

Reading Mark Hume and the River

Conditional Lyricism, Disappearing Salmon and the Braided Voice

As for men, those myriad little detached ponds with their own swimming corpuscular life, what were they but a way that water has of going about beyond the reach of rivers? I too was a microcosm of pouring rivulets and floating driftwood gnawed by the mysterious animalcules of my own creation. I was three-fourths water, rising and subsiding according to the hollow knocking in my veins: a minute pulse like the eternal pulse that lifts the Himalayas and which, in the following systole, will carry them away.

—Loren Eiseley, “The Flow of The River” 19–20.

Rivers have their own unique catches. On Canada’s west coast that catch is salmon and the politics of fishing have rarely been more intense. An increasingly publicized range of recent non-fictional prose demonstrates that rivers are under pressure from humans.¹ Literary non-fiction is often designed to teach us how we have got here, and how we might proceed; it amplifies and honours the scientific record with its growing evidence of ecological damage. In much of the writing I cite below, the river is a site of political and lyrical topicality, a place where ideas of nature and culture blur or might be revisioned. As Wyman Herendeen observes “the continuity of the river motif is one of the major sources of our modern response to landscape and of the myths and cultural expectations that we bring to it” (25). Rivers continue to act as currents of story and memory; they carry a figurative freight that enriches culture like silt. In this essay I examine one writer at the Bella Coola River in central British Columbia.

Below I sketch a context for the river writer, and examine Mark Hume’s *River of the Angry Moon: Seasons on the Bella Coola* (1998) which was prepared in close collaboration with Harvey Thommasen’s extensive fieldnotes. I then comment on some critiques of the book. Throughout, my concern is with the ways rivers demand a roving consciousness and a reflective ethics that balance personal limitation with hope.

Mark Hume's books *Run of the River* (1992), *Adam's River* (1994) and *River of the Angry Moon* (1998) contribute to a burgeoning body of very recent Canadian riverine non-fiction.² Many of these writers offer a telling portrait of squandered ecological bounty as the appetite for resources and the reach of technology extend into every part of the country and the planet. It can be depressing reading: they write of damaged watersheds and damaged lifeways, of vanishing stories and extinct fish. The writing is informed by ecological research and personal observation and tends to question heartfelt rapture before Nature. Any sense of ecological bounty is compromised by an awareness of logging roads, dams and fishery-collapse. But a longing for holism remains. The work draws lyricism from statistics as each writer confronts loss and remnant, while searching for ways of meeting the river that sustains its integrity as part of both an ecosystem and cultural network.

River of the Angry Moon uses lyricism and research to hook the reader into a nexus of perception and concern. Epiphany in this book (as in much "nature writing") is driven by an awareness of ecological loss. A combination of scientific studies, fieldwork and personal observation sustains this awareness. Essayistic lyricism and informed lament bind with scientific data to compose a picture of British Columbia's Bella Coola River on the brink of change. By blending different forms of voice (Harvey Thomassen's painstaking research, and Hume's personal observation, reflection and awe), *River of the Angry Moon* honours the braided nature of life in the watershed. For Hume, the river evokes larger forces.

After over a century of decline, Hume gathers stories and reads a river, mindful of the praise humans can offer and the care such humility inspires. How such vision can enter policy in a way meaningful to First Nations, sports and commercial fishing interests is an almost impossible issue to resolve; but moving towards it is necessary if any meaningful compromise is to occur. Attempting to gauge the efficacy of salmon restoration, Freeman House observes that "[t]he variables combine into an unsolvable equation each element of which provides more questions than answers" (208). But slow gains are made. Each writer urges that we too can be mindful of the future.

Casting for redemption: some recent river-washed writing

My reading of Hume's most recent book (the winner of the B.C. Book Awards 1999 Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize) pays attention to his rare and moving experiences of conditional lyricism at the Bella Coola River.

Hume's use of the lyrical mode is conditional because he is aware of the ecosystem damage at the river that is the basis for his insight. In his ecologically grounded riverine epiphanies Hume seeks to bring the reader closer to his sense of "the unknowable mystery of the river" (142). In the moments of insight, relayed by prose tinged with a sense of awe and loss, he approximates the work of writers like Haig-Brown, Barry Lopez, Kathleen Dean Moore, Kim Stafford and Scott Russell Sanders. Such a perceptual connection with "nature" extends his understanding of the river while rendering that current even more elusive. As a disciple of Roderick Haig-Brown's writing, Hume knows that the leaping fish "transports us imaginatively from one domain to another" (Leeson 157). To do justice, in writing, to the fragile world of fish stocks, human need and hope, demands a prose rich in variety of source and explication. Some recent river-washed non-fiction offers further examples of balance and inquiry.

Focusing on riverine ecological and cultural fragility highlights a concern with loss and potential. Elegy is a very strong component of this work. Hume and other contemporary nature essayists perform an eco-moral lament, the evidence of loss hooked by every absent fish. Jamie Benidickson records that in youth canoe camps of the late nineteenth-century, "quite deliberate efforts were sometimes made to promote a metamorphosis of the participants. . . . A vigorous exposure to the wilderness was promoted as an antidote to a rearticulated sense of moral decay" (64). The contemporary natural history essay offers a newer version of this sense of decline.

A backslide occurs on both ecological and moral levels because a failure of ecological stewardship abdicates human responsibility for the future. The "refrain of moral concern" Stephen Trimble identifies in recent natural history writing has a long provenance (28). It is present in much contemporary river-based non-fiction, partly because many rivers have been radically damaged in the twentieth century. These authors are still seeking the "durable scale of values" that Aldo Leopold invoked decades ago (279). They largely concur with environmental historian Richard White; speaking of the Columbia, White argues that "[w]hat has failed is our relationship with the river" (62).

An increasing sense of failure boosts the anger in the work. Peter Mancall (paraphrasing Tim Palmer) notes the effects of a conservation ethos on the literature: "By the late twentieth century . . . American writers . . . shifted the direction of protest. Though they continued to evoke nature and its splendors, they did so while describing the human and environmental costs

of unrestrained development, often with the explicit goal of stimulating a demand for changes in federal policy” (8-9). Hume and Thommasen wanted to “raise the education level in the general public” on matters riverine and ecological (Hume, Interview).

Because Hume puts fish and river first, his work is inevitably politicized: the scientific evidence and further ecological information he relays reject clearcut logging and wastefulness in sports, First Nation and commercial fishing and hatchery practice. Often his is the purist angler’s stance. When salmon are dying, Hume has no time for political correctness: species extinction is species extinction, and he stands in concord with Nuxalk elders he knows in rejecting wasteful fishing, by Native or White, as culturally inappropriate and insulting to tradition (125).

Hume is thus one of many North American writers trying to renew and revise the relationship with rivers as the ecological (and thus economic and cultural) costs of the twentieth century’s river “management” regimes finally hit home. Marc Reisner’s assessment of U.S. federal dam projects sounds like the way Thomas King’s Coyote would operate on a busy day: “What federal water development has amounted to, in the end, is a uniquely productive, creative vandalism” (485). “‘Perhaps it’s a Coyote dam’, says Coyote” (King 449).

Hume has travelled British Columbia, tracing the waters that form a “lacework” of streams, rivers and communities and noting the effects of that creative vandalism (*Moon* 137; Armstrong 181). He has seen how the Nechako and Peace Rivers have been silenced, heard how ancestral burial sites were flooded while Ingenika and other Carrier-Sekani people were denied compensation, and watched as fish numbers dwindled. Now, he ventures to an “untouched” watershed with foreboding. He concludes his first book with a warning: “There are 60 primary watersheds on Vancouver Island that are larger than 5000 hectares. Of these, only seven are unlogged: the Megin, Moyeha, Sydney, Power, Nasparti, East and Klaskish. . . . Remember those names, for they are the last” (*Run* 205).

As Donald Worster observes (of the U.S. West), ecological collapse brought moral responses: “a sense of irreparable loss began to settle about the water empire by the late twentieth century, a remembrance of things past” (*Rivers of Empire* 324). This pall of remembrance haunts Hume’s trips. His prose fuses ecology and commentary, lyricism and rage, story and inquiry. Moral outrage and tales of remembered biodiversity coalesce. Hume, like Jeannette Armstrong, Terry Glavin, Marc Reisner and Thomas

King, knows that nostalgia alone cannot energize or revision a durable scale of values.

It is useful to recall Glen Love's thoughts here:

Literary pastoral traditionally posits a natural world, a green world, to which sophisticated urbanites withdraw in search of the lessons of simplicity which only nature can teach. There, amid sylvan groves and meadows and rural characters—idealized images of country existence—the sophisticates attain a critical vision of the good, simple life, a vision which will presumably sustain them as they return at the end to the great world on the horizon. (231)

Many of the writers adopt an ecological stance that situates the human in a wider riverine network of species and processes, while realizing the “great [urban, human] world” is now a troubled and damaging one.

Any river depends on a network of watershed collaborations independent of the human realm. That extra-human reach compels and inspires human response. The river can touch human imagination at an intimate level. The recent written record in North America suggests river watching is an evocative process. Gaston Bachelard has called water “a substance full of reminiscences and prescient reveries” (*Water and Dreams* 89). Bachelard's rivers run through time, composing memory and vision. “Thinking like a river,” demands responsiveness in observation and a willingness to adapt in order to honour ecological and emotional connections (Worster 331). Writing like a river takes many forms. Much recent work tends to test the meniscus between self and river, feeling and site. Hume's use of a variety of prose modes is useful. The (“overwhelmingly” male) fly-fishing author “literally stands on the boundary between two worlds, the aquatic and terrestrial, half-submerged” (Browning 7). Hume's prose also mediates between the worlds of ecological fieldwork and personal elegy. It is a consequence of water-watching, as one of the finest of recent river writers, Oregon-based angler (and literature professor) Ted Leeson, observes that

By luck or intention, fly fishing has built into itself this same [Zen] idea [“how you see is what you see”]. In what is one of angling's most elegant expressions, we speak of “reading the water.” Reading a trout stream exercises a special kind of vision and, like reading anything, acknowledges that meaning dwells in contexts and on peripheries and that not all things come to the eye with equal readiness. . . . But a river is only itself. If forced, the water will mirror the likeness of an ego; on its own, it reflects on sky and clouds, and readily rewards those who approach it with humility and wonder. (115-16)

Water's capacity to reflect and absorb all metaphors is present in many forms of writing, oral tradition, and performance. The river, culturally

used, can be a sacred current, a trade highway and a route for exploration and story in First Nation, voyageur and colonial settler traditions in Canada. James Raffan argues that the river-borne canoe has been instrumental in Canada's history, and that the metaphor of the canoe quest has great relevance in contemporary cross-cultural Canada: "A canoe ties its paddlers to the water and to landscape, but it also ties them to each other in significant ways. . . . A canoe invites awareness, a canoe nurtures situated knowing" (34).³ Hume, angling for fish and image, also practices a form of explicitly situated knowing.

The braided voice: some features of the river narrative

In its consciousness, ours is an upland society, the ruins of watersheds, and what that involves and means is little considered. And so the land is heavily taxed to subsidize an 'affluence' that consists, in reality, of health and goods stolen from the unborn.

—Wendell Berry, "The Making of A Marginal Farm." *Recollected Essays, 1965-1980* 340.

Kathleen Dean Moore, the author of *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water* (1995), suggests the river informs the very motivation of the essayist:

I have come to believe all essays walk in rivers. Essays ask the philosophical question that flows through time—How shall I live my life? The answers drift together through countless converging streams, where they move softly below the reflective surface of the natural world and mix in the deep and quiet places of the mind. This is where an essayist must walk, stirring up the mud. (xii)

River writing often mimics the watched current. The process of "river reflection" and subsequent writing works best for Moore when textual form replicates the process of thought. Water interlaces different modes of narrative voice and the traditional digressive qualities of the personal essay. Links between self, community and watershed are central to the processes of river reflection and river writing. Moore's description echoes Hume's fondness for half-submerged excursions and associative prose (Hume, Interview).

Hume's cycles of lyrical disclosure foster a shared sense of inquiry which affirms (amidst the clearcuts) that the river is "a voice that can continue to speak to you in your everyday" (Kinseth 5). A wild river becomes a teaching and healing place. This modifies the primacy of humanism into a form of watershed-dependent functioning: "the role of the teacher is allocated to the wilderness countersite in political discourse" (Chaloupka and Cawley 11). Rivers are the focus of excursions and a source of insight: "To describe them

is, in a small and concentrated way, to describe the world” (Herendeen 10). Hume’s work speaks to and revises the primacies of the human-river nexus by putting fish and watershed first. Damage to species and site is the work of humans; Hume suggests we must act now to prevent further loss: “nature is not a dry goods store” and a salmon-centric vision is needed to counter the violence done to species up and down the western North American coastline (27).

The twelve linked chapters in *River of the Angry Moon* (each borrowing the translation of the Nuxalk name for that month, each chapter something of an essay in its own right), exhibit an understanding of a meandering (riverine) consciousness. Hume is attentive to scientific record, local history and personal remembrance. Chronology is measured by life in the watershed as time is fluidized into river detail, measured in salmon-runs, the movement of birds and the chill of the water. Hume begins his account in winter and lets the year and the river work through him. His vision is often midstream, where the past pushes at his back and flows ahead. Open to the “cross-connections” between insight and riverscape, the book (documenting river reflection) is fluid in its shifts from personal epiphany to data analysis (Adorno 22).

There is a movement between “inner” and “outer” inherent in ideas of connection, braiding and “interlacing” (Hume, Interview). Circulating between self and river, city and wilderness, speech and silence, or layered histories and ecological analysis, Hume adapts narrative register through the act of remembrance and writing. Hume’s focus on the lacework of memory and his own inner currents of feeling is linked to the river he attends to. A focus on the river and watershed binds disparate registers and feelings through the “meandering” narrative (Atkins 6). Hume’s focus proceeds “methodically unmethodically” while remaining attentive to the temporal and narrative shifts of the writer’s consciousness (Adorno 13).⁴ Such a journey tests the limits of representation and remembrance. The river is a reflective *and* political site.⁵

Despite the losses, Hume’s lyrical moments are there to inspire, to remind the reader of what *is* as well as what *was*. The fish that have died, their carcasses fuelling forest floor, bear hibernation or human cell division, remain in communal memory. The stories of metre-long salmon Hume gathers in Bella Coola serve to raise the ceiling of expectation. When Hume interviews White and Nuxalk elders he gives the reader a glimpse of an almost vanished world. “From what remains in the Bella Coola valley, we

get some idea of what once was" (8). His remembrance is crucial: fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly argues that unless that memory is passed on, the community's true sense of what restoration is or can be is diminished. The past can enhance the relationship between river and community; Hume's use of the past reminds the reader of what is lost, but also of what survives, for now.⁶

Above all, the Bella Coola River is a site of biodiversity. In collaborating with Harvey Thommasen, Hume has decided the ecological facts must be imparted along with the lyrical moments. Thommasen's extensive field notes become the basis for the book, and in fact undergird its insights. The book opens with lyrical passages ("The river is fed by the sky. It runs over a bed of shattered mountains, through the dreams of a great forest and into the mouths of ancient fishes" [4]); such a register becomes one more means of sharing the richness of the watershed. So a movement between lists of species, oral histories of past abundance, scientific data, and personal commentary is created. We read of the awareness of time and the river as fish leap, but we also read that there are 275 kinds of moth in the valley, and 75 species of moss. Such detail emphasizes the rarer more lyrical modes of inquiry, modes that Hume is naturally drawn to. His lyricism cannot exist in a bubble; it is compromised by its rarity and the possible extinction of the detail that forms it. Destroy the fish, Hume suggests, and you destroy his means of entering the world of the river.

Hume and the "interlacing" river narrative

Fishing is a poetic act. There are a great many books that talk about the poetry of fishing, and yet silence may be the best way to understand it. Only to know that it is there, within each person, in an infinite number of ways.

—David Adams Richards, *Lines on the Water* 54.

The contemporary river-writer faces a series of problems created by watershed damage. How does the non-fiction writer replicate a connection with a beloved river that might bestir the reader to look to his or her own local waterways? How can the writer entertain and inform to encourage a degree of pleasure *and* concern in the reader? The inscription of a process, observation and remembrance is one answer. This writing often begins in personal anecdote before moving to communal history and the process of ecological change at the river. These writers *do* wish, however gently, to provoke a response on several levels and they use several registers to do so. Through the careful braiding of these narrative focal modes a complex, meaning-laden

watershed emerges in print. These meanings endure, despite (or perhaps because of) dams and the contested landscape. *River of the Angry Moon* is no exception to this pattern of register. Its explication honours Hume's sense of a watershed of "interlacing" events and species (Hume, Interview).

Recent critical writing (in cultural geography, for example, where textual interpretation has undergone major change) conceives of "landscape" as a "discursive terrain" (Daniels and Cosgrove 59); "Landscape is a form of knowledge and a form of commentary" (Wevers, "A Story of Land" 9). In landscape convention the control of territory and people become a strategic, scopic act: "Landscape is a social and cultural product, a way of seeing projected onto the land and having its own techniques and compositional form; a restrictive way of seeing that diminishes alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature" (Cosgrove, *Social Formation* 269). Diluted, static and pre-emptive, it becomes a container for "the visual representation of a bourgeois, rationalist conception of the world" achieving, through linear perspective, "the control and domination over space as an absolute objective entity" ("Prospect" 49).

Yet despite the apparently pejorative associations "landscape" has gathered, the technique of textual landscape composition makes up the bulk of recent popular nature writing. Scott Russell Sanders provides us with one of the finest recent definitions: "What we call landscape is a stretch of earth overlaid with memory, expectation and thought. Land is everything that is actually *there*, independent of us; landscape is what we allow in the doors of perception" (*Hunting for Hope* 7). Sanders echoes my sense of the ways *riverscape* accrues (and depends on) memory and feeling. A neo-romantic impulse marks the river as a site of tutelage.

Jim Cheney suggests our capacity to learn from, rather than order, a very complex ecosystem puts human control in perspective. To feel amazed by ecological complexity reminds us of our dependence on a bioregion. For example, Hume describes the declining steelhead (70-82) and chinook (83-95) runs, then alleviates these back-to-back accounts of loss through descriptions of encounter with surviving fish. Such moments become enclaves of remembrance, passages of reflection that take shelter from absence, only to reinforce it. This cycle between memory and fact, lyricism and data is used to underscore Hume's concern. His is a "contextualized discourse of place" because it is alive to the complexities of the watershed and of Hume's dependent and fallible presence in it: "Bioregions provide a way of ground-

ing narrative without essentializing the idea of self” (Cheney 126, 128).

In *River Eternal*, Lance Kinseth notes “A landscape is a tapestry, yes but one too fluid to be picked up by the ends to be examined. . . . How to grasp hold of a river?” (42). His effusive attempt to “grasp” rivers through language poses a problem. There is no one answer to his question. In a post-colonial era riven with silenced languages/rivers there is no longer any untainted appropriative means, nor an essential river to grasp. Each river is unique; equally, each is culturally constructed. For Kinseth, landscape is an interconnected entity. Similarly, Hume observes “a pattern . . . in which the plant species are separated and yet woven together, as threads in a tapestry” (7). His focus on the complex variety of the ecosystem foregrounds the river rather than the author. Hume’s perspective is associative, digressive and interlaced, rather than strictly linear.

In braiding a variety of sources and descriptive modes, Hume seeks an alternative to a literary pastoral that frames the wild as another resource. At the Bella Coola Hume’s currency of choice is epiphany and insight. Yet moments of awakening are rare. Rapture is qualified by the ecological record Hume consults: declining fish numbers, clearcut forest, and bureaucratic compromise (he is, for instance, careful to report, after a classic ‘landscape’ description, that trees are being mulched “into toilet paper” on coastal mills [17]). In much of Hume’s work the moment of vision is thus borne out of a sense of loss: “[t]he ghost of the forest hangs over the valley. All that is left of what was once an old-growth forest, a great cascade of greenness that poured down from the mountains to the sea, is the smoke from slash, burned by forest managers” (*Moon* 127). When logging trucks continue to thunder past, there is precious little time for reverie, nor for the glee of the “birch canoedler” (Joyce I.8. l. 204). Biodiversity is under threat. Hume responds to this threat by arguing that rivers have standing; he also “wanted to make the rivers famous” (Interview). His notion of water rights is realized through water rites. But he avoids a purely nostalgic or introspective stance that could cloud his message of possible ecological collapse.

Hume’s riverine epiphanies intensify a sense of limited agency (he alone cannot “save” the River) and yet those limits are eased by the awareness of the ecological factors on which humans depend (a larger cycle inspires him). This experience of connection offers a sense of what could vanish as much as what remains. Hume may bestow vision, but he also bestows responsibility. Like Berry, Hume shares a concern for the ways watersheds are “taxed” and left as “ruins.” An interest in remnant ecologies and a focus

on personal and communal memory completes and reinforces a series of vital connections involving self, (hi)story and river:

Rivers spin our turbines, powering industry and lighting the cities. They carry away our industrial and residential waste. But they do not wash away our sins.

Long before environmental stress on a river becomes obvious to most of us, it shows up in the fish. They are canaries in a mine, but canaries that cannot sing. We must pay attention to what the fish are telling us, and to the whispering voices of our rivers, for they are speaking about our future. (Hume, *Run of the River 2*)

Like the watershed, Hume's narrative carries a variety of (textual) species. Passages of data and report explication segue into detailed watershed descriptions that are inspired by the flight of a bird or the appearance of a certain fish species. Throughout his essays and longer works, Hume uses anecdote and disclosure to ground his own response, stressing the personal impact of a site, whether that is the movement of a steelhead on a fly or the image of disinterred burial sites at the Peace River. Lyrical moments are used as liminal sites, offering personal gateways into chapters and out of individual sections or essays.⁷ But reverie returns to its inspiration: the details and particular qualities of a river.

For Hume, such narrative association is a primary means of organizing the numinous and scientific watershed and its scientific and less quantifiable data in a way that retains a sense of awe. To see a sockeye is to ruminate on fishing monopolies, sports angling and "hot lime-green flies" (109). In another passage, the reflection of Perseid meteors and Polaris on the darkened river inspires thoughts of pink and chum salmon navigation: "The two species travel separately but converge on the river mouth, like meteor showers coming from their own corners of the universe" (114). Salmon and the river mediate and inspire shifts in focus and register.

Hume's mid-stream narrative mixtures

The river is an expression of interdependencies. As such, it is used to serve a number of literary purposes: a site for plenitude and absence, a locus of insight and concern, an element that both reflects and absorbs thought. "The water we seek is the fluid that drenches the inner and outer spaces of the imagination. . . . this water has a nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors" (Illich 24-25). The "secrets of moving water" are manifold in the mind and the riverscape. Hume is angling for more than fish (14).

Hume lets us enter the river through anecdote and angling. Time and again his approach to the water begins with on-site description and moves

out as ripples from a stone in the water; this is an ecologist's landscape informed by story and in love with imagery. His initial description of a rock formation slips into expressions of geological data, orographic rainfall, lichen, moss and Sitka spruce, and from there to logging, fish habitat and salmonid species. Each fish species remains distinct, sharing the different levels of the river (surface and bed) depending on water temperature and feeding options: "Through the chaos of nature, then, we see these parallel lines of order running" (13). Hume learns from this cooperative concordance.

Standing at the snow-covered Bella Coola estuary, Hume feels the winter wind Nuxalk call *Sps*, "the Wind That Sweeps Away Food" (9). This wind drives fishing boats inland: if not heeded it will whip freezing sea spray onto deck gear, rigging and bundled nets:

There have been cases where a tonne of ice accumulates, capsizing boats and turning their masts into glaciated sea anchors. There are families in the valley who shudder when *Sps* rises, for in the moaning wind they hear voices from the past. They hear the sounds of breaking ice and of the sea rising over the hulls of white ships. (10)

The river helps site this vivid, macabre description. The river is what the salmon are heading for; it determines the presence of the fishing boats and Hume's own writing. Hume returns to this image at the close of chapter one: "the decline of the steelhead in the Bella Coola River, and in most rivers from California to Alaska, is deeply disturbing, for we simply don't know what is being lost. All we know is that they are being swept away as if by *Sps*, leaving the spawning beds empty under the shadows of the ancient glaciers" (14). The wind he feels has taken him through memory and emerged in a current analogy that zooms back from one site to scan a continent.

Hume plays the river so it might begin to sing itself on the page, but he knows the river valley and its creatures are impervious to his feelings. Other creatures will simply see him and move on: as a wolf crosses Hume's line of sight, he draws back from thoughts of emptied currents: "When it is gone, swallowed by the forest, I know I have been blessed. I have fallen from the mountain and landed on my feet in the river as gently as rain" (14). The wind has passed; the hydrologic cycle that drew the reader into the book, that draws the river from the mountains, has deposited our author into his body and the watershed's artery. Watching, "alert for the numinous event," Hume knows his appreciation of such rare instances depends upon species that are vanishing (Lopez 2). His salmon-centric vision cuts across difference and returns to human limits and human awe:

At night you can stand on the banks of the Bella Coola River listening to the rustle of the current, knowing the sound is timeless. Sometimes you might see the reflection of a shooting star and hear a salmon, rippling the current. You might say that's a dog, or that's a pink. But all you know for sure is that the river is running and the salmon are running in it, completing a transect between the heavens and the sea. (126)

"Water," Bachelard observed, "is a universal glue" ("The Hand Dreams"). The awareness of larger cycles and connections, hydrologic and otherwise, prompts a transcendent mode of associative writing evident in much river work (Tuan). The hydrologic cycle and all its cumulative co-operations and expressions have lifted Hume up and then returned him to the riverbed. Water binds disparate musings: Hume's discussion of meteors led back to the river, out into politics and the dwindling fish stocks that cause international difficulties for Bella Bella and the Nuxalk nation, as well as those younger entities Canada and the United States. Fish and rivers broach territorial borders, forming new stories and political tales there too.⁸ Association is a key ecological and essayistic principle: it is central to Hume's textual weave.

Despite his occasional rapture, Hume largely dismisses the view of nature as pristine and apart from human intervention. Part of him may want this: plenty of fishermen fail to engage with the river on his terms (90, 141). Yet his use of a range of scientific and economic reports and his consistent arguments in favour of the importance of rivers for the ecological health of fish (and thus birds, bears, trees and cultural practices) tend to mitigate romantic notions of untouchable rivers. He does not want a "Nature" separate from his life, or the economic life of Bella Coola; but he *does* want a form of economic involvement that is less extreme than clearcutting and salmon extinction.

Hume affirms what Hans Jonas terms "the imperative of responsibility" (where the needs of the future generations are crucial to today's actions). Epiphany thus becomes a lyrical backdrop to tabulated species extinction. Insight is a call to action: it works through the expression of personal feeling and a sense of site-specific loss. Yet the Bella Coola offers finned remnants that inspire him, partly because the Nuxalk (led by Art Saunders) had the conviction to protect their estuary from a pulp-mill development (115). There thus remains some habitat to enter. As with Eiseley's watery immersion ("a minute pulse . . . the eternal pulse"), submergence revises Hume's boundaries. Hume told me he might spend a day in the water and lose himself, emerging hours later with very little sense of where he has

been “emotionally, or mentally” (Interview). When he later begins to write, a process of recovery traces the extent of his immersion.

One of Hume’s most intense river experiences is a summer float trip down the nearby Atnarko River in a wetsuit. Setting out, he revels in “the shock of changing worlds” as he submerges and his feet are lifted from the riverbed (98). Trying to adjust his seemingly graceful descent reminds him of the power of the current: it is “as if the force of gravity has pivoted sideways” (99). He slips through a rapid into a deep pool, past six chinook, their gold-rimmed eyes visible just before their “miraculous” acceleration. As he continues, Hume finds the river working on his perception:

The difference between the underwater world and our own is profound, dramatic and as thin as the surface layer. At Belarko Pool, where the light plays beautifully over the river stones and salmon hold like kites in the current, I lift my head just a few centimetres—and hear laughter and excited screams. . . . The sounds and colours seem harsh and unreal, and they vanish as I drop my face again into the Atnarko. Hanging listless, drifting where the current takes me, I lose touch with my body and start to melt into the green light. Only the sound of my lungs brings me back. (100)

Hume continues his swim through water that refracts the light “like stained glass in a church,” past whitefish huddled “in monastic silence” (101, 102). But these numinous overtones are balanced by the presence of the clothing of a man nearly drowned by a logjam and the continued lack of steelhead sightings. Hume has not swum the river to become personally enlightened, but to count fish.⁹ He is tumbled by the current, he loses his sensory norms and is reminded of the river’s power, but he emerges feeling chilled not just by the water, but by the fact there are no steelhead in sight that day. With memories of lead weights coating the riverbed Hume leaves the water a haunted man.

Ultimately, Hume sees the river as “unknowable” (142). But when he does try to “grasp” the river through metaphor as Kinseth does, the results are instructive (37). *River of the Angry Moon*’s final pages recount an intriguing riverine epiphany. Hume has been dreaming of a certain steelhead catch for months; he is haunted by the image of a particular riseform, an unrealized vision of a life crossing elemental states. “I know that to finish the dream I must find the steelhead, and I know that the steelhead is somewhere in the Bella Coola River, waiting for me, as it has been all year” (168). Hume drives up from the city to fish. A Nuxalk fisherman tells him the December run is on.

Hume goes again to the river. When he enters the water amidst the December snow, a spell seems cast over his vision and his prose: the river

and the rhythmic casting have “mesmerized” him. His synaesthetic state envelops concern; he steps into the moment and the watershed, its elements sustaining him and drawing all his attention. His epiphany is beyond the domain of worry as he enters the river completely:

The forest surrounds me as the waters of the Bella Coola surround the fish.

An invisible rectangle exists in space and time, encompassing the river and the stones and history. I have been searching for it in a dark forest, along an endless shoreline. Without knowing, I step inside. I am in one corner and the great, sleeping salmon is at the other. The line drifts between the opposing points. (174)

As the fish takes, Hume’s attention is swallowed into an instant and the river’s reach. Images cascade as the entire river and key moments from the book coalesce:

I catch my breath, I hear my heart drumming like a grouse, I see the red blood on the snow, I know that somewhere river mist curls from the mouth of a running wolf and that great white swans are leaning forward to plunge their heads into the rich mud of the estuary. I know that the coho are moving gently together, shifting the stones, and I can hear salmon eggs falling. I know the river glints like sunlight on the wings of a dipper and that night folds itself over the valley like the soft brown wings of a sedge. I hear the Nuxalk drummers, but their song falls like snow into the river and becomes silent. Everything becomes water.

Then the fish runs. (174-75)

This is Hume at his most enraptured. Key instances of insight are subsumed into the river as hypersensitive understanding gives way to the wrenching realities of a hooked and running fish. The river and time blossom outwards; images are swallowed by the water. In this moment Hume depicts the wilderness as teacher.¹⁰ After a struggle, where time is again compressed and stretched (it “lasts an eternity but is over in moments, as if it somehow never existed”), the fish is pulled in. Emblematic of river, sunset and snow, this big steelhead is the prize Hume has sought; he bends to release it. Suddenly, in a single-line paragraph (the nature-writer’s stamp of significance), the rapture fades: the fish is bleeding, mortally wounded by Hume’s hook. The steelhead’s teeth cut Hume’s hand, but this wound will not kill the man, nor redeem him. The fish will “almost certainly” die: “I feel my centre give way” (175). Then Hume releases the fish so it can feed other creatures after its death. Demonstrating his humility and his complicity, he watches the fish swim on:

I let the fish go and it rests in the shallows next to me. In that moment I sense the timelessness of nature and the fatalism of the spawning run. I know that the rivers that I love are paved with the bones of the fish that I love and by this I am

bound to the planet. The dazed steelhead stirs, its tail roiling the surface of the great Bella Coola River, and then it swims out, vanishing under the sheltering forest. (176)

Hume's meditation on continuities of life and death are twined to the river. In this moment he allies himself with Haig-Brown in his love of place and his awareness that any enclave is bound to attract forces that will alter it.¹¹ Hume's motivation for vision may be similar, but its uncompromised (pristine) expression is as rare on the Bella Coola as anywhere else today.

Critique of Hume

Hume's harsh record of loss is not always popular. Reviewing *River of the Angry Moon*, Margaret Gunning regarded the mixture of data and poetic imagery as "flawed"—she wanted more poetic imagery and felt the data, Hume's "sermonizing" and a tendency to "rant" sat uneasily with the poetics. Readers of Edward Abbey will know such mixtures are common in textual eco-lament. Moreover, "like gamblers, baseball fans and television networks, fishermen are enamored of statistics" (Duncan, *The River Why* 14). Couple this fondness with Thommasen's rigorous eye in the field and it is no wonder that early drafts of their book were far more focused on the data in those fieldnotes. The publisher called for more lyricism in order to balance the form. Hume then set the data aside "and began to write from memory." The manuscript "became lyrical and it became much more personal" (Interview). But to source insight in that ecological network wakens him to complexity, compromise and loss—not lyricism alone.

For these reasons Hume is unlikely to practice the rapturous and intricate knowing of Gilean Douglas, whose life near the Teal River in the 1940s prompted and demanded a remarkable watershed knowledge. But Douglas's B.C. river cabin was isolated. The mistakes and needs of the larger world were more distant. Douglas had a much more tested sense of wilderness living than Thoreau; she *had* to learn in order to survive and her writing displays a remarkable engagement and activity. Her attention left her listening as "the green word speaks softly in the hills / And in the river's flowing" (Douglas 9). Dams and extinct fish stocks did not impinge on her prose as much as they do on Hume's. Her sense of the wild as a restorative site was not recreational; it was honed by constant work with (and dependence on) it. Hume's "green word" emerges fifty years later through a denser more troubling layer of human need and technology. As he closes his book, though, he returns to his lyrical mode to share the connection he feels with B.C.'s rivers and the awe that bond still imparts. But the kinds of sustained

learned delight Douglas has gifted B.C. with are hard to come by in its watersheds today. Even literary pastoral has become haunted.

The watershed inspires humility. What has been done to it evokes anger, grief and frustration. I doubt any single book can resolve these feelings for Hume. The one thing that may be the fact that Federal and B.C. governments have now established major fish-recovery programmes on the Bella Coola, with co-operation from all groups (Hume, Interview). Still, the book pulls no punches: Native, White, sport and commercial fishers all get telling-off, and Thommasen has been thanked by some Nuxalk for pointing the bone (Interview). The book's SalmonFirst! catch-cry does not hold back from criticizing any wasteful Nuxalk or non-Native fishing he observes. Hume believes the idea of some pristine, absolutely non-wasteful Native culture is "a very powerful myth in our society" that romanticizes First Nations life and denies tradition and human frailty (Interview). The book is not the cross-cultural study it might have been, mainly because its focus is cross-species. This brings me to Terry Glavin's main reservation about Hume's book: its appeal may not extend beyond "the people-bad, animals-good crowd, and among gentlemen anglers who advocate 'catch and release' fishing."

For example, one scene mentions that a Nuxalk man had caught and *killed* a protected steelhead. This is "troubling" to Hume (168). Rightly so, perhaps, but there needs to be some way that Nuxalk rights can enter Hume's pro-angling world. Nuxalk are part of the watershed. Given their declining numbers, Hume believes fish survival should, where necessary, take precedence over Native food fisheries. This is where Hume's salmon-centrism questions cultural politics and can make people angry: "cutthroat and steelhead populations are in decline. A dead fish does not care if it has been killed by a white or a Native hand—and it has no better chance of spawning. Blame is not the issue—survival is" (59). Perhaps so; but it does depend on what you can afford to put on the family table. Hume would respond by saying the more plentiful pink salmon is worth prizing, not discarding and it is time to let the river lie fallow (140).

Ultimately, Hume's decision to limit discussion of the careful practices of the Nuxalk he *does* know diminishes the reader's sense of the cultural watershed, even if one can argue with equal force that it is not his place to pass judgement on the Nuxalk techniques (125). Glavin wanted more focus on the Nuxalk and white pioneers, their methods of community, the tradition of extractive and efficient Nuxalk fishing operations and a stance that included First Nation and white fishers in movement towards dialogue between groups.

Hume could contribute to such a dialogue; *Run of the River* is one example of his concern with human experience, and trouble on the Fraser or at Burnt Church demonstrates that dialogue around fish is very hard, and very necessary.

I believe Glavin's concerns over *Angry Moon* have validity; had the Nuxalk world view been more developed the book may have been more "rounded." By the same token, there are an increasing number of books in which First Nations generously share their stories on their terms. The work gathered in Carlson and Hanna and Henry makes public some of the oldest insights into/from B.C. rivers from the Stó:lo and Nlha7kápmx Nations respectively. The fact Glavin (like Barry Lopez) favours dialogue between First Nations and other Canadians as a way into knowing nature is testament to the superb manner in which he has contributed to it. Such story-exchange can help foster understanding between different communities around this river-wrapped world. Writing of Maori eel-fishing practices, David Young observes "Story is part of the sinew that binds people back to the landscape. In this case the river is narrative, the flow is *tuna* [eel]; the harvest is understanding" (180).

Looking back, reading the waters ahead

So we beat on, boats in the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.
—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 182.

Plenty, like myself, sing the praises of rivers and do so on processed old-growth forest, using power sucked from rivers, as we sit in libraries made, Gary Snyder reminds us, from "cast-in-place concrete ... a transformation of water-washed gravels, a riverbed stood on end" (206). Flowing through stone, we descend through stairwells of vertical riverbed, fluid-based members of a populace that may lament the intervention of our passion for order on the remembered torrents of the past.

The invasive technologies of damming or polluting a river are portrayed in much recent river writing as assaults upon a fragile (somewhat precious?) ideal of harmony and care, as much as a physical riverscape. Andrea Cabajsky makes this point: "With the environmental crisis . . . comes a vilification of commercial and industrial land use and a celebration of recreational land use as essentially conducive to a conservation ethics" (24-25). At the river (a meeting place between cultures and a site for stories—and thus memories—from those cultures) the dominant society seeks a kind of hydrotherapy that will redeem the sins of a colonial past and the "technological colonialism" of the present (Cohen). This work is also an

examination of doubt in the face of such forces, because many of those who write of and oppose this colonialism realize the pace of development is torrential. Like Hume, they realize the contemporary river will not redeem us; we have come too far, too fast. On the Bella Coola, Hume (like Richards, Marlatt, Moore, Leeson and Bowling) gets “to trace the pulse of the river” and measure it against a personal sense of change and loss (166).

Steelhead runs caught to near-extinction, coho and sockeye numbers struggling, timber felled in an instant: such loss ensures lyricism, as a literary mode, is not enough for Hume. Lyricism does not allow enough room for suggested improvements in policy. And he has plenty.

In Hume’s view, the only way a salmon fillet should land on your plate is if you’ve caught it. Commercial fishing is seen as a drain on budgetary and finned resources. Hume is the first to acknowledge “it’s a tough balancing act” between short-term profit and long-term work (*Adam’s* 90). Richard White’s argument that work is part of nature, that labouring as a fishing or forestry worker remains an intense form of knowing is crucial here:

The choice between condemning all work in nature and sentimentalizing vanishing forms of work is simply not an adequate choice. I am not interested in replacing a romanticism of inviolate nature with a romanticism of local work. Nor am I interested in demonizing machines. Environmentalists need to come to terms with modern work. (“Are You” 181-82)

Hume has some trouble with the wasteful nature of modern transnational commercial fishing; he believes that locally based, fee-paying fishing is the answer to corporate waste. His solution to commercial fishing (which damages local communities and economies in his estimation—as well as fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly’s¹²) is the re-introduction of fee-paying sports angling and the decommissioning of the large commercial fleets. This is controversial and is possibly too extreme an answer, catering to those who can afford to equip and transport themselves to the river. Many would disagree with Hume’s fly-fishing agenda for B.C. He is more interested in speaking for rivers and fish than political expediency, which remains a way of seeing that harms both. His solution is meant to wrest control and capital from transnational companies (that have dictated the patterns of community along many a coastline), so smaller groups of locally sensitized workers can determine events. Jeannette Armstrong argues that such devolution of control leads to an evolution in bioregionally-attentive communication and community. But everyone will need to come on board.

Not all will make the effort. In agreeing to the closure of the B.C. sockeye

fishery in 1999, First Nations and White fishing crews put the salmon first but they also had their families in mind: that is another thing that binds cultures. As many affected by that closure know, the support of long-term vision has very tough short-term consequences. Story-exchange demands a level of patience and foresight that government and landlords find hard to accommodate. While First Nations forego a culturally significant food (and often their family's key protein source, according to Stó:lo Sonny McHalsie) and many lose income, the U.S. ships cruise the Pacific. First Nations, Canadians and salmon lose out, not to mention the bears and international fishing treaties (Armstrong).

Many nature writers believe sharing a concern for other species is good for human social development. For Hume and other river writers, putting the water and its finned creatures first offers one way through cultural difference towards a shared ethics of care. The past has carved a channel for us to live with and learn from. Such ways forward will need to take alliances between networked human communities into account if they are to work for the river. Jeannette Armstrong closes her remarkable essay in the anthology *First Fish, First People: Salmon Tales of the North Pacific Rim* (1998) by calling for collaboration between small-boat fishers and traders, First Nations, academics, and the sixty thousand school children rebuilding salmon habitat in BC and across the border. People are part of the "lace work" of the watershed and have a responsibility borne of dependence and foresight. Armstrong (of the Okanagan First Nation) offers us a locally specific and globally applicable vision; it is one Hume can appreciate, for he also knows how fragile and important the "lace work" of rivers are to life—he too knows the salmon offer lessons. A contemporary watershed is a shared site. Depending, as interlaced creatures do, on the currents that inform and compose it, we would be wise to look to the waters again, to reach for the elusive, revisionary language of compromise and balance that today's interconnected natures and cultures demand:

we must forge something new, a new course chosen for the right reasons. A course insuring the preservation of the precious gifts of life to each of us and our generations to come as true caretakers of these lands. For the salmon—our spirit relatives, messengers of the future—are swimming the unclean tides heralding our passing, and in their ebb speak of the duty entrusted to each of us born in this time of grave omens. (Armstrong 192)

NOTES

- 1 See Abramovitz, Armstrong, Bocking, de Villiers, Glavin, Gleick, Goldsmith and Hildyard, Hume's *Run of the River*, McCully, Reisner, Roy, and Waldram, for example. These authors amplify and honour the scientific record.
- 2 A small recent Canadian list might include other river-mesmerized authors Jeannette Armstrong, Terry Glavin (*A Ghost in the Water*, 1992; *This Ragged Place: Travels Across the Landscape*, 1996), Alan Haig-Brown (*The Fraser River*, 1996), Richard Bocking, David Adams Richards, Chris Gudgeon and Marq de Villiers. Richards and de Villiers won Governor-General's non-fiction awards (in 1998 and 1999 respectively), ending the century on a watery note. Further B.C. currents include the legendary *Steveston* by Daphne Marlatt (1974/84), and more recent work by Tim Bowling: *Low Water Slack* (the 1995 poetry début) and his first novel, *Downriver Drift* (2000), where fishing work, memory and place bind.
- 3 Though my focus here is one fly-fisherman's experience of a B.C. river, the full meaning of the river as a spiritual site in canoeing needs to be borne in mind, from fur traders or Pierre Trudeau's persona to the remarkable and empowering journeys First Nations continue to make along the West Coast, where cedar canoes are "healing vessels" (Neel 1). Cranmer's film *Laxwesa'wa: strength of the river*, Neel, and the people in Hanna and Henry, Carlson and Armstrong, et al. share the stories of many First Nations and speak with authority to the obvious gaps in Hume's work. Of special note is director Kane's *The River—Home*, a striking piece of riverine theatre. See also Benidickson, Raffan, Neel, Trudeau, and Bocking.
- 4 Adorno's phrase echoes Walter Pater's description of the essay's "unmethodical method" (Lopate, "Introduction" xxxvi). Hume's method is unmethodical because unplanned events on the river determine events and associations on the page.
- 5 Hume's latest river-text project—www.ariverneverasleeps.com—relays the politics of rivers to a global audience and pays homage to the work of B.C.'s most famous angler scribe. Another great river site is www.irmn.org.
- 6 As Hume, Abramovitz, de Villiers, Goldsmith and Hildyard, Gleick, Outwater, Palmer, Postel, White, Worster and others attest.
- 7 As Ted Leeson observes "the surface itself, the boundary we fish on, is an imaginative construct. In reality, only the water and air exist; the interface between them—some third separate place we call 'the surface'—is something we create. Our brains are not wired to accept the deep anarchy of absolute disjunction, and so we invent thresholds and zones of transition that soothe our understanding with little continuities and make us feel better" (158).
- 8 In some cases, Hume appears to ally both First Nations and multinational commercial fishing as negative, without always stressing the massive differences in scale. In August 1997 tempers flared as British Columbian fishers accused Alaskans of violation of the 1985 Pacific Salmon Treaty. "Over 60% of Sockeye taken in Southeast Alaska are Canadian origin Sockeye. . . . Between 1984 and 1995 Alaskan Coho interceptions increased from 350,000 to 1.4 million" (Armstrong 187, 189). Keeping with trade debate, controversy through 1999 regarding Canadian water export to the U.S. under NAFTA highlights the emotional links formed with water, particularly as it becomes an export commodity.
- 9 We can be forgiven for thinking Hume might prefer gills (he spoke of the "addictive" qualities of river-diving), but driftnets and anglers like himself have probably put him off

- the idea. That beautiful leap the hooked salmon makes is, after all, a reaction to pain. Catch and release fishing, when poorly done, still means catch and kill (107).
- 10 The book also tends to affirm Jim Harrison's wry construction of Canada as a kind of vast fishing lodge: "Canada was a ready-made time capsule into our sporting past—gentle, affable and not all that far away" (123).
- 11 Roderick Haig-Brown said a river "has its own life and its own beauty, and the creatures it nourishes are alive and beautiful also. Perhaps fishing is, for me, only an excuse to be near rivers. If so, I'm glad I thought of it" (352).
- 12 In a packed public lecture (referenced below), Pauly was asked what three measures he would implement to ensure the health of the west coast fishery. His reply: create marine reserves that protected spawning and feeding grounds, and stop commercial fishing that moved money from local communities into the hands of transnational corporations. There was no third measure; these two, he felt, would be enough.

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