

Portland State University

From the Selected Works of David Peterson del Mar

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**Review of Islands of Truth: The
Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver
Island by Daniel W. Clayton**

David Peterson del Mar, *Portland State University*

and *Bison* at an early stage; Dixon treats a truly fascinating subject that would be of wide interest were his book better written. As it is, only the most persistent general reader will want to tackle it.

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“Boston Men” on the Northwest Coast

The American Maritime Fur
Trade, 1788-1844

MARY MALLOY

(Fairbanks: Limestone Press, Alaska
History Series, No. 47, 1998. 232 pp.
Notes, index. \$28)

In transforming her doctoral thesis into published form Mary Malloy has produced something of a hybrid: part monograph and part reference book. It is in the latter that her principal contribution to the literature lies. The introduction to part 1 deals largely, and somewhat eccentrically, with the literature about American involvement in the maritime fur trade. She notes the limited use made of primary sources generated by the traders, particularly in ethnographic studies, including the Smithsonian volume on the Northwest Coast. Though a number of studies, mostly theses completed outside the United States, might qualify this assessment, Malloy's dismissal of James Gibson's *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods* (1992) is surprising. Gibson uses many of the sources that Malloy relies upon, but she does little more than note his study, offering no substantive evaluation and even omitting criticisms contained in her thesis.

In chapter 1 Malloy discusses the evolution of American involvement in the trade. She adds a few new details, gleaned from manuscript sources, to the familiar picture, but no more; she

also adds some errors about non-American participation. Chapter 2 is more interesting: she examines ship-board society and its implications for native peoples. Much of the discussion concerns the violence that characterized the trade. She shows that the evidence of conflict is widespread, but her discussion could have been strengthened by situating American actions in the broader literature on the contact process in the Pacific.

Part 2 consists of an alphabetical list of American vessels that participated in the trade. Building on the work of previous scholars, Malloy provides capsule histories for more than 150 vessels. These histories incorporate information from manuscript logs (including some previously unknown and in private hands), data laboriously extracted from ship registers for Boston and other New England ports, and from consular dispatches from Hawaii. The resulting list contains significant new detail and resolves some of the ambiguities of earlier studies. Malloy's list, the most complete currently available, is a guide that all serious scholars of the early contact history of the Northwest Coast will need to consult. However, minor quibbles of organization (no bibliography) aside, it is regrettable that Malloy has not used the secondary literature dealing with the Russian fur trade and the Hudson's Bay Company. Both contain information on the activities of American vessels that could have supplemented her list. As things stand, a small number of vessels either have been omitted entirely, or significant portions of their itineraries are missing.

Part 3 is a gazetteer of the places “mentioned most frequently” in the American sources (p. 175). The entries include commentaries on significant events that occurred during visits by American vessels. Such geographic information is important for anyone using the logs, but the gazetteer, though helpful, is not always reliable. A few sites have been mislocated. Part of

Malloy's problem is uncertainty about the complex ethnography of the region, combined with the traders' fluid use of terminology. *Nass*, depending on context, could refer to the mouth of the Nass River, to the Nisga'a, or to the Tsimshian; and the Nass area was also known, for a time, as Chebassah's. Malloy identifies the first two but not the latter, thereby confusing the discussion of the people encountered in the Nass area (pp. 193-94). In sum, although Malloy has produced a valuable addition to the literature on the Northwest Coast, by defining her concerns too narrowly, she missed an opportunity to do even more.

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Islands of Truth

The Imperial Fashioning of
Vancouver Island

DANIEL W. CLAYTON

(Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000. xxii, 330
pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography,
index. Cloth, \$85.00; paper, \$29.95
[Can.])

Daniel W. Clayton's *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* is the most useful book on native-white encounters on the Northwest Coast to appear in nearly a quarter century, since the University of British Columbia Press published Robin Fisher's *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (1977).

Clayton's book is divided into three broad sections: exploration, trade, and imperialism. The second is the strongest. Clayton follows Fisher in pointing out that the natives were not naïve dupes of the maritime fur traders. But he also argues that the trade constituted a “conflictual economy” (p. 73) characterized by anxiety, deception, and hos-

tility between and among the two races. It augmented the power of particular native individuals and groups at the expense of others. One wishes that Clayton had addressed how the fur trade affected gender relations. But he is more sensitive than Fisher to how new sources of wealth altered native society and politics.

He also makes a good case for linking the celebrated scientific endeavors of James Cook and George Vancouver to the exploitative colonial practices that eventually followed. Vancouver was not just making a map in the summer of 1792. Pacific relations with native peoples notwithstanding, he was assigning the names of British leaders to native places and identifying promising sites for British anchorages, harbors, and farms.

There is much else to learn from and praise in this fine book. Clayton at times writes eloquently. He is consistently erudite. He considers the history of contact from both the native and the British point of view and in his final section throws in Spain and the United States for good measure. His training as a geographer makes him sensitive to spatial relations on ships and in harbors and villages. He applies to his relatively narrow topic the work of Edward Said and other cultural theorists and uses them skillfully to analyze historical celebrations of the province's "discovery."

Islands of Truth is not without its weaknesses. Clayton's text is much more palatable than most postmodernist treatments, but the uninitiated will be put off by topic sentences that contain passages such as "a heterogeneous and hierarchized space-economy—a space-economy that was at once embodied and reified; a space-economy that imbricated the cramped confines of merchant vessels" (p. 76). Clayton also shares the poststructuralist antipathy for closure. He is more suggestive than definitive and sometimes throws up his hands. At the end of section 2, for ex-

ample, he points out that the sources do not allow him to analyze the ways in which native spirituality shaped the Indians' interactions with white traders and warns that this factor may have been extremely important. More attention to detail, perhaps by widening the area of study, would have made for a more useful treatment of that topic and others.

But this timidity is also a strength. All events are ultimately unrecoverable, and the extant documentation of early contact is particularly spotty and biased. The scope of this book is much more modest than Fisher's, both in its chronological and geographical compass and in its argument. But Clayton uses a relatively small place and brief period to open up very big questions about the nature of colonialism in all times and places. His treatment of Vancouver, for example, made this Oregonian immediately think about Lewis and Clark, those celebrated pioneering naturalists of the U.S. West.

The author's tentativeness is something of an artifice—and a useful one. *Island of Truth* is more a cautionary tale than a clarion call. Clayton would have us approach the volatile history of native-white relations thoughtfully and prudently, and he has given us a splendid model of how to do so.

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Portraits of Basques in the New World

EDITED BY RICHARD W.
ETULAIN AND JERONIMA
ECHEVERRIA

(Reno: University of Nevada Press,
Basque Series, 1999. xvi, 305 pp. Map,
illustrations, appendix, notes, index.
\$31.95)

Historians' perceptions of the American West have become increasingly sophisticated, in large part because of their recognition of the diversity of American frontier society. *Portraits of the Basques in the New World* contributes to this expanded view of the region by examining an often-overlooked community: the Amerikanuak, or Basques in America. The 13 essays in the collection present biographical sketches of individuals and families. The subjects range from the relatively famous Juan de Zumárraga (the first bishop of Mexico) and the author Robert Laxalt to the little-known Montana sheepherder Rene Tihista and hotel operator Lyda Esain. Collectively, the essays embrace 400 years of history, but most concentrate on the late 19th and 20th centuries. Despite its title, the book does not examine the Basque diaspora throughout the Americas but is limited to the Spanish borderlands and more specifically the western United States.

Several themes emerge from the essays. The most striking is the centrality of family networks. Kinship ties provided social and economic support as immigrants established themselves in the U.S. Though not all Basque immigrants worked in sheepherding, it was a common occupation, even when Amerikanuak were shepherds temporarily while they sought other opportunities. Finally, like all immigrants, the Basques faced the challenge of maintaining or promoting their ethnic identity at the same time that they adopted the United States as their home and assimilated into American culture.

The editors could have assisted the non-specialist in getting the most from this collection by presenting basic information about the Basque homeland, its history and culture, as well as an explanation of the Basque diaspora's causes. As the editors suggest, a reader could first look at William A. Douglass and Jon Bilbao's 1975 work *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World*, which pro-