

J. Leslie Mitchell/Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Exploration

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Writing to his future wife Rebecca ‘Rhea’ Middleton from the Royal Army Service Corps main supply depot in Jerusalem, 16 January 1921, a twenty-year-old Leslie Mitchell called himself ‘a child of the wanderlust’, claiming that he ‘would be cramped and stifled in one position all my life, [and] would hunger for the freedom, the wider spaces of the Earth’.¹ His four years in the army certainly allowed Mitchell to feed some of that hunger: he travelled to various countries in the Middle East and Central Asia, including Palestine, Egypt, Persia and India,² during a period in which he became interested in Egyptology and the anthropological theory diffusionism.³ Mitchell’s first short stories, published in the *Cornhill Magazine* from January 1929, focus heavily on the Middle East;⁴ in these, and in much of his longer fiction written under his own name, there is an exploratory – and utopian – impulse. This takes the characters to Egypt in *The Lost Trumpet* (1932). Likewise, in Mitchell’s first novel, the semi-autobiographical *Stained Radiance* (1930), John Garland sits ‘on top of the Grand Pyramid of Gizeh’ during his tour of Egypt with the Air Force.⁵ The central protagonist of Mitchell’s *The Thirteenth Disciple* (1931), Malcom Maudslay, bears the surname of the explorer Alfred Maudslay (1850–1931), who would reveal much about the ancient Mayan civilisation; the real-life Maudslay played a key role in deciphering Mayan hieroglyphics,⁶ a subject Mitchell would examine in his anthropological work *The Conquest of the Maya* (1934). Gershom and Ester in Mitchell’s *Image and Superscription* (1933), a novel influenced strongly by diffusionism and the work of Alfred Maudslay, travel to British Honduras to seek the lost Mayan culture. Again under the influence of diffusionism, Mitchell explores the fantastical possibilities of travelling to other times and places in his science fiction, going back to

Atlantis in *Three Go Back* (1932), and forward in time to a pastoral arcadia in *Gay Hunter* (1934). Mitchell's first book was the non-fiction *Hanno, or The Future of Exploration*. This 'child of the wanderlust' began – and would continue – his writing career as an explorer. In that beginning were the seeds of many of the major interrelated themes that were to concern him in the non-fiction books on exploration written by Mitchell and Lewis Grassie Gibbon examined here: the myth of the Golden Age; the beginnings of Western civilisation and colonialism; and the quest, ultimately spiritual in nature, to reconcile his own personal alterity ('English' Mitchell, Scottish Gibbon), his sense of himself as a Scot, with the alterity, the unknowableness of other cultures.

Hanno was published in 1928 by Kegan Paul in their 'Today and To-morrow' series. Many of the books in the series look through the lens of the past as a means to speculate on possible futures. Looking backwards in order to look forwards is something that informs the work of Mitchell and Gibbon, as it does modernism more generally; as Marshall Berman, writing of modernism and modernity, comments: 'going back can be a way to go forward'.⁷ In fact, the Mitchell/Gibbon oeuvre comes full circle: *Hanno*, Mitchell's first book, links to his last published work, *Nine Against the Unknown* (1934), in their shared focus on explorers and exploration, as well as through the use of a quotation from Tennyson's 'Ulysses'. Although, as Gibbon's biographer points out, the joint authorship of *Nine Against the Unknown* was a 'gimmick [that] annoyed more than it deceived, and the pseudo-collaboration invited sarcasm' in the press reviews,⁸ it is fitting that the book was written by J. Leslie Mitchell and Lewis Grassie Gibbon.⁹ For Berman, 'All forms of modernist art and thought have a dual character: they are at once expressions of and protests against the process of modernization.'¹⁰ This is decidedly true of Mitchell's and Gibbon's work, particularly that on exploration.

Hanno is a short, speculative book concerned with the future of exploration. It is characterised by a metaphysical yearning, a spiritual questing, and a searching in the past for the source of a utopian future that appears throughout Mitchell's work in particular, but also in Gibbon's. Peter Whitfield says of Mitchell that he 'was, in an undirected sense, a very religious man, but one who could never find his god'.¹¹ This is, perhaps, to misconstrue the nature of Mitchell's undoubted religiosity. His god could never be final or absolute because it was the quest itself that was the aim for Mitchell, not the coming home. Mitchell's love of exploration is fundamental to the quest in all of his work, which is ultimately a quest for that which must always remain unknown: the future. *Hanno* is probably Mitchell's worst literary undertaking, but it is here that we witness the genesis of his spiritual endeavour in quest of the unknown that continued until his last book. This spiritual search is, for Mitchell in *Hanno*, integral to 'the explorer's mental equipment', along with 'that half-unreasoning dream-pursuit, that aching wonder, that nameless urge'.¹² The ideal explorer, Mitchell believes, is poet, seeker and child combined. Yet the explorer must also be a writer, one who documents that which has been found. For Mitchell, 'the recording, as well as the apprehension, of the geographically unknown, is a necessary qualification of exploration' (*H*, p. 14).

Mitchell calls Hanno, the Carthaginian explorer and colonist who sailed 'beyond the Pillars of Hercules' to round the north-west coast of Africa, 'the first explorer on record' (*H*, p. 14). Mitchell wants future explorers to investigate beneath the oceans, beyond the stars, and below the Earth's surface. *Hanno* is in many ways a work of science-fiction become fact, a book of prophecy come true. Although Leonardo da Vinci is credited with designing the prototype of the helicopter as far back as the fifteenth century, an operational model was not in use until the 1930s; Mitchell, writing in 1928, wants explorers to use a 'helicopter aircraft' to map Antarctica (*H*, p. 34). With Wellsian foresight, he envisages that within the next fifty years humans will reach the moon, which indeed the Soviet Union did in 1959 with an

unmanned flight, followed by the US manned mission Apollo 11 a decade later. Mitchell even correctly anticipates the designated site for lunar landings, Oceanus Procellarum. While wrong in his satiric prediction that ‘the main explosive force behind the projectile may be Signor Mussolini in pursuit of an Italian Empire’, Mitchell guessed right that there would be an imperial space race to land on the moon (*H*, p. 84). For Mitchell, writing of the future of exploration, our very future as a species lies in exploration. He believes in a materialist, communist future where ‘Science and order will rule’ and ‘the snarling buffooneries of competition have given place to the sanities of universal co-operation’ (*H*, p. 23). Yet even in that ‘sane world’, explorers in the ‘tradition of Hanno’, the ‘mad admiral’, will still seek the unknown (*H*, pp. 22, 93, 14).

In *Nine Against the Unknown*, Mitchell writes biographical sketches of those explorers who followed in the ‘tradition of Hanno’ in their pursuit of the unknown. Subtitled ‘A Record of Geographical Exploration’, the book is actually less about the explorations themselves and more about the explorers, their psychological and emotional motivations. Here we find no dry mapping of previously uncharted terrain, but rather the true-life adventure stories of those explorers who were the first Western discoverers of previously unknown lands: Leif Ericsson, Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Ferdinand Magellan, Vitus Bering, Mungo Park, Richard Burton, and Fridtjof Nansen. William K. Malcolm argues that in *Nine Against the Unknown*, as in *Image and Superscription*, Mitchell’s ‘vision acquires an austerity redolent of the Absurd philosophy of Malraux, Camus or Beckett’.¹³ This is to misunderstand the nature of Mitchell’s vision, which, whilst non-Christian, is much more romantic quest than existential despair. Malcolm’s point also fails to align Mitchell’s spiritual quest for the unknown to exploration and its concomitant, imperialism. The ‘unknown’ is not only a place that Western eyes have never seen before, an undiscovered land, a new world on which to plant a flag. The unknown also

has obvious religious connotations. It is for Mitchell a metaphysical or spiritual no-place, a *terra incognita* of the mind, that nameless urge to reach beyond our human limits inspiring those acts of exploration described in the book. In that sense, the unknown is an ultimate that is ultimately unreachable. Once found, the sought-for land is displaced elsewhere, and the quest must begin anew. The unknown is a challenge, but, unlike the newly-discovered lands themselves, it is a challenge that can never be conquered. This is why the author characterises the lives of his explorers as ‘tragic epics’.¹⁴

The quest valorised in *Nine Against the Unknown* could be interpreted, in postcolonial terms, as the Western project of imperial conquest, with the engaging biographies of the explorers implicitly emphasising the Western individualism at the heart of the colonial mission. Mitchell never ignores the colonial impetus behind, or following on from, exploration. But the heroes of *Nine Against the Unknown* are not those out for mere loot. The Scot holds to the romance of exploration – ‘the glamour gloriously unescapable’ (*NAU*, p. 19) – under the influence of the colonial writers, such as Rider Haggard, who were, as Douglas Young has pointed out, the heroes of his boyhood.¹⁵ What the explorers of *Nine Against the Unknown* are looking for is the legendary Fortunate Isles: ‘a land of geographical fantasy, a land of Youth and Fortune and Gold’ (*NAU*, p. 17). Mitchell recognises, and approves of, the ‘irrational element’ in this quest (*NAU*, p. 17), and differentiates this from the rational, yet ignoble pursuit of wealth and territory for its own sake. He creates a distinction between ‘the new commercialist orientation of exploration’ – ‘trade, colonization, land-seizing’ (*NAU*, p. 15) – that hunts gold for profit, and the irrational quest for gold as a giver of life.

The place sought by the explorers of *Nine Against the Unknown* has been characterised ‘in theology, in folklore, as the Garden of the Hesperides, the Fortunate Isles, Valhalla, Wineland, the Land of Gold’ (*NAU*, p. 16). According to Mitchell, this utopia ‘was regarded not as a distant land in the skies, not in exact essence the Heaven or Hades of the

various mythologies, but as a definite terrestrial paradise' somewhere in the West (*NAU*, p. 16) – from Europe, this would be the Americas. This quest for the Fortunate Islands is a form of Golden Age mythology and can be found in, amongst other sources, Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Lucian, and in the recurring creative resonance of the Atlantis legend. Gregory Claeys points out that the 'epic voyage', such as those undertaken by Odysseus and Aeneas, is 'a key motif in utopian thought'.¹⁶ *Nine Against the Unknown* recounts the actual, rather than mythic, epic journeys of explorers whom Mitchell links to the myth of the Fortunate Islands. The author's own quest, political in nature, is to keep alive the idea of a utopian place through which current civilisation can be compared to its detriment. Harry Levin points out that it was during the Renaissance – the beginning of modernity, when 'the West' began to define itself as such, in part through the exploration of other lands – that the myth of the Golden Age was resuscitated through the encounter of Western explorers with primitive peoples:

The Middle Ages had buried the golden age under the conception of Eden; the Renaissance not only revived the original conception, but ventured forth on a quest to objectify it. When its locus shifted from the temporal to the spatial, it became an attainable goal and a challenge to the explorers.¹⁷

The tension haunting *Nine Against the Unknown* is that these very explorers, romanticised by the Scot as questing after an ideal, were actually the destructive harbingers of imperialism and Western civilisation.

By introducing the quest for the Fortunate Islands as a conscious or subliminal motivating force behind the explorations in *Nine Against the Unknown*, it could seem as if Mitchell is downplaying the more materialistic and imperialistic concerns of his explorers.

These famous explorers in historical time are paralleled with the first primitive explorers of pre-historical time, which, given the author's rosy, diffusionist view of so-called Natural Man as being decidedly not savage, could tend to idealise somewhat the portrait of the civilised explorers. The book is also a very saleable imperial adventure narrative, full of active, masculine, heroic action. Yet Mitchell does not shy away from the implications of Western exploration for autochthonous peoples, as in this account of the landing of the Genoese Christopher Columbus and his Spanish crew on a Central American island, now called Watling Island in the Bahaman archipelago:

The Spaniards saw they had nothing to fear from the natives who flocked about them in simple friendliness. By signs Columbus gathered that the name of the island was Guanahani. Calmly obliterating its name even as he had annexed its territory, he rechristened it San Salvador [Island]. The sun was shining and the air clear and sweet; and looking over the heads of the naked islanders he saw all their land behind them in 'the likeness of a great garden'. He looked at the children of this second Eden, and for perhaps a while he saw them with strange clarity as the innocent and happy souls they were, paradisaic folk whose paradise his coming was to end for ever. (*NAU*, p. 102)

Gibbon's biographical writings, as can also be seen in *Niger*, his Life of the Scottish explorer Mungo Park, are filled with authorial projection onto his subjects. Here we look through the eyes of a Christopher Columbus with diffusionist ideas of the islanders. Earlier, Mitchell had imagined how the islanders had felt on seeing the approach of Columbus and his men. In describing the islanders as 'the last men of the Golden Age that survived in the Central Americas', 'simple and kindly children of the earth and sea, Natural Men as once were all our fathers' (*NAU*, p. 101), he might be accused of imposing on the natives his own, very

Western fantasy of paradisaal innocence. An embodiment of the Golden Age myth, the islanders will lose their reputed innocence on contact with Westerners in search of paradise; as such, having sullied virgin territory, those Westerners will need to continue their quest for the ever-elusive Fortunate Islands. Imperial exploration has for long been characterised as rape of the innocent.¹⁸ And if innocence departs on capture then there is a continual need for ever-new explorations in search of new virgin lands. Seen in this light – and contrary to the idea of the Golden Age as a concept that allows a radical critique of Western civilisation – the myth of the Golden Age is actually the false consciousness of Western expansion, the dream-like illusion masking the ugly realities of Western progress.

In *Nine Against the Unknown* Mitchell points out that Columbus was not the first European to land in America, that being the Norse explorer Leif Ericsson some five-hundred years earlier. Rather, Columbus's 'discovery was not of a New World – which all his life long he strenuously denied and disbelieved. His discovery was of the sailing route across the Atlantic' (*NAU*, p. 125). This opening up of America to European migration and influence has had significant intellectual implications:

It meant the vanishing from the minds of men for ever of the flat-earth hypothesis, did that hypothesis still lingeringly endure; it meant the breaking down of a great and elaborate synthesis of thought regarding the earth's origins, the origins of all men, the connection of the facts of ethnology and history with the Mosaic myths. Nothing has been so fruitful of discussion and discovery as the question of the origins of the Red Indians and their various strange cultures. America, where the last of the great masses of Natural Men – neither savage, barbarian, nor civilized – were encountered as a consequence of the establishment of the transatlantic route, influenced profoundly contemporary and subsequent political and politico-sociological thought. It might be

said, indeed, with its influence upon Thomas More and Rousseau and the Encyclopaedists, that Columbus fathered the French Revolution and modern humanitarianism. He was (a ruddy, horrified shade) the godfather of modern Rationalism, the Diffusionist School of History, the philosophy of Anarchism. (*NAU*, p. 125)

The link forged by Mitchell between the Red Indians, Rousseau and the French Revolution is pointed to by H. J. Massingham.¹⁹ In *The Golden Age* (1927), an important book for Mitchell, Massingham observes ‘that it was the character of the Red Indians which profoundly influenced the French humanitarian thinkers of the eighteenth century’.²⁰ The perceived nobility of the Red Indians confirmed for the Encyclopaedists that humanity in a natural state, as it would have lived in the Golden Age, is intrinsically good; it is in fact civilisation that twists human nature, not human nature that is inherently fallen. Massingham recounts the eighteenth-century rediscovery of the Golden Age, claiming that ‘With the reign of the Encyclopaedists over mental France, the Golden Age begins for the first time in history to take its true place in the firmament of ideas’.²¹ Of central importance to the Encyclopaedists of the French Enlightenment was a belief in the possibility of human ‘perfectibility’, and an understanding of the key role played by ‘education and social environment’ in the shaping of character and conduct.²² For Massingham, it was Rousseau who freed the Golden Age from ‘its castle in the air where it lay guarded by [. . .] tradition, authority and ecclesiasticism’,²³ and brought it into philosophical use in the modern humanitarianism of French Enlightenment thinking. Rousseau, says Massingham, made of the Golden Age, traditionally a degenerationist concept, a progressive idea. And, as opposed to the more patrician Voltaire, it was Rousseau’s love of the masses, his belief that no future Golden Age could be worth the name without their happiness, from which grew the

republican liberty, equality and fraternity of the French Revolution. Massingham points to the importance of 'The Theory of Historical Regress' (1750) and the *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) as examples of Rousseau's emphasis on the moral superiority of primitivism. Neither Massingham nor Mitchell use the term 'Noble Savage' in relation to the Red Indians; indeed, the Scot explicitly rejects notions of Natural Man's savagery – although he does connote savagery with certain races (as he understands them to be) of civilisation, such as Leif Ericsson's Vikings (*NAU*, p. 21) and the Muslims encountered by Richard Burton (*NAU*, p. 271). However, the concept of the Noble Savage, which has been popularly attributed to Rousseau, is in many ways implicit in the idea that primitivism is synonymous with goodness.

The anthropologist Ter Ellingson's argument that the Noble Savage is mythical – 'The fundamental myth is that there are, or ever were, any actual peoples who were "savage", either in the term's original sense of "wild" or in its later connotation of an almost subhuman level of fierceness and cruelty'²⁴ – certainly chimes with the sense throughout Mitchell's work that the reputed barbarity of primitive peoples and early humans is a creation of the civilised. Ellingson is in tune with many postcolonial critics since Albert Memmi's *Portrait du colonise, Portrait du colonisateur* (1957) and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)²⁵ in the observation that such an equation, in which the 'savage' and the 'civilised' are diametrically opposed, has been developed for distinctly ideological ends:

The 'Savage' and the 'Oriental' were the two great ethnological paradigms developed by European writers during the age of exploration and colonialism; and the symbolic opposition between 'wild' and 'domesticated' peoples, between 'savages' and 'civilization', was constructed as part of the discourse of European hegemony, projecting cultural inferiority as an ideological ground for political subordination. For

most of the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the American Indians constituted the paradigmatic case of the 'savage', and the term was most widely applied to them.²⁶

The Noble Savage myth has, for Ellingson, been fundamental to 'both the conceptual and institutional foundations of anthropology'.²⁷ If, as Mitchell argues, Columbus's discovery of the sailing route from Europe to America helped indirectly to facilitate an understanding of history that is diffusionist, then, for Ellingson, anthropology itself finds its existence in creating the myth of the Noble Savage – an idea invented not by Rousseau in the eighteenth century but, according to Ellingson, in 1609 by a French ethnographer and lawyer named Marc Lescarbot. And just as Ellingson points to the colonial dichotomy created between 'savage' and 'civilised', a dichotomy written into the paradoxical term 'Noble Savage', so he also identifies an opposition between the savagery of cannibalism and the innocence of those dwellers in a paradisaal Golden Age that reveals much about Western representations of the colonised Other. Ellingson argues that these 'contrasting constructions', savagery against Golden Age purity, 'reflect outcomes of two opposing representational strategies: alienation from and assimilation to the familiar world of European experiences and values', and he confirms that 'both the cannibals and the Golden Age superimposed observations of unfamiliar peoples on idealized models drawn from Greco-Roman mythology'.²⁸ Not only has the 'savage' primitive/colonised acted as the polar Other to the 'civilised' Westerner/coloniser, but Western representations of that Other have themselves been polarised between good and evil. The Golden Age, as Ellingson sees it, is merely the 'positive valence' of colonial representation.²⁹ If an idealised Golden Age innocence, a concept actually drawn from the Classical European past, is imposed on the Red Indians, then the Indian present is evacuated of cultural and civil content. Into the vacuum

created by Western representation enters colonial administration. The Golden Age, for Ellingson, is a mythical subterfuge facilitating colonial domination.

The confrontation of West with primitive Other is a presiding theme of *Nine Against the Unknown*. Some of Mitchell's explorers are deemed to be up to the assimilative task of understanding the native experience, whereas one such as Marco Polo is depicted by the Scot as being unwilling or unable to transcend his prejudices and limitations. Mitchell describes Polo as a man with 'a mind that seems to have been as single-track as his soul' (*NAU*, p. 84). Such wilfulness no doubt helped to drive Polo onwards in his explorations, but, for Mitchell, it constituted a handicap to the sensitive portrayal of that which the Venetian had seen on his travels through Asia. In Polo's *Travels* 'the peoples of those distant lands of whom he wrote were verily inconceivable peoples, lacking every one of them both individuality and individuation'; these non-Christians encountered by Polo he depicts as mere 'shadow-folk' (*NAU*, p. 85) – an astute phrase revealing Mitchell's comprehension of the shadowy Otherness of native peoples in Western representations. Mitchell laments Polo's descriptions of the Chinese as savages, recognising that for this explorer native peoples are but the 'playthings' of politic strategy (*NAU*, p. 72). Acknowledging the greatness of Marco Polo as 'one of the earth's earliest true conquerors', Mitchell views his *Travels* as 'still authoritative' but nonetheless undermined by the personal flaws of the explorer:

He spent seventeen years in and around China; yet he never appears to have made any attempt to grasp the philosophy of those 'idolators' by whom he was surrounded. He never appears to have heard of Confucius or Lao-Tze. Buddha was to him the idol of a god. He was incapable of identifying even the Singhalese Buddha and the Fo of remote Shen-so – though their similarities are so obvious. His command of four languages there is little reason to doubt, and their very possession is the

more damning against him: with these as his tools he might indeed have brought a rich work of delineation and interpretation out of the East, beyond that painted veil that covered it from European eyes. But the soul-quality of the Venetian was unequal to the task (*NAU*, pp. 85–6).

In contrast to Marco Polo, Mitchell writes in praise of the Spaniard Cabeza de Vaca, who in the sixteenth century explored along the coastal paths of the Gulfs of California and Mexico. Cabeza de Vaca is described in *Nine Against the Unknown* as ‘that perfection of the civilized man of his time’ due to his unusually kindly response to the America Indians (*NAU*, p. 141). For Mitchell, the American Indians are ‘those simple men of the Golden Age’ (*NAU*, p. 140). Yet when Cabeza de Vaca’s writings suggest that Indian tribes such as the Quevenes and the Mariames had behaved violently to those outside of their kin group, Mitchell expresses first incomprehension then offers rationalisations. Of the Quevenes, who were ‘both truculent and cruel’, Mitchell speculates that ‘perhaps the passing bands of Spaniards had misbehaved in the usual fashion, leaving a fury of resentment in the Amerindian breast’ (*NAU*, p. 143). Likewise, the idea that the Mariames could have ‘treated with bitter cruelty’ three Spanish slaves ‘makes for strange reading’. Mitchell’s explanation? ‘War had very quickly destroyed the morale of the simple men of the Americas’ (*NAU*, pp. 143–4). Mitchell claimed to have read in translation both *The Narrative of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca* and *The Commentaries of A. Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca* – they are listed in his bibliography to *Nine Against the Unknown* – and he believed that, of all the explorers of the New World, Cabeza de Vaca ‘was one of the least prejudiced in recording the life and being of the Amerindians’ (*NAU*, p. 167). Yet, despite the Spanish explorer’s general sympathy for the America Indians, not even Cabeza de Vaca’s own first-hand accounts of brutality can be allowed to shake the Scot’s thesis that primitive peoples were naturally good, and were corrupted only by contact

with civilisation. The question arises: how can this argument be verifiable if the prime evidence of native peoples' behaviour is the journals of the first Western explorers and later anthropological and ethnographical records? How primitives behaved before Westerners arrived to document the scene must remain almost entirely moot – at least for those in the West. Like the child who, in Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, gazes in the mirror and brings itself to life, but does not yet exist to itself without such visual testimony, the West can only believe what it sees; without such proof – or is it projection of the Western self? – the Other is a mere *tabula rasa*.

Mitchell's portrayal of the polymathic English explorer Richard Francis Burton – in 1858 the first white person to see the Great African Lake Tanganyika – suggests a man who attempted to inhabit entirely the personae of the Other. Although described rather unpromisingly as having 'something of the hyena and the jackal about him' (*NAU*, p. 265), the multilingual Burton represents something of the Scot's ideal cosmopolitan figure. While Cabeza de Vaca is depicted as being 'as confused as Columbus, his search for the land of gold and his quest for the City of God inextricably mixed' (*NAU*, p. 130), Burton's quest appears both less materialistic and more sceptical than the Spaniard's and that of many of the other explorers in *Nine Against the Unknown*. Burton's assimilative qualities, his multitudinous talents suggest a quest for total *cultural* understanding. His fascination with Africa and, particularly, Arabia may seem to position him as one of Said's staid professional Orientalists. However, in Mitchell's portrayal Burton seems less concerned with scholarly (mis)representations of 'the East', and more with losing the shackling identity of Victorian Englishness in the ultimate absorption of himself with the Other. To Burton England was, according to Mitchell, 'this country he detested, known and clipped, with its pale pudding faces and pale pudding morals' (*NAU*, p. 268). In his famous pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina disguised as a Muslim, Burton attempted 'to live the Arab as completely as it was

possible for any alien to do' (NAU, p. 271). Burton grew rich through his translations of *Arabian Nights*. Yet his greatest accomplishment, for Mitchell, was ethical. Burton 'had none of the white man's belief in innate superiority, he had little care to either reform or suppress. He was, in fact, the typical earth conqueror unfolding in embryo' (NAU, p. 174).

If the explorations of Richard Burton were, as far as Mitchell was concerned, a means partly for him to leave behind his personal and national identity, then Mitchell's portrayal of Mungo Park suggests a man who, however far he travelled into Africa in search of the course of the River Niger, never really shook off an inhibiting Scottishness. His depictions of Park in *Nine Against the Unknown* and in *Niger*, his 1934 biography of the explorer written under his pseudonym Lewis Grassie Gibbon, tell us something about Mitchell's own hostility towards his nationality and rural upbringing. He shared both with Park, who was born at Fowlshiels, a farm near Selkirk in the Scottish Borders, in 1771 – the same year as Walter Scott, with whom he later became friends, and a year after James Hogg was born. Young tells us that Mitchell was influenced by Henry Grey Graham's *The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* and Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* as to the supposedly malign influence of Calvinism in Scotland. For Young, 'Mitchell displays a marked dislike of [Mungo] Park, seeing him as a typical product of a Calvinist environment'; Gibbon's portrait of Park is a 'caricature of the typical Scot'.³⁰ Gibbon writes in *Niger* of the 'dour acres of Fowlshiels',³¹ and the word 'dour' – Scots for stern, sullen, bleak, barren – drips like rain with a revealingly repetitive insistence throughout the biography. Gibbon parallels the dourness of the land with the dourness of the people, 'the dour even-tempered peasants of Scotland' (N, p. 10). Gibbon is making the perfectly reasonable point that Park's personality, for better or worse, has been formed by the harsh limits of the rural environment into which he was born. Yet he does so with a resentment that intrudes upon his narrative in a way that is akin to the personal bitterness which arguably mars George Douglas Brown's

depiction of small-town Scottish life *The House with the Green Shutters*, first published in 1901, the year of Mitchell's birth. Gibbon's own subversion of the Kailyard, *Sunset Song* (1932), which refers slyly to Brown's novel, has a main character in Chris Guthrie who, at least sometimes, 'hated the land and the course speak of the folk',³² and Gibbon admits in his autobiographical essay 'The Land' (1934) that such sentiments had been reflective of his own feelings: 'once I had a very bitter detestation for all this life of the land and the folk upon it'.³³ Young says of Mitchell that there is a 'certain amount of exaggeration in his own writing on Scotland and the Scots'.³⁴ Mitchell's adoption of the penname Lewis Grassie Gibbon to write his Scottish-themed work, such as *A Scots Quair* (1946), *Scottish Scene* (1934) with Hugh MacDiarmid, and *Niger*, may speak of a need to distance himself from his real identity as Leslie Mitchell and the emotional scars he felt had been inflicted by his upbringing. This forms the backdrop to Gibbon's *Life of Mungo Park* and, although it can only be psychological speculation, this sense of being confined, even harmed by provincial Scottish life may give us the clue to Mitchell's obsessive love for the exploration of other lands.

The Mungo Park of Gibbon's biography is a reserved and 'dour Scot' (*N*, p. 78). Even as a young boy he was 'alien and different' from those of his family and neighbours, and he repressed his true self in order to survive in a frosty emotional environment where there was no expression of 'unnecessary affection' (*N*, pp. 12, 13). Gibbon writes of Mungo suffering a 'code of suppression' at Fowlshiels impossible for any imaginative child to bear (*N*, p. 13). Mrs Park's putdown of her son's desire to be an author – 'You poor useless thing, do you think that you will ever write books?' – is said by Gibbon to be 'more than characteristic, it was national' (*N*, p. 15). Gibbon's own biographer recounts Mitchell's mother's response to her son over the local controversy caused by *Sunset Song*: 'Laddie, what did you want to write all that muck for? It's the speak of the place. Your father's fair affronted and I'm

ashamed of you.’³⁵ The tensions Gibbon ascribes to Mungo Park’s early life were surely present in his own.

Gibbon’s biography of Park, dedicated to another traveller, Compton Mackenzie,³⁶ has enough traces of displaced autobiography to tell us something of its author’s attitude towards Scotland and the Scots, however exaggerated. What Gibbon sees as the narrowness of Park’s, and his own, local origins, he broadens into a national malaise. Writing of the ‘Scots ballads’, for instance, Gibbon says that ‘they deal with the doings of a little people on a dark little stage, an unhappy questing people’ (*N*, p. 18), and so in reading them Mungo would have done little to expand his outlook. He conjectures when commenting on Mungo’s character, representative for Gibbon of a certain type of dour Scottish male, that the ‘inordinately shy’ Park was ‘cowardly as only a Scot can be cowardly’ (*N*, p. 16). Gibbon claims that the handsome young Mungo was too repressed to take an interest in women; or rather, he speaks not of repression, but uses instead the term ‘sublimate’, coined by Freud to mean the unconscious redirection of libidinal urges from sexual desire to more elevated and acceptable social and cultural aims. Gibbon connects such sublimation to Park’s place of birth: ‘He had sublimated too many vagrant impulses between the sharny [*dung-smear*] close of Fowlshiels and the Grammar School of Selkirk to unleash them on the subject of women: he waited for wider horizons to release him’ (*N*, p. 24). Continuing in Freudian mode, Gibbon goes on to link Mungo’s sexual repression to ‘a very passionate love for his mother’, a devotion that ‘set in a mould his whole love-life’ (*N*, p. 24). Gibbon divides Scottish men into two wildly generalised categories: those, like Mungo, for whom women are ‘mother-women’ (*N*, p. 24), and those, like Robert Burns, for whom women are lovers. Gibbon was fond of such dualities, implicit, of course, in his authorial split-personality. In *Sunset Song*, for example, Chris is divided between her father’s Guthrie side – ambitious, religious, repressed and ‘English’ – and her mother’s Murdoch side, which is full of life, love

and laughter, and identified with the land and Scots. Tellingly, Chris's mother is defeated and commits suicide. Gibbon believes that Mungo Park saw women 'as pitiful and kindly and very frail and shining people', and then argues somewhat spuriously for him as 'a feminist without a philosophy and before feminism' (*N*, p. 24). For Gibbon, Park's taciturnity, his repressed emotions, the sublimation of his sex drive, the discouraging of his authorial ambitions, even his 'mother-complex' (*N*, p. 256), all spring from his being a Scot. The Scottish character as Gibbon see it, certainly in the case of his biographical subject, is a heavy weight to carry, so heavy, seemingly, that Gibbon elides Park's Scottish roots and, while he is captive in Africa, 'has him drowsing to sleep and dreams of England, Yarrow-bank' (*N*, p. 208). (Park was born and brought up on the banks of the Yarrow Water, a river that, small as it is, provides an important parallel in Gibbon's narrative to Park's obsession with the mighty Niger). Perhaps the substitution of England for Scotland here is meant to indicate Park's own repressions, common enough in many eighteenth-century Scots in the period after the Union;³⁷ later, whilst Mungo is in London, Gibbon imagines him 'staring northwards at night, taking his thoughts beyond these miles of road and field to that Scotland which, like the good Scot of his age, he was so shy in acknowledging' (*N*, p. 254).

Gibbon's portrayal of Park suggests a repressed Scot who has repressed his Scottishness. It is as if Mungo is Other to his own Self and, in common with the depictions of some of the other explorers in *Nine Against the Unknown*, where Park also features, exploration becomes a means of escape from a somewhat discordant personality. Illustrating the difficulty of his biographical task in *Niger*, Mitchell describes the Scottish explorer in *Nine Against the Unknown* in terms that suggest Park as unknowable: 'Cool, impassioned, cowardly courageous, imperturbable, Mungo Park's character in analysis after a hundred and forty years disintegrates into fragments seemingly irreconcilable enough' (*NAU*, p. 263). Clichéd it may be, but many of Gibbon's explorers, perhaps Mungo in particular, are running

away from themselves, literally to the ends of the earth. However, if Park is in some measure alienated from his own identity, he is generally accepting of the different peoples he meets on his travels in Africa. For instance, Madiboo and Tami, described by Gibbon as ‘free negroes’, in fact slave merchants, would become ‘worthy and likable friends of Mungo’ once they had ‘succeeded in penetrating the icy reserve that cased about the young white’, and they ‘found little or nothing of white snobbery or white disgust’ in the Scot (*N*, p. 49). Park need not be commended for not being racist, of course, but this is significant, less for what it may say of Park, and more for what it tells us of Gibbon, who points out that ‘there was a great Black civilisation long ere there was a great European’ (*N*, p. 30). Park seems to have been no abolitionist.³⁸ He lived off the slaver Karfa, and used slaves of his own on his journey. In the slave huts of Kamalia, Park continued taking notes, ever the disinterested observer. Those notes would become the bestselling *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, first published in 1799. Gibbon observes that ‘the *Travels* were prepared without a word in condemnation of the institution of slavery’ (*N*, p. 259), and he attributes this to the malign influence of the ‘notorious anti-Abolitionist’ Bryan Edwards (*N*, p. 258), who acted as Park’s ghost writer. Gibbon quotes Park as saying ‘that every sheet of the publication had undergone his [Park’s] strict revision, and that not only every fact but every sentiment was his own’ (*N*, p. 258). However, Edwards’s ghosting of the *Travels* suggests once more the slipperiness of Park’s identity.

The elusiveness of Park’s personality is used by Gibbon to suggest the relativity of both cultural identity and Western cultural superiority. Indeed, in *Nine Against the Unknown* (authored as Mitchell), he comments that in Africa the dark young Scot ‘was generally taken for a half-breed Moor’ (*NAU*, p. 256). While, in Gibbon’s view, Park does not in the main ‘Other’ the natives, the natives often do ‘Other’ Park. This overturning of cultural hierarchies is enjoyed and approved of by Park’s biographer. Gibbon, looking through the eyes of ‘some

hospitable Foulahs', a tribe of pastoral Muslims, describes Park as 'poor white trash'; later, among the people of Bambara, 'the ragged white man became an object of mirth' (*N*, p. 172). Park among Moors is depicted by Gibbon as 'that rare freak, a Christian' (*N*, p. 139), something to be stared at in commingled amazement and disgust – 'that horrific animal, the Christian' (*NAU*, p. 241). On his travels in search of the Niger, Park is merely 'a white man, that unicorn of the African interior' (*N*, p. 176). Seeing 'his first negro albino', Mungo 'stared at him in considerable distaste'; Gibbon has the probably leprous black stare right back in 'equal disgust' (*N*, p. 235). On being told by colonial officials that he should seek tuition in Arabic before embarking on his second African expedition, Park hires 'a stray Moor, one Sidi Ambak Bubi', who accompanies the explorer from London to Peebles in the Scottish Borders, and 'where his advent woke that somnolent borough to interest for the first time in its recorded history'. Gibbon continues in satiric vein: 'Peebles ran and gaped and stared much as the African villages had done at sight of Mungo. The Sidi's opinions of his reception are not recorded. One hopes he later returned to Barbary and wrote an account of his *Travels in the Interior of Scotland*' (*N*, p. 270). As Kate Ferguson Masters notes, 'Park is a study in contrast.'³⁹

Park's travels in Africa in search of the Niger were, for the author of *Nine Against the Unknown*, 'the strangest and most terrible in many ways in all the history of exploration' (*NAU*, p. 263). Mitchell was fascinated by the history of exploration, and *Nine Against the Unknown* is his populist contribution to that history. But he was particularly compelled by the life of the Scottish explorer Mungo Park. Park's nationality and rural background play a large part in Mitchell's interest. As Ian Munro has observed, 'There is no doubt that Mitchell sensed a kinship with the enigmatical Scottish explorer.' In particular, 'The shyness, strangeness, dourness and endurance of Mungo Park' resonated with Mitchell. 'And the divided personality of the boy from Foulshiels has parallels in the make-up of the boy from

Bloomfield.⁴⁰ Some of the reviews of *Niger* in the Scottish press were especially scathing, believing Gibbon's portrait of Park to be lacking in sympathy. Mitchell would write a rejoinder to these critics saying that their attitude was of the jealous 'I kent his faither' nature, peculiar, in this regard, to Scotland.⁴¹ Certainly, one abiding impression of Park from *Niger* is of a dour Christian prig. However, aloof as the explorer is painted by Gibbon, he admired Park's coolness under pressure, as well as his ability to take people as he found them. As the first European to see the Niger, Park's was indeed 'one of the greatest feats in exploration' (*NAU*, p. 250) – hardly grudging praise. Gibbon's apparent dislike of Park is actually a residual hostility to their shared rural Scottish origins. As Whitfield says of *Niger*, 'The opening chapters describing Park's farming childhood are pure autobiography, as Mitchell projects his memories of alienation and escape [. . .] back onto his subject.'⁴² The Othering of the white Christian Mungo in Moorish and pagan black Africa is relished by Gibbon, not only because it is a reversal of our normal Western expectations, and so undermines dominant world hierarchies, but also because it exposes the douce respectabilities of Scottish provincial life as being in fact limitations of understanding of the sheer cosmopolitan diversity of humankind. Both Mitchell and Park grew up in the kailyard. Mitchell's and Gibbon's writings on exploration are not only his means of escape from that kailyard, but his parting shot at its bows. Gibbon hopes that Park's Arabic tutor will match the explorer's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* and write his own *Travels in the Interior of Scotland*, thus making Scotland strange to its inhabitants so they can see themselves clearly for the first time. In a sense, by writing of Park, particularly in his childhood and youth, from a psychoanalytical perspective, exploring his own innards at the same time as his subject's, Gibbon has in some measure with *Niger* written his *Travels in the Interior of Scotland*. Seen from a distant outside perspective, that of the vastness of Africa, and from the inside, which exposes the repressive borders of Christian morality, Scotland looks damningly provincial. The reflection

seen in the mirror of *Niger* is arguably too harsh. *A Scots Quair* would be his true *Travels in the Interior of Scotland*.

Notes

¹ NLS MS26063, ff. 12–9. Rhea is sometimes also rendered as Ray.

² Ian S. Munro, *Leslie Mitchell: Lewis Grassie Gibbon* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), p. 32.

³ For more on Gibbon and diffusionism, see Scott Lyall, ‘“East is West and West is East”: Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s Quest for Ultimate Cosmopolitanism’, in Michael Gardiner, Graeme Macdonald and Niall O’Gallagher (eds), *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 136–46; and Scott Lyall, ‘On Cosmopolitanism and Late Style: Lewis Grassie Gibbon and James Joyce’, in Emma Dymock and Margery Palmer McCulloch (eds), *Scottish and International Modernisms: Relationships and Reconfigurations* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2011), pp. 101–15.

⁴ I discuss many of these stories in Lyall, ‘“East is West and West is East”: Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s Quest for Ultimate Cosmopolitanism’, in Gardiner et al (eds), *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature*, pp. 136–46.

⁵ J. Leslie Mitchell, *Stained Radiance: A Fictionist’s Prelude* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2000), p. 139.

⁶ Ian Graham, *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya: A Biography* (London: The British Museum Press, 2002).

⁷ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1983), p. 36.

⁸ Munro, *Leslie Mitchell*, p. 191.

⁹ Henceforth *Nine Against the Unknown* will be attributed solely to Mitchell.

¹⁰ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 235.

¹¹ Peter Whitfield, *Grassic Gibbon and his World* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Journals Ltd, 1994), p. 57.

¹² J. Leslie Mitchell, *Hanno, or The Future of Exploration*, in *Today and To-morrow: Volume 25* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 11–12. Page numbers for subsequent quotations will be given in the text preceded by *H*.

¹³ William K. Malcolm, *A Blasphemer and Reformer: A Study of James Leslie Mitchell/Lewis Grassic Gibbon* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984), p. 34.

¹⁴ J. Leslie Mitchell and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Nine Against the Unknown: A Record of Geographical Exploration* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2000), p. 19. Page numbers for subsequent quotations will be given in the text preceded by *NAU*.

¹⁵ Douglas F. Young, *Beyond the Sunset: A Study of James Leslie Mitchell (Lewis Grassic Gibbon)* (Aberdeen: Impulse Books, 1973), p. 4.

¹⁶ Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), p. 22.

¹⁷ Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 59.

¹⁸ Paul Brown, citing the example of Ireland in Spencer's *The Faerie Queene*, argues that the 'sexual division of the other into rapist and virgin is common in colonialist discourse'; Paul Brown, '“This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine”: *The Tempest* and the discourse of colonialism', in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (eds), *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 48–71 (p. 62).

¹⁹ See John Corbett, ‘Ecstasy Controlled: The Prose Styles of James Leslie Mitchell and Lewis Grassie Gibbon’, in Margery Palmer McCulloch and Sarah M. Dunnigan (eds), *A Flame in the Mearns: Lewis Grassie Gibbon: A Centenary Celebration* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2003), pp. 99–100 for more on Massingham.

²⁰ H. J. Massingham, *The Golden Age: The Story of Human Nature* (London: Gerald Howe, 1927), p. 17.

²¹ Massingham, *The Golden Age*, p. 50.

²² Massingham, *The Golden Age*, p. 51.

²³ Massingham, *The Golden Age*, p. 54.

²⁴ Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), p. xiii.

²⁵ See Jeremy Idle, ‘Introduction to “The Epic”, “Dienekes Dream”, “Revolt” ’, in Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *The Speak of the Mearns, with selected short stories and essays*, introduced by Ian Campbell and Jeremy Idle (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994), for the argument that in some of Mitchell’s early fiction set in Egypt there is a ‘complicity with Orientalist cliché’, pp. 218–22 (p. 222).

²⁶ Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, p. xiii.

²⁷ Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, p. 4.

²⁸ Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, p. 12.

²⁹ Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, p. 12.

³⁰ Young, *Beyond the Sunset*, pp. 19, 20.

³¹ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *Niger: The Life of Mungo Park* (Edinburgh: The Porpoise Press, 1934), p. 9. Page numbers for subsequent quotations will be given in the text preceded by *N*.

³² Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), p. 32.

³³ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 'The Land', in Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene, or The Intelligent Man's Guide to Albyn* (1934); reprinted in Valentina Bold (ed.), *Smeddum: A Lewis Grassie Gibbon Anthology* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), p. 83.

³⁴ Young, *Beyond the Sunset*, p. 19.

³⁵ Munro, *Leslie Mitchell*, p. 99.

³⁶ See Munro, *Leslie Mitchell*, p. 142 for Mackenzie's objection to the anti-Christian tone of *Niger*.

³⁷ See, for instance, Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988).

³⁸ Kate Ferguson Masters comments that Park's *Travels* was used by pro-slave traders and abolitionists alike to argue their opposing cases; see Ferguson Masters, 'Introduction' to Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 13–15.

³⁹ Ferguson Masters, 'Introduction' to Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ Munro, *Leslie Mitchell*, p. 141.

⁴¹ Munro, *Leslie Mitchell*, pp. 142–3.

⁴² Whitfield, *Grassie Gibbon and his World*, p. 69.