

Naomi Mitchison's 'We Have Been Warned' in Post-Referendum Scotland

By Anna McFarlane

Over the last few years Glasgow publishers Kennedy and Boyd have been reprinting Naomi Mitchison's 'most significant work' in their [Naomi Mitchison Library series](#), with the help of Professor Isobel Murray as series editor.² These editions have made previously out-of-print novels and diaries available to the public once again, including Mitchison's controversial novel of the inter-war period, *We Have Been Warned* (1935). In her introduction to the 2012 edition, Professor Murray describes the novel as 'Naomi Mitchison's least successful novel' and warns that 'new readers should not start here!'.³ Unfortunately, these comments are used by the publishers for what must be one of the most discouraging blurbs ever to be published. Sent into the world with these words on the cover, *We Have Been Warned* comes with a warning and one that would be enough to put off any bookshop browser. The reasons for Murray's opinion are fair criticisms of the novel's structure and style; Mitchison weaves a realist political novel about the lives of two upper-middle class women in 1930s Britain with abstract forays into Scottish folklore as the kelpies follow the sisters, haunting their modern activities. Sometimes the dialogue is stilted, and reads as thinly-veiled politics rather than the high literature found elsewhere in Mitchison's oeuvre. But, in spite of these shortcomings, the novel has much to offer a reader, and particularly one reading from post-referendum Scotland. Even those who have never read a Mitchison novel before, despite Murray's urge to caution, will find much to admire and celebrate in this complicated book. The politics of Mitchison's novel, which covers the debates between communism and socialism, and between socialism and feminism, often read as relevant to modern debates and Mitchison's forward-thinking attitude to birth control and abortion might mean that the novel would still be banned if it were published today, particularly in certain American schools.

We Have Been Warned follows the lives of Phoebe and Dione, upper-middle class British sisters. Phoebe is an artist who practices free love while Dione supports her husband as he runs for a parliamentary seat as a member of the Labour party in Oxfordshire. Like Mitchison, who was born in Edinburgh and had a home in Carradale, Argyll for most of her life, the sisters have an ancestral home in rural Scotland and the action of the novel repeatedly returns to the fictional Auchanarnish where the family meet for parties and important occasions. The novel was deeply controversial upon its release and some of its subject matter maintains its challenge to the reader in a way that other controversial novels of the time such as D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) fail to do.⁴ Dione's journey into socialism as a Labour canvasser demands that she show solidarity with the working class, and her praxis leads her to aid a murderer in escaping to Russia. While in Russia, her husband takes a lover and the attraction of Russian communism glows from the pages. Later in the novel, Dione is raped by a Communist comrade in an incident that many on the Scottish Left will read as relevant today in a socialist movement still trying to promote women's equal rights and respect as essential to the liberation of the working class, rather than as a secondary concern that can be overlooked when expedient. Later, Dione becomes pregnant by her husband and comes close to having an abortion as she feels it is immoral to bring another child into the world before the socialist revolution has taken place, when other families must limit their children because of economic, material pressures. After her husband, Tom, realises how important the baby is to her he pressures her into cancelling the abortion and having the child. The novel depicts a time when the future seemed particularly uncertain and the 'warning' of its title refers to the rise of fascism in Europe which loomed on the horizon during the writing of the book, particularly towards the end of its gestation as the Nazis contrived to blame the German Communist Party for the burning of the Reichstag. This fear of fascism, and the novel's warning about it, takes place in the final few chapters as Dione is granted a vision of a possible future, in which fascism violently takes hold in Britain.

While warning casual readers away from the novel, Professor Murray does agree with Mitchison's biographer Jenni Calder that 'it is not a good novel, but it is an extremely interesting one' and with Jill Benton that it is an important document of 1930s politics and attitudes.⁵ The historical interest in the novel is certainly one that Mitchison would have welcomed and seems to have been very much part of

her approach in writing the novel. Mitchison had previously been best known for her well-received historical novels set in Ancient Rome, and in her preface she describes *We Have Been Warned* as a 'historical novel about my own times'.⁶ The First World War had made Mitchison self-aware about the experience of living through history and her non-fiction writings repeatedly show a commitment to documenting personal histories for future audiences. Her autobiography of her early years, *Small Talk* (1973) is subtitled 'an Edwardian childhood', showing her wish that readers draw general conclusions from the specifics of Mitchison's personal life. While she was looking for a publisher for *We Have Been Warned*, Mitchison travelled to Vienna where fascism was in the process of taking hold and agrees with Victor Gollancz to keep a diary of her time away. In contemplating the role of her diary Mitchison writes that, 'simply as an observer I shall be some use', and shows her self-awareness of how situated her observations will be:

I'm an observer. I'm also a Socialist, and my observations will be the observations of a Socialist, just as they'll be the observations of a woman of thirty-six, of someone brought up before the war, partly scientist, partly historian, nothing complete, the usual set of odds and ends that my social class and circumstance are likely to produce. So I shan't be objective. But, then, nobody is, so that doesn't matter.⁷

This catalogue of her identities shows Mitchison's awareness of her historical position, imagining how her attitudes and circumstances may limit the viewpoint of a reader from the future encountering her work. *We Have Been Warned* comes to the reader with a similar awareness, and dramatizes much of this subjectivity through reproducing Dione's internal debates as her principles and the practical business of living in the world rub up against one another. This self-awareness means that *We Have Been Warned* is indeed an important document of socialist attitudes during the 1930s in Britain, but also that it attempts to capture the affect, the emotional feeling, of living through the times.

However, the novel's value is not limited to that of a distant historical account. It is a compelling read in contemporary Scotland in the aftermath of the 2014 independence referendum and the ongoing discussion about the nature of nationalism that the campaign provoked. During the Scottish referendum campaign, nationalism was naturally a talking point for all sides of the debate. The official Labour party line privileged socialism over nationalism, arguing that a vote for independence was a vote against solidarity with the working classes in

other parts of the UK. Meanwhile, voices on the pro-independence side argued that socialist principles could only be achieved by dismantling a British state that had become increasingly homogenous, promoting a neoliberal pro-austerity point of view that differed between parties only by degree. The 1930s, as portrayed in *We Have Been Warned* are preoccupied with a similar tug-of-war in which nationalism is by turns regressive and pregnant with revolutionary potential. This battle is particularly important for someone like Dione who spends a lot of time in Scotland as a landowner but lives in England and fights for the socialist Labour cause there. Nationalism in the novel is shown in the complicated interstices of history, emotion, and politics. It is at the forefront of Dione's mind particularly as fascism on the continent takes advantage of nationalist sentiment to strengthen its political foothold. On a trip to Auchanarnish, Dione tells her comrade Agnes, 'I'm not really a Nationalist. At least — I'm a Socialist first'.⁸ This uncertain relationship between nationalism and socialism is an important theme that bookends the novel, which both starts and finishes in Auchanarnish and Mitchison sees the debate as crucial to understanding the rise of fascism and how it might be combatted.

In order to portray the complexities of nationalism, Mitchison uses a number of figures from folklore. Mitchison draws on the 'kelpies', traditional figures of Scottish folklore. Kelpies are water demons that often appear as horses but can change into human form. Stories of the kelpies appear all over Scotland and the tales often involve an element of seduction as the horses offer their backs to weary travellers, even singing to them in some cases, before dragging them below the water to their death. In *We Have Been Warned*, the kelpies represent regressive forces and, as such, are depicted as appearing over Dione's shoulder, as though the history of the country pulls her back even as she tries to move forward. The seduction that the kelpies represent, pulling one back into the past, is compared with the seduction of capital: 'Images, images! One peers over one's shoulder in the mirror and at the back, instead of kelpies, one sees a great £ sign or a \$ sign, or — what was the sign for a shekel?'.⁹ Like the mystical pre-modern times of the kelpies and the nationalism that they invoke, Dione sees capital as an outmoded system that must disappear into the past but continues to haunt and tempt people who try to move into the future.

As well as this traditional use of folklore Mitchison also gives Phoebe and Dione's

family a personal folklore associated with the house at Auchanarnish.¹⁰ In the first pages of the novel Dione contemplates 'Green' Jean McLean, the Lady of Auchanarnish who had been accused and acquitted of witchcraft, but had later been driven from her house by the women of the Campbell clan and left to die of exposure with her baby. Dione relates to Jean, imagining that she had indeed been a witch, 'had belonged to this other, this oppressed secret society, and had probably had dealings with some pre-Celtic and conquered folk'.¹¹ Dione's sympathy for Jean and the anti-imperialism of witchcraft leads her to muse that 'the Sabbats sounded very much like Labour Socials'.¹² The figures of the Campbell women appear throughout the novel, representing regressive establishment forces that seek to stamp out any signs of innovation or change.

Though the kelpies and the Campbell women are both Scottish figures in the novel, Scottish nationalism is not simply portrayed as a regressive impulse. Mitchison also uses the figure of Green Jean in order to show that change can grow from the past to produce radically different future possibilities. Jean's witchcraft is represented as having a primitive and revolutionary power, one that connects Dione to her ancestors and gives her some protection from the Campbell women and the kelpies. In the fantastical final section of the novel, Jean appears to Dione at Auchanarnish and tells her that 'you and your coven are in danger' and offers her a vision of the future that she can see by looking through a stone.¹³ The future Dione sees involves a socialist revolution in Britain, one that provokes the formation of a fascist counter-revolutionary movement known as the Specials who are characterised by their radical imperialism, saying, 'We are not concerned with what the foreigner thinks. We are concerned with our English Empire'.¹⁴ Dione sees the execution of her husband and a number of her comrades before waking up on the floor in Auchanarnish with her husband and her comrade Agnes standing over her. The novel finishes with these lines:

'We have been warned,' Dione said, and it was as though a steel spring had suddenly loosened and vibrated inside her. The baby was coming alive and moving in her for the first time.¹⁵

Jean's warning of things that may come to pass coincides with the quickening of Dione's baby in a move that shows the inevitability of the future and the power of the past in shaping that future. Nationalism is thus equated with history itself; the

regressive impulse of nostalgia, or longing for a past that never existed, is as dangerous as a kelpie, but the power of that history also offers a map for the future, a warning that can be heeded to shape a safer future for the next generation. Professor Murray has done Scottish literature a service by helping this and Mitchison's other rare works back into print; they should be widely read rather than avoided by all but the most committed Mitchison-philes, and this book in particular brings nuance and historical context to contemporary debates about nationalism; some warnings need not be heeded.

References & Further Information

¹The author is grateful to the Wellcome Trust for supporting her ongoing work on Naomi Mitchison through a Small Grant Award for a project entitled 'Nursing, Reproduction, and Writing: Naomi Mitchison's Science Fiction as Activism'.

² The series mission statement for [The Naomi Mitchison Library Series](#) can be found on Kennedy and Boyd's website.

³ From Isobel Murray's introduction to *We Have Been Warned* (Glasgow: Kennedy and Boyd, 2012), pp.v-xix.

⁴ Mitchison was a great admirer of Lawrence's work and wrote a dedication to him in her pamphlet, *Comments on Birth Control* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930), calling him 'one of the great men and liberators of our time' (32).

⁵ Both Calder and Benton are quoted in Murray's Introduction (pages v and ix respectively). Jenni Calder's biography is *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London: Virago, 1997) while Jill Benton's is *Naomi Mitchison: A Biography* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990).

⁶ Naomi Mitchison, *We Have Been Warned* (Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd, 2012): xxi. For an example of the glowing reviews for Mitchison's historical fiction, see [The Spectator on her debut *The Conquered*](#) (1923), described as 'one of the best historical novels we have read'. 29th June 1923.

⁷ Naomi Mitchison, *Vienna Diary 1934* (Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd, 2009), pp.10-11.

⁸ Naomi Mitchison, *We Have Been Warned* (Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd, 2012), p.552.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.441.

¹⁰ While the stories of witchcraft appear to be specific to the fictional Auchanarnish household, the stories of witchcraft and witch trials are reflected in Scotland's history. See Lizanne Henderson's 'Witch-hunting and Witch Belief in the Gàidhealtachd' in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) edited by J. Goodare, L. Martin, and J. Miller, pp.95-118.

¹¹ Naomi Mitchison, *We Have Been Warned* (Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd, 2012), p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 529.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 550.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 553.

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