

## Vancouver's Coastline – Putting the Northwest on the Map

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In the beginning there was sea and land. And because both were vast and powerful, there was bound to be conflict at the place where they met. From the dawning of time, they contended against each other: water and weather assaulted the land, and the land retreated or resisted. Then, for thousands of year, the land was shaped and scoured by a blanket of ice. When the ice receded to reveal its handiwork, there were no straight edges. This Coast (later the NW Coast) was an intricate thread of inlets and islands, of beaches and bays. Even though it was complicated and convoluted, the coast was a line that would be traced through history. The meeting place of tide and time, it both marked a boundary and invited crossings.

The coast could provide moments of complete serenity, but it was not a benign place. When the gales ripped from the Pacific, the coast could rage and storm like no place on earth. Even sailors who come only in summer know its many moods. One such mariner, approaching the coast on 16 April 1792, instantly felt its anger – it was as if the land resisted his coming. In the middle of the night, as the elements roared around his vessel he “stood on a wind until day-light,” waiting for better weather. Compared to the safety of the open ocean, a coast could be a dangerous place. On-shore winds, reefs and rocks could spell disaster, so he drew in carefully. As the storm subsided, he unfurled his sails and moved in closer to the land. Drift wood and seaweed floating in the water and shore birds flying overhead heralded his approach to the coast. But still he could not see the land as the weather became “thick and rainy.” Then, late in the afternoon, he got close enough that his soundings reached bottom – he wrote in his journal – “The land was now discovered bearing by compass from E.N.E. to E. by S. at the distance of about two leagues, on which the surf broke with great violence.”

Captain George Vancouver had arrived on the NW Coast in command of his ship Discovery – over the next three summers he would do more than any other individual to put the NW Coast on the map.

George Vancouver came to the NW coast to make new discoveries, but he already knew that there were people who had made the coastline their home – Some say the people came down from the north – or perhaps it was that raven was strutting down the beach and discovered the people trapped in a clamshell and struggling to be free. However they came to the coast, by the time Vancouver arrived, they had been here for thousands of years and they had learned its ways. They found the shoreline to be rich and abundant if they responded to its rhythms. Living and moving according to the seasonal round, the people gathered its resources in summer and explored its mysteries in winter. In villages facing the sea they established rank and order, ritual and art: in a word “civilization” – and by the time Vancouver arrived those civilizations were as old as those in Europe.

The numbers of the people increased until the coastline was one of the most densely populated parts of the continent – different cultures developed, but they all had the coast in common as it provided the people with food and shelter. The land separated people and the sea was the connecting link. For hundreds of generations the people of the coast adapted and endured, and they saw the turning of time in the ebb and flow of the tide and the circle of the seasons

George Vancouver also grew up close to the sea – in the Norfolk town of Kings Lynn – one of the busiest ports on the east coast of England in 18<sup>th</sup> century – a thriving market and trading town in the center of a rich agricultural area – streets and alleys lined with warehouses and the waterfront with ships – Vancouver’s father the collector of customs

As a young man Vancouver sailed with James Cook – who was simply the greatest navigator of all time – got the position as midshipman through family influence and was fortunate to do so – best training he could have had as he learned his navigation from the master mariner – and from the astronomer, William Wales, who taught him to take lunar distances in order to fix longitude - Vancouver sailed with Cook on his second and third voyages – second Pacific Islands and Antarctica – Vancouver furthest south?

Cook's third voyage was more to the north Pacific – in March 1778 arrived at Nootka Sound where Cook was the first European to set foot on the coast of British Columbia – Cook came to the NW Coast in search of the northwest passage – that fabled route across North America that was supposed to link Europe with the Orient and facilitate trade with China. Cook's investigation of the coast was only a reconnaissance – he landed in a couple of places (Nootka and Cook Inlet in Alaska) but there were huge gaps in his map between those places – it was that space that Vancouver was to fill in.

So in 1791 Cook's protégé, George Vancouver, was selected to lead another British expedition to the NW Coast and complete the task

Vancouver had selected his two ships – Discovery and Chatham – Discovery was a former merchant vessel and, though “not a pretty ship” she was a good sailor and fit for the work of the voyage – 100 ft long x 28 feet wide – 6 ft height between deck – would provide cramped quarters for 100 men, their gear and supplies. He had also appointed his crew – men whose names would endure on the NW coast – Mudge, Puget, Baker, Whidbey – and Archibald Menzies the scientist on the expedition.

Trusting that the date was not significant, the expedition left Falmouth on 1 April 1791 and, after sailing round the Cape of Good Hope and up the Pacific arrived on the coast a year later.

Important to remember that, like most European explorers of the eighteenth century, Vancouver did not come to the coast simply to find new land for the sake of Geography – He also represented business interests looking for new commercial opportunities for Britain – he came to the coast when the maritime fur trade, the first such business enterprise on the coast, was in full swing. It was a trade that the Native people very much controlled.

George Vancouver was sent to the NW Coast to do two things specifically:

1. to negotiate with the Spanish at Nootka Sound over possession of the area and the right to trade: and,
2. to carefully survey and chart the coast from bottom to top to determine whether there was a northwest passage, or as the Spanish more romantically called it, the Strait of Anian.

It has to be said that Vancouver was not particularly successful as a diplomat. At a personal level he got on famously with Bodega y Quadra, the Spanish representative. But, largely because his instructions from the British Government were not very clear, he could not settle the issue of jurisdiction over the coast.

Spain had claimed that area – detained a couple of British ships that they claimed had violated their jurisdiction and created an international incident in Europe between Britain and Spain.

Vancouver thought that he was to receive restitution of a large part of the coast from the Spanish, but they were prepared to concede a tiny piece of land at Nootka Sound where the British Trader, John Meares, had built a house. It was an impasse and Vancouver sent to London for further instructions and they never came. Vancouver left the coast with the matter unresolved.

It was probably unreasonable to expect Vancouver, whose talent was to delineate specific stretches of coastline in meticulous detail, to carry off the grand gestures of international diplomacy. It is as a surveyor, not a diplomat, that Vancouver left his mark – for he fulfilled the second part of his instructions, to map the coast, meticulously and brilliantly.

Vancouver reached the NW Coast (as he called it New Albion) near Point Cabrillo, about 100 miles north of what is now San Francisco Bay. In his way he knew exactly where he was – by dead reckoning the longitude was 231° 30' and the observed latitude was 39° 20' north – Cook and navigation – latitude by sextant – longitude with clocks

from that point over the next three summers he would examine the length of the coast– in greater detail than anyone had done before.

He began by turning northward and conducting a running survey of the coast from California to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. This was a technique that he had learned from Cook. The work was done from Discovery as they ran up the coast. They tried to keep the land in sight during the day, then they hauled off and tacked about during the night so they could start at the same point in the morning. Vancouver and his officers kept a careful record of the ship's track and took compass bearings of prominent features of the shoreline – the intersection of several bearings giving the true position of a particular feature. Compass bearings of the sun were taken daily to calculate magnetic variation, and soundings were taken to measure the depth of the water. Details of the coast were filled in by visual observation and the midshipmen made drawings of significant features of the coast.

Two features of Vancouver's work revealed on this stretch of coast – his blind spot on rivers and his devotion to Cook. Passed by the Columbia River without close investigation – understood that it was a river and so, according to his instructions did not delay as it could therefore not be the NW passage. Like Cook doubted the existence of the Strait of Juan de Fuca until he actually sailed into it.

He got to the Strait of Juan de Fuca needing to find an anchorage - which he found in Discovery Bay (which he named Port Discovery after his ship) near Port Townsend. The crew began making repairs and gathering supplies, and Vancouver took a small boat into Puget Sound to investigate the area. It was at this point that he realized the magnitude of the task ahead of him – that given the complicated nature of the coastline he would have to use another technique to map it.

From here on the process would be followed again and again along the length of the coast.

The vessels would be anchored in a sheltered cove – an observatory was set up in tents on shore to take astronomical readings to fix their exact position. Meanwhile crews in small boats were sent out to probe the inlets and circle the islands in the vicinity of this

temporary base. This was grinding, back breaking work – the boat crews would often be away for more than two weeks at a time. When they returned to the ship another small section of coastline would be added to the chart. Then the expedition would move on to another base and the process began all over again.

This technique was first used to chart the inlets and islands of Puget Sound. Then in the same way, meticulously and methodically, he mapped to coast north to Alaska.

His second major anchorage was Birch Bay and from there he led a boat expedition northward – passed the mouth of the Fraser River and rounded Point Grey into Vancouver harbour – Spanish sailors had been there before him, but he was the first European to pass through second narrows into what is now the Port of Vancouver.

From there they moved steadily northward – Cheslakees village mouth of the Nimkish River – it was often dangerous work – nearly came to grief in Queen Charlotte Sound – miraculously escaped – left with a sharp reminder of the risks that they ran daily – so that it almost became routine – incredibly only one crew member lost during the whole time on the coast.

At the end of each summer, when the work was over for the season, he sailed for Hawaii to rest his men a refit his ships. In many ways more interested in Hawaii and its people. Tried, unsuccessfully, to bring peace among the warring factions on the islands. Did convince the raising Kamehameha to sign a document ceding the islands to Britain – an initiative that London failed to follow up on.

Vancouver returned twice to the NW Coast from Hawaii to continue his work – Middle coast of British Columbia in 1793 – into the labyrinth - detailed and complicated - Alaska coast from Cook Inlet to the Alaska panhandle (reverse direction) in 1794 – My St Elias – Icy Bay

He did not always enjoy his time on the coast – it often seemed alien and forbidding to him. Anchoring in a violent squall in one place, he wrote that the area presented “as

gloomy and dismal an aspect - - as nature could well be supposed to exhibit, had she not been aided by a little vegetation; which though dull and uninteresting, screened from our sight the dreary rocks and precipices that compose these desolate shores...an awful; silence pervaded the gloomy forests, whilst animated nature seemed to have deserted the neighbouring country.” “Our presence here,” wrote Vancouver, “was truly forlorn;” and he named the place Desolation Sound as an expression of his feelings for it.

More impressed in other places.

At another place, with the presumption common to all European explorers, he took formal “possession” of the area for Great Britain and named Possession Sound to the east of Whidby Island to commemorate the occasion

People already living on the coast naturally assumed that they were in possession of it – Vancouver encountered the people of the coast – not a particularly perceptive or interested observer of their cultures – never stayed long enough in one place to make detailed observations –

At one of his early encounters with a group of Native people on a beach in Puget Sound, Vancouver drew a line in the sand to separate the two parties – Vancouver’s boundary lines were mental as well as physical. The physical distance was kept out of fear. First encounters were friendly enough, he expected hostility and exaggerated threats. Mental distance came from lack of curiosity – drawings not terribly informative

Lines in the sand, like the beaches on which they were drawn, were there to be crossed. Native people did not always observe the boundary lines – frequently came to Vancouver’s ships to trade – later in second and third summer in the north things became more threatening and a couple of violent incidents – perhaps because the expedition had run out of trade goods. Other members of the expedition, particularly Archibald Menzies recorded more information about the First Nations people, their cultures – and thought

and wrote about such issues as why the population was relatively small for the size of the territory – though decided that they could not determine the answer – cf later historians

Even Vancouver made some interesting observations, such as the power of First Nations women – particularly on the northern coast – as he observed them directing trading relations. Vancouver also understood that his survey of the coast would have been impossible without the co-operation (or at least absence of opposition) of the Native people.

-Some tense moments towards the end of the survey when he had to fire on a group of threatening Native people – did he think of Cook

Spent more time at Nootka Sound than any other place on the coast – dealings with Maquinna – hospitality for Nootka chief – disparaging about

Work of charting the coast was completed when two boat crews came together on a beach in Frederick Sound in the Alaska panhandle – they had been mapping different parts of the area and now had connected with the point that they were at the previous summer – as they had done so often before the crews landed for the night, but this time the crews celebrated the completion of their task – some noted that they had left England on 1 April and spent four years searching for a non-existent passage and there was some drunken laughter at the notion – when they got back to Discovery there was another celebration – Vancouver reflected on the sheer hard work of his men that had made their achievement possible – they had traced the coast from top to bottom – in honour of the occasion Vancouver named his last anchorage Port Conclusion – they were ready for the voyage home.

When George Vancouver came to the NW Coast in 1792 he came in a vessel named Discovery – When he returned to England nearly five years later he wrote an account of his voyage and called it A Voyage of Discovery.

There is a sense in which the word “discovery” is inappropriate – the coast was not unknown to those who lived there – nor was it a new world – its cultures were well established –

The people of the coast had little reason to celebrate Vancouver’s coming – as long as they remained factor in the European’s agenda (through the fur trade) they retained some autonomy and their cultures remained intact – When they became less relevant to the plans of the newcomers, they were shunted aside – they have never ceased to assert their claim to the coast, but they have been diminished and dispossessed by the forces that Vancouver’s survey eventually unleashed.

There is another sense, however, in which the word discovery is appropriate – for Vancouver discovered things that were new to him and new to Europe.

And George Vancouver did more than any other individual to establish the geography of our coast – When he was done, Vancouver said that he had surveyed the coast – “through all the various twistings and windings” – from Baja California in the south to Cook Inlet, Alaska in the north – he had replaced theoretical speculation with real, practical detail – he had show what did exist as well as what did not – he returned to England to write up his detailed account of his years on the coast – and also to present the British Admiralty with a magnificent set of charts – the result of long and arduous work.

With the publication of his Voyage, Vancouver’s coastline was committed to paper – made permanent for others to see – where words failed him, he referred readers to his charts – once Vancouver put the coast on the map it could be copied, circulated and consulted by those who followed in his wake – there was no northwest passage running through the continent from Atlantic to Pacific – Europe’s sailors would have to reach the coast by more arduous routes – yet as they approached from the Pacific and needed to get their bearings, Vancouver’s coast could be laid out on the chart table and a clear line would become visible through the haze of uncertainty

– charts still used into 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Though his critics would quibble he had followed his instructions – as one author has put it, his voyage marked “the end of dreaming” about the North Pacific – from now on people would have to live with the hard reality of geographic fact as Vancouver had described it

Vancouver had also littered the coast with names – more than 400 of them (naming and appropriation) of British politicians, seamen and personal friends. The vast majority of these names have remained. His own name endures of course.

Mount Baker

Cape Mudge

Restoration Sound

Lynn Canal

The New Edystone

Then there is Vancouver Island - which he and Bodega proved was an Island – though Vancouver and Quadra’s Island became just Vancouver Island

Later in the history of British Columbia the coast would become Vancouver’s coast in another way as the city named after him came to dominate its trade and commerce – just as in an earlier period Fort Vancouver was the western headquarters of the HBC and the center of the fur trade.

There are other monuments like the simple grave in Petersham near London with a dogwood from British Columbia growing near it – half a world away he stands atop the dome of the provincial legislature in Victoria, gazing out at the coast that he did so much to define.

Should we seek any other monument of his work – his chart of the coast should be enough – above all else he was the one who first clearly set down the contours of this coast - the one who more than anyone else discovered (in the words of Earl Burney – Pacific Door)

the problem that is ours and yours  
that there is no clear Strait of Anian  
to lead us easy back to Europe  
that men are isled in ocean or in ice  
and are only joined by long endeavour to be joined

Vancouver discovery showed that our history must be worked out on this coastline where distance had imposed it isolation – and where a coastline invites crossings.

For in the end there is sea and land.