

Captain George Vancouver

The man who put the Pacific Northwest coast on the map surveyed much of the 27,000 kilometres of coastline in British Columbia.

THE CONTEMPORARY ADAGE “life begins at forty” would be laughable if applied to Captain George Vancouver (1757-1798). The brilliant Royal Navy explorer passed away at this hypothetically pivotal age, having experienced more adventure than most could expect from two lifetimes.

Born in the small port town of King’s Lynn on England’s east coast, Vancouver joined the navy in his early teens. He began his career in high-profile fashion, serving under the legendary Captain James Cook for seven years, on Cook’s second and third voyages. Upon his return home in 1779, Vancouver earned promotion to lieutenant.

A decade later he served on the warship HMS *Courageux* when Britain became embroiled in

the Nootka Crisis, a multifaceted dispute with Spain including the issue of territorial rights over Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island’s west coast. War was averted by the first Nootka Convention, and Vancouver was subsequently handed command of HMS *Discovery* to secure Nootka Sound and survey the coastline.

In April 1791 he departed Britain once more as commander of an expedition to explore the Pacific region. Into its second year, Vancouver’s flotilla arrived at and followed the coastline of what are now Oregon and Washington. His exploration of the area from this point in the voyage would assure the young captain’s place in history, Vancouver’s name today synonymous



Statue of Vancouver outside Custom House, King’s Lynn (Photo courtesy of Igor’s Jelimovs); Background: Burrard Bridge in Vancouver, BC (Photo by Al Harvey/Tourism Vancouver)

around the world with key destinations of the Pacific Northwest, particularly the cities of Vancouver, WA and Vancouver, BC, as well as Vancouver Island. He and his men surveyed every inlet and outlet on the Coast, as far north as Alaska, naming dozens of places as they went. One such was what is now known as the Burrard Inlet, named by *Discovery*’s captain for his friend, English politician and aristocrat, Sir Harry Burrard-Neale. No European had previously entered or charted this body of water, now the city of Vancouver’s main harbour.

Vancouver himself named Vancouver Island at the end of 1791, but at the time as ‘Quadra’s and Vancouver’s Island’ in honour of his Spanish navy counterpart, Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra. The latter’s influence remains through Quadra Island, a popular ‘Discovery Islands’ destination offshore of Campbell River on Vancouver Island’s northeast coast.

For a man of such historical significance and great achievement in his field, Vancouver’s premature death was a sad and lonely one. Returning home to a raft of problems in 1795, various individuals he had previously considered friends and colleagues trounced on him for their own personal reasons, as did the press of the day. One bitter man bent on confrontation with Vancouver was his unsavoury peer, Thomas Pitt. Widely known for belligerent behaviour, he attacked Vancouver in a London street in revenge for punishments meted out to him by Vancouver for persistent insubordination while serving under the explorer on the *Discovery*.

This event sent Vancouver into rapid decline, his death in tragic obscurity going unrecorded. There has since been much speculation as to the cause of his death, but the truth may never be known. It seems fitting, therefore, that his name and discoveries will live on proudly in the beautiful destinations of his beloved Pacific Northwest. —David Morrison



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