

# Nan Shepherd

1893 - 1981

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## Biography:

Nan Shepherd (1893 - 1981) : Anna (Nan) Shepherd was born in 1893. She grew up in Aberdeenshire, was educated at Aberdeen High School for Girls, and the University of Aberdeen, and spent most of her life there. After her graduation in 1915, she lectured English literature at Aberdeen College until 1956, when she retired.

Shepherd's work has contributed strongly to the Modernist fiction of Scotland. Her novels, The Quarry Wood and The Weatherhouse are insightful narratives about female self-realisation – appearing well before Grassie Gibbon's famous Sunset Song - dealing with the very real pressures on those who are forced to care for others, or whose love remains unrequited. Shepherd, similar to Wila Muir and Anna Buchan, hints at options of emotional fulfilment outside heterosexual union.

She also wrote the novel A Pass in the Grampians, a volume of poetry called In the Cairngorms, as well as a collection of non-fiction, The Living Mountain.

Shepherd edited the Aberdeen University Review after her retirement, and gave great encouragement and support to other writers. In 1964, she was given an honorary degree from Aberdeen University, and she died in 1981.

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## Contexts:

Nan Shepherd is one of Scotland's foremost novelists of the Modernist period in literature. She is contemporary with James Joyce, DH Lawrence (Lady Chatterley's Lover was first published the same year as Shepherd's first novel), and Virginia Woolf (Orlando was also published that same year). But it is with Lewis Grassie Gibbon, a novelist from the same part of Scotland whose Sunset Song appeared in print four years after The Quarry Wood, that Shepherd is most often compared to.

Shepherd had already begun writing and had in fact published her first novel and was well on the way to completing her second when Virginia Woolf published A Room of One's Own, an essay on the difficulties of a woman writing in a man's world in which Woolf famously asserts that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". Certainly Shepherd had both, thanks to a good education and a teaching position at the Aberdeen College of Education.

This may explain *how* she managed to write – she had a room and income of her own – but she remained a woman writing in a man's world and it is partly due to the sexual politics at work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that her work has been largely eclipsed by Gibbon's. Sunset Song has been a Higher set-text favourite across the country for decades while Shepherd is still relatively unknown, although Canongate re-printed all four volumes of her prose writing in a single anthology (Grampian Quartet) in 1996.

### The Quarry Wood and Sunset Song

Shepherd's first novel is a 'rites of passage' tale of a young girl who goes to stay with her aunt. Set in the north-east it is distinguished by a linguistic vigour and heightened descriptions of place and character that we can recognise in Gibbon's A Scots Quair. But The Quarry Wood presents in Martha a more accurate, realistic and ultimately more optimistic picture of the potential of young womanhood. The difference between Martha and Gibbon's Chris is that one is a female written by a woman, and the other is a female written by a man. It seems hard to believe now, but the reaction to the publication of Sunset Song in the Mearns area of Aberdeenshire where it is set, and in Scotland generally, was one of shame and disgust. The problem – too much sex. And not just sex, but rape, incest, adultery, and plenty of it throughout. The novelist Jessie Kesson, also from that area, even admitted to sneaking it into the lavatory to read where no-one would catch her.

Certainly, Chris Guthrie is a powerful (and, for some readers, an empowering character) but there is always the sense that we are witnessing her growing maturity in a voyeuristic way, rather than experiencing this maturity *with* her. Is this the result of the distance a male writer must inevitably have for a female character? Yet, in its day, many critics praised Gibbon for his ability to occupy so authentically a female perspective.

The Quarry Wood doesn't shirk issues of sex, there's just less of it, and with less (melo)dramatic conflict. In fact Martha embraces the pleasures of sex wholeheartedly – though she does so with the husband of a friend – and we see it as part of the journey she makes within the novel.

But perhaps this is missing the point. A Room of One's Own did more to highlight the social and economic conditions that made writing difficult for women. It led to people asking questions about

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the lack of representation of women in fiction: if women weren't writing – then who was writing about women? Shepherd and Gibbon (and Willa Muir and Naomi Mitchison among a few others) were giving voice to women – strong women, and we're glad that they did, since few others at that time were.

Ultimately, the main difference between Shepherd's character and Gibbon's is in their future. Chris Guthrie in [Sunset Song](#) is yoked to a life on the farm, of domestic drudgery – even though it is she who chooses that path. In contrast, Martha in [The Quarry Wood](#) manages to free herself of the parish and goes off into a brighter, more optimistic future at university and a life of personal freedom

## [The Weatherhouse](#)

Shepherd's second novel is widely regarded as her finest. It is a rich and subtle evocation of rural life, set in the fictitious community of Fetter Rothernie, and on one level deals with the impact of change and modernisation. This theme of transformation is taken to a deeper level, beyond everyday manners and customs and appearances, and begins to address the transforming properties of fiction – and story-telling – itself.

The landscape is transformed too, taken away from its usual role in rural fiction as a scenic backdrop or as a guide to the inner life of particular characters, and becomes something altogether more spiritual. Earth, rock, wind and weather are more than mere 'elements' – of nature, as well as elements of the novel; we come to realise that there is a deep organic – and fluid – connection between this world and the people who inhabit it. In fact they no more inhabit this territory than a mountain does: Shepherd's characters are fundamentally and essentially a *part* of it.

Shepherd asks the important questions: who are we? what are we here for? and seeks to answer them in her own way, through her characters, in a fiction which reaches beyond local circumstances and geography and strives towards a fundamental truth.

## [A Pass in the Grampians](#)

Shepherd's third and final novel – she would write one more prose work, [The Living Mountain](#), a celebration of walking and living in the Cairngorms – returns to the rites of passage genre of [The Quarry Wood](#), and revisits some of the themes explored in [The Weatherhouse](#). It is a novel which explores the classic and eternal dramatic conflicts: transformation and change, youth and age, spirit and substance are reconciled and balanced in the story of Jenny Kilgour

As Jenny grows up on a remote hill farm, she is led to question the harsh but homely qualities of life with her grandfather, in light of the vulgar and glorious energy of Bella Cassie, a local girl who left the community to make a success as a singer, and has now returned to scandalise them all. On one hand you've got the steady, dependable, hard-working virtuousness of the traditional life – symbolised in the cruel but constant landscape of Grampian – and on the other you have a young girl reaching womanhood in a modern age – symbolised by the reckless Bella, who represents the gaudy, heady delights that womanhood and the modern world can offer Jenny.

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## Further Reading

### SLAINTE

Biography and brief intro to Shepherd and her work.  
<http://www.slainte.org.uk/scotauth/shephdsw.htm>

### Association for Scottish Literary Studies

An essay about Sunset Song, but uses Shepherd's Quarry Wood as a point of comparison.  
[http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/NoFrames/Gibbon's\\_Chris2.html](http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/NoFrames/Gibbon's_Chris2.html)

### Canongate

This is on the website of Canongate, publishers of an anthology of Shepherd's novels. This is an extract from The Quarry Wood.  
[http://www.canongate.net/classics/clp.taf?\\_p=e2962](http://www.canongate.net/classics/clp.taf?_p=e2962)

The following websites will be of general interest to the student of Scottish literature:

### Scottish Literary Tour Trust

Featuring an extensive section on the Makars' Literary Tour  
<http://www.scot-lit-tour.co.uk>

### National Library of Scotland

Homepage of the NLS.  
<http://www.nls.uk/>

### Scottish Poetry Library

A very attractively laid out website with information on some of the major poets of the 20th century along with detailed readings of their best-known works.  
<http://www.spl.org.uk/index.html>

### SLAINTE

The name stands for Scottish Librarians Across the Internet. This excellent site features brief, well-written biographies of many of the great Scottish writers.  
<http://www.slainte.org.uk/Scotauth/scauhome.htm>

### Scots Online

From essays to an online dictionary this is a web-based resource with everything you could possibly need to know about the Scots language and how it is used.  
<http://www.scots-online.org/>

### Shudder at the Niffer

An essay in Scots about Scots.  
[http://www.fleimin.demon.co.uk/Bletherskite/Shudder\\_At\\_The\\_Niffer.htm](http://www.fleimin.demon.co.uk/Bletherskite/Shudder_At_The_Niffer.htm)

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## Gaelic & Scottish Connections

A resource on Gaelic language and culture, featuring poetry and essays and an online dictionary.

<http://www.gaelicscottish.com/>

## Electric Scotland

Electric Scotland is a real mixed bag of Scottish paraphernalia with nationalist overtones. This page in particular allows you to hear and read complete Scots poems, from MacDiarmid to Dunbar.

<http://www.electricscotland.com/si/features/scots/complete.htm>

## Literature links

An encyclopaedic web of links to Scots magazines, monuments, libraries and languages.

<http://www.burryan.com/scotland.html> - lit

## Project Gutenberg

This is a web-based publisher of copyright expired books.

<http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/cgi-bin/sdb/t9.cgi/>

## Poetry Archive

A good, user-friendly site, sponsored by a bookseller, which features examples from some of the best poets in the world.

<http://www.poetry-archive.com/>

## Poem Index

Almost 900 poems in the English language from 13th to 19th centuries.

<http://tcsu.trin.cam.ac.uk/~john/pgbev/html-interface/full-index.html>

## Representative Poetry On-line

An enormous and easy to use resource based at the University of Toronto featuring alphabetical and chronological lists of 450 poets with substantial selections of their work.

<http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poet42.html>

## Scottish PEN

The name stands for Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists and exists to promote the friendly co-operation between writers in the interests of freedom of expression throughout the world.

<http://www.scottishpen.org/>

## Writers' Portraits

Photographic and biographical pen portraits of some of Scotland's greatest contemporary writers.

<http://www.nls.uk/writestuff/>

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