

**W**HEN JUDITH PLANT PUBLISHED HER FIRST book, we were living in the mountains north of Lillooet, where we had published *The New Catalyst* magazine for four years.

Perched on a rocky bluff by the side of a mountain stream, we generated enough electricity from a micro-hydro system to power our household and our fledgling business.

Having to sometimes type by the light of two candles placed on either side of our portable Osborne computer, we called this our Paleotechnic era.

That summer we received a visit from the chief New Society editor and his partner, who was the finance manager for their book publishing operation. They had recently left the East Coast to open a West Coast office in Santa Cruz, California.

**David Albert** suggested that instead of publishing our quarterly magazine on tabloid newsprint, we should consider packaging the material in book form. That way it would last longer and have more shelf appeal.

It was an opportunity we couldn't refuse. We decided to open up a Canadian office for New Society Publishers, acquiring editorial projects ourselves and marketing the whole of NSP's list to the Canadian market.

That's how New Society Publishers Canada officially opened for business in 1990.

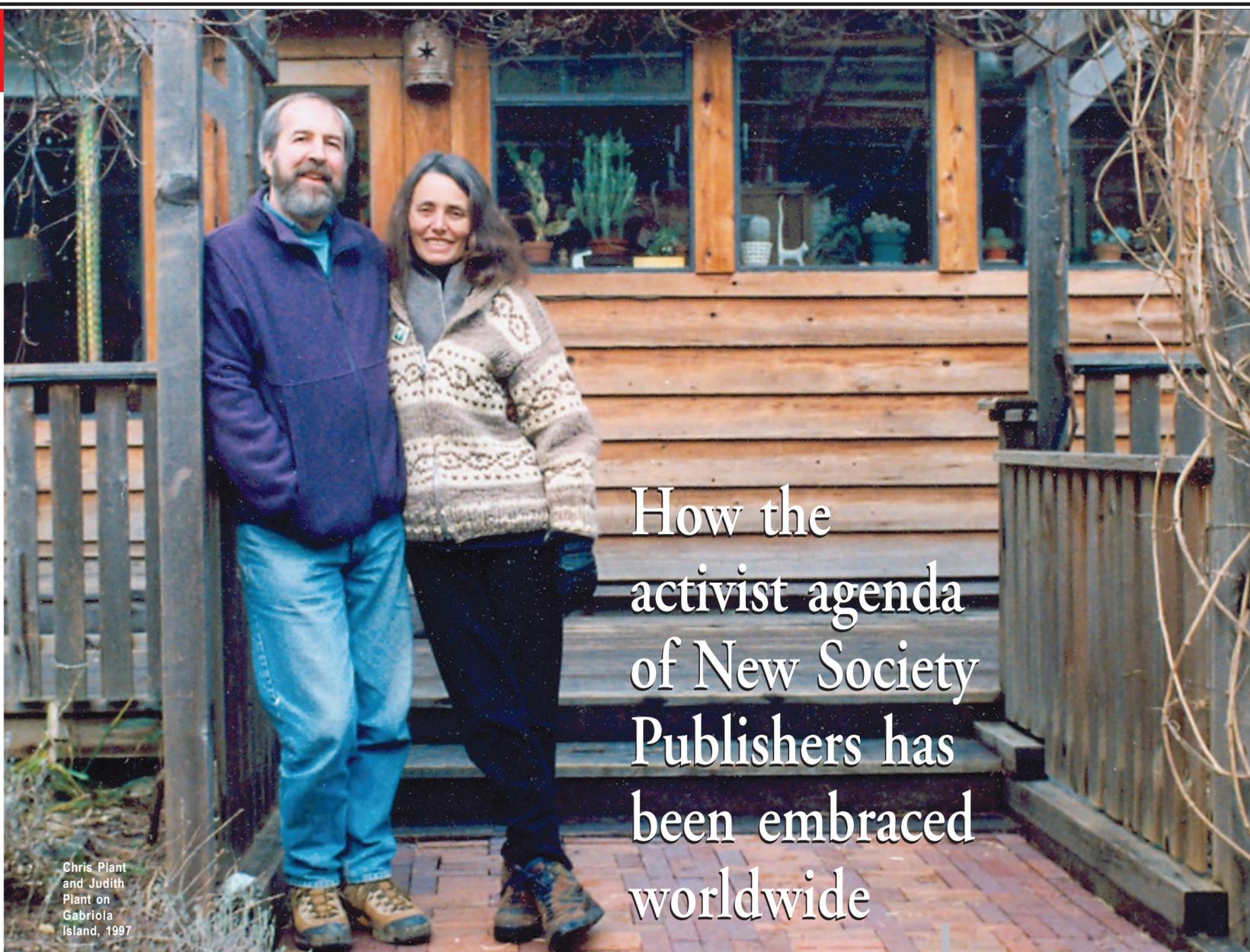
The first project we undertook was to edit, with our good friends **Van Andrus** and **Eleanor Wright**, the first anthology on bioregionalism, *Home! A Bioregional Reader*.

As promoters of the bioregional idea (we had organized the third continent-wide North American Bioregional Congress in 1986), this was a project close to our hearts. We then got to work on the new series. The first volume involved the transformation of some past *New Catalyst* material into book form. *Turtle Talk: Voices for a Sustainable Future* comprised a collection of interviews we had conducted with key characters in the sustainability movement that had appeared in the centerfold of *The New Catalyst* magazine. The book came off the press at the very time that we moved from the Lillooet area to our new home on Gabriola Island, and we spent many hours around the dining room table packaging up copies to send out to our 2000-odd subscriber list, conscripting my visiting aunt into the mailing process.

Other volumes followed in close succession—including *Our Ecological Footprint*, by **Bill Rees** and **Mathis Wackernagel**. We released two titles per year, sold by subscription and direct mail, as well as through the conventional book trade. We originated other B.C. titles, too, including *Colonialism On Trial*, something of a pre-Manga cartoon record of the Gitksan We'suwet'en land claims court case, and *Clayoquot Mass Trials* which documented a watershed phase in the environmental movement.

For the next couple of years or so, we learned the basics of book publishing, alongside advanced study in business cooperation. New Society was organized as a collective and our task was to insert ourselves into their management structure from a distance. There was no e-mail at the time and communication was a challenge, to say the least. Nevertheless we managed our tiny transnational corporation from three locations with remarkable ease.

The fax machine was a revolutionary tool that simplified our lives tremendously. We gathered once a year at an annual face-to-face meeting, and governed ourselves by means of a very unusual mutual aid agreement. We were publishing books to build a new society and running our lives according to the same values we espoused in our publications. These were heady times indeed.



Chris Plant and Judith Plant on Gabriola Island, 1997

How the activist agenda of New Society Publishers has been embraced worldwide

# FROM CANDLELIGHT TO LEADING LIGHTS

Twenty years ago, when **Judith Plant** published her first book, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* with New Society Publishers in Philadelphia, she and her partner Chris Plant wrestled with a publishing decision that changed the course of their lives, leading them out of the backwoods to the forefront of the Sustainability Movement. Here

**Chris Plant** recalls the evolution of their remarkable imprint.

At a face-to-face meeting in Philadelphia in 1995, we learned very suddenly that the Philadelphia office was basically bankrupt. Unless someone stepped up to the plate, the publishing operation overall would be forced to close. Unlike the key players in the Philadelphia collective who seemed tired, we were not ready to stop publishing—on the contrary, we were just getting going.

The only thing to do was to take over the whole operation. We were organized as non-profits at the time, and at first we tried raising the necessary capital through charitable means. But good fortune stepped in at the right time in the form of an angel investor, **Joel Solomon** (this angel had been on our mailing list from the beginning of *The New Catalyst* days), and so in 1996 Gabriola Island became the international headquarters of New Society Publishers.

We bought just over 50 percent of the NSP list along with the U.S. distribution infrastructure and a whole lot of goodwill. Not everyone was entirely pleased that New Society had become a Canadian enterprise, however, and our task became that of convincing authors and others that we could continue to be an effective social change publisher from north of the border.

New Society had started as a social movement, opposing the war in Vietnam, nuclear weapons and nuclear power, and publishing pamphlets on peace and nonviolence, civil disobedience, conflict resolution and social change. Their early books focused on nonviolence, feminism and alternative economics.

When we entered the picture, we added an environmental focus. Now we needed to reinvent the company and did so around the emerging idea of sustainability which, in our eyes, combined all of these interest areas and more. The question was whether we could sustain a values-based publishing operation while making sustainability successful in the business world.

It didn't help that, not too long after we purchased the company, InBook, our U.S. trade distributor, went bankrupt. It also didn't help that postal rates climbed dramatically as mail subsidies were gradually eroded—a kiss of death for the direct mail sales on which the company had been built.

Switching to Consortium for our U.S. trade presence was a major relief: they were well-organized and effective. But our attempts to support trade sales by religiously attending BEA, ALA and the like drove us to despair.

Slowly, we realized that, as an activist publisher, we had to be where the activists were, not try to compete in the glitzy corporate world of trade bookselling. We switched strategies, making it our business to be at renewable energy fairs, Green festivals, natural building colloquia and a myriad other events where we could network with the people who needed the material we were publishing for their organizing work—and who were writing the material we wanted to publish.

In the early years of this period, we continued publishing *The New Catalyst* as an occasional free broadsheet, distributed in tens of thousands of copies. Inside was our catalog of New Society books. Direct mail continued to be a major source of revenue, and early employees—and the occasional family member—took phone orders and packed books in the crowded little office next to our home.

We nervously borrowed money against the property to build the company, and slowly added staff. I was doing the editorial and production work; Judith masterminded finance and marketing; and we both made acquisition decisions.

Sustainability was a hard sell but we relentlessly released books on sustainable communities, simple living and eco-cities alongside critiques of economic growth, manuals on progressive leadership skills (facilitation, mediation, group process and the like), and parenting and education resources.

Thinking of ourselves as a progressive business, we even ventured into business publishing with a series called Conscientious Commerce that highlighted the ways in which the corporate world could contribute to environmental and social sustainability. Importantly, we walked the talk ourselves, committing, in 2001 with the release of *Stormy Weather: 101 Solutions to Global Climate Change* by **Guy Dauncey**, to printing all of our books on 100 percent Post Consumer-Waste paper and, a few years later, going carbon-neutral. We estimate, as of 2008, our pulp nonfiction business has saved over 13,000 trees.

For many years we existed on a very uncomfortable financial edge. But we were slowly building our market and our reputation. When peak oil first emerged as a crucial topic for the future of industrial society, we were there with one of the first books on the topic, *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Society*, by **Richard Heinberg**.

When 9/11 happened, we released a major exposé on the topic, linking the event to peak oil, that sold strongly. We added important renewable energy books to our categories of interest, as well as a line of natural and green building titles that caught the emerging Green building wave before it became merely fashionable.

Sales increased. We added staff. We added buildings. We almost doubled our output of titles per year. We gained some recognition for our efforts through two Ethics in Action awards for our social and environmental initiatives, and the BC Publisher of the Year award in 2003. In a note attached to the award, Jim Douglas praised "the international quality of our list."

And we began to make money. Always five to ten years ahead of the mainstream, our books rapidly gained relevance for a wider audience as the early years of the new millennium came to pass, and sustainability was suddenly the name of the game. As "green" became the color of choice, sales rose steadily, and we realized we had moved into a new phase.

At last, the sustainability publisher had become financially sustainable. But we were tired. We wanted our freedom back—including freedom from the anxiety of running a publishing business in a volatile market. So with considerable trepidation, we put New Society up for sale.

It was a relief when the final purchaser turned out to be Douglas & McIntyre. Their list had integrity and we had obvious compatibilities with their Greystone imprint, **David Suzuki's** publisher. More to the point, they were demanding no radical changes in the way the company was run. With our on-going mentoring, our loyal and highly capable staff will gradually take over the management of New Society. It looks like a win-win situation.

Judith and I never really intended to be Publishers for Life, and we certainly weren't business people at heart. In 1990, we had made a conscious decision to do our bit for the "turn-around decade" that was called for by David Suzuki and others. But somehow that turn-around decade has turned into almost *two* decades...

Now it's time for us to be *doing* more of the things we were publishing about. So we're forging ahead with a new chapter...



Judith Plant typesets by candlelight, 1988