

Bob Reid



British Columbia: History of its Early Days

Bob Reid has written a brief history of British Columbia, in several parts. The second segment will appear in our Winter 2002 issue, which will focus on “Roots.”

Part 1: European Discovery

By Sea

British Columbia was first discovered and inhabited by aboriginal people thousands of years before Europeans arrived in the 18th Century. Pre-contact population estimates range from 80,000 to more than 1 million First Nations people, although the accurate numbers may never be known. These aboriginal societies and cultures were highly developed and sophisticated, and they had contact with one another through the extensive trade routes linking the coastal nations to those in the interior. But their contact with Europeans did not occur until long after European nations had “discovered” other regions and aboriginal peoples of the New World. These earlier “discoveries” had little effect, if at all, on the people of the Pacific Northwest—the lands west of the Rocky Mountains in today’s British Columbia, and the present states of Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and parts of Montana, Utah, and California—who continued in their traditional customs and lifestyles, protected in their isolation behind the

mighty mountain ranges to the east. Little did they know that the Great Powers of Europe—Spain and Great Britain, with Russia, and the newly created United States of America—would soon arrive to change their customs and lifestyles forever.

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In 1513 Vasco Nunez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama and claimed the Pacific Ocean and all its shores for Spain. No one, however, travelled to the region of the Pacific Northwest until the 18th Century. Recent historical research has claimed that Sir Francis Drake may have explored the coast of British Columbia in the 17th century but that his voyage was kept secret by Queen Elizabeth to avoid angering the Spanish. And there are claims that the Chinese sailed eastward across the Pacific to these shores long before Europeans.

In the 18th century, Russia was the first European nation to exhibit an interest in the region. In 1740 an expedition by the Dane, Vitus Bering, on behalf of the Tsar, ventured south to the

islands off the St. Elias Range, the most northwestern extension of the Rockies in northwest British Columbia and the southwest Yukon. The range contains 15 of the highest mountains in Canada including the highest, Mount Logan, in the Yukon. Bering’s ship returned to Russia with the pelts of sea otters; Russian merchants soon returned to these waters in search of the riches to be gained in the trade with China for the fur of the sea otter.

At this time, Spain also became interested in asserting its sovereignty to this region, which they had long claimed but had ignored. In 1774 the Spaniard Juan Josef Perez Hernandez sailed from Mexico with orders to travel as far north as the 60°, the northern boundary of BC today. Although he did not reach that parallel of latitude, he did reach the Queen Charlotte Islands where he traded with the Haida people. On his return, he anchored at the entrance to Nootka Sound on the northwest coast of Vancouver Island, and traded with the Nuu-chah-nulth nation. The native people who welcomed the Spaniards little realized that their way of life was forever changed.

Great Britain also became interested in the region. Captain James Cook, the famed English explorer, was sent out to survey the Pacific Northwest with hopes of discovering the fabled Northwest Passage linking the Atlantic Ocean to the

lucrative trade areas of the Far East. In 1778 Cook took shelter in Nootka Sound. He failed to discover the Passage and was killed in the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). On its return, however, at stops in Asia, his expedition learned of the lucrative trade in sea otter furs with China. This trade intensified the international rivalry among Spain, Russia, Great Britain, and the United States, after it gained independence in 1783 for control of the region. France had also sent an expedition to the region; the country soon became engulfed in revolution, however, and never played a role in the Pacific Northwest.

British merchants were hampered in their entrepreneurial efforts in the region because of the trading monopolies that had been granted by the British government to private companies. The South Sea Company had a monopoly for British trade in the Pacific off the shores of North America; the East India Company had a monopoly for British trade with China. British traders needed the

permission of the former company to trade with the natives for sea otter furs and then permission of the latter company to trade these furs to the Chinese. Spurred on by the potential profits, inventive traders circumvented this problem, although illegally, by sailing under another country's flag. In 1788 John Meares, sailing under a Portuguese flag, "bought" land from the local chief in Nootka Sound to build a trading post. To enforce its claim to the region, Spain had also decided to construct a fort at Nootka Sound. This situation became the focus of international attention when the Spaniards captured the crew and workers on a British ship that arrived from China to build Meares' fort, and took them to Mexico.

Hotheads in Great Britain clamoured for war, but cooler heads prevailed. In 1790 the two countries signed the Nootka Convention, acknowledging the rights of both countries to trade in the Pacific Northwest and agreeing that no other country would be allowed to claim

Nootka Sound for itself. Both countries sent envoys to the region—Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra for Spain and Captain George Vancouver for Britain, the latter having visited Nootka Sound on the earlier voyage of Captain Cook. The Convention did not determine the question of sovereignty, or control, of the Pacific Northwest. This would wait until 1846.

In 1792 Captain George Vancouver arrived to make a show of British naval strength and to complete a detailed survey of the coast of the Pacific Northwest. The ships of both nations met off Point Grey. But Spain's interest in this northern region was waning; by the end of the 18th Century, it withdrew from the region leaving the field open to Great Britain, Russia, and the United States. Spain's interest was with its California settlements. In 1819, to protect its claim to California, Spain surrendered its claims north of 42°—California's northern boundary—to the United States in exchange for a promise

by the United States to respect Spanish control south of that line. This promise could not withstand the waves of American settlers driving westward in search of land or gold. In 1821 Mexicans gained their independence from Spain, but the new nation was no match for the expansionist dreams of the United States; in 1846 war broke out over territorial and boundary disputes. Victory by the Americans resulted in Mexico ceding California to the United States.

By Land

British interest in the Pacific Northwest also waned after Captain Vancouver's voyage to the region. The trade in sea otter furs was declining because of overharvesting, and the French Revolution engulfed Europe in war and turmoil. The continuing demand in Europe for beaver hats, however, had created a fierce rivalry between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company for control of the fur trade in British North America. This resulted in a search for new sources of furs and markets by the Nor'Westers into the unexplored regions west of the Rocky Mountains. The Hudson's Bay Company, founded by Royal Charter in 1670 and headquartered in London, had title to Rupert's Land—the drainage basin of the Hudson Bay extending westward to the valley of the Saskatchewan River. It built trading posts on Hudson Bay and encouraged the Indians to take their furs to these posts. The North West Company, established after the conquest of New France and headquartered in Montreal, adopted a different trading strategy; its traders ventured out to meet and trade with the Indians in their own lands.

In 1793 the Nor'Wester Alexander Mackenzie travelled by land to the Pacific Ocean near the mouth of the Bella Coola River. The overland expeditions through, over, and around the mountain ranges and rivers of British Columbia by the men of the North West Company could not have succeeded without the assistance of the local people. The local natives fed them and guided them along the traditional trading routes

linking the people in the interior to those on the coast.

The discovery of an overland water route to the coast was vital for control of the fur trade in beaver and other animals in the interior of the region. American merchant ships dominated the declining trade in sea otter furs. Control of the overland trade in furs, however, was open to resourceful men willing to seize the opportunity. And, although explorations and "discoveries" by these private traders would be vital for claims by Great Britain to the region, at the time sovereignty was not the issue; trading rights and profit were. But American interest in the Pacific Northwest was increasing.

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In 1803 the United States completed the Louisiana Purchase—an area stretching from the Mississippi River to the Rockies—from France. To discover what had been purchased, President Thomas Jefferson funded the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore this newly acquired territory. In 1805 these daring adventurers arrived at the mouth of the Columbia where they wintered. The Americans left the next spring. They had raised the Stars and Stripes over the post they built.

In 1805 the North West Company sent Simon Fraser to open the region west of the Rocky Mountains for fur trading. He built a number of posts, most notably Fort McLeod on McLeod Lake in 1805—the first trading post west of the Rocky Mountains. And in 1806, Fort St. James was constructed at the eastern end of Stuart Lake. It became the capital of the fur-trading district called New Caledonia—"New Scotland," the central interior region of BC. Other forts were Fort Fraser (on Fraser Lake) (1806) and

Fort (now Prince) George (1807). In 1808, with the aid of local natives, Fraser travelled down the river later named for him to the Strait of Georgia; at its mouth, the Musqueam people gave him a hostile welcome. He quickly retreated upriver, disappointed because the trip had confirmed that this great river was not the Columbia River, which he had hoped to explore to its mouth, nor was the Fraser River suitable for transportation.

The North West Company was faced with a serious economic problem. The high transportation costs of shipping beaver pelts to its Montreal headquarters cut into its profits. It could not ship its furs from posts on Hudson Bay because the Hudson's Bay Company had a monopoly over it. A water route or an overland route to the Pacific coast was needed to transport its trade goods. If the Fraser River was impassable, then this left the Columbia River, whose upper reaches were being explored by David Thompson, another famed Nor'Wester. In 1810 he heard of plans by the Yankee trader, John Jacob Astor, to build a trading post at the mouth of the Columbia River, site of present day Astoria, near where Lewis and Clark had wintered. Thompson set out down the Columbia to claim the entire territory for Great Britain. In 1811, when he arrived at its mouth, he found that Astor had arrived by sea a few months earlier and was in the process of building his fort. Thompson had to settle for building posts in the interior region. He founded Fort Okanogan, at the junction of the Okanogan and Columbia Rivers, and later established a trade route northward to Fort Kamloops, at the junction of the north and south Thompson Rivers.

Great Britain, absorbed with events in Europe, took little interest in supporting the North West Company's commercial interests in the region. Then in 1812, the Americans declared war on Great Britain. Although most of the action in North America took place in the east, with the Americans burning York (Toronto) and the British burning the American capital, a British warship arrived in the Pacific

Northwest and took possession of Fort Astoria, renaming it Fort George. It was given back under the terms of the peace treaty of 1814. Since Astor was unwilling to retake possession, however, the North West Company remained in occupation of the fort under an agreement granting it possession for a 10-year period, after which the Americans could repossess it.

The Treaty of Ghent also provided for arbitral adjudication by joint commissions of disputes over boundaries and fisheries between the two nations. In 1818 the boundary between British North America and the United States was set at the 49th parallel—but only from Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains. No agreement was reached on control of the territory west of the Rocky Mountains. Both countries did, however, agree on a right of free entry to this territory by their citizens.

In 1821 the North West Company merged with its rival, the Hudson's Bay Company, thus ending the long struggle for supremacy between them. The new Company, which continued as the Hudson's Bay Company, was a trading monopoly extending from Hudson Bay to the Pacific Ocean. It remained headquartered in London, sending Governor (later Sir) George Simpson, the famous "little emperor," to review and organize its operations. One of his tasks was to increase profits from the Columbia Department, a territory comprising British Columbia south of the Thompson River and the present states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and parts of Montana and Utah.

The Company was granted, for a 21-year period (until 1842), the sole British right to trade in the territory west of the Rocky Mountains. This right had to be shared with the Americans, because the territory was free and open to both countries. As both the Company and the British government were concerned about the future territorial claims of the United States, Simpson decided not to withdraw from the region of the Columbia Department, but to expand its trade prospects and make it profitable. On the

other hand, the Department of New Caledonia in the North was profitable; the question of whether its furs would be shipped back to Hudson Bay or to the coast remained to be resolved.

By the late 1820s, the best days of the beaver trade were ending; consolidation was the order of the day. Governor Simpson set out to improve profits by reducing the number of employees and cutting costs. To counter the American threat, he closed the trading posts south of the Columbia River and in 1825, established Fort Vancouver on the north bank as the headquarters of the Columbia Department. The fort was restored in 1966 and is known as the "premier archeological site in the Pacific Northwest."

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Simpson also ordered the remaining forts to grow more of their food supplies and to rely more on local salmon instead of importing food. For this reason, Simpson established Fort Langley on the Fraser River in 1827 (moved to its present site in 1839) as a farm to supply other trading posts with vegetables. In time, though, it was the value of the fishery that saved Fort Langley because salted salmon in barrels became a valuable trade item of export. Even though there was no competition to hamper the shipment of furs overland to Hudson Bay, Simpson opted to continue the shipment of the furs from New Caledonia over the brigade trail from Fort Kamloops via the Okanagan Valley to the Columbia River at Fort Vancouver, to be added to the furs from the Columbia Department, then onto the Pacific to Europe.

The year 1825 witnessed the elimination of one of the rivals to the fur

trade of the Pacific Northwest—Russia. The Russian-American Company had traded for sea otter furs, not only at Nootka Sound but also as far south as California where in 1812, it built a post, Fort Ross, 65 miles north of San Francisco. But the decline in the sea otter trade saw Russia restrict its interests to the Alaskan regions. To protect its interests in this region, Russia agreed, first with the United States and then with Great Britain, to divide its spheres of influence at the 54° 40' parallel, leaving Britain and the United States as the two rivals for control of the Pacific Northwest. (Note: the Anglo-Russian Convention also created what later became known as the Alaska Panhandle—as the line extended up the Portland Canal to 56° North Latitude, then ran across the summit of the mountain range, parallel to the coast to the 141st parallel. The Panhandle's exact boundaries were determined in 1903 by the arbitration process established in the Treaty of Ghent. (This arbitration will be discussed in a later article.)

American interest in the region continued to grow—to the concern of the Hudson's Bay Company. By 1828 the possibility of the loss of the Columbia Department to the Americans was growing. To counter this threat, Governor Simpson decided to establish a post, Fort Simpson, on the Nass River (later moved to its present location), to open a new route from the coast to New Caledonia. It was not successful. He also arranged for a steam vessel to be built as a supply ship for the Columbia Department. In 1836 the *Beaver* arrived at Fort Vancouver—the first paddlewheel steamer in the Northwest. She never returned to the fort because of the dangerous bar at the mouth of the Columbia on which two previous supply vessels had floundered. The *Beaver* did, however, prove her value in numerous ways, such as in the discovery of the coal deposits on Vancouver Island. In 1874 she was sold and operated as a towboat until she met her sad demise on the rocks at Prospect Point in Stanley Park on July 26, 1888.

Great Britain and the United States, having failed to reach agreement in 1818 on where the boundary west of the Rockies should run, agreed in 1827 to renew the earlier arrangement for joint occupancy on the basis that either country could terminate it on a year's notice.

But the British government began to lose interest in the Pacific Northwest, especially as the Oregon Territory—as the area south of the Columbia River was known in the United States—became more colonized by American settlers. The Hudson's Bay Company retained some hope that the boundary might be set at the Columbia River. This would leave the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound in British control. Sadly, this was not to be.

By 1839 the increased competition of Yankee traders, the influx of American settlers, combined with the decline in the number of furs, and the changing fashion in Europe—with the beaver felt hat being replaced by the silk topper—put the writing on the wall for the future of a monopolistic fur-trading company in a region that was becoming more agricultural. In fact, the HBC itself was turning its efforts to agriculture and other items for export—salmon, wood, hides, etc. The Company, in anticipation of losing its posts along the Columbia River, began a search for a new post suitable for seagoing ships. It found a site, situated on the southern tip on Vancouver Island. In 1843 Chief Factor James Douglas of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) established Fort Victoria—named in honour of Queen Victoria.

By the 1840s, the United States, driven by its ideology of "Manifest Destiny," claimed the territory to 54° 40' on the basis that it was the inheritor of Spanish claims to the territory, and "54° 40' or Fight!" became the campaign slogan of Presidential candidate James Polk. Great Britain was in no mood to fight. The Pacific Northwest had limited strategic and economic value for Great Britain, which was more concerned about keeping up good relations with the United States. It also appeared that the HBC had acknowledged the inevitable by moving its

headquarters to Vancouver Island. So in 1846, by the Treaty of Washington, Britain ceded all claim to territory south of the 49th parallel, although it retained the whole of Vancouver Island. This date is the date later recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada in the *Delgamuukw* case as the date that British sovereignty was imposed on British Columbia.

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The Americans also promised that the HBC could retain its property south of the border until it could be sold, and it could freely navigate the Columbia River. In 1847, the last fur caravan travelled the old brigade route to Fort Vancouver. The HBC now searched for an alternate trail from Fort Kamloops to the coast that was totally within British territory. This trail followed the Coquihalla River to a new depot at Fort Hope, constructed in 1849.

The next stage is the creation of a British colony in the Pacific Northwest. The history of British Columbia, continued in the next issue of *The Scrivener*, will deal with the colonial period and entry into Confederation. ▲

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Excerpts from the President's Report by Ernie Janzen: September 2002

This marks the first anniversary of Wayne Braid's full-time service as Secretary/Executive Director. We are most fortunate to have a person of his capabilities as our CEO.

In December 2001, I had the privilege of attending a dinner for the Premier of British Columbia. I was pleased to shake his hand and greet him. The government is proceeding with electronic signature and electronic filing of all transactions. The Society-owned conveyancing will meet all the needs of the electronic filing process and enhance the efficiency of each BC Notary's office.

Thank You Notes

Thanks to all the committee members who have given so much time and energy to the effective functioning of this Society. I am always amazed by the exceptional efforts put forth by Notaries who are also running busy practices.

I thank the staff at the Secretariat for your hard work in supporting Wayne and his weighty agenda. And in particular, I thank Wayne. I don't know how you can keep up the pace and enthusiasm the way you do.

Thank you all for giving me the opportunity to be your President, and to represent this great organization over the past two years.

J. Ernie Janzen