

We Proceeded On

MAY 2020 VOL 46 NO 2

LEWIS AND CLARK TRAIL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

— *T.S. Eliot*



The Explorers Issue

Mackenzie - Cook - Pike - Thompson

Why Do We Explore? by Felipe Fernández-Armesto

Filling Up the Canvas of North American Exploration

The great James Ronda challenged all of us lovers of Lewis and Clark to “get out of the river and over the bluff”—in other words, to *place* the 1804-06 expedition in the larger context of exploration and the Europeanization of the North American continent. His argument was that we cannot really understand the story we love so much without seeing how it fits in the larger historical picture. Zebulon Pike, for example, was exploring the upper Mississippi River precisely at the time Lewis and Clark were ascending the Missouri and yet the two expeditions seem walled off from each other in American historiography. David Thompson had reached the Mandan and Hidatsa villages in today’s North Dakota seven years before Lewis and Clark arrived. And his longitude work was exemplary.

It was also Professor Ronda’s view that a thorough examination of the expeditions of other explorers sheds important light on the Lewis and Clark Expedition. In other words, looking at Lewis and Clark through the lens of Alexander Mackenzie or Captain James Cook helps us understand our story more clearly. Some episodes and materials place it squarely in the larger tradition of exploration and others make it distinct, at times even unique.

What gear should you take? How do you communicate with Natives? What do you do if Native people try to stop you? What happens when someone gets sick or dies? What sovereignty tokens do you carry? What sort of report do you write when you get back?

In the spirit of Professor Ronda’s challenge, I asked a number of eminent scholars to write about other contemporary or near-contemporary explorers and expeditions while still keeping an eye on Lewis and Clark. I had to call in some favors (well, actually, beg) to secure essays and articles from these busy historians. With the deepest pride I can report that one of the world’s most eminent scholars, the polymath Filipe Fernández-Armesto, agreed to write the opening essay for this special issue of WPO, “Why Do We Explore?” If you haven’t read his *Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration* (2006) or *Millennium: A History of Our Last Thousand Years* (1995), you owe yourself that joy.

Barry Gough agreed to write about Alexander Mackenzie, David Nicandri about James Cook, Jack Nisbet about David Thompson, and Jared Orsi about Zebulon Pike. And I asked Cameron La Follette to reflect on the nature of exploration.

As Dr. Fernández-Armesto suggests, exploration began in what now might seem to be a timid way—some brave soul ventured out just a little beyond the narrow boundaries of the clan or the tribe into a dangerous *terra incognita*. The etymology of the word “explore” preserves the timidity. It literally means “to cry out,” or “to cry ahead.” That’s what we all do when we enter an eerie new place: “Hello, anyone there?” The first words of *Hamlet* are among the most important: “Who’s there?” The historical journey from those tentative first steps beyond the clearing into the unknown to Lewis and Clark or Apollo 11 is one of the most fascinating stories of civilization. It has roots in China, Egypt, Greece, and—eventually—Europe. Who among us did not first encounter the story of exploration back in grade school with Henry the Navigator and the astrolabe?

If there were no space and cost considerations, it would have been satisfying to include a range of other explorers in this issue: John Ledyard, Hunter and Dunbar, Freeman and Custis, Alexander von Humboldt, Jean François de Lapérouse, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, Peter Pond, Mungo Park, John C. Fremont, Sir John Franklin, Sir Richard Francis Burton, George Vancouver.... But this is a good start.

It would be interesting to gather a group of Jefferson and Lewis and Clark scholars to spend a day trying to rank the weight of the motivations and purposes that propelled the Corps of Discovery from Monticello and the White House to land’s end at Astoria—and back again. Enlightenment science—geopolitical rivalry—commerce and the fur trade—American Indian policy—land lust—an emerging national restlessness—the quest for longitude—unalloyed curiosity—the search for the Northwest Passage—the spirit of Sir Edward Hillary: “Because it’s there”? The more we ponder this question the more interesting, layered, and unresolved it gets.

We know this much. In his sixth annual message to Congress (his state of the union message in December 1806), Jefferson began by writing, “The expedition of Messrs. Lewis and Clarke for exploring the river Missouri, & the best communication from that to the Pacific ocean, has had all the success which could have been expected.” That, of course, was a statement for public consumption.

Because I live on the Great Plains and spend much of my time in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Idaho, I sometimes wonder—when I am out in the middle of nowhere—if I might possibly be the first person ever to set foot on a certain ridge, at this particular bend in the river, under this copse of trees, or on top of this butte. The answer is almost certainly no, but I still find it exhilarating, even breathtaking, whenever I sense that I am alone in one of the world’s seldom visited places. I do not share a kind of Alexander the Great lament—there are no more worlds to explore—partly because I feel certain I would not have been in that rare vanguard with men like David Thompson or Meriwether Lewis, but more likely laboring as a lowly copy clerk back in St. Louis or Philadelphia, but also because there is still so much left to explore, if by explore we mean hike over and inspect with fresh eyes the wonder and magnificence of the American outback. We are so very fortunate to live on a continent that is not completely paved and tamed. Lovers of Lewis and Clark have a particular advantage in this respect. For all that has happened to erase, impound, and despoil the Lewis and Clark Trail from Pittsburgh to Fort Clatsop, there are still hundreds of places and whole swaths where if you direct your eyes carefully and hike up over that next ridgeline, you can get lost enough to feel again the primordial continent. It was John Locke who said, in his *Second Treatise on Government* (1689), “in the beginning all the World was *America*.” To a deeply satisfying extent, it still is.

I hope you enjoy this special issue of *We Proceeded On*.

Clay Jenkinson

In this Issue:



Why do we explore? p 5



Where no man has gone before p 14



David Thompson locates himself on the grid p 22



Pikes Peak or bust p 30

Filling Up the Canvas of
North American Exploration *Inside Front Cover*

Message from the President 3

Why Do We Explore? 5

By Felipe Fernández-Armesto

The Drive to Discover, the Urge to Explore 10

By Cameron La Follette

The Cook Template 14

By David Nicandri

Travels of the Longitude Master: David Thompson
in Western North America 1784-1812 22

By Jack Nisbet

Exact Contemporaries: Zebulon Pike's Expeditions.... 30

By Jared Orsi

Alexander Mackenzie and the Far Side
of the World, 1793 38

By Barry Gough

Covers

Front and back: "Lewis and Clark, 1804," by L. Edward Fisher. Oil on canvas 6' by 6' – Commissioned by the Missouri Bankers Association, Jefferson City, Missouri.

We Proceeded On welcomes submissions of articles, proposals, inquiries, and letters. Writer's guidelines are available by request and can be found on our website, lewisandclark.org. Submissions should be sent to Clay S. Jenkinson, 1324 Golden Eagle Lane, Bismarck, North Dakota 58503, or by email to Clayjenkinson2010@gmail.com. 701-202-6751.



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As Keepers of the Story-Stewards of the Trail, the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, Inc., provides national leadership in maintaining the integrity of the Trail and its story through stewardship, scholarship, education, partnership, and cultural inclusiveness.

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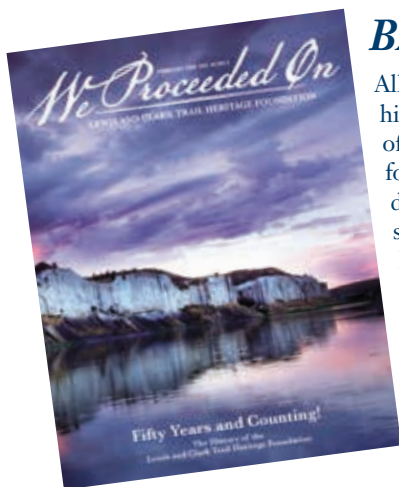
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A Message from the President



LCTHF President Louis Ritten

Exploration, the main subject of this issue of *We Proceeded On*, has been defined as “travel in or through an unfamiliar country or area in order to learn about or familiarize oneself with it.” Exploration is therefore a determined action, an act of seeking out. Discovery, defined as “the process of finding information, a place, or an object, especially for the first time,” is normally an active pursuit as well, but as we shall see, it can also take place in a more physically passive manner.

The Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation (LCTHF) was formed to honor the legacy of and stimulate interest in the Lewis and Clark Expedition and to disseminate the knowledge obtained during the journey. By joining LCTHF, you have made a concerted effort to increase your knowledge and broaden your perspective. We as an organization aim to assist you in that process by offering opportunities in the near future for exploration and discovery at varying levels of exertion. Please avail yourself of one or more of them and register quickly before time runs out.

As I write this, the coronavirus is raging through the country, with its

concomitant deleterious effects on public health and restrictions on economic and social activities. For the most up to date information about the availability of the opportunities presented below, please go to the LCTHF website, lewisandclark.org.

For the most adventurous, we are again offering a chance to travel by canoe through the White Cliffs section of the Missouri River in Montana and visit other sites of interest on a voyage of exploration and discovery emulating aspects of the original Corps of Discovery. Taking place from July 13 to 17, 2020, and starting and ending in Great Falls, MT, the trip will enable you to see the sights Lewis and Clark saw, experience time on the river with reenactors using period clothing and methods, and interact with fellow travelers, all while being pampered by guides who will ease your voyage downstream. A visit to the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in Great Falls, which houses the LCTHF headquarters, as well as tours of the Fight Site and the First Peoples Buffalo Jump will be included provided the weather is accommodating. Don't forget to say hello to Executive Director Sarah Cawley and Administrative Assistant Chris Maillet when you visit the office! Please see the LCTHF website at lewisandclark.org or call 406-454-1234 for further details of this exciting adventure.

For those more inclined toward sedentary discovery, may we heartily recommend our new and improved lewisandclark.org website. Our volunteer webmaster Kris Townsend has

undertaken an extensive update to make it more useful than ever before. With an uncluttered, clean look, it is both more attractive and more easily navigated than it had been. Please check it out and see for yourself.

While at lewisandclark.org, be sure to peruse the wealth of information contained on our companion Discover Lewis & Clark website by clicking on “Discover the Story.” Created by Joe Mussulman in the run-up to the Bicentennial, supported financially through the years by the National Park Service and others, and shepherded by the Fort Mandan Foundation until recently, we are proud to say Discovering Lewis & Clark is now owned entirely by the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation. Kris Townsend has again been instrumental in making this website as up to date as possible. We expect Discovering Lewis & Clark will be an integral part of fulfilling the mission of LCTHF as we head into the future. Anyone on earth with an internet connection can learn about the expedition without having to leave home. What would Thomas Jefferson have thought about such a marvelous, mindboggling innovation that still affords those least able to see the sights in person the opportunity to discover wondrous new things?

LCTHF is offering a third opportunity for fun and adventure for those who are willing to travel but who don't want to camp out on the river. The 52nd LCTHF Annual Meeting will take place in Charlottesville, VA, from August 2 to 5, 2020. On the lewisandclark.org website, please click

on “Annual Meeting” for more information. Your journey of exploration will be assisted by speakers and sites that will highlight the origins of the expedition. Many of the local sites we will visit have been updated and reinterpreted since our last gathering in Virginia over a dozen years ago. Discover for yourself what exciting changes have been made and enjoy the companionship of other Lewis and Clark devotees while doing so. As in the past, you must make your own room reservations. Staying at the Omni Hotel in downtown Charlottesville, the headquarters venue where many of the events will be held, will be the most convenient place to lodge. Please see omnihotels.com/hotels/charlottesville for more information about making

reservations at the Omni Hotel.

There also follows a separate, optional two-day add-on event that will take the traveler on a narrated bus ride from Charlottesville to the Cumberland Gap and back while visiting several historical sites along the way. A night’s stay in a fine hotel is included in the fee for this add-on trip. Two separate registration payments will be required should you choose to attend both the Annual Meeting and the add-on Cumberland Gap bus tour. You may also access information about the annual meeting and the optional bus trip at lewisandclarkvirginia.org/lcthf2020

Each of these opportunities provides an occasion to stretch your limits and boundaries, and to become

more knowledgeable about the story, the landscape, and perhaps even about yourself. For the explorers in our midst, you’ll also get the chance to make new friends and create new memories with old ones. Won’t you come along as we proceed on together? ■

Your humble and obedient servant,

Lou Ritten

President

Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation

“Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.” — Andre Gide



2021 National Fur Trade Symposium
New Date: Sept. 8-11, 2021 • Fort Atkinson State Historical Park

Call for Papers!

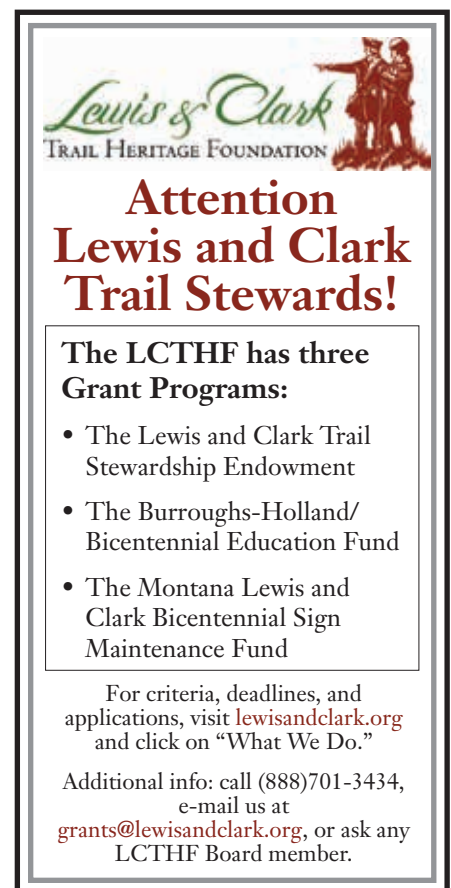
The focus of the 2021 symposium will be on the era of trade on the Missouri River between the return of Lewis and Clark in 1806 through the abandonment of Fort Atkinson in 1827.

We are looking for:

- Papers pertaining to notable individuals, companies or events occurring in that time.
- Papers about the impact of the U.S. Army and the implementation of federal law upon the fur trade and the Missouri River native tribes.

Email a copy of your paper, abstract or outline to Jason.Grof@Nebraska.gov or mail a hard copy to **Fort Atkinson SHP, PO Box 240, Ft. Calhoun, NE 68023** by June 1, 2021.

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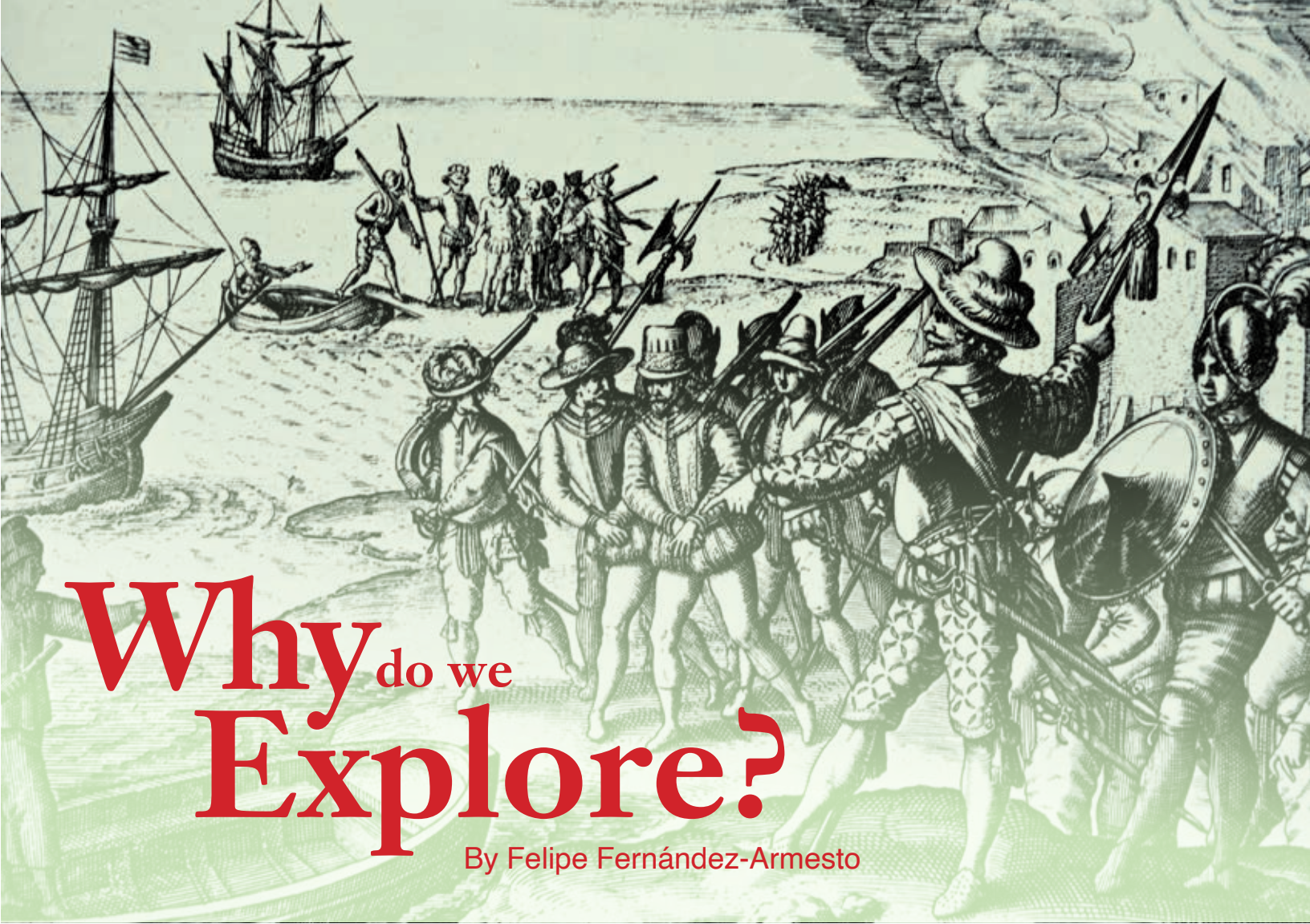
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Why do we Explore?

By Felipe Fernández-Armesto

Sir Walter Raleigh takes possession of the Isle of Trinidad on behalf of Queen Elizabeth I, 1595.

“It is a strange serpent,” said Lepidus in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. The crocodile – had they met – would doubtless have thought Lepidus equally strange.

Every species is unique, but humans think themselves unique in a unique way. Most such self-congratulation is unwarranted. Primatology and paleoanthropology show that we share with other creatures, in varying degrees, the capacities for culture, cognition, and communication that we once thought peculiar to ourselves. Maybe a fully objective observer—beholding us from the cosmic crows nest, at an immense distance of space and time, or from another universe—would define us as creatures unique only in thinking ourselves unique.

But the galactic onlooker would also surely notice that on our little planet, we humans are distinctive in two modest but puzzling ways. First, we occupy a staggering range of

environments: apart from the bacteria we carry with us, no other land-based species has penetrated more of the Earth. Second, despite our unparalleled diffusion around the globe, human communities are in touch with each other, whereas populations of other creatures know only those near them.

Explorers have led us into both these conspicuous forms of oddity—beating the paths that peopled the planet, finding the routes that re-united sundered cultures. The editors of *We Proceeded On* have asked me why: is exploration an innate or acquired impulse? A rogue feature—a weird genetic mutation, perhaps—or a common human trait unusually concentrated in some people? Is it a response to material circumstances or the property of a “spirit” or the result of some transcendent quality of mind or soul? Are explorers driven or drawn?

We should probably begin by admitting that Lewis and Clark were not—if there is such a thing—typical explorers.

They were explorers by command, not vocation: under orders, without which they might never had felt any desire to venture into the scientific void that beckoned beyond the Missouri. Political and economic constraints—rather than insatiable curiosity or restless wanderlust or fantastic visions—impelled their mission. Without Sacagawea’s under-acknowledged supervision they might never have accomplished it. Readers of *We Proceeded On* know, however, that something like a spirit of adventure overtook them on their march—“imagination,” as Lewis said, “suffered to wander into futurity” [April 7, 1805]. When he expressed his awe at a journey into “a country of at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civilized man had never trodden,” where “the good or evil it had in store for us was for experiment to determine,” he uttered the language of explorers: the language of science and adventure in unison.

But maybe there is no such thing as a typical explorer. Maybe the search for a universal explanation of what makes exploration happen is doomed to failure, like expeditions to El Dorado or Shangri La. At different times, in different cultures, and in different individuals, we can detect no uniform exploring profile, but contrasting motives and pressures leading to similar results.

If we go back to the first explorers, whose existence we can postulate but not document, we confront the most puzzling of all cases: that of people who forsook their environment of origin in the Rift Valley of East Africa to lead tiny groups—small, biddable bands or just a family or two—across unfamiliar terrain into destinations that demanded unprecedented adaptations. Something of the sort happened perhaps a million years ago or so, among communities of *Homo erectus*. About 100,000 years ago, long after *H. erectus* vanished from the Earth, individuals of our own species traveled in their wake and ended by vastly exceeding their range.

To understand how extraordinary their proceedings were, it helps to compare the history of *Homo sapiens* with that of our fellow-apes—the extant animals that most resemble us and are closest to us in evolutionary terms. They all occupy contiguous regions and generally do not venture, except when we wrench them, outside the biomes in which they evolved. The conspicuous exception is the mountain gorilla of Rwanda, whose ancestors left the lowland forests to head upslope, and survived by adapting an evolved physique to a challenging climate and diet. Our own ancestors achieved a similar adventure on a hugely greater scale, crossing

environments as hostile to human survival as deserts, mountains, and seas, modifying their cultures as they went to make survival possible. The peopling of the Earth was not a dispersion like that of other species. It took willpower and conscious commitment.



The world's first known explorer, Harkhuf. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Trans-environmental migrations have remained rare. Most migrants in documented periods stuck to familiar environments, looking for New Spains or New Englands and suchlike reminders of home. In the nineteenth century, the settlers who invaded New Zealand were willing to traverse the world—but only to reach somewhere they could recognize as resembling, for climate and soil, what they already knew. Today, migrant people will hazard unfamiliar climes and cultures, but only when transferring from one city to another. The environments they seek are man-made, but their criterion for settlement remains, as usual, familiarity.

Our fellow-apes can help us understand what was afoot in the breakthrough-explorations that peopled the world. Chimpanzees, for instance, stay in the forests to which they are well adapted, but they often break with their communities of origin to venture into what for them is the unknown—beyond the control of their tribes, in territory often patrolled

by hostile bands. The commonest reason for such secessions is sexual frustration: young males, whom elite rivals exclude from opportunities for mating, have two options: mounting a sort of coup against the existing alpha male and his cronies or seeking fulfilment elsewhere. The ancestors of mountain gorillas were surely escapees from restricted opportunities, perhaps of various sorts, in the lowlands. The impulses that drove the first human venturers beyond their homelands were—if the analogy is valid—of similar kinds. Internal competition for females or food or other resources, or fear of rivals at home, or (as I argued in my chapter in *The Cambridge History of the World*) the rigors of war, or of lower-level forms of violence, or the results of defeat could set them off and keep them going.

Did chance play a part? Historians unwilling to concede agency to “primitive” people have engaged in fantastic mythopoeia: imagining *Homo erectus* clinging to random tree-trunks to cross seas without any means of navigation, or Polynesians “drifting” across thousands of miles of the Pacific, sometimes to islands way beyond the normal reach of the winds, or predecessors of Columbus “blown across” the Atlantic by accident. There is no call to invoke anything so improbable. Exploration is purposeful by definition, though some accident, such as the discovery of an inviting cave mouth or glade or current, may stimulate it. Explorers are not always looking for something: Irish monks whose leather-bottomed currachs explored North Atlantic islands, perhaps as far as Newfoundland, in late antiquity and the early middle ages, were practicing a form of penitential self-exile, in which wandering, not arriving, mattered. “Is not God,” one abbot remarked, “the pilot of our little craft? ... He directs us whither He wills.” Some of the Norse navigators who established colonies in the same region a little later were expelled from their homelands, compelled to wander as convicts for crimes or losers of quarrels.

The long-term outcome of humankind’s first hundred thousand years or so of exploring was a divergent world in which mutually isolated peoples mutated and developed, independently of one another. Seas, deserts, and mountains, which their ancestors had crossed, now separated them, without beckoning them back. Subsequent generations of explorers re-established contacts. Sometimes their objective was to expand the resources of their home communities. The first explorer we know by name, about the middle of the third millennium BCE, was Harkhuf, who left Egypt at a pharaoh’s command to seek “incense, ebony, scented oil,

tusks, arms, and all fine produce,” beyond Nubia, and who brought back a pygmy “who dances divine dances from the land of the spirits.” Material gain or exigency justified most of the risks we know about, up to and including the Bronze Age: people to enslave or trade with advantageously; land to cultivate or cull; minerals to mine; conquests to exploit for tax or tribute; exotica cultivable only in new environments; allies to deploy in war or rebellion.

When did less crudely calculated motives, such as scientific or religious zeal, intervene? As so often with early examples of almost everything now seen as launching Western traditions, Herodotus is the source of the first known examples: in the fifth century BCE he recorded travelers who, starting along established trade routes, pursued them further than the merchants, to report on the mist-enshrouded seas of the boreal Cimmerians, or west African lands of beasts “with shaggy bodies, whom our interpreters called gorillas,” or the dreamlike interior of Asia, where ghosts and monsters dwelt. A couple of hundred years later, Buddhist *jatakas* relate unreliable tales of journeys to spread the faith; well documented cases follow, from about the fourth century CE, of Buddhist missions from China to India to gather texts or to southeast Asia to make converts.

All the motives discernible so far seem to have coalesced in exploration’s reputed “great age” of European out-thrust to much of the rest of the world from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth. The material greed, the imperial impulse, the missionary justification, the scientific curiosity: all are familiar to every reader of the literature. But what about that elusive exploring “spirit?”

I think it was there. You see it documented, to begin with, in two kinds of fiction: first came hagiography, which elevates seaborne wanderers, such as Brendan and Eustace, to the rank of saints, hallowed by their sufferings and their self-exposure to God’s will in form of wind and wave. Romances of chivalry followed—the late-medieval European equivalent of airport bookstall pulp-fiction, which was the common reading-matter of the age, accessible even to readers of modest literacy. The typical trajectory of such stories follows a hero down on his luck—a foundling, perhaps, or orphan, or victim of disinheritance, whose birthright is grand but who is obliged to make his own way in the world. He takes to the sea—the realm of fortune, where all inherited security counts for nothing. He joins a crusade or discovers an island, which he conquers from giants or monsters; the usual fade-out involves the protagonist’s marriage to a



Blank canvas: Aaron Arrowsmith's 1795 map of North American. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

“We shall delineate with correctness the great arteries of this great country: those who come after us will extend the ramifications as they become acquainted with them, and fill up the canvas we begin.” — Thomas Jefferson, 1805

fantastic princess and the re-attainment of his natural rank as a ruler. Cervantes satirized the genre in a delicious moment of the story of *Don Quixote*, when Sancho Panza begs the don to make him “the governor of some island with, if it may so be, a little bit of the sky above it.”

Fiction has a habit of anticipating reality, especially if readers take it seriously and model their lives on it. That is what happened with the romances of seaborne derring-do that inspired explorers. The navigators who brought Atlantic

archipelagoes into the ambit of European knowledge, commerce, and settlement in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were often disreputable cut-throats, but they gave themselves story-book names, such as Lancelot and Tristram of the Isle. Cartographers gave their discoveries (and the speculative islands which they scattered over their maps) names derived from Arthurian myths. When members of the entourage of a Portuguese prince reached and rounded the West African bulge from the 1430s, he spoke of the

natives they found there as *homines sylvestri* – the “men of the woods” of chivalric legends.

Much has been written of the religious zeal of Columbus and Cortés—but they came to it late, as most of us do, when disappointment had embittered them and the failings of human patrons made them confide in God. Their initial quests were for social ambition—to follow the plot of a chivalric hero to fame and fortune. One of Cortés’ men likened the sight of the Aztecs’ city to the revelation of an ogre’s castle in the best-selling knightly novel, *Amadis of Gaul*. Columbus was better read in romance and hagiography than in geography. Historians were long baffled by his insistence, against the evidence, that he had been the first aboard his flotilla to sight the New World. The explanation is that in the *Romance of Alexander*, in a Spanish version of the medieval re-write of the story of Alexander the Great, the world-conqueror travels to India by sea, and “proclaims that of all his crew he was first to see the land.” Columbus, who was obsessed with Alexander, was representing himself in his hero’s image.

Chivalric inspiration persisted throughout the “great age.” In the very year of the publication of *Don Quixote* (1605), Pedro Fernández de Quirós, the Pacific explorer who discovered the island he called La Austrialia del Espíritu Santo, celebrated his achievement by knighting every member of his expedition, including his cooks, and clothing them in blue robes as chevaliers of “the Order of the Holy Spirit.” The last great explorer in the service of the Spanish crown, the Welsh-nationalist renegade, Juan (John) Evans, whose mission in 1796 preceded that of Lewis and Clark in search of a route to the Pacific via the Upper Missouri, was consciously trying to replicate the fictional achievements of Prince Madoc, the hero of a chivalric legend of the twelfth century.

In consequence, “exploring spirit” became part of the mental equipment explorers needed in the Western tradition. The romantic quest—pursued in defiance of practicality to appease the soul rather than to feed stomachs or fill pockets—captivated explorers from the Enlightenment onwards. When Captain Cook vowed to exceed scientific demands by going “not only farther than any man has gone, but as far as it is possible to go,” or when Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis dreamed of “chasing God in the immensity of the heavens,” or when Meriwether Lewis broke into uncharacteristically exalted fervor for the unknown, or when Burke and Wills set off to cross Australia, or Scott to conquer Antarctica, in what can fairly be described as a cavalier spirit, they were taking part in a tradition of conscious adventure-seeking that

started with knight-errantry and led, all too often, to disaster. Without the successes that sometimes happened against the odds, the re-connected, joined-up, globalizing world we inhabit might never have been attained. ■



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A Short List of Fernández-Armesto’s Books

Ferdinand and Isabella. 1975.

Before Columbus: Exploration and Colonization from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic 1229–1492. 1987.

Columbus. 1991.

Millennium: A History of Our Last Thousand Years. 1995.

Reformation: Christianity & the World 1500–2000. 1996.

Civilizations. 2000.

The Americas: A Hemispheric History. 2003.

Ideas That Changed the World. 2003.

Humankind: A Brief History. 2004.

Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration. 2006.

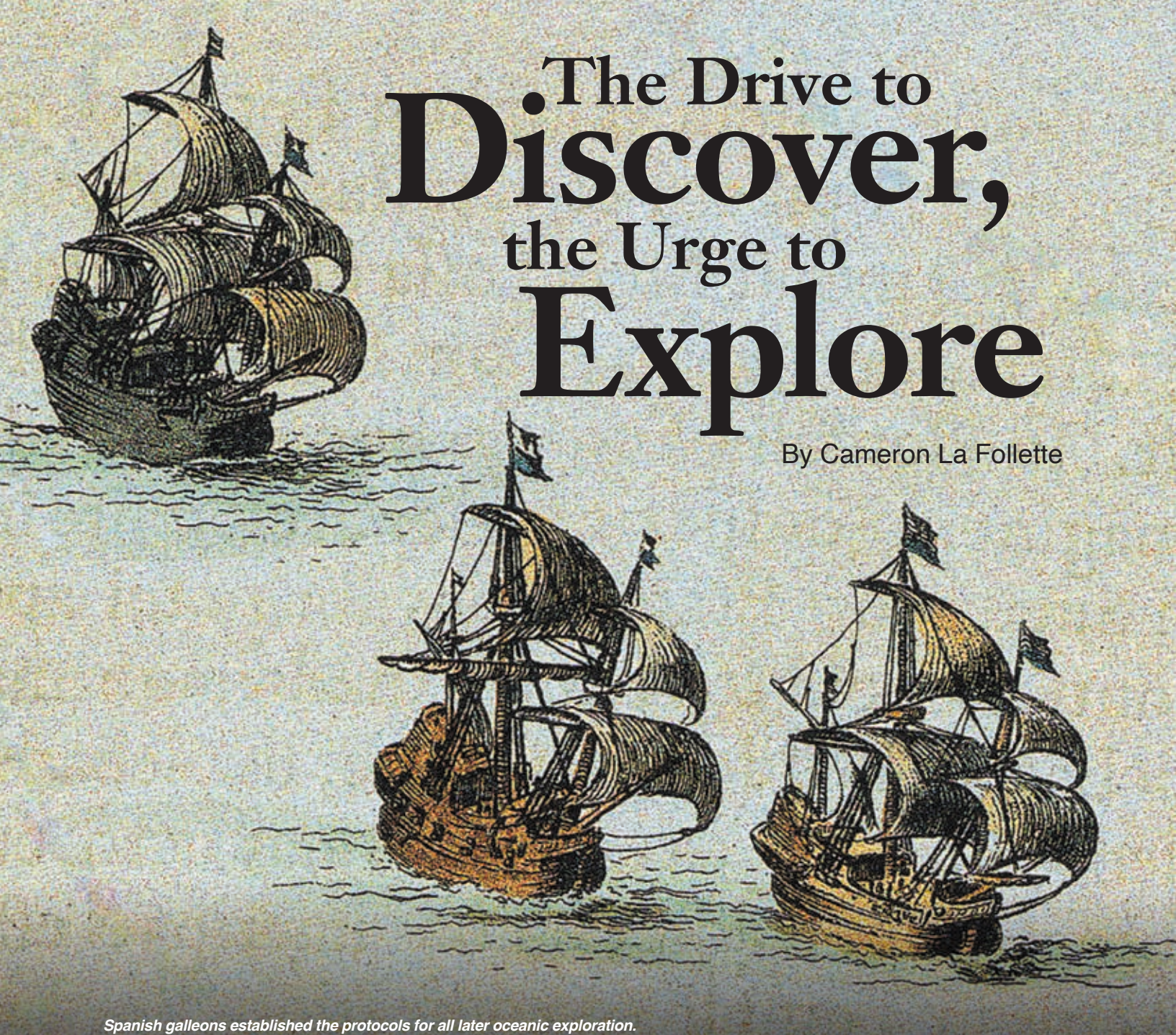
The World: A Brief History. 2007.

Amerigo: The Man Who Gave His Name to America. 2007.

1492. The Year the World Began. 2009.

The Oxford Illustrated History of the World. 2019.

Out of Our Minds: What We Think and How We Came to Think It. 2019.

The illustration depicts three large, multi-masted sailing ships, known as galleons, navigating across a vast, textured sea. The ships are rendered in a detailed, woodcut style, with their complex rigging and multiple sails clearly visible. They are positioned at different distances from the viewer, creating a sense of depth. The sky is a pale, textured blue, and the overall composition evokes a sense of historical maritime exploration.

The Drive to Discover, the Urge to Explore

By Cameron La Follette

Spanish galleons established the protocols for all later oceanic exploration.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition to the Pacific Ocean is often analyzed and celebrated as if it stood on its own, unique and monumental, head and shoulders above any other American venture into the unknown. But in fact it stands in a long and fabulous tradition of exploration in Western culture; its goals and achievements fit intimately into the history and nature of exploration as Westerners have experienced them for many centuries. To see Lewis and Clark in this tradition is to gain a greater understanding of their successes, and the appeal of the journey itself.

The Lure of the Horizon

The “lure of the horizon” is a fairly common phrase. It is used as shorthand for the yearning to explore, as well as the mysterious drive that sets the undertaking on its way. But the lure of the horizon implies that exploration arises from a single pure motive: fascination with the unknown. This pure desire to penetrate the unknown implies willingness to sacrifice all to experience it in person, on the ground, and preferably for the first time. We lionize most those explorers who were the first to climb a perilous mountain, first to find

the source of a sprawling river, first to cross an entire landmass, first to stand on the shore of an uncharted sea.

But it does not diminish a feat of exploration to examine its motives and find there were many. The grandeur of the horizon is not reduced if the explorer was mesmerized by the unknown, but also hoped to discover something so magnificent his reputation would shine forever in the annals of history. Nor is exploration diminished by finding that it was tied to a commercial motive, that men of commerce provided the financial backing to outfit and support the expedition in hopes of financial gain.

Whatever the motives, the desire to cross borders and enter forbidden or unknown territory seems universal. Many writers, explorers, and mariners later recalled hearing the reminiscences of returned travelers: stories of navigating the seas, tales of wondrous animals and unbelievable landscapes. Some cultures prize exploration. Western tradition has always valued the fearless folk who looked to the horizon and ranged across borders to expand knowledge, chart unknown lands, map new trade routes, or undertake lives of spiritual contemplation far from town and commerce.

Exploration to Chart New Lands and Seek a Life of the Spirit

One of the most revered, but also little known, explorers in the Western tradition is the Greek explorer Pytheas, who lived in Massilia, a Greek colony on the Mediterranean coast of France, now known as Marseilles. Around 330 BCE, for reasons that have not been ascertained, Pytheas decided to explore the vast barbarian regions of northern Europe, the mysterious territories from which came prized amber, tin, and gold. It is not known whether he went alone, with an expedition, or as the leader of an expedition. He was an astronomer and geographer with a strongly scientific turn of mind; and, as far as we can tell, was driven largely by scientific curiosity. He published his account of the stunning voyage in about 320 BCE.

Unfortunately, Pytheas' report has not survived the ravages of centuries, but later Greek geographers quoted extensively from his observations. This has allowed scholars to reconstruct his probable route: up along the Armorican peninsula of France, over to England, sailing between Great Britain and Ireland, north to the Orkney Islands. He most likely sailed yet further north, to what was then called Thule, now known as Iceland, though this is still a matter of scholarly debate. This daring journey would have allowed him to

experience the icy, semi-congealed seas of the far north, and sail the region where the sun never sets in the summer. On his return to Massalia, he apparently visited the North Sea coast, perhaps the western Jutland Peninsula (Denmark), and nearby Netherland and north German coastlines, regions long prized for their amber.

Some exploration is driven by seekers hoping to find lands of inspiration or unsettled territories where anchorites could contemplate the mysteries of the spirit in peace. Most famous of those were the sixth- and seventh-century Irish hermits, anchorites, and monastery founders, who traveled extensively along the west coast of Scotland and the Western Isles, and probably also to Iceland and the Faroes, in search of lands for contemplation and monastic settlement.

Another exceptional explorer for the sake of the spiritual life was a nineteenth-century French woman. By age eighteen Alexandra David-Néel (1868-1969), the famous French



Alexandra David-Néel in Tibetan garb, 1933. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

explorer of inner Asia, had visited England, Switzerland, and Spain on her own. She was one whom the road only captivated if she did not know where it would lead; but much of her phenomenal exploration was driven by a desire to live Buddhist teachings more deeply. She was the first Westerner to visit the Forbidden City of Lhasa in Tibet, crossing the Himalayas in winter at age 55 to reach the city in 1924. She traveled intermittently throughout inner Asia for more than 20 years in Sikkim, China, Tibet, and Mongolia, as well as Korea and Japan.

Exploration and the Hope of Commercial Gain

Yet it is commerce that frequently fuels the thrust for exploration into new territories, as is apparent from the first maritime voyages of the English. Watching the Spanish and Portuguese discover and expand into territories hitherto unknown to Europeans—including the Americas and the Spice Islands of the Far East—the English also wanted to find lands of riches and spices and begin their own commercial network, preferably far from the trade routes of the strong Iberian empires. But England had little history of long-distance voyaging. One of the first efforts was the 1553 search for a Northeast Passage to Cathay and the rich southern lands. Nobody in England knew if such a passage existed across the top of Europe. The voyage was organized by a newly minted “company of men,” merchant adventurers banding together and raising money for the great enterprise of exploration. Designed to fuse exploration and commercial opportunity, the company was led by nobleman Sir Hugh Willoughby, a knight and career soldier.

As with many bold initiatives, the voyage resulted in great success and also tragedy: two ships were lost on the north coasts of the Russian empire, but one ship made it to the sheltered estuary of the White Sea and wintered there. The pilot major, Richard Chancellor, and his officers traveled overland to Moscow, met Tsar Ivan the Terrible, received highly favorable trading privileges, and returned to England. The English had not found a Northeast Passage to Cathay, but they did forge a commercial link with an entirely new empire, and discovered hitherto unknown lands. The 1553 expedition led to the creation of the Muscovy Company, satirized by Shakespeare in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.

Following on the heels of this epic voyage came several to the west, again fusing commerce and exploration—this time searching the east coast of North America for a Northwest Passage linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.



Martin Frobisher sought the Northwest Passage from the east beginning in 1576. Painting courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Sir Martin Frobisher (d. 1594), a privateer preying on enemy shipping in the English Channel, led the first trip in 1576. His ships sailed to what is now Labrador, Canada, and Baffin Island. They found no fabled passage to Cathay. But because Frobisher returned to England with samples of what might be—it was fervently hoped—gold ore, he received much greater funding and made two more trips, in 1577 and 1578. Queen Elizabeth I underwrote much of the cost for the final trip, but the focus shifted. Instructions were to bring the gold-bearing ore home, and defer the search for a Northwest Passage. The ships returned safely to England, carrying 1,350 tons of ore. This turned out to be one of the most astounding boondoggles in English history: the ore was marcasite or pyrite, literally fool’s gold. It was worthless. The exploration of the Baffin Island coastline, however, and what came to be called Frobisher Bay, was valuable to future mariners; but the commercial goal was a spectacular failure.

Of Restlessness and National Pride

Like David-Néel, Frobisher had always been restless, living with his uncle, Sir John York, in London, and having more success at seamanship than school. Restlessness and the yearning for the horizon often go hand in hand, but in the history of human endeavors they are often combined with more worldly motives, which provide the funding, manpower, and support for exploration beyond known borders. Worldly motives include not only commerce but also national pride, often inextricably fused. David Thompson (1770-1857) is a fine example. His extensive and precise surveys and maps of Canada and the northwestern United States were largely done in the service of the North West Company, a fur-trading concern and rival to the Hudson's Bay Company. But Thompson's maps also gave Canadians their first real sense of the sprawling land they lived in. His longitudinal work was far more accurate than that of Meriwether Lewis.

The Spanish empire, having gained a foothold in the Philippines beginning in 1565, sought to expand the rich and longstanding local trade networks in the western Pacific region. The problem was to find the "westerlies," the trade winds that would allow ships to sail east, over the vast and uncharted Pacific, to the west coast of the Americas. Gifted navigator Andrés de Urdaneta (1498-1568), sailing on the *San Pablo*, deduced that the east-blowing trade winds might be found by sailing further north, into the stormy and unpredictable North Pacific. His gamble was accurate: three and a half months later, the *San Pablo* reached the port of Acapulco on the Mexican coast.

This vital geographic and commercial discovery inaugurated the fabled Manila galleon trade among China, the Philippines, and other eastern kingdoms and New Spain (Mexico), which lasted for 250 years. The Manila galleons carried an extraordinarily rich, luxurious, and varied cargo ranging from delicate Chinese silks to lacquered tables to spices and gems. The Manila trade strengthened the Spanish empire, added tremendous luster to its international standing, and made it the envy of all other European nations also striving for mastery of the seas.

The Many Facets of Exploration

We can thus look at Lewis and Clark's Voyage of Discovery, epic as it was, through the lens of the West's long history of exploration. A cluster of motives drove these courageous and perilous journeys: scientific exploration, opportunities

for land-based or seagoing commerce, empire-building, adding luster to national pride, and (occasionally) spiritual seeking. These journeys often lead to fabulous gains in knowledge or commerce, but they frequently go hand in hand with tragedies and disasters.

That Lewis and Clark succeeded so greatly, often in peril but never defeated, is greatly to their credit, and highlights the courage of all expedition members. But we should also remember the expedition for its role in crossing the unknown horizon. Like others in this great tradition, Lewis and Clark sought uncharted lands with many motives in their hearts. Later explorers, from mountaineers to astronauts, owe them a huge debt of inspiration. ■



Cameron La Follette is the Executive Director of Oregon Coast Alliance, a coastal conservation organization. She was the lead researcher and author of most of the articles for the Summer 2018 issue of Oregon Historical Quarterly entitled "Oregon's Manila Galleon," about Oregon's oldest known shipwreck. She continues to research and write on Oregon coastal history for such venues as Oregon Encyclopedia.

Notes

1. Barry Cunliffe, *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 2002).
2. Cunliffe, *Extraordinary Voyage*, 136-152.
3. John Marsden, *Sea-Road of the Saints: Celtic Holy Men in the Hebrides* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1996).
4. Sue Aran, "The Extraordinary Alexandra David-Neel: First European Woman to Travel to the Forbidden City of Lhasa." January 24, 2018. Accessed February 10, 2020, <https://bonjourparis.com/history/women-who-shaped-paris/alexandra-david-neel/>
5. Aran, "The Extraordinary Alexandra David-Neel."
6. James Evans, *Tudor Adventurers* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2014).
7. Evans, *Tudor Adventurers*, 71.
8. Evans, *Tudor Adventurers*, 225-247.
9. James McDermott, *Martin Frobisher: Elizabethan Privateer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 120-152.
10. McDermott, *Martin Frobisher*, 163-256.
11. William Lytle Schurz, *The Manila Galleon* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1959), 24.
12. Schurz, *The Manila Galleon*, 31-51.
13. Schurz, *The Manila Galleon*, 31-51. See also Cameron La Follette and Douglas Deur, "Views Across the Pacific: The Galleon Trade and Its Traces in Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 119:2 (Summer 2018), 160-191.

A detailed oil painting of Captain James Cook, shown from the waist up. He is wearing a dark blue or black military-style jacket with gold buttons and a white waistcoat with gold buttons. He has a white cravat and a white shirt with a ruffled cuff. He is looking slightly to the right of the viewer with a serious expression. His right hand is resting on a desk with a quill pen and a book. The background is dark and indistinct.

The Cook Template

By David Nicandri

One of the most significant passages in the journal of Meriwether Lewis is assigned the date of April 7, 1805. It is unusually lucid and cogent, even above Lewis' normally high standard (when he is writing), suggesting that it was a studied composition; that is, there were possibly, indeed probably, one or more earlier versions before the one that came down to us was inscribed. After all, Lewis had a whole winter to prepare for the moment when he, William Clark, and the larger party were to depart the icy mansion known as Fort Mandan. This line is of present interest: "Our

vessels consisted of six small canoes, and two large perogues. This little fleet altho' not quite so respectable as those of Columbus or Capt. Cook were still viewed by us with as much pleasure as those deservedly famed adventurers ever beheld theirs; and I dare say with quite as much anxiety for their safety and preservation."¹

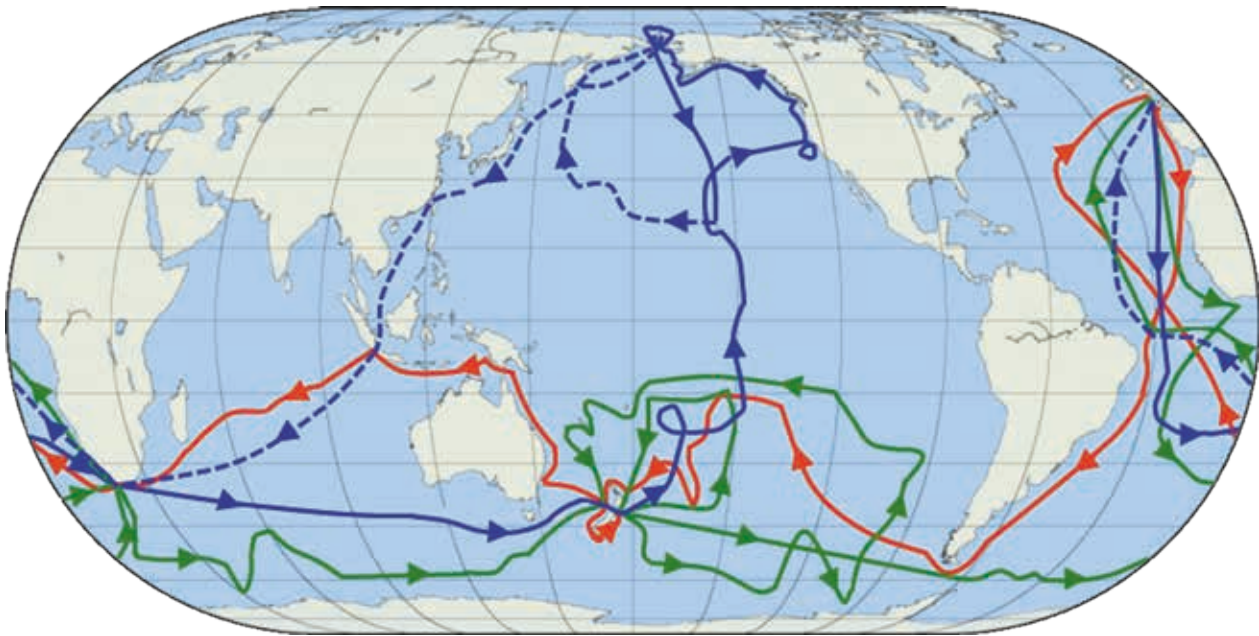
Although Clark was keeping a record at this point, it is not equivalent to his verbatim copies of Lewis that come later in the voyage. In those instances his slight deviations from Lewis's text can be interpreted for subtle meaning but that

analytic technique cannot avail here. Regardless, Clark did not replicate or even approximate the kind of enthusiasm for the departure moment that Lewis did. Sergeant John Ordway's parallel entry is more evocative of Lewis' celebratory sentiment, noting "we all went on board fired the Swivel and Set off on our journey." Likewise, Sergeant Patrick Gass records, "we left fort Mandans in good spirits." Private Joseph Whitehouse, whose journal (because of his lesser rank) can be relied upon intermittently to provide unfiltered insight into the group dynamic, has, for him, an unusually long entry for April 7, which, like Lewis', is indicative of the amount of time he had to prepare for the moment (temporally, psychologically, and as a scrivener). On this particular matter he writes, "we all embark'd, in our large Canoes and left Fort Mandan, on our way to the Pacific Ocean."² From these journal entries we can conclude that the departure from Fort Mandan was certainly a red-letter day for the expedition, if not for the nonplussed Clark, who was probably distracted by logistical matters. Lewis' text proceeds to a more elaborate peroration about penetrating "a country at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civillized man had never trodden; the good or evil it had in store for us was for experiment yet to determine." Lewis then returns to his "little vessells" containing "every article by which we were to expect to subsist or defend ourselves."³ The past tense construction of this last phrase is interesting in itself, indicating that the entire passage was written at some later point; most

prominent among the possibilities, Fort Clatsop.

There is more to unpack here. Lewis put Columbus and Cook in appropriate chronological order, but notice that he denominates the latter with a title. Cook had the working title of "captain" for all three voyages though he did not achieve the actual rank of "post-captain" until after his second. He was a newly commissioned lieutenant on the first expedition sent to Tahiti to observe the transit of Venus (1769), and then was promoted to commander for the second searching for *Terra Australis Incognita*, during which he circumnavigated Antarctica, a continent he sensed but did not see. In this manner, for two expeditions Cook operated in a scenario akin to William Clark's: he was in practical command (or co-command in Clark's case) but held a rank lower than captain. Columbus actually carried the even grander title of "Admiral," but his imperial association with Spain (from the Anglo-American perspective an odious one) and greater distance in time, inclined Lewis away from such usage. Conversely, Columbus, because of his legendary status as the putative discoverer of the New World, was even by Lewis' time so famous that a single name was thought to suffuse every aspect of identity. Other examples avail, from Cook's time, Linneaus; from ours, Oprah.

Cook, on the other hand, was a lived memory for Lewis' generation. As Gary Moulton notes in his annotation of the Lewis and Clark journals, Cook was "the most famous explorer of his time" and "greatly increased European



James Cook was the most systematic and comprehensive explorer in human history. The first voyage is traced in red, the second voyage in green, and the third and final voyage in blue. The dotted blue line marks the route of Cook's crew following his death in Hawaii in 1779.



Strange encounters: James Cook witnessing a human sacrifice in Tahiti, 1773. Engraving from an 1815 edition of Cook's Voyages. Illustration courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

knowledge of the Pacific.” Moulton adds, “Jefferson’s library included Cook’s journals of his last voyage, published in 1784, and Lewis was evidently familiar at least with the portions of it dealing with the Northwest coast.”⁴ As argued elsewhere,⁵ I think Lewis was quite familiar with not only Cook’s third-voyage journal but also his second, perhaps all three, including collateral accounts published by those who sailed with Cook. All of these would have been available in the library of the American Philosophical Society (APS), where Jefferson sent Lewis for pre-expedition training, or in the libraries of its constituent members. Though deceased by the time Lewis reached Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin had been on a first-name basis with many Enlightenment figures in London responsible for launching Cook into the Pacific, and likely met the great navigator after his first voyage before returning to America, just before Cook’s Antarctic expedition sailed.

The question arises as to what Lewis meant by his “little fleet” not being “quite so respectable” as Columbus’ or Cook’s. Cook never commanded more than two ships and Columbus, on his historic voyage, three, so it was not the number of vessels but probably their size that seemed to inform Lewis’ calculation, and possibly Lewis’ more geographically limited theater of operation. Whatever Lewis’ intentions for this text may have been, Nicholas Biddle did not include it for publication. Even if he had, few would

have given much thought to Lewis’ characterization of Columbus as an “adventurer,” but defenders of Cook’s reputation (which was somewhat vulnerable in the Napoleonic era) would have raised an eyebrow by associating him with that term. We know this because when Cook’s last expedition (after his death) stopped at Kamtchatka on the way home after its second swing across the icy latitudes north of Bering Strait, several junior officers took umbrage at their slow-in-developing understanding that the Russian fur men considered them fellow traders. No enlightened voyager ever thought of himself as a mere adventurer. They perceived themselves as being motivated solely by a quest for geographic and other forms of knowledge commonly referred to as natural history or philosophy. Closer to home, when Alexander Mackenzie wished to tarnish the idea of American fur trade expansion to the Pacific Slope in his epic *Voyages from Montreal* (1801), he used the same term to define his competitors’ short-term, mercenary outlook.

Lastly, there’s the question of just how much “anxiety” Columbus or Cook felt relative to the “safety and preservation” of their craft. To his credit, Lewis was forthright in admitting his own qualms, though the text in question could have been a simple purpling of prose intended to enliven the narrative. In retrospect Cook seems to have come out the better on this equation. Of the three, Columbus was surely venturing into the greatest unknown. The whole

building-block process of discovery made each subsequent expedition better informed and accordingly less risky. Although Cook covered thousands more miles than Columbus or Lewis, he had the notable advantage of Royal Navy backing plus the added benefit of the single greatest technological breakthrough in exploration history: a hand-sized chronometer that could keep Greenwich's time in all manner of climates and seas. This instrument allowed Cook to calculate his longitude in a relative instant, freeing him from the age-old nautical practice of running down latitudes. Cook could sail on the hypotenuse to anywhere he chose. One of Lewis' failings was not keeping his timepiece operative, which degraded the accuracy of the expedition's cartography. In his defense, except for his transect of modern Montana on the westbound leg, Lewis had the constant challenge of conducting an exposed party through foreign and potentially hostile nations. Surely, what Lewis was most anxious about was the potential threat from Native peoples. Cook provides a usable interpretive comparison. Though he had a handful of "near-death" experiences on all three voyages and was killed during the last, over the course of his career Cook always had the luxury of simply pulling up anchor and sailing away from trouble without necessarily retarding his discovery agenda. The closest Lewis and Clark got to this strategic luxury was at the end of the harrowing encounter with the Brule Sioux (Lakota); even then, Natives followed the expedition's upriver progress for days and continued to menace the expedition through the winter at Fort Mandan.

This last is a key concept differentiating early Columbus-style exploration lasting through the end of the sixteenth century, concentrated as it was on explicitly imperial, mercantile, and evangelical goals, versus what William Goetzmann once trenchantly denominated as the Second Age of Discovery for which Cook was the emblematic figure and Lewis a junior member. An agenda implied a scheduled itinerary and a prescriptive plan of observation. There were, assuredly, imperial and mercantile ramifications attendant upon Cook's voyages, but they were often tangential and inadvertent. For example, Cook is often mistakenly credited with originating the maritime fur trade on the Northwest Coast of America, but in actuality he was dismissive of that possibility because of Great Britain's distance from the fur zone. It was Cook's principal third-voyage adjutant, Lieutenant James King, who conceived of, and then later popularized in print, the potential for this triangular trade after the expedition's surprise discovery on the way home, with

Cook already dead, of sea-otter fur's value in China. On the other hand, Cook never struck a Christian evangelical posture. The closest he came was borrowing from the liturgical calendar's listing of saints' holidays to name islands and headlands after he had run out of British noblemen and admirals to honor.

Cook was not the first Enlightenment explorer, but his great success—based on a scrupulous adherence to discovery formulas established by Britain's best known learned association, the Royal Society (after which the APS was modeled, with Franklin a member of both), and the Royal Navy—popularized the idiom sparking many emulators. The Cook template took many forms. Two could be listed by title only though they are easily inferred in their import: personal discipline bordering on asceticism, and stewardship of the health and safety of crews entrusted to his care. (Throughout the First Great Age of Discovery—the era of Columbus, Magellan, Hudson, etc.—crews were considered an expendable commodity, like salted meat.) Another differentiating component of scientific discovery during the Enlightenment was the explorer's extended reflective journal, which expanded upon the base document known as the log. This narrative was essential for the proper recording of knowledge gleaned during the discovery process which, at voyage's end, was published for the edification of contemporaries and posterity. Cook was a paragon at this; correspondingly, it was Meriwether Lewis' greatest failure.

The vital element, the mainspring driving the course of events in Enlightenment era discovery, was the explorer's instructions. This is the one aspect of the Lewis and Clark Expedition that most closely followed the Cook template. John Douglas, a canon in the Anglican Church and editor of both Cook's second and third voyage accounts, inserted the text of Cook's instructions for his final expedition (which



The search for the Northwest Passage. Captain Cook's ships attempt to thread their way from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean. Illustration courtesy of the National Library of Australia.



The HMS Resolution and Discovery in Tahiti. Painting by John Cleveley the Younger (1747-1786). Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

we know Jefferson saw) in order to “enable the Reader to judge with precision how far they have been carried into execution.”⁶ Indeed, fidelity to mission was the hallmark of Cook’s career, much to the apparent consternation of modern scholars who wish that the great navigator had conducted his third voyage to their expectation, not the Admiralty’s. It must be added here that for the second and third voyages Cook largely drafted his own guidelines, which then came back to him under the imprimatur of the Admiralty, a circumstance that in itself distinguishes Cook from all other explorers before or since.

Not coincidentally, Thomas Jefferson included the text of his directions to Lewis in his “Memoir of Meriwether Lewis” that appeared as the front matter of Biddle’s edition of the journals of Lewis and Clark. This is only the first of many similarities between the two texts. The particular objectives, directions, and timelines differed substantially, but the intellectual model, or practicum, if not exactly consonant with Cook’s directive, rhymed with it.

Cook’s mission was outlined at the outset of his instructions. He was told “an attempt should be made to find out a Northern passage by Sea from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean.”⁷ It is worthy of remark that the goal was not specifically the *Northwest* Passage. Cook had the latitude to pursue a track across the top of Siberia and Russia (today Northern Sea Route) if the Northwest Passage above North

America (which was nonetheless the preferred track) should not prove practicable. Though little known in the general understanding of his life, Cook, after the ice had precluded a course eastward toward Baffin Bay, ran several degrees of longitude west of Bering Strait’s center-point before Arctic ice stymied sailing farther in that direction as well.

Jefferson, on the other hand, expended several paragraphs before getting to the point, finally telling Lewis “The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean . . . may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce.”⁸ This was an oblique reference to the same Northwest passage that Cook tried to find, although it was by now a third-stage concept. In Cook’s time the goal was an all-saltwater route (“by Sea”). This was followed by the successor geographic image of a large salt-water inlet accessible off the Pacific that mirrored Hudson’s Bay penetration into the continental interior. The expectation was that these two inland seas would narrow the terrestrial gap between oceans. George Vancouver demolished this idea in the 1790s. The Northwest Passage being such a durable idea, Alexander Mackenzie, following the lead of Peter Pond, then propagated the image of a network of rivers that could transect North America for the purposes of commerce. This is the idiom Lewis worked within.

Jefferson, meanwhile, scoffed at Alexander Mackenzie's achievement: "the trade of another nation carried on in a high latitude, through an infinite number of portages and lakes, shut up by ice through a long season."⁹

Moving to the practical realm, in the fourth paragraph of the Admiralty document Cook was encouraged to "distribute among the Chiefs of those [South Pacific] Islands such part of the Presents with which you have been supplied as you shall judge proper, reserving the remainder to distribute among the Natives of the Countries you may discover in the Northern Hemisphere."¹⁰ Jefferson broached this topic much earlier. His second paragraph referenced the many supplies and other items Lewis was to secure out of his financial grant, including "Light articles for barter and presents among the Indians."¹¹

Both explorers were conducting operations with potential diplomatic consequences. Cook was "strictly enjoined not to touch upon any part of the Spanish Dominions on the Western Continent of America, unless driven thither by some unavoidable accident."¹² In the parallel document, Jefferson told Lewis that he had informed "ministers here from France, Spain & Great Britain" about the American mission westward, securing Lewis passports from the first and last of these.¹³ Jefferson presumed one was not necessary from Spain, because of the Louisiana retrocession, but for the same reason Cook was waved off a generation earlier, prickly Spanish colonial officials tried to thwart the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Cook had sufficient experience around polar icepacks from his circumnavigation of Antarctica on the second voyage to include contingent language facilitating an exit from any exigent circumstance during the third: "having discovered such a Passage, or failed in the attempt, make the best of your way back to England by such Route as you may think best for the improvement of Geography and Navigation." In the Lewis analogue Jefferson advised, "should you be of opinion that the return of your party by the way they went will be eminently dangerous, then ship the whole, & return by sea, by the way of either cape Horn, or the cape of good Hope, as you shall be able."

Whenever Cook encountered terrain not previously recorded geographically he was "very carefully to observe the true Situation of such Places, both in Latitude & Longitude." Gene Roddenberry notwithstanding, THIS was the prime directive. Mathematical precision on this score translated directly to faithful cartographic depiction

of the globe, or a targeted portion of it, and was the single most salient property of scientific exploration. Admiralty guidance added that Cook was to document "the Variation of the Needle; Bearings of Headlands" and other maritime concerns, such as currents, tides, and shoals, "as may be useful either to Navigation or Commerce."

Jefferson instructed Lewis, though in greater detail given his protégé's lack of experience as an explorer, to record "latitude & longitude, at all remarkable points on the [Missouri] river, & especially at the mouths of rivers, at rapids, at islands, & other places & objects distinguished by such natural marks & characteristics of a durable kind, as that they may with certainty be recognised hereafter." Lewis was also advised to note "variations of the compass," the shifting nature of the magnetic north pole being one of nature's mysteries that intrigued Enlightenment science. Long after Lewis' untimely death, Jefferson was pressuring William Clark to add latitudinal and longitudinal data to his map of the American West. He urged him to "deliver the Astronomical observations to the Secretary at War, who would employ some one to make the calculations, to correct the longitudes of the map, and to have it published thus corrected."

For Cook, the subsidiary agenda was scripted as follows: "You are also carefully to observe the nature of the Soil & the produce [of any new found land]; the Animals & Fowls that inhabit or frequent it; the Fishes that are to be found in the Rivers or upon the Coast, and in what plenty." These were to be described in text and by "accurate drawings of them." Cook was not expected to delineate any biological specimens himself; he had artist/naturalists to do that work, a service that the nascent United States could not afford for Lewis. If Cook found "any Metals, Minerals, or valuable Stones, or any extraneous Fossils, you are to bring home Specimens of each, as also of the Seeds of such Trees, Shrubs, Plants, Fruits and Grains, peculiar to those Places, as you may be able to collect."

This last task Lewis was able to complete, pursuant to what Jefferson denominated as "other objects worthy of notice," a list longer than Cook's including "the soil & face of the country, it's growth & vegetable productions, especially those not of the U.S.," meaning the Atlantic seaboard. Lewis was to attend to "animals of the country generally" including "the remains or accounts of any which may be deemed rare or extinct," plus "mineral productions of every kind." Unlike the Admiralty, Jefferson was not interested in precious metals; he had Lewis keep an eye out for more

The Cook Template

practical substances such as limestone, coal, and “saltpetre” plus “volcanic appearances.” (Cook had taken note of these on the few occasions he encountered them in the Pacific’s “Ring of Fire.”) Jefferson also provided more detail in his instructions relative to climate and weather than Cook had, but then Cook was operating within a long-standing maritime culture for which wind, temperature, and precipitation in fluid or frozen form were always top of mind, less for scientific interest than day to day survival. For the Admiralty to tell Cook to record those quotidian matters would have been comparable to telling him to re-date his log with each passing day.

One of the more noteworthy overlaps between the two sets of instructions involved what the Admiralty document typified as the “Genius, Temper, Disposition, and Number of the Natives.” Cook was directed “to cultivate a friendship with them; making them Presents of such Trinkets as you may have on board, and they may like best; inviting them to Traffick; and shewing them every kind of Civility and Regard; but taking care nevertheless not to suffer yourself to be surprized by them, but to be always on your guard against any Accidents.”

Jefferson’s language echoed these sentiments, but he went into greater detail because, unlike Cook’s engagement with distant populations with whom trading relations involved transitory provisioning, the American expedition had to be more conscious of a regular “commerce which may be carried on with the people inhabiting the line” Lewis was to pursue. Jefferson also advised his man “to make yourself acquainted, as far as a diligent pursuit of your journey shall admit, with the names of the nations & their numbers.” Jefferson explicitly directed Lewis’ attention to indigenous material culture, vocabulary, and other knowledge providing insight into their “state of morality, religion” and related information. Cook did not need to be so instructed by the time of his third voyage. The ethnographic gaze was by this time standard practice on his expeditions, guided by what might be termed rules of engagement provided him by the Royal Society before his first voyage. On the other hand, like Cook, Jefferson told Lewis that “In all your intercourse with the natives, treat them in the most friendly & conciliatory manner which their own conduct will admit.”

In some measure an exploratory venture never happened until its principal agent returned with a journal that could be turned into a publication, a point emphasized by Thomas Slaughter in *Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and*



James Cook’s remarkable map of Newfoundland, 1775. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Wilderness. In that sense discovery was as much a literary enterprise as a physical one. This is why Jefferson was so perturbed by Lewis’ nonfeasance in getting his book into print after returning from the Pacific in 1806. The Admiralty told Cook that “upon your arrival in England, you are immediately to repair to this Office in order to lay before us a full Account of your Proceedings . . . taking care . . . to demand from the Officers & Petty Officers the Log Books & Journals they may have kept, & to seal them up for our Inspection, and enjoining Them & the whole Crew, not to divulge where they have been, until they shall have permission so to do.” In a related fashion, Jefferson advised Lewis to have “several copies” of his record made and entrust them to “the care of the most trust-worthy of your attendants, to guard, by multiplying them, against the accidental losses to which they will be exposed.” Upon his return, after discharging and compensating the men, Lewis was to “repair yourself with your papers to the seat of government;” no provision was made regarding the release of strategic information or care toward the prevention of unauthorized accounts, however. In the event, Lewis seemed to be more concerned

about unauthorized accounts than Jefferson was, given the former's unseemly squabble with the publisher of Gass' book. He should have learned from Cook's experience that public interest in travel literature, founded as a sub-genre by Cook's voyages, virtually guaranteed the appearance of illicit publications.

Discovery was dangerous work. Accordingly, both Cook's and Lewis' instructors anticipated the need for what in modern parlance is called succession planning. The Admiralty closed its guidance with advice to Cook that "in case of your inability by sickness or otherwise to carry these Instructions into execution, you are to be careful to leave them with the next Officer in command who is hereby required to execute them in the best manner he can." (The next line carried the date of issuance over the Admiralty secretary's signature, July 6, 1776, a week of great import for then Congressman Jefferson as well.) When it came time, President Jefferson told Lewis, also in closing, "to provide, on the accident of your death, against anarchy, dispersion, & the consequent danger to your party, and total failure of the enterprize, you are hereby authorised, by any instrument signed & written in your own hand, to name the person among them who shall succeed to the command on your decease." Jefferson added "all the powers and authorities given to yourself are, in the event of your death, transferred to, & vested in the successor so named."

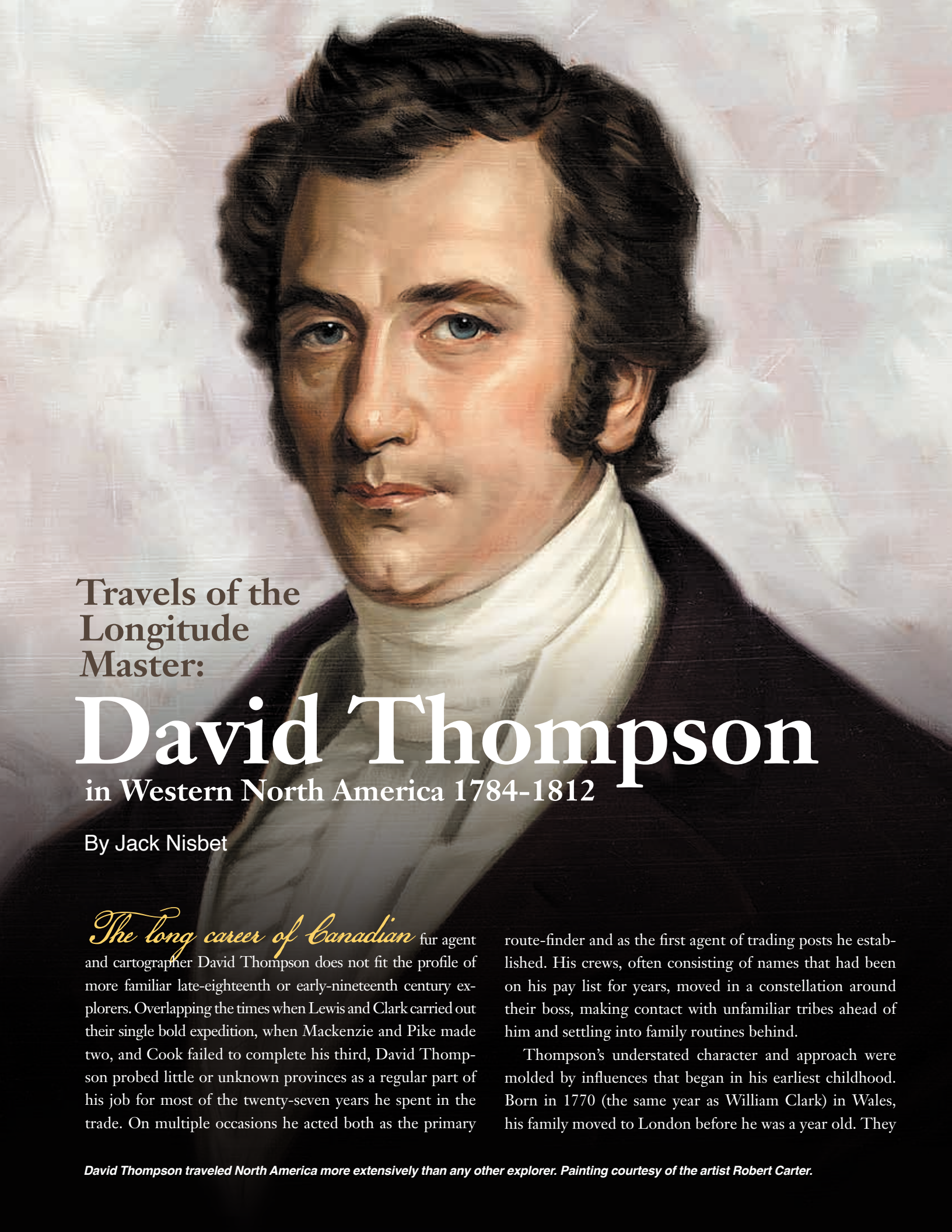
Of course, both Cook and Lewis died prematurely. Felipe Fernández-Armesto once quipped, "For some explorers, the best career move was death," and there is no doubt that this circumstance has heavily influenced the public's centuries-long interest in both men. Within a fortnight of the news of Cook's death reaching London, an anonymous chronicler named "Columbus" (surmised to be the famed naturalist and fellow Cook-first-voyager Joseph Banks) published a tribute in the London *Morning Chronicle* of January 22, 1780. Within his testament to Cook's navigational and management skills, perseverance, and contribution to science, "Columbus" also stipulated that "his paternal courage was undaunted." Jefferson favored Lewis with the same usage in his Biddle-edition memoir; indeed he replicated the exact same context by stating his man was "careful as a father of those committed to his charge." Stephen Ambrose later interpolated Jefferson's eulogistic expression for the title of his book which, given its remarkable popularity, cemented Lewis in the modern American imagination. ■



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A detailed oil painting of David Thompson, showing him from the chest up. He has dark, wavy hair, blue eyes, and a serious expression. He is wearing a dark coat over a white cravat. The background is a soft, textured wash of light colors.

Travels of the
Longitude
Master:

David Thompson

in Western North America 1784-1812

By Jack Nisbet

The long career of Canadian fur agent and cartographer David Thompson does not fit the profile of more familiar late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century explorers. Overlapping the times when Lewis and Clark carried out their single bold expedition, when Mackenzie and Pike made two, and Cook failed to complete his third, David Thompson probed little or unknown provinces as a regular part of his job for most of the twenty-seven years he spent in the trade. On multiple occasions he acted both as the primary

route-finder and as the first agent of trading posts he established. His crews, often consisting of names that had been on his pay list for years, moved in a constellation around their boss, making contact with unfamiliar tribes ahead of him and settling into family routines behind.

Thompson's understated character and approach were molded by influences that began in his earliest childhood. Born in 1770 (the same year as William Clark) in Wales, his family moved to London before he was a year old. They

David Thompson traveled North America more extensively than any other explorer. Painting courtesy of the artist Robert Carter.

landed in Westminster, a tough neighborhood with a deep history. Both the great abbey and poet John Milton's former residence became familiar landmarks.

When David's father died a few months after the family's arrival, the boy was left with no apparent prospects in a society where class and connections meant everything. That changed when a local businessman sponsored him to attend the Grey Coat School in Westminster, part of a charity system designed to provide poverty-stricken children with viable vocations. At Grey Coat, Thompson added proper English grammar to his native Welsh Gaelic and developed a lifelong love of reading. Students at the spartan school practiced penmanship endlessly, tended an extensive garden, and knotted rigging on a pair of scale-model ship replicas. Thompson learned the basics of carpentry and studied badger diggings in hayfields that adjoined the school grounds. He regularly made the short walk to the Thames to watch river traffic.

Girls from financially strapped families, equally in need of practical occupations, also attended the Grey Coat School. The girls learned housekeeping crafts that included sewing and weaving, two skills that Thompson absorbed and put to good use throughout his life. The Grey Coat's method of teaching mathematics went beyond such basic necessities. Naval officers from Greenwich Observatory boated up the

Thames to teach advanced male students, which exposed Thompson to the wonders of trigonometry and celestial navigation in his early teens.

Captain James Cook (1728-1779) was every boy's hero at Grey Coat, in part because Cook had managed to leap beyond his own humble beginnings by serving in the Royal Navy. Soon after Thompson entered the school, Cook set off on his third round-the-world voyage. When news of the captain's demise in Hawaii reached London, the ten-year-old would have seen the whole city plunge into mourning. His dream was to pursue a career in the Royal Navy, but upon graduation his only offer was a fur trade apprenticeship with the Hudson's Bay Company. He shipped out for Canada with the company's 1784 annual brigade.

Thompson's second education began at Churchill Factory, one of two main trade houses the company operated on Hudson Bay's western shore. Cree guides working for the fur company taught the teenager about polar bears, wild food procurement, and outside living in permafrost. He was quick to pick up the Cree language and learned how their traditional stories revealed complex relationships among humans, animals, and landscape. At the same time, he used his annual supply request to order back copies of Samuel Johnson's *Rambler* essays and a volume of Milton's poetry. Even hardened company agents saw promise in the youngster.



Map of David Thompson's dizzyingly complete travels through Canada and the northern tier of the United States. Map by Gregory A. Harlin, National Geographic Society image collection.



David Thompson was one of the greatest longitude men of his era.

At age seventeen, he was chosen to travel west to Lake Winnipeg and then up the South Fork of the Saskatchewan River to winter with a Pikani Blackfoot encampment south of today's Calgary, Alberta. Over the long dark days Thompson listened to Saukamappee, a Cree elder with a Blackfoot wife, describe a world before the advent of horses or guns. Saukamappee's facial scars helped to explain how his people had been decimated by the 1780-1781 North American smallpox pandemic. As one of five white men among 2,500 or so Blackfoot, the visitor also learned about political power on the East Front of the Rockies, meeting tribal peers who would become important headmen in the years to come.

In late 1789, Thompson suffered a compound fracture of his fibula at a Saskatchewan outpost. He didn't walk for eight months and credited his recovery equally to the attention of a kindly agent and the nutritious cooking of some Nipissing Cree women camped close to the trading house where he convalesced. By chance, the only experienced cartographer in Canada also wintered at the post, and Thompson spent his idle months immersed in practical surveying and mapping techniques. He took endless sextant shots to determine the exact location of the trade house, one known point in a vast unmapped world. He came to believe that with enough dogged persistence he might be able to chart that blank space.

When Thompson completed his company apprenticeship in 1791, he asked if he might forego the traditional honor of a new suit of clothes in exchange for a set of surveying instruments. The Hudson's Bay governors complied with an array that included a Dollond sextant, purchased from the same London shop that Thomas Jefferson patronized

while serving as a diplomat abroad. It was no coincidence that the telescope, chronometers, and compass used by the Corps of Discovery closely matched Thompson's own long-standing kit.

While the budding surveyor tested his instruments by attempting to pioneer a new route to fur-rich Athabasca Lake for the Hudson's Bay Company, the rival North West Company's own more experienced explorer, Alexander Mackenzie, pressed further west. In summer 1793 Mackenzie crossed the Continental Divide via the Peace River and completed the first recorded European crossing of North America north of Mexico. Although he failed to clarify the geography of the Columbia and Fraser Rivers, Mackenzie soon began to advocate for the two major fur companies to merge and extend joint operations across the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific to China.

Mackenzie's vision made sense, but the two corporations sprang from entirely disparate cultures. Hudson's Bay, more than a century old and comfortably based in London, favored a conservative strategy. The Nor'Westers, a loose consortium of mostly Scottish free traders based in Montreal, were much more aggressive. David Thompson certainly understood these differences, especially after he spent the next three years isolated in far northern posts, dogged by company infighting and limited in the time he could spend surveying new territory. Early in 1797, he unceremoniously quit the Bay Company and walked to the nearest North West Company post to offer his services.

That summer, when Thompson arrived at his new employer's warehouse near Grand Portage on Lake Superior, the partners immediately assigned him to lead an ambitious expedition. The surveyor began by making his way to Lake Winnipeg, where he assembled a crew of French-Canadian mixed-blood voyageurs. Those men and their tribal wives communicated in a version of French sprinkled with Cree and Iroquois words; this patois became the everyday business language that Thompson spoke for the rest of his time in the fur trade.

From the southern shore of Lake Winnipeg, his party looped west through the Assiniboine River drainage to determine which North West posts were north of the new international boundary established by the Jay Treaty. Next, Thompson directed a Christmas dog sled dash south to the Mandan villages on the Missouri River. There he determined the first accurate latitude and longitude for the villages, questioned visitors who had traveled from

the Rocky Mountains, and recorded cultural practices at the commercial hub of approximately 4,500 Mandan and Hidatsa Indians. After two weeks, he struck east to try to sort out the headwaters of the Mississippi. Although Thompson missed by a few miles the lake (Itasca) designated today as the source of the Mississippi, he did manage to win over several partners at the North West Company's 1798 summer meetings on Lake Superior. Mackenzie himself declared that their new surveyor had carried out two years' worth of tough work in ten months.

The Mandan trip also yielded Thompson's first significant map, an effort titled "Bend of the Missouri" that included censuses of encampments and accurate information gathered from tribal informants about river geography west to the Yellowstone. That map found its way to an American diplomat in eastern Canada, who funneled it to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson quickly understood its value for his own planned expedition to the Pacific, penciling a note that emphasized Thompson's coordinates of the Mandan villages and making sure to include a copy in the library of charts that Lewis and Clark utilized on their way up the Missouri.

Thompson, for his part, was just getting started. Assigned to carry out a survey of the expansive Athabasca District, he stopped at a northern Saskatchewan post to marry Charlotte Small, the daughter of early North West Company partner Patrick Small and a Cree mother. Charlotte was fluent in both Cree and English, and Thompson already understood the political and economic gains that came with language facility. Although their relationship certainly began as an arranged marriage in the custom of the fur trade (*à la façon du pays*)—Charlotte's sister was betrothed to fellow North West Company agent John McDonald of Garth—it developed into something deeper. They had thirteen children together and died within a few months of each other in Montreal 58 years later.

In the fall of 1800, the couple joined brother-in-law McDonald of Garth at the newly constructed Rocky Mountain House, far up the North Fork of the Saskatchewan. From there the North West Company intended to push their trade across the divide, with Thompson's surveying prowess essential to establishing the primacy of the foothold. As events began to unfold in rapid succession, he never lost sight of that larger purpose.

Soon after Thompson's arrival, Blackfoot visitors to the post informed him that a party of Kootenay (Ktunaxa) men and women, a Columbia Plateau tribe intent on forging

direct trade with the Euro-American fur companies, had crossed the divide via one of their many established trails. Thompson, led by a Blackfoot guide and wary of the complex political relationship of two tribes who regularly encroached on each other's territories, rode out to meet the Kootenays. Struggling with both a new language and Blackfoot horse thieves, he escorted the travelers to Rocky Mountain House for a trading session; he then dispatched two of his voyageurs back over the mountains to winter with the Kootenays and pave the way for a trading house on that tribe's home ground at the headwaters of the Columbia River.

The Kootenays had just departed when Duncan McGillivray, the man designated as the leader of the Nor'Westers' trade expansion, arrived at Rocky Mountain House. MacGillivray, young and charismatic, was certain that the following spring he would journey to the "Great River of the West" and follow it to the sea. Before leaving Montreal, in fact, he had copied extracts from George Vancouver's *Voyage of Discovery of the North Pacific Ocean* into his journal, with particular attention to Lieutenant Broughton's survey of the Columbia's lower 100 miles.

To keep up the business end of this endeavor, the Nor'Westers rode south to the same Pikani Blackfoot camps where David Thompson had wintered thirteen years before. Thompson knew the headmen that he and McGillivray met and wrote that two of those leaders agreed to allow Iroquois hunters, working for the North West Company, to trap beaver in the Rockies. Blackfoot oral accounts do not agree with that assessment. The elders also made it clear that they did not approve of the fur men trading guns across the



David Thompson locates himself on the grid. Sextant in hand, artificial horizon on the ground.



David Thompson memorial near Velva, North Dakota. Photograph by Clay Jenkinson.



Statue of David Thompson and his wife Charlotte, Invermere, British Columbia.

Rockies, which would alter the balance of power with their Kootenay and Salish counterparts on the west side.

Before returning to Rocky Mountain House, Thompson and McGillivray ascended the Bow River, and then scaled a peak to see what lay beyond. The intimidating mountains further west prompted Thompson to respond much as Meriwether Lewis did at Lemhi Pass five years later: “Never before did I behold so just, so perfect a resemblance to the waves of the ocean in a wintery storm.”¹ While McGillivray sported after bighorn sheep, a favorite food of the voyageurs, Thompson took his usual observations for latitude and longitude. When news of the sheep and the sextant shots found their way back to Thomas Jefferson, the newly elected president incorporated both into his plans for the Corps of Discovery.

The Nor’Westers’ own expedition ran into difficulties before it even began. First, over the winter of 1800-1801 Duncan McGillivray fell prey to a debilitating “rheumatism” that left him physically unable to lead the spring advance. Then a party of Stony Assinboines, intent on delaying further fur trade expansion, killed the Kootenay man tagged to serve as its guide.

The company pressed ahead with their intentions,

designating trader James Hughes to serve as the new leader and retaining David Thompson as second in command and chief surveyor. This attempt was stymied by a questionable Cree guide and ill-timed weather, so that a discouraged Thompson ended up back at Rocky Mountain House in late June 1801. In a report written for senior company partners, he laid out a plan that would address a range of problems and carry the mission forward.

However prepared Thompson might have been to take another crack at the Rockies, the chaotic state of fur trade economics kept him working more as a post agent, mostly in the Peace River country, for the next five years. It was the fall of 1806 before he and Charlotte, now with three children in tow, arrived back at Rocky Mountain House as part of a new North West Company attempt to reach the Columbia River. This time their advance team was led by Jaco Finlay, a mixed blood scout who had a tribal wife and local credibility. While Jaco and his voyageur companions hopped back and forth across the divide that winter, Thompson kept up with news from tribal informants that included an account of Meriwether Lewis’ skirmish with a Blackfeet party on the Marias River, and reports that American trappers were traveling back up the Missouri even

as the Corps of Discovery returned downstream.

In spring 1807 the surveyor cached trade goods at the last good hunting meadows before the mountains, then paced up and down his intended route waiting for winter's breakup. In mid-June he departed with a handful of voyageurs and various family members, including Charlotte and the three kids, for a six-day trek up and over what is now called Howse Pass. On the Pacific slope, Thompson's party followed the wild Blaeberry River down to the Columbia and waited for their Kootenay contacts to appear.

This was a difficult time, but twentieth-century historians who described Thompson as wandering lost on the west side, unaware that he had actually stumbled onto the main stem Columbia River, failed to grasp the context of tribal knowledge and complex geography that shaped the surveyor's movements. The Kootenay people had clearly informed the fur companies of their desire for manufactured goods. They had first crossed the Rockies asking for a trading house in 1792 as a way to avoid the use of Blackfoot middlemen. Thompson had direct personal contact with the tribal leaders of both sides and understood the delicate situation he was entering. The surveyor complained that Jaco Finlay had done a poor job of widening the trail and laid up rotten timbers for a much-needed canoe, but Finlay had also created a map, rendered in a tribal style, that accurately depicted the Columbia and Kootenay systems.

The snowmelt-swollen river that David Thompson met at the mouth of the Blaeberry flowed north. A hell-bent explorer like Alexander Mackenzie might have built a canoe out of Jaco Finlay's flimsy timbers and run it downstream, seeking the Pacific. Instead Thompson waited, hungry and irritable. When no Kootenay acquaintance arrived on the scene he moved south, upstream, to carry on with his business of trade.

That begrudged patience made all the difference. He encountered Kootenay headmen at the source lakes of the Columbia (Columbia Lake and Windermere Lake) who told him where to locate his Kootanae House trading post. Although anxious to go "on Discovery," as he liked to call it, Thompson waited as advised for the proper elder, a curly-haired Kootenay known as Ugly Head, to lead him into the new world. That fall Ugly Head showed his visitor how only a few miles to the south, the full-blown Kootenay River shot past the nascent Columbia, providing a direct highway that would lead the traders deeper into his homeland, provide a link to Salish people as further potential trading partners,

then discharge into the Columbia hundreds of miles closer to the sea. The surveyor spent that winter at Kootanae House absorbing all the cultural and geographical information he could about this new world.

Over the course of the next three years, under the guidance of Ktunaxa and Salish headmen, Thompson established an effective circle of trade houses that stretched south from the source lakes of the Columbia to the Kootenay and across the 49th parallel to the Flathead/Clark Fork/Pend Oreille and Spokane/Coeur d'Alene drainages. Strategically conceived, this circuit accounted for the inevitable competition of Hudson's Bay Company traders following him across the Canadian Rockies and American trappers approaching from the Missouri. When tribal visitors to Kootanae House brought in a threatening letter from two Americans who said they had prior claim on the territory Thompson was trying to explore—one of the signers called himself Zachery Perch, initials that instantly call to mind Zebulon Pike and the machinations of General Wilkinson—Thompson had the sense to ignore it, judging correctly that it would be years before any political settlement established firm boundaries in the Columbia country.

Business came first. After Plateau tribal people failed to bring in beaver pelts on the commercial scale he required, Thompson imported veteran Iroquois into the region. "Why should I like David Thompson?" Kalispel elder Alice Ignace, now deceased, would say when his name came up. "When he came here tattered and hungry we fed him, treated him with respect. Next thing we know there are Iroquois trapping up our creeks and all our animals are gone."²

There is no question that Thompson's approach had far-reaching effects for local people. Both the Iroquois and his mixed-blood voyageurs forged permanent unions within the local bands, adding new elements, including DNA, to the economic and social framework of Plateau culture. It was a system of integration rather than of outright confrontation and removal, however. Many descendants of the voyageurs, tribal men from east of the Rockies, and Scottish agents who worked with Thompson still thrive today around reservations and small towns along both sides of the international border.

After delivering his family to the security of a fur trade post back on the Prairies, Thompson returned to the Columbia drainage in fall 1808 to spend a second winter at Kootanae House, then two more in his Saleesh House near present-day Thompson Falls, Montana. Even as he addressed the demands of the fur trade and kept up his

ceaseless cartographic investigations, he also found time to plant pea and turnip seeds next to a Kootenay tobacco plot, assemble the first written dictionary of Salish language with the help of a Kalispel elder, and listen to stories that explained his hosts' system of beliefs. In regard to the latter, the surveyor expressed disappointment that his tentative grasp of the tongue didn't allow him to comprehend their deeper meanings.

When North West agent Alexander Henry wondered whether "the Philosopher David Thompson [might] succeed in making good returns in Beaver on the Columbia,"³ it is hard to tell whether Henry was taking a dig at Thompson's methodical ways or complimenting the breadth of his vision. A philosopher, in the usage of that period, indicated someone who was well versed in natural sciences such as botany, zoology, and especially astronomy. Thompson was a man who could navigate by the stars and chart a course for others to follow, but he had developed his own particular broad-reaching methods to accomplish those ends.

The journey often singled out to place Thompson in the company of colonial-era explorers hardly departs from these lifelong habits. In the summer of 1810, operating as head of the Nor'Westers' Columbia District, the agent left his Saleesh House in Montana and headed east via Howse Pass, making for the annual partners' meeting at Fort William on Lake Superior. He had paddled all the way to Ontario's Rainy Lake when orders came to turn around, get back across the Continental Divide, and finish sorting out the sinuous course of the Columbia River to the Pacific. The ocean goal formed only part of his obligation, however. The partners also expected Thompson to shepherd four canoes' worth of trade goods upstream on the Saskatchewan and over the mountains so he could resupply his interior Columbia trading posts along the way.

In early October, as Thompson's brigade approached the foot of the Rockies, they were halted by a Pikani Blackfoot blockade. The political landscape all along the Rockies was changing fast, and Pikani leaders had determined to halt all company trade with Columbia Plateau tribes. Thompson, understanding that he was the face of those efforts, retreated back downstream. Over the next several weeks, he redirected his trade goods to the Athabasca River, one major drainage north and beyond Blackfoot influence.

By December he had assembled a bare-bones crew of mostly unfamiliar voyageurs. An Iroquois trapper assured Thompson that he could show him a practical more

northerly crossing of the divide. While the men built dog-sleds in preparation for their upcoming journey, the women in camp packed food, netted snowshoes, and cut traces.

On the winter solstice, Thompson took advantage of a scout then returning to the Saskatchewan to pen a letter to a friend in Montreal. Facing a host of major impediments to his plans, the surveyor nonetheless began his letter by thanking the friend for keeping an eye on his oldest daughter as she attended school in that far-away city (which Thompson had never seen), and declaring that he was engaged in this grueling fur trade life only as a way to pay the high cost of his children's education.

Whatever his motivation, Thompson once again proved himself to be a master of resourceful adaptation. After a New Year's crossing of Athabasca Pass, his party struck the Columbia at Boat Encampment, the very top of the river's northernmost hairpin turn. There he built a cedar plank canoe of his own design, incorporating tribal and European elements into a "batteau" that he would refine as he constructed nine new versions over the ensuing year. He and three voyageurs coaxed the rough vessel over ice and water south to Kootanae House, made the short portage to the Kootenay River, then cut overland to Saleesh House, where he found the post abandoned due to Blackfoot threats.

Thompson delivered trade goods to his Kullyspel House, constructing a pair of new bateaux along the way, then followed a guide overland to Spokane House and north to Kettle Falls. There he built and launched his fourth plank canoe, with a crew that included five voyageurs, Iroquois at the bow and stern, and a San Poil couple as interpreters. It took them ten days to paddle the 700 miles to the river's mouth, where they found John Jacob Astor's recently arrived Pacific Fur Company finishing a trading house and contemplating their first tentative thrusts upstream. Thompson visited for a few days with the Astorians, several of whom he already knew because they were veteran Nor'Westers. Although his journals made no mention of any sovereignty issues, he clearly thought the British held the stronger hand as far as territorial claims on the lands north of the Columbia were concerned—a notion born out the following year, when a single British vessel purchased Astoria and all the company's wares for a pittance.

Thompson's nimble return upstream left an Astorian group who tailed him in a Chinook dugout far behind. At the junction of the Snake he purchased horses to shorten the trip back to Kettle Falls; there he built his fifth cedar plank

canoe of the year and headed upstream to meet another load of supplies at Athabasca Pass. When he pulled ashore at Boat Encampment he had completed the first end-to-end European-style survey of all 1,250 miles of the Columbia River.

Thompson retired back to eastern Canada in spring 1812 and spent the next two years assembling a large map for the North West Company. Upon completion of what he called “a first rough draft,” he immediately went to work on a more refined version. Thompson continued that quest off and on for the next three decades, incorporating information from other surveyors, tribal informants, and his own voluminous field journals to illuminate the western North America of his experience. He paid particular attention to the circle of trade he had established in the Columbia District, and was outraged when Great Britain gave up most of their claim to that territory in the 1846 boundary settlement.

By that time not many people were listening to his complaints. The fur agent never had any guiding mastermind like Thomas Jefferson to visualize the arc of his movements or to shape his reputation after a triumphant return to civilization. For four more decades, based in Montreal, Thompson carried on with his usual relentless energy, running far-flung water surveys and toiling over his maps. In his later years, primarily as a way to recoup financial reversals, he penned

his *Travels*, a collection of drafts that spans the course of his entire eventful life in artfully turned prose.

The term “explorer” fails to incorporate the pace and style of those travels. It might be more fitting to use the old-school title “philosopher” that a fur trade cohort once hung on him. Or perhaps in a more modern world, we could label David Thompson as a geographer in the fullest sense of the word. ■



Jack Nisbet has published two books about David Thompson: Sources of the River (which was awarded the Murray Morgan History Prize) and The Mapmaker's Eye.

He explored the many intersections of Thompson's world with that of the Corp of Discovery in an essay that can be accessed at lewis-clark.org/channel/381

To find out more about Nisbet's other writings, visit jacknisbet.com.

Notes

1. David Thompson notebook 13, fos. 50-62, Archives of Ontario.
2. Alice Ignace, interview with the author in Usk, Washington, September, 2004.
3. Alexander Henry. Letter to Duncan Cameron, February 1, 1809. National Archives of Canada, MG 19, E1, vol 29.

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Photograph of Trapper Peak, Bitterroot Mountains, Montana, courtesy of Steve Lee.

A portrait of Zebulon Pike, a man with dark, wavy hair, wearing a red military-style jacket with gold epaulettes and a dark cravat. He is looking slightly to the right of the viewer. The portrait is set within a dark oval frame against a light, textured background.

Exact
Contemporaries:

Zebulon Pike's

Expeditions in the American West

By Jared Orsi

One day in 1803, Meriwether Lewis came to Fort Kaskaskia in Indiana Territory. He was recruiting soldiers for his epic voyage to the Pacific. The commander of the post, Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike, surely longed to go, but Lewis was looking for enlisted men, not officers. So Pike must have been excited to get a letter from Lewis sometime later. President Jefferson, Lewis wrote, was planning other expeditions to explore the recently acquired Louisiana Purchase. He was looking for top men to command them. Did Pike,

Lewis wanted to know, want to lead one of them? He did.

This is a strange letter in some ways, for Lewis had no authority to select expedition leaders for the president. Two strands nevertheless stand out. First, the encounter at Kaskaskia reminds us of an essential but oft-overlooked fact: the Corps of Discovery was only one of many expeditions during the Jeffersonian era. We can learn something about both Lewis' and Pike's by juxtaposing them. Second, their interchange points to Pike's personal ambition and raises

Zebulon Pike traveled the West under the aegis of General James Wilkinson, not President Jefferson. Painting by Charles Willson Peale courtesy of Independence National Historic Park in Philadelphia.

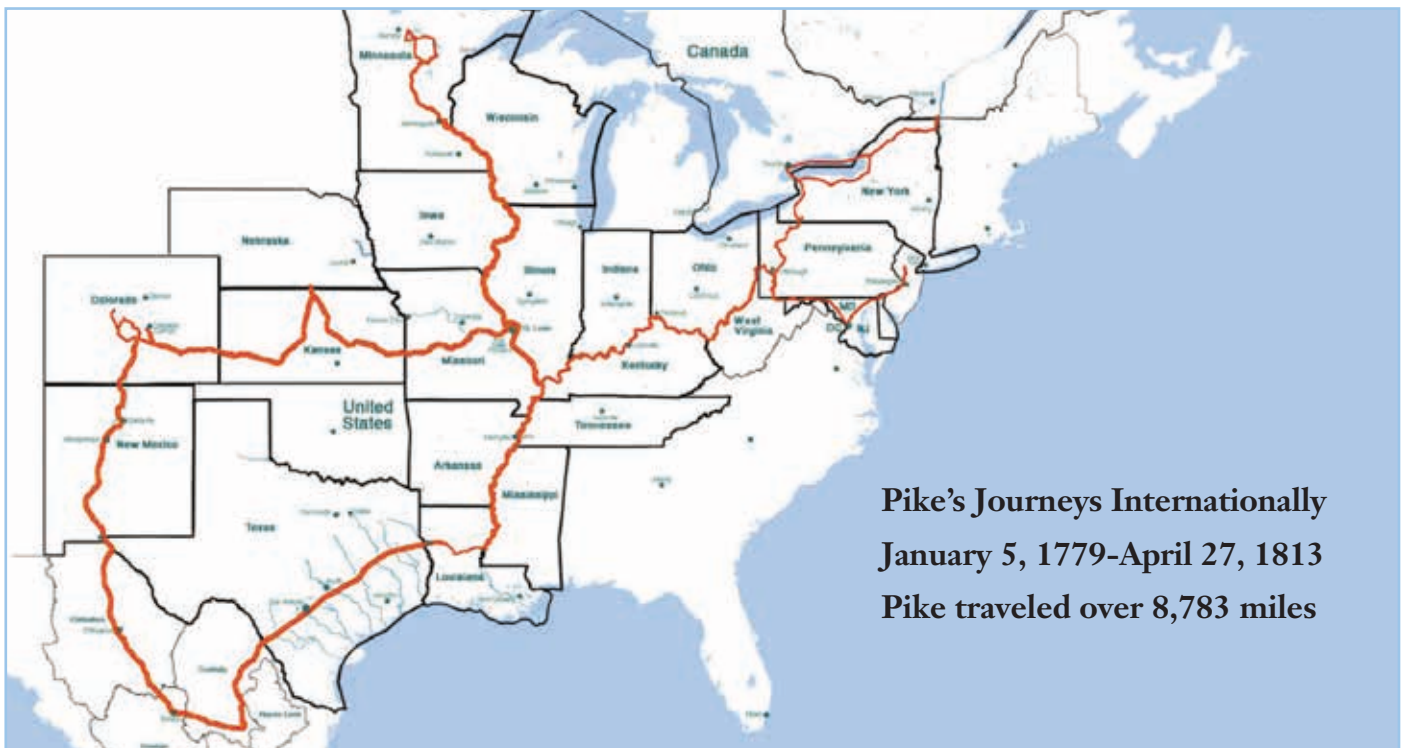
questions about upward mobility for the post-Revolution generation. Taking these two strands together, it becomes evident that Pike's personal character combined with the larger context of Jeffersonian exploration to shape the course of his voyage, making it distinctive but still analogous to the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Part I

Kaskaskia was not the sort of place for a man of Pike's ambitions. A former French trading post turned American military installation, the town was filled with soldiers, traders, and other frontier itinerants. Pike detested the locals' drunkenness and rough manners, and he lamented his well-bred wife's isolation among such society, calling her "nervous," "miserable," "low-spirited," and "lonesome." Additionally, both Clara Pike and their infant daughter suffered serious illness at Kaskaskia, and even Zebulon caught the measles. He did not, however, start life at a station from which he could disdain America's common people. In contrast to Lewis, well-tutored, a college graduate, possessed early on of an interest in the natural world, and enough of a member of Virginia's polite society to get noticed by Jefferson, Pike started low on the social ladder. For him, exploration, especially its physical hardships, was an avenue of upward social mobility, not an undertaking of scientific curiosity.

Orphaned at an early age, Pike's father enlisted in the Revolutionary Army. After the peace, he and his wife started a small farm in eastern Pennsylvania. In January 1785, six-year-old Zebulon watched as the county sheriff confiscated the family's possessions in payment for back taxes. It was the first of the family's several failed attempts to live out the Jeffersonian agrarian dream of self-sufficiency. Over the next few years, a series of moves took the Pikes farther west across the state until they were financially broke. Still possessed of the patriotism that had led him to join the cause for national independence, Pike's father rejoined the US Army at Pittsburgh in 1791 and moved to Ohio to fight Indians. His son Zebulon enlisted in 1794 at the age of fifteen.

Young Zebulon's early army duties entailed transporting supplies along the rivers of the Ohio Valley. He and his men spent much of their time hot, cold, hungry, fatigued, sunburned, and mosquito bitten. The work exhausted their muscles and taxed them mentally. In addition to suffering bodily, Pike watched his aging father decline. In his early fifties, the elder Pike had become invalided from years of army service, and rumors circulated that he was to be discharged from the army. "That's the end of...[a man] who has bled & spent his youth in the service of an ungrateful country," Pike wrote. "Fine encouragement for the sons to tread in the footsteps of their fathers." From that example, Pike



Map of Pike's travels in 1805 and 1806-1807.



Officers quarters at Fort Massac. James Wilkinson, Aaron Burr, and Zebulon Pike were all at Fort Massac for a few days in June 1805. They may have met in this building. Photo by Jared Orsi.

contemplated that he too might bruise and bleed and prematurely age, only to be abandoned by the military once he had lost his physical utility. He later despaired that army life might “render me unfit for any duty or profession.” The contrast with Meriwether Lewis’ relatively privileged upbringing is clear. During the Whiskey Rebellion, young Lewis was writing to his mother Lucy about his easy access to beef, booze, and rebel maidens.

Even something as intimate as bodily sensation, however, is shaped by historical context. Pike came of age amid the prevalence of advice literature directed at aspiring young men. He found the British writer Robert Dodsley’s *Economy of Human Life* (1750) particularly compelling. Although Pike’s copy has not survived, contemporary accounts indicate that he read it thoroughly, annotated its margins, and gave a copy to his wife as a gift. Dodsley dispensed wisdom about how loyalty, frugality, hard work, and other virtues would lead to social advancement and earn others’ esteem. He especially prescribed physical fortitude, which he said

would “sustain [a man] through all perils.” As the body was the soul’s physical covering, damage to it need not be mourned any more than a tear to a garment. Even death, if it be noble, was not to be feared. In addition, young Pike was exposed to other voices of the day advocating sacrifice for nation, including the example of George Washington, who gave up his military commission after the war to ensure civilian government and stepped down from the presidency after two terms to establish a precedent for peaceful transfer of power. Even though Dodsley acknowledged that “all are not called to guiding the helm of state; neither are their armies to be commanded by every one,” Pike must have wondered what he could give to his nation. He had no property, wealth, education, office, or glory to sacrifice. He did, however, have his body. One day in the margin of Dodsley, he scribbled, “Should my country call for the sacrifice of that life which has been devoted to her service from early youth, most willingly shall she receive it.”

Aspiring, patriotic, and eager to sacrifice bodily, thus did

personal circumstance and historical context form the young officer who received orders from General James Wilkinson in 1805 to lead an expedition from St. Louis to the sources of the Mississippi River. Pike and his party departed that August, returning the following April. Three days later, Wilkinson assigned him a second, even higher-profile mission, this one across the Plains and into the Rocky Mountains. The general's instructions for these undertakings resembled Jefferson's instructions to Lewis. Like the president, Wilkinson directed his agent to keep a journal, conduct Indian diplomacy, make careful notes on geography and nature, including taking latitude and longitude. Both Jefferson and Wilkinson asked their emissaries to send delegations of native dignitaries downstream for counsel with US officials. Specific to Pike's orders were directives to ascend the Arkansas River to its headwaters, locate the headwaters of the Red River, believed to lie somewhat south of the Arkansas, and descend back to the Mississippi. Not surprisingly, given the similarities of the expeditions' instructions, Jefferson spoke approvingly of Pike's voyage in a presidential address to Congress in 1806.

Wilkinson, however, was a rogue, so there was possibly more at work in his goals than the national good. In exchange for generous payments, he had long supplied the Spanish government with strategic information about North American geography and the character of its populace, and he had occasionally dabbled in fomenting frontier rebellion. He was a traitor, a double agent, pressing the Spanish authorities for money in exchange for betraying his country. Wilkinson perpetually used his office—by this time governor of Louisiana and ranking general of the US Army—to enrich himself, and it is likely that an expedition such as Pike's could have provided useful intelligence to aid Wilkinson's investments in the fur trade or advantaged his playing the Spanish and American governments off against each other. In addition, by 1805 the general had entangled himself in the Aaron Burr conspiracy, a murky plot that has been variously described as a scheme to separate western states from the union or, more likely, to filibuster in New Spain in order to set up a colony from which Burr and his friends could profit by selling land. If Wilkinson were up to something—and Wilkinson was always up to something—he might have tapped for the western expedition a commander who would spare no physical exertion to complete a mission and who would exercise endless loyalty to his commander, whom he did not suspect of duplicity. Whereas Jefferson had selected Meriwether

Lewis for his sharp mind, knowledge of natural history, and intellectual curiosity, Wilkinson likely found Pike's ambition and obedience to superiors equally appealing.

Moreover, Lewis and Clark's voyage gave Wilkinson cover to instigate an expedition to serve his own ends, or Burr's. The Corps of Discovery had launched in 1804 explicitly in service to national interests—commerce, Indian diplomacy, science, control of Louisiana, and a water passageway across the continent. It was not, however, an isolated affair. Jefferson also sent a party under the command of William Dunbar to explore the Ouachita River in 1805 and another with Thomas Freeman, Peter Custis, and Richard Sparks up the Red River in 1806. These, coupled with Pike's two expeditions plus Lewis and Clark's, make five separate explorations of Louisiana in three years. Thus, Pike's travels fit neatly into Jefferson's larger vision for exploring Louisiana for national benefit. Pike's orders resembled Lewis' possibly because Wilkinson was camouflaging his own nefarious activities in patriotic garb or perhaps simply because that's how exploration was done in those days.

Part II

On October 4, 1806, Pike and his men were guests at the Pawnee village on the Republican River near modern Guide Rock, Nebraska. His hosts were refusing to sell him the fresh horses he needed to proceed across the Plains. That day, however, he received some good news. Two French traders arrived at the village with word that “captains Lewis and Clark, with all their people, had descended the river to St. Louis.” This, Pike wrote in his journal, “diffused general joy through our expedition.” The Corps of Discovery had first learned of Pike's expedition not quite a month before, also from French traders, which has led Donald Jackson, a scholar of both the Pike and Lewis and Clark expeditions, to speculate on the possibility that the two sets of fur traders might in fact have been the same people. Whether that was the case or not, the Missouri Basin was a smaller world than might be expected, and the actions of the few Americans traversing the region often bore striking similarities, despite the vastness of space and absence of communication that separated them. Pike imagined himself acting a part in a national drama of exploration that also included Lewis and Clark. On his 1805 Mississippi River voyage, he had told Chippewas that his party was a counterpart to the captains who had “stayed the first winter at the Mandane's village.” Three weeks after learning of the Corps of Discovery's

return, he wrote to Wilkinson that "I humbly conceive, that my *two* Voyages ... might be compared with the *one* performed by Captains Lewis & Clark." He also expressed hope that his men would be compensated with "the same, or similar rewards, to those who accompanied Capt. Lewis." Nowhere were the parallels between the two expeditions more evident than in Indian diplomacy.

Pike set out from St. Louis with twenty-two men on July 15, 1806. After safely escorting a group of Osages to their villages in Missouri, he turned north in search of the Pawnees. Upon arrival, he found a Spanish flag flying outside the lodge of Sharitarish, the man he identified only partially correctly as a chief. A large contingent of Spaniards with a few hundred men and perhaps a thousand livestock had recently visited the Pawnees. They were looking to block the advance of an American party, which Pike flattered himself was his, though it more likely was the Corps of Discovery, the news of which Wilkinson had leaked to Santa Fe, triggering several attempts by Spaniards to stop it. Like Lewis and Clark, Pike gave presents to his Indian hosts. He also made two demands. First, the Pawnee must exchange the Spanish flag for an American one, and suspend all commerce with the Spaniards. Second, he requested to purchase fresh horses with which to continue his westward journey. Sharitarish took the two flags in hand and said that he esteemed both Spaniards and Americans. Pike later complained to Wilkinson that the Pawnees were decidedly under Spanish influence, but he misunderstood the complexities of Pawnee politics. Both the Spaniards and Pike had asked Sharitarish to pick a side, a choice he wisely refused, recognizing the advantage his people gained by playing each side off against the other.

The next day, Sharitarish informed Pike that the Pawnees would not permit the American advance. Pike retorted that he and his soldiers were "warriors" not "women to be turned back by words." The language strikingly echoes William Clark's boast to the Teton Sioux, who similarly were refusing passage to his party. Clark said his men "were not squaws, but warriors," which provoked a response from the Teton leader Black Buffalo that "he had warriors too." The parallels between the two passages seem too similar to be coincidental. Nor, since neither writer had access to the other's journals, can it be a case of one copying a good story. More likely, it seems to reflect a standard form of gendered dialogue that Indian and white males had discovered helped them to achieve common understanding. Culture chasms may have divided whites from Indians, but in some respects their outlooks converged,

and gender was one of these. Both cultures linked masculinity and martial prowess. So when Pike and Clark confronted nearly identical situations of Native peoples' threatening to block their forward march, they drew from the same well of gendered understandings common to white and Indian males of the era and came up with similar language.

Pike's departure from the village days later also resembled Lewis and Clark's escape from the Tetons, and, as with Lewis and Clark, there was more than one version. According to Pike, the Americans filed out of camp on the morning of October 7, mounted and well-armed. He calculated his exit path for maximum advantage in the event of a skirmish and ordered his men to hold "fire until within five or six paces, and then to charge with the bayonet and saber." He believed his party could have killed "at least 100 men" before being "exterminated." The Pawnees were rousting about but threatened no hostility. Pike conversed with Sharitarish, who offered no resistance to the visitors' departure. From a promontory overlooking the village, Pike looked back on the place where he had spent two troublesome weeks and felt relieved of a "heavy burthen."

In 1811, Sharitarish told a different story to the American Indian agent George C. Sibley. In this account, Pike and his small party confronted 500 Pawnee warriors, arrows fixed and ready to fire. Sharitarish walked out, unarmed, to meet the young American lieutenant. "Brave young chief," he told Pike, "you are free to pursue your journey—were I now to stop you by destroying you...I should feel myself a coward." If the "Spanish chief...wishes you stopped let him do it himself." According to Sibley, Pike later confirmed Sharitarish's version, so it may well be true. In any case, by assembling his warriors and coming to the brink of snuffing out the Americans before extending them his mercy, he demonstrated his power within his tribe and externally over both the Americans and the Spaniards in whose geopolitical dispute he refused to intervene. If this account of his sagacious behavior is true, no wonder he was still a powerful man five years later when the Indian agent came to the village.

Part III

Eleven days later, Pike and his men camped on the Arkansas River as they prepared to split the party. Half the party would head downstream, while Pike and the remaining fifteen would seek the river's headwaters. While awaiting the parting, Pike showed some of Lewis' scientific curiosity and made one of his few natural history journal entries. Prairie

dogs, Pike wrote, “reside...in towns or villages...their residence, being under ground.” Their communities “sometimes extend over two and three miles square.” In addition to remarking on their tails, color, food habits, and shrill warning calls, he poured 140 kettles of water down a burrow in hopes of flushing one of the creatures out, to no avail. Lewis and Clark performed the same futile operation, with fewer barrels of water, on September 7, 1804, on the Nebraska-South Dakota border. Pike’s party killed “great numbers of them,” he reported, and found them tasty—after leaving the meat out a few nights to mitigate the “rankness.” With the exception of this report, however, Pike’s journals rarely evinced the same interest in the natural world that Lewis’ often did. He had received his instructions from a military leader, not an exemplar of the Enlightenment. As nights grew chillier and the cottonwood leaves turned golden, Pike focused on what he called “the national objects” of his expedition, and he resolved to “spare no pains to accomplish every object.” Which raises the question: whose objects? Jefferson’s? Wilkinson’s? Burr’s? Pike never fully defined the term, but his behavior suggests he was single-mindedly focused on finding the headwaters of these great feeder streams of the Mississippi.

On November 15, Pike first spied the Rocky Mountains. The men cheered because they knew that in those heights lay their destination. Soon they could turn around and head home. One cannot help but smile reading his journal over the next several days. Repeatedly, Pike rose in the morning and prepared to march to the base of the mountains, only to find at the end of the day that they had made no discernable progress. In those passages, Pike suffered from conceptual errors of Enlightenment geography. Although the territory west of the Mississippi River was mapped scantily at best, one theory widely held by learned men such as Jefferson and Aaron Arrowsmith, whose 1802 map crossed the continent in the satchels of Lewis and Clark, was the idea of continental symmetry. This idea held that topographically the western half of North America must resemble the East. For Pike, this meant that the mountains he was seeing were about the same size as the Appalachians. Accordingly, he estimated them to be much smaller and closer than they were. The possibility that a western mountain could rise 14,000 feet high and that it could be seen from 100 miles away was not something he could yet wrap his Ohio Valley mind around.

Another Jefferson era misconception was the belief in the existence of a western height of land, that is, a single peak or plateau or range of mountains from which all the great

western rivers flowed. Jonathan Carver whose book, *Travels through America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768* (1778), Jefferson recommended to Lewis, claimed to have met Indians who told him of such a place. When Pike got near modern Pueblo, Colorado, more than forty miles from Pikes Peak, the towering mountain must have looked to him like the height of land. Indeed, he decided to climb it, believing it would afford a view of the headwaters of Arkansas, Platte, and Red Rivers, and maybe the Missouri, Yellowstone, Rio Grande, and Colorado as well. What explorer would not want to see all of that from a single precipice? Eager to gaze on the riverine geography that defined North America’s geopolitical boundaries, Pike took three of his men and attempted the ascent. Four days later, waist deep in snow and still seven or eight miles from the peak, he gave up, turned around, and returned to his party. On the last day of November, they resumed their course, still wearing army-issue summer cotton overalls. Whereas Lewis and Clark had spent a year carefully planning, gathering supplies, and learning about the territory they were entering, Pike’s expedition was hastily organized and poorly provisioned. Assuming they would return to St. Louis before winter, there was no plan for surviving Rocky Mountain weather or sheltering on the Plains until spring. Unwilling to pause for the season, Pike forged his way into the mountains on the morning of winter’s first blizzard.

In December, they had to make a decision. Like Lewis and Clark at the forks of the Missouri, they had to choose among several branches of the Arkansas. Pike guessed wrong. Believing he had reached the headwaters of the Arkansas, he followed a faint trail to the north, hoping that it would lead to their second destination, the Red River. When they reached South Park (in today’s Colorado), Pike correctly identified the headwaters of the South Platte River, the only geographical feature he got right during those brutal two months in the mountains. They then crossed west over the Mosquito Range and spied a wide river heading south. Believing it to be the Red, they camped on its banks on Christmas day near modern Salida, Colorado, and made preparations to head downstream, towards home, the next day. What Pike did not know was that the Arkansas makes a ninety-degree turn as it flows toward the Plains and that the Red River is in Texas. Although the Red River’s headwaters would not be mapped with certainty for another half century, Pike discovered his misapprehension about the Arkansas several days later after stumbling down the steep-walled Royal Gorge in which



Never as close as it seems: Pikes Peak, Colorado. Photo by Jared Orsi.

there was nothing to eat and from which there was no easy avenue of escape except to press downstream. On January 5, 1807, the day he turned twenty-eight, he spied in dismay the very spot where the party had turned north in December. Nearly a month of chills and hunger had yielded only the rediscovery of the river they had been following since October. "Most fervently did I hope," he wrote, "never to pass another [birthday] so miserably."

But if this were the Arkansas, where was the Red? Surely Texas was not one of the possibilities that crossed his mind. Leaving two men and the now lame horses at a makeshift camp, he and the rest of the party hefted seventy pound packs into the teeth of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains that soared more than 13,000 feet in elevation to the southwest. Before they managed to cross the mountains on January 28, they endured cold and blizzards and on multiple occasions went as many as four days without food. Pike left more men behind, including his personal attendant Thomas Dougherty and the party's most reliable hunter John Sparks, both of whom were so badly frostbitten they could not walk. Typifying his sense of duty to country and echoing Dodsley, Pike left, having urged them to "resist their fate," which possibly included death, with "fortitude" and promised to "send relief as soon as possible." In a later journal entry, he expressed his desire to deliver them into the "bosom of a grateful country." Here was the bargain Pike believe he himself had struck with America: physical sacrifice for the gratitude of the nation.

In the safety of the San Luis Valley, on the yonder side of the Sangres, Pike had his men build a small stockade while

they waited for a detachment of the party to rescue the men left behind. Before the party reunited, however, a troop of Spanish dragoons located the Americans, arrested them, and marched them to Santa Fe. A detachment of Spanish soldiers waited at the stockade and brought the other half of the party along a few weeks later. The New Mexican governor was unsure of what to do with the Americans, whom he took for spies. He punted them south to his superior, the provincial commandant at Ciudad Chihuahua, who in turn gave them a military escort across Texas for deposit on American soil in Louisiana Territory on July 1, 1807, nearly a year after their initial departure. The men left in the mountains would eventually return as well, except for one man, Theodore Miller, who was murdered by one of his fellow soldiers in Carrizal, New Spain. "Language cannot express the gaiety of my heart," Pike wrote in his journal upon returning to Fort Claiborne, "when I once more beheld the standard of my country waved aloft! 'All hail' cried I, the ever sacred name of country, in which is embraced that of kindred, friendly, and every other tie which is dear to the soul of man."

The nation of kindred and friendly ties, however, did not welcome him with the same heartiness. Instead, his relationship with Wilkinson put him under suspicion of involvement in the nebulous Burr conspiracy. A Washington grand jury had indicted Burr for treason the week before. Lewis, too, faced assorted scandalous charges in the years after his travels, but Pike's friends in high places for the most part had his back. Although his men never won the compensation from Congress that Lewis' did, and Clara would still

be petitioning the government for his pension in the 1840s, Jefferson, the secretary of war, Henry Dearborn, and a congressional committee all expressed approval of his conduct on the expedition. Indeed, Pike's trip was poorly timed to provide any intelligence useable by Burr, and treason was totally out of character, directly opposite to the patriotism Pike had repeatedly exhibited since adolescence. Pike had cast his lot in with his nation early on, and it seems doubtful that he would have involved himself in whatever Burr and Wilkinson had cooked up, even if he had known.

In any case, Pike's military superiors looked favorably on him, awarding a series of promotions that brought him to the rank of brigadier general during the War of 1812. Pike died in 1813 at the Battle of York (in Canada), a victorious campaign he had helped to mastermind. As word of his death reached the United States, newspapers eulogized him, bands played in his honor, writers penned epic poems, and Americans raised glasses in taverns in memory of their fallen hero. Interestingly, it was dying in battle, not western exploration, that most impressed his contemporaries. As late as the 1840s, biographers wrote hagiographies extolling his national sacrifice but barely mentioning his travels. In contrast to the broken Lewis, who died in ignominy, likely by his own hand, Pike joined the pantheon of American military martyrs, which included, among others, the Revolutionary War hero Richard Montgomery, from whom Pike took his middle name. Although initially overshadowed by his dramatic demise, Pike's adventures in Louisiana were significant. His published journal can justly be credited for helping to inspire the lucrative Santa Fe Trail trade, and for decades travelers along the route carried it as a guide to the region. The historian Elliott West went even further in emphasizing the significance of the Jeffersonian-era southwestern expeditions, arguing in a 2005 essay that the Santa Fe Trail trade and American immigration into Texas inspired clamor for the Mexican War. Only a small step beyond that contention would connect the conquest of Mexican lands with the mid-century sectional conflict and ultimately the Civil War. Pike's expedition, which opened the Southwest to bigger events later on, was part of this story. His fame, though, like Lewis and Clark's, faded as the century wore on. Not until the turn of this century and the national anxiety surrounding the (mis)perceived end of the nation's frontier experience, would Americans once again grow interested in the likes of Lewis and Clark, Pike, and the other explorers of the Jeffersonian era. ■

Professor Orsi thanks Oxford University Press for permission to republish language originally appearing in his book, *Citizen Explorer*.



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beyond the Nation: Global Perspectives on America's "Best Idea." In 2008–09, he was the Ray Allen Billington Distinguished Visiting Professor at Occidental College and the Huntington Library. His favorite class to teach is a summer field trip course that follows Zebulon Pike's 1806–1807 route across Colorado.

Notes

1. "Interrogatories Proposed to Major Z.M. Pike in Donald Jackson, ed., *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike with Letters and Related Documents*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 2:334 (hereafter ZPJ).
2. Pike to Isabella Pike, September 8, November 22, 1803, and Pike to Maria Pike, February 6, 1803, Pike Letters, Western Reserve Historical Society (hereafter ZMPL).
3. Untitled manuscript relating to *Commissioners of Bucks County v. Zebulon Pike*, 1786, Pike Papers, MSC 163, folder 1, Bucks County Historical Society.
4. Pike to Zebulon Pike, Sr., February 28, 1802, April 19, 1808, ZMPL.
5. Whiting, "Life of Zebulon Montgomery Pike," in *Lives of Count Mumford, Zebulon Pike, And Samuel Gorton* (Boston: CC Little and J Brown, 1848: repr., Charleston: Nabu Press, 2013), 314; John M. Niles, *Life of Oliver Hazard Perry* (Hartford: William S. Marsh, 1820), 319–20; Elliott Coues, ed., *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike, to Headwaters of the Mississippi, Through Louisiana Territory and in New Spain, During the Years 1805–6–7* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1895), 1:xxxiii–xxxiv; Robert Dodsley, *The Economy of Human Life* (1750: repr., Philadelphia: Joseph Crukshank, 1795), 12, 19, 92, 119–120, 127, 129, 130.
6. Wilkinson to Pike, June 24 and July 12, 1806, in ZPJ, 1: 285–90; Jefferson to Lewis, June 20, 1803, <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/preparing-for-the-expedition/jefferson-s-instructions-to-lewis/>; Doug Erickson, et al., eds. *Jefferson's Western Explorations* (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2004).
7. Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr* (New York: Viking, 2007).
8. Elliott West, "Lewis and Clark: Kidnappers," in *A Whole Country in Commotion: The Louisiana Purchase and the American Southwest*, ed., Patrick G. Williams, et al. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2005).
9. ZPJ 1:262, 330; 2:157.
10. ZPJ 1:330; James P. Ronda, *Lewis and Clark among the Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 33.
11. ZPJ 1:331; Ronda, *Lewis and Clark*, 37–40.
12. "Extract from the George C. Sibley Journal," ZPJ, 2:374.
13. ZPJ 1:338–39.
14. ZPJ 1:336.
15. ZPJ 1:366.
16. ZPJ 1:370, 381.
17. ZPJ 1:447–48.
18. Dearborn to Pike, February 2, 1808, ZPJ 2:300–01; House Committee Report, March 10, 1808, ZPJ 2:303; Dearborn to John Montgomery, December 7, 1808; House Committee Report, December 16, 1808, ZPJ 2:355–56.
19. West, "Lewis and Clark."



Alexander Mackenzie

and the Far Side of the World, 1793

By Barry Gough

Two and a half centuries ago the seas and lands of the Northwest Coast of North America were *terra incognita* to European science and knowledge. Indigenous, or Native, peoples who lived there and exploited its abundant resources to their profit, political power, and rivalry, backed by internecine warfare, were fully conversant with its geographical intricacies and dimensions. A tribe might often be in conflict with others, near or far. They were persons zealously protective of their property, including slaves, canoes, fishing privileges, and

more; perhaps no peoples valued their lands and resources as they did. That tradition lives on, notably in the lands through which fur trader and trade visionary Alexander Mackenzie (1764-1820) passed on his famed transcontinental crossing to the Pacific Ocean in 1793. Make no mistake: he was “first across the continent” north of Mexico. His track, determined by geography, not only went through lands entirely unlike what Thomas Jefferson might have imagined as a pathway through the garden; his small-party expedition was an entirely commercial affair with no government backing.

All was done “on the cheap” but the results gave new radical postulations to the prospects of trans-Pacific trade and to the possibilities of British trade expansion on the Northwest Coast and adjacent seas.

Among Canadian historians Mackenzie ranks first among the explorers of Canada, though hard on his heels comes David Thompson (1770-1857), who receives much sympathetic attention. Among American historians Mackenzie gets mixed billing, perceived as he is as a threat to then-current United States aspirations for transcontinental empire. Besides, his is a sidelight to the American achievement as exhibited in the historic journey of Lewis and Clark. The preemptive impulse sprang deeply in the American mind, and still does. All the same, Mackenzie possessed exceptional characteristics so widely admired in American circles. He was individualistic, enterprising, self-sufficient, prescient, durable in unimaginable hardships, and able to “lead from the front.” American historians concentrate on his influence on Thomas Jefferson’s quest to answer the British challenge

from the north and on the Pacific Coast. Here the matter is one of degree. One historian, James P. Ronda, treats him as writer of a hum-drum book of voyages that hastened Jefferson’s actions. Another, Bernard DeVoto, sees him as an idiosyncratic leader of men facing near-impossible odds. A third, David Nicandri, closely examines his writings and shows how the Lewis and Clark Expedition mirrored ever so closely Mackenzie’s concepts and achievements.¹ We are left with the view that Mackenzie holds an uncertain place in the American narrative. What is revealed in the following pages is how difficult were the geographical circumstances faced by Mackenzie and his party, and, more, how complex and demanding were the relations posed by the Indigenous peoples (of various nations and groups) in the course of his passage to and from Pacific tidewater.

On July 17, 1793, Mackenzie of the North West Company came down an effluent named Burnt Bridge Creek, doing so from high and precipitous coastal mountains and those lying to the northeast. He and his companions entered Bella



Map of Mackenzie's Canada, London 1809. Courtesy of University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

Coola River 31 miles from salt water. He did not encounter Captain Vancouver's ships. It was one of the greatest near misses in history, a story for another time and place. The British had now arrived by sea and by land, marking out—and here is the significant point—a future empire of trade west of the Continental Divide that became in time Canada's westernmost province. Russian America lay to the north, New Spain to the south.

Mackenzie, aged 31, was born in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, to a military and management family. He had been educated in the laird's school. Arriving as a young scholar in New York at age twelve, he was sent to Montreal for further education. He learned the keeping of accounts in a firm that formed one of the partnerships in the North West Company. Unlike the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) which possessed a charter (1670) giving it exclusive rights of trade in Rupert's Land, a territory comprising the Hudson Bay drainage basin, the North West Company worked along the southern margin of HBC territory. In Mackenzie's time it outflanked that firm in those lands that drained to the north, northwest, and west of Rupert's Land, including Athabasca. Sent west by principals in the firm who realized his immense promise—first to Detroit, then Michilimackinac, Isle a la Crosse, then Lake Athabasca, his star was rising fast.

At Fort Chipewyan, Lake Athabasca, Peter Pond's geopolitical thinking and, not least, mastery of long-distance land trading, enraptured the younger Mackenzie. Pond would have pursued the possible trails to "Cook's River" had he not been obliged, by Company demand, to withdraw from the wilderness—with a cloud over his head because of alleged murder committed against rivals.

Mackenzie embraced the project. In 1789, in a canoe and with Native guides,² he went in search of "Cook's River" only to find himself disappointed by reaching a point that he knew was the discharge of those waters into the Arctic Ocean. The Rocky Mountains barred his way to the Pacific and Unalaska (or some other Russian post). Mackenzie's river voyage—3,000 miles in a long summer of 102 days—is as harrowing a tale as is recorded. Privately, to his cousin Roderick, he gave the northern river, which the Dene called Great River or River Big, his own name: "River Disappointment."³

Returned to Fort Chipewyan, Mackenzie knew that he did not then have the scientific knowledge to record longitude by anything other than unreliable dead reckoning. He went to London on furlough. There, in quiet comfort, he learned the arts of navigation and surveying, including being able to

sight the moons of Jupiter. He learned to decode the *Nautical Almanac*, and thereby determine his location. And he learned to take and record horizons with accuracy so that he could place on the blank chart an exact longitude and latitude. This was a science that Meriwether Lewis never mastered.

Back in Fort Chipewyan in October 1792, we find him building an advance base on Peace River, so that when the ice broke up the next May he could get a jump, so to speak, on a long summer's travels west to the Pacific Ocean, and hopefully an encounter with the Russians at Unalaska or elsewhere.⁴ He intended to return to Fort Chipewyan, to his native wife and family, before the advance of winter (early in these northern latitudes).

Mackenzie was dependent on Native guides and Native advice. With a birch bark canoe built to his specifications, manned by Canadian voyageurs, and in company with kinsman Alexander MacKay (or McKay), when river ice broke up he made his way to and across the ramparts of the Rocky Mountains, losing his canoe at one stage and having to rebuild it. His voyage up and through the Rockies was hazardous in the extreme, and the circumstances were such that he faced revolt and even considered abandoning the project on which he had set so much store. If the canoe were lost, so, too, would be his provisions, ammunition, trade items, gifts, and, not least, dried food, rum, and instruments. But cross the Continental Divide they did. He found the source of a promising river. He would have proceeded down *Tatouche Tesse*, the Fraser River (which Mackenzie then considered a branch of the Columbia), had he not contended that he could not make that voyage to the Pacific and back to Fort Chipewyan in one season. There was another factor. Natives warned that going downriver on *Tatouche Tesse* would lead to death. Here and elsewhere his western route was thus determined on the basis of Native advice.

Returning upriver to near present-day Quesnel, he and his party pressed west, against the current of a stream he called West Road River. Storing the canoe and caching supplies, he and his companions took to the trails. They entered a high plateau, then passed through "a sea of mountains." Weather conditions were deplorable. They came to the lee of what he called Stupendous Mountain. His passage to the Pacific was being undertaken in higher latitudes than he had hoped for. His destination (and eventual arrival at Bella Coola) was directed by Native advice. Though it was June, the weather encountered was as cruel and biting as any he had ever experienced. On many days they were drenched by rain.

Then, having crossed the last ridge, he and his men quickly descended a steep and wooded hill, a drop of about 3,000 feet in one afternoon. They came to Burnt Bridge Creek. They were now in a region heavily populated by Indigenous peoples. To pursue their explorations and discoveries both courage and tact would be required in the face of possible death. They were on Native sufferance.

The village lay two hundred yards above Burnt Bridge Creek's junction with the fast-flowing Bella Coola River. Here stood *Nutleax*, that is, "place without a waterfall." Mackenzie called it Friendly Village. The population had swelled that season, for the local salmon weir had withstood some heavy freshets whereas elsewhere several weirs had been destroyed and food stocks eliminated. The event had driven many of the needy to *Nutleax*. The effluent in question is the stream *Xaiqts*, unique in the area because it does not drop precipitously into a ravine leading to the main river; it drains to a large delta, unusual in those parts. Some families of the Skeena River claimed this pocket-like spring to be where they and their ancestors first came to earth. It forms a focal point in local Native history, linking it to Mackenzie's coming so far overland from Canada.⁵ To the Bella Coola people war was secondary in importance to ceremonial rites.

Mackenzie's description of the village and its peoples and their occupations represents a vital source for ethnohistory and anthropology as well as cross-cultural studies. His notes are the first foreign observations of a unique world. Mackenzie and his men were generously treated. The Natives made clear that they wanted nothing to do with the venison the expedition was carrying downstream, nor iron to be used to catch salmon; these they regarded as detrimental to a good salmon catch. They made available to Mackenzie a wooden canoe. In this the party, guided by the locals, surfed down the cascading current, shooting over the salmon weir when required. The Natives took care to land the Europeans on the shore while they effected the transit, so as not to spook the fish. Mackenzie's details are fulsome and regarded as authentic; he was a careful, sympathetic observer.

The warm initial response from the locals changed, seemingly, the closer he got to the open Pacific. Intervillage rivalry and internecine characteristics (not propinquity to salt water) now shaped historical factors, though more than a faint suggestion exists that the prevalence of mortality owing to disease explains the harsh response on the more westerly inlets and channels. Smallpox and other infectious diseases had passed this way and would do so again at later

times. The marine life was different, too. This was the coastal environment of the precious sea otter. At one location, a young chief gave Mackenzie a fine sea otter skin. It is charming to think that this is the same one that he proudly showed to Governor John Graves Simcoe when he arrived at the seat of Upper Canada's government at present-day Niagara on the Lake, Ontario, on September 8, 1794. "Mr McKenzie observed that those Indians who inhabited the islands of the coast to be more savage than the others," Mrs. Elizabeth Gwillim Simcoe, the governor's wife, recorded in her journal. To this she added: "The otter skins are sold at a great price, by those who trade on the coast, to the Chinese."⁶

We return to the Bella Coola valley, this rugged area that led to deep fjords and high mountains, and resume our tale of adventurous discovery. The language of the Indigenous peoples was Coast Salish, and there were 61 village sites. In their delightful, easy course downstream, Mackenzie and his men came to *Noogulch*, the Great Village. There Mackenzie gathered his wits and presented himself as a visitor without fear, for the Natives made a frightening appearance. All of this ended in a disarming bear hug by the chief, a flattering reception. It was here he received his aforementioned sea otter robe. Mackenzie repaid the kindness with a pair of scissors with which, the explorer explained, the chief could cut his beard—which he did. Here Mackenzie was shown some blue cloth decorated with buttons, possibly Spanish he thought, and also a magnificent 45-foot cedar canoe, capable of carrying 40 persons. Mackenzie never missed a trick in his search for correct detail, stating adamantly that the northwest Natives had not decorated their canoes with human teeth as Captain Cook had recounted in his narrative, for the teeth in question were from sea otters.

The chief said that about ten years before he had voyaged toward the midday sun, where he had seen two large vessels full of men like Mackenzie—that is, Europeans—by whom he had been kindly received. These were the first Europeans the people of *Noogulch* had encountered. Mackenzie concluded these were Cook's vessels and the location must have been Nootka Sound, for Cook's track kept him otherwise offshore; or perhaps they were Strange's ships trading near Cape Scott.

Mackenzie continued his passage westward to another village, "Rascal's Village." This was *Qomq'ts*, Bella Coola nowadays. He could see a narrow arm of the sea—North Bentinck Arm, head of Burke Channel. A ship's boat from Captain Vancouver's expedition had been there in the same village on June 1. On the 20th of July Mackenzie was out of

the river and into the salt sea, 72 days out of Fort Fork, 850 miles distant. Success lay within his grasp.

Mackenzie Rock, near Elcho Harbor (three miles from Ocean Falls), is comparatively flat when observed against steep shores nearby. Mackenzie and his men were glad to land on a spot where they might take up a defensive position against hostile visitors. The traders had been accosted by Natives near King Island, possibly Bella Bella, western neighbors of those at Bella Coola. In the event, they picked over the exploring party's property with an air of disdain and indifference; nothing seemed of value to these property hunters.

A past grievance surfaced. One of the Natives, in a manner Mackenzie classified as insolent, told that "a large canoe had lately been in the bay, with people in her like me, and that one of them, whom he called *Macubah*, had fired on him and his friends, and that *Bensins* had struck him on the back, with the flat part of his sword." Again, ashore at Elcho Bay, an unwelcoming newcomer told that "he had been shot at by people of my colour" and that *Macubah*—Vancouver—had come there in his large canoe. *Bensins* was the surgeon and naturalist Archibald Menzies. This solo evidence is unsupported by other documentation and should be treated with care. The accosting Native had been misinformed: Vancouver was never there in his ships, only in ship's boats. Vancouver, for his part, made no references to any difficulties with Natives he met in Dean Channel on June 2. *Bensins* was not part of any boat expedition. If by *Bensins* the Native meant Master James Johnstone, then perhaps there was reason for complaint. Johnstone, leader of a ship's boat, admitted to forcing entrance to a seaside dwelling. No clash with the Natives of this quarter is documented in Vancouver's expedition papers. How the Natives came to this account is not known. They bore grievances, but these appear to be unfounded or at least undocumented. In any case, Captain Vancouver's men, six weeks and five days earlier, had been examining these same waters. At the time Mackenzie reached the same locale, Vancouver was surveying far-off waters that divide present-day British Columbia from Alaska.

On Mackenzie Rock, as it is now called, the explorer and his party were hostages to fortune. Mackenzie feared hostile designs. The Indigenous people demanded Mackenzie's short sword (his hanger), but to no avail. Some trade was accomplished. Finally, the Natives left. A close guard was posted for the night.

At eight the next morning, July 22, 1793, a clear sky

happily presented itself. All round the explorer whirled a tumult of Natives: people coming and going, bartering and calling, crying and shouting, and bringing furs and seal flesh to trade. Mackenzie got out his instruments. He took five altitudes for time, and after making calculations concluded that his chronometer was slow by one hour, 21 minutes, and 44 seconds. He was now able to make adjustments for his mapping. He patiently took a meridian to verify his position. He needed to be sure he had the geographic facts right.

In the event, Mackenzie had stoically declined to stir from his astronomical duties until he had accomplished his object. But he ordered his men to get their possessions into the canoe in preparation for a speedy withdrawal. He calculated the latitude of the rock, by artificial and natural horizons, as being close to what we now know it to be, 52 degrees, 22 minutes, 30 seconds North.

The chaos continued and indeed increased. Distractions were required. MacKay, Mackenzie's lieutenant, got out his burning-glass and soon lit a fire in the lid of his tobacco-box. This so surprised Native observers that they traded their best sea otter skin for the glass. Mackenzie's young chief, his close acquaintance, warned that the threatening Natives "were as numerous as mosquitoes, and of a very malignant character." The young man worked for his own safety and that of the explorers.

With absolute determination Mackenzie had completed his task. What he did next was an act of forethought. "I now mixed up some vermilion in melted grease, and inscribed, in large characters, on the South-East face of the rock on which we had slept last night, this brief memorial—"Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada, by land, the twenty-second of July, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three." Did anyone ever write such a pallid, laconic statement of accomplishment? It was merely a record of who, when, and where. The how and the why are absent from this sentence of such monumental attainment, this heroic exploit, whose significance echoes down through the years.

Years later, Native informants told of a man who looked like a goat, with a beard, who had a white face, thus possibly a spirit, and who moved his arms about, when at times wonderful stars, or eyes, seemed to shine forth from his person. The sextant was giving off reflections. Soon the spirit sat down and the canoe moved on. The Natives then went to the spot and noticed the writing on the rock, which to them looked like crows' marks. The Natives could not understand this writing whose figures, unlike their own

(this is a prominent place for petroglyphs and petroglyphs), did not resemble animals. Puzzled, they hurried away to their small village of Eaststam to tell their chief about the crows' marks. The chief told them to stay away from the writing as it might displease their gods.

When Mackenzie came to write his account of the voyage, he explained the ever so brief window of opportunity that was his in achieving his scientific goal. "I had now determined my situation, which is the most fortunate circumstance of my long, painful, and perilous journey, as a few cloudy days would have prevented me from ascertaining the final longitude of it."⁷ In 1926 Canada's Historic Sites and Monuments Board erected a monument and tablet to mark the terminus of the explorer's passage. The famous inscription was carved in the rock and filled in with red concrete.

As to the possibility of a Northwest Passage, Mackenzie was surprised that sea otter trader John Meares suggested that there was an inland sea or archipelago between Nootka Sound and the mainland. He was now certain that Meares was wrong when he said that Robert Gray, the American navigator, had given him that information. He was equally assured, as he put it, that Vancouver's findings could not be doubted; the captain's surveys had ended Meares' speculation and misleading information.⁸ Discovering a northwest passage had, Mackenzie knew, attracted the interest of British governments and enterprising individuals. Now, however, the non-existence of a passage through the continent by sea had been proved. This was his achievement. He did not stop there. It now required, he urged, that the British government would secure the inland trade to British subjects, for if not others would come and take it, and the national advantage gained by exploration would be lost.

These reflections Mackenzie made later in the safety of his study. But when out on the shore of the Pacific he had only one thing on his mind—to get those precious observations safely recorded for geographical science. He had proven the non-existence of a Northwest Passage by going to the Arctic. Now he had the geographical coordinates of the Pacific shore.

These were handsome details indeed to include in his own copyrighted chart that appeared with his voyage account, handsome details, too, for Aaron Arrowsmith to include as early as his 1795 map.

Mackenzie was back in Fort Chipewyan late that same summer, exhausted and in ill health.⁹ He spent one more winter in the interior, cursing it. Then with his star in its zenith he headed for his meeting with Simcoe, an expected

rendezvous with the powerful Governor Lord Dorchester in Quebec (cancelled because of Mackenzie's infirmities), and then a voyage to London. Had he met Dorchester he would have received a warm welcome, for Dorchester in 1768 had proposed to superiors in government the sending of a traders' expedition to the Pacific. There they would select "a good port, take its latitude, longitude, and describe it so accurately as to enable our ships from the East Indies to find it out with ease, and then return the year following."¹⁰ Mackenzie's power within the firm rose in consequence of his discoveries but was also related to his considerable commercial acumen. He became agent for many other traders. Athabasca country became the new Eldorado of the fur-bearing forests of America. In later years Mackenzie became a competent and articulate voice for Canadian commerce on the Pacific and across to China, and he never tired of bringing to the attention of government the necessity to nurture and protect trade, the lifeblood of empire, of profit and power.

On reflection, we see here how character and circumstance combine to make history. Mackenzie's explorations were self-driven, and made possible by the grudging consent of his partners, most of whom saw little advantage in geographical pursuits that did not yield immediate financial reward. Mackenzie acted very much alone. Inspired by Peter Pond, Mackenzie was a geopolitical thinker and an astute mercantile strategist in his own right, as his various appeals to secretaries of colonial and foreign affairs show for the years 1794 to 1812. He never tired of urging upon government the possibilities of western trade and Pacific Coast development. Further, he was an enthusiast for economic diversification—fishing and whaling development. He was thus far ahead of his time in British imperial thinking about the possible development of western North America.

Only when, on the eve of the War of 1812, it became clear that the Americans were making an appearance in the Columbia River, in lethargic succession to Captains Lewis and Clark's arrival at Pacific salt water in 1805, did the British government direct naval support for commercial activities there. It is true that Britain was otherwise occupied with Napoleon Bonaparte, and it is equally true that the North West Company had no charter such as did the Hudson's Bay, East India, and South Sea Companies. Caught in an octopus-like web of imperial charters and regulations, the Nor'Westers including Mackenzie had to resort to such arrangements with American shipping so as to get access to Canton to market furs and exchange them for Asian manufactures. At the same

time, they were driven by competition with the Hudson's Bay Company and John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company.

When we compare and contrast Wee Sandy Mackenzie with Lewis and Clark, we note that it was Mackenzie who had first completed a passage of empire to the Pacific. He was not on assignment from government. He was an informal and unauthorized agent of empire, and his canoe the vessel of an inland empire of lakes, rivers, creeks, and connecting portages. Lewis and Clark had their great river boat and then took to horses and canoes. Their expedition was to determine a suitable passage to the Pacific. But Mackenzie came from an earlier era, one when beaver was still king in Canada, but when now the sea otter was drawing him and his kind, and many mariners, to the North Pacific. Whaling was another prospect. Mackenzie developed a trading vision along geopolitical lines, linking North America to China and Asian ports. Not until the Hudson's Bay Company mastered the interior routes, using packhorses to circumvent the Fraser River rapids, did the Canadian trade on the Pacific flourish and grow.

Mackenzie was ahead of his time, prescient in his estimation of how a trans-Canadian, trans-continental economy might develop. He could see how the regions of Canada—the Pacific cordillera, the Prairie basin, the Winnipeg nexus, the Great Lakes, and the St. Lawrence River—could be linked by trade. This was achieved in different fashion by the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885. Industrial technology of the age of rail and steam locomotion would be required to overcome the geographical obstacles that Mackenzie had faced and vividly described.

It is well known that Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal* influenced, or spurred, President Jefferson in sending Lewis and Clark forth on their US Army expedition of exploration, one funded by Congress (and not private enterprise). Mackenzie's book was published in 1801, and was soon available in American, French, German, and Russian editions. Had it been published earlier, Jefferson would not have been involved in the response. Why did it take seven years to get the work into print?

We leave Mackenzie now, a bit breathless by the exhausting efforts of his passage through and over the mountains of the west beyond the Continental Divide. The voyages of discovery of Vancouver and Mackenzie were mere preludes to British imperial ascendancy on the Northwest Coast, a rise that limited Russian southward progression from Alaska, removed Spanish imperial ambitions and activities northward

from Mexico and California, and checked United States expansion by sea and land north of the 49th parallel, leaving Vancouver Island in British, later Canadian, hands and the continental realm totally under the same control. ■



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Notes

1. James P. Ronda, *Jefferson's West: A Journey with Lewis and Clark* (Monticello: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2000), 27. Bernard DeVoto, *The Course of Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry edition, 1952), 348-55 and elsewhere. David L. Nicandri, *River of Promise: Lewis and Clark on the Columbia* (Washburn, ND: Dakota Institute Press, 2009), *passim*, but esp. 205-17.
2. For the 1789 voyage I have examined Mackenzie's reliance on Native guides in *First Across the Continent: Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 84-93, to whose attention the reader is drawn for more details. Although Mackenzie was heavily reliant on such information as was provided by the likes of the Chipewyan chief Nestabeck (also Aw-geen-nah, a.k.a. The English Chief), it is also undeniably true, for the historical record, that often his informants ran out of authentic and verifiable information, were prone to doubts and suspicion at the limits of territories and waters familiar to them, and were very naturally, as humans are, prone to conjecture. Theirs was a natural human response and we ought not to expect less. See *ibid.*, 54-56, on Nestabeck, and for the text of Mackenzie's sage advice to Lt. (later Sir John) Franklin, R.N., 21 May 1819, for Franklin's first voyage, *ibid.*, 213-16. Mackenzie recommended to Franklin that he find Nestabeck and that he also make friends with Inuit who would aid the naval officer in his land passage.
3. W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (London: Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1970), 17. (Henceforth cited as *Mackenzie Journals and Letters*).
4. This is drawn from *First Across the Continent and Mackenzie Journals and Letters*. The latter contains a portion of Pond's map of northwestern America prepared for presentation to the empress of Russia, July 1787, besides maps showing Mackenzie's routes to the Arctic and Pacific as appeared in his *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence, through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans* (London: 1801), and Mackenzie's extant letters. See also, Derek Hayes, *First Crossing: Alexander Mackenzie, His Expedition Across North America, and the Opening of the Continent* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2001).
5. *Mackenzie Journals and Letters*, 358-94. This is site 44, shown and numbered, in Dorothy I.D. Kennedy and Randall T. Bouchard, "Bella Coola," in Wayne Suttles, Northwest Coast, volume 7 of *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 324-25.
6. quoted, Gough, *First Across the Continent*, 166.
7. *Mackenzie Journals and Letters*, 380.
8. Mackenzie compared notes with Gray on these points. See the extensive footnote Mackenzie wrote on this, *ibid.*
9. from Bright's disease, from which he recovered.
10. Dorchester (then Sir Guy Carleton) to Lord Shelburne, March 2, 1768, in Lawrence Burpee, *The Search for the Western Sea* (new ed., 2 vols.; Toronto: Macmillan, 1935), 1:303. Dorchester added: "Your Lordship will readily perceive the advantage of such discoveries, and how difficult attempts to explore unknown parts must prove to the English, unless we avail ourselves of the knowledge of the Canadians, who are well acquainted with the country, the language, and the manner of the Natives."



“Of the gladdest moments in human life, methinks is the departure upon a distant journey to unknown lands. Shaking off with one mighty effort the fetters of habit, the leaden weight of Routine, the cloak of many Cares and the Slavery of Home, man feels once more happy. The blood flows with the fast circulation of childhood.”

Sir Richard Francis Burton

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Advertiser must place a minimum of at least 2 ads within 12 months in the same calendar year or at least 2 consecutive ads if the ads fall in different calendar years. Payment must be received 30 days in advance of the ad deadline for the first scheduled ad. Multiple ads must be paid for 30 days in advance of the deadline for the first advertisement.

FOUNDATION MEMBER DISCOUNT: 15%

For example, a Foundation member who runs ads in the May, August, and November issues of *WPO* would receive an 18% discount on the total bill if paid by cash, check, money order, or credit card through our website—www.lewisandclark.org—by selecting “Join” or “Donate.”

Direct all advertising correspondence, including ad reservations, to chris@lewisandclark.org or call 406-454-1234.



PO Box 3434
Great Falls, MT 59403

There was in the Pacific an Arcadian time, of course, when all its islands belonged, if belonged is the proper word, to those who had made their livings there for generations. But one by one, group by group, European discovers happened upon these islands, and one by one group by group, they lost their easy innocence.

— *Simon Winchester*

