

Arms and Men on the Northwest Coast, 1774-1825

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It is usually held by students of the early period of culture contact on the northwest coast that the introduction of firearms had a devastating effect on the Indians. The argument has been advanced not only on the ground that the possession of guns gave European seamen a powerful advantage over the coast Indians, but also because the introduction of firearms made inter-tribal warfare much more deadly. The proposition would seem to be based on two Eurocentric, and therefore, in the context of examining northwest coast Indian cultures, somewhat dubious assumptions: first, that the weapons produced by European technology must, of necessity, have been superior to traditional Indian weapons and, second, that the Indians, perceiving the superiority of European firearms, must have wanted to possess them for the same reasons as Europeans — that is, because guns would eliminate enemies more effectively. The purpose of this article is to question both of these assumptions.

Many writers who subscribe to the "fatal impact" school of Pacific history have made unqualified statements about the destructive effect of the introduction of firearms among indigenous peoples.¹ Such opinions have also been expressed by historians writing about the northwest coast during the period of the maritime fur trade.² F. W. Howay, the first to examine the maritime fur trade in any detail, claimed that as long as the

¹ See examples quoted by Dorothy Shineberg, "Guns and Men in Melanesia," *The Journal of Pacific History*, VI, 1971, p. 78 fn. 60; and K. R. Howe, "Firearms and Indigenous Warfare: a Case Study," *The Journal of Pacific History*, XI, 1974, p. 21. I am particularly indebted to my compatriot, Dr. K. R. Howe, for suggesting the line of argument presented here by pointing out these two articles.

² I am taking the maritime fur trading period as being from 1774, the date of the first recorded contact between the Spanish and the Indians of the area that was to become British Columbia, to 1825, by which time the Hudson's Bay Company was becoming active on the northwest coast and the maritime fur trade had ceased to exist as a separate entity. It is also significant that by the late 1820s the percussion cap had been invented and, although it was not adopted by the British army until the 1830s, this advance in firearms technology was to greatly improve their efficiency. See, for example, Howard L. Blackmore, *Guns and Rifles of the World*, New York, 1965, pp. 46 and 53.

Indians were armed only with their traditional weapons they remained at a disadvantage in any clash with the Europeans, but once they became expert in the use of guns they "were much more on a level of equality with the white man."³ Wilson Duff, in *The Indian History of British Columbia*, has written that with the acquisition of guns, warfare amongst the coast Indians "suddenly became much more deadly."⁴ Similar statements have been made more recently. Criston Archer, in an article dealing with the Spanish on the northwest coast, asserts that by 1792 the Indians were abandoning their traditional weapons in favour of guns, and that warfare "became much more deadly when fought with the new weapons."⁵

Before these claims about the impact of firearms can be accepted or rejected, a number of questions have to be asked. What weapons did the Indians use before European explorers and traders started coming to the northwest coast? What were the strategies and tactics of traditional Indian warfare? What was the nature and capability of the firearms that the Europeans brought to the coast? How efficient did the Indians become in the use of firearms? Only after having considered these questions can we decide whether European weapons conferred great advantages on those traders and Indians who possessed them.

Prior to the coming of European explorers, the Indians of the northwest coast used a variety of weapons. They made bows and arrows and, although they probably relied on them less than the plains Indians did, these weapons were used both for hunting game and killing enemies. Bows were made of yew or some other hardwood and, among some groups, were backed with sinew for greater flexibility and resilience. Arrows were usually made of cedar with a hardwood, shell or bone head that was often barbed so that it would embed itself in the flesh. According to the ethnographies, some of the coastal groups also used a sling made of dressed elkskin. War legends have it that a stone hurled from a sling could crack the hull of a canoe, and one informant in the early twentieth

³ F. W. Howay, "Indian Attacks upon Maritime Fur Traders of the Northwest Coast, 1785-1805", *Canadian Historical Review*, VI, December 1925, pp. 307-8.

⁴ Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia, vol. I, the Impact of White Man, Anthropology in British Columbia Memoir no. 5*, Victoria, 1964, p. 59. Duff does add the qualification that "Noisy and short-ranged, the first muskets obtained by the Indians did not wholly replace the bow and harpoon for hunting purposes."

⁵ Criston I. Archer, "The Transient Presence: a Re-Appraisal of Spanish Attitudes towards the Northwest Coast in the Eighteenth Century," *BC Studies*, no. 18, summer 1973, p. 28; see also Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils, the Company Province 1871-1933*, Toronto, 1972, p. 30.

century claimed that an expert sling-shot could kill a water-fowl at a range of two hundred yards.⁶ Many coast Indians also carried a lance or spear, although it was usually handled like a pike or bayonet and not thrown.⁷ In fact, while the Indians of the northwest coast possessed projectile weapons, they relied much more on hand weapons. Clubs and daggers made of stone, bone or hardwood were their favourite arms. As well as carrying offensive weapons, some war leaders also wore protective armour made of elk hides or of wooden rods bound together with thongs, and on the northern coast wooden helmets were sometimes worn for protection.⁸

Because the Indians favoured hand-held weapons, aboriginal warfare on the northwest coast was usually conducted at close quarters. To have much chance of eliminating an enemy an Indian attacker had to get close to him, preferably without arousing his suspicions, and the tactics of Indian warfare were arranged accordingly. Rather than fighting pitched battles in the open, the Indians employed stratagem and surprise to defeat their enemies. They liked to organize their offensive tactics in such a way that their opponents had little chance to counter-attack, thus reducing their own losses to a minimum. Direct frontal attacks on fortified villages with strong wooden houses had only a limited chance of success and were likely to involve considerable loss of life, so the Indians relied on stealth and surprise. Kwakiutl warfare, for example, has been characterized as being "waged on the outnumbered and the unsuspecting, on victims rather than enemies."⁹ Typically, villages were attacked in the dead of night. The raiding party approached the village silently and carefully and attempted to enter the houses undetected. Once inside a house the escape routes were sealed off and, on a predetermined signal, the attackers fell on the sleeping inhabitants. In the pandemonium and confusion that followed, the advantage was very much with the attackers, and often the entire population of a house was put to death. After the people had been killed or captured, their houses were frequently razed by fire. In this way

⁶ Philip Drucker, *Indians of the Northwest Coast*, New York, 1963, p. 95; Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian . . .*, Norwood Mass., 1915, X, p. 18; Franz Boas, *Kwakiutl Ethnography*, Helen Codere (ed.), Chicago and London, 1966, p. 105.

⁷ Drucker, *Indians of the Northwest Coast*, p. 93.

⁸ Philip Drucker, *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast*, San Francisco, 1965, p. 77.

⁹ Helen Codere, *Fighting with Property: a Study of Kwakiutl Potlatching and Warfare 1792-1930*, *Monographs of the American Ethnological Society no. 18*, Seattle and London, 1966, p. 98.

a properly executed attack could result in the complete destruction of a village.¹⁰

As well as the use of ambush and surprise, outright treachery was practised, although not condoned, by some coastal groups. The intended victims might, for instance, be convinced to attend a feast and then, lulled by the festivities, they could be attacked and killed.¹¹ The objective of these strategies was to place the enemy in a position where he could be dealt with at close quarters with as little chance of retaliation as possible.

There is no doubt that following the first contacts with Europeans, the Indians of the northwest coast were introduced to new weapons by explorers and traders, as well as being provided with the materials to modify old ones. When the Spanish explorer Juan Pérez came to the coast in 1774, the Indians already possessed iron and knew its properties, but the subsequent introduction of relatively large amounts of iron enabled the Indians to produce more daggers and spears with sharper cutting edges. This development was an evolutionary one which simply enabled traditional weapons to become more sophisticated but which involved no change in the methods of waging war and probably did not affect the outcome of many engagements. Clubs made of stone or bone were, after all, just as effective for killing enemies as iron daggers. Firearms, however, were another matter. Here was a weapon that was quite new to the Indians and quite different from any that they had used before the Europeans came to the coast.

During the early years of the maritime fur trade the trading Indians had other priorities and therefore traded for other commodities, but gradually the demand for guns gathered and increased. In spite of their reservations about arming potential enemies, most captains were prepared to give guns to the Indians, either as gifts or as trade items. Firearms also passed along the chains of trade that linked the various Indian groups, so Indians who had had no direct contact with Europeans also acquired the new weapons. When the first explorers found their way into Johnstone Strait on the east side of Vancouver Island, they discovered that the Indians there had procured muskets from the Nootka;¹² and when agents

¹⁰ Homer G. Barnett, *The Coast Salish of British Columbia, University of Oregon Monographs Studies in Anthropology no. 4*, Eugene, 1955, pp. 268-69; Drucker, *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast*, p. 79; Curtis, *The North American Indian*, XI, p. 54.

¹¹ Philip Drucker, *The Northern and Central Nootkan Tribes, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnography Bulletin 144*, Washington, 1951, p. 338; and *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast*, p. 80.

¹² George Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean, and Round*

of the Hudson's Bay Company first moved into the interior of New Caledonia, they reported that the Chilcotin Indians possessed guns that they had traded from the coast Indians.¹³ During the maritime fur trading period, some coastal groups acquired relatively large numbers of guns. It was said in 1792 that Wickaninnish, the Clayoquot chief, could command 400 men armed with guns.¹⁴ In 1803 the great Nootka leader Maquinna held a potlatch at which he distributed 200 muskets and seven barrels of powder,¹⁵ and by 1811 the northern Haida were reported to be well armed with muskets.¹⁶ But as with all items acquired by the Indians through the maritime fur trade, the demand for guns was not constant; it peaked and then fell away. One trader found as early as 1794 that muskets had become of little value on some parts of the coast.¹⁷

Nearly all the firearms that the Indians acquired from the maritime fur traders were smooth-bore, flintlock muskets, the typical Indian trade gun of the late eighteenth century.¹⁸ On occasions, Indian leaders were presented with a brace of pistols as a ceremonial gift, and sometimes chiefs acquired blunderbusses or even small cannon mounted on a swivel. But it was the musket that the Indians procured in large numbers. And the smooth-bore, flintlock musket was a weapon with distinct limitations.

The flintlock was basically a mechanism whereby a piece of flint in the jaws of a spring-operated cock was released to strike against a piece of steel pivoted over the firing pan. The resulting spark ignited the powder in the pan and through the touchhole to set off the charge in the barrel of the gun. But many factors could prevent the efficient operation of this mechanism. If the flint was worn or broken, it could fail to produce a spark. It has been estimated that under battle conditions a new flint

the World . . ., London, 1798, I, p. 348; Cecil Jane (trans.), *A Spanish Voyage to Vancouver and the Northwest Coast of America . . .*, London, 1930, p. 77.

- ¹³ George McDougall to John Stuart, 18 January 1822, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, B-37/b, microfilm, Public Archives of Canada.
- ¹⁴ Edmond S. Meany (ed.), *A New Vancouver Journal on the Discovery of Puget Sound by a Member of the Chatham's Crew*, Seattle, 1915, pp. 40-41.
- ¹⁵ Jewitt, Journal, 24 November 1803, in John R. Jewitt, *A Journal Kept at Nootka Sound . . .*, Boston, 1807, p. 12.
- ¹⁶ Reynolds, Journal, 5 May 1811, in Stephen Reynolds, *The Voyage of the New Hazard to the Northwest Coast, Hawaii, and China, 1810-1813 . . .*, F. W. Howay (ed.), Salem, Mass., 1938, p. 18.
- ¹⁷ Magee, Journal, February 1794 [Bernard Magee], Log of the Jefferson, MS, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library, unpaginated.
- ¹⁸ Harold Peterson, *The Book of the Gun*, London, 1962, p. 113.

was required as often as every twenty rounds.¹⁹ If the priming became damp, it could fail to ignite — an important limitation for seamen generally, but particularly for those visiting areas like the northwest coast where there was high and persistent rainfall. If the powder was improperly loaded or if the touchhole between the pan and the bore became blocked, the result could be a flash in the pan that failed to set off the main charge.

Even when the musket did fire efficiently, there were many other limitations on its accuracy and usefulness as a weapon. The loading procedure was relatively complicated and took time. First a quantity of powder had to be placed down the barrel, followed by the ball which had to be driven home with a ramrod; then powder had to be poured into the pan and the gun aimed and fired. It has been estimated that a British infantryman, trained in the use of the musket under battle conditions, could fire two or three rounds a minute.²⁰ Less-disciplined men were unable to sustain even this rate of fire. When it was fired, the musket emitted a cloud of smoke that not only revealed the position of the marksman but also tended to obscure the target. Both the range and the accuracy of the musket were limited. A major drawback of the smooth-bore firearm was the difficulty of controlling windage. If the ball was smaller than the bore of the gun, if it was not cast in a perfect sphere, or if the density of the lead was uneven, then the bullet would bounce around the barrel as it was propelled out. The direction of the shot was determined to some extent by the direction of the last bounce before it left the barrel.²¹ The musket had an effective range of about one hundred yards, perhaps less. Certainly beyond that distance it could not be relied upon to hit anything smaller than the side of a barn.²² Tests conducted by the British army in 1834 showed that, under ideal conditions, flintlocks could fire a shot every 19.51 seconds, with 922 misfires out of 6,000 rounds, or one in every six and a half shots. Of the 6,000 rounds fired, only 3,680, slightly more than half, hit the target.²³ Two years later, figures were reported in the United States indicating that the percentage of hits on a target the size of a company front decreased from 75 per cent at 85 yards over smooth ground

¹⁹ Charles Foulkes, *Arms and Armament: an Historical Survey of the Weapons of the British Army*, London, etc., 1945, p. 54.

²⁰ See Howard Ricketts, *Firearms*, London, 1962, p. 68; and Howard L. Blackmore, *Firearms*, London, 1964, p. 86.

²¹ Petersen, *The Book of the Gun*, p. 133; and T. H. McGuffie, "Musket and Rifle," *History Today*, VII, 1957, p. 475.

²² McGuffie, "Musket and Rifle," p. 267; and Ricketts, *Firearms*, p. 68.

²³ McGuffie, "Musket and Rifle," p. 474; Shineberg, "Guns and Men," p. 76.

to 5 per cent at 510 yards over rough ground.²⁴ At best, then, the flint-lock musket was a somewhat unreliable weapon.

But the Indians of the northwest coast usually did not acquire the best muskets. The typical Indian trade gun, even by the standards of the day, was an inferior weapon. Gunmakers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, particularly in Birmingham, but also in France and the United States, made cheaper versions of military firearms for the export trade. These guns were often crudely made and were constructed of materials that had been rejected for military use.²⁵ Although the Indians showed "great judgment and sagacity" when selecting firearms,²⁶ they undoubtedly acquired a fair proportion of these substandard guns. When the articles they received from traders were found to be inferior, the Indians, understandably, became annoyed. Apparently Maquinna attacked and destroyed the *Boston* in 1803 partly because he had been given a defective musket by Captain Salter, and during the attack the life of John Jewitt was spared because, as an armourer, he possessed skills that the Nootka valued.²⁷ The Indians themselves often lacked the ability or the equipment to repair their guns or to cast shot of the required shape and density. Consequently the repairs that the Indians made to their guns were often rough and ready. The author of a study of firearms on the North American frontier has noted that the Indians were inclined to use brute force when their guns seemed to fail them and that most Indian guns now in private collections are damaged by rough handling or neglect.²⁸ Even when the Indians did acquire and maintain properly working muskets they were quite useless to them unless they also received good quality flints, powder and shot. On some occasions at least the Indians were given muskets without ammunition by the traders. When the English voyager John Meares gave Wickaninnish a pistol with only two charges of powder, it was a ceremonial rather than a useful gift.²⁹

Because the musket was a limited weapon there were limitations on

²⁴ Quoted in Carl P. Russell, *Guns on the Early Frontiers: a History of Firearms from Colonial Times through the Years of the Western Fur Trade*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1957, p. 163.

²⁵ Howard L. Blackmore, *Guns and Rifles*, p. 133; Russell, *Guns on the Early Frontiers*, pp. 104ff.

²⁶ John D'Wolf, *Voyage to the North Pacific and a Journey through Siberia more than Half a Century Ago*, Cambridge, 1861, p. 19.

²⁷ Jewitt, *Journal*, n.d., in Jewitt, *Journal*, pp. 3-4.

²⁸ Russell, *Guns on the Early Frontiers*, p. 141.

²⁹ Meany (ed.), *A New Vancouver Journal*, p. 40; John Meares, *Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789, from China to the North West Coast of America . . .*, London, 1790, p. 145.

the power it gave Europeans when they were attacked by Indians. There was, of course, a brief initial period when the coast Indians, like many indigenous groups, saw firearms as strange and wonderful devices. One of the first traders to come to the coast excited the "wonder and admiration" of the Indians of Nootka Sound when he demonstrated the use of the musket. James Strange tried to convince the Nootka that the gun could only be used by a white man, and perhaps this view was accepted by the Indians when one of them tried to fire the gun and was nearly flattened by the recoil.³⁰ Other groups reacted similarly when they were shown firearms for the first time. Thomas Manby, a member of Vancouver's expedition, records that some Puget Sound Indians "shook with fear" when they watched him kill a raven with a gun. Manby, anticipating hostility from the Indians, added that the party was glad at having so easily "frustrated the wicked intentions of this ferocious people."³¹ But the terror engendered in the Indians by the novelty of firearms protected the Europeans for only a brief period of time.

As the Indians became more familiar with the capabilities of the new weapons, firearms became less of a deterrent. The Indians had superior numbers and an intimate knowledge of the terrain, and the Europeans' guns did not necessarily outweigh these advantages. Captains soon learned that shore parties were particularly vulnerable.³² In July 1775 the Spanish schooner *Sonora*, commanded by Juan Francisco de la Bodega Quadra, was anchored in a cove near the present Point Grenville in Washington. A party was sent ashore to gather supplies, but as soon as the seamen landed they were attacked by Indians whom the Spaniards had thought were friendly. The sailors were cut to pieces without having a chance to use their firearms. Watching the attack from his vessel, Bodega saw only one flash from a gun on shore, and because there was no report he concluded that it had misfired. And even though the *Sonora* was anchored only thirty yards from the shore, shots from her swivel gun and muskets fell short and were of no help to the beleaguered seamen.³³

³⁰ James Strange, *James Strange's Journal and Narrative of the Commercial Expedition from Bombay to the North-West Coast of America . . .*, Madras, 1929, pp. 23-24.

³¹ Manby, Journal, 18 May 1792, Thomas Manby, *A Journal of Vancouver's Voyage, 1790-1793*, photocopy, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library.

³² It has been pointed out, in the context of a more general discussion of European expansion into Asia, Africa and the Americas, that up until the eighteenth century Europeans remained highly vulnerable on land. While they had a relative advantage on the sea, on land the fire power of their weapons could be easily overcome by large numbers of people. See Carlo M. Cipolla, *Guns and Sails in the Early Phase of European Expansion 1400-1700*, London, 1965, pp. 138-40.

³³ See Warren L. Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543-1819*, New Haven and London, 1973, pp. 72-75.

As long as crews remained on their vessels and could fire from behind cover, their firearms may have given them some advantage. But even then the crew of a trading vessel could direct musket volleys at a group of Indians and “not perceive that they were attended with any fatal effects.”³⁴ Trading vessels did not carry large crews, and the time that it took them to reload their muskets meant that they could not sustain a rapid rate of fire. The delay between the flash in the pan and the firing of the shot was another weakness in the traders’ defences. An agile warrior could watch for the flash and then leap out of the way or dive below the water to avoid the bullet.³⁵ Part of the coast Indian’s training for warfare was to practise the art of dodging spears and arrows, a skill that could be used just as well when facing musket fire. Once the Indians got aboard a vessel they met the sailors on much more even terms. It quickly became customary to allow Indians on deck to trade their furs and this habit sometimes enabled Indian attacks to be mounted from close quarters. Sometimes Indians tried to arrange for traders’ firearms to be rendered useless before they began an attack. Even in the early years of contact the Indians had learned all about wetting the priming of guns so that they could not be fired.³⁶ Once the fighting became hand-to-hand, the Indians not only outnumbered the sailors but probably had more experience in fighting with hand-held weapons.

Admittedly the Europeans had other types of firearms besides the musket. At close quarters a blunderbuss could wreck havoc as its flared barrel was designed to scatter shot over a wide area. But the blunderbuss was still a flintlock and it took just as long to load as a musket, and in the interim between shots an Indian attacker might well have settled the matter with a dagger or club. The cannon mounted on their vessels gave European captains the ability to destroy Indian villages from a distance, and on occasions this expedient was resorted to, although not with the frequency that some historians have imagined. As we have noted, the destruction of entire villages was not unknown in indigenous warfare, so this tactic did not terrorize the Indians because it was new to them.

³⁴ George Dixon, *A Voyage Round the World; but More Particularly to the North-West Coast of America: Performed in 1785, 1786, 1787 and 1788* . . . London, 1789, p. 271.

³⁵ The ability to perform this feat was observed in other parts of the Pacific; see Shineberg, “Guns and Men,” p. 77. Shineberg adds that “the fact that wild fowl were able to flee at the flash was a defect which led a sporting parson, the Rev. Alexander Forsyth, to his successful experiments on ignition by percussion.”

³⁶ John Hoskins, Narrative, February 1792, in Frederic W. Howay (ed.), *Voyages of the “Columbia”, to the Northwest Coast 1787-1790 and 1790-1793*, Boston, 1941, p. 271.

According to one story at least, the coast Indians became quite cavalier about the use of cannon against them. A later visitor to British Columbia inquired about the cannon mounted on the bastions at Fort Rupert and was told that once in the past they had been used to fire over the heads of a group of fractious Indians, but far from being terrorized by the white man's thunder, the Indians retrieved the ball and brought it back to the fort gate, offering to trade it so that it could be fired again.³⁷

It is also worth remembering that fur traders did not come to the north-west coast to conquer or exterminate the Indians, but to trade with them, and their enterprise was not advanced by killing potential customers or destroying their villages. In situations where the co-operation of the Indians was desirable, firearms had a more limited function.³⁸ They could not be employed to inflict indiscriminate destruction, and their use was largely confined to self-defence.

Many of the contemporary accounts of battles that traders had with Indians and the extent to which Indian life and property was destroyed come to us second hand. Often they are related by those who heard the story from the actual participants. It was an era when sailors passed the time by telling tall stories in which events were often exaggerated, so these accounts should be treated with some caution. In June 1791 Captain John Kendrick apparently repulsed an attack on his sloop *Lady Washington* by the Indians of Koyah's village on Anthony Island. Although a number of accounts of this affair survive in the journals of fur traders, none is written by a member of Kendrick's crew. The only eyewitness account is recorded in "The Ballad of the Bold Northwestman," a piece of doggerel of little literary merit and, because poetic licence may well have been taken with the facts, of doubtful value as an historical document. The other accounts of the conflict are written by men who obtained their information from the erratic and unreliable Kendrick or, perhaps, from the author of the ballad itself.³⁹ There is a consensus on some of the essential details but considerable disagreement on, for example, the number of Indians killed, with estimates ranging from thirty to sixty.⁴⁰ F. W.

³⁷ John Keast Lord, *The Naturalist in Vancouver Island and British Columbia*, London, 1866, I, p. 164.

³⁸ Cf. Shineberg, "Guns and Men," p. 62.

³⁹ The various accounts of this incident have been gathered together in F. W. Howay, "The Ballad of the Bold Northwestman: an Incident in the Life of Captain John Kendrick," *Washington Historical Quarterly*, XX, (April 1929), pp. 114-23. For an assessment of Kendrick's character see Howay, *Voyages of the "Columbia,"* p. xiii.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 116; and Ingraham, Journal, 7 December 1791, in Mark D. Kaplanoff

Howay has outlined fourteen other incidents that might be described as Indian attacks on maritime fur traders, but in at least five of these cases the evidence that the Indians had hostile intentions is extremely dubious.⁴¹ Indian accounts likewise tended to exaggerate the misfortune that had befallen other tribes or European parties that had been attacked.⁴²

Some voyagers at the time, and a number of historians since, have assumed that firearms gave the European a great advantage over the Indians of the northwest coast, but this implicit belief in the superiority of European technology is not supported by much of the evidence. Some early navigators thought that their firearms constituted "the strength and security of the small number against the multitude,"⁴³ while others more realistically observed that if the Indians acted with resolution they could take a vessel, the supposed advantages of guns notwithstanding.⁴⁴ It was for this reason that James Cook once had occasion to warn his men against using their guns too frequently since it might teach the Pacific islanders "that fire Arms were not such terrible things as they had imagined."⁴⁵ Cook remembered his own advice while he was on the northwest coast but he was to forget it, with fatal results, at Kealakekua Bay. Other captains who followed Cook to the coast were to discover, much to their chagrin, that the Indians were not in the least intimidated by firearms.⁴⁶

Indians armed only with traditional weapons did not consider themselves at such a disadvantage that attacks on vessels were inadvisable. The long-boat from John Meares' ship was attacked in the Strait of Juan de Fuca by a group of Indians who inflicted serious wounds on members of the crew with their arrows, stones and clubs. The sailors were only

(ed.), *Joseph Ingraham's Journal of the Brigantine "Hope" on a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of North America 1790-1792*, Barre, Mass., 1971, p. 181.

⁴¹ Howay, "Indian Attacks," *passim*.

⁴² Meares, *Voyages*, p. 184.

⁴³ C. P. Claret Fleurieu, *A Voyage Round the World, Performed During the Years 1790, 1791 and 1792 by Etienne Marchand . . .*, London, 1801, I, p. 421.

⁴⁴ Puget, Journal, 12 August 1793, Peter Puget, Log of the Proceedings of His Majesty's Armed Tender Chatham, Lieutenant Peter Puget Acting Commander, Commencing 12 Day of January 1793, microfilm, University of British Columbia Library.

⁴⁵ J. C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his Voyages of Discovery, II, The Voyage of the "Resolution" and "Adventure", 1772-1776*, Cambridge, 1961, p. 398, quoted in Shineberg, "Guns and Men," p. 81.

⁴⁶ Bishop, Journal, 14 June 1795, in Michael Roe (ed.), *The Journal and Letters of Captain Charles Bishop on the North-West Coast of America, in the Pacific and in New South Wales 1794-1799*, Cambridge, 1967, p. 62.

saved by good fortune and not by the supposed superiority of their weapons. Indeed Meares noted in his surprise that "the natives behaved with a spirit and resolution that resisted the usual terror of fire-arms among savage people."⁴⁷ The assumption that firearms, in themselves, conferred a superiority on the Europeans was perhaps a dangerous one for captains to make. Throughout the maritime fur-trading period the coast Indians continued to mount attacks on ships, with or without the "benefit" of firearms. The tactics used by the Indians probably had more bearing on the outcome of these engagements than whether or not they possessed guns. By catching a crew unaware, the Indians stood an excellent chance of success with traditional weapons, as some captains found to their cost. Sometimes, of course, they miscalculated. John Boit defeated an attempt to take the *Union* in June 1795 and a number of Indians were killed. Boit described the attack as "very impolitic", not because the Indians were up against guns but because they were too intent on boarding the vessel. He admitted that had they instead "stood off & fir'd their Arrows, no doubt they would have kill'd & wounded seivall of us."⁴⁸

It is also doubtful whether the introduction of firearms made a significant difference to Indian warfare. Muskets may have made a considerable impact on peoples of the Pacific who did not possess projectile weapons prior to European contact, but this was not the case among the Indians of the northwest coast. The disadvantages of the musket for the European voyager were also disadvantages for the Indian warrior, and all the more so if he were unfamiliar with the care and use of firearms.

Perhaps because the Indians often acquired poor-quality guns, there is some evidence to suggest that they were not always very expert users of muskets. Early in the trading period some Indians who had firearms still tended to favour traditional weapons,⁴⁹ either because the ability to fire a musket accurately was not an easily acquired skill or because the advantages of guns were not so immediately apparent to the Indians as they were to Europeans. A later observer reported that when the Indians shot grouse they would sit directly under the trees in which the birds fed and wait for an opportunity to shoot them at point-blank range.⁵⁰ If guns

⁴⁷ Meares, *Voyages*, pp. 177-78.

⁴⁸ Boit, *Journal*, 21 June 1795, John Boit, *The Journal of a Voyage Round the Globe, 1795 and 1796*, [in the *Union*], photocopy, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library.

⁴⁹ Robert Haswell, *Log, March 1789*, in Howay (ed.), *Voyages of the "Columbia,"* p. 62.

⁵⁰ J. W. Boddam-Wetham, *Western Wanderings: a Record of Travel in the Evening Land*, London, 1874, p. 326. For other accounts of Indian inefficiency with firearms

were frequently used in this way, then it is not surprising that fur traders were told by Indians that the bow and arrow was more effective than the gun.⁵¹

It is also unlikely that muskets greatly increased the number of fatalities when one Indian group waged war on another. The musket was designed for European armies which approached each other in lines of battle. The psychological effect of the noise and smoke produced by firearms was an important reason for their use. Certainly there was no aiming at specific targets. Rather the object was to lay down a field of fire through which the enemy had to pass before he could engage in close combat.⁵² These early firearms played an important part in the pitched battles fought by European armies but they were not so well designed for the kind of guerilla warfare waged among the Indians themselves. The noise and smoke of firearms may have added to the degree of panic during a night attack on a house,⁵³ although presumably by the time the attackers had entered a house and sealed it off, the fate of the victims was a foregone conclusion even when traditional weapons were employed. Single-shot muskets that took a long time to reload were not suited to the tactics of stealth and surprise that were so much a part of Indian warfare, and there is no evidence that their offensive tactics underwent any fundamental change during the maritime fur-trading period. Even if they had been reliable, muskets would still have been unsuited to the rough terrain and damp conditions on the coast.⁵⁴

Yet in spite of their limitations, firearms were sometimes used by Indian war parties, although guns did not, as some have claimed, completely replace traditional Indian weapons.⁵⁵ The Indians did not even regard guns to be such powerful weapons that, once acquired, they had to be retained at all cost. In August 1788 Maquinna was about to set off with

see Lewis O. Saum, *The Fur Trader and the Indian*, Seattle and London, 1965, p. 128.

⁵¹ John Tod, *History of New Caledonia and the Northwest Coast*, M5, Provincial Archives of British Columbia, p. 34.

⁵² McGuffie, "Musket and Rifle," p. 474; and Peterson, *The Book of the Gun*, p. 98.

⁵³ See Drucker, *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast*, p. 194.

⁵⁴ Cf. K. R. Howe, "Firearms and Indigenous Warfare," p. 36.

⁵⁵ The origin of this notion can probably be attributed to Edward Bell, a member of Vancouver's crew, who wrote that the Indians "former weapons, Bows and Arrows, Spears and Clubs are now thrown aside & forgotten." See Meany (ed.), *A New Vancouver Journal*, p. 41. The remark is quoted in Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire*, p. 341, and the claim that the Indians were abandoning their traditional weapons is also made by Archer, "The Transient Presence," p. 28.

a war party when he was provided with a quantity of firearms by Meares, who assumed that he was giving the Nootka leader a powerful advantage. Maquinna apparently used the guns against his enemies, but when the expedition returned to Nootka the firearms were handed back to Meares.⁵⁶ Many of the trade muskets that Maquinna procured from Europeans he in turn traded with the Kwakiutl groups of northern Vancouver Island, and he was also in the habit of giving away guns to neighbouring groups whom he invited to potlatch feasts.⁵⁷ These do not seem to be the actions of an Indian leader who perceived the continued possession of large numbers of muskets as essential to his continuing superiority over other groups.

It has been too easy to assume that European technology in the late seventeenth century must have produced weapons that were superior to those used by the coast Indians and therefore that firearms had a devastating impact by giving the European a great deal of power over the Indians and by suddenly increasing the number of fatalities in Indian warfare. At first glance it would appear that some of the statements of maritime fur traders, who claimed that firearms were more deadly than Indian weapons, lend credence to this generally held assumption. But European seamen who were isolated and outnumbered amongst a population which they often expected to be hostile needed to reassure themselves of their presumed superiority. They hoped that the Indians would perceive "that they have little less than inevitable destruction to expect from attacking people who's Instruments of death are far superior to their own."⁵⁸ But the Indians, during this early contact period, had no reason to accept any notion of white superiority any more than present-day historians should simply assume the superiority of European culture and its products. Given the nature of Indian warfare and the kind of guns that were brought to the northwest coast, it is probable that the use of firearms did not cause serious depopulation among the coast Indians during this period.

If we accept the proposition that firearms were of only limited utility as weapons, then we are left with the question: why did the coast Indians, or at least Indian leaders, want to acquire large numbers of muskets? It is not always remembered that when articles are transferred from one culture to another they do not necessarily serve the same function in the recipient

⁵⁶ Meares, *Voyages*, pp. 196-97 and 206.

⁵⁷ Jewitt, *Journal*, 26 March and 24 November 1803, in Jewitt, *Journal*, pp. 5 and 12.

⁵⁸ Ingraham, *Journal*, 7 December 1791, in Kaplanoff (ed.), *Ingraham's Journal*, p. 181.

culture as they did in the donor culture. In the case of the acquisition of firearms by the Indians of the northwest coast, as in most cases of cultural transfer, the motives of the recipient group were mixed.

Indians may well have felt, for example, that the advantage of guns was not that they were better weapons but that they were easier to acquire than traditional arms. As long as sea otter remained reasonably plentiful on the coast it was perhaps easier to capture pelts to exchange for guns than it was to fashion a bow or a spear by hand.

Firearms quickly acquired a function within the economy of the coast Indians. It is possible that Indian leaders believed that by possessing firearms they were partaking of the wealth of the white man. Certainly an Indian who owned large numbers of muskets demonstrated that he was a leading trader and therefore very wealthy. Among the coast Indians, showing one's wealth established one's prestige, and the fact that guns changed hands at potlatches indicates that they had acquired important status as wealth items. Once guns were sought after by Indian leaders for distribution at potlatch feasts, then the motivation for acquiring them became as complex as the motivation behind the giving of potlatches.

Indians may well have wanted firearms as much for their symbolic as their utilitarian value. One of the earliest students of the process of acculturation remarked: "Because of the value system of our own culture, European investigators are prone to think of the acceptance of new culture elements as conditioned primarily by considerations of immediate utility, yet we know that this does not hold even within the narrow frame of our own culture and society."⁵⁹ Given the nature of the documentation it is difficult for the historian to speculate on what was going on in the minds of the Indians during this early contact period, but some suggestions can be offered. In the catalogue of a recent exhibition of northwest coast Indian sculpture, Wilson Duff has suggested the possibility that some stone clubs evolved as art forms to the point where they ceased to be "functional as striking weapons." That is, in Duff's words, these clubs have become "images of power"⁶⁰ rather than instruments of power. Now most of the trade guns acquired by the Indians were certainly not works of art; although there is at least one example of a Hudson's Bay Company musket having been decorated by a Haida artist, and embellishing an object in this way indicates that it has ceased to have a purely functional

⁵⁹ Ralph Linton (ed.), *Acculturation in Seven American Indian Tribes*, Gloucester, Mass., 1963, p. 470.

⁶⁰ Wilson Duff, *Images Stone b.c. Thirty Centuries of Northwest Coast Indian Sculpture*, Saanichton, 1975, pp. 17 and 177ff.

value.⁶¹ Still, most firearms were not pieces of art, and yet they could, nevertheless, have held a symbolic meaning for the Indians. It has been demonstrated that sexual imagery was particularly important to Indian artists and, presumably, to the beholders of their art.⁶² The possibilities of guns as phallic symbols are obvious. Perhaps to the Indian, no less than to the European, guns came to represent male potency, instruments that exploded with life — and death.⁶³ As amongst other Pacific peoples, guns had an emotional value to the northwest coast Indians; their use constituted a show of force and power, irrespective of the number of opponents they dispatched.

Guns were in demand amongst the Indians of the coast in spite of the fact that they were not necessarily any more efficient killers than were their traditional weapons. Firearms came to have an economic and, perhaps, a symbolic value. The possession of large numbers of firearms by an Indian group demonstrated to its enemies, and its potential enemies, that it was both wealthy and powerful. These points could be made by displaying and giving away guns, or, in situations of conflict, by firing them off without actually hitting anyone. Killing people was only one way of exercising power. It is difficult to assert conclusively that guns made Indian warfare more bloody because we do not know precisely how destructive pre-contact warfare was. But having examined the nature of the firearms that were brought to the coast and having looked at the way in which they were used by the Indians, it seems unlikely that guns had the devastating effects that they have been credited with. Indeed it is quite possible that the coast Indians demanded these guns for reasons that had nothing to do with their capacity to kill enemies.

⁶¹ Vancouver Art Gallery, *People of the Pottlatch Native Arts and Culture of the Pacific Northwest Coast*, Vancouver, 1956, plate 40.

⁶² Duff, *Images Stone b.c.*, p. 21 and *passim*.

⁶³ The thought that weapons are life-givers as well as death-bringers has already been expressed, in the case of stone clubs, by Duff, *Images Stone b.c.*, p. 20.