

# Naomi Mitchison and the Supernatural

## By Moira Burgess

Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999) was brought up in an atmosphere of intellectual enquiry, her father and brother both distinguished scientists. During her long life she was an activist for many causes — health, education and social welfare among them — in London, Scotland and Botswana. A rationalist, she was dismissive of organised religion. All this is clearly stated in her memoirs<sup>1</sup> and the other non-fiction pieces which she contributed to a wide range of newspapers and periodicals. A strong, opinionated, realistic woman, then, hardly the type, one might suppose, to believe in fairies and magic. Yet in Mitchison's novels and short stories, again and again, there is a hint, or more than a hint, of some supernatural force at work behind the scenes.

Sometimes the belief can be attributed to the character rather than the author, but this is not always clearly the case. In addition, the very memoirs which testify to her rational common sense also contain intriguing, almost disturbing references to apparently supernatural experiences — 'irrational' is her usual term. Douglas Gifford, discussing her 1947 novel *The Bull Calves*, has noticed this:

[T]he reader is left feeling that there are two Mitchisons: one intensely organised and practical about the way forward for Scotland, and another lingering fascinated over the survival of actual Evil and the supernatural.<sup>2</sup>

The dichotomy seems worth exploring. It is there from the very beginning of her writing, and, according to her memoirs, from near the beginning of her life.

## Appearances and hobyahs

It is clear, and hardly unexpected in a future writer, that the child Naomi Haldane was a sensitive and imaginative little girl. Stalactites in the cellar of her maternal grandmother's Edinburgh house became ghosts for her (though even at the age of six she knew they were really stalactites), and there was something nasty in a

tower room at Cloan, her paternal family seat, though this was partly planted by an aunt's unwise joke (*ST*, pp.41, 33). At home she felt threatened by certain pieces of furniture, again not unexpectedly if we think of the heavy Victorian style; mirrors and grandfather clocks were particularly ominous (*ST*, pp.19-20).

More disturbing, in every sense, were the 'appearances' or night terrors which plagued her in the dark. She tries to account for them many years later in her memoir of adolescence (*ACH*, pp.92-96). They may have had physical causes, and she was somewhat comforted to learn, in time, that other writers — Ovid, Kipling, John Buchan — had alluded to similar experiences.<sup>3</sup> But it seems that she was left with an awareness, justified or otherwise, of another layer of reality behind the surface of everyday life.

It can't have helped much that the writer and folklore enthusiast Andrew Lang, a family friend, 'encouraged' her to see fairies, presumably to further his own research (*ST*, p.117). While in her memoirs she is fairly casual about this, the fairies seem to have stayed around:

[O]n the way back from the 1937 Labour Party Conference at Brighton — we had stopped to eat sandwiches and talk about George Lansbury — I happened to notice a hobyah type of fairy just going away. (*ACH*, p.96)

A hobyah is a kind of goblin; we may note that mischievous roadside fairies appear in Mitchison's fiction many years later, in the short story 'What do you think yourself?'<sup>4</sup>

When Mitchison, still in her early twenties, begins to write fiction, there is, from the very beginning, another layer of reality in her work too. Today we are well aware of the supernatural strand in the fiction of the Scottish Renaissance — Finn's perception of another world in Gunn's *The Silver Darlings*, Chris's visual and auditory experience in Gibbon's *Sunset Song*<sup>5</sup> — but we must acknowledge that Mitchison was early in the field: her first novel, *The Conquered*, was published in 1923.

## Early Fiction

As Mitchison was able in childhood to balance possible ghosts with actual stalactites, so in the early story 'The Barley Field'<sup>6</sup> she credibly presents the world

view of a Bronze Age farmer, while in a few words indicating the scientific explanation for his good crop of barley. The Gods must be pleased with him, he reflects, 'although perhaps also it had been useful to dig deep ... a hand deeper than any of the others' (p.14).

But no such explanation is offered in *The Conquered*. Indeed, after a carefully researched and colourful tale of Gaul in the first century BC, our final sighting of the hero Meromic (as we take it to be) comes as rather a shock:

Meromic's room stood empty [...] on the paths [...] there were tracks of wolves, and one wolf that went lame of the right fore-foot [...]<sup>7</sup>

Meromic, who has lost his right hand (p. 287) has become a wolf. What on earth is going on?

Mitchison has not produced this completely out of the blue. There has been a background of myth throughout: occasional sightings of an old sorcerer now begin to make sense. But there is more. *The Conquered* — as would have been more obvious to its first readers than perhaps to us today — throughout parallels, or at least refers tacitly to, the contemporary political situation in Ireland. The political theorist Ernest Barker supplies a preface to the novel. Meromic is a Celt; the wolf is the totem animal of his tribe. Barker suggests that despite defeat and tragedy — now as then — the essential Celt survives. It is a reading which informs us, at the beginning of Mitchison's career, that there is nothing simplistic about the use of the supernatural in her work.

## Witches and Women

Shapeshifting like Meromic's, alongside other apparently magical events, recurs in Mitchison's later historical (or quasi-historical) novels such as *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931) and *Travel Light* (1952). But these are set long ago and far away, in wholly or partly fictional worlds, where, one may say, anything goes. But how do we account for the ghost of an ancestor appearing in broad daylight in the thoroughly realistic and modernist setting of *We Have Been Warned*?

*We Have Been Warned* (1935), though not completely successful as a novel — it has an air of trying to pack too much in, of badly digested autobiography, and perhaps of preaching a socialist gospel — is notable in our context because it is

Mitchison's first novel-length attempt to integrate the supernatural into everyday contemporary life. It would appear, too, that she has discovered, not to say espoused, the witchcraft theories of Margaret Murray (1863-1963), highly regarded at that time, though later seriously challenged.<sup>8</sup> She more or less quotes Murray as her character Dione considers the ghost Green Jean, who:

more than likely [...] had been a witch, had belonged to this other, this  
oppressed secret society [...]<sup>9</sup>

A dozen years later, witchcraft — or Mitchison's view of it — assumes great importance in what is probably Mitchison's masterpiece, the historical novel *The Bull Calves* (1947).<sup>10</sup>

*The Bull Calves* is many things: a carefully researched portrayal of eighteenth-century Perthshire, a tribute to Mitchison's Haldane ancestors, perhaps most of all a consideration of Scotland at the end of a bruising period of conflict in 1947, as at the novel's setting date of 1747. But through the story of its strong yet vulnerable central character Kirstie Haldane — who bears a certain resemblance to Mitchison<sup>11</sup> — runs a thread of (apparent) witchcraft. To put the matter much too simply, Kirstie thinks that she may be a witch, and that she may through witchcraft have caused the death of her abusive first husband. Mitchison brings her, and us, to the realisation that grief, stress and emotional trauma have driven her to this belief.

Mitchison adds a historical 'witch' to the story, though Christian Shaw of Bargarran had in real life no connection with the Haldane family. She is the central figure of the Paisley witch trial of 1697. As in the near-contemporary Salem case, she begins to suffer strange seizures and accuses several people of causing them by witchcraft. The accused are found guilty; one dies in prison but the rest are executed (a horseshoe marking the site can still be seen in a Paisley street). Sure enough, the seizures stop.

Mitchison is well aware, as we are, that the explanation is much more likely to be found in psychology than in the occult. Yet a darkness hangs about the memory of Christian Shaw in her character Kirstie's mind, along with the memory of the then-recent (1662) Crook of Devon witch trials (of which a sober local account exists, no doubt read by Mitchison).<sup>12</sup> Kirstie sees, too, 'appearances' which she

attributes to black magic, but which sound very like the night terrors of the child Naomi. Kirstie is saved by the calm and loving rationality of her second husband, as Mitchison was when she spoke of her terrors to the young man she was later to marry (*ACH*, p. 96)

What we are left with at the end of *The Bull Calves* is the realisation that it is Kirstie's very strength — her sexual power, crushed and distorted in her first marriage — which has (or could have) given her, potentially, powers beyond the normal. Mitchison returns to this female power later, in 'To Deal with Witches', one of the stories arising from her involvement with the Bakgatla tribe of Botswana, which we will consider later.<sup>13</sup> The young female witch-doctor Malilo arrives in a village plagued by black magic, and clears up its problems where several male witch-doctors have failed. True, she is 'a Party member' and recommends planting fruit-trees and starting a co-operative — very like Mitchison in activist mode — but she is also a strongly sexual figure, and in fact sleeps with the Party Secretary, in a sort of trance (pp.136-137), after which all has come right. It is quite clearly her female power which brings healing to the village.

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Fairy hills — small green mounds, usually in fact prehistoric barrows or burial mounds — are found everywhere in Scotland, and indeed elsewhere (they are prevalent in Ireland, and we should not forget Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*). Mitchison may have come across the legend on earlier family holidays in Argyll, since she uses it in her 1936 collection *The Fourth Pig*.<sup>15</sup> Again, it features elsewhere in Scottish literature: a character in George Mackay Brown's play *A*

*Spell for Green Corn* hears music from the Trowieknowe (the Orkney name for fairy hills, since trows or trolls, Orkney fairies, live in them).<sup>16</sup>

But Mitchison from now on makes constant use of the legend. Even the rational William in *The Bull Calves* recalls it (p.275), and it is an essential plot device in the children's novel *The Big House* (1950), where the young hero and heroine find and help a piper who has escaped from the fairy hill (possible, if you're lucky, on Hallowe'en).<sup>17</sup> And the concept seems to have remained with her, growing in power, into the period of her African involvement over a decade later, as we shall see.

Meanwhile Mitchison sets her next novel, *Lobsters on the Agenda* (1952), in a village very like Carradale, though also like any Scottish village.<sup>18</sup> There are committee meetings and church services and gossip and feuds; we believe in this village. It is therefore easy enough to believe, when the disliked schoolmistress catches German measles or the repressive lay preacher sprains his ankle, that there is, as some characters maintain, magic going on.

But should we believe? Do the characters, really? Above all, does Mitchison?

It's hard to give a definite answer. Mitchison appears to help us — but does she? — by introducing into the *dramatis personae* a character called 'Mrs Mitchison from Carradale'. This brisk lady waxes eloquent on the White Goddess, whose powers have come down the centuries from the time when she was worshipped here (pp.195-199). Unfortunately, most of the other characters see 'Mrs Mitchison' as a bit eccentric, all but signalling that we are to dismiss her ideas. On the other hand, the likeable character Roddy the forester dismisses the very idea of magic so vehemently that we realise he is in fact afraid of it (p. 151). We are left uncertain, half-believing, rationally denying, like — perhaps? — Mitchison herself.

## **Africa**

Around 1959 Mitchison met — prosaically enough, at a British Council reception (*RFH*, p.24) — the young man Linchwe, paramount chief of the Bakgatla tribe in Bechuanaland, later Botswana, who was to occupy her time and thoughts for almost the rest of her life. Perhaps ready for a new cause to support after some

twenty years in Carradale, she threw all her energy and enthusiasm into helping him govern his tribe in the most enlightened fashion, and improving educational and social opportunities for his people. (*RFH*, *passim*). Most relevantly in our context, she found herself in a society where magic was an accepted, acknowledged part of everyday life.<sup>19</sup> Her collection of short stories *Images of Africa* springs from this world; and yet there is questioning here too. Is the boy in 'The Finger' afflicted by sorcery to prevent him testifying in a murder trial, or is it appendicitis? The reader is left unsure.<sup>20</sup>

Above all, the title of her African memoir signals that she is by then linking Highland legend with African myth, and, most importantly, that she is seeing herself as part of that myth:<sup>21</sup>

Linchwe was [...] the Chief, the fairy king [...] [Mochudi] remains the fairy hill, the place to which one must come back. (*RFH*, pp.38, 199)

## 'Five Men and a Swan'

This is the key to Mitchison's great short story 'Five Men and a Swan' written in 1940 though, as far as can be ascertained, not published till 1957.<sup>22</sup> It is a retelling of the widespread myth of the swan maiden, who can be possessed by a man who seizes her swan skin, the feather garment she puts aside to assume human form. Mitchison brings this otherworldly woman into the lives of a group of fishermen: Carradale fishermen, in fact, to whom she first read the story. As in so much of Mitchison's writing, there is a feminist message: the swan in the story will only stay with the man who does not attempt to take her by force, but treats her with gentleness and respect.

But perhaps there is another element to this swan. In a 1983 interview Mitchison says:

You know the story of the man who marries the Fairy Swan Queen, and so long as he allows her to fly away when she needs to, she'll always come back [...]

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I have suggested earlier in this essay that there is a certain element of self-portrait in some of Mitchison's female characters. Here, in the swan maiden, is a

female character who descends on a relatively closed community and changes the life of its members. We know from much of Mitchison's autobiographical writing<sup>24</sup> that she did bring about changes in Carradale, but that she seldom felt completely accepted there. She was the outsider, the 'other': as the swan maiden is among humans. All her life, as we have seen, she considers the possibility of another world behind, or alongside, the world of everyday reality. Briefly, for the space of a story, has she succeeded in bringing these two worlds together, as the activist changing lives in Carradale becomes the otherworldly swan?

## References & Further Information

Many of the topics in this essay are discussed at greater length in her monograph *Mitchison's Ghosts* (Humming Earth, 2009).

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# Africa

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*(c) The Bottle Imp*