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The Living Mountain: in an age of ecological crisis, Nan Shepherd's nature writing is more relevant than ever

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Its waters are white, of a clearness so absolute that there is no image for them. Naked birches in April, lighted after heavy rain by the sun, suggest their brilliance. Yet this is too sensational. The whiteness of these waters is simple. They are elemental transparency. Like roundness, or silence, their quality is natural, but is found so seldom in its absolute state that when we do find it we are astonished.

from The Living Mountain

A brilliant philosophical meditation inspired by Scotland's Cairngorm mountain range, The Living

Mountain was written in the 1940s, but remained unpublished until 1977. Thanks to its recent success the author, Nan Shepherd, is now regarded as a superb writer on the natural world.

The book dazzlingly captures the Cairngorms in their various seasonal moods. Shepherd's eye for detail is incisive, her understanding of the mountains, plants and animals profound. The Living Mountain reveals the visionary nature of Shepherd as a lone and intrepid hillwalker who sometimes went barefoot so she could feel the grass, mud and heather on her skin.

Influenced by Zen Buddhism, the book illustrates the importance of the natural world to human well-being. It is also concerned with the negative human impact on the local habitat. Crucially, its influence on contemporary nature writing, especially the work of Robert Macfarlane, has brought Shepherd to the attention of a new, ecologically aware generation of readers. The recently announced Nan Shepherd Prize for Nature Writing points to the growing relevance of *The Living Mountain* in an age of environmental crisis.

Scottish cultural revival

This focus on *The Living Mountain* tends to obscure the creative achievement of Shepherd's three novels, *The Quarry Wood* (1928), *The Weatherhouse* (1930) and *A Pass in the Grampians* (1933), with their attention to rural communities under pressure from modernity.

These novels emphasise the rural and local nature of much Scottish writing of the early 20th century modernist period and illustrate Shepherd's important place in the modernist cultural movement known as the Scottish renaissance. This was especially concerned with the nature of a changing rural modernity, and Nan Shepherd was one of its foremost fictional chroniclers.



Nan Shepherd, pictured on the Scottish £5 note. Shutterstock

The Cairngorms National Park - a special place



Modernism is traditionally viewed as a movement focused on city life. But academics increasingly recognise that the modernist “shock of the new” also affected rural life.

The Scottish modernism of the renaissance movement was largely centred in Montrose, on Scotland’s north-east coast, during the 1920s. Many writers and artists were based in or visited Montrose during this period, such as poet Hugh MacDiarmid, writers Willa and Edwin Muir, novelist Neil Gunn, poet and sculptor James Pittendrigh Macgillivray, poet Violet Jacob and artist Edward Baird.

Scotland’s north-east corner was also home to Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s trilogy, *A Scots Quair*, which begins in the fictional rural village of Kinraddie. Shepherd’s Martha Ironside may well be an unacknowledged model for Gibbon’s Chris Guthrie, the more famous heroine of *Sunset Song* (the first part of the trilogy, published in 1932).

Internationalist in its aims and appeal, and often modernist in its influences and aesthetics, Scottish culture in this period was still deeply rooted in the rural. In her three novels, *Shepherd*, from Aberdeen, was a key contributor to this Scottish cultural revival.

Exploring conflicting worlds

The Quarry Wood follows Martha Ironside growing up in the farming community of Wester Cairns. Martha, like *Shepherd*, goes to Aberdeen University, an environment very different to home.

Navigating between these two spaces – one of labour, earthiness and familial ties, the other of intellectual aspiration, refinement and burgeoning sexual desire – places *The Quarry Wood* in a tradition of semi-autobiographical modernist novels. Martha initially dreams of escaping the muck of the farm, but chooses ultimately to stay in her community, which offers a more satisfyingly embodied

experience of life than university.

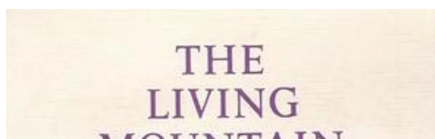
In *The Weatherhouse*, Shepherd's most complex novel, young soldier Garry Forbes returns to Fetter-
Rothie on leave from the First World War. He brings to this rural community a fierce drive for truth,
leading one character to lose her faith in God. But the lesson of *The Weatherhouse* is that what
constitutes true holiness is the understanding that each living thing has its own nature, which we can
only recognise if we get outside of our private selves.



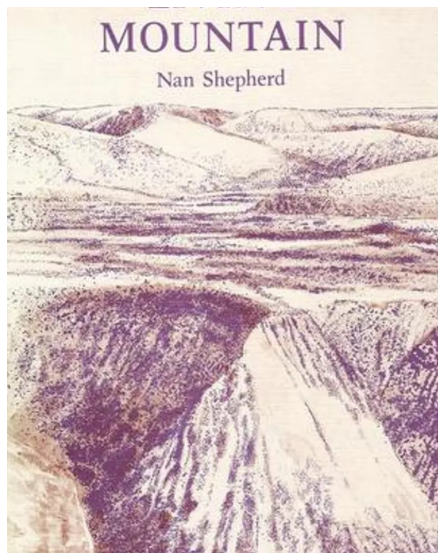
Loch Morlich in the Cairngorms. Shutterstock

A Pass in the Grampians concerns the effects of modernity on rural communities. Bella Cassie is a famous singer who returns to her birthplace to build a new house. She represents modernity, emancipation and the vulgar shock of the new, and her plans upset the rural traditions of the community. The novel lampoons modernism while satirising things like the locals' incomprehension of modern art which was coming out of great cities such as Berlin, Vienna, London and Paris.

For Shepherd, though, modernism's origins are complex and concealed. An orphan, Bella discovers to her horror that her father is an old sheep farmer bent "crooked, from a lifetime of labour and exposure". Bella, symbolising pleasure, art and beauty, is related to a man who embodies labour, servitude and parochiality. Modernism may have found its home in great cities, but often had its roots in less cosmopolitan locations.



Shepherd was one of the great early 20th century writers of nature, landscape and the weather. Such descriptions vividly



Aberdeen University Press

imbue all her works, not least *The Living Mountain*. But her novels also invite us to frame conversations around modernity and modern literature to include the importance of the natural world and its living rural communities.

For contemporary writers and readers, it is Shepherd's understanding of the connectedness of human beings to the natural world that has made *The Living Mountain* a much-loved work. At a time of global ecological crisis, when the greed and short-sightedness of humans threatens an increasingly fragile environment, her intuitive understanding of the landscape and the rhythms of nature is both a clarion call and a balm for the soul.

 **Modernism** **Scottish literature** **Nature writing** **Nan Shepherd**