THE LIFE AND WORK OF WILLA MUIR, 1890-1955

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THE LIFE AND WORK OF WILLA MUIR,

1890-1955

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Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

The thesis reconstructs the first sixty-five years of the life of Willa Muir, and provides a preliminary critical analysis of her pre-1955 works.

Wilhelmina Anderson was born in 1890 in Montrose where she spent the first, formative seventeen years of her life before proceeding to St Andrews University in 1907. Her university years produced academic and social success, but also the pain of a disintegrating romantic relationship and the horror of her brother's nervous breakdown. She spent the later war years in London studying child psychology at Bedford College, and living in the city's East End at Mansfield House University Settlement. She met Edwin Muir in September 1918 and married him in June 1919 - a development which cost her the vice-principal's post at Gypsy Hill Training College. They spent their first difficult married years in London where Willa pursued subsistence employment and struggled to contain the fears which plagued Edwin: but they were overwhelmed by London life and escaped into Europe for three years. This adventure included a period in Prague and one during which Willa taught at A.S. Neill's school near Dresden. They returned to three frustrating years in Willa's mother's Montrose house (where Willa wrote Women: An Inquiry) and a damp Buckinghamshire cottage from which they escaped to the cheaper, warmer climes of southern France. Five years in Crowborough then ensued; Willa produced a son, an outpouring of translations and a novel called Imagined Corners. The three years which they then spent in Hampstead were amongst the happiest in Willa's life. She produced her second novel, Mrs Ritchie, but also experienced her son's road accident. This event drove them to seek a less populous location and they moved to St Andrews. This was a nightmarish period in which they suffered social ostracism, illness and the effects of the Second World War. Willa wrote

Mrs Grundy in Scotland. Edwin then began an eight year association with the British Council which started with war work in Edinburgh and then took them back to Prague. This was an initially happy experience which was soured by internal machinations at the Council and the horror of the 1948 Communist putsch. They were physically and emotionally injured by this experience but were healed by a second British Council posting to Rome. The final chapter describes their residency at Newbattle Abbey College in Scotland - where Edwin was appointed to the post of warden - and explores Willa's crisis of confidence during this period. The thesis ends at the point of the Muir's 1955 departure for Harvard University. It is a natural hiatus in Willa's personal history and marks the beginning of a comparatively fallow period in her creative life.

DECLARATIONS

(i) I, Kirsty Anne Allen, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 150,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Date: 19th October **Signature of candidate:**

(ii) I was admitted as a research student in October 1993 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in October 1993; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 1993 and 1996.

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CHAPTER I

A CHILDHOOD IN MONTROSE. 1890-1907.

So many disparate strands of places, people and periods contribute to the tapestry of a life. Disentangling one thread can cause the entire image to unravel, leaving little more than a higgledy-piggledy jumble of brightly coloured irrelevances. Reconstructing a muddled canvas, and documenting a life story demand a careful drawing together of diverse and unlabelled threads. In the case of Willa Muir, the memorial canvas is virtually blank, and the stitches which decorate the following pages are the first which have been dedicated to the recognition of the importance of her life and work.

* * * * *

The story begins on Scotland's North Eastern Coast in an ordinary little town called Montrose. The town's life is largely unadorned by the great historical dramas which appeal to the hearts and minds of the children of future generations; reminiscing town worthies probably rue the dearth of greatness and influence amongst the sons and daughters of Montrose. They can tell of the phlegmatic acceptance with which the townspeople greeted the earliest intrusions of interlopers from Rome and Scandinavia, and of their later and greater battles against the ravages of plague and disease. They may boast that the Treaty of Arbroath was signed twenty miles away in 1320; and speculate about the indiscretions and high jinks of the local Lairds in the House of Dun over the centuries. They can leaf through the references to

Montrose in the books on the shelf and find that in 1773 Samuel Johnson visited the town and, in a rare burst of enthusiasm, judged it to be 'well built, airy, and clean'.[1] But any hint of Johnsonian John Bullishness which might have found its home in some hidden corner of the town stood little chance of survival amidst the rampant and resident MacDiarmid-ism of the twentieth century.

But in that douce and cautious manner which is native to the Scots of the North-East, the townsfolk of Montrose remained obstinately and consciously resistant to the turbulence and restlessness which periodically consumed the rest of the nation. With an eye to their financial well-being, they resisted the romantic lure of the Chevalier and refused to be caught up in the rebellions of 1715 and 1745. They were a people radical by inclination and conservative by nature; loathe to swim against moral, political or religious currents and keen to embrace the dominant and officially sanctioned position. A constitutional resistance to change - more extreme even than that which persistently inhibited life and thinking throughout much of Scotland - often ensnared Montrose in value-systems and ideologies outgrown or outworn by the rest of Britain.

Montrose, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, remained firmly ensconced in the extremes of mid-century Victorian Presbyterianism. It was a world of absolute moral standards and easy judgementalism; of systematic philanthropy and harsh mistreatment; of constitutional class and gender division; of unquestioning submission to the officials and dictates of the Kirk.

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[1] Samuel Johnson. A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland. London: Penguin Books, 1984. (p41)

This was the environment into which Wilhelmina Johnston Anderson was born in 1890.

The Anderson family were recent immigrants to the Howe of the Mearns. Willa's parents were Shetlanders who had been born and brought up on the tiny island of Unst (the northernmost of the sprinkled Shetland archipelago) and were of farming and fishing stock. The life of their childhood community was necessarily intimate: daily living was a shared experience upon which the wider world scarcely impinged. The elements and the weather dominated the lives and intimated the deaths of these self-sufficient island people who followed a pattern of life which they had inherited, almost unchanged, from their Viking forbears. A consciousness of the fragility of human existence in the face of Nature was the birth-right of any Shetland-born child. In 1866 Willa's grandfather and his brother on her father's side had both been 'drowned at sea by the upsetting of an open boat'[2], and had left their wives and families to battle on alone against their inhospitable environment. This way of life, and the ties by which its children are bound to it, are incomprehensible to those who have not grown up amidst its hardships and deprivations; but shared experiences and ancestral inheritances - which Edwin Muir later defined as the 'collective unconscious' - unite the people of isolated communities in a particularly intense and pervasive way.

Intermarriage becomes inevitable in an environment beleaguered by the strictures of geographical necessity and steeped in the exclusive and impenetrable dictates of cultural unilateralism: the marriage of Willa's parents - who were first cousins - was not therefore particularly unusual. They were certainly unaware of the potential procreative dangers of a relationship in which a limited gene pool might lead to unhealthy 'stock either of mind or body.'[3]

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[2] Certificate of Death. Record of Births, Deaths and Marriages. New Register House, Edinburgh.

At the time of her marriage in 1889, Elizabeth Gray Anderson was living with her family at 7 Dundee Terrace in Edinburgh. The motivation which lay behind the severing of the Shetland roots is uncertain but was probably dictated largely by economic hardship. We can be sure only that, by the end of the 1880s when the wedding took place, the family was permanently settled on the Scottish mainland and was re-constructing its life and work amongst the intimidatingly busy streets and apparently hostile natives of the Scottish capital.

Peter Anderson was meanwhile engaged in the laborious establishment of a draper's business in Montrose. He and his mother had moved to the town in 1887 and he had initially spent three years in partnership with another 'draper and clothier' with whom he ran the firm of Anderson & Glen[4] at 180 High Street. By the time he married in 1889 he was running his own drapery business from these premises. He was twenty four years old.

The couple were married in Edinburgh on the 22nd February 1889 by a minister of the doctrinally and morally narrow Free Kirk of Scotland. Their parents and various other relations attended a service at which no introductions were required.

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[3] Dorothy Lytten in a letter to Kirsty Allen. 3rd August 1994.

[4] The Montrose Yearbook: Directory of Trades and Professions. 1887. From the Press of the Montrose Review. In Montrose Town Library Archive.

Peter Anderson brought home an ideal business associate (Elizabeth Anderson was a dressmaker by training) as well as a good marriage partner to the now flourishing drapery business in Montrose. The couple and his mother made their first home at 34 High Street. But it was at 14 Chapel Place on the thirteenth of March 1890, that Betty Anderson gave birth to a first child who was later baptised Wilhelmina Johnson Anderson at the Free St George's Church of Montrose.

Willa was born into an age in which labour still represented a very real threat to the lives of both mother and baby; infant mortality remained a commonplace occurrence. The safe arrival of a child and its survival through the dangerous first months of life were, in themselves, a cause for celebration.[5] And yet a daughter generally failed to satisfy the patriarchal Victorian craving for an heir. It is impossible - and patently unfair - to suggest that the Andersons were anything other than delighted with the little girl whom they referred to as 'Minnie'. But that same little girl would later express anger at the reaction with which society greeted the birth of a daughter.

> From time immemorial and to the present day the female child has been received at birth with groans of disappointment and nurtured, if at all, with resentment. While still in her infancy she is made to understand that the one possible return she can make for the inestimable gift of life thus accidentally and

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[5] Patricia Branca. Silent Sisterhood. Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home. London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1977.

> unwillingly bestowed upon her is to devote a life of willing service to the father who engendered her, any male members of the family to whom she can be useful, or, if she is supremely fortunate, to the man who will eventually claim her as his own and magnanimously take upon his shoulders the burden of her existence. Her environment teaches her to regard man as her superior, her guide, her justification, and her fulfilment.[6]

But this vision of childhood from old age is inevitably coloured by the life-long burden of experience, observation and barely suppressed anger. The resentment which the child might have experienced could presumably only be formulated and articulated with the benefit of hindsight. The scar inflicted by the inherent lopsidedness of the society in which she grew up was undoubtedly both deep and lasting; but it was the product of a continual chaffing and not of a single injury. Her family undoubtedly contributed to the wound; but they represent only one element in what the little girl apparently perceived as a universal assault.

The quest for equality would not in any case have been one in which Betty and Peter Anderson were likely to be engaged. They were bringing up their small daughter in a comfortably prosperous environment and it was presumably unimaginable to them that this financial security would not answer her every emotional and intellectual need.

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[6] Flora Grierson & Willa Muir. Alas We Females! A Modest Proposal for the Solution of many Problems by the Abolition of the Female Sex. Incomplete and unpublished article. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The Victorian bourgeois culture of the 'middle classes' offered exciting opportunities to those who grasped the ethos of social and economic mobility: but there was no guarantee of stability and the system included a very real element of fear. The promise of success and of an unprecedented standard of living was qualified by the very real dangers inherent in a system which would cast down its disciples as readily as it would exalt them. Prosperity was assured only to those who could fight the capitalist fight; and material affluence could not be insured against the pressures of illness or death.

But the new middle classes determinedly embraced the ethos of a society in which they dispensed with their acquired wealth almost as rapidly as they earned it. It was the first consumer society and an era which was unprecidented in its determined display of wealth. Mrs Grundy and her pervasive and insiduous moral and material standards loomed large in the Victorian mind.[7] Financial success of even the most modest kind forced the businessman into the treacherous tide of competition which capitalism embodied. It was a race in which Peter Anderson was forced to compete and (in spite of the Free Church teaching which set little store by rewards other than those promised in heaven) even this canny and cautious Norseman bought into the world of consumer society.

The genuine will to serve the best interests of your children is often only slightly differentiated from the desire to let the Grundys see that you are capable of providing the best beginnings, opportunities and advantages in life for your offspring. The reasoning which motivated Peter Anderson's entrustment of the early education of his children to a very select private educational establishment is therefore questionable. The education provided by the state at the local board schools was certainly not of a particularly high standard; but the academically renowned Montrose Academy had a junior department which, although fee-paying, would not have made the same demands upon Peter Anderson's wallet as those which Miss Davnie[8] undoubtedly did. But it was into Miss Davnie's hands that Willa's early education was entrusted.

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[7] Willa Muir. Mrs Grundy In Scotland. London: The Routledge Press, 1935.

Miss Davnie was probably one of the legion of widowed and unmarried gentlewomen who peopled the particularly Victorian governess sub-class. She taught her few pupils in a house at 32 Bridge Street and, in common with many ladies of her rank and class, was probably only saved from destitution by the income generated from her teaching and by the charity of a Mrs Shaw in whose house she lived as a 'companion'.[9] It was to Mrs Shaw's large house, just a short walk from the Anderson's home, that Willa was sent at the age of three to begin her education. It is likely that the instruction was of a sort designed to inculcate the values of gentility and the virtues of ladylike behaviour in the small girl, rather than to provide her with any solid grounding in more academic matters. Peter Anderson's vision of material and social aggrandisement possibly came complete with a polished and poised drawing room daughter. There was now, in any case, a son in the Anderson household who required some of the attention which 'Minnie' (as she was known within the family) had hitherto claimed.

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[8] Parish Records of the Borough of Montrose. In New Register House , Edinburgh.
[9] Patricia Branca. Silent Sisterhood. Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home. London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1977.

The sought after son and heir was born on the 7th January 1892 and was baptised Basil Ramsay Anderson. The name 'Basil' was borrowed from Peter's brother who had enjoyed a certain renown in Shetland and beyond as a poet; 'Ramsay' was the maiden name of the baby's grandmother on the paternal side. William John Anderson was then born in the June of 1894; and a larger house was needed in order to accommodate the rapidly expanding brood. The family therefore moved to a house at 93 Bridge Street which offered a standard of living far outwith the reach of most of the residents of Montrose. For the working class folk - most of whom worked in the mill or at the fishing - life was conducted in the virtual squalor of small, dirty and badly ventilated cottages within smelling distance of their workplace. The Andersons, with their large comfortable home and their privately educated children, clearly operated in at least the upper middle echelons of Montrose society.

It was a bustling and busy household which echoed with the noise of three young children. Betty Anderson was grateful for Granny's presence and for the extra pair of hands which helped her to deal with the constant demands of a baby, a toddler and an exuberant five year old. Willa was not the easiest of children. Her harmless but high-spirited exploits often ended in tears for Basil and she apparently 'had a temper as a girl and acted first before thinking. She pushed the unfortunate Basil through a glass door when he couldn't join in her boisterous yet academic games at a tender age.'[10] A barely latent antagonism often existed between the two older children. But her relationship with Willie was different: Willa always felt an intense and protective affection for her vulnerable younger brother. Neither of them had much in common - temperamentally or intellectually - with the pragmatic Basil whose future career in banking was inherent in his disposition from an early age. Willa and Willie on the other hand were driven by impulse and imagination and by the energy which they extracted from their living environment. Perhaps Willie shared with her in the composition of the fairytale fiction which amused Edwin when he read it many years later in the garden at Montrose.[11]

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[10] Dorothy Lytten in a letter to Kirsty Allen. 3rd March 1994.

In 1896 the family moved to a house at 81 High Street in which the three Anderson children in their earliest years enjoyed a very secure and comfortable environment. Business was booming at the draper's shop and the Montrose Yearbook's extravagent half-page advert trumpets Peter Anderson's increasing confidence and prosperity. The Central Mantle and Drapery Store was providing for its customers by 1898 'a large stock of jackets, mantles, dresses, stays, umbrellas, trimmings and fancy goods, as well as a well-selected stock of Heavy Drapery Goods'.[12] It was an enterprise which apparently promised infinite expansion and profit in its appeal to the new female consumer and its pandering to the Victorian obsession with frippery. The decoration and furnishing of the home and the person was destined to be a growth industry; and the Anderson store in the town's main street was in prime site Montrose.

But Peter Anderson's success was possibly won at the expense of home and family life. Capitalist thinking and the Protestant work ethic are natural bedfellows and are unremitting in their incitement to ambition and to dogged drudgery. Success in the eyes of both the capitalist and the Presbyterian was judged entirely on the basis of financial returns - and the later years of Victoria's reign saw an increasing conceptual entanglement between material rewards on earth and blessings promised in heaven. Prosperity indicated favour in the eyes of the Lord and was seen as a virtual guarantee of ultimate salvation: profit and not the sun shone on the righteous in Victorian Presbyterian Scotland. The extent to which Peter Anderson's life was dictated by this particularly Scottish mentality is purely conjectural: his Norse roots may have immunised him against the most destructive aspects of the doctrine; but he was an adherent of the Free Church of Scotland in which Knoxian Presbyterianism survived in its most virulent and undiluted form.

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[11] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968.

[12] The Montrose Yearbook: Directory of Trades and Professions. 1887. From the Press of The Montrose Review. In Montrose Town Library Archive.

Many years later, in the preliminary notes for a play which never progressed beyond the notebook, Willa created an embodiment of the worst characteristics of the Scottish Presbyterian businessman. The play's intended anti-hero is a draper in small-town north-east Scotland who is consumed by a lust for commercial success. He embraces the capitalist ideology to an extent which is virtually demonic in its horror and intensity. The play - which Willa intended to call The Cheesedish[13]- opens as the draper's daughter returns from London in order to minister to her dangerously ill mother. The draper defines the terms of his next business enterprise and plots his bid for the take-over of a rival firm as his wife lies dying. The entire concept is relentlessly bleak.

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[13] Willa Muir. The Cheesedish. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

This demonic draper is a fictional character and perhaps even a caricature. But the similarities between the events and the setting of The Cheesedish and the real-world environment in which Willa grew up are nevertheless interesting. Fiction and autobiography are perennial bedfellows in Willa's writing: her personal history infiltrates much - too much - of her fictional work at its very root, and brings her life into a relationship of almost suffocating intimacy with her writing. Her novels are peopled with characters who bear more than a passing similarity to those who inhabited her daily life. A fascinating figure of evil and ogrous horror looms large in Willa's childhood if the formula holds true for The Cheesedish. It's an unlikely parallel. Willa's father died in 1899 when his daughter was only nine, leaving her with a lasting craving for a father figure and the bewildered hurt of bereavement. A bereaved child is strongly affected by a sense of rejection: an irrational resentment and anger against the dead parent is a common defence mechanism and perhaps the only way in which a child can make sense of this absolute and unbridgeable separation. The creation of a fictional monster perhaps allowed Willa, as an adult, to express the frustration and pain for which, as a child, she had no real outlet.

So, monster or model father . . . ? The character of Peter Anderson, and his relationship with his daughter, lurk in a cloud of obstinate obscurity. There are no more than swiftly passing references to him in either Willa's formal or her informal writing. He would possibly feature more widely had his involvement in the development of his daughter's character been formative in a fundamentally destructive way. But this is pure speculation. It is perhaps more conclusively significant that, throughout her life, she remained convinced that the relationship between a woman and her father is potentially profoundly special; if her personal experience of the father-daughter bond had not been primarily positive she could surely not have written of it with such a yearning and affirming confidence.

There is perhaps also a significant sense of a missed and much regretted opportunity in her 1960 observation about a 'women's tendency to be attracted to a father-figure. . . . it is very natural for a girl to be attracted to her father as a boy is to his mother. Where the father is dead, or harsh and unlovable, she will set up some substitute father-figure and direct her feelings towards him: a tutor, a pastor, an uncle, a guardian, any older man who is reasonably kind to her. It is not the existence of father-figures that women question; they like father-figures. They feel that they can establish some special relation to a father-figure.'[14] The personal resonance of the observation is unmistakable and carries with it a number of significant questions. Towards whom, for example, did Willa direct her displaced father-attraction? It is possible, in looking at her school and university years, to identify a number of potential father substitutes who may have served as weights by which the perceived imbalance in her life could have been corrected. The gap in experience which was left by her father's death was never really filled and - although her foster father-figures may have provided token compensation - a consciousness of emotional deprivation and a sense of having missed out in some important way, permeates her writing and thinking over the years. This father idol is probably no less fictional a portrayal of Peter Anderson than the monster figure in The Cheesedish is.

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[14] Willa Muir. This Lop-sided World. Unpublished article. In the Willa Muir archive in the University library, St Andrews.

Image and imagination step in when situation and circumstance refuse to provide a model in life.

But regardless of whether Peter Anderson was a good man or a bad man, a good father or a bad father during the early years of Willa's life, family life in the house on the High Street probably provided the three Anderson children with the happiness and security which they needed. Money brought with it the comparative freedom which abject poverty denies; and the petty discomforts and injuries of childhood were ministered to by the ever-present and attentive figures of Mother and Granny. The middle-class Victorian attitude to childcare may not have considered cuddles and outpourings of love to be beneficial in the creation of adults fit for an Empire; but it was punctillious in its attention to the purely physical needs of the child. In 1898, the Andersons were possibly the embodiment of smug middle-class prosperity.

But storm-clouds soon broke and the certainties which had ordered and governed family life were violently and abruptly shattered when both Peter Anderson and an infant daughter (born in April 1899 and baptised Elizabeth Ramsay Gray Anderson) died within a few short months. Respiratory diseases like the phthisis which caused Peter Anderson's death after a six month illness were rife in Victorian Scotland where they were fostered by 'congested housing, insufficient fresh air or exercise, and infected food'.[15] They were also intensely contagious. Peter's work - with its long claustrophobic hours and its regular contact with customers from various social environments - made him a prime candidate for the various diseases which periodically stalked the town and which were perpetuated by the poverty and the squalid living conditions which were a reality for a considerable percentage of its population. The public health policies which gradually eradicated the scourge of tubercular and respiratory diseases came too late for Peter Anderson.

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[15] T.C.Smout. A Century of the Scottish People. London: Fontana Press, 1987.

With his death, prosperity in the Anderson household became a memory. The lives of his widow and children altered beyond all recognition and the shock left a scar on Willa's mind which never fully healed. It was not the financial deprivation in itself which was hard to accept. Betty and Peter Anderson had brought up their children to believe that wealth could never be taken for granted; the poverty of Shetland represented too recent and raw a memory for any indulgence in financial complacency. But it was the instant alteration in the social status and standing of the family in the eyes of the town which was probably hardest to bear. The comforts and expectations of middle class life vanished rapidly and absolutely, in a manner which must have been bewilderingly unaccountable to a nine-year old mind already hurt and confused by two deaths in as many months.

A certain social stigma infected a household deprived of its patriarchal head. Victorian society thrived on a sentimental celebration of the tragic plight of the widow and her fatherless children; but sentiment doesn't buy food, and active social concern was virtually non-existent. The struggle was intense for a woman on her own. She was left without respect or dignity and was rendered voiceless and unrepresented. She became an invisible constitutional non-entity who was forbidden to vote, to claim any statutary rights, or to own property in her own name. Identity and status were attributed only to men, and women could hope only for the reflected prestige which was won by making a 'good marriage'. Willa's 1936 novel, Mrs Ritchie, is an explicit and powerful attack on this systematic disempowerment of women at all levels and in every area of society. The title figure - who marries primarily out of a sense of the absolute anonymity which will characterise her life if she fails to do so - sees a husband only as the essential social accessory of respectability and respect. Only by marriage and procreation could the Victorian woman establish some public sense of purpose and meaning to her life.

As Betty Anderson contemplated the future in 1899 she must have felt the burden of widowhood to be almost insupportable. She was faced, at the age of thirty-two, with the task of bringing up three children and of maintaining the drapery business which would feed five mouths and clothe five bodies. Life altered irrevocably almost immediately.

Private education was clearly too great a drain on the strained finances and the three children were removed from Miss Davnie's select establishment and sent instead to the Townhead 'elementary Board School for working class children'.[16] The Anderson children found themselves suddenly and peremptorily ejected from the sheltered environment which had been their experience into the confusing rough and tumble world of children from a very different background and with entirely different expectations of life. Most of the Townhead children were forced to leave school at fourteen and find work which would ease the family finances: the school therefore offered a solid but primarily utilitarian education. Learning was by rote and discipline was harsh. Punishment was probably administered by an enthusiastic and prolific use of the 'tawse' or belt which was the mainstay of the Scottish dominie until fairly recently.

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[16] Willa Muir. Living with Ballads. London: The Hogarth Press, 1965. (p13)

But the classroom presented no real terror to an intelligent and 'passionate little girl'[17]. Her academic ability probably manifested itself very rapidly and she must have appeared to her teachers as a rare oasis of potential in an arid desert. But the playground was a much less congenial environment in which the order of the classroom was replaced by the anarchy which is a time-honoured reaction against excessive control.

In the Townhead playground Willa experienced an emotion which followed her through life; a feeling of exclusion; of not belonging to the world of which she was expected to be a part. In a journal entry, much later in life, she ascribed this feeling to the geographical dislocation of the Anderson family from its Shetland roots. 'All emigrants are Displaced Persons. My parents were D.P.s in Angus. So I grew up not fitting into the Angus tradition and therefore critical, resentful, unsure. Hence my secret desire to own a house, to belong somewhere.'[18]

She must also have been set apart by her social background during those first painful days at the Townhead School. Her accent and colloquialisms had come with her parents from Shetland and had, since her earliest childhood, been mocked with pitiless and relentless cruelty by the local Angus 'bairns'. 'Well before I was three . . . I had discovered that I did not really belong to the

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[17] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. September - November 1955. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[18] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. June 1947-January 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Montrose way of life. My people spoke Shetland at home, so my first words were in the Norse dialect of Shetland, which was not valid outside our front door. I remembered standing in Bridge Street, where we lived, fingering my pinafore, dumb with embarrassment, while four or five older girls squealed in delighted mockery of what I had been saying and urged me to say it again.'[19] And now the private school mannerisms and inflections which were Miss Davnie's legacy presumably provided more material which the Townhead children could use as weapons in their teasing, taunting battles.

But as the toddler had adapted to her environment by learning 'to speak broad Montrose',[20] so the nine year old now moulded herself rigorously into the shape of an elementary Board schoolgirl. She soon became a part of the seasonal round of singing and skipping games, spinning the peerie and playing with chuckie stanes. Many of these age-old Scottish childhood pastimes were, by the time Willa was growing up in Victorian Scotland, primarily restricted and relegated to the 'working class' culture. They would certainly not have been played in Miss Davnie's schoolyard; nor would they have been considered suitable activities for a superior young lady at the Academy. But the games which Willa learned in the girls' playground at the Townhead School offered her an invigorating induction into one of the rare aspects of her Scottish inheritance to which she formed a lasting attachment. She championed this simple traditionalism throughout her life, and believed it to offer an authenticity and validity which was entirely lacking in the exported carnival tartanry and impenetrable vernacularisms.

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[19] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p19)
[20] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p19)

Willa was rapidly absorbed into the culture of the Townhead School and began to display her customary mischievous exuberance. The social niceties of the private school were of little relevance in this environment; survival in the playground jungle required the approbation and the protection of the pack. '[W]e were not passive little conformists, such are usually called "good" little girls. We were far from being good little girls. In school, for instance, most of us put up a successful resistance to instruction despite exhortation and punishment. In the playground when not playing singing games we were noisy, rough-tongued and frequently aggressive.'[21]

And Willa was apparently no exception to this general rule. 'A lecture was just a tongue-lashing. The words were meant to hurt, and did hurt. Emphasis was just a weapon for chastising the sinner - that was me, of course, and so I can still remember it.'[22] But these regular and memorable chastisements were never sufficient to deter her from another of her hair-brained and 'sinful' schemes. Her intelligence and reckless courage led her regularly into trouble; and her charismatic personality and irrepressible sense of fun presumably exerted a magnetic and almost irresistible force on a whole crowd of little girls.

She was a natural leader who often provided the imagination and the motivation behind the various childish misdemeanours and scrapes in which she and her classmates became involved. The escape from the suffocating restrictiveness of Miss Davnie's establishment into the vaguely demotic world of the Townhead School possibly offered Willa the valuable and much-needed freedom which allowed her to establish a sense of independence and self-reliance. She spent three reasonably happy years at the school: a period which instilled in her a sense of her capacity for survival. She also gained a gift for establishing relationships with people whose experience differed widely from her own - a skill which was to stand her in good stead in the years to come.

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[21] Willa Muir. Living with Ballads. London: The Hogarth Press, 1965. (p33)
[22] Willa Muir. An Old Wife's Grumble. Unpublished article. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

She left the Townhead School at the age of twelve to take up a scholarship at Montrose Academy; it was the first of many occasions throughout her life on which the doors of opportunity, which poverty would otherwise have slammed in her face, were opened by her intelligence and intellect. The Academy was 'one of eleven Higher Class Public Schools originally constituted under the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872,'[23] and it offered an excellent education at a minimal cost to the parents of its pupils - a cost which would nevertheless still have been outwith Betty Anderson's very limited means. For the price of just twenty-five shillings a quarter, students at the school were offered a 'modern' education, and 'training for industrial and scientific as well as professional careers'.[24]

Educational standards in all areas of the curriculum were maintained to a very high standard, and the pupils were offered a remarkable variety of options in their choice of subjects. There was, however, a particular and predictable emphasis placed upon the study of the Classics: the school was the first public school in Scotland to offer Greek on its syllabus. This tradition of enthusiasm for Greek and Latin was perpetuated during the years which

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[23] Montrose Academy Prospectus. From the Press of The Montrose Review. 1902-3.
[24] Montrose Academy Prospectus. From the Press of The Montrose Review. 1902-3.

Willa spent at the school by John Yorsten, the principal teacher of classics and a later and very popular Rector.

He was a remarkable character who inspired an abiding devotion for himself and for the subject which he taught: Willa certainly remembered him with a fondness which is otherwise invariably lacking in almost all of her memories of her schooldays. 'Mr Yorston was the Classics master, and the best teacher of Latin and Greek I have ever known. Because of his imagination and thorough teaching I fell in love with the Classics and specialised in them at the University of St Andrews later on. I remember him with gratitude and affection.'[25]

John Yorsten also captured the heart and the admiration of Helen Cruickshank - another alumna of the Academy who went on to make her mark on the Scottish literary world. She was a pupil at the school from 1896 and, although her affectionately nostalgic recollections of the town and school in which she grew up are almost incomparable with Willa's predominantly bitter and resentful memories, the two women do coincide in their opinion of their Classics teacher. 'The favourite teacher of many of us was John Yorsten, a graduate of Edinburgh University . . . He was an inspired and inspiring teacher, not only of Latin but of a rounded way of living, and with his wit and humour, his classes were always something to look forward to.'[26]

Modern languages were also taught but primarily only to those who were deemed to be unable to cope with the rigours of a 'real' classical education:

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[25] Willa Muir. 'Memories of Under the Dome'. In Under The Dome. Montrose Academy School Magazine. From the Press of The Montrose Standard, 1962.

[26] Helen Cruickshank. Octobiography. Montrose: Standard Press, 1976. (p29)

this unconscious and parochial snobbery was certainly the prevailing attitude in Scottish education until very recently. Maths and English were, of course, at the very heart of the curriculum; but the school also taught all of the main branches of science. Elizabeth Macdonald, whose mother was at school with 'Minnie' Anderson, believes that 'Montrose Academy must have been a very progressive school at that time because my Mum did a Higher in Botany which could not have been a very common subject then.'[27] Any attitude to education which would permit women access to the science laboratory *was* 'progressive'; but various apparently arbitrary distinctions still existed. It was, for example, deemed necessary to exclude the girls from the study of 'Chemistry and Magnetism and Electricity' and to instruct them instead in 'Botany and Hygiene' which were presumably more feminine subjects. Or perhaps it was considered indelicate to force young gentlemen to consider the issue of 'Hygiene'!

The Academy certainly saw fit to advertise an assurance to the parents of prospective pupils that, despite the school's emphasis on the advantages of co-education, the special educational needs of their daughters would be met. 'The course of Study for Girls [sic] embraces the branches usually taught in the best Girls Schools. Needlework is carefully attended to, and special arrangements are made for lessons in cookery in connection with the Montrose School of Cookery.'[28] But this strict segregation of the sexes for 'cookery and needlework' and 'manual instruction' is not unexpected; after all, what use would the young Victorian gentleman make of any proficiency with the needle or the rolling pin? And his sister would certainly, in the realm of the well-regulated Victorian home, never be expected to be *au fait* with a hammer!

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[27] Mrs Elizabeth A. Macdonald in a letter to Kirsty Allen. 28th April 1994.
[28] Advertisement in The Montrose, Arbroath and Brechin Review and Forfar and Kincardineshire Advertiser. August 11th 1899.

It wasn't easy for Willa to adjust to life as an 'Academy Puddock.'[29] The intimidating gold-domed building with its numerous classrooms, endless list of subjects, and its undefined and incomprehensible expectations and standards must have loomed terrifyingly large in front of the frightened 'new girl' when she first arrived in August 1902. Willa's intellect and her imagination had, by this time, won her the approval of both staff and pupils at the Townhead School and she enjoyed the considerable status of a top dog. The Academy presented a different ballgame.

This ancient educational establishment was described in hushed tones of awe and respect by those excluded from its hallowed portals, and with a conscious air of superiority by those who studied within. The school was certainly a deservedly reputed seat of learning; but it was also a breeding ground for snobbery. The uniform of the Academy was a badge of financial and social exclusivity: while Academy scholars pursued their study of Greek or trigonometry, their working class contemporaries were struggling to feed and clothe themselves out of the pittance for which they worked long hard hours in the mills, the factories or at the fishing. Willa had shared classrooms and friendships with these 'excluded masses', and she was intensely conscious of the absolute divides which carved late Victorian and Edwardian society into strata, and which were often ordained simply by the arbitary state into which a child was born.

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[29] Willa Muir. Mrs Ritchie. London: Martin Secker Ltd, 1933.

The snobbery was not, however, directed only against those outwith the enchanted circle of Academy life. Social divisions were also created and sustained within the school by ruthless and unforgiving childish perceptions: Willa was instantly a victim of this particular aspect of Academy life. The bursaries - awarded each year after a process of competitive examination to twenty particularly able students who would otherwise have been unable to continue their education - were looked upon with scorn by many of the full fee-paying students at the school. The bursars were often considered to be beneath contempt and were pointedly excluded from many of the activities of their classmates within and outwith school hours. 'Being a bursar, I discovered, instead of a fee-paying pupil, was a social stigma. Things may be different now, but at that time Montrose was an elaborately snobbish town and I had to "live down" my bursary. I must have been very innocent in some ways, for this fact took me by surprise: that is why I remember it.'[30] She found herself again to be the outsider, who could only look in upon an apparently complete and impenetrable social group. The scars, like the memory, were lasting. The sores which were the battle wounds of this exclusion often provided the raw material upon which her novels were based and are expressed most explicitly in an autobiogaphical, untitled fragment.

> The Clarks were a step above her in the social scale. Mr Clark sat in an office above the shop, and merely supervised his painters and decorators, while Elizabeth's mother stood all day behind the counter of her drapery emporium. Janet had been at the Academy since she was six, while Elizabeth had only entered it two years ago as a Town

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[30] Willa Muir in 'Memories of Under the Dome.' In Under the Dome. Montrose Academy School Magazine. From the Press of The Montrose Standard, 1962.

> Bursar. These distinctions fretted Elizabeth, but she could not bring herself to ignore them and go unasked to the Clarks' door.
>
> Elizabeth passionately desired to shine, and intellectual distinction provided the only means of securing that prestige denied her by her humble birth. In her divison of the class she was the only bursar among the girls, and she felt acutely not that she was a bursar but that all the others thought of her as a bursar. She had begun to imagine that they had forgotten it; but that very morning Annie Taylor had asked all the others to a party, including Janet Clark, and had omitted her. Of course, Annie Taylor's father was a sea captain. And yet even Annie Taylor had deferred to her leadership in school.[31]

Willa battled against the academic, emotional and social problems which were apparently inherent in the routines, rituals and prejudices of the Academy. She was simultaneously forced to deal with the flood of tensions and frustrations with which home life was awash. The usual petty squabbles which are endemic in small populous spaces must have been exacerbated as the family faced up to life without a father, a husband or a son. It must sometimes have seemed to the children that they had lost both parents. Mother gradually took over Father's place in the draper's store and was rarely in the house at 81 High Street; only Granny welcomed the young Andersons home from school.

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[31] Willa Muir. 'Elizabeth . . . ' Typescript of a short story/novel. Incomplete. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

It was a painful environment for a young woman with a vibrant imagination and an intense, if furtive, sensitivity. Adolescence for any woman is a particularly painful rite of passage during which the absolute sense of self which is inherent in childhood is replaced by a terrifying blankness upon which a new adult identity must be inscribed. The world has its own preconceptions and expectations and - with the noblest of intentions - it points the would-be adult along the paths of convention and tradition. Decisions suddenly become entangled with the concept of destiny; and, in the midst of a mass of hyperactive and confused hormone activity, the tried and time-honoured routes of the past seem infinitely more attractive than virgin and unmapped territory.

But Willa always refused to take the easy and unquestioning option; she inevitably battled against the tyranny of tradition and the bulldozer of world opinion. But the patent courage of teenagers who refuse to conform often masks the intense alienation which characterise their perception of life. There can be few more absolute and extreme forms of loneliness than that which afflicts the emotionally and physically isolated adolescent. Willa was launched into adulthood carrying with her a sense of this numbing loneliness.

Her perception of this period is inevitably altered by the jaundice of time. A sense of teleological inevitability always affects our retrospective recollection of events and a pattern; certainty is often superimposed onto that which was arbitrary and random. It is all too easy to dissect the actions and attitudes of a child and find, in these early characteristics, the first latent indications of the preoccupations and concerns of the adult which that child was to become.

It is tempting, for example, to put Willa's ardent adult commitment to the battle for sexual equality into the mouth and the mind of the teenage Minnie Anderson. And not without some degree of justification. Willa probably experimented, even in those early Montrose days, with views and attitudes which must have seemed virtually incomprehensible to her mother and which laid the foundations for the unscaleable barrier of non-communication which was a hallmark of the relationship between these two strong-willed women. The inevitable conflict between parents and their children is always a source of potentially explosive tension; and yet the children - and particularly the daughters - of the dying years of Victoria's reign suffered to a quite unprecedented degree from the effects of the generation gap. Society and its attitudes underwent fundamental alterations during this period - and did so with a quite breath-taking rapidity. Women who had grown up in the depths of the mid-Victorian era and who believed in the preordained absolutes of traditional and dictated gender roles, now found that their daughters were questioning the precepts upon which these stereotypes were based. The sense of a common destiny involving marriage and childbearing had previously united mothers and daughters in defence against the world and had given them a shared common ground; but now the younger generation of women was actively engaging with that world. They were no longer willing to accept that the burden borne by their foremothers need neccessarily be the lot of the modern woman with an education, quasi-independence and contraception.

Betty Anderson probably reacted with uncomprehending dismay to the attitudes and ambitions of this reprobate daughter who objected to the most apparently reasonable and minimal of her mother's demands. Much of

Willa's adult writing reflects this youthful resentment and anger and many of the young women who people her novels share Elizabeth's 'latent indignation'. '[Elizabeth's] younger brother already over topped her by half a head, and her mother's ideal of womanhood was purely domestic. . . . Her temper rose as she ran past the washing-house. George could stay out till eleven, and only be asked where he had been. And he was fourteen months younger than she was, and couldn't do his lessons without her help. Why should girls be treated so unfairly?'[32]

And Elise in Imagined Corners returns to her home on Scotland's north-east coast after an absence of twenty years - and is immediately reminded of the barely suppressible resentment which, as a child, she had felt against the God of sexual discrimination who had loomed so large in the lives around her.

> The small girl's emotions touched her again; she was no longer coolly amused at the paltry ugliness of the church, the narrow complacence of the worshippers, she was both furious and miserable at being forced to take part in the service. Her one positive conception of God that He was a miracle worker, an omnipotent magician, had been shattered on the day when she had prayed Him to turn her into a boy and nothing had happened. The God that remained was merely an enforcer of male taboos, and a male creature at that, one who had no sympathy for little girls and did nothing for them.[33]

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[32] Willa Muir. 'Elizabeth . . . ' Typescript of a short story/novel. Incomplete. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[33] Willa Muir. Imagined Corners. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1987. (p185)

> 'You know it's much more difficult for a thinking girl to swallow tradition than for a thinking boy. Tradition supports his dignity and undermines hers. I can remember how insulted I was when I was told that woman was made from a rib of man, and that Eve was the first sinner, and that the pains of childbirth are a punishment to women. . . . It took me a long time to get over that. . . . It's damnable the way a girl's self-confidence is slugged on the head from the very beginning.'[34]

The fictional aspects of this text should not divert the reader from its contextual and circumstantial similarities to the environment in which Willa grew up. Betty Anderson almost certainly believed that the ready service of every male need and whim was the highest and finest duty to which womankind was called. She probably upheld traditions which - even by Scottish standards - were old-fashioned and which held their sway only in the furthest outposts. She and Grannie, with their Shetland heritage, were separated from Willa by more than a generation. Culturally and historically their two worlds were alien and irreconcilable.

The relationship between two women of strong personality and opinion is inevitably fraught and potentially explosive: 81 High Street must often have been the scene of intense and possibly hurtful clashes between Betty Anderson and her teenage daughter. Willa expressed an equivocal and ambivalent attitude to her mother: their interaction over the years was characterised by tension, suppressed emotion and frustration. Willa was aware of the barrier of fundamental misunderstanding which separated her from her mother and its existence saddened her. Her mother's life was a profound mystery to her, and she often wanted to disentangle the obscurities which separated her from this alien woman. By 1948 - when Betty Anderson had been dead for almost twenty years - she was still unable to construct a just and true picture by which she could perpetuate her mother's memory. She described her then as 'in many ways, a simple woman with simple ideas & conventions.'[35] And a journal entry from 1952 declares her intention of 'try[ing] to write a book abt. my mother.'[36]

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[34] Willa Muir. Imagined Corners. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1987. (p216-7)

This book was never written; but there are various implicit and explicit references to the mother ideal in Willa's work which betray a very real anger and resentment. Mothers are often portrayed either as monsters or as mice in Willa's fiction; as 'formidable' women or 'puir auld mithers'.[37] They are either terrifyingly destructive Mrs Ritchie-type figures or, like Hector's dead mother in Imagined Corners, 'poor spiritless things'.[38] But, of the two dichotomous visions, it is the image of the monster mother which is pre-eminant.

The fictional monster mother in Mrs Ritchie reappears in an extended essay of the 1930s which explores the damage which an angry, frustrated or disturbed mother can inflict upon her child. 'As a mother, supreme within the home, she can have a lasting influence for evil on the children over whom she has control during their earliest and most impressionable years.'[39] But a paradoxical later article challenges and denigrates the whole concept of the Monster mother and depicts it as another weapon in the patriarchal arsenal of male manipulation and control. 'Any attempt of women to assert themselves brings up the bogey again, and one is warned about the Terrible Mother with her forces of destruction. Mum, in short, can be a monster unless she is kept under a man's thumb.'[40]

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[35] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1848. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[36] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[37] Willa Muir. Mrs Grundy in Scotland. London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd, 1936. (p112)
[38] Willa Muir. Imagined Corners. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1987. (p41)

Motherhood is an emotive issue in the mind of any woman: the relationship between a mother and daughter is often shrouded in guilt, resentment, regret or anger. Willa is therefore not unusual - except in her persistent attempts to analyse and to come to terms with the feelings and recollections which are more usually left dormant in some locked-up corner of the mind. Her mother always periodically occupied her thoughts and dreams; but these recollections assumed a particularly poignant intensity in the years after she became a mother herself. Random scribbles in various journals and notebooks during this period hint at the anguish which the actuality and the day-to-day realities of motherhood inspired in her. She yearned inexplicably for a daughter and yet she was painfully aware of the imperfections which had polluted her own relationship with her mother and of the unfathomable nature of the mystery which connects a child to its parents.

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[39] Willa Muir and Flora Grierson. Alas we Females! A Modest Proposal for the Solution of many Problems by the Abolition of the Female Sex. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[40] Willa Muir. This Lop-sided World. (pseud Anicula). In the Willa Muir Archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The roots are the same, the soil is the same, can the flower or the fruit be different?

a visit home - undertaken reluctantly - first brightness - how soon will the cloven hoof appear? - picking - disconcerting - decrying - in apparent chaff - then irritation rages - coupled with gifts. Sadness, humiliation, oppression - old sense of guilt. Must go away.

bitterness & swelling of heart - especially at a party how greedy Selfish, discourteous, ungracious you are. negative affection to one hungering for positive affection.

how I weep at a pathetic scene in a cinema about mothers & daughters - or in a novel where mothers & daughters are linked by affection or surrounded by strife?

sense of dull unhappiness - like a big jelly fish caught in a net with fine meshes - trying to get out into clear water which one can see but these filaments strain lightly over our bursting hearts, anchored to a heavy misery in the background. . . .

. . . suddenly awake & burst into tears not knowing why.

difference expected from a son & from a daughter - petty domestic services. spontaneous flow of affection - playful considerate - equal as from human being to human being

either caressingly or in a cheerful good fellowship don't you touch those chocolates. but to be told sullenly, resentfully, angrily

influence of the house? makes everyone irritable & snappy

jealous of her expansive kindness to guest & visiting children.

fake bright voice Well here you are heh heh heh heh

Her jolly laugh!

lies all of it.

> She ill treats & oppresses her own children. She's ruined my party for me already. As usual.
> fools will produce wise men and wise men fools[41]

These scribbled and disordered thoughts betray the extent to which the wound and the hurts of Willa's relationship with her mother never fully healed. Nor was her aversion to the house at 81 High Street diminished by the passing of the years: her revulsion to the place, the people and the four walls within which she passed her teenage years actually intensified as she looked back on it through time.

> Last night I dreamed that in 81 High Street Basil, aged about 15 or 16, was lying dead and naked on the bamboo hat stand in the lobby. Granny picked him up and carried him down to a dustbin in the close, round the corner by the old washhouse. And that was that! It woke me in a sweat of horror; I lay thinking about Montrose, & Basil & my mother, who was in many ways such a simple woman with sound ideas & conventions. And about Willie. And I realised how much I feared and loathed that house by this time; too many dead people have been carried out of it. My father, baby sister, Grannie, mother and Willie. The me that felt all that is still somewhere within my body.[42]

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[41] Willa Muir. Random notes. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[42] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. Jan1948- May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

That house at 81 High Street must sometimes have seemed like a desert of embattlement, embitterment and exclusion to the young Willa; but it was as nothing compared with the Lord's House in which, Sunday by Sunday, she was forced to endure a seemingly interminable internment. Willa, like Lizzy Shand in Imagined Corners, probably sat each week in the pews of the Free St Georges Church of Montrose bursting with frustration and indignation; and feeling imprisoned by the staunch human and material immovables which constituted the Kirk. She always resented Presbyterianism for its apparently conscious destruction of hearts and spirits and its inhibitive resistance to the fullness of life. Even less narrow and prohibitive forms of Christianity seemed to her to belong to a potentially divisive army of 'isms'; she never shared Edwin's later growing faith in the power and the love of an incarnate and defiantly un-Presbyterian God. The overwhelmingly male 'God of our fathers' remained outwith her vision of a woman's experience and perception of the world.

How can a woman who is surrounded by such heavily engrained preconceptions and attitudes even start to explore the concept of femaleness? Her only terms of reference are inextricably entangled in the concept of 'otherness'. She is left to scrabble for a sense of self which is shaped not by that which she is, but by that which she is not; to define herself by her deviance from a masculine 'norm'. The early days of the struggle for sexual equality and for the establishment of an autonomous female identity demanded a complete assault upon the preconceptions of society. As the nineteenth century ended and women began to question their traditional roles in both home and society, they faced the challenge of rescuing womanhood from the 'helpmate or whore' dichotomy. They recognised the necessity of undermining the male construct which, for centuries, had been accepted as the absolute definition of female identity and destiny - a construct which had persistently robbed women of their individuality and had turned them into feeble stereotypes and caricatures of womanhood. Those late Victorian women with their real and concerted offensives against the mandates and institutions of partriarchy were engaged in a dificult and dangerous venture. Unaccompanied by the sherpas of historic precedent with whom inveterate male explorers venture out into the unknown, they trod a virgin land unmarked by the tracks of tradition. A young woman growing up as the nineteenth century ended and the battle for equality began eagerly sought the female mentors in whom the amorphous vision of New Womanhood was physically embodied.

Willa's adolescent years were saturated with the company of women; but there was apparently no-one who could have inspired and encouraged her to pursue the quest for freedom, independence and equality which dominated the rest of her life. She was perhaps particularly sensitive to the 'biological law [which] has put into every woman just enough of the "old Adam" for her to rebel.'[43] And her adult native scepticism, cynicism and independence rebelled in any case against idolatry and hero worship; a legacy perhaps from the Presbyterian mindset of her childhood with its overdeveloped consciousness of human frailty and fallibility. But it was probably dearth rather than doubt which denied her a childhood preceptor. Female rôle models were thin on the ground in Montrose.

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[43] Willa Muir and Flora Grierson. Alas We Females! A Modest Proposal for the Solution of many Problems by the Abolition of the Female Sex. In the Willa Muir Archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Male minds during her secondary school years exerted the strongest influence on her attitudes and thoughts. She could not admire or respect the placid and accepting domesticity of the women with whose lives she was most familiar: she had no female kindred spirits with whom she could share the excitement and the intellectual challenges of the classroom. Her mother was preoccupied with the business and with practical worries to which trigonometry was an irrelevance. She and Granny probably debated the propriety of Minnie's educational preoccupation; books might lead to exam passes - but they seemed to knock little in the way of common sense or domestic skills into a lassie's head.

There are still Scottish homes in which parents throw up their hands in horror at the idea of a child, and particularly a daughter, with an enthusiasm for literature; the thought of idle hands and busy brains perhaps appeals to a lurking, primitive fear of the devil's power of appropriation! Helena Kennedy, barrister and Queen's counsel, grew up in Glasgow in the 1950's and recalls her teenage perception of an English degree as 'the most wonderful chance to read as much as you wanted without anyone accusing you of shirking. I had spent my childhood hearing aunts rebuking my mother for failing to take my nose out of a book and insisting that too much reading made you ill.'[44]

But the books on the Academy reading list certainly presented no danger to the unsuspecting and innocent female mind. The young woman who spent her days engrossed in some literary dwam might inadvertently neglect her domestic duties; but the books whose pages she was officially permitted to turn were not of a cast which could ever have compromised or threatened the ideals of domestic virtue. Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton virtually swamped English classes at the Academy until Jane Austen, Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens made their brief appearances at the latter end of the final year syllabus. This solidly conservative selection of literature was probably designed to uphold and reinforce the dearly held late Victorian and Edwardian values of feminine subservience, masculine dominance and the social status quo. Senior Three's glance at Tennyson is the token gesture towards modernity; and Sir Walter Scott - that inevitable giant in the Victorian vision of literary greatness - is the star player in the Academy's literary game. And women such as Rose Bradwardine and Jeannie Deans are, in spite of their undoubted virtues, certainly neither proto-feminists nor rôle models for an adolescent female reader!

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[44] Helena Kennedy. Eve was Framed. Women and British Justice. London: Vintage Books, 1993. (p35)

Nor were there any particularly influential or formative female figures on the staff at the Academy. There were in fact only two women on a staff of more than twenty teachers - and their influence was restricted to the cookery and needlework rooms. Even the School Board - with the exception of the token spinster of advanced years - was resolutely male. It was, however, a consciously co-educational establishment which, to a certain extent, managed to engender an ethos of equality.

> The girls who moved in 'county' circles might become Anglified, but the girls in the middle classes went to the same schools as the boys and studied the same subjects in the same classrooms. Girls attended not only the elementary but also the secondary schools side by side

> with their brothers. They learned Latin and Mathematics. They did not learn that it was necessary to wear gloves on the way to school. Even in their 'teens they did not learn to observe Mrs Grundy's social conventions. Did they address a schoolfellow as Mr Brown? Not they. Did Brown learn to greet a member of his class as Miss Smith? Not he. As Jean Smith and Willie Brown they hailed each other long after leaving school; the sense of individuality was too strong to permit of the social prefix.[45]

Academic performance in this atmosphere of equality was an absolute whose terms of judgement were uninfluenced by the sex of the pupil: it was an environment in which Willa conceived a solid sense of self-respect and recognised her value as an individual. It also justified and strengthened her confidence in her ability to compete on equal terms with anyone - male or female. And the overwhelming negativity and resentment which clouded her recollections of those formative years in Montrose is slightly qualified by her gratitude for the extent to which this aspect of her schooling influenced her self perception and her ambitions of her own life and of society.

Academy schooldays were, however, about more than just booklearning and abstract theorising: every aspect of Willa's life revolved increasingly around the school and the friends she made within its walls. She was a gregarious spirit who involved herself in everything and with everyone; she was imaginative and irrepressibly vocal; a natural and self-asserting leader, but one who also 'shared in all the fun and games of my class.'[46] 'That year we were reading Livy and we devoted ourselves to playing Romans and Carthaginians, each taking a name part. Instead of cutting off our enemies' heads, we turned their coats outside in and rehung them on the cloakroom pegs. . . . We were all famous generals: those with Roman noses had to be Romans: Emily Stobo, for instance, and Annie Taylor. I was Hannibal, and Margaret Ross was my little brother Hasdrubal.'[47] But a fictional version of this same reminiscence borrows a bitterer tone and recollects that 'even Annie Taylor had deferred to her leadership in school. She had been Hannibal when the class was playing Romans and Carthaginians; in fact, the whole game was her invention'.[48]

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[45] Willa Muir. Mrs Grundy in Scotland. London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd, 1936.
[46] Willa Muir. 'Memories of Under the Dome.' In Under the Dome. Montrose Academy School Magazine. From the Press of The Montrose Standard, 1962

Emily Stobo was Willa's particular kindred spirit during her teenage years. They wandered the town together, shared the gossip of the day, and indulged in various disruptive and mischievous exploits. Emily (upon whom Janet in the 'Elizabeth' fragment is probably based) was a schoolmaster's daughter.[49] Her comfortably well off family lived in a large house on the High Street and enjoyed the sort of lifestyle with which the Andersons had been familiar prior to Peter's premature death. Emily had attended the Junior Academy since the age of five and took for granted the privileged social status which was the automatic right of the feepaying student. She had an intelligent scientific mind; and she and Willa generally appropriated most of the Academy's senior honours and prizes.

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[47] Willa Muir. 'Memories of Under the Dome.' In Under the Dome. Montrose Academy School Magazine. From the Press of The Montrose Standard, 1962
[48] Willa Muir. 'Elizabeth . . . ' Typescript of a short story/novel. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[49] Montrose Academy New Code Admission Register, 1899-1908. In Dundee District Council Archives, Dundee

They certainly shared a conscientious and serious-minded attitude to academic work as well as an enthusiasm for wayward mischief. Willa often played the rôle of the classroom joker; but she was not cavalier in her pursuit of academic success. In the evening in the 'Anderson's house, Minnie was at one end of the dining-room table working hard at her lessons and her brother was at the other. Work was her life and she worked all the time.'[50] But the diverse busyness of Willa's life ensured that she never became neurotically bookbound: she was certainly not a swot.

Mrs Stobo - a formidable woman with a powerful and charismatic personality and an unshakeable confidence in her own opinions and judgements - was a part and a parcel of Willa's friendship with Emily. 'Mam' was as expansive and immediate in her affections as in her animosities; and Willa experienced both manifestations of this apparently Jekyll and Hyde personality. She was nevertheless fond of Mam and admired the exuberant and sometimes vindictive amusement which she derived from her world and its inhabitants. She also enjoyed Mam's reliably entertaining company; and appreciated her abilities as a raconteur; a 'famous' cook; and a marvellous hostess.[51] Mam later assaulted Willa emotionally and left her with a lasting wound to her confidence and self-esteem; but Willa was always open and sincere in her gratitude to the woman who introduced her to the man who would change and inform her entire existence.

But the future dangers and possibilities of the world beyond Montrose were too distant and unreal to impinge upon Emily's and Willa's teenage contentment. They were wrapped up in the busy social and academic whirl of Academy life during the week; and at weekends they often took to the hills together, 'stravaiging' for miles around Montrose. '"I'm awa' up the Glen," only had one meaning: Glenesk. Emily Stobo and I walked around it one Saturday and came home by Auchinblae: 37½ miles for the day: not bad for a pair of schoolgirls. I do hope these glens haven't been touristified yet: they probably have motor roads now, I suppose and I doubt if the Clatterin' Brig still clatters, or indeed, that it is still there.'[52]

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[50] Elizabeth A Macdonald in a letter to Kirsty Allen. 28th April 1994.
[51] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968.

The glory of the Mearns scenery was a gift which Willa accepted as a partial recompense for the numerous frustrations and petty restrictions of life in Montrose. The hills and glens allowed her the freedom to revel in the wild undisciplined rule of Nature and she carried the happy memories of those days of abandoned escape with her out into the geographically and historically distant fields of adulthood.

> O, the lang roads leading oot o the toon,
>   the lang Setterday roads!
> Nae schule an nae lessons the haill efternune,
>   on the lang Setterday roads.
> Faur the toon windows stopped an the hedges began,
> Ye daundered an dovered alang an syne ran,
> Full tilt like the wind withoot purpose or plan,
> On the lang Setterday roads. . . .

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[52] Willa Muir in a letter to Betty Anderson. London, 9th August 1965.

A'thing wis yours an ye were at hame,
On the lang Setterday roads.
Nae twa miles wis ever the same,
On the lang Setterday roads.
Hill or seaside or plooed faerm land,
Ferns an berries or shalls an sand,
A'thing was yours fatever ye fand,
On the lang Setterday roads.

Ay, that was oor kingdom fan we were bairns,
On the lang Setterday roads.
Up in Angus and through the Mearns,
On the lang Setterday roads.
but noo they've evened and ironed doon,
An buses an lorries mak sic a stoun,
Ye wad hardly ken ye were free of the toon,
On the lang Setterday roads.[53]

Willa and Emily also spent some of their free hours nearer to home amidst the unpredictable beauty of the 'Basin'. This tidal loch to the immediate south of Montrose hems the town into a cranny between the mountains and the sea and appealed deeply to Willa's imagination and affections. The waters of the loch drain away into the sea at low tide and leave an ugly muddy waste; but the tide soon turns and the waters flood back into the Basin and reflect the weather and the peculiar atmosphere and aura of the light on Scotland's north-east coast. It can present a face of remarkable and terrible beauty; and it was here that Willa experienced one of her earliest visions of the universal unity which Belonging describes as her informing sense of self and community.

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[53] Willa Muir. 'The Lang Setterday Roads'. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> I was sitting alone in a boat beached at the back of the island in the throat of the tidal lagoon, called the Basin, behind Montrose; the sun was setting before me and the Basin was full. Except for a distant curlew's call there was no living sound. The 'feeling' came upon me like a tide floating me out and up into the wide greening sky - into the Universe, I told myself. That was the secret name I gave it: Belonging to the Universe. Like Thoreau, I felt myself 'grandly related'.[54]

Betty Anderson perhaps shared this love for the countryside and yearned for the open spaces of her Shetland childhood. She certainly unshackled the chains of town life each summer, and 'rented for summer holidays a four-roomed cottage or a 'cottar house' on a farm beside the sea, five miles from our home town.'[55] The Academy schoolroom was exchanged for ploughing lessons from the bothy ploughman; and the petty social hierarchies of Montrose were forgotten as the Andersons willingly shared in the work of the farm labourers and 'tramped hay on the stacks, stooked oats and barley and hoed many turnips at the cliff-foot'.[56]

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[54] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press Ltd, 1968. (p14)
[55] Willa Muir. Living with Ballads. London: The Hogarth Press, 1965. (p35)
[56] Willa Muir. Living with Ballads. London: The Hogarth Press, 1965. (p36)

The happy bustle of young people in the cottage was generally supplemented by the arrival of three Anderson cousins from Glasgow. Willa had a particularly close relationship with the eldest Anderson who was 'like a sister to me. We were born in the same year and as children had always spent part of our summer holidays together. Dora had abundant auburn hair and eyes of the same colour with a temperament to match; she was fiery, easily kindled and generous.'[57] The two younger children - Betty and Victor - were ages with Basil and Willie. They all contentedly manufactured their own entertainment during those Mearns holidays and filled the hours with games and with the blissfully innocent pursuits of a by-gone rural living. 'We used to dance out of doors at the nearby cross-roads. . . We became very friendly with Nether Burton and his men. Indeed, before we left at the end of the summer, Nether Warburton gave us a dance in his barn, with melons and ice-cream as well as a fiddler and a piper to play for us; all the ploughmen came to it, in their tackety boots; it was a grand dance.'[58] These were - like so many of the times which Willa and Dora shared together in Glasgow, Montrose, Stirling, St Andrews and beyond - happy days of youthful exuberance and high spirits.

But the holidays eventually and regretfully drew to a close and the family were beckoned back to the work-a-day world of Montrose, the Academy and the drapers shop. The return to town signified the restoration of the petty frustrations and restrictions which always irritated Willa; but it also heralded the exciting start of a new term. She was a keen and natural scholar and her later years at the Academy were particularly satisfying, active and productive. She was at the very centre of school life and was enthusiastically committed to both the academic and the extra-curricular activities of the school.

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[57] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p21)
[58] Willa Muir. Living with Ballads. London: The Hogarth Press, 1965. (p36)

She certainly seems to have been involved in the production of the school magazine which appeared in June 1905. This edition of Under the Dome provides a fascinating insight into the life and the attitudes of the Academy and of the young middle class Scots of the period. Its pages contain a jostling and eclectic mix of satirical editorials on school life; of gossip and rumour; of sports team reports; of society information; of skits and satires; and of poetry and prose from the stable of Victorian melodrama. The authors of the articles are either anonymous or pseudonymous; but they can be identified from the pencilled notes and names (in Willa's distinctive hand) which appear in the copy of the magazine which Montrose Library holds in its archives. Much of the magazine seems to have come from the pens of a small group of people - Mudie, Kydd, W. Douglas, M. Cranston and 'M. Anderson' -whose names appear on page after page. Three of the magazine's thirty articles are offerings in poetry and prose from Willa's imagination.

The poems are writen in the direct and vaguely satirical style for which Willa always displayed a remarkable and apparently effortless talent. 'The Botanist's Cry'[59] displays the first indications of this gift for perceptively light-hearted ribaldry. 'Peals from the Dome' (a section about the news, gossip and petty scandals of school life) features another of Willa's poetic offerings. It is an adaptation of the section of Milton's L'Allegro which begins with the lines, 'Haste thee Nymph, and bring with thee/Jest and youthful jollity' and is a humorous and relevant poetic narrative about the high jinks and excitement enjoyed by the girls' hockey team at an away match fixture in the neighbouring town of Arbroath. Her third contribution is entitled 'The Alarum Clock' and is the archetypal girls' school tale about dormitory shenanigans.

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[59] Willa Muir. 'The Botanist's Cry' in Under the Dome. Montrose Academy School Magazine. From the Press of The Montrose Standard, 1905.

This 1905 edition of Under the Dome appears to be the only surviving literary relic of the years which Willa spent in the senior Academy. She later spent a number of years on the editorial team of the St Andrews University newspaper and it is not unreasonable to speculate that she was also similarly involved with the production of Under the Dome. Her continued contribution to the pages of the magazine would probably also make interesting reading; and it is therefore sad that these articles now appear to be irretrievably lost.

Nor is there any record of the Literary and Debating Society, another area in which Willa was probably actively and enthusiastically involved. The title character in the otherwise autobiographical 'Elizabeth' fragment was certainly 'chosen as class representative to discuss the founding of a Literary and Debating Society in the school'[60]. It was, moreover, another area of University life with which Willa became entangled, and her interest and ease in the debating chamber may well have had its foundation at Montrose Academy.

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[60] Willa Muir. 'Elizabeth . . . ' Typescript of a short story/novel. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

But these extra-curricular detours never distracted Willa from the books and the intellectual explorations which were her first priority and her greatest love. Between 1905 and 1907, she achieved passes at Higher in French, Latin, maths and science and at Honours in English and Greek; she also won the English Medal, the Angus Club Medal for Latin, the Duke Medal for Greek and was ranked fourth in the University of St Andrews Bursary Competition.[61] She left Montrose Academy in a blaze of academic glory on the 29th June 1907.

That last summer of childhood was spent as usual in the little farm bothy which nestled between the North Sea's rugged coastline and the lush and verdant hills of the Mearns. St Andrews was almost visible across the broad estuary to the south. October promised a new beginning and a myriad of social and academic opportunities in the weathered ivory towers of Fife's 'auld grey toun'. But amidst the anticipated turmoil of change and upheaval, was the assurance of familiar faces and old classmates from Montrose Academy and the knowledge that Emily Stobo would be venturing out beside her into St Andrews student life. Willa was, in any case, never intimidated by the prospect of change. She was invariably and gladly drawn away from the old and familiar territory of the past into the invitingly unknown terrain of the future. Her mind was probably filled with anticipation and excitement rather than with trepidation as October approached and she began to disengage herself from the tangled emotions of home and family life and from the Montrose of her childhood days.

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[61] Montrose Academy Prospectus 1908-9. From the Press of The Montrose Review. In Montrose Town Library Archive.

CHAPTER II

ST ANDREWS AND THE STUDENT LIFE. 1908-1915.

Willa's student days began at the beginning of October 1907. St Andrews was just two hours by train from Montrose; but it must have seemed a million miles away from the claustrophobia of 81 High Street. Willa's life was suddenly infused with an invigorating and breezy freedom. Montrose had shrunk into a suffocating state of narrowminded parochialism as Willa's mind had expanded into highspirited and broad minded adulthood: St Andrews signified the promise of escape.

She and Emily possibly set off together on the southbound train from Montrose. They had taken up shared lodgings in a big house on South Street owned and governed - probably with an austere and vigilant eye - by a Mrs Smith. The 'bunking' system was universal in St Andrews at the turn of the century, and numerous families provided termtime homes for students. 'Bunkladies' were the perennial butt of student jibes; but they were generally viewed with a goodnatured mixture of affection and fear. They treated their student lodgers as members of the extended family and watched over the activities of their young charges with a disapproving, matriarchal and proprietorial interest. And the system certainly cemented the relationship between town and gown.

The University and the town of St Andrews in 1907 were both deeply committed to the fostering of these feelings of community and unity. It was a golden age; and the students in those halcyon days were conscious of their good fortune and of their idyllic lifestyle and environment. 'Viewed in distant retrospect across the blighted span of two world wars, the University of St Andrews in the early years of this century appears a singularly happy place.'[1]

It was a small and intimate institution with fewer than six hundred students and a permanent teaching staff of only ten. Almost every member of the community was known by name; daily living was a shared and mutual experience. A pervasive attitude of positive and human progressiveness predominated and found its origins in the benign rule of Sir James Donaldson who occupied the Principal's chair from 1886 until his death in March 1915. Sir James was passionately concerned with the wellbeing and the happiness of each individual student who came into his fatherly and warmhearted care, and his door was always open to student callers. One particular turn of the century student remembered him being 'of gentle aspect and imperturbable good humour, and familiarly known as "Jeems". . . '[2] 'Withal, although quite capable of sterness, and even of animosity, he had a natural kindliness and homeliness of manner which endeared him to colleagues and students alike.'[3]

But this homely exterior hid the mind of an infinitely progressive educational thinker. He divined the future direction of the higher education establishments and gently and efficiently directed St Andrews through the exigencies and the challenges of change. He diplomatically and patiently dragged the congenitally conservative University body into the twentieth century. Women were admitted to University classes and degrees under his principleship in 1892[4] and he encouraged the foundation of a Women's Union to compliment the Men's Union which he had instituted in 1888. The institution of a Student's Representative Council to enforce the same laws and statutes which regulated and maintained town discipline[5] amongst the student body also took place under his auspices in 1886. He was a confidant and friend of Lord Carnegie and attended and advised at the birth of the Carnegie Trust from which so many Scottish students have since benefitted. And, with the 1896 opening of University Hall 'as a permanent Hall in which women students might reside and study'[6], he laid the foundations for the vast residential programme which now accommodates over three thousand students in university halls of residence. He was a man of stature and vision and his students admired him for these qualities as much as for his affability and humanity.

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[1] Ronald Gordon Cant. The University of St Andrews. A Short History. Dundee: St Andrews University Library, 1992. (p160)
[2] Elizabeth Bryson. Look Back in Wonder. Dundee: David Winter & Son Ltd, 1980. (p113)
[3] Ronald Gordon Cant. The University of St Andrews. A Short History. Dundee: St Andrews University Library, 1992. (p147)
[4] University of St Andrews Senate Minutes. 1908-1915. In the St Andrews Muniments Collection. University Library, St Andrews.

His attitudes and influence ensured that the environment into which Willa made her entrance was charged with vitality and optimism. It was an atmosphere which accorded with her own sense of the promise of the future and she was almost instantly at home in her new life.

She was also on familiar academic ground. Latin and Greek continued to excite and enthuse her; and Professors Lindsay and Burnet who taught these subjects deepened the love of the Classics which John Yorsten at Montrose Academy had instilled in her. She also elected to join the Ordinary Maths class - but this was a rather less happy decision! The subject failed to capture her imagination and she exerted little energy in attempting to master its complexities. It was a great relief to be able to quit the class at the end of her first year and to enrol instead in the Logic and Metaphysics Class for the session 1908-9.

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[5] Elizabeth Bryson. Look Back in Wonder. Dundee: David Winter & Son Ltd, 1980. (p105)
[6] University of St Andrews Calendar. 1911-12. In the University Library, St Andrews.

Willa's student years coincided with a period in which St Andrews was enjoying a reputation for unparalled academic excellence. 'Rarely had the university contained such a wealth of talent among its professoriate: Burnet and Lindsay in Classics; Stout, with first Bosanquet and then Taylor in Philosophy; Menzies in Divinity; McIntosh, D'Arcy Thomson, and Geddes in Biology; Purdie, Krienen, and Walker in the Physical Sciences; and many more beside.'[7] There was, in those early years of the twentieth century, an intellectual vibrancy which matched the liveliness with which the university was fitting itself for its future.

Burnet and Lindsay rapidly provided the raw material out of which Willa could construct her academic mentors. They were renowned scholars of international repute; and St Andrews students and staff were very conscious and proud of their prestige. '[Professor Lindsay] and his Hellenic colleague together form a classical decad of such far-reaching repute that it is a genuine honour, merely reflected though this may be, to be accounted to have sat at their feet.'[8]

Professor Burnet had held posts at Merton College, Oxford; Harvard University; and Edinburgh University prior to his 1892 appointment to the St Andrews chair of Greek. His contributions to classical learning included editions of Platonic and Aristotelian works, a Greek dictionary and a volume entitled Early Greek Philosophy. But he was also a very gifted and talented teacher who had 'a broad-minded feeling for every student who comes under his ken'[9]; and who could capture the interest and the enthusiasm of even the most reluctant student. Willa was intrigued and delighted by his tendency to stray from the syllabus and to head off instead into the world of unfamiliar works and authors.[10]

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[7] Ronald Gordon Cant. The University of St Andrews. A Short History. Dundee: St Andrews University Library, 1992. (p160)

[8] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 22nd November 1907. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

Wallace Martin Lindsay was a Latin scholar whose intellect and academic output had established for him a considerable reputation at home and abroad. He was the author of a seminal history of the Latin language, and had edited a number of classical works which were greatly admired by his students for their elegant literary style.[11] He too was an able and energetic teacher.

But they were universally popular as well as being academically respected. Their hospitality and friendship were as generous as their erudition; and they enthusiastically shared in the social and extracurricular lives of their students. Lindsay was a keen golfer, who spent most of his leisure hours on the links; while Burnet was the leading light, the moving spirit and the stage manager of the University's Shakespearian and Dramatic Society and would regularly open his home to students for use as a rehearsal space.

They were men who believed in the value of education in its broadest sense; and scholars who stroved to facilitate open, active and inquisitive thinking amongst their students. 'Unless we are gravely mistaken in our judgement, Professor Burnet's ideal of the student life is not the "swot". He will have his students work and work hard, but at the same time, he would see them taking some intelligent interest in the affairs of their Alma Mater and recognising that their classes are no more than a single aspect of their life up here.'[12]

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[9] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 4th February 1910. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

[10] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 4th February 1910. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

[11] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 22nd November 1907. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

This ethos appealed to Willa and she enthusiastically seized upon the various opportunities of university life and committed herself wholeheartedly to the projects in which she was involved. She played hard; but she also worked hard - often well into the night when the 'vibrations of the day had died down'[13]. Burnet and Lindsay's love of learning and literature appealed to her belief in the intrinsic value of education; and she became their willing disciple in their pursuit of understanding and knowledge. They recognised her natural abilities and her commitment to her studies; and they guided and encouraged her. She returned to Montrose at the end of that first session with first rank passes in Latin and Greek and a special prize for a Greek essay. It was the beginning of a distinguished academic career.

Attendance for summer term classes was optional and represented an impossible financial burden for the Andersons. Emily returned to St Andrews for the third term of the academic year but Willa worked part-time and read widely and voraciously. She 'discovered Jane Ellen Harrison's *Prolegomena to Greek Religion,* which I carried in my bosom during my first university summer' and began her first explorations into the 'underworld of feeling'.[14]

She and Emily returned to the same shared accommodation in St Andrews in October 1908 to begin their second year. Emily had also achieved considerable academic success in the sciences during her first year. She later achieved first rank passes in various chemistry and geology classes before going on to study engineering at University College, Dundee.

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[12] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 4th February 1910. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.
[13] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p163)
[14] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p13)

The 'extraordinary friendship and the curious freakish sense of humour' which the two young women shared was known to the 'whole University'.[15] Willa always participated in the excitement and the pleasure of a visit from 'Mam' and helped to entertain their guest and show off their mutual friends. Mam apparently paid one of her customary visits to St Andrews in the March of Willa's second year. Willa and Emily had recently contracted a friendship with a young and intelligent research fellow in the department of economics, and they were keen to introduce him to Mam.[16] Mam instantly liked the young man and invited him to spend the approaching Easter vacation with the Stobos in Montrose. It became increasingly apparent however (when he took Willa out for a birthday dinner and wrote her regular letters) that his affections lay with Willa rather than with Emily. Mam was incensed by the apparent slight which Willa had inflicted upon her daughter and reacted with instant and vicious vindictiveness. Willa later recalled this event and the lasting hurt which it caused her.

> Mrs Stobo was denouncing me to all the visitors in her house, to all the people whom I had met there familiarly . . . [She was saying] that I was vulgar, not superficially, perhaps, but vulgar in grain which was much worse. That I had a kind of exuberant vitality but nothing more. That I had no real ability and was simply a parasite on Emily. In short, that I pushed myself into the limelight, and kept her back, and stole all her ideas. A dreadful picture!

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[15] Willa Muir. 'A Visit'. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[16] Willa Muir. 'A Visit'. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> . . . My whole world came crashing about my ears. But my pride came to the rescue - in public at least. It was a deadly blow to my confidence in myself and in other people.[17]

It was an agonising chapter in Willa's life. Willa sat in the house at 81 High Street nursing her dying grandmother as Mrs Stobo stirred up intrigue and blackened her name. Granny died in the April, the boys went back to school - and a real loneliness descended upon Willa's life. Emily's friendship was lost to her and the Stobo's house in which 'I had always been more at home . . . even than in my own'[18] was now comfortless and forbidden territory. Even the pre-planned visits to Emily in St Andrews during the summer session were cruelly snatched away. And the prospect of a new academic year in which Emily would no longer be her familiar and accustomed companion loomed ahead.

She passed the summer in temporary employment and in the comforting world of literature; but her third year in St Andrews presented a dismal aspect and the October journey south was fraught with trepidation and foreboding.

> I went up grimly to begin my next academic year alone. I took a room by myself. That was an ordeal for me because the whole University had known of our extraordinary friendship, and I knew they would be gossiping. I stuck it out, however; I worked hard; it was really a good thing that I was separated from Emily, for I should not have been able to do so much work in her company.[19]

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[17] Willa Muir. 'A Visit', In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[18] Willa Muir. 'A Visit'. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[19] Willa Muir. 'A Visit'. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Her second year academic results had been unspectacularly mediocre;[20] but she returned to begin her third year with the impetus of loneliness and depression. Her academic record for the session of 1909-10[21] certainly suggests a colossal mustering of energy and intelligence; and she soon reclaimed her position at the top of the humanities classes. The will to prove her ability and her originality to Mam Stobo probably also represented a considerable motivation!

It was a busy year and the frenetic round of academic and social activity was perhaps a means of hiding from the hurt of the immediate past. But it was alternatively perhaps an exultant indulgence in her sudden freedom from Emily's oppressive personality; or a complete absorption and ease in university life and society. The world certainly seemed suddenly open to her; and she entered into its fullness. The rift with Emily - painful and life-shaking although it undoubtedly was - may in retrospect have been the most formative and fortuitous event of her university years.

October 1909 certainly began a period during which her involvement in university life was quite phenomenal. Her name is peppered over the student and official records for her three remaining undergraduate years and her influence is detectable in numerous exploits.

She appears, during her later years in St Andrews, to have been an active member of almost every one of the few societies which the university then boasted. She was a member of the Classical Society; of the Students' Representative Council; of the College Echoes editing committee; of the

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[20] University of St Andrews Calender. 1909-10. In the University Library, St Andrews.
[21] University of St Andrews Calender. 1909-10. In the University Library, St Andrews.

Women Students' Debating Society; and of the Women Students' Suffrage Society. And she was temperamentally incapable of anything less than total and hands-on commitment.

Her involvement with College Echoes apparently began in the autumn of 1909 with the appearance of her first contribution - a poem entitled 'Shadows' and attributed to Pax (Willa's pen-name). Numerous poetic offerings of variable quality and eclectic substance followed and there were few editions of the fortnightly newspaper during the academic year 1909-10 which did not carry at least one of Willa's creative efforts. Her contributions were so abundant that the editing committee actually recorded its gratitude to Miss Minnie Anderson for her creative fertility during that session in its Annual report.

She was elected to serve on the six-strong editing committee in the following year, and she thereafter contributed less obviously and specifically to the newspaper's pages. She apparently enjoyed the editorial and social perks of the job and served two years on the committee. College Echoes was a lively and competently produced newspaper with an attractive mix of creative writing, society and sport reports, university news and gossip and student opinions and grievances. A.S. Neill meanwhile edited the equivalent Edinburgh University student publication with a panache which was greatly admired by his St Andrews counterparts. 'A.S. Neill was the man who came nearest our conception of an Editor. A democrat, a cynic, a fearless, straightforward journalist. . . . Neill's cynicism is undoubtedly the result of his fight with the world. But there is much of the poet in him. He has made one mistake in life; he should have come to St Andrews. He has all these qualities which would have been best developed in our city of romance and poetry and Dame Echoes could never have wished for a better lover.'[22] These qualities - which later sustained his commitment to his educational ventures at Summerhill - also endeared him to a strong-minded and courageous Willa. The friendship which they forged during those student days endured until Willa's death.

Courage, energy and conviction were not optional qualities for those involved in the editing of a student newspaper. College Echoes was a powerful organism of influence which both reflected and formed the opinions and the attitudes of the student body. The editorial column offered consistently outspoken, aggressive and strongly worded assessments of university life and politics: educational, social and moral dilemmas were all grist to the editor's mill.

It was an invigorating and incendiary forum for debate; and Willa revelled in it. She was never frightened by controversy and was famed for her disputatious and skilful defence of even the most radical views and opinions: she now found time and space to experiment with embryonic ideas and ideologies; to discuss and to debate; and to address the various contentious issues of contemporary life and society. Many of these issues focussed upon the status and rôles of women in the modern world.

The battle for sexual quality was Willa's most ardently pursued crusade. Her childish hatred of sexual discrimination still informed her battle against the prejudice which she now encountered in St Andrews; but a certain amusement co-existed with her anger.

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[22] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 9th February 1912. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

> As a schoolgirl I shrugged my shoulders at the gap between the self I knew and the female stereotyping expected of me, but when I moved to the university I began to find the discrepancy comic. There was no lack of discrepancies affecting all the women students, not merely myself; the arbitrary conventions made eccentrics of us all.[23]

The university certainly retained an exceedingly ambivalent attitude towards the women to whom it had, as recently as 1892, opened its doors. Many university men were still distinctly unhappy at the intrusion of 'the monstrous regiment' into what had hitherto been a bastion of maleness. The S.R.C. still debated various motions which sought to limit the franchise of women within the university system and which regretted the concessions which had already been made to them. In 1907, 'Mr D J Forbes moved "That the authorities be petitioned to make University Classes which are exclusively medical open to men students only . . . " '[24] In the following year, 'Mr Gibson moved "That the S.R.C. petition the authorities to limit the number of female matriculated students at St Andrews University."'[25] And at the Inter-University Conference in Aberdeen it was considered to be 'advisable that a separate college or University for women students only be founded.'[26] The admission of women as fully matriculated degree students had obviously not ended the fight for equality. The uphill struggle for recognition and respect continued.

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[23] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968.
[24] University of St Andrews SRC Minutes 1892-1909. (17th December 1907). University of St Andrews Muniments Collection. University Library, St Andrews.
[25] University of St Andrews SRC Minutes 1892-1909. (25th November 1908). University of St Andrews Muniments Collection. University Library, St Andrews.
[26] University of St Andrews SRC Minutes 1892-1909. (16th December 1908). University of St Andrews Muniments Collection. University Library, St Andrews.

The age-old prejudices and misconceptions apparently remained firmly ensconced amongst the student body: even women students were often loathe to challenge them. It was an issue which aroused strong feeling and much debate; and the editorials in College Echoes often devoted reams of column space to a discussion of the effects and the repercussions of the admission of women to the university. An article which appeared in February 1909 eloquently describes and illustrates the atmosphere and attitudes in the university at the time.

> Some people have got it into their heads that St Andrews is going to the dogs, and that this unhappy state of things is solely due to the presence of the women-students and no argument suffices to get this theory out of their heads again. 'Shut all the women-students up in hostels', they cry; 'only let them out for an occasional dance or conversazione, and we shall be graciously pleased to allow their presence, but anything rather than the present state of things!'
>
> When one tries to get definite arguments, definite facts which condemn the existing state of things, it seems that one is contending with airy phantoms. One student cannot work in a class in which there are women; another sighs for the days of the gaudeamus and the 'true St Andrews spirit', and curses the conversazione which has driven it out; while another complains that now-a-days a college magazine must contain nothing which a lady cannot read. These arguments do not take us very far; against the student who cannot work in a class where there are women we may put the man who works hard because he does not like to be beaten by a woman; . . .

But for all that, the objections to the presence of the woman-student are not to be treated with contempt. To us they seem to be entitled to respect, because in some cases they rest on a real feeling, real in proportion to its difficulty of formulation, that in a system such as we have in St Andrews there is a danger of men becoming less manly and women less womenly. With this we may link the fear that the life of the scholar, that hard eager quest which demands the sum of a man's energies will soon vanish from the University. Let us take this last objection first. It is argued that women are naturally not so capable as men, and that kind-hearted examiners have in consequence lowered the pass standard, and so cheapened the degrees. It is said too that women do not really know how to work, they can only 'swot'; in other words, they obtain an unintelligent mastery over the text of a lecture, a knowledge which is far more complete than that of the average man, but is coupled with no insight into the significance of the subject. But it is a matter of general knowledge that the standard of degree examinations has gone up and not down in the last fifteen years. . . .

The common charge that the presence of the women-students brings about an unhealthy crop of sentimentalism we emphatically deny. We think that the surest way to dispel sentimentalism without destroying real respect is to allow men and women to meet each other as if the meeting were quite an ordinary occurence. Any relapse into the ways of monasticism we would utterly condemn; we are going out into a world in which there are as many women as men; and it does steady one up if one has mingled with sensible and refined women while one is still a student. Think, too, how little we do come in contact

> with each other here; four dances, two conversaziones, a few committee meetings, an occasional smile of recognition - that is almost all. Surely men and women have chance enough to develop along their own lines.[27]

The debate about the rights and rôles of women in a modern society was as heated in St Andrews as in the rest of Britain and the issue of gender equality assumed divisive and explosive proportions amongst a vibrant and energetic university population. Almost fanatically extreme views emerged from both sides of the debate and were argued with the intensity which grows out of a profound and emotive sense of an argument's consequential nature.

Nor was the tension confined to within university walls and debating chambers; the town also struggled to contain its sense of unease and division about women's suffrage. The St Andrews Citizen recorded the ongoing battles and clashes of opinions and lent its column space in turn to the respective, warring camp commandants. The town boasted branches of both the Women's Social and Political Union and the Suffrage Society, and each hosted regular meetings and discussion groups. Miss Christabel Pankhurst was the guest speaker at a meeting on November 10th 1910 when a packed Town Hall listened with interest as she illustrated the absolute and unreasonable illogicality of denying women the vote; and defended the law-breaking and property-destroying actions of the militant suffragettes. The Citizen observed - with typically conservative and bewildered parochialism - that 'although a militant suffragette, Miss Pankhurst is not a muscular lady';[28] and noted that, 'she said it gave her great pleasure to address a St Andrews audience, because she had been told there were many anti-suffragists there.'[29] She had been well briefed! The anti-suffragist movement - led by the formidable Lady Griselda Cheape - was a powerful and influential force in the town, and a vocal match for the suffragettes. Lady Griselda routinely organised bazaars in aid of Anti-Suffrage funds; sought out auspicious speakers and chaired huge Anti-Suffrage meetings; and spent long hours writing to the press and defending the sanctity of the British constitution. The Citizen was certainly not loathe to print her letters or to publish articles by other correspondents in praise of the patriarchal status quo. Righteous indignation regularly coloured the pages of the newspaper: there is a wonderful retrospective irony in some of the opinions which the newspaper aired.

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[27] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 19th February 1909. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

[28] The St Andrews Citizen. 5th November 1910. In the University Library, St Andrews.

> [The Suffragettes] plea seems to be grounded on the notion of the equality of the sexes. Once admit that, and every sort of restriction becomes a palpable injustice. If women may be lawyers and physicians, why may they not also be law-givers and members of the Cabinet? Why not have a female Chancellor as keeper of Her Majesty's conscience - a lady speaker of the House of Commons - or a Home Secretary in petticoats? Would it be fair to restrict the career of women to the Bar, and deny them promotion to the Bench? Why are Peeresses in their own right, prevented from sitting and voting in the House of Lords? Is it impossible to find a Dowager who might be Archbishop of Canterbury, or a female representative of Jenny Geddes to officiate as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland?

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[29] The St Andrews Citizen. 5th November 1910. In the University Library, St Andrews.

> [It is clear] that by the common consent of mankind in all ages, certain vocations have been assigned to each of the sexes, as their proper and legitimate sphere of action and utility - and that any attempted readjustment of these could lead to nothing save hopeless error and confusion.[30]

Willa readily entered the fray! She had harboured innate sympathies for the suffragist cause since earliest childhood and she now acted upon her beliefs.

The Women Student's Debating Society provided a forum in which the voice of woman could be heard. It was a milieu in which Willa was singularly at ease and, by the start of the academic year of 1910-11, she had risen up from the ranks, through the committee and into the President's chair! She fronted a lively and dynamic society which apparently met weekly and discussed a variety of issues. She was in the chair that year while the house debated the motions 'that popularity is a sign of intellectual ability', 'that the publication of cheap literature should be discouraged', 'that strong principles conduce to narrow-mindedness' (a motion which Willa herself proposed and carried) and 'that a University training is desirable for women who are not going to take up a profession'.[31]

She also demonstrated her commitment to the woman's movement in a more direct and explicit way during the year of her Debating Society presidency by assuming the vice-presidency of the Women Students Suffrage Society. It was a young society with an ethos of mission and a policy of education. Its first public meeting took place in March 1909 amidst a frenzy of mockery and disparagement from certain members of the university community.

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[30] The St Andrews Citizen. 8th October 1910. In the University Library, St Andrews.
[31] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. Session 1910-11. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

> The behaviour of the young male students at the women students' suffragist meeting in the Volunteer Hall last week called for the "chucking-out" method of obtaining quietness being put into force, but evidently none of the muscular young ladies present felt herself equal to the task. The suffragists must have realised that on some occasions might does have its way. To the bejant, life is a joke that's just begun . . . and when . . . they sometimes fail to treat seriously even the wise utterances of a Principal or a Professor it could scarcely be expected that they would give a reverential hearing to suffragist orators. To subject a body of young male students to a flood of suffragist oratory is like applying a light to powder.[32]

The student suffragists were obviously hurt and disappointed by this lack of respect and support from their male counterparts and a letter from one of their number deplores the actions of 'the worst type of hooligans' at the meeting and bemoans the aggressive opposition of the 'senior men'[33] to the cause. But the suffragists refused to be defeated. Another public meeting - organised jointly by the Scottish University Women's Suffrage Union and the St Andrews University Women's Suffrage Society - was scheduled for the next February and passed off without incident.

The university staff were at best benignly tolerant of the suffragist position and treated its proponents as if they were children with a simple and naïve perception of the world: at worst they were aggressively opposed to the actions and the ideologies of the women's movement. Principal Donaldson apparently subscribed to the benevolently dismissive school of thought.

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[32] The St Andrews Citizen. 13th March 1909. In the University Library, St Andrews.
[33] The St Andrews Citizen. 13th March 1909. In the University Library, St Andrews.

> When I was a student, I remember an occasion when a senior woman , of brilliant gifts and high academic standing, went to our Principal to ask permission for a Women's Suffrage Society in the University. He put a fatherly hand on the austere scholar's shoulder and said, "My dear, are you sure this wouldn't lead to free love?"[34]

Other members of staff were less conciliatory and more confrontational in their attitude towards the suffragists. Professor McIntosh of the Biology Department and Willa's beloved Professor Burnet were both active campaigners and speakers on behalf of the anti- Suffrage movement. When a branch of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League was set up in St Andrews in 1909, Professor Burnet was asked to preside. He claimed in the course of his presentation that he 'had found that the majority of the women in St Andrews were opposed to the political enfranchisement of women. (Dissent by a party of young ladies at the back of the hall.)'[35]

It was a period of anger and activity. St Andrews in the early years of the second decade of the century was suddenly at the centre of the female franchise uproar and was subjected to various acts of militant suffragism. These included arson attacks on the Gatty Marine Laboratory (in which Professor McIntosh worked) and on Leuchars station - although suffragette involvement was never definitely proved in the latter case.[36] It seems unlikely - given her later antipathy to any form of violence or aggression - that Willa would have allied herself in any way with the movement's more militant operations. But it is safe to assume that she was intimately involved with many of the deeds and doings of the St Andrews University Suffrage Society.

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[34] Willa Muir. This Lop-sided World. (pseud Anicula). In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[35] The St Andrews Citizen 6th February 1909. In the University Library, St Andrews
[36] Leah Leneman. The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1991.

Her energy seems to have been endless and she conducted an active social life around her involvement with university societies, organisations and committees. She seems rarely to have missed any of the numerous student activities and events for which St Andrews was renowned; and she routinely and regularly attended dances and dinners, conversaziones and concerts. She also sang and recited at the Women's Scarlet Gown Evening; and joined in the regular student round of tea drinking, chatter and laughter.

But her pursuits were not always entirely innocent! It was a period during which outbreaks of unruly, riotous and vaguely anarchistic behaviour were not uncommon and Willa occasionally found herself mixed up in these episodes and their consequences. Discipline problems periodically disrupted university life; and high spirited exuberance occasionally descended - particularly on formal and ceremonial occasions - into a state of dangerous and almost criminal disorder. 'Riots' were a fairly common occurrence at public meetings; and dramatic productions were often interrupted by student intervention. Town and gown events were subjected to noisy and disruptive behaviour from student participants and audiences. Sir James Donaldson, during his opening address for the session 1910-11, had to fight to be heard over the accompanying bedlam and chaos.

> The male students carried through their usual musical and acrobatic performances before the procession of Principal and

> Professors entered. The bejants were laid hold of as they entered, and then tossed about over the heads of the mass of students at the back of the hall. Although some of the bejants looked like having their entrance to University life marked by being pitched through some of the paintings of the distinguished fathers of the University that are hung on the walls, happily no such catastrophe occurred.[37]

Another perennial problem was the 'ragging' which made victims out of the weaker members of the university community. The description in Imagined Corners of Ned's descent into mental breakdown after being made the butt of rugby club barbarity, is an agonising illustration of the dangers and the potential consequences of this victimisation. Willa's brother Willie (whose university career in St Andrews began in the autumn of 1911 and was never completed) seems to have been the model upon whom Ned was based.

Willa always objected vehemently to the tradition of 'ragging' and sought to oppose it; but other transgressions and misdemeanours *do* bear her name and influence. The most serious of these (and one which became a major disciplinary matter in the university) involved damage to university property. The Library Committee Minutes for 1910 record an ongoing saga of vandalism and theft.

> The Librarian was also requested to draw the attention of the Students Representative Council to the continued abuse of library privileges by a number of students - partly by disfiguring the

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[37] The St Andrews Citizen. 8th October 1910. In the University Library, St Andrews.

> Library furniture, and partly by the removal of books of reference from the open shelves, either temporarily or permanently.[38]

The Librarian was instructed to examine the unofficial decorations on the Library furniture and fittings and to attempt to identify the culprits. He returned to the committee with a report claiming that forty-five student names adorned desks and window sills - and that 'Wilhelmina Anderson' appeared a total of seven times! She was summoned before the Committee and ordered to write a letter of apology to the Principal for her involvement in the sorry affair. She did so with considerable eloquence and sincerity - and the incident was relegated to the library archives.

But Willa was more usually in great favour with the university authorities. Her academic record endeared her to Principal and professors alike, and she gathered an increasing collection of honours and laurels. She graduated with first class honours in Greek and Humanities in June 1910, and returned in the autumn to read English Language and Literature and Modern History - in all of which she achieved first rank passes. She was also awarded a special essay prize and the Class Medal for her performance in the English Literature class. It was a remarkable performance and she was consequently offered the Berry Scholarship - 'the highest honour attainable'[39] - in order that she might be given the opportunity to continue her studies for a further year. So she returned to St Andrews and her old student haunts and pursuits. And this time she had the vulnerable and unbalanced Willie in tow.

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[38] University of St Andrews Library Committee Minutes 1889-1924. 25th February 1910. In the University of St Andrews Muniments Collection. University Library, St Andrews.
[39] Sir James Donaldson in a letter of reference for Minnie Anderson. St Andrews, 18th June 1914. In the Willa Muir Archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

College Echoes was delighted at this success by one of its luminaries. It chose to celebrate Willa's achievement by printing a poem - apparently inspired by a comment made by her bunklady in the aftermath of the Berry Scholarship announcement - in her honour.

> "Since you got that scholarship, they've been making quite a lioness of you."
>
> - Her Bunklady.

A lioness! O fearful name
For her! Can anybody guess
How she of whom we sing became
A lioness?

It is not in her face, her dress,
Her manner (absolutely tame),
Her temper, or her wantonness.

Alas, the fickleness of Fame!
That laurel berries, meant to bless,
Should make this Pax Vobiscum dame
A lioness![40]

She was restored to her old position on the College Echoes editing committee and continued to grace the newspaper's pages with her poetic contributions. She also returned to the chair of the Women Students Debating Society and, when she wasn't actually presiding over the proceedings, she was honing her debating skills to a level of quite devastating and terrifying efficiency. One particular motion against which she argued during the 1911-12 session, was that it would be of 'greater benefit to humanity if insane people rather than criminals were destroyed'. Her humane and thoughtful defence assumes a poignant and personal significance in the light of later events.

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[40] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 18th October 1911. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

> Miss Anderson, in moving the counter-motion, pointed out that the law which destroys criminals is rightly founded on a high valuation of human life. Also criminals must necessarily lower the moral tone of the country because of their deliberate degeneracy, while the insane exert no such evil influence, but rather evoke pity, being blameless. If there were a wholesale destruction of the insane we would run the risk of destroying intellectual progress, for all genius is akin to madness.[41]

But she also explored new avenues and experiences during that extra student year and was instrumental in instituting a university Fabian Society at whose inaugural gathering she spoke at the end of January 1912.

> Socialism was a psychological attitude of the mind to the eternal problem of the balance between the Individual and the State. Socialism is Individualism clothed in its right mind. She then dealt with the question of the unemployed and maintained that the present plutocracy was ruining the country. Every man must have an equal opportunity, which certainly is not the case today.[42]

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[41] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 17th November 1911. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

[42] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 23rd February 1912. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

It was one of the few occasions on which she formally implicated herself in political partisanship and in adherence to an '-ism' of any persuasion or colour.

When she wasn't editing, debating or politicking, she was engaged in the academic study for which the scholarship was intended. She enrolled in the English Literature Honours Class and was soon absorbed, with the intensity and concentration for which she was famous, in the varied and eclectic works on the course syllabus. Professor Lawson placed an emphasis on the theory and history of language and literature and insisted that his students should have a good understanding of 'I. Literary Theory, Hegel's Aesthetics, in so far as it deals with Poetry. . . . III. Textual Criticism. IV. The Debt of English Literature to other literatures, with detailed study of the debt to French literature in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries.'[43]

But his students also studied classical texts and eminent authors. Honours students delved into the English Bible (Authorised Version) or The Spectator and into the works of Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, Spenser, the pre-Romantics and the Romantics, Burns, Johnson, Scott, Tennyson, Browning - and many more. The students were expected to have an intimate familiarity with these numerous texts and were examined primarily on their capacity for detailed and contextualised referencing and copious quotation. Finals were an inspection of knowledge and memory and demanded little in the way of critical analysis or imaginative and innovative thinking. Willa loved the literature and always viewed that extra student year as a gift for which she was grateful. She also established her overwhelming academic entitlement to the opportunities which the scholarship offered when she achieved a first rank pass in the final Honours examination and won the English Literature class medal.

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[43] University of St Andrews Calendar. 1912-13. In the University Library, St Andrews.

A certain non-academic enticement had also made a fifth year in St Andrews a particularly attractive proposition. 'At the age of twenty I had fallen blissfully in love with a medical student, a famous player in my university's Rugby team, and got engaged to him, a glamorous man not unlike Jane Austen's Henry Crawford, with 'countenance' and 'address', a lively eye and an impressively broad chest.'[44] This rugby playing Adonis - who went by the somewhat unlikely name of Cecil Wilmot Morrison - asked Willa to marry him shortly after she had won the Berry Scholarship. She accepted. He proabably seemed like a very eligible suitor; and he certainly managed to sweep her off her douce and sensible feet. He was handsome, charming and adored by most of the female student population. But he was also a well known figure about town. A 1913 edition of College Echoes included him in a series of poetic lambastes.

> Here is a man with a past that will last,
> With a present whose presence annoys him,
> With a future whose horoscope no man'll cast,
> And a flowing moustache that o'erjoys him.[45]

Cecil - if the editing committee's cryptic character analysis is to be trusted - was a rather enigmatic character with a reputation for romantic exploits.

He was a native St Andrean, but had spent much of his childhood in Dunedin, New Zealand where his father, Edward Ellice Morrison, had played rugby for the national side. The death of Edward's father and the appeal of a fairly considerable property inheritance had probably precipitated the family's return to Britain. When Cecil began his medical studies at the university in 1903, the Morrisons' were certainly resident *en massse* in the family house at Stravithie in northern Fife.

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[44] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p12)
[45] College Echoes. University of St Andrews Student Newspaper. 1912-13. In the University Library archives, St Andrews.

His university education was an extended and chequered affair. He gathered an unimpressive handful of passes in various medical science subjects between 1903 and 1906 and then disappeared entirely from the university records for a period of five years. He resumed his studies in 1911 and struggled doggedly through the remainder of the degree requirements before finally qualifying in 1916. He was then made a captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps and was dispatched abroad in the service of King and country.

But the sunshine of present happiness in 1912 forbad any prophetic speculation about this potentially cloud-dimmed future. Willa existed in an exuberance of love and refused to entertain any doubts about the solidity of her relationship. Her life now centred around her 'Rugby champion'[46] and she even turned down the chance of a research scholarship in Rome which Professors Burnet and Lindsay offered to secure for her. 'In the ecstacy of first love I could not be so widely separated from my sweetheart.'[47] The relationship was tinctured at that early stage with all of the delicious sweetness of ardour; a sweetness which her memory retained. She even wrote in a 1947 journal that she had 'dreamed two nights ago about Cecil! Profile from Roman Soldier in Puck of Pook's Hill: general feeling of peaceful harmony. Apparently my Id still remembers.'[48]

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[46] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p26)
[47] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p26)
[48] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. November 1946-June 1947. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The bliss of love and the vision of future married happiness intensified her dread of leaving St Andrews at the end of the academic session. Only the necessity of finding work could drive her away from Cecil and her alma mater. But the undergraduate idyll had to end: it was time to move on.

In the autumn of 1912 she therefore took up the position of Classics Mistress at Brancepeth Rectory Home School in County Durham. It was a small and privately owned school which the wife of the parish rector had founded with the intention of turning her three teenage daughters into young ladies of consequence. The Reverend Frederick Glyn was a much-loved priest whose kindness, grace and dignified good looks had won him many admirers and loyal followers during his forty year ministry in the affluent and elegant parish of Brancepeth. The Rectory itself was an immense and sprawling building which looked out over countryside sprinkled with the numerous aristocratic residences and stately homes in which the charming and refined rector of Brancepeth could command a welcome. He was gifted with an equal ease in the villagers' cottages.

Mrs Glyn was as arrogant, haughty and viciously supercilious as he was pleasant, friendly and good-humoured. She was universally feared; and she made no secret of her rabid hatred for the parish's less polished characters. It was perhaps the desire to safeguard her beautiful and accomplished daughters from these 'village urchins' which had motivated the foundation of the Brancepeth Rectory Home School and the recruitment of various genteel and well-bred young lady pupils as day-girls and as boarders. It was not an establishment with a happy reputation: the people of Brancepeth were outraged, fascinated and openly critical of the manner in which Mrs Glyn treated her students and of the standard of food and accommodation which she offered.[49]

Academic standards were nevertheless reputed to be high and Mrs Glyn was apparently energetic and rigorous in her quest for an intellectually and morally excellent teaching staff. Willa apparently fulfilled these demanding prerequisites and criteria, and she joined the household in Brancepeth Rectory at the beginning of the 1912 Christmas term.

None of Willa's papers or journals make any mention of the two years which she spent in Brancepeth. It was probably not an easy environment in which to live and work; Mrs Glyn evidently created an atmosphere of oppressive and claustrophobic tension, and presided with matriarchal authoritarianism over her little empire. The kindness and warmth of FrederickGlyn perhaps served as a partial antidote to the harshness and arrogance of his wife; but Willa presumably felt isolated and probably yearned for Cecil and for the intimate community life which she had enjoyed in St Andrews.

The remnants of that old St Andrews life began to sour as Cecil luxuriated in a series of romantic dalliances and infidelities; and confessed them to her in painful detail.[50] She initially restrained her doubts and hurt; but it was increasingly difficult to ignore the validity of her mother's misgivings. She nevertheless hoped that the long vacation would afford them time and space in which to resurrect their shattered love.

But only heartache and broken dreams came out of the summer of 1913. Willa went home to Montrose in July for a much-needed holiday; to muster ideas and energy for the new academic session; and to attempt a reconciliation with Cecil. It was a tense and trying time in the cramped house at 81 High Street and the couple could apply only sticking plasters to the wounds in their relationship.

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[49] I am grateful to Canon Alan Nugent of the Diocese of Durham for his most generous assistance in this matter.
[50] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p12)

Anguish and anxiety seemed to dominate Anderson family life that summer and Cecil was not its only cause. Willie returned home from an army cadet camp at the end of August and immediately exploded into a frightening frenzy of violent depression which became increasingly dangerous and unmanageable. Mrs Anderson struggled to contain his wrathful neurosis but was eventually forced to admit that she could no longer cope with his delusions, hallucinations and anger: she reluctantly authorised his admission to the James Murray Royal Asylum in Perth. It must have been an agonising decision; but she was at least spared the distress of travelling with him to the large, dark and dismal institution in which he was imprisoned for the next four months.

That nightmarish journey - and the ultimate hell of being forced to abandon Willie to an environment which was obviously anathema to his sensitive and vulnerable nature - was entrusted to Willa and Cecil. Willa never escaped from the tragedy which took place that day; and Imagined Corners resounds with the bitterness and pain of the relative who can only watch as a loved one succumbs to the underworld of delusions, neurosis and clinical insanity.

> The stillness, although it enfolded Sarah, began to oppress her. She did not now need to stretch her ears listening for Ned. Ned had been carried out to the ambulance like a dead log, and she it was who had doctored his food for him. . . . Where would they all have been without her?

> Sarah's lower lip trembled and she began to smooth her black skirt over her knees. Ay, she had always had the heavy end of the stick. And in spite of all she had done it was her that Ned blamed and would go on blaming: 'My *sister* turns them on to me.' Not a word to William.[51]

The resonances and resemblances between this fictional representation of the violent delusional insanity and the actual facts of Willie's mental instability are irrefutable. And pain, in both cases, is the overwhelming keynote. Willa must have been profoundly hurt by the deluge of anger and resentment which Willie probably poured out upon her: she almost certainly blamed herself for the indignities which Willie suffered in the asylums in which he was destined to be a patient.

The stigma and treatment of 'madness' in 1912 hadn't developed far beyond the days of the Victorian 'madhouse'. The mentally or emotionally imbalanced were feared and rejected; and the primary function of mental hospitals was to keep these individuals out of the community. Psychiatric expertise was, moreover, virtually non-existent. The concern and sympathy of the medical staff at the James Murray Royal Asylum is unquestionable; but they were unable to provide any real course of therapy or medication for Willie's mental condition.

His casenotes describe a profoundly distressed and unhappy character, who oscillated between violent, destructive anger and silent, listless depression. He often shouted for the police, threatened suicide and tried to force his way out of the hospital through the window; his nights were noisy and restless. He also refused to eat and became gradually thinner and more emaciated until he was eventually forcefed by tube at the beginning of November. But the most distressing symptom of his illness was the daily plague of hallucinations and the delusions of persecution .

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[51] Willa Muir. Imagined Corners. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1987. (p201)

> The said Wm. John Anderson asserts and maintains that people are constantly saying things about him. He says that he hears them, that the remarks made even come in at the window. . .
> Told his mother that he was the illegitimate son of a famous golfer. Used to hear people saying things about him as walked along the street or road.
> His sister confirms these delusions.[52]
> At times he says that the devil talks to him.[53]

There was pathetically little that the doctors could do to help him or to relieve his obvious distress: they prescribed nerve tonic and codliver oil; they asked a great many questions and attempted to construct a theory by which they could elucidate the root cause of Willie's illness. And then they diagnosed his condition as 'delusional insanity' and suggested that the prognosis was 'doubtful'.

The notes do however contain a rather interesting hypothesis about the virtually ubiquitous 'madness' of the Anderson family. Mrs Anderson and Willa are both described as 'neurotic' and other family members are bluntly declared 'insane'. The grounds for these allegation are - sadly - never specified!

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[52] Medical Certificate from Dr Johnston (family doctor in Montrose). In the casenotes of William John Anderson in the James Murray Royal Asylum Patient Records. In James Murray Royal Hospital, Perth.
[53] Medical Certificate from Dr Grant. In the casenotes of William John Anderson in the James Murray Royal Asylum Patient Records. In James Murray Royal Asylum, Perth.

That hideous summer eventually ended - but a mixture of relief and guilt went back with Willa to Brancepeth. Worries and troubles can't be left behind as places can; and her anxieties about Cecil and Willie continued to bother her amidst the distractions of the busy teaching day.

The final and decisive split with Cecil took place during that autumn term 'and cost me much anguish.'[54] She agonised for months over the decision; but acted with her customary exuberant and energetic panache when the die was finally cast. '[T]aking [Cecil's] ring off my finger - a pretty ring of diamonds and sapphires - and saying: 'Watch this!' I threw it into the sea off St Andrews pier where we were standing.'[55]

She was left lastingly hurt and shaken by the whole painful break-down of the relationship and by the violence of the final rift; but she never doubted the rightness of her decision. Elizabeth Shand in Imagined Corners embodies the disastrous and loveless mess from which Willa believed she had extricated herself by mustering her courage and breaking off her relationship with Cecil.

> I thought that even if I could not detach myself from my emotions, I could perhaps use them to present a story in a Montrose setting, imagining what might have happened had I married my Rugby champion and gone to live there, and I suppose, assuring myself what a nightmare that wrong marriage would have turned out to be.[56]

The Cecil question could at least be addressed and resolved: there seemed to be no such simple answer to the problem of Willie's mental condition. He left

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[54] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p24)
[55] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p12)
[56] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p125)

Murrays 'against advice'[57] on the 24th December 1913 to spend a presumably hellish Christmas in Montrose with Willa and the rest of his family. He spent only three days at home before being compulsorily admitted to Sunnyside Royal Hospital in Montrose. He was not eventually 'discharged relieved'[58] until September 1914. It was a prognosis charged with a tragically misplaced optimism. The entire family meanwhile struggled under a huge burden of emotional and financial pressure. Basil and Willa were in paid employment; but hospital costs were considerable and the Andersons' means were fairly limited.

September brought the overdue and tentative promise of a happier and brighter future: Willie's welcome release from hospital was complemented by Willa's glad acceptance of a teaching assistant's post with her old mentor in the Latin department in St Andrews. Brancepeth was now fraught with the unhappy associations of a past from which she was desperate to escape; St Andrews offered the possibility of a new start in a familiar and much loved setting. The 'auld grey toun' was still shrouded in the blissful and remembered glow of her carefree student days.

The world was meanwhile charging inexorably into a period of impenetrable darkness and suffering. No-one could have predicted the carnage which would result from the war which would be 'over by Christmas' and life went on pretty much as usual after the first excitement had subsided. W.M. Lindsay in St Andrews had been forced to sacrifice his male teaching assistants to the war effort, and had therefore sent Willa 'an S.O.S. to come and be an assistant of his, so I turned up in St A. and was there 1914-15.'[59] It was a remarkable and empowering vote of confidence in her abilities as a Classicist and as a teacher; and it was a gesture which deeply influenced the future pattern of Willa's career. The appointment of a woman to a university post was a huge and practical advertisement of Lindsay's faith in the intellectual and academic capacity of women; and an unequivocal confirmation of all that Willa had ever believed about women's commensurate qualities and potentials in a man's world.

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[57] Casenotes of William John Anderson in the James Murray Royal Asylum Patient Records. In James Murray Royal Hospital, Perth.

[58] Casenotes of William John Anderson in the Sunnyside Royal Hospital Patient Records. In Sunnyside Royal Hospital, Montrose.

The post also allowed her the opportunity of establishing an interest in educational practices; and she undertook some research work into Educational Psychology under the supervision of Professor Edgar. It was exciting and intellectually stimulating work which initiated her life-long interest in the theory and the practice of psychology; but it did not mitigate her increasing inability to reconcile her cocooned ivory tower with the wave of carnage and bloodshed which was decimating an entire generation of young men on the fields of France and Belgium. She was keen and ready to leave St Andrews.

Her psychological research had, in any case, now advanced beyond the expertise and the facilities which were available to her in St Andrews; in order to complete the thesis which she now envisaged, she would have to continue her studies elsewhere. At Professor Edgar's instigation, she therefore applied to The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and was awarded a grant for research into:

(1) Mental association in children.

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[59] Willa Muir in a letter to Anna J Mill. 26th January 1963. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

(2) The diurnal rhythm of energy for children.

(3) Development of appreciation of morals in fables.

In Columbia University under Professor Ruger, or in Bedford College, London, under Miss Edgehill.[60]

The news of the award arrived at the beginning of July when Willa was at home in Montrose. She briefly debated her choice of establishment; and then wrote to Miss Edgell at Bedford College requesting that she be 'accepted as a research student for the ensuing academic year'.[61] Columbia perhaps seemed intimidatingly distant; and Mrs Anderson was probably horrified at the idea of such distant and alien shores. And Bedford offered the exciting and attractive possibility of working with an illustrious female academic whose specialism coincided entirely with Willa's proposed area of experimental psychology.

Miss Tuke - Bedford College's Principal - subsequently sent Willa a conditional acceptance, an official application form and a demand for references. Both John Herkless, the Principal of the University of St Andrews, and Professor John Edgar willingly acted as her referees; and they submitted assurances of her fitness for postgraduate study and glowing testimonials to her academic and personal qualities.

> She has begun special research on Educational Psychology . . . and I am hopeful that she will in time publish some work of real value. She is a woman of exceptional abilities and wide culture.[62]

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[60] The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. Annual Report. Appendix E. In the Carnegie Trust archive, Dunfermline.

[61] Minnie Anderson in a letter to Miss Edgell. Montrose, 3rd July 1916. In the archives of Royal Holloway College, University of London.

[62] Professor Edgar in a letter to Miss Tuke. St Andrews, 29th September 1916. In the archives of Royal Holloway College, University of London.

Willa's place at Bedford College was emphatically ensured.

She embarked on this new adventure with a renewed and reinforced confidence in her attributes and abilities. She left Scotland in early September with the maturity, balance and self-awareness which the gauche seventeen year old who had started University seven years before had lacked. But the hope and enthusiasm which had taken her to St Andrews carried her onwards to London and allowed her to embrace her future with ardour and eagerness.

CHAPTER III

LONDON: THE WEST END AND THE EAST SIDE. 1916-1919.

London was a vaguely frightening prospect for a young woman from small-town Scotland. She was faced for the first time with the new challenge of unfamiliar and foreign territory. Her ebullience and confidence ensured that she would not be intimidated or defeated by her new environment; but offered her no protection against inevitable nervousness. Independence led her to refuse an offer of accommodation in the College Residence and sent her in search of lodgings elsewhere. By the end of September and the start of the winter term, she was housed, settled and ready to explore and experience London life. To her delight, and in return for her 10/ fees, she was also allocated a little office in the College.

The Bedford College for Women had recently moved from its original cramped York Place quarters into new buildings in Regent's Park. This colossal development had involved the expansion of teaching space, the creation of new residence facilities, and the construction - from the proceeds of an 'ample benefaction'[1] from Lady Tate - of a vastly enlarged library provision. An agreement was also forged with 'King's College by which students of either King's or Bedford may, under certain conditions, be admitted to the use of the Library of the sister College.'[2]

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[1] Margaret J Tuke. A History of Bedford College for Women 1849-1937. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939. (p270)

[2] Margaret J. Tuke. A History of Bedford College for Women 1849-1937. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939. (p270)

The move to Regent's Park had brought another unexpected alteration in the nature of the College life. As the staff and students settled into their new setting, 'it became possible to satisfy the desire of some of us to make Bedford as far as possible a centre in London for the work and interests of women in the widest educational sense. Thus the halls and lecture rooms have been constantly lent to many women's societies for meetings, conferences, social events - the garden offering a special attraction for the latter.'[3]

It was an exciting period of College expansion, innovation and progressive thinking and the administration prided itself on an enlightened commitment to the employment of a predominantly female staff. 'By the time of the move to Regent's Park there had been a gradual move in the direction of senior appointments going to women . . . In 1908 the policy was adopted of making all academic appointments irrespective of sex.'[4] In 1897 the College could boast two women in professorial positions; one of whom was Dr Beatrice Edgell. She dominated the department of Philosophy and Psychology and the Faculty of Arts until her enforced retiral in 1933.

But Willa arrived to an era in which the College was more profoundly altered by the external pressure of a warring world than by the forces of an internal revolution:

> The years of the War were at Bedford College, as elsewhere, years of suspense, of living from term to term, from year to year. Being a College for women, it did not suffer from depletion of students as did those where men were in a majority. The

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[3] Margaret J. Tuke. A History of Bedford College for Women 1849-1937. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939. (p276)

[4] Margaret J. Tuke. A History of Bedford College for Women 1849-1937. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939. (p218-9)

> employment of women in various positions not till then open to them, for which a university training was to be desired, created a new demand for admission to the women's Colleges, and this compensated for the loss in the usual clientele due to the number of girls who now took up war work on leaving school instead of proceeding to the University.[5]

The effect of the war was universally life-shattering. Willa later described it as 'the great shock in my adult life . . . which knocked me to pieces for a time.'[6] Official sources attempted to suppress the dissemination of information from the trenches: but there was an increasing consciousness in Britain of the horror and the enormity of the killing fields. There was no refuge from the host of missing faces which haunted every family in the land. 'I remembered that by the time the casualties of Loos were published in the last war about half of the young men who were students with me had been killed.'[7]

Mrs Ritchie - Willa's 1933 novel - portrays the emotional and psychological wounding which had arisen out of the Great War. Resentment, pain and suffering dominate this novel: it is fraught with powerful depictions of war as a predatory and evil monster which is hellbent on the wholesale destruction of personal relationships, individuality and of the humanising qualities of love, trust and truth. The novel's closing pages include a letter which describes one man's emotional reaction to his experiences in the trenches of war-scarred France.

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[5] Margaret J. Tuke. A History of Bedford College for Women 1849-1937. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939. (p228)

[6] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p20)

[7] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p204)

> 'I'm not J.S.R. anymore. I'm *every soldier*, maybe *every man*.'
>
> Sarah Annie kept that letter under lock and key. But she could not keep it out of her mind, especially whenever she saw a detachment of soldiers marching through the streets to entrain for the Front. The tears would come into her eyes, a hysterical lump would rise in her throat; there went Everyman, marching to his death; there went Everyman, having shed his individuality, his spiritual values, become merely a numbered animal whose vitality and courage were doomed to mechanical extinction. . . . Beneath Sarah Annie Ritchie there stirred the old instinct of Everywoman, the instinct to save something of these men from annihilation, the instinct that had made some nameless girl in London hungry for the soldier who once had been a boy called John Samuel Ritchie. When death came so close individual differentiation ceased to matter, and Sarah Annie, with tears in her eyes, felt her body yearn towards these anonymous soldiers, as if she could not let them die before they had been accepted by her.[8]

The enduringly life-destroying implications of this de-personalised, reductive and nihilistic vision of human existence weave inexorably through the later stages of the novel's narrative and cast a shadow of hopelessness and futility over the future. John Samuel is effectively destroyed by his experience of the brutal reality of war:

> And all his feelings for Betsy Reid had been sentimental bunk. He had only wanted to kiss her and lie with her and he had thought it was love. Love! When you throw a bomb into a man's

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[8] Willa Muir. Mrs Ritchie. London: Martin Secker, 1933. (p309)

> belly and burst it to pieces you didn't stop to think about his feelings and his honour and his immortal soul . . . you just hurled the bomb. And when you went into a girl's belly you shouldn't stop to think about her feelings. . . . What a sentimental fool he had been! . . .
>
> . . . What made it ghastly was the systematic organization of warfare under the banner of Bunk, making chaps fight for Bunk called patriotism or Bunk called God. A man could fight and be reconciled to his enemy and quit fighting; but Bunk could go on fighting for ever and ever, Amen. . . . A man could use his fists, or even a bayonet, a bomb, or a rifle, but Bunk used big guns and tanks and poison-gas. A man could kill his enemy and be quit of him, but Bunk preached immortality and kept alive a mob of vengeful ghosts. . . . A man could live in this world, looking, tasting, listening, enjoying even the cold and the rain, using his hands, his feet, all his members, but Bunk preached heaven and hell and scared him out of his natural enjoyment. . . . [9]

John Samuel eventually sinks beneath the burden of this war-learned wisdom. The falseness and fruitlessness of the life which was revealed to him on the fields of France seems insupportably meaningless and bleak: he eventually hurls himself from a railway bridge into the path of an oncoming train. For the generation which lived and died amidst the slaughter on the killing fields of France there was no escape from the scenes of universal loss and suffering which had been played out before them.

The war dragged on, and it was increasingingly difficult to maintain the semblance of normal daily living on the Home Front. The old moral and social certainties died alongside the soldiers in the trenches and were never resurrected. John Samuel and Sarah Annie from Mrs Ritchie are merely fictional embodiments of the representatively nihilistic voices of a generation from whom innocence was violently and irrevocably stolen.

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[9] Willa Muir. Mrs Ritchie. London: Martin Secker,1933. (p314-5)

> Life was less than cheap; it was thrown away. The religious teaching that the body was the temple of the Holy Ghost could mean little or nothing to those who saw it mutilated and destroyed in millions by Christian nations engaged in war. All moral standards were held for a short moment and irretrievably lost. Little wonder that the old ideas of chastity and self-control in sex were, for many, also lost. . . . The great destroyer of the old ideal of female chastity, as accepted by woman themselves, was here. How and why refuse appeals, backed by the hot beating of your own heart, or what at the moment you thought to be your heart, which were put with such passion and even pathos by a hero here today and gone tomorrow.[10]

And as society's structure shuddered and fell, London also exploded more palpably. The European war crept increasingly into mainland Britain and into the lives of its citizens. German bombing raids over the capital found Britain unprepared and resulted in a considerable loss of life. The 'worst raid of the whole war came on 13 June 1917 when 162 people were killed and 432 injured, and the autumn that followed was so full of menace that Londoners took to the practice of sheltering in the Tubes, while some of those who could afford it moved to the safer locations of Bath or Bournemouth.'[11]

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[10] M A Hamilton. Our Freedom. Quoted in Arthur Marwick. The Deluge. British Society and the First World War. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1965. (p108)

[11] Arthur Marwick. The Deluge. British Society and the First World War. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1965. (p195)

The munitions factories also took their toll of life and health. 'Deaths from poisoning were not uncommon among those handling explosives, and there were occasional explosions, the worst being that of January 1917 in a munitions factory at Silvertown in east London, which resulted in considerable loss of life.'[12]

The entire country was meanwhile beset by the deprivations and inconveniences of food shortages and rationing. Food queues became an inevitable aspect of London life and 'sugar, tea, butter, margarine, lard, dripping, milk, bacon, pork, condensed milk, rice, currants, raisins, spirits, [and] Australian wines'[13] were all in short supply by the end of 1917. 'Over a thousand people waited for margarine at a shop in New Broad Street in the heart of the city, and in Walworth Road, in the south-eastern side of London the queue was estimated to number about 3,000. Two hours later 1,000 of these were sent away unsupplied.'[14]

London occasionally seemed unbearably suffocating and depressing during these bleak mid-war days. Willa generally returned to St Andrews during College vacations in order to recharge her weary and overwrought batteries and to indulge in the activities which had filled her student days. She spent a couple of weeks in the spring of 1917:

> getting brown and fat: perhaps you [Sylvia Lehfeldt] won't recognise it when you see it as your Bunty.

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[12] Arthur Marwick. The Deluge. British Society and the First World War. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1965. (p198)

[13] Arthur Marwick. The Deluge. British Society and the First World War. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1965. (p195)

[14] The Times. 17th December 1917. Quoted in Arthur Marwick. The Deluge. British Society and the First World War. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1965. (p195)

> I have been enjoying myself much as usual in St A. An old chum of mine, with whom I bunked 8 years ago & have scarcely seen since, came up to bunk with me again, & has just gone home to Glasgow. She brought with her a diary of our 2 years - bejant and semi - (i.e. 1st, 2nd) whch we had together from Oct 1907 till June 1909. Some diary. . . .
>
> [I have] run along the tops of dykes and never been to church and swotted in the library & nearly written an essay on Prayer, not to mention 3 other essays for Prof Adams. . . .
>
> Why don't you write an essay on Prayer yourself? Mine is strong in theory, but sadly to seek in practical examples.[15]

Willa received confirmation from The Carnegie Trust in the summer of 1917 that her scholarship was to be extended for a further year. Her field of research during the previous year had gradually narrowed and had focussed increasingly on a specific area of experimental child psychology involving an 'Analysis of the problems raised by sex in education.'[16] Her interest in the subject was enduring and some of her later writings present a fictional portrayal of the issues which her research addressed. She assumes this psychologist's mantle for an exploration of the complexities of a child's mind in Mrs Ritchie.

> In the emotional bewilderment of childhood a sense of persecution can easily arise, and to be like other children, to be doing the same thing as other children is a magic that lulls one

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[15] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. London, 29th April 1917. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[16] The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. Annual Report 1916. Appendix E. In the Carnegie Trust archive, Dunfermline.

> into security and keeps off the nightmare of isolation. But the separate dream persists.
>
> . . . The separate dream can persist until the sense of isolation becomes acute and one child after another sees itself in fantasy detached from its family, from its playmates, as a changeling or a martyr, and from this forlorn position begins to reach blindly for support. Many children at this time attain the highest pitch of imaginative passion, for the gathering force of puberty has not yet drawn them into the middle of the stream, and it is in the middle of the stream that dreams can be lost for ever in some inaccessible part of oneself.[17]

Willa's second year at Bedford College was fragmented by external pressures. No-one was exempted from the impact and effect of the war; desperate times often demanded desperate measures. Women were now employed in spheres of activity and influence which would have been unthinkable prior to the outbreak of war; the force of necessity seemed set to achieve the objectives which had remained unrealised through hard years of suffragist activity.

Willa began war work in September 1917 at the desperately understaffed Board of Agriculture and her academic pursuits were increasingly constricted into sparse spare hours. The College granted her the continued use of her little office in exchange for the payment of her research fees; and during long dark evenings and short weekends, she struggled to assemble the residue of her thesis.[18]

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[17] Willa Muir. Mrs Ritchie. London: Martin Secker, 1933. (p17)

[18] Minnie Anderson in a letter to Miss Haydon. London, 5th October 1917, In the archives of Royal Holloway College, University of London.

But there were still bright times and amusing people amidst the gloom of a war-time world. London continued to offer entertainment and pleasant society and Willa was characteristically loathe to forego any prospect of fun. Sylvia Lehfeldt - a fellow Bedford College student - was often a co-conspirator in the pursuit of amusement, and they shared many hours of conversation, laughter and mutual confidences. The quirky and familiar warmth of the friendship is illustrated in a scribbled note which Willa wrote to Sylvia in October 1917.

> I, Wilhemina, falsely called the son of Anders (being, indeed, his daughter) do by these presents send GREETING.
>
> Whereas
>
> I have been asked out to luncheon & to tea & must therefore now depart.
>
> And whereas
>
> I am also going to a lecture after tea.
>
> Now
>
> I do hereby declare that I won't be back here until tomorrow.[19]

And time still had to be found for the demands of an embryonic thesis amidst this minor social whirl. It seems unlikely that the work ever actually reached completion: Willa was unusually reticent about the two years which she spent at Bedford. Belonging provides only a cursory and inaccurate reference to the period and her other autobiographical writings resolutely ignore this particular chapter of her life. It was possibly a less-than-happy experience and one which Willa elected to forget. She never felt the sense of 'belonging' to Bedford which she felt so intensely in other periods and places of her life. A letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt - dated towards the end of her first year in London - attempts to account for this unease. 'I can tell you what it is about Bed. Coll. that doesn't agree with me - it is too ladylike! However, I will try to be l.l. while within its respectable portals.'[20]

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[19] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. London, 23rd October 1917. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

She perhaps also consciously decided to bury the details of an academic venture which she uncharacteristically failed to complete. There is certainly no mention of the thesis in the archive records of Bedford College (now a part of Royal Holloway and Bedford New College at the University of London).[21] And yet Willa's later employment as a lecturer in psychology at a teacher training college implies a measure of academic standing and some formally certificated competence. We know only that Willa had relinquished her little office by the end of May 1918 and had settled all of her final accounts at Bedford College - with the exception of one unreturned library book![22]

September 1918 offered the prospect and the challenges of an appointment to the position of lecturer and Vice-Principal at Gypsy Hill Teacher Training College. But it also demanded the regretful conclusion of her involvement in a venture which was very dear to her heart and which had consumed much of her time and energy during the previous year. It was a commitment centred upon a community in East London and on the vision of an organisation called The University and Social Settlement Movement.

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[20] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. St Andrews, 29th April 1917. In the Lehfeldt archives in the University Library, St Andrews.

[21] I am grateful to Sophie Badham, archivist at Royal Holloway, for her endless patience and assistance with my research into this period of Willa Muir's life.

[22] The librarian at Bedford College in a letter to Miss Tuke. Bedford College, London, 18th July 1918. In the archives of Royal Holloway College, University of London.

Arnold Toynbee was the father of the Settlement Movement in Britain and had opened the first Settlement at Toynbee Hall in East London in 1885. The aim of the Movement was to bring young graduate men (and - later - women) into communion and community with the peoples of Britain's most squalid urban deserts. It sought to undermine the socially divisive mentality of Victorian philanthropy; and to provide active and practical support instead of the traditionally passive and patronising conscience-soothing alms-giving.

> Drop in a coin, and the duty to a neighbour was done. But duty so done proved often more harmful than helpful. A society acting by rules sometimes patched "hearts which were breaking with handfuls of coals and rice." The best-devised mechanism can have neither eyes nor feeling. It must act blindly, and cannot evoke gratitude.
>
> Thus it came about that a group of men and women at the Universities distrusted machinery for doing good. They were between two duties. On the one side they were bound to be true to themselves and do their own work. On the other side they were bound by other means than by votes and subscriptions to meet the needs of the poor. They welcomed, therefore, the proposal for a settlement where they might live their own lives and also make friends among the poor.[23]

It was a radical, visionary and progressive approach to an age-old problem. It challenged the class structure without advocating revolution; it addressed the issues and effects of poverty and deprivation without resorting to facile and condescending moralising; and it responded to the needs and dreams of human existence without demanding gratitude and servitude in return.

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[23] Canon S.A. Barnett. 'University Settlements' in University and Social Settlements. Ed W. Reason London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

> Toynbee Hall seems to its visitors to be a centre of education, a mission, a centre of social effort. It may be so; but the visitors miss the truth that the place is a club in Whitechapel occupied by men who do citizens' duties in the neighbourhood. The residents are not as a body concerned for education, teetotalism, poor relief, or any special or sectarian object. Each one leads his own life, earns his own living, and does his duty in his own way. Catholic, Churchman, Jew, Dissenter, and Agnostic, they live together and strengthen one another by what each contributes to the common opinion. . . . A few men with their own bread to earn, with their own lives to enjoy, with their own sense of social debt come to live together. No one surrenders what he has found to be good for his own growth; each man pursues his own vocation and keeps the environment of a cultured life. There is no affectation of equality with neighbours by the adoption of mean or dirty habits. There is no appearance of sacrifice. The men live their own lives in Whitechapel instead of in West London, and do - what is required of every citizen - citizen's duties in their own neighbourhood. . . .
>
> . . . A settlement, by bringing into a neighbourhood people whose training makes them sensible to abuses, and whose humanity makes them conscious of other needs, does what machinery as machinery cannot do. It fits supply and demand; it adapts itself to changing circumstances; it yields and goes forward; it follows or guides, according to the moment's need; it turns an organisation which might be a mere machine into a living human

> force. Above all, it brings men into touch with men, and, by making them fuller characters; enriches their work.[24]

It was a vision in which - as a veteran of the Fabian society and a life-long campaigner for social equality - Willa could readily and whole-heartedly share.. She fervently and consistently believed that all men and women were inescapably bound together by their common humanity and that divisions of class were purely artificial and arbitary. The Settlement Movement provided her with the opportunity of living by the ideals of which she dreamed.

> All Settlements, both in England and America, seem to be begun upon one uniform principle. The first object, to which every other is subsidiary, is to make friends with the neighbourhood - to become part of its common life; to associate with the people on equal terms, without either patronage on the one side or subservience on the other; to share in the joys and sorrows, the occupations and amusements of the people; to bring them to regard the members of the Settlements as their friends.[25]

It was a vital and formative period in Willa's life: the time she spent as a resident of Mansfield House in Canning Town fundamentally influenced her sense of self and society. The importance which she attached to the experience is perhaps illustrated by her flawed and exaggerated recollection of the extent of her Mansfield residency. The few precious months which she spent at the Settlement expanded in her memory to a period of two full years over the five decades which elapsed before she recorded a chronology of her early life in a letter to Peter Butter.

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[24] Canon S.A.Barnett 'University Settlements'. In University and Social Settlements. Ed. W. Reason. London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

[25] Will Reason. 'Settlements and Education'. In University and Social Settlements. Ed. W. Reason. London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

Mansfield House was founded in 1890 by the students of Mansfield College, Oxford. 'The distinguishing feature of this Settlement is not so much any one line of activity as an all-round occupation with the different aspects of the life of the poor, social, economic, educational, and religious.'[26] The Settlement worked in close association with the Canning Town Women's Settlement, which boasted a 'medical department, consisting of Medical Mission Dispensary and a hospital for Women and Children.'[27] 'Two days a week, Monday and Friday, are spent at the dispensary in giving free advice to those women and their children who are unable to pay for the services of a doctor. The number attended in this way last year [i.e 1896] was 5584.'[28]

But the work of the Settlement ranged far beyond the simple provision of medical services. Mansfield House members 'have taken a great share in the public life of West Ham, on the Town Council, School Board, and Board of Guardians. It originated the "poor Man's Lawyer," while its Lodging-House for Working-Men is unique among Settlements.'[29] 'Canning Town has a workroom for needlewomen, preference being given to the old and others who cannot easily get work; and this is not very far from being self-supporting.'[30]

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[26] Directory of Settlements. In University and Social Settlements. Ed. W. Reason. London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

[27] Directory of Settlements. In University and Social Settlements. Ed. W. Reason. London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

[28] Appendix B. In University and Social Settlements. Ed. W. Reason. London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

[29] Directory of Settlements. In University and Social Settlements. Ed. W. Reason. London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

[30] Margaret A. Sewell & E.G.Powell. 'Women's Settlements in England'. University and Social Settlements. Ed. W. Reason. London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

Education also featured amongst the activities at Mansfield House, and the residents encouraged their students towards the attainment of various 'certificates in connection with the Society of Arts, London Matriculation, and St John's Ambulance Society, all of which are in their respective ways communally valuable.'[31] Child and adult education and literacy occupied equal time and resources, and lectures on a variety of subjects were offered. Classic artwork was also imported into the community and Mansfield arranged events at which 'some of the finest pictures in England have been exhibited, and the average attendance of 130,000 seems to show that this piece of municipal enterprise is greatly appreciated by the working-classes.'[32]

Willa loved the ethos and the aims of Settlement life and devoted herself whole-heartedly and with characteristic energy to the life and the vision of the community. The accounts and anecdotes in Belonging of the various exploits and adventures in which she participated during her months at Mansfield are unreservedly affectionate and unequivocally positive.

> I told [Edwin] about my factory girls, packers from Bryant and May's and Knight's, whom I used to teach during wartime in the Mansfield House University Settlement, Canning Town. On discovering that none of them had been farther west in London than Aldgate, I had a hilarious afternoon escorting a dozen of them to Westminster, which I described to Edwin. It took me more than half an hour, for instance, to get them off the escalators at Liverpool Street Station, since they had never seen escalators

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[31] Will Reason. 'Settlements and Education'. In University and Social Settlements. Ed. W. Reason. London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

[32] Percy Alden. 'Local Administration'. In University and Social Settlements. Ed. W. Reason. London: Methuen & Co, 1898.

> before and abandoned themselves to the ecstacy of rushing up the Down and down the Up.[33]

It was an exhilaration in which Willa clearly shared. Mansfield House with its novelties and eccentricities provided an invigorating antidote to the academic stuffiness at Bedford College and the constantly suffocating consciousness of war.

The autumn of 1918 heralded colossal changes in Willa's life. She left Mansfield House in September and moved into her accommodation in a student hostel at Gypsy Hill Training College. The start of term promised various substantial challenges and a considerable level of responsibility; but Willa remained typically undaunted. 'Behold - as I said, I would do something funny! I am the Vice-principal of [Gypsy Hill Training College for Teachers of Young Children]: lecturing in English, **Psychology** and education. . . . You'll have a fit when you see me swanking here.'[34] She was excited by the prospect of a return to the classroom and genuinely revelled in the process of encouragement and education. And she could rest assured in the incontestable social value and significance of her work; the College sought - by its commitment to the training and certificating of previously uncertificated primary teachers - to unlock the gates of opportunity.

The ethos of the College was probably not entirely sympathetic to a woman of Willa's character. The Principal (Miss Lillian de Lissa) and the patroness of the College (a wealthy elderly lady by the name of Miss Belle Rennie) sought to maintain traditional and conservative Christian moral standards in their management of the establishment, and were probably aggressively suspicious about the new Vice-Principal's fascination with modern psychological thinking. Willa strode resolutely and confidently forward into the promise of the future as they clung disconsolately to a rapidly fading world.

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[33] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p17-18)
[34] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. London, 4th December 1918. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The optimism of her youth persisted amidst the mayhem of war and focussed on the new potential and possibilities which could be created when peace once more broke out. 'In my club, too, the 1917 Club, there was constant discussion about the psychology of the unconscious. We all believed that a new liberal-minded era was about to dawn.'[35] It was probably a prospect which filled Miss Rennie and the College Principal more with dread and disgust than with delight; regular and considerable tensions probably plagued the senior staffroom at Gypsy Hill during the brief period of Willa's employment. But Willa was generally happy at the College. She was always in her element in a classroom; and she exuded affable and amused affection in the boarding hostel of which she was also in charge.

London now enveloped her in a whirl of social and intellectual excitement. She was surrounded by friends with whom she explored the opportunities and the entertainments of even the war-time metropolis; and she exulted in the cross section of humanity within across London life. A few familiar faces (including A.S. Neill, who was now living in Hampstead and teaching at King Alfred School) also appeared from the past.

But nostalgia occasionally drew her back to the scenes of her childhood and student days. Scotland was home to many of her oldest and closest friends and the prospect of reunion and shared reminiscences still lured her homewards. A visit to the Glasgow home of Emily and Mam Stobo was always included in the itinerary for these northbound trips: the hurt and bitterness of past injustices had faded with the years, and Willa could again enjoy Mam's effervescent and energetic entertaining.

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[35] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 17)

It was at a Stobo dinner party that Willa was first introduced to a young shipping clerk by the name of Edwin Muir. That September evening changed the course of Willa's future life.

Willa resolutely disliked the prospect of this fellow dinner guest of whom Mam was so proud. She had spent the afternoon (at Mam's instigation) in the company of a copy of Edwin's recently published first work; and she was now determined to hate its author.

> We Moderns, it was called, published under the pseudonym Edward Moore. He had written it, she said, on slips of paper hidden among the pages of his ledgers; it was made up of paragraphs and aphorisms which had appeared in the New Age. Aphorisms? Scaffolding for a book rather than a book, I decided. But I began to look through the longer pieces and felt increasing surprise as I read. We Moderns was not only an unusual work to come from a costing-clerk's office, it was not at all what one would have expected from a friend of Mam's.
>
> What Mam asked from life and from the books she read was material that could be turned into amusing stories. She was concerned with appearances, with show business, and cared little for truth. But this book, We Moderns, was written by a young man trying to lift himself by his boot-straps beyond his ledgers into a world he accepted as noble and true, inhabited by figures he thought noble and true, such as Goethe and Ibsen and Nietzsche. 'Edward Moore' seemed an earnest, occasionally

> solemn, young man of a kind that I could have sworn Mam would find boring.
>
> I felt impatient with him myself, here and there, as I read. His extreme admiration for Nietzsche put me off. . . .
>
> I chanced then upon a paragraph entitled: 'Love and Innocence', which moved me unexpectedly . . . Edward Moore insisted: 'Only lovers can generate such wealth of life that it overflows, enriching their friends, their enemies, all the world. To love one is to love all.' This sense of overflowing feeling, was it essentially the same as mine?[36]

She nevertheless resisted both the uncertain charms of the work and the enthusiasm which Mam felt for its author. 'Every now and then with all her force, which was considerable, she pushed at me the suggestion that I might tell Edwin Muir how much I liked his book. I privately determined to say nothing about it unless he did, and even began to stick derogatory labels on him, such as "Nietzschean!" I was not going to add anything to the size of the fish in Mam's net.'[37]

The reality of the first encounter bore no resemblance to the pre-constructed imaginings. An introduction dissolved the resentment and the dislike which had poisoned her expectations of Edwin:

> As I usually did when meeting young men for the first time, I looked at eyes and mouth. I had too often met well-shaped foreheads and clever eyes spoilt by ill-shaped mouths, tight-lipped or foolish, the mouths of men whose intellects had been

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[36] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (pp 12-15)
[37] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 15)

> educated but not their feelings. Edwin Muir's eyes and mouth promised well; his brow was an intellectual's, disproportionately wide and high, very noticeable above the slight, even meagre body, yet his eyes were dreamy-looking, sea-blue, with a hint of distance in them, and his mouth was well-cut, with full, sensitive lips. A little later I noticed that one of his thin shoulders, the left, as if cramped with too much leaning on an elbow, was held stiffly above the level of the other. But when he laughed two blue flashes shot from his eyes and one forgot the cramped shoulder. His voice, too, was pleasantly soft and gentle.[38]

The ensuing evening was unexpectedly enjoyable. 'As usual at Mam's, there were plenty of sallies and pleasantries while we ate one of her favourite casserole dishes.'[39] Willa and Edwin explored the life and language of their common Norse inheritance; and Willa later 'crooned one or two Gaelic songs I had heard Patuffa Kennedy Fraser sing in Tobias Matthay's house. These songs enchanted Edwin, as I could tell. He left shortly afterwards.'[40]

A mind full of wonderings accompanied Willa to London on the following morning. Mam - who was tired and frustrated as a result of a socially unsatisfactory dinner party - irritably urged the departing Willa to write and to offer Edwin the literary compliments which she had neglected during the previous evening's conversation. But Willa 'did not write to him, wary as always when urged by Mam to do something. To my surprise in about six weeks' time he wrote to me, apologizing for what he called a 'career-y' letter, begging me to tell him if I thought he had any chance of finding work in London. . . . I answered the letter warmly.'[41]

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[38] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 15)
[39] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 16)
[40] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 16)

London was meanwhile abuzz with the prospect of incipient peace and an eventual armistice. Peace was finally declared on November 11th 1918 and waves of celebration swept across the nation.

> Extraordinary scenes were witnessed in London on that day. Into the streets crowded masses of people who had left every office empty, every house deserted. They packed motor buses, taxis, private cars, anything that was moving. Military lorries set out upon journeys of their own devising, with picked up loads of astounded and cheering passengers, going nowhere in particular and careless of whither they went.
>
> Crowds of people surrounded Buckingham Palace, and had the King and Queen out on the balcony in the middle of the morning, and fairly mobbed the Royal carriage driving along The Mall in the afternoon. They drifted to and fro hour after hour, increasing as the evening came.
>
> But, despite this spontaneous gaiety, there was more a sense of intense relief than anything else.[42]

Willa wholeheartedly shared in the joy and the excitement of celebration. 'I wrote gaily to Edwin, with cocksure optimism, and we exchanged several letters. In a burst of high spirits over the Armistice I even sent him some doggerel couplets in the Unst dialect.'[43] Britain (and London in particular) exploded into an exuberant and enduring frenzy of rapture: even the economic hardship and social disintegration which followed hard on the heels of the peace treaty failed to subdue the energy and liveliness to which the Armistice had given birth.

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[41] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 16-17)

[42] W.J. Makin. News Chronicle Story of Twenty-Five Years. London: George Newnes Limited, 1935. (p262)

[43] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 16-17)

> The post-war craze for amusement had also come into being. Night clubs, dance-halls, and theatres and restaurants were opening everywhere, and being crowded. All the pent-up emotion of the war years seemed to be let loose in this new freedom, particularly among the young.
>
> Dancing became nothing more or less than a national craze. It was the era of jazz. Morals, too, seemed to have taken on a new freedom after the war, and cigarette smoking women were now to be seen everywhere.[44]

> The unabashed ordering of restaurant meals, the public smoking of cigarettes, the much publicized invasion of the public-houses, made light of by Shadwell as merely a return to the Middle Ages, when public-houses were not only frequented by women but were generally kept by them - these features were all part of the new manners. Most striking of all was the change in women's dress; for, however far politicians were to put the clocks back in other steeples in the years after the war, no-one ever put the lost inches back on the hems of women's skirts.[45]

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[44] W.J. Makin. News Chronicle Story of Twenty-Five Years. London: George Newnes Limited, 1935. (p282)

[45] Arthur Marwick. The Deluge British Society and the First World War. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1965. (p111)

This reckless and carefree London gaiety was a world away from the dour and genteel severity of the Glasgow tearoom into which Edwin ushered Willa in December. 'But the High Tea made an enjoyable meal, for there was no constraint between Edwin and me. During the three months' interval since our first meeting the acquaintance had apparently grown into friendship without our knowing it.'[46] It was a happy evening. The conversation flowed easily and was warmed by a growing mutual confidence. 'Our exchanges became more personal and intimate. Instead of talking things over with an eye on possible London jobs for Edwin, we were now talking ourselves over.'[47] Edwin hesitantly offered her a first glimpse of the deep-rooted pain and suffering which had entered his life at the age of fourteen when he had been severed from his Orkney roots and transplanted into the harsh realities of Glasgow life. Willa - whose early feeling of un-belonging in Montrose had familiarised her with the concept of human displacement - could understand this sense of geographic and historic displacement.

Willa travelled onwards towards Montrose and reflected on Edwin's suffering at the hands of cruel and inexplicable circumstance. Then she turned her thoughts towards her own life of good fortune and happy chance; about 'the great shock in my adult life, the 1914 war, which knocked me to pieces for a time, I did not think at all.'[48] Even the spirit of optimism which had been generated by the restoration of peace couldn't banish the painful memory of wartime loss and suffering.

The sweet taste of peace was in any case increasingly soured by the practical implications and consequences of the war. Endless delays in the demobilising process had spawned an ugly mood of resentment and frustration which was exacerbated by the discharged soldiers' inevitable sense of alienation from civilian life. Tensions also arose from women's unwillingness to renounce the freedom of their wartime occupations and to restore their jobs to the millions of men who were fresh from the trenches. The issue of labour became increasingly fraught and 'unemployment had topped a million'[49] by March 1919; 'many hardships, real and imagined, combined to make 1919 a year of strikes.'[50] A chaos of disenchantment and discontent mocked the concept of a 'land fit for heroes'.

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[46] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p17)
[47] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p18)
[48] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p20)

Willa was meanwhile distracted by concerns unrelated to the fragile and disparate state of the nation. She and Edwin had 'arranged to meet again at Easter. A member of the Glasgow Guilds group, a fellow-student of mine at St Andrews, was planning to give an Easter dance and meant to invite me. Edwin was to be invited too, and we looked forward to seeing each other there.'[51]

She arrived at Dora Anderson's house on the day of the dance - and discovered that the whole Glasgow Guilds group was abuzz with concern for Edwin's safety. Dora agitatedly explained that he was in grave and unconscious danger of being 'swallowed alive by Mam'[52] and that he required immediate rescue. Willa was sceptically amused and she suggested that Edwin was quite well able to look after himself; but she 'betted Dora the usual bob that I could detach Edwin Muir from Mam.'[53] By the evening's end she had won her bet. A love-struck trance enfolded Edwin and Willa as they danced waltz after waltz together; and on a park bench in the early hours of the following morning, 'the strength of our feeling for each other swept us right out of ourselves beyond consciousness.'[54] It was the beginning of a love affair which lasted a lifetime.

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[49] W.J. Makin. News Chronicle Story of Twenty-Five Years. London: George Newnes Limited, 1935. (p283)
[50] Arthur Marwick. The Deluge British Society and the First World War. London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1965. (p272)
[51] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (pp 19-20)
[52] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p21)
[53] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p22)

Willa sojourned in Montrose; and then joined Edwin and 'a party of my cousins and some friends in a long weekend at a St Andrews hotel'[55] where their love was confirmed over four brief and blissful days. Then Edwin panicked. He suddenly felt that his autonomy was under threat and that a final bid for freedom was required. He launched a desperate attack on the relationship - but to no avail. The time for hesitation was long past and an inexorable force (Willa!) was apparently leading them onwards into a shared future.

> In defending his threatened individual self, he said, he had developed . . a technique to keep under control his susceptibility to girls. When one of his 'affairs' had gone on long enough for him to feel his independence encroached on he got a last-ditch feeling that enabled him to say: 'You know, this isn't going to do.' If the girl wept . . . he wept too but his will to stop the affair remained inflexible. In a moment of panic he had tried the same technique on me, but instead of weeping or arguing I *laughed* . . . . And suddenly he felt how ridiculous he was with his willpower and his precious personality, and he could not help laughing too.
>
> Edwin's power of detaching himself from emotional experience was clearly much greater than mine; whenever he felt his deeper feelings in danger of coming up he could shut a door on them at

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[54] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p23)
[55] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p23)

> once. I might have recognised this repression of feeling as a danger signal, but being head over ears in love I did not.
>
> That evening, our last, Edwin proposed that we should spend the weekend in London together when he came up at Whitsun for the National Guilds League conference. To my own great surprise I felt myself unwilling and found myself arguing that if we had any children I shouldn't like them to be bastards.
>
> Then and there it was decided that we should get married at Whitsun. I say 'it was decided' because I cannot now tell which of us first brought out the word 'marry'.[56]

The reckless spontaneity of the decision appalled their friends and family. Six months of casual friendship and a week of starry-eyed romance were improbable foundations for the construction of an enduring and contented marriage. 'It was . . . unlikely that having met we should get married less than a year later and most unlikely of all that our marriage should last. Edwin's Glasgow friends, who thought they knew him, prophesied that it would not last six months; my friends in London who thought they knew me, were of the same opinion.'[57] Willa's mother 'ignored my announcement about marrying Edwin, having probably acquired a habit of discounting anything I said. I had to write again and insist that I was really going to get married.'[58]

Many of her friends were greeted with the news of the engagement before they were aware of the courtship. Willa told Sylvia Lehfeldt in May that:

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[56] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (pp24-25)
[57] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p11)
[58] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p27)

> If I can possibly turn up I will. But I am very busy - as I'm going to be married on June the 7th. Now, hold up, & don't faint. . . .
>
> I am, of course, flourishing & I don't mean to cease work here. Have taken on a three year lease on half a maisonette at no.13 Guilford Street. Bow wow!
>
> The man is one who writes, especially to the New Age, as Edward Moore but that is only swank for his name is Edwin Muir.[59]

The notes of scepticism and disbelief which wafted through her world from various sources failed to disrupt the blissful harmony in Willa's heart. She was serenely confident that their adherence to True Love would enable them to surmount any obstacle - and she resolutely refused to question her judgement or to contemplate an earlier occasion on which she had catastrophically confused infatuation for love. Problems and practicalities were flung nonchalantly to chance, and future exigencies were swallowed up by present emotions. The quiet voice of reason was sacrificed completely to the spirit of insane optimism; and to a reckless faith in the power of love. There was no time to spare a thought for the world beyond the wedding.

> What was to happen after that we did not bother about. Our whole lives were to be spent together and ways and means would doubtless discover themselves.
>
> We were indeed naïve creatures. As a basis for living, to feel that one Belongs to the Universe can prove misleading, especially if one takes for granted, as I then did, that the run of the Universe corresponds to one's own needs and aspirations. As a subjective

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[59] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. London, May 1919. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> experience Belonging to the Universe feels natural and right, but once it is framed as an intellectual concept it may begin to look absurd. I did not frame it as an intellectual concept; to me it seemed natural and right. My love for Edwin and his for me Belonged to the Universe and so things were bound to work out well. Naïve as it was, this assumption of mine was sustaining.[60]

This imperturbable tranquillity and assurance was less evident in Edwin's troubled mind. His life had hitherto been ruled by caution and reticence; he was startled and unnerved by this sudden wave of impetuous and transforming emotion. One decisive action now seemed set to rob him of his certainties and to catapult him into an unknown world. His innate fear of unguarded love was compounded by these unforeseen and terrifying practical consequences.

The years of his adolescence and early adulthood had been characterised by a propensity for passionate and intense feelings and a contradictory resistance to any sort of long-term commitment; he was therefore unable to form and to preserve adult relationships. He desperately wanted to give and to receive love; but he was unwilling to accept the earth-bound, mundane and physical realities of married life. A letter to an old friend and past flame shortly before his engagement to Willa illustrates the pain of this incessant internal strife; but also portrays the masochistic pleasure which he derived from renunciation:

> When I read your letter this morning I was kneeling in spirit at your feet with a reverence as great as I have ever felt. You will let me say this, now that we are not to see each other? . . . You know

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[60] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press,1968. (p 25)

> the story of the great Italian poet, Dante, and Beatrice? He only saw her once or twice during his life, and I don't know whether he ever spoke to her; but all his life she inspired him and he speaks of her in accents of the most exalted love. Is that not beautiful? . . . It often seems to me that love such as ours can never reach its true expression in marriage, but only in high dreams and in some act of great renunciation whenever the one needed the other. . . . Though I will not see you, except when Fate decides so, I shall love to think you are living and breathing in such and such a human habitation.[61]

He married Willa less than three months after the expression of these emotions to Jean Leitch. Willa was blythly unaware of Edwin's miserable confusion and uncertainty in the weeks leading up to the wedding. Happy anticipation absorbed her and rendered her impervious to life's knocks. Even the loss of her job at Gypsy Hill failed to ruffle her equanimity or to shake her faith in the future - but she was angered by the injustice of her dismissal.

Shortly after returning to London for the start of the summer term she had announced her engagement to the Principal of the College.

> She seemed interested and sympathetic. I am not now sure whether there was still at that time an ordinance forbidding female teachers in training colleges to have husbands, but I was quite certain that if the Principal and the patroness of the college, a rich old lady, Miss Belle Rennie, chose to approve, I could have a husband and go on lecturing, since the Principal herself had just

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[61] Edwin Muir in a letter to Jean Leitch. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (pp19-20)

> got married with Miss Belle's blessing. I gave her We Moderns to look at and went back to my hostel without any misgivings.
>
> Nothing out of the ordinary happened for a few days and then I was summoned to a special interview with the Principal and Miss Belle. They both wore shocked faces, and Miss Bell, picking up with obvious distaste my copy of We Moderns, said: 'Miss Anderson, do you know that this man you are proposing to marry *doesn't believe in God?'* They made it quite clear to me that if I persisted in marrying 'this man' I must give up my post as lecturer and Vice-Principal. It seemed pointless to argue. I said that I would resign my post on the spot, rescued that godless book We Moderns into my own loving hands and stalked out.[62]

Her offence seems to have been sufficient to justify the scrupulous excision of any mention of her brief contribution to the memories and the history of Gypsy Hill Training College from the pages of the college records and archives.[63]

The wedding neared. Willa filled in the appropriate forms at the St Pancras Register Office and bought tickets for Diaghileff's *La Boutique Fantasque*. Mrs Anderson - who now realised that her daughter intended to proceed with this ludicrous and unlikely marriage - wrote to Willa 'pleading that I must come home and be married properly by a minister of the Kirk. How like my mother, I thought; she meant well but she did not understand. To get married in Montrose, properly or improperly, in a social context to which neither Edwin nor I belonged, would not make sense at all.'[64]

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[62] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 26)

[63] I am indebted to Dr Gibson of the Department of Education at the University of Kingston - who has recently written an account of the history of Gypsy Hill Training College - for his help in this matter. He had encountered no reference to Willa Anderson in the course of his research, and supports my assertion that the circumstances under which she left and the prevailing ethos of the college could well have conspired to rob her of her place in the official college records.

Willa and Edwin were married in London on June 7th 1919. It was a day of love-struck fearlessness and uncomplicated joy. Willa was 'too happy to have misgivings'[65], while Edwin was 'carried through everything on a wave of exhilaration'.[66] 'As for the ballet, that lifted him clean out of himself. He had never imagined such magic to be possible, he said . . . Russian ballet always intoxicated me too and we were both drunk with sheer elation when we went back to Hunter Street. Then in bed together we were as well matched as on the dancing floor.'[67] A life-long love-match had begun.

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[64] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 27)
[65] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 28)
[66] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 28)
[67] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p 28)

CHAPTER IV

LOVE AND MARRIAGE. 1919-1921.

Their euphoria pursued them, on the following day, to the National Guilds League conference where Edwin - as a Scottish delegate - was required to make a speech. It had not occurred to Willa that her own blythe confidence as a lecturer was unusual and that the prospect of addressing a vast assembly might be terrifying to Edwin. She listened with cringing embarrassment as her new husband stammered through an agonisingly incompetent speech, liberally punctuated with 'erms' and 'ums'; and decided - with unconscious arrogance - to hone his speaking skills. She had apparently already initiated the life-long process by which she would 'develop [Edwin] into a successful little literary gentleman.'[1] Edwin was undoubtedly always altered more profoundly, intimately and consciously by Willa than she was by him.

They successfully survived the conference ordeal and - at the insistence and the expense of one of Willa's friends - they embarked upon a three day honeymoon in Sheringham where they basked in blissful sunshine and in the glow of deep, romantic love.[2]

A sunburnt but serene Edwin returned to Glasgow while Willa tried half-heartedly to muster some motivation for her final weeks at Gypsy Hill Training College. Her interest in the college 'had been receding since my interview with the Principal and Miss Belle, so that I was rather fagged by the struggle of forcing myself, against the grain, to finish my term's work in style.'[3] Her energies and enthusiasms were engaged instead in a quest for the first of the numerous houses in which she and Edwin were destined to live. There was a grave shortage of accommodation in post-war London but a 'fellow member of the 1917 Club, Barbara Low, had an option on half a house in Guilford Street, W.C., and wanted someone to share it with her.'[4] Willa was not particularly well acquainted with Barbara (nor with the unpleasant and neurotic eccentricities which she later revealed); she was merely relieved and grateful to have found somewhere cheap and central to live. She readily agreed to accept the joint-tenancy of the property.

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[1] Hugh MacDiarmid in a letter to Peter Butter. Biggar, 22nd December 1966. In The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid. Ed. Alan Bold. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1984. (p868)

[2] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. Cambridge, 11th May 1962. I am grateful to Peter Butter for the loan of these letters.

Guilford Street - in the Holborn area of London and not far from the British Museum - had seen better days. It had 'been allowed to run down, but the firm of lawyers who administered the Georgian houses had set out to rehabilitate them; each house was re-pointed, done up with fresh paint and divided into an upper and a lower 'maisonette'. . . . [Barbara] had the two upper rooms, I the two ground-floor rooms; we had to share the bathroom upstairs and the big basement kitchen.'[5] It was not an ideal arrangement; but it was a place to live and it was, as Peter Butter observes, 'the first real home [Edwin] had had since his parents died.'[6]

Willa splashed out most of her meagre savings on basic furnishings and began to impress some cosy individuality onto their well-proportioned and attractively appointed rooms. 'The front room, the living room, had an Adam chimney-piece, and behind the bedroom at the back there was a small paved yard which I bordered with African marigolds. A week after we set up house an uncle of mine on his way to America presented us with a wheel-back armchair, hand-carved, and two small chairs to match: we had also two blue pouffes from my college sitting-room and a Morris armchair, so that we felt luxuriously outfitted.'[7] Willa apparently always possessed the happy knack of being able to create a home out of any house.

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[3] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p30)
[4] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p29)
[5] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p29)
[6] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p66)

The summer term staggered to a close, and a relieved and excited Willa boarded a northbound train at Euston. 'The nearer I got to Glasgow, the more I came alive, and I forgot my fatigue when I saw Edwin on the platform.'[8] He had borrowed a friend's flat for the duration of their stay in the city, and he proudly escorted her up stone tenement steps to a heavy front door. Gloomy, ugly and old-fashioned rooms greeted her inside the flat and the kitchen was dominated by a monstrous coal range. It was an overwhelmingly oppressive environment: but Willa consoled herself with the reflection that they need only endure a couple of days in this Victorian timewarp before escaping to her mother's house in Montrose. Edwin squirmed visibly; he had, he confessed, not yet given his week's notice at the clerk's office.

Willa was distressed and bewildered by this unexpected revelation. It had never occurred to her that Edwin might be nervous about the loss of all the landmarks of his life or by the prospect of a new beginning in utterly uncharted territory. He had already sacrificed his precious independence to marriage; and he was now expected to abandon the secure familiarity of a regular salary from an occupation which allowed him 'a little leisure and the freedom to write what I like.'[9] Willa attempted to reassure him; but he nervously insisted that they must exercise at least some measure of reason and common sense in their dealings with the world.

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[7] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p29)
[8] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p30)
[9] Edwin Muir in a letter to H.L. Mencken. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p21)

Willa spent the following day in a paroxysm of lonely despair. Edwin went out to work as usual; and she was left alone to meditate melodramatically on a future of depressing flats in dismal cities. She was suddenly painfully 'aware that the coal cooking-range in the kitchen, with all its dampers, seemed as incomprehensible as Edwin, since I did not know what to do with either of them; that George Thomson's flat looked ugly and gloomy, despite its lofty ceilings, with the dark heavy mahogany furniture and large dark oil paintings; that the wooden bunker full of coal which stood waiting in the hall was somehow a reproach to me, since I had not one single apron in my suitcases.'[10]

The city streets felt alien and frightening and the few people whom she knew were away on holiday. She sat down and wept bitter tears. And yet it never occurred to her that her present sense of dislocation was comparable with the fear inspired in Edwin by the prospect of London life. 'After sitting for I do not know how long, feeling my way rather than thinking, I came to the conclusion that the passage from known, familiar Glasgow to unknown, unfamiliar London was a Rubicon Edwin had to cross of his own accord. I did not myself like being pushed into things and I must not push Edwin or bring any pressure to bear upon him. He knew that I had had to give up my job because of getting married, but I must not let him know that I was virtually sacked because I insisted on marrying the author of We Moderns. Nor should I expatiate on the delights of our home in Guilford Street. He must feel free to make up his own mind.'[11] It is interesting to speculate on what Willa might have done had Edwin not 'made up his own mind' in the 'correct' way; but that problem never arose!

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[10] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p30)
[11] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p32)

She therefore made no reference to the possible nature or location of their future lives together when Edwin returned from work; she entertained him instead with anodyne anecdotes about her day. The management and manipulation of Edwin were, from that moment, the primary challenges of her marriage. They enjoyed a relaxed evening during which Edwin 'suggested that he should play truant from the office and . . . take me to the heather hills, to Strathblane, . . . '[12]

That day of truancy provoked a watershed in their affairs. In a blaze of summer sunshine they 'spent some time at a burn launching little boats of wild flag-leaves, with a bit of folded leaf for a sail, just as he had done in Orkney as a boy, and we began to say 'thu' and 'thee' to each other instead of 'you', in good Orkney fashion. Away from his office Edwin grew visibly happier and we came back to the flat in high spirits.'[13]

An outbreak of freckles on Edwin's fair skin belied the illness which he had pleaded as the explanation for his absence from work; and a second day of enforced truancy was rendered necessary. On the third day, 'he decided, with apparent lightness, to give the shipbuilding firm a week's notice. He was duly provided with testimonials to his efficiency as a costing-clerk which said that Mr Edwin Muir was neat, methodical and could be trusted with the cash.'[14] The Rubicon was safely crossed.

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[12] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p32)
[13] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p32)
[14] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p33)

Willa was infinitely relieved to exchange the gloom of Glasgow for the open skies and the seascapes of Montrose where her anxious mother awaited a first encounter with this latest human whim of her wayward daughter. Willa 'knew that she had been disappointed at my marrying a mere clerk instead of a minister of the Kirk or a university professor, but Edwin was an Orkneyman, a sound recommendation to her. In a day or two she was inclined to favour him rather than me, for she valued men more than women and would have been sorry for any man I married. He would never have a button on his shirts, she told him, or on his trousers, or a pair of whole socks to put on his feet, poor Edwin.'[15]

She was probably right. Domestic niceties were never destined to be a priority in the Muir household and it was only with the assistance of a series of more-or-less competent housekeepers that they somehow managed to muddle through. It must nevertheless have hurt Willa that her mother should so utterly demean her before a man with whom she was still not entirely confident and at ease. Willa never entirely defeated the ambivalent emotions and the reluctant resentment which always simmered just below the apparently calm surface of her relationship with her mother.

'Poor Edwin, meanwhile, spent one afternoon in our garden roaring over some tragic short stories I had once written and now dug out of a cupboard. I was both vexed and infected by his merriment. Through his eyes I could see how funny was my offhand treatment of whole hours of mental agony suffered by my characters, and yet I felt he need not have laughed at my efforts quite so heartlessly. One of my agonised heroines, Dagmar, a Viking maiden whose sweetheart became a Christian and turned the other cheek, especially delighted him; he kept teasing me by repeating with hoots of mirth:

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[15] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p33)

'Dagmar strode by the sea till dawn.' If I had any doubts about Edwin's power of detaching himself from personal feeling they should have been resolved that afternoon.'[16] The first months of any marriage are likely to be challenging; but Willa soon discovered that she had taken on a more difficult job than she had ever imagined. An impenetrable and insurmountable defensive barrier excluded her entirely from Edwin's vulnerable and frightened emotional core.

A glorious golden autumn welcomed them to London: 'the atmosphere had the suspended stillness which comes when the year is hesitiating on the turn: a crystal density in which even the roar of the traffic seemed muffled and remote.'[17] Willa proudly introduced the wonders of their home to Edwin whose 'personal delight astonished me by its intensity. After his many years of dingy lodgings our two rooms seemed like heaven to him, the doors and windows were so well proportioned, the furnishings so gay.'[18] A cosy kitten made this picture of domestic bliss complete.

The quest for work pre-occupied their first weeks in the capital. There seemed to be no rush or panic in their process; a quiet and inexplicable confidence assured them that the work was there and would eventually appear. The Universe, Willa insisted, was on their side. She would reflect with disbelief, in later years, upon this sense of certainty; and laughingly recall 'what naïve creatures Edwin and I were'.[19]

The Universe fulfilled the faith they placed in it: they both found makeshift work on the same late September day. Edwin was 'engaged nominally as a clerk in an engraver's office, but found that he was mainly occupied in packing and tying up parcels of engraving blocks. . . . I was taken on by a cramming institution in Red Lion Square to teach précis-writing.'[20] It was mundane and tedious work: but it paid the rent and enabled them to partake of some of the cheaper pleasures of London life - such as tea in Kensington Gardens and football on Hampstead Heath.

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[16] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p33-4)
[17] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p148)
[18] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p34)
[19] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. Chelsea, 14th April 1965.

But Edwin was now forced to venture out alone into the disconcerting vastness of the London streets. Unconscious fears and insecurities filtered uninvited to the surface of his mind and he was consumed with an inexplicable terror of being buried beneath the rubble of imagined falling buildings. '[T]he feeling that I was plunged among several millions of people who seemed to be quite kind, but with a different kindness from that which I had been accustomed to, an alien, tangential kindness, disconcerted me. The mass of stone, brick and mortar was daunting; the impersonal glance of the Londoner, so different from the inquisitive glance of Glasgow, gave me the feeling that I did not really exist; and my mingled dread and longing now turned upon itself and reversed its direction, so that as I gazed at an object or a face - it did not matter which, for the choice was not mine - I was no longer trying to establish a connexion with it, but hoping that it - whether animate or inanimate - would establish a connexion with me and prove that I existed. The vast solidity of my surroundings and my own craving emptiness threw me into a slightly feverish state, drove fear up into my throat, and made my lips dry, while at the centre of myself I tried to assemble something there, though what I did not know.'[21]

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[20] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p35)
[21] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p148)

He hovered on the brink of nervous breakdown and suffered bleakly from the agonies of dread and disillusionment. But his pain was no longer entirely his own and Willa also endured a silent, private hell throughout those tortuous months. She could not help but feel some guilt for having been the force by which he had been propelled into a London life with which he could not cope. She must also have missed the freedom of her erstwhile existence; and have felt suffocated by the responsibility of being a sole anchor and support to such a vulnerable being. There is no isolation more absolute than emotional distance between lovers.

Their home was Edwin's only shelter from the outside world; a refuge within which he could feel secure. Willa desperately 'tried to multiply the friendly, warm spots in which he could relax, taking him round to visit friends of mine in the evenings',[22] and they also entertained endlessly at 13 Guilford Street. Edwin also occasionally visited Orage at the New Age office in Cursitor Street and was soon entirely at home in that environment too. His debilitating 'sense of being in an alien place wore off when I realized that at this or that address there was some one I knew'.[23]

He was also bolstered by the presence in London of various old acquaintances from his Glasgow days: he was particularly pleased to welcome Hugh Kingsmill and John Holms to the house. Hugh was a comparatively old friend; but Edwin had only lately been introduced to John. They had recently spent a blissful day walking the hills near Glasgow and pursuing an intense and intimate conversation. Willa took an immediate and enduring dislike to Holms. '[H]e and I resented each other from the beginning of our acquaintance; he patronised me insufferably - or so I thought. I got on excellent terms with Hugh Kingsmill, whom I liked very much, but never with John.'[24]

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[22] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p36)
[23] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p150)

But even Hugh initially aroused her ire and irritated the sensitive antenna which alerted her to chauvinism. The two men 'sat down in our sitting-room and at once the air grew dense with embarrassment. I could not think why, for I felt kindly towards these friends of Edwin's; I had not met them before but I knew how much he liked them. Apparently they did not welcome my kindness. If I said anything, Holms fiddled with his moustache, stared fixedly at Edwin with round red-brown eyes that matched his hair and made no answer. Hugh gave me a quick, sideways glance and made no answer either. Their conversation was addressed exclusively to Edwin, so I fell silent. Clearly my presence incommoded them. Would they have been equally embarrassed, I wondered, had I been a man they were meeting for the first time, or was it my being a woman that bothered them? Of course, they were not long out of prison in Germany where they met no women, and before that they had grown up in English public schools without feminine company in the daily round; was it possible that they did not know what to say to a woman or what to do with her unless she was for going to bed with? In that case I was simply Edwin's woman to them, a *femme couverte*, with an invisible label: keep off the grass.'[25]

Willa responded immediately with silent, calculated and ironic action: she would provide them with an exaggeration of the wifely stereotype with which they were apparently at ease. She unearthed a virtually unused sewing basket and began an obtrusive sock darning caricature with the largest needle and the thickest wool she could find. 'Edwin caught the idea quickly enough: I saw his lower lip beginning to tremble. . . . Holms and Hugh got the idea too, but my manoeuvre instead of amusing or embarrassing them soothed them wonderfully. I had now become what I should have been all along, an undemanding bit of background, a proper wife darning a sock. They began to quote Shakespeare, interrupting each other freely. Their embarrassment vanished. Holms started a long monologue.'[26]

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[24] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. Cambridge, 11th January 1963.
[25] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p37)

Kicking against convention always stirred her adrenalin and she revelled in open combat against the forces of apparent chauvinism. But this confrontational proclivity occasionally brought her to unjustified and harsh conclusions and catapulted her into unwarranted warfare. Reason left her when her ire was roused; and she often failed to appreciate that every situation was complicated by an alternative interpretation. Hugh and Holms might, for example, have been intimidated or irritated by her voluminous garrulousness and have resented the extent to which she was inhibiting the conversation of old friends. T.S. Eliot certainly complained in later years that it was impossible to talk with Edwin when Willa was present because she invariably and incorrigibly dominated the discussion.[27] And Holms was also undoubtedly jealous of Willa and of her relationship with this friend whom he wanted to keep to himself. But these various complexities entirely escaped the bullishly rombustious and youthful Willa. And Edwin remained either unconscious or uncaring about the antipathy between Willa and Holms.

That blissful autumn faded into winter, and both Willa and Edwin were seriously stricken by a dose of Spanish flu. Willa 'sent an S.O.S' to Alexis Chodak Gregory (a Russian doctor friend from her St Andrews student days) 'who saved both our lives, as we felt at the time.'[28] He also insisted that they should convalesce, at his expense, in a hotel in Crowborough with which he was familiar; the only condition to his offer was that Edwin must shave off the ginger beard which had grown during his illness. Willa was infinitely relieved by this support to her own campaign against the monstrosity which now adorned Edwin's face and of which he was inexplicably proud. He 'admired Ezra Pound's beard and he longed to look like Ezra Pound whom he had met in Orage's office. He had described Pound's appearance to me: the neatness of the little beard, the knee-length Norfolk knickers, the black stockings and patent-leather pumps that contrasted so delightfully with the poetic freedom of the wide-open shirt collar and lavish silk bow worn instead of a tie. This, Edwin felt, was how a poet should look. He was not himself a poet as yet, but some inklings of vocation must have been stirring in him. After the stick-up collars of Glasgow Pound's flying silk bow and large wide-open collar were irresistibly attractive. So was the beard.'[29] It was, however, a beardless Edwin who recuperated with Willa in Crowborough and who fell in love with the gentle rises and leafy heathland of the Southern English countryside.

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[26] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p38)
[27] Janet Adam Smith in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 18th September 1995.
[28] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p39)

On their return to London, Orage 'invited Edwin to be his assistant in the New Age office; three days' work at three pounds a week. Edwin gladly accepted the offer and there was no more parcelling of engraving blocks. He joined the weekly New Age conferences in the Kardomah Café, Chancery Lane, where he got to know AE and saw more of Ezra Pound, who was then extremely poor, he told me, and might have starved had it not been for what Orage paid him. He also got to know a Yugoslav, a serb called Dmitri Mitrinovic who was trying to 'influence' people in London, including Orage, and finally helped to sink the New Age by the dead weight of the columns he contributed under the pen-name of M.M. Cosmoi.'[30] These illustrious gatherings were probably something of a trial to Edwin who was, at that time, 'shy and unsure of himself, and probably took no prominent part in these meetings, but was liked by everybody.'[31]

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[29] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p39)

The New Age under Orage's early editorship was 'the most vital and adventurous, in intellectual and cultural matters, of the London papers. The talented young writers whom Orage had fostered and published included, besides Muir, T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, Katherine Mansfield, Herbert Read and Richard Aldington. He printed much Imagist poetry and many articles on recent Continental literature and philosophy, especially Nietzsche, Bergson and Croce. In politics, Orage publicised Guild Socialism, a philosphy which sought to protect human values against the dehumanising tendencies of industrialism and collectivism by converting the trade unions into guilds and transfering to them the management of industries and public services. . . . However, since the values of Guild Socialism were basically conservative, the New Age could easily accommodate Hilaire Belloc's attacks on State power and T.E. Hulme's diatribes against humanism, while its foreign affairs correspondent, J.M. Kennedy, advocated an aristocratic society, on principles derived from Nietzsche. Later Orage came under the influence of Major C.H. Douglas . . . and by the early '20s much of the New Age was devoted to advocating Social Credit. (Among New Age contributors, Muir, Pound and C.M. Grieve all became proponents of Social Credit; . . .)'[32] The journal had passed the pinnacle of its prestige, power and circulation by the time Edwin joined the staff; but it remained influential and Orage continued to be widely acknowledged as a mighty force in literary journalism.

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[30] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p39)
[31] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p73)
[32] Ritchie Robertson. "Our Generation': Edwin Muir as social critic, 1920-22.' In Scottish Literary Journal. no.2, vol9. December 1982. (pp45-65)

Edwin's own relationship with Orage was ambivalent. The hero-worship which had developed during his Glasgow years had been intensified during his first months in London by Orage's indisputable and untiring kindness to him. Edwin also admired the lucidity of Orage's mind and its ability to 'flow round any object, touching it, defining it, laving it and leaving it with a new clarity in the mind. From a few stammering words he could divine a thought you were struggling to express, and, as if his mind were an objective clarifying element, in a few minutes he could return it to you cleansed of its impurities and expressed in better words than you could have found yourself. . . . He was a born collaborator, a born midwife of ideas, and consequently a born editor.'[33]

And yet the two men were antipathetically different in temperament and never developed a real empathy or intimacy. Orage would seize an idea for the purpose of its development; whereas Edwin was excited by the initial idea in and for itself. 'First thoughts did not excite him, as they excited me, except to the formulation of second thoughts; and all his life, it seems to me, was spent in an effort to find a second thought, perhaps a second personality, which would satisfy his idea of virtue and knowledge and conform to his taste.'[34] Edwin also consciously rebelled against the process of grooming by which Orage hoped to mould Edwin into his disciple and successor as the author of The New Age's 'Notes of the Week'. Faced with Edwin's unexpectedly fixed will, Orage eventually gave up his manipulatory efforts and treated Edwin with a bemused impatience.

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[33] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p166)
[34] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p166)

But it was Orage's kindness which dominated Edwin's early days in the New Age office; he was genuinely concerned about the obviously unsettled and disturbed mental state of his newest recruit. He suggested that Edwin might benefit from 'his own recipe for achieving concentration and inner power, the practice of yoga and meditation on abstract values.'[35] Edwin was accordingly given a mantra upon which he and Willa could focus during their morning and evening meditations: 'Brighter than the sun, purer than the snow, subtler than the air is the Self, the spirit within the heart. I am that Self, that Self am I.'[36] The prospect of this solemn recitation reduced Willa to a fit of helpless girlish giggles and she was predictably and ironically dismissive of the suggestion. Edwin did attempt to sustain the process; but he was discouraged by her mocking attitude and rapidly relinquished the necessary discipline.

Orage accordingly referred Edwin 'to an analyst, a brilliant and charming man who one evening invited me round to see him. I went, not suspecting any plot for my good, was greeted kindly, and then asked some blunt questions which greatly shocked me. At the end, the analyst told me that he would like to analyse me for the mere interest of the thing, and without asking for any payment. In spite of the fears that had been tormenting me for so long, I still did not admit to myself that I was a neurotic needing the help he freely offered me; but I had read a good deal about psychoanalysis, the experiment itself attracted me, and I accepted.'[37]

He had indeed been fascinated for a number of years by the potential inherent in the unconscious mind; and by various New Age articles 'on pyschoanlysis, in which Freud's and Jung's theories were discussed from every angle, philosophical, religious, and literary as well as scientific.'[38] The wonders of this world were now explicitly revealed to him.

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[35] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p42-3)
[36] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p167)
[37] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p167)

Maurice Nicoll was a Jungian psychologist with a considerable reputation in the field of psychoanalysis. He was particularly renowned for his work with shell shock victims of the first world war; and for an 'unusually sane, sensible, and undogmatic work'[39] called Dream Psychology. His philosphy was immediately appealing to Edwin because he believed that the 'object of analysis . . . is not only to help the patient to rid himself of conflicts, but also, having removed blockages, to put his conscious mind in fruitful contact with the unconscious, which is a source of energy.'[40]

It was not, however, a painless process. Edwin's exploration of his unconscious proved to be an agonising and humiliating experience. Nauseatingly disreputable interpretations emerged from his flood of dreams and he recoiled in terrified revulsion from the image of himself which was revealed to him as he travelled anew through the dread territory of the Glasgow slums; the valley of death and the Greenock bone-yard. A crisis of self-hatred consumed him; and Willa must inevitably have partially partaken of his pain.

He was simultaneously shocked and exhilarated by the experience; and he began to have the vivid visions and waking dreams which An Autobiography describes at length and in detail. Willa shared in the excitement and the fascination which these experiences aroused in him and 'sat thrilling while he unrolled the pageantry that had been projected on the wall before him. He spoke at great speed, for the visions had come so fast, episode upon episode, that he was anxious not to omit or forget any part of them. I was, like him, filled with wonder at what had happened. The last episode of all, when he and I on one wing apiece flew hand-in-hand through the sky and settled behind the back of an antique Jehova figure, where we kissed, lit me up with happiness as well as wonder because it showed that in the deeps of Edwin's unconscious we now belonged unquestionably to each other.'[41]

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[38] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p167)
[39] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p73)
[40] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p73)

Edwin was desperate to unlock the total meaning of these dreams and to interpret the revelation - 'perhaps a myth of man's destiny'[42] - which he fervently believed his vision concealed. His excited mind embarked upon a frantic quest for the source from which these dreams had emanated; and he urgently pursued the dynamic force which had inspired his reverie. This objective dissection of chimeric vibrations unnerved Willa. She believed that 'the mystery remained a mystery and a wonder which could not ultimately be explained. We always lived in a cloud of unknowing, I said, and we would just have to go on living in it.'[43] But Edwin was not satisfied or appeased by this blythe acceptance of the inexplicable. He 'did not know at the time what to do with these mythological dreams, and I do not know yet; I used the trance for a poem, but a poem seemed a trifling result from such an experience.'[44]

'One conclusion at least was certain: that Edwin possessed an uncommon power of communicating with forces from the unconscious. If the channels could be kept open, he would have the imagery of the unconscious at his command and something uniquely worth while to communicate. And these visions were such a massive break-through that inspiration might go on welling up.'[45] And, as she had shared in Edwin's pain, Willa now rejoiced with him in this imaginative re-awakening.

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[41] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p43-4)
[42] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p44)
[43] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p44-5)
[44] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p167)

But Maurice Nicoll was infinitely alarmed by the sheer volume and the vividness of these visions; he possibly suspected that Edwin was inching towards insanity. He therefore advised Edwin 'to stop the dreams, switch them off. And he did.'[46]

But Edwin did not completely abandon these visions. They afforded him a lifetime of poetic material and 'gave him a new access of self-confidence. I found him one day in the sitting-room with discarded scribblings around him, scoring out again what he had just written. 'I'm trying to improve my style,' he said, and from that day set himself to practise writing clearly and simply without Nietzschean rhetoric.'[47]

The process of Edwin's psychoanalysis was never completed. Maurice Nicoll left London for Fontainebleau where he hoped to work with the great Gurdjieff, and he entrusted Edwin's continuing treatment to his colleague, James Young. 'For some reason, or impulse, or prejudice Edwin could not make the transition with confidence. I know that he was put off by James Young's telling him that a man set more value on something he paid for than on what he got free, so he would charge a shilling or two for each session. This, I believe, was current psycho-analytical doctrine but it seemed misconceived to Edwin, who paid the token shilling with, I fear, a curling lower lip. Whatever the cause, he became more and more irregular in his attendances and the psycho-analysis petered out.'[48]

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[45] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p45)

[46] Willa Muir. 'Mrs Muir's Reminiscences.' In the Willa Muir Archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[47] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p45)

[48] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p47)

But his emotional healing had begun and he had benefitted widely and greatly from the treatment he had already received from Maurice Nicoll. Those long and painful months had enabled him to realise 'the elementary fact that every one, like myself, was troubled by sensual desires and thoughts, by unacknowledged failures and frustrations causing self-hatred and hatred of others, by dead memories of shame and grief which had been shovelled underground long since because they could not be borne. I saw that my lot was the human lot, that when I faced my own unvarnished likeness I was one among all men and women, all of whom had the same desires and thoughts, the same failures and frustrations, the same unacknowledged hatred of themselves and others, the same hidden shames and griefs, and that if they confronted these things they could win a certain liberation from them.'[49]

This access into a spiritual and emotional renewal was one gift for which Edwin was always grateful to Orage; but Orage and the New Age also provided the Muirs with a wealth of interesting and appealing companions. The eccentric Mitrinovic became a regular visitor at Guilford Street and always arrived with a couple of empty beer bottles which the Muirs gratefully exchanged for cash at the local pub. He was erratic, pretentious and vaguely lunatic ('Janko Lavrin describes him as a man with a "home-made Messiah complex", concerned to be a saviour rather than to save any one'[50]); but he was also an inordinately entertaining guest, and he would regularly enchant the Muirs with his evolutionary speculations and his grandiose and nonsensical philosophising.

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[49] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p151-2)
[50] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p74)

Janko Lavrin was an entirely different class of companion and one of whom the Muirs became increasingly fond. 'His conversation was just as heady as Mitrinovic's with the great advantage of being based in actualities, and he radiated even more charm, so that he trailed clouds of friends around him and was the means of introducing us to I do not know how many painters at I cannot tell how many studio parties.'[51] Lavrin was a highly educated and widely travelled Slovene; he had studied in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Norway and was now working in the department of Slavonic languages at the University of Nottingham. He later attempted to get Edwin a post in the extra-mural department of the university; and Edwin accordingly 'went down and gave a brilliant lecture, but was not appointed, presumably because of the lack of paper qualification.'[52]

Through his work at the New Age Edwin also encountered other literary figures including John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield, the Sitwells and Aldous Huxley; but these professional contacts were never destined to develop into personal friendships.

Willa and Edwin were, in any case, already awash in a sea of socialising. '[O]ur house was always full of people at that time, we couldn't sweep them out with a broom. But they were always in - lots of people in, drinking Russian tea, tea with lemon, and they were nearly all painters, because we found so many young painters round about that were so gay and so pleasant and so nice to talk to. We didn't look for or try to find the literary crowd in London, we just took whatever came.'[53]

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[51] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p47)
[52] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p74-5)
[53] Willa Muir. 'Mrs Muir's Reminiscences.' In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Edwin was, by this time, the dramatic critic for The Scotsman 'which meant going to shows three or four times a week, dashing off immediately afterwards to The Scotman office in Fleet Street, writing a critique as fast as possible not earlier than one in the morning. By an escapable law of London life the busier we got the more we were invited out and the more people dropped in to see us. My recollection of this period, which tells me that every time Edwin came back from Fleet Street he found our sitting-room crammed with people . . . , may be somewhere at fault, but the impression remains that we were crowded out of leisure time.'[54]

They indeed led incredibly and increasingly busy lives. Edwin was providing an occasional anonymous and sympathetic book review for The Atheneum; and reviewing regularly and writing his 'Our Generation' series for The New Age. He was also asked to lecture on 'The Novel' to a branch of the English Association - an invitation which Willa seized upon as an opportunity to help him to improve his public speaking skills.

Willa was meanwhile involved in a new project which had been masterminded by 'three young women whom I had earlier been helping to train for Day Continuation School teaching. They were all Oxford graduates and had come regularly to Canning Town during the war to try coping with my factory girls. Without my knowing it they had now persuaded a group of West End drapery stores to start a Day Continuation School for their own employees and to appoint me its headmistress, at £400 a year. This seemed wealth to Edwin and me; we now felt well provided for.'[55]

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[54] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p53-4)
[55] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p49-50)

The nature of the work was as attractive as the wealth; and Willa relished this unexpected and welcome escape from the mundane drudgery of the cramming institution in Red Lion Square. She immediately attempted to construct a syllabus based upon the world of material and textiles with which these young women from Debenhams, Harvey Nichols and Marshall and Snelgroves were familiar. She therefore gathered material about 'the great silk road from China', 'merino sheep in Spain' and 'the waulking of tweed in Harris'[56] and, with the assistance of her three teaching assistants, wove these textile tales into history and geography lessons. They decided, however, that English literature could best be approached from the 'romance and love' perspective.

The busy syllabus also included 'practical work, hand-loom weaving, fashion-drawing, pattern-designing, colouring. All this accounted for three-quarters of the time-table; the rest of it was given to eurhythmics, dancing and singing. For the eighteen-year-olds I took a class myself called 'general psychology'; they asked me questions about anything at all and I did my best to answer.'[57] The actual contents of this latter class are indeterminate and sadly undocumented.

Each of the school's five hundred girls was allocated one morning and one afternoon of teaching every week and was assigned to a particular group of twenty five students. The classes all contained a mix of showroom, clerical and workshop girls and, to Willa's surprise, they immediately introduced the snobberies and the hierarchies of the workplace into the classroom. But Willa 'did not propose to allow a pecking order in my school, so I got over a hundred gymnastic tunics of varying sizes, and each batch of girls was put into them. The result was admirable. I had, in fact, no more difficulties from the girls; I think they enjoyed their schooling too much to make difficulties.'[58]

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[56] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p50)
[57] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p51)

Her work at Canning Town had done nothing to prepare her for the obstacles which she now encountered. Her interest in the girls at Mansfield House had been entirely personal and private and had never extended into their working worlds. '[T]he management of Knight's, or Bryant and May's, once having been persuaded to let some packers have two afternoons' education a week, did not bother about the kind they got.'[59]

The ethos of the big drapery stores with whom Willa was now expected to work was entirely different. Various shop Welfare Workers and forewomen objected to letting their employees off work to 'spend their time dancing and singing', and Willa was accused of 'wasting their time and the firm's time.'[60] They also grimly suspected that this woman - who smoked cigarettes at her desk and refused to discipline the girls for minor offences - represented a dangerously subversive influence. Willa could never co-habit comfortably with authority; she resolutely refused to believe that apparently petty rules could be integral to the safe and smooth running of a large-scale operation. She was eventually asked politely to leave and was given a lump sum in compensation. The school scarcely outlived her brief contract.

Her compensation money permitted her 'to stay at home for a while and practise cooking'[61] and also provided them with the wherewithal to travel north and spend Easter with friends in Glasgow. Edwin made a pilgrimage to his old office and discovered that 'the easygoing manager had been laid off shortly after his own departure and an up-to-date manager installed. Some clerks had been sacked and the survivors felt harried.' Willa gloated irritatingly at her supposed prescience: "See what the unconscious did for us, getting thee out at the right time," was the comment I made.'[62]

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[58] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p51)
[59] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p50)
[60] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p52)
[61] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p52)

She was rather less complacent about her first encounter with Jimmie and Lizzie - Edwin's eldest brother and sister. She was suddenly and painfully aware, as she observed the family dynamics, that Edwin's periodic and terrifying 'remoteness' was a characteristic common to all of the Muirs. Edwin and Jimmie, for example, 'were not at all unfriendly, but spoke to each other across a psychological distance'; while Lizzie exhibited a 'quiet, withdrawn dignity.'[63] It was unnerving to be brought face-to-face with so blatant a reflection of the very characteristic which she sought to undermine in Edwin; and she 'wondered if Edwin too were going to shrink into himself as he grew older, or if it were only a discouraging ambience that made the sensitive Muirs beat a retreat. Lizzie, according to Edwin, had had a hard life, and Jimmie had been more or less conditioned into respectability by his wife. I could not imagine my conditioning Edwin into respectability, and I hoped that his hard times were now at an end; presumably he would not need to withdraw into remoteness, sensitive though he was.'[64]

The general Glasgow ambience with which the Muirs were confronted that Easter was not particularly encouraging to a sensitive soul. The Glasgow Guilds Group were openly disapproving of the Muirs' new London ways, and it was 'felt that Edwin and I were getting a bit above ourselves, though the censorious voices blamed me rather than him.'[65] They returned, with relief, to the comfortable familiarity of their Guilford Street home.

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[62] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p33)
[63] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p53)
[64] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p53)

But they were, by now, utterly overwhelmed and exhausted by the freneticism and hectic socialising of London life. They were increasingly aware that 'you need at least three lives in London if you're earning your living. One to work, one to keep up with theatres, concerts, movements, everything and a third one to entertain friends.'[66] They no longer had the energy to maintain the pace of life at which they had been living and their work and their well being were suffering; they realised that they needed space and time in which to re-discover themselves and one another.

It was at this juncture that Van Wyck Brooks - the literary editor of a new American weekly called The Freeman - opportunely intervened with an offer which would facilitate their escape from the London rat race. He had apparently been impressed by We Moderns (which had been published in the United States in the early months of 1920) and by Edwin's various New Age articles; he was keen to engage Edwin as a regular contributor to The Freeman and offered him the princely sum of sixty dollars an article for one or two articles a month.

This assured regular income was the Muir's final incentive to leave London and to explore the wider world. Janko Lavrin's European adventures had already excited their enthusiasm and curiosity; they were keen to discover for themselves the foreign wonders he had described. They hesitantly asked him for advice and he 'supported the project with enthusiasm, saying: "Why not go to Prague to begin with?" Prague was in the very middle of Europe; it had the best ham in Europe and the best beer. These arguments seemed compelling; we decided to go to Prague, knowing nothing about the Czechs and the Slovaks except that they had got a country for themselves out of the Great War.'[67] Willa was probably the real impetus behind this decision; Edwin generally participated readily in Willa's periodic flights of fancy but spontaneous whims were alien to his own nature.

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[65] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p53)
[66] Willa Muir. 'Mrs Muir's Reminiscences.' In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

In late June, they dismantled the happy home in which their marriage had begun; distributed their furniture amongst 'impecunious friends';[68] and deposited their cat and their books with Willa's mother in Montrose. Mrs Muir was utterly horrified at the prospect of their imminent disappearance into unknown lands and probably attempted to dissuade them from this act of apparently wanton and foolhardy irresponsibility. But her protestations were in vain; Willa and Edwin embarked at Leith for Hamburg on the 31st August. Their first European adventure had begun.

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[67] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p54-5)

[68] Willa Muir. 'Mrs Muir's Reminiscences.' In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

CHAPTER V

FIRST TRAVELS. 1921-1924.

It was a turbulent crossing; and Willa and Edwin were relieved by their safe arrival in Hamburg. Their first steps onto foreign soil were greeted by a 'charming old customs officer' who 'raised his hand in dismay when he heard where we were going and implored us to stay in Germany, which was a civilised country.'[1] The Muirs laughed off his genial comments as a product of national prejudice; but must also have reflected nervously upon the utter unknown into which they were travelling. The ease of modern travel and the sense of a shrinking world make it impossible for a late twentieth century observer to understand the enormity of the Muirs' adventure; but Europe was beyond the wildest imaginings of these two innocents abroad. Edwin would never even have left Scotland had it not been for Willa's machinations; and she was now launching them headlong into another new world. Their respective accounts of these first voyagings make no mention of any nervousness; Willa later accredited their partnership with this confidence and suggested that 'because there were two of us, we came out of ourselves instead of crawling in, feeling gay and irresponsible, called to adventurous living.'[2] But they must occasionally have felt thoroughly disorientated and displaced amongst unfamiliar people and places.

They gathered their limited luggage and boarded the train to Berlin where they spent one night *en route* to Prague. At the hotel in Berlin they were ushered into an expensive and palatial 'room with a dais, as if we were royalty';[3] but were too tired and tongue-tied to plead penury. They perfunctorily and wearily explored the city; and were astonished and refreshed by the 'feeling of cheerfulness, of comfort, of contentment, especially of hope for the future, that came like a breath of fresh air after London.'[4] But their sights were set on Prague and they soon boarded another train and crossed the border into Czechoslovakia.

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[1] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p176)
[2] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p56)

Prague struck them with a sense of strangeness which they had not experienced in Germany. The language defied intuitive interpretation; and even the quest for the station exit eluded them until they 'abandoned visual aids and followed the rest of the passengers, who all trooped up Vychod; thus we began to learn the only practical method of discovering Prague, through our foot-soles, through our skins, through our noses as much as through our eyes.'[5]

Their noses directed them towards 'a rank of one-horse open carriages' where their 'driver perceived without difficulty that we were foreigners and indicated by gesture that he knew where to take us. After being carried past mosaic-paved sidewalks and fine shops with unreadable signs we were decanted not at a hotel but at a Büro. Here luck was on our side, for this was the office set up to provide accommodation for foreigners visiting the Trade Fair then being held in Prague, and our wily driver got us registered as visitors to the Fair, which procured us a hotel address and a title to a room. Our hotel was in the very heart of the Old City, near the medieval Powder Tower and the room struck us as being very grand indeed.'[6]

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[3] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p176)
[4] Edwin Muir in a letter to Lizzie and George Thorburn. In The Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p23)
[5] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p56)
[6] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p56-7)

The food in the hotel restaurant downstairs was as strange and as incomprehensible as the language and they cheerfully experimented with unfamiliar delicacies. Experience soon taught them to avoid bulls'-knees, the 'rather rank tasting mutton', Olomucky cheese and 'puddings compounded with poppy seeds': they opted instead for ham, roast goose, 'delicious thin pancakes'[7], tea with lemon and rum and the excellent and inexpensive Pilsener lager.

Hotel bills rapidly outstripped their Freeman income; and they were soon in search of accommodation elsewhere. Their first Prague lodgings were unbearably noisy and brought them into uncomfortably intimate contact with 'bed-bugs, slow-moving creatures that loved the dark and, as we soon discovered, grew bemused in the light. A Czech friend whom we told about it explained something we had found rather puzzling, that in all the private houses we had entered there was no wall-paper, merely flowery wall-paper designs stencilled in colours on bare walls. During the war, he said, Prague became infested with bugs, and it was supposed that they lived on the paste behind the wall-paper, so an order was issued that all wall-paper must be stripped off.'[8] Some resilient bugs had clearly evaded this extermination and harried the Muirs from their lodgings.

They escaped into the home of Pani Mala on the Nabrezi Legii where they remained for the remainder of their Prague sojourn. Pani Mala was a 'kind handsome, and charming woman' who lived peacably and contentedly with her pretty ten-year-old daughter, her 'ancient mother', a fat poodle and 'a maid called Marie who said, 'Ruku libam' ('I kiss your hand') every time she entered the room. . . . It was a pleasant, kind and good house, in which every one, from Marie to the old mother, seemed to be happy.'[9]

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[7] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p56-7)
[8] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p62)

This domestic felicity provided a base from which the Muirs could conduct a thorough and relaxed exploration of the people and the peculiarities of Prague. Czechoslovakia was newly independent and its capital city was vibrant with the energy of a nation 'striving tooth and nail to make this new Republic work'.[10] The Czechs' lives overflowed with inexhaustible and vigorous activity and they looked askance upon these apparently indolent foreigners who merely stood and stared.

There was much to see. They were captivated by the baroque elegance and gothic splendour of the city and by the eccentric beauty of the piled-up palaces which jostled one another on the hill of the Mala Strana. And they loved the lively cafés and cabarets; the Vltava River, the Kinsky Park and the glorious countryside with which Prague was surrounded; and the peculiar amalgam of cosmopolitan culture and peasant parochialism which mingled in this 'city of extremes, where the civilisation of the West . . . meets the civilisation of the East with a shock. Electric trams of the best Continental model run rapidly through narrow cobbled streets full of dirt and palaces: women in Turkey red peasant costumes with shawls on their heads sit in the stalls of the National Theatre: in the magnificently upholstered banks one must dawdle three hours to have a cheque cashed: and in every dish of one's exquisitely cooked dinner there are caraway seeds!'[11]

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[9] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p177)
[10] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p64)
[11] Willa Muir. 'A Woman in Prague'. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

A natural and attractive social equality co-existed with the new Czech sense of national identity; and an energising sense of freedom pervaded the atmosphere of the city and besieged the remaining 'social distinctions and snobberies'.[12] But this inherent Socialism was not complemented by an equivalent equality of gender: patriarchal attitudes were still firmly imbedded within the Czechoslovakian psyche. Willa describes this explicit sexual inequality in an article entitled 'A Woman in Prague' which is surprisingly uncritical of practices and opinions which would undoubtedly have aroused the author's ire in a British context. The article is obviously self-consciously aware of the complexities of cultural diversity and is consequently anodyne - but interesting - in its forgiving complacency.

> For example, all the unskilled heavy labour of the town is provided by women. It is not considered a man's job to carry hods of bricks, or to deliver a ton of coal up three flights of stairs. When the coal cart stops in front of a house the shawled and barefooted women sitting on the back climb down and stand patiently in the gutter while the man in charge shovels the brown coal into enormous baskets which they carry on their backs. The weight of these baskets is incredible; I have seen a Scot straining himself to lift one without budging it an inch from the ground. Every woman of the lower classes carries one as a matter of course if she goes out; full of firewood, or laundry or furniture, towering so high above her head that in the distance she is barely discernible beneath it. The weight of the basket is partly borne by the hips, but it must pull terribly on the shoulders: and it does not conduce to a graceful carriage.[13]

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[12] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p182)
[13] Willa Muir. 'A Woman in Prague'. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The article is witty, observant and pithy: but it lacks the biting edge of social satire which is integral to Willa's more successful writings.

The throng of first impressions gradually receded and the Muirs became increasingly involved in the rich and indigenous literary life of the city. Paul Selver in London had furnished them with letters of introduction to various writers including Karel Capek, who 'was a focus for much of the heady excitement in the city. He and his brother Josef, who also drew, painted, wrote poetry and plays, and Josef's wife Jarmila, who wrote children's books, lived together in a pleasant old house in the Malá Strana'.[14] The Muirs liked Capek and spent many happy hours in 'the den where so much of his work has been done, a small den, with just enough room to move from the desk to the sofa and from the sofa to the wardrobe. We pack ourselves in, light cigarettes and look at each other. Karel Capek has a fresh complexion, and at first glance appears childlike, even naïve; but when we look again we find a provocatively sly humour lurking behind that childlike eye. His manner is shy and gentle and we feel ourselves more and more at home, in spite of the difficulties caused by the fact that although he understands English he speaks it with difficulty, while our knowledge of Czech is negligable, and our German painfully inadequate. The impression of a warm and lovable personality grows stronger every minute: we begin to understand why the Capeks are regarded with such tenderness by all their acquaintances, even by those who disapprove severely of their innovations in the theatre.'[15]

Capek was a pivotal figure in the artistic renaissance which revolutionised Prague in the early years of the Republic. It was an era in which 'world theatre opened up to Czechoslovakia and Czechoslovakia opened up to world theatre'.[16] The creative excitement in Prague was palpable and the Muirs avidly revelled in the theatrical feast which Capek laid before them. They had hitherto only 'ventured once to the National Theatre to see Bajazet, not realizing that it would be presented in Czech of which we understood only three words at the end of the play announcing that Bajezet was dead, but now Karel Capek urged and insisted that we must see every new production at the Vinohrady Theatre where he had recently been made a *regisseur*.'[17]

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[14] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p58)
[15] Willa Muir. 'The Brothers Capek at Home in Prague'. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The Vinohrady specialised in the imaginative staging of both experimental and traditional drama from all over the world. Many of Capek's own dramas were successfully premiered in the theatre; but the Muirs also saw plays by Shakespeare, Molière, Alfieri, Goethe, Calderon, Marlowe, Synge, Yeats, Wilde, Ibsen, and Chekhov.

Capek and the theatre provided the Muirs with an additional incentive to learn Czech. They had already learned that their limited German was a hindrance rather than a help in conversation with the Praguers: the 'hatred for the German language was so rabid in Prague that it dumbfounded us.'[18] The indignities and violence which the Czechs had experienced at the hands of their Austrian occupiers were not easily forgotten; a residual and virulent hatred of the Hapsburg Empire still occupied Czech hearts and minds.

The Muirs accordingly enlisted the help of a language teacher; 'a Polish lady, a pale young woman with iron-grey eyes, hair tightly combed back and a grim expression.'[19] Willa diligently and proficiently accumulated a fluent working knowledge of the language and had soon 'made enough progress to read one of Capek's plays in the original, as a reward for which he presented her with another that he had just written.'[20] But Edwin never managed to get his tongue around the complexities of the multiple consonants and resolutely 'refused to believe in [Czech] as a language. Besides, his natural 'r' was the French 'r', not the Scottish, and he could not pronounce tri- or pri - , sounds that are common in Czech.'[21] He did not devote either energy or enthusiasm to his language lessons; and admitted defeat when he could make necessary purchases in shops and restaurants. His attitude in this instance is a salutory reminder of the pigheadedness and prejudice which occasionally influenced Edwin's character - and which Butter either ignores or overlooks in Edwin Muir: Man and Poet.

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[16] Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz. The Silenced Theatre: Czech playwrights without a stage. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979. (p5)
[17] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p58-9)
[18] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p58-9)
[19] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p182)

A luminous autumn faded into a bitterly cold winter. The river froze, sub-zero temperatures settled over the city, and 'the whole countryside was covered with . . . the idiot blankness of snow.'[22] The Muirs also laboured under the chill of the financial uncertainty which the routine disappearance of their precious Freeman cheques caused. A black bun which Willa's mother sentimentally sent them at Christmas time also vanished into the quagmire of postal fraud and inefficiency. 'Someone explained that Czechs had for so long regarded it is a virtue to cheat the Austrian government that they could not learn all at once not to cheat their own government. Every two months or so there was another purge of the Post Office staff; before we left Prague our cheques were coming along regularly.'[23] But in the meantime, and in the heart of a unremittingly bleak winter, they suddenly found themselves 'almost penniless, and could not afford to have a hole mended in one of

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[20] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p182)
[21] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. Chelsea, 11th November 1966.
[22] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p61)
[23] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p61)

[Willa's] street shoes, the only pair fit for outdoor winter wear.'[24] She succumbed to a severe and inevitable bout of bronchitis which further compromised their already limited resources and required them to call upon the services of an English-speaking Austrian doctor who lived upstairs. 'He had an extraordinarily calm, disillusioned, and yet pleasant manner. The War had killed his ambition; he did not think that the battle of life was worth waging; all that remained to him was a sense of honour. . . . He had no political convictions, and if any reference was made to politics he looked disgusted: he gave me more strongly than anyone else I have ever met the feeling that he had come to a place from which there was no turning back, the place which Franz Kafka says must be reached; but in the doctor's case it did not seem to be the right place, even though he would never turn back. . . . He had come to terms with a completely unsatisfactory state of things, being convinced that life itself was completely unsatisfactory.'[25] The Muirs indulged his nihilistic existentialism whilst retaining their wide-eyed idealism and their optimistic vision of the world.

Winter and the urge to dance brought the Muirs into contact with the English-speaking community which they had assiduously avoided during their initial months in the city. They became members of the Social Club in which the British congregated and enjoyed the luxury of conversing in their own language. Their lodgings soon became a tea-time haunt in which a group of their fellow countrymen and women gathered to discuss the latest literary and expatriate gossip; and the Muirs were conscious of their pleasure in a conversation in which the incessant quiver of political excitement and intrigue was absent. It was impossible to relax in Prague's atmosphere of intense and energetic activity.

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[24] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p61)
[25] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p186)

The winter cold lessened slightly in the early months of 1922 but they were 'getting impatient with the severe, prolonged winter, which was wearing us down. People assured us that Prague in spring, bowered in fruit-blossom, was enchanting, and we did not disbelieve them, yet spring even in March seemed still far away. The river, frozen solid since November, was only beginning to break up and we felt the need to see brown earth again. Perhaps we had had as much of Prague as was good for us, since it had kept us on the stretch; at any rate, in a sudden fit of impatience, we decided to go to Dresden for a weekend to see what it was like.'[26]

Spring had already arrived in Saxony and Dresden basked in a gently warming sunlight. An unexpected sense of relaxation washed across the weary Muirs and they succumbed gladly to Dresden's charms. The comparative simplicity of the German language also seemed conducive to tranquillity. They returned to Prague only to pack and to say their farewells.

They found congenial lodgings on the top floor of a long insurance building in a secluded square. 'Our spacious rooms looked over tree-tops to the Elbe and were furnished in high style with leather armchairs, an enormous flat desk at which we could both sit, and in the bedroom a Himmel-Bett adorned with cherubs. For all that we could see, the old, comfortable burgess life was still going on and the 1914 war might never have happened. Nothing in our daily routine ruffled our peace.'[27]

An interlude of blissful tranquillity ensued. The incongruous simplicity of the Saxon people compared favourably with the anxious and frenetic Czech self-consciousness; Dresden's whole 'rhythm of life was less hustling than Prague's. The city seemed self-complacent and both had and gave plenty of elbow-room. The river here was flowing through flatter, wider country, and Dresden spread itself at large, not crowded, as Prague was, between eroded heights. What lingers most in my memory of the months we spent in Dresden before going to Hellerau is the fragrance from avenues of blossoming lime trees which went to our heads as we sat in the open eating ices in mindless peace.'[28] They indulged in a leisurely and undemanding exploration of the city and its theatres, concerts and cabarets; and they spent hours on the shore of the Elbe and enjoyed 'a pleasant, vacant life, without a trace of boredom'.[29] They exulted in their own gentle companionship; and rejoiced in the imaginative awakenings which grew out of this period of peaceful and luxurious leisure. Edwin 'attempted one or two poems with indifferent success';[30] while Willa was preoccupied with an idea for a play. 'Apparently I had been so steeped in theatre during the winter in Prague that my imagination turned to play-writing as a way of embodying the making of a new world.'[31]

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[26] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p65)
[27] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p66)

Her idea centred upon a modern portrayal of the inhabitants of Noah's Ark and of their creative dilemmas in the aftermath of the flood. She envisaged 'important parts for Mrs Noah, Mrs Shem, Mrs Ham, and Mrs Japhet, but I was still trying to decide precisely what kind of man each husband should be. Shem, the father of merchant adventurers and bankers, might be a prospective City man; Ham, according to S. Augustine, the father of Zoroaster the Magician, was surely an ancestor of gipsies, musicians and artists; while

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[28] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p67)
[29] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p193)
[30] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p193)
[31] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p71)

Japhet, the father of land-grabbers and fighters, looked to me like someone in plus fours with a reddish face.'[32]

She devoted herself enthusiastically to the shaping of the plot, the delineation of the characters and to an extensive experimention with the tone and tenor of dramatic dialogue. Then she mentioned the idea to Edwin. This uncharacteristic hesitation betrays her nervousness about his reaction and the importance which she attached to his approval and support. Her fears were amply vindicted by his response.

> [T]o my dismay he did not like it at all; worse than that he was shocked by it. The mere suggestion of putting Japhet into plus fours distressed him. He objected that it simply should not be done. I did not understand why this way of using an old story should raise all his hackles, but I realised well enough that he thought it vulgar.
>
> Edwin had often enough been shocked by gay doings of mine in the past, at my taking shillings from the gas meter in Guilford Street, for instance; I had usually laughed at him and gone my own way, telling him that it was good for him to be shocked every now and then. But here I could not laugh, for I was on new ground where I felt uncertain. I had never before tried to write a play and Edwin was more experienced in writing than I was, so that his disapproval and my inability to understand it discouraged me profoundly. I am sure he did not expect me to be so downcast, for despite his gentleness he was much tougher inside than I was; had he decided to write a play, disapproval from someone else might have influenced but would not have

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[32] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p71-2)

> stopped him. Yet the conviction that he found my notion outrageous did stop me.[33]

The incident reveals some interesting aspects of the Muirs' relationship. Edwin's reaction may, as Willa suggests, have been provoked entirely by puritanical outrage; but his expressions of shock might equally have been designed to dissuade her from an exercise for which he considered her to be creatively unqualified. He often betrayed a sly and cowardly dishonesty in his pronouncements on her writings and could be hurtfully obstructive or oblique in his critical response to works which he didn't approve or applaud. An Autobiography refers briefly to Willa's play project but offers no particulars or details; and Edwin betrays no consciousness of his own destructive influence upon the work.

It is nevertheless unlikely that The Ark would ever have reached either the stage or the bookshop. Willa's faith in the project (embodied in her uncharacteristic preservation of a hoard of embryonic notes) and in her own competence as a playwright were probably misplaced. The surviving fragments of clumsy, unworkable and unconvincing dialogue reveal Willa as an inept dramatist.

> **Shem:** God. The God of my Fathers says . . .
> **Japhet:** Have you seen him yourself?
> **Mrs Shem:** Japhet!
> **Japhet:** I'm not irreverent. I'm simply not a humbug. I believe in the unseen, but I can't believe in what other people tell me about it unless it is accepted

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[33] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p72)

> by a feeling in here! (strikes his breast) Fudge for
> the God of my Fathers.[34]

But even Edwin and Willa's unsettling dissension over The Ark could not detract from their general happiness in Saxony; a period which Edwin later described as the happiest of his life. Willa's confident contentment was so complete that she could even accept 'without demur the recurrent presence of the Holmses. Holms had left the army, and his father, an Anglo-Indian martinet, then sent him to Oxford, from which he was presently sent down, whereupon his father cut him off with an allowance of two hundred and fifty pounds a year on condition that he never returned to Britain. He persuaded Dorothy Jennings, a pretty red-head, to share his fortunes abroad; . . . They turned up now in Dresden and with them we went to concerts and various shows or ate in cafés and restaurants of an evening. Apart from monologues addressed exclusively to Edwin, Holms's conversation consisted of dissertations on what was and what was not a good wine or a good dish, or who was and who was not a Great Man in Literature and the Arts. I developed the habit of listening with only half a mind.'[35] The tranquillity of Willa's mind is amply illustrated by her ability to cope so patiently with a presence which she would otherwise have found insufferable. Edwin records without irony that Holms was trying 'to make up his mind whether Wagner compared with Beethoven could be called a great man, and whether love satisfied or love unfulfilled was the better inspiration for the artist, Wagner standing for the first and Bethoven for the second.'[36] Vacuous and pretentious philosophising was usually a red rag to Willa's sarcastically bullish streak.

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[34] Willa Muir. The Ark. Notes. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[35] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p71)
[36] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p193-4)

Her patience might have waned had they not encountered A.S. Neill at a Dresden bus-stop in the early summer of 1922. Surprise and delight accompanied this chance meeting; and Neill revealed that he was 'starting a school at a place called Hellerau, some miles out of Dresden, an international school; as soon as he set eyes on [Willa] he made up his mind that [she] was the very person he needed to help him.'[37] This instantaneous decision was inevitable. Neill knew and approved Willa's teaching methods and educational attitudes; and (perhaps because she 'was never one of his flirts'[38]) had a genuine affection and admiration for her. He later observed that many 'men are afraid of the intellectual woman, the highbrow, the scholarly woman. I never was. My old platonic friend Willa Muir was a very clever woman, a match for her poet husband Edwin. But she was never unfeminine and her sense of humour saved her from being an intellectual prig.'[39]

A more selfish impulse also manifested itself in Neill's enthusiastic inclusion of Willa in his educational experiment. He had already experienced some 'difficulty in finding new staff in whom [he] could feel confidence partly because of the scarcity of qualified people committed to his way of thinking and partly because of his own insecurity in introducing men who might rival and eclipse him.'[40]

Willa was enormously excited by the Hellerau project; but she did not immediately yield to Neill's entreaties. She and Edwin first visited the school and 'at once liked the look and feel of Hellerau, a village planned for craftsmen and artists . . . with pleasant houses set irregularly on the slopes of a sandy hill among pinewoods and hedged in everywhere by fragrant sweetbrier. The buildings erected in it for Jaques Dalcroze, the originator of Eurhythmics, had lain derelict since the 1914 war, but the owner, who lived in Hellerau, wished to have them put to use again and for that purpose had formed a limited liability company to run them, made up of Hellerau residents and Neill.'[41] Edwin and Willa returned to Dresden to think over the decision; and then resolved to participate in Neill's international circus.

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[37] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p71)
[38] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. Cambridge, 5th January 1963.
[39] A.S.Neill. 'Neill! Neill! Orange Peel!' A Personal View of Ninety Years. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973. (p224)
[40] Ray Hemmings. Fifty Years of Freedom. A Study of the Development of the Ideas of A.S.Neill. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1972. (p46)

The date on which the Muirs' Hellerau residency began is uncertain and resistant to research. This period of their lives is, as Howard Gaskill observes[42], shrouded in the secrecy of inadequate documentation; it is impossible either to verify or to expand upon some of the contradictory assertions which appear in Willa and Edwin's respective memoirs. Willa questions Edwin's autumn dating of their move to Hellerau in an early draft of Belonging, and recalls that when 'we left Hellerau in the May of the following year, I remember remarking that we had been about a year there, and I still think so. I do not insist upon it, for my sense of time is unreliable and my dating may be wrong. But I remember the fragrance of the air in Hellerau on hot days when the sand burned one's footsoles and the heat drew out the strong resinous tang of the pinewoods, a memory which belongs to high summer rather than autumn.'[43] The published version of Belonging omits this chronological confusion; this detail of dating is largely irrelevant except as an illustration of the biographical difficulties inherent in researching this chapter of the Muirs' life. It seems likely that the Muirs were enjoying cheap board and lodgings in the house of Frau Doktor Neustätter (who later became Neill's first wife) by the end of June.

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[41] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p73)
[42] Howard Gaskill. 'Edwin Muir in Hellerau.' In Scottish Literary Journal. no.1, vol.11. May 1984. (p45-56)
[43] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The formidable Frau Doktor was the motivating and driving force behind Neill's Hellerau project. 'She was an Australian who had gone with her sister (the novelist Henry Handel Richardson) to study music in Leipzig and there married a Bavarian eye specialist now living in Hellerau and working for a ministry in Dresden.'[44] Her son had been one of Neill's pupils at the King Alfred School and - in the course of her enforced exile in England during a war which had caught her unawares - she had been 'fired by [Neill's] educational ideas. When the Hellerau project was mooted, she saw in it a heaven-sent chance to begin the very a.b.c of international understanding in a school run by Neill, since there was a spare wing among the Dalcroze buildings.'[45] Neill had recently been forced 'to leave the freest school in London because it wasn't free enough to tolerate me',[46] and he eagerly embraced this new educational opportunity.

> 'The whole scheme took place much as [Frau Doktor] envisaged it. The central complex, with its theatre, sun terraces and practice rooms, was the Eurhythmic college; Neill had one of the two substantial wings for an international school while the other became a German school for the village. A separate building, the Schulheim, was a residence for Neill and his pupils as well as a meeting-place for everyone at a midday meal shared in common by the Eurhythmic students and all staff. Frau Doktor, as

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[44] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p73)
[45] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p73)
[46] A.S. Neill. A Dominie Abroad. London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1922. (p64)

> everyone called her, had appointed herself housekeeper-matron for the Schulheim and everything was now in train.'[47]

The school's academic teaching team was strictly limited: Willa later objected to the terminology and the delusions of grandeur which Neill employed in his recollections of the period. He 'says: I 'joined the staff' of his school in Hellerau. I was the staff! Neill and I ran the school between us.'[48] Her slight exaggeration is understandable. Karl and Christine Baer ran the Eurhythmics college; but the only other teacher at the International School was 'the Swiss artist-craftsman, Professor Zutt. His aim in teaching handwork was to help children experience the joy of creation, of which all were capable, he thought, given the freedom to make what they wanted, learning techniques as they created, unrestrained by practice exercises. "What Zutt calls *Freude* [joy] I call interest," Neill wrote, "and although our terms are different we are completely at one in our attitude to education."'[49]

Neill had meanwhile recently realised, 'with something of a sudden shock that I am no longer interested in teaching. Teaching English bores me stiff, and teaching other subjects would also bore me stiff. All my interest is in psychology, and I fear that another man [sic] must come and be official leader of the school. The life I fancy is to go round with a pipe in my mouth, speaking to individual puils who are in any way unusually interesting psychologically.'[50] It seems likely that Willa assumed Neill's mantle as the 'leader of the school' and that she consequently bore the entire burden of the teaching curriculum. Her fascination with both teaching and psychology nevertheless probably mitigated the onerousness of the task.

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[47] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p73-4)
[48] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. Swaffham Prior, 5th January 1963.
[49] Ray Hemmings. Fifty Years of Freedom. A Study of the Development of the Ideas of A.S.Neill. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1972. (p46)
[50] A.S. Neill. A Dominie Abroad. London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1922. (p196-7)

Academic exercises were not, in any case, granted priority status within Neill's educational vision. Classes at the International School were entirely optional and the students were free to spend their days in the forests, the carpenter's shop or the Moritzberg Lake if they so wished. Discussion and debate were instituted in place of the more traditional and formal teaching methods; and psychology featured as strongly as English in the timetable. Neill 'reflected that school subjects had no particular value and should really be totally abolished. "Life is no subject, and education is life." He wanted his school to be "a school for libido not for intellect" but he was not confident that that was what they were achieving except perhaps in Zutt's workshops and Frau Baer's Eurhythmics. There was still the need to prepare children for a career, or rather to prepare them for the acquisition of qualifications that acted as passports to careers but which were largely irrelevent to the work at which the children might be aiming.'[51] Willa's academic legitimacy and formal qualifications probably represented a useful defence against the charge of educational incompetence and anarchy.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which Willa concurred with the educational liberties and freedoms of the community at Hellerau. Belonging records her appreciation of the carefree and happy ambience of Neill's venture; but it contains no hint of Willa's opinion of the school as an educational establishment. She certainly sympathised with Neill's abhorrence of the authoritarian system which they had experienced as children; but she was always staunch in her defence of the value of academic qualifications and she regularly and insistently advertised her own intellectual achievements. She may have shared some of Edwin's profound mistrust of Neill's educational philosophies; but she was convinced that 'whatever theories Neill might air, his practice with children was almost infallible.'[52]

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[51] Ray Hemmings. Fifty Years of Freedom. A Study of the Development of the Ideas of A.S.Neill. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1972. (p48)

Neill's intuitive genius for facilitating the happiness and wholeness of his pupils was the foundation upon which the school's aura of contentment was built; the individual needs of each child were addressed and answered within the context of community. It was a genuinely international assembly in which '[e]very country in Europe was represented except Spain, Italy and Russia. Three of Neill's pupils came from England, two little brothers and a girl in her early teens. In the schools and at the Schulheim dining-table the common language simply had to be German. Edwin and I soon became fluent in German since every word we learned was on active service. In Neill's school the English children and a couple of Belgians who wanted to practise their English could be dealt with in English, but the others, who, like me, were also learning German, had to be addressed in the common tongue.'[53]

The staff made every effort to treat each child as an individual with specific needs and desires. Frau Doktor was the school's mother-figure; while Neill and a 'handsome young Bavarian in the German school, the only two bachelors among so many girls, became . . . emotional centres for the "hopeless passions" which young girls seem to need for practice.'[54] Neill was aware of this danger; but he was also keen to experiment with his untried techniques of therapy. He believed that there were 'girls in the Dalcroze school who are badly in need of help.'[55] 'He was bold enough or rash enough to offer them some form of therapeutic sessions in spite of the difficulties presented by his also meeting them socially every day - having lunch with them and dancing with them in the evenings.'[56] 'Rash' is probably more appropriate than 'bold' as a description of Neill's pursuit of psychoanalysis in a context which he knew to be entirely unsuited to objectivity and professional detachment. 'The danger . . . is that if I try to help a pupil she at once has a strong transference; I become not only the substitute for father and mother, but I become a sort of Christ who helps people without thought of reward.'[57] It seems incredible that he should make such an observation and yet remain either unconscious or unconcerned about the very real dangers inherent in this 'transference'. His practice, in this instance, is either gratuitously curious or insanely egotistical; and a nauseating glee accompanies his descriptions of the more unusual cases. 'I began to treat her, and found that she had the most delightful unconscious I had ever known or read of. One day I may publish her fantasies and dreams as a valuable addition to psychological literature.'[58]

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[52] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p76)
[53] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p74)
[54] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p75)
[55] A.S. Neill. A Dominie Abroad. London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1922. (p207)

It is difficult to believe that Willa - who had the professional training in psychology which Neill lacked - entirely condoned these practices. Neill's accounts suggest that the therapy was his personal project and that Willa was therefore not actively involved: Belonging certainly makes no mention of the psychoanalytical aspect of the Hellerau system. It is possible that the discretion of friendship partially influenced her otherwise unaccountable reticence about a presumably vital aspect of the school life: Neill was very much alive and educationally active when Willa was writing Belonging and his continuing affection was vitally important to her. Alternative explanations for her silence might include the conviction of an already adequate documentation of Neill's professional activities elsewhere; or the belief that the issue was not a sufficiently pivotal factor in her Hellerau experience to warrant discussion. But these latter arguments are less persuasive and less characteristic of Willa.

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[56] Ray Hemmings. Fifty Years of Freedom. A Study of the Development of the Ideas of A.S.Neill. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1972. (p49)
[57] A.S. Neill. A Dominie Abroad. London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1922. (p207-8)
[58] A.S. Neill. A Dominie Abroad. London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1922. (p208)

But these speculative doubts about the particulars of Neill's project obviously failed to detract from her general happiness in Hellerau. The small, international community inhabited a charmed and charming world which was 'quite unaware that the climate outside was darkening. Our visitors brought us no awareness of that. . . . We made friends with many Hellerau residents, among them a Regierungsrat who took Edwin and me to visit a rich margarine manufacturer's wife in Dresden so that we could see her modern pictures; but the Regierungsrat gave us no hint that there was trouble brewing in the outside world. The Wandervögel who came into the woods at weekends with rucksacks and guitars looked like simple Saxons, apparently as carefree as we felt. The terrible inflation of the German mark was not so far away, Hitler and the Nazis were already stirring in Munich, yet we had no premonition at all.'[59]

It was perhaps a never-never land of idealistic, 'eccentric and gently permissive'[60] escapism in which its inhabitents enjoyed a joyful and carefree existence. Edwin later reflected cynically on a period during which they experienced 'a climate of "new ideas", and looked forward to a "new life" which would be brought about by the simple exercise of freedom, a freedom such as had never been formulated before in any terms, since it too was new. We were, or thought we were, without "prejudices". We "accepted" everything, no matter what it might be. We were interested in psychoanalysis, not as a scientific method but as a magical process which would deliver us from our inhibitions and leave us with a freedom all the dearer because it was beyond our imagining.'[61]

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[59] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p76-7)
[60] Howard Gaskill. 'Edwin Muir in Hellerau.' In Scottish Literary Journal. no.1, vol.11. May 1984. (pp45-56)

Hellerau's starry-eyed and optimistic idealism was probably polluted in Edwin's memory by his retrospective knowledge of later historical realities. He was also increasingly distrustful of Neill and his philosophies; and this may have coloured his recollections of a unequivocally contented epoch in his life. It is therefore probably unfair to suggest, as Butter does, that Edwin looked with a 'certain detachment at the somewhat cranky, yet agreeable, people' with whom they shared their 'gay and rather sentimental paradise'.[62] Edwin was probably as immersed in dreamlike contentment as the rest of the community; and as equally incapable of any objective assessment of his admittedly eccentric environment. Butter's analysis (which is rooted within his own prejudices against Neill's educational philosophising) also borrows Holms's wholesale disparagement of the Hellerau experiment. Holms told Kingsmill in a letter from Dresden in 1922 that he was 'fed up with cranks - I think I told you of the school at Hellerau near here - psychoanalysis is damned interesting, but with the fools who are immersed in it one has to forget that and protect oneself by humour.'[63] Holms (who was never famous for his sense of humour) was evidently eventually defeated by 'the fools': he and Dorothy left Edwin and Dresden and headed south to Italy. His departure was probably both helpful and healthful to Edwin's burgeoning creative work.

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[61] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p195)
[62] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (pp 78 and 79)
[63] John Holms in a letter to Hugh Kingsmill. In Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p83)

Hellerau may - as Holms and Butter suggest - have been populated by cranks and good-lifers; but it was nevertheless an environment in which an active and fruitful imagination was fostered and encouraged. Edwin - unfettered by financial constraint or by the burden of routine employment - was entirely free to spend his days in the woods around Hellerau with only a book, his thoughts or Ivo von Lücken for company. Howard Gaskill traces Ivo's life and his considerable influence on Edwin's poetic work in a 1979 article ('Edwin Muir's friend in Hellerau: Iwar von Lücken' in German Life and Letters); but Willa's brief description suffices here. '[Edwin] had found . . . a dear friend in Ivo von Lücken, an impoverished elderly Junker who was a poet and lived in the basement of the Schulheim on the food he got from people to whom he taught Spanish; together these two wandered in the pinewoods reading and meditating on Ivo's two favourites, Hölderlin and Kleist.'[64]

Willa blamed herself in hindsight for the extent to which she used Edwin's friendship with Ivo as a justification for her devotion to the school rather then to her husband; but this unjustified self-flagellation does not detract from the artistic importance of the hours which Edwin spent in Ivo's company. This was the period during which he began to experiment with his Chorus of the Newly Dead, 'in which the dead were to look back at the life they had left and contemplate it from their new station. The idea greatly moved me, but my imaginative excitement never managed to communicate itself, or at best now and then, to the poem'.[65] Edwin wrongly assigned the birth of this work to the later Sonntagberg sojourn: it is a mis-memory which perhaps manifests his retrospective reaction against the Edenic idealism of the Hellerau period.

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[64] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p75)

[65] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p218)

The whole ethos of the school community was an ambience in which ideas and imaginings (albeit occasionally wild, wonderful and off-the-wall) were rife, respected and readily discussed. Evenings at the Waldschänke (the local inn) were often abuzz with lager-lubricated and eager intellectual debate as well as with the more traditional pastimes of laughter, music and dancing.

But life in the Schulheim was occasionally suffocatingly intense and intimate: escape was sometimes necessary. Willa and Edwin spent an enjoyable couple of weekends exploring Berlin's theatres, cabarets, literature and art; and they returned with strong 'personal impressions of likes and dislikes but no understanding of that feverish city.'[66] Oberammergau (where they went to see the Passion Play) was infinitely more appealing and attractive to them.

They went on a walking tour during the 1923 Easter vacation along the Bohemian Frontier with Frau Doktor and two of the Eurhythmic students, 'little Nushi from Budapest, who was a general pet, and Gerda, a South German, with dark bobbed hair framing a thin face and large, expressive dark eyes.'[67] Gerda's involvement in this holiday venture seems fraught (in the light of later events) with foreboding; that week was perhaps the breeding ground for the unsuspected and 'hopeless passion' which almost destroyed the Muirs' marriage. It is ironic that the only surviving account of the trip is an exuberant and linguistically eclectic outpouring from Gerda's pen. It is entitled 'Familie Pierrie Pig's Ausflug: Eine lustige Geschichte in Wort and Bild' and it records the adventures and 'the disconcerting effect which the quirky appearance and behaviour of the group seems to exercise on the local inhabitants of the places through which they pass. Everywhere they seem to be stared or laughed at, but, unconcerned, carry on their merry way:

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[66] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p77)
[67] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p78)

But oh goodness und potzdaus,
Sehn wir denn so komisch aus?
Nein, wie ist das bloody dumm,
Alle Leute sehn sich um.
Doch wir ziehn fidel und heiter
Lustig unsres Weges weiter.'[68]

Gerda's competent poetic bilingualism also found an outlet in her translation into German of some of Edwin's earliest and least distinguished poems. This work was not merely the secret labour of an adoring and lovesick teenager; it also enlisted Edwin's active collaboration and hours of his company. Gerda clearly enjoyed a 'youthful empathy with Edwin's dreams and visions, as they were to be articulated in his poems. It seems natural that he appreciated, even needed, the encouragement of such a response, tinged as it was with an element of hero-worship. It was not something which, at the time, Willa was able to give (nor could it be reasonably expected of her). Gerda Liebrecht, in her self-deprecatory fashion, plays down her role here, and suggests that her enthusiastic echoing of Edwin's inspirations led him perhaps to see more in her than was really there.'[69] Gerda's later declaration of love (for which Edwin almost sacrificed his marriage) is therefore not as unexpected and surprising as Willa's Belonging account of events suggests.

The only obvious storm clouds over Hellerau were national, economic and political. French and Belgian forces occupied the Ruhr in the early days of

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[68] Howard Gaskill. 'Edwin Muir in Hellerau.' In Scottish Literary Journal. no.1, vol.11. May 1984. (pp45-56)

[69] Howard Gaskill. 'Edwin Muir in Hellerau.' In Scottish Literary Journal. no.1, vol.11. May 1984. (pp45-56)

1923[70] and 'effectively stifled the hope of healing the bitterness of defeated Germany.'[71] The national sense of anger, injustice and humiliation was moreover disproportionately heightened by the 'gross error in psychology'[72] which the French committed in deploying 'black' Algerian troops.

These first rumblings of discontent were accompanied by the rapid devaluation of the German mark and the dissolution of the national economy in an almost fantastic process which ultimately 'ceased to be economics and passed into the realm of phantasmagoria.'[73] 'On the day the Armistice was signed . . . on November 11th, 1918, the German mark stood at 7.45 to the dollar. Five years later, in November of 1923, the German mark stood at 4,210,5000,000,000 to the dollar - four trillion, two hundred and ten billion, five hundred million.'[74]

Neill had invested all of his savings in the Hellerau venture and was rendered virtually bankrupt by this unforeseen economic landslide: the Muirs (whose income was in dollars and pounds) were meanwhile delivered into unwelcome affluence. 'The dearer everything became for our friends the cheaper it was for us. We began taking people into Dresden by the half-dozen, to the best restaurant, the Königsdiele, knowing that whatever they ordered, let them begin with champagne cocktails and finish with *omelette surprise*, the bill would not amount to more than ninepence a head. Our usual cigarettes from the village shop, Avramikos, excellent Virginia cigarettes from

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[70] Erich Eyck. A History of the Weimar Republic. Volume 1 From the Collapse of the Empire to Hindenburg's Election. Translated by Harlan P. Hanson and Robert G.L. Waite. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962. (p232)

[71] Ray Hemmings. Fifty Years of Freedom. A Study of the Development of the Ideas of A.S.Neill. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1972. (p57)

[72] A.S. Neill. A Dominie Abroad. London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1922. (p13)

[73] Richard Hanser. Prelude to Terror. The Rise of Hitler 1919-1923. London: Granada Publishing Limited, 1971. (p304)

[74] Richard Hanser. Prelude to Terror. The Rise of Hitler 1919-1923. London: Granada Publishing Limited, 1971. (p304)

Hamburg, came down to seventeen a penny while friends of ours were buying them by twos and threes. . . . In the Dresden market-place prices were changed every hour, then every half-hour, then every ten minutes. A man would cram his week's wages into a suitcase and then run full tilt to the market-place, hoping that he might still have enough to buy a dinner for his family.'[75] The Saxon ambience became increasingly uncomfortable - and Edwin and Willa's guilt and shame gradually overwhelmed them. 'Whatever we did, handing out cigarettes, wine, food, amounted to very little compared with the flood of catastrophe that was coming from outside . . . . Feeling like cowards we decided to run away.'[76]

Holms was the unlikely knight in shining armour whose timely intervention rescued them from the nightmare which Hellerau had become. He and Dorothy had taken a small seaside lodge in the northern Italian village of Forte dei Marmi: their own funds were insufficient to meet the rent and they asked the Muirs to join them for the summer and share the expense. Edwin felt duty bound to answer this cry for help; and Willa grudgingly agreed that it was their opportunity for escape.

Their relief was tempered by the sadness of parting from good friends and happy memories. The community gathered to wish them well and to wave them off; and Gerda, Nushi and Jeju escorted them to the station. 'Gerda was hanging on to Edwin's arm, Nushi to mine, while Jeju from Helsinki on my other side was explaining that she was not going to give me her address, which I would certainly lose or forget, but was going to tell me how to find her in a way I would not forget.'[77] The excited babble of schoolgirl voices which washed around Willa deafened her to Gerda's passionate declaration of her love for Edwin. They were both emotionally drained by the time they boarded the southbound train.

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[75] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p79)
[76] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p79)
[77] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p80)

Edwin was increasingly hot and headachy as they travelled. When the train eventually crossed the border into Italy and stopped at the little station at Riva, they decided that they could go no further and instead would rest and await his recovery. They booked themselves into a pleasant hotel beside Lake Garda and began a gentle exploration of the surrounding countryside by foot, by water and in a carrozza.

Edwin's headache continued to torment him and he irritably refused to accept Willa's attempts to comfort or to minister to him. She was increasingly affected both by the contagion of his misery and by the desolating absence of emotional communication. They visited Sirmione on the third day; but it 'was a day of more acute misery, since I felt not only the absence of loving vibrations from Edwin but waves of silent hostility. I saw the drifts of poppies among the olives trees on Sirmione through a haze of unhappiness which the thought of unhappy Catullus did not alleviate, and by the time we came back to our room in the hotel I was desperate and asked Edwin urgently: "Peerie B, my lamb, *what is it?*"'[78]

His response shattered her confidence in the intrinsic goodness of the world. He told her that Gerda had confessed her love for him and that he wanted to return to Hellerau to be with her. 'A man couldn't just abruptly go away and leave a woman who said she loved him; it wasn't a thing anyone should do. He must go back to Gerda.'[79]

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[78] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p82)
[79] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p82)

Willa fled to the solitude of the lakeside where she could 'howl and roar over the unheeding waters of Garda. Edwin couldn't leave Gerda, but he could leave me.'[80] The hours passed in a grey dream; and she wandered obsessively backwards and forwards along the shore until nightfall. She then realised that she 'was sopping wet from the knees down. By the time I turned back to the hotel I had lost all confidence in myself, in Edwin, and in the Universe, but I knew what had to be done. If Edwin wanted to go back to Gerda, he must go, by tomorrow morning's express.'[81]

This apparently passive acceptance is incomprehensible. Willa described it as a 'compound of self-respect and desperation'[82]: her four day hell had convinced her that it would be unbearable to live with Edwin if his heart was elsewhere. But it is also possible that her magnaminous concession was inspired by the guilt which early drafts of Belonging describe.

> I walked at the edge of the lake, beginning to reflect by fits and starts over where I must have gone wrong in our relationship . . .
> . . . I had been taking our marriage too much for granted as if it were a static absolute, while it was really a process changing like life itself from day-to-day and needing as much attention as any other process; . . . [83]

A degree of calculated cunning also undoubtedly informed her decision; she could probably predict Edwin's reaction to any response she might make.

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[80] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p82)
[81] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p82)
[82] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p83)
[83] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

She returned to their hotel room and informed Edwin that he was free to go to Gerda if he wished; but that she would need some money and the means to obtain a passport. 'Edwin stretched out his arms towards me and cried: "Peerie Willa!" Then he began to sob. I flew to him, wet feet and all, and we clung to each other for comfort. There was no barrier. The Edwin I knew had come back. In the middle of it he asked me to forgive him, and I surprised myself by saying that True Love never found any *need* to forgive; forgiveness was irrelevant and superfluous.'[84]

Willa claimed that they never again referred to Gerda. This is simply not true: their thoughts and conversations returned to those agonising Lake Garda days as Edwin expanded The Story and the Fable into An Autobiography thirty years later. And Willa was profoundly hurt and frustrated again by Edwin's unwillingness to include the episode in a work which purportedly recorded his life.[85]

The matter did not dissipate in the euphoria of Willa's immediate relief. The summer of 1923 was fraught with the tentative reconstruction of their shattered world. Edwin could not immediately banish the deserted Gerda from his thoughts and Howard Gaskill describes a later love letter in which Edwin expressed his reciprocal emotions and his willingness to return if she wished.

> Nothing had prepared [Gerda] for the discovery that feelings which she had kept secret until the last moment were reciprocated. The prospect of what had been an innocent and

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[84] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p83)

[85] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews. See Newbattle chapter for a discussion of the impact of this re-opening of old wounds.

> harmless infatuation turning into something considerably more serious filled Gerda with understandable alarm, and she turned for advice to Frau Dr Neustätter. . . . Together they agreed that Edwin should be gently told to stay with Willa (of whom Gerda was also very fond). Gerda wrote to him suggesting that it was best to regard the Hellerau days as a beautiful interlude, something cherished in memory, and that he should write to her no more.[86]

Gaskill offers no date for Edwin's love letter and it is therefore impossible to determine whether his commitment to Gerda outlived the crisis at Lake Garda. Willa's knowledge - or otherwise - of this letter's despatch is also left uncharted; but she was presumably unaware of its existence.

It was a fortunate ignorance; her already fragile emotions were ill-equipped to survive another blow. In the ensuing weeks, her 'confidence in Edwin was partly restored, my confidence in myself not very much, my confidence in the Universe not at all. I could not forget the utter indifference of the lake and the mountains when I was in agony. I had told myself then that I could no longer "kid" myself about having a special relation to the Universe, and I still held by that. I had discovered that if Edwin and I did not Belong together, I now Belonged nowhere.'[87] She was prostrated by this startling and sudden dissolution of certainties and she never fully recovered her unquestioning faith in the goodness of the world.

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[86] Howard Gaskill. 'Edwin Muir in Hellerau.' In Scottish Literary Journal. no.1, vol.11. May 1984. (pp45-56)

[87] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p83)

Nor now was her confidence in Edwin a simple absolute. A scrawled contemporary story records her indeterminate misery and fears during a weekend without Edwin.

> Last night in the darkness I myself was melodramatic as I lay in bed, and melodramatic tears wetted my pillow, simply because the darkness was heavy and black, because I was alone, because we owe money and have very little, because my husband might fall in love with somebody else, because I cried out and nobody heard me. Was that myself? No, for I upbraided it, and deliberately lit a candle and read a book until I myself laid those tearful ghosts to rest. Was it not myself? It could not have been anybody else. What, then, am I?
>
> At any rate, last night in my moment of triumph over myself, I did not care whether my husband loved me or not, whether I loved him or not; the only thing I cared for was that he existed, that he was, and that I existed, that I was, and that a relationship between us should continue indissolubly, whatever should companion it, tenderness or irritation, hatred or love, happiness or despair, success or failure.[88]

Belonging minimises the pain and fear which she suffered during this period of re-adjustment. Her description of their southward journey to Forte dei Marmi and of her renewed consciousness of the beauty of the landscape is a consciously brave refusal to acknowledge the agony and wariness of her heart. Edwin was also unhappy and uneasy. He 'could not come to terms with [the Italian landscape] or with the combination of nature and art which the Italians embody in their lives and the contour of their faces. Coming for the first time to the South, I was repelled by the violence of the colours, the sea like a solid lake of blue paint, the purple sky, the brown earth: to my unaccustomed eyes the contrasts seemed crude and without mystery.'[89] He offers no real explanation - other than aesthetics - for his repulsion against the strong colours which surrounded him; but Willa associated this dislike of his world with his displeasure with himself.

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[88] Willa Muir. 'The Weekend'. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The lodge at Forte dei Marmi was not an easy environment in which to patch up a marriage. The constant and claustrophobic presence of the Holmses ensured a very public arena and imposed an additional and unneccessary restraint upon the Muirs. The Holmses had also already requisitioned the best accommodation and dictated the daily routine in the lodge by the time the Muirs arrived.

Casa Pellizze was a pretty little house with the beautiful bay of Viareggio for a garden. The Muirs spent long, lazy hours on the beach under a sun of drowsy contentment; and when the heat became unbearable, they simply retired to the shade of the garden and produced the articles which were the bread-and-butter of this leisured existence. Edwin worked on his Freeman column; and Willa wrote some short stories and sketches about Prague and Hellerau which were unceremoniously returned to her by the publishers to whom she sent them.

Life at the Casa Pellizze assumed a blissful monotony. Lunch was prepared and served under the shade of a pergola by a beautiful Etruscan girl whose classical features bewitched Willa. In the evening they walked the mile into Forte dei Marmi where they dined at a local restaurant and drank 'the excellent full-bodied local wine, called simply vino nero; perhaps it was the same kind of Carrara wine Pliny praised so much.'[90]

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[89] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p195)

Holms routinely subjected his captive audience to various dissertations and diatribes at dinner-time. A heat induced torpor apparently silenced him during the day; but the cool of the evening revived him and 'he could not resist the temptation of acting as a benevolent Virgilian guide and making us see everything with his more expert eyes. His tone at these moments was indulgently authoritative, and I can still hear him, as he gazed at a particular effect of light one calm evening, saying pensively, while he plucked at his beard: 'It's pure Leonardo da Vinci.' '[91] His arrogant, pretentious and dogmatic monopolism drove Willa to distraction; but her objections were self-censored by her fear of upsetting the fragile equilibrium of her relationship with Edwin. She was even able to respond with admirable good-humour to Holms's suggestion that her tardiness in washing and darning Edwin's sock reflected a general neglect of her husband's creature comforts! And, during a short hiking holiday in the Carrara mountains, she discovered that both Holms and Dorothy were easier and more pleasant company when they were on the move. But this new-found and entirely external tolerance did not detract from her heart-felt contempt and disgust for Holms; nor from her scorn for Dorothy.

August brought a letter from F.G. Scott inviting Edwin to join him in Salzburg for a fortnight at a music festival. Edwin suggested that he and Willa should spend a week in Florence from where he could travel on to Austria while she returned to Forte dei Marmi and coped alone with the hysteria and turmoil which were the perennial trademarks of the Holms' relationship.

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[90] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p86)
[91] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p206)

The Florence trip was not a complete success. They were enchanted with the city; but Edwin was plagued by terrifying and violent nightmares which he attributed to a possible episode in the historic unconscious of their hotel. But Willa 'could not help wondering whether it might also be a therapeutic dream, a vehicle for ridding Edwin of repressed hatred, but I did not suggest this to him since I could not tell whether it might be hatred of me, or of himself, and had no wish to stir up these possibilities.'[92] Her residual insecurity about the relationship is embodied in this uncharacteristic reticence.

An abrupt change in the weather greeted Edwin on his return from Salzburg and a flood of rain washed away the remnants of an endless summer. Willa was relieved by her reunion with Edwin and she realised that he 'was as glad to see me as I was to see him; he seemed very nearly himself again.'[93] He had been utterly captivated by the charms of Salzburg and he wanted to share his enthusiasm with Willa. Austria would be their next destination.

They experienced an immediate sense of harmony as they arrived in Salzburg in early October. It was a new environment which offered them a fresh beginning and an escape from a cloudy past; and which also released them from the oppressive presence of Holms. Willa described this period as one of resolution and consolidation; one during which they looked back on the Gerda incident as something 'important in our marriage, helping it to become a more conscious partnership; it had in a way wakened us up, so that we were now looking at each other with the opened eye of the mind. Fortunately, we each liked what we saw.'[94] But this unreasonably sage pronouncement evidently owed more to the hindsight of forty years than of four months. In Salzburg they probably experienced the mellowing of hurt through the passage of time rather than the absolute healing which is the product of forgetfulness.

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[92] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p90)
[93] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p91)
[94] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p93)

The Muirs' enduring love affair with Salzburg was initiated during these few short months in the autumn and the early winter of 1923. They were thrilled by the delicious incongruity of baroque grandeur and peasant humour in the city; and by the sort of liberating permissiveness which they encountered at the municipal baths. 'No one asked us to prove that we were married; we were passed at once into a large room in which a spacious bath was sunk, a warm little swimming pool edged with marble; beside it a sofa and two armchairs stood waiting round a coffee table. We had only to ring for coffee or beer or cigarettes, wrapped in huge towels as we lounged, a most comfortable arrangement which we naturally decided was "very Austrian".'[95]

They paid an early December visit to the spa town of Badgastein where one of Willa's erstwhile colleagues from Brancepeth was now living with her husband. Badgastein, with its blanket of new-fallen snow, resembled a magic world of Christmas card beauty with which the Muirs were immediately enchanted; but this fairy tale was not exempt from the traditional scary 'baddie'. The sixth of December is the feast of Saint Niklaus in the Germanic countries; the Muirs 'went with our host, got up as Santa Claus, on a round of visits among neighbouring families; he was accompanied also by two Krampuses, attendant devils with blackened faces, great antlers on their heads and yards of clanking heavy chains round their middles and in their hands. They were only local young men dressed for the part but they looked sinister enough and sounded more so as they roared and rattled their chains.

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[95] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p94)

I asked what the Krampuses were for and was told: 'to frighten naughty children'.'[96] It was not an experience which Edwin and Willa particularly enjoyed; they recoiled instinctively from the concept of obedience by intimidation and from the survival of this residual demonology. Later, when they reflected upon their recollections of this period, they associated the Nazi regime with the Austrian culture of terror-based discipline.

December deepened and Christmas approached: the Muirs made for Vienna. Neill (who had moved his International School into Austria in the aftermath of the Communist Putsch in Saxony) had recommended a cheap hotel from which they could seek more permanent lodgings; and they soon discovered that they had inadvertently ensconced themselves in the heart of the city's Jewish quarter. Willa's stock of prejudices did not include anti-Semitism and she was genuinely shocked by the forcible segregation of the Viennese Jews into ghettos. They had encountered the Austrian obsession against the Jews in Salzburg; but the bigotry and the intolerance of their Viennese acquaintances 'seemed more shocking than the gutter insults of the Salzburg Iron Broom because it was fully conscious, buttressed by would-be intellectual arguments. Something as absurd as the Russian Protocols of Zion must have been the basis of their insane logic. They proved to us that all subversive minds were Jewish, therefore Bernard Shaw was of course a Jew and, equally of course, Ramsay MacDonald. Bernard Shaw was a red-head as well, clearly a Judas type.'[97] But this anti-Semitic mind-set seemed so self-evidently ridiculous that the Muirs chose to ignore it.

They located suitable lodgings by Christmas and enjoyed the festive celebrations. Even their annual bout of Christmas homesickness was presumably mitigated by the hope that they would 'be back in Scotland to stay next summer. We'll try and get a small cottage in the Pentlands, not far from Edinburgh'.[98]

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[96] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p96)
[97] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p98)

They were meanwhile determined to enjoy the pleasures, gaiety and glitter of 1920s Vienna; the city's rich tradition of theatre and opera was a revelation to them. They heard the whole of The Ring and decided that they were 'not destined to become Wagner addicts'[99]; they thrilled to Mozart; and they 'attended a performance of Toller's Der Deutsche Hinkemann, where the whole theatre, not only the stage, provided the melodrama, since the audience was tense with apprehensive expectation that some German Nationalist would loose off a revolver at the actors, as duly happened.'[100] And they decided, as they waltzed the night away at a ball in the Redouten-Saale, that Vienna was infinitely more civilised than Berlin.

It was a city in which they felt that they belonged and they therefore 'tried to do as the Viennese did. While the snow was still on the ground we went to Baden for a week to practice ski-ing and progressed as far as being able to avoid a tree without falling down.'[101] They were also initiated into various literary circles; and were soon accepted as regulars in a restaurant on the Alser-Strasse where they lunched each day with a group of American writers.

The idyll ended abruptly at Easter 1924 when a letter from The Freeman announced that its current edition would be its last. The Muirs were saddened by the demise of a periodical which they genuinely respected; but they were more immediately concerned with the practical problem of economic survival. Their residual funds were insufficient either to return them to Britain or to support them in Vienna; Neill and his school on the Sonntagsberg were their last resort. And Neill of course responded to Willa's plea for help by warmly offering them board and lodgings at the school until such time as they could find an alternative means of earning a living.

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[98] Edwin Muir in a letter to Lizzie and George Thorburn. Vienna, 20th December 1923.
[99] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p98)
[100] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p101)
[101] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p101)

Spring was breaking across the lower reaches of the Sonntagberg when the Muirs arrived in the little town of Rosenau at the mountain's foot; but the snows of winter still surrounded the school at the summit. The yellow-stuccoed ex-monastery in which Neill and his pupils were now housed could be reached only at the end of a two hour scramble up slippery mountain tracks. It was a lofty rural isolation which seemed initially to offer a veritable 'paradise for children'.[102] Winter offered the pleasures of ski-ing and tobogganing; while summer promised fragrant mountain fields and the cool of the village pond. Edwin and Willa were enchanted with this 'paradise' and were free to explore the surrounding buildings and countryside: Neill had already procured an assistant teacher (a Welshwoman who was referred to as 'Jonesie') and Willa was therefore not needed in a teaching capacity.

The Wallfahrtskirche which neighboured the school was a church of pilgrimage to which the faithful flocked during the 'idle time between the hay and the corn harvest.'[103] The first batch of pilgrims arrived in April with their bands and their bedding. 'Their reception by the officiating priest varied according to the fee paid, so the caretaker told us. For the larger fee priest and acolytes went as far as the pond to meet the pilgrims; for the smaller fee they merely stood waiting at the head of the church flight of steps, which the more pious pilgrims ascended on their knees. Neill is my authority for stating that the whole pilgrimage knocked four hundred days off Purgatory. I cannot help feeling that this may be an over-estimate.'[104]

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[102] A.S. Neill in The New Era. In Ray Hemmings. Fifty Years of Freedom. A Study of the Development of the Ideas of A.S.Neill. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1972. (p58)
[103] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p217)

It was an incongrous environment for a 'free' school. The passing months brought an antipathy of interest between Neill and the local community and the idyll was increasingly polluted by suspicion and mistrust. 'The first overt act of hostility was the filling of the village pond with broken glass and crockery, so that our pupils had to go all the way down to the river Ybbs for a swim. From the caretaker Neill then learned that the village accused us of indulging in illicit sexual relations between pupils and teachers; pupils had been seen, they said, climbing naked over the balconies into staff bedrooms. The next stage must have been a complaint lodged in some local office of the Education Ministry, for one day a gendarme arrived with a fixed bayonet and a questionnaire for Neill to answer'.[105]

The fault was not entirely on the side of the villagers; they were simple peasant people with a limited experience and knowledge of the wider world. Liberal and cosmopolitan minds often recoiled from Neill's unconventional educational methods; it was therefore inevitable that the natives of the Sonntagberg would look askance upon Neill and his international circus and would treat them with deep mistrust. The unsympathetic and disrespectful attitude which Neill adopted in his dealings with his mountain neighbours was moreover profoundly culpable and shamefully imperialist. He made no allowance for the fears of a pious people who were suddenly forced to share their lives with a group of half-naked 'aliens who never went to church and were certainly heretics if not altogether godless.'[106]

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[104] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p105)
[105] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p108)
[106] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p108)

Neill's own description of the Sonntagberg exploits of his pupils is a sufficient explanation for the hatred and hostility of the village people. 'The church had stone saints all around and when the pilgrims came from all over Catholic Europe our English pupils used to give the saints haloes by shining broken mirrors at them. There was much crossing of themselves by visitors and, when the children's trick was discovered, I wondered why we were not lynched, for the peasants were the most hateful people I ever came across.'[107] Such profound insensitivity to other cultural traditions and life-blood beliefs almost merits a thorough lynching!

The Muirs had meanwhile been delivered from their financial troubles by a cable from 'Ben Huebsch, the publisher in New York, asking if we would translate three of Gerhart Hauptmann's plays into English blank verse at a hundred dollars a play. We returned an answer of two words, all we could afford: Yes, Muir.'[108] It was, as Edwin ruefully reflected, 'the beginning of a period when we turned ourselves into a sort of translation factory'[109]; but it was work for which Willa knew herself to be competent and 'well-trained in accuracy . . . and that was all to the good, for Edwin's interpretations tended to be wild and gay.'[110] Edwin's hatred of the actual Hauptmann plays hampered him still further and he complained in a letter to Sydney Schiff that 'it has not been the labour which has exhausted us so much as the stupidity of the original.'[111] A more probable reason for this self-professed exhaustion was the incredible rapidity with which they worked: they had completed the translation of all three plays when they left Austria in early July 1924.

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[107] A.S.Neill. 'Neill! Neill! Orange Peel!' A Personal View of Ninety Years. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973. (p120)
[108] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p106)
[109] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p217)
[110] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p106)
[111] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. Sonntagberg, June 1924. British Library, London.

The end of the summer term brought the school's Sonntagburg sojourn to a close. Neill and Frau Doktor had decided to transport the whole operation to England where they eventually found suitable accommodation in a house called Summerhill at Lyme Regis. Willa and Edwin meanwhile also 'felt it was time to look at the English scene again'[112] and, as high summer broke over the continent, they turned their heads towards home. Their 'first European adventure had come to an end.'[113]

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[112] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p109)
[113] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p109)

CHAPTER VI

CREATIVITY AND CRISIS: MONTROSE, PENN AND MENTONE.

1924-1927.

The forgotten noise and enormity of London took them by surprise: the foreign cities in which they had spent the past three years had seemed less intimidating and claustrophobic. Edwin craved the recognition of the London literati; but they both recoiled in horror from the prospect of living in this large and anonymous city. And yet it was an unexpected relief to be surrounded by the voices of their mother tongue and to be able to understand - instantly and without effort - the surrounding buzz of conversation. The insistent urging of Edwin's internal compass now pointed them northwards to Scotland: but they paused briefly for a happy reunion with Denis Saurat who was now living and working at the French Institute in London; and for a first encounter with Violet and Sydney Schiff.

The invigorating affection and hospitality which the Muirs received in the Schiff's Chesham home was a pleasant revelation. The friendship had been contracted in the wake of a book review for The Freeman in which Edwin had naively welcomed Schiff's Prince Hempseed as the promising work of a new, young writer. Schiff - a wealthy and comparatively well-known author in his late fifties - had reacted with amused tolerance to this innocent faux pas; but had been impressed by Edwin's otherwise astute critical commentary. He expressed his appreciation in a letter which Edwin received during the impoverished Sonntagberg sojourn and he had thereafter offered to provide the Muirs with accommodation - at his expense - near his Buckinghamshire home. Willa and Edwin declined this generous offer and its uncomfortable implications of patronage: they later enlisted the assistance of the Schiffs in finding, but never in funding, a house.

Willa was profoundly and enduringly affected by her first encounter with Violet and Sydney and by the intense intellectual and creative energy which they generated. 'My first impression of them was how highly finished they were, compared to us, in dress, manner, sophistication and experience; we must seem very unfinished to them, I thought; but the warmth, the glow of kindness they met us with, brought us out of ourselves to an uncommon degree. Edwin's conscious personality which had seemed luminous in Vienna was now more than luminous; it coruscated. He and Sydney lit each other up. I marvelled at the passion driving each of them as they discussed the making of works of art, the transmutation of experience into structures which they saw as crystalline and immortal. They were both agreed on the need to detach oneself from emotion, and here I could not follow them, for I could never detach myself from my emotions and rise into their invisible world of art. But I was exhilarated by the invisible fireworks they were setting off and at the same time calmed and steadied by Violet, a poised and beautiful woman with far-seeing eyes.'[1]

The conversation was of the self-consciously 'literary' mode which Wyndham Lewis later mocked in his sketch of the Schiffs and their 'set' in The Apes of God;[2] but to the un-worldly and surprisingly naïve Muirs, it was a thrilling 'first glimpse of a world we had never entered. The Schiffs, it appeared, knew all the literary figures of our age, *tout Londres* as well as *tout Paris*. . . . This was a quickening experience for Edwin. When we left Chesham he was full of what he called a "surge of ideas", about the volume of literary essays he was compiling'.[3] Willa's imagination and intellect were also energised by her conversations with the Schiffs and she began some preliminary work on an essay about her inability to detach herself from her emotions; and the possibility that this characteristic might be common to all women.

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[1] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p112-3)

[2] Wyndham Lewis. The Apes of God. (Part IX - 'Chez Lionel Kein, Esq.') Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984. (First published in 1930)

The Schiffs were perhaps primarily important to Willa for emotional rather than for intellectual reasons. The obvious intimacy of the Schiff's relationship possibly helped to restore her shaken faith in her own marriage; and to encourage her hope of a stable and enduring future with Edwin. A draft passage of Belonging (which was excluded from the final version) expresses her timid optimism 'that the bond between [Violet] and Sydney was like the bond between us two. This was a strong encouragement to me; I drew comfort from actually seeing that a married partnership could be both loving and intelligent, a fusion of head and heart, as I had always dreamed it should be.'[4] The wounds of the Gerda incident obviously festered still.

The Schiffs' legacy of buoyant enthusiasm and excitement travelled northwards to Montrose with Edwin and Willa; but dissipated rapidly amidst the realities of small-town Scotland. The Montrose of the 1920s was apparently devoid of the living culture of art, literature, theatre, philosophy, psychology and music to which the Muirs had become accustomed during their European wanderings. They craved kindred spirits and bemoaned the lack of a 'human ambience, vibrations of understanding from the people around us, the responses of a cultured environment. Edwin and I did not Belong, except to each other. . . . None of my mother's friends in Montrose were interested in the arts. Edwin's conscious intellectual life at this time was strengthening and reaching out, so that he was very aware of his need for stimulation, and after the soaring discourses he had enjoyed with Sydney Schiff the flatness of people's minds in Montrose depressed him.'[5] His misery and a suffocating sense of entrapment rapidly rendered him bitter and verbally aggressive; he told Sydney that 'Scotland has been a sad disappointment to us after all the longing we had for it, so shut in, unresponsive, acridly resolved not to open out and live. For our sake we shall not live here for long, not more than two months I think, if we can help it.'[6] This longed-for escape to the civilised south was intensified in September when Leonard Woolf accepted First Poems for publication by the Hogarth Press.

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[3] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p113)
[4] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft Version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Willa didn't share this profound despair and disappointment; her childhood memories bound her to a Montrose of the imagination and protected her from the barren blast of her present experience. 'The great round of sky, the wide links with their stretches of thyme and eyebright, the wild North Sea beating on sand dunes held together by tough pink liquorice and marram grass, were still as I remembered them; was it not a setting where the wind of the spirit had freedom to blow?'[7] She reverted to the hairbrained pastimes of her youthful exuberance and introduced Edwin to the pleasures of the golfcourse and the beach as a therapeutic release from the daily grind of translating Hauptmann or of working on her essay about the nature of womanhood. She was aware of her mother's generosity in accommodating them and in providing a space and an ethos in which they could work on their respective projects: Edwin may have bemoaned the creatively unconducive atmosphere of Montrose but he nevertheless managed to write regular reviews for The Nation and Athenaeum; to complete the literary essays which appeared as

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[5] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p114)
[6] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. Montrose, 2nd August 1924. British Library, London.
[7] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (P114)

Transition; and to make considerable progress with The Chorus of the Newly Dead.

Willa could never be happy if Edwin was not. A return to old haunts and habits promised a contentment which was never realised because of the extent to which Edwin's misery and disappointment impinged upon her fragile emotional state. Her impressions of the six month period which they spent in Montrose between the July and the Christmas of 1924 were apparently so clouded with despair that she utterly excised them from her memory. The first draft of Belonging contains no mention of the Montrose interlude: her second draft correction of the dating was prompted by the intervention of Peter Butter (who was engaged in research for his biography of Edwin); and by Sir Edward Beddington Behrens's chance offer of access to the Schiff/Muir correspondence. Willa told Peter Butter that '[w]hat I had done in my memory was to expunge entirely six months we spent in Montrose before going to Penn, after we got back from Austria. I did not know that my bias against Scotland amounted to flagrant cheating like that.'[8] This is, of course, Willa's typically psychologised reading of the inevitable lapses of memory which insinuate themselves into a time gap of almost forty years.

Nor are the Muirs entirely fair or accurate in their portrayal of Montrose as a cultural desert; there can then have been few more artistically vibrant places in Scotland. Christopher Grieve (alias Hugh MacDiarmid) had recently been appointed to the editorship of The Montrose Review and was busily establishing the town as the focus for his nascent Scottish Renaissance movement. He was committed to the rejuvenation of a Scottish national identity; and aggressive in his incitements of creativity in those writers, poets, musicians and artists whom he believed were pivotal to his cause. 'He and his fellow-Borderer, F.G. Scott, had already started the ferment of poetry and music with which they meant to regenerate Scotland, then slipping, they felt, into a moribund provincialism. Christopher wrote good modern lyrics in Scots which F.G. set to modern music; then Christopher set himself to getting out, by hook or by crook, magazines which would publicize the new works.'[9] MacDiarmid had 'already published Sangschaw, containing his earliest, and some of his best, lyrics in Scots, as well as Annals of the Five Senses which Muir had praised highly in a review.'[10]

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[8] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. London, 13th November 1964.

MacDiarmid and the Muirs were thrown inevitably into one another's company. Edwin and Willa were interested in exploiting MacDiarmid as an oasis of intelligent conversation in an arid desert of the mundane; while MacDiarmid possibly perceived Edwin as a useful addition to his cultural master plan. Edwin and Christopher occasionally 'went for walks together, and relations were amicable; but the temperamental differences were already evident. Grieve remembers that whereas he wanted to talk about literature, Socialism, etc., Muir was most keen to tell him of his dreams and visions.'[11] Willa also describes this incongruity of personality; but is so excessively biased in Edwin's favour that MacDiarmid, by implication, emerges as some monster of literary depravity. She claims that Grieve 'had a make-up quite unlike Edwin's. He had no wish to fight or "show-off" or score points over other people: he had passion, but in him passion aspired towards ecstasy rather than domination; he preferred simplicity in his conduct as well as in his writings, and could never have become a publicist.'[12]

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[9] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p115)
[10] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p111)
[11] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p111)
[12] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p118)

Willa's vision of the relationship between Edwin and MacDiarmid is inevitably viewed through the lens of later events. The Scott and Scotland schism of the mid-30s left enduring scars on the heart and minds of all of those who were directly involved: it is therefore difficult to ascertain the extent to which the supposed tensions and clashes of personality were already existent by the 1920s. Edwin certainly never shared MacDiarmid's enthusiasm for the Scottish vernacular and always claimed his detachment from the whole debate 'because after all I'm not Scotch, I'm an Orkney man, a good Scandinavian, and my true country is Norway, or Denmark, or Iceland, or some place like that.'[13] He made no secret of this perspective in his conversations with MacDiarmid or Scott - although he *was* 'privy to F.G's and my ideas and had never expressed himself against them (as far as these ideas in themselves, or for F.G's and my expressive requirements went - but he was of course never committed to them himself)'.[14]

The jaundice of restrospect probably coloured Willa's recollections of the social companionship which the Muirs and the Grieves (and, to a lesser extent, the Scotts) enjoyed. Peggy Grieve 'was then pregnant with their second child; we thought her most attractive as she stood clinging to Christopher's arm, the day we first met her, looking up shyly through dark eyelashes, with a daisy-like white collarette round her neck, apparently an embodiment of the 'wee wifie' liked by Scotsmen.'[15] Peggy represented the stable base from which Christopher would venture out into his occasional restless orgies of drink and debate; and to which he would return for succour at the end of the evening. When the Muirs turned up without prior warning on one occasion, they 'found Peggy at her wit's end, Christopher having come home from some farmer's junketing and locked himself into the bathroom, since when there had been neither sound nor movement from him. Peggy was sure he had passed out. Edwin managed to scramble from outside through the high, narrow, bathroom window, found Christopher lying mother-naked, cold, insensible but alive in a completely dry bath . . . '.[16] Willa blamed Christopher's apparent propensity for drunkenness for the breakdown of his marriage to Peggy; but Christopher insisted that '[t]hat was never the case. The occasion when Edwin rescued my nude body from the bathroom was quite exceptional. My really heavy drinking was in 1930 when I was in Liverpool and was a consequence, and not the cause of our rift.'[17]

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[13] Edwin Muir in a letter to George Thorburn. Menton, 14th May 1927.
[14] Christopher Grieve in a letter to Willa Muir. Biggar, 5th September 1967.
[15] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p116)

These occasional high jinks and energetic exuberances did not distract the Muirs from the inexorable demands of their work. Willa intended to apply the final polish to the Hauptmann translations and to dispatch her completed essay on women to the Schiffs for critical comment before they finally put down their pens, packed up their bags - and turned their thoughts southwards to the Buckinghamshire cottage which was to be their new home. They spent Christmas in Montrose before travelling south to Summerhill School in Lyme Regis where they welcomed the New Year and recuperated from a particularly virulent bout of influenza.

In the first week of January 1925 they finally took up residence in the pretty - but anachronistically primitive - little cottage which Sydney Schiff had found for them on the outskirts of the village of Penn. 'There was no sewage . . . nor any gas or electricity. Ours was the only dwelling to have piped water laid on; even the public-house opposite drew its water from a well. The village smith, the last of his kind, who had lived and died in our flint-knapped cottage, had not troubled to get a damp-course laid in it, but he had left a large, empty smithy close by which made a good enough study to work in once we managed to heat it, although draughts coming through the split door blew smuts all over us at first. In the living room the old open fireplace gave out smoke rather than heat, until we got a tin hood fitted, and the 'blue flame' paraffin cooker needed constant watching.'[18]

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[16] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p116)
[17] Christopher Grieve in a letter to Willa Muir. Biggar, 5th September 1967.

These various physical inconveniences and discomforts did not detract from the overall happiness of Edwin and Willa's ten months in Penn. They experienced a renewed sense of 'belonging'; and they rejoiced in the ready availability of friends, culture and kindred spirits and in the settled sense of living amongst their own furniture for the first time in nearly four years. They occasionally visited old friends and colleagues in London; but the Schiffs - whose Chesham house was within easy reach - were their most constant and congenial companions. Edwin and Sydney developed an intense and mutually supportive friendship; and it is significant that Edwin's most direct surviving profession of his gratitude and his love for Willa should appear in a letter which he wrote to Sydney at this time. It is an uncharacteristic outpouring; and is charged with a heartfelt and expressive eloquence which is lacking in other references to his wife:

> To myself I make no contradiction when I say that the artist should not be solitary and that his centre should be within himself. It is like saying that we are mankind and yet individuals. You mentioned the other day how galling it sometimes is that we cannot talk to all sorts of people; that we are cut off by modern life from all sorts of experience. I take this to mean finally that we all have a tremendous impulse to be united with humanity in some way; we get it, according to our natures, in becoming

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[18] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p118-9)

> drunk, in joining societies, in becoming socialist, in working for 'humanity', in a hundred different ways. Union is as essential as separation, and the most profound union that can exist is that between a man and a woman in love. But the most essential thing in that union, it seems to me, is the unconscious out and in flowing of life between the two, which postulates both a physical and a spiritual correspondence between them, and is very like a process of nature, and is in any case as old as the hills. But this process strikes me as more like a free give and take, the freedom of two people who are united in one thing (their feeling towards each other) than like a unity. What is it that gives one thoughts, images and so on, in the centre of oneself? It is one's unconscious which is one's own from the cradle, but which a great experience can set free - a union with someone one loves, for instance. If marriage can do that, it does not matter how extreme may be what you call the tyranny of love, it is entirely a good thing. If it does not, then it is not good.[19]

The creative and 'unconscious out and in flowing of life between the two' finally brought The Chorus of the Newly Dead to fruition in the early summer; and Edwin re-directed his efforts towards the bread-and-butter translation work which he had devolved entirely onto Willa's shoulders during his period of poetic absorption. He was irritated by this menial diversion from his more creative occupations and - despite the fact that Willa was actually responsible for the vast majority of their translation work - he nevertheless complained that they spent 'too much of our lives in the following years in turning German into English. It began as a resource and hardened into a necessity.'[20]

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[19] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. Penn, 8th May 1925. British Library, London.

But even the daily grind and tedium of translation could not detract from the Muir's exuberant contentment during that long and blissful summer at Penn. Willa was buoyed by an excited anticipation of Hogarth's imminent publication of her essay on women; the sun meanwhile shone copiously and complimented her rapture. The Muirs created a garden lawn out of squares of turf which they purloined from the neighbouring Baptist church; and '[i]n the brilliant sunshine of that summer many people arrived by car to visit us of an afternoon and we used to have tea beneath the shady tree with a field-mouse for extra company. Hugh Kingsmill mobilized his friends' cars so that he could be brought to see us, and whole coveys of their friends came too. I began to like Hugh very much, though he was still wary of me; at least he used to say: 'Willa, I'm sure you are malicious', an uncalled for aspersion, I thought, although he may have meant it for encouragement, being himself chock-full of highly exaggerated, comic malice.'[21] Sydney Schiff was less impressed by Hugh's unpredictable and boisterous brand of humour. He was profoundly irritated on the one occasion on which he and Hugh coincided on the Muir's lawn by the extent to which Hugh's antics interfered with the exchange of ideas which he and Edwin usually enjoyed.[22] Hugh was an acquired taste; and so was Sydney.

Sydney's legion of literary connections permitted him to arrange a meeting that summer between the Muirs and Wyndham Lewis. '[A]t that time Sydney was a partisan of Lewis's, recommending his work to Edwin, who was reluctant to second what he felt to be Sydney's excessive praise and did not want to include Lewis in his book of essays. An appointment was made for us to meet for tea in an A.B.C. shop. It was not a successful meeting. Lewis watched us both suspiciously, but on catching my eye or Edwin's slid his eyes sideways at once. He hardly spoke to me, being, apparently, one of those Englishmen who do not have the habit of talking to women. My invisible antennae conveyed to me that he resented my being there at all, that in his opinion a wife was out of place and that Edwin was a coward for having brought me as a protective cover, the only motive he could imagine. We parted with relief on both sides.'[23]

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[20] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. (p222) Edinburgh: The Canongate Press, 1993.
[21] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p120)
[22] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In theWilla Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Lewis's caricature of the Muirs (as the 'Keiths') in The Apes of God probably emanated from this single encounter. It is (as Peter Butter suggests) a superficially accurate first impression of Willa and Edwin; and it certainly doesn't compete for cruelty with the barbed malice of Barbara Niven's 1938 cartoon of the couple in MacDiarmid's The Voice of Scotland.[24] But it is a satire of grotesque exaggeration; and it therefore paints an unfair and distorted picture of the Muirs and their relationship:

> [Keith] is as you see, a very earnest, rather melancholy freckled little being - whose desire is that, come into civilization from amidst the gillies and the haggises of Goy or Arran, living in poverty, he fell in with that massive elderly scottish lady next to him - that is his wife. She opened her jaws and swallowed him comfortably. There he was once more inside a woman, as it were - tucked up in her old tummy. In no way embarrassed with this slight additional burden (the object of all her wishes; of masculine

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[23] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p120-1)
[24] Barbara Niven's cartoon in The Voice of Scotland. no.2, vol.1. September-November 1938. (p10)

> gender - but otherwise little more than a sexless foetus) she started off upon the *grand tour*. And there in the remoter capitals of Europe the happy pair remained for some time, in erotic-maternal trance no doubt - the speckled foetus acquiring the german alphabet, learning to lisp italian, greek and portuguese.[25]

This charge of subsumation was often levelled at Willa by those who disliked her. She certainly tended in company to dominate the conversation at the expense of Edwin's more reticent personality; but Edwin was never 'swallowed' by anyone. Willa's verbal pyrotechnics thrilled and amused him; but he had no desire to produce a comparable display of his own. She certainly fought his battles and protected his interests; and, as Lumir and Catriona Soukup observe, he undeniably encouraged and abetted her in doing so. 'Edwin expected Willa to defend him, he was happy to let her put herself between him and his adversary. After some offensive remark he would look across at Willa, the expected smile would appear on her face, and one could see that he was looking forward to relishing her reply, as was everybody else, except perhaps the unsuspecting offender. No-one was ever disappointed, because Willa never repeated herself, her irony was always fresh. It was sometimes uncanny how she could sense enmity before anybody else even realised that an attack on Edwin was imminent.'[26] She certainly never conspired to 'swallow' Edwin - nor could she have managed it had she ever tried; Edwin's docile external appearance concealed an inner strength and confidence which, in many respects, made him the dominant partner. Kathleen Raine claims that Willa 'leant on Edwin more that he leant on her. She was impractical and not good at coping; she relied a great deal on Edwin.'[27]

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[25] Wyndham Lewis. The Apes of God. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984. (p300-1)

[26] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir. I am grateful to Robert Calder and Joy Hendry for the loan of this manuscript.

Their busy summer of sunshine crawled to a reluctant close, and the Muirs returned to Lyme Regis for a fortnight's holiday with Neill at Summerhill. It was a peaceful interlude during which they talked, swam, worked and were happy in an environment which they felt to be 'so good for us in every way that it would be a pity to come away.'[28]

They returned to Penn to find a depressingly dark and stormy autumn seeping through the cottage walls and invading the living-room with damp. Willa 'was stricken by what seemed to be lumbago as I was vaulting over a field-gate, and it occurred to us that the colds and indispositions which had plagued us in the early spring might have some connection with the lack of a damp-course in the cottage.'[29] The summer idyll faded into the chill reality of an English winter and they longed for milder and cheaper climes. They were attracted by the idea of a 'fishing-village our artist friends had praised in the south of France, an unspoilt village called St Tropez. But Edwin wanted to finish Transition first, so we succumbed to my mother's solicitations and went again into Scotland, to her dry, warm house in Montrose.'[30]

They probably experienced a depressing sense of defeat in being forced to return to Scotland less than a year after their last desperate escape; but Willa did at least return to her homeland as a published author. Women: An Inquiry was published in November 1925 - and was greeted with virtually unanimous press silence. Willa was naturally disappointed and hurt by this critical apathy; but she remained hesitantly confident about the sense and the validity of the essay, and of the importance of its sentiments. She apparently envisaged the essay as an incitement to debate - she certainly told Sylvia Lehfeldt that she would be 'awfully pleased' if 'it interests you into discussion or controversy'[31] - and the press neglect of the work was probably therefore a particularly cruel blow.

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[27] Kathleen Raine in an interview with Kirsty Allen. London, 24th March 1995.
[28] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. Summerhill, 1st September 1925. British Library, London.
[29] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p121)
[30] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p121)

The perfunctory indifference with which the work has invariably been treated (Peter Butter even managed to misquote its title in a footnote in Selected Letters of Edwin Muir) is both unwarranted and unfair. Women: An Inquiry is, in many ways, a quite outstanding exploration of the perceived qualities, characteristics and capacities of women; and of the necessity of extensively integrating them into every social sphere. It is - in the light of modern feminist thinking - a considerably misguided and dated thesis which is as entertaining as it is intellectually misguided; but in its own historical context - and as a work contemporary with Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own - it is a fascinating document which offers a remarkable analysis of the nature of femaleness.[32]

It is, however, an undeniably problematic text. Its most fatal flaw is its postulation of the absolute symbiosis and complementarity of mutually exclusive male and female characteristics; and its conclusion that men and women therefore occupy pre-ordained societal rôles. The work is consequently an unconscious endorsement of the patriarchal system which had kept women in the home and in the submissive position against which Willa constantly rebelled. It is worth noting that the only contemporary criticism of the work expresses unconscious recognition and applause for the essay's involuntary allegiance to the status quo. The review, which appeared in the 26th November 1925 edition of The Times Literary Supplement, is a genuinely positive and intelligent assessment of the text; but it gravitates inexorably towards a final analysis with which Willa herself could not have sympathised:

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[31] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. St Tropez, 12th July 1926. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[32] These ideas and those which follow are taken from my Introduction to Imagined Lives, a Willa Muir reader due for publication by Canongate Press in late 1996.

> The position is, in itself, familiar enough; but Mrs Muir's essay is significant because all her material, however familiar, is consistently and freshly seen. Thus she is led by a perfectly clear sequence of thought to maintain that women, just because they work in the unconscious, are a danger to society when ignorant and suppressed. When women are ignorant the laws of society are prescribed by men - that is, by the half of the race which has the least knowledges of the ends to be served. Women do not readily formulate laws. They know too much about life, feel too deeply the significance of each individual being to care to legislate; however, when laws are made the subservient woman cleaves to them inordinately (and has thus been in the past her own worst enemy) in the very timidity arising out of her subservience. So original, so confident in its wide-ranging suggestiveness is Mrs Muir's development of her simple thesis that it enables her at last to confront our commonest convictions with the gaze of the discoverer. . . .
>
> In short, Mrs Muir has made a substantial contribution to one of the most difficult and most vital problems which the forward races of mankind in their deliberate advance have now to grapple with. There is some danger lest, in our reaction against the injustices and superstitions of the past, we may allow ourselves to

> confuse anew the true relations of men and women and to count upon a kind of equality between them which, being unreal, would merely produce a crop of fresh injustices. We need not merely to uproot prejudice, but to take care that the ground it occupied is not left empty; we need to discover, in the common work of progress and civilisation, what the specific, the reciprocating contributions of men and women are to be. Obviously, in a division so broad, any specialization of aptitude that may declare itself will be likely, when the life of the mind is under review, to affect trends and tendencies of activity rather than to separate activities themselves as proper some to women and some to men. The main fact must always be that life is a whole and that the whole of life has to be lived by both; and since, by an accident of their physical constitution, life has been made easier for men, that will be a reason for doing whatever reason and chivalry may suggest to redress the balance. The two motives operate together. It is to the general advantage that women should be strengthened on every side in the bracing school of experience; only, since they run at a disadvantage, means must constantly be found to give them the compensating handicap which may prevent them from exhausting themselves in an uneven contest. Meantime, our aim in the emancipation of women is to secure the benefit of their diversity.[33]

The essay's unconscious ambivalence and conservatism (and the schizophrenic feminism of its author) are perhaps best illustrated by a comment which Willa - in all seriousness - made to Violet Schiff shortly prior to the publication of the work: 'I hope you like the essay. It is not good enough to make me feel confident: as a matter of fact, I am a little twittery about it. If I had been a man I could have done it with less effort!'[34] But these various doubts, and her later uncertainty about the essay form as a suitable medium for the advancement of the feminist cause, didn't ever destroy her pride in the work. In a laboured first draft of a passage which she excised from the final version of Belonging, she expresses her residual confidence in Women: An Inquiry as a 'good piece of work, although I no longer believe that a reasoned, intelligent statement, especially about men and women, is bound to have some influence. New attitudes may be conveyed by works of art which can and do change climates of opinion but a reasoned, intelligent statement has little or no influence on the beliefs of other people except when the time is ripe for it.'[35]

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[33] Anonymous reviewer in The Times Literary Supplement. 26th November 1925.

Willa's work on Women: An Inquiry (with its emphasis on the potential for motherhood as the only characteristic common to all women[36]) had perhaps directed her mind towards issues of fertility and childbearing. She was certainly pregnant by the time she arrived in Montrose in November 1925. It is interesting to speculate on the reasoning behind this sudden drive towards motherhood; and to suggest that she had, in the course of writing Women: An Inquiry, reasoned herself into a childbearing mentality. Is it possible that she had, in fact, effected an intellectual pregnancy? There is certainly no prior suggestion of any maternal urgings nor of an interest in expanding the family unit beyond a cosy duo. Kathleen Raine suggests that Willa's feminism - and her belief in 'a woman's right to have children'[37] - was the motivation for a pregnancy which took no account of the fact that 'Edwin never wanted to have children. He could just about cope with what he had to do as a writer and he couldn't cope with family life as well.'[38] It is fair to say that this damning indictment of Willa's approach to parenting is probably partially motivated by Kathleen's vehement anti-feminism; and yet it seems likely that her criticisms are not entirely without foundation. Childbearing perhaps represented the exercise of a 'privilege' which was denied to men and which was therefore tantamout, in Willa's mind, to a statement of feminism.

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[34] Willa Muir in a letter to Violet Schiff. Montrose, 25th November 1924.

[35] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[36] Willa Muir. Women: An Inquiry. London: The Hogarth Press, 1925. (p16)

[37] Kathleen Raine in an interview with Kirsty Allen. London, 24th March 1995.

Aspersions may justifiably be cast upon her motives for motherhood; but it is unfair to doubt the pain and disappointment which she experienced in the wake of an inexplicable December miscarriage - a 'damnable affair'[39] 'which left me feeling forlorn and empty, reduced in spirit as well as weak.'[40] And the unreasonable but inescapable sense of inadequacy which a miscarriage generally induces must - if we perceive her pregnancy as a statement of her feminism - have been compounded in Willa's case.

Edwin was significantly less disturbed by the pregnancy's termination. He apparently perceived miscarriage as another species of illness and was therefore unable to recognise or to respect the emotional impact of Willa's loss. He was able, less than a fortnight after the miscarriage, to tell Sydney Schiff that he was 'feeling very hopeful now about her and about us both, and we are really, in spite of her illness, very happy.'[41] This contemporaneous version of the period's events and emotions is considerably more persuasive than Willa's retrospection in Belonging and her claim that 'because of our close companionship this lapse of mine made Edwin low-spirited too and hampered his essay writing.'[42] It is depressingly significant that she should describe a miscarriage and its emotional consequences as a mere 'lapse'.

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[38] Kathleen Raine in an interview with Kirsty Allen. London, 24th March 1995.
[39] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. St Tropez, 12th July 1926. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[40] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p121)
[41] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. Montrose, 17th December 1925. British Library, London.

She was well enough, by the beginning of 1926, to be able to help 'a crowd of amateurs to produce Midsummer Night's Dream'[43]; but was then faced with a new complication in the form of the characteristic bout of sympathetic ill-health with which Edwin generally complemented Willa's maladies. His work on Transition was entering its final stages when he suddenly collapsed with what seemed to be appendicitis. 'The doctor threatened an operation for Saturday if his pulse and temperature were no better. However on Friday night I managed to get him into a good sleep and he was much improved next day'.[44]

Their craving for the gentler climate of the French Rivier had been deepened by the burden of illness and the gloom of a Scottish winter; and Huebsch and Secker rendered their escape financially feasible by offering them a contract for the translation of a Feuchtwanger novel called Jew Süss which they had read and recommended to their publishers. While Edwin applied the finishing touches to Transition in the early days of 1926, Willa 'was getting on as fast as I could with this translation, which was wanted by the month of May. As soon as the last essay was finished we set off for St Tropez in late February 1926, taking Jew Süss with us and also, although only in Edwin's head, an idea for a novel and a conviction that he was going to write more poetry.'[45]

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[42] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p122)
[43] Willa Muir in a letter to Sydney and Violet Schiff. Montrose, 27th January 1925. British Library, London.
[44] Willa Muir in a letter to Sydney and Violet Schiff. Montrose, 27th January 1925. British Library, London.
[45] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p122)

Spring was breaking across the Mediterranean coast as the Muirs arrived in the unspoiled fishing village of St Tropez with its peripatetic community of 'writers and painters, and a retinue of followers from England, America, France, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia; a foreign population with ways of their own, unlike those which they followed in their own countries, and quite unlike those of the St Tropez people.'[46] Edwin and Willa rented an idyllic and incredibly cheap beachside villa from an elderly, English expatriate couple; and soon felt deliciously at home in this comfortable and generously proportioned house with its tangled and fragrant garden of rosemary bushes, almond trees, maquis and mesembryanthemums.

It was a peacefully conducive working environment; and the Muirs rapidly managed to convert the 150,000 words of the Feuchtwanger novel into a polished and accessible English. 'The ultimate result was a popular success . . . . We had no royalty on the book's sales; we got only our translation fee of £250, . . . It was the publishers who raked in the thousands.'[47] Jew Süss was always destined to bring them fame rather than fortune; and Edwin was consequently 'hailed everywhere as "the translator of Jew Süss", which' - Willa claims - 'amused me but irritated him'[48] This profession of benign amusement is a blatantly euphemistic falsehood: Willa was invariably hurt by the extent to which her role in the Muirs' various team translations was disregarded. In later years she also resented Edwin's collaboration in this apparent conspiracy against her literary reputation.[49]

They allowed themselves a week of well-earned indolence in the wake of their translating exertions; and then directed their energies towards the nascent novels which had been germinating in their minds. Edwin's tale was set in Salzburg and described the love of an idiot boy for a wooden marionette; Willa meanwhile intended 'to present a story in a Montrose setting, imagining what might have happened had I married my Rugby champion and gone to live there, and, I suppose, assuring myself what a nightmare that wrong marriage would have turned out to be.'[50] Willa was struck by the thematic similarities of these novels and by their simultaneous preoccupation with the 'right' and the 'wrong' types of love; but she also noted their stylistic differences and she castigated herself for her inability to detach herself from her emotions. Imagined Corners is, in many ways, a better novel than The Marionette; but Willa was always humbly and unjustifiably insistent about the superiority of Edwin's work.

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[46] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: The Canongate Press, 1993. (p223)
[47] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p125-6)
[48] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p126)
[49] See the Newbattle chapter for a full discussion of Willa's feelings about her disregarded contributions to the translations.

This quiet and pleasant writing routine was interrupted in the June of 1926 by the unwelcome advent of the Holmses. Willa was horrified by the prospect of another summer of John's depressing and alienating conversation; and she resented the enforced daily intimacy of their communal dinners in the Café du Commerce on the harbour-front. Dorothy - whose company was forced upon Willa by the exclusivity of Holms's obsession with Edwin - was now wearied and jaded with her nomad existence and she systematically unloaded her interminable burden of self-pity onto Willa's waiting shoulders. Holms meanwhile monopolised Edwin, and used him, 'I thought, as others use drugs or incantations to induce a state of self-hypnosis or trance, in which he delivered himself of interminable monologues. He was in a worse state than I had yet seen him, as he kept fingering at his childhood memories of 'thick horror' when not wallowing in the horrors of the animal world.'[51]

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[50] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p125)
[51] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p127)

Willa was granted a brief reprieve from the horror of the Holmses by the advent, in early August, of F.G. Scott. His two week holiday coincided with the unexpected appearance of Mary Litchfield and these 'two visitors, whose Scottish temperaments got free rein on holiday, led us a gay dance. More and more St Tropez was filling up with artists from every quarter, including some from Scotland, and we found ourselves caught up in what Edwin denounced as the 'excessive gregariousness of artists'. I was both startled and amused to discover that Mary's seven years in London had turned her into a siren capable of annexing at once any man she wanted, and still more startled to observe her effect upon Scott. One evening, when Mary had vanished with a new man, Scott raged up and down our sitting-room shouting: "Such a damned tangential bitch I never did meet!"'[52]

But these guests were a mere hiatus in the increasingly isolated loneliness of Willa's recurrent Holms nightmare. She resolutely 'refrained from grumbling, partly because I knew that [Edwin] disliked negative feelings and partly because Holms was his close friend'[53]; but resentment eventually outgrew restraint and her helpless despair drove her into an explosive and unguarded expression of her feelings. 'The force of my rancour made it impossible for me to discuss the situation with Edwin in a civilized manner. All I could say was that I had got a "scunner" at Holms, using an expressive Scottish word, that I could not stand any more of him, that I would die if I had to sit at the same table with him again. Edwin, reluctant to admit my unreasonable complaints, said that Holms was in great difficulties and needed him. I denied that he was ever going to solve his difficulties or that Edwin could do it for him. . . . Edwin felt my desperation although he disapproved it, and as I cooled down a little pointed out that he did not know how to tell Holms about my attitude: what was he to say? "Tell him what thu likes," said I, bursting into tears, "tell him thu has a difficult and unreasonable wife."'[54]

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[52] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p128)
[53] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

It is incredible (in the face of Edwin's thoughtless insensitivity) that Willa should accuse *herself* of being unreasonable. She was presumably only irrational and incoherent in as far as the force of her feelings was an obstacle to her expression of them: 'Men can prove their theories even when they are wrong; women cannot prove their intuitions even when they are right.'[55] It is also rather depressing - but not uncharacteristic - that she should choose to accept the Edwin-dictated version of herself.

She and Edwin retreated to Menton - which Holms had once told them 'was the last place on earth he would ever be found in'[56] - to investigate a possible escape from St Tropez; and it was there that Willa finally managed to communicate to Edwin the real reason behind her Holms aversion. Early drafts of Belonging recreate the revealing rationalisation of Willa's conviction that in 'cutting me off from Edwin . . . Holms was cutting me in two so that what was left to sit opposite Dorothy was only half a person. I told myself that he was not only insulting my womanhood, he was outraging my "me" and trying to disrupt my marriage. I saw Holms regarding Dorothy and me as detachable appendages, something like the detachable tail a species of lizards has. If one loses a tail of that kind one simply grows a new tail; he would gladly see Edwin shed me like a lizard's tail, I fancied. Once this notion seized me I began to sicken at the sight and sound of him, and could scarcely eat my dinner. My unconscious was in full revolt.'[57]

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[54] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p127)
[55] Willa Muir. Women: An Inquiry. London: The Hogarth Press, 1925. (p26)
[56] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p129)
[57] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The spectre of Gerda obviously still loomed over Willa and was her constant guard against complacency in her relationship with Edwin; she still hoped that by 'making our marriage day by day . . . taking each other as we were, as I was, as Edwin was, the good and the bad together (I admitted that I had been behaving badly), might find out by experience what was true and lasting in such a relationship, but not if Holms kept interfering. And he did interfere, I insisted. He might even infect Edwin with his devaluation of me.'[58] The blatant urgency and obvious validity of her arguments were apparently persuasive; and Edwin eventually and reluctantly succumbed to her demands. They sought and found a suitable Menton house to which they could move when the lease on their villa expired at the end of September; and then they returned to St Tropez to face the music - and the Holmses. Willa never knew 'what Edwin told Holms . . . , but until the end of the month we dined with the Holmses only now and then and I found that he had ceased to be a bogey to me.'[59] Even Edwin later admitted that he was relieved 'to have got away from Holms; a pressure was removed, a burden eased; we had room to breathe and grow.'[60]

The incipient invasion of fashion, finance and fame had already begun to affect St Tropez as the Muirs left the town in the early October of 1926. Menton, by comparison, was charmingly sedate, civilised and old-fashioned; the town seemed almost to have been frozen into a Victorian time-warp and its antiquated community of English expatriates enjoyed 'an English church, English tea-rooms and a very Victorian English library.'[61] Jo Grimond later claimed that he was 'rather surprised that a man [Edwin] who enjoyed Menton with its "old fashioned English colony, its Victorian grace, its superannuated old ladies dressed like Queen Alexandra, its modest incomes and regular habits" should have found little to say in favour of [St Andrews] and its university.'[62] But it was the attitudes and not the antiquity of St Andrews to which Willa and Edwin most vehemently objected[63]; and in Menton they most consciously and assiduously eschewed 'their resident compatriots and made friends with various Americans, thus avoiding the possible constrictions of the English way of life, which, we suspected, was still bound to wear a Victorian mask in Mentone. . . . On the other hand, it was wonderfully easy to get seats in the Casino to hear Corto play or Paul Robeson sing, or to slip into a front row in the Monte Carlo tennis grounds to watch Mr G., King Gustav of Sweden, playing singles with Big Bill Tilden. Monte Carlo was only a short train ride away, and although we did not do any gambling we went as a matter of course to see the Monte Carlo ballet companies on many an evening. It was all very unlike the home life of Montrose.'[64]

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[58] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p129-30)
[59] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p131)
[60] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p133)
[61] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p133)

The dearest and most enduring of the Muirs' American friendships in Menton was with a delightful couple called Mary and Arthur Mason. The Muirs appreciated the 'daftness and light gaiety'[65] which the Masons brought to the dinner conversation; and they later bemoaned the lost '"vibrations" which used to flow so freely and warmly between us four sitting at that little table in the "Globe" so that they seemed to bind us in a magic circle.'[66] The joyous life and friendship which the quartet shared during that Menton winter are best communicated in the celebratory 'birthday' poems which Willa wrote. The tragedy of Willa's blindness to her genius as a comic poet is also illustrated by these snippets of doggerel:

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[62] Jo Grimond. The St Andrews of Jo Grimond. Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1992. (p33)
[63] See the St Andrews chapter for a full discussion of the Muirs' aversion to St Andrews.
[64] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p133)
[65] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Hampstead, August 1933.
[66] Edwin Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, June 1931.

I met a man in Menton, with a square and rakish rig,
He could whistle, and he could sing, and dance an Irish jig;
I liked the nautical cut of his jib, I liked his roving eye.
And I said, "For a deep-sea sailor, you're surely high and dry,"
And I said, "For an old lime-juicer, this is a funny ditch!"
- But he roared, "That's none of your business, you
God-damned son of a bitch!" . . .

. . . So here's to Arthur Mason, toast him loud and long:
He's having another birthday and still is going strong;
No barnacles on his bottom, no rats within his hold,
He's weathered the roaring forties, and he's a sailor bold,
One of the real lime-juicers, sweeping the seven seas,
With a yarn for every dog-watch, and a sail for every breeze:
May he never founder, and anchor without a hitch,
When he comes to the end of his voyage, the
God-damned son of a bitch![67]

O Mary, on your natal day,
(Perhaps it was a natal night?)
Little you thought this fatal day,
Would be so merry and so bright:
And later, as your legs grew long,
And ran you into many frays,

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[67] Willa Muir. A poem for Arthur Mason's birthday. Menton, March 1927.

Little you thought this little song,
Would come to wish you happy days!
You never thought you'd be in port,
(Though port has often been in you)
Captained by Arthur, good old sport,
With me and Edwin Muir for crew:
When on New York you turned your back,
I wonder if you ever guessed,
That you would find a flank attack,
In Love or War the very best?
Well, never mind: pour out the rum,
Here's hoping you'll ne'er be dejected,
Here's hoping all the years to come,
Will far outdo what you've expected.[68]

But the greatest source of the Muirs' happiness in Menton was the little hillside villa which they made their home. It was a lofty and turreted house which looked out over the sea in one direction and up the valley towards Mont Agel in the other; '[t]he front door faced the hill, with a marble table beside it, a lemon tree and mimosa tree.'[69] It seemed like a haven 'made for us to be happy in. Not that we lived in conventional luxury: the furniture was spare, formal in the French style, conceding nothing to comfort, and our diet was frugal; yet even frugal living in Mentone was good. By running down to the garden gate at street level with a tin plate I could get from a barrow-boy excellent Portuguese oysters at sixpence a dozen, and I never picked a fresh lemon from the tree at our door without feeling as if I were in the Garden of Eden; the fragrance of the lemon-blossom, the savour of the fruit were paradisal.'[70]

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[68] Willa Muir. A poem for Mary Mason's birthday. Menton, 1927.
[69] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p130-1)

It was an environment conducive to healthful radiance, euphoric peace and productive creativity. Edwin completed and sent The Marionette to Holms and to Huebsch in London in November; and then spent the early months of the following year re-writing the final section in accordance with Holms's critical suggestions. The Muirs' bread-and-butter translation work also continued in Menton; but it was Willa's - and not Edwin's - novel which was temporarily sacrificed on the pyre of financial exigency as she churned out three more Hauptmann plays.

Spring brought a brief and unwelcome visit from the Holmses; and the infinitely happier prospect of the Menton carnival. 'After finishing The Marionette Edwin was ready for that carnival; . . . and we both delighted in taking a holiday and having fun. We danced in the streets, dressed up as Pierrots in yellow suits with black ruffs and buttons, pelted our friends with flowers and sang the absurd little carnival song:

> Coucou, coucou,
> Coucou, soulêve ton loup . . . .

Our son Gavin was begotten and conceived during that Carnival interlude; he could not have had a more carefree origin.'[71] The later reality of Gavin's life, and of his relationship with his mother, reflect a somewhat harsh and defensive irony on to this superficially innocent observation.

His foetal existence was not, moreover, a particularly happy or healthy period in Willa's life. She was plagued with morning sickness during the early months of her pregnancy and although Edwin was sympathetic to her discomfort he was equivocal in his paternal enthusiasm. 'We should both have preferred that it should not have come at this present time; but if Willa is to have one it would be better that it should come sooner rather than later; and our prospects for the coming year in the way of money are better than they have ever been before. I shall be glad when her sickness is entirely over; nature seems to inflict a great deal of stupid suffering on women. However, she like a dear is cheerful, and only complains because she cannot do as much work as usual.'[72] Willa's cheerfulness is intriguing and suggests either a very real pleasure in her impending maternity; or a desperate determination to encourage a positive response in Edwin. The least charitable interpretation of her happiness is that she felt a certain triumph at having reached her procreative goal.

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[70] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p130-1)
[71] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p134)

Secker commissioned them in April to translate Feuchtwanger's The Ugly Duchess and, with an eye to the impending financial burden of parenthood, they this time demanded a cut of the book's royalties. They made the mistake, however, of changing their winning Feuchtwanger formula and 'instead of exploiting the technique which had helped to make Jew Süss so popular, . . . we set ourselves this time to produce a faithful translation of The Ugly Duchess. In one sense it was a good translation, but it was not destined to be a popular success. The British public, presented with authentic Feuchtwanger, did not take to him.'[73]

Their thoughts now turned to the future and to the impending and inevitable changes to their lifestyle. A male baby born in France might, for example, be liable to compulsory French military service in the future; and so they turned their thoughts reluctantly homewards to Britain. A discontented Britain in the aftermath of the General Strike probably seemed like a poor exchange for their sundrenched Eden on the French riviera; but they also recognised the danger of settling in Menton 'into what could have become a frustrating life, for although we felt that we belonged to Mentone, our Mentone did not belong to anything but a dream-world. We had been living our inward life, outside all social pressures, and in time that lack of pressure, which so far had been good for us, might have made us eat each other's hearts out. Edwin, after all, could not help being a literary man, and there was no literary ambience for him in Mentone.'[74]

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[72] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney and Violet Schiff. Menton, 19th April 1927. British Library, London.
[73] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p134)

In late May, they started their depressing journey homewards through 'the places whose very names we had come to love, Cap Martin, Roquebrune, Villefranche. Two years later I made a song out of that journey to please my baby, but it was a sad progress and I found relief in flapping a straw hat most of the way to Marseilles.'[75] Their French idyll was over; and the challenge of parenthood was about to begin.

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[74] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p135)
[75] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p135)

CHAPTER VII

MOTHERHOOD, 'MARMADUKE' AND MORTALITY: CROWBOROUGH.

1927-1932.

The lush greeness of southern England contrasted pleasantly with the Mediterranean aridity which the Muirs had left behind. They spent a few brief weeks in Hazel Cottage in Dormansland, Surrey before signing a lease on the cheap, comfortable and furnished White House in the same village. It would be their home for the next eighteen months and would witness the most radical upheaval which their joint existence had yet experienced.

There was, as Willa later reflected, a certain fantastical and make-believe quality to that last childless summer. A dreamy enchantment of apparently endless sunshine filled their days and they experienced a curious and not unpleasant sense of dislocation and unreality. 'As householders we were not taking things seriously, rather playing about. The cottage we lived in was furnished in a pretty-pretty style; among its gimcrack trimmings we felt like characters in someone else's story.'[1] Willa's translating attention was still devoted to the completion of The Ugly Duchess; while Cape - under whose imprint The Marionette had recently appeared - had offered Edwin a post as a reader *and* a contract on a biography of John Knox. They nevertheless took time to enjoy the pleasures of the surrounding countryside and to marvel at the elegant beauty of the racehorses on the nearby Lingfield racecourse.

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[1] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p145)

Willa meanwhile waxed large: by September, when the translation was finally finished, she 'was learning what it meant to be a heavily pregnant woman.'[2] 'I found that I could not run, nor even walk very fast. I had to progress across fields with a slow, majestic gait, and one day said to Edwin, in surprise: "Do you know that if a bull came after me I couldn't run away? Now I understand why women need protection." I began to understand something else too, for a sudden glimpse of myself in a long glass gave me a shock. I looked like a bulging fruit, and my head on the top of it seemed small and unimportant. No wonder, I thought, that many men believe women to be mindless. I stared at the figure in the glass and all at once felt a revulsion of sympathy in favour of the poor little head. " But I am still me!" I said, aloud, more than once. "I am still me!"'[3] The published text of Belonging offers a significantly abridged record of these reflections and makes no mention of her interesting '*revulsion* of sympathy in favour of the poor little head.'

It is difficult to interpret Willa's ambivalent attitude towards her pregnant self. She was apparently both fascinated and disgusted by the strange being into which she had metamorphosed; and was resentful that she had 'been taught nothing at all about being a woman. At school and University the formal education would have been the same had I been a he instead of a she, with one exception: at the age of sixteen, I was told, along with the other girls in our class, that being females we were not to study electricity and magnetism, subjects reserved for the senior boys, but would take botany or domestic hygiene instead. We all, of course, opted for botany, yet the study of flower fertilisation did not tell us much about human conception, and our being sheltered from a knowledge of electricity was not much of a help either when we came to grow up. So it was with great ignorance that I observed my pregnancy.'[4] There is a peculiarly scientific and psychological objectivity in her perception of herself and of her 'interesting condition'; and a curious and almost conscious detachment from her emotions. She later recalled, for example, that the secrecy of the pregnancy 'impressed me. New life was being made inside my body yet it was being managed without my knowledge: the omnipotent Unconscious was in charge arranging it all. I remember telling Edwin that the Unconscious had probably jockeyed us from Montrose to Mentone in order that we should be vigorous and gay enough to start our baby. . . .'[5]

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[2] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p143)
[3] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

This calculated rationalism is further illustrated in her pre-natal preparations and in her uncharacteristic and determined deference to the professional medical advice of the two doctors at the London nursing home which had been recommended to her by Summerhill's Jonesie. 'In a matter-of-fact and utterly reasonable manner they frightened me. The baby's head was already so big, they said, it would be dangerous for me to let the pregnancy go on until full term. Thirty-seven was too old to take such a risk with a first baby. I must have the birth "induced" some weeks beforehand.'[6] She had no choice but to defer to their superior knowledge and to admit her own resentful and unusual ignorance in the matter.

The baby was born on the 29th October 1927 after a long and difficult labour which Willa attributed to the doctors' decision to induce the birth. She retrospectively believed that 'my baby did not want to be born before his time and my body did not want to bear him before his time';[7] and she blamed this mutual reluctance for her sixty-five hour confinement.[8] Hindsight is a useful diagnostic instrument but it lacks the important qualification of contemporary relevance. Willa's charge of medical incompetence is certainly not necessarily justified in this particular aspect of the treatment which she received before, during and after the birth of her baby. Thirty-seven is, even now, considered to be an advanced and a potentially risky age for the bearing of a first child; the inducement of a large and fully developed baby is therefore not unreasonable.

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[4] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[5] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[6] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p143)
[7] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p144)

But the doctors *were* nevertheless guilty of various serious and incredible ineptitudes in their treatment of Willa. They 'apparently did not realize that I was unusually susceptible to drugs and I got chloroform poisoning. Despite everything, the baby and I both took our time. In the end I was badly torn at the birth and in the flurry the doctors forgot to stitch me up. They did not tell me that I was torn open, a defect which was the basic cause of the troubles which began to bedevil me in about three years and later brought me to hospitals time and again.'[9] It was a remarkable and culpable catalogue of errors. Willa later made light of these various misadventures and advised Sylvia Lehfeldt jokingly that she should 'never marry a man with a big head';[10] but she was both physically and emotionally scarred by the whole unfortunate episode. Edwin was also considerably and characteristically shaken by the experience; and told Violet Schiff that he had 'never had any idea before that birth was so terrible; or could be so terrible.'[11]

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[8] Edwin Muir in a letter to Violet Schiff. Dormansland, 8th November 1927. British Library, London.

[9] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p144)

[10] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. Crowborough, 20th August 1931. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[11] Edwin Muir in a letter to Violet Schiff. Dormansland, 8th November 1927. British Library, London.

Willa required a prolonged period of hospital recuperation; but by the 8th of November she had 'quite definitely taken the turn; she is glad, now that it is over, that it happened; and she and the baby are both getting on well.'[12] They 'called it [sic] Gavin (for him) Anderson (for me) Cormack (for [Edwin's] mother) Muir (for Edwin)',[13] and were suitably and smugly impressed by their creative genius. An interesting - and somewhat unflattering - explanation for this conscious divergence from the traditional practice of naming a first male baby after his father appears in an early draft of Belonging. 'In the secret centre of himself, Edwin was already dedicated to being a poet and when the question came up what name our son should have, that was probably why he declared, firmly, that he did not want two Edwin Muirs in the world.'[14]

They nervously carried him home to Dormansland and eagerly embarked upon the new routines of a baby-centred home. Willa was genuinely surprised by the extent to which 'looking after a baby is a full time job, in itself, . . . it's a mercy he's a good baby and gives very little trouble.'[15] They were both 'awed and happy at finding ourselves turned into these traditional figures, a father and a mother, all the more as the baby was a credit to us both. We now felt more deeply that we belonged to the human race, not only to each other: his presence made an extra resonance in the chord of daily life.'[16] Edwin claimed that the demands of a baby 'simplified life for us, and filled it with a daily simplicity, beyond which we did not have any wish to look.'[17] Willa's maternal pride even transformed her into a secret 'prampeeper, peeping into all the prams I met to make doubly sure that our baby was more beautiful than any one else's.'[18] Edwin was less jubilantly enthusiastic; but he did consent to describe his baby son as 'a dear little fellow' and his wife as 'a mother in a million'[19]. As the baby became a toddler (who was apparently 'quite spontaneously fond of his parents'[20]) it was primarily his mother upon whom he relied for comfort and company. An exhausted Willa told Sylvia Lehfeldt in 1931 that she and Edwin spent 'much time in sneaking the moments required for work, as he is convinced that Dadda may be busy sometimes but that Mamma must never be busy when he wants her.'[21]

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[12] Edwin Muir in a letter to Violet Schiff. Dormansland, 8th November 1927. British Library, London.

[13] Willa Muir in a letter to Lizzie and George Thorburn. Dormansland, 10th May 1928.

[14] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[15] Willa Muir in a letter to Lizzie and George Thorburn. Dormansland, 10th May 1928.

[16] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p144)

[17] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p227)

Willa was determinedly devoted to the physical demands of her offspring and reacted with condescending pity to the kindly and advisory interest of her neighbours. She slipped effortlessly into the guise of the patronising psychologist and bemoaned 'how widespread the bossy false dilemma was in English minds and how unthinkingly accepted. People used its *clichés* freely. "You're making yourself a slave to that baby," said one neighbour to me, quite fondly. I could not help smiling but did not point out how irrelevant the master-slave dilemma was to a nursing mother with her baby. "Well I don't blame you," was another frequent remark of hers, which I took as kindly as was intended.'[22]

It is therefore ironic that the Truby King system of child-rearing (to whose cast-iron dictates Willa neurotically adhered) should be so dictatorial in its insistence upon the danger of allowing the baby to be boss.[23] Rhythm and routine were the keystones of a credo in which discipline was more important than devotion. Willa retrospectively wondered 'whether I ought to have followed such a rational, mathematically spaced regimen, feeding my baby exactly every four hours, instead of letting him satisfy himself when he felt like it. Aware of how little I knew, I reasoned that I had better follow expert guidance. It did not dawn on me that the mathematical intellect may not be a good controller of natural processes which do not rigidly follow clock-time although now, when it is much too late, I have my doubts.'[24] At the time Willa doubted the absolute wisdom of the regime and questioned whether 'feeding to timetable = emotional starvation.'[25]

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[18] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[19] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney and Violet Schiff. Dormansland, 26th April 1928. British Library, London.

[20] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney and Violet Schiff. Crowborough, 11th April 1931. British Library, London.

[21] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. Crowborough, 20th August 1931. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[22] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p144)

She also wondered 'whether this insistence on mathematical pattern helped to influence Gavin's mind, for by the time he was rising three he was fascinated by number and number systems. The sense of glory I got at his age from seeing a wealth of growing flowers he got from grand totals of telegraph wires, and would shriek in ecstasy: 'Mama, the seventeens are going here on to the twenty-ones!' Yet I was comforted because he was musical as well as mathematical; he sat singing to himself long before he made any attempt to speak.' It is perhaps rather surprising that, at the age of two, he could produce 'queer wavering tunes' although he hadn't yet begun to 'talk intelligibly.'[26]

But this avowed parental devotion and pride belies the inadequacies and peculiarities in the Muirs' treatment and perception of their son. Kathleen

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[23] F. Truby King. Feeding and Care of Baby. London: Macmillan and Co., 1921.
[24] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[25] Willa Muir. Journal: Marmaduke. The development of Gavin Muir from 6 weeks to 3 1/2 years. In the Willa Muir archive of the University Library, St Andrews.
[26] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 18th October 1929.

Raine fervently believes that it had never occurred to Willa that a child would require raising as well as bearing; or that her maternal responsibility would extend beyond the delivery room.[27] This alleged dissociation between cause and effect would certainly explain some of the various anomalies which are manifest in Willa's relationship with her son. Her contemporaneous record of his infancy and early years is remarkable, for example, for its scientific and unemotional objectivity and its depiction of Gavin as a phenomenon rather than as a person; the baby is mentioned by name only once during an extended description of his development during his first six months. These 'Marmaduke' diaries are basically a psychological treatise of which Gavin is merely the focus; they bear no resemblance to any traditional and doting 'baby book'.

The journal is an interesting hotch-potch of ideas and hypotheses about the psychology of childhood and about the child's interaction with the world; but it also provides a useful insight into Willa's later relationship with Gavin and into her ideological thinking about feminism. She suggests, for example, that '[m]en's first relations with women are so undignified that some of them spend the rest of their lives trying to get even.'[28] But she also posits a converse theory about the infant human's innate and primitive belief in the existence of a Mother God. This Mother God:

> [p]rovides everything, good or bad, destiny or fate or whatever she is. Mere size does not yet mean power to the infant. Male voice apparently does not terrify him at all. No fear attached to man in comparison w. woman: hence no special propitiation of man God in infancy.

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[27] Kathleen Raine in an interview with Kirsty Allen. London, 24th March 1995.

[28] Willa Muir. Journal: Marmaduke. The development of Gavin Muir from 6 weeks to 3 1/2 years. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> ? But man himself is so conscious of his magnanimity in not beating or eating the little creature that he constantly suggests it: therefore the creature accepts it as an axiom that the man God is very gracious not to manhandle him. This suggestion is vaguely in the air and is impressed on the baby when it is coming out of infancy into childhood. Matriarchy belongs to first year of consciousness. Patriarchy to second year?[29]

Gavin's every action was recorded and converted into some psychological absolute; the journal betrays a vaguely fanatical fascination with his behavioural reactions to himself, his environment and his bodily functions. Willa was apparently particularly intrigued by his lack of interest in his own penis; by his 'infantile ecstasy at the mother's breast';[30] and by the potential psychological mileage which could be made of the fact that 'e' and 'go' (e - go) were his first sounds. The journal also includes her fascinating and irritatingly persuasive 'Psychology of breast v. bottle' in which she suggests that breast-feeding establishes a:

> vital connection with Life - Universe. Living link to everything, of course: mystical therefore strongly emotional. Then finishing milk, not because it's exhausted - as bottle - but because time's up, or satisfied. Inexhaustibility of Nature apprehended. Also (for older baby) bottle can be seen diminishing fatally: milk breast is unknown - must evoke faith not reason.[31]

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[29] Willa Muir. Journal: Marmaduke. The development of Gavin Muir from 6 weeks to 3 1/2 years. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[30] Willa Muir. Journal: Marmaduke. The development of Gavin Muir from 6 weeks to 3 1/2 years. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[31] Willa Muir. Journal: Marmaduke. The development of Gavin Muir from 6 weeks to 3 1/2 years. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

And yet she was relieved by the freedom which she gained when Gavin was deprived of the faith-filled infinite and completely weaned at the age of nine months!

The Muirs' alleged parental 'state of heightened tenderness'[32] and their feeling that 'life was very much worth living'[33] could not entirely preserve them from the irritating realities of the world. 'Loving emotion' couldn't thaw frozen pipes; and 'swelling hearts'[34] were an insufficient resource when it came to earning the money which put food on the table. Willa managed some light translation over the winter; and by April she had churned out another two Feuchtwanger plays. Edwin was meanwhile absorbed in the final corrections for The Structure of the Novel; but was already turning his mind towards his Knox commission: 'As I read about him in the British Museum I came to dislike him more and more, and understood why every Scottish writer since the beginning of the eighteenth century had detested him: Hume, Boswell, Burns, Scott, Hogg, Stevenson; everyone except Carlyle, who like Knox admired power. My book was not a good one; it was too full of dislike for Knox and certain things in Scottish life. Though dead for three centuries and a half, he was still too close for me to see him clearly, for I had met him, or someone very like him, over and over, it seemed to me, in the course of my life.'[35]

Secker had meanwhile offered them a number of translating contracts which included a life of Elinora Duse, a war book by Ludwig Rinn, and another interminable Feuchtwanger novel. And in a precedent which became a practice, Willa reluctantly re-shelved the manuscript for Imagined Corners and concentrated instead upon the apparently endless drudgery of Feuchtwanger's Success. 'He has obviously been so tickled by the praise of English critics for his "large canvas" that he has set himself down with the idea of showing 'em what he could do. At the rate he's going the completed book will be half a million words. Who's going to read it? Ask me another. Unfortunately I know who have engaged to translate it.'[36] They continued to be plagued by the novel '(damn it to hell)'[37] for a further eighteen months: it was the late summer of 1930 before they finally freed themselves from the nightmare of a work which had been 'hanging round our necks'[38] for an inordinate length of time.

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[32] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p145)
[33] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p148)
[34] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p145)
[35] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p226)

There were compensations for their translation toils. Willa enjoyed some of the texts with which she was engaged; and the freelance nature of the work meant that they could dictate the rhythm of their days and weeks. They enjoyed a pleasant Easter holiday in 1928 at Leiston in Suffolk; and throughout the hot, dry summer of 1928 they interspersed solid work with baby play. They also partook of an autumn vacation with Willa's mother in Montrose; but this was a less carefree and happy experience.

The winter of 1928 warmed into the spring of 1929; and Willa and Edwin became increasingly frustrated by the pretty-pretty accoutrements and twee knick-knacks of the White House. They craved the comfort of a home in which they could create an environment to their own tastes; and in which Gavin could wreak havoc without reference to the safety of someone else's property. 'Remembering how much we had liked Crowborough and the Ashdown Forest when we were convalescing from the Spanish influenza, we took a semi-detached house on the outskirts of Crowborough, at forty pounds a year.'[39] 'The Nook' was a generously sized house with 'three bedrooms, a nursery, a bathroom, a study, dining room, kitchen, outhouses and a pleasant garden full of flowering bushes and fruit trees'.[40] The charms of this grand and glorious garden - 'blossoming with huge peonies and flowering shrubs, which stretched down to a vista of fields open all the way to the horizon with not another building in sight'[41] - immediately wooed and won the Muirs; they readily signed a three year contract on the property and moved into their new home at the end of March 1929.

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[36] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 16th March 1929.
[37] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 16th July 1930.
[38] Edwin Muir in a letter to Lizzie Thorburn. Crowborough, 23rd July 1930.

'The Nook' was an apparently ideal situation for health and happiness. It was within reach of London; and yet it nestled loftily amidst pleasant walking countryside and enjoyed the benefits of 'delicious and bracing'[42] air. Edwin and Willa bought various cheap and comfortable items of furniture in nearby Tunbridge Wells and revelled in the pleasant and unfamiliar sensation of belonging to an environment of their own making. Gavin could safely 'knock about'[43] the house and garden while his parents devoted themselves to the deluge of translation work which had descended upon them.

The move to Crowborough marked the beginning of a period of incredible translating productivity. Financial necessity drove Edwin and Willa into a frenzy of work; and a total of eight volumes of Muir translation were published over the next two years. Secker, with a shrewd eye to the British market, generally selected suitable German texts and then commissioned the Muirs as translators; but it was primarily at Edwin and Willa's own earnest request that Kafka's The Castle was translated and published. They had been profoundly affected by this remarkable novel; but there 'was a difference in emphasis between our separate appreciations of The Castle . . . . Edwin was more excited by the 'whence' and I by the 'how'. That is to say, Edwin tried to divine and follow up the metaphysics of Kafka's vision of the universe, while I stayed lost in admiration of the sureness with which he embodied in concrete situations the emotional predicaments he wanted to convey, situations that seemed to me to come clean out of the unconscious, perhaps directly from actual dreams.'[44]

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[39] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p148-9)
[40] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 16th March 1929.
[41] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p149)
[42] Willa Muir in a letter to Lizzie Thorburn. Crowborough, 30th May 1929.
[43] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p148)

They approached The Castle enthusiastically and were exhilarated by the prospect of introducing a British readership to Kafka's work. Most of the earlier translation work had been accomplished almost entirely by the sweat of Willa's brow; but the Kafka and Broch translations were the products of a genuinely symbiotic fusion of the Muirs' respective linguistic talents. They 'divided the book in two, Edwin translated one half and I the other, then we went over each other's translations as with a fine-tooth comb. By the time we had finished the going-over and put the two halves together the translation was like a seamless garment, for we both loved the sinuous flexibility of Kafka's style - very unlike classical German - and dealt with it in the self-same way.'[45] The Castle was therefore a pleasure to translate and it was completed and in the hands of the publishers by the turn of the year.

The translation treadmill continued to turn - and the dispatch of The Castle re-consigned Willa to the drudgery of bread-and-butter translation. The works of Carossa were a welcome oasis in the desert; but her dreams of translating Rilke were never realised. 'All my resources, I felt, would be needed to cope with the queernesses of Malte Laurids Brigge and I longed to try; but the publishers were already bound to accept a translator authorized by Rilke himself and I did not get the chance of trying.'[46] Edwin was absorbed in the composition of his second novel; but Imagined Corners remained firmly on the shelf. Willa was presumably intensely frustrated by this enforced neglect; but she loyally insisted that the translation 'was my contribution as a partner so that Edwin should have more time for literary work and for brooding on poems.'[47]

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[44] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p150)
[45] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p150)

Summer arrived in Crowborough and brought the pleasant visiting distraction of family and friends. An uncharacteristic (and perhaps guilt-driven) gesture towards family unity inspired the Muirs to invite two of Edwin's nieces to spend August with them at 'The Nook'; and a surprisingly enjoyable vacation ensued. The whole venture was in fact so successful that it was repeated in each of the following two summers and these 'wonderful holidays'[48] were always anticipated with great eagerness by the two teenagers. Willa and Edwin were apparently abundantly generous in their hospitality and overwhelmed the Thorburn girls during their second Sussex summer by giving them a bicycle each.

The summer idyll was succeeded by a winter of discontent. The house became cold and draughty as the winter set in and it was virtually impossible to maintain a comfortable living and working environment. The chill deepened and Willa, whose tired and weakened immune system was probably susceptible to infection, developed an abscess in her throat. She was seriously unwell for a period of about three weeks and required the constant attention of a doctor who repeatedly lanced her infected ulcer. Edwin meanwhile learned that Mrs Anderson was suffering from cancer and that her death was imminent. He endured 'a rotten time . . . because he was forbidden by the doctor to tell me till I was recovered: and you can guess how badly Edwin is adapted to stand a strain of that kind.'[49]

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[46] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p150)
[47] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. Swaffham Prior, 11th May 1962.
[48] Irene Abenheimer and Ethel Ross in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 5th February 1994.

Willa gradually recovered and recuperated; but her mother's health worsened until 'a telegram came telling [Willa] to go up to Scotland at once, as her mother might die any moment. We rushed off the same night (for Willa wasn't able to go herself) and found that Mrs Anderson had had a heart attack (on the top of the cancer) but had recovered from it. We stayed there for three days, Willa's throat began to get bad again, we came back and when we reached here she had to take to her bed with another spell of throat.'[50] Gavin meanwhile managed to poison his finger and to develop a worrying and unpleasant infection of the inner ear.

The death clouds thickened with news of another apparently terminal illness in the Anderson family: Willie - Willa's '"problem" brother'[51] - was suffering from tuberculosis in the larynx[52] and was not expected to outlive his mother. Belonging makes no mention of this illness; Willa was outwardly indifferent to his fate and described his impending death as 'a relief, in fact; for he is so unhappy in himself that life can give him nothing.'[53] It is however difficult to believe that she can have been so callously unaffected by Willie's illness and eventual death. There may - quite justifiably - have been some gratitude for his deliverance from the neurotic unhappiness which had plagued him for more than fifteen years; but there must also have been some personal grief for the death of a brother whom she had once adored. A retrospective and meditative letter to the Masons certainly suggests that she was dreaming about her mother *and* about Willie and that *both* 'their deaths knocked me up.'[54]

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[49] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 23rd December 1929.
[50] Edwin Muir in a letter to Lizzie Thorburn. Crowborough, 23rd December 1929.
[51] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 23rd December 1929.
[52] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 16th July 1930.
[53] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 23rd December 1929.

Willa and Gavin spent a melancholy and Edwin-less Christmas in Montrose. It was an enforced separation which Willa bitterly regretted; but with '[m]y mother dying as she is, I can't refuse to take the baby up to see her, . . . she has set her heart on seeing Gavin this Xmas.'[55] It was a reasonable request; but Willa was nevertheless glad to return to Edwin and the chilly Crowborough house.

The New Year had scarcely begun before she was back in Montrose for the mournful solemnities of a double funeral. Willie died in a sanatorium in Edinburgh on the 31st January:[56] his mother died at home in Montrose on the following morning[57] after a distressingly 'long and disintegrating illness'.[58] Belonging makes comparative light of this double bereavement; but Willa undoubtedly grieved for her loss and told the Masons that it was 'very strange what a curious effect the death of relatives has on one, even when the tie is not very real.'[59]

Willa was once more weakened and unwell in the aftermath of these deaths and Edwin suffered from a miniature nervous breakdown which they attributed to stress and overwork. They therefore decided to take a complete month's rest. Menton was their inevitable destination for 'a recuperative holiday'[60]; and they spent happy days amongst the old and happy haunts of their Riviera reverie. A respite from the responsibility of caring for Gavin was apparently one of the pre-conditions of their relaxation; they certainly had no intention of taking him with them. Belonging claims that they engaged a nurse to care for him during their absence; but contemporary letters reveal that they in fact enrolled him temporarily in a nearby Montessori school where he was proclaimed as '"a Montessori genius"'.[61] This is an interesting piece of misremembering which perhaps suggests a retrospective guilt about leaving a child of less than thirty months old in an educational institution. It is certainly difficult to give complete credence to Willa's claim that 'when we came back from Mentone, we were as sentimental about seeing him again as any young thing could be about seeing a sweetheart - same queer, tight feeling in the chest.'[62] He was apparently returned to school as a permanent boarder at a slightly later date; but Willa and Edwin were eventually obliged to remove him because he was 'breaking his little heart'.[63] The unidentified school in this instance might actually have been Summerhill rather than the Montessori establishment; Willa was always eager to enroll her son with Neill although she knew that Edwin was vehemently opposed to the idea.[64]

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[54] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 16th July 1930.
[55] Willa Muir in a letter to Lizzie Thorburn. Crowborough, 23rd December, 1929.
[56] Record of Births, Deaths and Marriages. New Register House, Edinburgh.
[57] Record of Births, Deaths and Marriages. New Register House, Edinburgh.
[58] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 16th July 1930.
[59] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 16th July 1930.
[60] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p151)

Edwin and Willa returned to Crowborough in May feeling infinitely restored and refreshed by their Mentone holiday. Willa re-engaged with the translation treadmill while Edwin applied the finishing touches to 'a story of the Reformation, The Three Brothers.'[65] This novel was published by Heinemann in January 1931 and was 'a pretty complete failure publicly'.[66] Willa excused this critical opprobrium by suggesting that the 'time was hardly propitious for novels that harrowed one's feelings. The American slump in 1929 and the consequent Great Depression had caused bank failures and unemployment throughout Europe, and Britain was of course involved. Pessimism and turbulence were spreading, and Edwin's optimism also began to fade; an undertone of dejection, even of misery, crept into the poems he was writing.'[67] Edwin himself recognised that 'the poetry I wrote at that time was tinged with apprehension. The fears of writers living nearer the centre of things must have communicated themselves to us. 1930 had passed, and the poetry of Wystan Auden and Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis had caught the general feeling that something must be done if we were not to be entangled in a war.'[68]

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[61] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 16th July 1930.
[62] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Crowborough, 16th July 1930.
[63] Willa Muir in a letter to Lizzie Thorburn. Crowborough, 12th July 1931
[64] Kathleen Raine in an interview with Kirsty Allen. London, 24th March 1995.
[65] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p227)
[66] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. Crowborough, 11th April 1931. British Library, London.

The mood of uneasy misery in 'The Nook' was probably exacerbated by the translation project upon which the Muirs now embarked: The Sleepwalkers - Hermann Broch's expansive trilogy about the 'break-up of civilization in contemporary Europe'[69] - was their latest commission. The Muirs greatly admired Broch's work and were rapidly seduced by the novel's pessimism and its uncompromising 'ambience of bleak despair';[70] but they nevertheless 'refused to be bludgeoned by Broch's logic' and 'did not agree that the unconscious should be despised as Broch despised 'the irrational''.[71] A correspondence and a friendship gradually developed between the author and his translators; and Willa told Broch that she believed that he had 'a peculiar genius for rendering what, I think, has not yet been made conscious in literature, what you so well describe as the sleepwalking of the human race, what psychologists are beginning to investigate under the names of the Unconscious and the Superconscious, but which as yet is more than psychology although it would be wrong to call it metaphysics. In this immense and shadowy realm you seem to me to move with extraordinary intuition, as well as knowledge: there are constant flashes of insight in your work which make one go on thinking about them long after the book has been laid aside.'[72] Edwin and Willa certainly expended a great deal of time and energy on The Sleepwalkers; and were therefore 'bound to be influenced by his pessimism.'[73]

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[67] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p151)
[68] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p227)
[69] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p152)
[70] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p152)
[71] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p152)

Willa's mood was lifted and lightened by the eventual completion and publication of Imagined Corners. Edwin 'thought much of it' and believed that it contained 'very excellent and subtle things'[74]; but Willa was uncharacteristically reticent about the finished product and responded with heartfelt gratitude to the critical approval of friends and family. She told Sydney Schiff that he was 'a brick to send me such comforting words about my book. There is much of it that is only suggested and half-stated, because I was afraid of putting more into my characters than probability would bear, and the very suspension of my beliefs in the book seems to have prevented some people from seeing that they were there at all. But you have felt that they were there, and I am very pleased. . . . I am learning that one must understand with sympathy the most awful people, if one is to write about them: and I think there will be more understanding in my next book, and the irony will be less obviously on the surface.'[75] This self-criticism is presumably a direct response to the comments of The Times Literary Supplement reviewer who, in a largely complimentary description of Imagined Corners, suggested that: '[t]he author's idea is, apparently, that the world just goes inexplicably awry for some people, . . . but a novelist has got to invent necessity or his record fails.'[76]

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[72] Willa Muir in a letter to Hermann Broch. Crowborough, 7th July 1931. I am grateful to Peter Butter for the loan and the translation of these letters.
[73] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1969. (p152)
[74] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. Crowborough, 22nd March 1922. British Library, London.
[75] Willa Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. Crowborough, 22nd March 1922. British Library, London.

The Glasgow Herald offered entirely unqualified approval of the novel. An anonymous reviewer suggested that 'Mrs Muir, although a Scot by birth, by temperament, and, we imagine, by inclination, possesses the inestimable advantage of having, like the sophisticated Elise of her novel, both in body and in spirit, resided long enough and far enough away from her native land to be able to view its virtues and its vices with a serene detachment.'[77] The barely suppressed anger and resentment of Imagined Corners is not, however, indicative of a 'serene detachment' on the part of its author: this is an aggressively Scottish novel in both its setting and in the literary precedents which place its bitter and vitriolic portrayal of small-town Scottish life firmly within the anti-kailyard tradition of George Douglas Brown and Ian Hay. But the observations of the Glasgow Herald reviewer are otherwise just, well-judged and a suitable preface to the sympathetic and intelligent critical commentary which follows. The applause for Willa's 'complete and resolute assessment of psychological values'[78] is particularly astute and displays an unusually empathetic understanding of the novel's primary purposes. The review closes with the suitably nationalistic observation that Imagined Corners 'is not a specially cheerful novel, but it is just as certainly not depressing: and it is a memorable contribution to the cartography of the soul of Scotland.'[79]

This 1930s Glasgow Herald review compares interestingly with the same newspaper's reaction to the 1987 re-publication of the novel by Canongate

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[76] Unknown Reviewer in The Times Literary Supplement. 2nd July , 1931.
[77] Unknown Reviewer in The Glasgow Herald. July, 1931.
[78] Unknown Reviewer in The Glasgow Herald. July, 1931.
[79] Unknown Reviewer in The Glasgow Herald. July, 1931.

Classics. Lesley Duncan welcomes the book in this later review as her 'Paperback Of The Week' and suggests that the novel's 'most impressive quality is its sheer intelligence. It is as if this brilliant woman had flung into her fiction all her wide-ranging speculations on the nature of religious belief, women's status in society, the anarchic influence of sex, the infinite shallows as well as depths of human relations.'[80]

This is an accurate analysis of Willa's self-imposed and perhaps unconscious mission in Imagined Corners: the novel is undoubtedly a fictional exploration of the hesitantly feminist theory which Women: An Inquiry expounds. But Women: an Inquiry dabbles in tentative theoretic absolutes while Imagined Corners glories in the fickleness and complexity of real humanity. The radically feminist assertiveness of the fiction is in fact curiously incompatible with Women: An Inquiry's conservative exploration of the symbiosis and complementarity of the sexes. The cautious traditionalism of the theory is infinitely removed from the explosive and unconventional extremes by which Willa's various fictional characters assert their individuality and independence. Elise in Imagined Corners consciously sacrifices her precious 'respectability' on the altar of freedom, and consequently lives a life of banishment and exile; Elizabeth Shand rejects Scotland and men in a revolutionary renunciation of her roots and her marriage; and Annie Ritchie pursues a meaningful identity in Willa's later Mrs Ritchie with the most horrifying and domineering tyranny.[81]

Willa's feminist concerns are self-evidently central to a novel of psychologised fiction in which two female consciousnesses and an unambiguously female narrator are the narrative voices. Elizabeth Shand and Elise Mütze embody the qualities of quiet endurance and undemonstrative resilience which are common to all of the women in Willa's fiction. Elise is an apparently instinctive feminist who possesses the innate intelligence and courage to recognise and release herself from the shackles of the patriarchal Presbyterian culture of her Calderwick childhood. She has sacrificed neither her freedom nor her femaleness to the emotional and physical hardships which have been the product of her convictions; and has consequently developed an indomitable and exquisite awareness of herself and her world. Elizabeth Shand, by comparison, appears initially to be a victim of the culture in which she has been reared. An underdeveloped sense of self has caused her to confuse lust for love in her relationship with her husband; and her vision of marriage is shaped entirely by the time-worn expectations and stereotypes of a patriarchal society. The men in the novel seek to construct artificial certainties and absolutes out of an unpredictable and living world. 'Womanhood' assumes static and fixed qualities in the minds of men who are afraid of what might happen if women were permitted to be women rather than to fulfil the time-honoured male constructs. The 'Madonna or whore' dichotomy still predominates in Calderwick society; and it is therefore inevitable that women are seen primarily as types rather than as individuals. Hector, for example, has always:

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[80] Lesley Duncan. 'Paperback Of The Week' in The Glasgow Herald. 30th May 1987.

[81] These ideas - and those in the paragraphs which follow - are drawn directly from my introduction to the Willa Muir reader, Imagined Lives, which is due to be published by Canongate in autumn 1996.

> accepted unthinkingly the suggestion that women were the guardians of decorum - good women that is to say, women who could not be referred to as 'skirts.' Good women existed to keep in check men's sensual passions. A man, driven by physical desire . . . is mad and reckless, and his sole protection from himself is the decorum of women.[82]

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[82] Willa Muir. Imagined Corners. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1987. (p77)

It is, in fact, only when Elizabeth is freed - by Elise - from Hector's unreasonable and inbred expectations, that she can begin to explore the emotional and intellectual aspects of herself which extend beyond the bound of Hector's all-consuming physicality. Self and sisters are - as both Elizabeth Shand and Sarah Murray learn - the only real sources of strength and support upon which a women can rely: 'If it wasn't for the women the world would be in a gey queer state. And the women got little credit for it.'[83]

This is not, however, a chauvinistically female novel; the women of Calderwick are not paragons of pleasant virtue who compare entirely admirably with their pathetic and patriarchal menfolk. Small-mindedness, claustrophobia and suffocating intrusiveness are the primary characteristics of Calderwick existence; and are primarily the products of female endeavour. Gossip retailing is the means by which many of the townswomen imbue their often empty and meaningless lives with some sense of futile purpose; but this is a destructive form of watching which gloats over the misfortunes of others and exclaims with self-righteous horror over the sins of one's neighbours. Willa always blamed the iron-fisted grasp of Presbyterianism for this judgemental tendency; and Imagined Corners is informed in many explicit and implicit ways by her revulsion against the Scottish national religion.

But these small-town 'sins' do not alienate the reader from the novel's 'sinners'; one of the great strengths of Imagined Corners is that it contains few characters with whom the reader does not engage empathetically. Willa's protagonists are certainly not authorial playthings for the illustration of ideologies; they are three-dimensional characters whose interaction is as important as their individual qualities. There is a sense of balance and debate in the novel; of an interaction of attitudes and perceptions; of attack and defence; of a conscious resistance to dogmatic conclusionism. And it is this dialogue of views and visions which gives the text its richness and its relevance.

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[83] Willa Muir. Imagined Corners. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1987. (p202)

The novel actually engages in a controlled, equable and irreconcileable debate with itself and leaves the reader with a series of numerous loose threads and unanswered questions: Is leaving Scotland the only course open to those who feel limited by her attitudes? Is the renunciation of men the sole means by which women can achieve full and fulfilled womanhood? And ultimately - as Ned's struggle with his mind continues - is there a meaning to human life?

It is not a novel in which philosophy or text book absolutes hold the floor; it is a novel steeped in a sense of its own humanity. The lived existence - with its cruelties, bigotries, foolishnesses, strengths and weaknesses - is the context in which Willa's characters take their place. And her warm, wry and grudging critical affection suggests a residual sense of optimism and hopefulness about the human race.

This residual optimism reflects an interesting light onto the autobiographical elements of the novel. Ned Murray's descent into madness is an obvious and blatant account of William Anderson's breakdown and eventual incarceration in Murray's Asylum in Perth; but the description coincidentally illustrates the emotional affect on Willa (in the guise of Sarah Murray) of the painful decision which she had been forced to make.

> Thankless work. Ay, thankless work. Sarah 's lip trembled still more. Not one of them valued what she had done. Ned least of all. And now, at the end, they had forced her to be a Judas. She it

> was who had called in the doctor and put the powder in Ned's soup.
>
> But she had called in John Shand too, hoping against hope that he at least would be able to manage Ned. . . . And all he had done was to hurt the laddie. . . . Not one of them knew how to do it except herself, and she was tired out. . . . None of these men could stand from Ned the half of what she had stood for all their size and strength.[84]

The novel's most interestingly autobiographical element is embodied in Elise's regretful and nostalgic descriptions of her mutually fulfilling relationship with Karl. This undoubted love match echoes Willa's perception of her own marriage and is primarily and overwhelmingly positive; but a doubt is cast upon the apparent perfection of the relationship by the fact that even the liberated and independent Elise has acted as a reluctant muse and mother to her beloved Karl.

> Her vitality, he had said, was all he needed to provide him with vegetative material on which to feed. . . . Women were like grass, he said; they were the fundamental nourishment. . . . Anonymous nourishment, thought Madame Mütze, remembering how she had objected to this description. Karl had always explained her elaborately to herself; but he had explained himself too; he was able to say at any point precisely what influences were affecting him, and she never subscribed to his explanations. Still, Karl survived in these seven books, and she survived only in herself.

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[84] Willa Muir. Imagined Corners. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1987. (p202)

> She had nothing else to show. Was she, then, mere pasture on which an imaginative man could browse?[85]

These transparently personal reflections suggest an interesting, early and reluctant tension in Willa's relationship with Edwin. She was already aware of the painful and frustrating invisibility which was implicit in 'nourishing' the life and the work of a literary figure; and although her love for Edwin was never compromised by professional jealousy, she was occasionally and perennially niggled by a nagging doubt about the reputation which she had possibly sacrificed for Edwin's sake. There is a prophetic significance to these Imagined Corners sentiments; an outburst in Willa's 1950 journal virtually and distressingly mirrors Elise's retrospective perspective on her own insignificant existence.

> I am a better translator than he is. The whole current of patriarchal society is set against this fact however and sweeps it into oblivion, simply because I did not insist on shouting aloud: 'Most of the translation, especially Kafka, has been done by ME. Edwin only helped.' And every time Edwin was referred to as THE translator, I was too proud to say anything; and Edwin himself felt that it would be undignified to speak up, I suppose. So that now . . . I am left without a shred of literary reputation. And I am ashamed of the fact that I feel it as a grievance. It shouldn't bother me. Reputation is a passing value after all. Yet it is now that I feel it, now when I am trying to build up my life again . . . . Because I seem to have nothing to build on, except that I am Edwin's wife and he still loves me. That is much. It is more in a sense than I deserve. And I know, too, how destructive

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[85] Willa Muir. Imagined Corners. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1987. (p150)

> ambition is, and how it deforms what one might create. And yet, and yet, I want to be acknowledged.[86]

Willa's physical health was a more immediate concern than her literary reputation in 'The Nook' at Crowborough in the 1930s. The source of the ill-health which had plagued her since Gavin's birth was finally recognised and addressed by a competent medical practitioner. In August 1931 she was admitted to the local cottage hospital for reparatory surgery. The operation was considerably more serious than the surgeon had anticipated: Willa was forced to spend a full three weeks in hospital before she was finally allowed home on the express condition that she remained in bed and avoided any sort of lifting.[87] Her operation was nevertheless apparently less immediately distressing for her than for Edwin: he found her absence from home utterly unbearable. But Willa was returned to reasonable health as a consequence of the operation; and family life returned to a state of comparative normality.

The humdrum routine of daily life was unexpectedly interrupted in early 1932 by the arrival of a letter from Helen Cruickshank, the secretary of the Scottish branch of P.E.N., 'an organization of Poets, Essayists and Novelists.'[88] The Committee had resolved to send a delegate to the forthcoming international P.E.N. conference in Budapest and had elected Edwin as their chosen ambassador of Scottish arts and culture. It was an unmissable opportunity for a subsidised holiday abroad with 'the prospect of meeting imaginative writers from all over Europe.'[89] They readily and enthusiastically accepted the invitation and were duly despatched with the solemn charge of ensuring that the English delegation did not 'claim Scottish P.E.N. as a regional offshoot; we had to insist on the separate national identity of the Scottish P.E.N.'[90] P.E.N.'s resolutely 'non-racial, non-political and non-sectarian'[91] creed was somewhat qualified amongst Scottish writers by a prevailing mood of literary nationalism and the concern that 'even in our own country there was not enough knowledge of our cultural heritage.'[92]

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[86] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[87] Edwin Muir in a letter to Ethel Ross. Crowborough, 26th October 1931.
[88] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p152)
[89] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p152)

The eager anticipation and enthusiasm with which the Muirs arrived in Budapest in May 1932 evaporated rapidly amidst the palpable tension and intrigue of the conference proceedings. Rifts, resentments and schisms were rife within various delegations. Edwin and Willa were drawn into conversation at the opening reception with some agitated and irate young representatives from the Hungarian P.E.N. and listened in sympathetic horror to the various grievances which were splitting their delegation. 'The Hungarian P.E.N. had allotted a money prize to a novelist for an excellent book he had published, but only a fortnight before the Congress the government had intervened, forbidding them to choose that work and ordering them to give the prize to another. "A Blubo book!" chorused the young rebels indignantly. (Blubo was the current term for the kind of books the Nazis were sponsoring, "Blut und Boden" literature, Blood and Soil.) "And when our secretary refused to do it, they said they wouldn't give us a single pengo for the Congress. So we had to knuckle under. But we're not going to put up with it."'[93]

It was a salutary foretaste of the political intrigue and conspiracy which polluted the entire Congress. The atmosphere was particularly thick with rancour and resentment whenever the Romanian and the Hungarian delegations were brought together in discussion; but the air of unease and mistrust was virtually universal. 'The French were detested because, it was said, they took for granted that they alone were capable of providing leaders in discussion or settling details of procedure. The Austrian delegation, a large one, included men whose work we liked, such as Felix Salten, but he was going about with a worried face, and Roda Roda, the Viennese columnist, was also unhappy-looking despite his cheerful red waistcoat. . . . The Germans had brought as a respectable "front" old Theodor Däubler, looking with his curling white beard like Olympian Jove, but the rest were Nazi supporters to a man, on the telephone at all hours receiving instructions and transmitting information. The atmosphere of Nazi intrigue and political conspiracy between Austrians and Germans was so thick that no one could miss it, and the smaller countries' delegations were resentful and apprehensive.'[94] The Muirs and Hermann Ould sought refuge from the tensions of the Congress in a secluded local restaurant; but this haven was rapidly and reluctantly altered when Ernst Toller joined them. 'In a way, that was the last straw for us both, since Toller daily brought with him some new story of oppression in Hungary itself.'[95]

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[90] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p153)
[91] Helen B. Cruickshank. Octobiography. Montrose: The Standard Press, 1976. (P68)
[92] Helen B. Cruickshank. Octobiography. Montrose: The Standard Press, 1976. (P68)
[93] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p153)

It was a miserable experience and both Edwin and Willa consequently suffered from subdued spirits. Willa later expressed her bitter anguish to Helen Cruickshank in 'a private, unofficial account of many things which we do not care to put into an official report.'[96] 'In short, the general anguish [in Hungary] is filled with hatred, revenge, and cruelty. Perhaps this should not have depressed us, but it did: and I spent Thursday afternoon of Congress week in roaring and greeting in my room over the state of Central Europe.'[97]

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[94] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p154-5)
[95] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p155)
[96] Willa Muir in a letter to Helen Cruick shank. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p72)

Their misery was compounded, towards the end of the week, by a more immediate and intimate threat. Edwin had been bathing alone in the hotel swimming pool, and had become entrapped beneath the waters of a strong current which was generated by a wave machine. He was only narrowly rescued from drowning and was profoundly shaken by the experience. Willa 'had a moment of near terror . . . : it seemed as if the whole occurrence had been evoked like a dream from Edwin's underworld, so perfectly did it find a shape for his own situation in the Congress, plunged in deep misery before the power-machinery at work there. And he might have been drowned. But he was only half-drowned, shocked, distressed and reeking of sulphur. My moment of terror passed, though I was thankful to remember that the Congress was nearing its end.'[98] They could scarcely wait to escape from the nightmare of this eagerly anticipated Congress to the comparative security of Broch's hospitality and friendship in Austria. 'I am greatly looking forward to seeing you. It will be restful after this tohu-bohu here to talk to someone about whom one knows at least something! I am in a kind of nightmare of Bulgars and Danes and Letts and Serbs and Dutchmen - not to speak of Hungarian magnates in grands cordons!'[99]

Vienna promised an eventual meeting with a man with whom they had already forged a certain intimacy and friendship through their efforts to translate his work. The frenzy of conversation which greeted them and which was eagerly sustained throughout their brief Viennese sojourn was inhibited only by the frustration of their respective linguistic hesitancies. '[H]uman understanding is difficult as it is, but when the barrier of another language is added, the difficulty is unfairly intensified. I was sorry all the time I was in Vienna for my faltering German - we both used to speak it far better, indeed fairly well, years ago, when we stayed in Austria and Germany - and it was most unfortunate that it should fail us just when we most wanted to summon it.'[100] But the soothing balm of empathetic conversation failed to comfort Willa or to efface the memory of the hatred and turmoil which they had left behind them in Budapest. 'From his tall height Broch looked down on us compassionately as on a pair of children who had just been learning the facts of European life.'[101]

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[97] Willa Muir in a letter to Helen Cruick shank. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p74)
[98] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p156)
[99] Willa Muir in a letter to Hermann Broch. Hungary, May 1932.

The journey home took them across a stormy Channel and delivered them back to an equally and unexpectedly tempestuous atmosphere in 'The Nook'. A seriously disturbed and distressed Gavin awaited them. '[W]e found the cook giving notice because she had quarrelled with the nurse, and our little boy in a state of nervous depression, partly because of that, and partly, I am afraid, because he longed so much for us. However, we are no longer sea-sick: a new cook has come: the nurse is pacified and rebuked: the small Gavin is singing all day: I have started on my new novel: the sun is actually shining outside and the P.E.N. Congress is fading into a bad dream.'[102]

The comfort of their daily routine and the gentle warmth of early summer gradually repaired the emotional scars which the Congress had left: they now projected their thoughts into the future and contemplated the possibilities and oppportunities which lay before them. The British economy still laboured under the hefty burden of the Great Depression; employment was a sparse and keenly sought commodity; and a diluted version of central Europe's political unease and social malaise was sweeping across Britain. Emotions were running high and it was impossible to be unaffected by the agony of expectant tension which coloured the nation's life. '[T]he apprehension had somehow reached us, and perhaps because of it, perhaps because of a feeling that we were living too far from the life of the time, we decided to move to London.'[103]

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[100] Edwin Muir in a letter to Hermann Broch In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p76)
[101] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p157)
[102] Willa Muir in a letter to Hermann Broch. Crowborough, 2nd June 1932.

Financial and literary considerations also exerted a significant influence in directing them towards London; 'commissions for work could now be got only by practically sitting on publishers' doorsteps. As we were determined not to spend another winter in the Crowborough house and could now afford the shift to London, because my mother had left me some money, we began hunting for a house in Hampstead, at that time a focus for literary people.'[104]

They revelled meanwhile in the blissful afternoons of a sun-drenched summer and explored the countryside of Sussex in a 'second-hand car, a blunt-nosed Morris Cowley'[105] which they bought with Willa's mother's money. 'Gavin usually sat in my lap and Edwin did the driving. Sticking to minor roads he got us to the places we aimed for at his favourite speed of twenty-five miles an hour; he had no affinity with machinery but I learned to be a calm passenger, whatever happened to the gears.'[106] He was apparently always a liability behind the wheel of a car!

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[103] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p227).
[104] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p158)
[105] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p158)
[106] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p158-9)

Summer faded into early autumn; and another Crowborough winter loomed. The Muirs despaired of ever finding a suitable London house. But a 'pleasant one at 7 Downshire Hill'[107] eventually presented itself and in mid-October they bade a cheerful farewell to the Sussex house which had witnessed the emotions of a birth and two deaths. The literary and cosmopolitan bustle of London beckoned.

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[107] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p158)

CHAPTER VIII

HAMPSTEAD: AN OASIS OF HAPPINESS. 1932-1935.

They were soon installed in the 'pleasantly shabby'[1] Downshire Hill house which they quickly came to love. A catalogue of domestic disasters characterised the first months of their Hampstead sojourn as the walls of their charmingly dilapidated home tumbled down around their ears. The property had apparently been subjected to a long regime of neglect for which the Muirs now paid the price. 'A plumber and repairer had attended to it for an absent-minded trust for forty years. Plumbing had developed during that time, but he had not. The roof of our bedroom leaked, and for the first few weeks we had to sleep with a large umbrella over our heads in case of rain. We got him to put in a new bath, but he absent-mindedly left the waste-pipe hanging in the air, and the first time the bath was filled water poured down into the dining room below, bringing a large chunk of plaster with it. The lavatory pan swayed precariously when you sat on it. The garden at the back was filled with small bones and oyster-shells. An elderly lady who had the house before us had spent her days in bed, living on mutton chops and oysters, and throwing the bones and the shells through the open window. As I look back on the troubles with our house, they seem part of the pleasure it gave us, though they must have been exasperating at the time. The fact was that we were in love with its sweet battered, Mozartian grace, and for that were prepared to forgive it anything.'[2]

Exasperation rather than pleasure certainly dominates the tone of a letter which Willa wrote from the epicentre of this chaos. '[W]hen your lavatory is condemned and dismantled, and bricks fall down the kitchen chimney, and a large portion of plaster narrowly misses Edwin as it falls from the ceiling in the dining-room, and rain soaks in at every corner of the roof, a mere failure to write letters becomes as nothing. We have been living in a nightmare, not a house, and I have not been able to think two connected thoughts.'[3] But even the wreckage couldn't prevent her from loving the quaint old house 'with its Gothic windows and absurd battlements'[4] and its genteel and gentle neighbourhood. A pervasive sense of peaceful happiness was her constant reminder, during the three years of her Hampstead sojourn, of her good fortune 'in living here in a garden street among houses that delighted the eye. There was loving-kindness in the way it had been planned.'[5]

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[1] Janet Adam Smith. 'Writers Remembered: Edwin Muir.' In The Authors. Spring 1988. (pp8-9)

[2] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic. 1993. (p232-3)

She and Edwin were thrilled too by the forgotten buzz and excitement of London life; and they relished the prospect of getting 'back into human society again, after almost six years of living among English grass and clay.'[6] Hampstead promised the lively companionship and intelligent conversation of kindred spirits and 'was filled with writing people and haunted by young poets despairing over the poor and the world, but despairing together, in a sad but comforting communion.'[7] 'This made a wonderful ambience for us and was part of Hampstead's magic.'[8]

Those first chaotic months were a whirl of social activity. An abundance of fond and familiar faces rapidly appropriated their lives and filled their home; and they busily rekindled the ashes of old and half-forgotten friendships. The close proximity of the Carswells (who had helped them to find the house at 7 Downshire Hill) was a particular source of pleasure to the Muirs, and they enjoyed many happy evenings together. Cathy shared many of Willa's characteristics and convictions; but her exuberant vitality was usually tempered by the gracefulness which Willa often lacked. She was 'a very charming feminine person, quick and witty, with an exquisitely fine shell-pink complexion and beautiful eyes. Honest and open in all her opinions, she was advanced for the times in her views of the relations of the sexes, which was not unexpected in one who was a personal friend and biographer of D.H. Lawrence.'[9] Willa was occasionally irritated by this 'foolish fondness'[10] for Lawrence and by Cathy's dewy-eyed adulation of his 'domestic skills, "nobody could lay a fire like Lorenzo".'[11]

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[3] Willa Muir in a letter to the Thorburns. Hampstead, 31st October 1932.
[4] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p159)
[5] Willa Muir. Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[6] Edwin Muir in a letter to the Thorburns. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p78)
[7] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p227)
[8] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p159)

The Hampstead homes of the Muirs and the Carswells became the centre of a London-Scottish literary coterie which included George Malcolm Thomson, Flora Grierson and Janet Adam Smith. Leslie Mitchell, John Rafferty and 'two very young painters from Glasgow - could they have been Colquhoun and MacBryde? -' were also amongst those whom Janet Adam Smith remembers 'dropping in at Downshire Hill. There were other suppers and parties at my flat in Ladbroke Square - at one gathering I admired another accomplishment of Edwin's - his nimbleness and neatness in Highland reels.'[12]

The Muirs' social circle expanded rapidly and they 'met many young poets and other writers'[13] with whom they could discuss the earnest idealism and artistic ideologies of the new generation. 'Dylan Thomas and George Barker were writing their first obscure verse; David Gascoyne, still in his teens, was interested in surrealism. Geoffrey Grigson was conducting his lively journal, New Verse. A new generation had appeared from a country which I had never guessed at; they had been nourished on strange food and prepared, it seemed by a secret discipline; now they appeared to belong in a specific way to the present, as if it were theirs exclusively, or as if they had been forged by it alone. My wife and I came to know most of them and had no difficulty in entering the worlds their minds moved in; but to us there seemed to be a hiatus between it and the poetry they wrote, so that they seemed to be more real than their poetry.'[14]

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[9] Helen B. Cruickshank. Octobiography. Montrose: The Standard Press, 1976. (p68)
[10] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p159)
[11] Janet Adam Smith. 'Writers Remembered: Edwin Muir.' In The Authors. Spring 1988. (pp8-9)
[12] Janet Adam Smith. 'Writers Remembered: Edwin Muir.' In The Authors. Spring 1988. (pp8-9)
[13] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p159)

Many of these young writers - as a reaction against the fascist revolution which was sweeping across much of mainland Europe - had adopted Communist principles and were entirely committed to the creation of politically engaged poetry. 'To be modern meant in the thirties to interpret the poet's individual experience of lived history in the light of some kind of Marxist analysis.'[15] Edwin and Willa 'distrusted systems ending in -ism, especially political systems, abstractions one and all.'[16] The implications of Communism repulsed them and they feared the possible consequences of its influence on life and literature. Edwin believed that 'history as the unending anger of class against class seemed an empty idea which, like a curious mechanism, explained nothing but itself.'[17] 'When Communists told him that Communism was "historically inevitable" he was horrified by their determinism, which he felt to be an arrogant lie, as if human history were not a living, growing process. He objected also to the vaunt of Communists that their system was "impersonal", in the sense that it disregarded personal values. For Edwin personal feelings were a source of strength and poetry, not an emotional mess as these doctrinaire theorists assumed.'[18] Edwin's rejection of Communism was as inevitable and as natural as the contradictory attraction which drew the younger generation to its banner. His poetic and personal doctrines were in direct and irreconcileable contrast to the dehumanising determinism of the Communist ideology; he simply could not understand the nature of the idealism which rendered Marxism attractive to the new generation of poets and writers. They meanwhile believed that Communism was the only political system which could offer a positive and relevant vision for present and future society.

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[14] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p228)
[15] Stephen Spender. The Thirties and After. Poetry, Politics, People (1933-75). London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1978. (p25)
[16] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p166)
[17] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p229)
[18] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p166)

> But this was a decade in which many assumptions previously taken for granted in middle-class democratic Europe and America seemed shaken. There were vast numbers of unemployed workers, ill-dressed, living on the dole, which was below subsistence level, standing idle in the streets or desperate on hunger marches. The capitalist system which seemed on the verge of complete breakdown and which was incapable of employing the workers, or, if they were unemployed, preventing them from almost starving, was the same system that supported the cultivated leisured class of those whose aesthetic values seemed to have no connection with politics and social conditions. In such circumstances, many young writers came to feel that art unconnected with social conditions was 'about' this very lack of connection. . . .
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> Thus the thirties was a time when, under the extreme complacency of English governments, members of the younger generation felt themselves divided by the thinnest of walls from destructive forces which seemed absolute, from terrible suffering and pure evil. Perhaps one reason for the attraction of communism was that the communists also had their vision of the final crisis, though they regarded it as one involving the destruction of capitalism rather than of civilisation. Considered

> as an apocalyptic vision, the communist view coincides with that of T.S. Eliot in The Waste Land or Yeats in 'The Second Coming'. To see this is to see how, looked at from a certain angle, or in a given situation, works which seem quite alien to all ideas of politics can suddenly seem to be politically symptomatic and to offer a choice between complete despair and revolution. . . .[19]

Edwin and Willa were saddened and repulsed by the political and poetic vision of this new generation of writers and intellectuals; but they 'found the young men themselves very attractive'[20] and regularly sought their company as guests at Downshire Hill. The possible incongruity or awkwardness which might have arisen out of the generation gap which separated them from these angry young men never occurred to them: the young men 'may have seen Edwin as an elderly romantic steeped in bygone sentiment but I did not get that impression. Edwin was gentle and ageless; he still looked young and appeared quite at home among the youngsters.'[21] The young writers were meanwhile grateful for the friendship and the encouragement which the Muirs infallibly and tirelessly offered, and probably appreciated the warm welcome and the homely surroundings which greeted them at 7 Downshire Hill. One of the tentatively aspiring young writers whom Edwin took under his literary wing was George Barker. He first visited the Muirs on:

> one wet evening in the autumn and met for the first time a phenomenon I hope never to forget: the extraordinary gentleness that prevails in the presence of many men who are truly poets.
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> I think often with gratitute of evenings spent in his quiet company, because here I learned that words were not only delightful things in themselves but also - this mysterious fact still

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[19] Stephen Spender. The Thirties and After. Poetry, Politics, People (1933-75). London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1978. (p21-2 and p24)
[20] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p159)
[21] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p159)

> fascinates me - that they stand for far more than most people think or are. Muir was like a silent clock that showed not the time but the condition, not the hour but the alternative.
>
> And I as gratefully remember that occasion when the overpowering caryatid of Willa Muir took up the Homer and began to recite that opening passage in Greek, so that the whole of that tasteful room in Hampstead gradually filled with the loudmouthed rolling parallels of the poem and the sea - until I was witnessing the living demonstration of Eliot's assertion that a poem can communicate before it is understood.[22]

The house was constantly abuzz with the laughter and chatter of friends and literary acquaintances. Both Willa and Edwin were occasionally oppressed by the hectic enormity of London life; but the entertaining round was a generally happy revelation. Many months passed before they considered themselves to be fully acclimatised to the demands and stresses of the London social whirl. 'Other writers dropped in and became friends; in London fashion they often brought strangers with them. If there were too many strangers in our sitting room Edwin and I at first tended to lose our poise; he retreated into Muir-family remoteness and I covered up by becoming too voluble. Our idea of good company was a quiet meeting of friends, preferably not more than two or three, rather than a scramble of literary acquaintances.'[23] Willa revelled in the intimacy of a small dinner party and presided vivaciously and enthusiastically over the good-natured get-togethers which took place at 7 Downshire Hill. They were 'convivial and jolly evenings'[24] during which the conversation wandered easily amongst the trivialities of 'gossip and the doings of the day.'[25] Willa's naturally extrovert personality tended occasionally to overwhelm her companions and the tone of the gathering was often determined by her voice and views. '[E]xuberant over the supper table, or in the garden on summer evenings as she talked of Dresden and Vienna, A.S. Neill and the psychology of motherhood, Willa Muir would appear to dominate. She admired Edwin and she loved him deeply, but she would hardly let him get a word in.'[26]

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[22] George Barker. 'Coming to London.' in London Magazine. no.1, vol.3. January 1956. (pp51-2)
[23] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p159-60)
[24] Janet Adam Smith in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 18th September 1995.
[25] Janet Adam Smith in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 18th September 1995.

Hesketh Pearson and Hugh Kingsmill were frequent visitors and reliable purveyors of riotous conversation and hysterical laughter. 'It was literate, defensive, throw-away fooling, a type of fun-making belonging to the upper-middle classes of English life whom Hugh called "the mupples". Years later we found it also in P.G. Wodehouse. "She looked like something that might have occurred to Ibsen in one of his less frivolous moments." That is Wodehouse, but it might have been Hugh, said with a blink of the eye and a twitch of the mouth; he could never quite keep a poker face.'[27] Hugh was plagued by financial worries and by the apparently insoluble mystery of turning his wit into wealth. He was something of a social liability when his circumstances were particularly straitened, and Willa cringingly recalled one occasion on which Hugh's arrival coincided with a visit from the great William Empson whose recently published book - Seven Types of Ambiguity - had won him considerable renown. 'Hugh, large and florid as usual . . . must have been in deep waters that evening. . . . [H]e smote Empson on the back and said: "What about the eighth type of ambiguity, Emp, old man?" Empson winced and went on wincing as Hugh persisted in goading him and calling him "Emp".'[28]

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[26] Janet Adam Smith. 'Writers Remembered: Edwin Muir.' In The Authors. Spring 1988. (pp8-9)
[27] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p163)
[28] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p164)

They were generally happy days during which the Muirs 'felt that there was no pleasure greater than that of good company.'[29] They basked in a warm sea of friendliness and a sense of belonging; and they experienced an indefinable wellbeing which was inexplicably unaffected by their painful consciousness of the breakdown of civilised life in Central Europe. It was impossible to ignore the growing canker of fascism and the dire and doomful prophesies of a future hell. 'It's a dreadful world that we're living in just now: like the Dark Ages, when the civilisation was breaking up and another was forming with painful, fragmentary slowness.'[30] Broch's letters regularly and explicitly described the process by which society and culture were being destroyed by the influence of a totalitarian state; and he intimated Germany's rapid descent 'into nothingness with the terrible fear-love relationship toward death which has become the European danger.'[31]

But the decade's deepest gloom couldn't undermine the resilient contentment which had taken up residence in the house at 7 Downshire Hill. 'We have come to think so much of politics as colouring or overshadowing all our thoughts and feelings that it is easy for us to forget the truth, which is that the impulses of the heart come of themselves, and that our most precious experience takes place, happily for us, in a universal unchanging underground. There seems to have been no objective reason for our happiness in Hampstead, and when I try to resuscitate it now it seems to have been made up of a confusion of things, many of them quite trifling.'[32]

These social pleasures and societal pains were intermingled with the inevitable quest for subsistence work. Edwin's contract as a reader with Secker - 'on which we were depending for a livelihood'[33] - was terminated soon after they moved to Hampstead; and they were faced with an imminent financial crisis. Willa was translating a play by Broch; but the income from this project was entirely dependent upon the dubious possibility of contracting either a performing or a publishing arrangement for the finished work. 'We are trying to get it accepted and produced in London, after translation, and Broch promises himself and us heaps of money out of it . . . ! I don't think. I wish I did, but it's not easy to make money out of really intellectual work in these days: something with legs and curls in it is more likely to do that.'[34]

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[29] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p232)
[30] Edwin Muir in a letter to George and Lizzy Thorburn. Hampstead, 11th March 1933.
[31] Hermann Broch in a letter to Willa Muir. Hellerau School, 18th March 1935.
[32] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p232)
[33] Edwin Muir in a letter to George Thorburn. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p79)

By Christmas, they were 'down to £1.10.0, with no job in prospect, the rent due, myself down with the flu.'[35]

The arrival of 1933 heralded the promise of comparative prosperity and financial security; Edwin was offered a contract as a reader with Gollanz, *and* a regular reviewing job with The Listener in the first week of January. Janet Adam Smith - then the Literary Editor of The Listener - was only later aware that her employment proposition had narrowly saved the Muirs from absolute poverty. 'I can't think that we were offering more than a few guineas for each fortnightly review; certainly The Listener had far the best of that bargain. Edwin kept up the assignment wonderfully for several years. He was one of the earliest to acclaim Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Antonia White's Frost in May; he gave every book his full attention - if it wasn't tremendously good, that was no reason for him to be excessively sharp - and he never showed off.'[36]

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[34] Willa Muir in a letter to the Thorburns. Hampstead, 31st October 1932.
[35] Edwin Muir in a letter to George Thorburn. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p80)
[36] Janet Adam Smith. 'Writers Remembered: Edwin Muir.' In The Authors. Spring 1988. (pp8-9)

This feast of work after their recent famine was augmented by a translating contract from Secker for various novels, 'including one by Sholem Asch which was the precursor of several Asch books, and there was another Kafka to get out: The Great Wall of China, and another Broch. Translation went on busily. After some argument we had jacked up our fee for translation to two guineas a thousand, which was supposed to be very good pay, but many hours of hard work were needed to earn a sizeable sum.'[37] The drudge of 'doing bloody translations for bread and butter'[38] was often painfully soul-destroying; Edwin later bitterly reflected that 'too much of our lives was wasted . . . in turning German into English. It began as a resource and hardened into a necessity.'[39]

But there were occasional moments of creative satisfaction which mitigated the misery of this exacting discipline. 'Each foreign sentence on the printed page entered her mind, found a meaning there, flowed more or less sinuously into it, and came out again, altered in shape, as an English sentence, a process which seemed always mysterious and interesting to Mrs Muttoe, although sometimes she claimed that it was as exhausting as stone-breaking.'[40] Critical acclaim and literary applause also lightened their burden of translation; and they reflected with pleasure on the fact that their efforts were the single most important factor in introducing Broch and Kafka - whose writing they greatly admired - to a British readership.

> Kafka's reputation in the English speaking world was built on the versions of Edwin and Willa Muir who translated The Castle in 1930 and the bulk of his work in the next two decades, turning

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[37] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p162)
[38] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Hampstead, August 1933.
[39] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p222).
[40] Willa Muir. Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> Kafka's prose into an English so natural that one might not suspect he had written in any other language.[41]

Their work was also appreciated by the novels' original authors.

> Broch clearly though highly of Muir (he even published a translation of one of Muir's poems); and counted himself fortunate to have such an accomplished writer as translator and mediator of his work. At the same time, both Broch and his publishers seem to have recognised Willa as the major partner in the actual work of translation.[42]

This recognition of Willa's phenomenal contribution to the Muir translating business was unusual: the generally grudging acknowledgement of the extent to which the major translations are largely her work remains an issue of considerable contention. 'It was her capacity for language which earned the money; her linguistic ability and Edwin's creative ability combined to produce undeniably great translations.'[43]

They were completely swamped by this deluge of translations, reviews, articles, poems and novels during the early months of 1933. Willa was attempting to construct a second novel which would be called Mrs Ritchie; but translation deadline demands and sheer pressure of work tied them to their desks and consumed their waking hours. They struggled doggedly against the attractions and exigencies of the outside world and attempted to entrench themselves in their respective studies. Creative time and space were a commodity which Edwin took for granted; but Willa was continually hampered in her literary work by a constant trail of domestic circumstances and demands. 'In his study at the top of the house which contained only a table, a chair, an ink-pot and a fine view over roofs and tree-tops, Edwin now and then produced a poem. . . . My study on the ground floor was neither so bare nor so secluded. Here I was intruded upon at all hours by household staff, the weekly washerwoman, any casual caller ready for a gossip, and Gavin whenever he came home from school. . . . Toys, picture-books and hoards of Gavin's were in my study, an upright piano, a wicker wash-basket for laundry, a sewing-machine, a small sofa for visitors and goodness knows what else. I envied Edwin's power of sitting down immediately after breakfast to concentrate in solitude on what he wanted to do.'[44] Rueful reproachfulness seems to creep unbidden into this description of a world in which circumstances (not 'power') enabled Edwin to withdraw into a creative isolation, while she was forced to deal with the trivial and cluttered necessities of home and family life. 'A woman can make a provisional environment for a man or for a family, but where is she to find one for herself?'[45]

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[41] Ronald Gray. 'But Kafka wrote in German. . . ' In The Cambridge Quarterly. vol.VII(3). 1977. (pp205-216)

[42] Howard Gaskill. 'Edwin Muir. the German Aspect'. In Lines Review. no.69. June 1979. (pp14-20)

[43] Janet Adam Smith in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 18th September 1995.

She could however reclaim the daytime hours for herself when they 'found a pleasant little school for [Gavin] round the corner from Keats Grove, not more than five minutes away, where he was learning among other things to play the piano.'[46] It was a small and friendly school in which his obsessive and passionate interests in mathematics and music could be recognised and nurtured. Willa's relationship with Gavin was increasingly confused and ambivalent. She determinedly maintained that 'any spare time I have belongs to my little boy';[47] but she was more than ready to abdicate some of her responsibility for him into the hands of the school. She was bemused by the incompatibility of his actual development with her psychological theories; and she felt estranged from this child with whom she and Edwin apparently had little in common. His 'delight in enumerating the fractions of his pear seemed all at once faintly alarming: one ought to grasp a pear whole instead of insisting on mathematical dissection.'[48] She worried about his fractious nervousness and emotional brittleness; and she watched with the hawk-eyed meticulousness of the psychologist for an insight into his personality. Neither the scientific nor 'the earth mother side of Willa knew how to handle Gavin.'[49] But she persuaded herself that the Hampstead happiness in which she and Edwin basked also exerted a positive influence on their son. 'He is such a big boy now, and has got rid of all his troubles about the school, and is so nice and sweet and mischievous that we are amazed at the speed with which he is developing. You would find him much improved: the nervous complexes are gone and he is tremendously happy.'[50]

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[44] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p162-3)
[45] Willa Muir. Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[46] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p163)
[47] Willa Muir. Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

His happiness was augmented by the unplanned and spontaneous adoption of a canine companion called Matthew. 'Matthew was bred by two friends of ours, Flora Grierson and Joan Shelmerdine, who combined the breeding of cockers with running a hand-printing Press, the Samson Press'.[51] Flora's father - Sir Herbert Grierson - was of Shetland stock; and Willa was 'happy to think that it was the Shetland heritage which made [Flora] direct, outspoken warm and intelligent. Whenever these two came to Town we were more than pleased to see them.'[52]

The two women arrived on one occasion with a 'wildly lolloping puppy' which they had rescued from an incompetent, inattentive and uncaring owner. This bundle of noisy energy and the ensuing 'yelping and laughter brought Edwin down from his study and this is the picture that stays in my mind: Edwin in an open-necked shirt and grey flannels coming across our back lawn looking gay and beaming a welcome, Joan and Matthew inextricably mixed up with the lead and a deckchair, Flora helpless with mirth and the sun shining brightly over all.'[53] Willa remembered those precious moments affectionately as an 'afternoon of very simple happiness.'[54]

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[48] Willa Muir. Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[49] Janet Adam Smith in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 18th September 1995.
[50] Willa Muir in a letter to the Thorburns. Hampstead, 31st October 1932.
[51] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p160)
[52] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p160)

Flora was Willa's co-conspiriter in the creation of the uncompromisingly titled Alas We Females! A Modest Proposal for the Solution of many Problems by the Abolition of the Female Sex. The work was never completed: but the surviving notes and initial jottings display the embryonic beginnings of a hard-hitting and radically feminist analysis of contemporary society. The opening paragraphs neatly embody the perspective and tone of the article as a whole.

> From time immemorial and to the present day the female child has been received at birth with groans of disappointment and nurtured, if at all, with resentment. While still in her infancy she is made to understand that the one possible return she can make for the inestimable gift of life thus accidentally and unwillingly bestowed upon her is to devote a life of useful service to the father who engendered her, any male members of the family to whom she can be useful, or, if she is supremely fortunate, to the man who will eventually claim her as his own and magnaminously take upon his shoulders the burden of her existence. Her environment teaches her to regard man as her superior, her guide, her justification, and her fulfillment.
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> Unfortunately an inconvenient biological law has put into every woman just enough of the "old Adam" for her to rebel, often at an

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[53] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p160)
[54] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p160)

> early age, though of course in varying degrees, against her status of subservience. And yet her status as an inferior being should be clear, even to herself, from her place in the scheme of nature as the Servant, the sex which ministers to mankind, and as the link between entities, between man and man, community and community, generation and generation, rather than as an entity in herself.[55]

Later pages explore the indestructible and immovable inequalities which the authors identify as the central constructs of society; and the consequent necessity for separatist feminism. The work is peppered with bitter indictments of the enduringly destructive attitudes which inform society's perception of the relationship between women and the family; women and art; women and religion ('rotten with sexual symbolism'); women and politics; women and society; women and warfare; and women and the world. It is a far- and broad-reaching document whose completion was possibly defeated by its own insupportable and unsustainable vitriol.

The smooth flowing of their lives was periodically disrupted by a succession of disastrous domestic appointments. A somewhat naïve trustfulness rendered Willa and Edwin helpless in the face of either competent duplicity or absolute desperation and their good faith was continually abused. A determinedly sulky Welsh maid took their best linen with her when she left to get married; and was replaced by a Scottish maid and a Northern cook who requisitioned the house as the centre for a ring of burglars and 'left one night after having drunk all our wine and whisky.'[56] Willa invested much emotional energy in her quest for a 'domestic treasure'; and she retained a starry-eyed idealism which was inevitably and consistently undermined by the real world. '"Well, taking on a new cook is rather like taking on a new love-affair. And that isn't so surprising, for what I'm looking for . . . is a wife."'[57] She was constantly confused by the demands and expectations of her relationships with her servants; yet she seems never to have been struck by the ideological inconsistency which could simultaneously battle against the inequality of the sexes and accept the indignity of domestic servitude.

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[55] Willa Muir and Flora Grierson. Alas we Females! A modest proposal for the solution of many problems by the abolition of the female sex. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[56] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p232)

By Easter 1933 they were vaguely oppressed by the pressure of London life and craved the peace of the countryside and of undistracted worktime. They were offered the use of a cottage in Sussex into which they transported the entire household, its accoutrements - and an utterly incompetent and emotionally dependent Cockney cook whom Willa had 'engaged out of pity'[58] and who transpired to be more of a hindrance than a help. The holiday was consequently less intellectually productive than they had anticipated; but they were refreshed and revitalised by this breathing space in their busy lives.

They waved a relieved farewell to the Cockney cook when they returned to London; and returned to the round of employment agencies in pursuit of domestic help. It was a long and arduous process which culminated in the appointment of 'a new cook and housemaid, Irish Catholics, an aunt and a niece. It was a package deal; they would not be separated; I had to have both or neither.'[59] 'They looked like the right kind of women. Mary the cook was small, spare and middle-aged, with prematurely white hair, a clear skin and lips folded in a line of patient sweetness.'[60] Willa loved her 'at sight, and rightly; she proved to be a kindly woman and a good cook. Julia the niece, a tall gaunt girl who looked rather like De Valera in petticoats and had hard, suspicious eyes behind her spectacles, gave me a sinking feeling which I ignored, for I was busy with a press of work; both reason and expediency told me I should not waste more time in having to hunt for other maids; besides, I believed she was bound to improve, to grow less suspicious under friendly treatment.'[61]

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[57] Willa Muir. Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[58] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p233)

[59] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p170)

[60] Willa Muir. Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The appointments were formalised and Willa's domestic worries were immediately displaced by the annoyances and anxiety of literary deadlines. Vast German novels were piling up in untranslated and reproachful bundles while Willa struggled to return the final proofs of Mrs Ritchie to the waiting publishers. The minor and routine irritations of domestic life were rapidly swept away on a remorseless tide of work which occupied each hour and thought, and she virtually barricaded herself into her study in order to devote herself to the tasks in hand.

The annual P.E.N. Congress was in Dubrovnik in May; and Edwin was again selected as the representative for Scottish P.E.N. Gavin's fragile emotional state and the pressure of work effectively precluded the possibility of Willa accompanying him; and she determined to exploit Edwin's absence as an opportunity for uninterrupted and concentrated work. 'I am very busy here all by myself. Two translations going, both of which should have been finished by now, and aren't, . . . So I have no time to miss Edwin. Besides, Gavin is on my heels all day.'[62]

The chaos in her busy mind was compounded by the sad and unexpected death of Edwin's sister, Clara. Shock was rapidly succeeded by some confusion about a mystery girl for whom Clara had recently and inexplicably become responsible. 'How can you track the kid's parents Lizzie? Is there no clue at all to them? Why did they hand her over to Clara, in the first place? It would seem the best thing to find them, for I don't think you can possibly take on any more family and I know that we shouldn't want to do it.'[63] Willa decided against wiring the news to Edwin in Dubrovnik; but in his absence she donated every spare penny which the Muirs possessed in the hope 'that some cash is the most practical sympathy'.[64]

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[61] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p170)

[62] Willa Muir in a letter to the Thorburns. Hampstead, 26th May 1933.

The devastating tidings with which Willa greeted Edwin on his return from Hungary catapulted him instantly and cruelly out of a recent idyll during which he had been 'breakfasting with H.G. Wells and lunching with the editors of "Vogue".'[65] He was also faced with the unhappy prospect of 'such vast piles of work' that he hadn't even sufficient leisure for a weekend trip to Glasgow in order to help settle Clara's affairs.

Then - through a haze of panic, pressure and preoccupation - Willa 'became aware that Gavin was obscurely troubled about something'.[66] The 'nervous depression'[67] which had tortured him during his parents' absence in Budapest returned to plague him, and he became inexplicably clingy, neurotic and terrified by bathtime. It was a frustrating and inopportune distraction; and Willa's reaction was probably unfairly tinged with resentment as well as with concern. But when the actual source of Gavin's fears emerged, her heart was filled with simple and uncomplicated anger.

> He was afraid of the first pond on the Heath, afraid that it would drown him. The pond was reputed to be deep in the middle and people had in fact been drowned there - but who had told Gavin that? We went round it as far as we could, planting my walking-stick every so often in the water, not too far from the edge, to show that it was not so very deep and could not come over a little

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[63] Willa Muir in a letter to the Thorburns. Hampstead, 26th May 1933.
[64] Willa Muir in a letter to the Thorburns. Hampstead, 26th May 1933.
[65] Edwin Muir in a letter to Ethel Ross. Hampstead, 11th June 1933.
[66] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p171)
[67] Willa Muir in a letter to Hermann Broch. Crowborough, 2nd June 1932.

> boy's head, until in relief my son told me that Julia had said bad boys were drowned there.
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> Had I understood then, as I did not, that she had been frightening him with Hell and Sin, I do not know what I should have done to her. As it was, I forbade her to frighten him with bogey stories about drowning. She looked sullen but said nothing. I sang Gavin to sleep as usual that evening and told him again that Julia's talk was nonsense, thinking to myself that he would soon be quite reassured.[68]

Willa reflected comfortably and briefly on her swift and decisive reaction; and then dismissed the whole unpleasant chapter and returned her attention to the neglected piles of work. But her placid confidence was sadly and disastrously misguided. Julia remained silently unrepentent and was resolutely determined to prove the ultimate justification of her actions. She continued to goad Gavin with threats of divine retribution and prophesied awful, fiendish punishments for his childish misdemeanours and innocent fictions. Gavin was too emotionally vulnerable to withstand this constant verbal assault and became increasingly distrait and terror-stricken. The disaster which ensued was tragically inevitable.

It seemed, to Willa's busy and preoccupied mind, that the dust of household dissent had settled and she again trusted Gavin's daily walk into Julia's hands. Then 'the catastrophe occurred. Gavin, running home across the road that divided our street from the Heath, was knocked down by a petrol tanker; his right leg was broken in two places and his head severely concussed; it was a miracle he was not killed.'[69] Edwin and Willa were abruptly informed of the accident by a breathless and frightened child at their front door; they immediately 'ran down the street towards the Heath and found a small crowd waiting beside the main road. Our son was lying on the grass, one of his feet sagging to the side, as if it had no connection with his leg. An immense oil-tank was drawn up near by. Gavin was very pale and quite silent. An ambulance was coming down the hill. He was carried into it, we went in with him; the hospital was a little distance up the road.'[70]

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[68] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p171)
[69] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p171)

Edwin and Willa were paralysed with shock and anxiety; but in 'the middle of our distress I dealt with Julia, having realised, too late, that I should have heeded the heart-sinking message from my unconscious when I first saw her. . . . I could not possibly keep her in my employment, now that I knew that she was not to be trusted. She must leave as soon as possible. Julia then told me that ours was a godless house and we were bringing Gavin up to be a little heathen. At last I understood, with certainty, that the boy had run in front of the tanker because he had been running away from Julia. She was sullen, enraged and unrepentant, reiterating that she had only been telling him things every child needed to be told.'[71]

The banishment of Julia failed to assuage Willa's anguish and guilt. She blamed herself for the train of events which had culminated in this tragedy; and she inflicted agonies of self-loathing and misery upon herself. She reflected upon the past few months and bitterly regretted her engagement of Julia; her failure to recognise and respect Gavin's terror; and the work preoccupation which had rendered her blind to the portents of disaster. "O, bad bad peerie Willa!' I sobbed, to Edwin's distress. 'If thu keeps on saying that,' he protested, 'thu'll make me believe it.' I knew that this was true, Edwin being supremely suggestible in moments of heightened feeling. I kept my sense of guilt under cover after that, and so began preparing an inward sump of self-accusation and grief.'[72]

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[70] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p236)
[71] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p171-2)
[72] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p172)

It was a trying period during which nothing mattered except a small boy in a hospital bed. The previously pressing demands of work seemed suddenly insignificant: the all-important translations were left to fester and Edwin's Listener review arrived uncharacteristically late on Janet Adam Smith's desk.[73]

'Gavin was in the hospital for two weeks; then we brought him home with his leg in plaster, and he lay for a few weeks longer on the sofa in the sitting-room and in good weather on a swing-settee which we had set up in the garden.'[74] His recuperation was protracted and was fraught with anxious moments until Gavin eventually got back on his feet. Time also slightly healed his parents' wounds of worry and converted their initial horror into a twisted, wry and forced humour. 'Gavin is a large and a highly individual lad: his individuality went so far that on July 1st he tried to beat a petrol lorry across the road and had his right leg broken: he was lucky not to be killed. We have all been recuperating from the shock: he is now running about, but he'll not run in front of an automobile again, thank goodness! A drastic way of acquiring traffic sense, isn't it?'[75]

But their worries were not at an end: Gavin's leg had healed, but his mind remained profoundly troubled and he still 'twitched and trembled whenever a car passed'.[76] '[T]he shock to [his] system had gone deep and the clear brightness of our little boy was now shadowed with clouds of opaqueness. His confidence in the world and in us had been severely shaken. As Protecting Powers we had failed him and he resented our failure. The hospital doctors had told us to treat him very gently, never to cross him or attempt to 'discipline' him, treatment which was entirely in accord with our own desires and practice, although we sometimes had difficult moments to endure with our resentful child.'[77].

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[73] Janet Adam Smith in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 18th September 1995.
[74] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p236)
[75] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. St Andrews, August 1933.
[76] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p236)

Gavin's accident and its aftermath overshadowed the publication of Mrs Ritchie on the sixth of July. Willa considered it to be 'a really good book'[78] of which 'I am not ashamed'[79] and she eagerly awaited the reactions of critics and companions. Friends were generally generous in their appreciation and praise; but the reviewers gave mixed, muted or damning assessments of the novel which dampened her self-confident enthusiasm. The Scotsman and The Listener quietly applauded the work; but their general approbation was hesitantly qualified by hints of reservation.

> Mrs Muir's novel, like other such "realistic" studies of Scottish life, is open to criticism on the ground that though actions of disinterested kindness are not absent, the dominating influence of the central figure leaves insufficient scope for portrayal of the softer yet prevailing forces of ordinary sympathy in human relationships. It is not a pleasant story, yet it is told with considerable skill, and with obvious power in portraying character, whether commonplace (one is grateful for the sketch of Bet Reid, where ready humour and charity occasionally relieve the sombre study of her enemy's mind) or remote - as Annie Ritchie is - from normal standards.[80]

> Few life-history novels cover the years as tautly as this story of Mrs Ritchie, née Annie Rattray, daughter of a Calderwick washerwoman. There is no flabbiness or sagging; the novel is excellently proportioned, finely worked out to the smallest

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[77] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p172)
[78] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. St Andrews, August 1933.
[79] Willa Muir in a letter to Hermann Broch. Hampstead, September 1933.
[80] Anonymous Review of Mrs Ritchie in The Scotsman. 13th July 1933.

> degree, and so has a wholeness rarely found. Mrs Muir has too firm a grasp of the business of the novelist ever to be classed among the intelligent and literary people who have found novel-writing the way of least resistance. Her Mrs Ritchie is Greek drama in the kail-yard. Psychology takes the place of the gods, but is no less ruthless and long of memory than they were. . . . [T]he result is a novel more admirable than likeable. It rouses fear but not pity, and makes one wonder if ever a woman was quite so mad inwardly and so sane outwardly as Mrs Ritchie, whether in life there is not always some breaking up and blending together of that madness and that sanity. Similarly the psychology and the psychological symbolism of the story as a whole are too complete and perfect. One's pleasure in it is intellectual rather than artistic; one is interested but not carried away. It would be most untrue, however, to give an impression that Mrs Ritchie is merely the studied working out of a grim idea; it is a story full of subtle realism, and often humorous in a particular and unusual way.[81]

But the more damning critics could not forgive Willa for the ruthless intellectualism and the unmitigated harshness of the novel; and were relentlessly savage in their condemning censure of the work.

> It had long been orthodox among young authors to thank God they are not as this Pharisee; one regrets, however, that a translator of Mrs Muir's capacity should take for her second novel so worn a theme as the unpleasantness of the virtuous and show in handling it, such a very docile adherence to tradition.[82]

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[81] Anonymous Review of Mrs Ritchie in The Listener. no.240, vol.X. 16th August 1933.
[82] Anonymous Review of Mrs Ritchie in The Times. 7th July 1933.

> Dislike, untouched by the humour that turns it to satire or by the humanity that gives the miscreant at least the semblance of a sporting chance, is a dangerous emotion for the artist; and the acrimony shown here towards the subject is not of the kind that vivifies creation. In spite of the careful photography of the details, the lingering thoroughness of the dissection, the result is nearer to science than to art, and not to the more vital form of science. One feels as if one were not watching human living, but listening to a conscientious teacher, who does not think her subject is quite nice, but knows she is expected to do her duty, and bravely holds up appropriate specimens at arm's length between revolted thumb and finger; and one becomes inclined to look at the clock and to wish the lecturer's precise and competent academic voice were a little less constant to its high monotone, especially as she steels herself for the words that it might confess "inhibition" to leave out, whether or not they are inevitable.[83]

Adverse criticism also emanated from rather more surprising sources. Helen Cruickshank at Scottish P.E.N. aroused Willa's displeasure and resentment by her objections to the novel on the grounds that it 'painted an unlovely picture of our home town Montrose and was too full of phallic symbols for my liking.'[84]

Willa drew considerable comfort from a recommendation from the Book Society; but her faith in her novel was inevitably shaken by this ambivalence and disparagement from her literary peers. When she returned to Mrs Ritchie thirty five years later, she reckoned 'that I lost control of it in the second half, although the first half is quite good.'[85] This is a very reasonable and just assessment of a novel which seems in its later pages to lose its way amidst a maze of psychologising, theorising and judgementalism. The opening chapters provide a generally powerful and realistic image of the young Annie Rattray and are (despite occasional and irritating narrative detours into the psyche and the imaginative life of children) genuinely entertaining and absorbing. The vivid representation of John Samuel Ritchie's war-torn mind in later chapters is equally brilliantly and evocatively conceived. But these memorable flashes of genius and narrative lucidity become less obvious as the novel moves remorselessly towards its relentless conclusion and the three-dimensional complexity of human nature is sacrificed to the pursuit of a psychological absolute.

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[83] Anonymous Review of Mrs Ritchie in The Times Literary Supplement. 13th July 1933.
[84] Helen Cruickshank. Octobiography. Montrose: The Standard Press, 1976. (p150)
[85] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p163)

July meanwhile faded into August and London basked interminably in the oppressive and insupportable sunshine of a city summer. A fever of nervous and physical exhaustion consumed Willa and Edwin. The previous months had been fraught with endless trauma, tragedy and toil and they now craved the healing peace and balm of the countryside. And so - when Gavin was well enough to travel - they turned northwards and focussed their sights and hopes on Orkney.

'We lodged in a farmhouse off the main road. It was run by a young farmer whose family had tilled it for centuries. . . . From the windows we looked down on the isle of Damsay, with its one farm and the ruins of a chapel said to have been built by Adamnan, the disciple and biographer of St Columba. A path across a field led down to the beach and we spent most of our time there. I had not been back to Orkney for many years; few of the people I had known were there still; but the beauty of the light showered from the wide sky and reflected from the spreading waters, and diffused, a double radiance, over the bright fields, was the same beauty I had known as a child; and the loneliness of every shape rising out of the treeless land, the farmhouses and the moving outlines of men and women against the sky, had, as then, the simplicity of an early world. The peace helped to still Gavin's fears.'[86] The wife of the young farmer with whom they lodged remembered Edwin's 'gentleness, and the delight he took in the sunsets, in helping to stook the sheaves in the harvest fields and in hearing again old Orkney words and sayings.'[87]

They returned home to Hampstead by way of St Andrews and Glasgow and felt refreshed, restored and ready to engage anew with London life and work. Willa immediately and reluctantly re-embarked on their ill-fated quest for domestic help; and 'by great good luck I found Hilde Wiessenseel, an "Aryan" but non-Nazi German, who became our cook and housekeeper, a mainstay of our lives, and Eja Bergmann, a Finnish student learning English, who was the housemaid. Hilde spoke German but little English, Eja spoke some English and very little German; they bought miniature pocket dictionaries of English-German from Woolworth's and tied them to their belts, exchanging words with much laughter as they went about the house.'[88] 'The house grew stable under their reign, and Hilde . . . became a close friend.'[89]

But the pleasure which Willa derived from these cheerful new faces was compromised by the reappearance of an unwelcome and disagreeable associate from the distant past. John Holms arrived in London with Peggy Guggenheim in the winter of 1933 and Willa rapidly discovered that his company was as objectionable to her then as it had been during those far-off foreign days. 'It was a personal thing; a character clash; she just couldn't stick him.'[90] Willa still resented the way John chauvinistically and pointedly excluded her from any intellectual discussion; and the extent to which he monopolised Edwin's attention. Her dislike was perhaps also coloured by mutual jealousy; both she and John wanted the first claim on Edwin's affection. The complexities of the situation were rapidly and tragically resolved in the early days of the new year by John's untimely death on the operating table. He 'had injured his wrist in a fall from a horse in the summer and was to have a minor operation. His heart gave out under the anaesthetic, and he died on 19 January 1934. He was cremated. Muir, one of the few people present, remembered the ceremony as "a dreadful violation of death, too horrible for tears. But afterwards, walking about outside along a brick wall crowded with niches and urns, I cried at the thought that he had died so easily, for that was the saddest thing of all: as if Death had told him to come, and like a good child he had obeyed, unresistingly letting Death take him by the hand."'[91]

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[86] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p236-7)
[87] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966. (p134)
[88] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p172)
[89] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classic, 1993. (p233)
[90] Janet Adam Smith in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 18th September 1995.

Winter and its mournful memories disappeared into an undifferentiated sequence of desk-days. The routine of life and work; illness and health persisted amidst the inevitable and occasional crop of sadnesses and joys. Translations and reviews still filled their working hours and provided the bread-and-butter of their existence; and Edwin 'made his one excursion into periodical journalism as editor as well as contributor. With his old friend Janko Lavrin he started the European Quarterly to keep open communications and "to foster the growth of the European spirit in every sphere of human activity". It ran for four numbers, and contained writing of high quality. It aroused some interest abroad, but very little in Britain, where almost the only subscribers were Jews and Germans. There was not enough support to enable them to keep going beyond the one year.'[92]

The budding spring heralded a new lightness of heart; the publication of Variations on a Time Theme (Edwin's latest volume of poetry); and the arrival of Christopher Grieve. He 'surprised us on another evening by turning up in high feather, a gay Borderer carrying out a raid on the English. He was staying with the Carswells, having come to London with enough money in his pocket (so he said) bestowed upon him by some trusting Scot, to engineer the removal of the Coronation Stone from Westminster Abbey and its return to Scotland. . . . His enterprise was supposed to be a Top Secret, but he had already told the Carswells about it, confidentially, and he told us about it, confidentially. During the next few days we discovered that he was telling various other London Scots about it, confidentially. . . . In his mind's eye he saw the whole ploy brought to a triumphant conclusion. I think he did not bother about the mere technical problem of prising the Stone loose; he was gloriously racing north with it in A Fast Car . . . and was going to drop it in some Border stream where it would look like any other boulder until the time came to escort it through Scotland after the hue and cry had been baffled. The brilliance of this idea illuminated Christopher. His yellow hair fizzed up; he was radiant with sheer daftness.'[93]

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[91] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966. (p134)
[92] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966. (p134)

He was meanwhile occupied in an exploration of London nightlife and the consumption of considerable quantities of alcohol in 'his favourite pub, The Plough in Soho'.[94] Willa later suggested that 'he stood drinks all round most generously' and 'enjoyed himself too much to have any money left for A Fast Car'[95] when the hour of glorious theft eventually arrived; but these good-natured aspersions were dismissed as 'sheer nonsense' by Grieve. 'I may have said so myself at the time but I certainly had no £400 - I doubt if I had a twentieth part of that, and certainly I did not stand treats conspicuously in The Plough or anywhere else. What drinking took place was after I and my two companions discovered that we could not take the stone with the resources at our disposal. One of my companions, Graham McGibbon, a giant of a man, was responsible for this decision, on purely technical grounds, after we had thoroughly examined the stone and its setting.'[96]

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[93] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p164-5)
[94] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p165)
[95] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p165)

But his quibbles do not dispute the fundamentally alcohol-sodden nature of the expedition or the long nights of drunken joviality in which he regularly indulged. The aftermath of some debauch occasionally deposited him at the Muirs' front door 'needing breakfast and a shave before he could face Cathy Carswell.'[97] Poor Cathy 'had planned a peaceful, busy Easter with John away, but Grieve, a Scottish poet (good poet and remarkable man . . .) came to stay for '3 or 4 days' and still with us at the end of a fortnight. His hours and meals are peculiar and he has taken up a good deal of time and energy . . . but fortunately I like him and he doesn't get on my nerves as even nice visitors are too apt to do. We had some good talks too.'[98]

A stoneless, Fast Car-less retreat was the inglorious finale to Grieve's blaze of brave words and rampant idealism; but the eyes of the London-Scottish literary community followed him north towards Edinburgh and dwelled with interest on the preparations for the forthcoming P.E.N. Congress. 'Plans had to be drawn up for the various Congress entertainments. Hotel accommodation, theatres, etc., had to be booked. It was all hard work but good fun. The goal we were working for would definitely put Scotland on the map, for we anticipated an attendance of over 300 writers and friends from over thirty countries.'[99]

Edwin and Willa were invited to attend the Congress; and Edwin decided to combine the conference trip with a recent commission for 'a book to be called Scottish Journey, in a series already begun by J.B. Priestley with English

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[96] Christopher Grieve in a letter to Willa Muir. Biggar, 5th September 1967.
[97] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p165)
[98] Catherine Carswell. Lying Awake. Ed. John Carswell. London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1950. (p140)
[99] Helen Cruickshank. Octobiography. Montrose: The Standard Press, 1976. (p84)

Journey and Philip Gibbs with European Journey. To Edwin a journey through Scotland inevitably led north to Orkney, and so, he announced, we were all going up to Orkney. The commission for the book would take care of all our expenses. He would borrow Stanley Cursiter's old car . . . and would make the Journey in that while the rest of us took the steamer from Leith.'[100]

The Congress was a happy, successful and well-attended affair of which 'the highlights were the final banquet in the Music Hall presided over by R.B. Cunninghame Graham, and earlier in the week a garden party in the grounds of the Royal Palace of Holyroodhouse.'[101] The Muirs rekindled the timeless literary friendships of their European wanderings, and revelled in the cosmopolitan discussions and the vibrant socialising of the Congress.

Edwin then gathered up the 'set of Bartholomew half-inch maps' which Janet Adam Smith had lent him 'so that he could more easily explore the byways';[102] clambered into his battered, borrowed 1921 Standard; and headed off alone on his Scottish Journey. 'The Cursitors went to see him off as he passed their house just outside the city; he came bowling along, stopped at traffic lights, looked up and enquired whether it was the red or the green that meant "go". The car . . . evidently had quite a personality of its own; and his rather inefficient handling of it is one of the humours of the book.'[103] Willa certainly believed - as she stood at Stromness harbour awaiting the arrival of the ferry which contained Edwin and his idiosyncratic vehicle - that 'the most unexpected thing about Edwin's Scottish Journey . . . was that he had accomplished it with the old car still holding together; there sat the Standard among the other cars on the *St Ola*'s deck, Edwin at the wheel. But it was the last to come ashore, since something apparently had gone wrong and it would not move. Two members of the crew then suggested, grinning, that the brakes should be taken off. Gently, with dignity, Edwin took them off and successfully ran the car off the boat, driving us afterwards to Isbister House, the front half of a farmhouse which we had rented for three months.'[104]

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[100] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p174)

[101] Helen Cruickshank. Octobiography. Montrose: The Standard Press, 1976. (p93)

[102] Janet Adam Smith. 'Writers Remembered: Edwin Muir.' In The Authors. Spring 1988. (pp8-9)

[103] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966. (p135)

It was a brief period of blissful enchantment. The countryside was bathed in 'a luminous veil of summer light' [105] and was awash with a torrent of colour: the fields glowed with robust fertility. Willa and Edwin left Gavin in Hilde's reliable and capable hands and explored the historic treasures with which the islands are prolifically spattered.

> There was hardly a field in Orkney without its reminder of legendary past generations, were it only a so-called 'Picts' house', some stone-lined hole half underground or peering from the slope of a hill. There were brochs, also legendary, many hundreds of years old; another large one being excavated at a place called Aikerness. There was the Late Stone Age village dug out of the sand at Skara Brae, how many thousands of years old? We took the whole family to see that and to visit the great tumulus of Maeshowe, entered by a low, wriggling passage but rising to cathedral proportions, where chambers of megaliths were hewn as tombs for ancient kings laid in the womb of Mother Earth, possibly with the hope of re-birth, three thousand years ago. Maeshowe was already ancient when some Vikings on their way to Jerusulem left remarks scratched in runic writings on its rock walls. Set up presumably by the same megalith builders the Standing Stones of Stenness too, still watched the lochs on either

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[104] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p174)
[105] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p177)

> side of their circles and registered the journeys of the sun and moon[106].

Edwin was instantly re-absorbed into this Eden of his childhood consciousness. The intoxicating aura of a living human history rapidly refreshed his poetic soul, while his town-weary body was revitalised by the open spaces and vigorous Orkney air. He and Willa went to Wyre - 'the little island that was [his] earliest remembered home'[107] - and rediscovered the sites and scenes which had filled his primitive world and fed his infant imagination. Willa understood - perhaps for the first time - the mystic communion which united Edwin indissolubly with his Orkney forbears.

The ghosts of the racial unconscious were not their only holiday companions in those summer months. They rapidly discovered a ready-made social circle which centred on Eric Linklater and his tribe of relatives; and on a 'schoolmate of Edwin's, Eunice. . . [who] had rented for the summer a house on the other side of the main island and brought her husband, a London stockbroker, and other friends.'[108] 'Among them we were caught up in a round of gay hospitality. We seemed always to be running the old car across the Lyde Road on our way to a luncheon party or a dinner party or what have you, when we were not giving parties ourselves. Matthew [the spaniel] had a delirious time vainly chasing hares up the hillsides; Gavin, daily losing his tensions, played beside the oyce; Hilde and Eja swam in the sea and made excursions all over the island.'[109]

It was easy to ignore the insistent demands of the hefty volumes which awaited translation; their anticipated industry was soon forgotten amidst the unpredicted delights and indulgences of an Orkney summer. It was a period of blissful indolence; a hiatus in a year of prodigious productivity. German literature was now a dinner table topic rather than a life-consuming means of subsistence. A participant in one of these occasional debates nevertheless vividly recalls the humiliation which he suffered as a result of an apparently innocent observation on the absence of intellectual communion in British student circles. Willa rounded belligerently on him and demanded his definition and perception of the term 'intellectual.' His momentary hesitation was a sufficient incentive for her launch into a twenty minute display of 'verbal fireworks. It was non-stop, brilliant and fluent; a rapid run-through of neo-contemporary German literature. She reeled off questions of symbolism, metaphysics and mysticism and displayed her erudition in a remarkable *tour de force.*'[110] She then turned to her unfortunate interlocutor and benignly asked: "Is that what you would call 'intellectual'?"

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[106] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p175-6)
[107] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p176)
[108] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p178)
[109] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p179)

But the conversation within the Muir household focussed increasingly on future plans and places during the waning days of summer. Fifteen years of contented exile and a numbing pessimism about the state of Scottish life and culture should presumably have ruled out a return to Scottish residency; but Edwin's vision of his Orcadian Eden had been reinforced during those halcyon summer months and he had secretly considered a permanent home on the islands. Orkney inspired him with an apparently infinite sense of physical and poetic wellbeing, and he was loathe to abandon the throng of spirit generations which now peopled his work.

Willa half-heartedly concurred; but she was not at all 'sure that it was the right place for them because, to her sharp critical mind, Edwin put the Orkneys on a pedestal and his opinions were too naïve and impractical.'[111] They began to look at various redundant manses and 'the more manses

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[110] R.A.Wilson in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 26th April 1995.

[111] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

[Willa] saw, the less willing I was to live in any of them. I used not to shrink from new environments, yet now I felt vulnerable, even a little scared at the idea of settling permanently in Orkney, as if it meant our crawling well out on a limb. . . . What I most wanted to do was to live with Edwin, and I could not bear the feeling that we were beginning to lean in opposite directions.'[112] But her intuitive revulsion was not a sufficiently cogent argument against the intensity of Edwin's wishes. She struggled desperately and consciously to sublimate her will to his; and reasoned submissively that 'if [Edwin] wanted Orkney he should have it.'[113] Willa Muir, the theorist, must sometimes have despaired of Willa Muir, the wife.

She tried desperately to produce a rational explanation for her apparently irrational doubts and ascribed her timidity to a fear of the winter winds and endless nights; to economic and employment anxieties; to concerns about Gavin's schooling. Then her body gave her an excuse to which Edwin would have to listen: 'I was acting as goalkeeper over the burn outside Isbister while Gavin and Edwin kicked a tennis-ball about, and my inside suddenly fell out again. Something within me had been aware that my organs were once more displacing themselves. The only doctor we could get from Finstown was elderly, ham-fisted and inexpert for my troubles; I needed more medical skill than he could provide.'[114]

She was exhausted and relieved by the narrowness of her escape; but was able to enjoy a sea voyage and to participate in the robust good-nature of a cattle-boat and its crew. She was burdened only by the familiar consciousness of impending poverty; and by a nagging guilt about severing Edwin from his artistic and emotional roots. But she still suspected that her instinctive recoil was justified. 'Orkney had been Edwin's starting-place, but I could not feel that it was meant to be his destination. After all, he had said himself that Orkney lay outside the main stream of future social development.'[115]

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[112] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p181)
[113] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p181)
[114] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p182)

The familiarity and comfort of Hampstead instantly re-absorbed them; and they relaxed gratefully into the routine hubbub of life and work. 'Yet we began to realize that London, with its incessant motor traffic, was not the *milieu* in which Gavin could quickly recover his confidence. Even our quiet street had its traffic lane at the end of it and was bound to keep him in mind of the accident that had shattered him.'[116] His parents' internal compasses were also tugging them northward and they were seriously considering a return to Scottish residency.

> 'If I were a Sussex woman' said Mrs Muttoe, 'I'd want to go to Sussex. But I'm a Scots woman, and so I want to go to Scotland. I just want to go home. . . . '[117]

They also yearned for the space of the countryside and for an escape from the frenetic activity and busyness of their London lives. Broch sympathised with this claustrophobic and frustrated desperation; he could 'understand very well that you cannot stand it any longer in the city. Someone who really wants to work must be able to see a tree or a mountain or the ocean. The city is terrible.'[118]

They 'began to think about going to St Andrews. Ever since attending a P.E.N. Congress in Edinburgh . . . we had been urged to return to Scotland on the flattering plea that Scotland needed us. . . . Yet we did not think seriously of moving into Scotland until after Gavin's accident. The most persistent urging had come from James Whyte in St Andrews, who said he was building two modern houses in North Street and one of them should be ours. In Scotland he was doing his best for the Scottish Renaissance by publishing a magazine: The Modern Scot, and opening an up-to-date bookshop.'[119] St Andrews apparently offered the sanctuary they sought and held the hope of a settled future. Willa's enthusiasm was moreover sustained and encouraged by her happy memories of her student days in the town. '[T]he prospect of a house there attracted me and I believed that it would be a satisying place for Gavin to grow up in. I had already assured Edwin that St Andrews would not be disappointing like Montrose since it had an ancient university and a large girls' public school, St Leonards; there would be intelligent company on the staff of either institution; we should make friends there and feel at home.'[120] Their translation and reviewing factory could easily be transported to St Andrews, and would guarantee them an income. Scottish provincial life would in any case be less expensive than the London literary scene.

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[115] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p183)
[116] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p173)
[117] Willa Muir. Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[118] Hermann Broch in a letter to Willa Muir. Hellerau School. 18th March 1935.

The debate and discussion eventually solidified into decision; and they turned their lives towards St Andrews. They were saddened by the prospect of leaving the scenes and the people who had filled the days of their happy Hampstead idyll; but they were quietly optimistic about the future. Their regrets were further diminished when Janet Adam Smith ('the best friend we made in London'[121]) announced her own departure for a new married life in Newcastle. Her literary editorship at The Listener was to be inherited by Joe Ackerly to whom Janet dutifully introduced her regular contributors. 'I invited the Muirs to lunch at the Cafe Royal and was dreadfully embarrassed when Willa held forth at length on the subject of breastfeeding - especially as Joe was very homosexual. She often did that sort of thing in order to assert herself. T.S. Eliot would say that it was sometimes good to have dinner with Edwin and without Willa.'[122]

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[119] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p179-80)
[120] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p180)
[121] Janet Adam Smith in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 18th September 1995.

The Hampstead chapter steadily approached its conclusion and the prospect of an imminent escape from the city and into cooler climes was increasingly attractive as summer settled over London. The Muirs began the mundane practicalities of packing and removal; and the familiar muddle of 7 Downshire Hill was gradually and regretfully resolved into ordered trunks and cases. The adored old house gradually assumed a barren and anonymous face which broke their hearts. Farewells were offered and promises of regular correspondence were exchanged.

This process of leavetaking was interrupted in late July by the distressing news from Glasgow of George Thorburn's death. Edwin wrote immediately to Lizzie to express his shock and sadness and to offer his support and assistance. 'Willa and I will be more than glad to do anything we can. I wish we had been in Scotland already; we will be there in a fortnight, by the middle of August.'[123]

The final days passed in a flurry of flustered activity which was inconducive to contemplation or regret. The die was cast; it was patently pointless to dwell upon the happiness of past times. When the hour of departure eventually arrived, they focussed consciously and positively on the promise of the future. 'But for years afterwards, until 1950, whenever we were in London we made a pilgrimage to Hampstead and stood fingering our old garden gate, ostensibly to see if the latch had still the same defect.'[124]

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[122] Janet Adam Smith in an interview with Kirsty Allen. 18th September 1995.
[123] Edwin Muir in a letter to Lizzie Thorburn. Hampstead, 29th July 1935.
[124] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p173)

CHAPTER IX

THE NIGHTMARE YEARS: ST ANDREWS AND THE WAR.

1935-1942.

They were established comfortably in Castlelea - the cliff-top house which the ever-obliging James Whyte had found for them - by the end of August. It was an attractive, spacious and salubrious dwelling which looked out upon the Castle ruins and the North Sea. The Muirs fell instantly in love with it and Edwin was soon urging Stephen Spender to visit them and admire this 'really lovely place and a lovely house.'[1] Hilde (Eja had returned to Finland from Leith) rapidly set about creating order and domestic harmony.

The circumstances were apparently laden with the promise of contentment and stability; and their most immediate worries rapidly evaporated. Willa's health was - temporarily - restored to her by the ministrations of an 'intelligent and sympathetic woman doctor, Dorothy Douglas' who 'took me in hand and fixed me up so that I could at least carry on.'[2] Their financial circumstances were still straitened; but the bank relieved the pressure by granting them an overdraft. Mounds of translation work separated them from the prospect of an incipient income and they spent the autumn months buried amongst the works of Asch, Broch and Feuchtwanger.

Their leisure time was too sparse at first to permit the luxury of much socialising; but they spent a considerable amount of time with James Whyte in his South Street house. 'It was padded everywhere with cushions; the sitting-room ceiling had been painted blue to match them and silvered with stars. James was obviously a young man who liked to be in the fashion and could afford it; ceilings like his must have been then 'the fashion', and walls outfacing each other in contrasting colours. . . . [We] felt, as we told each other later, that we were being ushered into a whole new world, since in James's house, the furniture, the pictures, the lighting as well as the music, were all fashionably *avant-garde.*'[3]

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[1] Edwin Muir in a letter to Stephen Spender. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p86)
[2] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p183-4)

The Muirs liked him; but they suspected that his vision of a St Andrews-based Scottish Renaissance was fundamentally naïve, and that his periodical and his bookshop were doomed to failure. His courageously avant-garde ventures seemed hopelessly and unconsciously incongruous within the Scottish social climate of the 1930s. Nor was this pessimistic opinion peculiar to the Muirs. Other St Andreans cheerfully prophesied that Whyte's projects would meet a rapid demise. Jo Grimond recalled that '[Mr Whyte] hoped to make his bookshop in South Street a meeting place for St Andrews lecturers, students and literateurs generally. To some extent he succeeded, but he met with the reserve with which St Andrews greets anything raffish or out of the way. . . . I remember little about Mr Whyte except that he gave me rose-petal jam for tea and appeared free from the vices of which he was accused, being, as far as I could see, neither a traitor, an anarchist, nor a show-off.'[4]

Life settled into a pattern of semi-normality in the Muir household, and the question of Gavin's schooling arose. The obvious choice was the Madras College Primary School which Willa remembered, from her teacher training days, as 'an excellent school'.[5] It demanded a nominal fee and was therefore considered to be 'a cut above the others';[6] but it remained relatively faithful to the democratic ideals which Willa had always admired in the Scottish educational system. Gavin was therefore duly enrolled in the youngest class of the junior school on the 30th September 1935.[7]

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[3] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p184)
[4] Jo Grimond. The St Andrews of Jo Grimond. Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1992. (p46-7)
[5] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p187)

Autumn faded into winter and the burden of work slackened: Willa and Edwin raised their eyes from their books and began to consider the social possibilities of St Andrews. Their arrival in the town had 'caused a stir because so many people had heard of the translaters of Jew Süss',[8] but they struggled to gather a social circle. Friends and kindred spirits were surprisingly slow to emerge. A young psychology lecturer called Oscar Oeser and his wife Drury were, however, soon regular fixtures at Castlelea, and the Muirs greatly appreciated their convivial company and their informed concern about the progressive breakdown of European democracy and society. Oeser - a South African with a Ph.D. from Imperial College - had recently been charged with the task of developing and expanding the University's psychology department. He was a brilliant and extraordinary academic with boundless stores of energy, charisma and intellect; but his reputation around St Andrews centred instead upon his scandalous elopement with 'the wife of the headmaster of some school!'[9] The Oesers' flat in Howard Place was widely (and often disapprovingly) described as a 'centre of forward thinking.'[10] The Muirs and the Oesers would often dine together on Saturday evenings, and Drury recalled that 'in their house we listened to records of Mozart, and especially Don Giovanni, Edwin's favourite opera, and talked books; in our house we talked books and politics and perhaps listened to some Bach. From a woman's point of view Edwin was a specially delightful person when he got just a little drunk with wine. Then some of his shyness and inhibitions disappeared, and if one were sitting by him, he would become what I can only describe as chastely affectionate and very beguiling. He would bend towards one from time to time and kiss one, gently, lightly and with leisurely enjoyment, looking slightly mischievous. . . .'[11]

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[6] Glen Pride in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 15th May 1995.
[7] Madras College Admission Register, 1935. In Madras College archives, St Andrews.
[8] John Hunter in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 4th September 1995.
[9] Ronald Cant in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 3rd June 1995.
[10] Ronald Cant in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 3rd June 1995.

Douglas Young (poet and professor of Greek) was another regular Castlelea visitor. He was well-read and intelligent and, although his moods and opinions were unpredictable and often explosive, his conversation was reliably intriguing. He was affectionately regarded as one of the town's 'characters' and had a reputation for being 'bizarre, but very much his own man.'[12]

> He was tall, thin and bearded. A genuine scholar, being for a time a university lecturer in the Classics, he was also a mine of inaccurate information. He was speculative and dogmatic about the results of his speculation. He enjoyed argument. In fact, he resembled many Scots, though not as combative as some. . . .
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> . . . He also had excellent manners. The hearts of such as my mother, who otherwise would have shied at his pre-Raphaelite or Tennysonian appearance with wide-brimmed hat and tweed trousers and who disapproved of some of his opinions (he was a voluble Scottish Nationalist), were softened by his agreeability. Foibles which might have been met with derision such as publishing in 'Lallans' a slim volume Frae the Bulgarian though he did not speak a word of that language were passed off with

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[11] Drury Oeser in a letter to Peter Butter. In Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p156)

[12] Ronald Cant in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 3rd June 1995.

> smiles. Alas, his beard itself was not a foible: as a haemophiliac he could not shave and died young.[13]

Unlikely friendships also developed in the discussion groups which the Muirs and the Oesers inaugurated. Oscar suggested the formation of a club in which burning contemporary issues could be discussed; and the Muirs - bereft of the intellectual and political debate which they had enjoyed in Hampstead - enthusiastically concurred. 'There were thirteen members including the Oesers and ourselves; we met alternately in the Oesers house and in ours; we talked openly and freely to each other without condescension from the more educated to the less, and we became warmly friendly. The topics discussed tended to be anything but literary, which was not surprising when one considers the membership: two workmen from a nearby paper mill, a master mason who was a Socialist of Edwin's old-fashioned kind, three junior mistresses from St Leonards, one of the town's scavengers, the Congregational minister (a woman), and a senior master from the Madras College.'[14]

Tom Scott, whose father was involved in the Thirteen Club, 'formed another group to discuss literature, and this met in the Muir's house, which he remembers as the centre of intellectual life in St Andrews at that time.'[15] Tom also shared the Muirs' later involvement in the 'Stop the Coming War' movement and recalls Willa and Edwin's generosity in accommodating these meetings.

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[13] Jo Grimond. The St Andrews of Jo Grimond. Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1992. (p93-4)

[14] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p192)

[15] Peter Butter Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p157)

Conventional St Andreans, with their fixed notions of social proprieties, were outraged by the contempt for the established order which these unorthodox associations and friendships implied. But the Muirs' bohemian attitude and lifestyle was more usually a source of shocked interest to their proper and punctilious Scottish neighbours - who were suitably outraged to discover that the family's breakfast dishes were occasionally uncleared and unwashed until lunchtime![16]

The cool reception which greeted the Muirs was partially coloured by the natural and inevitable human fear of the unknown and unfamiliar. 1930s St Andrews was governed by a series of uncompromisingly conservative mores and expectations; there was a terror of the potential consequences of a threat to the status quo. Society's strata were pre-ordained; and the townsfolk were discomfitted by the appearance of a couple who resolutely refused to conform to any particular category.[17] 'Everybody knew their place - except Willa. And she blotted her copybook further by being into labour politics.'[18]

The Muirs and St Andrews were - through no fault on either side - clearly incompatible. Willa and Edwin were tainted with the dangerous whiff of a liberal London culture; and their thinking was too advanced for a resolutely insular and provincial East Neuk town. It was therefore an event of great pleasure and excitement to the Muirs when some less parochial friend arrived: the Muirs were always ready and able to find space for an unexpected guest. F.G. Scott and his family were regular summer residents in St Andrews, and the two families shared many happy sunshine days of laughter and conversation. F.G. Scott's son, George, vividly recalls the exuberant gaiety of those holiday gatherings: 'And if the Muirs were there, if

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[16] John Hunter in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 4th September 1995.
[17] Marie-Louise Moffet in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 14th August 1995.
[18] Glen Pride in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews. 15th May 1995.

Willa was there (for they were inseparable) the sun shone more brightly, the goldfish in the lilypond glanced more gracefully, the company was captivated by her presence. . . . She was a constant source of entertainment, she lived to talk, to tease, to act out the meaning of being a social animal to the last flicker of an eyelid. She personified the joie de vivre.'[19]

F.G. shared Willa's extrovert tendency; and they often reduced the entire company to helpless giggles or loud and riotous disorder. Edwin - with a cigarette and a smile on his lips - was content simply to provide appreciative applause and ready laughter for the antic-makers. 'George Bruce . . . remembers his first meeting with Muir. . . . "F.G. bursts into the Muir's house - Willa and he embrace, rather hug like bears. I see Edwin's face behind smiling and then laughing out loud." Later F.G. sang some of his songs, and there was much gay conversation. "By all the rules of the game F.G. and Willa ought to have established themselves most strongly in my mind, for they did most of the talking. They cut and thrust with great warmth and freedom of expression." Yet it was Muir, sitting quietly on the periphery of the group that he remembered most vividly.'[20]

Janet Adam Smith (who was now married and living in Newcastle) was another welcome guest at Castlelea. Her enduring memory of one visit is of the 'arrival of a case of white wine shipped directly from France, which the Muirs were to share with a congenial University lecturer. He and Edwin outdid each other in ineffectiveness as they wrestled with the bung of the cask, then seemed to spill as much as they managed to bottle - Willa and I in fits of laughter, relishing the comedy while deploring the waste.'[21]

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[19] George N Scott. '"Peerie Willa": A Voice of Scotland'. In Chapman. nos.27-8, vol.VI. Summer 1980. (pp38-43)

[20] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p152)

They also enjoyed a visit from Leslie Mitchell (Lewis Grassic Gibbon) and were enthused by the 'scheme which he and Christopher Grieve had been planning: a series of small books about Scotland to be called The Voice of Scotland. . . . Leslie wanted Edwin to take some specifically literary subject; why not Walter Scott? And he wanted me to write about Mrs Grundy in Scotland, . . . It all sounded like great fun to me.'[22] '[Leslie] generated an exciting vitality around him when in congenial company';[23] and the Muirs appreciated his convivial and intellectual effervescence.

The arrival of Hugh Kingsmill and Hesketh Pearson also produced a blast of hectic energy in the Muir household. They were 'on their way to Skye, following the footsteps of Dr Johnson and Boswell, in order to concoct a book which they called Skye High. They . . . were overflowing with their usual brand of fun, which refreshed us to such an extent that I still remember my gratitude for their visit.'[24]

But these various festivals of friendship were rare oases in the parched desert of their life. St Andrews seemed oppressive and depressing after the airy, cultured and open-minded atmosphere of Hampstead; and they missed their circle of literary friends and associates. They felt frustrated and isolated amongst the divisive snobbery and social pretentiousness which visibly permeated every aspect of St Andrews life. Suspicion and mistrust effectively excluded them from the life of the town; and an abject sense of un-belonging barred them from every one of the various fixed factions into which the town was rigidly divided. 'They had no links with the "county" and the sporting gentry who came to the Royal and Ancient Golf Club. The prosperous middle class seemed conventional and money-grubbing. . . . Among University people the Muirs found a few individual friends, but the university showed no recognition of the fact that they had a man of genius on their doorstep, someone who understood literature from the inside. . . .'[25] The University wallowed instead in a stagnant pool of archaic academic elitism and snobbery. Even the English department, 'where we might have expected to meet some friendly interest, ignored us, taking its tone from the professor, who refused to admit that any contemporary work could be regarded as literature, or any contemporary writers as literary men. For Yeats he made an exception; he boasted that Yeats had once spent an afternoon on his sofa; but for an upstart like Edwin Muir, who was now labelled in the University as 'a man who wote for the papers' (so we were told), no exception could be made.'[26]

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[21] Janet Adam Smith. 'Writers Remembered: Edwin Muir'. In The Authors. Spring 1988. (pp8-9)
[22] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p195-6)
[23] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p193)
[24] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p193)

Professor Blythe Webster was apparently determined to go 'out of his way to be particularly nasty to Edwin.'[27] Edwin's name was later raised at a Senate meeting as a possible appointee to a temporary lectureship when the outbreak of war decimated the English Department teaching staff; and Blythe Webster apparently exploded in a splenetic paroxysm of bitter vitriol. He abruptly dismissed the Muirs as 'a crofter's son who had never been to University and his qualified wife who is nothing but a pain in the neck.'[28] Edwin was genuinely hurt and bewildered by this pointed and apparently vindictive ostracism from the only intelligent society St Andrews seemed to offer. 'With no paper qualifications, [he] was a prophet without honour in his own country. "As if my writings were not better qualifications" he complained and I reminded him of the Calvinistic doctrine: rejection of works.'[29]

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[25] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p149-50)

[26] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p189-90)

[27] Ronald Cant in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 3rd June 1995.

[28] Ronald Cant in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 3rd June 1995.

But Willa's academic qualifications were an equally inadequate defence against the town's resolute and relentless censure: familiar faces from the past were now loathe to acknowledge and befriend her. 'A fellow-student of mine, who took her classics degree the year after I did and had inherited my text-books and note-books, was now a war-widow, with one little girl and had come to live in St Andrews as junior assistant in the Latin Department . . . I dressed myself in my best London clothes, took Gavin by the hand and went to call on her, expecting a warm welcome. I did not get it. Apparently I had come to St Andrews to carry on the kind of anarchic life we had been used to in pre-war days, when students lived in town lodgings, and I was likely to undermine the respectable status she had now acquired, married as I was to 'a man who wrote for the papers' while she was sending her daughter to St Leonards.'[30]

Resentment, despair and frustration gradually consumed Edwin and Willa. 'The minds of people seem to grow older more quickly in small towns than in great ones; they get fixed in their place; and the fixity and the steady advance of time between them beget a sanctioned timidity, where no one any longer expects much. We could find no-one to talk to.'[31] Their abject and aggrieved loneliness was mitigated only by the warmth and kindness of the Oesers and of Professors Forrester and Bailey of the Divinity Faculty. But the apparent aridity of the town and its people rapidly dried up Edwin's Orkney flood of poetic inspiration; he retreated increasingly into his familiar protective carapace of misery and isolation.

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[29] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.
[30] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p189)
[31] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: The Canongate Press, 1993. (p238)

Willa shared his grief and resentment; and suffered the additional torment of guilt. She watched helplessly as Edwin sought refuge from the world behind his wall of self-containment and bitterness and 'knew that I was responsible for him being in St Andrews. Neither by look nor word did Edwin blame me, but I blamed myself.'[32] Day followed day; and life went on. Within the four walls of Castlelea, a haven of comparative content was sheltered from the chilly winds of disapproval and mistrust which blew through the town. 'The natural man in Edwin took comfort from the natural woman in me. In a way, I was the more fulfilled of us two, for I could see Gavin growing fast and happily, while poems dawned on Edwin only at rare intervals.'[33]

Their respective contributions for the Voice of Scotland series meanwhile occupied their minds - but with differing degrees of intensity and rancour. Willa wrote Mrs Grundy in Scotland, 'more or less to entertain Leslie Mitchell, and it was a slap-dash performance. But when Edwin sat down to do Scott and Scotland . . . something of a very different nature emerged, with an undertone of personal exasperation in it, to be found in no other book of Edwin's. The emptiness in Scottish life which he had been aware of during his Journey and was now aware of in St Andrews, a hiatus caused, he felt by the lack of an organic society with an alive centre, seemed to him to have crippled Walter Scott in spite of his genius and was bound to cripple any writer still trying to produce Scottish literature or any critic trying to assess it.'[34] He suggested that the Union had robbed Scotland of her common tongue and tradition; and had therefore deprived her of the unity and the organic energy which are the prerequisites of artistic creativity. He concluded that the revival of the Scots language was irrelevant to the quest for a renewed golden age of Scottish literature.

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[32] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p195)
[33] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p193)
[34] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p194)

Scott and Scotland sent a shockwave through the world of Scottish culture. MacDiarmid was incensed. The entire work was a scarlet rag to his bullishness; and he publicly and vehemently castigated Edwin for his treachery to the Renaissance cause. 'For Christopher, Edwin now became The Enemy, and his fighting blood, like that of a Border cateran, prompted a literary vendetta against Edwin Muir which went on for years, during which he published many vituperative polemics to which Edwin made no answer of any kind.'[35] The violence of MacDiarmid's reaction produced a hysterical critical interest in Scott and Scotland which paid scanty reference to the work itself and which therefore perhaps overestimated its intrinsic qualities. It is a comparatively solid thesis of excellent and estimable material; but it is blemished by flawed arguments and unsubstantiated assertions.

And Mrs Grundy in Scotland paid the critical price for this unprecedented outbreak of literary mayhem and madness. Willa's book slipped unnoticed into the bookshops as the two giants of contemporary Scottish literature battled in open conflict. A perfunctory indifference greeted the work and it rapidly descended into the realms of literary obscurity. It is an unwarranted neglect. Mrs Grundy in Scotland - contrary even to Willa's own opinion - is an incisive piece of social and historic commentary which deserves due recognition within the canon of twentieth century Scottish writing.

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[35] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p195)

It explores and illustrates the effect of austere and self-righteous Presbyterianism on Scottish life and culture; and suggests that it is has alienated the Scots from a true knowledge of themselves and of their community. Willa claims that the nation's women had responded by either bridging or by exacerbating these divisions; but that in doing so they had paid the heaviest price for the emotional aridity and the harsh judgementalism of Scottish Presbyterianism. Their selfhood, their femaleness and their feelings had been wantonly sacrificed to the 'greater good' of the Kirk.

> The austere Lowland Scottish tradition, which for the individual drew a straight line from earth to heaven terminating in the Day of Judgement, had deeply affected the official status of women. Being women, they could not help mothering their families, but if they sought to influence their children through natural affection they were held to be 'unprincipled and careless.' That is to say, if they exercised their natural faculties of sympathetic understanding, of sensitiveness to emotional needs, they were held to be interfering with the principles of religion. The quick mother-wit that knows when and how to foster a growing personality had no prestige or authority in the eyes of the Kirk. The father-image of mankind sanctioned by the Kirk was as absolute and solitary as its presumable prototype in heaven. None of your environmental nonsense in Scotland. Ilka herring had to hang by its ain tail. Man was an individual reaching to the skies: woman, being more akin to the earth, a lesser individual stopping short of the skies and therefore not to be trusted, even

> with her own children, unless she obeyed the precepts of the Kirk.[36]

The text then claims that this suppression of the female instinct had diminished Scottish society's organic wholeness; and had left a virtual vacuum where a rich and vibrant pre-Reformation Scottish culture had once thrived. The nation's inner life therefore remained untapped and undeveloped; and its people now worshipped the God of materialism and 'The Old Lady of Threadneedle Street.'[37]

Mrs Grundy in Scotland is a remarkable piece of work in its own right, and in its literary and social context: it is certainly not a 'slap-dash performance'. It deserves recognition both for the inter-disciplinary breadth and the perceptiveness of its cultural and gender analysis; and for its examination of the Scottish mindset. Even its hyperbole and artistic licences are attractive and insightful. And it is a fascinating and resonant companion to Scott and Scotland - a relationship which has not been critically explored.

The contemporary critics nodded approval, but failed to recognise the importance of the work. A reviewer at the Manchester Evening News commended the book, but failed to identify the main contention of the text - and the gender of its author!

> Going back to the time of Thomas Morton's play, in which Mrs Grundy was a character representing censorious morality, the author offers the theory that the increasing influence of finance and industry has warned Mrs Grundy off politics in England. She

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[36] Willa Muir. Mrs Grundy in Scotland. London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd, 1936. (p106-7)

[37] Willa Muir. Mrs Grundy in Scotland. London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd, 1936. (p166)

> began visiting Scotland with Queen Victoria and evidences of her lasting traces - if we are to believe the author - have shown themselves ever since, and still do so today, in the corporate and the private lives of the Scots.
>
> The author write in a way that shows that he [sic!] is no respecter of Scottish persons, and his work is an entertaining piece of social history.[38]

George Scott-Moncrieff provides a more intelligent, just and appreciative criticism of Mrs Grundy in Scotland for the New Statesman and Nation: 'Mrs Muir's bogus biography is a delightful piece of work. It is a squib, sparkling and well aimed. It is no easy feat to maintain a note of ironic humour throughout the development of a complex theme, or to personify a medley of unpleasant social phenomena.'[39]

The work is still unrecognised and unjustifiably excluded from both Scottish and female literary canons.

A new source of stress and worry meanwhile ruffled the surface of household calm. Gavin's second term at Madras drew to a close and Willa was increasingly aware of her misplaced optimism in enrolling him at the school. The nervous twitching which had resulted from his accident and which had evaporated under the Orkney spell now returned to plague him. A daily battle of wills was required in order to get him out to school; and questioning revealed that 'the teacher was strapping him . . . nearly every day.'[40] Willa was outraged; and she could be a maelstrom of terror and a match for even tyrannical primary school teachers when roused to temper!

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[38] Unidentified reviewer. Manchester Evening News. 9th May 1936.
[39] George Scott-Moncrieff. In New Statesman and Nation. 27th June 1936.
[40] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p187)

'I . . . went down to see his teacher at the school break, preparing to reason with her in the manner of one who believed in imaginative understanding. But I had reckoned without the residue of unreconstructed viking in me that rose to the surface when she told me, in a voice as angry as Hitler's that boys needed to be hardened if they were to grow into Men, not Mollycoddles. She had strapped Gavin because he was very disobedient. He had not folded his arms when she told the class to do so, and when he did at last fold them he drove his elbow into the side of the little girl next to him. I then informed her that I was not going to leave my nervous little boy to her drill-sergeant methods, and that he would not be returning to her class.'[41] Gavin was duly removed from the school role on the 20th March 1936. This unpremeditated and involuntary explosion of righteous indignation may perhaps have been the product of over-protective motherhood: those who were familiar with the Madras regime in the 1930s suggest that her parental defensiveness perhaps caused her to exaggerate the enormity of a venial and isolated offence.

The complications inherent in Willa's crusade were soon painfully apparent; and the problem of Gavin's future education became the focus of a new dilemma. 'If Gavin were not to be safe from strapping in the Junior Madras, he would be even less safe in an elementary school. That left only the preparatory school, New Park, which had just been started at the end of the Lade Braes, a school for small boys only, on the English model. Edwin and I, being accustomed to the traditional pattern of Scottish schooling in which boys and girls were educated together as a matter of course, thought the English model of segregation much less sensible and natural. Yet the New Park school was being patronised by the same professional classes who in my time had sent their sons and daughters to the Madras College. . . . New Park conferred superior status and its fees were high. Yet Gavin must be sent there we decided, and for a long time did not regret the decision. The prep. school teachers used neither strap nor cane and were kind to our nervous little boy.'[42]

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[41] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p188)

Gavin was therefore enrolled at New Park at the start of the 1936 summer term, and embarked upon the next phase of his troubled education. The school buildings were comfortable and homely; and a small, relaxed and happy community of little boys were taught in an informal atmosphere which fostered friendships and provided a positive learning environment. The headmaster, Mr Cuthbert Dickson, encouraged pupil co-operation in discipline matters; and was loathe to employ 'the heavy hand of authority.'[43] He and his staff were genuinely committed to the wellbeing and achievements of each individual child; and Gavin was treated with a care and kindness which addressed his particular special needs.

He adapted happily to the change and was soon settled into the routine of New Park life. Smaller classes and sympathetic teaching gradually evaporated his nervousness and rehabilitated his social skills. He usually engaged in solitary pursuits outwith the classroom, and was happiest when he was wellied and wet to the knees in the Swilken Burn. Complicated nature studies[44] filled his leisure hours and 'he was fascinated by the weather and the movements of the sun.'[45] His classmates soon delineated him as a 'notably eccentric'[46] 'loner'[47] with a potentially vicious and explosive temper: but he had the most exciting birthday parties in the school and they could therefore overlook his various aberrations and peculiarities! But these universally appreciated annual events are recalled with mixed emotions by one of Gavin's contemporaries. His enjoyment was poisoned at one party's close by a casual comment which Willa made to the various parents who had assembled to reclaim their respective offspring. 'You sometimes wonder,' she said, as she watched Gavin's antics, 'whether they are worth having.'[48]

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[42] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p188)
[43] Bill Adams in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 19th March 1994.
[44] Fred Urquhart. 'Edwin and Willa. A Memoir.' In Chapman 49. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp11-14)
[45] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.
[46] John Hunter in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 4th September 1995.
[47] David Forrester in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 5th June 1995.

Gavin's patent contentment at New Park was an enormous relief to his parents; but the turmoil of those trying months had left them tired, traumatised and in need of a holiday. They therefore left Gavin with Hilde and explored the Western Highlands, 'which is entirely Free Kirk and Sabbatarian . . . I did not know that such things still lingered on; but they do; and ministers up there boast that "not a wheel turns on the Sunday". Willa suggested that God's wheel still did, but it is doubtful whether western Highlanders quite approve of such activity on a Sabbath. Yet they are fine people all the other six days of the week, the best people one can find in Scotland, I think.'[49]

Vast piles of abandoned paperwork greeted their return. They plunged immediately into a period of concentrated slog: autumn faded unnoticed as they ploughed doggedly through a translation of Kafka's The Trial. They both considered it to be a work of major importance and one of which the British public ought to be aware: but the novel's pessimism and menace were oppressive. They became increasingly obsessed with the gathering stormclouds over Europe and with the safety of their friends and fellow writers in Germany and Austria. They were particularly anxious about the fate of Hermann Broch for whom they had a personal as well as a professional concern; and from whom they received regular and vivid descriptions of the inexorable brutality of Nazism. 'With violence and murder crossing the Austrian frontier from Nazi Germany and appearing openly in the streets of Vienna, Broch, a Jewish writer, could not but feel despairing about the future; at the same time, being a philosopher and mathematician, he could not help schematizing his despairs into logical systems over which he brooded incessantly, passing them on to us. What shattered him most, he told us, was to find the prophecies actually coming true which he had been elaborating for the past twenty years, ever since the 1914 war. And since these prophecies included the forecast that Europe's devotion to Art, romantic outlook, way of thinking, basic philosophy, would have no meaning at all in the coming epoch, the great collapse into Nothingness which was beginning in Germany, he was beset by the temptation to cry: What's the use? 'We must march through Nothingness', he said, 'through the coming war of which we all speak but which is nearer to us than to you because we are too close to Germany.''[50]

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[48] Bill Adams in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 19th March 1994.

[49] Edwin Muir in a letter to David Peat. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p90)

The months passed and the Austrian predicament worsened; it became increasingly imperative that Broch should be extricated from potentially dangerous Nazi clutches. He 'was in prison for a few weeks after the Hitler invasion, and is now out again, but very anxious to leave Austria. He is such an extraordinarily sensitive creature, that it makes my heart sore to think of his position. It is terrible to think that men like Hitler have power over such men as Broch.'[51] A British literary consortium intervened on his behalf and the Aliens Department at the Home Office was inundated with letters from Sydney Schiff, Aldous Huxley, Herbert Read and Edwin Muir. Edwin and

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[50] Willa Muir. Belonging. The Hogarth Press. London, 1968. (p196-7)
[51] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. St Andrews, 17th May 1938. British Library, London.

Willa offered him a home with them and insisted that they 'should be glad to keep [him] indefinitely, means or no means. . . .'[52]

He arrived in St Andrews in the autumn of 1938 and moved into the Muirs' spare bedroom. It 'was spare enough in comfort, like our other bedrooms, and had only a small gas fire to warm it. Yet he confined himself to it day after day, answering letters from desperate people in Vienna who thought he might help them to get out too. . . . He was glad to have escaped from Austria, glad to be with us, but he was profoundly unhappy. He did not believe that for people of the old order, like himself and us, there was any possibility of collaborating with the forces of the new, no chance of modifying their destructive rush into nothingness, their abandonment of all recognizable ethical motives, without which humanity would become inhuman.'[53]

He spent only a month with the Muirs before yielding 'to the solicitations of the Schiffs who wanted to look after him in London.'[54] But he was equally unsettled there and he was in New York by the beginning of December. 'I cannot tell you how happy I was at your home - I cannot be grateful enough to Hitler that he has made that time possible for me. And I want to have it back again. And I want to go putting again, and I want to have tea again in the living room at 12 midnight. I can only think of St Andrews with deep emotions. And I embrace you both.'[55]

But his despairing preoccupation with the 'Nothingness' of life had been contagious. Financial constraints required the Muirs to persevere with the translation work which was the only mainstay of their existence; but Edwin was increasingly discontented and self-doubting. 'The turning of German books, good and bad, into English, had become meaningless as a way of life, and more and more difficult to support because of its meaninglessness.'[56] Only an occasional lecture for the University Literary Society[57] or the London Scots Self-Government Committee[58]; or a broadcast on St Andrews day for the BBC[59] relieved the drudgery and exercised his intellect and passions. He was increasingly frustrated by creative anxiety and poetic sterility. A new volume of his poetry - entitled Journeys and Places - was published in 1937; but its contents had been written prior to his arrival in St Andrews.

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[52] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. St Andrews, 17th May 1938. British Library, London.
[53] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p199)
[54] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p199-200)
[55] Hermann Broch in a letter to Edwin and Willa Muir. New York, 3rd December 1938.

Miserable months dragged by and both he and Willa struggled to subdue the insistent intuitive reactions and emotional impulses which urged them to leave St Andrews. They had always blithely and readily relocated; but they now decided to remain in a suffocating and unhappy environment. They were perhaps influenced by Gavin's happiness at New Park; or by a resiliently optimistic belief in the improvement of their situation. They were perhaps simply paralysed by inertia and apathy.

They intimated this intention of permanence by moving out of their temporary accommodation at Castlelea into a more congenial, less draughty and unfurnished house on Queens Gardens. It was a generously proportioned terraced residence which had been the Congregational church manse until recent financial restraints had forced the minister to let the property. It was an elegant house with a prime location in the very heart of the most desirable and salubrious part of the town; but, as Jo Grimond justifiably asserts, Queens Gardens is not 'as nice as it should be. Its houses are all right, and it has harboured several interesting people . . . . I like the arrangements of the gardens across the street. It should be as attractive as Greyfriars Gardens - its double - but somehow it isn't.'[60]

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[56] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p239)
[57] The St Andrews Citizen. 31st October 1936. In the University Library, St Andrews.
[58] The St Andrews Citizen. 5th November 1938. In the University Library, St Andrews.
[59] The St Andrews Citizen. 14th November 1936. In the University Library, St Andrews.

The Muirs luxuriated in the pleasure of being surrounded by their own familiar possessions in the significant spaciousness of this new house. The public rooms were on the first floor and looked out onto the grounds of St Mary's College and the meticulously tended allotments of Queens Gardens. 'All that I remember about [the sitting room] now are the mirrors, like car mirrors, that were fixed to the insides of the windows, slanting downwards so that you could see who was passing along the street or knocking at the front door. I have always felt that it was Willa who rigged up these mirrors; she was much more inquisitive than Edwin.'[61]

The comings and goings of the wider world presented an infinitely less comfortable and entertaining image of the human condition. Conversation focussed increasingly upon the simmering ferment in Europe and the possibility of another war. 'The treachery of London politicians concerning the Spanish Civil War and Hitler's bullying demands in Europe was a never-ending topic for the Oesers.'[62] Drury, as the Honorary Treasurer of the Basque Children's Committee, transformed her angry words into useful actions on behalf of a group of battle scarred young refugees who were billeted in Montrose. Edwin was also roused to rage by the 'isolation' policy of the British government and was an instigating force and a chief signatory to a resolution of protest against 'the indiscriminate bombing in Spain' which was sent, by the Left Book Club, to the Prime Minister.

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[60] Jo Grimond. The St Andrews of Jo Grimond. Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1992. (p99)

[61] Fred Urquhart. 'Edwin and Willa. A Memoir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp11-14)

[62] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p191)

Willa meanwhile exerted her energies in support of one of Drury's more frivolous fund raising projects: 'St Andrews Basque Children's Committee are holding a Spelling Bee in the Congregational Church Hall on Thursday June 2nd. Among those competing will be a team of ministers, a team of "foreigners", several teams of teachers and students, and a team led by Mrs Willa Muir.'[63] In a hotly contested competition, Willa's team reached the semi-finals and were then beaten by the University Socialist Club!

But the routine pleasures and pursuits of life were darkened by the looming clouds of an impending war. The nation sustained the hope of peace; but prepared itself for a return to the killing fields. St Andrews received its first consignment of gasmasks for distribution[64] in September 1938 and circulated the official details of air-raid precautions. Willa and Gavin composed a lighthearted song which illustrated these various precautions[65]; but this show of joviality failed to dispel the air of oppression and fear which was engendered by imminent war.

Gavin's safety and sanity were Edwin and Willa's most immediate concerns as they contemplated the impending hostilities. His emotional state remained unstable and his fragile mental equilibrium was easily unsettled. 'The slightest psychical stimulus produces almost immediately such a strong physical response, driving the blood from his face, often actually hollowing his cheeks. Excitement can turn him green. I don't know what is to be done with a sensibility like that. On the one hand it is a strength, and goes with his enjoyment of music: on the other, it is sometimes almost paralysing to him. . .

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[63] The St Andrews Citizen. 21st May 1938. In the University Library St Andrews.
[64] The St Andrews Citizen. 1st October 1938. In the University Library, St Andrews.
[65] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 21st September 1939

I'm very attached to [him] and very moved by him in all sorts of ways, powerfully and happily.'[66]

But he was also an undoubted source of great pride to his parents. He was a star performer at school concerts[67] and was apparently 'turning out to be a musician of remarkable ability. I don't mean only that he plays the piano well - which he does - he is a musician through and through and composes things that are remarkable for his age. Otherwise he's a good-looking kid, better-looking than either parent, and does very well at mathematics and general buffoonery. But we fear he may have the naïve literary tastes of the musician and the mathematician: certainly English will never be his strong point.'[68]

The threat of an impending war occasioned a more immediate and personal consequence in the Muir household. Hilde - the family's anchor and mainstay - felt that Europe's continued unrest signalled an end to her happy British sojourn. She was as loathe to leave as Willa was to lose her; but both women recognised the inevitability and the wisdom of the resolution. And the reasoning and the motivation behind Hilde's resolve were irresistable. 'She had been used to think that there was nothing to be said for marriage, she told me, but now she had been watching Mr Muir and myself for four years and had come to the conclusion that there was a great deal to be said for it. So she wanted to marry before she was too old. She had learned some sense, too, and since it now looked as if Hitler were going to last a long time and she wanted to marry a German, one of her own people , not a foreigner, she would probably be able to put up with the regime and hold her foolish tongue. . . . In a thorough, Hilde-like fashion, she had drawn up a list of men who had wanted to marry her, was writing to ask each of them what he looked for in marriage, and was going to choose the one whose answer pleased her best. . . . [I]n due time, Hilde, selected a man on the list . . . and sailed to Germany from Dundee. All of us were in tears at this parting, including Hilde.'[69]

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[66] Edwin Muir in a letter to Alec Aitken. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p102-3)
[67] The St Andrews Citizen. 30th March 1940. In the University Library, St Andrews.
[68] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 21st September 1939.

Hilde's departure presented the Muirs with a more-than-minor hiccup in domestic harmony. Willa was an utterly incompetent housekeeper with no inclination or interest in the niceties of domesticity. Edwin - in common with almost every male of his generation - was entirely clueless about the mysteries of the kitchen. They desperately and immediately required a Hilde-substitute and despaired of ever finding one. Willa eventually managed to engage the services of a German refugee called Käthe Silber. She was a highly educated woman with a doctorate in psychology and 'was resentful and humiliated because she was expected to do the cooking while I was busy with translations which she was sure she could do better'.[70] Willa was unfairly and unreasonably irritated by this justifiably reluctant servitude and by the atmosphere of bitterness and animosity which Käthe engendered in the house. She dismissively described Käthe as a 'typical Prussian intellectual product, although nominally a Jew. She feels that housework is beneath her. She is a Froebel-Pestalozzi psychologist, more vague metaphysician than psychologist, who despises statistics. She is, like all Bavarians, averse to shouldering guilt of any kind: being incapable of standing up to it. So her idea of responsibility is not accepting guilt for one's own failures: instinctively and quickly she projects the guilt on to others, on to conditions, on to her material. Having broken more plates in a month than were broken in this house for years, she says in a voice of loud reproach: "These cheap plates always have a very short life."'[71]

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[69] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p200-1)
[70] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p201)

The aversion was apparently mutual. Käthe Silber described her period of service with the Muirs as the unhappiest six months of her life. She felt isolated and alienated; estranged from her culture and her people. She yearned for the comfort of familiar faces and places and was hurt by the growing British animosity against the homeland for which, despite her hatred of the Nazi regime, she retained a genuine and inevitable sense of love and affinity. She struggled too under a burden of grief and guilt about a brother whom she had left behind in a German concentration camp. 'She felt badly that she had been given the opportunity of escape while she had left her brother to certain death.'[72] The domestic demands of her new situation were probably also bewildering to a woman who had previously been accustomed only to the demands of mental exertion. 'She didn't actually think that housework was beneath her; she simply didn't know how to do it.'[73] The Muirs, she felt, were scanty in their respect and sympathy for this turmoil of emotions, and did little to ease the pain of adjustment.

Both Muirs were admittedly absorbed in their respective literary projects and were frustrated by the intrusion of this domestic disharmony into their creative concentration. Edwin was embarking on the creation of 'something like a description of myself, done in general outline, not in detail, not as a story, but as an attempt to find out what a human being is in this extraordinary age which depersonalises everything. Whether it will be a success or a failure I can't say; it may be that I have found at last a form that suits me; it may be that I haven't found a form at all, but merely a collection of fragments.'[74]

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[71] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. St Andrews, 20th December 1938. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[72] Marja Hunter in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 4th September 1995.

[73] Marja Hunter in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 4th September 1995.

He was also involved in a new and life-enhancing friendship with Alec Aitken, a Reader in Mathematics at Edinburgh University. Alec had an intelligent and informed passion for poetry, and Edwin found in him a kindred spirit with whom he could discuss contemporary intellectual and literary issues and to whom he could open his heart and mind. Alec was Edwin's oasis of sanity throughout the madness of the war years.

Willa was meanwhile working on Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey. This alleged novel is a thinly disguised documentation of her three happy Hampstead years and of the characters and crises which had coloured that epoch. It is too closely entangled with real places and people. Willa sacrificed her creative judgement to an emotional and psychological revisiting of the past: the work is merely a delineation and dissection of her hurts, resentments and joys. It is a fascinating piece of autobiography; but a flawed work of fiction which both British and American publishers universally rejected.

But this novel was Willa's emotional and creative safety valve; it relieved the drudgery of translation. She was continually frustrated by the numerous personal and literary obligations which impeded and restricted its progress and completion: 'I have a good novel half-finished, which I can't get at because I have to translate Feuchtwanger, whom I detest. Why do I translate him? Because we have to pay for food and school fees and God knows what.'[75]

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[74] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. St Andrews, 17th May 1938. British Library, London.

[75] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 21st September 1939.

She was overwhelmed increasingly by a plague of personal and financial pressures; and her fragile health was continually overstrained by the demands which she placed upon it. In December 1938 she collapsed whilst making a batch of home-made sweets and was admitted to hospital. The collapse, it transpired, was yet another residual consequence of the shoddy treatment which she had received in the aftermath of her difficult labour. 'Apparently my whole inside was rejected by some part of me, for it was all on its way out, trying to flype itself like a stocking. (There is no good word in English for flype - or one has to say clumsily turn outside in.)'[76] 'My heart was missing beats, [Dr Douglas] said; I had clearly been living for months beyond my strength. It was high time the strain on my system was eased through my being finally and definitely stitched up by a first-rate surgeon. The best gynaecological surgeon in Scotland was Professor Margaret Fairlie in Dundee and she would book her. But first I would need to lie on my back until I was fit for the operation.'[77]

A period of complete bed rest was prescribed: in order to withstand the strain of surgery she would need to regain some of her strength and stabilise her shaken heartbeat. It was a trying and worrying time for all the family. Edwin succumbed predictably to sympathetic ill-health and 'had to have out all my remaining teeth but two.'[78] Gavin contracted chicken pox!

Margaret Fairlie (who was soon to become the first female professor at the University of St Andrews[79]) eventually operated on Willa. '[She] stitched me up thoroughly and her stitches never came undone again. I had known her when she was a first-year medical student at St Andrews, a plump, rosy giggling girl with a drawling, humourous voice. She came to see me some little time after the operation and sat on the edge of my bed, a tall, still woman with a pale, unmoving face and icy-cold hands, . . . The price she had to pay, she said, for being such a skilful surgeon was that she had to repress all human feeling. She could not risk allowing the faintest quiver of emotion to deflect her hand when she had to make incisions and cuts. She could not risk being aware of her cases as human beings; they were merely objects, areas for operating on. The result was that she was turning into ice inside: she could feel the icy coldness growing within her; but she could not risk other people's lives by trying to save her own and allowing her feelings free play.'[80]

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[76] Willa Muir in a letter to Sylvia Lehfeldt. St Andrews, 20th December 1939. In the Lehfeldt archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[77] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p201)

[78] Edwin Muir in a letter to Sydney Schiff. St Andrews, 17th May 1938. The British Library, London.

[79] The St Andrews Citizen. 13th July 1940. In the University Library, St Andrews.

Edwin had meanwhile experienced a life-changing, spiritual awakening.

> Last night, going to bed alone, I suddenly found myself . . . reciting the Lord's Prayer in a loud emphatic voice - a thing I had not done since my teens - with urgency too, and deeply disturbed emotion. As I recited it I grew more composed; my soul, as if it had been empty and needed replenishment, seemed to fill: and every word had a strange fullness of meaning, which astonished and delighted me, and gave me not so much hope as strength. It was late; I had sat up reading; I was sleepy; but as I stood in the middle of the floor half undressed reciting the prayer over and over, the meanings it contained, none of them extraordinary, indeed ordinary as they could be, overcame me with joyful surprise, and made me realise that this petition was always

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[80] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p201-2)

> universal, always adequate, and to life as it is, not to a life such as we long for or dream of; and for that reason it seemed to sanctify common existence.[81]

Willa and Edwin's new-found sense of physical and spiritual wellbeing inspired them anew in their quest for local and international human freedom. They engaged, that spring, in a crusade against an injustice which was apparently being perpetrated almost on their own St Andrews doorstep. It concerned the publication and the management of College Echoes and the recent interventionist policy of the University Senate. A letter of vehement protest against this perceived infringement of liberties was despatched to The Citizen from various literary luminaries including George Blake, Neil Gunn, Eric Linklater, Compton Mackenzie, A.S. Neill, J.B. Salmon and George and Ann Scott-Moncrieff.

> "College Echoes" is a journal which has been run by the students of St Andrews University for fifty years. It has existed purely to express the views of the students. It has always claimed and exercised a healthy latitude. Within recent years it has commented on political questions.
>
> A few months ago the Students' Representative Council received a notification from the Senatus that in future the journal must be controlled by an Advisory Committee, consisting of two members of the University staff and two students, the Chairman to be a member of the staff with a deliberative and casting vote. The S.R.C. refused to carry on the journal on such terms, and for three months no issue appeared. Then an accommodation was

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[81] Extract from the Journal of Edwin Muir. In Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p162)

reached, after an assurance had been made that one of the aims of the Advisory Committee would be "by co-operative effort and goodwill" to assist in raising the standard of "College Echoes" to "the highest level of literary taste." Three issues have since followed, but have shown no sign that this high aim was attained. That does not surprise us. And we doubt whether such promotion can be achieved by such means. If young writers are not allowed liberty to write, they will never learn to write passably well, far less in a lofty style.

From the Scottish Universities have come Scotland's greatest philosophers, theologians, scientists and statesmen, as well as many of its best writers. These men were reared in an atmosphere of independence; the life of the Scottish Universities has always been freer than that of the English. It is a matter of urgent importance for our nation that the tradition should be preserved, and therefore that attention should at once be drawn to any attack upon it. A situation in which the students of a University are at enmity with those who should be preparing them for their tasks in the world is unusual and painful to contemplate; in this case it has been brought about by the authorities of the University themselves; they, not the students, are the attackers; and they are attacking not only the men and women for whose education they are responsible, but an integral part of Scottish tradition and Scottish life. We cannot stand aside and see this happening without entering our most emphatic protest.[82]

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[82] The St Andrews Citizen. 11th March 1939. In the University Library, St Andrews.

This miniature fracas was a symptomatic sideshow to the incipient war in Europe. The War Office intimated its expectation of an immediate military engagement by calling up all young men aged twenty or twenty-one in early June; one hundred St Andrews youths registered for active service.[83] Willa realised with relief that Edwin was too old and Gavin too young to be enlisted in any of the armed forces; and she determined to continue the routine of family life in the face of the impending international crisis.

Their world appeared externally to be unruffled by the prospect of war: heavy hearts and minds were disguised behind a brave facade of normality for Gavin's benefit. He was now entirely settled and content in St Andrews and thought of it as 'his beloved home town.'[84] He was also very happy and successful at New Park and in that last summer of peace he gathered a collection of academic and athletic accolades. He spent much of that long vacation in the Pierrot Pavilion at the Step Rock Pool acting as the 'chief unpaid assistant to the local pierrot troupe . . . [He] says firmly that when he grows up, he's going to be a pierrot.'[85] He also participated in the various children's talent contests which regularly took place in the pavilion during the summer months. Tom Scott remembered a particular occasion on which, 'after one of the 'Good Ship Lollipop' turns, Gavin ascended the stage. His long, lank hair flopped around his face and he looked like a young Chopin. And then, with great aplomb and much passion, he thundered out a sonata which, to the discomfort and confusion of the compére, he announced as his own composition!'[86]

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[83] The St Andrews Citizen. 10th June 1939. In the University Library, St Andrews.
[84] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p212)
[85] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 21st September 1939.
[86] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.

Autumn succeeded summer and the anticipated war finally arrived. Rehearsed precautions were rendered real as windows were blacked out and gas masks were laid ready in preparation for the expected bombing raids. Hotels were commandeered for the military use of the Initial Training Wing;[87] and the town was immediately faced with the challenge of accommodating three thousand evacuated city children and various young German Jewish refugees. The Madras College Magazine for 1939-40 recorded that although 'nothing in the school life has remained unaffected by the war, nothing has been so strange as the beginning - the hasty formation of plans to meet unknown conditions, the suspense while we waited the delayed arrival of the trains from Edinburgh and the great outburst of energy that carried the scheme through. It was an improvisation that worked through the adaptability and zeal of the staff, the senior pupils and other helpers.'[88]

Stalwart optimism and quiet determination asserted themselves in the form of the quintessentially British stiff upper lip; vehement allegations of virtual treachery were levelled at even the slightest suggestion of the possibility of defeat. The Muirs succumbed sadly to the necessity of an apparently justified and inevitable war.

> [Willa] stood at our front door imagining a file of German motor-cyclists coming down the street and estimated how I could best hurl heavy milk-bottles at them to make sure of crashing one or two of them before I was myself done in.
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> What had happened to our gospel of non-violence and imaginative understanding? Hitler and his Nazis had happened. War had happened. One does not carry on a dialogue with a

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[87] Mary Wilson in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 31st August 1995

[88] Editorial. Madras College Magazine 1939-40. In Madras College Archives, St Andrews.

> beast of prey crouched to spring. For the moment the need to survive, simply to stay alive, displaced all other considerations including gospels. The beast of prey had already sprung on Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland; our turn was coming; the dark cloud of destruction was reaching our own country and we could not stop to parley. There had been too much vain parleying already, over Czechoslovakia.
>
> In a way it was a relief to know that Britain was at last prepared to resist the Nazi evil, although the prospect of war flooded Edwin and me with woe as well as personal grief.[89]

But the most uncompromisingly optimistic will-to-win was diluted by a sneaking pessimism about the ultimate future of the world and its people. 'Perhaps out of this war an age of reconstruction will spring. If we get rid of Hitler, however, that looks like the sole gain to the world that will emerge from the present mess. The extent of the U.S.A. is so enormous that the seething tea-cup of Europe must look insane to you: but we are in the middle of the seethings, and though it looks insane enough to us, we are heavily aware also of the resentments, the passions, the trickery, the oppression and injustice that poison life in every country of it, not only in the totalitarian areas. Ordinary decent people exist in crowds, but they are baffled and bewildered.'[90]

The first shock of the oubreak of war faded; the nation shouldered its silent burden of grief and sadness and grimly continued with the business of daily living. Willa and Edwin contended with a considerable pressure of work which partially distracted them from the tension and frustration of the phoney war. A Feuchtwangler translation was required at the publishers by Christmas and demanded long and intense periods of concentration. Edwin's autobiography also absorbed much of his mind and time; and as 1939 drew to a close, he 'worked day and night'[91] to finish it before the turn of the decade. He had also a promised lecture to prepare for the December meeting of the Edinburgh branch of the Scottish National Party - of which Willa had also recently become a member.

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[89] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p203-4)
[90] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 21st September 1939.

Christmas provided much-needed relaxation and subdued celebration. Mary Litchfield and Fred Urquhart joined the family gathering and willingly participated in the round of seasonal festivities. Late on that Christmas night, 'Willa and . . . [Fred Urquhart] went with some of the Muir's other guests for a walk round the Castle, the University and their neighbourhood. While walking, Willa and some of the other student guests sang 'Silent Night' in German, as well as some other sentimental German songs. Mary, who had stayed in the house with Edwin and some of the other older guests, said it was very foolish of us, considering the war and anti-German feeling.'[92] Fred generally avoided participation in Willa's high-spirited and reckless capers. He was 'intimidated' by her 'aggressive energy' and he suspected that 'despite her display of intellectual tolerance, her left-wing views and her bohemian behaviour, [she] didn't really like young men she suspected of being homosexual. I was never at ease with her. She tried jocosely to be one of the boys, and she would often leer and give me metaphorical digs in the ribs.'[93]

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[91] Edwin Muir in a letter to Alec Aitken. St Andrews, 4th January 1940. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p111)

[92] Fred Urquhart. 'Edwin and Willa. A Memoir.' In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp11-14)

[93] Fred Urquhart. 'Edwin and Willa. A Memoir.' In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp11-14)

The new decade arrived amidst muted hopefulness. The war had so far failed to manifest the immediate and violent devastation which had been predicted at its outset; a hesitant normality was resumed. But weeks dragged into months, and the Nazi regime remained unchallenged: the earlier tentative expectations of a rapid peace settlement gradually dissipated. The prospect of a prolonged and full-scale war forced Willa and Edwin to reassess their situation. They were increasingly aware of the danger inherent in exposing Gavin's fragile health to the slightest possibility of nerve-jangling air-raids and they reluctantly considered the possibility of sending him overseas. 'In the circumstances, nothing would please us better than to send Gavin to the States. He is worth preserving for his musical gifts are really astounding. The obverse side of that is his extraordinary susceptibility to sound: I think he must have extra large resonance chambers in his ears: it is impossible to forecast what effect a really big aerial bombardment might have upon his nervous system. This house here has a basement, and I should muffle his ears with cotton wool, of course, but even so, I shrink from having him subjected to such an ordeal if it can be circumvented by getting him out of the country.'[94] The heart-searching decision was further complicated by Gavin's violent reaction against a separation from his parents. 'He gets asthma and begins to gasp and choke as soon as the thought of crossing the Atlantic is suggested to him: we have no choice at present but to keep him here.'[95] The Muirs later considered the possibility of a temporary family emigration to America; but rapidly realised that financial stringencies and various bureaucracy formalities presented insurmountable obstacles to the scheme. They reluctantly resigned themselves to remaining in St Andrews.

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[94] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 23rd June 1940.

[95] Edwin Muir in a letter to Stephen Spender. St Andrews, 20th July 1940. The British Library, London.

War had meanwhile diminished some of the town's distressing and destructive divisions and snobberies. A common enemy and a shared purpose united the townspeople and propagated an unexpected sense of community. Edwin joined the Home Guard 'and was drilled in the evenings by a retired sergeant, on the grounds of the University, along with professors, divines, teachers and shop-assistants. . . . Shopkeepers and workmen who had army experience were set above professors and lawyers, and the change was accepted as natural though surprising.'[96] This prompt and anarchic reversal was received with unexpected pleasure in various quarters. Professor Rose of the Greek department told a meeting of the Rotarians in the autumn of 1940, that he:

> had been long enough in the Home Guard to learn quite a number of interesting things about his neighbours. Before the war began he knew that his neighbours were exceedingly honest and decent folk; that many of them got their living by more or less skilled occupations. Of late he had realised they were all thoroughly delightful people, and how skilled they were! He had a slight suspicion that he had surprised one or two of them by showing no horror at having to soil his hands with such uncultured tools as a spade or a pick. . . . The sandbag was a great stickler for equality, and seemed not to care whether it was filled by a Professor, a labourer or any other kind of professional man or tradesman. . . . They all looked very much alike in battle dress.
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> Such comradeship was amusing and interesting and he saw in it a check against perhaps the most detestable of the so-called

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[96] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. (p243). Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993.

> modern ills, class hostility. An antidote to class enmity was good; but perhaps an antidote to fear was better.[97]

It was a physically strenuous occupation however and often involved long hours and sleepless nights. Edwin shared the routine responsibility of 'guarding the telephone exchange, armed with a silver-mounted shot-gun which had been presented by a local landowner, but with no ammunition. To pace around the telephone exchange from two to four in the morning emptied the mind of the cares of the day and removed the war itself to an inconceivable distance. . . . My return in the morning through the empty streets prolonged the tranquil pleasure of those night vigils, until, with breakfast and the newspaper, the war and my personal worries rushed back again.'[98] He revelled in this feeling of usefulness and enjoyed the shared sense of a common identity; but he was not physically or emotionally equipped for these considerable exertions. Professor Rose's socially equalising sandbags overstrained Edwin's heart and (a couple of days after a serious stumble in the blackout in Dundee in autumn 1940) he collapsed whilst on duty and was relegated to his bed for six weeks.

It was another cruel blow in a stream of misfortunes and it exacerbated the Muir's already straitened financial circumstances. Publishers were no longer interested in texts by German writers: the translation work which had been their primary source of income throughout the previous decade was no longer a feasible occupation. Broch incessantly urged their collaboration in his most recent project; but Willa 'could not promise to translate The Death of Virgil. I did not care for it, nor did I feel able to cope with it, for I was growing unaccountably tired.'[99] Edwin had recently managed to obtain employment 'stamping papers in the Dundee Food Office, at three pounds a week, out of which he had to buy his lunches and his train fare from St Andrews.'[100] It was a menial and demeaning occupation and 'Willa said that she had seldom seen him suffer greater degradation: he had begun as a clerk in Glasgow, was he going to finish as a clerk in Dundee, earning less than he had in Glasgow twenty years before!'[101] The combined income from this job and from his evening classes in English Literature was pitiful: but it was an essential contribution to the famished family coffers.

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[97] The St Andrews Citizen. 19th October 1940. In the University Library, St Andrews.
[98] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p243)
[99] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p200)

The exigency of their situation had also forced Willa to accept a teaching post at New Park. The school had been deprived of many of its regular staff by the insatiable demand for servicemen; Willa was appointed to the position of Classics mistress on terms and conditions which were tantamount to extortion. 'They would be getting me on the cheap, I knew, but beggars can't be choosers: three pounds a week, clear, was always something coming in. I should have stuck out for better pay, but I was in no condition to fight, being depressed by the war, my menopause, and the private load of guilt I was carrying for our being in St Andrews at all.'[102]

This apathetic and weary defeatism did not qualify her enjoyment of the actual teaching. The classroom was still her natural environment and she was genuinely fond of her young pupils. 'I liked the little boys I taught: it had already struck me on Sports Day how much nicer they were than most of their parents.'[103] Her pupils readily returned her affection and appreciated her innovative teaching methods. She 'was an inspired teacher and a sympathetic person. She could get into the mind of a little boy.'[104]

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[100] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p205)
[101] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.
[102] Willa Muir. Belonging. The Hogarth Press. London, 1968. (p205-6)
[103] Willa Muir. Belonging. The Hogarth Press. London, 1968. (p206)

But even the nicest little boys have mischievous and unpleasant qualities; no teacher is ever exempted from the consequences of these less savoury characteristics. Willa's New Park pupils mocked her for her scruffy and unconventional clothing and for the unpleasant odour which she allegedly exuded.[105] Their parents meanwhile indulged in orgies of hushed censure which cast aspersions on her personal cleanliness and her domestic dispositions.

Her timetable primarily comprised Latin classes, although 'three boys in the top class had lessons in Greek, and one of these was Gavin. I was anxious not to let the class, any class, feel that I had favourites, and Gavin rather expected privileged treatment from me, which I tried not to give him.'[106] David Forrester, whose father was the Professor of Practical Theology and Christian Ethics, was one of the other participants in that select group and he remembers the exhilarating energy of those classes. 'She was a meticulous teacher who loved her Greek and who rapidly took us ahead of the syllabus.'[107]

He also recalls another (and less savoury) aspect to her teaching. 'Around the classroom table she was instructing us in socialism and complaining about New Park School. She spoke about politics, equities and justice - and she laid it on thick. We were left awestruck by these discussions. Looking back, I think that the context of an all boys school forced her to institute socialism in place of sexual equality as her hobby horse. She was certainly guilty of indoctrination. Whatever else she was teaching us, she wasn't teaching us Latin or Greek.'[108] Willa's behaviour was - if these recollections are accurate - an indefensible betrayal of the responsibility which is entrusted to teachers. Her bitterness about the treatment which she had received in St Andrews (and in New Park in particular); and her pessimism about the state of the world had perhaps corrupted the nicety of her academic judgement. Perhaps she was simply unwell.

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[104] Bill Adams in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 19th March 1994.
[105] Bill Adams in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 19th March 1994.
[106] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p206)
[107] David Forrester in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 5th June 1995.

There was certainly scant relief from the weariness of dreary and onerous school rituals. She and Edwin both 'found it a hard strain - we're no longer young - to get up at 7 every morning and go through a settled routine all day, after keeping no times for twenty years.'[109] Excitements and distractions were few and far between - although Willa did enjoy a short-lived celebrity status in consequence of her spelling bee success on the light entertainment channel on the 'wireless'! She was also accorded the dubious privilege of opening a fund-raising bazaar in a local church.

The oppressive consciousness of war quashed every simple pleasure. The news from Europe worsened, and only the hope of ultimate survival lightened those dreary hours. St Andrews duly sustained its share of sacrifice; and experienced the privations and adaptations of the war effort. Accommodation had to be found for a constant tide of British servicemen in training and for the 'contingents of Poles who quite literally in many homes replaced the men at the front, so that our St Andrews doctors cynically referred to spring-time as the "Polish lambing season."'[110] Their continental charm apparently cast an entirely unfamiliar and seductive spell over the female population of St Andrews and was so beguiling that one Divinity lecturer was moved to warn the young women of the town that although it might be impossible not to lose their hearts to them; 'try not to lose your heads as well!'[111]

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[108] David Forrester in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 5th June 1995.
[109] Edwin Muir in a letter to Alec Aitken. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p130)
[110] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p206)

They were impulsive and emotional young men who could not understand the British response to the war. 'In June, when the news came that France had surrendered, two Poles who used to visit us, highly intellectual Jews who the Polish officers kept busy at chores like peeling potatoes, met me at the front door, crying out: "We don't understand you at all. Don't you realise what has happened? Are you incredibly brave or just incredibly stupid?"'[112]

This obstinate acceptance also characterised the British reaction to the ever-present threat of aerial bombardment. Willa and Edwin converted their basement into an air raid shelter in which 'Gavin is now bedded, so that he merely has to stay put. I have sweets parked down there, and a pack of cards, besides first aid gadgets. Sometimes, when a warning is on, one thinks: how quiet! The sky and the trees look as hushed as on an ordinary night. And then the chug-chug of a German plane comes down from the sky. We know the difference between the German planes and ours, and we sit holding our breath when that grrr-grrr, chug-chug, grrr-grrr, chug-chug begins. Sometimes I sneak to a dark window and watch the search-lights fingering the sky, but usually I just sit quietly beside Gavin's bed.'[113] Willa was more fearful of the unpredictable and indiscriminate possibility of day-light raids and was nervous about Gavin's safety in the event of such an attack. 'I have got over feeling scared every time he is out, but I admit that I feel a certain relief whenever I hear him come back. I have instructed him what to do and where to go if there's an air-raid warning while he's at the beach, but of course he might forget and just start running for home. Still, an air-raid warden would shoo him under cover I suppose and it's no use worrying. Quite illogically, I don't feel at all apprehensive if we all go out together - to the pictures for instance . . . . One cannot live in a bath of apprehension - it's not a medium in which life goes on - and everyone, like us, goes out as usual, - shopping, beach, movies, rambles etc., without being conscious of apprehension. I do catch myself wondering sometimes when I do something: is this the last time I'll do it?'[114]

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[111] John Hunter in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 4th September 1995.
[112] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p206)
[113] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 16th August 1940.

This incessant worrying was only occasionally vindicated by an actual aerial attack; but on one memorable and unnerving occasion a bomb descended almost directly onto the Muirs' doorstep. 'It knocked out some of our windows and blew the back door off its hinges; it was more exciting and amusing than frightening. It happened one evening just as we were going into the boarding-house next door for our supper. As we were going down stairs I heard a loudish bang and thought it was a door banging in the house. When I opened the front door I heard a louder bang and saw two school-boys running down the street at full speed towards us. We hurried along the pavement to the boarding-house; the school-boys reached it at the same time; there was a really loud bang which made us turn round. A German bomber with its lights on was scraping the roof of the church opposite. We tumbled into the lobby of the boarding house, all mixed up, the school-boys, Willa, Gavin and myself; and a second afterwards there was loud crash and the fanlight at the top of the stairs came down on our heads.'[115]

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[114] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 16th August 1940.
[115] Edwin Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 22nd May 1941.

But the danger of air attacks was a relatively minor preoccupation in comparison with the Muirs' more immediate personal and financial concerns. Edwin's illness now deprived them of a vital source of income; and Willa's insubstantial salary was insufficient to provide for even the most basic requisites of existence. Gavin's school fees were suddenly a luxury which they could no longer afford and by Christmas 1940 they owed a considerable amount in outstanding arrears.

At the start of the new term, Willa 'was informed that New Park would apply my weekly wages to paying off my debt, so that I was to teach all day for my lunches only and take no money home. Not only that, but I was asked to teach more subjects. I finished up by instructing the school in Latin, English, Greek and Scripture.'[116] The school was admittedly probably as straitened as the Muirs by the exigencies of wartime[117] and was perhaps forced to employ desperate measures in order to cope with an impossible situation.

These worries overstrained Willa's health and she was plagued by constant and incapacitating stomach pains. She struggled against an onslaught of debilitating pain and fought to maintain the daily routine of school and family life. But her embattled body was eventually forced to admit defeat and, at the beginning of May 1941, Dorothy Douglas 'kidnapped me from New Park in her car and forbade me to go back to it; I was put into a bed in the local hospital instead and remember little of what happened after that, until I came to and saw Edwin sitting beside me.'[118]

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[116] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p207)
[117] John Hunter in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 4th September 1995.
[118] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p207)

She was subjected to another necessary but 'difficult operation'[119] from which she awoke 'in such weakness that the doctors feared for her life; for some days she had to be kept alive with sips of champagne.'[120] It was a frightening and lonely time for Edwin. His own health was still fragile and the nagging pain which haunted his chest was a constant source of discomfort and distress to him. And now the anchor of his existence and the partner of his soul was transformed into this barely living body in a hospital bed. 'Danger made him more than ever conscious of what he owed to her.'[121] 'One day when I went to see her I realized that my being there no longer had any meaning for her; she had gone too far away and she did not have the strength to reach out to me. That was our worst day.'[122] He was ill-equipped to cope with this intimation of her mortality; the vision of life without Willa was unbearable to him.

Willa had meanwhile 'been lost in a bleak region where there was no living thing, not even a microscopic insect or a minute speck of lichen, nothing but ice, deep clefts and high ridges of bluish ice, with jagged peaks of ice rising beyond them which I knew I had to climb.'[123] As she gradually recovered consciousness, 'this frozen landscape was still around me, yet I knew that this man beside my bed was Edwin. He saw me open my eyes and laid his hand on mine. I turned the hand over a little and looked at it; the fingers were slim, tapered and heavily stained with tobacco. It was only a hand, not very clean, an irrelevant hand, yet I told myself: But this is Peerie B's hand! And I was sorry that I had no feelings about it. Tears began to trickle from my eyes because I was sorry for being so unfeeling, and the faster they flowed the sorrier I felt, until all at once I was flooded with warm love; the icy peaks faded; I held on to Edwin's hand and knew that things were coming right for me again. From that moment I began to recover.'[124]

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[119] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p244)
[120] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p244)
[121] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p180)
[122] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p244)
[123] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p207)

The process of recuperation was painful and protracted. Many weeks passed before Willa was well enough to leave hospital and 'when she came home at last she had shrunk as if by some chemical process, and life, of which she had been so full, had shrunk to its inmost source. Years passed before she returned to the semblance of what she had been.'[125]

She had recovered sufficiently by autumn to be able to do 'some real work, helping to finish vetting the nit-wit translation of a Hungarian book on Rubens. And I am now going to tackle the French translation we have got. And there is a possibility of a definitive edition of Kafka, to be brought out by Secker and Warburg; which means more bits of translation and other work.'[126] She also zealously acquired and practised various 'homemaking' skills which had hitherto been consciously and dismissively excluded from her repertoire of competences. 'I have been making apple jelly from the windfalls, but I have now come to the end of my saved-up sugar so there will be no more jam making. I have also learned to knit. And I am turning into a good baker, though not yet a very good sewer. War is a great forcing-house for domestic accomplishments, I find: . . .'[127]

Edwin had meanwhile found congenial and fulfilling employment in 'visiting labour camps to see if libraries can be supplied to them, lecturing to the Poles on English Literature, reviewing for my faithful Listener, and vetting a translation in pidgin English for a London publisher. I have by now almost enough poems for a new volume, and I have been wondering whether a collected volume of poetry would be a possible proposition in America. . . . I know that poetry does not pay, except in periodicals; but a volume of verse. . . might help my reputation a little.'[128]

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[124] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p207-8)
[125] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p244)
[126] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 9th October 1941.
[127] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 9th October 1941.

Their tortuous anxiety about financial exigencies was eased by Gavin's removal from New Park and his enrolment - along with a few of his prep. school contemporaries - at Madras College at the beginning of the new academic session in September 1941.[129] It was not a development with which Gavin himself was particularly enamoured. '[H]e had absorbed snobbish ideas about status from his class-mates and regarded Madras as a social let-down, but once he was in it he found that he liked it very much - especially the girls in his class.'[130]

The process of adjustment from the protective intimacy and small classes of New Park to the boisterous self-sufficiency and comparatively large numbers at Madras was not in fact as painless a rite of passage as Willa suggests. It was not easy for the 'new boys' to adapt to a radical contrast in teaching styles and to the distracting presence of girls in the classroom. 'Willa had been a very motherly teacher and we now had to cope with Miss Barnes who taught Classics at Madras. She was shocked to discover the looseness of our grammatical knowledge and often set us extra work. Gavin lived in sheer fear of her. But every aspect of that school petrified him to the nth degree.'[131] The stringent and strict academic standards of Madras represented a stressful culture shock to Gavin after the educationally relaxed atmosphere of New

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[128] Edwin Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 5th October 1941.
[129] The Madras College AdmissionRegister. In Madras College archive, St Andrews.
[130] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p208)
[131] David Forrester in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 5th June 1995.

Park. 'He has now as many children in his class as were in the whole prep. school before: work is harder: home-work is set for anything up to two hours nightly: he has to be particular about details, like ruling lines, and margins, and writing in ink! Petty details, but this school emphasises them; and to Gavin who was used to writing at his own sweet will in pencil, just anyhow, it has been a hard discipline!'[132] He was also initially tormented by the bullying[133] which he suffered at the hands of new classmates who were unfamiliar with, and unforgiving of, his peculiarities.

He gradually established his own niche as the school musician and his usefulness as an entertainer was soon recognised and exploited. 'I remember his being encouraged (albeit rather reluctantly) to play boogie-woogie (especially "In the Mood") on the Assembly Hall piano, also his performances (classical this time) at School Concerts.'[134] 'He was able to master some of the most difficult works for the piano, as well as produce what at the time was probably quite foreign to us - jazz as we know it to-day.'[135] An impressive music department provided him with his first formal tuition in the arts of harmony and counterpoint; and at the end of the academic year he carried home the 'Prize for Sight Reading - Piano.'[136] He was also encouraged to join the school orchestra and played at the back of the second violins. He meanwhile spent countless hours at home practising, experimenting and composing at the piano; and was a ready performer at the Muir's various social gatherings. Willa however - who was 'pretty tough with Gavin'[137] - was often irritated on these occasions by his improvised jazz versions of familiar classical pieces and she resented his experimental propensity for 'clowning Beethoven.'[138]

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[132] Willa Muir in a letter to Mary Mason. St Andrews, 9th October 1941.
[133] Glen Pride in a letter to Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 20th April 1995.
[134] Glen Pride in a letter to Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 20th April 1995.
[135] Douglas P Hamilton in a letter to Kirsty Allen. Strathkinness, 31st May 1995.
[136] The St Andrews Citizen. 18th July 1942.
[137] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.

His academic abilities also developed and flourished and he was soon a willing and intelligent pupil with an extraordinary gift for maths. A Madras contemporary remembers 'competing for the 'Mental Arithmetic Prize ("The Knife" as it was known) and Gavin (who won it) babbling continuously all the way through it.'[139]

Willa was proud of Gavin's academic and musical success; but she remained still vociferously defensive and 'over-protective'[140] of his emotional and social vulnerablity. She or Edwin were reliably present at the school gates at four o'clock and this daily reunion was characterised by a very un-Scottish effusiveness which greatly amused his classmates; Edwin's unconventionally visible affection apparently invoked the helpless giggles of the watching schoolboy audience. Gavin - in his oblivious and self-absorbed world - was perhaps unaware of the embarrassment potential of these parental peculiarities and he invariably manifested a devoted attachment to his father. 'He really loved Edwin and would often come and sit on his knee. There was, however, a kind of definite and unpleasant tension between Gavin and his mother.'[141] But one of Gavin's classmates denies this suggestion of a latent and culpable antipathy and suggests instead that 'any divorce between Willa and Gavin existed purely because Gavin couldn't be got through to. She was always anxious about him and would suddenly break a conversation in order to talk about him. She was a Mother all the time I knew her.'[142]

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[138] Willa Muir quoted by Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.
[139] Glen Pride in a letter to Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 20th April 1995.
[140] Glen Pride in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 15th May 1995.
[141] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.
[142] David Forrester in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 5th June 1995.

But as Gavin finally settled at Madras negotiations were afoot for another major Muir upheaval which would re-uproot him. Edwin, under the auspices of the British Council in Edinburgh, had given a highly successful lecture on English Literature to a group of Polish Officers in the late autumn of 1941. 'That winter, Harvey Wood [the British Council Representative] was organising International Houses in Edinburgh - a Polish House, a Czechoslovak House, a French House, later an American House - where servicemen and refugees from those countries could meet each other and the people of Edinburgh.'[143] Lumir Soukup claimed that 'Harry was a first class organiser and because he was both cultured - the highest accolade I can bestow - (as is clear from his book "The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson") and a shrewd judge of his fellow human beings, he chose the right staff, people he could trust and to whom he could delegate the various jobs. The National Houses grew in number and in stature. There soon arose an urgent need for someone to co-ordinate their cultural activities, so that they would supplement each other rather than compete. After one of our usual monthly meetings, Harry told me that he had found just such a person. He had proposed to London that Edwin Muir should come and head the committee which proposed and co-ordinated the cultural programmes of the different Houses, and that he was to arrive in a few days. I pleaded, truthfully, ignorance. Harry confided that there was some hesitation in London; Edwin Muir was a socialist, not a member of the Labour Party but by conviction, as could be deduced from his books; but that he had finally been appointed, although in a local and temporary capacity. As an after-thought he mentioned that Edwin Muir was a poet and considerably older than myself. That cheered me: no stuffy career civil servant or professional Kulturträger.'[144]

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[143] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p189)

The appointment offered the Muirs an eagerly sought opportunity of release from the St Andrews nightmare. Edwin - with Willa's approbation and encouragement - enthusiastically embraced this new adventure and, 'in March 1942, . . . he began his eight years association with the Council.'[145]

He initially spent only the weekdays in Edinburgh, and returned to St Andrews and his family for abbreviated weekend visits: '"Home for the weekend" only means from Saturday at four until Monday morning at eight.'[146] Separation was an agony to which neither Willa nor Edwin were amenable and Edwin passed his scant free hours in a desperate quest for suitable accommodation in which the family could be re-united. Lumir and Catriona Soukup (with whom Edwin shared his British Council work in Edinburgh) were struck, when they first met him, by the patent sense of disorientation and dislocation which Willa's absence occasioned in him. 'He talked of Willa with tenderness and love, and when he told us about her his blue-grey eyes seemed to focus not on us but on her, as if she were with us in the room. I often think about that first evening, such a vivid memory, how it was obvious that he and Willa needed to be together, how much he loved her and wanted her to share our evening. His emotion was in no way embarrassing; though we had known each other for only a few hours I think we recognised that we were kindred spirits, and that we shared the same values.'[147]

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[144] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.
[145] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p189-90)
[146] Willa Muir in a letter to Ethel Ross. St Andrews, 6th May 1942.
[147] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

The quest for a family home finally prospered and an 'empty flat was finally secured, on the second floor of a terraced house, bow-windowed like its neighbours. There were exactly similar bow-windows all along the opposite side of the street, as if two rows of large parrot cages fronted each other. It was no use repining; we were lucky to have a flat at all.'[148] Willa, whose physical health was still infinitely fragile, was filled with dread and horror at the prospect of packing, removal and upheaval; but she was sustained by the desperate need for a final and resolute closure to the miserable St Andrews chapter. Gavin was strenuously and vocally loathe to leave both Madras and 'his beloved home town'[149] of St Andrews; he kicked 'strongly against going, but he'll have to adapt himself.'[150]

His objections were rendered purely academic by the end of June. His name was removed from the school roll; and the house at Queens Gardens was stripped and readied for abandonment. Edwin made only a brief sortie from Edinburgh in order to orchestrate and supervise the 'flitting'[151] and to say a last farewell to the few friends who had lightened the burden of their lives throughout the gloom and despair of their seven long St Andrews years.

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[148] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p209)
[149] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p212)
[150] Willa Muir in a letter to Ethel Ross. St Andrews, 6th May 1942.
[151] Edwin Muir in a letter to Dover Wilson. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p134)

CHAPTER X

ESCAPE: EDINBURGH. 1942-1945.

The bustle and the busyness of Edinburgh life contrasted completely with the catatonic quiet of St Andrews; and Willa was inflicted with a disconcerting and disabling nervousness. Her recent months of ill-health and isolation had levelled a profound blow to her confidence and she had developed an agoraphobic fear of unfamiliar faces and places.

Edwin could sympathise: he had experienced a similar sense of unsettled dislocation and bewilderment during his earlier induction into this new world and could 'still remember my first day in the Edinburgh office. As I had to know all the people I would be dealing with, Harvey-Wood had arranged for a number of them to come, and the day passed in a continuous sequence of introductions and discussions. During the past years my wife and I had seen only a few people; now in a day I met more of them than I had done in a twelvemonth; and when I returned to my lodgings in the evening I went up to my room and did not stir from it again for fear of meeting someone else.'[1] But he gradually became re-accustomed to this hectic human contact and began to love the diversity and hectic activity of the job. A new sense of productivity and purpose suffused his life and he was relieved to feel that he could, at last, make his own contribution to the war-effort. 'My work is arranging for lectures and concerts to the foreign population here, Poles, Czechs and others, and bringing them in intelligent relations with our own people. It is work well worth doing, and should have a permanent effect surviving the war - at least I hope so. It means for me quite a different kind of life from the one I have been used to; I meet lots of different people every day, and move about, and take chairs at meetings, and so on: it is probably very good for me as well as being good in itself.'[2] Each new day offered a new set of challenges and chores which required Edwin to explore the furthest reaches of his organisational and artistic talents. 'He lectured a good deal himself, mainly on poetry; he wrote scripts for dramatic entertainments; got many distinguished poets, other writers and scholars to lecture at the Houses; arranged concerts; and by his presence contributed to the gaiety and friendliness of these Houses, adding for those able to hear it the note of intellectual distinction. The impetus given to the cultural life of Edinburgh in those days by the Council and the presence of so many Europeans led on after the War to the starting of the Edinburgh Festival, of which Harvey Wood was one of the principal inspirers.'[3]

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[1] Edwin Muir. Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p245)

The impact of Edwin's influence on the activities of the Council was rapid, and his imaginative and original contributions were received with universal enthusiasm. 'The standard and scope of the cultural activities in the different National Houses changed very quickly with Edwin Muir's arrival, which marked the end of exclusivity and of parochialism, even though local contributions were not to be neglected.'[4] 'As Harvey Wood says: "Most people thought (and I did too) that he was far too good for us and for the work he was doing."'[5]

But Edwin was genuinely appreciative of the opportunities and experiences which came with the job; this haven of European cosmopolitanism was a milieu in which he was contented and at ease. He relished the diversities, eccentricities and peccadilloes which differentiated the National Houses and was intrigued by the cultural contrast in atmosphere and social dynamics. 'Polish House, he told me was the liveliest in discussion; it was well supplied with senior army officers each of whom felt himself completely qualified to lay down the law on music, art, literature or architecture. The Free French were inclined to be quarrelsome, but what struck Edwin most strongly about their committee was its preoccupation with personal prestige. A Belgian merchant, a Baron feeling that he ought to be the Big Shot because of his title, was harassed by the rival claims of a Holy Roman Countess, who said she had inherited her title from an aunt, and had, moreover, the 'particule', a *de* in her name. At loggerheads about everything else, the Baron and the Countess combined to snub the Treasurer, who was a commoner, a simple M. Gateau, the most likeable and dependable of men, according to Edwin. By way of squashing M. Gateau the titled notables would spend hours tracking down alleged missing halfpence in the House laundry accounts, and Edwin used to come home from Free French meetings torn between high mirth and exasperation. The Norwegians were the quietest and easiest to get on with, although the Mayor of Hammerfest told Edwin that every winter, in the long Arctic darkness, his citizens became very litigious and brought law-suits against each other for trivial causes. But he knew that when spring came they would feel differently, and so always procrastinated and put off law-suits until the spring thawed everything out, people, law-suits and all. Edwin loved Czech House best, mainly because of the delightful man in charge of it, Lumír Soukup'.[6]

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[2] Edwin Muir in a letter to Mary and Arthur Mason. Edinburgh, 9th April 1942.
[3] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p190)
[4] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.
[5] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p190)

Czech House, in fact, owed its very existence to the energy, enthusiasm, commitment and determination of the idealist young Czechoslovakian who now ran it. Lumír Soukup had been studying for a Ph.D. in theology at the

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[6] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p209-10)

University of Edinburgh when the outbreak of war had forced him into indefinite exile in Scotland. He had immediately volunteered for military service but had been rejected on medical grounds and - although the Ministry of Information and the Scottish Army High Command employed him regularly for linguistic and intelligence purposes - he nevertheless felt that he was failing in his duty of service to both his native and his adopted country. The setting-up of a Czech House along the lines of the already established National Houses seemed to offer the perfect antidote to this fever of futility and frustration; and he eagerly accepted the offer of a large and empty house which the Church of Scotland owned. He was sustained by a naive optimism about the feeble sum of money in his bank account and 'was convinced that, if I could run it for a few months, somehow, somewhere help would be forthcoming. So number 34 Lauder Road, Edinburgh, became not only a cultural centre, but also a place, unique among all the other national Houses, where Czechoslovak soldiers and airmen (and occasionally, if there was room, those of other nationalities) could spend their leaves and have a roof over their heads, at a fraction of the price they would have had to pay elsewhere.'[7]

It was initially a very informal and haphazard operation which relied heavily upon the unmitigated goodwill and assistance of a limited circle of friends and wellwishers. 'I started the House with the help of a Czech girl as cook and housekeeper, and a Scottish girl who was engaged to a Czech officer. At the beginning we all shared any work that had to be done. They knew that I could not pay them apart from their keep, and it was only later that they received a small, nominal salary. They too, took the job as their contribution to the "War effort". Keeping the House clean and making beds daily, washing the linen and the dishes, was no small undertaking. But soon neighbours came in to help and there were unknown numbers of Scottish friends who cheerfully shared in the dull and routine housework, all of whom I remember with gratitude.'[8]

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[7] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

Assistance - in the form of interest and support - was also offered by Professor Sir Herbert Grierson (the father of Flora Grierson with whom the Muirs had established a friendship during their Hampstead days) and the Very Reverend Principal David Cairns. Lumír regularly and readily sought the sage advice and wisdom of these two venerable and eminent Scottish academics and greatly appreciated their active involvement in the routine running of the House. Sir Herbert was, in fact, the catalyst by which the mutually advantageous union between Lumír and the British Council was ultimately forged.

> [H]e told me he had mentioned the work carried out [in Czech House] to Mr H. Harvey Wood, the British Council Representative in Scotland, and told me to get in touch with him. I telephoned Mr. Harvey Wood and invited him to come and see for himself. . . .
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> [He] and his secretary Mrs Elizabeth Osman, who became Harry and Elizabeth only a few weeks later, were certainly surprised the day they came to see the house. I was unknown to them and they to me. . . .
>
> The House had great potential. . . . Five bedrooms and two dormitories, all with beds, were used as sleeping accommodation for thirty soldiers and airmen. The dining room downstairs was also a recreation room for reading, listening to records or playing games; members of the armed forces on leave could relax, be by

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[8] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

> themselves or meet their new Scottish friends. The very large drawing room upstairs, with a first class piano, was used as a lecture room and for concerts and exhibitions. This, naturally, was of most interest to the two representatives of the British Council. They must have been impressed and satisfied, because there and then Harry explained the role the British Council played in the other National Houses, about which I was still largely ignorant. And then it was my turn to be surprised when he promised to ask his head office for financial help - to provide newspapers, books and records, perhaps a record player to replace the portable gramophone (it arrived in a month), fees for lecturers and artists to be chosen by the British Council and myself (as "warden" - I think it was the only time he addressed me thus), and money to advertise the meetings in the newspapers, which I certainly could not have so frequently afforded, as well as a British Council Secretary to help me and at the same time liaise with his office. And thus help came long before my initial funds and hope were exhausted, and went much further than I had ever dared to dream. They did not believe that till then I had run the House on a monthly budget which would not have covered a single day of their expenses.[9]

Willa's first evening venture out of the security of her own home was to a lecture at Edwin's beloved Czech House. She was still physically weak and uncertain about the extent of her stamina. Even the simplest expedition demanded an almost unsustainable expense of nervous and emotional energy; and she dreaded the exhaustion which inevitably resulted from any social engagement. The road back into normality demanded all her energy and she travelled slowly with small and painful steps. It was many months before she was 'able to go out into the evening black-out and take a penny tram to Czech House all by myself.'[10] But the International Houses - and Czech House in particular - offered a cheerful and cosmopolitan home-from-home in which she could feel welcome and at ease; and the warm and genuine kindliness of Lumír Soukup and of Catriona, his 'delightful'[11] Scottish girlfriend, rapidly enveloped her and restored a little of her bruised confidence.

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[9] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

This first recuperative outing also branded an indelible mark in the memories of Lumír and Catriona. They had eagerly anticipated this encounter with the woman about whom they had heard so much from Edwin; and they were immediately struck by the image of unity and 'belonging' which the re-united couple presented. Catriona could clearly 'remember the first time I saw them together. . . . [Q]uite a lot of people had come to a lecture and we were talking and laughing in the hall, when suddenly I noticed two people standing just outside, watching us. I knew one of them, Edwin. He had his hand on the elbow of a white-haired lady who looked older and who was leaning on a stick. I noticed especially, their expressions. He looked happy, proprietorial; she looked both alert and slightly on guard, and amused. They seemed fragile, standing apart from the others and watching. When I approached to bring them into the house: "Don't tell me, Edwin", she said, "this must be Catriona. Now let me pick out Lumír". Sure enough she did, . . . When one saw them together for the first time, the impression one got was of Edwin's gentleness and vulnerability and of Willa's strength, in spite of her physical infirmity. Only later did one realise that almost the opposite was true.'[12]

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[10] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p210)
[11] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p231).
[12] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

It was the beginning of an unlikely, enduring and enriching friendship which survived the vicissitudes of their respective lives; and which ultimately outlived both Edwin and Willa. And yet the relationship seemed initially to be foredoomed by the presence of some inauspicious and malignant star. An atmosphere of tentative and awkward mistrust poisoned the harmony of their first tea-table gathering and they were all aware of an 'undefined undercurrent of unease, . . . Lumír recalled that whenever he started to talk about Edwin's book on John Knox, there had been a certain hesitation on Edwin's part. And we came to the conclusion that someone had talked to them about our backgrounds. (Lumír a graduate of theology and I, a minister's daughter and descendant of generations of ministers which, we thought, might have acccounted for Willa's slightly aloof manner. They told us later that somebody had indeed told them all this, and they were frightened of offending us.)'[13]

Days and discussions gradually dissolved the last remnants of these misperceptions and mistrusts; and an increasing intimacy and fondness developed. Absolute openness and ease soon informed their conversations, and they regularly shared their innermost thoughts and feelings about life, literature and the troubles of the world. The friendship was further cemented by their mutual love of Czechoslovakia and of Prague in particular. Catriona 'used to go to see Willa in the afternoons. I knew she would be in because we both thought walking was a vastly overestimated and completely unnecessary activity. . . . I told her that I read just about every book on Czechoslovakia that I could lay my hands on. She looked at me silently for a long time and obviously liked the way I felt towards my adopted country. I had often listened to Czechs talking about "home" but Willa was the first

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[13] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

English speaker who described Prague and the Czech countryside to me with a vividness that I still remember. Her memories were all happy ones.'[14]

But Lumír and Catriona were not the only friends with whom Edwin and Willa rapidly established an intimacy. Edinburgh seemed to offer a wealth of kindred spirits and congenial companions: the Muirs were soon integrated into a pleasant round of social activity. Often (and particularly in the months immediately following their arrival) they chose to entertain in their own 'lovely house'[15]; Willa remained nervous about venturing out into the unfamiliar and blacked-out streets of the capital. Morley Jamieson remembers the house as a 'cultural Piccadilly Circus. We met many Orcadians, Stanley Cursitor, Robert Kemp and Eric Linklater among them, but only Edwin kept his Orcadian accent. Visitors fell into two categories: the serious and the jocular; no doubt the professors like Grierson and Alexander Gray could also be jocular but it might have been difficult to crack a joke with Norman Kemp Smith or Edmund Whittaker. Nigel McIsaac the painter and J.T.R. Ritchie, film-maker, poet and author of The Singing Street and The Golden City, were visitors.'[16] Neil Gunn, William Montgomery, Joe Chiari, Sorley Maclean (who had been invalided out of the army after sustaining serious wounds in both feet at the Battle of El Alemein[17]), and Douglas Young (who had recently been released from prison after having served his sentence for conscientious objection) were also regular visitors and ready purveyors of literary, social and personal anecdotage.

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[14] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.
[15] David Forrester in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 5th June 1995.
[16] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)
[17] Hugh Macdiarmid in a letter to Douglas Young. In The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid. Ed. Alan Bold. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984.

The main figure of noticeable absence amongst this veritable coterie of the Scottish literati was Sydney Smith. He shared MacDiarmid's resentful dislike of Edwin and was vehement and vocal in his opposition to Edwin's opinion of the validity of the Scots language as a literary medium. There was, however, only one occasion on which Sydney's niggling dislike exploded into a vitriolic display of open and very public antipathy. It was 'at a party in Lauder Road where the wine was flowing rather freely. [Morley Jamieson] was surprised to see Sydney but when was there ever a party that Sydney was not likely to appear at? As always, he proceeded to get more and more buoyant and even outrageous. He was seated between Willa and myself; at one point Willa made some general remark and Sydney threw back his head and laughed so loudly that the whole room went quiet. Then, still sniggering, he gave Willa a friendly push and said loudly, 'How can you - a staid old-fashioned body like you - know anything about it?' Whatever it was, the effect of Sydney's words was electric. I could see from Willa's face that she took it ill. The barb 'old' I never expected to hear addressed publicly to Willa and he compounded it by saying, 'an old grey-haired wummin like you."[18]

This cruel and unnecessary attack probably presented a potentially daunting set-back to the slow process of recovery in which Willa was laboriously engaged. But her confidence and her health did gradually return, and she resumed the simple tasks and chores of daily life. Wartime created unusual difficulties and complications, and 'with rationing and shortage of money, the domestic side of life at Blantyre Terrace initially at least was difficult.'[19] Willa soon became 'accustomed to standing in queues at the grocer's, the fish-shop, and the butcher's, bringing home dried egg and Iceland cod and small rations of meat. . . . After some months, as I became a familiar figure in the queues, I got occasional extras from under the counter, but by the end of the war I never wanted to see dried egg or cod again.'[20] But one illicit substance was routinely smuggled into the house - for medicinal purposes! Willa's residual depression and ill-health seemed to be alleviated only by recourse to 'a good malt whisky. Of course such a thing was vitually unattainable but Mrs Douglas at the American consulate was able to secure a bottle of malt whisky. Flora and I [Morley Jamieson] were sent down to Regent Terrace for a bottle of this elixir and I carried it home under my coat as if it were the Holy Grail.'[21]

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[18] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)

[19] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)

No amount of ill-health could prevent Willa from attending almost all of the British Council lectures - particularly those in which Edwin was involved. Lumír recalls that 'we made it a rule that one of us would meet her, sometimes at the tramstop when she telephoned beforehand, and take her upstairs where a comfortable chair was reserved in a corner, allowing a little more room for her legs.'[22]

Edwin persuaded various London friends and acquaintances - including T.S. Eliot - to travel north and lecture in the International Houses; and these lectures - which attracted large and varied audiences - were soon recognised as a central feature of the British Council's wartime work in Edinburgh. Morley Jamieson remembered Eliot as a 'rather sad but kind and considerate'[23] man; but Lumír Soukup received Eliot's visit with less anodyne respect.

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[20] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p210)

[21] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)

[22] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

[23] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)

> "Is the accountant in Edwin blossoming out into the City? Just look at the stock-broker he's with" I asked Willa, when I saw a gentleman in a black jacket, silver tie, striped trousers, bowler hat, carrying a rolled-up umbrella, walking beside Edwin towards the entrance to Czechoslovak House. Willa hushed me, and whispered that it was T.S. Eliot.
>
> His delivery perfectly matched his dress. He read his paper in a monotonous, emotionless voice, as if it were a balance sheet or a financial report to a shareholders' meeting, never lifting his eyes from his notes as though afraid of making a mistake, . . . [T]he speaker did not seek his audience's approval, his statement was subject to no vote, he made no attempt to make any contact with his audience. . . . [M]y impression was that he thought that his readers were lucky to be there, and should feel very honoured to be admitted to his presence.[24]

Stephen Spender - a later speaker and a close personal friend whom Edwin was delighted to be able to entertain in Edinburgh - inspired entirely different emotions in his audience. His lecture communicated the congenial aspect of the London literati and won him the instant affection and respect of his auditors.

> His jacket and trousers were not carefully pressed, but baggy, of no special cut. His hair was unruly . . . - it seemed not to have been cut or groomed for months. His body was in constant movement, involved in the debate, arms and hands emphasising his words, completely unlike Eliot's emotionless mask, the facial

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[24] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

> muscles immobilised as if in a permanent cramp and his still hands and statue-like body.
>
> Words stopped being just a combination of letters which had certain meanings, expressing different ideas and moods, and which can subsequently be dissected and classified under different headings for further academic research, or for further lectures. The dead letters and words became alive, their ideas and moods excited not only the speaker but also his audience. His lecture was not written down, he was thinking aloud, and one could feel his listeners inwardly arguing with his statements, some of which he himself discarded with an infectious laugh. There was a sense of eagerness and vitality, an absence of pomposity, and a willingness to listen as well as to talk.[25]

Spender also impressed Morley Jamieson, who was struck by the air of spiritual detachment in the poet's demeanour. 'I remember him as a lofty sycamore tree with hardly any apparent roots. He could not be described as a sunny personality but he had a nordic appearance and would enter a room gazing way above the heads of the people, which gave him the appearance of a starry-eyed idealistic poet, or, as if he were on a cloud much above everyone else.'[26]

The International Houses played host on other occasions to such intellectual and artistic luminaries as John Betjemen, Hugh Kingsmill, Alexander Gray and F.G. Scott. Helen Cruickshank was present at the evening meeting in Polish House at which F.G. Scott spoke:

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[25] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.
[26] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)

> with musical illustrations of his own song compositions. Edwin introduced him as "the greatest song writer in Europe".
>
> Meeting Edwin accidentally on the top of a tram next day, during my lunch hour, I told him he had been exaggerating.
>
> . . . I had myself told Scott that his partisan friends were doing him more harm that good by their wrong psychological propaganda on his behalf and he seemed a little alarmed at this reading of the situation.
>
> So when the same extravagant praise was voiced by Edwin who had seemed to me to be the soul of integrity as a critic, I had to express my disapproval. . . .
>
> To come back to the top of that tram, Edwin confessed that Scott had "been so undervalued in Scotland that I felt I had to give him a special boost."[27]

Edwin was also fortunate in having various 'distinguished Europeans to hand, such as Raymond Aron. Louis Aragon turned up; he was too arrogant for our liking; but Paul Eluard was a delight. Neither Edwin nor I could ever quite understand how such a gentle, sensitive poet could be a Communist. Our most amusing visitor was Max-Pol Fouchet, who did not come to lecture; he had escaped from Algeria with only one ragged shirt to his back and no money at all. Madeleine Gill, whose husband lectured in French at the University, took him in charge; she had been born in Oran and was an old friend of his. The British Council generously provided money to buy Max-Pol a few garments, but he had his own ideas of what he wanted; he spent nearly all of it on tartan ties and waistcoats, a Scottish bonnet, flamboyant oddments from Princes Street souvenir shops, with which he was exuberantly pleased. War or no war, he was like a school-boy on holiday.'[28]

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[27] Helen Cruickshank. Octobiography. Montrose: The Standard Press, 1976. (p119)

The various International Houses also offered evenings of informal entertainment and hospitality, at which Willa and Edwin could relax and enjoy the cosmopolitan buzz of European voices. They integrated easily into the ethos of these refugee communities and were able - undemonstratively and empathetically - to share in the laughter and the fears of their new companions. 'All sorts of things were discussed in the friendly atmosphere of the houses: the war, the future of Europe, on which our hopes were beginning to fix themselves, the habits and traditions of different lands. The terrible memories which the refugees brought with them became more distant and bearable as they fell into the mould of a story, often repeated.'[29] Edwin would occasionally sing 'in a pleasant tenor voice ("almost in tune" one friend tells me, but that may be unfair) at evening entertainments in the International Houses';[30] while Willa indulged in various multi-lingual conversational fandangos.

Life in the Muir household meanwhile resumed the rhythm of happy normality which had been dissipated by the bleak despair of the St Andrews years. Gavin attended George Watson's Boys College and, although he was manifesting the early symptoms of the deafness which was to plague him throughout his life and 'which was a special handicap to one who showed great promise as a musician,'[31] he was reasonably settled, happy and academically successful - particularly in music and maths.[32]

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[28] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p211)
[29] Edwin Muir. Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p245)
[30] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p193)
[31] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p194)
[32] George Watson's Boys College. Register of Marks. 1944. In George Watson's College archive, Edinburgh.

Edwin was also quietly contented and 'began again to radiate that good-will which in the years to come grew so noticeable.'[33] 'These were his happiest years in Scotland; Edinburgh was more than usually full of life, and he was at the centre of it. He was working with congenial people, had many friends and friendly acquaintances, and was modestly glad to be doing a useful job in wartime like everybody else.'[34] He continued to review regularly for The Listener and The Scotsman and to demonstrate his gentle and undemonstrative broadcasting talents for the BBC. He also relearned the pleasures of city life and revelled in the flood of lectures and concerts which were now available to him. And he often spent his Saturday afternoons on the terraces at Hearts Football Club. The sordid desperation and frustration of the St Andrews era became a realm of painful memories from which he slowly reemerged into the fullness of emotional warmth and intellectual satisfaction. This new contentment of mind was also conducive to creativity: he discovered that 'sitting on the top deck of a tram in rapid motion set his unconscious moving too, so that the lines and snatches of the poems began to come up. When the tram journey stopped, the poem stopped.'[35] 'Or this might happen in company, and he would withdraw right out of conversation, and Mrs Muir would nudge her neighbour and say "birth is coming".'[36]

This perceptible fading of the family storm clouds coincidentally relieved Willa of some of the weight of guilt and self-loathing with which she had been insupportably burdened. She recognised Edwin's poetic receptivity as a confirmation of his spiritual healing; and she rejoiced in his renewed wholeness and inner contentment. Her own happiness was always entirely dictated and determined by the state of Edwin's mood; and she was therefore consciously and continually devoted to the sustenance and protection of his heart, soul and mind. This reflexive defensiveness often resembled an attack; and sometimes earned her enemies.

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[33] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p209)
[34] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p190)
[35] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p210)
[36] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p191)

> [W]hen she stepped into the ring to prevent [Edwin] being hurt, it was not so much that she wanted a fight, but rather that one was thrust on her. Edwin achieved resilience and courted timidity, which in turn led him to its companion; shyness. Willa, on the other hand, described herself, correctly, as a 'soft-centred creature' and had to overcome this by aggresivity [sic], but it remained a cultivated and conscious effort. I cannot describe their relationship better than by quoting from her letter: 'Edwin was a soft-shell crab and I was his carapace.'
>
> Edwin expected Willa to defend him, he was happy to let her put herself between him and his adversary. After some offensive remark he would look across at Willa, the expected smile would appear on his face, and one could see that he was looking forward to relishing her reply, as was everybody else, except, perhaps, the unsuspecting offender. No-one was ever disappointed, because Willa never repeated herself, her irony was always fresh. It was sometimes uncanny how she could sense enmity before anybody else even realised that an attack on Edwin was imminent.
>
> The litmus test for Willa's reactions fell into three categories: firstly unfounded criticism of Edwin, then male chauvinism, as a close second. Any form of showing off or pretentiousness was a distant third. Edwin would suppress his comments. Willa could not, . . .

> A lot of people made all sorts of critical remarks about her, and when we repeated them, they usually amused her, although not always. But on the whole they were silly, or betrayed a complete misunderstanding of her words. On the other hand there were times when her reaction to certain words or opinions were more acerbic than perhaps was called for.
>
> If a shield was needed, it was preceded by several rapid pulls on a cigarette, which was always in a longish black holder - into which she first stuffed a small plug of cotton wool - "my filter" - extracted from a large wad kept in the handbag that accompanied her everywhere. . . .
>
> In the unlikely event that a cigarette was not to hand, she would clear her throat and with her capable hands would begin to prepare one, as if by pausing she gave her opponent a chance to retract. Then she would raise her head, lean forward, turn her face towards the person she was going to address, one puff, and then taking the cigarette-holder from her sardonically smiling lips, she would begin talking in her East Coast lilt. No rudeness, but no lack of directness either.[37]

Edwin obviously appreciated and desired her protection as readily as she offered it. His love for her was as intense and absolute - although not perhaps as demonstrative nor as easily communicated - as her love for him; her life-threatening illness in St Andrews had suddenly rendered him exquisitely aware of the debt of love and gratitude which he owed her. The Narrow Place - which appeared in 1943 and which contained the poetic products of the aftermath of those lonely days in which he seemed so dangerously close to losing his beloved wife - includes some love poems for Willa.

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[37] Lumir and Catriona Soukup in an unpublished critical biography of Edwin and Willa Muir.

Peter Butter suggests that it is 'remarkable, though characteristic of him, that his first love poems . . . should have been written at over fifty and after more than twenty years of marriage. Harvest fields were his favourite sight, and he was the poet of things ripened by time, yet exempt from time. In love he experienced a triumph over time, but one which could happen only in time; love was born "Here in a time and place."'[38] Willa was deeply moved by this very public poetic affirmation of an enduring love-affair which the passing years had only served to deepen. She was also wryly amused when, 'a critic called Frederick Grubb upbraided [Edwin] for writing these poems to some insubstantial idealized girl: in fact they were written to an actual, middle-aged, much harassed wife. One of them, 'The Confirmation', which ended with the approving words:

> But like yourself, as they were meant to be.

sent me privately into a passion of tears, because I knew too well that I was only a botched version of what I was meant to be. Edwin published in all eight love poems to me. When he died I would have given every one of them to have him back, but I am more than glad now for these witnesses to True Love.'[39]

This helpless sense of a wasted self and an unfulfilled existence haunted her until her death; it was never satisfactorily resolved within her own heart or mind. But there *was* a ready solution to her domestic troubles as a 'much harassed wife.' In February 1943, the Muirs asked Morley and Flora Jamieson 'to live with them at Blantyre Terrace and thus began a very happy relationship.'[40] Willa readily relinquished all responsibility for the running of the house into Flora's hands and relaxed in the knowledge that she was at last being looked after. She also mustered the time and energy required to write an article which described a flourishing matriarchy in an imagined ancient land and which appeared in The New Alliance under the title 'Flea Circuses'.

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[38] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p203-4)
[39] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p210-11)

Morley Jamieson remembers 8 Blantyre Terrace as 'a liberal household: and one of the things I found a little odd at the time was that Gavin, their son, then about thirteen or fourteen, addressed them as 'Edwin' and 'Willa'. There were no locked doors in the house and one day in the course of household chores, Flora went into their bedroom to find them both in bed on top of the bedclothes. Edwin was lying on top of Willa and both were fully dressed. Flora did not wait for any reaction but later Willa, with her usual candour, told her that they often did this when they were tired or anxious, and that it had the effect of releasing tension and recharging their emotional batteries.'[41]

Vague eccentricity and ready laughter were apparently endemic in this little community at 8 Blantyre Terrace. On one occasion, Neil Gunn 'had just negotiated a lucrative contract with the film company for The Silver Darlings and had taken [Willa and Edwin] out for drinks and they came back at about half past six and we could hear them coming up the stair laughing and there may have been a snatch of song. Willa came into the kitchen where Flora was preparing dinner. Willa still had her coat on and her hat was rakishly over one eye, and said to Flora, 'Have you put the rice in the pot?' Flora said no, she had not, yet. Willa then took the rice tin from the dresser and threw several handfuls of rice in the general direction of the pot on the stove with positive abandon. The rice rattled everywhere like hailstones on a tin roof. Willa with an exaggerated dignity left the kitchen to join the men who were already in the sitting room.'[42]

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[40] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)

[41] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)

But life at Blantyre Terrace was not without its troubles. The ancient spectres of physical and spiritual ill-health still periodically plagued the Muirs and they were often weary and dispirited. In March 1944, Edwin suspected a residual murmer in his heart; but was reluctant to seek a doctor's help for fear of a doubtful prognosis. His anxiety proved unfounded: when he eventually sought medical advice he was informed that his heart 'was practically recovered. What has been bothering me is anaemia; I have only 70% of the blood I should have'.[43] But his hypochondria was perhaps merely symptomatic of the deeper terror which troubled his soul. His recently-discovered faith had forced him to consider his mortality and to question the meaning and value of human existence as a mere precursor to the promised Christian afterlife. He told Stephen Spender in the spring of 1944 that he had 'been going through all sorts of crises myself, which have been unpleasant and good for me, and have taken me uncomfortably near the kind of rejection of life for eternal ends which some people call religion. I'm glad I've got over it, though glad I've seen it and realised that I don't like it or want it at all, and would not have it at any price. It's very late for me to come to such a conclusion, and it may not seem a remarkable one in any way to you: I don't think it is myself: but our crises often seem to be unnecessary in a sense, or only necessary so that they may prove they are unnecessary. . . .'[44] Willa probably bore the emotional brunt of these various doubts and uncertainties.

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[42] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)
[43] Edwin Muir in a letter to Stephen Spender. In Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p194)

And in the wider world, the 'war rumbled on, the sirens screamed, the searchlights based near us on Corstorphine Hill criss-crossed the skies every night. The Spitfires rushed out over the North Sea from Turnhouse Aerodrome, a couple of miles away.'[45]

The birth of 1945 heralded a new national optimism and a vision of the peace which could exist beyond the war. Talk of normality and reconciliation no longer seemed entirely ludicrous and the future was once more a prospect to be forged, not feared. 'As early as September 1944 Muir was writing to Spender that he would like to get to Europe as soon as the war was over.'[46] He and Willa had, since Munich, suffered from 'sore hearts about the fate of Czechoslovakia' and they were keen to make their own amends for this British betrayal of Czech trusts and hopes. So when the war finally ended, 'Edwin asked the British Council if they had any work he could do there. The Council told him that he could not be put on the pensionable list, since he was too old, but if he would accept that proviso, they would appoint him Director of the British Institute in Prague.'[47]

The prospect of a return as residents to the country which had won their hearts so many years before must have seemed like a heaven-sent opportunity. 'Prague to them was still the ideal city though they must have known that there would be a great many changes. For them it was a place of enlightenment and tolerance where people were gentle and loving and humorous; it was where poets and writers and artist were highly regarded and not looked upon as freaks.'[48] .The proposition also coincided perfectly with a natural hiatus in their family life: Gavin - 'now a tall good-looking young man of nearly eighteen'[49] - had finished at George Watson's in the summer of 1945 and would begin his University career at St Andrews in the autumn. The only apparent complication in the master plan was the dismantling of their wartime flat and the storage of their furniture. This 'proved to be an insuperable difficulty; every furniture repository in Edinburgh and neighbourhood was already crammed to bursting point. Our very good friend, Joseph Chiari, then the French vice-consul in Edinburgh, finally offered me an empty room in his house, and I was able to save as many pieces as could be packed into it.'[50]

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[44] Edwin Muir in a letter to Stephen Spender. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p136)
[45] Helen Cruickshank. Octobiography. Montrose: The Standard Press, 1976. (p119)
[46] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p208)
[47] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p211)

All was now organised, and Prague beckoned them onward into a new adventure. They were genuinely sorry to leave Edinburgh and the friends and colleagues with whom they had shared the trials of war; but they also eagerly awaited their departure details. It had been a happy and healing interlude; but the future promised new excitements and the Edinburgh era was duly consigned to the realm of pleasant memories.

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[48] Morley Jamieson. 'Recollections of Edwin and Willa Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp26-31)
[49] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p212)
[50] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p212)

CHAPTER XI

PRAGUE AND THE PUTSCH. 1945-1948.

Willa was left in Edinburgh to settle the fickle, final details of their wartime existence while Edwin set off for Prague across the lands of war-scarred Europe. He had been 'asked to take out a private car belonging to the British Council Representative'[1]; and this overland journey rapidly initiated him into the nightmare of routine devastation which six years of war had inflicted upon continental Europe. He was faced with scenes of bleak and abject hopelessness in Germany which could have emanated directly from the pre-war pens of Kafka and Broch; he struggled against the rising nausea of fascinated horror.

> [T]here seemed to be nothing unmarked by the war: the towns in ruins, the roads and fields scarred and deserted. It was like a country where the population had become homeless, and when we met occasional family groups on the roads they seemed to be on a pilgrimage from nowhere to nowhere. In the towns and far out in the countryside we met them pushing their belongings on hand-carts with a look of dull surprise on their faces. . . .
>
> In a few hours we reached Cologne and drove through the fine straight avenue leading into it from the north. All the houses were standing, and for a moment the sense of a settled peaceful life came back. It was an illusion. The spacious houses were roofless, the windows empty gaps. Presently the sour stench of the corpses buried under the ruins rose about us. The stench, the

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[1] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p247)

> unreal houses, the crumbling pavements, prepared us for a dead city; yet people were out as usual for their Sunday evening walk in their Sunday best, the children decked in chance remnants of finery. It was a lovely late summer evening, and the peaceful crowds in that vast graveyard were like the forerunners of a multitude risen in a private resurrection day to an unimagineable new life.[2]

It was a long and gruelling journey. Blighted lives were evident on every roadside and the relics of a dismembered civilisation greeted them forlornly in every town. It was a relief to arrive at last in Prague and to be able to seek refuge in the comfortable familiarity of half-remembered streets and buildings. But even this eagerly anticipated solace contrived only to engender additional unease in his already troubled mind. 'I spent an hour or two proving that I could find my way about, and recognizing houses and streets which I had forgotten. In some indefineable way they looked different from my memory of them, and by a detail here and there insisted on their individuality, which had been worn smooth in the process by which the mind helps to make everything more conformable to it. . . . During my first few weeks in Prague I felt I was in a strange place, and was teased by the fancy of another city, the same and yet not the same, whose streets I or someone very like me had walked many years before.'[3] The city disturbed and unsettled him. It was the first time in all his married life that he had been forced to cope alone with new and unfamiliar experiences; and he suffered from unashamed cravings for the security of Willa's loving, reassuring presence. He finally despatched a despairing 'S.O.S. . . . beseeching me to hurry for he needed me.'[4]

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[2] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p247-8)
[3] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p251)
[4] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p212)

These nervous anxieties were compounded by the unsolicited attentions of a certain female and he foresaw his wife's arrival as his refuge from this unwelcome (and probably entirely ingenuous) paramour! 'Unattached women on sighting Edwin were drawn to him, which I could well understand, sometimes tried to attach him by clutching and being possessive, of all things the easiest way to make him lose his equanimity. When the culprit was a member of his own staff whom he could not avoid and did not want to snub he grew nervy.'[5]

Willa was meanwhile impatiently ensconced in a Hampstead boarding house, trying to extract herself from the tangle of British Council bureaucracy in which she was embroiled. 'I went to British Council headquarters in a fairly impatient frame of mind. A pretty red-haired poppet in charge of transport took down my Hampstead address and telephone number; I assured her that I was ready to start at five minute's notice. Days went by and no message came from the Council; I got instead a telegram from Edwin asking if I were ill, since he had been to meet the plane on which my seat was booked but I was not there. A superior young man in the Council, admitting that the mistake was regrettable, pooh-poohed my insistence that I must have a flight at once by suggesting that my presence in Prague could not be urgently required. "Of course", he said, "we know that wives are useful socialleh."'[6]

But Willa knew that it was as his soulmate - and not his social accessory - that Edwin desperately needed her. He 'was beginning to feel nervy and sleep badly'[7] and she was increasingly fearful for his vulnerable emotional stability.

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[5] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[6] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p212)
[7] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p212)

The whims of the British Council now appeared to her as a luxury for which she could no longer afford to wait; it was necessary to take the initiative into her own hands. And so she descended upon Lumír Soukup (who was now a secretary at the Czech Embassy in London) and enlisted his assistance in this mission of mercy. She embarked on her first airborne voyage twenty-four hours later, and was Prague-bound at last.

She 'climbed happily into the converted Dakota, which carried eight passengers, sat down by a window and forgot to feel scared. We left the ground smoothly and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to be airborne: we flew low enough to have the irregular small fields of Kent, the white-streaked channel, the larger more geometrical enclosures of northern France spread out beneath us like a map easy to read, except that at first I could not tell whether round objects in the noon-day sun were humps or hollows, corn-stacks or shell craters.'[8] The terrain across which they travelled was peppered with hints of the carnage and destruction to which it had been subjected; but the aircraft's altitude protected her from most of the horrific images to which Edwin had been exposed. 'By the time we came to the Rhine, where broken bridges were sticking up out of the water like blackened teeth, the clear sky to the right of us had thickened into deep cloud and we coasted along beside these white cliffs of vapour like a pleasure-craft sailing down a river, while Europe flowed past underneath, a unity, as I felt it should be, interrupted by no artificially drawn frontiers. It was a fascinating journey, and like good journeys ended appropriately in a lovers' meeting. Edwin was at the airport.'[9]

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[8] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p213)
[9] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p213)

They were housed initially in 'uncomfortable, cold, noisy and expensive'[10] rooms in the Sroubek Hotel in Wenceslas Square. Prague was in the throes of an accommodation crisis in the aftermath of systematic Nazi property purges and appropriations. Various home-owning Jews had mysteriously 'disappeared' into concentration camps or exile and it was initially impossible for the authorities to determine whether their vacated houses were likely to be temporarily or eternally empty. The 'liberating' Red Army had exacerbated the confusion by their heavy-handed and undisciplined requisition of the city's limited accommodation.

The flat into which the Muirs eventually moved in the early spring of 1946 bore the trademarked scars of these various hostile occupations. It was situated in a 'quiet street which the Praguers called "Little Moscow", since the Russian Embassy stood at the far end of it, beside the gates of a wooded public park once known as "The Royal Hunting Forest" and now more soberly named The Place of Trees, while at intervals all the way to the tram-stop at the other end Russian offices and quarters had been established under the Embassy's wings. We did not mind being neighboured by Russians, for the flats, once cleaned, were pleasant although they had been occupied by very dirty Russian soldiers, perhaps some of the contingent from beyond the Urals. A glassed-in veranda in our flat had been used as a latrine, and the wall of the sitting room was pocked with bullet-holes.'[11] '[T]he flat had been occupied first by German officials and then by Russian officers, and we could tell where a portrait of Hitler had hung; it had been so often shot at that its outline was clearly picked out.'[12] 'But there was a green garden, shared by the three flats of the house, and besides our verandah a large walnut-tree, with a black squirrel living among the scented leaves.'[13]

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[10] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p255)
[11] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p224)
[12] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p256)

But many months of unsettled discomfort in the Sroubek Hotel were destined to pass before this comparative luxury was realised. Life in post-war Prague was a spartan experience. Food and fuel were in desperately short supply and even the most basic necessities were often virtually unobtainable. 'In the large ground-floor café of the Sroubek, where more than twenty years earlier we had drunk much coffee and read the newspapers, one could still order tea or coffee, but the "tea" was pink, tasting of raspberry drops, or brown, tasting of cinnamon, while the "coffee" was made from ground acorns. The British Embassy had been getting British Army rations sent by truck from Vienna, which they shared with the Council, so that we were sure of one good meal a day to begin with; presently a restaurant was taken over and we had the chance of two good meals a day.'[14]

Chaos and disorganisation hampered the painfully slow pursuit of semi-normality and a storm of irritating inefficiencies complicated every aspect of daily existence. The Muirs soon discovered that patient, good-humoured acceptance was the sole guarantee of personal sanity and the only conceivable remedy for the ills of this wounded society. Even the immaculately efficient machinery of the British Council was reduced to inconvenient and makeshift improvisations until the Czechoslovakian bureaucracy could muster adequate provision and accommodation for the Embassy and its staff. When Edwin arrived in the city in early September, a 'skeleton British Council staff was all that existed in Prague . . . and it was housed in a small flat in a side street. One room was reserved for the Council Representative and a tiny closet for his secretary; the rest of us had to do our work at a large table in the remaining room. An unoccupied palace had been promised to us in which the Institute could hold its classes. But the tug between East and West had already begun; excuse followed excuse, and the prospect of occupying the palace seemed remote. Meanwhile the staff increased as more people were sent out from England; our table became overcrowded; there was no place to keep our papers, and we had to clear them away every day when our luncheon was brought by car from the Embassy Mess.'[15] The situation was exacerbated by the inane incompetence and apathy of a British Council Representative who was more concerned with diplomatic socialising than with the tedious minutiae of official business. He 'had been educated at Eton, was pleased to know that his car was the biggest in Prague, and looked for banquets of honour to be given him all over the country.'[16] He 'took no interest in the way the Institute was run, probably considering it beneath his attention, teachers being small fry compared with Administrators. As far as the British Institute was concerned, he was a kind of King Log, and Edwin the poet, backed by Bill, the musician, had a free hand.'[17]

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[13] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p224)
[14] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p214)

Tensions and frustrations were inevitable in this fraught and claustrophobic environment. The Institute staff were painfully aware of the inadequacy of their cramped facilities, and the crowded quarters simmered with the explosive potential of a smoking powder keg. Only Edwin's placid presence averted an outburst. As those around him lost their heads, he 'remained quietly humorous amid the hurly-burly, and impressed everyone by his quiet sense of purpose.'[18]

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[15] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p256)
[16] Willa Muir. Belonging. Draft version. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[17] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p225)
[18] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p209)

The tension was mitigated too by the general affability and optimism of the Institute staff. Edwin appreciated their genuine commitment to the people of Prague and to the aims and ideals of the Institute; and he was grateful for their enthusiasm and talents.[19] The hiccups and the stresses of those early months, which could so easily have spawned animosity and division, served instead to draw them together into a close-knit and sympathetic team. '[T]ogether they had shared hardships, lack of food, lack of accommodation, working and eating together in one small room; together they had shared fears and hopes; . . . they were as good a staff as one could find anywhere.'[20] Edwin was particularly fortunate in his 'second-in command. Bill Allen was a good musician - he played the 'cello and the viola - and was already intimate with the best string quartets in the city; his ear for sounds made him a genius at teaching foreigners to speak English and he was especially skilled in transmitting English idioms to his classes. His open, friendly nature made friends for him everywhere.'[21]

Uncomplicated affection had been a rare commodity in Nazi-occupied Prague and the Czechs were initially suspicious of the simple friendship which Edwin and his Institute staff offered. Defensiveness and mistrust were the inevitable products of seven years of systematic Nazi degradation; mortification was apparently imbedded in the Czech psyche and proved to be resistant to change. 'They had been terribly humiliated by the occupying Germans, even in small matters, like being forbidden to enter their own city parks or sit on public benches, or to buy any plates, cups or glasses but the cheapest and plainest, decorated china or glass being reserved for the superior Germans. To them, we were the Victorious British, superior even to the Germans, who might perhaps look down our noses at them. We all had to show patience and direct, open friendliness until they could feel that we were not looking down our noses at them but meeting them on the level. This psychological barrier was even more difficult to penetrate than the language barrier that had baffled Edwin and me on our first visit to Prague in the early twenties.'[22]

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[19] Edwin Muir in a letter to William Montgomerie. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London; The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p141)

[20] Willa Muir. The Usurpers. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[21] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p223-4)

The gravity of the wounds inflicted upon the Czech people by their German occupiers was entirely outwith the experience or the imaginings of those who had never experienced such cruel and dehumanising treatment. The scars of individual suffering were initially too raw to bear discussion: a period of many months passed before Edwin and Willa were admitted into the nightmare world of Nazi atrocities. The truth was more horrific than they could ever have anticipated.

> The Germans had struck with instinctive sureness at the very heart of Czech life, at that invisible emanation, made up of beliefs and traditions, heroic legends, folk-lore, art, poetry, music and vernacular songs, which surrounds a people and sustains its sense of identity and self-respect, being all the more potent because it is invisible. . . . It was, for Nazis, a region they felt at home in, and they knew how to sap it in Czechoslovakia. Not only were the Czechs excluded from all higher education, they were told that the national history they had been taught was false to the core and in primary schools were given a simplified version prepared by German scholars, showing that any part played by Czechs in the history of Europe was the result of them following German leadership or example; it was rubbed into them that they were an

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[22] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p216)

> inferior mongrel race, born to be subordinates; that their legends were lies, their traditions fraudulent, their art and music merely derivative, their literature rubbish, their language a kitchen language unfit for higher uses.
>
> This was the kind of damage Edwin and I expected to meet, and because it went deep we knew it would not be easy to deal with, even though the Germans who had caused it were now in their turn discredited. . . .
>
> The damage done by Gestapo direct methods, being less devious, was easier to cope with although sometimes startling. In a Czech friend's flat, for instance, between one cup of tea and another we were suddenly shown a cardboard box, rimmed with black and silver in a parody of mourning, containing a man's white shirt neatly folded yet filthy with bloodstains and scraps of human skin. 'That's what the Germans sent me through the post after torturing my husband to death,' said our friend. Some young members of our Institute showed us the numbers tattooed on their arms when they were in concentration camps and described how they escaped from the trucks taking them (they supposed) to the gas chambers almost as the Russians were entering Prague. . . . These callous and cynical reminders of human degradation made us literally sick, but they were more open wounds, less hidden than the damage done to the self-respect of Czechoslovakia as a whole.[23]

The Czech abhorrence and fear of the Germans was abundantly justified by these horrific images and anecdotes; but Willa and Edwin were less immediately able to comprehend the national ambivalence towards the Russian liberators.

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[23] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p219-21)

Mixed emotions and tempered joys had shrouded the last days of war in Czechoslovakia. The pleasure of a long-awaited release from Nazi occupation was clouded by resentment at the American concession to Stalin at Yalta which had guaranteed him the privilege of taking Prague, and had thereby agonisingly delayed the final liberation. '[W]hen the option of taking Prague arose, Eisenhower forbade Patton from moving the forty miles that would make all the difference for postwar Czechoslovakia. Churchill correctly predicted that not taking Berlin and Prague was a fatal mistake. Stalin had good reasons for liking Eisenhower so much: Eisenhower's immense strategic blunder is now obvious, but it was not in the spring of 1945. The Prague uprising in the last days of the war (May 5-9, 1945) had an unexpected outcome. While the citizens of Prague were on the barricades waiting for Patton's army, the Americans did not move from Pilsen. Patton thought about moving to Prague and calling Ike from a Prague telephone booth to ask about what his latest orders were - that is, by pretending that he had not received the order that forbade him such a move. The Soviets did not like the American idea of taking Prague, and that was the end.'[24]

And so the glorious Red Army swept into the city of Prague in May 1945 and loudly proclaimed a Soviet victory over the powers of Nazi evil. The war-weary citizens managed to muster an enthusiastic welcome for these conquering heroes and watched in awe as the enormous liberating force assembled. 'The Red Army is the largest military force in the world. It is an enormous and truly indescribable compound of men, nationalities, materials, colours, ideas and traditions. It has to be seen to be believed, and it has to be seen from near and while on the move: its tank divisions, which clear the way, well disciplined, well armed and trained and composed of picked soldiers; the columns of guns and lorries, the parachute divisions, motor cyclists, technical units . . . But this is not the real Red Army, it is only its vanguard and the nucleus of its striking force. More than anything else the Red Army is a mass - and again one feels like thinking of a mass of water which bursts its dam and goes on spreading in width and depth: columns of marching soldiers, dirty, tired, clad in ragged uniforms. Tens and hundreds of thousands of columns moving on the dusty roads of central and eastern Europe.'[25]

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[24] Ivan Sviták. The Unbearable Burden of History. The Sovietization of Czechoslovakia. Volume 1: From Munich to Yalta. Prague: Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, 1990. (p79-80)

The sweet taste of liberation soon turned sour in Czech mouths as the Soviet propaganda machinery churned out reminders of the debt which the people of Prague owed to the Red Army. An uneasy and vaguely antipathetic relationship rapidly developed between the Czechs and their latest occupying force. Willa naively assumed that 'occupying troops, however friendly in theory, are usually resented by any city, and had the Russians been archangels the Praguers would still have been glad to see them go.'[26]

There was nothing angelic about the soldiers of the Red Army. Czechoslovakian ideals about the Communist 'brotherhood' were systematically shattered as Russian realities were brutally and explicitly revealed. The people of Prague were accustomed to the violence of Nazism; but they were unprepared for the comparable Red Army violations which now commenced. They looked on in helpless horror as the undisciplined ragbag of the Soviet army ran amock through the city streets: a new reign of atrocities haphazardly emerged. For the people of Czecholovakia, it was a rude awakening from their wartime dream of peace and freedom. '[T]he Russian St George came, killed the dragon and liberated the imprisoned princess, but then he got drunk, looted the castle and raped the princess. No wonder the liberated ones longed for him to leave as soon as possible and, especially, prayed that he should never, never come back again.'[27]

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[25] Jan Stransky. East Wind over Prague. London: World Affairs Book Club, 1950. (p22)
[26] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p219-21)

But it was not until November 1945 that these predatory liberators were finally 'collected in large trucks at a starting-point in the Vaclavské Namesti and took their departure. . . . Excited crowds gathered on the pavement and started throwing flowers and bottles of wine into the trucks. I threw them some flowers on my own account. Their departure made a definite breach in the wary reticence of the Czechs'.[28] A sigh of relief echoed through the city as the Praguers exulted in their repossession of the capital. Gestures were made towards a tentative normality and the approach of Christmas was celebrated with a touchingly nervous optimism and a hesitant joyfulness; illuminated Christmas trees were erected in the city squares and streets. The painful healing process had apparently begun.

The Muirs had already sensed some signs of a thawing in the Czechoslovakian emotional chill. Soon after his arrival in the city, Edwin had been offered a lectureship in the Charles University of Prague and he enthusiastically accepted. But he was unprepared for the horde of eager students who poured into his lectures, hungry for the learning of which they had been deprived during the Nazi occupation. The prospect of teaching English literature without the benefit of books was disconcerting: the English Department Library had borne the ravages of war and was virtually bare. He found himself having to '*create* Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake and the others for them - however I have hit on the idea of getting them to type out some of the best poems, and cyclostyle them, so that we are amassing a small anthology as we go along.'[29]

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[27] Jan Stransky. East Wind over Prague. London: World Affairs Book Club, 1950. (p37)
[28] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p216-7)

These material inconveniences were insignificant difficulties in comparison with the barriers of suspicion and mistrust which he encountered amongst his students. The sense of inferiority with which the Germans had infected them was still deeply imbedded in their consciousness; they were afraid to voice opinions or to engage in open discussion. The informal irreverence with which Edwin approached his subject was a revelation to them; and they were inspired by his transparent enthusiasm for the texts about which he lectured. This gentle and committed fervour won him the devoted and lasting affection and trust of those who attended his classes.

These twice-weekly lectures were a source of great joy to Edwin too. He was impressed and humbled by the industry and intelligence of his students and took a genuine interest in their lives and studies. 'Most of them were poor and working at various jobs as well as attending the university: at part-time teaching, journalism, translating, office-work. They had been idle by compulsion during the Occupation and now they never seemed to rest from morning to night. They appeared to believe that the good life consisted solely in hard work; . . . I suggested that, if they worked all the time, they would have no time left for thinking; but they did not take my words seriously. They read and read, wrote and wrote, worked and worked, in a continuous fury which would have exhausted an ordinary student.'[30]

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[29] Edwin Muir in a letter to William Montgomery. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London; The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p140)
[30] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p258)

But Edwin's commitment to his students, their homeland and their culture stopped short of learning their language. Willa ruefully admitted that 'Edwin did not budge from his attitude of twenty years earlier; he would not learn to speak Czech'.[31] 'He refused to believe in it as a language. Besides, his natural 'r' was the French 'r', not the Scottish and he could not pronounce tri- or pri-, sounds that are common in Czech.'[32] He chose to circumvent this difficulty by assuming the bemused guise of an innocent abroad and by trusting either to the Czech enthusiasm for the English language or to the competence of willing translators. Willa meanwhile oiled her rusty Czech and dutifully performed some of the petty diplomatic niceties from which Edwin's determined incompetence exempted him.

The routine round of formal and official functions became chaotic in the spring of 1946 when the British Council was finally allocated suitable accommodation in the small and attractive Kaunic Palace. It was a spacious and gracious building which initially accommodated the offices of the Council and the classrooms of the Institute in comfort. It rapidly became cramped however: no-one could have predicted the success and popularity which the Institute would enjoy nor the crowds of Anglophile Praguers who would flock to the building. The comparatively modest opening programme of events was rapturously received by a population which had been starved of culture and was avid in its attendance at the lectures and concerts which the Institute staff had arranged during their recent period of enforced sequestration. Informality and friendliness were the cornerstones upon which the Institute's atmosphere was built: an unreserved warmth greeted every visitor. Edwin, Bill and their willing staff 'invited Czechs not only to attend classes in language and literature but to sing madrigals in Bill's choir or join his orchestra; to take part in magazine programmes made up of English poetry and prose read, recited, or acted, programmes designed by Edwin on the same lines as those he had devised in Edinburgh; to learn old English dances; to join in discussions on topics like the significance of detective stories - to enjoy themselves, that is, without arrière pensée, to give their imaginations an airing and meet us all as friends in the Institute tearoom, which we took turns in supplying with home-baked cakes from our own rations.'[33]

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[31] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p225)
[32] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. London, November 11th 1966.

It was a happy, carefree and homely oasis of laughter and conversation into which even distinguished speakers (such as Stephen Spender, Herbert Read and Graham Greene) were received with unceremonious informality. Lectures were usually scheduled for a Friday evening and were inundated with eager Institute faithfuls who became increasingly willing to participate in open discussion and to ask unselfconscious questions. A-politicism and internationalism flourished; propaganda of any persuasion was entirely and expressly outlawed. 'I think that the Institute's being quite outside all false dilemmas came as a relief to the Czechs, especially the students. Without preaching the British way of life we conveyed it, of course, in everything we said and did, which seemed to us a more appropriate way of communicating it than through lectures. The Institute, gay and spontaneous, was soon regarded with affection all through Prague.'[34]

A new and vibrant joyfulness suffused the city in the winter of 1946 and the Institute became a social mecca in which the repressed exuberance of eight long years was finally released. The happiness was contagious and the entire Institute seemed constantly to be abuzz with cheerful energy. Parties and dances suddenly proliferated and the students 'flung themselves into these as if they were working at some task. They were like pleasure-seekers who cannot endure a hiatus or silence in time, but must find something to fill it, no matter what.'[35] These revelries were generally noisy and high-spirited. Willa and Edwin were often called upon to perform some Scottish song or to lead a country dance; and Bill's choir would occasionally sing the vaguely bawdy songs which were universally appreciated.

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[33] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p225)
[34] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p225)

The Muirs also enjoyed the less boisterous companionship of the writer's circle which they entertained in their own home each Monday evening. This circle provided a forum in which a group of young Czech poets, novelists and playwrights discussed their own work and contemporary English literature. Edwin referred to this group in his 1947 personal report to the British Council and suggested that there was 'more interest among young writers than among the middle-aged and old people, who are still under the influence of French culture which was so strong during the Masaryk republic. I think this is a group which will do considerable service for us, not because of any incitement from me, but because they wish it and have it at heart.'[36]

Edwin and Willa reciprocated this enthusiasm by their own active interest and involvement in Czech literature and in the new Prague literati. Edwin regularly went to the monthly meetings of the Prague P.E.N. Club and, in June 1947, he and Willa participated in the International P.E.N. Conference in Zurich as members of the Czech delegation. At the invitation of the local British Council Representative they then travelled to Austria, where Edwin performed a series of lectures in Innsbruck, Vienna and Graz about contemporary English literature.

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[35] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p259)
[36] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966. (p210)

The establishment of a comfortable routine of regular events was one of the factors in Willa and Edwin's increasing contentment and security. The Institute and the city furnished them with a warm and close-knit community of friends and associates and they enjoyed an active social life. Prague was enjoying a post-Nazi cultural renaissance and the city was awash with music, dance and drama. 'In the summer of 1946, the British Council sent the Sadler's Wells Ballet to Prague . . . and that company did more than our classes could ever have done to show the vitality and inventiveness of the English to foreign people.'[37]

But their flat was a haven of calm tranquillity and a refuge from the whirl of work and hectic socialising. They were surrounded once more by their familiar, well-loved and well-travelled furniture; and they had appointed a competent cook. Ella 'was a temperamental Slovak who had been cook to the Slovakian Ambassador in Berlin during Slovakia's brief term of nominal independence under Hitler. . . . Ella's cooking was truly ambassadorial and we began to give dinner-parties. My Czech, which was already fluent, now became adequate to any dramatic situation once I found that I had to govern my cook firmly, since, large, dark, jealous creature that she was, she refused to provide a meal for our humble weekly washer-woman except under duress from me. Even under duress she would not dish up goulash for visitors; goulash, she said, was not a proper dish for visitors; and although her goulash was incomparable and I ordered it knowing that British guests would love it, they always got something quite different, much grander, more "suitable".'[38] The routine preparation of a casual dinner for two offended Ella's self-important dignity; but she revelled in the challenges of grand scale entertaining and could readily conjure up a sumptuous, copious and elegant spread for a special occasion.

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[37] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p259)
[38] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p224-5)

She was not, however, the easiest of house companions. She could stir up a storm as well as a soufflé and was a constant source of nagging tension within the flat. Willa eventually dismissed her in November 1947 and replaced her with Polaková - a cook of lesser culinary competence but infinitely greater affability. 'Ella's departure has now opened up histories of her doings. So many kilos of butter vanished. Tradespeople giving Polaková sidelong glances as if expecting something (probably butter). P. is going to change most of our shops and start afresh.'[39] It was an unpleasant interlude and its resolution was a source of great relief to Willa. She was occasionally overwhelmed by the sheer volume of purely routine activities: the additional burden of domestic turbulence was insupportable.

They were desperately in need of some respite from the incessant socialising and the claustrophobic intensity of Institute life by the summer of 1946. They felt oppressed by Prague and by the panic which had been awakened in the hearts of many of its citizens by the unexpected outcome of a May election in which the Communist Party had won 38 per cent of the votes.[40] Dinner party conversations veered obsessively towards a possible Communist takeover. Edwin and Willa were sceptical about this apparently unwarranted apprehension; but they could not help but be affected by the overriding atmosphere of fear in the city.

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[39] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. September 1947-January 1948. In the Willa Muir archives in the University Library, St Andrews.

[40] Hans Renner. A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. (p5)

Edwin escaped briefly to Edinburgh on business; but it was an unhappy and unsatisfactory fortnight[41] from which he returned in a state of exhaustion and vague despondency. They finally escaped from the heat and the tension of Prague into the Slovakian High Tatras where they attended a Summer School in early August. It was a working holiday; but the change of scene and the invigorating sense of the open countryside, refreshed, revitalised and renewed their enthusiasm for the tasks which awaited them on their return. The incipient arrival of Gavin was an additional incentive to return home: 'his train had to be met in Prague two days later at half-past eight in the morning. One day to get back, we thought, plenty of time.'[42]

But they had reckoned without the series of crises and calamities which conspired to hamper their homeward progress. The tyres of the recently-acquired Institute car were obviously not designed to withstand the heat or the pot-holes of Czechoslovakia's roads: the driver managed to patch various punctures and leaks until 'a hissing, a slither and a bumping told us that once more a tyre had gone. Again we drew into the side of the road, again our chauffeur looked for the jack. But there was no jack. Apparently it had been mislaid and left behind on our last mending bout; we had to sit waiting for some car to pass from which we could borrow a jack. No car came in sight.'[43]

They became increasingly anxious and frustrated as the hour of Gavin's arrival in Prague approached. An open-top sports car eventually appeared and its driver agreed to lend them his jack and to drive Edwin and Willa to the station in nearby Tabor from where they could catch a train into Prague. Willa sat in the front seat beside the driver while 'Edwin climbed in behind with the suitcase. We roared off. I do not know what was our actual speed but it seemed at least a hundred miles an hour. We roared off all right, but not to Tabor. Uphill and down dale we raced, swooping round corners on two wheels, and every few minutes the demon driver enquired: "Are you afraid yet, gracious lady?" I sat primly upright . . . and replied in as calm a voice as possible: "Oh no, not at all." The efforts to scare me were then redoubled.'

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[41] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London; The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p141)
[42] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p221)
[43] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p221-2)

Hour after hour, and mile after mile, they raced along the roads of Czechoslovakia. Willa sensed that she would have to 'resist the madman's obsession until he got bored trying to frighten me, so I kept telling him how enjoyable I was finding the excursion. It was indeed exhilarating to rush through the dark night at such reckless speed behind these enormous headlights. At last, around four in the morning, he did get bored and decanted us abruptly in the main street at Tabor.'

It was an unnerving experience and they were shaken to the core; but they were also aware of the immediate necessity of finding a taxi which would take them to Prague. This problem was duly solved by the night porter in a local hotel and they arrived at the station in time to offer Gavin a somewhat tremulous welcome.

Gavin was equally relieved to be reunited with his parents and to have survived a journey which 'had rather alarmed him in prospect.'[44] His first year at St Andrews University had been a struggle in survival: his sensitive soul was now in desperate need of parental love, care and reassurance. He was introverted, socially inept and congenitally unsuited to the boisterous gregariousness of student life. His contemporaries recall him as a thin, gaunt, ghoul-like figure who 'wandered aimlessly around the town and behaved as if the rest of the world didn't really exist. He hardly ever spoke to anyone. It was as if he lived in a shell and had no need of anyone else. He seemed always to be looking down upon people - which wasn't exactly an endearing or attractive characteristic.'[45] His only moments of confidence were at the piano. 'He had no hesitation about exposing himself musically. He was an accomplished and very popular performer at the Old Union Diner smokers; even the drunken oafs would shut up when Gavin was playing. He knew that he was good and he accepted applause as his right.'[46]

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[44] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p146)

His academic performance was less impressive. The June degree examination results revealed that he had failed both Natural Philosphy and French and that he would be expected to return for resits in the autumn. He had passed only Maths. He was upset and shaken by this unexpected débâcle and Willa and Edwin decided to keep him in Prague 'until the beginning of October when the new term begins: I think it would be foolish for him to return for that examination in the beginning of September; and he needs our care for some time.'[47] It was a pattern of failure which was repeated annually although Gavin was thereafter required to attend the resits or to face an enforced termination of his studies.

Willa and Edwin worried about Gavin; but there was no time for leisured angst or brooding. Contented, colourful and chaotic activity swallowed their days and left them with no space for quiet contemplation and tranquillity. The Institute's reputation as a social and educational centre was spread by word-of-mouth, and the people of Prague flocked to the Kaunic Palace in their droves. Edwin's influence at the University attracted the same sort of enthusiastic attention. His 'gift of permeating the space around him, giving out an unassertive sense of benevolence, was appreciated by his students, who also much enjoyed his improvised lectures. . . . But it was at examination-times that he evoked the strongest gratitude from his students. Edwin told me that his colleague in the English Department, a philologist, in private a pleasant little man, became a terrorist when conducting an examination, trying to uncover whatever students did *not* know and pouncing on them for ignorance, so that they became rigid with terror and could not do themselves justice, while Edwin set himself out to find out what they *did* know and gave them due credit for it.'[48]

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[45] John Feuster in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 24th April 1995.
[46] John Feuster in an interview with Kirsty Allen. St Andrews, 24th April 1995.
[47] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London; The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p146)

His contribution and commitment to the rehabilitation of the once-great Charles University of Prague was also appreciated by the University authorities. The Nazi occupation had left them educationally and emotionally bewildered and beleaguered; and they were grateful to Edwin for his intuitive ingeniousness in the face of overwhelming practical odds. On Edwin's sixtieth birthday - the 15th May 1947 - the University publicly expressed their 'gratitude by staging a ceremony . . . for the sole purpose of giving him an honorary Ph.D., which had been unanimously agreed to by representatives from all the faculties. The public oration was given by Dr Otakar Vocadlo, a survivor from a Nazi starvation camp, who had been the main instrument in prompting the University to do Edwin honour.'[49]

It was a spectacular and happy occasion which was apparently awash with a wave of affection and warmth. The simple sincerity of the gesture filled

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[48] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p226)
[49] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p227)

Edwin with quiet pride and satisfaction; and Willa felt that her faith in her husband's intellect had finally been vindicated by this official recognition of Edwin's academic legitimacy. The ceremony itself was important to her only as the outward show of rich and deeply-felt emotions. 'I love my Peerie Beek, and I am glad that he is so beloved, but all this doctorial business seems irrelevant, somehow. Perhaps I am only tired. It was an impressive, traditional, fine ceremony, worth experiencing, and I had not much emotion about it: the friendliness of everything moved me much more than the pomp. Perhaps it is old age?'[50]

Tiredness and old age probably *did* contribute to her slightly hesitant enjoyment of the festivities. The debilitating weakness and susceptibility which was the legacy of her wartime collapse still plagued her, and she was invariably prostrated by long days of formal function-going. Aching limbs and nervous exhaustion conspired to make this graduation day seem endless. The ceremony itself was followed by a celebration luncheon which had been arranged jointly by the University, the Syndicate of Writers and the British Council, and which took place 'at Dobris, an eighteenth century palace which has been put at the disposal of the Syndicate of Writers.'[51] Willa and Edwin fell instantly in love with the grace and grandeur of Dobris and returned to the palace in the spring of 1947 for a short and idyllic holiday. The graduation dinner was wonderful; the speeches were flattering; the gifts were generous and the goodwill was overwhelming - but Willa was left craving solitude and quiet. She was faced instead with the prospect of an evening party in her own home.

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[50] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. November 1946-September 1947. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[51] Edwin Muir in a letter to Nancy Parkinson. Prague, 29th May 1947. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

It was a day which left her fit for nothing except bed and a good book. The world had different plans however, and the 'next evening the Students British Association threw a party for Willa and myself in the Palace Hotel.'[52] It was a lively and enjoyable evening of song, dance, and unembarrassed tributes to the beaming man who was the focus of the celebrations. A confused reporter from The Scotsman observed that it 'was something of a shock . . . to hear a Czech choir singin Ho Ro, mo Nighean Donn Bhoidheach - to say nothing of "Ca' the Yowes to the Knowes' and other Scots songs.'[53] It was an event during which the students' overwhelming affection for the Muirs and for the British Institute was amply and decisively demonstrated.

But the changes which ultimately destroyed Edwin's British Institute were already afoot. In early 1947, the 'King Log Representative was withdrawn, because the Ambassador had had enough of his tactless remarks at public banquets, and a new Representative arrived, a bureaucrat to the fingertips, whom London had instructed to be a new broom.'[54]

Reg Close was a meticulous and conscientious administrator with a passion for protocol and procedure. He adhered obsessively to the niceties of social decorum and was arrogant in his conviction of British superiority. Order and absolutes were his *modus vivendi* and he lived in daily terror of any question or challenge to his paranoid and suspicious authoritarianism. There was precious little common ground upon which he and Edwin could establish a relationship: the ensuing clash of interests was inevitable and surprisingly rapid.

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[52] Edwin Muir in a letter to Nancy Parkinson. Prague, 29th May 1947. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andews.
[53] Anonymous Article in The Scotsman. 24th May 1947.
[54] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p227)

'An evil chance made his first visit to the Institute coincide with an informal Evening Party for the students. The Institute, being grateful to the students, who had been its first members, staged every now and then for their benefit a Students' Evening Party, which was always noisy and gay. It was too noisy and gay for the new Representative and he was shocked by its informality. Bill, the Master of Ceremonies, was not wearing a dinner-jacket and black tie. Nor was there a receiving line to welcome guests. . . . To the new Representative it seemed that the Institute was carrying on as if it were merely a kind of night-club for the young to romp in. We tried to persuade him that romping was just what these young people needed to counteract the stiff formality with which they had met us at first, all the clicking of heels and bowing from the waist. He was not to be persuaded. Black ties became a *sine qua non* for all social functions after that, and a Receiving Line of British Council wives in which I stood Number Three and Hilda Allen Number Four.'[55]

The relationship between the Institute and the Council became increasingly frosty as Close gradually discovered the full extent of the 'atrocities' which Edwin had committed in the absence of the restraining hand of efficient leadership. Edwin and Bill had - he believed - consciously seduced the people of Prague into believing that 'the Institute *was* the Council and Dr Muir (as people now insisted on calling Edwin) the most important person in it. Administratively, this was preposterous, for the Institute was, and should appear to be, merely a teaching subsidiary of the Council. The new Representative felt it his duty to reorganize the whole structure of Council activities, so that the British Arts and the British Way of Life might be presented to the foreign public with due dignity and decorum on the very highest level.'[56] The enthusiastic amateurism of Bill's choir irritated him; and he promptly ensured its immediate demise by enlisting the services of a specialist Music Officer who could institute professional concerts in its place. The Institute's sphere of influence was further diluted by the arrival of an Education Officer and a Medical Officer; but the final straw came with the appointment of a Close clone as the new Deputy Representative.

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[55] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p227-8)

Hawkins - the new Deputy Representative - was a sly and vindictively malicious man who compared unfavourably even with Close. The most atrocious and misguided of Close's actions were at least perpetrated primarily in the interests of the Council's good: Hawkins was committed only to the service of his personal ends. He was a practised sycophant and a blatant hypocrite with a ludicrously overdeveloped air of self-importance and a dangerously underdeveloped self-knowledge.

He and Close together conspired to destroy the Institute's atmosphere of conviviality and companionship. The old order passed away; and Reg instituted a new rule which was designed to minimise the influence of Edwin and the Institute within the British Council. The Kaunic Palace was no longer a haven of happiness in which work was a pleasure.

The re-allocation of office accommodation was the most immediate and eloquent statement of this altered and hierarchical regime. Close was horrified to discover that Edwin inhabited the most palatial and impressive office in the building and resolved to correct this procedural indiscretion and to claim the office for himself. Hawkins was inanely delighted to be placed in sole charge of administering the move; and he gleefully co-ordinated the entire operation with military precision. Willa's journal records the '[t]ale of the Office Flit. 9.15 Hazel: 9.45 Marjorie etc. Hawkins: "Will you please check that your watches are synchronised with that of the telephonist?" "It's all finished, and three minutes ahead of schedule!"'[57]

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[56] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p228).

This humorous episode was merely a foretaste of Close's increasingly sinister machinations for the removal of the Institute's apparently anarchic privileges. Many of his schematic incisions (such as the re-assignment of the Institute's car to Hawkins) were merely inconvenient and could be accepted with comparatively good grace; but the transfer of Bill Allen to Bratislava in the autumn of 1947 was a blow which struck right at the heart of the Institute's ethos. Edwin was profoundly distressed, but 'set himself to make the best of it, . . . The happy family atmosphere of the Institute almost vanished; even Council Staff, harassed by too much protocol were visibly unhappy; and since Edwin felt it his duty to keep both Institute and Council staff from open rebellion, the strain told upon him. To me he said that the whole process felt like the Chinese torture of Death by a Thousand Cuts.'[58]

Tensions flared; relationships disintegrated; and Willa and Edwin were often required to minister to the emotional wounds of their staff. Ludicrously tragic infatuations and animosities erupted periodically and Willa was forced into service as the Institute's honorary nurse, psychologist and surrogate mother. On one occasion in early April, Cedric Hall appeared on her doorstep, begging her to 'go and see Violet [his wife] who had been fainting and was emotionally disturbed because she was in love with Harold Davies.'[59] It was a potentially explosive scenario; Cedric and Harold were British Council colleagues and their relationship was integral to the working atmosphere of the office. Violet was therefore bodily transported into the Muir's spare room; cosseted, cajoled and councilled by Willa for a fortnight and given a breathing space in which she could re-evaluate her life.

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[57] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. November 1946-September 1947. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[58] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p230)

[59] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. November 1946-September 1947. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The situation was temporarily resolved; but the dust of strife had scarcely settled before another crisis shattered the Institute's fragile harmony. Hawkins - for whom suitable accommodation had not yet been found - began to agitate and conspire for the Allen's Prague flat. He contested that his superiority of status and Bill's enforced absence in Bratislava were sufficient grounds for the eviction of Hilda Allen and her two children; and he scoured the Council regulations for clauses which might forward his cause. His wife meanwhile bullied Hilda Allen: she alternated veiled threats and accusatory epithets with reasoned and persuasive concern for the wellbeing of the Allen children. The discord grumbled through the corridors of the Institute, exacerbating dislike and mistrust for Close and Hawkins and provoking loud and vociferous protests against this latest abuse. The conflict escalated, expanded and became increasingly unpleasant.

But the administrative machinery was inexorable and the battle was over by Christmas. Dulcie Hawkins moved smugly and without remorse into her comfortable new home; while Hilda and the children departed for an uncertain and unsettled future in a Bratislavan hotel. It was a horrendous and shameful episode in the Institute's life. Hilda wrote to Willa from Bratislava and told her that she:

> had hoped the atmosphere here to be a little clearer. I find it nevertheless quite murky enough. Bill is far more depressed than I had imagined, and he said that it is affecting his work so much that it really is bad. He has taken to dreaming of murdering Close

> . . . I think that Bill is more upset because he foresees being transferred to some outlandish place next summer, and being obliged to leave this country to which he is sentimentally attached. He does not share your faith in Reg's removal this summer, but I can see that it will be either Reg or Bill, voluntarily or involuntarily. . . .
>
> When I look back on Prague, the first wonderful impressions I had of historic calm, deep-rooted serenity and unshakeable faith are sadly blurred by an unpleasant haze of intrigue and fears, struggles and great personal unhappiness. I can only hope that these last impressions will fade in time.[60]

The absence of the Allens did not silence the residual rumble of rebellion in the Kaunic Palace. Close was conscious of the unrest amongst the Institute staff and lived in daily fear of an uprising. Guilty paranoia led him to suspect Willa as a leading malcontent and chief conspirator and he resented her intimate involvement in the Institute's life. But his suspicions merely simmered on the brink of confrontation until the January day in 1948 on which

> . . . Edwin came home and told me Reg had had an outburst to him in the car about the dreadful things people were saying about the Closes; that they were turning Hilda out into the gutter; and that he thought Willa was responsible. Also: Willa was making a rift between Council and Institute. So I insisted on seeing him . . .
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> I said to him I was 'staggered' at what he said: that I had discussed the Allen's flat in the B.C. and had not talked about it

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[60] Hilda Allen in a letter to Willa Muir. Bratislava, early 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> all over Prague: that I thought his actions over the flat had been unkind and ill-judged: that perhaps the lack of judgement was Hawkins's fault. To this he agreed: he even said Hawkins was a problem! (It is easy to get him to push any fault on to anyone else, even his own lieutenants who are always liable to be blamed for his difficulties.) If he had settled the matter personally with Bill, they would have been just as far now as they are, or further, and all this waste of nervous energy, fret, irritation would have been avoided . . . .
>
> . . . Also, it was such a shock to Hilda that of course one sympathised with her, and she naturally told her friends. What else could he expect? And why should he bother about gossip?
>
> But what I wanted to point out was that I was not causing rifts. I felt personally responsible for Edwin's staff, for keeping them happy; I was even a safety valve. He said I was not aware, perhaps, of the great influence I had, and that junior members of the staff chattered about 'Willa said this, or that' and it magnified itself.[61]

Willa was probably surprised - but not displeased - by this suggestion of her power and prestige. It implied an appealingly matriarchal majesty which vindicated her independence from the preordained rôle of a diplomatic consort. But the conversation also illustrated Close's feelings of beleaguerment and fear and Willa was suddenly granted a rare and sympathetic insight into his perspective on the affair. 'Because Reg's touchy vanity makes him take everything personally; dislike is a deadly insult; and he suspects intrigue and bad faith everywhere. Edwin too, although honourable in intent and kindly, is a bit devious in some things; he is too afraid of hurting people's feelings. And whereas his exasperation is caused by Reg's furtive oppression and intrigue, it makes him less than just to Reg. It is, of course, difficult to be just to Reg. On the other hand, Reg probably has no idea why some of his attitudes and pronouncements have annoyed Edwin. Quite apart from his behind-back intrigues, suggestions and belittlements of Edwin, which must give him somewhere a guilty feeling, and so make him suspicious, he probably is genuinely unaware of his native offences, since they arise out of his character and he can't help them. So when he is disliked it seems all the more outrageous to him; he feels simply ill-treated, for no reason at all; he must attribute dislike to downright malice.'[62]

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[61] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. September 1947-January 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Understanding Reg did not make it easier to like him. He was a constant source of niggling irritation to Willa and she marvelled at the extent to which he lacked sensitivity, diplomacy, imagination and insight into human nature. Her poem - 'The Misrepresentative' - is an explicit statement of the utter scorn in which she held him.

> Unhappy Reg! by stale moralities
> encircled as within a thorny hedge,
> from behind which his enemies he spies,
> (Unhappy Reg!)
> men lacking principle or loyal pledge,
> advancing to attack him in disguise.
> He has but moral thorns to turn the edge,
> of their ridicule, yet he will rise,
> from his close-stool and stab where he can sketch,

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[62] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

with pointed half-truths and still sharper lies.
Unhappy wretch.[63]

His actions were often tragically absurd and farcically laughable in their utter foolishness and pathetic authoritarianism. The most abject of his ill-conceived schemes was perhaps the decision to exclude locally appointed Czech staff from the Institute tea-room.

It was an inflammatory decision. 'The London-Appointed Staff at once closed their ranks in solidarity with their Czech colleagues and announced that they would boycott the tea-room until Locally-Appointed Staff were allowed into it again. . . . There was a state of acute tension in the Kaunic Palace, and the tea-room boycott came as a kind of comic relief. Friends from outside, even from our Embassy, used to look in, grinning, to see how the Great Tea-Room Row was progressing. The ring-leaders made illicit coffee in their cubby-holes for all the deprived victims and argued the toss fiercely with the Deputy Representative, who was no match for them. In the end, Locally-Appointed Staff were allowed to use the tea-room in shifts, for strictly limited periods, and that ridiculous episode was over.'[64]

But this foolishness was indicative of the sickness which was eating the heart out of the Institute *and* the Muirs. Willa told her journal that she was depressed by 'the conflict of Faith v. Works! Reg and Hawkins believe in Works, in subordination without real devotion to the people among whom they carry on the Works. Machinery of life versus life. The feelings of the local staff do not matter: they are "only" local staff. That Hilda and the children have nowhere to go, doesn't matter: they are "only" subordinates, of a lesser rank in the hierarchy than Hawkins.'[65]

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[63] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. September 1947-January 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[64] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p230)

The city of Prague meanwhile writhed in the throes of a political power struggle. The Communists became an increasingly powerful and substantial force as the opposition parties foundered in a muddle of disordered and ineffectual democracy. 'When, in the autumn of 1947, it seemed that the Czechoslovak Social Democrats, who, till then, had been just a branch of the Communist Party together with whom they had a parliamentary majority, might become slightly more independent, the Chairman of the Party, the well-known Communist fellow-traveller Fierlinger, called a meeting of his Party's Executive and asked it to vote a resolution containing a pledge to even closer co-operation with the Communists. He used the argument that the Soviets were perturbed by the possibility of an anti-Communist front being formed in Czechoslovakia, which for them would be identical with an anti-Soviet front, and which would necessitate their intervention. It was all nonsense, but the frightened Social Democrats actually voted the resolution, and - as their decision aroused a storm of protest in the ranks of their Party - the members of the parliament excused themselves in their constituencies by saying that Soviet occupation of the country had been imminent, that Czech Communists were better than the Red Army, and from the two evils the Party had wisely chosen the lesser one.'[66]

It was the beginning of the end for democracy in Czechoslovakia. The popularity which the Communists had enjoyed during the immediate post-war period had virtually disappeared and it became increasingly apparent that they were arming for war. Elections were due to take place in the May of

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[65] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. September 1947-January 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[66] Jan Stransky. East Wind over Prague. London: World Affairs Book Club, 1950. (p56-57)

1948, and it seemed likely that the Communists would make a pre-emptive bid for power rather than risk defeat at the polls.

The Muir's complacency was stirred to concern and they began to register the potential gravity of the unfolding events. The Institute and the University were rife with rumours of an imminent Communist coup and the Writers Circle talked obsessively about the political machinations within and outwith parliament. The tension was inescapable: even Willa and Edwin's autumn holiday at the summer school in Mariánské Lazné was tinctured with terror and dogged by the petty complications and resentments of a nation in turmoil.

The atmosphere there was pregnant with a sinister unrest which inspired Edwin to a period of intense creativity. He had apparently had 'a number of poems dammed up in me for some months, with no chance of coming out; and there by good luck I found the means and the right moment for them. . . . To get these poems out was a great satisfaction to me, but I was disappointed that I didn't get out all the poems I wanted. On the other hand new ones appeared, which was gratifying, and so I found myself partly in a state of poetic resolution and partly in a state of flux. But the holiday hasn't given me as much rest as I really should have had, but instead excitement partly pleasant and partly painful.'[67]

An icy winter settled resolutely over the city, and the Muirs succumbed to recurring and financially ruinous bouts of bronchitis and flu. Gavin came out from Scotland in mid-December to spend his Christmas vacation with them - and immediately succumbed to Prague's unhealthy air and to a serious dose of asthmatic bronchitis. Willa suspected that his illness was partly psychosomatic, and that it had been triggered by the disapproval which she and Edwin had expressed in his recent conversion to Communism. 'First asthma as a child while we went to P.E.N. in Budapest: second when we thought of sending him to Canada in 1940: third, now, when he feels division from us again. Soothed, encouraged, cosseted him: he is now all right: sense of division, I think smoothed out.'[68]

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[67] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p146-7)

A Communist coup was meanwhile an increasingly palpable possibility in Prague. Edwin and Willa were now too conscious of the practical implications of Sovietization to permit any complacency or indulgence in their attitude towards their son's political leanings. Czechoslovakia resembled a hand grenade without a pin; it was obviously only a matter of time before events exploded. Fierlinger, whose Communist sympathies had eventually caused his dismissal from the Chair of the Social Democratic Party, represented an immediate threat to democracy as he ricocheted dangerously around the political arena, stirring up trouble and vowing his revenge upon his erstwhile allies.[69]

Life in Prague was increasingly unpleasant. The nascent sun of democracy disappeared behind the cloud of Communism and fear stalked the city streets. Kangaroo courts and trumped-up conspiracy charges were a dismal commonplace and the police cells were swamped with political prisoners. The Muirs were unexpectedly affected personally by this institutionalised travesty of the justice system when a Czechoslovakian employee of the British Institute - Dick Pollak - was arrested by the secret police and 'charged with military treason, with espionage on behalf of a foreign power.'[70] He was subjected to three agonising weeks of interminable interrogation, brutality and near-starvation - and then released without charge.

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[68] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. September 1947-January 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[69] Jan Stransky. East Wind over Prague. London: World Affairs Book Club, 1950. (p193)

The Institute reeled with shock: Communism was suddenly an immediate and appalling reality. Dick and his wife Edith were swamped by a wave of compassion during his imprisonment and after his release; only the cowardly Close dissented from these expressions of concern. He officially dissociated the Institute from Dick for fear of repercussions. Willa was outraged. She was now so profoundly sickened and disgusted by Close and his sycophantic sidekick that, when Hawkins crashed the Embassy car whilst driving recklessly in dangerous weather conditions, she 'felt quite frankly that it was a pity [he] hadn't killed himself.'[71] She was utterly 'contemptuous of the Hawkinses and Reg . . . . Their remarks seem petty or pompous, facetious or dull. . . . Understanding is possible only where there is goodwill. Reg and Hawkins kill goodwill, so that petty resentment alone is left.'[72]

These dangerously simmering internal Institute tensions were reflected on a grand and accelerating scale in the Czechoslovakian political arena. Three years of Communist intrigue finally exploded into open revolution in February 1948, and the dominoes of democracy toppled rapidly and without demur. Five cataclysmic days passed power into totalitarian hands and left it there for forty years.

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[70] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. September 1947-January 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[71] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. September 1947-January 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[72] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

The Putsch was preceded by a period of intense disquiet in parliament. Democratic ministers were increasingly alarmed by Prime Minister Gottwald's Communist inclinations and by the considerable influence over the 'masses' which the Communist party now enjoyed. The Party 'also controlled the police and the mass media. It used blackmail and violence against politicians of the democratic bloc, eliminated the non-communist leaders in Slovakia, mobilized its supporters in the army and trade unions, built up a network of fellow travellers within other political parties and armed its People's Militia.'[73]

Antagonisms escalated and the 'time for the decisive showdown was now not far off. On 20th February 1948 an acute cabinet crisis was at hand and the democratic ministers resigned from the government convinced that president Benes would not accept their resignation, which would mean the fall of the Gottwald government and early elections.'[74] This was the opportunity for which the Communists had been waiting and they eagerly seized the crisis

> as the pretext for a police putsch. The Social Democrats never joined the other democratic parties in resigning - they had not the courage, . . . Yet, on the other hand, the Party did not join the Communists either when they wanted to form a government excluding the other parties. It just sat on the fence, and so the Communists came to the conclusion that a certain amount of pressure was necessary.
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> On February 24th, when the headquarters and printing offices of the other non-Communist parties had already been occupied

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[73] Hans Renner. A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. (p8)

[74] Hans Renner. A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. (p9)

by "action committees" and their functionaries arrested by Communist police, the Social Democrats still could not make up their minds if their Ministers should resign and join democracy, remain in office and join the Communists or just sit and wait. Rank and file party members wanted to fight, the left wing wanted to give in. It was imperative to come to a decision, but there was still no decision. So, to help matters, at about lunchtime the Communist militia, seconded by the police, invaded the Social Democrat building. They occupied the basement and lower floors, while the Party's Executive was deliberating in the upper part. On the staircase, between the room in which the meeting was taking place and the Communists, stood a determined and courageous group of Social Democratic members, students and employees of the Central Office who had hastened to help, and for hours they held back the Communist rabble in short, but sometimes bloody clashes. Towards the evening the attacks all at once relaxed: Fierlinger, heartily greeted by the militia, appeared in the building, and joined the discussion of the Executive. He asked the Party to form a government with the Communists, and that the Party's Chairman and some other representatives should resign their functions. His suggestions were defeated. After that Fierlinger stepped into the adjoining room, dialed a number on the telephone and, according to several witnesses, said:

"They do not want to see reason - go to it!"

In ten minutes' time a number of lorries drove up to the building, bringing several hundred more militiamen. Shortly afterwards, the Communists broke through the barrier on the stairs, invaded the whole building and dispersed the Executive.[75]

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[75] Jan Stransky. East Wind over Prague. London: World Affairs Book Club,1950. (p200-2).

Prague was paralysed. Its people numbly conformed to the demands of the usurping power and submitted to the indignities of the new regime. The army, the police and the Press were brought under Communist control: the populace was bullied and blackmailed into allegiance to the Communist cause. 'All the workers in the factory . . . had been given rifles and told to march to the Vaclavské Namesti or lose their jobs. That was on February 23rd, the day the new police swarmed everywhere in pairs, boys in their early twenties with the snub black noses of rifles showing over their left shoulders, even in our quiet street. I saw also one of the armed workers' processions making for the city centre: many elderly men in it trailed their rifles with the look of dogs who know that tin cans have been tied to their tails. In the Kaunic Palace, since the members of our Institute were partisans of the West, there was more weeping. People poured their distress into our bosoms, some of them wildly asking: Why did the Great Powers like France and Britain *allow* it? So many people were openly crying as they walked through the streets that no one found it odd.'[76]

The city was flooded with saturation Communism. There was no escape and no reverse. On the 25th February, 'the newspapers appeared . . . under Communist editorship, and all saying the same thing. At last, in the late afternoon, Gottwald announced over the radio that the President had accepted the Communist government.'[77] Benes - old, sick and tired - resigned on the 7th June. He 'died on 3 September of the same year, just in time to get a state funeral.'[78]

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[76] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p234)
[77] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p261)
[78] Hans Renner. A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. (p11)

It was all over. There had been no struggle and virtually no resistance. 'With a few exceptions, (e.g. the vehement protest by Czech students), the reaction to the February events can be described as resigned. After Munich and the German occupation the communist coup was the third blow for the Czechoslovaks to cope with within ten years, while they had not yet recovered from the previous two. They trusted and counted on Benes and the democratic leaders, but these gave in. In this situation the Czechs and the Slovaks could not be expected to climb the barricades, quite apart from the fact that barricades, armed resistance and heroic uprising did not fit in with their historic tradition. What did? Apparently what did fit was their talent to adapt themselves from pure self-preservation to the enforced reality while awaiting better times or the right occasion to take fate into their own hands.'[79]

This apparent apathy and uncomplaining fatalism was a source of bemused irritation to Willa. 'I wonder about this country. . . . The Czechs certainly seem to be reconciling themselves to the régime, as if it were the weather, to be accepted though grumbled at.'[80] Their complacent passivity frustrated her and 'there were days when my heart withered up and I felt a scunner at the Czechs, mere grumblers at a fait accompli; there were other days when I was filled with remorse, especially when my friend Jirina, who was being threatened with the loss of her widow's pension if she did not join the Party, said one must never lose faith, never give up hope.'[81] Willa watched with pained resentment as the machinery of Communism ground down the people and the places she had come to love. 'In the streets, in the trams, one saw the same closed faces. People no longer talked to each other; the fear of spies and informers was in the air as thickly as in the time of the German Occupation; no one, it seemed, trusted anyone else.'[82]

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[79] Hans Renner. A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. (p18)

[80] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[81] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p238)

Edwin still lectured at the University but 'all was changed; my class, once eager to discuss everything, was silent. Two Communists were in attendance, taking down what I had said. I could speak to my class, but I no longer had any contact with it. Yet in spite of this I felt in a privileged position, compared with the Czech professors and lecturers who were in the employment of the State. I did not try, therefore, to modify the tone of my lectures to suit the new demands. I was ploughing through the Victorian age at the time, and when I came to John Stuart Mill, I gave my students a summary of his ideas on liberty. The two Communists grew agitated; the students seemed to be fearfully enjoying a forbidden pleasure: I felt them coming to life again. But it was a temporary revival; the class quickly dwindled.'[83]

The Communists were, in any case, ruthless in their expurgation of unsuitable 'bourgeois' literature - particularly Czech and Slovak writings. 'The head of the communist inquisition in Prague was Václav Kopecky. He banned the 'remains of bourgeois ideology' so forcefully, that, of the big private book collections confiscated by the state, half of all titles, some 7 million copies, ended up in the paper mill. A mere 3 million books were thought to be ideologically harmless and taken to public libraries, the rest went to various warehouses not open to the public. As regards the liquidation of Czechoslovak literature, the communists even outdid the National Socialist 'Kulturpolitik' of the German occupation. The literature confiscated by the Nazis in the years 1941-4 (from bookshops, publishers, colleges, public libraries and so on) consisted of a "mere" 2,100,000.'[84] Edwin, who had just repaired some of the literary damage which the Nazis had wrought in the Charles University Library, watched this new process of destruction with heartbroken disbelief.

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[82] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p238)
[83] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p268-9)

Innumerable personal tragedies were played out against the backcloth of national disaster. A glut of suspicious suicides and mysterious disappearances greeted the Communist Putsch; and Dick Pollak was merely one amongst the many Czechoslovaks who vanished during the dying days of February 1948. 'He told Edith he had to go to Brno, went off without any pyjamas or anything, as if for the day, but didn't come back.'[85] Edith greeted the ensuing suicide note with stunned and silent anguish: she and Dick had been married for less than a year. It was impossible to comfort or to solace such a sorrow: Dick's erstwhile colleagues rallied round and the officers of the British Council rapidly arranged for her immediate return to England.

It was a painful episode and one which left the Institute bereft of a loved friend and a trusted colleague. Willa, whose emotions were profusely coloured by her love for her own husband, was particularly sensitive to the enormity of Edith's loss and was 'haunted by thoughts of Edith and Dick. Edith is . . . crazy with grief.'[86]

May brought brighter news from Britain. Dick was alive, well and reunited with Edith who had apparently collaborated in his faked suicide and his hurried escape from his homeland. The tidings brought a rare gleam of sunlight into the overwhelmingly gloom-ridden Institute. Reg was the only voice of outraged disgruntlement: he told Willa in a fit of pique that it was 'quite ridiculous the theatrical way these people go on: I shall never forgive Edith Clayton for the wild way she went on. And it was nonsense Pollak carrying on like that: they didn't want to get hold of him, they were probably only too glad to get him out of the country. . . And all he wants now is for the B.C. to send his things after him! That's all the thanks we get.'[87]

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[84] Hans Renner. A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. (p22)

[85] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[86] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Numerous Czech lives were immediately blighted and destroyed by the chilly blast of Communism. The suicide of Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk on the 10th of March affected the entire nation. Masaryk's father, had been the first president of the Czech Republic, and Jan had inherited his father's patriotism. Throughout the Nazi occupation, he had indomitably embodied and preserved the spirit of the Czech republic and was a virtual icon of his people's independence. And now he, and all that he had represented, was dead. The 'whole country was convulsed with grief, a deep, human grief that came up against the impersonal, cold, synthetic system of Communism but could not overcome it.'[88]

Lumir Soukup was Masaryk's secretary at the Czech foreign office in Prague and insisted that the death was a genuine and pre-meditated suicide; but other observers were less sanguine about the circumstances surrounding Masaryk's demise.

> Jan Masaryk's body was found at 5:30 A.M. in the courtyard of the Czernin Palace. Was it suicide or a murder? The circumstantial evidence indicates foul play, and a strong

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[87] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[88] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p235)

suspicion that he was murdered is supported by the evasive official reports. Masaryk wanted to leave the country and strange things happened during the critical night. If Masaryk attempted to leave secretly by plane, and if he sought the assistance of the British secret service, then such a plan would have been known to the Russians. At least three Soviet spies, Guy Burgess, Donald MacLean and Kim Philby . . . had operated *within* the British secret police. In such a case, the emergency action by the Soviet, Beria-Zorin-operated KGB assassination squad in Prague would have to act swiftly to prevent further embarrassment in the United Nations. . . . But nobody knows for sure and the KGB files do not leak. The decisive argument against the murder alternative is the correct reasoning that Gottwald needed Masaryk in the new government. The fallacy lies in the assumption that Gottwald controlled the operations of Beria's agents, which he did not. It is also naive to attribute to . . . Gottwald the civilized restraints of a parliamentary lobbyist. If Gottwald could hang his best Communist friends on trumped-up charges in 1952, why not secretly eliminate a bourgeois enemy . . . ? Masaryk's escape had to be prevented by any means, and Beria knew how to cover up the murders as suicides and how to take care of a murder with a eulogy.

From a Soviet point of view, Masaryk's presence in the government was problematic, and it was obvious that he could not be trusted in the new circumstances. . . . Was he driven into suicide by strange events of the last night or was he murdered? The Czech Communist government never bothered to find out, never disclosed any documents relevant to the case: and the mockery of an investigation from the Prague Spring of 1968

> ended with an official report that Masaryk's death was not even a suicide but an unfortunate accident. We are told that Masaryk liked to sit with crossed legs on the window sill - to cool off in cases of sleeplessness! Whatever happened, it is certain that it accentuated the previous national crisis by a personal tragedy of a man well known and liked by Western statesmen. Masaryk's body was displayed in the Czernin Palace, and crying crowds passed along the coffin to pay their last respects.[89]

Lumir was 'appointed the executor of Jan Masaryk's papers, and although being followed round by a Communist watch-dog, thought he would be safe enough until he had finished that job. His wife had been summoned home to Edinburgh where her father was mortally ill, and would not now be coming back. Lumir did not want us to communicate with him at all: better not, he said.'[90] He was increasingly elusive and secretive about his activities and often unexpectedly and uncharacteristically absented himself from Institute and Foreign Office receptions. Willa worried about his wellbeing; but knew that it was impossible to contact him without endangering his life. Six weeks passed without sight or sound of him until, on the 5th of May:

> the telephone in the hall rang . . . when I was busy with flower pots, and Edwin, after a little prodding answered it. He was beginning to withdraw himself from taking action of any kind, but this evening's happenings brought him back down to earth again. He returned puzzled, giving the name of a British Embassy attaché who, it appeared, had rung up to ask if we would both be at home, saying he would ring again later, before

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[89] Ivan Sviták. The Unbearable Burden of History. The Sovietization of Czechoslovakia. Vol 1: From Munich to Yalta. Prague: Academia Praha, 1990. (p107-8)
[90] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p235)

he came in. We were not intimate with him, and it seemed odd that he should have referred to me as 'Willa'. When the telephone rang again, I answered it, and recognised Lumir's voice as he gave the false name. Would we open the outside gates, he said, in about five minutes' time? When Edwin heard that it was Lumir, he roused himself and went out to the gates. Presently they both came in, but Lumir would not sit down until he had made sure that all the windows were shut and all curtains drawn tightly across them. He did then sit down and told us he was going to escape in the coming weekend, when there was a holiday of two days for all government offices, thanks to Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius, whom the government had forgotten to abolish. The route he proposed to take, across the south-western frontier into Austria, was dangerous, patrolled by men with rifles and police dogs. About one man in five got through, said Lumir, but he was going to take his chance. On this evening he had thrown off the man who was tailing him and had come to say goodbye. We weren't to worry about him; he would get across the frontier. . . .

Lumir looked as if he had been shrunk and bleached. Sheer lack of sleep, he said, working all day and more or less conspiring all night. His job was ended now, and it wouldn't be safe for him to stay; he knew too much. Once he was across, the young British attaché, whose name he had used, would tell us, sending a message about the edition of Shakespeare having safely come to hand, or something like that. He would make his way somehow across the sea and get to England.[91]

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[91] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p240-1)

An agonising and suspenseful wait ensued: but the Muirs were eventually informed of his safe arrival in Britain and of his joyful reunion with Catriona.

The Institute meanwhile struggled to maintain some semblance of normality in the form of routine receptions, lectures, informal gatherings and magazine evenings; but it was increasingly difficult to stem the rising flood of panic amongst the staff and their families. Many of Edwin's colleagues felt that their work was irrelevant within the new regime; and suggested that their primary duty was now to inform and warn the outside world of the horrors of Communism. '[S]ome of the wives insisted on going home to England, as did also some of the British wives in the city who had married Czech soldiers during the war.'[92]

Spring blossomed into farewell parties and leavetakings - and Edwin suggested that Willa should join the general exodus. He urged 'me to go, sooner or later. I am deeply distressed. I feel no clear call from within to scuttle home. I want to stay here, until events force me out. Left to myself, I am shocked but not panic-stricken, and feel that one can carry on an outpost here of some kind. . . . There are too many people here to whom I feel bound. My general horizon is clouded, even misty, but not lurid. I may be blunted, less sensitive, less receptive than I should be, or I may be incurably an optimist, but I think more of personal relations with people and less of political pressures. Perhaps I believe vaguely in something like a transfiguration of life from within. I hate these political pressures: I hate violence and injustice: but I can keep moving amongst them, I think, and yet keep something real alive.'[93]

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[92] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p235-6)
[93] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

She and Edwin were tired and jaded by the constant battle against overwhelmingly life-inhibiting forces. The constant pressures and tensions of Prague and the Institute systematically destroyed their residual optimism and energy: they were no longer fit to cope with the simplest demands of life. They retreated to a spa at Piestany in Southern Slovakia at Easter and 'as the days went on, lying sodden in bed all afternoon, after a morning at the baths; we felt better and more relaxed.'[94]

But they realised that 'the strain was wearing us down, the double strain of life in the Council and under the Communist government in the country.'[95] Edwin was increasingly disillusioned by his ineffectiveness and 'felt that I was not doing any good in Prague. When my students came to see me at the Institute or at our house, I could offer them what comfort I could think of, but I could not give then any encouragement without the risk of getting them into trouble. It was a hopeless position, and when the Chairman of the Council came out to Prague, I told him that I wished to be transferred to some other post. He promised to see what could be done.'[96]

Willa was ecstatic. 'Edwin has done it! He saw Sir Ronald just before 12 and asked for a transfer on the score of health. Sir R., Edwin says, looked a little apprehensive when he began, as if he were expecting recriminations about Reg, and he was very relieved when Edwin merely brought up his health. Sir R. said "we must find you a good job", "we must give you a choice of two or three", and was very sympathetic. So Edwin feels deeply relieved, and so do I.'[97]

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[94] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[95] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p240)
[96] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p269)
[97] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

But relief could not dispel the heart-felt despair and emotional fragility of many months of anxious misery. Soon after Edwin's interview with Sir Ronald, Willa 'finished a piece of Kafka I had been translating through and between everything. With the end of that task, my ravaged nervous system began to make itself more felt: I found myself shivering and sobbing for no reason at all; anything could make my eyes overflow.'[98] Loneliness and uncertainty filled her soul; and she retreated to her bed where she 'cried, and felt miserable. Edwin sat in drawing room and came in after ten to tell me wireless news, but long before that I had convinced myself that he wasn't really fond of me at all (leaving me as I wouldn't leave a dog) but only habituated to me; . . . that his nervous tension was partly caused by his inability to love anyone but himself! So I had decided to treat him accordingly on the assumption that I had spoiled him by giving him fondness and expecting too little in return. All of this vanished, of course, as we both recovered a bit next day.'[99]

They turned their weary minds towards the day which would release them from this living nightmare; and extended their residual love towards the friends they would probably never see again. Willa organised a farewell party; but it was not easy to say goodbye and there was a great heaviness in their hearts as they packed their few possessions.

There was one last Communist-inspired ordeal to be endured before they could escape Prague. They were not allowed to leave until government officials had thoroughly checked all of their belongings, 'from the pillow-sheets to the coffee-spoons, so as to assure themselves that we were not taking any Czech property out of the country.'[100] Willa was required 'to make a list in Czech of every item we proposed to put in the van, and the list had to be in triplicate.'[101] And so:

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[98] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p240)
[99] Willa Muir. Journal: Prague. January 1948-May 1948. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> two Customs officers arrived to check my lists. The Ministry had carefully sent two men who spoke no English; they had closed, unsmiling poker faces. I was not quite at ease, because among our books were some of Lumir's, volumes about Masaryk that were now taboo, and I feared they might be confiscated. But we started at the kitchen end of our possessions, counting coffee spoons, cutlery, towels, china and glass, item by item, checked by the Customs officers on the lists they held. It was a dreary process, which Edwin was lucky enough to miss, since he had gone to the Kaunic Palace.
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> Then a glass tumbler turned up, with the first verse of a patriotic poem by Jan Neruda painted all around it in white, with red ornaments and capital letters. One of the Customs men picked it up and began to read the poem. His face broke into a smile, a very human smile, and he said: 'Jan Neruda is my favourite poet.' I smiled back and we began to discuss Neruda's poems. The whole atmosphere was altered in a trice. I sent for some lemon tea and biscuits from the kitchen and the three of us sat down to a friendly survey of Czech poetry . . . . After that there was no more separate checking of items. The Customs men waved their arms, comprehensively taking in everything of ours, signed all the lists without further ado and wished me a good journey.[102]

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[100] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p269)
[101] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p242)
[102] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p242-3)

And so the Muirs' Prague sojourn ended. 'On the last day of July we found ourselves on the train to the border. It stopped there for two hours, in a hot dusty station. People here and there were ejected, and luggage flung out of windows. At last the train went on and we were running through the American zone of Germany.'[103] Britain beckoned.

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[103] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p269)

CHAPTER XII

AN INTERLUDE OF NOTHINGNESS: 1948-1949

Bleak misery suffused the six months which followed their return from Prague. 'By the time we got to Cambridge where we had been recommended to try a quiet boarding-house called "The Hermitage" . . . we were both exhausted. The exhaustion took us in different ways. My back seemed broken in two but I was still more or less myself; Edwin's back stayed unbroken but he was hardly recognizable as the same man.'[1] Adrenalin and sheer will power had carried them through the latter stages of their Prague sojourn; but Edwin now retreated into the deep, despairing recesses of his mind and soul.

Whilst he had remained in Prague, he had been 'taken up so much with so many different things, many of them troubling, finally after February 1948, all of them troubling. After I left Czechoslovakia . . . I paid for this with a breakdown . . . . It was the result of living as one should not live, and in surroundings I could not like (I mean after the communist putsch.) There was so much fear diffused over Prague that we could not get away from it.'[2] He now felt as if he had fallen 'plumb into a dead pocket of life which I had never guessed at before. It was hard to live there, simply because it was unimaginably uninteresting. I awoke each morning feeling that I had lost or mislaid something which I was accustomed to but could not name; I slowly realized that it was the little spring of hope, or of interest, with which the day once began. . . . This left a blankness which was very disagreeable; and wrapped in it I had neither the power nor the wish to regret the loss of what had been a part of myself; yet I was not resigned either, but merely apathetic. Memories of Prague now and then shivered the surface of my mind, but never sank deep into it. I wandered about the colleges, seeing but not feeling their beauty; I navigated a punt on the river, played clock-golf and table tennis on a lawn behind the house, and read detective stories. I was a poor companion to my wife in these weeks.'[3]

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[1] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p244)
[2] Edwin Muir in a letter to Irene Abenheimer. Rome, 1949.

Willa despaired of ever being able to retrieve him from this utter inanimation. Many years had passed since he had last subjected her to a bout of the remoteness which had dogged the early years of their marriage. But he now 'seemed almost dumb and although neither deaf nor blind heard or saw things without attaching meaning to them. His eyes went to and fro following, as if by compulsion, any small movement within range, a tortoise walking along a garden path or a golf ball being putted across a lawn, but they might as well have been camera eyes; he watched these movements with the vacant stare of a shell-shock case after a modern war. In response to suggestion from me he reacted with mechanical politeness, sitting down to food and eating it, accompanying me for a walk, undressing and going to bed, but he initiated no conversation, no action. Left to himself he merely sat and stared.'[4]

Willa inevitably experienced Edwin's 'complete withdrawal from life'[5] as a personal affliction with which she had to cope alone. Loneliness and isolation surrounded her and she was painfully aware that the 'other people in the boarding-house were not of the kind to help us in any way. Employed in university offices or laboratories they were closed in their own parochial round and talked their own shop, giving out no human warmth to us and very little, I think, to each other. . . . Edwin, anyhow, was unaware of them. He was nearly unaware of me but not quite; he went on accepting suggestions as I made them. His formal politeness was heart-rending.'[6]

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[3] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p270)
[4] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p244)
[5] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. London, 11th November 1966.

A friendly hand was extended by E.M. Forster. 'We had never met him before, but Edwin was very friendly with his cousin, J.R. Ackerley, who had passed on the information that Edwin was to be at the Hermitage. Mr Forster sat down and gently tried to talk to Edwin but could get no response; after a little while he went quietly away.'[7]

Willa was meanwhile struggling with the onset of the excruciating and incapacitating back troubles which were to torment the remaining years of her life. She consciously sublimated her own physical suffering in order to tend to Edwin's emotional breakdown but she was intensely aware of the potential seriousness of her complaint. The pain increased in intensity throughout the months of their stay in Cambridge until eventually, at the beginning of December, a discharge of fluid from the base of her spine relieved her discomfort, but did not solve the actual problem. She consulted a London specialist who subjected her to various tests and X-rays and decided that she required extensive surgery to her lower back. The operation never took place. Instead, she had 'ten million units of penicillin shot into me, and it has CURED the infection. A sheer miracle. I can now bend and straighten and even walk fast!'[8] But it was a qualified miracle.

Optimism crept back into their lives as the depression slowly lifted from Edwin's soul and the pain receded slightly from Willa's back. They began to venture beyond the immediate confines of the gardens at 'The Hermitage' and 'so discovered Clare Fellows' Garden which seemed the very place for both of us. No one queried our entry and we went there daily to sit beside a lily pool with busy birds and green, growing plants around us. Edwin now began to give signs of coming back. He noticed that I moved with difficulty because my back hurt and he said he was sorry. We actually exchanged a smile or two. . . . Yet his reviving awareness of the world had little warmth in it.'[9]

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[6] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p245)
[7] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p245)
[8] Willa Muir in a letter to Dora Anderson. London, 21st January 1949.

They also discovered a small local pub into which they eventually ventured with Gavin, who had joined them for part of his summer vacation. 'It was a usual kind of small English pub, but it had cushioned benches as well as the usual piano, a dreadful instrument which Gavin could not resist trying. After producing some lively jazz from it he launched out on a Polonaise of Chopin's which pleased the few customers. When more people came in, he was urged to play on, and a warm feeling spread in the air. Every evening after that we dropped in at the pub and were welcomed, because of our son's piano performances, with a simple friendliness that I think did Edwin good.'[10]

The British Council meanwhile endeavoured to find suitable employment for Edwin. Various possible posts in Coimbra, Padua and Hamburg[11] were suggested and then withdrawn; but Edwin seemed entirely indifferent to this uncertainty about the future. His only expressed desire was 'to breathe the air of Scotland before I go away again';[12] and Willa was reluctantly willing to humour him.

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[9] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p246)
[10] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p246)
[11] Willa Muir in a letter to Dora Anderson. London, December 29th 1948.
[12] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In The Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p150)

His sentimentalised Scottish cravings were temporarily assuaged by the realities of their northern foray. So many 'people wanted to see them that he got quite exhausted. They pretended to leave Edinburgh, but in fact settled in a quiet little hotel, where they had, he wrote to Miss Patricia Swayle, a colleague in Prague, "a large room with large windows looking out on trees and the Pentland Hills. It is one of those places where the meals are served in one's room: we have had to see literally no one but each other, a Polish man-servant and a Polish maid, and it has been really lovely. I think these misanthropical establishments should be encouraged."[E.M. in a letter to Swayle. 16th October 1948]'.[13]

They returned refreshed to London, where they stayed initially with friends and then latterly in lodgings in Hampstead where happy memories surrounded them. It was a period of healing; and the 'kindness of London, born during the blitz, was a comfort to us after the chilly suspicion that had closed over Prague; and it helped to relieve a succession of dead months.'[14]

Christmas (for which Gavin joined them in London) passed in a turmoil of suitcases and uncertainty; but the door into the future re-opened decisively in January 1949 when the British Council asked Edwin to take up an appointment as the Director of the British Institute in Rome. Willa was thrilled at the prospect of Italy; and Edwin was, by this time, sufficiently recovered to anticipate the appointment with equanimity if not enthusiasm. But there was no time for reflection; the 'strange interlude'[15] was over and a new chapter was about to begin.

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[13] Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966. (p230)

[14] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993. (p270)

[15] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p246)

CHAPTER XIII

ROME AND THE SPIRIT OF HEALING. 1949-1950.

A piercingly cold winter greeted their arrival in Rome at the end of January 1949. It might almost have been Prague; except that the chill stopped short at the Institute door. The spontaneous warmth of the welcome which Willa and Edwin received within the building was adequate compensation for the Arctic weather conditions outside. The atmosphere was redolent with relaxed happiness and quiet efficiency, and the staff exuded an aura of good-natured harmony. Roger Hinks, whom Edwin was replacing as director of the Institute, 'had been so loved by his staff that I felt, the first morning I called at the Institute, that I was breaking into an Eden which could never be quite the same again, now that he was about to leave it. He inducted me into my work and gave me a great deal of useful advice before he left.'[1] It was April before Edwin was left in sole charge of the Institute and its staff.

Hinks bequeathed an enthusiastic, motivated and amiable team with a commitment to the Institute and an affection for the people of Rome. Edwin rapidly realised that he had a 'staff I should thank God for; it is great good luck that I happened upon them. It is great good fortune to work along with people you like and who like one another: it makes all the difference between happiness and frustration.'[2] He was particularly fortunate in his Director of Studies - a delightful Glaswegian called Joe O'Brien - who shared Edwin's egalitarian vision of the Institute's rôle within the local community.

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[1] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p272)

[2] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p154)

The staff were initially uneasy about this new arrival in their paradise, and apprehensive about the effect which 'an official tied up in red tape' might exert upon the idyllic and relaxed working ambience of the Institute. These fears were finally expressed by 'Laura Minervine, the secretary and moving soul of the Institute,' who 'took me aside one day and told me how happily they had all worked together till now, and how much she wished they might do so still, now that I had come.'[3] Edwin hastily reassured her of his abhorrence of formal bureaucracy and of his commitment to the maintenance of the office's tradition of warmth and friendliness.

It was an environment which promised contentment and kindred spirits, and Edwin observed the workings of his new realm with optimistic satisfaction. He and Willa were also enormously encouraged by their first encounter with Ronald Bottrall, a minor poet and the Council Representative in Italy. He immediately 'held up to our ridicule, with loud guffaws, London's warning to him before our arrival that Edwin was a trouble-maker and Willa a dangerous woman. We laughed too, though not quite so whole-heartedly; we thought we knew where this assessment of the Muirs had come from, even if Ronald might have embroidered it a little.'[4] But Prague and its painful memories became increasingly dim and distant and Rome absorbed them instead into its comforting and maternal bosom.

The three month hiatus between their own arrival and the departure of Hinks allowed the Muirs a blissful period of establishment and exploration. Willa's first priority was to seek suitable accommodation away from the noise and the bustle of their city centre hotel. She trailed dutifully and despairingly around New Rome's fashionable quarters; before suggesting to their letting agent that the less aggressively chic ethos of Old Rome might harmonise better with their modest tastes. She was exhausted and bronchitis-ridden when they finally discovered 'a small penthouse on top of a solid apartment block beside the Tiber, in the Campo Marzio. Once we stood on its wide terraces we knew that this flat was ours. The east terrace looked towards the Quirinal, over some of the oldest roofs in Rome; the west terrace faced the Tiber and the Palace of Justice.'[5] This lofty 'gingerbread house suitable for Hansel and Gretel'[6] was a source of great happiness and healing throughout their Roman residency. 'We would welcome the sun on either terrace or avoid it by shifting to the other as seemed convenient. Sitting beside tubs of geraniums, oleander and Beautiful Ladies of the Night, on top of the Roman world, we were deeply content'.[7]

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[3] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p272)
[4] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p251)

Rome itself was a reason for happiness. They fell in love with this city in which the very bricks of the buildings seemed to be suffused with a palpable sense of the continuity of the centuries. Willa was intensely moved by this historic unity of all peoples and ages; and felt a sense of her own belonging to the timeless human family of mother Rome. The city was peculiarly familiar to her and its landmarks were somehow 'already loaded with associations. The Tiber was a known river as the Vlatava had not been; we had never heard of the Prague Hradcany before seeing it, but we had heard of the Quirinal; a hill outlined in the sky from our western terrace had been long known to me as Horace's Soracte, *nive candida,* a piece of knowledge now shared by Edwin. In the same way all through the city the many great buildings that witnessed to the ambitions and aspirations of the men who had erected them were already familiar to our minds. What we had known as concepts or pictures now became actual, daily realities. We recognized that the layers of history visible in Rome were layers from the history of European civilization, our own history.'[8]

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[5] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p252)
[6] Edwin Muir in a letter to Patricia Swayle. In Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966. (p231)
[7] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p255)

They passed many blissful days in simply wandering the city and exploring the various architectural wonders which greeted them at every turn. A sense of historic calm enfolded them and they revelled in the occasional 'vistas at street corners where one looked from one century to another'[9].

Willa exulted in this intimate and spiritual reunion with the peoples of the past but she could not share Edwin's excitement at the numerous instances of the Incarnation made visible. Rome inspired in him a living sense of the Word made flesh. Images of Christ were 'to be seen everywhere, not only in churches, but on the walls of houses, at cross-roads in the suburbs, in wayside shrines in the parks, and in private rooms'[10], and Edwin was deeply moved by these overwhelmingly frank incarnations of God in human form. 'This open declaration was to me the very mark of Christianity, distinguishing it from the older religions. For although the pagan gods had visited the earth and conversed with men, they did not assume the burden of our flesh, live our life and die our death, but after their interventions withdrew into their impenetrable privacy.'[11] Willa watched with uncomprehending wonder and relief as 'Edwin was flooded with a love for the incarnate Jesus. After that experience there was no more withdrawal. What he had called The Interceptor in a Prague poem never came back at all: he was wholly committed to sharing in human life - not easy for anyone, nor for him, but he did it wonderfully.'[12]

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[8] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p255-6)
[9] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p273)
[10] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p274)
[11] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p274)
[12] Willa Muir in a letter to Peter Butter. London, 11th November 1966.

Rome filled them both with a profound contentment. Their happiness was heightened by an emotional reunion with a war-scarred Hilde whom Willa summoned from the northern shores of Lake Como where, since 1945, she had been living with her Italian husband and son. The hardships and ravages of ten long years had radically altered her physical appearance; but her indomitable spirit had survived the horrors of a war in Germany and a mother-in-law in Italy. Her affection for the Muirs was undiminished and she was desperate to assume her former position as their housekeeper and cook. Her only hesitant demand was that Mario, her five-year-old son, might be allowed to share the small spare room with her. Willa naturally agreed at once and by the end of February they were all contentedly settled into the roof-top penthouse in the Campo Marzio.

It was a happy household. Mario was frightened and 'very tense at first. He ran at Hilde's heels like a shadow, as if he were afraid to lose sight of her even for a moment. But soon he began to play on the terraces and a corner of the kitchen became his private den, where he hammered pieces of wood together to make aeroplanes. He would rush along the back terrace, which was wide and quiet, flying his aeroplanes at the full stretch of his arms and making them zoom down with terrifying noises.'[13]

Hilde meanwhile worked her usual domestic magic: 'her foraging among Roman shops and market-stalls was highly successful. In about six wine-shops she sampled the draught wines - her taste in wines was professionally excellent - and having found a good red *vino aperto* in one of them she laid it in for us by the litre.'[14] She relished the challenge of a party or a dinner gathering, and encouraged the Muirs in their prolific hospitality. The flat was constantly awash with a deluge of old and new friends. Rome and the Institute furnished them with an instant social circle; but they also gathered friends from the Scots College (in which Joe O'Brien had a friend who was a Monsignore); and the Vatican where another of the Institute staff had a brother who served in the Pope's Noble Guard and who could guarantee them seats at any ceremonial in St Peter's. Rome also boasted a 'double contingent of diplomats, those accredited, as usual, in Embassies to the Italian Republic and those accredited to the Vatican, so that the round of diplomatic cocktail parties was twice as large as elsewhere. The only thing to do, we were told, was to attend them all at first, until we discovered for ourselves which we could omit. We found it easy to decide on omissions. In general Edwin and I followed up introductions only to the people we personally liked.'[15]

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[13] Willa Muir. About Hilde. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[14] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p254)

They were both deeply appreciative of the immediate, open and intimate affection of Rome and its citizens. '[I]t was a new experience to know people who spoke from the heart, simply and naturally, without awkwardness, and put all of themselves, heart and soul, into what they said. I had known fresh and natural speech among Orkney farmers living close to the cattle and the soil, but not till now among men and women moulded by city life, and sometimes of subtle mind. From such people what one expects is sophistication, but here there was something quite different, for which sophistication seemed a vulgar substitute. The people we knew had the air of stepping out completely into life, and their speech, even at its idlest, had something of the accent of Dante, . . . The humanity was perfectly natural, but

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[15] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p251-2)

I knew that naturalness does not come easily to the awkward human race, and that this was an achievement of life.'[16]

The customary and delightful Italian throng in the Muir's flat was often complemented by the welcome arrival of old friends from past places. Rome seemed to be a 'sort of thoroughfare all the world passes through'[17] and the lofty penthouse on the Campo Marzio was often inundated with a stream of foreign guests. Graham Greene, V.S. Pritchett, George Scott-Moncreiff, Rex Warner and Douglas Young all found their way to the Muirs' door; and W.H. Auden 'turned up one evening and over litres of *vino aperto* . . . argued the case for the resurrection of the body while Edwin argued for the immortality of the soul'.[18]

The leisured months which preceded Edwin's inheritance of the Institute reins allowed the Muirs to conduct their own exploration of Italy. Edwin's lecture tours stretched from Venice in the north to Syracuse in the south - with Naples, Palermo, Florence, Bologna, Milan, Genoa, Siena, Perugia and Assisi along the way. And in the course of their travels, they were constantly struck by the beauty of the buildings and the artefacts which had been produced by centuries of Italian imagination and invention. But they did not love these cities as they loved Rome, and they were always glad to return to their roof-top haven in the capital.

They were vaguely relieved when this limbo period ended and the official work began. Edwin immediately set about galvanising the Institute into new life without threatening the old atmosphere. He and Joe hoped to extend the

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[16] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p271)
[17] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p155)
[18] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p255)

Institute's restricted membership and they therefore persuaded the Council to open an Institute tea-room. Tidings of the tea-room spread rapidly across the city and 'it became a favourite rendezvous for Romans. They did not bother to say 'The British Institute Tea-room'; they told each other simply: I'll meet you at The British.' Because the atmosphere of the whole Institute was friendly and welcoming, the response from Romans was instantaneous and the membership went up by leaps and bounds.'[19]

There was a constant and contented bustle in the corridors and classrooms of the Institute; lectures and magazine evenings were well and widely attended and eager young Italians swamped the regular social gatherings. Edwin once more revelled in his teaching; and both he and Willa threw themselves into the Institute's chaotic life. The Institute under Edwin's ministrations was still, to the relief of its anxious staff, 'a sort of talkative Eden and was the most friendly, kind, busy place imaginable.'[20]

But the Institute's expansion and success were achieved 'at a price of energy paid out'[21] and by the beginning of July, Edwin and Willa were utterly exhausted. Thunderclouds hovered menacingly on the skyline and Rome sweltered unbearably in the heat of an Italian summer while its citizens disappeared *en masse* to cooler climes. Hilde accordingly wiled Edwin and Willa to the banks of Lake Como where they enjoyed a happy and peaceful summer amidst wild flowers and mountain breezes. Gavin - who had graduated in maths and astronomy on the 30th June - joined them for a summer vacation before returning to St Andrews in October 'to do a special thesis in Astronomy. . . on the occultation of stars by Jupiter, by way of helping his Professor, Freundlich, in some new theory concerning relativity.'[22] Edwin and Willa returned to Rome at the end of September by way of a P.E.N. conference in Venice.

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[19] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p257)
[20] Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993. (p272)
[21] Willa Muir in a letter to Dora Anderson. Rome, 2nd December 1949.

The pleasant warmth of early autumn hung over the capital and the Muirs basked in the soft light which danced across the early evening on their roof-top terrace. The penthouse was Edwin's only refuge from the joyful - but exhausting - life and chatter with which the Institute was constantly abuzz and he retreated gladly homeward at the close of every day. Willa was meanwhile frantically engaged in writing a factual account of Hilde's dramatic wartime experiences; and was determined to get the completed text to London by Christmas.

They were generally happy and fulfilled; although exhaustion and nagging ill-health occasionally sapped their energy and enthusiasm. Autumn brought Edwin 'the Foyle poetry prize, which has just been instituted this year, so that I'm the first to get it' and an honorary doctorate from the University of Rennes - 'but even they have failed to lift my present weariness.'[23] By December, Willa was feeling old, worn 'and due for some rejuvenation. . . . I am much too fat, and I can't do anything about it, whereas Edwin is still slim and youthful-looking except for grey hair.'[24] And so when Gavin arrived - at 'ruinous cost'[25] - to spend Chrstmas with them, they all retreated to Capri in order to recharge their sluggish batteries.

The new year - an Italian Holy Year - brought disturbing tidings from the British Council offices in London. The government had ordered immediate and drastic cuts in the Council subsidy; and the Council accordingly decided to shut down many of its European Insitutes 'on the theory, which we thought mistaken, that the United Kingdom was close enough to Europe to need little help from the Council in establishing good-neighbour relations. The money saved would be better used, it was thought, in setting up centres far away, in India, say, or Africa, or South America.'[26]

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[22] Willa Muir in a letter to Irene Abenheimer. Rome, 24th June 1949.

[23] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p154)

[24] Willa Muir in a letter to Dora Anderson. Rome, 2nd December 1949.

[25] Willa Muir in a letter to Dora Anderson. Rome, 2nd December 1949.

The Muirs were genuinely shocked and distressed by the decision. They had envisaged a long and settled sojourn in Rome, and were heartbroken at the prospect of leaving the city after only eighteen blissful months. So much remained unseen and undone; and they were particularly frustrated by the enforced cessation of the Institute's good and useful work. The Romans considered the decision 'to be an outrage, almost a national insult'[27]: but the Council was adament. The Institute's death sentence was pronounced; and the execution date was set for the beginning of July.

But there were rumblings from Scotland which hinted at a permanent job and a home at Newbattle Abbey College for the Muirs. The Abbey - a large, handsome and vaguely Gothic building set on the banks of the River Esk amidst acres of glorious, open countryside - had for many centuries been the principal seat of the Lothian family. Phillip Kerr (the then Lord Lothian) had handed the building over to the Scottish Education Department in 1937 for use as Scotland's only adult education college. But the War Department had requisitioned the College buildings in 1939 and the plans for the venture were necessarily and temporarily shelved. The time now seemed right for the College to open its doors to the adult students for whom Lord Lothian had originally intended it.

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[26] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p262)
[27] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p262)

And so the vast and disparate Executive Committee of Newbattle Abbey College turned its collective mind, during the early months of 1950, to the task of appointing a suitable warden for the project. Opinions were divided, and discord (with which both the committee and the college were perenially plagued for the next five years) was instantly rife. It was John Macmurray (a personal friend of the Muirs and the Professor of Philosophy and Chairman of the Extra-mural Committee at the University of Edinburgh) who first suggested that Edwin would be the ideal man for the job. Willie Ritchie (whose friendship with Edwin stretched back as far as their youthful socialist days in Glasgow) was also on the Committee and he added his voice of approbation to Macmurray's proposal. The debate eventually subsided and a decision was reached. Macmurray was commissioned to contact the Muirs and to extend an official invitation of employment to Edwin.

Edwin and Willa were unaware of the machinations which had been taking place on their behalf. The decision to close the Rome Institute had taken them by surprise and they were uncertain about their next step. They knew only that they wanted to return to Britain and to find a project to which they could devote their revived energies. The providential offer of the Newbattle position seemed to be the answer to their quest.

Edwin was instantly attracted by the College's liberal and imaginative constitution. It aimed to 'provide for the needs of those who, having been engaged for some years in the ordinary vocations of life, desire the opportunity of a wider and fuller education.'[28] And Edwin, 'if anyone, should know what it felt like to be a young adult hungering for education and enlightenment without knowing where to turn for help.'[29] But Willa was less instantly enthused by Macmurray's invitation. She couldn't entirely share Edwin's missionary zeal; nor could she forget the psychological and physical wounds of the St Andrews years.

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[28] Newbattle Abbey College Prospectus. 1950-51.

But a contradictory force was also at work in her heart and mind. The offer of the Newbattle job 'stirred into action a foible of mine which I had for years been trying to ignore: my secret wish for a permanent home. I had ignored it because a more powerful voice within me said that my home was in Edwin's bosom. The foible took its revenge every now and then by compelling me to read through the pages of British Sunday papers which advertised houses for sale or to let, but I had managed to keep it under cover. I cannot be sure that Edwin didn't know about it; I think he did not. Now it began to assert itself, telling me that Newbattle Abbey might prove to be a permanent home for our old age.'[30]

Edwin was meanwhile asked to undertake a lecture tour of Sicily and Willa desperately wanted to accompany him. She had a 'passionate desire to see with my own eyes the quarries at Syracuse where the Greek prisoners had suffered incarceration, and all the other scenes of The Sicilian Expedition'[31]: but the British Council were not prepared to finance the whims of a mere wife. She was informed that she would only be permitted to accompany Edwin if she would agree to give a lecture of her own; so she duly prepared a lecture in Italian and they embarked upon an exploration of as much of Sicily as their schedule would permit.

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[29] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p262-3)
[30] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p264-5)
[31] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p260)

The pilgrimage was a fabulous finale to their Italian idyll. The lush and fecund beauty of the island enchanted them; and they rejoiced in the antique and vaguely Orcadian charm of the Sicilian peasantry. Mount Etna was the only blight in this Edenic landscape, and the Muirs recoiled in horror from the town of Catania 'where the houses were trimmed with black lava 'like a pleasant street in hell' and the soil was pure black slag, growing seven crops a year.'[32]

Willa's dreams and expectations of Syracuse were utterly fulfilled: their 'guide, a Syracusan poet, Luigi Guido, was himself a delight. He escorted us to the widespread ruins of ancient Syracuse, which had been a huge city. Crowding together in outsize cities was apparently a much older habit of the human race than I had suspected. Then, very unwillingly, we left Syracuse because we wished to make a dash to see the great temples at Agrigentum before giving back the car to the Council officials at Palermo who had lent it to us. These temples provided another unforgettable experience, sited as they were in such harmony with the landscape and the sea. The Greek temples and theatres I saw, either in Sicily or on the Italian mainland, all seemed to suggest a relation with infinite spaces beyond them; they were built and placed in such a way that they led the imagination out into the sky, the sea, or the mountains; unlike modern buildings they never stopped dead just where they stood.'[33]

They returned to Rome in early June to begin the ritual round of closures and farewells. They had accumulated few possessions and the packing-up process was straightforward; but their friends were legion and the leavetakings were emotional. Even the chauffeur could not restrain his tears and affection as he bade them a fervent farewell at the station in early July. But their sadness at the send-off was tempered by the deliciously farcical experience of sharing their home-bound train with Laurel and Hardy. It was, as Willa laughingly reflected, 'a real Roman goodbye.'[34]

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[32] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p260)
[33] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p260-1)

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[34] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p263)

CHAPTER XIV

NEWBATTLE: THE GRAVEYARD OF VISION. 1950-1955.

Willa and Edwin drove through the imposing front gates of Newbattle Abbey College and up the long and stately drive which led to the front door in the early summer of 1950. They were instantly impressed by the forbidding elegance of the immense building which stood before them. The turrets and battlements were designed to make an instant appeal to the romantic imagination and the peering windows hinted tantalisingly at the dignity concealed within. The building was open but apparently desolate as the Muirs walked for the first time into the surroundings which were to be their home for the next five years. The welcome - when a human presence finally made itself felt - was not warm. Their visit was unannounced and therefore unwelcome and they were discomfitted and bemused. Awkwardness haunted the proceedings; and intensified as the housekeeper insisted that it would be impossible for them to penetrate beyond the locked door of the warden's flat. 'It served us right, I supposed, for coming without warning. We had forgotten that Scotland was not Rome, where our childish impetuousness would have been accepted with indulgence and very likely someone would have picked the lock of the Warden's flat for us.'[1] But the Muirs' warmth gradually thawed the icy displeasure of the occasion, and the peace was entirely restored by their genuine pleasure and admiration as they were guided round the magnificent building.

They moved into their flat almost as soon as a key could be retrieved from the pocket of the absent caretaker. It was an attractive and sunny apartment which looked out over the Italian garden towards the river Esk. 'The only really palatial thing about it was the drawing room, with its vaulted ceiling, covered with stars, and bordered with gold leaf.'[2] But it was a generous and comfortable flat which comfortably housed the three Muirs and the various vagrant items of furniture which had wandered around Britain and Europe with them. Domestic matters were to be dealt with by a maid who came in daily from Dalkeith to clean the flat and do the washing.[3]

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[1] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p266)

There was a great deal to be done before the College could open its doors to the students in October: the teaching staff were yet to be appointed and there was no curriculum in existence. Edwin immediately set about organising his empire. He had clear ideas about the emphasis and the ethos for which he aimed, and he was determined to gather a staff which would share in his ideals and support him in his task.[4] Decisions of this sort were, as far as he was concerned, entirely in his hands and he believed that the Executive Committee had given him a free rein in the College's day-to-day running. He was later proved very wrong.

The teaching team was soon assembled. Elizabeth Lyall was to be the resident historian; Kenneth Wood would be responsible for the economics classes; and Ian Farningham - at Gavin's recommendation - was appointed to teach philosophy. English Literature was to be Edwin's realm and he anticipated with relish his return to the classroom. The staff were all housed in and around the college and were expected to share in the life of the community.

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[2] Alex D. Reid in a letter to Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 14th March 1995.
[3] Margaret Duncan in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 9th October 1994.
[4] John MacMurray in a letter to Willa Muir. Beaconsfield, 18th August 1966.

A curriculum was designed and the appropriate texts were added to the College's impressive existing library facilities. Edwin was keen that the students should be offered as wide a range of courses as possible and his staff were therefore expected to teach from a vast sweep of texts and disciplines. The English Literature course, for example, was designed to give a 'brief and general account of the development of English Literature from Chaucer to the present day'[5] and then to provide a closer study of various particular movements and periods of English literature. The door to academic wealth and diversity was to be opened wide and the students were to be invited to enter and explore at their leisure.

Edwin insisted also that his policy of liberal education must not be inhibited or compromised by the imposition of any formal academic assessment or examination system. He did not want to create a cramming school or a feeder system for the universities: his College was designed for 'the person who wants education rather than definite vocational training.'[6] This vision was, from the outset, a target for the vehement opposition of certain powerful quarters: even those who sympathised in principle with Edwin's ideals were painfully aware of the numerous practical disadvantages and drawbacks of his policies. A 1954 article about Newbattle in the Edinburgh Evening News discusses the advantages and disadvantages of education without examination, and concludes: 'at first one feels that some might benefit from more pressure, something more solid on which to cut their intellectual teeth, but one soon finds that what seems to be a weakness is, in fact, a strength - strength not to interfere or to push, but to draw each man out to fulfill himself in his own way.'[7] But although the article states its staunch support of the

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[5] Newbattle Abbey College Prospectus. Session 1950-51.

[6] 'Newbattle - Scotland's only residential college'. In the Edinburgh Evening News. 10th December 1954.

[7] "Newbattle - Scotland's only residential college'. In the Edinburgh Evening News. 10th December 1954.

Newbattle policy; it also recognises the challenges which inevitably threaten an academic utopia amidst the harsh realism of financial constraints. Edwin's academic idealism:

> . . . obviously makes the position of those who are supposed to support it slightly difficult. Few people really like paying a piper if they can neither call the tune nor even know what tune he is going to play.
>
> The four Scottish Universities are trustees, and the S.T.U.C., the W.E.A., the Chambers of Commerce and almost all who could possibly be interested are represented on the board of governors. They, and almost everyone else are sympathetic and approving, but there is very little sign anywhere of any really positive enthusiasm.
>
> . . . a public body cannot be expected to be very liberal with public money in a cause which the public is not really behind.[8]

The question of how and by whom the College would be funded was always contentious and the Newbattle dream was constantly threatened by the perennial scrabble for cash. The Committee engaged in incessant financial wrangling and maintained an unsettling ambivalence about the economic status of the College.

> The major difficulty was money - in particular, could the college be made to pay its way, if so how, and if it failed to do this, who would guarantee the deficit.

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[8] "Newbattle - Scotland's only residential college'. In the Edinburgh Evening News. 10th December 1954.

> . . . From the beginning there were doubts, even on the small committee, whether we could really finance the running of the kind of College we had set up. There was, to my astonishment, very little interest, certainly very little enthusiasm in Scotland for it, at any rate where money might come from. It was clear that in a few years the College would have to become at least nearly self-supporting. There would have to be a campaign to put the College on the map throughout Scotland, in order to attract sufficient students to make the College self-supporting. For this there would have to be money forthcoming to subsidise them. There were those who thought this kind of College was the wrong kind. It could not be made to balance its budget. The Trades Unions were dead against us. The kind of College we were trying to create and for which Edwin was an ideal head, would simply imbue their members, if they went to it, with a desire to climb into a higher class, and they would be lost to the Trade Unions. They were probably right. But this meant no subsidies to students from Trade Union Funds. The Education Department was prepared to meet the deficit for a year or two, provided that there were signs that the deficit would disappear with the success of the College.[9]

Student numbers were inevitably adversely affected by this economic deadlock and only twenty or thirty of the sixty available places at the College were taken up each year. Edwin realised - with an increasing sense of frustration - that innumerable academically and intellectually able candidates were being denied the opportunity of attending the College because they were unable to obtain financial backing. College fees (which covered board, residence and tuition) were £125 a year and a limited number of students were granted Scottish Education Authority bursaries to cover this expense. Various educational trusts across the country also offered some level of funding, and it was expected that the Trade Unions would follow suit. Few ever did. The College therefore 'had to open its doors to a medley of people who had somehow or other managed to get a grant from their local authority or trade union. Sometimes an education committee . . . was generous enough, and enlightened enough, to give a bursary to a student whose aim was quite frankly to learn as much as he could about life and literature from such a splendid exponent of them as Dr. Edwin Muir.'[10]

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[9] John Macmurray in a letter to Willa Muir. Beaconsfield, 18th August 1966.

No student at Edwin Muir's Newbattle ever regretted the economic hardships and sacrifices which they suffered as a result of the experience: many of the Newbattle students who sat at Edwin's feet describe their time at the College unreservedly as 'the happiest year of my life'[11].

Newbattle Abbey College opened its doors to its first motley group of students in October 1950. Their backgrounds, motivations and aspirations were various; but they 'had one aim in common, we were eager to study, to acquire knowledge, most of us for the sheer pleasure of doing so. Several hoped to go on to University, one or two aspired to write, but for most the future was uncertain. The present was what mattered - all of us were determined to enjoy and extract the maximum benefit from this priceless gift of a year in which to study.'[12]

Those autumn Newbattle days saw the forging of immediate and enduring friendships amidst the demands and the exhilarations of community life. The

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[10] E. W. Marwick. 'Fine Ideal Valiantly Maintained'. In the Glasgow Herald. 15th October 1955

[11] George Mackay Brown. In an article in The Sunday Times. 3rd September 1989.

[12] Mairene Gordon. 'Newbattle Abbey in Retrospect'. Unpublished article. By kind permission of Mairene Gordon.

Crypt - which was used as the student common room - was soon the focus of many College activities, and was the atmospheric setting for play and poetry readings, music recitals and 'informal often fiery discussions'.[13] The staff usually shared in the after-dinner debates and entertainments in the Crypt, and Willa revelled in the atmosphere of intellectual and literary banter. Edwin generally watched her appreciatively as she poured out her customary stream of wit and erudition. Her 'presence was felt everywhere in the college: cheerful, kind, delighted especially if she succeeded in shocking someone. But there was never malice in her laughter. She was the most generous woman I have ever known.'[14] She was universally popular with both staff and students. She consciously subdued and controlled many of the more flamboyant and ebullient aspects of her character during those Newbattle years, and assumed instead the persona of a 'benign and good-natured mother in the background.'[15] The emotional and physical wellbeing of the entire community became her self-imposed responsibility.

Her kindness and concern for the students was apparently infinite. George Mackay Brown remembers that, when he was unwell during the early months of 1952, she 'installed me in the guest bedroom of her flat, so that I could recover with delicious meals and peace and laughter and good books.'[16] And Mairene Gordon (a Newbattle student during the 1950-51 session) recalls the practical sympathy and compassion which Willa showed to her during a period of illness and depression. 'Edwin was extremely kindly; Willa was a kinder person.'[17]

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[13] Mairene Gordon. 'Newbattle Abbey in Retrospect'. Unpublished article. By kind permission of Mairene Gordon.
[14] George Mackay Brown 'Edwin Muir at Newbattle' Akros. no.47. August 1981. (pp6-13)
[15] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.
[16] George Mackay Brown 'Edwin Muir at Newbattle' Akros. no.47. August 1981. (pp6-13)
[17] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 3rd April 1995.

She was active in the classroom as well as in the sickroom and the students appreciated her unofficial Latin and German classes. Latin was then a necessary university entrance qualification and Willa willingly guided interested students through the subject's complexities. Tom Scott remembers her as an excellent teacher whose extroversion, humour and intelligence made even Latin grammar seem interesting and enjoyable. She taught German on the same unofficial and voluntary basis and Alex Reid (who was a later Principal of Newbattle) remembers those classes with gratitude. 'As the years pass, I realise more and more how exceedingly fortunate I was to have this opportunity given to me, quite gratuitously.'[18]

The teaching standards were incredibly high. All of the staff - except Edwin - were young, highly motivated, and enthusiastic about their subjects; and their excitement was transmitted to their students. There was a flexible attitude towards the syllabus, and courses were tailored to the interests and the abilities of individual students. 'There were no exams, so there was a certain freedom to range beyond the set themes. This was encouraged on the whole.'[19] And Edwin, although he consistently opposed the imposition of a formal assessment system, 'was not against "academic excellence". While he insisted on the importance of grammar, impeccable spelling, clear expression, intellectual honesty, industry and craftsmanship, he abhorred authoritarianism, hierarchy and pretentiousness.'[20]

Edwin stirred the imaginations and captured the hearts of his Newbattle students. They exulted in the exhilarating aura of creativity and peace which he radiated, and sensed that their lives had 'been perpetually enriched by his presence among them'[21]. Their devotion was inspired as much by his remarkable skill and insight as an educator as by his poetic and personal charm. Many of the students who came to Edwin's Newbattle were drawn to the College primarily by the attraction of studying literature at the feet of one of its modern giants. The figure of Edwin Muir dominated the public perception of Newbattle, and the College's reputation was inextricably and entirely entwined with the status of its poet warden. The other lecturers at the College were constantly aware that they were merely accessories to Edwin's greatness; and they occasionally and justifiably resented this. 'The establishment at Newbattle was a literary establishment, and we all felt that what mattered most was Edwin and his students.'[22]

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[18] Alex D Reid in a letter to Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 12th April 1995.
[19] George Mackay Brown in a letter to Kirsty Allen. Orkney, 1st February 1995.
[20] James D Young. 'A Socialist's-Eye View of Edwin Muir'. In Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp21-25)

But Edwin was too gently unassuming to inspire any real bitterness or animosity amongst his staff. They recognised the remarkable power and impact of his teaching manner and methods, and they were generously and unjealously admiring. 'Edwin had a depth charge affect on his students. His teaching of those who had a real interest in literature was fantastic. We all recognised how great he was.'[23]

The students were particularly conscious of the greatness of the placid and gentle man who stood before them in the English Literature class and quietly dispensed his wealth of intuitive and erudite knowledge. Mairene Gordon recalls that 'his lectures were the most popular in the College . . . it was a privilege, a delight, and an illumination to listen to him discourse on literary themes, figures, movements. Tolerant, wise, penetrating, his quiet delightful humour high-lighted the vagaries of the literary world but unveiled literature not as something arid or precious but as a vital living thing.'[24]

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[21] George Mackay Brown. 'Edwin Muir: A Personal Memoir'. A foreword to Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993.
[22] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 7th April 1995.
[23] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 7th April 1995.

Spike Mays, a student at the College during the 1951-52 session, had similar memories of the magic which Edwin cast. 'Kindly, tolerant, with an inexhausible reserve of patience, Edwin's lectures, while of a high academic standard, were given with great clarity and simplicity. Because he was a fine poet, writer and literary critic, we thought we could not afford to miss one of his lectures, to be warned in his inimitable style against the atrocities we committed in everyday speech and writing upon the world's best language. We all plumped for English Literature.'[25]

And George Mackay Brown - a contemporary of Spike's and perhaps the most famous graduate of the class of '52 - remembers that 'because Edwin was a famous writer, most students attended his lectures. The Elizabethan Dramatists were his subject that year. Edwin would come drifting in to the lecture room, sit down, and begin to speak about Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare, in a kind of mild Orcadian lilt. There seemed to be no attempt at eloquence at all; so some students were a bit disappointed. The lecturer appeared to be in a kind of gentle trance. One could sense the depth under the tranquil surface. Sometimes he would open a text and take off his glasses and read a passage. The substance of some of those lectures appeared in his excellent book Essays on Literature and Society . . . Then the voice trailed off, and the lecture was over.'[26]

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[24] Mairene Gordon. 'Newbattle Abbey in Retrospect'. Unpublished article. By kind permission of Mairene Gordon.

[25] Spike Mays. No More Soldiering for Me. London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1971. (p161)

[26] George Mackay Brown. 'Edwin Muir: A Personal Memoir'. A foreword to Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993.

In tutorials and in his monthly one-to-one meetings with his students he bolstered wavering confidence .and overcame academic and personal uncertainties. He treated each student with unqualified respect, and was always gently and affirmatively sensitive in his assessment of their monthly written assignments. 'He never said anything to hurt anyone's feelings (though many of the essays must have been dreadful) . . . "How are you getting on?" he would say, Then, "I hope you're quite happy here . . ." The masterpiece of an essay lay on the desk, but at last, after all the kind enquiries and the silences, the manuscript had to be talked about. He sifted through the pages. "Oh, it's interesting," he might say at last.'[27] He understood and empathised with these eager young men and women whose hunger for education was qualified by doubts about their intellectual and creative capacities. His social and academic background enabled him to identify completely with the aspirations and the hopes of his students, and to communicate with them in a relationship of complete equality. 'In contrast to other tutors at Newbattle who sometimes could not understand what their working-class students were saying to them and who responded by using the off-putting "Pardon?", he would ask, "What do you say?"[28]

This differentiation illustrates a significant aspect of Edwin's attitude towards his students; but it also creates a grossly unfair representation of the other staff at the College. Their class credentials were as diverse as their characters, and the academic routes which had brought them to Newbattle were varied and often unconventional. They shared only a common commitment to the life of the College, and they spent long, hard hours creating and fostering the ethos which Edwin envisaged and sought. Spike Mays provides a detailed and revealing description of the incredibly high standard of the teaching, and the remarkable personal qualities of the College staff.

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[27] George Mackay Brown. 'Edwin Muir: A Personal Memoir'. A foreword to Edwin Muir. An Autobiography Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993.

[28] James D. Young. 'A Socialist's Eye View of Edwin Muir'. Chapman. no.49, vol.IX. Summer 1987. (pp21-25)

> Economics . . . was taught by Kenneth Wood, who possessed the knack of putting over the more difficult aspects of other people's theories so that even I could follow them. In spite of heavy tutorial and secretarial commitments he found time to give evening talks on Greek History and Greek Mythology, and to describe his own poems, some of which had been broadcast by the BBC . . .
>
> Miss Edith A. Lyle was the charming and beautiful lady who regaled us on the wickednesses of British and European history. Her subjects ranged from the Development of Western Civilisation to the political, social, ideological developments and international relations, and the impact of Western ideas, on Asia and Africa. The special object of her course was to trace the origins and the course of the events which have shaped our own lives, and to understand the position of Britain and the Commonwealth in the present day. As if these were not big enough buns for us to get our teeth into, Miss Lyle taught evening classes in Appreciation of Music and produced plays in which most of us took part.[29]

Willa had little in common with the 'charming' Miss Lyle. Donald Gordon describes Edith as 'something of a manhater' and suggests that she 'would have been great as a headmistress of a girls' school'.[30] She was destined to become the first victim of the crippling cuts which the Scottish Education

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[29] Spike Mays. No More Soldiering for Me. London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1971. (p161-3)
[30] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 7th April 1995.

Department perenially inflicted on the College: Edwin was forced to dispense with her teaching services at Newbattle in 1953. But 'poor Edith's' 'nagging', 'shrill governess tone', and embittered 'reflections on adult education'[31] still resounded occasionally through the College corridors.

Edith's dismissal was not the first sacking at Edwin's Newbattle. It became clear, within a year of the College's re-opening, that Farningham's appointment had been a very profound and destructive error of judgement: the only possible solution was to dismiss him immediately.

> The Philosophy Lecturer, an attractive young man of strong personality, had been a fellow-student and friend of Gavin's in St Andrews. On our way through London we had given luncheon to him and his wife, since he had applied for the post, and liked them enough for Edwin to appoint him. Their flat was above our drawing room and we could hear the rumble of lively discussions going on overhead until the small hours, which we thought all to the good. But during the second term of that first year a deputation of students came to see Edwin, complaining that the Philosophy Lecturer was slanting all discussions towards Communism. Our most solid and reliable students were on that deputation and they accused the Lecturer of being an under-cover Communist trying to make converts. Their disputes with him, they said, were now threatening to spread through the College, because the Bursar, apparently under the Lecturer's thumb, had begun canvassing all the students, asking them if they were for or against the Lecturer.

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[31] Willa Muir. Notebook 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> . . . Edwin investigated the evidence, patiently, allowing for the possibility that the Lecturer, being young and inexperienced, might simply have been trying to stimulate his students by throwing pro-Communist arguments at them. His subsequent interview with the lecturer was none the easier for that young man's being an intimate of Gavin's, whose presence hovered invisibly in the background. . . .
>
> . . . As it was, Edwin decided that the Lecturer and the Bursar between them were creating an intolerable situation in the College, and could not be trusted not to do the same again. He sacked them both, for that reason, leaving aside the question of whether the Lecturer was an under-cover Communist or merely a fellow-traveller.
>
> The whole episode was a strain on both of us, especially as Gavin resented his friend's dismissal. But once both men were gone, a tension went out of the College.[32]

These troubles cast a gloomy shadow over the closing weeks of the Muir's first year at Newbattle and affected them far more profoundly than Willa's account of the sorry tale in Belonging suggests. They were involuntarily returned to their recent and painful memories of Prague, and found themselves at war again with the ugly and destructive power of Communism. Edwin spent the last day of the summer term 'at an executive meeting in Edinburgh deciding the fate of two blown-on staff - the Tutor and the Bursar. We had our farewell party last night, and in the circumstances it was difficult for us to maintain the right appearance of joviality. In fact, we are both feeling a bit sick at the stomach metaphorically: and rather tottering with tire. . . . [We] expect the Tutor and the Bursar to be sacked. The Bursar is already looking like an ill-boiled pudding, and he will be heavy with resentment. The Tutor (whom we like, alas!) will be wistful, I fear; and our hearts are already bruised and might even break. Seriously, it has been very trying; and we are divided between the high tragedy of the Tutor and the low comedy of the Bursar. I wish life weren't so very difficult. But it always is. . . .'[33]

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[32] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p274)

The year had been bedevilled by an endless torrent of troubles and anxieties and Edwin's nerves were already frayed by his perennial battles with the executive committee, his constant scrabble for cash, and the Farningham manufactured tensions. These stresses and strains considerably exacerbated his nervous digestive disorder and Willa suffered from 'rheumatism plus adhesions from an old operation plus a dicky coccyx (sounds very grand!) and have been very immobile in consequence.'[34]

Their lives had also been darkened in the early months of 1951 by the sudden death of Edwin's older sister, Lizzie. Willa considered that she was 'better gone', since 'she was becoming a trial to everyone, with her persecution mania.'[35] But Edwin was inevitably distressed by the severing of this rare link with his Orkney childhood.

They desperately needed a holiday by the end of July; and Edwin's internal compass turned them northwards again to his Edenic Orkney. They spent a week in Kirkwall and then travelled to Shetland for a couple of days amidst the haunts of Willa's Anderson forebears.

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[33] Willa Muir in a letter to Stanley and Phyllis Cursitor. Newbattle, 15th June 1951. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.
[34] Willa Muir in a letter to Stanley and Phyllis Cursitor. Newbattle, 26th May 1951. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.
[35] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Various summer schools were meanwhile underway at Newbattle and the building bustled with activity. The Committee hoped that this imported wealth might eventually provide the income to ensure the College's financial independence and to permit the Scottish Education Department to relinquish its share of the economic responsibility for the venture. Their objectives were never realised: the summer schools managed only to impose an intolerable extra burden on the overworked College staff, and to make it impossible for them ever to plan a proper holiday.

But these problems were merely distant future grumblings. The Muirs returned refreshed to Newbattle and felt ready to face the challenges of a new session. Edwin's most immediate task was the selection of a new Philosophy tutor; and he was now painfully aware of the significance of his decision. But he was confident - as he and the rest of an interview panel which included Ritchie, Greenhill and Macmurray reached their final decision at the end of a hard day - that they had found the right person for the job in Donald Gordon.

Donald travelled north to Newbattle from Warwickshire (where he had been studying law) on the Sunday before the autumn term began in October 1951. He was greeted by Edwin who showed him to his flat - and announced that Donald's first lecture on Descartes was scheduled for the following morning, and that Edwin would himself be attending it! It was a baptism of fire; but a valuable and instant lesson in the ethic and the ethos of Edwin's Newbattle.

Donald's introduction to Willa didn't take place until the Monday evening. She was sitting in her customary chair in Edwin's office, and Donald was not aware of the extent to which her arthritis crippled her until she stood up. Her walking stick was now never far from her hand, and she leaned heavily on Edwin during their slow daily rambles around the Italian garden at the

College. She seemed 'sweetly regal' to Donald on that first meeting, and he was impressed by her 'lovely crisp Scottish voice'. He realised, as he came to know her better over the weeks and months that followed, that she was 'a highly educated woman and a brilliant academic'. There was 'nothing phony' about her.[36]

The College that year was a happy place. The disruptive tensions of the previous year had disappeared with Farningham, and there was much laughter and lively conversation at meals in the dining room. Willa always sat at the head of the high table and 'presided' over the growing Newbattle family and its stream of formal and informal visitors. The atmosphere was relaxed and contented, and Edwin's vision of an active community spirit thrived. Colleagues and companions from the dark days of wartime Edinburgh regularly swelled numbers at dinner, and numerous other friends from across the world turned up periodically upon the College doorstep. The many guests whose visits are recorded in Willa's journal for those years include Kathleen Raine, Flora Grierson, T.S. Eliot, the Soukups, A.S. Neill and Emily Scobo.[37]

The happiness of that year also owed something to the fact that Edwin and Willa found in Donald Gordon a kindred spirit whose company they greatly enjoyed. He was well and widely read in numerous philosophical disciplines; and was genuinely interested in social and experimental psychology. He was a likeable, energetic and charismatic figure and the affection and respect in which he was held by his students was obvious, immediate and deserved.

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[36] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 7th April 1995.

[37] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> Douglas [sic] R. Gordon . . . in a voice which compelled immediate attention . . . taught Philosophy, Political Theory, and Psychology. After the daily lectures he continued to give unstinted advice to perplexed would-be Existentialists in the quiet of his private chambers. This course covered a general statement of Philosophy with an initial account of current trends and with reference back to Descartes and the British empiricists, Locke, Berkeley and Hume. I thought Douglas [sic] Gordon was at his best on Political Theory. His great knowledge of Aristotle, Plato and Machiavelli was used to great advantage when making comparisons with current political practices and the ideas of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau; . . . Psychology was in two parts: an historical introduction to Experimental Psychology, and the special problems of Social Psychology including the relationship to Child and Educational Psychology.[38]

Willa inevitably shared his enthusiasm for this latter area of psychology. She also appreciated his ready humour and educated intellect, and greatly admired his abilities as a teacher. His wife Kathleen (who was heavily pregnant with their first child) joined him at Newbattle at Christmas and established an immediate and mutual friendship with Willa. Baby Jennet was born into the rapidly expanding Newbattle family in February 1952; and Willa instantly loved this little blonde bundle.

Donald was, however, always inexplicably unsure of Willa's opinion of him. He could never really believe that she even liked him; and it was not until many years after her death (when he discovered some unread letters which she had written to him in the years following her departure from Newbattle) that he actually believed that he was included in her transparent fondness for his wife and children. He was then profoundly moved by the unexpected richness of the unashamed warmth and affection of this correspondence: but it was by then too late. He had entirely severed any connection with her in the early 1960s because he had been fearful of possible allegations of an ulterior motive in a friendship with Willa. He resented the bandwagon of mock adulation and fake affection which already surrounded Edwin's widow; and he was loathe to be seen to jump aboard. He believes in retrospect that it was 'very foolish of me. I think I hurt Willa a lot. The fact that I wasn't mentioned at all in Belonging was proper and just retribution.'[39]

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[38] Spike Mays. No More Soldiering for Me. London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1971. (p161-3)

But these tensions had no place in the Newbattle of 1951. Peace and companionship reverberated through the Abbey's ancient corridors, and students and staff alike basked in the constructive creative ethos. A small but outstanding crop of students filled the College classrooms that session; and Edwin felt that his vision of education was finally coming to fruition. His heart warmed particularly towards a young and nervous Orcadian poet called George Mackay Brown whom he and Willa had interviewed in Stromness that summer. Mackay Brown had been:

> . . . so nervous I drank a couple of pints of beer in the bar below. It was a rather awesome prospect, to be meeting for the first time the author of The Story and the Fable and The Labyrinth.
>
> All that I remember of the meal was that Willa told stories and laughed a great deal. Edwin sat among swirls of cigarette smoke, silent and smiling.
>
> . . . At the end of the tea and cakes, Edwin said that he'd liked a story of mine in The New Shetlander. On the strength of that,

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[39] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 3rd April 1995.

> he'd take me as a student when the new session began in October 1951.[40]

George was universally well-liked. His quiet courtesy was balanced by a gregarious nature which invariably catapulted him into the midst of the regular Crypt discussions and debates. He could moreover be relied upon to lead the nightly expeditions to the Justinlees pub in Dalkeith and to return 'nicely sozzled. He was never unpleasant or aggressive.'[41] As Miss Duncan (the College housekeeper) locked up the College in the evening, she would often discover him asleep on the stone floor of the Crypt and put a pillow under his head.[42]

But there *were* occasions on which the goodnatured and inebriated exploits of the young Orcadian threatened the decorum of a formal college function. Donald Gordon recalls one particular evening in the spring of 1952 on which the College was playing host to a distinguished gathering of delegates from the British Council. It had been a pleasant and successful evening and the college staff were bidding their guests a relieved farewell at the front door when a jocose and singing figure suddenly appeared at the distant main gate of the College - and began a slow and staggering progress up the long drive towards the assembled dignitories! Embarrasment seemed inevitable. Then Donald Gordon gathered his wits; strolled calmly towards the reeling poet; and managed to keep him engaged in earnest conversation about an adjacent turnip field until the delegates had departed and the moment of crisis had passed![43]

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[40] George Mackay Brown. 'Edwin Muir: A Personal Memoir'. A foreword to Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993.
[41] Margaret Duncan in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 9th October 1994.
[42] Margaret Duncan in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 9th October 1994.
[43] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 7th April 1995.

George Mackay Brown spent the less bibulous and convivial moments of this 'best year of my life',[44] in the magnificent Newbattle library reading copiously and composing poetry.

> I first showed some poems I had written, to Edwin at Newbattle, very tentatively. To my great pleasure he liked them; and I could gauge by the tone of his voice that he genuinely liked them. He gave me every encouragement to continue writing verse. He sent some of my poems to the literary editors of The New Statesman and The Listener. . . . He went to endless pains to get my work accepted. When, at my own expense, I published a small book of verse in Orkney called The Storm, Edwin obliged with a generous introduction. He later showed my verse to the Hogarth Press in London, and they became my publishers.[45]

The atmosphere at Newbattle that year was apparently particularly conducive to creativity. Edwin agonisingly rewrote The Story and the Fable into the form in which it is now better known and it was published as An Autobiography in 1954. The first notions of a novel were meanwhile stirring within Willa. As Edwin recreated his personal history, she constructed a fictional representation of the events and the lives of the people whom they had known before and during the Communist putsch in Prague. She immersed herself completely in the world of this novel for more than a year during which it became the entire focus of her life: she neglected even her journal between January 1951 and the early spring of the following year. But, by February 1952, The Usurpers was finished.

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[44] George Mackay Brown in a letter to Kirsty Allen. Orkney, 1st February 1995.
[45] George Mackay Brown. Edwin Muir A Brief Memoir. West Linton: The Castlelaw Press, 1975.

A muddle of raw and mixed emotions immediately beset her; and Edwin's apparent indifference to the work hurt her deeply. Both life and literature suddenly seemed meaningless and irrelevant.

> I had a fit of black despair and resentment when I had finished [the novel], just because Edwin let it lie for days before reading it. I know he was tired and busy, but I had wanted him to show enthusiasm and interest; he never said a word about it, not even regretting that he couldn't read it, because his eyes hurt, or he had other work, or what-not. Had he regretted not reading it, had he said: I'm sorry I can't get at it yet, I should have been appeased, for I think I am reasonable. It was his apparent utter indifference that got me down; I could see how little value he attached to the expectations he might have of it, how little real importance he felt it would have. Perhaps he is right, thought I; this book I have been dreaming myself into, with such enthusiasm and delight, is really a second-rate production: it won't matter to anyone. It made me suicidal for some hours until I got the better of it.
>
> Once convinced that you are utterly unimportant, you think suicide doesn't matter. Nothing matters.
>
> Well, it is now lying about, that book, waiting again for Edwin to make suggestions, which he said he would like to make. It has been waiting for ten days, since he read it. I shall begin going over it myself; I can't wait. If I wait, I grow resentful again, and it's not worth while letting one's inner vanity swell things up until one weeps with hurt pride. The only thing is to depend on myself, although I shrink from looking at the book again.[46]

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[46] George Mackay Brown. Edwin Muir A Brief Memoir. West Linton: The Castlelaw Press, 1975

These revisions were complete by the middle of April and Willa was generally pleased with the finished work. She had removed 'my excess of emotional statement: all the "alls" and the "veries" and some of the descriptive adverbs; more important, I excised bits here and there that weren't strictly necessary. The result, I think, is shapely.'[47] Edwin continued to be grudging and half-hearted in his approval and interest; and Willa was reluctantly forced to turn to various literary friends in search of some support and affirmation. The Muirs went on holiday at Easter to Woodstock with Flora Grierson and Joan Shelmerdine, and Willa took the manuscript of The Usurpers with her. 'In a dumb way, I had hoped Flora would read the m.s., but she cried that I wasn't to expect her to read handwritten stuff. Anyhow, I know that she wasn't well, - a bad cold - and I didn't let resentment come up this time, although again I felt how little importance other people expect to find in anything I write. I must have been damned splurgy in the books I put out when I was young. But this one isn't a splurge.'[48]

She tremulously sent her precious manuscript (under the psudonym 'Alexander Grey') to the publishing houses of Macmillan, Hamish Hamilton and Chatto and Windus;[49] but received only a hurtful sheaf of rejection letters in response. Edwin's initial injurious indifference now appeared vindicated by the publishing community's negative reaction to the novel. The work apparently displayed some ineradicable flaw.

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[47] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[48] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[49] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

It is - despite Willa's contrary conviction - a significantly less successful work than either of her 1930s novels. It is stylistically laboured, heavily overwritten, and beset by basic literary naivetés and immaturities. The narrative is confused, and excessively punctuated with the philosophising and the pontificating which had weakened her earlier works.

But the greatest and most unpublishable weakness of The Usurpers is its libellous parity with the real people and events of Prague and its British Council offices in the 1940s. The novel virtually replicates the material of Willa's daily diary: but it doesn't reproduce the terror, the inexorable tension, and the genuinely expressive immediacy which the journals evoke. It is a novel which fails to be fiction. Lucidity and coherence are compromised by the emotional entanglement of teller and tale, and the detachment and objectivity of the narrative voice cannot withstand the intimately personalising affect of a central female character who is clearly a fictional representation of the author. This parallel is ludicrously illustrated by Willa's presentation of herself as 'Jamesina' - an obvious, clumsy and heavy-handed adaptation of Wihelmina - in the first draft of the novel.

Willa denied this relationship between fact and fiction in the disclaimer with which the novel begins and which asserts that the 'story is a pattern seen in a field of probability. The characters, the action, the country in which the story is set, are all to be regarded as imaginary.'[50] But even the slightest knowledge of Willa's Czechoslovakian experience renders this statement farcical. The events of the novel are clearly poached wholesale from her own account of the dark days of the Czechoslovakian putsch; and almost all of the novel's characters are immediately and blatantly identifiable as her associates and friends in Prague.

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[50] Willa Muir. (pseud Alexander Grey). The Usurpers. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Edwin's fictional alter ego as the 'head of a lecturing and teaching branch' of the 'Cultural Mission'[51] is 'Martin Russell' - a physical, emotional and intellectual replica of his real-life counterpart. The portrait of Martin Russell's 'mild, thoughtful eyes retreating behind high cheekbones' and his 'lofty forehead'[52] completely parallels the description of Edwin which appears in Belonging. 'Edwin Muir's eyes and mouth promised well; his brow was an intellectual's, disproportionately wide and high, very noticeable above the slight, even meagre body, yet his eyes were dreamy-looking, sea-blue, with a hint of distance in them, and his mouth was well cut, with full sensitive lips.'[53]

The parallels are numerous and often scurrilous. Close and Hawkins are reproduced in all their horrific and inhumane entirety in The Usurpers as Archibald Edgar Bower and Bob Collins of the 'Utopian' (!) Mission; and the attitude and actions of the two fictional characters entirely replicate the distastefully objective and calculating perspective of the originals upon whom they are based. Willa's journal for 1948, for example, observes that

> . . . Reg and Hawkins believe in Works, in authority, in reports to London vaunting Works, in subordination, without real devotion to the people among whom they carry on the Works. Machinery of Life versus Life. . . . What matters is pre-eminance in authority,

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[51] Willa Muir. (pseud Alexander Grey). The Usurpers. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[52] Willa Muir. (pseud Alexander Grey). The Usurpers. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[53] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p15)

> power, status. Power-menschen always call for sacrifice from others, I notice. Power-menschen are terribly moral.[54]

And the same sense of hopeless frustration and distress is similarly expressed in The Usurpers.

> "You'll have plenty of spare parts, Russell, to keep the machine going," said Collins cheerily.
>
> "I don't regard the College as a machine." Dr Russell's tone was very dry. "That's one of the differences between us. And our members don't regard it as a machine, either. . . ."
>
> . . . "You don't suppose that Arch lectures to the University students because he's interested in them, do you? That lecture of his [on 'The Tertiary Use of the Preposition'] was miles over their heads because he was out to show off, not to enlighten. Of course they didn't understand one word in ten. But Arch wanted to sound important, and he probably did. It will be the same in the College. He's not interested in our members, he only wants to impress them with his importance. And when you have a man exercising power over people, for the sake of being important, for the sake of power, without any sympathy for the people themselves, you have the extension of the disease that I think is killing our civilisation."[55]

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[54] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[55] Willa Muir. (pseud Alexander Grey). The Usurpers. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Every detail (such as the title of Arch's lecture) is appropriated unaltered from the journals and the pages of the novel are entirely populated by Willa's anecdotes and recollections of Prague. It is an admirable and acutely recorded piece of journalism; but a profoundly flawed work of fiction. Willa was primarily an observer and commentator who 'loved life and the masquers in the pageant of life and chiefly the amusing ways they behave.'[56] She possessed the qualities of a 'great reporter'[57] and was also capable of producing an energetic and inspired stream of 'vivid pastiches and caricatures and clerihews'.[58] But this is not the raw material out of which great imaginative writings emerge.

The novel was never published. Willa recorded in her journal on the 14th October 1952 that she had 'withdrawn my m.s. because of a letter from Marjorie Williams identifying me as the writer. Also, all the publishers it was offered to turned it down; perhaps afraid of libel.'[59]

She struggled against depression and disappointment in the months which followed. Newbattle's permanence and continuity was her only comfort; and she gradually and gratefully realised that the flow of College life hadn't slackened or altered during her stasis period of immersion in the world of The Usurpers.

The spring and summer terms of 1952 were eventful and administratively fraught. January was characterised by heavy snowfalls and violent gales - during which the ancient beech in the Abbey grounds finally lost its four hundred year battle with the weather. It was found prostrate and forlornly massive in the snow one morning.

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[56] George Mackay Brown 'Edwin Muir at Newbattle.' In Akros. no.47. August 1981. (pp6-13)
[57] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 3rd April 1995.
[58] George Mackay Brown. 'Edwin Muir: A Personal Memoir'. A foreword to Edwin Muir. An Autobiography. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993.
[59] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> All that day, and for many following, little knots of people gathered in the slush to gaze sorrowfully at the stricken colossus. Everyone felt it to be symbolic, though of what nobody knew.
>
> Edwin and Willa Muir were much upset, and we were upset for them. It was always a revelation to see them together hand-in-hand under that tree, with love in their eyes. After that day, they walked in the gardens.[60]

Winter dragged on. The College heating system eventually collapsed under the strain and plunged the entire building into a state of icy purgatory. 'Day after day students set forth with axes, frosted breath and glowing faces - to hew logs for the crypt fire. Every night after dinner there were fierce, mute struggles for the best armchairs, nearest to the blazing logs. Not a single concession was made for sex or infirmity. For two weeks life was a relentless struggle for heat.'[61]

The weather warmed but a growing frostiness now chilled the meetings of the Newbattle Executive Committee. The Scottish Education Department threatened to withdraw its financial support unless student numbers could be increased: closure became an imminent possibility. 'This came as a knock-down blow to Edwin; he was stunned to realize that the College was not being backed, as he understood backing, by the Committee or the Department, or, presumably, by the Treasury. . . . His old acquaintance, the Director, was now urging upon the Committee the scheme for turning

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[60] Spike Mays. No More Soldiering for Me. London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1971. (p178).

[61] Spike Mays. No More Soldiering for Me. London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1971. (p178)

Newbattle into a week-enders' short-term College, and unless he did something to prevent that, a short-term College it would most likely become.[62]

Edwin was particularly hurt by the hostility of Ritchie, whom he had always trusted as a sympathetic and reliable ally. He was now increasingly embattled and isolated: his conflict with the committee intensified and a growing antagonism became apparent. His vision for Newbattle was apparently irreconcileable with the financial and ideological precepts of the College's management, and a state of open warfare was now in operation. Edwin declared himself 'prepared to fight for a concrete embodiment of what he valued, his beloved residential College which, as Warden, he was responsible for and had to protect.'[63]

He was permanently tense and distracted. He hated confrontation and was distressed by the personal animosity which characterised so many of his dealings with the Executive Committee - some of whom now referred to him publicly as 'that bloody poet'.[64] But he was also grimly and passionately purposeful. That Easter, at the annual conference of the Scottish Institute of Education, 'Edwin took the floor and, as Kenneth told me, ridiculed the short-term partisans with such wit and energy that they were routed. Kenneth added that he had never been aware of so much cold determination as Edwin gave off in the car all the way to the Conference.'[65]

A compromise which temporarily relieved the tension in the College atmosphere was finally reached in April .

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[62] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p279)
[63] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p279)
[64] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p280).
[65] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p280)

> Part of the Abbey was hired out to the managers of the Lothian miners who arranged that resident weekly courses for batches of mining foremen or deputies would be held by their own officials. The miners would use the student's common-room, the crypt, for recreation, and the housekeeping staff would feed them and look after their bedrooms. The rent to be paid for this accommodation would suffice to keep the College going.
>
> Edwin, formally and informally, made the miners welcome and begged our students to do the same. The students rose to the occasion. The good atmosphere in the College proved its worth; although they were overcrowded in their common-room, the students showed great goodwill.[66]

The students initially feared that their Eden might be threatened. They greeted the first interlopers with 'some trepidation, but soon relations could not have been more cordial; especially on Thursdays, when the deputies' party was held in the crypt and we danced and sang together long into the night.'[67] The entire population of the College was invited to participate in these regular Thursday evening extravaganzas - and attendance for the staff was generally duty bound. The 'students were a bit full of drink after going to the Justinlees'[68] and 'Gavin Muir always played the same piece of Chopin, week after week, in spite of his mother's urging him to vary his offering a little.'[69] Tom Scott, a student at the College during the academic year 1952-53, recalled one evening concert at which Gavin was 'so drunk, that he couldn't hit the keyboard never mind the keys!'[70] 'Edwin always sang a solo. He had rather a weak fluttering voice, but always, every Thursday evening to oblige the generous miners, he would rise up and waver through "My love is like a red, red rose." The miners always accorded him polite deferential applause.'[71] Willa, who was 'not a bad pianist', sometimes accompanied the fine voice of Donald Gordon.[72] And then, as the visiting miners 'did their party pieces', 'Edwin and I, in two special chairs, sat out the whole programme.'[73]

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[66] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p280-1)
[67] Spike Mays. No More Soldiering for Me. London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1971. (p179)
[68] Freda Wood in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 1st November 1994.
[69] George Mackay Brown. Edwin Muir: A Brief Memoir. West Linton: The Castlelaw Press, 1975. (p12)

Summer came early to Newbattle and suffused the Abbey grounds with an intense glow of glorious colour and warmth. 'Trees budded and shook out their tender leaves under the sun like myriads of small green lanterns. Gold and purple crocuses faded from the banks of the Esk, to make way for daffodils and anemones. Magnolias stood on their branches like stiff white candles against the Abbey's south wall.'[74] Willa also cast off her winter gloom and rejoiced in the sunlight and the beauty of her environment. In the years to come, it was always during the summer months that she most missed the College and its grounds 'and the Esk and the trees and all the happy summer days.'[75] The students basked in an idyll of contentment and revelled in the charms of these last weeks of their year-long Newbattle dream.

> It is usual, I suppose, for young people to be happy at that time of the year. Yet I think there would not have been such a delightful atmosphere in the college had it not been that Edwin and Willa Muir ruled with gentleness and charity and kindness

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[70] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.

[71] George Mackay Brown. Edwin Muir A Brief Memoir. West Linton: The Castlelaw Press, 1975. (p12)

[72] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 7th April 1995.

[73] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p281)

[74] Spike Mays. No More Soldiering for Me. London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1971. (p179)

[75] Willa Muir in a letter to George Mackay Brown. London, 15th June 1968.

> from the centre. Their presences threw no shadow across our days, but only light, and made more meaningful our communings with books and the springtime and our friends.
>
> In those beautiful mornings of April and May 1952, we would see Edwin and Willa walking together in the garden or beside the river. Willa toiled along in constant pain because of the arthritis. Edwin walked beside her in a slow trance-like glide.[76]

The publication of Edwin's Collected Poems on June 13th coincided with the end of term and introduced an air of celebration into the sadness of partings. Tears were shed as 'Edwin and Willa said farewell to us at the great door of the Abbey.'[77] Many of the students intended to continue their studies at various Universities across the country while others simply returned refreshed to the suspended lives which they had left twelve months before. All of them were profoundly and enduringly affected by their Newbattle year.

The staff meanwhile prepared for another chaotic summer of short-term courses. The College was re-populated weekly by a fresh influx from the various organisations and institutions which used the Abbey as their residential centre. Newbattle housed a stream of university extra-mural departments, nursing colleges, drama workshops, further education establishments and special interest groups during the three months of the long vacation. Some of the more weird and wonderful courses wafted a vaguely surrealistic air through the ancient and traditional College corridors - and occasionally compromised the inscrutable and straight-faced gravity of the Newbattle staff. A conference of Trappist monks descended upon the College one July with the intention of learning Esperanto and they held a Burns supper to which Edwin, Willa and the permanent teaching team were all duly invited. The evening passed uneventfully until 'the staff at the top table disgraced themselves with helpless giggles and had to leave as the Haggis was solemnly addressed in Esperanto!'[78]

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[76] George Mackay Brown. 'Edwin Muir at Newbattle.' In Akros. no.47. August 1981. (pp6-13)

[77] George Mackay Brown. 'Edwin Muir at Newbattle.' In Akros. no.47. August 1981. (pp6-13)

The Muirs escaped to Orkney for a holiday in late July and gradually relaxed into the gentler pace of island life and the congenial company of old friends. Edwin was wearied and weakened by his ongoing battle with the Executive Committee; but his profound affection for Newbattle still remained intact. He and Willa began the 1952-53 session on a wave of optimism and with a renewed consciousness of the positive aspects of their situation. The Abbey and its grounds were a constant delight to them; and they were increasingly appreciative of the comfortable friendliness of the staff. 'I think that, with occasional little rubs, we were a more friendly and harmonious staff than could be found in many residential colleges. I am very happy, looking back on everything, and we did very good work. I regret nothing, . . .'[79]

It was a fairly uneventful academic year. A workable and successful syllabus had now been firmly established and had inspired the staff with the confidence which comes of routine and custom. The teaching and study format had also solidified comfortably into a standard - but flexible - pattern.

> We were given three lectures a day on the average, and the bulk of the work had to be done by the students themselves. The lectures served as a good basic introduction into the . . . subjects,

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[78] Freda Wood in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 1st Nov 1994.

[79] Edwin Muir in a letter to Kenneth Wood. In Peter Butter. Edwin Muir: Man and Poet . London: Oliver and Boyd Ltd, 1966. (p261)

> and they also initiated the student to the proper use of the library. It was there where we spent the greater part of our time during afternoons and evenings.
>
> . . . The tutorials given at frequent intervals were very useful in discussing essays, problems and in the exchange of opinions. I then was able to admire the great devotion and patience of the Warden, Dr. Edwin Muir, and of our tutors. From time to time we had to hold seminars ourselves, and this too was a good method of making use of the material studied and expressing thoughts and views. . . .
>
> I should like to mention that Mrs Muir was so kind as to continue the weekly conversations which offered me the inestimable opportunity not only of improving my English, but also of extending my knowledge of various problems of life in Britain.
>
> The atmosphere in Newbattle Abbey was one of true comradeship. The common life of the students was a great help to the foreigners in making them feel 'at home'. We had many activities organised by the students themselves, among them interesting social evenings. The Warden, the Tutors and the staff did their best - and this was quite a lot - to help us solve our daily problems.[80]

The College's troubles weren't as easily solved. Spats and squabbles were dishearteningly common features of the meetings of the Executive Committee, and Edwin was increasingly worn down by the constant animosity and feuding. He and Willa were plagued by ill-health and in

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[80] Michael Passweg in a report written on his return to Israel after a year spent studying at Newbattle Abbey College. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

March 1953 he told Kathleen Raine that 'my ailments were brought on by worry over this place.'[81] But he still clung resolutely to his beleaguered vision for adult education and intended to seek out sapling writers who might benefit from the Newbattle influence. During a trip to London in the early spring of 1953 he 'mentioned the idea of gettting young poets to Newbattle to Janet [Adam Smith] and John Lehmann, and they didn't look on it as a wild idea. I'll do it to Kathleen Raine and T.S.E. as well. Perhaps something will come of it.'[82]

Edwin was awarded a C.B.E in that summer's Coronation Honours List and Willa and Gavin accompanied him to the presentation ceremony at Buckingham Palace. This unexpected accolade and formal recognition of Edwin's achievements thrilled them, and they glowed with genuine pride and pleasure. Old friends shared in their happiness and celebrations and, as they wandered contentedly amongst their Hampstead haunts and companions, they felt themselves re-absorbed into the milieu of literary London.

But Newbattle was never far from Edwin's mind and he collected two promising young writers for his 'bloody poet's' College in the course of that London trip. He had already written to Tom Scott to congratulate him on his admirable translation of Beowulf into Scots and to propose that he should spend a year in the peacefully creative atmosphere of Newbattle. That tentative and unofficial offer was formalised and finalised at a poet-laden summer party at G.S. Fraser's Chelsea home. Bernard Bergonzi (who was a close friend of Scott's and another of Frazer's guests) also went home at the evening's end with his name on the Newbattle enrolment register for the

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[81] Edwin Muir in a letter to Kathleen Raine. Newbattle, 14th March 1953. In the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.
[82] Edwin Muir in a letter to Willa Muir. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p165)

1953-54 session! The only remaining hurdle was the funding issue; and the two new conscripts were duly despatched to the London County Council offices in pursuit of the necessary money. Tom's application - accompanied by dazzling references from Janet Adam Smith, Kathleen Raine and T.S. Eliot - produced the unsurprising offer of a generous grant![83] Bergonzi was equally successful in his quest for cash. October promised an influx of fresh creative talent in the College.

The joy of London evaporated rapidly amidst the grim reality of a life in which 'the tide [was] at its lowest ebb.'[84] Willa sunk into a deep and self doubting depression as July faded into August and then into September; her world and its certainties disintegrated and she began to question the meaning and the value of her existence.

Gavin then exploded suddenly into a frenzy of misery and resentment. His impenetrable shell of silence and detachment shattered abruptly and he discharged a flood of vitriol and emotion.

> One night, about 3 a.m., I heard him stumbling outside our door, in the corridor. I leapt from bed, opened the door, and he laid his head on my shoulder and sobbed. 'I want to tell you that I love you very much, and I'm sorry I haven't been able to show it.'
>
> I was at once alarmed and exalted: something was breaking through his armour. I comforted him, cuddling, soothing, babying & then got him to bed, got in beside him and babied him until he slept.

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[83] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.

[84] Willa Muir in a letter to Kathleen Raine. Newbattle, 28th July 1953. In the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

> I was so thankful, so glad, so deeply moved. Since then he had, after a day's interval, another break-out, this time out of doors, when Edwin and I were sitting on the river seat. He came & sat between us & cried a little. Then he became a little aggressive, later still, and begged me not to be so possessive.
>
> This hurt, of course, for I have been leaning over backwards for years to avoid influencing him, to avoid interfering - Oh dear! - how can one be wise?
>
> But I went to see him & told him, with urgency, that I wasn't ever trying to master him. That love is clean away from the dominant/submissive world. That I didn't think I had humiliated him or won a victory when he wept on my shoulder. That submission and victory were not in the realm of love at all. I think it made some impression.
>
> Since then he has been opener, kinder, & more 'matey'. We are now having breakfast all together in the dining room, instead of in bed.[85]

It was an inevitable climax to the mounting neurosis and alienation from which Gavin had apparently suffered for many years - and it was now impossible for Willa and Edwin to ignore the psychological or psychiatric disorder which was increasingly manifest in every aspect of his behaviour and thinking. He was a social misfit and was entirely unable to deal with normal human interaction or to communicate except through music. His deafness had served to alienate him further and had allowed him to construct an insurmountable barrier between himself and the world around him. It was a mysterious deafness which appeared to respond to circumstances and to Gavin's will. Donald Gordon recalls various occasions during which he and Gavin had talked at length about mathematics and had scribbled copiously in pencil on the wonderful marble fireplace which dominated the living room of the Gordons' apartment. Gavin would initially be 'as deaf as a post, and then would get less and less deaf as the evening went on. It seemed to be an inorganic deafness.'[86] Willa was often pointedly irritated by Gavin's failure to respond to comment or conversation; and she claimed that Gavin's hardness of hearing was, in part, a consciously manufactured defensive mechanism.

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[85] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Gavin desperately needed sympathy, understanding and an assurance of his parents' love. He received only continual criticism, nagging, fussing, belittling - and his mother's psychological theorising. It is hard to imagine a more inappropriate and inhumane response to a complete emotional breakdown than to explain love as an entity 'clean away from the dominant/submissive world. . . That submission and victory were not in the realm of love at all.'[87] She effectively reduced him to case history status as she had done with her baby 'Marmaduke' twenty five years before. This flicker of unconscious cruelty is tragically characteristic of her behaviour towards Gavin - and undoubtedly partially explains his bitter resentment of her after his father's death.

But it is futile to attempt to apportion blame or to ascertain the root cause of any facet of Gavin's dysfunction. Willa and Edwin always described his psychological disorder as the product of his childhood road accident injuries; others believe that his emotional scars were the inevitable consequence of his parents and of the intensity and exclusivity of their love for one another. Any final and definitive conclusion is impossible and ridiculous. Numerous influences inevitably inform the creation of a character: it seems likely that these and other factors contributed to the destruction of Gavin's psychological and emotional stability.

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[86] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 3rd April 1995.

[87] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

Willa and Edwin were now faced with a situation in which they were powerless. Their son had become an unknown and unknowable figure who haunted the Newbattle corridors and who communicated with them only in frenzied and angry outbursts. His peculiarities frightened, upset and irritated them both; and they were often guilty of a cruelty which possibly arose from a sense of their own impotence. 'Willa tended to bully him - although not intentionally. She just pushed him around because he needed it.'[88] 'On two different occasions I remember Gavin coming into the sitting room and Willa saying to him with casual brutality "Go Gavin". She wanted rid of him just because he was there. And he would go.'[89] He 'often affected a kind of apologetic crooked half-grin. Latterly, Edwin could not bear to have him there and was quite splenetic about it. Maybe it was some sort of guilt which made them dislike the aspects of them which they saw in him. Willa certainly had her composure least when it came to talking about Gavin.'[90]

Many of the students perceived him as a rather sinister figure whom they assiduously avoided. 'He would meet you in the corridor and ignore you. One of his more terrifying habits was to stand close behind some young female student and scare her silly. He was a spooky kind of figure; a poor lost soul wandering around this great vast place. We often found him on the top floor amongst the dormitories.'[91]

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[88] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.
[89] Jack Rillie in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 2nd April 1995.
[90] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 15th May 1995.
[91] Jack Rillie in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 2nd April 1995.

But one young female at Newbattle that summer refused to be frightened by Gavin and her influence was perhaps the catalyst which produced Gavin's August explosion. Ewen McColl was devising and running a theatre workshop in the College that July, and a young nurse called Dorothy was the governess to his children. She was a strong-minded and confident young woman who was immediately attracted to Gavin's vulnerability and insecurity. She believed that his mother was to blame for all of his repressive behaviour and his neuroses; and she dedicated herself to rescuing him from Willa's maternal possessiveness. The dislike and distrust was mutual and 'Willa said some pretty horrible things about Dorothy who was a big, hefty girl and altogether too much for Gavin.'[92]

Dorothy returned to the college in October as Gavin's guest and 'stayed two nights in a large, draughty room. There was no visible tension between Willa and Gavin at all. She brushed him off with "go and play the piano now darling," and I was left to continue the conversation. She said he had some odd political friends but his deafness made him vulnerable to others who took advantage of him. She treated him like a handicapped toddler. But Edwin told me to take care of Gavin as he was so lost in his deaf state. He said his accident at the age of six . . . had made him withdrawn during most of his adult life.'[93] It was ironically not any intervention or possessiveness on Willa and Edwin's part which caused the ensuing eight year hiatus in the relationship; but rather an edict from Dorothy's parents which forbad her marriage on the grounds of her youth. This severance was not healed until the late 1950s, and the couple finally married in September 1959.

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[92] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 3rd April 1995.
[93] Dorothy Lytton in a letter to Kirsty Allen. Norwich, 27th February 1995.

Gavin's attention was in any case re-diverted in September towards his piano and his impending second attempt at the L.R.A.M. exam. Willa was desperately worried about his capacity to cope with the exam and with the hazards and confusions of London: she was therefore thrown into a dread panic when he suddenly announced, on the eve of his departure, that his accommodation plans had disintegrated and that he had nowhere to stay.

> Edwin and I both got nervous shock. Edwin, deep in his autobiog., didn't want to be startled out of it at all, and was: I felt despairing. Such a hoo-ha! Gavin of course had written to Farninghams only at the last moment, although he has known the date for weeks. On a chance, I rang up Mary Bosdet, who, also by chance, was in her flat & answered: she said she would bed and breakfast him AND meet him at the station. So that was O.K. Yet the agitation caused did not die down as quickly. Edwin especially was badly upset. Our son seems to have no common sense. He talked, vaguely, of getting a bed & breakfast hotel, somewhere, and then, if he was broke in consequence, he would hitch-hike home again! He does not realise at all what London is like. He calls us 'possessive' if we intervene in his affairs, and yet he messes himself up if he is left alone. Even Mary Bosdet's providential offer he shied at a little: it was too much like something 'managed' for him.
>
> . . . Well, I cut Mary some everlastings and lavender for Gavin to take down, and my blooming back ached so badly I couldn't go on cutting for more than a short time. So it is partly 'nerves'. If

> Gavin were to begin to hear, if Gavin were to be on a more even keel, my back would recover.[94]

It was a great relief to have Gavin safely home and to learn that he was satisfied with his performance in the exam. Willa was optimistic that a formal assurance of success and competence might bolster his confidence and heal his psychological scars; the impending arrival of the results was an event which she anticipated with some trepidation. She was therefore plunged into helpless despair on the morning of the 30th September when 'word came to Gavin that he had failed again in the L.R.A.M. Performers'. I couldn't resist opening the envelope, addressed in his own handwriting, because I knew it must be the result of his exam, and I was instantaneously depressed; not because he hasn't got these letters to put after his name, but because he has twice failed, like a nervous horse balking at a fence which it could sail over if it weren't nervous. He took it "well"; that is, he did not make any demonstration and said it must have been a "close shave". Perhaps it would have been better had he burst into tears and let something out. Unless Edwin and I are completely out in our estimates of his ability, he is well above the standard needed, and only his nervous instability must have frustrated him.'[95]

Professional help was now a necessity and an appointment was made for Gavin with Dr Kramer at the Davidson clinic. But Willa felt that the situation was hopeless; and that Gavin had embedded himself so entrenchedly within his own psyche that he was now utterly unreachable.

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[94] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[95] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> What can get deep enough in him to harmonise his conflicts? We do all we can by providing a loving, kind environment, but he is still on the defensive, putting up armour against a hostile world, being himself hostile in his interpretation of stray words & gestures. It is this split, this cutting-off, this projection of an invisible line, on one side of which all is suspect, that is the most trying element in his pattern. The line is laid down and strengthened by ideology. Theory about parents, about mothers, about complexes, about politics, determines and blankets what he sees of the real world, so that his whole vision is distorted. This must be partly due to ambition, to a too strong cultivation of the ego, to an urge towards assertion of himself; he asserts himself therefore in the wrong ways, by withdrawal, suspicion, rudeness, deafness. And yet there is inside him a fountain of affection, a childlike naïvete, warmth and simplicity, that would make him very lovable and charming were he to let it flow out spontaneously.[96]

It is rather ironic that Willa - a specialist in the reduction of human nature to psychological characteristics and categories - should accuse Gavin of excessive ideologising and theorising and then proceed to disembowel his psyche and his soul. And yet a certain residual bemused and tormented affection is evident in this helpless assessment of his troubled nature.

Gavin was not Willa's only source of anguish during that painful summer: the deepest wounds were those which were unconsciously inflicted upon her by Edwin. He was absorbed in the reworking of his autobiography - and his selective recollections of events and feelings was profoundly painful to her. She found herself unable to control the fire of resentment and hurt caused by Edwin's knowing omission of many of the experiences which had shaped their relationship and her sense of self. His denial of their common history was tantamount to a conscious negation of some aspect of her identity and seemed pointedly and completely to exclude her and her contributions to his creativity from his life's story. The lengthy entries which she made in her journal in the wake of various discussions with Edwin about the autobiography consumately capture her consequent despair, self-doubt and intense hopelessness.

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[96] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

> Yesterday afternoon, walking the garden with Edwin, we discussed the part of our life, first visit to Italy, which he is writing about now in his autobiography. He said he was finding difficulty in writing it. I suggested that was because he was going to miss out so much: for instance, I was sure he would leave out the Gerda episode.
>
> Yes, indeed he would, he said.
>
> We began talking it over. I found I still could call up vividly the emotions of that terrible time, especially when we got to the Riva, & on our day in Tremosine when Edwin thought the walls were going to fall on him every time we climbed at all high. The dull misery behind those brilliant blue days in the white powdery dust, I felt it all again. . . .
>
> "What did she do to you?" I asked. "She must have felt your emotional state was vulnerable and launched a shaft of power into it."
>
> "Something like that", he said.
>
> "Would it have been better for you to go back to her?" I asked.

"Don't be silly", he said.

But I remembered the agony with which I walked on the wet beach of Garda, walking through the waves without even noticing that my shoes were soaking, as I wrestled with my misery, in the half moon-light, alone, and then went back to tell Edwin that if he wanted to leave me in Italy and go back to Gerda, he should do it.

. . . Well, churning up these past events brought up in me a surprising rush of angry feeling that I had thought was long past and done with. The misery, the resentment, the irritations were all present again. . . .

. . . Then I unpacked all the unhappiness that had made my life bitter after finishing [The Usurpers]. - Then I perceived well enough that the earlier bitter feelings had been only an excuse for releasing the later. I really did let them all out. Edwin said, once, when we came back to the house: I don't think we should say any more about it; but I felt that these things should be talked out, to prevent their festering inside. . . .

And then I told him that even the translations I had done were no longer my own territory, for every one assumes that Edwin did them. He is referred to as "THE" translator. By this time he may even believe that he was. He has let my reputation sink, by default; so now I fear that if the Feuchtwanger publishers are told that I am prepared to do his beastly novel, they will refuse unless Edwin engages to do it, or to put his name to it.

And the fact remains: I am a better translator than he is. The whole current of patriarchal society is set against this fact, however, and sweeps it into oblivion, simply because I did not insist on shouting aloud: "Most of this translation, especially

> Kafka, has been done by ME. Edwin only helped." And every time Edwin was referred to as THE translator, I was too proud to say anything; and Edwin himself felt it would be undignified to speak up, I suppose. So that now, especially since my breakdown in the middle of the war, I am left without a shred of literary reputation. And I am ashamed of the fact that I feel it as a grievance. It shouldn't bother me. Reputation is a passing value, after all. Yet it is now that I feel it, now when I am trying to build up my life again and overcome my disabilities: my dicky backbone, for instance. Because I seem to have nothing to build on, except that I am Edwin's wife and he still loves me. That is much. It is almost all, in a sense, that I could need. It is more than I deserve. And I know, too, how destructive ambition is, and how it deforms what one might create. And yet, and yet, I want to be acknowledged.[97]

By the end of September Edwin had managed to extricate himself from his entanglement in the Italian interlude: the Gerda incident could almost be consigned again to history and to the unprobed corners of their minds.

Willa's emotional distress was compounded by physical pain and constant ill-health. She was crippled increasingly by arthritis, and by the side-effects of the various treatments which she received. A course of pep pills which had been prescribed to swiften the loss of her excess weight, affected her particularly badly and she suffered from a serious and frightening night-time bout of faintness and nausea. But by the end of August she was able to boast that she 'was a great deal thinner. It's much easier to stand straight and to walk. I am not built to carry as much weight as I had.'[98]

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[97] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

And even the deepest water of gloom couldn't halt the continuing and inexorable flow of daily life. The usual crop of holidaying friends descended on the College and were made welcome. A.S. Neill was one of the various relics from a past existence who appeared on the doorstep that summer; and who found himself absorbed into a typically lively multi-cultural gathering in the Muir's sitting room! There was then an influx of visitors seeking Edinburgh Festival accommodation; spare bed space had somehow to be found for everyone.

Willa and Edwin dutifully and hesitantly trailed into Edinburgh for any Festival event which involved their numerous friends or colleagues; but their increasing uneasiness about Edwin's fitness to drive completely spoiled their enjoyment of the evening. Their fears were justified in mid-September when they drove into town to visit the 'MacTaggarts, taking back the morning suit Willie so kindly lent Edwin for his investiture. . . . On the way, at the corner of Hanover Street, Edwin, held up by cars in front, was hemmed in by a flock of pedestrians crossing his bows; he thought they were clear & started the car, but he knocked down a woman who fell against another and knocked her down too. This latter was an elderly woman. They weren't hurt, but shocked, & were helped into the nearest shop to recover. (Two separate people came to tell me, in the car, that they weren't really hurt.) Edwin fled after them & they told him themselves they weren't really hurt, not injured, that is to say, only nervously upset. They couldn't have been more upset than he was: he got the pain in his chest; when we reached the MacTaggarts . . . I told them, and they gave him a glass of whisky to help him recover. . . . It's an anxious business being driven through Edinburgh traffic by Edwin, & this pain he gets in his chest makes me more anxious. We can't really go there often, unless we get Webster to drive.'[99]

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[98] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

They became reticent about venturing too far from home and were increasingly content to spend their days within the College and its grounds. They derived their entertainment from the vagaries and idiosyncracies of the lives in which they shared, and were delighted by the various minutiae and miscellany which were the bulwark of community existence. Willa was also intently absorbed in the creation of a play; and a series of scurrilous and very funny clerihews or ephemeridae about various notable contemporary figures in Scottish literary life including James Bridie, Eric Linklater, Hugh MacDiarmid, Compton Mackenzie and Norman MacCaig.

The summer of suffering drew eventually to a tardy close and the advent of autumn heralded the arrival of a new batch of students which included Tom Scott and Bernard Bergonzi. Another difficult and battle-ridden year lay ahead of Edwin; financial and ideological tensions still splintered the Executive Committee and the Trade Unions continued to oppose his concept of education as a self-justifying entity. 'Most of the chaps were working class intellectuals and their Trade Unions wanted certificates. There was a constant clash between Edwin (who believed in education for its own sake); and the Union go-getters. Newbattle was always criticised for being a school for poets.'[100]

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[99] Willa Muir. Journal: Newbattle. January 1951-September 1953. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.

[100] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.

This was, for many of its students, the College's greatest attraction and strength and each year brought a number of applications inspired by the fascination and allure of Edwin's poetic ambience. Tom Scott professed an unashamed indifference to 'philosophy and economics. I didn't bother with any of their lectures - but I went to all of Edwin's classes. The last thing I ever did at Newbattle was to run a tutorial on Edwin which Edwin attended. I attacked Scott and Scotland and at the end of the class, Edwin came up to me and said "You know Tom, I didn't realise that you were so intellectual!"'[101]

Guest speakers also contributed their diverse wisdom and experience to the Newbattle melting pot and catalysed the poetic and intellectual debate. The impressive list of 'celebrity' visitors to the College during Edwin's wardenship included such cultural giants as T.S. Eliot, Kathleen Raine, Hesketh Pearson, Francis George Scott and Professor Dover Wilson. The students were always genuinely appreciative of these contributions and were enthusiastic and energetic in their response. The ensuing discussion and elucidation of the speaker's thesis often continued long into the night and yielded bleary breakfast eyes the following morning.

Abject exhaustion was now a habitual state for the Muirs. Willa's festive correspondance in 1953 betrays this weariness; but also stresses a renewed sense of confidence and optimism about the future of the College.

> We have 25 long term students of very high quality, and there are already applications or enquiries for next year. About 76 applied for admittance this year, but of course, they didn't all get LEA grants; if they had we would have been more than full. Anyhow, Newbattle seems to be making headway. . . .

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[101] Tom Scott in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Edinburgh, 30th March 1995.

> Edwin is very tired. One has to be up on one's toes to live up to this lot! Yet it is heartening and sustaining as well as tiring to have such good students as these. There are only 7 (or is it 8) Scots among them; all the rest are from England, except one Yugoslav. We may be having two or three Norwegian girls next term, too. But Scots are still shy, although some of those we have are very good indeed.[102]

A tentative happiness crept back into her life and was boosted when Gavin finally agreed to wear a hearing aid. She nursed a secret hope that it 'may help him to recover inside himself when he finds that he doesn't really need to put up defences against what people say.'[103] They shared this fragile Christmas contentment with Tom Scott and his wife at Newbattle and rejoiced in good companionship and conversation.

But this peaceful interlude was the calm before a tremendous storm. Willa was taken in to Chalmers Hospital in Edinburgh in February for exploratory tests which revealed an apparently benign lump in her colon. '[T[he surgeon operated upon her, but found that he had to make two operations instead of one: an older growth behind the one shown by the X-ray. Two days later internal bleeding was still going on, and another operation had to be made to stop it. For some days she hovered between life and death, but then gradually began to recover. Then pleurisy set in, throwing her back again, but at last she began to come back to life.'[104]

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[102] Willa Muir in a letter to Ethel Ross. Newbattle, 2nd December 1953.

[103] Willa Muir in a letter to Irene Abenheimer. Newbattle, 3rd December 1953.

[104] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974. (p 168)

The recovery process was long, slow and arduous. April was almost at an end before she was allowed to return home and to continue her recuperation amidst the familiar scenery of Newbattle. Physical and emotional weakness still plagued her, but by early June she was 'steadily improving, but still not able to make much effort. All this is the last phase of a long illness which had cast anxiety over her and me. Now that the operation has been successful, I think she will be better in health than she has been for years. I feel as if we were beginning to emerge out of a long dark fog of anxiety into light again.'[105]

The whole experience had shaken and unsettled them both. Willa's long hospitalisation left Edwin in 'a terrible state and desperately lonely. [Donald Gordon] used to go downstairs to his flat and drink a bottle of whisky with him each night.'[106] A terrifying vision of the emptiness of his life without Willa obsessed and paralysed him, and he was occasionally defeated in his struggle to maintain the normality of College life. 'I've learnt a great deal about what fear means in the last few months and what a purely destructive thing it is, and how right Christianity is in setting up faith and hope as great virtues.'[107]

Willa, who didn't possess the same sustaining resource of faith, was often swallowed up in a dark tunnel of pain and dread. She had felt alone and frustrated amidst the hospital's clinical silence and was perhaps afraid that the growths might, after all, transpire to be sinister. Her mind was tiresomely active and irritated by her body's incompatible inactivity when the first immediate danger had passed. Two pieces which she wrote during the summer after her operation, were possibly the product of this enforced thinking time in hospital.

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[105] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London: The Hogarth Press,1974. (p 168)
[106] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 3rd April 1995.
[107] Edwin Muir in a letter to Joseph Chiari. In Selected Letters of Edwin Muir. Ed. Peter Butter. London:The Hogarth Press, 1974 . (p 168)

The first of these was a radio script which was broadcast on the hundredth anniversary of the death of the Scottish novelist Susan Ferrier. It is an entertaining and scrupulously researched assessment of Ferrier's life and work and was apparently greatly appreciated by BBC radio listeners. She produced a second radio script in Scots in November about 'the noise of 1954 life; and the fact that many people speak aggressively in private or public; some of them broadcast and they add up to an indescribably large amount of the total broadcast from whatever source.'[108] But it was rejected and returned to her bearing the disheartening verdict that 'it will not stand by itself.'[109]

The College was meanwhile increasingly beset by insufferable intrigues and smouldering resentment and Edwin's will and his capacity for resistance receded in the face of incessant assaults from the Executive Committee. The final and decisive blow was struck unexpectedly by Willie Ritchie.

Edwin decided one evening to accompany Ritchie to the bus-stop in Dalkeith and to continue the discussions of a lengthy College meeting. He returned irate, miserable and consumed with an enduring hatred of Ritchie. He angrily paced the room and repeated the details of the conversation and of Ritchie's treacherous summing-up of College affairs in the infinitely wounding comment that 'I always said it wouldn't do.'[110] It was the final straw. Edwin had assumed that Ritchie was an ally and he was shocked to find him in the enemy camp. Hurt and rage combined to make a potent poison for which he never found the antidote.

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[108] Aidan Thomson of BBC Scotland in a letter to Willa Muir. Edinburgh, 30th November 1954. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[109] Aidan Thomson of BBC Scotland in a letter to Willa Muir. Edinburgh, 30th November 1954. In the Willa Muir archive in the University Library, St Andrews.
[110] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 7th April 1995.

Willa participated in Edwin's anger, outrage and detestation of Ritchie. She resented his disloyalty and the coldly cruel pragmatism with which he had 'turned against Edwin.'[111] She never forgave him, and ultimately held him virtually responsible for Edwin's death.

Willa wrote two poems during the weeks which followed that dreadful and revelatory evening. The first is purely cynical and humourously dismissive:

When Adam and Eve set up in Eden,
  with fruit a-blossomin' and a-seedin',
I saw no future for them two,
  I always said it wouldn't do.

When Noah started on his ark,
  it wasn't a sea-worthy barque,
and he'd have trouble with his crew;
  I always said it wouldn't do.

When David fitted out his sling,
  it was a home-made childish thing,
and river pebbles don't aim true;
  I always said it wouldn't do.

When Christ let fly some repartee,
  and upset every Pharisee,

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[111] Donald Gordon in an interview with Kirsty Allen. Glasgow, 7th April 1995.

I knew his project would fall through;
  I always said it wouldn't do.

So now in Scotland's capital city,
  on the Chairman's private sub-committee,
of Newbattle Abbey College -- pooh!--
  I've always said it wouldn't do.[112]

But the second is unnervingly vitriolic and vicious. It is aptly entitled 'A Song of Hate'.

You are gone but alas! not dead,
And yet, each week, each day,
Others are killed instead,
shrugged, washed or blown away,
by earthquake, flood, typhoon.
May it be your turn soon!

Atomic mushrooms trouble,
our sickening atmosphere;
yet, were they to redouble,
catastrophe, I fear,
justice would not be done,
by earthquake, flood, typhoon.

Others we ill can spare,
beloved artists, die;
yet you still breathe the air,

---

[112] Willa Muir. 'I always said it wouldn't do'. From a collection owned by Donald Gordon.

and patronise the sky.
I ask one simple boon,
of earthquake, flood, typhoon:
- May it be your turn soon![113]

The Muir's energy and enthusiasm was now entirely spent. It became increasingly clear that it was time to abandon the vision and to leave Newbattle in other hands. The Executive Committee were now openly hostile and were 'conspiring to get rid of [Edwin]. They had called their last meeting without letting him know, although *ex officio* he was bound to attend. The Director of Education, our old acquaintance, was canvassing in support of a certain able young man, the successful head of a short-term college in the north of England, the very man, he said to make a good Warden of Newbattle instead of Edwin.'[114]

They survived a long, bleak and frustrating winter term; but by December 'Edwin & I were tired and "no weel": so we fled to a small hotel in Edinburgh for Christmas, taking Gavin with us, and simply used it as a nursing home: i.e. we just ate and slept and ate, sleeping every afternoon, most evenings, and all the nights. Gavin went out on his own, but we enjoyed ourselves in our own peculiar fashion.'[115] And it was perhaps this luxury of thinking time and space which ended their Newbattle sojourn. They had certainly resolved, by mid-January, that the coming summer term would be their last.

> Edwin's nervous pain is letting up, too, partly because - now pay attention here - partly because he has quietly made up his mind to leave Newbattle this summer. It is only a private decision, so far;

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[113] Willa Muir. 'A Song of Hate'. From a collection owned by Donald Gordon.
[114] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p282)
[115] Willa Muir in a letter to Ethel Ross. Newbattle, 17th January 1955.

> don't say anything about it, to anyone. . . . His health, his nerves, simply won't any longer stand the strain of coping with Lord Greenhill and W.D. Ritchie. He hasn't resigned yet, and, indeed, may not resign after all; I am only telling you how he feels just now. But it is such a relief to him that I think he will stick to the decision & give them three months' notice - probably in June. You see, we have only 20 students this year, although we had, I believe, over 70 applications: the grants were refused for all the others. And Lord G. & Ritchie have been stymied for the present, but they're the kind who always come back; and they are likely to turn the College into something Edwin wouldn't like, or be able to cope with. We have had a very good innings, but it is better for Edwin to go, rather than worry himself to death. I have no idea where we shall go. My home is in Edwin's bosom, but that is a good deal less peaceful and static than Abraham's![116]

The prospect of leaving this yearned-after and much-loved home terrified and depressed Willa. She was too incapacitated and elderly to relish the vagrant life: the wanderlust of her younger, fitter years had evaporated with the onset of old age. She was also intensely galled by the injustice of their apparent defeat; her sensitive pride prickled with pain.

And then fate intervened and simultaneously solved their dilemma and saved their pride. 'An invitation came out of the blue from Harvard, asking Edwin to be the next Charles Eliot Norton Professor for the year 1955-6. He would have to give only six public lectures during the tenure of the Professorship. Edwin accepted the offer, with gladness . . . To be invited to Harvard, an honour, instead of straying into uncertainties was like taking a child's revenge on the Executive Committee, leaving with a bang instead of a whimper.'[117]

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[116] Willa Muir in a letter to Ethel Ross. Newbattle, 17th January 1955.

And yet their intense relief was qualified by their profound sadness at leaving Newbattle. It had often irritated, frustrated and upset them; but it had also been a refuge, a home and an inspiration. They were filled with despondency at the prospect of parting from familiarities and friends and of establishing roots elsewhere. But they bravely faced their future.

The long-suffering furniture was banished again into storage and the wearisome business of closure and end-tying was gradually accomplished. The academic year dragged to an end. Edwin gladly abdicated his responsibility for the College and departed in the confident knowledge that he was bequeathing a competent and motivated staff to his successor. The last cases were packed and the final goodbyes were said. London and the New World beckoned.

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[117] Willa Muir. Belonging. London: The Hogarth Press, 1968. (p282 and 284)

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