

'Adventure to the Adventurous': Naomi Mitchison's Travel Narrative 'Mucking Around'

By Helen Lloyd

Adventure to the Adventurous¹

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

— Naomi Mitchison, *Correspondence*, NLS Acc 10888

In her late seventies, Naomi Mitchison published three volumes of autobiography: *Small Talk: Memoirs of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973), *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (1975) and *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (1979). These memoirs are, however, an account of less than half of her 101 years, and Mitchison's personal writings extend far beyond these three volumes, to be found in a wide range of out-of-print and unpublished material including diaries, correspondence, fiction and poetry and, the focus here, travel writing.

Mitchison travelled extensively throughout her life, the journeying instinct becoming apparently stronger with age, and her personal experience and knowledge of diverse cultures and people exerting a significant influence on her shifting sense of identity and belonging and, through this, to her work as a writer. In all periods of her work, the inspiration of real life experiences can be seen to have a bearing on the production of her narratives, both fictive and actual: Mitchison, wrote Jenni Calder, 'lived the lives she wrote about and wrote about the lives she lived.'²

Unlike many travel narratives which document a single journey or period of travel, Mitchison's 1981 volume *Mucking Around: Five Continents Over Fifty Years* is unusual in that it brings together a lifetime of travel, detailing her experiences of many parts of the world. The temporal distance from which many

of these journeys are seen raises similar issues to that of Mitchison's three volumes of autobiography in which she considers the 'process of finding one's way back in time.'³ 'Clearly', she acknowledges, 'the memories, as they come into consciousness sixty or sixty-five years later (or more) have been distorted or censored. There is an element of unconscious choice.'⁴ As in the autobiographies, Mitchison pieces together the elements of *Mucking Around* from the many notebooks, diaries and letters she wrote as she travelled, as well as from her own recollections. The result is a loosely structured text, and although there are moments of great emotion and real anger, such as her hauling down of the British flag in newly independent Botswana, the overall effect is of a light, conversational tour through a life of travel.

What *Mucking Around* lacks in structure, however, it repays through the extended perspective it offers on the changing nature of travel for a privileged minority throughout the twentieth century. Early in the text is the description of a driving trip through the Baltic States in the years after the Great War, and the various border-negotiations which arise from the newly reintroduced passports and travel papers. The difference between this early trip and the later almost routine jumbo jet flights to America and Sub-Saharan Africa only really becomes apparent when it is made clear that the driving is done by a driver, paid for by her husband's family and 'not terribly expensive in those days'.⁵ In between these two extremes, the text documents her various methods of travel: trains through India, cruise liners to America and Communist Russia, a slow ferry to the Shetland Isles, a small government plane across the Zambezi flood plain, and on the back of a motorbike through the Khyber Pass. While the early chapters focus on trips to Scotland and Europe, the text spreads outwards in ever increasing circles as, through developments in speed and comfort of transportation, the world opened up to provide ever more opportunities for travel and exploration.

In some ways, however, the title, *Mucking Around*, could not be more misleading, since, through her many travels abroad, Mitchison could seldom be described as 'mucking around', or rarely even as simply having a holiday. Her travel is not, for the most part, tourism, a significant consideration for many of the critical responses to travel writing, where much debate (and disagreement) surround the hierarchy of 'explorers', 'travellers' and 'tourists'. While the application of such a hierarchy appears to be a highly questionable method for assessing the validity of

journeys and the worth of their subsequent incarnation in text, it is true that Mitchison's travel is not presented as the idle voyaging that her social class and economic freedom might have led us to expect. Arising clearly from the work is the impression that Mitchison was often 'on a mission', travelling to foreign lands as part of an official fact-finding party (as in her visit to Russia in the early 1930s, organised by the Fabian Society), or with the intention of exchanging political and practical ideas, helping or organising wherever there was a need for her wide-ranging abilities — a tendency best illustrated by her long-term association with Botswana. Perhaps in this light, 'Mucking In' would have been a more appropriate title. The notion of travel with a purpose is raised by Jenni Calder who, discussing Mitchison's tribal identity in Africa writes, 'There is a hint of the missionary in this characterisation of Naomi, and some have placed her in the tradition of the enlightened female missionary, of which Scotland produced several.'⁶

Individual chapters are arranged within sections, and the titles of these sections can also be seen to offer an insight into Mitchison's attitude to overseas travel, and her sense of belonging in Scotland. Each title provides a compass bearing, 'South-West-By-North', 'West-By-East' and so on, highlighting the orientation of her travel from a fixed point of reference. While many of her writing contemporaries left Britain for more liberal, warmer climes after the travel limitations imposed by the First World War, or sought similarly to up sticks in the years following the Second World War, Mitchison's bearings remained intact. Her increasing identification with Africa and her family's traditional orientation towards India⁷ did nothing to weaken her understanding that 'home' remained in the Western Highlands.

Discussing Mitchison's compulsion to travel, Jill Benton, her first biographer, writes that 'while continuing her life in Scotland, she turned [...] her adventuring eye to the reaches of what had been the British Empire.'⁸ This comment, along with the section titles, reinforces the view that, while she travelled, she remained firmly rooted in the British Isles. Both this and the sense of political purpose or 'mission' which surround Mitchison's journeys invite an analysis of the inter-relationship between travel texts such as *Mucking Around* and the politics of colonial rule. While Britain's force as an imperial power in the mid-twentieth century portrayed in Mitchison's texts may have been a shadow of its nineteenth-century manifestation, it remained a dominant influence in the areas of local-

governmental organisation in which Mitchison took a special interest, particularly in certain parts of Africa, and in India.

‘There I stayed with friends in the diplomatic service’,⁹ Mitchison writes; while this sentence describes a trip to Baghdad in the early fifties, it gives a flavour of much of her experience of travel in *Mucking Around*. One advantage of her social position and connections, both through family ties and her husband’s political career,¹⁰ was immediate access to and friendship with the ruling class of the places she visited. In Pakistan she stays with the Pakistani High Commissioner for Britain, in Delhi as guest of the Indian Civil Service, and in Nigeria she stays with the District Commissioner in ‘the old world of [...] colonialism, perhaps at its best’.¹¹ In India she walks round the garden with Pandit (Jawaharlal) Nehru, India’s first post-independence Prime Minister, and is introduced to his *pandas*. ‘We had I suppose talked politics’,¹² she writes, as if this were naturally what one did when abroad.

Familiarity with (and easy access to) a governing or colonial class does not mean that Mitchison was complicit in its founding ideology, or anxious for its continued survival — the energy she poured into African independence in her later years is evidence enough of her acceptance of the need for change. Yet her unalterable position as a white European aristocrat abroad, descended from a long line who similarly ‘went out’, whatever the motives, cannot be ignored. Participation in the lifestyle of the dying days of Empire implies a certain necessary acceptance of the structures of colonial rule that still hold. Hence, Mitchison, although writing in the 1980s, does not think to question the presence of Indian servants who lived in the garden of the Indian Civil Service buildings — indeed her life-long assistance by a body of ‘house-staff’ in Britain must have made this seem unremarkable. Equally unremarkable to her are the bells which hang from trees in the Indian High Commission garden to ring for drinks — a colonial image if ever there was one. Inevitably, a certain nostalgia creeps in for the bad old days this lifestyle represents, and Mitchison wonders if it ‘would still be so fifteen years on?’¹³ In contrast, however, knowledge of the governing classes produces a healthy disrespect for the authority they represent and, in India in 1950s during the festival of Holi, Mitchison is moved to shower the bemused diplomats of the Russian Embassy with coloured powder shouting ‘Comrades, you are not keeping

correct contact with the masses’!¹⁴ In conversation with Isobel Murray, Mitchison later remarked that ‘one of the pleasures in life is making things awkward for the top people’.¹⁵

Mitchison does occasionally acknowledge the position of privilege she holds within the communities she visits. Talking to a group of Indian administrators about African tribal culture, she admits, ‘It must have been a little muddling for my audience, since I was speaking both as a member of a tribe and as one of the Raj.’¹⁶ Although she chooses not to explore the problematic nature of this dual identity in detail within *Mucking Around*, she is clearly aware of its potency. Carrying on the custom of his social background, Denny, Mitchison’s eldest son, followed his uncle JBS Haldane into Indian academia in the 1950s. Visiting him there in the wake of Independence she notes that relations are ‘sometimes understandably touchy’¹⁷ between the local people and themselves as ‘members of the ex-Raj.’ It is also possible to detect an occasional note of naivety in Mitchison’s presumption of acceptance within the colonised nations she visits, largely, one suspects, because of her certainty that she is on the side of the oppressed. In Ghana, Mitchison’s response to street banners bearing the message ‘Down with Colonialism’ is to state ‘I don’t think many people any longer seriously considered the British as oppressors.’¹⁸ That this scene took place in the wake of Ghanaian Independence suggests that anti-colonialism may have been more of an issue than she concedes. Similarly, her tearing down of the British flag at the Botswanan Independence ceremony, while apparently a powerful symbol of her rejection of imperialist ideology, is more problematic than it at first appears. In that central features of independence are self-determination and the freedom to learn from one’s own actions rather than retaining a child-like dependency on Empire, it would have seemed symbolically apt for the flag to be lowered by a Botswanan. Mitchison herself makes this point in reference to Ghanaian Independence when she writes, ‘Is your freedom really necessary? Yes. Yes. Until people have freedom they cannot even make their own mistakes.’¹⁹ In addition, Mitchison’s description of the moment, ‘So there was the flag lying in the dust at my feet and I wondered if I minded and I remembered the many tyrannies and deaths of *lesser breeds* over which the Union Jack had floated’²⁰ [my italics], while consciously echoing Kipling, is perhaps an unfortunate choice of words in her endeavour towards integration and understanding within ex-colonial territories.

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

While this exploration of Mitchison's relationship with colonial agendas may seem critical of her, that relationship must be set against and seen in proportion to a background of sympathetic concern for Africa as it emerged into the modern political world, as well as to the decades of dedicated involvement with the Bakgatla tribe of Botswana into which she was adopted as 'Mmarona' or tribal mother. Mitchison's involvement with this world is explored in her first extended piece of travel writing, *Other People's Worlds*, published in 1958.

Part anthropological survey, part philosophical treatise, *Other People's Worlds* is the least directly autobiographical of Mitchison's travel writings. Yet, while she plays a smaller personal role in it than in *Mucking Around* (or in her 1966 exploration of her relationship with Africa, *Return to the Fairy Hill*), it is an important text in terms of constructing the widest possible picture of her relationship with 'abroad' and, by implication, with her sense of home and belonging. This being so, it is surprising that as a text it has received almost no critical attention to date. The reason for this neglect is most likely due to be its apparently waning relevance to contemporary developments: a similar fate has befallen many of her more political and philosophical works. The text focuses ostensibly on the 1957 Independence celebrations of Ghana (which Mitchison was covering on behalf of *The Manchester Guardian*) and on a trip to Nigeria and, as she notes herself in the introductory chapter, 'by the time this book is published, we shall be taking [its contents] completely for granted'.²¹

Nevertheless, while *Other People's Worlds* appears dated in its representation of political structures, the existence of three strands in the text argues that it should by no means be consigned to oblivion. Within it are detailed Mitchison's initial responses to the African Zeitgeist, paving the way for a fuller, more personal response in *Return to the Fairy Hill*; an early reassessment of her relationship with Scotland in the years surrounding her disenchantment with the effectiveness of her ability to help the community in Carradale; and the use of the travel form

as a vehicle for the polemical essay.

Although space here does not permit a detailed analysis of *Other People's Worlds*, it is clear that in both this work and in *Mucking Around* Mitchison manages to identify herself with the colonised while at the same time being inextricably linked to the forces of colonialism. While this contradiction — so typical of the contradictions that surround Mitchison — is not explored in any depth in either of these texts, her increasing involvement with the Botswanan people in the 1960s forces a recognition of the paradoxical nature of her position, and she confronts it bravely and with clarity in *Return to the Fairy Hill*.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*