

Refocusing the Kaleidoscope: The Protagonists Who Illuminate Mollie Hunter's Journey

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Abstract

An exploration of eclectic titles by renowned Scottish author Mollie Hunter led to the publication of “A Voyage of Discovery: Exploring a Kaleidoscope of Religion and Culture in the Writings of Mollie Hunter,” *Adventures, Fantasy and Dreams in Children's Literature*.¹ The titles examined crossed genre and generations, but were bound by a common thread.

A revelation of literary and personal significance was unearthed during that investigation: Ms Hunter and her protagonists were engaged in parallel spiritual journeys, each seeking a meaningful relationship with God. This epiphany was an illumination for Mollie Hunter who had declared God dead when her beloved father succumbed to war injuries in 1931. This insight provided the impetus to refocus the kaleidoscope and broaden the lens to include philosophy, personal correspondence and conversations with Ms Hunter. Titles were carefully selected to reflect the genres in which she has published: non-fiction, fiction, fantasy, historical fiction and folklore. The query continued the consideration of the analogous quests of the author and the characters about whom she writes.

The Author

Once upon a time...is there a more evocative invitation into a world of possibilities? So it was that once upon a time, a very long time ago a wee Scottish lassie was born into a family long awaiting a male heir. The tiny girl became the favored child of her beloved father and stood at the center of the universe basking in his approval. Life was exuberant for young Mollie; she was adored and safe; she was the favored bairn and had a special place “in the sun”. Her father encouraged her writing and lively spirit. Mollie was thus assured that she would live happily forever after.... In her ninth year, the fairytale ended abruptly with the arrival of a black limousine. “Times’ winged chariots” took the father who was her god, and on that day God died. And so the journey began...

In the spring of 2009, an epiphany of staggering importance emerged from the research for “A Voyage of Discovery: Exploring a Kaleidoscope of Religion and Culture in the Writings of Mollie Hunter.” The work was blessed by Mollie, and although she was not actively

¹ Cooper, Susan, “A Voyage of Discovery: Exploring a Kaleidoscope of Religion and Culture in Writings of Mollie Hunter,” in *Adventures, Fantasy, and Dreams in Children's Literature*, ed. By McConnell-Farmer, Judith Lynne (Chicago (USA), Cambridge (UK), New York (USA): Linton Atlantic Books, Ltd., 2010): 43 – 55.

participating, she was involved in reading and responding to the drafts. After months of coding content for corroborating passages, it became extraordinarily evident that Mollie Hunter's conviction that talent alone could not make a writer was poignantly demonstrated in the selected titles; the works dramatically pointed to the person behind the writing.²

It was with trepidation that I revealed to Ms Hunter the insight gained from exploring her writing through a complex, ever evolving kaleidoscope. The spiritual journey embarked upon by Coll, the young crippled orphan challenging invading Roman soldiers in the Carnegie Award winning title, *The Stronghold*³ paralleled that of Martin Crawford, the soldier/scholar serving Robert the Bruce during Scotland's thirty-year war through the pages of *The King's Swift Rider*.⁴ It was, however, the journey undertaken by Bridie McShane, Ms Hunter's pseudonym for the protagonist in *The Sound of Chariots*, (the 1992 Phoenix Award recipient)⁵ and Bridie's continuing odyssey in *Hold On To Love*,⁶ that illuminated the fact that Mollie Hunter and her protagonists were synonymous.

Mollie Hunter was Coll, questioning the fallibility of organized religion in first century Scotland; she was the intellect seeking spiritual solace in *The King's Swift Rider*. The writer, Bridie McShane, who was denying, challenging and bargaining with the very God she claimed was dead, was and is Mollie Hunter. For almost eight decades Ms Hunter has declared that God died on the day that her beloved father was taken from her, yet every book has served as a vehicle for her spiritual quest.

The 1975 May Hill Arbuthnot lecture, "Talent Is Not Enough," was not merely a philosophical discussion of Mollie Hunter's belief that "in a writer's life comes the situation where he or she is faced with all the implications of his own personality in relation to past events and future possibilities," it was a declaration of the instrument she has employed on her quest for God.⁷ When presented with the insight my kaleidoscope had provided, Mollie initially expressed surprise, followed by affirmation. That conversation with Mollie was concluded with her words of encouragement. And so I am continuing the commission to illuminate the work of a Scottish national treasure through a refocused lens.

² Hunter, Mollie, *Talent Is Not Enough* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

³ Hunter, Mollie, *The Stronghold* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁴ Hunter, Mollie, *The King's Swift Rider* (New York: Harper & Row, 2000).

⁵ Hunter, Mollie, *The Sound of Chariots* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

⁶ Hunter, Mollie, *Hold On To Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

⁷ Hunter, Mollie, "May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture," *Talent Is Not Enough* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 4 – 30.

The Friend

It is as difficult to separate Mollie Hunter's writing from the friend as it is to delineate religion, culture and philosophy in her works; the tapestry is so interwoven that it is virtually impossible to disconnect the author from her life, culture, philosophy and spiritual journey. Ms Hunter has acknowledged that she "lives each story to the point of being transferred to a different time and place". She has frequently become so immersed in the writing that she has become oblivious to all else; she was imprisoned the Castle of Lochleven as the young Mary Queen of Scots,⁸ walked the Highlands as Cat McPhie and her family of tinkers,⁹ and has given voice to her environmental causes as young Donald in *The Walking Stones*.¹⁰ Mollie Hunter embodies the hero she defines in "A Need for Heroes".¹¹ She has admitted that the past is like a country she has come to know. Mollie Hunter has literary walked the terrain and relived the journeys of her protagonists. Her husband grew weary of coaxing her back into the twentieth century, and was too frequently perplexed when she stared at him with question and asked his name. It was to this point that a family rule was established: Mollie had to suspend writing each day prior to Mike's arrival home.

Sojourning the past while living in the present, framing modern fiction with ancient Scottish folklore, and piecing the patterns of the spiritual fabric of the culture are defining elements of her life and her writing. Ms Hunter's conversations and books are permeated with references to the supernatural, the long history of strife in her beloved country, the complex culture of a nation long held subject to their southern neighbor. Philosophically her writings resonate with a voice of compassion for the underdog, empathy for the misunderstood and illumination that allows the readers to vicariously experience centuries of Scottish history, lore and religion. Mollie has acknowledged that each book can be traced to an incident within her life. And so it is that Mollie Hunter provides her readers a glimpse into the religions, cultures and philosophies that have formed Scotland and the author.

Mollie Hunter's assurance that out of tragedy truth can emerge, out of pain strength may be realized and that the choice is ours, leads the reader to examine her work through a kaleidoscope that redefines the journey with each turn. The events and the characters are as complex and elusive as the writer; there are no definitive patterns to the ever present spiritual, cultural and philosophical elements. The ongoing wonder of what may emerge with the next turn of the kaleidoscope is an apt analogy; the pieces may appear broken and scattered, but the refocus on how they appear when connected, reflects the growth and the hope.

Selecting titles to explore was a daunting task; the body of work is voluminous, diverse and intriguing. A question evolved from the initial study: are all of the works autobiographical?

⁸ Hunter, Mollie, *You Never Knew Her As I Did* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

⁹ Hunter, Mollie, *Cat Herself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

¹⁰ Hunter, Mollie, *The Walking Stones* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

¹¹ Hunter, Mollie, *The Pied Piper Syndrome* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992): 59 – 74.

With this query parameters were set that necessitated looking across genres: Historical fiction, fantasy/folklore, and non-fiction were chosen. They are representative of the work produced by this prolific writer, span decades of the cultural and religious history and of Ms. Hunter's life.

The Trip

Mollie Hunter's passion for the history that frames Scotland in the twentieth-first century first became apparent to this researcher during a visit to the author's home in 1995. A group of American library students trekked to Britain to further investigate Celtic Lore. Three days with the author was part of the scheduled itinerary, and included the students first meeting Ms Hunter in a small coastal village. What ensued was a rare, first-hand opportunity to live the lore.

Mollie boarded the coach to identify landmarks and provide context. Within a few moments, the students were directed to peer out of the left windows at the dramatic coast. It was there, in 1956, that the last mermaid sighting had occurred. The women and children gathering seaweed saw the sea creature, but as she was struck with a pebble thrown by one of the wee lads, the mermaid slipped into the sea, never to return. It was from this event, and Ms Hunter's insatiable interest in sea lore, that *The Mermaid Summer* evolved.¹² When challenged by a doubting American student about the authenticity of the tale, Mollie merely asked if she was being called a liar, and continued to relate the history of Scotland.

The religion of the people was Druid until about 565 A.D. when Columba, an Irish missionary arrived in Scotland. Legend says that Columba cured the king of a fatal illness by giving him a healing stone, and thus converted much of Scotland to Christianity. It was Saint Columba who first mentioned the Loch Ness Monster. He sent a young monk into the loch to retrieve a boat and the monster appeared; Saint Columba demanded that the monster retreat "in the name of God."

The difference between the folklore of the lowlands and the highlands was explained by the influence of the Protestant Reformation in the south; the fear of hell and the delineation between good and evil became much more pronounced in the lowlands. As a result, the lore is foreboding and dark. The Reformation was a tremendous boost to literacy throughout Scotland, all sought to read the Christian Bible.

Ms Hunter pointed to the factors that shaped the folklore: climate, terrain, religion, economics and politics. The Scots became self-reliant with a reputation for bravery. It was a culture that greatly admired beauty and physical strength. .

The students were directed to look at a large, rounded mound of earth, a fairy hill, and with the direction came a tale. In the summer of 1715, two young pipers were walking toward their

¹² Hunter, Mollie, *Mermaid Summer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

village when they were invited by an elderly gentleman to accompany him. The old man led them to a large earthen mound which had a bright green door in the side. The fellow opened the door and encouraged the pipers to enter. Once inside the hollow mound, the pipers were asked to play, and so they did; they played throughout the night for a group of merry dancers. When they left the next morning, they headed back toward their village, but when they arrived nothing looked familiar. They did not recognize anyone or any of the establishments. Soon their queries led to their arrests; the sheriff believed that they must be intoxicated. He took the gold they had earned for playing their pipes, and took them before the judge. The judge called for the clergy to pray for the lads, and then he released them. The sheriff returned their gold, but it turned to dust the instant it touched their hands. The sheriff handed them papers declaring that they free to go; the date was exactly one hundred years from the time they entered the earthen mound. Ms Hunter proclaimed that fairy encounters continued to be reported events in the Highlands.

Mollie continued to share highland lore. She told the story of King Conifer and his very big dog. The dog was fast and skilled, but there came a time when the big dog grew too old to hunt; the king decided that the only kind thing to do was to kill his dog. A wise woman told the king that the “day of the dog was yet to come, and that he must not kill him”. Shortly after that the big dog again joined the king and his hunting party. The big dog ran briskly, as though he were a pup. A wild boar charged the King but the big dog attacked, saving the King, but losing his life in the process. The King had a boar’s head placed on his shield and buried it next to his big dog.

The final stop was Mollie’s home, the lovely Sheiling, overlooking the Loch Ness. Sheiling is Scottish Gaelic for huts; they were constructed throughout the highlands for the young girls tending the flocks, had served as summer shelters for centuries. Ms Hunter said that it was true that much courting occurred in those huts, and many stories were woven.

Arrival at the Sheiling led to tales of the Loch Ness. Aerial photographs revealed a prehistoric settlement beneath the lake. The formation of the lake may have occurred centuries ago when a young mother neglected to replace the lid on the well. It is believed that water rose until it filled the valley; the people cried “Loch Ness”, there is a leak in the well. Stories of a “beastie” in the Loch have existed for centuries. The Monks at Ft. Augustus told of the beastie, time after time. In 1934 the story first appeared in newspapers; scientists have investigated it since. Even Mike, Ms Hunter’s husband, acknowledged once seeing “something” several feet out of the loch, moving very quickly and disappearing into a pool of ruffled water.

Settled on the hearth, savoring the pungent arid fumes of the burning peat, the students settled in for an unprecedented evening. Mollie Hunter exceeded their expectations! She began by asking whether she had told me of the day she took her labs into the woods. It was an event of which I was unaware.

With that invitation to enlighten, Ms Hunter began to talk of the crisp fall day when she left her writing to walk her black labs in the forest behind the Sheiling. It was an ideal afternoon for

hiking, and Mollie and the dogs reached the mid-point clearing in record time. The labs immediately treed a squirrel and set about teasing the trapped animal. Mollie suddenly heard something thunderous; it sounded as though a very large animal was running toward the clearing. The sounds of breaking branches and hoofs striking the earth were evident. As frightened as she was, Mollie was aware that the dogs paid no heed but continued to bark at the squirrel. The sounds came closer, but the frenzied nature slowed. A beautiful brown filly appeared in the clearing; she had no bridle. Mollie stood quietly while the filly approached and then nuzzled her. For what seemed to be a very long time, Mollie stroked the filly's nose, and talked to her soothingly. Throughout this time Ms Hunter's dogs continued to harass the squirrel. Suddenly the filly turned, left the clearing and then thundered through the woods. Then Mollie whistled for the labs and walked toward The Sheiling. The neighbors were questioned, but none had a filly nor had they seen one. It was Mike who unraveled the mystery of the beautiful brown filly.

Centuries earlier there had been a blacksmith by the name of Aung Gile Moor; he had seven sons and a fairy lover. His cattle began to weaken and dwindle, and his fairy lover laughed at him because they were fairy cows put there to replace his healthy stock. Trying to kill the fairy cows, Aung Gile Moor grabbed the tail of one, and he was dragged to the mountain. The fairies bargained with him to keep their secrets. He asked only for a small brown filly that would never tire because of fairy magic. The filly had to be yoked to a cow and nothing else, however. One day he forgot and yoked her to a wagon and she lost all of the magic. No one knows for sure where she is. It has been true through the centuries that those with pure hearts have encountered a beautiful brown filly on occasion.

Through the days that followed, Mollie Hunter explained that oral tradition allows people to hold their history in their minds. The bard was the cultural historian and trained to keep the stories. She shared the history and culture of the land she so passionately loves, and invited us to vicariously venture through centuries of Scottish fact and lore. With each tale, it was dramatically evident that Mollie Hunter is Scotland's current bard!

You Never Knew Her As I Did

Ms Hunter frequently refers to living her history. This is evident in her oral traditions, but it is also demonstrated through the dimensional characters that permeate her historical fiction. *You Never Knew Her as I Did!* invites the reader into the inner circle of Mary Queen of Scots.¹³ It is an amazingly intimate account of the imprisonment of the young monarch and the power she had to captivate her subjugators. The queen is the champion of her people and her God; Will Douglass, the illegitimate son of her captor, is the queen's defender.

Mollie Hunter introduces Mary to the reader as she enters the site of her imprisonment. She was beautiful by all standards, devoutly Catholic and determined to maintain her crown. The tale of Mary's captivity, the treachery within the court, the divisive role that religion played in sixteenth

¹³ Hunter, Mollie, *You Never Knew Her As I Did* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

century Scotland and the ongoing quest for freedom illuminates the complexity of the English/Scottish conflicts. The young queen is heroic and tenacious, and those who risk everything to free her fulfill Mollie Hunter's definition of hero: "...an ordinary person who can draw on the source of some emotion common to all mankind, yet still one which enables that person to transcend his or her ordinariness and to become, for a moment, an inspired and inspiring figure".¹⁴

It was on God's authority that Mary claimed the throne, and she refused to denounce her marriage or her faith. Mary Queen of Scots believed that she was persecuted because of righteousness, and went to her death believing that God would usher her into the kingdom of heaven.¹⁵ The Beatitudes also explain the transformation of Will Douglas after his failed attempt to free the queen from imprisonment. Will was banished from his father's house, and stripped of his arrogance. It was only when he saw himself as a servant that he was able to serve his queen and his Lord.¹⁶

Sir William Douglas, the reluctant guardian of the incarcerated ruler, banished his bastard son, Will, for humiliating the family and placing them in political risk. Will returned home, feigning the prodigal's redemption, and was embraced by his father. This charade is illuminating on several points: Will Douglas was indeed remorseful of his previous brashness because it had cost the queen her freedom; he returned to his father a new man, one no longer self-absorbed, but one determined to serve his queen and his God. Sir William Douglas is a paradox; he refused to officially acknowledge Will as his son, but welcomed him home and serves the "fatted calf". Ms Hunter's examination of the cultural mores, the religious dichotomies, and the characteristics of father figures also provide a focused lens on the parallels that exist between the author and her protagonists.

The author interweaves the country's history with the religious struggles that have formed so much of its identity. She provides a lens into the culture and into the writer. The rich tapestry that has shaped Scotland is always evident, but then too are the characters that face horrible adversity and through perseverance, faith, wit, and occasionally a bit of luck, prevail. The circumstances change, the genres shift, but the hero's journey parallels the author's quest for God, a father figure, an answer...

The Pied Piper Syndrome

Parker Palmer defines the spiritual as "the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work..."¹⁷ Through the writings and the life of Mollie Hunter the heart's longing to be connected with something bigger than self is exemplified. The philosophical underpinnings of her prose are evident; "Mollie

¹⁴ Hunter, Mollie, *The Pied Piper Syndrome* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992): 59 – 74.

¹⁵ Matthew, chapter 5, verse 10, *Life Application Bible* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale, 1988).

¹⁶ Matthew, chapter 5, verse 5, *Life Application Bible* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale, 1988).

¹⁷ Palmer, Parker, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998): 5.

Hunter never fails to reveal herself from the moment she speaks with her slight Scottish burr and delightful lilt of language. But she always gives us so much more; she lets us see in the process of how a story happens.” In the introduction to *The Pied Piper Syndrome*, Charlotte Huck points to the reoccurring themes in Mollie Hunter’s work: (1) belief in the supernatural, (2) the power of love, (3) the need for heroes, and that (4) reading expands the possibilities of the mind.¹⁸

Mollie said that “the whole reward of reading is to have one’s imagination carried soaring on the wings of another’s imagination; to be made more aware of the possibilities of one’s mind through the workings of another mind; to be thrilled, amazed, amused, awed, enchanted in worlds unknown until discovered through the medium of language, and to find in those worlds one’s own petty horizon growing ever wider, ever higher”.¹⁹ So it is through the pages of her tales that Mollie Hunter answers the heart’s longing to connect.

Ms Hunter identified her obsession with courage as an additional thread that is evident in all of her writing. Across genres she has questioned the courage of conviction. *The Stronghold* vividly gives life to first century Scotland and the Druid community.²⁰ The courage of the men to thwart a Roman invasion was defined by physical valor, but Mollie used the kaleidoscope to view it from multiple dimensions. The crippled, orphaned Coll used his keen intellect to design round towers that were impenetrable. He exhibited tremendous bravery by questioning the authority of the Druid priest. Coll’s brother, Bran, sacrificed his life to save a young girl, and in doing so, invalidated the priest’s authority. The physical brawn of the chief and his ability to lead men into battle was challenged by the logic of constructing defensive strongholds; the chief had the courage to listen to a young boy’s advice. The priest, proven fallible, embraced Coll and ordained him a “discoverer, one of those who can think”,²¹ demonstrating the ability to learn from mistakes. The question of how to define courage was examined spiritually, intellectually, physically and the answers were complex and varied.

Historical figures have directed the quest as Mary Queen of Scots went to her death affirming her Catholic faith.²² Robert the Bruce led Scotland in the quest to free his country from British rule, trusting God to direct him),²³ but it the author’s life that resoundingly defines courage, with the same complexity that her characters demonstrated. Cat McPhie’s refusal to be delegated to the traditional role of a tinker woman forced tenacious, and sometimes dangerous, stances to find herself.²⁴ Cat’s defiance was derived from a gift of intuitively knowing the future, a deep connectedness to God and nature, and a strong sense of self. The reader is invited into the world of the tinker where the rules are unconventional but consistently value the fact that “every life

¹⁸ Hunter, Mollie, *The Pied Piper Syndrome* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992): xvi.

¹⁹ Hunter, Mollie, *The Pied Piper Syndrome* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992): xvi.

²⁰ Hunter, Mollie, *The Stronghold* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

²¹ Hunter, Mollie, *The Stronghold* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974): 204.

²² Hunter, Mollie, *You Never Knew Her As I Did* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

²³ Hunter, Mollie, *The King’s Swift Rider* (New York, Harper & Row, 2000).

²⁴ Hunter, Mollie, *Cat Herself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

has its own importance”.²⁵ Cat wants to be true to herself, emulate her father, and be accepted. Straddling gender roles and remaining fully feminine is a challenge. Cat McPhie is a strong protagonist developing into an independent, open-minded woman. The courage she displays is noteworthy. The delineation that differentiates Mollie Hunter from her characters that defy tradition for the sake of God, politics, family, country, love...is difficult to identify.

A Sound of Chariots

Mollie Hunter’s journey has been one of challenges which have been met with heroic valor. The death of her beloved father redefined life for the then nine year old child and her odyssey has always been shaped by that devastating loss. The economic demands on the family were intensified following her father’s death, and Mollie’s mother was forced to take in boarders and work as a domestic laborer. Mollie left the safety of her small village and went to work in her grandfather’s floral shop. The dream of being a writer was the intrinsic spark that kept her in night school, and the world around her became the fodder for her gift.

In 1992, Mollie Hunter was presented with the Phoenix Award for *A Sound of Chariots*; her acceptance speech revealed to the world that she was Bridie McShane!²⁶ It was a vulnerable, courageous discussion of the depression she suffered as a young mother, and the epiphany she had while hospitalized. Mollie realized that the dark cloud she was fighting was due to the fact that she had never fully grieved the death of her “god,” the father who left her so prematurely. She was also cognizant that the series of treatments for depression could not lift the veil; she had to write about the warm, gentle man who exemplified courage. Mollie had to bring her father to life through her writing; she needed to share the man who taught her courage, sought to live as Christ, the gentle revolutionary, and gave her a place in the sun.

The writing process is as varied and as complex as those involved in it. There is no simple formula to the magic of weaving words into vicarious adventures for others. The integrity with which Mollie Hunter approaches the task is reflective of the spiritual depth and personal philosophy of the author, and reflective of the Scottish propensity for language and lore.

Mollie Hunter has defined a hero as a person of courage, and has identified the true battlefield of good versus evil as the human psyche.²⁷ The premise that exploring our psychological darkness as the path to creative light has long been explored through literature.²⁸ It is the journey to self-knowledge and the one that provides the opportunity to emerge courageous.

A Stranger Shore

²⁵ Hunter, Mollie, *Cat Herself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985):187.

²⁶ Hunter, Mollie, *A Sound of Chariots* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

²⁷ Hunter, Mollie, *The Pied Piper Syndrome* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992): 60.

²⁸ LeGuin, Ursula, “The Child and the Shadow,” *The Language of the Night* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992):59 – 71.

In 1998, Betty Greenway wrote of Ms Hunter's quest. She spoke of the fact that the author had to leave school at the age of fourteen in order to take a financial burden off of her mother. While working in her maternal grandfather's floral shop, Mollie Hunter took night classes, and pursued knowledge through systematic research at the National Library of Scotland. Her first chosen subject was God, because He knew everything.²⁹

Ms Greenway concluded that Mollie's research on God led her to explore primitive beliefs that were reflected in many of the tales she had heard as a child. She realized that the power of those stories connected her to the folklore that defined cultures across centuries. It was thus that Mollie Hunter decided that all fantasy writing must be approached in a matter of fact way.

The Otherworld that permeates Celtic lore is defined by Ms Hunter as a "world beyond the grave...peopled with the gods, the dead heroes, and the ...ancestors."³⁰ The cornerstone of her belief about the Otherworld is that it is a place of perfection, void of sickness, pain or death, but also void of love. That makes it safe, and therefore tempting, but her absolute conviction that it is love that transforms, also makes it a dangerous haven. Ms Hunter's writing about the propelling force of love to humanize is evident in all of her work, and in her life. She consistently writes on these two levels: the engrossing story, and her philosophical beliefs.³¹

Mollie Hunter has frequently denounced institutionalized religion, although she admits being deeply moved by the pageantry. She cannot accept the basic beliefs, yet she seeks to live everyday of her life emulating her mother who transformed the Sermon on Mount into a daily lifestyle. Greenway suggested that Ms Hunter's conflict between pagan beliefs and Christian values could be reflective of her intrinsic struggles.³² It is my conviction, however, that the journey has always been to find the gentle revolutionary her father believed Christ to be, the forgiving Savior her mother embraced, while reconciling those with the God who took her beloved father. Mollie once told me, "God and I are okay, it is the church that creates the problem."

Mollie was quoted in *A Stranger Shore* as saying that "...a writer...must have a philosophy of life born of self-knowledge and compassion for others which is expressed, not didactically but implicitly in everything...she writes".³³ Mollie Hunter's heroes parallel her odyssey toward self and her creative light. Dickens' self-query in his autobiographical *David Copperfield*, "...whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else..."³⁴ also invites us into the pages of Ms Hunter's life and writings. The kaleidoscopic examination of her journey and those of her protagonists reveal ongoing battles between good and evil, the questioning of love, faith, life, death...and the ambiguous nature of

²⁹ Greenway, Betty, *A Stranger Shore* (Lanham, MD & London: Scarecrow Press, 1998).

³⁰ Hunter, Mollie, *Talent Is Not Enough* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

³¹ Hunter, Mollie, *The Pied Piper Syndrome* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992): 66.

³² Greenway, Betty, *A Stranger Shore* (Lanham, MD & London: Scarecrow Press, 1998):21.

³³ Greenway, Betty, *A Stranger Ashore* (Lanham, MD & London: Scarecrow Press, 1998): 128 – 129.

³⁴ Dickens, Charles, *David Copperfield* (Rahway, NJ: Mershon Company, 1870): 7.

conflict. Mollie Hunter is a heroic figure, transforming her readers' lives through pages that reveal her personal struggles.

British writer, Jill Paton Walsh has said that ...“literature is consoling, even when it tells the darkest truths.”³⁵ Ms Hunter's works cross genres, but somehow reminds the readers that through the pages we will find that we are more alike than different, cultures, eras, religions, genders...we are all seeking love and its power to heal. Through the power of story we can be consoled.

The Walking Stones

The Walking Stones is remarkably reflective of the author's passion for the pristine preservation of the Highlands of Scotland.³⁶ It is a tale that is modern folklore. The protagonists are at opposite ends of the continuum of life; the Bodach, Gaelic for old man, who served as a mentor to his young neighbor, Donald Campbell, was gentle, wise and mysterious. The Bodach had the Second Sight, the ability to foresee the future; this gift could not be summoned, however, it came only when the events to follow needed to be revealed.

In contemporary Scotland, Donald Campbell and his parents farmed sheep in the glen close to the cottage of the Bodach. He was a welcome guest in their home, and Donald viewed him as a grandfather wise in the way of stories. So it was that one night the Bodach revealed a vision he had; the glen was to have visitors. Three men would appear. One would carry a forest on his back, the second would have lightning in his hand, and the third would bring death.

The following night three strangers appeared at the home of the Campbell's, just as the Bodach has predicted. The first had pinecones in his backpack, to plant a forest. The second had blueprints for a hydroelectric power station to bring man-made lightning to the glen. The third man, the designer of the project, announced that the glen would be flooded, bringing death.

Thirteen stones, perfectly separated, formed a circle in the glen. They were twelve feet in height, two feet wide and six feet thick. It was believed that every one hundred years the Stones walked to the river and submerged their heads into the water to renew their strength. The Bodach determined that the glen would not be flooded until the Stones could renew their strength.

The Bodach carried a carved black staff, given to him at the time he was given the power of the Second Sight. The gift allowed him to project himself, and thus to place himself in the very area to be flooded. When it became evident that the Bodach was dying, it was Donald to whom the Bodach passed the gift of Second Sight, and the responsibility of saving the Stones.

Mollie Hunter incorporated the Druid beliefs in the power of the Stones with Highland lore that death merely meant that an “old person was going to his own herd...going home to the One that

³⁵ Walsh, Jill Paton, in discussion with the author, New England Children's Literature Conference, 1993.

³⁶ Hunter, Mollie, *The Walking Stones* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

created him...”³⁷ In this spiritual dimension, she also placed the importance of tradition, legacy, the environment and respect for nature.

Cat Herself

The nomadic lifestyle of Scotland’s travelling community is depicted with the genuine respect that Mollie Hunter has for the subjugated. The tragic death of a young tinker woman “...from an older land than ours, and from a stranger one”³⁸ led the author to give her a voice of dignity and to illuminate the religious hypocrisy that led to her demise. It is a theme that resonates in her writing; she gives the disempowered a voice. As a young teen, Mollie suffered the humiliation of being poor, and so with empathy and respect she has taken on the social mores that strip people of their self-respect.

Cat McPhie’s charge to trade handmade baskets for clothing led her to the home of the gentry. She wove a pitiful tale of need, and was given a stack of cast-off apparel. It was when she offered the basket in payment that Cat fully realized the status of the tinkers. “...thank you, no. It’s very nice,...but you might...that is, I don’t want the baby to catch anything.”³⁹ From that dehumanizing experience Mollie Hunter portrayed a spunky Cat, one determined to be true to self and not defined by others. The deep veins of faith and superstition that permeate the tinker culture, the family ties and loyalties, and the refusal to conform become platforms that delineated the differences and the underlying message: people are more alike than different. Cat’s father simplified the laws of the land, explaining that it was God that “...put the trout and salmon in the water, the same as it was Him that put the hares in the field”.⁴⁰

The realization that she knew the future came to Cat when she knew that she would return to her grandmother’s “enchanted land, the place where it all started...”⁴¹. Her grandmother told her to trust the gift. The interweaving of the supernatural, faith in God and belief in tradition and family form the structural framework of the travelers’ mores. Ms Hunter depicts them with rich cultural roots and deep commitments to nature, independence and one another.

The very title reflects the author’s life of nontraditional approaches to cultural and religious mores. Mollie Hunter went to night school to pursue her dream of writing when education for working class women was viewed as superfluous. Her writing has always reflected her passion for her country, its history and the people who so courageously honed its independence. The struggles that Cat McPhie battles are intrinsic as well as extrinsic; the protagonist and the writer know one another well.

³⁷ Hunter, Mollie, *The Walking Stones* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970): 100.

³⁸ Hunter, Mollie, *A Sound of Chariots*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972): 33.

³⁹ Hunter, Mollie, *Cat Herself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985): 32.

⁴⁰ Hunter, Mollie, *Cat Herself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985): 66.

⁴¹ Hunter, Mollie, *Cat Herself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985): 43.

The Refocused Kaleidoscope: A Conclusion

The kaleidoscope is often a plethora of designs and colors without pattern, but when refocused the insights gained through twenty years of friendship, visits across continents and a shared understanding of how childhood tragedy shapes the future resonate with the fact that Mollie Hunter and her protagonists are synonymous. She has fashioned her understanding of history, employed her deep intellect and shared her personal journey to light the way for her readers. She is an enigma: fiercely private and disarmingly vulnerable, constantly denying God while seeking Him through the spiritual quests of her protagonists. Transforming the lives of her readers through the revolving kaleidoscopic lens that reveal the ongoing parallels between her life and that of her characters: the struggles between good and evil, life and death, faith, love and the ambiguous nature of conflict, Mollie Hunter is heroic!

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