

Book Reviews

Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543-1819, by Warren L. Cook. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973. 620 pp., 62 illus. \$17.50.

It has taken a long time since the work of Henry R. Wagner, William R. Manning, and Judge Frederick W. Howay, for a truly significant volume to appear on the early history of the northwest coast. That it took such an interval for an historian to sift through published materials and the rich archival resources in the Americas and Europe is remarkable although the labour itself might have deterred the more faint-hearted. Professor Cook is the first to attempt an evaluation of the nearly three centuries of Spain's interest in the Pacific Northwest. Not only has he scoured the archives for new material, but he demonstrates an enthusiasm for his subject which is transmitted to his readers. Very often his descriptions of places and events reach near poetic beauty. The book is necessarily a large one and its fresh interpretations will have a considerable impact upon historians of British Columbia.

During the breathless thrust of expansion in the sixteenth century, Spaniards seemed unwilling to let any corner of the New World avoid their glance if not their touch. The search for precious metals, new Indian civilizations, or other resources, led explorers north from Acapulco almost to modern Oregon before the climate and exhaustion halted further reconnaissance. Spain closed the book on expansion to the north of California, concealing existing information to prevent possible foreign competition. By the eighteenth century even the Spanish government had forgotten about knowledge which lay buried in dusty archives. Occasional visits of the Manilla galleons which crossed the Pacific annually between Acapulco and the Philippines to northern waters left little mark. As the history of the wrecked Nehalem Beeswax vessel near the mouth of the Columbia River points out, survivors did not live to inform anyone of their discoveries. Throughout the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth

centuries, the world was content to trust apocryphal accounts of exploration and to leave the entire coast to the theoretical Spanish claim.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, it was not a renewal of curiosity that impelled Spain to substantiate long neglected claims over the northwest coast. Rather it was a reaction to the intrusions and competition from Russia, Britain, and the United States which rekindled Spanish efforts and resulted in a dangerous confrontation between Spain and Britain at Nootka Sound.

It is the period 1769 to 1795 that forms the major substance of the book. Professor Cook examines the expeditions of Juan Pérez, Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra, Esteban José Martínez, and others, pointing out that one of the great errors of the Spanish imperial government was to keep these expeditions and their discoveries shrouded in near total secrecy. Not only was this detrimental to the case for sovereignty over unsettled territories, but the remarkable endeavours of Spanish explorers were lost to the world. When Captain James Cook visited Nootka Sound in 1778, he found little evidence of previous Spanish visits. With the publication of Cook's journals and information that the northwest coast possessed a marketable resource in sea otter pelts which could be sold at great profit in Canton, the race was on. By 1786, there were at least six vessels on the coast of present British Columbia from England, India, and China.

Not only were Spanish claims being lost by default, but during the 1780's the coastal Indian societies received their first major contacts with Europeans. As Professor Cook points out, these Indians were soon dependant upon metal utensils, firearms, and other trade goods. The price they would have to pay was a high one for European diseases and greed accompanied the traders. Because these individuals did not have to return annually to the same territory, the maritime fur trade could be exceptionally brutal. For their own part, many of the coastal tribes were exceptionally warlike and jealous of their sovereign rights. Incidents were common and the atrocities perpetrated by one group of fur traders brought the revenge of the Indians against the unsuspecting occupants of the next expedition. Fortunately, not all Europeans present on the coast abused the Indians in pursuit of sea otter pelts. The intellectual curiosity and scientific spirit of the Enlightenment were also present. Since the Spaniards did not develop major commercial interests, they presented less immediate danger to the Indian societies.

The confrontation which developed between Spain and Britain at Nootka Sound in 1789 could scarcely have ended with an amicable

agreement. As it was, the rival commanders Esteban José Martínez and James Colnett were not men cut out for complex diplomatic negotiations. In his treatment of the incidents, Professor Cook has drawn upon a vast array of documentation to see what factors motivated the various parties. The behaviour of Martínez in arresting Colnett and other British citizens, so long portrayed by historians as an act of drunken irrationality, becomes a necessary step for the protection of Spanish sovereignty. Not only did Martínez take his responsibilities seriously, but he understood that without dramatic action to stop Colnett, there would be a strong British base established somewhere on the coast.

While the author's interpretation of the Nootka incidents appears quite logical, many historians like contemporary eighteenth-century observers have been influenced by the colourful fantasies and propaganda generated by John Meares. Injured financially by the seizure of the British ships and by the advent of Spanish power at Nootka Sound, Meares twisted the events to strengthen the British case for possession. In the process, he painted the Spaniards and particularly Martínez as barbarians capable of the worst cruelties. Despite the fact that Professor Cook identifies Meares for what he was, a most intelligent and witty liar, his loaded arguments and ability to dramatize make it very difficult for any historian to avoid some of his myths.

Although they were well aware of the potential of the fur trade, Spaniards lacked the flexibility and initiative to make profits. Their attempts to utilize established markets in the Philippines failed since neither Mexican nor Philippine merchants were willing to take up the challenge of the fur trade. The Spanish occupation of the coast was to maintain sovereignty and to investigate the possibility of a passage through the North American continent to the Atlantic.

The driving force at Nootka came from a number of strongly motivated and highly intelligent individuals who were not restricted by purely economic factors. Captain Pedro Alberni, commander of the Catalonian volunteers who garrisoned Friendly Cove, became more famous as the first successful gardener on the coast. Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra during his governorship at Nootka, developed a most successful relationship with Chief Ma-Kwee-na; his realistic Indian policy drew widespread acclaim from all of the nationalities visiting the port. Even if Bodega's policies were based upon the need to strengthen the Spanish claim to the coast, the result permitted some penetrating scientific observations of Indian society. The accounts compiled by Alejandro Malaspina, José Moziño, Dionisio Acalá Galiano, Cayetano Valdés, and others, provide

raw material for excellent insights into aspects of Indian culture and the results of European contact which otherwise would have been lost. Some of this material has been available for many years in published form, but Professor Cook adds a new depth resulting from his extensive archival investigations.

On the thorny question of whether the coastal Indians practised cannibalism, the author tends to oppose the generally held opinion today that it did not exist. Certainly there is no lack of source material which purports to explain in lurid detail how Ma-Kwee-na butchered youthful victims for his cannibal feasts. John Meares published full accounts of these ceremonies from evidence he claimed to have collected from Indian chiefs other than Ma-Kwee-na. Since Meares's account influenced other observers including the Spaniards, many of their descriptions repeated his information. Although Professor Cook catalogues numerous sources which referred to cannibalism, there is no hard evidence and even the existing circumstantial reports might be discounted. Francisco Eliza, for example, learned about Indian cannibalism from the English prisoners of the *Argonaut* (page 296). As Chief Ma-Kwee-na explained in rebuttal to the charge, rivalries within Indian society made it good politics for others to condemn him for a crime which sparked great abhorrence from all Europeans.

When Malaspina visited Nootka, he set out to study the Indians in order to solve some of the great discrepancies in European accounts about the coastal societies. He found that almost all sources from Captain Cook to John Meares reported the existence of cannibalism and that the members of the Spanish garrison accepted the belief. After questioning witnesses and visiting the Indian villages on numerous occasions the only confirmation of cannibalism came from an eight- or nine-year-old boy who had been sold to the Spaniards. Quite possibly he reflected the opinion of the friars who were certain that they had saved him from a horrible death. When one relative of Ma-Kwee-na answered in the affirmative when asked about cannibalism and then realized what the question had been, he retracted his answer demonstrating great repugnance and horror at the whole idea.¹

Malaspina concluded that the charges of cannibalism and particularly those of Meares were false. Severed hands and other human remains possessed by the Indians and used by Europeans to suggest cannibal

¹ Pedro Novo y Colson, ed. *La Vuelta al Mundo por las corbetas Descubierta y Atrevido al mando del Capitán de Navío Don Alejandro Malaspina desde 1789-1794* (Madrid, 1885), 355-356.

proclivities were probably nothing more than war trophies. An experience of Captain George Vancouver illustrates the attitude of at least some Indians. Invited on board Vancouver's vessel to dine, the Indians ate everything provided except venison. Understanding the possible meaning, the officers attempted to clarify the origins of the meat by pointing to the fur garments of the guests. This seemed to confirm their suspicions since they felt the finger pointed to them rather than their furs; they rejected the meat until the seamen produced the remainder of the haunch.² If indeed cannibalism or even occasional ceremonial cannibalism existed, the Indians soon accepted admonitions against it. Since the power of any Europeans to influence Indian customs was not strong at this point, it seems more likely that Malaspina's conclusions were correct.

Professor Cook presents a masterful treatment of the competition for the coast and the dangerous international repercussions of the Nootka Sound Controversy. For Spain, the ramifications of a diplomatic defeat in which her claim to sovereignty over unsettled territories was lost, marked the beginning in a long series of disasters. While the major preoccupation of the Spaniards at Nootka was to negotiate an acceptable settlement with the British commissioner, Captain George Vancouver, the implementation of the Nootka Conventions was not an easy matter. When it became obvious that much of the British case rested upon the total mistruths provided by John Meares, Vancouver's position was not strong. The Spaniards, although they had expanded the post at Nootka by 1792 into a fairly permanent fortified base, desired to establish the line of demarcation at the Strait of Juan de Fuca where they had a small garrison at Puerto Nuñez Gaona (Neah Bay). The plan was to make Vancouver commit his nation to a relatively modest section of the coast and thereby to remove British claims to all territory north of San Francisco. The result was a diplomatic standoff in which Spain sought to reduce the damages done through earlier European negotiations. Finally, impelled by the need for alliance in Europe and with the knowledge that there was no north-west passage, the Third Nootka Convention of 1795 resulted in a mutual abandonment of the northern port with free access to the coast guaranteed to both parties.

In the latter section of the book, Professor Cook breaks new ground to show how Spain retained an interest in the Pacific Northwest after the evacuation of Nootka. Efforts were made from the province of New Mexico to close off the land approaches to the west. While the expeditions

² George Vancouver, *Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World*, I (London, 1798), 270.

dispatched to intercept Lewis and Clark illustrate a continuation of Spanish concern with the northwest, such acts were little more than muscle spasms soon to be followed by rigormortus. Any real policy to maintain a presence in the Pacific Northwest would have demanded the reoccupation of Nootka Sound or some other port. The author's argument that part of Spain's weakness resulted from the placement of California, the Columbia basin, and the Strait of Juan de Fuca under the control of the Captain General of the Interior Provinces at Chihuahua isolated from the northwest coast is certainly correct. If, however, there had been a genuine policy to re-establish territorial claims, distance and administrative errors could have been overcome quickly. Even before the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in 1807 and the outbreak of the first Mexican Revolution in 1810, the idea of restoring Spanish control over the distant northwest coast had ceased to influence all but a few.

Perhaps the author's description of Spain's activities on the northwest coast as "the apex of her colonial expansion" is just a little misleading. From the beginning, most authorities in Madrid and Mexico City considered the region to be little more than an expensive and bothersome annoyance. There was little of the missionary zeal and effort to utilize available resources which characterized the Spanish empire in an earlier age. The flood tide of empire was carried forward by its own inertia beyond the point it should have ebbed. Despite the play on metaphors, Professor Cook has written an admirable book which will become the standard history of Spain's role on the early northwest coast. The only error of note is on page 107 where mercury is described as being in demand in New Spain for refining gold ore, which should read silver ore. Other errors (pp. 134, 185, 195, 394, 481, 530, and 549) are either small typographical mistakes or incorrect dates.

University of Calgary

CHRISTON ARCHER

British Columbia: One Hundred Years of Geographical Change, by J. Lewis Robinson and Walter G. Hardwick. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1973. 63 pp.

This comprehensive historical geography of British Columbia by two University of British Columbia professors of Geography is a pioneer work in its field. It is concise yet packs in a surprisingly large amount of information on and interpretation of its subject. Some might consider it regret-