

Barry Gough. *Possessing Meares Island A Historian's Journey into the Past of Clayoquot Sound*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, www.harbourpublishing.com, 2022. 230 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. CDN \$36.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-55017-957-6.

In his latest book, Canadian historian Barry Gough brings us face to face with historical origins of modern environmental problems, involving the rights of Indigenous inhabitants of ancient lands as opposed to interests of private corporations, provinces, and the nation of Canada. Another theme running through his text is the impact of modern industries on forested environment and native habitats, as private and governmental interests exploit nature's bounty and convert it to profitable and popular uses. The over-hunting of species to the point of extinction, such as the sea otter, and the clear-cutting of primeval forests that cannot be replaced are but two examples, as Gough shows in this fascinating study.

As explorers from foreign shores ventured to places such as Meares Island, British Columbia, the Indigenous inhabitants showed a willingness to enable the exploiters, whether they were from New England, Great Britain, Russia, or Spain. The trade in sea otter pelts, fish oil, and timber commenced during the eighteenth century. After Captain Cook's discovery of the west coast of Vancouver Island, merchants from New England and Europe were quick to react, sending ships to participate in the sea otter trade with China. Royal Navy commander John Meares found the island now named for him in Clayoquot Sound. Over the next two centuries, the migration of settlers to the Pacific Coast brought an increasing exploitation of these natural species and raw materials to the point where the native inhabitants realized they were helping to deprive themselves of the ancient habitat, religion, and customs on which they depended.

Several small tribes of First Nations peoples inhabited Vancouver Island at the time the European traders arrived. Of primary interest here are those of Meares Island, the Nuu-Chah-Nulth, and others of the Clayoquot, and Ahousaht-Kelsemaht nations. Over time, the steady incursion of logging corporations had made in-roads, to the point that in 1984, local tribal representatives, environmental activists, and First Nations lawyers gathered to resist any further logging of the old growth forest on Meares Island. In writing the history of Meares Island, Gough tells his own story of how a law firm asked him to participate in a legal suit as an expert witness on the history of Vancouver Island and its First Nations peoples. He and his anthropologist colleagues had three years to complete their research and to "make sure no stone is unturned."

Gough raises the question and meaning of "possession" as he used the

term in the title, noting it has different meanings for different people. In the earliest times, the Nuu-Chah-Nulth people were in possession of their forested island. They had possessed the island as their sacred residence since pre-contact and were in continuing use of its flora and fauna. Europeans arrived with their own ideas about what possession meant – that they would trade woven goods and manufactures, including guns, copper, ammunition, and liquor, and make profits from the sale of sea otter skins and timber. When the logging industry arrived, its concept of possession was (and is) that they would purchase licenses not to own but to exploit the timberlands through legal transactions with the official possessors, the province of British Columbia and the sovereign nation of Canada. By the late twentieth century, the Nuu-Chah-Nulth and related Indigenous peoples asserted a concept, supported by oral history, unwritten traditions, and archeological research, that they had never given up Meares Island and its tall evergreen forest, had never abandoned or sold the island, and still depended on it in their belief system and for their own welfare. “Possessing” Meares Island in Gough’s terms changed depending on which culture and at what period of time. It is also a concept that can exist simultaneously in the minds of concerned people, whether they are Indigenous, white traders, modern logging corporations, environmentalists, historians, or tourists.

In 1984, a crisis arose because of the intent of a Canadian logging corporation to clear-cut the island’s forests. It began as a peaceful protest by First Nations representatives and their allies blockading the loggers’ access to Meares Island. The RCMP showed up and arrested many protesters. Some were jailed and gained criminal records for their trouble. The incident ended up in court as the two sides squared off. This produced a lawsuit entitled *Moses Martin et. al. v. HM the Queen, et. al.* that worked its way up to the Supreme Court and Appeals Court of British Columbia in 1991.

For historian Gough, this was a crucial event because, as he wrote, he was “not fond of being on the losing side” (xxii). The experience turned out to be a successful lesson in applied history. The result was a legal compromise, an accommodation that halted the logging operation. The private and provincial interests had to accept an injunction, a ruling that the First Nations, environmentalists, and naturalists also had rights of “possession” to protect this beautiful place of ancient human habitat, irreplaceable first growth forest, and significant economic value, subject to periodic regulatory review. Barry Gough’s important book is a personal, gracefully written, “historian’s meditation on matters of the past” (1).

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