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Discovery of the North West Coast

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DISCOVERY OF THE NORTH WEST COAST

By F. W. HOWAY

The story of our western coast is filled with romance. The search for the North West Passage and the Great River of the West, the adventurous life of the fur traders on sea and land, and the lurid scene in the gold "rushes" to the Fraser and to Cariboo all find place and combine to make the history of British Columbia intensely interesting.

Let us turn over to-night the first few pages of this attractive story, see the clearing away of the mists of ages with the false accounts of the region before the light of knowledge shed by Captain Cook's last voyage, and watch the maritime traders reaping rich harvests of sea-otter skins on the northwest coast.

In 1579 Sir Francis Drake, the free-booter, having ravaged and pillaged the coast from Chili to Mexico, and with the hold of the *Golden Hind* filled with treasure, feared to return to England either by way of Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope, lest his vessel should be intercepted by the Spaniards. In this dilemma he bethought himself of the North West Passage and determined to sail home by that route. In his search for this passage Drake reached latitude 43°, possibly latitude 48°, but, of course was unsuccessful.

(Here may be shown a picture of Drake's silver map, with the suggestion that according to it the utmost limit of Drake's voyage was in reality 48°; and also views of ships of that time.)

Thereafter the North West Passage must be sought for beyond the limit of Drake's voyage, whether 43° or 48°. Many persons wrote of the passage, claiming to have found it on the British Columbian coast, and to have sailed through it to the Atlantic. Of these the best known are de Fonte and de Fuca. Their stories were false; but until the facts of geography became known (and afterwards, too, strangely enough!) many believed in them. The region at that time was a favourite hunting ground for the romancers—Bacon's Atlantis was there and Swift's land of the giants, Brobdingnag.

The Russians from Siberia were the first to see the extreme northern parts of America. In 1741 Behring and Chirikoff had glimpses of the Alaskan coast; and, later, Russian traders began to arrive and make settlements, or rather, trading posts. But the last land to be spied out on the western coast was that between 43° or 48° and Alaska—in other words, speaking generally, the coast of British Columbia.

In 1603 the Spaniards, Viscaino and Aguilar traced roughly the coast to about 42° or 43°; but from that time until 1774—one hundred and seventy one years—no further effort was made by Spain to discover what

lay under the mists of the North. Spain was, in truth, not eager for discovery on the northwest coast further than was necessary to obtain knowledge of safe harbours for her rich treasure ships from the Philippines. In the North West Passage, so ceaselessly sought by the British, she took no interest. But the activities of the Russians in the far north at last aroused her from her lethargy.

In 1774 therefore Juan Perez was sent out from Monterey in command of a small vessel, the *Santiago*, to explore the coast as high as latitude 60° and take possession for Spain so as to hem the Russians into the northern region and prevent them from spreading their trading posts southward towards Mexico. On 18th July, 1774, the Spaniards on this little vessel—first of Europeans—obtained a view of the British Columbian coast. They were then off the Queen Charlotte islands, and, according to the diaries of the friars, Crepi and Pena, who recorded the incidents of the voyage, saw on the northeast horizon an “insulated cliff or peak with a flat top covered with snow.” This was, plainly, San Christobal, or “the sierra of San Cristobal,” as Perez later named it.

Continuing northward the Spaniards on 20th July saw Dixon Entrance and the distant Alaskan coast. The natives came out in their canoes to trade with them and invited them to land; but the constant fog, the swift currents of the entrance, and, perhaps, a certain amount of fear of the “pagans” deterred them from doing so, though they were in need of water and had prepared a large cross to be planted on the shore as a token of possession. The friars noted the presence of iron implements amongst the Indians; but they could obtain no information as to the source of supply. It was plain, however, that the savages knew the use of that metal and in the trade that went on they showed their desire for it in any form that had a cutting edge. The women, too, were observed to be wearing rings on their fingers and bracelets of iron and copper.

For four days the *Santiago* hovered in the vicinity of Dixon Entrance but without making a landing; finally, in desperation, she turned her prow again to the southward and, through fog so thick that sometimes the watch could not see the ship's length, made her way slowly towards Mexico.

(Here insert an early map of the coast, say, that of Maurelle to be found in Barrington's Miscellanies, and early views of the Haida, with pictures of the labret, taken from Dixon; views of totem poles, etc.)

On 6th August, 1774, as they were returning homeward, in latitude 48° the fog rose for an instant and they saw the high, snow-capped, majestic Olympic range. Carried northward as the fog again settled down the *Santiago* did not sight land again until in latitude 49° 05', at four leagues distance. Making in with it the Spaniards, on 8th August, anchored in a C-shaped roadstead, which they called San Lorenzo. This spot from their description and from Indian legend has been identified as being a few miles north of Cape Estevan, the southern point of the large bay in which Nootka Sound is situated. Here, too, they met the Indians who paddled out to the vessel as she lay at anchor about a league from the shore. Trade sprang up between them; according to the friars the natives were willing to exchange the skins they had and their manufactures for clothing, ribbons, and shells from the beach at Monterey. “Some pieces of iron and of copper and of knives were seen in their

possession," says Crespi. It would be interesting to consider at length whence and how they had been obtained.

(Here insert picture of sea-otter, pictures of Indian canoes on west coast, and of their manufactures and implements, taken from the Guide to the Anthropological section of the Museum of British Columbia.)

Now it was determined to plant the cross that had been so long awaiting the opportunity. Scarcely had the long boat departed on this mission when a westerly gale arose and Perez, fearful of being caught on a lee shore, cut his cable and ran for the open sea. This move, of course, forced the long boat to abandon her purpose; it was only after much difficulty that she reached the *Santiago*, lying to, three leagues off shore. The ship's company being thus reunited the *Santiago* resumed her interrupted voyage southward and we follow her no further.

The Indian tradition of this visit, as recorded by Father Brabant the first resident Roman Catholic missionary on the west coast of Vancouver island, runs in this wise:—

"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 the 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 bygone 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."

(Here insert a map of west coast of Vancouver island, and views of Indian village at Friendly Cove and of Indians taken from Captain Cook's Third Voyage.)

Following Spain's age-old policy of secrecy in all matters relating to the northwest coast, the report of this voyage was not given to the world, but remained buried in the archives until quite modern times. In consequence though Captain Cook reached Nootka sound almost four years later, yet as the British Government at once published his account of his voyage containing the first information of the land and the people he has been always recognized as the discoverer of British Columbia, and it is probably too late to secure to Juan Perez his proper position.

CAPTAIN JAMES COOK

In 1776 the great Captain James Cook sailed from England on his third and last voyage. So far as America was concerned the main object was to seek out the strait of Anian, or the North West Passage, as it was commonly called. To encourage the effort the terms under which the reward of £20,000 had been offered in 1745, were altered so as to include the discovery of the passage from the Pacific side.

In March 1778 Cook made a landfall on the western coast of America about latitude 43°. Continuing his route along the coast he sighted cape Flattery, but owing to a gale he was glad to get an offing. Much fault has been found with him because he stated, after speaking of that cape: "It is in this very latitude where we now were that geographers have placed the pretended strait of Juan de Fuca. We saw nothing like it nor is there the least probability that ever any such thing existed." His critics point out that cape Flattery is at the entrance of the waterway that we now call the strait of Juan de Fuca; hence, say they, Cook should not have made such an *ex cathedra* statement. But it is they who are in the wrong; for though to-day the strait bears the name of the lying old Greek pilot (if he ever

really existed), yet if the account of his alleged voyage be examined it will be seen that he placed the strait between 47° and 48° ; Cook had passed that latitude and could say positively that no such strait existed there.

(Here a few words may be given to the earlier voyages of Captain Cook, with a picture of himself and his vessels, the *Resolution* and *Discovery*.)

After a succession of gales—for it was the equinoctial season Cook, on 29th March, again saw the land. By an odd coincidence it was the same point off which Perez had anchored nearly four years before—cape Estevan, or as Cook called it Point Breakers. Passing the point and continuing eastward he was soon in Nootka sound. The natives came out in their canoes to greet him. They circled around the ships; they cast feathers upon the water in token of amity; and one of the men, standing up, delivered, to the accompaniment of a rattle “loudly strook,” a lengthy oration, doubtless of welcome, but of which, it is needless to say, the strangers understood not a word. Finally the two ships, the *Resolution* and the *Discovery*, were anchored in “a convenient snug cove,” which is now known as Resolution cove in Bligh island, Nootka sound.

(Here insert pictures of Nootka sound, of the vessels at anchor in Resolution cove, taken from Admiralty drawing, and of Indians and Indian canoes, etc.)

Cook's chief business was to obtain wood and water and to make repairs to his ships. While the work went on the natives visited the vessels day by day bringing for barter various articles of their manufacture and the skins of various animals, but especially of the sea-otter. He observed amongst them “little ornaments of thin brass and iron, shaped like a horse-shoe” which hung from their noses; more important, however, he saw several chisels or pieces of iron fixed to handles. The savages here too, like those Perez had met at Queen Charlotte islands, were eager to obtain iron and brass. He remarks that the iron was paler in colour than English iron and that it had been formed into the shape of knives. Again the question: Whence came this iron?

Cook remained about a month at Nootka, for the repairs, as frequently happens where old things are the subject, occupied far longer than had been originally anticipated. Thus he had an opportunity not only to meet the natives at the vessels, but what was far more valuable, to visit them in their homes. By reason of this almost daily intercourse he was enabled to describe for us their houses, their tribal arrangements, their clothing and food, their implements of peace and war, their methods of hunting and fishing, their habits of life, and their language and amusements. During this time the sailors sought to replenish their wardrobes with the only commodities the country afforded—skins. For bits of brass, tin, copper, or iron, for nails, looking-glasses, buttons, and similar trifles they obtained sea-otter skins which were afterwards found to be of great value in China. But the strange thing is that, though he remained the whole time within about twenty miles of the place where Juan Perez had anchored less than four years before he does not appear to have seen or heard anything to cause him to suspect that the Spaniards had preceded him. In none of the published accounts of the voyage—of which there are three besides the official one—is there the least hint of any knowledge of the earlier visit of the *Santiago*.

From some natives who lived in the vicinity of cape Estevan and who came, as did all the neighborhood, to see the marvellous sight of the strange ships and strange men were purchased two silver tablespoons, “which from their peculiar shape,” says Captain Cook, “we supposed to be of Spanish manufacture.” Yet this incident does not seem to have raised

in his mind any question as to how those admittedly Spanish articles had reached this spot, so far removed from any territory occupied by Spain. Others, however, drew a deduction therefrom. In the manuscript diary of Thomas Edgar, the master of the *Discovery*, the following entry occurs: "In the afternoon (20th April, 1778), Captain Clerke of the *Resolution* bought of the Natives for a pewter washhand bason two silver tablespoons of Spanish make, an almost certain proof that the Spaniards have been here, if not actually at this place, in the neighborhood of it." And from Haswell's manuscript Log of the *Columbia* we learn that the visit still remained in the minds and memories of the natives.

(Here insert a selection of the views given in Captain Cook's Third Voyage, view of Maquinna's grave, and views from the atlas of the Viage hecho por las goletas Sutil y Mexicana.)

Having completed his repairs Captain Cook sailed northward to pursue his discoveries. He did not sight land again until he reached Sitka; what lay between Nootka and Sitka was unknown: Juan Perez had seen a bit of it, but his record was buried in the Spanish archives. From that point he continued his northward voyage, passed through Behring Sea and Behring Strait, and endeavoured to make his way eastward, but was driven back by the ice floes. He returned to the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands to winter and there he was killed on 14th February, 1779. Returning to England the vessels called at Canton where the sailors were surprised and delighted to find a greedy market for the sea-otter skins that they had so casually obtained at Nootka. One seaman sold his stock for \$800. A few prime skins brought \$120 each. Captain King says that the crew must have realized about £2,000 from the sale of their furs, many of which through neglect had been somewhat injured. He adds that, as we can readily believe, the men were most eager to return to the coast and make their fortunes by obtaining a cargo of these sea-otter skins, so cheap there and so valuable in China.

(Here insert views of Canton in the fur trading days taken from Old Shipping Days in Boston, and the publications of the Marine Research Society of Salem.)

EARLY MARITIME FUR TRADE

Out of this knowledge sprang the maritime fur trade. The first vessel to undertake this trade was a small British bottom under Captain Hanna which left China in 1785. The success of this pioneer effort induced others to follow. They came from the ports of India, from China, from England, from France, and from the United States. It is not intended to deal with the particulars of their work, but rather to give some idea of what this trade was like and how it was carried on. In every case the effort was to seek out a spot for trade to which no one had previously resorted. As a consequence the gap in our geography which Captain Cook had left was soon filled up—at least as regards the exterior shore of the continent. The maritime trade early established the existence of the Queen Charlotte Islands and indicated in a general way the numerous inlets that indent the coast of Vancouver island and the continent to the northward. But, naturally, as the traders were seeking skins and furs and not engaged in exploration, they did not attempt to spell out all the ramifications of the maze of waterways along the coast.

The traders were seeking principally the skin of the sea-otter which at the commencement could be purchased for bits of iron and copper. For some years the standard item of trade was the "toe," a bit of iron, five or

six inches long and about the width and thickness of strong hoop iron. For one or more of these "toes," or chisels as some called them, the trader could in the early days of the trade, obtain a sea-otter skin worth \$40 in China. The following description of a trading scene near the northern end of Queen Charlotte islands is given by Dixon who was on the coast in 1787:—

"A scene now commenced which absolutely beggars all description, and with which we were so overjoyed that we could scarcely believe the evidence of our own senses. There were ten canoes about the ship which contained, as nearly as I could estimate, 120 persons; many of them brought most beautiful sea-otter cloaks; others, excellent skins; and, in short, none came empty-handed; and the rapidity with which they sold them was a circumstance additionally pleasing; they fairly quarreled with each other about which should sell his cloak first; and some actually threw their furs on board, if nobody was at hand to receive them; but we took particular care to let none go from the vessel unpaid. Toes were almost the only article we bartered with on this occasion, and indeed they were taken so very eagerly that there was not the least occasion to offer anything else. In less than half an hour we purchased 300 sea-otter skins of an excellent quality."

As the trade increased this primitive simplicity vanished. The items of trade became diversified and included bars of iron, sheets of copper, knives, axes of all kinds and shapes, chisels, pots and pans, mirrors, guns and gunpowder, blankets, clothing, blue cloth, and (we should blush to admit it), rum, besides of course buttons, beads, bells and trinkets of all kinds. But the traders found the natives strangely whimsical; and what was worse with the increase of competition that natural whimsically was fomented. Thus it happened that a vessel well equipped with trading goods would discover that she had nothing on board that would tempt the fickle fancy of the savages. Perhaps the experience of Joseph Ingraham of the brigantine *Hope*, of Boston may make this plain. When he arrived in 1791 he found the Indians at the northern end of Queen Charlotte islands already supplied with all the clothing, pots and pans, axes and knives that they wanted. He was therefore forced to discover something to tempt them. He thought long and hard and at last evolved the idea of supplying them with iron collars. It may sound like fiction; but it is hard fact. He directed his blacksmith to cut iron rods about half an inch in diameter into convenient lengths to slip over the head and encircle the neck. Three of these pieces were then twisted together neatly and smoothly polished. This hideous ornament, being a fashionable article, was very expensive. It cost three prime sea-otter skins; but everyone must be in the fashion; everyone must have his iron collar. Using these collars as a means of barter Ingraham obtained in 49 days more than 1,400 sea-otter skins. He then sailed to China to dispose of them. On his return to the coast he kept his blacksmith busy making a stock of these collars and shaping daggers of a form that the natives had demanded; but on his arrival he found that the fashion had changed. The savages would not look at his iron collars, nor at the daggers. What they now wanted were tablespoons—an article that in the preceding year they had quite condemned—heavy sole leather to make their coats of mail, and a special kind of pearl shell.

The great aim was to discover what the whimsical natives wished or needed, or thought that they needed, and to supply it. Some of the traders made fortunes by seizing upon a taste of the natives and supplying it. For example, it had been remarked that they held in high esteem the skin of the ermine for decoration of their ceremonial dresses. Though many had observed this fondness for ermine skins it remained for a quick-witted trader to take advantage of it. He purchased on the Atlantic coast some

3,000 of these little skins. Arriving on the coast he traded them at the rate of five for a prime sea-otter skin. As they had cost him 30 cents each it will be seen that he was making a good bargain—\$1.50 for \$40. Others noticed their desire for something to hang on the fringe of their garments that would give a tinkling sound. Some imported large quantities of the cheap Chinese copper money commonly called cash. These they traded with the Indians to be sewed on their ceremonial dresses. They answered for a time, until another trader bethought himself of thimbles. Gross upon gross of thimbles were brought to the coast, not to be used by the women in sewing, but to be hung on the men's garments like little bells so as to give out a continual tintinabulation as the wearer walked or moved about.

In the early days of the maritime fur trade the vessels merely fired a gun and lay-to, sometimes two or three leagues, or more, from shore, and awaited the arrival of the natives with their furs. But as competition increased a change occurred: the trading vessels began to come closer in and soon they sought out every Indian village and anchored before it to obtain trade. At first, too, no savages were allowed on board, except the chiefs or other high persons to whom the trader wished to show favour. The trade was then conducted over the ship's side from the canoes alongside. But soon in order to ingratiate themselves the traders began to ask the Indians indiscriminately to come aboard; until finally the savages regarded it as their vested right to be on the deck when disposing of their furs. Thus they were brought close to what was to them immense wealth. Occasionally the temptation was more than they could stand, and as a result, many efforts to capture the vessels were made, some of which were unfortunately only too successful. Yet it must not be thought that all the attempts at capture arose in this way. The maritime fur trade was always a disconnected thing. It lacked the union and the continuity that marked the land trade. A ship might be on the coast for only one season and never return. There was thus the inducement to the trader to seize a present gain by some dishonest or dishonourable conduct. Though that trader might never return the remembrance of the wrong remained in the mind of the savages, who seized the opportunity to revenge themselves upon the next visitor who was, of course, no party to the original wrong. This accounts for many of the outrages committed by them. All who are acquainted with the story of the capture of the *Boston* in 1803 will remember that Maquinna, the celebrated chief of Nootka, after he had seized that ship and murdered the crew told Jewitt, the survivor, that he was actuated in part by the thought of the wrongs that other traders had committed against him.

The maritime trade was a very destructive one. When it opened the sea-otter were very plentiful. Between the years, say, 1785 to 1800 it was not uncommon for a vessel to collect in the short season of three or four months—May to October—from 1,000 to 1,500 or even 1,800 sea-otter skins. Within thirty years the sea-otter had become, for all practical purposes, an extinct animal. Thus in 1834 the journal of Fort Nisqually records that only one sea-otter skin was offered for sale in that year; but even it was not obtained, because as the entry states the price could not be agreed upon and in consequence the Clallam Indians who owned the skin had returned to their homes and carried it back with them.

(Here insert pictures of Maquinna, of the capture of the *Boston*, of the various vessels engaged in the trade; these will be found in Jewett's Narrative, in Haswell's Log, and Ingraham's journal.)