Small Spaces and Multiple Contexts: Nootka Sound’s Global Locality 1774–1794

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Abstract

This article conveys the power of place in global history through the multiple perceptions of space and possession in one small remote locality – Nootka Sound on the Northwest coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. This space was, for a brief period between the 1770s and 1790s, connected with many parts of the world. Microhistorical methodologies applied to the texts of traders and explorers and turned to the study of a locality such as Nootka Sound reveal the close global connections of agents and events and help us to challenge the frameworks of global history.

Keywords


Introduction

In 1790 the Nootka Crisis brought the attention of the public in many parts of the world to a small cove on the northwestern edge of what is now Vancouver Island, British Columbia. An international incident centered on this place brought Spain and Britain to the brink of war. Yuquot, in Nootka Sound, was first and foremost the long and ancient residence of the Mowachaht people. From the early 1770s it became a focus of interest for the Spanish and Russians, soon to be followed by the British, the Americans, and other Europeans. Two
quests, the maritime fur trade and the search for the Pacific Northwest Passage, encouraged Europeans and Atlantic traders to risk the long journey and treacherous waters of Cape Horn to reach the northwest Pacific, as well as others sailing from Bombay, Bengal, and Macao to make the journey from the East.

Nootka was one of those “small spaces” signified by David Bell that needs to be studied in its own right: it was one of those “intense, dynamic, laboratories of change,” though not in the way indicated by Bell for the history of Paris.1 Home to several thousand Mowachaht people who were often visited by many indigenous groups tributary to them by kin or diplomatic connection, it became a frequently visited harbor for over four hundred European and American ships within ten years. Yuquot was soon abandoned by traders and by-passed by voyages of exploration. As a result, the power and wealth of its indigenous chiefs was undermined. A place that was so frequently visited and well-known in the last decades of the eighteenth century today has one family in residence.2

Historical methodologies built on microhistory can help us to understand this history. Applying the work on specific localities and the economic and social interactions in these places, as developed by the early German and Italian microhistorians, can also lead us to understand how these spaces were perceived by their inhabitants and their visitors.3 Those histories emphasize the power of place, and this needs to be built into our global histories. More attention to local spaces and methodological reflection in new microhistories will address or challenge the categories, theories, and frameworks of global history.4

The objectives of my article are first to briefly summarize the ways in which Yuquot and Nootka Sound was an indigenous space, and second to set out the

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factors which connected different parts of the world to this space. My sources for investigating these factors are the journals and accounts left by European traders and explorers, and I will set these in context. I will present perceptions of this space as conveyed in the first European sightings and experiences of the Sound in the 1770s and 1780s; I will trace how these perceptions changed over the brief period of Euro-American interaction with indigenous peoples on the coast, and as the space became perceived as a trading hub and a recognized space in European strategy in the Pacific. I will investigate ideas of property and possession, and how indigenous views were conveyed and discounted in the accounts. The accounts I use include those by Captain James Cook, James King, Alexander Walker and James Strange, James Colnett, John Meares, Alejandro Malaspina, Etienne Marchand, George Vancouver and Archibald Menzies, and José Mariano Mociño.

Yuquot and Nootka Sound

Though Yuquot was by many accounts a small space, it was one of “multiple contexts,” and issues of borders, property rights, commons, claims, and possession loomed large in a place that was only settled as a fortification for a brief six-year period by the Spanish, one among the many colonial powers that visited it during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Just how was this space perceived and then written about by the early visitors to the area?

Borders and property rights belonged to the indigenous peoples first. The spaces and localities of Nootka Sound were above all indigenous spaces. The historiography has focused on legal and geopolitical spaces, and conflicts over these between indigenous peoples and European visitors. Nootka Sound was a maritime area, not considered part of settled British territory until the mid-nineteenth century. The fine recent histories of land disputes and dispossession of indigenous peoples have set out legal and geopolitical histories. Stuart Banner has set this area and the rest of British Columbia in comparative context with the rest of the Pacific as an area perceived by its British colonizers as “terra nullius,” land owned by no one, and therefore available for the taking. It was the only part of Canada where the land was treated in this way.5 Likewise, Alan Greer’s Property and Dispossession compares indigenous and colonial property holding and common lands and the disputes that developed in three different parts of North America from the sixteenth into the nineteenth

5 Stuart Banner, Possessing the Pacific: Land, Settlers and Indigenous Peoples from Australia to Alaska (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 2, 196, 230.
centuries.6 We could set these histories alongside a longer history of European
claims and attempts at possession of lands in early modern Asia, and as part
of legal histories leading to the formation of maritime and international law.7
The languages of geopolitics and sovereignty over the much more specifi-
cally maritime spaces of the northwest Pacific coast have been effectively used
in Joshua Reid’s depiction of these indigenous spaces. Nootka Sound was part
of a maritime borderland area of approximately five hundred miles stretching
from northern Vancouver Island to the southern coast of the Strait of Juan de
Fuca. The Mowachaht peoples, presided over by Maquinna, lived in the region
around Nootka Sound; the Clayoquot people, led by Wickaninnish, along the
mid to southwestern coast of Vancouver Island; the Makah people, with their
chief, Tatoosh, immediately south of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Each group
claimed sovereignty over specific geopolitical spaces.8 The maritime sur-
rounds of these three groups were subject to strictly-controlled property rights
well before European encounter; in these spaces there was regional trade and
tribute relations with subordinate indigenous groups and kinship ties among
all three major groups.9
Europeans coming to the northwest Pacific and seeking to trade on the west
cost of what became known as Vancouver Island entered these three preex-
isting trading blocs led by powerful figures all related to each other by mar-
riage, and thus allied. The landed territories occupied by these different groups
were furthermore deeply historical spaces. Seasonal movement always meant
return, and lodges were rebuilt close to or on top of each other generation after
generation.10

6 Alan Greer, Property and Dispossession (Montreal, 2018).
7 See Adam Clulow, “The Art of Claiming: Possession and Resistance in Early Modern Asia,”
American Historical Review, 121 (2016): 17–38. Also see Saliha Belmessous, Native Claims:
Indigenous Law against Empire, 1500–1920 (Oxford, 2011). On maritime and international
law see Lauren Benton, A Search for Sovereignty (Cambridge, 2009).
8 I have discussed these indigenous localities in greater detail in Maxine Berg, “Sea Otters
and Iron: a Global Microhistory of Value and Exchange at Nootka Sound, 1774–1792,” in
Global History and Microhistory, ed. John-Paul Ghobrial, Past & Present Supplement, 14,
2019: 50–32, 54–56. See Joshua Reid, The Sea is my Country. The Maritime World of
the Makahs (New Haven, 2015), 13–15, 23–26. See Reid’s discussion, on pp. 14–15, of the bor-
derland concept of Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders:
Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History,” American
9 Reid, The Sea is my Country, 22–25.
10 On the family relations, hierarchies, and methods of governance among these and other
chiefs in the region see Yvonne Marshall, “Dangerous Liaisons: Maquinna, Quadra, and
Vancouver in Nootka Sound, 1790–5,” in From Maps to Metaphors: the Pacific World of
George Vancouver, eds. Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnston (Vancouver, 2014), 163–175; Yvonne
Marine spaces were particularly important. To what extent can we see these as “borderlands”? Joshua Reid, drawing on the work of Adelman and Benton, uses the contested term “borderland” to describe areas of networks, diplomatic protocols, and trade in controlled spaces. How did the jurisdiction of different groups of indigenous peoples come to raise significant issues for trading encounters with Europeans? European merchants, travelers, and settlers assumed property holding signified their own civility, and that new territories and seas they came to were not owned by others. But in the view of the first peoples, all the maritime areas of the borderland were subject to complex systems of ownership rights. The Makah “spoke of the oceans as the homeland of their peoples.” No one could take or harvest from certain marine and terrestrial places without permission and recognition of the rules and protocols governing access.

This article will set out early perceptions of the land, the shores, and interactions with those living in and visiting these as expressed in early travel accounts. My intervention is not to add to a well-established legal history, nor is it to add to an already rich ethnography of the indigenous groups. It is rather to look at the transformation in the way this “local” space was seen in merchant and exploratory voyages. How can we write about this local space within a wide global history, and just how was this space situated in the ideas, imaginings, and plans of those who came at these late stages of early modern global trade to this hitherto unknown, then quickly well-known place?

Nootka’s Global Locality

Nootka was a place “discovered” by Europeans, then developed as a trading hub in the context of two new initiatives in the late eighteenth century – first the search for the Northwest Passage, and second the development of a maritime fur trade targeting newly-uncovered markets in China. The maritime fur trade is little-considered in our histories of global trade in the early modern world. Sea otters and fur seals became a focus for European powers and the new American Republic for a brief period. This was, furthermore, not a trade in


12 Reid, The Sea is my Country, 126.
luxuries for European markets, but one centered on the China trade. The furs were identified as a key trade good in exchange for Chinese silks, tea, and porcelain. Nootka's locality connected with the hubs of trade for voyages coming from Europe and the Atlantic world, and by other European traders based in both South and East Asia. Its space was marked by trade monopolies, especially the East India Company, but also by private trade ventures run from London or her colonial trading factories, and using other European "flags of convenience." Nootka was also a locality that emerged (then soon disappeared) in an imperial imaginary, drawing Russian, Spanish, and British territorial interests into conflict.

Trade had long connected the Mowachaht people from Nootka Sound and across the Pacific coast and its hinterland. Looking out from Nootka, we see four different factors emerging in the later eighteenth century to connect this space with many different parts of the world. First, Nootka's trade benefited from the expansion of East India Company trade and of the private trade linked to it. New trading companies were formed, and British voyages set out, not only from London, but from Bombay, Bengal, and Macau.13 Second, the trade brought the Boston Atlantic traders to the Pacific coast, connecting them more closely to the China trade.14 Third, a long conflict between Russian traders and Spanish territorial interests on the Pacific coast became centered for the Spanish, then the British, on Nootka Sound. And fourth, both the China trade, with a new trade good – sea otter furs – and a newly reinvigorated search for the Northwest Passage became global priorities which also centered on Nootka Sound. These four factors, studied from the viewpoint of one small area, Nootka Sound, demonstrate the close connections in global trade between the Indian Ocean, the China Seas, and the Pacific, and in turn their connections with Spanish America, Russia, and European power struggles.

The Spanish, and then British, interest in the Northwest Coast was stimulated by the Russian fur trade into the North Pacific between Siberia and Alaska, and by state-sponsored expeditions in the 1760s to search for a Northwest Passage. The Russians started to gather sea otter furs from the Pacific coast of


Siberia through to Alaska starting in the mid eighteenth century but made no concerted entry to the North American coast until after 1799. The Spanish, following the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, believed they had rights to the northwest coast, as they did to Spanish America and the coast of California (all of these were considered parts of the “Mar del Sur”). But the Treaty stated that sovereignty was not a given; it relied on recurring proofs such as mapping and ceremonies of possession. The Russian advancements and news of British plans to find the Northwest Passage sparked Spanish initiatives to protect the coast. Expeditions were sent from San Blas, led by Juan Pérez in 1774 and by Bruno de Hezeta in 1775, to conduct acts of possession on the coast. After first sailing north to Alaska, Perez’s vessel turned south and stopped off Nootka Sound, which Pérez named “Surgidero de San Lorenzo,” but both here and further north storms and fog prevented them from making landfall and performing the ceremonies of possession. Relying on journals from the subsequent expedition led by Hezeta, Antonio Bucareli, the Viceroy of Mexico, claimed four official acts of possession on the coast. The voyages of 1774, 1775, and one later in 1779 were not, however, publicized, undermining Spanish claims of ownership by reason of prior discovery. Spanish priorities at this point as well as in the years following did not involve plans for settlement, missionary activity, or trade. Instead, their aim was to keep the coast as a wilderness in order to serve as a buffer to protect its colonies in California and Mexico.

James Cook’s exploration and mapping of the Sound, and the month in 1778 he spent in close vicinity to Yuquot, brought other ships to the coast, and stimulated the subsequent British voyages from Asia, notably those by James Hanna from Macao (1785), James Strange from Bombay (1786), and by John Meares.
from Bengal in 1788, as well as those from London by Nathaniel Portlock and George Dixon in 1786 and 1787, and by James Colnett in 1788. Either expedition leaders or travelers on all these voyages left travel accounts. The rapid influx of British-based vessels and American Boston traders into the Sound soon allowed the British state to create a great triangle trade of European, American, and Asian goods.\(^\text{19}\) Spanish and British attempts to establish a fort in order to participate in a mobile maritime fur trade soon led to the events of the Nootka Crisis of 1789–1790. The Spanish claimed Yuquot, were challenged by the British, and then conceded their dominion over the territory, though they did not leave until 1795.\(^\text{20}\) The Mowachaht left Yuquot for their winter quarters in Tahsis, up the Sound, over this whole period, not returning to rebuild their lodges until the Spanish and British ceremony of abandonment of the settlement in March 1795.\(^\text{21}\)

### The Accounts

Two sets of contested ownership rights, an indigenous one and a conflicted European one, confronted the large numbers of vessels of trade and exploration that came to this key node on the Northwest Pacific coast. How did these Europeans on voyages of discovery and of trade view the space they entered at Nootka Sound? What claims and possession did they think they had? What was their view of the land and maritime rights of the Mowachaht peoples and other indigenous groups they encountered? We can get some sense of an answer to these questions through the accounts of these voyages.

The accounts I draw on are all European. Some were published close to their time of writing; others in the following years, up to the early nineteenth century. Other very significant accounts remained unpublished, buried in archives, and were not published until the later twentieth century.

Two Franciscan friars, Fray Tomás de la Peña and Fray Juan Crespi left accounts, never publicized at the time, of Spanish encounters off the coast of Nootka

\(^\text{19}\) Alan Frost, “Nootka Sound and the Beginning of Britain’s Imperialism of Free Trade,” in From Maps to Metaphors, eds. Fisher and Johnston, 104–126, 123, 126.


\(^\text{21}\) Reid, The Sea is my County, 77–87; The Adventures and Sufferings of John R. Jewitt Captive of Maquinna, annotated and illustrated by Hilary Stewart (Seattle, 1987).
Sound on two voyages from Mexico ordered by Antonio de Bucareli, Viceroy of New Spain, in 1774 and 1775. Both voyages reached Nootka Sound and never landed but did encounter Mowachaht people in their canoes.\(^\text{22}\) The first actual landing at Nootka Sound was that of Captain James Cook on his third voyage in 1778. This was a large-scale, state-supported voyage of discovery, with the goal of searching for a Pacific entrance to the Northwest Passage. After his death on the return voyage, Cook’s journals were submitted to the government. Accounts by a number of his officers and seamen, including those by James King, used here, were published in the years immediately following.

The next English accounts were left by merchants traveling from China, India, and London. The first voyage to reach Nootka after Cook’s was that of James Hanna from Macau in 1787. He left no account, and his voyage was followed very shortly later that same year by that of James Strange from Bombay. We have accounts from Strange, a merchant, and Alexander Walker, an East India Company ensign. Strange’s account was printed and submitted to the government at the time; Walker worked on his account, preparing it for publication into the early nineteenth century, but died before his work could be completed. It was first published in 1798. Other private merchant voyages were organized under Richard Cadman Etches’ King George’s Sound Company, whose purpose was to develop the Western fur trade. The first of these, led by Nathaniel Portlock (who had served on Cook’s third expedition), and George Dixon came to the coast in 1787. Portlock’s *Voyage Round the World* was published in 1789.\(^\text{23}\) The next was led by James Colnett, who had been a midshipman on Cook’s *Resolution* during the second expedition and worked for three and a half years under Cook. He commanded a two-vessel commercial venture that left England in September 1786 and was not to return for six years. In this time he made two expeditions to Nootka; the first from England arrived there July 1787, afterwards sailing on to Macao, then Canton; the second expedition left China and arrived at Nootka in July 1789. Colnett’s *A Voyage for Whaling and Discovery Round Cape Horn into the Pacific Ocean* (1790 and 1791) was not published until 2004.\(^\text{24}\) John Meares left the third and best-known account from the Etches’ company. It was published quickly after his voyages of 1788


\(^\text{23}\) Nathaniel Portlock, *A Voyage Round the World but More Particularly to the North-west Coast of America: performed in 1785, 1786, 1787 and 1788, in the King George and Queen Charlotte, Captains Portlock and Dixon* (London, 1789).

and 1789 for wide circulation in the London print market and was part of his political campaign to establish his own and British claims to land in Yuquot.25

Other accounts I will draw on arise from voyages of exploration and ambassadorial accounts between 1790 and 1792 during the Spanish-British negotiations over the Nootka crisis. Yuquot was by this stage a widely-known trading hub and was under occupation by the Spanish. Accounts were left by Alejandro Malaspina and José Mariano Mociño, neither published at the time. Malaspina’s expedition was modeled on those of the British and French navigators: Cook, la Pérouse, and Marchand. The purpose was scientific exploration, including investigation of the lives of native peoples, for which Nootka was seen as an ideal place. But there were also secret tasks: reports on Russian and British movements in the area, as well as acts of possession. Malaspina reached Nootka in August 1791 and spent sixteen days there after a voyage from Spain, around Spanish America to Acapulco, then north to Yakatuk Bay, and departed after Nootka for Mexico. Malaspina’s account was first published around 1824–1827 in Russian; there was no Spanish edition until 1885.26 José Mariano Mociño’s Noticias de Nutka was written after a five-month stay in Yuquot in 1792 as a member of the ambassadorial expedition of Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra. He was also one of the naturalists on Malaspina’s expedition when it stopped at Nootka in 1790. Noticias de Nutka was, likewise, not published until many years after.27

George Vancouver’s A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and round the World 1791–1795 was another multi-volume text written by a navigator. Reporting on a state-supported naval voyage of discovery and ambassadorial mission addressing the Nootka crisis, the text is best-known for its detailed accounts and surveys of the North Pacific. Vancouver’s detailed surveys and mapping from the lower California coast to Cook Inlet in the Gulf of Alaska, along with his observations and commentaries, was first published in three volumes in 1798. Archibald Menzies was the botanist and surgeon on Vancouver’s

25 John Meares, Voyages made in the years 1788 and 1789, from China to the North West Coast of America. To which are Prefixed, an introductory Narrative of a Voyage in 1786 from Bengal, Observations on the Probable Existence of a North West Passage (London, 1790).


27 José Mariano Mozño, Noticias de Nutka: an Account of Nootka Sound in 1792, ed. & trans. Iris Higbie Wilson (Seattle, 1970). Mozño was his original name; I refer in my text to the current usage, Mociño.
voyage, and also kept a journal. He had served as surgeon on James Colnett’s fur-trading expedition to the northwest Pacific in 1786.28

First Approaches

Early descriptions of the coast were of the unknown. The first Spanish expeditions came from San Blas in Mexico in 1774 and 1775; these were followed by Cook’s approach to the coast from the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), then up the coast from what is now Oregon. The two early Spanish expeditions did not touch land at Nootka, but la Peña and Crespi wrote of their land sightings and first encounters with indigenous peoples of the place. Wind, fog, and heavy seas prevented landfall in the outer harbor of Nootka where they anchored in the roadstead, and which they called San Lorenzo. On both journeys they came within one to two leagues of the land and saw it “so thickly covered with forest that no part of it can be seen which is not clothed with a very thick growth of tall timber ...” and they saw “the bonfires of the inhabitants.”29 Visits from the people out to the ship came soon: “And we noticed that a canoe came out from a break in the land like the mouth of a river and was paddled toward the ship. While it was still distant from the vessel we heard the people in it singing ... Throwing several feathers into the sea, they made a turnabout the ship.”30 Spending several days off the shore, they were much visited by the Mowachaht people; at one point twenty-one canoes brought two hundred people keen to trade.

The forest and undergrowth brought fear. The 1775 voyage, stopping further south at Point Grenville on the Washington coast, lost several men on a reconnaissance for water to an ambush by three hundred Quinault warriors emerging from the underbrush. The ship, making its escape and pursued by canoes, killed more of the Quinault people.31

The next to come to Nootka was Captain Cook. Cook sailed up the coast from sightings of the land near Oregon, looking for the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

31 Cook, Flood Tide of Empire, 75–76.
He missed this, and afterwards on March 29, 1778 caught sight of what he called an “inlet”: 

We had got pretty near the inlet before we were sure there was one; but as we were in a bay I had resolved to anchor to endeavour to get some Water, of which we were in great want.32

Both Cook and his second in command, James King, went out in armed boats, and Cook reported that he found a “pretty snug cove.” They traded all manner of small metal things with the “mild inoffensive people” who visited the ship in their canoes.

Historian of the Nuu-chah-nulth people, Daniel Clayton, describes the oral accounts that these people left, in which those who first saw the ships thought they were salmon come here as people, or a bird, or the moon. The accounts point, he argues, to aspects of the encounter more obscured in Cook’s journal. They show a more face-to-face, bodily process of interaction, and one that left memories of wonder, astonishment, curiosity, and fear. Cook and King moved the ships and armed vessels not into empty spaces, but into those already inhabited with peoples investing their physical landscapes with spiritual meaning.33

First arrivals next came from merchant vessels, since Nootka was now a recognized source for a newly sought-out luxury good to trade to China – sea otter furs. James Strange, with the East India Company ensign Alexander Walker, traveled from Bombay in June 1786. They reached Nootka Sound on June 24, approaching from the northwest. From there, constantly surrounded by canoes, they did not reach Ship’s Cove, the harbor described by Cook, until July 5. Strange did not record his impressions of the place.34 Walker was more expansive, describing days of fog, rain, and problems with finding safe anchorage. Walker described the harbor as “situated behind the point that forms the West side of the entrance into the Sound,” and as “inferior to no place on the Coast in size or population,” with approximately three hundred to four

32 The Journals of Captain Cook on his Voyages of Discovery, 4 vols., iii, The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery 1776–1780, ed. J.C. Beaglehole, (London, 1967), 1457. Also see “Nootka Indians – Discovery (Cook’s ship).” Portion of an incomplete journal kept by Thomas Edgar, March 7–June 6, 1778, B.C. Archives AA 20 D63E.


34 James Strange’s Journal and Narrative of the Commercial Expedition from Bombay to the North-West Coast of America (1790), ed. A.V. Venkatarama Ayyar (Madras, 1928), 20.
hundred inhabitants. Its situation at the “entrance to the Sound” was “favorable for vessels coming in or leaving the harbour.”

The month Strange and Walker spent at Nootka gave them further knowledge of the land and its resources. Walker wrote in later years: “The slight view that Captain Cook took of this Coast prevented him from ascertaining a true and accurate knowledge of it. His knowledge was confined to a few points of the Sea Shore. We were able to add little to his rapid and able Survey ... the Sound of Nootka is formed by a vast multitude of Islands. These Islands cover the Coast of the Continent, which lies at a considerable distance. They consist of an immense archipelago.”

Shortly after Strange’s voyage, ships connected with Etches’ enterprise arrived. Portlock and Dixon, who stopped at Nootka in 1787, arriving from Prince William’s Sound in the north, left no account of their impressions of the place. Although tasked by Etches, who funded the voyage, with establishing a factory, they did not do so. This job was then left to James Colnett, arriving from England in July 1787. He found another ship already there, the Imperial Eagle, captained by James Barclay.

Andrew Taylor, the Chief Mate on Colnett’s expedition, kept his own journal, and commented that, “The Town which stands very pleasant, the Natives call

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35 An Account of a Voyage to the North West Coast of America in 1785 & 1786 by Alexander Walker, eds. Robin Fisher and J.M. Bumsted (Vancouver, 1982), 60; Walker of Bowland Papers, National Library of Scotland, MS 13777, 13778.

36 An Account of a Voyage ... Alexander Walker, 123.


Nutka." He noted plentiful fruit and vegetables, deer, and fish which "makes the Nutka an excellent Port of refreshment in this part of the World."  

John Meares, who reached Nootka on his second voyage from China to the northwest Pacific coast in 1788, described the first sight of land thirty leagues off on May 11 as "an atmosphere in a state of illumination caused by vast mountains of snow ... whose summits were hid in the clouds." He described Friendly Cove as a "protecting haven." He went on to describe Nootka as "situated on a rising bank, which fronts the sea, and is backed and skirted with woods. In Friendly Cove the houses are large ... each of these mansions accommodates several families ..." He found another ship, the Princess Royal led by Captain Duncan, nearby, and also reported four other ships (apart from his own, the Felice, and the Iphegenia) on the coast in 1788.

Meares was traveling with a member of the Mowachaht community, Comekela, whom he was bringing back from Macau. Comekela had been transported on an earlier voyage to Macao, and was then returned to his home, as were several inhabitants of the Sandwich Islands who had been taken as "objects of curiosity" by earlier ships. When they reached the cove they saw "a multitude of the natives, assembled on the banks in front of the village, in order to take a view of the ship." The ship was soon surrounded by canoes bringing fish, and these set out to the shore with Comekela, "The whole body of inhabitants moved towards the beach, and with a most unpleasant howl, welcomed him on shore." Soon after "the whole company proceeded to the king's house ..."

Several days later, Maquinna and Callicum, leaders of the Mowachaht, returned from a visit to Wikaninnish, chief of the Clayoquot peoples, further to the South. Twelve war canoes surrounded the ship in great ceremony. The eighteen men in each canoe "were cloathed in dresses of the most beautiful skins of the sea otter, which covered them from their necks to their ancles ... The chief occupied a place in the middle, and was also distinguished by an high cap, pointed at the crown, and ornamented at top with a small tuft of feathers." Song and ceremony were followed by visits to the ship from Macquinna and

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39 A Voyage to the North West Side of America, see Galois's account of Taylor, xiii. For Taylor’s description of Yuquot, see p. 119.
40 John Meares, Voyages made in the Years 1788 and 1789, from China to the North West coast of America ..., (London, 1793), 103–104.
41 Meares, Voyages, 111.
42 Meares, Voyages, 10.
43 Meares, Voyages, 108–111.
44 Meares, Voyages, ibid., 112.
Callicum where they were given a present, and “on receiving it, took off their sea-otter garments, threw them in the most graceful manner, at our feet ...”

1792: In the Wake of the Nootka Crisis

The Mowachaht peoples’ encounters with the Spanish at sea in the Sound in 1774 followed by Cook’s landing in 1778 were encounters with strange mythical objects and creatures. Less than five years later this place, which had given Europeans impressions of forest, fear, and great ceremony, was replaced by an entry point to a much-visited European trading hub. The powerful indigenous chief, Maquinna, and his people had been displaced to their autumn salmon fishery in Tahsis, much of a day’s travel up the Sound. By this stage the volatile Spanish captain of the Princessa, Esteban José Martínez, who in 1789 established the beginnings of a Spanish fort at Yuquot, had committed two violent acts which dramatically escalated antagonism between the Spanish and British, and disrupted earlier co-existence with the local Mowachaht people. He seized three British trading ships, captained by James Colnett, then shortly after killed Callicum, the second-ranking chief of Maquinna’s confederacy and Macquinna’s close friend, possibly his brother. Callicum was also the key interlocutor in gathering the furs, trading them, and managing the other indigenous groups visiting the Sound. Maquinna and his people left shortly after, taking refuge first with Wikaninish and the Clayoquot, then moving to their winter quarters in Tahsis. The seizure by Martínez of the British trading vessels, and his dispatch of two of these with their captain, James Colnett, to San Blas, led quickly into the Nootka crisis of 1790 during which Spain and Britain went onto a war footing over the territory, then followed with negotiations known as the Nootka Conventions. An international incident elevated Yuquot from trading hub to a centerpiece of European strategic policy.

By 1790–1791 the Spanish had not only made one further expedition to Nootka but had also left Captain Pedro Alberni and a group of Catalonian volunteers to stay. They added to Martínez’s fort, built barracks, dug wells, and created a

45 Meares, Voyages, ibid., 113.
By 1792 the Spanish had a well-provisioned fort on the Mowachaht lands, leaving aside the small disputed area where John Meares had built a small structure, the basis of British claims to the territory. There were then about sixteen houses plus storehouses, a bakery, an infirmary, and animal sheds. Thirty-two ships from several European countries, as well as Mexico and Boston, visited Yuquot that year. Rich accounts of this time include those by the Spanish naturalist José Mariano Mocino and by the explorer Alejandro Malaspina, as well as by the English naval surveyor Captain George Vancouver and the botanist Alexander Menzies, who accompanied him. All convey the dramatic change.

Malaspina, who came into the harbor in August 1791, described the transformation:

At the end of the harbour we could see various huts built of wooden planks, which were guarded and kept in good order by Alberni and the troops quartered ashore. The baker, which daily supplied fresh bread to all, the vegetable gardens, in which nature was already providing generously ...

By this stage, however, Malaspina “found it difficult to meet the natives.” Relations with the Spanish remained strained after the murder of Callicum two years before. He described “cautious behavior towards our establishment.” No one appeared for three days after their arrival, and it was Tlupananúl, the highest-ranking chief of the groups who lived in Tlupana Inlet just to the east of Nootka Sound who appeared, though “shy and alarmed at the sight of such an assembly of forces.” Maquinna was “afraid to visit us”; a few visiting his settlement “for geodetic purposes” found huts abandoned and people hiding in the forests.

A few weeks later, however, some trust had been established; Maquinna came to Yuquot, and “took several cups of tea on board the Atrevida,” a custom now well-established among his relations and subordinate chiefs, his head adorned with a sort of strip of red cloth to which were sewn little stars of glass.

47 Cook, Flood Tide of Empire, 276–285.
48 Cook, Flood Tide of Empire, 360, Appendix E.
50 On Tlupananúl see Clayton, Islands of Truth, 115. On relations between Tlupananul, Maquinna, Quadra, and Vancouver see Marshall, “Dangerous Liaisons,” 163–175.
He was given “two canoe sails, four panes of window-glass, a sheet of copper, several pieces of blue cloth and a few pieces of hardware.”

Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, the new commander and also commissioner charged with negotiating the Nootka Conventions, arrived at Nootka on April 29, 1792, and stayed until September of that year. The naturalist Mociño and his two assistants accompanied him. Mociño described a picturesque view with high mountains, “but upon going ashore one finds nothing anywhere except small sandy beaches, thickets, precipices, large sharp rocks, and huge craggy masses in disorderly array. Even volcanic lahars are found on the shores of a lake which lies at a distance of less than one-quarter of a mile from the anchorage.” He continued, “the natives inhabit only the beaches, and mountains are reserved for the bears, lynxes, raccoons, weasels, squirrels, deer and so forth.” He had visited Tahsis, three leagues (forty miles) away, where the Mowachaht were then living, describing it as on a large island at the foot of mountains; these formed “a barrier against the ferocity of the north wind,” and the shores were “bathed by the waters of a protected channel.” The “majority of the scattered lodges are reunited here ... the inhabitants sustain themselves with dry fish ... [They] receive visits from the Nuchimanes, settlements on the opposite side of the mountains.”

Captain Vancouver, with his naturalist, Menzies, arrived at Yuquot on August 28, 1792. Both went to pay respects to Quadra and reported on his great hospitality. Menzies, like Malaspina, reported on the Spanish barracks and the gardens “which grew here very luxuriantly, particularly in the places formerly occupied by the Habitations of the Natives ... [There were] well-stocked poultry yards, goats, sheep & black cattle ... blacksmiths & carpenters ... In short the Spaniards seem to go on here with greater activity & industry than we are led to believe of them at any of their other remote infant Settlements.” He reported at the time “ten vessels riding at Ancor in this small Cove & two small ones building on shore – ... the number which visited this Coast in course of the summer has been far greater.”

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52 The Malaspina Expedition, 186.
53 Noticias de Nutka, 4.
54 Noticias de Nutka, 6.
55 Noticias de Nutka, 41.
57 Menzies Journal of Vancouver's Voyage, 112.
58 Menzies Journal of Vancouver's Voyage, 124.
The detailed commentary of the accounts show the transformation of this local space into a global hub of trade and exploration now dominated by Europeans within a five-year period. Interactions with Maquinna and the other Mowachaht were now a degraded ceremonial of tea taking and generic presents of European trade goods, valued though some were, rather than Cook’s gift of a ceremonial sword. Quadra, the hospitable and diplomatic commander, entertained Maquinna and other chiefs at his table alongside his European visitors, but this ended when Quadra left Yuquot in late 1792.59

Next, we’ll look at how Europeans reflected on the way this local space was situated within wider global strategies of trade and political domination.

A Trading Hub

Many commented on the peculiar qualities of Yuquot as a trading hub. Unknown to Europeans before 1778, it was now on all their maps. For the Mowachaht people it had a long history as a place of meeting, ceremony, and exchange. Indigenous occupation was seasonal, and the perceptions of early visitors were shaped by the timing of their visits, which were usually from late spring to autumn.60 Indigenous groups living in the areas close by were estimated by Malaspina in 1792 at close to 4,000, all subordinate to the Mowachaht chief, Maquinna. Five ships spent time at Nootka between 1778 and 1787. As the trade in sea otter furs escalated from 1787, Maquinna and his family had first rights of access to Europeans, and Yuquot had become the primary locus of trade. The Mowachaht also became intermediaries, trading on the much richer collections of fur from other groups of “strangers,” requiring that European merchants only be accessed through them, and forged alliances with groups up and down the coast through the exchange and gifting of new European luxury goods.61

Many of the first British merchants discussed their plans to establish a factory in the cove. Walker, visiting Yuquot on the merchant expedition led by James Strange in 1786, wrote later of “Friendly Village” as a “situation favourable for vessels coming in or leaving the harbour,” and having a considerable population. In late revisions of his Account of a Voyage, he wrote it has

“continued the Emporium of Nootka.”62 He recalled Strange’s and the East India Company’s plans for building a fort there, with he and the small band of nineteen soldiers on the journey to remain.63 He wrote of the local resources, proposing the development of the fur trade and a whale fishery, (“the astonishing numbers of these Animals promise a rich Commerce”), as well as a trade in pine wood and pine bark extract to Canton.64

Portlock and Dixon, the commanders appointed by Richard Etches, who were followed by Colnett, were searching the northwest coast for furs in 1786 and 1787, and were also instructed to start a factory at Nootka. Colnett reported on his own instructions to “purchase of the natives” land for the establishment of at least one “factory,” with the expectation that the first choice would be Nootka Sound, “it being centrical [and]... in every respect consistent with the intent of forming such establishment.”65 John Meares, arriving later in 1788, wrote of preparations of the ships and crew for building factories and “extending the plan of commerce in which we had engaged.” He had brought a large Chinese workforce with him from Canton.66

Within three years the British were well entrenched along the coast. In August 1791 on the northwest coast the French Captain Marchand found parts of the coast so much frequented by the English that he traveled south to Barkley Sound, which he then believed to be mostly unknown, with the prospect of trading with “a people who might not have traded before, he would make up for the time which he had uselessly consumed in following a beaten track ...”67 Vancouver wrote of a significant trading hub during his first visit in August 1792 when he noted eighteen vessels in the cove, and British and American ships bringing frames for schooners to be built on site. On his return trip in May 1793 he witnessed the arrival of two small ships, one with two thousand otter skins and the other with one thousand.68

At the end of the several months he spent at Yuquot in 1792 Mociño recommended that the Spanish enter the fur trade as a way of securing their possessions on the coast. He thought the Spanish had a special advantage because of their access to Indian trade goods within the empire and noted that a mission

62  An Account of a Voyage ... Alexander Walker, 60.
63  An Account of a Voyage ... Alexander Walker, 67.
64  An Account of a Voyage ... Alexander Walker, 192–197.
65  A Voyage ... by James Colnett, 11.
66  Meares, Voyages, 2.
67  A Voyage round the World, performed during the Years 1790, 1791, and 1792, by Étienne Marchand. Translated from the French of C.P. Claret Fleurieu, of the National Institute of Arts and Sciences, and of the Board of Longitude of France, 2 vols., Vol. 1, (London, 1801), 327.
had never been established; the priests had reported “a lack of cultivable land,” a reason he dismissed. But, reflecting sometime later, and at the conclusion of his account, he recommended abandoning the expensive fortifications at Nootka and at posts further north. The final Nootka treaty was signed on January 11, 1794, and the ceremony of abandonment of Nootka by both the Spanish and British took place under the leadership of Vancouver’s replacement, Lt. Pierce, and the Spanish General Alava on March 23, 1795. Maquinna and the other chiefs gathered; the Spanish fort was dismantled, and the settlement abandoned. The British flag was hoisted then given to Maquinna to show whenever other traders came, and in the summer the Mowachaht lodges were built again. The cove returned to its previous appearance, but the Mowachaht did not regain their former power over other indigenous groups that they had held when Cook landed there seventeen years earlier.

Possessions on Land and Sea

As we have seen, the British and Spanish expeditions and merchant voyages first came to land and oceans in Nootka Sound that were possessed by the Mowachaht people. Diplomatic protocols and trading conventions governed the use-rights of these areas and led to war if transgressed. These spaces and resources were not perceived as common property, but as being owned by specific social groups. Ownership was, further, at the level of a house group or lineage or even local group. Members of a family were ranked on the basis of primogeniture, and the highest-ranking member was regarded as the owner of most of the group’s property.

European visitors were quickly made aware of the strict divisions maintained by the Mowachaht from those they called “strangers.” The Mowachaht controlled not just their territories, but their access to European trade. Through webs of marriages and alliances they managed the resources of the region and co-existed with its many other groups.

Cook became conscious of his own “possession” by the Mowachaht. He made his principal anchorage at Resolution Cove, just inside Muchalaht

69 Noticias de Nutka, 81, 85.
70 Noticias de Nutka, 93.
71 Cook, Flood Tide of Empire, 423.
74 Clayton, Islands of Truth, 115.
territory, a distinctive group but one connected to the Mowachaht. When he entered Nootka Sound, he first made contact with people from Yuquot; this made he and his crew principal "allies" of Maquinna.75

Both Cook and Walker wrote of how the Mowachaht monopolized the trade or acted as intermediaries to the "strangers." They "claimed exclusive privilege of buying or selling anything."76 Walker noticed that most of the foreign traders came from the south, though from no great distance. Colnett, too, reported Taylor's descriptions: "The Village is under the Government of two Chiefs of nearly equal power, they are both keen clever men well acquainted with barter, in all its Stages, as well, with distant tribes for Skins, as with us in the slave of them, and they spare no pains in getting them into their possession."77 Colnett continued, "these Savages wished to secure all the advantages of our Commerce to themselves ... they carefully watched and excluded Strangers from any intercourse with us ..."78 Much later, John Jewitt, the captive, reported visits of "strangers" from "no less than twenty tribes tributary to the Nootka, and of practices of exchange of presents."79

Many of the British and some of the Spanish expeditions recorded their entry into waters and onto areas of land as unproblematic, though they were well aware of the indigenous peoples around them, and in some cases also of their strongly proprietorial behavior. Upon reaching land at any point on the coast, European merchants and explorers sought out water and wood and set up observatories; none wrote of seeking the permission of indigenous peoples. Surveys and mapping were part of the purpose of the global expeditions but were also written into the project plans of a number of the merchants. From Cook’s meticulous surveys there followed commissions for even more detailed charts by Vancouver and Quadra to establish lines of ownership between the British and the Spanish.80 The construction of the observatories was perceived as part of the entry into and claiming of territories.

On the third day from his arrival on the coast Captain Cook went with a party of men to cut down a tree to make a new mizen mast, and "... the observatorys..."

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75 A Voyage ... by James Colnett. Introduction by Galois, 34.
76 Walker, Account of a Voyage, 110.
77 A Voyage ... by James Colnett, 118.
78 A Voyage ... by James Colnett.
and Instruments for making observations were set up on an elevated rock on one side of the Cove close to the Resolution."\(^{81}\) The men cut wood, cleared a place for watering, and set up a forge; they returned later to cut down another tree after a fault was discovered in the first mast they had made. Several days later he went in a boat to another village on the west side of the Sound; they went to gather grass for the shipboard livestock, but discovered no grass was to be had except by purchase. "As soon as I heard of this I went to the place and found about a dozen men who all laid claim to some part of the grass which I purchased of them and as I thought liberty to cut where ever I pleased, but here again I was mistaken, for the liberal manner I had paid the first pretended proprietors brought more upon me and there was not a blade of grass that had not a separated owner, so that I very soon emptied my pockets with purchasing, and when they found I had nothing more to give they let us cut where ever we pleased."\(^{82}\)

Strange and Walker next reported on their use of the land. Strange set the sick brought from the ships to work as they recovered, "gathering vegetation and berries, and in gardening using seeds he had brought." All of this was stated with no mention of special permission by the Mowachaht to do so. Walker, however, raised more explicitly the "liberty" they had to do so. He reported the assistance of the "Natives" in "rolling the water casks to the beach & in getting the large trees into the sea." The crew had "liberty to wander through their woods and houses at pleasure and used all the spontaneous productions of the country as we chose."\(^{83}\)

Walker reported later that when they came to the northern end of Vancouver Island on the voyage north they performed a series of "naming and possession" ceremonies. They landed, saw no inhabitants, but did see the "remains of 10 or 12 miserable huts built on the beach of driftwood."\(^{84}\) Shortly afterwards Strange also "discovered" and "named" Queen Charlotte's Sound.\(^{85}\) All of this was stated, even by someone as observant as Walker, and indeed in light of the long period of reflection he had in preparing his journal for publication, without any comment. James Colnett, coming to the Sound soon after Strange and Walker, had specific instructions to visit Nootka Sound and to "purchase of the natives" land for the establishment of at least one "factory."\(^{86}\)

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81 The Journals of Captain Cook on his Voyages of Discovery, iii, Online Version, Haitha, Tuesday, 31st of March, 1778.
82 The Journals of Captain Cook, ibid., Tuesday 31st March, 1778; Thursday, 16th April, 1778; Wednesday, 22nd April, 1778.
83 Account of a Voyage ... Alexander Walker, 56.
84 Account of a Voyage ... Alexander Walker, 129.
85 Account of a Voyage ... Alexander Walker, 131, 133.
86 A Voyage ... by James Colnett, 11.
Meares entered Yuquot he displayed arms and built a house, “We thought it prudent to inform them of our power, by explaining the force we possessed and mode of applying it, in case they should at any time change their present disposition towards us.” He built a house on land he claimed had been given to him by Maquinna, “with great help from the natives.”

The Spanish perceptions of their possession rights were little different from those of the British. Mociño recounted that “Macquinna gave to Eliza the land of which Martínez had taken possession, on the condition that it be returned to him (as soon as the Spanish left), so that he could establish his village there, as had all of his ancestors and as he himself had done during the first years of his government.” When Malaspina arrived in April 1791 he saw himself as walking onto a Spanish possession, though one in dispute with the British. He “set up an observatory at a suitable spot not far from the huts.” When Vancouver arrived later, in August of that year, he believed Nootka to be a British possession in the process of being ceded by the Spanish. “The tents, observatory, chronometers, instruments, etc. were sent on shore the following day … The boats … were in want of much repair, and were hauled on shore for that purpose.”

The indigenous hierarchies of property holding of local spaces on land and sea were displaced by these new European claims, but the Mowachaht continued in an uneasy peace with the Spanish, and Maquinna conveyed this to Mociño and to Malaspina. Mociño wrote that Maquinna’s people were a nation of fishermen that could only settle properties which included “the beaches and the adjoining waters that bathe them.” “The people of Yuquatl [Nootka], dispute with arms the right of fishing in their respective districts … believe that foreigners violate this public right when they sail into these areas for that purpose … They drew their sustenance from the sea, and always inhabit the shores, moving according the levels of fish stocks.”

The detailed commentary in these accounts demonstrates the transformation within little more than a five-year period of this local indigenous space into a global hub of trade and exploration now dominated by Europeans.

87 Meares, Voyages, 115.
88 Noticias de Nutka, p. 80. See Marshall, “Houses and Domestication.”
89 The Malaspina Expedition, vol. 2, 172.
91 Noticias de Nutka, 7–9; Malaspina, vol. 2, 186.
Conclusion

Space and locality are central to global history; global historians have sought out in the wider world connections of specific cities, regions, and trading centers. Family connections, community networks, property, and possession based in specific places lie behind many of the legal and inquisition cases that comprised the sources drawn on by the first generation of microhistorians. This article has brought these approaches together; it conveys the power of place in global history through the multiple perceptions of space and possession in one small remote locality which was, for a brief period, connected with many parts of the world. Microhistorical methodologies that turn on the study of a locality such as Nootka Sound also reveal the close global connections of agents and events. This article contrasts perceptions and accounts by European traders and explorers of a small locality on the far side of the world over the brief periods between "encounter," trading hub, and finally colonial possession. Long-established indigenous perceptions of space, property, and possession were never acknowledged in the brief visits by Europeans, but they had to be negotiated in early trading ventures. With the turning of the Nootka crisis, however, Europeans entered a space they no longer associated with unknown landscapes and indigenous groups. They came instead to a space surveyed and claimed by Spain and Britain, a much-visited global trading hub and a significant strategic space in European strategy over the Pacific. They came and then they left; their short episode in Nootka Sound completely transformed a deep and long indigenous history of this space.

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