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**The Hidden Figures of the Scottish Literary Renaissance: Willa Muir**

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is the analysis of Willa Muir as a Scottish woman and as a writer, and how she is framed within the Scottish Literary Renaissance, which was a progressive tendency that reached its peak in the interwar period. We also aim to exhibit the importance that female figures had in this literary movement, highlighting Willa Muir.

The methodology used was, firstly, that of bibliographical research, and, secondly, a close reading of the two chosen texts: "Women: An Inquiry" (1925) and *Imagined Corners* (1931). We analysed the main characteristics and repertoires of these works in an attempt to accurately assess Muir's contribution to Scottish literature. This paper's introduction provides the essential information on the literary movement and on the author's life and work. Bearing in mind the characteristics of the movement, we highlight Willa Muir as she represents a key figure (due to her translations and her own contributions) of the Scottish Renaissance that has been hidden because of her gender identity.

The main sections of this paper analyse on the one hand the Scottish Literary Renaissance (its characteristics, its aims, the historical and literary context, etc) and the role of women within this movement (the repression, the publishing conditions, and the pressure they suffered), and on the other hand Muir's life and work, focusing our attention on two of her earliest literary productions.

Section number 2 is an overview on Scottish Literary Renaissance. We will discuss how this movement was born as a reaction against the political and literary degradation of the previous century, caused by the political union of Scotland and England, and the use of outgrown literary forms such as the Kailyard and the Celtic Twilight. To solve

this, many authors became politicians, and the translations of European contemporary works became crucial. However, the movement was dominated by men, who disregarded women's literary production. As a result, since the 1990's female scholars are reappraising these women's texts, at least those that have been transmitted.

Section number 3 focuses on Willa Muir, first on her biography and then on her works. Muir's life greatly affects her books, so we will look into her life, demonstrating the veracity of that statement, her linguistic competence and her progressive views on topics such as motherhood, equality, and women's creativity. First, we will do an analysis on her first essay "Women: An Inquiry", which has not caught the 21st century attention due to her dated views on feminism and its contradictions. However, this piece is vital to understand her later productions, as it presents ideas that she will explore in her novels. Second, we will study *Imagined Corners*, Muir's first novel and an exploration of the feminist thesis presented on her previous essay. This novel is more successful than the book in its depiction of a new model of womanhood: a woman who searches for her own worth outside of her role as a wife and/or mother. However, its portrayal of Scotland reflects Muir's resentment toward the patriarchal society in which she grew up.

## **2. Introduction**

During the interwar period, a cultural, artistic, and political movement within Modernism called "The Scottish Renaissance" reached its peak. This literary revolution was born as a reaction against the literary production of the previous century, as the most cultivated genres, the Kailyard (a sentimental genre that focused on the rural way of life) and the Celtic Twilight (originally from Ireland, a literary revival of the interest in their Gaelic heritage), were on clear decline. Politically, the Renaissance is a response to the degradation that Scotland suffered as a result of its political union with England.

The main aims of the Renaissance were the revitalisation of the literature and languages of Scotland, and the political independence of the country. To achieve these, Scottish writers introduced the modern literary techniques that were being used in Europe, hence the importance of translators such as Willa Muir during this period. They also wrote using their native languages (Scots and Gaelic) but ultimately decided to use a Scottish version of English so their message could spread further. These authors became politically involved in parties aimed at accomplishing the objectives of the movement.

The Renaissance, however, was clearly dominated by men, who withheld positions of power inside the group and overlooked their fellow female writer's works as they did not portray Scotland the way they considered appropriate. Men used women as a symbol for the nation, disregarding their individuality and failing to create a tradition as these representations were too diverse.

In addition to the difficulties placed by men and society over women, their works have been lost in some cases due to the low quality of the publication medium or the fact

that many had to publish anonymously. Since the 1990's, many female scholars have been republishing and reappraising the texts from the women writers of the Scottish Renaissance.

Willa Muir (1890-1970) is one of these women who are being revisited. From an early age, she showed her linguistic competence and domain, obtaining several scholarships and works as a teacher at university. She married another Renaissance writer, Edwin Muir, with whom travelled through Europe, worked on translations, and had a child. Their travels deeply influenced Willa, who mastered German in their time living abroad. She was the main translator of the couple but Edwin has historically received the credit for these works. Motherhood radicalised Willa's feminist view, explored in the texts analysed in this paper.

The objective of this paper is to analyse Willa Muir's figure and work to adequately frame her within the Scottish Literary Renaissance and to provide a comprehensive exhibition of the importance of her figure to Scotland's history. Another objective of this paper is to analyse how the chosen texts reflect her feminist thesis, looking for contradictions and evolution as the texts are chronologically distanced (and a life-altering event took place between them: the birth of their son).

Willa Muir published texts from different literary genres which include: essays, *Women: An Inquiry* (1925) and *Mrs Grundy in Scotland* (1936); novels, *Imagined Corners* (1931) and *Mrs Ritchie* (1933); several articles, and even a book of Ballads *Living with Ballads* (1965).

To write this paper, we used two texts from Willa Muir: "Women: An Inquiry" and *Imagined Corners*. "Women: An Inquiry" is her first published text and one of the earliest pieces of feminist analysis in Scotland. *Imagined Corners* was her first novel

and can be seen as a fictional exercise based on the essay. These texts were selected based on chronological reasoning and due to the close link between the two. Also, by analysing texts from different genres, an essay and a novel, our investigation is more comprehensive of Willa's work.

The methodology behind this paper was developed in two distinctive phases. First, a bibliographical research was conducted. This allowed the formulation of the state of the matter in relation to other works on Willa Muir's literary texts. We analysed texts by a plethora of scholars (from the 1990's and more contemporary works): Allen (1997), Dunn (1994), López-López (2015), Pickard (2020, 2021) and others. Secondly and after the close reading of Muir's selected texts, we fixed the focal points of this analysis: how these texts portray women, how are they fit in Willa's production, how was the critic response, and the feminist ideology behind these pieces. Due to the particularities of each one, the analysis varies.

This paper is organised in two main sections framed by the introduction and the conclusion. The first section (number 2 in the index) is an overview on Scottish Literary Renaissance. We will discuss the literary and political reasons behind this movement, and its aims. Within this section, we will investigate women's role in the Renaissance by disclosing men's responsibility on the concealment of these figures, the use of women as a symbol of Scottishness, and lastly the position of women inside the movement.

The second section (number 3) is focused on Willa Muir's figure and work. We will start with the study of the author's biography to then attempt to assess her literary production, as Muir's life deeply affects her texts. Within this section there is the analysis of the chosen books: the essay "Women: An Inquiry" and the novel *Imagined*

*Corners*. Each one of these has its own segment on the paper (3.1.1. and 3.1.2. respectively).

### **3. Scottish Literary Renaissance: An Overview**

In the study of Scottish literature or culture, there are two periods called “Scottish Renaissance”, so this term can present some difficulties for those who are studying Scottish Literature for the first time. Chronologically, the first time period called *Renaissance* is the European Renaissance, that dates back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Scotland gained relevance in this period and thus why the term “Scottish Literature” may be used to refer to this literary period. The second period that can be called this same way is the one on which this analysis is focused: the literary revival that took place during the interwar period in Scotland.

The “Scottish Literary Renaissance” is a term usually used to describe a cultural movement that originated in the late nineteenth century and achieved its peak during the period between the first and the second world wars. This movement aimed to revitalise the Scottish literary tradition, after it had been in decline due to the political union of Scotland with England in 1707. It could be classified under the European Modernist movement because of its innovations in aesthetics and the extensive use of subjectivity. However, the Scottish Literary Renaissance had a political nationalistic dimension and was concerned with the promotion and recuperation of the native languages of the country: Scots and Gaelic.

The name “Scottish Renaissance” was first used by the French philosopher Denis Saurat in 1924 in his well-known essay “Le Group de la Renaissance Écossaise”, which was published in the *Revue Anglo-Americaine*. He used the term to describe the poetic movement that was centred around the figure of Hugh MacDiarmid, whose



poems Saurat translated into French in 1925. Soon, the new writers of the 1920s and 1930s adopted the term *Renaissance* to make explicit their intentions of reviving Scottish culture and raising it up to the level of importance and quality it had in later periods. However, the idea of a renaissance was not his, as we can trace back to the beginning of the nineteenth century the first symptoms of a cultural revival in Scotland.

The literary scene during the nineteenth century culminated the process of cultural deterioration, as the most cultivated literary forms, “the Kailyard and the “Celtic Twilight”, were sentimental and clichéd sub-genres which bore little relationship to contemporary Scotland” (Clark: THESIS, p. X). The Kailyard had a strong bond with the past and, because of this, they impeded any progress on the literary scene. The writers (and readers) of this sub-genre were reactionary and looked back at the previous generations with nostalgia. Later, Renaissance writers would put the blame on these for the backwardness of the country, both culturally and politically. The Celtic Twilight was popularised in Ireland in the nineteenth century and was also linked with the past. However, the Scottish Renaissance was useful to some extent to Renaissance writers as it had its base on emphasising the relevance of the autochthonous Celtic culture, which was useful to further distance Scotland from England (which had its roots in the Anglo-Saxon culture and not in the Celtic one). Hugh MacDiarmid soon realised that the Celtic theme, however, did not succeed in its aim.

The need for a revival came after a long period of cultural degradation which, as stated above, had its origins in the political union of Scotland and England. MacDiarmid and his followers started to use the term *Renaissance* because it made explicit their intentions to restore the quality of the literary and cultural production of Scottish artists to which it had in the previous period. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth

centuries, Scotland was an independent kingdom and, as such, it managed to be a member of the European comity of nations. This meant that Scotland had its voice heard in both diplomatic and military affairs. Also, by having their own court and government, Scots was able to develop and be the literary language of one of Europe's key nations. The independent period ended with the Union of Crowns in 1603 and was amplified by the Union of Parliaments in 1707. The lack of independence came with the dissolution of the Scottish national identity, at least partly.

The Scottish Renaissance was a cultural movement, but it surely had a political dimension from the onset. The writers associated with the movement aimed for political independence and for the defence of their native languages, as the culture of the country was becoming increasingly Anglocentric. The main figure of the movement, MacDiarmid, promoted what he called the "Chapbook Programme" in his first and most notable magazine (published in 1922). With this publication, Christopher Murray Grieve (his real name) became Hugh MacDiarmid, a poet who wrote in Scots. This was an attempt to separate Scottish identity (both political and cultural) from the English. The programme sought the publication of contemporary works (regardless of their language) and to bring Scottish Literature closer to the European trends of the moment to try and modernise Scottish literature.

The *Chapbook Programme* depicted the native languages (these being Scots, Gaelic and Scottish English) as the medium that could fulfil their objectives. MacDiarmid "played a crucial role in the recuperation of the Scots language, which had been reduced to dialectal use and was deemed unfit as a literary medium" (López-López, 2015, pp. 6, 7). The author used in his poetry a version of Scots which he had composed from idioms and words he collected from different sources (both historical and dialectal). This use of language was criticised due to its "synthetic" origin. The

biggest voice in the opposition was Edwin Muir. His remarks followed a similar train of thought to T.S. Eliot's, who had stated that "Scottish literature lacks, in the first place, the continuity of the language" (Palmer MacCulloch, 2004, p. 8). The Scottish believed this language to be inadequate for other means of communication other than "simple" poetry or short stories. This linguistic debate ended up in a compromise proposed by Grassic Gibbon. He reconciled both views by promoting a Scottish version of English: the foreign language would be adapted to the rhythm of spoken Scots and would add to its vocabulary some words in Scots. This was used in *A Scots Quair*, a trilogy by Grassic Gibbon, and attempted to depict the Scottish language while being comprehensible to an English audience.

The linguistic issue was certainly not the only political affair that worried Scottish Renaissance writers. Nationalism played a central role in the ideology of the movement, especially after World War I. These artists were not just concerned about progression in a literary sense, but also in a political and nationalist way. Apart from their literary work, some of them became politically involved. MacDiarmid, for example, founded the National Party of Scotland and Neil M. Gunn was a key figure in the unification process of the National Party and the Scottish Party (which took place in 1934). Even though not all of the members of the literary movement were nationalists, most agreed with some nationalistic policies pushed by these parties, like Edwin Muir, for instance.

The Scottish Literary Renaissance started off in poetry with some authors writing in Scots (Violet Jacob, Marion Angus, Lewis Spence, and William Soutar). As we already discussed, the language choice of authors did not come without a debate, as some criticised the adequacy of the native language to spread their message as they lived in an Anglophone culture after centuries of English cultural colonisation. With the

passing of time, more authors gave in and started to write in the foreign language to be understood by a wider audience so their socio-political activism could spread further. English linguistic dominance was gaining momentum in detriment of Scots, which was being forced to occupy a peripheral position. The Church of Scotland, which was a national institution, started to promote the use of English throughout the Highlands, where the population was traditionally Gaelic-speaking.

Translation was central to the carrying out of the Renaissance agenda, explicit in the already mentioned *Chapbook Programme*: it enabled literary texts in Scots to be widely spread, and it also allowed the new European trends to make their way into the country. During the Modernist period, England and Germany were battling to occupy the central position in Europe's literary scene. Politically, England was weakened by World War I and the British Empire was starting to decline. Even under English rule, Scotland and its Renaissance decided to get their inspiration from their coloniser's rivals. This rapprochement between Scotland and Germany had to be carried out through translations of German-speaking writers. In the early 1920s the marriage composed by Willa and Edwin Muir took on the task of translating Kafka's work, amongst others, into English.

The influence of German language modernism on Scottish modernism illustrates that national renaissance can only be imagined through the translated experience of internationalism and the internationalist act of translation (Lyll: 2019, p. 26)

### **3.1. Scottish Women's Literature During the Renaissance**

The Scottish Literary Renaissance was a movement with a high degree of political awareness, but its main focus in this field was on nationalism. The predominance of

male members and this narrow political target meant that gender issues were rarely discussed. Men became politically active and, because of this, they were inside the discourse and women became alienated and disregarded. The inner circle of the Renaissance failed “to account for the role of women in the creation of nationhood” (López-López: 2015, p. 8).

The women that were part of the movement were not particularly involved in politics (obviously, at the time women were not that common in the political sphere because of sexism). Scottish women, however, became a symbol for the nation. Through the male gaze, women are seen as depictions of abstractions, something generic or global, and never as something individual as men were believed to represent. This has been useful to nationalistic movements, especially those of minority cultures (Scotland and Galiza, for example) because the peripheral characteristic of women in society can be easily related to these cultures. In addition, women are valued by the sexist ideology on their reproductive abilities. Also, women and land were seen as objects to conquer by men. The reproductive side of women was not limited to breeding, but extended to signify cultural transmission. Soon, women came to represent the Scottish nation:

Scotland, like the Muse, is a feminine term and Idea. Among the more obvious examples are Dame Scotia in *The Complaynt of Scotland*, Scota in Ross’s *Helenore*, Burn’s more local Muse, Coila, in *The Vision*, and perhaps also Kilmeny in James Hogg’s magnificent poem of magical nationalism (Dunn: 1994, p. 16).

What Dunn failed to realise is that the examples that he provided cannot be seen as a tradition because each one depicts the idea of the nation being a woman in a

different way and not all of them can be classified as symbolic. Due to this lack of tradition, the members of the Scottish Literary Renaissance (from a male perspective as they were mostly men) had to create one. They were influenced by the neighbouring country, Ireland, which also understood their nation as a female. The Irish, unlike the Scottish, had a myth that explained this relation between nation and womanhood: they used a goddess from their Mediaeval literature which had continuity in the poetic genre called *aisling*.

During the Renaissance, there were multiple attempts to solidify the representation of the nation as a woman: MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* could be considered the two most relevant cases. However, these examples do not achieve their goal, as the representation remains contradictory. MacDiarmid's portrays Jane as the nation symbol while Gibbon's Chris represents a dissident woman that is able to take action and to make choices, which is far from the simplistic idea of women representing collectives that was already discussed.

As such, female symbolic representations are bound to embody the cultural and linguistic diversity which characterise the Scottish Literature Renaissance, preventing the constitution of an allegorical female form which must be by definition unitary and whole (López-López: 2015, pp. 15, 16).

So far, the only women we have analysed have been those fictional characters used to represent the Scottish nation. Even in the general introduction to this paper, only Willa Muir was mentioned, and not even individualised, as we discussed her translation work alongside her husband, Edwin. When we now study literature, we are aware of the difficulties that women face in order to be recognised. Women are not canonised by the critics to the same degree as men are in all European literatures

(and most cultures for that instance). It is necessary to examine the reasons behind this discrimination before we go any further with this analysis.

In the nineteenth century, women's position in the literary scene was precarious. There are two main factors for this circumstance: their publication conditions and their own conception of their works (and, probably, these are interconnected). When we study women's literary production during this century, we face a revelation: many of these women had to publish anonymously. This obviously hinders any attempts of research, as it is impossible to analyse women's works if we do not know that they were, in fact, written by a woman. Some women who published anonymously were: Mary Brunton, Susan Ferrier, and Christian Isobel. Regarding their means of publication, women from a working-class background are also harder to study as they usually published their literary works in magazines, which rarely withstand the test of time (Scottish Women Writers on the Web: nd).

The second factor for the invisibility of women's literary works is their perception of the texts and their abilities. The few women that could publish under their real names were not promoting their work. Historically, women were conditioned to conceive their artistic creations as a special interest, and not as something profitable or deserving of recognition. We should bear in mind the weight of societal standards at the time and not blame these women for their lack of visibility. Women more than men were pressured by religious values, which enforced modesty on them in all aspects of their lives. As a result, many never considered themselves worth reading. A highly educated woman at the time was seen as a bonus for their life in the domestic sphere, and her knowledge would be understood as something pleasant for her male companion, as the value of a woman was, still, defined based on its utility or convenience for the men in her life.

However, men were, ultimately, guilty for this erasure. With the twentieth century the Scottish Literary Renaissance came, and the inner circle of it were exclusively male writers. Those men are responsible for the hiding of the women writers of the period, as they withheld the positions of power, leaving no space for the women at the head of the trend. The men (Hugh MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, and Neil Gunn to name a few) made a male-dominated movement out of a nationalist and progressive one. As we saw on the last section of this paper, one of the aims of the Renaissance was the promotion of Scottish literature to restore the European relevancy it once had. These authors overlooked their female colleagues' works, and even dared to classify their peer's fiction and poetry as "lacking in aesthetic complexity and political import" (Scottish Women Writers on the Web: nd). Women's perception of the nation was not useful for the male heads of the Renaissance, who believed women did not manage to represent the desired Scottishness in their works and so they got rid of it.

This male-gazed perception of women's literature in the twentieth century penetrated the critic. For decades, the literary works of these women were disregarded by the same literary scholars who did not even read them (and who were mostly males). It was not until the 1990's when Scottish women became interested in these texts and started to analyse them. Some of these women were Carol Anderson, Douglas Gifford, Dorothy McMillan, Margery Palmer, and Glenda Norquay. Sadly, in many European literary cultures the arrival of women to this discipline was necessary to finally appreciate the works of our female predecessors.

From the 1990's onwards, there has been an expansion in the interest over these women and the study of their works. Many of them (those that were transmitted) have been republished, causing a great impulse for the reappraisal of these hidden writers and their texts. The reprinting of these books caused the expansion of the Scottish



literary canon, as they were not accurately considered by their contemporary scholars and literary critics, precluding them from entering the canon. The women who wrote during the Renaissance came from different backgrounds within Scotland; they wrote using a plethora of narrative techniques and themes, and so they show the plurality and complexity of the texts produced by women at the time. With the republication of these works, new literary criticism also came. Some of the reviews have been published as well in collections such as *Scottish Women's Fiction. 1920s to 1960s: Journeys into Being*, for example. These collections ease the way for those new to women's writing and/or the Scottish Literary Renaissance, while functioning as canonising devices.

Scottish women's writing is doubly peripheral because of their status as women (who are pushed to the margins in patriarchal societies) and as Scottish (which is considered a minor literature). The works of the twentieth century Scottish female writers have been marginalised and even lost in some cases. Some of the greatest novelists of the Renaissance had their works out of print for decades due to this fact. Willa Muir was one of these women. Her novels are as intricate and valuable as the one's produced by authors such as Erik Linklater, Tom MacDonald, and Compton Mackenzie, but her literary work has been minimised by scholars. Besides suffering such discrimination, she lived in the shadow of her husband, Edwin Muir, until very recently.

#### **4. Willa Muir (1890-1970)**

Willa Muir was born on March 13, 1890 in Montrose, a coastal town in Angus, Scotland, under the name Wilhelmina Johnston Anderson. She had three younger siblings, and both her parents' (Elizabeth Gray Anderson and Peter Anderson) families

were originally from Unst, one of the Shetland Islands, where a Shetlandic dialect of the Scots language was spoken. This linguistic heirloom probably helped her acquire the linguistic skills she later in life developed. During her childhood, she wrote plays and short stories, anticipating her later career as a writer. She became a polyglot in her youth, as she spoke the Shetlandic dialect at home, Scots at school, and English (Scottish English) in the classroom:

By the time I was four I could speak Shetland, Montrose, and the kind of English used at the small private school in Bridge Street [...] And that, I decided, was why I became good at Greek and Latin (Muir: 1968, p.20).

She was an excellent student and won a scholarship from her primary school. This allowed the little Minnie (as they called her at home) to attend Montrose Academy, where she studied multiple languages (Latin, Greek, French, and English) and Science. Her excellence continued throughout her school life, performing exceptionally well in the St Andrews Bursary Competition led her to university in 1907. She was one of the first women in Scotland to ever attend university. She graduated with honours in Greek and Humanities (Classics) in St Andrews University. Muir continued her education, with the Berry Scholarship, with a postgraduate degree in English Language and Literature. She was also involved in the life of the university community: she was active in the Women's Debating society and contributed to *College Echoes*, the university magazine, as a writer and an editor. She was an assistant in the classics department for a year and then taught Latin and educational psychology at Gypsy Hill Training College, in London. She also studied at Bedford College, where, in 1918, she left her thesis on Child Psychology unfinished (Pickard: nd)

That same year she met Edwin Muir in Glasgow and they were married by the next year. They lived and worked in London initially, but, during the interwar period, the Muirs travelled through Europe because Edwin was hired by the magazine *Freeman*. The newlyweds lived in Europe during two periods: from 1921 to 1924 and from 1926 to 1927. They lived abroad in the city of Prague during the first period and there they met Karel Čapek, a playwright. They soon became part of his theatre circle and Willa learnt enough Czech language to be able to translate her new friend's work *Insects* into English. After three years in Prague, they moved to Dresden, and, for Willa, this was a crucial period of her life. She met unexpectedly with A. S. Neill, who Willa already knew from university. He was an educationalist and was, at the time, working to create an experimental international school in the city. Willa accepted to join him at this school as an additional teacher and, although the marriage had a basic command of German, she learned to speak the language like a native. This chance had great implications in the marriage's future, as they became translators and even were the first to put Kafka's works into English.

During the 1930s Edwin's reputation as a writer and translator grew, and he was constantly credited as the main (or even sole) translator of Kafka's work. Willa also published book translations under the name of Agnes Neill Scott. It is now widely accepted (due to the evidence that we now have) that Willa was the principal and sometimes the only translator of these texts. With what has been shown so far, it is clear that she had a greater linguistic competence than her husband. Thanks to some preserved correspondence from Willa, we can now see her side of the story: she was more involved in the translations than Edwin (who frequently wrote in his letters about his wife being busy translating) and she was deeply frustrated at not being credited enough:

And the fact remains; I am a better translator than he is. The whole current of patriarchal society is set against this fact, however, and sweeps it into oblivion, simply because I did not insist on shouting aloud: 'Most of this translation, especially Kafka, has been done by ME. Edwin only helped'. And every time Edwin was referred to as THE translator, I was too proud to say anything; and Edwin himself felt it would be undignified to speak up, I suppose. I am left without a shred of literary reputation. And I am ashamed of the fact that I feel it as a grievance [...] And yet, and yet, I want to be acknowledged (St. Andrews MS 38466/5/5: 1953).

The marriage travelled throughout Europe extensively and spent some time in several countries (apart from the ones already mentioned, they also lived in Italy, France, England, The United States, and multiple regions of their homeland). These experiences earned them an extensive comprehension of the political situation, which was later reflected on some of her work (the unpublished novel *Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey*, for instance). Their travelling also helped their translation work, not only by teaching them different languages, but by bringing them closer to other cultural realities apart from their own.

The Muirs had a son in 1927, Gavin Muir, who is rarely mentioned in Willa's literary work; we can see subtle references to him in *Belonging*. Some critics have analysed Willa's autobiographical pieces as documents on the marriage's life and travels. If we understand those texts this way, it would be odd to not reference their child, as he is a part of their relationship. Some believe that Willa was trying to protect her son from the public exposure that the marriage faced, and so "Galvin is only included in the narration when his behaviour has direct influence on the choices and decisions of his parents" (Fuentes-Vázquez: 2013, p. 49). As a result of the lack of representation that

their child got from her literary works, we have to determine her thoughts on motherhood from the dispersed remarks that she made in her autobiography. Even though her travels and background shaped her perspective on literature and politics, it was motherhood what ultimately carved her views.

“Marmaduke” is a journal that Willa wrote about the first years of her son’s life. It remains unpublished, but it is useful as it can be read as the documentation of Gavin’s early years. However, the most relevant contributions that the journal made were those instances when “it uncovers Muir’s own anxieties and fears about her role as a mother” (Pickard: 2021, p. 28). Muir’s literary work shows the struggles that many women suffered when trying to express the uneasiness they go through while being a mother, which society has established as their natural duty. Muir believed in equality between the genders and in the benefits it would entail in a marriage. However, by doing so she was going against the patriarchal society that hid her literary contributions because of her gender. Historically, women have struggled to make it into the canon, as it is elaborated by men and usually resists the incorporation of peripheral voices. Willa Muir did not adapt her texts to the male standard so that she could be recognised; she developed her own style, creating a counter-canon.

Her role as a mother was not the only facet of the writer that affected her career. The fact that she married Edwin Muir, one of the central writers of the Renaissance, also had its effect on her reputation. In Willa’s memoir she describes how MacDiarmid saw her husband as “the Enemy, and his [MacDiarmid’s] fighting blood, [...] prompted a literary vendetta against Edwin Muir which went on for years (Muir: 1968, p. 195). Willa was further detached from Scotland as the writer sided with her husband in this confrontation and the “opponent” was the main figure of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. Edwin was not a Scottish nationalist and had his disagreements with

MacDiarmid regarding the linguistic debate of the Renaissance (Edwin did not support the revival of the native languages of Scotland); so, even though he occupied a central position within the movement, he was the opposition. However, we cannot fall under the impression that she left herself to be influenced by her husband in her views on Scotland. She already had her reservations at a very young age, as she disregarded her family's Shetlandic dialect even though the fact that her initial bilingualism expedited her later language learning: "My people spoke Shetland at home, so my first words were in the Norse dialect of Shetland, which was not valid outside our front door" (Elphinstone: 1997, p. 400). Also, she left Montrose, her hometown, as she believed she could not prosper there. As she did not feel a sense of belonging to her nation, she sought this feeling by belonging to Edwin. After Edwin's death, the author went back to Scotland looking for reconciliation. Gavin, however, frustrated this by scattering his mother's ashes over his father's grave, banning her from finding a resting place.

#### **4.1. Willa Muir's literary work**

Apart from teaching and translating, Willa supported the family by writing her own literary works. She published two novels, *Imagined Corners* (1931) and *Mrs Ritchie* (1933); two long feminist essays *Women: An Inquiry* (1925) and *Mrs Grundy in Scotland* (1936); a memoir, *Belonging: A Memoir* (1968); a book of ballads, *Living with Ballads* (1965); and multiple articles and essays. Her unpublished works ("Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey" and "The Usurpers") are kept with her correspondence and journals in St Andrews University archive.

Muir's essays, poems, and unpublished works are worth exploring for what they can tell us about an individual woman's uncensored voice, and therefore,

contribute to the theoretical framework of life writing to reclaim marginalised voices more generally (Pickard: 2021, p. 217).

In her novels, Willa Muir has women protagonists who are “in the search for their own identities, in a narrow-minded community influenced by a strong sense of Presbyterian religiosity and morality” (Romero: 2015, p. 74). These protagonists live in a past Scotland, where they follow their desires instead of the roles that this society had created for them. The two novels that she published are set in a provincial, small-town atmosphere (a town called Calderwick: a fictionalised representation of Montrose) and the main characters fight the strong sense of tradition (to the author, linked to backwardness) present in their hometown to discover their own self. By presenting this reality, we can deduce by her comments on the ideals of the Scottish northeast that she deeply disagreed with them. The process that the female characters go through echoes Willa’s life, as she grew up in a small town and had to leave to search for her own identity. Muir lived in a dichotomy, as she was trying to balance having her own voice and being the best partner possible for Edwin.

Willa Muir’s entire work is deserving of analysis and recognition, as it constitutes a great source through which to study a woman’s thoughts on the Scottish Literary Renaissance. Scholars have been revisiting her texts for decades now and they have inspired outstanding contributions that reclaim women’s literary pieces during this movement. Willa Muir created a new model of womanhood by expressing her ideas on women’s place in society: female writers can also be the voices of the change.

#### **4.1.1. “Women: An Inquiry” (1925)**

In a State where men are dominant, as in most of our civilized States for the past two thousand years, certain attributes are considered to be characteristic

of women which are equally characteristic of men in a State where women are dominant (Muir: 1925, p.7).

“Women: An Inquiry” was Willa Muir’s first text to be published. This essay was also one of the earliest pieces of feminist analysis in Scottish history. The text, however, is not coherent and her later work would contradict some points the author made in it. Even though some critics (Pickard: 2021, p. 29) argue that her later literary texts and not this essay were her greatest contribution to Scottish feminism, this text is significant as it expresses her discordance with male dominance in society and the literary scene.

In addition, this essay was published before the birth of her son, and motherhood was a key factor for Willa Muir’s radicalization in feminism. Already in this text, however, Willa presents the problems of trying to be a mother and a writer simultaneously (as motherhood presents an impediment for women when trying to build a career). Willa became the primary caregiver for Gavin and a mother occupying this role was (and still is) nothing unusual in Scottish society. However, for a couple that based their relationship on equity (“He refused to boast himself up the ladder into becoming a dominant male, and I refused to be pushed down in into female subserviency.” [Muir: 1968, p. 138]), this reveals inequality in the relationship, which goes against the view that both of them held over love:

True Love, I felt, never seeks to exert power, especially over the beloved. If he is kind, one does not conclude that he is under one’s thumb: If he is unkind, one does not retaliate (Muir: 1968, p. 136).



“Women: An Inquiry” was published in November 1925, with Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press. The essay was greeted by the literary critic and the press with practically no response. It was also disregarded by those scholars who revisited the author’s work, which probably has to do with the proto-feminist values it holds. It was brought into the light again by Kristy A. Allen, who edited a collection of Muir’s works containing her two novels (*Imagined Corners* and *Mrs Ritchie*) and three essays (“Mrs Grundy in Scotland”, “Women: An Inquiry”, and “Women in Scotland”). Muir’s views on feminism in this essay are now considered outdated and so they can only be analysed as the historical document that it is (due to its lack of relevancy nowadays).

“Women: An Inquiry” is, in many ways, a quite outstanding exploration of the perceived qualities, characteristics and capacities of women; and of the necessity of extensively integrating them into every social sphere (Allen: 1997, p. 200).

While on the surface the essay can appear progressive, the conclusions we can extract from it are dated views on the differences between the genders. The problematic aspect of the text is, definitely, the portrayal of women and men as complementary, each genre holding certain characteristics that are lacking in the other. This reinforces gender roles, as she states that each gender has a predefined duty in society. Thus, the essay endorses the patriarchal system it intended to dismantle, as it was extremely detrimental to women and Willa was a victim of this. The true values of the text, however, are the conceptualization of separated spheres (although it fails to realise or analyse how the existence of these prevents women from entering the workplace by forcing them to occupy the domestic sphere) and the fact that it helps scholars understand her first texts.

“Women: An Inquiry” is an early testimony of a woman investigating through philosophy the justification for women’s oppression. Willa Muir’s essay displays the differences between the genders and how these restrict women’s potential (artistically and intellectually), according to the author. The text is highly contradictory and fails to recognise the real problem: women have been relegated to the domestic sphere and cannot access the public sphere due to male dominance (which exists in all patriarchal societies, such as the Scottish). Instead, Willa Muir tries to change men’s perception (of women) and “mould restrictive biological functions into a utopia of gender balance” (Pickard: 2021, p. 76).

In some instances, Muir’s reasoning supports the biological essentialist theories that were used by the patriarchy to repress women. She displays women as abnegated and bases the differences between the genders on biology, condoning the unequal division of labour and, therefore, women’s inferior position in society. Ultimately, the difference lies in women’s ability to bear children (“At the lowest estimate of their powers, all women are potential mothers” [Muir: 1925, p. 11]): women’s creative capacity would be linked to their capability to reproduce.

motherhood was smirched with original sin. Later on it was still further belittled. Women were regarded as mere receptacles, passive receptive bodies which created nothing. Men must have felt that motherhood was important, or they would not have tried to explain it away altogether (Muir: 1925, p. 11).

From a contemporary point of view, this essay would be easily disregarded. The historical context in which Muir lived explains her lack of accountability of infertility, individuals who do not desire to become a parent, and the existence of trans people. We will not be elaborating on these subjects any further as it is not the object of our

study. However, it is interesting that she placed such a strong importance on motherhood when she was not yet a mother when she wrote this essay. Later, Muir realised that she was pregnant while she composed the essay but this pregnancy would not come to terms due to a bad miscarriage. The link she made in “Women: An Inquiry” between women’s natural creative power and their literary creativity, and her initial failed attempt to give birth resulted in a period of time where Muir doubted her own creativity. Some scholars believe that the thesis behind this essay is rooted in her own insecurity.

Everything disclosed in this section would later appear in other works by Willa Muir. Although “Women: An Inquiry” is an incoherent and contradictory text, it can be used to analyse the author’s later works. It also represents one of the first efforts to theorise over women’s position in society in relation to their role as mothers (and how motherhood is linked to artistic creativity). Her true contributions to feminist theory, however, would be presented in her novels, which are also more accessible.

#### **4.1.2. *Imagined Corners* (1931)**

To go back to Scotland was the right thing to do. One should have a standard by which to measure one’s growth. In returning to the home of her childhood and stormy girlhood she would perhaps find out where she now stood (Muir: 1931, p. 191).

*Imagined Corners* (1931) was Willa Muir’s first novel to be published. The title comes from the seventeenth-century poet John Donne and his poem “Holy Sonnet Number VII” :

At the round earth’s imagined corners, blow  
Your trumpets, angels; and arise, arise  
From death, your numberless infinities

Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go (Donne: 1897, VII. 1-8).

The poem makes reference to the biblical version (in the Book of Revelations) of the Earth with four corners and four angels. The poem presents the Last Judgement and how people fear its coming. The reader has two possibilities: to fear or not to fear. Muir continues this idea in her novel: the world with or without corners and how the characters challenge these impositions. This suggests how in this literary world there are real corners, that is, the physical limitations of the small-town; and imagined corners, those of social and/or ideological origin.

*Imagined Corners* is also a fictional exercise based on the author's questionable feminist thesis presented in "Women: An Inquiry". In that sense, the novel is more successful as it "glories in the fickleness and complexity of real humanity" (Allen: 1997, p. 237), unlike the essay, which is a superficial thesis. Therefore, Muir's novel contains a more toughened feminist theory than the essay. The fiction presents "a clearer representation of this divide between self and expectation by showing her readers the trap of patriarchy and its effects, rather than attempting to outline these" (Pickard: 2020, p. 85).

Unlike the essay, Muir's first novel was "appraised and welcomed by critics as a mature novel" (Romero: 2015, p. 95) and these critics also valued the open-mindedness of the author and her use of Scotland as a place in which to set the fiction. However, the public did not enjoy *Imagined Corners* as much as the critic did. Readers found the novel difficult to read as it contains enough material for several books. The several narrative strands and the fact that two main characters have the same name only makes the novel even more complex. However, it was chosen as the first Canongate Classic, which indicates the level of canonization it holds.

The novel portrays the way of life in a small town in Scotland, Calderwick (a fictional Montrose), and the effects that this lifestyle has on its inhabitants. The novel is, in a way, a searching mechanism for the writer to find an authentic self, as it uses the character's dreams and longings to escape the restrictive social constructs present in Calderwick's small-town life. *Imagined Corners* confronts the repressive ideology behind Calvinism. Religion has been used by the patriarchy to reinforce its tenets:

This patriarchal law based on Calvinist principles relegated women to a secondary status, making them passive victims of a masculine State, governed by the Ecclesiastical Church solely by economic principles, and therefore relegated women to a secondary position since they were not the subject of creation of economic growth (Romero: 2015, p. 96).

You know it's much more difficult for a thinking girl to swallow tradition than for a thinking boy. Tradition supports his dignity and undermines hers. I can remember how insulted I was when I was told that woman was made from a rib of man, and that Eve was the first sinner, and that the pains of childbirth are a punishment to women... It took me a long time to get over that... It's damnable the way a girl's self-confidence is slugged on the head from the very beginning (Muir: 1931, pp. 216, 217).

Elizabeth Shand (the main character of the novel) has recently married Hector and now lives in a community ruled by this patriarchal ideology and; therefore, lives repressed as a woman. Elizabeth was a good student at university and by marrying Hector, the outcast of the family, had to move to Calderwick. She is new in town and soon feels like she does not belong there, as there are many expectations placed on her due to the Shand's status and her role now as a wife. However, Elizabeth refuses

to be submissive and constantly disobeys Hector, who is hurt by her attitude. The couple goes through many misunderstandings, as the foundation of their relationship is their sexual attraction, which was “wrongly misinterpreted by Elizabeth as true love” (Tillschneider: nd, p. 12). Elizabeth is objectified by Hector, who expects her to serve him. The protagonist feels that this new role imposed on her implies the loss of her identity, but, after a quarrel with her husband, the woman decides to submit and do her wife duties. This causes her to undergo an identity crisis caused by her feelings of restraint in this submissive and obedient wife. The marriage fails because of this and Hector’s incapacity to be a good husband.

The arrival of her sister-in-law, Elise (Lizzie) Mütze, from Italy opens Elizabeth’s eyes to the possibilities that life brings her (on a personal and sexual level). Like Elizabeth, Elise is a stranger to Calderwick, as she ran away and married a German scholar, Karl, when she was just nineteen. She returns to Scotland as a widow to recover her sense of belonging to her land of origin. The two women share the same name, indicating in an explicit way the analogies between their lives: they both suffer because of a man and their feelings of belonging. While Elizabeth suffers an identity crisis due to her new status as a wife, Elise suffers her husband’s loss. Having lost her main source of male validation, Elise searches for the acceptance of her brother (John). This dependence on men is not only psychological, but also financial. The two women escape to Europe (southern France), where Elise was once liberated, and this trip opens Elizabeth’s eyes to new possibilities. Elizabeth is Willa Muir’s new model for women at the time; a woman who has rebelled against the patriarchal society that restrained her to search for her own version of success and happiness.

*Imagined Corners* is a novel that interrogates gender roles, and in doing so, questions where the ‘new place’ for women in society and in (re)production fits

in. Her conclusion, it would appear at the end of the novel, is that women's roles in reproduction, if they desire autonomy and freedom, are out with the structural boundaries that tie them to biological productivity (Pickard: 2020, p. 86).

The two women run away at the end of *Imagined Corners* without ever mentioning motherhood or the desire to bear any children and without the prospect of getting re-married. Their conditions as single and childless creates a new model of womanhood. Willa Muir explored with this novel an original role for women in which motherhood and marriage are not end goals or requirements to have a fulfilled life. Also, the novel presents women who are childless but still experience their sexuality, which is a deliberate act of provocation to the Church, as it demonstrates that sexual intimacy does not have to be linked to procreation.

The childless choice of Elizabeth and Elise contrasts with the sterility of Mabel and John. There is an instance in the novel where Elise, who thinks that Mabel and John are both healthy, asks Mabel why they are childless. Those supposed children would be, like their parents, a proper embodiment of society's standards. We learn at the beginning of the novel how their sexual intimacy is static. After the first years of matrimony, they fell into the habit of maintaining sexual relations every Sunday, as a "tradition" (Muir: 1931, p. 55). This regularity and the couple's wealth suggest that they are practising "some form of birth control within marriage" (Pickard: 2020, p. 100). This also constitutes a model, as this couple enjoys a central position in Calderwick's society.

Elizabeth and Elise, to achieve their freedom, have to leave Scotland, depicting the country as patriarchal and retrograde. Elizabeth and Elise reject Scottish Calvinist society, which repressed women by forcing them into moulds (the wife, the mother,

the fallen woman, etc) created by men, and, therefore, built without women's considerations in mind. Willa Muir tries to fictionally explore an opposition to this religious and patriarchal system that dominated Scotland. Elise, who grew up in this small town and was influenced by these societal values until she left, bases her value by Calderwick's standards (needing a man's acceptance to feel worthy). By meeting Elizabeth, Elise becomes aware of other possibilities and wants to redefine the base of her self-worth (outside of the patriarchy). Willa Muir used *Imagined Corners'* Calderwick to criticise the way of life that was predominant in her hometown and that had restrained her life due to her gender identity.

In writing *Imagined Corners* Willa Muir makes use of a small town in Scotland to bring about those aspects of life which had also restricted her as a woman in those days. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the town and its structure more closely (Tillschneider: n.d., p. 7).



## 5. Conclusions

This paper has explained the central position that Willa Muir and her production hold inside the Scottish Literary Renaissance. This movement had three aims: the revitalisation of Scottish literature and languages, and the political sovereignty of Scotland. While they failed to recover political independence and many of the authors ended up writing in English, they sure changed the literary scene by incorporating European trends through translations such as those conducted by Willa Muir.

Women were overlooked by the male writers, critics, and scholars of the time, restraining them from entering the literary canon. It is a complex task to bring Renaissance texts written by women back for two main reasons: the poor quality of the editions has made the transmission of these texts impossible, and many of these women wrote anonymously. Furthermore, society conditioned women to question the value of their production.

Willa Muir has been in the shadow of her husband due to the wrong assumption that he was the main translator of the couple, an assumption which is rooted in sexism. Despite being a competent scholar and a skilled linguist, her production is often relegated to a secondary position when discussing Renaissance's main figures. Willa lived repressed by the patriarchal values present in the society in which she grew up (Montrose) and her literary work, which is set in a fictional version of her hometown, explores women's identity.

Her first published work, "Women: An Inquiry" was one of the first feminist theses to be published in Scotland. The essay may be lacking in some aspects (its coherence,

its failure to recognise other female realities, and the dated ideas that it exposes), but it still constitutes an important piece to correctly analyse her later production, especially *Imagined Corners*. In addition, it speaks about the restriction that motherhood can entail to any woman trying to have a career. Therefore, this first essay is highly flawed but still represents a critical piece of Scottish literature as it is useful to understand women's situation at that historical moment and Muir's later works.

Her first novel, *Imagined Corners*, can be read as a fictional experiment based on her first essay. However, the novel presents a more radical view on feminism than the other text. Willa Muir creates a new model of womanhood that does not base its worth on the children that she has or her marriage prospects. The new model of femininity proposed by the author bases her self-worth on herself and not on how good of a mother and/or wife she is. It also introduces a new way to view sexuality, going against the oppressive Church values. The novel presents two women with the same name and an analogous life situation: Elizabeth is suffering an identity crisis because of her new status as a married woman, and Elise is going through the same due to the recent death of her husband. These women complement each other to create Muir's new womanhood: childless, without a man, and searching for their own happiness once they leave behind the reactionary town of Calderwick.

This paper's characteristics forced us to focus only on two of Willa Muir's texts. Future research can follow this analysis with the exploration of the remaining ones. A comparative analysis of her novels or essays could also prove to be fruitful.

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