

## A Counterblast by George Woodcock

It is agreed among writers that to be condemned is infinitely preferable to being ignored, and that the more elaborate the condemnation the more seriously one is being taken, at least as a threat. Certainly in that respect I have been handsomely treated by Levine and Macnair, for never in forty years of writing, in which I have submitted more than that number of books to the wrath of the critics, have I been reviewed at such length and with such a paper-tigerish show of righteous indignation as on this occasion. Observe the elaborateness with which the Provincial Museum Honourable Artillery Company prepares its attack: two authors, so unsure of themselves that they have to be supported by two advisers; twenty-two pages of typescript; "various drafts" and even numerous last-minute corrections, so that I have received two versions of the review even in the last week; footnotes and a bibliography that includes even unpublished works! And this vast and lumbering Heath Robinsonian howitzer is trundled out to destroy what, according to these self-complacent critics, is a mere sparrow of a book! If only they had kept their powder dry!

I am not in the habit, respected editors, of replying to reviews that express honest disagreement, and when apparent errors — which occur in the best of books — are pointed out I take notice and give humble consideration to improving the next edition. Nor do I worry if my work is rated "one of the worst books" on the subject by people who have published no books. I wait quietly to see what they themselves may publish. ("Oh, that my adversary would write a book!" to misquote Job.) But when reviews are dishonest and deliberately distort the facts, I do reply. And this is now the case. Bombardiers Levine and Macnair have been aiming that great popgun of theirs rather wildly, and the result is a number of damaging misrepresentations.

The worst are probably those that relate to two much more capable authorities in the field than either Levine or Macnair, G. F. MacDonald of the Museum of Man, and Bill Holm, who has written many fine books

on the peoples of the Coast. The Bombardiers say of MacDonald's review of *Peoples of the Coast* that it is "the only genuinely critical examination of the book that we know of," and since they say nothing more, the implication is that the review is *critical* in the same totally destructive way as theirs. But in fact, far from saying that this is one of the *worst* books in the field, MacDonald begins his *Ottawa Citizen* review by stating that "the attempt is very successful and he [Woodcock] has produced the best available account of the historical background of this culture area."

Their total disregard of the truth in the references to Bill Holm and their irresponsible and scurrilous attack on Mel Hurtig form an even worse example of the Bombardiers' dishonesty. In fact, Bill Holm did not read *Peoples of the Coast* for Hurtig; he read it for the American publishers of the book, the Indiana University Press. And it was on Holm's strong recommendation, in the course of which he remarked that I had given the best account of the potlatch he had read, that Indiana accepted the book and published it. If the alleged "detailed criticism" was ever sent, it was certainly never seen by me or Hurtig. The Bombardiers question my motivation in writing *Peoples of the Coast*. But what, one may sardonically ask, is their motivation in writing a review whose feebleness has to be buttressed by deceptions and slanders?

I do not propose to waste your space or the readers' time in dealing with all the points of detail which the Bombardiers so tediously raise. Here and there they light on the kind of slip that even the best historian may let pass in the first version of his book. For example, I say that a dance is unique to the Salish, whereas my critics are right in saying that the dance did appear among the Nootka and the Kwakiutl, though its incidence was in fact rare and late and it was certainly a borrowing.

But many of the "errors" they point out in fact arise from a poor reading of the text. For example, on page 15 when I say that certain activities were carried on "during the dark rainy months of November and March" I am not — as the Bombardiers suppose — saying that they take place *exclusively* at that period, and my point is substantially correct since the time spent on these craftsmanly activities was of necessity far less in the summer when people were gathering and preserving food than in the winter. Again, in referring to my statement on pages 8 and 9 about the revival of arts, the Bombardiers distort by quoting out of context. What I actually say is:

And the traditional arts of wood carving, painting and weaving, together

with the arts acquired since European contact, like argillite carving and silverwork, have shown a quite remarkable renewal, notably among the Kwakiutl, among some of the younger Haida and especially among the Gitksan where the historic poles I saw decaying so long ago have been salvaged and repaired, or have been reproduced by skilled carvers.

When one sees the sentence as a whole it is clear that I establish first a series of arts that have revived, and secondly a group of peoples among whom there has been a revival of the arts, and that I am not specifically saying that the Kwakiutl carve argillite; indeed the only thing I say specifically is that the Gitksan are carving poles again.

And while we are on the question of the Gitksan, let me take up two other points. The Bombardiers claim that "Woodcock thinks" the "Hole-in-the-Sky" pole at Kitwancool "was carved in the 1890s." Actually, I say that it is "at least ninety years old," which means that the latest possible date I recognize is 1887 (ninety years back from my book) and that I accept the possibility that it was carved earlier. As for the "un-truth" of the statement that "fine poles were still being carved by the isolated Gitksan on the Skeena in the 1920s," I was there in 1950, long before the Bombardiers started travelling around, and saw such poles; I even saw a poorly carved pole that had been made and raised in 1940 and was dated to that effect.

To continue with a couple more points, I am attacked for using the word "explode" in connection with what happened to the pitch or gum used on a whaling harpoon. It has long been noticed by people concerned with literature, like myself, that linguists have little awareness of the living use of language and virtually no awareness of its metaphorical use. If the Bombardiers turn to their OED, they will see that "explode" does not necessarily mean to "go off bang" like their howitzer. It can mean "to fly in pieces, under the influence of suddenly developed internal energy," and this, I submit, is what happens to the harpoon head, while of course the use of the word in this context has a metaphorical overtone, being meant to enhance the sense of violent and sudden action when the harpoon strikes. And, to give a final example, I am accused of wrong attributions in my illustrations. In each case I have used the descriptions given by the museums involved, and, to be frank, I prefer to accept their word rather than that of the Bombardiers, whose concern for the whole truth, as the Holm example shows, is not reliable.

One could go on to the same tedious extent as the review itself in dealing with such pettifogging pedantries, so I will end with some remarks on the general criticisms that feature in the latter part of the

review. I am attacked for my interpretations of what happened in prehistory, and particularly for my use of linguistic evidence; it is asserted that I use outdated evidence, and in their enthusiasm to keep up with the times the Bombardiers even quote two papers (one of them by modest Levine himself) which are not yet published even in 1979, so that I would have been unable — writing in 1976-77 — to benefit from their wisdom. I would remind everyone concerned that in whatever I said about the prehistory of the Indian peoples of the coast, I made it clear that I was proceeding at best by “informed conjecture.” Ethnologists and linguists proceed from nothing more when they go on from the concrete and particular facts of archaeology and the abstract suppositions of linguistics to create a probable shape for the past. My viewpoint as a historian is perhaps wider than theirs, and is certainly different from it, and I still contend that, having looked at the evidence and having shut out the urge to be fashionable in choosing theories and interpretations, I have created a believable picture of what may have happened. I claim nothing more, and the “experts” can claim nothing more.

As for the linguists, their pseudo-science is only a shade more exact than astrology, and theories and interpretations are in a state of constant flux. What the Bombardiers say today will be sniped down by dozens of rivals tomorrow, and I do not therefore feel called on to defend myself, as a man also concerned with language (a professional user of it), for my selection from the half-knowledge the linguists present.

Let me finally comment on the plaintive and lachrymose remarks that terminate the review. Regrets are expressed that the task of explaining Indian cultures is left to people who are not “experts in the human sciences.” But then the gallant Bombardiers go on to lament that there is nothing in the way of academic advancement to be gained from such books and that is why they are not produced by the “experts.” Such remarks, it seems to me, are pitiful and shameful. If a work is worth doing, there is always time to be found in which to do it, and the true scientist will not be concerned over tenure or title or salary if they interfere with his saying what he believes worth saying. The real trouble, it seems to me, is that the human quasi-sciences are inhabited largely by people who are specialists without having the broad view of the true scientist and also without having the ability to write except in their tribal jargon, and that these are the people who want to set up the “No Trespass” signs around their fields of study. Perhaps the best reply to the Bombardiers’ Lament, and to their whole review, would be a para-

phrase of Shaw's famous remark about teaching. "Those who can, do; those who can't, criticize."

A last, sardonic note. The Bombardiers remark that "Woodcock could have contacted people in specialized fields." Woodcock did, though without letting himself be bound by every opinion such people expressed. He even tried to talk to Bombardier Macnair, who happened to be out of Victoria on a study trip at the time and never answered Woodcock's call. I wonder if anything was lost by that particular failure to connect!