

One of the earliest of the European explorers of Canada's west coast described what he saw there as "dreary" and a "glooming scene". Simon Fraser could scarcely have envisaged that 200 years later the forbidding forests and coast of British Columbia would be described as Canada's lotus land and become a youth, tourist, business and retirement mecca for thousands of Canadians.

When the European explorers, sailors and fur traders — Juan Perez, James Cook, Simon Fraser, David Thompson, Alexander Mackenzie — charted the B.C. coast and interior from 1774 to 1800, the land of the tall pines already had long-established residents but no written history. It is probable that the West Coast Indians were the last of the "native" people of North America to arrive from Asia across the Bering Strait land bridge about 10,000 years ago. Made up of several linguistic and cultural groups, they numbered approximately 80,000 at the time of the earliest European contact. The Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Bella Coola, Kwakiutl, Nootka and Salish enjoyed a high standard of living, based on a wealth of forest and sea resources. According to one historian, they also had "perhaps the richest culture of all the hunting peoples of the world".

For years the West Coast Indians had been fishing the sea for salmon and other species of fish and felling

giant cedars for their buildings, canoes, artistic woodworkings and garments (woven from the shredded bark). Their ingenuity in living with their environment was a boon to the early European explorers, who acquired valuable skills and knowledge from the Indians.

The European explorers were soon followed by fur traders and an important maritime fur trade developed. This led to a period of international tension which was allayed by the Nootka Sound Convention, signed by representatives of Britain and Spain in 1790, making the northwest coast open to all nations.

The competition between the two great fur-trading companies, the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, meanwhile was furthering land exploration east of the Rockies. In 1793, while Captain George Vancouver was making detailed maps and charts of the northwest coast, Alexander Mackenzie of the North West Company became the first European to make a land crossing of Canada to the Pacific Ocean. His fellow Scots — and fellow Nor'westers — Simon Fraser and David Thompson also reached the coast, by way of the Fraser and Columbia Rivers respectively.

American maritime fur traders were also active on the coast. Territorial rivalry between the Americans and the