

## **An Imperial Context for the Spanish Presence on the Northwest Coast**

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**Abstract:** The Spanish presence on the Northwest coast of the Americas has always been considered within the context of Mexico and what has been termed the “thrust” to California by Spain in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Scholars of the Northwest Coast have taken the view that the establishment of a Spanish military garrison at Nootka Sound, isolated, and thousands of kilometres away from the next nearest Spanish settlement was unique. This article argues that the Spanish garrison at Nootka was not conceived and built in a vacuum of knowledge; rather, Spain brought their long history of colonialism with them to the Northwest coast.

On July 27<sup>th</sup> 1773, the Viceroy of New Spain, Antonio Maria de Bucareli y Ursua, wrote:

Any establishment by Russia, or any other foreign power, on the continent, ought to be prevented, not because the king needs to enlarge his realms, as he has within his known dominions more than it will be possible to populate in centuries, but in order to avoid consequences brought by having any other neighbours than the Indians.<sup>1</sup>

The Spanish presence on the Northwest coast of the Americas has always been considered within the context of New Spain and what has been termed the “thrust” to California by Spain in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Historians of the Northwest coast have taken the view that the establishment of a Spanish military garrison at Nootka Sound, isolated and thousands of kilometres away from the nearest Spanish settlement located at San Francisco was unique. Historians have puzzled over the fact that almost no effort to Christianize the natives was undertaken. Similarly they have questioned the lack of agricultural efforts undertaken by the Spanish at Nootka.<sup>2</sup> It is a common assumption that the poor agricultural potential of the area plus the lack of a

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<sup>1</sup> Warren L. Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543- 1819* (New Haven, 1973), 55.

<sup>2</sup> There are various nomenclature associated with the site of the Spanish outpost. The Nuuchah-nulth name for the location is Yuquot, in Spanish it was called Santa Cruz de Nutka, and it is common to use the English spelling of that name to describe the location, although now Nootka Sound refers to the entire region around Nootka Island, the actual cove where the outpost was is named Friendly Cove, and was sometimes referred to as *Cala de los Amigos* by the Spanish.

missionizing endeavour on the part of the Spanish doomed their presence from the outset. The establishment at Nootka was haphazard and never sustainable, merely a piece in the game of eighteenth-century European international rivalries.<sup>3</sup>

But was the Spanish presence at Nootka so unique? Spain had a multitude of small, isolated military establishments spread across its incredibly long frontier. In what would become the Southwestern United States, Chile and Argentina, these isolated forts and outposts abounded, acting both as deterrents for foreign encroachment and as centres of trade and diplomacy with independent First Nations. By the time Spain sent agents of the crown to the Pacific Northwest, they had the experience of almost 300 years of colonialism in the Americas to draw upon. The Spanish garrison at Nootka was not conceived and built in a vacuum of knowledge; rather, Spain brought its long history of colonialism with it to the Northwest coast.

California and the Northwest coast first drew the attention of Spanish officials in the late 1750s as knowledge of Russia's expansion into eastern Asia and potentially the Americas filtered into Europe.<sup>4</sup> By January 1768, under the direction of the Royal *Visitor* Jose de Galvez, a Royal Order had been drafted for the occupation of Monterey Bay in *Alta California* in order to establish a mission and counter any Russian expansion down the Pacific coast.<sup>5</sup> A year later, under the direction of Galvez and Franciscan missionary Juripero Serra, overland and naval expeditions were launched for the colonization of San Diego, Monterey, and San Francisco. The missions were to be protected by soldiers, as Franciscan missionaries congregated local First Nations into communities around the site. European agriculture was introduced and the Franciscans enacted various measures to eliminate what they considered vice and pagan religious customs.<sup>6</sup> Although a slow and halting enterprise that sometimes bordered on starvation in the early years, by the late 1790's the California missions were exporting surpluses of agricultural products to Mexico. Many authors have argued that the failure to enact this system at the settlement at Friendly Cove

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<sup>3</sup> Christon I. Archer, "The Transient Presence: A Re-Appraisal of Spanish Attitudes toward the Northwest Coast in the Eighteenth Century," *B.C. Studies* no. 18 (Summer 1973), 3-32. On page 32 Archer calls the establishment at Nootka "irrational and overly hasty," and in *Flood Tide of Empire*, Cook places the expansion in the context of the situation in Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire*, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Jackson and Edward Castillo, *Indians, Franciscans and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on California Indians* (Albuquerque, 1995), 80.

extensively played into Spain's failure to hold onto their claims on the Northwest coast.<sup>7</sup>

Friendly Cove, located at latitude 49°35'00" and longitude 126°37'00," almost exactly halfway along the coast on the seaward side of Vancouver Island, is located right at the entrance to Nootka Sound. Except for the fog that is prevalent up and down the coast, it is perhaps the most convenient port for sailing ships to enter north of San Francisco. Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra wrote in a letter to Viceroy Revilla Gigedo in 1792 that:

The port of Nutca [sic] is of the best proportions that can be encountered along the entire coast, in which the winter can be passed without apprehension, it is possible to enter and leave with promptness at anytime, its habitants are docile, the climate healthy, it does not lack land for seeding, nor wood for construction. In its immediate area abounds the fur-trade, and in one word despite the reports that I have and the judgement that I owe, I see today it is the only place, without reservation of our *presidios*, in which it would be possible to form an establishment advantageous and useful to commerce.<sup>8</sup>

Spanish agents felt correctly that fortifying the cove, and establishing a First Nations policy that encouraged support for Spanish claims to the coast, would enable agents of the crown to solidify their enforcement of Spanish sovereignty on the entire Northwest coast.

Instead of being placed in the context of the expansion to California, when Nootka is placed in the imperial context of the Spanish empire in the Americas, the similarities between the Spanish experience at Nootka and other locations in the empire are easy to identify. Few historical works have explicitly recognized a connection between the Northwest coast and the Southern coast of South America. One rare example is the Spanish language article entitled "Notes for a Comparison Between the Expeditions to Patagonia and those to the Northwest of America."<sup>9</sup> Another is David Weber's comprehensive book *Barbaros: Spaniards*

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<sup>7</sup> Christon I. Archer, "Seduction Before Sovereignty," in *From Maps to Metaphors: The Pacific World of George Vancouver*, eds. Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnston (Vancouver, 1993), 143; Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire*, 530.

<sup>8</sup> "Quadra a Revilla Gigedo, Monterrey 24 Octubre, 1792," (AHN, Estado, Legajo 4287) quoted in Freeman Tovell, "Rivales y Amigos: Quadra y Vancouver" in *Nutka 1792*, eds. Mercedes de Palau, Freeman Tovell, Pamela Spratz y Robin Inglis (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de Espana, n.d.), note 19, author's translation.

<sup>9</sup> Angel Guirao de Vierna, "Notas Para una Comparacion entre las Expediciones a la Patagonia y a las del Noroeste Americano" in *Culturas de la Costa Noroeste de America*, ed. Jose Luis Peset (n.p.:Turner, 1992), 265-276.

*and their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment*, in which Weber uses the Malaspina expedition to link Spanish policy towards First Nations across the Americas.<sup>10</sup> In “Notes for a Comparison . . .” historian Angel Vierna lays out the general objectives of Spain during its expansion and expeditions into the far reaches of its empire during the close of the eighteenth century. These included increasing the cartographic knowledge of unknown or poorly mapped coasts, the protection of Spanish possessions from all of its European rivals, the maintenance of communications between the metropolis and the periphery, and the maintenance and formation of new secure shipping routes. Linked with these objectives was the desire to vindicate the discoveries realized by Spaniards to other foreign nations and by default Spanish sovereignty over said territories.<sup>11</sup> Considering these imperial objectives there were at least five similarities between the Northwest Coast and Patagonia. The first was that both regions were of primary importance to the borders of Spain’s American holdings. Second, there was the considerable interest by foreigners in both zones. Third, these two zones were removed from the centers of Vice-regal power by thousands of kilometres.<sup>12</sup> Finally, there was also the necessity of establishing a secure port of refuge in zones that were dangerous for navigation, while at the same time affirming the active presence of agents of the Spanish crown.

The Spanish move up the Northwest coast was concurrent with other movements in the empire. Between 1765 and 1795, the time period when Spain was most active on the Northwest coast, officials sent eight different expeditions to the Falkland Islands, while sending four expeditions to islands in the South Pacific in order to block British expansion into those areas.<sup>13</sup> In fact some of the officers that would later be sent on expeditions to the Northwest coast and Nootka participated in the expeditions to the Falklands and the South Pacific.<sup>14</sup> Along with these expeditions, it was the Viceroyalty of Peru, not Mexico, which initially paid more than 100,000 pesos for a frigate, arms, equipment and personnel for the 1779 voyage of exploration to the Northwest coast

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<sup>10</sup> David Weber, *Barbaros: Spaniards and their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Weber, *Barbaros*, 266-7.

<sup>12</sup> Weber, *Barbaros*, 273.

<sup>13</sup> Carlos Martinez Shaw, “The Spanish in the Pacific” in *Spanish Pacific from Magellan to Malaspina*, ed. Carlos Martinez Shaw (Madrid, 1988), 22.

<sup>14</sup> For instance Manuel Quimper saw service in Southern Chile, and was part of the 1774-5 expedition to Tahiti (Amat) to enforce Spanish sovereignty there. Eric Beerman, “Manuel Quimper y Bodga y Quadra: Dos Limenos en el Servicio del Armada Real,” in *Nutka 1792*, 32.

under the command of Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra.<sup>15</sup> This again demonstrates that the Northwest coast was an imperial concern and not a project solely related to California or even Mexico.

The foreign and particularly British threat to Spain's empire was very real.<sup>16</sup> The British push to Nootka at the end of the 1780s followed on the heels of English expansion to the Falklands (*Malvinas*) in 1771 and the establishment of the colony at New South Wales, Australia in 1787.<sup>17</sup> At the same time that Spain was preparing to occupy Nootka Sound to counter a perceived Russian threat, the British government was preparing three vessels for a naval expedition to occupy the Northwest coast via Australia and Hawaii.<sup>18</sup> The planned British expedition involved sending three ships, the *H.M.S. Discovery* and *H.M.S. Gorgon* from England, and the *H.M.S. Sirius* from the East-India squadron, to rendezvous at Hawaii. They would then proceed to the Northwest coast, where they were to establish a colony and link up with an overland expedition sent from Montreal.<sup>19</sup> The outbreak of the Nootka Crisis – a political dispute between Britain and Spain over the sovereignty of the region – put a hold on the plans for a British colony, but the *H.M.S. Discovery* would still be sent to the Northwest coast with the *H.M.S. Chatham* under the command of George Vancouver.<sup>20</sup>

When considering the Spanish presence on the Northwest coast, first and foremost it should be understood that Spain and its agents had absolutely no desire to spread the Catholic faith. The instructions issued to Juan Perez for his 1774 voyage to the Pacific Northwest were the only ones (out of a possible forty expeditions to the region) that carried the provision that the reason for the voyage was a “spiritual conquest” of the native inhabitants.<sup>21</sup> Even this has been dismissed as a “smokescreen” by

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<sup>15</sup> Salvador Bernabeu, “Los Viajes de Bodega y Quadra al Virreinato del Peru (1776-1783),” in *Navigare necesse est. Estudios de Historia en Honor de Lola Higuera*, ed. Luisa Martín-Merás (Gijón, 2008), 81-105. Bodega's time in Peru is covered on pages 88-89.

<sup>16</sup> Despite being claimed by Spain, most of the Americas remained in the hands of indigenous peoples until after the period of national revolutions in Latin America. See Weber, *Barbaros*, 6, 257-278.

<sup>17</sup> Barry Gough, “New Empires of Trade and Territory in the time of Malaspina,” in *Malaspina 92 Jornadas Internacionales*, eds. Mercedes Palau Baquero and Antonion Orozco Acuaviva (1994), 132.

<sup>18</sup> “The Right Hon. W.W. Grenville to Governor Phillip,” *Historical Records of Australia: Series 1: Governor's Despatches to and from England. Vol. 1, 1788-1796* (Sydney, 1914), 161-164.

<sup>19</sup> Rene Chartrand, “Malaspina and the Spanish Explorations: A contribution to the Geostrategic History of Canada's West Coast,” in *Malaspina 92*, 322.

<sup>20</sup> Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire*, has multiple chapters covering this complicated incident.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Cutter, “The Malaspina Expedition and its place in the History of the Pacific Northwest,” in *Spain and the North Pacific Coast: Essays in Recognition of the*

some historians, as the instruction had more the appearance of a legal trope rather than actual policy.<sup>22</sup> As evinced by Bucareli's 1773 statement at the beginning of this paper, Spain had no desire to expand its actual dominion, and was perfectly happy to have First Nations along its frontier as opposed to European rivals.

While some authors have focused on how the establishment at Nootka failed as an outgrowth of the Californian *mission-presidio*; no one has recognized how the garrison resembled another institution of Spain's northern frontier, the *establecimiento de paz* (peace establishment). The idea behind the *establecimiento de paz* was that soldiers rather than missionaries would settle Apaches and other First Nations who had resisted missionization in communities around garrisons in regions where Spain hoped to extend its control and sovereignty and carry out non-spiritual cultural exchange.<sup>23</sup> Spanish officials were painfully aware of the Spanish Black Legend, and operated within an enlightened policy that did its utmost to avoid conflicts with the very independent First Nations that were present along all of the borders of the empire.<sup>24</sup> Missionary proselytizing was forbidden in *establecimientos de paz* in 1791 in order not to annoy the residents and cause them to leave.<sup>25</sup> The mission system and the *establecimiento de paz* represented the dual native policy of Spain's northern frontier: there was a policy for sedentary peoples (missions) who could be easily incorporated into traditional missions and a policy for nomadic peoples (the *establecimiento de paz*) where the mission structure could not be applied.<sup>26</sup>

Despite humanistic directives from officials the *establecimiento de paz* could sometimes be disrupted due to outbreaks of violence between

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*Bicentennial of the Malaspina Expedition 1791-1791*, ed. Robin Inglis (Vancouver, 1992), 4; and Manuel P. Servin, "The Instructions of Viceroy Bucareli to Ensign Juan Perez," *California Historical Society Quarterly* no.40 (1961), 237-48.

<sup>22</sup> James Gibbon, "Nootka and Nutria Spain and the Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast," in *Malaspina* 92, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Weber, *Barbaros*, 194.

<sup>24</sup> The Black Legend was a predominantly English notion of Spain's conquest of the Americas, based off of Las Casas' 16<sup>th</sup> century book, *Destruction of the Indies*, which chronicled the initial conquest and enslavement of many of the America's original inhabitants during Spain's expansion into the Americas in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the 17<sup>th</sup> and into the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the Legend had come to stand for what was perceived to be Spain's greed, immorality, cruelty, treachery, and pride. See William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558-1660* (Durham, 1971), 132.

<sup>25</sup> Weber, *Barbaros*, 194.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph P. Sanchez, *Spanish Bluecoasts: The Catalan Volunteers in Northwest New Spain 1767-1810* (Albuquerque, 1990), xii.

frontier soldiers and the native communities. Frontier soldiers tended to be convicts or conscripts pressed into service. The poor living conditions of most frontier outposts, along with the general incompetence and corruption of officers, made it easy for violence and acts of insubordination to occur. In order to prevent this at Nootka, Spain sent the First Company of Catalonian Volunteers to the settlement. The company had been created out of recruits from Catalonia region of Spain and had been in New Spain since 1767, mostly fighting against ‘rebel’ indigenous groups in the Sonora region of Mexico.<sup>27</sup> The idea behind sending well-trained and armed professional soldiers to Nootka instead of conscripts was that they would be able to withstand any sort of surprise attack, be it from another European power trying to dislodge the Spanish from Nootka, or native populations.<sup>28</sup> At the same time it was assumed that the soldiers would be disciplined enough not to mistreat the native peoples of the region and thus endanger Spain’s position on the coast.

Once established at Nootka, the garrison’s duties included first and foremost the protection of the isolated establishment.<sup>29</sup> In order to ensure the establishment’s security three lines of defence were established. Out of a full force of thirty-four soldiers, twelve were always on patrol. Four were stationed at the fort of San Miguel guarding the entrance to the cove, and four were always manning the ship of war *Concepcion* or similar vessels that were serving as the naval presence for the garrison. Four soldiers patrolled the settlement itself.<sup>30</sup> This arrangement gave the small settlement three lines of defence. The battery of San Miguel and the garrisoned ships in the cove were to guard against any naval action, and were also to provide the soldiers in the settlement with supporting fire in the case of a ground attack. The fort was always to be the last line of defence for the small settlement, as it would be the most difficult to take in the case of a conflict.<sup>31</sup> Despite these obvious defensive preparations historian Rene Chartrand has noted the settlement lacked any serious defensive works to guard against a land attack, and that the settlement did not consider a shore landing or native attack to be a primary threat.<sup>32</sup>

There is further evidence that the Spanish settlement at Nootka had more the appearance of an *establiciemto de paz* than a traditional

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<sup>27</sup> Sanchez, *Spanish Bluecoats*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Sanchez, *Spanish Bluecoats*, 36-7.

<sup>29</sup> Sanchez, *Spanish Bluecoats*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Museo Naval, Madrid. MS 330: Doc 24, fol. 86.

<sup>31</sup> Sanchez, *Spanish Bluecoats*, 80.

<sup>32</sup> Rene Chartrand, “The Soldiers of Nootka: Spanish Colonial Troops at the End of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *Spain and the North Pacific Coast*, 112.

mission. For one, it lacked a church or any other religious structure, except for the large cross set up adjacent to the cemetery. Furthermore, Francisco Eliza issued orders to the garrison that the members should do all they could to attract Natives to the establishment so that they could teach them Spanish customs and have the local native population slowly learn the benefits of what the Spanish perceived to be a superior European civilization.<sup>33</sup> The success of such a policy can be seen in comments by observers such as Joseph Ingraham of the American trading vessel *Hope*, who noted that the local chiefs, when at the Spanish settlement, were “meeting and parting with strangers with a great deal of bowing and scraping, ‘Adios Senor’ in the most approved Castilian style.”<sup>34</sup> Other observers commented that chief Hannape and his four sons spoke more or less fluent Spanish and English and were forthcoming explaining their culture with Europeans and willingly learned about the cultures of the European visitors.<sup>35</sup> These examples demonstrate that the Spanish settlement had some success as a location of cultural exchange, and had a policy geared towards the promotion of such an outcome.<sup>36</sup>

The Spanish policy towards First Nations on the Northwest Coast can be characterized as successful. Spanish policy involved more than just establishing a framework for cultural exchange. By cultivating strong ties between Spaniards and First Nations, Spain hoped it would be able to enforce its sovereignty along the coast by encouraging native peoples to resist the presence of other Europeans. Christon Archer has criticized the Spanish outpost noting that in the final years of its life it “made little impression upon the Native world . . . in many respects, the small Spanish garrison at Yuquot became the hostage of Native activities and of the rivalries among the different Nootka tribes.”<sup>37</sup> But this is, in effect, exactly what the Spanish wanted. Re-enforcing their relations with the First Nations on the coast was the easiest and only way for the Spanish to legitimize their sovereignty of the region in regards to the other Western nations operating in the area. An indication of the success

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<sup>33</sup> Archer, “Seduction Before Sovereignty,” 148.

<sup>34</sup> Archer, “The Transient Presence,” 25.

<sup>35</sup> Yvonne Marshall, “Dangerous Liasons: Quadra and Vancouver in Nootka Sound, 1790-5,” in *From Maps to Metaphors*, 166.

<sup>36</sup> The intensity of the cultural exchanges varied depending on which commanding officer was presiding at Nootka. Estavan Martinez, Francisco Eliza with Pedro de Alborn, Ramon Saavedra, and Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra were all enthusiastic about promoting cultural exchange. In the later years of the settlement’s life, Salvador Fidalgo closed off the settlement to the local first nations, except for occasional visits by local chiefs. For more information see Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire*.

<sup>37</sup> Archer, “Seduction Before Sovereignty,” 155.

of their policy was that the Spanish were eventually being potlatched like any other group in the area.<sup>38</sup> The Spaniards attending these events may not have completely understood their significance, but they were still acting appropriately within the context of the local customs. Enough was understood of these events that one Spanish commentator noted, “vaunting each above the other is the main topic of conversation among the ‘taises’ or ‘chiefs.’”<sup>39</sup> The invitation of the Spanish to potlatches should be considered a political victory for the Spanish. As the Spanish Botanist and Ethnographer Jose Mozino noted “many of our officers went alone and without arms to visit a number of villages, conducted in the savage’s own canoes. They always returned impressed by the affection and gentleness they had observed in everyone.”<sup>40</sup> Clearly the Spanish had succeeded in ensuring the security of the outpost while integrating themselves into the indigenous political structure of the region. In these early years of the fur trade the indigenous population clearly held the upper hand and controlled relations with Europeans, and especially the Spanish, who unlike the rest of the transient Euro-American population of the coast, could easily be found at Yuquot.<sup>41</sup> Complaints against Spanish personnel were heard by the base commander, and those who were found to have violated orders or transgressed against First Nations were flogged.<sup>42</sup>

As other historians have remarked, when considered within the context of the Spanish push to California, the Spanish outpost at Nootka Sound seems out of place and an entirely unique undertaking. However, when the outpost at Nootka is considered within the context of the Spanish empire as a whole, it ceases to be a unique entity and instead fits logically into Spain’s efforts to preserve and promote its empire across the Americas. The garrison at Nootka was neither the first nor the last Spanish outpost to reinforce its perceived sovereignty over a region by ignoring the traditional mission system and instead centring itself on a system of cultural and material exchange with independent indigenous groups. Agents of the Spanish crown had varying experiences across an incredibly large empire, and brought the lessons learned in prior

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<sup>38</sup> Marshall, “Dangerous Liasons,” 166.

<sup>39</sup> Marshall, “Dangerous Liasons,” 166.

<sup>40</sup> Jose Mariano Mozino, *Noticias de Nutka*, trans. and ed. Iris H. Wilson (Seattle, 1991), 84.

<sup>41</sup> To understand the power that local indigenous people held during the maritime fur trade see Marshall, “Dangerous Liasons,” 160-175. See also F.W. Howay, “Indian Attacks Upon Maritime Traders of the Northwest Coast, 1785-1805” *Canadian Historical Review* 6 (1935), 287-309.

<sup>42</sup> Christon I. Archer, “Retreat from the North: Spain’s Withdrawal from Nootka Sound, 1793-1795,” *B.C. Studies*, no. 37 (Spring 1978), 23.

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assignments to the Northwest coast. Despite a lack of missionary effort and the minimal attempt of the Spanish crown to make a profit on the Northwest coast, the Spanish presence there should be considered a success. If the reactions of the Nuu-chah-nulth and other First Nations in the region are any indication the Spanish became an accepted part of the political make up of Nootka Sound. At the same time ships of all nations who visited the Spanish outpost at Nootka found it prudent to submit to the Spanish flag. In the years it was active on the Northwest coast, Spain did all it could to promote its empire, and within that context its efforts cannot be considered hasty or unique.