



**Norway's Dark Past:
An Interview with Ian George Burden**
by Ian George Burden

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Can you introduce yourself and tell a little bit about your background?

My name is Ian George Burden. I am 38 years old and live in Norway with my wife and daughter. I originally come from Scotland, in the UK and I work with multimedia. I have been politically active for ten years and have made projects reflecting the opinions of minority/marginalized groups both in Scotland and currently here in Norway.

Can you elaborate on this work?

Yes, I have worked with various groups, who were not represented by the mainstream press, where I have been commissioned to produce videos and multimedia exhibitions about their plights to help raise awareness. These have included:

“Working Towards Sustainable Development”(Friends Of The Earth, Scotland)

“Drug and Alcohol Problems Amongst Black and Ethnic Minorities in Glasgow”
(Scottish Drugs Forum)

“Young People and the Dangers of Dance Drugs ” (Crew2000, Scotland)

“Edinburgh Feels Like a Divided City, The Wealth and Health Divide of
Edinburgh” (Magic Lantern Van, Scotland).

And is this what you are doing today in Norway?

Not full time, but I have been researching the history of a group of petroleum deep-sea divers, who from the mid 1960s, both here in Norway and in the UK, made the North Sea oil adventure a reality. They were the men who attached the engineering equipment on the deep continental shelves. Often this required they go down hundreds of metres under the North Sea to work.

This work sounds very dangerous?

It is and many of these men never came up to the surface alive. Others were unable to work again due to the rare nature of their medical problems. These were a result of illegal experiments on these men because the political urgency to supply oil and gas was worth more than their health and lives.

What do you mean by illegal?

Prior to the oil being discovered, the only others who had dived in deep-sea water had been the US Navy. The Navy logged oxygen and gas mix tables and strict guidelines about the anatomical effects of the body at depths down to 100 metres only. These mixtures and safety guidelines warned repeatedly about the fatal and long term health dangers of diving at heavy depths way before anyone was needed to put drilling equipment in place. Anyone responsible for employing divers must have known that to send men to 2 to 300 metres would obviously be putting these men at risk and that in turn required approval from the highest powers in the industry, namely the state.

Is this what you wish to discuss as part of this project on Rethinking Nordic Colonialism? And if so where do you see this fitting in within this event?

I feel the case of the petroleum divers is very relevant to this project because the case in question has been controversial within Norway and elsewhere for many years now. The survivors fighting for justice are not happy with the Norwegian authorities for denying their plights and throwing a small bone at them in the shape of tiny compensation awards. The principal here is the fact that Norway has become one of the biggest players in today's global economy because it found oil and gas almost forty years ago. The men who made it possible are in agonies you cannot possibly imagine because they are unique to their previous occupations, so much so, that many have chosen suicide rather than live with them. Many of the suicides have been provoked by the humiliation they felt at the state of Norway and the oil companies and their harsh treatment towards them.



You sound quite sure of these wrongdoings by those in higher powers. Are you completely sure they are to blame?

The facts speak for themselves: the Norwegian state introduced the Work and Safety Act in the North Sea environment in 1977. The petroleum divers were the only exemptions from the guidelines in that act. They were exempted until 1995. The requirements for an inshore diver, working in deep fjords was compulsory from 1946. That is, they could not work as a diver without a certificate to prove they could dive safely. The inshore waters are not as deadly as the North Sea hundreds of miles away from land. It only became a requirement for offshore divers, after 1980.

I think there is no doubt that the Norwegian state could not afford to experiment with safer working practices and that is the undeniable truth of their vulgar safety at work exemptions.

In fact this case is similar to another Norwegian case, in 1962, when a state owned coalmine in Kings Bay, Svalbard, collapsed and killed twenty-one men. The then Prime Minister of Norway resigned over the fact that he did not report fully all the facts of the tragedy to his parliament.

This case clearly shows that the principles of government between then and now have changed because the Norwegian state has never fully reported all the facts of this state owned tragedy to their people or their parliament. The state is not being nationalistic, but it does seem to be very xenophobic when it stops important records, some over thirty years old, being accessed by angry international and national wives, mothers and children who want closure to the deaths of their loved ones.

Also, when the state assigned a committee of enquiry to investigate the petroleum divers' case, every one of the committee's members worked directly or indirectly for the company they were investigating – Det Norske Veritas.

Is the case of the petroleum divers unique?

No, other organizations are also demanding recognition for the services and sacrifices they made to make their nation proud today. A few of these include navy sailors from the Second World War. The authorities forgot thousands of these sailors, while others who fought against the German occupants were honoured and got their "Thank you". Later, the Norwegian state posted medals of honour to the survivors, but this hardly showed the gratitude they really deserved, and for many of them it was too late as they had already passed on. Personally, I would not feel very honoured if I received a medal through the post. Before the Second World War, the state imposed its colonialism on the Sámi people of Northern Norway by not allowing them to speak any other language than Norwegian in schools. Lebensborn children are another case of cruelties encouraged by the colonialism of Norway and those acts of xenophobia are very well documented elsewhere.

In yet another repulsive act of its colonialism, Norway gave vasectomies to Romani people and other minority groups in Norway to prevent them from having children. This was still in practice on these groups as late as the 1970s. Norway may have received the United Nations award as number one country in the world to live in for the last five years. To look at or visit it is a beautiful country with magnificent examples of our planet's past history and formation. The majority of its people are Christian, hard working and friendly, but its government is hiding horrible dark secrets about its past colonialism and its current history, such as the petroleum divers' case.

The cases of the divers and the many others who helped it to achieve its wealth, pride and identification today are disgraces that need to be addressed and resolved urgently.

Do you think this project of rethinking Nordic colonialism will benefit anyone?

Yes, I think overall when we look at any of the colonial powers in the history of this planet, we read about the oceans of blood that have spilled in streets, trenches and laboratories. Norway and other countries in the Nordic group are no exception to man's inhumanity to man. The project is very positive and

valuable, before we *conveniently* forget the atrocities alongside the fantastic engineering, technological and educational progressions these countries have made and are currently making.

Is there anything else you wish to add here?

Only that the state of Norway claims to be a government doing what it can to show an honest face in today's world. It has one of the world's highest intakes of asylum seekers and gives a good deal of help to undernourished people and tragedies of nature. It does a lot for a small and very lucky nation, but it should address its past colonialism and show a bit more integrity with the people who gave their lives to shape a powerful nation, be they Sámi, foreigners or anyone seeking a few answers for their own dignity, living and in death.