

RODERICK HAIG-BROWN

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IN AN ARTICLE appearing in 1958, Roderick Haig-Brown was described as standing firmly "in that front rank of Canadian writers whose works are published in New York and London, as well as in Toronto, and whose reputations are international, rather than national or provincial."¹ I consider this a valid assessment, yet it must be admitted that his name is not one likely to spring to mind whenever contemporary Canadian writers are being discussed. He is a presence, certainly, but he remains as a writer shadowy, almost aloof — definitely outside the current "establishment". Most anthologies ignore him, and we look for his name in vain in such literary surveys as *Butterfly on Rock* or *Survival* (his absence from the last-named is all the more surprising, since survival is a recurrent theme probed deeply and variously throughout his work); even Pacey's comprehensive *Creative Writing in Canada* includes only two perfunctory references.

The main explanation for this neglect lies in the fact that Haig-Brown works best in a slighted genre. Though he has produced a number of works of fiction, aimed at both juvenile and adult readers, his most significant writing has been in discursive, non-fiction prose, and those who devote themselves to this literary genre are almost invariably the last to be recognized as writers of enduring merit. In Haig-Brown's case, however, there are a number of other contributory factors. His favourite subject-matter, wild life in general and fish in particular, places him in a special category likely to earn him the devotion of enthusiasts but the neglect of others. At the same time, his interests transcend the usual classifications; thus in most libraries his work will be split between fiction, literature, history, natural history, sociology, juvenile books, etc., and this inevitably discourages any unified response to his achievement. Finally, his international publishing history notwithstanding, he is a decidedly local writer, focusing his attention on western North America (particularly, of course, British Columbia), and it is well-known that, despite the provenance of this magazine, Canadian literary activity in its publishing, advertising, fashion-setting aspects is concentrated upon the eastern part of the country, with all the unconscious preferences and prejudices that always accompany such a situation. The aim of this article (by one who, though

a student of the literature of wild life, is no fisherman and lives and works in Toronto) is to try to right the imbalance; I hope to offer an introductory survey of Haig-Brown's work (in the logging terminology of which he is fond, a "cruise"), to establish its basic pattern and assess his overall contribution.

Haig-Brown's first book, *Silver: The Story of an Atlantic Salmon*, was published in 1931; his most recent, *The Salmon*, appeared in 1974. Across a span of over forty years, these two provide an appropriate frame for his literary career. The common subject-matter indicates a lifelong interest in fishing and ichthyology, and it is noteworthy that, although the former was written for children and the latter for adults, although the first is narrative and the second expository, both are didactic, informative. Haig-Brown has always been an instructor, a teacher or nothing. The connections between the two books suggest that his work does indeed possess a coherent pattern, but there is one significant difference between them: *Silver* was published in England and has an English setting, while *The Salmon*, though international in scope, was commissioned by the Canadian government and is primarily concerned with the North American situation.

An approach to Haig-Brown's writing is best made, in fact, through an account of his "transplanting" from southern England, where he was born in 1908, to Vancouver Island, which has been his permanent home since 1933. His roots go deep into the English countryside. His maternal grandfather, Alfred Pope, who had gone to school with Thomas Hardy, was mayor of Dorchester in 1886, the year Hardy published his Dorchester novel, so could legitimately think of himself as the mayor of Casterbridge. Haig-Brown spent many holidays in Dorset during his boyhood, and on one occasion accompanied his grandfather to tea with Hardy at Max Gate.² And it was in the environs of Dorchester that the foundations of his knowledge of outdoor life were well and truly laid. "In my earliest fishing years," he writes, "I fished between the chalk hills of Dorset until any change in the river Frome or the fish that swam in it or the duns that hatched from its weed beds marked itself instantly upon my mind."³

But alongside a loving familiarity with the natural world he also inherited literary interest and activity from both sides of his family. His grandfather was the author of *The Old Stone Crosses of Dorset* and his father, who was killed in the First World War, had published *Sporting Sonnets and Other Verse* in 1903 and *My Game-Book* in 1913, the latter dedicated to the five-year-old Haig-Brown who has since called it "as beautifully written a piece of tradition as any that ever sought to mold a boy" (*RNS*, 216). With this background, it is scarcely surprising to find him well versed in the English rural writers, and we encounter references to them throughout his work — naturally enough, to Izaak Walton and Charles Cotton (Haig-Brown's interest in fly-fishing leads him to prefer the latter to the former), but also to Gilbert White, Cobbett, Surtees, Barnes, Jefferies, Hudson, and Henry Williamson (whose *Salar the Salmon* [1935] was

anticipated to some extent by Haig-Brown's own *Silver*). Although I would not wish to imply that Haig-Brown is anything but Canadian in his mature writings, it is important to lay some emphasis on his connections with the essentially English rural tradition.

Haig-Brown first came out to Canada in 1925, travelling to British Columbia and the American Northwest, working in logging-camps and on surveys, and thereby gaining his initiation into what was to become "years of living with prospectors and trappers and stump ranchers" (*RNS*, 14). Before long, he had registered a trap-line in the northern part of Vancouver Island and entered into a hand-logging partnership. He returned to England between 1929 and 1931, at which time *Silver* was published, but he came back to Vancouver Island in the latter year, and after working for some time as professional hunter, trapper and guide, he married and settled down by the Campbell River, home of "the most famous run of big salmon in the world."⁴ In the books written since then — *The Salmon* is his twenty-third — he can be said to have made the mountains, forests and waters of British Columbia his own.

The relation between an immigrant and his adopted country is a complex one, especially for a writer who has established his literary niche as a detailed and wide-ranging commentator on his new land. One gets the impression when reading through Haig-Brown's work that he has been particularly conscious of a responsibility to justify his change of allegiance by a thorough mastery of all the historical, zoological and sociological aspects of the province in which he lives. I have taken my title for this essay from a passage in *Starbuck Valley Winter* (1943) in which Don Morgan, following in his creator's footsteps (he is also an immigrant, but in his case from the United States), is about to establish a trap-line in the wilds:

He had names of his own for most of the creeks and swamps he could see, and even for some of the logging roads. Standing there, looking over it, he felt a sudden pride in the country, a sense of ownership through knowledge, through having set his feet upon so much of it in the three years he had lived there.⁵

Similar sentiments recur in Haig-Brown's writing. Here, for example, is the continuation of the account of his Dorset upbringing in *A River Never Sleeps*: "In the years since then I have fished one or two Vancouver rivers [*i.e.*, the Nimpkish and the Campbell] until I know them as well as I know the Frome; I feel at home in them, and everything I see in them or about them has its meaning for me, as the life of the Frome meadows had" (*RNS*, 83). Ultimately, he can observe: "I fish the Campbell with a sense of ownership fully as strong as that of any legitimate owner of fishing rights in the world. . . . The sense of ownership grows simply from knowing the river" (*RNS*, 350).

The image of exploration and discovery may be seen as a unifying thread that

links his numerous writings. In his historical books for schoolchildren — *Captain of the Discovery* (1956), *The Farthest Shores* (1960) and *Fur and Gold* (1962) — he has brought to life the exploits of the men who first explored both the coast and the interior (Bering, the Spaniards, Vancouver, Mackenzie, Fraser, Thompson, etc.) and in the last-named the administrators and politicians (notably James Douglas) who consolidated the achievements of the explorers and initiated the subsequent development of British Columbia. In *Silver and Return to the River* (1941), at first sight books of a very different kind, a comparable interest is to be found, though this time the discovery is scientific; Haig-Brown is fascinated not only with the life-cycle of the salmon but with the efforts of dedicated human beings (the unnamed “Good Fisherman” in the first, Senator Evans and Don Gunner in the second) to discover and reveal the complex secrets of natural processes. In his juvenile adventure stories — especially *Starbuck Valley Winter* and *The Whale People* (1962) — the boy-heroes embark upon personal voyages of discovery, venturing into new places and proving themselves in new accomplishments. Haig-Brown’s own role as fact-finder and sympathetic interpreter is less dramatic but no less real; he communicates to his readers a sense of intellectual discovery through painstaking research and a lifetime of practical experience.

HIS FAVOURITE SUBJECT is, of course, fishing, and he has written on virtually every aspect of it, from practical handbooks like *A Primer of Fly-Fishing* (1964) to authoritative surveys like *The Western Angler* (1939), though he is at his best in the more personal mode, in such books as the four accounts of the fisherman’s year divided according to the seasons, and books of essays on fishing subjects like *A River Never Sleeps*. But he is by no means confined to the literature of angling. His ownership through knowledge extends over many other areas. One of his novels, *Timber* (1942; published in England as *The Tall Trees Fall* [1943]) is based upon his intimate acquaintance with the logging industry, and he made a special study of cougars in order to write *Ki-Yu* (1934; later republished as *Panther*) and another of the traditions of the Indians of the Pacific Coast for *The Whale People*. But the seal on his intellectual ownership of his adopted province was set by his writing of *The Living Land* (1961) — a veritable anatomy of British Columbia, which surveys its natural resources and future prospects on the basis of the studies produced by a series of Resources Conferences.

This whole image of ownership can, however, be carried too far. Haig-Brown is acutely aware of the fact that “any given generation of men can have only a lease, not ownership, of the earth; and one essential term of the lease is that the

earth be handed on to the next generation with unimpaired potentialities."⁶ He also knows that ownership of any kind, though accompanied with privileges, carries with it duties and responsibilities. It was not enough for him merely to discover and enjoy the wild life and natural beauty of British Columbia; these constitute a priceless heritage that must be both shared and conserved. The sharing of both his knowledge and his enthusiasm for the natural world has been accomplished by means of his writings. The need for conservation has similarly been urged through the written word, but it has in addition been furthered through his action and example.

Although his preoccupation with wild life had been fostered by his early upbringing and the practice of his father, he is by no means a blind follower of traditional ways. While his father's book reflected, in the son's words, "a vigorous man's love of shooting and fishing" (*RNS*, 217), his own development has been towards protection. During the half-century in which he has known Vancouver Island, the situation of its wild life has changed out of all recognition, and Haig-Brown has recognized and adapted to this change. As he writes in *Measure of the Year* (1950):

I hunt as often as I can get out, with greater enthusiasm and interest than ever; I shoot less and less, and with an ever-increasing reluctance, because a wholly new factor has come in to destroy all the calculations that once seemed to make my measure of killing reasonable and sane: I am no longer a single hunter among a few others of my kind; I am a part of a vast and always increasing army of hunters that suddenly seems to threaten the future of every wild creature I love. (*MY*, 199)

More recently he has made comparable statements concerning the population explosion among fishermen, and has proposed more stringent legislation and advocated rules of self-discipline to meet the new dangers involved. Although to some outsiders the combination of the roles of hunter, angler and protector of wild life seems contradictory, Haig-Brown is one of our leading conservationists, and he carries special conviction because of his previous, and continuing, experience as a sportsman.

He defines conservation as "a religious concept — the most universal and fundamental of all such concepts, the worship of fertility to which man has dedicated himself in every civilization since his race began."⁷ But his arguments have hardly anything in common with those of urban arm-chair conservationists who all too often have little or no familiarity with the wilderness they profess to defend, and whose opinions are abstract and theoretical. Like Thoreau and Jefferies before him, he is prepared to defend sport because "carrying a gun has taught me a thousand things about animals and country and wind and weather that I should not otherwise have bothered to learn" (*MY*, 203). He knows the differences between hunters and butchers (*MY*, 205), and insists that genuine

sportsmen “are the keenest and most effective of all conservationists” (*MY*, 201), that they can play a powerful and, indeed, essential part in any rational programme of protection.

In recent years, Haig-Brown has devoted a great deal of time and effort to his civic duties as magistrate and judge. This side of his life has found little immediate reflection in his writings (two amusing essays in *Measure of the Year*, the boys’ adventure story, *Mounted Police Patrol* [1954], some uncollected articles in popular magazines), and it seems, indeed, to have interfered substantially with his writing — *The Salmon* is his first book for a decade, and even this is little more than an up-to-date recapitulation of earlier material. We may well regret this, but it is not difficult to see the relation of this work to the overall context of his life. Haig-Brown is very much a humanist, and he knows that the framing of wise laws and the firm but humane enforcement of them are essential to our own survival and also to that of the other species with which we share the earth. His emphasis on ethics and restraint extends from conduct when hunting and fishing to behaviour in day-to-day living. Whether as magistrate, sportsman or writer, he actively upholds the need for human understanding, co-operation and discipline.

A DETAILED LITERARY EXAMINATION of Haig-Brown’s writings soon reveals the existence of two marked — and, at first sight, opposed — attitudes recurring regularly in his work. The first, one of the features that probably derives from the English rural tradition, is an ever-riding concern for truth and accuracy. Thus, in his dedication to *Silver* he writes: “I have tried to make it an interesting story and at the same time I have tried to keep to the truth about salmon and their ways.”⁸ Similarly, the preface to *Ki-Yu* begins: “Every detail of panthers and their ways set down in this book is strictly accurate — yet accurate knowledge of panthers is not easily gained.”⁹ And in the discussion of his own work that appeared in the first issue of this magazine, he told how his early logging-companions begged him “to tell the truth, the whole truth, not as poets and writers and film directors see it, but as they themselves saw it — the daily truth of hard work and danger.”¹⁰

Yet against this earnest preoccupation with unadorned fact is a balancing acknowledgement of the sense of elevating wonder to be derived from a knowledge of wild things. This is best described at the opening of *Measure of the Year*:

The great clear signs of the changing seasons, the migration of geese and salmon, of caribou and buffalo, the swell of leaf buds in spring, the first fall snow on the high mountains, have meaning beyond themselves and a power of association that must go far back into the earliest development of man. They have passed, many

of them, through wonder into superstition and religion, and are now become wonder again and living pleasure. (*MY*, 3)

Ultimately, however, these two attitudes are by no means incompatible. Haig-Brown is impressed by the realization that truth is itself wonderful. This is, indeed, one of the paradoxical (and pleasing) results of recent scientific discoveries in ichthyology. "In my own lifetime," he writes, "many questions about salmon have been answered, many mysteries have been revealed. But every answer, every revelation serves only to make these graceful forms lying over the gravels at the headwaters of a mountain stream a more affecting miracle."¹¹ Haig-Brown finds the same principle at work in all branches of natural knowledge; it is not too much to say that the prime impulse in his work is to reveal this miracle of the living fact.

Fact and the interpretation of fact: these not only make up the content of Haig-Brown's writings but also define their form. In *Return to the River*, for example, the subject is the life-cycle of a chinook salmon, but Haig-Brown's introduction of Senator Evans and Don Gunner the scientist is more than a technical device to guarantee authentic observation. The two follow the movements of the fish because it is in the interests of man that their habits are known and their runs preserved. The chinook-run on the Columbia River is appropriately scrutinized by conserving politician and research scientist because it is on co-operation between these two that the salmon depend in the modern world for their survival. Moreover, truth lies in the combined wisdom of the two observers. Don Gunner is prepared to admit that "you old anglers come much closer to understanding a place like this [the breeding-pool] than scientists do." Evans, who is sage as well as senator, replies that scientists have taught him about "the rhythms of life," and proceeds to articulate the pattern that gives the whole book its subject-matter, its form and its underlying philosophy: "From algae to plankton to insects to fish, from diatom to daphne to stonefly to fish again. From there to the birds and animals, finally man. And it all starts from decay, chemicals, bacteria. I like it."¹² *Return to the River* is a narrative of natural history, a demonstration of ichthyological research, a conservationist tract and a celebration of the natural process all in one.

In an earlier book, *Pool and Rapid* (1932), Haig-Brown employs imaginative means to convey a comprehensive truth beyond the scope of statistics or prosaic description. Based on his experiences on the Nimpkish River in northern Vancouver Island (called the Tashish here), the book chronicles the history of the river and its human inter-relations from the earliest times. Thus it begins in pre-history with the world of the Indian gods and continues through the period of early white settlement to the threat to the river (conveniently defeated in what seems now an over-optimistic climax) from industrial development. Alec Lucas,

who properly stresses the function of the river as a structural, unifying device within the narrative, classifies the book as "a novel,"¹³ but it is hardly fiction in the accepted sense. It is best described, I think, as imaginative history — history which recognizes myth as a legitimate part of the psychological, tradition-sanctioned truth of its subject, and admits created but representative figures (the young Indian chief, Skookum the first white settler, his son Redhead) as elements within a contrived but essentially accurate account of an extended historical process. Haig-Brown reveals the breadth of his own viewpoint by criticizing that of the technological experts brought in by the Tashish River Power and Pulp Company: "They talked of her [the river] as a *thing*; they could not see that romance and mystery were hidden in every crevice of her rocks, in every twist of her current, in every smooth curve of her graceful length."¹⁴ Had *Pool and Rapid* been written a little later, I suspect that Haig-Brown would have found words with less vague associations than "romance" and "mystery" to convey his sense of wonder at the span of historical continuity, but as a whole the book well illustrates his attempt to reconcile the needlessly opposed perspectives of scientific fact and literary creation.

Haig-Brown seems to have been drawn towards fiction (though, under the circumstances, imaginative narrative might be a more suitable term) by the opportunity it provides for genuinely creative presentation. It is not altogether surprising, however, that his novels are most memorable for their informative, non-fiction qualities. This is as true, I believe, of his juvenile fiction as of his adult novels. Thus *Starbuck Valley Winter* derives its interest from the account of trapping in a remote valley, the dangers of such a life under tough conditions, the sheer struggle for survival; these are far more compelling than the rather perfunctory plot-mystery centred upon the sinister figure of a rival trapper. Similarly, in *Timber*, the recreation of life in the logging-camps, the techniques and even the terminology of logging (which Haig-Brown reproduces exactly, together with a useful glossary), hold the attention more readily than the inconclusive love-triangle or the excessively didactic (and now outmoded) discussion of trade-unionism. The background proves more absorbing than the events played out against it.

His most important novel is unquestionably *On the Highest Hill* (1949). Though it shares some of the weaknesses of *Timber* — a rather rambling narrative, an uneasy compound of elements that do not belong integrally together — its interest lies in its hero, Colin Elmslie, whose compulsion towards a wilderness not yet discovered and spoiled by mankind provides the central focus of the book. It is a novel half-way towards allegory. The first confrontation between Colin and the mountain takes place in the school-room when he is required to write an essay:

No writing had ever poured from him so fast as those stored-up thoughts of the high mountain. He had stopped only when his imagination climbed beyond easy reach of words, and he scarcely knew that he had stopped; he had simply followed his thoughts into the mountains beyond reach or touch or need of pen and paper. Thought had climbed in him and with him, away from the room, from the valley, from the reality of the road home and suppertime and his father's return from work.¹⁵

Colin's life-pattern is implicit within this moment of revelation.

On the Highest Hill records the withdrawal of a solitary; Colin's love of wilderness develops into acute misanthropy. His mountain must be unsmirched, inviolate: "He thought: this is of me and I am of it. Nothing here is evil, nothing is touched, nothing dirty or destroyed" (*OHH*, 83). Away from mankind, "he was free to think clearly for the first time in his life" (*OHH*, 215). Though warned by an older hermit-woodsman that he may die in them if he persists in retiring into the mountains, Colin must follow his destiny. His tragedy (possibly too strong a word) is that complete solitude, whether desirable or not, is no longer feasible: "Seems like there's no place left where a man can keep to himself and act like a man" (*OHH*, 294). Ultimately, in a climax which offers an inadequate resolution of the tensions that have been building up in the plot, Colin turns to violence to defend his supposed right to isolation and dies a fugitive on the mountain to which he has retreated.

According to Alec Lucas, Colin Elmslie "becomes the author's final comment on civilization's ever increasing encroachment on the natural world and its suppression of man's freedom of spirit."¹⁶ My own response is rather different; I find Colin limited as a character because he represents what is virtually a distortion of his creator's general attitude. For all his dislike of developers and polluters, Haig-Brown is *not* a solitary; indeed much of his strength, as I have tried to demonstrate, lies in his active, positive role as defender of an authentic wilderness (his vigorous and eloquent protest over the governmental spoliation of Strathcona Park in the 1950's is a case in point¹⁷). In his neurotic escapism, Colin stands in marked contrast to Haig-Brown's own clear-sighted, balanced response to the often depressing tensions inherent in modern living. Part of the unease I detect in the novel stems from a difficulty in reconciling his apparently sympathetic presentation of his hero with the superiority of his own views as manifest in his writings as a whole.

In a recent interview, Haig-Brown was questioned about his preferences among the literary genres and replied: "I think novels really give you the greatest satisfaction in a way, because you live most intimately with them, but I like the essay form. It's straightforward and practical, and has a lot more useful purpose today than a novel does."¹⁸ Like so many writers on the natural world, he has effectively explored the indeterminate area between fiction and non-fiction. But

his best work, I have no doubt, is to be found in his essays and discursive prose. Here he is most at his ease. An adequate structure is provided by the natural divisions of the seasons or, often enough, can be imposed by the terms of his own interests and personality. (One of the most satisfying of his books, *A River Never Sleeps*, combines unity of subject — fish-lore — with month-by-month seasonal presentation, and buttresses the artistic structure by juxtaposing biographical experiences in England with those in North America.) An open form allows him to combine practical advice with anecdotes, reminiscences, didactic argument, evocative description. As familiar essayist, he claims the right to roam as his fancy inclines, and although in *Measure of the Year*, properly considered among his best collections, he demonstrates his versatility by studiously avoiding any direct discussion of angling, for the most part we are rarely far from the river-bank.

Roderick Haig-Brown has strong claims to be considered the North American "Compleat Angler." This continent has, doubtless, produced more expert fishermen, but none who can rival him in his comprehensive grasp of all that makes up the experience of angling or can convey a quintessential impression of its manifold attractions. Fishing, we might say, is where he starts from. For him, as for Izaak Walton, it is a multi-faceted activity, and the satisfactions to be derived from it include appreciation of the beauty of his surroundings, recognition of the numerous species of wild life around him, sheer joy in a challenge that combines skill and judgment with strength and physical exertion, the warm companionship of friends, and (recalling Walton's definition, "the contemplative man's recreation") "the flowing ease of thought that comes upon me as I fish" (*FS*, 13). He classifies angling as "an art, ephemeral, graceful, complicated, full of tradition yet never static, . . . as much a part of civilization as most of the minor arts and sciences" (*FS*, 11). Although a devotee, he is never pompous about it; he states frankly that he fishes because he likes it ("I go fishing to please myself, not to catch my breakfast or prove anything" [*FS*, 12]), and the words that tend to recur in his angling books are "pleasure," "beauty" and (especially) "observation."

Success in angling depends upon intimate "local knowledge" (*FS*, 70), and in acquiring this the fisherman must develop his powers of observation and sharpen his responses. The key-phrase here is "observation as participation" (*MY*, 4) — the necessary preliminary to ownership through knowledge. In order to attain expertise, the fisherman is impelled to "see" the countryside in the most positive sense: "A stream is just that to a casual observer — a pretty flow of water with life on its surface and growth on its banks. To a fisherman it is pools and runs and riffles, hidden rocks, sunken weed beds, gravel bars, log jams and cut banks."¹⁹ The fisherman's concerns, indeed, extend to include the whole of the natural world: "Nothing that moves or lives within range of his vision and understanding is unimportant to a fisherman. Birds, trees, mammals, insects and weeds,

weather skills, meadows and rock and sky, are all part of a fisherman's world and of his pleasure" (*FS*, 120).

Once again, comparison between his English and North American experience proves central. In *Fisherman's Summer* he makes an important distinction between "a parent stream" ("the river of growth, the scene of boyhood endeavors, successes and failures") and "a home river," to which the adult fisherman comes and brings experience and skill to be applied and tested.²⁰ The former, for Haig-Brown, was the Dorset Frome, but his "home river" is the Campbell, and he shares with the reader a loving exploration of every inch of it. The child, in Wordsworthian phrase, is father of the man in a very real sense. The whole structure of *A River Never Sleeps* depends upon this relation, and an extended passage from *Fisherman's Spring* needs to be quoted not only for the subtle distinctions it makes but for the admirable prose in which it is written:

No man loves the felt-soled boot and breast-high wader more than I do, no man throws a fly at leaping current waves with greater pleasure or keener expectation. Yet I remember well the easy, unhampered walking through the meadows, the calm of resting under a shade tree to watch a long, quiet reach of gliding water, the rhythmic, tearing sound of cropped grass as some rich dairy herd fed along the river's banks. And even more than these, the chance meetings with country people about their country affairs — hedgers and ditchers, herdsmen and shepherds, keepers and millers and farmers, the exchanges of tobacco and information, acceptance and acknowledgement of each other's business in the meadows.

Here, these things have their dimly recognizable counterpart; the trapper in his cabin on lonely lake or stream fork, the occasional game warden or prospector. We accept the deer coming down to drink, the bear seeking berries, the beaver swimming, in place of the slow-stepping Devons, the gleaming Jerseys or the block-bodied Shorthorns. They make a wilder scene, more exciting and unpredictable, essentially different. One may prefer it, as I do, but the other remains a part of angling, a part of fly-fishing. (*FS*, 214-4)

This seems to me a key passage for establishing Haig-Brown's unique merits as a writer; its argument depends upon subtle discriminations of response that can only be conveyed through a carefully modulated control of language. This is highly effective prose, yet it is difficult to isolate its qualities. There is a deceiving simplicity about it; it flows so easily that its excellence is apt to pass unnoticed. The concentrated multi-sensual precision (in "the rhythmic, tearing sound of cropped grass," for instance) is masterly, but we find no dominating use of metaphor, no conscious high points, no ostentatious patches of "fine writing". None the less, the prose can express, clearly and economically, all the distinctions and nuances he wishes to make. Without striving for any dazzling effects, it is richly evocative, yet keenly exact. We can visualize each scene as it is brought before us — not in the minutest detail, perhaps, but in all its essentials. "Neither sport nor art," he tells us, "should be unnecessarily cluttered and complicated" (*FS*, 45).

One might say that his prose shares its qualities with the rivers he loves — lucid, briskly and smoothly flowing, containing abundant life.

THE BOY who grew up in the English countryside becomes a Canadian adult, but one who nevertheless remains essentially rural in his attitudes. He is maturely aware of the importance and dignity of the regional and the provincial, and is not the kind of writer to be overwhelmed by an imagined sense of isolation — “whatever measure of isolation I have known,” he comments when pressed, “I do not regret.”²¹ He defends rural values with fervour and determination, insisting in *The Living Land* that “a sound and prosperous farm population is just as important for its human yield of valuable citizens as it is for its more commonly recognized yield of milk or potatoes or grain” (*LL*, 89). Unimpressed by the complacent attitudes of cosmopolitans, he refuses to equate reality with the latest urban fashion, and, though countryfied, he is a master of the urbane: “City people talk of ‘escape’ when they talk of country living. To me a cow is a reality. Escape is homogenized, pasteurized milk, delivered to the back-door in a disposable carton” (*MY*, 263). The tone is light-hearted, gently ironical, but Haig-Brown is wholly serious in his convictions. A few pages earlier, with earnest sincerity, he has noted how he hopes to protect his children “from the abysmal ignorance of the city, from the naïveté of extreme sophistication” (*MY*, 260). We recognize the committed tone of the unabashed countryman.

As a writer whose main subject-matter is the natural world, Haig-Brown does not fit readily into literary categories that are determined by either chronological periods or national boundaries. In many respects, he has more in common with the early nineteenth-century explorers of British Columbia than with the Canadian writers of the last thirty years that count technically as his contemporaries. He is read, in the United States, Great Britain and elsewhere, by a readership that, if modest in size, is loyal and appreciative, but he is read, of course, as an outdoors-writer, not for any particular Canadian quality in his work. Yet, in his undemonstrative way, he is firmly nationalistic, though without any trace of the flamboyant or the self-conscious. He shows little interest in ponderous discussions of “the Canadian identity,” and is unlikely to grant that any insuperable or even unique problems confront Canadian authors. Asked some years ago to comment on the future of Canadian writing, he observed: “A writer should aspire to write for the world, or as large a section of the world as he can reach, and for this reason conscious nationalism as opposed to its incidental expression has little real significance.”²² He is concerned himself with more basic matters. Preoccupied with the conservation of the Canadian environment, he knows only too well that the threats do not necessarily come from the other sides of borders; his opponents,

more often than not, are Canadian developers and logging-companies — and even Canadian governments.

As a significant contributor to Canadian culture, he has found his English origins a stimulation rather than an inhibition. He has always been aware of the fact that “Americans and Canadians share some traditions that British and Canadians do not: traditions of mass immigration and western development, of the opening up of land and the development of a country without hereditary rulers” (*MY*, 16). On the other hand, he is not ashamed to admit that he put aside many possible advantages when he left England; with the figure of Hardy still bright in his remembrance, he acknowledges that “for the writer . . . there is more to know, more to understand, more to use in the thousand square miles of Dorset than in the three hundred and fifty thousand square miles of [his] own province.”²³ But he has never regretted his choice; the gains outbalance the losses. He has resolutely gone his own way, and finds nothing to lament in his position (as the urban cosmopolites would describe it) “outside the main stream.”

Above all, it is the invigorating, pioneering challenge of the Canadian experience that he has found so stimulating. He has succeeded in grafting his English sense of tradition and history on to that purposeful energy that is so characteristically North American. “I love American and Canadian literature,” he writes, “because they speak directly to me with a fierce urgency and a closeness that is not in things European” (*MY*, 178). There can be no better summing-up of his attitudes — and of his inspiration — than the following sentences from *Measure of the Year*:

It is good to be writing at the start of a country's history instead of at the end, to be looking on new unwritten places and new unwritten people, trying to understand, trying to find shape and pattern and meaning where none has been found before. There is no limiting tradition at such a time, no need for precious form or pretty experiment. There is only the subject, too vast to be seen clearly, too amorphous to be pressed into completely recognizable shape, an infinity in which to search and reach and feel for finite things. It is a freedom beyond all conceivable freedoms, bounded only by the imagination's reach and the imagination's skill in finding words for it. If there can be no full success, if neither we who write nor the times we write in are ripe for profound understanding, at least we are in and of the country's flood, her spring, her increase. (*MY*, 25)

To this “increase,” Roderick Haig-Brown — still the explorer and the discoverer — has made a notable, enduring contribution.

NOTES

- ¹ Stanley E. Read, “Roderick L. Haig-Brown,” *B.C. Library Quarterly*, 22 (July 1958), 15.
- ² For his account of this visit, see “Hardy's Dorset,” *Tamarack Review*, 2 (Winter 1957), 46-54.

- ³ *A River Never Sleeps* (New York: Morrow, 1946), p. 83. Hereafter cited in text as *RNS*.
- ⁴ *Fisherman's Spring* (Toronto: Collins, 1951), p. 185. Hereafter cited in text as *FS*.
- ⁵ *Starbuck Valley Winter* [1943] (New York: Morrow, 1954), p. 34.
- ⁶ *Measure of the Year* (Toronto: Collins, 1950), p. 226. Hereafter cited in text as *MY*.
- ⁷ *The Living Land* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961), p. 21. Hereafter cited in text as *LL*.
- ⁸ *Silver: The Life Story of an Atlantic Salmon* [1931] (London: Black, 1947), p. 7.
- ⁹ *Ki-Yu: A Story of Panthers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), p. 1.
- ¹⁰ "The Writer in Isolation," *Canadian Literature*, 1 (Summer 1959), 8.
- ¹¹ *Fisherman's Fall* (Toronto: Collins, 1964), p. 85.
- ¹² *Return to the River: A Story of the Chinook Run* (New York: Morrow, 1941), p. 48.
- ¹³ Alec Lucas, "Nature Writers and the Animal Story," in Carl Klinck, ed., *A Literary History of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 378.
- ¹⁴ *Pool and Rapid* (London: Black, 1932), p. 142.
- ¹⁵ *On the Highest Hill* (Toronto: Collins, 1949), p. 11. Hereafter cited in text as *OHH*. It may be noted that this novel takes on a special interest for students of Canadian fiction, since its theme bears significant relation to the later explorations of man and his artistic conquest of nature in Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952) and Gabrielle Roy's *The Hidden Mountain* (1961). Characteristically, however, Colin's compulsion is to retreat into the mountain, not — despite the passage quoted — to express it in words like Buckler's David Canaan or in paint like Roy's Gédéon.
- ¹⁶ Lucas, p. 388.
- ¹⁷ See *The Case for the Preservation of Strathcona Park* (Victoria, B.C.: *Daily Colonist*, 1955).
- ¹⁸ "Roderick Haig-Brown Talks with Joan Heiberg," *B.C. Library Quarterly*, 35 (April 1972), 5.
- ¹⁹ *A Primer of Fly-Fishing* (Toronto: Collins, 1964), p. 126.
- ²⁰ *Fisherman's Summer* (Toronto: Collins, 1959), p. 49.
- ²¹ "The Wrier in Isolation," 11. It is worth noting that Haig-Brown's subtitle for this article was "A surprised exploration of a given subject."
- ²² "Two Authors Look at the Future of Canadian Writing," *Canadian Author and Bookman*, 46 (Spring 1971), 4.
- ²³ "Hardy's Dorset," 52.