

Research Notes:

More Letters of Edmund Verney

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Readers of the article, "Letters of a Victorian Naval Officer: Edmund Verney in British Columbia, 1862-65" (*BC Studies*, No. 86, Summer 1990) may be interested to know that recent cataloguing of the great archive at Claydon House in Buckinghamshire has brought to light additional letters written by Edmund Hope Verney during his period in B.C. as commander of the gunboat HMS *Grappler* to his father in England, Sir Harry Verney. The letters for the year 1863, which had become separated from the others and at the time I wrote the article were thought to be no longer in existence, have now been found, and with them is a letter of September 1864 partly about the Chilcotin uprising. This discovery is a result of the work of Mrs. Susan Ranson, the archivist at Claydon House.

The events recorded by Verney in these newly discovered 1863 letters include the *Grappler's* participation during the spring in the search for the Lemalchi Indians believed responsible for a series of murders in the Gulf Islands. Verney was not present at the bombardment by HMS *Forward* of the Lemalchi village on Kuper Island, and states that he is "thankful that the responsibility of firing the first shot has not fallen to me" (26 April), but he subsequently gives a vivid account of the finding of the body of one of the murdered men, William Brady, amid idyllic surroundings at Bedwell Harbour on Pender Island (3 May), and he provides a detailed and moving report of the surrender by the Cowichan Indians of two of the wanted men (5 May). He attributes the peaceableness of the surrender to the influence of Bishop Demers, and expresses a more favourable view of Roman Catholic influence on the Cowichans than he had in a letter of September 1862 quoted in the earlier article.

The principal event of the later part of 1863 recorded in the letters is a northern voyage in October-November to Metlakatla, which includes an extensive and highly favourable account of the missionary work of William Duncan. This voyage in very imperfectly charted waters at a bad time of year proved hazardous, and Verney gives a dramatic narrative of an occasion on which the *Grappler* was very nearly lost: on the return through

Milbanke Sound the ship struck a rock and remained stranded there for almost eight hours in an increasingly dangerous situation before floating free on the rising tide, with its bottom damaged (15 November).

The 1863 letters frequently record minor episodes just as interesting as the major events of the year, for example this on 17 January:

we anchored in Esquimalt Harbour on Thursday afternoon: in the evening, minute-guns were heard, and supposing them to proceed from a vessel in distress, I was ordered to get up steam, and two boats were sent out from the *Topaze*; I went out to the entrance of Victoria Harbour but could see nothing particular and returned: we afterwards found that the guns were part of a joyous demonstration made by the coloured population on account of the American emancipation proclamation.

Like the previously known letters of other years, those of 1863 are valuable for what they record of many aspects of the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia as well as for naval matters. Verney displays a constant appreciation of the coastal scenery and provides many detailed descriptions of settings and scenes. For example, on 15 January he writes that the English Camp on San Juan Island is "one of the most lovely views in this part of the world," and describes not only its situation "in a deep bay" "completely landlocked and sheltered," surrounded by dense forests; and then "the white and yellow houses for the troops" built around three sides of a square facing the water, with the tall flag pole displaying the Union Jack; but he also includes such details as the red coats of the sentries, the pet dogs sleeping in front of the officers' quarters, the sound of bugles calling the men to dinner, the striking of the hours "on a suspended crow-bar which emits a very soft and musical sound," and the curling puff of white steam occasionally let out by the *Grappler* lying at anchor. A similar sensitivity to auditory as well as visual elements appears in his description of a cold winter scene at Esquimalt Harbour on 8 February:

tonight is most lovely: not a breath of wind stirs the frozen air, and the stars flash like diamonds set in jet; the atmosphere is so clear that every sound is heard with wonderful distinctness, as the tramp of the sentry aboard *Topaze*, or every half-hour, as the bell strikes, his cheering cry of "all's well."

In addition to describing the snow-laden trees and rock surrounding the harbour, he includes in his evocation of the scene "the steady red light of Figgard Island Lighthouse, and low ceaseless moan of the swells heaving and sullenly breaking on the rocks at its base."

As in his earlier B.C. letters, Verney continues to write in 1863 much about climate and seasonal change. On 8 April he tells his father that

although he knows he "raved" about the beauty of the wild flowers of southern Vancouver Island last spring, he cannot refrain from doing so again, and he declares on 27 April: "I cannot believe that any part of the world can show a greater variety and number of wild flowers than this." During the northern voyage in the autumn he writes enthusiastically of the magnificent scenery of the Inland Passage; and on 14 October he suggests that Captain Vancouver would not have found the scenery around Bella Coola so desolate and inhospitable as he did if he had been there in duck-hunting season.

In his 1863 letters as in those of 1862 Verney provides candid and often critical comments on the establishment of colonial officials on Vancouver Island, as well as on his own superior officers. The letters indicate, however, that his relations with Governor Douglas during this year were cordial, and he records long conversations with Douglas in August and December. Among recent arrivals to the colony, he continues to display special interest in the welfare and marriages of the "female emigrants" brought on the "brideships" *Tynemouth* and *Robert Lowe*.

The 1863 letters also provide additional evidence of Verney's special interest in the progress of the agricultural settlement at Comox, which had been founded by a voyage of the *Grappler* in October 1862. He writes on 1 May about Comox (which he had begun by spelling 'Comucks' and now spells 'Comux' or 'Comax'):

I spent the afternoon in visiting the settlers who had much advanced since I was last there: land was being ploughed up; trees felled, and gardens cultivated, and I had a glass of rich and delicious new milk.

On another visit to Comox two weeks later he again canoed up the river and visited the settlers in their houses; he read divine service for them on Sunday; and he even brought "juvenile works in verse and prose for distribution among the youthful population of the Comax settlement" (15, 18 May).

A number of points that had not been previously clear emerge from the 1863 letters. They show, for example, that the cottage Verney rented in Esquimalt in 1862 and facetiously named "The Palace" was not, as I had assumed, the same as the cottage named "The Small Bower" in later letters, but "The Small Bower" was a cottage at the head of Constance Cove first acquired by Verney in the spring and summer of 1863, while the *Grappler* was laid up having its boilers replaced. The 1863 letters show that Verney immediately developed a great interest in improving the property and in gardening and raising fowls there.

More important than this, the 1863 letters explain what had seemed a puzzling fact, that for no apparent reason a great concentration of names connected with Verney and his family occurs on coastal charts in the Wells Passage area. The 1863 letters show that in just this area the *Grappler* made a rendezvous with the *Beaver* early in October, when the latter under the command of Verney's old shipmate, Daniel Pender, was engaged in survey work. The 1863 letters show that Verney placed names on the coast's inhabitants as well as upon its geographical features. On an occasion when Duncan's Indian converts at Metlakatla were given European names on baptism (2 November), Verney contributed such names as Edmund Verney, Frederic Calvert, commemorating the fact that his branch of the Verney family had in earlier generations been Calverts, and Richard Moody, as a mark of his esteem for the colonel of the Royal Engineers at New Westminster.

The 1863 letters provide additional information about Verney's activities in collecting Indian artefacts to be sent to Claydon House. Attached to a letter of 20 February is a list of such articles shipped to England on the Hudson's Bay Company ship *Princess Royal*. An entry in this list sheds some light on the trading methods through which Verney acquired artefacts:

One charm, composed to the unbelieving eye only of red cord and weasel skins, but which is really very valuable, and cost a nearly new uniform frock-coat. No bullet can harm the wearer: any one doubting its efficacy is recommended to try it.

The list includes "Two large carvings from the mouth of the Courtenay River in the Comux district," which Verney suggests will "do for garden gate-posts"; he refers to them again in the previously unknown letter of September 1864, suggesting that they be either used as garden gate posts or given to a museum. Fortunately they were preserved in the private museum at Claydon House: these are no doubt the Salish house posts from Comox village now displayed at the Museum of Mankind in London.

In far more ways than can be briefly indicated, the newly discovered 1863 letters add to the value and interest of Verney's unique personal record of naval activities and colonial life in British Columbia. This record is now known to extend without any substantial breaks for the whole period from Verney's arrival on Vancouver Island in May 1862 to his departure for England in June 1865. I am again indebted to Sir Ralph Verney and the Claydon House Trust for permission to quote from the letters here.