

REVIEW ESSAY

Navigating History's Straits

Barry Gough. *Juan de Fuca's Strait: Voyages in the Waterway of Forgotten Dreams*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing Co. Ltd., www.harbourpublishing.com, 2012. 288 pp., illustrations, maps, glossary, bibliography, notes, index. CDN/US \$32.95, hardback; ISBN 978-1-55017-573-8.

Much history has passed through the world's straits: the Bosphorus, Gibraltar, Molucca, Hormuz, Magellan, and here, Juan de Fuca's strait, the *Estrecho de Juan de Fuca*. Straits are like the architect's negative space, a portal through which significances pass, coloured by the land masses on their banks, and like negative space, the water can be more important than the nearby land. Such is the 13-mile-wide Strait of Juan de Fuca, located at 48° 23' N to 48°36' N, 124° 45' W, portal to the Pacific and the Georgia Strait and Puget Sound. A pinnacle, de Fuca's Pillar, off Cape Flattery marks the westerly entrance to the south, and to the north, the strait is bounded by Vancouver Island. Professor Barry Gough first wrote about the area in *The Royal Navy in the Pacific Northwest, 1810-1914* in 1971, and now over forty years and many books later, he returns to the subject in *Juan de Fuca's Strait: Voyage in the Waterway of Forgotten Dreams*. *Strait* is vintage Gough. Thoroughly ballasted in fact, it reads like a breeze.

Before taking on Gough's book, consider how it fits within the current art of writing history. A recent writer, Adam Gopnik, has observed that historians first treat races (dominant and subservient), then faces (the great and small), then places (wonders and the misbegotten). Modern history is mostly of place, "what all the little faces were doing while the big faces were looking at each other," he writes. Or the little islands, the San Juans, on the northwest backside of North America, whose significance was to grow from the exchange of otter and beaver pelts for Chinese silks and Oriental spices, to lumber and gold for Japanese steel and automobiles. Early on the Strait was hoped to be the western portal that opened into the Strait of Anian and a less trying route than the Strait of Magellan to Oriental riches. Straits, like rivers and harbours, shape the character of the land about them. Their water is too often seen as negative negative space, but A.T. Mahan reminds us that "control of the oceans by big navies was mostly what mattered." (Adam Gopnik, "Faces, Places, Spaces: The renaissance of geographic history," in *The New Yorker* (29 Oct. and 5 Nov. 2012): 108-16.) He uses Canadian geography to provide an example. "The Canadians, offspring of the British parliamentary tradition, have to be explained away as closet southerners clinging to the border," or such a view finds that Russian authoritative governments are the result of cold climate and the country's enormous size. This is geostrategic thinking that makes any event seemingly inevitable, like the Edwardians' view on the eve of the First World War, and a tenuous link between theory and the world's reality.

A variant is cartographic history, where an interpretation is projected onto particular lands, as in border studies. Borders are essential in defining the nation state. An

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example is those ruler-straight borders drawn by European powers in the Middle East to define their own economic interests. Another is the Canadian-U.S. border, the longest in the world, as “wilful an act of imagination as a work of conceptual curtaining by Christo, but its existence has made two separate peoples, with two separate stories.” Some histories mix the geo-cartographic, where idea and terrain fuse. In it there is the primacy of geography, affected by technology. Here, observes Gopnik, American prosperity results from “white people with guns owning a giant chunk of well-irrigated, very well-harbored real estate off the edge of the World Island, bordering a hot land on one side and a cold on the other”, a view whose burden “is as naturally sung by our bards as the olive oils and wine-dark sea at the heart of Greek culture were sung by theirs.” Indeed, he observes, the “continuities of geography are striking. But the discontinuities produced by thought are far more striking still.” Ideas “shape us more than mountains and monsoons can. Human history, like human love, is still made most distinctly face to face.” The *agon* of face to face drama, the masks of comedy and tragedy, heroes and spear carriers, played out on the plains of Troy, the Plains of Abraham, Thermopylae, Actium, or here, by captains and swabbies in the Juan de Fuca Strait—this is the agonistic stuff of Gough’s history writing.

Gough’s curtain opens on navigating the Strait itself, then begins the action by taking the audience back to April 1596. An English merchant in Venice, mercer Michael Lok, is seated across from a Greek pilot. Both men, smarting from their ill fortunes, are repairing their wits at a “steamy waterside bar or coffee house” near the Grand Canal (anticipating tastes a bit). Lok bends his ear to the pilot’s story of a strait and an inland sea from the Pacific to the Atlantic that he discovered while sailing for the Spaniards. The pilot, known to the Spanish as Juan de Fuca (born Ionnis Phokas, from village of Valeriano, on the Peloponnese, not far from the mariner Odysseus’ homeland) was speaking of the fabled Strait of Anian. That strait, like the Strait of Magellan, would bypass the impediment to Oriental riches—the Americas. Lok was a dealer in fine fabrics, a merchant in Venice, a witty honest man, but unhappy with his lot in life, as described by Richard Madox in 1582. He listened intently to the Greek. For his part, de Fuca, piloting a small *caravela* and an even smaller pinnace, had left México in 1592, and sailed northwest to 47° N. The land then trended northeast when he encountered a broad inlet between 47 and 48° N, marked at the south entrance by a “an exceeding high Pinnacle, or spired Rocke, like a piller thereupon.” He explored the inlet for twenty days, saw fur-clad inhabitants and a fruitful land “rich of gold, Silver, Pearle, and other things, like Nova Spania.”

Juan de Fuca provided Lok with a precise latitude and described a distinctive pillar on the south shore, but these facts were soon shrouded in myth as later mariners sought the strait in vain, and “by indirections trying to find directions out,” as Hamlet would say. Only in the late eighteenth century did the myth return to being fact. Gough’s story chronicles the byzantine attempts winding past rocks and bucking currents, heads of state, pilots, and surveyors. Gough’s is geographic history, but also a history of the big and little people. The smallest people are the Indians, who of course from time immemorial knew the lay of the land and its waters. European discovery was hardly a discovery to them. The largest of the players are the English captains James Cook and George Vancouver and the Spanish ones, Dionisio Alcalá Galiano (later of Trafalgar fame), Cayetano Valdés, and the Peruvian captain Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra, who surveyed the area and negotiated politics, as

a supporting cast pulled on the oars, hauled lines, or stood anchor watches in Nootka Bay. The villain of the play is John Meares, the wily British fur trader who sailed under false papers, and helped fire the Nootka Crisis by poaching in waters claimed by Spain, a man the Indians called “lying Meares.”

The Strait is also a tale of four nations: Britain, America, Spain, Russia. Spanish imperial design went back to the Pope’s Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 that Spain claimed gave them a religious right to the area. Where the Spanish sailed from the south, the Russians sailed down from the north, arguing for their latitudinal right to navigable waters, the right of possession. The Americans invoked manifest destiny as their right (later echoed as “fifty-four forty or fight”). The British took a mercantilistic view based on sea otter pelts, beavers, and Chinese silks. The matter was not settled until 1872, when the German Kaiser wove a line through the islands east of the Strait, setting the border.

Gough starts with Juan de Fuca’s voyage in 1592, and then shifts to his meeting with Lok in 1596 as recorded by Purchas in 1625. The story next jumps to the first half of the eighteenth century, when the Spanish began expanding northward, and the Russians south. The latter half of the century finds Captain James Cook missing the entrance in 1778. In 1788, American trading ships also sailed the strait to trade furs, the prized sea otter pelts later described as “among the most attractive natural objects’ to be found, excepting a ‘beautiful woman and a lovely infant.” Two years later, Esteban Martínez stepped ashore at Nootka Island, followed by Manuel Quimper, who claimed the area for Spain. In 1792, Vancouver arrived with orders to implement the Nootka Convention and to survey Puget Sound, the San Juans, and the Strait of Georgia in order to ascertain if there were, in fact, a Strait of Anian leading to the Atlantic. He and his Spanish counterpart, Quadra, disagree on sovereignty, and eventually Nootka Island reverted to the Indians. Act I and Act V, the book’s best, comprise the Lok-Fuca bits, and the sparring between Bodega y Quadra and Vancouver. The Spaniard had already explored as far north as Sitka, Alaska, in 1775, and the Englishman was only newly arrived on the scene. A Yankee captain, Charles Barkeley, appeared in 1787 with his young sixteen-year-old bride, Frances, to trade otter pelts. It was he who rediscovered, after two hundred years, Fuca’s Strait. A year later, the Strait’s latitude and longitude were measured by Charles Duncan, and not long after, Vancouver (the place) was determined to be an island separate from the mainland. When Galiano arrives midway in the book in 1792, Gough’s tightly packed style relaxes and remains so for the rest of the book, when by 1793 and 1794 respectively, Bodega y Quadra and Vancouver (the man) exit the stage.

Throughout, Gough’s masterful touch with words brightens the pages. In sketching Bodega y Quadra, Gough notes that this vice-regal figure’s empire was sadly “crumbling beneath him, and he was caught in a swirl of international politics in which he was cast to the winds of fate.” As for his counterpart, after three years of surveying the coast to Alaska, Vancouver wrote up his navigations “to prove as conclusively as possible that a hyperborean or northern ocean between the Pacific and the Atlantic did not exist. The whole was a fable, an illusion.” Gough draws on his extensive research here: that discoveries were made by sailing south, on the winds and currents, not north; that beaver drove Canadian history westward; that the development of British Columbian trade was

tied to China. He keeps up the suspense by seeing things through the eyes of his characters, and even when omnisciently eagle-eyed, he does not give away secrets seen.

Lest the reader think that the reviewer has neglected to keep his own eye out for the shoals of imperfection, let me mention a few. *Strait* is heavy on places, and despite its endpaper maps, it needs a clearer modern map to help readers who lack local knowledge of the area. Most of the time, these mariners were not dining off Peruvian silver at Bodega y Quadra's table but were in longboats surveying the coastline. What of more of their science and the daily life of the surveyor? How was the surveying done? The Russians seem to fade off into the sea mists to the north. What of them? After all, HM Royal Hydrographic Office still uses a Russian chart as the index for its Admiralty ones of the coastline from Cape Flattery to Alaska. Gough writes that in 1492, mariners knew no celestial navigation but relied on dead reckoning. In fact, Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, written in the 1390s, was as well-known as his *Canterbury Tales*. The astrolabe, like the later cross-staff, and much later sextant, measures the height or elevation of celestial bodies to determine latitude, and is, in fact, celestial navigation (the other part, measuring longitude, came later). By the 1590s, when Fuca was sailing, a good pilot practised reliable navigation. And to fill in somewhat, the Portuguese count their submission to the Spanish crown as from 1580, but Gough is right in stating that the coronation was a year later, 1581 (the capitulation of the Azores came still later, in 1583). The mention of Raleigh's misfortunes has him seemingly writing his *History of the World*, published in 1614, after his second disastrous voyage to Guiana and just prior to losing his head in 1618, whereas we (and the author) know that Raleigh spent his many years in the Tower writing his history.

The reviewer can only admire Gough's adroitness in presenting story, character and fact, analyzing and weighing evidence (as in the fine wrap-up at the end of the last chapter). I am reminded of Captain Joseph Conrad's aim as a writer, "above all, I want to make you see." Thus, there are many superb illustrations, from early maps (Vancouver's and Spanish ones) to fine drawings of harbours (as of Nootka Sound), ships (including one by John Gough, the author's father), and people (great and small). Halfway through the account, the author concisely sums up the knowledge of the strait, and then turns to surveying the ships of the time. He keeps the end in sight ("Commerce ruled and the British had global ambitions"). His epilogue rather neatly ties one of the principals in the Fuca Strait story, Captain Galiano, cut down at Trafalgar in 1805, to the author's participation in the bicentenary celebrations at Córdoba, Spain, honouring Galiano. Gough rounds up into the winds of the present, of the Canadian Navy base at Esquimalt, and ships heading down the Strait with oil and natural gas, potash, and wheat. If only that Greek seafarer could have seen the metamorphosis of his fact to fiction and back to fact, an ebb and flow so brilliantly recorded by Gough.

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