



Another view from the photo book 'Hebrides' by Peter May and David Wilson – "Rollers at Dalbeg - One of hundreds of Atlantic sunsets I have taken!" says David

Through the mountains of the past to solve the mystery of Katie Morag

By Katie Macleod

Driving through vast looming mountains shrouded in mist to see Mairi Hedderwick is a childhood memory that has always been marked out in my mind. They weren't really such vast mountains, of course, but those of Harris, and we were driving south from Stornoway to see Katie Morag's creator give a talk at the Harris Hotel.

As a child, Katie Morag was a favourite fictional character of mine, so to say I was excited that day is an understatement. However, what struck me the most was not the book being released – Katie Morag and the New Pier – but the realisation that there was a real person behind the books I loved to read.

"I am delighted to hear this!" says Mairi over email, when I tell her the impact her event had. "For me, it is what the whole thing is about – getting children to see the link between the book and its creator."

School talks are something the illustrator and author does regularly, and the reason behind her upcoming appearance at Faclan on October 30th. In the 33 years of Katie Morag's existence, Mairi has attended many children's events, always with Katie Morag's 'Tiresome Ted' in tow. As well as the Stornoway stint, she will be talking at schools and libraries in Castlebay, Daliburgh, and Shawbost.

"Is Katie Morag real?" tends to be the question children ask her most frequently. It is one I'm sure my five-year-old self would have certainly wanted the answer to. In a way, the Katie Morag series is rooted in reality; the books are inspired by Mairi's own experiences on the Isle of Coll in the Inner Hebrides.

Mairi was born and raised in Gourrock, and from there her love affair with islands began. "I watched the Loch Fyne regularly sail

down the Clyde and was told she was going to 'the islands.' My first introduction to that word – island – and its disease called islomania. Sufferers are called islomanes. I am one."

She first moved to Coll at the age of 17 as a mother's help, before studying at Edinburgh College of Art and entering the teaching profession. The Isle of Coll, real-life counterpart to Katie Morag's Isle of Struay, became her home again when she returned to raise her own children.

"I had illustrated for children's authors for years and was given a brief to create my own character for a picture storybook," says Mairi of Katie Morag's beginnings. "My children were teenagers at that time, so I indulged in a nostalgic re-run of their upbringing on the Island of Coll in the 60s and 70s."

Beautiful illustrations fill the pages of the Katie Morag books. From the colours of the sea around Struay to the shampoos and scents stacked up on Grannie Mainland's dresser, no detail is missing. They are images about to be brought to life on the small screen, when the CBeebies series of Katie Morag, produced by indie production company Move On Up, is launched in November.

Equally enchanting are the scenes shown in the sketches and watercolours of Mairi's books for adults. As well as the Katie Morag, Peedie Peebles and Utterly Otter series for children, she has written and illustrated a number of travel books. "I just love any opportunity to explore the country I love," she explains.

In *An Eye on the Hebrides*, which documented her six-month solo journey through the islands in the late 1980s, Mairi's last stop is Lewis, after alighting everywhere from Arran to Islay and even St Kilda. It was "often physically testing and solitary" with "plenty

of time for looking and thinking," Mairi remembers. "The Hebrides book was an attempt to get the islands out of my system. It didn't really work."

Filmed this summer on location in Lewis, the making of the much anticipated Katie Morag TV series was another opportunity for Mairi to indulge her love of the islands. "Move On Up invited myself – and my children and grandchildren – several times to watch the filming on Lewis," she says, describing the experience as akin to "waking into my own illustrations. The attention to detail was meticulous and such a compliment."

She had known Lewis long before Katie Morag," and is looking forward to returning once again. Mairi mentions some favourite local haunts: "Grannie Island's house on Loch Erisort, and the Isle of Struay Shop and Post Office at Tolsta Chaolais, of course." They are spots that will surely attract tourist attention from children desperate to discover the island world of Katie Morag.

With the adventures of Katie Morag, Mairi seems to have instilled a similar love of islands in the children who read her books. One boy burst into tears after arriving on Coll only to discover Katie Morag didn't actually live there; other tales of children begging their parents for a holiday to the Hebrides appear in the book review pages of national newspapers.

This month, almost two decades after my first encounter with Mairi Hedderwick and Katie Morag, Faclan will give a whole new generation of island children a window into the world of writing, and the adventures of a mischievous little girl from Struay.