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Quiet Chap

ON THE HIGHEST HILL. By Rod-
erick Haig-Brown. New York: Wil-
liam Morrow & Co. 1949. 319 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by BRADFORD SMITH

COLIN ENSLEY grew up in Can-
ada's western lumbering country,
hated conflict of any kind, was shy,
withdrawn, and preferred the solitude
of the mountains and forests to be-
ing with people. His teacher, young
Mildred Hanson, thought him des-
tined for greatness and ultimately fell
in love with him. But all her encour-
agements and all Colin's travels in-
cluding a trip to Europe made pos-
sible by the war failed to develop the
greatness she had sensed. Colin re-
mains shy and withdrawn, and when
his beloved solitudes are destroyed by
logging, he is destroyed too.

A few of the book's other folk—par-
ticularly Colin's father—come clearly
into focus, but not enough to put
springiness into a tale that Colin's
own quietness seems to muffle.

Mr. Haig-Brown appears most in-
spired by the vast and unpeopled Ca-
nadian mountain country, which he
evidently knows well. The reader who
longs for forest solitudes, mountain
climbing, and trap lines may find him-
self living vicariously through Colin
Ensley. But Mr. Haig-Brown's skill as
a story-teller is not sufficiently strong
to arouse the enthusiasm of a reader,
even a lover of nature, who expects
more than the satisfying of such a
special interest in his fiction.

The novel is competent on most
counts but not exciting. Why not? I
think because Mr. Haig-Brown has
not clearly enough understood the
central character on whom the whole
book depends. We are led at the be-
ginning to expect Colin to grow up to
greatness, and we are disappointed.
By the tests of our culture he fails be-
cause he fails to live with anyone or
for anyone but himself. Mr. Haig-
Brown seems to have notions of mak-
ing Colin into a tragic character, but
for tragedy one must have great as-
pirations, great struggles, in order that
the ultimate failure may be full of
meaning. Colin, despite his gentleness
and his physical skill, never comes to
grips with the world. His retreat is
not even a retreat of one who has
tasted the world's rewards and found
them not worth striving for. The fix-
ation on his mother is introduced too
late and pursued too little to explain
Colin and convince the reader.

It is possible that Colin's creator
wanted to criticize a society in which
such people as Colin must be judged
failures. If so, he has failed to per-
suade, for Colin fails to contribute
anything to society, and we have no
other scale by which to measure a
man's value.

Static rather than dramatic and
lacking humor in either the wide or
the narrow sense, "On the Highest
Hill" is a book which will appeal
primarily to readers who are already
excited about lumbering, or western
Canada, or living alone in virgin for-
est, or who find in Colin a spirit like
their own.

The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place, and Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
THE CASE OF THE FAMISHED PARSON George Bellairs (Macmillan: \$2.50)	Bashing of emaciated Bishop at English seaside resort where Insp. Little- john is vacationing sets stage for intricate, excit- ing chase.	Littlejohn's per- suasive methods with cast of amus- ing—and sufficient- ly sinister—char- acters gives extra zest to ably plotted, mystifying affair.	Grade A British
PLUNDER OF THE SUN David Dodge (Random House: \$2.50)	Operative Al Colby, in Chile, takes on smug- gling job that leads through sundry fatali- ties to partial salvage of lost Inca treasure.	Struggle to get parchment that tells all about Inca hoard provides plentiful action, in- formation, colorful backgrounds, and some romance.	Excit- ing
WALK THE DARK STREETS William Krasner (Harper: \$2.50)	Knifing of small-city niterary entertainer in hotel offers variety of tragic suspects to plod- ding but imaginative Homicide Capt. Birge.	Sordid first slay- ing, murderous aftermath, and strange solution portrayed with bleak but entirely effective realism. Punch but no frills.	Grim— and good

the Phoenix Nest

ON REREADING "ETHAN FROME"

WHAT brought frail Mattie
Silver to my mind
That melancholy twilight late
in fall,
And made me seek her lover's name
defined
In gold among the books that lined
the wall?
A troubled love that mirrored their
romance?
Another Starkfield winter on the way?
A Zeena-like relentless circumstance
Unconscious of the havoc it must
play?
Not these: a simple need to under-
stand
How they had loved who never spoke
love's name;
While our wise theorems, written in
the sand,
Yield us, as love's philosophers, but
fame.
No warmth, no joy sufficient to the
hour:
Ours the dry seed, but theirs the
crumpled flower.

—MARILOU S. LODER.

* * *

HERRING FOR GRANDFATHER

Roe herring was Grandfather's wish;
Roe herring was his chosen dish.
"Fit for the best of men," he said,
"Is herring and hot batter bread."

The Chesapeake, James, and Rappa-
hannock;
Chickahominy, York, and the Poto-
mac
Gave roe herring to soothe his hunger
Until it seemed they could no longer.

There was no doubt this *aqua manna*
Might bless the Hudson or Susque-
hanna.

From Kennebec and Penobscot some
might be deducted;
But Grandfather had never been re-
constructed.

"Up North, the fish," Grandfather
swore,
"Are nervous and skinny"; and he
was sure
This urge of production in Northern
waters
Was not directed toward herring
daughters.

All herring unequipped with roe,
Grandfather thought malapropos;
And it was not without compunction
He acknowledged the male to have a
function.

Grandfather bows his grizzled head
Over the fish and batter bread.
He says a grace for both the dishes,
With special praise for herring fishes.

—BRODIE HERNDON.

* * *

CONVERSATION WITH A CEILING

Why do I usually wake at about
2:00 A.M.? It's because you go to bed
so early. Yes, but I often read in bed
till nearly midnight. You didn't last
night; your book fell to the floor at
ten. Why is the world full of dictators
and Congressmen? And radio com-
mercials? . . . Thought police, thought
control; why on earth are they spend-
ing all this time trying to establish
the fact that Marx advocated the
complete overthrow of capitalism and
that Lenin did the same when every-
body knows and has known for years
and years that that is just exactly
what they did advocate? Am I a re-
actionary? No, according to that lady
who wrote me—a certified public ac-
countant she is—I am a vicious Red
and during the war she collected bits
of verse of mine in *THE PHOENIX*
NEST and turned them over to the
FBI! I wonder whether the FBI liked
any of them? I should thank all the
people who have written me about
the *Life* business. God, please let me
thank all those good people! I will be
excessively noble and even thank
those people who wrote in saying I
was a dupe, a dope, a traitor to the
cause of freedom, etc., etc. I also
thank, on my own side, a number of
warmheartedly violent contribs and
Editor Lalone of the *Christian Leader*,
a Universalist journal founded by
Hosea Ballou in 1819, long may it
wave! He spoke of me perhaps too
kindly. And the lady who sat under
Dr. Emery Shipler's ministry in
St. Paul's, Chatham, for some six
years, Sunday after Sunday, and
bears witness to his true Christianity.
And Mrs. Thomas W. Lamont, who
said, "It is so comforting to know that
there are a few people, anyway, with
the courage to speak out. Do it again."
But I think the meanest thing about
those *Life* pictures was that of
Vida Dutton Scudder, a great and
good woman and author of "The Life
of the Spirit in the Modern English
Poets," "Socialism and Character,"
"Social Teachings of the Christian
Year," editor of the works of John
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