic transitional phase between modernist and postmodernist writing, art and politics, a complex mutation that defined itself within, and in some ways, against the wider background of the popular writing and mass culture of the time (1997: 1)

The emphasis on reading the period as a 'transitional phase' is helpful, particularly when trying to trace Mitchison's complicated and shifting political outlook. While this chapter uses the Thirties as boundary to read her the works, the decade does not exist in isolation and is a product of the 1920s just as her time in Scotland during the 1940s had been influenced during the 1930s. Perhaps even more helpful is Janet Montefiore's extension of this idea into a questioning of periodisation entirely. For Montefiore, there is a fundamental and persistent 'blurring of boundaries' in the period that 'raises the question of whether it still makes sense to discuss the "writings of the 1930s" at all' (4). Justifying such a consideration, Montefiore recognises Eric Hobsbawm's argument that the years 1930–1939 should be viewed 'as part of the "Age of Catastrophe"' which is framed within 1914–1945. Of course, periodisation and decades are artificial but serve a purpose. Nonetheless it is very useful to heed Montefiore's caveat that 'literature of the 1930s [is] haunted by the memory of the First World War and the fear of the Second' (1996: 4).

Kristen Bluemel's invention of the term, 'intermodernism' is product of these debates. Bluemel asserts: 'I want intermodernism to locate a cultural or critical

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place, and wrestle articulately, both in theory and practice, with how best to express their involvement, how to communicate their vision to their readers' (2009: 22).

bridge or borderland whose inhabitants always look both ways', arguing that it 'has the potential to be the concept or space that inserts itself between modernism' (2009: 2–3). It is significant that intermodernism is conceived as having a Janus-face quality – a symbol which Janet Dowson identified as being ubiquitous in the decade due to the awareness of the war that had passed and the threat of another, to echo Montefiore's point above (1996: 12). In this new theoretical framework, Bluemel hopes to create a space which will allow critics to 'talk in new ways about artists, writers, journalists, and architects who were active during the interwar and war years and who, until now, have been treated as modernism's others, if they were treated at all' (2009: 6). Intermodernism aims to redress the partiality within discussions of writers from the interwar period and to acknowledge the influence of writers driven by left-wing politics.[6] Specifically, Bluemel identifies intermodern writers as those who

> tend to have their origins in or maintain contacts with working- or lower-middle-class cultures. As young people, they generally do not fit into the Oxbridge networks or values that shaped the dominant English literary culture of their time because they are the 'wrong' sex, class, or colonial status. As adults they remain on the margins of celebrated literary groups. Intermodern writers tend to hold down regular jobs (secretary, journalist, war worker, home worker, factory worker, teacher) to supplement their income from writing […] The intermodernists' social marginalization, lack of financial independence, and debts to realism, often resulted in writing that attends to politics, especially politics that may improve working conditions (2013: 42–43).

On the surface, Mitchison does not quite fit into this categorisation given she socialised with many Oxbridge highbrows. There was no need to 'hold down a

[6] 'Intermodernism should provide scholars with a literary-critical compass, analytical tool, or useful guidepost for finding and valuing vital figures and cultural forms that disappear in discussions of modernism or postmodernism (2009: 6) [and] solve practical problems for scholars who found themselves stymied by theoretical and institutional priorities that made it difficult to have sustained discussions about figures whose work and working conditions were different from or eccentric to those of the modernists' (11).

regular job' given her upper-class status and her household of maids. If we consider Mitchison's associations hers were certainly among such highbrow crowds. Indeed, W.H. Auden was hired as a tutor for one of her children, and Aldous Huxley was a close family friend who lived with her family during the First World War: clearly Mitchison was not lacking in Highbrow company.[7] Admittedly, Bluemel recognises this and reflects on Mitchison's contradictory position as a 'Scottish landowner with overt involvement in political life, a woman who enjoyed the wealth and the freedom to explore countries, cultures, and communities' which were 'closed' to her female peers such as 'the lower-middle-class [Stevie] Smith, the bohemian [Inez] Holden, and the socially-privileged [Betty] Miller' (2013: 52) With all this in mind, Bluemel still categorises Mitchison as 'an exemplary intermodernist' because of her commitment 'to advocating the rights of working people':

> She poured her energies into writing as an art that she understood to serve the people, and her insights into the parallels between ancient and patriarchal societies of a tyrannical nature and the capitalist democracies or fascist dictatorships of her own age led to trenchant critiques of the status quo on behalf of outsiders, especially women and workers (2013: 52–53).

Intermodernism is an appealing concept insofar as it recognises the importance of Mitchison's politics and writing, which remain on the peripheries of dominant discourses of the interwar period. I am inclined to agree with Elizabeth Maslen's view that 'literary labels, even if we deplore them, exist and are in constant play' and that 'intermodernism is promising [because] it could encourage more subtle classification of a number of mid-century narrative texts' (2009: 21). In its conscious re-naming, Intermodernism rather than 'the Thirties', for instance, perhaps

[7]'See Calder (1997: 26; 69) for Mitchison's friendships with Huxley and Auden.

encourages readers to view the period of 'interwar' and 'modernism' as more fluid and blended, echoing the view of Williams and Matthews. Widening the category to encompass literature from a wider period and to debunk fixed remits of what modernism might include, challenges complacent readings and assumptions based on existing or outdated male discourses. It also widens the parameters, as suggested by the other critics, to place the Thirties as part of a stage within the interwar period. While I recognise the benefits gained from disrupting outdated categories in order to offer more inclusive readings, and particularly to enable writers such as Mitchison to be given more credence and visibility, I am cautious about Bluemel's promotion of Mitchison as 'exemplary' with regard to her focus on the working-classes. In my view, a distinction needs to be made between Mitchison's advocacy on behalf of the working classes, for instance her important work on birth control, and her tendency to view the working classes only in terms of their class and risks homogenising the 'the masses' and where class difference could be overcome by sex, as I will discuss in due course. As such, Bluemel's position risks overlooking the disparity Mitchison felt between her socialism and her class position and the way in which her writing explores these differences. Therefore, while Intermodernism is a promising concept through which to read Mitchison's works, the problem of speaking for others is a crucial dimension to retain in light of such readings.

Mitchison was part of a wider movement which sought to document the working-classes but remained separated from them by their keen awareness of class difference. Ultimately, as an analysis of Mitchison's works from this period will show, her texts do not predominately give agency to the working-classes, but rather are works which often attempt to negotiate and reconcile the disparity of the upper-

class writer, their status, class and socialist ideals. Undoubtedly, challenging the male dominated discourses is important, and the concept of intermodernism attends to the more nuanced debates in the field. Evidently, however, Mitchison eludes neat categorisation; she always occupies an interesting in-between space and her personal conflict and ambivalence is one of the strengths of her writing.

Travels with Mitchison: mapping her writing from the 1930s

Paul Fussell emphasises in *Abroad: British literary traveling between the wars* (1982) that the interwar was a golden age of travel which was liberating after the limitations imposed by the Great War. But beyond exotic sojourns, the journey, and its ubiquity in literature during the Thirties, was a product of the political motivations of the time. Visiting slums, witnessing the lives of the working-class communities, and later travelling to fight in the Spanish Civil War were shared experiences for the politically-driven writers of the time.[8] In *The Auden Generation* Samuel Hynes claimed that 'the journey itself was the most insistent of "thirties metaphors"' (1992: 4). Travel narratives offered a means of documenting and understanding people and places which seemed uncertain and unknown, and Mitchison was one of several writers who travelled in order to understand the social and political landscape.

[8] In relation to the Spanish Civil War, the pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* devised by W.H. Auden, Jean Richard Bloch, Nancy Cunard, Brian Howard, Heinrich Mann, Ivor Montagu, Pablo Neruda, Ramón Sender, Stephen Spender, Tristan Tzara in Paris June 1937 posed the question to several authors: 'Are you for, or against, the legal Government and the People of Republican Spain? Are you for, or against, Franco and Fascism? For it is impossible any longer to take no side'. Mitchison's response was: 'there is no question for any decent, kindly man or woman, let alone a poet or writer, who *must* be more sensitive. We have to be against Franco and Fascism and for the people of Spain, and the future of gentleness and brotherhood which ordinary men and women want all over the world' (unpaginated).

Mitchison's journey closely mirrors that of her male peers and promotes the view that Mitchison and her works should be read as part of this literary period rather than in isolation or in a solely feminist context. Even though Mitchison and her works should not be limited by gender her feminism was, of course, an important dimension in shaping her political outlook. As this chapter will go on to show, the issue of voicing women's rights in the 1920s continued in this decade and sexual politics became caught up in her curiosity with Communism which was played out in her novel, *We Have Been Warned* (1935b). In this decade, Mitchison confronted difference, particularly in terms of class, and viewed the working classes as demographic that could instigate political change and revolution.

At the Coalface: Documentary, Reportage and Socialist Voyeurism

> The very shapelessness of the middle-class was taken as a sign of its inauthenticity, because, unlike the working and upper classes, its identity was not grounded in tradition (Golubov 2002: 42).

In Mitchison's view, the working-classes epitomised the romanticised ideal of the worker, and the belief that because they could not be complacent or satisfied with their current conditions they could be a source of revolutionary change. In Mitchison's view the middle-classes were both nasty and easily 'manipulat[ed]', because 'they are most usually bored, both in their work and in their homes, and yet they cannot help realising, from their newspapers and movies and other sources, that a large portion of the standards and values of the world are theirs' (Golubov 2002: 42). While her view of working-class groups was a more positive one, it nonetheless romanticised and reduced millions of people into a single homogenous mass.

The reality was that these worlds were beyond Mitchison's experience, and she was not alone in trying to explore, 'know' and document the working-classes. J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934) and George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) use the journey to investigate the working-class regions and slums of Britain. In the early 1930s, Mitchison also attempted to document the working-classes in her unpublished work, *Mother England* (Calder 1997: 125).[9] The book was devised partly from her own interests in canvassing among poor communities when trying to get her husband elected as Labour MP, another experience which would feed into her novel *We Have Been Warned*. But it was Mitchison's acquaintance with Walter Greenwood, author of *Love on the Dole* (1933), that fostered her idea to write about such conditions in a non-fictional text. In an unpublished piece entitled 'On and off the Dole' Mitchison documents her relationship with Walter Greenwood and recalls that she 'got to know Walter Greenwood in the early Thirties about the time *Love on the Dole* was published and when he was still very firmly in that world about which he writes'. According to Mitchison, the letters they wrote around 1933 and 1934 'show up that world which we tend rather to have forgotten, at any rate those who were not in it' (NLS Acc. 10753/7: 1). Greenwood's novel had been written from his own experiences growing up in the slums of Salford:

[9] 'She turned her attention to social conditions in her own country and planned a book on slum life. The book was never written, but early in 1934 she went to Glasgow and Salford, and later that year to Leeds and Birmingham, to investigate slum conditions. She recorded these visits in a 'Housing Diary', describing the overcrowding, the dirt, the gas lighting still common in Glasgow, and the deeply depressing, though in a way admirable, passive stoicism exhibited by people who had little or no control over their own lives, who were 'always having things done to them'. In Glasgow, she visited the notorious slums of Calton near Glasgow Green, determined to make first-hand contact with extreme deprivation. In Salford, she was escorted by Walter Greenwood, author of *Love on the Dole* […] Three years later, Victor Gollancz published George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* as one of his Left Book Club titles […] There was no book by Naomi' (Calder 1997: 125).

> He wrote 11 novels in all, but Greenwood's greatest achievement by far was his first: *Love on the Dole*, published in June 1933 by Jonathan Cape. *The Guardian* – then the *Manchester Guardian* – saluted not just its literary merit, but its authenticity: "We passionately desire this novel to be read; it is the real thing. Mr. Greenwood is a Salford man… he has been on the dole. He knows and he can tell." Unfortunately, it has long fallen from favour, arguably supplanted as the most definitive account of Britain's depression-era woes by Orwell's book *The Road To Wigan Pier*. Yet it is among the most evocative, affecting works of 20th-century English fiction. Not for nothing did Edith Sitwell claim that she could not recall being "so deeply, so terribly moved" as when reading this story (Harris: 2010).

Perhaps one of the most interesting claims made for the book in this review is that of 'authenticity'. Greenwood grew up in Salford and therefore was able to use first-hand experiences to write about working-class life. For Mitchison, to work alongside a novelist who had personal experience and who had been successful in writing fiction about a poor community in one of Britain's major cities was a great opportunity:

> I had clearly made some arrangement to go round rent collecting with [Greenwood] – I was now trying to get the material for Mother England, the book which I intended to write about actual conditions in the UK. He writes "do write the Mother England book. Do please, Naomi. I say this because you've got the capacity and what's so rare, the understanding. You know the diary positively reeks of Naomi Mitchison: all her niceness and shyness and fine sensibility. This is an opportunity from Cassells and it shouldn't take all that much of your time. And they pay well, I believe. There'll be good stuff in Salford for you and it will be interesting to see it through your writings" However, that book was too much for me and would have taken up too much of what time I had. If I had been going to do it I would have wanted to do it properly and not just odd bits. (NLS Acc. 10753/7: 5–6).

In a manuscript at the NLS entitled 'Statement for England 1935' and another entitled 'Scheme of Mother England' Mitchison maps out her vision for *Mother England*: 'This book should be divided into two parts, of which the first will be quite short, perhaps not more than a few thousand words and a few tables of statistics'. The emphasis on facts and figures arguably stemmed from the rational and scientific

interests which Mitchison had witnessed in childhood from her father. J.S. Haldane who had worked closely with miners to develop breathing apparatus, and often put his own health at risk during experiments to help them. Analytical texts of the kind Mitchison planned were in vogue at the time, and the focus on facts and figures was a distinctive trend in 1930s literature and were influenced by works such as the Lynds' Middletown studies.[10] *Mother England* was never published but it set out an idea and a structure which would be replicated later by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), a point made by Jenni Calder. Mitchison's desire to create a text which would be objective in its analysis, and function as an important social and scientific document, is telling of her commitment to exploring and exposing social inequality. The text, however, is not so much a text for the working-classes but is a text observing the working-classes. This demographic was to be the object of the study and not its audience, as Mitchison implicitly acknowledged in her plans for the work:

> I think it is very important that any book like this one should as far as possible avoid hearsay. So I would propose to go about it myself and only describe what I had actually seen. In the first section England by Regions I should first of all try to describe the conditions in the country side and should then go on to the various great industrial centres. My plan would be to get introductions either from local Labour people or from the Communist Party and go and visit the worst kind of districts. I should probably do this under an assumed name. Equally I would try to see a few doctors, social workers and such. What I should aim at would be a typical scene in each town with local colour.

Mitchison's approach to *Mother England* was perhaps rather clinical in its diagnostic aims: '[it is not] the kind of book which should wind up with any constructive suggestions, in fact I believe it should finish on a questioning and ironic note,

[10] https://www.theguardian.com/membership/2016/oct/18/view-from-middletown-us-muncie-america

something which will leave people uncomfortable and shaken in their beliefs'. Of course, it is purely speculation to discuss how *Mother England* would have been received but the fact that Mitchison was exploring this idea in the year Greenwood published *Love on the Dole* (1933) and Orwell published *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), and a full four years before Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), is significant. It is indicative of how Mitchison, who has become relatively obscure to contemporary readers, was engaging with and in some cases pre-empting the work of her better-known contemporaries.

Her interest in documenting working-class life was revived in 1936 when in an 'edition of *New Masses* Mitchison declared: '"We're writing a book!'" which was to be written 'under the guidance of a "Proletarian Committee" assembled for her by a skilled factory worker' (Smith 1978: 79). Mitchison explained the partnership:

> I put it to him as a craftsman that I, as a craftsman, was in difficulties; and he offered to get together a group who would help me and not be shy of me…I read the book aloud and whenever I go badly wrong on the details they interrupt and wrangle about it; if they think I've left something out I can very often put it in there and then (Smith 1978: 79).

Mitchison's attempt to 'authenticate' her writing by consulting with this particular working-class group in order to overcome her 'difficulties' serves to emphasise how detached she was from these people.[11] Resultantly it demonstrates a desperate need for Mitchison to validate *her* work: emphasis on it being hers since it would be unlikely she would have shared authorship. Mitchison hints at her superior role by assuming that the group would be intimidated and 'shy' given her implied superiority. As Smith points out, such a method of writing was consistent with contemporary literary experiment and one which Mitchison 'herself admits […] she

[11] Tellingly, she would use this same technique in Scotland when consulting with the fishermen in Carradale and later in Botswana when she would consult with the tribe.

borrowed […] from a Russian poet' (79). The book was never completed but her research for this text and *Mother England* help to situate Mitchison and her works firmly within the literary movement of the Thirties in which documenting and 'infiltrating' the world of the working-classes was a significant trend.[12]

The interest in documenting the 'masses' was organised on a large-scale in 1937 through the Mass-Observation project which aimed to create 'an anthropology of ourselves'.[13] The project included collating diaries from 'ordinary' people and Mitchison was one such participant who kept a diary through the duration of the Second World War that ran into over a million words. Mitchison's diary will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter as she wrote most of it whilst living in Carradale and it offers a useful source to consult when contextualising this time in her life. Mitchison had become acquainted with Tom Harrisson, one of the founders of Mass-Observation, through her friend Zita Baker who was in a relationship with Harrisson (and later Richard Crossman). Mitchison travelled to the USA in 1934 with Baker and again it was a journey driven by politics, particularly Communist politics which were appealing in America due to the ethos that racial divides would not exist in a collectivist society.

Communism and Race in America

Susan Pennybacker has provided a valuable insight into Mitchison's journey to America. Pennybacker explains that while Mitchison's interest in this journey

[12] Mitchison appeared in a film made by the Socialist Film Council highlighting the problems with the Means Test. It was filmed in George Lansbury's house and was directed by Raymond Postgate https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-the-road-to-hell-1933-online

[13] http://www.massobs.org.uk/about/history-of-mo See Hubble (2006) for a detailed study of the Mass-Observation project.

'started in her earlier encounter in the Soviet Union […] her American contacts were followers of the Second International – socialists not communists' (2009: 55). It was on the earlier 1932 trip to the USSR that she met Loren Miller and Langston Hughes (Pennybacker 2009: 19). Mitchison reflected on their meeting and the racial dimension:

> I discovered that the other one was Langstone [sic] Hughes, whom I knew by name (as they knew me). He was pleased at being recognized at all, I think […] They talked a good deal about the Scottsboro case and said nobody themselves would have heard about it – they themselves [would have paid] little attention to it, thinking it was only one more injustice out of a hundred – if the local communists hadn't taken it up […] I can honestly say I feel no colour antagonism at all, of anything a slightly romantic feeling toward them, because they have so lately been slaves, and are still terribly oppressed […] Hughes gave me a copy of his Scottsborough [sic] poem, which is not very good as a poem (though not bad at all) but which must have made a fine thing when acted. Something rather awful has occurred to me! I believe there is a party of Indian students in Moscow. Would I – could I – have felt so friendly towards them? Would I have found them so sympathetic? Could I have honestly said that I felt no colour bar? If not, why not? Can there possibly be an economic reason? (ibid.)

Pennybacker explains that

> the decade was marked by a literary curiosity about African American habits and rituals in the face of continuing racial violence. "Negroes" might be benevolently portrayed as incapable of concerted action and undeserving of brutal punishment, but for the fellow traveller like Mitchison the intellectual Negro was an amiable, momentary, and reassuring companion (Pennybacker 2009: 19–20).

Arguably it was the Scottsboro trial in 1931 which 'continued to enhance and to contribute to a fascination with the American South among both the British public and radical activists' (Pennybacker 2009: 55).[14] Mitchison is listed in Nancy

[14] The *Glasgow Herald* reported on this event: 'An appeal for support on behalf of her two sons, aged 17 and 13 respectively, lying in prison in Alabama, U.S.A. :- the one sentenced to be electrocuted and the other imprisoned for life – was made by an American negro woman, Mrs. Ada Wright, last night in Glasgow. Under the auspices of the International Labour Defence, Mrs. Wright had undertaken a two months' mission to the principal cities of Europe to speak on behalf of her sons, and she is at present making a ten days' visit to Britain. On arrival in Queen Street Station, Glasgow, yesterday

Cunard's controversial *Negro Anthology* (1934) among several other writers who spoke out against the Scottsboro Trial. The trial of nine young black men falsely accused of raping two white women became an international story and the defence and support for them was funded by the Communist Party. Cunard documents that Mitchison was among the writers who supported the cause to exonerate the men and that international protests stood at 'some 10,000,000 (259).[15] Susan Pennybacker adds:

> Literary scholar Lascelles Abercrombie […] play[ed] the leading administrative role in the new Scottsboro campaign defense committee. Nancy Cunard recruited many of the literary figures to the committee's work. Their lives reflected an earnest revulsion with social oppression and a common preoccupation with racial injustice. They knew each other, and their political work on many fronts dovetailed one another's. Naomi Mitchison was a contributor to Abercrombie's *Revaluations: A Study in Biography*, constituting a connection typical among the group. London was the campaign's headquarters, and […] in its heyday, it was led by the energetic Cunard, who once more appeared on the London scene in early 1933, and who, like most others, never joined the communist party (2009: 46).

While Communism and Russia may have increased an awareness of racial inequality amongst the upper-class literary elite, Mitchison was ultimately sceptical about the Communist Party. As Pennybacker asserts, 'Mitchison and others involved in the

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afternoon she was met by a large number of unemployed men, and she proceeded to Springburn at the head of a procession which was accompanied by a flute band. In the evening she addressed largely attended open-air meetings at Springburn, Gorbals, and Bridgeton, where resolutions were passed urging the release of the boys. Mrs. Wright leaves Glasgow today for Manchester, and on Thursday she is to speak in Dublin. ('Negro Mother's Plea for her Sons' – Meetings in Glasgow. Tuesday July 5, 1932: 3).

[15] 'The October 1932 *Week-end Review* carried a manifesto of support for the Scottsboro defendants […] signed by writers Mitchison, Vera Brittain, Louis Golding, H.G. Wells, Stephen Spender, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, and Hugh Walpole; scientist Julian Huxley; historian Raymond Postgate; and Bertrand Russell and other luminaries, adding gravitas and greater inclusiveness to the campaign' (Pennybacker 2009: 47) 'In April 1934 the British Scottsboro Defense Committee included Abercrombie who served as secretary, Gladys White, and the writers Carmel Haden Guest (wife of the liberal MP Leslie Haden-Guest), Norman Collins, and Mitchison, who may have been responsible for Eleanor Rathbone's name appearing on the letterhead' (Pennybacker 2009: 47).

Scottsboro campaign were unorthodox fellow travellers, not hardened party stalwarts' (2009: 57).

When Mitchison travelled with Baker to the USA in 1934 she was aware of the racial divisions but was surprised at the extent to which it was engrained in American society. They travelled to Arkansas and witnessed the abject poverty in which the Sharecroppers were living. Her experiences led her to write to her husband that '"If I were a citizen of this country […] I would join the Communist Party at once'" (Calder 1997: 138). Mitchison and Baker stood in solidarity with the Sharecroppers alongside Jennie Lee. Mitchison wrote to President Roosevelt but received no response. She published 'Arkansas Through British Eyes' in *Living Age* (1935c) where she wrote frankly about the tragic conditions and the racial discrimination which, while certainly found in Britain, was enforced with terrible brutality in the United States. The idea of the 'land of the free' is shattered in Mitchison's exposé in which she acknowledges that while the Civil War may have ended 'slavery in the cotton-fields of the south […] something worse than slavery is happening now to millions of men and women in these same cotton-fields of the Southern States' (278). Mitchison was radical in writing about and publishing such works on behalf of those who were denied basic human rights and was aware of her place as an author to try and instigate change. She describes the poverty and hopeless conditions in which these people lived and demonstrates that the responsibility must lie with everyone in order to 'turn the bright light of truth on Arkansas' (280).[16]

[16] M.S. Venkataramani's paper 'Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933–1937' contextualises the period in which Roosevelt's 1932 "New Deal" signalled hope for 'many Americans engaged in agriculture' (3). Among a unfair system of wealthy minority landowners and poor tenants, the sharecroppers were 'the least secure group among the tenants' which was essentially ' a modification of the slave system of pre-Civil War days' with 'poor white farmers, too, [having…] been gradually drawn into the system until, in time, they had become

Mitchison's *Vienna Diary* and *Beyond This Limit*

Mitchison's drive to document and report on events which would have otherwise been suppressed by governments continued as she travelled to Vienna in 1934. The political unrest affecting Europe was manifest in Austria which, in 1933, under the rule of Engelbert Dollfuss, became a dictatorship. Dollfuss had abolished parliament and 'outlaw[ed] the Communist and Nazi Parties' but enforced totalitarian rule: 'he reacted to a demonstration of socialist workers by ordering the army to attack a large socialist housing estate in Vienna'. Dollfuss would later be assassinated by 'Austrian Nazis' in 1934.[17] Mitchison's *Vienna Diary* (1934a) written in February of that year is another example of how her works engaged with the realist and documentary modes of Thirties literature, and demonstrates how war offered an provocative site for socialist revolution. The opportunity for Mitchison to document from the location was evidently appealing:

> Very few people will have both the money and leisure – and the will – to do this. I've got this because of my profession […] Simply as an observer I shall be some use; it's the one thing I think I can so well, though I don't think I'm a good analyser […] I feel all thrilled now, screwed up like a child going to play with the Indians (1934a: 10).

This is a telling quotation which acknowledges Mitchison's privileged status and elite lifestyle. But there is value in her honesty in admitting the voyeuristic appeal of visiting this site of crisis, where the duality between fearing war and death whilst also wanting to document the historical revolution as it unfolded. In the opening pages of the diary she acknowledges that 'I shan't be objective. But, then, nobody is,

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almost as numerous as Negroes' (1965: 4). The paper also identifies the anti-Communist defence which the Government adopted to dispel the truth of the sharecroppers being published and that, sadly, while attempts were made late in 1937 to offer help, only a fraction of those received it. Ultimately, it was only in 1941 and the involvement in the Second World War which altered the landscape for these communities (1965: 3–28).

[17] http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095725420

so that doesn't matter' (1934a: 11). She lists her failings as someone who is not brave or 'cool in emergencies' and notes both her excitement and worry. It is interesting that she admits: 'I've probably got a certain snob – value. I'd make a good headline if I got imprisoned – probably […] my name's still some use' (ibid.). Evidently, her class and status were precisely why she could and should document such events. The journey was dangerous and she was infuriated on her return to find that the *New Statesman* and *Time and Tide* would not publish her findings (Calder 1997: 129). In the diary she contemplates the devastation of the civil war and her role as reporter, and considers that this form of political writing was more immediately relevant than the work of Highbrow writers: 'Gertrude Stein, Joyce – and at the moment I simply can't feel they matter two pins' (1934a: 153).[18]

Mitchison viewed her diary as a valuable primary source which documented and reflected the immediacy of historical events, and saw it as a contrast to the frivolity and social irresponsibility of modernist experimentation. Such comments might be considered to reveal a certain lack of self-awareness in Mitchison, or may be seen as an indication of her paradoxical nature, for even as she was denouncing modernism in the name of enlightening social realism, she was working with Wyndham Lewis on a surrealist novella, *Beyond This Limit* (1935a).[19] In this novella, which has been likened to *Alice in Wonderland,* the protagonist, Phoebe, is transported from her journey on the Paris metro by the ticket collector to an underworld where she faces the end of the world (Germanà 2008: 135–148). Rather

[18] 'Most modern books seem to have been written in and for and about the capitalists of the world […] they miss out Kennington, Wapping, Balham and such places,' and consequently seem 'unreal' because capital cities are 'safe […] Nothing unexpected happens; it is the world of *Mrs. Dalloway'* (Golubov 2002: 22 – quoting Mitchison 1933).

[19] 'This story was composed in the autumn of 1934' (Murray 1986: xvii).

than accepting the end of her journey, Phoebe challenges the ticket collector who has been her guide through the underworld and insists that he not leave her and that they continue to travel elsewhere. The novella positions itself between two worlds and breaks down many of the assumptions held about the interwar and Thirties literature, in which the socialist and the fascist sympathiser – the 'Enemy' – collaborated; the 'lowbrow' writer works with the avant-garde artist to create a story which is both modernist in its form and thematically deals with the 'frontier' - a trope defined by Bergonzi – as well as the 'journey' as typical of Thirties literature.[20] Depicting a protagonist being caught between two worlds was a metaphor repeated in her novel, *We Have Been Warned* (1935b).[21]

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[20] Mitchison's novel, *The Corn King in the Spring Queen* (1931) has been read by Margaret Elphinstone as blurring the boundaries between a historical novel and one which 'embod[ies] the impulse of modernism' (Elphinstone 2000: 73). Elphinstone suggests that: "There are clear political parallels between the post-classical world created in the text and the 1930s in which it was written. However, the social/historical theme is meditated through a constant re-negotiation of what is reality, as the stability of social, rational and geographical boundaries is undermined by the eruption of magic into realist historical narrative' (ibid.) For Elphinstone, 'the element of magic within the social world of the text can be correlated to the psychoanalytic model of the unconscious within the psychic world' and that the inclusion of magic 'subverts unified, external definitions of reality, including a simple moral opposition of good and evil' (ibid). In culmination with the novel's 'meaning from multiple and contradictory perspectives' it can therefore be viewed as a modernist text.
Also, Mitchison's collection of short stories and poems, *The Fourth Pig* (1936), begins with a story of the same name, and acts as a parable to events in Europe. The fourth pig warns that: 'Sometimes the Wolf is quiet. But now the Wolf is loose and ranging and we are aware of him. […] I have a pain in my head because I am trying not to think about the Wolf, and the Wolf is not there to be thought about […] If only I could be told from which direction the Wolf would come and in what shape. We dare not be merry any longer because we are listening for the Wolf […] I am afraid now' (1936: 4 –7). This use of anthropomorphism and the warning against a political ideology is in keeping with Orwell's later *Animal Farm* (1945), which was of course more fully developed, but it can be located in a similar context of political scrutiny. The experimentation works well and has been praised by Elizabeth Maslen for its use of fairy tales to depict 'political, sexual' and 'psychological themes' as well as 'experiment[ing] with idioms which Q.D. Leavis would call lowbrow' (1999: 146). Arguably, the experimental features which recreate existing fairytales can be considered modernist in its use of intertextuality and subversion while its 'lowbrow' associations and allegorical political message align it with Thirties concerns. In this regard, the *Fourth Pig* shows the potential for an intermodern interpretation. It does not conform to either Modernism or Thirties literature but its language is accessible and it is concerned with contemporary political and social concerns.

[21] As Isobel Murray notes: 'The heroine, Phoebe Bathurst, had already appeared in *We Have Been Warned*, as Dione Galton's artist sister, saddened by the marriage of a former lover' (1986: xvii)

Looking to the past and the future: the Janus face in *We Have Been Warned*

For all of Mitchison's travel and increasing confidence as a writer, she continued to voice uncertainty about the way in which she as a writer could contribute. In 'Anger Against Books' (1933a) she claimed:

> The thing can't but seem a muddle and an angry muddle, and yet at the same time a hopeful and a glorious muddle out of which something is yet going to be made. But not, so far as we can see by us. All that we can do is to state and re-state what is happening from as many different viewpoints as possible, and as forcibly as we can…all I can do now, in spite of anger and worrying, is to go and write another book (Mitchison 1933: 93).

Evidently, Mitchison had tried to document the politics of the period, but it was her novel *We Have Been Warned* (1935b) that brought these observations together. But rather than resolve any muddle, the semi-autobiographical book encapsulates the uncertainty and anxiety of the political and social climate of the period.

Communism had appeared, to some, to offer a new kind of society where women could join the workforce, and where divisive issues as a result of status, race and class would disappear under collectivism. Through her connections with Margaret and G.D.H Cole and the Fabian Society Mitchison travelled to the USSR in 1932 to see such a society at first hand. The journey was a means to investigate her 'ambivalen[ce] about the Communist Party' and satiate her 'enormous […] curious[ity] about the Soviet Union' (Calder 1997: 111). It was on this journey that Mitchison witnessed a traumatic abortion, which became the basis for an episode in her novel *We Have Been Warned* (1935b).

Mitchison was disillusioned by Communism after witnessing the standard of living in the USSR but valued the ethos of comradeship. But the idealism of a classless society where sexual freedom was accepted resulted in Mitchison adopting

quite problematic views in which sex was viewed as a means to overcome class differences distorted by an idea of comradeship. John Pilley, who was a member of the Communist Party, became involved with Mitchison. He promoted his idea of sexual openness as a 'Comrade' to Mitchison, and she recalled offering herself up to nervous and inexperienced men on the boat trip to the USSR. She reflected in a letter to Pilley: 'I am really rather frightened […] my individual self wants to be your lover and nothing else. I am very inexperienced and I am so afraid of doing something which will leave a bad memory for him (and, for that matter, for me)' (Calder 1997: 177).[22] Again, it was an experience that fed into her novel, *We Have Been Warned.* Therefore, while Mitchison's beginnings in birth control promoted individual choice and autonomy, this became complicated when it became articulated in the network of communal obligation fostered by communism.

Ashlie Sponenberg notes that in 1934 'Mitchison recorded how she was already theorising about the relationship between sexuality and politics: 'a good Socialist may say: "My body is for you or for any other good person for whom it is happy-making, I will put up no barriers'. She reflected, 'It is very silly of me, but I am rather looking forward to the time when someone calls me Comrade! (Sponenberg 2002: 120).[23] There was a danger that in order to prove her egalitarian values, and her solidarity with the working-classes, that she would sacrifice her own dignity and individualism. Her view that class divisions could be overcome through sexual relationships, surely undermined her belief in an equal society. It risked

[22] In her biography, Jill Benton states that Mitchison knew a teacher and communist named John Pilley who made her come 'to believe that as a socialist gesture she should share her body sexually with others' (1990: 81).
[23] See Sponenberg for a detailed analysis of Mitchison's sexual politics in her 'long novels' of the Thirties (2002: 119–150)

reducing the complex politics of class warfare to a matter of satisfying immediate physical and emotional needs.

Ultimately, Mitchison rejected Communism but she wanted to represent the working-classes and promote a fairer society. One of her biggest problems in these years was in showing solidarity to a cause, and trying to prove her worth and 'authenticity'. Throughout her life, her status and role as a writer enabled her to reach peoples and cultures beyond her own. For Mitchison, the working-classes had the potential to instigate change. Yet this very belief verged on objectifying and romanticising the working-classes rather than presenting them as nuanced as people from any other demographic.

The experiences of travelling to the USSR with the Fabian Society, her unpublished work on *Mother England*, and her canvassing as the wife of a Labour MP, can be traced in this novel. Having completed the novel in 1933 she then faced difficulties in securing a publisher; Mitchison believed this to be as a result of the explicit depictions of sex and use of birth control explored in the book, but arguably it wasn't of the standard of her earlier works which had been critically acclaimed. Mitchison approached J.B. Priestley to write a recommendation for the book but he declined noting his concern about the novel's ending and the potential for it to incite hostility (Columbia, letter, 15 April 1935). Even when she did find a publisher Mitchison was forced to make alterations and to write a disclaimer at the start of the novel absolving the Labour Party of any association with the opinions voiced in the text.[24]

[24] Despite her determination to publish the text, the obstacles she faced would have shaken her confidence and this might explain her seeking promotion from the respected Professor Samuel Alexander, her adopted Godfather, to whom she wrote: 'Dear Godfather, it is a book which is obviously going to be attacked, actually on political grounds, though probably the attackers will

Many of Mitchison's personal experiences feed into *We Have Been Warned* (1935b), including: her experiences travelling to the USSR; her engagement with the Eugenics Society; her open marriage; her dilemma about the political party to follow. Mitchison's protagonist Dione Galton is married to an Oxford lecturer and MP, Tom Galton. She identifies herself as a Socialist but struggles with the conflict between the Labour Party and Communism. She travels to the USSR and becomes acquainted with members of the Communist Party including Donald McLeod, a radical and obstinate man who goes on to murder a relation of Dione's husband who is a Conservative. McLeod seeks help from Dione who travels with him to the USSR. Dione tries to marry the negative aspects of the totalitarian regime with those who promote it as the ideal society. Dione also practises an open marriage, and offers herself as a 'Comrade' to McLeod, who declines. While in the USSR, a Russian acquaintance rapes Dione. Having reflected early in the novel that she would not have children until after the 'revolution', Dione discovers she is pregnant by her husband. In the end she decides to keep the baby. At the end of the novel, she envisions a dystopian future in which the Fascists retaliate after a Communist victory and rape and kill her family.

Readings of the novel have thus far overlooked Mitchison's choice of name for her protagonist - Dione - a name which is a variation of Janus. As detailed in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, 'Diana […] may be described as a goddess of nature in

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pretend that it is on moral grounds. And so both they and I want to do all we can to get the book taken seriously. We want some opinions which can be published in newspapers and so on and they suggested that I should ask you for yours. You may think you ought not to because it is me or you may not like the book, but if you do think it ought to be taken seriously, I do wish you would write me a line saying so […] I am afraid the book is going to upset my mother a good deal on its political side, but one cannot go on indefinitely not doing things or putting them off because of personal relationships' (Alex, 11 April 1935).

general and of fertility in particular' (1917: 128). 'Janus, or Dianus and Diana […] were originally mere doubles of Jupiter and Juno' (1917: 190).[25] Frazer explains that 'In regard to their functions, Juno and Diana were both goddesses of fecundity and childbirth, and both were sooner or later identified with the moon'. Janus is the God positioned on a border or doorway at a moment of transition who is looking both back to the past whilst facing the future. Mitchison interweaves some of the surreal elements of her novella *Beyond this Limit* into this book and enables Dione to have visions of the past and the future. Dione is haunted by visions of a witch from the folklore of her Scottish ancestry, Green Jean, who represents the historical oppression of women burned for their beliefs. But Dione can also foresee a dystopian future. Dione is at a crossroads in her life where she tries to marry her socialist ideals within the chaos of totalitarian regimes. What is more, Dione's visions both focus on the horrific treatment of women who are either burned or raped. For Elizabeth Maslen, the interruption of Green Jean, in the visions of the past is problematic because it 'keep[s] invading the realist world of the rest of the novel, always at critical moments' (1999: 143). While I agree that Mitchison does not handle the use of the supernatural as well as she was able to in other novels, I find a passage from Samuel Hynes' book useful in offering an alternative reading of Mitchison's inclusion of the witch:

> The expectation of a coming war became an insistent part of the consciousness of the `thirties generation. It enters into – or perhaps one should say it intrudes upon – some of the best work of the decade's best writers, as a central image or an off-stage threat, as an obsessive metaphor, an image, or an allusion; in one form or another it seems

[25] 'Dianus and Diana, or Janus and Jana […] are merely duplicates of each other, their names and their functions being in substance and origin identical' (1917: 381).

> always to be there, at the edge of the imagination, a fearful trespasser, into private realms, a presence, a part of reality (Hynes 1976: 41).[26]

In the visions of Green Jean, Mitchison seems to be reminding the reader of the way in which women have been persecuted for their beliefs and interrupts a narrative about socialism with one which considers the role of women in society.[27] As discussed earlier, Mitchison seems to find it difficult to reconcile her gender with the socialism she promoted.

One argument for the use of the flashbacks in the novel, and the vision of the dystopian future might be as a means for Mitchison to imagine a place for women. Utopian literature works well to explore women's place in society since 'gender equality has never fully existed […] it must be imagined if it is to become a subject of conscious thought and discussion' (Johns 2010: 175). Mitchison's depiction of a dystopian world that 'belong[s] simultaneously to past and present and therefore 'constitute[s] a mixture of being and not-being (Hubble citing Fredric Jameson 2013: 74) seems to be suggesting a pessimistic view of women's place within society. Indeed, 'being and not-being' sums up the crisis of Dione's political commitment as she is unable to find contentment in her present life or in her hopes for the future within a Communist world. At the end of the novel, Dione's choice to have a baby – rather than wait until after the revolution as she once thought – seems to suggest a

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[26] See Moira Burgess (2008) which focuses on the use of supernatural elements in Mitchison's fiction and the contradictions inherent in Mitchison's character as a result of the pull between her rational and irrational thought.

[27] Mitchison's close friend, Aldous Huxley produced the one of the best known dystopian novels in his *Brave New World* (1932). The issue of reproduction is a clear comparison, as well as the lack of individual choice. Just as Huxley alluded to Ford, Mitchison's readers are expected to link her character's surnames, Dione Galton, and Fellow traveller Lady Nancy Ellis, with Francis Galton was the founder of the Eugenics Movement in Britain, and Havelock Ellis who served as president for the organisation as well as publishing on issues of sexology.

move away from investing in Communist or Socialist ideas in favour of individual choice.

Yet, within the novel there are conflicting passages which seems to handle sexual politics, freedom and choice in ways that were potentially damaging. Dione is raped by a man she has befriended in the USSR and goes on to offer a justification of the event which seems to be grounded in class differences:

> "You – behaved very badly, but – living as you do, you've got to. I see that. It's society's fault […] The people who oppress you, make you a slave. You were being like a slave when you did that to me, Idris – grabbing and hurting. But it's them I blame"
> "[…] can't you see it's not a personal matter at all […] I'm looking at it as a Socialist. I'm trying to see you as one of a whole class of people who've had a bloody time and who can't help doing bloody things back" (416).

It is such a troubling scene in the book which undermines Mitchison's attempt to present a credible text to explore the difficult political dynamic between a highbrow socialist engaging with working-class people. It is not plausible to believe that Dione's sexual assault could be viewed by her in such a clinical way. Furthermore, any attempt to try and use this scene as a means of evoking sympathy with the working-classes is undermined as she portrays them as violent reactionaries, who are unable to control themselves as a result of the social injustices they have faced. At this stage in the novel Dione seems to overlook the violent sexual assault by viewing it not as a personal attack but a product of class inequality. Yet, at the end of the novel when Dione envisions a dystopian future in which her daughter is raped and killed at the hands of the Fascists following a Communist victory she views it entirely differently: 'this attack, although identical to the one against Dione, is portrayed as unforgivable, because committed against a young woman and because it is not committed by a frustrated, angry member of the Left' (Sponenberg 2002: 133).

I concur with Sponenberg's reading which views the 'first rape as a particularly violent and shocking example of Mitchison's tendency to use sexual activity, especially women's, to bridge gaps between the working-class and socialist members of the upper classes' (133).

Mitchison was angry with the censorship she faced in publishing this novel but she also failed to recognise that her representation of Dione and her relationships with working class men in the novel was problematic. Mitchison responded to a negative review of her book at the time by stating that the critic 'has a peculiar view of me and my book, which I can only put down to his having some kind of unfortunate sex-complex. Otherwise, why should he have picked out, with such meticulous care, the passages dealing with sex, from an extremely long book'. Mitchison goes on to write that the scene is 'essentially descriptive and, so far as it is propaganda, is a plea for general decency and kindliness, and the kind of friendship (I will not worry you by calling it comradeship) which I have in practice, found amongst my fellow Socialists' (1936: 261). Mitchison may have been adamant in her decision to include such a controversial scene in her novel but as Elizabeth Maslen observed 'she did not make the same mistake again' in terms of writing about sex and politics in a contemporary setting, and chose to return to allegorical and historical texts for the remainder of the decade.

The opprobrium directed at the book was not just about its frank depictions of sex but rather its depiction of class differences. As Janet Montefiore points out, both Storm Jameson and Q.D. Leavis challenged Mitchison's novel on these grounds:

> Jameson's scathing reminiscence of the "well-to-do novelist [who] said at a dinner-party that one advantage of doing socialist propaganda was the chance it offered to get inside workers' houses – "to get the background right" – sounds ominously like Dione […] patronisingly

> visiting a Labour voter in her shabby kitchen. This scene was noticed in a devastating *Scrutiny* review of Mitchison by Q.D. Leavis (Montefiore 1999: 29).

As Isobel Murray explains, the novel was 'overcrowded'; a result of pulling together the various social and political observations she had made in her own life into one novel (1990: 250).

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the book is valuable in its own right, if only for the ways in which it encapsulates the sense of crisis, lack of direction and anxiety with regard to best course of politics for society, and the conflict between collectivism and individualism. Hence, my discussion of the novel here is not to offer a defence of the book with regard to its quality but rather to consider it is as a product of Mitchison's ambivalent political outlook at this stage in her life. The book represents and perhaps manifests a certain condescension and want of sympathy, for example in Dione's characterisation of the working classes: "Often they're slow, but then one must be patient. They know about things that we don't, but they aren't educated to conversation as we've been" "[…] But they have such incredibly bad taste"! (1935: 400–401). It may well be that this is authorial irony and that Mitchison is exposing rather endorsing the fallible views of her character. This is Phyllis Lassner's reading of the book and the grounds of her defence of it against the attacks by Q.D. Leavis. In Lassner's view Leavis is 'biased by her own identity politics cannot see Mitchison's critical irony' in her portrayal of the tensions between the upper-middle class protagonist Dione and the lower class characters:

> Mitchison is being self-critical in her portrait of the Galtons, and so portrays them as realizing that for their class, poverty is comfortably theoretical compared to others' material privations. The novel illustrates this criticism in Dione's shocked response to the mindless work of miners and labourers, the meagre rewards which cannot relieve their wives' despair over the smell of their poverty. Contrary to liberal and

> socialist sentiments, Dione comes to see that the conditions of industrial workers and their families cannot be explained by social science paradigms. While categories of the underprivileged may generate sympathy, they also condescend to the poor and comfort the privileged. Hence Dione discovers that while it is all too true that the workers are exploited to pay for the 'fine feelings' of the privileged, their impoverished condition also fails to numb the worker, either intellectually or aesthetically (76).

Lassner's view may be slightly generous but it is right to acknowledge that in Dione we see a flawed character who is exploring this tension, rather than a book denying any feelings of differences or uncertainty. This isn't a proletarian or a social realist book and does not focus on working-class protagonists. The novel is about the dilemma which the middle-class Dione faces in trying to reconcile her socialist politics with her acute awareness of difference predicated on her background and class. Dione vocalises this dichotomy when she says:

> I feel myself separate from these Sallington people, these people I'm working for, lying for. I know I wouldn't choose to live among them between elections. I am a foreigner here, I don't belong, they don't truly admit me.
> Where do I belong then? I think I belong with the young, gay, intelligent people, the girls doing jobs on their own, the writers, the painters, the exact scholars. Those are my friends, my equals, my set of values. I am betraying them here!
> […] Have I got to be torn, one half of me wanting brotherhood, demanding it as the only sensible thing, and the other half realising the plain fact of intellectual inequality?
> […] That's our fault, though: the people on top. The owners: even if they've gone highbrow now, like Phoebe and me…I'm afraid you can't have aesthetic equality, Dione Galton, till you've got economic equality (62).

This, in my view, is at the centre of the novel. For all the problems with the text, in speaking for others and drawing some problematic depictions of working-class groups, she also finds a space to represent the voice of the middle-class woman who was still a marginal figure. For all its failings, the book addresses this inequality and hypocrisy head on and allows the protagonist to attend to the gulf between the

politics which middle-class socialists championed, and the difficulty in reconciling this with their comfortable lives.

Looking to God for direction

The ambiguity of Dione's position in the novel is echoed in a letter written to Mitchison from George Orwell in 1938 in which he reflected that while he was sure that communism 'perverted […] the whole socialist movement', he believed that by not supporting the cause 'one is objectively, if not intentionally, is aiding the FASCISTS' [sic] (Calder 1997: 138).[28] Orwell's anxiety is reflected in Mitchison's own shift from declared pacifist in *Time and Tide* in 1936 to her recognising that by doing nothing she may be complicit in allowing atrocities to take place.[29] It is yet another example of Mitchison's shifting political outlook during the period and shows that while her views were always professedly left-wing and socialist, the assumptions about what that meant were constantly challenged and reconsidered. To be a pacifist or to live in exile would have been hypocritical and would have stood against her professed belief in community. Her feminism and her individualism which she would not reject in favour of Communism nonetheless took a back seat as another war approached. Mitchison hoped, as many did, that the conflict could be appeased, but knew by the late years of the decade that it seemed an inevitability. It was an impending crisis, and again Mitchison looked towards a way of uniting a

[28] Mitchison documented her experiences of being at the Olympia Rally and listening to Oswald Mosley. She noted: 'Afterwards, in the streets I saw a certain number of people who had been knocked about. Everyone's blood was up on both sides, especially among the friends of the victims, several of who complained of having been hit or knocked down while trying to get hurt men away' (1934b: 15).

[29] 'As the threat [of war] became clearer and more vividly documented, the efforts to find a way to prevent it became more strenuous and more partisan. An example is the debate on pacifism which ran through 1936' (Hynes 1976: 194).

community, a society, a country with something they could all invest in. Morality, it seemed, was the place to start.

The Moral Basis of Politics (1938) was in some ways a response to the negative reviews of her novel, *We Have Been Warned*. Mitchison pre-empted any comments which might be directed at this book to those who had criticised her novel by stating that this text was 'an attempt to clear [her] mind' rather than a piece of 'propaganda for [her] own political views' (vii). The book is a product of Mitchison's ambivalence and overtly positions itself as a personal quest for clarity: an attempt to negotiate the 'muddle in [her] ideas' which were 'full of strains and contradictions and small dishonesties' (viii). This is not quite the way the *Scotsman* saw it, finding that while the work was not uninteresting, it lacked 'intellectual or philosophical stamina. There is too much sentiment entangled in the author's reasoning' (NLS 9104/3 book review 'Morals and Politics', *Scotsman* 21 March 1938). This perhaps reinforces Mitchison's introduction to the work, which states that 'it was not written logically […] but rather by the old Socratic method of asking why' (1938: xii–xiii). The book works through various questions about what politics is, what it should be, and how it could be achieved. It is difficult to provide a clear synopsis of this sprawling and indeterminate text but Jenni Calder surmises that it is 'essentially about the difficulty of being a socialist in a non-socialist world'. Calder explains that it was for Mitchison a means of exploring 'the way forward […] in learning how to think and act as a group' (Calder 1997: 145).[30] Again, the book can

[30] Notably Mitchison's husband published a book titled *The First Workers' Government or New Times for Henry Dubb* which imagined what a socialist government would be like. Interestingly the introduction written by Stafford Cripps frames the book in terms of the journey stating that 'The long anticipated journey of the workers out of capitalism into a new and better economic system, has led to a great deal of speculation in the past. Utopias of all kinds have been pictured, mostly sketched in broad outline with little emphasis upon practical detail […] in the last two years we have awakened to

be situated in a wider literary movement; Virginia Woolf published *Three Guineas* (1938) in the same year, and the two books share similar concerns with the issues of women's role in society. Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* (1937) adopts a similar approach to Mitchison's text in its questioning of political and social issues. Evidently, the anxiety of politics, learning lessons from the past, and uncertainty over the future, situated Mitchison's non-fictional text within a wider literary movement of revaluation.

For Mitchison, the book provided no definitive answers. Her concern with morality and 'good' was based upon Christian ideology. This dimension is perhaps surprising and seemingly at odds with both Mitchison's agnosticism and the wider intellectual trends of the period. However, the book raised concerns that can be seen as part of a wider 'modernist crisis of authority':

> [There was a] widespread examination of what the fundamental values and character of 'Western civilisation' had been and should be, and for many the political crisis could not easily be separated from a religious one. How was Europe's Christian past to be understood, and was a post-Christian future unfolding? […] We find evidence of considerable artistic reinvention and appropriation of ancient Christian dogmas to a new crisis. For [Eliot and Auden] such reflection became a creative vehicle for confronting the pressing problem of authority anew (Tonning 2014: 103).

Mitchison asserts her agnosticism in her biographies, but in the latter years of the Thirties she experiments with Christianity as a means to consider what morality and 'good' means to people, and how Christianity's principles and emphasis on goodness and morality might contribute to a shared and equal society. Building on this theme,

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the fact that this is not something that we may have to do in the far future, but something for which the opportunity may occur very soon […] There are none who have carried that study as far as the author of this book. It is the most complete picture of the actual process of the transition to Socialism through democracy that has yet been drawn' (Cripps 1934: 5).

Mitchison published the non-fictional *The Kingdom of Heaven* (1939) for a series designed to examine systems of faith and belief. For Mitchison:

> It seems possible that there may be something like a general moral breakdown with the area of certain material circumstances and under pressure of suitable propaganda. We have no accurate data which might enable us to prophesy what is likely to happen after the present moral break-down in the Nazi countries: whether the storm-troopers themselves will be filled with horrible shame, or whether this must be delayed until the time of their children or grand-children (11).

The book's concern with morality is thus framed within the political climate of Nazism and war. Christianity is adopted and secularised as a means of considering how a collective and unified ideology of 'good' might stand against Fascism. While the text promotes a more rationalist ideology over a religious one, it warns that the dropping of 'all interest' in Christianity may have resulted in a belief that 'morals are all nonsense'. Christianity offered a means to react against Fascism: '[it] ought to be just what people who have lost their security need, to give them back their sense of worthwhileness' (19).

Samuel Hynes's description of Orwell's socialism in the context of *The Road to Wigan Pier* could easily be applicable to Mitchison's works in these latter years of the decade:

> The socialism that emerges is not so much a political philosophy as a personal myth of the good society, of a state based on freedom, justice, and equality, but without any specified principles. In this myth, the heroes are the working-class socialists […] the villains are all the faddists of Orwell's own class (1976: 277).

The hope for a socialist political movement 'full of simple virtue, with no more precise goals than liberty, justice, and return to the dream of working-class life' was a vision echoed in Mitchison's *Kingdom of Heaven* (1939: 277). Mitchison stated that she hoped her book 'has shown how we, now, are in a position to understand the

basic concepts of Christianity as they have not been understood for nearly two thousand years. I hope we may use them well' (157). The open-endedness of these works and the vague ideas about political and social change grounded in 'goodness' and 'morality' in many ways returned to the themes of her debut novel, and *The Blood of the Martyrs* (1939a) which both spoke out against oppression and which were layered with Christian martyrdom.[31] Recognising that propaganda and politics could interfere in her writing, Mitchison opted in these latter works of the Thirties for a sophisticated ambiguity: an attempt not to find answers but rather to allow the contradictions and conflicts of her character and her protagonists to be explored.

In a letter dated 9 June 1938 Mitchison described to an American friend her anguish with socialist politics and her interest in Christianity. In it she explains that her 'Moral Basis is obviously not going to be taken in America' having had several rejections, and states that 'it has done worse over here than any book I've written' (Porter, n.d. unpaginated).[32] Mitchison was inevitably discouraged not only because

[31] 'Mitchison's political critique is also visible in her characterizations […] first-century Rome is governed by a megalomaniacal, second-rate artist, the emperor Nero, clearly patterned on a more contemporary version of the same type – Hitler […] The fluid movement back and forth between the first-century narrative context and the twentieth-century site of enunciation can be jarring to a reader who approaches the novel with a strong desire for simple historical verisimilitude. Yet, this interruption of temporality seems to be part of the design of Mitchison's project [The novel] is built upon such anachronistic juxtapositions, the language of one historical situation superimposed upon another, the story of ancient tyranny and religious persecution mapped onto 1930s Europe. The work of analogy and allegory here depends upon identifications and disidentifications – the reader is called to align herself with the progressive, egalitarian, and solidarity-stepped early Christians of the narrative and thereby with the oppressed and disposed of her own time and place. Defying the long tradition whereby English historical fiction used Roman imperialism 'to think British national identity with', Mitchison uses a conventional genre toward politically progressive ends. That is, rather than merely producing a 'parable of the present' […] she has produced a complicated narrative and historical echo by playing antiquity and her current political moment off of each other' (Castelli 2006: 7–8).

[32] Thanks to the staff at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture who provided scanned copies of Mitchison's letters to Kenneth Wiggins Porter. The specific box details were not identifiable from the scanned copies but the original letters are held in the Kenneth W. Porter Papers, Correspondence – Poetry and Socialism, b.71 f. 51 – b.71 f.54 covering the years 1933–1978. This is echoed in a letter to Samuel Alexander: 'My Moral Basis book did quite incredibly badly; no-one is really interested in morality just now' (Alex/A/1/1/191/34).

of the criticism the book received from the 'right […] but also the orthodox left'. Although she was encouraged by Olaf Stapleton's regard for the book, she was angered that 'every single bloody little "Left Book" gets an automatic sale of a good many thousand' whereas her work was overlooked. Although annoyed she admits to feeling that she has 'lost touch with the ordinary person' and resultantly was 'back on ancient history' (ibid.). She describes her research for what would become her novel *The Blood of the Martyrs* and explains her interest in Christian theology, saying:

> I think the early church was the hell of a good show. I have had a lot of fun over the theology, because it is, I think, perfectly legitimate and historical to write it in such a way that there is absolutely no pie-in-the-sky, no rewards and punishments, and the Kingdom is visualised much like 'socialism in our time'. I think it was a pretty tough, proletarian, anti-rich, show at the beginning […] The ridiculous thing is, how extremely persuasive it all is; in fact, I think re-states Christian ethics are plumb-right. But I can't call myself a Christian because all it means now is some kind of church member, and above all some kind of deist, with a 'father' in anthropomorphic form, and resurrection pie and all that. And if it doesn't mean that, but means the real thing, I've obviously no right to call myself one; all I do is at times to attempt to act in a Christian manner. I wish I knew of anyone who really was a Christian in my sense! But I suppose they're rather impossible […] there are moments when I'm strongly tempted to go to Thaxted and get Conrad Noel to baptise me, as a kind of mark of solidarity with the thing, but obviously it would be silly, because it wouldn't be that (ibid.)

Recognising the limits of Christian theology as a basis for her politics due to its patriarchal structure, Mitchison was left feeling disillusioned by the end of the decade. Mitchison certainly valued ethical socialism's focus on community and the individual's role within it to maintain a shared moral code but was lost as to where these values could be applied within in the existing political parties.

Conclusion: Beyond Her Limits

The trajectory of Mitchison's interwar writing relates closely to the uncertain political climate of the time. But it also demonstrates the way in which overtly political narratives or speaking out for groups could be problematic for the author. The excitement about politics which was ignited at this time remained with Mitchison, but by the end of the decade the enthusiasm gave way to a more balanced political and social outlook. In her short but lucid, 'Anger Against Books', Mitchison examined the 'muddle and distress which we are in, of our lives reflected in books' (1933: 92). As this chapter has shown, this dilemma continued throughout the decade and is one which Mitchison never resolves despite her insatiable desire to engage with politics and find answers and solutions for a socialist society. Prophetically, in the piece she writes:

> We can't get away from ourselves; we can't become pure impersonal machines; we can't be objective, outside ourselves. We are the flutes of Apollo and we are made of a certain wood to start with […] And we can observe the other kind of wood, we can see the difference in grain and colour, count the rings of growth; but we can never become it, however much we want to (81).[33]

This quote encapsulates the drive and motivation for Mitchison to 'observe […] difference' (81) but the challenges she faces in representing lives outwith her own privileged world from which she had limited contact.

This was to change when she moved away from Oxford at the onset of war to live in a small fishing village in Scotland. Throughout the 1930s she had been engaging with Scottish writers, including Hugh MacDiarmid, and at the onset of the Second World War chose to relocate to Carradale where she would live for 60 years

[33] Note that Stephen Spender came to a similar conclusion and argued that writers of the period 'attempted to throw off their bourgeois environment […] They have sacrificed a life of which they did after all know something, and entered a whirlwind where nothing is tangible' (Hynes 1976: 362–363).

until her death. Despite her observation in the above quotation, I posit that her move to Scotland, and later years in Botswana, demonstrate that Mitchison's works continued to explore this dilemma. In fact, I will show a shift in these later texts and argue that she attempted to reinvent herself and authenticate her place within these other cultures, particularly within the context of self-determination during nationalist and independence movements. Her political journey and the problem of speaking for others continued.

CHAPTER THREE

Looking back to the future: *The Bull Calves* and Mitchison's political vision for post-war Scotland

In 1937 Mitchison and her family bought the Taigh Mòr – the Big House – in Carradale, Kintyre. By the time war was declared in 1939 it had become their permanent home and stayed as such for the remaining sixty years of Mitchison's life.[1] Mitchison was not alone in leaving the city; her close friends Aldous Huxley and W.H. Auden left for the United States, and their move was indicative of the sense of urgency to flee the impending threat of war. Life in the small fishing village may have been remote but, unlike her peers, Mitchison's move did not separate her from British life. First, her husband was a Labour MP so she remained tied to political life throughout the war. Second, Mitchison experienced the impact of war on British society first-hand, including rationing, the limitations on communication, as well as housing evacuees from Glasgow. Always unconventional, her home was also a refuge for Free French soldiers.[2]

The Second World War may have been a catalyst for Mitchison's move but as Douglas Gifford points out, 'since Mitchison's five children were all at or about to be at public schools or college in the south, it was obvious there were deeper motivations' (Gifford 1990: 221). Jenni Calder provides some indication of what Mitchison's motivation may have been, arguing that the disappointing reviews of *We Have Been Warned* (1935b) and her latter work of the Thirties had 'disrupted her sense of belonging to the London literary scene' and that her move to Carradale was

[1] 'Mitchison had bought Carradale House in Kintyre in 1937, and the outbreak of war caught and more or less kept her there' (Calder 1997: 445).
[2] 'I took in several French people who'd had a hard time. Because they were the ones who had been keeping on with the war they had been tortured by their own people' (1992b: 25).

'a physical divorce from London' (1997: 445).[3] In addition to the personal disappointments Mitchison faced (including having to secede from her stance as a pacifist in response to the growing aggression of Fascism) was the burden of failure she felt when she realised war could not be prevented. In a letter to Aldous Huxley, she states simply: 'It's absolutely paralysing, this feeling of moral failure. If one were a brick-layer, it would be possible, I suppose, to go on laying bricks, but it's hell trying to write' (NLS Acc. 8185).

Her struggle was evident. In contrast to the volume of work she published in the Thirties, her work during the Forties slowed and was directly impacted by both the war and her personal life. Sadly, after giving birth to a baby girl in July 1940, she lost the child the following day, and repeatedly in her personal writing from this period she notes her tiredness and low mood.[4] Mitchison's biggest literary commitment during this period was the diary she kept for Mass-Observation which served as a cathartic medium for her. The private text was eventually published forty years later, and in the introduction to the edited version she reflected back on that time:

> I wrote this diary every evening at my desk. It was not easy to do any real writing, though in 1940 I did a play for Carradale and later wrote *The Bull Calves.* But in general, ordinary professional writing wasn't on. A lot of it was about being tired; it was a kind of getting in touch with something outside, not that I wanted or asked for help, but maybe one needs to cry on an invisible shoulder (Mitchison 1985: 20).[5]

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[3] In a letter to her Godfather which must have been written between her father's death in 1936 and Alexander's death in 1938 she writes: 'I've lost confidence in myself as a writer and person, pretty thoroughly. I suppose that's being middle age, but it's hell all right' (Alex /A/1/1/191/9).

[4] This was the second child she had lost; her nine year old son died from meningitis in 1927. Isobel Murray explains that Mitchison was 'becoming more consciously Scottish in her thinking, and the new baby was to have sealed her making Carradale her home' (Murray 2005: 72).

[5] '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 - ? I envy Dick having this Ministry of Labour job; I wish I could immediately do something which would employ my mind […] 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 wish I could go to the south and get into an air-raid. But what's the good? The only thing I can do is

In spite of the difficulties she faced, Mitchison continued to write. Carradale was a new venture and, characteristically, her immersion in this community shaped her writing and politics, and she became resolute in her focus on Scottish affairs during the 1940s and 1950s.

Evidently the move to Carradale was a result of several factors but it was Scotland, specifically, that appealed to Mitchison. Scotland held significance because of her family ties but it was during the 1930s when she became aware of those involved in the Scottish literary renaissance that she began to overtly address Scottish political themes in her writing. In a letter to Samuel Alexander, she noted:

> I went up to Glasgow with my father for one of his sets of Gifford lectures […] there's quite an interesting set of poets and painters and musicians in Scotland – and particularly in Glasgow – just now; some of them are doing really fine stuff, particularly a poet called Hugh MacDiarmid, who writes in a very fierce and obscure Scottish dialect, which he has largely made up for himself out of various districts and books: it's curiously effective (Alex/A/1/1/191/18)

Mitchison's engagement with this group resulted in her publishing the poem, 'The Scottish Renaissance' in Hugh MacDiarmid's, *Living Scottish Poets* in 1931,[6] and the following year her article in the *Modern Scot* outlined 'A Socialist Plan for Scotland'. In 1935 she stood for the Scottish Universities seat and recalled the election address she gave: '"I believe that the real and important aims of Scottish nationalism can only be attained and put into practice through socialism'" (1979b:

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write. And the only people who can write now are the real successful professionals like Priestley and co, or the equally whole-hearted antis, who can write against. Denny, no doubt, thinks I should do proper Daily Worker anti writing, but that's no good for a Liberal anarchist like me. Nor is it really writing. I wish there was a chance of my making contact with any of my friends who are doing the same kind of thing as I am. […] But, much as I love the folk here, they can't help or heal […] The silly thing is that I realise perfectly that much worse things are happening at this moment to thousands of people (and indeed have done so for a long time), but one cannot generalise as simply as that. I at least cannot change pain into love […] All this was meant to be a kind of binding between me and Carradale, and now that's smashed' (Mitchison 1985: 72–73).

[6] This poem would later be republished as 'The Scottish Renaissance in Glasgow: 1935' in her poetry collection, *The Cleansing of the Knife* (1978a) which was actually written during the 1940s.

38). In short, her politics were broadening to consider the way in which nationalism might complement her socialist values.[7]

Therefore, Mitchison's motivation to relocate to Carradale in the late Thirties can be attributed to her desire to leave the London literary scene, and to escape from the war, but it should also be recognised as being directly linked to her growing interest in Scottish cultural and political developments around this time. Resultantly, the relocation impacted on Mitchison's life and writing and there is a significant shift from the myriad of concerns which occupied her writing during the interwar years to her (almost) sole focus on Scottish matters during the 1940s and 1950s.[8] Although her bond with Scotland was fostered from childhood through annual visits to her family in Cloan and Edinburgh, it is fair to state that her literary and political focus on Scotland only began to develop during the Thirties and was cemented by moving to Carradale. As Kirsten Stirling notes:

> Mitchison's position is interesting because she has made a conscious decision to be Scottish […] had she stayed in London and not moved to Carradale in 1939, had she not started writing definably Scottish books, she would still exist on that hazy margin of Scottishness reserved for good writers with Scottish parentage. This perhaps serves to illustrate how fluid the idea of what 'being Scottish' is (Stirling 1999: 255).

This chapter will map Mitchison's journey as she began to write 'definably Scottish' texts. An evaluation of Mitchison works will show how her socialism was malleable and during this period of her life she contemplated how nationalism might offer a meaningful way of unifying communities to work together for a common purpose.

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[7] Moira Burgess (2006) observed that *We Have Been Warned* (1935) is technically Mitchison's first Scottish novel, as it featured Scottish women protagonists, haunted by Scottish witches. Certainly, the timing of when she wrote and published this book coincided with her developing interest in Scottish affairs.

[8] Mitchison campaigned for Nuclear Disarmament during the 1950s. She travelled with Douglas Young and Doris Lessing to the USSR in the 1950s for the Authors' World Peace Appeal. She also travelled to Pakistan in the 1950s.

Significantly, her time in Scotland drew attention to her place both as insider and outsider in the community, and her writing from this time reveals the way in which the problem of speaking for others remained, and was inherently bound up with Mitchison's contradictory identity.

Writing herself into Scotland

Kirsten Stirling states that it was *The Bull Calves* (1947), Mitchison's only novel of the Forties, which was pivotal in Mitchison's 'reincarnation […] as a Scottish writer' (1999: 255). Jenni Calder and other scholars have echoed this sentiment arguing that the novel functioned as a means for her to 'write herself' into the community, and an evaluation of these debates will be opened out shortly. It is interesting that Mitchison, who was born in Scotland, with Scottish ancestry, felt the need to reinvent herself in this way. Undoubtedly, Mitchison's writing was a means for her to authenticate her place, prove her 'credentials', in order to show her 'knowledge' and speak out on Scottish issues. She had lived for forty years in Oxford and London and was removed from the issues affecting Scotland, not least in a small fishing village.

The Bull Calves (1947) is one of Mitchison's most successful works, having been described by Cairns Craig as 'one of the most powerful historical novels of the century' (2002: 164), and more recently included on *The List* magazine's 100 Best Scottish Books.[9] The novel has received a selection of critical readings by, among others, Beth Dickson, Isobel Murray, Douglas Gifford, Gill Plain, Kirsten Stirling, and Moira Burgess. Building on the research of the aforementioned critics, I concur

[9] https://www.list.co.uk/articles/100-best-scottish-books/show:100/ Published in 2005.

with their readings that the novel brings together several of Mitchison's concerns from this time which include: an eagerness to fit it and be identified as a Scottish author; an interest in writing women into history; an interest in the supernatural and psychology. These themes and tropes are layered and interconnected and serve as a platform for Mitchison's political agenda which promoted a form of socialism which was sympathetic to nationalist agendas, including devolved powers for Scotland. Douglas Gifford has argued that 'it is a hard novel to come to terms with. It is enormously detailed, both historically and in terms of fictional characters and the complexity of their relationships' (Gifford 1990: 219).[10] But Mitchison adeptly handles all of these themes and, unlike in *We Have Been Warned*, creates a novel which is a commentary on contemporary society and politics, but which functions as a sophisticated and detailed historical novel in its own right.

The novel shares similarities with *The Conquered* and *We Have Been Warned* in that it depicts protagonists living through a turbulent period in history, and characters who struggle with their own division and liminal position in society. These tropes lend themselves well to a Scottish literary tradition which is permeated by texts that explore the 'divided self in a divided and war-torn country' (Gifford 1990: 223). Mitchison wanted to distance herself from historical fiction during the early Thirties, concerned about how truthful and authentic her work in this genre was. Here she returns to the genre, but departs from classical worlds to engage with more recent history, setting her novel in Scotland two hundred years earlier and

[10] Isobel Murray's focus on the poem which prefaces the novel, 'Clemency Ealasaid' identifies its reference to Isben's Peer Gynt and 'the Boyg' which 'prevents straightforward progress, always tells you to go 'round about', effectively, not straight to your goal' (Murray 2005: 78). The reference seems apt in a novel in which individuals are confronted with obstacles and difficulties which they must overcome, and where the past is told and re-told.

using characters based on her own ancestors. Drawing upon the traditions of Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg, *The Bull Calves* explores division, religious fanaticism, and the supernatural in the aftermath of the Union in 1707 and the Jacobite Rebellions. Adopting this mode of historical fiction, which draws upon a Scottish tradition, results in a text which plays with the supernatural and psychological, and she layers the text with gothic tropes which depicts the fear associated with the divided self. For Mitchison, myth and shared national identity was valuable in bringing people together to work as part of a smaller socialist network. However she was wary of the tendency in Scottish history to perpetuate myths of victimhood and defeat. Ultimately, she wanted the nation to look to the future and not be stuck in the past and the gothic aspects in the novel lend themselves to this viewpoint: history could be positive but the gothic was a 'distortion' based on fear that had the potential to limit progress. Kirsty MacDonald's review of Scottish literature's 'lengthy and vigorous relationship with the Gothic mode' draws upon the work of David Punter, Ian Duncan and Alan Bissett all of whom share the view that the gothic is closely associated with Scotland's idea of nationhood and history. Punter identifies the 'distortions of history' which lend itself well to the 'stateless nation' and the recurrent discussions surrounding Scotland's complex position in British history. Duncan considers that the 'association between the national and the uncanny or supernatural' are again gothic tropes which are used to represent issues surrounding a divided national identity (MacDonald 2009, unpaginated).[11] In this historical novel, the characters themselves look back on their own pasts and history and conclude by resolving to set their differences aside and work together to build a

[11] https://www.thebottleimp.org.uk/2009/11/scottish-gothic-towards-a-definition/

positive future. The novel is acutely aware of the power of tradition and heritage, but it also cautions that the past can inhibit progress. For Mitchison, and in keeping with the debates within Scottish literature at the time (and since), cultural values were needed to serve contemporary society and complement an international outlook, but had to resist becoming insular or parochial.

In Mitchison's personal writing, she indicates that she found the aspects of the Scottish community to be restricted by 'tradition' and suggests that it could be unwelcoming place for women. In this regard, Mitchison's works will be shown to conform to a Scottish literary tradition while also challenging it. What I aim to show is that Mitchison once again presents a complex and paradoxical text, which is reflective of her personal writing that exposes her own contradictory position within the Scottish community. Although categorised as a historical novel, I propose that *The Bull Calves* demonstrates a shift in Mitchison's literary style with her overtly engaging with a Scottish literary tradition. What will be evident in the novel, and throughout this chapter, is that while Mitchison remained a socialist and Labour Party member, and wife of a Labour MP, in this new context her writing and work promoted a form of socialism that was sympathetic to the values espoused by the Scottish nationalists. Again, this chapter explores Mitchison's position within a particular socio-historical period and interrogates the way in which her fiction grapples with an uncertain political climate. Moreover, her writing repeats a pattern of presenting protagonists who occupy a liminal position in society, and texts which are set during a period of transition.

Gill Plain has identified that *The Bull Calves* is an 'historical novel, war novel, coming-of-age drama, romance, mystery and […] a feminist utopia' which 'operates

on a multiplicity of levels' in which there is also a 'fascination with the inexplicable and the excessive' (1996: 142). Plain also writes about the way in which the 'idea of doubling' is a 'common theme' in Mitchison's work and has shown the influence of Jung on the development of her characters, who work through a process of individuation, battling with their anima and animus.[12] Gill Plain surmises that 'Mitchison's concern was with the smaller family units and communities from which society must attempt to regenerate itself in the aftermath of war' adding: 'the possibility of regeneration is perpetually under threat from what could be termed the dark side of the past' (1996: 155). Plain frames her analysis within the parameters of psychoanalytic and feminist theory, but her statement can also be used to understand how Mitchison viewed national identities, where the value of myths to unite communities was appealing but she was wary of repeating defeatist histories. Mitchison valued myth and culture for promoting 'confidence' for the people of Scotland but was reluctant to promote a narrative of victimhood or to allow negative history stories to become the dominant discourse.

For all the novel portrays the past as being potentially threatening and destructive, the aforementioned critics have agreed that the conclusion of the novel promoted a message of 'reconciliation' which was significant for the post-World

[12] Mitchison wrote to Robert Graves on 16 November 1948 in relation to his *The White Goddess: a historical grammar of poetic myth* (1948): 'Jung's concept of the anima is no doubt his vision of the white goddess but I think he would be apt to separate her various functions and might say that in modern society they could be separated. I think he may be right, that in order to become integrated one must make peace with all versions, ie perhaps one should go through the various sacrifices. [...] the difficulty is this, and it is something which I have been groping about for during the last few years, but without ever being able to get it into words, although one has moments [...] in the old world of a materially simpler civilisation, it was possible to be a compete person, but we have now, I think, to take in an enormous amount of knowledge which they had not got; and it is wrong and dangerous to turn ones back on this knowledge on the grounds that's it doesn't fit in' (NLS Acc. 5836).

War Two readership.[13] I concur with this view but question whether the colonial backdrop which features in the novel might disrupt this interpretation. Mitchison's novel can be only be reconciliatory for her white Scottish characters, while the colonial Others which feature remain silenced and forgotten. Even if we overlook this as being an accurate representation of the eighteenth-century setting, given the allegorical readings that the novel has received, particularly regarding its parallels for Europe to rebuild after the Second World War, it seems important to reconsider this representation. The year of the novel's publication, 1947, was a significant one marking the Partition of India, and given Mitchison's promotion of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, it is an aspect of the novel worth questioning.

An analysis of Mitchison's 'Scottish phase' has often been limited to a discussion of her fiction but it is important to attend to her non-fiction which offers an important insight into her politics. A critical evaluation of Mitchison's political writing on Scottish affairs has been minimal: this in spite of the pervasiveness within Scottish literary studies to analyse this dimension in almost all the work of her peers. To fully understand these influential years in Mitchison's development it is useful to look to her non-fictional works, both published and unpublished, and these will be mapped against the historical and political landscape of the time. Uncovering these works demonstrates her tenacity as a political campaigner. Much of what Mitchison was promoting remains topical for contemporary Scottish studies and the continued interest in the field with regard to the nexus between literature and politics. This chapter will offer an analysis of these neglected works to show Mitchison's contribution to Scottish literary and political debates.

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[13] See Stirling (1999: 255; 265) She emphasises the need for 'rebuilding' and draws upon examples in the text which focus on agriculture 'as a metaphor for the regeneration of Scotland' (266).

A Renaissance woman: Mitchison, nationalist politics and the Second World War

The Second World War continues to be viewed as an exceptional time in British history in which people of all backgrounds worked together to fight against Nazism. Works such as Angus Calder's *The Myth of the Blitz* (1992) and *The People's War: Britain 1939–45* (1969) have offered counter-narratives to these dominant discourses, and Mitchison's own Mass-Observation wartime diary similarly challenges simplistic notions that this was a period of particular unity and tolerance within British society. Nonetheless, while such 'myths' have been challenged, Gill Plain is right to remind readers that, 'the war introduced discrete class and communities to each other' and this was a significant and important development in society (Plain 2013: 5). In contrast to the Thirties where Mitchison and her peers would visit areas of poverty to gain an insight into the masses of British society, the war brought the realities of social deprivation and cultural differences into much closer contact, with the enforcement of rationing, for instance, levelling the discrepancy between rich and poor. Evacuation was another way in which social barriers were broken down, and Mitchison's own experience of housing children from Glasgow was significant in exposing her directly to the poverty and lack of education endured by families. This is not to say that class and differences were overcome but, to paraphrase Plain, the war fostered an environment in which a greater number of people from varied backgrounds encountered one another, sometimes for the first time.

In reality the 'events of the war had covered over, but not erased, the tensions between an imperial Englishness and its subject nations' (Plain 2013: 269).

Mitchison had begun to formulate her own ideas about how small nationalist units could work as early as 1932 in her article, 'A Socialist Plan for Scotland'. Later in her wartime diary she reflected: 'I am wondering whether nationalism is entirely a bad thing'[14] and considered that it was imperialism rather than nationalism which was at the root of the problem:

> Imperialism cannot develop in an international frame-work. But nationalism can do so: it does not want to conquer other nations. It wants to develop its own […] But I am almost sure that nationalism is on the whole good for people, that it corresponds with something they want, and that is not incompatible with internationalism or peace (Mitchison 1985: 78–79).

This was a sentiment that Mitchison would repeat again and again and it became the central focus of her political outlook during the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, she included this agenda for Scotland in her Notes to *The Bull Calves*.[15] In a letter written in the 1940s she records: 'Nationalist feeling is growing; it's not anti-English, but there is a general feeling that we want to run our own affairs' (Porter MS, 16 July [no year]). Gill Plain, quoting Robert Crawford explains that

> the cultural energies of the interwar renaissance were 'not entirely dissipated' by the [war]. Instead, Scottish writing would go on to develop 'in tandem a strong nationalist impulse and a corresponding cosmopolitanism', simultaneously looking inward for its subjects, and outwards past England to the fertile possibilities of European culture (Plain 2013: 268–269).

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[14] Echoing her diary is the unpublished manuscript entitled 'The Auld Alliance Re-Stated' which begins: 'Most of us find it oddly difficult to explain to our English friends just what we mean by Scottish nationalism. Yet it seems easy enough to explain to the Free French. The English are friendly, most of them, and very reasonable. They want to understand, even to help, only the words one uses to explain the thing in one's mind seem not to condense into any meaning for them' (HRC Folder 3. Works A. TMS. n.d. 2pp)

[15] 'It has taken a deal of shaking up and of highly necessary restatement concepts, before people began to realize that nationalism and internationalism are not opposites, but only two sides of the same thing, and to realize, after that, that self-government for Scotland is not a step back to the days of local wars, anger and hatred before the Union, but rather a step forward to added values for several million people contributing their share towards the peace and civilization of the world' (Mitchison 1947: 524).

Mitchison had rejected Communism in the Thirties but valued the principles of socialism grounded in community. Although she began to promote a nationalist position, she remained a member of the Labour Party and viewed devolution as a positive move for the Party, and not just an SNP agenda. Writing in *Forward* she explains that:

> There is a certain danger that some of us in the Scottish Labour Movement, in a revulsion against certain aspects of the Stone ploy, should take an anti-self-government attitude. Let them read [Richard] Crossman's pamphlet […] where he points out the need for distribution of power and responsibility throughout the community, decentralisation, and giving the ordinary person the feeling that he is of some value (1951: 1–8).

Her attitude towards socialism and nationalism during this time is far less radical than that expounded in her work of the Thirties. Mitchison seemed to have mellowed and was less interested in being a revolutionary and instead considered tangible ways to improve social conditions. Her political outlook was shared by Neil M. Gunn and the two corresponded throughout the war. He too recognised that Communism was not the answer for Scotland, although he valued collectivism and shared responsibility. In a letter to Mitchison he states: 'I know that most writers (like Edwin Muir) and others deplore this individualism. I don't, because in the presence of any form of socialism it would be the natural safe-guard against the tyranny of minority dictatorship, such as we know it on the Continent' (NLS Acc. 5885).[16]

[16] He adds: 'We have had enough ideological splitting of hairs in our own history, especially in religion – and the Russian business is pretty much on that level apparently! – to last us surely for a long time'

Mitchison's Scottish political agenda

Mitchison, like Gunn, was particularly interested in the Highlands. Mitchison's role in instigating political change in Carradale and the Highlands remains under-researched, and has only recently been explored in detail and considered within a historical analysis. John A. Burnett's *The Making of the Modern Scottish Highlands, 1939–1965* provides a welcome and detailed account of Mitchison's role as a member of the Argyle County Council and the Highland Panel in 1946 and 1947, respectively.

Burnett repeats the view that 'the war acted as a catalyst for a new, more forceful attitude within Scottish political circles' and states that Mitchison was a proponent in arguing for self-government although 'any devolvement of power was welcome' (Burnett 2010: 195). In his historical account of the period, Burnett finds a new context in which to read Mitchison and Gunn; he lauds both authors but states with regard to Mitchison, 'others did not match her enthusiasm and conscientiousness' (2010: 186).

One issue of concern was the fundamental desire to preserve the 'civilization of the old Gaeltachd [sic]' (Burnett 2010: 190). But although interested in the 'preservation of the Gaelic language and culture' Mitchison had 'a more fatalistic attitude towards the survival of the culture':

> 'When I first came [to Kintyre] there was still some ceilidhing, the small gatherings round the fire with homemade songs and music. But the wireless killed that'. She felt that the predominant attitude among the younger population was to tune into the radio and experiences other cultures rather than listen to relatives singing 'the old stuff'. Because of this negative response, she felt that many of the older people denied their Gaelic inheritance and acquiesced in the eradication of the language. (Burnett 2010: 191)

Mitchison was not essentialist about preserving the language or insistent upon a single unified language for Scotland – she epitomised the way in which language was not a barrier to producing 'Scottish' art or advocating Scottish matters and reflected that 'Carradale isn't really Highland. It is mixed in blood and feeling (Mitchison 1955: 16).[17]

Rather, in her letters and diary she notes that she was more concerned about American culture and the wireless having a negative impact on Scotland.[18] She recalled: 'It also annoys me that if I write a book theoretically in 'English' but full of American gangster-slang, nobody will complain, but if I put my own Scots words into it, people will say it's provincial and they can't read it'. [19] Taking this argument further, she wrote about 'Murder in our Scottish Schools' in the *Scotsman* identifying that children are being taught to 'despise their own language and the language of their parents' (1956: unpaginated).[20]

Of course, she realised that it was not simply English or American influences that affected the culture and education of Scotland. Poverty played a large part, not to

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[17] Press cutting can be found at NLS Acc. 8503/7.

[18] Mitchison wrote in a letter during the 1940s: 'The Englishry [sic] that we all dislike so much is really – I'm afraid – American commercial culture, and if we are to become a province of Wall Street […] quite a lot of people will kick' (Porter, 16 July, no year).

[19] In a letter to Porter dated 17 October she echoes this: 'There is a good deal of strongly nationalist feeling in Scotland now, not anti-English but we have a distinct preference for running our own shows. God knows what's happening in India. It seems to me the hell of a bad show' [sic]. In a letter of 11 March she writes to Porter to say: 'There is a certain amount of political crystallisation going on, but we don't see it very clearly yet. It's fairly clear from here that Scotland won't put up indefinitely with London government, but I don't know if that is as clear from London' (Porter, no date)

[20] Press cutting can be found at NLS Acc. 8503/8.
See also Mitchison's article "'English" in Scottish Schools' where she writes: 'Most education authorities take it for granted that their "English" is doing good to the child […] I am going to question this […] When I first came to live in the West Highlands, people were shy of me. They tried to speak "properly", that is to say, in the kind of language which they had been taught at school, but which was not easy for them […] After […] people had ceased being afraid of me, they began to speak in their own way and immediately everything became much more lively' (1950: 147).
Gill Plain notes that: 'cultural insensitivity generated support for nationalist movements in both Wales and Scotland' with George Orwell writing in the *Tribune* in 1947 that 'Scotland "is almost an occupied country"' (Plain 2013: 268–269).

mention ‘Church authorities who could not bear the heathen pipes or any other kind of colour and joy in life. They have a false utilitarian psychology and have not realised that man cannot live by bread alone’ (Mitchison 1951: 1–8). In Carradale, Mitchison would find the restrictions imposed by the Kirk to be diametrically opposed to the values she championed. Religious fanaticism would feature in *The Bull Calves* as a negative and oppressive force to be resisted.

At times, she could be frustrated with the lack of political progress and the apathy of those in the community who did not match or follow her lead; though few people could have matched her tenaciousness and drive. Lewis Grassic Gibbon wrote a diatribe against ‘all the Scottish cities’, describing Dundee as ‘a frowsy fisher-wife addicted to gin’ (Riach 2008: 126) and Mitchison wrote a similarly reductive review of Edinburgh and Glasgow but she had hopes for their potential to rebuild and develop:

> Edinburgh has two faces, one of beauty and order and the possibility of civilization: the other of conservatism and the dead hand – a little enthusiasm over the preservation of past beauty but none over the creation of a new beauty along new lines. And Glasgow also has two faces. Neither is of beauty or order. It is a disgustingly ugly town, a huddle of dirty buildings trying to outdo one another and not succeeding […] The population is as ugly as the buildings. Walk down the Gallowgate; notice how many children you see with obvious rickets, impetigo or heads close clipped for lice, see the wild, slippered sluts, not caring any more to look decent! […] They do not speak any real variety of Scots, but a blurred, debased English, or – since 1942 – American. […] But yet through all one’s anger against Glasgow, there is the other side. It is alive, it is full of hope and people wanting to be educated, wanting to try out something new, even though they don’t rightly know what it is. And it is friendly – dirty and friendly and hospitable as a great slum tenement or a Highland stronghold two hundred years ago. And it might be great and beautiful (1947: 434–435).

In one article, she dismissed the depiction of Glasgow as ‘full of razor and bottle gangs’ and writes light-heartedly that if she were ever lost in the city, the nearest

gangster would escort her to the station. She writes, 'I was born in beautiful, noble Edinburgh, I know it well and love it, but if I were poor lost and unhappy it is in Glasgow I would rather be' (1958: 40).[21] In this regard, she was unlike her peers. Edwin Muir had famously gone to look for the 'real' Scotland in his *Scottish Journey* (1935) and was surprised not to find 'it'. Mitchison was fallible and, certainly, her belief that she was best placed to help the community and Scotland could verge on being patronising; as she stated in her diary, she had little hope in the community's ability to make changes themselves. Nonetheless, there is no doubt of Mitchison's interest and concern for Scotland during this time. Although she could be negative on occasion, she worked tirelessly to better improve the social, political and cultural landscape of Scotland.

Despite Mitchison's connection with the writers of the renaissance, she remains on the periphery of this literary movement. Although she occasionally lamented her lack of recognition, it was arguably to her advantage, as she was less interested in debating which language was the best medium for Scottish texts and more concerned with action.[22] Eleanor Bell has discussed the way in which Mitchison and other women writers have been excluded from historical accounts, citing the celebrated 1962 Writers' Conference in Edinburgh as one such example: Mitchison was 'embarrassingly silenced at the end' with her contribution having 'been glossed over in the available transcripts and recorded histories of the event'

[21] Press cutting NLS Acc. 8503/13

[22] Lewis Grassic Gibbon told her 'there's no need to regret that you don't write Scots – a thankless job' (NLS Acc. 5885 10 Aug 1933).
She reflected on her career and involvement in Scotland and writing material that would produce a 'kind of plan for the Highlands'. She noted: 'all this was practical dog's body work and has, I suppose, little to do with the higher flights of the Scottish Renaissance' (1979b: 46).

(2012: 124).[23] But, as Bell concludes, women writers 'may have consciously resisted prominent debates concerning that national literary culture, or simply ignored them […] for whatever reason their experiments reach beyond the limitations of the provincial' (129).[24] Without question, Mitchison was far less interested in conflict and the petty arguments with regard to the use of the Scots language in literature, than she was in applying herself to making changes that would benefit the people of Scotland. An example of her indifference to these literary spats was her response to an article written by Hugh MacDiarmid which was less than complementary to her. The magazine printing the article contacted her and asked her for a response, and in her diary she records:

> I wrote them a short letter which I said they could print what they liked, not arguing, just giving a couple of sharp socks to the jaw. The man doesn't even mention Gunn, just his crop of horrible young pseudo-poets who seem to appear like mildew at the moment. I wish him joy of them, and them of him (Mitchison cited in Burgess 2008: 7).

Mitchison was not afraid of confrontation but was not interested in engaging in a meaningless public argument with a man who had a reputation for conflict.[25] When she reflected back on MacDiarmid in Nancy's Gish's book, *Hugh MacDiarmid: man*

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[23] In a press clipping held in the NLS archives, Mitchison voices her embarrassment in a letter to the editor: 'Some of those who attended last year's Scottish Day at the Writers' Conference may remember that I seized the mike at the end and started apologising to the audience for the exhibition they had seen and heard, all the worse, because, at the preliminary meeting, we writers agreed on the heads of a technical discussion that might have interested an intelligent Scottish audience. The mike was cut before the end of my first sentence. I still feel ashamed of that afternoon. One the other hand it gave the Festival a boost which it might otherwise have missed. We who were the victims must console ourselves with the thought we had been used in the good cause, one hopes, of increasing Festival publicity and the rolling in of the bawbees' (NLS Acc. 8503/15, 30 July 1963).

[24] It is worth noting that in 1962 Mitchison was beginning to forge close connections with the Bakgatla tribe in Botswana. So too, she published her first science fiction novel in this year.

[25] In fact as early as 1935 she wrote to Kenneth Porter saying: 'You'd be right to think that Hugh M'Diarmid wasn't "particularly stable!" He started life as a postman, but I think he must have been a bad one. He has now borrowed (and not returned) money from all his friends an acquaintances, and is living on his second wife, a very nice barmaid he seduced in London; we have made him go and live in the Hebrides which are a strictly temperance place. But he's a poet in parts' (Porter, 1 March, no year).

and poet, she describes him as 'always gentle, even over-polite' but abruptly states: 'But I have nothing of interest to recall' (Mitchison 1992a: 39). Clearly the earlier admiration of each other's work had dwindled.[26] As a figure often hailed as a hero and leader within Scottish literature, Mitchison deliberately counters what we might expect within a panegyric collection such as this. Mitchison acknowledged his contribution to the Scottish Renaissance but was reluctant to hail him as the leader of this movement: 'I doubt if one person can ever be responsible for the Zeitgeist of a country or community' (40). MacDiarmid could be a divisive figure and in this short piece she recognises his 'political effect' but refuses to concede that he was solely responsible for the change in Scottish literature, culture and politics, adding that she found his '"political" verse […] unreadable' (39). In a telling paragraph, she claims that: 'I was much less directly associated with the national poet because I just can't do with drunk men looking at thistles' (40) – a cutting assessment which simultaneously belittles one of MacDiarmid's most lauded works, whilst also hinting at a literal attack on the man himself - and her impatience for those who liked to drink.

[26] Letters from MacDiarmid to Mitchison indicate their earlier, positive correspondence. In a letter dated 31 May 1931 he congratulates her on *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (NLS Acc. 5836). The following year Mitchison spoke at a Burns' Supper and MacDiarmid wrote to say: 'How can I thank you for your references to me in Edinburgh the other night. I would not attempt to do so if I did not feel that they were in measure justified. They certainly represent my constant appreciation of the need for a poet to grapple with the problems of his age (not perhaps that I have achieved this in anything like the measure you suggested, but that I have certainly felt it to be urgently necessary and consistently striven to achieve it). I have a great body of work on hand and feel that speeches such as yours in clearing away a great many misapprehensions which have hitheto thwarted my efforts in Scotland and elsewhere must, to a large measure, simplify my task in attempting these […] you probably appreciate from my last book 'Hymn of Lenin' the profound effect upon me in certain directions of the book you gave me, viz Gerald Heard's *Social Substance of Religion* and I feel I have been thinking so largely since then along certain lines of interest that we have in common that we could very profitably (or at least I could) take up our previous conversation where it was left off' (NLS Acc. 5836, 27 January 1932).

In contrast to MacDiarmid, Mitchison's role in this interesting period in Scottish history remains overlooked. Her contribution to Scottish literature extends beyond her fiction to her non-fictional works, which advocated political and social change and development. So too, in the revisionist readings of the period which have reframed the Renaissance as Scottish Modernism, and which have been eager to promote the internationalist outlook as integral to this nationalist movement, Mitchison's contribution is absent.[27] I would argue that whatever criticism may be directed towards Mitchison and her writing, there is no doubt that she practised and promoted an ethos which was internationalist and she worked for better conditions for people in Scotland.

Mitchison published articles and pamphlets relating to the promotion of Highland political and social matters during the 1940s and 1950s. One such document was the eight-page pamphlet, *Declaration on Scottish of Affairs 1944* which was created by Mitchison, Neil. M. Gunn, John M. MacCormick, Agnes Mure Mackenzie, Compton Mackenzie, William Power, William Leonard MP, and James A.A. Porteous. The pamphlet was a product of the 'private meetings held, on a non-party basis, to consider the position of Scotland in the circumstances likely to arise after the war'. They note that as a group they are 'far from unappreciative of the work done […] by the present Secretary of State' – Tom Johnston – 'or of the value of the various Advisory committees and Councils he has set up'.[28] However, from

[27] Margery Palmer McCulloch uses *Beyond this Limit* as the title of her fourth chapter in *Scottish Modernism and its contexts 1918-1959: literature, national identity and cultural exchange* (2009) but unfortunately neither Mitchison or the novella are included in her discussion. However, McCulloch does consider Mitchison's 'A Socialist Plan for Scotland' and her Russian diary (2009: 104; 108).
[28] Burnett provides details on the remit of the Panel which was established on 21 January 1947: 'To keep under review and advise the Secretary of State on the carrying out of, the approved programme of Highland Development and to arrange in consultation with the Secretary of State for the investigation of further means of promoting the economic use and capacity of resources in the Highlands and Islands, and the social welfare of the Highland people' (2010: 148).

their perspective they 'cannot regard these as any permanent or adequate substitute for a reasonable measure of devolution and democratic self-government such as is proposed' (2). They make a list of several points to outline their proposals, among which was the recommendation that agricultural matters, transport, education and broadcasting 'fall within the purview of the Scottish Parliament'. They vocalise their concern that 'centralisation has gone too far' arguing that 'the reasonable degree of self-Government suggested would promote a more vital democracy and a more vigorous cultural development' (7). The resonance of their arguments continues in Scotland to the present day. As was noted, the group recognised that importance of the work carried out by Tom Johnston and his legacy as Secretary of State for Scotland, as Alan Riach explains:

> [He] really did help to bring about change in the Highlands and Islands. He was determined to benefit people who lived there. In the 1940s and 1950s, with the development of the Hydro Board, Johnston confronted people with vested interests who thought all the energy that could come from those parts of Scotland should be directed towards industry. Johnston said no, the first loyalty and responsibility should be to the people who live there. That was a very important choice. So the more isolated communities got electricity (2008: 59).

Mitchison's admiration for Tom Johnston was apparent when she included him as part of her long poem 'The Cleansing of the Knife' (1978a), written during the 1940s. [29] The twelfth canto begins 'The end of an old song / In Seventeen Seven: / The years that go by are long / And sad for Scotland'. Within this section the speaker reflects on the 'disruptions and jealousies, / Small angers made to last' which have become part of Scotland's 'old song'; its telling of history since the Act of the Union. But then there begins 'the start of a new song' (68) as she introduces 'this man from

[29] Although she recalled later in her life that she 'didn't know [Johnston] that well' but 'felt he was the kind of person one could trust to do anything' (NLS Acc 11307/21–30, pp 75/410) The document is a typescript of an interview.

Kirkintilloch' (she names him later as Johnston). The speaker quotes Johnston and his words echo Mitchison's own political sentiments: '"Scotland will only be free / With jobs and houses and health" / It is up to us to choose. / Local authorities / Have powers to plan and act / Which we must make them use' (69). The speaker repeats the need to give 'up old jealousies, / Quarrels, suspicions, tricks' (70) in order to work to build a better future for Scotland; a message which was to be central to *The Bull Calves*. In the final lines of the stanza the speaker places hope in Johnston as 'the man / Who could surely shake us surely awake and make us / Lead ourselves, thirl ourselves to a service / known and agreed / And sing a new song' (71).

Kirsten Stirling has argued that Mitchison uses the poem to point 'out that the stories of Scottish history tend to be based upon famous disasters' and that this 'confused and partial recollection of Scotland's past privileges a somewhat defeatist perspective' (1999: 257). As the poem develops, Mitchison highlights this pattern of victimhood and challenges the standpoint in which 'we accept no responsibility for the state of the nation' (258). With the introduction of Tom Johnston, Mitchison is able to voice her owns hopes through his words and 'anticipates a socialist future for Scotland' (258). Stirling's analysis adds that *The Bull Calves* complements the themes addressed in 'The Cleansing of the Knife'; for Stirling, Mitchison was 'fascinated' by the way in which 'history is constructed by narrative' (259) and she demonstrates the way in which *The Bull Calves* is similarly full of 'stories' and retellings which serve to question 'the reliability of the narratives of history' (260). Usefully Stirling reminds readers that telling 'stories' can relate 'to narration' but

also can 'denote a lie' (261).[30] Building upon this reading which presents a detailed and interesting analysis of the novel in its depiction of history as a 'construction', forms the basis of my reading of the novel and its use of gothic tropes.

Truth, Lies and Reconciliation in *The Bull Calves*

In 1940 Mitchison intended to write a social history of Scotland, and in many ways this choice followed the pattern of her Thirties writing which adopted an anthropological approach to researching communities in order to 'know' them and fit in. But during her research, the work shifted direction and the material was instead used to create an historical novel set in Scotland in 1747, namely *The Bull Calves* (1947).[31] It took the majority of the war years to write and was her only novel of the decade. The text draws upon members of Mitchison's own historical family as inspiration for the characters, and focuses on a Lowland family gathering at their ancestral home (a setting which was replicated from Mitchison's own paternal family's home in Cloan). The novel is primarily centred on the divisions between the Highlands and Lowlands, and when a Jacobite Rebel is harboured in the attic of the house, various secrets, lies and tensions are unearthed. The suspicions and prejudices within the family between Whig and Tory, Presbyterian and Episcopalian, Highlander and Lowlander, are confronted with the arrival of the Lord President Duncan Forbes. Rather than punish the family for harbouring a rebel (who has since escaped) he reviews the situation and resolves that 'we must act together and build

[30] As a result, the narrative is called into question and the reader led to doubt which stories are true and which are false, and in addition the reader must also make inferences from silences: 'What Kirstie does not say is as much part of her history as what she does say' (262).
[31] Stirling (1999) details the influence of Agnes Mure Mackenzie on Mitchison at this time, including her history of Scotland.

ourselves up slowly and surely […] until we are well of our wounds […] aye, Scotland will need all of us' (Mitchison 1947: 389).

Mitchison had written in her diary in 1941 about the way in which she wanted to write 'something for my own people in Scotland […] to make them confident and happy' (1985: 159). This, coupled with the novel's positive and reconciliatory ending, where the characters let go of their bad experiences and choices from their pasts, has understandably merited analysis which has interpreted the novel as serving to reinvent Mitchison as a Scottish author, as well as functioning to bridge the gap between herself and the local community.[32]

Mitchison's novel literally maps out, with a family tree at the start of the novel, her Scottish heritage. Mitchison was aware of her outsider status in the small community, having lived all her life in the cosmopolitan circles in Oxford and London. Moving to Carradale she was the 'lady from the big house' with a received-pronunciation accent, and privileged background, far removed from the world of Carradale, or indeed, any working class area of Britain. But, it was this complexity inherent in Mitchison's identity, which would inform the characterisation in her novel. *The Bull Calves* values heritage and tradition while simultaneously destabilising any essentialist notions associated with lineage. It draws attention to the crossing of borders made by these characters, drawing attention to the fluidity of nationality, identity and heritage.[33] Mitchison's own position outside the community

[32] 'We too know that she was now increasingly haunted by a desire to reconcile herself with the Carradale people, the ordinary people who distrusted Tigh Mhor, the Big House, for its outside loyalties, its snobbery, its power over them. What better theme for the novel which was to lay ghosts and cleanse knives than one dealing with that oldest of Scottish fictional concerns, the divided self in a divided and war-torn country?' (Gifford 1990: 222–223).

[33] Susanne Hagemann praised the novel 'its constant subversion of seemingly clear-cut categories' (1997: 324).

meant that she often found it difficult to accept the rules of the Kirk, and in the novel she writes against the religion and its tendency towards fanaticism. She wrote to her friend: 'Since living in a Presbyterian community I have become – inevitably – extremely anti-Presbyterian; I feel rather like Burns did, though the theocracy is not so powerful now – it is powerful, though' (Porter, 11 March, no year).

As I have explored in earlier chapters, Mitchison often depicts characters on a boundary between conflicting states during periods of transition, and here in *The Bull Calves* she repeats this pattern. But Mitchison creates a different kind of historical novel that is unlike her books set in classical civilisations. Instead, *The Bull Calves* conforms to the style of the genre most readily associated with Sir Walter Scott, and which has been adapted within the Scottish literary tradition. It is a subtle but significant shift in her approach to the historical novel which served to connect Mitchison to more recent Scottish history, and was a useful medium through which she could explore the tensions between history, nationalism and feminism. Mitchison had written in the Thirties that she wanted to leave historical fiction, concerned that it was not truthful or authentic. In *The Bull Calves* its mimicking of a Scottish historical novel allows her to draw attention to that, and in doing so raises questions about Scotland's relationship with its own history, as well as how women have been obscured in traditional narratives. In the novel, essentialist ideas of history, nationalism and religion haunt the characters. While tradition was valuable, Mitchison's novel promotes the need for the past to be left behind, or at least not to dominate the present. As Roderick Watson identifies in his study of writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance: 'the best creative writers of the socio-political counter-discourse in favour of Scottish cultural identity (at a time when that was

under considerable threat) ended by problematising the concept of identity itself. Paradoxically, this may have been the early Scottish Renaissance's most significant achievement as a contribution to Modernism and literary theory' (2009: 87). In her choice of historical fiction and the adoption of gothic tropes, Mitchison both asserted and subverted lineage and heritage and singular notions of 'Scottishness', as I will now discuss.

National Amnesia: fear, forgetting and the future for Scotland [34]

The notes section of *The Bull Calves* constitute a fifth of the overall volume of the text and serve several functions. In spite of their volume, the notes do not detract from the novel, and the fiction can be read independently without attending to these references; in fact, it has become commonplace for historical fiction to include such lengthy addendums. Jerome de Groot suggests that 'it might be a rule of thumb to define the historical novel as something which has an explanatory note from the writer describing their own engagement with the period in question, either through schooling or, more commonly, through their reading and research' (2010: 7). It will not surprise scholars familiar with the genre that this paradigm can be attributed to Sir Walter Scott's seminal historical novel, *Waverley* (ibid.). As De Groot explains, the notes function to assert the author's 'authority' as well as 'defend the novel from accusations of frivolity' (ibid.). But, conversely, these 'extraneous metanarratives' also 'point to the artificiality of the exercise', and this paradox seems to be intrinsic to the form which is 'obsessed with pointing out its own partiality' (De Groot 2010:

[34] National Amnesia alludes to Katie Trumpener's (1997) *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton University Press). Specifically, the section 'National Memory, Imperial Amnesia'.

8); a point Kirsten Stirling has made in her analysis of the novel (1999: 267). Mitchison's text exemplifies all of these traits, with the opening paragraph to her Notes typifying this mode:

> The author of a historical novel hopes to be justified, ultimately, by the value of the book as a work of art. Yet there are other qualities involved. 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 (since it is a work of art and therefore of selection) 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 (Mitchison 1947: 40).

Here Mitchison immediately directs the reader to both the fictionality and the functionality of the novel. By including the notes her readers are able to appreciate that 'art' without having to be drawn into the references and bibliographical details but, crucially for Mitchison, the notes provide a space in which she can also express her personal motivations in writing the novel and her political agenda. While the novel was a medium to present a story for readers to reflect and 'revalue such times with reference to his own', the notes enable Mitchison to explicitly outline what lessons her readers might learn. Mitchison repeats this agenda when she asserts: 'in a book which has the social and political implications that this book obviously has, one's motives are not purely artistic – if such a thing is ever possible' (1947: 411). The notes enable Mitchison to show off her research and knowledge, as well as comment on and express her political hopes for Scotland, without impinging on the narrative itself. As a result, the work is an accomplished and coherent piece of literature which skilfully blends several texts: an epigraph which consists of a poem dated July 1940; a family tree; the eighteenth century narrative; and the politically informed notes written from the perspective of the 1940s standpoint, all into a cohesive whole. Take this is contrast to *We Have Been Warned*: here Mitchison is

clear and focused in her politics which valued socialism but wanted a decentralised form of government so Scotland could have more autonomy to tailor its political and social requirements specific to the nation. In *The Bull Calves* she accomplishes a layered and considered novel, which offers a multitude of satisfying interpretations and areas for consideration.

The Plan to Rebuild Scotland

> Mitchison's concern was with the smaller family units and communities from which society must attempt to regenerate itself in the aftermath of war. Yet the possibility of regeneration is perpetually under threat from what could be termed the dark side of the past. The sense of the past as a perpetually threatening entity is embodied by Kyllachy, whose blood relation to the Haldanes, and clan relation to William, also makes him an all-purpose shadow-self. A devil's advocate figure, he appears from nowhere on what appears to be a mission to disrupt the comfortable complacency of the Haldane cousins. He is a constant reminder that the past never dies, and that it has the potential to become a dangerous weapon. His divisive influence, which exacerbate the tensions beneath the surface of the family, illustrates the difference between using the past to think of the future and using the past as an instrument of revenge. In the defeat of Kyllachy's schemes *The Bull Calves* suggests that the ghosts of the past can be laid to rest through an aspect of the gift, namely, forgiveness. This conclusion is supported by the patterns of confession, assimilation and reconciliation that recur throughout the novel (Plain 1996: 155–156).

The 'threat' of the past in the novel served to bring together Mitchison's hopes that Scotland would look forward to rebuild, and avoid becoming an antique which perpetuated a narrative of victimhood. She used tropes found in the Scottish historical novel including witches and ghosts and these symbolise the way in which the past can haunt and torment their characters, inhibiting them from progress.

Set in 1747 over a two-day period, the Haldane family are gathering at their Lowland home. The protagonists are Kirstie, the eldest and only sister, who is

visiting with her husband, the Highlander, William of Borlum/Black William. Symbolically their marriage appears to represent the union within Scotland, between Highland and Lowland in the aftermath of the Jacobite Rebellions, and in the opening chapter their love and respect for one another is evident.[35] Part one of the novel focuses on Kirstie telling her niece about her life before William, and we learn of her unhappy marriage to a domineering Minister, Andrew Shaw, who eventually died. Wisdom and serenity seems to emanate from Kirstie as she talks to her young niece. But in the opening of part two, William and Kirstie are alone in their room and it is revealed that Kirstie has in fact not told her niece 'the half of it' (Mitchison 1947: 154). Furthermore, while Kirstie's brothers have seemingly welcomed William into the family, it is clear that there is still uncertainty and mistrust, a fact of which William is aware: '[Your brothers] are as nice as can be, but they are forever thinking I am a Highlander and so a double-dealer and a liar and not civilised the way they are. So I just needed to make them think I was as honest as any Edinburgh banker' (Mitchison 1947: 152). William's phrasing here is crucial in relativizing what is considered 'honest'. Throughout the novel honesty, truth and lies become pliable terms. Indeed, Douglas Gifford has identified the differences between the types of lies in the novel, with Kirstie and William telling 'white lies' as opposed to other characters (1990: 228) while Kirsten Stirling has identified the way in which 'storytelling' is both a narrative function and a means of lying (1999).

[35] 'The marriage of the central female character, Kirstie Haldane, to William Macintosh can be read as symbolising the union of the Lowlands and Highlands. The union is miraculously fruitful, since the couple have a child, born to Kirstie at the age of well over forty. Little Elizabeth, however, is not present at the family gathering in the Ochils which her parents have come to attend; she remains hidden in the narrative, as does the soul of Scotland in the notes. Interestingly, Elizabeth is one of the few entirely fictitious characters in the novel: the utopian, feminine Scotland she embodies lies outside the realm of history. In a sense, the same is true of Scottishness' (Hagemann 1997: 324).

In contrast to the serenity of part one, part two begins to reveal the complex secrets which the characters are hiding. Firstly, Kirstie re-tells William the unedited version of her first marriage. It is a story which she has told him before, and we learn that in an attempt to break from Shaw's verbal abuse Kirstie sought refuge in a coven of witches led by her sister-in-law Christian Shaw.[36] As a result, Kirstie has carried this secret with her and her transgression makes her believe she had something to do with Shaw's death through these supernatural forces. William comforts her and reassures her that she is not to blame, and Kirstie eventually calms down. William, then, begins to tell Kirstie about his life in America and his shame over some of his actions there, including affairs, forgery and murder. Kirstie, in turn, consoles him. During William and Kirstie's stories, the action shifts focus from their room to the attic, where the reader learns that two of the younger Haldane men have smuggled in Robert Strange – a Jacobite Sympathiser. [37]

The following day another cousin unexpectedly arrives at the house – Kyllachy – a devious character, and someone who had betrayed William and his family after the Rebellions. Kyllachy's arrival is not only unfortunate for William, but in trying to find a room for the unwelcome guest to sleep, it is revealed that Robert Strange is hidden in the attic, embroiling other family members into conflict. William takes some of the blame in order to divert attention from one of Kirstie's brothers; an

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[36] Shaw was a real person. Mitchison's aunt, Elizabeth Haldane, she writes about women in relation to Scotland's manufacturing past: "let us begin with the manufacture of linen. We must not forget that this was no new thing in Scotland, for Christian Shaw, the daughter of the Laird of Balgarran, began about 1725 to manufacture fine thread from the directions of a friend who had seen the process in Holland, and who founded an industry which has brought great wealth to Paisley [...] Scotland had indeed for centuries been a cloth making country' (1933: 183).

[37] Robert Strange was a relative of Mitchison who was an engraver who designed Prince Charles's banknotes. Although in her Notes she considers that, 'It doesn't appear that he was, as we say now, 'politically conscious', and he was always dashing back to Edinburgh to see his betrothed' (197: 467–469) See also https://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/s/artist/sir-robert-strange/object/prince-charles-edward-stuart-1720-1788-sp-iv-123-20

action which only serves to confirm Kyllachy and other family members' suspicions about William's Jacobite sympathies. At this point, Kirstie's brother Patrick arrives – a lawyer who is close with the couple – having been sympathetic to their troubled pasts, and who helped William return from America. But Patrick asks to speak with William alone, and he presents documents to the Highlander which pertain to his past in America. William is concerned that they implicate him in forgeries, but Patrick reveals a far worse revelation that he knows that William was, in fact, married while in exile to a Native American woman. The reader recognises that this is part of his life he was attempting to reveal to Kirstie earlier, and it is clear he is devastated to think that this revelation could ruin their marriage. As it turns out, Patrick knew of this marriage and has no intention of telling Kirstie. Instead, he brings news that the American wife is now dead, theoretically lifting William's burden.[38] William tells the curious Patrick about this relationship, and the children he had in America, revealing that he left after being unable to live with the torture and pillaging which the Native Americans undertook. Finally, the Lord President, Duncan Forbes, arrives at the home, and Kyllachy threatens to implicate the family in harbouring a fugitive. The Lord President gathers the family together, and although the fugitive has managed to escape, Forbes listens to the characters' testimonies. He concludes that no one will be prosecuted, but urges the family to work together for the sake of Scotland.

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[38] 'Many characters undergo this process of absolution, but the most important revelations pass, in a neatly cyclical fashion, between Kirstie and William and their closest friend within the Haldane family, the unconventional sceptical lawyer, Patrick. Each must undertake both to speak and to listen, and the series of interactions portrayed reveals Mitchison's underlying interest in psychoanalytical theories. Kirstie confesses to William who confesses to Patrick who confesses to Kirstie. Each must listen without the expectation of being listened to in return. It is not the subject of the confession which matters (indeed William has heard Kirstie's tale of witchcraft before), but that act of confessing itself. The process of working out old griefs and guilts is essential to a healthy relationship. Left inside, Kirstie's worries would fester and destroy her' (Plain 1996: 156).

The reconciliatory ending is echoed when William tries to confess to Kirstie about his marriage and children in America. Instead, Kirstie deliberate evades William's attempts to tell her the truth:

> I know fine you have your secrets, William. And in the goodness of your heart you are lying to keep the thing from me. But you needna lie, mo chridh. Maybe I can guess the kind of thing it would be, and maybe I am better so than knowing it for sure and it would hurt the both of us seeing the thing over plain, and it doesna concern us now […] there will be nothing that need be said. And you needna lie to your Kirstie. But, my soul, I will ask you to keep silent on the main thing and that willna be hard for you, since it is for your Kirstie's sake. But dinna think you are deceiving me, my love, by keeping silent, and dinna think you are doing wrong. For you arena, whatever you may have done in times past (1947: 406).

On the surface, this is a satisfying conclusion for the reader who finds their two amiable protagonists able to move on, leave their troubled pasts and destructive relationships behind, in favour of a positive future based on mutual love and a willingness to forgive. Yet, there is something unsatisfactory about Kirstie's deliberate avoidance of William's past which disrupts the reconciliatory ending. The issue does not lie with Kirstie choosing to ignore William's past - she is to be commended for being so trusting and forgiving – but rather the way this issue is problematized if we are to view Kirstie as a symbol of Scotland. As several studies have noted, Kirstie is compared to 'poor Scotland' and in this regard draws parallels with Chris Guthrie in *Sunset Song* (Dickson 1988: 253). Scotland's colonial past is ignored in this ending. Kirstie shows strength in her forgiveness of William and her emphasis on looking forward rather than dwelling on the past, but on the basis that certain uncomfortable truths are ignored. Juxtapose this to the context of the year of the novel's publication – 1947 – when the legacy of the British Empire was harder to ignore and was brought into acute focus as a result of the Partition of India. As one

of the Empire's most prominent colonies, India's independence marked a significant shift in Britain's imperial hold, and the start of a series of decolonisation and independence movements worldwide. Decolonisation would result in postcolonial texts, and revisionist literature – a world where characters like Ohnawiyo would be agents in their own stories. Choosing to look forward may have been the hope for Scotland and Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War, but their involvement in Empire raised new and important questions about politics and, once again for Mitchison, the problem of speaking for Others.

Mitchison layers the text with sinister imagery and in the opening paragraph to Part Two of the novel creates a unsettling mood within a familial and homely setting:

> It was not yet near dark, but the windows of the room were narrow, since window glass had been none so easily come by when they were built. Kirstie leant against the sill of the northern window, watching the light as it went farther and farther back into the colourless profound sky behind the Grampians […] Black William came and stood beside her […] she turned her eyes back into the room, blinking. The window at the far end, looking up Gleneagles, had darker sky at the back of it, near mountains closing in, and the tops of firs, black and moving like sea beasts in a half-lit pool. There was an eeriness and threat from out by that made her terribly glad of himself at her side and the bed between them and the window. 'Will we have the candles?' she said; and he, also aware of the steep cup of Gleneagles pressing in on them with the fall of light, lifted the shutter bars against it and lit the candles in the well sconces and by the bed.
> There were two dressing closets to the room, one with Kirstie's dresses and cloaks, the other with Black William's coats and wigs. Kirstie spoke across from hers […] 'What for were you lying to my brothers, William?'
> 'Which time?' said William (Mitchison 1947: 151).

The impending threat which is building as twilight approaches is punctuated by William's line which reveals that he has been lying, and that Kirstie is fully aware of his deception. He has not lied once, but on several occasions. Mitchison marks this turn in the novel with the shift from day to night; Part One is set in the daylight,

outdoors, with the family all seemingly getting along. Part Two is set in the 'near dark' drawing attention to this transitional and this liminal part of the day. Indeed, throughout the novel Mitchison uses this device to discretely layer the novel so that uncertainty is continually evoked: 'half choked with tears'; 'half hating yon woman' (215); 'half waking' and 'half light' (182). Night is foreboding and is emphasised by the imagery of the mountains moving like 'beasts'. In Romantic literature, mountains and the landscape are viewed as sublime, but in this text nature is distorted and the sublime instead becomes a threatening presence. Then there is the deliberate positioning of Kirstie near the liminal space of the glassless window which blurs the boundary between outside and inside, and places her between the seemingly threatening world outside, and the safety of her room. Truth, lies and confession are bound to these descriptions of liminal spaces throughout the novel, and in this paragraph the 'closets', 'wigs' and 'cloaks' do not only describe clothing but have connotations with disguise, deception and secrecy.[39] In this short paragraph, Mitchison concentrates the motifs and themes which were to be central to the novel and which draw upon gothic conventions and which are used as a backdrop against the secrecy, deception and psychological trauma that manifests in the characters.

Kirstie's belief that she had somehow caused the death of her domineering husband leaves her on the verge of madness. The description of the night William visited her home recounts several gothic motifs. In this scene, Kirstie is pictured as the virginal heroine, baring her body under a thinly veiled white nightdress. She waits by the fireside and is visited by what she first believes to be the Devil, who is in fact William. Likening William to be the Devil here is indicative of Kirstie's mind

[39] Mitchison uses this again when she writes: 'But in the Haldane house all were asleep, and Robert Strange on a heap of cloaks in the long attic of the farther wing of the house' (1947: 185).

set, but is also a deliberate comparison; Mitchison compares the hero of her novel to the Devil questioning the merit of this likable character: 'I have done the most wicked things […] I could have been the very De'il you were looking for. Listen, Kirstie, and judge me' (173). But while William is an indeterminate character we learn that William is not anyone to fear but rather is painted as Kirstie's saviour. Instead of the anti-Catholicism often present in gothic narratives, Mitchison draws upon its imagery, and positions William as the antithesis of the Devil: 'William you did a wild, Popish thing, you made the sign of the cross on me' (170). His hybrid form of Christianity, which is more grounded in humanism, stands in contrast to the 'hell-fire' minister, Shaw, who shows little in the way of tolerance or compassion.

The interspersing of gothic conventions in the novel connects it to the long tradition of the divided self in Scottish literature. Gill Plain has considered the influence of Jung in 'crystallising aspects of Mitchison's own thought'.[40] In particular, Plain recognises that Mitchison wanted 'to question the founding principles of binary oppositions', an issue alluded to in her diary entry where she considers 'the difference it would make if there were not four airts on a compass points but five, and so no complete opposite to anything' (Plain 1996: 140).[41] Mitchison used the archetypes in her novel, but resisted a straightforward depiction of contrasts and divisions, preferring multiplicity to duality:

> I can't really see that there's any unifying principle in history or that things get done for one reason: that is, I can't see history from the point

[40] In her Notes at the end of the novel Mitchison considers that 'Jung says that no woman has portrayed the animus. That strikes me as questionable. What about Rochester? (1947: 513). We know from her war diary that Mitchison went to see the 1944 film *Jane Eyre* (1985: 271). On the surface we could argue that *The Bull Calves* share similar features with Charlotte Brontë's novel: a stranger in the attic who threatens to ruin the protagonists' happiness; the hero/villain and his secretive colonial past; the strong female protagonist who drives the narrative and challenges oppression.

[41] I think this idea manifests itself in her novel *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) in her depiction of the starfish. See Nick Hubble who in his reading of the novel notes the protagonist Mary's shift in her thinking 'which holds open more possibilities than conventional binary thought' (2013: 76-79).

> of view of historical materialism, or national patriotism, or religion of one kind or another; the psychological view-point is attractive, the difficulty being that it can be used to prove anything […] In fact, I think people do things for a variety of reasons. I suppose I think that, because I am against (or for) several things, not just one thing. It is more comfortable to be for or against one thing, to be able to put the blame somewhere definite. But I don't think I can be. It makes one a less efficient politician of course (1985: 75–76).

Unlike Mitchison's other historical novels, the characters also look back to their pasts, and show the way in which history and resentments can prevent development. Mitchison may have wanted to prove her Scottish heritage and write a Scottish novel but once again depicted characterisation which occupies interstitial and complex spaces, and the gothic serves to explore this conflict in a Scottish setting:

> In constructing an apparently singular narrative, the Gothic, in fact, draws attention to the ways in which a story always emerges from a polyphony of clashing voices, throwing light on the fabricated nature of both the story and history. As [Angela] Wright claims, once of the distinctive qualities of Scottish Gothic is precisely that contested territory that the contradictory narratives of a Gothic text frequently uncover […] Challenging the definition – and existence – of a singular truth, the coexistence of multiple voices and, frequently, multiple texts, erodes the foundations of hegemonic authority, allowing a plethora of "other" voices to emerge (Davison and Germanà 2017: 5).

With regard to the way in which Mitchison explores psychoanalytical theory in the novel, the gothic features enable the psychological issues of the characters to manifest themselves in a way which was appropriate for the eighteenth-century. Mitchison's protagonists experience 'supernatural' or 'inexplicable' events but are able to conceive of them as psychological manifestations, even if they do not use that language:

> 'There are these contradictions in us,' said William, hesitating, walking about the room, 'and if one refuses to allow for them, then one can see that far less into events and into how folk will act on a given occasion. Which is so with over many of the religious. You are saying that one side is true and the other utterly false; I wouldna like to say that' (1947: 279).

William recognises that Kirstie's involvement in the coven is actually a result of 'a deep part of ourselves' struggling with 'God's love' and 'equally […] things of the Pit' (1947: 327). In the beginning of the novel, Kirstie asserts to her niece that the supernatural is irrational and that

> 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. And dinna you get believing in witches, Catherine, even if you must have your castles and enchantments and knights in armour! Witchcraft was a gey ugly thing, whatever made it. And it is over and done with in Scotland for ever (Mitchison 1947: 41)

William's difficult past also enables him to develop and become tolerant to the complexity of others, particularly as a result of his exile to America. The house, and Scotland, then are not the only sources of tension and fear. Mitchison uses an element of imperial gothic to explore the psychological conflicts inherent in William's character. Let us consider that the

> 'Gothic' could denote, confusingly, both the native and the foreign, both the folkloric roots of British culture and the Oriental fantasies that Europeans had encountered during their Crusades against the Saracens. This doubleness energizes Gothic fiction. In its presentation of bygone horrors, it provokes a sensation of "confused remembrance" precisely by intermingling the here and now with the then and there (Lynch 2008: 51).[42]

The gothic often used old documents to catalyse the conflict in the novel, often serving to undermine authority and authenticity. In the novel, William and Patrick are both concerned that documents will provide evidence to secure their downfall: William with his involvement in forgeries, and Patrick for his satirical attacks against the Church. Of course, it is William's marriage to the Native American, Ohnawiyo, which is exhumed and as a result the validity of his marriage to Kirstie is brought

[42] Lynch identifies "confused remembrance" as 'a psychological condition often investigated in Gothic fiction – the hazy sense of half-knowledge, or déjà vu' (Lynch 2008: 50).

into doubt. Neither character faces any persecution, but while Patrick is an ally to William, the way in which he holds back the truth from William (the fact he knew about his marriage and does not plan to tell Kirstie) is rather cruel. That Patrick should keep William in suspense, even if only momentarily, functions to show the power dynamic he holds over William. The hero is reduced to tears fearing that the blissful and contented marriage between him and Kirstie threatens to be ruined. It is important that Mitchison choses Patrick as the listener to William's confession since he represents the dominant, patriarchal, capitalist figure in the novel. It is Patrick whose status places him in the position to absolve William. In her decision to have William recount his past to Patrick, Mitchison draws parallels with the Highland culture and the associations with Scotland's own internal colonial dynamic: 'Failing his tongue, his hands turned towards Kirstie's brother, a light and thin-boned hand, of a different race'(Mitchison 1947: 266). William in justifying his relationship with Ohnawiyo also makes an explicit comparison to the Highlanders and the Native Americans:

> And there was Ohnawiyo the same as the fairy woman that could have been watching among the birches of Knocknasidhe beyond Borlum, in the twilights […] There was a power of the fairies put upon me as I looked from her fur robe to her face, to her eyes; the trader's thoughts in me withered to nothing (Mitchison 1947: 275).

William considers that 'There are two ways of thinking on the Indians and neither of the two of them right'. His claim that 'Indian treacheries which are yet maybe no worse than those of our own politicians' (Mitchison 1947: 272–273) presents William as the mouthpiece to challenge the binary assumptions made against the colonial peoples. William's speech attempts to undermine imperialist ideology which he himself fell victim to as a Highlander. But, nonetheless, William sheds his radical

and 'irrational' Highland identity for a passive and compliant role within the dominant 'rational' Lowland community. William is proud of his Highland culture but nonetheless conforms to the restrictions that suppress markers of that culture, such as the kilt and the claymore.

Despite Kirstie and William having troubled pasts, both are depicted as characters with a strong ethical and moral code. It is the fact that Kirstie and William have experienced difficulties and recovered which allows them to be less judgemental than other characters in the novel. Their liminality, then, is actually their strength. Kirstie and William seem to be distanced from the highbrow and modern world of the rest of the family; instead they are often associated with the land. But, their liminal positions – Kirstie is a Lowland Haldane, but is female; William a man, but a Highlander – offer a unique vantage point:

> Seeming to be outside the group, the liminal figure is actually its moral representative and, in fact, exists to serve the social structure from which he seems to have been separated. The liminal figure provides for his audience a vicarious experience that offers a kind of safety valve for the hostility or frustration engendered by the limitations of structured life […] Social rules, categories, classes, and institutions are strengthened by enacting a fantasy of their weakness (Gilead 1986: 184)

However, in the end William acquiesces with the family and they are unified in their plans to rebuild Scotland, setting aside religious and political differences to value community. The colonial family he left in America, and his own Highland identity seems to have been sacrificed.

The Bull Calves contributed to Mitchison's 'reinvention' as a Scottish author. The family tree included in the novel illustrated Mitchison's family heritage in Scotland, and reminded readers of her own birth in Edinburgh. Mitchison was keen to emphasise her 'Scottish identity' and this, coupled with her political writing and

endeavours helped to forge her place in the community. However, for all of Mitchison's emphasis on lineage, in *The Bull Calves* she destabilises notions of the purity of linearity and nationality, which is implied by the simplicity of a family tree. Rather, through her depiction of the fictional Haldane family she shows characters who have different political outlooks which lead to conflicts, and she disrupts the figure of the archetypal Scottish Highlander by telling readers he is 'in fact half-English' (Hagemann 1997: 324). Value is placed on the decision by the characters to look past their conflicts and invest in 'building up Scotland' together, and it is this cooperative attitude which Mitchison's novel values over the characters' backgrounds. All this is commendable, and while the progressive ending of the novel shows the characters looking towards their future, in which individualism is complemented by a politics grounded in localism and self-determination, in contrast, the country's links to colonialism lurk silently in the background as something to be forgotten. It is for this reason that I have questioned the 'reconciliatory' ending – for it is only reconciliatory for the elite few. Indeed, given the year of the novel's publication – 1947 – the Partition of India the legacy of British colonialism was harder to ignore.[43] As one of the Empire's most prominent colonies, India's independence marked a significant shift in Britain's imperial power, and the start of a series of decolonisation and independence movements worldwide. Emphasis is instead placed on the construction of the family, the nation and history; it is the characters' decision to look past their conflicts and invest in 'building up Scotland' together that is important. While the progressive outlook shows the characters looking towards their future in which individualism is complemented by a politics

[43] Given Mitchison's keen interest in politics, as well as her friendship with Jawaharlal Nehru, it is clear she would have been aware of these issues.

grounded in localism and self-determination, in contrast, the country's links to colonialism is something not to be disturbed, and relegated to the past.[44]

Conclusion: Mitchison's political hopes for Scotland

As a writer and a social activist, Scotland offered a new start for Mitchison. Writing in 1939 Mitchison expressed her frustration with campaigning for her husband in his Yorkshire constituency, and questioned whether she was doing 'much good'. However, she contemplated:

> Scotland is a different matter; I can't help thinking that in Carradale itself I have achieved something near the classless society; the next stage is to get the economics a bit better – but I've cut the vicious circle in a different place. I am engaged in guerrilla warfare with the local Presbyterian Ministers and their wives, who are frightfully against classlessness! But I've got the fishing fleet with me, and most of them are beautiful and blue-eyed and all that. But in Argyllshire as a whole I've done something else – I found for them a young socialist candidate, who, if we can keep success from going to his head, will be the leader of the Left whom we have been looking for. Well, I don't know, but I feel in a queer way more hopeful and certainly happier than I've done for a long time. Which is one in the eye for Hitler (Porter, 14 May 1939).

The romantic image of Carradale with its 'blue-eyed fisherman' and the community coming close to representing a 'classless society' echoes some of Mitchison's earlier political idealism. It resonates with a statement made by her aunt, Elizabeth Haldane, in her non-fictional book, *The Scotland of our Fathers* where she stated: 'the attraction of life in the remote islands was and is the independence of an almost class-less population' (Haldane 1933: 335). Of course, Mitchison was fully aware that hierarchies did exist which were imposed, in part, by the Kirk, and she

[44] Notably Mitchison would later write science fiction which actively looks to the future. As Nick Hubble explains: 'This progression embodies the historic transition, highlighted by Frederic Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), by which science fiction has superseded the historical novel as the main literary vehicle for the pursuit of utopia' (2013: 74).

understood that her home – The Big House – was itself a symbol of a feudal past.[45] Yet the tone in this letter echoes the optimism of the early 1930s whereby writers looked to regions and communities with the hope of finding a site for political change, and it also repeats Mitchison's tendency to place herself at the centre of such progressive changes.[46] It is unsurprising that her optimism dwindled, for it would have been exceptional for Carradale to be isolated from the challenges faced elsewhere in Britain, socially, economically and culturally, particularly during the turbulent years of war, and in the years of recovery which followed.[47] An extract from Mitchison's wartime diary encapsulates a pessimistic tone which, understandably, began to permeate her private writing during this period:

> Well here is the end of the war, and the end of this diary, with some of the same people in the house as were here at the beginning. But all older and tired. I feel far more suspicious of the Carradale people than I did; I know them less capable of either thought or generosity. Yet I am considering standing for the County Council with all the worry and extra work that this will imply. I am more cut off from London yet miss it more. However I have done my job for and with Dick. I know we are going to have hell trying to work the peace, trying to give people a worth-while-ness in their peace time lives comparable with the worth-while-ness of working together during the war. We shall probably fail (Mitchison 1985: 338).

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[45] 'She was required to confront the feudal system in personal terms when she and her husband bought Carradale House in Kintyre' (Burgess 2006: 144). See also pp. 144–151.

[46] 'If I had not worked day after day with West Highlanders, danced with them, quarrelled with them, loved them, cheated and been cheated by them, had we not been thirled to one another by common action, by kindness, by violent happiness and unhappiness, then I might have written some other book. If you go back to the why below this – why did my great-grandfather and his brother come west to 'heathen Kintyre' a century ago, to preach on the hill-sides in the teeth of the respectable Ministers and lairds? Why did the folk here listen to them? Why had Gilbert Macallum to take on the preaching after them, in barns or kitchens, Gilbert Macallum whose nephew's grandson, my pupil, should have been a poet of the West, but was killed by a German bomb in Patrick? What is this knotting between Highlands and Lowlands that has us caught, why should the fresh knot come now, timeously to its place and myself in the centre of it? The whole net is not to be seen; half of it is yet under the waves' (Mitchison 1947: 411–412).

[47] In a letter dated 2 March 1946 to Kenneth Porter she writes: 'One can't help feeling a bit gloomy about the state of the world, though it may be better than pretending everything is lovely like we did last time […] Here one can't help realising how different everything is, somehow different in quality. It's not a very nice kind of change at present, but it may become so' (Porter).

This is a rare example of negativity on Mitchison's part. Aside from being discordant with her usual enthusiasm, it stands in contrast to *The Bull Calves* which was widely regarded as presenting a positive message for communities and nations to 'reconcile' and 'rebuild' in the aftermath of war (see Dickson 1988: 247; Gifford 1990: 222-223; Plain 1996: 144; Stirling 1999: 255; Murray 2005: 72). This extract from her diary demonstrates Mitchison's continued sense of social responsibility and desire to work for political change, in spite of her waning enthusiasm. Notably, she touches on 'worth-while-ness' and the forced community effort which the war imposed, and her concern is that this positive dimension, in an otherwise traumatic situation, might be lost during 'peace time'.[48] In relation to politics and the problem of speaking for others, it shows Mitchison again taking on the role of leader and spokesperson, in this case suggesting that the community would be unable to do so without her.

Mitchison was not always pessimistic, but war and the loss of her baby inevitably took its toll. With regards to her political journey, the idealism which had sometimes skewed her outlook during the interwar period was replaced with pragmatism. The realities of living within a small community, removed from Oxford and London society, was productive in pushing Mitchison beyond simply theorising about politics and fictionalising it, to actually engaging with it on a practical level. She was not a voyeur visiting a region, but actually part of the community. The quotidian reality of living within a remote fishing village, and through the Second World War in particular, exposed Mitchison to rationing, evacuation and farming. It

[48] Gill Plain's discussion of J.B. Priestley's *Bright Day* seems apt here: 'The problems that confront them are the collapse of community and the resurgence of self-interest; a sense of cultural invasion, manifest in a parody of Hollywood cinema; visceral divisions between town and country; the resurgence of class boundaries and the re-emergence of a pre-war mode of "power" concentrated in the hands of an unscrupulous privileged few' (2013: 207).

brought the realities of an egalitarian society into much closer focus, as well as bringing to her attention to the economic and cultural decline affecting Scotland, and the Highlands. She was now focused on the social and political landscape of Scotland, far removed from her life in Oxford and London, and was able to recognise the compelling arguments for a devolved and decentralised mode of government that were taking shape. She was less resolute in her allegiance to any political party – although she remained a member of the Labour Party – claiming that: 'I get more and more immersed in various kinds of public work and a bit fed up with straight politics. One wants to get houses built and doesn't care so much if they [are] Labour houses or Tory houses! (Porter, 17 March, no year). Rather than working from a privileged 'centre' and aiming to apply abstract ideologies of 'comradeship' to engage with the a working-class 'mass' – she was better positioned to recognise the nuances in society, and the complexity of how religion, culture and geographical area all impacted on social and political matters. Class was a determining factor and the problem of speaking for others remained. However, Mitchison forged valuable relationships which gave her insight into the social and economic issues facing Scottish communities. In Carradale she did not find a utopian society of 'blue-eyed fishermen' but came much closer to understanding what that community needed and valued: she was emphatic that local rather than centralised government could better relate to the people it served and this, in turn, was essential for the prosperity of the United Kingdom. In short, Carradale and her life in Scotland are a turning point in Mitchison's life and political development.

CHAPTER FOUR

Speaking as Tribal (M)other: postcolonial politics in Botswana

Mitchison was afforded the opportunity to document some of the decolonisation and independence movements in her capacity as a reporter, and her journeys to India, Pakistan, as well as areas of Africa, were published in *Times Educational Supplement*, the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and later in her book, *Mucking Around: Five Continents over Fifty Years* (1981). Helen Lloyd's thesis has been one of the only detailed discussions of Mitchison's writing from this period, and she theorises travel writing as a mode of autobiography, noting the implications of the genre as a colonial discourse.[1] Undoubtedly, within Mitchison's works there is a tone which echoes a colonialist perspective; on witnessing Ghana's independence ceremony in 1957 she recalled: 'in general I was in the old world of District Officers and colonialism, perhaps at its best', adding: 'I don't think many people any longer seriously consider the British as oppressors' (Mitchison 1981: 115; 119).[2]

Mitchison had the opportunity to reconsider the impact of colonialism a couple of years later when she forged a deeper connection with Africa, which actually began at Carradale in 1958. She was hosting a British Council event at her home welcoming various students, including Linchwe II, who was to become the future Chief of the Bakgatla tribe in Botswana. Admittedly, she initially 'didn't know where Botswana was' (Calder 1997: 227) but her connection with the country was established in 1963 when she was invited to attend Linchwe's installation ceremony

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[1] 'The recent re-evaluation of travel writing in terms of post-colonial theory has also done much to renew interest in [the genre of travel writing] while paradoxically highlighting an uneasy and potentially suspect relationship with colonial and imperialist discourses' (Lloyd 2005: 72).

[2] 'There were Down with Colonialism slogans strung across the road, but I doubt anyone took them very seriously. Out of the crowd of brown skins and dark eyes a dear old man rushed up, flung his arms round my neck and said, "Wonderful, wonderful, a white face"' (Mitchison 1981: 119).

to become Chief, and was bestowed the honour of adopted advisor and mother to the tribe.[3] As a result of her role, Mitchison travelled there every year up until she was too elderly to travel, forging a lasting connection to Linchwe, the tribe and Botswana.[4]

Documented in biographies and obituaries, her role as Mmarona (mother) has been presented as a unique aspect in a long and varied career, but aside from Lloyd's unpublished thesis, *Witness to a Century: The Autobiographical Writings of Naomi Mitchison* (2005), critical readings of the period are sparse.[5] This in spite of Mitchison's experience having influenced several of her works including: *When We Become Men* (1965); the non-fictional, *Return to the Fairy Hill* (1966); eight children's books;[6] a history book entitled, *The Africans* (1970); a biographical study entitled *A Life for Africa: the story of Bram Fischer* (1973) [7]; a collection of stories

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[3] 'He came to parties in London from time to time; I was always quite pleased to see him but there was a limit to what one had to say. He no doubt felt the same. The common experience was not there yet, still less a common cause' (Mitchison 1966: 25).
When she attended the Installation Ceremony in 1963 she 'was interviewed by forty male elders of the tribe […] they approved of Naomi' (Benton 1990: 149).

[4] 'During the 1960s [she] journeyed to Mochudi twice each year, then once a year until [1990]' (Benton 1990: 151).

[5] See Shaw, Sarah (2002b) The short article sets out to 'consider whether [Bessie] Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* [is] a revision of Mitchison's *When We Become Men'* (42). The analysis employs theories from Baudrillard and Nietzsche.

[6] *Ketse and the Chief* (1965); *A Mochudi Family* (1965); *Friends and Enemies* (1966); *African Heroes* (1968); *The Family at Ditlabeng* (1969); *Sun and Moon* (1970); *Sunrise Tomorrow: a story of Botswana* (1973); *The Brave Nurse and other stories* (1977).

[7] In 1973 Mitchison published *A Life for Africa: the story of Bram Fischer,* a biography of the Afrikaner lawyer who defended Nelson Mandela. The biography does not include a preface to the text or any references, and only one of her biographies makes a passing reference to this book. It is therefore difficult to understand how she obtained the materials for the research. The book itself was banned in South Africa and Mitchison was a prohibited immigrant there and in Rhodesia (Benton 1990: 149). It is possible, given the political climate at the time, that details are absent to protect those who may have contributed details for the book and who may have been penalised by the South African government as a result. This text is not strictly a biography, although it does detail the life of Bram Fischer, particularly in the later years acting as a lawyer who defended, amongst others, Nelson Mandela. It is an odd book initially, with the opening pages reading like a work of fiction, describing the landscape in a part of Africa. The opening chapters of the book are undermined by statements such as 'I can only guess' and 'It is possible that' (30) with regard to Fischer's views and motives. We are told that Mitchison's parents hosted Bram and his sister while he was studying in Oxford (Mitchison did not meet him) but there are no specific details. The strength of the text is not grounded in personal biographical details but rather when it documents the context surrounding the growing political unrest

derived from folktales, *Images of Africa* (1980), as well as many articles.[8]

This chapter argues that Botswana encouraged Mitchison to, once again, strive to reinvent herself; she worked to reconcile the dichotomy of being a white British visitor, and simultaneously an insider in her role as advisor to the tribe's Chief during a decade where it transitioned from a colonial to a postcolonial period.[9] In presenting a selection of Mitchison's works, namely *When We Become Men* (1965), *Return to the Fairy Hill* (1966), as well as a brief consideration of *The Africans* (1970) and lesser-known journal articles, the chapter posits that in keeping with Mitchison's previous campaigns, Botswana brought into focus the disparity between her politics and her privileged background, a point which may seem obvious but her role and her writing has largely evaded evaluation. Furthermore, with regards to her political development and socialist outlook, there are clear parallels between Scotland and Botswana; a point Mitchison will be shown to regularly reinforce. Mitchison's writing functioned, in part, to reconcile the contradiction of being Lady Mitchison and Mmarona. Beyond representing the Batswana and aspects of African society in her writing, the texts function to carve out a space for her to speak and validate her place within their community. This chapter proposes that Mitchison's

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under apartheid, and the various political parties and players who sought to counter the injustice of the regime. The text is accessible and functions as an overview to some of the events leading to Fischer's eventual imprisonment. Mitchison states: 'I used to think about Bram Fischer in Botswana with anger and frustration, and yet knowing that because of him the white image in black eyes was a better one. Nothing had been in vain' (181). Her admiration for Nelson Mandela is apparent as she identified him as 'a leader, a symbol, someone to speak about forever' (95).

[8] Mitchison also wrote several articles. She published 48 times in *Kutlwano* which was founded in Botswana. Also in *Transition* which was founded in Uganda in 1961, *African Affairs, Botswana Notes and Records*, and the *Journal of Modern African Studies.*

There are several notebooks that Mitchison kept from her time in Botswana which are held by the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas and at the Borthwick Institute at the University of York. Unfortunately, a combination of Mitchison's handwriting and the fact most are written in pencil, makes the majority very difficult to decipher.

[9] Lloyd points out that her diaries highlight 'once more the desire for community integration and the search for identity present in so many of her actions' (2005: 69).

writing is focused on this duality: on the one hand the writing is a product of the socio-historical context and Mitchison's political and social engagement at the time, in that it was anti-colonial and aimed to promote self-determination in the early years of independence. On the other hand, it can be found guilty, at times, of echoing a colonial discourse in which the white European visitor speaks for the underrepresented and colonial Other who ultimately remain silenced in the background. Mitchison's writing battles with the oppositions of being mother/other, insider/outsider, often placing her identity and role within the tribe at the centre.

Mitchison's writing from the period can be categorised into many genres: fiction, diaries, anthropological studies, political journal articles, and social and cultural history books. In all of these categories, Mitchison grapples with the paradox of her identity which is both insider and outsider. In many of the texts she asserts her close contact with the tribe, her knowledge of them, and shows her ability to explain them – all of which places her in a position of authority. In doing so, Mitchison is not only trying to justify her right to speak for Others, but is conscious that her white skin, and upper-class British background, may have been at odds with the agency she sought to instil for the community. By examining her works in this chapter, I will show the ways in which she uses each medium to position herself in relation to the tribe she speaks for, and the extent to which this is complicated by her consciousness of nationality and skin colour. Botswana brings into focus patterns which have been explored throughout this thesis regarding the difficulties Mitchison faced in reconciling her status and politics, and to cite Phyllis Lassner it 'leads us back to a question that has not been put to rest: who is authorised to represent people unlike

themselves?' (2004: 119).[10] There is no simple answer to this question, but this chapter aims to engage with the way in which the nuances of speaking for others is compounded in the context of postcolonialism, particularly during these formative years where Botswana was emerging as an independent nation after years of being a British Protectorate. Fiction is not dictated by personal experiences nor should the author need to justify their right to explore experiences beyond their own, but when dealing with issues where people have been silenced or subjected, it's important to be sensitive to how those people or cultures are represented. I consider that Mitchison's African writing, while at times progressive and important, often suffered from her didactic tone.

In a review of Warren Howe's *Africans* in a 1958 edition of the *Glasgow Herald*, Mitchison wrote that

> Citizens of Great Britain […] can not only be proud of what we have done for our ex-colonies, but we can hope to go there as technicians, educators or even as traders, and be made welcome. Africa is essentially a friendly, warm-hearted place, if it is approached in a friendly and warmed-hearted way (NLS Acc. 8503/10).

Tellingly Mitchison criticises Howe for being 'violently pro-African, to an extent which, if I was an African, I might find embarrassing' (ibid.). As this chapter will demonstrate, when Mitchison herself became involved in Botswana, her works could subject her to the same criticism.

Yet, as Mitchison's involvement developed she proved herself a dedicated advisor, just as she had been in Carradale, and explored how politics and culture could best function for the community. She initially romanticised the country and hoped, as she had done with Carradale, that the tribe might be a classless society.

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[10] Lassner cites Micere Githae-Mugo who echoes Chinua Achebe: 'the only "portrayal of fellow-Kenyans" that has "depth…is likely only to come from a native son"' (Lassner 2004: 119).

However, as Mitchison became more involved with the community she realigned this idealism to consider how the tribal structure could negotiate a place in a postcolonial and capitalist world. In this regard, her political trajectory reflected her time in Scotland in that her political involvement increasingly dealt with the practicalities of education, questioning of how decentralisation might best work for the community, and I will outline this in reference to several non-fictional texts.

Beginning with an analysis of her novel *When We Become Men* (1965) I demonstrate her return to exploring the dynamic between characters living through political oppression and uncertainty, negotiating a place within the community in order to assert a form of political and social self-determination. In this regard, it follows on from the previous novels discussed. I will consider the way in this novel, and in some of her other texts, Mitchison strove to write herself into the narrative, justifying her role and right to represent the Batswana. I will also consider the way in which her political writings show a development and shift which was sympathetic to the postcolonial context of the time, and which attended to the values of self-determination whilst recognising the need for internationalism and cooperation. Kwame Anthony Appiah's useful definition of 'cosmopolitanism' as 'universality plus difference' seems to complement Mitchison's internationalist outlook as a 'citizen of the world' in this latter stage in her career (2007: 151; xvi). Mitchison moved further away from political parties and ideologies to focus on the importance of autonomy for small cultures and societies and the benefit to societies on a global scale.

When We Become Men: the outsider in the tribe

Mitchison first visited the tribe in 1963 when it was still part of Bechuanaland – a British Protectorate. These initial years living among the tribe enabled Mitchison to witness an important and transitional period in the country's history as it moved from a colonial to post-colonial nation. In 1965, Seretse Khama (who was part of the Royal family of the Bamangwato tribe) became elected as the country's first President, and in the following year independence was gained resulting in the country being renamed Botswana.

Botswana gained liberation from British administration but was implicated with neighbouring South Africa, and occupied a difficult position both geographically and politically during the era of apartheid.[11] The impact of refugees, for instance, was a central concern at the time. Mitchison's novel, *When We Become Men* (1965), which was her first novel based on her experiences of the tribe directly engages with these concerns. Written in haste during her initial visits to the tribe in 1963, the novel is set in a tribe in Botswana with a refugee from South Africa as its main protagonist. Isaac is an outsider who is initially sceptical of the tribe which he sees as antithetical to his life as part of the apartheid resistance. While Isaac sees himself as an active participant in instigating change, the tribe is viewed by him as a regressive and outdated hierarchy:

> He felt dead scared of these tribal people who didn't know that, in the end, he was fighting for them. For their rights, for freedom and democracy, against the old witch doctors and chiefs! They'd know by his voice, by the remains of his clothes, even, that he was a stranger, and so someone to be got rid of. They didn't know the meaning of the word

[11] Linchwe's tribe occupied a precarious position which 'straddle[d] the colonially imposed international border between Botswana and South Africa', which was not only 'physically porous, because it was sparsely patrolled, but also ideologically porous. The lives of members of Bakgatla society transcended the demarcation in many ways, the deepest being kinship networks, family links and temporary flows and migrations. Older residents in Mochudi recall many Bakgatla who were resident in Botswana regularly travelling to South Africa for work, usually living there for nine months in every year. The territorial distinction and the frontier made little practical or ideological difference to Linchwe's chiefly authority' (Cantwell 2015: 258).

> freedom: his word. How could they know, tied down the way they were, tied down by their own wish, worse than being bossed over by whites. He felt himself inside hating them (Mitchison 1965: 12–13).

As with many other of her books, Mitchison considered that it might be her 'best' (1966: 71). Although the preface claimed that the work was entirely fictional, Mitchison admitted to blurring fact with fiction in her own mind.[12] Evidently, Mitchison returned to using personal experiences to inform her fiction, and for that reason it is perhaps not surprising that the novel is set in a tribe in Botswana or that one of the central characters, Letlotse, is a young law student in Britain who returns to take on his role as Chief – just as Linchwe II had done. The novel mirrors some of Mitchison's earlier works in that it deals with the theme of conflicting loyalties set against the backdrop of colonialism and imperialism. Isaac is initially distrustful of the tribal community and annoyed to learn that the Chief's son is 'at a University in England' (28). He resents Letlotse, with his 'savage' name, being given such opportunities (29). Indeed, he argues that the privileged lives of the Chief and his family 'is exploitation' and a 'class' issue (29). However, the tribe has provided him safety as a fugitive which he reluctantly accepts knowing he has little choice. In the course of the novel he develops a relationship and eventually marries the Chief's cousin, Tselane. At the end of the novel, he is officially initiated into the tribe, through the traditional ceremony – mophato – and shows respect and understanding for what

[12] The novel is prefaced with the following statement: 'I would like to state most definitely that all people and situations in this book, as well as the two main towns, are entirely imaginary. The only exceptions are the real people who appear momentarily under their own names in chapter 22' (1965). Yet, despite this in *Return to the Fairy Hill* she admits that 'everything was tied up in it; I mixed Mochudi with Ditlabeng so that I said Ditlabeng when I meant Mochudi. I tried very hard not to mix the people: to keep Letlotse and Linchwe separate in my mind […] Yet, the whole ambience was the same' (1966: 69). There is nothing wrong with Mitchison's experiences influencing her fiction, but to state so unequivocally that the novel was 'entirely imaginary' is false. Her historical fiction set in worlds she never entered could be described in this way, but not this contemporary novel, and certainly not when she admits the influence only a year later in her diary.

the tribe represents, claiming that the tribe has a 'moral order'. In contrast, in South Africa: 'it was still an order of fighting and perhaps before one could think of such things as happiness, one had to think of courage and steadfastness, the virtues of war, of the old moral order of tribes. The war that was still there, out in the Republic, that must go on happening' (229). In the end Isaac is pulled between two commitments and loyalties, and he chooses to leave his new family in the tribe to go and fight in the Republic.

Mitchison's novel returns to confront how people reconcile differences in communities and the extent to which they will fight – literally and metaphorically – in order to gain autonomy. In many ways, the novel is a repetition of Mitchison's earlier works *The Conquered* and *We Have Been Warned* in that it depicts protagonists torn between opposing political sides and struggling to find the best approach to gain autonomy. While Mitchison declared herself a pacifist, her politics forced her to confront whether violence might be necessary. In the case of Botswana and the apartheid regime in neighbouring South Africa, it was apparent why such a desperate situation evoked questions over the justification of 'resistance'. In the novel, while the brutalities of apartheid are never directly confronted, Isaac's decision to return to the Republic is presented as a necessary step towards progress. Just as the Chief must guide his community, Isaac views his role in the resistance as a necessary means of disrupting the regime. While Isaac initially resents the tribe believing that they are sheltered from apartheid, Isaac comes to recognise the values and sense of community which the tribe instils. He considers that perhaps 'most kinds of society are too big for this', and the tribe seems to represent a political structure based on local input and

autonomy, within the wider framework of the nation. The tribe, then, is shown to be an institution worth preserving.

Mitchison's novel engages with central concerns for the Batswana and the tribe at this time. The tribe was a structure which was sympathetic to her political vision: a small community which created a structure and system of order, within the much wider political organisation of Botswana as a whole. Like *The Bull Calves*, in this novel Mitchison places value on localised communities in having a positive impact for the nation. There are unquestionably 'lumps and bumps' in Mitchison's novel, but her choice of subject matter proactively engaged with the political and social problems affecting the Batswana at the time.[13]

At the end of the novel Isaac and Letlotse meet and discuss their individual concerns, with Letlotse having to sacrifice completing his education in Europe to fulfil his role as Chief, and Isaac having to leave his new family in the tribe to return to fight for his causes in South Africa. Isaac has transformed from a sceptic to being an initiated member of the tribe, and he sees in Letlotse: 'someone younger than himself and troubled, the kind of young man who comes into politics perhaps out of a mission school with all his old assumptions and values cracking under him and the new one not yet found' (222). Letlotse admits he is uncertain and is ambivalent with regard to wanting to fulfil his role as Chief, but also wanting to live his own life and complete his education. He laments: 'I would have liked to get a degree, very much indeed. Now I have to go back in time […] I have to go back to all this at my Installation, to the leopard skin and the assegai, but I can only do it with half of me. The other half wants

[13] Jenni Calder contends that 'the novel's fabric is not without its lumps and bumps and frayed patches. The characterization and the narrative are both strong, yet at times it founders as Naomi strives to pull together more arguments and illustrations that the plot can sustain' (1997: 259).

to be civilised' (223). This statement which equates the tribe as oppositional to 'civilisation' is countered by Isaac, who used to hold the same belief:

> It is possible to be a chief and be civilised. I think, for instance, of Khama. He was of his time, but he had great ideas. But for him, perhaps our country would have been given away, given to Rhodes and the adventurers. If that happened, we of the Batswana would have been a bit of Rhodesia, perhaps even a bit of the Republic. But Khama stopped it (223).

The passage shows Isaac's progression and understanding of the tribe, and also the pressures faced by the young Chief. But, problematically, it implies that Letlotse does not have the acumen to see this for himself. Despite his education, it is Isaac the 'outsider' who is able to provide objectivity and explain how the tribe could progress. This passage could be considered patronising for in spite of Letlotse being part of a generation of tribal leaders, and who has been afforded the opportunity of education, he still requires an outsider to show the best direction for the future. By focalising the text predominantly through Isaac, we fail to get a rounded version of Letlotse. The content of the above passage shows the anxiety of the young Chief on taking on the responsibility for the tribe – a role into which he was not elected but born: 'I would like to do good. But I also want a little freedom, not always to be tied by the old men, by precedents, by this thick smothering blanket of the past!' (223). Letlotse is not given space in the novel to explore these tensions, although Mitchison would detail them in her non-fictional writing, and I will come to detail these.[14] Within the novel the choice to focalise primarily through Isaac gives credence to his

[14] The term 'civilised' is laden with negative connotations, particularly within a colonial context, in which the 'civilising mission' was used as justification for imperial control. This connotation manifests itself by placing Isaac as the knowledgeable outsider. Surely, the Chief who has been afforded an education and travelled beyond his community, would have also learned some lessons and gained perspectives on the world? Letlotse's use of the word and his frustration suggest that civilisation used in this context means not being bound to the past and open to new ideas. We know from Mitchison's diary that this was something Linchwe was conscious of, and so it is reasonable that her protagonist might depict these anxieties.

perspective as an outsider and refugee, and less space is given to understand Letlotse's viewpoint. When the Chief does feature he fails to have the depth Isaac has in the novel. Jenni Calder has argued that Linchwe is 'barely disguised, as Letlotse' (Calder 1997: 245); what I contend is that it seems that Isaac is barely disguised as Mitchison in this section - the outsider speaking to a Chief who she sees as young, naïve and anxious about the future. While I am conscious not to blur fiction and reality, Mitchison undoubtedly drew upon personal experiences to inform her work. In a personal letter she explains her approach to writing this novel, and her pride in depicting the Batswana:

> It is like having got hold of a real Spartan or inhabitant of Marob to tell one if one was right […] So if I am right about the Batswana I am justified in my historical methods and perhaps the ancient world was as I have shown it. […] I am using whatever tool it was that I used for getting inside the past but now I am getting inside the Africans (Calder 1997: 258).

The comparison Mitchison makes is an interesting one; by choosing to contrast characters from her historical fiction to the tribe, she implies a type of anthropological study in which an ancient and dead society is reclaimed and represented. Mitchison's role as an author here verges on that of an anthropologist in which she packages and presents 'Africans' for her readership. Mitchison equates her ability to research and write historical fiction as being able to get 'inside the Africans' – a statement which reduces the complexities of a vast continent to one which is singular and homogenous. While Mitchison's position is arguably coming from a place of good intentions, in which she aimed to present a truthful and accurate depiction of the tensions affecting the tribe and the refugee crisis, this boastful comment removes some of that agency. This argument concurs with Jenni Calder's assertion that in many ways this novel was prompted by Mitchison's own 'impulsive,

immediate reactions to the newly-discovered territory of Bechuanaland' and that it was a 'territorial marker. By writing these books she made real her identity as a Mokgatla' (Calder 1997: 256).[15]

Presenting the Batswana as a group to be reclaimed and represented is in danger of objectifying the community as an anthropological study. The use of language in the novel, and at times the tone, sits awkwardly within the narrative: 'Funny the way Africans have to build their own schools, but white children's schools get paid for by the Government – buildings, teachers, pencils, jotters and all […] But who are the richest?' (Mitchison 1965: 152). At times the attempt to depict the rhythms of the voices of the Batswana can impinge on the text and leave the characters sounding uneducated and simplistic, which detracts from their views and opinions. Isaac states: 'We are civilised. We Africans. Africans must be better than whites' (Mitchison 1965: 138). The removal of 'are' in the second sentence, when it appears in the first, is an example of this and it lowers the register.

The depiction of African voices is particularly marked in contrast with the third person narrator, and white characters, whose speech is presented in Standard English. Within the novel there are only a couple of white characters, who are represented fleetingly: the English District Commissioner, and the Scottish volunteer teacher, Dougal. The Commissioner is depicted as law abiding, and as a liberal and valued confidant to the old Chief. Mitchison's personal politics at times seem to be voiced through this character who is able to 'explain' things to the Chief. For instance, when Isaac and Josh are first found he argues that to call the men 'terrorists' is inaccurate and that 'it is normal to shelter such people' (1965: 21). He

[15] Referring to *Return to the Fairy Hill*, Calder states that it is 'a book about Naomi at a turning point in her life, rather than a book about Botswana' (Calder 1997: 260).

stands in contrast to the Chief's intolerant nephew, but it also paints a picture of an ineffectual Chief having to be guided by others. The other white character, Dougal, is a shy and well-meaning man, with a name which means 'Black Stranger' (the name echoes that of Black William in *The Bull Calves*, and also reinforces a kindred relationship between the Highlands and Scotland which Mitchison did in other works). The white characters in the novel are literally only given a line or two of dialogue, and feature very briefly. Mitchison is keen to show white characters who are working within the tribe and African communities to contribute to education and development.

In a novel whose main protagonist is a refugee escaping the apartheid regime, the complexity of race relations are largely overlooked. Isaac refers to 'the animal smell of whites' (10) and Letlotse comments on a white waitress: 'I do not like their smell unless they wear scent […] without it they smell of cats' (77). This is echoed by the narrator who focalises the view of the white characters who: 'were vaguely uneasy, looking at the slightly different forehead and nose and lips, monkeyish, wasn't it?' (69). It is revealing that Mitchison chooses to engage with the difference between the races in such a reductive way in the novel. Tellingly, Mitchison voices a similar view in a book review, thus the view was probably not intentionally reductive.[16]

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[16] In 1953 Mitchison reviewed *In The Castle of My Skin* by George Lamming, *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers and *Return To Goli* by Peter Abrahams, stating: 'Three books that seem to be among the most significant of those that have appeared in the last few months: a common theme – and what an odd one, if one can look at it objectively! Some people in this one little world of our's have skin varying in colour from a lucent black to something several shades lighter than the average Highland fisherman; with that goes black hair, sometimes frizzy, several different types of facial conformation and a smell slightly different (and often less unpleasant) than that of Europeans and others of European ancestry. What a funny thing to make such a fuss about! But fuss there is. Fundamentally the same fuss that male trade unionists make when women want to have the same wages as themselves. But even the most conservative old trade unionist doesn't forbid inter-marriage with the rebellious women! And if we aren't very careful that fuss will lead to a situation which will

Within Mitchison's novel there is no scope to look beyond the superficial observations between her white and non-white characters to counter these reductive perceptions which are focused on the issues of 'colour of skin, shape of nose' which Chinua Achebe warns against (Phillips 2003). The problem is that Mitchison fails to explore the reasons for these tensions or reductive viewpoints in more detail. For instance, it would not be unusual for a novel to describe the distinctive smell of an individual – perhaps a positive one based on perfume. But in this novel, Mitchison squanders the limited contact between black and white characters and presents a superficial judgement of difference based on appearance only. Take the fact that the characters do not refer to the smell of an individual but of an entire grouping which risks being reductive and overlooks the important issues to be addressed with regards to inherent racism. By grouping all people of a particular race by smell, for instance, seems to debase them and to view their relationship in animalistic terms – it is not a meeting of minds, thoughts or equality.[17] And this is a problem which does not only arise in the novel, there are times in *Return to the Fairy Hill* where Mitchison echoes her characters; when meeting black African visitors in Edinburgh she states 'it was so nice to smell them again' (1966: 73) - not to see them, talk to them, hug them, but rather smell them. Despite the positive themes in her novel, in the non-fictional *Return to the Fairy Hill*, there are several uncomfortable passages which expose the incongruence between Mitchison's Scottish and African life, and her desperation to reconcile the two.

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make the present cold war look like universal brotherhood. When is a black not black? When he's a red' (NLS Acc.8503/6).

[17] 'Even the dear Adams family were strangers, smelt different' – Mitchison referring to a white family with whom she stayed with in Africa (1966: 65).

Lady Mitchison, I Presume? Bridging the gap between Scotland and Africa

On several occasions, Mitchison compared the tribe to the Highlands and Scotland.[18] Mitchison justified her place in Botswana by emphasising that the economic and cultural issues affecting the Highlands were comparable with Botswana, in some ways. Her experiences in instigating change in Scotland could be learned from and applied to Botswana and, significantly, it helped close the gap between her life in Scotland and her life in Africa. Like Scotland, Botswana made her question her identity and purpose as a writer, as well as emphasising the value of self-determination. Just as Mitchison had been aware of her outsider status in Carradale and worked to 'reinvent' herself, she also worked to justify her place and right to speak as a member of the Bakgatla. Where class had previously been an issue for Mitchison when trying to prove her 'solidarity', it was the politics of colonialism and race in Botswana, and particularly neighbouring South Africa, where the dichotomy of being both Lady Mitchison and a Mokgatla was apparent. Where her upper-middle-class status could have previously been deemed paradoxical to her socialism, in the climate of postcolonialism and Pan-Africanism, her white skin made her very conscious about how apposite it was for her to speak for the Batswana. Indeed, due

[18] 'We Scots should draw the direct parallel between our own history and that of the Africans in the Republic. In the days when Wallace was dead, after torture perhaps no worse than a systematic modern police "investigation," when Robert the Bruce was hunted, nearly captured half a dozen times, there must have been plenty to say it was all hopeless. Better give in to the English. In the same sense it is hopeless for the Africans struggling against their white masters […] Yet there were enough Scots who stood together to "fight only for freedom which no good man surrenders but with his life." There are and will be enough Africans. We can only give them moral support; we can disbelieve what their oppressors say about them; we can practise economic boycott; we can support the United Nations in its protests against apartheid and condemn apartheid whenever we see it. In the name of Wallace and Bruce, let us do so (1963, unpaginated). Press cutting can be found at NLS 28/05/07 ACC. 8503/16. Lloyd (2005: 85-91) also identifies this in her reading of Mitchison's *Other People's Worlds* (1958).

to apartheid, speaking out as a Mokgatla and aligning with the tribe came with consequences, resulting in her being a Prohibited Immigrant in South Africa.[19]

Botswana gave Mitchison a renewed sense of purpose and value. In the initial years of visiting the tribe she reflected:

> I knew quite well that I felt myself at one time committed to Scotland, to the dream of Alba. The reality of working for Scotland had got rid of most of that, though occasionally I still got a breath of it. Possibly the same thing would happen here. Reality of Africans might kill the dream of Africa […] But I became more and more afraid that it was blotting out other necessary sympathies; I began to judge people by their attitude to my touchstone and that was all wrong (Mitchison 1966: 68–69).

Mitchison had become disillusioned with politics over the years but the tribe renewed Mitchison's enthusiasm. As Doris Lessing observed: 'there's something that cries out in you to be fed […] and that's why you are now Linchwe's mother and mother of the tribe' (NLS Acc. 10307/1, letter from Doris Lessing, dated 23 July 1964).

Return to the Fairy Hill (1966) was one of the earliest texts influenced by her experiences in Botswana. It is a non-fictional text which was derived from Mitchison's diary and documented her initial experiences of the tribe, and in many parts Mitchison reflects on what 'cried out in her to be fed' and why the role was so significant for her. It aimed to show that her role was not nominal, but it was also about the need to 'know' her subject, to write 'authentically' and to prove her 'solidarity' – she was not just a visitor and advisor, she was one of the tribe, which was also a trait in her earlier writings.[20] Helen Lloyd addresses the fact that the

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[19] After refusing to adhere to the apartheid rules Mitchison records that 'I have this funny little document from the Government of the Republic of South Africa which will stop me going even as far as Mafeking; I take it as a compliment' (1966: 34).

[20] Consider her choice to go in disguise into slums during the 1930s; her clandestine trip to Vienna during the Civil War; the decision to write a History of Scotland and to document the fishermen in Carradale.

'recent re-evaluation of travel writing in terms of post-colonial theory has […] highlight[ed] an uneasy and potentially suspect relationship with colonial and imperialist discourses' arguing that this 'holds particular relevance' when reading Mitchison's work from her perspective as 'western, aristocratic, and educated' (2005: 72). Lloyd points out the overlap between travel writing and autobiography arguing that in the latter 'the self that is portrayed is set against a background of cultural difference' (73). In *Return to the Fairy Hill* this is even more palpable due to Mitchison's initiation into the tribe as adopted tribal mother; she is not just a visitor trying to blend in, she is trying to write as a Mokgatla. Mitchison is not simply a tourist and her role highlights the need for her to show her knowledge of her new 'family' in order for her position as advisor to be justified. In the opening pages Mitchison establishes her remit for the book:

> To write about the people of Bechuanaland and especially the Bakgatla. And also to write a study of commitment. This would be my own commitment to the Bakgatla, my own tribe, and through them Bechuanaland; it would also be their commitment to me. A clinical study of commitment by a highly conscious writer is doubtless of some value in itself. But the reaction of those to whom the commitment was made is much more important (Mitchison 1966: 1).

The repetition of 'commitment' exposes what is at the heart of this text: it is about Mitchison proving herself in her new role. Moreover, it is about showing that as a white, British woman, she had become accepted and integrated into the tribe. Mitchison states that: 'if I could show the mechanics of a completely non-racial relationship, of mutual love between a Scots intellectual and an African tribe, I might help solve a world problem' (1966: 1). While Mitchison may have been trying to convey a positive message in this preface, it is undermined by her confidence or, at

best, naivety, that in documenting her life among the tribe she might eradicate racial discrimination.[21]

Return to the Fairy Hill (1966) is presented as an anthropological study introducing the reader to the Bakgatla, explaining some of the geography, history, education and agriculture. The book is punctuated with details of Mitchison's time there where she discussed education and politics, but the text does not always explain things to the reader, who are left wondering about the people she talks about. There is not a clear chronology in the book, and it can be difficult to get a sense of what was going on in the tribe.[22] Rather, it is about Mitchison documenting how her time was spent during these early years, often dealing with education, but significantly it was about how she was negotiating a space for herself in this new tribe and in this new role. As she emphasises in the preface, it is about her 'commitment' which might be interpreted as her need to prove that her title was not a token gesture but purposeful.

We learn that Mitchison was initially invited to the tribe in 1963, having no idea that she would be attending Linchwe's Installation, or that she would be established as mother and advisor. It is surprising to learn, then, that during this first visit Mitchison helped Linchwe write his formative installation speech, particularly based on Mitchison's limited knowledge of the tribe, its customs or history at this

[21] Of course, it is positive to do want to do so, but Mitchison seems oblivious that the first president of Botswana, Sir Seretse Khama was married to a white British woman, or that her friend, Peggy, was married to Joe Appiah, who were also a prominent inter-racial couple recognised in Ghana and internationally. Mitchison was therefore by no means the first, or most influential example of how inter-racial relationships could exist. Peggy Appiah (neé Cripps) was the daughter of Mitchison's friend, Stafford Cripps. Mitchison mentions Peggy in *Return to the Fairy Hill* (1966) and compares their relationships as white British females and their role in Africa. 'Only those directly involved in Africa felt as I did and even so it had to be a love involvement. Peggy […] felt as I did' (1966: 73).

[22] See Helen Lloyd's thesis which cites a letter from Doris Lessing to Mitchison giving her feedback on her novel (2005: 227).

point. In the diary she states: 'it would not be right to say the whole thing was his, and yet it was certainly not mine' (1966: 40). Mitchison admits that some parts are 'recognisably Naomi Mitchison' (40) and states that it took three lines to explain 'classlessness' (41), a concept which Mitchison uses to describe an idealised community where class divisions don't exist. Because *Return to the Fairy Hill* is part diary, part anthropology, we only hear Mitchison's perspective. The reader only gets glimpses of the other side in the relationship, even though her remit is to show 'the workings of a non-racial relationship'. Overall, the tribe and even Linchwe are a silent and elusive subject matter. We only get Mitchison's perspective, and this is part of the issue. In a text which aims to show the dynamics of her relationship with the tribe, we only ever see things from Mitchison's view point. We only ever hear Mitchison being paid compliments, while she has the advantage of venting her frustrations regarding the negative traits of others, including Linchwe. Indeed, while this chapter aims to redress the absence of critical discussion on Mitchison's works, it is important to recognise the difficulty in piecing together a more complex image of how Mitchison was regarded, and how her works were received.

Throughout the book Mitchison outlines several hopes for the tribe and the future in Botswana, by promoting education and healthcare. She emphasises that the tribe is not a 'relic' or 'tourist attraction' (1966: 7) but an important political and social structure which is a 'flexible concept'; all ideas found in the installation speech. Mitchison viewed the tribe as being able to shape Botswana's future, as it was grounded in a form of democracy which was, in her view, not yet tainted by individualism or capitalism. The structure of the tribe as a self-contained organisation within the wider community of Botswana is something which Mitchison

saw as pertinent to resisting centralisation.[23] In her final chapter she reiterates: 'let me emphasise again: the tribe need not be static […] is this compatible with a 'modern' political and administrative system? I think so' (220–221). However, she admits that she is unsure about the 'future' and argues that 'over some kinds of administration and organisation nothing less than world government makes sense. Over others, nothing larger than the island, the clan or the tribe' (222).

But beyond the potential for the tribe, the book grapples with her identity in this role. The chapter 'A Year out of Time' is particularly personal when she reflects on the initial visit to the tribe and its impact on her. She recalls how 'violently happy' she was, how 'everything became more clearly apprehended, more full of light' after her time spent in Botswana (68), but this euphoria is starkly contrasted when she states:

> It was a state of Grace; like all states of Grace, it was totally undeserved. It was gratis and it meant that one was dedicating all one's work in the way that a really good Christian can dedicate his or her work. […] I had become completely, alarmingly and joyfully committed; and I knew this was all wrong […] But I became more and more afraid that it was blotting out other necessary sympathies; I began to judge people by their attitude to my touchstone and that was all wrong (68–69).

Mitchison recognised the way in which her new role was influencing her outlook. She felt guilty about it eclipsing other aspects of her life, but she also relays guilt that such a position should be so enjoyable stating that: 'What was much harder to take was that so far apparently what I had to do was not hard or hurting; it was instead delightful' (79). Mitchison goes on to claim that 'It didn't seem fair that I should be doing something which should be a kind of atonement, a kind of crucifixion, and that

[23] 'The tribe is an enormously complex society, held together or parted by a thousand tensions which I only begin to see. Compared with this, an individualist, free-for-all modern capitalist society is too simple for words' (1966: 127).

instead I found myself back in the Garden of Eden' (ibid). Mitchison could be dramatic in her writing, but the biblical references here are hyperbolic even for her. Mitchison does not state it explicitly, but the sins which are to be 'atoned' seem to be grounded in guilt about her white upper-class background. While Mitchison tones down the biblical references*, Return to the Fairy Hill* shows Mitchison repeatedly framing her narrative through this lens of punishment and sacrifice.[24] In one instance she records cutting her hand with a knife and then shaking Linchwe's hand in order to prove her solidarity. She becomes fixated with proving herself; after cutting herself she wrote: 'I didn't bother with disinfectant, being secure in my own mind that Kgosi's hand on it would heal' (1966: 54).

At times she sought desperately to deny any differences between herself and the tribe, and she embarrassed those around her by attempting to act in a way which she thought pertained to behaviour of the tribe:

> Sometimes Naomi over-reacted and made others uncomfortable. Didon Faber remembers the embarrassment caused by her rubbing noses when she greeted Africans. Others have commented on her exaggerated gestures in the symbolic juxtaposition of black and white skin, her hand on an African hand. Yet it was probably Europeans who were made uncomfortable by these, in their eyes, misjudged actions. The Batswana accepted them, if sometimes with amusement, because fundamentally the British were odd and unpredictable by definition (Calder 1997: 251–252).

Mitchison's repeated insistence that there were no differences between herself and the tribe achieves the opposite result and reveals her acute awareness of their differences. She recalls boarding a plane 'to Salisbury in a plane full of whites. And

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[24] 'I knew this was pure idiocy that the one essential was to keep out of war; I had said so with all my force […] I am against war, all wars. I know I should probably find it very hard to kill anyone myself. I also knew that if this should happen, it would be no clean, easy death […] I would not die heroically in Linchwe's arms. He would be the one to be killed. I would be taken prisoner by the whites and treated as a traitor […] My brother saw it in me, and wrote that I had better not make Linchwe into Kleomenes' (1966: 70).

I didn't like them; I wasn't one of them. […] At last I came across James Baldwin's articles in *The New Yorker*. They made sense, they were about my people. I wrote to him later but he didn't reply, he probably thought I was another silly white' (Mitchison 1966: 65–66).[25] Mitchison distinguishes herself as an individual who is different to the other 'whites'. In contrast, she homogenises her 'people' with all people of African descent. While she recognises that skin colour did not equate to common cause or experience, she fails to fully grasp the limitations of her view: 'I wanted very much to talk to the Africans in the London streets, but hardly ever did; one didn't know for certain where they came from, they might have been West Indians. […] Only once in Trafalgar Square I shouted God Save Africa' (Mitchison 1966: 69).

In his book, *Racism,* Albert Memmi delineates the way in which racism exists and remains pervasive. Memmi points out that, of course, 'the description of a difference does not constitute racism; it constitutes a description' but acknowledges that 'such descriptions can be used by racism in its attacks' (2000: 36). In an example Memmi demonstrates the subtleties between those who recognise difference but in doing so delineates that such an awareness only becomes racist when 'the deployment of difference [is used] to denigrate the other' (37). Discussing difference in the context of colonialism Memmi recognises that in relation to the colonists and the colonized, 'both sides […] had been wrong. Both had fundamentally supposed

[25] In the climate of Pan-Africanism, perhaps Mitchison felt Baldwin's work was directly related to the lives of those living in the tribe. But Baldwin wrote in his autobiographical notes that: 'I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe' in the context of exploring his own dilemma with his identity. (1955: 7).
Helen Lloyd in her thesis exploring the autobiographical work of Mitchison, considers *Return to the Fairy Hill* (1966). She posits that such denials of her background 'from the white western world […] is so marked that a form of reverse racism begins to creep into her writing' (2005: 92).

that it was bad to be different' (45). At times, this complicated negotiation is found in Mitchison's writing. While conscious to proving her loyalty, to be deemed trustworthy, and not racist, she occasionally denies this difference. Living in such close proximity to the apartheid regime, which had justified difference based on skin colour, meant that this, of course, had to be vehemently opposed. But perhaps in her choice to deliberately reinforce her stance against this, there is a reluctance to recognise any differences which inevitably would have existed between cultures and individuals. Indeed, Mitchison's skin colour and background undoubtedly shaped her experiences – the very reasons she had been able to travel so freely, and write so openly. Mitchison strives to create a bond between herself and the tribe and the Chief: 'It had been decided that I was truly his mother, perhaps even closer' (1966: 57). These claims do not always demonstrate her value as a member of the tribe and verge on undermining her.[26] Mitchison claims there were subtle 'tests' to question her motives and her role as mother and prides herself having 'never [known] they were tests and, acting by instinct without thought, passed them easily' (1966: 40). At times, this reinforcement of her innate connection to Linchwe and the tribe reveals itself in rather romanticised ways: 'I was fairly sure that he saw himself as a philosopher king and me as his Plato' (43).[27] The elevated sense of self and her integration into the tribe is mixed up with her role as a writer of fiction, and she wrote to Henry Treece marvelling in her ability to accurately depict the Batswana:

> I had basically used the same methods I have used in all my historical novels: a combination of research and imaginative sympathy towards the

[26] 'No doubt some of the tribe think of Mma-Mitchison as a kind of magic old Granny who can produce everything and knows all the answers. Others think of me even more vaguely as the white woman who stays with the Chief. Those who take their hats off and greet meet as kgabo think of me essentially as the Chief's mother, part of him' (1966: 194).

[27] 'Even if now I was only the Winter Queen, I was with my Corn King – but no, he was the Rain King […] But the Fairy Hill was Marob, my place imagined over half a century, now real' (1966: 52).

> characters and their historical situations. But there was never a Gaul or Spartan to ask if one had got it right, and I had begun to feel less and less certain of my reconstructions – the more praise I got the more I felt guilty, in case I'd got it wrong and misled the seekers for knowledge. But if *When We Become Men* was genuinely about the Batswana so that they genuinely recognized themselves, then it would show that I was justified in my working methods. It would mean that ancient history was perhaps something like I had imagined. And also it would be my gift of a pick and shovel towards the barrier-breaking between cultures that has to happen (76).

While Mitchison may have been confident in her role as an author of fiction, the reality of her role as mother and advisor brought her own identity into focus, [28] and beneath the conceited statements, it was evident that she struggled to reconcile her identity as Lady Mitchison and Mmarona:

> Sometimes, of course, looking back at my tribe from London or Scotland, I think angrily that all they want, all their apparently solidarity with me, is only that they are after certain kinds of material help which I am likely to get for them, so long as they are, so to speak kidding me on. But I think this is not a correct assessment. In a sense it is too complicated. In fact it is just not so. If I put it in it is because I want to be truthful (192–193).

Ironically, in a book which is meant to detail Mitchison's role as advisor and mother and prove her commitment she seems to have overlooked her value. She is so focused on proving that she is not like other white people that there are lapses in her rational thinking as she forgets that 'it was precisely the fact that she was white and well-connected that enhanced her value in Botswana' (Calder 1997: 251–252).[29] Doris Lessing echoes this point and advised Mitchison that Linchwe and the tribe

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[28] 'To try to label the ways Mitchison constructed her identity within the texts as either colonial or anti-colonial would be too simplistic. Her life in Africa was a constant negotiation between her conflicting loyalties, the inextricable links of her cultural background, and the tribe which claimed her as mother, and accepted her as their own. As such, *Return to the Fairy Hill* is a complicated medication between these two poles, pivoting, as did her whole life on her one "unresolvable contradiction"' (Lloyd 2005: 96, citing Benton 1990: 153).

[29] Helen Lloyd echoes this 'It is a painful paradox of Mitchison's position that while she wishes to be integrated into the tribe, it is her unassailable differences, her colour, culture and wealth (and through these, her ability to help) that make her presence there possible in the first place' (2005: 94).

may well have wanted to take advantage of her, in a manner which was more opportunistic rather than exploitative, because 'we are the fortunate of the world' (Lloyd 2005: 225). She also points out that 'Of course on one level with the tribe, they 'use' you. Why not? You have asked for it and invited it. But on another level they love you' (Lloyd 2005: 26). This fact is exposed by Mitchison who talked of the classless society in Botswana, just as she had in Carradale, but in the diary she admitted her place was among the elites and the educated in the tribe and Batswana. So, too, she aligns herself with the men, which she had always done and, in part, this is also down to class and education: 'It is clear that my real contact in the tribe is with the elite, the educated. With them I can discuss anything, remembering that, as with, for instance, some of my best-loved Highland colleagues, it is pointless to discuss the latest literary of cultural fashions of the London-Paris or Oxbridge set up' (1966: 120). Indeed, Mitchison's connections in Africa, staying with prominent politicians and being looked after by District Commissioners exposes this.[30]

Arguably, by writing a partly anthropological text based on her experiences, Mitchison tries to justify her ability to speak on behalf of the Batswana, and it is genre which by its nature objectifies its human subject. In her paper, 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', Linda Alcoff notes that within anthropological studies questions are being raised over the ethical grounds on which the study and documentation of peoples is based:

> In anthropology there is also much discussion going on about whether it is possible to adequately or justifiably speak for others. Trinh T. Minh-ha explains the grounds for scepticism when she says that anthropology is 'mainly a conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them', of the white man with the white man about the primitive-nature man…in which 'them' is silenced. 'Them' always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and

[30] Mitchison admitted that Linchwe 'has probably read and made more sense of more political and economic theory than I have' (1966: 72).

> speechless…'them' is only admitted among 'us' the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by an 'us' (Alcoff 1991/1992: 1).

Return to the Fairy Hill (1966) focuses on her role, her identity, and carves space to explain her understanding of the tribe and by extension her justification to represent them as speak for them. During her time in Botswana Mitchison repeatedly includes prefaces or explanations in her writing which function not only as an informative preamble but a place for Mitchison to justify – partly to herself – her ability to speak on behalf of the tribe:

> I pay tax in Mochudi, the capital of my tribe; I am irrevocably a Mokgatla – that is one of the Kgatla people – and because of that I count myself de facto, if not de jure, a Motswana. This means I have obligations and loyalties to my title, which may sometimes, in some ways, conflict with my loyalties as a British citizen. But it also means, I think, that I have learnt to slip into an African skin, to think and feel as an African, to have it said to me lovingly: 'I cannot think of you as white.' Yet remember, all writers are shape-changers or, if you like, so strung that they can play tunes in all modes. The ancients knew this, honouring their bards or griots or prophets, expecting them to tell the truth about situations into which ordinary people were too hurried or scared to enter. Perhaps we are all one (Mitchison 1968: 7).[31]

The notion of 'shape-shifting' is an important one. Mitchison is right to acknowledge that as a writer she can depict worlds and lives beyond her own experiences. It becomes problematic when Mitchison mistakes empathy and humanity, with her ability to 'shape-shift'. Where Mitchison falls down is in her elevated sense of self – that she is braver than the 'ordinary people' in speaking out about the issues in their society. In reality, Mitchison had the privilege as a white British citizen, and wife of a Labour MP, with support and status to write about issues such as apartheid.

[31] Earlier in her career Mitchison asserted, 'Reading prefaces is a thing I never do myself if I can help it, so I can only suppose that a very few of the people who want to read the stories in this book are going to start here' (Mitchison 1930: 7).

Representing Others and Visiting with Respect

One of the main outputs for Mitchison during her time in Botswana was the journal, *Kutlwano*: 'mutual understanding', which began publication in 1962.[32] The remit of the journal was to

> provid[e] information about government policies and document […] the events leading to the country's independence. The name Kutlwano […] described the mutual understanding which presumably existed between the colonial administrators and Batswana leaders during negotiations for independence in the early 1960s. The magazine became very popular judging from the number of people who wrote in, because it was the only thing of its kind. The only magazine that would tell you about Batswana![33]

Mitchison published in the magazine forty-eight times between 1965 and 1980, mostly during the 1960s. She closely interrogated the policies and changes which were to occur during these early years as the country transitioned from Bechuanaland to Botswana for example by evaluating the 'Transitional Plan' for Botswana in 1966. The Parliamentary Secretary from the Ministry of Finance responded to issues highlighted by Mitchison in her article, and diplomatically ended his statement saying: 'it is pleasing to note that so stern a critic as Lady Mitchison agrees with so many of the ideas in the Plan […] we hope that as many other people as possible will choose to comment on the Plan in the pages of *Kutlwano*'.[34] Evidently, Mitchison continued to

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[32] The University of Edinburgh library holds copies of this journal.

[33] 'The British news also dominated the magazine. It was another forum through which the colonial government informed the British administrators about the events in Bechuanaland. However, *Kutlwano* was popular among Setswana speakers because it made people realize that important events were happening in their region and their input was critical […] In 1964, Kgosi Lebotse became *Kutlwano's* new editor and under him, this magazine "for the people of Bechuanaland" as it was sometimes called, moved to Gaborone and was the only publication available to rally Batswana to vote for the first time on March, 1, 1965 in the lead up to independence. The other task was to educate Batswana on their important role in electing their government. Education of this nature was a necessity because involvement was new to Batswana. When Botswana eventually got its independence, Kutlwano was there to introduce the new cabinet to the people and later announced the retirement of Sir Peter Fawcus, the resident colonial government Representative who oversaw the transition from the British rule to self-determination'. http://www.kutlwano.gov.bw/kut-content.php?cid=11

[34] December 1966: 2–4; 11–12. Mitchison and Mr. M. Segokgo (Secretary), respectively.

be a prolific political commentator and critic and these early, formative years for Botswana were fertile ground for her to realise and promote her ideals for a new society.

The first article for the journal *Kutlwano* was entitled 'Education and Sex' and resulted in five letters in response, as well as a piece written by the Editor in subsequent editions that year. Evidently Mitchison was again willing to be outspoken in order to instigate debate when addressing political and social issues. Education was one of the central tenets for Mitchison which she addressed on at least nine occasions in her articles for this journal, recalling in one piece that she visited the 'Swaneng High School' and was 'proud […] to have helped mix the concrete for the foundations of the new classrooms', proving not only her interest in theorising about the issues but showing how she put her words into action (1969: 12–13). In another article, she discussed the way in which the children needed to be encouraged to ask questions, and not be concerned that this inquisitiveness would might be seen as rude (1967a: 28–29). This article, like many of Mitchison's, is grounded in a desire to push and challenge the status quo, and to contest engrained narratives in order to build 'confidence'.[35] Education was an area in need of development, especially so for girls. Articles called for women to have better education which was, in part, affected by the lack of birth control which led to both students and teachers to abandon career prospects in favour of children. Limitations also existed through institutional and legal restrictions which maintained the belief that men were 'superior'.[36]

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[35] Mitchison strove to promote home-grown talent and build up this confidence which she believed was lacking. From encouraging the teaching of local and African history, to music competitions, and supporting a museum in Botswana, Mitchison worked hard to engage with the community.

[36] 'Improve the Status of Women', *Kutlwano*, January 1968: 21- 22. See also, *Kutlwano*, , November 1965; January 1966; March 1967; June 1967; October 1967; November 1968; March 1969; August 1969 all of which address education.

While vocal in providing input regarding what social issues needed to change and where there were areas for development, Mitchison's emphasis on confidence meant that she also recognised the importance of self-determination. The article 'Help and Self-Help' in the July 1965 edition of *Kutlwano* addresses this issue when she acknowledged that:

> All the good will in the world is no substitute for the final doing of things ourselves. We all know this. Anybody in Bechuanaland who thinks at all is bound to realize that self help is going to be the most important thing over the next twenty or thirty years at least. We welcome all we get in money or knowledge but in the end we must depend on our own hands and our own brains (11).

Mitchison could be frustrated with the lack of progress, and in the article 'Botswana Contradictions' she contemplates whether it would be better if 'we [outsiders] could all be thrown out so that the people of the invaded country could go ahead with making their own mistakes' (1978: 231). Yet, she adds: 'they would lose not only those who are in Botswana for their own profit […] but also those who are doing a job for which, so far, there is no replacement'. She goes on to assert:

> There is all the effort that so many Europeans have made to find and train replacements, especially in non-office jobs, and I know it would be a bad, perhaps desperate, set-back for Botswana, as for some other African countries, if all Europeans, Americans and other non-nationals were to leave. Yet there is a growing anti-white feeling in Botswana, which was never there before. It comes with the influx of refugees from Soweto and Rhodesia and is, I fear, quite inevitable. Because we are white we are mixed up in people's minds with the brutalities of the white police and blind stupidities of the Governments in Pretoria and Salisbury. Just now the UK is blamed all the time for the failures on agreement in Geneva; one gets tired and angry hearing this (231–232).

Overall, Mitchison understood the importance of self-help, giving the Batswana agency and control to promote autonomy and self-governance. However, in one article Mitchison was challenged for her role in speaking for the Batswana. In an article by a Dr Fuller (a cultural anthropologist from Nashville) called, 'This

"Cultural Heritage"', he challenges 'Well-meaning persons, including some European agitators who ridiculously try to present themselves as 'more African that the Africans' (1967: 2). Fuller argues that such people impose a view upon Botswanan people that they should 'abandon all the moral and social principles they have assimilated in their culture [sic] contacts with others'. He contends that any attempts to promote a 'return to some undefined set of principles which they inaccurately call "African"' is laden with 'sentimentality'. For Fuller, such methods are a means of keeping the Batswana and other African communities separate and removed from an international context. Believing that the 'bona fide people of Botswana […] should carve out their own and their country's destiny' he goes on to criticise Mitchison for her statement in an earlier edition of the journal in which she claimed that while educational and technological influences would be welcomed from developing countries, our 'morals and our history remain our own' (ibid.). For Fuller, this is problematic and he argues that Mitchison has no right to assert what a community should and should not be influenced by: 'The Batswana […] have the inalienable right to judge social and cultural features offered [to] them from alien sources, screening them, and adapting them to their situation here'; and he goes on to show the ways in which the Tswana people and culture have continually developed and adapted based on various 'contacts'. He ends by praising the Botswana and its 'heritage' which 'embraces both the local, the national, and the international' and cautions that 'those interested in the future of this nation could well spend their time clarifying the major options before the nation and the people rather than picking up petty points designed to bring about dissension and disruption' (2–3).

Unsurprisingly, Mitchison responds to Dr Fuller via a letter to the Editor. In the short piece she argues that 'Scotland has had its overdose of English culture (and, recently, American) and has accepted these values uncritically, and has lost morale and creativity […] the Batswana, like the Highlanders have to be reminded of their own heritage'. Mitchison concurs 'the Batswana must decide' but that Dr Fuller fails recognise that the readership of the journal are among those who have been 'educated and culturally or religiously brain-washed, in such a way to feel that their own moral code is inferior to the European one'. For Mitchison, then, that extended to include how African history is regarded in comparison to European history. Mitchison concludes that 'my job as an outsider is, as I see it, to show there is another side. I try to help the balance swinging fairly [sic]. What's wrong with that?' (1967b: 7).[37] It is a fair question, and one which brings another dimension to the problem of speaking for Others. Even in this context where Mitchison aims to promote agency and value in Batswana culture, it is implied by Fuller that she does not have the right to do so. Mitchison understood her value as an outsider in being vocal advisor: 'I hear criticisms and points of view which would not, I think, be shown to an outsider. If I can be inside yet also remain completely in touch with European thought and organisation, I should be useful' (1966: 119).

The role of the outsider as observer and potential problem solver is a metaphor adopted by Chinua Achebe when reflecting on the way in which European writers depict Africa. In an interview in the *Guardian* in 2003 Caryl Phillips asked Achebe whether there were any European writers who successfully depicted Africa

[37] In an article praising Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Mitchison noted: 'this is a book of immense understanding of the Batswana, from someone who can get closer than, for instance, I – a white – could ever get'. Head dedicated her book to 'Naomi Mitchison who loves Botswana' (1969).

and its people. Achebe responded, 'That is difficult. Not many', but acknowledged Graham Greene when prompted:

> Achebe: Yes, perhaps. Graham Greene would be one because he knew his limitations. He didn't want to explain Africans to the world. He made limited claims and wasn't attempting to be too profound. After all, we can't be too profound about somebody whose history and language and culture is beyond our own.
>
> Phillips: But you're not suggesting that outsiders should not write about other cultures?
>
> Achebe: No, no. This identification with the other is what a great writer brings to the art of story-making. We should welcome the rendering of our stories by others, because a visitor can sometimes see what the owner of the house has ignored. But they must visit with respect and not be concerned with the colour of skin, or the shape of nose, or the condition of the technology in the house (Phillips 2003).[38]

Achebe's evaluation is one which is useful for interrogating Mitchison's writing because I think it delineates how we might critique her work from her time in Botswana. At times, Mitchison's writing grapples with her duality of being both outsider and insider, and at times verges on attempting to be 'too profound'. In another venture which came from a place of good intentions, Mitchison's choice to write a history of the Africans arguably encroached upon try 'to explain Africans to the world'.

'A nation without a past is a lost nation, and a people without a past is a people without a soul'

Neil Parsons explaining that 'the idea of regaining our history was immensely popular in Botswana during the 1960s and 1970s' (2006: 668) quotes President

[38]. Interview with Chinua Achebe on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/feb/22/classics.chinuaachebe

Seretse Khama who, in a speech given in 1970, claimed: "'We should write our own history books …because …a nation without a past is a lost nation, and a people without a past is a people without a soul'" (ibid.). It is significant that the year Khama made this speech, Mitchison published her history book, *The Africans: from the earlier times to the present* (1970). Khama's sentiment was undoubtedly shared by Mitchison who recognised the importance in promoting a revisionist history which challenged some of the problematic narratives that had only presented a European perspective. As the title suggests, it is an ambitious text which goes as far back as the ninth century to capture histories from across the continent and concludes in 1970. Mitchison once again grapples with her identity in a text which is meant to be about Africans. In her preface she claims that 'there is special reason' that she is suited to writing about this vast continent and its people:

> There is special reason why I can do it. I come from a great Scottish family, the Haldanes, who have known, encouraged and accepted great changes. Even in my own lifetime there has been change from society based strictly on class in which my family were near the top, to something approaching classlessness. But also I have considerable experience of the Highlands and of fairly recent Highland history, including the destruction of the clan system. There are many analogies between Highland and African people and history; I think these may be helpful and illuminating so they will be found in several places in this book (1970: 12)

Arguably, Mitchison positions herself above the African people she sought to give agency to. By emphasising her role she takes much of the force away from what is meant to be a positive argument for reclaiming and re-presenting the narratives erased by colonialism. Mitchison positions herself as being best suited to understand and write about the country. Ironically, because African history has been side-lined she argues that it has led to a lack of agency and confidence, and 'makes them less

able to think for themselves and take responsibility' justifying her decision to write the history book: 'that is why I am trying to write their African background history from an inside Africa point of view'.[39] It is one thing to argue that the colonial and imperial project caused Africans to assimilate European education, literature and history, but it seems unfair that this has created a group of people who are unable to think or take responsibility for themselves. No doubt, such a sustained practise of erasing aspects of African culture is one which would shape a distorted history which needed to be re-presented, but it suggests that the communities are ignorant of their own histories and unable to represent these narratives themselves. Mitchison's claims about writing an 'African background' and 'point of view' in a book which spans decades and various countries which make up the vast continent was perhaps overly ambitious.[40]

Achebe's caution that writers should 'make limited claims' and 'not try and explain Africans to the world', seems resonant here. Mitchison's preface undermines some of the agency of this history text, by placing her as the civilised outsider who is not only able to research and present these facts, but actually understand a whole

[39] In the preface to *The Africans* (1970) Mitchison writes: 'I have plenty of reference books and I have read widely in libraries, as well as looking at things and talking with historians, but most of the older books at least are written from a point of view which begins to make me uneasy. I am still more uneasy when I see the kind of textbooks they read in schools. They are not, in my mind, adequate reading for young Africans […] It seems to me essential that peoples in different parts of Africa should know how the rest were living during the African Past. This means that in choosing the facts that I have used for this book, I have an African audience in mind, although I hope also that it will help people in Great Britain to understand more about this continent. It is impossible to put in all the facts about any situation. Writers of history inevitably choose the facts and make the comments on them which fit their historical thesis; it is better to be aware of this than not to know what one is doing. But if I am biased in a pro-African way, I do not think that I have ever so far forgotten myself as to have invented evidence or told deliberate lies. If I had done that I would have been shamed before the gentle and truthful people of my tribe' (Mitchison 1970: 13–15).

[40] Possibly by pitching the book as a means to explore the country rather than claim to be able to present all Africans' views would have been more realistic.

continent of people. The decision to write such a book began in 1966 and shows that much of the good intention is also grounded in guilt:

> The thing that worried me, in a way, most, was that they had so little African confidence, so little on which to build an African future, or a Tswana state. I became more and more determined to make a go of my very difficult History of Africa […] I stuck for a few days before I could write the chapters about the slave trade, simply because I was so filled with the horror and guilt at the thought of what might have been done to my people here, by my people there (Mitchison 1966: 111–112).[41]

Hence, in *The Africans* Mitchison works to justify her right to speak for others and close the gap between her feelings about 'her people here' and her 'people there': 'I am a member of the tribe, a Mokgatla; it would be unthinkable to suppose that my friends who work in the office or come in or out are in anyway different from me because their skins are darker than mine, and their hair curls crisp and close to the head' (Mitchison 1970: 12).

Perhaps Mitchison felt it necessary to explicitly state that skin colour should not be a factor in difference, particularly in the climate of the period. It was right that Mitchison should use her role to condemn and speak out against racism and draw attention to the injustices of apartheid which imposed such cruelty based only on skin colour. But, to quote Achebe, it would be reasonable to accept that Mitchison would, at least initially, notice differences, based on the very fact that the 'language

[41] Her book, *African Heroes* (1968), is an example of this. Again, she uses the preface as a forum to justify her role in speaking about these topics: 'slipping into an African mentality led me to realise that there were people whose heroes had been taken from them, and led me further to think what the white invaders had done over six centuries or so of African history, not only to the bodies of Africans, but to their minds. It is bad for people to have their heroes taken away from them, even if the heroes were, like most of the heroes in early European history, war leaders and believers in the strong arm. And perhaps it is equally bad for the invaders to be able to look down on the invaded as people without culture and without a heroic past. If this book had gone on into modern times, we might have has such heroes as John Chilembwe, Chief Luthuli, and some who are not dead but who are held in prison, Mandela, Sisulu, Sobukwe and others, and with them at least one white man who is also an African hero: Bram Fischer. May it not be the end for them!' (Mitchison 1968: 7–8). However, it was also an example of her positive work in documenting histories and building confidence for the Batswana to use their own stories, particularly in schools.

and culture was beyond her own'. Mitchison is so concerned with being racist, that she denies any gap in experiences between herself and the tribe.

In the final chapter of *The Africans* entitled 'For A' That and A' That', Mitchison departs from history to consider what the future may be like, and for her to set out her wider ambitions for the tribe, Botswana and Africa. She highlights the flaws in the Commonwealth and the strings of neo-colonialism which were still resonant. But she also asserts her confidence in the African people to make their own judgements and decisions arguing: 'it is hard not to foresee a time when Great Britain is by no means the most important member of the Commonwealth and will have to do quite a lot of adjusting. A grandmother who can't do this will find she is no longer loved or visited and that is sad for everyone' (Mitchison 1970: 215). Mitchison recognises Britain's involvement in the tribe and Botswana will have to end in order for self-determination and independence to be properly realised. The metaphor is not only for Britain, but Mitchison herself, as she recognised that her role could not always be one which imposed itself upon the tribe. There was a need for detachment, trust and respect in the tribe, and in Linchwe's ability to make decisions and choices best for his tribe and culture.

However, so much of her work and involvement was grounded in positive motives, providing support and creating a place for self-determination to flourish. Another endeavour in which Mitchison used her experiences of the tribe to depict their culture was her collaboration with the tribe's historian to collate African proverbs. She explains that 'All over southern Africa part of education is to learn to speak in proverbs and riddles. A young or uneducated person can be spoken of rather scornfully as someone who does not know the use of proverbs' (Pilane and Mitchison 1974: 29).

The collaborative work with the tribe's historian, demonstrated that she was not the only person working to promote and preserve the tribe's culture. Publishing these proverbs was seen as an important task in maintaining an aspect of the tribe's oral traditions that might have been lost. It echoes some of her endeavours in Scotland to build confidence by allowing people to speak in their 'own language'.

Occasionally, Mitchison positions herself as best served to understand the needs to the tribe and Botswana and inadvertently removes their agency and ability to speak for themselves. Jenni Calder considers the contradictions of Mitchison's role but states:

> Whatever uncertainties Naomi had about her personal standing with individuals in Botswana, she never seemed to have thought that she could not 'become' African, just as she became Spartan, or Athenian, or Marobian, or Scottish. It was a matter of culture and mind-set rather than national identity, and the result of her acute eye for the pivots of social and cultural intercourse. It was also the result of a generosity of emotion and her innate theatrical talents (Calder 1997: 251–252).

Calder suggests that because 'she had often described the clash between a colonising power and native resistance […] if the territory was geographically and specifically new, psychologically she knew exactly where she was' (Calder 1997: 452). I would argue that psychologically it could be difficult for Mitchison, as is evidenced in the way in which she continually justified her place, and expressed the guilt she sometimes felt. Mitchison was altruistic but was aware that her status and whiteness afforded her the choice to be so, and that in speaking out against issues such as apartheid she was less at risk from punishment than her black friends. Certainly, as this thesis attests, Mitchison had repeatedly looked beyond her privilege to engage with political and social issues impacting on the vulnerable and marginalised. There is no doubt that Mitchison's involvement with the tribe and Botswana was relentless

even when she felt that she was not being fully appreciated, specifically by Linchwe, who invited her to become involved in the first place. As someone who prided herself on her liberal and socialist outlook, but who understood the value of individualism, it is surprising that she often fell into a trap of trying to eradicate her British identity in order to fulfil her duties in Africa. As discussed in reference to *The Bull Calves,* Mitchison had realised that while nationality and group identity could be traced through heritage, the value in asserting a Scottish identity and the politics to promote it were not grounded in looking for authentic or essentialist markers, but in an acceptance of difference and individualism and the choice to work collectively. Mitchison had reflected on her career in 1984 and considered the theme of loyalties noting:

> I'm sure one of the most interesting things to happen to anyone, is this business of loyalties and how to reconcile them. One's got a loyalty presumably to one's family to begin with, and then it widens out to one's village, one's town, one's country. Perhaps to being European, and finally, I suppose, to being a human being. But one feels that *that* loyalty is the one that's got to be cultivated, because at the moment we are all threatened, whatever our colour, or race or anything. And I always find it very interesting that when I'm here I feel myself basically a Scot, but in London during the Blitz, I felt tremendously a Londoner. Not English, but London' (Murray 2002: 73).

Mitchison's focus on loyalties resonates with Kwame Appiah's interrogation of the concept of cosmopolitanism whereby he echoes the issue of loyalties and reminds us that:

> Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life. Whatever our obligations are to other (or theirs to us) they often have the right to go their own way […] there are times when these ideals – universal concern and respect for legitimate difference – clash. There's a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge (2007: xiii)

Mitchison understood this challenge and was adept in adapting to show commitment and loyalty to new groups throughout her life, and it was undoubtedly one of her strengths. However, occasionally, during her time in Botswana, the anxiety to fit in, to speak for others, saw Mitchison promoting universality above all else.

CONCLUSION

> And what about my own life as a political person? Would the world have lost anything if I hadn't made these journeys and had these doubtless mind-stretching adventures? If I had stayed at home and really studied local problems of politics, education and administration? If I had ever finished my own broken education? Or if I'd have been a whole-time mother with perhaps more children? Or less? – but that's something I can't bear to contemplate. No, I just don't know. We go with the wave of our time, getting whatever is to be got out of it (1979: 206).

This thesis has mapped Mitchison's political journey to show her steadfast commitment to speaking out for others, from her youthful admiration of Kipling's vision of the British Empire to the shift in her adult life and writing which was diametrically opposed to such imperialistic views. Mitchison's conservative views were quickly replaced by her socialist and left-wing sympathies but Mitchison's extremes are symbolic of her success as a writer and political campaigner who was able to see both sides in political conflicts. Undoubtedly, because of her privilege she was able to travel widely, raise a family, and engage with the many 'interventions and interests outside the literary world' which gave her opportunities and experiences which were exceptional for one person (Joannou 1998: 293). I have interrogated the problems of speaking for others in Mitchison's writing which could, at times, be grounded in her guilt at the privileged life she led. Often Mitchison struggled to reconcile her status with the egalitarian politics she promoted and, at times, she not only speaks for silenced groups, but insists on her authority and responsibility to do so. But whether Mitchison was motivated by *noblesse oblige* no one can dispute her commitment in working to improve the lives of people she felt were being misrepresented, oppressed or silenced. What Mitchison achieved as an

author is impressive enough, but to work so tirelessly for a fairer society is admirable.

In 2014 at the annual Naomi Mitchison PEN lecture, Prof Zöe Wicomb presented a talk titled, 'Writing and the Stranger'. In her introduction, Wicomb referred to Giorgio Agamben's concept of the 'bare life' explaining that it 'reminds us that writing itself is a privileged position'.[1] Mitchison's life was certainly privileged and her ability to write and have a platform to speak out for others was undoubtedly linked to her status. Wicomb points out that 'Mitchison could […] be singled out for actively engaging with the Other' and she not only 'confronted […] apartheid' and produced works 'condemning white supremacism' but was international in her outlook and had a 'hands-on engagement with strangers'. Whatever difficulties readers may have with Mitchison speaking for others due to her class and upbringing, she wanted marginal and oppressed groups to have a voice and to be heard.

In a letter dated 12 February 1974 Mitchison claimed that 'politics is much harder now; all our old certainties have gone. We don't even have a certain enemy and that's something one misses!' (Porter, unpaginated). Despite Mitchison's mischievous tone, her comment reaches to the heart of what seemed to drive her, and what has been explored in this thesis: to speak out against injustice. The 'enemy' has shown itself to be imperialism, capitalism, sexism, totalitarianism, fascism, centralised government and racism. Throughout Mitchison's life, she interrogated her socialist stance and considered how politics could be used to assert the value of the individual within the community. There was a scientific curiosity to learn, to visit

[1] A transcript of Zoë Wicomb's lecture can be found at https://scottishpen.org/2014-naomi-mitchison-lecture-zoe-wicomb/

new places, to hear and tell people's stories. Mitchison's political journey offers a unique perspective on some of the twentieth century's most significant historical moments, and her work not only shows her speaking for those who have not been heard, but working to negotiate a space for her voice to be represented, too.

More remains to be explored and Mitchison's corpus offers several promising avenues for further research. It would have been possible, of course, to read her science fiction through a political lens but the focus on 'speaking for others' meant that genre did not quite fit the discussion outlined here.

Scottish Modernism and Intermodernism, in particular, offer new frameworks through which to read Mitchison's work and situate her as a writer engaged with the political and cultural issues affecting society throughout the years from the 1920s – 1950s. Intermodernism, as outlined in Chapter Two, echoes the remit for Scottish Modernism defined by Margery Palmer McCulloch. Both Bluemel and McCulloch's studies are a product of revisionist readings which focus on the interwar and Modernist period in order to consider how parameters might be widened and be more inclusive than previously suggested; in McCulloch's words:

> Modernism as a movement has been undergoing fresh critical scrutiny and interpretation in recent years, with the earlier 'high modernism' emphasis on avant-garde artistic experimentation and withdrawal from direct involvement in social and political affairs being replaced by an understanding that there were in fact many modernisms (2009: 2).

McCulloch emphasises that 'Scottish modernism […] is not entirely synonymous with what we have become used to calling the Scottish Renaissance' since the not all the 'work for change in Scotland both political and artistically […] could be characterised as "modernist", even in an expanded sense' (2009: 6). Therefore, as with Intermodernism, Scottish Modernism, recognises the importance that the

essential criterion for Modernism remain but argues that the studies of this period in history offer 'a fuller consideration of participants' (2). While Bluemel has promoted Mitchison's 'exemplary status' as an Intermodern writer, Mitchison's involvement with Scottish culture and society remains underrepresented. McCulloch in her concluding remarks to her monograph notes that 'this perception of the stationary cultural journey of the 1940s and 1950s is not true to the reality of the period' and certainly, as this thesis has shown, Mitchison's engagement with Scottish matters during this time should counter the view that it was a 'a kind of no-man's land' with regards to literature being produced in Scotland (198). Mitchison resists simple categorisation but her political interests which were underpinned by attempts to revolutionise society and make things new, blends a modernist ideology alongside a motivation to engage with communities and heritage as a basis for this renewal.

This thesis opened with quotations from scholars expressing the difficultly in engaging with Mitchison's vast corpus and varied life. This thesis has been an effort to add to existing readings of Mitchison's works and to excavate her extensive corpus, much of which remains out of print and hidden in archives. It not only offers an insight into her individual contribution to literary studies, but shows her engagement with significant literary movements during the twentieth century. It would have been 'impossible' as Maroula Joannou claims, to devote a single study that could attend to all of Mitchison's texts but I hope that by drawing on previously unpublished material this thesis has contributed to the growing map from which readers can navigate Mitchison's incredible life and career.

Mitchison's quotation above reflected: 'would the world have lost anything' had she not committed her life to so many various people and places; for this reader,

Mitchison's life and prodigious corpus are a fascinating record against which to read many of the political and social issues affecting Britain during the twentieth century, and it would be a great loss if she or her works were forgotten.

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