

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – The Living Mountain

Reviewer name: Scott Main

Book title: The Living Mountain

Author name: Nan Shepherd

Genre: Scottish Outdoors/Nature Writing/Mysticism

Overall Rating: Excellent

Brief summary: Nan (Anna) Shepherd (11 February 1893 – 23 February 1981, <http://www.slainte.org.uk/CILIPS/publications/scotauth/shephdsw.htm>) was a Scottish novelist and poet who was born and lived most of her life in the Aberdeenshire village of West Cults. She became an early Scottish Modernist writer, producing three stand alone novels set in small, fictional, communities in the north of Scotland. The Scottish landscape and weather played a major role in her novels and were the focus of her poetry. Shepherd was a lecturer of English at the Aberdeen College of Education for most of her working life.

'The Living Mountain' is a non fiction account of her experiences walking in the Cairngorms. It was written in the later years of The Second World War but remained unpublished for over 30 years. It contains exquisitely fine grained descriptions of the natural environment on the plateau of the Cairngorms. The scope extends through geology to water courses, all flora and fauna, and the weather systems which envelop the whole. Indeed, the whole is a key theme because Shepherd conveys a mystical apprehension of a profound unity which lies behind the diverse and amazing phenomena to be encountered whilst out hill walking in the wilds.

There is a great deal of insight to cherish in this work. For example, the point is made that repeat visits to the same locations can serve to intensify rather than limit vision. By concentrating intensely on the particular, one may discern fine tuned principles which are universal. This is marvellous to read in our contemporary culture which remorselessly promotes novelty over originality, the surface over depth. The mystical dimension of Shepherd's writing could be indicated by saying that throughout her observations we share her sense of 'the irradiation of the commonplace'.

A further theme is philosophical. This is about the interpenetration of mind and body to the point of their inseparability. In many passages Shepherd suggests that body is thinking. Such is her heightened awareness of, and response to, the natural world through her senses that we feel the author as a psycho-physical unity blending with her environment. This understanding is captured at a theoretical level in embodied mind theory (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/embodied-cognition/>) an early exponent of which was Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his 1945 work 'The Phenomenology of Perception'. The argument goes that knowledge is 'felt', that our bodies concretely apprehend the world in ways which precede cognition. We do not stand on one side of a chasm, coolly and dispassionately describing the world at a distance in the categories of science. The human body, its aspect of conscious awareness, and the phenomena they encounter are all inextricably entwined. All existence, which includes the human, is inescapably relational. As Shepherd writes: 'The body is not negligible but paramount' and 'Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body'. Contemporary philosophy in this vein is found in the work of Andy Clark at Edinburgh University. Cf. (http://www.amazon.co.uk/Supersizing-Mind-Embodiment-Cognitive-Philosophy/dp/0199773688/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1447416697&sr=8-2&keywords=andy+clark). This is a rich vein of thought which is greatly worth pursuing

What you liked?: Metaphysics in the Scottish landscape.

Who should read this book?: Anyone who relishes the Scottish landscape and ravishing prose description.

Any additional comments?: The edition of 2011, in Canongate Canons, includes an introduction by the academic and travel writer Robert Macfarlane

(<http://www.emma.cam.ac.uk/contact/fellows/?fellow=172>)

Enquire at your local library or consult http://www.amazon.co.uk/Living-Mountain-Celebration-Cairngorm-Mountains/dp/0857861832/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1447408231&sr=8-1&keywords=living+mountain for full bibliographic detail.

160 pages in Canongate

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