Far Short of Expectations or Wishes:
Lewis and Clark in Columbia River Country

By David L. Nicandri

Chapter 1

The Great River of the West

By August of 1805 Meriwether Lewis was desperate to find the Shoshone Indians. Lewis had long deemed the Shoshones and their horses essential for an expected portage across the Continental Divide. Once beyond this ridge Lewis expected to find the waters that would take the Expedition for Northwestern Discovery from the Missouri River drainage to their ultimate destination—the Pacific Ocean. As he had done before, and would do again, Lewis, accompanied by George Drouillard and John Shields, jumped ahead of William Clark and the larger party still managing the struggle of bringing canoes up the headwaters of the Missouri. By August 12th Lewis's squad had traveled nearly to the crest of the continent on their scouting mission. Though the Shoshones had been briefly sighted, they had proved entirely elusive. Their trail over Lemhi Pass, however, was entirely evident. Lewis recorded in his notebook "I therefore did not dispair of shortly finding a passage over the mountains and of taisting the waters of the great Columbia this evening." [1]

What Lewis could not have known is that coming to understand the complex geography of the Columbia River country would confound him and Clark for the next two months. But before proceeding west with Lewis to the Columbia, let us first explicate the hazy understanding he and Clark had about this Great River of the West on the verge of their first physical encounter with it.

Geographical lore from the time of the French explorers Marquette, Hennepin and LaSalle in the 17th century suggested that beyond a series of mountains set in the western interior a great river flowed to the Pacific Ocean. British cartography in the 18th century reinforced the early French imagery with the notion that a river with might equal to the Missouri flowed westward from shared heights. Peter Pond, an American but one employed by the Northwest Company, a fur trading enterprise with headquarters in Montreal, presented the United States Congress with a map in 1784. This instrument, based on Pond's travels in the West, adhered to the erroneous French theory about a single range of mountains that did much to mislead a generation or two of armchair and practical geographers about the true complexity of the Rocky Mountain system. Faithful to the reigning theory, Pond's map showed a westward flowing river emanating from a narrow ridge opposite to the headwaters of the Missouri. Remarkably enough, Pond speculatively placed the common wellspring of these great rivers at the 45th parallel--precisely the latitude of what would later be named Lemhi Pass. [2]

Pond's guess was partially substantiated over the course of the next seven years via the American fur trader Robert Gray's accidental discovery and by the more purposeful explorations of George Vancouver and Alexander Mackenzie working on behalf of British interests. Actual geographic definition of the great western river finally began to supplant hopeful theorizing, but only barely. Gray and Vancouver established the Columbia River's mouth at the 46th parallel, a propitious finding since it seemed to match the envisioned headwaters of the Missouri, as delineated by Pond and others. Alexander Mackenzie complicated this core article of geographic faith with the putative discovery of a northern fork of the Columbia River in present British Columbia. Still, the

mythic ideal of two great western rivers with adjoining sources held sway as the last great hope for the fabled Northwest Passage. [3]

The unsettled state of geographical comprehension can be seen in President Thomas Jefferson's message to Congress requesting funding for what would become known as the Lewis and Clark expedition, and the ensuing correspondence with friends and confidants in the Philadelphia scientific community. In the former document, Jefferson never even mentioned the Columbia River by name, though as a theoretical placeholder a great western river was envisioned as the link by which "an intelligent officer" might explore a line across the continent "to the western ocean." [4]

In the latter communications, Jefferson repeatedly stated the Missouri River was to be explored along with "whatever river," heading with the Missouri ran to the Pacific Ocean. Jefferson's eventual instructions to Lewis clarified this picture only by the slightest of degrees. "The object of your mission," the president directed, "is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by it's course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregan, Colorado or any other river may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce." [5]

The vagueness found in Jefferson's correspondence at the commencement of the enterprise was rooted partially in diplomatic discretion, but also in the fact that, geographic lore notwithstanding, only the lower most section of the Columbia was fixed geographically. Named in May 1792 by the Robert Gray for his ship, *Columbia Rediviva*, the little that was generally known of this river was actually attributable to the efforts of an Englishman, Lt. William R. Broughton in service of his captain, George

Vancouver, in command of the *Discovery*. In a cutter (or jolly boat) and a larger launch from the armed-tender *Chatham* anchored at Grays Bay, Broughton and a portion of his crew rowed up the Columbia River in late October 1792 as far as Cottonwood Point near present Washougal, Washington. Broughton's geographic insights, as conformed and distributed by his fellow Briton, the influential cartographer Aaron Arrowsmith, eventually found their way into the map prepared by Nicholas King at the request of Jefferson's Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin, for Lewis's use in the field. (Indeed, when in Philadelphia, Lewis himself made sketches from Vancouver's survey and forwarded them to Jefferson and via Gallatin to King.) East of Mounts Rainier and Hood (named by Vancouver and Broughton respectively) all the way to the Rocky Mountains, King's map was nearly void of information. The only substantive content in that section of King's map, and even that was denoted as "conjectural," was the "River Oregan" which east of Rainier and Hood split into northerly and east/southeasterly branches of equal size. The name "Oregan," borrowed from Arrowsmith, in contradistinction to "Columbia," shows how ephemeral Gray's finding was even among his own countrymen, a point which will loom large with Lewis and Clark when they reach the main stem of the great river themselves. [6]

The northern fork of the "Oregan" on Arrowsmith and then King's map headed in present British Columbia and closer to its extremity bore the name Tacoutche-Tesse, as denominated by Alexander Mackenzie. This fur trader for the Northwest Company turned scientific explorer came upon a large southward flowing river during his cross continental trek in July 1793, coincidentally the same month Gray returned to his home port of Boston and Broughton to his in England. (Broughton left Vancouver's squadron

in California after the 1792 season of exploration and found his way to Great Britain via land passage across Mexico to the Atlantic.) We are not certain of the extent to which Gray and his corporate sponsors touted the geographic and related commercial prospect attendant upon his discovery of the Columbia River. It mattered little anyway because even by the time Broughton crossed the bar, another fur trader had followed Gray in making Broughton at least the third to anchor on the Columbia. But we do know the British Admiralty wanted to control the release of information from Vancouver's coastal reconnaissance because of imperial consideration, at least until such time as Vancouver himself returned to Great Britain, which turned out to be October 1795. Unlike John Meares before him and Alexander Mackenzie afterwards, Vancouver quickly turned to the production of his exploratory narrative without resort to a ghostwriter. Vancouver's three-volume *Voyage of Discovery* was published in late August or early September 1798, including an inset map of Broughton's Columbia River survey on plate 5 of the Atlas. Consistent with Vancouver's narrative, the Atlas refers to the "River Columbia," though a separate map engraved by Arrowsmith appeared in November 1798 titled: "Plan of the River Oregan from an Actual Survey." This, of course, was Broughton's work, with the title pointedly avoiding the American derived nomenclature "Columbia." [7]

Mackenzie did not return to Upper Canada from the field of his western explorations until the late summer of 1794. In a letter written on September 10 of that year from the settlement that was to become Toronto, Mackenzie reported to John Graves Simcoe, a British colonial official, that after crossing the Continental Divide in the northern latitudes he made his way to the "Tacoutch Tesse." Necessarily without any insight into the explorations of either Gray or Vancouver, this river, Mackenzie

continued, took "too much a Southern Course to bring me to the sea as soon as I expected, and from the best information I could procure judged it did not discharge itself to the northward of the River of the West; a Branch if not the whole I take it to be." Only later, by word of mouth within commercial fur trade circles or from British colonial sources, would Mackenzie learn of the Gray/Broughton/Vancouver geographic discourse and the name of the river, Columbia, that he too presumed to have discovered, but by land and at it northern extremity. Mackenzie's post-expeditionary insight gleaned from the efforts of other explorers -- that his Tacoutche-Tesse became the Columbia or a tributary thereto--was incorporated into his narrative, *Voyages From Montreal*, published in Great Britain in 1801. In fact, Mackenzie had stumbled upon what is now known as the Fraser River, a circumstance that would not become evident until 1808, long after Lewis and Clark had returned. [8]

King's southeastern branch of the Great River of the West flowed out of the Rockies from a point conveniently adjacent to the imagined location of the headwaters of the Missouri River. This fork was an act of pure invention, but it had the merit of fulfilling the theory of symmetrical geography. This mode of thought held that the earth's architecture required continental landmasses and river systems to mirror or balance one another. As we shall see later, King's imaginings reified specific American imperial desiderata, namely that a large southern fork would trump Mackenzie's priority on the northern fork. Better yet, with a source shared with the Missouri, the southern fork of the Columbia would yield an "All American" trade route to the Pacific and avoid British entanglements altogether. [9]

Allowing for Mackenzie's brief sketch of the presumed northern fork, George Vancouver's narrative of Broughton's explorations was the only extensive account about the Columbia River available at time that the Expedition for Northwestern Discovery originated. If Broughton, via Vancouver, was to be believed, the Columbia's source was in the vicinity of Mount Hood, and not the northern hinterlands visited by Mackenzie nor juxtaposed with the Missouri. To Broughton, the mountain "seemed to announce a termination to the river," perhaps in as little as a day or two's more travel beyond his farthest upstream position opposite the present Sandy River in Oregon. The resident Indians provided Broughton a description of a waterfall above them, which was probably an ill-fated attempt to communicate information about the Cascades or the falls at Celilo. Given his predisposition to view Mt. Hood as the source of the river and the obvious height of the mountain, Broughton probably did not find this local information an exceptional insight. The native understanding of upstream topography may have suggested a slightly longer running river to Edward Bell, clerk on the *Chatham* who accompanied Broughton on the Columbia reconnaissance. Bell thought it likely, as speculated upon in an unpublished manuscript, that in their 127-mile voyage to Point Vancouver they had probably traversed half the river's length. Though Bell was open to more grand possibilities, geographically speaking, Broughton's view of the Columbia's prospects prevailed. Vancouver, summing up the determination to return to the *Chatham* stated "Mr. Broughton gave up the idea of any further examination, and was reconciled to this measure, because even thus far the river could hardly be considered as navigable for shipping." [10]

Donald Jackson asserts that Thomas Jefferson was familiar with but did not own a set of Vancouver's muli-volume *Voyage of Discovery*. Lewis, of course, was one source of potential information because he had access to Vancouver's account when he was interning in Philadelphia, but it is unknown to w hat extent he studied any aspect of it other than the atlas. One of Jefferson's regular correspondents, the French naturalist Bernard Lacépède, was intimately familiar with Vancouver's narrative and he offered the president an interpretation of its significance in a letter received in Washington, DC in July 1803. The planned American expedition to the West, (of which Jefferson had written earlier), Lacépède wrote, "could well [find] the *Colombia*" at the desired spot opposite the headwaters of the Missouri. Being perhaps the first to question Broughton's conclusions, Lacépède suggested that where the British voyagers turned around the Columbia was "still far from its source." Lacépède came to this conclusion because of the still great depth of the river where Broughton terminated exploration. As it had for Broughton, however, Mt. Hood also challenged Lacépède's ability to comprehend continental geography. Such an eminence, Lacépède told Jefferson, was a likely "dependence of the *Stony mountains*." The notion another major chain of mountains running north/south west of the Rockies had not yet been conceived let alone discerned. [11]

Jefferson promptly forwarded Lewis a digest of Lacepede's geographic analysis, including the key provision that where Broughton left the Columbia "it was far then to it's head." Lewis acknowledged receipt of Jefferson's missive but not the specifics of Lacepede's putative geography lesson. Since it was presumed by all, including Lacepede, that the Missouri took its head in the Rocky Mountains, of which he imagined

Mt. Hood to be a part, any number of conjectures could have crowded Lewis's mind. How far to the west was the fount of the Missouri? Was the Columbia a long river or a short one? What was the extent, that is, the breadth of the Rocky Mountains? [12]

W. Kaye Lamb, the modern editor of Vancouver's *Voyage* is critical of the various geographic deductions accompanying Broughton's decision to turn back. Stating the obvious, Lamb notes, "Broughton would have been astonished to learn that he had left over a thousand miles of the Columbia unexplored." In another instance, Lamb says Broughton "should have" known better than to ascribe the profusion of driftwood found at the limits of his exploration to the effects of "an unusually high tide," as opposed the spring freshet. However, these normative expectations, and by analogy today's ubiquitous interpretations of what Lewis and Clark *should have* known about their place in the world west of the continental divide, are modern anachronisms. If, as seems likely, by the winter of 1803 Thomas Jefferson and Meriwether Lewis believed the Columbia to be a river of significant magnitude, the only basis for them to believe this was Lacepede's armchair geography and Mackenzie's (mistaken) notion that he had sighted its northern fork. The only people who had actually been on the Columbia, per Vancouver, thought the river was only 250 miles in length, at the most. Thus, through a combination of real, theoretical, and mistaken ideas, when Lewis and Clark left St. Louis in May 1804 they expected to follow the Missouri to its fountainhead near the 45th parallel and make contact with the major southern fork of the Columbia. This river would take them, in turn, to the Pacific Ocean. [13]

The only post-Vancouver/Mackenzie information Lewis and Clark gleaned of a westerly river interfacing with the Missouri came from Indian informants during the

winter of 1804-1805 at Fort Mandan. At every opportunity Lewis and Clark quizzed the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara villagers for intelligence about western topography. In the first published edition of the journals paraphrased into a continuous narrative by Nicholas Biddle, a map of the upper reaches of the Missouri River was deemed a more precious gift from a chief than his volunteering the sexual favors of his wife. Meriwether Lewis, in his comprehensive summary of geographic findings for the first year of exploration (1804) written at Fort Mandan concluded his recapitulation with a forecast of the Missouri River affluents expected in the forthcoming season of exploration. The "information has been obtained on this subject," Lewis wrote, "in the course of the winter, from a number of individuals questioned seperately and at different times. [T]he information thus obtained has been carefully compared, and those points only, in which they generally agreed, have been retained." Characteristically, William Clark was slightly more circumspect on these matters. In a letter to his brother-in-law written less than a week before the expedition headed west from Fort Mandan, Clark said: "Country and River above this but little Known. Our information is altogether from Indians collected at different times and entitled to some credit." [14]

What, precisely, did Lewis and Clark learn (or presume to understand given the vagaries of language and translation) about the Columbia River at Fort Mandan? Above the Great Falls of the Missouri the Medicine River (Sun River today) flowed into it. The Medicine River had its source in the Rocky Mountains "opposite to a river which also takes it's rise in the same mountains and which running West discharges itself into a large river, which passes at no great distance from the Rocky mountains, running from N to South." Promising as this prospect may have seemed at first, Lewis and Clark were

not disposed to take this more direct Medicine River route because is was said to pass through "a mountainous, broken and woody country." Worse yet for voyageurs, it was "not navigable in consequence of its rapidity and shoals." [15]

The Medicine River, which Lewis assessed on the return trip in 1806 and would prove in the end to be the shortest route between the Missouri and the Columbian waters, was not explicitly referred to at Fort Mandan as a connector between these two great rivers. Whether the Hidatsa had intended to convey information along that line of reasoning is an open question and is addressed below. Nevertheless, Lewis and Clark were inclined to believe that one had to reach the ultimate extent of the Missouri to interface with the Columbia, and the Hidatsa themselves gave the captains specific directions to the great western river. To reach it, the Hidatsa said, the Americans would have to go up the Missouri to its three forks and then over the dividing ridge. This passage from one river system to another, the Indians told Lewis (or again, Lewis understood them to say) would take but half a day. On the other side of this divide, separating "the waters of the Atlantic from those of the Pacific ocean," Lewis wrote, was yet another "large river which washes [the mountains] Western base, running from S to N." Since this description perfectly reflected the authoritative expectations created by Pond and more immediately by Nicholas King, then surely what the Indians described at Fort Mandan was the Great River of the West that Lewis and Clark understood would take them to the Pacific. [16]

Why might the Hidatsa have encouraged the longer route and how could the captains have construed the portage between to the two rivers as only requiring half a day to traverse? First, the Hidatsa probably knew more about the three forks route, erstwhile

home of the more easily manipulated Shoshone Indians, than they did about the Medicine River which coursed through the homelands of the far more formidable Blackfoot Nation. After all, the whole story about Sacagawea, a Shoshone taken captive by the Hidatsa who years later joined the expedition at the Mandan villages as an interpreter, is itself fully indicative of the balance of military power on the plains. Second, though Lewis and Clark knew, via Charbonneau, that the British fur traders had long been habituated to the upper Missouri and were, predictably, bad-mouthing them, the captains may have underestimated their influence. Indeed, it would take 25 more years after Lewis and Clark for American fur traders to gain parity with the British in terms of commercial relations with the tribes. Alexander Henry, visiting the vicinity of Fort Mandan in 1806, claimed the Hidatsa were "disgusted at the high sounding language the American captains bestowed upon themselves." Though Henry would have had his own reasons for propagating this perspective it is nonetheless true that the Hidatsa may have withheld some information out of loyalty to their preferred trading partners. [17]

A fictional but popular account of the Lewis and Clark Expedition postulates that the Hidatsa were purposefully treacherous in the travel advice they gave. More likely, the Hidatsa were simply doing the captains a favor by sending them in a safer direction than the Medicine River route. After all, when Lewis and Clark returned to the Hidatsa homelands in the summer of 1806 Chief Black Moccasin was "extreamly pleased to See us," William Clark reported. As for the short passage across the mountains, much like the misimpression carried in the minds of Lewis and Clark about how long it would take to bypass the falls of the Missouri, the Hidatsa were thinking in equine terms. Lewis and Clark's frame of reference was hydrological. Charles McKenzie, a British trader that

Lewis and Clark met at Fort Mandan later confided in correspondence that the Indians had trouble understanding the captains' intentions. [18]

Yet another and perhaps surprising tribe of Indians may have also influenced the Hidatsa recommendations and indirectly the expedition's route. Unbeknownst to the captains until their return trip, members of the Nez Perce nation were in the Mandan villages shortly after Lewis and Clark left those precincts. (This would, of course, have been months before the expedition first encountered the people on the Clearwater River of Idaho.) More importantly, since we must presume this was not the first time the Nez Perce had interacted with the Hidatsa, as a Columbia River tribe they would have had occasion to inform the plains Indians about the rivers and lands west of the Shoshones at the divide. The Hidatsa themselves, Lewis reported, never went farther west in their "war excurtions" than "the top of thes[e] mountains." [19]

There is ample evidence of Nez Perce geographic intelligence embedded in Lewis's Fort Mandan summary. The great river running from south to north at the western base of the continental dividing ridge, Lewis noted, was "at no great distance" from the "Flat head Indians [who] live in one considerable village on the western border of this river." Confusion reigned in the minds of Lewis and Clark, and many others thereafter, as to the source of the name "Flathead" and which peoples the term was meant to represent. Nevertheless, it is clear that the captains, by both their geographic understanding and usage of the term (as in "Flatheads of the Kooskooske," (Lewis and Clark's name for the Clearwater River), they were referencing the Nez Perce in their Hidatsa geography lesson. [20]

The Nez Perce would have been the obvious source of information about the terrain to the west of the great northward flowing river on the Pacific side of the divide. This most western country, Lewis and Clark learned at Fort Mandan, was "open & level plains like those [the Hidatsa] inhabit, with a number of barren sandy noles irregularly scattered over the face of the country." This we must surmise is a reference to the hills, buttes and scablands of the Palouse country and Snake River plains. [21]

Furthermore, the "Flatheads" of Lewis's cognizance at Fort Mandan partook of a "large fish, which they take in the river on which they reside." This is an obvious reference to the prodigious salmon fishery (formerly) on the Snake River and its tributaries. It could *not* have been a reference to the Salish-Kootenai of the Bitterroot and other western valleys in Montana. As Lewis and Clark would discern in September 1805, impediments on the Clark Fork/Bitterroot tributaries to the Columbia did not allow salmon to pass to Salish-Kootenai homelands. Finally, the Hidatsa reported that the Shoshone visited this same "Western river at certain seasons of the year, for the purpose of taking fish which they dry in the sun and transport on horses to their villages on the three forks of the Missouri." All this geographic intelligence about a river that ran south to north towards a possible junction with Mackenzie's northern fork led Lewis to a forthright conclusion. "This river we suppose to be the S. fork of the Columbia, and the fish the Salmon, with which we are informed the Columbia river abounds. [T]his river is said to be rapid but as far as the Indian informants are acquainted with it [is] not intercepted with shoals." [22]

William Clark's complement to Lewis's narrative explication, a summary table of western rivers and a map he composed at Fort Mandan, conforms to Lewis's judgment.

The expedition would first have to proceed above the falls, bypass the Medicine River and proceed through the rocky defiles at the first gates of the mountains to the three forks of the Missouri. From thence, Clark projected the course "to a large River on the west of the mountains." With that, Clark's catalogue of western information ends. Clark's map, one that was to be sent back down the Missouri to President Jefferson when the bulk of the party headed west, had been a work in progress for many months, presumably in tandem with his table of western rivers. Beginning as early as December 16, 1804 with an Indian sketch of the upper Missouri provided by Northwest Company trader Hugh Heney, Clark began pulling his thoughts together. Clark's map was underway by the first week of January. The Mandan Chief Big White provided a sketch "as far as the high mountains." Later that month Clark attempted to persuade a Hidatsa chief out of attacking the Shoshone but in so doing coaxed out of him "a Chart in his way of the Missouri." By early March 1805 Clark had completed his map. [23]

The last word on the captains' geographic assessment at Fort Mandan about the great river of the West was contained in a letter from Lewis to his mother Lucy Marks, written the week before expedition left their winter confines. It is worthy of being quoted in full.

The Indians in this neighbourhood inform us, that the Missouri is navigable nearly to it's source, and that from a navigable part of the river, at a distance not exceeding half a days march, there is a large river runing from South to North, along the Western base of the Rocky mountains; but as their war excurtions have never extended far beyond this point, they can give no account of the discharge or source of this river. We believe this

stream to be the principal South fork of the Columbia river, and if so we shall probably find but little difficulty in passing to the Ocean. [24]

For present purposes, the key phrasing in this passage is *not* the oft-cited naivete Jefferson and Lewis had about the complexity of the continental divide, and its companion notion about how easy it would be for the expedition to reach the Ocean. The former had long been an axiom of geographical speculation.
The latter may have represented a son simply trying to reassure an anxious mother. Rather, more noteworthy and frequently overlooked is the degree to which this information reflects the expectation that there was a major, probably a great, river flowing south to north immediately west of the Rocky Mountains. As stated earlier, King's map had speculated on this point, but the actual native residents of the west seemed to confirm what had heretofore been deemed "conjectural." Lewis's letter, much like Clark's summary of western rivers cited above, also suggests that any river running south to north west of the Rockies was also the *larger* fork of the Columbia. This is a theme to which we shall return in a later chapter. [25]

Curiously, in his correspondence with Jefferson, Lewis, unlike his letter to his mother, does not elaborate on this great western river of which he has learned so much. Lewis may not have wanted to speculate about it because any letter to the President ran the risk of being published, perhaps prematurely. Lewis did opine that if the Columbia River should "not prove navigable where we first meet with it, our present intention is to continue our march by land down the river untill it becomes so, or the Pacific Ocean." This would prove prophetic.

[26]

As the expedition gradually wound their way up the Missouri in the spring of 1805, the appearance of tributaries the Hidatsa had predicted reaffirmed Lewis and Clark's confidence that they were on the right course to the headwaters of the Columbia. As early as the Yellowstone-Missouri confluence reached on April 26, 1805, Lewis recollected geographic intelligence provided by the Indians at the winter camp and speculated that the Yellowstone, as well as the Missouri, had its source with "the South branch of the Columbia river." Curiously, Clark did not replicate this reference to the Columbia in his notebook, as would have been his normal practice when Lewis was keeping a journal. But as will be discussed at greater length in the ensuing chapter, one must always be careful about determining the actual date of origination for certain of the captains' entries. For example, consider the illuminating example found in Clark's notebook for May 25, 1805. The expedition was then in the heart of the Missouri Breaks but Clark's journal contains a comparison between the antelope found in that area versus those of the "Columbian Plains." The latter term was not even conventionalized as a place name by Clark until he was at Fort Clatsop, half a year or more later. Thus, in the present instance of Clark ignoring Lewis's reference to the "South branch" of the Columbia, Clark probably dropped the allusion to the Great River of the West in light of subsequent geographic insight based on actual exploration of the Columbia basin. The great significance of Clark's repeatedly editing out references to the Columbia River will be explicated at length in a later chapter. [27]

At the famed confluence of the Marias and Missouri Rivers in early June 1805, where Lewis and Clark studied the proposition of which fork was the main stem, the prospect of reaching the Columbia River loomed large. Making the right choice was

pivotal to the success of Jefferson's venture for, as Lewis explained, the Indians at Fort Mandan told them that the true or main stem of the Missouri came "very near to the Columbia river." If the captains made the wrong choice and bungled making contact with the Columbia, they feared losing a whole season of exploration. This development, Lewis wrote, "would probably so dishearten the party that it might defeat the expedition altogether." Every man in the detachment, except Lewis and Clark, thought the northern fork was the true Missouri. In another famous passage from this storied point of observation, Lewis wrote that the men "said very cheerfully that they were ready to follow us any wher we thought proper to direct but . . . were afraid that the South fork would soon termineate in the mountains and leave us at a great distance from the Columbia." [28]

These memorable lines are usually presented as evidence of the captains' decision-making skills, their powers of geographic deduction, and the command's esprit de corps. Surely they are also testament to the gravity brought to the issue of finding the headwaters of the Columbia and the perception of where *its* main stem might also be located. The unvarnished journal of Pvt. Joseph Whitehouse puts this issue into greater relief, which his candid reckoning of affairs often did. According to Whitehouse, Lewis communicated the view that this northern fork of the Missouri (the Marias) went too far north to be the true Missouri. If a mistake was made "we Should have more mountains to cross & further to go by land to git to the Columbia River, which we have to descend to the west." This comment by Whitehouse can also be read to mean that the supposed northern fork of the Missouri may also have taken them closer to Mackenzie's *Tacoutche Tesse* but that the main Columbia River was to their west or southwest. In short,

determine the main stem of the Missouri River and you will find the companion feature of the Columbia. [29]

This whole question was brought to bear once again at the Great Falls of the Missouri. In a fretful entry describing the poor health of Sacagawea, Meriwether Lewis was concerned not merely for her personal well being, but the fate of the expedition, now for the second time in two weeks! Lewis wrote of his dependence upon her for productive negotiations with the Shoshone Indians “on whom we depend for horses to assist us in our portage from the Missouri to the columbia River.” Still later, at the three forks of the Missouri, Lewis took consolation from his confidence that the southwesterly tributary, named by him the Jefferson, could head only “with the waters of any river but the Columbia . . ..” Sergeant John Ordway recorded in his journal that the elusive Shoshone had left that district and gone over to the “Columbian River.” Whitehouse provided the rationale; the Shoshone left “to fish & c.” [30]

The first practical speculation about actual travel on the Columbia occurred a week later, on August 8, 1805. In a bold passage, borne of his continued frustration in not encountering Sacagawea’s people, Lewis wrote of his intention of proceeding with a small party “to the source of the principal stream of this river and pass the mountains to the Columbia; and down that river untill I found the Indians.” Two days later, Lewis laid out his plan for the final assault on the Continental Divide from his position on the Beaverhead River (a tributary to the Jefferson River, south of present Dillon, MT.) With his mind this particular day reeling with a multitude of geographical visions, Lewis concluded that no where in the world was there an “example of a river running to the extent which the Missouri and Jefferson’s rivers do through such a mountainous country

and at the same time so navigable." Lewis continued, wishfully he would soon learn, "if the Columbia furnishes us such another example, a communication across the continent by water will be practicable and safe." But on reflection Lewis stemmed his optimism. Given the principles of continental architecture he knew a "practicable and safe" passage down the Columbia ran contrary to his "knowledge of its having in it comparatively short course to ocean the same number of feet to descend which the Missouri and Mississippi have from this point to the Gulph of Mexico." This accurately foretold fast water, rapids, and falls, which geographer John Logan Allen termed "a remarkably prescient observation" and evidence of Lewis's sophisticated understanding of hydrological principles. [31]

After decades if not centuries of speculation and many years of investigation and planning by Jefferson, Lewis, and Clark, the true scope of the Great River of the West and its connection to the interior of the continent was about to be revealed.

Notes

[1] *JLCE*, 5:74

[2] Allen*, Lewis and Clark*. pp. 8, 19, 23-24.

[3] Ibid., pp. 30, 38, 44.

[4] Ibid., p. 72; Jackson, *Letters*, 1:12-13

[5] Jackson, *Letters*, 1:16, 17, 18, 21, 61. Jefferson reiterated the prime instruction to Lewis in a letter dated November 16, 1803, which would have found Lewis at that winter's campsite on the Mississippi. Jefferson began, "The object of your mission is single," adding the last two words for emphasis upon the original direction, "the direct water communication from sea to sea formed by the bed of the Missouri & perhaps the

Oregon." This was one of the earliest appearances of the term "Oregon" in what would become the standard form. Ibid., 1:137. The first mention of the river "Ouragon" is attributed to Robert Rogers, and English adventurer from the French & Indian War era, who published an account of North American geography in 1765. Jonathan Carver, another veteran of the French & Indian War from Connecticut, published his T*ravels Through the Interior Parts of North America*" in 1778 and therein perpetuated Rogers' term, though now abridged to "Oregan." Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Rocky Mountains: Exploring the West from Monticello*. (Norman, OK, 2002), pp. 91, 93. Hereafter cited as Jackson, *Jefferson*. William Clark so reflected the indeterminacy of the western rivers as found in Jefferson's instructions that he once referred to himself in correspondence as "Capt. on the Missouri Expedition." Jackson, *Letters,* 1:208

[6] J. Neilson Barry, "Columbia River Exploration, 1792," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 33:1 (March, 1932) pp., 31, 36, 40; 33:2 (June, 1932) p. 145, 154. Hereafter cited as Barry, "Columbia River Exploration." Jackson, *Letters*, 1:46, 47 n.1, 48 n.2; 53; *JLCE*, 1:5, map 2; 5: 198 n.2.

[7] *JLCE*, 1: map 2. For a capsule biography of Mackenzie see William H. Goetzmann, *New Lands, New Men: America and the Second Great Age of Discovery*, (New York, 1986), pp. 101-103. Hereafter cited as Goetzmann, *New Lands*; Frederic W. Howay, ed., *Voyages of the Columbia to the Northwest Coast, 1787-1790 and 1790-1793* (Portland, OR: 1990), p. x. Hereafter cited as Howay, *Voyages of the Columbia*. W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Voyage of George Vancouver, 1791-1794,* vol. 1 (London, 1984) pp. 111, 117, 188, 201, 206, 229, 242. Hereafter cited as Lamb, *Vancouver*.

[8] W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (London, 1970) , pp. 455-56, 455 n. 6. Hereafter cited as Lamb, *Mackenzie Journals*. Allen, *Lewis and Clark*, pp. 70, 74-83. Barry Gough, *First Across the Continent: Sir Alexander Mackenzie*, (Norman, 1997), pp. 134-138. Hereafter cited as Gough, *Mackenzie*. Jefferson ordered his own copy of Voyages in June 1802, and probably read it that summer. Donald Jackson, "Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, and the Reduction of the United States Army," in Ronda, ed., *Voyages*, pp. 64, 70 n. 9. Hereafter cited as Jackson, "United States Army." Jackson also surmises that Jefferson might have purchased a copy of Mackenzie's *Voyages* for Lewis's use in the field. Jackson, *Letters*, 1:56n. Although Mackenzie denominated his southward flowing river "Tacoutche Tesse" or Columbia in his narrative, neither Arrowsmith's map of North America in 1802 (the last map of his published before Lewis and Clark ventured off) nor King in 1803 used the term "Columbia" on their maps. Arrowsmith, with King later emulating him, used "River Oregan" but only in juxtaposition to the lowest extent mapped with certainty by Broughton. Mackenzie would have had a compelling imperial reason to conclude his Tacoutche Tesse was the Columbia, because it countered Gray. King, working for the United States, had an equal and opposite reason for emphasizing the term "Columbia." Inexplicably, he let the British terms stand. Furthermore, Arrowsmith very subtly in his 1802 map hedged his bets by prominently placing the words "Great Fork" and "Principal Branch" at the headwaters of the Tacoutche Tesse, something Mackenzie did not do on his prototype manuscript and published maps. In divining the terms "Great Fork" and "Principal Branch" for the Tacoutche Tesse, Arrowsmith would have drawn on Mackenzie's narrative for these references. The Nor'wester's account of travel uses

these terms periodically to refer to several headwaters streams—James and Herrick Creek, affluents to the McGregor River, and it in turn to the Fraser—but never to refer to the entire north fork of the "Columbia River." However, Arrowsmith (whether in league with Mackenzie or not) may have had British commercial objectives in mind while doing his engraving. Through cartographic suggestion, he could help stay Robert Gray's hand and the imputed American claim to the great river derived from his crossing the bar at the river's mouth, should Gray's "Columbia" and Mackenzie's "Tacoutche Tesse" prove to be the same river. See maps relevant to this discussion in Derek Hayes, *First Crossing: Alexander Mackenzie, His Expedition across North America, and the Opening of the Continent* (Seattle, 2001) pp. 198, 234, 250, 264, 279. Hereafter cited as Hayes, *First Crossing*. King's map is at *JLCE*, 1: map 2. Also see Beckham, *Literature*, pp. 56-57 on the Mackenzie-Arrowsmith-King connection.

[9] Allen, *Lewis and Clark*, pp. 102-103.

[10] Lamb, V*ancouver, 1791-1794*, vol. 1, p. 112; vol. 2, pp. 757-760.

[11] Jackson, *Jefferson*, p. 94; Jackson, *Letters*, 1: 16n; 47n; 246-47.

[12] Jackson, *Letters*, 1: 109, 111.

[13] Ibid., 1:112; 2: 760 n. Allen, *Lewis and Clark*, pp. 133, 176.

[14] An edited version of Biddle is constituted as Eliott Coues, *History of the Expedition Under the Command of Lewis and Clark* (New York, 1893) vol. 1, page 226. Hereafter cited as Coues, *History*. *JLCE*, 3:310, 362; Jackson, *Letters*, 1:230.

[15] *JLCE,* 3:368.

[16] *JLCE*, 3:368; Allen, *Lewis and Clark*, pp. 247-248.

[17] John C. Ewers, "Plains Indian Reactions to the Lewis and Clark Expedition," in Ronda, ed., *Voyages*, pp. 175-76, 189. For William Clark's interpretation of Sacagawea's perspective on how the Shoshone were force into the mountains by raiders from the eastern plains see *JLCE*, 8: 180, 182.

[18] Allen, *Lewis and Clark*, p. 249; Brian Hall, *I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company: A Novel of Lewis and Clark* (New York 2003), p. 237. Hereafter cited as Hall, *Extremely Happy*. Raymond W. Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818* (Norman, OK: 1985), pp. 238-39. *JLCE*, 3: 241; 8: 298. Gary Moulton has written that the Medicine River route "was the one the Hidatsa had told them of at Fort Mandan which [Lewis and Clark] missed on their westward journey," with the implication that this was the corridor that had been advised. *JLCE*, 8: 96 n.7. However, to be sustained this view requires the Hidatsa to have fully absorbed Lewis and Clark's purposes as defined by Jefferson's instructions—"the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce"-–a questionable proposition. Jackson, *Letters*, 1:61.

[19] *JLCE*, 3:368; 7: 242.

[20] *JLCE*, 3: 368; 4:13 n. 11. For similar references to the Nez Perces see Ibid., 5: 220-21, 242.

[21] *JLCE*, 3:368; Allen, *Lewis and Clark*, p. 223.

[22] *JLCE*, 3: 368-369; 5: 192.

[23] *JLCE*, 3: 258, 265, 268-269, 276, 298, 303, 308 369, 374; Coues, *History*, 1: 221n.

[24] Jackson, *Letters*, 1:225

[25] *JLCE*, 3: 374. Clark's Fort Mandan map was sent to Jefferson along with a host of plant and animal specimens that had been collected on the trip up the Missouri. Lewis prefaced its arrival by saying it "will give you the idea we entertain of the connection of these rivers, which has been formed from the corresponding testimony of a number of Indians who have visited the country, and . . . we therefore think it entitled to some degree of confidence." Several versions of this map were copied from the Clark manuscript by Nicholas King over the ensuing few years, but the original is no longer extant. On Clark's map from Fort Mandan, as adapted serially by King, the "Oregan" of King's 1803 map has now become the Columbia, and its previous east/southeasterly branch, became one that ran strictly south to north, as per Lewis's letter to his mother from Fort Mandan. The name of the northerly fork was foreshortened to "Tacoutche River" and King seems to have given its course a second line indicating greater width than the southern branch; both having been designated by dotted lines in the 1803 version. The basis for King having done so is a mystery, because there is nothing in the documentary record to suggest Lewis or Clark conveyed such an insight, nor could they have done so until Lewis reached Washington, DC on December 28, 1806. Indeed, as stated above, Lewis probably thought the southern branch was larger. King's choice may reflect the priority of designation via Mackenzie for the Tacoutche Tesse or a function of Arrowsmith's manipulative notation about "Principal Branch." The earliest of King's adapted maps from Clark's Fort Mandan source map is dated 1805, though there is no clear reference to Clark's work being in Jefferson's hand until January 1806. Moulton suggests that both the Fort Mandan map depicting the Missouri-Columbia interface as well as segment maps of the Missouri were in Jefferson's hands by July 1805 but the

letter presumed to carry that notion (Jefferson to Henry Dearborn) is inconclusive on this point. As Elliott Coues noted, Jefferson did not forward Clark's map to Congress until February 19, 1806, and if he had it appreciably earlier than that time one imagines that the President would have shared its contents on a more timely basis. Donald Jackson was of the view that King's version of Clark's 1805 Fort Mandan map was prepared in 1806. In any event, King's cartography on the size of the northern branch was conjectural, as Lewis's informants had no information beyond the base of the mountains footing the southern branch. *JLCE*, 1: 8-9; 18 n. 85; Maps 2, 32a, 32b, 32c. Jackson, *Letters,* 1: 233, 237 n. 5, 252, 290; Coues, *History*, 1:221n.

[26] Jackson, *Letters*, 1: 233.

[27] *JLCE*, 4: 71, 198; Allen, *Lewis and Clark*, pp. 262-263.

[28] *JLCE*, 4:246, 271.

[29] *JLCE*, 11: 186.

[30] *JLCE*, 4: 299, 437; 9:190; 11:243. Moulton's annotation that Ordway "uses the term 'Columbian River' very broadly in the next few weeks" exemplifies one of the pitfalls of documentary editing wherein normative understandings brought about by subsequent experience and knowledge subtly vitiate our understanding of what these explorers believed to be the case in "real time." Ibid., 9: 191 n.3.

[31] *JLCE,* 5: 59, 65; Allen, *Lewis and Clark*, p. 291, n.15.

2006, David L. Nicandri