

tragic, but the characterization, as in so much of Haig-Brown's fiction, is shallow. Haig-Brown's materials might have led to the creation of Paul Bunyan-like legends. Instead, the logging stories often read like bad Jack London. Haig-Brown's presentation of this world does not match the deftness of Martin Allerdale Grainger's *Woodsmen of the West* (1908) or the near-mythic resonance of Jack Hodgins's recent evocation of the same world.

The second group of stories dates from 1935 to 1939, the years immediately following Haig-Brown's marriage and settlement in Campbell River. Two of these pieces simply shift the themes of the early stories to a more populated rural setting. The need to prove yourself a man is the theme of a brief sketch about a youth walking at night on a dark woodland road; he is frightened by an animal but will not confess his fright to the father who sent him out into the night. The bravery of an animal (rather than a human) is the basis of a story about a rooster who, with the connivance of an admiring farmhand, wins a reprieve from execution. Another story embellishes a fishing tale which later, in a less fictionalized form, became part of *A River Never Sleeps* (1946). The two other stories from this period show Haig-Brown moving towards the anecdotal form and sporting subjects with which he is most closely identified. One piece relates a series of hunting and fishing stories concerning a remarkable dog that Haig-Brown once owned; the other tells of a winter trek on snowshoes during which Haig-Brown displayed his qualities as an outdoorsman.

The third group of stories dates from about 1950, after Haig-Brown's duties as magistrate had made him intimately acquainted with his Campbell River community. Two relatively weak stories return to the logging and trapping worlds of the early fiction, but four stronger pieces deal

with the same local subjects that Haig-Brown was concurrently using to express the essentially pastoral vision of his book about life in Campbell River, *Measure of the Year* (1950). "The Wharf" is a sentimental vignette about a young English boy's quest for a trophy salmon. It was first published in *The New Yorker*, and has the evanescent plot and bitter-sweet sadness of much writing from that magazine. Three other stories each focus on a particular "character" from the Campbell River area. They do not try to achieve a well-plotted climax, but dwell lovingly on the eccentric personalities of the central figures.

The stories in *Woods and River Tales* demonstrate Haig-Brown's versatility, but they will not significantly affect his reputation. This is a book primarily for the confirmed admirer. Readers who are new to Haig-Brown's several "worlds" would still do best to turn to one of his collections of angling essays or to *Measure of the Year*.

T. D. MACLULICH

ETHEL WILSON

1888-1980

TO THINK OF Ethel Wilson is, for me, to think of wry humour, of graceful, elegant prose, of delight in nature, of strong and solitary women characters, and, most of all, of Donne's phrase "No man is an Iland," which she used as the epigraph to *Hetty Dorval* and in other places, and which is central to her view of the universe and man's place in it. Ethel Wilson is a humanist whose humanism is existential and transcendental. All people, in her view, while necessarily asserting the freedom to be and to express themselves, are bound up with others. *Swamp Angel's* Mrs. Severance, quoting Donne's words, even goes beyond his Christian metaphor to embrace all creation.

Often it is through interaction with the natural world that her characters acquire an awareness of self, and of that self's relationship with other human beings, with God, and with the cosmos. Specifically, the mountains, trees, and lakes of British Columbia form an integral part of "the miraculous interweaving of creation" in the experience of many of Mrs. Wilson's characters. What the narrator of *Swamp Angel* calls "the essence of place" has complex significance in Mrs. Wilson's fiction. For Ethel Wilson continually reminds her reader of the paradox which everyone must contend with. While acknowledging our responsibility as "a part of the maine," each of us is essentially alone. "I am . . . like a swimmer," says her character Maggie Lloyd. "Swimming is like living, it is done alone." But this essential aloneness must be balanced by an involvement with others.

Reflecting on Ethel Wilson's fiction, and her humanism, brings me to consider her gallery of women characters — Maggie Lloyd and Hetty Dorval, Lilly and Topaz, Mrs. Forrester and Mrs. Gollightly. Most of them demonstrate Maggie's sentiment — that living is done alone. Often, they are shown rejecting an untenable life to forge a new one, or facing new experiences with courage and determination. And Maggie, for me, is the most memorable of them all.

The concern of these women for others may be seen as a form of mothering, a taking on of the maternal role, which is social and psychological as well as physical. Thus do Mrs. Wilson's women work out their need to balance independence with commitment — a paradoxical combination which later women writers have also discovered a need to come to terms with. Like Eva of Constance Beresford-Howe's *Book of Eve* (whose first reaction to freedom is "I opened my eyes into a perfect self-centred bliss without past or

future, and rejoiced in everything I saw"), today's women protagonists are discovering that they cannot opt out of life for "self-centred bliss," but must become, or remain, involved with others. Like Rachel of Margaret Laurence's *Jest of God*, their mothering may differ from that implied by the traditional concept of the role. To return to Maggie's swimming analogy, "one does not stay, ever, in a lagoon." Thus *Swamp Angel* in particular can be seen as an early feminist novel, for while the concern for independence and self-expression is one aspect of Mrs. Wilson's fundamental humanism, it remains true today, as it was in 1954, that to achieve these goals is more difficult and more complex for women than for men.

Mrs. Wilson's stylistic skill is best revealed in her adroit handling of the narrative voice. Her third-person narrator often takes on individuality and personality. At the same time, the tone of her essays leads to the conviction that aspects of her own personality are inherent in the sophisticated, ironic, narrative voice of much of her fiction. Yet, while wit, gentle irony and whimsical humour characterize her writing, it possesses at times a broader humour. Witness the "comic-strip" vignettes which reveal without comment the ludicrous Eddie Vardoe and his Ireen. But amusement at the foibles of the frailer members of the human race is always tinged with compassion. This is equally true of the short stories which, of all Mrs. Wilson's works, have received the least attention. With their polish, grace, deceptive simplicity, and unobtrusive use of symbols, they recall A. J. M. Smith's words about poetry, "... the worth of a hard thing done / Perfectly, as though without care."

Of international stature, Ethel Wilson's fiction remains quintessentially Canadian. The regionalism of much of her writing and the sense of commitment of her characters to the community, to others, situate

her in the mainstream of Canadian writing, as does her skill with the short story, the genre in which much of our most exciting writing is being done today. Her creation of strong women characters links her with Margaret Laurence, her irony and paradox with Alice Munro, the elegant polish of her short stories with Mavis Gallant, her superb craft with Audrey Thomas, and her humour with most women writing in Canada today. She was part of a generation which brought Canadian fiction into a new and exciting age.

LORRAINE MCMULLEN

JOHN COULTER

1888-1980

WITH THE DEATH OF John Coulter, Canada's oldest living dramatist and "Dean of Canadian playwrights," an important epoch in the history of Canadian theatre has come to an end. Coulter belonged to that group of dramatists, either born or educated in the British Isles, who wrote polished, sophisticated plays about Canada and Great Britain, influenced by their English, Welsh, Scottish, or Irish forebears in the art of playwriting. It was this group who prepared the groundwork for later indigenous Canadian plays.

The last of the "old guard," Coulter was a leader. With others he attempted in the 1930's to initiate a transition in English Canadian theatre from its devotion to the plays of other countries to its first tentative steps towards the creation and production of a national drama. Such authentically Canadian drama as is being produced today is the result of much dogged persistence in demanding of young Canadian writers a body of work true to the spirit and nuances of Canadian life.

John Coulter's long and distinguished career, though marked by many failures and few real triumphs, was, in retrospect,

much more successful than he was able to admit. When Nathan Cohen, in a CBC radio interview "Tuesday Night" on December 3, 1968, asked Coulter why he continued to write for a theatre in Canada "that rejects you . . . which treats you so shabbily," Coulter replied: "Because I have something to say and I want to say it here. But it is a grinding and intolerable thing." Cohen went on to say that if Coulter had lived in London, Dublin, or New York, his works would have been produced. Coulter's problem was the same for all playwrights in Canada in the decades of the forties and fifties, when directors were afraid to produce Canadian plays which Canadian audiences rejected. Coulter had had his Irish plays produced in Belfast and Dublin. He was unfamiliar with an audience that rejected its own native plays. Born in Belfast in 1888, he lived and worked successively in Belfast, Dublin, and London. He wrote for *The Ulster Review* and produced radio plays with Tyrone Guthrie on BBC in Belfast; he learned to write stage plays from contact with theatre folk at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin; he was managing editor of John Middleton Murry's journal *The New Adelphi* in London. In 1936 Coulter followed the girl with whom he had fallen in love to Canada. He married her in Toronto a few weeks later, intending to bring her back with him to England, but to his own amazement, they remained permanently in Toronto. His wife, Olive Clare Primrose, a writer, was the daughter of Dr. Alexander Primrose, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto.

Plunging into a writing career in Toronto in 1936, Coulter created plays for CBC radio, and the Arts and Letters Club. Modelling his own plays on the work of such great dramatists as Synge, Yeats, and Lady Gregory, he attained recognition in Canada with his Irish play, *The House in the Quiet Glen* (1937),