

Overview of the Murder of Peter Brown

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A company employee, . . . a shepherd named Peter Brown, was killed by Indians in the Cowichan Valley. Apparently two Indians were involved; one was a Cowichan and the other was a member of the Nanaimo tribe. When he learned of the murder, Douglas was determined to capture the two individuals, but he was equally determined not to blame their tribes. For reasons of 'public justice and policy' he did not want to involve all the members of the tribes in the 'guilt' of two, nor did he want to provide the closely related Cowichan and Nanaimo with a reason to form an alliance against the whites. Douglas sent messages to the tribal leaders demanding the surrender of the murderers, but when these requests produced only evasive replies, he decided that 'more active measures' were required. So in January 1853 he assembled a force made up of 130 marines from the frigate *Thetis* and a small group of militiamen who called themselves the Victoria Voltigeurs. Accompanied by this force Douglas went first to the Cowichan Valley and then to Nanaimo and was able to capture the two Indians without loss of life. But the arrests were not a simple matter. When the Cowichan charged his force as a ceremonial test of its courage, Douglas had great difficulty in restraining his men from firing a volley. The Cowichan murderer was finally surrendered by his people, but the Nanaimo Indian was a man of some prestige in his tribe and was more difficult to secure. In the end Douglas had to take him by force of arms. Once captured, the two Indians were tried and hanged before the Nanaimo people. Douglas was highly satisfied with the operation. He considered, in the case of the Cowichan, that the surrender of the killer without bloodshed 'by the most numerous and warlike of the Native Tribes in Vancouver's Island' was 'an epoch [the beginning of a new period of history], in the history of our Indian relations.'

Douglas had successfully employed the fur-trading principle of selective, rather than indiscriminate, punishment. In fact, he was of the opinion that the success of the venture owed as much to the influence of the Hudson's Bay Company as it had to the use of intimidation. . . The Colonial Office considered Douglas's actions to be 'highly creditable.'

Source: Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890*. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977/1994), pp. 54-55.

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In November 1852, a white shepherd was killed a few miles from Victoria, and the killers were presumed to be two Native men, a Cowichan and a Nanaimo. Douglas, acting quickly to capture them so as to 'prevent further murders and aggressions which I fear may take place if the Indians are emboldened by present impunity [without punishment],' assembled a force of more than 150 men, largely drawn from a British frigate at Esquimault (sic), and embarked for Cowichan Bay in early January with a flotilla of small vessels and the HBC steamer *Beaver* . . . The Cowichan turned over a man. Douglas promised to give him a fair hearing at Nanaimo, and told the Cowichan that 'they must respect Her Majesty's warrant and surrender criminals belonging to their respective tribes on demand of the Court Magistrate and that resistance to the civil power would expose them to be considered as enemies.' There were similar intimidations at Nanaimo, but no one was turned over; the wanted man was captured after a long chase. Both were hurriedly tried on the quarterdeck of the *Beaver* before a jury of naval officers, and hanged the same day in the presence of most of the Nanaimo. The size and composition of the expeditionary force, the rhetoric of law and civil government, and the trial were new (there had not been trials since NWC days), but otherwise the assumptions and tactics of the Cowichan expedition were of the fur trade, even in the spies Douglas hired.

Source: Cole, Harris, *Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997/2000), pp. 65-66.