Birth of Esquimalt as Empire’s naval anchor topic in new book

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For Victoria native Barry Gough, author and Emeritus professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University, his newly written book, "Britannia’s Navy on the West Coast of North America, 1812-1914" represents the culmination of a lifetime spent researching the naval history of Esquimalt.

Gough’s book spans several turns in the history of CFB Esquimalt, from the burgeoning infrastructure of the base to the development of changing naval technology. “I think the material is engaging,” he says. “It speaks to me about a time we have lost, and I regard history as a bit of a salvage operation to try to recover the past. I see my role as a historian as the interlocutor between the past and the present.”

The book details the requirements needed to build a naval base in Esquimalt by the British Imperial forces, while showing the political will needed to bring it into existence.

Gough fleshed out three-dimensional characters of historical figures in the book who sought to make Esquimalt the British watchtower of the North Pacific. “I included the characteristics and personalities of the admirals and captains, and crafted the nature of who these people were and why they saw, in our part of the world, so much importance here,” he says. “These British naval officers had a global reach – Britannia ruled the waves.”

But writing a book of history with such detail and precision, spanning a large time frame, required him to spend at least a decade researching, and another three years revising the manuscript.

Gough says his initial work on the book began during his PhD and was completed under the mentorship of famous naval historian Gerald Graham in London, England. “I had to develop a topic that was suitable for the requirements of a PhD, and so I sought out the help of an archivist in British Columbia, who suggested the only topic that hadn’t been properly studied in Canadian history was the rise of Esquimalt as a naval base.”

What followed was years of demanding, but pleasurable, research completed in London at the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, The National Archives, The British Library, the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, and the Royal Geographical Society. This research, says Gough, paved the way for the prequel to his new book, published in 1971 as "The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast".

"The history of Esquimalt documented in my books shows how this place stands in the world – we aren’t just confined to our municipality here,” he says. “Our history is of global importance.”

Time, he says, has allowed him to complete a vast agenda of histories. Gough is already at work on a book to be published next year, which will focus on political tug-of-war during the First World War between Sir Winston Churchill and British Admiral Jacky Fisher.

Gough’s book will be launched by Heritage House Publishing at the Wardroom on Thursday, Sept. 8 at 2 p.m. He would like to thank Debbie Towell and Clare Sharpe with CFB Esquimalt’s Naval and Military Museum for their tremendous help. He would also like to thank the staff at Heritage House Publishing.