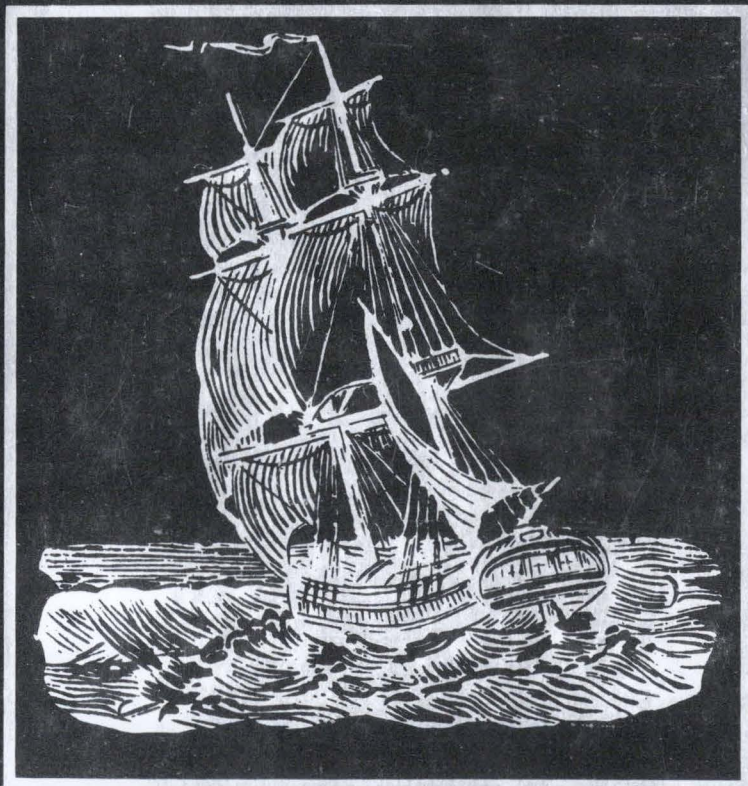


GEORGE BOWERING

# BURNING WATER



*Burning Water* (Don Mills: Musson, 1980). Black and gold dust jacket with title, author's name, and image of sailing ship in gold.

## JORDAN ABEL / Burning Water (Indian, Indians)

for George Bowering

The two men were Indians, and they knew enough to blend in with the rocks and trees, for the time being at least.

"It is the first time in my life that I have seen a vision," said the first Indian.

"A vision?" said the second Indian.

The second Indian, who was about ten years older, a world-weary man with scars here and there, sighed. The second Indian looked over at his companion, who was now leaning back on a bare patch of striped granite, idly picking at his navel.

The first Indian looked from his companion to the contraptions and back again. He turned full around, and looked at the second Indian as suddenly as he could, fishing for a truth perhaps swimming in the shadow of a rock.

The first Indian looked with his very good eyes.

The second Indian squeezed tight on his shoulder.

They were standing in the dull light in front of the Indians' long houses.

While he was ensconced there, repairing his gear and doing a little fishing, he managed also to do quite a bit of talking with the Coastal Indians. It was one of the few pieces, perhaps the only piece, of Indian elephant in his village.

"It is my belief," said the first Indian to the third Indian, "that these persons may be gods and they may be men, but that in either case they came to us from the sun."

"That would explain why the canoes you saw were wearing wings," suggested the third Indian.

The third Indian's efforts to be creative were noted by his friend with approval. A lot of people think that Indians are just naturally patient, but that's not true. Before the white "settlers" arrived there were lots of impatient Indians. It's only in the last two hundred years that Indians have been looking patient whenever there were any white men around.

"I would be looking for Indians."

"And what if there were no Indians?"

Suppose you were from the sun, and you have come all the way and now you were in our harbour and you didn't see any Indians.

The third Indian thought about it for a while. The first Indian watched him thinking. He saw the third Indian's eyes light up as imagination hit home.

"Clams!" shouted the happy third Indian. But the third Indian was lost in thought. The first Indian was impatient with him, but he knew his friend's reputation for the overlooked possibility.

"I am thinking about it, and I am imagining that I am one of the people from the sun," said the third Indian sadly.

"I was born to see visions," replied the first Indian. "Instruct a poor Indian."

The third Indian shifted uncomfortably, despite all the people who think Indians are always fully comfortable in their natural environment.

"Until the Great Uprising of the People," put in the first Indian.

"And we will then become the Indians with nothing," said the first Indian, picturing their fate mainly in terms of his wife and children.

"There is an old Haida saying I have heard," said the third Indian, "that says history will repeat its unhappiest hours upon those who do not remember what happened the first time."

It reminded the first Indian of something.

"At last we were become so scare of ammunition to defend ourselves from the treacherous Indians," wrote Menzies, "that we were obliged to get supplies of Powder from both the Spaniards and Traders before we left the Coast.

On the shoulder where the bay met the Chimacum River, they found the settled and peaceful remains of an Indian village. He didn't like to be around the Indians.

"I have never eaten a person," said the first Indian.

"I am also innocent of eating any person," said the second Indian.

"It seems as if I did hear something once about our forefathers eating people long ago before the time of the Great Flood," offered the first Indian.

"You were fortunate perhaps to find one of their camps," said the first Indian.

"We will see you again soon," suggested the first Indian, betraying a little of that impatience the Red Man had before the coming of the Europeans.



“We will do our best to supply an answer,” said the first Indian. Now they stopped, the signal that this was as far as the two Indians would be accompanied. The second Indian just plainly looked away into the forest, while the first Indian tested one of the steel blades against the bark of a fir trunk.

The first trouble with the Indians came while Peter Puget was surveying the complicated sound that would be named after him. One morning as they filled the boats and prepared to go ashore for firewood, they espied thirty quiet Indians along the edge of the land, bows in the hands they carried by their sides. Now he wanted to hear the Indians say it, or something equivalent.

When he did that the thirty Indians fitted their very long bows with very long arrows, and pointed them at the mariners. The Indians let the strings of their bows back gently, and accepted the worthless trash from the landing party that included a contingent of marines with muskets.

Worse was his derangement, as neither he nor the witnesses could swear to whether he was violating a wounded and dying Indian, or a corpse.

Plus this fact: the Indians were not all the same Indians.

But the shores here were so pleasant, and the Capilano Indians so gentle, that it was no disappointment, Burrard Inlet.

The first Indian’s eyes opened wide.

The second Indian, understanding that the imprecation was an essential part of a ceremony having to do with assuring the Great Spirit that one was thankful for His care despite a disappointment this time, shouted louder than anyone thus far.

All the Capilanos, about fifty of them, stood up in their dugout canoes as only they could do and shouted in unison, so that their deep Indian voices resounded from a curved rockface a mile away:

“Aeh, shitt!”

The Indians sat back down in their canoes and laughed.

The Englishmen ate the Indian salmon, and the Capilanos drank the English rum, and everyone got happy and sleepy, and it was one of the best ever Friday nights enjoyed there.

This is something the Indians showed me.

So there were always Indians around, asking permission to try their hands at the European oars, belaying pins, sextants, and coffee cups. The Indians were always doing that to white men.

One of them said something loudly in Indian, and one held his arms in front of him and said, "Poo, poo!" They jostled and leaned backward and stepped up and down, and finally the first Indian felt himself pushed out in front of his fellows.

"Aeh, *shitt!*" hollered the Indians.

A day after the Indian shot Puget's map table to kindling, the two ships were sailing through a bit of a storm into another waterway a few miles north.

"I could think of a good use for a shovel right now," whispered the first Indian.

That is, he was seen by some of the white men and all of the Indians. These the Indians were supposed to look at.

"It is a relative question," said the first Indian.

Vancouver did not realize that he was twisting the strip of sea otter skin in his hands, though all the Indians had seen it. The second Indian nodded his head in the white man's fashion.

"Oh yes," said the second Indian. The first Indian remained impassive, the way Indians liked to do in front of white men, to suggest that they were patient.

"We have," said the second Indian.

"It is as many suns as we all have fingers on our hands," said the second Indian, looking about as if to count by fives. The first Indian waited till they had walked some distance from the group who were trying on the Irish linen.

Did you notice something odd about the *Mamathni*?" asked the first Indian the next day. The Indians plied canoes just about as long as the *Chatham* but they have never conceived the notion of placing chairs and tables and beds in them.

"Of course," replied the second Indian now.

All the while these words were being said, the first Indian was fidgeting, his fingers and toes moving out of sequence, and his mouth slightly open. The second Indian loved being middle-aged.

"What I would like to point out, if it has to be left to me," said the first Indian, "is that the *Mamathni* are all male."

The second Indian was really taken aback.

“How do they make more of themselves, then?” asked the first Indian, as they sat on the rocks looking toward the cove where the buttoned people had last been seen.

“Perhaps they fall from the sky with the rain, as frogs do,” said the second Indian. The second Indian was a little bashful for some reason, but he continued. The first Indian was playing with the scissors that had been part of the deal for the dream of the large eastern sea.

There they met the East Indian fur trader *Venus*, that had come over the foam from Nootka, with a litter for George Vancouver. They told each other tales of the sea, and compared their disdains for French sailors, Chinese and Indian food, and Yankee traders. He was also proud, and as far as the whites were concerned, pride was a very important quality in the Indian.

He had trouble understanding what the English officers said, so it is no wonder that all he perceived was a sort of fat Indian saying something like, “*Euclatle muh Maquinna, kimscutla naw kimscutla, neah kyumkhwalek Nootka skaw kimscutla koakoax.*”

In the Americas the Indians would have begun to do that, but they were interrupted, so they said in their new language, Ah shit!

With the exception of Captain Vancouver, Mudge may have been the only man aboard the *Discovery* who did not have sex with the Tahitians and Indians. The Indian houses at Friendly Cove settled back into obscurity as part of the low land mass.

The Indians, unlike the fishermen and boat makers and house builders of the bracing north, were satisfied to sit around in the dirt with colourful though soiled cloth over their knees, and their hands out. The soldiers and sailors of the distant Spanish nation had made it all the way from the tropics to here, with the prime purpose of making Christians of the Indians. For hundreds of years the Spanish had been grabbing gold out of the Indians’ hands, and giving them wooden crosses in return.

The Spanish gave the Indians wooden crosses.



He got as far south as he was going to go that winter—the National Museum of Costa Rica, which is all about Indians and Spaniards and the great question of religion—before Vancouver did, or before he allowed him to.

The two Indians were cleaning their fish and spreading them open on the racks leaning over the smoky fire. “Cutting fish open is not as much an interesting occupation as is waiting for the nets to fill,” said the first Indian.

“Oh, there are worse jobs,” said the second Indian. “I mean there are fewer and fewer pleasures for us older Indians, and one of them is the opportunity to poke fun at you young fellows.”

The first Indian ran the point of his steel knife briskly along a silver belly and flipped the floater and the rest into the creek, all the while leering at his teacher. “But as I was saying,” continued the first Indian, “they seemed to be men while they were here, but who knows that they were not sent by gods from another land?”

“What is this ‘How’?” asked the first Indian of his companion.

“Search me,” said the second Indian.

“No thanks,” said the second Indian in his own language.

“I wouldn’t mind having one of those mirrors,” said the first Indian to the second Indian.

“Offer him a fish,” said the second Indian.

He is the king of those Red Indians out there.

“How about some interestin’ Indian trinkets?” said Magee, opening a box and extracting several leathern sacks depending from cords made of beaded hide. There are hardly any Indians, but the ones who plied boats about this coast a few hundred years ago had a language that depended a lot on dreams.

The Indians, without any address to the white men, started to pick things up, not even bothering to smile at the owners. The Indians dropped the stuff and let their canoes drift back a piece. The officers and men filled the air with smoke and sound, the Indians threw their spears, grabbed what they could, and scattered into the fading twilight.

When it was all over there were two wounded sailors, and eight dead Indians, some of them probably sons of the gang’s leader. The last dying Indian was brought to him and dumped at his feet.

The civilian officers were interested to hear of Vancouver's work, and they were especially animated upon hearing of his recent run-in with the old Indian women and her gang. On conversing with these paddlers we heard them claim that they had proceeded eastward a month to barter with an Indian people completely alien to them.

But now he remembered that when the Indian pointed the barrel at his chest he could have moved, he could even have dived into the water. But in fact, the farther north they travelled the more intransigent did the Indian tribes become.

The unfriendly Indians were shouting and waving their weapons.

"In fact I think I liked him best of all the *Mamathni*," said the first Indian.

"A full man of the tribe," said the second Indian.

"I liked the man who drew images of the plants," said the second Indian.

"I thought you were an artist," said the second Indian.

## Note

"Burning Water (Indian, Indians)" was composed entirely from sentences in George Bowering's novel *Burning Water* that contained either the word "Indian" or the word "Indians." I was interested in exploring this text sentence by sentence. What surrounded the word "Indian"? What surrounded the word "Indians"? What happened when these sentences were placed side by side? What narrative sifted through? What did that narrative say about Indigenous peoples? What did this study in context say about George Bowering's writing? What did it say about me?