Artist Molly Moss (1915–2001): Creativity, Communism, and Community

During the difficult 1930s, many British intellectuals turned to communism as the most promising approach to the country's economic woes and to resist fascism. Mary Eileen "Moll" Moss, an artist known professionally as Molly Moss, married two writers intimately connected with these trends.[1] She illustrated their books and dust covers, and had a few brief years of commercial success in the early 1950s, but both her work and she herself faded into obscurity in the early 1960s. This essay reconstructs her life and work from a range of pertinent but unreliable sources, including myself as her niece. Firstly, her sister Katie wrote an unpublished memoir and kept various newspaper clippings and the odd photograph that I inherited. Secondly, her husbands both wrote fictionalised autobiographies that gave accounts of how she fitted into their lives (!). These three major personal sources are supplemented by family history sites, memoirs, biographies, and sundry newspaper articles. Other than verifiable facts, all share the problems of outsider interpretations, radical differences in meaning structures, glossing, and dramatic distortion.[2] Of these narratives, Katie's is the least "loaded," given that Moll was a tangential figure in her story.[3]

Formative Years

Siblings George and Kathleen Moss, born in the early 1880s in Hull, were brought up acutely aware of social status and the perils of poverty.[4] To George's "disgust," of the five children born between 1909 and 1917, none were boys (he did not even mention Cec's birth at work) (Moss, [1966?], 1). Moll came fourth, born on 18 February 1915. By this time, George was a primary school headmaster and his sister Kathleen was a permanent fixture at home as a maiden aunt.

The Moss sisters, c. 1920: Thora (1909–93), Kathleen "Katie" (1912–97), Marjorie (1913–2001), Mary Eileen "Moll" (1915–2001) & Cecily "Cec" (1917–85)

The Moss family lived in a lower middle-class area of Hull, the Avenues. Lilly, busy running the household like clockwork with help only to do the washing, was her

girls' "ever-loving kind and pretty one, … always there when her arms were needed" (1). Proud her grandfather had played the flute for "her Ladyship," she "delighted in playing excerpts from Schubert, Beethoven and Chopin" (39). George, her counterpoint, ruled the home as an ill-tempered *pater familias*: "Unpredictable moods swept through him, and … his eyes would grow glazed … so that he hardly knew what he was doing" (40). Lilly and Kathleen deferred to him; the girls feared him. Moll evaded him with humorous quick-thinking. When one Sunday the girls were listening to "Donna Clara" on the crystal wireless, which was the latest popular song (a tango, sung in German), George thundered in, shouting, "Turn that thing off." Moll quickly said, "It's a German church service" (40). He left the room, but later, in a rage put his fist through one of the speakers. No wonder the sisters laughed at macabre rhymes, such as:

> "Oh mother, dear, what is that stuff
> That looks like strawberry jam?"
> "Hush, hush, my dear, 'tis poor papa,
> Run over by a tram" (31).

Indeed, the girls were a great comfort and resource for each other, reciting nonsense rhymes as the antidote to seriousness and discipline, drawing, and inventing all sorts of games in winter.

The latter was especially the case for Moll and Marjorie, who spent nine months together shut in their bedroom behind a formalin-soaked curtain when Moll caught polio and Marjorie rheumatic fever. The legacy for Moll was damage to her left hand, only noticeable when she used her fork. As to being in a female body, Moll seemingly had very similar opinions to Katie, who wrote of Newland High School (which all the girls attended) in the 1920s, "Bras were unheard of, and I watched the floppy bosoms rolling about under loose blouses of some of the better-endowed teachers with some disgust" (33–34).

At this school, the girls received old-fashioned tuition in perspective drawing, a delicate style of plant drawing based on accurate observation, memory drawing "when we were given things like a tramcar to observe during the week in preparation for a pencil drawing in the next lesson, and, in the autumn, watercolour paintings of the colourful blushing Virginia creeper" (36). At Hull College of Art, students learned

"life drawing, antique, architecture, anatomy, heraldry, and how to use an HB pencil, because if you can draw skilfully with that, any other medium will be easy" (38). Contrast these teachings with Eileen Agar's experience, far more suited to emerging trends: "I had a good drawing master … We used to fill a book with quick sketches of this, that and the other, always of people moving or playing games but never standing still for a moment" (1988, 28).

When Moll left school in 1931, static middle-class expectations ruled her future. George's mantra was, "Never be poor" (33). Various "ladies with posh accents, flowery hats and high heels" told the girls on prize days how they must work hard and "'get on' in life, implying that the aim was to make a lot of money" (37). For girls for whom university was too expensive an option, low-paid clerical work, teaching and nursing offered single middle-class women some degree of financial stability. Katie leapt the barrier by winning a scholarship at the Royal College of Art, with teaching studies integral to this. Thora and Marjorie did shorthand and typing, and respectively worked in the civil service and for a lawyer. Moll despaired because clerical work was like an ugly toad (without the prince) plonked upon her future. She quarrelled with her mother because she wanted her life to contain art and love, in that order of time and importance.[5]

Bohemia in Hull

Hull was by no means immune from wider social trends. By the late 1920s, there was a repertory theatre, an art gallery, a literary club, and a ladies' luncheon club, all of which received press coverage. These institutions, and the informal networks that supported them, came to matter to Moll through Kathleen's friend, Eva, a headmistress and frequent visitor to the house.[6] She was "a very characteristic figure of the Twenties period: a strong-boned tall tailored sort of woman with a square bob of black hair and a soft ruminative voice; a vegetarian, new-healther, theosophist, student of comparative religions, Krishna Murti fan, expert on modern child-raising methods (eurythmics and what goes with it)" (Nicholson 1934, 15).

Eva belonged to the luncheon club, and as such was the first speaker in the affirmative in a debate with the members of the literary club.[7] More privately—and aware of sixteen-year-old Moll's desperation—, in 1931 she asked Moll to illustrate her book of theosophical nursery rhymes with pen-and-ink silhouettes. Then she

arranged for the drawings to be shown to the Director of the Ferens Art Gallery, Vincent Galloway, courtesy of the out-of-work theatre critic and reporter for the *Eastern Morning News* quoted above, Hubert Nicholson (1908, 96).[8]

The son of an autodidact, Hubert had objected to his father's proposal of university, and, in 1919 chose the "real world" to which his soldier brothers had introduced him. Now aged twenty-three, as a critic his job was to keep abreast of cultural trends—his fellow journalists had long ago introduced him to café life, Turkish cigarettes, waltzes, the blues, affairs and contraceptives. After the *News* shut down in 1929, obtaining the odd scrap of work must have been difficult, but he managed to get to London to see Russian films and enjoy *la vie bohème*. Cy Fox was later to describe him as "erudite, unregenerate, [and] agreeably raffish" (2025, n.p.).

Moll was understandably shy when Eva arranged a preliminary meeting with Hubert at her home. She would have had no idea that he was lust-struck by "the shimmering perspective of girlish calf and a cavern of serge pleats, and the loose fall of a white blouse over swelling breast and the soft line of chin and cheek and the hair's aureole against the wide width of the sky" (Nicholson 35). That this meeting led to Galloway persuading Moll's parents to let her attend the Hull School of Art (as had Katie) ensured she saw Hubert as her saviour.

Four terms of study went by. Ostensibly to help Moll work on her drawing skills, and paternalistically evaluating her as "eager, intelligent, and determined to make the best of her abilities," Hubert modelled for her, which he found "shockingly enjoyable" (Nicholson 15). She drew children playing in parks and the ballet too. She loved the gift he had given her of a bright future, while he exploited it. How soon did he deflower her? "She was a virgin and deadly frightened! She cried, because although she wanted kisses, she hadn't much liked them" (35).

Socially, Hubert drew Moll into the heart of Hull's bohemian intelligentsia, which centred on the Hull Repertory Theatre. In the '20s and '30s, seasonal professional actors included Colette O'Neil (Bertrand Russell's lover), Margaret Vines (one of the founders of Equity), André van Gyseghem (later a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB]), and Alan Wheatley (who later worked for the BBC). Lead locals were Edgar Appleton and his wife Connie, who lived in an arty flat in the Avenues. Guests at their soirées drank China tea with lemon, played a piece,

sang, gave a talk on, say, a Hokusai print or a record, or answered a questionnaire. Hubert, a regular, later evaluated it all as somewhat precious. However, Moll felt ill at ease with this sophisticated and articulate group—she must have thought them very old and boring. Hubert doubted she would ever fit in.

In January 1933, of the locals exhibiting portraits in Hull, the reviewer (Hubert?) deemed Moll "a newcomer who showed remarkable vigour and promise" ("Exhibition of Art" 1933, p. 8). When Moll passed her drawing examination in July, Hubert talked about "a new group [Artists International, Artists' International Association—AiA— as of 1935] that wanted to bring more foreign art to London" (37).[9] As a member of its executive committee, he mentioned that a representative show of Surrealism was planned for autumn. Moll, keen to create a new style and leave out the boring parts of art training, asked her parents if she could go to London. When they refused their permission, she decided to run away. Hubert helped her buy a suitcase, but soon there was no need; she was allowed to go because her unsuitable suitor had landed a job in Bristol. Just before they left for their separate destinations in October 1933, they danced to Louis Armstrong at the Beverley Road Baths.[10]

Bohemias and Politics

The plural "bohemias" is intentional: besides distant Paris, upper-class, moneyed bohemia could be found in Bloomsbury and at the top of Hampstead; middle-class, impoverished bohemia—it was the Great Depression—was located in Chelsea and Belsize Park (then considered of lesser status, but still referred to as Hampstead). Moll lodged in Chelsea with Katie, where living conditions were appalling. At the time, much of the area (especially around World's End Café, where bohemians including Dylan Thomas gathered) verged on ruins—besides which, there was no money for, nor any interest in (bourgeois) cleaning products. There was encrusted filth in corners, bed bugs crawled beneath the wallpaper, and cockroaches skittered across floors, tables, and beds as well if they used Keating's powder [pyrethrin] to kill the fleas.

The compensation was richly cultural "even living on a pittance;" for a start, exhibitions of works by Turner, the Impressionists, Van Gogh, Klee, Picasso, and Dali made all the art the sisters had seen before seem like "brown soup" (50). Then too, Henry Wood gave Prom concerts, Laurence Olivier played at the Old Vic, Russian and German movies screened at the Forum Cinema, and the Ballet Russe—with Alicia

Markova and Anton Dolan as principal dancers— wowed audiences at Sadler's Wells. *The Rites of Spring*, *Petrushka*, and *The Firebird*, whose settings and choreography were inspired by Diaghilev's Surrealist leanings, and whose costumes were by Leon Bakst, meant euphoria ("one would emerge from a performance at least two feet above the ground") (45).[11]

A Happy Accident: Helen Musprat's Solarised Image of Eileen Agar (1988, n.p.)

The Arts and Politics

Back in Hull, Moll had been enthused Surrealism: apparently unrelated forms were wittily juxtaposed or integrated with each other, making visual metaphors—truths beyond realism, "sur-réalism" (Apollinaire 1917). Happy accidents and unconscious processes would liberate human experience from false rationality and restrictive cultural assumptions, as in the solarised image (left), "taking lines for walks" in art (as Katie put it), and automatic writing for poets like André Breton and Louis Aragon. This was as true of ballet as it was of the other arts. Diaghilev sought out Dali, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, Léon Bakst, and Erik Satie to "astound" him with their work for his productions (Diaghilev, quoted in Steegmuller 1970, 82–83).

Surrealism was quite a package for a provincial teenager, particularly given its political dimensions. In 1920s Paris, the Surrealists had split into two branches, the anarchist revolutionaries embracing Dada, and Trotskyist André Breton's group. The AI followed Breton; its inaugural meeting at the home of chair [Sir] Misha Black (more of whom later) attracted thirty-two members associated with the CPGB.[12] The aim of AI was to promote united action among artists and designers in addressing the rise of fascism—Hitler had successfully engineered his appointment as Chancellor in January 1933. Evelyn Waugh's older brother, artist Alec Waugh, explained the synergy between anti-fascists and communists: "Russia, so it seemed to them, had built out of revolution a new form of society that did not need to prey upon its neighbours and impose its will upon them, since by the elimination of the profit motive it was

independent of the hysteria of recurring booms and slumps" (1962, 254.) The line between anti-fascists and communists was thin as a hair. Hubert and Moll's London network probably included Alec Waugh, Paul Nash and photographer Eileen Agar (each other's lovers in 1934 when both were married), artist Roland Penrose, ballet critic Arnold Haskell, painter Richard Nevison, art historian Herbert Read, sculptors Henry Moore and Jacob Epstein, and certainly Dylan Thomas. No doubt one of Moll's and Hubert's outings would have been the AI exhibition in Charlotte Street, "The Social Scene," which included works by Russian artists.[13] Surrealist bohemia had another distinction: changing life-partners and frequent extra-marital sex. For example, Peggy Guggenheim answered the question, "How many husbands have you had, Mrs Guggenheim?" with, 'Do you mean my own, or other people's?'" (Gill 2002, 85).

Hubert took "naïve" Moll to Paris in February 1934 (Nicholson 70). For her, this was the magical city from where Kathleen had brought back dolls each year. Here, besides an anti-parliamentarian demonstration (the so-called Veteran's Riot) in which a small group of the French Communist Party fought against fascists, they attended a bohemian party at which absinthe purportedly laced with strychnine was on offer. The line was that "We shall be dead in an hour. All the really important things can be said in 60 minutes" (109). Moll received the attentions of a ballet-dancer who was "famous for the ballerinas, archdukes, and bishops who had whipped and trampled on him. [Hubert] … heard him murmuring [to her], "Your heels, my dear child, should be higher, much higher. In the point of each heel, my dear [Molly], should be a small emerald" (100). When Hubert didn't like the party—and presumably the attention Moll received—, she thought he was trying to spoil it all for her "because the good old days will always the best. You like the things I haven't experienced to be better than those I have" (114). She claimed that "he had brought her out to Paris to tell her she was not good enough" (121). To cap it off, over lunch one of the communist fighters in the riot, a young and famous poet, asked Moll if she'd like to sleep with him for "a different experience" (123). While she refused the offer, Hubert saw that she glimpsed "the alluring Paris she was missing, where everybody lived constantly on a high and exacting level of activity and brilliance, opposing convention with courage and impunity, perpetually creative and extravagantly amusing; heroes, exalted men and women without problems" (122).

The experience affected her deeply. When she visited Hull,

> There [was] a great quarrel. They didn't like her manners, her ways, the words she used. She couldn't stand the home–so shabby, so stuffy–her mother so fussy and solicitous. She told them a little about [her life]. It alarmed them. She told them about parties, about theatres, about people's mistresses, about late nights. She felt that these memories and hopes were all that she had to pit against the old life, the old enemy. […] She determined solemnly never to see her home or her people again.
> (Nicholson 1934, pp. 66–67)

If Moll gave such details to George, it was likely she was thrown out of the house (he had tossed Thora's shoes out of a window after she stayed out late). Only Nicholson's coda rings true: Moll had wholeheartedly embraced the Surrealist / bohemian / communist antipathy to middle England.

In addition to partying and politicking with Hubert in London and Paris, Moll paid visits to Bristol, where her work was exhibited at the Clifton Arts Club. Here, for Hubert, the social scene was increasingly political, because he was a member of the Bristol branch of the Society for Cultural Relations with the U.S.S.R (SCRUSSR). Members included nuclear physicist Klaus Fuchs (a member of the German Communist Party who fled the Nazis in 1933, then research assistant to Professor Nevill Mott), and Mott himself, a former Fellow and lecturer at Cambridge (the seedbed of British anti-fascist, communist activity, and double agents). At their meetings they would act out translations of the Soviet treason trials, with Fuchs as prosecutor.[14]

In London, as the year went on and Katie fell in love with the man she was to marry, Moll found cold comfort in her cramped lodgings and her uncertain future. Aged only nineteen, she hurried to the altar to escape the void and assert her new self. On 24 December 1934 she and Hubert married in at the registry office in Hull. Her choice of venue and of a scarlet velvet dress with a frill collar of silver lamé and a black hat and veil emphasized her breakaway identity. Neither she nor Hubert seem to have considered that, if the Depression continued, as a married woman Moll was unlikely to obtain work.

Life in Bristol and Cheltenham

After a short honeymoon in Paris, they rented a flat in Bristol and bought a Russian Blue cat (Vladimir). Moll enjoyed homemaking. She chose furniture, decorated, painted a pair of ballet dancers on a piece of tin as a splash back, and enamelled a plaster high relief of the goddess of spring. One room was black, pink and grey; another black and green; and the kitchen was cheered up by a red, cream and black check tablecloth. She glowed with pride when Dolin and Markova, newly branching out on their own, visited.[15]

Around this time, Chapman and Hall approached Hubert for the option on any full-length novel he thought of writing. This became the autobiographical *Face your Lover* (1935). Hubert commissioned Moll to design its dust cover and that of other books in the pipeline. In June, James Stevens "Jim" Cox, owner of the Coleridge Bookshop in Bristol, footed the bill for publishing twenty-eight of Hubert's poems, *Date*, with illustrations by Moll.

However, frequent squabbles punctuated a largely happy year. Moll complained that all their friends were his, that she felt stuck at home, that she could not understand him. Hubert thought she would settle into his world over time. Exactly. Then work problems blotted out their troubles; rival newspapers amalgamated, and the only job Hubert could get was in Cheltenham. Cecil Day Lewis headed the CPGB there, so social life came ready-made.

A particular friend from this circle was rebel Connie Swan. Connie had quit her office job in Birmingham, posed in art schools, lived with gypsies in the New Forest, and sketched people at 3d and 6d a drawing in Brighton.[16] Like Moll, she hated Cheltenham. The trio drank, talked, and climbed the Devil's Chimney together, and all was rosy. Then Connie moved to Bournemouth, and, once again, Moll felt isolated.

Face your Lover came out in September. He received praise for doing justice to the "age-old eternal triangle" by taking an extraordinary number of angles and dealing with the love of an older man for a young girl with delicacy ("Hull Journalist's Success" 1935, 8). Another reviewer disliked his characters, "vapouring among the post-war weeds of moral turpitude" ("First Novel by Hull Author" 1937, 6).

It is probable Moll and Hubert were two of the 6,000 or so visitors to the AI Artists Against War and Fascism exhibition in November 1935 (a protest against Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia). Held in a derelict building in Soho Square,

exhibitors included Viscount "Jack" Hastings.[17] A digression about Hastings is in order, as some of the people he knew were in Moll's life, if not then, within a couple of years. Hastings, Richard Carline, and Stephen Spender studied together at the Slade in the late 1920s. Hastings went to the States in 1930 to ask actor Douglas Fairbanks (who had visited Moscow in 1926) to introduce him to communist muralist Diego Rivera; he returned to London in 1934.[18]

In the summer of 1936, Hubert and Moll spent two weeks in Poole near Connie. They swam, sunbathed, danced at the Jolly Sailor and at the Rotunda, drank cheap draught cider, and went on half-drunken car-rides. The upshot was the decision to leave Cheltenham and try and make a living in London.

Thus far, since rejecting her upbringing and as a blow-in, Moll's identity (always a social phenomenon) was restricted to Hubert's view of her. She had only felt a sense of belonging in Connie's company.[19] The sense of belonging is grounded in subjective feelings of value, respect and fit (regardless of financial, cultural, or gender-based differences); sharing experiences and understandings; and finding that wanting to belong (choice) is matched by being made, and feeling, welcome.[20] Neither Appleton's soirées in Hull, nor the SCRUSSR in Bristol, offered her such experiences.

Back in London

Hubert went flat hunting. In the end, he found a ground floor flat off Great Ormond Street for the three of them, two bedrooms and a kitchen-cum-living room in a straight line. Connie took the front room; when they moved in on a rainy August Bank Holiday, Hubert and Moll had less than £10 in the bank. Luckily, just one month later, in September 1936 Hubert got a scoop that landed him a full-time job.

As to Moll's work opportunities, they were scant. Only one in ten married women worked outside the home, so any money she brought into the flat had to be through casual jobs or pawning so-called valuables. In fact, Moll occasionally worked in the Parton Street bookshop at Red Lion Square, which was, from May 1935 the headquarters of the AiA, *the* "central node for a particular leftwing, intellectual, bohemian lifestyle" (Hubble 2021, n.p.).[21] Proprietor David Archer (also publisher—as Parton Press—of Dylan's poetry) ran a café in the basement, gave hungry writers money from the till, a bed if they needed one, and let impoverished customers borrow books that were for sale.[22] However, the bookshop offered Moll more than the "central

node" for a lifestyle, it generated a sense of belonging. Here, there was an approach to the problems of the Depression more in tune with her consciousness, her sense of fun, and her need to feel more "in control" of her life.[23]

One of Moll's co-workers was an ex-seaman, ex-carpenter, ex-stage-hand, and career writer, John Hugo Sommerfield (1908–91), an egalitarian CPGB member with a typical public school accent that originated in his schooling in Hampstead.[24] He knew people in the AiA, most particularly Stephen Spender (they had attended the same school). At home in the hard drinking sub-culture of Soho pubs, his first novel in 1930 had brought him new friends, especially fellow ex-seaman and heavy drinker Malcolm Lowry.[25] His now broken marriage to (E)stella Allen, his son Peter,[26] and his friendship with Dylan all dated to 1933. His second novel, *May Day*, was published in 1936, its cover design, by Misha Black (who, with his wife Betty co-owned the iconic bohemian haunt, the Piccadilly Kardomah Exhibition Café).[27]

John's initial impression of Moll ("Liz") was similar to Hubert's in terms of lust, but added an element of character: "A quiet, shy-looking girl. Round face with a blunt nose, large wide mouth and very dark brown eyes. Short, straight black hair, wide shoulders and strong, well-shaped legs. She was wearing a nondescript skirt and a too-large man's denim shirt that baffled a slight curiosity I felt about her breasts.[28] I didn't register her as being particularly attractive, but there was something about her than appealed to me, something gentle, confiding and honest" (1977, 52). As to what John was like, there are three impressions, firstly a drawing by Moll (see p. 15). Secondly, Doris Lessing described him as "a tall, lean man, pipe-smoking, who would allow to fall from unsmiling lips surreal diagnoses of the world he lived in, while his eyes insisted he was deeply serious. A comic." (1997, 90). The third was his own comment on his interests at this time: like everyone else in this circle with a failed marriage, his preoccupation was "indiscriminate screwing" (Sommerfield 53).

In fact, the worse things got in Europe, the more bohemians chose escape. In the first six months of 1937, Moll and Hubert joined in twenty-five bottle parties. Each person brought their own, and Duke Ellington and the Hot Club de Paris provided the music. They went to grand dos with movies and asparagus tips; wild parties with fireworks thrown in amongst the dancers; tatty parties with All-Souls' Eve rituals; penniless parties where the drink ran out; and a French Surrealist party to which so many people came that the Surrealists couldn't get in.[29] This may have been the house

party held by Roland Penrose in July, "with Roland taking the lead, ready to turn the slightest encounter into an orgy.[30] I remember going off to watch Lee [Miller] taking a bubble-bath, but there was not quite enough room in the tub for all of us" (Agar 1988, 133).

Much more formally, Surrealists gathered once a month in a Soho Spanish restaurant to have fun, discuss ideas, and make plans. Artists included Eileen Agar, Penrose, Miller, Moore, and Nash; another attendee was filmmaker Humphrey Jennings.[31] One set of plans no doubt related to the AiA's First British Artists Congress and Exhibition in Grosvenor Square in April 1937, its broadsheet designed by Moore. Hastings opened the Congress and led the discussion panel, composed of Misha, Clive Bell, and art historian Herbert Read.[32] Another set of plans related to Jennings, as co-founder of Mass Observation (MO) with poet and reporter for the *Daily Mirror*, Charles Madge. Madge was struck by the difference between the attitudes of the working-class people he met through work and views reported in the press. The pair set up MO on shoestring budget to solicit and collect diaries written on the 12th of each month from working-class volunteers. Missing the gap between what is observable and what is recorded, they thought that this would create "an anthropology of ourselves" (Madge and Harrisson 1939, 12). Anthropologist Tom Harrisson fixed this anomaly when he joined them: in his "Worktown" project in Bolton, Lancashire, observers documented conversations and behaviour *in situ*.

By this time, the political battle around poverty led to fascist riots, a huge May Day march, and unprecedented strike action.[33] More peacefully, MO conducted its first major project, concerning ordinary people's views of George IV's coronation on May 12th. When a Hampstead woman (possibly Eileen Agar or Bauhaus-trained photographer, communist, and Soviet spy, Edith Tudor-Hart [born Suschitzky]?) sent photographers and people to take orders out to capture images of children's teas and treats in the working-class streets, Moll and Hubert signed on.[34] He had pawned his watch and owed money to relatives, and they had sold Moll's fur coat for eight shillings to buy food. It rained, and they made no money.[35]

Then, fortuitously (for him at least), Hubert sold a couple of articles. He had enough of a surplus to be politically active. He took a cheap trip to Paris for July 14 with some labour delegates. It cost a fiver to get there, 3rd class via Dunkirk and Tilbury. Afterwards, he and Moll took a cycling holiday, using bikes borrowed from

Misha and Betty. The holiday did not go well. Worse still, in Chelsea the stressors increased—stones were flung at their windows, the doorbell rang in the middle of the night, and a heavy man charged them and pinned them against railings. In a particularly wet autumn, Moll and "Eyleen" (Eileen Agar?) took part in a torch lit peace procession, but their shoes leaked and they sat around in damp clothes.

That Moll produced some surrealist paintings of torn limbs and people trussed in ropes indicated her level of distress to Hubert. Hubert saw this as an expression not just of the political climate, but of how he had tried to coerce her into being an extraverted and rational equal. He was panic stricken: "The strain which now even the smallest demands seemed to intensify only turned my wife deeper in upon herself, and as her love for me dwindled, mine for her became more neurotically intense. It became a passion of the damned." (1941, 205). Significantly, "she seemed to be finding pleasure now in the company of the 'submerged,' the 'dumb oxen' who were anathema to me" (205). The oxen were the men who were ready to fight with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, most particularly John. In October 1936, poet John Cornford recruited him to fight for the cause.

In John's absence, needing to think her situation through, Moll left Chelsea.[36] It seems she turned to Agar, whose marital trajectory was similar: when she married, she wrote, "I realised Robin was the escape-hatch which freed me from the clutches of my family. I will always be grateful to him for helping me to leap into a new life, but at the time I had become very disillusioned with the whole situation" (1988, 53). Using "Eyleen" as her go-between, Moll dithered for three weeks about what best to do. The news from Spain was not good, but abandoning the limited financial security in favour of the chance that John would survive, or returning, beaten, to Lilly and George was risky.

As to John, besides three weeks in bitter cold in the open hills near Madrid, he endured the terrible eight days of Nazi Condor Legion air raids and the hand-to-hand bayonet and hand grenade fights of the Battle Ciudad Universitaria (15 to 23 November 1936). Then he either awoke sick with pleurisy to find his much-depleted brigade had left without him, or he could not face any more of the horror.[37] In December, he arrived in London to find his obituary in *The Times* and the *Daily Mail.* Of course, he returned to the Parton Street bookshop and his old Soho pub haunts,

where he sang “bogus bolshy” songs—not that he was bogus (Lowry, 1983 [1947], 183).

Unaware of these developments, Moll had gone back to Hubert. They decided to go to Paris, so Hubert pawned what he could and threw in his job. They arrived three weeks before Christmas, but everything went wrong. They could not get hold of the key for their friend’s flat, had to spend their few sous on hotel bills, and Hubert could not find work. The weather turned against them, too: blizzards kept them stuck in their stuffy hotel room or sent them into cafés to thaw out. After three solid weeks of squabbles, there was no choice other than to go to his family home in Hull. Arriving there on Christmas Eve, Hubert teetered on the verge of a breakdown. When they returned to London, they moved into Dylan’s vacant Hampstead flat, which Moll painted sculptural white.

However, John was not only back on the bohemian scene, he was a hero, a survivor. It was not long before Moll’s marriage ended with a showdown in Soho, and Hubert had to move out of the flat. She invited John for a meal. After a Lilly-style lamb chop dinner, a walk on Hampstead Heath, and a night of good sex after which Moll declared “I wanted you … but you didn’t do anything,” John realized “[Moll] was my first love, and we were happy together” (1977, 84).

At some point in 1937, Moll and John were in Bolton together, contributing to the “Worktown” project. Moll drew while John documented people’s behaviour in pubs.[38] Posh accents like John’s were not the problem that Jennings had anticipated because of shared adversity (group cohesion as in London’s bohemia). Interestingly, data collection on a daily basis was more about Jennings’s random ideas than part of a coherent plan—one such idea may even have come from Moll, that of observing people at funerals. Processions that used to pass the family home when she was a child, with “people … making their talk ever so low, the crowd [stretching] their necks to watch, and fathers [standing] still to lift their trilby hats in a solemn way” (Moss 19).

In April 1938, John spoke in Hull as a representative of the International Brigade at the Left Book Club on the significance of the Spanish struggle for the whole world.[39] His talk to a full house, which followed the screening of *Defense of Madrid*, may well have been a promotion for his book, *Volunteer in Spain*, for which he had received an advance of £35 from Lawrence and Wishart but still had £18 to earn. Moll was clearly in no better a position financially with John than she had been with Hubert, but a far better one emotionally.

Portrait of John Sommerfield by Molly Moss, n.d., bearing similarities to Musprat's solarized photograph. Image taken from Andrew Whitehead, "John Sommerfield."

John's novella, *Trouble in Porter Street* (1938), with its cover, map and illustrations by Moll, resulted from a CPGB request to develop a manual as to how to collectively fight rent rises. For Moll, besides such illustrations, she probably—like many others in her circle—turned her hand to quicker, more ephemeral styles that reflected the urgency of the political situation, such as banners, pamphlet covers, murals and cartoons.[40] No trace of these works remains.

A year later, when the couple "worked hard for the cause," the couple lived as Molly and John Sommerfield in Islington (Sommerfield 84). In his terms, Moll had "deep, simple convictions and worked for them, taking on the dullest and most discouraging jobs" (84). She continued to paint, but the romanticism had gone. Her social realist work in an exhibition of working-class art—note the "working-class"—, entitled The Kentish Town Power Station (dark towering chimneys against an evening sky), was described as "impressive" ("Pictures of Everyday Life" 1939, 13).[41]

During the War

In February 1940, MO published Harrison's and Madge's observations of public interest in government propaganda posters. Fewer than 4% even looked at them, and of those who did, fewer than 21% of men and 10% of women remembered the words.[42] In

April, MO secured regular funding from the Ministry of Information (MoI) to collect home intelligence to inform public policy, and—through the war Artists' Advisory Committee—to create appealing propaganda (particularly posters) that secured improved compliance.[43] It is not known whether Moll contributed to this work, but she certainly had the connections to do so.

John was mobilised in July, but was in London with Moll as late as January 1941, teeing up a drinking session with Dylan.[44] Later that year, Moll obtained her divorce from Hubert. Then, after the Battle of Britain, Katie (who had been in Sheffield with George and Lilly, daughter Jean (1940–2021), her sister Thora and her two toddlers) returned to Hampstead. By 1943, Moll and her step-son Peter lived with Katie, her husband Bert, and Jean in a spacious protected tenancy at 17, Belsize Crescent. Lower and upper front rooms had bay windows letting in a lot of light for painting. On a broader scale that year, Misha Black headed the Design Research Unit in the MoI, which brought art and industry together.[45] Again, it is likely that Moll was contributing work. The sisters joined the Hampstead Artists Council (HAC) when it was founded in 1944 with Moore as the figurehead, and exhibited together for three weeks at the Wilson Galleries in Hampstead in April 1945. Belsize Park came to be the heart of the sisters' sense of belonging, although, like everyone else at the time, they called it Hampstead.

After the War

Both Moll and Katie remained serious about the need to liberate people from middle-class stuffiness. Once the war ended, the two children (Peter and his cousin Jean) attended a "Progressive Day School" established by Andrew Ottaway (later a writer on the sociology of education) ("Burgess Hill School" 1936, 39). Ottaway was the son of the headmaster of an "awful" residential school for destitute boys; beyond the 3Rs *his* school left the children free to learn and play as they chose ("My Time at the School of Handicrafts," n.d.).[46] Children had shared responsibilities in weekly meetings of parents and staff who they called by their first names (two of whom were sociologist Mrs. Mary Buchanan and novelist Bernice Rubens).[47] Peter thrived there, meeting cricketer Dennis Compton and earning praise from the Minister of Education for a painting.[48]

Meanwhile, Moll and John moved to a basement flat opposite Katie, and the

sisters displayed works at the inaugural annual HAC open-air exhibition in 1947. Katie hosted an annual fancy dress party, decorating the walls with paper sculptures (bodies, heads and limbs cut freehand and looped onto the wall in dancing positions). Moll and John's friends contributed to the fun, including Django Reinhardt, a Roma jazz musician who had survived the war playing "degenerate" jazz music in Paris.

One couple in the HAC relevant to Moll's life were potters Pam Nash and Ernie Collyer. They rented the bowling green pavilion at Elstree Studios at Borehamwood, facilities used by the MoI during the war for producing propaganda, owned by Douglas Fairbanks as of 1953.[49] Of course, they socialised with the people using the studios, such as Spike Milligan, Spencer Tracey and Katherine Hepburn (who bought some of Moll's paintings). All the while, John continued to work with MO, and to write. Moll and he teetered on the edge of destitution: "Like everyone else then, they had no money. […] During one hard winter, when the Sommerfields were broke, their big tomcat caught pigeons for them, which they stewed, giving him half of what he caught" (Lessing 1997, 90–91).

In 1950, Misha's work with London Transport furnished Moll with just two much-valued commissions, her tableau posters "Out and About, Winter London: Piccadilly Circus" and "Poster Art: Hampstead Heath," for use in the Underground.[50] The latter became her mascot, because it generated sales at the time when government investment in art dried up.[51] No longer a member of the HAC, in December 1954 at the Hanover Gallery Inaugural Show of Modern Art, ten of her works sold on the first day.[52] Others were loaned by Tracey and Hepburn. Moll continued to illustrate John's book covers and, in 1955, a textbook, *En Voyage*.

There was a counter-dynamic at work, however. Much of London's housing stock had been destroyed by a combination of shoddy development, lack of maintenance, and bombing. In 1953 the Churchill government published their housing policy, which included the derequisitioning and sale of empty housing stock. Moll and John bought a tiny terrace house at 107, Mansfield Road, which joined Hampstead to Kentish Town. There was one room downstairs that led to the garden and of which the feature was a small pot-bellied stove; John's bottle green Lagonda was parked outside.[53] John's *North West Five* (1960) depicted the lives of an impoverished young couple in Kentish Town.

In 1957, government policy was reversed: Moll and John's terrace typified the type of building subject to compulsory purchase and demolition. Perhaps their relationship was under stress well beyond the question of where they might live. In *The Imprinted* John asserted that he celebrated his 50th birthday (1958) not with Moll, but with a wealthy, good-looking alcoholic, "Myra Hodgson" (1976, 19).[54] Although the date the terrace was demolished is unknown, the rebuild only got underway in 1974; in the meantime, Moll and John bought a cottage at Bullingdon near Oxford, with "gorgeous woods back and front" (Lilly Moss, 1965). Moll was featured in an article on gardening in *The Tatler* in 1961.

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Mrs. John Sommerfield (*painter Molly Moss*) *lives with trees—very tiny ones. She is proud of her two lemon trees, one eight years old, which she grew from pips. "I found them sprouting on the compost heap. There's also a peach tree in the garden which grew from a stone." She and her writer husband have collected various plants on their travels and keep most of them in a glass-covered veranda room next to the kitchen. What used to be a sash window between the two rooms has been removed (right) and puts on the sill include a Clivia and a lemon. (The painting is one of her own.) Among those looking out on the garden (below) is a Bilbergia, and another Clivia. The cactus comes from Portugal. In summer a screen of runner beans outside throws a cool green light into the room*

"Mrs. John Sommerfield." *The Tatler*, 23 May 1962, 696.

Illustrating the enduring gender-bias in literary and artistic circles, Moll's marital status came before her creativity; note also Moll's 1950s abstract expressionist painting on the wall in the photograph. Perhaps a little later in the decade, she also turned her hand to Pop Art in painting faces and hairdos on wig stands.[55]

In 1971, the year after Lilly died, Moll and John married. This was shortly before the government offered housing in new towns outside London, but relocation to "Zombie shelters" was not to John's taste:

> The planners speak of "decanting" the people who are rehoused as part of this process. It's progress, with central heating, built-in kitchen gear, modern hygienic bathrooms, lots of amenities that most of the tenants have lacked before. And then there'd be the new supermarkets and the too-big characterless new pubs to replace the inefficient local shops,

> where everybody knew everybody, and the usually rather scruffy run-down local pubs that had been genuine unorganized community centres.
>
> The new developments liquidated communities. Perhaps not very good communities, but genuine ones with some degree of warmth and neighbourliness. (1977, 138.)

Hampstead artists formed one such liquidated community.

Both Moll and John died in Bullingdon, John in 1991, and Moll ten years later.

Molly Moss's "Disappearance"

Moll's artistic trajectory took in traditional line drawing, surrealism, social realism, tableau (posters), abstract expressionism, and Pop Art. Personally, she journeyed from being the family joker (sometimes in a covert conspiracy against a bullying father) to being a displaced child bride who found independence, love, and a sense of belonging in a bohemian community of anti-fascist communists. Although having a Yorkshire accent and lacking money were more of a passport into than a barrier to belonging in these circles, the casual misogyny and the trivialization of women's achievements that typified the art world affected her visibility.[56] Much more specifically, the politics of the left meant that art produced in the later 1930s and during the war was largely anonymous, and the Cold War led to the ghosting of people with communist affiliations. Capping this off, when poor bohemians—communist or not—left Hampstead, their identities were privatised. In this light, it's ironic that I give John the last word, confirming the inevitably tentative nature of this portrait of Moll: "One day I'll disappear and it will be as if all the fuss and bother and sweating self-concern of whatever it was that had been me since I was born, had never happened" (1977, 176).

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[1] When first mentioned, or if extra clarity is required, full names are used.

[2] See Madge 1978, 5, 87; Schutz 1980 [1932]; Hodder 1998, 110, 125; Lieblich, Tuval-Massiach and Zilber 1998; Smith 1998; and O'Toole 1999.

[3] See Park 1929, quoted in John Madge 1978, 86.

[4] Moll's grandmother Margaret Carter née Rollit's wealthy cousin, Sir Albert Rollit, famously married into the nobility. In contrast, widowed in 1862, she lived in reduced circumstances. While her daughter, Lucy, ran a Ladies' School, she took in a lodger, Carl Moss, to make ends meet...

[5] Information about Moll in this period is drawn from Hubert Nicholson's autobiographical novel *Face Your Lover* (1934) and *Half my Days and Nights:*

Autobiography of a Reporter (1941). For later characters, I knew some of the people, and recognise (sometimes vaguely) several names.

[6] It is unlikely Katie used pseudonyms. Possibly the headmistress of Hull Girls' High School, Eva M. L. Elliott.

[7] "Should a Play Teach?" *Hull Daily Mail*, 17 February 1931, 5.

[8] Galloway had fought with the Artists Rifles in WW1 alongside Paul and John Nash.

[9] "Examinations in Art"1933, 7.

[10] Hubert interviewed him for the newspaper.

[11] In 1926 Diaghilev had Surrealist artists Joan Miro and Max Ernst involved in his productions. See Rosie Lesso 2021, n.p. Note that Ninette de Valois, who founded the Vic-Wells Ballet in 1931, had danced with the Ballet Russe, as had Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin. Dolin lived in Chelsea, in a street of studios leased to sculptors, painters, illustrators, musicians, and writers (including Augustus John, Paul Robeson, Leonard Lambert, Sir William Rothenstein (head of the R. C. A.), Sydney Nolan, and Mervyn Peake. See "Glebe Place" n.d.

[12] Black was principal exhibitions designer for the MoI. As a founder of Design Research Unit (of which one of the directors was Herbert Read), he liaised with London Transport about artists' commissions. Artists from the AiA included people associated with Elstree Studios; people who lived in Hampstead included Henry Moore, Richard Carline, and Eric Ravilous. See "Misha Black" (1983).

[13] See "Painting the Town Red."

[14] For the good relationship between "the city" and the university, see Sir Nevill Mott (xxx, 4).

[15] Dolin was to dance in *Invitation to the Watch* filmed at Elstree Studios the following year.

[16] See "1936 Pretty 20 Year Old Birmingham Clerk."

[17] Information on Viscount Hastings is drawn from Alison McClean, n.d.

[18] Viscount Hastings's wife Cristina and sister Lady Marion Cameron were members of the CPGB. Hastings and Cristina visited Russia with Alec Waugh in 1935.

[19] As living, embodied social beings oriented towards survival, our actions are unconscious, conscious, and self-conscious. Capable of creativity, improvisations and spontaneity, we engage in meaningful interaction with some choice over which rules we will adhere to in which situations within the constraints and enablers of particular

power relationships, and use a range of tools and artefacts to communicate. See Burkitt 1999.

[20] See Alyson Mahar, Virginie Cobigo, and Heather Stuart (2012, 1–1).

[21] Those who dossed down in Parton Street included Dylan Thomas, John Cornford, and Thomas Alfred Jackson (who founded both Socialist and Communist Parties in Britain). In terms of art styles espoused in bohemia, Surrealists were ceding to social realists (see Alison McClean n.d., p. 2).

[22] See Dom Moraes 2004, 207, and "Radical Bookshop History Project," n.d., 12.

[23] Collective actions, however mistaken, generate euphoria, and restore the sense of being "in control" when social order is threatened. See "Engaging the Community." 2014.

[24] These jobs find a place in John's first two works, *They Die Young* (1930), and *Behind the Scenes* (1934). For a full list of Sommerfield's work and a link to a few papers archived at the Cadbury Research Library, see Andrew Whitehead's website, "John Sommerfield."

[25] Known others are artist Nina Hamnett (a Fitzroy regular, and CPGB member as of 1926), and actress Elsa Lanchester (whose mother was Eleanor Marx's secretary, and who married Left-leaning Charles Laughton).

[26] Peter Sommerfield (1933–2019).

[27] For the Blacks, see "Kardomah Café, Piccadilly," and Molly Russell, 2021. The story spanned just over two days in London that led up to a May Day demonstration. John decried capitalism, but imagined that a mobilized and disciplined working class could create a classless society (King 2013).

[28] Possible evidence for Moll sharing Katie's opinion that breasts should be concealed.

[29] Possibly thrown by Julian Trevelyan (1910–88), who studied art in Paris, meeting famous surrealists. The alternative host is Jennings, who organised the International Surrealist Exhibition in London, along with Read, Penrose and Breton.

[30] Penrose liked to bind women's wrists together, and keep them that way all night. See Peggy Guggenheim 1979, 191.

[31] See Agar 146 and Guggenheim 159. Married, Jennings's known lovers were Americans, diarist Emily Coleman and—very briefly because she thought he looked "like Donald Duck"—soon-to-be art collector Guggenheim (159).

[32] Clive Bell was a pacifist; Read dismissed social realism as feeble and endorsed the revolutionary potential of surrealism and abstract art. See Herbert Read (1935).

[33] For an account of these events, see John Saville 1977, 232–37.

[34] Tudor-Hart came under MI5 watch soon after she arrived. See Diane Smyth 2024.

[35] That the woman organising the photography lived in Hampstead is unsurprising. In the low ground of Belsize Park, residents included, in the 1920s, Stanley Spencer, and, in the 1930s, Herbert Read, Henry Moore (married to his Polish ex-R. C. A. student), and Ben Nicholson and his partner Barbara Hepworth at the Mall Studios.

[36] Hubert has Moll staying in Bristol, the place she complained she had no friends of her own. In order for there to be a go-between, she was more probably in Hampstead with "Eyleen."

[37] His story in *Volunteer in Spain* is that he awoke to find them gone; in *The Inherited* that he had pleurisy.

[38] See Nick Hubble 2021, n.p. John co-wrote the chapter on pub life with Harrisson for MO's review of their first year's work ("Pub-Goers" 24–31), and drafted *The Pub and the People* at this time (published in 1943).

[39] See "Modern War Horrors" 1937, 6. This anti-fascist club was founded in February 1936. Besides books, it offered educative activities including reading groups, holidays, and cinema trips to foster political knowledge. See Roscoe 2019.

[40] These included Pearl Binder, Baroness Llewellyn-Jones; Viscount (Jack) Hastings (who painted the mural, *The Worker of the Future Upsetting the Economic Chaos of the Present*), and Peggy Angus (a contemporary at the RCA of Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Eric Ravilious, taught by Paul Nash). Stephen Bone was on the AIA committee from 1936 to 1939, helping artist refugees from Germany to live and work in Britain. AiA records (1933–1971) are in the Tate Gallery Archive, TGA7043.

[41] Note that John's autobiographical "I" in *The Inherited* was the son of a thoroughly working-class bricklayer.

[42] See "War Posters did not Impress us" 1940, p. 7.

[43] Unfortunately, the names of the 400 contributing artists remain elusive, but those on contracts included Paul Nash, John Piper, and Eric Ravilious; casuals included Henry Moore; and they used works by William Rothenstein.

[44] See Dylan Thomas (1941).

[45] The DRO shared the MO office in Kingsway.

[46] I attended the school briefly, but was frightened by the unruly dining room and what looked to me like a game of hanging kids upside down from trees when no adults were

around. Albeit a decade later, both phenomena can be seen on you tube, “Beat School (1961).”

[47] Mary Buchanan (1909–1971) was co-founder with former lawyer, refugee smuggler, and wartime BBC announcer Dr. Henry Alexander (1879–1988) of the British Pestalozzi Children’s Village Foundation for orphaned refugee children. See “The Founders” n.d. Bernice Rubens, in *When I Grow Up: A Memoir* (2004), wrote about the school from a teacher’s perspective.

[48] See “Dennis Compton with Rotarians” 1948, 1, and “Minister Praises Boy’s Painting” 1948, 4.

[49] Of the four studios at Borehamwood, the most likely is that now owned by the BBC, but by the British National Film Company (Wesleyan Joseph Rank and wealthy widow Lady Ann Henrietta Yule) between 1939 and 1948, then by Lady Yule and her daughter Gladys Meryl Yule. Douglas Fairbanks followed in 1954.

[50] Moll’s original of Piccadilly Circus hangs in my niece’s dining room. See also “Poster Artwork: Hampstead Heath, by Molly Moss” (1950). The V & A has a copy of “London Transport wishes you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year” (1950). A “Pop Art Oil Painting,” painted on board (which was cheap), “Hi! Hi! Little Boys” was on sale as an antique, dated as 1950, but the style is more typical of the 1960s. “Covent Garden Market Flower Show” was painted for the cover of *John Bull* in 1951. Various other works by Moll have been auctioned in recent years, as listed under References.

[51] See “Hampstead Artist Gains Fame” 1951, 5.

[52] See “Artist Sells ten Paintings on First day” 1954, 9.

[53] We were given one short drive in this glamorous vehicle. The car and the house descriptions are my recollections.

[54] I am unable to deduce her identity.

[55] See “Bust of a Female” [1965?].

[56] See Eleanor Frizell 2014.