

Encounters in the Fairy Hill

By Rob Hardy

Throughout her life, Naomi Mitchison kept imagining disruptive and potentially transformative encounters between self and other — encounters that explored personal and cultural differences (as well as differences between species), and raised the possibility that such differences could be reconciled and the self-transformed. Mitchison's own life provided a template for these encounters. As a child, she thought of herself as a boy, and attended the Dragon School in Oxford with other boys, until the onset of puberty set her apart as a girl. But in her reading and writing, she was still able to imagine herself as a man. Imagination became her means of negotiating difference — both the differences she felt within herself, and the differences she encountered in the world around her.

Difference was also at times a source of frustration and disappointment for Mitchison. Imagination drew her into sympathy with ordinary people — the fishermen of Carradale, for example — but she was not entirely able to be one of them. In the words of her obituary in the *Scotsman*: 'She was privileged and she was posh, but she tried hard not to let that get in the way of relations with the Carradale community — or indeed with any of the many communities which she adopted. But she wasn't without self-awareness — she knew there were barriers.'¹ She often found herself cast as patroness rather than as one of the people.

In the early 1960s, when she was in her sixties, Mitchison hosted a young African student named Linchwe at Carradale House, her home in Scotland. After his return to Africa in 1963, Linchwe sent Mitchison a letter inviting her to attend his installation as Paramount Chief of the Bakgatla, a tribe in southeastern Bechuanaland — a British Protectorate that in 1966 became the independent Republic of Botswana. This visit was the beginning of a close relationship with Linchwe and the Bakgatla that would last the rest of Mitchison's life. She threw herself into the relationship: she taught classes in a tribal school, provided the tribe with money and advice, and advocated for them with British authorities and international aid groups. The Bakgatla, for their part, formally adopted her as a member of the tribe.

‘We did not start by belonging in the same culture group’, Mitchison wrote in her memoir of her first years in Africa. ‘But I find that only a small effort of the imagination is necessary to overcome any awkwardness that this might cause’.² Once again, imagination is her means of negotiating difference — this time, the cultural difference between a Scottish intellectual and an African tribe.

At the same time, Mitchison could not entirely erase difference, no matter how hard she imagined. She was wealthy, well-educated, British, and white, and there would remain an unresolved tension between her privileged position and her desire to be part of an impoverished African tribe. As Helen Lloyd writes: ‘She would always be set apart, different, because of the money (and education) which, at once, made it all possible, and was a burden’.³ Fifty years after its publication, Mitchison’s African memoir can appear naïve. She appears to idealize the ‘primitive’ Other, to approach her African experience in ways that have been revealed as problematic in more recent theorizing about race and culture. But this doesn’t diminish her memoir’s value as autobiography, as a contemporary account of Mitchison’s relationship with Africa and as a record of her own encounter with difference.

She called the memoir, published in 1966, *Return to the Fairy Hill*. For Mitchison, Mochudi, the chief village of the Bakgatla, was the Fairy Hill, a magical place where what had long existed in her imagination became real: ‘the Fairy Hill was Marob, my place imagined over half a century, now real’.⁴ The fairy hill — outside of time, full of peril and possibility — had been a recurring motif in Mitchison’s writing since the 1930s,⁵ and was the setting of *The Fairy Who Couldn’t Tell a Lie*, the children’s book she published in 1963, just as she was beginning her association with the Bakgatla. In this book, as she does so often in her writing, Mitchison imaginatively transforms her own experiences to create a fairy tale about cultural difference and personal transformation.

The Fairy Who Couldn’t Tell a Lie tells the story of Brec, a swan fairy cursed at birth with the inability to tell a lie. Since falsehood and deception are the principal weapons of the swan fairies in their perpetual war with humans, and with the rival seal clan, this curse makes Brec’s life extraordinarily difficult. She can’t even sing songs or tell stories, because art itself is a kind of falsehood. But because she’s different, because she can’t lead humans astray with falsehoods,

she befriends a human girl, Clare, who wanders into the fairy hill. When the seals capture both Clare and the Chief Swan Maiden's prized emerald, Brec uses her shape-changing hat — another gift she received at birth — to infiltrate the seals' underwater home and save the day. As a reward, the Chief Swan Maiden makes Brec her deputy chief.

After her success against the seals, Brec contemplates using her shape-changing ability more often, thinking 'it would be interesting to be a hedgehog and really like eating worms. Or to be a worm and be able to be cut in bits and grow again'. Brec thinks it might even be interesting to spend more time as a member of the seal clan, among the sworn enemies of the swan clan. Perhaps she can learn to live in different worlds. At the same time, she refuses to return with Clare to the world of humans. 'If I went, I couldn't be me', Brec thinks. 'I'd have to pretend to be a human. I'd be a lie'.⁶ Temporarily transforming into a hedgehog or a worm would be an exercise in expanding her experience. She's afraid that if she became a human, she would lose herself. Through her friendship with Clare, she was already too close to it. She needed to keep her distance and preserve the difference that made her herself.

The issue of truth and falsehood, which is central to Brec's story, was very much on Mitchison's mind as she thought about her relationship with the Bakgatla. When she decided to write a book about her experiences in Botswana, Mitchison approached Linchwe and asked him, 'Shall I try to write this book? It might hurt people.' Linchwe told her, 'Write the truth. The truth cannot hurt.' She responded, 'Truth can sometimes hurt more than lies.' But in the end, she says, she 'tried to write only the truth'.⁷ Her friend Doris Lessing, who read a draft of the book, protested that Mitchison was still too close to the experiences she had written about to tell the truth about them. Mitchison's success as a historical novelist was due in part because she was able to project her own passions — for socialism, for reproductive rights — into the past, and to provide a distance that seemed to separate them from her personal activism.⁸ A certain distance was necessary to make her experience available to others. The experience had to be both felt from the inside and examined from the outside for its whole truth to be understood.

Mitchison addresses this point in a whimsical fashion in *The Fairy Who Couldn't Tell a Lie*. Early in the book, Brec's mother encourages Brec to practice using her

shape-changing hat. Brec says she's frightened of shape-changing because of her compulsion to tell the truth: 'If I turned into something else', she asks, 'whose truth would it have to be, mine or its? I don't know what I'd do!' Her mother suggests turning into something that can't talk: a table. Brec puts on the hat and becomes a table:

It was at first very satisfactory; her four strong legs — how could she have ever managed with two? — her smooth, solid top. But then it began to seem boring — couldn't she manage some carving? A wriggly feeling came over her sides and she felt proudly that she was no longer a plain table. What about a leather top? Or a marble one? And some inlay! And drawers with gilt handles! Lined with velvet!

At this point her mother, alarmed at the baroque monstrosity Brec has made of herself, snatches off the changing hat. 'What got into your head?' she asks her daughter. 'I suppose it came of being wooden', said Brec. 'All those ideas came bumping in. I wish I could have seen myself instead of being myself'.⁹

Brec's deep involvement in her woodenness, and in the idea of being a table, makes it impossible for to imagine what she looks like to others. She needs to see herself as someone else would see her. For me, as a middle-class white American man, 'woodenness' could be 'whiteness' or 'maleness'. Whiteness and maleness are just 'what it feels like', and go unquestioned unless I can adopt a standpoint that allows me to see whiteness and maleness as privilege. For Brec, drawers with gilt handles feel like part of being a table — from the inside she can't see them as an artificial excrescence.¹⁰

Brec's sense of her own difference — she is both inside the fairy group and set apart from it by her inability to lie — gives her an empathy the other fairies lack. It allows her to make friends with Clare, a human. As the swan fairies prepare for battle against the seal fairies, they assume their swan shapes and the Chief Swan Maiden rallies them:

'We are going to win!' she cried. 'Call after me, all swans, we are going to win!' And so did all the swans, calling tumultuously, beating their wings, except for Brec who could only call, 'I hope we are going to win.' The two swans next to her edged away with disdainful looks, and suddenly Brec thought how much more understanding Clare would have been.¹¹

Brec is unable to participate wholeheartedly in swan triumphalism, but in the end she uses her position as a swan fairy to help her friend Clare — rescuing her from the seals and delivering her safely back to the world of humans. Mitchison herself was at odds with the world of British colonialism, but she was able to use her position and connections within that world to promote the interests of the Bakgatla. Brec and Mitchison experience both internal and external differences — difference from the other fairies and British, difference from humans and the Bakgatla — and leverage these differences to practice empathy and generosity.

Difference is never entirely erased, and the tensions it creates are never entirely resolved, either for Brec or for Mitchison. Brec refuses to join Clare among the humans because it would mean pretending to be something she's not, but she does consider using her changing hat more often. As she contemplates changing into a seal fairy, she thinks: 'I could change into a very old deaf grumpy seal and then I wouldn't have to tell lies. I could just grunt or not say anything.'¹² She adopts silence, refusal to communicate, as a strategy for protecting her own difference. Among the Bakgatla, and especially in her relationship with Linchwe, Mitchison remained acutely aware of differences that involved a failure of communication. It particularly bothered her when Linchwe was unavailable to her: when he failed to show up for an appointment she had arranged with him, when he refused to open up to her. These failures of communication made her question her 'solidarity' with the tribe and reinforced her sense of cultural difference.

In *Risking Difference*, Jean Wyatt argues that these failures of communication and breaches of civility are necessary disruptions of 'solidarity' that prevent complete identification and preserve the sense of difference necessary for a pluralistic society that benefits from multiple perspectives. She writes:

It may seem counterintuitive to embrace the 'cold shoulder' — either the turn away from mutual understanding or the rupture of decorum — as constitutive of community. But such a forcible reminder of difference may be necessary to disrupt a community's movement toward unity at the expense of difference. That drive toward unity would erase the benefits of pluralism, including the dialectic between different cultural perspectives [...] ¹³

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identification and difference became for her a catalyst for political action and a source of inspiration as a writer. Difference — like Brec's inability to tell a lie, which sets her apart from her own people — is in the end both a curse and a gift. Throughout her life, Naomi Mitchison kept imagining disruptive and potentially transformative encounters between self and other — encounters that explored personal and cultural differences (as well as differences between species), and raised the possibility that such differences could be reconciled and the self-transformed. Mitchison's own life provided a template for these encounters. As a child, she thought of herself as a boy, and attended the Dragon School in Oxford with other boys, until the onset of puberty set her apart as a girl. But in her reading and writing, she was still able to imagine herself as a man. Imagination became her means of negotiating difference — both the differences she felt within herself, and the differences she encountered in the world around her.

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