

Willa Anderson, Mrs Edwin Muir,  
1890-1970. Writer and translator.  
Nigel McIsaac, 1944. Scottish  
National Portrait Gallery.

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confessed to having coached them in the Gaelic (MS 38466 5/9).

It was a very merry evening, the journalist concluded.

The scene from post-war Prague sheds a different light on a Willa Muir who is usually viewed a little dryly and piously in literary history: in her Prague journals she is a cheeky, spirited, and sometimes deeply depressed, woman who presented a public face of diligence and propriety, and a tongue of acceptable and normalized literary English. That identity was one to be worn. In her Prague journals, a few months earlier, Willa Muir wrote a poem about Edwin getting ready for work at the British Council, entitled *Metamorphosis*: My only love, daily I see you change, / donning hard rows of buttons, buckled, braced, / brushed smooth and shaven till you are bare-faced, and then disguised with large and horn-rimmed glasses should I not find this frightening and strange? (MS 38466/5/2). The martial imagery spoke to internecine fighting at the British Council and to their protections against some of the English snobbishness and xenophobia that she would fictionalize in her unpublished novel, *The Usurpers*, as analogous to the world of doctrinaire and dogmatic Communists who were about to stage a coup in Czechoslovakia: the English seemed to her quite as exclusionary and harmful.

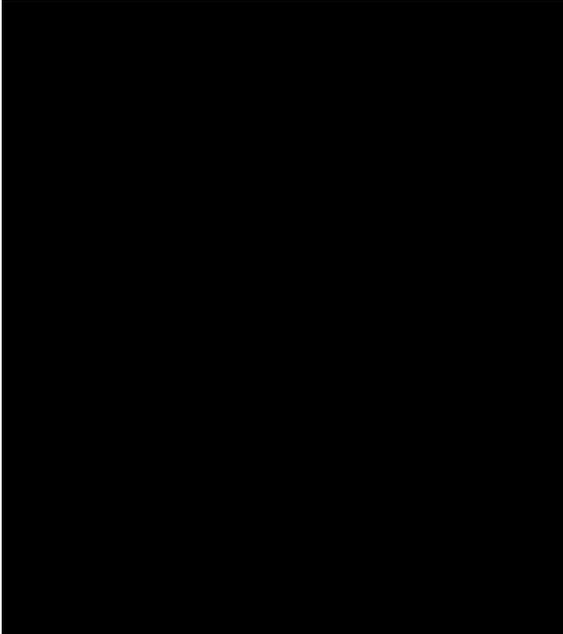
Her Prague journals start with an observation about the English watching others (and, implicitly, herself): they are always maddeningly sure of what to expect from others: behaviour becomes for them simply a cliché: Spoken like a true gentleman. No lady would do such a thing. Most unEnglish! (MS 38466/5/2). They judge foreigners immediately by this normative sense of behaviour and the way those outsiders dress, but Muir thinks, too, they can't comprehend a thinking individual who was born in the country who does not want to behave or dress differently; you can't behave with natural spontaneity or else you'll be classed as eccentric, if not rank outsiders (MS 38466/5/2). Her decision to teach the Czech students merry songs in Gaelic is a surprise gift to her husband but also a cheeky rebuke to the judgmental and disapproving English bureaucrats, challenging the primacy of their tongue.

Muir keenly felt an immense w( and heir

belong somewhere (MS 38466/5/3). Muir called her autobiography, *Belonging* (1968), which came with a central argument that she found a home in Edwin, their marriage and their common literary work, however physically peripatetic their lives were. They never quite fit in wherever they settled, but this outsidersness also meant they also showed a democratic openness to others. Popular with the Czech students taking classes at the British Council, the Muirs were also immersed in the vibrant immediate post-war Czech literary scene, one that would be rent apart after the February coup in 1948 because of diverging political affinities. The Muirs supported writers looking to emigrate after the coup, including the poets Jiří Kolář and Ivan Blatný, but others in the British Council made difficulties for visas for the writers who are to go to England; Parrott alleging that Kolář and Blatný are just Communist stooges (MS 38466/5/4). Blatný made it to an unhappy exile in England; Kolář did not, was imprisoned by the Communist regime in the 1950s and later forced exile after signing the Charter 77 petition.

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adding right underneath (Edwin!) (MS 38466/5/3) as if Kafka's description of the fifth son in the story perfectly encapsulated her husband facing his travails at the British Council. A month after the coup, and the morning after Klaus Mann



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Two months after the coup, the Muirs attended a reception given by the new regime's foreign minister, Vladimír Clementis, who received us very cordially but it made Willa Muir wonder about this country. If our relations with people were purely formal, superficial, we might go on living here for some time yet We could, ideally, get on with and sympathise with the people of good will, like [Marie] Pujmannova, talk literature, translate, benevolently watch over developments. But could we? The problem was that they were close to Czechs who were now enemies of a regime, that abuses and defames quite impartially and it she knew it would also defame us if that seemed necessary. Clementis himself would be executed after a show trial in 1952 (the subsequent airbrushing of whom famously opens Milan Kundera's 1979 novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

the British Council. A month after the coup, and the morning after Klaus Mann visited the Council, she notes slept in: late breakfast: rest of morning unexpected peaceful concentration on Kafka (MS 38466/5/4: 20 March 1948) and finally, a month after that, she mentions in-fighting at the Council, a visit from Czech friends, and a celebratory statement, underlined for emphasis: I finished Kafka (MS 38466/5/4: 28 April 28 1948).

It is hard to imagine, given Kafka's iconic fame and, by 1948, he was a figure who was already becoming iconic in England and the US thanks in large part to the Muirs' translations how little known his work was in Prague and the Czech lands at this time. The German-speaking Jewish community to which he belonged had just been almost wholly murdered in the Holocaust (including his three sisters), and, in the immediate post-war period, non-Jewish German-speaking communities were being expelled *en masse* in retaliation for assumed collaboration with the Nazis. Willa Muir, translating in Prague in 1947-8, was working in a language, German, that had been and was being expunged from Czech life. She was translating Kafka around the corner physically from where he had lived thirty years earlier, and yet his work was all but forgotten in his native city. The work Willa Muir was doing in Prague, nonetheless solidified Kafka's reputation in English and then globally, so much so that in a Kafkaesque twist the new Communist regime banned his work until 1963.

Had a fit of the scunners: heart withered up, Willa Muir wrote on 7 May 1948

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*(c) The Bottle Imp*