A Conversation With Roderick Haig-Brown

GLENYS STOW

STOW: In *Fisherman's Spring* you say that you are a writer first and a fisherman second; but your interest in the natural world began when you were very young, didn't it?

HAIG-BROWN: Yes, I became interested in the natural world when I was very young, but also in writing about it at the same time and for the same reason. My father was a very keen fisherman, hunter and naturalist and writer. His main profession was school-teaching but he earned about as much money again by writing articles, poems, and other materials, and he wrote practically every evening when he was home. He went overseas in World War I, when I was six-years-old and was killed in 1918 when I was only 10, but he left me a legacy in the form of a book called *My Game Book*, mainly about wildlife and hunting and fishing. His other legacy was his considerable distinction as a writer. Even in the brief years I knew him, he taught me an interest in fish, as well as fishing, and in wildlife, more than in hunting. He let me help him plant rainbow trout in a small pond near Lancing College; and he often took me with him when he went out with a gun, to carry game or stir it out of thickets. He was also a very skillful photographer and illustrated most of his own articles. In this way the *idea* of writing, of communication, came quite naturally to me.

STOW: Your deep love of the Dorset chalk streams and farmland of your childhood is clear in several of your books. Did your habit of meticulous observation begin at the same early period?

HAIG-BROWN: Dorset is my mother's county and we were taken there to visit my grandfather every summer holidays, from the earliest time I can remember. There was opportunity there, with my father and my uncles, to see more of wildlife and streams; I am not quite sure how much affection I developed for Dorset at that time, but I know we children enjoyed those visits.

After World War I, when my mother and the rest of us were living in Oxford, my grandmother died and it became necessary for my mother to go down and look after my grandfather. From then on I was living in Dorset whenever I was not away at school. Several of my uncles, and Major H.M. Greenhill, a friend of the family of whom I have written in *A River Never Sleeps*, undertook my outdoor education. All of these men were keenly interested in understanding and management of wildlife and countryside, not simply in hunting and fishing. One learned to understand something of forestry and farming and crops and livestock, and learned about the management of game on a large acreage by the rearing and planting of pheasants and general management of the lands and woods. Stream management was perhaps a little less intensive and less well understood but one did know that there was a duty to get in and do something about fixing up the stream from time to time, when one could; perhaps cutting weed, perhaps shoring up banks; whatever came

readily to hand and, from doing it, one learned the reason for it. One sharpens powers of observation all the time and also broadens those powers by shifting interests to include new species and new terrain. Both hunting and fishing are almost ideal sharpeners of intensive observation though they tend to narrow the interest so that one misses the periphery. It is good to develop beyond them and dedicate the powers and techniques of observation so learned to other subjects and different angles of view.

STOW: In *A River Never Sleeps*, you tell of the friendship between your grandfather and Thomas Hardy, and mention that you sometimes visited the novelist. Can you tell us your reactions as a young boy to a man of his literary stature?

HIAG-BROWN: My meetings with Thomas Hardy were very brief and really, I had little ability to judge very much about Mr. Hardy except from his reputation, which was so clear that you knew he was a very great man in a way quite different from anything that you ran across in your day-to-day life. The respect for him in my grandfather and in all the people in Dorset who spoke of him was so obvious and it was a very noticeable thing because it was also obvious to me that this was not the type of respect they were used to giving, nor were they used to giving respect for this type of achievement. I wondered that this greatness could be in this rather small, quiet, lively man who was so well protected by his wife and lived, so to speak, just down the road. At the times I met Thomas Hardy I had not read a great deal of his work -- *Tess of the d'Urbervilles,* perhaps *Jude the Obscure,* and a number of the poems. I was in no way capable of assessing his quality as a writer; I just knew that he was a great writer and that I was privileged to meet him.

STOW: Do you think that your decision to become a writer, your style, or your attitude to man and nature were influenced in any way by your visits to Hardy?

HAIG-BROWN: I doubt very much that I could claim I was influenced in any significant way by these meetings with Hardy. I had already, before I ever met him, decided that I would write. I didn't believe that I could in any way emulate his greatness, nor did I try to learn or understand what his way of doing things might be. I had a sense of his feeling for the unity of man with the land about him and to an extent at least, I felt the same thing myself. But I did not expect to write in the same way, nor of the same subjects.

STOW: In at least two books you talk about the writers who have most strongly affected your love of fishing. Among them are Dame Juliana of Norwich, Charles Cotton and Isaac Walton. All of these saw fishing as more than simply a way to catch a meal. How have their philosophies affected you?

HAIG-BROWN: Fishing, and fly fishing especially, has a surprisingly extensive literature. Much of the writing is technical and I have read a great deal of the technical writing about fishing. But much angling writing is literary, descriptive, to some extent inspirational, and I have read a great deal of this too. Writers like Walton, Cotton and Dame Juliana are powerful influences for me, as they are for all fishing writers because their place in the tradition is so secure, so solid, that everything

arises from there and carries forward into the present. All along the centuries from Dame Juliana, there have been writers about fishing who carried this literary quality. I have been instructed and influenced by many other writers, some practically of today or yesterday like J. W. Hills, Plunkett Greene, Skues, and others who have had this quality of literary communication, and also by naturalist writers, like Charles Roberts and Thompson Seton, who wrote little of fishing. My own aim has always been to convey to others some of the intense pleasure and satisfaction I find in rivers, in the fish themselves, in the sport of fishing, in the observation of all life around rivers, lakes, sea and in the beauty of natural water of any kind. In the course of time I have tended more and more to concentrate on the fish themselves, their own special qualities, their life histories, the kind of ecology, the kind of environment that is essential to them and all things that can be done to protect them and enhance their value, both aesthetic and pragmatic. My interest extends to commercial species and their management as well as the game species.

STOW: You talk of fishing, at its best, as being "the strong and sensitive pleasure of a civilised man". Why did someone as civilised as you, and with such strong roots in the English countryside, come to North America?

HAIG-BROWN: When I first came to North America, I was filling an interval, rather than immigrating. My intention had been to go into the colonial civil service but, at 18 years of age, I was some three years too young to be accepted and I had the opportunity to come to North America and did so. While it was a big chance, I did not feel very much uprooted. It seemed extremely natural for me to be in the woods and mountains of the Pacific north-west and natural enough to be part of a logging camp and working in the woods at a logging operation. I was learning of course, and I was new to it all but at that age one is new to most things, so it didn't seem strange and I soon developed a very deep affection for the Pacific north-west as a whole. It was, in fact, a continuation of what I had learned about nature and countryside and trees and all the rest of it, in Britain. I found I had a place in it and I found the people accepting and kindly.

STOW: In *Fisherman's Spring* you say of yourself "I am not an innovator or a revolutionary. I prefer growth in continuity along traditional lines." Wasn't the decision to emigrate a very hard one for a traditionalist?

HAIG-BROWN: The comment that "I am not an innovator or a revolutionary" should, I think, be taken in its context and I was really applying it to fishing and the mechanics of fishing rather than anything else. It is true I suppose, basically true, that I am not an innovator or revolutionary and I do prefer to develop and grow along traditional lines insofar as I can find them. The positive decision to emigrate was made only after my return to Britain where I discovered that I was no longer eligible for the colonial civil service because there had been a policy change since my first visit to North America. The decision then, of course, was not so much to emigrate as to return to a land for which I was already extremely homesick.

STOW: In describing your early days in Washington state, you spoke of "the strength and passion with which America grips her immigrants", and of an old Irishman who very seriously described his new home as "the land of the free and the home of the brave." Freedom and courage, strength and intensity of purpose (if I can define passion in that way) are values which appear continually in your books for adults and children. Are these qualities more easily expressed in North America than in England?

HAIG-BROWN: For me, the qualities you describe certainly have been much more easily expressed in North America than they could have been in Europe. What I found in Britain was that there really was very little opportunity for anyone to do anything that was out of some accustomed line and there was little opportunity for me, in particular, to do anything in an accustomed line. In Canada I had learned it is always possible to get by. There is a lot of land, or there was in those days; there is, or there was in those days a wide open coast. There was logging, guiding, fishing--a whole range of possibilities that would allow one to get by and to write at the same time and this was what I returned to. I was looking too, for unused material; material that I could make use of in my writing. I felt that I could find it and I felt that I already had found it to a great extent, on the Pacific coast.

STOW: In *Fisherman's Summer* you describe most anglers as having "a parent stream and a home river," one the river of youth, the place which formed his character, the other perhaps in some distant part of the world where life has taken him, which he knows best, fishes regularly, and has adopted as his own. Campbell River in B.C. has been your home river for 40 years; have you found there qualities which in some ways remind you of Dorset, or is Canada quite another stream from England?

HAIG-BROWN: Canada is quite a different stream from England and the Campbell River is an entirely different stream from those I knew in Dorset and the south of England generally. The Campbell River is now a much abused stream--dammed, controlled, limited in many ways, over-crowded and far too accessible, but it's still, I suppose, my home river and I still enjoy it. I fish occasionally. More often, I prefer to go in a wet suit and snorkel and either slide down through the rapids and stop in the pools to look at the salmon or simply go in here or there to see what is going on. I look over the River every day and watch for movements of fish life and bird life and any other life that I can see along it. It is very much home to me and I have a deep affectionate regard for it. The streams of Dorset are quiet and soft and weedy and rich and very civilised. The Campbell is big and strong and rough and rocky, even though it is now confined and limited to the wishes of man rather than to the urgencies and stresses of the seasons. I have abundant affection for both types of stream and can find massive interests in either of them. No river is really alien to me and at present I am transferring much of my affection to the Fraser, though I find that one a large undertaking.

STOW: W. O. Mitchell has suggested that a man can only write with validity about the terrain and experiences of his childhood. It seems to me that you have proved him to be wrong. Do you think that your long

training as a naturalist and a quiet, perceptive observer has given you, though an adult, an ability to feel for a new landscape in a way that normally only a child can do in his native environment?

HAIG-BROWN: W. O. Mitchell is right of course, as he usually is, and I do very often feel a sadness that I didn't experience a childhood in the country of my adoption. But when I came here first, I was still pretty young and I had some intensely happy years without any serious responsibility. I worked when I felt like working and for the rest, I enjoyed the country; I went out to hunt and fish and try this and that and the other thing with no great sense that I had to make some life work of it; simply that all was experiment and was new experience. This, I suspect, is something very like a childhood in that the senses, accepting newness, are very acute.

I had, in a sense, been reborn and I was learning very, very fast so that I could adapt to all the newness and find my way among it with confidence and certainty. In order to feel at home I had to learn as rapidly as possible something about the trees, plant life, the birds and fish and wildlife and all the other natural things about me. This sort of need inevitably sharpens observation.

STOW: A child's eye for the truth of his surroundings takes him beyond surface detail, doesn't it? In your preface to *Panther* you state your conviction that "nothing in nature, so long as it is honestly observed and honestly described, can harm the mind of a child. Almost all the ills of the human race may be traced to the fact that it has strayed too much from nature and knows too little of the natural order of things. Conceal from children, if you will, the baseness of man. But let them read and understand the ways of animals and birds, of water and wind and earth; for these things are pure and true and unspoiled." Your books for children are entertaining, by your own definition of that word; they contain sustenance for the mind. But don't you also write in the hope of showing adults and children an older way of life which is more basic, more traditional, more spiritual than their own?

HAIG-BROWN: I do, most intensely, want to let people know, whether they are adults or children, something of the way of the life of the world, apart from humans, is. I don't think that it is necessarily true that natural life, wildlife or human life lived close to it is more basic or more traditional than civilised human life of cities. It has its own values and its own messages, its own lessons. But enormous numbers of people do live in cities, remote from most forms of natural life. They go out into the countryside at certain times of the year, on holiday, and see various things that have meaning or value for them, but one wonders and is concerned as to how deeply they see into the meaning of those lives about them, whether they are lives of trees and plants, or lives of animals or lives of fish. I would like all people to see and understand more because there is both pleasure and fulfillment in seeing and understanding, and because the only hope of preserving the natural world is in the deep understanding of people. What I would like most of all is for the city people to be observant of the very large areas of natural life that exist in cities. Opportunities for observation are frequent, almost constant and I think are largely unused and thereby much pleasure and much satisfaction is lost and wasted. Yet I cannot

say that I have, or would want to have any aim as positive as this. I want to describe what I have seen and felt myself, in such a way that the sensations and values are fully conveyed. If this is done in any significant degree at all, the writer's mission is essentially fulfilled. What people do with it from there is beyond his control and so it should be because the purpose is to reveal, stimulate, excite, develop and share, not to dictate or control.

STOW: Your descriptions of fish and animal life certainly give the reader vicarious opportunities to observe in a breadth and detail that most of us have neither the skill nor the chance to practise. You also make the natural cycle so engrossing that we can sense the drama in life-death pattern of a salmon's journey, for example, or of a panther's struggle for survival. Your first children's book, *Silver: The Story of an Atlantic Salmon* (1931) which is structurally based on this cycle, has both qualities, observation and drama, as has your book on a similar topic written ten years later, *Return to the River* (1941). Could you give us some ideas on what makes one a story for children and the other an adult book? Or would you say that the dividing line between the two is in fact rather nebulous?

HAIG-BROWN: As the dedication explains, *Silver* was written deliberately as a child's story. *Return to the River* was not. *Silver* was my first book and, while I was extremely anxious to get away from anthropomorphism, I was still far too much influenced by writers like Fortescu who wrote *The Story of a Red Deer* and Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies* and so on. The book, I think, is somewhat too cute. In spite of this, it has been, over a long period of time, quite consistently popular with both adults and children; except for a brief period during the War when no paper was available, it has never been out of print.

Return To The River was an all-out attempt to tell an animal story as it should be told with as much reference as possible to the real way of life of the animal and as little as possible to human comparisons. There are no concessions to simplicity, concreteness, or anything else that I would normally consider desirable in writing for children. The result, of course, is a book that children can appreciate just as well as adults because children, like adults, become interested in a subject very much in proportion to the intensity with which it is examined and discussed. I think it is right to say that the dividing line between the two books is somewhat nebulous, if only because so many adults read and enjoy *Silver*. *Return To The River* is simply a much stronger and more firmly thought out book than *Silver* and the research behind it was far better informed. The subject, though complex, is not difficult, and I would assume that *Return* would appeal to somewhat older children than *Silver*.

STOW: Does the fact that *Silver* is set in Britain and *Return To The River* in Canada affect anything more than the landscape and natural life described? Does it make a difference to the mood of the story, or the conclusions drawn?

HAIG-BROWN: I would think that the difference in my own age and stage of maturity made more and greater difference between *Silver* and *Return* than the difference in setting. At the same time I was aware that the setting of *Return* had a certain grandeur and the fish

themselves, in their massive abundance, were an altogether bigger and more impressive story than the smaller run of the smaller river in Great Britain. So, I would say the mood is substantially different and I would suspect that the conclusions left to the reader would be somewhat different too since I had, in *Return*, a more sophisticated concept of salmon as a massive and important resource.

STOW: Of your second children's book, *Ki-yu: A Story of Panthers* (1934) you note a critic as objecting to the number of killings involved in the tale. Violence appears often in your stories, especially in those which focus on hunting by animal or human predators. In view of the concern which is often voiced about the effect of T.V. violence on children, what are your feelings about death and injury as topics in juvenile fiction, and what are some of the problems facing a writing who handles these experiences?

HAIG-BROWN: *Ki-yu* (*Panther*) was not written for children, though it does seem to have been adopted by children and for children. It was intended to be a realistic tale of a wild animal and it was intended again to get away from the cuteness and anthropomorhpism that has, in the past, been too much associated with animal stories. The violence in this and, I hope in my other stories too, is incidental to the story itself and to conceal it or play it down would probably be both dishonest and unsatisfying. T.V. violence is an abomination, played purely for its own sake, its own kicks and thrills and it is essentially false 90% of the time. This is evil in itself and I have no doubt that its effects are evil. Death and injury, which are things incidental to life, so long as they are shown as incidental to life, are topics of great importance for children as well as for anybody else. Honesty, I think, is the key word here. If you are using violence as a showpiece to attract readers, it has to be wrong. If you are using it in the attempt to show something as it really is, then your problem is to handle it realistically, without making it too offensive. The impact of the printed word is extremely heavy; heavier than a passing picture and altogether heavier than reality itself where there are always many trivialities that distract. A writer must balance all these considerations with care and adjust his descriptions to give what he feels to be the proper weight and value. To deny death, which is often beautiful, to children, is an offense. To conceal injury and pain is an offense. To exploit either or both is the worst offense of all.

STOW: *Ki-yu* follows the cycle of a panther's life from his conception and the subsequent death of his father at a hunter's hands, through the year and nine months during which his mother cares and hunts for him and his sisters until they too are killed, through his developing maturity, his mating and the battles with other predators, to the inevitable end in aging, sickness, and final destruction by a pack of wolves. During this sequence you describe Ki-yu with knowledge and sympathy, but never become anthropomorphic; and you convey with equal understanding the feelings and experiences of the human hunter who pursues the panther throughout his life. Children's books so often present conflicts in black and white terms. How have you been able to avoid this trap?

HAIG-BROWN: I think the simple answer to the avoidance of black and white thinking is sympathy for both sides. In this particular

instance, my first interest is in the wild animal Ki-yu so, clearly, I have the stongest kind of sympathy for him and his doings. But, at the same time, I have personal experience as a hunter and of the hunter's very deep respect and appreciation for his quarry. It seems to me that this is pretty much what life is all about. The hunter has his function although it may be misconceived by some standards. The animal has its indisputable function which it performs inevitably. One does not have to arrive at judgments in such situations as this. It is only necessary to lay them out honestly and sympathetically so that the reader can understand and reach his or her judgment.

STOW: In this book you describe the panthers of Vancouver Island as being relentlessly hunted. Does this still occur today, and is there any danger of their becoming extinct?

HAIG-BROWN: Panthers are not hunted relentlessly any more, in fact they are protected and are recognised as a game animal with a special permit and resticted limits. I don't think they will ever become extinct on Vancouver Island, certainly not by hunting, though the removal of the forests and encroaching civilisation will make things increasingly difficult for them. Fortunately there are always mountains and I don't suppose the encroachment will move very rapidly into them. I discussed this a little in the foreword to the latest edition of *Panther* (Houghton-Mifflin, New York 1973).

STOW: In *Starbuck Valley Winter* (1943) and its sequel *Saltwater Summer* (1948) you describe the adventures of a boy of sixteen who goes, sometimes alone, sometimes with a friend, to manage a trapline in the B.C. mountains and then to skipper a fishing boat along the coast. Returning to my question about the distinction between a child's book and an adult's, aren't you chiefly concerned with mature and independent experience? These novels are exciting to me as a reader because, as well as learning a great deal about the wildlife of B.C., I can identify with someone who is learning to operate as an adult in a dramatic and challenging environment. It seems to me that your children's books are, like those of a number of other excellent writers, really on the borderline of the teenager's world. They are about his becoming a man.

HAIG-BROWN: A child's novel and an adult novel are essentially the same except that in the novel for a child, one tends to emphasise action and concrete situations rather than depending on introspection and complex thought. So, the dividing line really is very slight. In writing *Starbuck Valley Winter* and *Saltwater Summer*, I was looking towards the teen-age market because I had been told that there was a great and serious lack of "good stories" for young people in this age group. For some years I deliberately planned that one book in every three I wrote would be directed to children and I felt this as being something of a responsibility. Young people--let's say between the ages of 12 and 20--are always struggling and striving towards self-realisation in some form or another, so I suspect they are always looking slightly ahead to the next stage of development and wondering about it. I suppose this is why one tends to emphasise the theme of growing up and developing from fairly childish things. This is a struggle that everyone faces and so should have universal appeal.

STOW: You spoke earlier about sensations and values which you hope that readers will experience through your writing. Could you talk more about some of these? Don Morgan certainly has new experiences and acquires new values when he moves from the city to his uncle's farm, and more still when he becomes a hunter and fisherman. Some of these you discuss openly (as in the courtroom episode in *Saltwater Summer*, for example); many more, both sensory and ethical, are implied.

HAIG-BROWN: I find myself wondering, in answering these questions, if I am not doing a little too much rationalisation and self-justification. I have never made it a practise to think about past books; in fact, I have never read a book of mine through once it has been printed and bound. I refer to them only as my attention is drawn to them by others, then perhaps read a chapter or an essay and leave it at that, once I have determined what the question in the reader's mind is all about. So, we could say that I am not competently self-critical but you, to some extent, are forcing me into it and what I say may not be all that sound. The sort of values one wants to pass on to readers are often more vividly expressed as fresh or first experiences. A child or young adult is always moving into fresh experience and so these things are often best shown through a child's eye. Move a child from the city to the country, or vice versa, and immediately the newness is enhanced and the challenge increased. In writing for children, I would guess that sensory values can be described, but ethical values are much better implied. In fiction writing of any kind, it is always better to show something rather than expound upon it. The perceptive mind of a child facing new experiences is therefore a good means of justifying the description of sensations.

STOW: Friendship, communication, mutual trust, and the responsibilities of one human being towards another seem to me to be very important in your books. In *Starbuck Valley Winter* a hostile and lonely man, Lee Jetson, is brought back to the human community through his association with Don and his friend Tubby. Similar situations are often handled by lesser writers in a stereotyped way (''noble teenagers win the heart of crusty old hermit''), but you are able by the gradual exploration of Jetson's background and actions, and by the balancing weaknesses shown in the boys, to make the result psychologically in writing, or is it simply a pleasant by-product?

HAIG-BROWN: I have always been convinced that it is impossible to hate anyone if you know them really well. I have also had the opportunity of observing quite a number old trappers and prospectors who had spent a lifetime in the woods and were, shall we say, quite idiosyncratic. All these men had their own stories and their own particular prejudices that one had to respect if there was to be communication. I think I am trying to say that first judgments are by no means always sound and that sympathy, understanding and tolerance can usefully be extended to almost everyone. In a sense, one is describing a relationship between human and human that is somewhat similar to the relationship between human and creature that we discussed earlier. The difference is that here we can come at a happy conclusion, because the humans can communicate effectively.

STOW: Sheila Egoff comments that *Mounted Police Patrol* (1954) is made less compelling than your earlier books by an "overtly moral tone." Could you tell us how this story set in Alberta came to be written? It is an exciting tale, certainly different from your previous ones, and it seems to concern the hunting of men rather than of animals. What do you think of Sheila Egoff's remark about it?

HAIG-BROWN: I was not particularly anxious to write this book but my publishers knew that I had been on loan from the Army to the Mounted Police for a period during the War, and were anxious for to do something with it. I could not find any really good reason for not doing it and my mind, of course, began, to work on details of plot and character and I thought that I could make an interesting book. It may have been unwise to choose a city kid with a chip on his shoulder, but I suppose this comes out of spending so much time on the bench and naturally wondering what would become of an association such as the one examined in the book. The contrast between the values of the policeman and the values of the boy inevitably lead to too much moralising, and I wouldn't question that Sheila Egoff is right in her assessment. My purpose was not to moralise but to demonstrate the life of an R.C.M.P. constable in a small rural detachment. By centering the interest in the boy, possibly I overbalanced this somewhat but the essential theme still remains and I do feel a considerable resentment at the failure in understanding there can be between young people and police and vice-versa. It strikes me often as totally unnecessary and purely the product of failing to know each other. These sort of feelings too would help to set the moralising tone of the book which, of course, I regret.

STOW: In the fifties you widened your field more than geographically, and produced a volume in the "Great Stories of Canada" series, entitled *Captain of the Discovery: The Story of Captain George Vancouver* (1956). In 1960 and 1962 you went further into the historical field with *The Farthest Shores* and *Fur and Gold*, originally commissioned as C.B.C. dramas about British Columbia's past. What new problems did the writing and dramatizing of history present to you?

HAIG-BROWN: John Gray, of Macmillan, one of Canada's truly great publishing men, talked me into doing the life of George Vancouver. I forget now just what his grounds of argument were but I would assume it was because I know something of the Pacific Coast. One of the problems with work of this type is the need for intensive research. I had some experience of this in working on matters connected with natural history but this was rather different. One becomes fascinated with historical research and the temptation to probe more and more deeply is so great that the question arises "when does one cut off the research and get to the writing?" My instinct always is to go to original sources and I generally feel that in incidental and contemporaneous things like diaries and journals of the explorers matters are better told than they could ever be re-told. In my first attempt at *Captain of the Discovery*, I tried to write practically the whole thing directly depending on quotes from Vancouver's journals. John Gray was not a bit happy with this and persuaded me that it was best to get away from the direct documentary approach. By shifting, I probably changed the age group for which the book is best suited and it is now usually read by younger children than I

had anticipated. I get many reactions from them, nearly all favorable but, for at least a few, where it is required reading in the schools, it is a little too heavy still. I am not sure there is much one can do about this except hope that they will develop themselves, because the book really is not difficult. *The Farthest Shores* and *Fur and Gold* presented a problem in the question of technique. As you say, these books were originally developed as radio plays. I felt that one way of making them available for children would be to leave them in dramatic form and let the teacher assign parts in the classroom. I adopted this method with *The Farthest Shores* and I am not too satisfied that it was successful. At all events, Helen O'Reilly and I decided to change and *Fur and Gold* is written in simply literary narrative, or more nearly so anyway. I had intended to convert *The Farthest Shores* to this form and to continue with one, and possibly two other volumes in the series but have never really had the heart to do this, partly because I have become so very busy in Court in the past ten years. I enjoy history very much, especially local B.C. history but I do find the writing of it is quite confining and I should not care to be limited in this way very much of the time. In fact, one of the things I do search for, more than anything else, is the freedom to let imagination range.

STOW: Your best known historical fiction, and according to many critics your best book, is *The Whale People* (1962) which won the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians Book-of-the-Year Award in 1964 (as *Starbuck Valley Winter* had done in 1947). This story about the Hotsath tribe of coastal B.C. who shaped their lives around the pursuit of the whale tells in gripping detail what it feels like to leap onto a sperm whale's back from the bow-thwart of a canoe, and to thrust at him with a shell-tipped lance. Could you tell us about the research which you did in preparation for this book?

HAIG-BROWN: *The Whale People* is a good example of an effort to get away and free the imagination from all restrictions. I deliberately chose to set the story in a pre-historic time which would force me to exercise my imagination with the restriction of only a limited amount of fact. I used a number of sources for the technical details of whaling equipment and the life of the tribes. Philip Drucker's *Northern and Central Nootkan Tribes* was of great importance to me and so, also was Alice Ernst's *Wolf Ritual of the North West Coast.* Curtis' pictures were a help to me and so was John Newett's narrative of his captivity among the Nootkas. I had a good deal of other material including a good account of Makah Indian whaling equipment which is essentially similar to Nootka. I spent some time on the Quinault River with an Indian friend who had one of the last ocean-going canoes and a crew to go along with him in search of sea mammals, though they did not hunt whales. From him I got some of the feeling of the sea hunt. Incidentally, he was a Hoh River man, not a Quinault River man, though we worked the Quinault together. The Hoh River people are close to the Makahs but, he told me, hunted whales only for sport and prestige, not for subsistence.

STOW: What I like best about *The Whale People,* apart from the impressive sensory effect of the fishing scenes in it, is the way in which you immerse the reader in the tribal life so that he feels and understands it from the inside. Atlin's visits to his ancestors' shrine, for example, and his imitation in the nearby pool of the swimming movements of the

whale, are described with a seriousness and sympathy which make the reader forget his own world and think only of the symbolic meaning of these actions for the boy. The reader also quickly comes to understand the relationship in this culture between man and the animal world. "I do not despise (the whales)" says Nitgass, chief of the tribe, "I love them as my brothers. That is why they take my harpoon and swim quietly to the beach with it." You mentioned earlier your sense of the unity between man and the land about him. Is this feeling widespread among hunters and fishermen, or do you think it is stronger among our native people, perhaps because it is part of their religious view of life?

HAIG-BROWN: Sense of unity between any primitive people depending upon hunting and fishing and the land and the wild creatures they depend on is very strong indeed. It is, of necessity, strong in any good hunter and any good fisherman. The native Indian concepts of the creatures they hunted and fished for were intimate and very beautiful. They were also quite highly self-centered, as one would expect. There was the idea of return, replenishment, replacement. There was a sense of equality rather than superiority, of a shared humanness rather than two alien natures. All these concepts I find very touching and very beautiful and I imagine, under the circumstances of those early lives, very useful. I feel no difficulty at all identifying with Atlin in his observation of the whale rituals and the other preparation for the hunt. I do not find, and never have found, any great difficulty with the concept of animals as equal life, even though different. I believe that by cultivating it, we can carry our sense of unity with natural things to a much higher plane than even the Indians were able to achieve. Every good hunter (and in the word "hunter" I of course include fisherman) is or should be acutely aware of the whole environment of his quarry and that includes other animals which may or may not have interdependent lives. These things are sharpened by the intensity of hunting and fishing but, at the same time, it is quite possible to go beyond this and escape the somewhat narrow focus of the hunter and fisherman, extending the intensity to everything. Sophisticated thinking is by no means hostile to emotional concepts, and love of the land and the creatures of the land is by no means hostile to religious concepts. The native Indian people at their best use both concepts to the full, as have all culturally developed people. Neither Indian nor white has any monopoly of these sensitivities and both can learn from each other.

STOW: Structurally *The Whale People* is like *Starbuck Valley Winter* and *Saltwater Summer* in that, because Atlin's father dies when the boy is still young, he is forced to put his early training into practice and make himself into a man and a whale-chief. His rapidly increasing physical skill and his growing maturity in his relationships with his friends and followers is an important aspect of his becoming adult, but the story ends at the point when Atlin resolves a conflict with a neighbouring chief and is about to send a robe of sea-otter skins to him as a token of his desire to marry the chief's daughter. In human life marriage marks the point at which childhood decisively ends; would you say that the discussion of man/woman relationships is inappropriate for a children's book?

HAIG-BROWN: I certainly do not think that discussion of man/woman relationships is inappropriate for a children's book. Such discussion may

or may not be necessary to the story one wants to tell and I should assume that today one could be much freer, if it were necessary to be so, in discussing this sort of thing than would have been the case ten years ago. Explicit accounts of sexual activities may be entertaining, but they are not usually important in advancing a story. It was necessary for Atlin to develop his interest in the chief's daughter to enable me to tell my essential story, which is this: after successfully solving the problems of leadership and physical achievement, the next step in his chieftainship was a move into the more difficult and subtle diplomatic fields. These were a real and well understood part of Indian life on this coast before the coming of white people and it seems to me that a book that did not recognise them would be in some way rather hollow. By establishing it, I feel the book is given new and stronger dimension and a more accurate picture of what that kind of life was all about. I have no idea how close I have come to getting inside the mind of a young, high-class Indian boy in pre-contact times. I suspect not very close because there is a vast difference in conditioning between us. George Clutesi read the book and said: "I can tell you are a very sincere man." I take that to mean, "you have tried honestly, but you have really not got inside our thinking."

STOW: You carry the reader beyond the events of youth and into the hazards of courtship, love, and the choice of a lifetime pattern, in your novel *On the Highest Hill* (1949). This starts with the hero as a young boy, follows his growing attraction to the young woman who is his teacher, and dramatizes the difficulty he has in choosing between a city career of great promise and a life in the wilderness. His choice of the latter eventually leads him to murder and then death, as he tries to defend the mountain slopes that are threatened by a logging operation. As he falls from the mountain, his body finding "the death his soul had neither sought nor feared," he reminds me to some extent of David Canaan in Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, who was faced with a rather similar choice and died too on a mountain top with his dilemma unresolved. Colin is much more active than David, however, and it seems to me that external circumstances, particularly the Depression, the beginning of World War II, and man's greedy destruction of the wilderness, play a large part in defeating Colin (if he is defeated), whereas David Canaan's own indecision creates his tragedy. Could you tell us why you decided to extend the history of a boy beyond the limits of the adolescent world in this novel?

HAIG-BROWN: *On the Highest Hill* grew backwards from an account in *Life* of a backwoodsman in Montana who was hunted to the top of a mountain and killed there by a sheriff's posse. In the story there was a reference to him as a wild beast, or something of that kind and later, his sister wrote to the magazine and said "my brother was not like that at all, he was a very kind and religious man." From that I began to wonder how such a situation could develop. The whole story of Colin Ensley is a protest; a protest against so many circumstances that could attack a rather simple man and drive him to desperation. The rape of the wilderness after World War II and with it, Colin's own sense of peace, is the final factor. I wrote of the boy only to account for the man, so the story is really not one of "a boy carried beyond the limits of the adolescent world" but of the man who felt that the adult world was too negative and too destructive to live with. This novel was long before its

time and might have been better understood had it been published 20 years later. It still finds its enthusiasts and a fair number of people write to tell me they think it's the best book I have ever done. It may well be the most important, if not the best.

STOW: As a final question, could you say which of your children's books you most enjoyed writing, and which you feel is your best work?

HAIG-BROWN: I think I enjoyed writing *The Whale People* most of all because, as I have said, it allowed free range for the imagination and speculation. This background information was at once a control and a stimulation to the imagination and one just had to watch a little closely how one directed it. I also felt very close to Atlin and his father in their thinking and in their hopes and fears.

Starbuck Valley Winter has probably been by far my most popular children's book and both it and *Saltwater Summer* have probably been more widely read than any of the others. I enjoyed writing them, as I have enjoyed writing all my books and, as I have told many people, many times, the best book is always the next book.

Answering these questions has been a most interesting exercise but I say again that I have very grave suspicions about myself as a self-critic. There is a great temptation to make it all sound good. Writing a book is a conscious act--planning and developing story and character are also conscious performances in greater or lesser degree; but there is not much doubt that many things of which the writer is little aware can influence him greatly.

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Roderick Haig-Brown's books include: *Silver, Pool and Rapid, Panther, The Western Angler, Return to the River, Timber, Starbuck Valley Winter, A River Never Sleeps, Saltwater Summer, Measure of the Year, On the Highest Hill, Mounted Police Patrol, Fisherman's Spring, Fisherman's Winter, Captain of the Discovery, Fisherman's Summer, The Farthest Shores, The Living Land, Fur and Gold, The Whale People, A primer of Fly Fishing, Fisherman's Fall, and The Salmon.*

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