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Fred Harrison tells of the  
Canadian Indians' land  
recovery battles

AS A BOY, Watson Price was taught the secrets of the rain forests that cloaked the Queen Charlotte Islands, off the west coast of Canada. He learned how his ancestors, who were master carvers, transformed the giant red cedars into magnificent totem poles which they erected in front of their long houses on the beaches. He stalked deer and trapped otter, and was inducted into the medicinal powers of the herbs that could be gathered in the clearings.

Then he started working for a Canadian company as a logger. He felled spruce and hemlock for the sawmills, the timber being used to make houses and furniture and toys in the metropolitan cities of North America. Over the course of half a century, Watson Price saw the verdant hillsides turned into barren terrain, blitzed as if by napalm, as the logging companies clear-cut their way to fat profits. As the forests fell, the salmon streams were disrupted and the Haida mourned. Smallpox cut down the Haida in the 19th century, and the culture of those who survived was further weakened in the 20th century. The Queen Charlottes escaped the erosion of the Ice Age, but now man, in cold blood, is decapitating this paradise in the Pacific for profit.

But the Haida have started to rescue the ways of their ancestors. Symbolically, their last stand is in defence of the trees. Eleven Haida, including 81-year-old Watson Price — now chief of an Eagle clan — face prison in defence of the trees. Their case is one of several pieces of litigation which Canadian Indians have forced into the courts, and which could transform the structure of power and wealth in British Columbia.

The tribes want recognition as the owners of the west coast province. If they succeed, they will join the ranks of the richest rentiers of natural resources on earth. But to reduce their motives to money would be to misread the smoke signals coming from the councils of war now being held in the north-west, that most far-flung corner of the American continent. The Indians want to retrieve the traditional principles by which they lived in harmony with the riches of nature. They want a new — a higher — order based on the combination of traditional hunting and gathering ways with the best of what can be learned from white men.

This is why many tribes are suing the British Crown, as head of the Canadian state, for land which was neither conquered nor ceded by treaty. They know that land-use maps are geographical reflections of culture. So to revive and protect their traditions, they have to redefine property rights — rights which white men are trying to erode. According to British anthropologist Hugh Brody, whose film on the Gitksan tribe was televised by Channel 4 on July 7: "One-third of Canada is in dispute at the moment. In BC the issue is electric because there are no treaties. The Indians are making non-negotiable claims. Not



● Eagle chief Watson Price, "not afraid of jail"

negotiable on either side: this is not a case of buying the government's way out of trouble."

The strategy of confrontation with the Crown is ironical. For the Haida Indians made it plain to me that they respect Prince Philip for his tireless promotion of conservation, and they admire Prince Charles for his willingness to advocate alternative ways of viewing life. They believe that, if it were left to the Royal family, they would be given a fairer deal.

*Waatcheseaa* ("Lucky Twin") whose white name is Mike Nichol, was born of a Scots father who married a Haida woman from Masset village on the northern coast of the Queen Charlotte Islands. Mike was born into the Raven clan called *Yahgulanaas*, or "Middle Town People", who by tradition are the bureaucrats. Appropriately, he is the administrator of the Haida Council of Nations.

Like the Gitksan, the Haida want provincial status with the power to raise taxes and control the natural resources on which their culture depends. "There is a real desire for a high degree of autonomy," declared Mike as we ate a breakfast of herring eggs on seaweed, a delicacy collected from the shores that morning. "The Canadian constitution recognises aboriginal rights. Canada is probably one of the best in the world for holding out hope for aboriginals. We want the right to control logging licences, raise taxes, manage natural resources and prevent environmental degradation."

Unlike the Gitksan, however, who are claiming legal title to 22,000 square miles, the Haida refuse to seek a legal endorsement of their rights. "We don't need anyone to tell us that it is our land," says Mike Nichol. Instead, the Haida have resorted to civil disobedience. The focus for their dispute is the fate of the ancient trees on Lyall Island, which they do not

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want logged. More than 70 Haida were given suspended prison sentences for contempt of court. The BC government has now charged 11 of them with wilfully disobeying a court order, for which they face two years in prison.

Lyllal Island is sacred to the Haida. In the 1880s, many Haida who were gathering food on the island were wiped out by smallpox. According to their religion, the spirits of people who die before their time remain in the locality. They say that clear-cutting is an act of desecration.

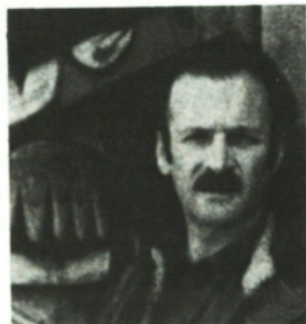
One of the Haida's lawyers, Michael Jackson, a Londoner who is now Professor of Law at the University of BC, explained the spiritual significance of Lyllal Island. "Where can the ancestral spirits go? They cannot live among the desolation that is left behind by a clear-cutting operation."

To survive, the Haida know that they have to preserve their religion. Diane Brown, who is in charge of the health centre on the Skidegate reserve, says she has heard the spirits singing on Lyllal Island. "Our ancestors who guide us are spirits, but that is not to say they do not enjoy a beautiful tree. Our spiritual ancestors would feel much the same pain and sense of loss as I do when I am totally surrounded by clear-cutting. Without my religion I would lose my identity and sense of pride. Without that, what have you got left? Nothing. You get apathy, alcoholism, drugs."

The potlach is an institution which European missionaries nearly destroyed because they thought it was a pagan rite. In fact, it was a social and legal ritual which, for example, was staged by a new chief who needed social recognition. The chief and his clan amassed wealth which they distributed to other clans at a festival; acceptance of the gifts acknowledged a new chief's right to hunting and fishing territories.

Watson Price became the chief of an Eagle clan when his uncle died two years ago; but he could not use the title until he held his potlach last month. He and his clan shared out money and goods worth nearly \$6,000 (£3,000) to members of the Raven clan. Now he can use the name Chief Gaathlaay and is responsible for the moral leadership of his clan. As we clambered over bare mountainsides where deer once roamed among the 500-year-old red cedar, he told me why he had defied the white man's law on Lyllal Island — he is one of the 11 now facing prison. "I went to Lyllal Island to make a stand. I am not afraid of going to jail."

The Haida are now sceptical when they hear



● Diane Browne and Michael Jackson — "a spiritual loss"

Europeans talk about conservation. The Indians believe that licences have more to do with social control than with conserving their ecology, which is rapidly being depleted by commercial interests armed with fistfuls of licences.

Take logging. My guide, *Guujaaw* (the potlach name which means "drum") a member of the Raven clan who sports a long pigtail down his back and a razor-sharp dagger in his belt, showed me the remains of a clear-cutting operation. Large tree trunks were strewn everywhere. "What kind of conservation do you call this?" he asked bitterly. "These should have gone to a pulp mill to make your magazine."

The logging companies can afford this waste because the BC government does not charge them the full economic rent for removing the trees. One opposition politician, Bob Williams of Vancouver — Minister of Natural Resources in the BC government 10 years ago — estimates that the logging companies are being undercharged more than \$500m. (see story on page 82).

The UN World Commission on Environment and Development has now taken an interest in the fate of the Queen Charlottes. Two commissioners and their secretary general, Mr Jim MacNeil, arrived in a seaplane for an on-the-spot investigation. Mr MacNeil told me: "It is evident that the environment in general is deteriorating in ways that are predictable and avoidable. We need a dialogue between the indigenous people and the governments."

But, meanwhile, the Haida Indians have to make their world work for themselves on a daily basis, even at some personal risk. *Guujaaw*, my guide, is now on the run from the Mounties. He will not pay a \$150 fine for snagging 29 pink salmon to feed his family. He faces imprisonment. "I have never owned a licence in my life; the fishery authorities would not like my fishing gear, which is illegal. I snag salmon above the tidal boundary, at a place where people traditionally catch fish. I have never done any harm to the environment. I consider myself as natural as a bear which catches fish for food. A bear has never had to go before a judge to own up to fishing."