

# Naomi Mitchison: Traveller and Storyteller

By Jenni Calder

Naomi Mitchison lived for almost the whole of the twentieth century and achieved in that time more than could reasonably be expected of a single individual. She worked energetically for political and social causes. She played a forceful part in the remote Argyll community of Carradale, where she and her husband, lawyer and MP G. R. Mitchison (Dick), bought a house in 1937. She was a county councillor and Argyll Council's delegate on the Highland Advisory Board which worked on post-war regeneration in the Highlands. She had seven children, five of whom survived, and led an experimental and complicated personal life. She campaigned for racial and gender equality and for greater recognition of the particular needs of Scotland. And inseparable from all these things, she was a novelist, poet, playwright, journalist and polemicist. She wrote over eighty books.

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Mutual responsibility, loyalty, communality: these were the trademarks of her life and work. Shortly after she and Dick bought Carradale House, she wrote a poem about Carradale as a fishing community. *The Alban Goes Out* describes with vivid immediacy a night's fishing with the Carradale herring fleet. It is a poem about the nature of co-operative effort and the need to work together. 'How can we think of our neighbours/except in a neighbourly way?' That spirit is echoed in *The*

*Cleansing of the Knife*, which has a much broader canvas, for although an intensely personal poem it is about the condition of Scotland and the need for political and cultural regeneration, a theme which also drives the novel she was working on at the time, *The Bull Calves*.

Mitchison is pre-eminently a historical novelist. She made her name initially as an innovative and sometimes provocative interpreter of the distant past. Her first novel, *The Conquered* (1923) concerns divided loyalties, personal and political, at the time of the Roman conquest of Gaul. It set the direction of much of the fiction that would follow, as she continued to explore relations between individuals and communities, systems of belief and collective good. For these novels she had a constituency, readers who enjoyed them for the freshness and vigour of the narrative, and who valued the social enquiry that they contained.

Mitchison showed herself adept at making herself comfortable in habitats distant in place and time. For her the past was not a foreign country, and the people of the past did not do things differently. Her historical fiction is in fact about doing things the same. Her characters, in their hopes and fears, emotions and conversations, are intended as vehicles for comment on the issues of her own time. *The Conquered* was triggered by the civil war in Ireland in the early 1920s. In the thirties, with Fascism on the rise, Mitchison's fiction was examining the nature of Spartan oligarchy and Athenian democracy.

Her political involvement led her in 1932 to the Soviet Union as part of a Fabian Society delegation. She was thirty-four years old, the author of sixteen books — fiction, plays, poetry and social comment, and her epic novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* had been published the year before. She went to the Soviet Union in a spirit of sympathetic curiosity. Like so many left-wing intellectuals at the time, she wanted to find that the Soviet socialist experiment worked. What she actually found was a mass of contradictions. While she envied the existence of a cause, a focus of belief, she could not ignore the negative workings of a repressive regime and a heavyweight bureaucracy. She had caught glimpses of the enormous human cost of making the system work. She came face to face with the challenge at the heart of every political and social system: how do you balance individual and collective benefit?

Mitchison's diary of her visit to the Soviet Union is, among other things, the record of an internal dialogue which helps to illuminate the left-wing intellectual's

dilemma in the 1930s and which is just as relevant today. She had been convinced since World War I that a more just society was necessary and possible. Much of her work explores and tests ideas of communality. She believed that it *was* possible to achieve a balance between the individual and the collective, and also that the human cost of progress was sometimes worth paying. Ideas of sacrifice and the meaning of comradeship always absorbed her. They underpin, for example, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*.

Her visit to the Soviet Union did not shake her socialist principles. 'I believe I am getting increasingly red', she wrote to her friend Edward Garnett soon after she returned. Less than two years later she was making another politically motivated journey, this time to Vienna on a mission to support the defeated Austrian socialists. It was a dangerous and dispiriting venture. 'I don't think I've ever understood about oppression before', she wrote in her Vienna diary, published in 1934. 'I've written about it, and imagined it, but here it was.'

A third political journey took her to the United States to embrace the cause of southern sharecroppers protesting against a deeply exploitative system. In Marked Tree, Alabama, she addressed a demonstration organised by the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and was deeply affected when black and white together sang *We Shall Not Be Moved*. It was, she wrote to Dick, 'damned nice being on their side'. But the black leader who introduced her to the crowd put his hand on her shoulder and later was beaten up by whites furious at this presumption.

These three journeys fed both Mitchison's spirit and her imagination. They influenced what she wrote, and they highlighted issues that informed the whole of her life. These were new departures, but they were also entirely consistent with the schoolgirl who was determined to be as good as the boys in everything she did, the teenager who wrote plays about conflict and sacrifice, the young woman whose first novel was triggered by empathy with Ireland.

When Mitchison took up residence in Carradale, another war was approaching. Memories of the previous war, in which her cousin, brother-in-law and many friends were killed and her husband and brother both seriously wounded, were painfully vivid. She saw war as the 'ending of a civilisation, and above all the killing of people, the extermination of a generation. I don't see how that is to be avoided if the war goes on.' The evolution of her views, from horror through ambivalence to a belief that the defeat of Hitler could bring both socialism and a

measure of independence for Scotland, is chronicled in detail in the diary she kept for Mass-Observation. The diary also chronicles Mitchison's relationship with the Carradale community — complex, uncertain, rewarding, frustrating — and reveals her increasing focus on the prospects for Scotland's future. 'I believed strongly in the simple case for a reasonable society in which liberty, equality and above all fraternity were genuine ideals, towards which we could all work and which seemed almost attainable', she wrote of this time.

*The Bull Calves* (1947), set just after the 1745 Jacobite Rising, is a novel about the state of a nation after conflict, a nation at a crossroads, divided but on the eve of a golden age of creativity and achievement. It is a statement of her commitment to Scotland and to the nation's potential at the end of another period of conflict — the parallels are clear. The novel established her credentials as a Scottish writer, but her achievement was not acknowledged at the time. There was little response. For the next twenty years or so, Scotland was the main subject of her pen, but Scotland was not particularly interested. She felt sidelined by the literary communities of both London and Scotland.

All through the fifties Mitchison was writing prolifically, at the same time as working tirelessly for Highland development and in particular for the needs of Carradale. A flavour of her involvement is found in her *Lobsters on the Agenda* (1952), an illuminating, gently ironic portrait of a West Highland community. The setting is contemporary, but the theme reasserts earlier concerns: 'we've somehow got to find a way of holding together, or — or we're clean done', as her central character puts it. She was also at this time writing pieces for the *New Statesman* that documented Carradale life — her political life and her writing and her other, very demanding, existence farming and running a large house. For her, farming was hands-on and much preferable to domestic work. 'How tired I am with Carradale and running the bloody house', she complained to a friend.

Then came a characteristically dramatic change of scene. She was sixty-five when she made her first visit to the village of Mochudi in the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland, soon to become the independent state of Botswana. She had been invited there by Linchwe, chief designate of the Bakgatla people whom she had met in Scotland. From that time she went regularly to Botswana, believing she could contribute to the village and to the country at a crucial time in their development. She recognised similarities between tribal Africa and the Scottish

Highlands, identifying the best of tribal values as the same community and collective values she had all her life worked so hard to foster. Africa provided enormously fertile ground for her to continue what she had begun in the 1920s.

She turned her attention to building dams, sinking boreholes and piping water in a country ravaged by drought. She helped set up a library. She visited schools and engaged with students. She campaigned for a new secondary school and a museum. She advised on health, contraception, nutrition. And she believed that Linchwe had the ability to combine the positive aspects of traditional tribal government with an imported democratic system to build a stable and self-sustaining community. She saw herself as a guiding hand in this process, bridging the gap between tribal cohesion and new ideas. Her ability to utilise the rational without eliminating the irrational was a striking asset in her relations with the Bakgatla, although it provoked the conventional colonial presence, who saw her as an irritant at best, a serious troublemaker at worst.

As in Carradale, Mitchison had high expectations, which were perhaps inevitably frustrated. On occasion she fumed at Bakgatla intransigence, just as she fumed at Highlanders. But at other times she felt inspired, and she kept on going back. Out of Africa, of course, came books. The speed with which she translated experience into writing shows how quickly and skilfully she was able to grasp the social and political currents of a territory that was new to her. She wrote the novel *When We Become Men* (1965) in the white heat of conviction, testing it out on her Mochudi comrades just as she had tested *The Bull Calves* on Carradale folk. The novel explores the tensions between tribal traditions and colonial intrusion. In some respects, she had been here before, for these are encounters not so different from that of the barbarian world with Athenian democracy, or of Gaul with the Roman empire, or of the Highlands with post-conflict government — post-1745 and post-1945. She often described such clashes, and sympathetically investigated value systems that failed to mesh. If the territory was geographically and specifically new, psychologically she knew where she was.

It is this under-the-skin response that makes her not only comfortable with African tribalism but a citizen of the world. Wherever she went, the act of writing was an essential part of her response and of her sense of responsibility, and the doing was inseparable from the writing. This meant that her writing sometimes lacked finesse, but it rarely lacked relevance. Her ability to empathise with the past is essentially the same talent she had for empathising with any other

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In her eighties she brought her imagination back to Scotland. One of her last novels, *Early in Orcadia* published in her ninetieth year, shows that her talent for inhabiting alien territory had not diminished. In it she goes back further than ever before, beyond the reach of written accounts and calling on the imagination to construct a convincing social and spiritual fabric for the novel's people. A clue to her approach is found in her preface to the novel: 'There is no reason to believe that men and women then were totally different from men and women now. Go far enough back and all humankind are cousins.' That last sentence is engraved on a stone in the City of Edinburgh's Makars' Court.

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Her life and work are complex, formidable even. The diversity of her writing in many ways counted against her and makes it hard to assess her influence. Yet I believe we can draw all the strands of her life together in a single word. She was a storyteller, in the traditional sense. She aspired to explore the past and interpret the present, to create a sense of communality, of shared experience, that could be passed on in a resonant voice and with fitting ritual. Naomi Mitchison lived for almost the whole of the twentieth century and achieved in that time more than could reasonably be expected of a single individual. She worked energetically for political and social causes. She played a forceful part in the remote Argyll community of Carradale, where she and her husband, lawyer and MP G. R. Mitchison (Dick), bought a house in 1937. She was a county councillor and Argyll Council's delegate on the Highland Advisory Board which worked on

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