

SEASPAWN AND SEAWRACK: JACK HODGINS'S FIRST BOOKS

A Review Essay

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Spit Delaney's Island: Selected Stories

Jack Hodgins

Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2011. 208 pp. \$18.95 paper.
(First published by Macmillan of Canada, 1976)

The Invention of the World

Jack Hodgins

Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2010. 366 pp. \$18.95 paper.
(First published by Macmillan of Canada, 1977)

The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne, or A Word or Two on Those Port Annie Miracles

Jack Hodgins

Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2013. 296 pp. \$18.95 paper.
(First published by Macmillan of Canada, 1979)

The Barclay Family Theatre

Jack Hodgins

Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2012. 282 pp. \$18.95 paper.
(First published by Macmillan of Canada, 1981)

POETS, I THINK, true poets, write foremost for themselves. Discoverers as well as makers, they write in search of knowledge, and only secondarily do they write with the recognition that others may overhear their private ruminations. But novelists are obliged by their vocation to be public in their artistic outlook, even if they are not always themselves gregarious. If lyric poetry is solipsistic, the novel is preoccupied by the manifold, dynamic ways in which characters are alternately bound together and held apart. Even when novels focus closely on a protagonist, as in the *Bildungsroman*, or cleave to an identifiable world, as in the *roman*

à clef, the novelist's art consists in great measure in the portrayal of the ineluctable connections among people, from which stem many ordinary happinesses and travails. In this sense among others Jack Hodgins is a novelist par excellence, for his works are consummately social in their orientation. His novels, and indeed his short stories, are concerned with communities and, in particular, with the feelings of cohesion and alienation that arise in isolated, insular locales – that is, quite literally, on islands. His recurrent settings are the small towns and farms of Vancouver Island, which in his reckoning is a world unto itself, lying on the edge of the province of British Columbia and the edge of the country of Canada, and separated from both by a gulf far wider than the twenty miles or so of the Strait of Georgia. “My God,” says Aunt Nora in a story called “The Trench Dwellers,” from *Spit Delaney's Island* (1976): “It looks as if you could walk across in fifteen minutes but that damn ferry takes for ever” (80).¹ Hodgins's works teem with images of extremity, distance, and limits; he refers to the “edge of the water” or the “edge of the sea” with uncanny frequency. When a character is described as “a figure on the edge” (*Spit* 4), the phrase connotes both a marginal location and a perilous state of mind. But in “More than Conquerors,” a story in *The Barclay Family Theatre* (1981), the outsider's perspective envisions Vancouver Island as a “Frontier island on the far edge of a frontier country . . . an island that is not yet even aware of itself” (118). Hodgins's fiction seeks to correct this misperception. It celebrates the paradoxical quality of places such as the unnamed bay in “After the Season” (in *Spit Delaney's Island*) that is found “About fifty miles up the coast past the end of all public roads” (150), and such as Port Annie in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* (1979), which is “miles from anything else except mountains and bush” (5). There, where the ocean and the rain threaten to wash human habitations and vanities away, the bonds of community are strongly felt. And sometimes they are resented: in “The Trench Dwellers” Gerry Mack, the black sheep of the Macken clan, seeks to escape, by fleeing to the mainland, the confinement that islands, geographical and imaginary alike, can impose.

The milestones of the author's biography illustrate his close ties to British Columbia and especially to Vancouver Island. Hodgins was born in Comox in 1938 and raised in Merville, to the north. He studied at the University of British Columbia and then worked as a teacher in Nanaimo

¹ In the same story a character describes the mainlanders' prospect of Vancouver Island: “‘There it is,’ he said. ‘Twenty miles away. I bet you hardly ever notice it there, like a fence that borders the back yard’” (78).

for nearly twenty years. After his rise to literary prominence, he taught writing at the University of Victoria for almost two decades, beginning in 1983. (On that campus, where he is known almost universally by his first name, he is revered.) He has been awarded honorary degrees from the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria. But while Hodgins's fiction is regionalist in its assertion of a profound commitment to his part of the world, that devotion does not constrain the reach of his works. His terrain is allegorical as well as literal. His far West Coast, the end of the road, is a place of earthquakes, tempests, and floods. These upheavals inevitably interrupt, or even destroy, the idyll that the coast is often believed to be. The second long section of *The Invention of the World* (1977) is called "The Eden Swindle"; Hodgins's works routinely treat deceptions of various kinds. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) E.M. Forster described the vast landscape of the genre in question in terms that accord with the geography of Hodgins's domain: "All we can say of it is that it is bounded by two chains of mountains neither of which rises very abruptly – the opposing ranges of Poetry and of History – and bounded on the third side by a sea," the sea of Prophecy (25).² And certainly Hodgins's works are shaped by these ranges and this sea, as they are by the Vancouver Island Ranges and the Coast Mountains and by the Pacific Ocean itself.

Hodgins's awards and honours are many. He is a Member of the Order of Canada, for instance, and he won the Governor General's Award for *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*. The view is nonetheless held in some quarters that he has never quite been given his due. Ronsdale Press is to be thanked for making his first four books available in handsome and very readable paperback editions. The republication of the works offers an occasion to consider them anew and to revel in Hodgins's accomplishment. This reader's view, confirmed by the pleasures afforded by the Ronsdale volumes, is that British Columbia has been blessed with a marvellous storyteller whose fiction rewards careful rereading.

Spit Delaney's Island, Hodgins's first major book, is a collection of ten short stories. (He was already an editor and anthologist; his introduction to *The West Coast Experience*, a selection of literary works of regional interest that was published in the same year as *Spit Delaney's Island*,

² E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 2005). The prophetic novel is exemplified in Forster's view by *Moby-Dick* (126). Hodgins's fiction is neither apocalyptic nor theological – "It is to his conception of evil that Melville's work owes much of its strength," Forster suggested (128) – but his comic, tolerant vision of the world nonetheless grants the existence of a mythical dimension, as in the final sentences of *The Invention of the World*: "And if, as Becker will tell you, with borrowed words, pulling you closer, rolling his eyes in the direction of the House, *if they're not dead nor gone they're alive there still*" (354).

is noteworthy for its suggestion of the magical qualities of coastal topography.) The two novels that followed, as if in defiance of the strictures of the short story, are long, unruly works, not loose baggy monsters but sprawling, episodic narratives that depict contemporary Vancouver Island in light of the historical conditions that have shaped the present. *The Invention of the World* recounts the establishment at the close of the nineteenth century of a utopian community – the Revelations Colony of Truth – and the fraudulent ministrations of Donal Keneally. In time the site of the failed Colony is occupied by the Revelations Trailer Park. The lives of its inhabitants resound with the echoes of the past.

In *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* Hodgins describes the repercussions on Port Annie of a tsunami and the extraordinary appearance of a foreign visitor, a “gift from the sea” (1, 9, 45): the novel is a farcical account of flotsam and jetsam. The verbose second part of its full title, *A Word or Two on Those Port Annie Miracles*, signals the comic register; Hodgins’s fiction characteristically draws upon tall tales and fables. *The Barclay Family Theatre* gathers eight stories. They are richer still and more expansive than those of *Spit Delaney’s Island* – “The Sumo Revisions” is seventy-two pages long in the present edition – with themes of departure and loss more pronounced. (Ferries from Vancouver destined for Nanaimo arrive at Departure Bay – a melancholy name.) The first story, “The Concert Stages of Europe,” captures with ample humour the stifling nature of rural life, a theme that plays throughout the collection. “The Sumo Revisions” takes Jacob Weins, the somewhat Micawberish mayor of Port Annie in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, to Japan. (“Nothing between us and Japan, except that water,” says Madmother Thomas in *The Invention of the World* [19].) In “The Plague Children” a scourge of psilocybin-seekers descends upon the families of Waterville (the Mackens and Barclays and others), who vainly seek to repel the tide of outsiders – hippies whose values and theirs are not easily reconciled. The invaders are as irrepressible as the hallucinogenic mushrooms that they covet. In these stories Vancouver Island and the wider world converge; differences in perspective and belief prove difficult to resolve.

Hodgins’s first books appeared in quick succession. The two collections of stories and the two novels were published in a period of six years. (There was an interlude between *The Barclay Family Theatre* and *The Honorary Patron*, a novel, which was published in 1987. *Beginnings*, a slender volume published meantime in 1983, gathered excerpts from

Hodgins's early writings – novels attempted between 1952 and 1973.) The quartet – “tetralogy” strains the connections – demonstrated his allegiance to the story and to the novel alike. He has continued to work in both forms. The stories in *Damage Done by the Storm* (2004) reprise settings and subjects of the early collections. Of the later novels, *Broken Ground* (1998) is particularly well regarded. *A Passion for Narrative* (1993), his *Guide for Writing Fiction*, provides a sense of the aspects of the novel and the story in which he is most interested. It is above all a practical book, as its subtitle suggests, and it attests to the generosity of spirit for which Hodgins, as a teacher, has an enviable reputation. In addition it provides commentary on the works of his predecessors and peers and indeed on his own writing: his explication of the Spit Delaney stories is among its most fascinating elements. Evident in *A Passion for Narrative* is his meticulous attention to the technical demands of fiction; equally apparent is his affection for a good yarn. His writing has often been compared to the so-called magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez and other Latin American novelists, and his regionalism has been compared to that of Faulkner and Steinbeck. But local traditions – stories told in barrooms, kitchens, and coffee shops, and the myths of the indigenous peoples of the West Coast – inflect his fiction as well. Classical and biblical allusions are also present. In this world the danger is constant that mountains may be carried into the midst of the sea and that the waters thereof may roar. Floods bring change, and mysterious men and women emerge from the ocean. Allan Pritchard wrote, in an essay published in this journal, that “Hodgins’ myth-making is an expression of island reality, rather than a flight from it” (66).³ The observation is astute. I add only that the disparate elements of Hodgins’s métier show that “reality” is rarely a singular phenomenon.

Again and again Hodgins portrays clashes between insular worlds and the cosmopolis, and between rural customs and metropolitan power. His stories and novels often concern class and education, and especially their divisive force. More generally he invites readers to observe what typically passes undetected. His characters are eccentrics – odd, remote men and women, the richness of whose lives could easily be overlooked. Albert “Spit” Delaney appears in “Separating” and “Spit Delaney’s Island,” the stories that bookend, or frame, the first collection. He is a wise fool and a survivor, “a lanky scrawny-necked engineer who needed a shave” (194), who works at the paper mill, and who is half in love with his old steam

³ Allan Pritchard, “The Shapes of History in British Columbia Writing,” *BC Studies* 93 (Spring 1992): 48–69.

engine. He is, Hodgins noted in *A Passion for Narrative*, “beset like Job” (265).⁴ “Spit” – the man, like the landform, protrudes. He is as vulgar as expektoration.⁵ His “rude, rustic nickname” has “some explosion in its sound,” Hodgins wrote in his guidebook to writing (262). (In the first chapter of *The Invention of the World*, the crass Danny Holland “spat snoose out the broken window onto the pavement and wiped an arm across his mouth” [5]. In “More than Conquerors” Carl Roote’s teeth are stained by snoose. Images and motifs recur throughout Hodgins’s works, the discrete parts forming a whole.) Spit is described from a distance in “Separating”: “People driving by don’t notice Spit Delaney. His old gas station is nearly hidden now behind the firs he’s let grow up along the road, and he doesn’t bother to whitewash the scalloped row of half-tires someone planted once instead of fence” (*Spit* 3). But Hodgins demonstrates that what is hidden from view – Spit himself, the explosions in his life, his nonconformity – is endlessly complex.

The first sentences of *The Invention of the World* likewise compel readers to attend to an unusual personage:

Becker, the first time you see him, is at the mainland terminus waving your car down the ramp onto the government ferry and singing to your headlights and to the salt air and to the long line of traffic behind you that he’d rather be a sparrow than a snail. Yes he would if he could, he loudly sings, he surely would. In his orange life-jacket and fluorescent gloves, he waves his arms to direct traffic down that ramp the way someone else might conduct a great important orchestra – a round little man with a sloppy wool cap riding his head and a huge bushy beard hiding all of his face except the long turned-down weather-reddened nose. He’d rather be a forest, he sings, than a street.

Follow him home. (vii)

The scene is burlesque. The lyrics of “El Condor Pasa (If I Could),” sung, as perhaps Paul Simon never imagined, to the queue of travellers, suggest Strabo Becker’s desire for freedom and reinvention. He is absurd, yet his role in this introductory passage is vital: to summon readers onto the

⁴ Jack Hodgins, *A Passion for Narrative: A Guide for Writing Fiction* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993).

⁵ The review of the original edition of *Spit Delaney’s Island* in *Books in Canada* (July 1976) was aptly titled “Great Expektorations.” The Dickensian streak in Hodgins’s writing is unmistakable in the unlikely and in some cases flatulent names of characters: Preserved Crabbe, Fat Annie Fartenburg, Belchy McFadden. Slim Potts lives with Jenny Chambers in what must be known as the Chambers-Potts residence. (This motley cast appears in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*.)

vessel that will depart for a strange realm. The ferry, in lieu of a bridge, connects his world to that beyond; but the water that it traverses is, if not always troubled, still a barrier. Crossing the threshold requires a guide. Becker's name is nearly *beckon*, nearly *beacon* – he is a leader, a signal. He conjures up Charon. His long nose is his *beak*; he is birdlike, a figure of song. He is also a figure of good cheer: *Keep your Becker up!* Becker, a sleuth whose name in German means “baker,” cooks up a story about the Island's past, using for his ingredients “the tales and hints and gossip and whispered threats and elaborate curses that float in the air like dust”: “Trust me or not, believe what you want, by now the story exists without us in air” (69). The promise of transformation (from snail to sparrow) and the suggestion of concealed identity (“hiding all of his face”) hint at the wondrous nature of the crossing from the mainland to this Island of the Blessed. The imperative – “Follow him home” – leads to further directions to the reader and further description, in Hodgins's rhythmic, extended sentences, of Becker himself:

Ride the ferry with him on its two-hour trip across the Strait of Georgia, while the long backbone ridge of the island's mountains sharpens into blue and ragged shades of green, and the coastline shadows shape themselves into rocky cliffs and driftwood-cluttered bays; then follow him up the ramp, the end of his shift, as he sets out through the waiting lines of traffic and gusts of rushing passengers on foot. No longer the serenading conductor, he is a short stump of a man walking the full length of the waterfront parking lot and then up the long slow hill towards the town, his black overcoat hanging down past the top of his rubber boots suggesting the shape of a squat crockery jug. (vii)

Readers who recognize this landscape may be struck by the verisimilitude of the passage and by the novelist's skill at evoking the experience, mundane yet always somehow preternatural, of boarding and disembarking from the ferry. Such responses are powerful indeed, as is the appeal of having one's world reflected, enchanted, and explained. The fictional territory that Hodgins invented in the 1970s and the early 1980s remains to be discovered, many years later, by new readers who may delight in the thrill of recognition and come to see their surroundings with sharper eyes.

Yet to some degree Hodgins's Vancouver Island has receded into the past; it is a wave that will not return to shore. His fiction chronicles ways of life that were changing even at the time of the first publication

of *Spit Delaney's Island*, and shows that islands and coastlines are enormously delicate in ecological and social terms, their conditions highly mutable. The Island today is not as remote as it was. Like the province and the country to which it belongs, it is more populous and more urban than in the past; the deluge of hippies in *Spit Delaney's Island* and *The Barclay Family Theatre* provides an image of the world's encroachment upon a once peripheral place.⁶ Such changes have altered the character of communities of the kind that Hodgins describes. The growth of the coastal population in British Columbia accords with the general shift observed by the historian John R. Gillis in *The Human Shore*: "In postwar America and Europe, millions ... were making their own personal rediscovery of the coasts in one of the great human movements that continues with ever greater acceleration today" (18).⁷ As I write this essay, Victoria is in the midst of its annual influx of cruise ship-borne visitors. In the warm summer months the southern Island is busy with tourists even at some distance from town – in Port Renfrew, at Sombrio Beach, at Honeymoon Bay. Even further afield the countryside is well travelled: Tofino, a gateway to Pacific Rim National Park, is an immensely popular destination.⁸ The changing demography and economy of British Columbia necessarily affect the ways in which Hodgins's works are understood and appreciated. His stories and novels, although they are neither simply nostalgic nor elegiac, suggest the ease with which fragile cultures change as a consequence of pressures imposed from without. They are moreover increasingly valuable for historical as well as aesthetic reasons in allowing glimpses of the Island's recent past.

Hodgins's writing, well attuned to social change, is perhaps most sensitive to disruptions in individual lives – to the minor earthquakes

⁶ The population of Nanaimo in 1941, for example, was 6,635. In 1961 it was 14,135. By 1991 it had increased greatly to 60,129, and by 2001 it had expanded still further to 73,000. The population of Port Alberni grew from 4,584 in 1941 to 11,560 in 1961. Then, after a boom in the next decade, it declined from 20,063 in 1971 to 18,403 in 1991 and 17,740 in 2001. In 2011 86.2 percent of the provincial population was urban, while in 1951 the corresponding figure was 52.8 percent. Shifting municipal boundaries make the growth of cities difficult to track with absolute precision, but the trend is clear: coastal British Columbia is different today from the coast of Hodgins's youth and the beginning of his literary life. (I have taken the census figures from the third edition of Jean Barman's *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007], 443. The percentages are drawn from the third edition of Brett McGillivray's *Geography of British Columbia: People and Landscapes in Transition* [Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011], 282.)

⁷ John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Gillis suggests that, in view of the "unprecedented surge to the sea" that has occurred around the globe, "we are all, in some way or another, coastal" (1).

⁸ The Pacific Rim National Park Reserve was established in 1970.

that alter the expected course of affairs. He portrays the foaming shore and the still waters of his region and its communities with compassion, but his works are not sentimental. Yet because they are typically comical, they can be mistakenly regarded as not wholly serious. His books are undoubtedly entertaining, their plots marked by coincidence and spectacle, but they have a strong moral dimension, too: they probe matters of right and wrong conduct. His works show the complexity inherent in the interactions among members of families and small towns. As Strabo Becker would agree, even on an island as large and varied as Vancouver Island, a sense of separation from the mainland is often felt. In the seemingly closed worlds of Hodgins's fiction, isolation exacerbates conflict and provides the author opportunities to explore one of his primary topics: the problem of balancing personal desires with the demands of relationships with others. The boundaries between his characters, who abut and sometimes overwhelm each other, are as fluid and fine as the coastal boundary between land and water. In the last sentences of "The Concert Stages of Europe," from *The Barclay Family Theatre*, Barclay Desmond, the narrator, claims that his boyhood defeat in a local talent competition released him from expectations and from all ambition save that of emulating his captivating neighbours, the Korhonen family:

I wouldn't worry any more about becoming a pianist for my mother. Nor would I worry any more about becoming a high-rigger for my father. I was free at last to concentrate on pursuing the only goal that ever really mattered to me: becoming a Finn.

Of course I failed at that too. But then neither did Cornelia Horn-castle become a great pianist on the concert stages of Europe. In fact, I understand that once she got back from her holiday on the beaches of Hawaii she announced to her parents that she was never going to touch a piano again as long as she lived, ivory, or cardboard, or any other kind. She had already, she said, accomplished all she'd ever wanted from it. And as far as I know, she's kept her word to this day. (21)

Here is a humorous expression of Barclay's youthful determination to set the direction of his life himself. If in truth he can neither become Finnish nor abandon his own family, he can nonetheless attempt to fathom, like his rival Cornelia, how "someone from the stump ranches of Waterville" ought to live (2). In various ways, Hodgins's other Islanders face the same task. At the conclusion of *Aspects of the Novel*,

Forster, writing somewhat diffidently about the possibility of changes to human nature, mustered whatever conviction he could: “as I look back at my own scraps of knowledge, and into my own heart, I see these two movements of the human mind: the great tedious onrush known as history, and a shy crab-like sideways movement” (152). Hodgins, too, his reader senses, has looked carefully upon what he knows and feels. By paying unstinting attention to local details, he has created works of broad appeal.

Although Hodgins is essentially a comic writer, his fiction abounds with violence. Often the Pacific belies its name. Characters suffer storms that could render them mad; at times they remember, as Spit Delaney does, “that damned seam” on the ocean floor, “the lava . . . leaking out of the crack along the bottom, pushing the continents apart” (*Spit* 179). (The fault is a geological equivalent of original sin.) They endure poverty and the horrific wounds inflicted by the logging industry on the bodies of workers. In “Other People’s Troubles,” from *Spit Delaney’s Island*, Lenore Miles’s reward for tending to widows and a battered woman is the unexpectedly early return of her husband from the woods, where he was struck by “twenty pounds of falling cedar limb” (129): “Pure white bandages wrapped around and around. A faceless mummy. There was blood on the mackinaw, . . . a dark stain along the collar” (130). In “By the River,” an utterly sad story from the same collection, Crystal Styan walks to meet the train that will deliver her husband to their rural home. But Jim Styan, who brought Crystal from “the island of her birth” (115) to the wilderness of the distant Interior, “looking and looking for his dream” (118), is not aboard. He has not returned to their cabin in months. Her life has unravelled: “The train releases a long hiss and then moves slowly past her and down the tracks into the deep bush. She stands on the platform and looks after it a long while, as if a giant hand is pulling, slowly, a stay-stitching thread out of a fuzzy green cloth” (120). Hodgins’s fiction is humane but not without its dark moments. It teaches the unhappy lesson that friends, neighbours, and lovers can be brutal to each other in innumerable ways: Vancouver Island can be all too much like the rest of the world. But though the seas threaten and sometimes harm in his works, they are merciful, too. His wise novels and stories trace, in a phrase from “Separating,” “The long curving line of sand that separates island from sea and man from whale” (*Spit* 5). In so doing they chart a place and its people with deep sensitivity. Hodgins’s contributions to Canadian literature are as great as that strand is long.