

and arduous and, when she finally reaches the backwoods of Lake Ontario country, Duncan has died and his family gone home.

There is Mary, alone among the United Empire Loyalist settlers — a girl whose native language is Scots Gaelic, who believes as firmly in the existence of fairies and legendary creatures as she does in her own second sight, living among the pragmatic New England refugee loyalists who consider clairvoyance as nonsensical as the idea of fairies. Furthermore, she hates the low, flat country and is terrified of the forest.

As diaries from that time reveal, the Highland Scots were terrified of the forest. There hadn't been forests in the Highlands for a thousand years or more. My husband's great-grandfather was a lumberjack a little west of Ottawa only a few years after the events in this novel. He described the woods to his grandchildren (one of whom was my mother-in-law). He talked about the towering pines that hid the sun and were "so wide apart on the ground you could drive an ox cart between them."

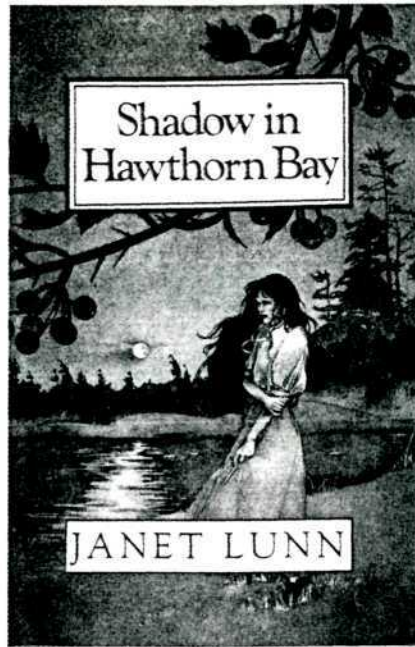
How to make peace, much less live with any kind of grace in such a low, dark land among a people so alien? That is what the rest of Mary's story is about and it is a story I had to write.

Twenty-year struggle

It took twenty years from the birth of the idea to the writing of this thank you. Twenty years ago this month I was in the library in Inverness in the north of Scotland (with the aid of a grant from the Canada Council) reading old newspapers and documents for sailing times, descriptions of ships, families, local politics. My first book, *Double Spell*, was at the publisher's and I was sure that this one would follow it into print — probably the next year.

Oh, how little I knew myself or my story! I wrote it — almost to the end, knew it was all wrong, and didn't know how to make it right. In a flood of rageful tears, I stuffed it into a folder and shoved it into the back of my filing cabinet — never to look at again. I do that with a lot of writing that goes badly, but this time I meant it. I couldn't write this book. I wasn't a Scot. I wasn't a loyalist either. No, I would not write this book.

I wrote three other books. I worked for several years as an editor. I travelled. I



spent a year as writer-in-residence at the Regina Public Library, and all the time the story nagged at me.

It sent me to libraries to read more books about Scotland. It sent me to seers and mediums to find out how they perceive the world. It sent me to record stores to acquire the largest collection of Scottish folk songs outside of the Institute of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. And it kept me making cryptic notes about characters and scenes and dialogue that would have been part of the book I had sworn never to look at again. Halfway through my year in Regina and a book I *really* believe will never see the light of day, I took Mary Urquhart's story out of its prison.

Second try

I went back to Scotland, tramped the hills of Glen Urquhart, and Mollie Hunter touched the nerve that had set me dancing after this story in the first place. I remember her so well standing in the middle of a large field near the shore of Loch Ness where we had gone to exercise her dog. It was one of those high, windy days that seem to happen only in the north of Scotland — grey and bright at the same time and very exhilarating. She surveyed the field slowly and carefully, then, in a deep dramatic voice (Mollie Hunter has a marvellous sense of drama) she half whispered, "Our ancestors have been living on this land for more than two thousand years." "And ours," I said,

"found primeval forest two hundred years ago when they came to Canada."

After that I bussed, walked, boated along the Great Glen to Fort William, listened feverishly to Highland speech patterns, came home and began again. Clear sailing now, I thought.

But it wasn't. Halfway through Chapter two: "I can't write this story," I cried. "It's not my story. I'm not a Scot!" "Then whose story is it?" (This from that argumentative voice that lives in my head — the one that almost never shuts up.)

"It's theirs, the Highlanders! The Gaelic speakers!" I shouted. But, by this time I wasn't so sure. I, too, had left hill country for lake country and understood about emigration. And, by this time, I had begun to know Mary Urquhart and her friends, Luke and Henry and Patty. I was caught. I couldn't abandon them. So I wrote their story once more and once more and once more.

It was a failure. I knew it was a failure. A year and a half ago I was visiting Joyce Barkhouse in Halifax, moaning and wailing about the inevitable poor reception my story was going to have.

"Well," said Joyce comfortingly, "I love the story and, anyway, you had to write it, and you've almost finished. Finish it and get on with the next one. If I'm wrong and you're right, you'll just have to accept that some of what you write isn't going to be successful."

I decided she was right. I finished it, and then even the title was elusive. My editor and I were still on the phone quibbling over it while the manuscript was on its way to the printer, and I put it out of my mind.

No one could have been more amazed at the wonderful, warm reception this story has been given. I needed to write it. I needed to articulate for myself the deep, almost never articulated anguish our people felt as they struggled to transplant their deep roots from their ancestral lands to begin a new country. I needed to write this story so intensely that I did it in spite of all logic and common sense — which is just what any proper Highlander would have done. 🍷

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