Professional Boat-Rocker: Naomi Mitchison and Africa

By Jenni Calder

The place is Ghana, the year 1957. Naomi Mitchison is in Accra to cover Ghana's independence celebrations for the *Manchester Guardian*. At midnight, Kwame Nkrumah speaks, and 'After the last words he burst into a dance of achievement and joy which was taken up all round.' The other journalists head off, 'their minds on drinks and typewriters', but Mitchison joins in the dancing: 'I slipped into the High Life, a constant bath of happiness.' This was her introduction to thirty-odd years of involvement with Africa.

Why Africa? How did it happen that Africa dominated Mitchison's life as she moved beyond middle age? What was she looking for, what did she find, and how did it affect her writing?

In 1957, Mitchison was in her sixtieth year, an author of repute, the wife of a Labour MP, a county councillor, a member of the Highland Panel, the mother of five children. None of these roles in themselves or even in sum measured up to her sense of purpose. For a time, she had believed that Carradale, the Kintyre community she had adopted, would provide the territory for the role she sought. Instead, and less paradoxically than it might appear, it proved a staging post on the road to Africa.

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garden of her house in Carradale: she had invited to tea a group of British Council students travelling round Scotland, and singled out the only black face among them. This was Linchwe, chief designate of the Bakgatla, a tribe divided between Bechuanaland and South Africa. It was the beginning of an extraordinary friendship. Mitchison believed that through Linchwe it might be possible to achieve in a little-known African country a blend of the best of traditional tribal values with the best of modern democracy.

Mitchison did nothing by halves. Just as she had been determined to enter the bloodstream of Carradale, she threw herself into the life of the village of Mochudi, the focal point of the Bakgatla in Bechuanaland. Almost every year she spent weeks or months there. She was given the title 'mother of the Bakgatla' and played a key role in the ceremony which installed Linchwe as chief. She was present and prominent when Bechuanaland became the independent nation of Botswana. When at the crucial moment the Union flag was slow to descend she snatched it, hurled it at the feet of the British officials, and declaimed Lady Macbeth's 'Stand not upon the order of your going/But go at once'. Not surprisingly, she was seen by the British as a potentially dangerous troublemaker.

When in the mid-sixties there was severe drought she, like the Bakgatla, lived on meagre rations. She attended the *kgotla*, the traditional community court which dealt with village and tribal issues. She quickly grasped the problems and set about finding solutions. A library, schools, community centre, dams to store precious water, a tractor, printing press, support for Bakgatla refugees crossing illegally from South Africa, feeding schemes for children, contraception: she played a part, in some cases a crucial part, in all of these. 'I'm really deep in over Africa', she wrote to her friend Bettie Baxter, 'I feel as if I'd got something like Spain, something to die for.'

And all of it she recorded: in scraps of diary, hand-written in cheap exercise books or typed on ill-assorted sheets, in letters, and in two books of memoirs, *Return to the Fairy Hill* (1966) and *Mucking Around on Five Continents over Fifty Years* (1981). She wrote two books of history, *African Heroes* (1968) and *The Africans* (1971), and a biography of Bram Fischer, *A Life for Africa* (1973). She also wrote fiction directly inspired by her African experiences, a novel *When We Become Men* (1965), several short stories and stories for children aimed at an African readership. (The latter were still being read in 1995 when I visited Botswana.) Everywhere she went she had the means to write – pen and paper and the little

portable typewriter that accompanied her everywhere. She wrote in the midday sun, in huts and on trains, by the light of candles and oil lamps and torches.

Mitchison recognised that her involvement with Botswana was close to an obsession. She also knew that it was a replay of her involvement with Carradale and with the Highland Panel, both of which had led to disillusion. In *Return to the Fairy Hill* she wrote:

> *I had become completely, alarmingly and joyfully committed; and I knew this was all wrong. I knew quite well that I felt myself at one time committed to Scotland, to the dream of Alba. The reality of working for Scotland had got rid of most of that, though occasionally I still get a breath of it. Possibly the same thing would happen here. Reality of Africans might kill the dream of Africa. Yet it was always being revived by people or letters.*

She was aware that many of her family and friends were impatient with her Africa obsession, and also of her tendency to judge people by how they responded – or failed to respond – to the issues that for more than two decades dominated her life.

Frustrated by the community in Scotland she had tried to make her own, Mitchison was primed to find in Africa what she was looking for. But it was balanced by the 'reality of Africans'. She makes it clear in *Return to the Fairy Hill* that there were aspects of the attitudes and behaviour of the Bakgatla that hurt and angered her. They could be casual and unreliable, and unconcerned if they upset her. But it is necessary to dig into another level of interpretation to understand the extent to which Mitchison was vulnerable. Her relationship with Linchwe was fraught and ambivalent. She identified him as destined for great things and identified herself as an essential guide along the rocky road to leadership. But Linchwe was not necessarily co-operative. Mitchison's letters and diaries document quarrels, pain and disappointment. The tribe had claimed her and she had claimed the tribe, but sometimes the tribe seemed careless of their mutual bond.

The nuances of belonging and rejection that colour so much of what Mitchison wrote about Botswana parallel her experience in Kintyre. She needed to feel that she had something to offer that was qualitatively different from anything or anyone else. Equally, that 'something' had to be accepted and acknowledged. If

‘the fairy hill’ has meaning beyond the vaguely suggestive, it is that it is a place where true identity is released. If there is a hint of the supernatural in this, that is entirely appropriate, for Mitchison was highly responsive to cultures that respected magic, as both traditional Highland and Bakgatla cultures did. The ‘priestess’ role she had explored through the heroine of her best-selling novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931) allowed that blend of symbol and supernatural with the wholly practical, which first Kintyre and then Botswana seemed to offer.

Was Mitchison’s contribution to Botswana, and in particular the village of Mochudi, qualitatively different? I think so, yes. Much of the importance of what she gave rested in her acceptance of traditional tribal values, which Linchwe (who died in 2007) himself held to. She talked and wrote at length about how these values might blend into modern democratic institutions. She responded to any challenge that came her way. She positively relished getting up the noses of the British establishment, many of whom regarded her as perniciously interfering and provocative. In an incident when she and Linchwe went to Mafeking, across the border in South Africa, she stormed out of a hotel which refused to serve them together and deliberately aggravated the police by insisting that Linchwe sit with her on a park bench labelled ‘whites only’. She had done similar things in Scotland, only there it was class rather than racial boundaries that she crossed.

In a sense, she was proving herself, demonstrating her credentials as one of the Bakgatla, on their side. At the same time she was, inevitably, demonstrating her difference, the classic privilege of the outsider. She went with the men on hunting trips in the Kalahari. She argued with and criticised the chief. In other words, she entered territory that was closed to African women. The confidence and connections that gave her influence underlined her separateness. Certainly, the Bakgatla respected her, valued her as a friend and were happy to accept her as ‘mother of the tribe’, but it was on their terms, which did not necessarily coincide with Mitchison’s.

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helped to create, and met many who remembered her with affection and admiration.

What was the response of this community to this odd woman, who, however committed, was always a temporary resident, always going to leave? Most of those who witnessed Mitchison, stomping up the hill to the Mochudi kgotla with her notebook, or who benefited from her help in schools, the library, the health initiatives, would never leave. She may have been 'mother of the tribe' but she was also an outsider, an intruder, bossy, opinionated, volatile, as well as supportive and determined. It was these less manageable qualities that, often, enabled her to succeed.

The outsider has certain privileges. Although she embraced a tribal identity, Mitchison was never going to relinquish her individuality, which had always been unorthodox. She did not hesitate to use her status to get what she wanted for her tribe, and to persuade the tribe to follow what she considered to be the right course. As an outsider she could act as a catalyst. At the same time, she could not act alone. She relied on her often stormy relationship with Linchwe, with his wife Kathy who was a valuable interpreter and mediator, and with many friends, black and white. She chose not to escape the consequences of her actions, not only because she returned regularly to Botswana but also because she took the country home with her. Back in Britain, she lobbied on Botswana's behalf, looked after visiting Bakgatla, prepared future trips.

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community was destroyed.

Why was she so sympathetic to tribal culture? Partly because it responded to her own needs. It provided a continuity and a collective ethos which she had always sought. Botswana gave her a cause, a role and a valid context in which to pursue it. Because she was a woman, she was assigned an identity that fitted in to an existing social and ethical framework, the identity of adoptive mother of the chief and therefore of the tribe. And she was there at the right time, at the beginning of a new phase of the country's development.

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(c) The Bottle Imp