

Chapter 3

The Fur Trade of the North Pacific

BEFORE Cook's third voyage the north-west coast of America was virtually unknown to Europeans. Five years afterwards ships of several nations were converging upon the region while the fur traders of Hudson's Bay and Montreal were seeking an overland route. Within ten years England and Spain were on the verge of war over trading rights in this region and whaling rights over the whole Pacific coast of America. The whaling story will be treated separately—few whale ships engaged in the fur trade—but in national policies the fur trade and the fishery were bracketed.

The explanation for the acute political tension that arose can be most graphically put by the equation stated by one trader: A tennepenny nail in America bought furs worth a hundred dollars in Canton. That means that the region had the economic pull of a rich gold field. In this gold rush, as in so many others, there were blanks as well as prizes; the risks were high; for the English they were increased by the need to come to terms with both the East India and the South Sea Companies. That the rush took five years to develop was clearly due to the war between Britain, France, Spain, Holland and America.

In 1785 the King George's Sound Company was formed in London for a trading venture to Cook's Nootka Sound, renamed. The ships were named "*King George*" and "*Queen Charlotte*" and commanded by two of Cook's men, Portlock and Dixon. They had a licence from the South Sea Company which, though not trading itself, "stood in the way of more adventurous merchants". The licence from the East India Company was conditional on its receiving a half-share of the profits but also permitted a tea charter from Canton to London. The sale of furs was vested in the Company which sold them far below the market

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value. Nevertheless, Portlock asserted that this trade was "perhaps the most profitable and lucrative" that merchants could engage in¹.

The account mentions the advantages of a trade to Botany Bay from the Sandwich Islands because of the cheapness of provisions there. It also mentions briefly other adventurers at Nootka Sound, naming Hanna, Meares, Strange and Tipping. As early as 1781 one English adventurer had planned to enter the trade under the flag of the Emperor (of Austria) from the Adriatic; this project of Bolt's had been adopted by British subjects settled in Asia. Dixon had been told by Colnett "that in King George's Sound he had found a ship under Imperial colours, commanded by Captain Barclay and manned by Englishmen"². Dixon himself had received offers from Mr. Bolt's Imperial Asiatic Company; the retention of his services was an object of the merchants who applied to the East India Company for a licence³.

The best accounts of the new trade are given by the chief actor in it, Lieutenant John Meares, R.N., published in London in 1790 and dedicated to Lord Hawkesbury "whose commercial erudition and official station render him the best judge of all works tending to promote... British commerce"⁴. In his introduction Meares tells how in 1786 separate ventures, from Bombay and Calcutta were set on foot "under the patronage of their respective governments". Meares himself had sailed from Canton under less regular auspices. A base was established at Nootka Sound with a work force of Chinese coolies and his ships traded on the coast and wintered at the Sandwich Islands. In 1789 when his ships returned to Nootka, two of them were seized by Spanish ships and taken to San Francisco, though two American ships, "*Washington*" and "*Columbia*" were allowed to proceed. Meares' ships were commanded by Colnett, another of Cook's men, who had had "seven years of commercial undertakings on the north-west coast of America" and "never ceased to blend the zeal of (his) naval character with the spirit of commercial enterprise"⁵.

Meares hastened to London to report and in May, 1790, gave evidence for two days on the fur trade and whaling prospects before the Committee for Trade and Plantations⁶. His evidence covers the trade in sea otter furs, which he thought could be expanded, and the potential markets in China, Japan and elsewhere. The furs sold by the East India Company, from Portlock,

1—Portlock: *Voyage Round the World, 1785-88*. London, April 1789.

2—Ibid., Page 307.
3—H.M.S., 494/5 pp., 359 ff. Minutes E.I.C. Court of Directors—Quoted Harlow and Madden—Supplementary Page 21.

4—Meares' *Voyage to North West America*.
5—Colnett: *Voyage to South America Round Cape Horn, etc.*, 1798.
6—B/T, 5/6, Page 225 et seq.

had hurt the market because they were sold through the Hung merchants. There were three American ships there but no Dutch, Danes, Swedes or French, except the "Chevalier de la Perouse" . . . on a voyage of discovery who collected a great quantity and sold them in China". Meares had learned in Canton that La Perouse had intended to return and set up a trading post on one of the Kurile Islands. He thought the English trade should be by one firm if it was to be profitable — the best place for a settlement was the Sandwich Islands "provided that no nation was to have a settlement on the North West of America". From the islands to Canton the passage took six weeks now that navigation conditions and wind systems were better known. He reported also "beautiful woods of pine and fir fit for naval purposes and particularly for masts". There were great quantities of whales of both sorts, the sperm and black, and seals.

In his book he stated: "The most valuable branch of commerce which is offered spontaneously by the North West American coasts is the whale fishery which might be carried on to any extent."⁷

Meanwhile the London merchants had followed up Portlock's voyage by sending J. H. Cox, a partner of Cadman Eches, in the brig "Mercury" on a fur trading venture. A brig of 60 tons, she sailed in March, 1789; in 70 days she was off Capetown but did not call; she spoke there an American ship bound for Canton. At Amsterdam Island over a thousand seals were taken. In Tasmania her watering place is still known as Cox Bight. Other staging places were Tahiti and Hawaii; she arrived at Oonalscha in October. By January, 1790, she was in Canton and returned to London. In 1791 a brief account was published by private subscription. The long list of subscribers includes the Marquis of Buckingham, the Earl of Lansdowne, Lord Hawkesbury, Sir Joseph Banks and Sir John Sinclair. No account of the profit is given but such a voyage showed that Alaska was not too remote to interest merchants, as Cook had feared.⁸

In 1790 the government planned an expedition to found a settlement on the North West of America for the assistance of His Majesty's subjects. Because of the Spanish action at Nootka it was not sent. The draft letter to Governor Phillip (also not sent) stated that the "Gorgon" would take supplies to Port Jackson and that he was to select 30 persons for the settlement — details from the N.S.W. Corps, overseers and "a few of the most deserving of the convicts to whom you may offer a remission of part of their service as an inducement to go."⁹

This shows quite clearly both how the government regarded the Port Jackson settlement, as a base for further settlements, and its opinion of the importance of the fur trade, linked as it was with the China trade. Professor Greenwood finds such plans "amazing"; viz., that the infant colony was to furnish stores and personnel, that New South Wales was regarded as an inexhaustible storehouse.¹⁰

It is not amazing once we grasp the fact that Port Jackson was from the first intended for this. It is a commonplace of naval service for one ship's crew or stores to be drafted to another as required and Port Jackson was a naval establishment under a naval captain. We might note that the "Guardian" had been sent with a full supply of stores some months before and her loss at the Cape would not have been known when the orders were issued. Also Greenwood shows that later when the "Daedalus" called at Port Jackson for supplies for Vancouver "the stores were well stocked and (Grose) was able to furnish the articles required."¹¹ The "Guardian's" stores were still at the Cape at this time.

The proposal also shows the purpose of the convicts — they were resources of manpower at the disposal of the home government, and were used to recruit the N.S.W. Corps and officials of the settlement but also for replacements in crews of naval vessels and as the workforce for such settlements as this one and Norfolk Island.

By the terms of the Nootka Convention of October 28, 1790, the settlements and property seized were restored and compensation paid. British ships were allowed free access to the fur trade of the north west and freedom of whaling on the coasts of Spanish America. Though the immediate incident related to the fur trade, it had been preceded by numerous complaints from whalers and sealers of molestation by Spanish coastguard ships while in Patagonian waters.¹² It is no wonder that the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Commons of the City of London presented to the King an address of congratulation on the signing of the convention.¹³ In the House of Lords, Lord Lansdowne saw the matter thus: "Some young gentlemen of China, attached to geography and a little commercial advantage, fit out a vessel called the 'Sea Otter' for the North West of America. Some Bengal adventurer fits out two other ships with fine names under Portuguese papers and colours. Some speculative merchants, men of letters perhaps, equip two other ships, and the whole under the command of a young gentleman named Meares, who is

7—Meares: op. cit. lxxi.

8—Mortimer: Narrative of a Voyage, etc. In Royal Society Library, Hobart. 9—H.R.A., Vol. 1, 1, Page 162.

10—Greenwood: Early American-Australia Relations, Pages 58-9.

11—Greenwood: Op. cit., Page 61.

12—B/T, 5/5, Pages 388 and 407-424.

13—Annual Register, 1790.

instructed to violate a system regarding Spanish America which it has been the policy of England to adhere to for ages."¹⁴ Pitt's speech in the Commons described the trade as "one which has been carried on for years without molestation" and stressed the importance of extending navigation and the fisheries. The Fishery dominated the debate. Mr. Alderman Curtis "whose maiden speech possessed all the characteristics of commercial oratory" said that his constituents in the City applauded the Convention and that more ships were preparing for the Southern Fishery than on any former occasion. We might note that he was also the owner of one of the transports of the First Fleet, the "*Lady Penrhyn*" which went on to Canton for a tea charter.¹⁵

Although the Southern Whale Fishery will be dealt with separately it is necessary to refer here to its attitude to the new situation. On January 20th, 1791, Messrs. Enderby, St. Barbe and Champion, the principal merchants concerned in it, attended the meeting of the Committee for Trade and Plantations to seek explanation of their rights under the Convention. They wanted definition of the areas to which the "not less than ten leagues from the coast" applied. They also sought freedom from the necessity of applying for licences while engaging in lawful trade and to have the sealing ships put on the same footing as whalers for premiums. They wanted the premiums extended to any ships which might carry convicts out to Port Jackson. So it is clear that the preparation of the Third Fleet had a bearing on this.

The Committee in turn put questions to the whalers — whether it would be to their interest to send ships north of the Equator to the North West of America if so permitted and whether, in that case, they would enter into bonds not to engage in illicit trade. After consideration of this they replied in writing the next day that it would be to their advantage to have permission to cross the Line for the joint purpose of fishing and trading with the natives on the North West Coast of America.¹⁶

We should note in passing that the Third Fleet sailed two months later, including five whalers who had licences to proceed to the Peruvian coasts, and that Phillip voiced the doubt whether the attractions of the fur trade might not prevent them from making a fair trial of the coastal waters of New South Wales. There is no need to dub him "visionary" on this account. His expectation of an Empire was being vindicated, an empire of trade based upon a freedom of the seas for which such bases as he had founded were essential; a freedom which was eroding the protectionist systems of mercantilist states and mercantilist trading corporations.

In April, 1791, Vancouver was sent from England to Nootka Sound to oversee the restoration of the trading post and also to make further survey of the Sandwich Islands and the coasts near Nootka to see whether there was any substance in the legend of a waterway linking that coast with Hudson's Bay. His discovery of King George's Sound in West Australia was not merely from zeal for scientific exploration — the route to China and the Pacific Ocean was so well established that it was important to know what places of refuge and what navigational hazards existed on that coast. Adverse winds and lack of time prevented him then from testing the belief that a strait existed between New Holland and Van Diemens Land. As mentioned elsewhere, his supply ship later brought cattle and kidnapped Maoris to Port Jackson and drew thence some additional stores.

Even during the wars the extension of trade was pushed on. In 1795 Commander Broughton sailed for Nootka in the "*Providence*" (just returned from Bligh's second breadfruit voyage) with secret orders to survey the coasts of Japan and Korea. After rounding Van Diemens Land he was blown north of Sydney and put in to Port Stephens where he found four runaway convicts living with the natives. He returned to Sydney for supplies before proceeding. He refers to the practice of merchant ships carrying off convicts when bound for the North West coasts of America and that these men generally deserted by the way, at the Society or Sandwich Islands.¹⁷

The common acceptance of the view that Botany Bay was chosen because escape of convicts would be difficult is simply naive. Whether London merchants urged the making of such a settlement or not, they certainly saw in it, and statesmen knew they would see, a safe base for refreshment from which they could draw supplies. There was always some wastage of men as well as of ships' gear. Collins makes frequent mention of the numbers carried off by ships. Delano states that he had seventeen men who had been convicts and "had secreted themselves on board without his knowledge"¹⁸. Few private merchants published their doings and none would admit to carrying convicts away but all seem to agree that others did it.

Another private fur trading venture of the period is worth quoting for its appraisal of Port Jackson. John Turnbull had been second officer in the "*Bartwell*" in the China trade and was impressed by what he learned of the lucrative trade to the North West of America. He passed through Bass Strait and remarks that ships which sailed for China too late in the year were obliged to make this eastern passage. Of Port Jackson he wrote that even

14—Perlt, Hist., XXVII, Pages 15—White: Journal of a Voyage to N.S.W., 1790, Page 111.
16—B/T, 5/7, Pages 10-21.

17—Broughton: Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific, etc. London, 1804.
18—Narrative of Voyages, Boston, 1817, Page 320.

the London docks, built at enormous expense, "do not exceed this natural port for safety. Ships of any dimensions requiring any repair to their bottom may heave down, keel out, with the greatest security, alongside the rocks, the water being sufficiently deep to afford this". The account mentions the numerous ships in the harbour, three of them on the same speculation as themselves¹⁹.

Such bases, provided they had the organisation and work force to give despatch, gave reality to the idea of freedom of the seas. Such a base might be also a penal settlement in law. These two aspects were in fact complementary, especially in wartime. All contemporary accounts of ports and naval bases mention the use of convict labour. During World War II much of the dirtiest work of the Durban dry dock was done by gangs of Bantu convicts.

Opinions of French & Americans on Pacific Trade

EVERY schoolboy knows that the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay only a few days before the ships of La Perouse and some are still being taught that if he had arrived earlier the history of Australia might have been very different. Professor Manning Clark avoids this error by ignoring the visit altogether.

Not many know that La Perouse had received from France specific orders to visit the new settlement and report on what was happening there. From what Collins wrote of the visit it is clear that La Perouse expected to find a trading establishment. He had already visited the one at Nootka Sound and expected to find something much more important. The published journals, up to his arrival at Botany Bay, make clear the suspicions of the French government about British activities in the Pacific¹. The journal includes over 200 pages of introductory material, giving at length the orders and planned itinerary, extending over a four years' survey, mainly of Pacific regions. One object was to search for rivers or gulfs which could lead to waterways between the North West Coast of America and Hudson's Bay. Also he was to try to reach Kamchatka by 15th to 20th September, 1787. His actual arrival was on September 7th and there he received orders relating to the sailing of the First Fleet and the need for reports on the doings of the settlement. The text of the journal has been censored on these orders but the editor omitted to suppress the words included in the chapter heading: "Un courier arrivant d'Okhotsk nous apporte nos lettres de France."² Farther on in the Appendix a letter dated 21st September gives the proposed itinerary after leaving Avatscha Bay, which was to be for New Zealand by way of the Caroline and Solomon Islands³ and a footnote states that in a letter dated 28th September M. de la

1—Voyage de la Perouse, Paris, 1791; London Edition, 1799.

2—See Chapitre XXII.

3—Page 464.

Perouse wrote that he had received letters from the Minister but would not change his plan, except to omit New Zealand, in order to have more time to examine the coast of New Holland "et l'établissement que les Anglais y ont fait"⁴.

The decision to omit New Zealand is explained by the facts that Cook's survey had been so fully done and that the part of his instructions relating to it was now unnecessary.

The instructions as printed have a separate heading, "Objects relating to Politics and Commerce"; where over a score of points are itemised. In the South Atlantic he was to examine some islands (one mythical) and report on their suitability as bases for French whaling fleets. We might note in passing that in the year before he sailed (1784) the French government established a colony of whalers at Dunkirk, commanded by American "loyalists" from the island of Nantucket, in the hope that the produce of this sperm whale fishery would remove French dependence on oil bought through the whaler merchants of London.

For the Pacific islands he was asked to report in general on climate, customs, products, and warlike habits of the peoples; on whether they distinguished between the various European nations and if so what their opinions were of them respectively and on what use they had made of the plants and animals left by Cook. He was asked to indicate what fields for commercial speculation might be opened in them, especially in islands which had not been previously visited.

In New Zealand he was to visit Queen Charlotte Sound in order to discover whether the English had not already formed a settlement there or whether any settlement was intended. If one had been made he was to examine it and discover its purpose.

The survey of the fur trade was to be made without giving any offence to Spaniards but he was to ascertain what quantities of various furs were to be had, what goods were accepted for them, whether the sea-otter was the most common, what facility for a French trading post for trading with China where furs enjoyed "un débit facile". He was to find out whether any communication overland had been opened from Hudson's Bay or from any part of the United States; also the extent of Russian trading and whether it was being extended to America.

An island site for a trading post was to be sought in the Kurile Islands and he was to test whether trade to northern Japan was as strictly forbidden as in the south.

The ships were to winter in Canton where the European trade was to be studied fully and in detail and he was to hire interpreters for Chinese, Japanese and Russian before his second visit to Avatcha.

We may remark that there is no mention of New Holland in this commercial roundup. In the 70 pages of geographical and historical notes on the places to be visited there is brief reference to the parts of Van Diemens Land seen by Tasman.

He was provided with the latest editions of the British East India Company's sailing directions and amongst the equipment for navigation we find the Nautical Almanac for the years 1785-9 and an English chronometer. Two French chronometers were carried and he mentions that after two years of service their rate as verified by lunars showed an "imperturbable régularité"⁵. A general conclusion stated in the Appendix asserts that "la combinaison de nos deux moyens, les observations de distance et les horloges marines, a complètement résolu le problème (of longitude)"⁶.

In all respects this expedition shows the same quality as that of Cook; the same technical excellence of ships and men. A letter sent from Avatscha reported that after 26 months there was no sickness in either ship and that there had been no deaths on the "*Bonssole*"⁷.

On the Russian trading plans in the North Pacific and Siberia there is an interesting memo by M. de Lesseps who was sent from Avatscha to France with despatches. It is dated "31 Octobre 1788"⁸. Its tenor is that the Empress had asked the British government for the services of someone skilled in the field of geographical survey and Mr. Billings, who had been "aide-astronome" on Cook's third voyage, was appointed. He was made Captain 2nd Class in the Russian Navy and given carte blanche to survey Siberian trade routes. When La Perouse was in Avatscha he was told of two ships being built at Okhotsk and warned that he might meet them later in the North Pacific but when de Lesseps saw them later they were hardly begun and would take some time to complete. Meantime Billings had gone towards the Arctic by the river routes. The secret of the destination of the ships was "bien gardé" but it is rather obvious. We will meet Billings again: let us note how Cook's disciples were being drawn by devious routes to the el Dorado which he had uncovered.

Let us note in closing this part that at Botany Bay La Perouse expressed no regret at being preceded so narrowly by the English but much regret for the men killed by the natives of the island of Maouna of which he warned "le commodore Phillips" as it was possible he would be sending expeditions to the islands of the South Seas. He remarked on the extreme reticence of the

4—Page 465.

5—Page 467.
6—Page 498.
7—Page 463.
8—Page 473.

English officers about their discovery of an excellent harbour (the French ships anchored in Botany Bay and were not allowed to enter Port Jackson). Let us say he knew that a "purely scientific expedition" was just as spurious as a "purely penal settlement".

For an independent opinion about La Perouse let us turn to Thomas Jefferson who was then the United States' ambassador in Paris. Two days after the ships sailed from Brest he asked John Paul Jones to make enquiries, going to Brest if necessary, about the destination and details of the men and equipment? On August 14th he wrote to John Jay that the official purpose was "the improvement of geography". From evidence of their lading he suspected some other design, perhaps colonising on the north west coast of America or only "to establish one or more factories there for the fur trade". He was not much worried about this but doubted whether the French were "weaned of the desire of possessing continental colonies in America"¹⁰.

In October he received Jones' report which indicated an intention to establish factories only but conjectures about destination were divided between "New Holland and the North West coast of America"¹¹. In August, 1786, he reported to Jay the news from the Gazette that La Perouse was in Brazil and would proceed to Tahiti and California. He inferred that an establishment on the North West of America was the likely objective¹².

Even at this time Jefferson was preaching the necessity for American expansion into the Indian country, even to the Pacific, though the continent between was almost unknown. The story of John Ledyard is worth notice here for many reasons — he had sailed with Cook as Sergeant of Marines and was in the fatal affray at Hawaii; his subsequent career, though a man alone and without influence and money, won the support of people like Jefferson and Banks and others in Russia; and he showed the same "rage for speculation" in the new fur trade as did Cook's officers and numerous commercial adventurers in India, China, Britain, France, America and Port Jackson. He is the forerunner of the rugged individualists who were soon to develop the fur trade by land and of the tens of thousands who won through to California in 1849; in 1785 he was unique.

Born in Connecticut in 1751 of a Yankee merchant family, he was trained as a missionary to the Indians in Dr. Wheeler's Dartmouth College and lived with Indian tribes for long periods. Failing to secure ordination, he sought his fortune in England where he was chosen by Cook for service as a marine, probably because he knew something of Indian languages. He kept a

9—Memoirs, London, 1829, Vol. 1, Page 267.

10—Ibid., Page 276.

11—Ibid., Page 335.

12—Ibid., Vol. II, Page 39.

journal and published a narrative of the voyage which showed some understanding of the Polynesian culture; his brief reference to the fur trade stresses that an outlay of sixpence brought furs worth a hundred dollars in Canton. When the Alaskans made Cook understand that there were Russian traders among them, he chose Ledyard as his emissary.

Back in America after the war, he tried to secure backing for a trading voyage to Nootka, intending to return to the United States across the continent. He found in New York "little home navigation" — both capital and ships were scarce after the war, so he made his way via Cadiz to France, seeking backers and hearing rumours of ships sailing for his *el Dorado*. A French syndicate agreed to back him but nothing came of it — possibly the departure of La Perouse to explore the trade caused the government to deter private adventurers.

Through Jefferson he sought permission from the Empress of Russia to travel overland to the east where he might find a way to Nootka but found that this would take a long time and he was penniless. In 1786 he was invited to London where a ship commanded by one of Cook's officers was about to sail. Banks was backing the venture and Ledyard was to be given passage to Nootka Sound. Ledyard, like other "loyalists", was acceding to the state which could use his talents. The ship actually sailed but was recalled by the customs and authorities and "exchequered"¹³. This sounds like another episode in the feud between Banks and the East India Company for in the matter of licence to trade in the Pacific it was the law.

Ledyard then decided to try the overland route alone and reached St. Petersburg in March, 1787. He learned there that four Russian ships were being prepared for Kamchatka and that a land expedition had gone there in the previous year. By June 1 he had permission from the Empress and travelled in the company of a Scots physician in the imperial service, into Western Siberia, via Moscow and Tobolsk. From there he travelled with the Russian posts reaching Irkutsk on August 16th and in 22 days by boat down the Lena River he reached Yakutsk. In St. Petersburg he had drawn a bill on Banks for twenty guineas, relying on an understanding with him. At Yakutsk his hitch-hike ended; the commandant would not allow him to proceed, alleging that the onset of winter made travelling too dangerous.

He wintered in Yakutsk and in November the Arctic expedition came in, led by the same Billings referred to by La Perouse. Ledyard's former shipmate had then been two years in the Russian service. They returned together to Irkutsk; the winter sledge journey on the frozen river took only 17 days. Here he was

13—Sparks: Biography, Page 234.

arrested and sent back to Poland — there was by this time a Russian American Fur Company and interlopers were not wanted¹⁴. In Poland, he drew on Banks again and reached London in May, 1788.

In June he left for Cairo, engaged by Banks and the African Association to cross Africa from the upper Nile to the Niger, "a region better known to the Romans than to the Europeans of his day". In November he died in Cairo of an overdose of vitriol.

Jefferson's opinion of him was a high one — "his enterprising spirit, a genius and education better than the common; honest, truthful, and a singularity of character of the kind necessary to make him undertake the journey he proposes"¹⁵. In June, 1787, Jefferson had received a letter from St. Petersburg: Ledyard had two shirts and no money but seemed "determined to obtain the palm of being the first circumambulator of the earth"¹⁶. Before Ledyard left for the Niger he reported to Jefferson his failure to reach Kamchacka and promised that if he returned he would go to "Kentucky and endeavour to penetrate westwardly to the South Sea"¹⁷. This project foreshadows the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804 which did this during Jefferson's term as President.

The entry of American traders into the fur trade of the North West America, like all others of the time, was a means of achieving an increasing import of goods from China. Their trade with the Australian settlements and their activities in sealing and whaling in Australian waters as well as their use of the Australian route to Canton and the Pacific were all dominated by the same objective of more trade with China and Japan. There was one great difference from that of other states — Americans were much more intimately concerned to maintain friendly relations with Spain because of the Spanish control of New Orleans and the increasing importance of the Mississippi as the outlet for the produce of their western settlements.

Jefferson spoke for America in what he wrote on these matters. In 1789 he returned to the United States and in 1796 became Secretary of State to Washington. In April, 1789, he wrote to the Consul in Madeira of the two Boston ships sent to the North West in 1787 to "try a fur trade with the Russian settlements on the North West of which such wonders had been published in Captain Cook's voyages". The vessels were expressly forbidden to touch at any Spanish port¹⁸. In August, 1790, when war between England and Spain seemed imminent he reminded the

14—For details on this see Dict. Amer. Biog. under Wilson P. Hunt, A. A. Baranov and J. J. Astor.

15—J. Lafayette, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Pages 446-7.

16—Ibid., Vol. II, Page 162.

17—Ibid., Page 340.

18—Ibid., Page 53.

Consul to Spain of the American interest in the Mississippi¹⁹ and to the U.S. representative in Paris he sent papers which were to be sent to Count de Montmorin via Lafayette, if war began, to inform him that America would be against Spain unless she yielded on the Mississippi navigation and its port²⁰. In March, 1791, he was persisting in getting from Madrid a final decision on the right to navigate the Mississippi²¹.

The intensity of the need increased and burst out with the cession of Louisiana to France. Jefferson was then President but wrote privately to Livingston, the Minister to France: "There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans, through which the produce of three-eighths of our territory must pass to market, and from its fertility will ere long yield more than half our produce and contain more than half our inhabitants.... The day that France takes possession.... seals the union of two nations who, in conjunction, can maintain exclusive possession of the ocean. From that moment we must marry ourselves to the British fleet and nation.... this is not a state of things we seek or desire...."²².

It was Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana for the United States which made it possible to send Lewis and Clark in 1804 to blaze the Oregon Trail through the Indian country to the Columbia and make possible the establishment of the American Fur Company at Astoria. By this time, 1811, the Hudson's Bay Company was also established on the Fraser River. Astor's agent, McKenzie, a cousin of the McKenzie who in 1793 first crossed the continent, sold out Astoria to the Hudson's Bay Company in 1813, just before the arrival of a British frigate sent to seize the Astor factory.

The British defeat at New Orleans in 1813 marks their acceptance of the verdict of the Treaty of Paris of 1783. New Orleans was the key to the American way to the Pacific; Astoria, Nootka, Hawaii, Batavia, Manila and Singapore (1819) were key points in the command of trade with Canton, which was reached by American ships in 1784. Thus was the decision to make a settlement at or near Botany Bay influenced by the independence of America.

Thus we must see that the stock phrase of Australian historians, "fear of the French", must be given wider application and must be translated into specific terms on each occasion that it is used. The mutual fears and suspicions of rival merchant

19—Ibid., Page 64.

20—Ibid., Page 69.

21—Ibid., Page 90.

22—Ibid., Vol. III, Page 500; *Forer: Basic Writings of Jefferson, 1944, Pages 656-7.*

interests in the light of the new commercial possibilities emerging in the Pacific Ocean were merely an extension of the attitudes of merchant communities of Europe and of America.

To understand events in the Pacific region we must take account of European commercial policies. In the years between the American war and the settlement of Australia there was intense British-French interest in the condition of the Netherlands. The commercial oligarchies of Amsterdam and other seaports had declined in importance to the point where it was clear that they would have to accept control either by British or French interests. We must avoid personification of States, that vulgar error of historians, and think in terms of Dutch merchants, some of whom saw their future interests as linked with those of French merchants and bankers while others saw their prosperity as being based on close links with merchants of London, Leith and Hull. This is not to say that many British merchants approved of or welcomed these relationships. Much of the trade was keenly competitive and also illicit — the smuggling of tea, spices, silks and saltpetre was common. Nevertheless, that there was trade of increasing volume, especially in the new cheap cotton stuffs, argues a mutual advantage.

The essential aspect of the situation is that a commercial revolution was taking place in Europe and meeting with a complex opposition from the privileged interests of the old order. In France a new commercial middle class was verging on political revolution against the old order which had just concluded an iniquitous trade treaty with Britain. In America a colonialist middle class had carried their point against the mercantilist policies of Britain. In Britain the new merchant groups of the "outports" like Liverpool and Glasgow were trying to put down the established interests of London and especially of the privileged chartered companies.

Likewise in Holland an emergent group called the "Patriots" was challenging the authority of the Stadtholder and the old merchant interests of Amsterdam. The French government and business interests supported the Patriots with arms and money while Pitt backed the Stadtholder's party. In 1787, with help from the Prussian army, he forced the French government to withdraw military aid from the Patriots; the resulting agreements also covered reduction of naval forces — all this while the First Fleet was on its way and secret orders were being issued to seize Dutch ports in India-Ceylon at the first opportunity.²³

The apparent secrecy and haste with which the First Fleet was sent at this time arose from the fact that French control of "the Republic" through the Patriots would give the French the use

of Capetown and Batavia as well as Mauritius, Pondicherry and the rest. Lord Cornwallis in India had orders to seize Trincomalee as soon as news of war reached him. It was the only harbour in those seas which was safe in both monsoons, though it had no intrinsic commercial value. The other key ports were too strong to be taken except by major military operations but a base on the New Holland route to Canton and the Pacific would enable East Indiamen to bypass the hazards of the Indian Seas and Sunda Strait. The plan to settle at Botany Bay (or any better harbour in that region) was thus in part an insurance against a French takeover of the Netherlands and of its trading bases.

We must always remember the double advantage principle inherent in this policy. Every port, every mast and spar, every pound of hemp or saltpetre denied to the French was also added to British resources — like ships captured in war. Thus to occupy Norfolk Island as well, knowing its lack of a safe anchorage, can be regarded indifferently as a potential source of masts and cordage or as a denial of those possibilities to enemy forces. The official gloss, "a place which might hereafter be useful", can be construed as "useful to us" or "useful to the French" — both make sense. No historian (until recent controversy gathered weight) has attempted to explain the intentions which were carried out in such a way as to prove urgency.

The consistency of the policy of containing French-Spanish expansion (and taking over suitable bases) can be seen in the Nootka incident of 1790; in the same year there was another incident with Russia over the Black Sea port of Oczakow. Behind the diplomatic language and the threats of naval action lay an attempt of French merchants to get from the Russians a concession to obtain from Poland large masts for use in the Toulon dockyard. Until then the best masts for large ships were ratted by the Vistula to Danzig; the French sought to tap the same region by the Dneiper. British merchants had controlled the Danzig supply by commercial means — they overbid the French agents. British diplomacy thwarted the attempt of French agents to open a new route for masts and monopolise it.

(The issue was not merely one of "masts and spars miscellaneous"; the increased size of warships and East Indiamen alike demanded larger masts for more power, and these had to be transported whole, for seasoning and shaping at dockyards. The lower masts of a "74" cost over £2,000 each; size and quality were worth that money. Masts and spars of Norway and Canada were not in that top class in either size or quality. Hence the interest in the pines of New Zealand and Norfolk Islands — for the East India dockyards which had hitherto been supplied with both masts and cordage from European sources.)

²³—*Journals and Correspondence of Lord Auckland*, Vol. 1, Chapter IX, London, 1861.

We should note also that when in 1797 it became important to secure Capetown (and deny it to the French) it was done bloodlessly and at small cost in the name of the Stadtholder, then in exile in England. (In 1941 the attempt to take over Dakar was made in the name of the French government in exile.)

At least as early as 1784 the necessity of taking Capetown was seen but it took the exigencies of war to convince the Cape Dutch merchants that it was in their interest to accept British control instead of French. In 1786-7 it was by no means clear that they would do this. By 1797 they knew that either British or French control was inevitable.

We have already seen how in 1785 the French government sent La Perouse to get first hand information of the commercial possibilities of the Pacific lands and peoples. In 1802 a valuable retrospective assessment of British designs was written by another French scientist and self-confessed spy, Francois Peron. An "almost literal translation" was published in 1914 by Professor Ernest Scott²⁴.

Scott (and later historians) have missed the significance of this report, partly because of an error in translation. A brief postscript whose original is deciphered as "ce piege naisant d'une grande puissance," is translated as "this freshly-set trap of a Great Power". "Trap" is meaningless; it comes from misreading "siege" as "piege" and the translation should be "this newborn base (seat or site) of great strength (or power, influence, importance)". In any case there is no warrant in the French original for "a Great Power".

The report (a letter from Peron to General Decaen at Ile-de-France — Mauritius — Dec. 11, 1802) begins by asserting that in 1787 "Europe" was ignorant of the objects and nature of the English settlement. (There is no mention of the bearing on this of the total loss of the La Perouse expedition.) "Europe" was still ignorant of the rapid growth of the settlement—the outcome of heavy expenditure and the planting of a numerous population. Peron stressed the increasing wealth of the settlement and the private fortunes that were being made.

He asserted that Baudin's scientific expedition was a pretext — they were merely "strangers in appearance to all political designs". His personal status as a scientist had enabled him to elicit information without arousing suspicions. Besides the Governor King, and his secretary — both "spoke our language very well" — he was on visiting terms with the Commandant of Troops, Mr. Paterson; and "through him made the acquaintance of all the officers of the colony". He names the Surgeon,

Mr. Thompson; the Surveyor, Mr. Grimes; the Commissary-General, Mr. Palmer, and Mr. Marsden, "a clergyman" and "a cultivator as wealthy as he is discerning". Thus the principal people had furnished him "unsuspecting, information as valuable as it is new." His report on the "present establishment" stresses the superb harbour, the roads and public works and the fertility of the Parramatta and Hawkesbury districts. Hawkesbury had rich soil and water transport — it would therefore be "the source of rapid and very large fortunes".

From this base an "Empire of trade in the Pacific" was being built. (Does this not explain Phillip's reluctance to have convicts as the foundation of an Empire?) New establishments were planned for Port Phillip and Van Diemens Land, to assure the monopoly of trade. The whale fisheries of New Zealand were a principal seat (sic? siege?) of the wealth of the colony — an extraordinarily lucrative fishery. The "cedar" of Norfolk Island and the commerce of the islands were important; there were expectations of extending control to the commerce of Peru. There was already a contraband trade and in the last war (1797-1802) many prizes had been taken off those coasts by "simple whaling vessels". The Cape Horn route was favoured by merchant ships and whalers returning to Europe.

Peron stressed that the prevailing winds facilitated the projects of private traders and government ships and the English government was building up the colony rapidly with supplies, convicts and free immigrants who received lavish concessions, including goods at prices below those ruling in England.

He found astonishing the increase in sheep flocks and also the improvement in the quality of wool — he mentions the capture off the Peruvian coast of a number of fine-woolled sheep sent to the Viceroy by the Spanish government at great expense. There was expectation that the colony would in a few years furnish valuable and abundant material for English manufacturers. He had seen the flocks of Paterson, Cox and Marsden and also samples of their wool.

There was also hope of a production of hemp large enough to free England of "the considerable tribute she pays at present to the north of Europe". "The famous flax of New Zealand" had strong commercial possibilities. "A cargo of cordage from the Navigator Islands" suggests that coir ropes were also being made there. He cites his resistance to rotting, a quality peculiar to coir, but does not use the term.

Concerning the China trade he pointed out that Lord Macartney's mission had failed to increase the sale of British manufactures there but asserted that through the fur seal production the English were "about to become masters of the China trade".

²⁴—Scott: *Life of Matthew Flinders, R.N., Appendix B, Pages 436-464.*

Here then we have an assessment of the increasing wealth of a new colony arising from its situation and qualities in relation to the trade with China, the islands and Peru and from the thriving whale fishery. All these were foreshadowed in the proposals of Matra, Young and others, in the journals of Cook's voyages and in the requests of the whaler merchants of London well before the official decision to make the settlements was announced. The growth of such a colony was foreshadowed by the motto chosen for the Great Seal of New South Wales: "Sic fortis Etruria crevit". The British had seized the key to the new situation and were building on a position of strength.

Peron urged that the colony be destroyed as soon as possible, concluding: "Today we could destroy it easily: we shall not be able to do so in 25 years time." His postscript stated that M. Freycinet had examined all points favourable to the landing of troops.

Scott's treatment of this document is almost pointless. He cites and paraphrases²⁵ another report to the Minister of Marine, presumably by Freycinet, assessing the military weakness of the settlement due in part to the large numbers of dissident Irish. His main concern is for the moral turpitude of Peron and Freycinet though his strictures could also apply to Flinders' intentions when he called at Mauritius²⁶. These details which show specifically why "fear of the French" was warranted are ignored as is the evidence which enlightens the original purpose of the British government in making a settlement.

He points out minor errors of the report while making no comment on the broad truth. For example, where Peron stated that the government was seeking a strong military base nearer to the coasts of Peru Scott's footnote reads: "This statement was entirely false." Yet in 1792-4 Colnett's official expedition had sought harbours for whalers in the Galapagos Islands and whalers using these had taken many prizes in the ensuing war. The desire for a military post (a naval base) had substance: it was not "entirely false" but a shrewd inference at least from the information Peron had received. Had Scott seen the Pitt papers on this he would have found Enderby's proposal of 1799 for an expedition against Peru and Chile using Port Jackson as a main base and convicts as recruits for a landing force.

The report is a logical appraisal of the reasons for making several settlements but historians still take the view that there were discovery expeditions that were purely scientific. In 1943 Prof. Greenwood reached the conclusion that on the weight of evidence Baudin's expedition was pure. If there is any evidence at all to the contrary then such a statement is illogical.

The Whaling Industry, 1770-1800

THE loss of the American colonies has been commonly accepted as the dominant cause for settlement of Australia because of the need for a place where convicts could be disposed of. The fallacy will be treated elsewhere. Another view is that there was need of an alternative source of supply for whale oil because the American supply was now lost¹. This is also too simple to be true. The oil came from America in the sense that it was collected there for shipment to London but much oil came from the Arctic whale fleet in Britain itself. The sperm whale oil came from the South Atlantic where it was taken by New England whalers. Nantucket Island was the chief base for these but though the industry was manned by Nantucketers it was dominated by the finance of London, their chief market. During and after the war the centre of operations became London itself but the personnel of the industry was dominated by the skilled "loyalists" who defected from the United States in large numbers. This was the origin of the British Southern Whale Fishery which was so closely linked with the founding, supplying and using of the new settlements at Port Jackson, Norfolk Island and later Hobart.

It is of some significance that the French government also established a Southern Whale Fishery at Dunkirk, in 1785, with several families from Nantucket and with Nantucket ships².

After the Treaty of Paris the Americans had the status of foreigners and were in theory subject to the full rigour of the Navigation Acts. They also were free of the previous prohibition on trade to the regions monopolised by the East India Company. To use this freedom much capital was needed and the Americans began to discover how much of their colonial trade depended on the finance-capital of London. Political freedom and economic

²⁵—Pages 254-264.
²⁶—See Scott: Flinders, Page 304.

¹—Greenwood: *op. cit.*, Page 64
²—P.R.O., B/1, 5/3, Page 263.