

# Roderick Haig-Brown:

by Jim Casada

Roderick Haig-Brown is probably best known to posterity as a fishing writer. Indeed, it could be argued that no North American author has made more of an impact on the rich literature of angling, both here and abroad, than him. Yet, his many important books and scores of articles represent but one aspect of this man of many parts. His life was a full, varied one. The titles of several of Haig-Brown's most popular books are suggestive of the man's feel for the world in which he moved and his determination to savor all its many joys. In this context, one thinks particularly of *Measure of the Year* and the "Seasons" books, *Fisherman's*

*Spring*, *Fisherman's Summer*, *Fisherman's Fall*, and *Fisherman's Winter*. Haig-Brown was a devoted conservationist, and intellectual of considerable power, a historian with a deep, appreciative sense of the past, an individual with a real sense of commitment to his fellow man, and a humanist.

Having hinted at the man's Renaissance qualities, however, the fact remains that two themes, flyfishing and writing, run as bright, continuous threads through the entire fabric of his life. With that in mind, what follows is a brief glimpse at this talented angler and author, with special attention being devoted to those pursuits which were the

central features of his life.

The biographical basics are simple enough. Haig-Brown was born on February 21, 1908, in Lancing, a small town in Sussex, England. He inherited some of his literary inclinations from his father, who was a prolific contributor of articles and poems to the era's periodicals. Tragically though, Roderick's father was killed on the Western Front late in World War I, and the boy entered adolescence without enjoying the paternal companionship he might have known. Still, he was fortunate in having two men in particular who took him under their wings. These were his maternal uncle, Decimus Pope, who was the tenth of his mother's brothers, and his sporting mentor, Major H.M. Greenhill. Between them these fine men saw to his educational molding, both formal and otherwise, as well as serving as substitute father figures.

The family lived in rural Dorset, and that lovely county in the south of England provided an ideal backdrop for shaping a life closely attuned to nature. The influence of Major Greenhill on this portion of his youth was one which Haig-Brown later recognized in many of his books. A comment in *A River Never Sleeps* is typical: "The strongest lesson he taught, though he never named it, was complete concentration on and devotion to, the matter in hand. . . While we were out I must see everything and know everything." This formative training in the techniques of acute observation made a lasting impression, and in time it would become one of the most endearing characteristics of Haig-Brown's writing. Precious little escaped his discerning eye, and his was the rare ability not merely to observe but to share what he saw as nature's endless delights with legions of devoted readers.

Young Roderick came to love the outdoors at an early age, and he was especially attracted to fishing. By way of sharp contrast, the confines of the classroom he found stifling, with school rules being "a list of provocations and the picturesque method of enforcing them a challenge." Predictably, this attitude soon brought him trouble, and eventually he was expelled from Charterhouse School for general roistering and rowdiness. Had the school authorities possessed suffi-



Photo provided by Van Egan.

# An Angler For All Seasons

cient insight, they might have recognized that a streak of rebelliousness, aimed straight at inflexible officialdom, was one of Haig-Brown's most salient characteristics. Throughout his life he was known as a man who readily (and eloquently) spoke against those in positions of power whenever he thought they were in the wrong. Incidentally, it is a testament to his warm humanity that Haig-Brown was, for all his outspokenness, a man whom everyone who knew him considered a friend.

His abrupt departure from Charterhouse ended his formal education, and it says much for his curiosity and self-discipline that Haig-Brown eventually became exceptionally well-read. Likewise, anyone who treats himself to much of his prose will realize his power of expression and way with words. In looking back, one could even argue that this troubled time in Roderick's late teens was a hidden blessing, for it set in motion the chain of events which brought him to America. Over the next few years, working first in Washington state and then in British Columbia, the young man savored a raw, rough life in the outdoors first as a logger and later at "trapping, beacheombing, . . . rounding up errant bush cattle, commercial fishing in season and occasionally guiding sportsmen." All the while he was accumulating, through personal experience, the sense of oneness with nature which is an integral part of virtually all his books.

Meanwhile, he began to venture out in his first tentative efforts as a writer, and by the time Haig-Brown had reached his mid-20s, his path in life had become quite clear. *Silver: The Life Story of an Atlantic Salmon*, appeared in 1931 (it was written during a two year return to England), *Pool and Rapid* followed the next year, and *Panther* was published in 1934. The same year he married Ann Elmore of Seattle, "a red-haired American girl who fills every ideal I ever had of what a wife and a woman should be." With her stabilizing influence nicely paired with his growing devotion to writing, Haig-Brown happily settled down to the serious business of shaping a career.

He and Ann moved into a rented house on the Campbell River, and before long they bought the house

next door, together with 20 acres of land. At "Above Tide", as they named the site, the pair raised a family while Roderick wrote, fished, and dabbled in farming. One of the early products of this new existence was the beautiful Derrydale Press edition of *The Western Angler*, now a treasured collector's item fetching hundreds of dollars. The book appeared in 1939 even as Haig-Brown began to venture out along other avenues. He was a magistrate at the town of Campbell River for some three decades (from 1941 to 1975, interrupted only by an interlude in World War II when he was in the Canadian Army), and in looking back it must be a source of regret to his readers that the job took so much time. In particular, he published no books (though he continued to write for magazines at a pace most freelancers could only envy), from 1964 to 1974. Yet in his magisterial duties he felt a real sense of commitment to his neighbors, and it was a job to which he gave freely of himself.

Haig-Brown, as his literary reputation grew, also had ample opportunity to promote conservation. Themes on appreciating and preserving habitat sound as a repeated clarion call in his books, and he gave unselfishly of himself in this regard. He was, among other things, a director of the National Second Century Fund, a Senior Advisor for Trout Unlimited, on various Canadian commissions dealing with natural resources and the environment, on the International Pacific Salmon Commission, trustee to the Nature Conservancy of Canada, and the holder of countless similar positions. Of particular note for present purposes is the fact that Haig-Brown was instrumental in the founding of the FFF and served as a Senior Adviser from the Federation's creation until his death in 1975 (see Vol. X, No. 1, p. 25 of *The Flyfisher* for Steve Raymond's memorial tribute). Haig-Brown also found time in his busy schedule to attend several conclaves, and he contributed two important articles to the magazine. One of these, "Objectives and Priorities," appeared in the fourth issue of *The Flyfisher* and issued a challenge to flyfishermen to educate themselves and others about their sport. The second, "Steelheading Angling Comes of

Age," appeared shortly before the author's death (Vol. VIII, No. 3, 1975) and covered Haig-Brown's first flyfishing love.

Articles such as these tend to be passing things, even though Haig-Brown wrote many of them for all the major sporting periodicals of his day. They provided a consistent source of income along with royalties from his books. Thankfully his daughter, Valerie (who was of inestimable help to me in preparing this piece), has rescued many of his better articles from obscurity by bringing them together in three posthumously published books. These are *Woods and River Tales* (1980), *The Master and His Fish* (1981), and *Writings and Reflections* (1982). These join the main body of works produced in "The Master's" lifetime, and anyone who would truly know Roderick Haig-Brown can best understand him through his books.

There were 23 original works published in his lifetime, plus two others he co-authored, and these constitute a lasting literary monument. Most are on fishing, but there are novels for both adult and adolescent audiences along with three histories. While some of these fictional efforts, particularly *Starbuck Valley Winter* (1943) and *Saltwater Summer* (1948), are charming, it is for his fishing books Haig-Brown is most widely recognized. This is only proper, for these books feature the writer at his best. Anthony Robertson, in a fine little book which summarizes his life (*Above Tide: Reflections on Roderick Haig-Brown*, 1984), argues that "he was not a fisherman who happened to write, but a writer who happened to fish." I'm not sure. To me, the two are inseparable, for he approached sport and literature with equal passion. His own comment on the subject is interesting: "Fishing to me is not, as some of my critics have suggested, a way of life. But it is one of the keenest and best-wearing pleasures of life." The question of exactly where fishing fit in his scheme of life is a subject worthy of fuller examination, and here, as with many other facets of his life, it is a matter of regret that we still await a definitive biography of Haig-Brown. Robertson's book is a delightful capsule, while the only other full-length treatment, E. Ben-

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nett Metcalfe's *A Man of Some Importance* (1985) is at once sensationalism, silly, and at times, senseless.

At any rate, anyone who reads Haig-Brown will, I am certain, experience at least two sensations. He will come from the pages of his books refreshed, and he will realize that Haig-Brown somehow managed to convey in words what so many of us sense while astream yet find difficult to express to others. Everyone will have their favorites among his books, and the fact that so many different ones are widely acclaimed is a testament to his literary versatility and consistent achievement of a high level of quality. *Measure of the Year* is my personal favorite, largely I think because it offers a philosophy of life I find most attractive. I obviously like *Return to the River*, which many consider his best book. Many would agree with his conviction that "natural life and changing seasons" offer us "a thread that strengthens and supports and gives depth." The "Seasons" books are all powerful ones — full of the convictions he held dear and the flyfishing which lay near — and several other volumes fill the reader with a warmth and feel for the man and his milieu.

Through all of them he enriches us, and collectively the books give Haig-Brown a secure place in the annals of flyfishing literature. Indeed, one could go further, as Arnold Gingrich did, and say that his writing "is universally negotiable as literature." This is best decided, naturally, by each individual reader. At the very least every flyfisherman owes it to himself to drink from the fountain of Haig-Brown's literary outpourings. Most will find his work so charming, so full of the *Bright Waters*, *Bright Fish* which are the ti-

tle of a posthumously published book, that they will return to his books with each passing season.

Certainly few writers have been more convincing in their ability to capture the essence of what the sport means to us. To him fishing "has become an art, ephemeral, graceful, complicated, full of tradition yet never static. It is as much a part of modern civilization as most of the minor arts and sciences and probably has more direct effect on more lives than any of them." For Roderick Haig-Brown that "direct effect" was at once profound and undeniable. As is man's wont in later years, he mused on our lack of immortality not long before his death, and in so doing he returned to the theme, fishing, he held so close: "I think there is nothing very bad about dying except for the people one has to leave and the things one hasn't had time to do. When the time comes, if I know what it is all

about, I suppose I shall, think, among other things, of the fish I haven't caught and the places I haven't fished." These are thoughts with which any flyfisherman can readily identify, and in an unintended but real sense they express what Roderick Haig-Brown did and continues to do for others. He fills us with pleasant thoughts of fish yet to be caught and streams yet to be fished. In so doing he leaves a rich legacy as a writer who was truly an "angler for all seasons."

*JIM CASADA has authored a number of articles for us recently, and will continue to help us with more historical articles about prominent flyfishermen, who were often authors. Jim edits a publication called Sporting Book News, for history buffs and book collectors. If you'd like a copy write: P.O. Box 770, Camden, SC 29020.*

## Haig-Brown's Books

*The list which follows is in chronological order by date of first publication. It should be noted that the vast majority of the books have been reprinted one or more times, and many are presently available in print. Indeed, Nick Lyons Books is presently reprinting the "Seasons" quartet.*

*Silver: The Life Story of an Atlantic Salmon (1931).*  
*Pool and Rapid (1932).*  
*Panther (1934).*  
*The Western Angler (1939).*  
*Return to the River (1941).*  
*Timber (1942).*  
*Starbuck Valley Winter (1943).*  
*A River Never Sleeps (1946).*  
*Saltwater Summer (1948).*  
*On the Highest Hill (1949).*  
*Measure of the Year (1950).*

*Fisherman's Spring (1951).*  
*Fisherman's Winter (1954).*  
*Mounied Police Patrol (1954).*  
*Captain of the Discovery (1956).*  
*Fisherman's Summer (1959).*  
*The Farthest Shores (1960).*  
*The Living Land (1961).*  
*Fur and Gold (1962).*  
*The Whale People (1962).*  
*A Primer of Fly-Fishing (1964).*  
*Fisherman's Fall (1964).*  
*The Salmon (1974).*

## Published Posthumously

*Bright Waters, Bright Fish (1980).*  
*Alison's Fishing Birds (1980).*  
*Woods and River Tales (1980).*  
*The Master and His Fish (1981).*  
*Writings and Reflections (1982).*

*In addition to these books, two other sources are of particular note for any serious student of Roderick Haig-Brown. His voluminous papers, which have been catalogued, are held in the Special Collections Division of the University of British Columbia (1956 Main Mall, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T 1Y3). The Haig-Brown property, except for the Haig-Brown residence, where Ann Haig-Brown still lives, now cared for by*

*the Haig-Brown Kingfisher Creek Society (P.O. Box 400, Campbell River, B.C. Canada V9W 5B6). The Society has as its goal "to demonstrate the philosophy of Roderick Haig-Brown by maintaining and enhancing the fish and wildlife resources, natural setting, and social values of the Haig-Brown property and the Kingfisher Creek watershed."*

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