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Willa Muir, Imagined Corners (1931)

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There may be several reasons why Willa Muir's *Imagined Corners* (1935) came last in the contest for Scotland's Favourite Book. As critics have noted, it contains enough material for several novels: the various narrative strands are at times so complex that the reader might lose their way, a fact not helped by two of the main characters sharing a name. Set in a thinly-disguised Montrose, the novel offers neither the urban nor Highland environments readers might expect from a Scottish novel of the period. Perhaps just as importantly, the novel contains the two clunkiest opening sentences of any great novel. And yet *Imagined Corners* is indisputably a great novel, perhaps equalled in British fiction only by *To the Lighthouse*, and utterly unique in the Scottish canon. It was an excellent choice for the first Canongate Classic, and while it is not always easy to find a copy now, it is the text my own students have most often cited as changing their mind about what Scottish fiction is and can do.

Muir's concern in the novel is no less than what one character calls "the ideology of Scotland," and questions of class, religion, sexuality, politics, and education are all addressed at length. Most of all, however, *Imagined Corners* is a novel of small-town life, the petty rivalries and small affections shared by people who know each other slightly too well. Lizzie Shand's journey into being is no less momentous than that of Nan Shepherd's Martha Ironside or Lewis Grassic Gibbon's Chris Guthrie, but is arguably more nuanced: rather than the poles of home and education the more famous characters navigate, Lizzie is forced to define herself in a society which often fails to recognise the possibility of self-determination. The novel is explicitly concerned with the often limited choices available to women (and indeed men), but rarely simply condemnatory. Instead, Muir is concerned with how each individual is formed in relation to their community, and the constant tensions between internal and external life.

Muir's account of how the self is formed in society reaches back to George Eliot; her attempt to take in all of Scottish life at a particular period surpasses that of her contemporaries. For all its intellectual ambition, the novel is also marked by rich characterisation and a clear emotional foundation. At times comic, at others almost tragic, the novel is never less than affecting. The combination of a firm attention to place with cosmopolitan ideas and contemporary philosophy lends the novel a unique

blend of local and international relevance. *Imagined Corners* is smart, ambitious, and richly observed; it is one of those novels that seems to contain the entire world, and deserves to be far better known.

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