

REVIEWS

KAFKA'S SCOTTISH TRANSLATORS: WILLA AND EDWIN MUIR BETWEEN ANGLOPHONE AND CENTRAL EUROPEAN MODERNISM

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Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Edwin and Willa Muir: A Literary Marriage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 368 pp. ISBN: 9780192858047.

Although they were probably among the most cosmopolitan of British literary couples, Willa and Edwin Muir's greatest fame arguably came from their jointly credited translations of Franz Kafka. Edwin Muir's reputation as one of the major poets of the interwar Scottish Literary Renaissance long overshadowed that of his wife as a novelist, but more recently a number of literary scholars have worked to bring greater attention to Willa's work, including Kirsty Allen and Aileen Christianson. The late scholar and editor Margery Palmer McCulloch from the University of Glasgow, who discussed both Willa and Edwin in considerable detail in her monograph *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts 1918-1959: Literature, National Identity and Cultural Exchange* (2009) devoted the last several years of her life to a joint biography of the Muirs, leaving a full but unrevised draft when she died in 2019. Thanks to the editing work of Roderick Watson, the book was recently published by Oxford University Press, offering the first genuinely balanced account of the mutual influence these two distinctive figures had on each other's life and work. While both of them published autobiographies (Edwin in 1954 and Willa in 1968), and much of the material has been covered by previous scholars, this study is particularly useful for its detailed analysis of both Muirs' relationship to Prague and the Czechs.

Willa and Edwin Muir never met Kafka, but his native Prague played a significant role in their lives beyond its connection to his work, due to two periods they lived there nearly three decades apart: first in the optimistic new Czechoslovak Republic of the early 1920s, and then in the weary postwar period of the late 1940s, just after the Nazi occupation and just before the Communist seizure of power. Drawing on unpublished materials from Willa Muir's archive in St Andrews, McCulloch discusses both periods in considerable detail, including their friendship with Karel Čapek, which gave them deep insights into Czech culture (Willa even learned enough Czech to read some of his work in the original, although she did not publish any translations of it). She also describes the Muirs' involvement with the Czech House set up in Edinburgh during World War II by

the Czech exile Lumír Soukup, and Edwin's appointment to the British Council in Prague soon after the war. While it was initially a time of renewed optimism, the institute had bitter internal conflicts that mirrored the ominous struggles for power in Czechoslovakia and inspired one of Willa's last fictional works, which was recently published for the first time.

McCulloch begins her biography with Willa and Edwin Muir's first meeting in 1918, and Chapter 2 covers their first sojourn in Prague (their first experience of expatriate life) beginning in autumn 1921. In a letter written a few months later, Edwin finds reminders of home: "Its situation is somewhat like Edinburgh's, with a castle on the top of a rock standing by itself; only where the Princes Street Gardens are in Edinburgh there is a fine river in Prague, the Vltava (or Moldau), crossed by [the Charles Bridge] dating from the 14th century." (29) Willa's early impressions, later recounted in her autobiography *Belonging*, were of a city "sizzling with hope and experiment and enthusiasm" (31). Through his work in A.R. Orage's journal *The New Age*, Edwin had met Paul Selver, the first English translator of both Jaroslav Hašek and Karel Čapek, who then put the Muirs in touch with the latter (and his brother Josef) even before he had become famous abroad.¹ In her unpublished essay "The Brothers Čapek at Home," which as McCulloch suggests "was probably written after she and Edwin had become more familiar with the brothers and their working relationship in regard to their theatre productions," Willa observes that "Karel is perhaps responsible more for the writing of the plays, and Josef for their artistic setting; but they are so perfectly complementary to each other that once a play has passed through the minds of both it can be described only as the work of the brothers Čapek—like the *Insect* play." (33-34) While it was *R.U.R.* that brought Karel Čapek worldwide fame (and as the origin of the word "robot," has kept his memory alive far beyond literary circles even today), Willa notes that he himself preferred his earlier, lesser-known play *The Robbers*. McCulloch emphasizes Čapek's social and political engagement, including his close relationship with President Tomáš Masaryk, as an "important factor" in his work: "This positive involvement with his country and its future featured in his journalism, his creative writing, and his social critiques." (34) In the first edition of his autobiography, *The Story and the Fable* (1940), Edwin appreciates the fact that Czech culture displayed "a feeling of nationality and a feeling of equality, [which] went together," and the "warm, easy-going contact" they had

¹ McCulloch previously wrote about this connection in an article for *Litteraria Pragensia*: Margery McCulloch, "Scottish and Czech Cultural Exchange: The Muirs, Karel Čapek and a Shared Story of Europe," *Litteraria Pragensia* 27, no. 53 "Cultural Exchanges in Scottish Literature" (July 2017): 70-83.

seen (partly through Čapek's interactions with admiring compatriots) "was the first thing that made me wish that Edinburgh might become a similar place and that Scotland might become a nation again." McCulloch points out that "this comment about Scotland becoming a nation again was omitted from the revised and extended version of *The Story and the Fable*, which was published as *An Autobiography* in 1954." (35)

For the most part, McCulloch describes Willa and Edwin Muir's literary marriage as mutually beneficial, but one of the few times she directly compares their work is through their writings about Prague. Each of them wrote three essays describing Czech society and culture. Two of Willa's pieces from the 1920s, the Čapek profile mentioned above and another entitled "A Woman in Prague," were not published; a third was published in 1930 in the *Radio Times*. In McCulloch's view, while the unpublished articles "have an immediacy and a 'surprise' element in their descriptions," all three of them "are marked by an immediacy, a sharpness in observation, and a liveliness in description that would become the hallmark of Willa's mature creative and descriptive writing." (96) In contrast, she describes Edwin's two-part "Impressions of Prague" and his concluding piece "Impressions of a People" (all published in the *American Freeman* journal in 1922) as "much more stilted" (96). McCulloch is unusually critical of the first of these articles, stating that "Edwin seems to be struggling, not only to come to terms with his unfamiliar physical and cultural environment, but also to find a new and more personal way of writing about it," resulting in a piece that "reads like the somewhat laboured product of a conscientious student" and "seems more like an essay than a lively descriptive article" (36). McCulloch also comments on the "artificiality" of Edwin's observations such as "Prague is a country town, a big country town, dignified, even distinguished, but still a country town. From the moment one set foot in it one would not think of calling it a metropolis." (37) In his second Prague article, which was later "transposed" into his autobiography as a "vivid" record that would "better communicate his first impressions," she finds a "less constrained observer" and a "more politically acute writer," although she seems disapproving of his "romanticized portrait" of the old women he sees "carrying immense burdens with a careless air" (38). Edwin's socialist inclinations become more pronounced in the last article, in which "he seems to have found a voice to interpret and communicate more freely what he notices in the streets of the city, perceptions that fit more readily with Willa's memories of a 'sizzling' atmosphere." He is particularly "aware of the vitality of the republican idea in Prague [...] it seems as if the whole people, old and young, after being denied all their life any voice in their political fate, had resolved at last to enjoy an orgy of self-government [...] they enjoy their very difficulties because of the freedom with

which they can discuss them." McCulloch also observes Edwin's "greater understanding of the contemporary problems facing the new Republic," particularly the grievances of the German and Slovak minorities. (38)

Although Willa's first two essays were written around the same time, McCulloch discusses them separately in Chapter 6 of her biography, "Early Writings." As she notes, Willa's "first attempts at creative writing of a descriptive nature came with their stay in Prague and their involvement with the Čapek brothers and their theatre circle." Her first article's "description of [their] meeting and her comments on the brothers' collaboration in play-writing bring the encounter alive for the reader," while her second essay "calls attention to the surprising contrasts found in the city itself," particularly the juxtaposition of Baroque splendor with everyday squalor, and the fact that "all the unskilled heavy labour of the town is provided by women," including carrying loads of bricks and coal. As McCulloch points out, "Willa's interest in the actuality of the women's lives here, as opposed to Edwin's romanticization of them, anticipates the feminist concerns present in her future writings." (96)

Both Edwin and Willa recorded their observations of lingering tensions between Czechs and Germans in the early years of the republic, although they were cut off from direct contact with the Prague-German literature they would later make world-famous through their Kafka translations. As Willa describes in her autobiography, "We were so busily involved in Czech doings [...] that we never knew about the German life still going on in pockets here and there in Prague. We never got even a hint that Kafka or his friends had ever existed in the city. An invisible but unyielding barrier cut off German-speakers from Czech-speakers, and it was only the Czech-speakers that we came to know." (36) McCulloch explains in Chapter 12, "Translating for a Living," that Kafka was writing *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*) in Prague while the Muirs lived there, but it was only published in 1926, after his death, "and somehow came to Edwin's attention when he was in Scotland in early 1929, researching material for his book on John Knox." In a letter to their friend Sydney Schiff (also known as Stephen Hudson), who was translating Marcel Proust's *Time Regained* at nearly the same time, Edwin described *The Castle* as a "purely metaphysical and mystical dramatic novel [where] everything happens on a mysterious spiritual plane which was obviously the supreme reality to the author; and yet in a curious way everything is given solidly and concretely." (176) The Muirs translated the novel through the rest of 1929 (despite Willa's lingering health problems following their son Gavin's birth in 1927) and it was published in March 1930. It was followed by their translations of *The Great Wall of China and Other Pieces* (1933), *The Trial* (1937), *America* (1938), and after World War II, *The Penal Settlement, Tales and Short Pieces* (1948).

Over the past few decades, Willa has finally been given primary credit for producing these translations, even as they have come under increasing scrutiny and criticism and have gradually been replaced by more contemporary versions. McCulloch provides a detailed overview of the Muirs' translation process as well as the scholarly debates over the quality of their texts. She cites Willa's memorable observation in *Belonging*: "We divided the book in two, Edwin translated one half and I the other, then we went over each other's translation as with a fine-tooth comb." More practically, as McCulloch explains, "Willa was clearly the trained grammatical expert in this process," since Edwin "was not able, as she was, to come to terms with the complex grammatical structures of the German language," but "his experience as poet and his interest in imagistic and metaphorical communication [...] made him an essential partner in the Kafka translations, as his own critical essays on Kafka demonstrate." (177) While their versions remain in print, the reason that they have "fallen out of favour with more recent specialists," she suggests, are the "over-religious interpretation of *The Castle* in particular, together with a general overreliance on the background material and interpretations as published by Max Brod, Kafka's friend and editor." Brod's editions, which formed the basis for the Muirs' translations, were overly shaped by his idealization of Kafka, and have now been replaced by later versions that in turn have been retranslated. McCulloch discusses the 1996 article "Digging the Pit of Babel" by the Irish translator Mark Harman, whose version of *The Castle* appeared in 1998 and whose criticism of the Muirs had a significant impact on Kafka scholarship. She agrees that "translation practices and theories have changed over the years, leaving the naturalizing approach of earlier translators open to criticism," but she disputes what may be Harman's best-known claim, "that the Muirs' version of *The Castle*, especially as shown in Edwin's introductory note, had been adversely affected, not only by their acceptance of Brod's religious interpretation of the novel, but also by Edwin's own Calvinist religious background." Here McCulloch's knowledge of the Scottish cultural context enables her to argue in turn that "Harman himself did not fully understand the philosophical and literary background of Kafka's Scottish translators, especially Edwin's life-long battle against Calvinist ideology." (178) She does agree in part with "Harman's criticism that it is Kafka's ironic scepticism as well as his black humour that are missing from the Muirs' translations," particularly in their version of *Amerika*, which Edwin describes in his introduction as "one of the happiest of Kafka's stories," but which is now often translated by its darker original title *The Man Who Disappeared* (179).

The Muirs spent a considerable part of the 1930s back in Scotland, including a period in Montrose living near the leading poet of the Scottish Literary

Renaissance, Hugh MacDiarmid. As McCulloch suggests, Edwin Muir's ideological differences with MacDiarmid, apart from their "different temperaments," can partly be attributed to the perspective he gained from the Czechs: "For Edwin, despite his wish that Scotland might become a nation again in the spirit of Čapek's republican Prague, socialism still had to come before nationalism, and as an Orkneyman he was not particularly committed to a revival of the lowland Scots language for literary purposes, preferring to write in English." (71) The Muirs watched with horror as Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain participated in the 1938 Munich Agreement which handed Czechoslovakia over to German control (leading to full Nazi occupation the following year), and signed an open letter condemning it, organized by their fellow Scottish author Eric Linklater. As Edwin observed in a letter to Schiff in January 1939: "I am ashamed, as every citizen of this country should be, of the part England has played. And share, with everyone else, part of the responsibility for it; for we have all been too easy-going and thoughtless and hopeful." (174) McCulloch notes that on MacDiarmid's part, his magazine *Voice of Scotland* originally rejected supporting an English war against Germany, "but MacDiarmid changed his mind after Munich and the betrayal of Czechoslovakia, writing an angry anti-Chamberlain, anti-Hitler poem which he dedicated to Karel Čapek, who had died shortly after the Munich Agreement." (197)

During the war, Edwin was appointed to a temporary position with the British Council in Edinburgh, which supported the establishment of cultural centres for soldiers of allied nations living in exile. The director of the Czechoslovak House, the young theologian Lumír Soukup, and his Scottish wife Catriona eventually became close friends of the Muirs. Another wartime visitor was Dora Diamant, Kafka's last lover, who had first escaped from Germany to the USSR, then fled to England just before the war and who came to stay with the Muirs for three weeks. As McCulloch notes, "Unfortunately, and surprisingly, neither Willa nor Edwin mentions this Kafka-related meeting in their later memoirs," although she quotes from Morley Jamieson, the Muirs' boarder at the time: "We liked her and she was friendly though our lack of German and her poor English made it difficult to get far in friendship." (213) According to Jamieson, Diamant's visit may have influenced "their post-war intentions" because he felt that "they both thought of Prague – Kafka's city – 'as a kind of dream or mythical city and even [...] the Lawnmarket and High Street reminded them nostalgically of other days there.'" (217)

After the war, Edwin Muir requested a position in Czechoslovakia and was appointed as director of the British Institute in Prague. In Chapter 15, "The Cold War and Prague 1945-1948," McCulloch describes his return to the postwar, traumatized city: "Edwin's thoughts seemed to echo Kafka's sense of [Prague's]

dual nature, as he recalled the old Jewish ghetto that had once been part of it— ‘With our eyes open we walk through a dream: ourselves only a ghost of a vanished age [...] I felt I was in a strange place, and was teased by the fancy of another city, the same and yet not the same, whose streets I or someone very like me had walked many years before.’” Edwin found the Czechs looking “undernourished and apprehensive,” and the Soviet soldiers still occupying Prague “seemed to be lost in the alien city and only half-aware of the power they possessed and the fear they inspired.” (220-21) Despite the material deprivation and physical discomfort, the Muirs’ social life improved in spring 1946 when their friends Lumír and Catriona Soukup arrived from Scotland. According to McCulloch, “Soukup’s memories of this time are significant in relation to Edwin’s relationship with Charles University, where, as a part of his institute duties, he was appointed a Visiting Professor of English Literature.” Edwin’s style was strikingly different from “that oratorical delivery which, although foreign to English lecturers, is yet common, and even expected, on the Continent,” and “to illustrate a point, he would quote lines of poetry and even prose, relying only on his memory,” which led to “a hugely increased attendance at lectures” (224). Although he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Charles University in May 1947, some colleagues (both British and Czech) disapproved of Edwin’s teaching and “believed that the dignity of the professorship was being devalued by such familiarity” (225). In the meantime, Willa was experiencing tensions with the local population in such situations as being unable to pronounce “the word for cherries, which began with the letters ‘tž’” [*sic*, it is unclear if this misspelling of *třešně*, cited from the manuscript draft of *Belonging*, is Muir’s or McCulloch’s] leading a suspicious fruit-seller (presumably assuming her to be German) to refuse her request. Although Willa replied defiantly that she was Scottish, she “wrote later that this was an experience of political hostility, and that she had not understood how the Nazi occupation had struck at the heart of Czech identity.” (226) Additionally, as McCulloch observes, “The post-war residence in Prague must have been the first time in [her] married life that Edwin had undertaken a public occupation quite separate from their previous shared lifestyle as translators and writers,” and her frustration with her limited role can be found in her journal entries, including a 1947 poem about her husband which she entitled “Metamorphosis” (229).

Ultimately, unpleasant internal intrigues at Edwin’s institute, accompanied by the Communist coup d’état in February 1948, brought their second Czech sojourn to an end. In January 1949, Edwin was reappointed to Rome, a relatively happy period for both of them following their disillusionment in Prague, but the institute there was closed in 1950 for financial reasons, and Edwin found a position as

warden of Newbattle Abbey, an adult education centre near Edinburgh, where they spent the following five years. During this period, Willa wrote a novel based on their life in Prague just before the Communist coup d'état. Her initial excitement about this work, which she called *The Usurpers*, subsided when it was rejected for publication, and even Edwin showed little interest in reading it, prompting her to comment in her diary: "Perhaps he is right; this book I have been dreaming myself into, with such enthusiasm & delight, is really a very second-rate production: it won't matter to anyone." (265) While McCulloch sympathizes with her creative struggles at a time when Edwin's success as a poet continued to grow, she also notes that Willa "should have realized that her subject matter was still too close to the events in post-war Prague, leading perhaps to fears of libel on the publisher's part, not to mention fears for the safety of some of the people caught up in that dangerous time." McCulloch concludes that Willa's need for "a life-writing source to work with in constructing her fictional narratives [...] has potential drawbacks" (266). In this, she offers a milder version of the judgement given by Willa's previous biographer Kirsty Allen, who calls *The Usurpers* "stylistically laboured, heavily overwritten, and beset by basic literary naivetes and immaturities," as well as borderline libelous toward the real-life figures portrayed in it.² The manuscript, held in Willa Muir's archive in St Andrews, remained unpublished and mostly forgotten until Jim Potts, the director of the British Council in Prague in the late 1980s, edited it for publication by Colenso Books in 2023. In his introduction, Potts disagrees with both Allen's and McCulloch's dismissive assessments: "Unlike Edwin Muir, and perhaps the authors just cited, I have read *The Usurpers* with great pleasure a number of times, and regard it as a masterpiece of fiction."³ In the present reviewer's opinion, the novel is neither a masterpiece nor an abject failure, but with the growing popularity of autofiction, many readers are no longer concerned about the strict separation of fiction and autobiography. Willa Muir's novel is worthwhile as a portrait of expatriate life in postwar Czechoslovakia, as well as for its insights into the relationship of Kafka's first translator with the city for whom he has become an inseparable symbol.

Margery Palmer McCulloch's biography of the Muirs devotes relatively little space to the last decade of Willa's life after Edwin's death in January 1959. As she concludes her account, "The Muirs' joint story is a story of Scotland, England, and Europe, at critical points in the history of the twentieth century, a history of spiritual

² Kirsty Allen, *The Life and Work of Willa Muir* (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 1997) 457.

³ Jim Potts, "Introduction," in Willa Muir, *The Usurpers*, ed. Jim Potts (London: Colenso Books, 2023) xiii.

crisis, war, and dispossession. [...] Their story has left an enduring social, political, and artistic record of what it was to live in the twentieth century, and how much it meant to share it with a loving partner." (335) In this manner it complements her earlier book *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts*, whose aim was "to resituate the Scottish revival of the post-1918 period in the context of the Anglophone and European modernism of the early twentieth century, and in the context of how it was perceived by its principal activists in its own time."⁴ Her colleague Roderick Watson and her husband Ian McCulloch should be commended for their efforts in bringing her last project to completion, rather than leaving her notes unpublished in an archive (as a considerable portion of Willa Muir's writing remains to this day). While not as detailed as Kirsty Allen's biography and not as theoretically innovative as Aileen Christianson's analyses,⁵ this monograph will likely remain the definitive joint biography of the Muirs. As the present review has tried to demonstrate, it is particularly valuable in its portrayal of Edwin and Willa Muir not just as Scottish or British writers and translators, but as distinctive figures of European modernism, with their unique relationship to Central Europe and Prague.

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⁴ Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts 1918-1959: Literature, National Identity and Cultural Exchange* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 5.

⁵ Aileen Christianson, *Moving in Circles: Willa Muir's Writings* (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2007).