

SOCIAL POWER AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN PRE-COLONIAL BRITISH COLUMBIA¹

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From the first White contacts along the Coast in the 1770s to the establishment of British colonies in the mid-nineteenth century, outside involvement in the territory that is now the province of British Columbia turned primarily on imperial geopolitical claims and the spatial momentum of commercial capital. Exogenous diseases accompanied — in some cases slightly preceded — these explicit interests. All such introductions reached into space that, along parts of the Coast and the major salmon rivers, probably supported as dense non-agricultural populations as anywhere in the world. The numerous peoples of the northern Cordillera responded to these introductions in ways that have been subject to renewed scrutiny in recent years, part of a worldwide interest in contact processes and in the strategies and tactics of colonialism and resistance. It seems useful, therefore, to review current understandings of the major new vectors of power in the northern Cordillera during these years and, in this light, to consider what generalizations can now be offered about social power and cultural change during the better part of a century between the first appearance of Europeans and the creation of colonies.

The crew of brilliant anthropologists and ethnographers who first studied the Native cultures of the Northwest Coast in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rarely raised questions about cultural change and social power during the early contact years. Franz Boas and others of his and the next generation gathered ethnographic information from elderly informants and sought to record traditional

¹ I thank Daniel Clayton, Robert Galois, Richard Mackie, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on a draft of this essay. An earlier version was given at the BC Studies Conference in Nanaimo in May 1997.

cultures before they disappeared. They opposed traditional to modern culture and, while understanding that modern culture had been imposed on traditional ones in complicated ways, did not focus on the “transitional” cultures that resulted from such overlaps. Later, when it no longer seemed possible to conduct salvage ethnography, scholars devoted more attention to cultural change. Then they tended to argue that introduced goods and ways were incorporated into dynamic, expanding Native cultures. As early as 1929 Marius Barbeau, an ethnographer with the National Museum of Canada, argued that the aging totem poles fronting Native villages along the middle Skeena were recent and that they were “the first set of elaborate memorials ever erected among the Gitksan.”² According to Helen Codere, a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University in the late 1940s, new wealth encouraged more extravagant potlatches; eventually, when British law and warships curtailed inter-Native warfare, Native groups fought with potlatch goods.³ According to Joyce Wike, a contemporary of Codere’s at Columbia, Northwest Coast society “rushed out to meet the sea otter trade,” and the new wealth associated with it “promoted and enhanced previous cultural forms.”⁴ Such ideas were widely accepted. According to Wilson Duff, anthropologist and author of the influential *Indian History of British Columbia*, the fur trade did not destabilize Native life. Rather, new tools and guns increased efficiency, and fur markets brought increased returns; new wealth strengthened existing socio-economic systems as chiefs became wealthier, potlatches bigger, and ceremonial life more elaborate.⁵ Such ideas, coupled with his own sharp reaction to the effacement of Native peoples implicit in the “fatal impact” approach to colonial historiography,⁶ influenced a young New Zealander, Robin Fisher,

² Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles of the Gitksan, Upper Skeena River, British Columbia*, Canada, Department of Mines, National Museum of Canada, Bulletin 61, Anthropological Series 12 (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1929), 4.

³ Helen Codere, *Fighting with Property: A Study of Kwakiutl Potlatching and Warfare, 1792–1930*, Monographs of the American Ethnological Society 18 (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1950); reprinted in 1966 (Seattle: University of Washington Press).

⁴ Joyce A. Wike, “The Effect of the Maritime Fur Trade on Northwest Coast Indian Society,” (PhD thesis, Department of Political Science, Columbia University, 1951). In a remarkable later essay, Wike was much more cautious: “Problems in Fur Trade Analysis: The Northwest Coast,” *American Anthropologist* 60 (1958): 1,086–101.

⁵ Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia*, Vol. 1, *The Impact of the White Man*, Anthropology in British Columbia, Memoir No. 5 (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1964), 57–60.

⁶ As in Alan Moorehead, *The Fatal Impact: An Account of the Invasion of the South Pacific, 1767–1840* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

to suggest in a PhD thesis in history at the University of British Columbia that became a remarkable and influential book — *Contact and Conflict* — that Europeans and Natives met as equals on the Northwest Coast, that contact violence has been considerably exaggerated, and that an infusion of wealth created a brief high point in Northwest Coast culture. The disruption and degradation of Native cultures came later, Fisher argued, with the onset of formal colonial regimes.⁷

Fisher's conclusions summarized and extended the prevailing anthropological understanding of the previous generation — a set of assumptions often loosely labelled the cultural enrichment hypothesis, after a phrase first used by Joyce Wike. But now, twenty years later, new information is available, Native voices have repoliticized issues of land and colonial appropriation, and the intellectual climate has changed. In British Columbia, as elsewhere, scholarship is now positioned somewhat differently in relation to the places where Europe and non-Europe, the literate and the oral, abruptly ran into each other.

In this article I summarize parts of this new scholarship and some of the ideas that flow from it. I do so under three headings: *Inscription and Geopolitics*, the means by which outsiders recorded and transposed information about the Northwest Coast to distant locations and then used this detached information to their own geopolitical ends; *The Geography of Disease*, the distribution of several inadvertent and devastating microbial introductions; and *Spatial Strategies of Commercial Capital*, the way fur traders sought to deploy themselves so as to conduct profitable trades in what, for them, were intricate, forbidding, and largely unknown places. These sections identify, I think, the principal “technologies” of external power that reached what is now British Columbia between 1770 and 1850. I then comment on the Native response to each and, in conclusion, muse about the generalizations that can now be made regarding continuity and change in Native cultures during these years.

⁷ Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1977); also “Arms and Men on the Northwest Coast,” *BC Studies* 29 (1976): 3-18; and “Indian Control of Maritime Fur Trade and the Northwest Coast,” in D.A. Muise, ed., *Approaches to Native History in Canada: Papers of a Conference Held in the National Museum of Man, October, 1974*, National Museum of Man, Mercury Series, History Division, Papers 25 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1977), 65-86.

VECTORS OF EXTERNAL POWER

Inscription and Geopolitics

In the first edition of *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726, Jonathan Swift included a map that showed a sizable peninsula, Brobdingnag, jutting from the Northwest Coast of North America well north of Monterey and of the "Straights of Annian." By the mid-1780s the space for geographical conjecture had been greatly reduced. Two Spanish explorers (Pérez and Quadra) and one British (Cook) had sailed along the Coast, and the first maps that could be considered fairly reliable had reached Europe. The general configuration of this coast became known to the outside world. In the next few years both Spanish and British explorers extended their investigations, mapping with increasing precision and renaming prominent features. In October 1794, George Vancouver completed his remarkable survey of an abrupt, convoluted coast, in the process producing charts that would not be superseded for more than fifty years. The year before, Alexander Mackenzie, fur trader and explorer, had reached the Pacific overland, adding an east-west cordilleran axis of cartographic information.

Such mapping was a technology of power.⁸ It enabled captains who had never visited the Coast to sail along it with some confidence because they carried information about the headlands and harbours ahead. It began to redefine the land in terms Europeans could understand, managing it cartographically, identifying it with familiar names, Europeanizing it somewhat.⁹ A form of knowledge-making that re-situated land within prior categories of European thought, it presaged the creation of formal colonial space.¹⁰ Maps enabled knowledge of the Northwest Coast to be inscribed and transported elsewhere, to be pored over before another voyage or to enter the calculations of

⁸ There is now a large literature on this point, for example: J. B. Harley, "Maps, Knowledge and Power," in D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels, eds., *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); J. Brian Harley, "Rereading the Maps of the Columbian Encounter," *Annals, Association of American Geographers* 82 (September 1992): 522-35; Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), esp. ch. 1; and, locally, Ken G. Brealey, "Mapping Them 'Out': Euro-Canadian Cartography and the Appropriation of the Nuxalk and Ts'ilhqot'in in First Nations' Territories, 1793-1916," *The Canadian Geographer* 39 (summer 1995): 140-56.

⁹ And contributing, as José Rabasa has shown, to an increasingly Eurocentric view of the world. *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), introduction.

empire. Such recontextualized fragments of knowledge became part of the means by which the Northwest Coast was repositioned as a distant periphery of Europe.¹¹ Maps and other texts could be studied and added to fields of representation within which decisions could be taken and moves made on the basis of abstracted, rudimentary information about distant places. For many of the purposes of imperial power, a sketch plus the knowledge that the area had some commercial value sufficed to turn the Northwest Coast and its peoples into pawns in geopolitical chess games being played thousands of miles away. The results of these games would affect the political and cultural future of the Northwest Coast, but the games themselves, adding only a few detached regional inscriptions to imperial fields of representation, were invisible to the peoples who lived there.

This process began, as Daniel Clayton has recently shown in a remarkable study of the making of Vancouver Island as a colonial space, in the diplomatic confrontation between Britain and Spain, which culminated, in October 1790, in the Nootka Convention.¹² The two nations had almost gone to war over a territory they hardly knew. Pitt, the British prime minister, relied on Arrowsmith's *Chart of the World on Mercator's Projection, 1790* (which included European discoveries in the North Pacific to 1780); on the representations of a British trader, John Meares, who claimed to have purchased land and built a habitation in Nootka Sound before the Spanish arrived (thus, in British eyes, validating Britain's claim by architecture and occupation); and on trade statistics and registers of commerce. The Spanish held different views of possessory rights than did the British: they had been there first; moreover, the Pope had granted this territory to Spain in the 1490s. Both parties subscribed to the tenet of the Law of Nations, widely assumed at the end of the eighteenth century, that the inhabitants of territories claimed by Europeans had no legal rights thereto.¹³ And so a dispute between Spanish and British captains in Nootka Sound was ramified and reconfigured in European legal and diplomatic discourses that largely ignored the Northwest Coast except as a remote place on European maps indicating who

¹¹ A point somewhat elaborated by Bruno Latour in *Science in Action* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1987), ch. 6.

¹² Daniel Clayton, "Islands of Truth: Vancouver Island from Captain Cook to the Beginnings of Colonialism" (PhD thesis, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1995). Part 3 of this work, "Circulating Knowledge and Power," deals with the issues touched on in this and the next paragraph.

¹³ Leslie Green and Olive Dickason, *The Law of Nations and the New World* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1989), esp. 125-26; cited in Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 429.

owned what and where. In this case the Spanish, diplomatically isolated in Europe and confronted by a stronger power, backed down, paying reparations and granting Britons trade and settlement rights. Five years later the Spanish abandoned their garrison at Nootka and withdrew from a coast they had claimed but never controlled. Many of the place-names they had strewn around went with them or were slowly superseded. Except for the groups in Nootka Sound, one of which quickly reoccupied its former village site, the Spanish withdrawal, the subject of so much fuss in Europe, had almost no direct effect on the peoples of the Northwest Coast.

After the Spanish withdrew, the boundary-making procedures and place-holding tactics that abstracted and claimed the Northwest Coast were pursued by Britain, Russia, and the United States. In 1818 British-American diplomacy fell back on the 49th parallel (a line that had appeared during British negotiations with the French during and after the Treaty of Utrecht [1713] and that corresponded, approximately, with the southern margin of the British fur trade) to fix a boundary between British and American territory across the Plains to the Continental Divide. The same diplomacy created a new geopolitical and commercial space to the west — the Oregon Territory — which would be open to traders of either nationality until an agreement on a border could be achieved. In 1824 the Americans, and in 1825 the British, worked out agreements with the Russians that fixed the southern limit of Russian America at 54° 40'N. Invisible to the people living nearby, this border was highly visible from afar and was adopted by American rhetoric in the mid-1840s — “54 40 or fight” — as a possible solution to the boundary problem in the Oregon Territory, but one soon qualified by diplomacy and the Royal Navy.¹⁴ In 1846 Britain and the United States ratified a treaty that extended the international boundary along the 49th parallel to the Pacific. The old Oregon Territory, such as it was, was gone. The people who rounded on the Fraser River during the 1847 salmon season had no idea that some of them had crossed an international boundary, nor had any conception of what such a line could be in their territory or of how it could have got there.

The effects, however, were soon felt: the colony of Vancouver Island created in 1849, the colony of British Columbia nine years later, and with them settlers and the machinery of colonial power. Governor

¹⁴ Barry M. Gough, *The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast of North America, 1810–1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1971), ch. 3.

Douglas could now tell Native people that “the whole country was a possession of the British Crown”¹⁵ — a statement that, to his Native listeners, probably seemed to drop from the blue. Yet it was a product of the previous sixty years and more — of a process that depended on a few inscriptions from the Northwest Coast reworked elsewhere in geographical abstractions and imperial equations and then reintroduced as a geopolitical framework around the age-old territories of Native peoples. Colonial dispossessions and repossessions of land effectively began after 1849, as representations elaborated thousands of miles away began to bite into the colonial spaces they had created.

The Geography of Disease

Orchestrated from afar, these processes of inscription and representation were largely invisible to the peoples whose territories became part of the process. By contrast, introduced diseases were invisible from afar yet devastating to local peoples. The outside gaze saw introduced diseases so poorly that even the salvage ethnographers, inveterate compilers of information about Native ways, ignored them; their extent is only now coming to light.

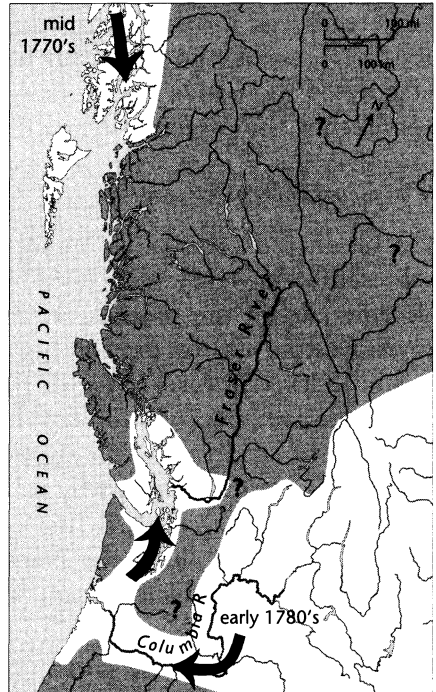
A thesis in anthropology by Robert T. Boyd at the University of Washington (1985) was the first comprehensive analysis of disease and depopulation along the Northwest Coast during the contact century. In this and subsequent work Boyd identified eight major varieties of epidemic diseases introduced during this period: smallpox, malaria, measles, influenza, dysentery, whooping cough, typhus, and typhoid fever.¹⁶ Syphilis and gonorrhea arrived with the first exploratory voyages in the 1770s and so perhaps, though the evidence for its introduction is unclear, did tuberculosis. Only the most visible of these introduced diseases — smallpox, malaria, and measles — can now be tracked through the population with any accuracy.

Smallpox appeared among the Tlingit, Haida, and perhaps some of the Nisga'a and Tsimshian in the 1770s; and at approximately the

¹⁵ Douglas diary, 3–11 January 1853, J. Douglas, Private Papers, second series, reel 737A, Victoria, British Columbia Archives and Record Service (BCARS).

¹⁶ Robert Thomas Boyd, “The Introduction of Infectious Diseases among the Indians of the Pacific Northwest, 1774–1874” (PhD thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, 1985). Boyd’s other principal works are: “Demographic History, 1774–1874,” in Wayne Suttles, ed., *Northwest Coast*, Vol. 7, *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 135–48; and “Smallpox in the Pacific Northwest: The First Epidemics,” *BC Studies* 101 (spring 1994): 5–40.

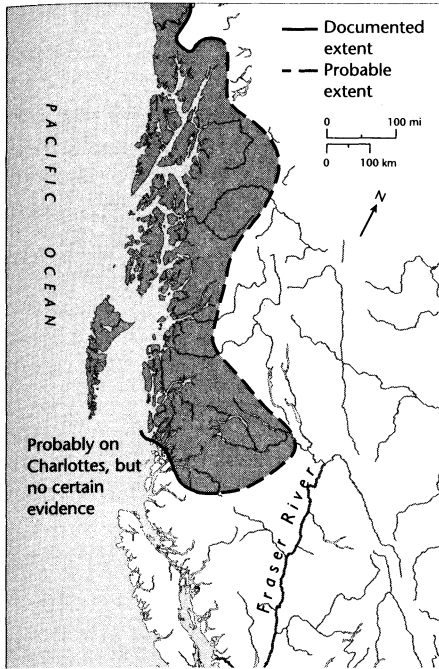
same time in Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia, along the lower Columbia, and on the Columbia Plateau. Boyd associates these geographically separate data with a Northwest Coast pandemic in the 1770s, but his claim is weakened by the lack of evidence of early smallpox along the middle coast. Neither the Spanish nor the British at Nootka Sound mentioned the disease, nor did any of the maritime fur traders' accounts of the West Coast of Vancouver Island — a silence that seems incompatible with a major smallpox epidemic only a few years before. Similarly, Robert Galois's exhaustive, recent evaluation of evidence from the Kwakwaka'wakw (the peoples of northeastern Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland) turns up no indication of eighteenth-century smallpox.¹⁷ I have argued that the evidence better fits the hypothesis that there were separate epidemics, one in the north in the 1770s, introduced by sea, the other in the south in 1781-82, introduced overland from the Plains (Map 1).¹⁸ Boyd identifies a second epidemic in the south in 1801, whereas to my mind the evidence he presents for it better



Map 1: Distribution of smallpox, 1770s and 1780s.

¹⁷ Robert Galois, *Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements, 1775-1920: A Geographical Analysis and Gazetteer* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Cole Harris, "Voices of Disaster: Smallpox around the Strait of Georgia in 1782," *Ethnohistory* 41 (1994): 591-626; reprinted with some additions in Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), ch. 1. Boyd has recently defended his position in "Commentary on Early Contact-Era Smallpox in the Pacific Northwest," *Ethnohistory* 43 (1996): 307-28. On the smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 on the Plains, see: Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 105-08; Jody F. Decker, "Tracing Historical Diffusion Patterns: The Case of the 1780-1782 Smallpox Epidemic among the Indians of Western Canada," *Native Studies Review* 4 (1988): 1-24; and Jody F. Decker, "Depopulation of the Northern Plains Natives," *Social Science and Medicine* 33 (1991): 381-96. For more literature on this and other continental epidemics consult the notes and bibliographies in the above.



Map 2: Distribution of smallpox, 1830s.

fits a regional epidemic in 1781-82.¹⁹ There is more consensus about the timing and extent of smallpox in the north in 1836. This epidemic spread south along coastal Alaska as far as the Heiltsuk (Bella Bella) and the Nuxalk (Bella Coola), and probably to the Haida on the Queen Charlotte Islands (Map 2).²⁰ Smallpox next appeared after the period considered here. In 1853 it affected much of the Columbia basin, the coasts of Oregon, Washington, and southwestern Vancouver Island, and parts of the land around Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia. In 1862-63 it spread through most of what is now British Columbia.

In 1830-33 malaria spread through the lower Columbia and into southern Puget Sound, its northern diffusion apparently checked south of the present international border by the northern limit of the anopheles mosquito. Measles in 1848 was probably the first epidemic to affect almost all of British Columbia.²¹ Carried along the coast by the Hudson's Bay Company steamer *Beaver* and in the interior by the company's horse and canoe brigades, and then diffused locally within Native networks of food procurement and trade, its geographical range was an inadvertent consequence of introduced transportation systems. The weakened populations left in its wake were struck by influenza the following year.

Although the effects of the same epidemic could vary greatly from winter village to winter village (some wiped out, others hardly affected) and it is rarely possible to be confident about precise de-

¹⁹ Boyd and I do not disagree, however, about the early presence of, and destruction wrought by, smallpox on the South Coast and throughout the Southern Plateau.

²⁰ James R. Gibson, "Smallpox on the Northwest Coast, 1835-1838," *BC Studies* 56 (winter 1982-83): 61-80.

²¹ Robert T. Galois, "Measles, 1847-1850: The First Modern Epidemic in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 109 (spring 1996): 31-43; also Robert Boyd, "The Pacific Northwest Measles Epidemic of 1847-1848," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 95 (1994): 6-47.

population ratios for particular places, there is now very little doubt that the overall effect of introduced diseases was devastating. People had no acquired immunities, no inherited selection against these alien diseases; it has also been argued that their relatively similar DNA structures, compared to the variety in European populations, facilitated the spread of these infectious diseases.²² Malaria may have been the most lethal of the major epidemic introductions; Boyd estimates that population decline in the malarial areas of the Northwest Coast in the 1830s was 85 per cent, in some areas well over 90 per cent²³ — this on top of an earlier decimation due to smallpox. Although a major killer, mortality rates from measles were much lower. Galois and Boyd suggest that a mortality rate of 10 per cent can be attributed directly to the measles epidemic in 1848, although Galois thinks that if the “aftershock” of influenza is included, measles may have been as deadly as smallpox.²⁴ The smallpox epidemics were certainly horrific. There are many references in Native accounts to smallpox killing everyone in a village. The close proximity of people in a coastal long house or interior pit house, coupled with a complete lack of understanding of the etiology of the disease (the attempted cure, often, was to dance and chant close to the victim in order to frighten off evil spirits) created ideal conditions for contamination once a disease spread by droplet infection (usually sneezing) entered a village. The epidemic of 1780-82 was undoubtedly variola major, the most lethal form of the disease. David Thompson estimated that it killed one-half to three-fifths of the people on the northern Plains.²⁵ Old Pierre, a Katzie living in the Lower Fraser Valley in the 1930s (when the ethnographer Diamond Jenness recorded a story about Old Pierre’s great grandparents’ escape from the disease), estimated that three-quarters of the people along the lower Fraser died during this epidemic.²⁶ It is becoming clear that such an estimate is not obviously preposterous. Even in areas where there do not seem to have been major epidemics before 1848 — as along most of the west coast of Vancouver Island or in Kwakwaka’wakw territory — there is evidence of sharp population decline (almost certainly, according to Galois with reference to the Kwakwaka’wakw, by the 1820s, and perhaps a

²² Francis L. Black, “Why Did They Die,” *Science* (11 December 1992): 1, 739-40.

²³ Boyd, “Demographic History,” 139-40.

²⁴ Galois, “Measles,” 43.

²⁵ Richard Glover, ed., *Thompson’s Narrative, 1774-1812* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1962), 235-36.

²⁶ Harris, *Resettlement*, 8.

good deal earlier).²⁷ There are isolated archival references to unidentified diseases. The Bostonian Robert Kemp, on the brig *Otter* just north of the Queen Charlotte Islands in December 1810, reported that “the Natives are all infected with the Land Scurvy which Renders them Completely Incapable of Hunting[.] this Coast is as Silent and Solitary as the House of death and I wish that I was Clear from it.”²⁸

Although the timing and effects of introduced diseases varied greatly from place to place, the following generalizations probably hold: The peoples inhabiting the territory that became British Columbia were not spared the demographic devastation that accompanied Europeans elsewhere in the hemisphere. If, as is now widely held, the characteristic rate of hemispheric depopulation during the contact century was in the order of 90 per cent,²⁹ then there is no reason to assume that the figure was substantially different in British Columbia. In most areas, massive depopulation had occurred by 1850.

Spatial Strategies of Commercial Capital

Commercial capital reached the Coast in 1785, when the British trader James Hanna arrived at Nootka Sound to trade for sea-otter pelts. The maritime fur trade expanded rapidly thereafter, and its most vigorous years were probably already behind when North West Company traders from Montreal, coming via the Peace River in 1805, built the first fur posts in the northern Cordillera. A few years later an American company, the Pacific Fur Company of John Jacob Astor, established itself on the lower Columbia, a position it lost in 1813 to the Montreal-based North West Company which, in turn, was absorbed in 1821 into an enlarged Hudson's Bay Company. After 1821 the HBC monopolized the Interior fur trade, and by the 1840s it also monopolized the Coastal trade, by then almost entirely in land furs.³⁰

The maritime and land fur trades shared the essential problems faced by commercial capital operating in unfamiliar territory. Gain

²⁷ Galois, *Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements*, 34-47.

²⁸ Robert Kemp, “Journal of the Brig *Otter*,” Peabody Essex Museum, 11 December 1810; cited in Mary Malloy, “Boston Men’ on the Northwest Coast: Commerce, Collecting, and Cultural Perceptions in the American Maritime Fur Trade, 1788-1844” (PhD thesis, Department of American Studies, Brown University, 1994), 92.

²⁹ For a cautious assessment of recent estimates, see William Denevan, “Native American Populations in 1492: Recent Research and Revised Hemispheric Estimate,” in Denevan, ed., *The Native Populations of the Americas in 1492*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

³⁰ Richard S. Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), ch. 6 and 312-14.

was their objective and to achieve it they sought to create, as did commercial capital everywhere, ordered and managed trading environments in which irregularity and uncertainty were diminished and trade was regularized as much as possible. Such order was difficult to achieve, however, where capital operated beyond the state's machinery of law and order in unfamiliar territory and among unfamiliar peoples, languages, and cultures. In these circumstances fur traders had to devise a means of protecting themselves and their property while engaging strange peoples — in their eyes untrustworthy and potentially hostile savages — in trade. Success in both the maritime and land trades depended on these procedures of protection and engagement. On the other hand, traders were not interested in changing Native cultures. Nor did they want Native land; beyond their palisaded forts and few farms, they did not claim Native space.³¹ They were not colonizers.

However similar their basic objectives, maritime and land fur traders were very differently prepared. Behind the land fur trade that reached into the northern Cordillera were some 150 years of fur-trading experience in the continental interior, out of which had come a host of accepted strategies for the protection of traders and the conduct of trade — a set of material practices, assumptions, and values that may be considered the largely taken-for-granted discourse of the fur trade.³² Lads who aspired to be officers entered the trade as clerks in Montreal or at one of the posts on Hudson Bay, learned its ways, and eventually, if they showed promise, worked their way up the company hierarchy to take charge of a post or a district. Along the way they usually learned a Native language, acquired a country (Native) wife, and were absorbed to a considerable extent into the fur trade's polyglot, multi-racial society. They knew the trade, and when they opened posts in new areas they introduced the lore and procedures of a trading company already well adapted to its circumstances. Many of these ways fit the considerably different circumstances of the Cordillera. In contrast, maritime fur traders, sailing from Boston, London, or India and perhaps trading here and there en route, had much less established procedures to fall back on and were much less imbricated in their trading territories. Very few of them made more

³¹ John McLaughlin at Fort Vancouver apparently assured local chiefs that the HBC needed only a few small sites and that all other land would continue to belong to them. Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains*, 309-10.

³² On the economic characteristics of this discourse, see Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains*, 40-43; on the strategies for Native management, see Harris, *Resettlement*, ch. 2.

than two voyages to the Northwest Coast.³³ They had no home experience with indigenous New World peoples.³⁴ They probably had read the accounts and studied the maps of some of their predecessors, and they acquired a certain amount of experience (of more or less relevance to conditions along the Northwest Coast) around the Pacific. Eventually, after a debilitating voyage that took the better part of a year, they reached a mountainous, forbidding coast densely inhabited by people they could not know and suspected of every treachery. There, with commercial intelligence that was at least two years old, they entered an intensely competitive, rapidly changing trade the eventualities of which were impossible to anticipate. The traders' misconceptions, deceptions, and fears are revealed in their journals.³⁵

In the land-based trade, protection was provided by the fur fort, which was almost always palisaded; well armed with cannon, blunderbusses, and muskets; and carefully guarded. Inside the palisade the layout was somewhat military, with a central space (parade square, mustering ground), a big house for the trader in charge, and a powder magazine, if possible on higher ground at the back. Men were managed with military-like discipline, and the hierarchy of the fur trade was constantly expressed in living quarters, dress, food, and (in the case of officers and clerks) position at table. Linking the forts were fur or, for faster communication, express brigades, which used canoes or bateaux on navigable waters and packhorse trains overland. The brigades were always well armed, and, with any indication of Native threat, they moved in close formation, portaged under cover of arms, and camped in tight squares with sentries posted. Brigade routes were the lifelines of trade. Along these corridors of European transportation in Native territory moved furs and other trade goods, accounts, letters, gossip, and personnel. Essentially, this introduced system of nodes and circuits comprised a minimal but sufficient human geography for the land-based fur trade, providing regular sites of trade, secure havens for traders, and connections between forts and with the outside world.³⁶

³³ Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 185; F.W. Howay, "An Outline Sketch of the Maritime Fur Trade," *Canadian Historical Association Report* (1932): 5-14, at p. 9. Howay said that "very few ships" made more than three voyages. "The trade was one of individual effort and constant change" in which present advantages were seized regardless of future prospects.

³⁴ Malloy, "Boston Men," 127.

³⁵ See Clayton, "Islands of Truth," chs. 5-6, for a sustained analysis of what he calls the traders' "spaces of miscomprehension."

³⁶ These matters, and those in the next two paragraphs, are treated much more fully in Harris, *Resettlement*, ch. 2.

Within this framework, traders managed their relations with Native peoples as best they could. They always assumed that any assault on company personnel or property should be met with quick, violent retaliation, preferably in public theatres of power intended to convince Natives that, if they did certain things, they would become victims. This politics of fear — “respect” or “terror” were the traders’ common words — was intended to make life safe for traders and their employees in settings where more elaborate machineries of surveillance and social management were absent. Once the lesson — administered in the form of beatings, time in irons, staged public executions, or (when no individual could be identified) bombardments of villages — was learned, Natives would monitor their own behaviour. Such power over life is what Michel Foucault called sovereign power, a sporadic, local, and highly visible seizure of property or life that, he wrote, “sought a renewal of its effect in the spectacle of its individual manifestations ... [and] was recharged by the ritual display of its reality as ‘super-power.’”³⁷ In the Cordillera, such power did not validate a discourse of legal rights and property relations, as it did in Europe. In settings beyond the reach of the state’s soldiers and laws, it was intended only to secure the traders’ presence and the safety of their trade.

Combined with a considerable repertoire of less violent methods, it generally did. Traders operated within an ongoing display of power that went well beyond their palisades and cannon, from a confident bravado to salutes fired by fort guns, welcoming fusillades, trumpet calls, drum rolls, flags, and demonstrations of superior marksmanship. They could threaten to release smallpox³⁸ or to blow everyone up with gunpowder — threats Native people had to take seriously. Their literacy seemed astonishing spirit power. It enabled them to know what had gone on afar without having been there or having talked with anyone who had, and it contributed to the initial Native sense that the traders were supernatural beings. Moreover, the traders were in the Cordillera for one explicit reason — profit — whereas the Natives lived there, their lives grounded in the environments, pasts, and intricate social relations of the places where they lived. In contrast to the system and focus of the fur trade were all the complexities and

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 57.

³⁸ As did Duncan McDougall, in charge at Fort George when news arrived that the North West Company ship *Tonquin* had been captured in Clayoquot Sound. Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831), 314–15.

tensions inherent in local lifeworlds. Traders understood this difference and exploited it to the hilt. The Native women who lived with men in the forts were conduits of information, often the means by which traders were alerted to Native stratagems against them. The traders' action against one Native group always found other Natives more than ready to settle old scores against traditional enemies by undertaking a raid or acting as spies. In such socio-political alignments the traders had a decisive conceptual advantage. They conceived of themselves as civilized Europeans and of the Natives as savages, in so doing drawing on preexisting categories formed out of the long European engagement with the larger world.³⁹ Such stereotypes enabled them to identify their enemies and to coordinate their strategies. Should rival European traders be pushed into the same tight corner, they banded together against the larger threat of savagery. Native people had no such categories to fall back on, not even, initially, a common word for themselves to oppose to "European." Significantly, it was trading pidgins — at Nootka Sound, on the Queen Charlotte Islands, and eventually on the lower Columbia (Chinook) — that coined such words. It would take time for Native people to conceptualize themselves as a generic group, develop a conception of Native, and coordinate responses to the new peoples and pressures suddenly in their midst. On top of all this was the great attraction of the goods traders offered. Kettles and blankets were, at the very least, enormous conveniences;⁴⁰ guns, powder, and shot became necessities when traditional enemies were so armed. A trader's threat to abandon a fort if the local Natives did not "behave" became, in Native eyes, a threat to their well-being, often to their survival.

Although few in number, traders had learned how to play the cards that enabled them to operate with considerable confidence across huge territories and deeply different, mutually suspicious, cultures. The extent of their recourse to violence varied directly with the competition they faced. In competitive trades, more guns and liquor were dispensed, and fear was used to secure trading partners. In areas

³⁹ The original and most influential discussion is in Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

⁴⁰ Jean and John Comaroff are probably right to suggest that such goods began to introduce the assumptions and practices of hegemonic colonial culture. See *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), especially the conclusion. For an alternative view, see Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge MS: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. ch. 3.

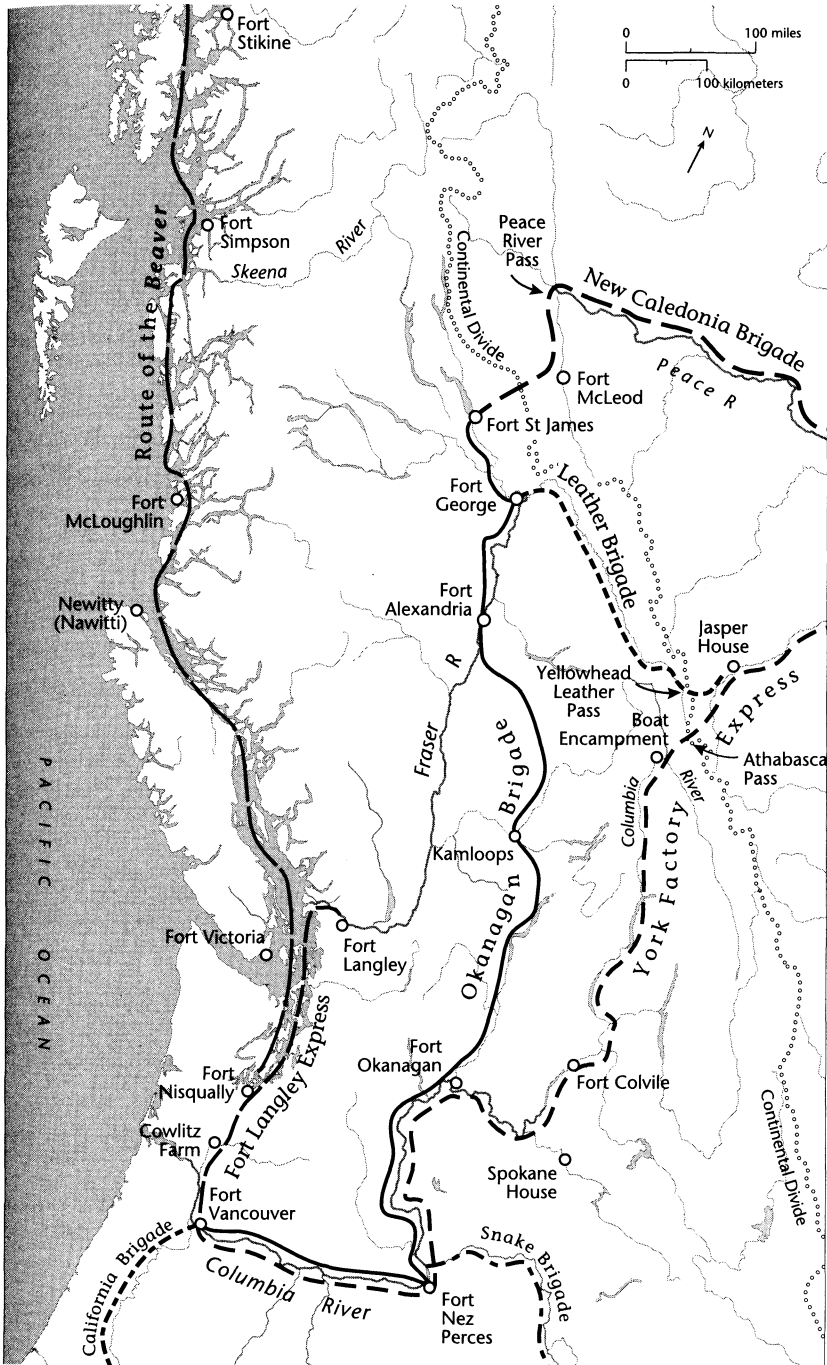
to which the trade had recently arrived and in which its position was insecure, violence was also likely to be more pronounced. Early traders along the lower Columbia, for example, fought their way through portages that local Native groups had previously controlled. But as the years went by, and especially when monopoly conditions prevailed, the trade settled down. Its point about violent retaliation made and apparently understood, it relied on other stratagems of control. For a time, especially along the old, principal corridor of trade from the lower Columbia through the Okanagan to what is now north-central British Columbia (Map 3), the trade began to approximate the ordered, managed business that the company sought. Fort life settled into its daily and seasonal routines; brigade departures and arrivals were the main events of the year. The men at the forts spoke Chinook and usually something of a Native language. Most of them lived with Native women. Many of the personnel involved in the trade were of mixed ancestry. There had been less time than in the boreal forests of the Canadian Shield but, as had happened there long since,⁴¹ the fur trade was becoming part of the fabric of regional life in what, on the ground if not in European geopolitical calculations, was still Native land.⁴²

By contrast, the maritime fur trade had little of this fixity and stability. It was always highly mobile. Plans to establish shore “factories” never materialized, and the ship, rather than the fort, remained the locus of trade. Even if traders overwintered on the Coast, as some of them did, they usually quartered themselves aboard ship. The ships were the forts of the maritime fur trade, the place on a forbidding coast where traders felt relatively secure. Ashore they were exposed to surprise attack; on ship they were protected by a considerable armament in a space they knew. Captains deployed boarding nets, kept cannon aimed, allowed Natives on deck in ones and twos, and traded while crew stood by with muskets and blunderbusses at the ready. A ship aground, in the traders’ eyes, was as exposed to Native attack as was a burned fort.⁴³ In the early days, ships travelled, if possible, in pairs, the one a highly armed protector of

⁴¹ For a fine description of the society and economy of northern Manitoba as reorganized by the fur trade, see Frank Tough, *“As Their Natural Resources Fail”: Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870–1930* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), ch. 1. Throughout eastern Canada, this reshaped world became “traditional” Native society, and such, for all the early ethnographers’ enthusiasm to the contrary, may widely have been the case in British Columbia.

⁴² For most of this paragraph, see Harris, *Resettlement*, ch. 2, esp. 63–65.

⁴³ Clayton, “Islands of Truth,” 210.



Map 3: Forts and major transportation routes, Columbia Department, 1843 (after Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains*, 97).

the other.⁴⁴ The spatial strategies of trade varied a good deal; some captains cruised the Coast, putting in here and there, hoping to skim off the best furs. Others made for a known harbour and put in to trade, assuming that word of their presence, trade goods, and prices would draw Native traders. Whatever their strategy, the trade was driven by the local extermination of sea otter and the spatial momentum of capital to seek out new supplies. The trade that began in Nootka Sound in 1785 was over there by 1795; the Spanish had left and local sea otter were hunted out. Such was the recurrent pattern; in 1800 American vessels traded some 18,000 sea-otter pelts on the Northwest Coast, in 1828 fewer than 500.

While it lasted, the sea-otter trade was intensely competitive. By 1800 it had become, essentially, an American trade based in Boston, many British traders being, by then, drawn into the Napoleonic Wars and always constrained by the monopoly of the East India Company from selling Chinese goods in Britain. In 1807 one Boston firm, J. and T.H. Perkins, claimed to have gained control of the Northwest Coast trade. It had not, however, and traders continued to compete with each other for increasingly scarce furs. As many have shown, fur prices rose dramatically. At Nootka in the late 1780s a sea-otter pelt was worth about a seventh of a musket; five years later it was worth a little more than one. On the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1802, the exchange value of one pelt was three muskets or five blankets; in 1825 it was seven blankets, one musket, and an axe; and in 1828 it was ten blankets, two gallons of mixed rum, and two gallons of molasses. Prices, however, were strikingly uneven. They varied from place to place along the Coast, and traders often found to their dismay that goods that had been in sharp demand two years before had suddenly become virtually worthless, their value undermined in a volatile and easily saturated market. Iron and copper, initially in high demand, were worth next to nothing in many areas by the mid-1790s. Adjacent groups often had very different demands; within the same group demand and exchange rates could fluctuate virtually day by day — much as, traders often thought, did Native character. They participated in a trade that did not quite make sense.⁴⁵ Make sense or not, it had the capacity to inject an enormous quantity of new

⁴⁴ James R. Gibson, *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785-1841* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 204, 207. The other factual information in this paragraph and the next is also drawn from Gibson, *Otter Skins*, 179, 182, 184-85, and 219.

⁴⁵ Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 276-77.

goods into the economy of the Northwest Coast, principally iron goods of various sorts, copper, firearms, cloth, blankets, liquor, and foodstuffs. Assuming, for example, the above Queen Charlotte Islands prices for 1802, the American trade that year (estimated at 15,000 skins) brought the equivalent of 45,000 muskets or 75,000 blankets to the Northwest Coast.⁴⁶ Such trade, however, was fleeting, concentrated now here, now there, and nowhere for very long.

Like the land-based fur traders, the maritime traders operated beyond the law and observation of their home societies. Captains might be instructed by their backers to be fair with Natives, but their conduct towards them, known largely through the traders' own and usually unpublished accounts, was unobserved and unreprimanded. American traders on the Coast had no official backing, no territorial ambition.⁴⁷ Some of the early British traders, like Meares, became enmeshed in the geopolitical argument with Spain; it settled, they came only as traders. Except in moments of geopolitical stress, as during the War of 1812 or the Oregon Crisis in the 1840s, British warships were not on the Coast.⁴⁸ Throughout the maritime fur trade, the traders and the Coast were, essentially, alone with each other.

Judge F.W. Howay, the first major historian of the maritime fur trade, considered it predatory, destructive, and violent. For him it was "at best an unequal trade with primitive people,"⁴⁹ a "looting of the coast."⁵⁰ All of his views have been questioned, but the three most recent studies — by James Gibson, Daniel Clayton, and Mary Malloy — agree that endemic violence characterized the trade. Violence began, apparently, in August 1785, when James Hanna arrived in Nootka Sound. Trade commenced immediately, then, apparently, Hanna fired on some Natives "for a petty theft," the Natives regrouped and attacked, and Hanna responded with muskets and cannon, killing many people. A few hours later, trade resumed. The mixture of misunderstanding, violence, and greed that would exemplify the maritime fur trade was under way.⁵¹ Both sides were

⁴⁶ I use these figures, which I take from Gibson, *Otter Skins*, 179, to give a rough estimate of the volume of new wealth introduced to the Coast by the maritime fur trade.

⁴⁷ Malloy, "Boston Men," 18.

⁴⁸ There were no Royal Navy ships on the Northwest Coast between July 1818, when the sloop *Blossom* reached the Columbia, and July 1839, when two survey ships arrived there. Gough, *Royal Navy*, ch. 2.

⁴⁹ "Anglo-American Competition in the Maritime Fur Trade," in H. F. Angus, ed., *British Columbia and the United States* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1942), 1-13, at 12-13.

⁵⁰ F. W. Howay, "An Outline Sketch of the Maritime Fur Trade," *Canadian Historical Association Report* (1932), 5-14, at 14.

⁵¹ Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 200-06, 239-40.

violent. Natives killed individuals, attacked ships, and, by relying on surprise rather than frontal attack, succeeded in taking some vessels that were poorly equipped or carelessly defended. Traders always considered themselves vulnerable as soon as their guard was down. They were not above capturing Natives, flogging them, clapping them in irons, or holding them for a ransom to be paid in sea-otter pelts. They turned cannon, loaded with grapeshot, on flotillas of Native canoes. They bombarded and burned Native villages, including, in March 1792, the 200 houses at Opitsat in Clayoquot Sound (on Vancouver Island south of Nootka), perhaps the largest village on the Coast. The local chief, Wickaninish, had tried to entice a Hawaiian deserter to wet the ship's powder — a measure of his understanding of the technology and power imbalance that confronted him.⁵² Gibson stresses the superiority of the traders' firepower. Natives, he concludes, could not take a well-armed and defended ship. Most encounters between ships and Natives ended in standoffs, with most of the casualties on the Native side.⁵³ In 1792 Edward Bell, a clerk on the Vancouver expedition, wrote that "few Ships have been on the Coast, that have not been attacked or attempted to be attacked, and in general many lives have been lost on both sides."⁵⁴ Some years later William Sturgis, probably the most experienced American trader on the Coast, wrote that "injustice, violence, and bloodshed" always characterized the trade. Natives, he thought, were "victims of injustice, cruelty, and oppression, and of a policy that seemed to recognize power as the sole standard of right."⁵⁵ Contemporary scholarship accords more place to Native agency but otherwise returns to this position.

Why this violence when it would seem in the traders' interest to cultivate friendly relations with their trading partners? A voyage, of course, consisted of a large investment played out over several years. Against the allure of spectacular profits (several times the investment)⁵⁶ was the risk of not getting a cargo because, perhaps, the trade goods one brought were no longer in demand. A volatile Northwest Coast trade, changing rapidly in space and time, intersected the

⁵² Gibson, *Otter Skins*, 163; Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 338-44.

⁵³ Gibson, *Otter Skins*, 170.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵⁵ Cited in Malloy, "Boston Men," 39. Sturgis was a seaman at sixteen, a first mate at seventeen, and a master at twenty (in 1801). He was on the Northwest Coast four times between 1799 and 1808, learned something of several Native languages, and apparently had the respect of Coastal chiefs. Gibson, *Otter Skins*, 293.

⁵⁶ Gibson, *Otter Skins*, 176-7.

cumbersome logistics of long-distance travel.⁵⁷ Chiefs approximately understood this and often would not trade until the end of a season, assuming that traders, by then desperate for pelts, would give more for them. Most of the traders themselves would never be back on the Northwest Coast and would not have to deal with the consequences of their actions.⁵⁸ In these circumstances, a political economy of violence on the Northwest Coast begins to make sense. If trade could not squeeze pelts out of Coastal peoples, violence might. A captured chief brought a ransom. Floggings or killings reminded people of what might happen if trade did not ensue. A bombardment that drove people from a village gave traders its contents. Such violence seems less a calculated politics of fear geared to securing social control than, crudely, a means of appropriating property. Captains brought some experience with such tactics from other trading locations around the Pacific.

But this hardly seems the end of the matter. Malloy and Clayton suggest, in effect, that the maritime fur trade operated within what could be called a culture of terror. Malloy notes that common sailors were often considered misfits and outcasts ashore, the dregs of their societies, and that shipboard society was itself violent.⁵⁹ Men lived in cramped spaces on long, perilous voyages; within rigid hierarchies of power; and with constant, disciplined work. Plotted mutinies, floggings, and beatings were part of shipboard life. The Coast presented its own dangers: the risk of grounding, the fear of Natives who were always assumed to be treacherous. Nor, Clayton points out, was there an "Archimedian point from which to survey and essentialize the trade; just an ensemble of sites and situations within the trade itself from which statements about the particular and the general, about place and space, could be articulated." Traders were caught in "spaces of miscomprehension," the Native places they could not understand, the commercial space they tried to improvise for themselves, the whole "economy of truth of the maritime fur trade [acquiring] a hallucinatory quality."⁶⁰ It begins to look, he suggests, like the jungles along the Putumayo, a tributary of the Amazon, during the rubber boom, where, the anthropologist Michael Taussig has argued, traders and Natives interacted in violent incomprehension, terror

⁵⁷ Malloy, "Boston Men," ch. 2.

⁵⁸ McLoughlin made approximately this point in 1843 when he called the American Coastal traders "mere Adventurers without capital." Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains*, 150; Gibson, *Otter Skins*, 82.

⁵⁹ Malloy, "Boston Men," esp. 36-37, and ch. 3.

⁶⁰ Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 225, 223, and 197.

acquired a life of its own, and torture and killing ceased to be rational acts.⁶¹ Northwest Coast violence never matched what occurred along the Putumayo, but violence and terror do seem to have acquired their own momentum there. A shipload of tough, isolated men, accustomed to violence, dropped on an unsuspecting Native village. A frightened captain firing on approaching canoes, their intention unknown. Native revenge meted out on the next Whites to come along. More evidence of bloodthirsty savages. More killings in response. Terror and violence, intertwined and ongoing.

NATIVE RESPONSES

To Mapping and External Geopolitical Calculations

The geopolitical games outsiders played with the Northwest Coast largely took place elsewhere and, in the years in question, had a negligible impact on the peoples of the region. They affected the nationality of the traders who came there, no more. For the most part, Natives neither knew about nor were influenced by distant claims to their territories until, which would eventually happen, claims became on-the-ground acts of occupation. European cartography and place-naming served distant geopolitical imaginations and coastal traders' navigations but did not yet impinge directly on Native people. They still knew their own places in their own terms and by their own names. Exogenous mapping and naming, themselves, had no power to change this.⁶²

To Disease

Native people were, however, enormously affected by introduced diseases. Accounts are numerous of villages where virtually everyone died, where dazed survivors collapsed roofs of burned lodges to dispose of the dead. These fragments, for example, filtered through the ethnographers who recorded them, are about the smallpox

⁶¹ Ibid., 220. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁶² Much has been written about cartography and place-naming as forms of colonial power without it always being recognized how situated they were in other colonial processes. Both contributed significantly to a complex of colonial powers centred on the state. Remove the state, and maps and place-names lose most of their authority. When the Spanish state withdrew from the Northwest Coast, Spanish cartography and most Spanish names were withdrawn as well.

epidemic of 1782 near what is now Vancouver.⁶³ An old Squamish man telling (in 1896) that “A dreadful skin disease, loathsome to look upon, broke out upon all alike. None were spared. Men, women and children sickened, took the disease and died in agony by hundreds, so that when the spring arrived and fresh food was procurable, there was scarcely a person left of all their number to get it. Camp after camp, village after village, was left desolate.” An old Katzie man telling (in 1936) of his great grandparents who returned to their village after a year in the mountains to find that “All his kinsmen and relatives lay dead inside their homes; only in one house did there survive a baby boy, who was vainly sucking at its dead mother’s breast. They rescued the child, burned all the houses, together with the corpses that lay inside them, and built a new home for themselves several miles away.” Old Kwantlen people telling (mid 1890s) of a monster who breathed on the people. “Where his breath touched them sores broke out and they burned with the heat, and they died to feed this monster. And so the village was deserted, and never again would the Indians live on that spot.” Stó:lō people telling of a village where everyone died save one boy who settled down with a girl who was the only survivor of a village nearby, or of another village called “a lot of people died at once” where twenty-five to thirty people died each day. Similar accounts, through a missionary, from the Stikine in the northwestern corner of British Columbia tell of smallpox in the 1830s and measles (incorrectly identified as smallpox) a decade later: “[The] stories of these two waves of smallpox are well summed up by the Indians as they recounted stories everybody died, just like the rabbit sickness, only somebody left here & there with no friends or relatives. we often saw somebodys bones childrens bones too on the mountains & in the forests & and not know who they were.”⁶⁴

Depopulation created holes in the settlement pattern. Peoples previously excluded from favoured sites often could now move there. Along the lower Fraser River, groups from the tributaries suddenly had access to, and built villages on, the main river.⁶⁵ It also mixed people up, as John Dunn, a fur trader, noted in the 1840s. Smallpox, he said, had swept westward across the Rocky Mountains. “Numbers of tribes were totally swept away; or reduced to a few scattered and powerless individuals. The remnants of many others united; and

⁶³ These Coast Salish stories are told more fully in Harris, *Resettlement*, ch. 1, esp. 6-9.

⁶⁴ Cited in Galois, “Measles,” 40-41.

⁶⁵ Harris, *Resettlement*, 23.

formed a new and heterogeneous union.”⁶⁶ The historian Richard White describes the same process in his intricate account of the refugee populations west of Lake Michigan in the 1650s.⁶⁷ The extent to which this reshuffling went on west of the Rockies is not known — at different scales and rates, presumably, in different areas. One would also expect a shift from more to less intensive land uses. At sites in the Stikine Canyon, for example, there were no longer enough people by 1850 to build and maintain the elaborate constructions of traps, ladders, and scaffolding required for the salmon fishery.⁶⁸

Depopulation also opened up social hierarchies. In status-conscious societies (particularly those along the Coast), with a limited number of status positions and intensive competition to acquire or augment them, it increased competitive opportunities. In a culturally homogeneous but reduced population, there were suddenly defined openings to fill; in a more heterogeneous assemblage of peoples, new status hierarchies were to be worked out. In a study of Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka'wakw) potlatching, Helen Codere explored some of these relationships with considerable analytical power some fifty years ago. By her calculations there were 658 potlatch positions in a large “traditional” population.⁶⁹ As the population dropped, potlatching became more frequent and, with new goods available, more extravagant. She located this process principally in the late nineteenth century, when she thought most depopulation occurred. But if, as now seems certain, much of the Coast was considerably depopulated during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then it began earlier. Presumably it took many forms.

Epidemics threatened knowledge as well as bodies, particularly the stories that situated people in the world. Sudden high mortality rates reduced the store of knowledge and, if the storytellers died, detached survivors from their pasts. T.P.W. Thorman, a missionary on the Stikine, noted that smallpox had killed almost all the Tahltan storytellers and that the Daksh Khit (the storytellers’ guild) had been discontinued; as a result, Tahltan history was largely lost. “Each tribe had its authentic Story teller who instructed in the true method of narrating stories with a strict adherence to a word for word repetition

⁶⁶ Cited in *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁷ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), ch. 1.

⁶⁸ Galois, “Measles,” 41.

⁶⁹ Codere, *Fighting with Property*. Her population figures — 17,000-23,000 — are based on an estimate by Kroeber and on the HBC censuses of 1836-41. For a much fuller analysis of these censuses see Galois, *Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements*, 382-98.

as taught to her pupils so that it might pass unaltered from generation to generation.”⁷⁰ The decoupling of people and past must have been common. In extreme cases (as after malaria along the lower Columbia in the 1830s), fragmented memories of various pasts converged in new societies. What this loss of knowledge, coupled with the failure of the shamans and the dismemberment of communities, meant to a people’s cultural confidence can only be imagined. It is in this context that we begin to understand Martin Sampson, a Swinomish chief writing in the early 1970s about his people in Puget Sound. Whites, he said, “never saw the Indians at their full numbers and the peak of their culture. What they found was the broken remnant of a once-powerful people, reduced to this state by disease.”⁷¹ This was after smallpox in 1782, malaria in the early 1830s, and smallpox again in the early 1850s; north of Puget Sound and the anopheles mosquito, the demographic catastrophe, severe as it was in places, seems to have been less devastating.

To Commercial Capital

The fur trade was the main theatre of cultural interaction in these years. Native people participated eagerly in it; outsiders brought goods they wanted, and they set out to get them on the best possible terms. When buyers competed for their furs, Natives faced tumultuous conditions but often were able to obtain goods at close to their European value. When they dealt with monopoly buyers, fur prices were usually lower and the conditions of trade were more stable. However conducted, trade introduced a range of coveted new goods to Native societies. Noting this, the many scholars who have broadly subscribed to the cultural enrichment hypothesis have tended to make, or to assume, the following claims:⁷² New tools and guns increased Native productive efficiency, allowing them a larger return from their labour. Labour became more specialized and, now connected to an international market, allowed Natives to participate in the presumed efficiencies of an international division of labour. A system of production for direct consumption was moving towards more specialized production for exchange, and the result was the generation of a great deal of new wealth. Wealth, it is held, brought general

⁷⁰ Cited in Galois, “Measles,” 41.

⁷¹ Martin Sampson, *Indians of Skagit County*, Skagit County Historical Series, 2 (Mount Vernon, WA: Skagit County Historical Society, 1972), 1.

⁷² The arguments were well summarized by Joyce Wike forty years ago: “Problems in Fur Trade Analysis: The Northwest Coast,” *American Anthropologist* 60 (1958): 1,086–101.

prosperity and, to the extent that trade was funnelled through the chiefs, enhanced their status. Regional inequalities in wealth probably increased, and this, coupled with the introduction of firearms, probably made warfare more deadly (a disputed claim).⁷³ New wealth also increased conspicuous consumption, encouraging more elaborate ceremonies and the production of art. Potlatches became grander, more and larger poles were carved, and the curio trade in argillite carvings began. Such has been considered to be the direction of change along the Coast. This analysis hardly extended to Interior societies, which tended to interest ethnographers and anthropologists less and where the contact process was assumed to have been less spectacular, involving beaver (rather than sea otter), monopoly (rather than competition), and more local and less artistically sophisticated societies.

The only way to test such ideas is to undertake detailed, local studies of Native responses to new trading opportunities. Such studies are beginning to appear and, as they do, intricate local genealogies, geopolitics, and patterns of settlement emerge. A few Natives stand out as individuals. In the following section I summarize the results of such investigations in three local areas, and then resume my general discussion — to which some readers may wish to proceed directly.

Along the Skeena, as Susan Marsden and Robert Galois have shown,⁷⁴ the fur trade destabilized prior balances of power and led to a complex jockeying for power, which was solidified by marriage alliances and sometimes through warfare, as groups sought to influence rapidly changing circumstances to their advantage. The situation, oversimplified, was this. At contact the House of Ligeex, the dominant house of the Tsimshian village of Gispaxlo'ots, controlled Tsimshian trade with the upper Skeena and the Gitksan who lived there. It also controlled outside access to the spring oolichan fishery on the Nass. These privileges made the Gispaxlo'ots the wealthiest Tsimshian village and Ligeex, chief of the House of Ligeex, the most powerful

⁷³ The strongest arguments against the claim that the maritime fur trade was inherently violent or that, as a result of it, Native-Native violence increased along the Coast has been put forward by Robin Fisher, "Arms and Man on the Northwest Coast, 1774-1825," *BC Studies* 29 (spring 1976): 3-19, a position he has recently repeated: "Contact and Trade, 1774-1849," in Hugh M. Johnston, ed., *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1996).

⁷⁴ Susan Marsden and Robert Galois, "The Tsimshian, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Geopolitics of the Northwest Coast Fur Trade, 1787-1840," *Canadian Geographer* 39 (summer 1995): 169-83.

individual Tsimshian. This eminence was challenged by the sea-otter trade, for the Gispaxlo'ots had no direct access to the sea-otter grounds or to the trading harbours. Power shifted abruptly south and west, principally to the island village of Gitkxaabla and its dominant chief Ts'ibasaa of the House of Ts'ibasaa. Ligeex responded by making two marriages with high-ranking women in Tsimshian villages that had trading prerogatives with the Masset and Kaiganee Haida, where the sea-otter trade was in full swing; but the fortunes of his house were hardly restored until, between 1805 and 1810, the decline of sea otter and a growing trade in land furs reemphasized the Skeena River. By this time, traders from Montreal had established posts to the east of the Skeena in the upper Fraser watershed, and Ligeex competed with them for the intervening trade while seeking to control coastal access to it. He married the niece of the leading Nisga chief on the upper Nass and extended his trading prerogatives to eastern Gitksan villages further up the Skeena. When Nisga-Gitksan trade began, Ligeex complained that the Nisga were "eating out of my food box on the upper Skeena,"⁷⁵ burned the Gitksan village of Kispayaks, and took some of its women and children as slaves. The eastern challenge intensified in 1822 when the HBC established Fort Kilmaurs on Babine Lake. Ligeex promptly sent thirty men, armed with muskets, to convince the Babine to bring their furs to the Skeena. In this, apparently, he largely succeeded; in 1823 the chief trader at Fort Kilmaurs estimated that "three fourths of the furs procured by the Indians of Simpson's River [the Bulkley River] were carried below and traded with the Indians of the sea coast."⁷⁶ On the Coast Ligeex married two of his sons to powerful Tongas (Tlingit) women and a daughter to a Tsimshian chief who had trading rights among the Stikine Tlingit; he also took a fourth wife himself, a leading woman in the House of Ts'ibasaa. He had more than restored the eminence of the Gispaxlo'ots and the House of Ligeex, enhancing their positions on the Coast, in the Interior, and along all the major routes between — a major geopolitical achievement.

When the HBC established a fort at the mouth of the Nass in 1831, Ligeex was able to act from a position of strength. He married one of

⁷⁵ W. Beynon and M. Barbeau, "The Gwenhoot of Alaska in Search of Bounteous Land: Raven Clan Outlaws of the North Pacific Coast," and "Wolf-Clan Invaders from the Northern Plateaux among the Tsimshians." Manuscripts, Folklore Division, Canadian Museum of Civilization. Cited in Marsden and Galois, "The Tsimshian," 173.

⁷⁶ W. Brown, "Report of the Establishment of Fort Kilmaurs, Babine Country, 1822-1823," B/11c/2 fol. 12, HBCA. Cited in Marsden and Galois, "The Tsimshian," 173.

his daughters to the fort's surgeon and chief clerk, gaining preferred access to the fort. He probably assisted the HBC when it relocated, three years later, to Fort Simpson, a coastal site just south of the Nass. The company's and Ligeex's interests were the same: to draw trade away from American ships and to focus it on Fort Simpson. Natives required Ligeex's permission to trade there, and they acquired it by giving him gifts and, perhaps, a percentage of their fur returns. Company personnel at Fort Simpson did not venture up the Skeena, and Ligeex largely managed the flow of furs to the post. Then, two years after Fort Simpson was established, smallpox struck. Ligeex was vaccinated and survived, but his chosen successor died, as did Nts'iitskwoodat, his Nisga wife (through whom much of the Nass trade had been organized), and Nishoot, a Tongas Tlingit chief whom Ligeex had apparently brought into the Fort Simpson trade. His trading network was weakened, and it was further weakened when Ligeex himself died four years later and control of his House passed to a less astute successor.

Native society around Nootka Sound was even more disrupted. The maritime fur trade began in this sound, and in its first decade (1785-95) 70 of the 107 vessels on the Northwest Coast called there. These ships, as Daniel Clayton and Yvonne Marshall have shown, dropped into particular locations controlled by particular chiefs within a dynamic political and commercial space.⁷⁷ Chiefs had immediately responded to what were seen, according to one trader, as "enormous bulk[s] of wealth."⁷⁸ At the onset of trade there were, apparently, several scales of political organization in and near Nootka Sound: independent local groups tied, usually, to the mouths of particular salmon streams, alliances of inside groups living in the inlets, alliances of outside groups living on the coastal fringe of Nootka Sound, and the Yuquot-Tahsis confederacy. The latter was a large, hierarchical political structure dominated by Maquinna, Callicum, and Glabquakinnah, each the highest ranking chief of his respective lineage. Maquinna considered himself, and probably was, the most powerful of the three. Chiefs and their families owned the local areas where sea otter were hunted and controlled trading relations with more distant groups. In Nootka Sound chiefs allowed commoners as

⁷⁷ Clayton, "Islands of Truth," chs. 7 and 8; Yvonne Marshall, "A Political History of the Nuuchah-nulth: A Case Study of the Mowachaht and Muchalalt Tribes" (PhD thesis, Department of Archaeology, Simon Fraser University, 1993).

⁷⁸ Alexander Walker, *Account of a Voyage to the North West Coast of America in 1785 and 1786*, ed. by Robin Fisher and J.M. Bumsted (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1982), 41. Cited in Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 285.

well as members of chiefly families to participate directly in trade, but chiefs had the most furs, monitored their followers' activities, and accumulated most of the wealth by employing their followers as hunters and by receiving tribute from those who sought access to European traders. The trade enhanced Maquinna's and Callicum's wealth and power within the Yuquot-Tahsis confederacy and strengthened it relative to more local alliances.

Nootka Sound itself could not satisfy the demand for furs, and almost as soon as the trade began the principal chiefs of the Yuquot-Tahsis confederacy began sweeping the west coast of Vancouver Island for sea otter. They also drew furs across the island from the Nimpkish. In 1791 the Spaniard Malaspina claimed that the Nimpkish supplied 6,000 skins a year;⁷⁹ in 1792 the officers of the Vancouver expedition found the Nimpkish well supplied with European goods, most of which, they were given to understand, came from Nootka Sound.⁸⁰ The value of sea-otter pelts declined drastically with distance along these circuits of Native trade. A pelt that traded for three coppers in Nootka Sound had been obtained from the Nimpkish for one, and by the Nimpkish for much less again. Middleman profits were large. As was the case along the Skeena, these trading networks were underpinned by marriage alliances and, in some cases, by warfare. The Yuquot-Tahsis confederacy seems to have warred with various Kwakwaka'wakw groups to protect its lucrative trade with the Nimpkish. Profitable as it could be, the whole system was unstable. In 1789 the Spanish captain Martínez shot and killed Callicum, and the Spanish fortified themselves at Yuquot. In spite of Maquinna's efforts, the Nimpkish began trading elsewhere. By 1793, if not before, Maquinna was running out of furs, and after the Spanish withdrew from Nootka in 1795 there was little reason for traders to call there. Maquinna's trading empire was crumbling, and with it his wealth and prestige — a possible reason (along with revenge for previous insults, plunders, and killings) for his 1803 attack on the *Boston*, one of the rare ships to come his way in these years. A few days after the attack, in which the ship was captured and most of its crew killed, Maquinna held a great feast and gave away, according to John Jewitt

⁷⁹ Alessandro Malaspina, "Politico-scientific voyage round the world ... from 1789-1794," Book 2, 228-29 (Carl Robinson trans., Special Collections, UBC Library); cited in Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 314-15.

⁸⁰ W. Kaye Lamb, *The Voyage of George Vancouver, 1791-1795*, Vol. 2 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1984), 625-27; C.F. Newcombe, *Menzies' journal of Vancouver's voyage April to October, 1792*, Archives of British Columbia, Memoir 4 (Victoria 1923), 88. Cited in Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 315.

(the ship's armourer, spared for his utility), 100 muskets, 100 looking-glasses, 400 yards of cloth, 20 casks of powder, and other articles⁸¹ — giving probably intended to restore a faded eminence.

To the south, in Clayoquot Sound, trade was dominated — much more than it ever was by Maquinna in Nootka Sound — by one chief, Wickaninish, and his House. Apparently Wickaninish had established his position in the area by a series of wars not long before the fur trade began. As Clayton shows, he was not a preeminent chief in a confederacy, but a patriarch who owned rich territories and monopolized trade.⁸² Commoners in Clayoquot Sound rarely offered more than fresh fish; outside groups paid tribute for the privilege of trade. Ship captains had to accommodate Wickaninish's seasonal round as well as his prices and desires. They found themselves incorporated in ceremonial displays intended to enhance his status. Those who did not satisfy him did not trade, and thwarted captains frequently turned violent, trying to seize what they could not obtain otherwise. In Clayoquot Sound, as elsewhere, misunderstanding and violence marked contact relationships. Yet Wickaninish's monopolistic strategy apparently worked. He redistributed huge quantities of provisions and trade goods at feasts and, in so doing, consolidated his prestige and the loyalty of his followers.

Wickaninish's influence extended southward into Barkley Sound, a region rich in sea otter and little visited by traders. This was not a matter of marriages and alliances, but of war, conquest, and tribute. The Clayoquot brought muskets and even, according to one story, captured cannon. War began about 1792 with the Hatc'a'atHa, a group that, apparently, had not paid proper homage to Wickaninish and may have traded without his permission. The Clayoquot-Hatc'a'atHa war dragged on; in 1803 Wickaninish told Jewitt that he had just killed 150 of his enemies from Barkley Sound. Eventually the Clayoquot prevailed, wiping out the Hatc'a'atHa. According to some traders, Wickaninish controlled the trade of the northwest side of Barkley Sound, and local groups would not trade directly with visiting ships. Probably, however, the situation was more complex than this, with many groups in and around Barkley Sound seeking to position themselves in relation to its resources and the fur trade. The intensity and violence of a succession of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-

⁸¹ John R. Jewitt, *The Adventures and Sufferings of John R. Jewitt, Captive among the Nootka, 1803-1805* (from the Edinburgh 1824 edition), Derek G. Smith, ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 39; cited in Clayton, "Islands of Truth," 286-87.

⁸² Clayton, "Islands of Truth," ch. 9.

*century wars in Barkley Sound was apparently enhanced by firearms, and the motivation for these wars seems to have been tied to old animosities compounded by different degrees of access to the fur trade. There is considerable evidence for late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century depopulation; and in this case warfare, rather than disease, was probably the principal cause.*⁸³

Each of these regional analyses describes a new source of wealth dropped accidentally (from the perspective of the receiving populations) into particular locations and abruptly destabilizing prior configurations of coastal life. Native economies and polities responded immediately to these introductions, as individuals and groups sought to reposition themselves to take advantage of new opportunities and to secure the best prices for the goods offered. In the process, the economic and political geographies of coastal life were substantially reworked. Where these changes were superimposed on imbalances caused by recent depopulation, the effects were particularly drastic. The Lekwiltok, a southern Kwakwaka'wakw people from northeastern Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland, abutted Coast Salish populations that had been devastated by smallpox in 1782. This, plus the Lekwiltok's access to firearms through the maritime fur trade, gave them a decisive military advantage that led to the considerable southward expansion of Lekwiltok settlement and to Lekwiltok slaving raids south into Puget Sound and throughout the Lower Fraser Valley.⁸⁴ Here, as elsewhere, prior arrangements were changing rapidly, and in the process, as Robert Galois has pointed out, there were obvious winners and losers.⁸⁵ Those who happened to be located near the places where the traders arrived did well, at least initially. Larger geopolitical alignments fared better than did small ones. Some chiefs who were particularly shrewd and well-positioned amassed great wealth and prestige, and they redistributed unprecedented quantities of goods at feasts. Others lost status. Some groups were absorbed into new geopolitical alignments or wiped out in wars. Responses were exceedingly uneven. But it seems clear that the fur trade did introduce and concentrate new wealth; emphasize the power of some chiefs, houses, and tribes; and provoke some thoroughly bloody wars and slaving raids in which the uneven possession of firearms conferred

⁸³ Richard I. Inglis and James C. Haggarty, "Pacific Rim National Park: Ethnographic History," unpublished report, Parks Canada, 1986, 87-93.

⁸⁴ Galois, *Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements*, 223-76.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

advantage.⁸⁶ Whether or not it raised living standards because of the efficiencies of new tools and the specializations of labour and an international market is much less clear: the same conditions can produce debt peonage, as analysis of the fur trade in the continental interior has shown.⁸⁷ Over the whole trade hung the uncertainties of capital moving quickly through the spaces of the Northwest Coast, exhausting the resource that drew it in the first place and responding to an outside calculus of profit and loss.

The cultural effects of the fur trade are more difficult to discern. Clearly, the increased concentration of wealth had tangible effects. The feasts given by the most important chiefs became much larger, though there is no evidence for the suggestion, made years ago, that the inter-village feast ("potlatch" in Chinook jargon) may have been invented at this time.⁸⁸ Many thousands of blankets, increasingly the standard gift good, might be given away at a single imposing feast — just as, in the New Guinea Highlands, pig feasts became more extravagant after contact than anyone could remember.⁸⁹ The long-held view that totemic carving increased seems to be correct. Maritime fur traders never described forests of totem poles; to judge from their accounts, even single poles were uncommon sights at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁹⁰ Iron tools may have made carving easier, and chiefs with new wealth on their hands were in a position to commission more poles. Disease, which opened up positions in social hierarchies, and the pressures of trade, which destabilized alliances and status positions, may have required new affirmations of status that were eventually reflected in a competition of poles in front of villages. And argillite carving began, the first argillite pipes from the Northwest Coast appearing in New England museums about 1820.⁹¹ Such carvings were new products for the souvenir trade, the result of a largely Haida attempt to find a marketable commodity when the

⁸⁶ On the relationship between the fur trade and slaving, see Leland Donald, "The Slave Trade on the Northwest Coast of North America," *Research in Economic Anthropology* 6 (1984): 121-58; and Donald H. Mitchell, "Predatory Warfare, Social Status and the North Pacific Slave Trade," *Ethnology* 23 (1984): 39-48. Slaves appear to have become an increasingly valuable trade good that Coastal Native traders frequently exchanged for furs from the Interior. The range of slave raiding probably increased; according to Mitchell, predatory warfare became a business venture. Slaves may also have been sought to restore populations decimated by disease.

⁸⁷ For example, Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*.

⁸⁸ Homer Barnett, *The Coast Salish of British Columbia* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1955), 254-56. Also, "The Nature of the Potlatch," *American Anthropologist* 40 (1938): 349-58.

⁸⁹ Lisette Josephides, *The Production of Inequality: Gender and Exchange among the Kewa* (London: Tavistock, 1985).

⁹⁰ Malloy, "Boston Men," 142, 158.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

sea otter were almost exterminated and, on the Queen Charlotte Islands, the trade in land furs was inconsequential.

Some of the outside goods that entered Native lifeworlds apparently soon became necessities. The differential introduction of firearms disrupted prior balances of power and created sustained demands for guns, powder, and shot. Traders with such goods brought lifelines to people who had already felt their effects. For such groups, the maintenance of trade often became, as they saw it, a matter of survival. Such, for example, was the response to traders of eastern Cordilleran groups who were reeling from attacks by the Blackfoot and other peoples of the western Plains — peoples who had been armed before them by a westward-advancing fur trade. Similarly, the Salish peoples around the Strait of Georgia and along the lower Fraser River lived in terror of the Lekwiltok, armed before the beginning of the nineteenth century with muskets obtained through the maritime fur trade. The establishment of Fort Langley in 1827 on the lower Fraser began to redress this imbalance. Some chiefs also claimed that they could not get along without tobacco. Domestic life was suddenly different with kettles, trade blankets, and iron knives.⁹² Attire changed, not only with the introduction of cloth and blankets, but also, increasingly, with adoptions of European styles. In one view, such introductions may be seen as harbingers of a colonizing culture, in that they acquainted people with some of its everyday forms and, more indirectly, with some of its underlying assumptions.⁹³ To some extent, these media probably contained such messages, but Nicholas Thomas and Marshall Sahlins are convincing that the meaning of goods is never fixed, always somewhat contextual.⁹⁴ In cultural contact situations, as on the Northwest Coast, people responded to introductions according to their own categories, logics, and understandings. They could hardly do otherwise, and in the process goods acquired meanings they never had before. It is probably less accurate to think (as did the salvage ethnographers) of Native cultures in the process of transition into something else, than as moving cultures responding to unfamiliar but generally welcome introductions within their own systems of signification. A trade gun invested with spirit powers, incorporated into Native ceremonials, combined with local

⁹² Harris, *Resettlement*, 61.

⁹³ A case argued, gently, by Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, esp. ch. 8.

⁹⁴ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1991), esp. ch. 3; Marshall Sahlins, "Goodbye to *Tristes Tropes*: Ethnography in the Context of Modern World History," *Journal of Modern History*, 65 (March 1993): 1-25.

environmental knowledge, and put to use in local wars had been recontextualized. So had a trade blanket ornamented with trade buttons, inscribed with its wearer's crest, and used in place of a cedar-bark blanket at a winter ceremonial dance.

In 1850 Native people still lived in what, from their point of view, was their own land. There were only four fur posts along the whole coast of what is now British Columbia, pinpoints of European organization and control along thousands of kilometres of convoluted coastline. In the Interior there were more and generally older posts, with well-used brigade trails between them. The rhythms of the fur trade were much more established than along the Coast, monopoly conditions much older, trade less volatile, and post society somewhat more integrated with, and accepted by, surrounding Native groups. The trade had settled down. Native people could neither take a well-armed and defended post nor repulse a frontal attack on one of their villages. In various ways, as I have shown, the fur traders wielded a lot of power and may be thought of as precursors of more explicit colonial regimes. At the same time, traders, posts, and the fur trade were incorporated to a considerable extent within Native frames of reference and the meanings Native peoples gave to people and places. In a sense, they had become part of Native life. Years later, in 1910, a group of Interior Salish chiefs told Wilfred Laurier, Prime Minister of Canada, that the first Whites (the fur traders) "did not interfere with us nor attempt to break up our tribal organizations, laws, and customs ... They never tried to steal or appropriate our country, nor take our food and life from us. They acknowledged our ownership of the country, and treated our chiefs as men ... We never asked them to come here, but nevertheless we treated them kindly and hospitably and helped them all we could. They had made themselves (as it were) our guests."⁹⁵ Beneath the veneer imparted by passing years, this statement embodies a long-held and basic Native understanding of the fur-trade years. In 1850 in what is now British Columbia Natives still outnumbered newcomers by perhaps 100 to 1.

⁹⁵ Memorial to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Premier of the Dominion of Canada, from the Chiefs of the Shuswap, Okanagan, and Couteau Tribes of British Columbia, presented at Kamloops, BC, 25 August 1910. This was written by the ethnographer J.A. Teit, secretary to the chiefs, a man who was fluent in Interior Salish languages and whom the chiefs trusted completely. From everything we know of Teit, he reflected the chiefs' meanings as closely as he could.

REFLECTIONS

Forty years ago, when Joyce Wike reviewed ideas about social change along the Northwest Coast in the contact period, she noted that all claims were “preliminary and inconclusive” and should be treated provisionally as “unproven assumptions.” The fundamental problem, she held, was the lack of detailed research.⁹⁶ With some qualifications about the concept of proof — Wike wrote within the positivist assumptions of her day — much the same could still be said today. But intellectual contexts change and, in so doing, reposition data. Moreover, there have been important pockets of new research. We now have a far clearer, if still inadequate, understanding of the diffusion and impact of contact diseases, a sharper sense of the operation of power in the fur trades, and several regional studies of Native responses to these trades. We are beginning, therefore, to generalize the Northwest Coast differently.

I am struck by the extent of human geographical change in what is now British Columbia between 1770 and 1850. Local settlement patterns had often been rearranged and there were far fewer people on the ground. In some cases rearrangements followed from disease, in others from relocations associated with the fur trade. The Tsimshian tribes had moved their winter villages to Fort Simpson, the Haida and Nuu-chah-nulth had apparently abandoned many small winter villages for a few larger ones, and the Stó:lō occupied a handful of their former village sites. Much trade had been reconfigured around the forts and harbours that were the foci of European-Native interaction. Older trading patterns survived under and within this superimposed layer. Political geographies were different as well, as larger polities tended to supplant smaller ones and new alliances formed. Marriage and warfare, age-old political instruments of the elite, were aggressively used to create or consolidate these new arrangements. However much their meanings had been recontextualized, many new and attractive goods circulated, and some old practices acquired a particular extravagance. There were new ships along the Coast and forts with new people in them — pinpoints that radiated their presence across wide spaces. Native settlements themselves did not look as they had, nor did their inhabitants.

Other changes were less tangible. Where epidemic disease had been severe, the stock of stories had thinned and histories were simplified.

⁹⁶ Wike, “Problems in Fur Trade Analysis,” 1,086.

Confidence in traditional spirit powers and in the shamans, trained mediators with the spirit world, probably weakened. The presence of previously unimagined newcomers forced Native people to reconceptualize themselves in relation to these others. The use of muskets, however recontextualized, in hunting must have rendered some former environmental knowledge irrelevant, as these guns were more powerful than indigenous weapons and required less intricate knowledge of the habits of the intended prey. Some edge of Christian practice and theology arrived, usually through the men living with Native women; at the very least, as these men learned a Native language, there were new stories from time to time in the pit houses on winter nights. Native women living in the forts carried new conceptions of domestic life into their former villages. None of this is very well understood. Native people themselves must have been bewildered from time to time — a bewilderment reflected, perhaps, in the prophet cults that were circulating through the Cordillera.⁹⁷ The ethnographic collections of Native stories reveal, here and there, traces of protracted debates about how to respond to the many new pressures in their midst.

All of this suggests, I think, that the cultural enrichment hypothesis needs to be approached very cautiously. Crudely applied, it quickly becomes Eurocentric and far too simple. It tends to measure cultural achievement against quantitative and materialistic Western values of accumulation. Feasts became bigger and distributed more blankets, muskets, and sheets of copper. More poles were carved. In some areas carvers turned to argillite and developed new trade items. There is good evidence for all of these developments. But to represent the enormous complexity of Northwest Coast cultures, evolved over the millennia and intricately connected to various pasts and places, by these simple and, apparently, culminating markers is to deny or trivialize that complexity. Moreover, the concept of cultural enrichment seems to posit change within a restricted model of culture akin to the salvage ethnographers'. The concept assumes that traditional Northwest Coast culture, much as the ethnographers understood it, was being enhanced. A given culture would seem to have its good periods and its bad, and traditional Northwest Coast culture to have been bucked up by the fur trade. But there were many Northwest Coast cultures, always in motion, both before and after

⁹⁷ A fine recent contribution to the large literature on this vexed topic is Elizabeth Vibert, *Trader's Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846* (Norman & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), ch. 2.

fur traders arrived. They responded differently to the traders' presence. There was no one culture and no fixed datum plane against which to measure cultural enrichment. There were complex, changing societies adjusting to new pressures in a great variety of ways, in none of which is it possible to identify the cultural standard required by the enrichment hypothesis. Most telling perhaps, the enrichment hypothesis ignores too much of what was going on along the Northwest Coast during the contact years. Against enrichment measured by poles, feast goods, and the enhanced authority of some chiefs were epidemics, increased violence, depopulation, and, for many, a drastic loss of cultural and historical memory.

A summary of developments during these years should emphasize, I think, the variety of responses to contact conditions. The impact of disease in pre-colonial British Columbia was highly uneven; some populations were devastated while others were spared the major epidemics. The inland fur trade was not the coastal trade and, as recent local studies are showing, responses to new trading opportunities varied greatly within these regions. Generalizations at the scale of the Coast tend to dissolve on close inspection into the different scales and regions of a complex, rapidly evolving human geography. But there is one generalization that may hold fairly well for most of the Coast and, in the early years of trade, for much of the Interior. It is this. The pre-colonial years seem to have been a tumultuous and, often, frantic time. Indigenous societies were being hit by an enormous amount: diseases they could not control, that killed large numbers, and often wiped out much of the record of the past; strange, powerful people from outside local lifeworlds and experience; strange, powerful weapons that were differentially introduced and that brought with them new balances of power and, probably, more and more killing wars; new sources of wealth dropped accidentally, so it seemed, here or there and then (especially on the Coast) moving rapidly elsewhere; many new and highly desirable objects; and re-arranged alliances, trading patterns, and social hierarchies emerging out of the tensions of new trading opportunities and depopulation. Much had been abruptly destabilized, especially along the Coast — to which gargantuan feasts and forests of poles may testify. Native people were anything but passive victims of these new circumstances, some of which they had largely made themselves. They drew hard trading bargains. Some chiefs were shrewd geopoliticians, manipulating new situations to their considerable advantage. But much of what Native people faced was very strange, and much was beyond

their control. This was a time of particularly rapid cultural change, a time when lifeworlds were in flux and when people were trying as they could to ride an escalating sequence of extraordinary developments.

In the process, the context of Native lives was changing in a space that Native peoples considered theirs and that international diplomacy now considered British. Native peoples still had no reason to think that anyone else controlled their land, but some of the preconditions for later colonial regimes were in place: an accepted White presence that could hardly be dislodged and that was considerably experienced in the management of Natives; a measure of Native dependence on introduced European goods; an international position, sanctioned by diplomacy and international law, that fixed the vector of colonial expansion. From mid-century these preconditions began to be translated into explicit colonial regimes that were based in London, England, and were locally managed, in good part by experienced personnel from the fur trade. With these regimes came settlers, industrial capital, land laws, and property rights, all backed by the power of the British state. Then began the displacements and reoccupations that pushed Native peoples to the margins of their own land, as what came to be known as British Columbia was resettled by newcomers and the issues that are still with our courts and treaty commissions first came into focus.