



Patriot or Scalawag?

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By J. Richard Nokes

Captains John Kendrick and Robert Gray were still a year away from sailing out of Boston on their pioneer American voyage around Cape Horn into the Pacific Ocean when a brash English seafarer, John Meares, was piloting his vessel into a harbor on the Northwest coast in the autumn of 1786.

The paths of the Americans and the Englishman would cross in the Northwest in subsequent years, but now Meares was preparing his ship, the *Nootka*, to winter over in Prince William Sound on the coast of Alaska. Save for Russian outposts farther north, Meares would be the first captain to hold his ship on the coast through the winter. He chose the same waterway in which the tanker *Exxon Valdez* would run aground in 1989, causing one of the greatest oil spills in history. That disaster devastated marine life, but it didn't match the loss of human life that Meares' misjudgment of the severity of the winter weather caused two centuries earlier. Before that terrible winter was over, 23 crewmen died of scurvy and exposure. Another died later. A second ship under Meares' command, the *Sea Otter*, was lost at sea with all hands.

That was not the only experience that brought notoriety to the English captain: He built the first European house and ship in the Northwest and explored the coastline for a Northwest Passage he was sure he would find. His crew fought a fierce battle with Natives inside the Strait of Juan de Fuca. He carried the first Chinese to the Northwest and Hawaii, and had a Hawaiian prince aboard his ships as passenger. He wrote an outstanding journal of his adventures, and his charts and maps were of value to later mariners. And a memorial he presented to the British Parliament in 1790 almost provoked a war with Spain.

That memorial is contained within his journal of voyages from India and China across the Pacific. The report is beautifully written and wonderfully printed. The original version, leather-bound and well illustrated, was published in London by the Logographic Press in 1790. Copies may be found in the best rare book collections, including that of the Washington State Historical Society.

Meares was a dreamer. He dreamed of a trading empire across the Pacific Ocean from the Northwest to the Sandwich Islands, to China and thence to England. He intended to find a passage from the Pacific Ocean to Hudson's Bay, and thought it might be through the Strait of Juan de Fuca. His plan was to colonize the Northwest coast and gain sovereignty over the Sandwich Islands for England.

In 1786, with the backing of several unidentified sponsors in India, Meares acquired the *Nootka*, 200 tons burden, and the *Sea Otter*, 100 tons. He would head the expedition in the *Nootka*. Lt. William Tipping, Royal Navy, would command the smaller ship. To help underwrite costs, Tipping took a cargo of opium from Bombay to Malacca for 3,000 rupees. Because of problems on the *Sea Otter*, the ships went their separate ways to the Northwest and planned to rendezvous there. The *Nootka* arrived off Prince William Sound on September 20, 1786, and dropped anchor in Snug Comer Cove, visited earlier by explorer James Cook. On

the shore Meares noted evidences of timber cut with sharp-edged tools and a section of bamboo, indications that Tipping had been there and gone. A Native chief confirmed this, saying a ship had left with a cargo of pelts a few days earlier. It being so late in the season, and with heavy weather already at hand, Meares decided to stay the winter. It was a tragic decision. He found a better anchorage in the sound 15 miles east-north-east, then put his crew to work erecting a log cabin and making the ship weatherproof. The Natives harassed the work-men ashore, so they had to abandon the log house; the extreme cold, snow and icy winds attacked before the Nootka could be made tight. Ice closed around the ship. Cold penetrated the deck and hoarfrost an inch thick covered the overhead below, though three stoves were kept burning 20 hours a day. Meares wrote:

While tremendous mountains forbade almost a sight of the sky, and cast their nocturnal shadows over us in the midst of day, the land was impenetrable from the depth of snow, so that we were excluded from all hopes of any recreation, support, or comfort, during this winter, but what could be found in the ship and in ourselves. This, however, was only the beginning of our troubles.

By mid-January 1787, 12 men were down with scurvy. Four died later that month. Twenty-three took to their hammocks. The surgeon became ill. Meares wrote that his first officer began to suffer and started chewing "young pine branches, and swallowing the juice." He improved, but "few of the sick could be prevailed upon to persist in taking it." Four more died in February. Thirty men were too sick to stand duty. "In the hopeless minds of the crew," the slightest symptom of scurvy "was a certain prelude to death."

The surgeon died in March and to Meares fell the responsibility of doctor and "the dreadful office, of dragging the dead bodies across the ice, to a shallow sepulchre which our own hands had hewn out for them on shore. The sledge on which we fetched the wood was their hearse, and the chasm in the ice their grave." Provisions that would have helped were exhausted.

Death still stalked the Nootka in March and April. Some who tried pine needles improved. Others refused the diet.

On May 19, 1787, Chief "Sheenoway" came by to tell Meares that two sailing ships had been sighted. Two days later Native canoes led a boat carrying Captain George Dixon of the ship Queen Charlotte out of London, sent by Captain Nathaniel Portlock of the King George to investigate the Natives' report that a white man's ship was in distress.

Assistance was not given without stern arguments between Portlock and Meares. Eventually, Portlock transferred two of his sailors to augment Meares' reduced crew, but Meares had to promise under a £ 1,000 bond to leave the coast without further trading.

The Nootka's hold was not filled with furs, but Meares had obtained many from Natives in the Aleutians and in Prince William Sound. He sailed for China on June 22 via the Sandwich Islands, where he took aboard "Tianna" (Kaiana), a "prince of Attoo" (Kauai), and carried him to Canton. There Meares learned that the Sea Otter had not returned to China: "I am to lament the fate of our consort...no tidings have been received of her after she left Prince William Sound. We must conclude that she and her people have perished beneath the waves."

Despite the discouraging outcome of the first voyage, Meares held to his dream. He gained new sponsors (including the governor general of India) and the support of a Portuguese-born merchant, Juan Cowallho (Carvalho). He acquired two ships-the Felice Adventurer and the Iphigenia Nubiana-for another Northwest adventure.

On January 22, 1788, Meares put to sea from Canton. His ship, the Felice, 230 tons, and the Iphigenia, 200 tons, commanded by William Douglas, were classed as "snows" (similar to brigs). Meares signed on 50 "China-men," most of whom were craftsmen, to help him on building projects in the Northwest. They were the first of their countrymen in the Northwest, and when they arrived in the Sandwich Islands in the fall of 1788, they were the first in Hawaii, too.

Also aboard the Felice were Tianna and Winee, "a woman of Owhyhee," two other Sandwich Islanders and a Northwest Native that had been taken to China by other traders. Winee had come to China with Captain William Barclay on the Imperial Eagle; Mrs. Barclay, a bride sailing aboard her husband's ship, became attracted to Winee in Hawaii and engaged her as her maid. Winee became ill and was left in China, from where Meares offered to carry her back home. Meares had portraits made of Tianna and Winee while in Canton. They appear as illustrations in Meares' journal. Winee died on February 5, 1788, and her body was committed to the deep. Tianna, grieving terribly, was transferred, along with the other passengers, to the Iphigenia, where he was consoled by Captain Douglas. The Iphigenia suffered damage in a storm and needed a new mast. Meares forged on alone and arrived in Nootka Sound on the coast of Vancouver Island on May 13.

The Britishers were welcomed by Chief Comekelah, "dressed in scarlet regimental coat, decorated with brass buttons,...a military hat set off with a flaunting cockade, decent linens, and other appendages of European dress." On May 16 Meares received the royal welcome of Chief Maquilla (Maquinna) and Chief Callicum. Twelve canoes, each occupied by 18 Natives dressed "in the most beautiful skins of the sea otter" from neck to ankle, paraded around the ship. Their hair was powdered with "white down of birds" and their faces daubed with red and black ochre. But they called out "wacush, wacush," which Meares translated to mean "friends," and they sang "a pleasing though sonorous melody ."

Meares presented the chiefs with copper and iron and other items, whereupon the chiefs doffed their splendid fur robes and threw them at Meares' feet, leaving themselves naked. Meares hastily presented them with woolen blankets.

That was the beginning of a pleasant experience with the Natives during the summer of 1788. Meares wrote on May 25:

Maquilla had not only most readily consented to grant us a spot of ground in his territory , whereon an house might be built for the accommodation of the people we intended to leave here, but had promised also his assistance in forwarding our works, and his protection of the party who were destined to remain at Nootka during our absence. In return for this kindness, and to insure a continuance of it, the chief was presented with a pair of pistols.

The Natives helped bring timber from the woods, for which they were paid beads and iron. By May 25 the house was finished. Meares considered it spacious for the party that would remain there while he went exploring along the coast. It had workshops and storerooms on the ground floor and eating space and bed chambers above. (Others, including Robert Gray, later denigrated its sumptuousness.) A breastwork was thrown up around the house and a cannon mounted to command the harbor.

Work began on a vessel (described as a sloop and schooner) of 40 or 50 tons. It was designed to enter shallow harbors. Trading also continued, and by June 5 Meares had 145 otter pelts aboard.

While Meares avowed in his journal that his expeditions were commercial in nature and not for the purpose of discovery , it is obvious from his records that he had both in mind when the Felice sailed south from

Friendly Cove in Nootka Sound on June 11. He counted on the Iphigenia, which had not yet arrived, to trade and explore north of Nootka.

Off Clayoquot Sound he encountered Chief Wicananish, who led him into his village and entertained the officers in a huge house of planks. The carved and painted rafters were supported by great posts adorned with "gigantic images."

Meares sailed further south, and it was on this cruise that he could have attained the glory of important discoveries that eventually went to Gray and other mariners.

On June 29 at three in the afternoon, the Felice arrived at the entrance of "the great inlet" that he recognized as the "Strait of John de Fuca." (Meares gave credit to Barclay's crewmen in a boat for discovering it in 1787, but believed Barclay himself did not see it. Other journals dispute this.) Meares does not make plain why he did not sail in at once. "Circumstances put it out of our powers," was all he wrote. His journal does provide a sketch of the entrance with a boat under sail.

He did espy a large opening in the vicinity of 47°1' that he again failed to enter after repeated attempts. He called it Shoalwater Bay (today's Willapa), on the Washington coast. As he searched to the immediate south for an opening, he sighted, on July 6, a large cape that he thought might be the "Cape San Roc" shown in Mourelle's charts, based on a sighting by Bruno de Hezeta in 1775.

The Felice doubled the cape at three miles. "After we had rounded the promontory, a large bay, as we had imagined, opened to our view, that bore a promising appearance, and into which we steered with every encouraging expectation." He continued:

As we steered in, the water shoaled to nine, eight, and seven fathoms, when breakers were seen from the deck, right-ahead, and from the mast-head, they were observed to extend across the bay. We therefore hauled out, and directed our course to the opposite shore, to see if there was any channell, or if we could discover any port. The name of Cape Disappointment was given to the promontory, and the bay obtained the title of Deception Bay. It lies in the latitude of 46°10' and in the computed longitude of 235°34' East. We can now safely assert, that...no such river as that of Saint Roc exists, as laid down in the Spanish charts; to those of Mourelle we made continual reference, but without deriving any information or assistance from them.

Meares came closer than any mariner up to the time of Robert Gray in 1792 to entering the long-sought "River of the West" that Gray named Columbia, after his ship.

Meares continued south the same day to another opening, which he named Quicksand Bay. It is known today as Tillamook Bay. "By seven o'clock we were abreast of this opening, the mouth of which, to our great mortification, was entirely closed by a low, sandy beach, nearly level with the sea, which appeared to flow, over it, and form an extensive back water: ...beyond it...an open champaign country extended to a considerable distance, when it was confined by a boundary of lofty mountains."

Meares gave the name Cape Grenville to a headland adjoining the bay. (It was named Captain Gray's Hill in 1988 in a ceremony in Garibaldi honoring the 200th anniversary of Gray's entry into the bay. Gray sailed in on the sloop Washington only a month after Meares passed by.) Seeking an opening, Meares sailed south on the morning of July 7 until he encountered a cape that he named Lookout. Realizing the bay could not be entered below that point, he turned northward. That cape has since been renamed Cape Meares, and the name Lookout was transferred to another promontory a few miles south.

Meares sailed north across the entrance of the Strait of Juan de Fuca a second time and moored in what is known as Barclay's Sound (he called it Port Effingham). From there, he sent his longboat, under First Mate Robert Duffin, to explore and trade in the strait. Duffin had a pitched battle with a party of Natives that set upon the boat from the shore. Several sailors were severely wounded. Duffin was struck in the head by an arrow. His life was spared because of a heavy hat he was wearing. One of the Chinese also was wounded. The Native death toll is unknown. Meares' journal says that Duffin's crew sailed in "near thirty leagues" and could see a stretch of open water for fifteen leagues more.

Meares said he had taken possession of the strait "in the name of the King of Britain," but he himself was not present. He had ordered Duffin to conduct such a formal ceremony.

Upon return to Nootka Sound (Meares always called it King George's Sound), the English captain found that the schooner being built on his "spot of ground" was well along; the hull was nearly planked and the decking in place. The crew also had traded for many furs.

Within two days (on July 28), a mutiny broke out. Most of the sailors apparently were sympathetic to the outbreak, but Meares and his officers nevertheless put down the uprising. The leader, a boatswain, and seven or eight others, were put ashore "among the savages" as punishment. Maquinna wanted to kill the lot, but Meares dissuaded him; instead the Natives made them virtual slaves. Meares wrote that the mutiny was caused "by the impatience of their passions to get to the Sandwich Islands where they longed to solace themselves in the enjoyments afforded by those voluptuous abodes."

In early August Meares provided small arms and ammunition to Maquinna, who desired to make war on a northern tribe. It may have been the first use of guns by one Native group against another. The expedition ended "in a most shocking scene of blood and massacre," Meares wrote. He repossessed the guns.

The long-missing Iphigenia appeared on August 26, 1788, and Meares welcomed the Hawaiian prince, Tianna. "There was not a seaman on either ship, that did not love Tianna as himself." Tianna rejoiced, too, when told he soon would sail for his islands. The Hawaiian detested the Natives of the Northwest for what he regarded as their dirty habits and crude culture. He condemned their "cannibalistic appetites," Meares wrote, and said that human sacrifice in his own land was to appease the gods, not to satisfy Native appetites. He saw a distinction.

The Iphigenia had cruised the coastline from Prince William Sound in Alaska to Nootka, and Meares said the voyage "had brought the most indisputable proof of the Great Northern Archipelago."

Meares was under orders of his sponsors to send the Iphigenia back to China at the end of the season with all the furs the two ships had collected. But on the coast he decided otherwise. He would return in the Felice; the Iphigenia and the schooner would winter in the Sandwich Islands. He promised Maquinna he would return the next season to establish a colony "and introduce the English way of life."

To ensure he would have an adequate crew for the three vessels, he received the mutineers, save for the boatswain, on board with the forfeiture of nine months of pay (that later was returned in China). The boatswain was left ashore. Meares later complained that Captain Kendrick took the mutineer aboard, but what eventually happened to the stubborn sailor is not clear.

Meares said Maquinna did "obedience to us as his lord and sovereign" in front of the Natives. "He took off his tiara of feathers, and placed it on my head; he then dressed me in his robe of otter skins; and, thus

arrayed, he made me sit down on one of his chests filled with human bones, and then placed himself on the ground."

On September 17 the English sighted a sail and believed it to signal arrival of another British vessel, the Princess Royal. But it turned out to be the Lady Washington, commanded by Robert Gray, out of Boston, the first United States ship on the Northwest coast, according to Meares' own records.

Friendship blossomed as the British helped the Americans make repairs to their sloop, which had been damaged on the bar of Tillamook Bay. Gray and his officers and men then helped celebrate the launching of the first boat to be built on the Northwest coast. Meares named it the North West America.

Meares believed everyone present was mightily impressed. Tianna, he wrote, danced and shouted, "Myly, myly," a term of delight. It may have been, "Maitai, maitai," Hawaiian for good, good. "The Chinese carpenters were also in an almost equal degree of astonishment."

On September 24, 1788, a farewell party was held aboard the Felice. Meares promised to take a packet of letters from Gray that could be dispatched from China via another ship to Boston. But after sailing from Friendly Cove a few miles, Meares sent a boat back with Gray's letters, advising that he didn't know where he might go "in India." Gray was affronted. Another year would pass before he could notify his sponsors he had arrived safely in the Northwest. He believed Meares intended to discourage American fur traders. It may well have been the reason the American traders later favored the Spanish over the English in what became known as the "Nootka controversy."

Within a few days of Meares' departure from Friendly Cove, Captain Kendrick arrived in the Columbia. His crew suffered terribly from scurvy. Before Captain Douglas left Nootka Sound with his Hawaiian passengers and his crew, he tore down the house that Meares had built near the Native village. Some of the boards were given to the Columbia. That was reported in a letter that Gray and the chief mate of the Columbia wrote in 1790.

The Iphigenia and the North West America, under Robert Funter, arrived off Mowee (Maui) on December 6, 1788, and on December 20 the celebrated Prince Tianna left the ship with his accumulated treasures. But he went ashore on the big island of Hawaii, under the protection of Chief Kamehameha, because he feared his enemies had taken control of his home island of Attooi (Kauai) and he would be murdered.

Douglas visited all the major islands with his two ships over the next four months before departing again for the Northwest coast on March 18, 1789.

Meares, meantime, had proceeded in the Felice to the China coast, fully intending to rendezvous with Douglas for another season of trading with the Indians. But a change in his backers caused him to alter the plan. As he reports in his Memorial to Parliament in 1790, a previous supporter, Juan Cawallho, became bankrupt, and Meares formed an alliance with the Etches company of London, which had licenses from the East India and South Seas companies to conduct trade from the Northwest. No longer would it be necessary to fly a Portuguese flag as his ships had done on previous occasions in 1788. The firm purchased a ship, the Argonaut, which had been built in Calcutta. Meares ordered James Colnett to take the Argonaut and the sloop Princess Royal to the Northwest coast to rendezvous with Douglas and his ships in Nootka Sound. Colnett was instructed to build a permanent English base on the "spot of ground" Meares felt was his.

Douglas, not knowing of the change in sponsorship, still believed he must show the Portuguese flag to escape licensing penalties of the two British monopoly companies. In fact, he had a Portuguese, Viana, as

the titular captain when he arrived in Friendly Cove in April. The Columbia and the Lady Washington were already there, having spent the winter. The North West America almost immediately sailed on a trading cruise.

On May 6 a 26-gun Spanish warship, the *Princesa*, arrived, commanded by Estevan Jose Martinez. At first all was friendly in Friendly Cove. On May 13 a Spanish gunboat, the *San Carlos*, with 16 guns, dropped anchor. The following day, Douglas was arrested after Martinez told him and "Captain" Viana he was under orders to seize all non-Spanish ships on the coast.

Martinez ceremonially took possession of Nootka Sound for His Catholic Majesty, the king of Spain, and claimed all land from Cape Horn to 60° north latitude. He started building a Spanish fort at the entrance.

Martinez soon released Douglas and his ship on his promise to sail for China and do no more trading. Instead, Douglas sailed north and completed his trading before leaving for China. But the Spaniard did take the *Princess Royal* and the *North West America* and arrested their crews.

The *Argonaut* arrived about July 3 and was seized by Martinez the next day. Captain Colnett was arrested and told he would be hanged if he did not cooperate. Words flew, but Colnett was disarmed and made prisoner. Most of the prisoners were taken to San Bias, Mexico, for trial, and were later released. The crew of the *North West America* was put aboard the *Columbia* for transport to British authorities in China.

News of the Spanish commander's high-handed action caused a fury in England. When Meares' Memorial on the subject, heavily couched in terms favorable to the British cause, was presented to Parliament on May 13, 1790, indignation knew no bounds. War between the nations seemed imminent. But Spain's partner in the Bourbon Alliance, France, was in no position to help. Revolution had broken out there. Without support, King Carlos of Spain felt he had to give ground.

A huge indemnity was paid on Meares' claim, attached to his Memorial, of the great losses he and his backers had suffered \$653,000 Spanish dollars. Spain also had to agree that the coast north of Spanish bases in California had to be open to other nations. (Later she yielded her claims to the United States.)

Thus came to a close Meares' adventures on the coast, but he had one more controversy to face. His journal referred several times, in text and charts, to a voyage in the "autumn of 1789" by the American sloop *Washington* through the Strait of Juan de Fuca and behind Vancouver Island. That would have been three years before George Vancouver and two Spanish captains "discovered" it was an island. The English captain, George Dixon, wrote a public letter denouncing Meares' contention as inaccurate, and Meares responded with equal heat that he had obtained that information from a reliable source in China who had obtained it directly from the American, John Kendrick. The exchange is contained in the book *The Dixon~Meares Controversy*, by Frederick W. Howay.

When Vancouver arrived off Cape Flattery in 1792, he encountered the *Columbia*, now under command of Robert Gray. He sent Peter Puget and Alexander Menzies to interview Gray to learn if he had been captain of the *Washington* in 1789 and, if so, whether or not he had proceeded through the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Gray said he had been master of the American sloop but had penetrated the strait only about 50 miles.

That seemed to say Meares was in error. But that is not necessarily so. Kendrick and Gray changed commands in late July, 1789, and the former assumed charge of the *Lady Washington*, Kendrick's records have never been found, but it is believed he sailed from Clayoquot Sound, on the southern coast of Vancouver Island, north to the Queen Charlottes and beyond to trade. He could have taken a course around

Vancouver Island and up what is today called the Inside Passage. Kendrick would have been captain of the Washington in the "autumn of 1789," not Gray. Also, Meares' chart of the Northwest coast shows the track of the Washington running behind Vancouver Island and returning to the sea at 51°, the northern end of the island.

Whether Meares was a scalawag, as some of his fellow mariners contended, or a patriot trying to do his best for his country and his companies remains undecided. Certainly, he performed remarkable deeds on the Northwest coast in the first days of the white man, and helped break Spain's claim to sovereignty over the vast area of the Northeast Pacific.

J. Richard Nokes, retired editor of The Oregonian, has written a book on Robert Gray to be published in 1991 by the Washington State Historical Society in connection with the observance of the bicentennial of Gray's discovery of Grays Harbor and the Columbia River in 1792.

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