Unity with natural things: Roderick Haig-Brown as a writer for children

Heather Kirk

The response to the work of Roderick Haig-Brown has been fragmented and only one admirable essay by W.J.Keith in *Canadian Literature* has attempted to right this situation. As Keith explains, Haig-Brown's interests "transcend the usual classifications; thus in most libraries his work will be split between fiction, literature, history, natural history, sociology, juvenile books, etc., and this inevitably discourages any unified response to his achievement."[1] Thus in the *Literary History of Canada*, for example, one finds references to Haig-Brown under half-a-dozen headings, including "Nature writers and the animal story," "Children's Literature" (in both Vols. 2 and 3), "Biographies," "Essays 1920–60" and "Fiction 1940–60."[2] In the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, as well as the principal article on Haig-Brown by Geoff Hancock, there are many references to him in Sheila Egoff's section on "Children's Literature in English," and the treatments do not overlap. Egoff rates Haig-Brown as one of Canada's most important writers for children. About his "outdoor-adventure stories," she says they "brought Canadian children's literature into the modern age"; about his "realistic animal stories," she says that one of them, *Silver*, is a "tour-de-force"; about *The whale people*, she says it is one of "our two finest historical novels for children."[3] Yet Hancock does not give much weight to Haig-Brown's importance as a children's writer, summarizing his career as follows:

> Haig-Brown wrote twenty-five books – including adult novels, short stories, and children's books – but he is best known as a nature writer, specializing in fishing and natural history. An outdoorsman who was also one of the finest prose stylists in Canada, he was skilled at observing creatures in natural settings, especially "the strangeness and beauty of the fish, their often visible remoteness, their ease in another world, the mystery of their movements and habits and whims" (331).

Who is right? How important *is* Roderick Haig-Brown as a writer for children?

Hancock's view that Haig-Brown is above all a writer of adult non-fiction about nature, especially fish, coincides with the views of the two principal articles on Haig-Brown published to date in *Canadian Literature* in 1976 and 1981, as well as with the view expressed in *A man of some importance*, the only book about Haig-Brown, published in 1985. W.J. Keith in "Roderick Haig-

Brown" says that Haig-Brown's juvenile novels, as well as his adult novels, are most "memorable for their informative, non-fiction qualities" (14). Haig-Brown's best work, says Keith, "is to be found in his essays and discursive prose" (16). S.E. Read, George Woodcock, and T.D. MacLulich in "Three Views of Haig-Brown" refer to him respectively as an "intellectual fisherman," a "naturalist," and a poor "story-teller." Read focusses on Haig-Brown's "host of works on fish and fishing, most of which have become classics in the vast world of angling literature."[4] Woodcock calls Haig-Brown "perhaps Canada's best essayist and a late master in the kind of descriptive narrative of outdoors adventures at which the great natural historians of the Victorian era excelled" (180). MacLulich concludes that Haig-Brown is "much better at the informal essay than he is at fiction" (181).

E. Bennett Metcalfe, author of *A man of some importance*, sees Haig-Brown's children's books as manifestations of a kind of failure. According to Metcalfe, Haig-Brown's motives for writing children's books were laziness and expedience; what's more, the results were flawed because Haig-Brown lacked certain crucial writer's gifts:

> As a novelist he diverted himself from the impossibly complex world of the contemporary adult and tried to create a different, freer, more innocent world of Canadian childhood. His own four children were growing up around him, demanding more of his attention and simultaneously offering him an invitation to live again as a child for a little while. The children's novels he produced in this period – Starbuck Valley Winter, Saltwater Summer, and Mounted Police Patrol – made authoritative use of his own view of his own experience as a woodsman, commercial fisherman and RCMP consultant, but as keys to his own view of the realities of the very young, they are interesting chiefly for their idealistic and sentimental approach to them. "Rather icky," was Ann's way of dismissing them. As with adults, so with children; he lacked the writer's ear for the way they speak and the sense of their true motivations. There can be no doubt, reading them today, that he was deliberately trying to provide the world with "good kids" who could not possibly exist otherwise. Yet to his own children he read such classics as Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, as well as Rudyard Kipling's Starky [sic] & Co.[5]

On Haig-Brown's other books for children, Metcalfe passes no judgement. He does, however, devote considerable space to discussions of Haig-Brown as a writer always divided within himself, unable to integrate (and so preferring to repress) his eccentric libidinal drives and private, radical sympathies with socially acceptable behaviour and opinions.[6] Haig-Brown's "calm, unexcitable prose-style," according to Metcalfe, "attained the perfection he had striven for since his youth" in these six non-fiction books for adult sportsmen: *A river never sleeps* (1946), *Fisherman's spring* (1951), *Fisherman's winter* (1954), *Fisherman's summer* (1959), *Fisherman's fall* (1964), and *A primer on fly fishing* (1956) (202).

The contemporary mainstream view that Haig-Brown's writing for child-

ren represents at best a sideline and at worst a pathetic attempt to avoid real issues could, of course, reveal a bias against children's literature on the part of contemporary mainstream critics or a lack of knowledge about a subject which for the most part has been left to children's librarians. Metcalfe himself mentions that initial reviews of Haig-Brown's first children's book, *Silver: An Atlantic salmon* (1931) were extremely positive. "High praise in the most prestigious press" is how Metcalfe sums them up, quoting from the *Times*, the *New Statesman*, and *Nature Magazine* (115). Metcalfe does not mention what reviewers said about Haig-Brown's next children's book, *Panther* (1934), but presumably it too was well received because in February 1935 Faber & Faber wrote Haig-Brown from London asking him to contribute a piece to an anthology called *My best animal story* (145). Furthermore, at about the same time Haig-Brown (whose total output included three books of which two were for children) acquired a new London literary agent, James B. Pinker, who was according to Metcalfe "a most famous literary agent of that day" (145). According to Metcalfe, among Pinker's clients were Henry James, Joseph Conrad, John Galsworthy, Virginia Woolfe and Ford Madox Ford. An initial review in the *Canadian Forum* of Haig-Brown's next book for children. *Starbuck Valley winter* (1946) was superficial and brief, as well as slightly inaccurate, but it was unreservedly positive:

> Here is the ideal Christmas present for a teen-aged boy who is fond of outdoor life. It is an excellent story of trapping, hunting and canoeing in the woods of British Columbia, obviously authentic and very factual without ever being dull. The author is a close observer of nature both animate and inanimate, and makes the reader feel thoroughly at home with deer and buck, seals, bald eagles, marten, wolves, wolverines and even cougars.[7]

Not only were the early mainstream reviews of Haig-Brown's children's books positive, those authorities concerned specifically with children's literature praised him until at least within this present decade. *Starbuck Valley winter*, Haig-Brown's third children's book and eighth book altogether, was his first book to win an award – the "Book of the Year Award" from the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians. His next children's book, *Saltwater summer* (1948), received a Governor-General's Award for best juvenile. *The whale people* (1962) also received a "Book of the Year Award" from the CACL, and in 1965 Haig-Brown was given the Vicky Metcalf Award from the Canadian Authors' Association for "a body of work of interest to young people." Then too, children's librarian and professor of library science, Sheila Egoff praised Haig-Brown roundly not only in the *Oxford Companion*, but in the *Literary History of Canada's* "Children's Literature" sections, and in her ground-breaking, unique *Republic of childhood: a critical guide to Canadian children's literature in English*."[8] As recently as 1975 and 1978, the scholarly magazine, Canadian Children's Literature, carried two lengthy articles on

Haig-Brown's writing for children. In her 1975 article, "A conversation with Roderick Haig-Brown," Glenys Stow calls *Starbuck Valley winter* and *Saltwater summer* "exciting" books that convey "sensations" as well as "values" like "friendship, communication, mutual trust, and the responsibilities of one human being towards another." She also says the books are "psychologically" accurate.[9] In his 1978 article, "Haig-Brown's animal biographies," Alex Lucas claims that Haig-Brown gave the distinguished tradition of the Canadian animal biography "a new direction."[10] As recently as 1978, when Irma McDonough's important Canadian books for young people was published, *Starbuck Valley winter* appeared on a select list of fiction titles chosen by librarians as "the most informative, relevant and excellent books for young people among titles in print."[11] That Haig-Brown's name does not appear in Michele Landsberg's much publicized 1985 guide to children's books means little, since it is subjective and inconsistent, attempting to take in American and British as well as Canadian books; she also fails to mention Tom Sawyer, J.M. Barrie (or his famous Peter Pan), or Ernest Thompson Seton, among others.[12]

Given then that the widest schism in the response to Haig-Brown's work is quite possibly between those who take a professional interest in children's literature and those who do not, and given that many who are professionally concerned with children's literature have praised Haig-Brown highly, clearly an assessment of Haig-Brown's work in this area is important for an understanding of his work as a whole. That this is so becomes all the more obvious when one considers that over one-third of Haig-Brown's books – or approximately eleven out of approximately twenty-eight, depending on how one calculates – were written for or have been adopted by children. Then too, Haig-Brown himself was professionally interested in writing for children; writing for children was not an avocation, it was a consistent vocation. Metcalfe himself notes that at the very outset of his career, while he was writing *Silver*, Haig-Brown was reading children's classics like Charles Kingsley's *Water babies* and Kipling's *Jungle books*. Furthermore, in this same period Haig-Brown apparently clipped a news item in the *Times* which reported a children's librarian as saying, "Children are just as keen to find new authors as the older readers" (112-113). At the end of his career, in his interview with Glenys Stow, Haig-Brown said that "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" (16). And too, more than once did Haig-Brown take the trouble to set down in writing his ideas about children's reading needs and about writing for children.[13] Surely this kind of seriousness and consistency warrants more respect for Haig-Brown's motives and results as a writer for children. If one is unbiased in approaching this area of Haig-Brown's work, one can see Haig-Brown as fitting C.S. Lewis' classic statement about the best way of writing for children: that it "consists in writing a child-

ren's story because a children's story is the best art-form for something you have to say."[14] Haig-Brown is not necessarily a lesser writer for wanting to direct his attentions to children. His children's books are not necessarily of less absolute value because children enjoy them more than do adults.

What, specifically, are the merits of Haig-Brown as a writer for children? In my opinion he was one of the very few Canadians who took his vocation seriously and yet avoided simple-minded moralizing. Furthermore, he was an innovator, applying high standards of technique and subject matter to his work, and being above all thoughtful. Never degenerating into writing sequels, he produced outstanding books in at least three of the four genres he chose to try. At the root of his accomplishments was an unusual vision of life which matured as he attempted over and over again to express it. His was an attempt to find meaning for himself by finding it for others, including children. "My first thought on writing for children," said Haig-Brown in an address to an International Reading Association conference in 1959, "is that I do not consider it a thing apart."

> It is simply writing to be read by a lively, curious, active and exciting audience. I would not dream of insulting this audience by making things too easy. One of the purposes of writing for them, as in all writing, is to make them reach, cause them to understand something new or something old in a new way, to leave them a little richer in mind and spirit than before.[15]

He challenged children to think hard about life and to feel profoundly by presenting them with a complete view of the world to which they could relate which was exciting yet sobering, and increasingly ripe with spiritual implications and the essence of a fundamental code of ethics. His vision, perhaps best expressed in the phrase "unity with natural things" (Stow 34), is wider and deeper in implication than that suggested by W.J. Keith – "ownership through knowledge" which evolves through the idea of "responsibility" to the importance of "conservation" (9,11) – Keith's vision is an important subtext. What Haig-Brown wanted to say to children was that only by fitting into the world as it is – not conforming but rather *per*forming superbly within it – can one find meaning in one's existence. This theme – which evolved in part out of Haig-Brown's early experiences among West Coast loggers where he learned, as he put it, "the daily truth of hard work and danger"[16] – is reworked again and again until in Haig-Brown's last and best work of fiction for children, The whale people, it receives its most complete and satisfying expression. I would say that in The whale people, as well as to a lesser extent Starbuck Valley winter, Saltwater summer, Panther and Silver, Haig-Brown achieves the ultimate goal of a writer for children, providing for children what Bruno Bettelheim in *The uses of enchantment* states a child "ought to gain from the experience of literature: access to a deeper meaning, and that which is meaningful to him at his stage of development."[17]

The world as it is, according to Haig-Brown, must contain nature. Human life must take into account the lives of plants and animals. This implies not only that people must take responsibility for their planet – a now widely disseminated theme of conservationists and ecologist – but also that people must live closely in harmony with nature, and thus with themselves. Throughout Haig-Brown's writing career, what he had to say to and about people was largely based on his observations about the non-human species. In his preface to the 1934 *Panther*, he wrote: "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" (13). Forty years later, in the Stow interview, his words were softer and the message had apparently become a polite call for conservation:

> I do, most intensely, want to let people know, whether they are adults or children, something of the way of the life of the word, apart from humans, [that] is.... 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 (13).

But the later, conventional and acceptable message of the now public man is terribly understated. Haig-Brown is now only able to expose the full implications of his very original feelings and thoughts indirectly, through fiction, where he can with relief "get away and free the imagination from all restrictions" (19). Further on in the Stow interview, when he is discussing *The whale people*, Haig-Brown expresses himself more clearly, if still in understatement, because he himself is less directly implicated:

> [The] 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-centred, 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 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.... 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....(Stow 20).

This is not merely a call for conservation. Nor is this merely a nostalgic longing for an idealized past of another, idealized race – Golden Age escapism. This is a strong statement by a highly civilized man of a radical view: contemporary man, however sophisticated, must recognize that he himself is subject to the laws of nature – if he is to survive *psychologically* as well as physically, if he

is to be whole and well.

Haig-Brown's view – which was probably rooted in the pantheism and idealization of childhood that Peter Coveney has identified in most late-19th and 20th-century British writers for children as late-Romantic, middle-class revolt against "utilitarian values and the Machine,"[18] but developed beyond mere escapism because of Haig-Brown's early and thorough exposure to the raw West Coast wilderness and the men who dealt with it – is expressed in his fiction for children in three stages corresponding to the beginning, middle, and end of his writing career when he wrote respectively his animal stories, his outdoors-adventure fiction, and his historical fiction. At all three stages there is one central metaphor, hunting, which symbolizes meaningful work. For a being to be whole and well, according to Haig-Brown, he must have meaningful work: activity which demands the best of him and which ultimately contributes to the well-being of his species. [Compare this to Bettelheim: "To find deeper meaning, one must be able to transcend the narrow confines of a self-centred existence and believe that one will make a significant contribution to life – if not right now, then at some future time" (4)]. At all three stages there are hunters and hunted, and the hunters themselves are hunted, or at least vulnerable. In the animal stories, the focus is on the hunted animals, while in the outdoors-adventure fiction and the historical fiction the focus is on man the hunter, but at all three stages the main concern is with man's place in the natural cycle and integration and interdependence – the so-called "web of life" extended to people as well as plants and animals – emerges increasingly as the ultimate goal.

In his animal stories, *Silver: an Atlantic salmon* and *Panther*, Haig-Brown, as Stow comments, makes "the natural cycle so engrossing that we can sense the drama in the life-death pattern of a salmon's journey, for example, or of a panther's struggle for survival"(14). Yet authenticity is never sacrificed for the sake of emotional impact. On the contrary, as Lucas points out, Haig-Brown's worthy successors in the unique Canadian tradition of the realistic animal story begun by Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton, offer even greater realism than their predecessors. Haig-Brown, according to Lucas, does not use animals as "human archetypes" like Roberts does (24); he avoids the "adulterated Darwinism" of Seton and Roberts (26); and he does not indulge in either the "purple-prose romanticism" of Roberts or Grey Owl or the "excessive detail that often spoils realism" (29). Egoff too mentions that Haig-Brown "emphasizes the truths of wild animal life to an even greater degree than Roberts and Seton."[19]

For the sake of authenticity, both *Silver* and *Panther* are structurally based on the life cycle of the animals concerned. In the opening paragraphs of *Silver*, two nameless salmon are spawning while a nameless man looks on with "tremendous interest." The salmon turn out to be the parents of Silver, who is from birth the "strongest and healthiest" salmon of them all,[20] the one who

manages to survive all sorts of danger and deprivation, reach the colossal weight of 60 lbs., and go up river to spawn not just once but four times. (This presumably is authentic, "survival of the fittest" Darwinism.) The man turns out to be the "Good Fisherman," because he is "such a great fisherman and fine sportsman" (29), knowledgeable about the ways of fish and concerned about conservation, but also so emotionally involved in the natural phenomena he observes as to be virtually a worshipper: "for he loved salmon as some men love their books or their wives, and his whole heart was bound up in the delight of gaining new knowledge of them" (9). When he catches Silver before he is full grown, the Good Fisherman marks one of his fins with a "small metal disc" (29), and returns him gently into the water. ["Small trout and salmon parr are delicate little things: if you just throw them back into the river any old how they're almost sure to die" (30)]. When Silver is full grown and, on his fourth journey to spawn, is unable to make the leap up the waterfalls because the water in the river is too low, the Good Fisherman is the only angler wily enough to catch the fish, and the catch is not merely a prize to the man, for he is deeply moved by the sight of the "great fish" with the "wonderful heart," fighting magnificently to the end, until he is simply "the battered glory that had been Silver" (94-95). The Good Fisherman's entire raison d'être is to observe and care about the salmon; the salmon exists only to struggle and reproduce, and his struggle is admired by – is even the chief inspiration to – the man.

Panther likewise begins with the mating of the parents of the principal character, Ki-yu, who is again the strongest and most aggressive of his siblings, as well as the only male. It ends with Ki-yu's death. Again the animal's life consists of one long struggle to survive and reproduce. Again there is a human observer of the animal, who hunts him yet who also understands and appreciates him. This time the hunter is named – his name is David Milton – and though his role is similar to that of the Good Fisherman, he is less sentimentalized and more fully developed as a character. That is not to say that his personality is probed in any depth; he has a wife, for example, but this relationship is completely unexplored. Rather his skill is elaborated upon: Haig-Brown carefully explains why he is such a good hunter. Basically, Milton has hunted all his life, and he is made for hunting. He has "confidence and understanding" as well as "experience and endurance."[21] His physical features are made to seem admirable because functional:

> His face was clean-shaven and pleasant, with a fine straight nose and a good-natured mouth and chin; but it was entirely dominated by his dark eyesclear, keen, tolerant eyes that told of endless patience, of a calm, good-natured acceptance of the queer things his life force upon him. After his eyes, his body was remarkable; long-armed and long-legged, supple and lightly built as a boy's, yet very sure of itself and carried with an ease that was perfect grace. He walked smoothly with a long, flat, straight-footed stride and an almost imperceptible spring to each step. He carried a rifle in the crook of his left arm

and a half-filled packsack on his backand he was so used to both burdens that they seemed to fit his body perfectly (Panther 27-28).

Indeed, Milton the hunter is remarkably like Ki-yu the hunted (who is of course also a hunter): a glorious animal different only in that he can think as well as follow instincts.

David Milton's attitude toward the panthers he hunts is not sentimental. At times he can even be shockingly perfunctory. When, for example, Milton shoots Ki-yu's mate, Haig-Brown manages to put pathos in the scene without putting pity in Milton. Ki-yu's mate, Osa, enraged because she has just lost all her young to a wolverine, is threatening one of Milton's dogs when he comes upon her:

He shouted, but she did not hesitate or look up; her eyes were fixed on Mona [the dog]. Swiftly he raised his rifle and fired. The bullet flew past Mona's head and struck Osa squarely between the eyes, so that she plunged forward and crumpled. Both dogs were upon her in an instant, tearing at her hide while she was still kicking; but the movement of her legs was feeble and uncontrolled and her claws had drawn in at the shock of the bullet.

David went up and stood looking down at the dogs. He heard Carl coming up the hill, hurrying to learn the reason of the shot, but he bent down and caressed both dogs.

"It's not the right one, is it, dogs?" he said softly. "But we don't care do we?" (Panther 155).

Nor is Milton's attitude toward his dogs sentimentalized, for his feelings are inextricably linked to his working relationship with the animals. When, for example, Milton thinks that both his dogs Jim and Jack have been killed, he is "wretched" mainly because of what the loss will mean to his ability to make a living:

He had time now to realise what his loss meant: Jim was dead; Jack also must have been killed or he would have returned by now – the only two dogs he had that were fully trained, the two dogs he had been hunting with for years and had learned to trust, which were his livelihood. Three years to train a panther-dog, he told himself bitterly, three years and less than a minute to lose one (Panther 111).

Milton's place in the web of life is not idealized. Milton hunts simply because he is "essentially a professional hunter. He made his living – supported a family and kept up his house at the mouth of Wapiti River – almost entirely by hunting panthers" (54). Nor does Milton have higher motives like conservation – though he does regard it as his duty to kill panthers who are threatening farms (132) and though he never kills wantonly.

If there is a conservation message in *Panther*, the message is subtle and indirect. One becomes so interested in the animal that one admires him – even though he is a killer who does become over confident and kills wantonly and

attacks farm animals, and even though he is never anthropomorphized. One feels that, so long as he kills to survive and does not interfere with legitimate human endeavours, he has as much or more right to roam free in the wild as does the man who hunts to feed himself and his family. Haig-Brown's motive seems to be to ennoble both Ki-yu and David Milton: to ennoble them and to show them as beings fulfilled because they engage themselves utterly in the ultimate life-and-death struggle. Their understanding of and struggle with each other ennobles them. There is here an almost Hemingway-esque code of ethics. This code raises rugged individualism almost to the level of religion, but the code in the final analysis is not quite satisfactory because it ignores questions about interrelationships between man and man. In the final analysis, *Panther* is very much a boys' book in the tradition of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle books*. Although the central characters in *Panther* are adult through most of the story, and although the treatment of animals is quite original, as is the theme, the central characters (with whom presumably the child identifies) mainly engage in having great adventures off by themselves away from society; and in doing so they consistently prove themselves clever and able fellows. In other words, *Panther* is an extended coming-of-age story where the protagonists never stop proving themselves until the day they die (inevitably of unnatural causes).

In the outdoors-adventure fiction written almost fifteen years after the animal fiction, *Starbuck Valley winter* and *Saltwater summer*, the hunter's side of the man-and-nature connection is still more fully explored. The coming-of-age story is divided into two parts, with the first book being about the individual finding his self, and the second being about the individual finding his place in human society. The central character in both books is Don Morgan, who is sixteen years old, an orphan living with his uncle and aunt on a farm in British Columbia. In the first book, *Starbuck Valley winter* (1944), one witnesses Don's growth to independent manhood, a growth of mind and spirit that takes him to the threshold of self-confident competence in his chosen profession as a hunter and trapper. In the second book, *Saltwater summer* (1947), one watches the young man growing into a social being, taking his place as a man among men. The two books together take place over the course of one year; Don's development is far faster than it would be in life; Haig-Brown has learned how to compress. The plots of both books are admirable crafted to highlight Don's step-by-step development without sacrificing suspense. In the first book the developments are task-related; in the second they are decision-related.

In *Starbuck Valley winter*, the question "Can I be a hunter?" is answered gradually as Don proves his skills initially by killing a deer by himself, then by successfully hunting and trapping for an entire winter, despite many difficulties and obstacles like loneliness, inexperience, his aunt's opposition to the scheme, a hostile neighbour, and his partner's being seriously injured. The

minor subplots – Don's inventing, building and testing a waterwheel to pump water to his uncle's house and his cousin Ellen's wanting to marry someone her mother does not approve of – carefully underline the importance of self-reliance and skill, and the need for young people to assert their independence despite parental opposition. Don's discoveries about his eccentric, aggressive hermit neighbour Lee Jetson – that he is a prospector like Don's own father; that he has been treated badly by people and is therefore overly suspicious of them; and that he can be a knowledgeable and helpful friend when he is offered understanding and treated well – underline the paradox that in becoming more confident of himself, Don becomes less rebellious against the adults around him. But it is Don's growing knowledge of himself, rather than of others, that is the most important in this book: others are mainly sketchy father-figures like Uncle Joe and Jetson who teach him hunting skills, or a peer like Tubby who lacks these skills and so suffers by comparison with Don. Like David Milton in *Panther*, Don Morgan is born to hunt. In *Starbuck Valley winter*, rather than a whole personality developing, one sees a hunter emerging; yet the text is not without psychological subtleties or without wider ramifications – one witnesses also the growth of an inventive, independent mind. This is made clear in the opening paragraphs:

> Young Don Morgan lay with his back against the roots of a big alder tree, looking out at the quick, broken flow of the Starbuck River. A long-handled, four-pronged digging fork was on the ground beside him and just back of where he lay was the dark-soiled clearing in the alders where he had been digging spuds since morning. Watching the river, his mind was busy with sudden inspiration. There it was, all that water going past, right past the farm, twenty-four hours a day, year in, year out, and there was, as they had said a thousand times, no way of getting it up on the land – no way that they could afford, anyhow. But the house was something else again. Now they pumped water by hand from the well outside the back door. Don's sudden inspiration showed him the river pumping its own water, not enough to irrigate the pastures perhaps, but enough for the house.
>
> The flow of water to turn a wheel and the wheel's movement used to drive the pump –even that old hand pump at the back door. It wasn't clear in his mind yet, but he knew he could work it out; it was a wonder Uncle Joe hadn't thought of it years ago, except Uncle Joe wasn't the mechanical kind.
>
> But even the new thought didn't make Don altogether happy. He wasn't exactly miserable – he hadn't any reason for being miserable and he had several good reasons for being happy – but he had so darn much figuring to do that for the moment the world seemed just to big to cope with.
>
> Everything was going on at once and nothing was happening, and from somewhere in the revolving, oppressive mix-up he had to find what he was going to do during the winter....[22]

Don Morgan is, as Sheila Egoff says, a "believable" teenage boy (*Republic* 156).

In *Saltwater summer* as the question "Can I be a fisherman?" is answered

– if he is to hunt in the winter, he must fish in the summer when he cannot hunt – Don's psychology is probed far more extensively as he comes to decisions about how to behave on the basis of his observations of the adults around him. Don is seen to be, as Egoff asserts, "a rather complex person" who is "moody," "ambitious" and "impulsive." His "path to heroism," says Egoff, "is a process of development, not a melodramatic change of heart" (*Republic* 156). What's more, the psychology of the adults is also probed – an important innovation on Haig-Brown's part. "Haig-Brown knows how to handle adults," says Egoff:

> In most Canadian children's books the world of youth is quite divorced from the world of adults. . . . Haig-Brown's adults do not catch the imagination as do Stevenson's great creations, but at least they exist. They have mixed motives, complexity, reality (Republic 156-7).

I cannot recall *any* children's book – British, American or Canadian – where the central, child character wants to and must involve himself with adults to such a degree. Indeed, to my knowledge, virtually all the important works of fiction for children of the last century or so in English have been written according to the unwritten law that children live in a world quite separate from adults. As Don learns to be a man among men, he is not just searching for a role model (although this is certainly a great part of what he is doing), he is also absorbing realities of the adult world to a remarkable degree. As Don sets off with his friend Tubby for the fishing grounds far north of where his uncle and aunt live, he begins to lose the prestige and self-respect that he earned through his hunting prowess the previous winter as he makes one mistake after another in his new situation – mainly because he does not follow the right examples. Some of the other men are lazy or ignorant, or they make excuses for themselves and drink to forget their troubles. One man, "Old Cowbells," is successful but strange and eccentric, keeping too much to himself. The partnership that most draws Don, is unfathomable because Red Holiday, who seems so competent, puts up with Tom Moore who is strangely silent, whose hands shake, who suddenly attempts suicide and then sobs uncontrollably. Gradually Don learns that Tom has been in the war and is suffering combat fatigue; Red served with him and remembers him as an outstanding leader of men. As Don learns by trial and error to balance confidence and assertiveness with a recognition of the worth of others, Tom (because of Red's faith in him and care) slowly recovers. When the men argue about the rights of the Japanese Canadians to fish and own land on the West Coast, Tom shows himself the clearest thinker. Later in several rescues, he shows himself courageous and strong, a leader again, but always capable of co-operation. By the end of the book, one supposes that Don too will eventually be some sort of leader (an outstanding specimen like Silver and Ki-yu), but he will be very much aware of his limitations, and of the necessity and strengths of others.

Otherness is likewise the crucial concept in *The Whale people*, written nearly fifteen years after *Starbuck Valley winter* and *Saltwater summer*, the book which Egoff calls one of Canada's best works of historical fiction for children (*Oxford Companion* 121), and which Stow says many call Haig-Brown's best work (19) – otherness being both other people and other creatures, human society and nature. In *Starbuck Valley winter* and *Saltwater summer*, the man-nature, man-man interface is not perfectly realized, with the former book concentrating more on Don's ability to cope with the wilderness and the latter on his ability to cope with people. In both books, man's relationship to nature is somewhat indirectly expressed in particular moments when Don finds himself very moved by his connectedness with the land and living creatures (as in the "ownership through knowledge" passage quoted by Keith) (9) or when Don learns an important lesson about nature like the need for conservation (as when he is goaded by drunken fishermen into killing a deer out of season, is shocked at his own behaviour, and thinks "Wrong to kill deer out of season, but it was more deeply wrong to kill and waste meat.")[23] In *The Whale people* Haig-Brown achieves a remarkable, even poetic vision of perfect integration between self, nature and society. *The Whale people*, says Egoff, has a "simple strength, dignity, and even starkness that are akin to the great northern myths" (*Republic* 104). Haig-Brown's creative imagination, says Egoff, makes us "part of man's long quest, first to find himself and then to find his place in the world around him" (*Republic 106*). *The Whale people* is, Egoff also says, a remarkable example of "dramatic unity" (*Republic* 106). Egoff is quite right. In this coming-of-age story, the action takes place over three years (not two, as Egoff says). During that short span, the central character, Atlin, son of a Hotsath tribe chief, develops from carefree childhood to competent adulthood. He experiences tragedy, triumph, and love; he learns how to earn a livelihood and lead his people; he wins a wife and saves his tribe from war; yet he is not a hero, but rather part of the long traditions of a proud people. That the title of the book is not *Atlin's quest*, or some such thing, but *The Whale people*, points to the unusual maturity of Haig-Brown's vision here, where he seeks to celebrate a people rather than an individual, a people whose existence depends upon their knowledge of and respect for nature and their ability to co-operate with each other.

Yet Atlin, like all Haig-Brown's protagonists in his fiction for children, is a remarkable being with whom a child would gladly identify. And too, the focus of the narrative is always on the boy, always on doing rather than thinking or feeling, and never blurs into abstract theorizing or moralizing. The book opens, for example, with a description of Atlin and a friend fishing:

> It was a hot day, with a westerly wind, but inside Kashutl Inlet, behind the rock bluffs of the northern shore, the water was still as glass. The two boys, Atlin and Hinak, were letting the canoe drift over the cod-bank that lay a few hundred feet out from the bluffs. The canoe tilted far over as both boys gazed down into the still water. They could not

see the bottom, even in the strong sunlight that streamed past them into the water, but the water itself was alive with the drift and movement of millions of tiny creatures and the flash of the eel-like bodies of the needlefish. The boys gazed past all this, into the deeper invisible depths from which they hoped to draw another movement.

One does not quickly get inside the main character through a dramatic outburst that reveals his emotional state, nor does one quickly get inside the action, through a lively scene that arrests one's attention. Yet the boys are not merely part of a static, picturesque scene. They are named, after all, and they are in the act of hunting, blending as perfectly as possible into the surroundings and searching for prey. The reader is looking at the boys, and the boys are looking into the water, and the water is a vision of flux and fecundity, and their quarry is an integral part of the whole pattern of life – to illustrate this is the function of the abstract language in the last sentences of the paragraph. Beyond the "drift" and "flash" are the "deeper invisible depths" from which they hope to draw not, specifically, a salmon or cod, but "another movement."

When one focuses more closely on the boys in the next paragraph, it is again what they are *doing* that is most important:

Hinak, a tall slender boy of fourteen, was pushing a long pole rather carefully down into the water, hand over hand. Atlin, who was shorter, more heavily built and some two years younger, was holding another pole in a thrusting position, but his eyes were on the distorted length of Hinak's pole as it pushed down into the depths....

Also important, warranting more detailed description than the boys themselves, is the instrument they use to hunt. Atlin's pole is "an old two-headed salmon spear of his father's, with points of bone and horn set in sockets at the tip and secured to the shaft by short lines of nettle fibre." The boys' relationship is defined in terms of roles established by their position in their society, roles from which they cannot deviate:

Although he was the younger of the two, it was Atlin and not Hinak who held the spear and made all the final decisions. He was the chief's son. Hinak was the son of a slave from a distant tribe, taken in war many years earlier.

In the third paragraph, when Atlin spears the cod, the boys work closely together, according to their roles. In the fourth paragraph, when they finally speak, their conversation is strictly about the catch, about Atlin's frustration at merely catching cod, which is "women's work," and about Atlin's desire to be allowed to go seal hunting, a closer step to his ultimate goal, hunting wales. Atlin's identity is being defined strictly in terms of his position in the ancient, Hotsath-tribe society. The action of the story will be subjugated entirely to Atlin's step-by-step development toward taking over his position as chief.

In the first half of the book (Chapters One to Eleven), Atlin is still a child, learning from his father Nit-gass, the chief. In the second half (Chapters Thir-

teen to Twenty-two), after a transitional chapter in which Atlin dreams about his father, Atlin is chief because Nit-gass is dead but he is not really ready to take on all the responsibilities entailed and is struggling to put to use what his father taught him. Atlin's main lesson from his father is that leadership requires spiritual power, as well as superlative skill and physical strength. The chief must not only lead the whale hunts and do the actual spearing of the whale, but also he must play a ceremonial role in daily life as well as in great festivals, and in doing so must ensure that through ritual real spiritual sustenance is given and received. Much of Nit-gass's teaching is devoted to clarifying the differences between mere superstition and good sense in spiritual matters. At the shrine, for example, Nit-gass lays aside Atlin's naive worries about "the skulls and skeletons and newly dead corpses that whalers were said to use in seeking the favour of the whale spirit" and shows him how to gain self-confidence, knowing it is "the real secret of success in striking and killing whales."[24] Spiritual preparation for the whale hunt consists in purifying oneself and concentrating one's thoughts on the task at hand. This is achieved by fasting, swimming in cold water like a whale, and praying where and when praying seems appropriate. Nit-gass's approach is contrasted to that of a lesser, neighbouring chief, Eskowit, who makes magic by robbing graves "so that dead whales will drift to the beaches" (30). While Nit-gass places great emphasis on exact craftsmanship in the making of hunting tools and painstaking preparations for the hunt, as well as team effort, the objects of worship are mere symbols that can be changed at will according to how one's beliefs grow and change as one observes life. In his rational approach to religion, Nit-gass follows the tradition of his father, also a chief, who in his day halted the tradition of spearing the flesh of Hotsath chiefs at the winter festivities because one of their strongest men had died through this. Tetacus decided that the spearing had become merely a "game" (78) not important enough to warrant its repercussions, and so dropped the ceremony. When Atlin is on the verge of truly being able to fulfill his chiefly duties, he too exhibits such powers of mind, for example dismissing the superstitious fears of the slave Hinak and explaining to him that the currents, rather than magic, bring whales to Eskowit's beaches (166).

What Atlin learns is that survival depends upon peaceful interaction with other tribes, effective co-operation within his own tribe, and good hunting. To achieve these ends, the chief must employ clear understanding of other people and animals; his efforts at purification and concentration help him totally identify with other people and animals, so that he is self-confident but not over-confident. Nit-gass respectfully listens to the council of his uncle Tokwit, whom he acknowledges as wiser than himself (36). He has a strong fellow feeling about whales: "I do not despise them," Nit-gass tells Atlin. "I love them as my brothers. That is why they take my harpoon and swim quietly to the beach with it" (23). A chief, Atlin's grandfather Tetacus explains to him, must "be

all things to his people;" yet he is "nothing without his people" (68). When at the climax of the novel Atlin kills his first whale, Atlin is a recognizable, proud, normal young man; yet he knows that the triumph is not his alone, although it is also his:

> It was a moment of elation and a memory that would stay with him until he died – the memory of the first time his heart and mind and body, the crew behind him and the gear they used had worked perfectly together to achieve their purpose (169).

And Atlin's greatest moment comes in the final chapter when, having proven his prowess as a hunter beyond all doubt, he shows magnificent generosity as well as diplomatic sagesse by giving the neighbouring chief his hard-won kill, making peace, assuring all concerned of a future common well-being. Atlin proves himself a master of the necessary struggle for reciprocity and mutual respect.

NOTES

1 W. J. Keith, "Roderick Haig-Brown," *Canadian Literature*, 71 (Winter 1976) 7.
2 Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976).
3 William Toye, ed., *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983), 330-331.
4 T. D. MacLulich, S. E. Read, and George Woodcock, "Three Views of Haig-Brown," *Canadian Literature*, 89 (Summer 1981) 178.
5 E. Bennett Metcalfe, *A Man of Some Importance* (Seattle and Vancouver: James W. Wood, 1985) 201.
6 See pp. 104, 118, 148, 155, 167, and 181 for interesting discussions of how Haig-Brown's psychological problems supposedly affected his writing.
7 H. G., *Canadian Forum*, 26 (Jan. 1947) 238.
8 Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975.
9 *Canadian Children's Literature*, 1 (Summer 1975) 17.
10 *Canadian Children's Literature*, 11 (Summer 1978) 37.
11 Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978. This book is now in its 4th edition (1988) and is edited by André Gagnon. I have not been able to check a copy of *Notable children's books* (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1973), ed. Sheila Egoff and Alvine Bélisle, in order to check its references to Haig-Brown. Most of Haig-Brown's children's books, except *Silver, Mounted Police Patrol*, and *Fur and Gold* are listed in *Canadian Books for Children*. Here librarians chose "the most informative, relevant and excellent books for children from among titles in print," according to the book's foreward.
12 *Michele Landsberg's Guide to Children's Books* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985).
13 The *Canadian Periodical Index* lists about half a dozen articles by Haig-Brown on children or on why reading is important, of which at least two are directly relevant to children (I was not able to see all the articles). The two directly relevant are "On Writing for Children," *Canadian Author and Bookman* 35 (Spring 1959) 4-6 and "On Receiving an Award," *Canadian Library Association Bulletin* 7 (Jul. 1956) 10-12. The other articles listed were (in chronological order) "Children", *Ladies Home Journal*

67 (Jul. 1950) 11; "How Important is Reading," *Canadian Library Association Bulletin* 12 (Aug. 1955) 24-8; "On Writing For Children," *Senior School* 75 (Oct. 1959) 23; "Delight and Charm of Books," *Canadian Library* 19 (Jul. 1962) 23-5.

14 C.S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," *Only Connect*, ed. Sheila Egoff, G. T. Stubbs, and L. F. Ashley (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969) 208.

15 Published as "On Writing for Children," *Canadian Author and Bookman* 35 (Spring 1959) 4.

16 Haig-Brown, "The Writer in Isolation," *Canadian Literature* 1 (Summer 1959) 8.

17 *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977) 4.

18 Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood*, int. F. R. Leavis (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1967) 31.

19 Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood: A Critical Guide to Canadian Children's Literature in English* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975) 150.

20 *Silver: the Life Story of an Atlantic Salmon* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1964) 14.

21 *Panther* (London: Collins, 1967) 27.

22 *Starbuck Valley Winter* (London: Collins, 1965) 7-8.

23 *Saltwater Summer* (London: Collins, 1969) 158.

24 *The Whale People* (London: Collins, 1962) 27.

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Heather Kirk *is a freelance writer and part-time Ph.D. student at York University, specializing in Canadian literature. Her M.A. thesis at the University of Toronto was on British children's literature, 1894 to 1914.*