

# The Royal Navy and the Oregon Crisis, 1844-1846\*

BARRY M. GOUGH

The division of Oregon as announced in a treaty signed by Great Britain and the United States of America on July 15, 1846, brought to a conclusion the protracted contest for the sovereignty of the region, a rivalry in which the Royal Navy played a significant part, especially in the latter stages. The Anglo-American Convention of 1818, the terms of which were renewed in 1827, recognized the historic claims of Britain and the United States to Oregon but did not allow for any means whereby the matter could be resolved by arbitration. War would be the alternative should diplomacy fail, and in this regard naval and military preparedness were important considerations at the height of the crisis from late 1844 to June 1846.

The diplomatic issues involved in the Oregon question are well known, even if interpretations of the outcome vary.<sup>1</sup> But the Royal Navy's role in the crisis has been strangely neglected on two counts. The one is that it has not been explained how British naval power was largely responsible for achieving an equitable settlement for Britain. The United States government could ill afford to neglect British primacy at sea and diplomatic developments reflected this. The other is that the activities of British warships on the Northwest Coast of America — which were so beneficial in supporting national political and commercial interests at a time of turbulence on the frontier — have not been examined or narrated at length. The purpose of this essay is to correct these deficiencies by demonstrating how British naval primacy influenced the course of Anglo-

\* Adapted, by permission of the publisher, from Barry M. Gough, *The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast of North America, 1810-1914: A Study of British Maritime Ascendancy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1971).

<sup>1</sup> See especially, Frederick Merk, *The Oregon Question: Essays in Anglo-American Diplomacy and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); H. C. Allen, *Great Britain and the United States: A History of Anglo-American Relations (1783-1952)* (New York, 1955), 409-14; and Charles Sellers, *James K. Polk: Continentalist, 1843-1846* (Princeton, 1966), 235-58 and 357-97.

American relations and showing how British warships protected national interests and claims, provided naval intelligence important in formulating Foreign Office policy, and made their influence felt, perhaps out of all proportion to their numbers, on the Northwest Coast and in the Pacific at a time when relations with both the United States and France brought the government almost to the point of war before the Oregon crisis subsided and the area was partitioned by treaty.<sup>2</sup>

The territory in dispute in 1844-1846 lay west of the Continental Divide between the northern boundary of California (42°N) and the southern extremity of Russian America (54°40'N). Britain and the United States each claimed this region by virtue of exploration, discovery and trade.<sup>3</sup> Each nation realized that a solution to the Oregon question probably would be found in an equitable division of the country. Apart from the often exaggerated vote-getting election slogan of the Democratic Party in America — "Fifty-four Forty or Fight" — that swept James K. Polk into the presidency in 1844, each nation eventually saw the advisability of compromise. Essentially, therefore, the issue was how to divide Oregon between the two claimants. In other words, should the boundary extend along the 49th parallel from the ridge of the Rocky Mountains to the sea, as the United States insisted? Or should it follow the Columbia River from where its course intersects the 49th parallel to the Pacific, as Great Britain initially contended?

If war were to be avoided, as each party wished, it was necessary to limit the area in contention to that which extended west and north of the Columbia River to the 49th parallel, including the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Within this territory were three geographical regions of importance to fur trade, settlement and maritime development. The nucleus of British commerce on the Northwest Coast was Fort Vancouver, situated about 100 miles inland near the head of navigation on the Columbia River for ocean going ships. Fort Vancouver was built on the north bank of the river in 1826, as the Foreign Office and the Hudson's Bay Company realized that the Columbia might become the international

<sup>2</sup> The influence of France on Britain's position in the Oregon crisis cannot be ignored. See George V. Blue, "France and the Oregon Question," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XXXIV (1933), 39-59 and 144-63; also, John S. Galbraith, "France as a Factor in the Oregon Negotiations," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, XLIV (April 1953), 69-73.

<sup>3</sup> The full claims are given in "Correspondence Relative to the Negotiation of the Question of the Disputed Right to the Oregon Territory," *Parliamentary Papers*, 1846, LII (Cmd. 695). On the British case, see Travers Twiss, *The Oregon Question Examined, in Respect to Facts and the Law of Nations* (London, 1846) and Adam Thom, *The Claims to the Oregon Territory Considered* (London, 1844).

boundary. Nearly opposite Fort Vancouver, the Willamette River joined the Columbia after draining the Willamette Valley. The Columbia River basin may have been rich in furs and lands for settlement, but it was not readily accessible to shipping owing to dangerous, shifting shoals at the river's mouth.

The second area of contention was Puget Sound, reaching southward from the Strait of Juan de Fuca. In addition to offering fine anchorages, this body of water offered possibilities of great maritime expansion for the nation that could control its shores. It also furnished, from the north, a more sheltered and safe approach to the Columbia Country than that via the Columbia's estuary. Ships could anchor near Fort Nisqually at the head of the sound and from there travellers and traders could reach Fort Vancouver by going through the Nisqually and Cowlitz river valleys.

The third district of importance, especially to the British, embraced the southern tip of Vancouver Island. This area had several fine harbours readily accessible to ships and arable land nearby. For these reasons, the Hudson's Bay Company, whose maritime operations on the coast and in the Pacific were hindered by the difficult navigation of the Columbia River up to Fort Vancouver, built Fort Victoria in 1843. The Island was also almost certain to be in British territory after an agreement was reached with the Americans.<sup>4</sup> Vancouver Island was therefore the focal point of British concern and the last line of defence against American expansion in Oregon.

Throughout Oregon, the Hudson's Bay Company held a British commercial monopoly. The Company successfully destroyed competition by American and Russian traders on the Northwest Coast in the 1820's and 1830's. However, they were unable to halt the flow of American settlers who came overland by way of the Oregon Trail after 1842; settlement spelled the end of the fur trade in the Columbia River Basin in more ways than the destruction of habitat for fur-bearing animals. Although the implications of the influx of Americans received scant attention in discussions between the British and American governments in reaching a compromise over the Oregon boundary, it must be remembered that Britain could not have controlled an area populated by Americans. In retrospect, the only feasible method of permanent defence that Britain could have employed in this region was British settlement. This view is supported by reports from British naval and military officers, submitted in 1845 and 1846, which described American settlements on the south

<sup>4</sup> W. Kaye Lamb, "The Founding of Fort Victoria," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, VII (April 1943), 71ff.

bank of the Columbia River and in the Willamette Valley. The British ministry knew that Company interests, at least south of the Columbia, would have to be sacrificed for the preservation of peaceful Anglo-American relations.

The Company understandably opposed a surrender of the Columbia River Basin and Puget Sound, and warned the Foreign Office accordingly. It felt that the British would lose a valuable field of commerce, and, more important, that the Americans would gain the upper reaches of the region giving them "the command of the North Pacific and in a certain degree that of the China Sea, objects of the greatest commercial & political importance to Gt. Britain."<sup>5</sup> The Company also fully realized that New England commercial and shipping interests sought these ports.<sup>6</sup> It appeared to Dr. John McLoughlin, Director of the Company's Western Department, that the United States Navy also hoped to develop a base on Puget Sound.<sup>7</sup> In view of this, the British government was caught between the appeals of the Hudson's Bay Company for support and the demands of the American government for "All Oregon."

While diplomatic developments ran their course, the Royal Navy protected British interests on the Northwest Coast. The first mention of plans to support the British position in Oregon was contained in instructions to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, written in late 1842, which ordered a warship "to the coasts of the Territory of the Columbia River, the Straits of San Juan de Fuca [*sic*] and Gulf of Georgia."<sup>8</sup> Why no ship carried out this duty remains obscure; most likely, the demands of the station were such that no vessel was available for this service. However, the plans were fulfilled late in 1843, when the Foreign Office advised the Admiralty to instruct the British Admiral in the Pacific to send a warship to the Northwest Coast, to "show the flag" at the main centres of Hudson's Bay Company trade.<sup>9</sup> The task fell to the 18-gun sloop *Modeste*, Commander the Honourable Thomas Baillie.

<sup>5</sup> John H. Pelly (Gov., H.B.C.) to Lord Palmerston (F.O.), 26 February 1840, copy, C[olonial]. O[ffice Records, Public Record Office, London]. 6/14.

<sup>6</sup> See Norman Graebner, "Maritime Factors in the Oregon Compromise," *Pacific Historical Review*, XX (November 1951), 331-46.

<sup>7</sup> J. McLoughlin to Governor, 28 March 1845, B.223/b/33, fos. 170-72, H[udson's]. B[ay]. C[ompany]. A[rchives, London]. The writer acknowledges, with thanks, permission granted by the Governor and Committee of the Company to examine and quote from pertinent documents in the Company Archives.

<sup>8</sup> These instructions, noted in IND[ex].4761, Public Record Office, were received by Rear-Admiral Richard Thomas on February 11, 1843.

<sup>9</sup> Lord Aberdeen's instructions to the Admiralty, 23 October 1843, are in R. C. Clark, *History of the Willamette Valley, Oregon* (Chicago, 1927), 327-28.

H.M.S. *Modeste* arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River on July 7, 1844; her object was to indicate to the Americans that Britain would not tolerate interference with her trading interests and territorial claims in Oregon. Baillie rightly believed that his mission could best be achieved by taking the *Modeste* upstream to Fort Vancouver. Aided by a Company pilot, he navigated the treacherous waters as far as the post, where he learned that most of the two thousand settlers — of whom only 450 were British — lived south of the Columbia and that only a few lived north of the river. His report strengthened the view of the British government that only the territory south of the river should be relinquished to the United States.<sup>10</sup>

After a three-week stay at Fort Vancouver, Baillie sailed downstream for the river's mouth, where the *Modeste* grounded on the notorious bar and narrowly escaped disaster. After repairs were made at Baker's Bay, he pointed the *Modeste* to the north and Fort Victoria. But the harbours of Vancouver Island's southern tip were as yet uncharted, and Baillie was forced to run in to Captain Vancouver's old anchorage, Port Discovery, across the Strait of Juan de Fuca from Fort Victoria. After receiving provisions from the Company off the entrance to Victoria harbour, the *Modeste* sailed for Port Simpson, the main trading centre on the north coast, near the northern extremity of British claims. There a further examination of her hull revealed more extensive damage than had been disclosed at Baker's Bay, but successful repairs eliminated the possibility that she might have to return to England.<sup>11</sup>

Having completed her mission, the *Modeste* sailed for the Hawaiian Islands. Her visit to the disputed district was significant in that it marked the first of a series of visits by the Royal Navy to show the Americans, and, indeed, the Hudson's Bay Company, that Britain intended to protect her interests in Oregon, notwithstanding Lord Aberdeen's conciliatory foreign policy.

This was the first use of "gunboat diplomacy" in the Oregon crisis and it coincided with the formation of plans in London to reinforce the defences of British North America. In the event of war with the United States, the critical areas of operation would be the Atlantic seaboard, the St. Lawrence River, and Lakes Ontario and Erie. In preparing for hos-

<sup>10</sup> See "HMS *Modeste* on the Pacific Coast 1843-47: Log and Letters," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, LXI (December 1960), 408-36, and T. Baillie to Thomas, 4 Aug. 1844, Adm[iralty] Records, Public Record Office], 1/5550.

<sup>11</sup> F. V. Longstaff and W. Kaye Lamb, "The Royal Navy on the Northwest Coast, 1813-1850, Part I," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, IX (January 1945), 19.

ilities, the Admiralty and the War Office were reminded of the experiences of the War of 1812. During that war waterways were essential to communications, and sea power on the Lakes played a decisive role. Consequently, in 1845, the Royal Navy sent Captain F. R. "Bloody" Boxer to examine American military establishments on the Great Lakes. This officer advised the Admiralty that Britain's defence of Canada and the "exposed frontiers of Canada West" depended on maintaining "the command of the navigation of the lakes."<sup>12</sup> He suggested methods, which were largely implemented, of increasing British maritime strength on the Lakes and of conveying troops thereto. His reports and those of other investigators reflected the need for increased military preparations during the gravest foreign crisis to face Britain since the War of 1812.

The problem of sending troops to the remote Northwest Coast would be a major one in the event of military operations there. Soldiers would have to be transported overland from Canada or sent by sea. As a matter of fact, Baron Metcalfe, the Governor-General of Canada, thought that European and native troops from India would assist the British cause.<sup>13</sup> When the United States Congress passed an Oregon bill to incorporate the territory to 54°40' in the Union, the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, considered sending to Oregon secretly a frigate bearing Royal Marines and a small artillery force.<sup>14</sup> But this remained only an idea as the Foreign Minister, Lord Aberdeen, believed that the strength of the Royal Navy in the Pacific was sufficient to deal with any incident. Simultaneously, Sir George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company Territories in North America, thought that the British position could be strengthened by stationing four warships (two sail and two steam) in the Columbia with a large body of marines and two thousand Métis and Indians on board.<sup>15</sup> The ambitious proposal of the "Little Emperor," as Simpson was called, did not bear fruit. However, he did convince the Governor

<sup>12</sup> This report and those of other officers, naval and military, relating to the defences of British North America at this time, are in Adm. 7/626.

<sup>13</sup> Baron Metcalfe to Lord Stanley, 4 July 1846, confidential, W[ar]. O[ffice Records, Public Record Office]. 1/552.

<sup>14</sup> Sir Robert Peel to Aberdeen, 23 February 1845, Aberdeen Papers, Add. MSS 43,064, fols. 178-81, B[ritish]. M[useum, London]. Peel referred to this ship as "an additional frigate"; he must have known that the *America* 50 was then bound for Oregon.

<sup>15</sup> Sir G. Simpson to Pelly, 29 March 1845, copy, F[oreign]. O[ffice Records, Public Record Office]. 5/440; on this proposal see E. E. Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870* (2 vols.; London, 1958-59), II, 724, and C. P. Stacey, "The Hudson's Bay Company and Anglo-American Military Rivalries during the Oregon Dispute," *Canadian Historical Review*, XVIII (September 1937), 285-301.

and Committee of the Company, the Governor-General of Canada, the Duke of Wellington and the Foreign Office that the British should have a military post near Fort Garry, Red River, to counteract American influence in the Canadian Northwest.<sup>16</sup> And finally, "in deference to the earnest entreaties of the Company,"<sup>17</sup> the British government sent 346 troops of the 6th Regiment of Foot, the Royal Warwickshires, from Cork to Lower Fort Garry by way of York Factory in Hudson Bay. These soldiers reached their destination September 18, 1846.

As an aid to this expedition, two British officers stationed in Canada were sent to Fort Vancouver "as private travellers." They were to report to London and Montreal on the feasibility of sending troops overland to Oregon in the event of American encroachment on British rights there. They were also instructed to gather information on American settlers, and in cooperation with officers of the Royal Navy, to ascertain the possibilities of defending British interests on the Northwest Coast from an American attack. This hasty investigation was promoted by Simpson, who met with Peel and Aberdeen in London on April 3, 1845, and sailed for Montreal three days later with complete authority from the Ministry to arrange details of the military reconnaissance of Oregon. Lieutenants Henry J. Warre and Mervin Vavasour were chosen for the undertaking, and Simpson accompanied them from Montreal to Fort Garry.<sup>18</sup>

The first stage of the trip presented so many difficulties that these officers immediately advised the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies that a route via York Factory would be much better for any cavalry or artillery which might be dispatched to the Canadian Northwest.<sup>19</sup> Warre and Vavasour then began their journey on horseback across the plains and through the difficult passes of the Rockies, accompanied by their guide, Chief Factor Peter Skene Ogden, and seven Company servants. They hoped to reach the Pacific by mid-August, in advance of Lieutenant John Frémont of the United States Army, who was thought to be on a similar mission for the United States.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See Simpson to Lts. Warre and Vavasour, 30 May 1846, confidential, W.O. 1/552, and Alvin C. Gluek, Jr., *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest* (Toronto, 1965), 60-71.

<sup>17</sup> C.O. Memorandum on H.B.Co. Defence, 27 November 1845, C.O. 537/96.

<sup>18</sup> H. U. Addington (F.O.) to J. Stephen (C.O.), 3 April 1845, confidential, W.O. 1/553. The planned meeting with officers of the Royal Navy is mentioned in Henry J. Warre, "Travel and Sport in North America, 1839-1846," typescript, R.G. 24, F71, 52, P[ublic]. A[rchives of]. C[anada, Ottawa]. Simpson to Pelly, 4 May 1845, D. 4/67, fols. 13-15, H.B.C.A.

<sup>19</sup> Warre and Vavasour to Sec. of State for the Colonies, No. 1, 10 June 1845, W.O. 1/552.

<sup>20</sup> Simpson to P.S. Ogden, 30 May 1845, confidential, copy, *ibid.*

The hazards they faced convinced Warre and Vavasour that Simpson's proposal to send British soldiers overland to Oregon was impracticable to say the least and certainly optimistic. Alternatively, they realized that Oregon could be defended best by establishing control over the strategic waterways of the area, chiefly the Columbia River and Puget Sound, in order to exclude American warships from the region. They assessed Fort Victoria as "ill-adapted either as a place of refuge for shipping or as a position of defence."<sup>21</sup> But not so with Fort Nisqually, which Vavasour described as having fine harbours, accessible at any season to ships of any size and therefore the most suitable place for disembarking British troops.<sup>22</sup>

Warre and Vavasour found Cape Disappointment to be the key position in the defence of that part of Oregon. Perhaps with some exaggeration, Simpson had emphasized that British fortification of this headland on the north bank of the Columbia would be advantageous, for enemy warships entering the river would have to "pass so close under the Cape" that shells from a battery "might be dropped almost with certainty" upon their decks.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the merits of Simpson's proposal became evident to Warre and Vavasour when they reached the river entrance. Consequently, they recommended that Chief Factor Ogden buy the land from two American settlers under the pretence that it would be used as a Hudson's Bay Company trading post.

Subsequently, Vavasour submitted plans to his commanding officer in Canada for three batteries of heavy guns at Cape Disappointment, and an additional battery of similar guns at Tongue Point on the south bank of the river.<sup>24</sup> With these fortifications, it was believed the British would be able to control the entrance to the hinterland from the sea. Moreover, as Warre so cogently pointed out, they could control "the whole of the country south of Puget's Sound, there being no other harbour or place of landing between the Columbia River and St. Francisco [*sic*], where ships of sufficient tonnage to navigate the Pacific could enter or remain at anchor in safety."<sup>25</sup> Nothing came of these plans, for reasons that remain obscure. Probably the British Ministry realized that the military defence

<sup>21</sup> Warre and Vavasour to Sec. of State for the Colonies, No. 2, 26 October 1845, *ibid.* (Received 7 July 1846).

<sup>22</sup> Vavasour to Col. N. W. Holloway, R.E. (Officer Commanding, Canada), 1 March 1846, copy, F.O. 5/457.

<sup>23</sup> Simpson to Pelly, 29 March 1845, copy, F.O. 5/440. See the sketch of the river entrance in Warre Notebook, R.G. 24, F71, P.A.C.

<sup>24</sup> Vavasour to Holloway, 1 March 1846, copy, F.O. 5/457.

<sup>25</sup> Warre, "Travel and Sport in North America," 143, P.A.C.

of Oregon was impracticable. In any event, in a war over Oregon, the decisive theatre would not be the Northwest Coast but the Atlantic seaboard and Great Lakes region. In other words, a war over Oregon was unlikely to take place there.

Meanwhile, what Peel had referred to in September 1844, as "a good deal of preliminary bluster on the part of the Americans" continued to grow in intensity.<sup>26</sup> By early March 1845, the Prime Minister, although unable to persuade Aberdeen of the merits of sending a secret force from Britain to the Columbia by sea, did convince him that a British warship should appear on the Northwest Coast from time to time, and that the flagship of the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, should also call there. Subsequently, the Foreign Office advised the Admiralty that "Rear Admiral Sir George Seymour should himself visit that Coast at an early period in the *Collingwood* with a view to giving a feeling of security to our own Settlers in the Country, and to let the Americans see clearly that H.M.'s Govt. are alive to their proceedings, and prepared, in case of necessity to oppose them."<sup>27</sup> With these words, the British ministry gave its first indication of being ready to use the Royal Navy to oppose the American "bluster."<sup>28</sup> The change of policy prompted Aberdeen to write to the British Minister in Washington: "At all events, whatever may be the course of the American Govt., the time is come when we must endeavour to be prepared for every contingency."<sup>29</sup>

The British ministry could be assured that Rear-Admiral Sir George Seymour, appointed Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, in May 1844, would employ warships to their best effect in support of British policy. Seymour was an outstanding officer whose forcefulness and ability made him the choice of Lord Haddington, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and Sir Robert Peel as Commander-in-Chief, Pacific. He knew a good deal about the Northwest Coast. Before he sailed for the Pacific on September 7, 1844, he had read Vancouver's *Voyages*, Robert Greenhow's *Memoir . . . on the N.W. Coast of North America*, and the Secretary of the Navy's report to Congress, November 1843, on American activities in the Pacific.

<sup>26</sup> Peel to Aberdeen, 28 September 1844, no. 270, Add. MSS. 44,454, B.M. He suggested that the flagship *Collingwood*, "When she has leisure," might visit the mouth of the Columbia.

<sup>27</sup> Addington to Corry, 5 March 1845, secret, encl. in W.A.B. Hamilton (Adm.) to Seymour, 10 March 1845, confidential, Adm. 172/4.

<sup>28</sup> The hardening of policy was announced in the Commons, April 4, 1845. *Hansard*, Third Series, LXXIX, 199.

<sup>29</sup> Aberdeen to Pakenham, 2 April 1845, private, Aberdeen Papers, Add. MSS 43,123, fol. 2476, B.M.

He had also studied the events leading to joint occupation of Oregon, examined charts of the Columbia, discussed the importance of the region with Sir John Barrow at the Admiralty, and visited Hudson's Bay House in London. He was anxious that the ships under his command should do everything within Foreign Office instructions to keep Oregon and California out of the American hands and as many South Pacific islands as possible from falling under French control.<sup>30</sup>

But the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, was acting under a handicap which had plagued his predecessors and would plague his successors until the advent of the telegraph and wireless telegraphy. Several months must elapse before a reply to his most urgent message could reach him from the Admiralty. At the time of the Oregon crisis, outwardbound dispatches were conveyed from London to Jamaica and Colon by monthly steam packet, then across the Isthmus of Panama by mule or horse, and on to Callao, which was the port for Lima, and Valparaiso by Pacific Steam Navigation Company ships. This took 55 days, considerably shorter than the 120 days previously required on the route around Cape Horn but still a long time. There was no certainty that a reply would reach the Admiral immediately, however, for he might be absent from port at the time. Furthermore, sending ships from point to point in the vast Eastern Pacific was time-consuming. The passage from Valparaiso to Hawaii was at least 60 days, and from Hawaii to the Northwest Coast a further 21 days under the best conditions. In view of these limitations, the responsibility placed on the flag officer as an interpreter of British diplomacy was great indeed. He had to assess the validity of old intelligence in relation to his latest instructions and make the best possible disposition of his forces under the circumstances. Similarly, captains under his command frequently were required to exercise judgment concerning their actions and movements.

Seymour was at Lima, Peru, on July 6, when he received orders to sail for Oregon. He had to decide whether to sail first for Tahiti, where he hoped to forestall the French who were planning to establish a protectorate, or to sail directly for the North Pacific. He decided to wait at Lima for news of events in London and Washington. On July 14, he read a Liverpool paper reporting that no action on the Oregon issue could occur

<sup>30</sup> Seymour, *Private Diary*, CR 114A/374/21, *passim*, W[arwickshire]. R[ecord]. O[ffice, Warwick]. Statements from the Seymour of Ragley Collection in the W.R.O. are published herein by permission of the Marquess of Hertford. On Seymour's career and the Pritchard Affair at Tahiti, see *Dictionary of National Biography*, LI, 321.

for some time, no matter how arrogant President Polk might be.<sup>31</sup> He therefore decided to sail for Tahiti and then for Honolulu, where he could obtain further intelligence on the state of the Oregon question.

Seymour knew, in setting a course for Tahiti, that the British frigate *America* 50, Captain the Honourable John Gordon, was bound directly from England to the North Pacific because of the Oregon crisis and would soon be in the Strait of Juan de Fuca.<sup>32</sup> Seymour realized that the *America* could not cross the bar of the Columbia, because she drew more than fifteen feet of water. Therefore, she would have to take up her station in the less hazardous, albeit less influential, position at Port Discovery, near the entrance to Puget Sound. From there a party could go by water and land to Fort Vancouver. Seymour believed that this would suffice to show the British in Oregon that their government was "well inclined to afford them protection."<sup>33</sup>

When Chief Factor John McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver received news that the *America* was on her way, he complained to the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company in London that a frigate would be absolutely no use to the Company in Oregon; instead a smaller vessel was required, which could ascend the river to Fort Vancouver.<sup>34</sup> McLoughlin's complaint was legitimate, but he did not know that Seymour intended to send the sloop *Modeste* back to the coast of Oregon and to Fort Vancouver, if necessary, to strengthen the British position.

The *America* did not reach the Strait of Juan de Fuca until August 28, 1845, because of calms and contrary winds. Captain Gordon of the *America* was the brother of the Earl of Aberdeen, the Foreign Secretary, and one of his officers was Lieutenant William Peel, son of the Prime Minister and an able officer in his own right.<sup>35</sup> The presence in the ship of two persons with such prominent connections caused at least one official, Thomas Larkin, the United States Consul in Monterey, Upper

<sup>31</sup> Seymour, Private Diary, CR 114A/374/22, 14 July 1845, W.R.O.

<sup>32</sup> For a more detailed account of this mission, see Barry M. Gough, "H.M.S. *America* on the North Pacific Coast," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, LXX (December 1969), 292-311.

<sup>33</sup> Seymour to Corry, 14 July 1845, Seymour Order Book I, CR 114A/414/1, W.R.O. A copy of Seymour's instructions to Gordon, 13 February 1845, are in *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> McLoughlin to Governor, 28 March 1845, B. 223/b/33, fols. 170-72, H.B.C.A.

<sup>35</sup> On Peel, see Capt. J. Gordon to Seymour, 22 October 1845, Adm. 1/5564; *Dictionary of National Biography*, XLIV (London, 1895), 224; and Admiral Sir Albert H. Markham, *The Life of Sir Clements R. Markham* (London, 1917), 39-41. Markham thought Peel "the perfect model of what a British naval officer ought to be."

California, to ponder the purpose of the *America's* visit to the Pacific Northwest.<sup>36</sup>

From the *America's* anchorage in Port Discovery, Lieutenant Peel went by launch to Fort Victoria. He had two purposes. His first was to deliver a letter given to Gordon in England and addressed to the Officer-in-Charge of the Fort, explaining that the principal object of the *America's* visit was to assure Company authorities that the British government would oppose American encroachments in the Columbia River basin. The second purpose was to request the use in Puget Sound of the Company steamer *Beaver*.<sup>37</sup> The *Beaver* was away on a trading cruise so the request could not be granted; consequently, Peel and his party were forced to take the frigate's launch to the head of the sound and then travel overland to Fort Vancouver.<sup>38</sup>

Peel had been ordered by Captain Gordon — and may even have been selected by Seymour — to report on the settlements on the banks of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers.<sup>39</sup> His two reports are well known and reveal the judgment that distinguished him as an officer. In the first, addressed to his captain, he gave details on the territory investigated.<sup>40</sup> In the second letter, to Richard Pakenham, the British Minister in Washington conducting talks with the United States government on Oregon, he expressed agreement with Gordon's belief that Vancouver Island must be retained by Britain if the 49th parallel became the demarcation line. Gordon's contention was based on the fact that the northern channel around Vancouver Island was unnavigable for sailing ships, and thus Britain would lack access to the inland passages from the Strait of Juan de Fuca to latitude 51°N.<sup>41</sup> Peel noted that the Island commanded the Strait of Juan de Fuca, possessed a good harbour and had been selected by the Hudson's Bay Company as the eventual hub of trading activities on the Northwest Coast. In his description of growing settlements between

<sup>36</sup> T. Larkin to Dr. John Marsh, 19 August 1845, Marsh Collection, California State Library, Sacramento; in John A. Hawgood (ed.), *First and Last Consul* (San Marino, Calif.; Huntington Library, 1962), 33.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon to Officer-in-Charge, Fort Victoria, 31 August 1845, Port Discovery, B. 226/b/1, fols. 35-36d, H.B.C.A.

<sup>38</sup> Lieut. Thomas Dawes, "Journal of HMS 'America'. . . .," JOD/42, MS 57/055, 85, N[atational]. M[aritime]. M[useum, Greenwich, England].

<sup>39</sup> Gordon to Lt. Wm. Peel, 2 September 1845, encl. in Corry to Addington, 13 February 1846, F.O. 5/459.

<sup>40</sup> Wm. Peel to Gordon, 27 September 1845, encl. in Hamilton to Addington, 10 February 1846, F.O. 5/459. Inscribed on the back, probably in Aberdeen's hand, is "a very good report."

<sup>41</sup> Gordon to Admiralty, 19 October 1845, Adm. 1/5564.

the Willamette and Sacramento Valleys, he foretold the inevitable American control of the port of San Francisco which would give the United States a decided maritime superiority in the Pacific.<sup>42</sup>

Peel reached the Admiralty with vital dispatches from Gordon and McLoughlin on February 10, 1846. On the same day, copies were sent to the Foreign Office. It is not known if this intelligence had any influence on the British ministry or the discussions then taking place in Washington. Undoubtedly it did add greatly to British information on the Oregon country as a critical stage in negotiations with the United States.

Before the *America* sailed from Fort Victoria for Honolulu on October 1, 1845, Captain Gordon and other officers enjoyed the hospitality of Roderick Finlayson, Officer-in-Charge of Fort Victoria.<sup>43</sup> According to Finlayson's account of Gordon's visit to Fort Victoria, Gordon claimed he would not exchange "one acre of the barren hills of Scotland for all he saw around him."<sup>44</sup> What especially disgusted Gordon was that the salmon were caught by baits or nets, and not by the fly as in his beloved Scotland. "What a country," he is reported to have exclaimed, "where the salmon will not take to the fly."<sup>45</sup> His negative reactions were not shared by all the naval officers on the coast, and Finlayson stated that several who visited Fort Victoria earnestly desired to be sent on a mission of conquest, claiming "that they could take the whole of the Columbia country in 24 hours."<sup>46</sup> Gordon's apathy in regard to British and Company interests in Oregon was also noticed by James Douglas, then Chief Factor at Fort Vancouver, who now had good reason to wonder to what degree the promised naval protection would be made available should circumstances require it.<sup>47</sup> Gordon evidently saw no reason to extend his visit to the Strait of Juan de Fuca or visit Nootka Sound and by October 1 the *America* had cleared Cape Flattery bound for Honolulu and the ports on the west coast of Mexico.

<sup>42</sup> Peel to R. Pakenham, 2 January 1846, F.O. 5/459.

<sup>43</sup> R. Finlayson to McLoughlin, 24 September 1845, Fort Victoria, B. 226/b/1, fol. 37d, H.B.C.A.

<sup>44</sup> [Roderick Finlayson], *Biography of Roderick Finlayson* (Victoria, [1891]), 15; see also, his "History of Vancouver Island and the Northwest Coast," typescript, 34, B[ritish]. C[olumbia]. A[rchives, Victoria].

<sup>45</sup> From Finlayson's Journal, B.C.A., quoted in John T. Walbran, *British Columbia Coast Names* (Ottawa, 1909), 210. See also, Leigh Burpee Robinson, *Esquimalt: "Place of Shoaling Waters"* (Victoria, B.C., 1947), 29-30.

<sup>46</sup> Finlayson, "History of Vancouver Island," 35.

<sup>47</sup> James Douglas to Simpson, 20 March 1846, private, D. 5/16, H.B.C.A.; Douglas was indeed correct in his views on Gordon, for the latter thought Oregon of little importance, especially in contrast to California. See Gordon to Sec. of Adm., 19 October 1845, Adm. 1/5564.

About a week later, the *Modeste*, Commander Baillie, then returned to the Strait of Juan de Fuca to continue protection of the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>48</sup> The obvious reason for her reappearance lay in the fact that she was more manoeuvrable and had a more shallow draft than the *America*. She therefore could enter the Columbia to support the British position, if required. Rear-Admiral Seymour knew that the Hudson's Bay Company would require assistance to maintain law and order, especially in view of the great tide of immigration then flowing into Oregon. He had already informed the Admiralty that he was willing to stop the Americans if circumstances required drastic action, despite his inability to send even small ships such as the *Modeste* into the Columbia without some degree of hazard.<sup>49</sup>

At Fort Nisqually, Commander Baillie found Hudson's Bay Company officials most anxious for him to take his ship into the Columbia. James Douglas, for one, told him of McLoughlin's warning to Gordon that unless the government took "active measures" they would lose Oregon.<sup>50</sup> Under these pressures, Baillie sailed for the river mouth and eventually brought the *Modeste* to anchor off Fort Vancouver on November 30, 1845, the passage having taken almost a month owing to difficult winds and currents in the river.

What were the reactions at Fort Vancouver to the reappearance of the British sloop? Warre and Vavasour considered the arrival of a British warship extremely timely as it encouraged British subjects to support their rights. Moreover, it discouraged Americans from taking the law into their own hands; and it gave protection to Hudson's Bay Company property.<sup>51</sup> In other words, they believed that the presence of the *Modeste* achieved the desired effect: American immigrants who had arrived recently were acting peaceably. A similar view was held by McLoughlin, who wrote that the ship's presence "has both a moral and political effect and shows that our government is ready to protect us."<sup>52</sup> The importance of stationing a British warship at Fort Vancouver is best revealed by the fact that

<sup>48</sup> Baillie's instructions from Seymour, 12 August 1845, are in Adm. 1/5561.

<sup>49</sup> Seymour to Corry, 14 July 1845, Y 158, Adm. 1/5550.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas to Baillie, 8 October 1845, copy, B. 223/b/33, fols. 107-107d, H.B.C.A.

<sup>51</sup> Report No. II of Lieuts. Warre and Vavasour to Sec. of State for the Colonies, 8 December 1845, in Joseph Schaefer (ed.), "Documents relative to Warre and Vavasour's Military Reconnoissance [*sic*] in Oregon, 1845-46," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, X (1909), 64.

<sup>52</sup> McLoughlin to Governor, 20 November 1845, in E. E. Rich (ed.), *The Letters of John McLoughlin from Fort Vancouver to the Governor and Committee, Third Series, 1844-46* (London, 1944; Hudson's Bay Record Society, vol. VII), 48.

the *Modeste* remained until May 1847. She was indeed indispensable to British authority in the Lower Columbia.

The Oregon crisis was on Seymour's mind continually while he attended to affairs in Tahiti. On August 19, 1845, he instructed Captain John Duntze of the frigate *Fisgard* 42 to prepare to sail with the steamer *Cormorant* 6 to Puget Sound during the spring of 1846 if the United States and Great Britain did not soon come to an agreement. With this possibility in mind Seymour also considered a plan "to push our Steamers" into the Columbia. There they would be beyond any gun batteries that the Americans might have built on Cape Disappointment.<sup>53</sup> The *Cormorant* and *Salamander*, both paddlewheel sloops, were the only steamers then available to Seymour. There seems to have been not more than two steamers on the station until about 1857 when some screw-frigates and corvettes became available.

His fears were somewhat allayed when the *Collingwood* reached Hawaii in September 1845. He believed that news of the British flagship's presence at Honolulu would eventually reach Oregon and convince Americans there that Britain attached great importance to her interests on the Northwest Coast.<sup>54</sup> At Honolulu, he met his American counterpart, Commodore John F. Sloat. Naturally, each was suspicious of the other, but each also expressed hope that the two nations could reach a peaceful agreement on the definition of the Oregon boundary. Seymour was especially concerned for the fate of Upper California after his conversation with Sloat.<sup>55</sup> At this time, Sloat told him that if the Oregon question were not settled it would be entirely the fault of the American government.<sup>56</sup>

When Seymour returned to Valparaiso on February 15, 1846, he learned that Sloat's squadron was being reinforced from the East Indies station by the ship-of-the-line *Columbus* and the frigate *Constitution*. This information substantiated his fears that the United States Navy was soon to act against either the British in Oregon, or the Mexicans in Upper California — or perhaps both. Therefore, he immediately sailed north to Callao with the brig *Spy* 6 to await news and dispatches from London and New York. There he learned of President Polk's "arrogant declaration" of December 2, 1845 to the United States Congress.<sup>57</sup> Polk had reasserted the Monroe Doctrine, called for an end to the joint occupation

<sup>53</sup> Seymour to Gordon, 12 August 1845, private, Tahiti, CR 114A/418/1, W.R.O.

<sup>54</sup> Seymour to Corry, 3 October 1845, Honolulu, Y7, Adm. 1/5561.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Seymour, Private Diary, CR 114A/374/22, Appendix, W.R.O.

<sup>57</sup> Seymour, Private Diary, CR 114A/374/23, 26 February 1846, W.R.O.

of Oregon and proposed that Federal jurisdiction be extended to that territory. Such expansionist views hardly could fail to provoke a war, Seymour believed.<sup>58</sup> "To provide for war taking place," he sent the *Cormorant* north, along with a supply of coal in the chartered freight ship *Rosalind*, made arrangements for the provisioning and deployment of the squadron in case of war, and issued instructions for part of the squadron expected at Valparaiso — particularly the frigate *Grampus* 50 on her way from England.<sup>59</sup>

Before the *Collingwood* left Callao for the North Pacific to meet the growing crisis, Seymour penned a lengthy report to the Admiralty informing their Lordships of the situation and appealing for additional naval support. In essence, he expressed concern over the inadequacy of his squadron for guarding British interests in the vast Pacific. At a time when the possibility of war with the United States and France was so great, he had only fifteen ships under his command: one ship-of-the-line, two frigates, ten sloops, one brig and one storeship.<sup>60</sup> The inferiority of the squadron was substantiated in his "Account of Foreign Naval Force at present employed in the Pacific" which accompanied his letter to the Admiralty. This listed the French naval vessels at sixteen (two frigates, nine sloops and five smaller ships) and the American vessels at eleven (one ship-of-the-line, two frigates, five sloops, and two schooners, with an additional frigate, the *Congress*, expected). Clearly, the British would be at a disadvantage in the Pacific if France and the United States joined forces in a war.

To counteract the growth of rival sea power in the Pacific, especially American influence in Oregon, Seymour made a bold appeal to the Admiralty to assign two more ships-of-the-line for duty in Puget Sound. He also requested an arsenal or port for his squadron, as well as a naval-stores depot somewhere between the Northwest Coast and New Zealand. Seymour realized, however, that enlarging his squadron would not overcome the limits of the role that the Royal Navy could play in supporting the British position in the Pacific Northwest. As he admitted to the Admiralty, the rapid increase of American settlers would give them control of the Lower Columbia without the aid of the United States government. Unless a British military force opposed them — and Seymour was reluctant to send naval brigades a great distance from their ships — the

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 March 1846.

<sup>60</sup> Seymour to Sec. of Admiralty, 6 March 1846, Adm. 1/5568.

Royal Navy could do very little beyond the areas accessible to ships.<sup>61</sup> This was a fact the Americans knew very well.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, he sought to strengthen his case for an increase in the number of British men-of-war in the Pacific by sending a private letter to his friend, the Earl of Ellenborough, the First Lord of the Admiralty. Seymour could not ignore the deteriorating situation in Oregon, even though some of his acquaintances at the Admiralty considered Polk's address to Congress "mere blustering." It was essential, as he explained to Ellenborough, that "a force commensurate with the superiority of our Navy over that of all other Nations should be sent to these seas. . . ."<sup>63</sup>

These words achieved their desired effect. The Admiralty supported Seymour's urgent demands and informed the Foreign Secretary on June 6, 1846, that it was necessary to increase the Pacific squadron to give it "a decided preponderance" over that of the United States.<sup>64</sup>

The decision was made with some reluctance. Their Lordships feared that strengthening the force in the Pacific would weaken the Royal Navy in home waters, for the French had sixteen or seventeen ships-of-the-line in commission.<sup>65</sup> Fear of French intentions arose two years earlier, in 1844, when the Prince de Joinville published his famous *Note sur l'état des forces navales de la France*, in which he contended that French steam-power could transport thirty thousand French troops across the English Channel at night. This pamphlet touched off a stormy debate in England on national defence, in which alarmists such as Palmerston had warned that steam had "bridged the channel."<sup>66</sup> Thereafter the Admiralty kept a sharp eye on the strength of the French at sea.

These developments prompted the Lords of the Admiralty to explain to the Foreign Office that the Royal Navy was placed in an awkward position by the possibility of a French invasion of England and a war with the United States over Oregon. Henry Corry, the Secretary of the Admiralty, explained the gravity of the situation in these words:

My Lords consider that it would be inconsistent with the character this country has hitherto borne as a Predominant Naval Power, and with that

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Report of William Wilkins (Secretary of War), 30 November 1844, *Senate Documents*, 28th Cong., 2nd Sess., vol. I, 113 ff.

<sup>63</sup> Seymour to Lord Ellenborough, 7 March 1846, Ellenborough Papers, PRO 30/12/4/20, P.R.O.

<sup>64</sup> Corry to Smythe, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 6 June 1846, F.O. 5/461.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> For a critical evaluation of the crisis, see C. J. Bartlett, *Great Britain and Sea Power, 1815-1853* (Oxford, 1963), 148-74.

degree of prudent precaution which under the most flattering circumstances of amity with France we ought still to observe, were we to exhibit our Naval Force at home as inferior to that of France, and this too at a period when there are unsettled differences with America, which may unfortunately terminate in war.<sup>67</sup>

But if an increase in force for the Pacific were authorized by the Foreign Office, more ships would have to be commissioned for protection at home, a difficult matter owing to the shortage of seamen.<sup>68</sup>

The reply of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Aberdeen, to the recommendations of the Admiralty indicated that war with the United States seemed then to be unlikely. He disagreed with Seymour's proposal for strengthening the Pacific squadron on the "supposed probability of war with the United States or with France, or with both countries."<sup>69</sup> Although Aberdeen could see the wisdom in a small increase in the forces for the Mexican Coast to protect British merchants and trade — especially as war between the United States and Mexico appeared imminent — in his opinion the Oregon question provided no threat to British interests. In fact, owing to diplomatic developments, Seymour's fears were now believed to be unfounded.<sup>70</sup>

Aberdeen's confident answer regarding the state of Anglo-American relations can be explained by the fact that Britain gained the upper hand in her diplomatic dealings with the United States by June of 1846. In these negotiations she was able to use her supremacy at sea as a threat. The British ministry, like Seymour, was outraged by Polk's statement, mentioned earlier, to the United States Congress on December 2, 1845. Certainly Peel decided that the time had come for action when on January 6, 1846, he informed a friend, "We shall not reciprocate blustering with Polk but shall quietly make an increase in Naval and Military and Ordnance Estimates."<sup>71</sup>

From January to June, Ellenborough at the Admiralty repeatedly urged the Prime Minister to further increase the estimates to prevent the Royal Navy in the Pacific and elsewhere from becoming inferior to the American force.<sup>72</sup> Concessions were made to Ellenborough in this regard

<sup>67</sup> Corry to Smythe, 6 June 1846, F.O. 5/461.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Addington to Corry, 19 June 1846, confidential, Adm. 1/5568.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Peel to Lord Egerton, 6 January 1846, Peel Papers, B.M.; quoted in Wilbur D. Jones and J. Chal Vinson, "British Preparedness and the Oregon Settlement," *Pacific Historical Review*, XX (November 1953), 360.

<sup>72</sup> Ellenborough to Peel, 5 March 1846, Peel Papers, Add. MSS 40,473, fols. 78-78b, B.M.

but finally Peel was forced to state categorically that he could not sanction further demands on the Treasury in time of peace. He concluded his sharp rejoinder to the First Lord by declaring that Britain was far in advance of her American rival in actual preparedness for war.<sup>73</sup> Peel assured his colleague that the United States knew this, and would see the advantage of signing a treaty ending the dispute over the Oregon boundary. Nevertheless, Ellenborough, the most belligerent member of the cabinet, remained unconvinced. Eventually, in July of 1846, he resigned in objection to the unwillingness of his "timorous colleagues" to be ready for war.<sup>74</sup>

The strength of the Royal Navy may well have been inadequate in Ellenborough's view. It is now clear, however, that Britain's superior strength at sea was the decisive factor in precipitating an agreement between the two powers over Oregon. On January 6, 1846, Louis McLane, the American *chargé d'affaires* in London, met with Aberdeen to discuss the points of dispute. His report of this meeting to officials in Washington warned that the British planned to commission immediately some thirty ships-of-the-line in addition to steamers and other vessels held in reserve.<sup>75</sup> In all likelihood, this alarming news induced the Americans to adopt a less belligerent attitude.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile, at the Foreign Office, plans were underway for a carefully calculated diplomatic manoeuvre. The intent was to draw from the American delegate to the negotiations in Washington a proposal that the boundary west of the Rocky Mountains should be the 49th parallel to the middle of the Strait of Georgia, and then the middle of channel leading to the Pacific, thereby leaving Britain in full possession of Vancouver Island. Under the threat of British sea power, the Americans accepted these terms, which formed the basis of the Oregon Treaty signed on June

<sup>73</sup> Peel to Ellenborough, 17 March 1846, secret, Peel Papers, Add MSS 40,473, fols. 120-23, B.M. The naval estimates of 1846 were 12 per cent higher than those of the previous year because of developments in steam engineering, fear of war with France, and, according to Peel, "relations with the United States." Julius W. Pratt, "James K. Polk and John Bull," *Canadian Historical Review*, XXIV (1943), 346.

<sup>74</sup> Ellenborough to Seymour, 28 June 1846, Ellenborough Papers, PRO 30/12/4/20, P.R.O. On Ellenborough at the Admiralty, see Albert H. Imlah, *Lord Ellenborough: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), 236-38, and Bartlett, *Great Britain and Sea Power*, 182.

<sup>75</sup> See Hunter Miller (ed.), *Treaties and Other International Acts of America*, V (Washington, 1936), 58, and Merk, *Oregon Question*, 341-42.

<sup>76</sup> On this point, see the convincing article by Jones and Chal Vinson, "British Preparedness and the Oregon Settlement," 361-64. Merk (*Oregon Question*, 362-63), in discounting the importance of sea-power in this crisis, makes no reference to the above-mentioned work.

15, 1846. The final partitioning of the continent between Britain and the United States therefore was achieved by an adroit combination of British diplomacy and naval primacy.

Throughout the period when the ministry was reaching an accord with the United States government, Rear-Admiral Seymour possessed sufficient strength on the Northwest Coast to protect British interests in the region. After the *Congress* 54, flagship of Commodore Robert F. Stockton, arrived in the Pacific, Seymour concluded that the Americans were about to take action against the British in Oregon.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, he had carried out his plan, discussed above, of sending the *Fisgard* and the steamer *Cormorant* to join the *Modeste* in those waters. He was confident that they would reach the Strait of Juan de Fuca before the *Congress*, thus forestalling an American occupation of Oregon.<sup>78</sup>

The difficulty of sending ships into the river mouth handicapped the Navy in supporting the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver. Ships that drew more than fifteen feet could rarely pass over the bar, and most ships at Seymour's disposal had a draught in excess of this. Because of this, the *Fisgard*, on April 30, 1846, was forced to take up a station at Fort Nisqually at the very head of Puget Sound, after reaching the Strait of Juan de Fuca and receiving supplies at Fort Victoria. Her captain, John Duntze, had instructions that emphasized that he was to send the *Cormorant* and even, if circumstances warranted, the *Fisgard* into the Columbia in order to "afford British subjects due security."<sup>79</sup> However, the matter continued to disturb Seymour, who noted in his diary on July 19 that his sleep would improve if, somehow, he could put the *Fisgard* into the Columbia River without danger.<sup>80</sup>

By this time, other ships had been sent north to check American influence in Oregon and Upper California.<sup>81</sup> The *Grampus* 50 was to join the *Talbot* 26 at Honolulu; the *Collingwood*, *Juno* 26, *Frolic* 16 and *Spy* 6 were in Californian and Mexican waters.

Seymour also expected the *America* to be in the Northeastern Pacific. To his surprise and disgust he learned that she had sailed for England "without orders, with money."<sup>82</sup> In this, Captain Gordon had acceded to

<sup>77</sup> Seymour to Corry, 7 April 1846, San Blas, Y 63, Adm. 1/5561.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Seymour to J. Duntze, 14 January 1846, copy, Adm. 1/5561.

<sup>80</sup> Seymour, Private Diary, 19 July 1846, CR 114A/374/22, W.R.O.

<sup>81</sup> On Seymour's policy for California, see Ephraim D. Adams, "English Interest in the Annexation of California," *American Historical Review*, XIV (1909), 756-61. Seymour to Corry, 7 April 1846, San Blas, Adm. 1/5561.

<sup>82</sup> Seymour, Private Diary, 14 August 1846, CR 114A/374/23, W.R.O.

the pressure of British merchants on the Mexican coast. They feared a Mexican-American war and thought their funds would be endangered if sent in H.M.S. *Daphne* 18 to England. Gordon evidently thought this was the best means of protecting British interests. The *America* reached the English port of Spithead on August 19, 1846. According to Seymour, Captain Gordon had made an "ill-judged decision which might have turned the fate of war with the United States against us by taking off the station the only strong ship except the *Collingwood* when he was aware I considered war most probable."<sup>83</sup>

When the *America* reached Portsmouth, a court martial was assembled, "and after due deliberation to the pros and cons," as a junior officer recalled somewhat sarcastically, "our worthy old Chief was doomed to be reprimanded, as indeed if a war with the United States had been brought on, he would have deserved to have been shot. Fortunately for him Polk and Aberdeen made it up somehow."<sup>84</sup> The charge of "leaving his station contrary to orders of his Admiral" was "fully proved" and Gordon was "severely reprimanded."<sup>85</sup> At the court martial, pecuniary gain from the freight monies he received for conveying funds to England was ruled out as a motive. Gordon retained command of the *America* for a brief time and then returned to take advantage of a newly-instituted retirement scheme.

As for Seymour, his anxieties ended on August 23, when he learned that Britain and the United States had resolved the Oregon question. With obvious relief that there would be no further need to send warships over the bar of the Columbia, he wrote to the senior naval officer on the Northwest Coast to inform him of the Treaty. His frustration with the whole crisis was revealed when he added, "... the terms are what I understand our Government were ready to give two years ago without all the bluster which has since occurred."<sup>86</sup>

The Treaty effectually signified the end of the Hudson's Bay Company's territorial — but not commercial — domination in Old Oregon. Important provisions in the agreement allowed them to retain full navigation rights south of the 49th parallel and to enjoy access to the harbours

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, appendix, 129. Seymour expressed his displeasure on this subject to Capt. H. Byam Martin, C.B., of the *Grampus*, and the latter knew that "with so great a probability of an American war" Gordon would be "called to account." *Grampus Journal*, Byam Martin Papers, Add. MSS 41,472, B.M.

<sup>84</sup> Dawes, "Journal of HMS 'America' . . .," 107, N.M.M.

<sup>85</sup> Court Martial Books, Adm. 13/103 and 104 for 26 August 1846.

<sup>86</sup> Seymour to Senior Naval Officer of H.M. Ships in Oregon, 3 October 1846, Honolulu, CR 114A/481/2, W.R.O.

of Puget Sound.<sup>87</sup> Although it could be argued that the Treaty did not limit the Company's enterprise, the interests of the Hudson's Bay Company in Oregon declined understandably after 1846.<sup>88</sup> The new depot at Fort Victoria soon began to flourish as it took the place of Fort Vancouver, which was outliving its usefulness as the hub of Company trade on the Pacific. Indeed, Fort Victoria constituted a more suitable port than Fort Vancouver for an organization whose interests west of the Rockies were becoming increasingly involved in coastal shipping, trade with the Hawaiian Islands and commerce with London by way of the sea lane round Cape Horn.

The Royal Navy continued to safeguard the property rights of the Company in Oregon for three years after the signing of the Treaty. Because the terms were variously interpreted in Oregon, the *Modeste* remained at Fort Vancouver until May 3, 1847; she left only after Captain Baillie received information that cleared up all confusion.<sup>89</sup>

Thereafter, Seymour pursued a policy based on the conviction that the security of Company interests in what had become American territory could not depend on the continued presence of a ship of the Royal Navy in the Columbia River. He recommended to his successor that a ship should "show the flag" in Puget Sound in the summer of 1848 as an alternative to a Hudson's Bay Company request for a small force to replace the *Modeste*.<sup>90</sup> In recognition of the continuing presence of the British at Fort Vancouver, Seymour also advised that the Royal Navy make occasional visits to the settlements on the Columbia.<sup>91</sup> British warships were on the Northwest Coast in 1847, 1848, and 1849, but none ventured into the Columbia; the gradual extension of American authority in Oregon Territory coincided with the withdrawal of the Hudson's Bay Company. At no time during this transfer of influence were British interests endangered.

<sup>87</sup> These became points of dispute later. John S. Galbraith, *The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1957), 253-55, 260-61, and 271.

<sup>88</sup> Frank E. Ross, "The Retreat of the Hudson's Bay Company in the Pacific Northwest," *Canadian Historical Review*, XVIII (September 1937), 262-80.

<sup>89</sup> Company agents at Honolulu had advised Seymour of the great necessity "to leave one of HM Ships at the River until everything was finally settled." Reported in Pelly and Allan to Gov., H.B.C., 1 October 1846, A. 11/62, fols. 139, 139d, H.B.C.A.

<sup>90</sup> Seymour to Ward, 27 September 1847, Y 174, Adm. 1/5578.

<sup>91</sup> This advice was forwarded to the next Commander-in-Chief, Pacific. W. A. B. Hamilton to Rear-Admiral T. Phipps Hornby, 10 December 1847, instructions, PHT/3/5, N.M.M.

The Royal Navy played a dual role throughout the Oregon crisis. In the first place, ships on the Northwest Coast acted in various capacities — upholding the Hudson's Bay Company, maintaining law and order and acting as deterrents to any possible American filibuster. According to the Directors of the Company, the *Modeste's* presence, for example, helped prevent a "collision between the inhabitants of British origin, that would have led to most serious difficulties with the parent states."<sup>92</sup> Six ships were stationed on the coast during 1845-1846 and others were ready to act in support of British interests if needed. Hudson's Bay Company officials were accordingly grateful for such overwhelming protection. As Chief Factor James Douglas remarked, the British government had indeed shown "an extraordinary degree of solicitude and taken most active measures for the protection of British rights in this Country."<sup>93</sup>

In the second aspect of its dual role, the very fact of the Royal Navy's predominance in the world — if not always in the Pacific as Seymour and Ellenborough knew — proved instrumental in keeping the peace.<sup>94</sup> There is little reason to doubt that the Oregon compromise, as two notable scholars of American sea power have shown, "saved the United States from a repetition of disasters" characteristic of the War of 1812.<sup>95</sup> The overall fact of British supremacy at sea, the operations of British warships at points of stress such as Oregon, and artful British diplomacy in European and American affairs enabled Great Britain to accomplish its objectives — to protect colonial territories of her worldwide empire and to provide security for the homeland and for growing seaborne trade. As a result of this strength Polk's "bluster" proved to be exactly that.

<sup>92</sup> Directors of H.B.C. at Ft. Vancouver to Capt. Baillie, 1 May 1847, extract, in Seymour to Ward, 27 September 1847, Y174, Adm. 1/5578.

<sup>93</sup> Douglas to Governor and Committee, Hudson's Bay Company, 28 July 1846, extract, encl. in Pelly to Earl Grey, 11 December 1846, C.O. 305/1 (original in B. 223/b/34, fol. 34, H.B.C.A.).

<sup>94</sup> Statistics on the relative strength of British, American and French warships, both sail and steam, are given in Merk, *Oregon Question*, 348.

<sup>95</sup> Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776-1918* (Princeton, 1939), 132.