

*Alexandro Malaspina to Paolo Greppi* [1]

*San Blas, October 11 1791*

After six months of rather arduous travel, and having in so little time passed from the frozen wastes of [Mount St. Elias](#) [2] to a climate like this where the thermometer in free air generally reads 90° [3], I ask you to believe me, dear friend, when I say that this all conduces to a negligence that may be forgiven even though it is towards the most intimate friends. I should add that we have not found even a single letter here, and that having to send our news to Mexico allows me only a few free moments; it will not seem unjust to you if I ask you to accord some value to this letter, however meagre and poorly constructed it is.

The voyage made from Acapulco last May had as its object, as I believe I told you, to discover whether there exists at around the 60th parallel the entrance by way of which an earlier mariner, Ferrer Maldonado, said he had passed in very little time to the Atlantic Ocean. This possibility, even if raised lately by M. de Buache at the Academy of Paris, is intrinsically improbable, though the results of the explorations made here by ourselves and by the English during the Cook expedition were not known in Europe.

This voyage was in the beginning very successful: on the 26th of June we found ourselves in the approaches to Behring's Bay, where we were able to correct some of the doubtful results reached by the English captain, and the following day I came to anchor in Port Mulgrave at 59½ degrees of latitude, with a mind to take on water and wood, carry out the experiment with the constant simple pendulum for determining the shape of the earth, and reconnoitre an inlet, where, having approached it in the corvette, I did not find any sign of a good harbour, given the excessive depth indicated by one and the other shore.

Using the launch, I myself conducted the survey of this inlet. Entering only a few leagues into it, between floating ice floes, we soon discovered, around a small island, a bank of solid ice which, by its structure and the fact that it was now the beginning of July, we felt assured was permanently connected to the adjoining shore. Nonetheless, the botany conducted by [Mr. Haenke](#) on the nearby plains was successful enough, and its inhabitants allowed us to discover, in connection with their customs, character and religion, a thousand things which are completely new and which will be of no small interest in Europe. Our interaction with these natives was entirely peaceful, although there were two incidents where conflict might have arisen: in one case there was a considerable advantage on our side; in the other we were of inferior strength and there was a serious risk to our [Bustamante](#), who, with musket unloaded, found himself confronted by an armed and aggressive native, to whose support many others were already coming with deadly intent [4].

After we left this inlet at the beginning of July, the rest of the month was used to resolve the question mentioned at the outset. We were able to make a scrupulous survey of the coast as far as Prince William Sound, and thereby more islands were added to the chart of Captain Cook and, wanting to pass between the coast and "Kaye's Island," as it was called by the same captain, we found that this is in fact a peninsula, connected by low-lying land to the continent [5].

When this first goal had been accomplished, we turned to an exact survey of the coast as far as 55 degrees, and we were already under sail for Dixon Entrance [6] when a series of really heavy storms interrupted our intentions and prevented us from entering Nootka until August 13th. A new excursion from this port with the launches enabled us to determine the directions and farthest bounds of all the channels that Captain Cook had not been able to survey; among these was one that communicated by way of another inlet with the sea, and thus made a considerable island of the landmass [Nootka] that we had believed to be part of the continent [7]. We developed clear understandings of the local geography, as well as of the religion and laws, criminal and social, of its peoples, very different from those who live either further north or further south, and then continued the survey of the coast from Cape Mendocino [8] to Monterrey, where we were in serious danger of losing the ships, and where we stayed for 8 or 10 days. Finally, with regard to the coast of California itself, we stopped briefly off Cabo San Lucas to reconcile with ours the excellent observations of Abbot Chappe [9] and Mr. Roy [10], and the day before yesterday we set off from this anchorage, having already sent Bustamante to Acapulco, where I think to reach him in a few days, and having picked up some odds and ends that we needed, and in particular the orders of the Court, which direct our steps. Therefore I will write to you at greater length from there, and I will reply to any of your kind letters I find there. I will be obliged to you if you can send further correspondence for this year to Canton, care of the English or Swedish [11] establishment there. Please send a copy of this news to my brother, and believe me always ...

---

[1] Original in ASMi / *Greppi* (cart. 193, n. 40); Caselli, pp. 175-177; Manfredi 1999, pp. 264-267. Cf. the (almost identical) letter of the same date to Azzo Giacinto Malaspina, manuscript copy in [APSE](#), published by [Picanyol](#), pp. 59-60. [\[Editing Criteria\]](#)

[2] The great glacier that descends from Mount Saint Elias still bears the name of Malaspina. It descends from a height of over 300 meters and reaches the sea on a front of about 30 miles.

[3] Here Malaspina uses the Fahrenheit scale; this temperature is equivalent to a little more than 32° Celsius.

[4] It is interesting to read how Bustamante managed to avoid the danger: knowing that his rifle was unloaded, he offered it to the indigene, as a sign of friendship: and he and his companions, won over by the friendly gesture of the Spaniard and abandoning any violent purpose, opened their arms "singing the hymn of peace"; see E. Bona, *Alessandro Malaspina. Sue navigazioni ed esplorazioni*, Roma, Istituto Grafico Tiberino, 1935, p. 147. [Perhaps unfortunately, this rather romantic description of the encounter is not borne out by the corresponding passage in Malaspina's journal of the voyage, In the entry for July 3, 1791. Malaspina says that Bustamante aimed the unarmed musket at the aggressive indigene while shouting to the chief to call him off, and that this duly occurred. – *Trans.*]

[5] This was one of the few errors of the expedition: Cook was right in believing that his "Kaye's Island" (in Alaska) is indeed an island [now known as Kayak Island – *Trans.*].

[6] The channel which separates the Queen Charlotte Islands [now known as Haida Gwaii – *Trans.*] from [what Cook called – *Trans.*] the Pitt Archipelago.

[7] In fact, Cook believed that Nootka was part of the continent, while Malaspina – at the time of writing – knew that it was an island, but still believed that the channel in question separated it from the continent. The exploration conducted in 1792 by [Dionisio Alcalá Galiano](#) and [Cayetano Valdés](#) showed that the coast opposite Nootka Island is not that of the continent, but the west coast of Vancouver Island.

[8] The westernmost point in California.

[9] Jean Chappe d'Auteroche (1722-1769), French religious and astronomer.

[10] Malaspina may mean Pierre Leroy or Le Roy (1717-1785), French clockmaker and inventor of the detent escapement for chronometers (1748). We note too that Charliat writes of a clock, used by Abbot Chappe, which had been built by a Julien Le Roy; see P.-J. Charliat, *El tiempo de los grandes veleros*, Madrid, Espasa Calpe, 1982, p. 189.

[11] [Here Malaspina uses "Sueca", the Spanish rather than the Italian word for "Swedish" – *Trans.*]

Text courtesy of the [Centro di Studi Malaspiniani](#), Mulazzo, Italy; notes by Dario Manfredi; translation by John Black. [Italian Original](#)