

A WITNESSING

The concluding chapter of George Woodcock's
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MIDDEN BAY is not a name you will find on the maps, but it represents a real place, a Salish village on the frayed eastern coast of Vancouver Island, facing the Gulf of Georgia. It was not easy to find on the cold and misty December night when we turned off the Island Highway fifty miles or so north of Victoria and followed the winding side road around placid coves and then into a forest where the only landmark we had been given was an Indian cemetery at a crossroads. We found the cemetery — white wooden crosses gleaming suddenly out of a tangle of brown bracken — but turned the wrong way and ended in the cul-de-sac of a sluggish development : roads roughed in, tumbling billboards, a couple of derelict trailers. We retraced our way to the cemetery, took another direction, and knew we were on the right road when the hardtop ended and we began to bump over the potholes of a decaying gravel road. We passed Indian houses, slowing to avoid children and pups dashing into the gleam of the headlights, and came down to the water's edge, the black bay sucking at the banks of mingled soil and broken oyster shell that betokened an ancient settlement, the houses lit with bare bulbs, cars parked along the ice-glazed earth road around the beach. Behind the houses loomed a long dark building — no windows but sparks spurting out from the three wide openings in the corrugated iron roof. We nudged our Volkswagen in between the big, battered old cars and the new station wagons, and as we turned off the engine the hard thud of the drums beat in our ears. The spirit dances had begun.

When the Indian Act of 1951 was passed, and the infamous clause prohibiting potlatches and spirit dances was finally removed from the statute books, an injustice that had lasted as long as most living Coast Indians could remember was furtively rectified. This did not mean that the ceremonies started up again, for they had never come to an end, but at least nobody risked going to prison for performing them. Nor did it mean that potlatches and spirit dances came into the open. Experience had taught the Indians of the Pacific Coast the wisdom of keeping their customs to themselves. Even today, twenty-five years after the ban was lifted, many people who live quite close to Indian villages have no idea that the traditional ceremonials have returned to assume once again their centrality in the pattern of native life. The woman who kept the lodge where we would be returning to sleep the morning out traded regularly with women from Midden Bay for their Cowichan sweaters and other craftwork, but she was quite unaware that dances went on regularly there — sometimes two or three times a week — throughout the winter. We had come to know of them only by chance, and it was by oblique arrangement that we received a barely stated invitation from a chief's wife who was herself an initiate. We were to turn up, and if anyone questioned us, we were to mention her name; she would be there, but it was clear she did not intend to sponsor us in any open way. And it might be a good idea, the message went, if we left our cameras and tape recorders at home.

Thus, by the time Inge and I pulled open the heavy wooden door of the dance house at about eleven o'clock that December night, we had a good idea how important a part spirit dances had resumed in Salish life. Even so, we were not prepared for the scene that greeted us. The house was made of sheets of plywood nailed on a frame of rough cedar; it was somewhat over two hundred feet long and more than fifty feet wide. Six-tiered bleachers of worn planks ran along two sides and both ends, and these were well occupied. In the long open floor of the house three great fires blazed, six-foot logs piled crisscross in squares to the height of a man so that they became gigantic cubes of flame and embers, out of which the smoke and sparks drifted up to the smokeholes and billowed around the house, occasionally half-blinding one. At least another hundred people — men with tambourine-shaped drums in their hands — stood on the trodden earth floor, so that altogether there must have been between eight and nine hundred people there. (We were afterwards told that as winter involvement and attendance increased each year the house became more crowded, so that by the end of March between fifteen hundred and two thousand people might be present, coming from villages all over southern Vancouver Island and even from the lower Fraser valley and from the State of Washington over the border.)

We stood diffidently just inside the doorway, waiting, as seemed appropriate, to be recognized. A man almost as big as the King of Tonga, with a drum in his hand and his face painted black with a mixture of charcoal and grease, came forward, said we were welcome, and led us to the bleachers on the right of the house, nearest the door; the chief's wife never made herself known. We climbed to places on the top bench and saw at once that the house was divided between the initiates with their black faces and their attendant family groups on the left-hand side of the room, and the noninitiated spectators and witnesses on the other. A few smartly dressed Indians from the United States were sitting next to us in our little strangers' enclave;

we were the only white people there.

The drumming had just ceased when we entered, but as soon as we sat down there was a kind of coalescent flowing of the men on the floor towards the initiates' bench. A black-faced girl with a tartan blanket slung over her shoulders began to stand up, assisted by women on each side of her, and all at once, with a spontaneity which I afterwards learned was more apparent than real, the drums began to beat in a distinctive rhythm, and the song — the girl's personal spirit song — emerged (that is the only word that really expresses the process) in a kind of surging chorus, as she started the dance that the spirit had given her, which would take her around the hall and the great fires. She danced with her torso bent forward, gaze fixed on the ground as if in trance, disregarding the spectators, her hands extended, and fingers weaving in patterns that reminded me of the **mudras** of Asian dancing. In her dance she was followed by a little cluster of attendants, members of the extended family to which she belonged, the women raising their hands upward and addressing strange high-pitched calls to the spectators, as if appealing to us for witness, and as they went they handed out silver quarters to the drummers — for every participant in any Pacific Coast Indian ceremony must be rewarded.

As the dancer spun round the third fire at the head of the house, the drums thudded more loudly, people in the bleachers joining in with their own drums and keeping the rhythm, until there must have been two hundred drums beating and the sound reached a thunderous crescendo that seemed to carry the singing on its crest and filled the house with an extraordinary atmosphere of occult power, which we felt even on that first dance and more intensely on each occasion as the evening went on. Finally the girl danced back to her place on the bench and sank down on it, wailing loudly. It was the spirit calling from within her, and as she wailed, the spirits of the women around her were activated, and they gave strange mewling calls like seagulls.

The drums and the singing had ceased as abruptly as they began, as if some invisible conductor had waved his staff. All suddenly became relaxed, the crowd of drummers dissolved into pairs of men chatting as they strolled over the floor, children clambered over the bleachers, women wandered off into a little room in the corner of the house and came back with paper cups of coffee and pieces of home-made cake as if it were a church social. And then, out of all this casualness, there came another sudden gathering of the drummers, the next black-faced girl rose from her place, a different song surged up, and she made her turn of the room. Five women danced in this way; the drum and song rhythms were similar, and so was the general shape of the dance, yet in each case the hand movements and the stance, like the song, were quite distinctive, expressing each dancer's special spirit helper, and I was reminded of the Samoan women's dance, the **siva**, which is regarded as the supreme expression of any woman's personality.

Inevitably, as all this went on, we were apprehensively assessing the attitude which these hundreds of Indians engaged in their native ceremonies might display towards us, strangers and aliens as we were. Those from south of the border, among whom we sat, were friendly enough, but though they were also Salish they shared neither the dialect nor the dance traditions of the Cowichans, so that they were almost as much outsiders as we were. And we had heard, as one does everywhere in British Columbia these days, of militancy among the native peoples. The lodge keeper had told us how, only a month before, the people of Midden Bay, incited by "agitators from the States," had closed off all the local roads in pursuit of their land claims. And yet, though we stayed among them until far into the morning, we were aware of no special feelings towards us of any demonstrable kind. Certainly nobody made any gesture of hostility, and later we were in a special way included in the events enacted that evening. For most of the people, we seemed to be merely members of the crowd of witnesses, and we were careful to do nothing that might draw us out of the anonymity of such a role.

The men's dances were perhaps more closely traditional than those of the women. The women had worn no distinctive garments and used no ceremonial instruments. But as the dances went on the black-faced male initiates sat shaking their rattles, which among the Salish are staffs about three feet long, carved and painted, with crests on their tips (I noticed the head of a bald eagle and that of a serpent) and half way down rings of mussel shells (once it would have been deer's hooves) that give a thin, dry clatter when they are shaken. When a man's turn came to dance, he would give his rattle to an attendant who plied it as he followed the dancer around the fires. The men dancers wore embroidered dance leggings and jackets of dark blue serge, from which hung dozens of little bone appendages in the form of miniature paddles. They danced with knees and elbows rigidly angled, performing a percussive stamp and nodding their heads up and down vigorously; the most vigorous were those who wore wigs of human hair that came down over heads and shoulders, almost to their waists, like great candle-snuffers with tufts of feathers at the tops, and completely blinded them so that their attendants had constantly to push them away from the fires. These were initiates possessed of warrior spirits. When the men returned to their seats, they too wailed, but the spirits aroused in the men around them growled like bears.

These were all men and women who had actually gone through initiation and performed their novice

dances at some time in the past; they were now validating their status as full-fledged spirit dancers. But all at once, in the middle of the men's dances, an uninitiated girl was spontaneously possessed. She was sitting among one of the families on the dancers' side of the house when she sank wailing into a trance and was immediately lifted and carried over to the spectators' benches, neutral ground. Women clustered around her, speaking to her, stroking her, wailing softly, until a strange, tall figure appeared and knelt before her. He was an old man with the asexual look of those elderly actors who play young women in Kabuki, his grey hair long, plaited around his head, tied with bits of red ribbon. It was too far off to see what this ritualist actually did, but it appeared to be some kind of communing with the spirit, for he made passes, and then raised his head and twice gave a strange falsetto cry, after which he immediately threw a blanket over the girl's head. She remained under that blanket for the rest of the night, for a bit of stifling is considered a good thing in such situations, and when her family left early in the morning she was led out, still completely covered, for her protection but also for those of others, since supernatural forces were hovering around her. Her initiation would begin at once, and while she was kept for days in seclusion on a meagre diet, her attendants would listen to the spirit speaking through her in cries out of which they would compose the song that henceforward would be hers alone. People who are conscripted, as it were, into the fellowship of dancers often have to go through severe hazings, as they did in pagan days, but those who are spontaneously possessed are treated with special gentleness.

Now began the part of the ceremonial without which none of the dances we had seen would be regarded as valid. The only way of validation is through giving on the part of the initiates' families. Men and boys began to come into the house carrying cardboard cartons, which were piled in a long row in front of the initiates' benches. Then, one by one, the family groups began their round of the bleachers, the black-faced dancer making the gifts, and an elder in each group, expert at the gradations of rank, pointing out each recipient.

Blankets were — in keeping with tradition — the principal gifts, and a person's status was made evident by the kind of blanket he received. High rank (which usually means you have made rich gifts in the past) merited five-point Hudson's Bay Company blankets, low rank (which means meagre giving in the past) merited only hideously flowered flannelette sheets. We ranked at the level neither of blankets nor the silk scarves with rhinestone jewels knotted in the corners which formed the second round of gifts. Still, we were witnesses, our presence helped to validate the dances, and we were rewarded during the later rounds, when crockery and fruit were given out; we had to accept, for refusal of a gift would have publicly shamed the dancer and his whole family, and ourselves as well. Gift after gift was sent up, hand over hand, to our place at the top of the bleachers; when we counted them afterwards, we found that we had collected one gold-and-white cup and saucer, one large rose-patterned ironstone plate, one glass mug, one Pyrex dish, four oranges, and fourteen apples. Such gifts indicated that our presence and our behaviour had been accepted. They also gave some means of judging the quantity of goods changing hands that night, for we were only minor recipients among the three or four hundred people who sat on the spectators' benches. One gigantic woman sitting just below us went out with three large cardboard cartons filled with her presents, and the combined families must have spent several thousand dollars in such gifts alone.

Nor were these the only transfers of property, for every occasion like this is used as an opportunity for the public settling of ceremonial debts, and the floor was taken up for at least an hour, while the families went round with their gifts, by men making orations in ceremonial Old Salish as various obligations were straightened out by the handing over of prominently displayed bundles of bills, whose amount was always declared on spread fingers raised high for everyone to see. Several hundred dollars changed hands in this way in addition to the gifts made to the witnesses on the right-hand benches.

It was after the giving that two isolated dances took place, and these in their different ways were the most moving episodes of the night. A small boy led in a young man in a strange garb of jerkin and leggings of grey and white wool, with many tassels, and head-dress coming down over the face, rather like that of the warrior dancers except that it also was made of much-tasselled grey and white wool. He carried a tasselled spear jingling with shells on whose point someone had struck a big red apple.

He was a novice dancer in a state of possession, and according to Salish beliefs a highly dangerous figure who had to be watched carefully lest he go berserk and start attacking people with his spear. This young man, however, did nothing but wander vaguely around the floor until the drums began to beat; this threw him into his dancing frenzy, and he covered the circuit of the house twice in a series of extraordinary sightless leaps, like some blind primitive Nijinsky, bouncing up and down with knees and feet tightly together, as if he were made of rubber, and giving a great deal of trouble to his small attendant who had to keep him from jumping into one of the fires. At last he sank down on a bench at the far end of the house, well away from the actual initiates, and there the spirit wailed in him like a wolf for a good hour before he finally settled into a silent trance. Nobody took any notice of all this. It was obviously what a respectable traditionally minded young man was expected to do in Salish society.

This performance of a young man beginning his career of spiritual possession was balanced by the other late dance, which clearly marked an end. An ancient woman had been sitting in the middle of the dancers' bench, and now she was being helped to her feet by her daughters and granddaughters. She was almost skeletally fragile and dressed in a pink sequined gown and a rhinestoned headband with a few white eagle feathers stuck in it, as if she had got ready for one of Pierre Berton's early Hollywood films on the Canadian West; her cheeks seemed to have been dusted with wood ash, for they had an unnatural greyness. She was so weak that she had to be supported in her slow walk, and all that remained of her dance was the continual movement of her hands and fingers in the gestures that expressed her spirit. Yet it was in one way the most dramatic dance of the whole night, for the drummers came down out of the bleachers to join those on the floor and make an avenue of sound through which the old dancer progressed, with hundreds of voices shouting out her song, and her attendants scattering handfuls of coins among the drummers and the singers. It was obviously a farewell, for we felt no doubt that this was the old woman's last dance, and that she and everyone else knew it. But it was also the kind of assertion of continuity, for here was a person who had been a child in the last flourishing of the old native culture, and by supporting her in her dance the rest of the people were not only proclaiming their continuity with the past but also celebrating the revival of the old ways.

Somewhere past three in the morning the crowds on the bleachers began to thin as people set out on the way home to other villages, and we went out with them. We were elated by what we had seen, above all by what we had heard and felt in the vast vibrations of sound that surged about the great house. The Salish contend that attendance at the spirit dances can cure many sicknesses that are in some way or another psychosomatic. But it seemed to us not merely a matter of individual cure, but of the cure of a whole people from the alienation of those intermediate generations when they lived between two worlds, their native culture almost completely destroyed and the culture of the white man temperamentally alien to them.

It seemed as though time had taken a spiral, and now these Coast Indians were in possession again of the heart of their culture, the spirit dance cult, which expressed their collective Salish identity, and at the same time emotionally supported each individual as the old communal Indian life had done. Quite apart from the sense of occult power produced by the drumming and the singing, one recognized a feeling of confidence and pride among the hundreds of people gathered in the dance house. Here they were in their own world, secure, and that was perhaps why they could accept the two of us without either the shy embarrassment or the nervous hostility that so often mars relations between Indians and whites. It was a sign of the reverence with which the people of Midden Bay regard their revived pagan ceremonies, that — despite cynical forewarnings by local whites — we saw no one in the great house who was either drinking or even mildly drunk, and when we went outside there was none of the drinking in cars that accompanies white dances in Vancouver Island village halls.

Next morning we went down again to Midden Bay to see in the daylight what the village looked like. It was little different from other Vancouver Island Indian villages. The cemetery at the crossroads was a rough field where gaudy, plastic flowers were the only decorations. The houses looked ill-maintained, the gardens grew only rubbish, and if it had not been for some expensive station wagons and pick-up trucks, one would have thought Midden Bay one of the poorest places in Canada. This was not really so, for the Indians here were relatively prosperous, many of the men earning well from fishing and most of the others having regular work in the local sawmills. It was merely that they had different ideas on how money was well spent; that night of ceremony and giving suggested to me that they might be right.

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(George Woodcock. PEOPLES OF THE COAST: The Indians of the Pacific Northwest, 1977:209–214)

“ Strength in your weeping,
Tears that come seeping,
Down the old canyons,
Back to the sea.”