

‘What Does a Socialist Woman Do?’ Birth Control and the Body Politic in Naomi Mitchison’s *We Have Been Warned*

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WHEN WRITING HER 1979 MEMOIR *YOU MAY WELL ASK*, the multi-genre novelist, chronicler, and activist Naomi Mitchison looked back on a time in the 1930s when her books were considered ‘a possible menace to the respectable reader’.¹ She went on to reflect that ‘it is funny to think that I was generally considered to be near the verge of obscenity’,² though she might not have realised just how near. It wasn’t until the release of government papers in 2005, six years after Mitchison’s death, that it was revealed Scotland Yard had investigated her work in 1935 – or to be precise, one work in particular. A novel that caused outrage when it finally made it into print that year, following lengthy arguments with various publishers, and despite concerns that no printer would take the job. In this context the novel’s title reads almost as a disclaimer, as Mitchison lights the fuse of her most subversive and autobiographical work, without stepping back: *We Have Been Warned*. But what, we may well ask, made the novel so contentious? Mitchison had by this point, as Jenni Calder points out, been ‘acclaimed as a fresh, innovative and challenging novelist’,³ who had already shown an interest in tackling sexual and reproductive themes; but this had been from the safe distance offered by historical fictions set in foreign and fantastical lands, such as those of *The Conquered* (1923) or *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931). However, Mitchison then took her signature style and thematic concerns and merged them with 1930s political realism – to rather astonishing effect. It was the resulting depiction of taboos ranging from adultery to abortion, set against the backdrop of the 1930s Labour movement, and including a foray into Stalin’s Russia, that made *We Have Been Warned* so much more problematic than anything else she

¹ Naomi Mitchison, *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920–1940* (London 1979) p. 71.

² *Ibid.*

³ Jenni Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London 1997) p. x.

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had written before. Mitchison herself has reflected on this, and several critics (Calder, Rob Hardy, Elizabeth Maslen) have identified the inflammatory mix of sex and politics as something that was unpalatable then, as indeed it would appear to be now. Though the novel is no longer attacked with the same ferocity, it continues to be dismissed or denigrated – generally approached with caution, couched criticism, and nose firmly held. It has been cast as a failed experiment, even by those ostensibly bound to promote it; the 2012 reissue features an introduction by Isobel Murray that Anna McFarlane has called, ‘one of the most discouraging blurbs ever to be published’.⁴ Indeed it is unfortunate that both Murray and Calder, who have done so much to highlight Mitchison’s work, agree that *We Have Been Warned* ‘is not a good novel, but . . . an extremely interesting one’,⁵ and that each focuses on its perceived faults without sufficiently examining the novel’s potential appeal. Murray’s main criticism seems to be Mitchison’s failure to maintain ‘the writer’s appropriate literary distance’;⁶ but this is an intrinsic part of Mitchison’s personal, political, and artistic agendas, and it is the force and immediacy – the visceral honesty – that make *We Have Been Warned* so engaging. The novel’s neglect is particularly surprising when we consider its sheer singularity. No other woman was writing about the body with the same frankness as Mitchison; this in itself warrants further critical attention, for as Judith Butler has shown us, ‘to invoke matter is to invoke a sedimented history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures’⁷ – erasures perpetuated by the censure, criticism, and silence this novel has been met with over the years. What’s more, many of the topics it tackled are still vitally relevant to women today. Mitchison leaves no feminist issue, big or small, untouched: from marriage and sex to pockets and typing,⁸

⁴ Anna McFarlane, ‘Naomi Mitchison’s *We Have Been Warned* in Post-Referendum Scotland’, *The Bottle Imp*, 19 (2016).

⁵ Jenni Calder, quoted in Isobel Murray’s introduction to Naomi Mitchison, *We Have Been Warned* (Kilkerran 2012) p. v.

⁶ Murray, *ibid.*, p. viii.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York 1993) p. 49.

⁸ Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist Dione’s husband publishes a book he has been working on, and she comments; ‘he showed her his reviews . . . But he was no longer interested in that book, though Dione, who had typed it all, still was’ (p. 437). This brings to mind the hashtag #ThanksForTyping, that went viral in 2017, encouraging researchers to post references to wives from the acknowledgement sections of academic works. Following its success, the University of Oxford held a conference on the theme in 2019: <<https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/event/thanks-for-typing-wives-daughters-mothers-and-other-women-behind-famous-0>>.

each is approached with the same openness and dynamic mode of narration, through her engaging, if blundering, protagonist.

We Have Been Warned is the story of Dione Galton and her family. Like Mitchison, Dione is of Scottish heritage but lives in Oxford and has a husband – named Tom in the novel – attempting to be elected as Labour MP for a constituency in the north of England. The novel begins in Dione’s ancestral home in Argyll, and as well as Oxford, London, and the industrial north, large sections take place ‘Under the Red Flag’, en route to and within the Soviet Union. It tracks Tom’s election campaigns, Dione’s struggles to reconcile her politics with her lived experience, the trip to the USSR during which both Dione and Tom engage in extra-marital affairs (of some form or other), and their attempts to negotiate a new sort of family life while awaiting the revolution.

While Mitchison has drawn criticism for everything from her use of autobiographical detail to a narrative style that combines realism and multiple sets of fantastic imagery, these elements can be seen to reflect the sexual politics of the novel in her disregard of convention. She wanted to write her story her way, with a refusal to be pigeon-holed that extended from life to page, and back again, conjuring the complaints of feminists to come – such as Irigaray – demanding the right to say their multiplicity. But what exactly did Mitchison have to say, and why has it prompted such hostility? In the following sections I will contextualise the novel before going on to examine its most controversial and important elements: the depictions of abortion, rape, free love, and, most crucially, contraception. This article seeks to shine a light on *We Have Been Warned*, and thus into the darker corners of women’s sexual and reproductive experiences in the early twentieth century. It explores what it was that made this particular work so offensive, and what that tells us about gender dynamics and sexual politics in the 1930s, before going on to consider what the novel has to offer readers today, when feminists face familiar problems in different guises, as well as a new set of existential threats. Considering the novel in historical context, and alongside some of Mitchison’s non-fiction writing from the time, reveals a tension between language and materiality that has implications for both the autonomy-seeking female and the body politic – not only of the febrile 1930s, but well into the twenty-first century.

The 1930s are often thought of as an age of extremes: extreme poverty and extreme politics marching hand in hand. As Janet Montefiore has noted, ‘Inaugurated by the Wall Street Crash in October 1929 and ending with Hitler’s invasion of Poland, those ten years of mass poverty, protest and imminent war have never stopped mattering in British political

culture.⁹ Despite the fact that the gendering of both the public and domestic spheres had been largely reasserted in the wake of the First World War,¹⁰ many women did by then have increasing access to education, contraception, and the workplace, leading some to prematurely believe that the battles for women's rights were largely won and thus not the priority. Maroula Joannou points out that 'the most important political objectives for many women in the 1930s were the defence of democracy and the defeat of Fascism'.¹¹ Mitchison shared these objectives, but she was also aware that the struggle for gender equality was far from over. Her writing, particularly *We Have Been Warned*, shows us how these agendas intersect. Other writers, such as Storm Jameson and Winifred Holtby, were engaged in similar tasks, though the work of women writers has been largely overlooked in critical appreciations of the period. As Rosalind Miles has pointed out, the view was that 'women did not handle the "big" themes of war, (or) politics . . . they concentrated instead on the literary equivalent of flower arranging or *petit point*'.¹² However, Mitchison's successes in the 1920s and 1930s illustrate the benefits of approaching 'big' themes in period guise; her prowess in handling classical history garnered an uncommon degree of respect from contemporaneous historians and academics,¹³ and saw her establish what Hardy calls 'an unrivalled reputation'¹⁴ in that field. Her work was also admired by fellow writers such as Holtby, who went so far as to say that *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* was 'of the calibre of which Nobel prize-winners are made'.¹⁵ Yet by the time of her death in 1999, Mitchison had come to be regarded as neglected. To some extent she was a victim of the critical squeamishness that dogged the historical novel over the latter half of the twentieth century;¹⁶ however, her

⁹ Janet Montefiore, 'The 1930s: Memory and Forgetting', in Maroula Joannou (ed.), *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh 1999) pp. 16–32: 16.

¹⁰ Barbara Caine and Glenda Sluga, *Gendering European History* (London 2003) p. 166.

¹¹ Joannou (ed.), *Women Writers of the 1930s*, p. 10.

¹² Rosalind Miles, *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel* (London 1987) p. 88.

¹³ In *You May Well Ask* Mitchison writes: 'once I got started, various scholars and professional historians came willingly to my help, knowing that I would live into their period and make it more real to them' (p. 164).

¹⁴ Rob Hardy, 'Naomi Mitchison, Peaceable Transgressor', *New England Review*, 36/1 (2015) pp. 40–52: 40.

¹⁵ Winifred Holtby, quoted *ibid*.

¹⁶ Though critics such as Alfred Sheppard (*The Art and Practice of Historical Fiction* (1930)) praised the high standard of historical novels in the early twentieth century, Sarah L. Johnson, in a 2005 guide to the genre, pinpoints the mid-twentieth century as the point at which the market was flooded and quality plummeted: Sarah L.

forays into other genres appear to have complicated matters too. She is a notoriously difficult writer to encapsulate. This is partly because her career spanned almost the whole of the twentieth century, with outputs ranging from historical fantasy tomes, science fiction shorts, poetry, and plays, to Mass Observation diaries, papers on Mendelian genetics, and political essays; but it is also because Mitchison herself is such a contradictory and complex figure, something Calder expertly demonstrates in her aptly titled biography: *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*. In the introduction Calder observes that despite success Mitchison never became ‘established’.¹⁷ This is not surprising considering how anti-establishment her views were and how they permeated her fiction from the outset. Even her much-lauded novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, set in revolutionary Sparta, is transgressive in both its political and corporeal focus. Published in 1931, it was followed by a collection of short historical and contemporary works, titled *The Delicate Fire* (1933), which was deemed ‘even more definitely revolutionary in tone’ by Kenneth Porter in a 1939 article.¹⁸ He went on to note that this collection from Mitchison provided ‘a bridge’ between the classical and the contemporary, which prepared the public ‘more or less’ for her next novel;¹⁹ however, his subsequent stream of invective on the subject suggests nothing could possibly have prepared Porter for *We Have Been Warned*. In it, Mitchison sought to directly promote her socialist agenda as the threat of fascism loomed over Europe. Like many other writers and artists, she saw this as her duty, but the fact that it apparently necessitated a move away from historical fiction could be seen to cast a lingering aspersion on the genre – which will be discussed further in the latter sections of this article. However, the move in *We Have Been Warned* to Mitchison’s ‘own time’ (preface) had more immediate and damning consequences for her own career. Even now, most critics share Porter’s opinion that it would be better for Mitchison’s reputation if *We Have Been Warned* could be forgotten altogether. Colleagues and friends had sought to warn her regarding its scandalous potential but she remained resolute. She wrote in her memoirs that, at that time, ‘we felt we had a cause worth living for, even worth Johnson, *Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre* (Westport, Conn. 2005) p. 2. Writer and critic A. S. Byatt has stated that, ‘during my working life as a writer, the historical novel has been frowned on, and disapproved of, both by academic critics and by reviewers’: A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London 2000) p. 9. Both Johnson and Byatt indicate that the genre’s critical status was looking up again by the twenty-first century.

¹⁷ Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. x.

¹⁸ Kenneth Wiggins Porter, ‘Naomi Mitchison: The Development of a Revolutionary Novelist’, *Social Science*, 14/3 (1939) pp. 252–60: 257.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

dying for',²⁰ – naturally it was worth risking a career for. The quotation above echoes a violence of feeling which can be traced through to the novel. It all feels a very long way from the literary equivalent of petit point.

Recent reappraisals have gone some way to show the skill and deftness with which women were in fact handling the so-called big themes, but what sets Mitchison apart is the forthrightness with which she delved into sexual politics – shifting the battleground to the site of the body itself, struggling with what Elizabeth Grosz would later theorise as the body's ability to 'speak social codes'.²¹ These were codes that Mitchison could not always understand, and her missteps, as will be discussed, tell us as much as her precisely landed blows.

Despite the changing gender dynamics in the wake of the First World War, neither the unfairly labelled 'feminine middlebrow', high modernism, nor even 1930s realism, was able to fully articulate the bodily experiences of modern women, due to restrictions of censorship and the self-policing associated with gender performance. While literary censorship in Britain was largely a social rather than legal operation²² – and no less problematic for that – Mitchison's own publishers, Jonathan Cape, had faced an obscenity trial in 1928 following the publication of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. They were unwilling to face the prospect again, and it was Victor Gollancz who eventually took on *We Have Been Warned*. Always an advocate for freedom of expression, Mitchison was willing to stand as a witness for *The Well's* defence. However, the judge chose not to hear from the many writers cited and eventually ruled that the book should be destroyed. It was the same year that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was first published in Italy, though the British public would have to wait until 1960 for an unexpurgated version. Lawrence had been plagued by the censor since the trial and subsequent ban of *The Rainbow* in 1915. There is a brief and somewhat conflicted reference to Lawrence in *We Have Been Warned*, with Tom saying, 'his books are all right still, but so many idiots have made him an excuse for doing anything in the sex line that they want to do, preferably so as to hurt other people, that I'm sick and tired of it!'²³ Kindness was key for Mitchison, as will be discussed below. It was also important for

²⁰ *You May Well Ask*, p. 205.

²¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York 2018) p. 35.

²² This is discussed at length by Philip Waller in chapter 27, 'Pricking Censorship', of his comprehensive study *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1860–1918* (Oxford 2008).

²³ Naomi Mitchison, *We Have Been Warned* (London 1935) pp. 188–9. Subsequent citations are to this edition; page references are given parenthetically in the text.

her that women were able to speak for their sexual selves, particularly as attitudes and actions began to change – but the consensus remained that women were not expected to own, let alone verbalise, their desires in a serious way.²⁴ The popular women writers of the 1920s and 1930s thus had to, as Nicola Humble put it, pick ‘their way carefully through the minefield of sexual description, evolving a respectable discourse for the representation of the previously unmentionable’.²⁵ The idea that some things might be ‘unmentionable’, however, was not one that cut much ice with Naomi Mitchison, in print or in life. In one memoir she equates the censorship of her novel to that of her young self, writing retrospectively: ‘The lines that were drawn seem very curious now. Clearly, I no more understood them by ladylike instinct than I had understood the lines of conduct I was supposed to keep to earlier, as a teenager.’²⁶ Her sense of being bound by gendered convention extends to the confines of her own body. She has spoken about how at school she enjoyed the physical and intellectual existence of a boy, until ‘the awful thing happened’²⁷ – her first period. It is this interest in the life of the body, the body as a site of conflict, the body as a vehicle for praxis, that marks Mitchison’s writing as ahead of its time and gives it its visceral edge that readers found so troubling. Yet while some of the editorial suggestions strike us as farcical today – ‘in one I was told I could keep the word “button” if I omitted the word “trouser!”’²⁸ – there is much in the book that still has the power to perturb.

Abortion is one of the taboos Mitchison tackles that was more commonly touched on by women writers in the inter-war period. Novels like Rosamond Lehmann’s *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) sensitively depicted the before and afters of an experience that many women faced, regardless of the sometimes dire physical and legal consequences.²⁹ But, unlike

²⁴ Historian Hera Cook has convincingly demonstrated the complexity of female sexual repression and women’s repudiation of physical sexual desire in the early twentieth century. Discussing the period 1900–40, she states that ‘in a society in which speaking, or writing, about physical sexual experience was strongly discouraged, those who have left records of their sexual expression were unusual by definition’: Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800–1975* (Oxford 2004) p. 178.

²⁵ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford 2001) p. 198.

²⁶ *You May Well Ask*, p. 171.

²⁷ Hardy, ‘Naomi Mitchison, Peaceable Transgressor’, p. 43.

²⁸ *You May Well Ask*, p. 176.

²⁹ Jones has recorded that between 1928 and 1933 there were 500 deaths a year due to abortion complications: Emma L. Jones, ‘Representations of Illegal Abortions in England, 1900–1967’, in Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge (eds.), *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature* (Liverpool 2013).

Lehmann, Mitchison brings the reader with her to observe an abortion taking place, as she herself had done on her 1932 trip to the Soviet Union – the only country to have legalised the procedure at that time.³⁰ She wrote, in her Moscow diary (one of many she wrote and published extracts from), an account that Calder calls ‘cool’ and ‘objective’,³¹ but when it came to the novel, the embodied narrative with its internal focalisation brings the scene brutally to life:

At first it did not seem to hurt much; then blood began to flow and the woman on the table shut her eyes and went white. Now blood and tissue poured out of her; the surgeon took another instrument and for a minute or so there was the peculiarly unpleasant sound of metal scraping against human flesh. Once the woman on the table gave a little gasping cry; no one heeded her. The surgeon swabbed round with cotton-wool, turned and smiled at the onlookers; it was all satisfactorily over. . . . So that’s what it comes to, Dione thought, the smell of blood in her nostrils, the look of the woman, so terribly uncovered, branded into her imagination. That’s what all the fuss is about, that’s reality. (p. 259)

It was a reality too many people didn’t want to hear about, and Porter, writing in 1939, accused the book of ‘lingering lovingly’ upon aspects of Russian life such as ‘public abortion for the delectation of tourists’.³² However, the above extract demonstrates the wilfulness of such a misreading, which also ignores the fact that Dione, like Mitchison, has a particular professional interest in the matter; Mitchison believed women should have the right to choose, but she in no way romanticises the act. It is the bare-faced biology, ‘the smell of blood in her nostrils’ that lingers, as well as the implied critique of the dehumanising treatment of the patient. This fictional account of the procedure was subversive in several ways; there is the visceral detail itself, then the undeniable voyeurism – which Dione acknowledges, bristling at the spectacle she has been complicit in and that has left her ‘branded’. There is also the fact that this clean and clinical setting was at odds with popular perceptions in Britain of abortion and abortionists – most commonly preceded by the qualifier ‘back-street’ – who, Emma Jones notes, were viewed as ‘dirty’ due to both their questionable hygiene and their dubious morals.³³ Dione visits the clinic expecting to

³⁰ Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 111.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³² Porter, ‘The Development of a Revolutionary Novelist’, p. 259.

³³ Jones, ‘Representations of Illegal Abortions in England, 1900–1967’.

witness something unequivocally more civilised, but the reality is more complex, complicated not least by the performative nature of the procedure; political propaganda comes before the patient – which is of course to be expected in a regime where the individual is subjugated to the state.

Neither Dione nor Mitchison is converted by what they see in Stalin's Russia. As Dione puts it later in the novel: 'Sometimes it seemed to her that the whole place was like one vast school, all becoming more and more imbued with that public-school spirit, government by public opinion and if necessary public chastisement, the dear old O.T.C. very much to the fore, and Stalin something between head-boy and head-master!' (p. 295). The tone is critical but consistently focalised through a character that can be naive, ironic, and comedic at the same time. A combination critics, then and now (from Porter to Calder), have found distasteful regardless of the fact that it provides a more nuanced and human account of how foreign countries and their political regimes could be experienced; encounters with other people are inevitably sometimes positive and sometimes negative. Dione at these times seems to occupy a grey area, rather than black and white, or relentlessly red.

And it was not only the Moscow abortion scene that proved problematic. Towards the end of the novel Dione discovers she is pregnant, and she and Tom agree she should go to Paris to have the pregnancy terminated. The reasons behind this decision are deeply political. Dione feels that she doesn't have the right to have another child when there are those in Tom's constituency unable to feed and clothe theirs – though of course they wouldn't be able to afford a Parisian abortion either. Tom says: 'the political grounds are more urgent than ever; we can't go giving any more hostages to safety first. And what sort of world is it going to be for the children? If there isn't a revolution it's likely enough that they'll be killed in another war' (p. 491). Yet in the end they do keep the baby, in the same way that they keep their household staff while the people in Tom's constituency wait on the housing list. Dione is the first to observe the contradiction in her situation. She is a committed socialist (never crossing the line into communism, though always willing to hear the views from the other side) working for the revolution, but tells herself that 'economic equality will be no fun for you. Or for your children: you won't be able to grab things for them then!' (p. 62). Part of the attraction of Dione's character is that she is honest with herself. Brutally honest at times. It is apparently not an endearing quality, as she is consistently attacked by critics (Porter, Calder, Hardy, Maslen) for what they see as her ambivalent attitude towards the working-class people she wants to unite with: 'The good Labour homes I've stayed in, with their frightful pictures and rugs and art needlework! That's our fault, though: the people on the top' (p. 62). The critic

Maslen sees this as a failing on Mitchison's part to deal sufficiently in her fiction with people in the present rather than the past, saying, 'all sorts of gremlins emerge once she moves into the Thirties, one of them being class'.³⁴ But class is indeed a gremlin, and the sort of snobbery Dione recognises in herself is one the intellectual left is still mired in to this day, whether individuals are willing to admit it or not. And as Joannou points out, writers like Mitchison 'were never, in the class-conscious age in which they produced their writing, allowed to forget the privileges of their birth'.³⁵ Mitchison chooses not to dodge the issue in her fiction, portraying more realistically flawed characters; and she herself acknowledged that as an activist, no matter how well-intentioned, 'sometimes no doubt I was insufferably patronising'.³⁶

Dione, like Mitchison, wants to break through the barriers separating 'us' from 'them', and 'I' from 'we', but an inherent middle-class guilt propels her along an unsteady path at times. For Dione, her praxis reaches its limit with the prospect of having an abortion, but there are many other extreme examples in the novel of her making the political, personal. The most troubling sections of the novel for today's readers are perhaps those where she feels obliged to be 'kind' to male comrades. As Calder points out, for Mitchison 'comradeship meant sharing bodies as well as ideals. It meant not being selfish with sex'.³⁷ There are two key encounters in the novel along these lines. The first involves the thoroughly unlikable character Donald, whom Dione romanticises due to his Highland heritage and thus helps escape to the USSR after he commits an act of terrorism; not satisfied with compromising herself morally, she realises en route that he also requires some help with his sexual hang-ups. Although Dione frames this as a call of duty – 'If I can only be sensible and see things steadily. If I can see what I ought to do as a Socialist woman' (p. 230) – it is implied that there is a part of her that simply wants to sleep with him: 'She heard him turn on the water and begin splashing about; she suddenly wondered what he was like naked, and had half a mind to go and see' (p. 285). In the end she only kisses Donald, but when she finds herself in a similar situation later in the novel it results in her rape. She blames herself:

If only I hadn't been so bloody soft. Being a comrade. But it wasn't being a comrade, it wasn't kindness, he wasn't Donald, he turned into a horrible, blind, hurting animal. Oh why, why – just because I was

³⁴ Elizabeth Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', in Joannou (ed.), *Women Writers of the 1930s*, p. 145.

³⁵ Joannou (ed.), *Women Writers of the 1930s*, p. 12.

³⁶ *You May Well Ask*, p. 184.

³⁷ Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 109.

afraid of being a prude, afraid of being North Oxford – and then – oh, his cruel hairy legs, his sharp knees digging into me ... She chucked her head about wildly, wanting to bang it into something, stop it remembering. And then she felt like nothing but vomiting, and sat down on the floor. (p. 414)

Immediately after her attack she gives the perpetrator a speech in which she blames society. Her reluctance to explicitly blame him comes across as a sort of coping mechanism, in an attempt to rationalise it all away and regain some form of control and understanding. However, this is a modern reading verging on retrospective diagnosis, for as Joanna Bourke has argued, ‘it took until the late 20th century for “trauma” to slip under the skin into a psychological space in Anglo-American narratives of the sexual violation of adult women’.³⁸ This episode, which Dione attempts, with some success, to quickly put behind her, is thus possibly more shocking now than it was then; today’s readers can construct their meanings drawing on an evolved understanding of both consent and PTSD, while contemporaneous critics seemed more appalled by the physical details, such as ‘his sharp knees digging into me’ – focusing on the physical contact rather than its non-consensual nature – though the language could not be said to be gratuitous. Dione sees too late the flaws in her reasoning about being ‘kind’ with her body, but this doesn’t invalidate her experience or Mitchison’s right to articulate it.

Although both abortion and rape were taboo subjects, the most controversial elements of the novel at the time were its more sex-positive aspects, in which women played an active role rather than that of victim or mute specimen: these aspects are its references to contraception, and treatment of free love. Naomi and Dick Mitchison’s marriage was famously open, as were those of many of their friends. Mitchison had written theoretically about it in her 1930 essay ‘Comments on Birth Control’, on which such arrangements naturally depended. In the essay Mitchison explores the apparent incompatibility of the sexual life and ‘a life of brain-working’,³⁹ largely focusing on contraception but also suggesting that a ‘temporary change in partners ... may solve many problems’ (p. 22). She sees the root of society’s sexual problems as being the dislocation modern man, or woman, feels not only from the community but from such things as the land, or the seasons. In short – life in urban capitalist societies makes sexual

³⁸ Joanna Bourke, ‘Sexual Violence, Bodily Pain, and Trauma: A History’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29/3 (2012) pp. 25–51: 35.

³⁹ Naomi Mitchison, ‘Comments on Birth Control’, *Criterion Miscellany*, no. 12 (London 1930) p. 21. Subsequent citations are to this edition; page references are given parenthetically in the text.

neurotics of us. What Mitchison proposes is that we aim instead for a 'super-conscious community', which 'might be simpler and lovelier still, for I cannot see that there would be any need in it for this intense couple and couple longing, this desire to become part of a unity however small' (p. 32). It is difficult to tell how widely read these comments on super-consciousness and unity were, as they don't appear to have overly troubled anyone in particular. However, when played out using the minds and bodies of her characters they proved too much for some. When the wife of a magistrate in Norfolk contacted Scotland Yard, her foremost complaint was that 'page 274 describes carefully the seduction of a man, hitherto moral, by a Russian woman'.⁴⁰ The man is Dione's husband Tom, the woman is called Oksana, and it is unclear to what extent her Russianness was an exacerbating factor (but it did make her a threat to both the sexual and political order of Norfolk). But readers didn't need to wait until page 274 for adulterous content. In the opening chapters we are told very matter-of-factly that Dione's sister Phoebe has been having an affair with a man named Phil. Phoebe and Phil's story goes on to spur some of the most powerful and beautiful prose in the novel. When we meet them the affair has already ended, but Phoebe is still haunted by it, Phil regularly intruding into the stream-of-consciousness narrative flow:

Phoebe refilled the cans and went on pouring water into the flower-jars. She dipped her hands into the copper pan that was going to be filled with iron-blue hydrangeas. The water struck chilly at her wrists, over the pulse. Once she had trailed her hands over the side of the punt high up the river towards Islip, and Phil had discussed relativity and she had understood. (p. 10)

In this extract Mitchison makes evocative use of sensory detail, drawing us first into Phoebe's body – utilising the sensitive skin of the exposed wrist – then her memories and emotions; the pulse hints at the warm blood within that cannot be chilled, but what Phoebe mourns most is the mental stimulation her affair provided. Free love for Mitchison is not mindless promiscuity, it is more akin to what we would today refer to as polyamory. But like Tom's relationship with Oksana, Phoebe's story shows the heartache involved and the difficulty of rationalising emotions, however sensible the arrangement may sound to begin with. Indeed, even D. H. Lawrence rejected free love as a sustainable model, saying 'the final result is disaster,

⁴⁰ 'Scotland Yard Probed Racy 1935 Book', *UPI NewsTrack*, 3 Oct. 2005. *General OneFile*, <<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A137034331/ITOF?u=ustrath&sid=ITOF&xid=cd2fdab8>> (accessed 3 July 2019).

every time'.⁴¹ Yet Mitchison's depictions show us the many important factors that fuel such desires, aside from the sexual and intellectual attraction to an individual other than your spouse. It was part of a renegotiation of marriage, necessitated by the shifting gender dynamics and the demands from women for more freedom and greater equality. As Tom puts it: 'Marriage has been so hellishly commercialised . . . it's only when one gets out of the proper buying and selling pattern of it that one sees it for the good thing it can be, when it's not bargaining' (p. 488).

While the Mitchisons were part of a minority experimenting with a particular mode of marriage, they were not alone in questioning the institution itself, and by the mid-1930s this appears to have reached 'crisis' stage in public discourse, with much attention being given to the topic in print and on the airwaves. As Diana Wallace has highlighted, 'the key elements responsible for the "crisis" in marriage and the changing nature of family life were the emancipation of women and the increasing spread of birth control',⁴² both of which Mitchison actively campaigned for. Indeed the Mitchison brand of free love, despite its connotations of an uninhibited return to nature, relied heavily on new contraceptive technologies to avoid further complications. It is interesting in this context to consider the links sociologist Georg Simmel has made between the roots of sexual monogamy and the rising value of private property. Children are heirs (that 'hellish' commercialisation again). But for Mitchison they were also potential 'hostages' in the revolution: so 'what does a socialist woman do?' (p. 230). In the novel Dione resents having to use 'these beastly contraceptives' (p. 145), but considers it her duty; they both end up failing. Essentially Dione, like Mitchison, has several children with her husband because she can afford to support them, and have her work supported by a host of household staff, though again she fiercely believes in women's right to choose, and that everyone should have access to the best knowledge and devices.

Both Dione and Tom advise other characters as to where to obtain contraceptives. Dione advises one of Tom's working-class constituents, during a scene that bears a marked resemblance to the testimonies gathered by oral historian Kate Fisher as part of her seminal project on birth control,⁴³ this counteracts to some extent Maslen's and other critics' accusations that Mitchison was unable to deal authentically with contemporary working-class characters. Tom, not to be outdone, advises one of his female undergraduates, wondering 'whether he dared, as an Oxford tutor, say what he

⁴¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Pornography and So On* (London 1936) p. 49.

⁴² Diana Wallace, 'Revising the Marriage Plot', in Joannou (ed.), *Women Writers of the 1930s*, pp. 63–75: 65.

⁴³ Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage in Britain 1918–1960* (Oxford 2008).

now wanted to say. However, he did: "My sister, among her many activities, runs a birth-control clinic in London. I believe you'd get the best possible advice there" (p. 153). In another scene he asks a male student, 'couldn't you manage to sleep with Miss Newall once or twice before bringing up the question of marriage again?' (p. 189), depicting an undergraduate economics programme that was particularly well-rounded.

The many references to contraception in the novel reflect Mitchison's engagement with the topic at this time. Both she and her husband Dick were on the board of the first birth-control clinic to be set up independently of Dr Marie Stopes.⁴⁴ Mitchison herself had been an early admirer and beneficiary of Stopes's *Married Love* (1918), which had been a bestseller and put sex firmly on the agenda. However the comments from Mitchison's memoir show that these were still sensitive topics: 'Marie Stopes was quite often at my parents' house, discussing the coal measures with my father. She was a colleague, a good palaeobotanist. If he ever heard her name linked with less acceptable subjects he paid no attention.'⁴⁵

By 1930 the Church of England was able to agree, during its Lambeth meeting, that contraception might potentially be tolerated if used within marriage, yet significant levels of opposition remained in several sections of society, including within the medical profession itself. Fisher has noted that though there was a growing number of family planning clinics, local authority clinics were limited to advising women whose health depended on it, and many doctors either opposed birth control, were unwilling to cooperate with clinics, or were themselves shy of broaching the subject with patients.⁴⁶ It took until 1974 for birth control to be completely included in the NHS, though by the 1920s there was at least a growing literature on the subject. Nonetheless, when Mitchison published her own 'Comments on Birth Control' in 1930 she was still able to approach the topic from some new and rather unorthodox angles which are likely to have raised, if not the alarm at Scotland Yard, then at least a few eyebrows. Interestingly, as with much of her fiction, the essay reveals her as being torn between the rational scientific world, in this case employing technology to keep families within their economic means, and a more timeless spiritual world, with its possibilities of universal consciousness and fertility controlled at will. She paints a picture of the middle-class woman as someone being pulled in different directions: namely, between family and work, or what she calls 'brain-work', presumably as opposed to work undertaken out of economic necessity, which less privileged women had always had to do. She believes

⁴⁴ *You May Well Ask*, p. 34.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Fisher, *Birth Control*, pp. 44–5.

that women shouldn't have to choose between work and family life, but that something is inevitably lost in the compromise to accommodate both: 'The two things are not compatible, except in very rare cases ... They [women] insist – as I think they should – on having both worlds, not specialising like bees or machines; but they must give up something of both, not necessarily all the time, but sometimes the work and sometimes the full sex life' (p. 25). Though prepared to picture a future in which women could control their ovaries with their minds, she refuses to entertain the possibility of having it all; while this phrase is more closely associated with later, more grasping decades, it is a question rooted in the developments of the interwar years. As Thomas Staley points out, issues of 'identity, career, motherhood, marriage, sexual and economic freedom are all the more complex as they become matters for active decisions rather than merely subjects for hope and speculation'.⁴⁷

In *We Have Been Warned* Dione envies her sister Phoebe the satisfaction and kudos she gets from her work as an artist. Yet Phoebe feels that she is 'not a real woman', and guilty because her marriage has failed and she is not 'clever enough to be able to deal with stair-carpet and jam and things' (p. 43). She chooses to prioritise work over her domestic duties. And as more middle-class women entered the world of work, anxieties around the nation's declining fertility rate began to rise. Contraception was thus framed as a way of spacing children, rather than remaining child-free, and it wasn't just Mitchison who saw the personal matter of childbearing in terms of its political consequences. Mass Observation revealed that some women simply resented the idea of breeding future soldiers. At the same time, much of the writing of Marie Stopes reflects the rising eugenics concerns of the period; there was a feeling that contraception should not be used disproportionately by middle-class couples while the lower orders were allowed to multiply out of all control.⁴⁸ It is this sort of attitude that Dione attempts to counteract in *We Have Been Warned* by limiting her own family as well as dishing out advice to other party members. The fact that her family continues to expand regardless of her efforts and convictions reflects her inability to connect in the way she wants to with Tom's working-class constituents. Yet at the same time, the act of giving birth itself is one of the few experiences that allows Dione to relate to these other women. As she says to Tom, 'modern medicine hasn't got far enough to prevent child-birth being devilishly alike for all women' (p. 299).

⁴⁷ Thomas F. Staley, *Twentieth Century Women Novelists* (Houndmills 1982) p. xii.

⁴⁸ Marie Carmichael Stopes, *Contraception (Birth Control) Its Theory, History and Practice: A Manual for the Medical and Legal Professions* (London 1924) p. 9.

However, if the issue was already being politicised elsewhere, what was it that made the mention of contraception so contentious in *We Have Been Warned*? The problem, once more, was language – mentioning the unmentionable. While Mitchison's own essay on contraception had theorised many controversial scenarios, it was again the embodied experiences of her characters and the language of idiom that landed her in the most bother. While Dione generally refers to contraceptives, presumably condoms, in the novel as 'things', Donald's Russian lover startles him by saying: 'You got – rubber goods – comrade?' (p. 275). While this reads rather comically today, it was all too much not only for publisher Jonathan Cape, but also his assistant, and long-time champion and friend of Mitchison, Edward Garnett. She writes in her memoir: 'Some bits had definitely shocked him [Garnett], especially anything about contraceptives: I don't suppose any reputable writer before my time had mentioned the unpleasantness of the touch of rubber.'⁴⁹

It was the visceral details that seemed to offend the most, something Mitchison always struggled to comprehend. She was baffled that she was allowed to write of 'her soft breasts' but not, as she had wanted to put it, 'breasts and belly and legs'.⁵⁰ She was refusing to toe the line expected of women writers at that time, to 'pick their way carefully' to quote Humble again, or to tackle sexual themes like Woolf: 'approaching (when at all) via the metaphor, under cover of the symbol'.⁵¹ Mitchison resisted as best she could the pressure to mince her words and to portray a less threatening female sexuality.

Part of the reason the contentious issue of abortion, despite its illegality, was still easier than contraception for women writers to address in fiction was that it was easier to separate from sex. It happened after the fact. It was a problem for the woman alone – or the woman, the police, and the Medical Council. The use of contraceptives, on the other hand, required couples to think and talk about sex in ways they may not have done previously, and which certainly hadn't graced the pages of women's novels. Thus a reluctance, or inability, to mention the unmentionable could have a direct impact on the birth-control measures available to women, consequently impacting everything from relationships and family size to health and quality of life. Furthermore, female desire was not just censored on the page; its sublimation and disavowal were part of an entrenched gender performance, which further problematised affirmative or pre-emptive female-led contraceptive methods – for example the insertion of an occlusive

⁴⁹ *You May Well Ask*, p. 173.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁵¹ Miles, *The Female Form*, p. 59.

cap in anticipation of the sexual act. Some women found these aspects humiliating and unnatural.⁵² Many felt it was the man's duty to take the necessary measures, whether that involved a prophylactic or not; well into the twentieth century the most common method was still, by and large, the low-tech and risky withdrawal.⁵³ But by 1945 the preface to a Mass Observation publication titled *Britain and Her Birthrate* acknowledged that 'contraception . . . is here and is likely to stay'. Yet it also warned that if current trends continued there would be 'no babies, no Englishmen or Englishwomen, for war or for peace', and 'only those who do not like the English race can look forward to that'.⁵⁴ Arguments such as this show that female emancipation could be perceived not only as a danger to national security, but as an existential threat. This was just the sort of line that Mitchison balked at. It put her and other feminists on their guard for the fights ahead. Of course, women's bodies are still a contested site with the battle for reproductive rights ongoing. And there are new 'gremlins' to contend with too.

In the novel Dione and Tom worry about what sort of world they are bringing babies into. They live in hope of revolution but with the knowledge that it will be unpleasant, and may not succeed. In the final chapter Dione has a horrific vision of a violent counter-revolution in which her husband is executed – yet she manages to suppress this and remain positive, and is suffused with joy when she feels the baby begin to move within her womb.

In 'Comments on Birth Control' Mitchison writes: 'At present contraception is practised very largely for economic reasons. When housing, education and the security of future food and clothing and fuel cease to be a problem, as they must sooner or later if our civilisation goes on (as, of course, it may not), then contraceptives will not be nearly so necessary' (p. 25). The parenthetical phrase, which first appears as an offhand counterpoint within the assertiveness of the overall sentence, is altogether more striking for modern readers who might feel that they are now inhabiting this parenthetical place – civilisation being crushed between two brackets: corrupt political systems and the climate change they have produced. Women today face stark choices, with those known as BirthStrikers believing it is unethical to bring children into an unstable world that is hurtling towards ecological disaster.⁵⁵ We are also, arguably again, facing a rise in

⁵² Fisher, *Birth Control*, p. 104.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵⁴ *Britain and Her Birth-Rate: A Report Prepared by Mass-Observation for the Advertising Service Guild* (London 1945) pp. 7, 23.

⁵⁵ 'BirthStrikers: Meet the Women who Refuse to Have Children until Climate Change Ends', *Guardian*, 12 Mar. 2019; available online.

right-wing opinions, but in contrast to the 1930s, today there is less of a general belief that a left-led revolution could transpire, if, as Mitchison put it, 'we tried hard enough'.⁵⁶ In one scene in the novel Dione's children ask if the revolution will happen, she answers, "Perhaps," . . . almost adding, if you're good . . .' (p. 46). However, Mitchison's equation of children with the future *is* paralleled in recent climate strike activism, in which young people have played a key role. The hostages strike back?

Mitchison raised many pertinent points in both her fiction and nonfiction writing relating to family planning in the 1930s. In her essay she mentions that 'recent research methods of contraception by inoculation point to the solution of some of the smaller and more concrete problems . . . but doubtless new emotional difficulties will be raised' (p. 30). And indeed after decades of relatively carefree pill-popping there has been a recent backlash against hormonal contraception, with many women no longer willing to suffer the physical and psychological side-effects. For a brief moment it looked as if women might be able to control their fertility by the touch of an app,⁵⁷ but this has since proved to be another of technology's golden geese, to which a recent spike in Swedish abortion rates has been attributed. There has also been renewed attention on trials of male contraceptive pills, the history of which tells us much about gender equality, and how far we still have to go along that road. It extends from the home into the workplace, and seems to raise a new series of obstacles to be negotiated by each generation. As Mitchison put it in her 1930 essay, 'apparently all the feminist battles are gained, or almost all. Actually, nothing is settled, and the question of baby or not baby is at the bottom of almost everything' (p. 32).

The quality of birth-control options available to women at any particular time can tell us about the status of women and thus the broader socio-political context, so it is as important to be aware of these today as it was in the 1930s. But there are also other themes within the novel that make it pertinent to today's readers, such as the questioning of what a loving, committed relationship might look like. While there is little scholarly research available from which to draw any significant statistics, polyamory does at least seem to be having a 'cultural moment', receiving attention in the popular press (*Metro*, the *Independent*, the *Guardian*), endorsed by various celebrities, and even providing the subject matter for a recent BBC drama titled *Trigonometry*. And, in yet another angle, McFarlane has highlighted the novel's explorations of tensions between socialism and feminism, which she sees as 'relevant today in a socialist movement still trying to promote

⁵⁶ *You May Well Ask*, p. 205.

⁵⁷ 'I Felt Colossally Naive': The Backlash against the Birth Control App', *Guardian*, 21 July 2018; available online.

women's equal rights',⁵⁸ which is worth bearing in mind as the Labour Party elects its nineteenth male leader. So will the novel perhaps now finally find the audience it deserves?

With *We Have Been Warned*, Mitchison sought to move away from the historical fiction with which she made her name, and write 'a historical novel about my own time' (preface). However, this abandonment – albeit temporary – does have potentially damning implications for the genre, as if it is somehow unfit for purpose when the writer feels their duty to respond most keenly. Diana Wallace has noted that 'it is sometimes difficult to see the connections between a historical novel and its moment of writing, which is why historical novels are frequently dismissed as escapist, conservative, or irrelevant'.⁵⁹ Yet Wallace herself has taken a leading role in creating a critical framework for analysing the multiple levels on which historical fiction operates – including the space it affords women to explore sexual themes, something further demonstrated by the troubles Mitchison encountered transposing her transgressive topics to the twentieth century. Mitchison's views could never be considered mainstream, but the way she articulates them, and the reactions to them, which were often extreme, tell us much about attitudes of the time. In one particularly striking scene in the novel, Dione has her ears boxed by a passing man for daring to attend a protest and trying to stand up for herself. He tells her, "Women like you shouldn't be allowed in public places!" (p. 455); but Mitchison insisted on taking up space, in public places and pages. Yet it is the novel's powerful feminist qualities that have been largely ignored even by contemporary critics, distracted by their condemnation of its politics or blend of particular prose styles. It is continually dismissed as 'unsatisfactory',⁶⁰ too raw, a 'purely emotional'⁶¹ work that has 'deservedly faded'.⁶² One of the few grudging acknowledgements of any artistic merit to appear in print comes from, of all places, the Home Secretary John Simon's decision not to prosecute: 'The book as a whole is, I dare say, a work of art';⁶³ snubbed even by the censor, Mitchison was thus denied a day in court which, Calder agrees, she would have relished. But perhaps, with the passing of time, Mitchison's historical novel of *then* can speak to readers today, attempting to keep sight of feminist objectives in the face of political absurdities and a

⁵⁸ McFarlane, 'Naomi Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned*'.

⁵⁹ Diana Wallace, 'Difficulties, Discontinuities and Differences: Reading Women's Historical Fiction', in Katherine Cooper and Emma Short (eds.), *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction* (Houndmills 2012) pp. 206–21: 207.

⁶⁰ Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 121.

⁶¹ Edwin Muir, quoted in Wallace, 'Revising the Marriage Plot', p. 69.

⁶² Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, p. 301.

⁶³ 'Scotland Yard Probed Racy 1935 Book'.

dying planet. Her warning, delivered from the 1930s, was against the immediate threat of fascism, but it was also against the insidious erosion of women's rights and the new challenges that lay ahead both at work and at home – not least being the pressure to choose between the two. To sacrifice something. Take hostages. Children or the revolution; what does a socialist woman do? Sex *or* politics: what does a socialist woman write? Mitchison in her wilful conflation of the personal and political explodes the falseness of the dilemma, offering an alternative path, perilous though it may be. In her memoir she writes, 'I sometimes hoped I was fighting for more freedom for a whole generation of women. My daughters' perhaps?'⁶⁴

In the novel Dione says of her eldest daughter:

'I want her to have both kinds of life. I want her to be tough enough to live two hours to any man's one!

'She will have been warned, anyhow ...' (p. 105)

⁶⁴ *You May Well Ask*, p. 173.