Peter Hollindale

World enough and time: The work of Mollie Hunter

The work of Mollie Hunter is published and read throughout the world. She won the Carnegie Medal in 1974 for The Stronghold, and she was the May Hill Arbuthnot Lecturer in 1975, travelling in the United States for six weeks giving a series of addresses that have been collected in Talent Is Not Enough (Harper & Row, 1976).

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Mollie Hunter is by general consent Scotland’s most distinguished modern children’s writer. Scotland is the setting for almost all her stories, and they are rooted almost exclusively in Scots folklore and history. She herself lives in the Highlands. Yet she now enjoys an international reputation, and is read with pleasure not only in her own country or by the offspring of expatriate Scots, but by legions of young children whose prior knowledge of Celtic legend is nonexistent, and by older readers whose acquaintance with Scots history is at best rudimentary.

Whether or not one actually finds this puzzling, it raises a delicate matter which any appraisal of Mollie Hunter’s work must start by facing. The fact is that one cannot talk about Mollie Hunter without talking about Scotland. If one finds her work parochial, one finds Scotland parochial. If one is surprised by the international interest shown in her work (given, of course, that it has the major intrinsic qualities that I for one believe it has) one is surprised that Scotland itself should be so interesting. The general idea that a confined setting means a confined range of interest was obviously laid to rest long ago, not least by Sir Walter Scott’s generous and appreciative judgement of Jane Austen. But somehow the notion persists for some readers that Mollie Hunter’s subjects should by all the rules be indigenous, provincial, and abstruse, yet have somewhat eccentrically turned out not to be.

The opposite is true. On the one hand, she has at the disposal of her considerable scholarship the folklore, history, and culture of a nation: she is not a
regional—but is a national—writer, and it is in her work that children can find the fullest recent expression of the legend and history which make Scots culture distinctive. On the other hand, she has achieved this without being at all eccentric, difficult, or insular. The chosen geographical bounds of her fiction are narrow, yet they reach to distant horizons. Her 'Scottishness' (even allowing that by birth she is half Irish and that one of her best books is the very Irish Patrick Kentigern Keenan) is uncompromising, but it is not limiting: it is also open, hospitable and generous towards readers who are not Scottish, combining an imagination which is charged by the historic energy of a precise locale with a humane moral intelligence that seeks always to be accessible and understood.

The combination is admirable. It is also—if the impertinent generalisation can be pardoned—typically Scots (true for instance of her beloved Edinburgh, at once most-fervently national and most cosmopolitan of cities). Here the whole strength of Scots literary tradition is on her side, and without inferring direct 'influences,' it is not hard to see how it has aided her. First, the historical novel is one of its established forms and glories, not as in England a kind of sub-literature which has never fully severed the umbilical cord which binds it to 'escapist' romance. This does not mean that it is free of technical problems: each writer must confront and resolve these anew. Mollie Hunter acknowledges her awareness of this in her revealing essay 'The Last Lord of Redhouse Castle,' where she discusses the problems of writing historical novels for children: 'the first being the one peculiar to Scottish writers in this field—how to set the scene in a country whose history is unknown to non-Scottish children.' But it does enable her to use the form with all the confidence and flexibility of a writer who knows that her national tradition fosters and respects it.

Second, and this is important for a writer who, like Mollie Hunter, is repeatedly concerned with witchcraft and the supernatural, Scots writing has a long history of concern with such phenomena. Indeed, it is a matter of history that witchcraft, as the object of fearful superstition and punitive law, remained a serious issue in Scotland much longer than it did in Britain as a whole. Stories of the supernatural are not, as they tend to be in England and America, a kind of deviant occasional writing for major authors (like The Turn of the Screw), and the special preoccupation of minor eccentrics like M. R. James; instead they are serious and central events in a writer’s work, like Stevenson’s Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde or his story ‘Thrawn Janet.’ More particularly, the supernatural is not something which intrudes upon the human world only in response to evil or reckless invocation: it is omnipresent and close at hand, hidden from human awareness only by the lightest of shadows. Perilous and rash transactions between the human and the supernatural have never, perhaps, been so brilliantly depicted as they are in that neglected masterpiece, Hogg’s Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner, a work which is deeply concerned with self-destructive bigotry. A strong available tradition of this kind is clearly helpful to a modern writer like Mollie Hunter, whose historical novel