

to know a River

*Few men know rivers so intimately and fondly as does Roderick Haig-Brown. No one, before or after Izaak Walton, has written of these long and deep-running friendships more lyrically than Haig-Brown in his recently re-issued *A River Never Sleeps*. Three decades is a long time to wait, and we rust to reprint one of our favorite sections of the book on the following pages.*

Roderick Haig-Brown

I HAVE WRITTEN . . . nearly always of rivers—occasionally of lakes or the salt water, but nearly always of rivers and river fishing. A river is water in its loveliest form; rivers have life and sound and movement and infinity of variation, rivers are veins of the earth through which the life blood returns to the heart. Rivers can attain overwhelming grandeur, as the Columbia does in the reaches all the way from Pasco to the sea; they may slide softly through flat meadows or batter their way down mountain slopes and through narrow canyons; they may be heavy, almost dark, with history, as the Thames is from its mouth at least up to Richmond; or they may be sparkling fresh on mountain slopes through virgin forest and alpine meadows.

Lakes and the sea have great secret depths quite hidden from man and often almost barren of life. A river too may have its deep and secret places, may be so large that one can never know it properly; but most rivers that give sport to fly-fishermen are comparatively small, and one feels that it is within the range of the mind to know them intimately—intimately as to their changes through the seasons, as to the shifts and quirks of current, the sharp runs, the slow glides, the eddies and bars and crossing places, the very rocks of the bottom. And in knowing a river intimately is a very large part of the joy of fly-fishing.

One may love a river as soon as one sets eyes upon it; it may have certain features that fit instantly with one's conception of beauty, or it may recall the qualities of some other river, well known and deeply loved. One may feel in

the same way an instant affinity for a man or a woman and know that here is pleasure and warmth and the foundation of deep friendship. In either case the full riches of the discovery are not immediately released—they cannot be; only knowledge and close experience can release them. Rivers, I suppose, are not at all like human beings, but it is still possible to make apt comparisons; and this is one: understanding, whether instinctive and immediate or developing naturally through time or grown by conscious effort, is a necessary preliminary to love. Understanding of another human being can never be complete, but as it grows toward completeness, it becomes love almost inevitably. One cannot

Roderick L. Haig-Brown has written more good books on angling than any other writer. Born and educated in England, he came to the Northwest as a young man; both were the better for it. He has recently retired as Chancellor of the University of Victoria, British Columbia. His home is on the Campbell River.

This selection is excerpted from *A River Never Sleeps*, © 1946, 1964 by Roderick L. Haig-Brown, by permission of Crown Publishers, Inc.

"A river is never quite silent; it can never, of its very nature, be quite still; it is never quite the same from one day to the next." Photograph by Nicholas Foster.





"One may love a river as soon as one sets eyes upon it; it may have certain features that fit instantly with one's conception of beauty, or it may recall the qualities of some other river, well known and deeply loved." Accompanying photograph by David A. Gowans, Inverness-shire, Scotland.

know intimately all the ways and movements of a river without growing into love of it. And there is no exhaustion to the growth of love through knowledge, whether the love be for a person or a river, because the knowledge can never become complete. One can come to feel in time that the whole is within one's compass, not yet wholly and intimately known, but there for the knowing, within the last little move of reaching; but there will always be something ahead, something more to know.

I HAVE KNOWN VERY FEW RIVERS thoroughly and intimately. There is not time to know many, and one can know only certain chosen lengths of the few. I know some miles of the Dorsetshire Frome and of the little river Wrackle that cuts

away from the Frome by Stratton Mill and rejoins it farther down, because I grew up with them and had all the quick instinctive learning power of the very young when I fished there. It was a happy and proud thing to know those streams, and the knowing paid great dividends in fish; it paid even greater dividends in something that I can still recapture—sheer happiness in remembering a bend or a run or the spread below a bridge as I saw them best, perhaps open in sunlight with the green weeds trailing and a good fish rising steadily, or perhaps pitted by rain under a gray sky, or white and black and golden, opaque in the long slant of the twilight. I knew those streams through fishing them, through cutting the weeds in them, through shooting ducks and snipe all along them, through setting night lines in them, through

exploring them when the hatches were down and the water was very low. I carry them with me wherever I go and can fish them almost as well sitting here as I could were I walking the meadow grass along their banks six thousand miles from here.

I learned other waters almost as easily, though more superficially, when I was very young. The lower reaches of the Frome, between Wool and Wareham, where we used to fish for salmon, were harder to know than the best of the trout water because the river was deeper and darker and slower down there, more secret within itself. But I fished with a man who knew all the secrets, and we used the prawn a lot, fishing it deep down and slow, close to bottom and close under the banks. Fish lay where he said they should lie and took hold as he said they would take, and one remembered and fished it that way for oneself until the knowledge was properly one's own. I think I could still start at Bindon Mill and work on all the way down to the Salmon Water without missing so very many of the good places. And then, perhaps, I could walk back along the railroad track toward evening with a decent weight of salmon on my back.

I knew the little length of narrow carrier in Lewington's field by the bakery at Headbourne Worthy; it was so small and clear that one couldn't help knowing it and so difficult that one had to know it. I knew where each fish lay and why, how he would rise and when, what chance of ground would hide me during the cast, what tuft of grass would probably catch my fly on each attempted recovery. And Denis and I knew the narrow part of Avington Lake where the great pike lay under the shadow of the rank weeds; we knew the schools of roach and rudd and the few solitary trout; we had seen the big carp and the slow black tench; we knew, almost, where each little one- or two-pound pike had his hunting ground.

The winter days at Avington, under the tall bare beeches and ashes and sycamores, were very good. There were always mallard to be seen in hundreds, always herons, sometimes a peregrine falcon chasing the mallards; the cock pheasants were richer, burnished gold against the gold of fallen beech leaves, and rabbits sometimes rustled the leaves softly, unaware that we were fishing near them. The rank thick weed banks of the bottom showed clearly, green through the shallow water of the narrow part of the lake. We cast our big spoons and phantoms and wagtails far out, letting them into the unrippled water as gently as we could, then brought them twinkling back over the dark mystery of the weed beds. Sometimes a big pike was lying out over the weeds, and we tried and tried to tempt him. Sometimes one appeared suddenly behind the spoon, followed it and took or turned away. Sometimes—and this was best and surest of all—there was a heavy flash and a swirl as the spoon passed over a known lie, then the pull and the lunging fight.

THE FIRST WESTERN RIVER I learned was the Nimpkish, the seven twisting miles of it that lie between the lake and the sea. I learned the best of the trout pools first, wading the round and slippery rocks in an old pair of calked shoes, letting the swift water climb up to the pockets of my shirt and sometimes letting it knock me down and carry me half the length of a pool before I could find a way out of it. Then I learned the tyee pools and the cutthroat trout runs of the tidal reaches. Taking the canoe up to go over the traps, lining the big skiff through to the lake, fishing for steelhead, watching the salmon runs, I learned more of it and felt it my own. But I never really knew the river as one can know a river. I don't know, even today, just how and when the

steelhead run there, nor more than a fraction of their lying places. And I never could solve the secrets of Ned's Canyon and Wright's Canyon or that third one of the long, slow, deep pools on the river; they were so big, and I knew so many other places to catch fish that it was hard to give them time. But I once wrote a book that had the Nimpkish for a heroine and I saw and learned so much of her for myself through five or six years that I feel my faulty knowledge has given me a full love of her. Whenever I think of a western fishing river, one typical of all the best things that western fishing can offer, I think of the Nimpkish; and I expect I always shall.

The Campbell I know almost as a man should know a river. I don't know the whole story, or anything like the whole story; but the outlines of plot and characterization are clear and definite, much of the detail is filled in and each new detail fits neatly into an appointed place as I learn it. The Campbell is a little like the Nimpkish, yet most unlike it. Both rivers are broad and clear and swift, with broken, white water, rare, smooth pools and rocky beds. But the Campbell runs only three or four miles to salt water from the foot of its great Elk Falls, beyond which salmon and steelhead and cutthroat trout from the sea cannot pass. The Nimpkish is a highway to all the miles of Nimpkish Lake and the Klamath River and Woss Lake, to the Hustan River and the chain of lakes beyond that, and to all the tributary streams of the watershed. The Campbell draws to itself a noble run of winter steelhead, a run of fine cutthroats, a queer little run of small summer steelheads; it has its great tyees, its dying run of humpbacks, a fair run of cohos and dogs in some years, but no more than an occasional sockeye, probably a stray from some other parent stream. The Nimpkish has all the runs that the Campbell has in fullest strength and adds to them a fine run of true summer steelheads, a wonderful sockeye run and a fabulous dog-salmon run. The Campbell is the simpler river of the two, easier to know and understand for all those reasons. Nimpkish is more wonderful, more impressive, more beautiful; but Campbell—and not simply because I live within sight and sound of her—is the better of the two to love.

I can mark the months on the Campbell and tell myself, at least to my own satisfaction, what will be happening in the river during each one of them: In January the steelhead are running well; in February the cutthroats are spawning; in March and April the winter steelheads spawn; in May the little summer steelhead should be in the Island Pools, most of the humpback fry will already have found their way to the sea and the flying ants will hatch out; in August it is time to go to the Canyon Pool and look for the big cutthroats; in September the tyees are in the river; during October the cohos will come; in December the steelhead again. I know the May-fly and stone-fly nymphs that I will find under the rocks and the caddises that will crawl over the bottom in the different months; I know the rocks that the net-winged midges will blacken with their tiny cases, the places where the bright-green cladophora will grow richly, and where and when the rocks will be slippery with brown diatom growth. Some of these things, perhaps, are not important to know if one only wishes to catch fish; but they have their part in the pleasure of fishing.

I find I am quite often wrong about the Campbell even now. I may say that it is too early for the fish to be in, then go up and find them there. I can't always judge when the freshets are coming, but that, perhaps, is no more than saying I'm not an infallible weather prophet. Perhaps it is truer to say that I often find new things about the river than that I

am often wrong about her; and sometimes I suddenly realize things that I have known for quite a long time almost unconsciously. It is years, for instance, since I first knew that I could kill fish well in August with the fly I call the "Silver Brown." I tied the fly to imitate coho fry, which are the only numerous salmon fry in that month. In spring, when the river is full of many kinds of fry, the Silver Brown does not do so well for me, and I use the Silver Lady, which has a paler wing and a more complicated tying. I changed over with comparatively little thought, and the true inference of the change only came to me this year—trout may at times feed rather selectively on fry of different species.

Apart from bullheads and sticklebacks, one can expect some five or six different species of fry in the Campbell. Cutthroat fry and coho fry are so much alike that no sensible fish would bother to distinguish between them; it is reasonable to use the Silver Brown as an imitation of both. But humpback fry are like no other fry, trout or salmon; they are, for instance, quite without parr marks, their bellies are brightest silver, their backs generally bluish. I remember that I have fished a fly with long blue hackles for wings and often killed well with it during the humpback run. From there it is only a step to the making of a special humpback imitation; I think I shall start with something of this sort: tail—green swan, body—flat silver tinsel, hackle—scarlet and quite small, wing—blue hackles, back to back, enclosing a white strip and perhaps a strand or two of blue herl, cheeks—pale-blue chatterer. When I fish the river again in springtime, I shall use that fly.

If a coho-cutthroat imitation and a humpback imitation, why not imitations of the others in their days and seasons? The Silver Lady, perhaps, is sufficiently like spring salmon and steelhead fry. Yet the spring salmon fry has a light brown in his back and an impression of palest pink about him which the steelhead fry has not. It might make all the difference one day. So I shall build a fly with a tail of pink swan, a silver body and wings of barred summer duck enclosing yellow swan; and if that isn't good, I shall try grizzled hackles, preferably from a Plymouth cock with a touch of Red Game in him, set back to back with light-red hackles between them.

None of that is desperately important or highly significant and I suppose I should feel ashamed of having waited ten or fifteen years to think of it. What I really feel is a good measure of gratitude to the Campbell for having at last brought home to me the rather obvious point that, if it is worth trying for exact imitation of sedges and May flies, it is worth trying for reasonably exact imitations of salmon and trout fry. In time I shall think of dressings for the green color that is dominant in the backs of dog-salmon fry and the olive-grass green of the young sockeye's back. I may catch very few more fish through my efforts than I should have caught without them, but it's going to be fun.

I fish the Campbell with a sense of ownership fully as strong as that of any legitimate owner of fishing rights in the world not because I do own any part of the river, nor even because I should like to or should like to keep other people away from it; I should not care to do either of these things. The sense of ownership grows simply from knowing the river. I know the easiest ways along the banks and the best ways down to the pools. I know where to start in at a pool, where to look for the fish in it, how and where I can wade, what point I can reach with an easy cast, what lie I can barely cover with my strongest effort. This is comfortable and pleasant and might well begin to seem monotonous sooner or later were it not something of an illusion. I have a

fair idea of what to expect from the river, and usually, because I fish it that way, the river gives me approximately what I expect of it. But sooner or later something always comes up to change the set of my ways. Perhaps one day, waiting for a friend to fish down a pool, I start in a little farther up than usual and immediately hook a fish where I had never been able to hook one before. A little more of the river becomes mine, alive and productive to me. Or perhaps I notice in some unusual slant of light what looks to be a glide of water along the edge of a rapid; I go down to it and work my fly through, and whether or not a fish comes to it, more of the river is known and mine.

For years I have promised myself to fish through the sort of half pool below the Sandy Pool. It starts almost opposite my own line fence and is little more than a smoothing off of the long rapid that runs right down to the Highway Bridge; but there are many big rocks in it and—I can say this now—some obvious holding water. I fished it twice this spring. On the first evening I caught two or three fair-sized cutthroats, and once a really good fish broke water at the fly. I went down earlier on the second evening. A three-pound cutthroat came to my first cast. There was a slow silver gleam as the fly came around on the second cast, a solid heavy pull and the 2X gut was broken. I put up heavier gut and hooked a clean steelhead that ran me almost to the end of the backing. I hooked two others along the pool that evening, both of them too close to their spawning; but the pool is the Line Fence Pool now, something so close to home and so obvious that I took ten years to learn about it, a discovery as well worth while as any I have ever made.

ONE DISCOVERS OTHER THINGS than new pools and new fish lies in old pools. One learns to mark one's casts by such things as the kidney stones and the flat rock in General Money's Pool in the Stamp, one learns to hope for the sight of a pileated woodpecker crossing the river in swooping flight at this place, a flock of mergansers at that place, a dipper against black rocks and rippled water somewhere else, deer coming down to eat the moss on the rocks at the water's edge in hard weather. All these things are precious in repetition and, repeated or no, they build the river for one. They are part of the background of knowing and loving it, as is every fish hooked, every cast fished through, every rock trodden. And men and women come strongly into it. Here, I can remind myself, was where Ann sat that first day we came up the river together, and here it was that she loved the September sun the year before Valerie was born. Here we stopped and Letcher made us an old-fashioned before we went on to the Canyon Pool that day. Here Buckie brought his first fish to the bank, here I gaffed Sandy's first steelhead for him, here Tommy hooked one last winter, there it was that the big fish took Reg's line across the roots of the cedar tree. . . .

I still don't know why I fish or why other men fish, except that we like it and it makes us think and feel. But I do know that if it were not for the strong, quick life of rivers, for their sparkle in the sunshine, for the cold grayness of them under rain and the feel of them about my legs as I set my feet hard down on rocks or sand or gravel, I should fish less often. A river is never quite silent; it can never, of its very nature, be quite still; it is never quite the same from one day to the next. It has its own life and its own beauty, and the creatures it nourishes are alive and beautiful also. Perhaps fishing is, for me, only an excuse to be near rivers. If so, I'm glad I thought of it. ■

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