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Around the island in 1853

by Nick Doe

Background

Prior to 1852, the European newcomers to the Pacific coast had no particular interest in the Nanaimo area. What finally brought them here was, of course, coal.¹

The existence of coal on the coast was first reported in 1835 by Dr. Tolmie, but, being fur-traders, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) took little immediate interest. Times and technology were changing however, in spite of the conservatives in the Admiralty who thought nothing was as good as sails and a good puff of wind. In 1846, Captain G.T. Gordon of HMS *Cormorant*, a small paddle-wheeled steamer, purchased 62 tons of coal directly from the Kwakiutl (*K^wak^waka'wak^w*) on the northeast coast of Vancouver Island. The quality of the coal proved to be high. By 1849, the HBC had learned there were ways of making money "beyond mere trafficking in peltries", and so, alerted by the *Cormorant* purchase, they established Fort Rupert, just a mile or two down the coast from the present-day Port Hardy. Here they made their entry into the coal-mining business.

The Fort Rupert enterprise was short-lived. There was trouble finding enough good coal, trouble with the Native people, and trouble between the HBC and the miners over their contracts as a result of the HBC's inept management of the mine. Already by the early 1850s, the search was on for alternative sites. As it happened, one had

already been found. Coal at Nanaimo had been reported to the HBC by one of the local Snunyemux^w in December 1849. In 1852, a sudden interest in the report developed, and the first shipments of coal left Nanaimo harbour in September of that year.

One of the early customers for Nanaimo coal was HMS *Virago*. The *Virago* was a wooden paddle-wheeled steam sloop, about 180-feet long. Under favourable conditions, the ship was sailed, but if necessary, it could proceed under steam at up to 9½ knots.

The British Royal Navy's Pacific Station at that time was in Valparaiso, Chile, but the difficulties with the United States over the border had made Esquimalt an increasingly important port of call from 1848 onwards. In December 1852, HMS *Virago* left Valparaiso on a long cruise to Vancouver Island, via Callao, Peru; Pitcairn Island; Tahiti; and Hawaii.² After a very stormy passage, the vessel arrived in Esquimalt on April 17, 1853. The captain was James Prevost and the master, George Hastings Inskip, but the hero of our story was one of the three master's mates, William Ebrington Gordon.

Up to Nanaimo

On April 28, HMS *Virago* left Esquimalt bound for the Queen Charlotte Islands to investigate the suspected presence of hundreds of American interlopers seeking gold. After a brief stop in Bellingham Bay to investigate reports of coal deposits, the *Virago* headed toward Nanaimo. On

¹ Arthur Leynard, *The Coal Mines of Nanaimo*, typed manuscript in NW History Section of Nanaimo Public Library, 1982. See also Lynne Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams*, Oolichan Books BC, 1987.

² G.P.V. & Helen B. Akrigg, *HMS Virago in the Pacific 1851-1855*, Sono Nis Press BC, 1992.

reaching the Porlier Pass (the Cowichan Gap) between Galiano and Valdes Islands, Captain Prevost, who had on board as a passenger a veteran HBC captain, decided, out of curiosity, to steam through the pass into the Trincomali Channel. What happened next is best described by the Akriggs in their book:

“...Captain Prevost lingered too long. When he attempted to return to the eastern end of the [Cowichan] gap, he found the tide beginning to turn and already racing out through the narrow pass. Yawing off course in mid-passage, the *Virago* veered too far towards the northern shore. With a sudden thump she struck, running up on a rocky ledge. Every effort was made to get the *Virago* loose. An anchor with an eight-inch hawser was let out and made taut. Guns and water were shifted to the stern, while the reversed engines were run at the limit of their power. All was in vain. As the ebbing tide raced like a sluice stream, the ship’s bow rose higher and higher above the rocky ledge until her stern windows were almost under water....”

About ten that evening there was another high tide, and with a “grand heave by hawser and engine” and “perfectly enveloped in a cloud of sparks” the *Virago* shot free, so fast that it almost ran stern on to the opposite shore. The next morning, the ship and its thankful crew arrived in Nanaimo harbour.

The anchor retrieval attempt

The incident in the Porlier Pass led to the first recorded circumnavigation of Gabriola Island. To call this a “first” is, of course, somewhat ridiculous. Aboriginal people, who used canoes every day, have been living in the area for two thousand years or more, but William Gordon was the first “white guy” to leave us a map and a short description of his exploit.

During the near-catastrophe in the pass, the *Virago* had lost an anchor, so while the ship was coaling, Gordon was instructed by Captain Prevost to go back to the pass in the ship’s pinnace and to try and retrieve it.³ With him went Captain Stuart (Stewart), the HBC captain who had been aboard the *Virago*, and who presumably had thought that entering the Porlier Pass was a good idea.⁴ They also took an Indian interpreter⁵ and thirteen men to people the oars.

They left Nanaimo at eight in the evening, Monday, May 2, 1853. They got as far as False Narrows where they “...lighted a large fire around which the men slept, pitched a small tent for Mr. Stuart and myself [Gordon] and anchoring the pinnace off passed the night very comfortably”.⁶

From the sketchmap in Gordon’s journal, we can see that the camp was on Mudge, just across from the Snunéymux^w village on Gabriola, which he marks. There is no comment at all about the village, even as to whether it was occupied, which it normally would have been at that time of year.⁷

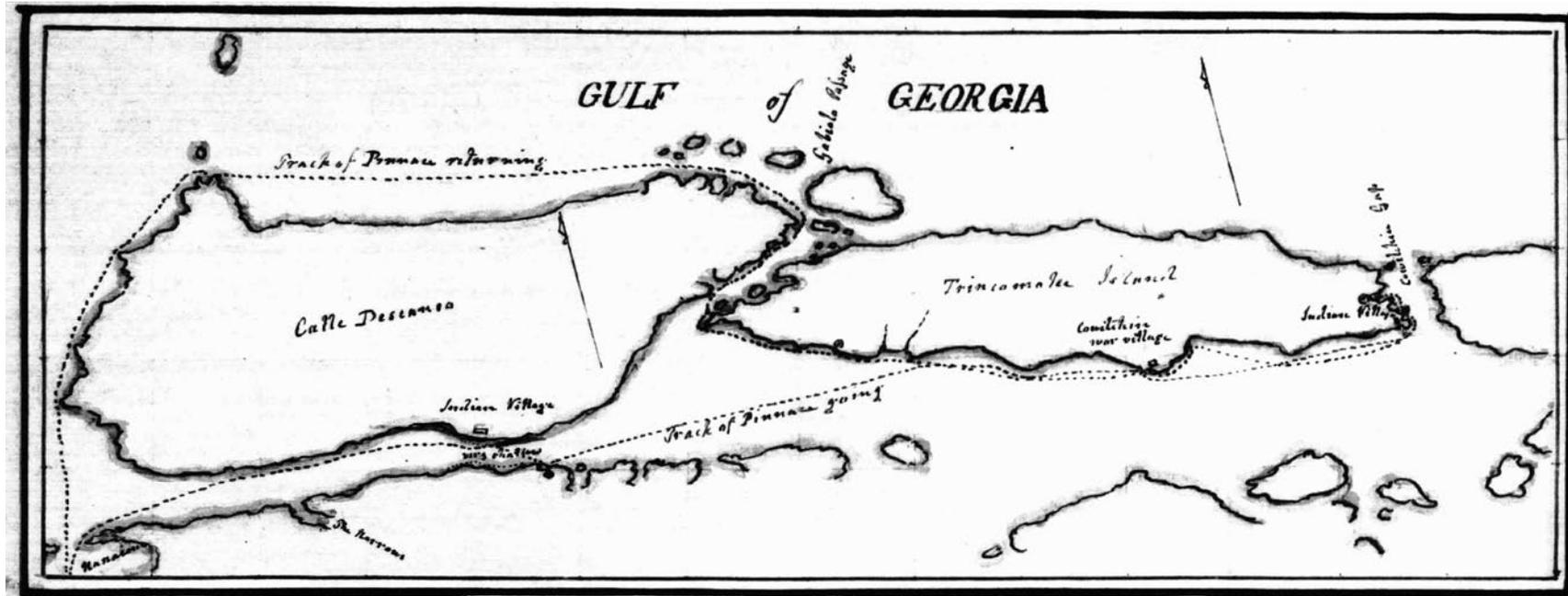
³ A pinnace was a ship’s boat, which could be rowed or rigged with a single fore-and-aft sail (sloop rig). The *Virago*’s pinnace would have had positions for sixteen oars.

⁴ The Stuart of Stuart Channel.

⁵ Judging by their track through False Narrows avoiding the reefs there, the interpreter also acted as a guide. *Rufus Churcher*

⁶ William Ebrington Gordon, *Journal kept on board HMS Virago, Sept. 10, 1851–Jan. 28, 1854 and HMS Portland Feb. 1–April 28, 1854*, MSS 3091, Mitchell Library, Sydney, Australia.

⁷ Gordon’s somewhat derogatory comments about the Snunéymux^w in Nanaimo and Songhees in Victoria suggest they might, at the time, as well as alcoholism, have been suffering from one of the several newly-introduced diseases against which they had little or no immunity.



Sketchmap of William Gordon's circumnavigation from his journal. Gabriola Island, on the left, is marked as *Calle Descanso*, a muddled version of the Spanish *Cala del Descanso*, "cove of rest". Valdes Island, in the middle, is marked as *Trincomalee Island*. Galiano Island is on the far right. Note that the *Indian Village* at False Narrows is marked. False Narrows is annotated as being *very shallow*, although the (calculated) tides were not especially low. Other annotations are *Nanaimo*, *The Narrows*, *Track of Pinnace going*, *Cowitchin war village*, *Indian Village*, *Cowitchin Gap*, *Gabiola Passage*, and *Track of Pinnace returning*.

William Ebrington Gordon, *Journal...* Mitchell Library MSS 3091



A sketch in Gordon's journal. He does not say where it was made, but from its position in the journal, it was probably Nanaimo.

William Ebrington Gordon, *Journal...* Mitchell Library MSS 3091

Gordon gives the following enthusiastic, if less than prize-winning description of the landscape:

“Our passage all the way had been through the most delightful scenery, fir trees of many various sorts and shades lined the shores here and there relieved by clusters of almost golden maple. In some places some sloping banks from the forest to the water and at other times our course lay under lofty sandstone cliffs chiselled by the hand of nature into the most grotesque and exquisite forms with many a ledge and cranny from which would descend [~~sending~~ a verdant slopes in ample* bunches the verdant streamers of the rock].”

* Gordon's handwriting is unclear here.

The next day, they went down to Valdes “against a strong breeze and a contrary tide”. They stopped for lunch at a deserted “Cowitchen war village” at Shingle Point, and arrived at Porlier Pass at 3:30 in the afternoon.⁸

They remained at the pass until Thursday, fruitlessly grappling for the anchor. They tried buying information from the on-looking Cowichan, and at one point “in consequence of our taunts they [the Cowichan] went out in their canoes for about half-an-hour and pretended to look for it”. The Natives almost certainly knew where the anchor was, probably having recovered it themselves, but they weren't about to admit it.

The Gordon party left their camp, which was at a “sufficient” distance from the Indian

⁸ The “war village” was on Lyackson IR4 (DgRv 2). The village was constructed “in imitation of Fort Victoria”.

It used to be thought that defensive structures in the Strait of Georgia were a post-contact phenomenon, but the archaeological evidence is that this is not so. Grant Keddie, *Aboriginal Defensive Sites*, *Discovery*, 24-8/9, 25-1/2, Royal BC Museum, 1996-7.



Cowichan children seen from inside the tent at the camp on Valdes.

William Ebrington Gordon, *Journal...* Mitchell Library MSS 3091

Acknowledgements

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village at Cayetano Point, on the southern tip of Valdes, on Thursday evening; bivouacked *en route*; and on Friday, May 6, 1853 directed their course through the “Gabiola Gap”, remarking that they believed it to be “never passed by white men before”.

They reached Nanaimo late that evening, thereby completing their circumnavigation of Gabriola Island. There, they found that the *Virago* had completed coaling that same afternoon. At 5:30 the next morning, they proceeded on their way into the Strait of Georgia and on up the coast toward the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The following year, the *Virago* was involved in the fiasco at Petropavlovsk; but that's another story....