

The Case for Quiet

by Grace Irwin

Vic Report 6.3 (1977): 6-8.

From Loon Echo Island where in 1928, as an undergraduate, I wrote my first full-length novel (unpublished) comes, fifty years on, this cri de coeur.

Imagine a lake. You can't? Too big? Then imagine a bay not a half mile either way, opening widely into a vista of lake. It is lovely in itself and is made lovelier by a single rocky wooded island in the centre.

Indians have left stone axe-heads, arrow-heads, and pottery in the sandy shore of the westerly point. A solitary lake-farm, the farmhouse deserted in the early days of the century, left grazing fields and tangles of raspberry bushes on the opposite side. For fifty years the bay had two cottages. Loons nested yearly on the island where there was always a calm shore. Now there are fifty cottages and their activities ensure that there is no calm shore in nesting season. The loons have tried in vain for eight years to hatch two eggs or even one. Last year they deserted the bay and succeeded in producing a solitary loonlet. But occasionally, on a tranquil morning, the little flotilla visits its former domain and the echoing shore recaptures its eerie calls.

There are other sounds: a gull crying, the dip of a paddle, the sound of a hammer, the call of children from a rowboat to children on a beach, the hum of a fishing line slung out from a punt. Birches and cedars are reflected in the water. And there is the scent—the indescribable smell of water from which mist has lately lifted, of land where fir needles build the soil, of untainted limitless freshness.

Or is it afternoon. There is a breeze and a white sail cuts the bright blue lake under a summer sky. The flap as the tiller swings round, the purr of wind in trees, the slap of wave on rock, are added to the sounds. There are swimmers, some diving, some lazing on pallets; others watch them from deck chairs on beach or verandah. From one to two hundred, in fifty cottages, are enjoying the unbarterable benefits of the lake, recapturing what civilization is snatching away: the joys of seeing, hearing, smelling, *feeling* peace.

Then—from nowhere, from any one of a dozen docks—with a roar of opened throttle, shoots a hundred-horse power boat. It has one passenger, the driver; one aim, motion. It is not going anywhere; it has no time limit. It zigzags around and around and around. The noise has two tones—bang bang bang against waves, drone as of the invasion of science-fiction mosquitoes. The boat may be joined by another—sometimes half a dozen feel the urge at the same time. But whether together or singly, the noisy motion continues for the greater part of the day, with only an occasional grateful moment when the drone of one dies at a dock, to be replaced by another of the relay.

There are, of course, the water-skiers. These, while responsible for a more predictably prolonged disturbance, have at least the motive of exercise, of skilful, if blatant sport. But the result is the same. Silence is broken. The healing and learning process which a hundred were, even unconsciously, experiencing is destroyed for the pleasure—in some cases—of one, seldom at a time of more than eight. The shallows of the lake are churned, docks and resting boats are pounded. Other sounds are obliterated. And presently across the freshness drifts the taint of oil, the curse of city and highway, spreading to the calm lake, often leaving a foul slick on morning backwaters.

No one denies the utility of the motorboat; even on a small lake for conveyance of and by the physically unfit; for safeguard in an emergency; for carrying supplies; or on a large and stormy lake for transport. Its use as an oversized mechanical toy is difficult of rational justification in the conditions described. The offenders are often well-meaning, usually thoughtless and ignorant. Unappreciative of silence, they

have no idea, either of the negative effect of their play—the ruin of the manifold pleasures of quietness—nor of the positive—the genuine agony for the aural nerves of their captive audience. Usually unaccustomed to other water transport, they do not understand the additional complications which their curveting tempests create for the skill of canoeist, the loitering rhythm of rower, the watchful plasticity of sailor. Like a child who does not see why his loud-mouthed monologue should not usurp the table conversation of a dozen adults, the boater plays artlessly with his toy—and if he gleefully swerves between the shore and an uncertain swimmer, or toots his motor-horn with illegal persistence, or thinks it a lark to pursue a flock of ducklings or cut between a pair of loons and their hard-won, unskilled young, he childishly claims indulgence—isn't he just having fun? For, like a child, he (she, they) sees from only one point of view. He is not only the centre but the circumference of his tiny universe.

Then there is sunset. In song and story, music, poetry, prose—all depicting human experience—the hour between daylight and dusk is a time set apart. Usually the wind falls; even if the lake still recollects it, there comes a gathered hush as of a hand stroking the waves to stillness. The western sky may be hazy, or faintly glowing, or alive with vast swathes of sunset. But there is peace, a breathing waiting peace, a heart-calming, nerve soothing tranquility.

Not now. As if at a signal, motor-boats leap from all sides to the attack. “Music and silence. How we hate them both. Some day,” said C. S. Lewis’s senior devil Wormwood, “we shall fill the universe with Noise.” His unconscious servitors now do their share towards that design. They are not enjoying the sunset—no one can at that speed; they are not thinking or conversing—no one can in that noise; they are not getting fresh air—it is pungent with gasoline. Again they are not going anywhere—back and forth and around, with a ten-mile run down two lakes possible, they circle and criss-cross less than a mile of water. But they have fulfilled a purpose. Any number of beings trying to be humans, not automatons, have had their healthing undone, their meditation shattered, their privacy or companionship invaded, their elixir snatched away.

Night presents problems for the motorboat. Waterskiing is less fun, also illegal (but its devotees are seldom familiar with rules!) It is also colder. But there are parties. And it is a rule of the lake reveller that a party never breaks up quietly, or all at once. At well-designed intervals, just long enough for the really tired cottage or visitor to fall almost asleep again, a burst of laughter and farewell, a prolonged toot of the horns, a roar of open throttle—and a single boat cannonades from the dock.

Four of these untimely reveillees murder sleep as effectively as Macbeth ever did. For the genuinely sleep-needing, sore labour goes without its bath, the sleeve of care is still ravelled at dawn.

But that is mostly at weekends, the noise defender urges. When people are up only for a weekend, they want to have a good time. Exactly. And, though increasingly the noise is invading the weekdays, it is true that All Hell Breaks Loose from Friday evening to Sunday.

But what of the others, who also come from a hard week of noise and heat and work, to enjoy the complete change which the lake used to—still might—provide?

That is my case. Are “rights” restricted to those whose unbridled exercise of them denies “rights” to others?

If the theoretical hundred people whose desire and right of quiet is stripped away by one should force that one to sit quietly or read a book for three hours, it would be considered an unbearable infringement of his rights. Yet the converse is taken for granted.

It is not majority rule, then, not democracy. It is worse than the lowest form of One man, One vote. Certainly there is no privilege or property, age, reason, or service. The preference and need of one who has paid taxes for years on 500 feet of lakefront are not only equalled but denied by the fourteen-year-old son of a Johnny come-lately, or by a seven-day guest with a boat hired from the locat motel.

The Case for Quiet

Published on E.J. Pratt Library (<https://library.vicu.utoronto.ca>)

Unfortunately, unjustly, they are within the law. In the rules governing the use of “small” craft, noise is no offense. (Sounding of horns is, except under specific situations but that, though irritating, is a fractional part of the total cacophony.) On a long narrow lake nearby a youth pleased himself by careening from one end to the other at ninety m.p.h. in a hundred and fifty h.p. boat. One of the maddened cottagers, other recourse failing, threw a number of objects at the boat as it swerved near his dock in open taunt. The resultant court case absolved the boy and fined the cottager. As it stands the law could do nothing else. Laws catch up slowly with conditions; in days of a few outboard motors used on punts for trolling, no one had a visual picture of a small lake completely surrounded by cottages nor could imagine the incessant barrage of noise engendered by a succession of power boats. Owners of boats hesitate to complain against the Brotherhood. Anyhow, to what purpose self-discipline when the boat from the next dock drenches the shore-line with noise? Will nothing but energy failure restore the people’s right to quiet?

There are laws to curtail pollution by septic tanks. Could a code be agreed upon to curtail pollution by noise? that water-skiing be restricted to certain hours of morning and afternoon and prolonged runs be kept at a distance from the shore; that racing—with a competitor or with one’s pride—be prohibited except at least half a mile from shore; that traffic at sunset be restricted to essential travel; in effect that a lake be permitted periods of its own quiet evdty day?

There are laws to curtail pollution by septic tanks. Could a code be agreed upon to curtail pollution by noise? that water-skiing be restricted to certain hours of morning and afternoon and prolonged runs be kept at a distance from the shore; that racing—with a competitor or with one’s pride—be prohibited except at least half a mile from shore; that traffic at sunset be restricted to essential travel; in effect that a lake be permitted periods of its own quiet evdty day?

Oh well—I can dream, can’t I?

Sequel: This year the loons returned and hatched twins, to the fascination of the bayshore population. So some dreams come true!

Last updated: March 25, 2015

Source URL:

https://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/collections/special_collections/f33_grace_irwin/vic_article_1977