

WEST OF THE GREAT DIVIDE

A View of the Literature of British Columbia

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FASHIONS IN LITERARY CRITICISM change rapidly. The “survival” thesis that has dominated the thematic criticism of Canadian literature in recent years may be about due to fall from favour. Yet it has proved highly stimulating, and its usefulness has still not been totally exhausted. Before it recedes from its present prominence at least one further value can be extracted from it, although of a paradoxical kind. It serves admirably as a means of defining the regional characteristics of the literature of British Columbia — if one merely reverses its central propositions.

The survival thesis is now so familiar that little reminder is needed of its salient points. Like much of the best in our criticism, the view that conflict between man and nature is central in Canadian literature seems to have developed from some brief but perceptive remarks of Northrop Frye. It has been elaborated by many critics and given its fullest and most influential formulation by Margaret Atwood. According to Atwood, the essential literary symbol for Canada is survival in the face of hostile nature. In our literature, she suggests, man is seen predominantly as a victim and nature as a monster. The land is alien. Of the seasons only winter is real. The characteristic experience of the immigrant and settler is exile and defeat. Canadian books are populated by life-denying women and trapped, defeated characters. The central experience represented is death, and as a whole the literature is “undeniably sombre and negative.”¹

If one turns from these propositions about the nature of Canadian literature and looks at the work of such notable writers of British Columbia as Roderick Haig-Brown, Malcolm Lowry, Ethel Wilson, and Jack Hodgins, the sense of contrast is so strong as to suggest the scene in *October Ferry to Gabriola* where Lowry describes the journey of his central characters, the Llewelyns, westward from Ontario. At the Great Divide they had their first view of “the wild beauty of lakes and ravines and pastures of British Columbia” like “two children of Israel shading their eyes before a vision of the Promised Land.”²

This contrast brings into sharp relief the common qualities that the writers of British Columbia have tended to share in their response to the land, notwithstanding their admirable individuality and diversity. This is not a case where the Atwood thesis can be applied with minor modifications to take into account variations from the norm caused by local factors of geography, climate and history. Rather, the dominant characteristics of the literature of British Columbia appear to be diametrically opposed to those Atwood postulates for the literature of Canada as a whole. Here the writers have more often shown relations between man and nature as harmonious than as hostile. The experience of the immigrant has more often been represented as fulfilment and growth than as imprisonment or defeat. Writers have more often developed themes of integration than of alienation. Celebration of the splendour and generosity of the land has been central in the literature. If a single symbol or myth can be found for the literature of British Columbia it is certainly nothing so negative as survival, but so far from this that a strong case can be made for the legend of Eden or the earthly paradise, which is developed in a great variety of versions ranging from the romantic to the ironic yet always with a sense of its special relevance for the experience and literature of this region. Appearing in local literature as early as the 1840's, it is grandly elaborated a century later by Malcolm Lowry, and is prominent in the work of many other writers, both major and minor. The most remarkable writer to emerge recently in the region, Jack Hodgins, recognizes its centrality by making an examination of the quest for Eden the subject of his novel, *The Invention of the World*.

AMONG THE USEFUL LESSONS Margaret Atwood has helped impress upon us is the importance in studying themes of this kind of giving due attention to documentary accounts, such as the writings of Susanna Moodie, as well as to fiction and poetry. The literature of British Columbia is exceptionally rich in autobiographical narratives and these provide the best starting point for an exploration of the response of the writers to the land. This approach has a special value for it reveals that to a surprising extent even such an exotic figure as Malcolm Lowry fits into well-established local patterns of response. In the documentary narratives the basic pattern is established very early. The prominence of Edenic language and imagery in descriptions of British Columbia by early European settlers is striking. The mountainous coastline had impressed the navigators of the late eighteenth century sometimes as sublime but often as sombre and desolate. From the mid-nineteenth century, however, explorers and settlers seem to have been confident that in this wilderness were to be found places that might fittingly be compared to the earthly paradise. In 1843 James Douglas saw

the rugged northwest coast as a "dreary wilderness" in contrast to the rich Oregon territory about to be lost to British possession, but he reported he had found a site for the Hudson's Bay Company's new headquarters on the southern tip of Vancouver Island that appeared "a perfect 'Eden.'" In March 1850 John Helmcken, the young doctor who was to become Douglas' son-in-law, arrived at the newly established Fort Victoria, where as he later recalled, in his first view of the park-like landscape in the bloom of spring, against the background of sea and mountains, "everything looked paradisiacal." He responded with similar enthusiasm to the rougher and more heavily timbered coastline he observed on a voyage in May 1850 to the north end of the Island, even though his scientific training had made him aware of the struggle for survival that rages in the world of nature: "Wild and savage, yet wonderfully lovely . . . apparently happiness, peace, contentment reigned."³

Gilbert Sproat, who arrived from England in 1860, not only reported that Victoria had probably the best climate in the world but described on the west coast of the Island, where he founded a settlement at Alberni, scenes "like the creations in a happy dream." In this period there appear many similar celebrations of the visual splendour and the richness and abundance of nature in the coastal area. Before long we find that even the remote and misty Queen Charlotte Islands are being described as if they were some Hesperides. In a narrative of his visit in 1863 an English engineer, Francis Poole, calls the Queen Charlottes "a land of enchantment," "the Eden of the North Pacific," and comments: "As far as the eye can reach either way the land was a picture of loveliness. The very atmosphere seems laden with the perfume of its vegetation."⁴

Such enthusiastic early descriptions may not be in themselves necessarily a contradiction of the survival thesis, for Atwood suggests that a characteristic pattern of Canadian experience has been a favourable first impression of the land followed by disillusionment upon closer acquaintance. Thus she states that Susanna Moodie's first impression of the scenic grandeur of Canada was replaced by a sense of the wilderness as prison, and that the life of the immigrant then became an exile from the loved home country. However, this disillusionment seems far from characteristic of the narratives of pioneer life in British Columbia. Perhaps the closest Western equivalent to Mrs. Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* is Susan Allison's *Recollections*. Mrs. Allison was an English gentlewoman who lived and brought up her many children during the 1860's and 1870's in parts of the Similkameen and Okanagan areas so remote that years sometimes passed without contact with other European settlers; yet she writes in her reminiscences: "I led a perfectly ideal life at this time." Among some specially advantaged settlers of a particularly idyllic area, the Gulf Islands, we even encounter the complaint that life was too good, so easy and pleasant as to be damaging to the characters of boys growing up there.⁵

In more typical narratives we have descriptions of the arduous labour of clearing homesteads of the great trees of the coastal forest and other pioneer hardships, but almost always with the reflection that the immigrant has come to a land that offers him far more than the one he left. Eric Duncan, pioneer settler and poet of the Comox Valley, comments that if a band of crofter-fishermen of his native Shetland Islands had suddenly been set down with their boats on the coast of Vancouver Island "they would have thought themselves in Paradise," such was the richness of both land and sea. In one of his poems, "Unreasonable," he expresses homesickness for the Shetlands but he turns this into a reflection on the illogical nature of nostalgia in "A land of rural bliss, to poverty unknown."⁶ Rather than suggesting imprisonment the narratives of pioneer life often lay great emphasis on freedom found in the new land, including liberation from the rigid class structures of older societies. The young Englishman Martin Allerdale Grainger in perhaps the first notable novel to be set in British Columbia, the strongly documentary *Woodsmen of the West* (1908), writes much of isolation and other hardships of life in a logging camp on a sombre inlet but he comments enthusiastically on the sense of freedom he feels to be characteristic of the country. Frequently this freedom is associated with human growth. Eric Collier, who arrived in the Cariboo from Northamptonshire at the age of nineteen, writes, "I took to the sparsely settled outlands of interior British Columbia as the sunflower takes to the sun."⁷ Here the survival thesis of Margaret Atwood seems to have less relevance than the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner.

Such accounts cannot be dismissed simply as belonging to an early period of uncritical optimism about the new land, for narratives of personal discovery and experience that locate the great good place in British Columbia have continued to be numerous in the middle and later twentieth century. Nor have they been confined to the mild climate of the coastal area; in recent years they have often been set in the more remote parts of the interior, as is the case with Eric Collier's book. Theodora Stanwell-Fletcher's *Driftwood Valley* (1946) is a classic account by an expert naturalist and gifted writer, a native of Pennsylvania who spent some three years in a very isolated area of the interior, where she encountered winter temperatures cold enough to freeze horses. Yet she found the land far lovelier than such tropical areas as Fiji and Java, where she had previously lived. She comments that here nature is much harder and more terrible than that known to Wordsworth and the English Romantic poets, and needs someone stronger and more elemental, but that it has all the greater wonder and beauty. Despite dangers and hardships, the cold of winter and the flies of summer, her confidence in the wilderness steadily grew, and she gained an ever increasing contentment. She writes in her diary: "This must be what is meant by perfect happiness." Even the accounts of hardships often rise beyond survival into something approaching epic, as when she reports that farewells with a family of

Indians with whom she had had many disputes were affectionate: "for we have seen and done great things together."⁸ Although *Driftwood Valley* is superior to the average in its literary qualities, the experiences it records have close parallels in many other narratives. For example, T. A. Walker's recent account of life in the remote Cassiar mountains, *Spatsizi* (1976), is much more a story of growing harmony than of antagonism with the environment. The author writes: "The wilderness never failed us, and the first years in Spatsizi were our paradise."⁹

In these narratives the attitude toward the native Indians conforms no more closely to the Atwood thesis than the attitude toward nature. While Atwood has emphasized that in Canadian literature the Indian is frequently seen as a menacing figure, associated with an alien world of nature, in British Columbia writing the hostile Indian is relatively rare. Helmcken discovered in 1850 that even among the war-like Indians of northern Vancouver Island he could roam freely, and stated he certainly "felt less fear of molestation than I had often experienced when traversing the slums of London."¹⁰ Such narratives as Susan Allison's have much of kindness and friendship received from Indians. Rather than appearing as threatening, the Indians and their traditional cultures provide in the writings of Stanwell-Fletcher, Emily Carr, Earle Birney, and many others models of the ideally harmonious relation between man and nature. In the literature of this region the menacing figures are much more often land surveyors and real estate developers than Indians.

Many of the autobiographical narratives are built around dominant themes of the kind Atwood identifies and discusses, but these are rarely developed in ways so "sombre and negative" as the survival thesis would lead one to expect. For example, there is the theme of exploration, which is nowhere more prominent than in this region. The earliest literature of British Columbia in the European languages is literature of exploration; and the exploits of the early explorers have been made the subject of books by writers as diverse as Haig-Brown, Roy Daniells, and George Bowering. It seems in keeping with the spirit of the place that the daughter of a pioneer of the Gulf Islands should remember in later years that what she had learned from her father was above all a love of exploration,¹¹ and that one of Ethel Wilson's characters, Aunt Maury in *Love and Salt Water*, although a native of Nova Scotia, should frequently occupy her time in those same islands by reading the journals of Captain Vancouver. How far this oldest of themes is from being exhausted is indicated by the fact that in *The Invention of the World* Hodgins gives the ferryman who conducts us to Vancouver Island, Strabo Becker, the name of a great classical geographer.

As a fine and original example of the many modern narratives of personal exploration we may take M. Wylie Blanchet's *The Curve of Time* (1961), a story of voyages made in a small boat by the author and her children during several summers in the Gulf of Georgia and the coastal straits and inlets, some-

times following the routes of Vancouver and other early navigators. The book is not without sombre aspects, for it is haunted by the awareness of mortality and a sense of the ruins of time represented by the relics of a vanished Indian culture, in a way that brings into question Earle Birney's well-known dictum of a land without ghosts, but it is none the less a joyful celebration of the beauty and variety of the coastal landscape and life and of the possibilities of adventure. It provides a total contradiction of Atwood's suggestion that in Canadian literature exploration is typically represented as leading only to disappointment or death.

By a natural process the narratives of exploration frequently lead into a second major theme: the making of a home. A good example of a book that has making the home as its primary subject is Eric Collier's *Three Against the Wilderness* (1959). The author settles with his wife and child in the remote Meldrum Creek area of the Cariboo, builds a house, clears a garden, and learns how to make a living from the land, experiences that bring none of the frustration postulated by the Atwood thesis but fulfilment and growth. The title seems to suggest an antagonistic relation between man and nature but the narrative has more of heroic adventure than mere survival, and its ultimate theme is harmony with nature. The author works not only to build a home for his family but also to create a habitat for wild life, to restore streams and bring back the beaver. Here the theme of making the home leads into another theme that, as will be seen, has special prominence in the literature of British Columbia: conservation.¹²

The theme of making the home is closely related to another very large theme, which may be termed possession. It attempts to answer the question of how those who have newly arrived in a land can gain any close and enduring hold upon it, and often recognizes that no real possession is to be bought with money or conferred by legal ownership. One of the most moving manifestations of this theme occurs at the end of Cliff Kopas' *Packhorses to the Pacific* (1976). The author and his wife rode by horseback in the 1930's from Alberta, then blighted by depression and drought, through the mountains to the Bella Coola valley on the coast. His response to the lush valley, with its rich soil, great trees, and salmon-filled streams, was to kiss the earth and then kiss his wife with the earth still on his face, and to take the resolve that there they would remain. Kopas takes pride in the fact that his identification with the place was later strengthened as a result of medical blood transfusion: he has in his veins the blood of the Bella Coola tribe, as well as of the Norwegian and Scottish pioneers of the area.¹³ This desire to establish some special tie with the native Indians is a form frequently taken by the possession theme: if the Indians cannot be claimed as ancestors by ties of blood, then there will be at least an attempt to establish by adoption ties of culture and art. Other striking manifestations of the theme include the wish in those who have come from other places that they had been born in the new land, a feeling sometimes detectable in Haig-Brown's fictional accounts of boyhood in British

Columbia (despite his happy memories of his own childhood in England) and expressed also by characters in Ethel Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller*. In the context of this local fascination with possession it is entirely appropriate that Joseph Bourne's splendidly ambiguous book of poems in Hodgins' *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* should be titled "Possessing Me." For the writers of this region the theme of possession clearly has special importance, and they have made it, whether implicitly or explicitly, very nearly the major theme of the literature of British Columbia for the past one hundred years, the grand theme into which all other themes dissolve. It is the antithesis of the exile theme of the survival thesis.

SUSPICION MAY OF COURSE ARISE that the strongly favourable view of the land that dominates such minor and documentary writers as have been considered thus far is superficial, and it may be expected that we will encounter a view that is much darker as well as much more complex when we turn to the major writers of the region. In fact, when we make this move we find much less contradiction than continuity. The transition to the major writers is most easily made by way of Roderick Haig-Brown, who has good claims to be regarded as the first to sustain a long and distinguished career as a writer in British Columbia. Like Lowry he is an exceptional figure who arrived on the scene rather deceptively in the guise of a familiar, easily recognizable local type of English migrant: while Lowry might be seen as the last of the remittance men, Haig-Brown was initially attracted to British Columbia, like many another young Englishman, by the possibilities of sport and adventure in a frontier area, but instead of contenting himself with a conventional book on British Columbia as a sportsman's Eden he proved to be a talented and dedicated writer with the fullest possible commitment to the new land. His first book with a local setting, *Pool and Rapid*, published in 1932, was followed by more than twenty others during the next forty years. Although he wrote some fiction, he was primarily a naturalist and essayist: this is a region that has tended to produce and attract naturalists before novelists, and painters before poets.

Haig-Brown's special subject was angling, but his writings range far beyond this, to describe the splendour and variety of the coastal landscape, the richness and abundance of the vegetation and wildlife, the distinctive ways of life of the loggers, fishermen, and farmers. Taken together his books probably provide a more comprehensive picture of the landscape and life of the coastal area — outside the cities, at least — than is to be found in any other writer. His work is a prolonged celebration of the land. He constantly writes of it not only with scientific precision but also with wonder and with an overwhelming sense of its generosity. A typical comment is the one he makes on a fixed fishing line stretch-

ing into a channel of the sea at Stuart Island: "I can never pass this contraption without feeling that I live in a country whose generosity is in a class with that of the better South Sea Islands."¹⁴

In Haig-Brown's writing the themes already identified as characteristic of much of the literature of British Columbia are fused inextricably together: exploration, making a home, possession, and conservation. He insists that possession can come only from knowledge, from no other form of ownership, and he seeks this knowledge both through the scientific skills of the naturalist and through years of close observation and varied experience of the land. For him life was a continual process of exploration, and though he travelled widely throughout the world he valued specially the detailed knowledge of the single locality where he made his home at Campbell River. In striking contradiction of the Atwood theory of a land that disappoints on close inspection, he held that a lifetime was not long enough to exhaust the fascination even of a single stretch of his home river.

In his writings about nature scientific language moves easily into the language of love, and a favourite word for the knowledge he seeks is intimacy. This intimacy is revealed especially in relation to the seasons, for he believes, as perhaps countrymen always have, that the true test of knowledge is the ability built up through observation of a place over many years to mark what is specially early or late, usual or unusual. Hence his two finest collections of personal essays, *A River Never Sleeps* (1946) and *Measure of the Year* (1950), have the structure of a monthly calendar of the year. In a key passage of the latter he writes that to watch the signs of the seasons is "a rite among men." These signs have passed "through wonder into superstition and religion, and are now become wonder again and living pleasure." They are a pleasure not for themselves alone but they bring also "the sense of participation in the world's real life, of steadily increasing intimacy, of possession that grows gradually stronger over the years."¹⁵

As this statement suggests, Haig-Brown's celebration of the land is of a much profounder kind than is characteristic of the numerous books written to praise British Columbia as the "sportsman's Eden." He writes as a naturalist but even more as a humanist. His ultimate theme is the quest for the full, harmonious, and integrated life, and he celebrates the land because it provides opportunity for complete human growth and balanced development. He is, he declares, although a professional writer, "the professional amateur" in all other things, holding that in an age of specialization "amateurism is the world's lost youth and hope and delight."¹⁶ He writes not only as the fisherman, scientist, and artist, but also as the farmer and gardener, the axeman, book collector, magistrate and conservationist, not least as husband and father, and as one who combines many other roles; and he rejoices in a land generous enough to allow fulfilment and growth in all these diverse roles.

HAIG-BROWN'S PRIZING of his amateur status, his refusal of the status of the specialist, and his desire to express in his writings all the aspects of a very full and rounded life no doubt make the essay the right form for him, for in these things his position is much like that of Montaigne, from whom the great tradition of the personal essay springs. Unexpectedly, however, it is not the finely balanced Haig-Brown but the tormented Malcolm Lowry who applies to his writings of British Columbia the motive he believes existed for Montaigne, the belief "that the experience of one happy man might be useful."¹⁷ In the new environment Lowry temporarily achieved a balance and happiness he had not known before, and integration became the theme of the best of his writings with West Coast settings as much as of Haig-Brown's. In a letter in 1951 he described "The Forest Path to the Spring" as the only short novel he knows of its type that brings the kind of majesty usually reserved for tragedy "to bear on human integration and all that kind of thing."¹⁸

In the regional context Lowry has a special claim to interest as the writer who has made the most serious, sustained and successful application of Edenic imagery to the British Columbia setting. His modes of celebration of the land are of course completely different from Haig-Brown's. He writes not so much as a naturalist (although he took a great interest in studying the flora and fauna of the area) as a poet and symbolist, much less literal and more "literary" and allusive than Haig-Brown, more intense and lyrical, reaching closer to mystical levels, although with less power to sustain or achieve permanence in the vision. As has often been pointed out, "The Forest Path to the Spring" was conceived by Lowry as the *Paradisio* to the *Inferno* of *Under the Volcano*. The image of British Columbia as the earthly paradise is established near the end of *Under the Volcano* when the consul Geoffrey Firmin meditates in the heat of Mexico that the place may be "an undiscovered, perhaps undiscoverable paradise."¹⁹ Lowry's description of life in British Columbia in "The Forest Path" is "half real, half fable," filled with paradisiacal imagery from Genesis and Revelation, from Bunyan's journey to the Celestial City in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and many other sources. His home on the north shore of Burrard Inlet is given the name Eridanus from the river that in Virgil's *Aeneid* waters the Elysian Fields of the Earthly Paradise. His narrator meditates: "there was everywhere an intimation of Paradise."²⁰

In "The Forest Path" the splendour of natural setting, its beauty and peace, lead to inward purification and ecstasy, and the realistic details of the description of place become the symbols of divine perfection. In this benign setting the cougar is not harmful, the mountains are not threatening but guardians; the clear waters of sea and spring, the greenness of the forest are emblems of life and

growth. Even the seagulls are "dovelike" and have "angelick wings." Here the narrator finds both freedom and tranquility; he learns the nature of reality and love. He achieves a true harmony with the world of nature, with the woman he loves, with humanity as represented by neighbours, who appropriately are fishermen; and he gains an almost mystical sense of unity with the whole creation. He reflects: "Ah, what a life of happiness had now opened before us!" "Was it possible to be so happy?" "We were still on earth, still in the same place, but if someone had charged us with the notion that we had gone to heaven and that this was the after life we would not have said him nay for long."²¹

A writer could scarcely go further than Lowry does here in celebrating the earthly paradise, but his vision is expanded in *October Ferry to Gabriola*, which is filled with memories of the perfection of life in Eridanus, from which the narrator feels threatened with eviction. It provides another demonstration that in British Columbia Lowry had found a natural setting so magnificent and benign as to liberate him for a time from the prison of egotism, the self-absorption of the writer and alcoholic, and from the obsession with words and symbols to the exclusion of other realities. Here the wanderer found a home, and the archetypal theme so prominent in much of the literature of British Columbia, making or finding the home, is developed with peculiar intensity. The narrator in *October Ferry* is the eternal wanderer, sometimes linked with the Wandering Jew, who has lost through a succession of catastrophes every home he ever inhabited, until he finds the perfect home unexpectedly in a little wooden shack built on piles over the water in Eridanus, and then he fears nothing so much as losing it. He meditates that it is so precious to him and his wife he would lay down his life for it: "But what was it that gave them this life so free and dear, that gave them so much more than peace, what was it that made it more than an ark of timber? Ah, it was their tree, door, nest, dew, snow, wind and thunder, fire and day. Their starry night and sea wind. Their love."²²

A stronger confutation could hardly be found of the Atwood thesis that the characteristic experience of the immigrant has been disillusion and defeat, the sense that the good place is not here but elsewhere, the feeling of exile. Lowry and Haig-Brown both declare their preference for the new land above the most idyllic settings of the old. Haig-Brown had spent much of his childhood beside the Frome, in the place that stood for Thomas Hardy as the earthly paradise, the Valley of the Great Dairies in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; yet though he was well aware of the advantages of the Dorset setting for the novelist he came to prefer the Campbell River to his native Frome.²³ Lowry not only contrasts Burrard Inlet with his native area, "the terrible city" of Liverpool, which becomes a symbol of deprivation and alienation from nature, but he prefers it even to the most sacred place of Romantic nature poetry. After the return to England at the end of his life he visited Grasmere, as he states in a letter, "not because it reminds

one of Wordsworth so much but because if we half shut our eyes we may be able to imagine we're back on Burrard Inlet."²⁴ For him the flow of nostalgia was totally reversed.

A VERY SIMILAR VIEWPOINT PREVAILS in the fiction of Ethel Wilson, even though in many other respects she is as different from both Lowry and Haig-Brown as those two writers are from each other. If her characters experience any sense of exile it comes not from life in British Columbia but from absence from that place. In *Hetty Dorval* the narrator Frankie Burnaby spends a happy childhood on a ranch near Lytton, which provides a total contrast with Atwood's picture of the typical childhood of Canadian fiction as crippling or restricting. Hers was so filled with love of her parents and love of the land that she writes: "Life, for me, could not have been bettered." When Frankie is later taken to live for a time in England, even though she appreciates the beauties of Cornwall she knows that she must return to her native place, and in London she yearns for the sage brush country of her early years when some reminder calls up "a disturbing magic," "the genius of my home."²⁵

Ethel Wilson, who was born in South Africa but lived in Vancouver from childhood, provides her fullest account of the immigrant experience in *The Innocent Traveller*, which is based on the life of an older member of her family. Aunt Topaz, although migrating in middle age from a very comfortable life in England to the raw new town of Vancouver in the 1880's, responds to the land with the greatest enthusiasm, rejoicing in its beauty and openness, and when she returns for a visit to England she becomes a fierce defender of the "colonials." Although she has the limitations of a person who lives on the surface of life, she is shown to possess good judgment, and her enthusiasm for the new land is shared by the other characters of the novel. On arrival from England Aunt Rachel feels immediately that she has come to her own kind of country, although no words could express her all pervading release of spirit. She wishes she had come there two generations ago. She writes to a cousin: "It is so lovely, Eliza, that I feel I've wasted my life in not living here before," while the grandmother writes to a son in England that although they miss the family and old home "this place is beautiful beyond description." Nor is there any disillusionment after this initial enthusiasm. Before long the contours of the mountains have become part of the lives of the characters, and they are happily tied in numerous ways to the new land.²⁶

Ethel Wilson has just as powerful a sense both of place and of the goodness of the land as we find in Haig-Brown and Lowry. In *Swamp Angel* Mrs. Severance comments: "Everything of any importance happens indoors," but the central character Maggie Lloyd immediately replies, "Oh, it does not," and here we feel

that Maggie speaks for the author.²⁷ As a psychological novelist and moralist Ethel Wilson is primarily concerned with the inner landscape, with the development of the heart, and with relations between people, but the outer landscape and local imagery are of great importance to her also. Indeed they are so prominent in her novels as sometimes to puzzle critics to account for them. The novels provide loving descriptions of so many areas as to constitute a literary exploration of the province: the mountains, harbour and townscape of Vancouver, past and present, in all seasons and all weather, the Fraser Valley in a golden autumn and a severe winter, the sage brush country at Lytton in the drought and heat of summer, a peach orchard in the bloom of spring beside the lake at Naramata, lakes in the Cariboo, numerous rivers and streams, Comox with its bay and spit, the west coast of Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands. These landscapes are developed not in vague general terms but with precisely observed details of vegetation and wild life, whether the arbutus, juniper, and cedar of the Gulf Islands, the aspen around a lake of the interior, the seabirds of Vancouver harbour, the flight of wild geese, or the ways of trout. These things are not superficial touches of "local colour" but part of the substance and texture of her novels and stories.

Ethel Wilson's view of the relation between man and nature, inner life and outer landscape, is far from simple. She develops images of Darwinian cruelty as well as of Wordsworthian beauty, joy, and healing power in nature. In her fiction sometimes a character's move to an idyllic rural setting may represent a flight from responsibility or a retreat into life-denying isolation, as with Ellen Cuppy's flight to the Gulf Islands in *Love and Salt Water*. More often, however, the country is a setting for renewal, integration, and growth — providing the character makes the right moral choices, as is the case with Maggie Lloyd in *Swamp Angel*. Maggie follows the river from the city to its source in a pure lake, and there, while working to help others, she is able to recover and grow, to make a new and better life. Themes of growth and integration predominate in her fiction (published mainly in the late 1940's and 1950's) to a degree that seems to run counter to the literary fashions of the mid-twentieth century. She has, like Haig-Brown, a distrust of extremes, including perhaps such high flights as Lowry's, but a belief in the possibility of a "happy chequered life," which is Ellen Cuppy's fate at the end of *Love and Salt Water*.²⁸ There is surely a close relation between the two features of her novels that have most puzzled critics: her predominantly optimistic view, despite her strong awareness of the fragility of human life and happiness, and the prominence of landscape and nature. The optimism seems so inexplicable to one critic that he has referred to it as "whimsy,"²⁹ but it springs partly from the sense that once one has learned to accept inevitable limitations the created world becomes a source of great and enduring joy.

Ethel Wilson's descriptions of place and time provide the strongest possible contradiction of Margaret Atwood's claim that Canadian fiction has only one

season: winter. Wilson, Haig-Brown, and Lowry all share the view that a special glory of the land they describe is the variety of the seasons, the endlessly repeated cycles of gradual change: Haig-Brown is as much the essayist of the gently changing Vancouver Island seasons as James Thomson is the poet of the English seasons. If there is a single season that dominates the others, for the writers of the mild coastal area it is not winter but spring. This is of course a clear case of geographical determinism. The spectacular nature of the coastal spring immediately impressed the early settlers. Eric Duncan recollected fifty-seven years later the indelible impression he received upon his arrival at Comox in June 1877: "everything was a tangle of green. I had never seen such growth before, and I shall never forget my first sight of it — I can shut my eyes and see it now."³⁰ The challenge for the coastal writers has been to evoke this extraordinary phenomenon of greenness and growth, to render it as vividly as Emily Carr in paintings. The most successful, in addition to Emily Carr herself in her journals, have been Haig-Brown, Lowry, and more recently Hodgins. Haig-Brown made his first attempt to describe the coastal spring in *Pool and Rapid* and returned to the subject again and again, achieving his finest handling in *A River Never Sleeps* and *Measure of the Year*. In keeping with the paradise theme, spring is the dominant season in "The Forest Path to the Spring," although Lowry describes all the other seasons as well. Comparison between his and Haig-Brown's descriptions, for example, of the varied shades of green in early spring would make an interesting exercise in criticism. It need hardly be added that just as the imagery of winter is associated with negative views of life in the survival thesis, in the literature of this region imagery of spring is commonly associated with themes of growth and fulfilment. The fiction of Hodgins, where the idea of "second growth" has special prominence, provides notable examples.

THE WRITERS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA have been much more inclined to praise than to curse the creation, and there has been more of celebration than of survival in the literature. This tendency has been carried so far, indeed, that concern is sometimes expressed by Hodgins and others that the poets and novelists of the region face special dangers in being seduced away from other subjects and themes by the very splendour of nature and landscape. Even where the writing expresses anguish of mind and spirit, the land is more often seen as a mitigation than a cause, as the poetry of Susan Musgrave illustrates. Frequently the writers seem inspired by the spirit of the Psalmist (*Ps.* 16:6): "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." It is impossible to escape the conclusion that the survival thesis does a great injustice both to the land and to those who have written of the land.

There are of course darker and more negative aspects of the literature of the region than the picture given thus far suggests. Many of these are inherent in the theme of the earthly paradise itself, for no writer of any sophistication can write of paradise without also writing of paradise lost. Even in his most exalted celebration of Eden in "The Forest Path to the Spring" Lowry is well aware of the dangers of immaturity and delusion in the idea of the earthly paradise: death camas is among the flowers that grow in Eridanus. In his later writings and those of others the special strength of the theme of possession is matched by an equally intense fear of dispossession; there is growing protest against the spoiling of the land, and strong contrasts are developed between the magnificence of the natural setting and the imperfection of the social order.

If we carry our examination of the Eden theme into the later part of the twentieth century we will find that its tragic and ironic dimensions become increasingly prominent, as if serious treatment were taken as far as it could be in Lowry's "Forest Path" and after that only ironic versions were possible, perhaps even for Lowry himself in later writings. Here one might well echo Milton's words as he approaches the Fall in *Paradise Lost* (ix, 5-6): "I now must change / Those Notes to Tragic." The "perfect 'Eden'" of James Douglas and the "paradisiacal" place of John Helmcken are replaced by such ironic versions as the "Garden of Eden" in a real estate advertisement (Lowry) and the "Paradise Beer Parlour" (Hodgins).³¹ In Birney's *The Damnation of Vancouver* the picture is of a spoiled place that is described as "this Eden" only by Legion, an absurd booster and blind believer in material progress.³² Hodgins makes the central myth of *The Invention of the World* not Eden but the "Eden Swindle." Such a development appears inevitable, particularly if one recalls that during the very year when Douglas described the site of Victoria as an "Eden" Charles Dickens published *Martin Chuzzlewit* with its satire on the ironic gap between the promise and the reality of the western American paradise, as represented by the activities of "The Eden Land Corporation."³³

Yet there is much in Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* to suggest that the "Eden Swindle" was not a swindle after all, or at least that the goodness of the land and the strength of the human spirit were great enough to convert tragic into comic irony. The Irish peasants who followed Donal Keneally to Vancouver Island were deceived by the messianic pretensions of their leader and harshly exploited by him but they were not disappointed in the place to which he led them, where the forests had "a higher, sweeter smell even than the furze" of Ireland.³⁴ Space does not allow any detailed examination of Hodgins here, but there is in fact a high degree of continuity between the responses to the land exhibited in this novel and those expressed by Haig-Brown, Ethel Wilson, and even by Lowry in the "Forest Path." It is not to question Hodgins' very striking

originality to suggest that their central theme of integration and growth in a generous land is ultimately also his central theme.

The Invention of the World is a novel that might almost have been written to refute the survival thesis, and this is equally true of the more recent *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, even though it carries further Hodgins' satire on the western Eden and his criticism of all materialistic conceptions of paradise and possession. While Atwood comments on the lack of heroes in Canadian literature, Hodgins' fiction is as full of exemplars of true and false heroism as the work of Spenser and Milton (although his characters may hide their heroism beneath unpromising exteriors), and her criticism that vital life-giving women like Molly Bloom do not appear in Canadian fiction³⁵ is contradicted by such prominent characters as Maggie Kyle in *The Invention of the World* and Jenny Chambers in *Joseph Bourne*. While Atwood suggests "surely the central Canadian experience is death" and holds that funerals have a special prominence in Canadian literature,³⁶ *The Invention of the World* concludes with an exuberantly joyful wedding. *Joseph Bourne* does indeed include a funeral but it is comically rendered, and the central subject is not death but resurrection. At the conclusion of this novel the words are carefully chosen in the comment on the life-affirming dance with which Jenny Chambers responds to disaster: she and the other characters are "much more than simply survivors."³⁷

The existence of these strong and pervasive contradictions between the literature of British Columbia and the survival thesis obviously raises the question whether a thesis that fails to pass such a regional test can be valid as a national theory of literature. The contradictions have their own value, however, in defining many of the special characteristics of British Columbia writing. They may help us understand the meaning of Ethel Wilson's words: "my locale in a sustained piece of writing (that is, in a book) has to be British Columbia. There are other places in the world that I know and love, but none that I know, and feel, and love in the same way. But I did not choose it. It chose. It is very strong."³⁸

NOTES

¹ *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 245. Such a summary inevitably makes Atwood's formulations appear cruder than they really are, but they were clearly intended to be provocative. If they have hardened into an orthodoxy, that is probably the fault of others.

² Ed. Margerie Lowry (New York and Cleveland: World Publishing, 1970), p. 151.

³ See Douglas to James Hargrave, February 5, 1843, *The Hargrave Correspondence*, quoted by Maria Tippett and Douglas Cole in *From Desolation to Splendour: Changing Perceptions of the British Columbia Landscape* (Toronto and Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin, 1977), p. 29; and *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken*, ed. Dorothy Blakey Smith (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1975), Appendix II, pp. 282, 298; cf. pp. 103-05. Tippett and Cole's study of

- regional traditions in painting provides many interesting points of comparison for the literary treatment of the landscape.
- ⁴ Sproat, *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life* (London: Smith, Elder, 1868), pp. 12, 18. Poole, *The Queen Charlotte Islands* (London, 1872), quoted by Sam L. Simpson, "Two Voyages by Sea — 1863 and 1971," *The Charlottes: A Journal of the Queen Charlotte Islands* (Queen Charlotte Islands Museum Society), no. 1 (1971), 35, 38.
- ⁵ *Survival*, pp. 50-51. Mrs. Allison's comment is specifically on life in the Okanagan in the 1870's: *A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia: The Recollections of Susan Allison*, ed. Margaret Ormsby (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1976), p. 47. The last comment is Beatrice Freeman's, in *The Gulf Islanders, Sound Heritage*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1976), 15.
- ⁶ See Duncan's *From Shetland to Vancouver Island, Recollections of Seventy-five Years* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1937), p. 80, and his *The Rich Fisherman and Other Sketches* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 104-05.
- ⁷ *Three Against the Wilderness* (1959; Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1965), p. 10.
- ⁸ *Driftwood Valley* (1946; New York: Ballantyne, 1971), pp. 178, 101, 75, 342.
- ⁹ (Surrey, B.C.: Antonson, 1976), p. 260.
- ¹⁰ *Survival*, pp. 91-95, and Helmcken, *Reminiscences*, p. 326. Cf. Helmcken, pp. 143, 284, 292, and Allison, *Recollections*, pp. 33-39.
- ¹¹ Dorothy Richardson, in *The Gulf Islanders, Sound Heritage*, 5, no. 4 (1976), 23. For Atwood on exploration see *Survival*, p. 115.
- ¹² I hope to deal with themes of spoiling the land and conservation in a sequel to the present article. Here of course the Atwood thesis becomes relevant but only in its reversed form: nature as victim of man.
- ¹³ *Packhorses to the Pacific* (Sidney, B.C.: Gray's, 1976), p. 125, and Kopas, *Bella Coola* (Vancouver: Mitchell, 1970), p. viii. Atwood has an interesting discussion of attempts by Canadian writers to adopt Indians as ancestors, although this phenomenon is not easy to reconcile with her main thesis (*Survival*, pp. 103-05).
- ¹⁴ *A River Never Sleeps* (Toronto: Collins, 1974), p. 236.
- ¹⁵ *Measure of the Year* (Toronto: Collins, 1950), pp. 3-4.
- ¹⁶ *Measure of the Year*, pp. 246-48.
- ¹⁷ "The Forest Path to the Spring," *Hear us O Lord from Heaven thy Dwelling Place* (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1961), p. 281. Lowry gives his source for this idea simply as what "someone said, speaking about Montaigne"; "someone" is probably Virginia Woolf in her essay, "Montaigne," in *The Common Reader*.
- ¹⁸ *Selected Letters*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Lowry (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1965), p. 266.
- ¹⁹ (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 354.
- ²⁰ "Forest Path," pp. 255, 261. Like many of Lowry's allusions, "Eridanus" is complex and ambiguous, but this is the explanation given in *October Ferry*, p. 164.
- ²¹ "Forest Path," pp. 232, 242, 281.
- ²² *October Ferry*, p. 67. Cf. Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry, A Biography* (New York: Dell, 1975), pp. 406, 415-18.

- ²³ See for example *A River Never Sleeps*, pp. 83-84 (where the context is trout fishing).
- ²⁴ "Forest Path," pp. 225, 240. Letter to Ralph Gustafson, April 29, 1957, *Selected Letters*, p. 410.
- ²⁵ (1947; Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 8, 56, 87.
- ²⁶ (Toronto: Macmillan, 1949), pp. 113, 121, 122.
- ²⁷ (1954; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962), p. 149.
- ²⁸ (Toronto: Macmillan, 1956), p. 203.
- ²⁹ Frank Birbalsingh, "Ethel Wilson, Innocent Traveller," *Canadian Literature*, 49 (Summer 1971), pp. 35-46.
- ³⁰ *From Shetland to Vancouver Island*, p. 128; cf. Duncan's *Fifty-seven Years in the Comox Valley* (Courtenay, B.C.: Comox Argus Publishing, 1934), p. 21.
- ³¹ See *October Ferry*, p. 244, and *The Invention of the World* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), p. 95.
- ³² (1957; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p. 49.
- ³³ However, even Dickens in his role as editor helped disseminate the Edenic view of British Columbia. When he published a report in the journal he edited, the region was described as a "garden of the Hesperides," with rich resources and ideal climate, from which the world had long been jealously excluded by the Hudson's Bay Company; and Bishop Hills' opinion was quoted that Victoria was "the most lovely and beautifully situated place in the world": "Episcopacy in the Rough," *All the Year Round*, 4 (February 23, 1861), 470-74. (Dickens was a close friend of Hills' patroness, Angela Burdett Coutts.) Nevertheless, the complaint that British Columbia has been falsely represented as an "Eden" by land speculators appears in R. Byron Johnson's *Very Far West Indeed, A Few Rough Experiences of the North-West Pacific Coast*, third edition (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Low and Searle, 1872), pp. 44, 278; and no doubt earlier examples could be found.
- ³⁴ This is the comment of one of Hodgins' characters, Seamus O'Mahony, p. 116.
- ³⁵ *Survival*, p. 199. In regional terms it is interesting that Atwood notes Ethel Wilson as in some respects an exception.
- ³⁶ *Survival*, p. 222. In keeping with this view, Atwood emphasizes the prominence of death by drowning in Canadian literature (p. 55), but Hodgins in *Joseph Bourne* (like Ethel Wilson in some of her work) develops symbolism of swimming in a much more positive way, to represent mastery over fear.
- ³⁷ (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979), p. 269.
- ³⁸ "The Bridge or the Stokehold? Views of the Novelist's Art," *Canadian Literature*, 5 (Summer 1960), p. 44.

