

RAIDERS FROM THE SEA

- the writing of Carnegie Medal winner, *The Stronghold*, by Mollie Hunter

As I travelled from Edinburgh to Inverness to meet Mollie Hunter, Scottish history unfolded before my eyes – the ruined homesteads, their inhabitants ‘cleared’ by Victorian landlords; the blood-soaked field, site of the Battle of Culloden on the outskirts of the city; all surrounded by magnificent scenery. Mollie Hunter had lived for years in a small village on the shores of Loch Ness, but now in her mid-eighties lives in a more genteel cottage tucked away in Inverness town centre. It was built originally to house the workers building the cathedral in the nineteenth century, and at that time there were four families crammed inside! Mollie is one of the great story tellers and that talent has not dimmed in the slightest over the years as she told me of her childhood.

“I used to wander the countryside when I was a girl in East Lothian, just south of Edinburgh, and I came across a deserted castle one day. I was interested to know why anyone would want to build something so large – as a small child it seemed colossal! I had no knowledge then of people wanting the power to control others. My father couldn’t tell me but he had a friend in the local history society whom he visited to borrow books. This man passed on to me a great tome which he thought would interest me because it contained pictures! It was called *Domestic and Castellated Architecture in Scotland*. I loved it and matched the notes and drawings of ‘my castle’ with what I found in that book. And that interest in things



Photo of Mollie Hunter by John Paul

from the past has remained with me for the rest of my life.”

Mollie left home at fourteen to work in Edinburgh. She read profusely, teaching herself all about Scotland, its history and its people. She also had a passionate desire to write, and in particular, to portray this history in books for children.

“Many years later, when I was near the village of Brora on the east coast of Scotland, I saw a very strange building which was the first time I’d seen a *Broch*. I was determined to study and find out how it had come about and from that developed my fascination with Orkney where the Brochs were considered to have originated. I felt I had a story inside my head and needed to place the book somewhere on that island. I walked and walked, and walked again to find the perfect site. All Brochs are built near the sea. Fresh water had to be nearby, too.

And I was still tramping all over the island to find an ideal spot. One day I was standing on a grassy knoll on the cliff top. The sea was thrashing and churning seven hundred feet below over great rocks when I noticed a cormorant kept flying into a cleft in the rock face. I attempted to see if it was nesting. I lay down and looked in. There was the hen bird. Oh, she was so black, and beautiful! Her eyes were golden and she looked at me calmly and serenely. I had found her nest so rose to go. I knew I was close to the edge and turned to the left before realising I was about six inches from there. A voice in my head shouted “Throw yourself backwards!” and I did so, landing on my back at the very edge of that cliff. It was a hot summer’s day. The grass was slippery and I began to slide until my feet projected over the edge. I dug my hands in, pushed my shoulders back and pulled as hard as I could. I swung on to my face and clawed the grass, digging my nails in and eventually hauling myself away from what would have been certain death.

“I went on exploring, learning what it must have been like to live at the time the Broch was built. I knew then that I could recreate the islands by soaking up as much information as the people there had. I learned about the winds; I learned about currents; I learned of the tides; the vegetation; the local wildlife – the birds, the fishes, the animals. I tried to register them all in my mind as I learnt about their personal habits.”

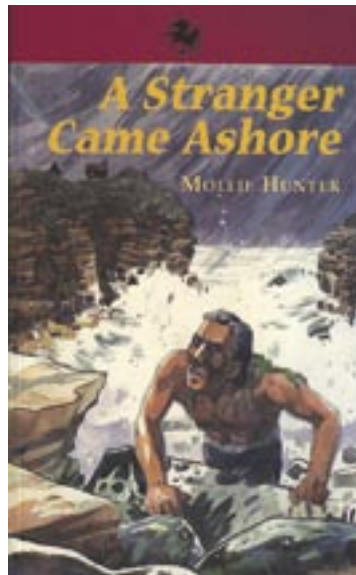
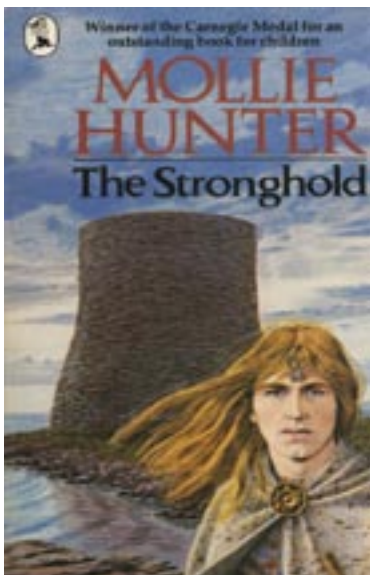




Photo of the Ring of Brodgar, Orkney by Valerie Bierman

I was curious to know how she had discovered that the men on Orkney were clean shaven, for example. “I got that from Julius Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* where he described physical appearances in detail so I was able to imagine them. I was able to recreate their environment and create the reason for building the Brochs – which was thought to have been a defensive one. I started to write the book. I wrote and wrote and wrote, but the story would not come. Eventually I returned to Orkney and on the first night went to the Ring of Brodgar. It is a great ring of stones with a loch on either side and the wild fowl were eerily calling. It was a night of a three-quarter moon, with the wind blowing the clouds periodically across the moon’s face. In this light I stood alone in the centre of the circle. I waited there and the longer I stood the colder I got. It wasn’t an outer cold but an inner dread. My body felt as though the blood was draining out of it and slowly it dawned on me that this Ring, this great ring of stones, was where people had come to witness the magical ceremonies, practised here by the Druids who led them in their beliefs about the Other World. They must have been gripped by the same chill that enveloped me. I felt the Ring taking me over. I stood for as long as I could; at the very moment when I could stand no more I ran back to my car, jumped in and never was so glad to be safe in that little box of glass and steel. I raced back to my hotel, picked up my pen and, inspired, wrote and wrote. I now knew my characters well, knew exactly how they felt, and how they behaved. I began:

‘This is the story of Coll, master of the Stronghold and of Fand, whom he loved and who was doomed.’

“The book took me over – the way the people lived, the way they dressed, I

could research. But I could not research how they thought. In fact, I had been so deep into this that several times when my husband came in from work, I had been aware of someone else in my study. I looked at him, my husband of thirty years, and said “Who are you?” I was not imagining things. This was someone from another age. I was so far into their thoughts, their feelings that I was able to know them very closely. The story had taken over – I was there. I was living it.”

Mollie went on to write many fine historical novels, *The Lothian Run* set in eighteenth century Edinburgh, *The Thirteenth Member* about the Scottish Witch trials and the wonderful, autobiographical *A Sound of Chariots*. But I wondered therefore, if she had ever felt the need to return to the first century.

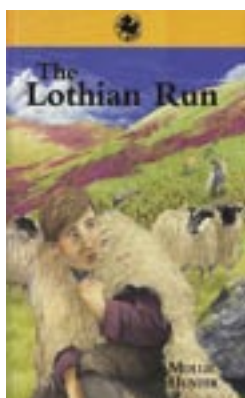
“No.” she replied emphatically, “because I had written definitively about those people – to my own satisfaction.” Great success came when *The Stronghold* was awarded the Carnegie Medal in 1975. “I was very proud – it was unexpected,” Mollie recalled. “After all it was a subject seldom tackled and I had no idea how my publisher would receive it. I wasn’t really expecting it to be accepted, let alone winning an award. I simply wished to re-create those people in a story.”

We pondered over today’s publishers who often maintain that historical novels are not popular and won’t sell. We both disputed that claim. Was it publishers and booksellers or was it simply that children were no longer interested in the past?

“They don’t teach history as they used to,” suggested Mollie. “Therefore children’s interests are not awakened. History is the story of people’s lives. If you tell a tale about other people’s lives, it does not matter when it happened as long as it is exciting. So long as it has characters with whom you can empathise and adventure to drive the reader along. You share their lives – the good and the bad – and you live along with them in their time, and in their way. If your imagination has not been captured by the lives of people who lived yesterday, how can you be aroused by those of today?”

It is a great pity that so many of Mollie Hunter’s books are out-of-print, her stories would awaken any child’s interest in their ancestors. The current appetite for fantasy may be set in the future but the past holds far more interest for me – how can you know who you are if you don’t know where you came from?

Valerie Bierman



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