

Book Reviews

The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast of North America, 1810-1914: A Study of British Maritime Ascendancy. By Barry M. Gough. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1971. Pp. xvi, 294. Illus., maps. \$12.50.

This study, Dr. Gough tells us in his preface, was "undertaken to pursue the argument stated by Holland Rose in relation to the period 1810-1914, namely, that the security of British interests on the Northwest Coast can be attributed mainly to British strength at sea." His interesting and carefully documented narrative, based on a wide variety of primary sources, including Admiralty and Colonial Office records and the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company, amply supports the Rose thesis.

The history of the century falls naturally into three parts. The first, extending to 1844, was marked by the War of 1812 and the joint occupation of the region between California and Alaska agreed to by Great Britain and the United States in 1818. The second, to which Dr. Gough rightly devotes more than two-thirds of his text, comprises the 28 critical years from 1844 to 1872, when relations with the United States were almost continually troubled and were often threatening. After 1872 British sovereignty on the Northwest Coast was secure, and the development of tensions elsewhere made it necessary to reduce the naval forces stationed there, and finally to abolish the Pacific Station altogether. These important but undramatic 43 years are here well summarized in only 23 pages.

In the War of 1812 the point of local interest was Astoria, John Jacob Astor's trading post at the mouth of the Columbia River, and the only American foothold on the Northwest Coast. It became British in 1813, first by purchase and then by a formal act of possession performed by the captain of H.M.S. *Raccoon*. In these transactions the role of the Royal Navy was decisive. The Americans were anxious to defend Astoria, but their naval forces were very limited, and were hampered by the British blockade of their Atlantic ports and bases. Only the frigate *Essex* reached

the Pacific, and after doing considerable damage to shipping she was run to earth and forced to surrender. It is significant that this single action was sufficient to give the British command of the ocean.

Except for its final years, there was little need for naval activity during the period of joint occupation. The British were more concerned about other areas, including Tahiti and Hawaii, and ships of the Royal Navy sailed north of Mexico only eight times in 25 years. To some extent this was because joint occupation, by its very nature, made it impracticable to establish any sort of base on the Coast. This was a problem of long standing for the British, who at the time had no possessions on the west coast of either of the Americas. As a consequence, the Pacific Station, established in 1837 to succeed the old South American Station, continued to have its headquarters at Valparaiso, and to depend chiefly on storeships stationed there, and later further north at Callao. Amongst other things, this produced formidable problems of communication. Cables and telegraphs were nowhere available; four months was the minimum time within which the Admiral commanding at Valparaiso could hope to receive a reply to a dispatch sent to London; a ship normally required about 80 days to travel from Valparaiso to the Northwest Coast. For many years ships on the Station depended primarily on sail, which made their movements slow and unpredictable. Once a ship disappeared over the horizon it might take the Commander-in-Chief months to regain contact with her, even in the face of the most pressing necessity.

Under these conditions it is surprising how well and relatively promptly the Navy was able to respond to the Oregon boundary crisis, which ushered in the anxious years from 1844 to 1872. Both British trading interests (represented by the Hudson's Bay Company) and the future of the territory were involved. The former were the first concern of the Admiral commanding the Pacific Station. In the summer of 1844 H.M.S. *Modeste*, a small sloop that could enter and ascend the Columbia River, was sent to Fort Vancouver, where her visit did much to safeguard the authority and property of the Hudson's Bay Company. Late in the fall of 1845 she returned to the river and remained there until May of 1847, by which time news of the signing of the Oregon Boundary Treaty had been received, and local excitement over the crisis had died down. In the interval, other and larger ships had cruised the Coast and patrolled such strategic waterways as the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound.

The boundary question itself was dealt with in London and Washington. The British Government was well aware that the influx of thousands

of American settlers into the valley of the Columbia meant that a substantial part of the Oregon country would become part of the United States, but it was not prepared to yield to President Polk's belligerent demands for the whole of it. For support it turned to the Navy, and a threatened large-scale naval mobilization early in 1846 seems to have been a critical factor in the American decision to accept the 49th parallel as the boundary. In the war over Oregon, as Dr. Gough points out, "the decisive theatre would not be the Northwest Coast but the Atlantic seaboard and Great Lakes region." This was a prospect that gave the Americans pause, especially as the war with Mexico that was to add the whole southwest to the United States was already brewing.

To a considerable extent the history of this period is that of American advance on the Northwest Coast by land and of British counter measures, first by sea, and presently by land as well, but with naval protection and support playing an essential role. The colony of Vancouver Island was established in 1850; in 1858 the Fraser River gold rush erupted on the mainland. An influx of Americans that far exceeded the Oregon immigration of the 1840's followed. British sovereignty might well have been shaken, but by good fortune two ships of the Royal Navy happened to be close at hand. Without them, Dr. Gough points out, "local civil authorities would have been powerless." With them, Governor Douglas was able to seize firm control of the Fraser River — the only easy means of entry for men and supplies — and so maintain both law and order and his own authority.

The Civil War brought five years of tension in the early 1860's, and the Alaska purchase of 1867 caused further uneasiness. Dr. Helmcken recalls in his reminiscences that the Americans "boasted they had sandwiched British Columbia and could eat her up at any time." Fortunately 1867 was also the year of Confederation, and a decisive Canadian approach to the Northwest Coast by land at last got under way, with the important result that British Columbia became part of Canada in 1871. That same year Britain and the United States settled most of their outstanding differences with the Treaty of Washington, and the San Juan arbitration award followed in 1872.

Meanwhile railways had entered the political and military picture. In both the United States and Canada it was recognized that political union without easy and direct communication would be of little effect and almost certainly temporary. It was also recognized in both countries that a railway to the west coast, over which troops, equipment and supplies could be moved quickly, was of great military importance. The first

American line, completed to San Francisco in 1869, was intended not only to keep California in the United States, but to strengthen American defences against possible hostile moves by the British Navy. The Canadian Pacific had a similar dual purpose, but it came on the scene late in the day, when Anglo-American relations had improved greatly, and Canadians were concerned chiefly with its domestic importance.

Mention should be made of the Crimean War, another disturbing event of the mid-century years. The chief factors that affected naval dispositions were the abortive attack on Petropavlovsk, which Dr. Gough describes in interesting detail, and the possibility that the United States might intervene on the side of Russia. The war's only tangible legacy on the Northwest Coast was a group of three modest frame buildings at Esquimalt — soon dubbed the "Crimean huts" — that were intended to serve as a naval hospital and actually became the nucleus of a naval base. The Esquimalt base grew slowly, by fits and starts, but a shore establishment was authorized formally in 1865, and by degrees it became in fact if not in name the headquarters of the Pacific Station. It had much to offer — an excellent harbour, a ready supply of spars for the ships still equipped with sails, and coal from Nanaimo for those with steam engines. Its great lack for many years was a drydock, and this was not provided until 1887, when the importance of the base to the Royal Navy was declining rapidly.

This well designed and produced volume is the first publication of the new University of British Columbia Press, which succeeded the U.B.C. Publications Centre in March 1971. It is pleasant to find that the Press evidently appreciates the value of pictures; 45 well-selected illustrations, as well as seven maps and a striking pictorial dust jacket add much to the interest and attractiveness of the book. The bibliography, though modestly described as "selected" is in fact lengthy and detailed. Footnotes are where they properly belong, at the bottom of the pages of the text. The proofreading has been carefully done; this reviewer noticed only one slip. One minor criticism seems to be in order: the lack of page references in the table of contents may improve appearance, but it is an inconvenience to the reader. Otherwise author and publisher alike have set a high standard for the publications of the new Press.

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