

Early Coastal Explorers

Heather Conn

LONG BEFORE 1791, when the first major exploration and charting of waters around Vancouver took place, native people travelled the region by canoe. When Captain James Cook arrived in 1778 at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island's west coast, the natives believed his crew were transformed fish. "One white man had a real hooked nose," retells Winifred David, whose husband's Mowachaht (Nootka) ancestors greeted Cook's ship and passed down this oral story. "And one of the men was saying to this other guy, he must have been a dog salmon, that guy . . . Look at that one, he's a humpback [salmon]."

Juan Perez in the *Santiago* made the first Spanish voyage to the Northwest Coast in 1774. Like Britain, Spain longed to discover the Northwest Passage. Control of this passage, believed to link the Pacific and Atlantic oceans across the top of North America, promised trade. Dutch, British and French navigation on the Northwest Coast threatened Spain. Russians had already colonized what is now Alaska and their fur trading stimulated coastal exploration in the 1770s. Spaniards had colonized the Pacific Coast near San Francisco and made brief trips farther north. But Spain wanted to boost her sovereignty claim to this region. So between 1774 and 1779, Spain sent three separate expeditions to explore the northern Pacific Coast. That's when Cook arrived at Nootka Sound via the South Pacific and followed the coast from Oregon to Alaska. But no ship had yet reached the Strait of Georgia.

For the next few years, war replaced exploration. Britain fought the American colonies to crush their bid for independence while Spain and France, to support the colonies, maintained ships in the Atlantic. But exploration resumed after the American Revolution ended in 1783. More than 100 trading ships, mostly from Britain and America, arrived at the coast between 1785 and 1792. French ships navigated parts of the coast in 1786. John Meares visited Nootka Sound in 1788 and helped British fur-traders keep an almost constant presence there. This diminished Spain's historical claim to the site, which was still believed to be part of the mainland. In 1789 Alejandro Malaspina received orders to check on Spain's new settlement at Nootka Sound, which he did, and to discover the Northwest Passage, which he did not.

Europeans first ventured into Vancouver's surrounding waters in July 1791. Spanish navigator José Maria Narvaez explored the Strait of Georgia for three weeks. He sailed "a

line of water that was more sweet than salty" between what is present-day Point Roberts, Washington and Point Grey. He saw openings in the land but did not realize that these formed the mouths of the Fraser River. Narvaez thought that Point Grey was an island surrounded by other islands, and called "them" *Islas de Langara*. On his chart of this region Narvaez marked three squares on today's north shore of Burrard Inlet. Evidence indicates that these were native villages, the first recorded dwellings in Greater Vancouver.

In the summer of 1792 British and Spanish ships appeared in the area. Captain George Vancouver, Cook's former apprentice, led his expedition in the sloop *Discovery*. They anchored at Birch Bay, then travelled up Georgia Strait in smaller boats. The Spaniards, who had sailed from Mexico to Nootka, used Narvaez's chart to explore the area. Their two schooners, one under Dionisio Alcalá Galiano, anchored off Point Grey. Both nations' expeditions sailed up Burrard Inlet and the east coast of Vancouver Island. Galiano explored Indian Arm, then shared his information with Vancouver, who passed the mouth of the Fraser River but decided that its shoals precluded channel navigation. Vancouver produced meticulous maps of the area between 39° and 52° north latitude. He examined the Strait of Juan de Fuca (whose namesake explorer had wrongly charted the waterway at 47° and 48° north latitude), and realized that it offered no source to the Northwest Passage. Vancouver charted more of this shoreline in one summer than any predecessor. He found Howe Sound "a dreary, comfortless region."

Britain became Spain's ally in the French Revolution. But by 1795 Spain's influence declined and she withdrew from the West Coast. Britain now ruled the region. Today, coastal names still evoke Spain's former glory. Vancouver relied on Spanish charts and never changed original Spanish names. Explorers did not appear again in Vancouver until 1808. That spring, Simon Fraser of the North West Company visited the area to establish trading posts. Navigating the Fraser River, he reached its mouth on July 2, but not the open sea. Two years before, he had approached the Fraser overland, thinking it was the Columbia. But this time he found that the nearby latitude was 49°, which ruled out the Columbia, as its entrance is 46° 20'.

Vancouver's era of coastal exploration ended here as overland travellers—from eastern Hudson's Bay Company sites to the Fraser River Gold Rush—sought furs and gold. They formed the roots of permanent settlement, resulting in the ultimate exclusion of Vancouver's first residents—the native people—from most of their traditional lands.