

Naomi Mitchison was born in Edinburgh in 1897 and died in 1999. Her career spanned from 1923 with the publication of her first novel *The Conquered* and lasted into the 1990s. While best known for her historical fiction, the genre which dominated her early career during the 1920s and 1930s, her novels have also been categorised into phases which include, ‘classical’ literature, the ‘Thirties’, ‘Scottish literature’, ‘science-fiction’, ‘children’s literature’ and ‘African literature’, as well as a variety of other texts which do not easily subscribe to an ‘obvious grouping’.¹ Mitchison also wrote poetry, plays, autobiographies, journalism and academic papers. Despite the rich and varied nature of Mitchison’s literary career, there are recurring motifs running through much of her writing; as Isobel Murray points out ‘above all she is concerned with loyalties and the way in which they conflict and confuse people’ and that ‘the exploration of the psychology of both slave and slave owner is a central interest for Mitchison’.² This is substantiated by Mitchison herself; forty years after her career began, while living as adopted mother within the Bakgatla tribe in Botswana, she contemplated:

And now again I began to wonder whether I was repeating myself, whether the helots in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, Tragon and Neareta and Phoebis, were Africans: whether I take sides, not for reason but because of something in myself, something in childhood, perhaps a revenge on my mother [...] It is at least quite reasonable to suppose that we whites have been unforgivably bloody to the Africans in various situations: but that in certain circumstances which we must create, we shall be forgiven³

Mitchison’s upper-class upbringing and her mother’s relentless promotion of the Empire and belief in social hierarchies validates Mitchison’s questioning⁴, and led

¹ Murray, I 1990 ‘Human Relations: an outline of some major themes in Naomi Mitchison’s adult fiction’. Schwend, J & Drescher, H.W (eds). *Studies in Scottish fiction: twentieth century*. Frankfurt am Main, (pp.243-256; 254).

² Murray, I 1990 (p. 248)

³ Mitchison, N 1966. *Return to the Fairy Hill*. London: Heinemann. (p.79)

⁴ See Calder, J 1997. *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*. London: Virago (p.13)

Diana Wallace to assert she could have easily have become ‘one of those complacent imperialists’.⁵ Overtly concerned with the negative impact of colonialism on indigenous populations, Mitchison desperately wanted to ‘undo some of the harm the white’s have done’ and believed her writing could ‘maximise goodwill’ and move towards circumstances in which colonisers could be forgiven.⁶ In this way, Mitchison consciously and significantly distances herself from her own, white, upper-class background.

Of course, Mitchison’s concern with loyalties in many ways stemmed from her own experiences and conflicts:

I have obligations and loyalties to my title [as mother to the tribe], which may sometimes, in some ways, conflict with my loyalties as a British citizen. But it also means, I think, that I have learnt to slip into an African skin, to think and feel as an African, to have it said to me lovingly: ‘I cannot think of you as white.’ Yet remember, all writers are shape-changers or, if you like, so strung that they can play tunes in all modes.⁷

Mitchison was acutely aware of her difference in Africa but as the above quotation demonstrates she continually tried to underplay her difference from this grouping, whilst inevitably having to maintain it: ‘part of that role meant retaining her own otherness, for it was precisely the fact that she was white and well-connected that enhanced her value in Botswana’.⁸ At times, however, Mitchison felt the strain of trying to represent her tribe and maintain her own identity and integrity:

We whites with our feelings of deep, romantic guilt, may lap up both Fanon’s and Sartre’s preface to punish ourselves with. But it is not quite real. One day some of us will get bored of saying it is all our fault, please

⁵ Wallace, D 2005 ‘Remembering the conquered: Naomi Mitchison’s anti-imperialist fictions’, In Wallace, D *The Women’s Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000*. Basingstoke, 43-53 (p.45)

⁶ Mitchison, N 1966 (p.76)

⁷ Mitchison, N 1968. *African Heroes* (p.7).

⁸ Calder, J 1997 (p.251-252)

cut our throats. Some of us have no feelings but disgust for our ‘kith and kin’ in Rhodesia – disgust and the political action that goes with it⁹

The pull between ‘sides’ is repeatedly dismantled resulting in texts which examine ambivalence and complicity in colonial relationships. While this is applicable to Mitchison’s early works which were often set in ancient Greece and Rome, the colonial relationship becomes more problematic when we move into her writing produced during her years spent in Botswana:

the thing that worried me, in a way, most, was that they had so little African confidence, so little on which to build an African future, or a Tswana state. I became more and more determined to make a go of my very difficult *History of Africa* [...] I stuck for a few days before I could write the chapters about the slave trade, simply because I was so filled with the horror and guilt at the thought of what might have been done to my people here, by my people there¹⁰

‘Mitchison’s people’ in Scotland and her own ancestry which she depicted in her first ‘Scottish’ novel *The Bull Calves* (1947) showed that her own relations had slaves and again disrupted any binary notions of ‘sides’. *The Bull Calves* was her first novel published after her move to Carradale in Scotland in 1939 and has been lauded as establishing her role as a Scottish author.¹¹ Set 200 years earlier at her paternal family’s (Haldane) ancestral home in Gleneagles, the novel focuses on characters based on Mitchison’s distant family, their divisions in the aftermath of the Jacobite Rebellions, and how grudges are overcome and resolved. The novel brings together the Haldane family, most significantly Kirstie Haldane and her husband, the Highlander, William of Borlum; symbolically their marriage represents the bond

⁹ Mitchison, N. Letter to the Editor. ‘Fanon’s Formula’, *Transition*, 27, 1966, p.5

¹⁰ Mitchison, N 1966 (pp.111-112)

¹¹ See Gifford, D 1990 ‘Forgiving the past: Naomi Mitchison’s *The Bull Calves*’. Schwend, J & Drescher, H.W. (eds). *Studies in Scottish fiction: twentieth century*. Frankfurt am Main, 219-241. Also, Stirling, K 1999 ‘The Roots of the Present: Naomi Mitchison, Agnes Mure Mackenzie and the construction of history’ In Cowan, E.J & Gifford, D (eds) *The Polar Twins*. Edinburgh, 254-269

between the Highlands and Lowlands and the potential for divisions and conflicts to be resolved after the Rebellions. Thematically the novel looks at national conflicts and the way in which these loyalties and principles need to be reassessed in order to progress and forgive and to benefit from the Union. While the novel has been praised for offering a reconciliatory tone, which was particularly significant for post-WW2 Europe, the novel's sub-narrative in which William is exiled to America and subsequently marries and abandons his Native American wife and children is a factor which has been overlooked by critics but which arguably constitutes a major factor in the novel. At the end of the novel, William's attempt to confess all to Kirstie is prevented as she tells him:

I know fine you have your secrets, William. And in the goodness of your heart you are lying to keep the thing from me. But you needna lie, mo chridh. Maybe I can guess the kind of thing it would be, and maybe I am better so than knowing it for sure and it would hurt the both of us seeing the thing over plain, and it doesna concern us now [...] there will be nothing that need be said. And you needna lie to your Kirstie. But, my soul, I will ask you to keep silent on the main thing and that willna be hard for you, since it is for your Kirstie's sake. But dinna think you are deceiving me, my love, by keeping silent, and dinna think you are doing wrong. For you arena, whatever you may have done in times past.¹²

In her notes on the text, Mitchison implies that histories which suggest that Scotland willingly joined the Union and benefited from it are inaccurate. In doing this, she implies that Scotland was coerced into its role in the Empire, which history has shown is far from accurate. The silenced Native Americans in the text and the way in which Scotland is united as part of the Union at the end of the novel, demonstrates the way in which Scotland *was* complicit in the Empire, disrupting any singular notion of Scotland's relationship with imperialism.

¹² Mitchison, N 1947. *The Bull Calves*. (p.406)

Within postcolonial studies the issue of who can speak for Others has been widely debated and is a question which is arguably central to Mitchison’s work.¹³ Chinua Achebe’s assessment of Joseph Conrad’s work that he used Africa as a mere backdrop to explore the European psyche is exemplary of the way in which colonised peoples and cultures have been marginalised in literature. Achebe has, however, argued that people should not be limited to writing about their own cultures but must recognise that they cannot ‘be too profound about someone whose history and culture is beyond their own’. Achebe’s position suggests that while ‘outsiders’ may depict other peoples and cultures they must avoid being reductive and, inadvertently, assuming the position of ‘knowing’ and ‘explaining’ the other culture, which simply perpetuates a imperial ideology.¹⁴ Therefore, we should not immediately exclude Mitchison’s writing based on her experiences in Africa simply because they are not written by an ‘indigenous’ person. Indeed, her decision to depict colonial relationships which demonstrate the ambivalent and complex relationship between colonised and coloniser, undermining any simple binary divisions, is indicative of her success in presenting anti-colonial texts. Yet, her time in the Bakgatla problematises the way in which writers in a postcolonial world can continually speak for Others. Arguably, her continual insistence of her right to speak as a Bakgatla weakens her position by trying to be ‘too profound’; continually asserting her knowledge and understanding of the tribe and claiming that she ‘can think and feel as an African’ results in texts which remove agency from the peoples which she attempts to represent.

¹³ See Fee, Margery 1995. ‘Who Can Write as Other?’. Also, Alcoff, Linda ‘The Problem of Speaking for Others’, *Cultural Critique*, No. 20 (Winter, 1991-1992), 5-32

¹⁴ Phillips, Caryl ‘Out of Africa’, *Guardian*, Saturday 22 February 2003. Interview with Chinua Achebe on Heart of Darkness. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/feb/22/classics.chinuaachebe>> [Accessed 25 May 2009]

Achebe, Chinua 1988. *Hopes and impediments : selected essays 1965-1987*. London: Heinemann

For Scottish studies, Mitchison’s works are an important contribution through which to evaluate the contentious issue of postcolonialism within the field. They are indicative of the ambivalence in which Scotland is held in the debate on postcolonialism; where it is considered as both coloniser and colonised. Her attempts to write from the perspective of the colonised, while depicting the coloniser as equally complex, could be recognised as employing some of the discursive techniques of postcolonial literature. However, at times her African writing moves beyond a desire to explore these complexities and difficulties and becomes a means of absolution for her rather than a liberatory text for the culture she depicts.

Mitchison’s work relates significantly to the legacy of colonialism and Empire, yet her narratives complicate any ‘easy’ notions of Scotland’s relation to colonialism: there is less concern with trying to prove or disprove its place in the ‘seductive’¹⁵ field as colonised victim, but rather explores the ambivalence and recognises Scotland’s complex past within the Empire.

¹⁵ Parry, B 1997. ‘The Postcolonial: Conceptual Category or Chimera?’ *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 27, pp. 3-21.