

The Voyage of Captain George Vancouver: A Review Article

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A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the world, 1791-1795, by George Vancouver, 4 vols., edited by W. Kaye Lamb. London: The Hakluyt Society, 1984. Pp. xx: 1752, £50.00.

For some uninitiated readers, especially those from British Columbia — where the name “Vancouver” is a part of everyday life referring to the city, the island, street names and numerous other things — it may come as something of a shock to discover that while library stacks bulge with books on the exploits of Captain James Cook, his successor has attracted much less attention from historians. Although Cook’s name was assigned to islands, inlets and other features of the Pacific world, Vancouver, whose voyage did not generate anywhere near the popular interest and whose published journal evoked yawns of boredom from many readers, has been remembered through the names of places that became more significant.¹ Immediate fame as a world explorer eluded Vancouver when he made the definitive discovery that there was no Northwest Passage connecting the Pacific to the Atlantic in temperate latitudes, and no inlet or navigable river system that might permit easy access to the heart of the North American continent. If geographic realities foiled Vancouver’s dreams, he undertook his duties as the epitome of the honest surveyor — dogged in his determination to record every detail, single-minded in his devotion to fulfil the terms of his commissions, and aware that he was paving the way for those mariners who would use his charts and directions. He was an extremely good journeyman commander of the late eighteenth-century navy, a gifted marine surveyor, and a man capable at times of true flashes of vision. Vancouver spent three seasons charting the Northwest Coast from Alaska to California and visiting the Hawaiian

¹ The surgeon-botanist of Vancouver’s expedition, Archibald Menzies, criticized Vancouver for naming present-day Vancouver Island, Quadra and Vancouver’s Island instead of remembering King George III. See Menzies to Sir Joseph Banks (IV: 1622).

Islands on three separate occasions. He intended his published journal to be "a plain unvarnished" account of a loyal naval officer dedicated to his mission and his nation (I: 291). That there was a much more interesting and even scandalous side to Vancouver's exploits was well known in 1798 at the time of publication, but the full story becomes available for the first time in the Hakluyt Society edition edited by W. Kaye Lamb.

Lamb reinforces some of the accepted notions about Vancouver, but as editor of the journal he illuminates a much more complex man in the Pacific world undergoing rapid change in the period following the first voyages of discovery and commerce. The outstanding introductory essay which takes up most of volume one, combined with exceptionally well researched notes from contemporary and modern sources, bring to life a quite different Vancouver than appears in the journal. Moreover, Lamb's research contributes many original insights into the history of the Pacific during this most crucial period. While there are some specialized readers who might have wished that the Hakluyt Society could have granted Vancouver and Kaye Lamb the same treatment as Cook in the publication of all of the major expedition journals edited by J. C. Beaglehole,² the present editor has done his utmost to compare and contrast Vancouver's observations with those of his associates. The notes are a mine of useful detail and suggestions for further reading.

Throughout the published journal, Vancouver presented himself as an exemplary officer, commander and leader. Despite the harsh northern climate, isolation, dangers of native violence, poor diet, unhappy seamen, miserable cramped quarters and other factors, Vancouver appears as a tower of moderation and calm good judgement. It must be said that he sanitized or "varnished" his view of himself and of his relations with his officers and crews. There were positive and negative sides to Vancouver's character and leadership. Having served as one of James Cook's subordinates, he was careful to give attention to diet, hygiene, medicines of anti-scorbutic value and shipboard sanitation. In these respects, Vancouver presented himself in the journal as something of a father to his crews and as a source of calm inspiration under the often adverse conditions during the long surveys. Lamb's research points out more clearly than previous studies that *Discovery* was anything but a model ship. And Vancouver himself, quite contrary to the flattering self-portrait he painted, emerges as something akin to Hollywood's version of Captain Bligh. He fumigated

² J. C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Journals of Captain Cook on His Voyages of Discovery*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1967). Also see Beaglehole's, *The Life of Captain James Cook* (Stanford, 1974).

between the decks even when sick seamen lay in their hammocks, bullied and punished his midshipmen, used the lash inordinately to keep discipline, and was prone to outbursts of temper that made his subordinates wonder sometimes about his basic sanity.³ Vancouver's trouble with Thomas Pitt, later Lord Camelford, a close relative of Prime Minister William Pitt, demonstrated pig-headed rigidity and stupidity. Flogging the young Pitt three times for minor offences made Vancouver a powerful enemy whose vow of vengeance and harassment made his last years miserable and could have hastened his early demise.

Some of the charges made against Vancouver were quite serious. As purser of *Discovery*, he was accused by his officers of avarice and, even worse, of outright corruption. Midshipman Thomas Manby wrote in a private letter, "I am sorry to [say] what with his pursuing business, and a Trade he has carried on, are unbecoming the Character of an Officer in his Honorable and exalted station" (IV: 1641). Botanist Archibald Menzies quarrelled with Vancouver constantly over his plant collections which were kept in a glass cold frame on deck where they suffered periodic inundations of fouled water from the rigging, assaults by poultry and climate changes as the vessels sailed back and forth from Hawaii to Alaskan waters and then south round Cape Horn (I: 218). Toward the end of the voyage, Menzies' complaints caused Vancouver to become so enraged that he placed his surgeon-botanist under arrest.⁴ Like Cook before him, Vancouver seems to have had little time for scientists and those of their routines that interfered with normal shipboard activities.

Despite Vancouver's conflicts and occasional tantrums, it would be wrong to view him out of the context of his age. Lamb points out that the punishment record aboard *Chatham* was only marginally better than that in *Discovery*. As commanders, William Broughton and Peter Puget were less severe than Vancouver, but the flogging of seamen was very common (I: 216). Corporal punishment was a product of the times and of the fact that angry impressed seamen were being used on a voyage that would have tried the devotion of the most dedicated volunteers. At

³ See for example (I: 215). Punishments of twenty-four, thirty-six or forty-eight lashes were not uncommon, and even more severe floggings were administered to seamen found guilty of stealing or desertion.

⁴ Menzies to Joseph Banks, 14 September 1795 (IV: 1630-1631). Menzies stated that Vancouver's actions left him with only "dead stumps" of his plants. When he complained to Vancouver that the cold frame had been left uncovered during a heavy rain, the captain "immediately flew in a rage, and his passionate behavior, and abusive language on the occasion, prevented any further explanation — and I was put under Arrest, because I would not retract my expression, while my grievance stil remained unredressed"

least part of the reason for Vancouver's bad temper might be traced to chronic poor health aggravated by the expedition. On several occasions he was too ill to lead boat expeditions dispatched to conduct detailed surveys. It should be recalled that he died in May 1798 when he was working on the journal for publication, not even having reached forty-one years of age. Examining the existing evidence, Admiral Sir James Watt has concluded that Vancouver suffered from myxedema (thyroid deficiency) compounded by Addison's disease (I: 212).⁵ Even without Vancouver's special medical deficiencies, however, other Pacific explorers and merchant captains of the period exhibited similar strains caused by poor diet, exposure, the pressures of command and other factors. To describe them politely, most commanders were extremely eccentric, but their weaknesses were offset usually by strength under the adverse conditions of solitary navigation in uncharted seas. Vancouver's surveys took his vessels time and again into waters that later became graveyards for sailing ships of all sizes and types. He had to face a multitude of natural hazards such as currents, hidden reefs, rocks, lee shores and human dangers posed by aggressive indigenous inhabitants. In British Columbia and Alaskan waters, the maze of inlets, islands and channels could be charted only from small launches that operated as far away as sixty miles from *Discovery* and *Chatham*.

Little wonder Vancouver described much of the Northwest Coast as "dreary and inhospitable" and found the labour that went into charting the continental coastline "perplexing, tedious and laborious" as well as just plain dangerous (III: 1022; and IV: 1587). For all of the difficulties, however Vancouver's charts marked a great advance over those made by the Spaniards and the fur traders. The detailed descriptions of coastal features and charts offered the first comprehensive guide for mariners — one that was of inestimable value to fur traders, whalers and merchants. Following the publication of the journal and its charts, few wise captains sailed without their own copy of Vancouver's voyage.

British interests in the Pacific extended well beyond the Northwest Coast and the dispute with Spain over possession of Nootka Sound. Lamb is

⁵ For additional detail by Watt on Vancouver, see "The Voyage of Captain George Vancouver: The Interplay of Physical and Psychological Pressures" (unpublished paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, Vancouver, British Columbia, September 1985). For additional interesting detail on maritime medical history, see Sir James Watt, "Medical Aspects and Consequences of Captain Cook's Voyages," in Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnston, eds., *Captain Cook and His Times* (Vancouver, 1979), 129-57; and J. Watt, E. J. Freeman and W. F. Bynum, eds., *Starving Sailors: The Influence of Nutrition upon Naval and Maritime History* (London, 1981).

careful to trace the full extent of Britain's developing Pacific strategy, which helps to explain Vancouver's special concerns in the Hawaiian Islands. In addition to the trans-Pacific fur trade in sea otter pelts, British whalers and merchants had begun activities in many different Pacific regions. From Asia, the Etches-Meares Company proposed to establish a permanent post at Nootka; British interests sought bases for the southern whale fishery; and a number of British and American nationals had begun to settle in the Hawaiian Islands, Tahiti and other places where they advised the native chiefs and helped them gain mastery over firearms.

Clearly, the growing competition for Pacific possessions forced Britain to offer backing for its unofficial traders. France had dispatched the Comte de la Pérouse (1785) to emulate James Cook, Spain responded with the expedition of Alejandro Malaspina (1789), and the Russians expanded their fur-trading activities from their Alaska posts.⁶ The Nootka Sound Controversy was little more than a flashpoint representing much larger struggles in the Pacific. In 1789, when Esteban José Martínez detained the vessels under James Colnett at Yuquot (Friendly Cove), he might just as easily have been going after United States or Russian interlopers into Spain's supposed preserves. The Pacific Ocean, its islands and its continental coastlines were being thrown open at a frantic pace.

As Britain's representative in the enactment of the provisions of the 28 October 1790 Nootka Sound Convention, Vancouver discovered that the diplomatic victory won in Europe did not necessarily translate into real terms in the North Pacific. John Meares, whose exaggerated claims fuelled British combativeness, left Vancouver in a weak position. The Spanish commander at Nootka, Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, collected evidence from the Indians and fur traders proving that Meares' claims to have constructed buildings and bought tracts of land were all almost completely apocryphal. In 1788 Meares had occupied a small beach within Friendly Cove where he built a hut or shed made from Indian planking. He had not purchased land from Chief Maquinna, as

⁶ See Jean Francois Galaup, Comte de la Pérouse, *A Voyage round the World in the Years 1785, 1786, 1787, and 1788* (London, 1789); Pedro de Novo y Colson, ed., *La vuelta al mundo por las corbetas "Descubierta" y "Atrevida" al mando del Capitán de Navio D. Alejandro Malaspina desde 1789-1794* (Madrid, 1885). For additional background, see Glynn Barratt, *Russia in Pacific Waters, 1715-1825: A Survey of the Origins of Russia's Naval Presence in the North and South Pacific* (Vancouver, 1981); Barry M. Gough, *Distant Dominion: Britain and the Northwest Coast of North America, 1579-1809* (Vancouver, 1980); Iris H. W. Engstrand, *Spanish Scientists in the New World: The Eighteenth-Century Expeditions* (Seattle, 1981); and Warren L. Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543-1819* (New Haven, 1973).

he claimed, and by 1789 there were no signs remaining of his construction (I: 102-03). Vancouver's decision to explore Juan de Fuca Strait and thereby to establish the insularity of Vancouver Island at the same time the Spaniards were doing the same thing under Dionisio Alcalá Galiano and Cayetano Valdés with *Sútil* and *Mexicana*⁷ gave Bodega y Quadra a lengthy period at Nootka Sound to expose the real weakness of Britain's case. By the time Vancouver met his Spanish counterpart at Friendly Cove, what could have been a quick settlement was turned into a lengthy disagreement requiring further consultations and negotiations by London and Madrid.

As Britain's representative on the spot, Vancouver showed a definite lack of decisiveness. While he might be lauded for not treating the Spaniards in an arbitrary manner, this was most unusual in eighteenth century British-Spanish relations. In many respects, Vancouver and his officers fell victim to one of the oldest tricks of diplomacy — showering the opposition with an embarrassment of gifts and services in order quite literally to sweep them off their feet. Using generosity and attentiveness, Bodega y Quadra seduced his British opposites. Following the hardships of an exhausting voyage, Vancouver found the warmest hospitality at the Spanish post rather than the frosty exchanges he anticipated. Traditionally, Englishmen and Spaniards were enemies whose deep mistrust reached near legendary proportions. The American fur trader Joseph Ingraham recorded the reaction of Captain Thomas New of *Daedalus*, Vancouver's storeship, who told him:

the stories his grandmother had related to him in his infancy respecting the Spaniards were yet fresh in his memory and excited such horror that for some time he could scarce reconcile to himself that the people who were treating him with such attention and hospitality were Spaniards.⁸

To impress foreigners and Indians and to gain support for Spain's case for sovereignty, Bodega y Quadra offered lavish hospitality — such as dinners of many courses served on solid silver plate — that left every observer amazed as well as impressed. Misunderstanding the full range of Bodega y Quadra's diplomacy, Edward Bell of *Chatham* commented (II: 673, note 1):

we may say Mr. Quadra was *too good* a man, he ever treated the Indians

⁷ José Porrúa Turanzas, ed., *Relación del viage hecho por las goletas Sútil y Mexicana en el año de 1792 para reconocer el estrecho de Fuca* (Madrid, 1958).

⁸ Mark D. Kaplanoff, ed., *Joseph Ingraham's Journal of the Brigantine Hope on a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of North America, 1790-92* (Barre, Mass., 1971), 228.

more like companions than people that should be taught subjection, — his house was open to them all, and a considerable number of them were fed there every day.

No one at the time suspected Bodega y Quadra's motives, and historians have continued to consider him the friendliest of individuals.

Lamb accepts the general view that Bodega y Quadra "was gifted with an ability to be hospitable and in a measure informal without prejudicing his position and authority" (I: 99). In part, of course, this was correct, but Bodega was successful in perpetrating a diplomatic ruse to defend Spain's interests. His generosity made solid supporters out of fur traders, Indians and even his British opponents. Later, Bodega claimed back from his government all of the expenses he incurred at Nootka for his entertainments, whereupon he discovered that the Mexican viceroy was not as generous in settling the accounts as he himself had been in dispensing his northern hospitality. After his sudden death in March 1794, Bodega's estate took years to settle. Like Vancouver, he was a complex and interesting character. Born in Peru, he enjoyed a successful career in the Spanish navy, but did not rise to the high rank and position he aspired to attain. If Vancouver envisaged fame based upon great discoveries, Bodega y Quadra saw his defence of Spain's Pacific sovereignty as a way to enhance his career.

In their relationship at Nootka Sound, Vancouver lost to Bodega y Quadra that diplomatic advantage that so often marked British successes. Bodega was willing to hand over the Spanish post and to move his northern base to Puerto de Nuñez Gaona (Neah Bay) in Juan de Fuca Strait, but he refused to concede sovereignty to Britain except over the tiny bit of land Meares had occupied in 1788. Vancouver could have attempted to maintain Meares' fraud and depended upon bluff or threats. Robert Duffin, who had been a subordinate of Meares in 1788, testified to Vancouver that his captain had purchased all of Friendly Cove from Maquinna for some copper sheets and other trade goods. Duffin described the hut Meares built as a house having "three bed chambers, with a mess room for the officers, and proper apartments for the men" (II: 679). According to Duffin, there had been storage facilities and other outbuildings as well as the house. All these properties had been left under the care of Chief Maquinna. Vancouver did not press this specious line of argument or move beyond his own limited instructions to take possession. Later, Admiralty sources wished that he had accepted the post from Bodega on any terms if only to solidify the British claim through actual occupation of Nootka Sound (I: 108-09). When Vancouver and Bodega

y Quadra reached an impasse in their discussions, the only solution was to reopen negotiations between the two governments, which produced the final convention in January 1794. In the interim, the British government left Vancouver in the dark about the proposed final settlement of the issue.

For the Spaniards, Vancouver's lengthy presence in Pacific waters posed a series of potential dangers and embarrassments. Given his mission to chart the North American coastline and his visits to California ports, where he conducted hydrographic surveys, it was natural that the Spanish authorities and some subsequent historians should suspect that Vancouver had spying on his agenda. Lamb denies that there was any concern with espionage (I: 119), but given Spanish attitudes and the weakness of their defences, this was a natural worry. At first, Bodega y Quadra extended his Nootkan hospitality to include the California ports, thanks to which move Robert Broughton received permission to journey across Mexico on his return to Europe with dispatches — notwithstanding the fears of some Spanish officers that he would have ample opportunities to report on the Mexican defensive structure. By 1793, when Vancouver made his second visit to California, some Spanish authorities had reconsidered their openness (I: 144-45). Even if he was not actually spying, Vancouver's published journal enlightened the world about the empty lands of California. After Bodega y Quadra's sumptuous Nootkan lifestyle, the underdeveloped primitiveness of San Francisco and the other mission presidios came as a surprise. Vancouver reported in detail about the lack of agriculture in a potentially rich land and on the indolence of the Spanish settlers and soldiers who managed to maintain internal peace with the Indians, but could not guard against any foreign invasion (III: 1123-24). With remarkable foresight, Vancouver predicted an end to Spanish rule in California and replacement by one of the trading nations. His only mistake was to neglect including the United States as a potential successor to Spain and Mexico (III: 1135). Vancouver's visit to Valparaiso and Santiago, Chile, further underscored the Spanish concerns about British plans in the Pacific. The captain general of Chile, Ambrosio O'Higgins, informed Vancouver that an army of 8,000 men could be moved to the defence of the port city within twenty-four hours (IV: 1509). This was an absurd claim, but Vancouver had seen the paucity of defensive preparations and needed to be impressed that Chile was not as easy a target as it appeared.

Despite his petty squabbles with the one scientist aboard his vessels, Vancouver was representative of his times in expressing great interest in

the world he viewed. He was by no means an austere and single-dimensioned naval man dedicated wholly to coastal profiles, harbour soundings and charting. It is important for readers of his journal to examine the account in its entirety rather than to dip into it for sections that relate to one specific region he explored. Certain themes pervade the journal and develop as Vancouver crossed the Pacific and then sailed north and south from Alaskan waters to California and Hawaii. Lamb notes that Vancouver offered much more detail on the Hawaiian natives and that his descriptions of the Hawaiian Islands were often more lively than those of the Northwest Coast which he found "dreary and inhospitable" (I: 121). In part, the reason was probably much less complex. Vancouver and his crews saw Hawaii in the same way as today's winter tourists; the islands were an escape from the cold and from the drudgery of the northern surveys.

On the Northwest Coast, Vancouver was not at all negative toward regions that appeared to hold some promise for cultivation and European occupancy. In Juan de Fuca Strait, he commented, "A picture so pleasing could not fail to call to our remembrance certain delightful and beloved situations in Old England" (II: 515). Off Whidbey Island, he became even more effusive in his praise (II: 543):

The serenity of the climate, the innumerable pleasing landscapes, and the abundant fertility that unassisted nature puts forth, require only to be enriched by the industry of man with villages, mansions, cottages, and other buildings, to render it the most lovely country that can be imagined.

This most positive impression changed as *Discovery* and *Chatham* probed northward through the Strait of Georgia and into the maze of islands and inlets that were to slow exploration and to take up the next years with exhausting and not particularly rewarding efforts. Craggy mountains, precipitous waterfalls that thundered into inlets, and vast forests, no matter how beautiful, were not attractive to Vancouver. He employed such terms as "wild," "gloomy," "dismal," "dull," "barren," "inhospitable," "dreary" and "impenetrable." He complained about the monotony of the country, noting after a reconnaissance expedition near Calvert Island that (II: 657)

the country they had visited differed in no one respect from the general appearance we had long been accustomed to, nor did any thing occur to vary the continual sameness, or chequer the dreary melancholy before them. . . .

Lamb reminds us that the Spanish explorers of *Sútil* and *Mexicana* expressed similar opinions about the scenery and the land's general lack of

potential (I: 121, note 2). The Spanish commissioner, Brigadier José Manuel de Alava, related his astonishment to Vancouver that the Northwest Coast "could ever have been an object of contention between our respective sovereigns" (IV: 1405).

After a season of launch expeditions, constant rain and dampness, threats by unfriendly Indians, cool treatment by California commandants and a monotonous diet, Hawaii was a magnet for Vancouver as well as an important component of his ideas for British dominance in the Pacific. Even with its negative memories stemming from the murder of his mentor, James Cook, Vancouver expressed joy to be returning to Kealahou Bay. It was, he wrote (III: 1185), "an asylum, where the hospitable reception, and friendly treatment were such as could not have been surpassed by the most enlightened nation of the earth."

As an ethnographer and general observer of indigenous cultures, Vancouver deserves mixed marks at best. While his journal is valuable and his subordinate officers added data on native cultures, there are disappointing lacunae in almost all areas. He died before he could write his chapter dealing with the "manners, customs, laws and religion" of the Pacific peoples. His brother, John Vancouver, simply could not assemble George's notes and had to drop what was to have been a most significant concluding chapter (I: 293). Moreover, his primary task of surveying the coast prevented him from spending long enough in one place to overcome language barriers and to develop any real familiarity with the Northwest Coast Indians. His lack, too, of a trained Spanish translator retarded access to Spanish ethnological knowledge during periods when his vessels were anchored at Nootka Sound. Alejandro Malaspina enjoyed the advantages of trained scientists to conduct ethnographic research, longer periods in ports, and, most important, the accumulated knowledge collected by Spanish observers based at Nootka Sound who had made voyages and maintained close contacts with the fur traders of different nationalities. Vancouver, however, had the advantage of almost none of this — though he was more successful in his collection of data on the Hawaiians, where English informants were resident and could offer knowledge that was unavailable during a short visit.

The worth of his observations on the indigenous peoples was lessened, too, by the unfortunate tendency to dismiss natives as "wretched," their houses or huts as "miserable" and their ceremonies and entertainments as "ridiculous," "preposterous" and "indescribable." It is clear that Vancouver, like so many other Pacific navigators, subscribed to the common

view that “savages” were infants who had to be disciplined.⁹ From his first touching Australia and New Zealand, across the Pacific and during his explorations of Hawaii and the Northwest Coast, he tended to employ exemplary punishments to train any indigenous persons about accepted behaviour toward Europeans. At Tahiti, the theft of a hat by two natives brought severe floggings and the shaving of the offenders’ heads — a treatment Vancouver described as “a slight manual correction” (I: 416). Robbery of William Broughton’s linen resulted in an order to shoot native thieves and threats to destroy their property (I: 418-20). At Cross Sound on the Northwest Coast, an Indian who attempted to make off with a part of the rudder chains of *Discovery* was chased down and inflicted with an exemplary punishment of four dozen lashes (IV: 1342). Vancouver felt that thievery was instinctive in the “uncivilized world” and that the natives simply could not restrain their inclinations.

On the positive side, Vancouver was careful to restrain indiscriminate and random fire upon Indians unless his men were in life-threatening circumstances. Although there were some incidents where Indians were wounded and killed, on most occasions the boat crews demonstrated considerable fortitude in the face of danger to avoid opening fire. Sometimes the Indians — particularly the aggressive Tlingits — were able to grab muskets and other arms away from the boat crews. In such situations the seamen were outnumbered by Indians armed with their own weapons and quite frequently with muskets they had obtained in trade for their sea otter pelts.

Arbitrary implementation of exemplary punishments caused Vancouver to make potentially damaging errors. Perhaps the worst incident was in the cases of Captain Richard Hergest and astronomer William Gooch of *Daedalus*, who were murdered at Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands on their way to a rendezvous with Vancouver. Hergest was a very good friend, and Vancouver decided immediately to track and punish the guilty Hawaiian natives when he returned to the Islands during the next winter. He said that the purpose was to prevent further atrocities, but his demand for exemplary punishment on this occasion was much more like blind revenge (I: 97; II: 876). Normally Vancouver was not precipitous in his dealing with the Hawaiian chiefs, whose near-Byzantine politics and factional alignments made truth almost impossible to establish. On another occasion, he noted, “nothing short of indefatigable labour can obtain the truth and correct information, from men in so early a state of

⁹ P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 1982), 301.

civilization" (II: 451). His rage at Hergest's unfortunate death made him cast aside caution and accept the machinations of the chiefs whose wish was simply to mollify Vancouver with sufficient blood. After a most dubious inquiry at Oahu in which Vancouver demanded executions to check any future "barbarous and unprovoked outrages," three Hawaiians were executed by their own chief, who shot them in the head with a pistol. The three victims seem to have expressed no objections to or fear of boarding *Discovery*, where they were denounced and secured. Quoting surgeon's mate George Hewett, who later was a Vancouver detractor, Lamb expresses doubt about the guilt of the three victims. Most Hawaiian historians are convinced that the three were little more than sacrificial offerings by their chiefs to appease their powerful visitor (III: 879).¹⁰

Vancouver's account of his role in Hawaiian affairs during the expansionism of Kamehameha I forms one of the most fascinating and detailed parts of his journal. He was an acute observer of Hawaii at a time of accelerated change brought about in large part by the advent of European traders who introduced gunpowder weapons and encouraged chiefs in their ancient wars and rivalries. Indeed, his journal consistently stressed the danger to European interests and to the indigenous peoples of the Pacific created by firearms. Like religious missionaries since the sixteenth century who sought to protect native cultures, Vancouver was certain that the sort of Europeans who came to the Pacific were not the best equipped to spread the good aspects of European civilization. The sexual promiscuity of the Hawaiian Islanders and the wantonness of the women horrified Vancouver, who wrote that these evils had been introduced "by the different civilized voluptuaries" who visited (II: 462). Obviously, he had forgotten completely about his earlier voyages and his experiences with James Cook! Even worse than offering their bodies, the Hawaiians made constant requests for trade in muskets, pistols and gunpowder. Experiencing some difficulties obtaining fresh provisions because of his high moral standards on the gun trade, Vancouver informed the chiefs that King George had tabooed muskets, pistols, gunpowder and balls (II: 470; III: 800).

Vancouver condemned the traders for "unpardonable conduct" in introducing firearms and noted that the Hawaiians "have become very familiar, and use these weapons with an adroitness that would not disgrace the generality of European soldiers" (II: 472). Lamb notes that James Colnett gave a three-pound swivelgun, a few muskets and two or

¹⁰ See for example Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom, 1778-1854* (Honolulu, 1938), 44.

three blunderbusses to stop some Hawaiians from befriending the Spaniards (II: 476).¹¹ Vancouver knew very well that the Hawaiian chiefs were more interested in using their powerful new weapons to extend their own dominions and that firearms had increased warfare since Cook. Menzies wrote that guns “serve to stir up their minds with such a desire for conquest, ruin and destruction to their fellow creatures” (III: 797). He was convinced that, given the numbers of guns in Hawaiian hands, visits by single trading vessels would not be possible for much longer.

The most ambitious and successful chief, Kamehameha, of the Island of Hawaii, learned quickly how to use his European connections to further his plans, and was eventually able to unite the islands under his dominion. He recognized that Vancouver’s expedition was much more than a mere trading voyage and saw possibilities in developing close connections with the British, who could assist him and protect Hawaiians against the depredations of some armed vessels. Understanding the strategic value of Hawaii, Vancouver wanted Kamehameha and other chiefs to accept voluntary cession of the islands to Britain. Clearly, both sides had their own schemes to gain the best advantages, and it is fascinating to speculate upon who gained most. Although he did not really know it, Vancouver was dealing with an extremely perceptive leader who was quite capable of manipulating his visitors. To build his forces and to master gunpowder weaponry, Kamehameha had to maintain good relationships with traders who were the key to his mastery of Hawaii, Maui and the other islands. He bought arms from both British and American dealers, but a great number of the trade muskets were so bad that the barrels exploded the first time they were fired. Edward Bell of *Chatham* saw about thirty muskets in Kamehameha’s house, but commented, “such trash I never beheld, woe be to the man that first fires out of them” (III: 818, note 1). Menzies learned that the American trader John Kendrick purchased a great feathered cloak for two stern chasers mounted on carriages (III: 1196, note 3). Kamehameha needed both protection against shoddy weapons and technical assistance to learn how to build a suitable vessel that would at once support artillery and underpin his projects of conquest. Vancouver seemed to fit all of these requirements, and so the Hawaiian leader was quite willing to accept cession — which he may not have fully comprehended — in exchange for British aid.

¹¹ F. W. Howay, ed., *The Journal of Captain James Colnett aboard the Argonaut from April 26, 1789, to November 3, 1791* (Toronto, 1940), 219-22.

Vancouver proposed to regulate the Hawaiian chiefs and their foreign advisors (whom he described as "a banditti of renegadoes") (III: 1191). And, while it should have been obvious that Kamehameha's ambitions would lead him to overseas adventures against his Hawaiian adversaries, he granted technical assistance for the construction of a small European-style vessel named the *Britannia* (III: 1178-79). He viewed the aid program in terms of his own diplomatic effort to attain the cession of the islands, but Menzies was more realistic. The scientist knew that a vessel in the hands of Kamehameha's forces "would be the means of defending and overawing their enemies from further attack" (III: 1181). Despite his opposition to the arms trade, Vancouver thus granted Kamehameha the platform and technical knowledge he required to fulfil his imperial pretensions. In the end, all came to nothing anyway, for Vancouver's project for the cession of the Hawaiian Islands, a good idea to assist Pacific mastery, was not supported by the British government.

Although arms possessed by the Hawaiians were of only limited danger to Vancouver's expedition, the situation was quite different on the Northwest Coast, where the surveys demanded small boat expeditions distant from the protection of the great guns of the ships. Vancouver discovered that John Kendrick and other maritime fur traders had been exchanging muskets for sea otter pelts. Edward Bell reported that the rate of exchange of six or seven skins per musket had been reduced to only one or two per musket. The Barkley Sound chief, Wickananish, was said to have 400 men armed with muskets and plentiful supplies of ammunition. Bell saw muskets replacing indigenous weaponry, which would pose a grave danger to the European traders (II: 612, note 2). At the Kwakiutl village of Chief Cheslakees, situated at the mouth of the Nimpkish River, Vancouver saw two or three muskets in each house and eight firearms in the chief's house, all in excellent order (II: 626). Like the Hawaiian natives, the Northwest Coast Indians were extremely anxious to supply themselves with gunpowder weapons. The Kwakiutl, Bella Coola and other tribes not situated at the front line of contact with the Europeans on the outside coast were desperate to trade directly with Europeans or to obtain muskets by way of their old trade connections with the Nootka bands. As was the case in Hawaii, many of the trade muskets were of such poor quality that they soon burst. As he had in the Hawaiian Islands, Vancouver condemned the traders who "have fomented discords, and stirred up contentions, between the different tribes, in order to increase the demand for these destructive engines" (III: 1016).

The Indians realized that the firearms used by Vancouver's men were much better than any offered to them in trade for their pelts. The aggressive and warlike Tlingits went so far as to grab muskets from the boats involved in survey expeditions. One Tlingit chief, challenging a launch under Joseph Whidbey, had seven muskets and some brass blunderbusses in his canoe — all in excellent order. This chief had adopted other accoutrements of European mariners; he used a speaking trumpet and a telescope to assist his operations (IV: 1352). As in Hawaii, Vancouver condemned the (IV: 1370)

unwarrantable and impolitic conduct of the several traders on this coast, in supplying them so amply with fire-arms and ammunition, and in teaching them the use of those destructive weapons.

He feared for the safety of his survey crews, whose launches were not much better equipped with firearms than were some Indian canoes. He was convinced that if the arms trade continued for another year unimpeded, the small boat expeditions would simply have become too dangerous (IV: 1382).

For a number of reasons, this fear of firearms has been discounted by some modern historians. Lamb, using the research of Robin Fisher, feels that the dire warnings by Vancouver, Bell, Spanish observers and others were exaggerated (II: 612, note 2). Fisher, citing his own findings as well as those of Judge F. W. Howay, argues that there were relatively few Indian attacks on trading vessels.¹² Furthermore, he points out that Indian dependence upon the fur traders prevented them from indiscriminate attacks upon their suppliers. These arguments are, of course, worthy of attention; there were, nonetheless, many unreported incidents, clashes, and even total losses of vessels. Menzies noted John Kendrick's report of an unidentified wreck burned to the waterline in the Queen Charlotte Islands (IV: 1396, note 4). The Spaniards at the Nootka post recorded Indian complaints and incidents, and it seems likely that many more took place but were not mentioned to Europeans.¹³ Still, Fisher is right to suggest that the Indians were not principally interested in sniping

¹² Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1977), 16-17.

¹³ Within range of the Spanish post at Nootka Sound, both fur trader and Indian reports chronicled some of these incidents. Further to the north, however, there were fewer observers, and the fur traders did not always keep accurate logbooks and journals. In 1794, for example, Captain Francisco Viana of *Nuestra Señora de las Angustias* mentioned in passing to the Spaniards that during the previous year at Yacutat, his men became involved in an incident with the Tlingits that resulted in the deaths of several seamen and many Indians, including the chief and

at their suppliers. As in the Hawaiian case, possession of gunpowder weapons could mean the difference between potential expansion at the expense of traditional and new rivals, or a gradual loss of precious beach-front locations, estuaries, sheltered sites and other resources that spelled the difference between wealth and poverty, plenty and famine. The rapid acquisition of firearms was essential to Indian bands if they wished to preserve their traditional balances of power in a fast-changing world. It was not necessarily important for muskets to be employed directly in battle. Fisher is probably correct when he argues that indigenous weapons were better suited in many respects to the forms of warfare practised on the Northwest Coast.¹⁴ What counted was the psychological advantages possession of these weapons conferred, for a tribe in possession of more of them than its rivals could quite simply over-awe those rivals.

Vancouver found what he thought were Spanish muskets at the village of Chief Cheslakees at the mouth of the Nimpkish River and concluded correctly that the Kwakiutl were Maquinna's trading partners (IV: 612-13). In a speech to Vancouver that could have been uttered by Kamehameha or any of the leading Hawaiian chiefs, Maquinna extolled the virtues of his people and blackened the reputations of his powerful neighbour Wickaninish "or any chief whose people committed acts of violence and depredation on the vessels and their crews that visited their country" (IV: 1402). Maquinna boasted that his people benefited because Nootka Sound was the way station and entrepot of the North Pacific. Vancouver noted that Maquinna staged a dance that was an "exhibition" of their firearms, weapons, and implements "seemingly with intent to display their wealth and power" (IV: 1402). It is interesting that violence by Nootkan bands against trading vessels occurred after this period of prosperity when Nootka Sound ceased to be of such strategic importance on the Northwest Coast. The epic of John Jewitt and the fact that the assault on the American vessel *Boston* seemed to originate from a faulty firearm fit the picture feared by Vancouver. Jewitt's survival after the massacre of his shipmates was a direct result of the fact

his eldest son, who had been on board at the time the violence broke out. See Apuntes, incoordinandos a cerca de las costumbres, usos, levas de los salvajes habitantes del Estrecho de Fuca, Secundino Salamanca, 1792, Museo Naval, Madrid, vol. 330; and Desde la salida de la fragata *Princesa* del mando del Teniente de Navío D. Salvador Fidalgo que verificó el 7 de junio del año pasado de 1793, han ocurrido hasta el día las siguientes novedades en este establecimiento, Ramón Saavedra, 15 June 1794, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, vol. 4290.

¹⁴ See Robin Fisher, "Arms and Men on the Northwest Coast, 1774-1825," *BC Studies* 29 (Spring 1976), 3-18.

that he was an armourer whose talents were in great demand by the Indians. The *Boston* carried a cargo including "a great quantity of ammunition, cutlasses, pistols and three thousand muskets and fowling pieces."¹⁵ If one trading vessel contained sufficient arms to equip a European regiment of two or three battalions, one need not speculate for long about the potential for damage to Pacific cultures caused by the general traffic in weaponry. Vancouver opposed this arming of indigenous peoples, which he described as "barbarous and inhuman" (III: 1161).

Vancouver's somewhat bleak outlook for the future of Pacific peoples was not confined to his criticisms of the European traders and the arms merchants. He was aware of other factors that might be influencing the demography of the Pacific lands he visited. Although he was a poor observer of ceremony, dress and culture, he had a quite acute sense of demography and especially with the demographic impact of European culture upon Pacific peoples. Lamb describes Vancouver as being "mildly obsessed by the idea of depopulation" (II: 540, note 1), an attitude that Robin Fisher might identify as the beginning of the "guilt-induced mythology"¹⁶ disseminated by historians who have argued that the arrival of Europeans was disastrous for Indian populations. While the demographic disaster concept will continue to spark debates among researchers, one should not dismiss Vancouver's evidence and his "mild obsession" out of hand. Fisher is quite correct in assuming that Vancouver and other observers mistook abandoned villages that were part of the annual migration cycle for evidence of cataclysmic depopulation.¹⁷ However, there is simply too much additional data suggesting that tragedies were striking the Indian civilization for the notion that their numbers were shrinking to be dismissed out of hand. On several occasions during his cruise through the interior waterways between Vancouver Island and the mainland, Vancouver saw Indians pitted by smallpox scars and often blinded in one eye by the same disease (II: 528, 559). At Admiralty Inlet, Whidbey visited one of many abandoned villages that can be explained by annual migration, but on this occasion several graves were opened that were found to contain the skeletons of "many young children tied up in baskets" (II: 568). Since it is well known that disease often spread in advance of the European frontier elsewhere in the Americas and that demographic disasters occurred with the arrival of Europeans, it seems

¹⁵ Derek G. Smith, ed., *The Adventures and Sufferings of John R. Jewitt, Captive among the Nootka, 1803-1805* (Toronto, 1974), 19.

¹⁶ Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

quite likely that Vancouver was correct in his view that the Northwest Coast Indian population had been much larger in the past (II: 538-39, 629).

Certainly, much work remains to be done on Indian populations, but Vancouver's evidence cannot be dismissed as easily as it has been in the past. At Prince William Sound, Alaska, he wondered about depopulation caused by the Russian presence and argued from different perspectives before concluding that the native population had diminished by one half (IV: 1306-07). His theory about the Russians as agents of demographic disaster is consistent with evidence from contemporary Spanish sources. In 1788, during a visit to the Russian post at Kodiak Island, Esteban José Martínez learned that in the past winter alone 700 natives had perished from epidemics and from the cold.¹⁸ The epidemics may be attributed to the Russians and the winter deaths to disruptions caused by Russian rearrangement of the annual food gathering and storage systems of the indigenous peoples. The problem was that in many instances there were no observers on the Northwest Coast to record epidemics, the results of dislocations caused by European activities, or the losses to venereal diseases. By the time accurate data became available, the size of the original population was already a subject for debate.

In many respects, then, the sentiments of George Vancouver were correct. His fears about firearms and the negative side of European contact were much more than theoretical anxieties. The weapons traffic and the maritime fur trade itself were often brutal businesses which took place on a frontier outside of accepted European law and moral restrictions. British and American traders used weapons to supply themselves with cargoes of furs when their trade goods did not sell. A Spanish observer, Secundino Salamanca, lamented:

Impiously, they rob these unfortunates and they force them with superiority of arms to give their furs, the only endowments that nature has apportioned to them, or to defend their possessions at the cost of their lives and the ruin of their temples and houses.¹⁹

Vancouver realized the dangers and foreshadowed many of the themes that would affect Pacific cultures. He should not be faulted for his per-

¹⁸ *Diario de Navegación que con el favor de Dios... va a egecutar el Piloto de la Real Armada, Don Antonio Serantes sobre la Fragata de S.C.M. La Princesa...*, 1788, Biblioteca Nacional, Mexico City, Caja Fuerte.

¹⁹ *Apuntes, incoordinados a cerca de las costumbres, usos, y levas de los salvajes habitantes del Estrecho de Fuca, Secundino Salamanca, 1792, Museo Naval, Madrid, Spain, vol. 330.*

ceptions in these fields, even though he may not have been the best ethnologist of his times. His survey was a magnificent achievement which alone should grant him major recognition. That he managed to shepherd his vessels and crews back to England with so few losses after such a lengthy and exhausting voyage was in itself a remarkable feat of seamanship and marine leadership in the field of nutrition and sanitation. Even if his detractors were correct in identifying flaws in his methods and his personality, Vancouver emerges through the journal as a compelling and complex character. Lamb and the Hakluyt Society are to be applauded for producing a truly major work that will remain an essential tool for all scholars interested in the history of the North Pacific.

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