



## **Viewpoints and Visions in 1792: The Vancouver Expedition encounters Indians of Western Washington**

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**By Delbert J. McBride**

In 1792, when Captain George Vancouver sailed and charted the verdant western shorelines of what is now the state of Washington, the sciences of anthropology and ethnology were developed hardly at all in any systematic fashion. It remained for the later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientists with their calipers, excavating tools and interminable notebooks.

A popular concept of the late eighteenth century was that of the "noble savage." This was conceived, however, by stay-at-home philosophers in their cozy, book-lined studies rather than by the more rough-and-ready types actually out in the field exploring, mapping, bartering with Native people they encountered, occasionally fending off sudden, unpredictable hostile attacks or becoming sacrificial victims of clashes between divergent cultures. This happened to Captain James Cook, Vancouver's commanding officer on an earlier expedition in Hawaii. A few years before, in 1775, Spaniards under Bruno de Hezeta painfully discovered this while attempting to replenish their water supplies at a point which Quinault oral tradition places near Moclips. They were unaware that this was a sacred place connected with the coming into womanhood of female members of the tribe, promising death to those who profaned it. Semi-legendary narratives of this episode have passed down to present tribesmen, made more relevant because of later deception and oppression practiced by those considering themselves of the "superior" race.

For such reasons, the Vancouver Expedition proceeded in a cautious but outwardly friendly manner in their meetings with the Native inhabitants. Aside from one or two minor crises, a rapport was established that aided later Britishers who arrived to trade and set up posts reaching from the Columbia to Russian America.

Traveling on a sea past a vast forest, broken by pleasant meadows reminiscent of the English countryside, and backed by towering mountains, these explorers envisioned a land which would soon become populated (by their British compatriots) and prosperous.

Those westward-bound land-hungry Americans who began arriving in the 1840s did not initially fare as well as the "King George" men who maintained consistent policies not in conflict with the strong Native belief that the earth could belong to no individual and must be conserved far into the future.

Some contemporary scholars have wryly commented that only anthropologists and children (of various ages) retain an interest in American Indians, and that serious historians neglected or skimmed over this extensive subject. Others have deplored the role of Natives as only bit players in the historical drama of Euro-American culture, this perhaps enforced by early accounts which tended to treat the indigenous population as merely another feature of the wilderness landscape, along with terrain, weather and wild beasts.

In recent years there has been a more conscious striving toward an equitable balance, as evidenced by numerous studies of the historic role of the Indians, some researched and written by Native Americans themselves.

#### Original Sources are Scattered Widely

The basic source material on Vancouver in the Northwest is the three-volume official account, *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific and Round the World* (London, 1798), with an atlas of maps and engraved plates; plus the voluminous writing of Hubert Howe Bancroft; and Professor Edmond Meany's book, *Vancouver's Discovery of Puget Sound*, largely based on the original Voyage, with additional notations on the explorers themselves and prominent British figures for whom many of our geographic features were named. Meany also edited an unauthorized journal kept by an unnamed crew member of the Chatham, discovered in New Zealand in the early 1900s. Robert B. Whitebrook checked and listed Vancouver's Puget Sound anchorages, and Bern Anderson has edited the journal of Captain Peter Puget, the original of which is in the London Public Record Office. Notes of the expedition's botanist, Archibald Menzies, were published in Victoria, B.C., in 1923. Dr. Erna Gunther made extensive studies of the artifacts collected, most now in European museums. More recently, local authors Murray Morgan and Robert Wing have included the Vancouver explorations in their books *Puget's Sound* (1979) and *Peter Puget* (1979), respectively.

Other references continue to crop up in rather unexpected places, such as a century-old volume entitled *Zig-Zag Journeys in the Great Northwest* by Hezekiah Butterworth, illustrated with some fanciful woodcuts of Vancouver on Puget Sound.

#### An Abbreviated Chronology

On March 16, 1792, the Discovery and the Chatham left the Sandwich Islands, sailing eastward. The Discovery was a sloop-of-war, 100 feet, with a crew of about 100; the Chatham, slightly smaller. The coast of New Albion, just below Cape Mendocino, was sighted on April 17. On the 27th an inlet (named Deception Bay by Meares) appeared. On the 29th they met Captain Robert Gray at sea, and on the 30th entered the famed Strait of Juan de Fuca, following its south shore to a point they named New Dungeness; then on to Port Discovery, where the ships lay over for refitting and exploratory trips.

On May 18 both ships sailed southward, the Discovery taking the eastern branch of the inland waterway, the Chatham the western. Port Orchard, Vashon Island and other points received names. Puget and some others were sent on a seven-day exploration of the southernmost waters, later to be designated as Puget's Sound. They returned to the Discovery at two in the morning, May 27. On Sunday, June 3, all hands were given a well-deserved day of rest; and on Monday, birthday of King George III, Vancouver formally took possession for the British of the lands discovered, the inland waters and the outer coast to 39°20' north latitude. They were in present-day British Columbia waters off Point Grey by June 13, and continued northward through July and on into August. On August 28 Vancouver's ships anchored at Nootka for important meetings with the Spanish lasting about a month.

#### Encounters with the Indian Inhabitants

While villages and canoes were sighted along the Washington coast, the first direct contact was made after entering the Strait of Juan de Fuca with the people of Classet, the Makah Tribe. Vancouver recognized these as resembling and being related to the Nootka of Vancouver Island. Their territory was along the coast south of Cape Flattery (to Ozette) and along the southern coast of the strait to the Hoko River.

The journal states: "...some of the inhabitants found no difficulty in visiting us; this they did in a very civil, orderly and friendly manner, requesting permission before attempting to enter the ship; and on receiving some presents, with assurances of our friendship...very politely and earnestly solicited us to stop at their village." Vancouver declined, mainly because the anchorage was too exposed. He states: "The few Natives who came off resembled in most respects the people of Nootka. Their persons, garments and behavior are very similar; some difference was observed in their ornaments, particularly those worn at the nose...instead of the crescent worn at Nookta, these were straight pieces of bone. Their canoes, arms and implements were exactly the same." It is mentioned that the language was also the same, but they did not approach whites with a similar degree of formality as the Cook Expedition had found, probably because they had over the intervening years become more familiar with strangers.

The explorers passed some permanent villages with wooden plank houses similar to those of the Nootka, but in their first actual contact with Coastal Salish Indians at the New Dungeness anchorage they saw temporary summer habitations, "...being composed of nothing more than a few mats [probably of cattail rushes] thrown over cross sticks". The inhabitants seemed to view us with the utmost indifference and unconcern; they continued to fish before their huts as regardless of our being present as if such vessels had been familiar to them, and unworthy of their attention."

The Coast Salish tribes occupied territory Vancouver's groups would be exploring over the next two months, and were linked by language into two divisions, the coastal, including Clallam, Twana, southeast Vancouver Island and Strait of Georgia; and the Nisqually dialect group, to which almost all the Puget Sound Indians belonged.

It was here that the party encountered structures which mystified them and which are depicted in two of the engravings from sketches made on the spot. "On the low land...erected perpendicularly, and seemingly with much regularity, a number of very tall straight poles, like flagstaves or beacons, supported from the ground by spurs " At first it was thought these might be used for drying fish, but seemed too high and far apart. Whether their purpose was of "a religious, civil or military nature, must be left to some future investigation. Later Indian informants have confirmed that these were erected on the flyways of waterfowl, with nets stretched across in season, to snare the birds as they came in for a landing.

At Discovery Bay two or three canoes of Indians brought fish and venison for sale, the latter being especially welcome since the crew had little luck in their own hunting efforts.

The similarity to the people of Nootka is again remarked: "though less bedaubed with paint and less filthy in their external appearance. They wore ornaments in their ears but none were observed in their noses...they were clothed in the skins of deer, bear and some other animals, but principally in a woolen garment of their own manufacture, extremely well wrought." This was undoubtedly a mixture of mountain goat and dog wool, as Clallam territory was more or less the center for weaving cloaks or blankets of these yarns.

"What was very extraordinary, they offered for sale two children, each about six or seven years of age, and being shown some copper, were very anxious that the bargain should be closed." Vancouver prohibited this trade, showing his strong disapproval. It is possible that these were captive slave children. The Spanish recorded that several were purchased and taken to Mexico in the belief they were being rescued from either slavery or cannibalism. The Northwest Indian institution of slavery continued into the mid-nineteenth century when it was prohibited by numerous treaties.

Another instance of customs deplored by the whites was the beheading of captives taken in war, and displaying of the heads in front of the villages as trophies of war. An instance in present Port Townsend is described thus:

We found...two upright poles set in the ground, about fifteen feet high, and rudely carved. On the top of each was stuck a human head, recently placed there. The hair and flesh were neatly perfect and the heads appeared to carry the evidence of fury or revenge, as in driving the stakes through the throat to the cranium, the sagittal, with part of the scalp, was borne on their points some inches above the rest of the skull.

Between the stakes a fire had been made, and near it some calcined bones were observed. It is ironic that at the time this grisly discovery was made, heads of criminals executed in civilized London were displayed in similar fashion.

Puget was not too favorably impressed with these people, who must have been Chimacums, the only non-Salish-speaking people encountered on Puget Sound. They were constantly warring with the Salish and suffered considerable oppression from their lesser numbers. According to Puget:

The people in their persons were low and ill made, with broad faces and small eyes. Their foreheads appear to be deformed or out of shape comparatively speaking with those of Europeans. The head has something of a conical shape. They wear the hair long with quantities of red ochre intermixed with whale oil or some other greasy substance that has a...disagreeable smell. Only one man had a thick beard, the others wore a small tuft of hair on the point of the chin and on the upper lip like mustaches; on other parts of the body they suffered Nature to have its course, which was as well supplied as in the common run of men except the breast, which was totally destitute of hair. Square pieces of earshells [probably abalone] were hung to small perforations in the ears with small rolls of copper. Necklaces of the same materials as the latter were used, also around the ankles and wrists. Their garments consisted of the skin of an animal tied at the two corners over one shoulder, the upper edge coming under the opposite arm, by which both hands were free. The rest of the body was perfectly naked. They had no other arms than bows and arrows pointed with barbed flints, and long spears in their canoes. These consisted only of a log hollowed out, sharp at both ends and tolerably well constructed for paddling. The paddles were short and pointed at the ends.

Another Puget Sound encounter was with seventeen Indians in six canoes. They resembled the Clallams at Port Discovery, who had no knowledge of the Nootka language, and had nothing to trade except bows, arrows, and woolen and skin garments. One fur appeared to be that of "a young lioness," correctly identified by Menzies as a cougar or puma. Bartering also went on with some Twana Indians for beads, iron and copper, but they declined to come ashore at the white men's camp.

Puget and the Suquamish had a meeting at aptly-christened Alarm Cove (probably present-day Van Geldern Cove). Puget tried to call some Indians alongside his boat, but they held back, so presents of sheet copper, looking glasses and trinkets were tied to a piece of wood and left floating. The Indians recovered these presents but remained shy and distrustful. Puget had the boats beach for a noon meal and to put out seines for salmon. At that time six canoes filled with Indians were seen approaching. The explorers had muskets, and a line was drawn in the sand which the Indians were to stay behind. The canoes pulled off and were joined by others, with much parleying among themselves. Suddenly the Indians landed again, stringing their bows in readiness as they did so. Puget was confident of his position, but did not want an open fight. He had one of the boats' swivel guns loaded with grapeshot fired over the water. This seemed not to impress the Indians much, but during the excitement Puget's party assembled and prepared to embark. Suddenly the Indians showed an about face, unstrung their bows and began to barter their bows and arrows. Thus, coolheaded action succeeded in turning what might well have been a fatal encounter into another friendly meeting, albeit somewhat strained.

A second meeting, much more propitious, took place May 23. This was at Nisqually Reach, and Puget says:

We again set out and pulled for the supposed termination of the southern arm [of Puget Sound], where from the appearance of the low country, we expected to find a river. We were joined by some canoes with various articles for traffic, such as bows, arrows, etc. Their behavior was the opposite from what we had experienced from the Indians at Alarm Cove; these came alongside the boat with the greatest confidence and behaved themselves with much propriety, a commerce was therefore established for their different articles, carried on with the strictest honesty and apparently to the satisfaction of both parties.

The river mouth was not explored. As Puget says:

The water had shoaled quite across to 4 and 5 feet; that stopped our further progress toward the shore as it was falling tide and I was fearful of causing more detention, which would have been the case had we grounded. These friendly [Nisqually] Indians followed the boat a considerable distance up the west arm which we were now pursuing, though they had sold all their articles. In their persons, customs and manners, they appeared to be of the same tribe with those on Alarm Cove, the only difference a friendly disposition. Their canoes, weapons and paddles are of the same construction. They did not leave us until after we had passed the SSW Channel, and still conducted themselves in the most inoffensive and peaceable manner.

There follows Puget's account of his visit to Eld Inlet, at the extreme southern end of the sound:

An Indian village made its appearance from whence some canoes came off perfectly un-armed. On our way down [to the termination of the inlet] we landed for a short time and were received by the inhabitants with all the friendship and hospitality we could have expected. About sixty in number, of all ages and descriptions, they lived under a kind of shed open at the front and sides. The women appeared employed in domestic duties such as curing clams and fish, making baskets of various colors and so neatly woven that they are perfectly watertight. The occupations of the men I believe consist chiefly in fishing, constructing canoes and performing all the laborious work of the village. Though it was perfectly curiosity which had induced us to land, yet that was the sooner satisfied by the horrid stench which came from all parts of these habitations, with which they appeared highly delighted. The natives had but two sea otter skins, which were purchased, and a variety of marmot [mountain beaver?], rabbit, raccoon, deer and bear skins were also procured. The men had a war garment on; it consisted of a very thick hide from the moose deer [elk] and well prepared. I have no doubt it is a sufficient shield against arrows, though not against fire-arms. It reaches from the shoulders down to the knees; this however was got in exchange for a small piece of copper. They likewise disposed of some well constructed bows and arrows...their faces were ornamented with streaks of ochre and black glimmer [mica]...every person had a fashion of his own and to us who were strangers to the Indians, this sight conveyed a stronger force of the savageness of the native inhabitants than any other circumstance we had met with, but not their conduct, friendly and inoffensive, which already merited our warmest approbation.

...Though we could not behold these ornaments with the same satisfactory eye as themselves, yet in receiving looking glasses, each appeared well satisfied with his own fashion, at least the paint was not at all altered. They likewise had their hair covered with the down of birds, which certainly was a good substitute for powder, and the paint only differed in the colors and not the quantity used by our own fair country women. In these two instances, we meet with some resemblance to our own customs and I believe the above mentioned ornaments were of a ceremonious nature for our reception at the village.

On Saturday, June 2, Joseph Whidbey of the Discovery landed at Penn's Cove, Whidbey Island, to take angles, and saw hordes of friendly Indians arriving from every direction to view the strange white men. Gifts of roasted roots, dried fish, venison and fresh water were brought, Natives following the white men wherever they went. The scene is described thus: "Deer playing about in great numbers, rich black soil,

grass which grew to three feet in height, ferns nearly twice as high, and an abundance of freshwater streams."

The Indians were very curious about the skin color of these white sailors. Whidbey is said to have unbuttoned his clothing to demonstrate that he was naturally white all over, and not painted. He deduced that these particular Indians had never seen Europeans before, although judging from articles they possessed, such as metal, they had been in communication with more distant trading tribes.

When the small boat was stuck in mud on the receding tide, the Indians were most cooperative, and the chief himself helped them get the boat floated into deeper water. Whidbey told of Indians estimated at about 600 in number, and bands of little white woolly dogs which were sheared for their wool.

The Natives furnished their new friends with fish, and traveled on foot around to the other side of the cove to continue contact when Whidbey's small boat moved on to the north to rejoin the Discovery and the Chatham.

The attitudes of the Indian women in these early meetings bears mentioning. Having only recently arrived from the relatively free-and-easy morality of the South Seas, it was no doubt startling to the lusty British sailors to find the virtue of high-born Salish girls guarded as jealously as that of vicars' daughters in their own Georgian England. A crew member's journal states: "The women are very modest in their behavior, and cannot bear the most trifling attacks of gallantry. An indelicate word will often bring tears to their eyes; but as there are few societies without a bad member or two, so it was here."

Some noted the Indian custom of frequent bathing; however, the use of paint and oil on face, body and hair, and the lack of proper soap somewhat offset the effects of bathing. There were also comments on the prevalence of both lice and fleas among the Natives.

There was evidence of an earlier occurrence of smallpox among the Indians, acquired from other tribes or from direct but undocumented white contacts. This writer's grandmother told of a Salish ancestor who escaped an epidemic, presumably smallpox, which wiped out her village. It was brought by strange men in a sailing ship and can be dated about 1780. The Indians called them "So-so-nah," their term for people of unknown origin.

The girl had been isolated in a menstrual lodge some distance away. On discovering her village decimated, she fled to the foothills where she managed to live for several years, with only wild creatures as companions, until captured by a hunting party headed by the son of a Nisqually chieftain. They married and had nine children, unusual for Indians of early days. Many descendants still live in the area.

The journals mention men with pockmarked faces. Possible evidence was also found of a smallpox or measles epidemic near Discovery Bay: "We found a deserted village capable of containing an hundred inhabitants. The houses were built after the Nootka fashion, but did not seem to have lately been the residence of Indians. The habitations had now fallen into decay, their inside, as well as a small surrounding space that appeared to have been formerly occupied, were over-run with weeds, amongst which were found several human skulls and other bones, promiscuously scattered about."

While carved and painted house posts are mentioned for tribes farther to the north, these do not seem to have been observed around Puget Sound. However, most Indians were occupying mat houses in their seasonal search for food, and in general the explorers declined to enter the plank houses for reasons of caution against possible ambush.

While there may have been petroglyph-carved boulders visible from the water, no mention is made of these. This is not unusual, considering that a few years later Lewis and Clark, tireless observers of the scene, passed down the Columbia among some of the richest petroglyph and pictograph territory anywhere without any indication they had seen these. During this period there was much speculation about hieroglyph rocks and possible connections with lost civilizations.

It was at Port Discovery that Menzies, Hewitt and Swaine began to collect those artifacts which eventually wound up in the British Museum and Cambridge University Museum. Manby, another expedition member, also acquired many items, their present whereabouts unknown.

Carved bracelets of mountain goat horn in distinctive Salish style, a wooden figure inlaid with what was then a precious material, bottle glass, and a human figurative food or grease bowl reminiscent of potlatch feast dishes found farther north, were collected at Restoration Point on Bainbridge Island and provide somewhat of a puzzle for anthropologists to this day. It was noted that a number of the arrow points traded were of thin iron as well as stone and bone, indicating a lively trade even in pre-contact times. It is certain the Indians were skilled traders before the white man came. Hiaqua (dentalium shell), beaver skins and beads were media of exchange; and as soon as obtained, copper and iron along with sea otter skins were financial standards along the western coast.

Some historians conclude that Indian vices were fewer than those of white people of that day. In spite of a naturally abundant environment, a combination of gluttony, waste and careless improvidence sometimes led to periods of temporary famine. Another vice, as seen by whites, was gambling, the passion for which led to almost unbelievable sacrifices.

Cannibalism of even the token kind was considered almost non-existent, and some tribes expressed abhorrence of the practice. Some Indians made fun of white men for eating dog and horse meat, and certain of the fish-eating coastal tribes even placed venison in the same derogatory status. Intoxicants were unknown until introduced by whites, and were at first resisted as shameful and downright disgraceful, causing the drinker to lose control of his spirit power.

## Conclusion

Careful reading of the early accounts give Native Indians a better bill of character than has been manifested by many historians. Home life embodied strong attachments to wives, children and the aged. Though at times women's workloads were unfairly apportioned, some women held high positions of respectability and had nearly the status of chieftains. These people received strangers hospitably, practiced a simple, unostentatious religion, were generally men of honor, simple industry and physical skill. Their vices were not necessarily crimes, though occasional cruel treatment of enemies seemed unnecessary. The crimes of treachery, drunkenness, atheism or idolatry were more likely to be found among the ordinary Europeans, for all their condemnation of such things.

These conclusions may not be radical or startling, but they can perhaps bring about a fuller understanding of the aboriginals first encountered by white explorers.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE** While every effort has been made to stay true to eighteenth-century documentation, some liberties have been taken with archaic spelling and the literary style of a more leisurely age. Where undocumented Native American oral material is included, it stems from long association with tribal elders, several no longer among us, who were descendants of various tribes encountered by the chroniclers of that era of first contact in the Pacific Northwest.

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