

All Those Bloody Cassandras

A Review of *On The Perimeter*

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Picture a tweedy Welsh granny making tea on a log fire for a shaved punker whose head is painted paratrooper-camouflage; picture sturdy matrons, preschool teachers, social workers, secretaries, students, nuns, nurses, lawyers, mothers and militant lesbians grouped around the USAF Cruise Missile Base on Greenham Common for a common cause—picture them the bravest women in the world, our modern amazons, Cassandras against the Cruise. They are ordinary. They are everybody.

It is difficult to speak of the Greenham Common peace women without raving about their determined devotion to the unpopular cause of saving the world's life. Their courage in the teeth of adversity does not lend itself to sane pronouncements about war and peace in the global village of Newbury, only 63 miles from London. That is what Caroline Blackwood discovered during her visit to the peace camp there, all round the nine mile perimeter, in 1984. *On The Perimeter* is the result of that journey—her assignment: to document the demise of the Women's Peace Movement¹.

On her assignment, Blackwood met people straight from a Dickens' novel who so hate the women they have banded together and called themselves RAGE, ratepayers against Greenham encampments. In the sacred name of declining real estate values, they have been instrumental in having the women's possessions evicted twice daily by the bailiffs. Led by Mr. Learoyd and Mrs. Scull, RAGE is of the opinion that the peace women are dangerous and cruise missiles are protection. They are typical of what the women call "sleepers in the snow"—people whose perceptions are so dulled they see filthy, squatting women on the common, but not barbed wire, steel and concrete of the military base. Snow-sleepers have swallowed the poison

"war is peace" propaganda fed them by a government that never asked if they wanted American military bases on their island (1981).

Not everyone has quaffed the magical elixir, however. Women protesting militarism as "an addiction that distorts human development"² are squatting on the Common to remind the sleepers and everyone else that they are as close to annihilation as the women are to the nine mile of razor wire, the perimeter of armageddon. When the women hold mirrors up to the base, they are trying to awaken military guards who have been drilled to sleep by the nature and demands of their stupid occupation, part of which is to guard common land from trespass by people who used to own it, from whom it was stolen. Having to face women they would like to think they would be protecting in time of war torments them with the truth, turns them vicious. Their orders are to have no eye-contact with these women, but they can be as abusive as they like.

Two paratroopers were standing behind the first women's camp that I visited. They were only separated from the benders (sheets of plastic slung over bushes and pegged for shelter) by the barbed wire of the great fence and they looked caged, like ferocious animals as they glared at the benders with an expression of venomous hatred that ironically was mingled with fear, as if they felt it was the women who had the dangerous weapons. (p. 4)

When Blackwood speaks with a woman named Pat who is camping at Blue Gate, she is told, "We had such an awful night with the soldiers. They abused us all night. They just wouldn't stop. It was sexual, of course. It's always sexual." (p. 14).

Naturally, the year is 1984. Peace is the enemy. These women have done horrible things to the military of two

great nations: decorated the perimeter with photographs, booties, flowers, webs, darned miles of it, trespassed onto the base, stolen secret papers, xeroxed them all, put them back, painted peace symbols on the mighty cruise phallus, monitored its every move. They have proved beyond doubt that the base leaks, security is laughable.

As they tried to wake the sleepers in the snow, the peace women recognized that their role was bound to be very unpopular. The sleeper hates to be woken. He hates to be alerted to his peril. His terror, and his fury at the terror he feels, can project itself. The figure who points out the danger can seem like the danger itself. (p. 34)

All those bloody cassydras on the Common are confronting military abuse, the people's RAGE, and local hooligans who fling blood and excrement on them and pierce the plastic benders with hot poker. Mr. Learoyd, leader of RAGE, offered an explanation why: "He said I'd no idea how much damage those women were doing. I ought to see the filthy mess that they had made of the common. They were lawbreakers. They danced naked. They were lesbians. They created health hazards. They smelt." (p. 64).

Sound familiar?³ Add that they made his wife barren and his garden go limp and you can bring on the Inquisition to judge and burn them. Do they really kidnap and eat babies? Which reminds me of a poem by Robinson Jeffers.

The mad girl with the staring eyes and long white fingers
 Hooked in stonies of the wall,
 The storm-wrack hair and screeching mouth; does it
 matter, Cassandra,
 whether people believe your bitter fountain?
 Truly men hate the truth, they'd liefer
 meet a tiger on the road.
 Therefore the poets honey their truth with lying, but
 religious vendors and political men
 Pour from the barrel, new lies on the old, and are praised
 for kindly wisdom. Poor Bitch be wise.
 No: You'll still mumble in a corner a crust of truth, to
 men and gods disgusting—You and I, Cassandra.⁴

Change Tiger to missile and mankind has not changed much, but these current peace cassydras on Greenham Common, although they face fierce, relentless persecution and media coverage which distorts their image—harpies, witches—have a global support system that would make your heart sing.

As the whole position of the Greenham women was a symbolic one, they sometimes seemed like high-priestesses of a mysterious cult who required more esoteric symbolic offerings than toothpaste, soap and brillo pads...when male supporters... arrived with gifts, many of them were shy and awkward.... Were they allowed to go up to the women who were sitting in a circle in the mud? Could they just hand them bags of potatoes and packets of lighters or could these gifts only be relayed to the women through some female intermediary?...it was as if they believed there was an invisible and magical ring surrounding the Greenham women which no male could pass with impunity. Once they grasped that the women would not be offended if they went right up to them and handed them their offerings, they looked relieved and proud as if they'd passed some gruelling test. "Don't thank me—you are doing all the work," I heard one may say. (p. 81)

Minutes after the bailiffs come to evict their possessions—benders, pots, food, water—the support system drives up with gortex bags, firewood and candles. Evictions, arrests, processing and trials of these women for trespass, willful damage to a policeman's shoe, or cutting the perimeter fence clog the courts and cost thousands of pounds. When they are released, they go back to camp and engage in acts of solidarity and civil disobedience in conditions that are less than primitive. No caves when rain comes. Fires go out. Life in a gortex bag on the side of a public road. Compared to this, to some, jail is considered a rest.

Why is the government willing to pay over three million pounds per year to police the peace women when jobs are scarce and poverty endemic? Why have the Greenham women put up with it for years?

A British ex-magistrate looked at all the hoards of police with a shudder. She had been sent to jail many times since she had become a Greenham woman. "I wonder if this country can continue to have nuclear weapons without turning into a police state," she said. "More people ought to ask that. Who cares whether its wrong to be a lesbian and all that trivial, frivolous nonsense? All that's only used to camouflage the issues that really matter (p. 112).

Part II: The Greenham Tapes

Protect and Survive was a BBC television program which outlines government approved survival tactics for the British population in the event of nuclear war. Simone Wilkinson, one of the Greenham women, explained in an

interview, how she was converted to the cause of peace after watching this program. It was suggested that citizens should remove four doors from their houses to make a shelter by leaning them against an inside wall, if the ones outside had been blown away. After placing sandbags on top of the doors, they were to stow in there all the family's needs (food, sanitary facilities, water, light, heat) for two weeks, then get in and wait for the radiation to disperse. The government's plan had such obvious flaws that Wilkinson realized: "In the Event of nuclear war, I would have to watch my children die. I didn't bring my children into the world so I could push them under four doors and watch them die."⁵ That seems to be what brought women to the missile base—sudden outbursts of truth, clarity and humanity which grip the normal mind and heart when one considers the world dying. It is almost enough to make people want to beat the missiles into ploughshares.

When Blackwood's documentary ended, in 1984, things took a turn for the sinister. In September, 1985, several Greenham women attended the Halifax World Peace Conference⁶, but they also came to find Canadian experts on microwave crowd control. Kim Bessley and Simone Wilkinson spoke to CBC producer Max Allen at the University of Toronto where they were seeking advice about the mysterious illnesses that had begun to afflict women camping at certain locations around the base's perimeter, especially near Green Gate, where the silos house the cruise missiles. Their symptoms included sweating, vomiting, sudden face burns (at night), deregulated periods, miscarriages, and migraines. Many women felt they were being "zapped" by something, and some could pinpoint places where it happened. They hesitated to complain at first for fear of being thought hysterical, which is also one of the symptoms they experienced. Loss of memory, inability to concentrate, nausea, eye pain, slurred speech, nosebleeds, disorientation, pain in ovaries, palpitations, pain in womb, lethargy, aggressiveness, retinal bleeding, panic attacks in safe situations, post-menopausal breakthrough bleeding—these are some of the symptoms Kim Bessley listed during the interview. Was it stress? Combat fatigue? In spite of conditions, Bessley said the women were normally quite happy at the camp, which is spread over nine miles, some quite isolated from others. Gradually, the word began to spread of "zapping zones." The women near these zones began to collect data, keeping journals of their symptoms, the sudden onset, their ability to walk in and out of places where even the animals acted strangely.

Kim Bessley thinks the US military is experimenting in microwave radiation crowd control, but paranoia is an often reported symptom of zapping. Would anyone believe

a bunch of hysterical women who are usually considered by their own government and military establishment to be either Russian spies or communist dupes? Having breached military security at the base, these women are as much the "enemy" as whomever else the military imagines is threatening it;

although men have always said they go to war for the sake of women and children, it is very apparent at Greenham common and other women's peace camps that men are now willing to hurt or even kill women in order to go to war. Military and police brutality at Greenham and Cosimo, Italy, has already resulted in women having their bones broken and skulls fractured. Being confronted with their own actions in conflict with their stated objectives must pose a serious crisis in the minds and hearts of these young men.⁷

Because Rosalie Bertell believed Bessley, she has been to Greenham to measure this microwave activity on sensitive radio equipment and found it to be most concentrated at Green Gate, the silo site, the place women had identified as a zapping zone. At the base's Main Gate, which is a public roadway, there is no sign of this activity.

Serious study of the biological effects of microwave radiation began in 1953 when the American government discovered that their Moscow embassy was somehow being zapped by antennae aimed at the building by the Russian government. The Americans were forced to erect a radio barrier against it when it was discovered their embassy personnel were becoming disoriented, unable to concentrate, erratic, aggressive or lethargic. The government tested all those so affected by the bombardment and found biological damage from exposure to low-level microwave radiation. Naturally, they began to research these findings for possible weapons' applications. After all, war is their business. That was only the beginning. In 1985, the American military funded (\$600,000) two such research projects at the University of Western Ontario.⁸

Why waste thirty years of research when enemy guinea pigs are camped around your perimeter intent on making military security impossible, even laughable. Kim Bessley has said that the base is unworkable now from a strategic point of view. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the American military might want to know what the long term effect of microwave radiation might be on people who are not going to be moved any other way short of shooting them all.

The peace women have decided to act as guinea pigs in this experiment and are having regular medical tests in an effort to collect substantial evidence against the military to take it (them?) to court. Once there was a massive physical presence, paratroopers guarding the perimeter of what Simone Wilkinson called "Auschwitz in England." Now, there are more antennae and fewer people. Through the night-shrouded villages on their way to the woods, women still monitor the cruise convey thundering along roads never built for the weight or velocity. They still enter the base nightly to paint peace signs on the silos and cement bunkers. Once, when a British politician was busy pouring oil on the public about how safe, how utterly safe, these missile bases were, there were 2,000 women engaged in cutting down four and one half miles of the perimeter fence. From 1981 to 1985, there have been 10,000 arrests of women for single and mass trespass. The courts had to pass a special law to make trespass a crime. In English law, common ground cannot be trespassed unless the American military has stolen it first.

England is not just another unlucky country where the drama is happening. This is nuclear war and we are all under it. Here, in Canada, we are becoming inured to cruise missiles falling out of the sky on their way to American military bases we did not know existed until an accident happened at Cold Lake, Alberta. Missiles fall out of the sky with a regularity that can be easily documented from military tests, and wherever there are missiles, there are other ones being aimed at them. Storage is dicey. We are as occupied by the American military as England is; not being a smallish island, we do not notice is as much. The peace camps make us take notice. For this, if for nothing else we should be eternally thankful that the Greenham women, and women in peace camps everywhere⁹, are willing to face the rough techno-beast and monitor the mad machinations of patriarchy.

We all live in the shadow of the threat of nuclear war. We demand an end to research, testing, development, and deployment of all weapons of mass destruction, to the militarization of space and to all form of violence. As a first step, we call for a comprehensive test ban treaty.

Resolution
Halifax Women's Peace Conference
June 5-9, 1985

NOTES

1. "Demise of the Women's Peace Movement"—same tactic as to send someone to find out about the demise of the Women's Movement. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Every few

years someone is sent to feel collective women's pulse to find that, indeed, yes, she still lives. Most reportage is biased (excluding Blackwood's book) judging by the media coverage of the Nairobi Conference and women's peace demonstrations—most of the coverage goes to what fights might arise. Women speaking out against the terrible waste and intellectual breakdown called The Great War (1914) were branded "pro-German" or "traitors and enemy agitators" in the British press. That was praise compared to the coverage of the women's peace conferences of that period. Here were women risking direct enemy fire to try unofficial diplomacy with involved and neutral governments, trying, in fact, to batter the idea of a united nations into the wood of Woodrow Wilson's head in Washington before the USA leaped into the fray. Their diplomacy was unofficial since they did not have the vote, but their goals were international, not narrowly national. There was the press calling them "misguided," "world peace fanatics," and the ever popular "frustrated, hysterical spinsters."

For a wonderful history of the origins of the Women's Peace Movement, see Ann Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women*, Feminist Peace Campaigners of the Great War. London and Boston: Pandora Press, 1985.

2. Quoted from a resolution of the *Women's Peace Conference in Halifax*, June 1985.

We condemn militarism. Militarism is an addiction that distorts human development, causing world-wide poverty, starvation, pollution, repression, torture and death. Feeding this habit robs the world's children and future generations of their inheritance.

Unfortunately, another term of Atilla the Hen is not going to change the face of militarism on England's green and pleasant shores.

3. Sound familiar? Name calling and the Women's Peace Movement have been associated since Lysistrata said no to war and warriors. At the 1915 International Women's Peace Conference in The Hague, reporters characterized them as "cranquettes" whining about a cruel world where men fought wars while the world cheered. This was certainly not the case. (See Ann Wiltsher's *Most Dangerous Women*.)

Whether it is by their dismissive ridicule or murderous abuse (cf. suffragette's treatment, witch burning in 14th-18th centuries, ask Joan of Arc), most male-dominated hierarchies (including news media where applicable) betray their nervous fear of women's mass movements whether for suffrage, peace or equal rights. Evelyn Sharp, a British journalist, analysed the British press response to the Women's Congress in The Hague:

But I am dealing here with a mass of comments selected almost at random from numbers that appeared in the papers before the Congress took place; and their wilful inaccuracy, their abusive impudence, and the underlying note of fear that runs through them all, takes one back to the early days of the Woman's Movement. There seems to be a certain set of adjectives specially reserved in newspaper offices for women who set out to try and make the world better. "Misguided" is fairly common, so is "chattering"; "hysterical," of course, has become a byword of anyone who wants to fling a sneer at a woman.... As in all progressive movements...it is fear that really runs through the outcry of the Press—fear lest the women might perhaps be right.

From *Most Dangerous Women*, pp. 99-100

4. Robinson Jeffers. "Cassandra," *New Pocket Anthology of American Verse*, p. 242.
5. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, "The Women of Greenham Common," *Ideas*. Two-hour radio documentary (from tapes) produced by Max Allen at the University of Toronto, broadcast September 1985.
6. The Halifax World Peace Conference (5-9 June 1985) was composed of 350 women from 33 countries convened to propose "Women's Alternatives for Negotiating Peace." Some of the conference's affir-

mations are the same as those drafted as a manifesto of the Women's Peace Party in January, 1915 (see Women's Peace Party "Program for Constructive Peace," History of the Women's Peace Party by Louise Degen, 1939).

7. Rosalie Bertell. *No Immediate Danger: Prognosis for a Radioactive Earth*. London, England: Women's Press, 1985, p. 234.
8. Projects: This information from Max Allen on CBC tapes, "Women of Greenham Common."

9. See Seager and Olson's "Women in the World, An International Atlas," London: Pan Books, 1986, for a map of women's peace camps 1970-1985. "Peace has always been a women's issue: women have been in the lead in anti-war and anti-militarist movements for the last century, as in the current women's peace camp movement." (39, Protest, in *Women in the World*)

Sinistrum

The aircraft comes to us
 out of the sky
 into the T.V. screens of our hearts
 like a black accusing finger.
 With swept back wings
 —the aerodynamics
 of an insect—
 it will carry
 two nuclear missiles
 and exceed the SALT II accord.
 Heat waves rise around its shape
 in the shimmering disturbed air.
 Men who have always feared dinosaurs,
 fragile men
 weak in blood and bone
 have built this black Leviathan
 believing it made them powerful.
 Even now, little men rush out on the field
 like satanic worshippers
 not one of them perceiving
 that his head
 and all our heads
 are trapped in the mouth of a dragon.

Diane Moon Sautter
 Michigan.