

1 Introduction and Earlier Research

To one who loves the hills at every season, the blossoming is not the best of the heather. The best of it is simply its being there—is the feel of it under the feet. To feel heather under the feet after long abstinence is one of the dearest joys I know. (Shepherd, *Living* 51)

Anna “Nan” Shepherd (1893–1981) was a Scottish poet and novelist. Born in Cults, Shepherd lived in Aberdeen all her life and became a renowned lecturer at the Aberdeen College for Education. Shepherd was a significant contributor to the Scottish Literary Renaissance during the first half of the 20th century but later fell into obscurity. Rediscovered and popularised by Robert Macfarlane in the 21st century and adorning the Scottish five-pound-note since 2016, Shepherd is now recognised as an important voice in literature whose work deserves further academic research. She was an avid hillwalker (especially in the Cairngorms) and is famous today for her non-fiction memoir *The Living Mountain* that was published thirty years after its conception during the Second World War. Shepherd also wrote three novels, called *The Quarry Wood*, *The Weatherhouse* and *A Pass in the Grampians*, that are all set in small communities of Scotland’s Northeast. Other than the common locality, all her novels predominantly explore the lives of women affected by social change. The underlying themes in all her works are universal: Shepherd explores existential questions by connecting self, community and the natural world. She powerfully demonstrates how nature and culture are connected and how they can shape identity through that interconnectedness. A joy to be alive and to be able to experience the world permeates Shepherd’s writing.

The Living Mountain I encountered by chance while spending Christmas in Scotland in 2019. A hillwalker and nature lover myself, Shepherd’s memoir resonated with me. Her descriptions of the peace found when “one walks the flesh transparent” (Shepherd, *Living* 106) captures an experience I had not been able to put into words: “Shepherd’s prose is of the *zeitgeist* in that she seeks to express how she walks herself into a sense of unity with the mountain that is both physical and spiritual at the same time” (T. Gifford 21). Shepherd writing about an area in Scotland whose

bounds I knew quite well made me see the place with different eyes. It also inspired me to get into the Cairngorms, to see the places Shepherd so lovingly described. I climbed Cairn Gorm on my 30th birthday with a copy of *The Living Mountain* in my backpack. Despite the intimate resonance for many, extensive academic engagements with Shepherd are rare. This doctoral thesis seeks to right this wrong and to contribute to the ongoing canonisation of Nan Shepherd beyond the Scottish Literary Renaissance.

This literary epoch between the 1920s and 1950s was Scotland's modernist movement that sought a renewal for Scottish culture. Aiming to create a distinctly Scottish and modernist literature, Scotland's history, culture, landscape and languages were used to construct a Scottish identity independent from English modernism. The key figure of the movement was the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, most famous for his poem "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle". He was "primarily fuelled by patriotic sentiments" (Szamosi 71) and encouraged other writers to find a voice for Scotland to celebrate Scottish uniqueness and cultural and linguistic heritage. While he was specifically interested in the Scots language and incorporated it in his work as a poet, his influence as a political figure had a lasting impact on the wider Scottish literary scene at the time. The Scottish Literary Renaissance's cultural impact persists until today as questions of cultural and national identity in post-Brexit Scotland remain relevant. Many female writers contributed to the Scottish Literary Renaissance but remained obscure or middling, as the movement was male-dominated and the inclusion of 'female' or 'feminist' themes was dismissed as not political or relevant enough to inform national and cultural identity. Thus, a re-evaluation of canon as described by Alan Riach is needed:

We might therefore begin to review and re-evaluate not only those writers and texts hitherto consigned to the margins or peripheries, but to interrogate the processes which relegated them to such positions, and which have kept them there. For these processes are inevitably human constructions, and they operate across societies, nations and cultures. If we are to question and counter them, our practices must attend equally well to cross-cultural or trans-cultural texts, drawing strengths from conditions formerly considered debilitating. (A. P. Riach 158–59)

Beyond the Scottish Literary Renaissance, Shepherd's writing reflects a deep affinity for the natural world and offers a unique perspective on our

relationship with the environment that is widely affected by climate change today. Especially in recent years, Shepherd has been widely celebrated. Yet, as Sassi summarises, “notwithstanding such militant and articulated presence in the cultural and literary debate of her time, little effort has been made so far to integrate Shepherd’s literary work and her vision into the wider picture of the Scottish Renaissance” (Sassi 68). Both feminism and academia contributed to the gradual inclusion of female voices and notable progress has been made in recent years with regards to other under-represented voices. Nan Shepherd is a fitting example to showcase the gender bias of the Scottish Literary Renaissance while also acknowledging her relevance today, beyond gender. Especially her novels can be seen as counter-history because of their inclusion of female struggles within the Scottish Literary Renaissance:

In all three novels she concentrates on the development of lively, intelligent young women, and examines what it takes for them to gain an important balance both of self-knowledge and knowledge wider than the self; all three also explore characters who have deceived themselves into thinking they are acting on and for truth with some kind of moral mandate or superiority. (A. Smith 34)

Shepherd’s first novel *The Quarry Wood* was published in 1928 and explores themes of identity, community and self-discovery. Martha Ironside, the protagonist of this *Bildungsroman* comes from a rural lower class background and fights to pursue higher education. While her studies at Aberdeen University introduce her to culture and knowledge and contribute to her losing her Scots, she has trouble fitting in with her family and the surrounding community because of this. Martha loves the natural world surrounding her but struggles to find a place for herself, a farmer’s daughter, in the grand scheme of things. The natural world accompanies Martha’s coming-of-age and offers her insight and identification beyond the self. Martha’s passion is knowledge and she is valued for this by her foster sister’s husband Luke, whom she secretly loves. When a neighbour spies Martha being kissed by Luke in the woods, gossip is used to discredit her when she is later courted by Roy, the hedonistic opposite of the intellectual Luke. It is rumoured by the neighbours that her mother’s adopted child is actually hers. The discovery of both her sexuality and the value of life experience beyond academia leads to an identity crisis that Martha can only resolve by a transformation of her place in her community to fit her needs: Martha embraces the gossip and adopts the child

to experience fulfilment and motherhood without husband or marriage while remaining a working woman. The novel plays with modernist modes of narration and reader expectations while openly discussing gender, class, identity, academia, and nature in a mixture of English and Scots. *The Quarry Wood's* depiction of social movement and gendered struggles invites comparisons to Lewis Grassie Gibbon's influential 1932 Scots Renaissance novel *Sunset Song*, which is often seen as a thematic successor to Shepherd concerning storyline, North East Scottish setting and inclusion of Doric language:

Shepherd is a noticeable absentee from Gibbon's 'Literary Lights', his 1934 essay on the principal Scottish Renaissance writers, but her portrayal of a strong female protagonist such as Martha Ironside, torn between individual development through education and commitment to community and personal ties, surely provided a template for the Chris Guthrie of *Sunset Song*. (Lyall, "Hugh" 177–178)

The Weatherhouse (1930), another of Shepherd's novels, is set in Fetter-Rothnie, a small fictional community in Aberdeenshire during the First World War. It follows the stories of the multi-generational inhabitants of the Weatherhouse, their relatives and neighbours. While the novel's modernist multiperspectivity and kaleidoscopic fragments create a realistic depiction of the lives of the predominantly female characters, the main conflict of the novel is triggered by a man: the return of the shell-shocked soldier Garry Forbes from the war. When he learns that his deceased friend and fellow soldier David was secretly betrothed to a local woman, Louie Morgan, Garry seeks to unearth what he considers to be her lies and untruths. Deeply disillusioned from the war and struggling with his identity, Garry learns that his binary thinking in connection to 'truth' can only do more harm than good; his betrothal to temporary Weatherhouse resident Lindsay suffers, as does his social standing. When Louie is exposed for having invented the betrothal against his will in front of the community by Ellen Falconer, a middle-aged woman from the Weatherhouse who values stories more than reality and who has also secretly fallen in love with the young soldier, both Louie's and Ellen's lives are destroyed. While Garry can find meaning and belonging through identification via natural world and community, the novel chronicles the partly tragic lives of women often side-lined in history and literature. *The Weatherhouse* is Shepherd's most modernist novel; it creates liminality through the usage of "[b]orderline figures, places and songs [...] spaces

of instability which problematise identification, in psychic, social and geographical terms” (Norquay 88). With the generational conflicts of the women in the narrative, torn between tradition and modernity, as well as the depiction of the war’s effect on a small Scottish community, Shepherd’s novel contributes to portraying Scotland’s multi-faceted history.

Finally, Shepherd’s third novel *A Pass in the Grampians* (1933) revisits the coming of age of a young Scottish woman: Jenny Kilgour loves her life at her grandfather’s farm in a small Aberdeenshire glen. She shares her grandfather’s strong connection to the land. When the orphan Bella Cassidy, adopted by Jenny’s grandfather, returns to the rural community as a successful singer, secrets from the past are uncovered and Jenny realises that she wants more from life than what her community can offer her. The novel again subverts narrative convention and reader assumptions since all storylines appear to be disjointed: Bella, who had been an unhappy child, constantly shamed for her greed for life and her body size, has returned to impress Jenny’s grandfather, whom she believes to be her father. However, local crofter and sheep herder Durno is Bella’s father. Durno’s wife first fled to the Kilgours and then committed suicide to escape from the hands of her ex-husband. Durno’s sister Alison has kept the secret for decades and Bella’s arrival leads to Andrew Kilgour, Jenny’s grandfather, discovering the truth. When Bella is confronted with the identity of her father, she burns down her partially built house on top of the glen and vows to never return. Her hedonistic lifestyle and refusal to be intimidated by the community deeply impresses young Jenny. While she is in tune with the natural world and loves the glen deeply, unlike Martha in *The Quarry Wood*, Jenny decides to follow Bella to London to experience life in the big, modern city. Shepherd’s last novel again chronicles the lives of women in an ever-changing Scotland: Be it successful, proud and portly Bella, whose hedonism shocks Jenny’s aunt Mary even though both are working women in London returned to the glen, or Jenny’s realisation that her identity within her grandfather’s realm is not enough to satisfy her, Shepherd depicts torn, sometimes unlikeable figures who create a ‘realistic’ picture of Scotland in the early 20th century.

Shepherd’s three novels share the deep connection of self and the nature with her non-fiction memoir *The Living Mountain* (1977). Blending travel

literature, autobiography, nature writing and philosophical exploration in the form of prose poetry, Shepherd's memoir was only published a few years before her death and is the product of her time in the Cairngorm mountains throughout her life:

The Living Mountain, it seems, was too difficult a text to be assimilated into its age, not purely as a consequence of the economics of publishing, but also due to the impossibility of its very categorisation. Yet it is precisely this fusion of the exploration of the local, combined with philosophical rootedness in the body, and concomitant ontological quest, which have made this text so relevant for contemporary nature writers. While Shepherd's work lay hidden from view in a drawer for thirty years, her observations being too out of step with her contemporary world, for the contemporary 'new nature writers' this blending of the boundaries of travel and nature is *de rigueur*. (Bell 132)

While exploring the Cairngorms in terms of geology, flora and fauna throughout the seasons, Shepherd eschews a scientific or naturalist approach in favour of a more holistic, transcendental experience of body and self with the mountain. Instead of racing to the top, Shepherd spends time with the mountain and explores the experiences that the natural world can offer. By focusing on her senses, identity beyond the self and in harmony with the natural world can be achieved. Her poetic meditation on humanity's relationship with nature is joyful. Without being pedantic or intimidating, Shepherd focuses on a constant repositioning with regards to self, community and nature. Her contemplative and deeply poetic approach encompasses a local as well as a universal scale. The geo-poetic contents of Shepherd's short text lend themselves well to ecocriticism: through a deep appreciation of the natural world, readers are invited to reconnect to nature and bridge the gap that separates them from it. *The Living Mountain* has established Shepherd not only as a genre-defying, convention-breaking trailblazer and mountaineer but also as a precursor of ecocriticism and modern nature writing. The text inspires readers to not only experience one's body and self in the mountains, but to also preserve and protect the natural world:

Shepherd's is a voice that opens up possibilities for conveying modes of experience existing beyond the constraints of everyday life. Her engagement with the natural world is a direct, embodied encounter with the elemental, opening up a new space outside of our habitual experience, re-framing our perception of the world, and our relationship with it. Thus, her writing upsets habitual and hegemonic ways of seeing and understanding the world, and reveals the hidden ideological nature of the dominant discourses of science, history, romanticism and landscape aesthetics that have come to define the Scottish landscape. (Kockel and McFadyen 200–201)

While Shepherd is mostly claimed as a feminist writer struggling to find success due to patriarchal restraints by scholars, the significance of her works cannot be reduced to gender alone. While the focus on female experiences and identities matters, Shepherd transcends gender binary thinking entirely.

This doctoral thesis will show how Shepherd's works explore the liberation of self regardless of gender through the individual's connection with nature. When eco-feminism often assumes an innate connection of women to nature, *all* characters in her novels experience freedom through the natural world, not just the women. As a mountaineer who climbed the Cairngorms alone, Shepherd's feats are rightly perceived as a feminist statement. Yet, in *The Living Mountain*, gender is irrelevant when it comes to the experiences that the mountain offers.

By adopting a childlike, playful view of the world, in putting her head upside down between her legs and displacing the self as the reference point, Shepherd completely dismantles the authoritative position attributed to sight. By disrupting the link between vision, power and possession, Shepherd not only undermines the discourses which promote aesthetic and scientific detachment, but also those that promulgate conquest, domination and mastery. (Carter 31)

The shared theme of Shepherd's works is a refusal to adhere to binary thinking and positioning oneself clearly: change and changed perspectives are the key to a resonant and joyful life. Gender is only secondary when it comes to the primary experience of expanding the self in communion with the natural world. In this way, Shepherd challenges and expands the canonicity of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, both in its time and in its later reception.

This dissertation utilises the multidisciplinary field of memory studies to frame the engagement with Shepherd: literature as a cultural artefact has an influence on the way individuals, groups and societies form their personal, social, cultural or national identity. With the scope of memory studies, literary reception and questions of canonisation can be used to conceptualise Shepherd as a writer during the Scottish Literary Renaissance as well as today. Shepherd's engagement with identity via language, memory and nature offers resonance even to contemporary readers. Resonance theory understood as reciprocity and as established by Hartmut

Rosa will be used to understand social phenomena through the relationship between human experiences, emotions, and cultural schemas. When Rosa diagnoses alienation of the self, struggling democracy, climate crisis, and capitalistic exploitation as problems of modernity, Shepherd as a writer during the Scottish Literary Renaissance connects to these questions despite the time gap. Shepherd's texts can offer resonance by showing how resonant an identity construction beyond the restrictions of the self in relation to the natural world and other people as part of it can be.

The theoretical approaches in Chapter 2 outline links between memory, literature, identity, nations, and resonance without considering the Scottish Literary Renaissance. These theory parts lay the groundwork for the actual engagement with Shepherd. Chapter 3 "Resonating Scotland" will then mix a literature review with a direct application to Shepherd's works to avoid repeating key aspects unduly. To visualise why Chapter 2 is more abstract and Chapter 3 uses more theory to expand on the themes established before, it can be helpful to phrase the objectives of Scottish Modernism as the following: As a modernist movement, the Scots Renaissance wanted to produce cultural artefacts (Chapter 2.1), especially literature (Chapter 2.2) by engaging with questions of identity (Chapter 2.3) to create a new national identity for Scotland (chapter 2.4) through an intense engagement with Scotland itself (chapter 2.5) to achieve what Rosa describes as resonance (Chapter 2.6). Chapter 3 introduces the Scottish Literary Renaissance in more detail as well as Shepherd's contributions (Chapter 3.1) and introduces female perspectives (Chapter 3.2) to further discuss Shepherd as a female writer and mountaineer despite being excluded from the Scottish Literary Renaissance (which might be read as an issue of male-dominated modernist literature in general). Identity construction and an engagement with memory within and beyond Shepherd's works and the connection to the nation as key ideas of the Scottish Literary Renaissance are the topic of Chapter 3.3. Shepherd's contributions to nature writing going beyond the Scottish Literary Renaissance are the topic of chapter 3.4. MacDiarmid's main goal for the Renaissance was linguistic in nature, which is why Chapter 3.5 introduces Scotland's languages and Shepherd's usage of them. Chapter 3.6 then moves to the reception of Shepherd: the chapter will look at Shepherd's

resonance in the 21st century reaching from an inspiration to writers to marketing of gin bottles.

Considering this, this dissertation re-evaluates Nan Shepherd's literary works and offers insights on her importance as a Scottish author both within and beyond the Scottish Literary Renaissance. It highlights how her writing challenges established genres and literary conventions by focusing on the joy of being alive and finding resonance through nature and community. The dissertation also explores how Shepherd's works can be situated within the context of contemporary environmental and ecocritical concerns, making her work relevant for modern readers. By utilising resonance theory, this dissertation seeks to add a qualitative aspect to memory studies as well as literary research in general. This dissertation lastly contributes to establishing Nan Shepherd as a significant and resonating Scottish author and woman to keep her memory alive.

