

# George Vancouver

## Forgotten Mariner

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WHENEVER I drive south on 101, heading toward Pismo Beach, the view of Point Sal in the blue distance makes me think of George Vancouver.

Who? Is he the same Vancouver as in British Columbia's largest city?

Yes, that's exactly the person I mean, an English seafarer born in 1757, a man who didn't live past age 40. In the meantime Captain Vancouver sailed 65,000 miles, surveying back and forth across the huge Pacific Ocean for the British Royal Navy over a period of five homesick years.

Despite his prominence in Canada, and despite his fame in the Pacific Northwest and in parts of California, George Vancouver is little known in San Luis Obispo County. He's barely remembered for having sailed south along our shores in November 1793. Granted, Point Sal lies within Santa Barbara County; besides, Vancouver never dropped anchor or set foot in our own county. But Point Sal was one of several place names he bestowed in what can broadly be called southern California. He also named Point Arguello (pronounced Ar-gay-yo). Vancouver did so on that same passage down the coast. In both cases he was commemorating Spanish officials he'd met in his sailings.

To give 1793 some context, it was 21 years after Mission San Luis Obispo's founding. It was 10 years after the American Revolution

ended. That same date fell early in George Washington's second term as President. Mission San Miguel, however—the next Franciscan outpost north of San Luis—wouldn't be founded by the Spaniards for another four years, not until 1797.

Besides naming Points Sal and Arguello, the southbound Vancouver left a vivid description of Point Piedras Blancas as he rounded it. He also described the native pines just down the coast from Piedras Blancas, either those at Pico Creek or surrounding what's now Cambria. More important, he described some local Indians who had a refined canoe, a *tomol* of unquestionable Chumash origin.

And yet so at variance with early California anthropology were Vancouver's words that some writers identified the point (Piedras Blancas) in that Englishman's journal as Point Estero, a few miles upwind of Cayucos. By doing so they made Vancouver's canoe more plausible by old-school standards—the Chumash having long been thought to range no farther north than the Cayucos area. It was a prime example of a historical fallacy: altering the facts to fit a preconceived assumption.

More recent research has moved the Chumash boundary well beyond Cayucos and Cambria, as far up the coast as Salmon Creek in the rugged Big Sur country. This makes Vancouver's recountings of 1793 fully believable, after many years of being misunderstood, even ignored. But has it done much good? Not really. Even the best books on Native California culture continue to draw a northwestern Chumash boundary line near Cayucos.

Going back more than two centuries before George Vancouver, we can cite Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, who sailed north past the greater San Luis Obispo area in 1542. Like Vancouver, Cabrillo never anchored along this coastal stretch (despite some tired old stories that he did). That's what the most current Cabrillo scholarship favors. All the same,

Cabrillo has rightly been called the Christopher Columbus of California history. Vancouver belongs in a similar pantheon. He's been so recognized by those who know the maritime past of San Francisco Bay and that of the Monterey area. But again—by prevailing standards of San Luis Obispo County history—George Vancouver keeps getting left out.

Why is that? Why, for example, aren't today's anthropologists fascinated by Vancouver's canoe story of 1793? They should be. Someone should have written an entire book by now, or at least a detailed paper. Santa Barbara has long been the center of Chumash interest and knowledge. Nothing's been forthcoming, though, from that quarter on Vancouver in this specialized regard.

The problem has much to do with what's been published in the past—or hasn't been published. Vancouver's multi-volume journal first saw print in London in 1798. The English mariner had died that very year. His brother had to finish George's compilation and see it through the final paces. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the next century, some reprints of the Vancouver journal appeared. But those books were always expensive and hard to find.

For our regional purposes, Dawson's Book Shop in Los Angeles—a cultural shrine that is no more, although Glen Dawson himself is soon to be 101—published *Vancouver in California: 1792-1794*. That was in the mid-1950s. A petite, three-volume work, it's a much sought-after collector's item. The Dawson edition includes Vancouver's descriptions of Piedras Blancas, the nearby coastal pines, the Indians and their sleek canoe, the naming of Point Sal, and many other choice details. Vancouver also named a point along the Malibu coast, oddly calling it Point Dume (in honor of Father Dumetz of Mission San Buenaventura), the cause of linguistic confusion ever since.

Otherwise, George Vancouver was typically spot-on with his observations. He continued southward along the California coast late

in 1793, crossing today's international boundary and sailing down the upper Baja shoreline, as far as El Rosario. From there he veered southwest to the tropical Hawaiian Islands, where he wintered into the early part of 1794. He doubled back to the Pacific Northwest and farther north with the return of milder weather. He had much surveying to do still for the British crown.

On these back-and-forth voyages in the early 1790s, Vancouver had also been in California in 1792. But during that year he'd made a beeline for Hawaii from Monterey, not heading south along the San Luis coast the way he did in 1793. That later year was the only one that saw him passing our area, leaving his descriptions and—once beyond our county line—assigning some place names that we should always connect with him.

It makes for prime historical musing, that shimmering view south from Shell Beach toward Point Sal. I regale in it every time. And I often dust off my Dawson's set of *Vancouver in California* for a brush-up reading once I'm back home in San Luis.

Coffman has adapted this brief article from "Vancouver and the Canoe," a chapter in his forthcoming book *North Coast Beginnings: The Early Days of Cambria and San Simeon*. Your comments are welcome at [taylorcoffman@aol.com](mailto:taylorcoffman@aol.com). See also the author's website, [www.coffmanbooks.com](http://www.coffmanbooks.com).