

# I heard the owl call my name

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A quiet graceful testimonial to a vanishing way of life, this was Margaret Craven's first book, written when she was in her late sixties. A novel of poignant beauty which reflects the author's sensitive observation, wisdom and insight.

It tells of a young vicar named Mark, sent to a remote Kwakiutl village not knowing he had less than three years to live. In the village Mark came to understand the Kwakiutl Indians around him and saw how their traditions were being destroyed through the influence of white men. He watched the 'English woman anthropologist' who came to study the natives and insisted upon calling the villagers 'Quackadoodles'; he experienced the impact when the government declared it illegal for Indians to buy liquor and when traders cheated the villagers out of their cultural treasures; he saw the children lose their ties with their families and heritage while living in residential schools among white. In striking

contrast to the avarice and arrogance of most whites is the selflessness of a part of the Kwakiutls and the beauty of running salmon, tall trees, and tribal festivals. Mark becomes a part of the Kwakiutl world, learning its language and ways, until finally 'Time had lost its contours. He seemed to see it as the raven or the bald eagle, flying high over the village, must see part of the river that had passed the village, that had not yet reached the village, one and the same'. Gentle, full of profound philosophy, this is a book that both calms and disquiets, saddens and exhilarates.

'Don't be sorry for yourself because you are going to so remote a parish,' Mark Brian is told when he is sent to the village of Kingcome, in the wilds of British Columbia. 'Be sorry for the Indians. You know nothing and they must teach you.' But the young vicar is full of cautious determination as he sails along the beautiful, wild coastline to Kingcome inlet, not knowing that an incurable disease will cut short the time he has to earn the trust and love of his parishioners, such proud, unfathomable people.

While sharing the salmon fishing and deer hunting, the festivals and rituals, the joys and sorrows of a once-flourishing tribe, Mark learns enough of life to be ready when the owl finally calls his name...

When the bishop is told that Mark only has a short time to live he decides to send him to his most difficult parish because he must learn a great deal in a very short time. Mark is not a flighty lad but already seems to be well on the road to wisdom and insight because he does not arrive in a blaze of ambition but listens to the Indian Jim who is his guide and is about to become his best friend.

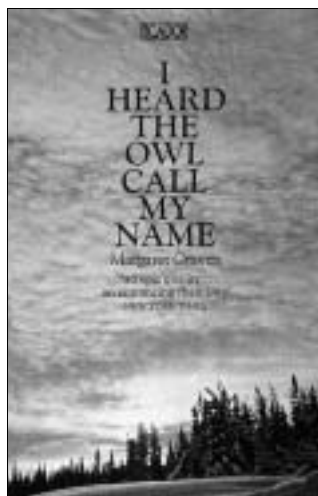
He is so overwhelmed by the sheer beauty and splendour of his surroundings that he says, 'If man were to vanish from this planet tomorrow, here he would leave no trace that he ever was.'

'It is an old village - nobody knows how old. According to the myth, after the great flood two brothers were the only human beings left alive in the world, and they heard a voice say, "Come, Wolf, lend them your skin that they may go fleetly and find themselves a home." And in the wolf's skin the brothers moved south until they came to a small and lovely valley on a river's edge. Here they returned the skin to the wolf and Khawadelugha, the elder, built his house, and in his dances he moved right as even now the dancers move right, because the wolf moved right, and on his totem he carved a wolf as one of the crests of his tribe.

'The village site was chosen wisely, because its river is treacherous and easily defended. But the enemy was wise also, and in the great tribal wars it came through a mountain pass and down the river, and the spirit that lives in Whoop-Szo, the Noisy Mountain, that is across the river and towers over the village, heard the enemy coming and sent down a slide and buried it.

'Now Kingcome is a Christian village, and this means that to run smoothly the elected chief, the vicar and the agent from the Indian Affairs Department must be cooperative and wise, and though I am sure the Lord could pass a small miracle and manage this He seldom does.

'The Indian feels for his village as no white man does for his town. His village is not the strip of land four miles long and three miles wide. The myths are the village and the winds and the rains. The river is the village and the black and white killer whales that herd the fish to the end of the inlet the better to gobble them. The village is the salmon who comes up the river to spawn, the bluejay whose name is like



the sound he makes - "Kwiss-Kwiss". The village is the talking bird, the owl, who calls the name of the man who is going to die.

'The fifty-foot totem by the church is the village, and the Cedar-man who stands at the bottom holding up the eagle, the wolf and the raven! And a voice said to the great Cedar tree in Bond Sound, "Come forth Tzakamayi and be a man", and he came forth to be the Cedar-man, the first man-god of the people and more powerful than all others.

'And the Bishop had been silent for a moment before he added slowly, "If you go there, from time to time you tie up at the float in the inlet, the village is also you. But there is one thing you must understand. Even if you should leave a broken man, they will not thank you. There is no word for thank you in Kwákwala."

Mark sees that the vicarage and the church are in need of many repairs and sets about doing what he can. He is a gentle soul and goes about making friends slowly. He feels his way with the elders and gradually finds favour amongst the people because he is not over-confident or aggressive. His vicarage is finally rebuilt, he doesn't ask for help because he sees how the minds of the people work. He tries to pronounce the names of the village and the language properly but has great difficulty in doing so. However, the fact that he tries pays dividends and wins friends.

Mark is very lonely at first until one day when he unthinkingly talks to the salmon run and calls the big one Swimmer, Jim realises that Mark really is one of them and their friendship is set.

Another friend he made was Marta, one of the elder women who came to respect and like him. She was particularly helpful with the old customs.

Mark comes to see that the world outside is very bad for the protected youth of Kingcome. He experiences first hand the cruelty of the whites who try by any means possible to cheat the Indians of their birthright and their human rights. It saddens him and he comes to understand the sadness of the Kwakiutl people.

He helps to bury the bones of their people who were buried in the trees in times gone by, and with the rotting of the trees the caskets had fallen down and scattered the bones around. For this he earns great respect. He lives, and comes to think as the Kwakiutl do. His heart is sore at the degeneration of the men when alcohol is permitted to the Indians. He comes to understand their way of doing things and really belongs amongst them. The Indians grow to love

him as no other vicar before him. Eventually the time comes for the Bishop to be called because he is growing thin and his time is getting short.

'When the Bishop comes he takes Mark away to the inlet beyond the scar of the great mountain slide. "Always when I leave the village", the Bishop said slowly, "I try to define what it means to me, why it sends me back to the world refreshed and confident. Always I fail. But when I reach here and see the great scar where the inlet side shows its bones, for a moment I know."

"What my lord?"

"That for me it has always been easier here, where only the fundamentals count, to learn what every man must learn in this world."

"And that, my lord?"

"Enough of the meaning of life to be ready to die", and the Bishop motioned Mark to start the motor, and they went on. It was not until the seaplane set down on the water that the Bishop found the courage to say to Mark, "Your work in the village is almost done. When I have found the right man to take your place, I shall write you, and when you come out, you will come to me."

"Yes, my lord."

On his way back to the village Mark came to the realisation that there was more to his weariness than he at first thought. He realised that he was very ill and many thoughts that he had ignored came back to him. On the shore before he anchors he hears an owl call twice and realises that the owl has called his name. He asks Marta about it and all she says is "Yes, my son."

In the night the heaviest of the spring rains fell in torrents. At the same time the vicar was having a battle of his own - he did not want to go away, he felt he would be a stranger in his own land. In the morning Keetah came to see him and asked him not to go away because he has become one of them and they love him. On the afternoon of the same day a logger who had been drinking heavily stole a boat and went for the straits. Mark whose boat was fastest was summoned to help in the search for the man. On the way Mark talked to Jim about his coming marriage to Keetah and his manners. It is almost as if he knew he would not be coming back to Kingcome. Then suddenly a tree is struck by lightning on the side of the mountain that started a landslide catching the boat carrying Jim and Mark. Only Jim survives and the village is in mourning because they have lost one of their own.