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THE FOUNDING OF  
THE SECOND BRITISH  
EMPIRE

1763-1793

VOLUME II

NEW CONTINENTS AND  
CHANGING VALUES

by

VINCENT T. HARLOW

C.M.G., M.A., D.LITT.

*Late Beit Professor of the History of the British Empire  
and late Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford*



LONGMANS

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## CHAPTER VII THE CHINA TRADE AND THE CANADIAN PACIFIC COAST

THE opening of the Pacific Ocean to European penetration took place from two widely separate directions. On the one side, British, Dutch, French and others pushed outward from the Indian Ocean into South-East Asia and on to the China market. On the other side, British whalers began to feel their way round Cape Horn into the southern areas of the Pacific, profiting by the discoveries of James Cook. The possibility that the Asian and American coasts of this huge expanse of sea might be linked together in commercial exchange offered, it seemed, immense opportunities. Moreover the hoped-for discovery of a direct sea-route between Europe and the Pacific through Baffin and Hudson Bay would provide the means of creating a new triangular trade. British goods such as iron tools, cloth, and trinkets would be sold along the North-West American coast for furs and other natural resources, which with British commodities would make up assorted cargoes for China and (it was hoped) Japan. Then home with cargoes of tea: triple profits and shorter, cheaper voyages.

The hope of a navigable North-West Passage, so strenuously pursued in Tudor times, had never been entirely abandoned; and, as we have seen, Cook in his last voyage had been under instructions to make a landfall in the vicinity of Drake's New Albion and to explore the coast northward in search of a channel which might lead on into the Atlantic. The Admiralty had also dispatched a complementary expedition to search for a channel from the eastern end.<sup>1</sup> In the course of carrying out his orders Cook had explored Nootka Sound on the west coast of the island which was afterwards named after Capt. Vancouver.<sup>2</sup> Many of the crew had taken the opportunity of acquiring in exchange for articles of trifling value some 1,500 sea-otter skins, and when they offered these for sale at Kamchatka and later at Canton they found to their surprise and joy that they fetched high prices. One sailor sold his consignment for 800 Spanish dollars (about £170). The crew were all for going back for more.

When Cook's discoveries in the north Pacific became known in Europe the information aroused widespread interest. Political con-

<sup>1</sup> See vol. I, pp. 55-61.

<sup>2</sup> Nootka Sound had been previously visited in 1774 by a Spaniard, Juan Perez (*Relacion del Viaje hecho por las Goletas Sutil y Mexicana*, Madrid, 1802, p. xcii et seq. Cited by F. W. Howay, 'Early Days of the Maritime Fur-Trade on the North-West Coast'. *Cam. Hist. Rev.*, vol. IV, No. 1, 1923).



fusion at the close of the war of American independence ruled out an immediate follow-up from England, but the Imperial Asiatic Company of Austria became interested and enlisted the services of George Dixon and a number of others who had been with Cook in the *Endeavour*. A special ship for an exploring expedition to the Pacific was built at Marseilles, but the financial state of the Company compelled them to abandon the enterprise. The French Government then became interested and after elaborate preparations two vessels sailed from Brest in August, 1785, under the command of François de la Perouse. His task was to fill in the gaps left by Cook. In addition to extensive exploration in the south Pacific he was to explore the coasts from China to Kamchatka and then to make a thorough examination of the North-West American coast with the view to finding a passage to the Atlantic. At the same time he was to observe the possibilities of trade.

News that such an expedition was being fitted out reached London early in the year and an enterprising group of merchants decided that, if possible, they would be beforehand with the French. In March George Taswell, a merchant of Madras then in London, wrote to Lord Sydney, seeking Government approval for 'an Expedition of Experiment to our new Discoverys on the N. Wt coast of America'. In order to open a new source of trade sanction was sought for an initiatory voyage through the Straits of Magellan to the North-West Coast for the purpose of collecting furs which would be taken only to China for sale. At Canton the proceeds of the sales would be paid into the East India Company's treasury, which would give bills of exchange on London in return. The expedition would be carried out under such restrictions as might be thought necessary 'to prevent Interference with the present Trade of the said Company either to, or from, China, which the traffick in Furs will not in any manner do'. But speed was essential both because of the approach of the season for setting out and also to anticipate the French.<sup>3</sup>

Official encouragement having been given, the group acted quickly. A syndicate was formed with the name of the King George's Sound Company. The principal subscribers were Richard Cadman Etches and three other members of the Etches family, and the membership included George Dixon and Nathaniel Portlock, both of them sea captains of exceptional ability.<sup>4</sup> A scheme

<sup>3</sup> Geo. Taswell to Lord Sydney, 23 March, 1785. London. *Home Misc. S.*, vol. 190 (13), p. 617.

<sup>4</sup> The members were listed as follows: Richard Cadman - merchant, London; John Hanning - gentleman, Dawlish, Devon; William Etches - merchant, Asborne, Derbyshire; Mary Camilla Brook - tea dealer, London; William Etches - merchant, Northampton; John Etches - merchant, London; Nathaniel Gilmour - merchant, Gosport, Hants; Nathaniel Portlock - Capt. of the *King George*; George Dixon - Capt. of the *Queen Charlotte*. (*Ibid.*, p. 248.)

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idman - merchant, London;  
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was prepared which received (in general terms) 'the Countenance of His Majesty's Ministers' and was considered by the Court of Directors on 29 April. The schemes was not lacking in boldness or publicity appeal.

It was proposed that Government should grant them a Charter of exclusive privileges for a period of years to trade the entire length of the North-West Coast from Cape Blanco in latitude 43° 6' N. up to Bering Strait, with the right to establish a factory at Nootka Sound or at another convenient place as a mart for furs and other products obtainable from the natives. With such cargoes they were to be at liberty - 'to endeavour to open a friendly intercourse with the Island of Japan, Jesso [Yezo], the Kuriles, and the Coast of Asia from Siberia to the Gulf of Siam - ever subject to a prohibition of trading with the Chinese in any Article whatever except the produce of the said North-West Continent of America, nor to return to Europe with any traffic the manufactory or produce of China'. And since they might find it difficult to secure sufficient freight for the return voyage to Europe, they sought permission to import into Britain whale-oil, whalebone and seal skins caught by them in the North-East Pacific duty-free. In this connexion it will be recalled that Hawkesbury and the Board of Trade strongly encouraged the Southern Whalers to take part in the new maritime fur trade. The north Pacific was rich in sperm whales, as the Americans afterwards discovered; but it may be doubted whether that formidable trio, Enderby, Champion and St. Barbe, would have quietly acquiesced in the promotion of a new and competitive fishery.

The King George's Sound Company submitted further ideas. Following Cook, they stated their intention of using the Sandwich Islands with their healthy climate and abundance of foodstuffs as a rendezvous in case of sickness or accident. It seemed probable that these Islands at some future period would become 'the grand emporium of Commerce between the two Continents and the innumerable Islands of that immense Ocean'. Furthermore there was the possibility of discovering a passage from the North-West Coast into the Atlantic.

As there are a number of Inlets in the Prince William's Sound and Cook's River that time would not permit Captain Cook to explore, it is very probable that, in prosecuting a Trade in those parts, some very essential discoveries may be made and perhaps a communication carried on to Hudson's or Baffin's Bay.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps someone at the Board of Control warned the Syndicate

<sup>5</sup> It was stated that these observations were based on the opinion of some of the officers who had been with Capt. Cook (e.g. George Dixon) 'and from the remarks of the natives'.



using the more flexible and enterprising methods of the old French *voyageurs*, began to spread out into the North-West, thus turning the flank, so to speak, of the Hudson's Bay Company.

In 1783-4 various competing Canadian groups amalgamated as the North-West Company. One of the moving spirits was Peter Pond, a trader who during the previous ten years had himself been pushing steadily westward. At the time of the formation of the new Company Pond saw accounts in Montreal of Cook's survey of the Pacific coast during his last voyage, and he conceived the idea that the Athabaska River flowed into Cook's 'River' on the Alaska coast which Cook had visited. Thus the profound and diverse influence of Cook's exploration upon British overseas commercial expansion also contributed a stimulus to a territorial penetration which led to the creation of western Canada. The Athabaska-Cook River waterway, if it existed, would be a good deal further north than geographers hoped. Vancouver, it will be recalled, was instructed to investigate this possibility, but only if he failed to find a route in more southerly latitudes.

The North-West Company applied to the British Government for a grant of exclusive trading privilege for ten years in the areas which they were opening up, and they offered to explore and supply maps of the western country from 55° to 65° north latitude. The application was rejected as involving an infringement of the Charter rights of the Hudson's Bay Company: but the exploration proceeded, and London followed the new developments with active interest. Peter Pond himself journeyed through Clear Lake and Buffalo Lake, over the Mathye Portage, and so down the Clearwater River to Lake Athabaska, where a fortified trading station, named Chipewyan, was established. In 1788 he sent a party still further to the north-west which found a waterway to the Great Slave Lake and established a post on its shores. Full reports of these discoveries were sent to Evan Nepean of the Home and Colonial Office: Dalrymple was consulted, and plans were made for sending a ship (the *Discovery*) to search the Pacific Coast, while at the same time another vessel was to be sent in one more effort to find a water communication to the west from Hudson Bay.<sup>118</sup>

Meanwhile Alexander Mackenzie, the greatest inland explorer of the century, was building on the work already done by his colleague, Peter Pond. Leaving Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabaska on 3 June, 1789, he made his way down the Slave River (in spite of its rapids) to the Great Slave Lake. No one knew whether the large river which drained that lake flowed into the Pacific or the Arctic, and Mackenzie's purpose was to find out. That river (which now bears his name) flows westward for a considerable

<sup>118</sup> See H. A. Innis, 'Peter Pond and the Influence of Capt. Cook . . .' (trans., *Roy. Soc. of Canada*, 1928, vol. XXII, Sect. II).

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<sup>119</sup> See  
<sup>120</sup> A.  
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profitable trade in the Pacific was sure to be regarded as Directors who comprised about to engage in a long defence of their lucrative and may, however, have in- after decided to take action

*Nootka* with John Meares e William Sound, and its for China.<sup>23</sup> Thus a third followed the track of Cook the purpose of opening a genesis of the Meares adven- d up current gossip about merican Coast and to have in Calcutta who traded as nance a trial expedition. lavy who (like many such) of employment. He lacked nily, the navigational and ixion, and the semi-official se handicaps did not deter enabled him to speak as of a new trade between hen the crisis with Spain wronged and the national . He was a man of great nsiderable ability as an opagandist. His pertinacity E his predecessor, Captain uld not be entirely beside tween Capt. Jenkins and

gre description of the ex- asafed to Strange from the erwards gave in evidence aimed that the enterprise e of the Governor-General, the Bengal establishment surveying the Countries'.

d sold an assortment of furs for t at sea (*Official Papers Relative in and Spain on the subject of* 1790. Intro., p. iv). p. 439 *et seq.*

As arranged the *Sea Otter* sailed from Macao along the north coast of China, 'in Order to ascertain the Existence of the Straits of Teso, which separate Corea from Japan'. Tipping had been ordered in the course of his voyage 'to endeavour to open an amicable Intercourse with the Inhabitants of Corea or Japan, or of the Islands to the North or South'.<sup>25</sup> Thereafter he was to rendezvous with the *Nootka* in Prince William Sound.

Meares himself on board the *Nootka* sailed along the American Coast as far north as Cook's Inlet in latitude 61° N. to see what opportunities of trade might offer, to establish contact with the natives, 'and of fixing a Post there if found expedient'. It was not expedient, for on entering the Inlet they came upon a Russian settlement of forty or fifty men who had built some fifteen houses which were defended by a mud redoubt and cannon. The Russians prevented the Indians from bringing furs to the English ship, and so after sending a boat 'to take possession of the Point called Point Possession, which had formerly been taken possession of by Capt. Cook', Meares departed southward for Prince William Sound, where he arrived on 25 September, 1786. While trading in that region, Meares declared, he formed a treaty of commerce with a chief named Shenawah. 'The terms of this Treaty were that Shenawah should, in consideration of some presents made to him for that purpose and not in return for any Articles of Trade, agree to grant us an exclusive right to Trade with his People, and that they should deal only with us, that is with the Ships under my Command.'<sup>26</sup>

Having decided to winter there, Meares had a house built ashore 'for the reception of the Carpenter, etc'; and by the beginning of November the ship was frozen in. Lack of fresh foodstuffs and anti-scorbutic remedies during the long severe winter exposed them to the ravages of scurvy from which several officers and artificers and all but nine of the crew died. When spring came at last (in May) Capt. Portlock in the *King George* and Capt. Dixon in the *Queen Charlotte* from London anchored at the entrance to

<sup>25</sup> 'I had given these Orders,' stated Meares, 'in consequence of some imperfect Knowledge we had obtained of a communication between the Chinese, Japanese and Coreans. Those Empires being at Hostility with each other, the only Communication carried on between them was through the Islands lying in those Seas. The Emperor of China rather winked at this Communication.' (*Ibid.*) Possibly because the *Sea Otter* had failed to open a trade in this region, Meares concealed the fact that Tipping reached the North-West Coast and made a return voyage to China. Immediately after the quoted passage Meares states, 'the *Sea Otter* was lost', but Strange's account of the arrival of the *Sea Otter* at Prince William Sound and the official entry of his sale of a cargo of furs at Macao on 12 March, 1787, shows that the vessel must have been lost thereafter, possibly while returning to India. Meares was very anxious to convince the Government of the feasibility of a trade with Japan. It is discrepancies such as this which make Meares such an unsatisfactory witness.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



could have been wished.<sup>100</sup> made with local chiefs in ally authorised. On the other Company, which had been of Control and the Directors icitly stated that permanent and the expedition under ised under the aegis of that pped for that purpose. Mar- stic measures, as his Diary n China were (on their own permanent trading station. or a frustrated attempt could ation' unless it was followed sert the *right* to occupy, and Spain constituted the issue.

Spain agreed to 'restore' a ts had been 'dispossessed', most northerly Spanish post the Russian trading stations wn open to all nations. The ig factories – at Nootka or l been conceded. Hence the ance to the demand, for it ed principle of prescriptive ues opposed this claim with sovereignty, conveying ex- il there had been effective ch the British were entirely s, for example, the seasonal ier times or the wide terri- any); but the counter-claim open to all comers was not e occasion. In the process of merce under the impulsion : Administration were con- of trade and navigation' in

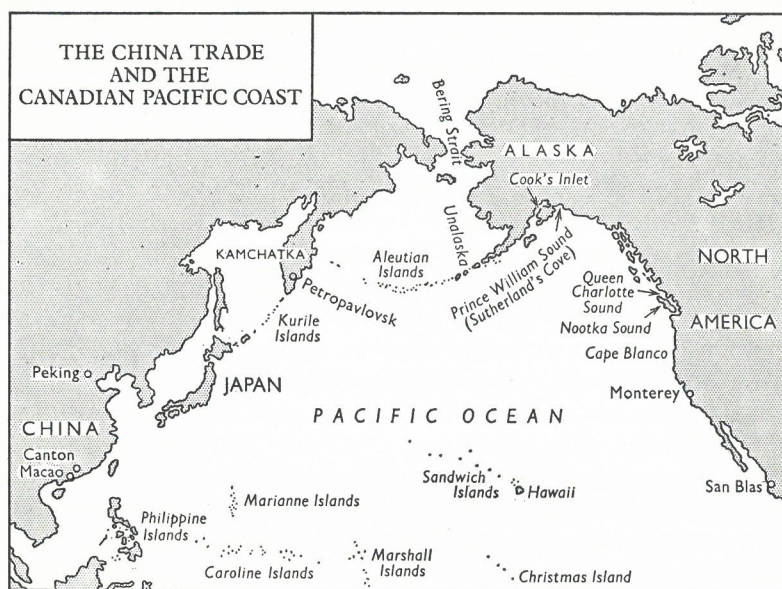
ed Britain and Spain both

Controversy (Annual Rept. of the

nds that the British purpose in ive a gloss of respectability to a ision to commit that act was not ice, still less by a coherent theory

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began to think in terms of an alliance, and in spite of the fact that they had so recently been on the edge of war. Florida Blanca, with his eyes on the ominous developments beyond the Pyrenees, was looking to a political and military compact. Pitt, on the other hand, was much more interested in reviving his plan for an Anglo-Spanish treaty of commercial reciprocity on similar lines to that negotiated in 1787 with France. For Pitt the Nootka crisis had been a dangerous episode which had to be handled with firmness and caution in order to clarify the status of British commercial expansion in the Pacific. When that was out of the way, he sought to resume the trade negotiations which Sir Robert Liston had been conducting in Madrid between 1786 and 1788.<sup>103</sup> His object was to secure a mutual lowering of tariffs which would enable British manufactures to flow into Spain and thence (through lawful channels) into Spanish-America. London merchants trading to Spain naturally pressed for it, but Spanish merchants would also have greatly benefited and the Spanish Government would have been relieved to a large extent of the vexations arising from the British use of Free Ports and 'hovering' ships. But the proposition (which would have been greeted with enthusiasm by Elizabethan

<sup>103</sup> As already noted, Florida Blanca had informed Fitzherbert that he was doing his best to further the idea of a commercial treaty even before the Convention was signed (p. 457 above.) A month after the Convention definite moves towards a treaty of alliance were made. The Spanish Government wanted it, but were hesitant in case the royal authority in France was re-established, and in that event Spain would not wish to break the Family Compact (Fitzherbert to Leeds, 28 Nov., 1790. *F.O.* 72/20).