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INTRODUCTION

I have said very little here about my writing. It is my job and I think I do it well. In some ways my writing is old-fashioned, but I doubt if that matters much. . . . I know I can handle words, the way other people handle colours or computers or horses.

—Naomi Mitchison, aged 90¹

Reviewing a book by the poet Stevie Smith in 1937, the year after *The Fourth Pig* was published, Naomi Mitchison opened with a characteristic *cri de coeur*: “Because I myself care passionately about politics, because I am part of that ‘we’ which I am willing to break my heart over, and can no longer properly feel myself an ‘I,’ because that seems to me to be the right thing for me to do and be, I see no reason why everyone has got to. Stevie Smith can still be an ‘I.’ And that’s good.” She is thinking about her contemporary’s enviable singularity of experience and voice: “Such people don’t have to be ‘we’; they can be ‘I,’ proudly and bouncingly as

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1 Naomi Mitchison, *Saltire Self-Portraits 2* (Edinburgh: The Saltire Society, 1986), p. 32; see also Elizabeth Maslen, “Mitchison, Naomi Mary Margaret, Lady Mitchison (1897–1999),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed., May 2009, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50052>, accessed 30 Aug. 2009); Diana Wallace, “Naomi Mitchison,” *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 14 Nov. 2005.

2 • Introduction

Blake was. . . Stevie Smith bounces with Blake.”² The passage is revealing in many ways: Naomi Mitchison’s style is colloquial, vigorous, and unsentimental; it drew praise from E. M. Forster, for example, for the directness with which she brought distant, exotic characters to life before the reader’s eyes. Furthermore, the review reveals her generosity of spirit: where some critics might inflict a wound, she embraces a potential rival or adversary, insisting on others’ democratic right to difference. But above all, her sense that she belonged to a group or a class, rather than enjoyed the free play of subjectivity like the visionary Blake, or the inspired eccentric Stevie Smith, reflects an anguished split deep down in Naomi Mitchison’s consciousness.

She was right to recognise this division in herself, between public duty and private vision, between communal feeling and personal passion, between elite learning and popular lore. She was torn all her life between her intellectual, feminist ambitions and her wealthy, patrician upbringing and way of life—“the incalculable advantages” of her background, as Vera Brittain put it.³ “Nou” Mitchison, née Haldane, was a woman from “the Big House,” as she put it in the title of a story for children.

Her double consciousness created further tensions that pull her writing this way and that, between solemnity and frivolity, mandarin and demotic language, between playful ingenuousness and harsh defiance of convention. She was born in 1897; her

2 Quoted in Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 131.

3 Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1993), quoted in Ali Smith, “The Woman from the Big House: The Autobiographical Writings of Naomi Mitchison,” (1987) introduction to Naomi Mitchison, *Small Talk . . . Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973) (Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd (2009), p. vii.

mother and father were divided in their political—and social—opinions and attendant social mores. Her Tory mother was horrified, for instance, when Naomi made friends “behind the counter at the small draper’s in North Parade”: as a result Naomi was “severely lectured about trade.”⁴ Naomi’s girlhood was enmeshed in dynastic kinship systems; her grandparents were wealthy landowners in Scotland, with huge, chilly castles, salmon brooks, deer-stalking, while her parents, by contrast, were Liberal and progressive and brilliant. Her father, John S. Haldane, was a distinguished medical biologist at Oxford and, deeply concerned for working men and women, led pioneering work on lung disease at the beginning of the century, diagnosing the miasmas that killed in the mines, factories, and mills of industrialised Britain. He also helped invent the first gas masks for protection in World War I. His concerns shaped his two children more profoundly than his wife’s sense of class and etiquette.

Naomi’s older brother, J.B.S. (Jack) Haldane, made an even greater mark, as a geneticist and biologist. He was a colossal personality, and his transgressiveness, independent-mindedness, and sheer cleverness set a bar for Naomi she was always longing to leap. He was a free, even wayward spirit—sacked from Cambridge for adultery with a colleague’s wife (he married her), he became a Communist, and later, an Indian nationalist, renouncing his British citizenship. When they were children, they’d been allies and equals and sparring partners; they played charades and dressed up, putting on plays they wrote themselves; they experimented together on scientific questions, cross-breeding coloured

4 Mitchison, *Small Talk*, p. 50.

guinea pigs, and cutting up a caterpillar—this last was intended to be a rug for the dolls' house, but it shrivelled (a lesson in life and death).

After this enchanted though stormy alliance, Jack was sent away to school (Eton), whereas Naomi had to stay at home. Before then she had been a rare girl attending the boys' Dragon School in Oxford. Jack's going away, the arrival of a governess for all-important lessons in decorum, the new ban on climbing trees, all gave Naomi a bitter taste of gender injustices. The title of *Small Talk* (1973), a marvelous, witty, and tender memoir about her childhood, catches the stifling restrictions she suffered, and she never overcame her ferocious jealousy of her brother. Consequently Jack dominates his little sister's fiction in various little-disguised heroic personae. But her imagination also stamped out in her stories one spirited daredevil young woman after another—wild girls, strong-limbed and tousled, who break rules, act vigorously, and reject mincing and simpering. This is what I found in her books when I was young, when I too was furious that being female still prevented me from being as free as a male.

Naomi, the faery child, had intense dreams and kept open the connection to childlike wonder and terror. "I met a brown hare," she remembers, "and we went off and kept house (marriage as I saw it) inside a corn stook with six oat sheaves propped around us." She did not know then, she continued, that the hare is closely associated with the moon and the goddess, as well as with witchcraft. "As I remember it, I was married young to the hare."⁵

5 Ibid., p. 33.

The bride of the hare was also a bookworm and a hungry listener, especially to the many charismatic friends and lovers in her long life. By the time she was sixteen, she had read all the way through the complete *Golden Bough* of J. G. Frazer: relations between magic and society, and regeneration rituals involving dying kings and tree cults, run a live current of atavistic ecstasy through her work. The Greek myths and Celtic—especially Scottish—lore, predominate, chiefly because she was brought up among Oxford classicists and spent her summers in the Highlands, on the Cloan estate of her “Granniema,” until she moved to her own home, Carradale, in Argyll in 1937. These two potent, intertwined influences from north and south were also often under tension: on the one hand she was drawn to neo-paganism, which was founded in scholarship and a broad curiosity about European magical wisdom; and on the other she was wrapped in the Celtic Twilight, which focused on the Scottish legends and folklore of her forebears and, later, of her chosen home in Argyll. In the Edwardian period, these varieties of supernatural experience burgeoned into correspondingly contrasting uses of enchantment: first, avant-garde demands for liberty (Nietzsche’s vision flows in Jane Harrison’s Greek scholarship and infuses *The Rite of Spring*; the D. H. Lawrence of *The Plumed Serpent* turns to myth for reinvigoration of the life principle), and second, traditionalist nostalgia for a lost, enchanted pastoral, reflected in some of the most celebrated fantasy classics, such as *Peter Pan*, by a fellow Scot, J. M. Barrie; Kenneth Grahame’s *Wind in the Willows* (1908); and A. A. Milne’s stories of Winnie the Pooh (who makes his first appearance in 1926).

After Naomi Mitchison moved to Scotland, she became something of a Scottish nationalist, but before that she was already striving, as evident in this collection, to combine the Gaelic traditions of fairyland with myths of gods and goddesses. She also adopted traditional oral forms, such as tales and ballads, historical epic, praise song, flyting, charms, and elegy. As the stories in this book show, she relished tales of changelings, fairy abductions, and the local population of bogles, boggarts, and other eldritch folk in the Highlands. Walking past a deserted village on her way home one evening, she ran into the “botoch” or spirit of a villager who haunted the place. He had been eaten alive by rats. She was only able to pass after she had recited a Gaelic charm she knew—or so she related to one of her grandsons. The past, both as recoverable imaginable history and as a granary of story, served to open ways of picturing possibilities for the present. She cultivated her imagination with the deliberateness of an experimental scientist, in order to move on, into a dreamed-of, better future.

In 1916, when she was not yet twenty, she married Dick Mitchison, who was a friend of her brother Jack’s; he was also very young (b. 1894), a soldier in the Queen’s Bays infantry regiment and about to fight in France; he was badly wounded in the head almost immediately in a motorbike accident as he was carrying dispatches; but he returned to the trenches, rose to become a Major, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre. In civil life he became a lawyer, and a distinguished Queen’s Counsel; together they grew to share overwhelming indignation at the social conditions in England. He entered parliament as a Labour MP amid the bright hopes of the 1945 Attlee government, and was later ennobled (though Naomi did not use the title “Lady Mitchison”).

Their marriage was long, turbulent but strong, both of them accepting each other's lovers as friends. After the shock she felt during her first experiences of sex as a very young wife, which she wrote about frankly and bravely, Naomi struck out for freedoms (such as contraception, abortion, and open marriage) with more courage than many in her social circle. Nevertheless, she had six children, losing her firstborn, a boy, to meningitis at the age of 9, and a daughter shortly after birth, events which surface in anguish in many of her books.

Naomi Mitchison conjures up ardent tomboy heroines in homage to the dream of freedom she had entertained before the conventions of class and gender put her in shackles. She imagines them as paragons of desire and autonomy in faraway settings—in ancient Egypt, Scythia, Sparta, Gaul, Constantinople, Rome, Scotland, or Hell, where they can act as daughters of her longings, and she wanted them to beckon to her readers as irresistibly as any fairy from the fairy hill. Several stories in this collection, such as "Soria Moria Castle" and "Adventure in the Debateable Land," and Kate Crackernuts herself, present such figures of female liberators.

She also wanted to prove that science—her father and Jack's preserve in her family—could be reconciled with fantasy, which was her own strength. She refused to allow the latter to be dismissed by the former. In an attempt to rekindle magic in modern, rational times, she plays with wilful anachronisms. The technique is a form of defamiliarisation: she takes the humdrum and queers it. Slang falls from the lips of the gods ("What utter bilge, Xanthias," says Dionysos in "Frogs and Panthers"). Later in the same story, the god returns in a motorcar, smoking. In this updated

classical myth, Mitchison kneads together her lingering conscience about belonging to the upper class, her solidarity with the workers, and her memories of her father's work on the respiratory horrors of industrial towns in the north. She wanted to refresh tradition, and feared what she called "the archaistic view."

The literary scholar Gill Plain recently commented that Mitchison "creatively politicised history, using it as a space through which to imagine 'an abstract future postwar,' and to challenge the assumptions of patriarchal history."⁶ She reaches backwards in time, and reconstructs a better, more intense, more conscious, more meaningful experience in the past for several periods and peoples and cultures. History, retooled, is then shot through with magic and mythic effects. The Debateable Land that is the literary terrain of myth and fairy tale set her free to imagine what she longed for—or sometimes feared.

Naomi Mitchison was one of the splendid unstoppable graphomaniacs of her day, to put alongside prodigal precursors and authors of her youth (Mrs Oliphant, Walter Scott, H. G. Wells); she published nearly a hundred books, as well as hundreds of articles, reviews, and blasts in the papers, not to mention her private letters (she and her husband, when apart, would correspond on a daily basis until the Thirties). Writing became as necessary to her existence as breathing or eating: a form of health-giving exercise. She was of the generation of women who went in for emancipatory athletics, as in the Women's League of Health and Beauty. Her activity was writing. There is hardly a genre she did

6 Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 154.

not attempt, a reader whose interests she did not try to capture, or a world of experience she did not enter.

The struggle between the good citizen and the wild girl, the nurse and the sorceress, runs through the whole of her astounding body of work. It accounts, too, for the neglect that she has fallen into for some time now. For it is a bit of mystery that this once best-selling novelist, polemicist, memoirist, and *grande dame* of letters, who came from a fabulous intellectual lineage, was englamoured by wealth and prestige (at least for part of her lifetime), and led an intrepid experimental life in her work and her loves, should not have captured more attention since her death in 1999 at the age of 101. After all, the Haldanes were formidable scientists, eccentric, spirited, politically activist, and far richer than, for example, the Mitfords, who have inspired shelfloads of admiration. Naomi wrote several times, with wry, comic vividness, about her family's charmed life before the Second World War, with many forbidding aunts and grandparents, crowded households of servants to meet every need, and much nonchalant possession of dark labyrinthine mansions; her memoirs give off a wonderful whiff of Blandings Castle and the immortal Aunt Agatha of Wodehouse's imagination. The novelist Ali Smith has commented warmly on "the overall frank friendliness" of her voice in these books.⁷ Naomi Mitchison seems ripe for Bloomsbury-style fandom.

But she does not command this kind of following, and the problems that her writing poses for contemporary readers stem from that split she rightly diagnosed between the "we" and the "I"

7 Smith, "Woman from the Big House," p. vii.

in her makeup. Some of the writers with whom she could be compared—contemporaries such as Virginia Woolf (b. 1882) and Elizabeth Bowen (b. 1899), and others who were close friends, Wyndham Lewis (b. 1882) and Aldous Huxley (b. 1894)—were naturally modern. Whether by instinct, default, or choice, such writers belonged to the twentieth century and conveyed features of the time without needing to check their watches. But Naomi Mitchison is only partly modern. Or perhaps, as in the title which Jack Zipes has given this series, she was oddly, but not entirely, modern. This quality, her faltering modernity, arises from many features of her life and work.⁸

Chiefly, she felt deep loyalty to a whole array of groups, with whom she cultivated a sense of belonging, and for whom she spoke. They were the “we” who shadowed her throughout her life: they changed identity, but, at one period or another, Soviet workers, oppressed women and mothers, sharecroppers in the South of the United States, Scottish crofters and fishermen, Botswana nationalists, all claimed her attention.

The love of enchantment flourished alongside practical activity: farming, campaigning for Scottish development and for the community around her—a lively fictionalized memoir, *Lobsters on the Agenda* (1952), chronicles her efforts on behalf of local fisheries. She was also actively involved in the independence of Botswana, where she became a tribal elder. Jenni Calder gave her 1997 biography the title *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, but nine is an understatement. Mitchison unleashed her forces in all

8 The terms “intermodern” and “intermodernist” have been suggested in relation to Mitchison and contemporaries; see Further Reading for critical studies by Hubble, Lasser, Montefiore, Maslen (see note 1), and Mackay and Stonebridge.

these areas, as well as giving voice to her unstoppable imaginative powers, in book after book, article after article. Among nearly a hundred publications, the heroes and heroines she brings to life before us often represent a cause. To an exceptional degree, Mitchison's torrential energies were directed at making a difference to others, and there is sometimes too much of a sense that she has designs on her text, and on you, her reader.

Naomi Mitchison's less than complete modernity also stems from her passionate belief in the mythical imagination. She fought to defend it against the high status of rationality and scepticism, advocated by family and friends. She also liked witches and witchcraft, and in her ferocious magnum opus, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), she creates a towering, complex self-portrait in the character of Erif Der (Red Fire backwards), who has the gift of spellbinding, and uses it to powerful but often troubling effect. She felt animosity towards D. H. Lawrence, on account of his view of dominant male sexuality, but she shares some of his love of primitivism and ritual. In spite of her distaste for archaism, archaism colours her passionate imagination, adding a streak of neo-paganism that has been relegated from current versions of modernity. It can make her a bit old-fashioned, as she herself recognised in later years.

Mitchison the writer saw herself as an enchantress, and she liked to attract a large company around her, of children, family, friends, and retainers. In the Fifties, at her home in Carradale on the beautiful Mull of Kintyre in Scotland, a family friend called Charlie Brett painted the doors of a cupboard with a romantic panorama of the house standing in the magnificent landscape. Naomi figures there as Circe, standing on the threshold facing

the sea, where Dionysos' vine-wreathed barque is sailing by and Ulysses is approaching in his boat, while local fisher folk, friends, guests, shepherds, villagers are also transmuted into creatures from myth and fairy tale. Scotland was Attica, or Thrace, or Calypso's Isle—or Circe's.

Several of the friends in the circle of her passionate attachments can be glimpsed in the wings of these fairy tales: "Granddaughter" is written for Stella Benson, a kindred spirit, feminist and writer, who had died of pneumonia in 1933. G.D.H.C., the dedicatee of "Soria Moria Castle," is Douglas Cole, who was the husband of Margaret Cole; she was a longtime lover of Naomi's husband, Dick. In "Birmingham and the Allies," which describes the Labour defeat in 1931 and Dick's initial failure to win a seat in parliament, his election team are included by name, including his agent, Tom Baxter. The dedication of "Mirk, Mirk Night"—"for strange roads, with Zita"—alludes to Naomi's travels in Alabama with the adventurous activist Zita Baker, when the two women joined the sharecroppers in their fight for better conditions, outraged the local white inhabitants, and had a great deal of fun. Her obituary in the *Guardian* rightly commented, "There was a Fabian, Shavian flavour to her energy; she could have belonged to the 'Fellowship for a new Life.'"⁹

The commitment to fantasy takes a lyric songlike form, as in some of the writings in this collection, and also often tends to comedy (sometimes inadvertently—the "Chinese fairies" in "Birmingham and the Allies" don't quite bring the comrades to mind as they should). Sometimes this British taste for feyness and

9 Neal Ascherson, "Naomi Mitchison—a Queen, a Saint and a Shaman," *Guardian*, 17 Jan. 1999.

nonsense has the effect of undermining the strength of her dreams. Her rational side refused to allow full surrender to the seductions of fairyland—she is clear that she doesn't believe in the supernatural, but her fictions are driven by its forces and structured by ritual. At her best, Naomi Mitchison is forthright and witty, writes with brio and passion and lucidity, and conveys a huge appetite for life, for people, for new adventures, and for breaking through barriers. At her worst, she damages her serious purposes with whimsy, sometimes with wishful thinking, and sometimes with lurid bacchanalian violence. Her writing is a bit hit-and-miss, but her personality is colossal and wonderful.

Towards the end of her life, Mitchison was disappointed by the neglect of her work: she was no longer Circe or the oracle at Delphi or Cumae, but Cassandra, and was not being heard. The political ideals for which she and her family had battled were being mothballed; she was born under Queen Victoria when Gladstone was Prime Minister and died under Tony Blair and New Labour: the span reveals a changed world, and the dashing of progressive hopes and dreams.

The tales in *The Fourth Pig* are a “misch-masch,” as Lewis Carroll called his first such compilation, the album of miscellanea he made up to amuse his siblings. Naomi Mitchison customarily wove prose and poetry together in her fiction, and published such anthologies throughout her career, refusing to rank genres of storytelling, or to make a hierarchy of different belief systems or manifestations of the supernatural. Fairy tales were not inferior to myth or myths lesser than religion. Some of the stories she reworks here are very well known (“Hansel and Gretel”; “The

Little Mermaiden”); in others she picks up the tune of a ballad with admiring fidelity to the form (“Mairi Maclean and the Fairy Man”); several of the tales involve experimental twists of her own. The reverie of Brünnhilde as she floats down the Rhine takes its place beside a fairy play *Kate Crackernuts*, dramatising in charms and songs a struggle against the subterranean powers who live in the fairy hills of Scotland and abduct humans for their pleasure.

The story of *Kate Crackernuts* was collected by Andrew Lang in the Orkneys and included by the folklorist Joseph Jacobs in *English Fairy Tales* (1890; a misnomer, but an inspired and foundational anthology). Naomi Mitchison adapted it as a lively fairy-tale play in verse, written, as the stage directions show, for family theatricals. The story inverts the fairy tale “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” as it features a spellbound prince instead, who is stolen away to dance all night in fairyland. The play version here also carries strong echoes of Christina Rossetti’s famous poem “Goblin Market,” which similarly stages an epic struggle between two loving sisters and the rescue of one by the other. In Mitchison’s version, Ann is transmogrified by Kate’s cruel mother, and given a horrible sheep’s head, while Kate’s rescue mission introduces a heterosexual love plot, not found in Rossetti. The play also recalls the terrible wound and subsequent delirium and illness that Dick Mitchison, Naomi’s young husband, suffered in World War I, and her long vigil at his bedside as he pulled through. It is characteristic of Naomi Mitchison’s spirit that she dramatises a girl’s heroic knight errantry on his behalf. The same memories haunt the poignant closing story in the collection, “Mirk, Mirk Night,” but the heroine here is herself res-

cued from the fairies by the hero, who “smelt of tobacco and machine oil and his own smell,” suffers from the shivers from shell shock, and yet delivers her from the beguiling, shining, and crying of the trooping fairies in pursuit.

The belief in the danger posed by fairies from the fairy hills was recorded by the Reverend Robert Kirk in the manuscript of his parishioners’ beliefs, drawn up at the end of the seventeenth century. Walter Scott, who reinvigorated the folk and fairy lore of Scotland, was the first to write about Kirk’s astonishing anthology, but it was not published until 1893, when Andrew Lang edited it under the new title *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, and supported its accounts of Second Sight and other paranormal and curious powers.¹⁰ Andrew Lang was a family friend of the Mitchisons, and Lang’s appetite for legends, history, and fantasy can also be strongly felt in Naomi’s combination of proud localism and voracious eclecticism. Beginning with *The Blue Fairy Book* in 1889, he edited stories from all over the world in anthologies for children that were revised and generally standardised and cleaned up by his wife, Leonora Alleyne, and other female scribes. In spite of this bland tendency, Lang’s collections were wildly successful, and have influenced generations of writers, including the preeminent English fabulist Angela Carter (1941–1992), whose fierce, baroque revisionings of classic fairy tales in her collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) took the erotic supernatural to a pitch of intensity that Naomi Mitchison would have relished.

10 Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, ed. Andrew Lang, with introduction by Marina Warner (New York: *New York Review of Books*, 2007).

Later in life Naomi declared that she “never much cared for the more romantic series of fairy tales in spite of their lovely pictures.”¹¹ The “lovely pictures,” mostly by H. J. Ford, depict details of jewels and clothing with a heightened, Pre-Raphaelite realism that chimes with Mitchison’s love of vivid description. Like Carter and unlike Lang, Mitchison avoided the *Fairy Books*’ rather solemn politeness; by contrast she relished transgression and a certain degree of delinquent extremism—especially in her female characters. Her stories are filled with daring steps across the threshold of permitted normative behaviour, and often open into scenes of extraordinary erotic, savage violence, as in the fertility rituals dramatized in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. Here, in *Kate Crackernuts*, similar reverberations from Frazerian fertility ritual break through:

Fairy:

Shall we take her, shall we keep her?
In the harvest of the foe
Shall we bind, shall we reap her?
In the Green Hill deeper
Shall we stack her, hold her, keep her?

Sick Prince (with hate):

Take her, take her,
Bind her, blind her! (Act II, scene III)

Around this time Mitchison was close to Wyndham Lewis, and he illustrated an exuberant, crazy, phantasmagoric quest

11 Ibid., p. 51.

story she wrote in 1935, *Beyond This Limit*, about an artist called Phoebe, who, armed with an alarmingly live crocodile handbag, cures herself of a broken heart and sets out for freedom.¹² It begins in a *salon de thé* in a recognisable present-day Paris, but turns into a fugue through surrealist dreamlands populated by creatures out of the *Alice* books or one of Leonora Carrington's comic fables. But Mitchison is aware that not all her heroines succeed in cutting the traces of convention. The "Snow Maiden" in this collection is a promising mathematician, but boys and peer pressure and social expectations drive the brains out of a girl: "So Mary Snow got married to George Higginson, and then—well then, she just seemed to melt away . . . like an ice-cream sundae on a hot afternoon. . . . Some girls do seem to go like that after they get married." Jenni Calder comments that this bleak satire targets Lawrence.

The story which gives the collection its title, *The Fourth Pig*, foresees the impending horror of World War II with a clarity very few possessed in the Thirties: the jolly nursery classic of three little pigs has taken a dark turn, and their youngest sibling knows the nature of the Wolf: "I can smell the Wolf's breath above all the sweet smells of Spring and the rich smells of Autumn. I can hear the padding of the Wolf's feet a very long way off in the forest, coming nearer. And I know there is no way of stopping him. Even if I could help being afraid. But I cannot help it. I am afraid now."

Her brother Jack openly adopted Marxism in 1937, and Naomi herself was forthright in her support for the Republican side in

12 NM, *Beyond This Limit: Selected Shorter Fiction of Naomi Mitchison*, ed. Isobel Murray (Edinburgh: Association of Scottish Literary Studies, 1986), pp. 1–83.

the Spanish Civil War, which was raging as she was putting together *The Fourth Pig*: “There is no question for any decent, kindly man or woman,” she wrote, “let alone a poet or writer who must be more sensitive. We have to be against Franco and Fascism and for the people of Spain, and the future of gentleness and brotherhood which ordinary men and women want all over the world.”¹³ The “black bulls of hate” in “Pause in the Corrida” evoke the conflict directly, but much of the collection’s feeling of dread and darkness seeps through its pages from the implications of the Fascists gaining ground elsewhere as well.

In 1935 Mitchison had published *We Have Been Warned*, the only novel she set in her own time and place; it was unflinchingly honest—dismayingly so, to her contemporaries. Although the eventual publishers (Constable; others refused the risk) censored her original version, she was still too frank about sex for the critics: she sets down with her usual vigour the sexual difficulties and disappointments that she knew from experience, gives a picture of free love without apology, and describes her lovers using contraceptives—conveyed with a feminist practicality which eluded Lawrence, for example. But Naomi was not yet used to criticism, as her earlier fictions, from *The Conquered* (1923) onwards, had all been enthusiastically received—and widely read.

In the story here called “Grand-daughter,” a child looks back, from some unidentified point in the future, at the times of her grandmother’s generation, and wonders at their blindness. The little girl expresses her surprise at the foolishness of her elders in those distant days, the 1930s. She is imagined, by Naomi, leafing

13 John Simkin, *Spanish Civil War* (Spartacus Educational, 2012, <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Wmitchison.htm>, accessed 14 June 2013).

through books produced in the decade, books like *The Fourth Pig*, and marvelling at what their authors missed. This brief, ironic piece of proleptic memoir is a kind of premature obituary, but it does show Naomi Mitchison's self-awareness. She knows she was, like the grandmother in the story, "very much laughed at for saying that the industrial revolution had destroyed magic." But the imagined grandchild of the future goes on to defend herself: "All intelligent forward-thinking people, even in the so-called imaginative professions, insisted on the recognition of their rationality and put it constantly into their talk and writing. . . . Yet, of course, that was not the whole of life." Continuing in the voice of this child in the future, Mitchison then muses on the rise of "Nazi irrationality," which "was only successful because it gave some solid fulfilment to a definite need in human beings." She castigates herself and her generation for allowing the success of fascism in Italy, Spain, and Germany. Her generation failed because they did not provide an outlet for the emotions which fascism exploited: "The rationalists stupidly feared and hated this need [for magic] . . . and refused to satisfy it decently and creatively."

The passage is an exercise in counterfactual history, but in 1936 Mitchison does not know how long and terrible the effects of fascism will be. One of these prolonged effects—part of the long shadow cast on history by those times—concerns the cult of national folklore, myth, and ritual; they were implicated in the ugliest sides of nationalism, state power, and sexual prescription, repression, and ethnic identity politics. Naomi was writing when the act of recovering the neglected fairy lore of local, unlettered folk struck a blow on behalf of the overlooked labourer, and

when pagan, Dionysiac frenzy represented a belief in the arts and in freedom of expression against the choking grip of Christianity. In a letter to the poet Laura Riding at this time she expresses her anger that the Nazis have turned myth and fairy tale to their own purposes.¹⁴ The fate of the kind of neo-paganism that Mitchison dramatized is a complicated issue, and myth and fairy tale have taken a long time to break the tainting association with right-wing nationalism. The work of fairy-tale scholars like Maria Tatar, Donald Haase, Susan Sellers, Cristina Bacchilega, and the editor of this series, Jack Zipes, has been vital in reconnecting readers with the alternative tradition—with the utopian, or often dystopian, honest fabulism of philosophical fairy tales, from Voltaire to Kafka, Karel Čapek, Kurt Schwitters, Lucy Clifford, and Angela Carter.

In the Thirties, with the Third Reich in power and the Second World War impending, fairies were being claimed for the forests of Germany, and were changing in character; fairy tales and myths, fertility rites and tree worship were annexed for ideas that were utterly repellent, and Mitchison's witchiness and whimsy no longer matched her high purposes or the needs of the times. She has glimmers of this consequence here, and it is significant that, after *The Fourth Pig*, Naomi returned to her vast historical canvases and moved back into remote times. In 1939, she published one of her most famous novels, *The Blood of the Martyrs: How the Slaves in Rome Found Victory in Christ*. As the title suggests, early Christian persecution by Nero inspires a huge and fervent mani-

14 NM, Letter to Laura Riding, 1 March 1937 (http://www.ntu.ac.uk/laura_riding/scholars/119214gp.html, accessed 14 June 2013).

festo for the heroic and bloody resistance of the have-nots against the haves.

Wyndham Lewis painted Naomi's portrait while she was working on the novel: she is frowning, her chin gripped by her left hand, her focus distant and intense. It is a powerful picture of a woman writing and thinking; on her right, at her shoulder, recalling her new, ardent interest in Christian sainthood, he has included an image of Jesus on Calvary, with sketches of the other two crosses for the thieves.¹⁵

Later still, Mitchison turned away from history to science fiction, which is a related but different kind of fantastic storytelling. In *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), she still remembers her childhood biological experiments with Jack, and imagines hermaphroditic fluidity and intelligent sex organs; she also casts herself as the saviour of caterpillars who are being inculcated with low self-esteem through telepathic communications from beautiful butterflies. She has become an astronaut, has left the fairy hill forever and taken off into outer space.

Marina Warner

15 The picture is in the National Galleries of Scotland.