

Letters From Gaol: The Prison Experience of a Tree Protector

C. J. Hinke

I have been criticized for writing about my prison experiences. After all, what can I know about gaol after only thirty-seven days and when in many ways I had actually *chosen* arrest and imprisonment?

I have chosen a path of non-violent resistance to the rape of the temperate rain forests surrounding my home in Tofino, British Columbia. I camped in the middle of a logging road at Sulphur Passage with my fifteen year old daughter: positioned myself in the path of roadbed blasting; obstructed workers and machinery with my body; and climbed into trees to prevent their being cut. Because I have taken these actions I have had threats of death, dismemberment by chainsaws, maiming, crippling, beating, and lawsuit. I believe that these and other actions (e.g. one tree protector was shot with a pellet gun and chopped out of a tree) were actively fomented by logging company supervisors, although we made ourselves known as protectors rather than protestors.

The goal of this resistance was not to avoid being caught. I did it for myself because of the compulsion of conscience that I could not do otherwise; I did it for my children who deserve a future in this world; and, of course, I did it to raise public consciousness. Although I am a Quaker, I did not do this for religious reasons but for the pagan spiritual reason that I think trees may be higher on the evolutionary ladder than we are!

When the Friends of Clayoquot Sound actually resisted clear-cut logging, the British Columbia Supreme Court ordered an injunction against our interference with lawful work. Because of my resistance, I was served with this injunction twenty-seven times and finally arrested by the RCMP. I defended myself before the B.C. Supreme Court for more than a week.

So really I became a “prisoner on purpose”—like the title of a small book of reflections by those imprisoned in the United States for obstructing nuclear weaponry, some for eighteen years for trying to protect the rest of us from uncertain destruction. What did I learn about prisons?

Thirty-seven days in gaol this year for civil disobedience against contempt of nature has provided me with an opportunity to have some thoughts about imprisonment. The prison experience has come to be a part of the

North American experience for one in five of us, so it is important for 'environment' social activists to address this issue. The United States leads the world in prisoners *per capita* and Canada is third. But communities do not seem to have been improved by the removal of 'criminals' from our midst; in fact, statistics show we are increasingly violent and Canadian cities are becoming comparable to their American counterparts.

The overwhelming majority of prisoners have been convicted of crimes against property caused by poverty, lack of education, and broken families. Through advertising and example we are taught to desire and emulate 'the good life' (e.g. new cars, nice homes, electronic goods, designer clothes), although not everyone can fulfill these expectations. For some these items may have to come from theft. But for all of us, the ultimate cost is to the planet. Certainly all consumer goods come with a built-in environmental price degrading the quality of life proportionately for both the haves and the have-nots. Consumerism consumes all.

So spending more money on police and prisons, weapons and warfare is obviously not the right answer to community problems. The real answer can emerge only when 'criminals' are brought into the community process so that prisons can be abolished.

Through breaking the law for the right reasons, I found myself in prison, yet more free than before. I learned that people in prison are *people* first and must be treated with care and respect, and I learned that *nobody* deserves imprisonment. I am still working on the issue of gaols and what passes for justice in the world. The following, initially written in the form of three letters, are part of that work. They were written during and just after my thirty day imprisonment in Oakalla Prison and other gaols near Vancouver, B.C. The first one was ordered destroyed by a minimum custody facility director and had to be rescued from the wastebasket by another prisoner before it was smuggled out.

A Letter from Gaol

Life in gaol is largely what life might be like in any small logging camp: meat, potatoes, and no women. The life in Marpole Correctional Centre is soft—starch for three meals and no real work to keep the twenty-five prisoners busy. The youngest is nineteen; the oldest is sixty-seven; whites, Natives, Chinese, bikers. Not a single man is here for a crime of violence. These are your dangerous child non-supporters and impaired drivers from whom society needs protection.

So we live on upper Granville costing the taxpayer \$48,000 each year. The guards pull down \$23,000 a year for basically being

zookeepers, reading the newspapers, doing crosswords, and keeping the threat of real prison over your head. A waist-high fence protects the community from us dangerous criminals keeping ourselves imprisoned.

The lines were a lot more clearly drawn at Oakalla Prison where we all wore prison greens and had our watches taken. Time passes more slowly somehow without a watch. Two wings of around one hundred men each use the yard facilities for a total of four hours. Many of these are men who have escaped minimum custody by walking away, foreign nationals awaiting deportation—again, almost no crimes of violence.

We are locked in our cells at night and during meals. Being denied the social graces of eating is very demeaning: plastic utensils and trays, eating like dogs. The rest of the time we have the run of this tier of twenty cells; the end two are the library and shower, respectively. My cell has a steel slab bunk, a cold-water sink, and a seatless toilet. The bare bulb could be unscrewed at night for a modicum of privacy. A former occupant graphically depicted an act of cunnilingus on one wall. Out in the paved yard prisoners play handball or tennis or just lie in the sun. A mirror-shaded guard has a shotgun trained on us.

I am the first tree protector here, which in itself is a measure of our effectiveness. My first day in Oakalla was International Prisoners Rights Day (August 1) when prisoners worldwide fast in solidarity, so many prisoners understand why I am here: for the solidarity of humanity and nature. This will make it that much easier for the hundreds of environmentalists who will inevitably be joining me if logging practices in British Columbia are not changed to allow for sustainable development and a future for the west coast.

As a civil prisoner I will serve all thirty days of my sentence plus the seven for the \$500 fine I have no intention of paying. Paul Winstandley has followed me with a fifteen day sentence and already fifteen more have been arrested in defense of the Sulphur Passage. I have no doubts that more will follow. Should we not question logging when it requires police presence in order to continue?

I am proud to be a political prisoner in defense of the west coast and Native land claims. If we cannot stop the rape of the land, than I would prefer to be in prison. At least my children will know that I tried to stop the destruction.

A Gaol Within a Gaol

I've been doing a lot more yoga and meditation since I got thrown into solitary at Oakalla—the digger. The prison maxim, "Walk slowly and drink lots of water," hardly holds true here. Prisoners are held in two back-to-back tiers of fourteen cells each, steel boxes six feet by

seven feet high fronted by bars. The bars are doubled through the door and above the steel slab bed, presumably so no one can grab you and you cannot grab anyone else. The only other furnishings are a length of two-inch angle iron which serves as a shelf and what is euphemistically known as a "honey bucket"—a two-gallon plastic pail with a splash of disinfectant.

We are locked in this box twenty-three hours every day. There are no windows to know whether it is day or night, but I can occasionally hear the Canada geese flying overhead. I have been sent here from minimum-security Marpole, transported in handcuffs to face a disciplinary hearing for a serious infraction. I represent a discipline and management problem because of "unauthorized visiting and possession of contraband". Serious, eh? A Tofino visitor brought me fresh fruit on a Thursday evening because he would be going to the Sulphur Passage picnic during regular Sunday visiting hours.

I have been a vegetarian for twenty three years. I had written to the Department of Correction from Oakalla and was told by a director that my diet had been approved. On my transfer to Marpole I was told that they could not provide for special diets but that I could have food brought in. I confirmed this by phone. But after my article was censored by Marpole's director and I began appealing my conviction and sentence and articles started appearing in the media about my case, I guess my foodstuffs and visitors became a most vulnerable target.

Wake up and breakfast in 'the digger' are at seven; lunch at eleven, and dinner at 3:30. Then the endless wait until 10 p.m. lights out. We are unlocked after breakfast (three inmates at a time) to "the range", a corridor outside our cells nine paces wide by forty-eight paces long, with a shower, toilets and sinks at one end. At the other end, ironically, is the gaol within the gaol within the gaol: "the pink room", quiet cells, empty, with solid doors and a glass window where inmates who are violent, mentally disturbed or abusive are put, often forcibly. It is the only place down from here.

I was denied leave to appeal by the B.C. Court of Appeal on Wednesday and on Friday the Supreme Court refused to suspend my sentence. They ruled that I had not sufficiently purged my contempt. I suppose they are right: I have had a hard time working up any respect for rapists.

There are skylights here for ventilation and I can occasionally spot a ray of late afternoon sun out on the range. Today's lunch was two slices of white bread, a package of saltines, and a cup of tea.

Tomorrow I go before the Warden's (often called kangaroo) Court. The segregationists have mercifully allowed me some of my own

books. I've been reading *The Trial of Socrates*, without any delusions of grandeur, it seems somehow appropriate. This is being written in pencil as the unit doesn't allow pens—we might deface the walls. Today I wrote a rather graphic story on the inside of the horizontal bars. I haven't seen my wife and family in three weeks, so mostly I wait.

My body is here, my heart on the west coast.

The Nature of Contempt

I have just been released after serving thirty days for civil contempt of court, convicted of violating an injunction barring obstruction of road construction and clear-cutting fifteen miles up Clayoquot Sound and north of Tofino, B.C.

The current felling, blasting, and grading occur between the Atleo River, once a prime salmon spawning river, and still pristine Sulphur Passage, near the Beddingfield logging camp of Millstream Timber. Millstream is the contractor for British Columbia Forest Products, now almost wholly owned by Fletcher Challenge of New Zealand, where such logging practices would never be allowed. Fletcher's annual report reads like a takeover strategy for worldwide conquest, subduing Mother Earth in third-world countries like Canada.

And, incidentally, subduing any other mothers who get in their way: Ananda Lee Tan served forty-five days; eight other women were gaoled in maximum security. Ron Aspinall, a Tofino doctor and Green Party candidate served thirty-seven days. Allegations of contempt have been proven against thirty-six local residents. Many of them are members of the Tofino-Long Beach Chamber of Commerce who see the area's tourist potential being cut with the trees.

The boat blockades began June 12, 1988, making it dangerous to blast since flyrock and trees landed directly in the bay. This was followed by an encampment of protectors close to the blasting. I pitched my tent on the logging road with my daughter for four days, which earned my thirty days. Dozens of tree protectors stayed in the rainforest for days, but the company blasted anyway.

For weeks protectors took turns in a basket chair hung thirty feet over the blast face. Tree houses were built and destroyed at night by loggers. Paul Winstandley lived in a hammock strung between two trees eighty feet over the forest floor. On his third day, the owner of Millstream Timber shot Paul with a pellet gun, and loggers started to chop the tree he was in, cutting one through in the night while Paul scrambled more than sixty feet. All this was secretly recorded on video and Jim Kemp, the owner, pleaded guilty in court: he was sentenced to twenty hours or community service; the price of Paul's resistance was fifteen days in Oakalla Prison for contempt of Court.

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My month in gaol cost the province \$10,000 and the logging companies have spent hundreds of thousands trying to keep us away. Only if we interfere with their obscene profits will they listen. Of course, the Social Credit big business government has been unresponsive. Even the New Democratic Party, which has an environment platform and supported the preservation of Meares Island, sees this as an employment issue, although there is not a single worker from Beddingfield working in this area. The companies' theft of our future is not the fault of the workers, who merely suffer from tunnel vision and cannot see the destruction around them. They will wake up, though perhaps too late.

While in prison I wrote to nearly 200 members of the provincial Legislative Assembly and the Federal Parliament. Of the few replies I received, all but one talk about the importance of the rule of law. What about the rule of *right* ?

Graffiti has appeared on the sides of the Alberni Highway campaign: "Save Tofino: Kill a Protestor", "Stop Tree Rot—Bugger a Hugger", and so forth.

Company officials maintain that the logging road is not intended for logging the Megin River watershed, which backs up against Strathcona Provincial Park. Sources inside BCFP now say the road will be used by BCFP and MacMillan Bloedel, both of which hold timber leases in the Megin. Meanwhile, this area is all part of a larger Nuu Chah Nulth Native land. On August 28, 1988, Friends of Clayoquot Sound held a picnic for 250 people on the road which was supported by hereditary chief Earl Maquinna George and Ahousaht Natives. While the Federal government is willing to settle land claims, the provincial government will not even acknowledge them; so the Meares Island claim, on which Native people have already spent \$1.5 million, is expected to be before the courts for the next twelve years. Many loggers feel that the Native people only want the land back to log it for themselves, but of course 23,000 spiked trees provide some insurance against this. Why are we so afraid of land claims, anyway? The natives were far better caretakers and stewards for the land before we got here, and they certainly could not do any worse than we have.

Since this article was written twenty-two of those fined for contempt of court have served gaol sentences of 4-8 days. This writer has served a further seven days. Fourteen others are awaiting capture.