

THE VOYAGES OF JAMES HANNA TO THE NORTHWEST COAST

Two Documents

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IN RECENT ISSUES OF BC STUDIES W. K. Lamb and Tomas Bartroli have provided an illuminating discussion of the role of James Hanna in the development of the maritime fur trade on the Northwest Coast.¹ My own research on this general topic has unearthed accounts of the voyages made by Hanna in 1785 and 1786. These documents are reproduced in full, together with some brief comments.

THE VOYAGE OF 1785

Little is known about Hanna's first voyage, although Mackay suggests that a journal may have been "circulating in England in 1786."² The following brief account, contained in a letter "from a gentleman at China," was published in London in August 1787.³ Clearly, some knowledge of Hanna's voyage was available in England at least a year before the return of Portlock and Dixon and the publication of the account in *The World*.⁴

Like other descriptions of the voyage, this version includes an account of the conflict between Hanna and the Native people at Nootka. It by no means resolves the uncertainties concerning this incident, but does situate the events directly in the trading process.

¹ W. K. Lamb and T. Bartroli, "James Hanna and John Henry Cox: The First Maritime Fur Trader and His Sponsor," *BC Studies* 84 (1989-90): 3-36; and W. K. Lamb, "James Hanna and John Henry Cox: A Postscript," *BC Studies* 88 (1990-91): 93-94.

² D. Mackay, *In the Wake of Cook: Exploration, Science & Empire, 1780-1801* (London: Croom Helm, 1985): 80, note 46. Lamb and Bartroli list the known sources.

³ It appears in the *Daily Universal Register* of 21 Aug.; this was a precursor of the *London Times*.

⁴ On *The World* article, see Lamb and Bartroli, 13-14. This also appeared in the *Scots Magazine* in 1789; see J. S. and C. Marshall, *Pacific Voyages: Selections from Scots Magazine, 1771-1808* (Portland: Binford and Mort), 13-14.

It may be that Hanna, although his responsibility for the ensuing carnage should not be diminished, had become embroiled in a Native dispute about access to trade. As Lamb and Bartroli note, some kind of a relationship was established between Hanna and the Clayoquot Chief Cleaskinah, with the latter adopting the name "Hanna."⁵

In September, 1785, Capt. Hannay arrived in a small vessel of 50 to 60 tons at Nuttka, in George's Sound,⁶ on the coast of America, and entered into a friendly and commercial intercourse with the natives; but some difference about the barter of respective commodities arose, on which the savages retired for some days, having no communication with the vessel; at last a few prows approached her, in one of which was a herald, who, standing up to the bow of the prow, and within hearing of the European vessel, pronounced his reasons for war, and solemnly declared it; informing Capt. Hannay, that they would attack him the next day, by a certain hour. Capt. Hannay put himself into the best posture of defence possible, and awaited the enemy. At the hour appointed, a fleet of prows appeared, and advanced to the vessel, pouring into her showers of arrows and darts. Captain Hannay's musquetry and small guns did great execution among them, and they drew off. In the evening they sent an Ambassador, begging peace, which was concluded, Capt. Hannay applying plaisters to the wounded; and they continued to trade as before, until the departure of Capt. Hannay, inviting him to return next season, and promising to provide furs for him. Capt. Hannay did last year return to Nuttka in a larger vessel; but he not having reached Macao, before the last ship left China, his reception and success are unknown.

THE VOYAGE OF 1786

Hanna returned to the Northwest Coast in the summer of 1786. This voyage used a larger vessel, rigged as a snow, but again named the *Sea Otter*. The second mate, a Mr. Elliot, wrote the following letter from Macao to a friend in Edinburgh. It was published in the columns of two London newspapers in November 1787, when Elliot was identified as a "Gentleman on board the *Sea Otter*."⁷

⁵ Lamb and Bartroli, 12-13.

⁶ Nootka Sound.

⁷ It was published in the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* on 20 Nov. and in the *Daily Universal Register* on 23 Nov. There are minor differences, mostly typographical, between the two versions; I have reproduced the first.

Rather more is known about Hanna's second voyage than about the first, but Elliot's account provides new information.⁸ He gives an approximate chronology for the entire voyage, including the visit to Hawaii. On the other hand, Elliot offers no support for Walker's statement that the *Sea Otter* traded on the coast to about two degrees south of Nootka.⁹ Probably the most interesting part of Elliot's letter is the account of the visit to Nootka. Like the reports of many early traders, Elliot's contains a mixture of apparently accurate description and Eurocentric speculation.

I last year informed you of my being appointed second mate of a snow bound to America, which I accordingly joined in this port the 7th of March 1786, and on the 5th of May we sailed from hence.¹⁰ We met with steady contrary winds and frequent heavy gales; but our vessel proving an extraordinary bad sailer, it was the 28th of June before we got through Diemen's Straits, in the great Pacific Ocean. We then met with thick misty weather, constant small rain, and a fair wind, which brought us in sight of the snow-topped hills of America the 16th of August, and safe into King George's Sound the 18th, where we remained taking in wood and water till the 3d of September. Here we purchased 238 skins,¹¹ which were all we could get, for knives, small hatchets, and trinkets. We were also plentifully supplied during our stay, with salmon and cod-fish, and plenty of blae [*sic*], bramble, hain [*sic*], and cranberries.

I shall give you a small sketch of the natives which, from visiting the towns, and their constant attending along-side, I was able to learn, and likewise from the account of one of the inhabitants, whom we brought away and have now on board.¹² They are of a middle stature, stout and muscular built, of a dark copper colour, and very fierce

⁸ R. Fisher and J. M. Bumsted, *An Account of a Voyage to the North West Coast of America in 1785 & 1786 by Alexander Walker* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1982), cited hereafter as Walker; Alexander Dalrymple *Plan for Promoting the Fur-Trade and Securing it for this Country, by uniting the Operations of the East India Company and Hudson's Bay Company* (London, 1789). Fiche CIHM 27753, UBC (cited hereafter as Dalrymple); W. Beresford, *A Voyage Round the World; but more particularly to the North-West Coast of America: in 1785, 1786, 1787 and 1788, in the King George and Queen Charlotte by Captains Portlock and Dixon* (London: George Goulding, 1789), 316-17 (cited hereafter as Beresford).

⁹ Walker (202) states that after leaving Queen Charlotte Sound, "Hannah went to the Southward of Nootka, about one Degree and a half, or two Degrees. He touched at several places, and collected from 250 to 300 of the finest Furs . . ." Dalrymple provides no information on Hanna's movements after September 15.

¹⁰ Dalrymple (29) states the *Sea Otter* left Macao on 4 May.

¹¹ Walker (202) estimates 150 to 160. Beresford (317) states that Hanna obtained "about fifty good sea-otter skins" at Nootka and the full returns of the voyage were 100 skins and 300 pieces.

¹² Lamb and Bartoli (25) identify the passenger as Comekala, the brother of Maquinna.

countenance, which they heighten by smearing their whole body with red clay, mixed with fish oil, and streaking their face with black; they also daub their hair with clay, and powder it with white down of birds. The dress of the men is a skin or matt (which they work of stripes [*sic*] of some tough bark very neat), tied round the neck; and open before, with a hat made of stained twigs, like basket-work, of the form of a sugar-loaf. The women wear the hat also, and the skin or matt tied round their shoulders, with this addition — they overlap the skins before, and tie a string round their middle, which, with the help of a round matt and a hole in the center, through which they put their heads, and which hangs down to their middle, forming a complete covering; but every thing about them stinks most abominably, owing to the fish oil and other nastiness, with which they adorn themselves and their cloaths. The men, when going to battle, or on an expedition, are always perfectly naked. Fish appear to be their chief provision in summer, and indeed they dry a great quantity for winter; they eat the whale, porpoise, and every thing they can catch; I have seen them frequently take a mouthful of a fish even before taking it off the hook; in winter they have sea otters, seals, bears, wolves, and sundry other wild beasts, but no vegetables, nor any substitute for bread; they likewise eat their captives and enemies killed in battle, and I believe their own dead also; as, on our first arrival, they brought to us for sale a great number of skulls, hands, feet, and other human bones.

Their language is remarkably difficult of pronunciation, from its being entirely guttural, but consists of very few words. Their religion and laws without doubt are the same as among the brute creation. Their instruments for fishing are bone hooks, well contrived and made, and spears with two grains and bone heads, with which they strike. Their instruments of war are bows, arrows headed with bone, and six witters on each, bone spears (some of which are five feet long), fixed in a wooden staff, which make in all about ten feet long, bone daggers from one to two feet long, and stone mallets in various shapes, well polished, which they use when fighting at close quarters.

Their canoes and paddles are made better, both with regard to the regularity of shape and polishing, by these savages (though we found no other tools among them but small knives crooked, made of iron hoops or some other thin pieces of iron and good for nothing) than most part of [the] country joiners in Scotland could pretend to, with all their tools. They are cut out of the solid tree. I saw one of them, which was seventy-three feet long, eight feet broad and had seats for thirty men to paddle, besides which she could easily have carried

twenty more; this was called a war canoe and was adorned round the gunwale with three rows of human teeth. Their houses are built only of loose boards, and, though in such a cold climate, are neither wind nor water tight. We found there a man who had been left, about a month before our arrival, by two ships from Bombay;¹³ he, however refused to take a passage with us, choosing, rather, to remain among cannibals; so we left him to his fate.

From King George's Sound we proceeded northward, along the coast, as far as 52°20N.¹⁴ during which time we discovered a number of islands, &c, not before seen, to which we gave the names of our owners and sundry others; one of them, which I place in lat. 50°49N. long. 231°17E. of London, our Captain called (E._____t)¹⁵ by my name. We there met with extraordinary tempestuous weather, which prevented us from proceeding further north; and, on the 16th September, we anchored in a bay, which we named St. Patrick's,¹⁶ our Captain being an Irishman, where we remained till the 1st of October, when we proceeded for the Sandwich Islands, where we intended to winter, and return to America in the Spring. We here experienced very severe weather, the wind being foul and almost constant gales, till the 7th December, when we got the trade wind, being in lat. 23°N. and fine weather. On the 11th December we saw Owhyhee, where we intended to winter, under which we beat till the 19th December, when, finding little prospect of reaching the bay of Karakakooa, our vessel being very leaky from the severe weather, our sails all torn and worn out, and our rigging in very bad order, it was agreed in a council of war to make the best of our way to China.

Before proceeding farther, I will give you a short account of the Island of Owhyhee. It is in length about ninety miles, and nearly as broad, of a remarkably fertile soil, and very populous. It forms a delightful prospect, with its fine plantations rising gradually from the sea to pleasant green hills, and behind them mountains covered with snow, though the northernmost part of it lies in lat. 19°50N. We found

¹³ This was John McKay. He had been left by the expedition, consisting of the *Captain Cook* and the *Experiment*, commanded by James Strange. See the accounts in: Walker (177-89); A. V. Venkatarama Ayyar, J. Hosie, and F. W. Howay, *Records of Fort St. George: James Strange's Journal and Narrative of the Commercial Expedition from Bombay to the Northwest Coast of America* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1982).

¹⁴ If accurate, this would place Hanna in the vicinity of Milbank or Laredo Sound. Hanna's "Chart of Part of the N.W. Coast," reproduced in Lamb and Bartoli, takes the coast to about 52°35'N.

¹⁵ Hanna's "Chart of Part of the N.W. Coast" shows the easternmost of "Lance's Islands" as Elliot's Island.

¹⁶ Hanna's "Plan of St. Patrick's Bay" is reproduced in Lamb and Bartoli.

it exceedingly hot. The natives of this island were with us all day long, selling hogs, sweet potatoes, plantains, cocoa-nuts, bread-fruit, sugar-canes, salt, &c which greatly refreshed our crew. They are very tall, stout built, active looking people, many of them being seven feet high, and well made. Neither the men nor women wear any other cloathing than a maro, which is made of the rind of a tree, and narrow; this they put round their waist, and between their thighs, except on great occasions, when they wear a cloak (about the size of the silk cloaks in summer), wrought with feathers, of a bright scarlet and yellow colour, as thick as upon a bird. They wear also a helmet made exactly in the form of the old helmets of wicker work, and covered with feathers of the same colours as the cloak.

We then proceeded on our return, when, on the 3d of February, we saw the south end of Formosa; and, on the 7th of February made the coast of China, and anchored here next day.

You here see the end of a hard and unsuccessful voyage; however, I understand our owners mean to try again. We are now refitting, but where we shall proceed next year is yet uncertain.