

Logger, author, trapper and judge, Roderick Haig-Brown was an early conservationist and is still one of Canada's most eloquent voices

Crusader In Hip Boots

BY PAUL GRESCOE

HIS face is patriotic: hair receding up a lofty forehead, deep-set hazel eyes under fierce brows, hawk nose, jutting jaw. But his clothes run to the plebian: cowboy boots, a checkered shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a belt with a cowboy's buckle. As a man Roderick Haig-Brown is a paradox — and always has been.

An internationally acclaimed angler, he releases all the fish he catches. A lifelong hunter of birds and game, he now shoots only the thieving crows that strip his walnut tree. For 33 years, with no formal legal training, he was a magistrate and then a judge. And for 52 years, with little more than a high school education, he has been a writer, one of Canada's most eloquent and enlightened voices, an early environmentalist, a humanist and a celebrator of the joyous sport of angling — even though he doesn't like the taste of fish.

Haig-Brown is 68 now, retired as a judge but active as a writer and still a contradictory man for all seasons. An honorary patron of the Canadian Wildlife Federation, he is undoubtedly British Columbia's most colorful conservationist. English-bred but a Canadian all his adult life, he has been a logger, trapper, bounty hunter, commercial fisherman and gentleman farmer. Out of this rich background he has written 23 books that blend human and natural history, humor and philosophy, angling tips and conservation lore.

The New York Times has compared Haig-Brown to Thoreau. *The London Observer* has likened his work to the

As this magazine went to press, late word came from British Columbia that Roderick Haig-Brown had died.

clear-eyed realism of the Russian novelist Turgenev. His prose can be as taut as a fishing line; describing a school of tye (oversized chinook salmon), he writes: "They are so big and ealm and dignified, so clearly visible, so solidly set in their still-distant spawning purpose, so utterly contemptuous of a fly or spoon drawn across them or among them."

His books have been translated into several languages, and his first novel, *Silver, the Life of an Atlantic Trout*, has never been out of print since it was originally published in 1931. *Salt Water Summer* won him the Canadian Governor-General's award for juvenile literature in 1949. The classic *Fisherman's Winter* introduced South American angling to the world.

Despite his renown as a naturalist, Haig-Brown considers himself a professional writer first, a student of science second. He says he writes off the top of his head; for a book he plans on birds he won't be doing any new research. Yet the work that established his reputation, *The Western Angler*, resulted from a dozen years' study during which he became so expert an ichthyologist that he was invited to manage a game fishery.

In public, Haig-Brown is gracious even to his enemies, the governments and logging and power companies he tries to devastate with reason and research. He's so gracious that over the years both the Liberal and Conservative parties in his adopted province of British Columbia have asked him to run for office, thinking that he shared their political beliefs. But during the last election, he publicly announced his support of the left-wing New Democratic party.

His popular image is of such a serene man, so forgiving and hopeful that it's a surprise to learn he is not

always an unwavering optimist. For decades, he seemed confident in his crusade for wildlife conservation, especially in the fight to save the salmon of the Fraser River.

But now he suffers dark moments of pessimism. The International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Commission, of which he's a member, may soon be ruined by the wrangling of the Canadian and American governments over allowable catches, he says, and its essential work of rehabilitating salmon streams may be crippled.

Nor is he sanguine about an alternate system of salmon propagation — government hatcheries. These, he feels, are producing too many weak fish that can be destroyed by disease. Instead, he favors artificial spawning channels, gravel-bottomed canals used by natural populations just as they would use free-flowing streams.

This position makes him something of a patron saint to purist fishermen-conservationists such as those in California Trout, Inc., whose mostly wealthy members describe themselves as his disciples. But his stand also puts him at odds with such respected biologists as Peter Larkin of the University of British Columbia. "I view hatcheries as necessary in some cases," Larkin says. "You don't always have the option of putting in a spawning channel."

Larkin considers Haig-Brown's stand on channels idealistic but finds it hard to fault his adversary's well-developed arguments. Indeed, few of Haig-Brown's critics can help esteeming the man himself. Finding people so awed by Haig-Brown, the Canadian poet Al Purdy announced when he met him: "You ought to have a

A lifelong angler, Haig-Brown doesn't like the taste of fish. As a man, he is a paradox — ever the gentleman but always a fighter.

halo, an angel's halo quivering over your head."

Haig-Brown displays his humanism when he writes, as he did soon after the Second World War, about the inexcusable expropriation of property belonging to Japanese-Canadians evacuated from the West Coast. His environmental credo embraces not only campaigns against commercial ravaging of parks and rivers but also his personal rationale for fishing: "I go fishing to please myself, not to catch any breakfast or prove anything or enter into any conflict."

It wasn't always that way. As a boy he had to prove himself to a father who had died bravely in the First World War when Roderick was only 10. His father had been a famous soccer player in England, a respected schoolteacher and a graceful writer on the outdoors — in all, a difficult act to follow.

Nevertheless, young Roderick's growing-up years in England were lively. He played cricket and soccer, boxed competitively and at age 16 embroiled himself in his first conservation battle. He wrote a letter to the *Dorset County Chronicle* complaining about coal tar on the roads killing vegetation and suggesting a new type of tar that didn't excrete carbolic acid.

Formal schooling ended abruptly, however. After a drinking party and a visit to a London nightclub, he was expelled and had to finish his schooling with a private tutor. Then, instead of going on to attend a university, he joined the British Territorial Army, hoping to serve in India. Army pay was dismal so he looked for a civil service job instead. But at 18, he was three years too young, so — taking a standing job offer from an American family friend — he went to Washington state.

He was a surveyor for a logging company and a scaler, sizing fallen trees. In those forests, one frosted winter day, he experienced what he can only describe now as his rebirth — his transformation from a citizen of the Old World to a citizen of the New. "This was well up in the mountains, 3,000 feet. It was sunny, bright. There was a whole side of newly felled trees that I had to go and scale. The smell of the things was something out of this world. And I almost feel that that was the day I was born."

In the Pacific Northwest, the exu-

berant English kid boxed in saloons for \$25 a fight, wooed the ladies and, inevitably, fished. It may comfort other fishermen to know that on the first two occasions he went angling in North America, Haig-Brown caught nothing, and the first time he went after steelheads, he caught dolly varden instead — without knowing it — and then a bear ate them all anyway.

Faced with bureaucratic problems regarding his status as a full-fledged immigrant in the U.S., he decided to live briefly in Canada, where he worked for a logging company on Vancouver Island. Eventually, he went into business for himself, trapping marten and mink, bounty hunting, selling tyees he caught with rod and line, and contract-logging during a disastrous summer that netted him a broken elbow and very little cash. Occasionally he wrote articles and short stories for sporting magazines in England.

In 1929 Haig-Brown reluctantly returned to London, fulfilling a promise to his mother to try again for the civil service. But by then the service no longer wanted men with practical experience in place of a university degree. It was the perfect excuse for Haig-Brown to try being a professional writer. There, in London, he wrote his first book, *Silver*, which was greeted by *The Manchester Guardian* with a prophetic review: "Likely to be of interest for years to come, it should find a wider public than that of a fisherman."

BUT Canada, had got under his skin (quite literally too, because the long-buried spines of a devil's club plant from British Columbia came out of his arms when he was in London) and in the Depression year of 1931, he returned there — for good. He renewed his courtship with Ann Elmore, a handsome, well-read girl he had met in a Seattle bookstore in 1929. He also did another round of logging and commercial fishing and with two brothers built a lodge on the Nimpkish River as the base for a guide business that eventually failed.

Finished with his second book, *Pool and Rapid*, a conservation novel about damming a British Columbia river, he began work on a third. It was *Panther*, and he researched it by stalking cougars with a government predator hunter named Cecil (Coug) Smith. Through the winter of



Haig-Brown: a man for all seasons

Still going strong, British Columbia's most colorful conservationist, now 68, is retired as a judge but active as a writer. His books blend human and natural history, humor and philosophy, angling tips and conservation lore, personal anecdotes and rigorous research. Many were written at his farmhouse on the coast of Vancouver Island where he lives with his wife Ann, whom he met in 1929. "He gave me the blind staggers then," she says, "and he still does."

1932-33, plowing through snowdrifts with swollen knees, he absorbed the details that would vivify the cougar heroes of his book: "Running they seemed strangely awkward and clumsy — but the clumsiness came from over-developed forelegs and forepaws, from hind legs disproportionately long with the power of springing, from the balancing swing of tails heavy enough to guide and turn the whole body in midair."

Writing was now his life's work. He married Ann, and in 1934 they bought a farmhouse and 19 acres on the Campbell River and began filling it with fishing rods, books, trees, cows and sheep and chickens, and three daughters and a son.

Haig-Brown spent the first five years of the marriage continuing his research on *The Western Angler*, but early in the Second World War, the province asked him to become a local magistrate because he seemed to have a decent enough education and certainly, as a writer, enough time on his hands. He served in court briefly, until finally convincing the Canadian Army that, varicose veins or not, he could at least be a personnel officer.

After the war, Haig-Brown settled into serious writing again, interrupted by his magisterial duties and a judgeship that left him no time to write. He also devoted himself to time-consuming conservation crusades.

A major environmental encounter erupted in the early 1950s when the British Columbia Power Commission proposed a high dam in Stratchcona Park, 825 square miles of mountains and lakes in the center of Vancouver Island. The dam would flood Buttle Lake, an untouched sample of island country, the last in public hands, Haig-Brown argued. He prepared a personal argument and a fish and game associations' brief to present at hearings, wrote a series of articles for a Victoria newspaper, appeared regularly on radio to protest, convinced the Campbell River Chamber of Commerce to join the fight and at one point engaged the premier of the province in newspaper debate. The Commission eventually decided to build a lower dam and flood a smaller area, but Haig-Brown considered this a limited victory that left a second-rate recreational resource.

His other causes since then include a condemnation of DDT spraying that appeared in his *Fisherman's Summer* three years before Rachel

Carson's *Silent Spring*, continual sparring with logging companies that contaminate streams with erosion from clear-cutting and burning, and a major offensive against construction of the Moran Dam on the Fraser River. That river is potentially the world's greatest salmon watershed, he says.

In the 1950s and again in the '70s the British Columbia government wanted to build a dam on the river at the Moran Canyon in the interior of the province. Each time, Haig-Brown, along with the International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Commission and the Canadian fisheries department, argued that the dam would virtually annihilate the river's salmon runs. So far the salmon forces have won.

HAIG-BROWN isn't Has sure of winning the fight for the existence of the salmon commission itself. Created by the Canadian and American governments in 1937, it regulates the sockeye and pink salmon runs so fishermen of both countries share equally. He believes the continuing debate about the division of catch will kill the commission, to be replaced by bodies that will no longer finance the rehabilitation of salmon streams — which he considers the only way to produce enough strong, disease-free fish for the future. "The federal fisheries department will then be doing the enhancement and they aren't half as efficient as we are and they never will be," he says.

Roderick Haig-Brown has described the Pacific salmon runs as perhaps the world's most spectacular natural resource, a vital link in a remarkable cycle of life that begins with the algae in the sea. The algae feed shrimp which feed herring which feed salmon which feed man. And, as he wrote in *The River Never Sleeps*, "There will be salmon and more salmon to complete this cycle so long as they are allowed to enter the rivers to their spawning in sufficient numbers, so long as the way to the spawning beds is kept clear and easy and open and so long as the rivers are kept clean and fresh and pure. It is as simple as that." ■

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