

Beware of the Romance of Rivers

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and
waiting.

T.S. Eliot
Four Quartets

It was a river journey, undertaken by men who knew rivers as well as we know interstate highways. Better, because they earned every mile of their forward progress. In the Age of Jefferson, rivers were America's highways and our highways were rivers. The Lewis and Clark Expedition threaded its way from Pittsburgh all the way to Station Camp on the Pacific and back again by way of the Ohio River and the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Clearwater, the Snake, the Columbia, and the Yellowstone. The land portions of the journey constituted only a few hundred of the 7,689 miles the Corps of Discovery traveled: the Bitterroot Mountains, the Palouse, the interview at Two Medicine Creek on the upper Marias.

Lewis and Clark floated America. The rivers they pursued and charted are still there, more or less where the Corps found them, but they have been transformed, not beyond recognition, but with such military-industrial thoroughness that three of them, at least, vie in conservation literature for the title of “the most industrialized river in America.”

Because we are lovers of the Lewis and Clark story we like to imagine the American West as it was when the captain's “little fleet” first came around each bend of the Ohio, Mississippi, Missouri, Clearwater, Snake, Columbia, and Yellowstone rivers. We cannot help—in the second decade of the twenty-first century--but feel a sense of loss when we make contact with the Corps' riverine highways. We are creatures of nostalgia. We usually point our cameras at the least compromised vista wherever we happen to find ourselves on the Lewis and Clark Trail. In our minds and memories, we wish to airbrush out the grain elevators, power lines, strip malls, pulp plants, and railroad sidings. This makes perfect sense, but it does injustice to the hard-won century-and-a-half Euro-Americanization of the continent, and it does not provide a complete understanding of just what Lewis and Clark represent in the story of America.

As Robert Kelley Schneiders points out, the staggering drawdown of Great Plains flora and fauna, Fort Randall Dam, ethnic cleansing, barge traffic, and even Al's Oasis, the gaudy “authentic frontier town” at Chamberlain, South Dakota, are part of the implicit *wake* of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, whether we like to acknowledge it or not. As the beneficiaries of the most advanced industrial and material civilization in human history, we are agents of both development and loss, progress and degradation, prosperity and spiritual impoverishment.

We must not forget that the Columbia River helped to win the war—at Bonneville and Grand Coulee, and at Hanford. We need to remember that the taming of the Missouri River (1933-1970) prevented or

diminished the catastrophic floods to which the longest river in North America has been especially prone. The Ohio was so important as the portal into America's first "West," that Theodore Roosevelt's four-volume magnum opus, *The Winning of the West*, might just as well as have been titled "The Winning of the Ohio Country for Anglo-Americans." The Ohio River has been so powerful that the western state of Ohio produced six Presidents of the United States, second only to the flagship Commonwealth of Virginia, with eight. And the strangling of the Snake has enabled an inland irrigation and transportation empire that caused the desert to bloom with potato blossoms.

Although historian Bill Lang is careful not to say so, it seems certain that Jefferson and Meriwether Lewis would approve of the channelization of the Snake and Columbia rivers, because it is now possible to move barges and the occasional pleasure craft from Astoria all the way to Lewiston, Idaho, the farthest inland port on the west coast of America, Idaho's only seaport, a full 465 miles from the Columbia bar. Even so, after all of that laying of concrete, Jefferson's dream of a Northwest Passage through the heart of the continent continues to elude Industrial Man. At the apex of the Age of Steam, Fort Benton was the head of Missouri River navigation; if Lewiston is the effective head of Columbia-Snake navigation, that still leaves a 421 mile corridor through which, to use Lewis's words, "articles not bulky brittle nor of a very perishable nature may be conveyed" from one navigable river to the other across the Great Divide.

But Industrial Man found another way. Railroads and Interstate Highways whisk furs and countless other goods, some *bulky, brittle, and perishable* across the entire continent in a matter days. This is Jefferson's "Northwest Passage" on steroids, the dream fulfilled by other means. It is clear that Jefferson was less concerned with the romance of rivers than of getting the US into the global fur trade and finding a "practicable" passage to Asia. Rivers were less a metaphor for Jefferson than means to an economic and geopolitical end. The rivers Lewis and Clark traced were an important first step, but steam and the internal combustion engine eventually threw them into the category of picturesque.

If there have been losers in the quest to turn our great rivers into what historian Richard White calls an "organic machine," the people of greatest loss are the Native Americans for whom these rivers were lifelines, who have mostly been pushed aside by dams, towns, nuclear processing plants, and irrigation districts. Wildlife, flowers, grasses, and cottonwood trees have been losers, too. If you believe that rivers have standing all by themselves, that rivers in some sense have *being*, and that they have a right to flow their ways without being entirely instrumentalized by humankind, then it is impossible not to conclude that they have all been made to suffer by the hectic purposefulness of what Lewis called "civilized man."

Still, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) wrote, "In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. This is what makes America what it is." What she said of America is equally true of our great rivers. There is more Missouri (or Columbia, Snake, Ohio, or Yellowstone) where nothing human-made is than where something is. We still live in a country where it is possible to seek those empty places out and cherish them. We still love our rivers with some kind of primordial attachment that somehow flow deep in our cultural DNA. We seek them out to refresh our spirits, bathe in their beauty, and surrender to their gravitational tug. Our mediated twenty-first century quests are not the stuff of epic like the journey of Lewis and Clark, but we still always feel a little heroic floating a western river.

It would be possible to declare that 1970 (the moment of the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency) represented the high water mark of industrial gigantism on America's western rivers. Since then we have paused at the end of the developmental pendulum, at a kind of puzzling cultural solstice in our larger human journey, and the first signs of a modest post-industrial retreat have begun to reshape the

West. A few dams have come down. More are on death row. The rest of the twenty-first century will tell us who we are, who we intend to be, and it will in essential respects complete the journey of Thomas Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, and William Clark, not to mention the 29 others who actually pushed the payload.

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