

DAVART COMPANY, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

A young Valerie watches as her father casts on the Campbell River.

Roderick Haig-Brown

Valerie Haig-Brown

In the 15 years since my father died in 1976 I have been told many times that I should write his biography. Sometimes the implication is that I, as his daughter, should have such a thorough knowledge of him that mine would be the definitive biography, the ultimate truth. Other, probably wiser, people suggest that I should write "a" biography, knowing that I can provide only one point of view.

So far, there have been any number of articles about Roderick Haig-Brown and two book-length biographies. The articles rarely attempt to cover more than one or two aspects of his life—and he was a man of more aspects than many people realize. Some articles have been quite successful in capturing a genuine picture of him, usually those written by people who took the trouble to get to know him at least a little—not always an easy task, for he was both

a busy man and rather reticent, especially with people who were not particularly sensitive by nature or arrived with preconceived ideas about their subject. Successful articles have also been written by those who did not meet him, but have taken the time to understand what he has to say.

Of the two books about him, one (*Above Tide* by Anthony Robertson), is based on the written works only and involves a serious examination of the man as revealed in his books. Robertson was not particularly satisfied with the result, but readers have found the book interesting enough. The second book (of which enough was said in these pages in April, 1989) attempted to cover his whole life and proved to be a task well beyond its writer's capabilities. The basic facts are often wrong or so buried in the jumble as to be quite confusing, and the writer's prejudices lead to

what amounts to a personal attack on several fronts. Some readers find this book interesting, but most are outraged, especially those who knew my father.

There is a particular difficulty in producing a biography of a writer such as my father who wrote a good deal of autobiographical material in that much of the story is already on record. All my father's essays are highly personal, with only the rarest examples of telescoping facts such as combining two fishing trips to the same place in one. His notes, early diaries, and my own experience give ample proof of that.

A River Never Sleeps and *Measure of the Year* are the two autobiographical books that I return to again and again. The boys' novels, *Starbuck Valley Winter* and *Saltwater Summer* as well as *Panther*, were directly based on personal experience. And the posthumous collection, *Writings and Reflections*, is a deliberate attempt on my part to search out essays and speeches covering each aspect of my father's life except fly fishing. I was limited to some extent by the fact that there was not always a great deal to choose from, particularly with regard to the law. (He had only recently retired from the bench when he died and was planning to write a book on his time as a local judge after he wrote one on birds, which interested him as much as did fish.) But I was pleased to find as much as I did on his thinking on a number of subjects, because he was a careful and reasoned thinker—sometimes too much so for his children, who would have liked him at times to be more passionate in his public statements. Even in our house there was a generation gap.

The two questions I am most often asked by acquaintances, interviewers, or readers who never met him are, "What was he really like?" and, "What was it like to be the child of a famous person (or a writer, or Roderick Haig-Brown)?" Sometimes I feel I answer in a way that satisfies the questioner and sometimes I feel that I have not. There are those who want to know something of the depths of the inner man, to be given some incredible insight that would shed light on the whole riddle of what made him such a writer—or judge, or conservationist. No one answer solves that question for everyone, but the first one I give is, that as a writer who drew on his own experience, the books contain many of the answers.

fishermen, conservationists, jurists and their related organizations, as well as high school graduating classes. He always did his best to fit these last in if at all possible. And there were two books commissioned by the Canadian government. *The Salmon* was part of Canada's submission to the Law of the Sea Conference. *Bright Waters, Bright Fish* is a study of fisheries management in Canada and involved travelling all across the country. Different, but so important to him, that he was willing to take them on. Still, it was clear from the notes he was assembling at the time of his death that he had every intention of getting back to what he saw as the most important purpose of his life.

My father came to North America in late 1926 when he was 18. By the time of his nineteenth birthday on February 21, 1927 he was working in a logging camp near Lake Cavanaugh in Washington State. The North American connection was achieved because his uncle had married the daughter of the McEwans of Seattle who owned a logging company. The idea was that he would put in some time until he was old enough to apply for a position in the British Colonial Civil Service. He had been at Charterhouse School in England where his paternal grandfather, who died before he was born, had been headmaster. He was "sent down" from Charterhouse after sneaking off to spend a night partying in London. A large and overwhelming family (both maternal and paternal) had always had much to say about "the boy's" upbringing after his father, Alan Roderick, was killed in the First World War. But his mother had always been very supportive of her son, and she was able to make the arrangements that she hoped would give him some room to grow.

My father's U.S. visa was good for only six months, so by July he had a job in a camp on the Nimpkish River on Vancouver Island. His diary (some excerpts from which have recently been published in a small limited edition), which he began in 1925 and kept most faithfully until 1934, tells of the ups and downs of both earning a living and growing into some measure of wisdom. It also details his writing and reading during that time, as well as occasional longing for "woman," along with the joys of discovering how to apply his considerable knowledge of English fly fishing to Pacific Coast lakes and streams. Most of the articles he sold during

A daughter answers the question, "What was he really like?"

So we write of Roderick Haig-Brown what we know, given limitations of time and space, and hope that each attempt provides some enlightenment for those who happen to come across it.

First and most important, in spite of all the other words that appear on dust jackets of books in press releases, or in articles, my father was a writer. He made a living as a writer for most of his life. The long list from his early days—logger, surveyor, trapper, guide, bounty hunter, beachcomber—is all perfectly correct. It describes the jobs he had during the years 1927 to 1929 and 1932 to 1934—his first in North America. But before and during all those years he was writing, making notes, collecting his share of rejections and figuring out what he could write that would sell. Later in life there are such illustrious titles as Chancellor of the University of Victoria and Judge of the Provincial Court of British Columbia and member of the International Pacific Salmon Commission. These jobs took a lot of time in the last decade of his life, but he was still writing, although perhaps not in the same way he had been during most of his life. There were many speeches to fly

his first stay in Canada were about fishing and went to English Magazines such as the *Fishing Gazette*, which had also published articles of his father's. When I read these diaries I am constantly impressed with the perseverance and determination that kept him writing, even in a logging camp bunkhouse after a long day's work.

In late 1929 he kept his promise to his mother and returned to England. His mother and two sisters lived in the large and elegant house of his maternal grandfather, but he was not welcome there for long because he didn't seem inclined to get a job—he just wanted to write. A Haig-Brown uncle who was administering his educational fund was eventually prevailed upon to dole this fund out to subsidize a writing career. My father kept at it while falling in and out of love and enjoying the life in London. In 1931 his first book, *Silver, The Life Story of an Atlantic Salmon*, was published. The book stayed in print in England for 50 years and the first U.S. edition was published recently. By the time he decided in late 1932, that the place for him was the west coast of North America, the second book was well under way.

Before he returned to England at the end of 1929, my father had met Ann Elmore in Seattle. She worked in Harry Hartman's bookstore, and after a friend introduced them they quickly discovered that they had much in common, especially a love of books. Now that he was back on the coast my father alternated visits to Seattle with various jobs, including a winter spent cougar hunting on Vancouver Island as research for his third book, *Panther*. On January 20, 1934 he and Ann were married. They went to live in a rented house at Campbell River, the finding of which my father describes in *A River Never Sleeps*. Two years later I was born, and they bought the house just up the river.

From stories, photographs, multiple memories and even a diary kept for me by a fond father in my first months, I get the impression that my childhood was about as idyllic as childhoods are imagined to be. Doting parents, who bent the rules about not picking the baby up between feedings (fortunately), and a sister, Mary, born in 1938 made up the family in those first few years. Much of the life of our family, with the addition of Alan in 1941, and Celia in 1947, is described in *Measure of the Year* (reprinted recently).

When people ask me about life with my father I am no longer surprised if they want me to describe a serious man who led a very formal life. I used to be, but I slowly came to the realization that these people saw him only in later years when he was giving a speech to a large gathering about conservation, or thought of him primarily as a judge, or read of him in newspapers angrily denouncing the policies of B.C.'s already notorious Social Credit governments. Or they thought of him as "English" and therefore stuffy, perhaps. I never think fast enough to ask these people why they come to these conclusions; I am always too busy trying to tell them how much fun we had.

Because he was a writer he was always home in the years when I was growing up. Court took only a day or two a week and he wasn't yet jetting about answering the demands made on a man when he becomes "famous." When we came home from school, he was there. When we needed someone to watch us swim in the river, he was there. He built a small wing dam to slow the current and make a pool for us. When we were older, he tied a rubber dinghy to a tree on a long rope and we spent hours pushing it out into the rapids and riding down to the end of the rope. He not only encouraged summer water fights with the hoses, he often gave the losing side a hand. He bought better and better croquet sets as we got better and better at the game. And I remember him there with en-

couraging words as the white-robed nuns stitched up the cut in my foot that seemed to run from toe to heel. I can still see him in the emergency room of the little hospital.

And he was always there, too, at the track meets. I became quite a runner in high school, and he urged me on with considerable pleasure and pride (in spite of my mother's protestations that track wasn't exactly ladylike). He cut a running track in the long grass of one of the hay fields and dug a broad jump pit. And he took time to watch me train.



Roderick Haig-Brown

The expectations on us were high, but probably no higher than those he imposed on himself. There were scoldings, too. I remember tears over the unfairness of having to keep at my Latin correspondence course when no one else at school had to take it. But usually you could catch the slight gleam in his eye when there was trouble and get him to laugh about it all before too long.

He was away for a few years during the Second World War, and we missed him a lot. I was old enough to know how hard it was for my mother to keep the place going during that time, but I know my father admired her determination because he has written about it in *Measure of the Year*. When he came home I had turned ten and he put up a tent for us outside their bedroom window to start a long tradition of sleeping outside all summer. And on winter nights he would read bedtime stories, mainly for my brother, but no less a pleasure to his sisters. Robert Louis Stevenson, Tennyson's *L'Morte d'Arthur*, Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. And then there was the canoe—a 16-foot Peterborough freight canoe that he poled expertly in the rapids of the Campbell so we could see and learn and swim—we learned a lot about the river

from the point of view of the mergansers and the fish, whether by accident or design, I don't know. It certainly gave my father another excuse to be near a river.

By now some are asking "what about the fishing?" The business of going fishing played a less important part in our lives than one might imagine. Over time I think it also became less important to my father. Pressures of other work and a growing concern for preserving the habitat, especially for the salmon which I think were always his greatest love, took his time. He had long since mastered the skills of a good fly fisherman, in spades, according to those far more expert than I who knew him or even just saw him cast a line. Many of the visitors, and there were many, came to talk fly fishing and there was much casting on the lawn (I got rather good at that), but we didn't go fishing with him all that often. Typical excursions are described in, as always, *Measure of the Years*, and *Fisherman's Spring*; obviously we didn't put the business of fishing at the top of the list on these days. But I certainly learned the pleasure of being on the river and still use fishing as an excuse for that.

By the time I went to university in 1953, my father was well established as a writer. The books sold well and magazines came to him with requests for articles. The University of British Columbia had already granted him an honorary LL.D., which pleased him. No less pleased were some of his formerly disapproving English aunts who had themselves had careers in education of some note. Their letters were addressed to Dr. Roderick Haig-Brown from then on. Perhaps "the boy" had amounted to something after all! In the early fifties my father had also become involved in one of the first major conservation battles in British Columbia—the sort with which we are all so familiar. He himself has described the effort required to persuade the authorities to let some water flow down the Campbell when the first dam on that system was filling. The original plan was to shut the flow off entirely during the spawning season of the tyee salmon. The major battle of those years was to force the government of British Columbia, first, to hold public hearings and, second, to pay attention to the evidence given at those hearings into the damming of Buttle Lake, which meant destroying the core of Strathcona Provincial Park.

In spite of the evidence presented, the dam was built, though not in the location originally proposed. Now, of course, the battle goes on as logging and mining interests continue to attack the park with the collusion of the B.C. government. Not long ago 50 people spent the night in jail for protesting park destruction and some of them

see themselves as continuing a battle that was started 40 years ago. A friend told me once that when he was feeling discouraged my father said to him, "You won't win, but you gotta fight 'em." (Perhaps we are winning just a little right now.)

During the time I was at university and for the first few years when I was married and lived in Vancouver, there were many family visits back and forth and, as anyone who ever wrote him will know, my father answered all his letters. I wrote him almost weekly whenever I didn't see him and consequently have a treasure trove of letters telling of the daily goings on at Campbell River—the garden, the river, the animals and, of course, family comings and goings as well as his own. Rarely is there one without a touch of humor and a sense of the place.

Court proceedings began to take more of his time until by the seventies he was a half day a week short of being a full-time judge and was paid a reasonable salary for work that originally brought only a token amount. My father's family had a strong tradition of public service and saw his work on the bench as very much in that tradition. Canadian judges are appointed by the government, and when asked why he was chosen he often said, "Well, I had a little education and no business interests in the town, so I must have looked a good bet."

He was angered and disappointed when it was decided that all B.C. judges who were not lawyers must retire. He felt most strongly that lawyers did not make the best judges, since they were too far removed from the concerns of the people before them and too involved with the intricacies of the law. The lawyers were there in court to explain the law if need be and any intelligent and thoughtful man could make the decisions. In the course of his work on the B.C. coast as a commercial fisherman my brother Alan often ran into men who had been in my father's court room. When they discovered who he was they often told him, "The fines that he gave weren't too bad, but those damn lectures were a bit hard to take with a hangover." Very rarely was a conviction overturned on appeal.


Much of the last two decades of my father's life are a matter of public record. In addition to writing, his work on the bench, and the jobs as chancellor and on the Salmon Commission, he served as a director or advisor to Trout Unlimited, the Federation of Fly Fishers, the Nature Conservancy of Canada and federal government fisheries committees, to name a few. He also served three times on the commission to re-draw the federal electoral boundaries in B.C., a procedure required by law each time there is a new census. Awards for

both writing and conservation became almost routine. His papers that document all of this activity as well as all his original manuscripts, typescripts, incoming and outgoing correspondence, reports, etc. are gathered in Special Collections of the University of B.C. Library and are available to researchers.

During the last decade of my father's life I lived in Toronto and didn't see him as often as I would have liked. But we kept up the letters. I sometimes wonder if letter writing isn't partly a writer's way of putting off getting started on the business at hand. You are at least sitting at the desk, pen in hand, writing. (My father always wrote both books and letters with a pen, and my mother typed business letters and manuscripts until she became the high school librarian in the sixties. After that he had to hire a part time secretary.)

The last time I saw my father was at a conference of the fisheries managers concerned with the sport fishery he was writing about in *Bright Waters*, *Bright Fish*. I thought he seemed quite tired, but the book was nearly done and he was looking forward to more time for his own concerns. Less than two months later the manuscript of the book was in the mail, and he died a week later.

After 15 years, during much of which I have kept the literary business going with the help of a terrific agent and some wonderful publishers, I have grown to know my father in a way I might never have done otherwise. Because I made my living as an editor for some years, I have developed an eye for a well-turned phrase and every time I read one of the books again I am impressed, I hear his voice reading the words sometimes, in slow, measured cadence, particularly when I have the privilege of being asked to read to an audience. I have spent many happy hours matching, for my own interest, published words with handwritten notes or diary entries that contain the origins of those beautiful sentences. Even the notes themselves are often measured and rhythmic.

There is no real way of describing a man of as many parts as my father, a man who told stories about himself with considerable delight at times, but rarely revealed his struggles and sorrows. His frustrations in the conservation battles are known to those of us who have also come to participate, sometimes because he led the way. His early frustrations over his writing, common to any beginner, are revealed here and there in the diaries. But, whatever the cause, he didn't stay angry or frustrated long. He simply did the best he could and moved on. And his best was very good, both in my judgement and in that of the world he lived and worked in. 



Tomorrow's heirloom. An Abel Reel.



For a free 1991 Abel Quality Products brochure, please call or write:

Abel 165 Aviator Street Camarillo, CA 93010
Phone 805/484-8789 Fax 805/482-0701