TWO QUAKERS WRITE OF VIETNAM AND AFTER

At first glance, Lady Borton and Charles Clements could hardly seem more different: she is a birthright Friend from a long Quaker heritage, he is from a military family, an honor graduate of the Air Force Academy. But in fact they have some important things in common: above all both are Quaker Vietnam veterans, and both arrived there in 1969. Even here, however, similarity builds on differences: Clements is a Quaker *because* he went to Vietnam; Borton went to Vietnam because she is a *Quaker*.

This complex of parallels and differences is of interest now because, although their experiences were vastly different--Clements was an Air Force transport pilot, and Borton worked at the Quang Ngai Quaker Center--both have recently published books rooted in their Vietnam experiences. These books show, at one level, that Borton and Clements are like many other Vietnam veterans, for whom coming to terms with their war experience has been long and difficult; yet at another level, the books show what an unmistakable stamp Quaker convictions leave on this process.

Going 12,000 Miles Away To Find A Way Back Home

Lady Borton's book is *Sensing the Enemy* (The Dial Press, $14.95). It is primarily a series of vividly-described episodes from the six months she spent in 1980 as health administrator at a refugee camp for Vietnamese boat people off the Malaysian coast: she tells of rats eating her shoes; trying to protect suspected Vietcong refugees from a camp lynch mob; and throughout, the struggles and pain of homeless and homesick people. These episodes are punctuated by intensely-felt recollections of her time at Quang Ngai a decade before. But the main purpose of the book, indeed the main purpose of her trip back to Southeast Asia, was to come to some kind of reconciliation, not with the Vietnamese, or even with the war, but rather with a personal sense of failure and powerlessness: her failure to stop the killing there, for so much of which her nation was responsible, and the powerlessness to prevent the continued suffering occuring in Vietnam and elsewhere, even though the "war" was over.

From the outside, such a sense of failure seems a little out of proportion: why should she, one person, have expected to be able to stop the war and its aftermath? Yet that was a common outlook among anti-Vietnam activists, including many Quakers. My own suspicion, as one who felt the same way, is that much of it grew out of the same American optimism which, in another form, got us into the war in the first place: we *should*, we felt, be able to stop the war if we wanted to; after all, we went to the moon, conquered polio and put a color television in almost every home. This attitude, I suspect, was magnified for many young Friends of liberal backgrounds, who were raised on similarly upbeat stories of Quaker protests against slavery, religious bigotry and female oppression which almost always ended with the goal--emancipation, toleration, suffrage--all-but achieved. They grew up believing that good Quaker witness was not only faithful, but also almost always effective. *Effective*. How that word haunted so many of us, as our commitment and our protests, in those years, seemed always to fall so far short, no matter how total or risky they were; the war kept grinding on.

Coping With The Plague of Ineffectiveness

For Lady Borton, this haunting took the form of a long-term compulsion to write a novel about her Vietnam experience, a compulsion which over time undermined her closest relationships and left her all but a recluse on an isolated Ohio farm, but which she was never able to turn into a finished manuscript. Finally, in Twelfth Month, 1979, she found herself thinking, "Why bother?" and answering first, "For the children"; but "Then, deep in my bones, I realized I couldn't prevent their war, just as I hadn't stopped the war for those students I taught in 1967." This realization left her virtually paralyzed with despair for days; then she abandoned the novel and grabbed at the chance to return to Southeast Asia.

She does not write very directly of how her work on the island of Pulau Bidong ameliorated this sense of failure and hopelessness. But between the lines, it is evident that it did; of her last night at the camp she writes, "I felt as if Bidong had cured me of a long, painful illness. I was ready to go back to America." She was also, it turned out, ready at last to write a fine, compelling, if no longer fictional book.

Charles Clements had flashbacks to Vietnam, too; the most intense came in Eleventh Month, 1982 as he lay in a hut in El Salvador. For several days he had been delirious with malaria; his native hosts, not knowing what else to do besides pray, at length brought him a transistor radio and tuned it to the Voice of America. That day it was broadcasting the dedication ceremonies for the new Vietnam Veterans memorial, including a reading of the names of all 57,000 American troops killed there. Thus for hours, prostrate and semi-delerious in the jungle, Clements listened to the names; among them he heard those of several of his Academy classmates and flying buddies. One he had carried out of the bush in a body bag; four decomposing lumps of flesh were all that was left. Each familiar name moved Clements to moans and tears, and filled him with a sense of despair.

Yet this response was uncharacteristic. Clements was in El Salvador, not primarily to exorcize personal ghosts from Vietnam, but to help prevent that war's repetition in Central America, and to help heal some of the human damage already being inflicted there by those who, with U.S. money and resources, were preparing its repetition.

Protesting First One War, Then Another

Clements, in short, is a Quaker activist, with few illusions about ultimate effectiveness, experiencing spells of doubt, but following his leading just the same. This is evident in the double meaning of his book's title, *Witness to War*(Bantam, $15.95), which connotes not only witnessing the war firsthand, but also, as he puts it in the classic phrase, "to bear witness--to measure events with your own eyes and to attest to what you've seen...to speak truth to power."

Where Lady Borton had to contend with a near-psychotic sense of incompleteness about her Vietnam experience(her first chapter is entitled "Madness"), Clements may have been spared such an ordeal by the Air Force: when he declared his moral opposition to the war in 1970, the service responded by locking him up in a psychiatric ward for four months, a la Andrei Sakharov. Later he went to medical school, and it was while serving an internship at a California farmworkers clinic that he first treated Salvadoran refugees, many badly wounded.

Over the following months, Clements felt drawn to visit El Salvador, to see the war, and to work as a "medical neutral," treating civilians and not taking sides. To do this, however, he ended up having to enter El Salvador illegally, and to work behind the rebel lines. To some extent this was a matter of choice: he felt little sympathy for the government. But it was also a matter of necessity: the death squads had closed the nation's only medical school, killing many faculty and students. Treating poor civilians, as Clements was determined to do, was considered evidence enough to warrant mutilation and murder in their territory.

Healing The Sick: A Dangerous Undertaking

In any case, Clements' year in El Salvador was dangerous enough, as he, his peasant patients and their guerilla hosts were repeatedly attacked by U.S.-financed, equipped and trained troops and planes. Clements shows in excruciating detail the systematic savagery of these forces in their campaigns to deny the rebels their base territory; he also exposes many of the official lies used to justify the violence, by both the government in San Salvador and the government in Washington.

In this situation, the temptation to identify completely with the rebels and their cause was strong, and Clements caught himself yielding more than once. Yet the lapses were but temporary. "Suddenly," he wrote on one crucial occasion, "it was essential that I back away from their revolution. The principles that had brought me there had to be reasserted.... I decided if anything happened to me, it would be as a Quaker physician, not as a revolutionary."

Many things did happen to him, but like Lady Borton he returned home to write a book and bear witness. And different though they are--one essentially inward, almost like a Quaker journal, the other doggedly outward, aiming to throw its small weight like a stone against the Goliath of an immoral government policy--these two Quaker Vietnam Veterans' books appeared almost simultaneously, as if to underline the depth and range of modern Quaker witness.

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INSIDE: TWO QUAKER VIETNAM VETERANS TELL OF THEIR SEARCH FOR PEACE

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

It was on the 16th of Eighth Month in 1946 that the Pacific Coast Association of Friends met in Pasadena, California to consider becoming a yearly meeting. The Association had been formed in 1889 in San Jose, out of a controversy with Iowa YM, of which the new San Jose meeting was a part. The conflict centered on the importance of strict evangelical doctrine, revivalism and the trend toward pastoral worship; it resulted in the founders of San Jose meeting, Joel and Hannah Bean, being deposed as Quaker ministers by the distant, strongly evangelical Iowa elders. The Bean supporters formed the Association in response, as a nonrestrictive umbrella for unprogrammed Friends and meetings in the far west. Although its membership grew steadily, the group resisted becoming a yearly meeting for almost 60 years--until 1946. Then, after much prodding and diligent campaigning by Howard and Anna Brinton, the Association finally agreed to become Pacific Yearly Meeting, which met officially in the same month of 1947. Its spirit of independence still persists, however, as Pacific, like its growing sisters North Pacific and Intermountain YMs, have since remained unaffiliated with either Friends General Conference or Friends United Meeting. (Though just last month Pacific formed a committee to look into the possibility of joining one, the other, or both.) Howard Brinton called the emergence of these unaffiliated YMs the most important event of modern Quaker history. Pacific's story has been well told in the evangelical Friend David Le Shana's fascinating *Quakers In California*.

QUAKER CHUCKLE

A pompous bishop of Oxford was once stopped on a London street by a ragged urchin, who asked him for the time. With some difficulty the portly clergyman extracted a large gold watch and replied loftily, "Why my little man, it's exactly half past five."

"Well," responded the lad, starting to run, "at 'alf past six you go to 'ell!" and disappeared like a flash.

The bishop, flushed and furious, floundered wildly after him, but rounding a corner ran straight into the arms of a sober, grey-clad Quaker. "Friend Oxford," asked the Quaker. "why such unseemly haste?"

Puffing and spluttering, the bishop gasped out: "That insolent ragamuffin told me to go to hell at half past six!"

"I see," said the Friend. "But then why such a hurry? Thee's got almost an hour."