

# Launch of the North West America

By John Meares & Thomas Stothard

British maritime fur trader John Meares included this engraving in his narrative entitled, *Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789 from China to the North West Coast of America*, first published in 1790. The engraving may have been produced in collaboration with the British book illustrator Thomas Stothard.

John Meares began his career at sea with the Royal Navy in 1771. After leaving the navy at the rank of lieutenant in 1783, he entered the merchant shipping profession. In the mid-1780s he decided to mount a commercial venture to exploit the maritime fur trade market then developing along the Northwest Coast. Backed by British merchants in India, Meares made his first voyage to the region in 1786-87, spending a difficult winter in present-day Prince William Sound, Alaska. A year later he returned to the Northwest with two ships, the *Felice* and the *Lphigenia*. The expedition arrived at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island in May 1788 and made a base camp at Friendly Cove with the permission of the local Native leader, Chief Maquinna. Meares then ordered the construction of a smaller vessel, the *North West America*, for use in local trading along the coastal waters. In September 1788, Meares sailed to China in the *Felice* with his cache of furs while Captain William Douglas remained at Nootka Sound with the *Lphigenia* for another season of trading.

This engraving illustrating the launch of the *North West America* is a fanciful representation of Meares' actual experience at Nootka Sound. Rather than a dominant wooden structure, the base camp at Friendly Cove featured a temporary shelter and a few cannons. The view that local people from Maquinna's village of Yuquot were witnesses to a display of British imperial power is equally misleading. During the early decades of the maritime fur trade, village leaders in the trading centers such Nootka Sound and Clayoquot Sound controlled the commerce between Native and newcomers. These leaders held the upper hand due to the strategic location of their villages and the precarious position of the European and American traders, who were thousands of miles away from their home countries and the important trading ports in Southeast Asia. Meares' own narrative attests to the "methods employed by the Natives to advance the price of sea otter skins."

**Further Reading:** Arima, Eugene and John Dewhirst. "Nootkans of Vancouver Island." In *Handbook of North American Indians*. Vol. 7. *Northwest Coast*. Washington D.C., 1990, 391–411.

Gibson, James R. *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade on the Northwest Coast, 1785–1841*. Seattle, Wash., 1992.

Nokes, R. Richard. *Almost a Hero: The Voyages of John Meares, R.N., to China, Hawaii, and the Northwest Coast*. Pullman, Wash., 1998.

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