# Quiet pioneer: the novels of Nan Shepherd (1893–1981)

## By Charlotte Peacock

Nan Shepherd was reticent about her novels. The author, Jessie Kesson, knew Shepherd for three years before discovering she had written one. Even then, Kesson found out, not from Shepherd herself, but one of Shepherd's former students. That same ex-student recalled:

> *On the morning after the publication of The Quarry Wood, as she entered her class, the students, who had both great affection and respect for Nan, stamped their feet in recognition of her achievement. She raised her hand for them to desist, sat down at her table and went straight into taking the class as if nothing had happened.*[1]

Shepherd once told a journalist she thought more of her lectureship in literature at Aberdeen's teacher-training centre than she did of her writing.[2] It might explain her reaction that February morning in 1928. However, according to Malcolm Sutherland, a friend of Shepherd's from the 1930s until death in 1981, she never talked about her novels.[3] And during an interview in 1931, Shepherd herself is reported to have said, 'I never wanted or intended to write one. I can't tell you why I did'.[4]

## Nan Shepherd's novels

Shepherd wrote three remarkable novels. Published in quick succession between 1928 and 1933, *The Quarry Wood, The Weatherhouse* and *A Pass in the Grampians* were greeted with immediate critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Hailed as 'a writer of genius' and a novelist to put alongside Virginia Woolf, those hoping for a renaissance in Scottish letters were encouraged. A few more writers of Shepherd's 'power and originality' and Scotland might yet have a literature of its own.[5]

Significantly, Shepherd's first novel, *The Quarry Wood,* which she began writing in 1922, was rejected by thirteen publishers before finally appearing in print six years later. Those who refused it did not quite know what to make of it, conforming as little as it did at the time to the accepted idea of what a Scottish novel should be. Nor could it be shoehorned into one of the categories then available to Scottish writers: 'Kailyard', 'Scots Romantic' or, the antithesis of 'Kailyard', like George Douglas Brown's *The House with Green Shutters.*

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*The Quarry Wood,* like Theresa's pancakes, was something new.

## Nan Shepherd's contribution to Scotland's literary renaissance

The Scottish literary renaissance was not merely background noise for Shepherd. Whatever she said about not intending to write a novel, she later admitted 'she wrote only when there was something which simply had to be written'.[7]

Given the context out of which it was written, her statement suggests her fiction was a response to the destabilising confusion of the inter-war years which provoked the early revival movement.

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with contemporary authors, including Neil Gunn, Christopher Grieve and Agnes Mure Mackenzie, is testimony to her engagement with the issues concerning the literary revivalists. And although for Shepherd, art was not something to be labelled – 'All categories are absurd where art is concerned. I don't believe in categories, but in individualities'[8] all three of her fictional works show characteristics associated with Scotland's modernist movement.

Not least of these is her experimental, narrative technique, revealing her engagement with the debate about language which dominated the early renaissance movement and was prompted by T. S. Eliot. 'Was there a Scottish Literature?' he asked in 1919, before deciding there was not, because Scotland had neither a single language nor a coherent literary history.[9]

For Shepherd, the solution to the problem of Scotland's literary language was straightforward: English should be the medium of Scotland's literature, but it should be English as a Scotsman uses it. And four years before Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* erupted on the literary scene, she found a way to marry English and Scots so that the work retained a sense of cultural discreteness:

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Shepherd's vernacular of choice was Doric, the dialect of her native Aberdeenshire. Her narrative structure is less showy, less obviously experimental compared to Grassic Gibbon's, but her technique is quietly pioneering. Her narrative may be in English, but it is quite Scottish in style and makes no apology for using a Doric word when it presents itself. As old Mrs Craigmyle says to Ellen Falconer in *The Weatherhouse,* 'The young man has a good Scots name that won't fit into the metre. You're right. I shouldn't spoil an old name as though I had an English tongue on me – feared to speak two syllables when one will do.'[11] The art of Shepherd's dialogue is that she makes the rhythm, not the words, do the work.

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There was more to her choice of setting, however, than her familiarity with it. Shepherd uses the regional to explore the issue of national cultural identity.[12] This is most explicit in *The Quarry Wood* and *A Pass in the Grampians* where the symbolic Pillars of Hercules and physical Grampian pass, mark the boundaries and act as portals to the world beyond. Read consecutively, her novels explore the conflict.

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Shepherd's texts do not necessarily provide answers. She leaves it to the reader to decode her narratives. But the microcosm of rural community in the North-East also allowed her the exploration of a broad range of human experience, as well as more universal themes.

## To get leave to live

For women writing during the 1920s and 30s, Pound's modernist war-cry, 'Make it New!' 'did not necessarily mean responding to the destabilising challenges of the machine age'[15] (although Shepherd does address this in a *Pass in the Grampians*). It meant exploring women's identity and position in society post-vote.

Belonging to a close-knit, rural community yet also finding space for the self is a recurring theme of Shepherd's fiction. But whereas other modern Scottish writers like Grassic Gibbon suggest, somewhat gloomily, that the two are mutually exclusive, Shepherd's novels offer a fresh, more optimistic vision. The marriage of inner and outer lives *is* possible, she suggests, through a shift of perspective.[16]

## *The Quarry Wood*

In *The Quarry Wood,* Martha Ironside, ravenous for knowledge, fights her way from her working-class background to university and a teaching career, only to realise that man does not learn from books alone, but from living. Her altered perspective is brought home in a scene almost at the book's end. Her father, Geordie, is holding the still-twitching body of a hen whose neck he has just wrung:

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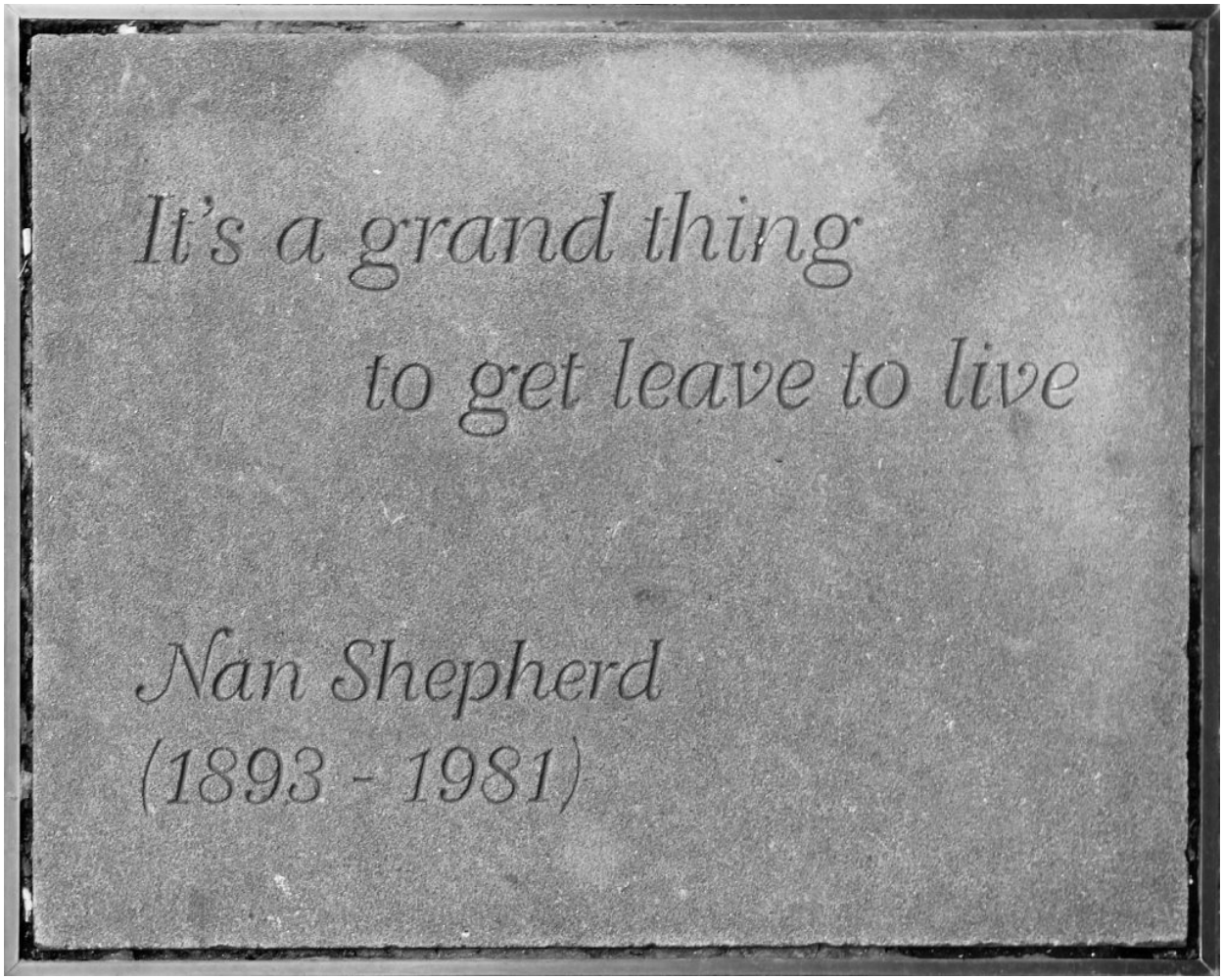
Nor is it just her heroines Shepherd uses to explore this conflict between inner and outer lives. Her novels are littered with female characters, young and old, grappling with their social situation; trying to get leave to live. Among them are Martha's outwardly conventional, but quietly anarchic, Aunt Josephine, who won't fence in her hens because their escape over the boundary serves as a symbolic reminder of life beyond it 'and Aunt Josephine at every turn chose instinctively the way of life'.[18] Lang Leeb Craigmyle in *The Weatherhouse,* on the other hand, gets leave by disengaging herself from active living. Mary Kilgour, the 'New Woman' of *A Pass in the Grampians*, sees her chance to get leave to live beyond the Pass of the book's title, and takes it.




Nan Shepherd's stone, Makar's Court, Edinbugh. Photo by Stefan Schäfer, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

## *The Weatherhouse*

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Its parochial setting and use of dialect (in prose which has become more pliable and expressive since *The Quarry Wood*) establish *The Weatherhouse* as renaissance literature. It is also more modernist. While its plot revolves around Lindsey Lorimer's engagement to Garry Forbes, no single character has a starring role.

Alongside Lindsay, the other women in the cast try to position themselves either within the community or beyond it. And through the eponymous Weatherhouse itself, with its 'quaint irregular hexagon' and its 'room that seemed not to end with itself, but through its protruding windows became part of the infinite world,'[19] Shepherd offers endlessly shifting perspectives. A kaleidoscopic lens on the relationship between inner and outer landscapes and the fragmentation of identity.

## *A Pass in the Grampians*

*A Pass in the Grampians* is the most modernist of Shepherd's fiction. As the use of the word 'pass' in the book's title suggests, the text is all about change – something central to the creative consciousness of the Scottish Renaissance. Representing a portal to the world lying beyond, the Grampian pass also symbolises the passage from girlhood to maturity. And young Jenny Kilgour – torn between the dour solidity of life on her grandfather's farm and the exciting, if vulgar, showiness of Bella Cassie – is desperate to get beyond the Pass.

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Underpinning all Shepherd's novels is a philosophical framework. Unravel the multi-perspective, layered narratives and their essence is revealed: an exploration of the fundamentally human puzzle of what is 'to *be*'. For Shepherd, 'getting leave to live', meant apprehending that to look out is to go in. 'Movements of being,'[24] as she described this traffic between the physical, outer landscape and spiritual inwardness she would go on to crystallise, first in her poetry and later in *The Living Mountain.*

Man's interrelatedness with nature is implicit in all her novels  but is perhaps most obvious in *A Pass in the Grampians.* At the end of the book, Jenny Kilgour envisions 'a new mode of being' on the other side of the Pass. She sees also, however, that 'her life is rooted deep in earth, its ample rhythms are in the movement of her thought'.[25]

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There is no evidence Shepherd read his review. (Or, indeed, any evidence Leslie Mitchell actually read her book.)[28] But two years later, she made a startling confession to a journalist. Interview over, standing at the garden gate, Shepherd said, 'I don't like writing, really. In fact, I very rarely write. No. I never do short stories and articles and I'm not going to give up teaching.'[29]

Mitchell's scathing attack on her novel might well have been prompted Shepherd's parting comment. Just as it might have been the reason she never produced another one – effectively removing herself from his arena. But it did not stop her writing. In the years that followed she went on to publish a volume of poetry and a short story, as well as a host of articles.

A prescient critic, she toiled to promote other the work of other Scottish writers she deemed valuable. Not just the lionised writers of the era, such as Neil Gunn, but the maligned and misunderstood, like Hugh MacDiarmid (whose poetry she made sure was included in the Training College's literature curriculum) and the neglected, including Agnes Mure Mackenzie, Marion Angus and Helen Cruikshank. In this respect, as McCulloch suggests, perhaps Shepherd's greatest contribution to the literary renaissance, was as an 'enabler' – working for change in Scotland in literary activity 'behind the scenes'.[30]

When Mitchell's life was tragically cut short in 1935, she contributed to the fund set up for his widow and children. But she never brought up the subject of her novels again.

## Nan Shepherd's renaissance

By the 1960s, her fiction and poetry books were out of print and Shepherd

appeared to have slipped into literary obscurity. She produced no other major works until 1977. When, believing the world was finally ready for it, she retrieved the manuscript of *The Living Mountain* from the drawer where it had lain for over thirty years and published it.

It was Roderick Watson who rediscovered her novels. 'They have been most unfairly forgotten',[31] he says in his introduction to Canongate's 1996 omnibus edition of her fiction and non-fiction works. In 2000 her cultural contribution to Scotland was recognised with a commemorative paving slab at Edinburgh's Makar's Court and her face now adorns the Royal Bank of Scotland's £5 note. Her poetry anthology *In the Cairngorms* has been reprinted, and a selection of her other writing – including her articles on MacDiarmid, Angus and Mackenzie – are now also available in print.[32]

The work widely regarded as her literary masterpiece, and the one for which she is currently best known, however, is *The Living Mountain*. So it's a grand thing that the line on her paving stone and the banknote is not from her last book, but her first.Nan Shepherd was reticent about her novels. The author, Jessie Kesson, knew Shepherd for three years before discovering she had written one. Even then, Kesson found out, not from Shepherd herself, but one of Shepherd's former students. That same ex-student recalled:

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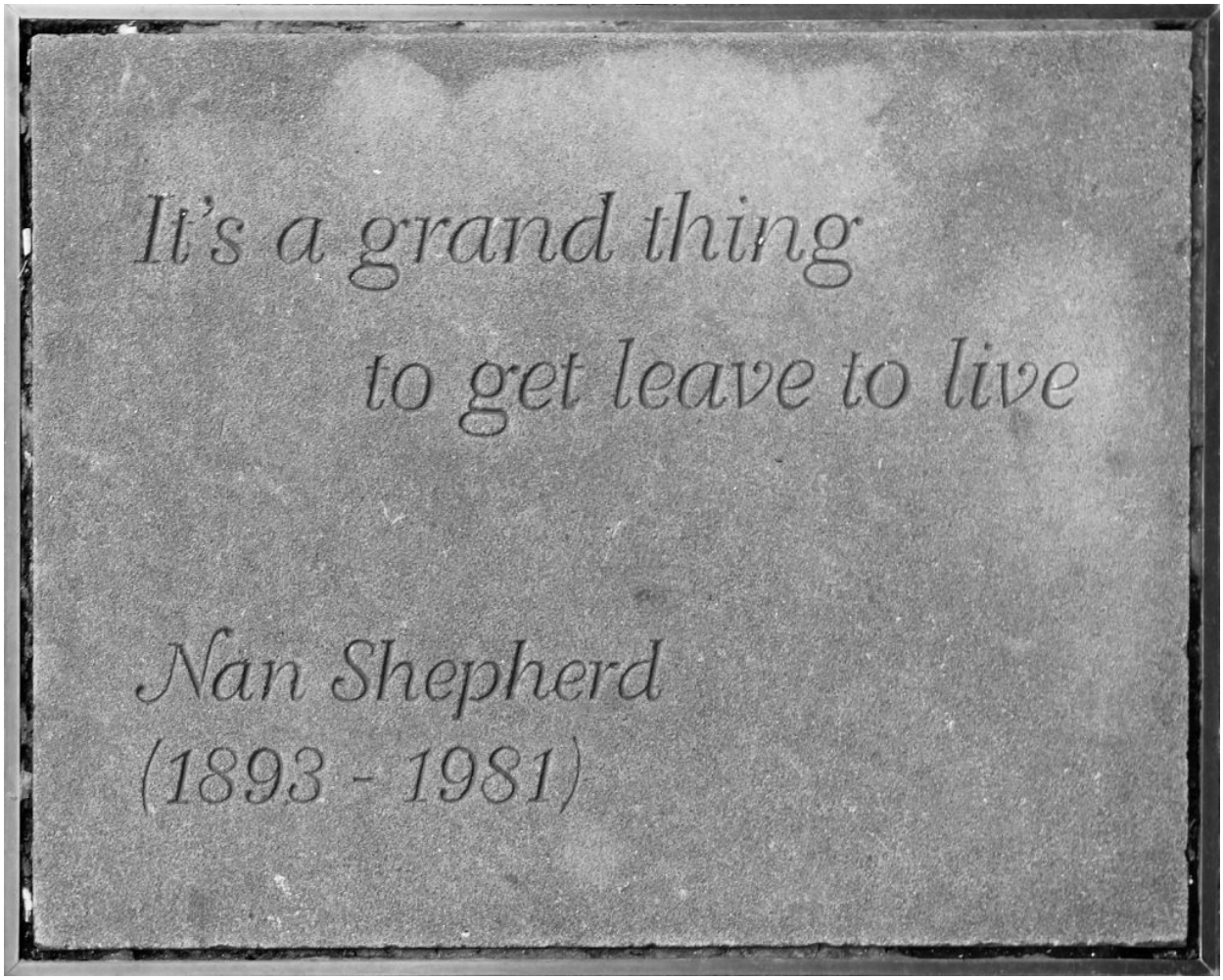


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When Mitchell's life was tragically cut short in 1935, she contributed to the fund set up for his widow and children. But she never brought up the subject of her novels again.

## Nan Shepherd's renaissance

By the 1960s, her fiction and poetry books were out of print and Shepherd

appeared to have slipped into literary obscurity. She produced no other major works until 1977. When, believing the world was finally ready for it, she retrieved the manuscript of *The Living Mountain* from the drawer where it had lain for over thirty years and published it.

It was Roderick Watson who rediscovered her novels. 'They have been most unfairly forgotten',[63] he says in his introduction to Canongate's 1996 omnibus edition of her fiction and non-fiction works. In 2000 her cultural contribution to Scotland was recognised with a commemorative paving slab at Edinburgh's Makar's Court and her face now adorns the Royal Bank of Scotland's £5 note. Her poetry anthology *In the Cairngorms* has been reprinted, and a selection of her other writing – including her articles on MacDiarmid, Angus and Mackenzie – are now also available in print.[64]

The work widely regarded as her literary masterpiece, and the one for which she is currently best known, however, is *The Living Mountain*. So it's a grand thing that the line on her paving stone and the banknote is not from her last book, but her first.

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