

Communication: J.E. (Ted) Roberts and Christon I. Archer on George Vancouver

Gentlemen:

That Christon Archer is no friend of Capt. George Vancouver is apparent from his review of Greg Dening's work on Bligh in *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord*, IV, no. 1 (January 1994), p. 101. Archer is entitled to his opinions, but they should not be accepted as fact. His charge that Vancouver was the "leading flogger of early Pacific exploration" is a fabrication and his "statistics" are totally meaningless. A moment's reflection will show that talking about "percent of men" whipped is no criterion; voyage length must be considered, for the longer the voyage the greater the possibility that more men will be punished. This will alter the figures used to make the case against Vancouver.

Archer is not the first to try to pin this label on Vancouver. Philip Amos of Simon Fraser University, writing in *Westworld*, IV, no. 5 (1978), pp. 6-7, labelled him "a barbarian" in a comparison with Cook and Bligh. Nothing is offered to substantiate the claim. Vancouver's men were punished for infractions of the Articles of War; since the majority did not warrant courts-martial, they were flogged in accordance with custom. On 17 August 1792, James Englehart, sailmaker in the *Discovery*, was sentenced to seventy-two lashes for embezzlement; the following day Isaac Wooden, seaman, received a sentence of sixty lashes for theft. In both cases they received half the sentence on that day and the balance five days later. This shows that Vancouver was not unreasonable. Readers unable to put flogging in its proper context will find guidance in N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World, An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London, 1986), pp. 218-251.

Use of the term "sedulous" to describe Vancouver brings to mind an instance when a speaker described him as an "overly meticulous" surveyor. The man was chastened when an oceanographer responded that in their professions it was impossible to be "too meticulous." I would have been happier if Prof. Archer had made it clear he was not using the term pejoratively.

In a review in *BC Studies*, No. 73 (Spring 1987), pp. 43-61, Prof. Archer claimed that Vancouver "demonstrated pigheaded rigidity and stupidity" in handling the Thomas Pitt case. Such a conclusion may result from a facile reading of the Banks Correspondence, which trivializes the events and exaggerates the penalties. As for the choice of "flogging," the punishments were inflicted in the cabin with insufficient room to swing a lash or starter. The events show clearly that Vancouver acted with restraint.

As a commander George Vancouver was a proper martinet. I would not have wanted to serve under him — unless I were determined to learn all there was then to know about nautical surveying.

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Christon Archer responds:

Perhaps the best aspect of Ted Roberts' letter is that I can refute his oft-repeated view that I have set out to malign Captain George Vancouver. Despite Roberts' effort to place me in the camp of those who wish pin a "brute label" upon Vancouver's reputation, I reject the charge. While I might not have engaged in the hagiography Roberts obviously desires, his charges are wrong and taken out of the general context. For the record, I admire Vancouver as a surveyor and navigator. But I am critical of him for incidents such as his treatment of Thomas Pitt, later Lord Camelford, because the good captain exhibited a rigidity and inflexibility that subsequently did his reputation and career needless damage. My belief that Vancouver had some flaws does not mean I think he was a "barbarian."

Roberts totally misinterprets my description of Vancouver as "sedulous" as an epithet. I have no idea what dictionary he uses, but my *Oxford English Dictionary* defines sedulous as "diligent, active, constant in application to the matter at hand; assiduous, persistent." *Webster* gives a similar definition, adding "persistently or carefully maintained." I chose the word carefully and continue to see nothing pejorative in it.

Unfortunately, Roberts' critique distracts attention from my review of a truly outstanding book by Greg Dening. On the question of flogging, the statistics are Dening's, not mine. Had Roberts bothered to read Dening's excellent chapter, "Some Cliometrics of Violence," he would have found percentages ranging from 8.33 aboard Bligh's *Providence* to 45.15 aboard Vancouver's *Discovery*. Dening reported the case of Vancouver's armourer, George Reybold, who received 252 lashes on nine occasions, (p. 114) Like Roberts, Dening quoted N.A.M. Rodger's *The Wooden World* to illustrate that violent punishments were accepted in the eighteenth century. Unless Roberts wishes to debunk Dening's work, I continue to maintain that Vancouver was the "leading flogger of early Pacific exploration." If flogging were an accepted and effective means of operating a naval vessel of the period, Vancouver stands out simply as its leading practitioner in the Pacific. Many current observers from Singapore to Vancouver would agree about the efficacy of flogging. Finally, since Roberts raised the subject, I cannot accept the argument about Vancouver's restraint based upon having Pitt flogged in a cabin with limited headroom.

Roberts concludes by saying that Vancouver was a martinet. Perhaps our views are not as far apart as Captain Vancouver's most staunch defender would have us believe. Readers should make their own conclusions by reading Dening's fine study and by consulting W. Kaye Lamb's definitive four-volume work, *George Vancouver, A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World* (London, 1984). George Vancouver was a fine mariner, explorer and surveyor. The Vancouver tourist bureau need not worry about the brute label.

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