

# Great River of the West

*Essays on the Columbia River*

Edited by

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# A Resurgent Columbia River: An Introduction

*The* history of writing about the Columbia River is puzzling. Before the 1990s, you could stack the major works on the river in a smallish bookcase. Most of them covered overexposed and romantic topics, such as the explorations of Lewis and Clark, the fur trade, the Oregon Trail, Indian wars, and white pioneer settlements. When the Columbia did figure in those histories, it often served as backdrop to other topics, such as the scene of perilous descents through the Gorge by Oregon Trail migrants or as the causeway for Hudson's Bay Company fur-trapping brigades. Literature on the river's twentieth century history languished even more. Readers could find only a handful of books that described the federalization of the Columbia and even fewer that explained what was happening to fish runs.

It is hard to explain this missing literature, because it is almost impossible to miss the central significance of the Columbia River in the history of the Pacific Northwest. The river dominates more than a dozen ecological regions as it flows 1,210 miles from its source in the Canadian Rockies to the Pacific Ocean. The mainstem gathers water from 259,000 square miles of territory, which incorporates parts of seven states and

one Canadian province and the drainages of eleven major tributaries—the Cowlitz, Lewis, Willamette, Deschutes, Snake, Yakima, Spokane, Clark Fork, Wenatchee, Okanagan, and Kootenay rivers. Perhaps more important, the Columbia's influence extends well beyond its enormous drainage basin because of the distribution of hydroelectric power generated by its dams and the economic relationships the Columbia has created for the region throughout the world.

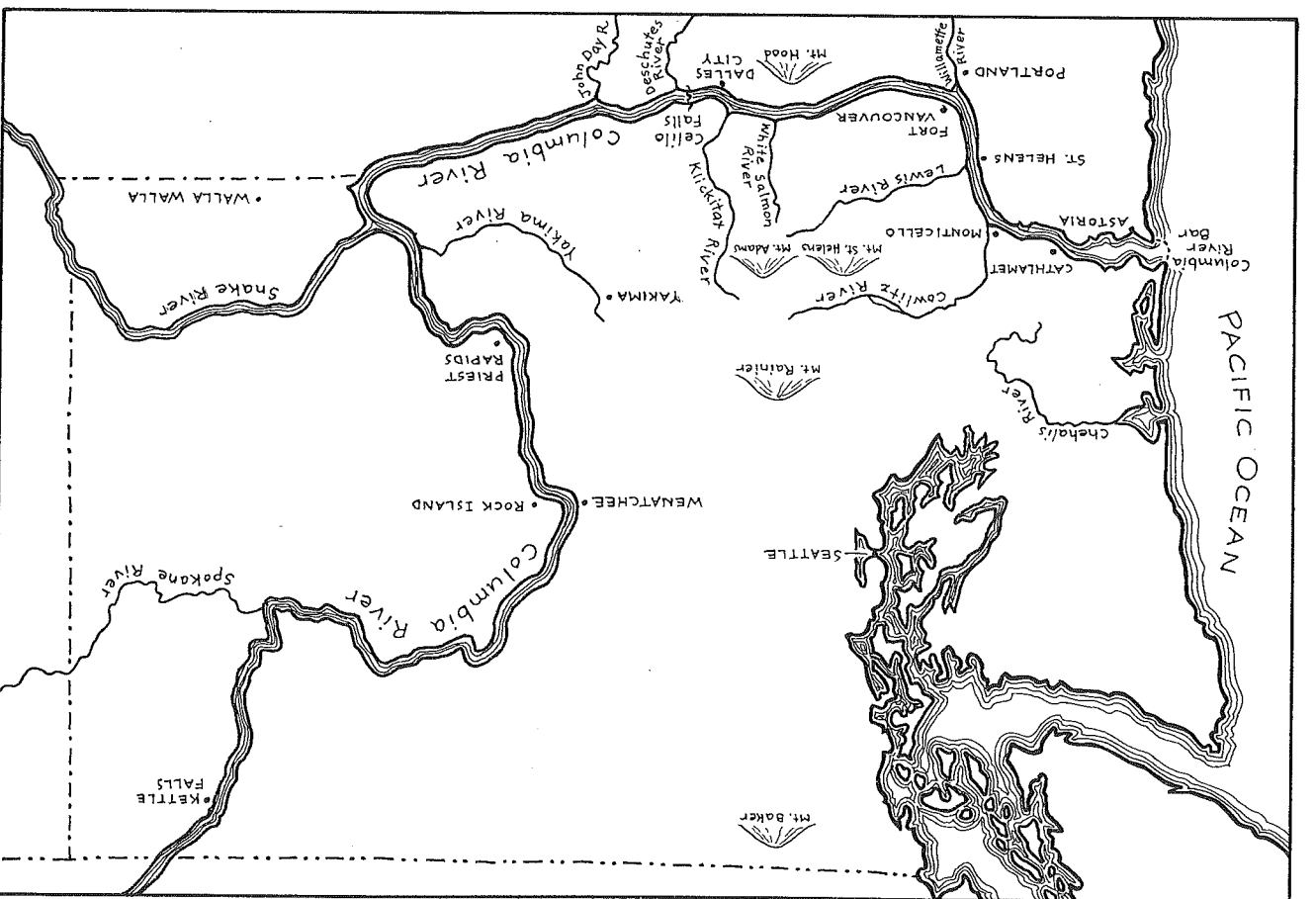
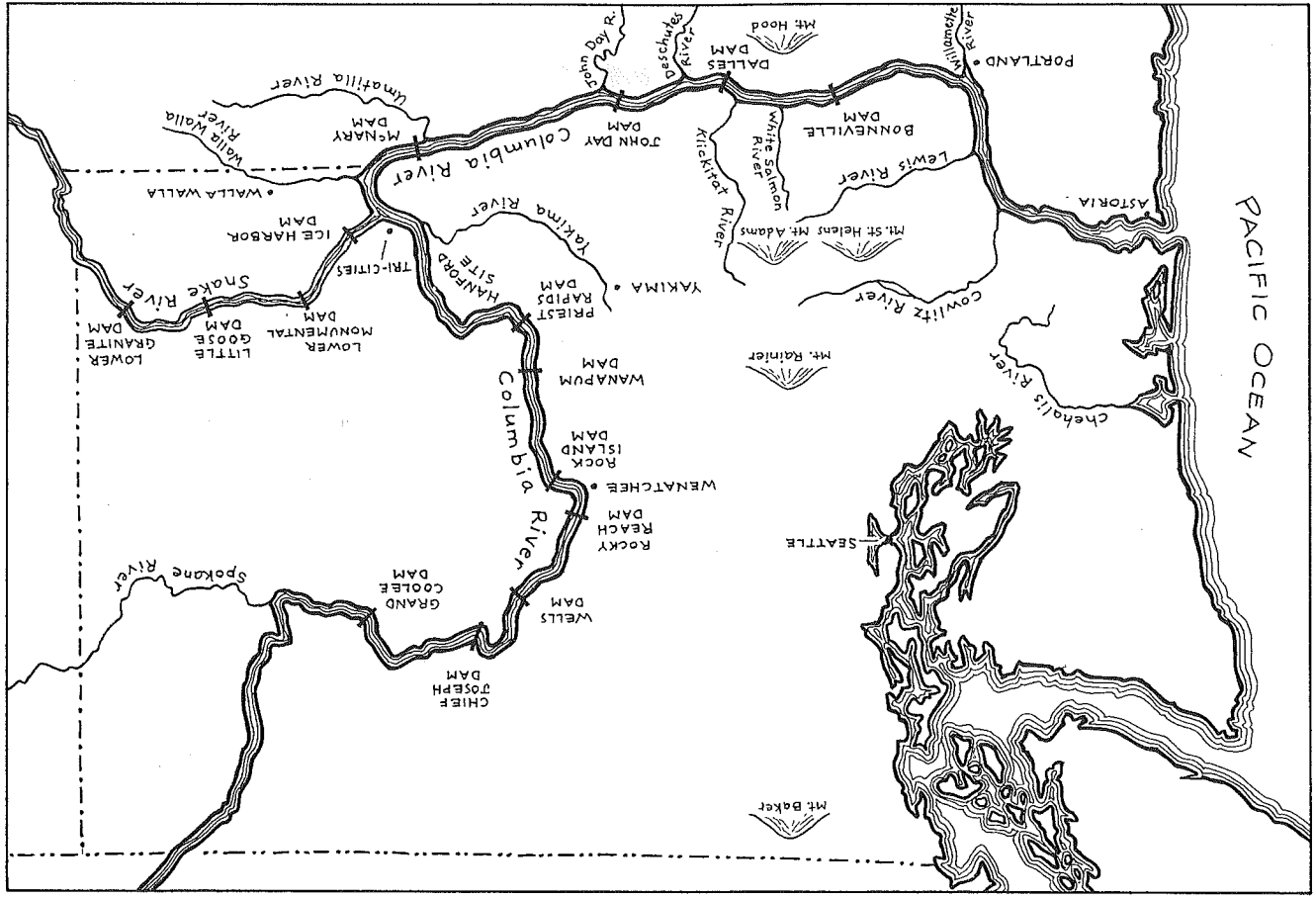
Although the paucity of literature on the Columbia did not constitute a total bibliographic drought, the sudden interest in Columbia River studies during the 1990s rose as quickly as the waters during the river's great 1894 flood. The reasons for this interest in Columbia studies are complex, but there is little question that the environmental condition of the river was at least partly responsible. Beginning in the late 1970s, scientists and managers of federal and state river operations realized that declining fish populations indicated a significant change in the river's natural recuperative power. The decades of increasing industrial, residential, and agricultural development in the basin had produced troubling evidence of environmental deterioration. The principal warning came from the plight of anadromous fish runs on the Columbia and its major tributaries. Publication of Anthony Netboy's *The Columbia River Salmon and Steelhead Trout: Their Fight for Survival* in 1980 had documented in strong language and with passionate purpose the worrisome future that faced salmon in the Columbia River Basin. The fate of salmon soon became nearly synonymous with the condition of the river.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, as river specialists studied conditions on the river and as state legislatures, Congress, and regulatory agencies made new policies, the public became more and more aware that a decades-long neglect of the Columbia's health probably mandated intensive care. Fay Cohen's *Treaties on Trial* in 1982 added to the list of significant river problems the plight and struggle of native peoples to regain their rightful place as fishers on the Columbia. By the early 1990s, hardly a week went by without publication of a major news story about the Columbia's ills or planned remedies. Ironically, this new interest in the Columbia only brushed up against the river's history; the public focused on the

future—what could be done to fix the Columbia? The river's past, on the occasions when it was invoked in discussions, became contested, the text of arguments about what activity or what group should accept blame for the Columbia's deteriorating condition.<sup>2</sup>

It took the addition of another kind of stimulant to fire up new historical investigations of the Columbia. In 1992, while the Atlantic world commemorated Columbus's landfall in the West Indies in 1492, groups in the Pacific Northwest observed the bicentennial of major Euroamerican explorations that took place in the region 300 years later: Robert Gray's anchoring in the mouth of the Columbia River, George Vancouver's explorations of Puget Sound, and Alejandro Malaspina's expedition to the North Pacific Coast. As part of the Maritime Bicentennial that included exhibitions and commemorative events in Canada and the United States, the two-year-old Center for Columbia River History sponsored a major conference that focused attention on the history of the Columbia River, from pre-contact to the late twentieth century. Dedicated to the study of the Columbia River Basin, the Center is a regional educational and public history consortium of the Washington State Historical Society, Portland State University, and Washington State University, Vancouver. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Center planned and staged a three-day meeting held in Vancouver, Washington, on the north bank of the Columbia.

Conference planners recognized the dearth of modern studies about the river and crafted a program that approached the Columbia's past through several disciplines. Specialists in economic history, social history, anthropology, literature, family studies, art, and linguistics addressed large questions about Columbia River history, with particular emphasis on how human communities have related to the river over time. The essays in this volume are revised versions of selected papers presented at that conference. It is clear from these essays that the river's power extends well beyond measurements of kilowatts generated or fish caught and marketed. As physical force and cultural metaphor, the river flows through communities in ways that affect economic activities, social relationships, political action, artistic expression, and cultural



exchanges. It can be said without exaggeration that little happens in the Columbia's drainage, especially in the late twentieth century, that does not carry the river's mark. Perhaps more importantly, little happens in the basin that does not reflect some measure of the Columbia's history. That is the larger message conveyed by these essays: the river's past is a dynamic presence in our lives.

The Columbia's historical connection with human communities reaches back ten millennia to the early Holocene, after the great Pleistocene floods scraped the topsoil off the Columbia Plateau, flushed millions of acres of water down the Gorge, and floated glacial erratics in icebergs clear up the Willamette River valley. Early archaeological evidence of fishing communities on the Columbia date to 9,000 B.P. Other evidence, including the largest Clovis point found in North America, discovered just west of Wenatchee, Washington, on the Columbia, documents a continual human presence in the basin. Descendants of these populations and other groups who moved into the region hundreds of years ago created cultures that relied on the Columbia for sustenance and meaning. In this volume's opening essay, University of Washington ethnobotanist Eugene Hunn explains how thoroughly the culture of the Columbia's indigenous people embraced the river environment and especially how powerfully central this connection has remained to native culture. It is evident, Hunn argues, in Indian oral literature about the Columbia, in the names of places, in the knowledge of botanical resources, and in the determination to preserve their connections to the landscape expressed by tribal representatives at the 1855 treaty councils. The focus on preservation of place and the right to live in close proximity to the riverine environment continued from early twentieth century court cases to the *Belloni* and *Boldt* decisions in the 1960s and 1970s.

Evidence of the deeper connection between Indian people and the environment appears on the landscape on basalt blocks, canyon walls, and cliffs throughout the Columbia River Basin. For thousands of years, Columbia natives created pictographs and petroglyphs to express their ideas and visions about the world and their place in it. In his essay, William

Layman investigates some of the most remarkable examples of this oldest art on the Columbia Plateau along the upper river near present-day Wenatchee. Layman also tells about the documentation of the images and about the dilemmas that faced dam-builders and native people when river impoundments inundated rock art sites. Although interpretation of the figures and geometric designs is problematic, Layman makes it clear that there is communication in the figures on basalt that spans generations, even millennia. The sites are sacred places, preserving the artistic expressions of some of the region's earliest people and connecting present-day Indians with a spiritual landscape.

In the Columbian world, during the early years of contact between native and non-native people, linguistic barriers created the need to invent language to facilitate trade and social communication. The Chinook Jargon, a combination of words and phrases from native and European languages, became the trade patois of the Columbia and much of the Pacific Northwest. Henry Zenk's translation of William McKay's centennial address in Astoria in 1892 underscores both the utility and the limitations of Chinook Jargon, while also emphasizing the ideas and viewpoints that Indian and non-Indian locutors most easily shared. The Jargon, Zenk explains, had fewer than one thousand words, yet it served trading and social interests at fur posts, in treaty talks, and at major trading locations like Celilo Falls. Chinook Jargon brought focus to the meeting of people from several cultures.

If the use of Chinook Jargon epitomized the social challenges of the encounter between native and non-native people on the river, the dynamic importance of the great trade mart in the Gorge—The Dalles—Celilo Falls complex—epitomized the breadth and speed of change that overtook the Indian world on the Columbia. As James Ronda lyrically suggests, it is the perfect place to view what the Columbia River has been to all of the people who have lived in its influence. Ronda recalls the geographic confusions about the “River of the West,” including the provenance of the term “Oregon” and how Euroamericans found the river and set about inventing it for their own purposes. The Columbia received its name from Robert Gray's vessel, but Ronda argues that the idea of

the river is much older and the changes made to it have been the text of relationships between itself and its people.

The overlanders who rushed to Oregon during the 1840s came to the Columbia near The Dalles, where they made a decision to descend the river through the Gorge on rafts and in boats or to snake their way around Mt. Hood on the trail blazed by Samuel Barlow and Joel Palmer in 1845. This way to Oregon, however, was not the only route, as Patricia Limerick reminds us in her description of the maritime approach to the Columbia River. The treacherous bar at the mouth of the Columbia distinguishes it from other great western rivers, and the heroics often invoked in its crossing give the river historical episodes that more than match tales from other great streams. Limerick finds riverine connections between dramatic events, such as the fate of the *Tonquin* in 1811 and William Broughton's standoff against an Indian armada in 1792, as indicative of the Columbia's place as a borderland and as a causeway. It is the ironic that Limerick highlights, and it is in irony that the genuine meaning of the Columbia is often found.

There is in the settling in Oregon and on the Columbia an irony that tests the importance of heroics of migration to the river, whether from The Dalles or from the Pacific. The heroics of settlement, as Lillian Schlissel hauntingly describes, burdened family and women in ways forgotten about or purposefully lost. Abigail Malick's experience in Vancouver is not easily forgotten, and its meaning extends well beyond the boundaries of one family. The Malick story is emblematic of the massive changes that would take place on the Columbia, where a new culture became dominant during the nineteenth century, pushing native people to the margins as it struggled to transfer earlier pioneering experiences to the Pacific Northwest. That culture came from a people in motion, from invaders who brought with them a litany of ideas about environment, cultural hegemony, and economic activity that would re-make the region.

What happened next on the Columbia is understood most forcefully in the range of literature that describes the river and its people. Richard Etulain is the acknowledged master of this field, and his survey of the Co-

lumbia's literature—from early discussions of the region by Frances Fuller Victor to the novels of Nard Jones and Craig Lesley—lets us see how the larger culture has dealt with the potential for human achievement on the river and the environmental sacrifice it endured. The latest stage in the literary history of the river, Etulain explains, is what might be called the postindustrial and perhaps postrregional expression, which puts the Columbia in a more reflective and global context.

The new literature on the Columbia comes directly from the realization that the river has been an extremely powerful unifying feature in the Pacific Northwest. The federalization of the river, especially through the construction of major engineering works from the mid-1930s to the mid-1970s, is one of the focal points in the volume's concluding essay. The spirit of the Columbia, as understood and expressed through the region's culture, is intertwined with the river's utilitarian role in the human community. Engineers, commercial fishers, and river managers see the Columbia from markedly different angles than Indian fishers, environmentalists, and recreationists do, but there is a shared response to the river that dares us to separate the instrumental from the spiritual, the beautiful from the functional. There is a unity in the effect the Columbia has had on the Pacific Northwest, especially during the twentieth century, even if the consequences to the river have been frighteningly problematic and divisive of human community. There is seeming paradox here—unity creating division—but the reality is found in the range of human responses to the Columbia and in the reluctance of anyone to give up any one response in favor of another.

The essays in this volume underscore the complexity of the relationships between people and their river in the Pacific Northwest. They also pursue the purpose of the Great River of the West conference—to direct new and serious attention to the Columbia. Conversations at the conference spilled out into the hallways and raised dozens of ancillary issues that demanded attention. Some in the audience had come to the conference because they had already begun work on Columbia River topics and wanted to pursue their ideas. William Dietrich's *Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River* was among the first books to appear in the amaz-

ing outpouring of work on the river during the years after the conference. A Pulitzer Prize-winning science reporter for the *Seattle Times* and author of *The Final Forest*, Dietrich approached the Columbia as a historical, political, and economic place. His questions about how people had lived with the river during the last two hundred years led him to conclude that what our industrial civilization has done to the Columbia is both tragic and desperately in need of revision. Historian Richard White arrived at a similar conclusion in his brilliant *Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*. White takes apart the conventional separation of the “natural” river from the “artificial” by arguing that the Columbia has been changed so fundamentally that it is in many ways a new river, one that has been tailored for human needs and human dreams. In White’s book, the Columbia stands as a metaphor for the late twentieth century’s misunderstanding of how human culture is intertwined with the environment.<sup>3</sup>

Engineering radically altered the river, and the largest of the engineering projects on the Columbia was Grand Coulee, the focus of another recent book, Paul Pitzer’s *Grand Coulee: Harnessing a Dream*. Pitzer takes readers deep into the great dam’s interior and explains how engineers solved vexing problems in spanning the Columbia. He also makes it clear that building Grand Coulee was as much a work of political engineering as it was civil engineering, taking nearly two decades of bureaucratic and legislative conflict before the federal government agreed to fund such an enormous structure so removed from population centers. The dam provided much needed employment during the Depression, but it also sent the lion’s share of its power after 1943 to another engineering development on the river—the Hanford Engineering Works. The controversies—political and historical—about what happened along the banks of the Columbia from 1944 until well into the 1980s are detailed in Michael D’Antonio’s *Atomic Harvest*, Michelle Stenjem Gerber’s *On the Home Front: The Cold War Legacy of the Hanford Nuclear Site*, and John Findlay and Bruce Hevly’s edited volume, *The Atomic West*.<sup>4</sup>

Hanford’s history is emblematic of what has taken place on the Columbia during the twentieth century. On the one hand, it is a tale of triumphal science and engineering, one of the nation’s remarkable wartime achievements; but on the other hand, it is a dystopian story that includes radionuclide pollution of the river and a legacy of unmeasured danger to human health. The channelization, damming, and impounding of the Columbia had generally received praise for creating new wealth, but the focus on environmental deterioration prodded researchers to ask increasingly critical questions about the engineered river. Some recent studies, such as Blaine Harden’s *A River Lost*, have been polemically critical of engineering decisions on the river. Other evaluations of the benefits and casualties of river management, such as Keith Petersen’s superb study of the lower Snake River dams, *River of Life, Channel of Death*, and Joseph Cone’s *A Common Fate*, have taken a measured look at how relationships between key economic interests and governmental policies led to environmentally disastrous alterations to the river. Yet others, such as Lisa Mighetto and Wes Ebel’s *Saving the Salmon*, defend government actions on the Columbia in mitigating the deleterious effects of engineering on anadromous fish, provide extensive documentation, such as Joseph Cone and Sandy Ridlington’s sourcebook, *The Northwest Salmon Crisis*, or critique policies, as Joseph Taylor does in *Making Salmon*.<sup>5</sup>

Since the Great River of the West conference in 1992, the humanistic side of the Columbia’s recent history has drawn increasing attention in community histories, collected essays, memoirs, and poetry. Evocative treatments of Columbia River environments, with an emphasis on the dimensions of place, are the focus of Kim Stafford’s *Having Everything Right*. The insightful and penetrating poetic vision of mid-Columbia Indian poet Elizabeth Woody in *Luminaries of the Humble* reminds readers of the deep cultural connections with the river that continue in the native community regardless of and in reaction to the dislocations modern engineering has forced on river people. Reactions among other ethnic communities on the Columbia are described in Irene Martin’s *Legacy and Testament* about the fishing town of Skamakowa on the lower river and

in Linda Tamura's *Hood River Issei*, which uses oral history to portray the trials and achievements of Japanese settlers in the Gorge.<sup>6</sup>

Increased interest in the river during the 1990s also drew writers who wanted to experience the Columbia firsthand. Sam McKinney took his boat along the shoreline and among the islands of the lower river in *Reach of Tide, Ring of History*, to find out how small towns prospered and waned in their relationships with the Columbia. Following in the wakes of other river descenders, from David Thompson to G. B. Forde to M. J. Lorraine, Robin Cody took the measure of the full reach of the Columbia in his canoe by paddling from Columbia Lake in British Columbia to Astoria. His *Voyage of a Summer Sun* is part experiential memoir and part commentary on the character of the engineered Columbia. Cody's commentary on the altered riverine environment complemented ecologist Robert Michael Pyle's *Wintergreen*, an open-eyed and critical evaluation of the effects of industrial logging on the lower Columbia.<sup>7</sup>

More than any other topic or force, environmental change has stimulated the renewed interest and writing about the river, but this modern focus has also regenerated interest in some of the traditional subjects of Columbia studies. The incredible exploits and journeys of Nor'Wester David Thompson are related and documented in Jack Nisbet's *Sources of the River* and Barbara Belyea's *Columbia Journals*. Robert Gray's historic sailing into the river has been retold in *Columbia's River* by Richard Nokes and in John Scofield's *Hail, Columbia*. The history of the Columbia District of the Hudson's Bay Company has received modern treatment in Richard Mackie's *Trading Beyond the Mountains* and James Gibson's *The Lifeline of the Oregon Country*, while the trade relationships with Columbia River Indians have been meticulously detailed in Theodore Stern's two-volume study of Fort Nez Percés, *Chiefs and Chief Traders*, and Robert Boyd's *People of The Dalles*.<sup>8</sup>

New works are likely to focus more on the Columbia's future, which is sure to be highly contested, and less on the heroic and distant past. Powerful economic interests will contend for advantageous uses of the river's wealth, while river communities will continue to adjust to changing patterns of development and social investments. How to maintain

some balance among competing interests in public decision-making about the Columbia has been the subject of a pile of government studies and reports. Kai Lee, in *Compass and Gyroscope*, proposes some systemic changes that might make decision-making less contentious, but it is clear from recent literature that no easy answers are at hand. Among the collaborative efforts on the river, one stands out as at least partially successful. The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, created in 1986, melded the jurisdictions and interests of federal, county, state, and municipal governments along a 140-mile stretch of spectacularly scenic riverine environments. Carl Abbott, Sy Adler, and Margery Abbott, in *Planning a New West*, interpret the history of this pathbreaking environmental legislation and evaluate its potential as a guide for managing the Columbia's complex environment. The conclusion Abbott and his coauthors reach echoes some results of the Great River of the West conference deliberations that are embedded in this volume. Ignorance of the Columbia's history has contributed to many of the errors in management on the river that have become so evident in the 1990s. Reflection on the history of the Columbia River and its human communities—from ten millennia ago to the present era—is among the best preparations for understanding tomorrow's challenges.<sup>9</sup>

This volume is the result of a collaborative effort. The original grant and program relied on the advice of a remarkable group of scholars and public historians who planned the NEH conference in Vancouver: Sue Armitage, Barbara Allen Bogart, Robert Carriker, Rick Harmon, William L. Lang, Donald Meinig, Laurie Mercier, Keith Petersen, James Ronda, Jennifer Jeffries Thompson, and William Willingham. Additional support in the NEH program came from David Nicandri, William G. Robbins, Eckard Toy, and the participation of scholars who gave presentations in regional conferences during 1992–1993. This book is the better for editorial advice from Julidta Tarver, Managing Editor at University of Washington Press, and it would be far less graceful without Marianne Keddington's perceptive and skillful editing.

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## NOTES

1. Anthony Netboy, *The Columbia River Salmon and Steelhead Trout: Their Fight for Survival* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980).
2. Fay Cohen, *Treaties on Trial: The Continuing Controversy Over Northwest Indian Fishing Rights* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986).
3. William Dietrich, *Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996).
4. Michael D'Antonio, *Atomic Harvest: Hanford and the Lethal Toll of America's Nuclear Arsenal* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993); Bruce Hevly and John Findlay, eds., *The Atomic West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); Michelle Stenjem Gerber, *On the Home Front: The Cold War Legacy of the Hanford Nuclear Site* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Paul Pitzer, *Grand Coulee: Harnessing a Dream* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1994).
5. Joseph Cone, *A Common Fate: Endangered Salmon and the People of the Pacific Northwest* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1997); Joseph Cone and Sandy Ridlington, eds., *The Northwest Salmon Crisis: A Documentary History* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1997); Blaine Harden, *A River Lost: The Life and Death of the Columbia River* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Lisa Mighetto and Wes Ebel, *Saving the Salmon* (Seattle: Historical Research Associates, 1994); Keith Petersen, *River of Life, Channel of Death: Fish and Dams on the Lower Snake* (Lewiston: Confluence Press, 1995); Joseph Taylor III, *Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).
6. Irene Martin, *Legacy and Testament: The Story of the Columbia River Gillnetters* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1994); Kim Stafford, *Having Everything Right: Essays of Place* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1997); Linda Tamura, *Hood River Issei* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Elizabeth Woody, *Luminaries of the Humble* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994).
7. Sam McKinney, *Reach of Tide, Ring of History* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1987); Robin Cody, *Voyage of a Summer Sun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Robert Michael Pyle, *Wintergreen: Listening to the Land's Heart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).
8. Barbara Belyea, *Columbia Journals: David Thompson* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); James Gibson, *The Lifeline of the Oregon Country: The Fraser-Columbia Brigade System, 1811-47* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997); Richard Somerset Mackie, *Trading Beyond the*

*Mountains* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997); Jack Nisbet, *Sources of the River: Tracking David Thompson Across Western North America* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1994); J. Richard Nokes, *Columbia's River: The Voyages of Robert Gray, 1878-1793* (Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1992); John Scofield, *Hail, Columbia: Robert Gray, John Kendrick and the Pacific Fur Trade* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1993); Theodore Stern, *Chiefs and Chief Traders* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1993); Robert Boyd, *People of The Dalles: The Indians of Wascopum Mission* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

9. Carl Abbott, Sy Adler, and Margery Post Abbott, *Planning a New West: The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1997); Kai Lee, *Compass and Gyroscope: Integrating Science and Politics for the Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993).

whites are known in Indian—peaceably, but with a mix of fear and anticipation. They had heard rumors and prophecies of their coming, and they had heard of the whites' great material wealth, of their pale skin, of their magic book. They helped these first explorers in many ways. Without the Indians' forbearance and the generous gifts of fish, of root-cakes, and of advice and information about the road ahead, the explorers would likely not have returned to the East to tell their tales, to publish the journals on which we now rely for a glimpse into an independent Indian way of life.

The First Peoples spoke Salishan, Sahaptian, and Chinookan languages, languages as disparate as English, Hindi, Turkish, and Japanese. These languages found subtlety and power in the orations of chiefs and the sacred storytelling by the elders of Coyote's great doings at the close of the Myth Age. Without writing, these Indians nevertheless faithfully transmitted ten thousand years of accumulated knowledge and insight through the generations. Some elders still tell these stories to a new generation of Indian children, and the quiet eloquence of chiefs still guides council deliberations. In January 1992, I was invited to a meeting at Celilo of the Columbia River Indian people, an informally constituted council led by Rock Creek, Klickitat, and Celilo chiefs. There was no formal agenda, but a number of critical issues were before them, such as a new education program for the children of Celilo and how to respond to the federal government's latest *in lieu* fishing site proposals. A point of contention was their relationship as the *original* Columbia River peoples to the established tribal governments at Yakama and Warm Springs reservations, governments that claim to represent their interests. Chief Howard Jim presided. All present were urged to speak their minds—or, in the native idiom, their hearts. Those in command of the Indian language spoke in Sahaptian, which was then translated for those who could not fully understand what was said. The people of Celilo have a lot of worrisome problems. Their lives are not easy, and they feel a heavy sense of loss when they speak of how things used to be when the Columbia River was theirs alone. They insist the river is still theirs.

## What Ever Happened to the First Peoples of the Columbia?

BY EUGENE S. HUNN

The First Peoples of the Big River, of Nch'i-Wána—the Columbia as we know it today—live on the river still. They call it home. They come together each year in April at Celilo, Priest Rapids, and Rock Creek to thank the Creator for the sacred foods—salmon, bitterroot, Indian celeries, huckleberries, and water—that still sustain their spirit; and they clean the graves of their ancestors each Memorial Day—those graves not drowned beneath the dams, that is—returning to the old cemeteries that overlook the river. These First Peoples have their own history to tell, a continuing saga, a contemporary history that is poorly known beyond their own communities. I will try to sketch that history for you, relying on my reading of the documentary record and on what Columbia River Indians have taught me of these matters. It is a dynamic history, tragic and inspiring by turns.

The First Peoples of the Columbia are the direct descendants of the men and women whom Lewis and Clark and David Thompson encountered on their pioneering journeys of exploration as the nineteenth century opened. The First Peoples greeted these aliens—these *shuyapu*, as

Where should we begin with the First Peoples' story? Perhaps with Luther Cressman's discovery of a basalt knife embedded 200 feet above the present level of the Columbia River in gravels of the glacial Lake Missoula flood. This flood carved the Grand Coulee and scraped the channelled scablands to bedrock. It was set loose perhaps 12,800 to 15,000 years ago. The great lake, impounded by a tongue of the Cordilleran ice cap in what is now western Montana, broke loose in one great sweep across the Columbia Basin.<sup>1</sup> Was the man who formed the knife swept off with that flood?

Cressman was also involved with salvage excavations at Fivemile Rapids before the waters rose in 1957, impounded by The Dalles Dam. Such salvage operations have been the norm for archaeological research along the mid-Columbia, one step ahead of progress. Cressman found a record of intensive salmon fishing at the rapids dating to 10,000 years ago—including the use of gill nets, suggested by the presence of grooved stone weights that may have been used to hold the nets in position. During subsequent millennia, styles of tool manufacture changed as the climate first grew warmer and then stabilized several millennia ago, closely approximating present-day conditions. About that time, the bow and arrow supplanted the *atlatl* as the hunting weapon of choice. The indigenous population no doubt increased gradually over those ten thousand years, but remained in balance with the foods the earth offered.

Were the first occupants of these Columbia River archaeological sites the ancestors of Howard Jim and his people? This issue has been front-page news since the discovery of the fine Clovis points in an East Wenatchee orchard in 1989. Should modern Indians claim hereditary rights to these ancient artifacts? The languages spoken by the Clovis hunters would not have been intelligible to present-day Sahaptin or Salishan speakers, just as we could not have understood the speech of Medieval England, but cultural continuity is undeniable through four hundred generations of Columbia River Indian people.

From the First Peoples' perspective, of course, Indians have always been on the Columbia River, at least since the great traveler Coyote—

known as Spilyay on the middle Columbia—prepared the world for their coming, bringing to a close the Age of Myth. These stories, told only in winter, are still told in a few fortunate families. They tell how Coyote made Celilo Falls, releasing the salmon trapped below the Swallow Sisters' dam. He tricked them by disguising himself as a baby strapped to a cradle board, abandoned to the river's current and rafted up against their dam. They took him in, and he stole the opportunity to dig channels through their dam while they were off in the hills gathering roots. Until those channels were flooded by The Dalles Dam, salmon ran up them past a gauntlet of Indian fishermen. Coyote's cradle board could be seen at the lip of Celilo Falls on the Washington side, turned to stone, until it was blasted away to make room for a footing for a railroad bridge. The mythical cradle board and the rock, called *sk'in* in Sahaptin, gave a name to the large north bank village at the foot of Celilo Falls, where Lewis and Clark recorded seventeen lodges of Indians on October 22, 1805.

A short distance up the river from Celilo Falls at the head of Miller Island—as we call it—is a deep hole at the foot of a steep bank on the Washington shore. That is where Naysh-hla, the Swallowing Monster, lived, devouring people. The monster swallowed Grizzly Bear, Cougar, and Rattlesnake, but it met its match when it swallowed Coyote. Coyote built a fire beneath the monster's heart and cut it down, feeding the monster's fat to the hungry people trapped inside. You can still see the groove in the hillside where Coyote was dragged down into the monster's maw. Pieces of the monster were scattered over the surrounding terrain, giving rise to the many Indian peoples who would soon occupy the land. Columbia River elders say they were put on this earth by the Creator and were given the Sacred Law by Coyote. They have been told this by their grandparents before them. But this is not what we style "history."

Just on the "other side of history"—that is, just on the other side of *written* history—a strange animal appears on the scene, a beast the size of an elk but, like the dog, a "pet." Today, the horse is called *k'usi* in Sahaptin and a dog is *k'usi-k'usi*, "little horse." At first, horses were treated

as curiosities, but they soon became an integral part of the Plateau Indian way of life, much as the automobile has captured the imagination and restructured the lives of modern Americans. The Horse Heaven Hills above the serene, stark landscape east of The Dalles came alive with horses. A Sahaptin legend recorded by Lucullus McWhorter attributes the phenomenal spread of horses in the Columbia interior to the mating of a stallion from somewhere to the east with a local girl, the daughter of a chief. They emerged with their offspring from a lake, perhaps the same lake that modern elders locate at Roosevelt, Washington, where mysterious dogs emerge at night to leave tracks on its shore.<sup>2</sup> Local tribes still protect their wild horse herds, though the great herds of the Horse Heaven Hills and elsewhere in the Plateau have been exterminated to make room for ranches and farms. It is ironic that Spanish horses have now become a prime symbol of Indian tradition.

Regardless of where Plateau Indian horses originated—whether from fleeing Spanish colonists on the Rio Grande or from the depth of a magic lake—the cultural transformation they wrought on the Plateau was indigenous in inspiration. Horses fit the Plateau way of life like a glove. In the open country east of the Cascades, horses thrived on the wild bunch grasses, required little special attention, yet multiplied a person's wealth and status as well as enhancing mobility. These people were accustomed to a seasonal round that took families each year over hundreds of miles of trail. They traveled from their winter home villages on the Columbia to nearby early spring root camps, then to gatherings at major fisheries for the spring salmon runs, and then high into the nearest mountains for roots to put away for the next winter. In early summer, they joined hundreds of families at the camas meadows, then climbed higher to the huckleberry camps where the hunting was good before returning to the river for the last fall fishing. Then they headed back home to rebuild their winter lodges.

Horses also brought less sanguine changes in their wake. Mounted raiding parties from the southeast might unexpectedly attack a Columbia River Indian village or camp, killing the men and carrying off the women and children into slavery as war captives. When Lewis and Clark

asked about the concentration of villages on the north bank of the Columbia or on islands in the river, they were informed that it was a defense against "Snake Indian" raids. Columbia River Indians returned the favor, raiding Paiute camps far south of normal seasonal haunts. Mounted intertribal parties traveled east across the Continental Divide led by Flathead and Nez Perce warriors, dodging Blackfoot Indian parties to pursue the great bison herds. The motive for the trips was apparently not primarily to acquire meat, though dried meat was sometimes packed home, but rather to obtain valuable bison hides and, one suspects, for the thrill of it. By the 1830s, The Dalles was notorious as a slave market.

One significant consequence of the enhanced mobility was an expansion of social horizons. It seems likely that Plateau Indians first learned of white people from bison hunting parties who had heard about the fur trappers and traders from their Plains Indian allies. Perhaps one such hunting party came home with smallpox, unleashing it on their unsuspecting kin. An epidemic on the Plains in 1782 may have been the source of the first documented smallpox epidemic on the Columbia River, though the Northwest Indians may have been infected a few years earlier from coastal trading ships.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus had set in motion a bold experiment in human contact, which precipitated a biological exchange of unprecedented magnitude. Historian Arthur Crosby has detailed the global impact of the exchange of new crops and domesticated animals that followed hard on Columbus's first voyage. The exchange was roughly balanced. The New World got Old World wheat, rice, sugar cane, coffee, chickens, beef cattle, sheep, and horses. The Old World adopted New World maize, potatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava, peanuts, black beans, chili peppers, and tobacco. But Crosby also documents the more sinister biological exchange of lethal pathogens. This exchange was grossly unequal. The New World was infected by Old World scourges such as smallpox, malaria, yellow fever, measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, plague, influenza, and gonorrhea. In return, the Old World received—it is believed—just one new epidemic malady, syphilis, which first broke out in Italy in 1493.<sup>3</sup> Syphilis was the AIDS of its day and age, yet the ef-

fects of that disease in Europe, Asia, and Africa can scarcely be compared to the devastation brought down on native America by the Old World epidemic diseases.

Why such a disproportionate exchange? The Old World had passed the Neolithic transition three millennia before the New World peoples of Mexico and Peru, and the dense urban masses of medieval cities had provided a rich soil for the evolution of deadly epidemic disease agents. Because the New World was too young a population to have produced such pathogens, Native Americans had neither a genetic nor a physiological resistance to the diseases. As a consequence, Columbia River Indians witnessed the distressing situation of new diseases killing their people mercilessly but having little or no effect on the white people who had come to live among them. The Indians were quick to draw a reasonable conclusion: the diseases had been brought by whites for the purpose of destroying them.

Smallpox was one of the worst killers. The first pandemic in the New World broke out in Hispaniola in 1519. It swept Cortes to power in Mexico and marched ahead of Pizarro into the Inca realm, rendering that great empire impotent against the triumphant conqueror. Did that great epidemic also reach into the Northwest? Some archaeologists believe that sites near Chief Joseph Dam in present-day Washington hold evidence of a sharp decline in population at about that time. The earliest positive evidence of smallpox on the river dates to about 1780, when the pockmarked middle-aged Indians seen by Lewis and Clark on the Lower Columbia probably contracted the disease. There are somewhat later accounts for the Nez Perce. It is estimated that a "virgin soil" epidemic of smallpox will kill an average of 30 percent of the affected population before it runs its course. The survivors have a hard-won immunity, but the next generation may suffer another outbreak, feeding on the young people born since the last epidemic.

The second epidemic on the Columbia came in 1801 and coincided with a heavy rain of ash from Mount St. Helens. The two events inspired eschatological prophecies by Plateau seers who predicted the coming of

the whites and the end of the world. One Spokane prophet's words from that time were recorded in 1844 by members of the Wilkes Expedition: "Soon there will come from the rising sun a different kind of man from any you have yet seen, who will bring with them a book and will teach you everything, and after that the world will fall to pieces."<sup>4</sup> Lewis and Clark arrived soon after the epidemic hit. They were followed in short order by Astorians and Nor'Westers competing for control of the globe-girdling fur trade. As early as 1811, Columbia River Indians at The Dalles confronted David Thompson: "When you passed going down to the sea [the month before], we were all strong in life, but what is this we hear . . . is it true that the white men . . . have brought with them the Small Pox to destroy us?"<sup>5</sup>

Disease is more than a malfunction of the body. Disease calls into question one's right to live. It infects the victim and the victim's family and community with grave moral doubts. Why me? What have I done to deserve this? Such questions are only natural. The belief that disease is sent as punishment or in retribution or that it is induced by hostile foes is widely shared by human cultures. We ourselves—prideful though we are in our advanced medical knowledge—are not immune to such thoughts. Witness the common reaction to the victims of AIDS, a disease that carries with it a strong moral stigma. Imagine, then, how the First Peoples of the Columbia might have felt when stricken with this new array of diseases. In traditional Plateau Indian belief, disease was assumed to be personal. It was a spiritual wound inflicted by a hostile Indian doctor, and the cure required the counterforce of a more powerful Indian doctor allied with the victim. Native doctors—also called shamans because they cured by means of the spirit powers they controlled—were powerless to treat the new diseases. The curative power of faith was broken. Smohalla, a well-known prophet and religious teacher of Priest Rapids, told an army investigator in 1884:

"Before . . . there was lirtle sickness among us, but since then many of us have died. I have had children and grandchildren, but they are

all dead. My last grandchild, a young woman of 16, died last month. If only her infant son could have lived . . . I labored hard to save them, but my medicine would not work as it used to."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the destruction of the Indians was "the will of God," as some whites loudly proclaimed. In November 1847, acting on the belief that "Marcus Whitman many years ago made a long journey to the east [in 1842] to get a bottle of poison for us," a group of Cayuse warriors overwhelmed Whitman's mission near Walla Walla, killing him, his wife Narcissa, and perhaps ten other unfortunate witnesses to the event.<sup>7</sup> Soon, the missions closed, and the great Hudson's Bay Company pulled out of what had by then become United States territory.

The white settlers established in Oregon Territory reacted to the Whitman incident with alarm and hastily organized parties of irregular militia to pursue the murderers. The federal government also responded, directing the army to establish control in the "Indian country" east of the Cascades. Thus the stage was set for the treaty councils of 1855. Governor Isaac Stevens and General Joel Palmer, each in charge of Indian affairs for their respective territories of Washington and Oregon, prepared a careful plan to divest the Indians of the largest part of their land, "to purchase all their country," as Stevens's secretary phrased it.<sup>8</sup> Stevens and Palmer subsequently negotiated ten treaties in the two territories during 1854 and 1855. All were duly ratified by the distant Senate and signed into law by President Buchanan. The treaties, modeled on documents that had proved useful in dealing with Indian tribes on the Missouri, all followed the same outline and used much the same language.

The Yakama treaty begins by naming the signatory parties:

Articles of agreement and convention made and concluded at the treaty ground . . . by and between Isaac I. Stevens . . . on the part of the United States, and the undersigned head chiefs, chiefs, headmen, and delegates of the . . . confederated tribes and bands of Indians, occupying lands herein after bounded and described . . . *who for the purposes of this treaty are to be considered as one nation,*

under the name of "Yakama," with Kamaiakun as head chief, *on behalf of and acting for* said tribes and bands, and being *duly authorized thereto by them* . . . hereby cede, relinquish, and convey to the United States all their right, title, and interest in and to the lands and country occupied and claimed by them, and bounded and described as follows . . . [emphasis added].<sup>9</sup>

Heavy words. Note how a "nation" was invented and a "head chief" appointed—by Governor Stevens, of course. The "head chief" was granted unprecedented powers, powers that no indigenous leader had ever claimed or entertained, the power to sell 10 million acres of Mother Earth on behalf of dozens of autonomous village communities within the ceded area boundaries. Kamiakan had little to say at the council deliberations and subsequently refused the title Stevens gave him along with the \$500 annuity that came with it. Instead, he took to the field of war in one last desperate effort to assert the independence of his people.

Though the Yakama, Nez Perce, and Umatilla treaties were duly "signed" at the Walla Walla Council, the official record of the deliberations clearly indicates the great ambivalence felt by the Indian participants. For example, the entries for June 7 and 8 read in part as follows:

The Walla Wallas, Cayuses and Umatillas, were understood as consenting to the Treaty, though some of the Cayuses did not assent and seemed much dissatisfied. The Yakimas still held back. June 8th. Friday. Much discussion and agitation among the Indians. The Cayuse and Walla Wallas retract. Kam-i-ah-kun is understood to express himself in favor of *some* Treaty, but does not agree directly to the one proposed.<sup>10</sup>

Then the Nez Perce chief Looking Glass rode into the council fresh from hunting buffalo in Montana. He cried out: "My people what have you done? While I was gone you have sold my country. I have come home and there is not left me a place on which I pitch my lodge."<sup>11</sup>

Lawrence Kip, a lieutenant in the army, attended the council as an

observer. His accounts of the speeches of the Indian leaders are more extensive than those in the official record, yet seemingly garbled, unless we are to attribute to the Indian orators an uncharacteristic mental confusion. Young Chief, a Cayuse, is recorded at some length on a theme introduced by the rhetorical question,

I wonder if the ground ["earth" might be a more faithful translation] has anything to say? I wonder if the ground is listening to what is said? . . . The ground says, "It is the Great Spirit that placed me here . . . the Great Spirit tells me to take care of the Indians, to feed them right. . . ." The Great Spirit said, "You Indians who take care of certain portions of the country should not trade it off."

Young Chief immediately followed these statements with the old caveat, "except you get a fair price."<sup>12</sup>

Governor Stevens went on the attack, chiding the Indian leaders for their reticence and their ambivalence:

Kamiakin, the great Chief of the Yakimas, has not spoken at all, his people have no voice here today. He is not ashamed to speak? He is not afraid to speak? Then speak out. Owhi [Kamiakin's uncle and Upper Yakima chief] is afraid to [speak] lest God be angry at his selling his land. Owhi, my brother! I do not think God will be angry with you if you do your best for yourself and your children. . . . But Owhi says, his people are not here. Why then did he tell us, come hear our talk? I do not want to be ashamed of him. Owhi has the heart of his people. We expect him to speak out. . . . The treaty will have to be drawn up tonight. . . . The Nez Percés [who, led by Lawyer and having little to lose, were willing to sign] must not be put off any longer. This business must be dispatched.<sup>13</sup>

And so it went. Surely, from the Indian perspective, this contract was not negotiated in good faith. The treaty was written in the legal jargon of a foreign language, with translation of the treaty and accompanying

commentary relegated to local mixed-blood settlers, none a native speaker of the several Indian languages represented among the Indians attending the negotiations. With his military escort at the ready in case of trouble, Stevens pushed as hard as he felt he could without driving the chiefs away. Yet, despite the coercive atmosphere of the council, these treaties now stand between the Indian people of the Columbia and their cultural oblivion. The treaty recognized their just claim to the lands and reserved for them and their descendants a tract of land "for [their] exclusive use and benefit." It also guaranteed "the right of taking fish at all usual and accustomed places, *in common with the citizens* of the Territory, . . . together with the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries, and pasturing their horses and cattle upon open and unclaimed lands [emphasis added]."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the treaty embodies a deep ambiguity. On the one hand, the intent of the U.S. government was to confine the Indians to an out-of-the-way, "useless" corner of their traditional territory. As Secretary Doty explained it, the Indians "were to remain upon their Reservation when required, and were in no manner to interfere with the whites when off from it." On the other hand, the treaty affirms the Indians' right to continue their customary and traditional subsistence activities—to harvest fish, game, roots, and berries and to graze their horses and cattle (a new cultural enterprise among them) as before and throughout their traditional lands so long as they did so "in common with citizens," language that specifically excluded the First Peoples until 1924.<sup>15</sup> It is this clause that was the keystone of the Boldt decision in 1974 and the ground on which many modern legal battles are fought.

The existence of Indian reservations is contested for in many Americans, both Indians and non-Indians. Those who oppose reservations see them as little better than concentration camps where Indian people are trapped in vicious cycles of dependency, whether on welfare or on alcohol. Those who hold this view—whether well-meaning or not—oppose treaty rights in the belief that they promote an invidious dual citizenship within the body politic. Those who defend reservations and the treaty rights on which they are most often based—and I count myself

among them—see reservations in a different light. They provide a permanent home, a land base, a collective anchor—a fund in trust—for the tribe and its members. In the Indian language, the reservation is known as *timanii ticham*, “the written earth or land.” The natural resources of this remnant of the aboriginal territory continue to feed the people. Managed by and for the tribe as a communal corporation, the land has the potential to provide good jobs to tribal members so that they can live well and support their families *at home*. They need not—as immigrant Americans by and large must—constantly uproot themselves to advance their careers. Family ties remain primary, and the tribes are like very large families, not always happy with one another, but still family.

This ideal of economically self-sufficient, reservation-based tribal societies is far from being the reality for Columbia River Indian people, but it is not a pipe dream either. The Warm Springs tribe reports, for example, that 2,300 people, mostly tribal members, lived within the same 1,000 square miles of their reservation in 1984. Meanwhile, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation—through its successful forest products and hydropower plants and its hotel resort—provided over fifteen hundred jobs. The 1979 payroll exceeded \$13 million, and the tribal corporation was able to return an annual dividend of \$2,400 to each tribal member.<sup>16</sup> This is not welfare, any more than a corporate investor’s profit share is welfare. At the Yakama reservation, the tribal government is run largely on income from timber sales and grazing leases on reservation lands. With this income, the tribal courts administer justice; a professional tribal police force maintains law and order, and, with joint tribal and federal funding, housing, welfare, health, and educational services are made available to tribal members. Despite continuing poverty and alienation, the reservation land base sustains a unique, indigenous American community that enriches all lives.

Yet, the reservation story is not the only continuing saga of the Columbia’s First Peoples. In the aftermath of the treaty councils and the skirmishes that followed, some families resisted the urging of territorial authorities to “remove to, and settle upon” the distant reservations.

Strong knots of Indian families continued to live where they always had—wintering on the Big River at Priest Rapids; at White Bluffs; on the Snake River; down the Columbia at Alderdale, Pine Creek, Roosevelt, Rock Creek, John Day, Maryhill, and Celilo Falls at the villages of Wayam and Sk’in; and in the Columbia River Gorge where they fished the Klickitat, White Salmon, and Little White Salmon rivers and lived on lands allotted to them near their traditional homes.

James Selam, my teacher, is a John Day River elder. He was born at Rock Creek just across from his family’s home at Blalock, known as *tawash* in Indian. As a child in the 1920s, he lived in a tule mat house, learned his native dialect of the Sahaptin language, and traveled to the “usual and accustomed” fishing sites his father had inherited at Celilo Falls, until the new highway brought tourists to watch and “foreign” Indians to crowd in with them as they dipped for salmon. James is not unique. His “brother”—all male cousins are called “brother” in Sahaptin—Howard Jim, now chief at Celilo, was also raised on the river, steeped in the traditional ways of the people of his home village at Pine Creek. In 1992 there was a plan to dump Seattle’s garbage in the hills near his old home, a plan he fought hard against. Other tribal leaders, however, supported the proposed development for its promised economic benefits, valuing them more highly than the sentiment Howard Jim feels for the land near the place where his ancestors are buried.

These recalcitrant Columbia River people have played—and continue to play—a key role in local history. The Boldt decision was handed down in a Tacoma courtroom in a case affecting coastal tribes, but the legal precedents on which it was based were to a large extent established by Columbia River Indian litigants, persistent and courageous in defense of their fishing rights. Landmark cases date back to *Yakima Tribe v. Taylor* in 1887, a dispute over access to fishing sites at Celilo Falls. In *U.S. v. Winans*, resolved in 1905, the defendant Winans was ordered to allow Indians to cross his land to use their traditional and customary sites at Celilo Falls. That decision reached the U.S. Supreme Court on appeal, and the high court affirmed the key “reserved rights doctrine,” that is, that all rights not specifically ceded by treaty were reserved by—not



granted to—the tribes. The landmark case of *Sohappy v. Smith*—later consolidated as *U.S. v. Oregon*—highlights the determined resistance to government interference in the Indian life on the river by a man who is now a martyr to the cause of Indian rights.<sup>17</sup> David Sohappy, Sr., died in 1991, weakened by strokes he suffered during his five-year imprisonment for his conviction in the notorious salmon-scam case. He and his nephew Richard Sohappy had invited arrest in 1968 as well, to protest attempts by the state of Oregon to regulate Indian fishing. The courts in that case established the “fair and equitable share” principle for the allocation of fishing between treaty Indians and the general public. The Boldt decision interpreted this as a 50 percent share, and it is tragic that the Indians’ share may prove in the end to be 50 percent of nothing.

David Sohappy comes from a long-established Wanapam family, at home at Priest Rapids. There the best known of the Plateau prophets, Smohalla, lived during the second half of the nineteenth century. Smohalla was a bitter thorn in the side of Father James Wilbur, long the Indian agent on the Yakama reservation. Wilbur struggled to suppress the “dreamer religion” espoused by Smohalla and other prophets and religious leaders among the Sahaptin Indians. Smohalla called on his people to reject white ways and white work, following the plow. He reputedly said, “You ask me to plow the ground! Shall I take a knife and tear my mother’s bosom?”<sup>18</sup> At Priest Rapids today, a century after Smohalla’s death, the Wanapam Indian community is growing, new housing has been built, and young people are moving back.

This prophetic religion lives on today at the spiritual center of Plateau Indian life. It is known variously as the Seven-drums, Long-house, or, in Sahaptin, Waashat, the “sacred dance” religion. Services are conducted in the Indian language, and worship focuses on giving thanks to the earth for the sacred Indian foods and the sacred water and on preserving traditional rites marking life’s stages—a young girl’s first bag of roots or first handmade basket, a boy’s first deer, the transfer of an ancestral name to the next generation, or memorials to those who have recently died. Elders raised off-reservation, down on the Columbia River, are frequently called upon as advisers by younger, less knowledgeable religious leaders.

The reservation communities depend on the conservatism of the independent river Indians for guidance and connection to their traditional life, while the reservation lands provide an economic base and legal protection for a threatened way of life. This is what happened to the First Peoples of the Columbia. The People still live. The river is still their home. The river sustains their way of life and waters the roots that hold them to their land. They certainly deserve no less.

## NOTES

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again, each time investing it with an identity that says more about us than this ribbon of twisting water. Reading it, we read ourselves until at last the river becomes, as T. S. Eliot said it would, a piece of the inside of us.

In the beginning it was Nch'i-Wána, the big river. As Gene Hunn eloquently writes in his book of the same name, the river forms "the spine" of the land, the "core of the Indian habitat," and "thus profoundly shapes their lives." At no place can we see this better and in all its complexity than at The Dalles. Two centuries ago, when white strangers first came to The Dalles, they found a place of extraordinary activity and enterprise. Here, where the river roared through the Long and Short Narrows, was the center of a vast trade network. What anthropologists have since come to call the Pacific-Plateau system involved exchanging huge quantities of dried salmon for other food and trade goods. Stretching from the Pacific Coast to Nez Perce homelands and linked to the Missouri River Indian villages by way of the Shoshoni Rendezvous, the network joined Chinookan- and Sahaptian-speaking peoples in an intricate set of personal and economic relationships. Through the trade system flowed not only fish, wappato bread, buffalo robes, and later European items, but also games, songs, and stories.

Geography, in the form of a dramatic narrowing of the Columbia at The Dalles and the resulting creation of ideal fishing stations, conspired with climate—warm, dry winds blowing up the Gorge—to make the Indian villages around the Narrows what explorer William Clark called "great marts of trade." Wishram Indians lived on the north bank at The Dalles; Wascos occupied sites on the south side of the river. Although trading and fishing took place from Celilo Falls down to The Dalles, the most intense bargaining was done at the main Wishram village. When Lewis and Clark visited the settlement in late October 1805, they found some twenty large wooden plank houses, each holding three extended families.

What no visitor could miss were the towering stacks of dried salmon. William Clark estimated that there were ten thousand pounds, pointing up the vast quantities of goods exchanged throughout the system. Trading took place from spring through fall, with most activity reserved for

## On the Columbia: The Ruling Presence of This Place

BY JAMES P. RONDA

The author of the line that gives title to this essay is Wendell Berry. On first hearing, his Appalachian mountain voice may seem an odd guide for any voyage on the Columbia. His country is the Cumberland and the Blue Ridge; his rivers the Kentucky, the Licking, and the Holston. But like many other American writers, Wendell Berry has grasped something fundamental about land, rivers, and the lives of all creatures. The whole of what he writes is this: "The river is the ruling presence of this place. The mind, no matter how free of it, is always tempted and tugged at by the nearness of the water and the clear space over it, ever widening and deepening into the continent." Definition and expression—that is what rivers have given to the cultures of the continent. Rivers have defined the spaces, marked the boundaries. They are nature's survey. In them we read the expressions, the aspirations, the mad dreams and schemes of men and women drawn to the river. Gretel Ehrlich writes, "To trace the history of a river is to trace the history of the soul." The Columbia has, in one way or another, been the "ruling presence" of this country. To comprehend its many histories, its many images, is to catch something of the story of the soul. We have invented the Columbia over and over

the fall season. During September and October, dried fish and roots were freshly prepared and in abundant supply. To The Dalles trade fair came nearby Yakama and Teninos as well as more distant Umatillas, Walulas, and Nez Perces. Local Sahaptins brought food products, including meat, roots, and berries. At the trading places, Wishram brokers exchanged these items for dried salmon and European cloth and ironware. Distant Sahaptins, especially the Nez Perces who had access to the plains, brought skin clothing, horses, and buffalo meat. Less interested in fish than their Columbia cousins, the Plateau people were drawn to the river in search of European goods, especially metal and beads.

Centered at The Dalles and with one arm stretching east, The Dalles river trade system also reached west down the Columbia to the coastal Chinookans. Pacific people used the river as a highway, bringing to The Dalles a variety of European goods obtained from maritime fur traders. Chinook canoes also carried indigenous food crops. Guns, blankets, clothing, and the prized blue beads—all came up the Columbia to The Dalles. Graceful canoes also transported wappato roots to be pounded and made into a tasty bread. Once at The Dalles, Chinookans traded for dried salmon, buffalo meat, and valuable bear grass used in making cooking baskets and the distinctive Northwest Coast hats.

The full flavor of a rendezvous at The Dalles must have been an unforgettable experience. The smell of dried fish hung in the fall air, and clouds of fleas and gnats hovered everywhere. At peak trading times, some three thousand Indians gathered for the rituals of bargain and exchange. But those festive fall days promised more than redistribution of wealth. Native people met old friends, made new ones, and heard the latest news. Gambling, socializing, and sporting for the opposite sex were all-important features of the trading days. Fur trader Alexander Ross, who saw The Dalles system before it was swept away by disease and white invasion, caught the spirit of those high times. "The Long Narrows," he wrote, "is the great emporium or mart of the Columbia and the general theatre of gambling and roguery."

Standing at The Dalles, any visitor—native or non-native—could see the visible signs of so vast a trading system. What was not so readily ap-

parent in this river world was power and politics. On the Missouri, Teton Sioux bands gained and exercised power by controlling goods moving up and down the river. Upper Chinookans like the Skilloots did not have the military power possessed by the Teton, but they were willing to resort to force to protect their accustomed place as river brokers, the middlemen on the Columbia. Just how far Indians from The Dalles to the Cascades would go to defend their role on the river would be revealed in 1812 and 1814, when river Indians fought pitched battles with fur traders for passage on the Columbia. Such was the contest of cultures as bearded strangers began to push and paddle their way into the Columbia River world.

For the native people of the big river, the Columbia was a fixed point in the rhythms of daily life. The river was there, in season and out. River spirits properly tended promised bounty and the security of a known place in a predictable world. Eighteenth century Europeans, of whatever national stripe, had a wholly different vision of the River of the West. In the geography of the mind, the Columbia was a ghost river, a fragment of the ever-elusive Northwest Passage. When gathered together, the fragments tell a story of empire and self-aggrandizement, national domain and personal ambition, communal pride and individual disappointment.

Robert Rogers is not a name quickly associated with the early history of the Columbia. This eighteenth century English soldier won his reputation in a series of bloody raids against pro-French Indians in northern New England. "Rogers' Rangers" brings to mind the shadowy world of irregular warfare, commandos, and Green Berets. But Robert Rogers was far more than a simple-minded frontier adventurer. In the mid-1760s, Rogers began to think long and hard about the rivers of North America. As he explained to English crown officials, he had a "great capacity for making Discoverys." In his mental geography of North America, Rogers imagined a single height of land, a continental divide, running north and south to split the country into two great watersheds. This bit of theoretical geography was not unique to Rogers. He probably borrowed it from French writers, but he was perhaps the first to give it expression in En-

glish. As Rogers envisioned it, one need only follow the Mississippi to its headwaters, cross the divide, and come upon the source of a mighty river bound for the Pacific. Rogers called this river the Ouragon. Following its path, English Americans could easily make their way to “the rich countries of the East.” Here was the Northwest Passage and the dream of the China trade, a dream that would haunt the Columbia for generations to come.

Rogers’s plea fared poorly, and in 1766 he was back in Massachusetts, planning his own transcontinental expedition. Rogers had just been appointed commander of the British garrison at Michilimackinac in the western Great Lakes. From that base, he intended to send a party up the Mississippi and on toward the Ouragon. His chosen adventurers were James Tute, former officer in the Rangers, and Jonathan Carver, lately mustered out of the provincial militia. The story of Carver’s travels on the upper Mississippi in 1768 need not detain us. What is important is the book and map that came from his journals. In 1778, ten years after Carver’s ill-starred search for the Ouragon, London booksellers offered a volume entitled *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*. The first printing of the book contained a map showing the headwaters of the Ouragon somewhere within present-day North or South Dakota. Here was the big river, carrying in print for the first time the name Ouragon. In subsequent editions, Carver or his editor expanded the cartographic vision. The 1781 printing, appearing the year after Carver’s death, holds a second landmark. That map offers the phrase “River of the West,” located approximately where today’s Columbia runs. That river strikes inland toward the empty space of the plateau. The Ouragon had become the River of the West.

But in telling you this I have taken you a bridge too far, a decade ahead of where we should be. Most of us would recognize 1792 as a pivotal year in Northwest history in general and Columbia River history in particular. But I would suggest that in the slippery world of dream and illusion, the year 1778 is far more important. That year held a trinity, a trio of events that would make the Columbia an imperial river, a highway for national domain. In London, it was Carver’s book and map, announcing

the Ouragon. Carver was joined that year by two of the most influential European explorers in Northwest history — Captain James Cook and fur-trade strategist Peter Pond. In the spring of 1778, Captain Cook was pressing his search for the Northwest Passage. Late May found his ships *Resolution* and *Discovery* along the Alaskan coast north of the Kenai Peninsula. There Cook found a tempting opening. The shape of the bay and the presumed river beyond it seemed to fit prevailing notions about the passage. After several days of probing, it seemed plain that this was not the true passage. But Cook was not so quick to abandon the illusion. He insisted that there was a river beyond the bay, that it stretched deep into the interior, and that someday it would be a great commercial highway. The illusory waterway soon carried the name Cook’s River. It would not be until 1794 that Captain George Vancouver would end the illusion, giving Cook’s Inlet its proper name and description.

At the same time that James Cook was chasing ghost rivers and fabled passages, fur trader and explorer Peter Pond crossed Methye Portage into the fur-rich Athabasca country of present-day northern Saskatchewan. Once in that country Pond heard from native people about rivers flowing west from Lake Athabasca to the sea. It was Columbus, Carver, and Cook revisited—the passage to the Orient. By 1784, Pond was certain that one of those rivers was the very one explored by Cook. Wintering at Athabasca in 1784 Pond began to draw a series of maps that expressed his western vision—that Lake Athabasca and the Great Slave Lake form a water hub for the entire Northwest. Pond imagined several rivers radiating, like spokes in a wheel, toward the north and the west. He was partly right. The Mackenzie, Peace, and Athabasca rivers do indeed head north and west from the lakes, but they do not make the navigable highway Pond and Cook so eagerly sought. Pond’s 1785 map shows Cook’s River heading inland from the Pacific while several Athabasca streams flow west to embrace it. In the early 1780s, Pond was uncertain about connections between the lakes and the western ocean. He easily confused Cook’s River with the present-day Mackenzie. By 1789, wishful thinking had hardened to conviction. Cook’s River was real, and it was the direct water route from the lakes to the sea.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Cook's River, the River of the West, and the Ouragon all ran together. Destiny's river was there because it had to be there. Europeans invented their Columbia before they saw it. As Barry Lopez reminds us in *Arctic Dreams*, desire and imagination create the landscape of the mind. Long before Robert Gray crossed the Bar and dropped anchor, Europeans were talking about the River of the West, dreaming it, scheming it, plotting its ways, and collecting its profits.

While we memorialize Gray and his crew as the initial European discoverers of the Columbia, the effective meaning of that discovery came from the creative mind of someone else. In so many ways, Alexander Mackenzie was the heir to the Carver-Cook-Pond legacy. The young Scot had wintered at Athabasca with Pond, and the old trader had taught his pupil the fundamentals of an imperial geography. After returning in 1794 from his great transcontinental trek to the Pacific, Mackenzie began to ponder the future of the Northwest. Although he initially confused the Columbia with the Fraser, by 1801 Mackenzie was quite convinced that the Columbia was the master river of the region. And he said so in unmistakable terms in his book *Voyages from Montreal*. Some historians have too quickly dismissed Mackenzie as an ambitious but parochial fur merchant, someone who never saw beyond stacks of pelts and lines in the ledgerbooks. But a careful look at Mackenzie and his writings reveals a far more interesting character and a vastly more complex vision. It was his vision of the river and the country around it that should now command our attention.

No one would ever accuse Mackenzie and his ghost writer William Combe of writing a compelling narrative. Even by the standards of the day, *Voyages from Montreal* was no page-turner. But for those who persevered—and among that company was Thomas Jefferson—the reward at the end of the book was geopolitical prophecy of the first water. "The Columbia," so proclaimed Mackenzie, "is the line of communication from the Pacific Ocean, pointed out by nature." The nation that controlled the Columbia, so it seemed, held the destiny of the entire region. For Mackenzie, the River of the West would carry more than a tide of

pelts. Columbia's empire promised permanent white settlement, agricultural colonies to anchor Britain's western domain. Mackenzie said as much when he touted the region as "the most Northern situation fit for colonization, and suitable to the residence of a civilized people." In Mackenzie's imagination, the Columbia danced to the tune of trade, farming, and a revived British Empire. Only a few years before, the empire had lost destiny's other rivers—the Hudson, the Ohio, and the Mississippi. Now the empire might strike back and by winning the Columbia secure much of the far West.

But fortune and circumstance conspired in the first decade of the nineteenth century to delay and eventually defeat Mackenzie's Columbian enterprise. The idea of the Columbia as an imperial-industrial river was conceived in the enthusiastic imaginations of Rogers, Carver, and Pond, advanced by Mackenzie, and finally brought to full flower by Thomas Jefferson. Although the Sage of Monticello sometimes talked about himself as a savage of the American mountains, it was rivers that fascinated him. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson filled page after page with vivid descriptions of those eastern rivers he knew and loved—the James, the York, and the Potomac. But there was more than an innocent literary Romanticism at work here.

Jefferson recognized the enduring political and economic significance of American rivers. They defined the country, gave it shape, and connected it to the wider world. By 1793, Jefferson had settled on the Columbia (or the Oregon as he sometimes called it) as his River of the West. It was not until the summer of 1802 that the Columbia became—at least for Jefferson—something more than a line on an Arrowsmith map. Reading Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal*, the president came to lines at the end of the book that were pure electricity. Here was the imperial challenge. Britain would plant an empire in the West, a domain along the Columbia. Mackenzie's vision now collided with Jefferson's. The president's dream of a republican empire of liberty was at risk. What Jefferson did over the next year is well documented in studies of the origins of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. By June 1803 Meriwether Lewis had comprehensive instructions from Jefferson for the first American

probe of the West. Those instructions picked up and extended what other Euroamericans had said about the Columbia. What kind of a river was it to be? Jefferson's Columbia, like Mackenzie's, was to be an imperial highway. The river's mission and purpose was commerce and sovereignty. Virtually every other river dreamer after Jefferson would agree. The Columbia was all about fur, wheat, timber, railroads, tourists, and windsurfers.

No more than a decade after Jefferson spelled this out for Lewis and Clark, John Jacob Astor put a point on it in his usually blunt way. "The Columbia," he insisted, "is the key to a vast country." Astor saw the river carrying a current of furs and trade goods in a spacious commercial empire. Two decades later, Methodist missionary Henry Spaulding echoed Astor, saying that the river was the "keystone to the plain and mountainous country." In Spaulding's geography of faith, the river was predestined to carry gospel light into the heart of native darkness. The river as key to a vast country, whether for profit, power, or souls, had strong appeal among the ranks of government explorers, wheat farmers, mill owners, and steamboat captains. As Senator John H. Mitchell thundered in 1885, the Columbia was "the only real pass through which the productions of the Great Columbia plain can find their way to the seaboard." The river highway represented more than commerce. Mitchell made it a symbol of triumphant nationalism. The Columbia "was endowed with all those elements of greatness and grandeur and moral and physical power that constitute and characterize the greatest of the great internal waterways of the world." From the eighteenth century on, the river was defined more and more by the language of commerce and sovereignty. The course of the river ran through diplomatic offer and counteroffer and between ledgerbook lines. Fur-trade strategists, town planners, and transportation moguls all envisioned the Columbia as a trunk line, linking branch lines and way stations to great metropolitan market terminals.

We might well extend Columbia's chronology and waterscape from Fort Clatsop, Fort Astoria, and Fort Vancouver to Bonneville, Grand Coulee, and the Port of Portland. Those years defined the river space in

a common way. The river world is the universe of energy and enterprise, dream and dominion. Historical geographer D. W. Meinig illuminates the ruling presence of the Columbia in his provocative book *The Great Columbia River Plain*. As Meinig explains it, the river and the region have gone through four distinct phases since the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the fur trade phase, the river tied the Columbia country east to Atlantic sources of investment capital, west to the China market, and north to the upper Columbia Canadian world. For missionaries, overland emigrants, soldiers, and miners, the Columbia was destination, pathway, and military corridor. Toward the end of the century, the river became a stream of wheat and cattle. The current that once carried fur, faith, and gold now ran heavy with grains like Spanish Little Club and Australian Bluestem. With the coming of various canal projects around The Dalles, and especially the railroads, the river entered what landscape historian John Stilgoe describes as "the engineered future." In the railroad age, the Columbia traffic-way was paved with the long steel rail and the short cross tie. The Columbia became what novelist Harold Waldo called a "river of steel." Henry Villard's imperial Oregon Railway and Navigation Company now bowed to competition from the Union Pacific on one side and the Spokane, Portland, and Seattle Railway on the other. "Uncle Pete" still rolls on the south side while the Burlington Northern hustles freight along the north bank. And in double-stacked container units marked APL, Mitsui O.S.K., and K-Line, the China trade has at last come to the Columbia. Today's passenger on Amtrak's *Pioneer* and *Empire Builder* is but following the iron path of countless travelers on premier trains like the *North Coast Limited*, *The Portland Rose*, and *The Columbia River Express*. Seen through Pullman windows or automobile windshields, the river was and remains just as much a commodity—scenery to be consumed and then held captive in an endless flow of postcards, snapshots, and fading memories.

A hundred and thirty-some years after Lewis and Clark, Woody Guthrie wrote a set of songs about the river and its future. Some of those songs have entered the folklore of the Northwest and at least one—"Roll On, Columbia"—seems destined to become the river's unofficial an-



them. Today, Woody's poetry is cherished as a powerful evocation of the river's wonder and majesty. But before we hail Oklahoma's native son as the sweet singer of the Columbia, we might well pause to look carefully at the connections between the River of the West as defined by generations of promoters and entrepreneurs and Woody's own rolling Columbia. In three memorable songs—"Roll On, Columbia," "Grand Coulee Dam," and "Way Up in that Northwest"—Guthrie answered the question, what kind of a river is the Columbia. Or rather, what kind of river should it become. Putting himself squarely in the lineage of Mackenzie and Jefferson, Reverend Spaulding and Senator Mitchell, Guthrie wrote: "Tom Jefferson's vision would not let him rest / An empire he saw in the Pacific Northwest / Sent Lewis and Clark and they did the rest." What was the vision? What was the rest? In "Grand Coulee Dam," Guthrie offers an unmistakable answer: "Roll along, Columbia, you can ramble to the sea / But river, while you're rambling, you can do some work for me." The Columbia had once been, in Woody's words, a "wild and wasted stream." What tamed the river, made it useful and therefore beautiful, were the dams. "There at Bonneville on the river is a green and beautiful sight / See the Bonneville Dam arising in the sun so clear and white."\* For Guthrie, the Dust Bowl of the Great Plains represented more than a regional nightmare and a personal disaster. The wind and dust seemed to challenge the very foundations of Jefferson's agrarian republic. How, Guthrie asked, could "dry barren hills" be transformed into "Green Pastures of Plenty" once again. The seemingly clean energy of hydroelectric force appeared the ideal solution. Dams and turbines would revitalize the American dream. Guthrie's industrial Columbia was not to be an oil-

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stained, acid-laden river. The river could ramble and work at the same time. Perhaps this was the most persistent illusion in river history—that the Columbia could at once be changed and yet remain the same.

What we have thought about the Columbia—how we have defined the river by our plots and plans—reveals the larger stories of the Northwest and the continent. Long before the current crop of deep ecologists and their warnings against putting a human face on nature, James Agee offered the following:

There is no need to personify a river: it is much too literally alive in its own way, and like air and earth themselves is a creature more powerful, more basic, than any living thing the earth has borne. It is one of those few, huge, casual and aloof creatures by the mercy of whose existence our own existence was made possible.

The living Columbia River has at one time or another appeared as a place to trade and fish, as a strategic center and zone of conflict, as a border and boundary, as a highway, as something to manipulate, as a destination, or as a passage to somewhere else.

What kind of a river is the Columbia? The voices answering that question are at once arrogant, optimistic, cranky, bitter, and painfully hopeful. Abigail Malick, riverfront homesteader, watched the Columbia flood her farm, "Sweeping every thing Before it." But as Lillian Schlissel reminds us in a sensitive essay about Abigail and her kin, the flood subsided and there was time to replant and run fence lines once more. Abigail's voice brings to mind Henry Van Dyke's pointed observation: "It is with rivers as it is with people: the greatest are not always the most agreeable nor the best to live with." As the river has flowed through our minds we have made it a barrier or a passage, a wild and wasted stream, or the fountain for a garden. The river is not the Other, some alien being or distant presence. We are not guilty of anthropomorphism by coming to believe that the river is the mirror of the Self, whether to shine or grow dark. What kind of a river the Columbia is, was, or might yet be depends on us—who we were, are, and might yet become.



Wendell Berry had it only partly right. The river is the ruling presence of the place. But now the river must share the ruling with the presence of human kind. And with all ruling comes obligation, the obligation to know the river's past and consider with care its future. We have not created the Columbia, but we have invented it. Invention imposes responsibility. In the ritual of the First Salmon, native people cared for the river. How can we express that same care for our invention? If it is true that the history of the river is the history of the soul, what does the Columbia reveal two hundred years after Robert Gray crossed the Bar?

wrestled against uprooting while men assumed family was like a weed—pull it up, and it would grow again anywhere you set it. There were distinctly different views of the journey women and men made together.

In *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, I wrote about “anonymous” women, part of the overland journey because their husbands or fathers had made the decision to go. These women understood the need, but they had not chosen the journey. With their men, they hoped for a better life, a new home, a chance for the children, all those human aspirations historians translate into statistical data: income, acreage, crops, agriculture, mining, ranching. But for women, changing the direction of history meant the chaos of kids who get the measles and poison ivy and of families with dysentery and cholera. Most historians are trained to look for order, for beginnings and ends, for cause and effect. But ordinary life is a muddle, and women’s writing brings one up close to the disorder of journeys that end with wagons left on the road; horses, oxen, and cows dead in the mountains; mothers riding into the territory on mules; and small children strapped front and back to the saddles or soaking wet on rafts guided by Indians. These are stories you all know, and hardship is an assumed experience of pioneering. But do such details change history?

For one thing, women’s writing frames new issues. Between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five, women were in their childbearing years; and while men of the same age were braced for the challenges of new lands, women could not have been prepared for childbirth in moving wagons or in wet tents or for a journey that could not be halted. They could not have been prepared for the cholera that swept through wagon parties between 1851 and 1853 or for burying their dead in unmarked graves on an unsurveyed landscape. Since care of the sick and the dying was “women’s work,” these experiences marked women’s journeys in profound ways. Women confronted the human costs of uprooting and, in their own ways, questioned what westering was all about. They seldom wrote about conquest and felt themselves survivors more than heroes. Helped by Indians who traded food and brought them across rivers, women thought of themselves as lucky to be alive.

“They have no father,  
and they will not mind me”:

## Families and the River

BY LILLIAN SCHLISSEL

As an easterner writing western history, I know the region does not reveal itself easily to strangers. Like a honky-tonk town, the West hides its darker streets. As a historian of women’s lives, I know that women, east and west, do not always come forward with their own realities. But then, historians have not always looked for those realities. When I began collecting the writings of women who were part of the overland migration of the 1840s and 1850s, few historians considered women’s writings significant. Women offered anecdotal evidence, sentimental excess, recipes, and assorted trivia, not the “hard” evidence of cut-offs and Indian skirmishes. But the question kept recurring: if a familiar event like the overland migration were told entirely through the eyes of women, would it change what we already knew? Would women provide new data or alter the conformation of the event we thought we so thoroughly understood? And I began to gather the diaries and journals and letters of over a hundred women. After six years reading the fragmentary snatches of women’s writings, I was convinced that the stories *were* different. For one thing, women tried to hold the family together while men stretched the family like a rubber band until it reached the new lands. Women

When *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* was published in 1982, I felt I had an unfinished story.<sup>1</sup> What happened to those new settlers of the Willamette Valley? What kind of life did they find? *Far From Home*, published in 1989, contains the stories of three families who went West to find a better life.<sup>2</sup> The first of three, the Malicks, came into the Oregon Territory in 1848. George Malick's people were German Lutherans who arrived in America in the 1700s and stood fast with George Washington at Valley Forge. Abigail was a Stuart who believed her family was descended from the royal line of England. They were part of the British East India Company. Abigail and George married and farmed near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in the 1820s. In the 1830s, with three children, they moved on to Illinois. Their eldest daughter married into a family named Albright and soon had children of her own. In 1848, George and Abigail Malick decided that "moving on" was their American birthright, and they set out for Oregon. The Albrights promised that the following season they would all be reunited in the Pacific Northwest.

Early on the westward journey, on a clear summer's day, when the wagons were still following the Platte River, the Malick's seventeen-year-old son Hiram drowned. They watched him struggle in the water. It took Abigail more than a year before she could write home about his death:

He went Aswimming with some other boys of the Compeny that we  
 Trailed with And he swum Across the river and the Water run very  
 fast And he could not reach this side. The young Men tried to save  
 him but he [had the Cramp] And Could swim no more. And they  
 Said o hiram do swim but he said I cannot swim eney More. And  
 one young Man took A pole And started to him And the water ran  
 so fast that he thought he Could not swim eney more so he re-  
 turned. And left him to his fate. And the other boys Called to him  
 and said O hiram O swim. And he said o my god I cannot eney  
 More. They said that he went down in the water seven or eight times  
 before he drowned. And then he said o my god O lord gesus re-  
 ceive My Soul for I am no More.<sup>3</sup>

Abigail added, "It has Almost kild Me but I have to bear it."

The Malicks registered a claim on the banks of the Columbia River, only a short distance from Fort Vancouver, which promised security against Indian uprisings. Their land seemed high enough not to be flooded, and they had more salmon that they could eat and enough lumber to sell. The Malicks were good farmers, and they worked hard. George built a porch and a milk house. On June 24, 1851, Abigail wrote, "Our house is full of good things And I have Made two new bedes since we have bin in oregon."<sup>4</sup> Soon she had store-bought chairs, a bureau and mirror, and a silk dress.

The spring after they arrived, news of gold at Sutter's Mill in northern California filled the territory. George and his oldest son, Charles, joined the rush of men from every corner of the world. They brought back \$5,000, more money than they had ever seen at one time. George thought that was enough, but Charles changed his clothes and went back to California. The Malicks never heard from him again. Friends said that Charles had been set upon by thieves; others said he died of brain fever. The family was never sure. Two years in Oregon Territory and the Malicks thrived, but one son was drowned and one son was missing. Around them the Willamette Valley bloomed. Oregon Territory formed its provisional government in 1843, built its trade, and moved from first settlement toward statehood.

By March 1852, the Malicks' sixteen-year-old daughter Rachel had more suitors than she could count. She chose a young lieutenant from Pennsylvania, where her parents had been raised. John Biles was a carpenter and a surveyor who wrote elegant letters. They carried on a long courtship and had an elaborate frontier wedding. Soon there was a son everybody called "Little Charlie," the beginning of new life after Hiram's death and Charles's disappearance. A year later, Rachel was pregnant again; but at her second delivery, she was carrying twins in breech position. She died screaming in pain at nineteen. John Biles fled the territory like a man pursued by demons. He gave his son to his mother-in-law and recrossed the continent, all the way back to Pennsylvania. On August 5,

1855, Abigail wrote to her daughter in Illinois, "We are All well. All that are left of us."<sup>5</sup>

Abigail Malick was by then a woman in her fifties, old by the standards of pioneering. She had farmed in Pennsylvania and in Illinois, and now, late in life, she came to love her claim on the Columbia River. Her daughter sent seeds from Illinois, and Abigail grew gardens that were the amazement of her neighbors. She planted orchards of apple, pear, and cherry. When her husband George died in 1853, she farmed alone, milking the cows and feeding the hogs. She hired Indians to cut the lumber and plow the fields and saw no reason to stop working. She had three younger children to raise, and she had Rachel's little boy. But raising children on the frontier was different from what it was in "the States." "They have no father," she wrote, "and they will not mind me." There was a wildness in these youngsters. Her son Shindel, nine when they came into Oregon Territory, found gambling and racing horses with the young men at Fort Vancouver more to his liking than farm work. Thirteen-year-old Jane preferred riding with handsome young officers to going to school. She was probably pregnant at fifteen, and her mother arranged a hasty marriage before a justice of the peace.

In the winter of 1855, the Rogue River Indians rose against the settlers, who scurried into Vancouver and to the fort at the Cascades. Abigail grumbled at having to leave her farm and her livestock, but her description of the Indians' resolve, written on December 8, 1855, was graphic:

The Indians sent word that they were a coming to distroy [the] whole [of] Washington and Oregon and Burn All that the Bostons [Americans] had and Murder All And Sclpe them. So the people had All to Leave there Homes and go to the nearest towns for to protect themselves. . . . [Some] people . . . brought in All the friendly Indians. They Were Scard As bad As the white people. . . . The [warring] Indians say they will fight the Americans As long as they have provisions. And [when there is nothing to eat], they will eat there Wifes And Children And fight the [Americans].<sup>6</sup>

By spring she wrote, "If you should not get enney Letter from us for six Months you can think that we Are All kild."<sup>7</sup>

By 1859, the family chaos had crossed the curve of political chaos. Jane's handsome lieutenant gambled away her dowry, and Jane came home barefoot. Abigail provided the details of the debacle:

When They Were Married [they] Went to the Dolls [The Dalles] to Live. And When They Went A Way He Had Nine Hundred Dollars Besides four yoke of oxen And A Nice Teem of American Horses. . . . When Jane Went A Way She Had Thousand of Cloathes And A Splended Bed. And I gave Her A First Rate cow And A Hefer Calif. . . . She Took Three Chestes Full of Cloathes And A Larg goods Box Full of Blankets and Sheates And Pillow cases And Five pares of Shooes And Stockings. . . . And When She Came Home To me she Had onley Mockones [moccasins] on Her Feet And Not Hardley Eny Cloaths. He sold Nearley [all] Her Cloathes.<sup>8</sup>

Jane's first child died in infancy in 1857. By the time her second child was born in 1859, she was subject to violent seizures. Her mother wrote back to Illinois on October 18, "I Have Had to Tak her Babe And Not let Her See it for two And three days At A Time And tie her down on the Bed and it took Three of us to do it At that."<sup>9</sup> Abigail kept Jane's madness a family secret until December, when Jane climbed to the top of the house, stripped naked to the waist, and began to tear the shingles from the roof. Abigail sent for a soldier from Fort Vancouver, who lowered Jane to the ground with a long rope.

Eight years after her arrival in Oregon Country, Abigail Malick had an errant son, a daughter given to madness, a newborn infant, a three-year-old whose father was three thousand miles away, and a pretty fourteen-year-old who was impatient to leave home. Abigail managed the farm and tried to hold these volcanic lives together. The extended family was broken into a grand triangle. John Biles was in Pennsylvania attending seances to conjure up images of his dead wife. Mary Ann Albright and

her family remained in Illinois. Abigail Malick was in Oregon on her claim on the Columbia River. It was no longer clear where the center was and, if there was one, whether it would hold. Abigail's land on the Columbia was as rich as she could want it to be, but catastrophes came close together. Without the Albrights, the Malicks were too fragile against an uncontrollable frontier, against Indians wars and childbirth, against a new idea of romance that pulled young women out of the house as surely as gold called young men. In 1860, Susan Malick eloped at sixteen. Within months, when her husband threatened to cut her throat, she divorced him, joined a troupe of traveling players and was paid twenty dollars a month—a lavish wage for a young girl in the western territories.

Mary Ann Albright urged her mother to come back to Illinois, but Abigail stayed on alone, renting half her house to strangers. She missed her grandchildren and had been a faithful correspondent for seventeen years, but she would not go back to Illinois. In 1865, when the Civil War ended, she died where she wanted to be, watching her orchards bloom on land she had cleared and cared for beside the Columbia River.

After Abigail's death, Shindel savaged his mother's claim and sold or gambled away every piece of furniture and every acre of land. He wanted no part of the legacy she had intended him to have. John Biles came back from Pennsylvania, married Elizabeth Kelly, and took little Charlie to live with him and his second wife in Portland. Susan and Shindel moved to Boise, Idaho. Abigail's letters—seventeen years of letters—found their way to a dealer who sold them for forty-five dollars to the Beinecke Library of Yale University. When I spoke with Mary Ann Albright's descendants, Abigail's great-great-grandniece, the family was still in Illinois where they had always been, but they knew nothing of the Malicks who had gone West.

Writing women's history and family history sometimes leaves a vacant canvas, the lives of ordinary people erased by adversity or mischance, the wrong key struck on the computer keyboard and the screen gone blank, the images that were once there turned into shadows that disappear. Some years ago, I visited the Vietnam Monument in Washington, D.C.

The taxi driver pointed toward the low hill faced with a long, polished, gray marble tablet. "It's over that way," he said, "but there's nothing to see." The Veterans of Foreign Wars later commissioned a traditional monument, the statue of three young soldiers carrying guns—three pioneers conquering their own wilderness.

The Vietnam Monument has a lot to do with the history of the Malicks and with the history of the Columbia River. The monument is a headstone for boys and girls remembered not because they were heroes but because we raised them and worried over them and loved them well. The wall imposes no image over our own grief. It is the same with the lives of ordinary people. Their "marker" is sometimes only their own failures and frustrations. Abigail Malick worked for her children. She sent them to school. She married them off. She gave them dowries. She would have given them her land. But the children who grew up in Oregon Territory fell too far from the tree to take root. Gnarled and indomitable, proud of having brought orchards out of the wild new land, Abigail died alone.

Some truths of American experience hover at the margins of historical imagination. C. Van Woodward said, "All history that the historian writes . . . has to be imagined before it can be written. . . . Documents and other sources help . . . but events have to be reconstructed by the imagination." Then he quoted Robert Penn Warren: "Historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake."<sup>10</sup> Abigail Malick is a signpost for the historian's imagination.

The Malicks, in their flamboyant failures, were far more typical of frontier life than is first apparent. For all the spectacular misadventures of their private affairs, they fall within the median range of statistics we can gather. The U.S. Census in 1850 shows forty-four families along with the Malicks in Clark County, Oregon. One decade later, only nine of those original families were still there. Eighty percent, like the Malicks, had moved on or disappeared.<sup>11</sup> Frontier families kept moving, and urban families did the same. According to historian Carroll Smith-

Rosenberg, the average residence in Buffalo, New York, in the 1850s was only 6.2 years. In Newburyport, Massachusetts, between 1860 and 1870, the transient rate was 65 percent.<sup>12</sup> John Mack Faragher found that in Illinois the persistence rate—the rate of families that stay in place—was less than 30 percent, that is, “two-thirds of heads of households moved elsewhere during the course of each decade.”<sup>13</sup> In western cities such as San Francisco, Denver, and Omaha, at the end of the nineteenth century, the number of *different* people at any one time was five to ten times the population in place the previous decade. In Albuquerque in the 1960s and 1970s, one-sixth of the total population represented in-migration to replace one-sixth of the population that had moved out.<sup>14</sup> *The New York Times*, reporting on the most recent census data in 1991, noted that “nearly half of the population of the United States . . . moved from one home to another from 1985 to 1989, with about 18 percent of the nation’s households pulling up stakes in 1989 alone. . . . The West . . . remained the most mobile section of the country.”<sup>15</sup> Behind the icons of permanence—the churches and the schools and the neat tract houses—Americans keep moving on. The freedom to create new lives in some “uncreated space” is our strong need. The culture raises us to believe in our capacity and in our right to start again, and most of us believe the next time will be better.

Family, the ordered relationship of generations that touch, contradicts the need to move on. In fact, one might say family is subversive of the values Americans are taught to prize. In the moving, we are likely to leave behind parents, to leave a sister or a brother along the way. In three hundred years of following frontiers, we have learned to live with less family and to live with “family” in permutations. We have grown comfortable with family in some “dis-assembled” state. Abigail would not go back to Illinois. Her children would not live with her.

Even the bizarre details of the Malicks’ story resonates in our common history. Abigail wrote of Jane’s insanity as if it were an everyday event—“Since coming down from the roof, Jane has never Had Eny simptoms”—as if madness were like the common cold.<sup>16</sup> But there were already three asylums for the insane before 1870—in northern Califor-

nia, at Stockton (established in 1852), and a few years later in Oregon at Salem and Portland. The Sisters of Charity opened a House of Providence in 1856 in Vancouver to serve as both orphanage and asylum. St. Joseph’s Hospital, built in 1855, did the same.<sup>17</sup> Reports of the insane asylum of Portland between 1870 and 1890 (deposited of all places in a dusty annex of the New York Public Library) show that the number of patients increased from 260 in 1870–1872 to 411 in 1876–1877 and to 734 in 1884–1886. Of that number, the fraction of female patients started at one-third and grew to one-half.<sup>18</sup>

But the numbers need to be transformed into images—Jane Malick as a young bride coming home barefoot from The Dalles, dancing half naked on the roof of her mother’s house, pulling off the shingles, carried down by an embarrassed young soldier assigned a task he had never contemplated. I think of Jane tied to her bed so that she could not harm her own baby. She was barely more than a child herself, thrust into a turbulent land, like Herman Melville’s black cabin boy Pip, frightened into madness by the ferocity of the quest for Moby Dick. I think of Jane as a sister to Benji, the idiot and loving heart of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Jane was not a heroic bronze tribute to the pioneer mother, but she managed to outlive her madness. She remarried, had children, and in later life tried to temper the passions of her irritable sister and brother. If not exactly whole, Jane was a serviceable frontier woman. I think of nineteen-year-old Rachel who died in childbirth after the doctor botched the delivery of twins, trying to dismember the infants so he could get them out of their mother’s womb. That is also a frontier story.

Most of all, I think of Abigail, who came into Oregon and built a home for her wayward children, who grew orchards out of the wilderness. On September 9, 1861, Abigail wrote:

We will Have An Abundance of chois Fruit. Pears And Apples And plums And Siberian Crab[apples] And peaches and Cheryes of difent kinds and Chois Apples Sutch As I Never Saw Eny In the states. I paid thirty Dollars For My Fruit trees and Currentes. There Will Be No End to them And goosburyes And Tame Ras-

buryes. I have Five difrent plum trees. . . . And four pare trees And I do not know how Meny peach trees And rasing More All the time. And I do not know how Meny Apple trees.<sup>19</sup>

Abigail's fruit trees were her true children. But the frontier images soon disappear. Stephen Dow Beckham checked the old survey maps of Vancouver for me and found that the Malicks' claim became industrial land with grain-loading facilities on the riverbank.

America's westward course has created different frontiers, born of geography and of the mind. Thomas Jefferson imagined a frontier of yeoman farmers, where men and earth were bound to each other in the benediction of fruitful labor. Jefferson's image of the Garden holds family and land in balance. It is what the poet Wendell Berry called "the gift of good land," a vision that resonates through our history.<sup>20</sup> It is a dream of order and Christian blessing and the continuity of generations, peace on a bountiful land. Abigail's orchards were proof of the goodness of the land and of the efficacy of work.

The Malick children preferred a different frontier. They preferred the spectacle and the promises of gold and silver in California and Idaho. The frontier they chose was a place of high stakes and low jokes, a place for buffoonery and swagger, where Shindel could race horses and gamble, where Susan could join a group of traveling players, and where Jane married a man her mother considered shiftless, "mean," and "dirty." Mining and gambling frontiers were the landscape of tricksters and wizards, sleight-of-hand merchants performing behind the survivors' offices, singing at the door of the land agent. And even though Abigail's children might be hungry or barefoot, they did not want to stay home. There were frontiers of such hardship that grown men cried, because they could not erase memories of living in a "coyote hole," or of children indentured to strangers because they could not be fed. Frontiers frame conflicting images and bid newcomers test which one would hold their future.

Bart Giamatti, when he was president of Yale University, wrote about baseball because he saw it as a peculiarly American game, a ritualized

performance about the skill and crazy daring one needed to reach the "frontiers"—first base, second base, third—and then to endure the anguish and the perils of finally reaching "home."

When a player rounds third, a long journey seemingly over, the end in sight, then the hunger for home, the drive to rejoin one's earlier self and one's fellows, is a pressing, growing, screaming in the blood. Often the effort fails, the hunger is unsatisfied as the catcher bars fulfillment, as the umpire-father is too strong in his denial, as the impossibility of going home again is re-enacted in what is often baseball's most violent confrontations, swift, savage, down in the dirt, availing nothing. If baseball is a narrative, an epic of exile and return, a vast communal poem about separation, loss and home for a reunion. . . . It is the romance of homecoming that America sings to itself.<sup>21</sup>

Home and the ways we leave it, frontiers and what they bring us—these are the thoughts I have wanted to share. The Malicks are what novelist Toni Morrison called "the deep story," the "coded language" of the American experience, the story of what frontiers have meant to families.<sup>22</sup> Beyond the Malicks, family and frontiers are the coordinates of an ongoing American debate, the magnets of our minds, a morality so cleverly charged that the polar points force each other apart. However we may yearn to come within the circle of home, we are also absolutely determined to escape its boundaries. American frontiers leave a complex emotional legacy, but so does family. Gathered around the Thanksgiving table, family is caught for a moment in the Instamatic camera. Then it breaks apart, not family at all, but the "frontiers" of private and separate lives.

The Malicks' story is a meditation on the American self. Perhaps in the end, they endure in their letters, with their flashbacks, omissions, and the ways in which they skewed the truth. The letters somehow join our lives and theirs. We know the Malicks very well. We know them better, perhaps, than they ever knew each other.



## NOTES

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3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. *Ibid.*, 45.
6. *Ibid.*, 50.
7. *Ibid.*, 51.
8. *Ibid.*, 70.
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21. A. Bartlett Giamatti, "The Story of Baseball: You Can Go Home Again," from "Americans and Their Games," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1989.
22. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 6.



gion, separate from surrounding areas. In other situations, northwesterners in eastern Washington and Oregon, Idaho, and western Montana have asserted they are another part of the Northwest, isolated and different from the coastal trough stretching from the Canadian to California borders.

The experiences of the Etulain family epitomize still another set of shifting images of the Pacific Northwest. When my Basque sheepherding father settled in eastern Washington, he carved out a ranch previously without buildings, fences, or roads. He thought of himself as both immigrant and frontiersman. But less than two generations later we were surrounded by huge symbols of American agribusiness and military might. We had obviously moved past frontier and beyond nascent region and were catapulted into something of a postregion. Many northwesterners have experienced similar sharp shifts during the last century, and their descriptions of these transformations are often intriguing searches for self-identification. The writings of novelists and historians are particularly useful barometers of these traumatic cultural changes.

In the century following Captain Robert Gray's entrance into the Columbia in 1792, explorers, travelers, overlayers, settlers, and a wide assortment of observers depicted the river and its inland empire in rich and varied hues. Some viewed it as a giant window on the Pacific, others as a necessary link with China and Indian trade, and still others as a frontier to be conquered, civilized, and exploited. Lewis and Clark, Astor's men, Oregon Trail pioneers, early entrepreneurs, and even the first novelists and historians echoed these outward-looking and inward-turning interpretations of the Columbian province as an open frontier whose native peoples and varied landscapes should be won over and utilized. These viewpoints persisted throughout the nineteenth century and into at least two or three decades of the twentieth.

The vision of the Pacific Northwest as an area ripe for civilizing is at the center of Frederic Homer Balch's *Bridge of the Gods* (1890), the most popular Northwest novel of its time and continuously in print for more than a century. Drawing on his own experiences living on both sides of the Columbia (near Lyle on the north and Hood River on the south), his

## Changing Cultural Inventions of the Columbia

BY RICHARD W. ETULAIN

Allow me to begin with what anthropologists call ethnographic evidence—what we historians call an anecdote—in this case, a family story.

Just as I had puberty in sight, the Etulains moved from Ritzville to Ellensburg, Washington. The move was more than just crossing the Columbia, more than a jaunt of 150 miles. We were abandoning a 10,000-acre stock ranch twenty-two miles from the nearest town, surrounded by fertile wheat ranches, and moving to a 300-acre farm in the Kittitas Valley, known for its cattle and hay ranches and small, irrigated farms. If Ritzville orbited around Spokane on the outer edges of the Inland Empire, Ellensburg wavered under the hegemony of Seattle and the coast. Before my senior year, we recrossed the Columbia—again at Vantage—to relocate in Moses Lake, the center of the Columbia Basin. Now off the ranch and farm, we ended up in a town, squeezed between a mushrooming irrigation empire and a sprawling military domain.

What the Etulains lived through in these three locations, many northwesterners have experienced during the last century: the Columbia River as both a powerful unifying and a dividing force. On many occasions, residents have represented the Columbian empire as an identifiable re-

readings in nearly all major nineteenth-century historical works about the Oregon Country, and his interviews with Indians and early settlers, Balch fashioned a highly romantic, sentimental, and improbable novel about a newly arrived missionary's contact with a sprawling Indian confederacy in the late eighteenth century. But the limitations of *Bridge of the Gods*, large and numerous though they be, are less significant here than Balch's treatment of the symbolic import of the Columbia River and its immediate surroundings.

The riverine system that Balch depicts unites as well as divides its cultural hinterlands. In the novel, Native American tribes from the upper reaches of the Columbia in the Okanogan country, southward nearly one thousand miles to the headwaters of the Willamette, and east to the backcountry of the Snake are inexorably drawn to the Indian confederacy centered near the confluence of the Columbia and the Willamette. Here the mighty Willamette chieftain Multnomah vaunts his power that reaches out, like tentacles, into the far corners of the Pacific Northwest. Yet, these far-flung tribes also reveal their differences and divisions. Angry chieftains and rebellious bands, especially those in eastern Oregon and Washington and along the Snake, fiercely challenge much of Multnomah's hegemony.

Fittingly, near the end of the novel, when rancor, competition, and belligerence destroy the shaky confederacy, a powerful earthquake erupts, demolishing the giant natural bridge spanning the Columbia. The collapse of the "bridge of the gods" along with the death of Multnomah, signals the breakup of Indian alliances. These linkages destroyed, the native peoples retreat to their fragmented, deadly competition. Only the Columbia remains. As Balch intones in the final paragraphs of his novel:

Blue and majestic in the sunlight flows the Columbia, river of many names . . . always vast and grand, always flowing placidly to the sea. . . . Generation after generation . . . all the shadowy peoples of the past have sailed its waters . . . and still the river holds its course, bright, beautiful, inscrutable. It stays; *we go*.<sup>1</sup>

Not all novelists or visitors of Balch's era saw the Columbia as he did, however.

Some travelers to the Pacific Northwest at the end of the century also commented on the significance of the Columbia to the region. In the decade before the publication of his best-selling novel *The Virginian* (1902), Owen Wister, snobbish Philadelphian with newly acquired Harvard airs, traveled to central Washington, first to gather materials for his fiction and then for his honeymoon. Forced to stay a weekend in Coulee City, Wister condemns the hamlet from end to end. It is, he writes, "a sordid community . . . huddled there in the midst of unlimited nothing." Coulee, he adds,

is too dead even for much crime. . . . Nobody got either drunk or dangerous. People have been killed there, I believe, but not too often, most likely not lately. There is but one professional woman in the whole town, and from what I heard the men say, she is a forlorn old wreck, so unsightly that even her monopoly brings no profit.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the terrain Wister encounters east of the Columbia he dismisses as barren, ugly, useless stretches of sage and waste. He is more attracted to the wooded areas west of the river, finding in them less uncivilized western life to denounce.

During their honeymoon in 1898, Wister and his new bride were repulsed by the areas surrounding the Columbia in central Washington. In nearby Winthrop, Molly Wister encounters "miles and miles of what seemed like the most unlovely wilderness, almost desolation. . . . Everything seemed stern and unforgiving. You can hardly imagine what the impression of nature with its beauty and tenderness left out is like." She had to admit, however, that the isolation and repose gradually grew on her, acknowledging, finally, that she could "be happy here for a long time." Her husband was less reconciled, declaring the Columbia "the most dreadful thing I have ever seen. . . . It is something to have nightmares about for 20 years. . . . It lies in a rut [and the surrounding hills] make a vast endless winding cleft of prison."<sup>3</sup>

Englishman Rudyard Kipling, arriving in the Pacific Northwest by way of India a few years before Wister, also displayed ambivalent reactions to the Columbia and its environs. Dismissing Portland as too busy with boosterism, building, and violence to pave its streets and manage its sewage, Kipling fled up the Willamette and Columbia rivers as far as The Dalles. The wooded shores and other green scenes—especially Bridal Veil Falls—are immensely attractive to him; and so are the running schools of salmon, although Kipling's graphic account of their being netted, filleted, and stuffed into cans suggests his revulsion at technology's destruction of nature. Meanwhile, The Dalles, called tongue-in-cheek "the center of a great sheep and wool district, and the head of navigation," is described as without "peace and purity," an uncivilized blemish on the Great River of the West.

Later, after a return to Portland and a quick visit to booming Tacoma, Washington, Kipling's party travels through verdant forests, only to emerge into a "wilderness of sage brush" near the Columbia. Yet, Kipling added, "one thing worse than sage unadulterated . . . is a prairie city. We stopped at Pasco Junction, and a man told me that it was the Queen City of the Prairie. I wish Americans didn't tell such useless lies."<sup>4</sup> Once the Englishman and his companions dashed through eastern Washington and re-entered the forested Rockies, his spirits revived.

Historians writing about a late-nineteenth-century Pacific Northwest were less inclined to see the dreary, uncivilized scenes and residents that vividly colored the reactions of Wister and Kipling. Between the 1880s and the 1920s, several historians produced pioneer accounts of the Pacific Northwest, with stress on the Columbia River, but their emphases were more prosaic than those in contemporary novels and travel accounts.

In the most extensive historical accounts published in the second half of the nineteenth century, H. H. Bancroft—better yet, Frances Fuller Victor, since she wrote most of the volumes—established a framework and periodization that historians seemed to follow for several decades. In two volumes on the Northwest coast (1883, 1886) and in other thick tomes on Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and British Columbia,

Bancroft-Victor details the numerous explorers who traversed the coast and inlets looking for passages into the interior. Then follow long chapters on subsequent overland explorations, fur trade competitions, diplomatic controversies, and first settlements. In all these discussions, the Columbia River plays conspicuous roles as a mysterious site, an avenue of eastern- and westward-moving exploration, an area of geographical/diplomatic competition, and a location of pioneer settlements. Overall, the Columbia country becomes a frontier, where newcomers confront novel terrain and new peoples and where they deal with challenging wilderness settings. None of these extensive volumes follows the story long enough or with sufficient insight to see beyond the Columbia as new frontier. Another half-century or more had to elapse before historians would begin to ask about the centripetal and centrifugal influences of the Columbia River.<sup>5</sup>

A generation later, long-time Oregon historian Joseph Schafer situated the Columbia on center stage in much of his story of the early Pacific Northwest. The prime importance of the river to exploration, the fur trade, and diplomatic negotiations is repeatedly emphasized in Schafer's *History of the Pacific Northwest* (1905). Once he treats these earliest contacts and conflicts, however, Schafer abandons the Columbia except to note it as dividing the new state of Oregon and Washington Territory and as the best route to the interior Northwest. But even these treatments are brief and fleeting. Schafer seems unaware of the Columbia as a backbone of a regional trade or transportation grid. Indeed, like nearly all historians of his time, he views the Columbia as a frontier rather than as a regional symbol.

The following year, the immensely influential Frederick Jackson Turner published his only completed monograph, *Rise of the New West, 1819–1829*, which, its title notwithstanding, devotes but one of nineteen chapters to the Far West. Although Turner only glancingly mentions the Columbia or the Pacific Northwest, he did see the river system as both a unifying and a dividing force. "The two great branches of the Columbia," he pointed out, "the one reaching up into Canada, and the other pushing far into the Rocky Mountains, on the American side, consti-

tuted lines of advance for the rival forces of England and the United States in the struggle for the Oregon country." And, a half-century before Henry Nash Smith's striking elucidation of the West as a Passage to India, Turner highlights the pregnant significance of Senator Thomas Hart Benton's dreamy prediction that "the valley of the Columbia might become the granary of China and Japan, and an outlet to their imprisoned and exuberant population."<sup>6</sup> As he did elsewhere, Turner agrees with those who viewed the American frontier and the West as a safety valve for needy and restless immigrants. But a new perspective about the Columbia and the Pacific Northwest was just over the horizon.

The regionalist movement that spouted in the Pacific Northwest during the 1920s was but one current of a nationwide flood that poured over all regions of the country. During the decade after World War I, journalists, historians, novelists, and painters, among others, turned cheerleaders for bold, new investigations of American regions and their cultures. In New England, the South, the Midwest, and the Far West, editors of dozens of regional magazines often led the charge, sometimes echoing the cries of other Pied Pipers for less addiction to alien cultural institutions and more scrutiny and celebration of local history and society. Participating in this cultural transition, writers and artists of the Pacific Northwest who focused on the Columbia in their works avoided viewing it solely as a frontier expanding into new lands and confronting new peoples. More often, they saw the Columbia as defining a region (or subregion), gradually spawning its own cultural identity. Still, the regional perspective did not entirely supplant the frontier viewpoint; instead, it arose as an alternative, competing vista gaining in popularity during the next generation.<sup>7</sup>

A number of notable transformations helped to usher in this rising regionalism. World War I, the social and cultural disruptions of the 1920s, the heightened migration west, especially to areas like Los Angeles, served to draw attention to the American West. At the same time, ironically, the peaking popularity of writers like Zane Grey, Max Brand, and Clarence Mulford, of an artist such as Charlie Russell, and of hundreds of western films kept things western in front of millions of Americans. It

also kept them attentive to other cultural depictions of the West, even if those treatments dealt with a regional rather than a frontier West. Furthermore, the same spirit that fostered greater interest in things regional in the South—particularly among novelists, poets, and historians—also helped ignite a regional revival in the West and in other regions as well. Even though literary and cultural historians often refer to the 1920s and 1930s as the era of the Lost Generation, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the proletarian era, it was likewise a generation of regionalism, with writers, painters, photographers, and planners discovering or rediscovering pulsating regional cultures throughout every part of the United States.

No writer more than H. L. Davis illustrates the surge of regionalism that washed over the Pacific Northwest during the 1920s and 1930s. The product of a peripatetic family that hoppedscotched throughout central and eastern Oregon early in the twentieth century, Davis naturally drew on these scenes and experiences for a series of lively sketches, stories, and novels published between the late 1920s and 1960. A skilled raconteur and committed regionalist, Davis always had difficulty keeping his picaresque characters together and headed in the same direction. Alongside his dozens of vignettes depicting coastal hamlets, ranching and farming settlements, and wandering workers are numerous descriptions of the Columbia, the travelers on it, and the river towns perched on its banks. Almost all of these works treat a postfrontier Northwest, a generation or two beyond initial white settlements. Moreover, well acquainted with the western and Mississippi writings of Mark Twain and buoyed by the encouragement of cultural pundit H. L. Mencken, Davis suffused his prose with a humor, iconoclasm, and satire reminiscent of those two writers.

One of the earliest of the sketches, "A Town in Eastern Oregon," illustrates the witty and sardonic tone that characterizes most of Davis's writings dealing with the Columbia. A rambling, abbreviated history of Gros Ventre (no doubt "gross venture"), it is a thinly disguised satire of The Dalles. The town was settled by backtrailers, Davis recounts, who wanted to settle in western Oregon but who found those areas too crowded and

love/hate attitudes toward the Landing. The power of the riverside land holds them, in spite of their longings to flee from it. Most of the novel's central metaphors—including the pull of epiphanic “distant music,” its major protagonists, and the book's plot—are linked to an interplay between setting and characters. Here is the central theme of the regionalist: how, over time, place has shaped the lives of residents. Along the shores of the Columbia, gradually, a regional identity results when several generations react to the land, to one another, and to the legacies of history bequeathed to them. In the closing chapters of this racy, vernacular novel, one of the central characters, *griot*-like, recaps the history of the Landing, squeezing the past for its secrets, empathetically scrutinizing the journeys of the town's residents, and concluding how the passage of time has laminated these experiences into a recognizable regional society and culture.

The regional bug bit other Northwest novelists besides H. L. Davis, but most did not focus on the Columbia. Davis's best friend, James Stevens, depicted life in the woods and among radical laborers; and Mormon novelist Vardis Fisher was even more voluminous, writing more than a dozen historical novels about southeastern Idaho and American pioneers of the nineteenth century and a string of novels treating human history from prehistoric to near-present times. Nard Jones and Archie Binns turned out several historical and romance novels, all competently done and some treating the Columbia River, included Jones's *Swift Flows the River* (1940), *Scarlet Petticoat* (1941), and *Strill to the West* (1946) and Binns's *Lightship* (1934) and *Yon Rolling River* (1947). None of these novels approaches the high level of Davis's best regional fiction, although the latest of Jones's novels contains a good deal of interesting commentary on the building of Grand Coulee Dam.

Historians and painters in the Pacific Northwest were slower than novelists of the region and historians and novelists of other parts of the West to treat the Northwest regionally. Although Walter Prescott Webb and James Malin published regional histories of the Great Plains and Kansas during the 1930s and 1940s and artists Thomas Hart Benton,

thus, reluctantly, backslid to eastern Oregon. Once there, this backwash of the pioneer movement, especially in river towns like Gros Ventre, was not solid citizens of pioneer heroic tradition but primarily wanderers lusting after quick riches. “The amount of devilment and cussedness that its citizens have succeeded in whipping out of its corporate limits since it was founded,” quips Davis, “would line Hell a hundred miles.”<sup>8</sup> Over time, missionaries, soldiers, and merchants—and later steamboatmen, railroaders, and freighters—invasion the town and attempted to civilize it by driving off all undesirables in the name of Civic Improvement. Those unable or unwilling to submit to the puritanical demands of the city fathers were thrown out.

Five years later in his first and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Honey in the Horn*, Davis interjected another section on The Dalles among descriptions of several other subregions of Oregon. The hero encounters a windy steamboat captain who puts him to work steering and looking after his boat. On the river, everything seems Edenic, quiet, peaceful, and safe. But once ashore in a variety of two-bit hellholes, brimming with thieves, prostitutes, drunks, and those who wish they were so, he discovers life at its lowest ebb, muddied with the foulest and greediest of human animals. The distance between the pacific river and clanging, amoral riverbank towns reminds one of Twain's moral geography: the big dark brown “God” of the Mississippi and the “barbaric yawp” of the phony and defiled citizens of the river towns. Like Twain, Davis seemed convinced of the rectitude of the peaceful river and the irredeemable decay and violence of society hunkered down on its banks.

Davis's treatment of the Columbia and river towns is but chapter-length in “A Town in Eastern Oregon” and in *Honey in the Horn*, but that emphasis moves to center stage and occupies the whole of his later novel *The Distant Music* (1957). This story describes a three-generation family, the Mullocks, putting down roots in the Columbia River town of Clark's Landing (The Dalles area, where Davis resided for nearly two decades). The three Ranse Mullocks—grandfather, son, and grandson—fight off their pasts, attempt to learn from one another, and display tormented,

Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry completed widely publicized regionalist paintings during the same period, historians and painters of the Northwest were less forward-looking.

Still, historians betrayed some interest in examining the Pacific Northwest as a developing region. In the most widely used general history of the region in the 1930s and early 1940s, *A History of the Pacific Northwest* (1931), George W. Fuller supplied prefatory chapters on the settings and natives of the region before launching into standard sections on explorations, fur traders, missionaries, and settlers, with a final chapter tiptoeing into the twentieth century. The Columbia receives little unusual attention, except for a glancing discussion of a projected Grand Coulee Dam and Columbia Basin Project. A decade and a half later, the first edition of Oscar Osborn Winther's *The Great Northwest: A History* (1947) appeared, with the author's pronouncement that the region had "come of age. Long an important hinterland, it [had] finally emerged as one of the very significant sections of the nation."<sup>9</sup> How that specific regional identity had evolved, however, was not an explicit theme in Winther's text. Indeed, only in devoting 70 of 350 pages to the post-1900 era did Winther break noticeably from previous historical overviews. Briefly discussing the Columbia's role in early diplomacy and transportation, the author celebrated Grand Coulee Dam as the "Eighth Wonder of the World" and mentioned the river's recent significance as a source of irrigation waters and hydroelectric power.

Nearly twice as long as Winther's account, *Empire of the Columbia: A History of the Pacific Northwest* (1957), by Dorothy O. Johansen and Charles M. Gates, now in its second edition, remains the most extensive history of the region. Expanding on the Columbia's central role in the earliest explorations and in later diplomatic and transportation efforts, the authors demonstrated, more than previous scholars, the river's important agency in the development of fisheries, shipping, and irrigation. Furthermore, Professor Gates was the first to show how the region rapidly became an urban-dominated area between 1880 and 1910, its largest populations and economic strength moving away from a river hegemony toward that of cities. *Empire on the Columbia* was, and re-

mains, a pathbreaking work of regional history; for the first time, readers were treated to a full history of the Pacific Northwest from its earliest frontiers through its establishment of a new regional identity.

World War II transformed the American West as no other previous event, except perhaps the Gold Rush, had done. Slashing across the Pacific Northwest, the war years revolutionized the economy of the region, as they did those of other subregions of the West, particularly those sectors involved in military-industrial developments. The events of those years also dramatically altered the region's sociocultural configuration and redefined its linkages with the nation and the globe. Not surprisingly, these striking changes, and those erupting a generation later during the 1960s, forced novelists and historians to re-imagine the Pacific Northwest and to describe the Columbia River and its influences in pathbreaking terms. Overall, a new postregional spirit emerged and with it more complex ways to describe the Pacific Northwest.

Postregional culture in the Pacific Northwest not only included earlier frontier and regional visions of the Far Corners but it also incorporated revised perspectives on older topics and encompassed new subjects. Postregionalism was thus inclusive rather than exclusive, illustrating the increasing complexity rather than the simplicity of the region and its cultures. Fittingly, the most recent interpretations of the Great River of the West illustrate this growing intricacy.

Several novelists whose careers began as early as the 1920s continued to publish novels with frontier or regional perspectives well past World War II. For example, three novels by Ernest Haycox—*Long Storm* (1946), *The Earthbreakers* (1952), and *The Adventurers* (1955)—focus on pioneer Oregon and include appealing depictions of the Columbia and its tributaries as notable transportation avenues in the development of the frontier Northwest. In the generation following 1945, A. B. Guthrie, Jr. (*The Way West*, 1949), Dorothy Johnson (*Indian Country*, 1953), and Vardis Fisher (*Tale of Valor*, 1958; *Mountain Man*, 1965) also published historical fiction treating the frontier or regional Pacific Northwest.

Gradually, however, new emphases helped to redefine the Northwest past and present. Novelists such as Ivan Doig and other members of the



Montana "school" stressed subregional experiences without falling victim to a numbing provincialism. As early as the 1930s, in D'Arcy McNickle's fiction and later in the writings of James Welch, Janet Campbell Hale, and Sherman Alexie, Native Americans accented ethnicity as much, or even more, as place in redefining the Northwest. Sophus K. Winther, John Okada, Craig Lesley, and David Guterson also called attention to immigrant or ethnic groups as important actors in the history of the Pacific Northwest. For Janet Campbell Hale and Marilynne Robinson, matters of gender and family merited more attention than the shaping power of geography. At the same time, a more pronounced environmental perspective colors the works of several writers. For example, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., implied that mountain men, overlayers, ranchers, and townspeople overlooked or discounted the ecological impact of their errands into the West. More recently, Ernest Callenbach, in his novel/position paper *Ecotopia* (1977), and Ivan Doig, in his autobiography and in his several Montana novels, make readers much more aware of people-land relationships than had earlier novelists.

Nor should one overlook the counter-classics or anti-Westerns of several recent writers. Ken Kesey uses Northwest settings to deal with conflicts between frustrated individualists and a suffocating, centralizing bureaucracy in his *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964). Both volumes, as well as other novels by Tom Robbins, Richard Brautigan, and David Wagoner, employ humor, irony, and satire to parody stylized heroes and villains appearing in popular Western films and fiction. These revisionist novels are clearly remythologizing the American West. Ethnic heroes, lively heroines, and new anti-heroes have shot the Virginians, the Lassiters, and the John Waynes out of their saddles.

Although historians treating the Northwest since the 1960s are moving in similar postregional directions, journalists and historians such as Stewart Holbrook, David Lavender, and Nancy Wilson Ross preferred, in anecdotal narratives, to deal with the Pacific Northwest as a persisting frontier or a newly developed region. Other writers wished to discuss whether the area was, in fact, a separate region. One of the most provoc-

ative of these discussions was the Writers' Conference on the Northwest held in Portland in the fall of 1946. Reflecting a variety of interpretations and often contradictory opinions about the Northwest, more than a dozen authors addressed the central question of whether the Pacific Northwest was a separate identifiable region in *Northwest Harvest: A Regional Stock-Taking* (1948). Distinguished critic Carl Van Doren was convinced that the Northwest merited identification as a region, whereas popular novelist Ernest Haycox did not think so. Other contributors, including professors H. G. Merriam and Joseph Harrison and journalist Joseph Kinsey Howard, urged northwesterners to study their recent culture and to take stock of varying districts within the Northwest.<sup>10</sup>

These two final urgings have been heeded recently, with scholars now paying added attention to the twentieth century and to subregions of the Northwest. As a pioneer in these areas, Earl Pomeroy demonstrates in his analytical essays and books the importance of scrutinizing the recent past as well as examining eastern influences on the Far West. Geographer Donald W. Meinig, in *The Great Columbia Plain*, surely one of the most significant books about a western subregion, illustrates how a careful study in historical geography can illuminate people-environment relationships. In more abbreviated fashion, historians David Stratton and Judith Austin also urge readers to pay more attention to the East-West, interior-coastal divisions of the Pacific Northwest.<sup>11</sup>

Revisions of earlier regional overviews and new syntheses of the Northwest also reveal how much postregional emphases are evident in recent historiography. The second edition of *Empire of the Columbia* expands its discussions of the modern region and adds coverage of ethnic groups. Meanwhile, Gordon Dodds's textbook, treating Washington and Oregon (but not Idaho) and reflecting recent historiographical shifts, includes generous sections on ethnic groups, women, and other sociocultural topics. These emphases are even more pronounced in Carlos A. Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History* (1996), a narrative loaded with vignettes of multi-ethnic peoples, discussions of gender, and particularly thorough treatments of environmental topics, the twentieth century, and the major subregions of the area.

But have these historiographical shifts influenced the ways we look at the Columbia? Do these transitions from frontier to regional to postregional emphases transform our images of the Great River of the West? They obviously do, in several explicit ways. Race, gender, and environment have clearly shoved aside frontier and region as the newest topics of widespread interest; in the last generation, contacts with new lands and new peoples and a developing regional consciousness have fallen before New Social and New Western histories.

Now, we have re-invented the Columbia River. Recent novelists and historians are more intrigued with questions about Indian fishing rights, the appropriateness of dams, giant reclamation projects, and, perhaps, Rivers of Empire. The specter of Hanford, little mentioned before the 1960s, has now become a controversial, much-discussed subject. Revealingly, Richard White, in his masterful overview of the West, speaks little of the nineteenth- or early twentieth-century roles of the Columbia but includes this attention-catching paragraph ringing with postregional emphasis:

Marvels, however, come at a cost. Bonneville, Grand Coulee, and their numerous smaller successors reduced the Columbia, which Americans had long celebrated as symbol of the nation and the West, to a series of lakes. The Columbia no longer ran mightily to the sea; instead, the river ran between its dams like a circus lion jumping through hoops. On the Columbia above the Grand Coulee Dam, where spawning salmon had once run in the millions, the salmon ran no more. The engineers who designed the dam had given no thought to the migration of salmon up the river, and the fish vanished from the upper Columbia.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the index of Patricia Nelson Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest*, the most widely cited of the New Western histories, contains no entry for the Columbia, but her lively book does include engaging discussions of much-needed Indian fishing rights and the dangers of Hanford.

Enough periodizing and example giving. A final larger question suggests itself: do these shifting emphases among novelists and historians furnish any guidance on better ways to understand the past and our interpretations of it? I think so.

Nearly fifty years ago in his pathbreaking book *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), Henry Nash Smith explained how Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier thesis were embedded in mythic notions about the West during the nineteenth century. "Whatever the merits or demerits of the frontier hypothesis in explaining actual events," Smith concluded, "the hypothesis itself developed out of the myth of the garden." Smith then proceeded to show how much Turner reflected popular notions concerning the shaping influences of nature/civilization and agriculture on American and European thinkers of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

Are similar insights to be derived from the shifting interpretations of the Columbia during the last century? Clearly, those depicting the river in the early twentieth century saw it as part of a frontier to be conquered; later regionalists viewed it as part of a region's progress and development; and more recently, still others, reflecting postregional attitudes, emphasize other topics. Shouldn't these changing interpretations, arising out of changing sociocultural conditions, remind us of what Smith concluded about Frederick Jackson Turner? Put another way, isn't the most probing historiography oxymoronic—not mine, not yours, but *ours*? Conversely, isn't the most dangerous trend toward hydroponic historiography, one fertilized by the conviction that only the present generation has unlocked the secrets of the past and one nourished by a destructive individualism, dismissing earlier views to champion a newer one?

So, shouldn't we conclude that all frontier, regional, and postregional perspectives supply useful interpretations of the Great River of the West? Moreover, hasn't the Columbia *both* unified and divided the Pacific Northwest? Obviously, yes, to both questions. When these acts of mental synthesis occur, our views of the Columbia, like our conclusions about the western past, become more complex, cumulative, and ever-



changing. When we glimpse this longer, larger vision, we shall be freed from an Ahabian hubris and see the elephant of the greater river of the West.

## NOTES

1. Frederic Homer Balch, *Bridge of the Gods* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1890), 279, 280.
2. Fanny Kemble Wister, ed., *Owen Wister Out West: His Journals and Letters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 136.
3. Quoted in Ben Merchant Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister: The Frederic Remington-Owen Wister Letters* (Palo Alto, Calif.: American West Publishing Company, 1972), 236, 234-35. For full descriptions of Wister's reactions to the Columbia area, see the helpful narrative in Darwin Payne, *Owen Wister: Chronicler of the West, Gentleman of the East* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985).
4. Arrell Morgan Gibson, ed., *American Notes: Rudyard Kipling's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 56, 57, 77.
5. William L. Lang has published a very useful overview of these early historical treatments of the Columbia. Consult his "Creating the Columbia: Historical and the Great River of the West, 1930-1935," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 93 (Fall 1992): 235-61.
6. Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rise of the New West, 1819-1829* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1906), 117, 132.
7. Especially helpful for understanding the rise of regionalism in the West and South is Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).
8. H. L. Davis, "A Town in Eastern Oregon," in *Team Bells Woke Me and Other Stories* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1953), 175. The story originally appeared in *American Mercury Magazine* in January 1930.
9. Oscar Osborn Winther, *The Great Northwest: A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), vii.
10. Carl Van Doren, "One Nation, Not Indivisible"; Ernest Haycox, "Is There a Northwest?"; Harold G. Merriam, "Does the Northwest Believe in Itself?"; Joseph B. Harrison, "Regionalism Is Not Enough"; Joseph Kinsey Howard, "Culture, Climate, and Community," in V. L. O. Chittick, ed., *Northwest Harvest: A Regional Stock-Taking* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948).
11. Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41 (March 1955): 579-

600, and *The Pacific Slope: A History of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965); D. W. Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain: A Historical Geography, 1805-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968); David H. Stratton, "Hells Canyon: The Missing Link in Pacific Northwest Regionalism," *Idaho Yesterdays* 28 (Fall 1984): 3-9; Judith Austin, "Desert, Sagebrush, and the Pacific Northwest," in William G. Robbins et al., eds., *Regionalism and the Pacific Northwest* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1983), 129-47.

12. Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": *A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 487.
13. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), 292. For more extensive comments on the concepts of frontier, region, and postregion, see Richard W. Etulain, *Re-Imagining the Modern American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996). Consult, too, Richard W. Etulain, "Inventing the Pacific Northwest: Novelists and the Region's History," in *Terra Pacifica: People and Place in the Northwest States and Western Canada*, ed. Paul W. Hirt (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1998), 25-52.

assurances from engineers and many scientists that what ails the river can be mitigated, remedied, and even reversed. Some deny that the Columbia is threatened in any serious way, arguing that while the river is a robust provider of human needs it is also perhaps the most scrutinized, monitored, and cared-for stream in North America. Nonetheless, federal and state governments have assiduously studied the Columbia—222 official reports were completed between 1956 and 1992—and have strenuously acted to mitigate the perceived problems. Between 1981 and 1996, for example, government agencies expended more than three billion dollars to protect wild salmon and improve fish runs. The Northwest Power Planning Council—mandated to monitor river management to equalize considerations afforded environmental, industrial, agricultural, and commercial concerns—has issued annual reports and drawn up several comprehensive plans for addressing the Columbia's problems. But no easy solutions have emerged. The industrial and agricultural users of the river, Indian tribes who fish and use the Columbia as guaranteed by treaty rights, recreational users, and environmental groups disagree about what should be done. Worse, the political process has put interest groups at odds over how and under what terms they can use the river. Underscoring their disagreements are strikingly different definitions of the river and depictions of its history, viewpoints that disclose fundamentally different understandings of what the Columbia means. The differences are buried deep in representations about history and place. This is where we should begin if we hope to sort out what has happened to the Columbia in our time.<sup>2</sup>

Writing about another place and another era in America's past, one of our nation's great poets put it exactly right when he characterized history as a relative of poetics, as a way of understanding the world that engages our curiosity, challenges our intelligence, and invokes our imagination.

Historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake.<sup>3</sup>

## What Has Happened to the Columbia? A Great River's Fate in the Twentieth Century

BY WILLIAM L. LANG

At the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of a new millennium, the life of a great river has entered a dangerous phase. Reports from researchers and environmental watch groups warn that the magnificent and multi-millennial Columbia River may have been changed too much, accumulated too much pollution, or become so compromised that it has been indelibly transmogrified from a living river to an engineered, industrial sluice. Some declare the river critically unhealthy. They cite the decline in salmon returning to spawn in the Columbia and its tributaries and the federal government's use of the Endangered Species Act in 1992 to save the native Snake River sockeye salmon as symptoms of an ecological and political illness that may be fatal. Other warnings include documentation of industrial toxins and radioactive isotopes in the river and fundamental changes in water quality caused by logging and agricultural chemical run-offs. The future of the modern river, these reports suggest, is hanging in some kind of contingent but obscured balance, and it may be too late to avoid a regional catastrophe.<sup>1</sup>

The apocalyptic descriptions of the Columbia's future are matched by

Robert Penn Warren wrote these lines in reflection on the Civil War, but he could have been writing about our historical relationship with the Columbia River. It is a relationship that has been at the center of our lives in the Pacific Northwest for thousands of years, from the era when human groups first fished on the Columbia to the twentieth-century assault on the river to make it a generator of kilowatts, a source of irrigation water, a commercial conduit, and a playground. Throughout the history of our engagement with the river, there has been no clear line between what we have extracted from the river in material things and what the Columbia has meant to the spirit of the people. Because this division between the material and the spiritual has been so difficult to draw, our relationship with the river has been enigmatic, often as instrumental as spiritual, as inspirational as remunerative. In short, the Columbia is our largest living myth and the progenitor of a thousand other myths that we constantly have remade and have invited to remake us.

As a physical and environmental reality, the Columbia has been our life cord. The river's meaning to its human communities is embedded in the stories we have told about the river and especially in the images we have created to represent it. It has affected the human geography of our place more than any other force. We have settled by it, built towns along it, fished it, ridden it, siphoned it, bridged it, dammed it, and protected it. The Columbia is nothing if it is not a river that turbulently blends the historic and poetic senses. If what Robert Penn Warren wrote is correct, then how we have described, understood, and used the Columbia says as much about us as it does about the river. The corpus of stories we have created stands both as a catalog of our culture's mythic vision and as a measurement of the historically powerful effects of the Great River of the West.

The relationship between the Columbia and its people during this century has been more dynamic and disruptive than at any time in the past. Between the 1890s and the 1990s, human ingenuity physically altered the Columbia in ways that stagger. For millennia it had been a river so powerful that only vulcanism and catastrophic Pleistocene floods changed its course, but applied engineering has made it a mutant. To-

day's Columbia is characterized by massive impoundments, control gates and locks, and altered environments. The relationship between people and river during the twentieth century has been especially unequal, with the Columbia suffering and partially sacrificing itself to human desires. In the sketchiest history of the river, the Columbia's biography is recounted in measurements of sustenance or gain, its benefits calculated in fish caught, hydropower generated, and commerce tallied. In telling its more complex history, we know that the river has been given valuations other than its worth in the exchange of goods or as a provider of industrial energy. In these stories, the Columbia embodies the spiritual energy people desire from their environment, where human action participates in the broadest dramas of life. This story includes Native American tales of Coyote's distribution of salmon in the Columbia River Basin, descriptions by Euroamerican explorers of a pastoral and dangerous place, and an idealized river landscape protected by the 1986 Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act. Making sense of the Columbia's fate during the twentieth century requires investigating these often contradictory perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

Two images dominate our views of the Columbia: the river as spiritual force and the river as cornucopian provider of economic value. At the center of both images is the Columbia's existence as nature. The raw and often terrible force of its current, the volume of its flow, and its extensive geologic and biotic environment make the Columbia a governing natural presence. Little that is natural or artificial within its 259,000-square-mile drainage area exists outside of the river's influence, from fish and wildlife to spinning turbines and barges transporting wheat. But what constitutes the natural and artificial on the Columbia, as historian Richard White recently argued, is a slippery conundrum; and once articulated, it raises additional questions about how we perceive the river as environment and human space. For twelve thousand years, the Columbia's environment has been the product of human and non-human forces, but during the last four decades the mixture has become much more dynamic and potentially confusing. Advocates to the new ecology, such as Daniel Botkin, argue that human-disturbed environ-

ments are little different in their components than their undisturbed counterparts. They are still places where natural processes and evolutionary dynamics operate and where flora and fauna exist in Darwinian niches and play out their lives. Our perceptions of the Columbia are no less contingent. From one angle, the river looks controlled and domesticated, prompting us to create images that are bold in engineering metaphors. From another angle, the river appears powerfully unpredictable, generative, and mesmerizing, which stimulates us to portray it in romantic, mystical, and even utopian terms.<sup>5</sup>

Images of the river as an economic and Edenic place run through the earliest Euroamerican descriptions of the Columbia. George Vancouver's men, in their fall 1792 survey of the river from the mouth to near modern-day Camas, Washington, wrote of the Columbia's pastoral beauty and commercial potential. Similarly, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark described the middle portion of the Columbia, from the mouth of the Snake River to present-day Astoria, Oregon, in terms that emphasized the fabulous wealth in anadromous fish and the clear opportunities for entrepreneurial investment. By the onset of "Oregon Fever" during the 1840s, the Columbia beckoned as wilderness environment and region for settlement, where Americans could extract wealth and establish homes. But it was the British Hudson's Bay Company that rushed to exploit the place, especially its fur-bearing animals. During the 1830s and 1840s, their descriptions and activities enhanced the Columbia's image as a cornucopia, where economic gain ruled human action, where, as geographer Cole Harris has argued, everything "turned around management, order, and property."<sup>6</sup> By mid-century, newly settled Americans in the Columbia River valley had extended the fur traders' reduction of the landscape to an ordered and commodified place, including the Oregon Steam Navigation Company's nearly monopolistic control of river passage from Portland to the Snake River. The image of the Columbia widened and lengthened through its identification with commerce to make it a political place, prompting Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens to remark in 1860:

It is a matter of national defense, the development of our interior, the availing ourselves of our geographical position. . . . It is not a fiction, the great vision of Columbus. It is a fact that if we stand firmly on our geographical position, and show a wise forecast in the measures looking to the development of our country [Columbia River Basin] we will have the means of diverting a large portion of the trade of Asia, and causing it to flow through our own land.<sup>7</sup>

A strain of thought throughout the twentieth century reiterates Stevens's representation of the Columbia as an economic destiny, a place that contained the means for an enriching future. Beginning with the first significant engineered alterations to the river during the 1880s and 1890s, the work of controlling the river increased in intensity and accomplishment throughout the twentieth century. As the work of building the first federal dams on the river got underway in 1933–1934, the images of a controlled river defined the Columbia's benefits as both regionally and nationally strategic. Damming the Columbia and controlling the riverine environment, Portland river transportation company owner Homer Shaver argued in 1934, "means the increasing of population here through the development of power and industries." The great hydroelectric projects became the vehicle for modernity and for creation of a new region in the basin. The prospect was both dynamic and benign. The region would become dramatically energized while it would also create a new civilization that could avoid and correct the mistakes that already littered the nation's industrial history. "We will have small cities," Shaver prophesied, "with industries rather than large cities as in the East." A decade later, during World War II, the images of a region electrified by falling water merged with visions of the Columbia as a cultural savior and bulwark for the nation. Speaking in late 1943, Bonneville Power Administration head Paul Raver pledged the river to a new future:

We are going to pay off our war debt. We are going to provide jobs for returning men and soldiers coming home and people displaced

in their employment through this war. The harnessing of that resource—the river—is but a method, a device, if you please, for paying off the mortgage—the war debt.<sup>8</sup>

This portrait of the Columbia takes instrumentality beyond commerce or defending regional wealth. In this vision, the river became a national property that could increase American prosperity and repay Americans for sacrifices made during the war years. By the time the nation and region had adjusted to a peacetime economy, river managers had revised their evaluations of the Corps of Engineers' earlier studies of the Columbia's potential as a controlled waterway—the famous "308 Reports." A predicted power shortage, continued agitation by the transportation lobby for an "improved river," and the demand for more irrigation impoundments led to authorization for McNary Dam near the mouth of the Umatilla River. It was the beginning of a rationalized river, where water in all tributaries would funnel into the mainstem to be used by a growing number of claimants. It was also the beginning of the post-New Deal construction of big dams on the Columbia that concluded in 1975, when the last of four dams on the lower Snake River went on line. "It will be a rare drop of water," a government official remarked in 1949, "which reaches the Columbia's broad mouth without having done some useful work for the Northwest."<sup>9</sup>

Twin images of control and efficiency guided engineers on the Columbia. Falling water meant hydroelectric generation, while impounded water meant transportation and storage for irrigation and flood control. Dams could both drop water and impound it, and multipurpose dams after World War II offered the promise that the Columbia would be a willing servant of important economic constituencies and a friendlier river that would stay within its banks. As the engineers stated clearly in the revised "308 Report," the goal was a fully managed Columbia River Basin that included numerous storage dams on tributaries and "run of the river" dams on the Columbia and Snake. Engineers promised that the new river would control or prevent the periodic and powerful flush-

ings that had been part of the great river system for thousands of years. During the nineteenth century alone, floods had drowned low areas in 1861, 1876, and 1894. The 1894 flood of record pushed 1,240,000 cubic feet per second past The Dalles. The river trickled by the same point in 1937 at only 36,000 cfs, the lowest documented flow on record. The image of a regulated river included eliminating these enormous swings and the seasonally erratic flow, which annually ran more than three times larger from May to August than from September to April. The engineers wanted to flatten out the river, to make it an equalized and regulated stream that could provide hydroelectricity on demand.<sup>10</sup>

Using the image of an engineered river knew few limits. Referring to anticipated difficulties in creating an integrated power network on the river in 1936, one engineer flatly promised: "There are no problems that cannot be solved, and their solution depends so completely on demands for power and their location, that preliminary planning is of rather academic value." It was an optimism that fueled itself on the seemingly limitless hydroelectric power that the Columbia offered. The future beckoned to the developers and to dreamers of an electrified river. Plans reified the dreams. Between 1931 and 1975, the Corps of Engineers conducted four major studies of the Columbia River Basin's navigable rivers and streams; other federal agencies completed another ten investigations that surveyed the region's riverine resources for development. Each plan concluded that mounds of data and sophisticated analyses proved the efficacy and rewards of operating the Columbia as a system, perhaps best as an improved natural system but nonetheless as a system. Increasingly, the evaluative measurement became economic. An extreme but not unrepresentative statement of this perspective appeared in the "Joint Policy Statement" issued by the negotiators of the U.S.-Canada Columbia River treaty in 1964:

Cooperative development of the water resources of the Columbia River Basin, designed to provide optimum benefits to each country, requires that the storage facilities and downstream power produc-

tion facilities proposed by the respective countries will, to the extent it is practicable and feasible to do so, be added in order of the most favorable benefit-cost ratio.

After more than three decades of refining the system, the definition of the Columbia had edged toward a reality best expressed on graph paper, with lines of hydrological measurements intersecting those of kilowatt production and reservoir volumes.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the Columbia's apparent confiscation by the actuaries of modern engineering and hydroelectric development, other images had lived alongside these calculations and suggested a much different river. "Alone of all the rivers of the West," Samuel Bowles wrote in 1865, the Columbia

has broken these stern barriers [mountains] and the theatre of the conquering conflict offers, as might naturally be supposed, many an unusual feature of nature, river and rock have striven together, wrestling in close and doubtful embrace—sometimes one gaining ascendancy, again the other but finally the subtler and seductive element worrying its rival out, and gaining the western sunshine, broken and scarred and foaming with hot sweat, but proudly victorious, and forcing the withdrawing arms of its opponent to hold up eternal moments of its triumph.

This image of power is no less impressive than the image of hydroelectric energy produced by spinning turbines a century later, but it is an organic strength that is depicted in a contested and natural drama. The image is both romantic and animistic, a portrait of the Columbia wrestling with its confining earthen structure to make its way to the sea. Seen from this viewpoint, there is blood, muscle, and heart in the river. For Bowles, the Columbia epitomized the raw and untamed nature that characterized the American West, a stereotypical image of exceptionalism that seems to emerge wholesale from the landscape.<sup>12</sup>

This Columbia—the romantic river—attracted investment of a different kind. By the end of the nineteenth century, when railroad and steamboat travel extended tourism to the Pacific West, the Columbia became part of a monumental landscape that exuded geographical and aesthetic power. The centerpiece was the 100-mile-long gorge that the Columbia had cut through the Cascade Mountains on its way to the Pacific. Towering cliffs, spectacular waterfalls, and a dense forest cover made it a place that prompted Scottish naturalist David Douglas in 1827 to call it "wild and romantic," a place that "is grand beyond description." By 1891, when regional historian Frances Fuller Victor wrote of the Columbia Gorge as a place where "wonder, curiosity, and admiration combine to arouse sentiments of awe and delight," Portland-based steamboats regularly cruised upriver to the Cascades with tourists who marveled as "each moment affords a fresh delight to the wondering senses."<sup>13</sup>

The river provided an inspiration that nearly matched its commercial potential. It seemed, as travel writer Henry Finck suggested in 1890, that nature had purposefully created the Gorge to embellish human life and improve health. Writing in *The Pacific Coast Tour*, Finck told readers he had "seen a great part of three continents,"

but if I were asked what I considered the best investment of a five-dollar bill I had ever made for combined aesthetic enjoyment and hygienic exhilaration, I should name this return trip on the Columbia River. Tourists who have time for one trip only should go up the river, because in that direction the scenery is arranged most effectively, becoming ever grander and wilder till the climax is reached in the marvelous rapids above Dalles City.

This was landscape with purpose and dramatic effect. More than that, the river offered travelers an intimate connection with a domineering natural place, engendering awe and respect as well as aesthetic enjoyment. Steaming upriver into the Columbia's great, verdant gorge, large

sternwheelers brought passengers and profits to steamboat companies. They also engaged an increasingly urbanized population in an intimate romance with a geography of scale so immense that it dwarfed human agency and a physical power so indomitable that it tested the steamboats' mechanical strength. Tourists always left the river impressed. The place overwhelmed in its open displays of emotional and psychological power. It compelled most commentators and publicists to plumb the mythic and mystic dimensions of human experience for descriptive analogs and comparisons, language to convey the inner strength of the place. Writers often located the source of the river's magical power deep in the landscape itself. "Much has been written concerning the beauty of the Columbia," a 1924 guidebook informed,

but no word painting can adequately describe this masterpiece of nature's handiwork. There is a mystic beauty lurking in its vales and dells, which lifts the soul above the realms of time and space, and makes the beholder sense the presence of the divine.<sup>14</sup>

That sense of "the presence of the divine" on the Columbia coexisted with the depiction of the river as mundane but cornucopian. Throughout the twentieth century, these two distinctive images of the river engaged in a contingent relationship that defies easy characterization. It was not so much a tussle of contending visions as it was a dance of suitors who all desired a cultural claim on the river's future. It was in the projections of imagined futures that the distinctions became sharpest, when the instrumentalist exploitation of the Columbia's power and riches diverged strongly from the idealist preservation of the river's aesthetics and spirituality. But there were times when the two views overlapped and lines blurred, when development of the river merged human purpose with providence. Speaking at the dedication of The Dalles–Celilo Canal in 1915, Portland civic leader and investor Joseph Nathan Teal pressed both touchstones in his accolade to the creation of an artificial waterway around the great obstruction Lewis and Clark had called the "Long Narrows" and David Thompson had described as "this immense body of

water under such compression, raging and hissing, as if alive." On May 5, 1915, Teal spoke enthusiastically under a hot sun to the largest crowd that had assembled in The Dalles since Oregon Trail days.

This mighty work symbolizes the stern, unflinching determination of the people that our waters shall be free—free to serve the uses and purposes of their creation by a Divine Providence. . . . It means the recognition by all that throughout this vast territory there is no division of interest. This a common country with a common purpose, a common destiny; and this stream, from its source to where it finally weds the ocean and is lost in the mighty Pacific, is one river—our river—in which we all have a common share.<sup>15</sup>

Mingled in the portrait Teal drew of the new canal, the powerful Columbia, and the future of the region were pictures of organic unity, the work of human ingenuity, divine purpose, and the merged fates of a river and its people. There is great cultural power in Teal's portrait, a communication that historian William Robbins has labeled a "celebratory breast beating" that became emblematic of the "instrumentalist designs of the dominant culture." It was that, but it was also more. For the power in Teal's imagery is in the wedding of the organic and the economic in the minds of his audience. No one could deny how the Columbia dominated in relationships between the river and its people, how the river's geography had provided opportunity for human activity and created obstacles to navigation. That was Teal's point when he proclaimed "that our waters shall be free—free to serve the uses and purposes of their creation by a Divine Providence." It was science and engineering, in other words, that allowed the Columbia to do what it could and what it should for humanity.<sup>16</sup>

The Columbia's instrumentalist future expanded well beyond Teal's imagination in 1915 and even the utility of the canal he helped dedicate. By the early 1920s, The Dalles–Celilo Canal had proven to be an economic failure. Nonetheless, for river developers like Teal and Nelson Blalock—who had told "Open Rivers Congress" in 1908 that creating an



open river to Wenatchee could be "quickly and easily done" with a "few blasts"—the image of the Columbia as a thriving artery of commerce was a siren that continued to lure, culminating in the construction of dams on the lower Snake River more than fifty years later.<sup>17</sup>

As engineering changed the Columbia, however, the images of a natural environment continued to inform discussions and often provided countervailing to the drive to extract economic value from the river. During the first decade of big dam-building, for example, regional planners approached development on the Columbia as something of a trade-off between economic benefits and aesthetics. The location of Bonneville Dam provoked the issue, because it straddled the Columbia at the western end of the scenic Columbia Gorge and planners knew that low-cost electrical power could attract major industries to the site. The image of the great gorge forested with smokestacks rather than Douglas firs seemed appalling. B. H. Kizer, chairman of the Washington State Planning Commission in 1937, feared that once the dam began delivering low-cost power the Gorge would be "doomed and not all society's feeble contrivances can save it." The report of the planning commission echoed Kizer's warning:

The introduction, into an area of great beauty, of that type of land use and construction which, of all the works of man, is least characterized by attractive appearance of architectural consideration, would be a visual incongruity which no subsequent effort could overcome. . . . The views from its summit [Beacon Rock] would overlook slag heaps and iron roofs, and all the miscellaneous jumble required by heavy chemical or metallurgical processing plants.<sup>18</sup>

In 1926, one of the seven commission members, highway builder Samuel C. Lancaster, had written a panegyric to the river which included: "The Columbia is peerless. Its grandeur speaks to men, and tells of Him who gathered the waters together into one place, and lifted up the mountains." The planners had a larger agenda. The likelihood of in-

dustrial developments in one of the most scenic portions of the river's mainstem forced them to ask difficult questions. Just what makes the Columbia special? What are the limits of development? What should be preserved or protected? The planning commission's Columbia Gorge Committee answered that their planning effort was not meant

to restrict the play of the physical and economic forces released by the Bonneville project and the consequent inevitable developments in or near the Gorge, but to urge the parallel consideration of all of the social and economic forces and developments, and to protect real economic values involved in recreational facilities and scenery.<sup>19</sup>

The text of the committee's report reflected a measured evaluation of Bonneville Dam's potential to change the area and elevate the economic over the aesthetic. "If the unique scenic values of the Columbia Gorge are to survive," the planners concluded, "natural conditions and appearances must be largely retained." But they knew full well that preservation could go no further than protecting the landscape not affected by the dam itself. "The dam is calculated to serve future as well as present generations," their report surmised, "likewise, the Gorge if preserved, would be of continuing value." Their rationalizing planning process forced them to equate the "peerless" qualities of the river with economic valuations, suggesting that the Gorge "is a major asset to the surrounding territory" and "is of such importance that it may fairly be considered a national treasure for which the Federal government should manifest a protective concern." The benefits for people were manifest and manifold, but they had to be evaluated as economic assets, the "demonstrated power of attracting tourist travel . . . a large-scale income-bearing property," rather than as a contribution to public pleasure or a valued spiritual resource.<sup>20</sup>

Damming the Columbia compelled the river managers, especially the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bonneville Power Administration, to increasingly view the river as one vast plumbing system. The first



run-of-the-river dams blocked the mainstem at the limits of flow within the United States at Bonneville and Grand Coulee. Additional dams, built by the federal government and public utility districts by the late 1960s, strung out between Bonneville and Grand Coulee, making the engineered Columbia the most productive hydroelectric river in the world and among the most controlled. The approval of the Columbia River Treaty between Canada and the United States in 1964 brought three additional mainstem dams on line by the mid-1970s. Completion of the lower Snake River dams and major storage dams on tributaries, such as Libby and Dworshak on the Kootenay and Clearwater rivers, filled out a system that required the daily regulation of water flows from more than two hundred fifty dams in the Columbia's drainage basin. In the plans of the river-manipulators, the purpose of the river could not be more obvious: "Every day this great river runs to the sea with any stretch of it unharnessed constitutes another day of wasted resources."<sup>21</sup> By the mid-1970s, engineers had "tamed" the Columbia by transmogrifying it from a predictably fluctuating river that flooded unpredictably and allowed water to flow "wasted" to the Pacific into a regulated stream understood best in acre-foot volumes in storage pools, feet of "head" behind dams, and millions of peak and "firm" kilowatts. It became what Richard White has called a "virtual river," a river represented in computer models created to predict salmon behavior in a Columbia that is littered with impediments and dangers for anadromous fish. In ways barely dreamed of by the planners during the 1930s, the refashioned Columbia had become the leading edge of the Pacific Northwest, the harbinger and vehicle for a braver new world. "The Columbia River of the future," an engineer prophesied in 1969, would become

a model of resources development which will be the envy of the entire world. By then [1980s] sufficient new knowledge concerning migratory fish will exist to permit adjustment of the now rigid water quality standards. . . . for a revitalized salmon industry, and for a high quality municipal supply.<sup>22</sup>

As magnificent as that imagined future might have seemed in 1969, there was a down side that the engineer acknowledged in his vision of the new river—the critical decline in anadromous fish runs in the mainstem and tributaries. No image of the manipulated river is bleaker or more disheartening than a Columbia without salmon fighting their way upstream to spawning beds, some swimming more than nine hundred miles and climbing more than sixty-five hundred feet from the ocean. That picture is the verso of the brilliant image of spinning turbines and the high-voltage transmission of low-cost electricity throughout the Pacific Northwest and as far south as southern California. This Janus-faced portrait of the modern Columbia represents both a vexing conundrum for Pacific Northwesterners and a battleground over what the river means to the human community.

From the earliest descriptions of the great river, the symbol of riverine fecundity had been the teeming millions of salmon that swam upriver in seasonal runs. Lewis and Clark had described a river "Crowded with Salmon in many places" and reported sightings of "emence quantities of fish" near the mouth of the Snake River in their 1805 descent of the Columbia. The estimates of migrating salmon invited exaggeration and fantastic stories, but the exceptional harvests by commercial fishers using seines, traps, and fishwheels seemed to justify the tales. A fishwheel at Cascade Locks scooped up 54,000 pounds of salmon in one day in 1894, and fifty years later a seine operated at The Dalles caught 70,000 pounds in a single day. The image of fecundity beyond belief had its penultimate expression in one of the great stories often repeated on the river and recorded by Patrick Donan in 1898:

Citizen George Francis Train, many years ago, left this statement—that would be remarkable anywhere else: "This is to certify, that I have today, with my slippers on, walked across the Columbia River, at The Dalles of Oregon, on the backs of the salmon, without getting my feet wet;—Colonel N. B. Sinott was a witness of the feat."<sup>23</sup>

Salmon migrating up the Columbia became vulnerable to nets and spears at Celilo Falls, where native fishers had garnered one-third of their annual caloric needs from the Columbia for thousands of years. They caught perhaps as much as 18 million pounds each year from six seasonal runs. Among pre-contact fisheries in North America none was more productive than at the series of rapids, basalt cliffs, and falls that curved across the river at Celilo. And at no place did salmon so dominate the lives of native peoples. Because of the singular importance of salmon, Indian fishers honored the captured fish through elaborate ceremonies. Each year at the first catch, Yakama fishers deposited the bones of the first salmon on the river bottom as a beckoning to the millions of salmon to follow. The ceremony recognized the ecological character of salmon behavior and signified the people's gratitude for the salmon's sacrifice. "They came to provide us an example of sacrifice," Yakama leader Ted Strong has reminded, "and we thank the creator that gave the salmon the feeling of servitude."<sup>24</sup>

In the late twentieth century, the fate of the salmon has become a litmus test of the river's ecological health, and salmon have become an icon for all that is natural and spiritual in the Columbia. The picture of salmon swimming against strong current or leaping waterfalls confirms the specialness of this animal, while it also characterizes the river's power in a way quite different from the image of a revolving turbine. Although Indian people have always revered salmon, it was not until the numbers of migrating fish went into a steep decline after the mainstem dams were built that non-Indians made salmon iconographic. The closing off of fish habitat by the dams—especially in the streams made inaccessible to fish by Grand Coulee Dam—combined with increasing commercial fisheries in the rivers and the ocean and the spoiling consequences of agriculture, timber, and industry to push salmon stocks to the edge of extinction. Fisheries biologists such as Joseph Craig had warned about these consequences as early as 1935, but the river managers made their choices regardless of the caveats. By 1947, with Bonneville and Grand Coulee in place and plans for three additional dams on the drawing boards, one official wrote: "It is, therefore, the conclusion of

all concerned that the overall benefits to the Pacific Northwest from a thorough-going development of the Snake and Columbia are such that the present salmon run must be sacrificed." The trade-off could not be more simply stated. Dams and development, the economic river, triumphing over salmon, the natural and spiritual river. Dams became the contrary icon to salmon, the personification of a damaged environment and altered relationships with the river. There was enthusiasm for dams as symbols of progress and improved living conditions, but there was also anger at what the dams killed in the river and how they inundated the past. Yakama leader Bill Yallup remembered tribal members standing on a hill above Celilo watching the river cover the falls: "Some of them sang songs like a funeral. They were very sacred songs. Three days and nights with no sleep. It was a sad day for them." Others acted out their concern. When the Corps of Engineers began preparing for The Dalles Dam, a young Ed Edmo remembered joining with other Indian boys to register an objection: "When the workmen finished surveying at the end of the day, some of us would pull out the stakes from the ground, fill the holes, and make a small fire out of the stakes. . . . In our own small way, we tried to stop the dam." Edmo and his friends knew they could not win. Nothing could stop the dams.<sup>25</sup>

By the 1980s, when the clarion call sounded to stem the decline of salmon runs, the dams became the focus of harsh criticism from nearly everyone who wanted the Columbia full of salmon again. Each group that contends for control of the river's future reaches back for historical justification of its wishes. Fishers bemoan the changes that have diminished salmon, and they long for a return to a river more congenial to their pursuits. Tribal governments, using the power inherent in their treaties and confirmed in recent court decisions, remind government agencies and private concerns that all changes that deprive them of access to salmon in the river and diminish salmon violate their heritage and religion. The dams, by casting themselves as "the future river," sharply abandon history and seem to stand outside of the river's historical narrative. Their existence literally swamps the past and verges on desecrating what remains. To embrace the river's past, in some sense, is to

challenge the dams and to question the Columbia's future. And it is anything but a romantic past, as lower Columbia fisherman Kent Martin's comments make clear: "Everything people said in the 1940s is coming true like a curse." Portrayed in these ways, the Columbia's story invites historicizing and polemics. Nonetheless, the most powerful narrative is found in representations of how the river has shaped the human condition and how human actions have shaped the modern river. The public seems to identify with both the economic and the spiritual Columbia. Opinion polls consistently reflect popular support for "saving the salmon," but they also indicate that people hesitate to change the management of the river without guaranteed results. At the end of the twentieth century, the story of the Columbia has become an inescapable conundrum.<sup>26</sup>

The compelling mythic story, even in the face of the most difficult choices, is a miraculous blend of both views of the river. In 1959, for example, the Oregon League of Women Voters addressed the threats to the Columbia in a widely distributed pamphlet:

Even with the abundance of water in the Columbia there already have arisen certain conflicts in use, as for instance between fish and power. It is not likely, however, that it will happen here as that which has occurred in some other sections of the country—we shall have to decide: fish or power! We can still have water for humans and fish, water for crops and forests, unspoiled streams for esthetic appreciation and water for fun IF, through comprehensive planning, the right choices and compromises are made in time.<sup>27</sup>

The compromises boil down to the conflict underscored by the League of Women Voters in 1959: Will it be fish or power? In each strategy devised by river managers and fisheries experts since 1959, promises of sufficient water for both fish and power have been constants. Neither view has been abandoned. As recently as 1993, Representative Ron Wyden commented on how the Columbia should be protected from degradation:

For people on both sides of the river, the Columbia is much more than a transportation route. For generations, the Columbia has been a source of exploration, inspiration and recreation. . . . We can either make some targeted investments right now or pay more in the long run.

The investments have been incredible, yet the solution to preserving the spiritual and historic river continues to elude us. The previously unimaginable strategy of removing dams has emerged from planning meetings into the full light of day. Tribal representatives want fish in the Columbia, while power and water users hope they can retain their claim on the river. The discussion, the story, and the expensive remediations roll on like the river itself, with no one quite sure how to stop the flow and decide which river to enshrine. "Either we ought to make enough changes to give the salmon a chance of coming back," former Northwest Power Planning Council Chairman Angus Duncan concluded, "or we shouldn't be spending any of this money at all." Yet, the will to have both power and salmon drive the storyline hard. In the political arena, the two goals remain joined, the two rivers still flow together. Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber put it bluntly: "You can't solve power issues without solving the fish issues, and you can't solve the fish issues without solving the power issues."<sup>28</sup>

This is part of the myth that pervades the Pacific Northwest, a part that runs rich in Robert Penn Warren's historic and poetic senses. For the Columbia, the myth is a mixed blessing at best, while for the people of the Columbia it is simply how the river is understood. There are few children of the region who do not have both rivers flowing through them; there are few who are entirely immersed in the economic or the spiritual river. It is what makes the questions about the Columbia's future so intractable. No one is quite free of the power of the competing visions of the river. Nonetheless, in the Pacific Northwest, the Columbia River has given life to all. Oregon novelist and poet H. L. Davis put it just right in his "Rivers to Children":

We rivers, we torrents,  
 We heavy-backed waters  
 Browned out of the green ocean,  
 Came, clouds, from the plunging  
 Sea restless as flame.  
 One-willed and unchanging,  
 We rained and flowed westward.  
 We crossed these same meadows.  
 We touched and knew children  
 Like you; not the same.<sup>29</sup>

What has happened to the Columbia River during the twentieth century has happened to the entire region. Like the river that has been changed so much, none of us is quite the same.

#### NOTES

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