

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

FRIENDLY FIRE

by Rick Foster

Let me begin by telling you a few things that were on my mind as I worked on this play.

I. APPROPRIATING THE LAND

Seeing the way that white people appropriated the land we now call California made me think about the history of conquest that lay behind the ideas and actions of the white settlers.

Once upon a time, in Europe, if you wanted someone else's country, and you were the stronger, you could just take it by force. You suffered no pangs of conscience.

The English-speaking peoples, about fifteen hundred years ago, crossed over from the continent and aggressively began to displace the Britons and the Welsh from the territory that came to be called England.

Four hundred years later the English were largely overrun by Danes who had no better argument for their actions than that they wanted the land.

Those ethically carefree days are gone. For the last thousand years, your better class of invader has felt obliged to develop moral justifications for its wars. Europe has seen a thousand years of almost continual warfare, but the victors have all developed language to “prove” that right was on their side.

This culture of justification carried over into the acquisition of land in the Western Hemisphere.

The Spanish and Portuguese invasions of the New World were justified by religion. The native peoples were to have their souls saved, no matter how much it hurt. Conveniently, the New World provided the conquistadors with untold wealth and a vast sea of indentured labor. Thus, greed could fuel their expansionist zeal whenever the desire to do God's work flagged.

Over the centuries the notion that there must be good justification for displacing

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anyone grew and came to be more dispassionately applied.

About sixty years ago the Nazis decided to make all of Central and Eastern Europe into a very roomy Germany. Their justification for this aggression was that Germans are naturally better people than anyone else and deserve all the land they can get. If they hadn't blundered by invading Russia they might have pulled it off, too. In the end, the Germans lost all the conquered territory and, moreover, hundreds of thousands of German-speakers were expelled from land they had farmed for centuries in what is now the Czech Republic and Poland.

The Nuremberg Trials, at which Nazi leaders were prosecuted and sentenced, were justified on the theory that there is an international law and this law forbids one nation from making what is called "aggressive war" on another, that is, a war whose aim is the conquest of territory.

The Allies' logic was enforced on the losers of World War II. And soon it was willingly accepted. A German politician today would no more promote the idea of the Master Race than he'd try to outlaw beer or automobiles.

Despite our principled stand at the end of World War II, the United States does not have an unblemished past as regards aggressive war. This skeleton in our closet is a source of continuing anxiety in some Americans, this writer included.

Our aggressive war was practiced on the native peoples of what is now the United States. The result was genocide. European diseases first decimated the peoples. Then followed outright murder, the destruction of their livelihoods, starvation, confinement in reservations, despair and its attendant mortalities. When the first Spanish missions were established in 1769 there were an estimated 310,000 Indians living in California. By 1900 there were fewer than 20,000, a loss of more than 93%.

The fact is that we all live on land that was obtained by practices we now abhor and condemn. Despite many piecemeal attempts, we have never found the will nor the way to atone for our acts of genocide and "ethnic cleansing." We are left with an anxiety that lingers like a low-grade infection. It doesn't stop us from going on with our way of life, but it doesn't disappear.

II. HOW WHITE PEOPLE JUSTIFIED TAKING NORTH AMERICA; CHALLENGING THAT JUSTIFICATION

The Northern Europeans who came to North America intended to occupy the land for themselves and their children forever. But the land was already occupied. The moral-psychological problem they faced was this: "How do we take this land which we need for our own well-being (or, in some cases, just to become wealthy) and not feel guilty?"

The history of rationalizations with which Native Peoples were slaughtered and deprived of their livelihoods is itself a fascinating study. I can't begin to summarize it

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here. But let me talk about one argument that still gets between us and a clear view of the truth.

Indians were seen as “children of nature.” In the opinion of the white peoples, they failed to obey the biblical injunction to “subdue and replenish” the earth. President James Madison developed this idea in legal terms:

“By not incorporating their labor, and associating fixed improvements with the soil, they have not appropriated it to themselves.”

The Indians, according to Madison, had no right to the soil because they had not altered the environment to make it productive for their way of life. For a white person to push them off the land was like pushing off bears or elk, not like displacing Swedes or Portuguese.

There are two ways to challenge Madison's argument. One would be to attack the biblical injunction itself: Who says that all the land should be “appropriated?” So what if they left the wilderness alone? If it's their wilderness, by golly, they can live in it however they want. This argument is, of course, central to the thinking of many environmentalists today and of course many environmentalists have adopted the native peoples as symbolic ancestors.

But rather than challenge Madison's underlying value, one can win the argument against him simply by proving that he was tragically wrong about the Indians. Forget his values, which are a matter of taste; the man was arguing false facts. The Native Americans had, in fact, thoroughly “appropriated the land to themselves.” Indeed, at the very start of the European invasion, the Pilgrims were saved from starvation by Indian agriculture. The brilliant James Madison, father of our Constitution, overlooked this. And by the time U.S. settlers arrived in California, rhetoric like Madison's had blinded the invaders to the evidence before their eyes.

Take the people of our own Sierra Foothills: Their staple food was the acorn. Far from being passive collectors of nature's bounty, these people engaged in systematic, highly effective practices that optimized production of the materials they needed. Their primary tool was fire. Selective burning created ideal conditions for the growth of black oak trees, which produced the acorns they liked best. It also created good conditions for the collection of the acorns and suppression of parasites.

The people also actively engaged in coppicing, tilling, pruning, sowing, and weeding to maximize production of other foods, fibers, tool-making materials, etc. There is now a lot of good work being done on this by ethno-botanists who have scientific ways of filling in the record that history failed to preserve. The book *Before the Wilderness: Environmental Management by Native Californians* edited by Kat Anderson and Thomas C. Blackburn, and published by Balena Press, is a mine of information.

Early commentators write of the park-like appearance of much of the Sierra Foothills. This was a result of the Indians' practice of managed burning. Today's huge accumulations of under-growth and the threat of monster fires are the result not only

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of our suppression of lightning-struck fires, but also of our failure to continue the Indians' practices of land management.

Yet even today, one can read historians who claim that the Miwok people had practically no impact on the local ecosystem. This false view is a late survivor of the myth that only the white people appropriated the land to themselves.

III. ENCOUNTERING SOME OF THE TRUTH ABOUT CALIFORNIA INDIANS

In my journey through the California public schools, in the 1950s, the only true thing I learned about Native Californians is that they made beautiful baskets. We were given the strong impression that they were not in the same league with the Sioux, the Navajo, the Apache, or the Cherokee. Some members of my family called them “diggers,” a word as hateful as “niggers,” which no one in my well-mannered family would ever have used.

Nothing in my schooling contradicted this view of Native Californians. In fact, I have recently seen a legal document from 1908 in which the State of California was attempting to evict Tom Williams and other Miwok-speaking families from land they were occupying in which Williams and his people were called “California Digger Indians.” (I'm happy to say that the State failed to show up in court and Williams was not evicted.)

The written record left by eye-witnesses of the Gold Rush years is dismal in its bigotry, inaccuracy, lack of curiosity. Of people who were on the scene in the 1850s, I have only found three sensitive observers of the Miwok peoples who inhabited our Mother Lode area. The best known of these is Galen Clark whose little book, “Indians of the Yosemite Valley” was published in 1904 and is still in print.

There are wonderful chapters in a little-known book by a Belgian miner, Jean-Nicolas Perlot. He wrote a memoir for his family and published it in 1897 (though, like Galen Clark, he had been on the scene in the 1850s). Only one copy of this edition is known to exist and fortunately it was given to the Bancroft Library at the University of California. An English translation was published by the Yale University Press in 1985 under the title, *Gold Seeker*. This is still in print, but not widely distributed.

The most fascinating material was that dictated by the Tom Williams of Jamestown whom the state was suing sixty years after the discovery of gold. Williams was born before contact and lived to work with the anthropologist E. W. Gifford in the second decade of this century when Williams was over eighty. (“Contact” is the term for the time when the two cultures first interact.) Gifford's material is scattered through several papers published by the University of California and some never published; it has never been gathered into a book accessible to the general reader.

So even now it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the people who had a large

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section of the Central Valley and the Mother Lode all to themselves for centuries up until 1848 and whose descendants live among us still.

Luckily, one is not entirely dependent on eye-witness accounts of Miwok life before contact. Aspects of traditional life survived well into this century and some even today. Also, Miwok culture had similarities with Maidu culture to the north and Yokuts to the west and south. A very valuable book containing the memories of a white man who spent most of his childhood living among Yokuts in Fresno County in the 1850s has recently been republished. It is *Indian Summer* by Thomas Jefferson Mayfield, published by Heyday Books.

IV: WRITING THE PLAY; SCRATCHING AN ITCH

Most writers are motivated by questions, not answers. As the great poet William Butler Yeats noted, poetry is made out of our arguments with ourselves. An argument one has with oneself can be like an itch that one must keep scratching until it is resolved, or at least temporarily worn out.

The story of *Friendly Fire* of course has a grounding in moral judgements. Most of these are rather commonplace: It is wrong to kill people; it is wrong to act upon prejudices; there are good people of every culture; justice should be given to all people; we should live by our values of tolerance and of equality. These are all things I believe in but they are not the reason I was driven to write the play.

The story depicts forty-niner life and Miwok culture as accurately as I could create them, given the limitations of time and the form. This too, I think is a valuable thing to have done, but this would not have been enough to make me write the play.

My unreachable itch was my own unresolved feelings about the land and my occupation of it. I love my own property, my community. I also love what we call “the wilderness.” I love some things that our culture has done to the land; I accept some others as “necessary evils;” and I abhor still others as wasteful, ugly, destructive threats to what I value.

When I read about the people who took over the land after 1848, I identify with some of their values and I am revolted by others. Yet I know that it is these very values that revolt me that allowed them to take over the land I now live on. I know that if I had been born in 1825 my values would have been like theirs.

It is not my personal virtue that leads me to judge that my ancestors committed a great wrong. It is the evolution of values over the past hundred and fifty years, and the much greater knowledge we have now about anthropology, biology, and ecology.

V: RESULTS OF THE EVOLUTION OF VALUES

The result of this “continental drift” of values and knowledge, is that I no longer feel identified with the white culture of 1848. Insofar as Western Civilization defined itself as distinct from (alien to) primitive and non-Western cultures, I am not within Western Civilization any more.

But of course, I am 99.99% a creation of Western Civilization. Even the parts of me that are most critical of Western Civ. have their origin in its skeptical tradition. If the world survives the crises of the next couple of centuries it will create a new civilization that is something more than a continued evolution of Western Civ. Whether or not I would feel a sense of belonging to this new civilization is a question I won't get to answer in my life.

What I do feel certain about is that, though I am a creation of Western Civ., I don't feel like I belong to it any more. (In another sense, I do feel that it belongs to me and that I am licensed to write about its characters from the inside; whereas I feel anxious whenever I try to write from the inside of a character from another civilization. It is this perhaps outrageous sense of ownership that allows me to explore my own anxieties through the persons of characters like Jeff Blake.) I am not at all unusual in this. The feeling of not belonging has been one of the central emotions of this century and it certainly looks like it will grow stronger into the next.

In fact, we keep finding new ways in which we don't belong. In the last decade the perceived bonds between employer and employee have been weakened in a flood of layoffs, down-sizes, corporate profits, and middle-class anxiety. Of course this alienation of labor is as old as the Industrial Revolution, but it feels new to the American middle-class and so has produced new feelings of not belonging.

When I started work on *Friendly Fire* I knew I wanted someone who had all the prejudices of his day to confront the fact that everything he thought he knew was wrong. Soon I realized that he had to be guilty of committing an atrocity and he had to try to take responsibility for his actions. I didn't know what sort of resolution he could find. It was only at the very end of the writing process, three days before the first rehearsal, that I realized the only resolution for Jeff Blake was to accept the fact that he could not resolve his problem within either the world he was born into, or the Indian world he had grown to love.

Jeff's only honorable course is to accept that he is between two worlds and to commit himself to moving forward inside that no-man's land. Jeff repeatedly tells us that he is not a hero. This is true. A hero might have tried to stop the first massacre, a hero might have confronted the army that burns the villages, a hero might have told the gunmen that he had gone native.

But if he lacks heroism, he owns a virtue many heroes lack. He is willing to see through his prejudices. He is willing to accept the permanent exile of not belonging,

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accept it where another man would have lied to himself and pretended to belong. And he is committed to going on, living in community with others who are also in exile.

I don't know of a name for the virtue that Jeff has, and that's too bad. It's not heroic, but it's at least as necessary as heroism if the world we build is to be better than the one whose environment is perishing around us.