

Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia
Canadensis

A Voyage to the Northwest Side of America: The Journal of Captain James Colnett, 1786-89. Edited by Robert Galois.
(Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003. xiii + 456 p., ill., app., bibl., index. ISBN 0-7748-0855-1 \$95.)

David MacKay

Volume 28, 2005

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800484ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800484ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

MacKay, D. (2005). Compte rendu de [*A Voyage to the Northwest Side of America: The Journal of Captain James Colnett, 1786-89.* Edited by Robert Galois. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003. xiii + 456 p., ill., app., bibl., index. ISBN 0-7748-0855-1 \$95.)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 28, 75-77.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/800484ar>

***A Voyage to the Northwest Side of America: The Journal of Captain James Colnett, 1786-89.* Edited by Robert Galois. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003. xiii + 456 p., ill., app., bibl., index. ISBN 0-7748-0855-1 \$95.)**

In the two decades following Captain James Cook's third voyage, a small group of British merchants sought to exploit his discoveries by trading for the rich pelts of the northwest coast sea otter, which were in turn traded in China. The evidence from Cook was of rich returns to be had at Canton. In reality the difficulties of the trade, competition from the Russians, huge logistical complexities and ultimately the decline of the sea otter population meant that few expeditions were successful.

Eager to seek investors and official support for such ventures the promoters enlisted the patronage of eminent scientists and statesmen, luring them with the prospect of the advance of scientific knowledge and further geographical discovery. The model of Captain Cook's own voyage was held out as the one being followed. The voyage of James Colnett in 1787 and 1788 conforms to this pattern and this splendid journal gives a fascinating insight into the precarious nature of the trade, the delicate relations with indigenous peoples and the complex choices and dilemmas that traders were confronted with at such distance from their home port.

Colnett was a naval officer who had served on Cook's second voyage but returned to naval duty in 1775 on the outbreak of the war for America. On half-pay following the peace he sought private employment and in 1786 signed up with the businessman Richard Cadman Etches as Captain of the *Prince of Wales*. Along with the 65 ton *Princess Royal* Colnett sailed for the northwest coast via Cape Horn. Arriving in Nootka Sound in July 1787 Colnett began the fraught task of gathering sea otter furs from the local inhabitants. The trade extended for two seasons, with

a break in the Hawaiian Islands between December 1787 and March 1788. In August the *Prince of Wales* left the coast for Hawaii and thence sailed to Macao and Canton where the furs were traded. Although the return was lower than expected, it was one of the more successful British expeditions to the northwest coast.

The *Journal* itself runs from the departure from London until the final sailing from Kildidt Sound on 18 August 1788. It is augmented by sections from the journal of Andrew Taylor, third mate on the *Prince of Wales*, and this provides a counterpoint to Colnett's own account which is particularly valuable in terms of attitudes to the peoples of the northwest coast. It is fascinating to observe the impact of Cook on the journal writing process itself. Colnett clearly had an eye towards publication, although in fact the journal was never to see light of day in his lifetime. Plainly he absorbed some of "culture" of exploration that Cook managed to develop among his officers. The *Journal* seeks to follow the model of Cook in terms of style and content.

Although the nature of the trade itself comes through in the account the emphasis is much more on navigation, exploration, landscape, natural history and ethnography. This may well give an accurate impression of Colnett's own preoccupations as it appears that towards the end of the voyage Taylor was becoming irritated at the missed trading opportunities arising from the Captain's decisions.

It is the ethnographic detail of the *Journal* which provides the greatest fascination. Colnett was frequently an acute observer of the societies of the coast and his narrative is in that sense an invaluable resource. He endeavoured to follow Cook's lead in providing an objective and systematic account of the cultures he encounters as well as struggling to understand relationships between different groups.

In spite of this, relations with local peoples were always fraught and constituted the environment of the trade. Securing the sea otter through barter required the maintenance of good relations but friction occurred at almost every stage of the process. From the European point of view different concepts of property created the greatest frustration. Theft was the principal preoccupation of the traders both on the northwest coast and in Hawaii. Generally unaware of their own transgressions or the complex nature of the geopolitical configurations on the coast, at times under genuine threat, the Europeans, too, frequently resorted to violence as a mechanism for achieving control.

The *Journal* itself is augmented by a comprehensive and authoritative introduction by Robert Galois. His command of the literature of the northwest coast is impressive, particularly in terms of its ethnography. He provides a sophisticated analysis of the intersection of the cultures and is

able to explain the extent to which Colnett's experience illustrates common themes in culture contact. The introduction is augmented by an Appendix of early contact narratives and a list of place names on the northwest coast relevant to Colnett's voyage. This is one of the most extensive and authoritatively annotated journals to have been published since Volume III of John Cawte Beaglehole's *Journals of Captain Cook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). It is accompanied by a useful set of maps, although here there are minor errors such as the confusion of the two ship's paths at the Queen Charlotte Islands in the summer of 1788.

In summary this is a fine work of scholarship which gives access to a significant and valuable piece of literature about early European contact on the northwest coast.

DAVID MACKAY
Victoria University of Wellington