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*Critical Conversations*



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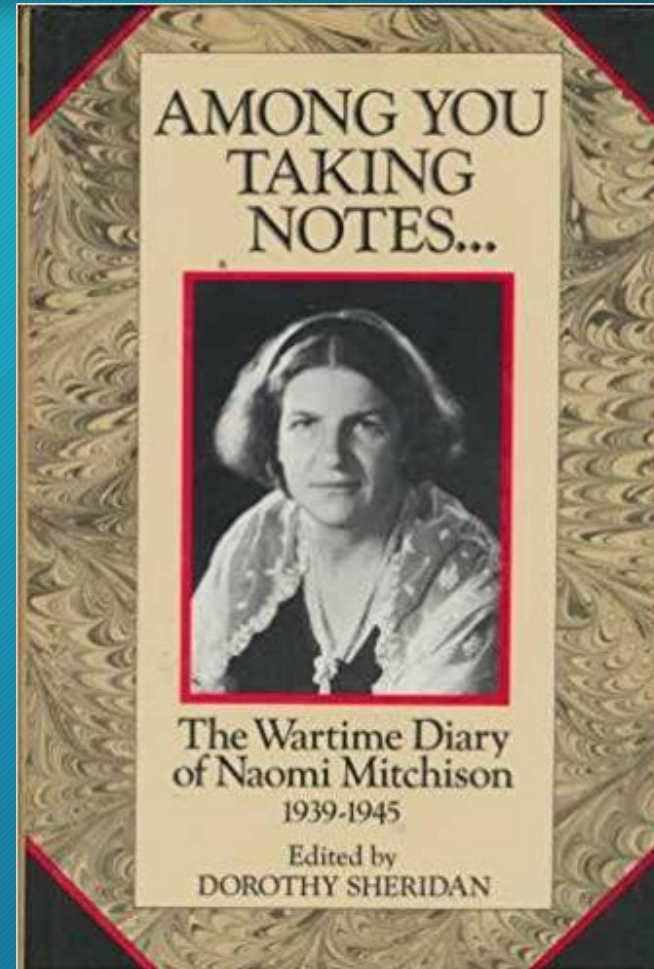
# Naomi Mitchison

Imagining and Creating Community in a  
World War Two Scottish Fishing Village

Hilary Lapsley, PhD

“One of the great subversive thinkers and peaceable transgressors of the twentieth century”

- Ursula Le Guin, science fiction writer, on Naomi Mitchison





# Naomi Mitchison in 1939

- Historical novelist, poet, intellectual, socialist and feminist, mother of five, married to a wealthy socialist London lawyer
- Leaving behind 1930s London life: intellectual, bohemian, literary, left-wing, feminist circles
- Context: disillusionment of the Left at the end of the '30s
- Newly at the helm of a landed estate in Carradale, Kintyre

# The 'Big House'



- Scottish baronial style
- Extensive gardens
- Acreage in farm & rough land
- Hunting and fishing rights
- Staff included gardeners, gamekeepers, domestic staff
- Tied cottages on the estate
- 'Laird' of Carradale community from feudal times



# Equipped with a manifesto for social change: Mitchison's 'Moral Basis of Politics' (1938)

- In hierarchical societies people are used as means to ends; leaders don't value human happiness
- 'Right relationships' between people depend on social equality and respect (between women and men, across the classes)
- Against ownership: love is a 'social glue' but not 'the binding, blinding kind of love that wants to own other people'
- Social change can only be imagined by those who can manage to see outside themselves' ...art and literature can foster empathy
- Wealthy people need to acknowledge that they have a stake in unequal social arrangements





# What steps did she take to bring about change?

- Treated locals as equals
- Gave locals free access to house and lands
- Worked alongside them (fishing, farming, community projects)
- Initiated building a community hall on donated land
- Engaged with them through her playwriting and poetry
- Engaged with them in political activism (e.g. Labour party)
- Learnt from them about Gaelic and Scottish history and culture
- Undercut traditional laird role (poaching, giving away parcels of land)
- Intimate friendships with fishing and forestry workers
- Recorded the wartime community in her diary

# Looking back on her 'ground up' efforts in Carradale

- '[The diary] is full of hope for a new kind of world, for something different, happier, more honest, for a new relationship between people who had been cut off from one another by money, power and class structure. It was the same kind of vision that people have had all over the world, whenever they began to question the morality of the system they happen to live under.'
- 'But the bright vision fades, always, always.'
- 'I tried to begin the change with personal relations, but Dick, my husband, working with Beveridge and Cole on the political and economic foundations of the welfare state, got much further in the end.'



# Her conclusions on community development

Later experience of Scottish local government and working in an African community saw Mitchison putting the case for a ground-up approach, as compared to imposing change from above:

‘[Community development is not] mucking about with the lives of other people...so that their patterns of development are broken and bruised and then substituting some other pattern which may well be easier to handle for the outsider and is thus supposed to be superior’

‘What Community Development is Not’, Community Development Journal, 1967

# The bond to Carradale

- Naomi Mitchison did not return to live in London after World War Two ended in 1945, but remained in Carradale where she died in 1999 at the age of 101. She was much loved in her community and continued to work on their behalf, as well as for Scottish Highland development, Scottish nationalism, Africa and world peace. She is recognised as one of Scotland's finest writers.





# Let's consider all this in a critical community psychology frame?

- Monterey declaration (2001) included
  - CPs need a critical vision of the good society, not just current norms
    - What do you think about NM trying to impose her radical vision?
  - CPs need to understand how power works on individuals through institutions
    - Can NM's account of community change contribute anything to psychology?
  - CPs should facilitate conscientization of themselves as well as communities
    - How possible is it to give away power?
  - CPs should work in collaborative partnerships
    - Were her relationships with local men unethical? (she saw herself as a change agent but not a professional one)