

WEST OF THE GREAT DIVIDE

Man and Nature in the Literature of British Columbia

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IN THAT LITTLE CLASSIC of coastal literature, M. Wylie Blanchet's *The Curve of Time*, there is an episode that illustrates well one of the characteristic themes of British Columbia writing. The author and her children while exploring the coastline in a small boat revisit a favourite place, Princess Louisa Inlet, but they find they are no longer in sole possession as they had been on previous visits. A cabin has recently been built there for a man from California. This cabin is a thing of beauty, the man has excellent taste and he is hospitable, but they lament that "the first thin wedge of civilization" has been driven into their beloved place, and they eventually perceive that he is similarly dismayed by their intrusion: "The man groaned . . . his paradise spoiled, I suppose. But what about ours?"¹

Although the word "paradise" here appears conventional enough, it has more than casual significance in the literature of this region. As I suggested in an earlier article, the literature of British Columbia has developed in ways that strikingly contradict the "survival" thesis about Canadian literature expounded by Margaret Atwood and others.² The writers of this region have rarely seen man as the victim of hostile forces of nature. More often they have celebrated the splendour and generosity of the land. They have frequently taken as one of their central images Eden or the earthly paradise, and a leading theme has been the attempt to gain and hold possession of the ideal place. If paradise is one key term in the literature, possession is another. As the episode in *The Curve of Time* illustrates, however, the image of paradise cannot be used without the apprehension of paradise lost. The discovery of the good place is inevitably followed by the fear of losing it, through some personal or collective eviction, and by the fear of its ruin or destruction. Hence much British Columbia writing seems to develop around the patterns, paradise — paradise lost, and the theme of possession is matched by equally prominent themes of dispossession and of spoiling the land.³

In the literature of the region the man from California appears frequently and under many names. The intrusions are not always so gentle as in *The Curve of*

Time. The signal of the threat is often the sound of machinery, the noise of an approaching aircraft, the roar of bulldozers or chainsaws. In Theodora Stanwell-Fletcher's *Driftwood Valley* (1946) the author and her husband travelled thousands of miles to find their ideal wilderness lake but they had no sooner arrived than an airplane made an emergency landing there. At the end of their time in Driftwood in 1942 they heard the rumble of bombers passing overhead, signifying the forces that called them back to the outer world from the place they considered their Shangri-La, and they departed with the prayer that if an Alaska highway was built it might pass far from their valley. Similarly in T. A. Walker's *Spatsizi* (1976) the author made a laborious trek by horseback to a perfect lake he discovered in the Cassiar mountains, and immediately encountered a tycoon from Pittsburgh, who had flown in and was furious upon finding others at "his" lake. Walker enjoyed his paradise for a number of years, but the beginning of the end was the appearance of a road construction crew. Finally there was a road on one boundary of his area and a railroad advancing up the other boundary, and he concluded that the only hope of saving the place from destruction was to have it made a park.

In all these narratives there is a double sense of irony: an awareness that those who resent the intrusions of the outer world are themselves seen as intruders by others (for it always turns out that there are earlier inhabitants, although sometimes they are at first overlooked), and the realization that those who find their paradise in a frontier area are inevitably overtaken by the forces from which they have fled. This sense of irony runs deep in R. D. Symons' *The Broken Snare* (1970). The author established a cattle ranch in the Peace River country, reluctantly disturbing the environment to which a black wolf, the last of his race, and an old Indian hunter belonged. His happy possession of the land ended when bulldozers (controlled as the machines often are in these narratives by men speaking with American accents) drove roads through it for oil exploration, raw gashes straight through swamps and over hills, destroying the grass and crocuses and smashing the wild raspberry patch loved both by his children and the bears.⁴ By the time he was forced to depart he identified himself increasingly with the black wolf and the Indian hunter. Here we have all the classic elements of the themes of dispossession and the spoiling of the land, which we will encounter again and again in the literature of the region, in both minor and major writers.

Documentary accounts like *The Broken Snare* provide a good starting point for the examination of themes and images which reappear, often in more complex form, in the work of the novelists and poets. Anyone who has read narratives like Symons' is in a position to recognize instantly the sinister significance of the activity of imposing straight lines and geometrical forms on the landscape in Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*, while in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* Hodgins has only to mention three yellow bulldozers sitting peacefully in

the background for the reader to know that at least one of them will roar destructively into life before the end of the novel.

Such themes and images are of course by no means confined to the literature of British Columbia. They are part of a larger North American pattern,⁵ but they have special prominence in British Columbia writing, far more than in that of other regions of Canada. One evidence of this is the fact that they immediately appear in the work of a writer so sensitive to environment and local factors as Matt Cohen when he writes a novel with a British Columbia setting, *Wooden Hunters*, while they are scarcely present in his fiction set in Ontario, whether written earlier or later.⁶ If the Atwood survival thesis in its primary form, man as victim of nature, has little relevance for British Columbia writing, it is in its inverted form, nature as victim of man, close to the centre of much of the literature of the region.

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N BRITISH COLUMBIA LITERATURE themes of conservation and spoiling the land emerged prominently long before the widespread modern development of ecological concerns. Among the first generation of European settlers on the coast, John Helmcken, who described the site of Victoria as "paradisical" at the time of his arrival in 1850, lamented the deterioration of climate that subsequently occurred when the trees were cut that had sheltered the area from winds, and he commented in 1890 on what man had made of the land as he looked around him on a landscape robbed of its forests: "the earth has been subdued and robbed ruthlessly, made the slave of man and treated as such."⁷

The theme of spoiling the land became specially prominent in this region in the late 1940's and early 1950's, an era of extensive, sometimes reckless, exploitation of resources, a time both of popular belief in progress and of growing awareness of a universal nuclear threat. To this period belong three particularly interesting, very diverse treatments of the theme: Roderick Haig-Brown's *On the Highest Hill*, Malcolm Lowry's *October Ferry to Gabriola*, and Earle Birney's *The Damnation of Vancouver*. Haig-Brown's work is dated 1949 and Birney's in its first version 1952 (final version 1957), and it is interesting to note how closely Lowry here, as in some other instances, fits into a local pattern: the time of *October Ferry* is October 1949, and drafts of the novel were written between that date and 1953.⁸ These three writers provide so full an exploration of the theme that when ecology became a subject of general concern in the 1960's, newly emerging writers in the region, such as Bill Bissett, faced special problems in avoiding the conventional and finding new methods of treatment.

Haig-Brown's *On the Highest Hill* is a novel with a pattern similar to a number of the documentary narratives already described. The central character,

Colin Ensley, grows up on a coastal farm, and comes as a boy to love a remote valley in the mountains. After service overseas in the Second World War, he returns to make a home in this valley, when he finds that the family farm has become a housing subdivision, but before long loggers follow him there. The sound of donkey engines, caterpillars, power saws, and the fall of trees mean to him that the violence he had witnessed during the war has followed him even to his favourite place, and he is filled with rage and despair at seeing the destruction caused around his cabin by logging. The novel has a tragic conclusion when Colin, who moves finally into an area of parkland, dies during an attempt to evict him.

Haig-Brown was, as he has stated, a conservationist all his life,⁹ and in his later years his dedication to this cause became so strong as to consume much of his time and perhaps even to take him away from writing. Lowry had no such life-long preoccupation with conservation but his concern developed entirely as a result of the love he felt for the setting of his home on Burrard Inlet or "Eridanus," and the prominence of the protest against the spoiling of the land in his writings is a measure of the greatness of that love. In "The Forest Path to the Spring" there are signs of threat to his paradise but these are not yet very potent: a temporary oil slick, an expanding oil refinery with a defective sign reading "HELL," the fact that the area at the head of the inlet known to the Indians as Paradise has been vulgarized to "Ye Olde Totemlande Inne."

In *October Ferry to Gabriola*, however, the threats have become much stronger, and if "The Forest Path" is Lowry's *Paradiso* then *October Ferry* comes close to being his *Paradise Lost*. The oil slick reappears in a much more menacing form. The refinery, which had once appeared innocent, even beautiful, has become truly infernal, a thing of strident noise, by night a fiery torch with a fiendishly lurid light, a true manifestation of the city of Dis. The novel is filled with ironic reflections on the nature of progress. With the theme of spoiling the land is fused a theme of personal dispossession. The central character, Ethan Llewelyn, who compares himself and his wife to Adam and Eve facing expulsion from Paradise, is threatened with eviction from his loved home on the inlet — by a peculiar irony, in the interests of park preservation, just as in the case of Haig-Brown's Colin Ensley. In the end this eviction is averted or postponed, but the dominant theme of the novel is dispossession, and it has the same intensity as the celebration of the Eden-like perfection of place in "The Forest Path." In *October Ferry* Eden is no longer found in present experience so much as in memories of the past.

It is an indication of the special importance of the subject of conservation for British Columbia writers that a hearing at Courtenay in 1951 on a proposal to dam the scenically magnificent Buttle Lake, which lies in a provincial park, was attended not only by Haig-Brown, as one would expect, but also by Earle Birney.

The outcome was not only the building of the dam but also *The Damnation of Vancouver*, a play written at a time when ecological concerns were a very unusual subject for poetry and drama. In his picture of what man has made of the environment Birney is at one with Haig-Brown and Lowry. The city is judged and condemned by a series of historical and dramatic figures: by Captain Vancouver, as he compares it both with the wilderness and the eighteenth-century city of London he had known; by a Salish headman, who deplores the lack of harmony between man and nature; by the raffish pioneer, Gassy Jack, who laments the disappearance of the small clean place he had known; and finally by the medieval poet, Will Langland, who delivers a fierce indictment of the pollution of the environment: "the fouled and profit-clogged Fraser," and "the raped mountains, scarred with fire and finance," and finds a corresponding moral corruption in the people. The image of the place as Eden or Paradise is presented only by the ludicrous and discredited figure of Legion, the simple minded believer in material progress.¹⁰

In these three works Haig-Brown, Lowry, and Birney all reject the temptation to represent the spoilers of the land primarily as Americans or other external forces. They hold that the enemy lies within, and they develop contrasts between nature and human nature that sometimes seem to bring them close to misanthropy. Of the three it is Lowry, that man of extremes, who comes closest to succumbing. In *Eridanus* he finds an inner psychological balance he had not known elsewhere, and in keeping with the spirit of the place he refuses to give in to the rage he feels against the spoilers in "The Forest Path," but in *October Ferry* and such stories as "Gin and Goldenrod" the struggle has become harder and the rage less controlled.

As one might expect, balance is much better maintained by Haig-Brown. He gives a perceptive and sympathetic picture of the evolution of Colin Ensley into a misanthrope, but he makes it clear that this solitary, moody character is not to be completely identified with himself. Where he writes in his own person he develops a view of conservation that is not misanthropic but strongly humanistic. The concern in some writers with personal dispossession broadens in his work into a concern with the danger of global dispossession or human extinction. He does not seek to preserve a private paradise but wishes to ensure that the land be used in the long-range interests of humanity, not for a single generation but for all the generations to come, conserved not as a refuge from modern realities but in order that man may learn the realities necessary for his survival as a species, including the lesson he refers to in a late essay as the "dramatic discovery of the century": "that the earth, far from being massive, imponderable, and inexhaustible, is small and finite."¹¹

Like Haig-Brown, Birney in *The Damnation of Vancouver* examines the misanthropic extreme without himself accepting it. Langland's indictment of the

city is tinged with misanthropy, but Birney does not allow Langland to have the last word, and in the end the city is saved by the testimony of Mrs. Anyone, a figure representing human vitality, love, joy, and hope, the better potentialities of its inhabitants. There are, however, dark later treatments by Birney of the spoiling of the land. In *What's so big about GREEN?* (1973) the title poem represents the history of European settlement in British Columbia as a total destruction of the environment accomplished in four generations—the end of the local version of progress is a radioactive wasteland.¹² But here the movement is not really into misanthropy so much as it is into social criticism, a movement as characteristic of Birney as of Haig-Brown.¹³

HAIG-BROWN, LOWRY, AND BIRNEY not only demonstrate that British Columbia writers have been quick to raise themes of conservation and spoiling the land from limited minor literary topics into major subjects but also show the way in which the special prominence of these themes conditions many aspects of the literature, including the development of social criticism and the representation both of the city and of such rural figures as the Indian and the logger. As their work suggests, the celebration of the Edenic natural setting has rarely resulted in complacency about human nature or the social order. Although British Columbia has attracted a number of utopian experiments, utopian hopes and dreams have not been prominent in the literature, and writers have seldom held any illusions that migration to a new land allows escape from the realities of human nature and human history. "This country ought to grow good people," a logger reflects as he looks at the mountains in Haig-Brown's novel, *Timber*,¹⁴ but Haig-Brown, whose social criticism gains authority from his long experience as a magistrate, places no special faith in that proposition. Not only has the literature of the region been relatively free from the naive assumption that a splendid natural setting assures an ideal society but frequently the splendour of the setting has served to intensify social criticism, both by leading to the special concern with the spoiling of the land and also by providing an ideal against which human imperfection and failure can be measured. It has helped ensure that no region of Canada has a more persistent and vigorous tradition of social criticism.

The way in which the ideal natural setting serves to intensify social criticism is strikingly shown in the representation of the city. As in Birney's *The Damnation of Vancouver*, the city commonly stands as the symbol of the dominant social order—most frequently of the worst aspects of that order. In British Columbia writing the treatment of the city appears remarkably negative, even if one recognizes how strong anti-urban biases have always been in pastoral tradition, and in the literature of many countries and regions since the Romantic movement.

Thus Haig-Brown, although the characters in his fiction rarely go to Vancouver, occasionally provides descriptions of ugly wooden slums in that city as vivid as his pictures of more pleasing rural landscapes. The loggers in *Timber* consider the opportunities for dissipation to be the city's only attraction, apart from the redeeming feature of its setting: "Even in Vancouver you can see mountains."¹⁵ Lowry's British Columbia writings are full of contrasts between the magnificence of Vancouver's setting and the ugliness and sterility of the city itself. Infernal imagery is as prominent in his descriptions of the city as Edenic imagery in his descriptions of the natural setting. In *October Ferry to Gabriola* the bulldozers, so often shown devastating the rural landscape, have moved into the city, destroying the pleasant old wooden houses that were the most attractive feature of the West End, so that they may be replaced by the soulless behemoths of concrete high-rises. The way in which landscape is turned into deathscape is represented not only by the oil refinery that threatens Eridanus but also, in a story like "Gin and Goldenrod," by a forest slashed for a housing development and made a blackened ruin, as if the woodland had been struck by lightning. To this picture of the city as sterile and sordid more recent writers emerging in the 1960's and 1970's, including the poets John Newlove (in his Vancouver period), Lionel Kearns, and Daphne Marlatt, have made substantial contributions.

In the literature of this region conventions expressing negative views of the city have developed so strongly as to produce sometimes the suspicion of a certain discrepancy between literature and life: it would be difficult to discern from their representation in fiction and poetry that Vancouver and Victoria are among the best loved of Canadian cities. The most notable exception among the major writers is Ethel Wilson, although her view of the city is certainly not without ambiguity. She writes with obvious love of the city of the past in *The Innocent Traveller* (though her central character has no sooner arrived in the little late nineteenth-century frontier town of Vancouver than she begins to worry that it is growing too fast)¹⁶ but she provides a more complex and critical view of the city of the present in such a story as "Tuesday and Wednesday" in *The Equations of Love*. While there is much undoubted affection in her representation of Vancouver, the most appalling pictures of isolation in her fiction are not rural but urban, to be found in such characters as Vicky Tritt in "Tuesday and Wednesday."

Many British Columbia writers have chosen virtually to ignore the city, whether from agreement with Lowry's observation that Canada's originality is in its wildness,¹⁷ or from the sense that community flourishes more strongly in rural areas and small towns than in the great cities, or simply from following the principle of writing about what they know best. When a writer is so much concerned with community as Hodgins moves away from his favourite rural settings it is not into the large cities but to the remote little pulp-mill town of Port Annie

in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*. Although in most matters his impulses are toward inclusiveness, he writes of British Columbia almost as if Vancouver did not exist, and of Vancouver Island almost without reference to Victoria. The city figures little more in his fiction than in the paintings of Emily Carr.¹⁸

As a corollary of the negative view of the city in the literature of the region, there has naturally developed a strongly favourable view of the figure associated with wilderness and an ancient rural culture, the native Indian, which contrasts with the negative and ambiguous views of the Indian that Atwood holds to be characteristic of Canadian literature as a whole.¹⁹ Thus in "The Shapers: Vancouver" Birney contrasts the destructive and sterile quality of urban development with the vitality of the traditional coastal culture: "in the screaming chainsaws / we hushed the old dreamers."²⁰ Among writers and artists the consciousness has been strong that, as Haig-Brown wrote in 1961, the Indians may well have "produced more creative development for the human spirit than has been produced in the hundred years of white civilization that have followed upon the time of their greatest flowering."²¹ This awareness is surely one of the distinguishing features of the region, and probably no British Columbia poet could write so ambiguously as Douglas LePan does of the "clumsily constructed" image of "some lust-red manitou."²²

In *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* Hodgins reminds us that the regional concern with the theme of dispossession begins with the native Indians.²³ In that novel the Indians fled from the site of Port Annie when that town was founded by the logging Fartenburgs: in commemoration of them, through a nice touch of irony, the booster Mayor Jacob Weins (about to be dispossessed himself when the town is swept away in a mudslide) wears his favourite Thunderbird costume. On a more serious level, the concern for conservation has often extended here from the natural into the cultural area. Emily Carr devoted much of her career both as writer and painter to recording and interpreting this culture threatened with destruction. The desire to conserve and commemorate the Indian culture has not only been reflected in a notable modern revival of native arts but has also inspired a remarkably high proportion of the recent books about British Columbia that have had wide international circulation, including John Gibson's *A Small and Charming World* (1972), Margaret Craven's *I Heard the Owl Call my Name* (1973), and Hugh Brody's *Maps and Dreams* (1981).

In the literature of the region the logger, like the Indian, frequently stands as the central figure in a traditional rural coastal culture, as one may see in many contributions to that unique journal *Raincoast Chronicles* (1972) dedicated to recording the life of logging, fishing, and farming that developed in the frontier era;²⁴ but the literary representation of the logger is far more ambiguous than that of the Indian. The treatment is complex enough to make an interesting subject for investigation through the work of such authors as Martin Grainger,

who wrote the province's first distinguished novel, *Woodsmen of the West*, and became its Chief Forester, Haig-Brown, Birney ("Images in Place of Logging"), Peter Trower, and Jack Hodgins. It displays ironies and ambiguities that sometimes remind one of the special effects Andrew Marvell gained when in a series of pastoral poems he substituted for the conventional figure of the shepherd, who lives in harmony with nature, the mower, who dwells close to nature but is at the same time an instrument of its destruction and a symbol of death.

In British Columbia writing the logger combines antitheses that make Marvell's ambiguities seem mild: he is at once hero and villain. He is the hero, whether viewed in Marxist or other economic terms as the worker whose hard, skilled, and dangerous labour has long been the foundation of the coastal economy, or seen from the more romantic perspective of well established folk traditions; but he is also the destroyer of nature and the producer of devastation on a scale that reduces Marvell's mower to insignificance. In Lowry the negative view strongly predominates, although he attempts to be fair: his central character in *October Ferry* meditates on seeing burned logging slash: "The abomination of desolation sitting in a holy place. It was too easy to judge the loggers." The two opposing views are both extensively developed in Haig-Brown, who represents the logger sympathetically in *Timber* but introduces him as the agent of destruction in *On the Highest Hill*. Hodgins displays a full awareness of the ambiguities, which are represented, for example, in the contrasting attitudes of Danny Holland and Wade Powers in the loggers' sports at the opening of *The Invention of the World*.

The literary handling of such topics as the city, the Indian, and the logger obviously appears to suggest that British Columbia writing has developed primarily as an offshoot of the Romantic movement, dominated by such Romantic tendencies as pantheism, primitivism, and nostalgia for the past. Yet this would be too simple a view, for the Romantic tendencies are frequently countered by opposing ones which saw the literature from Romantic naivete and extremes. For example, despite his scepticism about vulgar ideas of progress, Haig-Brown does not surrender to Romantic nostalgia any more than to Romantic utopianism but constantly insists, with the scientific authority of the naturalist as well as the understanding of the humanist, that there can be no life or growth without change.²⁵ Belief in the acceptance of change and the need for human growth is at the heart of the work not only of Haig-Brown but also of Ethel Wilson and Jack Hodgins, while even Lowry in his British Columbia writing struggles, though not always successfully, to accept change.

If Romantic strains are prominent in the literature, they are significantly tempered by moderating forces. While much of the view of life Atwood finds embodied in Canadian literature as a whole can be seen as essentially Puritan, many of these moderating forces in the writing of this region might better be

described by the contrary term from the great seventeenth-century conflict: Anglican. One of the principal writers, Haig-Brown, has often been viewed as a disciple of Izaak Walton,²⁶ and the literature of the region frequently embodies values and attitudes that have much in common with the Anglicanism of Walton's *The Compleat Angler* and *Lives*: the enjoyment of the creation as opposed to Puritan alienation from nature, the prominence of the Edenic and the relative absence of the utopian, belief in the goodness of life combined with the recognition of human limitations, valuing of community as balancing private judgment and private myth, distrust of apocalyptic claims, the high place given to practical charity, suspicion of extremes, and belief in moderation and balance — though British Columbia writers come closer to abandoning the last qualities when faced with the spoiling of the land than on almost any other subject.²⁷ Such values are as prominent in the writing of Ethel Wilson as of Haig-Brown, and they have more recently been embodied in the fiction of Hodgins.

British Columbia literature has, in the terms Hodgins uses in *The Invention of the World*, tended more to the celebration of created than invented worlds. Yet as hopes of a utopian social order have been less extravagant than those associated with the great American dream of a frontier or western Eden, the reality has been less lawless and violent than the American west as represented in such works as Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, and there has been less of the disillusion that from being an undercurrent in that narrative has become dominant in much modern American literature of the west, the sense of dream turned to nightmare. In *The Invention of the World* Wade Powers' phoney fort, built as a tourist trap, is symbol of a wild west that scarcely existed on Vancouver Island, and an American immigrant, Richard Ryburn, in this novel gives as a reason for living on the island the fact that "at least the crime rate so far is a lot lower" than in his native country.

It is not by any means so clear, however, that the unrestrained materialism and greed that Mark Twain in *Roughing It* found to characterize the American west as much as the violence have been less prevalent in the Canadian west. Hence, Lowry, Haig-Brown, and Birney have all seen the ruthless exploitation of resources as the great threat to the natural Eden, and have frequently made it the focus of their social criticism. It is an indication not of influence but of regional continuity that much of Hodgins' fiction in its aspect as social commentary can be seen as the imaginative and witty illustration of Haig-Brown's magisterial judgment upon British Columbia in *The Living Land* in 1961 as in "an awkward stage," difficult to assess, "between that of a true frontier state and the later organization that reveals a people's real genius," a stage in which the descendants of the pioneers in compensation for the deprivations of the pioneer era tend to become "opportunistic, pragmatic and materialistic, not knowing quite what to search for beyond material things." Hodgins has made the criticism

of materialism a central theme of his work from such an early story as "The Religion of the Country," included in *Spit Delaney's Island*, through his two novels, *The Invention of the World* and *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, to relatively recent stories like "Mr. Pernouski's Dream" in *The Barclay Family Theatre*.

IT IS WITH HODGINS that this discussion must conclude, for he is not only the writer of greatest originality and power to emerge in recent years in British Columbia but he is also remarkably comprehensive in his handling of established regional themes. No writer could be less willing to accept the limiting aspects of regionalism but none has done more to bring the tradition of his region into focus. While his fiction reaches far beyond the local, he has an unerring instinct for what is most vital and distinctive in his region's literary tradition, and he frequently provides both an epitome and criticism of earlier developments. The sense of exploration of new territories and pushing against established boundaries is strong in his work; yet he has often chosen to build his fiction around the critical examination of themes of paradise and possession, with the linked subjects of conservation and spoiling the land, that have long been central in the literature.

In *The Invention of the World* Hodgins' main setting is the Nanaimo area, which is a principal setting also of Lowry's *October Ferry to Gabriola*. It is unexpected but surely not altogether coincidental that the environs of this old coal mining town should have been made the scene for such diverse meditations on paradise and paradise lost: by his prominent introduction of the ferry at the opening of his novel Hodgins seems to invite comparison with Lowry. While Lowry in "The Forest Path to the Spring" and *October Ferry* writes of Eden and the expulsion, Hodgins in *The Invention of the World* writes of an ironic "Eden Swindle." The special significance of the quest for Eden in the history of the region is established by a chorus of comments by characters in the novel. Strabo Becker meditates that the Bible begins in Eden and the rest of the story is man's attempt to return, and the embittered Julius Champney, retired from the Prairies, comments: "You are inheritors of a failed paradise. This island is littered with failed utopias." The central myth of the novel is the story of one of those attempts to return to Eden. Donal Keneally, professing to be a Moses taking his people to the Promised Land, leads a group of Irish peasants during the late nineteenth century to Vancouver Island, and there founds the Revelations Colony of Truth. But he is in fact a "messiah-monster," a figure of egotistical materialism, who exploits his followers through slavery and fear.

Yet, however much Keneally's followers are deluded and exploited by him, they are not ultimately disappointed in the land to which he has led them. The favourable view of the land is reinforced by numerous comments and reactions from characters who are more recent arrivals on the island. Even sceptical and bitter characters like Champney see that the land is good and are perceived to enjoy it. Among the best balanced and most definite comments are those of Grandfather Barclay, who makes it plain that the majority of the settlers were not engaged in any utopian quest but only looking for a place where people could lead decent lives; he left an Alberta farm after a crippling winter and was glad to find a land where it was always green and where "nature gave you a little help."

In accordance with such comments as these, the negative theme of the disappointment of the "Eden Swindle" is gradually replaced in the novel by much more positive themes of growth and second growth, shown especially in the lives of Maggie Kyle and Wade Powers, who accept the created world with its necessary limitations and establish on the site of Keneally's Revelations Colony a community founded not on egotism but on practical charity, not on fear but on love, a community that has much less utopian pretension but contributes more to human happiness.²⁸ Thus Hodgins' handling of the quest for Eden, though it is strong in irony, is not developed along the lines of the Atwood "survival thesis," the idea of man as the victim of a hostile environment, and immigration to the new land as leading characteristically to defeat and disappointment. Rather the criticism is directed against the invented world of private myth, utopian dream, and apocalyptic claim: the invented world is rejected in favour of the created world. In the regional context this novel provides a climax in that tradition which celebrates the creation while distrusting utopian schemes that diverge far from the created realities.

Among the finest of Hodgins' achievements in *The Invention of the World* are the originality he brings to the development of the familiar theme of the spoiling of the land and his skill in integrating this theme with his narrative and characters. Keneally's combination of materialism and messianic pretensions is symbolized by his cutting the upward-reaching trees and making for his colony a clearing in the form of a perfect circle, and the novel has many images of the devastation caused by logging and the attempts to impose geometric order on the land. On the other hand Maggie Kyle is consistently associated with trees as symbols of aspiration and growth: she allows the second growth to spring up and obliterate the circle of the old Revelations Colony.

Hodgins' handling of the Eden theme does not end with *The Invention of the World*. His critical examination of the idea of the western Eden is carried further in the later novel, *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*. He appears to have chosen the setting of the pulp-mill town, Port Annie, as affording as close a thing

to the antithesis of the earthly paradise as can be found in his region or on his island. In contrast to the quest for paradise evident in the literature of British Columbia, many of the inhabitants have come there not so much to seek the ideal place as to escape a criminal or scandalous past. Port Annie is isolated, linked to the outside world only by a rough logging road. The sun rarely shines and the rain falls nearly all the time. The town is subject both to tidal waves and mudslides.²⁹ Yet, if this situation can be read as a parody of the quest for Eden, the comic elements of the irony ultimately predominate over the tragic almost to the same degree as in *The Invention of the World*. For all its striking disadvantages, Port Annie on "The Ragged Green Edge of the World" is a "breathtakingly beautiful spot," a place of greenness and growth.³⁰ Its inhabitants sometimes find life dull and frustrating but more often exciting, full of interest and possibilities.

In this setting in *Joseph Bourne* the themes of conservation and spoiling the land are still more prominent and even better integrated than in *The Invention of the World*. They have been made integral elements in a great conflict between forces of fertility and sterility that may sometimes suggest a modern *Tempest* and sometimes *The Waste Land* but is a remarkable imaginative achievement of Hodgins' own, fully realized in Vancouver Island terms. This integration of themes rests partly on Hodgins' recognition that conservation is, as Haig-Brown has stated, ultimately a religious concept, "the most universal and fundamental of all such concepts, the worship of fertility."³¹

The negative forces of sterility in the novel include highly original versions of all those figures and images traditionally associated with the spoiling of the land, just as the landscape includes patches of black logged and burned land and a polluted inlet. There are rapacious loggers, the Fartenburgs, whose self-defeating materialism is represented in Fat Annie's retreat into a living death. There are memorable pictures of real estate developers and boosters, champions of material progress plotting to turn Port Annie into a cactus-land tourist resort, such as Mayor Jacob Weins, Jeremy Fell, and Damon West, who are lineal descendants of Birney's figure of Legion in *The Damnation of Vancouver*, even though they are very much the product of Hodgins' own observation and creative power. Fell's dream of the future featuring the motors of bulldozers, the sounds of power saws roaring and trees falling, and the sight of surveyors at work and Weins' vision of progress in terms of used-car lots and drive-in hamburger stands come close to Lowry's darkest musings about the rape of the land in *October Ferry*, although they are rendered in a more comic mode than was possible for him.

These forces of sterility are more than matched by powers of fertility, when Port Annie, inundated in a tidal wave, undergoes a sea-change. Forth from the sea, Venus-like, comes the life-giving spirit of Raimy, as if a goddess of fertility. She revitalizes Joseph Bourne, who had been seeking death; so that he can

revitalize others. Through the influence of Raimey and Bourne more ordinary characters like Jenny Chambers and Larry Bowman learn to overcome the fear, egotism, and materialism that are the causes of sterility, as rain overcomes the giant cactus imported by Weins and brings about new growth all around it. The last picture of the cactus is as a grotesque dead object looking absurdly out of place in a land where everything is green.³² Thanks to its eternal rain, Port Annie cannot be converted into a wasteland, although it can be swept into the sea by a mudslide. Here as with many of his humorous paradoxes, Hodgins is making a serious point: Haig-Brown in his officially commissioned survey of British Columbia's resources, *The Living Land*, classified water as the most valuable of the province's natural assets.

In this conflict the "man from California" reappears in more than one role. Hodgins uses a number of Californians in the novel to suggest the relation between the western American and western Canadian versions of paradise, and he builds a nice set of ironies around the fact that threats to the dubious Canadian paradise may spring from a failed American paradise, while refugees from the latter may prove the truest admirers of the Canadian paradise. The developers who attempt to convert Port Annie into a wasteland resort are Californians with Canadian allies, and their threat is directed most immediately against Californian hippies who, having quixotically chosen to be amateur paper makers in a pulp-mill town, are squatters on the tide-flats in Port Annie: the effect is of a war between foreign forces on Canadian soil. Yet like Haig-Brown, Lowry, and Birney before him, Hodgins emphasizes that the source of the threat is as much internal as external. The chairman and chief stockholder of the Evergreen Reality Company, which plans to "develop" Port Annie into a desert, is Damon West, whose name suggests a spirit of the west that transcends international boundaries. It is significant too that in the end the Californian hippies with the other squatters on the mud flat alone escape eviction by the mudslide that destroys the remainder of Port Annie, and Hodgins gives them a special part in the sacramental feast in which the survivors of Port Annie join together at the end of the novel — appropriately perhaps because these Californians prove to be among the truest appreciators of the beauties of that isolated wet green place.

Despite all the anti-pastoral elements in this novel, Hodgins' criticism of the idea of the earthly paradise does not really take the form here any more than in *The Invention of the World* of disillusionment with the land, such as is implied in the survival thesis, but rather of an attack on the definition of paradise and possession in material terms. The book of poems by the mysterious, wise central figure, Joseph Bourne, is titled *Possessing Me* and the first poem quoted begins, "We possess nothing"; one describes a boat trip up a coastal inlet that might recall Lowry's *October Ferry*, but it develops the theme: "a search for a home in this earth was pointless." As Bourne later states: "Our real roots grow upward.

... We aren't trees, that anchor themselves in earth." The vanity of any attempt to put down roots or find a material paradise is shown most graphically when Port Annie is swept before the end of the novel into the sea by a mountain slide, as if to exemplify the biblical warning (Hebrews 13:14): "For here we have no continuing city. . . ." This slide is the ultimate in that dispossession theme that looms so large in British Columbia literature. Here everyone is dispossessed except ironically the group of squatters who had first been threatened with eviction. Yet this eviction is not tragic for most of the inhabitants. Nearly all survive and more than survive. The community, which is the people, still exists and it is implied that for most of them the forced move will be liberating, opening new possibilities. Thus Hodgins, who possesses so powerful a sense of place, uses that very sense of place ultimately to question the worship or idolization of place.

If British Columbia literature sometimes seems to have recapitulated the pattern, paradise followed by paradise lost, with Hodgins and other recent writers we have clearly reached a third phase, the question whether paradise regained is possible. In a late essay composed in 1972, "Some Thoughts of Paradise,"³³ Haig-Brown, writing of the paradise of the fisherman and naturalist but as always with wide implications for human life as a whole, gave his answer: it cannot be exactly reduplicated but it can be reclaimed through the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Hodgins in *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* also appears to suggest an optimistic answer but on a level more spiritual and transcendental, closer to the Miltonic "paradise within," although with a stronger concern for community than this phrase seems to imply. We must of course await his future books for the nature of that answer to become increasingly clear.³⁴

NOTES

¹ (1961; Sidney, B.C.: Gray's, 1977), pp. 29, 31.

² The present article, though it should be capable of standing by itself, builds on and extends the argument of the earlier one, "West of the Great Divide; A View of the Literature of British Columbia," *Canadian Literature*, 94 (Autumn 1982), pp. 96-112. References to Atwood are to *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).

³ In strong contrast to the sense of alienation and exile of persons disillusioned with the land, which according to Atwood characterizes much Canadian literature, one not infrequently finds here an element of paranoia on the part of those who feel themselves to inhabit a desirable land likely to be coveted by others — a paranoia that may even antedate European settlement, for anthropologists such as Charles Hill-Tout have seen it as long characteristic of the coastal Salish. See Hill-Tout's *The Far West, The Home of the Salish and Déné*, Vol. I of *The Native Races of the British Empire, British North America* (London: Archibald Constable, 1907), pp. 43-46.

⁴ In contradiction of the title of this article, Symons' setting is that part of British Columbia that lies east of the Great Divide. Perhaps it might be taken as a wry

comment on the nationalistic bias revealed in such narratives that in Jane Rule's *The Young in One Another's Arms* (1977) the situation is reversed: instead of Canadians menaced by American machines, good Americans are faced with a bad Canadian bulldozer man.

- ⁵ Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden, Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) discusses relevant aspects of American literature, primarily in the nineteenth century. In British Columbia literature it is often a case of the machine in the wilderness rather than in the garden, in a context more primitive than pastoral, the theme gaining its prominence not only from the special splendours of nature here but also from the fact that much of the region remained little settled or "developed" until machines had become very powerful and potentially destructive.
- ⁶ For example, see *Wooden Hunters* (1975; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, New Canadian Library, n.d.), p. 14, and note the role of the bulldozers and representation of logging operations.
- ⁷ *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken*, ed. Dorothy Blakey Smith (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1975), p. 104, and Appendix 2, pp. 282, 331.
- ⁸ See Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry, A Biography* (New York: Dell, 1975), p. 394. The total period of composition extends from 1946 to 1957; see "Editor's Note," *October Ferry to Gabriola*, ed. Margerie Lowry (New York and Cleveland: World Publishing, 1970), pp. 335-36. Reference below is to this edition. On Lowry and the local patterns, cf. "West of the Great Divide: A View," pp. 97, 104.
- ⁹ *Measure of the Year* (Toronto: Collins, 1950), p. 226.
- ¹⁰ (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), pp. 3, 49, 59, 62.
- ¹¹ "The Drama of Our Environment" (1970), *Writings and Reflections*, ed. Valerie Haig-Brown (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982), p. 219. Haig-Brown's optimism rarely altogether disappears but the editor comments on the "angry despair in some of the later conservation pieces" in this volume ("Editor's Note," p. 9).
- ¹² "What's so big about GREEN?" was published in a volume with that title in 1973 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) but the dates given in Birney's *Collected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), I, 148-53, indicate that a version of the poem was written as early as 1949.
- ¹³ See, for example, Haig-Brown's questioning whether the natural resources have been used in accordance with humanistic criteria, for the end of human happiness, in view of the severe nature in the province of such social problems as alcoholism and drug addiction, in *The Living Land, An Account of the Natural Resources of British Columbia* (Toronto: Macmillan, produced by the British Columbia Natural Resources Conference, 1961), p. 253. Birney has of course always been more the critic and satirist than the celebrator of a western Eden, and even when he comes closest to such celebration in a poem like "Eagle Island" some satiric point is usually involved.
- ¹⁴ *Timber, A Novel of Pacific Coast Loggers* (New York: Morrow, 1942), p. 154.
- ¹⁵ P. 155. Even on this subject, however, Haig-Brown's habitual moderation does not entirely desert him, and in *Measure of the Year* (p. 261) he tells us he has experienced pleasure in urban life.
- ¹⁶ (Toronto: Macmillan, 1949), p. 126.

- ¹⁷ This is Ethan Llewelyn's reflection in *October Ferry*, p. 188. Lowry expresses a similar view in a notebook entry; see W. H. New, *Articulating West, Essays on Purpose and Form in Modern Canadian Literature* (Toronto: New Press, 1972), p. 260. In this matter British Columbia represents an extreme but the same tendency is evident in other regions, and modern Canadian literature, with some notable exceptions like Mordecai Richler, has many of the aspects of an agrarian movement. The preferred setting for fiction has been, if not the wilderness, rural areas and small towns rather than cities: the most heavily populated part of the country has recently given rise not to a Toronto but a Deptford trilogy of novels, and Jubilee is more important on the literary map than Hamilton.
- ¹⁸ In *The Invention of the World* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), the environs, outskirts, and rural areas are used as a setting more than the urban centre of Nanaimo; Victoria people are present at the all-inclusive wedding celebration at the end of this novel but they sit together near the punch bowl "with their backs to everyone else," p. 344. Hodgins' skill in handling urban settings on those occasions when he chooses them is shown in *The Barclay Family Theatre*, in stories set in Ottawa and Tokyo.
- ¹⁹ See *Survival*, pp. 91-95.
- ²⁰ Printed in *What's so big about GREEN?* (1973), which is unpaginated.
- ²¹ *The Living Land*, p. 237.
- ²² "A Country Without a Mythology," discussed by Atwood, *Survival*, pp. 52-54.
- ²³ In relation to this theme, it may be noted that a later instance of large-scale collective dispossession, the deportation of Japanese Canadians from the coastal area during the Second World War, has given rise to a large and growing body of literature, from Dorothy Livesay's *Call My People Home* (1950) to Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981).
- ²⁴ This journal, edited by Howard White, has included fine essays like Leslie Kopas' "Growing up in Bella Coola," reprinted in *Raincoast Chronicles, First Five*, ed. H. White (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1976), pp. 170-75, that sometimes provide a documentary counterpart to the fiction of Jack Hodgins.
- ²⁵ Haig-Brown describes his transformation "from what I shall call a romantic naturalist into a modern naturalist" in "The Drama of Our Environment," *Writings and Reflections*, p. 215.
- ²⁶ Among Haig-Brown's own tributes to Walton and Charles Cotton, who shows the same fusion of angling and Anglicanism, is "Izaak Walton: His Friends and His Rivers," *Writings and Reflections*, pp. 48-56.
- ²⁷ Of course any single term, whether "Puritan" or "Anglican," is likely to be misleading when applied to a group of writers admirable for their individuality and diversity, and if the latter term is applied broadly to British Columbia writers it certainly should not be taken to imply the absence or neutralization of all radical spirit, or to indicate specific connection with the Church of England, when the principal writers of the region actually represent many varieties of religious belief and non-belief, or to suggest very close or exclusive English influence, when even a native of England such as Haig-Brown in British Columbia quickly came to see himself as North American, as he emphasized in *Measure of the Year* (p. 178): "I love American and Canadian literature because they speak directly to me with a fierce urgency and a closeness that is not in things European."
- ²⁸ Although on the surface the two characters are very different, Maggie Kyle's unsentimental manifestations of practical charity and adoption of a role as a "house-

keeper" for those less able than herself give her some affinity with an earlier Maggie, the central character of Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*.

²⁹ The prominence of water imagery in this novel reflects realities of northern and western Vancouver Island but it could also be seen as parody, pushing to a comic extreme of exaggeration a pattern of imagery that has long been dominant in British Columbia literature. Many writers of the region might well echo the remark of Ethel Wilson's Frankie Burnaby in *Hetty Dorval* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973, p. 56): "My genius of place is a god of water." Streams, lakes, and sea are everywhere present in Wilson's fiction, and the whole of her complex and ambiguous view of life is embodied in water imagery. Rivers are central in Haig-Brown's work from *Pool and Rapid*, *The Story of a River* (1932) to the end of his career: they stand for his basic conception of life as flow, constant change yet permanence, which includes both the successive seasons and the successive generations (as in *Measure of the Year*, p. 122). The similar prominence of water imagery in the British Columbia writings of Lowry is illustrated by the final paragraphs of "The Forest Path to the Spring," where many of the traditional and biblical associations are evoked: purity, baptism, renewal. (Hence for Lowry the special source of menace is oil refineries and slicks, just as inevitably for Haig-Brown the building of dams often appears as the great threat.)

³⁰ References are to *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979).

³¹ *The Living Land*, p. 21.

³² The images of greenness and growth sometimes suggest the island's greatest painter, and bring to mind those passages in her journals where she evokes "the great green ocean of growth" as an indestructible life-force: "Up it bursts; it will not be kept back. It is life itself, strong bursting life," *Hundreds and Thousands*, *The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto and Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin, 1966), p. 200. Hodgins writes, however, with an awareness of the limitations of such imagery for the contemporary poet and novelist, as the reflection of Bourne implies: "The old metaphors for eternity didn't work any more . . ." (p. 226).

³³ Printed for the first time in *Writings and Reflections* (1982), pp. 192-201.

³⁴ In *The Barclay Family Theatre* (1981), Hodgins extends his satiric treatment of materialistic local versions of the idea of Eden in the story "Mr. Pernouski's Dream," in which a Vancouver Island real estate agent representing Eden Realty professes to sell paradise.

