

Century Notes

By The Unreliable Narrator

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.) Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

Naomi Mary Margaret Mitchison, Baroness Mitchison, CBE (née Haldane; 1 November 1897–11 January 1999). How does one do justice to a writer who lived for over a hundred years? Who witnessed almost every single day of the entire twentieth century, with over eighty books and an uncounted number of articles and essays to her credit? Who, over and above her own literary achievements, helped shepherd into print titles as various and influential as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and James Watson's *The Double Helix*? One could begin, perhaps, by remembering not to forget her.

Mitchison has been dead, now, for just over seventeen years, and it can sometimes seem that her fame has faded. Even during her lifetime, in the latter years, her reputation had not waned, but grown dimly with neglect. This happens, of course: live for a century, and tastes will change, and those who ride opinion's tides may find themselves left stranded. It does seem, though, that women writers are more susceptible to the vagaries of fashion than their male counterparts. The literary world has often seemed eager for the ladies to withdraw, to allow more cigar and elbow-room within the canon for the men of letters. Even so, this was a woman around whose works the words Nobel Prize were uttered, in their day: it might be thought that a writer of such quality, and scope, and scale, and duration, might be due some continued critical attention.

But that's the thing about time: it keeps on changing. History may have ended in the 1990s, but it restarted with a bang shortly after; and now the shine's worn off the twenty-first century, many previously confident assumptions are open to question. Genres deemed *infra dig* in the Eighties and Nineties—fantasy, science fiction—are gaining ground; feminism is fighting back; Scottishness is broadening its shoulders, redeveloping lost muscles, lost dimensions. And slowly, piece by piece—a *Travel Light* here, a *Fourth Pig* there—Mitchison's work is finding its audience anew.

Or audiences, perhaps because this is a body of literature with a truly epic scope. Children's stories (with strong adult threads sewn through); myth and fantasy (from a scientific realist); socialist science fiction (written by an aristocrat); and of course historical fiction (which comments on the contemporary), all rising out of a scree of poetry and essays and articles and plays

Perhaps some of the neglect this mountain of work has suffered stems from its sheer diverse volume. Tricky to categorise, hard to label, difficult to traverse: pull too hard on *this* book, and your argument will fall; rest too much weight on *that* opinion, and you might get buried in the avalanche.

So all we aim to do here, in this issue of *The Bottle Imp*, is a little bit of long-range topography. A quick sketch, the merest outline, the waggle of a theodolite towards the misty peaks all to draw up a modest proposal that an expedition into the interior be considered. And even so, there's plenty to be going on with. As principal navigator, Jenni Calder maps out for us **Naomi Mitchison: Traveller and Storyteller**. Testing the ground, keeping our feet firm on 8 ori

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