

every instance. The pamphlet makes plain why the “inhabitants of Nootka” (34) are relegated to the very left margin of the design on Panel 1. “They are not well built and have ill-proportioned bodies. ... Their ugly faces do not appear in their natural colour being daubed with ochre and oil ... They are serious and phlegmatic but also cruel and vindictive. They eat their vanquished enemies and trade the feet, hands, skulls and other parts of the body which cannot be consumed” (34). While admiration of indigenous peoples did not prevent (and even stimulated) colonization, contempt for them justified conquest and exploitation. In the case of British Columbia,

the attitude of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* was one factor preparing the way for a bitter experience.

The University of Washington Press is to be congratulated on agreeing to distribute this study, jointly produced by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia (both of which own full sets of the wallpaper), in North America. While intended for an Australian audience, and while they are a bit disjointed, the contents of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* amply reward careful study. Above all this work makes widely available an important artefact that is otherwise little known and difficult to see.

*Almost a Hero: The Voyages of John Meares, R.N.,
to China, Hawaii and the Northwest Coast*

J. Richard Nokes

Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1998.
217 pp. Illus., maps. \$29.95 paper.

By Bruce M. Watson
Vancouver Community College

TO CONTEMPORARY Frances Hornby Barkley, British mariner John Meares was a thief who had stolen and used her husband’s maps; to George Dixon, Meares contradicted and misrepresented the facts, and to Robert Haswell he was a liar. Opinions of Meares by traditional maritime fur trade historians such as F. W. Howay, W. Kaye Lamb, and even Captain John Walbran, who examined the Barkley dairies, tend to agree with Meares’ contemporaries. To J. Richard Nokes, however, John Meares was a

man “of courage, energy and vision” who “deserves better” than the place in history that historians have accorded him. Nokes, a navy veteran and longtime *Oregonian* editor, sets about to throw new light on Meares in his book, *Almost a Hero*.

Nokes re-evaluates Meares through the use of narrative coupled with an examination of the criticisms. With the deft hand of an experienced editor, Nokes mines and amply endnotes the traditional and sometimes contradictory sources (Meares, George Dixon, Nathaniel Portlock, William Douglas,

and others) to create a clear free-flowing reader-friendly story. After briefly introducing the little known early life of Meares, Nokes begins his narrative in 1786 when the British mariner first came to the Northwest Coast on the ill-fated snow *Nootka* and ends it with the settlement of the Nootka Affair. A short "Afterward" sews up the rest of his life and brings to light a knighthood bestowed on Meares by the British Crown. On the way, Nokes dedicates considerable space to the Hawaiians, Kauai chief Kiana and the Barkley servant Winee, and broadens the content to include mention of the diversity of the crews, often overlooked by traditional historians. Periodic inserts entitled for example, "Nautical Terms," "The Sea Otter," "Macao and Canton" as well as contemporary maps and lithographs help enrich the understanding of the narrative. As well, an appendix which includes an examination of Mrs. Barkley's accusations, followed by a short document section which ranges from the 17 September 1778 "Passing Certificate for Commission of John Meares" to his last will and testament helps flesh out a John Meares beyond the person who plied the Northwest Coast.

Nokes forces a re-evaluation of the role of Meares by juxtaposing his accomplishments achieved always under difficult conditions, against traditional arguments held against him. Nokes shows that Meares pulled off many firsts at least from a Euro-Centric point of view. Although he missed finding the mouth of the Columbia as one of

the first non-Native explorers in the area, Meares was the first non-Native to found a fur trading "empire" in the region. He was the first to attempt to carry timbers (which he had to jettison during a storm) from the area thus creating an industry first. He was the first to carry Chinese to Hawaii and use East Indians (Lascars) as crew members, etc. Although Meares was only a pawn in the process, his "Memorial to Parliament" helped change the European imperial power structure in the area. Nokes' careful examination of the arguments against Meares does blunt some of the criticism leveled against him concerning his years on the coast. On the other hand, some may feel Nokes doesn't go the full distance to dispel the reputation perpetrated by his detractors as the records of the time imply that he angered practically everyone he met.

Almost a Hero is a good read for a student of Northwest Coast maritime fur trade history for it simplifies a very complex series of events which took place on the Northwest coast in the early years of contact when the maritime fur trade was in its infancy. Whether or not it exonerates Meares from the criticisms leveled against him is debatable. However, given the fuller account of his life, Meares comes across as more complex than the villain and the scoundrel which emerge from the records. As this is one of the first books to focus entirely on the life of Meares, rather than being addended to other events, scholars shouldn't pass this one by.