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**‘Becoming Acquainted With All That Pain’: Nursing as Activism in Naomi Mitchison’s
Science Fiction**

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Abstract:

The Scottish writer Naomi Mitchison worked as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse (VAD) during the First World War, serving on wards for several months before she left to nurse her wounded husband. Using previously unpublished archival material, this article argues that Mitchison’s experience as a nurse contributed to her career in crucial ways, by encouraging her to develop empathy towards others across barriers of class and nationality, and by drawing her towards fictions of estrangement (from historical novels, to fantasy and science fiction). The paper argues that the trauma of the war encouraged the estrangement of Mitchison’s debut novel *The Conquered*, a historical novel, and that this trend in her writing continued as she turned to science fiction later in her career, questioning the extent to which social pressures such as inequality and the class system shape bodies, their healthcare, and their horizons of thought.

Keywords:

science fiction; World War 1; nursing; Naomi Mitchison; Twentieth-Century Literature

Article:

The life of Scottish writer, Naomi Mitchison née Haldane (1897-1999), spanned almost all of the twentieth century and there are various avenues by which to approach her work fruitfully. One can look to her influential family, which included her father, the scientist JS Haldane, and her brother JBS Haldane, also a scientist and a prominent left-wing intellectual. Her social circle is notable, including friendships and correspondence with prominent writers of science fiction and fantasy such as Aldous Huxley, Olaf Stapledon, and JRR Tolkien. She worked at the forefront of genetics before the field had been recognised as such, even co-authoring an early paper on genetics, and rearing mice and guinea pigs for genetic experimentation.¹ She also wrote numerous novels and non-fiction books that agitated for radical political change and for a continual self-aware evaluation of the way in which we choose to live – a perspective that she honed in herself by writing Mass Observation diaries and memoirs for posterity. Through the scholarship on her life, Mitchison has been recognised as an important Modernist figure (given that she began publishing fiction during this period) and as an influential figure in the canon of science fiction.²

However, one aspect of Mitchison's life which has so far been underappreciated in Mitchison scholarship is her time spent as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse (or, VAD) during the First World War. Looking at this experience, and how it helped to shape Mitchison's outlook, leads to two key insights. The first is that Mitchison's experience as a nurse encouraged her towards estrangement in her writing – towards modes that inspire the reader to see their environment from a new perspective by making them aware of other cultures, whether fictional or otherwise. These estranging approaches – anthropology, historical fiction, fantasy, and science fiction – appear throughout Mitchison's career, and this paper will argue that this tendency towards estrangement was encouraged by Mitchison's experiences in the war, and of nursing in particular, as she turned to a fiction of estrangement

as a means of exploring the trauma of war at a remove.³ Mitchison's nursing and the medical knowledge that she gleaned from this period also had an impact on her political engagement and activism, and the ways in which both figure so prominently in her writing. Nursing left Mitchison with a sense of being 'on-call'; she remained aware that she had the ability, and therefore the obligation, to provide first aid to others in times of need and this left her with a sense of responsibility. Mitchison would always feel entangled with the well-being of others.

The second insight to be gained from viewing Mitchison's work from the perspective of her nursing experience comes as a result of the first. I argue that Mitchison's empathy and her sense of responsibility to others were gained, in part, through her nursing experience. This is at odds with later discourses in the medical humanities that are influenced by a 'two cultures' view of the world.⁴ Such discourses tend to suggest that the humanities can inject some much-needed empathy and warmth into the cool, objective, and scientific practice of medicine. For example, in developing her hugely influential concept of "narrative medicine", Rita Charon makes a distinction between "a scientifically competent medicine" and "narrative competence" which "enables the physician to practice medicine with empathy, reflection, professionalism and trustworthiness" (2001, 1897). In this article I argue that Mitchison found empathy through medicine, an empathy that she later expressed in her fiction.⁵ This reversal of the normal formula for the medical humanities has been explored by Jeffrey Bishop (2008), and the recent *Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (2016) makes a distinction between the "first wave" of medical humanities and a "critical" medical humanities which "insists that we move beyond the assumption that all affect and feeling are to be found in the arts and humanities, and all hard-nosed pragmatism in the biomedical sciences. Rather we begin to ask instead what the biomedical sciences might have to tell us about empathy" (Whitehead and Woods 2016, 5). In arguing for Mitchison's nursing-inspired empathy, and her sense of having an obligation to the needs of

others thanks to her medical training, I aim to contribute to this discourse about the value and origins of empathy. I will first do so by discussing Mitchison's wartime and nursing experiences, and that of VAD nurses more generally, before examining the ways in which this experience shaped her use of estrangement techniques and her idea of medicine as a practice of social responsibility. I will then trace the use of estrangement and medicine as social responsibility in her science fiction.

“Becoming Acquainted With All That Pain”: Mitchison's War Correspondence

The role of VAD nurses is now perhaps best remembered through Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933), its adaptation into a major BBC series (1979) following its 1978 republication by Virago Books, and its recent film adaptation starring Alicia Vikander (2015). The VAD nurses were organised by the British Red Cross as a reserve supply of volunteer nurses who could bolster the professional nursing forces in times of shortage. Mitchison had a family connection to the organisation as her aunt, Elizabeth Haldane, was a member of the council of the British Red Cross in Scotland and was instrumental in the development of the VAD force (Ritchie, 2004). A supporter of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), Haldane saw the feminist potential of the VAD force, as can be seen by her history of nursing, *The British Nurse in Peace and War* (1923) which does significantly more to situate women as central to the war effort than more conservative contemporaneous accounts such as Thekla Bowser's *The Story of British VAD Work in the Great War* (1917). Bowser is keen to emphasise the role of men, despite the fact that they made up a minority of VAD workers during this time and that the importance of women's work for the war effort was already being widely recognised, as Janet Watson shows; when the Imperial War Museum was founded in 1917, “women's contributions to the national effort were identified from the beginning as one of the fields of collection” (59).

Despite their differing experiences and politics, both Bowser and Haldane promote VAD work as a challenge to class boundaries. This is recorded by Mitchison in her autobiography through a growing acquaintance with menial tasks as she records that it was her time as a VAD that taught her “a bit about housework” (Mitchison 1979, 25). In this she was joined by Brittan who admitted that “what did profoundly trouble and humiliate me was my colossal ignorance of the simplest domestic operations” (262) before she signed up as a volunteer. VAD work required new nurses to take on the role of a probationer, “the lowliest of hospital personnel, who swept and dusted wards, cleaned out and laid fires, and spent much of their time mopping and scouring bedpans” (Hallett 2004, 5). By forcing upper- or middle-class women to do work that had previously been done by those from working-class backgrounds, the experience of VAD nursing made class boundaries temporarily permeable in some ways while reinforcing them in others; middle- and upper-middle class women predominated due to the VAD organisation’s desire for members of “that class whose static Victorian Value system could overcome, by sheer ‘character’ and ‘breeding’, any of the possible dangers that might affront the woman on active service” (Ouditt 1993, 19). The VAD environment was one that might encourage class consciousness through this contradictory employment of class identity.

As well as the family connection to the VAD enterprise, and to the war effort through the contribution of her brother, Mitchison may have been attracted to VAD nursing due to her previously sheltered upbringing. She had spent much of her childhood and young adulthood sleeping in her mother’s bed and had been excluded from some of her social circles when her brother and his friends continued at their boys-only school - a school that Naomi had been permitted to attend until she began to menstruate at the age of twelve (Benton 1992, 15). Jill Benton argues that such episodes left Naomi feeling constrained by her family, and her mother in particular, teaching her that “if Naomi was to achieve personal independence she

would have to do it for herself” (16). Perhaps nursing, and the chance to move away from her mother to London, represented an opportunity for freedom and for the forging of her own future.

According to her VAD card, the official record of her activities as a nurse, Mitchison was engaged as a VAD in August of 1915 and was later a probationer at St Thomas’s Hospital, London, in 1917. This was followed by six months of morning shifts at Wingfield, and work on the outpatient ward of the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford (British Red Cross 2017). Despite the fact that Mitchison found herself, at the age of 18, living away from home for the first time in an urban metropolis during wartime, there is little evidence from her correspondence that she was writing with the goal of protecting those at home from the realities of her wartime life. Her letters to her mother relate incidents from the hospital in detail: legs are amputated, pus squirts across the ward, and the smells assault the young women as they work.⁶ The location of an undated letter to Mitchison’s mother, Louisa Kathleen Haldane, reads simply “Hospital”, and Mitchison sympathetically describes the suffering of a new arrival: “Rather a horrible morning; a man with his leg off was simply awfully bad, no temperature, but rather delirious with pain and simply screaming when the wound was dressed. Poor boy, he’s an Australian and all his people are over there I suppose” (Mitchison 1915b). Mitchison’s mother considered herself a suffragist and had encouraged her daughter to follow a career in medicine (Mitchison 1988, 87) so Mitchison clearly felt that she could share gory details with her mother rather than shielding her from the realities of wartime nursing. Medicine was a profession familiar to Louisa’s family, her sister-in-law Elizabeth having contributed to the setting up of the VAD programme, so by telling her mother about the action she was seeing perhaps Mitchison could feel confident that her mother would be proud of her and fully expect her to hold up under the physical and psychological strains imposed by the work. Mitchison’s openness also highlights the

importance of her family background. In a family of politically-engaged intellectuals, many matters were up for discussion in the Mitchison household that might not have been suitable subjects in wider society. For example, the family interest in genetics meant that the young Naomi was theoretically familiar with the mechanics of the body and reproduction and viewed such matters in a practical way. She had already proved vocal on the topic of eugenics at the age of sixteen through her play *Saunes Bairos* (1913) which describes a eugenic dystopia and provoked an angry letter from Helen Cooke, the mother of some other girls of Naomi's age, who found the play to contain inappropriate material for her children (Cooke 1913). In the Haldane household, such matters were open for discussion and debate, and Naomi's father spoke to her openly about his experiments and intellectual pursuits, treating her as an equal in his correspondence, as he did her brother. This family environment was conducive to Mitchison's frank attitude with her mother, as was her mother's ambition that Naomi become a doctor.

As well as Mitchison's family background, the contemporary social situation may have encouraged her frankness. Other VAD nurses at the time described the scenes they faced, in part because of the political situation in which they found themselves.⁷ As women performing nursing duties with only limited training they often reported being treated coldly by qualified nurses who were in the process of seeking professional status from the Royal College of Physicians. As Janet S.K. Watson explains,

Nursing was considered exclusively and 'naturally' the work of women, and those women who had trained as nurses were not disputing that association. They wanted, however, to establish nursing as a profession rather than a calling, one that required significant and consistent training, and was worthy of payment and respect. Primarily middle-class daughters of professional men who could not afford to support them if

they did not marry, the nurses were staking their claims for a new socially acceptable work environment for gentlewomen. (60)

The debate about the professionalisation of nursing, and its complication during wartime as eager upper-class volunteers began to appear in hospitals, brought to light the tension between women's 'work' and women's service. Again, Watson explains:

the more service-oriented war work was considered to be, the more socially acceptable it was. At the other end, work-oriented efforts tended to be seen as more problematic. For a woman to serve, after all, was not threatening to her subordinate role in the existing social order. To work, however, suggested a position within the realm of the public, one that might entail new forms of power and, at minimum, financial independence. These definitions were not stable, though, and even service contained within it possibilities for subversion. Controversial work, conversely, was subject to extensive social efforts to make it acceptable – even admirable – work for women, though only “for the duration”. Work, in fact, could be popularly translated into service, partly defusing the threat that working women represented. (100)

The willingness and ability of VAD nurses to perform important duties without full training or professionalization put nursing in danger of regressing into a kind of feminised service, rather than being recognised as the work that the trained nurses understood it to be. The different perceptions between trained nurses and VADs over what nursing was, and how it should be carried out, sometimes caused grievances between the two groups as the nurses sought to protect their profession while the VADs expected recognition as respected and patriotic volunteers; or, failed to understand the discipline of the hospital environment. The

importance of the physical and psychological difficulty of the work could therefore be faced head-on as a means of showing Mitchison's contribution, as a Haldane and as a VAD, to society and to her family.

These frank descriptions of wartime nursing are tempered by Mitchison's understatement of her own reactions to the scenes in the hospital. Another letter to her mother tells of a man with a wound in his leg "through which one could see bone" and another "with one leg off at the knee and the stump not healed, and the other foot and ankle a mass of septic and swollen wounds" (Mitchison 1915). Mitchison spares her mother no details and admits that the encounter left her pale and faint. Clearly her experiences on the ward were very hands-on, but she tells her mother that washing and dressing the wounds was preferable to watching someone else working on the wounded. She writes, "it makes all the difference if you are doing something yourself, even if you are necessarily hurting the man and he is trembling all over with pain, clutching at the bed clothes and gasping out 'oh, god, ohgod, oh god!' as the stuff comes out of the yellow wounds" (Mitchison 1915, sic). While the medical situations are described in gory detail, Mitchison's reaction is stoical; while she admits to being faint, she describes herself holding up under pressure and getting back to work after only a little respite forced on her by her fellow nurses. She describes her shock after the operation through her inability to carry on with her duties, a temporary physical, rather than psychosomatic, drawback: "when I sat down to sew afterwards I simply couldn't hold the needle, which was perfectly silly and purely physical". She explains that the cause of her upset is "chiefly [...] the smell of the wounds". Mitchison plays down her need for care after the incident, writing that "I'd have been all right if they'd let me sit still, but as it was May said I was quite white and they made me lie down for a bit and gave me a potent drink... which bucked me up no end" (Mitchison 1915).

This description of the soldier's wounds juxtaposed with Mitchison's relatively mild reaction is typical of wartime writing as described by Carol Acton and Jane Potter, who point out that the medical practitioner working during wartime may not be able to write about the damage to their own psychology caused by their proximity to the dead or wounded because those physical wounds seem so much greater than the difficulties they faced in treating such gravely wounded men. The writers explain that, "understanding medical practitioners' wartime representations of trauma is thus problematic. When their accounts bear witness to the physical and psychological trauma of those they care for (and tend to be read in this context), they also obscure the writers' own psychological wounds" (63). This would appear to be the case also with Mitchison's account as she tells her mother that her reaction to the horrific wounds of the soldier was her inability afterwards to thread a needle which she hurries to claim was "perfectly silly and purely physical". She admits to being pale afterwards but, again, gives this reaction a physical basis, blaming it on "the smell of the wounds". As with much wartime writing, Mitchison represents the terrible wounds of the soldiers and their suffering as heroic while downplaying her own by contrast and effacing any possibility of psychological damage.

Estrangement in Mitchison's Activism

While this psychological damage was repressed in her contemporary letter-writing, it would appear in her writing after the war, infusing her novels and her politics. When she recounts her nursing experience in her autobiography *All Change Here* (1975) the only reference she makes to the psychological impact of nursing the wounded is to say that, "becoming acquainted with all that pain did something so drastic that I had to write about it, to externalise it on to paper, in order to get it out of my mind: hence the blood and pain in *The Conquered* and my earlier stories" (127-8). Mitchison's experience of the pain and suffering

of her patients led her to express the importance of biology and the sociology of biological states in her work. At the same time, she was sympathetic to internationalism in political movements, inspired in part by treating foreign combatants. This knowledge, fundamental to the science-fictional impulse which seeks to extrapolate from fundamental changes to social conditions, contributed to Mitchison's activism after the war, promoting liberal attitudes to sexuality, the availability of birth control, and openness to eugenics.

Her sympathy towards alternative ideas and visions of radically different societies is also clear from a collection she edited for children entitled *Notes For Boys and Girls and Their Parents* (1932). The collection includes essays from leading intellectuals of the day, including WH Auden and science fiction writer, Olaf Stapledon. The book aims to act as a critical encyclopaedia, giving young children information about the world around them while encouraging them to engage with the concepts creatively and analytically. Mitchison includes "Eugenics", an essay by Oxford zoologist John Baker which argues that civilisation does not allow for the Darwinian "survival of the fittest", leading to a degeneration of the human mind and body.⁸ Baker argues that:

It would be a good plan to prevent people who have inherited feeble-mindedness from having children, because feeble-minded people are not happy themselves, and they are not useful to other people, and they cost other people a lot of money. Unfortunately, they are increasing rapidly in numbers in Great Britain. Before long they will form quite a large proportion of our population, unless we decide not to allow them to have children. (205)

Baker's entry finishes with the somewhat sinister words, "Members of Parliament, who decide these things, think it best to let ['feeble-minded' people] go on multiplying. When

they were young, Members of Parliament did not have an *Outline for Boys and Girls*” (205). The characterisation here of eugenics as a common sense policy simply overlooked because of political cowardice and lack of education need not be read as Mitchison’s own view; while she was made a Life Fellow of the Eugenics Society she broadly subscribed to what Claire Hanson refers to as “enlightened” eugenics, which looked to genetics as a means of addressing social issues without advocating the racist ideologies of the Nazis with which it would later become associated, or indeed of John Baker. However, her willingness to engage with such ideas and to include them in a book meant for children, shows her commitment to considering ideas that would result in radically different societies, suggesting her belief in the possibility of radically different ways of life.⁹

Mitchison’s experience of medicine also informs the class consciousness and internationalism that would become so crucial to her work, particularly her science fiction. In her memoir *You May Well Ask* (1979), which covers the period 1920-40, Mitchison explicitly cites health as a source of class distinction:

On the whole, good health was privilege: it belonged to the middle and upper classes. You have only to look at photographs of primary-school children from an industrial area or glance at statistics of height and weight class-wise. There were of course no such things then as free ante-natal and post-natal clinics, foot clinics, school dentistry and so on. (29)

Being aware of the injustice of health inequality gave Mitchison an obligation to use the medical knowledge she had gleaned from her time as a VAD whenever the situation demanded, an attitude that overcame differences in class or nationality.¹⁰ During her time as a VAD nurse she saw and worked with people of a range of nationalities. For example, she

writes about a young soldier in a bad way who “lives between the two Belgians and the three are immense friends. One of the Belgians is a very nice educated man and we talked quite a lot” (Mitchison 1915). Mitchison found herself called upon to act as a translator for the Belgians on the ward, developing an internationalism that would influence her socialism well after the war. When she travelled to Vienna to show solidarity with the socialists there in 1934 the internationalist impulse to serve those she encountered occurred to her before she left, as she wrote, “I shouldn’t be hopeless at actual relief work, as I had my VAD training during the war, and am fairly practical at rolling bandages, and all that” (11). While her training had taken place in 1915, nearly twenty years before the time of writing, she felt that the knowledge and experience she had gained during her short time as a VAD had stayed with her and could be drawn on in desperate times.

As well as this sense of internationalism, Mitchison’s medical knowledge and specifically her experience as a VAD influenced the genres in which she worked, encompassing her successful historical novels and her later turn towards science fiction. Most immediately the trauma of the war, which saw Mitchison’s brother JBS Haldane and her husband serving at the front line, in addition to the first-hand experience Mitchison had on the wards, pushed her towards estranging genres of literature through which she could describe the traumatic experiences of war at a distance. Mitchison saw herself that nursing had directly influenced the violence of her novels, particularly her debut historical novel, *The Conquered*, when she wrote that, “becoming acquainted with all that pain did something so drastic that I had to write about it” (*All Change Here*, 127). The dedication of the book to her brother, who was at the front at the time, and the inclusion of an emotional portrayal of a sister watching her brother leaving for battle serves to underline the parallels with WWI. In *The Historical Novel* (1936), Georg Lukács argues that the genre emerged during the industrial revolution due to the sense of rupture experienced by the society as a whole, a

sense of rupture that allowed the historical past to be imagined as a place where people held genuinely different and alien beliefs; for those writing historical fiction in the immediate aftermath of the First World War (particularly those, like Mitchison, who had lost swathes of their social circles) this sense of rupture was intensified. *The Conquered* conveys the violence of war, but in the historical setting of the Roman conquest of Gaul, while Mitchison explicitly draws a direct contemporary parallel by prefacing each chapter with quotes from Irish poetry, comparing the conquest of Gaul to the British colonisation of Ireland.

Mitchison would also use estrangement as a means of political activism in her pamphlet, *Comments on Birth Control*, in which she estranges the reader from their own society by turning to another culture in order to question the line between biological determinism and social constructionism. Like science fiction, and its predecessor, the traveller's tale, anthropology provides an estranging encounter with the Other, one that invites the reader to look at their own empirical reality with a fresh perspective by presenting them with an alien and different society. While fertility is considered to be determined by biology, Mitchison turns to anthropology to question to what extent this is the case and to suggest that fertility may, to at least some extent, be socially constructed. She references Bronisław Malinowski's 1929 book *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* which describes inhabitants of Trobriand Island who rarely experience premarital pregnancy, despite premarital sex and fertility after marriage.¹¹ Mitchison sees the islanders as separate from Western medicine and the knowledge that sex leads to pregnancy, a separation that allows their bodies to conform to social norms rather than biological imperatives and wonders whether Westerners might be capable of recapturing such a state.¹² This move towards estranging techniques would lead Mitchison towards science fiction as her career progressed, and her interest in the borderline between social and biological constructionism became more central to her work. Such an anthropological interest anticipates the New Wave

of science fiction that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the work of its key practitioner, Ursula K Le Guin, who took inspiration from her anthropologist parents.¹³ Mona Fayad argues that this awareness of anthropology led to Le Guin's concern with questioning cultural biases while Jan Horner reads her work as always in conversation with that of her parents. The estrangement of such anthropological texts shows a genealogy that uses the estrangement of an "other" to allow readers a new perspective on their own societies and the customs that have become naturalised with familiarity.

Estrangement in Mitchison's writing was accompanied by a sense of being 'on call'; Mitchison's characters are bound by a sense of duty to use their skills when needed, and this gives them a sense of active participation in shaping their worlds. These two characteristics are perhaps related, as using estrangement to see society anew encourages an active engagement with that society and, in Mitchison's characters, this inevitably leads to an assessment of how one might intervene in that society to effect its improvement or to help the individuals one encounters. In her semi-autobiographical novel, *We Have Been Warned* (1935), a realist novel which uses elements of folklore and dystopia to shape its anti-fascist message, upper-middle class socialist Dione finds herself caring for a wounded man as a peaceful protest against unemployment gets out of hand. She sees the man receive a blow to the head from a policeman's baton and immediately reacts by providing first aid:

She proceeded with the iodine; the man opened his eyes and clawed at her with his hands, trying to sit up again. "Quiet!" she said, "Mother's got you." Again he collapsed. But the handkerchief wouldn't quite go round his head; she held it against the bleeding wound, wondering what to do. If only one wore petticoats nowadays! (454)

Dione's empathetic reaction to a man of a lower class who she immediately sees is "probably one of the marchers" because he is "thin and big and more raggedly dressed than any Londoner" (453) causes her to criticise the prioritisation of fashion over convenience and to comfort him intimately, as the use of the term "mother" shows. The use of familial intimacy in this First Aid context recalls the structures of allegiance in VAD units, as Sharon Ouditt explains: "while VADs declared their loyalty to the King, they were simultaneously instructed that their parent organisation was their 'Mother'. The familial metaphor thus domesticated the potentially revolutionary appeal of the VAD, which addressed its members as 'dutiful daughters', putting pressure on them to adopt the reverential role of the Mother in obeisance to the Father – the patriarchal nation state" (9). Here, Dione invokes that familial structure, but in the revolutionary context of breaking class boundaries and challenging the authority of the police officer, a representative of that patriarchal nation state.

However, Dione is not portrayed as a perfect ally to the working classes, and the incident forces her to consider her class privilege, as well as the sexist oppression she faces. When the policeman claims that he delivered the blow to prevent the marcher from kicking his horse Dione momentarily reels at the thought "that someone should have tried to hurt an innocent and valuable animal". She is thrown back into her upper-middle-class childhood experiences of horses: "Nice horse. Patting nursery horses held up to feed carrots velvety-soft snuffling muzzling noses" before remembering the injuries of the working-class man in front of her and shouting "You might have killed him!" (454). Dione's practical care for the man and her attempts to restore him to health allow her to (perhaps temporarily) overcome class prejudices instilled in her from her earliest memories, and to remember the humanity of the man who lies before her, regardless of their different class backgrounds. The reaction of the gathering crowd who witness the incident remind her of the dangers of betraying her class. Someone calls her a member of the "squawking sisterhood" while another describes her as

“one of those women who can’t help making fools of themselves”. One of the men, whom Dione recognises as a former public schoolboy from the tie he wears, grabs her and only lets her go when a lady tells him that they haven’t time to teach her a lesson: “You haven’t time to teach her now, said the words; you haven’t time to rape her now, said the tone. Oh God!” (456). Dione’s empathy for the working class, realised and emphasised by the administration of First Aid, becomes an incident that reveals to her the difficulties of overcoming the class divide and the dangers of doing so, especially for a woman seen as a class traitor. This hands-on approach is once again shown as Dione explains the mechanics of birth control to a poor urban woman who has only had sex with her husband on a small number of occasions since they cannot afford any more children. Here, once again, healthcare is represented as a crucial dividing line between the classes, one that Dione is keen to breach through information and practical help; once more, Dione sees health advice as a metonymy for the inequalities enforced by class.

As the novel reaches its climax, Dione is given a vision of a possible future fascist dystopia in Britain, one that sees her husband killed in front of her. Britain is under a military dictatorship, the populace, particularly those with Communist or Socialist sympathies, are terrorised by a militia known as “the Specials”, who ransack Dione’s Oxford home, forcing some of her children to flee to Scotland with their nurse. Dione finds her daughter, Morag, in the ruins of the house; Morag has been raped and describes the Specials as, “just ordinary people. One or two of them looked like undergraduates. But they were mostly older” (544). This description of the fascists shows the potential for people who appear normal to embrace fascism under certain circumstances, even those who might be considered too well-educated (Oxford undergraduates) or to have the wisdom of age (those who are ‘older’). This dystopian vision provides the ‘warning’ of the novel’s title and gives the sense that readers should resist being complacent about Britain’s potential to embrace fascism, instead adopting

an engaged and critical attitude to their societies and treating one another with empathy and respect, just as Dione has done through her administration of healthcare and advice throughout the realist sections of the novel.

Estranging Activism to Science Fiction

While *We Have Been Warned* straddles realist and fantastical genres, Mitchison would later work within the genre of science fiction proper. This move from the historical fiction of *The Conquered* to *We Have Been Warned*, which borrows from multiple genres, and then to science fiction can be viewed as a continuing development in Mitchison's career, but one that never loses sight of her interest in estranging the reader from contemporary society in order to reveal the flaws in that society. Fredric Jameson suggests science fiction as a counterpoint to the historical fiction described by Georg Lukács; whereas historical fiction captured a sense of the past, science fiction “registers some nascent sense of the future, and does so in the space on which a sense of the past had once been inscribed” (150). Carl Freedman develops this argument when he points out that “in the historical novel...the alternative to actuality is located in a knowable (and generally national) past”. This knowability means that “there is a real sense in which the [historical] novel...is prewritten before it begins” because the history represented in the text remains inevitable and unchanged by the writer’s imaginative efforts. Freedman compares this with science fiction, in which cognitive estrangement plays a more central role than in historical fiction by contrasting the writer and reader’s quotidian experiences with “a potential future that is indeed historically determinate (at least in literary effect) but of its very nature less factually preset than any established past” (54). Mitchison’s move towards science fiction later in her career allows her to explore the line between social and biological constructionism from a new angle. In her first and most celebrated science fiction novel, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), aliens, animals, and

humans are treated as beings which share a common corporeality which gives them a common understanding of what it means to be in the world and connects them across their difference. The experience of motherhood is a primary site for such connections as animals and humans take on a maternal role alongside each other in a grafting experiment (151-168), and in the Martian species motherhood is even something that connects across gender as male Martians can choose to bear children. Mitchison's spacewoman, Mary, experiences this as the 'father' of a haploid Martian child who she particularly loves among her children because of the child's difference. By moving from the historical novel and the use of anthropological narratives as a means of estrangement to science fiction Mitchison can represent the contingency, not just of human bodies, but of the concept of the body itself. The representation of alien bodies in the novel allows Mitchison to once again question the line between biological determination and social constructionism, for example during the spacewoman's encounter with a race of five-armed starfish-like aliens. Their five-limbed structures mean that the aliens show none of the predisposition to binary thought patterns that Mary becomes increasingly aware of in herself as "so many of my judgements were paired; good and evil, black or white, to be or not to be" (27). Mary explicitly recognises that "it is only in circumstances like this that we realise how much we ourselves are constructed bilaterally on either-or principles. Fish rather than echinoderms" (20). The estrangement of science fiction offers the reader a chance to consider how biology might shape the mind and, by extension, the structure of society. This, however, is not a simplistic example of biological determinism, but rather part of a dialogue that Mitchison shares with her reader about the extent to which biology and society shape the individual. As Gavin Miller has argued, Mitchison's position "is not to accept that [our forms of reason] are entirely determined by our embodiment, or immune to cultural or individual variation" (256). Mitchison's use of estrangement, developed in part as a means of expressing wartime trauma, is used here to

explore alien bodies, which reveal the ways in which corporeality and biology shape minds and societies.

While *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* considers the limitations and possibilities of different bodies, Mitchison's sense of being forever on call thanks to her medical training is reflected in *Solution Three's* Miryam. *Solution Three* (1974) depicts a society where cloning is encouraged and heterosexual reproduction has been designated a 'deviant' activity, fulfilling the science-fictional function of "transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come" (Jameson, 152) and thereby drawing attention to the historical contingency of human biology and social relationships. Sarah LeFanu (1994, 154) points out that the novel, published in 1974, has much in common with a feminist, and predominantly American, boom in science fiction at this time because of the way it foregrounds sexual politics: the novel's characters represent a range of sexualities, one of which is Miryam, a deviant mother of her own genetic children and a scientist sent to Outer Mongolia to investigate a virus that is damaging crops. During this expedition, Miryam encounters an unknown culture, much more simplistic than the megacities and complex systems of her own, and more recognisable to the reader as a society that could exist in our world today, or on the novel's publication in 1974. This is a development from Mitchison's earlier use of anthropological sources as a means of estrangement; working in the genre of science fiction allows her to produce an anthropology of the present day, and of her own society. *Solution Three* continues the sense of medicine as a social responsibility found in much of Mitchison's fiction, as Miryam "almost involuntarily found herself doing a bit of the primitive medical work" (104) as she spends time with the people of this ancient culture. Medical knowledge is a means of finding common purpose, even with cultures completely alien from one's own, and of feeling a sense of obligation and interaction between peoples. This sense of medical engagement as human connection is developed: because heterosexual parturition is rare and

cloning has become the norm, all clones are based on one of two people, known only as He and She. 'She' was a doctor, and one of the non-clone women, Mutumba, describes how her medical duties allowed her to see the beauty in everyone, "in India when she was still at the mission hospital. Well, it seems there were patients waiting and they were not beautiful. Not to others, not to anyone just ordinary", Matumba explains to one of the clones, "sometimes plain ugly with illnesses and bad feeding and maybe accidents that hadn't been looked after. A doctor is always kind, she has empathy; but She found them beautiful. She said so out loud" (117). The human connection found through giving medical attention is here emphasised as an important means of cultivating empathy, and of recognising that which is held in common among people rather than fixating on the differences that divide communities; an empathy reminiscent of Mitchison's war correspondence to her mother and the wounded men she nursed who found themselves so far from home.

Nursing the Alien

Mitchison's nursing experience had a significant impact on her writing career: it pushed Mitchison towards estranging modes of fiction, such as the historical novel, anthropological estrangement, and science fiction, so that the trauma of war could be discussed freely. This would later mean that she would address class and health inequalities using the same estranging techniques, and Mitchison could encourage her audience to consider how social circumstances shape conditions that may appear as biological imperatives. Her nursing training also gave her the experience of being 'on call', an attitude that would encourage Mitchison to use her writing as a means of political and social activism, imploring her readers to think about birth control options and their impact on class divisions, or to think of themselves as active citizens with a duty to intervene positively in the world around them. Finally, Mitchison's experience of nursing, health, genetics and reproduction fed her interest

in the difference between social and biological constructionism. In her science fiction, Mitchison could explore this line through imagining alien species or futuristic eugenic societies, exploring the ways in which medical possibility and availability shape the horizons of engaged citizens and define what is considered possible in any given social order. Each of these themes are crucial to Mitchison's work and considering her oeuvre in this light is a useful means of drawing together the seemingly disparate strands of her writing career. However, reading Mitchison's work in this light is also beneficial in the context of current debates which seek to shape the direction of medical humanities as a field. Mitchison's medical experience fed her empathic tendencies and encouraged that empathy to reach beyond those she encountered to encompass the foreign, the unknown, and the alien. The role of medicine in her career as an influence that promoted social responsibility and empathy in her work and in her political activism is one that chimes with recent critiques (Bishop, Woods and Whitehead) which seek to reassess an approach to literature and medicine which assumes that empathy can be cultivated through focusing on the former. Considering the case of Mitchison, someone who overturns the assumption that humanity comes from the humanities by bringing empathy from her medical training to her writing rather than the other way around, is a useful means of breaking down a binary that assumes that medicine as a practice is intrinsically objective or scientist. As we study literature and medicine alongside one another, hers is a useful example to bear in mind of the potential for humanity in both disciplines and their entanglement with one another.

Notes

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¹ The paper on genetics which she co-authored with JBS Haldane and AD Sprunt is entitled "Reduplication in Mice: Preliminary Communication" and gives Mitchison's affiliation as "home student". Published in 1915, the paper begins with apologies for premature publication but explains that publication had to be brought forward because Sprunt had already died at the front.

² For the most significant contributions to scholarship on Mitchison's life see Jill Benton's *Naomi Mitchison: A Biography* (1992) and *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (1997) by Jenni Calder.

³ The use of "cognitive estrangement" as a defining aspect of science fiction has been theorised at length by science fiction scholar Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) in which he argues that science fiction allows readers to see their own reality anew through a process of alienation, comparable to Berthold Brecht's alienation technique but based on the introduction of a "novum", a new technology that effects change in the environment described in the science fiction text.

⁴ "Two cultures" here refers to CP Snow's 1959 Rede Lecture which argues that Western thought has been separated into the two cultures of the sciences and the humanities, and that these two cultures should be reintegrated for the good of society and problem-solving.

⁵ While I here argue that empathy is a positive force in Mitchison's life which has contributed to her ability to identify and work to overcome structural barriers and differences, this is not always the case and empathy as a political concept must be approached with care due to its unevenness. For more on empathy's limitations and the surrounding debate see Ann Jurecic's "Empathy and the Critic" (2011) and Carolyn Pedwell's *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (2014).

⁶ See Mitchison's letter to her mother, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 4549/4.

⁷ See for example Brittan's *Testament of Youth* or Olive Dent's *A Volunteer Nurse on the Western Front: Memoirs from a WWI Camp Hospital* (2012), a collection of her contemporary WWI diaries.

⁸ Baker would go on to develop his ideas into *Race* (1974) which in turn inspired *The Bell Curve* (1994). For a description of these influences see Kenny, 2004.

⁹ For a more comprehensive discussion of Mitchison's complicated and changing views on genetics see Lesley A Hall, particularly her *Naomi Mitchison: A Profile of Her Life and Work* (2007).

¹⁰ Despite the fact that Mitchison was ostensibly working for the British Red Cross (as were all VAD nurses) this universal humanitarian ethos was by no means evident throughout the supposedly transnational organisation. Heather Jones argues that "a partisan climate increasingly affected national Red Cross societies" (702) and that this led to disagreements and stalemates at the Stockholm conference in 1916.

¹¹ Malinowski had found himself effectively stranded in New Guinea when WWI broke out, developing much of his anthropological approach and findings thanks to his inadvertent immersion in the society he studied; interestingly, another means by which the First World War estranged citizens from the quotidian and encouraged new perspectives.

¹² In "Pregnancy as protest in interwar British women's writing: an antecedent alternative to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*" (2016), Fran Bigman argues that Mitchison's use of these anthropological arguments amounts to utopian thought or speculative fiction, if not science fiction proper.

¹³ Le Guin's parents were Theodora and Alfred L. Kroeber. Alfred L. Kroeber was a prominent cultural anthropologist, particularly well known for his work on Native American history, while Theodora Kroeber published a biography of Ishi, a Yahi Indian and the last of his tribe, called *Ishi in Two Worlds* (1961).