

“The Kind of Woman Who Talked to Basilisks”:

Travelling Light Through Naomi Mitchison’s Landscape of the Imaginary

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Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999) was a prolific author, poet and essayist, active across most of the Twentieth Century. Following my introduction, I will outline in the first half of this essay how Mitchison made repeated attempts during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s to write fiction that supported the expression of an unconstrained female agency. In the second half, I will argue that this struggle culminated successfully with the creation of a space outside the patriarchal order in her 1952 fantasy novella, *Travel Light*. This was originally published by Faber and Faber but has been subsequently reprinted in a variety of editions including one from the feminist publishing house, Virago, in 1985. The novella is the story of Halla, a princess who is abandoned at birth to grow up with bears and dragons in the northern country of Finmark before eventually following the advice of Odin the Allfather to “travel light” (57). Her journeys take her, via Kiev, all the way to Micklegard (the Viking name for Constantinople) where she has various adventures involving talking animals and corrupt priests. While there she falls in with a man called Tarkan Der from Marob, a country bordering the Black Sea. Together they travel north again, back past Kiev, and then on with other men towards Holmgard (the Viking name for Novgorod). As they go, Tarkan Der becomes more interested in talking to the men than Halla, who gets scolded and lags behind talking to mythological creatures: “When she told Tarkan Der about the basilisk, he was worried, almost angry with her. It was as though he did not want her to be the kind of woman who talked to basilisks” (127). In fact, he wants her to be the kind of woman who is married to him and lives in a small house waiting for him to come home but Halla thinks, “No one can travel light with a house on their back, not even a snail” (129). The story does not end with Halla and Tarkan Der marrying and living happily ever after. Instead it twists, ending after the expected resolution, in a manner that I will argue makes clear it is intended as an alternative version of the Oedipus story.

In January 2014, the writer, poet and critic, Amal El-Mohtar, wrote about *Travel Light* for the “you must read this” section of the NPR website, in which writers recommend their all-time favourite books. El-Mohtar actually begins her column by telling us about falling in love at age seven with J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937) and how she made up her own adventures in Mirkwood with Gandalf, Beorn and the Elves. After reading everything she could find by, and about, Tolkien she decided she would also be a writer: “In many ways I can trace much of my life’s trajectory to that encounter with a single book at a delicate age” (np). However, it is precisely this understanding of how a book can guide someone towards being “one self rather than another” (np) that informs her recommendation of *Travel Light*:

I say this because almost 20 years later — sitting on my bed in a cold, damp room in Cornwall, floundering toward the end of a second graduate degree — I read Naomi Mitchison’s *Travel Light*, and suddenly felt as if I were seeing my life thus far from a great height. I felt, very powerfully, that I had been waiting for it, and that it was telling me the story of the person I might have been had I read it when I was a child. (np)

El-Mohtar explains the delight of reading a fable-like story that resists conventional structures or didactic moralising and thereby allows the protagonist to remain “always and utterly herself” (np). She was surprised and delighted to find out that there were good reasons to think of *Travel Light* and *The Hobbit* as two sides of her “heart’s coin” because Mitchison and Tolkien had been friends. Mitchison read the volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5) in proof and supplied the wonderful and enigmatic quote that the novel was “super science fiction”, which was to grace the inside leaf of the dustjacket of the hardback editions for years to come. They corresponded about dragons in 1949, Tolkien writing to her that “Fáfnir in the late Norse versions of the Sigurd-story is better” (Carpenter and Tolkien 134) than the one in the Beowulf story and was an influence on his depiction of Smaug in *The Hobbit*. This relative classification is reflected in *Travel Light* when Halla and the overtly-Norse dragon, Uggi, are “visited by the Grendel family, curious-shaped and rather watery folk” who are still indignant about the treatment of their grandmother and uncle at the hands of Beowulf “all because they had punctually taken their tribute – and no more – from the hall of the King of Denmark” (26). Earlier, Mitchison informs us that Fáfnir has been brutally murdered in cold blood by a young man named Siegfried, “who, however, came to no good end himself” (21). It is clear from such gently irreverent reference to mythic lore that Mitchison and Tolkien shared a sense of humour and an understanding that such archetypal stories could be subverted.

El-Mohtar was also surprised to find out that *Travel Light* was not a one-off achievement and that Mitchison, in the course of a long and active life, had written over 90 works of science fiction, historical fiction, nonfiction and poetry and yet not only was she unknown within the canon of genre fiction, “but in the course of three English degrees — almost 10 years of studying literature — I had never even heard of her” (np). In fact, not only was Mitchison a prolific writer, she was also at the centre of many of the key literary circles and networks of Twentieth-Century Britain, being friends with, variously, Aldous Huxley, Wyndham Lewis, Stevie Smith, Storm Jameson, W.H. Auden, Walter Greenwood, Stella Bowen and Olaf Stapledon (see Hubble 76). Her relative invisibility until recently (outside Scottish literary criticism) serves to demonstrate the hitherto conservative, and predominantly masculine, focus of the Modernist canon.

El-Mohtar speculates on what kind of paths she could have been led down if she had read *Travel Light* at the age of seven instead of *The Hobbit* and whether that seven-year-old girl still remained inside her “waiting to be beckoned onto a path of luggage-less travel, of dragons and Valkyries, languages and air” (np). Implicit to her article is the idea that greater exposure to a larger array of women’s writing, and the alternative pathways it offers, both in subject and style, may have supported her own writing and interests in a more symbiotic nature

than a conservative masculine canon. However, as I will argue below, Mitchison's achievement in writing *Travel Light* was, in itself, the result of a long and protracted struggle to find a space in which to live and write outside of the patriarchal order.

Born into the Haldane family, whose lineage extended back through eight centuries of Scottish history, Mitchison grew up at the centre of British political, intellectual and scientific life. Her father was the scientist J. S. Haldane and her brother, J. B. S. (Jack) Haldane, would go on to become a leading geneticist and Britain's premier Communist public intellectual. As Jill Benton notes: "For much of her childhood, Naomi was raised with boys and educated to think, behave and compete like a boy herself" (11). This period came to an end when Mitchison was twelve, after which she was taught at home by various governesses. On the one hand, the fact the family lived in Oxford and were connected to the intellectual elite meant that she still gained an unusually good education for someone of her gender at that time. On the other hand, because this classical education was not intended for someone of her gender but for the sons of the ruling class, it caused issues for Mitchison. Having grown up with no alternative but to participate in the world of her male peers, it is unsurprising that she sought to incorporate her own consciousness within the typically masculine classical settings of her novels. The inevitable distortion of the classical model that resulted from this is often disturbingly melodramatic. For example, in her first novel, *The Conquered* (1923), both male and female viewpoints are fused by having her female protagonist commit suicide in her brother's arms:

Fiommar drew her knife, Meromic caught her to him with his left arm, sobbing, "Don't, don't!" She pulled his head down on her to breast and held tight, stroking his hair and singing ...

Meromic, with his eyes shut, warm against his sister's soft heart-beating, felt her suddenly quiver all over; he looked up; she smiled at him with all the colour ebbing out of her cheeks; her hands fluttered for a moment over his face; she fell on her side (79-80)

Henceforth in the novel, Meromic doubles as the "female" point of identification in the text; sexually attracted to other men and unable to choose between his loyalty to Gaul and his individual love for a Roman Centurion. In theory, this gendered manoeuvre enabled Mitchison to challenge the patriarchy inherent to the classical tradition that still heavily underpinned the values of the society she was living in. In practice, however, her fictional experiment demonstrated that even when female consciousness was given the advantage of a male body, it still remained caught between social dilemmas that could not be resolved within the limitations of individual subjectivity. At the end of the novel, Mitchison is only able to generate a resolution by having Meromic magically transformed into a wolf: thereby returned to a state of nature and freed from social constraints.

In her substantial novel of 1931, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (also reissued by Virago in the 1980s) Mitchison managed to create a fictional woman who challenged the patriarchy around her: the witch, Erif Der ("red fire" backwards), who represents for the Corn King, Tarrik, an alternative way of life to both the traditional village culture of their native Marob and the philosophical detachment of the stoic philosopher,

Sphaeros. The novel is also about the utopian aspirations of the Spartan King, Kleomenes, and amongst these competing narrative strands, Erif Der is often sidelined and powerless despite her obvious strength as a character. In Mitchison's next major novel, *We Have Been Warned* (1935), she turned to contemporary Britain, in which she explored feminist preoccupations including birth control and rape, against the backdrop of rising fascist agitation. The narrative is even more complex than that of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, with the consequence that Mitchison again employs the device of witchcraft. However, what is permissible in the ancient world is rather more controversial in a contemporary setting; especially when combined with sex and politics. The book was rejected by a number of publishers and eventually only released in a censored form. Unlike *Travel Light* and *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, Virago did not reissue the novel even though Mitchison wanted it to be (see Murray x). In fact, even the back-cover blurb of the recent reissue of *We Have Been Warned* in the Naomi Mitchison Library describes it as "over-written, hectic and unbalanced ... poor". This suggests that the novel's combination of revolutionary socialist politics, women's sexuality and fantasy was not so much ahead of its time, as an expression of such radical alterity that it still remains unassimilable by mainstream culture to this day. The vehemence of the contemporary response to the novel so frustrated Mitchison that she temporarily abandoned her attempt to write a space for women's agency and turned instead to a philosophical undertaking.

In *The Moral Basis of Politics* (1938), Mitchison sets aside the question of gender in order to work through the implications of her own class position from first principles. This book accounts for her transition from someone with "a strong bias in favour of existing or *almost* existing (for we hoped for amelioration on a number of specific points) social forms" (vii) to someone who can look back and criticise her former attitude to the General Strike with an extended dialogic discussion of how to live and what constitutes goodness and right relationships between people (240). She accounts for her own conversion and such forms of political conversion in general, by referring to the historical examples of the political murders of Joan of Arc and Thomas à Beckett. The acceptance by both of these two of their martyrdom triggered observers into recognising their own complicity in the murder and thus caused them to repent and change their ways. Mitchison develops her argument by suggesting that: "[t]he same thing happens when we watch tragedies on the stage – *Hamlet* or *Oedipus*. We are the audience and we insist on the carrying out of the tragedy" (114). She concludes that in order to transform the unsatisfactory social relations of the contemporary world it is necessary to look upon them as a form of tragedy in which the audience must first acknowledge their complicity before undergoing a process of catharsis and change of heart. It is clear how this idea might appeal to one of her class background because it offered a purpose and potential leadership role for someone prepared to take on the role of the tragic king:

It may be that leaders and led should always have this "tragic drama" relation between them: that no leader should be tolerable to the led unless he or she has made the act of acceptance, has experienced the change of focus ("rebirth") and is prepared if necessary to be the sacrifice. (288)

From Mitchison's perspective, this relationship seemed to provide the natural way forward from hierarchical societies, in which the notions of cultural and moral value are patterned on the interests of the propertied few in

power, toward non-hierarchical societies in which values are orientated towards universal happiness and a Kantian notion of the “Kingdom of Ends” (60), in which people are never regarded as means to an end but only as ends in themselves.

Difficulties arise for Mitchison in the gap between her concept of happiness and her concept of transcendental good. Her concept of happiness depends on everyone being able to fully express themselves, which in turn means them satisfying the maximum number of their appetites. However, the relationship between this notion of value and her idea of transcendental good, as embodied, for example, by, Gandhi is problematic – as she acknowledges (360-1) – because this kind of transcendentalism is achieved precisely by rising above appetites. This leads her to speculate that we need a provisional morality to live by on an everyday basis, which needs to give way, in due course, to something orientated towards higher ends: “I have suggested that certain ideas are transcendent – that is, not to be achieved with present material. But these transcendent ideas are in our minds; we have them voluntarily and use them for direction” (291). Translated back into the language of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* or *We Have Been Warned*, the suggestion seems to be that the solution to the problem of society not providing space for the desires of Erif Der or Dionne to be met – and, therefore, the problem of society not allowing women like them to be happy – is that these desires will eventually be philosophically transcended and forgotten.

The difficulties identified in *The Moral Basis of Politics* form the subtext for her 1939 novel, *The Blood of the Martyrs*, which bears certain affinities to *The Conquered*. The later novel’s protagonist, Beric, functions similarly to Meromic as a “female” point of identification. In an ingenious synthesis of the opposed goals of “appetites” and “ends”, Beric, who is the adopted son of a Roman Senator, finally satisfies his desire to find equality with his mostly male slaves not through sex but by joining their clandestine Christian sect and then washing their feet in a state of delirious ecstasy. In similar vein, the novel ends with Beric eaten by a wolf in the Colosseum while being watched by one of his former homosexual pick-ups, who subsequently decides to convert to Christianity too. This resolution works symbolically because the key passages can simultaneously be read as scenes of sexual satisfaction and sublimation. However Mitchison is no closer to opening up a fictional space for women’s agency than in her first novel.

The intervention of the Second World War drastically altered the social playing field. Mitchison moved with her children to the Scottish Estate that she had bought with her husband in 1937. During the War, Mitchison kept a diary (see Sheridan) for the social research organisation, Mass-Observation, which she had been involved with since its formation in 1937. Karen Meschia observes that Mitchison’s diary reveals that one effect of the war was to make Mitchison even more painfully aware of “gender asymmetry” (Meschia 7). Although Mitchison noted her contacts with the great and the good ranging from Leonard Woolf to Nye Bevan, and poured considerable effort during the early months of the War into setting up a local branch of the Labour Party, she became gradually more encumbered with domestic responsibilities over the years. Finally, her husband’s selection as the Labour candidate for Kettering in the 1945 General Election relegated her to “the role of supportive, submissive wife”

(Meschia 8). This seems to have marked the end to Mitchison trying to participate as a man in the symbolic order of patriarchal society.

In her postwar historical Scottish novel, *The Bull Calves* (1947), Mitchison returned once more to the device of witchcraft that she had employed in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* and *We Have Been Warned*. Here, the struggle for female agency reaches hitherto untouched heights of melodrama as the protagonist, Kirstie, narrates in flashback how she participated freely in “Witches’ Sabbaths” and joined a coven in order to kill her first husband, a minister of the Church. Eventually, Kirstie reaches the point of perceiving a knock at the door to be the devil (the “Horny”) coming to commit her to eternal damnation. Rather than reach out for the Bible, she gets up and opens the door willingly:

The shape came walking into the room [. . .] it sat down opposite me with the width of the hearth between us, and I, a Minister’s widow, in my shift only, and my hair over my shoulders [. . .] and I waited for the Horny to open his mouth and to bid me serve him for all eternity, and to have his dealings that would bind me to hell, and for myself to say Yes to it all. (168-9)

However there is more than a perverse pleasure in macabre situations at work here; what subsequently takes place is no sacrificial exchange but a moment of mutual recognition. The “shape” is the highlander, Black William, back from exile in the Colonies and with his own dark secrets concerning time spent living with a “savage” Native American tribe. This recognition of a similar darkness between the two of them allows them to come together in their difference and achieve a genuine relationship that is not itself overtly perverse or melodramatic. At the end of the novel, Mitchison posits this idea as a way forward for society in general, and Scotland specifically:

It was at such times that the appearances had mostly come between one light and another, the images of corruption. And maybe they were in everyone, the creatures of the dark sea in which folks must swim or drown until they can find their own image or opposite. The same for everyone but not all allow themselves to perceive them. (404)

Arguably *The Bull Calves* represents a final abandonment of the attempt to reconcile female experience with the patriarchal order and the role of the tragic king, which so strains – albeit often in exhilaratingly exciting ways – Mitchison’s earlier fiction. Here, the forces of the imaginary break free and open up new opportunities. It was now possible for Mitchison to write a female agency that would be true to itself. This is precisely what she did in the form of the fable, *Travel Light*.

Travel Light begins with the new Queen seeing the old Queen’s baby daughter, Halla, and telling the King that “the brat must be got rid of at once” (11). However, before Halla can be left, like Oedipus, on a mountainside to die, her nurse transforms into a bear and runs off with her. Hibernation requirements result in Halla’s subsequent adoption by the dragon, Uggi. Thereafter she grows up on Dragon Mountain, being taught fire, geology, and economics, and getting to dress up in as much jewellery as she likes. The only problem, of course, is

men and their propensity in particular to send heroes – such as George, Perseus and Siegfried – to interfere with dragon-princess relationships. But mostly “the dragon made good and all ended for the best” (21):

Sometimes Halla played at Princesses and Dragons, pretending to be tied to a tree and then waiting for one of the young dragons to rush at her with his mouth open, drenching her in delightful tickly flames [she has been fire-proofed!]. And there would be no horrible hero to interfere. Sometimes Halla found herself wishing she was a real princess, so that it could all genuinely happen. (21)

Here, the fictional doubling within the story – a Princess wishing she was a Princess – mirrors the identification process of readers, or children having the story read to them, wishing themselves to be the Princess. Jenni Calder, one of Mitchison’s biographers, notes that the book is “obliquely for and about her daughters” (217). However one can also read the book as being about Mitchison herself. These layered-in levels of awareness within the story function as a means to tell, or remind, the reader or listener, and, indeed, the writer of the story something they already know but have forgotten or, at least, are not consciously aware of: that their subjectivity is actually different from the one that they are officially being interpellated within.

While Halla, and her readers, are therefore brought to understand that her role in life is not simply to wait for the right hero to happen along, both they and she are also forced to confront the disappointment that she is nonetheless not going to grow up to be a dragon. This becomes apparent when Halla asks Uggi to teach her to breathe fire:

Uggi sighed, a hot, hot sigh that burnt a small patch of lichen that had survived so far on the side of the rock. He felt that, in spite of the way he had brought Halla up as a dragon, the moment was come when she must learn the facts of life, hard though it would be for him to tell them to her. (23-4)

The unwelcome truth is that she is no more a dragon than Mitchison, despite growing up with the freedom to roam and read like her brother, had ever been a man. Frustrated by the apparent lack of a desirable adult role for herself, Halla finds some consolation in Uggi’s treasure hoard: if she cannot be a dragon, she can at least be “dragon-minded” (25) enough that she need never go back to living with people. This dragon-mindedness leads to her being called “Halla Heroesbane” (26) and subsequently results in her turning down an offer to become a Valkyrie on the grounds that she would not like the key component of the role: “You’re always choosing heroes aren’t you – touching them? And I hate them!” (31). The feminist subtext here becomes manifest when Uggi is slain by a prince and Halla is brought before him by his followers:

He looked at her grinning and asked her what she was called; she named herself Halla Bearsbairn, since she could not, for shame, speak her other name now. “It is clear you know the way of bears,” said the King’s son, “and after supper I shall teach you the way of women” (42-3).

However, she is saved *from* this hero by another dragon swooping down and rescuing her at the last moment. Mitchison does not allow her protagonist's identity to be shaped in relation to men but instead allows her to find her own way.

At first Halla recapitulates her childhood by living in the woods again, as she had as a bear cub, and then retrieving some of Uggi's treasure with the intention of making her own hoard in a cave. It is at this point, when she is in danger of retreating completely from the world into a Gollum-like relationship with her precious treasure, that she meets Odin, who – much as Gandalf draws Bilbo out of his hole and into the world in *The Hobbit* – sets her off on her own adventure with the titular advice to “travel light”. This leads her to her meeting with Tarkan Der in Micklegard and the journey back north with him after her escape from a nunnery where a corrupt priest has consigned her. It is at this point that *Travel Light's* alternative version of the Oedipus story – set up by the abandonment of Halla as a baby at the book's opening – becomes apparent. For unknown to her, Halla is returning to the place of her birth just as Oedipus unknowingly returns to Thebes before killing his father and marrying his mother.

As Halla and Tarkan Der sail up a river, they see a house being attacked by raiders and a young woman being dragged off by a bearded man in armour. Tarkan Der kills the man and Halla rescues the woman's father who has been tied up inside the burning house. The young woman is Alfeida and her husband is Modolf, who then tells his family story:

It is said that a certain king had a wife who died, and he married again. And there was a child of the first wife, a baby girl, and the second wife said it must be cast out into the forest and die. And so it was done. And my forefathers and I, God help us, through no fault of our own, are children of that king and that wicked queen. But there has been a continuous punishment and the sins of the fathers visited on the children. (139).

The story comes back on itself as in the Oedipus myth but rather than killing her father, Halla saves the father figure's life and the curse is lifted. In a neat resolution of loose ends, Tarkan Der marries Alfeida thus freeing Halla to continue travelling light. Although she learns that Odin was actually having a game with her by giving her this advice because, in a play on the time distortion effects that would result from faster than light travel, time has passed several hundred years in her homeland during the time she has been away. One consequence of this unexpected historical progress, however, is that heroes are now “getting very rare” (146) and Halla feels able to accept a renewed invitation to become a Valkyrie before riding off into the sunset. Here, the breaking of the Oedipal cycle of patriarchy enables Halla to remain free to roam around the pre-symbolic landscape of the imaginary.

One way to assess the significance of this landscape is through a consideration of John Clute's essay, “Notes on the Geography of Bad Art in Fantasy” (2002). Clute outlines a four-stage model of the “full fantasy story” (114), which begins with a land at peace being interrupted by a “wrongness” (114) as when the Shire is

invaded by Nazgûl, or, as in the case of *Travel Light*, when a new Queen demands that the King dispose of his daughter with the old Queen. The second stage is “thinning” (114): defeat, the breaking of the fellowship, “what happens to the Land when the Land becomes Fantasyland” (114). The world of *Travel Light*, with its talking dragons and basilisks, is a clear-cut example of such a “Fantasyland”. Clute sees such a condition negatively as “a reflection of what happens when Story forgets itself” (115). He goes on to note that “the way to escape the amnesias of thinning is to tell the Story again” (115). This is the function that is fulfilled in *Travel Light* by Modolf’s story, which reminds both Halla and the book’s readers of the full trajectory of her life. According to Clute, such a retelling, or remembering, should lead to the third stage of “recognition” (115), when the hero recognises their own agency, and thereby sets up the fourth stage of “return” (116): the possibility of resuming life as it was without wrongness. However, such a return could be seen as the completion of the Oedipal cycle and the restoration of the patriarchal order. In *Travel Light* this cycle is broken by Halla. It is not that she does not recognise the story; she recognises it at the moment when Tarkan Der complains about her talking to basilisks and starts trying to get her to keep house for him. But what she also recognises, or remembers, is that she has an identity outside the story – one that is unconstrained by the patriarchal symbolic order. Mitchison is unambiguous in her position on the question of what Clute calls “Story”, as is made clear in the chapter of *Travel Light* called “The Story”:

“It was a strange thing,” Modolf said, “that the curse held for so long, and all for the death of one small child. Worse things have been done than that. Yes. Much worse. Yet perhaps the death of the very innocent always carries a curse.”

“Perhaps she did not die, said Halla, “perhaps her nurse turned into a bear and carried her away into the forest. Perhaps she was brought up by bears and dragons. Perhaps it was better for her in the end than being a king’s child.”

“That was never in the story,” said Modolf.

“Forget the story,” said Halla. (140)

There can be no more serious declaration of the intent to abandon the symbolic order and live purely in the realm of the imaginary than this injunction to “forget the story”.

In this context, the fact that *Travel Light* shares the fictional setting of Marob with *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* is perhaps significant. As Janet Montefiore notes, Erif Der’s eventual “metamorphosis into a divine snake has [parallels with] Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa”” (167). Erif Der was just one of a number of fictional personas that Mitchison experimented with during the 1930s, which was for her a decade of possibilities. By the 1950s she had realised her need to escape the patriarchal symbolic order, which offered mainly a role as a politician’s wife. *Travel Light* was the way Mitchison wrote herself back into the landscape of the imaginary and thus bridged the gap between her novels of the 1930s and her subsequent science fiction. As Jill Benton argues,

what links *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, *Travel Light*, and *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) is a concept of “the female hero” who transcends binary gender and is “gifted with empathy”, capable of communicating “with all forms of life in the universe” (145).

Today, Mitchison would probably be marketed as a genre writer and that is more or less what she became, publishing a further two science fiction novels after *Memoirs of a Spacewoman: Solution Three* (1973) and *Not By Bread Alone* (1983). All three of these books feature women protagonists and – in the case of the first two certainly – are set in environments outside hierarchical patriarchal society. Her overall career demonstrates a link between the radical literature of the 1930s and postwar science fiction, which can also be found in the transition of the publishing house, Gollancz, from producing the iconic orange covers of the Left Book Club to the yellow dust jackets of its later specialism in genre fiction. In this context, the career of Mitchison offers a possibility for rethinking the history of British literature. She exemplifies a set of continuities that could be used to support an argument that the present-day successors of writers such as Orwell, Mitchison and Greene are Iain Banks, Gwyneth Jones and Ken MacLeod. However, the fact that these continuities are not widely acknowledged tells us in itself that there are factors working to occlude this kind of literary history. As Fredric Jameson argues, fantastika as a whole is subject to “psychic resistance” and is “the target of a kind of literary ‘reality principle’” (xiv n9). Mitchison, who employed the devices of fantastika across eight decades from the 1920s onwards to write variously about socialism, free love, birth control, abortion, and gender politics, should be someone known to all. If this was the case, *Travel Light* would no longer remain a hidden secret waiting to be discovered by adults like Amal El-Mohtar, but be available to all as a gateway to the landscape of the imaginary.

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