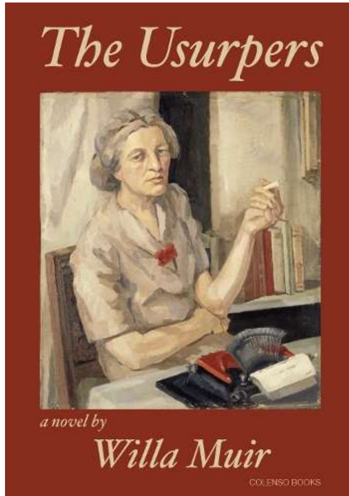
‘The Usurpers’, by Willa Muir

Review by Emily L. Pickard



In her posthumously published novel *The Usurpers*, Willa Muir (1890–1970) provides a stark contrast to her usual themes. Muir’s focus on corruption, deception, and communism in 1940s Czechoslovakia (here, ‘Slavomania’) shifts her agenda from gender-centric to Western-centric. Written in the 1950s, the novel’s similarity to Muir’s own experiences, with the central couple, Martin and Jamesina Russell, generally agreed to be depictions of the Muirs, made it unpublishable in her lifetime. Now, fifty-three years after her death, Anthony Hirst and Jim Potts of Colenso Books have deemed the British public ready for its revelations about the British Institute (here, the ‘Utopian Mission’).

The novel’s opening, though initially undramatic, paints unappetising images of many of Muir’s BI contemporaries and provides insight into the characters’ marriages and homosocial relationships. Given the familial and microcosmic focus in her other novels, we settle into an assumption that *The Usurpers* is a portrayal of petty rivalries and frivolous bureaucracy. However, Muir shatters this perception around a hundred pages into the novel when the poison simmering underneath trickles out.

At the Russell’s literary group, one Slavomanian explains the Communists’ plan should they gain power: ‘You’ll do what the party tells you to do. […] You’ll be allowed to express only the wishful thinking of the Party. […] Someone has had the bright idea that all new blocks of flats should be built of glass […] so that

every comrade can see what every other comrade is doing' (99). While the guests laugh at this, Jamesina expresses that it would be 'a nightmare, if nobody can trust anyone else' (99). Her guests assure her this is already happening but she remains in denial. The threatening depiction of their friend Dick Zelezny's arrest in the next chapter makes evident the days to joke are soon to end.

Hints of fascism and Muir's disturbing but relatable comparison between the bureaucratic and 'official' practices of the Mission's Chief, Arch Bower, and that of the Communist coup influenced by Soviet Russia begin to haunt the novel. Perhaps concerned that the similarities would go unnoticed, she spells it out for her readers using Martin Russell's post-coup explanation of the aggression that leads to authoritarianism. He connects this with Bower:

> *Call it a Party Line, or a line of argument. […] Your first point may be a small one. It may even concern a genuine grievance or a genuine loyalty. But you divide people on it; that's what matters. You tell them they must be for it or against it, […]. You don't give them time or room to realise […] that they can be indifferent because they're thinking of something else, or because they just don't care; you insist that they must divide. Of course you try to discredit the side you don't want them to take. You make it look as if justice and morality are on your side. [….] I ought to be grateful to Arch, Jamesina. I've learned a lot from him (268, 270).*

Muir suggests that while there may be differences between Western and Soviet politics, anyone can fall victim to the temptations and divisive nature of power. We are starkly reminded of the inefficiency of Western bureaucracy and risk-aversion that contributed to the horrors of the Second World War and, Muir suggests, the Putsch:

> *'Why do the Western Powers allow it, Mrs Russell?'*
> *[….]*
> *'But you Slavomanes are doing this yourselves,' said her mistress. 'How can anyone interfere from the outside?'*
> *'They should stop it,' insisted Annushka. 'I am angry with them if they don't stop it.'*
> *(275)*

Muir suggests that the lines between right and wrong, just and unjust, and who enacts oppression and why are muddied. Mrs Russell spends a majority of the novel in denial. In this scene with her maid, she confronts that ever-haunting paradox – the ‘Slavomanes’ *are* enacting this coup, and yet they are not. Many fled, were arrested, fired, and tortured for their dissent. Muir’s questions about power, authoritarianism, and a government’s ability to oppress its own people are encouraged by frequent allusions to the Holocaust and nuclear weapons. The questions this book raises are strikingly familiar for twenty-first century readers.

Fortuitously published in the same year as Dr Margery Palmer McCulloch’s (1935–2019) posthumously published *Edwin & Willa Muir – A Literary Marriage* (edited and introduced by Roderick Watson, Oxford University Press, 350pp), these books together tell the story of the Europe that the Muirs experienced. Outsiders at times, devoted allies always, the Muirs lived during a period fraught with powerful debates about freedom, the definition of basic human rights, and the best methods of achieving both on national and international scales. Muir writes about refugees in a touching and relevant fashion: ‘This is his country […] but he can’t live here, where his roots are [….] In France he might be rootless, but he would be free’ (289). Her character, Vladimir, describes this as ‘The dilemma of every refugee’ (289). By the novel’s conclusion, we feel the intense loss of place, community, and freedom that accompanies political and military coups, as if we are experiencing it personally. From the opening scenes of happy go-lucky dancing, as the book becomes increasingly shadowy and threatening, we see censorship, betrayal, and deception creep into every interaction. Even after finishing reading, it is difficult not to feel a sinister power in the air as one questions how, eighty years later, these challenges remain unsolved.

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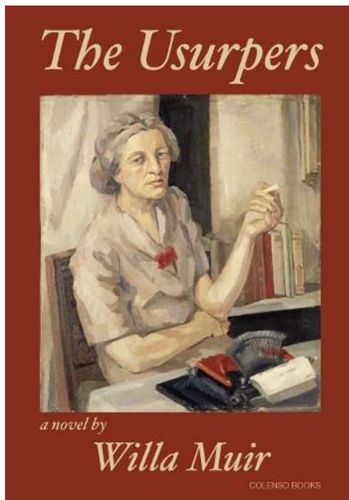

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