
NAN SHEPHERD (1893 – 1981)

LIFE AND LANDSCAPE



About Nan Shepherd

Nan (Anna) Shepherd was born in East Peterculter in 1893 and brought up in Cults, Deeside. She graduated from the University of Aberdeen in 1915 and was among the first of its female graduates, an experience she fictionalises in her novel *The Quarry Wood*. Her three novels *The Quarry Wood* (1928), *The Weatherhouse* (1930) and *A Pass in the Grampians* (1933) were all published while she was working as a lecturer in English at Aberdeen Training Centre for Teachers. Shepherd was also a poet and her collection *In the Cairngorms* was published in 1934. As the title of this collection suggests, Shepherd was a keen hill walker throughout her life and wrote about her experiences of hillwalking in *The Living Mountain*. While this was written in the 1940s it remained unpublished until 1977 but has now become one of Scotland's most popular texts.

Shepherd's work all reflects her love for the North-east of Scotland and it is all set in the region. However, it is never simply about North-east life. Rather, it explores the relationship between the local and the global and the ways we balance these different aspects of our experience. These complexities are also captured in Shepherd's nuanced use of Scots, in the richness with which she describes locale and in her innovative narrative methods. Her work also deals with the complexities of women's

experience in the early years of the twentieth century, and in particular the tensions that potentially exist between education and the domestic sphere. The richness of Shepherd's work led her to critical acclaim not only in Scotland but internationally.

As with many Scottish women writers Shepherd's work went out of print in the middle of the twentieth century and she was in part forgotten. However, her books were republished in the 1980s and 90s and were met with renewed popularity and critical attention. Recently, a reprinting of her account of hillwalking *The Living Mountain* has led to a recognition that this work was ahead of its time in its innovative approach to our relationship with landscape and that it has particular resonance for our own times as we negotiate our fraught relationship with our planet.

Recognition of Shepherd's achievements have led to her being granted her own stone in Edinburgh's Makars' Court, bearing the words from *The Quarry Wood* 'it's a grand thing to get leave to live'. More recently, her significance has been acknowledged in the decision to place her on the Royal Bank of Scotland five-pound note.



THE QUARRY WOOD (1928)

In this passage from *The Quarry Wood* the central character Martha Ironside describes her experience of arriving at the University of Aberdeen. While it is much more international now than it was when Shepherd is writing the university is still a place where people come together from many different backgrounds.

While her universe was thus widening both in time and in space, Scotland grew wider too. Hitherto her own blue valley, the city with its spires and dirty trawlers, had been her measure of Scotland. Now it grew. The North came alive. Out of it, from cottar-houses and farms, from parlours behind country shops, from fishing-villages on the Moray Firth, from station-houses and shepherds' houses and school-houses, manses and mansions, crofts on the edge of heather, snow-blocked glens, clachans on green howes beneath the corries, where tumbling waterfalls lit the rocks; islands in the Atlantic, gale-swept, treeless; thatched cottages where the peat reek clung in stuff and fabric and carried east in clothes and books – there flocked in their hundreds her fellow-students, grave, gay, eager, anxious, earnest, flippant, stupid and humble and wise in their own conceits, dreamers, and doers and idlers, bunglers and jesters, seekers of pleasure and seekers of wisdom, troubled, serene, impetuous, and all inquisitive; subjecting life to inquisition.

The Quarry Wood, p.54.

Textual Analysis Focus

Note how Shepherd uses lists to convey the sense of Martha's excitement. She also conveys this through her use of multiple adjectives. Synaesthetic imagery calls all our senses into play as we imagine the homes that the students have come from.

Writing Focus

How would you convey a sense of excitement at coming to a new place and meeting new people? How could this be conveyed through narrative voice, sentence structure and imagery?

In this passage Martha is reading from a history book and looks up from her book to see the familiar landscape of her father's farm in Deeside before her.

Martha lifted her head from the pages and looked out on those infinitudes of light. She was reading history that year. The slow accumulation of facts and dates was marshalled in her brain, waiting for the fire from heaven to fall; and as she turned from reading and gazed on that wide country gathering blue airs about itself; saw the farms and cottar-houses, roads, dykes, fields, river, she was teased from her own inner stillness by an excitement to which all she had been reading anent the press and stir of centuries contributed. Looking up, she thought suddenly, 'I am a portion of history,' and between her glancing from the pages and the formulation of the words, that she had spoken half aloud, there passed the fraction of a second, which nevertheless was crammed with furious

thought. She had seen the riotous pageant of history peopled with folk who were like herself. Wheresoever they had gone, whatsoever had been their acts and achievement, they had all begun in a single spot, knowing nothing, with all to find and dare.

‘This place as well as another,’ she thought; and then she said, ‘But I am part of it too’.

The Quarry Wood, p.80.

Textual Analysis Focus

Consider the ways in which Shepherd uses perspective as she moves our attention from the close-up view of what Martha is reading to the distant landscape before her. Note too how Shepherd moves our attention from the landscape back towards Martha’s thoughts.

Suggested activity: Write a paragraph in which you critically analyse the depiction of Martha’s thoughts and feelings in this passage.

Writing Focus

How can you convey what is going on in a character’s mind, particularly if you choose to write in third person? Would you do this explicitly, by telling the reader what a character is thinking, or implicitly, through their spoken words and actions?

Martha’s father tells her the following piece of folklore in which he describes Scotland. He misunderstands the term aurora borealis (northern lights).

Scotland is bounded on the south by England, on the east by the rising sun, on the north by the Arory-bory-Alice, and on the west by Eternity.

The Quarry Wood, p.20.

This is humorous but it both allows us to see Scotland from Martha’s child-like perspective and to recognise that her father is a kind but uneducated man. What other devices can you use to convey a sense of a character? How can you use humour?

A PASS IN THE GRAMPIANS (1933)

In the following passage from Shepherd's last novel, *A Pass in the Grampians*, one of the characters, Jenny, rides her bicycle across a landscape that she is familiar with. However, she knows that she will soon be leaving home (getting beyond the pass) and contemplates how much she loves her home while simultaneously wishing to leave it.

Next day the snow has melted. The burns clamour. The hills are brilliant now, scarlet and gold and blood-red, as mosses and blaeberry leaves, birches and brackens and *rowans*, are touched by the frost. The air is pure and strong; the nostrils dilate, the blood flows fast and fierce as the lungs breathe it in. Jenny races on. Her young blood is bounding, filled with the cold intoxicating brilliance of a mountain October; and as she races on, and rings her bicycle bell from sheer exuberance of spirit, she knows it is the last year she will go carolling thus, with cold fingers and stinging cheeks, to meet the morning. This free clear life will end. She wants it to end – oh, God, she wants it to end. She loves it as her very life, she will praise it forever as the only life worth having, but she must know the other. She must find a thousand answers to a thousand questions. She must get beyond the Pass.

A Pass in the Grampians, p.111.

Textual Analysis Focus

Note the way in which Shepherd uses the description of landscape to convey Jenny's love of it. Note too how Shepherd uses active verbs to give a sense of Jenny's energy. She also uses the technique of free indirect speech to let us see what Jenny is thinking.

Writing Focus

How would you convey a love of landscape? How would you let your reader see what a character is thinking?

Suggested activity: Write a piece which makes use of free indirect speech and other devices to convey a character's connection with their surroundings.

THE LIVING MOUNTAIN (1977)

Shepherd's love of the Cairngorms

This is the opening *The Living Mountain*.

Summer on the high plateau can be delectable as honey; it can also be a roaring scourge. To those who love the place, both are good, since both are part of its essential nature. And it is to know its essential nature that I am seeking here. To know, that is, with the knowledge that is a process of living. This is not done easily nor in an hour. It is a tale too slow for the impatience of our age, not of immediate enough import for its desperate problems. Yet it has its own rare value. It is, for one thing, a corrective of glib assessment: one never quite know the mountain, nor oneself in relation to it. However often I walk on them, these hills hold astonishment for me. There is no getting accustomed to them.

The Living Mountain, p.1

Textual Analysis Focus

Note Shepherd's use of simile to describe the landscape. Also note how Shepherd introduces herself and her relationship with the landscape here, indicating that this is a piece of reflective or life writing as well as a simple description of nature and landscape.

Writing Focus

How could you use a descriptive account of a visit to a place to convey your own personality?

Suggested activity: Consider writing a personal reflective piece about a place which holds importance for you, ensuring your own personality and views of the place shine through in the narrative.

Animals

In this passage Shepherd imagines the creatures that have run across the snow.

These tracks give to winter walking a distinctive pleasure. One is companioned, though not in time. A hare bounding, a hare trotting, a fox dragging his bush, grouse thick-footed, plover thin, red deer and roes have passed this way. In paw depressions may be a delicate tracery of frost. Or a hare's tracks may stand up in ice-relief above the softer snow that has been blown from around them. In soft dry snow the pad of a hare makes a leaflike pattern. A tiny track, like twin beads on a slender thread, appears suddenly in the middle of virgin

snow. An exploring finger finds a tunnel in the snow, from which the small mouse must have emerged.

The Living Mountain, p.23.

Textual Analysis Focus

Note how Shepherd uses active verbs to bring this landscape alive. Note too the minute details she captures in her writing. This form of 'close-up' description allows her reader to visualise the landscape.

Writing Focus

Could you capture this kind of detail in a description of landscape or place? How do you select which details to include and which to omit? Could any hold symbolic significance?

Snow

Shepherd is fascinated by the shifting weather patterns in the Cairngorms and in this passage describes snow.

When the ice-paws crisped round the stones in the burns, and the ice-carrots that hang from the ledges, are loosened, and the freed ice floats down the river, it looks like masses of floating water lilies, or bunching cauliflower heads. Sunset plays through this greenish-white mass in iridescent gleams...

...Snow too can be played with by frost and wind. Loose snow blown in the sun looks like the ripples running through corn. Small snow on a furious gale freezes on the sheltered side of stones on a hilltop in long crystals; I have seen these converge slightly as the wind blows round both sides of the stones. Another fixation of the wind. Or the wind lifts the surface of loose snow but before it has detached it from the rest of the snow, frost has petrified the delicate shavings in flounces of transparent muslin.

The Living Mountain, p. 25.

Textual Analysis Focus

Suggested activity: Critically analyse how Shepherd uses imagery here to describe snow. Evaluate how effectively the images help you visualise what she is describing.

Writing Focus

Suggested activity: Write a descriptive piece in which you convey the weather in the North-east of Scotland. How could you use imagery to enhance your description?

People

Shepherd is acutely aware of the impact human beings have on the landscape and their relationship to it. She expresses this here by describing the debris that is left behind by human beings.

Man's presence too is disturbingly evident, in these latter days, in the wrecked aeroplanes that lie scattered over the mountains. During the Second World War more planes (mostly training planes) crashed here than one cares to remember. Like the unwary of older days who were drowned while fording swollen streams, or dashed from the precipices they attempted to climb, these new travellers underestimated the mountain's power. Its long flat plateau top has a deceptive air of lowness; and its mists shut down too swiftly, its tops are too often swathed in cloud, pelting rain or driving snow, while beneath the world is in clear sunlight, for liberties to be taken with its cruel rock.

The Living Mountain, p.60.

Writing Focus

How would you write about the relationship between the natural world and human behaviour?

Suggested activity: Consider writing a persuasive or argumentative piece about how we as humans impact on our environment.



Images courtesy of Nan Shepherd's Literary Executor