Edwin and Willa Muir in Prague: A Biographical Case-Study in Twentieth-Century Archival and Creative Writings

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Abstract
The article investigates questions raised by archival research in relation to documentary and fictionalised writings and assessments of writers and the events of their times. The investigation will be grounded in the correspondence, journals, and creative writing of the Scottish writers Edwin and Willa Muir, with particular consideration given to their residence in Prague immediately after the end of WWII. The examination of Willa Muir's personal journals of the time suggest how external tensions can transform daily reporting of events into creative texts in their own right; while her conscious attempt to convert such experiences into fictional narratives raises artistic questions of distance and impersonality. Edwin Muir's Prague poetry, when placed in the context of archival material, raises questions about the role of the poet and the interpretation and 'ownership' of poetry by critics and readers. In the context of official recording, examination of such personal archival material may suggest the capacity for formal historical records, by their omissions, to simplify or evade difficult truths.

Keywords: collaboration, authoriality, gender, reception, impersonality.

Archives and Personal Identity

Edwin and Willa Muir were both to some extent what Willa, in her Prague journal of 1947 to January 1948, identified as "Displaced Persons". She wrote: "All emigrants are Displaced Persons. My parents were D.P.'s in Angus. So I grew up not fitting into Angus tradition and therefore critical, resentful, unsure"[1]. In adulthood, she attributed her skill with languages (which included the award of a First Class Honours degree in Classics by St Andrews

[1] Willa Muir, Prague Journal 1947-January 1948, MS 38466 5/3, St Andrews University.

University in 1911) to the need, at a very young age, to become trilingual: to learn to speak in the Shetland dialect used at home, the Angus Scots used in the school playground, and the Scottish-English used formally in school. The Orkney-born Edwin Muir had a similar sense of displacement in relation to mainland Scotland, where his parents and two brothers had died within five years of their emigration to the city of Glasgow at the turn of the century. He wrote to his brother-in-law from Menton in May 1927 that, although he to some extent sympathised with C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) in his view that Scotland would be more successful as an independent country, he felt "rather detached, as I've often told Grieve, because after all I'm not Scotch, I'm an Orkney man, a good Scandinavian, and my true country is Norway, or Denmark, or Iceland, or some place like that' (Muir, E. 1974: 64). And as late as 1958, he wrote in the article "Nooks of Scotland", published in the *Listener* in January 1958, that Scotland was "my second country" (Muir, E. 1958: 120). It may be, therefore, that it was this shared sense of displacement in relation to Scotland which not only brought him and his wife together, but also encouraged them to explore Europe in the 1920s, when the success of Edwin's *We Moderns* resulted in a contract with the American *Freeman* magazine and the financial freedom to travel. The first European city they visited was Prague in the newly-born Republic of Czechoslovakia, where they interacted with the Čapek brothers, Karel and Josef, and their theatre circle. Edwin wrote of how Karel Čapek was warmly greeted in the streets by passers-by and how the "warm, easy-going contact" in the town made him "wish that Edinburgh might become a similar place and that Scotland might become a nation again" (Muir, E. 1940: 228): a comment excised from the later, enlarged edition of his autobiography published in 1954. Such warm memories of the newly independent Prague in the early 1920s lay behind their hopes of helping the city to recover from Nazi occupation when they returned to work with the British Council, immediately after the end of World War Two.

Edwin Muir wrote in his autobiography that "My marriage was the most fortunate event in my life" (Muir, E. 1954: 154), and the perception of a shy, unassertive man and writer supported and protected by a stronger, more confident wife is one that

conditions most accounts of their relationship. For the critic Peter Butter (1990: 59), Willa Muir's "greatest work, I think she would gladly agree, was to make possible the production of [Edwin's] poetry". Wyndham Lewis characterises them less kindly in his satirical *Apes of God* (1930), while a cartoon by Barbara Niven, commissioned by Hugh MacDiarmid and published in the September-November issue of his magazine *Voice of Scotland* in 1938, shows a tiny lamb-like Edwin sheltering against an enormous, seated Willa. It is in such cases that archival research, and especially correspondence and journal material, can overturn apparently rigid perceptions. It is probably the case that Willa Muir was instrumental in persuading her new husband to resign from his Glasgow office employment and set up home with her in London, where she already had a teaching post: having experienced joblessness and poverty in the former second city of the Empire, giving up a modest but secure income would not have been an easy decision for him. However, Edwin's letters, as well as his actions, show that despite his soft Orkney voice and retiring manner, he had a firm sense of himself and what he wanted to be able to do in his life. With poor schooling from his time in Orkney, and no schooling in Glasgow, he educated himself through membership of left-wing organisations such as the Clarion Scouts and by reading *The New Age* journal, edited by A. R. Orage, together with poetry in translation by Goethe and Heine. He found the courage to write to Orage at a low point in his life, asking for advice, and he eventually became a contributor himself to *The New Age* where his *We Moderns* appeared as a series of articles before its publication as a book in London in 1918. His published autobiographical writings and his correspondence show that Muir was a committed autodidact, with a strong sense of what kind of achievement he wished eventually to attain. That achievement was a literary one – specifically, to be a poet. It is the correspondence in particular, however, that shows his awareness of the journey ahead of him in relation to poetry.

One of the most important archival sources for understanding "the growth of a poet's mind" in relation to Edwin Muir is his interwar correspondence with Sydney Schiff (who wrote under the name of Stephen Hudson). In this period, much of Muir's income derived from literary reviewing, and when sent a book by someone

named Stephen Hudson, he had initially thought that this was a young, upcoming writer. His discovery that Hudson – or in reality Schiff – was a much older man, wealthy, experienced, well-known in London and European society, and with several books already published, eventually led to a warm and open correspondence in which it seems that, for Muir, Schiff became a kind of father figure, a trusted relation or close friend with whom he could express his thoughts openly. In this correspondence we watch Muir maturing as a critic of modernist literature as well as working at his own development as a poet: arguing out his responses to the modernist writers included in his 1926 collection of essays, *Transition*; finding ways to communicate his admiring responses to Virginia's Woolf fiction and especially her *Mrs Dalloway*; struggling with D. H. Lawrence, and sometimes with Joyce, although persuaded in the end by the power of Joyce's writing and his own belief that the mythic element in Joyce's fiction derived from folk culture; finding T. S. Eliot at this point more powerful as a critic than a poet. Muir wrote in his introductory chapter to the published *Transition*, "The Zeit Geist", that the significant artist was one who struggled with a new age as opposed to rejecting it or attempting to escape from it into the past, and what Muir's Schiff correspondence conveys is his own attempt to do this in his criticism and essay writing, as well as in his less easily-resolved struggle with his own poetry. In recent times, awareness of Muir's literary criticism of the modernist period seems to have been displaced by a focus on his Scottish critical writings. The correspondence with Schiff, in contrast, uncovers the extent of his critical involvement with emerging writers who are now considered to be leading figures in English-language modernism, and makes a case for the rediscovery of this early Muir work. This correspondence also exposes Muir's realisation that his own poetry, despite occasional publication in journals and in a few selected collections, is not yet achieving what he considers he is capable of writing. He wrote in his autobiography that when he began to write poetry during his first stay in Europe, he had "no technique by which I could give expression to it. There were the rhythms of English poetry on the one hand, the images in my mind on the other. All I could do at the start was to force the one, creaking and complaining, into the mould of the other" (Muir, E. 1954: 205). The interest and

importance of the Schiff correspondence is that it documents not only the poet's struggle with his craft, and his wider development as critic and fiction writer, but also his holding to that inner belief that it is poetry that will be his final destination as a writer.

However, when Willa Muir is encountered via her own unpublished writings as opposed to public perception, a contrary scenario unfolds. This does not apply to archival correspondence (as in Edwin's case), for in her letters to friends and acquaintances Willa most often employs a dramatic style of writing and a persona which becomes a performance in itself, bringing together a variety of topics which then become part of the same performance. In the mid-1920s, for example, she writes to a friend who had expressed concern about not hearing from her:

> I have not been able to write to anybody for some time, & I had visions of wrathful friends. We have had a trying time – you will realise why, when I tell you that shortly after I came home I proceeded to have a bad miscarriage – think of it! I had no idea that I was pregnant (I thought I had got a chill & when I was sick I thought it was caused by lumbago) [. . .]. My old essay has fallen flat. [. . .] *The Nation* said it was as unexciting as boiled rice. [. . .] However – I shall launch bombs next time![2]

On the other hand, and as opposed to the prevalent dramatic and confident tone of her correspondence, Willa's inner thoughts and private persona are communicated in her unpublished journal writings (sometimes in the form of poetry) and in her unpublished longer fiction where invented characters play out scenarios closely related to those experienced in her own life. What is most often found there is not the confident persona who seemed to others to play the dominant role in the Muirs' married life, as well as in their public interaction with acquaintances, but a deeply insecure woman, troubled about her appearance and her sense of being an outsider; worried that her husband might fall out of love with her; confident only in her capacity, through her linguistic skills, to be the leading partner in the translation work which became a main source of their income in the interwar period. At a particularly low point

[2] MS 26194, 98, National Library of Scotland. Quoted also in Palmer McCulloch 2004: 201.

of her life as a result of illness, and angry and distressed that this one attribute about which she felt confident was not recognised, she wrote in her journal:

> 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[3].

Yet even the translation work, at which she was so competent, seems not to have been without its negative elements. The Muirs were the first to translate Kafka into English, with *The Castle*, published by Martin Secker, appearing in 1930. Willa's unpublished novel *Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey*, written in the later 1930s, is a thinly-disguised autobiographical fiction about a married couple living in London who make their living from translation as well as creative writing (including the translation of an author called "Garta"). While this unpublished fiction documents the daily difficulties of its female protagonist who has to organise the affairs of the household downstairs while her husband escapes to the security of his study in the top storey, it also communicates the impact of her translation work on her nervous system:

> It was true that Garta's work seemed to come straight out of the region which evoked dreams and nightmares. He showed an uncanny skill in describing the twists and turns of frustrated feelings; merely to read him was like having an anxiety dream by proxy. And every incident in his stories, almost every phrase, carried so many implications that the translation had to be done slowly, with extreme care. Yes, Garta is making me fearful, decided Alison Muttoe, opening her jotter[4].

In recent years, there has been a recognition, encouraged by feminist criticism, that Willa Muir contributed a much larger share of the

[3] Willa Muir, Journal Jan. 1951-September 1953, 20 Aug. 1953, MS 38466 5/5, St Andrews University.
[4] Willa Muir, "Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey", MS 38466, 2/1, St Andrews University.

Muirs' translation work than was acknowledged in their own time. This is also an area where archival research has a part to play, for it is clear from Edwin's letters to various correspondents, together with Willa's own correspondence with publishers and comments in her journals, that she was often occupied with translation work while Edwin was writing reviews or working on his own creative writing. His reviewing and other critical work was, of course, equally important with the translation activity in providing an income, but it also enhanced his reputation as a literary man, and no doubt helped his own poetry towards publication. It is unfortunate that Willa's contribution via translation did not have a similar public recognition.

Archives and Public Affairs

An important change in the Muirs' domestic and employment circumstances, and in the archival material which tells its own story of their lives, came with the end of World War Two and Edwin's posting to Prague as Director of the British Council Institute in the city. The outbreak of war in 1939 had previously brought an end to their regular translation from German-language literature, and the economic difficulties which arose as a result of this loss had been eased by Edwin's appointment to organise lectures and entertainments on behalf of the British Council for the many Foreign Houses established in Edinburgh during the war. His success in this position led to his post-war British Council appointment in Prague. Edwin departed first, having been commissioned, along with a colleague, to drive a car across Europe to Prague for the use of the British Council Representative; Willa followed later in a converted Dakota. Edwin had kept a diary in the dark years immediately before the outbreak of war in 1939, when Hermann Broch, whose novels he and Willa had translated, came to stay with them in St Andrews as a refugee from Austria and told them of the harassment of the Jews in Vienna by the Nazis. The hopelessness Muir felt at that time is starkly communicated in his abrupt, evocative diary sentences:

> The Munich days have come and gone. Hermann has left for America. [. . .] Yesterday Hitler marched into Prague, and he is installed now in

the Hradčany. The Prague policemen keeping order with tears running down their cheeks [. . .] Women weeping in Prague. Many suicides, mostly among the Jews, who are being driven out from there too[5].

With his happy memories of his first discovery of Karel Čapek's Prague in the 1920s, and wartime news stories about the Nazis in Prague in his imagination, he initially found it difficult to respond to the post-war Prague which now awaited him. He wrote later in his autobiography: "During my first few weeks in Prague 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" (Muir, E. 1954: 255).

Muir's new post with the British Council, alongside the teaching he was invited to do at Prague's Charles University, did not leave much time for keeping a journal; and it would appear from the number of poems he wrote during that period that he preferred in any case to keep what free time he had for poetry. The main source of archival reporting during this period is therefore to be found in Willa's journals. Her first Prague journal, headed "Prague Nov. 1946-47", begins about a year after their arrival in the city, and first impressions are therefore obtained more readily from her later published memoir *Belonging* and, less specifically, from Edwin's autobiography (as quoted above). She finds that the centre of the city "looked much the same", although in contrast "the one-time noisy, bustling cheerful people were warily silent, looking pasty-faced and ill-fed, with not a smile among them" (Muir, W. 1968: 214). Accommodation was a problem, with the British Council Institute "crammed into a small three-room flat" and personal living space scarce. In time the British Council was given the use of the Kaunic Palace, "a small pretty palace in a narrow street behind and parallel to the Václavské Namesti" [Wenceslas Square], and the Muirs were allocated a flat in a quiet street close to the Russian Embassy, and beside the wooded Stromovka public park, at one time known as "The Royal Hunting Forest" (Muir, W. 1968: 214). Willa's first Prague journal begins with measurements which seem to relate to kitchen curtains – "Kitchen. (70 broad - 4 1/2 metres)

[5] Edwin Muir, Diary 1937-39, MS 19668, National Library of Scotland.

5 metres needed for window, if 70 broad (doubled)"[6] – and so perhaps denotes a more settled accommodation situation. What is communicated initially in this journal, on the other hand, is a sense of personal insecurity which in later stages of the journal and more strongly in subsequent journals merges with a wider sense of public and political insecurity. Much of the personal communication in this first journal is realised through descriptions of strange dreams or in verse form: for example, a poem titled "Wartime Old Style", where "our tigers [which] were happy at home" have unexpectedly been released to range more widely and wildly; or enigmatic comments about her husband: "Edwin – a document indecipherable even for home reading"; and a poem "Metamorphosis" in which she sees him changed, "disguised with large and horn-rimmed glasses", as he leaves for his new life of teaching duties at Charles University in addition to his Institute work[7]: a life in which she has no official part. Alongside such seeming personal insecurities, there are reports of comments by Czech acquaintances as to the state of their country: "in a state of spiritual malaise [. . .] a nation of Schweiks, at least, all those over 40 [. . .] Czechs and Moravians would be better off without the Slovaks [. . .] Czechs are more kin to Russians than to West. Slower than West"[8]. One acquaintance comments that people in the country "refuse to see or intervene when anything is wrong", finding this an old trait which might well derive from earlier Austrian rule; and that now, after seven years of the Gestapo, "people would look the other way even if murder were done in the streets"[9].

In Willa's second Journal, "1947 – January 1948", comments begin to appear which relate more specifically to politics: a warning from a friend about secret police activity and to be careful about what one writes in letters apart from Council bag letters; her own speculation as she and Edwin watch the children playing in the Stromovka park that "the Russians are playing politics much as

[6] Willa Muir, Journal. Prague. November 1946-June 1947. MS 38466/5/2, St Andrews University.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*

they play chess: a move here, a move there, all over the world"[10] (a comment that on the surface does not obviously appear to be related to her previous remark about how only German children would have been allowed to play in the Stromovka during the occupation, and yet seems somehow ideologically connected). In October 1947, she writes: "I am in a queerly apprehensive state, and a gun went off just now (4 p.m.) and made me jump. Probably only nerves"[11]. In November, a Czech friend who works for the government as a liaison officer is arrested, "charged with espionage on behalf of a foreign power", and there are reports of others "belonging to some Anglophile 'British Society'" having been arrested also[12]. Alongside this increasing sense of insecurity in relation to the development of state politics in Czechoslovakia, there is a subplot played out in relation to insecurity and bad relationships within the British Council community itself: suspicion on the part of recently appointed senior staff in relation to existing locally-appointed Czech workers, and hostility to the egalitarian basis on which the outreach work of the Council Institute is conducted. Such tensions were no doubt exacerbated or even at times initiated by the political climate developing in the host country.

Tensions come to a head in Willa's journal of January 1948 to May 1948, titled "The Putsch, and after". The journal begins, as in previous journals, with a mixture of personal information, anxiety dreams, a poem, Institute problems, and successes such as the much appreciated visit of the writer Elizabeth Bowen as speaker at the one of the Institute's literary evenings. Here we also find another of those passing comments which support Willa's case to be recognised the main actor in the Muirs' translation partnership, and especially in their Kafka translations. On 13 December in the previous journal, in the midst of some family sickness, she had written, without elaboration, "I must finish this translation"[13]; now, after writing of the enjoyment of her meeting with Elizabeth Bowen, she chides herself: "This is Thursday –

[10] Willa Muir, Journal. Prague. 1947 – January 1948. MS 38466 5/3, St Andrews University.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.*

tonight I am tired & have been reading Stella Benson's life (Ellen Roberts) instead of translating!"[14] As the final Kafka translation under the Muirs' joint names, *The Penal Settlement, Tales and Short Pieces* was published by Martin Secker and the American publisher Schocken in 1948, it is most probable that it was this work that she was referring to in her journal comments, and she would appear to have been solely responsible for it. The strain Willa was labouring under at this time is given expression in a dream about her unhappy childhood in Montrose and the family difficulties she experienced there: "I realised how much I feared and loathed that house [. . .] too many dead people have been carried out of it"; and also in a humorous but ironic poem "Fever Train" in which she compares the train puffing through the snow to her own tiredness: "You need cough syrup/To stop your choking/I need fuel/Yes, I need stoking"[15].

The most outstanding section of this final Prague journal is the account of The February Putsch itself, something which cannot be communicated satisfactorily at second hand but needs to be read in its totality as composed and laid out on the page by its writer. It begins with the heading "Attempted Putsch (premature?)", followed by the comment "written Tuesday 24 Feb.". There then follows a taut, dramatic list of the events which eventually led to the takeover of the Czech government by its Communist faction, occasionally accompanied by brief personal comments as in the opening 19th and 20th February items: "19th Thurs. – 'Winter' Programme – Bronchitis" and "20th Friday – Bed – '12 Ministers Resigned' Brit. Wireless"; or by information or opinion from Polaková the maid, who becomes a kind of reporter from the morning milk front in the account: "They shouldn't have resigned. One shouldn't give up an inch"[16]. Event follows event quickly after the resignations, and the sense of an unstoppable movement is conveyed by the way these incidents are starkly listed on the page, one after the other, and without any attempt to comment upon them or put them into a historical or intellectual context. On

[14] Willa Muir, Journal. January 1948 – May 1948. "The Putsch, and after". MS 38466 5/4.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*

Sunday 22nd a token strike is called and on the 23rd police raid the premises of the National Socialists and announce a plot against the State: "police everywhere with rifles – ministries, banks etc. No one to leave country without Wosek's permission. 24th Tuesday: Police raided Social Democrats. [. . .] Some liveliness in Václavské Namesti at night, after 6 o'clock. Demonstrations and slogans". On Wednesday the maid Polaková comes back from buying the milk with the news that "high officials" in various ministries, including the Ministry of Justice, have been arrested. There are no newspapers apart from the Communist papers and one Social Democrat paper, and she reports "more indignation about the stopped newspapers than about anything else so far!" Willa goes on to comment: "This is therefore the day on which people will waken up to realise that the Putsch is here"[17].

There is then a kind of interregnum where the diary recounts seeming attempts to recover the political situation: a Committee of Action group puts up notices; there is an appeal for a reconstruction of the government, bringing about a "National Front of Unity"; a newly-formed National Defence committee also puts up notices intimating that this is a "political" crisis and that the army "stands at the disposal of the President"[18]. Students continue to demonstrate. But the outcome seems inevitable, as Polaková reports that senior ministers are being dismissed from their posts and forcibly removed from their offices, including the Minister of Justice. Then comes the announcement that the ageing and unwell President Beneš has accepted the new government. A student is killed and several wounded in an attempt to meet with the President; non-Communists are removed from offices and schools, and from university posts; foreigners begin to make arrangements to leave if they can, and finally the journal gives the news on Wednesday 10 March that the former foreign minister Jan Masaryk would appear to have committed suicide by falling from the window of his former ministry. Masaryk, who was the son of the first President of the new Republic of Czechoslovakia, had visited President Beneš on "Masaryk Day", the day which celebrated the life of his father. Now, on the day that the Czech Parliament was due to meet under its new

[17] *Ibid.*
[18] *Ibid.*

Communist government, he was dead. Willa reports comments on the BBC which suggested that "he gave his life for his country". And she asks: "What will happen?"[19]

The Muirs themselves eventually decided that they could no longer do any useful work in Czechoslovakia and returned to Britain, with a subsequent transfer to a post with the British Council in Rome. Both, however, left significant records of their experience of post-war Prague in their respective writings: Willa in her journals and in an unpublished novel titled *The Usurpers*, and Edwin in his poetry collection *The Labyrinth*, published in 1949. In a comment in her memoir *Belonging* about Edwin's first novel *The Marionette*, Willa writes that while Edwin transmuted personal memories and emotions into symbols in his creative writing, her own fiction relied on what she called "the empathy of personal feelings and memories" (Muir. W. 1968: 126). This personal empathy towards the people and situations encountered in post-war Prague is a quality which contributes greatly to the interest and power of her journals, especially in the final "Putsch" journal where it interacts successfully with her capacity for clarity in recording and her creative language skills. This approach worked well also in her first novel *Imagined Corners*, begun in Menton in 1925, but not finished and published until 1932 as a result of the pressures of translating for a living and the birth of her son in 1927. This early work drew on her experiences as a young university graduate and wife, and by the mid-1920s her life in Europe was sufficiently different from her past memories to allow it to be dealt with at a distance. She was less successful, however, when she applied the same empathetic and emotional approach in her unpublished *Mrs Muttoe and the Top Storey*, referred to earlier, which followed too closely her present everyday life as a harassed wife and mother as well as translator. In her Prague journals also, there are times when she appears to be involving herself too closely and emotionally with the internal difficulties of Institute staff and their families. This emotional empathy was also problematical when she decided to write a novel based on her and Edwin's experiences in Prague in the late 1940s (*The*

[19] *Ibid.*

Usurpers) with particular attention given to the internal politics of the British Council and its Institute. In addition, her attempt to disguise setting and characters through changes of names and places was artificially clumsy and unconvincing. The book was never published, although offered to more than one publisher, and Edwin did not support the idea of its publication. In contrast, her emotional responses to the external tensions of the time – emotions both personal to her own situation and those relating to the community to which she now felt committed – raise much of her journal writing, including a number of the poems included and especially her recording of events leading up to the February Putsch, to the status of creative texts.

Edwin's artistic response to the events in Prague was very different in nature. In the 1920s, as he struggled to come to terms with his own transplantation from pre-industrial Orkney to industrialised Glasgow, he had been much influenced by Eliot's insistence on the impersonality of art, on the necessary distance between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Eliot 1951: 18). Like Eliot also, although less successfully, he had communicated his themes in his early poetry through metaphor and symbol, as opposed to realistically, and this was a practice that he continued in his mature poetry of the 1940s and 1950s. Muir had also since his early days been interested in Greek myth. In *We Moderns* he had argued against realism in art, writing that the Greeks "did not aim at the reproduction but the interpretation of life [. . .] a symbolizing of the deepest questions and enigmas of life" (Muir, E. 1918: 15-16). Greek myth was also of interest to him in that it shared with Scottish Calvinism a belief that human actions were predestined and determined by the will of the Gods: a restrictive ideology which he came increasingly to recognise in communism as it had developed in Stalin's Russia and which he was now experiencing in post-war Prague.

The title poem of his 1949 collection *The Labyrinth* is an important example of Muir's use of Greek myth in his Prague poetry. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur is not retold in any detail, but is used referentially through the poem's title and occasional words and phrases: "Since I emerged that day from the labyrinth"; "the bull [. . .] dead on the straw" (Muir 1991: 157). The poem opens with what Muir described in a broadcast as "a very long sentence, deliberately

labyrinthine, to give the mood"[20]. The meaning of this sentence of thirty-five lines is continually obscured by complex syntax and parenthetical comments. Its imagery of "deceiving streets/That meet and part and meet, and rooms that open/Into each other – and never a final room" (Muir 1991: 158) might remind a reader of K's continually frustrated attempts to reach the Castle in Kafka's novel, but nothing is specifically related. The overwhelming experience communicated is of loss, confinement, despair: "no exit, none,/No place to come to, and you'll end up where you are,/Deep in the centre of the endless maze". (Muir 1991: 158). The *imagiste* poem "The Helmet", although not drawing on the myths of Greece, uses a similarly symbolic and hermetic approach to communicate the loss of human identity and feeling as a result of war, its regularly rhyming, predominantly iambic four-line verses reinforcing the sense of isolation and entrapment: "The helmet on his head/Has melted flesh and bone/And forged a mask instead/That always is alone" (Muir 1991: 168).

Conclusion

This discussion has attempted to suggest both the importance and the possible pitfalls of archival research in relation to biographical writing, and to show the achievement of both Edwin and Willa Muir through the different ways in which their writings responded to and communicated their experience of Prague in the immediate post-World War Two period. Edwin Muir's Prague poetry also raises questions concerning the interpretation and "ownership" of poetry (or any other individual art form) once it leaves the author's mind and hand and moves into the public sphere. Muir himself was no disciple of the New Criticism which developed in response to the supposed "difficulty" of early twentieth-century modernist poetry such as that of Eliot or Pound. He wrote in "A View of Poetry" that although New Criticism had "many virtues [. . .] I cannot read it myself [. . .] without a feeling that I am being shut in with the critic and the poem [. . .] knowing that I shall not get away until all three of us are exhausted" (Muir 1965: 231-2). At the opposite end of the

[20] Edwin Muir, BBC broadcast 3 September 1952 (quoted by Butter in Muir 1990: 339-40).

interpretive spectrum is the biographical approach, much aided by research in personal archives, where interpretations are arrived at through application of the known facts of the poet or artist's life. This is the approach adopted by Peter Butter in both *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet*, published in 1966, and his 1991 edition of Muir's *Complete Poems*. Although he admits that an autobiographical approach may be too limiting, for Butter Muir's "Labyrinth" poem "deals with Muir's state of alienation in his Glasgow years, his escape from it and his later efforts to reconcile two apparently contradictory conceptions of human life". The maze image which "swept me smoothly to its enemy,/The lovely world" in Butter's life-writing interpretation "corresponds to the time of Muir's marriage and his recovery of a sense of vivid contact with nature on the Continent afterwards" (Butter, 1966: 216-17). The success of Muir's own 1940 autobiography, *The Story and the Fable*, and its extended version *An Autobiography* (published 1954), has to a significant extent encouraged such an approach, but it is one that privileges the story of the life over the work's aesthetic and intellectual qualities, while ignoring also Muir's own insistence on the impersonality of art; as such, I would suggest that this approach distorts both the reading of the poetry and the assessment of its achievement. It is ironic that Eliot, Muir's critical mentor in relation to impersonality in art, is himself now in danger of being similarly subject to biographical interpretation, as editions of his letters and other personal archival material increasingly enter the public domain. Due to such archival material, *The Waste Land* may in future be read not as an outstanding example of an enigmatic high modernism in poetry, but as the story of a misguided and unhappy marriage.

A provocative footnote to this account of the Muirs' Prague material, and the positives and negatives of archival research, relates to my own experience of attempting to access a British Council report dealing with British Institutes in Prague, Brno, and Bratislava in the immediate post-World War Two period – only to discover that an embargo of eighty-two years had been placed on the release of this particular document, thus making it unavailable to the public until 2033. On my making a Freedom of Information application, which was initially refused, it was disclosed that the embargo was not because of the Cold War and continuing political tensions with the Soviet Union – which I had thought might be the case – but

because the document also dealt with sensitive personal matters concerning staff members of the various Institutes at that time. After two appeals on my part, based around my argument that the British Council had a historic duty to make available their witness to the events of that significant international period, it has, at the time of writing, very recently been agreed that the document can be released to me in a redacted form which will protect personal matters and identities. While there has therefore not yet been an opportunity to compare this official resource with the information previously uncovered through personal archival material, such difficulties of access might suggest that archival research relating to official historical records should be approached with a degree of caution – since, by their selective embargo or deletions, such records may simplify or evade uncomfortable historical truths.

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