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WINTER BROTHERS

A season at the edge of America

by Ivan Doig

December-January      The Boston Bird

Day one

. . . Capt John was here today, Swan writes from a century ago, and I related to him a dream I had last night, in which I saw several Indians I formerly knew who are dead. John said it was a sign the "memelose" or dead people are my friends and I would soon see that they would do something to show their friendship. . . .

Fifteen past nine. Out in the dark the Sound wind visits favorite trees, is shaken off, hankers along the valley in stubborn search. The gusting started up hours ago, during the wink-like pause of daylight that is December evening, and by now seems paced to try to last the night. Until the wind arrived the day was nordic: sunless but silent and dry. The neighborhood's lion-colored cat, inspector general of such weather, all morning tucked himself atop the board fence outside the north window as I began to read Swan. Out of his furry doze each several minutes a sharp cat ear would twitch; give the air a tan flick just to be certain it still could. Then the self-hug into snooze again.

The breakers, now Swan the third day after his dream, tore up the beach and rooted out immense numbers of clams which were thrown up by the surf. I gathered a few buckets full and soon the squaws and Indians came flocking up like so many gulls and gathered at least fifty bushels. . . .

Nine eighteen. I see, by leaning to hear into the wind, that the night black window which faces west off the end of my desk collects the half of me above the desktop and its spread sheaf of copied diary pages into quiet of my own. I think of another set of Swan's words in the untold lode I am starting on. The time he tells of a canoe crew of Makahs, Captain John's coastal tribe, stopping for the night at the cabin of an Olympic Peninsula settler; of

how they swung the canoe mast wrong while stowing it and crashed an end through the hard-bought one window of the homestead cabin; of the settler's highest fury, as if they had shattered a diamond. This suburban house of mine glints with thirteen more windows besides the glass my reflection occupies, windows to every direction and inclination. Wobbly mast bearers could pass none of my walls without creating crystal.

Nine twenty. Capt John told me, this the morning following the beach bonanza, that the cause of the great quantity of clams on the beach yesterday was the dead people I dreamed about the other night and they put the clams there to show their friendship. . . .

Nine twenty-one, and now winter. I notice the numbered throb of the moment--this arrival of season at precisely 2121 hours of December 21--which takes us through solstice as if we too, the wind and I and the fencetop cat and yes, Swan and the restless memories of departed Makahs, are being delivered by a special surf. The lot of us, now auspiciously into the coastal time of beginnings. Perhaps I need a Captain John to pronounce full meaning from that.

No, better. I am going to have Swan's measuring sentences, winterlong.

Day two

His name was James Gilchrist Swan, and I have felt my pull toward him ever since some forgotten frontier pursuit or another landed me into the Coastal region of history where he presides, meticulous as a usurer's clerk, diarying and diarying that life of his, four generations and as many lightyears from my own. You have met him yourself in some other form--the remembered neighbor or family member, full of years while you just had begun to grow into them, who had been in a war or to a far place and could confide to you how such vanished matters were. The tale-bringer sent to each of us by the past.

That day, whenever it was, when I made the sidetrip into archival box after box of Swan's diaries and began to realize that they held four full decades of his life and at least 2,500,000 handwritten words. And what life, what sketching words.)

This morning we discovered a large wolf in the brook dead from the effects of some strychnine we had put out. It was a she wolf very large and evidently had five whelps. Maggs and myself skinned her and I boiled the head to get the skull... . Mr. Fitzgerald of Sequim Prairie better known as "Skip," walked off the wharf near the Custom House last night and broke his neck. The night was very dark and he mistook the way... . Jimmy had the night mare last night and made a great howling. This morning he told me that the memelose were after him and made him crazy. I told him the memelose were dead squid which he ate for supper very heartily....Mr Tucker very ill with his eye, his face is badly swelled. This evening got Kichook's Cowitchan squaw to milk her breast into a cup, and I then bathed Mr Tucker's eye with it....

I recall that soon I gave up jotting notes and simply thumbed and read. At closing hour, Swan got up from the research table with me. I would write of him sometime, I had decided. Do a magazine piece or two, for I was in the business then of making those smooth packets of a few thousand words. Just use this queer indefatigable diarist Swan some small rapid way as a figurine of the Pacific Northwest past.

Swan refused to stay small, and rapid was the one word that never visited his pencils and pens. When, eight, ten years ago, I took one segment of his frontier life and tried to lop it into magazine-article length, loose ends hung everywhere. As well write about Samuel Pepys solely in terms of his office hours at the British admiralty. Another, later try, I set out merely to summarize Swan--oyster entrepreneur, schoolteacher, railroad speculator, amateur ethnologist, lawyer, judge, homesteader, linguist, ship's outfitter, explorer, customs collector, author, small-town bureaucrat, artist, clerk--and surrendered in dizziness, none of the spectrum having shown his true and lasting occupation, diarist. This, I at last told myself, wants more time than I can ever give it.

Until now. This winter will be the season of Swan; rather, of Swan and me and those constant diaries. Day by day, a logbook of what is uppermost in any of the three of us.

It is a three-month venture that I have mulled these past years of my becoming less headlong, and more and more aware that I dwell

in a community of time as well as of people. That I should know more than I do about this other mysterious citizenship, how far it goes, where it touches.

And the twin whys: why it has me invest my life in one place instead of another, and why for me that place happens to be western. More and more it seems to me that the westernness of my existence in this land is some consequence which has to do with that community of time, one of the terms of my particular citizenship in it. America began as west, the direction off the ends of the docks of Europe. Then the first comer comes from the east of this continent to its west, advance parties of the American quest for place (position too, maybe, but that is a pilgrimage that interests me less), imprinted our many contour lines of frontier. And next, it still is happening, the spread of national civilization absorbed those lines. Except that markings, streaks and whorls of the west and the past, are left in some of us.

Because, then, of this western pattern so stubbornly within my life, I am interested now in Swan as a west comer, and stayer. Early, among the very earliest, in stepping the paths of impulse that pull across America's girth of plains and over its continental summit and at last reluctantly nip off at the surf from the Pacific, Swan has gone before me through this matter of siting oneself specifically here: west.

The companion then, I feel an urgency to spend this winter with; meet day by day on the broad seasonal ground of time, here along the continental edge that drew us both.

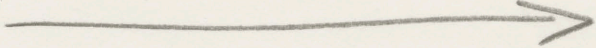
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If Swan attracts me in the way ~~that~~ an oracle such as the Makahs' Captain John attracted him--that here flashes the bard of a vivid tribe--it is the diaries ~~that~~ <sup>which</sup> throw Swan's particular glints.

The diaries dazzle and dazzle me, first simply by their total and variety: out of their gray archival boxes at the University of Washington library, they could be the ~~entire~~ secondhand wares of an eccentric stationer dreamed up by Charles Dickens. Some are mere notebooks with cheap marbled covers, and occasionally even a school exercise book will sidle into the collection, but most are formal annual volumes (for the purpose of registering events of past, present, and future occurrence, announces the opening page of the 1860 ~~diary~~ <sup>version</sup>) and a good number of them ~~display~~ have deft clasps to snug themselves closed from outsiders' eyes. It ~~marginally~~ <sup>marginally</sup> Swan diaries look closer alike than cousins, exaggerates to say no two are alike, but I haven't yet turned up three ~~any one~~ <sup>any one</sup> of a kind. Black-covered and green, tan and faded maroon, what ~~the~~ <sup>they</sup> diaries do have in common is that nearly all are small enough to fit into the palm of a hand, or a busy pocket. Those that won't are ~~great tomes,~~ <sup>actual ledgers</sup> such as the aristocrat of the congregation, 1866, ~~A fat tan ledger~~ some nine inches wide and twelve high, ~~it weighs~~ <sup>weighing</sup> four and a quarter pounds and ~~displaying~~ <sup>displaying</sup> an elaborately hinged and embossed spine and a cover panel of leather into the middle of which has been tooled in rich half inch letters J.G. Swan. I can scarcely wait for 1866--lay it open to the first of its ~~lordly~~ <sup>lordly</sup> 380 pages and handwriting neat as small embroidery ~~begins~~ <sup>instantly</sup> to recite: Diary and private journal of James G. Swan, being a continuation of daily record commencing July 1862 at the Makah Indian Agency Neah Bay, Washington Territory--but what browsing I have done into any of the diaries #



has been seductive. Opening the pages of Swan's years is like entering a room filled with jugglers and tumblers and swallows of flame, performance crowding performance. Went to see John this morning, found him better. All the Indians except his squaws and children have left the lodge. John is alone in one corner, surrounded by a mat screen. He tells me that the small pox will collect in his head and when it leaves him it will come out of the top of his head like a puff of smoke. To prevent it spreading he has a large hole left open in the roof directly over his head, through which the sickness is expected to escape....Last evening when the gentlemen from the Cutter were here, Capt Williams asked me for a drink of water. I handed him a dipper full from my pail, and he found a live toad in it which I ~~had~~ had dipped up from the brook....Bricktop the blacksmith and some other roughs got on a spree & took Hernandez the loony shoemaker to Hunt's Hotel and made him treat. John Cornish was there and stripped himself to his drawers to fight....Swan records the weather morning-afternoon-night; notes down when salmonberry has popped into spring bloom, when autumn's geese begin to aim past to the southern horizon; logs all ships that sail past his eyes and on along the Strait of Juan de Fuca or Puget Sound; remarks his off days (Severe attack of



neuralgia today Dr. Minn tried to cure it injecting morphine or something of the sort under the skin on my left cheek--This checked the pain but made me feel dizzy & sick at the stomach--the remedy was worse than the disease) and the other coastal days that shone as doubloon-bright as the most exhilarating hours anywhere; keeps account of letters written and received, and books borrowed and lent, and of his exceedingly ramshackle finances. His jottings overflow the day-by-day pages onto the inside covers of the diaries: mailing addresses <sup>of relatives in his native New England,</sup> ~~(including Matilda's and those of Swan's two brothers in the East),~~ Indian words and their definitions, sketches. On one back page a little

Indian girl on the wharf at Seattle, the child prettily prone on the planks as she ~~holds~~ <sup>directs</sup> a tiny fishing ~~pole~~ <sup>stick-and-string</sup> to the water and ~~directs~~ a level stare at the pencilman creating her. Elsewhere, the unmistakable pyramidal outline of Mount Baker, ~~the~~ <sup>wide</sup> dominant peak of the Strait country; how many thousand times Swan saw its white cone. On an inside cover inspiration of one more sort, a pasted-in clipping of a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier: Though dim as yet in tint and line/We trace Thy picture's wise design/And thank Thee that our age supplies/The dark relief of sacrifice/Thy will be done!

Terrific as all the expended diary energy is, page upon page and volume after volume, the simple stubborn dailiness of Swan's achievement seems to me even more dazing. It compares, say, to that of a carpenter whanging an hour's hammerstrokes on the same framework each morning for forty years, or a monk or nun spending ~~the same span in recitation of missals.~~ <sup>that span of time tending the same vineyard.</sup> Or to put it more closely, a penman who a page or so a day writes out a manuscript the ~~span of five copies of War and Peace,~~ <sup>equivalent length</sup> accomplishing the masterwork in frontier town and Indian village and sometimes no community at all.

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¶ For example, this:

This is the 18th day since Swell was shot and there is no offensive smell from the corpse. It may be accounted for in this manner. He was shot through the body & afterwards washed in the breakers--consequently all the blood in him must have run out. He was then rolled up tight in 2 new blankets and put into a new box nailed up strong.

Like Captain John, Swell was a chieftain of the Makah tribe of Cape Flattery, that westmost prow of this coast. Swell also was Swan's best-regarded friend among the coastal tribes of Washington Territory, a man he had voyaged with, learned legends from. The diary pages show them steadily swapping favors: ~~Now~~ Swell detailing for Swan the Makahs' skill at hunting whales, now Swan painting for Swell in red and black his name and a horse on his canoe sail. Swell said he always went faster in his canoe than the other Indians...like a horse, so he wanted to have one painted... On yet another diary end-page, there is the roughed outline of a galloping horse and above it in block letters the name SWELL, with five-pointed stars fore and aft. If Swan carried out the design, Swell sailed under the gaudiest canvas in the North Pacific.

I know the beach at Crescent Bay where Swell's life was snapped off. Across on the Canadian

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shore of the Strait of Juan de Fuca the lights of modern Victoria now spread as white embers atop the burn-dark rim of coastline, and west from the city occasional lighthouses make blinks against the black as the Strait seeks toward the Pacific. But on Swell's final winter night in 1861, only a beach campfire at Crescent on our southern shore flashed bright enough to attract the eye, and Swell misread the marker of flame as an encampment of traveling members of his own tribe. Instead, he stepped from his canoe to find that the overnigheters were of the Elwha village of the Clallam tribe, among them chanced to be a particular rival of Swell, and his bullet spun the Makah dead into the cold quick surf.

It was a killing less casual than the downtown deaths my morning newspaper brings me three or four times a week--the Elwhas and the Makahs at least had the excuse of lifetimes of quarrel--or that I might go see in aftermath, eligible as I am for all manner of intrusion because of being a writer, were I to accompany the Seattle homicide squad. James G. Swan did go hurrying to be beside Swell's corpse, and there the first of our differences is marked.

A morning soon after learning of Swell's death, Swan strolled into the Elwha village. Charley, the murderer, then got up and made a speech. He said that he shot Swell for two reasons, one of which was, that the Mackahs had killed two of the Elwha's a few months previous, and they were determined to kill a Mackah chief to pay for it. And the other reason was, that Swell had taken his squaw away, and would not return either the woman or the fifty blankets he had paid for her.

Swan was not swerved. I could not help feeling while standing up alongside this murderer. . . that I would gladly give a pull at the rope that should hang him. . . The day's chastisement was administered with vocal cords rather than hemp, however. My object was not to punish or kill Indians, but to recover property. Swan haggled out of Charley Swell had been carrying as cargo for a trader, the potweary several blankets and a dozen yards of calico, and as I had no authority to make them disgorge any other plunder called it sufficient.

Swan next carried the matter of Swan's death to the federal Indian agent for Washington Territory. Met inconclusion there. Sent a seething letter to the newspaper in the territorial capital of Olympia. . . an Indian peaceably passing on his way home in his canoe, laden with white men's goods. . . foully murdered. . . too good an Indian and too valuable a man. . . to have his murder go unavenged. . . agents of our munificent government have not the means at their disposal to defray the expenses of going to arrest the murderer. . . And at last canoed once more along the Strait to accompany Swell, still nailed up strong, to burial at the Makah village of Neah Bay.

At Neah, Swell's brother Peter came and wished me to go with him and select a suitable spot to bury Swell. . .

I did as he desired--marked out the spot and dug out the first sand.

And this further: <sup>Peter</sup> ~~He~~ also brought up the large Tomanawas boards, <sup>stand as</sup> the Makahs' cedar tableaux of magic which would ~~be~~ the grave's monument, of Swell's for me to paint anew. . .

There then is Swan, or at least a shinnying start on him. A penman from Boston asked to trace afresh the sacred designs of a murdered Northwest chieftain. I can think of few circumstances less likely, unless they are my own. <sup>The</sup> an onlooker who has set himself <sup>this</sup> a winter's appointment back <sup>into the last century</sup> ~~so many dozens of years~~ and across geography to the Olympic Peninsula and elsewhere along the coastal tracery of Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and indeed into the life of a person born <sup>ten dozen</sup> ~~121~~ years before him.

Day three

A phrase recalled this morning from John McNulty when he wrote of having journeyed to his ancestors' Ireland: that he had gone "back where I had never been."

Our perimeters are strange, unexpectedly full of flex when we touch against them just right. A winter such as this of mine-- or any season, of a half hour's length or a year's, spent in hearing some venturer whose lifespan began long before our own-- I think must be a kind of border crossing allowed us by time. Special temporary passage permitted us if we seek out the right company for it, guides such as Swan willing to lead us back where we have never been.

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So Swan on one side of the century-line, myself on the other; bearded watchful men both, edge-walkers of the continent, more interested in one another's company than the rest of the world is interested in ours, but how much deeply alike and different? That is one of the matters Swan is to tell me, these journal days when I stretch across to his footings of time.

James G. Swan had hastened west in the same scurry as many thousands of other mid-nineteenth-century Americans. Their word isn't much known today, but at the time they were called argonauts, the seekers drawn by the finds of gold in California streambeds as if they had glimpsed wisps of the glittering fleece that lured Jason and his Greeks. Like Jason's,

the journey for many of them was by ship, the very impatience for wealth to come evidently weighting the sailing vessels to slowness. Swan stepped aboard the Rob Roy in Boston harbor in late January of 1850, climbed off at San Francisco a half year later.

What exact cache of promises and excuses this man of New England left behind him can't be known in detail, but they likely <sup>amounted to</sup> were considerable. Something of the bulk and awkwardness of my own, I suppose, when I veered <sup>off</sup> from Montana ranching to college and a typewriter. Swan was 32 years old when he set foot on the Pacific Coast. By the time of his birth in 1818--Turgenev's year, Karl Marx's year--in the north-of-Boston village of Medford, the Swan family name already had been <sup>transplanted from Yorkshire to</sup> in Massachusetts for eighteen decades, evidently the devout achieving sort of New England clan which began to count itself gentry from the moment the Indians could be elbowed out of sight into the forest. (Swan himself was known to mention the family point of pride that his great-grandfather had been a landowner on the N.W. side of Bunker Hill, the Revolutionary War battleground.) Merchants, doctors, educators,

lawyers populate the erect generations. Swan's own older brothers stayed standard, Samuel as physician, Benjamin a minister.

But not James. He evidently <sup>reached down</sup> took the excuse that occasional seafarers had cropped up in the family--his own father, said to have been lost





in a gale while captaining a brig back from Africa in 1823; a legendarily adventurous uncle who had sailed in an early fur-trading vessel to the Pacific Northwest--and in his mid-teens started in on the try of a waterfront life in Boston.

Dallying around the docks, first as a clerk with a shipping firm and eventually as a merchandiser of ships' supplies, must have suited the young Swan comfortably enough. With forests of sail sweeping back and forth before his eyes and the new steam vessels shuddering to life around him, this adventurer of the waterfront shows no sign that he made any ocean voyage of his own until he was twenty-three. Then he embarked on a Boston to Liverpool jaunt with a chore or two of his employer's business attached and seems to have been content to do it just the once.

That once to Britain, however, put Swan's writing hand into motion, and by my terms the wan sheaf of paper that has survived comes as ancient and entrancing and intriguingly hued as a cave painting. The thirty brownish tatty-edged long manuscript pages are by a decade the earliest of all Swan's surviving paperwork, and must be a version he copied from a pocket notebook--it would have been the start of that habit, too--as soon as he returned to America. Any comparable paperwork having to do with my family would be drily governmental, in the Scottish archives, and likely would show sundry Doigs irretrievably in arrears on <sup>the</sup> ~~our~~ croft taxes or enlisting one of our number to die an infantry death in Madras or the Crimea. It is a bonus of archival magic for me, <sup>then</sup>, that the pages of Swan's life from his own hand begin here on the second of March, 1841, and recite the two months in which he sailed the Atlantic and rambled interestedly around Britain.

The wilderness of waters which surround us on his crossing; the storm which tossed a fellow passenger beneath the table and his breakfast after him, his head was covered with a shower of fried eggs which looked for all the world like doubloons stuck in his hair; arrival to Liverpool and St. Patrick's Day, the Irish have been walking in procession the whole day. . . all rigged out with green sashes and sprigs of shamrock, a species of weed similar to the chick weed. . . . Weather, conveyance, schedule, meals, roadside fields, birds of those fields, even Swan's morning disposition: I was very stupid today, the sixteenth of March, from the want of sleep last night and for the first time since I left home I felt really homesick & would have been glad to have been home but as soon as I walked out I felt much relieved & hope to get my thoughts on a business train after a good nights rest. All, all come on report at the nib of his pen. So too the social impress of Britain of Dickens' time. Liverpool astounds and horrifies this Bostonian with the hurly-burly of its streets: . . . female scavengers. . . go round with baskets and collect all the manure & offal in the city which they put in heaps & offer then for sale. Their heaps are bought by the gardeners for a few pence to enrich the garden beds--It struck me as the filthiest work I had ever seen a woman engaged in & more especially as they used nothing but their hands to work with. Then the proverbial fishwives, a queer lot of beings & probably the lowest of the human race. . . . Quickly the unsurprising exclamation: Liverpool is a shocking dirty place & I am sick enough of it. But Edinburgh is beguiling, the streets are laid out with a good deal of taste, and the trip southward a lark: In the carriage with me were a party of

Irish Gentlemen & Ladies. . . They all took me for a Scotchman & as I had just left Scotland I could talk to them finely. London proves to be downright wondrous, walked two hours this morning in one direction & every step of the way the street was crowded with people & vehicles. His young American eyes have not seen the like except possibly on a Boston market day when a drawbridge over the Charles River would hold up traffic, the crowd then is just the same as the streets are here all the time from sunrise to sunset. He glimpses the young queen, Victoria, trundling out of the Buckingham Palace grounds on her way to church. . . had a good sight of her face as she was looking out the carriage window. <sup>she had on</sup> ~~in a~~ little blue silk bonnet. He is drawn back and back to the stupendous dome of St. Paul's, even though the Easter service there seems to him mumbled over in a very bad manner. Tours the new museum of wax figures shown by an old French woman & her son--the Tussauds--who are making a deal of money out of this affair. Rides the night mail train from London back to Liverpool: they go with the greatest velocity sometimes 50 miles an hour-- about as fast as you could travel on the planet at the time--only stopping to get water.

Swan-among-the-Britons arrives at the last line of his journey having viewed a great deal to admire & much to censure, and that already is the exact Swan style I have begun to find amid his accumulating day by day pages on my desk, here at our shared ledge of the American landscape: banquet of details, ready snifters of opinion.

Something else of moment happened to Swan that year of 1841. He married rather above himself. Matilda Loring, of a prominent Boston printing and publishing family, a small neatly-built woman with a firm line of jaw, became his bride on the twenty-sixth of October.

Of the courtship and its aftermath, Swan's archival heap of paper is all too conspicuously silent. But from the circumstances, this reads as one of those marriages where it afterward is unclear whether the wife chided because the husband took on the world's whiskey as a personal challenge, or the husband fled into the bottle because the wife was a shrike. What is plain enough, even in the thumbing scan of his life I have been doing ~~yesterday and today~~ <sup>these first days</sup>, is that Swan continued to court the bottle long after, in the eighth year of marriage to Matilda, he pointed himself west across America.

I hunger to have overheard just how he said that decision. Swan and Matilda were living apart by the year 1849--he in a Boston boarding house handy to his waterfront life; she in Chelsea with the two children of the divided household, four-year-old Ellen and seven-year-old Charles-- and did Swan simply come onto the porch one day and offer, Matilda, I have been thinking I will go to California?

The many weeks to round Cape Horn in 1850, the long climbing voyage along the Pacific shores, arrival: then Swan, to judge by his readiest recollection, was like a good many of us ever since in not quite knowing what to make of California. Dozens, scores of deserted ships clogged the San Francisco harbor he sailed into, a fleet of Marie Celestes left ghostly by crews which had swarmed to the goldstrikes.

Swan too completed the pilgrimage up the Sacramento to the mining camps, but only as a purser on a river steamer. I find that he hesitated in that job, and at ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> maritime firm's dockside office in San Francisco, for only a matter of weeks, then signed onto a schooner bound for Hawaii to take aboard a cargo of potatoes.

Why Swan so promptly went sailing off for spuds is not at all clear to me, but his ear must have heard sweet somethings out there in the Pacific. The jaunt into the ocean seems to have been instructive enough. (A Swan proclamation from this period of his life: I never yet found that information was useless to any one.) He managed to linger at Lahaina on the Isle of Maui for twenty-five days, and one of his rare surviving letters,


to Matilda gives the islands and islanders a dozen pages of the same blunderbuss observation Liverpool and London had received: . . . on great occasions or when the white men will pay the expenses they get up a feast called a Lu wow. . . This Lu wow consists of a series of Baked dishes such as Dogs Hogs Turkeys fowls fish Fruits and Greens. . . Their native dances being prohibited are only given by stealth or by express invitation of the whites. They are called Hoolah hoolah. I was desirous of seeing one. . . The natives all call themselves mickonaree or missionary which is the term they use to express their ideas of christianity. . . there are but very few really sincere & devout persons among them. and are mostly like one I saw in Mr. Bolles store, who was cutting up some capers, when Mr B remarked, I thought you was a missionary Yes said the fellow pointing to his mouth "me mickonary here, all rest no mickonary."

Back from that sudden Hawaiian sojourn Swan at once settled again into a dockside way of life in San Francisco, again as a clerk for a ship-outfitting firm, through the rest of 1850, and through 1851, and through most of 1852. Money always slid through his pockets almost without stopping and he evidently found life sufficiently interesting by just being away from Massachusetts and alongside the rougher torrent of California waterfront traffic. His routine indeed seems to have been all but identical to the career ~~Swan had left~~ <sup>left behind him</sup> in Boston except that he could do it at about half speed and without regard for hometown opinion: laxities which

have been high among the rewards of the west ever since there was an America. <sup>4</sup> Then, late in 1852, down from the Oregon country to San Francisco arrived Charles J.W. Russell.

A self-described oyster entrepreneur, this visitor from the shaggy north was better portrayed by Swan as possessing a good deal of the romancing spirit of the Baron Munchausen. Russell had materialized in Oregon Territory in dream of some real estate scheme at the mouth of the Columbia River, found that he was a number of generations ahead of his time with that notion and instead ended up at Shoalwater Bay, some few miles north of the Columbia, where he began dispatching shiploads of oysters to San Francisco. Even at the distance of 130 years the gent has a sheen. Russell in his swanky spielster's way invited Swan to the oystering enterprise and Swan seems to have accepted as rapidly as he could get the words out of his mouth.


I have prowled the Washington coastline where Swan plopped ashore at the end of 1852, and a misted, spongy, ooze-ful kind of place it is. On the western rim of bay what appears from a distance to be a line of white-gabled houses proves to be the foaming surf of the Pacific. The saltwater reaches hungrily in through this entrance and in a momentous splatter of inlets and fingers, the bay lying stretched from north to south for twenty-five miles, and nearly ten across its greatest width, mingles with the inflow of half a dozen sizable rivers and who knows how many creeks and seeps. This mix yields a maximum of tan marshes and gray muddy tideflats, twenty-seven of these Shoalwater sloughs having been granted names by mapmakers and almost as many more not been thought worth the effort. Yet around its eastern extent the squishy bay surprises a visitor with sudden firm timber-topped cliffs about a hundred feet high. Banks of a



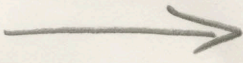
sandy clay, Swan once categorized them, intermingled with strata of shells and remains of ancient forest-trees that for ages have been buried.

All in all, a vast estuarine pudding in a clay bowl. One of the few advances since Swan's time has been the amendment of the big shallow bay's name from Shoalwater to the less embarrassing Willapa.

When Swan showed up here, more than likely shaking the rain off his hatbrim, Shoalwater Bay's sum of civilization totted up as a few huts, a temporary crew of sawyers cutting pilings, a shifting population of members of the Chinook and Chehalis tribes, and fourteen white "residents" who pottered away at oystering or homesteading. Fourteen kinds of Swan, it could be said. The whites hired the Indians to do the bulk of the oyster harvesting, the Indians held their own ebb-and-flow view of life. Put at its more generous, this colony on the eastern shore of Shoalwater Bay in the early 1850s--Bruceport, it was dubbed, in memory of the Schooner Robert Bruce, which caught fire and was <sup>burned to a hulk</sup> lost there--amounted more to an episode of prolonged beach combing than a serious effort at enterprise. And Swan, stretching ever more distance between himself and those 220 years of New England rectitude in his family line, Swan fit with the idling oysterers like a pinky in an opera glove.



# \_\_\_\_\_  
# Much of the lulling appeal of that beachside life, as Swan recounts it, was simply the stomach's common sense. The bay in those days set a kind of floating feast, offering as it did clams, crabs, shrimp, mussels, sand lobster, salmon, sturgeon, trout, turbot, sole, flounder, and, <sup>of course</sup> naturally, oysters. The facet of Swan that was an interested and inventive cook--his victuals often make a sudden savory appearance in his pages; among the Indian delicacies he notes down as having tried and liked are seal liver, cow parsnip, and cold raccoon--couldn't help but prize this easy bounty. Just once in these plump years does Swan undergo a hungry time, and that was during one hectic onset of winter <sup>spent under a</sup> when he was <sup>shared roof</sup> ~~trying to homestead~~ with an old whaling captain named Purrington. The





captain was famous for cooking every thing that had ever lived. We had eaten of young eagles, hawks, owls, lynx, beaver, seal, otter, gulls, pelican, and, finally wound up with crow; and the crow was the worst of the lot. The captain once tried to bake a skunk, but not having properly cleaned it, it smelt so unsavory when the bake-kettle was opened that he was forced to throw skunk and kettle into the river, which he did with a sigh, remarking what a pity it was that it smelled so strong, when it was baked so nice and brown.

While Swan carried on his love affair with Shoalwater's food and leisure he likely flirted often enough with alcohol as well. The bayside residents, white and native, emerge out of his words and those of others as a boozy bunch who did as much roistering as oystering. One ~~the~~ Fourth of July, ~~of 1853,~~ to take the prime frolicsome example, after orations and eating and a feu-de-joie by the guns and rifles of the whole company the Shoalwater patriots stumbled onto the inspiration to close the performances for the day by going on top of the cliff opposite, and make a tremendous big blaze. They found a colossal hollow cedar stump, filled it to the brim with dry spruce limbs, ~~torched it off.~~ <sup>the pyre</sup> It made the best bonfire I ever saw, Swan recollected in considerable understatement, and after burning all night and part of the next day, finally set fire to the forest, which continued to burn for several months, till the winter rains finally extinguished it. <sup>91</sup> A jolly conflagration of four or five months duration couldn't have been entirely usual, but much other unsober behavior was. And when Swan remarked of one of his compatriots that like all the rest of the frontier people, he was fond of Old Rye, the unwritten admission

is there that ~~also~~ among the frontier people was numbered ~~one~~ James G. Swan.

In the spring of 1853 when the region north of the Columbia River was hived off from Oregon to become Washington Territory, several of the Shoalwater oyster boys had been inspired to file for land claims. Swan selected a site at the mouth of what is now the Bone River--the Querquelin, it was called by the Indians: Mouse River--on the bay's northeastern shore. Reasoning that the absence of a wife by some three thousand miles didn't really lessen the marital status all that much, he claimed 160 acres for himself and a second 160 for Matilda.

A half-mile square of frontier conquered by ink. I was perfectly delighted with the place, Swan enthuses in one breath, and notes in the next that the unwooded portion was overgrown with nettles and ferns three feet high. In that divided comment he sounds precisely like my kin who grew up on our pair of Doig homesteads south of Helena, entranced to the end of their lives with memory of the blue-timbered glory of the Big Belt mountains and still furious with the impossible winter snows as well.

Swan and the convivial Captain Purrington eventually set about to build a cabin on the new riverside estate. Their cabin work went at a creep. You can all but see the pair of them, day upon day, sighing regret at the blisters on their hands and settling onto a handy log for Captain Purrington to recite another sea story. With winter stalking in fast they at last cobbled together a shack from the split cedar boards of an abandoned Indian lodge ~~and~~ ~~nd~~ Swan inventively masoned a huge fireplace out of clay blocks cut from a nearby cliff. The first real storm of winter made mud of his handiwork, sluiced a couple of bushels of coals and ashes

into the middle of the room, and very nearly set the place ablaze. Not long after, Swan catches a schooner back to San Francisco, to clerk under a dry roof until spring.

Fresh dollars in his pocket, he is found again at Shoalwater at the start of summer, 1854. For the first of numerous times in his life, Swan now wangles a brief, modest niche in the federal payroll. He was appointed assistant customs collector, for that portion of the coast north of the Columbia, including Shoalwater Bay and Gray's Harbor to Cape Flattery; the duties of the office being to report all vessels arriving at or departing from Shoal-water Bay, and to keep a diligent watch on the coast to see that none of the Russian or Hudson Bay Companies' vessels came around either for smuggling or trading with the Indians.

Since this comprised an all-but empty stretch of shore, with only the lackadaisical oysterers at Shoalwater, a handful of stump farmers and sawmillers up around Grays Harbor, and the tiny tribal settlements at a few river mouths, Swan's precinct seems to have been spectacularly free of smuggling prospects. The only time he is on record as having had to exert himself was when the Indians, as a joke, lured him several days up the coast to check on a vessel which turned out to be a U.S. Geological Survey steamship. Swan being Swan, he did not much mind the futile jaunt. So far as related to smuggling, I had walked sixty miles up the beach for no purpose, but I did not regret having started, as I had seen a line of coast which few, if any white men had been over before.

Months slid past, years began to go. Yet not nearly all of Swan's time at Shoalwater could have been spent promenading the coast or aiming

himself into the bottom of a bottle. He has left us a frontier view greatly wider and deeper than that. The maraud of <sup>a</sup> ~~smallpox~~ <sup>outbreak,</sup> which merely made the white men ill but slaughtered the Chinooks and Chehalis, <sup>the</sup> pride of place when selecting a homestead site, <sup>the</sup> casual reach of distance as Swan strolled sixty miles of wild coast to gaze upon an innocent steamship. <sup>these</sup> carry a sense of this rough margin of the west as true as a thumb testing the teeth of a rip saw. And all of ~~it~~ <sup>them</sup> derive from Swan as serious and published author, in a book I have been quoting from ever since he squished ashore at Shoalwater. (If Swan was diarying regularly in these years, and I judge he was not, although he mentions having written and lost a collection of notes about the Indians, the volumes never have come to sight.) The Northwest Coast, he titled the work, then thought he had better elucidate: Or Three Years' Residence in Washington Territory.

This coastal drifter, then, this dabbling man born <sup>two decades</sup> or so before my own great-grandfather, spent part of his life at the enterprise I do, shaping words into print. Whether the fact nudges Swan closer into resemblance of me or me to Swan I am not ready to say, but certainly it fetches both of us into the same cottage industry at least some hours of the week. I imagine that Swan, like me, when he held pen in hand for another chapter of Northwest Coast or, as later, to begin an article for a frontier newspaper had his times of wishing he had chosen some sounder cottage job, such as lacemaking or raising chinchillas. I imagine as well that in the next minute or so he was knuckle-deep into the words again. Cottagers have to be like that.

Harper & Brothers brought out Northwest Coast in 1857, and with its lore of baked skunks and patriotic pyromania, the tome stands as a jaunty grandfather of us all who face west above our typewriters. But more than that. This book of Swan's time at Shoalwater conveys, as he would in the diary pages for all the length of his life, his rare knack of looking at the coastal natives as flesh and blood rather than the frontier's tribal rubble.<sup>9</sup> He does not go all the way, sometimes dwelling overmuch on the simplicities of the bay's natives while he and the other oyster boys were not exactly an advanced institute themselves. Oftener than not, however, his remarks carry uncommon sympathy and insight about the Chinooks and Chehalis:

The Indians can see but little or no difference between their system of Tomanawos and our own views as taught them. For instance, the talipus, or fox, is their emblem of the creative power; the swispee, or duck, that of wisdom. And they say that the Boston people, or Americans, have for their Tomanawos the wheark, or eagle and that the King George, or English people, have a lion for their Tomanawos.

Or again: One day, while being more than usually inquisitive, old Suis. . . after trying to make me understand that the names I was asking about had no meaning, at last said, "Why, you white people have names like ours; some mean something, and others mean nothing. I know your name, Swan, is like our word Cocumb, and means a big bird; and Mr. Lake's name is for water, like Shoalwater Bay. But what does Mr. Russell's or Baldt's, or Champ's or Hillyer's, or Sweeney's, or Weldon's name mean?"

I told her I did not know. "Well," she replied, "so it is with us.

We don't know what those names you have asked mean; all we know is that they were the names of our ancestors--elip tillicums, or first people."

Thoughtful jots about first people, and the tamanoas of whites. The time of comradeship with Swell, and the honor to repaint his funeral boards, lay not so far ahead.

With Swan, you never know where a competence is going to lead, if indeed it ever ambles anywhere. It ~~was~~<sup>is</sup> his skill with the native lore and languages which now transports him for awhile out of the Pacific Northwest. In the mid-1850's territorial officials of Washington and Oregon began to summon the Northwest tribes into treaty councils. These worked out as was usual in our continental history. the Indians got a chance for soulful rhetoric, and the whites got the land. When this ritualistic process reached southwesternmost Washington with a treaty parley at a site on the Chehalis River in February, 1855, Swan inevitably was on hand, Territorial Governor Isaac I. Stevens ~~had~~<sup>having</sup> invited him to come over from the coast and interpret. Swan noted At the riverbank congress, ~~Swan noted with sympathy the objection of a Chinook chief to the governor's offhand plan to place the assembled tribes on a single reservation. We are not friends, and if we went together we should fight, and soon we would all be killed.~~ But he noted as well a chance for himself among the assemblage, and it was not on the Indian side of the campfire. Grasping at the coat tails of Governor Stevens and other budding politicians of the Territory, by late Swan the frontiersman 1855 he pulled himself to Washington, D.C.

First his follow of Charles J.W. Munchausen-Russell up to Shoalwater, now this traipse back around the continent behind political patrons. Moves of this sort cause me to think Swan must have been something like a

jack in life's deck, not a man of an instinct to be king. A bit of a courtier, say. In any case, his trajectory now is from the frontier Washington to the governmental Washington, where <sup>eventually</sup> somebody, and it is not evident who or how, arranges for him the brief job of writing about the burial customs of the Chinooks for the U.S. Indian Bureau's history of American tribes. In late 1857--another pointed fact about Swan is that a year or two could slip by before he turned to any next task-- he becomes secretary to Stevens, newly elected the territorial delegate to Congress. Swan ~~does clerky chores for Stevens until~~ <sup>When</sup> Congress recesses and his benefactor has to return home to woo votes, Swan himself then ~~turns~~ <sup>swerves</sup> like a windvane to the Pacific Northwest again.

~~But not again to Shoalwater and the oystering life.~~

On some amalgam of Stevens' advice that the community might be a comer and his own none too well-formed notion that he maybe would set up a supply station for whaling ships, Swan decides this time his site will be the customs port for Washington Territory, an aspiring frontier village called Port Townsend.

The location was, and is, one of the most intriguing on this continent. The Strait of Juan de Fuca swings broadly in from the Pacific, a fat fjord between the Olympic Mountains of Washington and the lower peaks British Columbia's of Vancouver Island, until at last, after a hundred miles and precisely at the brink of land which holds Port Townsend the span of water turns southward in a long, sinuous stretch like an arm delving to the very bottom of a barrel. The topmost portion is Admiralty Inlet, the rest of the thrusting arm of channel is Puget Sound. I live at its elbow. This small valley which holds my house is one of the wrinkles in the Sound's tremendous timber-green sleeves.

So it is that there is a route I walk regularly, a few hundred strides along this suburban valley, to the bluff above my house for a studying look north- westward, to where the Sound bends off toward the Strait. Around that horizon, at six on the morning of February 13, 1859: Swan awakes aboard the schooner Dashaway to find the ship passing the lighthouse at Dungeness Spit, coming on the wind into these waters where he will spend the rest of his years.



Day four

Sour ink today, Swan's and mine both. Again I am alone in the house, ~~six days~~ <sup>a week</sup> now, and the fact echoes. I miss Carol like the inner-ear cog that produces sense of balance. Need her lanky stride to unsilence the hallway to this writing room, her staccato typing to stir the air, her grin to tweak my musing. I even, ~~Death Valley~~ <sup>uttermost</sup> of desperation this must be, miss her goddamn puns.

The cottony moodless weather <sup>which arrived yesterday</sup> does not help. No winter I have spent in the Pacific Northwest--this will make an even dozen--ever has been as grayly bland and excitementless as the season's reputation. ("Oh, Seattle," anyone from elsewhere will begin, and one of the next three words is "rain.") There can be winter weeks here when the Pacific repeatedly tries to throw itself into the air and out across the continent, an exhilarating traffic of swooping storms. Other durations when the days arrive open-skied and glittering, the mountains of the Olympic and Cascade ranges a spill of rough white gems along two entire horizons. All else quiet, this valley invites wind, the flow of it habiting to the southwesterly mood of winter and arriving into this green vee like rainflow to a streambed. Oceanburst or brave thin days of sun or spurting breeze, Northwest winter I enjoy as restless, startful; except that this first of morning, it has followed me onto dead center.

Carol, Carol. Remember when we were crossing Healy Pass in County Cork, those drab poor howl-lonely slopes where stones, in evident desperation, would get up and become sheep? A Healy Pass of a day, this.

To work, refuge of the alone. To Swan, that other winterer and muller. His pages hold another matter I would see changed, as stones-into-sheep, and cannot. As I have told, by the time Swan spoke goodbye to

Matilda and the East in the first month of 1850 there were two children of the divided household: Ellen, four, and Charles, seven. In that moment Swan jettisoned them. Left daughter and son to Matilda and her lineal Boston colony as part of his passage price, which he seems to have been little enough agonized about assuming, for his leaving of New England.

At about the age of Charles, I was jettisoned myself, by the death of my mother. Following my father up and down our Montana ranching valley I began to learn that a sundered family can heal strongly across the break. If, that is, the remaining parent possesses the strength of stubbornness, and I think it can be granted that Matilda likely had her share of that. Hard witness that I am today, then, I am able to wish for Charles and Ellen only that they could have come argonauting with Swan. To reverse him in the imagination from stepping aboard the ship to San Francisco is merely to see him spending his time on the Boston waterfront, or any other waterfront, in preference to twiddling under the family roof. To transfer the roof with him, Swan and Matilda and the children all staunchly mutual new citizens of the Pacific shore, is to find the family settling to the grooved routines of a city neighborhood again; likely in Portland, with its New England affiliations. But could the Swan youngsters have grown up at their father's inquisitive side here along this coast in the life he led, absorbing the Indian languages and lore as he did, poking along the shore with him into the bays he appraised like a portraitist, stooping as he did to the frontier's odd bouquets of camas and kinnickinnick and yarrow and skunk cabbage, what western venturers that daughter and that son might have been.

Come they did not, of course; could not except as I would reinvent their lives, and but for Swan's scanty visits back to Boston heard their father's voice only from across the continent, by the paper echo of mail, for the next half century.

# \_\_\_\_\_  
Evening, last inches of the leaden day. Ellen and Charles missed sprigs of knowledge indeed when their father left them to Boston. From Swell's tribe, the Makahs, Swan noted down that their version of the sun arrived robustly each morning by thrusting away the stars with his head and trampling night underfoot. Rainbows, they considered, had claws at either end to seize the unwary. Comets and meteors were the luminous souls of dead chiefs. As for the mysterious northern lights that sometimes webbed the sky beyond the Strait, Swell explained them astutely to Swan:

Under that star, many snow's sail from here in a canoe, live a race of little men, very strong, who are dressed in skins. They look like Indians, but they are not taller than half the length of my paddle. They can dive down into the sea and catch a seal or a fish with their hands. Their country is very cold, and they live on the ice where they build great fires, and that light is the fires of those little people. . .

P. 34A follows →

Swell as tutor about Eskimo life puts light on something else as well. Along the wilderness that was the North Pacific coastland, more than five hundred thousand miles of broken shore from Neah Bay even to southernmost Alaska and greater distances beyond that to the people of the ice, ideas of that sort must have traveled like thistle-down on the breeze: canoeing tribe in wary touch with canoeing tribe, a seed of story deposited, to be carried along by the next barter-trip southward. By the time the Makahs had the story of the miniature ice-men of the north, lore had been nurtured into legend. I recognize such wafts of alchemy, for I live with them as well. A morning in the nineteen-twenties, a dozen riders are returning to their home ranches after a weekend rodeo. Whenever the horses' hoofs strike the dryness of a Montana country road, dust drifts up until from a distance the group looks like men of smoke. Most of the journey, however, cuts across open sageland, and the slap of the gray tassels of brush against leather chaps competes with their talk of the rodeo broncs. Unexpectedly, the loose troop reins to a halt. Across a stretch of pasture they have always ridden through, a fresh barbed wire fence glints. The owner of the land emerges from a nearby cabin to explain that he intends to plow the ground, that they can no longer go across it. A rider with a notch-scar in the center of his chin--he was my father--grins down at the man and says in his style of half-joke, half-declaration: "We never saw any place yet we couldn't go." Turning his horse to the fence, he touches spur to flank, and mount and man pass through the air above the blades of wire. One after another, the others soar after him, like boys on great birds of sorrel, roan, dapple gray.

p. 34B follows

The story and its impromptu anthem of the west's last horseback generation have come down to me, on embellishing lips, very much as legends of the Eskimoes must have arrived south to Swell. "The same winds blow spring on all men's dreams," I read once from a folklorist. Whether there were a dozen rodeoers or just four; whether they all lofted themselves in the barbwire steeplechase or just the rider with that starred chin: in the tale as ~~I have received it,~~ <sup>it has whiffed to me,</sup> they are twelve and they soar.

P. 34C follows

~~Later. How much comes out our fingers that was taken in by earlier eyes. Clearing a shelf for Swan's reams of diary, I discovered that my daybook of winter will not be my family's first. In a tottering pile of mementoes, one of my grandmother's tablet-sized address books into which she jotted everything from recipes to her schedule of television soap operas. And the arrival of Montana winter weather each year: our first real cold spell and lite snow falling and blowing Nov. 20 1963 2 below. . . our first snow storm Sept the 15-1965. . . our first snow storm 1 inch when I got up this morning Sept 14-1973.~~

That early snow of 1973 was her final such entry. The autumn of the next year she was dead, the last of the family to pass from the blustery valley where one or another of us had been for eighty years. Now, with my half-a-week-old words about the onset of this coastal winter, we begin to be jotted here on the continent's margin.

Day five

Christmas.

Carol steps from the airport ramp at 6:03 p.m., five lofted hours from New Jersey. Swan in his lifetime managed to go from one coast of America to the other, and back, a half dozen times. In the fourteen years of our marriage Carol and I have crisscrossed the continent on family visits or business so many times we have lost count.

The retributive pun I have been saving for days--"Hey, I've heard of you. The Christmas Carol, right?"--draws her groan and grin. We hold each other, amid the community of hugs of families reuniting. The New Jersey report is good; her parents are in health, and chipper.

Our car enters the freeway aqueduct of headlights streaming north to the city. We are to stop for Christmas dinner at the home of friends. On the table we can predict will be sauerkraut from her Baltimore, pecan pie from his Texas. Christmas Day of 1861 on the Strait, I read in the pages this morning, Swan set to work at this business of holiday dinner with similar seriousness. Duck stew and roast goose he produced for his guests, a pair of other batching pioneers, then brought out his gamble of the day. That autumn when a Makah canoeman had presented him a chunk of whale meat, Swan thoughtfully boiled it and chopped it, plopped in apples, raisins, wild cranberries, currants, brown sugar, salt, cloves, nutmeg, allspice, cinnamon and a quart of rum, then crocked the works in a stone jar. These months later he cautiously offers to his guests slivers of

P. 34 D follows

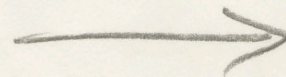
34D  
~~31~~

the baked result. Lifts a forkful himself, chews appraisingly for a moment. The eyes of the holiday trio light in elation, and they hurry on to further helpings of the whale mince pie.

p. 34 E follows

Days six, seven, eight, nine, ten

I have begun to follow Swan exactly year by year through his  
diaries. <sup>His</sup> ~~Swan's~~ own brevets of identification still are on the ~~diaries~~ <sup>diary</sup>--  
a small paper label on each cover where the title of a book would appear,  
the year inked there in his slanting hand--and <sup>upon</sup> ~~on~~ opening the earliest ~~one~~,  
1859, I found that it advertises itself as Marsh's Metallic Memorandum Book  
WITH METALLIC PENCIL The writing of which is as permanent as when written  
with ink, a claim I could now tell Swan is not nearly true. Luckily his  
experiment with Marsh's wan stylus ended when Swan ran out of pages in the  
memo book on the last day of August and switched to a plain tan pocket  
notebook and an ordinary pencil of blessed black clarity. But it is back





in those dimmest of pages, early 1859, that Swan's daily words of his Pacific Northwest life commence: the twenty-ninth of January, when he embarked at San Francisco on board ship Dashaway Capt J M Hill. . . ~~##~~  
bound for Pt Townsend, W.T.

~~#~~ When the Dashaway hove into Port Townsend on a morning in mid-February, a few weeks past Swan's forty-first birthday, almost precisely at the midpoint of his life, the diary shows that Swan at once ~~aimed~~ <sup>pointed</sup> himself as many directions as there were routes of water spoking out from the little frontier port. The editor of the San Francisco Evening Bulletin had agreed to buy from him a series of articles about Washington Territory; what San Francisco didn't take, Swan ~~found he~~ <sup>fledgling</sup> could readily place in one or another of the weekly papers in the ~~port towns~~ <sup>port towns</sup> of Puget Sound; and there ~~was~~ <sup>hovered</sup> that proclaimed notion of his to examine certain harbors, with a view of ascertaining the best locality for a whaling station. Whenever a ride could be hitched by schooner, steamboat or canoe, then off Swan would jaunt along the Strait or into the serpentine length of Puget Sound, up amid the San Juan archipelago or across Admiralty Inlet to long-cliffed Whidbey Island. His wake of ink shows him voyaging in and out of Port Townsend, his purported new site of enterprise, eight times in the first six months.

Inside all that motion, however, a pattern is ~~taking shape~~ <sup>shaping</sup>. Time upon time Swan's loops of travel happen to stretch westward the same distance, like the whorls of a topographic map compressing at an abrupt face of landscape.

March seventeenth: . . . came to anchor in Neah Bay & after dinner went ashore to Mr Webster's house where I passed the night.

June fourth, fifth and sixth, again at Neah Bay.

September fourteenth, Left Port Townsend at 5 PM in Swells canoe. . .  
for Neah Bay. Nine days, he stays this time.

October ninth, back at Neah Bay. Length of stay: fifty-five days.

At that time Neah Bay had its place as the geographical pinpoint on the American map that, say, Alaska's Point Barrow holds today: a final tribal outpost before the north margins of the planet take over entirely. The crescent eye of bay and its namesake village peek out between headlands at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The site nicks into the top--that is, the north-facing shore--of the coastal prow of rock which was dubbed Cape Flattery by Captain James Cook on his 1788 voyage, when a deceptive indent of the shoreline "flattered us with hopes of finding a harbour there." It ~~says much~~ <sup>vouches</sup> about the stormy remoteness of Cape Flattery that along its coastline the luck of even the incomparable Cook was nil; Two and a half explorations around the world by sail but here not only was ~~Cook~~ <sup>he</sup> misled about a harbor prospect, ~~he~~ <sup>Cook</sup> missed as well in the gray drifts of weather ~~his~~ <sup>dozen</sup> chance to discover the ~~twelve~~ <sup>dozen</sup>-mile-wide entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca and all the shoreline of Puget Sound beyond.

~~It is safe to say that the inhabitants of Cape Flattery,~~ <sup>Cape Flattery's resident sailors,</sup> the several hundred Makah tribal members at Neah Bay and four smaller villages dotted west and south along the peninsula, ~~would~~ <sup>deservedly</sup> have guffawed at seamanship of such low order. Out on their promontory into the Pacific which Swan began to share from them in 1859 and I now try to share from him, the Makahs

casually launched away in canoes to hunt creatures ranging in size and threat from sea otters to gray whales. In land terms that would be spaniels to dinosaurs. A prodigious sea-going people, these, and small wonder that from here on, in steady diary and occasional newsprint, the Makahs come off Swan's pages like people flinging open a door.

# \_\_\_\_\_  
 . . . The Mackahs are fond of music. . . and, as many of the men have made voyages to San Francisco on lumber vessels, they have learned a number of popular tunes. . . I was astonished, on entering a lodge one day, to hear a party singing "Oh Susannah" and "Old Folks at Home," accompanied by an accordion. . .

. . . The Makahs, in common with all the coast tribes, hold slaves. . . In former times, it is said, that slaves were treated very harshly. . . On the death of a chief, his favorite slaves were killed and buried with him. . . Latterly, this custom seems to have been abandoned, and their present condition is a mild kind of servitude. . .

This morning some squaws were swimming in the brook at high tide and sporting about as if it was midsummer. I don't think these people are as sensitive to pain as whites. They cut themselves on all occasions without seeming to mind it at all. And go into water at times when a white man would be chilled to death. . .

At daybreak this morning I was awakened by children singing and on getting up I found it proceeded from twelve girls who were going in a sort of procession with Sustaias, who has had her months' turns commence. . . for the first time. She had a blue blanket over her head and the party went a short distance up the beach where she was washed and then covered

with a white blanket and the procession started for home. They came out twice afterward and had two more washes...


The festivals are but few, and are confined to the ta-ma-na-was ceremonies, which usually take place during the winter months; to certain "medicine" performances...and the pot-lat-ches, or distributions of presents, which are made at all seasons of the year. The pot-lat-ches occur whenever an Indian has acquired enough property in blankets, beads, guns, brass kettles, tin pans, and other objects of Indian wealth, to make a present to a large number of the tribe; for the more an Indian can give away, the greater his standing with the others...

Blankets are the principal item of wealth, and the value of anything is fixed by the number of blankets it is worth. In the early days of the Hudson's Bay Company, and until within the past ten years, a blanket was considered equal in trade to five dollars; but since so many different traders have settled on the Sound, with such a variety of qualities and prices, the Indian in naming the number of blankets he expects to receive...will state what kind he demands. Thus, if the price is to be twenty blankets, he will say, "how many large blue ones," which are the most costly, "how many red, and how many white ones?"...

P. 38A follows →

They believe that, originally, mankind were animals, and that the present race were formed by a series of transformations. The Mackah tribe were a hybrid race, half-dog and half-Indian--the progeny of a white dog and the daughter of a great chief or necromancer, who lived on Vancouver Island, nearly opposite Neah Bay. This chief being angry with his daughter, sent her and her seven progeny to Cape Flattery, where a magician turned them into human beings, and the present race of Mackahs are their descendants...

# ——— More than legend linked the Makahs and their Vancouver Island cousins, the Nootkas. The tribes shared ~~a~~<sup>that</sup> brilliant skill, their seagoing hunting



of whales, which sets them apart in the history of this coast. <sup>4</sup> From what Swan could judge, the Makahs by the late 1850's were not as avid about whale hunting as they had been in their past. Whether the whales were more numerous, or that the Indians, being now able to procure other food from the whites, have become indifferent to the pursuit, I cannot say. . . Yet when Swell in the autumn of 1859 recited off for Swan the year's toll of whales, the kills added up to seven, which seems not too lackadaisical a tally. Fully practiced or not, the ocean abilities of the Makahs were so evident that Swan set down his estimation of the tribe in the most exalted terms a Massachusetts man could think of. They are, in fact, to the Indian population what the inhabitants of Nantucket are to the people of the Atlantic Coast.

As Swan discerned, when whales plowed north past Cape Flattery in their spring migrations the Makahs would <sup>push</sup> go out to hunt the sea behemoths with methods and tools they had honed to stiletto keenness. Their canoes were swift high-prowed blades of cedar which carried crews of eight; Helms-<sup>performed</sup> man, six paddlers, harpooner. This last was the gladiator, the one who triggered death for the whale; stood above the cruising creature with a harpoon eighteen feet long, twice the length of a modern javelin, made of two pieces of yew scarfed together with splicing bark, and lunged it home. The wooden shaft detached when the whale was struck and left imbedded in the flesh the harpoon point of sharpened copper or iron, barbed with spikes of elk or deer horn so that it would claw within the whale's body the way a fishhook snags itself with wicked irreversible angle inside a trout's mouth. Trollers of leviathan, were these Makahs.

Roped to the harpoon point with a cord of whale sinew was a seal-skin float made by skinning a seal and turning the pelt ~~with the fur in, as when~~ is pulled wrongside ~~pulling a sweater inside out.~~ Then the apertures of the head, feet and tail are tied up airtight, Swan ~~explained,~~ narrated and the skin inflated like a bladder. When further harpoons were hurled into the body of the whale, it is not unusual for from thirty to forty of these buoys to be made fast to the whale, which, of course, cannot sink, and is easily despatched by their spears and lances.

Dispatched and towed ashore, the whale begins to become bill of fare. All hands swarm around the carcass with their knives, and in a very short time the blubber is stripped off in blocks about two feet square. The portion of blubber forming a saddle, taken from between the head and dorsal fin, is esteemed the most choice, and is always the property of the person who first strikes the whale. The saddle is termed u-butsk. It is placed across a pole supported by two stout posts. At each end of the pole are hung the harpoons and lines with which the whale was killed. Next to the blubber at each end are the whale's eyes; eagle's feathers are stuck in a row along the top, a bunch of feathers at each end, and the whole covered with spots and patches of down. . . The u-butsk remains in a conspicuous part of the lodge until it is considered ripe enough to eat, when a feast is held, and the whole devoured or carried away by the guests. . .

Swan would, and did, journey almost anywhere with the coastal Indians in their canoes, but I ~~can~~ <sup>do not</sup> discover ~~nowhere~~ <sup>Makahs.</sup> in his diary pages or other writings that he ever went whaling with them. My guess is that he lost any such appetite early on, the time he was idling along paddling for Port Townsend in a canoe full of Makahs when

a whale innocently broached beside them in the Strait. Swan emerged from the resulting commotion enormously grateful that no harpooning equipment happened to be aboard and the Indians had to forfeit their excited notion of pursuing the whale to the water-end of the earth or to his death, whichever arrived first.

Swan's knowledge of the Makahs' soldiery of the sea, their whale hunts, then stops at the shoreline, and my questions ~~are~~<sup>go</sup> unmet. Whether the seabirds shadowed the canoes in white and gray gliding flocks as the whalemen stroked out from Cape Flattery into the ocean. Whether there ~~came~~<sup>hung--</sup> I cannot see how else it could have been--an audible silence of held breaths before the first paddler behind the harpooner judged the distance to the whale and cried: Now throw! Whether the crew ~~made~~<sup>shouted</sup> a united great cry when the harpoon blade snagged home, a chorus of conquest. And whether some tincture of fear mixed with whatever exaltation they ~~shouted~~<sup>clamored</sup>, for success meant this: their canoe lashed behind the harpooned whale: a seagoing cart harnessed to a creature several times the size of a bull elephant and dying angry.

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Yet if he did not go see whales stabbed, not a lot else of Makah life escaped Swan's attention. What a listener he must have been, the rarest kind who aims his ears as if being paid by the word. Whatever the majority of the Makahs thought of their white newcomer--and just as surely as his constant mention of some of them is testimony that they were attracted to him in friendship or something very close to it, there would have been those who suspected Swan, ~~thought~~<sup>supposed</sup> him silly or perhaps even vaguely dangerous-- a great number of the tribal members did talk with him, allowed him to ~~shadow~~<sup>rove</sup>



along on the rim of their Neah Bay life. Even yet in his words their personalities breathe hotly to me. Swell, of course, with his knack for fact and his easy competence. His brother Peter, a brawler and restless under the cleft of the white men's growing power over the natives. The obliging Captain John, something of a tribal bard, who drew on the first page of this book one of the skookums who cause the lightning by running out its tongue. (Swan in turn later sketched Captain John into the front of a diary--an oval ochre face, low broadlipped mouth, dark quarter circle eyebrows of surprising delicacy, amused eyes. Swan estimated him as without exception the biggest coward in the tribe and at the same time the biggest braggadacio, but he is shrewd and smart and accomplishes by finesse. . . as much as some of the others do by their physical prowess.) The exuberant Billy Barlow, who ~~took~~ <sup>escorted</sup> Swan duck hunting and wanted me to shoot everything I saw from a crow to an old woman who was at work on the prairie. Tsoviskay, an inveterate old savage implacable against white men; on his death a rarely harsh Swan ~~writes~~ <sup>raps out</sup> that the old fellow is no loss and his death did not affect the other Indians (except his own family) any more than if a dog had died. Colchote, a war chief who recited his skirmishes with other coastal tribes as if from a list in hand. <sup>91</sup> And the one of them all I would give most to have stood beside Swan and heard, an ancient woman, one of Colchote's slaves, from Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island, who recounted for Swan the white explorers she had seen arrive from the sea. She said she remembered when Meares brought a lot of Chinamen to Nootka, and built a schooner: 1788, more than seventy years before. And Vancouver, whom she called Macowber: 1792. And she saw the massacre on board Astor's ship,