

# Pat Duffy Hutcheon's **Lonely Trail** The Life Journey of a Freethinker

## ***A book review by Donald Hatch***

(Editor's note: It is not our usual practice to publish more than one review of a given book. However, this review by Donald Hatch seemed a particularly appropriate celebration of the life of Pat Duffy Hutcheon, a truly great humanist who died in February. See also the letter from Henry Beissel.)

**T**he early chapters of *Lonely Trail* provide what must be one of the most descriptive historical records ever written of the hardships experienced by the people living in rural Alberta in the dust bowl years of the 1930s. The ensuing chapters then complete the story of Pat Duffy Hutcheon's journey throughout her life. All the chapters portray Pat's many talents, and her strength of character comes through loud and clear as she encounters life's many challenges.

Lonely Trail was the name of the one-room country school that eight-year-old Patricia Duffy began attending in 1934. This school was located in marginal prairie farm land near the town of Acadia Valley, Alberta, close to the Saskatchewan border about 180 kilometers east of Drumheller. Unable to get steady work as a mechanic, her father Lew Duffy purchased a farm at a "bargain price" hoping that the prevalent drought conditions would let up and enable him to support his family consisting of his wife Nellie and their five children, Pat being the middle child. Weather conditions did not improve, and the family endured almost unbearable hardships for the next few years. Money was scarce

and the family had to survive on the barest of necessities.

After Pat's first term at Lonely Trail School, she was fortunate in having two remarkable teachers who instilled in her a fondness for learning. She became a free thinker at an early age, thanks to her free thinking father who encouraged all of his children to develop a love for reading. After yet another crop failure in 1938, Pat moved with her mother to her grandmother's house in the village of Oyen and attended the school where she had started her education some years earlier. She was an outstanding student and at one point won a Governor General's Medal for being the top student in the Acadia School Division. After attending two different high schools, she finished grade eleven. She then went to work for a year before coming back to Oyen to finish grade twelve in 1945. On VE Day she made her first of many public speeches. She was selected to represent "leaders of the future."

After receiving a War Emergency Teaching Certificate from the Alberta Faculty of Education in Calgary, she began teaching at the isolated Empress View one-room school near

the village of Empress. Teacher accommodation was primitive, but nevertheless she coped and took great pleasure in watching the progress of her pupils. Before long she was transferred to Acadia Valley to teach a difficult-to-handle class of grades four, five and six whom she successfully steered onto the road to learning. It was here that she met Jack Westcott, a psychologically-damaged war veteran, who after a time proposed marriage. She accepted, but not without misgivings. She taught for one more



Pat on VE Day

year at Big Prairie School in Cremona country, married Jack and became a hard working farm wife in the Acadia Valley area. Her consolation was the joy of raising her son Tommy after a very difficult childbirth. Eventually she realized she had to end the marriage and in preparation began taking correspondence courses from Queens University. She left the farm and began teaching in Calgary while completing her undergraduate degree, graduating with a Bachelor of Education in 1963. After obtaining a Masters Degree in Sociology she accepted a position as Assistant Professor at the Regina campus of the University of Saskatchewan. Teaching there was a rewarding experience. She was granted tenure and earned a promotion to Associate Professor. After receiving a no-fault divorce, and with her son Tom attending university in Calgary, she enrolled at Yale University in New Haven Connecticut to work on her PhD. Her first year was enjoyable and fulfilling, but unfortunately her second year was marred when her advisor made inappropriate sexual advances, a situa-

tion that persuaded her to return to teaching in Regina.

While living in Calgary, Pat became acquainted with Unitarianism and for the first time found herself among like-minded free thinkers. Moving to Regina, she joined the Unitarian Fellowship, and that is where she met her second husband Sandy Hutcheon, whom her son described as “one honest man.” They were married at Yale before she returned to Regina, and subsequently she and Sandy enjoyed many years of blissful

married life. Time was now right for going after her PhD, so she and Sandy headed for Australia, where after two years she obtained the coveted PhD degree from the University of Queensland in Brisbane. On returning to Canada as Dr. Pat Duffy Hutcheon, she accepted a teaching appointment at the University of British Columbia. Unfortunately the position did not work out as promised, so she and Sandy decided to take early retirement, joining the Golden Age Hiking Club and hiking on the many challenging trails in the Vancouver area and also in parts of Europe. Unfortunately for Pat, hiking came to an end in 1993 when she injured her back in a bus accident.

The penultimate chapter of *Lonely Trail* is entitled “Falling Leaves,” in which Pat laments the passing of certain relatives and friends, including her brothers Jack, Jerry and Bob, her mother Nellie (her father Lew died much earlier, in 1943) and then the loss of her beloved husband Sandy, who succumbed to Parkinson’s disease. Sandy hated hospitals, and Pat, with the help of relatives and friends, brave-

ly struggled to tend to his needs at home until he passed away in December 2001.

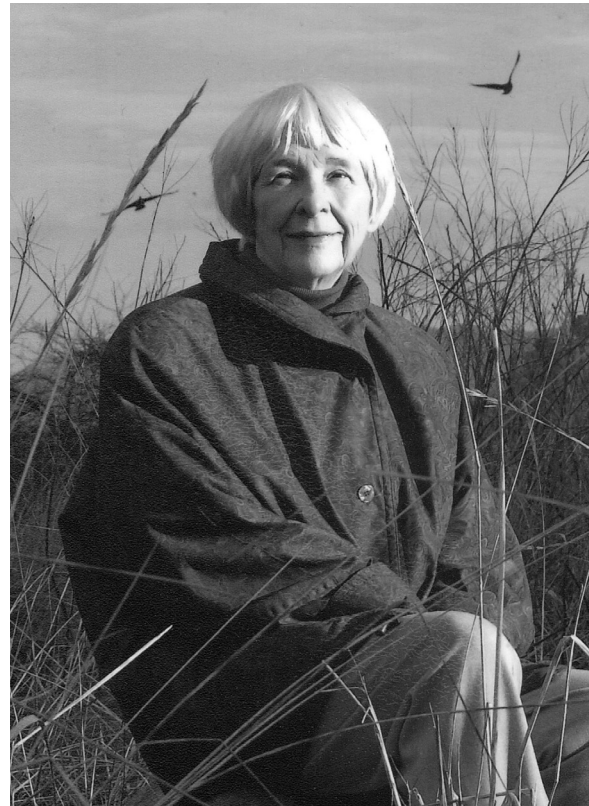
As previously mentioned, she became a free thinker at an early age and rejected any belief in the supernatural. She was indeed a natural born humanist with a common sense concern for fairness and justice. Perhaps above all, she possessed a natural talent for teaching that was soon recognized by the school inspectors with whom she came into contact. As well as being recognized as a leading Canadian educator and sociologist, Pat is an accomplished writer. In 1975 she published the textbook *A Sociology of Canadian Education*, the first ever on that subject. Subsequent books are *Leaving the Cave: Evolutionary Naturalism in Scientific Thought*; *Building Character and Culture*; *The Road to Reason: Landmarks in the Evolution of Humanist Thought*; a mystery novel entitled *Something Lost*; and now of course, *Lonely Trail: The Life Journey of a Free Thinker*. And we must not overlook her moving poetry, the caliber of which is plainly evident in the several

poems included in *Lonely Trail*.

The title of the last chapter is "Sowing Seeds." Over the years Pat has been asked to speak at many academic conferences, at Unitarian services and at Humanist events. At a Humanist Association of Canada conference in Winnipeg

in 2000, she was honoured as Humanist of the Year and was later declared a recipient of the American Humanist Association's Distinguished Humanist Award for 2001. (Numerous other awards are listed in the Biographical Notes at the beginning of *Lonely Trail*.) In this last chapter she expresses her concern that multiculturalism is dividing Canada rather than uniting it. She also briefly discusses the contents of all her

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books, including her wonderful poem *Amazing Life*, which can be sung to the tune of *Amazing Grace*. She concludes by expressing her great joy upon learning of the birth of her namesake, great-granddaughter Patricia Westcott. The chapter ends with these words: "With that event this eighty-two-year-old sower of seeds—this evolutionary naturalist, scientific humanist and free thinker ... has reached the peak of her life journey. It's been a wonderful life." Indeed it has.

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