# William Pitt's Triumph at Nootka Sound: Controversy in the British Press, 1790

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## Introduction

The ships of British merchant John Meares were attacked and seized by the Spanish in May 1789 at Nootka Sound on the west coast of what is today Vancouver Island. News of the crisis first reached London in January 1790 and was confirmed by Meares in April. Meares' claims encouraged many in Britain to believe they already owned a large amount of land in the Pacific Northwest. Information traveled slowly because Nootka Sound was one of the most obscure and distant places to Europeans in the late eighteenth century. In a time before the Panama and Suez canals, the British would go around the Cape of Good Hope, up around India, to Australia, then to the Sandwich Islands before finally reaching Nootka Sound. Merchants went this distance to make money in the fur trade. Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest wanted to acquire surplus resources through trade which made the work of merchants easier. Spain saw merchants, especially from Britain, as a threat to its sovereignty, which was why they attacked.[1] While Spain and Britain armed against each other, they ultimately settled their differences peacefully beginning with the first Nootka Convention of October 1790.

The British are remembered as triumphant in this dispute because they ultimately got the right to trade in the Pacific Northwest and to whale in the South Pacific; however, many contemporaries were not satisfied with Spanish concessions. This thesis will focus on the press coverage of the year 1790, largely focusing on *The Times*, to document the considerable dissent to the handling of the Nootka Crisis by Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger. *The Times* was one of the most important newspapers in 1790. Public opinion is an important subject given the gradual widening of the distribution of power to encompass the middle classes during this era, as

[1] Maxine Berg, "Sea Otters and Iron: A Global Microhistory of Value and Exchange at Nootka Sound, 1774–1792," *Past & Present* 242, no. 14 Suppl., (November 2019): 61-62.

well as Pitt's sensitivity to that change. There was an election in the middle of the Nootka Crisis, which not only decided the makeup of parliament, it gave Pitt and his government the legitimacy and self-confidence to act. Pitt's biographer John Ehrman has noted Pitt's "shrewd" use of public opinion.[2]

## Background to the Crisis

While the Spanish had coasted offshore in 1774, the British Captain James Cook became the first European to land on the west coast of Vancouver Island at Nootka Sound in 1778. He called Yuquot, the Mowachaht village there, "Friendly Cove" because the people were friendly. The long reigning Chief Maquinna led the people Cook met, and would later establish a monopoly of trade with Europeans.

A central part of the culture of the Mowachaht and other Indigenous peoples of Northwest America was a ceremony called the "potlatch" which involved inviting neighbouring communities, feasting them, and the mass giving of gifts. Gifts which could only be obtained by trading with Europeans, such as copper, were especially valuable because of their rarity. Since these Pacific Northwestern cultures required constant supplies of gifts, and Europeans could provide some of the best gifts, there was a large and consistent desire for trade.[3]

Europeans primarily wanted sea otter furs, which could be exported to China at a substantial profit. In the late eighteenth century Europeans were trading with the Chinese using silver.[4] From a mercantilist perspective, this trade imbalance seemed bad for Britain because

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[2] John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The Years of Acclaim* (London: Constable, 1969), 144, 319.
[3] Edward Gray, "Empire without Colonies: Paine, Jefferson, and the Nootka Crisis," In *Paine and Jefferson in the Age of Revolutions*, eds., by Simon P. Newman and Peter S. Onuf, 190. (University of Virginia Press, 2013).
[4] Berg, "Sea Otters and Iron," 53-54.

minerals, which have maintained value throughout history, would accumulate in China rather than Britain. The sea otter trade could alleviate this problem because their furs were popular with the Chinese elite. Moreover, otters are quite easy to hunt: indeed, they were almost extinguished in the Pacific Northwest because of these economic incentives.[5]

The published account of Cook's journals alerted Europeans to the abundance of sea otters and many traders came after him to reap the profits of this new trade. Pitt wanted to create a new triangle trade in the Pacific, which would involve the fur trade and whaling.[6] In 1790, the Lewis and Clark expedition and Vancouver expeditions had not yet occurred, so there was still speculation that there was a water route through North America, which would have made this trade even more lucrative.[7] The Spanish likewise wanted profit, although some historians suggest they saw no potential in the fur trade. Nevertheless, they viewed this region as a part of their empire, and any incursion into it as an invasion. In fact, Cook did not claim Nootka Sound when he landed in 1778 because he was ordered to not upset the Spanish, lest they be more inclined to help the Americans in their revolution.[8] Although both sides had an economic stake in Nootka Sound, what truly concerned the Spanish was the British desire to annihilate their American empire.

Spanish anxiety about British intentions was warranted. Spain had supported the Thirteen Colonies against the British, so it would make sense to expect retaliation similar in kind. In fact, British plans to weaken Spain went back long before 1790. Ehrman traces this tradition back to

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[5] Anya Zilberstein, "Objects of Distant Exchange: The Northwest Coast, Early America, and the Global Imagination," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 3, (2007): 599-600.
[6] Alan Frost, "Nootka Sound and the Beginnings of Britain's Imperialism of Free Trade," in *From Maps To Metaphors: The Pacific World of George Vancouver*, ed. Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnston (University of British Columbia Press, 1993), 123.
[7] Gray, "Empire without Colonies: Paine, Jefferson, and the Nootka Crisis," 200.
[8] Carol Higham, "Seeing Cannibals: Spanish and British Enlightenment on the Northwest Coast," *Pacific Historical Review* 88, no. 3 (2019): 353-354.

Queen Elizabeth I, where Spanish ports were raided and Indigenous revolts incited. By the mid-eighteenth century, these ambitions had grown, so that at every conflict between these powers a full scale destruction of the Spanish Empire was contemplated. Fransisco de Miranda was from Spanish America and had fought for the American Revolution. He arrived in Britain in 1785 with designs to create an American state independent of Spain. He discussed this scheme directly with the British state.[9] While destroying Spanish power through revolution was considered, the British were also gathering smaller concessions from Spain. In 1785-6 there was a dispute between Britain and Spain over Honduras. Belize (or British Honduras) was British but surrounded by Spanish possessions. A convention was signed which gave Britain minor economic concessions in return for abandoning some of their settlements.[10]

Britain's aggressive actions against Spain were partly motivated by the simple desire to eliminate rivals; however, there was also a broader strategy which historians have termed the imperialism of free trade. Alan Frost suggests that the ideology of Adam Smith played a role in the shift to free trade; but there were also opportunities for the empowerment of Britain, rather than universal economic growth. In this system of free trade, Britain would manufacture goods, while they would import raw resources from the world.[11] Direct access to colonies was not required for this. If the Americas were divided into many small states, they would be economically integrated into the British Empire, enriching British merchants and manufacturers. The British navy would find it easier to control these little states than the entire Spanish Empire. Better still for Britain, the cost of administering the empire would be left to the nominally independent states.[12] As will be discussed later, there were also ideological disagreements with

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[9] Gray, "Empire without Colonies: Paine, Jefferson, and the Nootka Crisis," 192.
[10] Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The Years of Acclaim*, 383-386.
[11] Frost, "Nootka Sound and the Beginnings of Britain's Imperialism of Free Trade," 123-124.
[12] Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The Years of Acclaim*, 383-386.

more traditional conquests. While this sophisticated form of empire might have been popular within the government, especially after 1790, *The Times* reflected the expectation of formal ownership.

Anxious about encroachments into what they considered their dominion on the northwest coast of America, Spain sent out Captain José Esteban Martínez. He arrived in Nootka Sound in 1789 with orders from his government to seize any ships that violated Spanish sovereignty in the area, which had been granted to them by the Pope back in 1494. He found British ships belonging to Meares, a merchant who made money trading furs at Nootka Sound in the late 1780s, as well as some American ships. The British ships were pretending to be Portuguese for tax purposes, but the subterfuge was obvious. He only seized the British ships because the Americans were less of a threat and generally treated the Spanish with more respect.[13] When news reached Europe, armament began. British armament went well, and Spain was isolated from its allies because of the tumultuous revolution in France and the work of British agents. In the First Nootka Convention of October 1790, Britain got various concessions, including the right to trade in the Pacific Northwest and to whale in the South Pacific. The Convention also promised Britain would get some land in the Pacific Northwest, the exact boundaries of which would be sorted out in Nootka by Juan Quadra, representing Spain, and George Vancouver, representing Britain.

While Vancouver was on his way to Nootka Sound, the genius diplomat Quadra was mending relations with Maquinna. Quadra told his men to treat these Indigenous peoples "as men should be treated and not as though they were individuals of inferior stock."[14] Quadra always singled out Maquinna for special treatment, offering him the "first place" at his table.

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[13] Warren Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543-1819* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), 150-153, 162-163.
[14] Higham, "Seeing Cannibals: Spanish and British Enlightenment on the Northwest Coast," 370-371.

Quadra also brought with him silver cutlery for dining and kidney beans for Maquinna's people, which were apparently quite popular among the "lower ranks." Feasting was perhaps even more important among the Mowachaht, Maquinna's people, than among Europeans, so Quadra made sure to never run out of food. Maquinna would sleep in Quadra's bedroom while lower ranks among the Mowachaht would sleep in the room of lower ranked Spaniards.[15] The success of Quadra's mission can be seen in a remark by Vancouver: "I could not help observing with a mixture of surprise and pleasure, how much the Spaniards succeeded in gaining the good opinion and confidence of these people." Perhaps Vancouver was happy with Quadra's success because the Spaniard had charmed him as well, despite their disagreements. Carol Higham suggests that Vancouver compared the Indigenous peoples of this area to animals, implying that he had worse relations with the Mowachaht.[16]

Historian Robert King has argued that Vancouver was expecting enough land to eventually turn into a convict colony, supplied with men from Botany Bay. When Vancouver arrived in Nootka Sound in 1792, he was embarrassed in the negotiations when Quadra disproved many of Meares' claims of ownership; however, even in 1793, there was still an expectation of settlement.[17] Quadra employed his reputation with Maquinna to humiliate Vancouver. Maquinna backed up Quadra's claim that only a small shed had been built by Meares, so that the Spanish only had to return that tiny area to Britain. As will later be established, the opposition predicted this would happen; however, Vancouver received no warning about such a limited concession. He thought it would make him a fool or a traitor to

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[15] Yvonne Marshall, "Dangerous Liaisons: Maquinna, Quadra, and Vancouver in Nootka Sound, 1790-5," in *From Maps To Metaphors: The Pacific World of George Vancouver*, ed. Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnston (University of British Columbia Press, 1993), 163-165.

[16] Higham, "Seeing Cannibals: Spanish and British Enlightenment on the Northwest Coast," 370-371.

[17] Robert King, "George Vancouver and the Contemplated Settlement at Nootka Sound," *The Great Circle* 32, no. 1 (2010): 6-7, 19.

accept this, so the debate was sent back to Europe. Ultimately, in 1794, Britain and Spain agreed to mutually abandon Nootka Sound.[18]

The historian Evan Howard gives a standard British perspective that Pitt and Alleyne Fitzherbert, minister plenipotentiary to Spain, handled the Nootka Crisis in a way that was universally praised as a triumph. He first suggests that this was a crushing defeat for the Spanish, "so humiliating that the Nootka Convention long remained the symbol of treason and appeasement, and the resulting Anglophobia became so strong that it delayed Anglo-Spanish cooperation when the French Revolution turned outward." Conversely, for Britain:

> Nootka was her greatest victory between the Peace of Paris (1763) and the Treaty of Vienna (1815). News of the peaceful settlement brought "universal joy throughout all the classes of citizens," Luzerne reported to Montmorin. British letters of congratulations were showered upon Fitzherbert, who was raised to the peerage as Baron St. Helens. George III offered Pitt the Garter as "a public testimonial" of his approbation," but Pitt declined, suggesting that it be given to his brother, Lord Chatham, who accepted.[19]

One can see a connection between Howard's comment and that of Lord Auckland, former ambassador to Spain, who said in 1790 that "This event and the whole conduct of circumstances which led to it will add new and great lustre to the assets of Mr P's Admin. – and the exertion, firmness, activity and naval strength of the Kingdom will have made an impression not to be forgotten either in present times or in History."[20] The Historian Paul Webb suggested that in late 1790 "few Britons doubted that they had reassumed their place in the front rank of nations after the humiliation of 1783." He then mentioned how this was undone by conflict with Russia in 1791.[21] This is a point that must be kept in mind, as it will be shown later that many in Britain

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[18] Ibid., 23-24, 26.
[19] Howard Evans, "The Nootka Sound Controversy in Anglo-French Diplomacy--1790," *The Journal of Modern History* 46, no. 4 (1974): 636.
[20] Paul Webb, "The Naval Aspects of the Nootka Sound Crisis," *The Mariner's Mirror* 61, no. 2 (1975): 151-152.
[21] Ibid.

did not support the Convention, and even anticipated that the true purpose of the Nootka Crisis armament was to prepare the navy for conflict with Russia in the Baltic.

Ehrman briefly addressed the parliamentary opposition's criticism of the government's handling of the crisis, suggesting that it never expected a significant amount of territory but was concerned only in acquiring trade rights. While some said Pitt had failed to get the territory promised to him in the first Nootka Convention, Pitt claimed that he "never intended" to claim exclusive ownership of the port of Nootka: all he wanted was the right to "settle or trade," which was satisfied by the delivering to Britain "any tract however small." However, this quotation does not come from 1790, when the press was expecting a large land concession, as was seemingly promised by the Convention. The opposition were the ones who correctly predicted that Spain would not do so. Only when it became clear the opposition was correct did Pitt claim that the goal was never to receive territory. Ehrman acknowledged that, in November 1790, Pitt "was momentarily inclined to dispute the rejection of precise territorial limits;" but even here Pitt did not actually want large amounts of territory in the Pacific Northwest. If Pitt's goals never changed, he did not make this clear to his people in 1790. One of them, the preeminent Scottish MP Henry Dundas, noted on December 14 that "We do not insist on any right to invade the colonial rights of other nations, in order to extend our commerce."[22] However, in 1790 it was widely believed that Britain rightfully owned a large amount of territory in the Pacific Northwest and could not be invading Spanish dominion. If the government had truly known that Spain was not going to offer them much territory, they would have told Vancouver that the opposition was correct and that Spain would deliver almost nothing. One might even speculate that Vancouver was designated by the government to take the blame for the failure of the Nootka Convention

[22] Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The Years of Acclaim*, 569.

which the opposition predicted. This thesis will demonstrate the significant dissent in the press to the government's handling of the Nootka Crisis.

## Expectations

Many contemporary British writers justified their nation's claims against Spain on three grounds: right by exploration; right by settlement; and right by good will of the Indigenous inhabitants. The secondary literature concurs that the British government thought they had claim upon, and actual possession of, land around Nootka Sound. It will be shown that this belief was cited and expanded upon by the press and that many lamented the Nootka Convention because they knew that British claim would ultimately be disregarded.

Alexander Dalrymple, an Enlightenment figure, prominent intellectual, and imperial projector, published a piece in May 1790 which was representative of the general perspective of the press on Britain's claims. He began by noting that the Spanish were honourable and did not want war; but if they did, the "Standard of Freedom" would be brought to their colonies and the "ancient rights" of the "Natives of Old Spain" would be restored.[23] This was a clear reference to the policy of breaking up the Spanish empire into smaller states that could be controlled by British merchants. The Magellanic region, at the southernmost tip of the Americas, was seen as a potential concession by many in the press during the early months of the Nootka Crisis, although this claim is not much mentioned by historians. Dalrymple noted that the Spanish did not have any pretense to first discovery of this region, citing a Spanish historian in 1601 who noted the English were the first to explore it.[24] He then goes on to try and prove English first discovery of

[23] Alexander Dalrymple, *The spanish pretensions fairly discussed, by A Dalrymple*, (London: printed by George Bigg, 1790), *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. 6.
[24] Ibid., 9.

the Pacific Northwest, citing a Geographer of the Spanish king who marked the region north of the 45th parallel as “unknown.” Rather, it was Sir Francis Drake who discovered “new Albion” in 1579.[25] *The Times* reported that Some Spanish sources suggested that Spain had visited Nootka Sound decades before Captain Cook.[26] Most British would have known Cook was the first European to record his visit within the cove itself. It is unclear how far north Sir Francis traveled, but Dalrymple thought it clear that he discovered the region first.

While right by being the first European in an area carried some weight, right by actual settlement and friendly relations with the Indigenous peoples was invoked more often by *The Times*. If the Mowachaht were friendly and willing to trade with the British, then there was more money to be made by merchants and there would be no expensive resistance to British presence. Furthermore, there was an Enlightenment notion that a European power should only control a territory if it had friendly relations with the Indigenous peoples. The British felt a greater desire for territory in the Pacific Northwest and felt a greater right to it, because they believed they had better relations with the Indigenous peoples than the Spanish. This Enlightenment notion, and speculations of profit, were both quite popular in the press.

Britain had better relations with the Mowachaht in 1790. Captain Meares claimed that Maquinna performed a feudal ritual of subjugation to him and that other chiefs had given trade concessions. Despite supporting capital punishment for mutiny, he acted horrified when the Mowachaht offered to kill his mutinous crew for him.[27] Meares also claimed that Maquinna and his brother Callicum were cannibals.[28] In contradiction to these attitudes, the British established closer relations with the Mowachaht than the Spanish after the events of 1789, when Callicum

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[25] Ibid., 13-14.
[26] "Madrid," *The Times*, August 26, 1790, 3.
[27] Margarette Lincoln, “Mutinous Behavior on Voyages to the South Seas and Its Impact on Eighteenth-Century Civil Society,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 31, no. 1 (January 2007): 64.
[28] Higham, “Seeing Cannibals: Spanish and British Enlightenment on the Northwest Coast,” 365.

protested the seizure of Meares' ships, claiming that Martínez was "a bad man and [a] thief."[29] Callicum upset Martínez so much that he and another Spaniard shot guns in his direction, one of which killed Callicum.[30]

While the killing of Callicum was the major reason for this deterioration of relations between the Spanish and Mowachaht, there were also some cultural faux-pas. Even before the murder of Callicum, Martínez had taken wood planks from an abandoned Indigenous village, which were very valuable because it takes a great deal of effort to process wood without metal tools. The village had not actually been abandoned: the peoples of Vancouver Island lived in different places, according to the season. Maquinna and Callicum were upset by this looting and demanded justice. Martínez gave them gifts, which were not satisfactory, and Maquinna went to tell all the nearby nations about the thieving Spaniards. Maquinna was more tactful than his brother. Knowing that the Spanish had a powerful presence in the region, he did not resort to violence or forceful protest. The Spanish infamy in the Pacific Northwest can be overstated. When an Indigenous boy's head was cracked open, his people asked the Spanish to help heal him, suggesting there was still a certain degree of trust. Furthermore, Maquinna and Martinez met soon after the altercation and crackers were provided, which the Mowachaht reportedly quite enjoyed. Despite this, the British generally had a better reputation with the Mowachaht until the arrival of Quadra.[31] Unsurprisingly, the British press had a less nuanced understanding, depicting the Spaniards as evil murderers.

In his May 1790 piece, Dalrymple said that a European country has the right to an already inhabited territory only by friendly relations with the Indigenous people there or by

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[29] Christon Archer, "Seduction before Sovereignty: Spanish Efforts to Manipulate the Natives in Their Claims to the Northwest Coast," in *From Maps To Metaphors: The Pacific World of George Vancouver*, ed. Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnston (University of British Columbia Press, 1993), 146-147.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543-1819*, 161, 163, 180.

conquering them in a war where the Europeans were not the aggressor. Both parties are free of "criminality" if the attack were caused by the Europeans who had failed to sufficiently explain their friendly intentions.[32] However "Enlightened" Dalrymple's perspective may have been, it was clearly a convenient one for Britain, particularly given the deterioration of relations between Spain and the Mowachaht.

News of Spanish aggression at Nootka was given to the government by Meares' notice of April 30, which reached the press a few days later. While there was some limited mention of Spanish armament before, this was when the details were made available to the public. It should be noted that Meares would not publish his book on his travels until November. His notice began with the claim that he bought land from Chief Maquinna. Furthermore, "in consequence of considerable Presents" he obtained from Chief Wickananish exclusive trading rights with "the Natives of the District."[33] Meares went on to describe similar land purchases and trade concessions he claimed to have received from other chiefs. His writings on the Indigenous peoples of this region seemed to assume that their societies were organised like the monarchies of Europe, where the king was responsible for his subjects, as evidenced by the fact that he speaks of acquiring exclusive trade deals. While this may have been an accurate depiction of the relation between an Indigenous master and his slave, the relation between a chief and a freeman was generally less authoritative than that between king and subject. For example, chiefs did not have the same taxation powers over their free people.[34] Regardless, a British audience would readily understand the right of a chief to make treaties like a king.

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[32] Dalrymple, *The spanish pretensions fairly discussed, by A Dalrymple*, 8.
[33] John Meares, *Mr. Mears's memorial, dated 30th April, 1790*, London, 1790. 1-2.
[34] Alan Gallay, "Englishman John R. Jewitt's Enslavement Among the Nuu-chah-nulth," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 56, no. 2 (2023): 247-248.

Meares claimed that Martinez seized his ships on the direct order of the king of Spain, although the American ships were not seized for reasons Meares did not explain. Martinez was said to have accomplished his theft in a ship prepared for war. Meares also claimed that the seventy Chinese labourers brought were going to be settlers, before going on to describe Spanish cruelty and their claim to all the land in question.[35] What is most important here is that the British press obtained a document that led them to believe Britain had the right to exclusive settlement and exclusive trade in the Pacific Northwest, which was justified by the perception of consent by the Indigenous peoples.

On May 4 *The Times* reported the Spanish seizure of British ships "at King George's or Nootka Sound" and the sending of the crews in chains to Mexico.[36] On May 6 it was reported that Meares had traveled to many places around Nootka Sound, "where no European had ever ventured," and nearly established a colony at Nootka.[37] This reinforces the notion of British right by first discovery. On May 10 a newspaper described the Indigenous people of Nootka Sound to a readership which likely knew nothing about them. The first sentence of this paper, after a brief description of the geography, was that "The natives are extremely inoffensive and appear very friendly to the English."[38] Any English person inclined to support the Enlightenment would thereby think Britain had the right to settle and trade in this friendly country. After briefly noting the Mowachaht's aptitude in canoeing and diving, *The Times* noted that they "have a very uncommon strict notion of having an exclusive right to the productions of their own country, and they are uncommonly jealous of other tribes interfering with their trade with Europeans."[39]

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[35] Meares, *Mr. Mears's memorial, dated 30th April, 1790*, 2-3.
[36] "We are glad to see Sherry so careful of the Editor of a News-paper's being innocently," *The Times*, May 4, 1790, 3.
[37] "The Cause," *The Times*, May 6, 1790, 2.
[38] "Nootka Sound," *The Times*, May 10, 1790, 3.
[39] Ibid.

The Indigenous peoples of North America were sometimes racialised into one category which had no notion of land ownership. This might interfere with the British claim that Meares bought land from them, which would be less legitimate if the Mowachaht did not believe in individual land ownership. If the Mowachaht felt exclusive right to the product of their country, as claimed in *The Times*, then Meares' alleged purchase of property was legitimate. The reference to jealousy around trade likely refers to Maquinna's establishment of a monopoly of trade with Europeans. British merchant readers might be excited by the profit to be made with a people friendly to the English and wanting to trade. Within the first few days of the Nootka Crisis in Europe, newspaper readers had gotten the impression that Britain had already secured exclusive trading rights with the peoples around Nootka Sound. On May 13 *The Times* reminded its audience of the massive profits to be made by the trade of furs there. It was noted that the Indigenous peoples liked "woollens of all kinds" which "were sold to the [those], with whose Chiefs treaties of commerce had been formed."[40] This is a reaffirmation of Meares' claim that the British already had established a right to trade with the peoples of the American Northwest.

The article went on to describe the cruelty of the Spanish. The "Black Legend" refers to the common British accusation that Spain was uniquely brutal in colonising the Americas, a belief that was often reiterated in *The Times* during the Nootka Crisis. If the Spanish treated the peoples around Nootka with brutality, then Britain had more right to trade and settle in the area –even to destroy Spain's empire. On May 13 *The Times* told the story of Callicum, "a Chief, second in authority at NOOTKA SOUND" who "was in alliance with the English."[41] Callicum was shot through the heart in the presence of his wife and infant son in June 1789. On the advice of his English allies, Maquinna left Nootka Sound to avoid the cruel Spanish. Moreover, "Such

[40] "Nootka Sound," *The Times*, May 13, 1790, 3.
[41] Ibid.

of the natives as they could seize, the Spaniards condemned to work as slaves on their fortifications."[42] The Spanish then seized the land of Meares and "opened valuable Mines."[43] This is likely a reference to what the Spanish did after their conquests of mineral rich colonies in the Americas, where many Indigenous people were enslaved to work in the mines. The dastardly Spanish even contemplated an attack on the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). This telling of the story is notable in three ways: it generalised guilt to the Spanish rather than Martinez; it reaffirmed the feeling of right to the land Meares claimed to have bought; and it played on British tropes of Spanish behaviour. The killing of Callicum was done by "the Spaniards" who "seized" Meares' land, which implies the British already owned the land at Nootka.

Similar Spanish evils were recounted in *The Times* on July 7, this time referring to Martinez directly as the individual who killed Callicum, "who was the particular friend of the English."[44] However, it was further noted that "The natives were so alarmed by this act of savage cruelty, that most of them have fled up the country to avoid the cruel persecutions of the Spaniards."[45] *The Times* described how the Indigenous peoples around Nootka Sound were friends of the English, selling them land and creating trade agreements; meanwhile the Spanish had no right to the territory, simply controlling it by unjust force of arms.

On August 4 *The Times* described two claims of the Spanish king: the Magallanic regions and all parts of Northwest America. The implication is that the British already owned these areas and the Spanish king was demanding them: it would not be called a "claim" if the Spanish already owned them. Therefore, any treaty which granted Britain this land would not be considered a British victory, it would simply be seen as maintaining the status quo. The article

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] "Nootka Sound," *The Times*, July 7, 1790, 2.
[45] Ibid.

goes on to reaffirm that Britain had right to these territories by discovery, noting that Captain Cook was the first European in Nootka Sound.[46]

Two days later, on August 6, an article was published with news that the Spanish had agreed to pay reparations to Meares for the damages sustained at Nootka Sound; however, Spain made it very clear that such a restitution was in no way an acknowledgement of Britain's claims on the region. The Spanish had every right to settle at Nootka Sound whenever they wished.[47] This seems to have been rationalised by the Spanish by arguing that, since the British merchants were unaware of Spanish sovereignty, they should not be punished for violating it.[48] This is a faulty argument given that Meares explicitly said he bought land on behalf of Britain.

One day after the August 6 report was published, regarding the Spanish agreeing to pay for the damages at Nootka sound, *The Times* lauded Pitt as "Our spirited young minister" who had "superiority over haughty Spain" because the "Dons" were so threatened by Britain's power. However, Pitt would "not sheath the sword of Britain, till our once proud opponents have been either CONVINCED OR CONQUERED!"[49] In a paper published on August 9, the government said that their land claims would not be as large as the press expected. Fitzherbert only demanded restitution for damages to British merchants and "the English Flag."[50] However, he would later go back on this: by October 26, Fitzherbert insisted that Britain get the right of settlement in Nootka Sound.[51] With some indecision from the government, there was still reason for British people to believe they would get large concessions.

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[46] "The present claims of the KING of SPAIN are of two kinds:," *The Times*, August 4, 1790, 2.
[47] "Counter-Declaration," *The Times*, August 6, 1790, 2.
[48] "State Paper," *The Times*, August 25, 1790, 3.
[49] "Our spirited young Minister has gained a decided superiority over haughty Spain-for were," *The Times*, August 7, 1790, 2.
[50] "The Family Compact," *The Times*, August 9, 1790, 2.
[51] "Paris," *The Times*, October 26, 1790, 2.

On August 31, British right to Nootka Sound was reiterated by right of first discovery, by right of actual settlement, and by the claim that Meares bought the land from the original owners. This article expanded on previous claims, noting Britain's right "To the possession of all the coast, from Cape Blanco, in lat. 43, to Cooke's river" by right of exploration.[52] Cape Blanco is in what is today southern Oregon, and Cooke's river is likely a reference to a river on the center of the coast of British Columbia. The article went on to note that "by Capt. Meares's purchases of the land from the only persons who have a right to dispose of it (the natives) the British nation has a clear title."[53] Four months after Meares' arrival in London, the claim by right of settlement and consent of the Indigenous people was still being retold to the public. As negotiations dragged on, and the armament became more expensive, there were fanciful predictions as to what the overwhelming power of Britain might reap.

## British Power

Not only were British expectations great, the British knew they had the ability to achieve them through war. When the French Revolution began in 1789, Britain was in a desperate state. Its largest settler colonies had violently broken away and formed the United States in 1783. Britain's debt consumed political discussion, having been accumulated by a century of almost constant war with the Bourbons in France and Spain. The situation had reversed by 1815, when France was finally subdued, and the Spanish American Empire had begun to shatter. The British Empire remained intact and had become the world hegemon. The Nootka Crisis lay in the time between crisis and victory. Historians agree with *The Times'* coverage on the power that Britain

[52] "The Times," *The Times*, August 31, 1790, 2.
[53] Ibid.

had over Spain. Opposition to the first Nootka Convention in Britain was in part based on Pitt's failure to exact all claims expected in *The Times*, despite having a superior force.

The British began arming in January because some reports had arrived before Meares. Britain's allies included the Netherlands and Prussia. Spain had a shaky alliance with France given the contradictory ideologies of revolution and hereditary monarchy. There was also a chance that Russia or the United States might have allied with Spain. Russia was an especially threatening opponent because of its control of the resources of the Baltic, on which Britain relied for crucial strategic resources for its navy, such as timber and tar.[54] Ultimately, Spain's potential allies backed down because France was experiencing revolution and Russia was involved in its own wars. The historian Howard Evans has also analysed the missions of William Augustus Miles and Hugh Elliot to France, who helped destroy the family compact.[55] Floridablanca, the First Secretary of Spain, tried and failed to enlist the help of the United States.[56] While the exact details are not relevant here, there were two factions in the United States: one wanted to help Spain, the other Britain. President George Washington wanted to play each power against the other by dangling the possibility of the United States joining either side.[57]

The United States was arguably leaning towards Spain, as seen by Britain's war plans. The British government was sufficiently anxious about an American intervention that they planned to inspire the Kentuckians, who resented the new federal union, to declare their independence and enter an alliance with Britain. This would have hemmed in the United States between Britain's western forts, Kentucky, and the Atlantic Ocean. The rest of the Americas

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[54] Webb, "The Naval Aspects of the Nootka Sound Crisis," 142-143, 153.
[55] Evans, "The Nootka Sound Controversy in Anglo-French Diplomacy--1790," 609–40.
[56] Webb, "The Naval Aspects of the Nootka Sound Crisis," 141-142.
[57] John Lamberton Harper, *American Machiavelli: Alexander Hamilton and the Origins of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 71-80.

would be newly independent Indigenous states, which could be economically controlled by Britain.[58]

The Armament ended in October, in which time forty ships of the line were readied and 55,000 seamen made available. The preparation of frigates was slower since Britain was focusing more on the ships of the line. Frigates would be essential in a far-off war, so presumably Britain thought much of the naval war would happen closer to home. The British navy was in its best peacetime condition of the eighteenth century. The Spanish were also frantically arming themselves, and their West Indies fleet was superior to Britain's. The Spanish armament was more effective than the British anticipated; however, while Spanish armament was impressive, they were severely limited by the old age of their ships and a crippling lack of manpower. Fitzherbert advised Britain in mid-May that the French had only a "paper armament," though by June it was clear that France had in fact substantially rearmed.[59] Even a twenty-first-century reader might be surprised by the degree to which Britain was willing to arm for a conflict over Nootka Sound. Contemporaries in the press had similar questions and came to different conclusions than historians.

The overwhelming confidence of Britain in its military superiority to Spain inspired public discontent with the first Nootka Convention because it was disproportionate to what Britain received. Contemporary press coverage is largely in agreement with the secondary literature on Britain's power in 1790, with one exception: the United States. While most historians characterise the dispute as being whether the United States would join Spain or stay neutral, *The Times* usually depicts it as almost inevitably going to war with Spain.

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[58] Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The Years of Acclaim*, 374-375, 383-386.
[59] Webb, "The Naval Aspects of the Nootka Sound Crisis," 133-139, 142.

Spain and France were seen to be in states of almost total anarchy, with little chance of fighting back. On June 3 *The Times* noted that it would take very little effort to incite a rebellion in Mexico and Peru.[60] Perhaps such confidence came from what was noted sarcastically on October 7 regarding the Spanish legacy of American conquests: when they killed "a million or two of human beings in America, – it was purely with a view to save their souls, and to deprive" them of gold, which is "the root of all evil."[61] On August 27 *The Times* published the claim that the "native Americans" of the Spanish Empire would gladly join Britain in war because of their "aversion" to the Spanish government, arising from a tradition of recounting "The cruelty of the first settlers from the Old World."[62] Another article from August 21 rationalised why Spain and France were so much weaker than Britain: while France had more and better land, Britain's enclosures operated far more efficiently; Spain had a vast empire, but it spent so much on religious institutions that it only had a revenue of ten million per year. Britain saw itself as the greatest imperial power involved in the Nootka Crisis.

Another potential cause of British confidence was the situation in Ireland. There were a couple of reports that the Irish parliament had agreed to help in the war, which suggests that at least the Protestant Irish elite would support the crown.[63] Ireland had long worried Great Britain because it was a potential staging ground for invasion. Specifically, there was a widespread fear in the 1790s that there might be a Catholic revolt like there had been in 1641.[64] This worry was quite rational, considering the events that were to occur in 1798, when Protestant and Catholic Irish rebelled with the aid of the French.

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[60] "What may be the consequence to SPAIN of an hostile armament appearing off Mexico and Peru," *The Times*, June 3, 1790, 3.
[61] "The Times," *The Times*, October 7, 1790, 2.
[62] "The Times," *The Times*, August 27, 1790, 2.
[63] "Parliament Of Ireland," *The Times*, July 7, 1790, 2.
[64] Colin Haydon, "Anti-Catholicism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Evangelicalism*, ed. Jonathan Yeager (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 399.

The war which resulted in American independence ended in 1783, seven years before the Nootka Crisis. From reading *The Times'* coverage, there was still clearly a great deal of emotion on the subject. While the government seemed to understand that America was no longer bound to Britain and would pursue its own interests, the press seemed to engage in fantasies of the two English powers uniting in war against Spain. In the message of April 30, Meares noted that American ships had been seized but did not say why. On June 3 an article was published which noted that, while Britain and America agreed to free trade on the Mississippi, Spain did not. The author suggested that Britain would help Americans assert free trade, assuming they "enter into a treaty offensive and defensive with us."[65] An article from June 7 claimed, "It is reported that our Government is about to conclude a treaty of Alliance with the United States of North America."[66] In retrospect, it may seem ridiculous that these powers would ally so briefly after fighting; however, such beliefs of alliance inspired more confidence in war with Spain, as well as greater expectations from any subsequent convention.

An article from October 23 said that Spain did not want its subjects trading with republicans, so it was unlikely that "many years [would] elapse" before Spain would go to war with the United States.[67] Just over a week before that, *The Times* claimed that the Spanish acted wisely in not seizing the American ships at Nootka Sound. Two paragraphs are spent fantasising about this counterfactual: Britain and America would be "joined together" against Spain, the United States attacking Spanish possession "on the coasts of the Gulph of America, as also the two Floridas," and other places down the Mississippi River.[68] *The Times* also noted some of

[65] "What may be the consequence to SPAIN of an hostile armament appearing off Mexico and Peru," *The Times*, June 3, 1790, 3.
[66] "London," *The Times*, June 7, 1790, 2.
[67] "Except both Britain and Spain agree to grant the Americans the free navigation of the great," *The Times*, October 23, 1790, 3.
[68] The "Gulph of America" is likely a reference to what most contemporaries called the "Gulph of Mexico" and would have been named after the continent (rather than the country) since the United States did not have a coast on

America's nautical successes, before describing its effort to purchase land in the East Indies as a wonderful contribution to American commerce, which "cannot be applauded too highly."[69] Instead of jealousy that the United States was reportedly considering expanding their commerce and empire, *The Times* was generally excited by America's successes. One reason for this might be the ideological support the American republic enjoyed in Britain, as attested by frequent accounts of the nature of the new American state, such as the article which spent multiple paragraphs discussing where its new capital would be.[70] Perhaps more likely is that Americans and the British had shared an identity until only several years prior: many in Britain likely saw Americans as being the same people, only now in a different state. They wanted to believe that powerful Americans would support the country from which most of them came against the anti-republican and hereditary monarchy of Spain.

One July 28th article rhetorically asked, considering that Spain and France helped bring about American Independence, "can we at all wonder" if the subjects of Spain "should pant for equal freedom."[71] There is an interesting redirection of blame for American independence, from the revolutionaries themselves onto the Spanish and French. Presumably then, the British people should be ready to fight with their estranged colonies against those who were responsible for the separation.

On September 27, *The Times* published a report (dated June 29) that a Spanish ship had brought a message to the United States, speculating that the Spanish were trying to get America to stay neutral in the conflict. A contemporary reader would conclude that the States were close

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the Gulf of Mexico in 1790 ; "Yesterday his Excellency the PRUSSIAN MINISTER transacted business with the Duke of," *The Times*, October 13, 1790, 2.

[69] "Except both Britain and Spain agree to grant the Americans the free navigation of the great," *The Times*, October 23, 1790, 3.

[70] "New York, Monday, July 5, 1790," *The Times*, September 7, 1790, 3.

[71] "SPAIN assisted AMERICA to complete her independence, which France had nurtured from its," *The Times*, July 28, 1790, 2.

to supporting Britain, otherwise Spain would not be trying to keep them neutral. Later the article said there were reports that Spain had ceded free trade on the Mississippi to America.[72]

By Christmas, *The Times* was thinking about how Britain might spread across the continent to the western side of the Mississippi.[73] The author was presumably imagining a world where North America was divided between the United States and Britain. Britain was more powerful than the isolated Spanish. British confidence was further bolstered by the belief in cooperation with the United States.

## The Nootka Convention

The full Nootka Convention from October 28 was published on November 10 in *The Times*. Before then, there was speculation as to what concessions Britain would get. On November 4, one writer noted how Spain would concede to Britain the right to South Sea whaling and trade in the Pacific Northwest. The author suggested that, if this had been conceded before the massive cost of armament had been incurred, he would have been satisfied; however, now that the cost had been incurred, Britain must take the opportunity to punish its age-old enemy. The author recounts many of the times Spain had given them "artful smiles, and treacherous assurances!"[74] Specifically, the trauma of the American Revolution was euphemistically invoked. Ultimately, the author argued on practical and emotional grounds that the Spanish Empire must be annihilated in this moment of British strength.

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[72] "America," *The Times*, September 27, 1790, 2.
[73] "The KING of NAPLES is at Feldsberg where he enjoys the pleasures of hunting, and of cheerful," *The Times*, December 25, 1790, 2.
[74] "To the CONDUCTOR of the TIMES," *The Times*, November 4, 1790, 2.

A November 6 article said that Britain would have the right to settle in Northwest America and that this was "worth almost the whole expence of our late armament."[75] The value of South Sea whaling was described and the immense cost of armament would be paid for by that.[76] On November 8 an article was published saying that Britain had gotten everything it desired, including "the full right of possession to NOOTKA BAY, and to settle and trade to every part of the North West Coast of America, within certain boundaries not inhabited by the Spaniards."[77] Moreover, Britain would get the right to settle uninhabited islands, and British ships would be allowed to refresh at Spanish ports.[78] Four days before the Convention was described to the public, it seemed to many as if the right to settle was already acquired. In practice, as others anticipated, Britain ultimately only got the right to trade and fish in these areas.

On November 16, six days after the Convention was made public, *The Times* reported "It is said we have obtained no more at NOOTKA SOUND than we possessed antecedent to the present Convention."[79] Yet this author tried to contain the outrage, noting that the Convention got Spain to acknowledge British claims. He then encouraged parliament to focus on the problem of all the debtors and malefactors in British prisons rather than "wasting their time on the airy phantom of discovering blemishes in the late convention with Spain."[80] Clearly, the author wanted to redirect the reader's attention away from the Convention and onto other problems. It is hard to imagine such a reaction if the Spaniards had truly been "convinced or conquered." Any such attempts at redirection did not work: many blemishes were found and critiqued for the rest of the year.

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[75] "The Convention Of Peace With Spain," *The Times*, November 6, 1790, 2.
[76] Ibid.
[77] "Ratification Of The Convention With Spain," *The Times*, November 8, 1790, 2.
[78] Ibid.
[79] "London," *The Times*, November 16, 1790, 2.
[80] Ibid.

On November 17 it was acknowledged that Britain did not have the full right to settle anywhere on the Northwest coast. However, *The Times* reminded its readers that, while there are "different points of view" on the Convention, people adopt these because they are "led by the party, by prejudice, or by ignorance."[81] It went on to demonstrate all the advantages of having access to the South Sea fishery, a point the opposition would not dispute. The article then noted that Britain got such a good deal because France ultimately decided not to assist Spain. Any supporter of the Convention would want to reframe the discussion as being about *why* Britain got a good deal, rather than *if* Britain got a good deal. The author noted that it was necessary to exact concessions, given that Spain would be an enemy in any future war with France – not addressing the fact that most opposition wanted more concessions from Spain, not less.[82] In most cases, for the rest of the year, the pro-Convention side would simply not acknowledge any critique, focusing instead on the value of the concession, which was not in dispute. As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, this triumphal narrative is seen by some modern historians as being almost universal in Britain.

On November 18 *The Times* recounted one interpretation of the events of 1737, when prime minister Robert Walpole had negotiated a convention with the Spanish where Britain got the right to South Sea whaling. Then, too, the opposition demanded more concessions from the Spanish. Ultimately, the duplicitous Spaniards did not live up to their promised concessions, so war was inevitable.[83] The parallel to the Nootka Crisis seems clear. Ultimately, this comparison was correct, in that the Spanish essentially eliminated the land concessions the British wanted, although war would be avoided because both would simply agree to mutually abandon Nootka.

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[81] "A Convention between Great Britain and Spain, was at length agreed upon, and signed," *The Times*, November 17, 1790, 4.
[82] Ibid.
[83] "Convention With Spain," *The Times*, November 18, 1790, 2.

If one thought war was inevitable, and Britain was in a unique position of power over a rebellious Spain and an unraveling France, it would make sense to push for immediate war.

## The Nootka Conspiracy

One of the most striking elements of the British newspapers of 1790 was the widespread claim that the true object of British and Spanish armament was not one another, and that they never had any intention of going to war. This would be controversial in the British case as it would be a usurpation of the financial prerogative of the Commons, as they would have been tricked into funding something else. The overwhelming perspective in *The Times* was that Spain was arming against its own people and therefore would either not go to war with Britain or, if it did, Spain would remain on the defensive and not attack Britain. This suggested that Spain was so weak that it posed no threat to Britain. The object of this thesis is not to establish the purpose of the armament, only to document the widespread opposition to the government's handling of the Nootka Crisis.

The general belief reported in *The Times* was that Spain and Britain were arming for other objects than fighting one another, but there was a difference of opinion on whether or not war would be declared. Meares' message was given to the government on April 30. On May 6, *The Times* published an article which noted that an idea prevailed, "among the best informed people," that Spain was stirring up trouble with Britain to divert the attention of its people from any ideas that might be inspired by the revolution in France.[84] Spain chose Britain for this end because it was "the only generous enemy on whom she could rely, when peace was proclaimed,

[84] "The Cause," *The Times*, May 6, 1790, 2.

for a just restitution of what might be taken from her."[85] It is unclear what the author thought Britain's role in this was; perhaps the Spanish simply knew them to be generous; or maybe they knew in advance Britain would give a mild peace. The article then goes on to note that there is "no hope" that France will help Spain, given its internal problem.[86] It is worth remembering that this article was published more than half a year before the first Nootka Convention. Like Pitt, most historians suggest that Spain was brought to the table when it was clear that France would not get involved.

On May 7 *The Times* published that Lord Stormont, an accomplished diplomat and one of the most prominent Scotsman of his time,[87] "doubted" the need to raise so loud a public alarm regarding the events at Nootka Sound, when such a matter could have been settled privately. He also wondered why Pitt came to parliament "in the fulness of all that oratory which in so eminent a degree he possesses, stated the flourishing state of the empire, and the serene prospect before us of a permanent peace [...]; for, at this very time, he must have known that we were on the eve of a war with Spain."[88] The suggestion here is perhaps that the Nootka Crisis was a contrived public spectacle and that the government knew it would not lead to war. Elsewhere in this newspaper, it was stated that there was a great possibility of war, but that readers should not bet their money as if war were certain. Spain's reason for attack was "*no doubt*" to divert the attention of its people from "*the schemes of REFORMATION so prevalent on the continent*."[89]

In an article published May 10, the author noted that Spain had attempted to stop the French Revolution and its ideals from spreading over the Pyrenees. The idea of freedom had

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[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] H. M. Scott, "Murray, David, seventh Viscount Stormont and second earl of Mansfield (1727–1796), diplomat and politician," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (September 2004).
[88] "House Of Lords," *The Times*, May 7, 1790, 2.
[89] Ibid.

become “a general idol of worship among all ranks, except those immediately in Administration.”[90] The Spanish cabinet's solution to this overwhelming threat was to establish a large standing army without the people realising it was directed at them. The author suggested the solution might have been “A war with England [...] as the property Spain might lose in the event, would become of very small consideration in competition with what was to be gained by securing their present system of Government.”[91] The prideful Spanish would gladly fight for their obscure claim, giving the government the opportunity to arm. This article is significant in explaining to the contemporary audience why two powerful empires would fight over such an obscure territory on the other side of the world. The author goes on to make a prediction: the Spanish government would procrastinate in negotiations with Britain to give itself time to arm, then concede on all fronts, including giving exclusive right to the Northwest of America to Britain. This prediction was correct insofar as Spain did seem to negotiate very slowly, but it was incorrect as to the negotiated outcome, though it did reaffirm the expectation of that right. The author believed that the notion that Spain had any other reason to provoke Britain to be “ridiculous” considering that they would not have the help of France.[92] He ended by claiming, over half a year before the first Nootka Convention, and almost four years before the final one, “THIS COUNTRY WILL NOT BE INVOLVED IN A SPANISH WAR.”[93]

Two days later, on May 12, a writer for *The Times* rejected the “profound and mysterious causes assigned by Politicians for the conduct of Spain” because “COMMON SENSE is satisfied with an obvious inference from indisputable facts” that Spain wanted war to prevent the people from rebelling.[94] Unlike the May 10 article, that of May 12 suggested that war would empower

[90] "Reasons," *The Times*, May 10, 1790, 2.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] "London," *The Times*, May 12, 1790, 2.

the French king. The author adds that Spain sent a message to Mexico two years prior ordering some sort of provocation against Britain. The evidence for this was that it would take two years for such an order to reach Mexico.[95] While it did not take two years to reach Mexico, the author was likely referring to the total time required to send the message to Mexico, send Martinez up to Nootka Sound, seize the ships, and for news to reach London. Two years is a fairly accurate estimation, although it might have been done in less time. This article also claimed that Spain had already been arming for two years, which seems to go against the notion that they were attempting to hide their armament. A proponent of this might suggest the armament was limited until May of 1790. The author of a May 13th newspaper stated that it had become generally agreed upon that the May 10th newspaper was accurate in its characterisation of Spain's motives. *The Times* noted that the only people who disagreed with this characterisation were untrustworthy, as seen by their false suggestion that Gibraltar was under siege by the Spanish on May 7.[96] The May 13 article provided some evidence to support their claim: the British Marine Corps had not been employed, which suggested they were not serious about going to war. Furthermore, the claim was made that Pitt was not spending as much as one might expect on armament if his government truly believed war was coming.[97]

On May 13, *The Times* was suggesting widespread agreement on the cause of the Spanish provocation; however, there was dispute on whether war would materialise. Most gamblers thought Britain would not go to war in the next month, but rather in the next six, as seen by the betting odds in Lloyd's Coffee House. Specifically, anyone who paid thirty guineas would get a hundred if there were no war in six months.[98] Perhaps because of the coverage of *The Times*,

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[95] Ibid.
[96] "London," *The Times*, May 7, 1790, 3.
[97] "The idea of the probable cause of the hostile conduct of Spain, as stated in our paper of," *The Times*, May 13, 1790, 3.
[98] Ibid.

betting odds changed by May 24; Lloyd's Coffee House now offered ninety-five guineas in return for two hundred if Spain and Britain went to war in six months.[99] It is worth mentioning that much gambling likely occurred without reporting in *The Times*, and it is likely the relative predictions were somewhat sporadic during the Nootka Crisis. That said, five months before the first Nootka Convention, Lloyd's Coffee House gamblers tended to think there would be no war.

On May 18 there was reporting of a prediction in parliament that the crisis would end peaceably and to Britain's advantage.[100] The next day *The Times* claimed that there "is no longer a doubt" Spain was provoking Britain to stop revolutionary sentiment at home. The author then noted that Spain was, at this point, nearing a state of outright rebellion. However, the theory of conspiracy was changed to include the notion that the royalist French were encouraging Spain to go to war in order to increase the power of the French king, should he join in. The author then said that the Marines had now been employed, which suggested that war was more likely.[101] On May 26 it was reported that British merchants in Spain made no haste to leave.[102] On May 29, in contradiction to some of the betting odds, *The Times* reported that the probability of war was increasing by the day, although it still reaffirmed the object of Spanish armament as earlier reported. However, if Spain decided to go to war, it would only be on the defensive: it would not attack Britain. The author also expanded upon the royal interest in France: the king would be empowered by war because he still maintained power over the French army and navy. There was also speculation that the monarchs of Europe would join against Britain in a war to empower the embattled French king.[103]

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[99] "War policies were doing on Saturday at Lloyd's Coffee House, offering 95 guineas to return 200," *The Times*, May 24, 1790, 3.
[100] "House Of Lords," *The Times*, May 18, 1790, 2.
[101] "Armament's In France And Spain!," *The Times*, May 19, 1790, 2.
[102] "Spain," *The Times*, May 26, 1790, 2.
[103] "War," *The Times*, May 29, 1790, 2.

On June 16, four and a half months before the first Nootka Convention, an article was published claiming that "the King of Spain trusts that Great Britain will not insist on" its claim of territory in the Pacific Northwest and that he "declares, that he has not the most distant wish of engaging in hostilities with Great Britain, and that his armaments are destined to other objects."[104] The suggestion that Britain would "not insist" on their territorial claim was likely a reference to the notion mentioned in the May 6 article, that the Spanish knew Britain would be very generous to them at the negotiating table. The June 16 article also claimed that Spanish merchants knew that Spain would not try to go to war with a Britain that was so much more powerful.[105] After reiterating the point recounted earlier, a July 3 newspaper added that the true object of Spanish armament was what "all despotic monarchs" fear most: "LIBERTY."[106] Spain was seen as so weak that it was afraid of its own people.

On September 1, one writer noted that "all the forces of Europe are in motion, and can we for a moment believe that all this preparation is for the mere object of *California* – that so trifling a possession should set all Europe in flames, and deluge it with blood?"[107] This author made it clear that there were other objects of the armament than the obscure claims on the other side of the world from Europe.

From mid-August until the signing of the Convention, there were increasing fears that war would break out, while others remained firm, claiming there was no chance that Spain would start a war it had no chance of winning.[108] After the signing of the Convention, accusations of the Nootka Crisis having been contrived seemed to wane, though they were still brought up by the

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[104] "Arrival Of The Messenger from Spain," *The Times*, June 16, 1790, 2.
[105] Ibid.
[106] "Great Britain And Spain," *The Times*, July 3, 1790, 3.
[107] "National Assembly," *The Times*, September 1, 1790, 2+.
[108] "Kemble's Richard last night, had its occusromed excellence,-the cruelties of the Tyrant had all," *The Times*, October 22, 1790, 2.

opposition in parliament. An article published December 28 shifted the blame for the Spanish actions at Nootka onto the French cabinet.[109]

## The Debate in Parliament as seen in the Press

Throughout 1790, there was an overwhelming belief that the events at Nootka Sound were contrived by the Spanish to maintain internal stability. There was also a great contingent in Britain that correctly and confidently predicted that Spain and Britain would not go to war. As will be noted in this section, in the parliamentary session, published on December 14 and 15, many were upset not only by the lack of concessions from Spain, but also by the tremendous cost. If Spain had simply been bluffing, or it had no intention of going on the offensive, then the government wasted a great sum of money. This raised the question of whether Britain's armament was truly directed at the Spanish: if they had known their bluff. This was a constitutional challenge over the notion that the prime minister could ask the Commons for money to pay for an armament whose true intentions were hidden.

Much of the opposition's dissatisfaction with the Nootka Convention was surmised in the parliamentary coverage reported by the *Morning Chronicle* and *The Times* on December 14 and 15. It should be noted that there had been an election ending in July, about three months before the First Nootka Convention, so the Commons might not have been representative of the electorate's positions on the Convention. James Graham, the Duke of Montrose, had sat in the Commons and then the Lords, and had worked in Pitt's government.[110] He brought forward a motion defending the Convention on the grounds that it would result in perpetual peace with

[109] "RETROSPECTIVE VIEW of the STATE of POLITICS during the last Week," *The Times*, December 28, 1790, 4.
[110] "GRAHAM, James, Mq. of Graham (1755-1836).," The History of Parliament.

Spain. Lord Rawdon, presumably Francis Rawdon, was a prominent military man who served in the American war.[111] He agreed with Montrose, saying that it would be dishonourable to beat Spain while it was down.[112] The notion that the Convention would assure peace between Spain and Britain sidestepped the argument of those in the opposition who wanted greater concessions from Spain while it was weak, even at the cost of war. Rawdon also avoided the opposition's argument, which was that it would be more honourable (and profitable) to destroy the Spanish Empire, which had not only brutalised Indigenous peoples but attacked British Ships. Montrose's motion passed, but only by a division –a clear indication of how controversial the government's handling of the Nootka Crisis was.

Henry Herbert, known as Lord Porchester, came from a fairly prominent family, his father, brother, and cousin serving in parliament.[113] He said that the Convention restricted British trading in the south Pacific, presumably referring to the new requirement that British ships would be punished for approaching the continent's coast by less than a distance of ten leagues.[114] Furthermore, he argued that the government had secret motivations for the armament which were unjustly kept from parliament. This is a reference to what was covered in the section "the Nootka Conspiracy" and is representative of many of the accusations of the press against the government. Porchester seemed to suggest that Montrose brought forward his motion to avoid being impeached by the Commons for the Nootka Convention, at the same time that the Lords were "moving an address of approbation of the conduct of that Ministry."[115] Lord Sydney was the Home Secretary, which was responsible for colonial policy, in Pitt's government until June 1789.

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[111] Roland Thorne, "Hastings, Francis Rawdon, first marquess of Hastings and second earl of Moira (1754–1826), army officer and politician," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (September 2004).
[112] "House Of Lords," *The Times*, December 14, 1790, 1+.
[113]"HERBERT, Henry (1741-1811), of Christian Malford, Wilts. and Highclere, Hants.," The History of Parliament.
[114] "House Of Lords," *The Times*, December 14, 1790, 1+.
[115] Ibid.

He cited precedence to claim that a motion approving of the conduct of a minister would not bar the Commons from impeaching him. It will never be known if Sydney or Porchester were correct because Montrose's motion was forwarded.[116] Either way, the fact that some in parliament were considering impeaching those who were responsible for the first Nootka Convention clearly indicated how strongly people disapproved of the government's handling of the crisis.

On December 15 there was further dispute over the Convention in the press. Various members supported it by noting all the profits to be made by south Pacific whaling. John Thomas Stanley was a new member of parliament, this being his first speech.[117] Despite his inexperience, *The Times* saw fit to mention him. Stanley could not understand how anyone could object to the Convention, given how good it was for Britain, noting that it was worth every last shilling to rectify the Spanish insult. William Pulteney, a wealthy and independent member of parliament,[118] also said some good words about the Convention before disagreeing with one article, which he thought would bind Britain to the impossible task of preventing smuggling on the other side of the world.[119] He clearly did not view the Convention as an absolute triumph.

Charles Grey would become a prime minister of great consequence in 1830, passing the Great Reform Act and outlawing slavery shortly thereafter. In 1790 he was a rising and fashionable Whig.[120] He made the common, and perhaps best, argument against the Nootka Convention: the boundaries of concession were so vague that it would cause future conflict. Dundas said this would not happen because someone would be sent to sort it out on the ground. That agent would be Vancouver, who would prove Grey correct when he returned to Britain

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[116] Ibid.
[117]"STANLEY, John Thomas (1766-1850), of Alderley Park, Cheshire.," The History of Parliament.
[118]"PULTENEY, William (1729-1805), of Westerhall, Dumfries and The Castle, Shrewsbury.," The History of Parliament.
[119] "Parliamentary Intelligence," *The Times*, December 15, 1790, 1+.
[120] "GREY, Charles (1764-1845), of Falloden and Howick, Northumb.," The History of Parliament.

empty handed. General Smith was cited in *The Times*, likely a reference to Richard Smith, who had served in the British army in India and reportedly lost £180,000 in his gambling with Charles James Fox.[121] He opposed the Convention, suggesting there was nothing to trade with the Indigenous people at Nootka except for human skulls – likely a reference to Captain Cook's claim that the local peoples traded human body parts.[122]

Finally, Pitt himself responded to the criticisms of the Convention, arguing that Britain would not have been able to get such a good deal if it had not spent the large sum on armament. Once again, the pro-Convention side focused on *what caused* the Convention to be good for Britain, rather than the question of *if* it was good for Britain, thereby sidestepping the opposition's argument. Pitt went on to say that the cost would have been even greater if the negotiations went on long enough to establish the clear boundaries of whatever territory Britain would receive. He further noted how profitable fishing would be in these locations. Pitt then seemed to suggest that the House should trust his judgement because he had led them into a prosperous position despite "emerging from the most fatal war this country ever knew" only seven years before. That "fatal war" was a reference to the American Revolution, and it exemplifies how emotionally charged the separation from America was for Britain.[123] Fox was one of the most prominent Whigs and opponents of Pitt. He said "that he would venture to risque all the credit he held as a politician if the public did not in a short time condemn the terms of the Convention, when it became better known and the fruits of it to be tried."[124] While one might expect rigid opposition to Pitt from Fox, this was by any standard a very strong statement against the Convention.

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[121] "SMITH, Richard (1734-1803), of Chilton Foliat, Wilts.," The History of Parliament.
[122] "Parliamentary Intelligence," *The Times*, December 15, 1790, 1+. ; Higham, "Seeing Cannibals: Spanish and British Enlightenment on the Northwest Coast," 356.
[123] "Parliamentary Intelligence," *The Times*, December 15, 1790, 1+.
[124] Ibid.

The coverage of the parliamentary session published on December 15 was similar in the *Morning Chronicle* and *The Times*, although each included some different details. Some claimed that Britain had secured the right to settle on the Northwest of America, but Grey noted that the concessions were so vague they were almost meaningless. Grey later asked: "What then is it that we have gained by this Convention? What accession have we made to our privileges or possessions?"[125] He went on to point out that, in cases where Britain might settle, Spain would also be able to settle, so "A Merchant must run all the risque of discovery, and all the expences of establishment, for a property" that "can never be placed upon a permanent footing of security."[126] He finished by reasserting that Britain had not expanded its position or ensured tranquillity, so the Convention had settled nothing. Dundas responded saying that Britain could not treat Spain in a more friendly way because their claims on British territory were ridiculous. This did not contradict Grey's argument, who never claimed Spain should have been treated more kindly. Dundas then addressed Grey's point by saying it was impractical to have clear boundaries and that the cost of armament was worth it because the fleet was now very well prepared for "future occasion."[127] Since military preparations deteriorate in usefulness overtime, the suggestion is that this "future occasion" would come relatively soon. It might be easy for someone to assume by this that Spain was not the object of the armament, if Dundas already knew of a conflict coming soon.

Sir John Pennington, known as Lord Muncaster, was a longstanding ally of Pitt.[128] As if to assert something makes it true, he claimed that "the Convention was the subject of universal praise and admiration." Muncaster admired the talents of the opposition, but wondered why it

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[125] "News." *Morning Chronicle*, December 15, 1790.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.
[128]"PENNINGTON, Sir John, 5th Bt. 1st Baron Muncaster [I] (1741-1813), of Muncaster Castle, Ravenglass, Cumb.," The History of Parliament.

held a different perspective on the Nootka Convention than it had a similar arrangement with the Dutch a few years prior.[129] The arrangement with the Dutch is a reference to the events of 1787, when Britain and Prussia used military force to rid the Netherlands of French influence, which ended in the "humiliation" of France.[130] Mucaster's comparison was invalid given that the Nootka Crisis was resolved with Britain applying less force than the opposition wanted, whereas the Dutch problem was solved with what it deemed the correct amount of pressure.

Fox claimed that Britain could have come to an arrangement with Spain in August, which would have avoided much of the cost of armament. "The Honourable Magistrate," whose identity is unclear, but who had traveled before to the west coast of America, then accused the government of intentionally deceiving parliament, pretending to be arming against Spain while they were truly bolstering the navy to secure the Baltic. Free government is not suited to such "master strokes of policy [...] which none but the weak would admire, and none but the wicked would execute."[131] If the House sanctioned this, the British government "would be worse and more faithless than the most absolute despotism."[132] This reinforced the perspective of Porchester because it suggested that Pitt had acted unconstitutionally. The magistrate then compared the Nootka Crisis to the Falklands Crisis, although the former Convention was even worse than the later. He noted that Pitt's father disagreed with the resolution to the Falklands Crisis and asked "what terms of reprobation would he not have applied to this?"[133] He then went on to critique the Convention on many of the same grounds as previous speakers. The *Morning Chronicle* went on to reference another critic of the Convention, who noted that Britain received nothing new from the Convention and that it was worded so that Spain would not give the concessions Britain

[129] "News." *Morning Chronicle*, December 15, 1790.
[130] Webb, "The Naval Aspects of the Nootka Sound Crisis," 134.
[131] "News." *Morning Chronicle*, December 15, 1790.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

expected. The sixth article of the Convention was especially offensive because it removed a previously established British right. It was later noted in this newspaper that Britain's agreement not to settle in South America was an incredibly important concession to the Spanish, for which the British got nothing in return.[134]

Many opposition members articulated the expectations reflected in the press, criticising the government's actions during the Nootka Crisis. Pulteney suggested the Convention would lead to future conflict with Spain, as Spain had only acquiesced by threat of violence. Unusually for the opposition, he questioned the value of the concessions, noting that the fisheries around Greenland were far more productive. Ultimately, though, he accepted the Convention in "general terms."[135]

The reporting on Pitt's response was similar to that in *The Times*. Pitt generally acknowledged the criticism and tried to downplay it or say the terms of the convention were necessary: mutual occupation, the vagueness of where the British could settle, and the ban on British ships going within ten leagues of South America, were not major problems and they were necessary to get Spain to agree. It is easy to imagine any critic of Pitt being confused by this comment; given Britain's overwhelming power by comparison with Spain, why did the former have to make any concessions at all to assure peace? Pitt also suggested that it was worth it to get Spain to affirm Britain's already existing rights. Fox responded by noting that those rights were already being exercised before the crisis and had been reduced by the Convention. Pitt then responded to the argument that the true object of armament was not Spain, claiming that the only evidence for this was the testimony of a member who had no idea what he was talking about.[136] As previously established, theories as to alternative motives for the Nootka Crisis were

[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.

widespread since early May of 1790. There was widespread discontent with the Convention in parliament, as reported in the British press.

## Conclusion

Between the humiliation of 1783 and the triumph of 1815, Britain was involved in the Nootka Crisis. Both sides wanted to protect positions to which they felt entitled and wanted to keep for self-empowerment. Both empires prepared themselves thoroughly, although British strength was greater. While some remember the Nootka Crisis as an undisputed British victory, many contemporaries objected to Pitt's actions. There was an expectation that Britain would gain a large swath of territory in the Pacific Northwest and the southernmost tip of the American continent. As claimed by Meares, Britain had the right not only to free trade, but exclusive trade in the Pacific Northwest. Britain also had been pining for over a century to destroy Spanish power in America, not only to undo the perceived brutality of the Spanish, but to empower the British Empire through the creation of nominally independent economic subjects in the Americas. These expectations were bolstered by the indisputable dominance of Britain and its allies over an isolated Spain, which enjoyed neither the support of its allies nor its own people. When Britain did not secure the rewards they both claimed and had the power to attain, there was dissent in *The Times* and in parliament, as amply attested in the press. Moreover, there was a theory, seen as indisputable, that Spain was arming against revolution, not against Britain, which further suggested Spain was no real threat – and perhaps, that Britain was really reinforcing its Baltic fleet, rather than any force directed at Spain. If either of these theories are correct, Pitt was asking for funding from the Commons without telling them his true objective. While historians

often remember the Nootka Crisis as a triumph, there was considerable opposition to it at the time in the press. Despite not going to war with Spain, Dundas was correct that the armament was useful for “future occasion”: Britain went to war with revolutionary France less than three years later.

# Appendix

## The Public Articles of the First Nootka Convention

### ARTICLE I

It is agreed that the buildings and tracts of land situated on the Northwest Coast of the continent of North America, or on the islands adjacent to that continent, of which the subjects of His Britannic Majesty were dispossessed about the month of April, 1789, by a Spanish officer, shall be restored to the said British subjects.

### ARTICLE II

Further, a just reparation shall be made, according to the nature of the case, for every act of violence or hostility which may have been committed since the said month of April, 1789, by the subjects of either of the contending parties against the subjects of the other; and in case their lands, buildings, vessels, merchandise, or any other objects of property on the said continent or on the seas or islands adjacent, they shall be replaced in possession of them or a just compensation shall be made to them for the losses which they have sustained.

### ARTICLE III

And in order to strengthen the bonds of friendship and to preserve in the future a perfect harmony and good understanding between the two contracting parties, it is agreed that their respective subjects shall not be disturbed or molested either in navigating or carrying on their fisheries in the Pacific Ocean or in the South Seas, or in landing on the coasts of those seas in places not already occupied, for the purpose of carrying on their commerce with the natives of the country or of making establishments there; the whole subject, nevertheless, to the restrictions and provisions which shall be specified in the three following articles.

### ARTICLE IV

His Britannic Majesty engages to employ the most effective measures to prevent the navigation and fishery of his subjects in the Pacific Ocean or in the South Seas from being made a pretext for illicit trade with the Spanish settlements; and with this in view it is moreover expressly stipulated that British subjects shall not navigate nor carry on their fishery in the said seas within the distance of 10 maritime leagues from any part of the coast already occupied by Spain.

### ARTICLE V

It is agreed that as well in the places which are to be restored to British subjects by virtue of the first article as in all other parts of the Northwest Coast of North America or of the islands adjacent, situated to the north of the parts of the said coast already occupied by Spain, wherever the subjects of either of the two powers shall have made settlements since the month of April, 1789, or shall hereafter make any, the subjects of the other shall have free access and shall carry on their commerce without disturbance or molestation.

ARTICLE VI

It is further agreed with respect to the eastern and western coasts of South America and the islands adjacent, that the respective subjects shall not form in the future any establishment on the parts of the coast situated to the south of the parts of the same coast and of the islands adjacent already occupied by Spain; it being understood that the said respective subjects shall retain the liberty of landing on the coasts and islands so situated for objects connected with their fishery and of erecting thereon huts and other temporary structures serving only those objects.

ARTICLE VII

In all cases of complaint or infraction of the articles of the present convention the officers of either party without previously permitting themselves to commit any act of violence or assault shall be bound to make an exact report of the affair and of its circumstances to their respective Courts, who will terminate the differences in an amicable manner.

ARTICLE VIII

The present convention shall be ratified and confirmed within the space of six weeks, to be counted from the day of its signature, or sooner if possible.

In witness whereof we, the undersigned plenipotentiaries of Their Britannic and Catholic Majesties, have, in their names and by virtue of our full powers, signed the present convention, and have affixed thereto the seals of our arms.

Done at the palace of San Lorenzo the 28th of October, 1790.

ALLEYNE FITZHERBERT.
THE COUNT OF FLORDABLANCA.[137]

[137] "Nootka Sound Convention." *Wikisource.* https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Nootka_Sound_Convention&oldid=12438828 ; The Articles were also published in The Times with slightly different punctuation: "Convention Between His Britannick Majesty, And The King of Spain." *The Times*, November 10, 1790, 3.

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