

Paying tribute to a passionate environmentalist, writer and friend



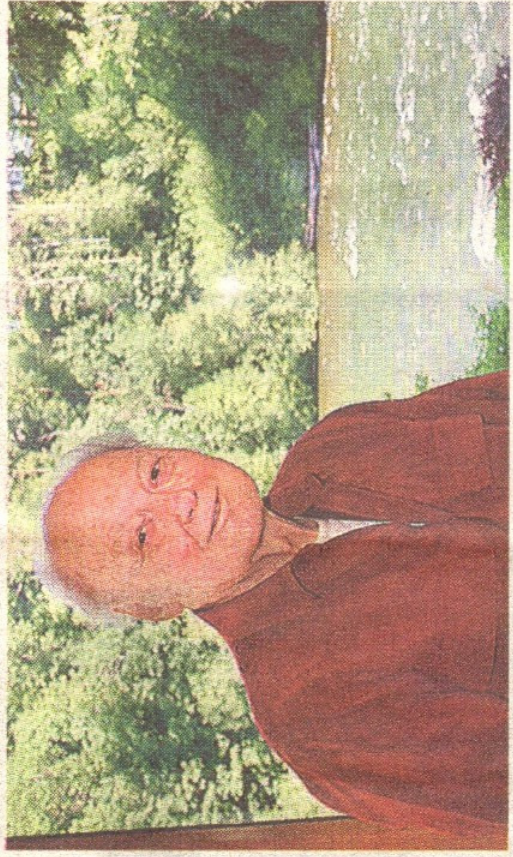
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From his writing desk in the cottage he calls home, Van Gorman Egan can look down on the glinting waters of the Campbell River, which flows along his property, before sweeping downstream to pass the old family home of the late Roderick Haig-Brown.

Mr. Haig-Brown, one of British Columbia's greatest authors and a passionate conservationist long before environmentalism became popular, was a close friend and fishing partner of Mr. Egan's for many years.

They tramped the river bank together, waded its deep runs, invented and tested flies, kept and exchanged secret fishing maps and shared conversations in the study where Mr. Haig-Brown wrote some of the books for which he is still revered.



Van Gorman Egan sits by his writing-desk window, where he penned a tribute to his old friend Roderick Haig-Brown. NEIL CAMERON

When the salmon start to run Mr. Egan can see them swirling in the river in front of his house, a sight that still stirs his angling blood after all these years, and which reminds him of the great days he spent fly-fishing on the Campbell with Mr. Haig-Brown, who died suddenly, and far too young at the age of 68, in 1976.

Friends have long known that with a little libation and a bit of prodding, Mr. Egan could be persuaded to lean back in his chair and talk about his friendship with Mr. Haig-Brown. One of those friends,

"I think of you often since you left us," Mr. Egan writes in the prologue. "Today the river is down after a long spell of high water. It might be a good day to go to the Islands; the low January sun will keep the ice out of our guides. There probably wouldn't be any fish though, but the water is clear and it sparkles and dances on its way. That's always nice."

After his great friend died, Mr. Egan spent years working to restore Kingfisher Creek, a small, burbling stream that cuts across the Haig-Brown homestead before pouring into the Campbell River.

Kingfisher Creek had once had a good run of salmon, but over time it faded away because of the impacts of logging in the headwaters and urban growth — just the kinds of abuses Mr. Haig-Brown warned about in his books.

Bringing salmon back to Kingfisher Creek was a fine gesture — but *Shadows of the Western Angler* may be an even better one, because it reminds us of the importance of Mr. Haig-Brown's life and the visionary nature of his writing. Mr. Haig-Brown lived at a time when salmon runs were

relatively plentiful, but he warned that if society continued to abuse the environment, eventually we might lose the fish.

A little over three decades after he died, British Columbia finds itself in the dark place he warned about — with salmon stocks at historic lows in many rivers.

Mr. Egan's book tells the story of how Mr. Haig-Brown arrived on northern Vancouver Island as a 19-year-old immigrant, in 1927, and how he rose from logging camp work to become one of the finest angling writers, and most important conservationists, of the 20th century.

He writes of first meeting Mr. Haig-Brown on the river, of swapping flies and fishing stories — and he touchingly includes, tucked into a pocket inside the back cover — two hand-drawn maps his friend gave him, with X's on the river to mark the spots where the trout lie.

He also chronicles many of the environmental battles Mr. Haig-Brown fought, some of which he lost, including heartbreaking campaigns against a dam on the Campbell River

and a mine on the lake above it, both of which ended up killing salmon.

This is a kind and gentle book, but Mr. Egan knew when he wrote it that Mr. Haig-Brown would not have forgiven him if he hadn't used the opportunity to drive home an environmental message.

He does that, closing with an epilogue that rips into the government for failing to deal with the threat salmon farms pose to wild stocks on B.C.'s coast.

"Dear Rod, I miss you. No, we miss you. Your river is being threatened again," he writes. "And all your (and our) salmon on too. You would grieve over what is happening."

Mr. Haig-Brown would have grieved the plight of salmon in B.C. today. But if he were able to, he would have written about it too, to stir the public to action and sting the conscience of government officials.

In his absence Mr. Egan has taken up the challenge. That after all is what friends are for.

Only 1,000 copies of *Shadows of the Western Angler* were published. Books can be ordered by sending an e-mail to: editor@courierislander.com