

Barry Gough

FORTUNE'S A RIVER: The Collision of Empires in Northwest America

**Trade was the major impetus for
Canada's claim to the Pacific Northwest.**

PHOTO AND REVIEW BY TIM LYNCH

socio-political trends, sometimes complementing, and other times competing with one another. The dominant trend from the Canadian perspective was the opportunity for expanding trading opportunities, primarily through association with friendly native tribes. The other was the desire of imperialistic nations like Russia and Spain to acquire new lands and assume the regal right over all people living thereon, and controlling any trade that transpired. Overshadowing these desires for commerce and territory was a belief in the existence of a Northwest Passage creating a direct trading route from Europe to Asia. The author contrasts the regal claims by Russia and Spain with the behaviour of the trading and related business practices of the British / Canadians and the Americans.

The book provides an analytical narrative of how, in the Eurocentric view of the world at the time, the challenge was to "go west young man." There are many examples of how this dictum was practiced and North America's intercontinental divide was transcended from east to west. Individuals from different parts of the world had the same passion for exploration. They cross paths in the history of the time like ships in the night. The reader becomes intimately acquainted with the Canadian contingent: Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, David Thompson, et al, all primarily motivated by trade and profit. The dominant American characters are the rugged individual John Ledyard, the first America globetrotter, and Captains Meriweather Lewis and William Clark of the US Corps of Discovery. Thomas Jefferson started collecting the writings of Cook, Mackenzie, Fraser and Thompson, along

On the BC FishNET Email network last November there was a fascinating discussion about early trading practices between the original European explorers and native tribes. As I read through the diverse opinions being expressed I thought about doing a content analysis of the material as a way of gaining insight into what happened back then. I was pondering this task when I was given Barry Gough's book, *Fortune's A River: The Collision of Empires in Northwest America* as a Christmas present.

Gough is a resident of Victoria and an international authority on Pacific Northwest history. In *Fortune's A River*, his latest book on the region, he has compiled an account of the way the Northwest coast of North America was surveyed and populated by Europeans. Starting with the survey of Nootka Sound in 1778 by Captain James Cook of the Royal Navy, Gough provides easy to read descriptions of two geo-political /

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with an assemblage of surveys and writings by a colourful assortment of explorers venturing west, when he was America's Secretary of State in the 1790's under President Washington. Later, as President he helped implement a government plan that laid the foundation for the America we know today.

Gough documents how the early Canadian traders collaborated with aboriginal tribes: Arikara, Assiniboine, Black Foot, Clatsop, Crow, Haida, Hidatsa, Kootenay, Mandan, Mowachaht, Nuuchahnulth, Piegan, Plains, Shoshone, Sioux, Tlingit (See *Facts, Figures and Legends*, **Fisherman Life**, May 2004). In addition to guns and alcohol, the major "currency" between the aboriginal peoples and explorers was trinkets, which the globalization of the era came to include Venetian buttons and beads. The appearance of such adornments on the various native tribes informed explorers that they had some past dealings with other Europeans. Marriage between the early European explorers and native women, including Mackenzie, was accepted and said to bring closer understanding between the races, as well as give the women entitlement to all employee benefits where applicable. The bibliography accompanying this book serves as a treasure trove of research about the relationship of tribes with European explorers.

In addition to providing insight on the Northwest theatre the book also discusses the influence of French in Louisiana and how the Americans handled that situation. It is reported that one of the French plans for the aggrandizement of their culture in North America was to attack the Canadians / British from the rear by taking a contingent of soldiers up the Mississippi River. The Americans did not support this plan and when Napoleon chose to take on the Russians in Europe there were insufficient French resources available to make it happen.

The reader learns about the monopolistic control of the Chartered Hudson's Bay Company and how the newly formed Montreal-based Northwest Company had to be created. While they had affiliations with HBC, Canada's pioneer traders belonged to the latter and were known as Nor'Westers. The primary customer for the trade opening up in the Pacific market was China. Sea otters, which densely populated the region prior to the arrival of the white man, were highly valued by the ruling Chinese dynasty for the soft

shiny pelts (See *Canada's Asia Pacific Gateways and Corridors*, **Mariner Life**, June 2007). The harvesting and transportation of such a resource was very profitable. The Russians referred to the pelts as "soft gold." Engaging in this trade the British / Canadian traders had to accommodate the monopolistic regulations of the British East India Company; arrangements were made with American mariners since they were not subject to monopolistic regulations.

Russia's Catherine the Great realized that she had claims on North American shores following inquiries from Paris about scientific exploration going east. While there were some noble attempts by the Russian navy to lay claim to Canada and America, they were a long way from St. Petersburg. This meant they were limited by their supply logistics and the threat of scurvy. They had to rely on the Hudson's Bay Company, or American mariners to provide them with the necessities of life. There is one account of how the Russians introduced the British navy to a maritime diet of salmon in place of the traditional British dried meat. In the absence of a large enough population to serve its colonies Spain relied on interracial marriage with and Catholic conversions of the local natives to establish their presence. These people eventually rebelled against the authority of Madrid that led to the establishment of Mexico.

As the title states, access to and ownership / control of a river to transport goods to the coast was worth a fortune; particularly access to the Pacific Ocean. A critical part of Canadian strategy, sometimes in conflict with the Americans, was to respect and to get along with native tribes who populated the terrain along rivers. While it documents the relationship of the early traders and explorers with the rivers of North America, the book focuses on the geography of the Columbia River, along with the Missouri and the Mississippi rivers. A major contribution of Captains Lewis and Clark was the confirmation that the Great Bend of the Missouri River was below the 49th parallel.

The prize for all of the nations involved in exploring the Pacific Northwest was the convoluted Columbia River that started in Canada (BC) and flowed north, then made a 180° turn south down into America (Washington state) before

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making a right angle turn west to the Pacific Ocean. The Russians tried to enter the estuary of the Columbia but were not able to overcome the extreme currents at the mouth. Thompson was the first white man to travel along the Columbia River to its entrance in to the Pacific Ocean. A German American immigrant, John Jacob Astor, who became interested in the Pacific Northwest through association with Montreal Nor'Westers, established a maritime community at the mouth of the Columbia which he called Astoria.

Gough dramatically reviews the changing ownership of this pivotal part of the Pacific Northwest. Canada's claim to the land north of the Columbia is documented through the trade routes and the commerce that developed following Thompson's travel there. The British and American diplomats, not wanting to go to war again following the 1812 American invasion of Upper Canada, agreed to find a negotiated settlement to their border disputes. The Americans stood their ground, reminiscent of the way they negotiated the 21st Century softwood lumber agreement. The British diplomats in Westminster agreed to the continuation of the 49th parallel beyond the Great Lakes. Perhaps there is some consolation that they did not slice off a portion of Vancouver Island as they did to Point Roberts.

During the period covered by Gough, late 17th to early 18th century, Canada was being governed by the bureaucrats in

Westminster, England. Their primary interest was in preserving profitable trade routes and creating wealth for the Empire. The British appear to assume they had claim on lands first visited by their emissaries such as Cook and Vancouver. I got the impression that the Pacific Northwest was regarded by Westminster as the far flung part of the Empire, and some may argue that their modern day counterparts in Ottawa have inherited a similar mindset. How different history would have been if Canada had had an equivalent to a Jefferson.

Not being familiar with the geography of the region I felt at a disadvantage reading this book. There were repeated references to Bering Strait, Gulf of Alaska, Queen Charlotte Islands, Nootka Sound, Strait of Juan de Fuca, Cape Disappointment, Monterrey, Baja California and various locations in between. To help me see the same shoreline the explorers saw I found the 21st century phenomenon of Google Earth the next best approach to actually travelling there. How much more rewarding this book must be to those who have traveled and witnessed the Pacific Northwest coastline in real time. 

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