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The Silencing of Clayoquot Sound

by Boyce Richardson

Witness to Wilderness: the Clayoquot Sound Anthology Arsenal Pulp Press, 292 pages, \$17.95 paperback

Clayoquot and Dissent Ronsdale Press (formerly Cacanadadada), 219 pages, \$9.95 paperback

On Easter weekend, 1984, I went to Tofino in British Columbia to film a demonstration by a then tiny, local organization, known as the Friends of Clayoquot Sound, against the planned clear-cutting of Meares Island by MacMillan-Bloedel. It was miserably wet, and so rough in the harbour that a procession of small boats had to be cancelled and the demonstration adjourned to the local school. During the delay I went up with the cameraman in a small plane. We flew between Meares island and the narrow peninsula of Pacific Rim National Park, and then across the island and around Clayoquot Sound, a magnificent landscape of steep, craggy hills covered in heavy coastal forest. We were buffeted by strong winds, a nansailing flight.

When we got around to the back of Meares Island, the spectacle that greeted us was something I will never forget. All around the sound steep hills had been devastated by clear-cut logging. Crude roads slashed around the hillsides had begun to wash away, creating huge slides. The logging seemed to have been wasteful. I was told later that the wastage was 30 per cent, so great that a separate industry had sprung up of small companies salvaging, by helicopter, the wood left behind by the clear-cutters.

I was amazed that any self-respecting nation could have placed such a glorious

landscape in the hands of profit-making businessmen. But I was equally astounded that any industry with the slightest concern for its own future could engage in such insensate practices. I came to the conclusion on the spot that not only Meares island, which then was under dispute (as it still is), but all of Clayoquot Sound, including Vargas and Flores islands, should be protected. Somewhere a halt had to be made to the destructive tendencies of *homo sapiens*. But did anybody care enough?

The heart-warming and inspiring anthology *Witness to Wilderness* testifies that, yes, many thousands of Canadians do care enough, and ten years later have made the fate of Clayoquot Sound into a major issue of public policy and have turned Canada's logging practices into a matter of international protest. This has been a remarkable achievement, for these protesters have contested the entrenched power of governments shamelessly aligned with internationally mobilized capital (which, as we all know to our cost, is now the dominant influence in economic and social policy-making in virtually every country in the world).

The essays in *Clayoquot and Dissent* give a detailed analysis of what has been achieved, and of the extremely unequal forces at play. It is a superb book, and if the country were being properly run would become required reading in every high school civics course (if there are still such things). But its conclusions are sombre, and should be of concern to everyone who cares about the quality of Canadian political and social discourse, and about the future of the country.

Witness to Wilderness contains 120 short pieces — poems, essays, reminiscences, jokes, articles — half of them written by women. I am sure that many thousands of

Canadians will recognize in the vision of its authors an attachment to the earth and to the nation that could give meaning to a collectivity that, in spite of our best efforts, has come to seem almost insignificant in this brutal and confusing world. At the same time, the book makes clear how much commitment is needed to oppose these powerful forces, commitment by individuals who are apprehensive and fearful of what it will mean to them if they stand up to be counted. Many of the contributors describe how conscience led them to the conclusion that they must do something. They are afraid when confronted by the huge logging trucks, by the taunts and insults of people who have been schooled to think of them as enemies, by the solemn injunctions of the courts and by the rough power of the police. Most people, especially of the middle class, never have to confront such things, and it is difficult. What is equally moving is their exhilaration at having done something.

Some feel they can win. "With luck, dedication, the power of a vast group of individuals, and hope, it seems inevitable that Clayoquot Sound will be protected," writes Valerie Langer of the Friends of Clayoquot Sound. "We have begun to set the agenda for how we want to see our wild lands, everywhere, respected....The forest corporations are on the defensive now. Their arrogance in the face of the public is turning to panic as they begin to comprehend that their days of controlling the forest agenda are numbered."

This is a bold claim, especially when one thinks of the broader picture. Clayoquot Sound opens out to the whole situation of the global economy, where the neo-conservative agenda, fuelled by the huge financial power of the giant companies and their client governments, is roll-

ing over the hard-won rights of people everywhere. As the anthology shows, opposition to this agenda, and to the huge network of officials, police, judges, unions, managements and publicists who are busy imposing it, requires greater effort and commitment than most people are able to make.

The most shattering revelation in these two books is that in spite of the biggest, best organized and most effective act of civil disobedience in Canadian history, and in spite of government promises to redress the wrongs, in 1994 the clear-cutting of the Clayoquot's old growth forest is proceeding as rapidly as ever.

Clayoquot and Dissent ends with a montage of pictures of many 1994 clear-cuts in which salmon streams have been violated, mountain landscapes devastated and protective regulations flouted, a year after the provincial government supposedly put a stop to all this. Every single block examined in a Greenpeace audit of recent clear-cuts has violated provincial standards. Even government audits from the last two years show that, on average, more than one stream with what the government calls "fisheries concerns" is damaged by every clearcut. The companies remain free of prosecution, while citizens who have protested have been treated as criminals. In other words, the big companies have been permitted simply to flout the law at will and to ride roughshod over public dissent.

How could this happen? Ronald B. Hatch, an English professor, has done us a great service with his long description of the miasma in the courtroom. He has undertaken this task because, apparently, lawyers are unable to criticize the courts for fear of damaging their careers.

The individual defendants were never permitted to mount a defence. They were charged initially with a civil offence by the MacMillan-Bloedel company. If the cause had proceeded in this way the defendants could at least have defended themselves on the grounds of conscience — the unconscionable behaviour of the companies

would have been described in court. To prevent this, your friendly NDP provincial government took over the case, which was then prosecuted by the Attorney-General who transformed the charge into a criminal offence, namely, contempt of court. Individuals who were not members of any organization were treated as a mob — or, in legal terms, as a group — and were jointly charged as such. The only evidence permitted in court was concerning the presence of the defendants on the logging road and the reading to them of the injunction. If they admitted to both, they were guilty, no further questions asked. And the sentences, up to 45 days in jail and up to \$1,500 in fines, for people with no previous convictions for anything, were wildly out of proportion to those given by the same courts to perpetrators of truly criminal acts.

In a beautiful essay in the same book, Dr. Maurice Gibbons, who offered himself for arrest with his wife Marguerite, describes how their lawyer told them there was no real defence: their best course was to go for a light sentence by pleading guilty, claiming that they were confused and didn't realize what they were doing, apologizing to the court for their contempt and promising never to do such a thing again. In other words, the only permissible defence was to disavow the very purpose of their highly principled actions! Is this what the law has come to in Canada?

The analysis in this book leaves us few grounds for hope for an improvement in the human and ecological condition; Clayoquot, after all, is only one of dozens of similar issues being fought across Canada and of thousands around the world. In British Columbia alone there are more than 30 environmental flashpoints, not to mention the many places in which Aboriginal people are under threat. There is, for example, the battle over the Kemano Completion Project, a gigantic boondoggle of the provincial and federal governments, allied with Alcan. The victims, the Cheslatta people, have been trying with only moderate

success to make a national issue of their cause. For another example, readers might like to consult *Nemiah, The Unconquered Country* (New Star Books, Vancouver), the latest in Terry Glavin's remarkable series of studies of Aboriginal cultures. It is an agonizing story of an entirely viable Aboriginal ranching community in the Chilcotin which is simply being run over by clear-cut loggers, in total disregard for the community's rights, and with devastating effects on the rich human quality of their lives. This is happening in every province. I will spare readers a more complete catalogue of these horrors.

Governments that are elected by the people actually turn out to represent the companies. Langer says provincial and federal governments have spent more than \$9 million on public relations for the companies in the Clayoquot battle, with five times as much to come. The battle for Clayoquot Sound has made it clear that the only interest really served by clear-cut logging in the B.C. forest is that of the huge companies. It is a colonial-type enterprise in that most of its fruits go to people elsewhere. The highly mechanized methods of the clear-cutters have reduced the B.C. forest workforce by 25,000 in the last decade. The union movement has allowed this to happen with scarcely a peep, and is now passionately aligned against environmental protesters because they are threatening jobs! This is rainwashing on a major scale.

Selective logging would not only preserve the forest but would give local people a stake in its use, through both profits and employment. But it is unlikely that this will ever be undertaken. Every provincial government has handed over control of the forests to private companies, to do with them more or less what they will. In British Columbia the instruments of this surrender of public property are called Tree Farm Licences, in Quebec, CAAF agreements.

When in the mid-'80s I was researching the film I referred to at the beginning of

this review (on the history of national parks), I learned to my astonishment how this system works. Although Pacific Rim National Park had existed for 15 years, the federal government owned only one per cent of the land within the park, because for years the Social Credit government of B.C. had been holding the federal government to ransom on behalf of the forestry companies. Tree Farm Licences come with an annual allowable cut; if the government withdraws more than five per cent of this, the companies are compensated. Thus the Scredts were holding out for many millions of dollars to be paid by the Canadian taxpayer to private companies in compensation for their not cutting trees owned by the taxpayer! The same tactics were adopted later in setting up the national park in the Queen Charlottes. In both cases, I believe, the government surrendered and made the payments. This is an equitable way to run a country? Whatever happened to the public interest?

A fascinating essay in *Clayoquot and Dissent* by UBC ecologist Loys Maingon, also arrested, analyzes how these corporations have come to have such unchallengeable power, and why all dissenting opinion has to be marginalized. Beyond anything else in these two books, this essay should give thoughtful people the heebie-jeebies. Maingon describes environmentalists as a distinct cultural group, somewhat akin to the Aboriginal people, in that they both "oppose the hegemony of technocratic corporate culture" and the ecocide it is practising. They share with the Aborigines "the recognition of the earth as a living entity". This is such a radical idea that both groups have to be marginalized by the technological-consumer culture if it is to maintain its drive for political power.

What makes environmentalists so dangerous, he says, is that they too practise science, but of a kind that is heretical to a technology-driven society. The mainstream authorities use the media to marginalize informed dissenters by packaging accept-

able images that will shape public perceptions. Ironically, even the Clayoquot protesters were forced into using the media to publicize their actions, although they knew that the media would reinterpret ("repackage") their actions so as to undermine their grassroots character. "In effect, the media assumed control of the protest to bring it into mainstream thinking," transforming a profound ecological, cultural and political protest into the familiar categories of "trees, jobs and loggers....The event is raped of its inherent cultural significance."

No wonder, then, that the legal process was also rigged to deprive the defendants of a chance to argue their case. Clayoquot, says Maingon, poses the need for a reassessment of our cultural direction.

These two books challenge the very basis on which our society rests. Their message is not cheerful, but at least they show that many people are not prepared to go under without a fight.

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