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## Nan Shepherd, The Quarry Wood (1928)

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## **Nan Shepherd, *The Quarry Wood* (1928)**

Though I can delight in the fact of *Sunset Song* being Scotland's favourite book—with its detailed attention to a female central character, communal voices and a foregrounded concern with sexual politics—any encounter with that novel never fails to remind me of *The Quarry Wood*, Nan Shepherd's novel from 1928, published four years before Grassie Gibbon's classic, which for me is even more vivid in delineating its female central character, its local language, and what is undoubtedly a radical engagement with sexual politics.<sup>1</sup> The novel is one of only three Shepherd published in her lifetime and shares much with what is, in the contemporary moment, her most famous book, *The Living Mountain*, written in the 1940s but not published till 1977, a meditation on her passion for walking in the Cairngorms recently championed as a classic of "nature writing" by leading exponents such as Robert Macfarlane. Both texts are luminous accounts of a "journey into being" (81) as Shepherd termed it, expressive of a pressing, immersive desire to experience life, and the self, to their fullest extent. For this, *The Quarry Wood* deserves a place in that top thirty of Scotland's favourite books. Published in the same year as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, it may not be as revolutionary a text, but it examines closely issues of sexual identity and gender relations, and it comes to its own thoughtful conclusions on women's place in the world.

The novel tells the story of Martha Ironside from nine year old child to young woman. Martha's over-riding characteristic is her passion; for books, for ideas, and in love. She struggles amidst a chaotic family household to complete her education; however, unlike Grassie Gibbon's Chris Guthrie, she does graduate and becomes a teacher, maintaining a connection to the land and community through her family and with the wider world through her job. Also unlike Chris, she doesn't marry, but resists the call of coupledness and the limitations of sexual passion for women. Two suitors are rejected: Luke, the intellectual husband of her best friend, who admires her purity as a "crystal of flame" (49); and Rory, the bombastic Scottish expat who wants to tame and conquer her as he has

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<sup>1</sup> Page references are to *The Quarry Wood*, (Edinburgh: Canongate (1987), and *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008).

conquered the steppes of South Africa. Objectified by both, Martha blazes with feminist indignation: "I can be my own creator" (1987: 184). And so she is, eventually adopting a young child, Robin, in the face of the scandalous assumptions of the community, and bringing him up in her accommodating, embracing family.

There is something not only feminist, but also slightly queer about the conclusion, in the novel's resistance to heteronormativity. As Ali Smith (another gaping absence from the BBC poll) notes in a critical essay

One of the main themes of Shepherd's fiction is the accepting of personal and communal responsibilities; she explores the notion that women need not follow conventional patterns to fulfil responsibilities that are nothing to do with gender anyway ... In the end Martha can even "get" a child for herself *by herself* (completely without the participation of a man) simply by telling stories the right way.<sup>2</sup>

The wayward family arrangements not only describe Martha's own parenting as a single mother, but also the wider family model, where her mother Emmeline has constantly fostered children and welcomed outsiders into their domestic arena.

Though Shepherd would have us believe that Martha "had acquiesced in her destiny" (210), we can understand that destiny as the opportunity to be an exemplar for coming generations, of all those feminist ideas which exploded our fixed conceptions of the self; whereas Gibbon's Chris is principally presented as a fractured self, Martha is a self-in-process, a self-in-relation, a disintegration and reconfiguration of the female self which can continue to inspire and conspire to change the way we see the world. "It's a grand thing to get leave to live" (210) says Geordie, Martha's father, and that's what Martha is given here, leave to live her life as she desires. It's no mean feat.

For its passion, its humour, its intimate North East language and knowledge, its feminism, its affection for difficult women, its ambition, its waywardness, *A Quarry Wood* deserves a place as one of Scotland's favourite books. It speaks to us now, like those other radical novels of the exciting, liberating, roaring twenties, of what we can be outside of our own social constrictions.

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Smith. "And Woman Created Woman: Carswell, Shepherd and Muir, and the Self-Made Woman," in Christopher Whyte, ed., *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 25-48 (26, 35).