

Conversation Pieces

Volume 15

Naomi Mitchison:
A Profile of Her Life and Work

A Monograph

by

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*To the memory of the forgotten
feminists of the 1930s*

Introduction

Naomi Mitchison led a long, diverse, and active life, spanning most of the twentieth century, before she died in 1999 at the age of 101. She is probably less well-known than she might be, quite possibly because of this very diversity; a recent and favorable review of a reissue of her fantasy *Travel Light*, for instance, characterized her as “relegated to rare footnotes buried in the reverent biographies” of J. R. R. Tolkien (Dan Hartland, review of *Travel Light* in *Strange Horizons*, 21 Nov 2005, http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2005/11/travel_light_by.shtml). People who come across her in one of the many contexts in which she might be found are not necessarily aware of all the others.

Mitchison’s numerous books span several genres of fiction and include a wide assortment of non-fiction. That most of her fictional writing is in genre and does not fit easily into the canons of literary modernism at least partially accounts for the lack of critical attention she has been accorded. Isobel Murray suggests that the extent and range of her works mean that “readers are liable to be baffled, confused, even lost,” especially

given the random and haphazard way in which her books come back into print and ready availability. And so, it is “hard to get any notion of this literary career: we don’t even have the crudest sketch map indicating the ground,” making it hard to locate her individual works within the larger body of her literary work (Murray, 1986, vii). Since Murray wrote this, Mitchison has begun to accrue at least some degree of critical attention, though it is usually focused on particular novels or groups of novels. Her historical fiction and the contemporary novel *We Have Been Warned* (1935) fit well into recent discussions of women’s writing, especially in the area of politically-informed fictions of the inter-war period, and particularly in the context of responses to the rise of European fascism. Mitchison is also gaining attention as a specifically and consciously Scottish writer; she was a major figure in the twentieth century Scottish literary renaissance. *The Bull Calves* (1947), set in eighteenth-century Scotland in the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion, includes her own Haldane ancestors among the characters. *Lobsters on the Agenda* (1952) is a contemporary novel based on her own experiences tackling the economic and social problems of the Highlands and Islands in the period after the Second World War. A number of her short stories and young adult books deal with Scottish themes both contemporary and historical.

Mitchison began as a historical novelist, transforming this genre and receiving widespread critical acclaim. Her books got right away from the Jeffrey Farnol school of costume and gadzookery to a pioneering new gritty realism, combining the immediacy of mod-

ern language with an ability to evoke the otherness of the past with great vividness. Her meticulous research, based on immersion in contemporary developments in archaeology and anthropology, was transformed by her capacity to recreate the past in almost tangible detail. She had enormous skills in evocative world-building, which served her well when she turned from the “other countries” of the past to imagined worlds, or visions of the future.

Her historical novels and short stories often incorporate fantasy elements. Meromic in *The Conquered* (1923) turns into his totem animal, the wolf, and Erif Der, the protagonist of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931) from the still barbarian culture of Marob on the Black Sea, possesses powers that the civilized Greeks she encounters have lost. But Mitchison also wrote works of explicit fantasy. In *Beyond This Limit* (1935), she took Phoebe, an artist and one of the leading characters from her realist novel *We Have Been Warned*, about the menacing political situation of the mid-1930s, and sent her on a phantasmagorical Carrollian journey of self-discovery in which she figures as an Alice for adults. *We Have Been Warned*, although belonging largely to the panoramic social- and political-vista genre of the 1930s, includes the climactic appearance of the protagonist’s murdered witch ancestress, who shows the protagonist a vision of a potential fascist regime. Her charming and recently republished *Travel Light* (1952), set in a time-traveling Europe from a period of Nordic myth to the late-classical and early medieval period, tells the story of a girl saved from her wicked stepmother by her shape-shifting nurse and brought up by

dragons. And *To The Chapel Perilous* (1955) shakes up Arthurian myth by presenting it through the eyes of two journalists negotiating the precarious ground between what they have seen and the demands of press owners who control the record for posterity.

In her sixties, Mitchison turned to science fiction, producing the novels *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), *Solution Three* (1975), and *Not By Bread Alone* (1983), as well as a number of short stories in the genre. But in her nineties, she returned to historical fiction with *Early in Orcadia* (1987), *The Oath-Takers* (1991), and *Green Ribbons* (1991), which is about the Levellers and other communitarians of the English Civil War period. Throughout her career she wrote numerous works for children; she also produced a number of novels and short stories with an African setting, based on her experiences in Botswana during a period of significant political and social change. Her entire oeuvre is outstanding for the way in which it foregrounds women and members of other marginalized groups as protagonists—frequently active, questing protagonists.

Mitchison's non-fictional works include biographies, autobiography, memoirs, political and social theory, social studies, and travel narratives. A selection from the extensive diary she kept for the social survey organization Mass Observation during the Second World War was published as *Among You Taking Notes* (1985).



On top of this impressive literary output (along with a substantial amount of journalism and reviewing), Naomi pursued a long career of political and

social engagement. She married rather young, in the fervor of the early months of the First World War, later commenting dryly in her memoir *All Change Here* (1973) that “I might have said yes to the first man (I beg your pardon: officer) in uniform who asked me to marry him in August 1914” (ACH, 103). In spite of early difficulties, she and her husband, a lawyer and Labour politician, worked out an affectionate and open marriage. They had seven children (one of whom died in childhood of meningitis; the last dying shortly after birth), and she led a vigorous social life with numerous intense relationships both sexual and non-sexual. She traveled extensively, was involved in left-wing politics both in Britain and internationally (including the birth control movement), became active in Scottish local politics, and at an age when many individuals are taking things easy, was caught up in the affairs of the Bakgatla tribe in Bechuanaland just before, during, and after its independence under the official name of Botswana. Although her father, John Scott Haldane, and her brother, J. B. S. Haldane, won fame for their ventures in scientific self-experimentation in connection with mine safety, deep-sea diving, and poison gas protection, Naomi instead lived an experimental life, trying out new ways of living and being that were only just becoming available to women.

Within the apparent centrifugal diversity of her life and careers (one of the biographies that appeared in her lifetime is entitled *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* [1997], although nine seems possibly too low a figure), it is possible to discern many common and repeating themes that concerned her in her fictional

and non-fictional writings—about the good society, about the relationship between the individual and the group, about the extension of loyalties and sympathies from the immediate to an ever-wider sphere, about right relationships between individuals, about communication across barriers and boundaries. Unlike many writers who have explored the possibilities of utopia, she accumulated considerable experience in the practical business of the day-to-day, step-by-step process of working toward change, both through supporting her husband's political career in the Labour Party and her own experiences in the birth control movement, anti-Fascist causes, and Scottish local politics. *Lobsters on the Agenda* in particular can be read on one level as a microcosm of politics, depicting various groups that not only have their own agendas on the various issues arising during the course of the novel, but are also themselves riven by internal conflicts and power struggles. She manifested considerable skepticism about simple one-size-fits-all solutions to social problems, a skepticism that underlies her cautionary late work of science fiction, *Not By Bread Alone* (1983).

Throughout her writing, the Other is not something alien to be feared and attacked, but rather to be encountered with interest, communicated with, understood—even loved. In *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), the protagonist encounters radial starfish-like intelligences on her first planetary expedition. She decides that “I had better...go around on hands and knees so as to be at the same aesthetic level.” The model is very much that of participant observation.

The paradigm of participant observation for research had long appealed to Mitchison. As a young girl before the First World War, Naomi and her brother kept guinea-pigs. Besides using them to study genetics (Jack Haldane later became a well-known geneticist), she:

gradually began to study them in a semi-scientific sense, listening to, identifying and copying their various squeaks and chitters, and seeing their relationship with one another and the whole pattern of guinea pig likes and dislikes. I even started taking notes. I certainly anthropomorphised too much, but I don't suppose anyone else has ever watched guinea pigs this way. Scientifically they are an exploited race (ACH, 61).

Naomi was herself a guinea-pig for contraceptive research in her association with the birth control movement, trying out new methods on herself, as did many women involved in this cause. She also took mescaline, under medical supervision during the 1960s, "as an experimental guinea-pig," presumably as part of the general sixties interest in the mind-expanding and potentially therapeutic use of psychotropic drugs (ST, 76).

That Mitchison is of more than historical interest as a pioneering woman writer in several genres and remains a figure of continuing significance is demonstrated by the recurrent "rediscovery" of her works. Over the past couple of decades, some fifteen of her novels and collections of shorter fiction have been reprinted in new editions, and her memoirs remain in print. After decades of critical neglect (although she received high critical acclaim in her lifetime: *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* in particular was regarded as

one of the important books of 1931 and described as “remarkable,” “a triumph,” “of the calibre...of Nobel prize-winners”), she is gradually coming to be studied as a significant figure in twentieth-century literature, though in most cases only some particular aspect of her work is under analysis.