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BC Studies Presentation

Individual and Collective Relationships with British Columbia’s Coastal Landscape in Roderick Haig-Brown’s *On the Highest Hill*

My presentation is on individual and collective relationships with BC’s coastal landscape in Roderick Haig-Brown’s novel, *On the Highest Hill*. Using the main character, Colin Ensley, I consider how individualism and collectivism play out in his relationship with the land. This paper asks large questions (although it does not answer them), such as what does BC’s natural landscape mean to people? Do people tend to think of the landscape objectively, spiritually or both? Are people’s perceptions of the BC landscape today much different than those in the 1930s?

So, Roderick Haig-Brown was a fisherman, judge, writer and conservationist, who moved to Campbell River in the 1930s. While the resource industry was booming more than ever in British Columbia, Haig-Brown was promoting conservation and ecological ideas. He was especially concerned about the impact of dams on salmon and the pace and scale of clearcutting on Vancouver Island. Scholars are interested in his twentieth-century conservation, because it provides philosophical background to different environmental movements, such as different forms of conservation and environmentalism. His conservation ideas changed throughout his life, from the 1930s to his death in 1976, likely because he witnessed a lot of ecological changes in BC.

Haig-Brown’s novel, *On the Highest Hill*, was published in 1949 and set in a BC coastal town during the Depression until shortly after World War II. It is a novel about Colin Ensley, who is a young man trying to find his place in the world. He is described as unusual, because he
is a shy daydreamer who prefers the company of trees and nature over people. Colin follows a pattern throughout the book, where he retreats to his cabins in the forests and mountains when he is upset with people or society. For instance, Colin often runs away, because of the mass amounts of unemployment that result in union strikes and violence amongst the employed and unemployed. He is discouraged by the crooked leadership that he witnesses in the local logging company and the union. After Colin returns home from the war, a vast amount of the forest surrounding his cabins is threatened by clearcutting. With the union workers ready to strike again, Colin witnesses the same issues and violence as before he left Canada; however, he can no longer escape society, because the logging company’s clearcutting threatens to populate the mountains and valley with loggers, eliminating his ability to retreat from the world. Even though Colin is reunited with his love, Mildred, he is worried, because the forests and mountains are the only places he feels content and happy. In response, he knowingly builds an illegal cabin on BC park land, far away from the logging. A whirlwind of events occurs, starting with a park ranger telling Colin to destroy the cabin. When the ranger returns, Colin panics at the thought of losing “his” property and one chance at happiness; consequently, he shoots a warning shot, but accidentally kills the ranger. Knowing he can no longer stay on park land, he burns his cabin and hikes to the top of “his” mountain to escape the search party seeking his arrest. Colin is eventually cornered at the edge of a cliff, forced to choose between literal prison and the metaphorical prison he associates with society, or freedom (i.e. jumping off the cliff), in which Colin chooses to jump, meeting his tragic end.

In my paper, I analyze how the tension between individualism and collectivism plays out in Colin’s relationship with the BC coastal landscape. I think the novel suggests that individualism is unavoidable, but a collective effort is necessary to protect natural resources from
irresponsible and excessive use, which is especially relevant nowadays in the wake of humanity’s largest threat – climate change.

In *On the Highest Hill*, the characteristics of capitalism – uneven wealth distribution, job competition and individualism – are so oppressive to the working class that their rights are often disregarded. Colin’s father, Will, has faith that his society and company will not leave him jobless, since he is skilled in his trade and “trusted by [his] company” (Haig-Brown 26).

However, Will’s faith breaks after his supervisor blacklists him for refusing to beat up a few union members that are holding meetings (Haig-Brown 140). His managers use job competition to their advantage, knowing that blacklisting Colin’s father will not hurt the company, as he will be easy to replace. After much fighting, the union gains more hours and better pay for its members. Colin’s mother, Martha, remarks that “the companies had been holding back something that it was in their power to grant” (Haig-Brown 124). The individualism of the owners is causing the working class to fight for necessities, such as food and livable wages. Job competition leads to men fighting and getting laid-off of work, causing Colin to feel a tremendous sense of futility in the capitalist system. A “free country” allows its people to plan a future, but without decent pay there is just survival (Haig-Brown 149). If the labourers want the lifestyle Canada promises – land to build prosperity, working for a livable wage and starting a family – then “the worker must fight, even to keep what he has” (Haig-Brown 285).

Collectivism and the union are occasionally positive forces in the novel, but the same individualism and lack of compassion in the logging company exists in the union. What is clear, however, is that a collective effort is necessary to gain social justice for the average labourer. Joan, who is the wife of one of Will’s co-workers, astutely observes that the only way the men will gain fair wages is through teamwork (Haig-Brown 94). Colin is ambivalent toward the
union, because he realizes its purpose is just, but he dislikes the widespread violence and fear amongst the members (Haig-Brown 202). At one point, a union member named Charlie Merck steals money from the union, because “a guy’s got to look after himself” (Haig-Brown 202). The men in the union are still living under a capitalist system, so even though they are working as a collective unit, the union’s power is threatened by its own members’ individualism. In comparison, when Colin is in the army (another type of collectivism), he enjoys the sense of teamwork and feels like he belongs in a way that he never has in society (Haig-Brown 273). After the war, the union’s authority grows, but it lacks sympathy and seems like another set of “shackles,” much like the corrupt leadership in the logging company that restricted people’s freedom (Haig-Brown 277). For instance, the union leaders recruit members through violence and scare tactics (Haig-Brown 284). Whether capitalist or collectivist, Colin is concerned with the lack of compassion and morality around him, seeing aggression and individualism in people too often.

The working class’s battle for livable wages, along with the fighting amongst the employed and unemployed, leaves Colin discouraged with society and drives him into the woods, where he develops a deep connection with the coastal landscape. Colin believes that the only places he “fits” are the mountains and the valley (Haig-Brown 287). British Columbia’s natural landscape allows him to escape from society’s problems and his own, giving him a sense of freedom and happiness (Haig-Brown 233). Haig-Brown was fond of the coastal landscape himself, with Arn Keeling noting that the conservationist believed outdoor recreation could lead to finding “spirituality and identity… in nature” (253). Colin captures the essence of Haig-Brown’s statement, since Colin understands himself better when he retreats into the mountains and the valley. When he describes his feelings toward the landscape, his descriptions are often
practical. For example, he frequently occupies himself with labourous work, such as trapping and hiking, and describes the “intense straining activity” as giving him “an exultant happiness” (Haig-Brown 293). The joy he finds in exercise and the satisfaction he feels after building a cabin is very realistic, but he also emphasizes peace, freedom, and spirituality in the landscape, which are Romanticized characteristics (Haig-Brown 227). Colin’s friend, Robbie, interprets their connection with the land spiritually, saying “God’s in everything – in this sand and in those mountains and in that sky” (Haig-Brown 108). His words “touch” Colin, accurately describing the spirituality in the landscape that they both feel (Haig-Brown 108).

Colin experiences the landscape in a Romanticized way, through the freedom he feels in nature and the pioneer desire for independence, but both are illusions and features of the wilderness myth. William Cronon talks about the wilderness myth in national parks and how it creates this fictionalized idea that these parks are landscapes untouched by human presence, which is remarkably similar to Colin’s perception of the coastal landscape. The wilderness myth, according to William Cronon, contains a paradox where people only exist “outside the natural” (17); therefore, if true nature is wild “then our very presence in nature represents its fall” (17). Cronon further explains that descriptions of “the wilderness” often contain spiritual values and “escape from responsibility” (16). Over time, the wilderness myth embodied the frontier myth, representing individual freedom from “the ugly artificiality of modern civilization” (Cronon 15). Cronon notes that the frontier was an era dependent on the concept of “free land on wilderness” (13); as a result, the wilderness myth adopted characteristics of the frontier myth, such as becoming dependant on the removal of Indigenous populations to create the concept of unoccupied and free land (15). Arn Keeling and Robert McDonald speak about the influence of the frontier myth on rural BC during the 1930s-40s, such as “pioneer dreams of independence”
As a conservationist, Haig-Brown would have been familiar with settler dreams of independence.

How does the wilderness myth relate to Colin? Well, Colin’s perspective on the coastal landscape resembles the wilderness myth, since he believes the BC landscape is free land that he owns. For instance, Colin believes the valley is his, because the land lacks human presence before his arrival; therefore, the cabins he built act as markers of his property (Haig-Brown 292). Haig-Brown is using a common literary settler trope, where the landscape is curiously absent of any First Nations presence. Colin’s feelings toward the landscape, as well as his choice to repeatedly run from society, are partially due to the freedom from responsibility and the spirituality that he feels in the wilderness (Haig-Brown 85). Lastly, the wilderness myth dismisses modernity and a few of Haig-Brown’s characters dislike modernity, too, like Robbie and Grant when they describe life in the city as “a pale, vicious half-life, dangerous and contaminating” (Haig-Brown 103). Clearly, society’s disregard for the natural environment is a concern of Haig-Brown’s. Perhaps, what is equally concerning is the illusion of freedom that Colin gains from the landscape.

Even though Colin seeks refuge from the tension between individualism and collectivism in society, his treatment of the coastal landscape reflects capitalist and collectivist characteristics. On the one hand, he lives simply in the mountains and valley, growing and hunting his own food and living with few possessions (Haig-Brown 220). His lifestyle is favorable to the environment and respectful to the interconnectedness he shares with the Earth, since he does not waste or excessively use natural materials. Similarly, collectivism considers the shared relationship between people and the environment (Williams 178). On the other hand, Colin admits there is a possibility that his cabin at the Gully is not “justified” or “practical,” since its main purpose is to
mark his possession of the Gully (Haig-Brown 227). He mentions that he feels a sense of fellowship and possession with the animals (279), as well as ownership over the valley (Haig-Brown 215). Although Colin is not materialistic and he does not use the land or nature for profit, his manipulation of the landscape to build impractical cabins is a form of exploitation. Under a Marxist perspective, exploitation of the natural environment is a characteristic of capitalism, since both (as James Goodman points out) “are in direct structural conflict” between human capital and natural capital (156). Secondly, Colin’s need to possess the BC landscape is a capitalist trait, since he desires ownership over it. Sam Gindin notes that ownership leads to capitalism rewarding and upholding Colin, then overriding any concept of shared community in the valley and Gully (3). From the beginning, Will says an “established citizen” owns land and Colin considers starting a farm numerous times throughout the novel (Haig-Brown 26).

Seemingly, land ownership to Colin is part of a successful and enjoyable life, whether he is removed from society or not. Overall, his relationship with the coastal landscape embodies aspects of capitalism and collectivism that are reflected in his property ownership and his sensitivity to the interconnectedness he shares with the natural environment.

Colin’s tragic death is due to two problems: he is unable to reconcile society’s tension between individualism and collectivism and he is under the illusion that the land is empty and offers freedom from society. For instance, Colin interprets the park ranger as “limit[ing] his freedom [and] deny[ing him] possession” when he is told his cabin must be destroyed, because it is on public park territory (Haig-Brown 307). Although Haig-Brown is writing fiction, he is conveniently using a literary settler trope by leaving the landscape empty of an Indigenous presence. Additionally, if the wilderness myth ties freedom to empty landscapes, then Colin’s freedom from society was an illusion, because the land was never empty of human presence. In
other words, Colin’s death is partially due to his reaction to the illusion of wilderness myth. However, his demise also results from his inability to reconcile his issues with violence in society. When he leaves the valley because of the logging operation, Colin says “a mans got to do something sooner or later” (Haig-Brown 296). His statement implies that one must fight alone, as opposed to fighting as a unit. It is as though the corrupt leadership of the union has jaded Colin, so he only sees futility and the “shackles” that the union and logging company represents to the working class (Haig-Brown 277). Nevertheless, the union is capable of positive change, since it raises wages and improves conditions for the workers (Haig-Brown 93). Colin believes in the union’s cause but he will not fight for it, causing him to indirectly weaken the union through his inaction (Haig-Brown 280). He wonders why “a man can[not] be free to work at a job and mind his own business” (Haig-Brown 278). In response, Earl, who is one of the other workers at the logging company, says maybe minding your own business was never an option (Haig-Brown 278). Once Colin shoots the park ranger, the illusion of freedom in the landscape becomes strikingly clear. Meanwhile, his choice to avoid conflict is like an impossible dream, much like running away from society.

Since collectivism and individualism dually embody Colin’s connection to the landscape, it seems like a balance of both in people’s relationships with the coastal landscape is a realistic option for preserving the environment and natural resources. Individualism plays a part in humanity’s survival, but the needs of the majority are a larger factor, embodying humanity’s survival and environmental conservation. Therefore, a collectivist rather than a capitalist approach would be more successful in maintaining a mutual relationship with the Earth. As Robert Spencer mentions, “environmental crisis is inseparable from” capitalism (47). Essentially, a capitalist society thrives on exploitation of people and nature, thereby threatening other
people’s well-being and the Earth’s limited resources for the sake of the individual (Williams 104). The wilderness myth is also problematic, since it allows people to envision the landscape as a sanctuary, and as Robert Spencer observes, sanctuaries do not allow for acceptable transformation of the natural landscape (45). Humans will impact the Earth and the Earth will impact humans, whether people respect the interconnectedness they share with the environment or not. In the end, Colin rejects collectivism in a capitalist society, which contributes to his own demise. With the union being the only successful force against capitalism, a collective effort is necessary not only to gain rights for the working class, but to gain rights for the environment. Arn Keeling says that even though Haig-Brown lacked a “coherent critique of the forces of state and capital,” he worried about the impact of society’s materialistic values on the BC landscape in the 1950s (260). His novel continues to give insight into how people bond with the coastal landscape and how collectivism must overpower individualism to achieve a harmonious relationship with the Earth.
Works Cited


