

CHAPTER IV

THE NORTHWEST CAMPAIGN

We can well imagine that Malaspina was terribly upset by the dispatch he received from Valdés ordering him to search for the strait of Ferrer Maldonado. The commander was already convinced that, with the exception of the channel discovered by Vitus Bering, which was not navigable because of the perennial ice, there was no open passage in the north of the American continent. Nevertheless, he was forced reluctantly to set aside other more useful projects in order to pursue this legend.

His disappointment was surely accentuated by his awareness that he, after all, was one of the people most responsible for the interest in this campaign, and that it would now cost money to the treasury, time to the expedition and physical suffering to all of its members, without adding anything of significance to science.

To understand the situation it is necessary to go back in time.

For more than two centuries there had been wild speculation about the existence of a navigable passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. By the late 18th century, however, no navigator believed still in its existence. Yet every so often some erudite who had never set foot outside a library asserted his belief in it, and that rekindled the debate.

Malaspina disbelieved totally in the existence of a Northwest Passage. He knew that Cook had hunted for it unsuccessfully, and the Italian had boundless admiration for Cook's exploits. In addition, he had read the memoirs of various navy officers and pilots who, since the time of Sebastian Vizcaíno at the beginning of the 17th century, had searched for it without success. And finally, he had learned that not even Jean François de La Pérouse had discovered the strait.

At the outset, when Malaspina and Bustamante were laying out the plan of the voyage, they had not discarded the possibility of a campaign toward the north, but early on they became sceptical and rejected that phase of the expedition, which would have required at least six months. Then, however, still during the preparations for the voyage, Alessandro changed his mind once again, and seemed more enthusiastic than ever.

What had happened was that José Espinosa, while doing research with other officers in the *Archivo de Indias*, had found a copy of the report of a voyage that the pilot Lorenzo Ferrer Maldonado claimed to have made in 1588. In this account he asserted the existence of the passage, and claimed to have traversed it, proceeding from Hudson Bay to the North Pacific. Espinosa had given the text to the commander, who must have seen something in it, because he immediately wrote to Valdés, giving him the news and adding that it was worth looking into the claim of the old mariner.

Lorenzo Ferrer Maldonado was a picturesque figure who lived in the 16th and 17th centuries. In his time he was known for various legal misadventures and scientific frauds. In 1608 he wrote a report of his alleged voyage and presented it to the Court in the hope of obtaining financing to repeat it. He claimed that the strait began at 60° north latitude and went up to 75° before ending in the Pacific, again at 60°. The report was not regarded as at all credible, and was soon justly forgotten.



Figure 10. *The Plaza Mayor in Mexico City*. Fernando Brambilla. Museo de América.

In 1781, Juan Bautista Muñoz, an historian who wrote about the Royal Navy, found a copy in the archives of the Duke of Infantado. He mentioned it and soon the Duke of Almodóvar, in his *History of the Overseas Establishments of the European Nations*, which he signed with the pseudonym of Malo de Luque, took up the subject. After that, silence fell over the document once again. It is worth mentioning, by the way, that this was not the only extravagant text produced by a whimsical mind. Some decades later, Juan de Fuca and a mysterious Admiral Bartolomé de Fonte wrote a similar treatise, except that they placed the latitude in a more southerly position, around the 48th parallel.

It is difficult to understand Malaspina's enthusiasm for this matter, since he must have been aware of the doubts about the various "discoveries." Perhaps there were details in the copy found by Espinosa that differed from other known versions and made it more credible. Or perhaps it was just that emotion obliterated Alessandro's rationality. We simply do not know.

We do know that Malaspina believed that scientific knowledge was humanity's common patrimony. Proceeding from this belief, he asked Valdés for permission to make

the document known to the scientists of London and Paris. This happened on June 9, 1789, and from that day the problems began.

Valdés had never denied anything to Malaspina, and on this occasion also the commander was convinced that the Minister would soon communicate to him the King's consent, which is probably why he made no effort to keep the document secret. Thus the Ferrer Maldonado voyage was probably the central point of discussion among the officers of the Cádiz Department at this time.

One of these officers was José Mendoza y Ríos, a close friend of Malaspina who was already rather well known for his studies in astronomy. At this precise moment Mendoza was preparing a trip to France and England to acquire books and instruments for the navy and for his colleague's expedition.

At this point the details are obscure, but we can infer some of them from what we do know. In November 1790, Philippe Buache (whose uncle of the same name was a geographer at the court of Louis XV; he had himself dealt with the Northwest Passage) read a paper to the *Académie des Sciences* in Paris that produced a small earthquake in European geographic circles. Buache summarized the Ferrer Maldonado account, publicly thanking the Spaniard Mendoza for providing it and for giving him permission to use it. He stated that the text satisfied the demands of verisimilitude and could therefore be considered authentic and true.

As soon as the opinion of the prestigious Buache became known in Spain, the government decided to put it to the test. Logically, the task was given to the Malaspina expedition, which just happened at the time to be only a few hundred miles from the region in question.

Alessandro must have cursed the moment he had given the Ferrer Maldonado manuscript to Mendoza. Moreover, it is likely that Espinosa, who, let us remember, had discovered the fateful document, also reproached the commander. Perhaps this explains the discord that grew later on between the two men. Otherwise it is difficult to explain their falling out, considering the affability of Malaspina and the skill of the young officer from Seville. In any case, from then on both men openly distanced themselves from Mendoza, but the harm had already been done. All that remained was to carry out as diligently as possible the campaign which the government had ordered. This was no easy assignment now that it all seemed so nugatory.

Malaspina immediately arranged to notify Bustamante, who was in San Blas preparing to take the *Atrevida* to Acapulco. The rendezvous of the ships took place on April 20. At a meeting of all the officers the following day the necessary plans were made for the imminent campaign, and the date of departure was set for May 1.

This surprise assignment did not mean that the tasks already allotted for the Viceroyalty of New Spain were to be abandoned. With this in mind, the leaders of the expedition agreed to leave behind in Mexico a few officers and the naturalists Pineda and Née, under the command of Dionisio Alcalá Galiano.

Before the arrival of the *Atrevida*, Malaspina had made a quick trip to Mexico City to pay court to the Viceroy, Juan Vicente Güemes Pacheco, the second Count of Revillagigedo, an enlightened man who was held by everyone in high esteem. Since he was a friend of Paolo Greppi, he had probably already met Malaspina. He had occupied his post for the previous two years and he had already encouraged many initiatives aimed at broadening the knowledge of the territory. He offered priceless help to Malaspina.

Upon his return to Acapulco, Alessandro wrote to Greppi :

Through this excursion, and through the generosity with which all educated people have shared their knowledge with me, I have finally been able to perfect my comprehensive understanding of America. With it I expect to propose a scheme that will harmonize the interests of each province, and of the totality of America with those of Europe and Spain. I hope to be able to serve the Ministry, providing it is willing to deal with a general system based upon solid and lasting principles. The commerce, defence and legislation of America will never be fully understood unless their main establishments are visited without received ideas or the wish to imitate [past mistakes]. In any case, if I can occasionally spend some peaceful and philosophical hours with you, which is something I wish for every day, you will see that I am very thankful to a nation that has shown confidence in me, and that I have not for a moment tried to deny the duties imposed upon me by my birth. Since the conquest, bad politics has held a veil over the eyes of the nation. If the veil had been removed earlier, and the necessary energy applied to the appropriate system with the appropriate amount of effort, then we would not have been made victims of an arrogant nation [France] which is laying the groundwork for its own imminent destruction.

This is clearly another tirade against revolutionary France and, indirectly, against the politics of Spain, which Alessandro considered too self-serving. In any case, because of his disappointment Alessandro began to distance himself from the problems of Europe, and began to think of his retirement. In the aforementioned letter he writes:

In the situation I may be in upon my return, I hope to have some refuge at hand to protect me from my rivals, one that will prevent me from humiliating myself and joining the horde of courtiers. Above all, I want to be able to show Bailío Valdés my sheer gratitude without becoming either a reformist or a pretender, terms which in our present situation make one tremble. ...

With the Malta Cross I am not looking for a means of avoiding work, but only some guarantee of avoiding humiliation or oppression.

In December 1788, Malaspina expressed himself similarly in a confidential communication to the minister Valdés:

I repudiate the title of reformist. ... I am not driven as much by ambition or interest as by the wish on this occasion to serve the monarchy with all the enthusiasm born in me.

The Spanish possessions along the northwest coast of America did not actually extend beyond the Californias. On these coasts a string of missions, run by the Franciscan



Figure 11. The Chief of Mulgrave suing for peace with the corvettes. José Cardero. Museo de América.

friars, had been founded, with the main purpose of offering support to the ships sailing those waters. However, Spain's interest in these territories, and especially in the northern ones, had increased recently because of the potential for competition in this area. The government in Madrid had learned that in the north the Russians occupied establishments which they used as bases to maintain a lucrative fur trade with the indigenous peoples. England was also showing an interest in the region. Even the enterprising merchant marine of the young United States occasionally ventured into those distant waters.

A few years earlier, the bay of San Lorenzo de Nootka, located near the 49th parallel, had been the object of a diplomatic incident which the governments of Spain and England were trying to resolve. In this situation, according to the Viceroy of New Spain, the Spaniards had vigorously to reaffirm the old rights of His Catholic Majesty, although they might concede that those regions could be inhabited by independent peoples governed by their local rulers within some kind of agreed framework. We cannot know whether these views were the product of the new ideas of the era or of an awareness that Spain was virtually impotent to occupy or even merely to control such enormous and distant territories.

The Count of Revillagigedo offered Malaspina his complete cooperation. He allowed the officers to examine the Mexican archives and to borrow those reports which could be of use to them; he encouraged the local experts to collaborate (and in fact the visitors made use of studies by José Mariano Moziño and José Antonio Alzate y Ramírez); he helped with the funding; and, finally, he ordered a painter from the Beaux Artes Academy of San Carlos to join the expedition for the length of the northwest campaign. Tomás de Suria was chosen. His diary has become particularly useful in

helping us learn about certain minor aspects of the voyage which the officers felt were superfluous or simply out of place in the reports that were intended to be published. To complete the contingent of artists, the duties of a crew member, José Cardero, were altered. Although self-taught, he showed great artistic talent, and his work was used by the other officers. We are indebted to him for some of the best drawings of the northwest coast.

Four days before departing for the north, Alessandro wrote to Azzo Giacinto, as if day-dreaming, "It would be nice if you were to receive letters from us from Hudson Bay." Then he returned to reality and advised his brother: "But I think that such an idea is merely a dream."

As planned, the corvettes headed north on May 1, 1791. Toward the middle of June they reached Cape Edgecumbe, then continued, reconnoitring the coast with great care in the forlorn hope of encountering the details described by Maldonado. Some sense of the feverish feeling which had spread aboard the ship is captured in a page of the journal of the voyage, where the commander wrote:

An opening was found in the mountain chain that rose from the depths of Almirantazgo Bay.³ Its mouth and serpentine course seemed similar to Ferrer Maldonado's landscape. The imagination soon gave birth to a thousand reasons that comported themselves to suit the [faculty of] desire. And so we accepted everything that seemed to agree with the description of the passage, and we dismissed or tried to rationalize whatever did not accord with the described terrain. Finally, each of us either extended the narrows in his own mind toward the north or attributed whatever did not fit to extreme distance or poor sight-lines. In this way we sought to dismiss any last doubt.

The corvettes anchored in the small harbour of Mulgrave on June 27. There was no possibility of a strait in that spot, but the vegetation as well as the natives were worthy of study. When the latter presented themselves, the officers were impressed by the enormous difference between these men and those living in the Californias. The furs they wore, the female custom of deforming the lower lip with a wooden disk, and the smell that emanated from their bodies all conspired to discourage any contact with them. Nevertheless, it was necessary to learn as much as possible of their customs and their language.

The tribal chief, whom his subjects addressed with the title of *ankau*, arrived singing a peace chant, and immediately showed interest in an exchange of goods. For that purpose he had brought salmon, beaver pelts and wooden utensils. The exchanges rapidly took place. Alessandro, an acute observer of human psychology, recorded in his journal an amusing description of the commercial "techniques" practised by the natives:

Not only do they hide the effects which they intend to barter, but on these occasions they present themselves with what seems to be total indifference. After a lapse of sometimes longer than an hour, during which they remain silent at the sight of the objects that are presented to them, they finally show either a fur strip or a doll, or a spoon, or some other bagatelle, offering to exchange that for what

³ Today Yakutat Bay in Alaska.

they are shown. They argue about size and symmetry when they cannot argue about quality. Once the exchange has been agreed upon, they go back and cancel it. Finally, if they have brought a really good pelt, they show it with great mystery, then withdraw it, then show it again later on. In this way they provoke in the most indifferent person a mixture of irritability and covetousness which is difficult to control even for the sake of [one's own] interest alone.

In fact, the Mulgrave natives would have willingly included the enjoyment of their women as part of the barter. The officers took measures to prevent disorders among the men over this issue, but their precautions were probably superfluous. Malaspina explained why:

Since the previous day they had repeatedly been sending out signals about letting us use their women while we were in the harbour. We were uncertain, however. Perhaps the signals were equivocal, or perhaps we even misinterpreted them, although they seemed clear enough. After all, the appearance of European ships in these waters was rare, and the offer did seem strange, since it could not have been made out of veneration or esteem for us, nor as the result of the alteration of customs by luxury, interest or example. So one of our officers, who was already near the huts and was decidedly alarmed by such an offer, decided to see what it was all about. If it meant what it seemed to mean, then it was necessary to take steps to maintain proper order among the crew; and, if not, then we had to erase such a sinister appraisal of their character and their customs from our minds. Led by two native youths, who kept repeating the known word *shoût*, the officer approached some trees near the huts. At that moment he was able to shed all doubts, for there, near the trees, were four or five women who were half-covered with seal skins and totally obedient to nearly the whole tribe, which seemed unanimous in offering to prostitute them. If desire had not been overcome either by example or morality, then it would certainly have been stifled at the appearance of these women, and at the amount of grease and dirt that covered them and gave off an odour so foul as to beggar description.

Another rather disconcerting trait of these indigenous people was their notable inclination toward theft. The theft problem was already known to European navigators. Before Malaspina, all the voyagers had had to deal with some very annoying episodes. Some of them had overreacted by killing the thief; others had simply permitted a handkerchief to be lifted from their pocket. Among the first group was Cook; among the second, La Pérouse. Alessandro did not like either of these solutions. As navigator-philosopher he could not accept the idea of spilling blood; as officer in the Royal Navy he could not tolerate a lack of respect shown to a subject of His Catholic Majesty.

At the same time, he was aware that the thefts did not imply human or social degradation. The natives simply acted according to their own moral and juridical code, which obviously differed from those of European civilization. It was necessary to understand that the behavioural rules of the natives originated in a different concept of property. Consequently, according to Alessandro, in order to avoid being robbed, one had constantly to act carefully and diplomatically. That meant not leaving scientific instruments unattended on the beach and, when necessary, appealing to the *ankau's* mediation when his impetuous subjects' behaviour needed correction.

There were indeed some rather delicate situations. On one occasion, Bustamante and two other officers were suddenly attacked by a group of armed natives. One of the officers reacted cleverly by aiming his unloaded musket at a hostile native, who was taken by surprise and responded, at the encouragement of the *ankau*, by extending his arms and singing the peace chant. On another occasion, it was necessary to keep *Ankau* himself hostage for several hours in order to recover some clothing that had been taken from one of the sailors. José Cardero preserved the memory of this episode in an enjoyable drawing of the natives asking for peace.

Between these various escapades and the frequent sessions of bartering, the Spaniards began their exploration in their small boats of the larger bay, while the corvettes remained anchored at Mulgrave.

Early in July the commanders decided to set sail. They had explored the area in great detail, but of course they had found no trace of the passage described by Lorenzo Ferrer Maldonado. They explored the head of the bay, which was surrounded by perennial glaciers that reached down to the water's edge, and baptized it, quite appropriately, Disenchantment Bay. On the beach there, Malaspina performed the symbolic act of burying a bottle which contained a document with the date and the names of the officers who took possession of the territory on behalf of the King of Spain.

A few years earlier, La Pérouse had criticized this procedure, according to which Europeans claimed legal possession of distant lands, and the right to govern – “exploit” is a more accurate word – the people who lived on those free lands. Alessandro was probably of the same opinion, but nothing in the world could dissuade him from performing a ceremony that his government demanded.

On the whole, the voyagers must have been feeling somewhat let down. They had undertaken the search for the passage with great enthusiasm, and a curious climate of collective participation in such a venture had taken hold of the vessels, affecting even the rawest young sailors among them. The commander illustrated this with an interesting episode that he entered in his journal. It seems that as they prepared to set off, they discovered that one of the artillerymen was missing. After a long and futile search, the officers were about to give up all hope when the man reappeared, totally exhausted. When asked why he had wandered off, alone and without permission, he replied that he had gone to look for the passage beyond the glacier, and that he had not wanted to mention it to anyone so that none of his companions could dispute his claim to having found it. Hereupon everyone laughed. No one felt that it was necessary to punish this undisciplined act, since it was felt that the man's disillusionment was punishment enough.

Leaving Mulgrave, the ships sailed north along the coast to latitude 68°, passing Mount St. Elias, whose glacier was later named after Malaspina. The presence of an unbroken mountain chain precluded any hope of a strait and adverse winds prevented entry into Prince William Sound. But its geography was already well known since Cook, and it had been mapped by Salvador Fidalgo the previous year.



Figure 12. Chief Maquinna at Nootka. Tomas de Suria. Museo Naval. Madrid

Although the search for the passage had been fruitless, like those of Cook, Dixon and La Pérouse, the journey had not been without significance. Referring to the last leg of the voyage, and with his mind fixed on James Cook, Malaspina wrote in his diary:

If the post-Cook labours that we have described did not give us the satisfaction of making geographic advances, they will at least prove useful by discouraging future searches for a passage in these parallels, and by thus saving both lives and money.

With that, the expedition set course due south.

On August 3, the corvettes were surprised near the Queen Charlotte Islands by a storm of exceptional violence and duration. In his diary, Tomás de Suria recorded the details of that week in dramatic tones. It was so bad, he noted, that the men were unable either to eat or to sleep. Malaspina was more restrained, writing only that “the wind on that occasion could be better called a hurricane.” That was not the only instance in which the commander minimized the dangers of the sea, nor was he the only one to do so. Cook also underplayed the “heroic” aspects of his voyages. These men obviously preferred to be remembered for the knowledge they had gathered, and not for the dangers they had overcome. Men like Cook and Malaspina agreed that these dangers were simply part of a mariner’s life, and thus not worth dwelling on. It was enough to mention that in certain seas, and in certain seasons, a particular phenomenon could take place. Thus forewarned, future navigators would be prepared to take appropriate action.

On August 13, the corvettes reached the surroundings of Nootka Island in Nootka Sound. The island, which lies alongside the much larger Vancouver Island, as it is known now, had seen its strategic importance grow in the preceding years. The entrance to the sound had been discovered by Juan Pérez in 1774. Four years later Nootka had been visited by Cook, after which British fur traders began to arrive. The serious incident in the summer of 1789, which sparked the Nootka crisis between Spain and England, led to the establishment in 1790 of a Spanish settlement and fort. Pedro Alberni commanded a garrison of soldiers and even tried to grow an experimental vegetable garden there. All of this was done in an attempt to stop the ever more frequent visits by fur-trading ships and to forestall the creation of a settlement by the Russians. These efforts, however, had been insufficient to stop the incursions of British and American ships. In spite of all these visits and explorations by the competing nations, the geographical knowledge of the region was quite thin. For example, it was not even known at this point that Nootka was an island, or that the mountains to the east were part of Vancouver Island, and not of the continental mass.

All of this territory was under the sovereignty of principal Chief Maquinna, who lived in a village at the head of one of the nearby inlets. Maquinna had already had contact with the Spanish, English, and American visitors, and relationships had not always been smooth. For instance, the ill-advised behaviour of the Spanish officer José Esteban Martínez had provoked an incident in which Chief Callicum, Maquinna’s ally, had lost his life. Malaspina had been ordered to maintain, and if possible improve, good relations with the native nation.



Figure 13. *Feast celebrated for Maquinna at Nootka*. José Cardero. This drawing served as the basis for the engraving published in the *Relación* of the schooners *Sutil* and *Mexicana* (Madrid, 1802).

The voyagers were overtaken by emotion as they sailed southward along the coast of Nootka Island. Recalling this moment, Alessandro wrote one of those passages in his journal in which political considerations were intertwined with those of a humanitarian and psychological nature.

One can imagine the emotion we felt when we saw our national flag waving on a promontory next to the southern point, and glimpsed among the trees the three masts of an unrigged vessel. We knew beforehand that we had an outpost along these coasts, and we knew how much money had been spent and how much blood had been shed to maintain our legitimate possession. Nevertheless, man's instinctual wish to be among his own, free of covetousness, or envy, or some misunderstood point of honour, is such that at that moment happiness transfigured what perhaps should have been taken as a dreadful and unfortunate sight.

On the promontory of San Miguel a fort had been created and the buildings constructed by the Spaniards were clustered together along the shore of the cove.⁴ Some canoes surrounded the corvettes, while Alberni's soldiers helped their countrymen in the sounding operations.

Three days went by before one of the local chiefs decided to come aboard. We learn something of this episode from Tomás de Suria's private diary, which is the least conventional document of the expedition. The chief was called Tlupanuc, and answered Malaspina's greetings with a speech as short as it is noble and intelligent:

⁴ Friendly Cove, named as a result of Cook's visit to the native village of Yuquot in that location.

Great Chief! Tlupanulj, a chief inferior to you, has listened to your polite and friendly message, and because of my respect toward it, and of the friendship that I profess toward your nation and to the Great Chief who sends you to our habitations, I have come to see you and I salute you. I am convinced that you will be informed by Chief Alberni of the reliability of my actions. More than my words, he has experienced my actions, and those of the men under my command. He is here and will be able to tell you the truth. I begin this speech in order to gain your complete confidence and I hope you will do the same. Do not think that my years are an impediment to my serving you in whatever you may wish. Although you may believe me a barbarian and wonder, I do not ignore the inviolable laws of friendship.

And those laws guided him first of all to set the Spaniards straight about the disguised enmity of Maquinna. Consequently, after having put them at ease concerning the rôle he might play in case of an attack, he added some surprising thoughts:

I know that you are men as I am, only more civilized. ... Actually, I am not an admirer of your instruments or your manufactures that are so coveted by my people. The common people do not know how to think, and thus attribute the awesome operations which you execute with your big canoes [ships] to magic. ... In any case, if you wish to gain the complete confidence of the tribe, act as the British, who although greedier than you, treat us with familiarity and courtesy.

Malaspina must have loved this speech.

In the days that followed, the officers undertook the systematic exploration of the region's many narrow inlets. No longer was anyone thinking about the Northwest Passage. However, Cook's maps contained a good number of gaps, and it was important to fill them in. Early on, these investigations ascertained the insularity of Nootka Island, which nestled in this broken coast of inlets, bays and islands, and led to visits to a number of native villages. The next year the Englishman George Vancouver and the Spaniards Dionisio Alcalá Galiano and Cayetano Valdés finally completed the charting of the whole region, during the course of which they met in the strait which separates Vancouver Island from the mainland.

The expedition paid a lot of attention to ethnological views of the natives. There were many legends and a lot of gossip about the Nootka people. For example, some navigators had written that they practised cannibalism. Some travel reports even described a macabre ceremony in which Maquinna had allegedly chosen his monthly victim from among prisoners of war. Not all Europeans believed this, but the Spaniards were uncertain. As a result they embarked upon a novel commercial activity in order to save at least the younger natives from such a horrible fate: they bought all the adolescent prisoners of war from the Nootka people. Later, the youths were shipped to California where they were converted in the missions and then turned over to a *criollo* dealer. Before



Figure 14. *View of the Vernacci Channel*. North-West Coast. Attributed to José Cardero and retouched by Brambilla. Museo de América.

long, this commerce proved to be disadvantageous. The continuous demand for these youths had raised the expectations of the Nootkans, who on occasion had demanded two copper sheets or a rifle for one young prisoner. Fabio Ala Ponzone wrote to his old tutor, Ximénez, about this matter. He suspected that when the Nootkans began to realize how generously the Spaniards paid, they increased their attacks on enemy tribes in order to acquire more and more of the young slaves. This issue about whether cannibalism was practised was therefore a mystery that had to be solved once and for all, and Malaspina put himself to the task.

After a few attempts which failed because the Indians dispersed into the woods, the officers Espinoza and Cevallos one day managed a successful visit to Maquinna's village. They discovered that the chief did indeed sleep with his head resting on a sack of human bones. Unfortunately they could not tell whether these bones were actually from victims of Maquinna, and the only way to tell was to ask the chief. The problem with that was that the divergent tales of previous sailors were based precisely on the widely varying stories they received from the natives. Alessandro realized that it was necessary to choose proper interlocutors and, above all, to ask questions in the proper manner. Obviously the commander had observed what the ethnologists wrote later on: the American natives, in their eagerness to please the Europeans who questioned them, always answered what they thought these foreigners expected to hear.

Malaspina found the ideal respondents in the brothers Natzape and Nanikius, two very intelligent native youths with an extraordinary ability to make themselves understood by the officers, almost as if they were not speaking a different language. The Spaniards came to the conclusion that cannibalism was unknown to the Nootka people; although they did have a tradition of cutting off a piece of an enemy killed in battle, this was only a symbolic act done in propitiation, and not a means of feeding themselves.

The philosopher Alessandro Malaspina was relieved when he came to this conclusion. Afterward he explained the matter in a long report, and to justify his prolixity he wrote:

It is time to put an end to this lengthy digression. Perhaps it seems verbose and out of order, but its aim is to justify our species and to counter an argument that has prevailed till now. The moral philosopher who believes that the harmonious facts of nature contribute to our well-being and to our multiplication will not be pleased at reading the ignominious truth about our species that is discussed in these lines, but I remind him that I have fought for humanity and that, among conflicting tales, I have preferred this approach to the natural desire in all travellers to distinguish themselves with tales of monstrosity.

It was the end of August now, and it was necessary to think about returning to Mexico. Malaspina had realized for some time that it would not be possible in just a few weeks to make a thorough survey of the coast, with all its channels, north of the Californias. Thus he made arrangements with the Count of Revillagigedo to launch another campaign the following year. He decided that it would be led by his officers Cayetano Valdés and Dionisio Alcalá Galiano (who could also count on the artistic talent of José Cardero) and that the vessels would be two schooners specially built in San Blas. Upon their return to Spain the works of these officers would be integrated with the rest, since in practice they were only two different logistical components of the same scientific expedition. The Spanish expeditionaries made a special effort to cement their relationship with the native people in order to secure their country's foothold in the sound. With this in mind Malaspina met with Maquinna to draw up a treaty of friendship. From this time of competing interests among the European powers, Nootka always retained a semblance of independence under the leadership of Maquinna's dynasty. Even today these native people enjoy a degree of autonomy within the system of Canadian government, and their chief has the same name – Maquinna – as his ancestor with whom Alessandro concluded a treaty between equals.

The corvettes sailed on August 27. They by-passed the Strait of Juan de Fuca (which, remember, Valdés and Galiano were to explore in 1792) and they did not stop until they reached the fortress at Monterey in Alta California.

In Monterey, which was the headquarters for the governor of that province, there were only a few cabins, a small church and a stockade to defend them. Next to the beach there was a shed for the use of the Spanish ships which arrived occasionally from San Blas. In the shed the officers were surprised to find the portable observatory that Dagelet, the astronomer of the unfortunate La Pérouse, had forgotten to take aboard with him. Their curiosity awakened, the officers searched for other remnants of the French expedition, and they found them at the nearby San Carlos Mission. With some emotion, Malaspina wrote:

We found, as worthy traces of that expedition and of the humanity of its leaders, a small quantity of seeds and some fruit trees that had already been planted in that mission and others nearby. We also found a small machine for grinding wheat that the Viscount of Langle had given as a gift to the mission padres.

We do not know if the officers were aware of the severe words with which La Pérouse had condemned the behaviour of the Spanish Franciscan friars. For the friars had never bothered to introduce into their missions even the most simple machinery (such as this very grinding machine), and had thus made it necessary for hundreds of natives to toil all day to obtain the same results that a few of them could have achieved with scarcely any effort by applying the most basic technology. It is likely that Malaspina held the same opinion. On more than one occasion we can verify the complete agreement between the Italian and the Frenchman on matters of politics and the organization of the Spanish empire. For example, La Pérouse had written:

If Spain does not change its system, if it does not allow free commerce, if it does not diminish the heavy duties it levies on foreign goods, if it does not realize that it is more profitable for the treasury that a small tax be paid by consumers than a heavy levy that suppresses consumption, Chile will never reach the level of development that its situation would allow.

Malaspina felt exactly the same way. And Chile's situation did not differ from that of the other American possessions he had visited during these two years.

On September 25, the officers left Monterey and the corvettes travelled together to Cape San Lucas at the extreme southern tip of the California peninsula. At that point they separated, the *Atrevida* sailing to Acapulco and the *Descubierta* to San Blas. Then, after having compared notes with the naval officer Salvador Fidalgo, who was actually based in San Blas, Malaspina set course for Acapulco. The *Atrevida* arrived on October 16 and the *Descubierta* three days later. Upon disembarking, Malaspina was pleasantly surprised to encounter the Italian painters Fernando Brambilla and Giovanni Ravenet. The two artists had left their ship in the Gulf of Mexico, proceeded to the capital, and from there gone on to Acapulco. In order to keep busy they had begun to draw. Brambilla was particularly adept at landscapes while Ravenet was an excellent portraitist. Thus they complemented each other. The commander ordered them to complete some sketches started by other artists during the Northwest campaign and prepared himself for the next leg of the voyage. He was to cross the Pacific and enter a world even less known.

As it happened, the naturalists Pineda and Née had amassed an enormous amount of data during these months; as a result of this the commander estimated that the expedition had already doubled its projected scientific results, whatever might happen in Asia.

The very day of their departure, Malaspina wrote to Greppi, who had left Spain and was now in Paris. Political affairs continued to guide Alessandro's pen:

As we examine what history tells us about man's character, we grow bold enough to predict what will happen. A maritime school of politics is produced which, in truth, lacks all kinds of things that could illuminate it, but which, at least, is not surrounded by all kinds of extravagant ideas. Instead, it rests on the simplest and truest foundation, which is the study of man, the influence of his passions on his deeds, and the influence of education, of climate and of national power on his passions. Here, my dear friend, are all the data that, in my solitude and surrounded by savages, lead me to believe that France is now immersed in a sickly dream. She could very well have put her finances in order if she had not

chosen to try to establish man's rights as read in Rousseau. However, in trying to reduce the royal authority by ridiculing it mercilessly, she degrades man, either by means of the mob's hatred or the King's apathy, more than she elevates him with very elegant speeches at the assemblies. If you wish, you may call me a man who reasons poorly, or a man wallowing in his own misery, but allow me to believe that the legislators of France are only carving out their own ruin, because they want man as he is in books, and not as he truly is and always has been. The history of Cromwell's England is going to repeat itself. Unfortunately, whoever would raise the mob to the same level as philosophers will only make fanatics of them all; philosophy will replace the old effects of religion among men, and they will continue to behead one another through the centuries. ...

But perhaps I have annoyed you enough with my dreams without praising those of others. Man never changes; it is enough that he has the past to help him cope with the present without getting involved with the future; but all he wants is to get mixed up in the future, abandoning the past and present, which would suit him better.

Even references to voyages already taken and to those yet to begin were only a pretext for Malaspina to emphasize their political usefulness. Thus he wrote:

Any Spaniard will be able to study the position, the rights, the advantages and the health of any aspect of the Monarchy. The government will find a system of national defence and of changing an old constitution saddled with all the inconveniences of the century in which it was conceived. And finally, Europe will see what our resources are and how deluded we have been by what we have been told in a thousand books.