

James Hanna and John Henry Cox: A Postscript*

Precise details of Cox's involvement in the Russo-Swedish War of 1788-1790 are given in an unexpected source — three articles published nearly forty years ago in Tahiti, copies of which were kindly made available to me by Margaret Waddington. Tahitians were interested in Cox because one of his sailors, John Brown, left the *Mercury* there and later played an active part in island affairs.

The author of the articles was Commandant J. Cottez, a retired French naval officer. References to Cox aroused his interest, and his first inquiries in Sweden brought the contradictory information that Cox had been commissioned a lieutenant in the Swedish Navy, in the expectation that his armed brig *Mercury* (later renamed *Gustavus III*) would harass the Russian fur traders in Kamchatka and on the Northwest Coast, whereas he had in fact merely paid them a friendly visit. This much Cottez had learned when he wrote a first article for the March 1951 issue (no. 91), of the *Bulletin* of the Société des Etudes Océaniques, published in Papeete.

Cottez had secured from the Library of the Swedish Parliament a copy of the key document in the story — the contract between Cox and the Swedish Court, signed at Gothenburg on 14 November 1788. The complete text (in French, the language of diplomacy), was printed in the much longer article Cottez contributed to the *Bulletin* for September 1952 (no. 100). Under its terms King Gustavus gave his "haute autorisation" to Cox to conduct the proposed expedition against the Russian establishments on the east coast of Russia and the north coast of America. Cox, on his part, was to provide an armed brig, and both the cost of the ship and all other expenses that might be involved in the venture were to be borne by him. In effect the contract evidently gave Cox letters of marque, as the King was to receive 10 per cent of the value of all prizes taken. Payments were to be made to His Majesty through Canton to Baron de Ruuth, one of his ministers. Finally, Cox undertook to captain a well-disciplined ship that

* See W. Kaye Lamb and Tomas Bertroli, "James Hanna and John Henry Cox: The First Maritime Fur Trader and His Sponsor," *BC Studies* 84 (Winter 1989-90): 3-36.

would not indulge in piratical or other dishonourable activities that would embarrass Sweden's relations with other countries.

Cottez was puzzled by Cox's failure to take any offensive action against the Russian posts. He had seen a copy of Mortimer's account of the voyage of the *Mercury* and noted that he said nothing whatever about its true purpose. Cottez concluded that the most likely explanation was that Cox was first and foremost a merchant, not a military man. Destroying Russian posts would profit no one, and might involve him in demands for royalties from the King of Sweden. Certainly Cox's motives throughout centred on trading possibilities, and — a highly important point overlooked by Cottez — the 1788 contract enabled him to sail his ship under the Swedish flag and thereby circumvent the monopoly restrictions of the East India and South Seas companies that applied to British vessels.

Cox corresponded with Baron de Ruuth from Canton in 1790, evidently with a second voyage in mind, but the conclusion of peace between Russia and Sweden meant that this became a purely commercial venture.

Cottez pursued his interest in Cox for some years. His third contribution to the *Bulletin* is a short paper in the issue dated March 1955 (no. 110). In it he thanks the Governor of Macao and M. Braga, a Portuguese authority on Far Eastern history, for their assistance, but the article is based very largely on such printed sources as Greenberg and Morse, to which he had evidently been referred.

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