

Barry Gough, *Juan de Fuca's Strait*—the Malaspina Galleries on Gabriola

These notes refer to Edition 1 of Barry Gough's book. Corrections to the history were made in Edition 2 (paperback edition), but not to the commentary on the geology of the galleries.



In a [SHALE article](#) on the history of the Malaspina Galleries on Gabriola Island, Barry Humphrey concluded with a comment on the number of times some of the basic facts about this geographic feature has been mis-reported in various publications. His closing words were: “As recently as 2001, in the June edition of *Westworld*, Danielle Murphy managed to identify Malaspina in the Spanish

drawing, and used a photograph purporting to be of the gallery, but which is of a different rock formation, probably on De Courcy Island, thus proving that the gallery has not lost its ability to cloud minds”.

In keeping with this tradition of “getting it wrong”, it was interesting to read the following in Barry Gough, *Juan de Fuca's Strait*, pp. 158–9, Harbour Publishing, 2012.

“On 15 June the vessels [*Sutil* and *Mexicana*] dropped anchor in Cala del Descanso (‘small bay of rest’), now Pilot Bay. There they discovered, to their surprise and delight, a remarkable natural overhanging gallery about 300 feet in length, 10 to 15 feet wide, and 12 feet high, situated at the water’s edge near Malaspina Point, on the western shore of Gabriola overlooking the harbour of Nanaimo. Beauty and romance mingle in this grotto by the sea.”

So far so good. ...except that Malaspina Point is not part of Pilot Bay; the Malaspina Galleries are not in Pilot Bay; and you can't see Nanaimo Harbour from Pilot Bay. The author goes on:

“Nature had created this ocean gallery; it has been hollowed out of the soft sandstone strata by the erosion of the sea, and has a floor of a hard concrete-like substance, fretted and honeycombed with many diverse patterns. ...”

Well, no; the gallery has not been hollowed out [by the ocean](#). It is the result of [salt-weathering](#) of the sandstone. The “hard concrete-like substance” is simply case-hardened sandstone, a common feature of sandstone in the Gulf Islands.

“...The lovely sketch of it made by one of the expedition artists remained hidden for nearly a century—the Spanish kept their records to themselves—and was not known to the wider world until it appeared in Malaspina’s *Voyages*, edited by Pedro de Novo y Colson, of the Spanish navy, and published in Madrid in 1885. ...”

OK as long as “expedition artists” (plural) is understood to mean the whole Malaspina expedition. Manuel José Cardero was the only artist to travel with Galiano and Valdés in 1792. Cardero’s original sketch was lost and has never been recovered. What was discovered in the 19th century was a painting by Fernando Brambila, but who never visited the Pacific Northwest.

“... The gallery, sometimes called the Malaspina Grotto, remained undiscovered until 1903. Alcalá Galiano named it Malaspina Gallery after his chief, but inasmuch as Malaspina never sailed these waters, the name has reverted to Galiano Galleries. ...”

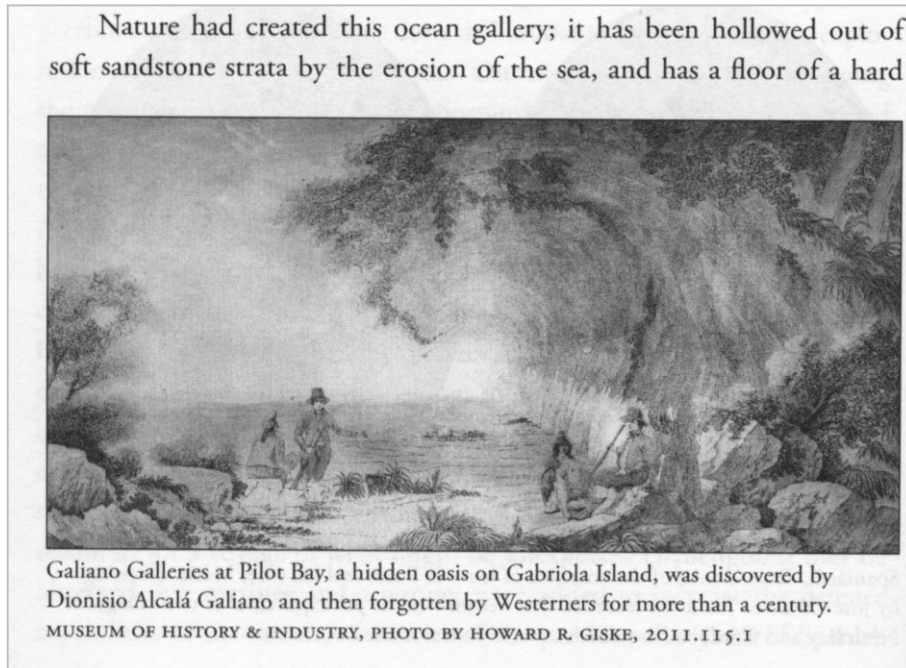
“Malaspina Grotto” was a name used in some 1903 newspaper reports, but so far as I know, it has never been known by that name by anyone familiar with it.

There is no evidence that I know of that Galiano gave any name to the feature. It is not mentioned at all in any of his diaries or notebooks, though it is possible that he did see it.

It acquired the “Malaspina” designation locally as a result of its picture being published in Pedro de Novo y Colson’s book. That the name be used officially was suggested by Commander Parry when he surveyed the island in 1904, but the name “[Galiano Gallery](#)” was adopted instead by the Geographic Board of Canada in 1906. This name has never caught on among people who live on Gabriola—they still know it and refer to it as the Malaspina Galleries (there are more than one).

“... A writer in the *Vancouver Province* in 1925 described his visit there: ‘While admiring the unusual beauty of the grotto, one cannot but endeavor to resist the spell that arises to picture the small fleet of old-time sailing vessels rounding the head of the island in their search for a sheltered harbour—a search that was rewarded by their discovery of this unusual shelter. Then Nature had been the only artist to decorate the walls of the retreat. But rude carvings and inartistic monograms have since been drawn and painted on the inside wall by rash explorers of a later day.’ “

There is a large element of fantasy here. The *Sutil* and *Mexicana* did not enter the bay where the galleries are, nor did the Spanish shelter there. They came across them during an exploratory expedition from Pilot Bay in the long boat. And although it cannot be confirmed, the Snunéymux^w used the gallery for their own purposes and there is a good chance it did exhibit their artwork in some form.



Looking at the caption in Barry Gough's book:

The galleries are not in Pilot Bay.

The reference to it as an "oasis" is rather an odd choice given that the landward side is a Douglas-fir coastal forest. Gabriola gets almost a metre of rain each year. The term was perhaps inspired by the "potted plants" probably added by Fernando Brambila who joined the Malaspina expedition in Mexico and did not travel to Nootka or with Galiano and Valdés.

The originals of this picture (Brambila's pen and ink wash drawing and Bartolomé Maura's later engraving based on it) are in the archives in Spain. This rather poor copy appears to have been taken from Pedro de Novo y Colson's book published in 1884 and again in 1885.

The clouding of minds continues. ◇

Nick Doe

Gabriola, December 2, 2012.