Rivers of Conjecture: The Hudson's Bay Company and the Exploration of the Far Northwest 1823-1851

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RIVERS OF CONJECTURE:
THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY AND THE
EXPLORATION OF THE FAR NORTHEAST, 1823 - 1851

by

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B.A. State University College at Potsdam, New York, 1975
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Department of Geography
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Unbridled imagination roamed the *terra incognita* of the Far Northwest in the early nineteenth century. Several geographic misconceptions, including the Northwest Passage, influenced the exploration strategies employed by the HBC fur traders as they attempted to penetrate the unknown country of northwestern Canada and eastern Alaska. During this period, British map-makers and geographical thinkers were given free rein to advance various hypotheses concerning the disposition of the waterways and mountain ranges west of the Mackenzie River. But ideas about the geography of this rugged landscape were grounded in speculation and wishful thinking. It was left to intrepid HBC explorers such as John McLeod, Samuel Black, John Bell, and Robert Campbell to put those fanciful ideas to the test.

The desire to find a water route across the continent to the Pacific was one of the most powerful geographical ideas of all time. Conditioned by the apocryphal lore surrounding the myth, George Simpson launched a series of explorations between 1823 and 1851 to locate a water communication to the western sea that would facilitate the expansion of trading operations. Ghostly images of the Colville and Cook’s rivers continued to haunt the region’s maps until 1852. Determining the whereabouts of these highly conjectural rivers directed Simpson’s geographical investigations into the uncharted terrain of the Mackenzie Mountains.

The Company’s early voyages of discovery unsuccessfully attempted to cross the heart of the Mackenzies. After that, Simpson concentrated exploratory efforts first along the range’s southern flanks, and then later, about the northernmost reaches. What the traders ultimately found was the fourth largest river in North America – the Yukon. And in the process, the last remaining blank space on the map of North America was filled in. The cumulative effect of the HBC explorations can be seen on John Arrowsmith’s 1854 masterpiece titled “Map of British North America.” For the first time, Arrowsmith was able to portray accurately the geography of northwestern Canada and eastern Alaska. Indeed, the adventures of McLeod, Black, Bell, and Campbell were responsible for unraveling the geographical puzzle of the Far Northwest.
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Tradition has it that the three voyages of Captain James Cook between 1768 and 1779 represented a proverbial testing of the theoretical waters. Influenced heavily by a potent mixture of myth and reality, geographical thinkers of the day asserted the following: (1) that a great, unknown continent lay in the vast reaches of the southern Pacific Ocean; (2) that the western entrance to the Northwest Passage was located somewhere along the rocky coastline of northwestern North America; and (3) that an ice free polar sea would permit easy navigation between the Pacific and the Atlantic. It was left to Cook and his crew to test those waters; and, as the Captain demonstrated, on all three counts the armchair theorists were wrong.

Nonetheless, Cook was instrumental in accelerating the exploratory process that ultimately revealed the true nature of the Pacific basin to the Atlantic maritime nations competing in trade for access to the riches of the Orient. It is an interesting coincidence for this writer that I am scribbling these words on the two-hundred-and-twenty year anniversary, to the day, of the Captain’s encounter with the inlet that today bears his name — a discovery on 27 May, 1778 that notably influenced the events with which this work is
concerned.

More intriguing for me, however, is to know Cook’s thoughts. Which books did he read? What maps did he study? With whom did the Captain talk or correspond? Did Cook believe that he would actually find the fabled southern continent and passage, or return home through an open Arctic Ocean? During the course of a voyage, as each new sighting either confirmed or refuted the Captain’s preconceived geography, where and when did he modify his ideas and develop new strategies to attain the expedition’s goals? And after the completion of each journey, how did the reports of the strange lands and peoples that Cook encountered affect those who followed in his wake?

For far too long, geographers and historians who study exploration have been content to simply tell the “story” of only the most notable journeys. Dramatic events, heroic deeds, personal hardships, and tragedies typically characterize these largely anecdotal accounts of the explorers and their voyages of discovery. Even when the chronicler goes beyond a mere description of occurrences, the analysis tends to focus upon social, economic, or political factors in determining the historical significance of each expedition.

This narrative approach to exploration research, however, rarely considers the geographical knowledge available to the explorers, and thus, ignores a crucial element of the exploratory process. After all, what is known and unknown, or thought to be known, about the nature of the lands to be investigated played an important part in launching the expedition in the first place.

As the journey progresses, routes of travel and courses of action are largely dictated
by the accuracy of the geographical intelligence possessed by the members of the expedition party. The explorers' ability to reconcile their biased geographical conceptions with any incongruous findings in the landscape that confronted them along the way usually determined whether or not the exploration accomplished its objectives. Finally, the geographic observations obtained from the voyage often guided where subsequent ventures, if any, were to be directed.

And that is exactly what this study intends to do; that is, this work will investigate the relationship between geographical lore and the process of exploration as conducted by the Hudson's Bay Company from 1823 to 1851 in the Far Northwest. During the first half of the nineteenth century, several geographic misconceptions, including the conjecture surrounding the Northwest Passage, governed the exploration strategies employed by the Company fur traders as they attempted to penetrate the unknown country of northwestern Canada and eastern Alaska. Rather than providing a straightforward account of the daring exploits of the fur trade explorers and their Indian guides in search of beaver and profit, this investigation will endeavor to demonstrate the link between geographical theory and exploratory practice.

In doing so, I have depended largely upon the original maps, journals, correspondences, and documents of the Hudson's Bay Company personnel actively engaged in locating a trade route to the Pacific. The enormous wealth of fur trade and Northwest Passage literature by both modern and ancient authorities has contributed to this effort as well. Complementing these geographical and historical sources is the firsthand knowledge and experience gained from the hundreds of miles that I have canoed
and hiked within the Yukon and MacKenzie watersheds over the past twenty years.

It is hoped that the results of this project will show how the search for furs and the passage by the Hudson’s Bay Company mapped the unknown country of the Far Northwest and put an end to one of the most powerful myths to ever exist. Furthermore, the outcome should give insight into the connection between the desire to comprehend the world and the evolution of geographical images, part real, part illusion, and into something even more basic: ourselves.

Neither this work nor the research it describes would have been possible without the help of numerous people. My original and greatest intellectual debt goes to Jeffrey A. Gritzner. It was a privilege to be associated with him, his learning and high standards, and the scholarly tradition which he exemplifies. I am particularly obliged to John L. Allen and Theodore J. Karamanski for their inspiration and help. I also want to thank H. Duane Hampton and Paul B. Wilson for their support and cooperation.

No account of my debts would be complete without recognizing the people at the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives whose congenial assistance always made my work there efficient and pleasant. Judith Hudson Beattie, Tammy Hannibal-Paci, M. Chris Kotecki, and Marie Reidke were especially generous with their time and expertise during my sojourns in Winnipeg.

To Mary O’Brien goes my sincere appreciation for her patience and good cheer while handling the word-processing and editing tasks.

And a very special thanks to my wife, Sherry Jones, whose sound counsel, encouragement, and love helped transform this work from fancy to reality.
INTRODUCTION

EXPEDICION for Hudsons Bay in the North west part of America for the discovery of a new Passage into the South Sea and for the finding some Trade for Furrs Mineralls and other considerable Commodityes. . .

Royal Charter of the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1670

No sooner than when North America was disclosed to be a new continent, did early sixteenth century Europeans begin to search for a way around, then through, and finally across the barrier that prevented a westward oceanic crossing to the Far East. These attempts gave rise to one of the most seductive and enduring geographical ideas of all time – the Northwest Passage.

But why were daring adventurers such as Christopher Columbus so intent upon attaining Asia and thereby ignoring the new lands beginning to unfold before their very eyes? If a single event or person could be identified as responsible, then the return of Marco Polo from Cathay (China) in 1295 heralded the beginning of the European desire

to reach the Far East.²

The wondrous stories of Polo’s seventeen years in China became well known to the West shortly after his return to Venice with the publication of his “Travels” which was quickly translated into several European languages. His descriptive reports of the spices, silks, and rare jewels of Cathay and India made real the potential wealth of the mysterious Oriental treasures that awaited those brave enough to try for them.

Marco Polo’s firsthand account included detailed narratives of the places he had been, as well as hearsay reports about unseen lands and thousands of unknown islands including Cipangu (Japan), of which he declared:

²Overland trade routes across central Asia had provided Westerners for centuries with tales of exotic riches from the Far East. A small number of privileged or lucky individuals had the good fortune to taste the spices or wear the silks and rare jewels that served to intensify the wish for more. However, these luxuries were generally not obtained directly from India and China. Muslim traders on the eastern Mediterranean coast served as middlemen and prevented Western merchants from traveling to the Asian markets themselves.

Meanwhile a few Christian missionaries seeking the mythical Prester John managed to avoid the Islamic strongholds and reached the heart of Central Asia by the mid-thirteenth century. Their descriptive reports and dramatic meetings with the ruling khans increased the European craving for the fortune that awaited over the eastern horizon.

In the name of free enterprise – and not Christianity – the Great Khans and their Mongol hordes conquered China and a good part of Central Asia; and, in effect, removed the Muslim blockade that had kept closed the overland roads to the East. Among the first to capitalize on this new commercial opportunity were two merchants from Venice, Nicolò and Maffeo Polo, who traveled to China and made contact with the Great Khan between 1260 and 1269.

The two brothers were well received by the Mongol emperor, and, in 1275, returned to China. On this visit, Maffeo brought along his teenage son, Marco, who eventually served as the ruler’s ambassador and, in this capacity, journeyed widely throughout the Khan’s domain.
"Its inhabitants have fair complexions, are well made, and are civilized in their manners. . . . They have gold in the greatest abundance, its sources being inexhaustible, but as the king does not allow it being exported, few merchants visit the country . . . The extraordinary richness of the sovereign's palace according to what we are told by those who have access to the place, is a wonderful sight. The entire roof is covered with a plating of gold. . . . The ceilings of the halls are of the same precious metal; many of the apartments have small tables of pure gold, of considerable thickness; and the windows also have golden ornaments. So vast, indeed, are the riches of the palace, that it is impossible to convey an idea of them.”

Much of what the West would come to know about – and want from – the East was learned from Polo’s astonishing story. When the Mongol Empire fell in the mid-fourteenth century, the overland routes to India and China became closed to the merchants of Christian Europe as an Islamic trade barrier was put into effect across Central Asia and the eastern Mediterranean coast. And thus, the need for a sea route leading to the riches of Cathay, Cipangu, and India began to exert great authority on the European imagination.

The desire to find a water route across North America figured prominently in the exploration of the continent, inspiring voyages of discovery from Sebastian Cabot and Giovanni da Verrazzano to Lewis and Clark and Sir John Franklin. First conceived as a sea-level waterway to the fortune located across the Pacific, the nature and purpose of the Northwest Passage changed over a period of more than three hundred years. The Strait of Anian, an inland sea, and a great western river all proved to be will-o’-the-wisps that eluded Spanish, French, and English explorers from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century.

centuries. In its final form, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the search for the passage involved the commercial exploitation of the fur trade and a trade link to the Orient.

The Hudson’s Bay Company, irresistibly lured by the conjecture linked to the passage myth, launched a series of explorations into the Far Northwest between 1823 and 1851 to search for a river leading to the sea that would facilitate the expansion of fur trading operations. Dwindling fur returns in the well-established trapping districts, and increased competition from Russian traders on the West Coast encouraged the Company to search for this rumored watercourse in the unknown country of today’s northwestern Canada and eastern Alaska. Of course, this was the only place left to look. Unsuccessful attempts to discover a practical communication through the mountains to the sea by Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser had eliminated the region farther south. During this time period, British map-makers and geographical thinkers advanced various hypotheses concerning the disposition of the waterways and mountain ranges of northwestern North America. But ideas about the geography of this rugged landscape were grounded largely in speculation and wishful thinking. A small number of travelers’ accounts prompted cartographers to develop whimsical notions about the remote and unexplored lands of the Far Northwest.

It was left to intrepid Hudson’s Bay Company traders such as John McLeod, Samuel Black, John Bell, and Robert Campbell to put those ideas to the test. Attempts to chart the unfamiliar territory often forced the explorers to discard what they had read or been told in order to make sense of what they found in the field. Paramount was the ability to
modify existing geographical beliefs based upon information acquired during the course of the journey.

Failure to do so usually guaranteed that the objectives of the expedition were not reached. Frequently the explorations were exercises in negative discovery that pointed the direction for future reconnaissance. Sometimes the voyagers produced maps of pure geographical fiction.

Slowly but surely, mile by mile, probe by probe, the Far Northwest became known to the Hudson’s Bay Company. And in the process, the last remaining blank space on the map of North America was filled in.
CHAPTER 1

TERRA INCognita

...what a field to feed the imagination, what a number of ideas rushes in at once, to call for the means to investigate a country so interesting.

Edward Smith, March 1825

For those with vivid imaginations, it is not difficult to picture Chief Trader Edward Smith of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) recording his thoughts in the post journal during the lingering deep chill of a northern winter. Dim lamp light reveals the huddled figure pausing to place the bottle of ink under his coat to thaw. A wispy trail of frozen breath betrays the bitter cold. He winces at its subarctic sharpness.

When he is finished with the daily log, Smith slowly gets up to stretch his aching back. Needing some fresh air, he stumbles over to the door of the smoke-filled room. It

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1Smith to Governor and the Committee, 1823 -1827, B.200/e/6 fo.4, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Hereafter this collection will be referred to as HBCA. All quotations are transcribed exactly from the document cited. Original grammatical and spelling errors are reproduced verbatim.
requires both hands and much of his weight to break open the seal of hoarfrost and wind-blown snow. As Smith gazes upon the icy black landscape, perhaps the fire of his imagination brings a feeling of warmth and a slight smile to his face.

While Edward Smith’s fanciful designs for the coming summer’s adventures seemed unlimited and full of promise, the demanding and unforgiving terrain of the Far Northwest proved to be much more severe than he imagined. Seemingly endless stretches of rugged mountains and hazardous rivers wrecked the best laid plans, and offered few routes across the unknown territory. Efforts to “investigate a country so interesting” involved separating the usually harsh reality of exploration from the sense of hope and conjecture.2

The “mind’s eye” has guided geographical curiosity since the first time someone wondered what was beyond the distant horizon. That first time represented the initial attempt to understand our world through the process of exploration. Fundamental to any search for geographical knowledge is how the terrae incognitae – or unknown lands – are imagined. As the eminent geographer John Kirkland Wright (1946) observed, “. . . the unknown stimulates the imagination to conjure up mental images of what to look for within it, and the more that is found, the more the imagination suggests for further search.”3

__________________________

2Foremost among scholars that study the connection between geographical images and the exploratory process is John Logan Allen. His classic, Passage through the Garden, has inspired and contributed immensely to this effort.

Put another way, the human imagination is a critical element of the exploratory process. Indeed, it is likely that the earliest migrations to North America via the land bridge were in response to northeastern Asians dreaming about the new hunting territories that lay ahead.

Writing at the beginning of the Christian era, the Greek geographical thinker Strabo noted, "wherever we have not been able to learn by the evidence of our senses, there reason points the way." This reliance upon knowledge and deduction was intrinsic to the Greek way of thinking. Based on concepts of symmetry and perfection, the earth's shape was determined to be round. Since the most symmetrical shape is a sphere, and the world was created in perfect form, the Greeks reasoned that the earth must be spherical. Both Pythagoras and Plato held this view.5

However, not everything reasoned or imagined is necessarily accurate. It was not until the fourth century B.C. that the Greek approach to learning about the natural environment began to change. Largely responsible for this new method was Aristotle, who also believed that the earth was a sphere. However, he sought evidence — based on observations — to support the theory.6 Noting the increase in the height of stars above the horizon as one travels north and the circular shape of the earth's shadow on the moon during an eclipse, Aristotle slowly built the case for a round world based upon something


6Martin and James, *All Possible Worlds*, 27.
more than just ideas.

Going even further, it was left to a new breed of explorer to go out and seek answers to questions that could not be solved by limited observations or reason alone. The daring voyage of Pytheas beyond the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar) was among the earliest attempts to extend the Greek view of the world beyond the Mediterranean region. Seeking knowledge for its own sake, Pytheas outfitted a ship and crew at his own expense, and sailed into the open Atlantic sometime between 330 and 300 B.C. After exploring the coast of France and the Scilly Islands off Great Britain, Pytheas continued northward until his progress was eventually halted by the frozen ocean. Foreshadowing the inception of the Northwest Passage myth was Pytheas' report of the strong, river-like forces he encountered while at sea. These tidal motions were new to the sailors whose

\[ \text{7 Some scholars suspect Pytheas' motives were less noble and that he was spying on the Phoenicians as part of the trade rivalry over tin and amber. For that matter, others consider the voyage of Pytheas to be largely apocryphal. Thought too strange to be true by most of his contemporaries, Pytheas' discoveries were, at first, summarily dismissed. Eventually, however, his report worked its way into the prevailing geographical lore and more significantly, about 200 B.C., onto a map made by Eratosthenes. Considered by many to be the “father of geography” or the “founder of scientific geographical study,” Eratosthenes placed prominently near the top of his world map an island called Thule, which represented the northernmost land reached by Pytheas during his voyage. Although most modern researchers accept Pytheas’ account today, prominent among the early doubters was Strabo, who would disagree with Eratosthenes on more than one occasion (see note 11).} \]

\[ \text{8 The general circulation of the earth’s waters was problematic for the Greek thinkers, and as a result, many fanciful theories were advanced to explain their movements. For instance, Aristotle had rather simply reasoned that sea water must flow from the “higher” regions of the north to the “lower” areas in the south. In fact, his death was believed by some to have been caused by the frustration that Aristotle experienced by his inability to logically account for the fluctuation of currents at the mouths of rivers that entered the Aegean Sea.} \]
previous experience was restricted to the Mediterranean basin were the ebb and flow of the tides were too small to notice.\textsuperscript{9} By putting theory into practice, Pytheas showed what first-hand observation could accomplish and pointed the way for those bold enough to follow. Demonstrating the scientific nature of his journey, Pytheas was the first Greek to observe the tides and connect them to the phases of the moon.\textsuperscript{10} But he did even more. Pytheas singlehandedly removed a small part of conjecture from the map of antiquity.

For Strabo, some 300 years later, the interplay between observation and reason became a major theme in his work. Representing one of the earliest efforts to compile all of the geographical lore known at the time, Strabo’s \textit{Geography} recognized the importance of accuracy in geographic information by identifying knowledge gained from first-hand observation and knowledge obtained through deduction.\textsuperscript{11} “Whether a proposition comes . . . within the range of sense-perception or of intuitive knowledge,”\textsuperscript{12} Strabo emphasized, “. . . the person who attempts to write an account of the countries of

\textsuperscript{9}Martin and James, \textit{All Possible Worlds}, 30.


\textsuperscript{11}Much of what we know about classical geography can be credited to Strabo. Although most ancient texts disappeared over time, his \textit{magnum opus} survived to be “discovered” by scholars during the Middle Ages. It is interesting that Strabo rejected the reasonably accurate calculation of the earth’s circumference by Eratosthenes which, in turn, influenced Ptolemy to grossly underestimate the true size of the world. This miscalculation was used, in part, by Christopher Columbus to advance his plan for attaining the riches of the Indias. He reasoned that not only was the East closer than anyone thought, but Columbus knew it would be possible to sail from Spain to the Indies along the same parallel of latitude – another idea found in Strabo’s \textit{Geography}.

\textsuperscript{12}Strabo, \textit{Geography}, 41.
the earth must take many of the physical and mathematical principles as hypotheses and elaborate his whole treatise with reference to their intent and authority."

By comprehending the roles that imagination and experience play in how we learn about the world, Strabo anticipated by more than 1,900 years John Kirkland Wright's formalization of the concept known today as geosophy, or the study of geographical images. Introduced as a new sub-field of geography in 1946, geosophy is, as Wright said “the study of geographical knowledge from any or all points of view . . . both past and present . . . both true and false, of all manner of people . . . and for this reason it necessarily has to do in large degree with subjective conceptions.” Perhaps prompting Wright's overture was his associate, Ralph Brown (1943) who wrote, “men at all times have been influenced quite as much by beliefs as facts.”

Like Strabo, Wright completed his own geosophical treatise, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades*, in which he examined the relationship between the creation of geographical patterns and the accuracy of knowledge during the Middle Ages.

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13 Strabo, *Geography*, 419.


17 Wright, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades: A Study in the History of Medieval Science and Tradition in Western Europe* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1925). This monumental work represents the most comprehensive survey and compilation of geographical knowledge available in Europe during the Middle
Wright’s urging inspired research in perceptual geography that continues to this day. In “Geography, Experience, and Imagination,” David Lowenthal (1961) stressed a psychological and behavioral approach in the subjective analysis of geographic thought. “Every image and idea about the world,” as Lowenthal puts it, “is compounded then, of personal experience, learning, imagination, and memory.”

Preston James (1967) in “On the Origin and Persistence of Error in Geography,” accounts for mistakes in geographical analysis by differentiating “percepts” of observations based on experience from “concepts” or mental images derived through reasoning. Yi-Fu Tuan, in 1976, repeated Wright’s proposal for research in subjective geography with the publication of “Humanistic Geography.”

Inevitably this line of geographical inquiry found its way into exploration theory. Prominent among researchers focusing upon the subjective nature of exploration was John Logan Allen, who, in 1975, studied the formation of geographical images before, during, and as a result of the Lewis and Clark expedition. On the quincentennial of the first voyage of Columbus (1992), Allen used imagination and experience as the

Ages and represents one of the earliest geosophical studies in modern geography.

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theoretical groundwork from which he evaluated the early European attempts to discover
the Northwest Passage.\textsuperscript{22} Also notable were J. Wreford Watson’s (1969) analysis of the
role of illusion in North American settlement,\textsuperscript{23} and Richard Ruggles’ (1988)
examination of Canadian map images as developed through exploratory activities.\textsuperscript{24} In
his brilliant model for a theory of exploration, J.D. Overton (1981) incorporated both
conceptual and perceptual filters as key components of the exploratory process.\textsuperscript{25} Finally,
1997 marked the publication of \textit{North American Exploration}, a seminal three volume
work which “emphasizes the role of the human imagination in exploration as much as it
features observations and experience.”\textsuperscript{26}

All of these scholars were preempted – just as Wright was – by Strabo when he
reported:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Allen, “From Cabot to Cartier: The Early Exploration of Eastern North
  \item \textsuperscript{23} J. Wreford Watson, “The Role of Illusion in North American Geography: A
    Note on the Geography of North American Settlement,” \textit{Canadian Geographer} 13
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Richard I. Ruggles, “Beyond the ‘Furious Over Fall’: Map Images of Rupert’s
    Land and the Northwest,” in Richard C. Davis, ed. \textit{Rupert’s Land: A Cultural Tapestry}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} J.D. Overton, “A Theory of Exploration,” \textit{Journal of Historical Geography} 7
  \item \textsuperscript{26} John L. Allen, ed., \textit{North American Exploration}, 3 vols. (Lincoln: University of
    Nebraska Press, 1997), vol. 1,6.
\end{itemize}
... while the senses perceive only the parts, the mind forms a concept of the whole from what the senses have perceived. And men who are eager to learn proceed in just that way: they trust as organs of sense those who have seen or wandered over any region ... and they form in one diagram their mental image of the whole inhabited world. 27

It is logical, then, to assume that concepts are formed, in part, by our perceptions of the environment, which vary from individual to individual. Accordingly, observations can be heavily influenced by an individual’s preconceived ideas. And therein lies the problem.

So it was for Peter Martyr (Pietro Martire d’Anghiera), an early sixteenth century Italian historian, geographical theorist, and the presiding official of the cathedral in Granada. From this advantageous vantage point in Spain, Martyr learned of the new discoveries being made across the ocean which he faithfully chronicled while attending to his administrative duties for the church. One of the more interesting stories that Martyr heard came from fellow countryman Sebastian Cabot, an adventurer whom he befriended when Cabot entered the service of Spain. Sebastian had inherited his father’s dream to reach Cipangu (Japan), where John Cabot believed “all spices of the world have their origin as well as the jewels.”28 Adhering to the elder Cabot’s more northerly route than those favored by the Spanish, Sebastian possibly cruised the Atlantic coastline of North

27 Strabo, Geography, 453.

America from Hudson’s Strait to the Caribbean between 1508 and 1509.\textsuperscript{29}

After hearing Cabot’s account of his voyage in the western Atlantic, Martyr reported in 1516: “Therefore it is not only probable but necessary to conclude that between these two lands hitherto unknown [North and South America] lie great straits which provide a passage for the waters flowing from east to west, which I judge to be drawn round by the attraction of the heavens in their rotation round the earth. . . .”\textsuperscript{30}

Martyr reached this conclusion based upon Cabot’s description about “the same flow of waters to the west, although mild in force, as the Spaniards find in their passage to their southern possessions.”\textsuperscript{31} Through the efforts of Christopher Columbus, the Spanish were already aware of the west running Caribbean Current along the southern shore of Cuba and the eastern coastlines of Central America and northern South America.\textsuperscript{32} The

\textsuperscript{29}John Cabot rediscovered North America in 1497, making the first recorded European landfall on the Newfoundland coast since the Norse discovery at least 500 years earlier. On the other hand, some scholars doubt if Sebastian Cabot’s expedition even occurred. “It may never be known,” observes David B. Quinn, “whether the voyage of Sebastian Cabot as set down in Peter Martyr’s chronicles ever took place. In the final analysis, perhaps, it makes little difference, for the geographical knowledge of this possibly apocryphal voyage became an important feature of maps of North America from the early 1500s onward.” Quinn, “The Northwest Passage in Theory and Practice,” in Allen, \textit{North American Exploration}, vol. I, 299. For a full account of the Cabots’ voyages with supporting documents, see Williamson, \textit{Cabot Voyages}; for Peter Martyr’s chronicles including Sebastian Cabot’s account, see Edward Arber, ed., \textit{The first Three English books on America, 1511-1555} (New York: Krause Reprint Company, 1971).

\textsuperscript{30}Williamson, \textit{Cabot Voyages}, 267. For a slightly different translation see Arber, \textit{English books}, 288

\textsuperscript{31}Williamson, \textit{Cabot Voyages}, 267.

\textsuperscript{32}Failing in his first two attempts to reach the Orient and discovering only the islands of the West Indies instead, Columbus encountered South America on the third venture in 1498 and coasted down a good portion of Central America during his fourth
westward flowing waters easily matched Martyr’s predisposed image on how the New World should be positioned with respect to the Old.\(^{33}\)

All in all, it is reasonable to say that sometime between the voyages of Christopher Columbus and Sebastian Cabot, as Europe first came to know the New World, began the desire to find a water channel through the American terra incognita to the Far East. Thus, handcrafted from a liberal portion of myth, and just a little bit of reality, the all-too-human concept of the Northwest Passage was born.\(^{34}\)

History is fraught with those who saw only what they were prepared to see. Columbus was so “locked in” to his own geographical image which did not anticipate a new continent between Europe and Asia that he died believing he had reached the Orient and final voyage between 1502 and 1504. The literature concerning Columbus is both rich and varied; however, for a short and up-to-date account, see Robert H. Fuson, “The Columbian Voyages,” in Allen, ed., *North American Exploration*, vol. I, 127-188.

\(^{33}\)The European encounter with the shores of North and South America made real for Martyr and many others an old view of the world first advanced during the second century B.C. by the Greek Stoic, Crates of Milos. In short, Cratesian theory imagined the earth to consist of four major land masses separated by two linear oceanic belts that were oriented in perpendicular fashion to one another which permitted the circulation of the seas through long and narrow passages between the continents. Emphasizing the Greek ideals of symmetry and logic, Peter Martyr experienced little difficulty fitting the sparse observations made by explorers of the new continents into his own conceptual geography derived from the past. For more on Martyr’s reasoning, see John L. Allen, “The Indrawing Sea: Imagination and Experience in the Search for the Northwest Passage, 1497 - 1632,” in Baker et al, eds., *American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture, and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1994), 10-16. For Cratesian theory, see Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, vol. I, 78-79; J. Oliver Thomson, *History of Ancient Geography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 202-203, 383; and Wright, *Geographical Lore*, 18-19, 158-159.

\(^{34}\)The Northwest Passage lore is extensive: perhaps the most comprehensive work is contained in the three volumes of *North American Exploration*. In particular, see Quinn, “The Northwest Passage in Theory and Practice,” vol. I, 292-343.
rather than North America. And Martyr's steadfast beliefs never considered prevailing geographic theory to be wrong, or by extension, the New World to be an uninterrupted coastline stretching from Hudson's Strait to the Strait of Magellan. Likewise, so strong was Giovanni da Verrazzano's mental image of the Northwest Passage, that he reported nearly finding it. While in service of France (1524), the Italian navigator looked across the long, thin barrier islands of North Carolina's Outer Banks, and failing to see the mainland beyond, mistakenly identified Pamlico Sound as the Pacific Ocean. Verrazzano concluded that it would be no great difficulty to locate a passage through this slim strip of sand. This sort of geographical "leap in faith" would occur time after time throughout the exploration of North America.

It is exactly in this manner that conceptions — which often may be illusory — can affect the decisions made by those in charge, and therefore influence the entire exploratory process. Citing sources from Ptolemy to Marco Polo as proof that Cathay (China) was close at hand, Columbus not only reasoned that it should be no great difficulty to attain the East by sailing west; but, he deduced that the reports of nearby lands lying to the west had to be islands and peninsulas of Asia. So real were these highly rumored lands to the cartographers and theorists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, that Columbus included the fabled Isle of Antillia as part of his exploration strategy to reach the Orient.  

For Martyr, the "two lands hitherto unknown" refer to the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{35}}\text{Several — and then eventually hundreds — of mythical islands began to appear on the portolan navigation charts and the mappa mundi world maps of the late Middle Ages. For a short summary, see Fuson, "Columbian Voyages," in Allen, ed., North American Exploration, vol. I, 130-137. In fact, Columbus' failure to locate Antillia contributed, in}\]

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southern discoveries of Columbus and the explorations by the Cabots in the north. Surely, he speculated, “great straits” must exist that allow passage through these mysterious lands, thereby assuring no shortage of those eager for “gold, God, and glory” to put his ideas to the test. Meanwhile, Verrazzano’s hypothetical geography insisted that a sea level strait must lie somewhere along the Carolina coast and that a passage to Cathay was not a dream. Shortly after his return to Europe, North America appeared as two subcontinents connected by a narrow isthmus on a map drawn by his brother, Gerolamo, in 1529. The *mare orientale* (eastern sea) or Sea of Verrazzano behind the Outer Banks would confuse explorers and map makers for the next one hundred years.\(^\text{36}\)

Yet much was gained all the same. Columbus’ voyages and Martyr’s conjecture pointed the way west for those who followed. Although Verrazzano never found a water route reaching the Pacific, he significantly contributed to the geographical understanding of the North American Coast by describing the forested landscape from the Carolinas to New England and providing Europe with one of the earliest and most detailed accounts of the indigenous populations inhabiting the new lands. His brother’s map, based in part on Verrazzano’s discoveries of 1524, was the first to show an uninterrupted coastline from Florida to Nova Scotia. Furthermore, Verrazzano’s account of the New World was responsible for launching the voyages of Jacque Cartier between 1534 and 1543 which

explored the St. Lawrence River, and eventually led the way to the Great Lakes.37

“For those who attempt to merge the study of geosophy with the history of exploration,” according to John Logan Allen, “the combination of experience (the process of developing understanding through experience and the direct perception of geographic reality) and imagination (the system of developing man’s understanding of his world through the application of theoretical reasoning and creativity) has been particularly important for interpreting that process called exploration.”38 Down through the ages, theorists and explorers have recognized how observation and imagination, experience and reason combine to fashion a conceptual objective based upon the geographic lore available at the time of the expedition. After all, as John Kirkland Wright stated:

Explorers have seldom gone forth merely to probe about for whatever they may discover. They have gone in quest of definite objectives believed to exist on the basis of such information as could be gathered from the geographical lore of their own and earlier times.39

Or, as Strabo observed, “the sailor on the open sea, or the man who travels through a country, is guided by certain popular notions.”40


38Allen, “From Cabot to Cartier,” 501.


40Strabo, Geography, 421.
One of the most accepted and persistent geographical conceptions or “popular notions” – the Northwest Passage – inspired thinkers and explorers to test the *terra incognita* of their minds in the empty spaces on the maps of North America for more than three centuries. The final piece to be fitted into this great geographic puzzle, that is, the Far Northwest, was claimed by the political and commercial ambitions of Great Britain.

This territory, largely unknown in the first part of the nineteenth century, obliged cartographers to fill in the blank gaps with conjectural rivers often depicted by broken lines and oversimplified mountain ranges that rarely reflected reality. Of course, the far more difficult task of actually unraveling the map-makers’ geographical inventions about northwestern Canada and eastern Alaska was charged to those dauntless fur trade adventurers of the Hudson’s Bay Company. So, here then, of passage and desire, is their story.
CHAPTER 2

THE PASSAGE MYTH

Though my discoveries are not likely to prove any material advantage to the Nation at large, or indeed to the Hudson's Bay Company, yet I have the pleasure that I have fully complied with the orders of my Masters, and that it has put a final end to all disputes concerning a North West Passage through Hudson's Bay.

Samuel Hearne, June 1772

Not quite. Hearne could not predict the power of the imagination to see past discouraging results, to devise new ideas, and to design alternative plans to achieve them. He underestimated his "Masters'" desire to locate a water route to the western sea. In short, Hearne misjudged the myth. And he was not the first — nor the last — to do so. Samuel Hearne had simply fulfilled his part in a long legacy of exploration rooted firmly in the traditions of European geographical thought.

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2A compelling concoction of geographical ideas from ancient Greece to the Middle Ages that were well suited for testing during the Age of Discovery substantially affected the course of New World exploration, and the search for the Northwest Passage was no exception. This theme runs strong in the works by John Logan Allen; see, for
To better understand what the Hudson’s Bay Company had inherited requires going back to a voyage so long ago as to almost be forgotten. After wintering on the shores of Hudson’s Bay and setting up a bartering agreement with the local Indians, the return of the fur-laden Nonsuch to London in 1669 heralded the beginning of the Canadian fur trade.3 Shortly thereafter, in response to the excitement among the city’s merchants over the potential bonanza in furs, the King of England, Charles II, granted his cousin, Prince Rupert, and his fellow investors a royal charter for the founding of the “Governor and Company of Adventurers of England tradeing into Hudson’s Bay.” By royal decree, the Company acquired “sole Trade and Commerce” of the entire Hudson’s Bay watershed called Rupert’s Land (map 1) – an area encompassing one and a half million square miles and more than forty percent of modern Canada’s territory.4 Within a decade, the Hudson’s Bay Company began generating generous profits from the two or three supply ships that penetrated Hudson’s Strait each summer to reach its trading posts (called forts or factories) scattered along the western and southern shores of the Bay, and

example, “From Cabot to Cartier,” “The Indrawing Sea,” and Passage through the Garden.


Map 1: Rupert’s Land west of Hudson’s Bay (from Ruggles, *A Country So Interesting*, page xv).
then, managed to return to England with holds full of furs before the freeze-up of the Arctic Sea.5

Although the Hudson’s Bay Company was founded, in part, to find the Northwest Passage (epigraph, p.1), the Company of “Adventurers” was largely content to let native trappers from the interior come to the bayside posts where the Indians would exchange their beaver pelts for various manufactured items of European origin.6 This failure to explore westward soon attracted a number of critics, including one disgruntled employee, Joseph Robson, who claimed that Hudson’s Bay Company had drifted into a deep “Sleep by the Frozen Sea.”7

What finally awakened the Company of Adventurers from their sleepful complacency on the Bay was a renewed interest on the part of the British Admiralty in locating the

5Intermittent war between France and England interrupted this profitable arrangement when the Company’s inadequately defended “forts” were easily seized by French ships and overland raiding parties from Montreal. The fur traders on the Bay picked up right where they left off, however, when the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 ended hostilities and once again gave England sole possession of Hudson’s Bay.

6Two notable exceptions were the inland voyages of Henry Kelsey (1690 - 1692) and William Stuart (1715). Kelsey traveled in a southwestern direction from the Bay’s west coast into the Canadian prairies. Even more remarkable than Kelsey’s exploratory feat is that the Company apparently ignored his discoveries and no record of Kelsey’s journey appeared on any HBC map of the time. Stuart followed a westerly course from the west side of the Bay and probably reached the vicinity between Great Slave Lake and Lake Athabasca. Not only was he the first white man to venture onto the Barrens, but more importantly, Stuart returned with ten Chipewyan Indians who told the Governor, James Knight, about a country abundant in beaver and valuable metals with rivers and straits that led to the western sea. Knight’s unfortunate disappearance while in pursuit of these rumors is discussed later in this chapter.

Northwest Passage. Prompted by longtime Company detractor Arthur Dobbs, an archetypical armchair geographer and influential member of the Irish Parliament, the Royal Navy mounted its first search for a navigable route to the Pacific. Dobbs persuaded HBC shipping veteran Christopher Middleton of the existence of the Passage largely upon the hypothetical grounds that since it had not yet been found or disproved, the watercourse through the continent must lie somewhere within the reaches of Rupert’s Land.8

Undaunted by Company skeptics, Middleton led the 1742 naval expedition and methodically explored the numerous bays and inlets of the Hudson’s Bay western shoreline. Even though he sailed farther north along the Bay’s west coast than anyone before, Middleton’s failure to find the Passage was harshly belittled by Dobbs who lambasted the Captain for not looking further. Middleton’s voyage of negative discovery, however, demonstrated to most (except Dobbs) that even if the Northwest Passage did exist in strictly a “technical” sense, it was certainly too far north to be navigable, or of any practical commercial value to the Company. From then on, the Hudson’s Bay Company would largely direct its attention inland; for after all, the French were poised to attain the western sea and thereby gain a considerable advantage over the English in their trade contest for the continent.9


9 A good narrative chronicling the French and English exploration of the continental interior is contained in Burpee, *Search for the Western Sea*. For a more
Despite the fact that peace reigned over Rupert’s Land, the struggle for control of North America between England and France was far from over. The French had extended their presence up the St. Lawrence River into the Great Lakes and down the Mississippi Valley. Planted along the Atlantic seaboard from New England to Georgia, the English were beginning to move across the Appalachian Mountains, and because of the commercial ambitions of the Hudson’s Bay Company, England continued to manage its holding throughout Canada. As the French continued to establish trading posts further westward from the Great Lakes, furs which otherwise would have been bound for the Bay were intercepted by the *coureurs des bois* (independent traders) and subsequently directed down the interconnected rivers and lakes to Montreal. Simply said, this was bad for Company business.

In response, the Hudson’s Bay Company sent Anthony Henday inland from the edge of the “Frozen Sea” in 1754. Working his way up the Saskatchewan River across the Canadian prairie, Henday was probably the first European to see the northern Rocky Mountains.\(^{10}\) He also witnessed firsthand just how far the French had expanded their

\(^{10}\)Some have it that Louis-Joseph the Chevalier, the son of French trader and explorer Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vérendrye, was the first white man to reach the Rocky Mountains in 1740, but most conclude that he reached only the Black Hills (South Dakota) or the Big Horn range (Wyoming) at best, and thus, credit Henday for being first. Boucher de Niverville, a French explorer following the Vérendryes’ path, claimed to have erected a fort at the base of the Rockies although there is scant evidence to support his claim.
enterprise toward the Pacific.

More remarkably, the nature and purpose of the Northwest Passage had begun to change. Originally conceived as a sea level strait which led through or around the New World to the spices, silks, jewels, and gold of the Far East, it was now, at least for the Hudson’s Bay Company, about capitalizing upon the abundant fur and mineral resources of the continental interior and developing a trade link with the Oriental markets in the western Pacific.

Sixteenth century explorations by Spain and England along the west coast of Mexico and California began to reveal a continent that appeared to extend westward much further than previously had been imagined. Of course, this was to be expected. Ever since Vasco Núñez de Balboa walked across the narrow isthmus of Panama in 1513 and gazed upon the Pacific’s blue waters, explorers routinely underestimated the actual breadth of North America.

Perhaps in an attempt to compensate for the discouraging reality of the considerable distance between the Great Lakes and the Pacific Ocean, geographers in France invented *la Mer de l’Ouest*, or the Sea of the West. The alleged discoveries of numerous straits, inlets, and enormous rivers and lakes throughout the Pacific Northwest by Juan de Fuca (1592) and Bartholomew de Fonte (1640), obliged these imaginative cartographers to

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place on their maps a large inland sea. The Sea of the West stretched eastward from the west coast into the plains of the interior, suggesting an easy passage to the Pacific for those who could find it.

In similar fashion, English map-makers were also seduced by the apocryphal accounts of Juan de Fuca and Bartholomew de Fonte. Representative of this highly speculative genre is A Map of North America with Hudson’s Bay and Straights engraved in 1748 by Richard William Seale for the Hudson’s Bay Company (map 2). Although the French-fabricated Mer de l’Ouest is missing, “De Fonts Track” and the western entrance to the Northwest Passage, known as the “Straits Anian,” are clearly visible on Seale’s map and provide testimony of what was wished for but never found.

Encouraged by the Indian reports of “great waters” that always lay just beyond the next river bend or range of mountains, French fur traders ventured across the prairies while they pursued this chimera of sparkling sea strands under the setting sun. After a while, the explorers realized that they had distorted the Indians’ descriptions of a western sea, and that all along they were talking about a ‘great river’ instead. The Sea of the West was soon transformed into the River of the West.

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12 The apocryphal voyages of Fuca and Fonte found their way onto the maps of 18th century French and English cartographers, which, in turn, sustained the belief in the Northwest Passage and encouraged widespread speculation about its location among geographers and explorers alike.

13 For a short treatment about the origin, purpose, and impact of Seale’s map, see Glyndwr Williams, “A Remarkable Map” The Beaver (Winter 1962), 30 - 36.

The pursuit of a large and navigable westward running river that emptied into the Pacific would dominate the Hudson’s Bay Company’s exploration efforts to the north and west of the Bay well into the nineteenth century. In fact, as early as 1719, the Company had engaged James Knight to search for this latest adaptation of the Northwest Passage. Rumors of copper and gold, abundant furs, and a river that flowed to the western sea became Knight’s vision of the Passage. Departing from Churchill, a new HBC trading post along the Bay’s southwestern shore, Knight and his two ships vanished into the icy mists. Three years later, a Company sloop trading with the Inuit off Marble Island (250 miles north of Churchill) recovered debris from the ill-fated expedition.15

The Arctic tragedy of James Knight and his crew effectively put to an end any serious attempts by the Hudson’s Bay Company to find a river that flowed to the western sea until 1762 when Moses Norton assumed control of Churchill’s trading operations. After trying Chesterfield Inlet in a failed attempt to locate the hoped-for route to the west, Norton sent two Chipewyan Indians, Idotliaze and Mattonabbee, inland to search for Knight’s fatal dream. On their return in 1767, after a five-year absence from Churchill, they reported finding a “grand river” rich in copper and furs.

This provocative intelligence prompted Norton to dispatch Samuel Hearne to locate “a river represented by the Indians to abound with copper ore, animals of the furr kind, etc., and which is said to be so far to the Northward, that in the middle of the Summer the

15A young Samuel Hearne was among those who discovered the wreckage of Knight’s final voyage on Marble Island in 1767, and four years later, in an ironic twist of fate, Hearne found the river and “copper mines” that where the object of Knight’s expedition.
Sun does not set, and is supposed by the Indians to empty itself into some ocean.”

Norton’s orders also directed Hearne “to find out, if you can, either by your own travels, or by information from the Indians, whether there is a passage through this continent. It will be very useful to clear up this point, if possible, in order to prevent farther doubts from arising hereafter respecting a passage out of the Hudson’s Bay into the Western Ocean.”

After two unsuccessful attempts, Hearne finally reached the mouth of the Coppermine River in 1771 with Mattonabbee as his guide. Unfortunately the highly rumored river did not empty into the Pacific; instead, Samuel Hearne became the first European to reach the Arctic Ocean by land.

Although Hearne’s extraordinary journey (of more than three thousand miles) across the Barrens of northern Canada yielded little in the way of furs and minerals – and seemingly ruled out a passage from the Bay – the 1773 publication of his journal fanned the flames of a new kind of geographical speculation concerning the nature of the rivers and mountain ranges in the Far Northwest.

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CHAPTER 3

NORTH WEST BY LAND

This Indian map conveys much information where European documents fail; and on some occasions are of much use, especially as they shew that such & such rivers of other remarkable places are, tho' they are utterly unacquainted with any proportion in drawing them.

Peter Fidler, July 1802

Exploration of the Appalachian Mountains had demonstrated that rivers flowing westward originated near the headwaters of streams running into the Atlantic. Drawing from classical and medieval ideals of symmetry and logic, it seemed reasonable to eighteenth century British geographers to predict a similarly balanced arrangement of river drainages for the mountains of the western interior. Hearne’s account provided


2 In fact, the very existence of the Northwest Passage was predicated, in part, upon the actuality of a southwest passage about South America. Since the Strait of Magellan provided a sea route through Tierra del Fuego (or the Drake Passage around Cape Horn), surely it was just a matter of time before a passage was located around or through the North American continent. Symmetry theory regarding western North America is further explained in Allen, Passage, 18 -26 and “To Unite the Discoveries: The American Response to the Early Exploration of Rupert’s Land,” in Davis, Rupert’s Land, 80 - 83.
support for the symmetrical geography of the West when he described an “immense chain of mountains which run from North to South of the continent of America. Beyond those mountains all rivers run to the Westward.”\(^3\) Foreshadowing the discovery of the Continental Divide and not long after Hearne’s return to Churchill, a single ridge of mountains appeared on the ca. 1784 map by Peter Pond, a partner in the Montreal-based and rival fur concern, North West Company (NWC).\(^4\) Following this, in 1801, a narrow divide formed the cornerstone of a map by HBC surveyor, Peter Fidler.\(^5\)

Both maps by Pond and Fidler reveal yet another twist associated with the symmetry concept and the Continental Divide; that is, a short portage over the mountains.\(^6\) On Pond’s map, for example, the Missouri River is shown flowing eastward from the Stony (Rocky) Mountains, and just a stone’s throw over the mountains from the Missouri’s headwaters is a west-running river called the Naberkistagan, which empties into the South Sea (Pacific Ocean). In similar fashion, Fidler’s Ac ko mok ki sketch map (map 3) which was derived largely from Indian reports, shows eastward and westward flowing streams

\(^3\)Glover, A Journey, note, lxix - lxx.

\(^4\)Pond’s ca. 1784 map appears in Allen, Passage, 24 -25, and Henry R. Wagner, Peter Pond: Fur Trader and Explorer (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1955), map number one.

\(^5\)Fidler’s 1801 map appears in Allen, Passage, 22.

\(^6\)Allen, Passage, 26 - 30, and “Unite the Discoveries,” in Davis, Rupert’s Land, 83 - 85.
Map 3: Part of An Indian Map of the Different Tribes that inhabit on the East & West Side of the Rocky Mountains with all the rivers & other remarkbl. places, also the number of Tents etc. Drawn by the Feathers or Ac ko mok k - a Black foot chief- 7th Feby., 1801. Peter Fidler (G.1/25,HBCA).
that have sources located in close proximity to one another atop a narrow divide.\(^7\) Like the eastern slope drainages of the Appalachian Mountains that quickly discharge into the Atlantic, the western rivers running from the Rocky Mountains represented on the maps of Pond and Fidler reach the coast in a relatively short distance. It soon became a foregone conclusion among theoretical geographers and fur trade explorers that it would be no great difficulty to travel up an east slope stream, cross the narrow range of mountains by boat or on foot, and then descend one of the western rivers to the Pacific.

This highly conjectural and unlikely scenario was made real, however, when North West Company explorer Alexander Mackenzie traversed the Canadian Rockies in 1793 and discovered "a beaten path leading over a low ridge of land eight hundred and seventeen paces in length to another small lake."\(^8\) Following Indian reports of a great river that flowed down to "the Stinking Lake [salt water of the Pacific]" where the people (of other tribes) live in houses and trade with white men "that come there in vessels as big as islands",\(^9\) Mackenzie became the first European to make a crossing of the continent north of Mexico. When he reached the Pacific at Dean Channel on the coast of British Columbia, Mackenzie painted on a rock the date, his name, and simply, "from Canada, by land". But, as the geosophical scholar John Logan Allen observed:

\[\text{References}\]

\(^7\) For a short but interesting discussion of Fidler's map, see Moodie and Kaye, "\textit{The Ac ko mok ki Map}", 4 -15.


Mackenzie had done more than just establish the theoretical short portage as geographical fact. For beyond his crossing of the mountains, he found a river which flowed in the direction of the setting sun, and although the Indians told him it was unnavigable for a substantial distance between the mountains and the Pacific . . . it was – in Mackenzie’s mind – the Great River of the West.\textsuperscript{10} Mackenzie’s Voyages, published in 1801, was widely read and quite influential among those interested in what might lie beyond the mountains, including the American president, Thomas Jefferson, who sent the captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark from 1804 to 1806 to explore for a water communication across the continent. The captains’ relatively easy ascent of the Missouri River and subsequent journey down the Columbia matched one part of the theory, but the intervening 165-mile trek across the Bitterroot Range of the Rockies did not.

Nonetheless, the short portage over a single range of mountains between headwaters in close proximity would continue to haunt the search for a western river that led to the Pacific well into the nineteenth century. “In this season, they would cross a great Part of the Mountains without any extraordinary Difficulty . . . near the Head of the River – from whence there is said to be a short Road to the waters which flow on the other Side the Mountain,” observed former HBC explorer David Thompson in 1801 after he switched allegiance to the North West Company.\textsuperscript{11} Later, in 1807, Thompson described the portage as a “marked Path, which leads to the Height of Land . . . which here rises &

\textsuperscript{10} Allen, \textit{Passage}, 30.

whose Current descends to the Pacific Ocean." In an interesting variation on the prevailing geographical lore, Nor'wester (that is, NWC) Daniel Harmon combined elements of both passage and portage when he wrote:

> It is a curious fact, in the geography of North America, that so many of the lakes and rivers, on the West side of this lofty range of mountains, discharge their waters through one narrow passage, in this great barrier.

Back in England, armchair geographer Alexander Dalrymple believed that the short and easy passage to the Pacific would promote British commercial expansion and imperial objectives. Even the best cartographic representation of the time, engraved in 1802 by London map-maker Aaron Arrowsmith, portrayed the Rockies as an easily traversed range of mountains labeled in one section as “Hereabouts the Mountains divide into several low Ridges.”

The most influential map to direct the course of exploration in the Far Northwest was a 1787 draught by NWC trader Peter Pond. Like Peter Fidler, Pond relied heavily upon information obtained from the Indians to develop his maps of the Canadian Northwest.

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16 Pond’s 1787 map appears in Wagner, *Peter Pond*, map number three.
Pursuing rumors of a great river that reached the western sea, Pond was the first European to travel over the Methy Portage into the fur-laden Athabasca country of the Mackenzie River basin. This large, unnamed river first appeared on his ca. 1784 map as flowing north from Great Slave Lake into the Arctic Ocean. When Pond finally reached the lake himself in 1787, and presumably explored the area while establishing a post on its southern shore, the river’s course was changed to flow westward instead. In fact, this is what the river now known as the Mackenzie really does – albeit for only the first 100 miles – before it swings north and drains into the Arctic Sea.

The most intriguing aspect of this river that abruptly vanishes into a blank space west of Great Slave Lake on Pond’s 1787 map is that it lies directly opposite (that is, nearly the same latitude) another large river a short distance away, which empties into the western ocean at Alaska’s Cook Inlet. Apparently Peter Pond had read the journal of Captain James Cook’s 1778 voyage along the northwest Pacific coast, for he copied part of the Captain’s map onto his own. Of particular interest to Pond must have been Cook’s log entry for May 30th when the Captain became “convinced that we were in a large River and Not a Strait that would communicate with the Northern Seas.”17 And on the first of June, Cook observed “it is but reasonable to suppose that both these branches [Knik and Turnagain Arms of Cook Inlet] are Navigable much farther than we examined them; and that by means of this River and its several bran[ch]es a very extensive inland

communication lies open."\textsuperscript{18} Pond and many like-minded traders readily agreed. It was plainly obvious in just a glance to anyone viewing Pond’s speculative 1787 map that the river reaching westward from Great Slave Lake must be the same as the river discovered by Captain Cook. What made this so convincing was the highly exaggerated size of Great Slave Lake, stretching to within little more than a degree of longitude to Cook’s River. In reality, the western end of Great Slave Lake is more than one thousand miles distant from Cook’s Inlet; however, Pond’s depiction placed the Pacific much closer. Furthermore, Pond reported that he encountered Indians at Great Slave Lake who had seen the Captain’s ships along the coast and possessed trade items of British origin. Accused of murdering two of his competitors, Pond left the Athabasca for good in 1788; but not before passing on this geographical notion to his young assistant, Alexander Mackenzie.

In the summer of 1789, Mackenzie commenced down Pond’s river of conjecture “in hopes of getting into Cook’s River.”\textsuperscript{19} When he found only the tidal ebb and sea ice of the Arctic rather than the Pacific Ocean, Mackenzie appropriately, if not prophetically, called the river that today bears his name the Disappointment. Echoing Samuel Hearne’s earlier sentiments, Mackenzie “was disappointed in this it proved without a doubt, that there is not a North West passage below this latitude \[69^\circ15'N\] and I believe it will generally be allowed that no passage is practicable in a higher latitude the Sea being


\textsuperscript{19}Lamb, \textit{Journals of Mackenzie}, 19.
eternally covered with Ice.”

During the return leg of his voyage, Mackenzie learned from some Indians that he met about “another large River on the other Side of the Mountains to the S.W. which falls into the Belhowlay Toe [white-man’s Lake or the Pacific Ocean].” These Indians also revealed that white men had constructed a trading post where the river emptied into the sea. “This I take to be Unalaschka Fort [a Russian trading Post] & of course, the River to the West to be Cooks River,” reasoned Mackenzie, and that, not too far away, “towards the Midday Sun,” was the bright prospect of a communication to the Pacific. The lateness in the travel season prevented him from pursuing this promising new lead, and after returning from a trip to England where Mackenzie improved his surveying skills, he embarked in 1793 on his epic overland journey to the Pacific in search of the great river.

Meanwhile, the Hudson’s Bay Company finally reached Great Slave Lake in 1791 through the efforts of their surveyors Philip Turnor and Peter Fidler. The trade contest for the continent between the Nor’westers and the Bay men had begun in earnest, and nowhere was it more fierce than in northwestern Canada. By the end of the eighteenth century, the North West Company controlled more than three quarters of the fur trade and the Athabasca was the crown jewel of their domain. As expected, the Hudson’s Bay

\[2^0\text{Lamb, Journals of Mackenzie, 19.}

\[2^1\text{Lamb, Journals of Mackenzie, 212.}

\[2^2\text{Lamb, Journals of Mackenzie, 213.}

\[2^3\text{The trade ‘war’ between the Northwest and Hudson’s Bay Companies in the Athabasca is fully described in Rich, Hudson’s Bay Company, vol. II, 333 -383.}
Company was slow to react, and did not establish its first post in the Athabasca region until 1802.  

The bitter competition between the rival concerns had nearly eliminated beaver from the districts to the east and south where trapping had occurred over a prolonged period. Since the fur trade was extractive in nature, it was inevitable that both companies would pursue a policy of exploring new frontiers to facilitate the expansion of trading operations; and thereby, recoup their losses from those areas depleted in fur bearing animals. Though it seemed that the Nor’westers were firmly in control, their rapid expansion (for they had not organized as a group until the 1770s) came with a price. The North West Company’s supply lines were stretched too thin. Trade goods and supplies from Europe were shipped to NWC headquarters at Montreal via the St. Lawrence River, and then up the Ottawa River by canoe to Fort William on Lake Superior. From there, these materials would be distributed to the trading posts by way of the vast system of interconnected waterways in the Canadian interior. This long, arduous process typically accounted for a discrepancy of at least two years from the time the Indians purchased their trade items to when the furs were sold in European markets. The farther the Nor’westers pushed north and west, the greater were the costs to provision their trading

24This is Nottingham House established by Peter Fidler.

25Some of the trapping out of large areas, such as in the Snake country, was intentional. In an effort to discourage American competition from the south, the Hudson’s Bay Company adopted a policy that was to “scour the country wherever Beaver can be found” and “as while we have access thereto it is in our interest to reap all the advantage we can for ourselves, and leave it in as bad a state as possible for our successors.” Cited in Rich, *Hudson’s Bay Company*, vol.III, 584.
posts over an ever-lengthening transportation network. This is where the Hudson’s Bay Company had a distinct geographical advantage. The Bay provided direct sea access into the interior of the continent and dramatically reduced the time-lag between the buying and selling of trade goods and furs, as well as holding down expenses associated with supplying the Company’s trading establishments.  

Geographical supremacy was not the Hudson’s Bay Company’s only edge over the Nor’westers. The Royal Charter giving the Company its monopoly over Rupert’s Land, which in effect assured long-term credit with the Bank of England, ultimately allowed the Bay men to outmaneuver the traders from Montreal. In the Athabasca, for instance, the Hudson’s Bay Company could better afford to undersell the Nor’westers with their trade goods to the Indians. Although this aggressive strategy strained the Company’s deep financial resources, it proved ruinous for the North West company, and eventually a culmination of tensions forced the Nor’westers into a partnership with the Hudson’s Bay Company.

The amalgamation of the two great fur enterprises in 1821 ushered in a new era of prosperity and power.  

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26 Innis, Fur Trade, 263 - 280.

27 For the best analysis of the new HBC enterprise after the merger in 1821, see John S. Galbraith, The Hudson’s Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821 - 1869 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).
Department governor, George Simpson. Among the many responsibilities charged to Simpson, organizing the Athabasca posts, and most notably, expanding the trade to the north and west, were goals that commanded his full attention. Writing to Chief Trader Alexander McLeod in 1823, Simpson assessed the situation:

The Athabasca Department, and indeed the country generally, which has for any length of time been established, is I am concerned to learn, much impoverished, and if we expect to make profits, we must study Economy in every point of view, and extend the Trade to Countries, hitherto unexplored.

Simpson quickly implemented this strategy and focused his sights on lands not yet depleted by previous trapping activity. One of these remote, peripheral regions of undeveloped fur potential was the Far Northwest. The country north of the Liard River and west of the Mackenzie represented the largest unknown territory under company rule; it was thus ideally suited for exploitation and expansion. In a letter to his mentor, Andrew Colville, who was an influential member of the Committee (that is, HBC Board of Directors), Simpson revealed his plan:

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28 A good biographical sketch of George Simpson can be found in John S. Galbraith, The Little Emperor: Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company (Toronto: MacMillan, 1976).

29 Simpson to McLeod, January 2, 1823, D.4/2 fos. 19d - 20, HBCA.
You will observe by my correspondence with McLeod that I have turned my attention very particularly to the affairs of McKenzie's River generally, as there is a greater Field for the extension of Trade there than in any other part of the country.\textsuperscript{30}

The problem confronting Simpson regarding the new frontier in the Far Northwest was simply how to get there. Crucial for the favorable outcome of this daring undertaking was locating an easy passage through the mountains to a navigable water communication that provided access to the interior or the sea. With a zeal which was second to none, that is precisely what Simpson set out to do.

George Simpson's trial by fire started in 1820 when he assumed command of the Company's fort on Lake Athabasca at the height of hostilities with the North West Company. The war against the Nor'westers afforded Simpson the opportunity to demonstrate his mettle and the strong leadership qualities that earned him even the respect of his NWC opponents, some of whom (including A. McLeod) would paradoxically work for the Governor after the merger. It was also during this period that Simpson began to display "a simple but very real satisfaction from traveling, and from

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1Simpson to A. McLeod, January 2, 1823, D.4/2 fo. 20, HBCA.

travelling faster in North American conditions than anyone had ever travelled before.”

Simpson conducted “a circuitous journey of about fifteen hundred miles,” during a 1821 inspection of trading posts to the west and south of Lake Winnipeg that provided him “a thorough knowledge of the Country and Trade.”

As part of an effort to apply cost cutting measures in trading operations, he completed an even more rigorous tour in 1822 of the country southwest of Lake Winnipeg. More extraordinary still was Simpson’s first of two transcontinental journeys in 1824 between Hudson’s Bay and the Pacific Ocean. Traveling by canoe up the waterways from the Bay to the base of the Canadian Rockies, Simpson and his party traversed Athabasca Pass and reached the mouth of the Columbia River in only eighty-four days – twenty days faster than any previous crossing.

Not only did the Governor like to travel, but he also engaged a keen interest in reading contemporary travel accounts and books on geography. As Simpson biographer John Galbraith puts it, “he had no apparent interest in literature. His small library was almost exclusively composed of books devoted to exploration, Indians, and the fur trade.”

In later years, for example, among the titles that Simpson checked out from the Company’s Board Room library in London were Franklin’s 2nd Voyage, Langsdorff’s

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4Merk, *Fur Trade and Empire*, 178.

5The interesting account of Simpson’s 1824 - 1825 travels is contained in Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire*. The Governor completed a similar transcontinental adventure between 1828 - 1829 which can be found in E.E. Rich, ed., *Simpson’s 1828 Journey to the Columbia* (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1947).

Voyages (2 volumes), and Cochran's Voyages (2 volumes).\(^7\)

It seems likely, therefore, that Simpson must have been familiar with current British cartographic concepts. He certainly knew the maps representing the travels of Hearne, Pond, Mackenzie, Thompson, and Fidler. In fact, the search for a passage by land or by sea had become part of British national discourse during the 1790s as a result of the promotional campaign waged by theoretical geographer Alexander Dalrymple who believed that England’s economic and strategic interests would best be served by an expanded fur trade in the Pacific.\(^8\) Dalrymple pressed both the British government and the Hudson’s Bay Company to develop a commerce that shipped furs from the Canadian interior directly to China from trading posts along the Northwest Pacific coast. The North West Company tried to implement Dalrymple’s plan from their posts on the Columbia River and, by the early 1800s, Mackenzie attempted to form a company to advance an Oriental fur trade in the Pacific.\(^9\) Simpson would adopt this strategy in 1825 for the Company’s new position (gained by the absorption of the North West Company) on the coast at the mouth of the Columbia.\(^10\)

In other words, Simpson’s intellect was predisposed to believe the geographical

\(^7\)Catalogue of Hudson’s Bay Company Library, 1818 - 1840, A64/20, HBCA.


\(^10\)Mackie, Beyond the Mountains, 50 - 52.
musing that began with Peter Pond and continued through Dalrymple and Mackenzie. Symmetrically balanced mountain ranges and watercourses that contained a passage to the Pacific were axiomatic for the Governor. For example, while crossing Athabasca Pass in 1824, Simpson observed:

At the very top of the pass or height of Land is a small circular Lake or Basin of Water which empties itself in opposite directions and may be said to be the source of the Columbia & Athabasca Rivers as it bestows its favors on these prodigious streams, . . . That this basin should send its Waters to each side of the Continent and give birth to two of the principal Rivers in North America is no less strange than true.11

After reading the journals of Captain James Cook and Alexander Mackenzie, Simpson reasoned that a water communication to the sea might be found somewhere north of the Fraser River.12 The spectre of Cook’s River lurked in “the Country laying to the West of the Mountain” and that is where Simpson intended to look. It is tempting to imagine, and not altogether unlikely given his character and ambition, that if duties and responsibilities so permitted, Simpson would have set out in a canoe to search for the great river himself. The Governor, instead, ordered Peter Warren Dease in 1823 to find the river of conjecture; and in doing so, initiated the Hudson’s Bay Company’s twenty-eight year

11Merk, Fur trade and Empire, 34.

exploration of the Far Northwest.13

Simpson’s first bold step to the westward was unfortunately taken quite lightly, for Dease never departed on his journey. Informing the Governor of the bad news, Dease offered some hope in that despite his “postponement of the Expedition,” Alexander and John McLeod “are actively employed in trying to open a communication with the Nahanny tribe, who inhabit the Mountains.”14 This is in reference to Simpson’s instructions for Alexander McLeod, and then John McLeod (of no relation), who were to proceed into the mountains and establish trading links with the people rumored to live there, the Nahanni, and more distant yet, the Dahoty Indians. “I am glad to find there are prospects of opening a communication with the Nuhanies,” but the Governor was concerned about “the Dahotys whose hunts are supposed to have been heretofore taken to the Russian Settlements on the Coast.”15 Not only was the Nahanni land thought to contain abundant beaver, but it seemed that Russian traders were diverting those furs which otherwise would have gone to Company posts on the Liard and Mackenzie Rivers.

13 All of the voyages of discovery in the Far Northwest of which this work is concerned are described in a masterly fashion by Theodore J. Karamanski, in Fur Trade and Exploration: Opening the Far Northwest, 1821-1852 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983). Although I have read or inspected most of the pertinent documents related to this project, Karamanski’s lively narrative provided the direction for my own exploration into the geographic images of the Far Northwest. For shorter but good accounts of the exploration of the Far Northwest from the merger (1821) to the mid-nineteenth century, see Allen, “The Canadian Fur Trade,” 109-131; and, Ruggles, A Country So Interesting, 74-86.

14 Dease to Simpson, June 6, 1823, D.4/2 fo.19d, HBCA. The word “Nahanni” was used by Athabaskan speaking tribes. Literally translated, it means “People-over-there-far-away.”

15 Simpson to A. McLeod, January 2, 1823, D.4/2 fo. 19d, HBCA.
If the Hudson’s Bay Company were to successfully develop the Nahanni fur resource, and intercept the Dahoty’s pelts bound for the Pacific, then finding a navigable watercourse to transport the furs was critical to Simpson’s plan.

The most immediate challenge facing Alexander McLeod, however, was the nature of the land itself, in particular, the Mackenzie Mountains. From his prospect at the junction of the Mackenzie and Liard Rivers, the great northwest-southwest mountain range seemingly formed a seven-hundred-mile impenetrable barrier that directed the Mackenzie River in a northwesterly course to the Arctic sea. The mountains are steep, and except for the most northern parts, densely forested. Its rivers are swift and rock-bound, often choked by deep canyons containing many rapids and cascades. The rugged, mountainous terrain was difficult to navigate and presented numerous hazards for those who might venture into this forbidding terra incognita. A direct assault across the Mackenzie Mountains seemed out of the question; instead, McLeod would attempt to skirt their southern flank.

Leaving Mackenzie River Forks (the Company post soon called Fort Simpson) in the middle of the winter of 1822 - 1823, Alexander McLeod traveled about 100 miles up the Liard to where it is joined by the “Nahany” River. Known today as the South Nahanni, the fast, southeast flowing stream and its tributaries drain the southern portion of the Mackenzie Mountains, and at first, appeared to offer relatively good access into the heart of the Nahanni Indians’ domain. How far McLeod went up the South Nahanni remains
uncertain, since no journal survives today describing his voyage. The Mackenzie Forks post journal records, however, on March 6th, state that: “Mr. Alex. R. Macleod returned from his Journey of discovery – which did not terminate agreeable to his wishes – although proved satisfactory in other respects as he ascertained that the Country did contain Beaver . . . and that the Country also abound in Animals for the natives to make great quantities of Provisions . . . [even though] A. R. McLeod suffered considerably from privation – for the natives who accompanied him were no animal Hunters.” Perhaps feeling his age, Alexander McLeod “appointed [the younger] Mr. John McLeod to command a party . . . on a voyage of discovery to the Westward with a view to open a Communication with the Nahanni tribes and one or two more tribes whom we are unacquainted with except from report by Indians of this Post.”

John McLeod and his crew departed from the Forks, now called Fort Simpson, during the summer of 1823 in search of the Nahanni Indians, while the Liard River was still in flood from the melting of the past winter’s snows. When the expedition turned up the South Nahanni, McLeod described the difficulties that they immediately experienced: “. . . we made but little progress up the Nahany River having a strong but smooth Current to steer, the Courses of this River is very various, and the Channels much obstructed by

16 From John McLeod’s journals and my own canoe trip “down” the South Nahanni, I suspect that A. McLeod’s progress was probably no more than thirty miles upriver from the junction with the Liard, in the vicinity of Twisted Mountain. A little further, McLeod would have encountered the Lower Canyon, especially treacherous to negotiate during winter.

17 Fort Simpson Journal, March 6, 1823, B.200/a/1 fos.31 - 32, HBCA.

18 A. McLeod to Simpson, April 3, 1823, D.4/117 fos. 54d - 55, HBCA.
shoals and driftwood."\textsuperscript{19} Headway against the swift torrent was nearly impossible, so McLeod and his party cached their canoe and pushed on overland toward the west. Rather than name the mountains he encountered, McLeod merely counted the ranges in sequence from the river (for example, first, second, third, . . .), eventually going beyond the ninth range where he climbed to the top of a mountain and observed "a fine view of the Country. To the Westward I could perceive no regular ranges of mountains, altho' some parts appeared very high but much broken and detached."\textsuperscript{20}

Seeing no sign of the Nahanni, McLeod decided to turn back. After several days of hard travel, McLeod succeeded in making the first contact with the retiring Nahanni in a cautious meeting somewhere between the fourth and fifth mountain ranges. McLeod was favorably impressed, for he described them as "a manly race of men and good hunters . . .[that] . . . are smart, active and quick in their motions . . . not haughty, but seem to be peaceably inclined, without the appearance of fears or meanness. They are Cleanly, Hospitable and Sociable."\textsuperscript{21} McLeod was disappointed, however, in that the Nahanni leader, White Eyes, could not "give us information of any Considerable Stream, which might throw any light, in what we had already heard . . . respecting a Large River to the Westward of the Mountains."\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{19}Fort Simpson Journal, June 11, 1823, B.200/a/2 fo. 2, HBCA.

\textsuperscript{20}Fort Simpson Journal, June 27, 1823, B. 200/a/2 fo. 7, HBCA. It should be noted that McLeod counted every ridge or peak along the way as a "range of mountains."

\textsuperscript{21}Fort Simpson Journal, July, 1823, B.200/a/2 fo. 11, HBCA.

\textsuperscript{22}Fort Simpson Journal, July 1823, B. 200/a/2 fo.11, HBCA.
Ordered once again to find the Nahanni and obtain more “knowledge of the Country beyond the mountains, or what they might have learnt from their Neighbors of the much talked of large Rivers to the Westward of the Mountains – or any other streams running in that direction,”\textsuperscript{23} John McLeod departed from Fort Simpson in the summer of 1824. Forced quickly to abandon the South Nahanni because “the strength of the Current, which is in my opinion now with greater velocity than the preceeding year,”\textsuperscript{24} McLeod steadily retraced his route across the mountain ranges. Although he could “conceive Nothing tempting for the fast Traveller in this part of the Country,”\textsuperscript{25} McLeod did manage to re-establish relations with the Nahanni. In fact, McLeod even coaxed White Eyes, his son, and his nephew to return with him to Fort Simpson in order to learn the correct preparation of skins for the fur trade. Once back at the post, White Eyes confirmed the reports of a trade with white men on the coast among Indians to the west, but he declined to sketch a map of his people’s lands for the disappointed McLeod.\textsuperscript{26}

In the meantime, another attempt to penetrate the Nahanni country that summer of 1824 was launched from nearby Fort Liard within days of White Eyes and his companions return to their mountain haunts. This voyage was led by Murdock McPherson who, beginning in 1822, helped build the new Company post on the Liard River a little upstream from where the South Nahanni joins it. During this time,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23}Smith to J. McLeod, March 14, 1824, B. 39/b/2 fo. 101, HBCA..
\item \textsuperscript{24}Fort Simpson Journal, June 11, 1824, B. 200/a/5 fo. 33, HBCA.
\item \textsuperscript{25}Fort Simpson Journal, June 18, 1824, B. 200/a/5 fo. 35d, HBCA.
\item \textsuperscript{26}R. M. Patterson, “The Nahany Lands,” \textit{The Beaver} (Summer 1961), 47.
\end{itemize}

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McPherson dispatched a hunting party of the post’s Indians to conduct a reconnaissance of the Liard’s upper reaches. Based on this intelligence and, in part, John McLeod’s 1823 exploration, McPherson concluded: “To Extend our knowledge of, and intercourse with the Country about the upper parts of the West Branch [Liard] of this River is in my opinion an object worthy of attention, but as this opinion is solely grounded upon Indian Information I should feel reluctant to make any propositions that, if acted upon might probably had to be a disappointment or at least not much with general expectations.”

With this disclaimer in mind, McPherson ventured up the Liard with objectives similar to those of McLeod; that is, to establish a trade with the Nahanni and to gather information about a river to the west. Regrettably, he accomplished neither. McPherson failed to make contact with any of the Nahanni and, as a result, did not learn anything new about the country to the west beyond the extent of his own travels. On the other hand, McPherson’s party found “New Beaver lodges on the Banks of the River . . . and many Trees newly Cut by the Beaver.” In particular, this description was representative of the lower stretch of the appropriately named Beaver River, a southeast flowing tributary of the Liard that McPherson turned up to explore. On his return to Fort Liard, McPherson underscored his expedition’s lack of success: “My trip to the mountains from which I have only returned a few days ago has not been attended with any circumstances worthy of much notice.”

27McPherson to Smith, March 1, 1824, B.39/b/2/ fo.90 HBCA.

28Fort Simpson Journal, July 15, 1824, B. 200/a/5/ fo. 27d, HBCA.

29McPherson to Smith, July 28, 1824, B. 39/b/2 fo.106, HBCA.
At first glance, it would seem that John McLeod's expeditions up the South Nahanni, were more successful than McPherson's efforts in that he established a trade with the Nahanni Indians and obtained valuable knowledge about the country west of the mountains. In one respect, however, McPherson made a more important contribution to the Hudson's Bay Company's exploration of the Far Northwest; that is, he made a map. McPherson's sketch map (map 4) shows the extent of his 1824 voyage up the Beaver River which flows through "Mountainous and barren Country" into the "Main West Branch Riviere au Liard." Later that year, McPherson drafted a "McKenzie's River" district map (map 5) that included John McLeod's information regarding the South Nahanni River. Perhaps the most prominent feature of this map is the bold northwest-southeast diagonal paralleling the Mackenzie River that represents the "supposed situation of the Main Ridge Rocky Mountain," which McPherson notes was derived mainly by Indian report.30 This corresponds to McLeod's fourth range of mountains which both he and McPherson agreed was the tallest. Once again— even though they knew otherwise — a single ridge of mountains appears on a map in 1824 as if to promise future explorers that the Pacific was all downhill from there. This perception was reinforced by McLeod's interview with the Nahanni chief, White Eyes, when "He expressed his ignorance of any other large chain of Mountains."31 Nonetheless, a small part of the "Country" had become terra cognita, and the first portion of the map of the Far Northwest had been filled in.

30Cited in Ruggles, A Country So Interesting, 77.

31Fort Simpson Journal, July, 1823, B. 200/a/2 fo. 11, HBCA.
Map 4: Sketch map of Liard River from sources to confluence with Mackenzie River, 1824. Murdoch McPherson (B.116/a/2 fo. 26, HBCA).
In view of the fact that the Hudson’s Bay Company would never again attempt as many voyages of discovery during the same year, Governor Simpson amazingly launched a third exploration in the summer of 1824 to search for “a water Communication running parallel with McKenzie’s River” (epigraph, page 45). This was actually the expedition Simpson first conceived of for Peter Warren Dease in 1823, which, for whatever reason, Dease seemed reluctant to pursue. Anxious to see the project get underway, Simpson met Samuel Black at York Factory (on Hudson’s Bay) during the summer of 1823, and after a tense interview, chose him to lead the Finlay River expedition.2 Black eagerly accepted, 

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2Samuel Black was a former Nor’wester with a reputation (not unlike Peter Pond) for intimidation and violence; and was, as a result, one of the most hated villains to those who served the Hudson’s Bay Company – including Simpson. Black was Simpson’s
for he was no ordinary fur trader. As a self-taught geographer, Black had studied Captain
Cook’s journal and possessed a keen interest in the geology of North America. Above
all, Black wanted to complete his own geographical discoveries and “make a name for
himself as an explorer.”3 Thus, the Company never developed a more fitting set of
instructions for one of its explorers:

That Mr. Black be directed to prosecute the original object of the expedition, in
and westward of the Rocky Mountain towards the Frozen Ocean, in the
discovery of whatever may tend to promote science, and encourage mercantile
speculation, and that he be provided with such assistance and facility as he may
require and the means may warrant.4

There was even more to these orders, as Governor Simpson revealed to Black that “we
are desirous to show the Government that no exertion is wanting on our part to secure to
the mother country by discovery as much of this vast continent and the trade thereof as
possible we therefore expect if any prospect of success remains that you will renew the
voyage as soon as the season admits, and that the Frozen Ocean will be the boundary of
your researches to the North West.”5 These grandiose plans suited Black well for the
reason that he would confess during the journey: “I wanted to do something more &

nemesis in the Athabasca during the winter of 1820 - 1821. For a brief account of their
first face-to-face meeting, see Karamanski, Fur Trade and Exploration, 58 - 60.

3Rich, Black’s Journal, lxiii.


5Simpson to Black, July 25, 1824, D 4/3 fo. 83, HBCA.

59
discover other Rivers & Lands.”

The Finlay country lay to the south of the Liard River and the explorations of McLeod and McPherson. Since the Finlay formed the northern branch of the Peace River, Black headed to Rocky Mountain Portage (i.e. Rocky Mountain House, originally a NWC post) on the Peace to spend the winter in order to be positioned for an early start up the Finlay the following spring. In fact, Alexander Mackenzie passed this way on his epic journey to the Pacific, traveling up the Peace’s southern tributary, the Parsnip River, which led to the short portage across the mountains and down to the southwest-flowing Fraser. Of course, Black was quite aware of this and fervently hoped that following the Finlay to its source would yield similar results. Over the course of the winter, he learned from Indian trappers of a river, the Schadzué (Stikine), running in the direction of the setting sun. It became apparent to Black that he might likely discover a water communication to the Pacific. The problem for Black, however, was that Simpson’s instructions directed him to locate a river that paralleled the Mackenzie and emptied into the Arctic Sea. In the spring of 1824, Black commenced his voyage of discovery with two conflicting geographical images in mind: The Indians’ west-slope stream that reached the Pacific and Simpson’s northward-flowing river to the Frozen Ocean.

Slow but steady progress up the Finlay River brought the explorers to Thutade Lake after almost six weeks of travel. Not only is this the source of the Finlay, but Thutade


Lake is the origin of the Mackenzie River as well. Thirty-five years after Alexander Mackenzie followed the great river to its end at the Frozen Ocean, Samuel Black had attained the nearly 2400-mile-long river’s beginning. The party rested at the lake for two weeks, allowing time for Black to make some geological observations: “The Rocky Mountains is not a place to pick up Fossils, the minute parts of the Creation are neglected . . . but the mighty works of the Creator are exhibited on a larger Scale, huge Strata on Strata towering to the wide expanse & seem far below the Vegitable or animal Kingdom at any period of the Creation & if ever Fossils of this Nature did exist near the Tops they are long ago mouldered into dust & carried away by the Elements in the general delapidation & waste peculiarly inherent in the Rocky Mountains.”

Demonstrating his resolve to make a contribution to science, Black reiterated “that my only Motive is a wish to inform & elucidate in the best manner possible what I have seen in these Regions never before traversed by any of the Companies Servants, that comparisons may be made with Voyages in other parts of these mountains, & conclusions drawn by the Scientific part of the World on the formation & Composition of that stupendous part of Gods Creation the Rocky Mountains.”

The respite also gave Black time to contemplate his next move. He was faced with making a difficult decision: should he head north, as Simpson wished, or go west, for which he was inclined? As if to compromise, Black proceeded overland “on our

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projected Tour to the North West Ward.” Ignoring his natural impulse to advance toward the Pacific each time there was opportunity to do so, Black repeatedly crossed the uppermost reaches of the westward flowing Stikine River. Pressing on, Black and his crew encountered some Thloadenni Indians who told them of the Schadzué River that led to a European trading establishment on the coast. Black was certain that the western sea was close at hand and, more importantly, a way to get there was nearby. But Simpson’s concept of a water communication that would extend the trade farther west of the Mackenzie River forced Black in that direction; and eventually, much to his dismay, the expedition happened upon an eastward flowing stream that he correctly surmised must run into the Liard and, thence, to the Mackenzie. Naming this river the Turnagain, Black retraced his route to Thutade Lake and down the Finlay, rather than challenge the unknown higher stretches of the Liard River.

The following year, Governor Simpson reported to the HBC Committee in London:

Mr. Black represents the country through which he passes as Wild and barren in the extreme . . . affording the means of living neither to man nor beast: he saw very few Indians who barely existed of Fish & Siffler. There are a few Beaver but occupying such inaccessible places . . . that it is very difficult to work them and they are not sufficiently numerous to defray the Expenses of an Establishment if it was even found possible to maintain one. . . I am concerned to say that the unsuccessful result of Mr. Black’s Voyage does not present sufficient encouragement to renew the undertaking.11

10 Rich, Black’s Journal, 84.

11 Simpson to Governor and the Committee, September 1, 1835, D. 4/88 fos. 90d - 91, HBCA.
Samuel Black’s expedition was, in effect, more of a failure than either McLeod’s or McPherson’s. His voyage of discovery “discovered” only a mountainous terrain, impoverished in both furs and Indians. It is difficult today to understand why Black did not explore the Stikine. The evidence obtained by McLeod and Black of Russian traders on the coast suggested that furs, which otherwise could have gone to the Company’s posts in the interior, were being directed westward. If Black had acted on his intuition, it is likely that he would have discovered the Stikine River and handed the Hudson’s Bay Company a strategic advantage over its Russian rivals. By coming through the back door, the Company could have engaged the Indians who were trading with the Russian settlements on the Pacific, and possibly driven them out of business. Given its history of cautiousness and “Sleep by the Frozen Sea,” missed opportunities were not surprising, and were often characteristic of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s exploratory efforts.

On the other hand, it is tempting and far easier to blame Simpson for Black’s lack of success. After all, Black was only following the Governor’s orders. Yet, in defense of Simpson, his instructions were based in faulty eighteenth and early nineteenth century geographical thought. Simpson’s objectives and planning simply fell victim to the symmetry of balance and proportion in North America’s mountain ranges and river systems. Perhaps the most significant result of 1824’s voyages by McLeod, McPherson, and Black was to point the direction for future exploratory efforts: the Liard River.

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12The Russian-American Company, chartered in 1799, operated a number of fur trading posts along the Pacific coast from Alaska to California. For a good analysis of the competitive relationship between the Russian-American Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company, see Galbraith, *HBC as an Imperial Factor*, 113 - 174.
CHAPTER 6

TO THE WESTERN SEA

... As no Mountains of any great magnitude appears before us, I have every expectation some of the Streams flowing to the Pacific cannot be at no considerable distance, and before long anticipate the hope of drinking of their waters.

John McLeod, July 1834

Every kind of country is good for something – even the harsh, spare land along the Liard River. The mountainous terrain covered by straggly spruce and soggy stretches of muskeg was now coveted by Governor Simpson for its promise to expand the trade. The years immediately following the expedition of 1824 were characterized by attempts of the Hudson’s Bay Company to cultivate a productive fur trade with the Nahanni Indians and the other tribes in the vicinity.

Samuel Black’s dark and pessimistic report regarding the potential for trading opportunities in the Finlay country eliminated the region south of the Liard River. Through the explorations and inquiries of John McLeod and Murdock McPherson,

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1Fort Halkett Journal, July 25, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fo.4, HBCA.
Simpson learned that the majority of the Nahanni lived in the upper reaches of the Liard which was rich in beaver. But there was another reason why Simpson determined the Liard to be the most favorable area toward which to direct the Company’s efforts and resources. “This would be the first step towards establishing a communication between the Settlement of Nass [on the Pacific Coast], which is now being formed and the interior, and would be the commencement of a District which in due time would deprive the Russian Fur Cop., our rivals in trade on the North West Coast, a valuable branch of their business,” schemed Simpson as he approved John McLeod’s plan to venture up the Liard River during the summer of 1831.2

McLeod expected the “West Branch of the Leard River as yet only know by Indian information, and reported by such . . . to be both a Dangerous and insurmountable navigation.”3 At least, that was what he was told by the local Indians who were probably none too excited at the prospect of McLeod opening trade among neighbors with whom they were often at war.4 Undeterred and “being the wishes of the Company to obtain some information regarding a part of the Country, so much and so long spoken of, I was appointed by Chief Factor Smith to navigate the West Branch if possible to its source which is supposed to form its headwaters West of the Mountains, running parallel with

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2Cited in Karamanski, Fur trade and Exploration, 92.

3Fort Simpson Journal, July 11, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fo. 3, HBCA.

4Relationships among the tribes (including hostilities) were complex and affected the fur trade in many respects. For more, see J. C. Yerbury, The Subarctic Indians and the Fur Trade, 1680 - 1860 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986).
Ascending the Liard River was difficult work at best, and at worst, extremely hazardous. Wicked stretches known today as the Hell Gate, Devil’s Rapids, and the Rapids of the Drowned tested the extreme limits of the party’s strength and skills. After gaining a view, McLeod recorded in his journal “as far as the eye can extend the River still holds a continuation of difficulties.”6 One of the greatest challenges for McLeod and his party occurred when they entered the menacing walls of the Grand Canyon of the Liard. “The contracted state of the river in some parts not more than from 15 to 20 Yards across for the space of two miles and the immense torrent of water gushing through such a narrow funnel with high perpendicular Rocks on both sides gives the spot a most forbidding appearance,” observed a watchful McLeod.7 Along the way, McLeod met Sandy Indians who had obtained Russian trade goods from other tribes near the coast. He also discovered a message from Samuel Black posted on a tree indicating his furthest advance northwestward in 1824. McLeod had crossed paths with Black. Now there could be no doubt that Simpson’s great river did not lie in the rugged landscape between the Liard and Finlay Rivers.

Noteworthy of McLeod’s voyage was the discovery of the Dease River, the Liard’s southern branch which leads to the Stikine River and then on to the Pacific. This river would soon play a significant part in future company explorations, and before continuing

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5Fort Simpson Journal, July 11, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fo.3, HBCA.
6Fort Simpson Journal, July 23, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fo.5d, HBCA.
7Fort Simpson Journal, July 27, 1831, B. 200/a/14 fo.7d, HBCA.
on up the Liard, McLeod distinguished it as such in his journal. Shortly afterward, McLeod ascended the northern tributary of the Liard, called the Frances River, and eventually reached Simpson’s Lake. Since it was late in the season, McLeod and his crew returned to Fort Simpson where he prepared a map of his travels.

The 1831 map of the West Branch (map 6) reveals how McLeod had really become more than just a fur trader. In a style similar to his friend and colleague Murdock McPherson, McLeod’s drawing depicts the area beyond McPherson’s single range of mountains, now labeled on McLeod’s as the “First Range of Mountains.” Portrayed for the first time are the upper reaches of the Liard River and its major tributaries including Black’s River (known today as the Kechika) which connects Samuel Black’s 1824 voyage from the south to McLeod’s journey from the east. Significantly, if not symbolically, marking the end of McLeod’s 1831 venture is a barrier of mountains abruptly cutting off the northwestern (upper right-hand) corner of the map. This is the actual divide between the waters that flow to the Pacific and the Arctic Oceans. McLeod

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8 McLeod’s “First Range” is one in the same with the Fourth Range of Mountains from his 1824 voyages up the South Nahanni River.
Map 6: Portion of a map illustrating journal of Expedition up the West Branch of the Liard River to the Frances River and Simpson's Lake, 1831. John McLeod (B. 200/a/14 fos. 1d-2, HBCA).
summarized his voyage with the following concluding remarks in his journal:

"The Navigation of the West Branch is not in many parts without it’s danger... The distant Nahanny are the only Indians from this side that cross the Range of Mountains at the source of the West Branch, they are the carriers for the other Tribes, and trade at or near some of the Russian Establishments... From my observations and every information from the Natives, the country West of the Mountains is rich in Fur bearing animals [and quite prophetically]... Dease’s Branch in appearance is a fine stream."

During the summers of 1832 and 1834 McLeod continued to explore the upper drainage basins of the Liard River. Meanwhile, in response to American and Russian traders in the Pacific, the Hudson’s Bay Company determined to construct their own posts along the coast. The first settlement in 1831 was located at the mouth of the Nass River. When Peter Skene Odgen was prevented from erecting a fort on the Stikine River by the Russians and their allies, the powerful Tlingit Indians (who wished to retain their middlemen position among the interior tribes), it became essential for the Company to develop a trade route from the east. Charged with this crucial undertaking was none

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9Fort Simpson Journal, September (undated), 1831, B. 200/a/14 fos. 15 - 15d, HBCA.

10A profitable China trade resulted from Captain James King (who assumed command for Cook when he was killed in Hawaii) when he reported making a small fortune by selling furs in Canton. Of particular concern for the Hudson’s Bay Company were the American traders who plied the Pacific Northwest Coast to “capture” Company furs.
other than the intrepid McLeod, eager to investigate his earlier discovery.

After repeating the difficult and long journey up the Liard trail, McLeod “reached the entrance of Dease’s branch. . . which stream I entered being fully convinced I would with more facility obtain the object in view, than by following the waters of the West branch to its source, in this hitherto unknown stream.”11 The Dease may have been unknown, but McLeod knew where he was going – for the most part, that is. From Black’s account where he questioned the Thloadenni band in 1824, McLeod learned of a large lake from which a route led westward to a large river and the homes of a tribe called the Trading Nahanni, who had direct contact with the coastal Tlingit. As McLeod and his party pressed up the river, they arrived at the junction with the Cottonwood River, a stream identical in size and volume to the Dease. McLeod pondered his choice; “I was somewhat at a loss this morning, which of the Two Streams near our Camp we should attempt surmounting.”12 After starting up the Cottonwood, McLeod quickly realized his error and climbed a mountain to survey the country ahead. From the summit he could plainly see the correct path and within a few days they reached Dease Lake – the large lake described by Black.

McLeod wasted no time in abandoning their canoe at what he characterized as “a magnificent body of water” and embarked on a brief excursion over the slight rise of land

11Fort Halkett Journal, July 10, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fo.1, HBCA.

12Fort Halkett Journal, July 20, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fo.3, HBCA.
to the west of Dease Lake.13 The next day, McLeod fell onto the headwaters of the Stikine and declared:

With satisfaction did the whole Party quench their thirst of the first waters on the West of that Barrier through which we have been penetrating for such a length of time.14

A few days later McLeod and his companions attained the Stikine River itself, “so much and so long spoken of by which the Coast [Tlingit] Indians annually come up in boats on trading excursions with the [Trading] Nahany and other Indians of the Interior.”15 The trail between the Stikine and Dease Lake was approximately fifteen miles, not quite Alexander Mackenzie’s “beaten path of eight hundred and seventeen paces,” but close enough. John McLeod had finally succeeded where Samuel Black had not, in discovering a trading route from the Mackenzie River to the Pacific Ocean. To underscore the point, McLeod drafted an Indian chart (map 7) clearly showing the overland passage (by dotted line) between Dease Lake and a tributary of the Stikine, the Frances River (now called the Tuya). The first thing that strikes one about McLeod’s simple yet elegant map is his representation of the Rocky Mountains, shaded in dark crosshatching and labeled in big black letters. Under closer inspection, the geographical curiosity (or contradiction) resulting from opposing directional arrows on the current flow of the first feeder stream

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13 Fort Halkett Journal, July 25, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fo.4, HBCA.
14 Fort Halkett Journal, July 26, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fo.4, HBCA.
15 Fort Halkett Journal, July 31, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fo.5, HBCA.
Map 7: *Indian Chart* showing West Branch of the Liard from Fort Halkett to source, Dease’s Branch, Dease Lake and Frances River, 1834. John McLeod (B. 85/a/6 fo.10, HBCA).
below Dease Lake affirms the complexity of the drainage systems found in western cordillera.

In an attempt to ascertain the distance to the Pacific, McLeod climbed a mountain along the Stikine and observed “I obtained the Summit at an early hour in the expectation of discovery something new, but my walk was of little import,” for the sea was still too far to see.\(^{16}\) As he retraced his steps and crossed Dease Lake, McLeod “rejoiced to see the Back Bone [i.e. the Rocky Mountains on his map] of North America once more.”\(^{17}\)

“From a small Party of . . . Indians whom I found on my way down Deases branch,” McLeod learned that “Four days traveling from the spot [junction of the Tuya (Frances) and Stikine Rivers] we turned back, from which place of meeting they represented the River [Stikine] free from any dangerous parts to the Sea..”\(^{18}\) In other words, it was “but a hop, step and a jump to the Pacific Ocean,” as one company officer observed after reading McLeod’s report and studying his map.\(^{19}\)

Based upon McLeod’s exciting results, the Hudson’s Bay Company determined to extend the trade up the Liard toward the Stikine. John McLeod was promoted for his efforts and reassigned to the Columbia Country, leaving behind the Mackenzie River district for good. His successor, John Hutchinson, “had been ordered [in 1836] to

\(^{16}\)Fort Halkett Journal, July 31, 1834, B. 85/a/6 fo.5d, HBCA.

\(^{17}\)Fort Halkett Journal, August (undated), 1834, B. 85/a/6 fo.6, HBCA.

\(^{18}\)Fort Halkett Journal, August (undated), 1834, B. 85/a/6 fos. 8d - 9, HBCA.

\(^{19}\)Edward Smith, cited in Ruggles, \textit{A Country So Interesting}, 78.
establish a post at Dease’s Lake & to explore as far as possible down the West side for the Mountains that summer. He had started off to carry out these instructions, but had not proceeded far when an alarm was got up that hundreds of Russian Indians [coastal tribes who were partners with the Russian traders] were advancing on the camp to murder them all. A panic seized the whole party and they ran down the bank pell-mell, jumped into their canoes & off down stream, never halting till they reached Fort de Liard where they stopped a few days & then came on down to Fort Simpson.”

Thus, an ambitious Robert Campbell “volunteered to go to Fort Halkett & carry out the instructions which. . . had been allowed to remain unfulfilled.” Campbell “found it very hard to get men, either whites or Indians, willing to go. The panic of the previous year seemed to have spread all over the district.” Eventually he managed to get a late start up the Liard River trail in 1837. The next year, his party arrived at Dease Lake in good time, and after leaving some of his men behind to construct a fort, Campbell proceeded forward to explore the west side of the mountains.

Following McLeod’s path over the low divide above the lake, Campbell made contact with the Trading Nahanni (which are actually Tahltan Indians) from whom he learned of a great rendezvous taking place on the Stikine River among many tribes including, of course, the dreaded Tlingit, partners in trade with the Russian-American Company.

20 Robert Campbell, Two Journals of Robert Campbell (Chief Factor, Hudson’s Bay Company), 1808 to 1853, typescript copy edited by John W. Todd, Jr. (Seattle: 1958), obtained from the Montana Historical Society, Helena.

21 Campbell, Two Journals, 31.

22 Campbell, Two Journals, 32.
Against the wishes of his new friends, and at no small risk to himself and his crew, Campbell decided to accompany the Nahanni (as he called them) to the Stikine in order to secure trade connections for the new post at Dease Lake. "Such a concourse of Indians I had never before seen assembled," wrote an astonished Campbell, "... gathered from all parts of the Western slope of the Rockies & from along the Pacific Coast." In a tense meeting with a Tlingit leader where he surprised four Russian traders, Campbell was convinced by his Nahanni friends to make a hasty retreat back to Dease Lake under threatening overtures from the Tlingit. Campbell paused briefly, however, on a hill overlooking the rendezvous "where I forthwith hoisted the H.B.C. flag & cut H.B.C. & date on a tree, thus taking possession of the country for the Company."24

Campbell and his men were forced to spend a brutal winter at Dease Lake where they nearly starved and then finally quit the post in the spring when the river became free of ice. Campbell spent the summer at Fort Halkett helping to refurbish the place and recovering, no doubt, from his previous winter ordeal. That autumn, he received a letter from Governor Simpson which informed Campbell of recent developments in negotiations with the Russians:

I last winter concluded an arrangement for the Coy; with Baron Wrangel acting on behalf of the Russian American Coy., by which we became possessed of the whole of the Russian mainland territory (for a term of ten years) up to Cape Spencer; by that means we became possessed of their establishment situated on Point Highfield, entrance of Stikine River, immediately, and have access to the

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23Campbell, Two Journals, 42.

24Campbell, Two Journals, 44.
interior country through all the rivers falling into the Pacific to the Southward of Cape Spencer. This arrangement renders it unnecessary for us now to extend our operations from the East side of the mountains or Mackenzie River, as we can settle that country from the Pacific with greater facility and at less expense.\textsuperscript{25}

Known as the Contract of 1839, this enabled the Hudson’s Bay Company to gain control of the Northwest coast (south of Alaska), and, in effect, made the expeditions of Black, McLeod, and Campbell unnecessary. In yet another twist in the course of events, the Hudson’s Bay Company abandoned its drive to the Stikine River. Simpson had sought a water communication to the Frozen Ocean, but instead, his explorers had rather ironically found the Western Sea. Now, by obtaining the trading rights to the Pacific coast, these voyages of discovery became entirely irrelevant. The Governor closed out his letter by advising Campbell that his “services will now therefore be required to push our discoveries in the country situated on the Peel & Colville Rivers.”\textsuperscript{26} Once more Simpson resurrected the dream of a great river west of the Mackenzie Mountains, and thus, the Hudson’s Bay Company directed its attention to the northwest.

\textsuperscript{25}Campbell, \textit{Two Journals}, 56 - 57.

\textsuperscript{26}Todd, \textit{Journals of Campbell}, 57.
CHAPTER 7

ALONG THE RIVER

I have made every inquiry concerning the route to the Colville from this Indian but cannot elicit anything from his information to prove the existence of water communication from this River to it.

John Bell, August 1840

The Hudson’s Bay Company first learned of the Peel River as a result of Captain John Franklin’s second polar expedition between the years 1825 and 1827. As Governor Simpson reported the event, “Captain Franklin on his late voyage discovered a River which was unknown to us only by Indian report, passing through the Mountains and falling into the lower part of Mackenzie’s River which he says affords a good communication to the interior country.” The Captain’s two great expeditions in search of the Northwest Passage mapped nearly eighteen hundred miles of the arctic shoreline

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1Bell to John L. Lewes, August 26, 1840, B. 200/b/13 fo.?, HBCA.

2Simpson to Governor and the Committee, July 25, 1827, D. 4/90 fos. 20d - 21, HBCA.
from Alaska to the Canadian Northwest Territories. The Company, bent on filling in the
gaps of the Franklin surveys and mapping beyond the furthest extent of his travels, sent
Peter Warren Dease and Thomas Simpson (a cousin of the Governor) from 1837 to 1839
to complete the task of exploring the northern outline of the continent.

Moving westward from the Mackenzie River delta, Dease and Simpson “passed the
mouth of a large River, with an Island among the Western Channels, the Middle Channel
deep and appears as far as we could judge to be about or near 2 miles wide” in 1837.4
After their discovery of the Colville River, Simpson sent a report to Robert Campbell
who had “received accounts from the natives of a much larger river, that also takes its rise
on the west side of the mountains in a great lake to the northward of the Stikine” during
his 1838 appearance at the rendezvous.5 Campbell promptly responded and conveyed his
thoughts on the two rivers about which Simpson records in his narrative:

3 Captain Franklin and his men surveyed the northern shore from the Coppermine
River (discovered by Samuel Hearne) eastward to Bathurst Inlet, a distance of
approximately 550 miles, on the first expedition between 1820 and 1822. From 1825 to
1827, Franklin conducted a reconnaissance along the Arctic coast that covered more than
twelve hundred miles between the Coppermine River and Return Reef (Alaska).

4 Peter Warren Dease, August 8, 1837, from Arctic Expedition Journal, 1836 -
1839, unpublished manuscript edited by and obtained from Dr. William Barr, University
of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1998.

5 Thomas Simpson, Narrative of Discoveries on the North Coast of America:
Effected by the Officers of the Hudson’s Bay Company During the Years, 1836 - 39
(London: Bentley, Wilson, and Fley, 1843), 129 - 130.
From the description I sent him of the Colvile, he thinks that it must be the same; an opinion which corroborates my own preconceived ideas. Should this conjecture prove correct, this river traverses, in its course to the Frozen Ocean, about twenty degrees of longitude and more than twelve of latitude; and the distance of its mouth from its source exceeds one thousand English miles.6

Simpson also drafted an exquisite and precise map (map 8), including latitude and longitude coordinates, representing their journey from Return Reef (Franklin’s farthest westward advance) to Point Barrow. And, of course, tantalizingly pointed in the direction toward Campbell’s rumored river, is the entrance to the northward flowing Colville River.

Back in England, Dease and Simpson received honor and recognition, some time off, and even monetary compensation for their voyage. The Hudson’s Bay Company was acknowledged for its promotion of science and the British empire as well. Needless to say, the Company was pleased:

The Discovery Expedition although projected + entered upon solely with a view to the acquisition of scientific knowledge + information and unconnected with any view towards advantage from Trade, is now we are glad to find likely to be productive of benefit in the latter respect, as from the extent of Colvile’s River we think there can be no doubt it is the outlet of many Lakes in the interior Country where Fish are sufficiently abundant for the maintenance of Establishments which might with advantage be formed with a view to collecting furs which must be numerous in that new Country.7


7Governor and the Committee to Council of Northern Department, June 1, 1838, A. 6/24 fo. 157, HBCA.
Map 8: Part of a Map of the Arctic Coast of America from Return Reef of Sir John Franklin to Point Barrow of Captn. Beechey Explored by The Honble. Hudson’s Bay Company’s Northern Discovery Expedition, 1837. Thomas Simpson and Peter Warren Dease (G.1/180, HBCA).
In Governor Simpson’s mind, the Colville promised to be the long-hoped-for water 
communication west of the range of mountains that would allow the Hudson’s Bay 
Company to compete directly with the Russians for control of the Alaskan interior. 
Following Simpson’s wishes, Murdock McPherson, now in charge of Fort Simpson, ordered John Bell to set up a new post on the Peel River. Once that was accomplished, McPherson advised Bell that “your utmost endeavors must be directed towards 
ascertaining whether a practicable communication exists between the Peel and Colville Rivers.”

The Peel skirts the eastern flanks of the Richardson Mountains (which are the 
northern extension of the Mackenzie Mountains) as a northward running stream that 
enters the Mackenzie River about one hundred miles above its mouth at the Arctic Sea. To Simpson and McPherson, it seemed logical that if Bell ascended the Peel, his course might intercept the suspected headwaters of the Colville River.

Bell pushed up the Peel in 1839, fighting difficult terrain and numerous rapids for nearly two hundred miles until he concluded that further progress was no longer realistic. He did pass through a countryside rich in beaver, however, and found a good location to establish a fort. Turning back, Bell descended the river to near its confluence with the Mackenzie, where he questioned a band of Locheux Indians (called Kutchin today) about the Colville River. They informed him about a small branch of the Peel, called the Rat River, that led westward to a low pass across the mountains. On the other side were Indians with whom the Locheux conducted a trade. It was possible that they knew something of the Colville, thought Bell, and so he resolved to find out. After several days

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8McPherson to Bell, June 17, 1839, B. 200/b/11 fo. 18, HBCA.
of hard work against a swift current, Bell succeeded in reaching the headwaters of the Rat River called McDougall Pass in the Richardson Mountains. There he met some western Indians, but Bell was unable to learn anything about a large river that might fit the Colville’s description. Bell returned to Fort Good Hope on the Mackenzie River unaware of what he discovered. Had he pursued this promising route, the low pass (only 1040 feet above sea level) would have taken Bell to the upper reaches of the Yukon River, which was still quite unknown to the Hudson’s Bay Company and British geography. Not since Alexander Mackenzie’s short portage over the Rockies had such an easy passage across the mountains ever been found.

Bell returned the next summer to establish the Peel River Post (and later called Fort McPherson) where a brisk trade developed right away. For want of provisions after a difficult winter, Bell’s assistant, Alexander Isbister, headed up the Rat valley during the early spring of 1841 in search of food. He climbed to the top of McDougall Pass on snowshoes, and discovered less than a mile away on the other side, what was to become known as the Bell River. The problem was that he did not perceive it as such. The frozen waters and deep snows of the gentle pass led Isbister to believe that he still was on the Rat River. In fact, amid the spring melt, the waters of the two rivers actually join together in the marshy ponds and lakes allowing McDougall Pass to be traversed in a canoe. Since the intermingling headwaters of each river lay frozen under his feet, Isbister was not able to discern where the Rat ended and the Bell began.

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9 Karamanski, Fur Trade and Exploration, 166.

Indeed, Isbister’s 1845 map of the Peel River (map 9) clearly shows one continuous Rat River that simultaneously straddles each side of the divide. This geographical implausibility is more understandable in view of the harsh conditions (for example, near starvation) experienced by Isbister during his journey. Moreover, this was not his first challenge regarding the evaluation of stream gradients. In describing a section of the river below the trading post “which communicated between the Peel and Rat Rivers,” Isbister observed that “so level is the bed which it has found for itself... that it is often difficult... to say whether it flows from the Peel to the Rat or from the Rat to the Peel river.”

Even the editor of Isbister’s account for the Royal Geographic Society at the time characterized the problem as “one of those anomalous features in hydrology for which science has not yet any specific name.” The rest of Isbister’s map, however, is a fair representation of the Peel River extending all the way to its headwaters. At long last, the northern part of the Mackenzie district had finally been mapped.

While Bell and Isbister were trying to get around the north end of the Mackenzie Mountains (that is, the Richardson spur), another attempt to bypass the southern flank of the Mackenzie was already underway. Governor Simpson had originally intended to have


13It is interesting to note that the latitude and longitude measurements were made possible by Thomas Simpson who gave Isbister a “pocket-sextant” at Fort Good Hope while on his way to the Arctic shoreline with Dease.
Robert Campbell to assist Bell and Isbister on the Peel, but soon changed his mind, thinking that Campbell’s abilities could best be used in searching for the Colville River from the Liard’s northern reaches. Accordingly, Simpson directed Murdock McPherson (in charge of Fort Simpson) to give Campbell the following instructions:

Your first object will be to reach ‘Toutcho’ or ‘Great Water’ which is reported to be at no great distance from the Head Waters of the West Branch [Liard] and from Simpson’s Lake discovered by Mr. John McLeod in 1831. This object attained you will endeavour to open an intercourse with the Natives . . . and ascertain if any large or navigable river issues from the Lake. . . You will likewise endeavour to ascertain . . . whether there be any other navigable River in that direction flowing in a Northerly or North Westerly course and whether it would be practicable to establish a Post on its banks.¹⁴

Campbell retraced his route along the Liard River; however, on this occasion in 1840 he passed by the mouth of the Dease branch and continued on to the Liard’s northern tributary, the Frances River. Heading up the river, Campbell followed the stream leading to Simpson’s Lake (marking McLeod’s turnaround point) and soon thereafter, Campbell recorded later, “we reached the Toutcho or Great Water now Frances Lake. . . and with rest started on foot. . . in search of the ‘Colville’.”¹⁵ Traveling overland along Finlayson Creek, Campbell and part of his crew discovered Finlayson Lake where he climbed a high ridge and viewed “a large river in the distance flowing Northwest.”¹⁶ Campbell went on

¹⁴McPherson to Campbell, March 29, 1840, B. 200/b/12 fos.7d - 8, HBCA.

¹⁵Campbell to Lewes, October 24, 1840, B. 200/b/13 fo.43d, HBCA.

¹⁶Campbell, Two Journals 59.
to name “the river ‘Pelly River,’” after our home Governor, Sir H. Pelly,” and then after “descending to the River we drank out of its pellucid water to Her Majesty for the H. B. Co.” After a brief trip down the river, Campbell returned to Frances Lake where he looked for a shorter route to the Pelly and assessed the area’s fur potential. Although he did not locate an easier path to the large unknown river, he did find an abundance of beaver, and returned to Fort Halkett (on the Liard) with the good news.

The post journal at Fort Simpson reveals what Campbell was thinking about his new finding: “After having crossed the Mountains on the West side of Lake Francis he fell upon a large River which from its magnitude and course he supposed to be the Colville.” In response to Campbell’s letter in which he describes his voyage of discovery, Sir George Simpson (recently knighted for his role in the Dease and Simpson expedition) in turn discloses his thoughts: “I think the stream (the Pelly) you are upon falls into the Pacific; as yet I have not examined the matter with sufficient attention to form a correct judgement but it would be very interesting to know what the river is.” It is not clear why the Governor changed his mind about the Colville and speculated that the Pelly River reached the Pacific; for after all, it was Simpson who sent Campbell to Frances Lake in search of the Colville in the first place. Simpson was four months into his nineteenth month journey around the world when he wrote Campbell in 1841, and it is

17 Campbell, *Two Journals* 59.

18 Fort Simpson Journal, September 17, 1840, B. 200/a/22 fo.?, HBCA.


possible that Simpson learned something about the Colville along the way or during the careful preparations he did beforehand.\textsuperscript{21} By 1843, the Governor was more specific and wrote to Campbell, “by one of your extracts, I see you fancy that there are either Russians or Siberians on the newly discovered river of which you speak. From the description that has reached me, my opinion is that the river in question is the Tako falling into Lynn’s Canal, and if that be the case there are neither Russians nor Siberians there, the supplies which the natives receive in that quarter being no other than our own. Other gentlemen fancy that the river in question is the Colville.”\textsuperscript{22} Whatever the Pelly was, Simpson thought that it was “very desirable we should ascertain all about the river and country in question.”\textsuperscript{23}

For his own part, Campbell had begun to suspect that the Pelly might be either the Comptrollers River (possibly today’s Copper River) or the legendary Cook’s River, which still appeared on the best contemporary maps of North America.\textsuperscript{24} Campbell also attributed some of his confusion to the fact “that I have not Instruments with the necessary Books, and a few lessons for taking altitudes, to enable me to ascertain the

\textsuperscript{21}Simpson started his voyage around the world on March 3, 1841, and returned to London on October 21, 1842. Although not a speed record, the Governor did manage to conduct business along the way. He also had a book ghost-written about his travels titled \textit{Narrative of a Journey Round the World During the Years 1841 - 1842}.

\textsuperscript{22}Campbell, \textit{Two Journals}, 71 - 72.

\textsuperscript{23}Campbell, \textit{Two Journals}, 72.

\textsuperscript{24}In fact, Cook’s River continued to haunt the most accurate maps of North America throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, including John Arrowsmith’s 1852 map of “British North America.”
geographical position of the more prominent points of the country through which I have, and may yet likely pass.\textsuperscript{25} From his new post on Frances Lake, which he helped build during the summer of 1842, and after a trying winter where "we found it hard to keep the wolf from the door," Campbell set out for the Pelly determined to reach the sea.\textsuperscript{26}

Campbell's trek over his old route brought him to the Pelly River in 1843 where one of his men had already constructed a small cabin (to be called Pelly Banks) and a canoe during the winter. Their voyage down the Pelly was largely uneventful, encountering only a few Indians here and there, until they "reached the junction of a large river flowing from the S. W., which I named the Lewes after J. Lee Lewes," his new superior at Fort Simpson.\textsuperscript{27} There things began to get interesting:

Early next day a short distance below the forks, we came upon a large band of 'Wood' Indians, whom we took completely by surprise, which almost amounted to awe, as they had never seen white men before. . . The said that inhabiting the banks of the Lower river were many tribes of bad Indians, who would not only kill us but eat us We would never return, & our friends coming after us would unjustly blame them. All this frightened my men so much that I had reluctantly to consent to turn back, which perhaps under the circumstances was the best thing we could do, as we were not equipped for a longer trip.\textsuperscript{28}

So ended Campbell's voyage of more than three hundred miles down the Pelly River.

\textsuperscript{25}Cited in Karamanski, \textit{Fur Trade and Exploration}, 184.

\textsuperscript{26}Campbell, \textit{Two Journals}, 64 -65.

\textsuperscript{27}Campbell, \textit{Two Journals}, 67.

\textsuperscript{28}Campbell, \textit{Two Journals}, 67 - 68
to its confluence with the Lewes. Even though he encountered Indians who had never met Europeans (which meant a new area ripe for trade expansion in conjunction with the plentiful beaver), Campbell was despondent about not reaching the Pacific and retreated to Frances Lake. If Campbell and his party had continued down the river, they would have experienced another fourteen hundred miles before seeing the Bering Sea on the coast of western Alaska. For what Campbell had found was the fourth largest river of North America: the mighty Yukon. The Pelly and the Lewes were simply two southeastern branches of the great western river that Simpson and the Hudson’s Bay Company had sought over the past twenty years. Beginning at the junction of these two tributaries, the Yukon River flows in a northwesterly direction before bending to the southwest at present-day Fort Yukon. In similar fashion to Bell and Isbister on McDougall Pass, Campbell stood on the threshold of a great discovery, which in his own words he confessed, “I was perfectly heedless of what was passing.”

Campbell was not the only Company man in the dark about the Yukon’s true nature, however, as evidenced by Simpson’s letter to him the following year:

Pelly River, from what you say of it & from an examination of the chart you have sent me, appears to be either “Turnagain” or “Quickpok” River, laid down by Arrowsmith’s map, the former falling into Cook’s Inlet & the latter into Norton Sound. The country is evidently rich both in large & fur bearing animals, & from your description of the Forks of Pelly & Lewes River, that appears a good situation for an establishment.

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30 Campbell, *Two Journals*, 75. The Hudson’s Bay Company gave the prestigious London cartographic firm of Aaron Arrowsmith and his sons access to all its maps and documents, and thus, they played an influential, if unofficial, role in the Company’s perceptual view of North America.
On the verge of unraveling the last grand geographical mystery on the North American continent, Simpson merely instructed Campbell to erect a new trading post at the junction of the Pelly and the Lewes Rivers.\textsuperscript{31} The resolution of the whereabouts of the great river beyond the mountains would have to wait just a little longer. In the interim, Campbell was satisfied to produce a sketch map representing all of his travels on the Liard, Stikine, and Pelly Rivers (map 10). Delineated for the first time is the “Height of land between the Northern and Pacific Ocean” separating the Frances branch of the Liard from the Pelly tributary of the Yukon River. And in a glimpse of what was to come, labeled clearly on the map’s western edge at the confluence of the Pelly and the Lewes, and the beginning of the Yukon River, was “Site for a Fort.” Another piece of the \textit{terra incognita} of the Far Northwest had been comprehended.

\textsuperscript{31}Although the HBC traders considered the junction of the Lewes and Pelly rivers to be the beginning of the Yukon, maps today show what was once the Lewes branch as the Yukon with its headwaters near Whitehorse.
Map 10: Part of *A Sketch of the course of the West Branch of the Liard River and Pellys’ River so far as discovered By Your obedient Humble Servant R. Campbell, 1844*. Robert Campbell (G.1/71, HBCA).
CHAPTER 8

THE FINAL VOYAGE

I had thus the satisfaction of demonstrating that my conjectures from the first – in which hardly anyone concurred – were correct & that the Pelly and the Youcon were identical.

Robert Campbell, June 1851

The year before Robert Campbell reached the Yukon, John Bell had successfully ascended the Peel River in 1842 and crossed the Richardson Mountains somewhere south of McDougall Pass. Bell’s “principal object and wish was to have reached a pretty large River reported by the Rat Indians to flow through the lands of another tribe of Natives more remote than themselves,” which he believed to be the Colville. Striking a small river on the other side, Bell and his Indian guides built a crude raft and proceeded downstream. This was the same river discovered by Alexander Isbister in 1841 and labeled on his 1845 map as the Rat. Even though Bell had previously gone up the fast

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1Todd, Journals of Campbell, 98.

2Bell to Simpson, September 11, 1842, D 5/7 fo. 250, HBCA.
east-sloping Rat River in 1839 and had just completed a difficult four-day passage through the mountains, Bell called this slow, westward flowing stream the Rat as well, perhaps remembering Isbister’s musings about the river’s true course. After procuring some Indian canoes, Bell’s party made better time and soon encountered a larger river known today as the Porcupine, another major branch of the Yukon River. This was not, however, the large river that according to Indian report came up from the south. Bell’s progress down the Porcupine was halted after a few days when his guide refused to go further. Uncertain as to how far it was to what he thought was sure to be the Colville, but in reality was the Yukon River, Bell reluctantly gave up and returned to the Peel River Post. Although Bell was confident that he discovered a route to the Colville River, the long portage across the Richardson Mountains caused him to lament to a friend: “What a pity it is that a water communication does not exist to enable us to form an Establishment in that apparently rich Country.”

Bell sent James Purden in 1843 to find a practical trail leading to the Colville that similarly ended in failure. Moreover, Chief Factor John Lee Lewes, who replace Murdock McPherson at Fort Simpson, launched yet a third expedition to search for the Colville during the summer of 1843 – the first time that the Hudson’s Bay Company

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3 Bell to James Hargrave, August 22, 1842 in G. de T. Glazebrook, ed., The Hargrave Correspondence 1821 -1843 (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1938), 408

4 Purden’s progress westward was halted (like Bell’s) when his Rat River Indian guide refused to go on. The Kutchin Indians, as they are known today, enjoyed a middleman’s position in the fur trade similar to the Tlingits’ on the coast. It was therefore more profitable for the Kutchins to make sure that the Hudson’s Bay Company did not expand their operations beyond the Richardson Mountains and thereby control the trade with the tribes along the Porcupine and Yukon rivers.
attempted as many explorations in a single season since 1824 (i.e. the voyages of McLeod, McPherson, and Black). Whereas Robert Campbell skirted around the Mackenzie Mountains’ southern flank, and Purden traversed the range’s northernmost reaches, Lewes planned a direct approach up the Gravel (today called the Keele) River into the very heart of the Mackenzie’s rugged terrain. Charged with this daring and unlikely venture to attain the headwaters of the Colville was Adam McBeath, who quickly learned firsthand why the fur traders never found a route through the Mackenzie Mountains. McBeath’s goal was a large lake rumored by Indian report to be the source of the Gravel. The swift and shallow east-flowing stream that enters the Mackenzie River roughly two hundred miles downstream from the mouth of the Liard forced McBeath’s party to abandon their canoe after only a few days of hard work against a strong current and headwind. Overland travel was no easier. In all-too-familiar fashion, his guide and chief hunter soon deserted, compelling McBeath to begrudgingly retreat. Company explorers would never again try to cross the Mackenzie Mountains, and the origin of the Colville’s waters would remain a mystery a while longer.

Administrative tasks involving the development of the region’s abundant fur resources occupied Bell’s time and prevented him from mounting another effort to reach the Colville until 1845 when he retraced his path across the Richardson Mountains to the Porcupine River. Going beyond the furthest point reached during his 1842 voyage, Bell continued down the fast stream until he finally reached the great river – nearly two miles across – that the fur traders had long heard about from the Indians since the time Alexander Mackenzie first learned of it during his 1789 journey to the Arctic Sea. Here
Bell met two Indians who told him that the river was called the “Youcon” or “White Water River.” To his way of thinking, the mighty watercourse was none other than the highly reputed Colville. For after all, the Yukon was flowing in a northwesterly direction from where he was standing and it was natural for Bell to imagine that the river continued on that bearing to the Arctic Sea where Dease and Simpson found the Colville’s mouth in 1837. In the oft-repeated tradition of missed opportunities, however, Bell failed to understand two crucial clues that would have caused him to conclude otherwise.

During the course of assessing the area’s economic potential, Bell met some Kutchin Indians who lived on the Yukon, from whom he learned:

According to their accounts the Country is rich in Beaver, Martins, Bears, and Moose deer – and the River with Salmon. . . [and] that White People have been seen by the Natives farther down the river with boats from the sea coast on Trading excursions.6

First it is curious that Bell did not realize that it was highly unlikely that Russian traders were established anywhere along the northern coastline since neither Dease and Simpson nor Franklin, for that matter, had found any evidence of their presence as far as Point Barrow. The large “number of beat-iron kettles of Russian manufacture” that he found in the Indians’ camp7 should have suggested to Bell an outlet on the northwest Pacific coast

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5McPherson to Governor, Chief Factors and Traders, November 30, 1845, D. 5/15 fo. 467, HBCA.

6McPherson to Simpson, November 18, 1845, D. 5/15 fos. 464 -464d, HBCA.

7McPherson to Simpson, November 18, 1845, D. 5/15 fo. 464d, HBCA.
where the Russian-American Company was known to be. And second, it was common knowledge among the fur traders that salmon occurred in only west slope streams. Bell knew this from his own experience on both the Peel and Mackenzie Rivers where there were no salmon. The Indians’ drying salmon and Russian ironware plainly indicated the Yukon’s true nature, yet Bell’s preconceived picture of an Arctic-bound Colville River prevailed over his good judgement.

John Bell was not the only HBC trader to be duped by the spurious speculation surrounding the Colville. Sometime between 1845 and 1848, Bell drafted a map of his explorations between the Peel and Yukon rivers which, unfortunately, has since become lost, although not before his friend Robert Campbell had a chance to study it. Bell’s map confirmed Campbell’s suspicion that the “Youcon” and the river formed by the forks of the Lewes and the Pelly were of the same current. As Chief Factor Murdock McPherson reported to Governor Simpson:

There is an opinion here that Bell’s “Youcon” and Campbell’s “Pelly” are one & the same River. . . From what I understand of the Geography of the Country, from the imperfect reports of courses and distances, I am persuaded that Bell & Campbell have been converging to a point, or approaching each other – the one from the enterance of Peel’s River, and the other from the enterance of the West Branch [Liard] but the distance between the termination of their discoveries cannot be less than 600 miles.

Campbell had originally thought the Pelly and Lewes to be the headwaters of the dubious

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9McPherson to Simpson, November 28, 1848, D. 5/15 fo. 466, HBCA.
Cook’s River or some other western stream that drained into the Pacific. But now Campbell, like Bell, concluded that the Pelly and the Yukon were in fact the Colville River. And also like Bell, Campbell should have known better. For while erecting his new post, Fort Selkirk, at the junction of the Pelly and the Lewes in 1848, Campbell observed how “Salmon of the best quality ascend the river in vast numbers in their season.” 10 From his prior encounter with the Russian traders near the coast at the Indian rendezvous on the Stikine River, Campbell could have reasoned that the kettles found by Bell in the Indian camp must have come from the Pacific; and thus, ruled out the Arctic shoreline as an outlet to the sea.

Fortunately, Campbell and Bell were soon to get help in deciphering the Yukon’s real course. The borderline separating Russian and British America was established by treaty in 1825 to be the 141st meridian, which is the present boundary between Alaska and the Yukon Territory. Clearly the route taken by Bell exceeded this limit, but Governor Simpson was never known to miss an opportunity to exploit undeveloped fur resources. 11 To this end, Simpson directed Alexander Murray in 1847 to establish Fort Yukon at the confluence of the Porcupine with the Yukon River. Murray was quite familiar with the Company’s conjecture regarding the Colville River having studied Bell’s and Campbell’s reports at Fort Simpson. While constructing the new post in the rich fur district, Murray quickly initiated a brisk trade and gradually learned from the Kutchin about the country down river. A pleased Murdock McPherson (recently reassigned to Fort Simpson)

10Campbell, Two Journals, 84.

11Karamanski, Fur Trade and Exploration, 233 - 234.
reported to Robert Campbell that Murray:

Has succeeded on the Youcon beyond even our most sanguine expectations [and]... that he has ascertained beyond a doubt that the Pelly & Youcon are the same River, but that his situation... is a great distance from the Forks of the ‘Lewes & Pelly’ and that his is yet a long distance from the sea.\(^\text{12}\)

Although at first Murray believed the Yukon and the Colville to be the same, repeated interviews with the Indians trading at Fort Yukon persuaded him to change his mind.

Murray writes in 1850:

I am now convinced that it is not the same with the Colville, and I have for some years suspected that its mouth lay to the west. The Russians have come up the lower part of the river regularly for some seasons. I was first informed that they entered it from another river, but I am now told positively by Indians who went down and met them last summer that they come into it direct from the sea. By one of these Indians I received a letter from the Russians, which, being in their own language is unintelligible to me. Salmon... ascend the river, but are not found in the Mackenzie, or rivers, falling into the Arctic sea. Again, I have made frequent inquiries of the”Gens du large” or the northern Indians, who visit the Arctic sea coast, and find that they are unacquainted with the mouth of the River.\(^\text{13}\)

Most significantly, Murray adds:

\(^{12}\)McPherson to Campbell, March 15, 1848, Alexander Murray search file, HBCA.

For two winter days' walking below the Porcupine, the Yukon trends to the west and southwest, and the natives say that it flows on in the same direction. I am therefore inclined to believe that the Colville is a smaller river, and that the Yukon empties its waters in Norton Sound [that is, the Pacific].

Alexander Murray had discovered the secret to the geographic riddle of the Yukon. What especially led to the confusion regarding the Yukon's true identity was the great river's abrupt change in course. Campbell and Bell did not know that after flowing for hundreds of miles in a northwestwardly direction, the river turns to the southwest just past the site of Fort Yukon and follows that line across Alaska all the way to the Pacific. Apparently Murray drafted a rough map of the area west of the Mackenzie River which may have depicted the Yukon's mighty bend, but has since been lost. All the same, Murray finally figured it all out: the Pelly and the Yukon, the Colville River, the Russian traders, and yes — even the salmon. All that was needed now was for someone to make it so; that is, turn rampant speculation into stark reality. Who better than the trader who first reached the Yukon's watershed ten years earlier?

Robert Campbell received his orders to go down the Yukon in 1851 when Governor Simpson at last became convinced by Bell, Campbell, and Murray that Fort Selkirk and Fort Yukon were located on the same river. "The long agitated question as to the identity of the Pelly + Yukon Rivers seems now pretty well set at rest, but the outlet of the stream is still unknown. It is now pretty well ascertained that your establishment is situated on

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14Burpee, Yukon Journal of Murray, 10.

the upper part of the river . . . some few days march above Mr. Murray’s post,” wrote a now confident Simpson in his orders to Campbell that authorized him to explore the Yukon as far as he deemed advisable. For Campbell’s part, “This permission granted in compliance with a long cherished & oft expressed wish I decided to avail myself of as speedily as possible.”

Indeed, Campbell wasted no time and departed Fort Selkirk in early June, traveling all day and night, stopping only to cook and to greet the Indians whom he encountered along the way. “After descending the river some hundreds of miles . . . we had the satisfaction of coming in sight of . . . Fort Youcon, situated at the confluence of the Porcupine river,” Campbell recorded of his historic voyage down the Yukon. Robert Campbell had succeeded in connecting the Hudson’s Bay Company’s major thrusts from the Liard and Peel rivers into the Alaskan interior in a most uneventful and undramatic journey lasting only a few days.

At first glance it might seem as if Campbell would have continued past Fort Yukon and followed the river to the sea, or been content with his discovery and simply returned to his post; however, he did neither. Although the Yukon’s outlet remained a mystery to the HBC traders, Campbell did know that the great river had to reach the ocean in territory controlled by the Russian American Company. He also knew from Indian report

16Simpson to Campbell, June 20, 1850, D. 4/71 fo. 130, HBCA

17Campbell, Two Journals, 93.

18Campbell, Two Journals 93.

19Campbell, Two Journals, 98.
and Alexander Murray that a considerable distance still separated Fort Yukon from the Pacific. Campbell’s wish to avoid direct contact with the Russian traders (or their potentially hostile Indian allies) and his inadequate state of provisions deterred him from venturing further downstream. And Campbell’s enterprising spirit also prevented him from returning to Fort Selkirk and resting on his laurels. Instead, on the next day from his arrival at Fort Yukon, he turned east and pushed up the swift current of the Porcupine. Within two months, Campbell had crossed the Richardson Mountains and ascended the Mackenzie River to Fort Simpson. Needless to say, many of his colleagues were pleasantly surprised to see Campbell arrive from the north (that is, the Peel) rather than his usual southern track along the Liard.20

Ostensibly, Campbell made the long trip to Fort Simpson to collect supplies for his post at the Yukon’s headwaters, but he had something else in mind as well. Campbell knew better than anyone (except perhaps John McLeod) how difficult and dangerous the Liard River was as a way to the Yukon. He wanted to prove that Fort Selkirk could be economically viable and felt that the longer but safer supply route that he had just completed would demonstrate just that. So after a brief respite at Fort Simpson, Campbell turned around and retraced his path down the Mackenzie River, up the Peel and the Rat, over the mountains to the Bell, down the Porcupine, and finally up the Yukon to Fort Selkirk by mid-October. Incredibly, Campbell had nearly circumnavigated the Mackenzie Mountains in one travel season. Of course, the gritty explorer would have completely circled the mountain range had he returned to Fort Selkirk by the shorter,

albeit more hazardous, Liard River trail.

In the long run, Robert Campbell’s exertions would be for naught. Campbell’s amazing 1851 journey failed to convince his superiors that Fort Selkirk could be reasonably supported and maintained over the Peel to Yukon road that he advocated.\(^1\) fact, Campbell’s excursion would be the last voyage of discovery to be initiated by the Hudson’s Bay Company in the Far Northwest.\(^2\) Even though the Company’s exploratory ventures were finished, two cartographic contributions to the geographical lore of the northwestern interior still remained to be made by the HBC fur traders.

First, in response to Governor Simpson’s request for more information about the country west of the Richardson Mountains, a rough chart of the “Yukon District showing positions of various Indian Tribes” was completed in 1853 by William Hardisty (map 11). As the clerk who replaced Alexander Murray at Fort Yukon in 1852, Hardisty had nearly thirty years of experience in the northwest, and thus, was particularly well suited to provide the Governor with what he wanted.\(^3\) His sketch map not only shows the Yukon River and most of its major branches, but also the location of eleven different Indian tribes important to Fort Yukon’s fur trade operations. Readily apparent as well is the large gap between the Yukon’s westward course just past Fort Yukon and a major river


\(^{22}\)Although the Hudson’s Bay Company would continue to consolidate and map the territory under its control such as Vancouver and the Queen Charlotte Islands until ca. 1870, Campbell’s 1851 exploration represented the end of Governor Simpson’s attempts to expand the fur trade across Rupert’s Land. For a full account of the Company’s mapping activities after 1851, see Ruggles, *A Country So Interesting*, 96 -118.

Map 11: Portion of a sketch map of Yukon District showing positions of various Indian tribes, 1853. William Hardisty (D.5/38 fo. 77, HBCA).
outlet near Norton Sound. The Yukon’s exodus to the sea was yet a mystery to British geographers.

By far the most important addition to the geographic understanding of the Far Northwest, however, was made with the help of none other than Robert Campbell himself. After his trading post was plundered in 1852 by Chilkat Indians from the coast, Campbell was forced to abandon Fort Selkirk and retreat to Fort Simpson.24 There he learned that the Company had no intention of rebuilding his fort at the headwaters of the Yukon River. Steadfast in his belief that Fort Selkirk could be profitable, Campbell set out that winter on snowshoes from Fort Simpson on an amazing three-thousand-mile journey to plead his case before Governor Simpson in Lachine (near Montreal).25 Although Simpson remained unconvinced, thinking Fort Selkirk was too vulnerable to attack from the Chilkats,26 the Governor did persuade Campbell to accept a leave of absence; and thus, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s most audacious explorer went home. Not to the Yukon, that is, but to Scotland.

During his furlough, Campbell traveled to London in 1853 and gave the map-making Arrowsmith firm an account of his travels. What followed that unique and most

24Campbell provides a vivid account of the Chilkat sacking of Fort Selkirk in which he nearly lost his life, in Campbell, Two Journals, 133 - 137. Also see Karamanski, Fur Trade and Exploration, 270 - 272.

25On the last day of November, 1852, Campbell set out on snowshoes from Fort Simpson and arrived at Crow Wing, Minnesota on March 13, 1853, establishing a new distance record for snowshoe travel that would last until 1877. From there, Campbell journeyed to the Governor’s residence near Montreal by horse, steamer, and rail.

26Karamanski, Fur Trade and Exploration, 272 - 274.
important collaboration between cartographer and explorer appeared in 1854 when John Arrowsmith published his *Map of North America* (map 12). The earlier editions of the Arrowsmith maps that contained only the ghostly images of the Colville and Cook’s rivers (map 13) had been replaced by thirty years of hard-gained geographical knowledge from Campbell and his Company comrades.
CONCLUSION
You should endeavour to make a rough chart of the route you pursue, taking the distances & courses by compass . . . make due allowance for the variation of the Compass, . . . when traced on a map we occasionally find rivers followed far out into the Arctic Sea, while they are made to cross other streams and mountain ranges in a marvellous manner.

Governor Simpson, August 1852

Unbridled imagination roamed the terra incognita of northwestern North America in the early nineteenth century. Cartographic representations from that time literally depicted scenes from another world. In all directions, as far as the eye could see, geographical thinkers and map makers were given free rein to develop a landscape grounded on conjecture and promotion. Early in his career, Simpson observed: “I have examined with much attention the different charts and maps that have appeared of this Country but none of them give any thing like a correct idea there of Rivers Lakes Mountains Plains & Forests being introduced and disposed as suited the fancy and taste of the Draftsmen . . . .” The Governor went on to complain that the theoretical geographers “had the effrontery to Gull the public with the produce of their own fertile imaginations differing widely from the truth

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1Cited in Ruggles, A Country So Interesting, 106.

2Merk, Fur Trade and Empire, 112.
and with descriptions of Countries they have never seen and which had not been explored when their works came from the Press.” ³ The Hudson’s Bay Company fur traders changed all of that.

Beginning with the bold voyages of discovery in 1823 and 1824, Governor Simpson directed the course of exploration in the Far Northwest to find a water communication – possibly Cook’s River – that reached the sea. Although Samuel Black’s attempt to penetrate “the Country laying to the West of the Mountain” was deemed unsuccessful, John McLeod’s and Murdock McPherson’s efforts were regarded as more promising. The rugged land was found to be inhabited by Indians who were generally eager to help exploit the area’s abundant fur resources in exchange for the Company’s articles of trade. Most importantly, the first maps of the region showing something real, rather than just simply dreamed-up, were produced by McPherson with McLeod’s assistance. Still, McPherson’s sketch map (map 5) contains little stars or ‘x’s marking the furthest points reached over the summer of 1824 on the Liard and Beaver rivers that must have invited the explorers’ imaginations to wander northward and westward beyond those limits attained; and perhaps, fill in the empty space with their hopes and desires of the next travel season.

Throughout the early 1830s, John McLeod pushed ahead from McPherson’s star on the Liard and eventually arrived at waters that emptied into the Pacific. McLeod’s westward advance was completed by Robert Campbell in 1838 when he dropped down from Dease Lake and appeared at the trade rendezvous on the Stikine River. On McLeod’s trail once again in 1840, Campbell ascended the Liard’s northern branch, the Frances River, and

³Merk, *Fur Trade and Empire*, 112
succeeded in crossing the divide and discovering the Pelly, or put another way, the Yukon River. With remarkable clarity, the Liard River basin had been finally comprehended by the Hudson's Bay Company. What is more, McLeod’s and Campbell’s voyages connected the upper Liard to both the Pacific coast and the yet-unfamiliar Yukon watershed. Each successive expedition contributed pieces of evidence, which, when all added up, can be plainly seen on Campbell’s 1844 sketch map (map 10) of the Liard’s headwaters.

Meanwhile, the discovery of the Colville River in 1837 seemed to match the Indian reports of a large river located to the west of the Mackenzie River that Governor Simpson first sought in 1823. From then on, much of the Company’s attention and resources would be devoted to blazing a trail from the Peel River across the northern end of the Mackenzie Mountains in search for a real, but greatly exaggerated, Colville. What they found in the process, largely through the exertions of John Bell, was the great river (“Youcon”) that the Hudson’s Bay Company had been looking for all along, even though they did not recognize it as such. For in 1845 Governor Simpson suspected that Campbell’s Pelly and Bell’s Yukon were different rivers with the former reaching the Pacific and the latter draining into the Arctic. The deceptive but powerful images of the Colville and Cook’s rivers that were shared by Simpson, Campbell, and Bell caused them to neglect important clues that would have revealed the truth about their new discoveries. Instead, it would have to wait until Campbell’s epic voyage in 1851 for the Hudson’s Bay Company to fully grasp and appreciate what it had uncovered in the remote stretches of the Far Northwest.

But what if Bell, Campbell, and the Governor had not been fooled by the highly conjectural Colville River? It is possible that had the Hudson’s Bay Company realized
sooner its strategic position on the fourth largest river in North America, the lease agreements with the Russian-American Company may have been negotiated to a different outcome. “For the British, however, this belief may have been a critical mistake that ultimately cost them the possession of Alaska.”

Or, what if Samuel Black had followed his own inclination and turned westward while traversing the headwaters of the Stikine, rather than obeying Governor Simpson’s directive to locate a northward running stream parallel to the Mackenzie River, which was based on erroneous geographical concepts? In effect, Black could have reached the Pacific fourteen years before Campbell did and perhaps enabled the Company to establish a trade monopoly over the Russians on the coast. Viewed in this light, the nature and purpose of John McLeod’s explorations in the 1830s as well as Robert Campbell’s 1838 voyage would certainly have been changed. For that matter, what would have been the sequence of events if Captain James Cook had proceeded farther up the inlet that is named for him? After meticulously surveying the Alaskan coastline in 1794, George Vancouver found himself disagreeing with the infamous Captain Cook when he concluded that “this can be no longer considered as a river [i.e. Cook’s]; I shall therefore distinguish it henceforth as in inlet.”

Vancouver went on to lament:


Thus terminated this very extensive opening on the coast of North West America, to which, had . . . [Cook] dedicated one day more to its further examination, he would have spared the theoretical navigators, who have followed him in their closets, the task of ingeniously ascribing to this arm of the ocean a channel, through which a north-west passage existing according to their doctrines, might ultimately be discovered.\(^6\)

Indeed, the entire course of discovery may have been a far cry from the manner and progression of actions that were initiated by Peter Pond’s conjecture about Cook’s River and a route to the western sea.

Against all expectations, however, a practical passage was never found. For while theoretical geographers and geopolitical promoters scripted what they wanted to find in the unknown terrain, the unforgiving and complex landscape of northwestern Canada and eastern Alaska said otherwise, as the explorers of the Hudson’s Bay Company soon found out. “No exploratory venture begins without objectives based on the imagined nature and content of the lands to be explored. Imagination becomes a behavioral factor in geographical discovery as courses of action are laid out according to preconceived images; later decisions based on field observations may be distorted by these images.”\(^7\) Governor Simpson’s geographic investigations were no exception. A symmetrically balanced landscape with a single ridge of mountains promised an easy passage from Hudson’s Bay to the Pacific in the early nineteenth century. Instead, multiple mountain ranges resulted in

\(^6\)Lamb, *Voyage of Vancouver*, 1243.

the confusing configuration of watercourses that often prevented any crossing at all. But never mind the harsh lesson of geographical reality since armchair theorists and overzealous promoters such as Arthur Dobbs and Alexander Dalrymple were always ready to convince even the most learned to suspend all logic and good judgement. That is, of course, the crux of the problem – the prevailing geographic theory sounded reasonable. Peter Pond’s interpretation of Captain Cook’s journal and his own discovery of a westward flowing river from Great Slave Lake at roughly the same latitude made possible the concept of Cook’s River. Repeated intelligence gleaned from various Indian sources of great rivers beyond the mountains seemed to match what explorers thought they already knew. All of the traders, from Alexander Mackenzie to Robert Campbell, followed the fleeting will-o’-the-wisp of the passage to the sea. What made their chase real, however, was the fact that the rivers really did exist. Rumor ran into reality with the discovery of the Stikine and Yukon rivers.

“The Country beyond the Mountains is rich in Beaver the many samples we have had from it leaves the subject beyond a doubt – Water communication to get at them when found may yet render the Mckenzie river the finest plume in our Capes,” observed a hopeful Edward Smith. The region west of the Mackenzie also appeared as a blank, empty space on maps before 1824. The pursuit of furs and the development of transportation routes, although never really a commercial success, established a comprehensible framework for understanding the Company’s territory.

Popular convention portrays the HBC fur traders as little more than adventurous

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8Glazebrook, Hargrave Correspondence, 81.
businessmen interested only in beaver and profits who rarely took notice of the country through which they passed. In other words, the Company traders were criticized for neglecting to publish maps showing the results of their exploratory ventures. In part, this reputation is based on the Hudson’s Bay Company’s desire to maintain its trade monopoly which demanded a secretive approach to its commercial affairs. It is not, however, a characterization the Company actually deserves. Even though only a few of its maps were made available to the general public (for example, Thomas Simpson’s 1837 sketch of the Alaskan coastline and Alexander Isbister’s 1845 representation of the Peel River), all of the Company’s explorations found widespread cartographic expression through the regular publication of the Arrowsmith maps.

The cumulative effect of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s explorations from 1823 to 1851 can be seen on John Arrowsmith’s 1854 masterpiece titled “Map of British North America” (map 12). For the first time, Arrowsmith was able to portray accurately the geography of northwestern North America. What made this armchair cartographer’s representation real, however, was Robert Campbell’s nineteen years of experience in Alaska and the Yukon. For no one else could have advised Arrowsmith as did Campbell. After all, no one else had ever pushed up the Dease’s branch to reach the Stikine or ascended the Frances tributary and attained the Pelly. On top of those two incredible achievements, Campbell was the only explorer to have gone down the Yukon and up the Porcupine to Mackenzie’s River. In fact, Campbell was the only man to have done it all.

As a result, Arrowsmith was able to connect correctly both the Liard and Yukon drainage basins to the Mackenzie River system. No longer did the apocryphal images of
Cook’s River or popular notions of “a water Communication running parallel with Mackenzie’s River” reside on Arrowsmith’s 1854 delineation. The Hudson’s Bay Company had completed the map of North America. Indeed, the adventures of John McLeod, Samuel Black, John Bell, and Robert Campbell were responsible for unraveling the geographic conundrum of the Far Northwest. And it all began by taking that first step into the terra incognita of the mind. For as Chief Trader Smith perhaps wondered as he watched the ghostly northern lights shimmer and flow across the cold, black sky:

... what a field to feed the imagination, what a number of ideas rushes in at once, to call for the means to investigate a country so interesting.

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