

Second Annual George Ryga Award for Social Awareness in B.C. Literature, July 2005 Adjudicator's Summation by Ross Tyner

In his lecture on the occasion of Canadian Literature Day in 1977, published later that year as "The Need for Mythology" in *Canadian Theatre Review* and again in 1992 under the same title in the Talonbooks collection *Summerland*, George Ryga bemoans the "crisis of spirit" he has witnessed in modern Canada and advocates a Canadian literature of commitment that communicates "the authentic fears, preoccupations and exaltations of the people" (208).

In what is but one of many of Ryga's works whose primary subject is the role of the writer in society, he continues:

Once we have opted for children, the only promise of immortality left to us, the obligation to history, to a piece of this earth, to the generations to come, begins. We are caught in the business of the spinning earth even far beyond the grave. Only madness exempts us from the responsibilities and rewards of changing the landscape and changing ourselves. (209)

The three finalists for this year's George Ryga Award for Social Awareness in B.C. Literature all eloquently demonstrate that Ryga's preoccupation with issues of culture, justice and society flourishes in early 21st century publishing in this province. In *A Stain Upon the Sea: West Coast Salmon Farming* (Harbour), a group of scientists, environmentalists and journalists exposes to the public the environmental, economic and social costs of the salmon farming industry and convincingly links the fate of wild Pacific salmon to that of British Columbians. Roy Miki, in *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice* (Raincoast), painstakingly describes the long process by which Japanese Canadians won a settlement for injustices they suffered at the hands of the Canadian government during World War II, in the hopes that other groups and individuals might benefit from their efforts and that all Canadians might better understand the complexity inherent in the concept of redress.

Had Robert "Bob" Hunter's *The Greenpeace to Amchitka: An Environmental Odyssey* (Arsenal Pulp) been published in 1971, the year in which the manuscript on which it is based was written, rather than in 2004, one can imagine that Ryga would have approved of its attempt to change the landscape, while simultaneously protecting it. Near the midway point of the Greenpeace's grueling six-week voyage, the objective of which was the preemption of a United States nuclear test in the Bering Sea, Hunter, following an emotional telephone conversation with his wife and children, describes his motivation for persevering in the face of long odds against success:

[W]hat kind of looks are your kids going to give you ten or twenty or thirty years from now when the whole shebang comes crashing down and they die of leukemia or cancer or bone-rot or DDT, or they are driven mad by overcrowding, or wiped out in a nuclear war, and they ask us, Why did you let this happen? The environmental destruction of the world is going on everywhere, in plain view, so anyone who carries on business as usual, or sits on their ass or keeps their head buried in the sand, is an accomplice in the crime of murdering the future. (147, 149)

Today, more than thirty years after the odyssey Hunter chronicles has ended, while the "whole shebang" hasn't come crashing down, the signs of an impending renewal of the nuclear arms race are evident, and the "echo" of Hunter's generation is showing a will to mobilize against perceived injustice that is reminiscent of the spirit of the protests of the 1960s and '70s. The more perspicacious among today's group of protestors will discover on their own and wrestle with the sober self-doubt that inevitably collides with the buoyant optimism required of any group of people who believe they can and will change the world. For those who require a primer on self-doubt and humility, Hunter provides it in the following passage from the book, in which he reflects on the support Greenpeace has received from Prime Minister Trudeau, the United Church of Canada, the

Kwak'wak'wakw Nation, Chief Dan George, the B.C. Federation of Labour, members of the U.S. Coast Guard, and others:

[I]f all these people care so much, how come they are all carrying on busily doing what they always do? Why is business going on as usual? In a sickening flash that takes me as low as I was high a moment before, I see that a revolution can go no faster or further than people themselves, and together people generate inertia. Even in this situation, when hundreds of thousands of people all over the political spectrum join together in a common objection, there is not enough momentum to move people out of the mass inertia. The Megamachine continues to plunge unimpeded toward destruction. (125)

Hunter's narrative derives much of its force from similar interior monologues, in which his indomitable enthusiasm and strength of conviction attempt to overcome the emotional disappointments and physical adversities that characterized the voyage. By the end of the journey, which failed to reach its intended target of the Amchitka nuclear test site, pessimism is winning the day and Hunter speaks somewhat cynically of the descent "from the pure crystalline heights of an international life-or-death protest to a troupe of party politicians making speeches" (201). It is only in 2004, with the perspective of more than thirty years of hindsight, that Hunter recognizes the true meaning of his work:

The trip was a success beyond anybody's wildest dreams. That bomb went off, but the bombs planned for after that did not. The nuclear test program at Amchitka was cancelled five months after our mission, and some scholars argue that this was the beginning of the end of the Cold War. Whatever history decides about the big picture, the legacy of the voyage itself is not just a bunch of guys in a fishing boat, but the Greenpeace the entire world has come to love and hate. (236-7)

As the legacy of the Amchitka voyage is impressive, so is that of Hunter, its chronicler, who died this past May at the age of 63. In 2000, *Time* magazine named him one of the 20th century's top ten environmental heroes, and obituaries, including those in "establishment" press sources such as *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Economist*, lauded him as "the original eco-warrior", "the man who initiated the modern environmental movement", and "a man of action who inspired a new brand of personal environmental activism."

Writing for *The Guardian*, Cathryn Atkinson reported that "[i]n 1979, when Greenpeace received a call from US President Jimmy Carter applauding its efforts to save whales, Hunter said he realized that the organization had come full circle, from environmental fringe group to something much bigger and with vast appeal." Fittingly, Hunter himself also came full circle, in that the last of his fourteen published books, *The Greenpeace to Amchitka*, lyrically and compellingly relates the events – with their accompanying "fears, preoccupations and exaltations" – which first brought him into the public eye. For this attempt to change the world, the late Bob Hunter, the book's photographer Robert Keziere, and its publisher, Arsenal Pulp Press, are honoured with the second annual George Ryga Award for Social Awareness in B.C. Literature.

Works Cited

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- Hume, Stephen, et al. *A Stain Upon the Sea: West Coast Salmon Farming*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2004.
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