

# The Roger Baxter Series Rescued From Obscurity

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*September 10, 1998*

*Published in Yellowback Library #174, December 1998,  
under the pseudonym Michael Harris*

1,255 words

Almost two years ago, I completed my collection of the Rick Brant series, for the most part a skillfully-written set of stories and thoroughly enjoyable. I asked a couple of book-collecting friends for suggestions of a series to collect next. Both urged me onto the Ken Holt series. I am embarrassed now to admit that, being fairly new to series book collecting at the time, I had not heard of Ken Holt. Growing up in the 1950s, I had read the Hardy boys, Tom Corbett, Tom Swift Jr., and Rick Brant. Somehow, I had missed Ken Holt.

But I took their word for it and bought *The Riddle of the Stone Elephant* from a local used book store where for several months I had seen it undisturbed on its shelf. When I turned the last page, I knew that my friends had steered me to one of the superlative series of all time. With the help of a few other collectors and enormous good fortune, I was able to round up all eighteen volumes in short order. Where I had read the Ricks like a child gobbling candy, I began to ration the Kens like a man hoarding water in the desert. (I still haven't read the last six volumes!)

One can imagine my delight, therefore, when I discovered the Roger Baxter series, written by Sam and Beryl Epstein, the authors of Ken Holt. (Sam and Beryl, now in their late eighties, live in retirement on Long Island.) This series consists of three books that were first put between boards in the late 1940s. The books are called *Stranger at the Inlet* (1946), *The Secret of Baldhead Mountain* (1946), and *The Riddle of the Hidden Pesos* (1948). They were written under the pseudonyms Charles Strong (volume 1) and Martin Colt (volumes 2 and 3). The Rogers are definitely not only from the same pen wielded by these prolific and talented writers, but lead directly into the Ken Holt books. Every Ken Holt fan must understand that no collection can be complete without the Roger Baxters.

Roger Baxter and his younger brother Bill live in Seaview, a small town on the Atlantic coast. Roger is 14 and Bill is 12. In spite of Roger's youth, he is clearly a precursor to Ken Holt. He is meticulous and reflective, analytical in his thinking, and courageous in action. Bill is an obvious anticipation of Sandy Allen. He is a tight partner and close friend to his brother, equally courageous when he needs to be, and also can consume a tableful of food. The plots of all three books show the inimitable Ken Holt style: the absence of coincidence to resolve rough spots in the action, marvelous descriptive passages, believable and very dangerous villains, convoluted and inspired storylines, and imprisonment by the bad guys before ingenious escapes and ultimate triumph.

The boys' youth is only a minor handicap to the action, as their ability to get around is made possible by being teamed up with a government agent whom they meet in the first book. He learns by experience that he can depend on the boys, and makes them his partners in the case at

hand while providing the requisite adult oversight for the mysteries. He becomes a vital character in the subsequent books as well.

The adventure in the first book takes place right in Seaview, located on an inlet of the Atlantic Ocean, where some sort of smuggling operation is known to be going on. An undercover operation is set up by a government agency to catch the smugglers in the act. Naturally, Roger and Bill become indispensable to the success of the venture—but not without a lot of danger and excitement.

The following quote from *Stranger in the Inlet*, taken from a scene when the two boys are on watch from a cliff in the middle of the night, is typical of the quality to be found throughout the books:

Roger was about to assure himself that he had been imagining things—that he was as bad as Bill—when he stopped still again. He felt certain there had been a movement over near the trunk of a solitary tree that grew by itself, out on the rocks.

With a warning squeeze of Bill's arm, he shifted his course slightly toward the left, and moved slowly forward again, keeping in the shelter of the wood's edge.

Bill motioned, to indicate that they were to have gone straight ahead, but Roger only nodded impatiently and pulled him along. And then once again he stopped, this time frozen in his tracks. He had seen something, over by that tree, that could have only one explanation. It had been a tiny fiery arc, curving down toward the waves below. It could have been made only by a cigarette, tossed from the rocks into the sea.

"Did you see what I saw?" Bill's tense whisper breathed against his ear.

Roger nodded. And now there was a definite movement over there by the single tree, and the figure of a man stood apart from it, to be silhouetted against the faintly star-lit sky. The figure reached up long arms in a lazy stretch, and then melted back into the tree again. But they had seen it clearly. They had both seen it.

The second book, like *Stone Elephant*, is set in Colorado, where the boys' father, an engineer, is responsible for overseeing a crew digging a tunnel through Baldhead Mountain. Sabotage by person or persons unknown is a regular occurrence, however. Roger and Bill, visiting their father for the summer, become involved in discovering who is behind the destruction and why. In one of the most tense moments in any series book, the boys are trapped in a mine behind a hundred feet of dirt and rock, deliberately caved in by their enemies. Hoping to follow an underground stream outside, they discover that it leads only to a small, motionless pool:

They found themselves in a sort of room hollowed out of the heart of the mountain. The roof and walls were all one, like a bowl turned upside down—a bowl roughly twenty feet across, and nearly five feet high. The stream, that entered it where the boys had come in, spread out over the whole floor like a smooth cool carpet. ... Then Bill said in a small strange voice, "But how do we get out of here?"

The third story takes place, like two of the Ken HOLTs, in Mexico. The boys decide to close off their summer stay in Colorado with a leisurely drive to Mexico City with their government agent friend. Alas, leisure will not be possible, for they discover that someone has secreted an enormous amount of pesos in their car, and that they are being chased through the Mexican

countryside. The action, reminiscent of Ken Holt's Mexican adventure, *The Mystery of the Green Flame*, is unrelenting and superbly exciting.

The Roger Baxter series has only one flaw: it is too short. Three of these exceptional books are simply not enough. But fortunately, Ken Holt takes over for 18 volumes. *Riddle of the Hidden Pesos* appeared in 1948, but Ken Holt debuted the next year in *The Secret of Skeleton Island*.

The originals of the Roger Baxter series are very hard to find, but fortunately, fifty years after they were published, the three books have been brought up from obscurity and scarcity, and (while copies last) are available in authorized reprints from Jim Towey.