This is a book about the Royal Navy and Northwest Coast Indians from the time that Britain and the United States divided the last remaining quarter of the North American continent between themselves in 1846 to the end of British naval patrols on Indian duties in the late 1880’s. It enquires into the way in which law, backed by armed authority, was transferred to a maritime frontier, heavily populated by natives and lying eighteen thousand miles by sea from the centre of empire in London. This is a story of gunboats, more correctly, sloops-of-war, corvettes and frigates, some of them steam-powered, some not. Because “Send a Gunboat!” was a cry voiced by British subjects at home and abroad, I have chosen to call this work Gunboat Frontier, and because this is a study of the extension of British influences, both imperial and colonial, by means of naval power, I have subtitled it British Maritime Authority and Northwest Coast Indians with approximate dates, 1846–90.

This book completes a trilogy on the maritime history of British Columbia. It is a companion to Distant Dominion: Britain and the Northwest Coast of North America, 1579–1809 (1980) and The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast of North America, 1810–1914: A Study of British Maritime Ascendancy (1971). In the latter I noted that the subject of the Navy’s relations with Coast Indians would be a topic of future enquiry. This book may serve to explain the intricacies in white-Indian relations in coastal British Columbia during the nineteenth century, particularly in the 1850’s, 1860’s, and 1870’s. My objective has been to get as close to the historic interface of white and native societies as possible, and to describe and assess how each responded to the other. I have also sought to give this work a sense of place—the environment of the natives and of the Navy’s actions—and to do this I have visited, wherever possible, every creek mouth and cave where the gunboat frontier was being exercised.
Reading Admiralty, Colonial Office, fur trade and other papers for a fifty year epoch reveals that in British Columbia authorities tended to respond on demand, enquiring into murders, thefts, and piracies, investigating illicit liquor traffic, slavetaking and a few cases of cannibalism, supporting settlers in fear of Indian attack, and aiding missionaries as the need arose. Indian policy was essentially crisis management. London had made declarations of intent towards the Indians, as in the charter of Vancouver Island colony in 1849 and in the statute establishing British Columbia as a colony in 1858, and Whitehall, particularly the Admiralty, was quick to rap the knuckles of its representatives if they did not proceed in acceptable fashion. From time to time, colonial governors, mainly Sir James Douglas, who bulks large in these pages, made statements of intent; but essentially London laid down general guidelines which were adapted as colonial circumstances warranted. British Columbia's "Indian policy" thus developed in its own, unique way.

After an uncertain start during Richard Blanshard's governorship, British Columbia's Indian policy was injected with Douglas's personal enthusiasm during his term of office. He authorized the practice of sending of gunboats, and through experience, he honed the rules of intervention to a sharp edge. During the early years of his governorship, Douglas drew on the Hudson's Bay Company policy of peace for the purpose of profit. But the Company's practice of retributive justice against Indians in retaliation for murders and thefts was also employed by British authorities on many imperial frontiers, most notably southern Africa and New Zealand. Douglas's greatest strength was his adaptability. At the same time, he always understood that he was specially empowered with authority to protect the interests of Her Britannic Majesty, Queen Victoria, from internal and external threats. That he was able to anticipate what London wanted and thereby forego the censure accorded his predecessor, Richard Blanshard, and at the same time act as an agent of destiny for his fellow British Columbians is one of his claims to greatness.

Readers of this book can judge for themselves the quality of the naval service before and after Douglas and its influence on the Indians in question. A cardinal tenet of nineteenth-century Englishmen as the Empire expanded was the extension of law as they knew it. John Stuart Mill stated in Considerations on Representative Government (1861) that force could be used legitimately to preserve internal peace and order. The reason for this was that order was the precondition for social progress and representative government. The "peace, order and good government" clause in the British North America Act, 1867, recognized this precept and imperial legacy in principle.
Because this book is based on possibly the last hitherto unused major corpus of documentary materials to tell about Northwest Coast Indian life in the nineteenth century, the Admiralty papers, it contains new findings. It provides the first full report on the "miserable affair" at Fort Rupert and the first investigations of the Cowichan crises of 1852–53 and 1856. It also brings to light Douglas's support for American interests in Puget Sound during the Battle of Seattle, 1856, and British gunboat involvement in Alaskan waters in support of Russian authorities in 1862 and American interests in 1879. It deals, too, with the Indians of Vancouver Island's west coast, particularly the largely unknown encounter between the Ahousat and the Royal Navy in 1864, an event generally overshadowed in much British Columbia history by the story of the Waddington party "massacre" near Bute Inlet in the same year. The Haida, Lemalchi Salish, Tsimshian and Nishga peoples feature in other places in this work as do official attempts to check Indian slavery and liquor selling to Indians and to support missionary efforts, particularly at Metlakatla. I have taken pains to mention individual Indians by name because regrettably all too few of them are presently known by anything other than tribal or village designation. Chapchah, Edenshaw, and Acheewun are among the Indian personalities who became better known in these pages.

The central theme of this book is the extension of law and order on the coast with the aid of maritime authority, and to develop it better, the work is divided into three parts, each beginning with an anchoring chapter. The first part, "Company and Colony," begins with a brief survey of the differences in Indian and white societies in the mid-nineteenth century. It then follows, through the 1850's, the development of the colony of Vancouver Island with particular reference to Fort Victoria, Fort Rupert, and Cowichan. The second part is entitled "Putting out Fires." It commences with a review of Indian policy in the colonial period with specific reference to the colony of British Columbia, followed by an enquiry into British attempts to check slavery and stop liquor traffic to Indians, though legal aspects of liquor prohibition are included in the appendix. Then it surveys, in four successive chapters, the exercise of authority "outwards" from the colonial capitals of Victoria and New Westminster to areas of influence—the Queen Charlotte Islands, the West Coast of Vancouver Island, the Strait of Georgia, and even Alaska. The third and final part, entitled "Extending the Frontier," starts with an analysis of Canadian Indian policy in British Columbia in the first twenty years after the colony became a province. The narrative then moves to a study of naval support for missions. The next chapter, "New Zones of Influence," deals with the last cases of gunboat diplomacy against North-
west Coast Indians—on the Nass, at Kimsquit, and on the Skeena. The book concludes with a retrospective assessment of the subject. By this approach I do not claim to have met all the needs of the subject, but had I used a mere chronological approach, my readers would have been totally distracted by jumps from Clayoquot to Kimsquit and from Capilano to Owekeeno. As it is, they will be obliged nonetheless to follow the chronology, recognizing that the maritime nature of this frontier meant that a piracy in one area could be going on at the same time as a murder in another or a theft or some other problem in a third or fourth.

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