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### The Spanish Discovery of British Columbia in 1774

F. W. Howay

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THE SPANISH DISCOVERY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA IN 1774

BY

F. W. HOWAY

In the eighteenth century Spain dreamed of world domination. One of the bases of this dream was the Pacific ocean, of which at that time vast portions lying both north and south of the equator were unexplored. The great island groups of the South sea were then unknown. The Philippine Islands were a Spanish possession and the coast of America, north of San Blas, was only regarded as useful in so far as it might afford some shelter or harbour of refuge for the richly-laden galleons in their voyages from those islands.

The old belief in a northwest passage remained a fundamental tenet of geography; but Spain's interest therein was more in preventing, than in aiding, its discovery. In the Spanish view no other nation had or could have any possessions in the Pacific ocean, which was regarded as a *mare clausum*, and hence such nations could have no reason for visiting or frequenting that immense ocean. This position was, in part at any rate, built upon the Papal Bull of Alexander VI and on the subsequent Treaty of Tordesillas. In consequence Spain looked with a jealous eye upon the western movement and vision of the seamen of England and of every other nation. At first that feeling was in combination with one of fear, for the buccaneers looted and plundered on the South American coast and thought the seizure and pillage of a Spanish galleon from Manila a fine way of singeing the Don's beard and, incidentally, of proving the virility of the reformed religion. But even after these freebooters had passed off the stage, Spain's jealousy remained in its pristine vigor and was directed against any and every country that sought to voyage to or carry on trade with any part of the Pacific ocean.

In 1774 Juan Perez was sent northward from Mexico on an expedition of discovery. This was the first voyage undertaken in that direction by the Spaniards since the days of Viscaïno, one hundred and seventy years before. The underlying motive was jealousy of the Russians who from the days of Bering and Chirikof had been looking longingly across the isle-strewn Aleutian waters towards the new world. The *promyshleniki* had led the way in their crazy, thong-woven craft, lured by the search for the sea-otter—the animal which played the part on the coast that the beaver had in the interior of the continent. Reports of the Russian movement eastward had reached Spain; and it was known that already settlements for trade were being made in Alaska. How far southward they had extended and what the Russian intentions were in that regard were unknown, but at any rate here was a danger threatening the age-old policy of Spain. At that time San Francisco, which had been founded in

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1769, marked the most northerly point of actual Spanish possession. When Perez prepared the plan of his proposed voyage, in 1773, he suggested falling in with the coast in latitude  $45^{\circ}$  or  $50^{\circ}$ ; but as this was allowing the Russians too great leeway, peremptory instructions were issued to him to make his landfall at about  $60^{\circ}$  and take possession for Spain. Perez, as is well-known, failed to reach the designated latitude. His most northerly position was in Dixon entrance, about latitude  $54^{\circ} 40'$ , and he never landed nor took possession anywhere.

The foolish policy of secrecy which shrouded all of Spain's activities on this coast has robbed Juan Perez of his rightful position as the discoverer of British Columbia. The accounts of his voyage, prepared by the two friars, Crespi and Peña, who accompanied the expedition partly for this purpose, were carefully copied and transmitted to Spain and then as carefully laid away in the archives where they remained for almost one hundred and twenty years. They were published in original and in translation, by the Historical Society of Southern California, in 1891, and are already amongst the scarce and rare Americana.

It is the purpose of this paper merely to summarize the information contained in these journals so far as it relates to the British Columbian coast. When he was preparing his History of the North West Coast, Bancroft had only fragments of them. Inasmuch as they give the very first information about our Indians and our western coast they are worthy of attention even though somewhat belated in their arrival. The diary of Father Crespi is the more full; this may be accounted for by the fact that he had lived in the vicinity of San Francisco amongst the natives there, and thus his eye was the keener to notice slight differences.

On June 11, 1774, Juan Perez set sail from Monterey, in the *Santiago*. Slowly the little vessel made her way northward. Three and four miles an hour, and sometimes even less, are frequently recorded. So slow was her progress that on July 15th, when in latitude  $51^{\circ} 42'$ , a council was held, and it was determined to seek land immediately in order to renew the water supply, and then to continue the voyage to the latitude of  $60^{\circ}$  mentioned in the instructions. The following day a great wooden cross was prepared, so as to be ready for planting when possession should be taken. Fog settled down as the *Santiago* approached the coast—all the early voyagers emphasize the constant fogs in this vicinity. On the 18th it cleared and the snow-capped summits of mount San Christobal were seen about twenty leagues distant. Standing along the western coast of Queen Charlotte Islands, North island, the most northerly of the group, was sighted on the twentieth of July. Bonfires were seen on the shore. Both of the fathers complain of the fog though they say that they

could see fully three leagues. The natives also saw the ship and came out in their canoes, which Father Crespi says, were much like those "used by the natives of the channel of Santa Barbara, except that the bow and stern are not spread out like a fan." In exchange for strings of beads they gave the visitors dried fish. This was probably halibut, for, as Crespi tells us, it seemed to be cod although it was whiter.

As the canoes approached the *Santiago*, Crespi says he knew that the people were pagans for the air they sang was the same as that sung at the dances of the pagans from San Diego to Monterey. They threw feathers upon the sea, as a sign of friendship, just as Cook records of the Indians at Nootka four years later. From the description of the locality it may be concluded that these Indians came from Parry passage, or Cloak bay, as Dixon called it fourteen years later. Pena states that the men were well made, white, with long hair, and clothed in skins. He only mentions that they had iron implements in their canoes; Crespi however, adds that one of their harpoons was of iron and resembled a boarding-pike. This raises the interesting question: where was this iron obtained? The late S. A. Clarke seriously suggested that the Indians knew the art of smelting. That, of course, is utter nonsense. It may have been obtained from neighbouring tribes who had received it in trade (or by theft) from the Russians at Kodiak a thousand miles away, or, indirectly, from the Hudson's Bay Company or the French traders of the interior two or three thousand miles distant. If both these sources are regarded as too chimerical, we are thrown back on a shipwreck, which is the explanation offered by Captain Cook for his finding iron and the knowledge of iron in many of the islands discovered by him in the Pacific (see his *Third Voyage*, vol. 2, pp. 194, 240-3). Bancroft, in his *History of Alaska*, states on the authority of Maurelle's manuscript, *Compendio de Noticias*, that an old bayonet and pieces of other iron implements were seen amongst them, which the pilot conjectured must have belonged to the boat's crew lost in 1741 by Chirikof's vessel somewhere in these latitudes.

The Indians remained around the *Santiago* until the vessel was eight leagues from shore; then, even though a high sea was running, they set off for their homes. The Spaniards, fearing the fog and the currents of the unknown region, stood off during the night, and on the following morning, July 21, reapproached North island "in order to plant there the standard of the holy cross." Being within a mile and a half of the shore the ship was this day surrounded by about twenty-one canoes carrying some two hundred persons—men and women, boys and girls. Though they had never seen a civilized person before, the Indians, says Crespi, came alongside without the least distrust, beating their tom-toms, and making movements like

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dancing. They brought to exchange: skins of the sea-otter, very well tanned and dressed; cloaks of sea-otter skins—the cutsarks of the later traders—sewn as neatly as any tailor could do; blankets of fine wool, about a yard and a half square, or as Crespi says, of the hair of animals that seemed like wool. This was probably the wool of the mountain goat, inasmuch as it is not known that the strange fleece-bearing dog had reached so far north. These blankets were ornamented with different colours, red, yellow, and black, and the weaving was so close that it seemed to have been done in a loom. These blankets must have been of the Chilkat type. They also brought mats made of cedar bark, which Crespi calls “fine palm leaves;” bunches of feathers arranged in various shapes; caps made of skins; cedar bark hats of conical shape, such as Cook describes at Nootka; wooden bowls ornamented with figures of men, animals, and birds incised or in relief; spoons of wood and of horn; and neatly made cedar boxes; some of which were almost nine feet in length, sewed with sinews at the corners, and carved or painted with various figures in the usual colours, red, yellow, and black. These they traded for ribbons, old clothing, knives, and beads. Iron articles were preferred, especially knives, and any form that had a cutting edge.

These people were clothed in skins or in a cape of woven woolen stuff covering the whole body. Their hair was long, and it fell in braids that reached to the shoulders. The friars state that the females were “as fair and rosy as any Spanish woman.” Captain Cook bears witness to the same effect, speaking of the natives of Nootka Sound he says: “The whiteness of the skin appeared almost to equal that of Europeans; though rather of that pale effete cast which distinguishes those of our southern natives. Their children, whose skins had never been stained with paint, also equalled ours in whiteness.” Dixon, speaking of the Haidas of Queen Charlotte islands, says: “If I may judge from the few people I saw tolerably clean, these Indians are very little darker than the Europeans in general.”

The women wore rings on their fingers, and bracelets of copper and iron; but they were disfigured by that strange feminine adornment, the labret, or stae. Father Crespi thus refers to it: “They wear pendent from the lower lip, which is pierced, a disk painted in colours, which appeared to be of wood, slight and curved, which makes them seem very ugly and at a little distance they appear as if the tongue was hanging out of the mouth. Easily, and with only a movement of the lip, they raise it so that it covers the mouth and part of the nose. Those of our people who saw them from a short distance said that a hole was pierced in the lower lip and the disk hung therefrom. We do not know the object of this; whether it be done to make themselves ugly, as some think; or for purpose of

ornament. I incline to the latter opinion; for, among the heathen found from San Diego to Monterey, we have noted that, when they go to visit a neighbouring village, they paint themselves in such a manner as to make themselves most ugly."

Two of the natives were induced to come on board the vessel and in exchange two sailors ventured into the canoes. The Indians, we are told, took pleasure in painting them with red ochre of a fine tint.

For about four days the slow-sailing *Santiago* strove, unsuccessfully to enter Dixon entrance. Sometimes the Spaniards were within a mile or so of the shore, and though frequently invited to land no steps were taken to launch a boat for that purpose. Day by day the friars record head winds, fog, and strong currents. In their fear of striking upon the ironbound coast they got so far out to sea that on July 24, Crespi writes: "Although since six in the morning until afternoon we had made four miles an hour we could not make out the land, and this although the horizon was very clear." Gradually the *Santiago* edged southward, still in hopes of finding some safe place where she might anchor. Each day saw her further from Dixon entrance; and thus she made her way slowly down the west coast of Queen Charlotte islands, always keeping at the distance of six or seven leagues from the shore.

The journals tell us of North cape, or cape Knox; of cape Muzon on the Alaskan side; of Dixon entrance, with its strong currents, and which they estimate to be sixteen leagues in width; of Forrester Island, lying west of cape Muzon; of the general north-west and south-east trend of Queen Charlotte islands; and of the high mountain range of San Christobal.

Regarding the origin of the Indians, a debated question ever since their day, the friars record that Juan Perez, who had spent some time in China and the Philippine islands, remarked their resemblance to the Sangleyes of those islands. The woven mats, they remark on his authority, were very similar to those of China.

Fog, so thick that they could not see the ship's length, came upon them on August 3, as they pursued their southward course. At mid-day the weather cleared and an observation gave them  $49^{\circ} 24'$ . Again thick fog settled upon them. So from day to day the entries show heavy winds, high seas and dense fog. On August 6, it cleared and they saw land, high and snow-crowned, at a great distance. The latitude was then  $48^{\circ}$ . This was the civilized man's first glimpse of the majestic Olympic range in the state of Washington. The currents now carried the *Santiago* northward; and on August 8, they again sighted land in  $49^{\circ} 05'$ , at a distance of about four leagues. As they drew near three small canoes came out from the shore and by gestures and signs warned them to depart.

Late that afternoon they finally anchored in a C-shaped roadstead about a league from the land. They named the spot San

Lorenzo. It has been identified from their descriptions and from Indian legend as being immediately northward of cape Estevan, the southern point of Captain Cook's Hope bay, and a few miles from the entrance of Nootka sound. Three canoes again came out and hovered around the vessel, always at about the distance of a musket shot. The Spaniards strove in vain to induce them to approach, but the occupants remained for about three hours at that safe distance constantly crying out in mournful tones. Then, no doubt feeling that they had done their duty, they departed.

The next morning some fifteen canoes, containing about one hundred men and but very few women cautiously approached the *Santiago*. Trade commenced. The Indians offered principally sea-otter skins, conical hats made of reeds, and cloth "woven of a material very like hemp," as the fathers call it, but which was in reality cedar bark. For these they accepted clothing, ribbons, and shells from the beach at Monterey. Here again "some pieces of iron and of copper and knives were seen in their possession." No cloth woven of wool or hair, such as had been observed at Queen Charlotte islands, was noticed. The natives, the fathers unite in declaring, were not as stalwart as those of Dixon entrance, nor were they as well clad. The fathers also remark that none of the women were disfigured with the hideous labret.

The long boat was launched to plant the cross and take possession; but hardly had she started on her errand when a heavy westerly gale arose. Fearful of being driven on a leeshore, Juan Perez hastily cut his cable and ran for the open sea, leaving the long boat to follow. Having rounded the point of rocks at cape Estevan and reached out three leagues into the ocean the *Santiago* lay-to and awaited the return of the long boat. It was only with much difficulty that it and its occupants were safely got on board. The fathers give no information regarding the fate of the cross; nor do we learn anything about their having obtained any water, which was the ostensible reason for attempting to make land more than a fortnight before. The Spaniards then turned the vessel's prow southward once more. The little *Santiago* stretched away for San Blas; and we could follow her no further.

It may be well to give in this connection the Indian tradition of the arrival of the Spaniards as recorded by Father Brabant, who was for many years a missionary on the west coast of Vancouver Island. "The vessel was seen far at sea from the Indian village known as Oum-mis, near what is now shown on the chart as Hole-in-the-wall. On first sighting her the Indians thought it was an immense bird, but when she came nearer and they could see people on board, the Indians thought that the vessel was some wonderful and very large canoe come back from the land of the dead with their by-gone chiefs. At

last the vessel came close to the shore, when the Indians found they were not their dead chiefs but entire strangers in colour and appearance. The Indians traded with them, and they gave the Indians iron and other articles for furs. The vessel stayed but a very short time."

It is strange that though Captain James Cook arrived at Nootka within four years thereafter and stayed for about a month, he did not learn of this Spanish visit. During that time he was constantly in touch with them, and he has left us a complete account of their habitations, implements, manners, and customs. He then obtained two silver spoons which are said to have been stolen from the Spaniards at this time. Here again we face a mystery. In none of the four accounts of the *Santiago's* voyage is there any mention of these spoons—all the printed information comes from Captain Cook. But in the manuscript journal of Martinez, to which I have already referred, the author claims to have given these spoons in the barter. It is quite unlikely that silver spoons in use on the commander's table would have been allowed to be bartered by the pilot. Cook's suggestion that they had been stolen is far more plausible. But Martinez in his journal goes on to say that in 1789 Maquinna, the chief of Nootka, recognized him as having been at Nootka in the *Santiago* fifteen years previous. Unfortunately for this story the landfall of the *Santiago* was miles distant from Friendly Cove, Maquinna's summer village; and there is no reference to him or any chief in any of the contemporary accounts. Over and above all, Maquinna never mentioned the Spaniards or Martinez so far as any of the four existing accounts of Cook's voyage shows.

All of these things seem to point to the conclusion that if Spain herself was blind to the interests of her navigators, some of them, like Martinez, were fully alive on the matter. They were prepared to claim even more than their real achievements, and were not above bolstering up their deeds by false assertions.

In the records of the voyage of the *Santiago*—and there are no less than four—no mention is made regarding the entrance we now know as the strait of Fuca. Hence we might conclude not unnaturally that that waterway was not seen by the Spaniards on this occasion. And thus we would feel buttressed by this negative induction in the opinion that Captain Barkley, of the *Imperial Eagle*, was in 1788 the first person to see the supposed strait of Juan de Fuca. But Martinez, the pilot on the *Santiago*, has seen fit to claim in his manuscript journal of 1789 that he saw this strait from the deck of the *Santiago*. As he first makes this statement after the fact of the strait's existence was well-known and after his seizure of Indian vessels had rearoused their ancient animosities, also having in mind his ever-present desire to belittle all things English, we may conclude that his memory has been eked out of his imagination.