

Walking the Land: The MIR Centre For Peace

Castlegar, British Columbia

—Myler Wilkinson

The Kootenay region of British Columbia lies about 350 miles due east of Vancouver in the narrow mountain valleys of the Selkirk range. The region is both physically and psychically distant from the major urban centres of the province. It has always been a place of retreat, often enough of exile, for the peoples who have found their ways here: the First Nations who followed the Columbia and Kootenay river systems as traditional fishing grounds, the Japanese Canadians who were interned in “ghost towns” in the early 1940s, the young American war resisters of the 1960s and 1970s and members of the counter culture from many nationalities who came here seeking simpler more sane existences, and of course the Doukhobors who began coming to the Kootenays almost 100 years ago now and developed one of the most impressive communal-pacifist societies in North American history.

Our story, and the brief history of the MIR Centre for Peace, is bound up with all these peoples and their histories, embedded in the many layers of history which make up the social reality of this unique area of British Columbia. But in order to understand what the MIR Centre for Peace stands for, and what it might become, we must first move back from the larger levels of public history and begin with a personal story.

For as long as my wife, Linda, and I have lived in the Kootenays and taught at Selkirk College, we have been fascinated by the physical setting of

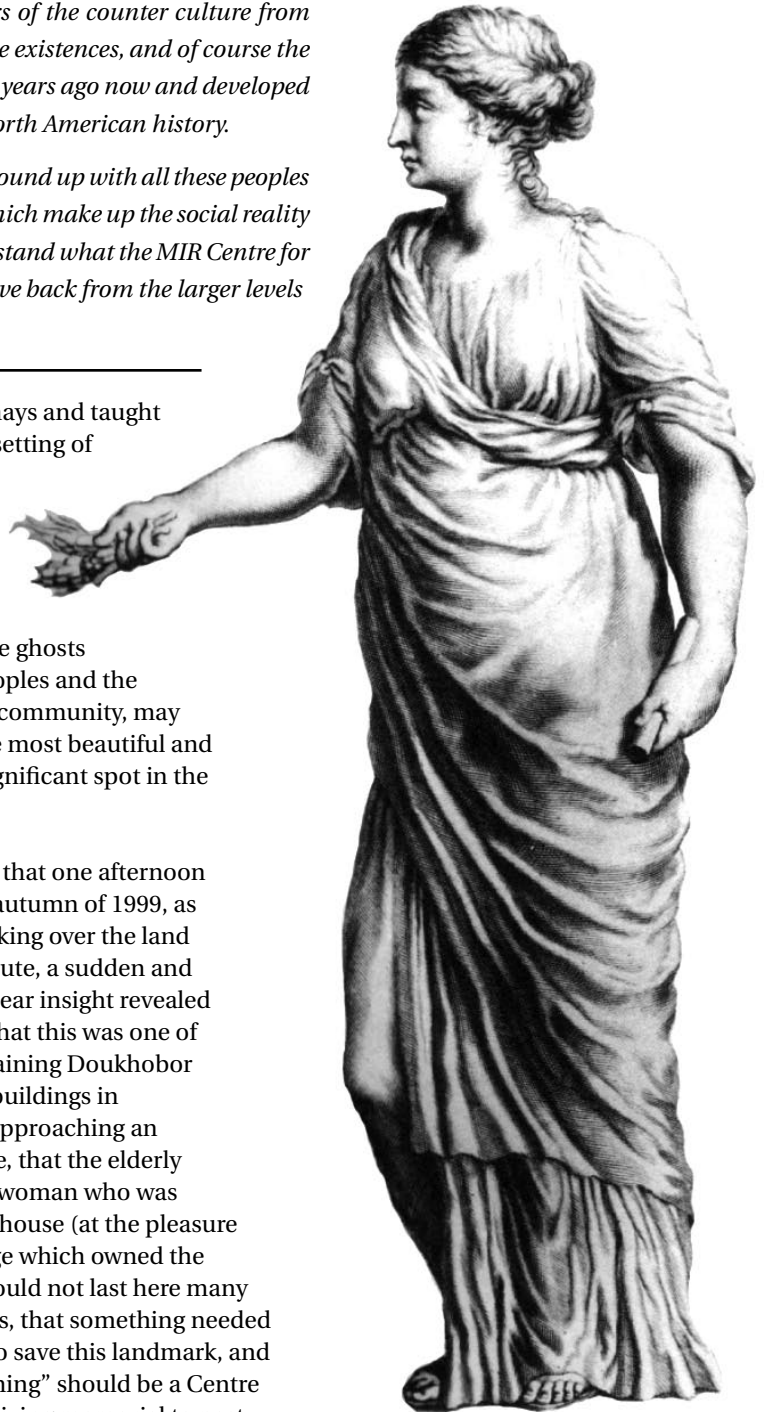
the College—situated on a point of land which overlooks the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers. A particular kind of genius of place emanates from this geography—lands where First Nations have gathered for millennia, where Doukhobors settled and began to create a flowering communal life rich with the knowledge of growing things and traditional craft, and where, most recently, was constructed the site of the first community college in the province.

For as long as we have known this magical place, my wife and I have taken a particular walk through the landscape whenever the world has become too much with us: down the hill from the main campus, through a forest to a meandering ox-bow created by the Kootenay river, across a meadow resonating with meadow larks, blue birds and other wild creatures, up a hillside path to a bluff which spectacularly overlooks the Columbia river, and finally along a winding dirt road to an old Doukhobor communal brick home surrounded by an eighty year old orchard of apple and pear trees—still flowering two generations after the Doukhobor communal experiment

came to an end. This place above the two rivers, still alive with the ghosts of native peoples and the Doukhobor community, may be the single most beautiful and culturally significant spot in the Kootenays.

It happened that one afternoon in the early autumn of 1999, as we were walking over the land along this route, a sudden and blindingly clear insight revealed itself to us: that this was one of the last remaining Doukhobor communal buildings in something approaching an original state, that the elderly Doukhobor woman who was living in the house (at the pleasure of the College which owned the property) would not last here many more winters, that something needed to be done to save this landmark, and “that something” should be a Centre for Peace, a living memorial to past belief and future practice.

Soon after this walk, the word MIR



became increasingly important in our understanding of what the Peace Centre might represent: MIR—an ancient and complex Russian word which means at one and the same time, peace, community, and world. Its original meaning emerges from the Russian village where the mir was the smallest unit of community agreement and consensus arrived at freely by the people.

This was our starting point for imagining a site for peace based in community experience and consensus but reaching out to larger worlds—a centre for “understanding and building cultures of peace” which became our most basic philosophical principle. Very soon, too, we realized that in addition to being based in the historical and cultural experience of our place, any successful Centre for Peace would need to be “vertically integrated”—in other words that old methods of understanding peace and social justice and healing were often enough sectarian in their approach, seeking one major path or goal; we soon reached consensus that many paths to understanding and building peace would need to be followed—from questions of personal, spiritual and family understanding, to issues of cultural and artistic importance, to challenges of conflict resolution based in community, global and environmental arenas, and finally to the lived experiences of peoples such as the Doukhobors, First Nations and others whose historical experience of peace, conflict and the need for healing go far beyond the merely theoretical. These voices needed to be listened to with seriousness, the threads of their stories drawn together and shared with other communities.

Events moved quickly following these initial insights: we received absolute support and commitment from the upper levels of administration at Selkirk College—people such as former President Leo Perra and current President, Marilyn Luscombe—but also from other

community leaders such as John Verigin Jr. of the USCC Doukhobors, and Marilyn James who represents the Siniixt people of this region. Increasingly there has been interest in the Peace Centre from community groups who want to offer their skills and financial support freely without any demand for public recognition. The British Columbia government, through the B.C. Heritage Trust in Victoria, has been very generous in providing initial funding for structural feasibility studies of the building, and then for the complete heritage renovation of the roof just prior to first snowfall last winter.

The physical structure now has been secured, and we are beginning to work on the next phases not only of the heritage reconstruction of the Doukhobor building, but also in carefully defining the philosophical, pedagogical and cultural goals of the Peace Centre. This is exciting and necessary work, which will require not only the skills and insight of our working group but also assistance from like-minded communities such as the Humanities Institute at Simon Fraser University. Professor Jerry Zaslove, then Humanities Institute Director and a friend, visited the site of our MIR Peace Centre earlier this year and we began to talk of ways in which we might work together (one of them being my agreement to serve as an associate of the Humanities Institute over the next three years).

We would be happy to communicate with all people from the SFU community who have an interest in the idea of the MIR Centre for Peace. On a very practical physical level, the Doukhobor communal home will be renovated with a strong fidelity to its original heritage structure, though we will be creating spaces and technology for modern education and communication. This will mean among other things: two spaces for traditional seminar and classroom activities, at least one or two other spaces for more creative

seminar and meeting activities, and potentially one space which would be dedicated to cultural and spiritual reflection. Our plan is to create a living museum and educational space with courses in peace and social justice studies, conflict resolution and healing, international cultures and literatures, environmental analysis and community institutes. In addition to learning spaces, we have completed architectural drawings which include space for a small library, a few offices, as well as a kitchenette which would allow for more informal community gatherings.

We have learned a few indelible lessons as far as we have come with the MIR Centre for Peace: we know now, even more clearly than we did before, of the importance of taking walks, of staying close to the earth but not fearing to raise one's eyes upwards. We have found that many other people walk the same paths, or want to; that many others, when they raise their eyes, see the same portents written in the skies above them.

