

# THE DYNAMITE MAN: A CHAPTER IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

*George Woodcock*

**T**HERE ARE PEOPLE who do not necessarily dominate periods of our lives, but who signalize them, so that when we look back to a particular time and pour the blood into the pit like Odysseus, one person advances out of memory before the others to give the tone to that past. In this way Anton Kohout signalized the period when Inge and I returned to Canada from a year — through 1951 and 1952 — spent in France and California.

Our first two years in Canada had been spent at Sooke, then a small and remote fishing and logging village on the southwestern tip of Vancouver Island; I have already told of that precarious time and of the way a Guggenheim fellowship in 1951 gave us an un hoped release from a situation of recurrent destitution. In 1952, at the end of the Franco-American interlude, we left the Russian River country of northern California, where we had spent the mild winter in a cabin in the redwood forest and started back to Sooke, to collect the possessions we had stored there and to decide how we would now arrange our lives in Canada, where we had finally decided to remain. As in our first years there, from 1949 to 1951, I had no regular source of income; no more than hopes. The Guggenheim fellowship had allowed me to put aside the small royalties from my book on Western Canada, *Ravens and Prophets*, and this time we had no intention of even trying to earn our keep by truck gardening, as we had done before. I wanted to finish the book on Proudhon I had researched in France, and then to establish enough literary connections to live by freelance writing; the first was a possible ambition, but the second at that time in Canada, as I soon discovered, was not.

We went by bus from San Francisco to Vancouver, travelling the Oregon coast road in a clear, bright spring, and sailed on one of the elegant old Canadian Pacific ferry boats through the Gulf Islands from Vancouver to Victoria. It was a slow four-hours' trip in those days, on an uncrowded boat with a passable restaurant, in which, on that day of our return, the first people we saw were Anton Kohout and his American wife Natalie. We sat down with them to clam chowder and halibut, and as the hour went by, the beginning of our second period in Canada was determined.

We had already known Anton Kohout for almost a year before we left Sooke

in 1951. Then he was a quick old man, more than seventy, Czech by race and certainly in appearance, with high Slavic cheeks, a rippling crest of white hair, a grey Hohenzollern moustache. His ice-grey eyes darted constantly and — like those of an animal — resisted one's attempts to fix them. People in Sooke considered him shifty, but I would rather describe him as protean, not to be trapped unless he wished it. His body never seemed out of motion, as if life were a constant gesture, and as if gesture could control the world; I remember how, when his ageing car would strain at a hill, he would move his body gruntingly backwards and forwards at the wheel, as if his action could magically help the machine.

Kohout talked rapidly and almost incessantly, and his accent was Germanic rather than Slavic. This gave a clue to his background, for he had been born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and — Czech though he might be in name and looks — he regarded himself always as a member of the Hapsburg Empire's German-speaking elite. Vienna, much more than Prague, was his spiritual home, and he had retained a kind of facile Viennese wit, interspersing his conversation with bright aphorisms and stale European jokes at which he would always laugh before anyone else, in a high-pitched mad cackle, rather like a jungle cock.

But his attachment to Franz Joseph's Empire had not prevented him from voting with his feet, for he had arrived in Canada not long after the turn of the century, and though he never admitted it, I am sure he left Austria-Hungary to avoid military service. After a period in Quebec he gravitated to Vancouver Island, and there I suspect he was involved in land speculation, for he was extremely informative about the corruption in provincial politics, particularly among the Liberals. Finally, he bought a piece of forest land on the cliffs at the entrance to Sooke Harbour, and there he built a resort hotel, the Sooke Harbour House, at the butt of Whiffen Spit, the long shingle bar that almost closes off the harbour. By the time we knew him he had sold it to a chef from Quebec who cooked disappointingly orthodox Canadian meals, even though his roast beef was succulent and his pies were crisp and crusty.

Very soon after we first encountered Kohout in the Post Office, where everyone picked up mail at 11 a.m. and exchanged greetings, we began to go down to the old farmhouse near Whiffen Spit which he was now inhabiting. We could not afford a car, and we had to walk nearly three miles, much of it along a narrow dirt road through the bush where in summer we would be half-choked by dust whenever anyone drove past us. The walks back along the unlit road after dark were sometimes nervous, for cougar and bear often used this piece of land as a thoroughfare, swimming the narrow entrance to the harbour on their way from the woods of Metchosin and East Sooke to the Sooke Hills. We never saw a bear there, but more than once we were assailed by a sense of presence and, halting, would hear a swish in the vegetation, perhaps a slight crack of a

twig, that ended immediately after we halted, and would know that a cougar, impelled by feline curiosity, was following us. And, though we knew that only when they were sick and starving did cougars attack human beings, we would still hurry to reach the main road as soon as we could.

Kohout had strange tales to relate, with a slightly contemptuous Viennese amusement, about the displaced English aristocrats and remittance men who gave a pinchbeck glitter to genteel life in the region thirty or forty years before we arrived. He had been there when the Prince of Wales came on an imperial visit and had attended the great eccentric ball that Lady Emily Walker ("that elderly cobweb" as the Pragger Wagger had privately called her) had thrown in her rustic mansion among the horse meadows, to the delight of the mosquitoes who flocked through the open French windows and the envious derision of the other would-be gentry.

But Kohout had other varieties of Island oddity to relate, including the strange history of the religious community known as the Star Brethren, some of whose decaying buildings the bush was slowly submerging down the road from his house. Many of the members had been farmers from Minnesota and other mid-western states who had sold their land and trekked in their old cars into Canada, and then, when one of the leaders absconded with the funds, had been left landless and penniless and, perhaps even worse, faithless.

And he had a great deal of miscellaneous Indian lore to go with the stone hand-hammers and arrowheads and the other artifacts that stood on his bookshelves in arresting contrast to the collections of Goethe and Schiller and Rilke and Hoelderlin in their gold-lettered bindings. Kohout had been in Sooke long enough to know an Indian woman who had been a slave of the Moachat at Friendly Cove, taken away as a child during the raids in which the West Coast peoples almost destroyed the once numerous Salish people of Sooke. The cliff edges at Whiffen Spit where he had built his hotel must once have been the site of a great deal of Indian activity, possibly even of commerce, for among the shell banks there he had found the artifacts — the last of a large collection — that stood in his house. Once, when he felled a tree, an Indian skeleton lay buried beneath it and, with the ignorance of archaeological methods at that time, he packed the bones into a box to take to the Provincial Museum. No archaeologists, but shocked at such disrespect for the dead and fearful of an angry spirit, his Chinese labourers at once deserted him, taking their story back to Victoria's Chinatown, and not until it was known that he had actually taken the bones to the museum did he find any Chinese willing to work for him again.

I don't think Kohout had a historical mind, though he did have that European way of valuing the past which distinguished his view of life from the living-for-the-day attitude of most of the Islanders we then encountered. He was essentially an anecdotalist, with a mind full of restless memories, yet he helped to

populate the tangling bush around us with historic content, and he was an amusing companion.

So, when we joined him and Natalie at lunch on the ferry that day in May 1952, we were receptive to his ideas and suggestions about our future, particularly as we knew that in a month at most we would have to move out of the cabin on the beach at Sooke Basin that had been lent to us. Why not remain at Sooke, Kohout suggested, particularly if we were giving up our Thoreauvian idea of living by truck gardening and subsistence cultivation? I would then have time to write at leisure, without the distractions of finding my feet in a city, and I could build up my connections in England and the United States to make up for the lack of outlets in Canada.

Half-convinced, we protested that we still had nowhere to live in Sooke after we left the cabin. A louder cackle than most, and then Kohout declared that he had the perfect solution. He had allowed the loggers to take out the largest timber on his cliff-top land, and now he was dividing it into strips, almost an acre each, with more than a hundred feet of water frontage. The price — it seems incredible today — was \$950, and we could pay it off at \$50 a month without interest. Since we already knew how to build a house, the second time over would take less time, and there were ways in which he could help us. For example, there was a cabin on one of the lots, built by an old hermit who had died a couple of years ago. Anton and Natalie, having left their farmhouse, were camping there at present, but we could occupy it for the time we needed to build our house.

Looking back, I can only paraphrase a famous saying and remark that the sole lesson of one's past is that one does not learn from the past. We had already in 1949 been taken to a piece of land at Sooke and had let our illusions about the kind of life we might live there lead us into a morass of poverty and frustration from which the Guggenheim Foundation had providentially saved us. And now, in 1952, we went down with Kohout, up the sawdust road the loggers had left, and into the lot he suggested.

Small trees and underbrush had been left as a protective band along the roadside, dominated by a single giant first-growth Douglas fir, about twelve feet in diameter. The rest of the ground was the bare forest floor, dotted with stumps, but down the cliffs the trees still grew high, and there was a steep path to a shingly beach that gave way to sand where the tide lapped up. A bald eagle sat in one of the cliff-top trees; delicately roseate lady's slipper orchids were blooming among the roots of the fir trees. We stood there, breathing the scent of the sun-warmed conifers, and talked about the kind of house that might stand there. As all of us were devoted to the Austrian Alps, it was perhaps natural that the idea of a kind of Tyrolean chalet under the great fir trees emerged. Inge sat down on a stump and sketched it out on an envelope: a single large room, el-shaped and

swinging round to the kitchen alcove whose wood stove would keep us warm in winter, a shower and toilet, windows on all sides to keep the room light in the shadow of the trees, a front verandah, window boxes and painted shutters, and the walls covered in rough cedar to fit the woodland. And this was the house we built. For, needless to say, we had fallen in love with the land, perhaps not as it was with its stumps and slash, but as it might be when we had cleared it all and planted grass and fruit trees and built a proper way down the cliff.

We built the house in six weeks of hard work, with handsaw and hammer. A friend helped me over a weekend with the rafters, and one day our aged local Ninety-Eighter, Dirty Sam, who had built the fireplace for our first house in Sooke, brought his vast birdsnest of a beard for a cursing day of tall tales about the Klondike as he laid the bricks for our chimney. For the rest we did everything ourselves, down to the wiring and the plumbing. They were long summer days, from eight in the morning until ten at night, and usually twelve hours out of the fourteen would be spent in the house; I was never so tired, or so slim, or so healthy, as at the end of those six weeks.

**K**OHOUT, WE REALIZED from the beginning, was moved to a restless fascination by what we were doing. He would appear with a loping walk through the trees, and stand with his head a bit on one side and his eyes darting foxily over the scene. "My, you're doing well!" he would cackle, and then begin to offer help in various ways.

His first passion, we discovered, was a constructive one, for laying concrete. When we poured the foundation blocks for the floor beams to rest on, he was there to help us hand-mix with shovels, and when we poured the concrete slab for the steps he again appeared. But very quickly we found that Kohout's passion had a more lurid side. Indeed, I have never met a man who more neatly exemplified such classic anarchist maxims as Proudhon's *destruam et aedificabo* (I destroy and I build up) and Bakunin's "The passion to destroy is also a creative passion." For Kohout was fascinated by dynamite and fire, and loved to find legitimate excuses for applying them.

I had not thought much about how we would get rid of the stumps on the property. I calculated that some might be grubbed out and burnt, and that the two or three large ones might somehow be disguised with shrubs and creepers. "Impossible!" declared Kohout. "It will take you weeks to grub out the smallest. And the large ones will be an eyesore for ever! You must *dynamite* them!" His crest of hair seemed to rise up as he spat out the words, and his cackle reached a peculiar tremolo of excitement. "I will show you! We will do it together!"

I was, indeed, somewhat amused at the thought that, having read and written so much about the famous anarchist *dynamiteros*, I should at last find myself

learning how to use the legendary stuff. So I agreed, since Kohout promised to do the more delicate tasks of fitting the detonators and the fuse.

We began, even while I was still working on the house, with a couple of small and distant stumps, and it was obvious that Kohout knew the art of dynamiting well, as he led me through the processes of digging out a suitable recess, well down between the roots of a tree, bundling the five or six sticks of dynamite, attaching the detonator and fuse, then burying the charge with good stiff mud and tamping earth over it to make everything firm, before we finally lit the fuse and headed for cover. There was a curiously intense quality to those moments of expectation as one squatted down behind another stump or a pile of brush, waiting until there was a satisfying crack in the air, a thudding vibration in the ground beneath one, a shower of earth pattering among the trees, and one stood up to see smoke drifting up between the neatly lifted and bisected or trisected stump.

The biggest stump of all was at least eight feet in diameter where it had been cut six feet from the ground; it was supported by heavily buttressing roots. It stood perhaps 150 feet from the house, and we should really have blown it before I even began construction. We decided that certainly it would have to be sprung before the windows were put in, and Kohout calculated that if we laid the charge properly we could direct the blast so that the house would not be harmed. So we went ahead, excavating a veritable sap under the centre of the stump.

Kohout was in a state of extreme excitement while this was going on, and when our sap was ready he huddled into it with a great bundle of fifty sticks of dynamite. He emerged, grinning and cackling. "That should do it! But, let me see! I've some old dynamite stored away that is probably not much good any longer. But it might give a bit of an extra boost!" So off he trotted to the cellar underneath an old barn on his property and emerged with another twenty-five sticks wrapped in an ancient newspaper. These too we packed around the fifty, and then went on with our tasks of fixing detonator and fuse, packing the end of the sap with mud, and then shovelling in earth and vigorously tamping it. "Whack it hard!" shouted Kohout, and whack I did, fearing all the time that too hard a bang might somehow set off the detonator.

When all this was done Inge and Natalie, who had watched the process with a horrified fascination, went off into the deep woods with our black cat Tim. I ran out into the lane to make sure no cars or people were around. And then we lit the fuse and headed into the trees a hundred yards away, where we squatted down in a ferny dell low enough to save us from the blast. We thought also that we were far enough away to avoid any falling debris, but when the mine did blow with a formidable earth-shaking roar (Kohout's stale dynamite turning out as good as the new), we cowered down in astonishment as rocks and hunks of wood went flying high in the air over our heads, missing us entirely and pepper-

ing the woods a hundred yards beyond us, I rushed back immediately, scared for the house, but Kohout's calculations had been exact. We had blown the stump apart into four vast segments in a way that did not harm the building.

Afterwards, when the house was complete, we blew the remaining stumps very successfully, and I became so infected with Kohout's enthusiasm that when he sold the next lot to a Danish logger and offered to blow his stumps, I gladly agreed to act as assistant blaster without pay. But it was on Erik's land that the moment of truth arrived which ended my career as a dynamitero. We were dealt with a moderate-sized stump that, we decided, needed ten sticks of dynamite. We went through all the processes, lit the fuse and retreated for cover. We squatted there the necessary time and nothing happened. A minute passed and extended into five minutes. Still nothing happened, and this time when I looked into Kohout's eyes they no longer danced away. They were fixed and anxious. He could not explain what had happened — perhaps a faulty detonator or a faulty fuse. But we could not leave the charge there to be a standing peril.

"What can we do?" "Risk our lives," said Kohout, his cackle quavering. "We can carefully uncover the charge and disconnect it. That is very risky. Or we can dig beside it and put in a smaller charge which we hope will blow the first. That is ten per cent less risky." "I'll settle for ten per cent."

So we got to work, digging carefully, in the end with trowels, beside the first charge, put in a couple more sticks, with detonator and fuse which we checked particularly carefully, hurriedly filled in over the second charge, lit the fuse, and ran. This time the double charge blew in a fine fountain of soil and stones, and we embraced each other and danced crazily in relief. I never blew another stump. Nor, so far as I know, did Kohout.

**B**UT THERE WERE OTHER WAYS of fulfilling the destructive urge. Dynamite merely split the stumps and lifted the fragments up. Fire was still needed to consume them, and we would drag slash and rubbish out of the woods during the day and pile it around the stumps in preparation for the evening change of wind, when the fires would burn with passion and clarity. I still remember vividly those exciting nights when the four of us, Inge and Natalie and Kohout and I, would feed the marvellously incandescent cores of the stumps, and over the crackling of the flames we would hear the slap of the seals as they played below the cliff or the crashing splash of the killer whales proceeding towards the harbour.

But Kohout was as dangerous a man with fire as he was with dynamite. As I have said, there was a good stand of surviving trees growing out of the cliff below our lot, somewhat cluttered with the debris of logging which we intended

some later year to clear away. But one day at the top of the cliff near the hermit's cabin to which he had returned, Kohout put a match to a pile of brush. It was early September now, and the last three weeks had been rainless, so that the rubbish among the trees had dried out. And, by a freak chance, the wind changed that evening from the customary southwester at that time of the year to a southeaster, blowing right along our cliff, catching the piles of slash and leaping into the trees. In the twinkling of an eye, almost, we had our own forest fire, the sky blazing a hundred yards away from our house.

Kohout appeared, darting along the lee of the fire, frantic, intoxicated with excitement, and in his face none of the still apprehension I had seen the day the charge did not blow. But in another way he was scared again, and when I suggested we get the Sooke fire engine he was so opposed that I knew he feared prosecution for setting a fire in a dry season. "It will burn out! It will burn out!" he kept on saying. It had only to run another half-mile, I pointed out, and then it would start to burn into the thick woodland of the next big property along the coast and he would have a major crisis on his hands. He still refused to go.

We had installed no telephone, and we feared too much for our own house for either of us to attempt the three-mile walk into the village or even the half-mile walk to Sooke Harbour House, which did have a telephone. So we stayed, our only weapon a garden hose which we took turns spraying on the roof of our house to put out the sparks that blew over from the blaze. There was nothing we could do with the fire on the cliff except to wait it out, and we stayed up most of the night merely to protect the house. Fortunately, when the fire had crept to the edge of the next property, the wind did shift and finally die down, but there were still smouldering pockets along the cliff that all night kept exploding into small fires. I went down next morning to see our cliff black and still smoking, the rubbish burnt away and many of the smaller trees killed; fortunately the bigger ones had not been harmed, except for a little singeing of the lower branches; they had been little cluttered with flammable debris and had stood mostly to windward of the blaze.

As winter came on, Kohout, who suffered from bronchial asthma, began to disappear for spells to avoid the intensely humid coastal winter: trips to the California desert ("For drying out," as he cackled), to Corvallis where Natalie had been a professor ("For edification") and to Penticton ("For elevation"). But every now and then he would appear again, scuttling through the trees to look at our lot and say "My, you're going well!" and sometimes taking us on trips in his car, of which I remember most clearly an expedition to Victoria in a blizzard, made terrifying by the fact that Kohout, who learnt to drive when there was virtually no traffic on the Sooke Road, seemed to regard it as his privilege to proceed in the middle of the highway in all weathers, as he had



always done, so that on that single brief journey we escaped at least three collisions in the blinding snow by a few inches.

Our house was now finished; with the experience of building an earlier home, and with a more modest plan, we had completed a comfortable small cottage by late autumn and had ploughed and seeded into a promising meadow the stretch of land between the house and the cliff. So I settled down to a winter of writing. Each morning I would work with saw, axe and wedge for an hour cutting and splitting the day's stove wood. Twice a week, when we could not scrounge lifts, we would walk into the village with our rucksacks to buy provisions and collect mail. On bright clear days I might put in another hour or so clearing more ground for future flower and vegetable beds. But there was still plenty of time to write, particularly as outside visitors had ceased to come and the lonely season had begun. I worked on the material I had gathered in France and the United States for my biography of Proudhon, and I wrote critical essays, and historical articles largely based on the knowledge I had gained in recent years about North America west of the Rockies. I established long-standing connections with the *Geographical Magazine* and *History Today* in England, with the *Sewanee Review*, the *New Republic* and the *Saturday Review of Literature* in the United States; in Canada, then so lacking in journals of literature and affairs, I continued to give occasional talks on the CBC networks and even sold a small series of documentary programmes on the history of utopian writing.

But still I was far from making the kind of living, through these remote freelance connections, that would enable us to live even the simple kind of existence we followed in Sooke, and when all the bills for our house had been paid we found ourselves again in debt and — as in our first 1949-51 period at Sooke — lacking any really assured stream of income. As soon as the weather broke in early spring, I had to take, as I had done in the earlier period, to manual work. I worked as a labourer for a friend who was building his house; this ended in a scare almost as extreme as that of the unexploded dynamite charge. I was working a small electrically operated concrete mixer, and suddenly, as I began to swing the handle to fill the barrow another worker pushed forward, I felt as if my whole body had been struck a great blow, heard a strange yelling voice which I later realized had been my own, and came to myself lying flat on my back; someone had switched off the power, but my hand was seared with a wide burn that took a couple of weeks to cure. I was puzzled that instead of showing sympathy and concern, my friend and his wife looked at me with a kind of suspicion that verged on hostility. Almost immediately I realized that they feared I might try to get compensation from them for my burnt hand, which would in fact have been something very much outside my view of friendship. So I quietly left.

Then Inge and I persuaded a fisherman who was building a house up the road to let us dig out his basement. For almost two weeks we laboured with pick and shovel and wheelbarrow, from morning often until dusk. We were paid partly in cash and partly in kind, and received \$120 and as much salmon and halibut as we could eat for the next two months; we got very tired of fish by the time the supply came to an end. Finally, the last phase of our relationship with Kohout began when he decided to enlarge the hermit's cabin and put in such amenities as a bathroom and a real chimney instead of the dangerous old iron stovepipe. I worked for him digging ditches, taking a pride in the skill I had learnt years before working on the land as a conscientious objector in England. I could compete with anyone in digging a smoothly finished ditch with a gentle and regular fall, and I was pleased when Dirty Sam, with his memories of miners' flumes and waterways on the Klondike, came to build the chimney and roared through the tangle of his beard: "There's a bloody dandy ditch!" I worked too as Dirty Sam's assistant and, between curses, increased my store of tall tales about Diamond Tooth Gertie and Bishop Bompas. But my employment by Kohout ended on a rather sour note, since I pointed out that the going rate for labouring work was now \$1.25 an hour and not \$1.00, as he proposed to pay. Kohout had retained a goodly share of the European peasant's traditional parsimony, and though he paid me in full before he set off on another trip, this time to Europe, he clearly resented doing so.

As it turned out, I saw him only two or three times again, and those were fleeting contacts. For by the summer of 1953 we had decided to leave. Though I was earning more by writing than when we last lived in Sooke, it was still not enough to keep us going. And, just as between 1949 and 1951 we learnt that we were not temperamentally fitted for a Thoreauvian mixture of manual and mental work, so now we learnt that at heart we were really urban people. We were lonely and lost in so remote a countryside, despite the odd friends we had made in Sooke and the few people who in good weather might venture there from Victoria or Vancouver. During the late spring, when we went to Vancouver for me to record CBC talks, we began to make tentative plans to move there. At least I would be nearer to possible sources of income, and we would be back in a city again. Then we put our cottage up for sale, and waited a nervous two months until we finally sold it to a couple of women teachers who were so taken with the way Inge had arranged it that they bought it with almost everything it contained, and we set off with no more than our clothes, books and manuscripts and our cat Tim to start again in Vancouver, where Jack and Doris Shadbolt had found a cabin for us in a wood near their house on Capital Hill.

We never saw Kohout after we left. But not long afterwards we heard he had died rather miserably yet in a way that seemed to fit the more grotesque

side of his nature, for he was involved in a freak accident in a hotel lift in which his leg was somehow trapped; it had to be amputated, and the shock killed him. I sadly remembered how, like Bakunin, he had seen the poetry of destruction; like a Zoroastrian, he had loved the leaping of the fire.

## DRIVING, ACCIDENTAL, WEST

*Robert Kroetsch*

1

the shaped infinity  
to hammer home  
  
help, and the wild geese  
heading south  
  
and every way and  
which, confuse  
  
the fall of light  
the fatal peen  
  
how, and the commonest  
crow or sparrow  
  
speak the pale  
or sensing moon

2

accelerate, the swan  
sing, or eloquent as  
  
antelope, the crisp  
rejoinder of the duck's  
  
quack to the deer's  
leap, and, even then  
  
even, a static dream  
twitter and acquit  
  
the kill, wait, for  
and the nasty snow  
  
fall, fall and for  
tonight, only, dream