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Stepping Westward:

The Long Search For Home in the Pacific Northwest

by Sallie Tisdale

The history of the West can be read in maps—in the faded Latin and fanciful coastlines of European cartography. Mapmakers sketched a changing planet, and added ships, their sails full of wind, mermaids with cunningly concealed breasts, and giant serpents. In time, mapmakers added the Northwest Passage. Claims of its discovery were frequent; for a time every explorer who came across a big lake or found a new bay assumed he'd found the Passage. One man even produced a map showing the Passage in support of his thesis that the Passage was there to be found, as though a pattern of the idea could make it come true. Beliefs, theories, cherished hopes were copied down on linen in rare inks, and whole lives bent to their power.

The Western Hemisphere took on a fattened, oval shape as time passed, speckled with interior seas, its westernmost coast sliding cheerfully to the east. On some later maps the barrier between the early colonies on the Atlantic and the waters of the Pacific was little more than a spit of land. In another the northern continent was divided cleanly in two by a strait from the St. Lawrence River to the Gulf of California. For details, the artists added the mythical lands of Zeno, the veiled island of St. Brandan, more mermaids, more monsters.

The dream of the Northwest Passage was a potent one. It was more than opinion: It was creed. We have forgotten, now, that the dream was real, that the Passage had to be there—certain, unattainable, drifting just out of reach.

Columbus struck land, with perhaps a little surprise and relief after all, and for a long time people thought the North American continent must be some strange, untamed part of Asia. When Vasco Nuñez de Balboa crossed Panama in 1513 and saw the Pacific, it was just like striking land again. Not only was he suddenly standing on a new continent, he was looking at a new, unimagined ocean. The wild land was truly an obstacle, a great wall between Europe and Cathay. Such a thing would not do.

The admirals of empire set out with all the confidence of their kings, to find what had to be there. The Northwest Passage meant the trade of Asia; the trade of Asia meant a great deal. The search for the Passage was driven with such power that enormous difficulties were overcome in its pursuit; the coincidental discoveries made along the way seem hardly to have been noted. On the earliest trip overland across the North American continent, in 1789, Alexander Mackenzie traveled through what is now Canada, thinking he would reach the Pacific. He found the Arctic Ocean instead, and great forests. No rejoicing. He named the rough water he'd followed much of the way the River Disappointment. But he stayed for a time and nursed his wounded hope. They all stayed, straying away and returning again and again, in memory if not in body—restless, powerful men stung by dreams. Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, one of the most dauntless explorers of the Northwest coast, wrote, "I

pressed on, taking fresh trouble for granted." In pursuit of the Passage and the setting sun, the Europeans traveled hundreds of thousands of miles over open seas, and circled the globe.

The search for the Passage began along the Atlantic, as a series of forays into colder and colder waters. Found almost as afterthoughts were waters that proved nearly as valuable as a true Passage might have been: Chesapeake and the great Hudson Bay, the waters of the Arctic around Baffin Island, the Narrows of New York Harbor. The explorers passed into ice and death, they sank, drowned, froze, and disappeared, and there was no Passage. But the repeated failures simply made it all the more enticing; so many of our dreams do that to us. The Passage would naturally be hidden in proportion to its worth. If it wasn't easily found, it must be more valuable than anyone had imagined it could be.

Centuries passed. The wall of land that was America took on its own intrinsic worth. The Spanish moved into Mexico and were probably the first Europeans on the northern Pacific coast. They had found and raped the fantastic cities of the Incas and Aztecs, and heard various tales about other cities and other temples of gold at the end of a long waterway to the north. The rough water and inhospitable coastline made for few landings, and all that could be seen by sailors—and then only when the fogs cleared—was a thick, dark forest extending to distant mountains.

And still the Northwest Passage kept getting found, and lost, and sought again. The records are full of stories, of bays leading into rivers, rivers crossing the land to far seas, streams passing the villages of undiscovered peoples, paradisiacal and forbidding lands. On the optimistic maps the northern edges of the new continent faded gently into obscurity, unfinished, its boundaries open for the asking. The Northwest Passage was a wish made real for the strength of the wishing. It was a passage into a new way of life.

A Greek Man named Apostolos Valerianos, who called himself Juan de Fuca, claimed to have sailed up the Northwest coast in 1592, and found there a Passage crossing the continent from sea to sea. De Fuca was a braggart, and chose for his own reasons to embellish his story with details of treasure and hidden cities. He might not have found anything; he may not even have made it as far north as he claimed, but some people believed him. He described latitudes and landmarks with a certain veracity. "We saw nothing like it," wrote James Cook in his diary, regarding the Greek's claim, "nor is there the least probability that ever any such thing existed." Cook had set the standard, though on one of his maps of the far north he described an area only as "Nobody Knows What." Perhaps Juan de Fuca was telling tales out of school. But then again, perhaps he found the wide, deep, singular channel that now bears his name. In 1787 Charles Barkley, twenty-six, and his wife Frances Hornby Trevor, only seventeen, sailed on an English ship

along the north coast. They found a strait to an inland sea and named it the Strait of Juan de Fuca. It was left to George Vancouver to send men exploring there; one, Lt. Peter Puget, had the waters named after him. His companion, Joseph Whidbey, got an island.

To understand the magnitude of this very real find you have to know something of Puget Sound. The inland shoreline, protected and bound, runs for twenty-one hundred miles. Two dozen rivers and uncountable streams empty into a glacial furrow several hundred feet deep, thick with fertile silts, broken by a multitude of rocky, wild islands. Through the long, wide Strait of Juan de Fuca, the Sound runs in and out of the sea, winding its twisted, hidden heart into endless salty canals pulsing with tides, full of cold, oxygenated promise. This is how big and deep Puget Sound is, how hard to miss: Paul Bunyan is said to have dug it when Babe, his blue ox, was dying. He'd brought her here to the West, in the faint hope that whale's milk would cure her. And in his grief at her illness, he dug her grave, a big man bent to a big task, scrabbling out dirt. He finished, she got well, he left behind the Sound, the islands, and the Cascades, the neat mounds of soil all in a row up and down the spine of the land. Puget Sound and its neighborhood hold the tallest trees, the largest octopus, whales as long as sailing ships, and clams the size of cantaloupes, and no one could find it. No one could find it because it wasn't what they were seeking; it wasn't the Passage of Dream.

So empire rolled on westward. What seems in hindsight to have been a smooth, even graceful journey was in fact a lurching series of fits and starts. The torchbearers of Europe took steps forward and steps back, and moved toward the horizon in the voyages of a few and the stumbling steps of the many—the least, the worst, the needy, and the lost. Traveling westward eventually had a name all its own: *westering*, and it was no passing trend. Westering became, in all senses, a verb: movement in one direction, without return.

By the latter part of the 1700s, the myth of the Northwest Passage had shrunk a little, become somewhat less fabulous—less perfect. It became the lesser dream of the Great River, a channel running, if not from sea to sea, at least from the heart of the new continent to its farther shores. It was thought to rise perhaps somewhere in the Great Lakes, or from the Missouri River. It was called variously the Long River, the *R. de l'Ouest*, or River of the West, or the River Buonaventura, or the River Oregon. And like the Northwest Passage, it was real.

Both James Cook and John Meares, another Englishman, missed the mouth of the Columbia River when they sailed up the northern Pacific coast. They traveled at night as well as during the day, and the days were often stormy and foggy in the extreme. All the clues of a river were there: floating logs, muddy water, complex currents and waves. Meares even named it Deception Bay because he believed that in spite of all appearances, there was no river there.

Bruno Heceta was the first European to discover that

the Columbia was a river—at least, his journal entries indicate he knew he'd found a large river or bay. But Heceta's men were weak from scurvy and Heceta himself was in a hurry—he was looking for the Northwest Passage. He either couldn't or wouldn't cross the river's bar. Then George Vancouver passed it, too, this nearest thing to a Great River the West holds, dismissing it with a few words in his journal. Robert Gray passed the mouth in May 1792 in his ship, the *Columbia Rediviva*. He passed but something made him turn around; perhaps he thought a new source of fur might lie up that rough water. He brought his ship back and waited for hours until the right combination of waves and current and wind came, and then he entered. Near what is now Chinook, Washington, a crowd of Indians watched, curious, eager to trade, empty of the future's dread, as Gray's great sailing ship crossed the bar.

The Columbia River is more than twelve hundred miles long, often more than a mile wide, and its waters drain an area almost as big as the state of Texas. More than any other landmark, this river ties the region together; it drains the three states of Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, crosses desert and high plains, flows through wheat land and cattle land and grassland, from aridity to dampness, through the remnants of the glaciers and the volcanic age, between buttes and forests into the sea. The Columbia is the largest river in the Western Hemisphere to empty into the Pacific Ocean, hitting the sea with such force that fresh water pours from its mouth miles out to sea. To the first European explorers, the Columbia River seemed virtually impassable. It was crisscrossed with rapids and sandbars that boats could not traverse. It was nothing like a passage at all.

When I was little, the electric company had a history program on the radio called "Pacific Powerland." I went home for lunch every school day and settled at the kitchen table, with a melted Velveeta cheese sandwich and a bowl of Campbell's soup, and listened. I was far too young to understand the irony at work, listening only for the sonorous tones in the voice of Nelson Olmsted. I cherished the corny jokes, the drama in his stories of the old Northwest, which seemed so far away and gone. I lived in a different Northwest, a place with towns such as Electron, Voltage, and Electric City. The "Pacific Powerland" tales were tales of a lost place where there had been no dams, and no hydro-electric conglomerates to pay for reminiscence.

Today there are eleven dams on the Columbia, eleven dead backwaters, and no rapids. Only about fifty of its thousand-some miles are free-flowing. Dredges gouge the river all year round to clear a channel deep enough for oceangoing ships. When I drive up and down beside the Columbia River now, I might be driving along a different river altogether. Down past Wallula just north of the Oregon border, where the placid Snake River empties into the Columbia, the water spreads wide and deep as a lake, lapping up against the dry talus hills. The river fills the whole low land, broad and untempered and raw. On either side are tan hills, with

sagebrush blooming dark golden, the color of copper and saffron. I count heaps of low buttes piled first with rocks and then, following the river down into the gorge, with trees, a row of pale blue and grey walls in the afternoon haze. Across the gorge long trains go by, and on the water, grain barges and sawdust barges. Almost seventy trucks a day travel up the narrow road of the gorge, hauling garbage from Portland and Seattle clear out to Arlington.

As I work my way out of the dry wheat land into the moisture of the west side, toward the sea, the river narrows, the buttes straighten and rise into cliffs. The water is gleaming and steady and calm; at Hood River windsurfers bounce across the tiny whitecaps. One tall trailing waterfall after another shoots out and down, hundreds of feet, the surprised leap of a stream with its bed cut off by ancient floods. Emblems of basalt leap from the banks, tall eroded rocks as big as skyscrapers--called Beacon and Rooster now instead of the pioneers' more proper obscenities.

At Celilo Falls, the wide terraced cataracts in the northern end of the gorge, the big river had to pass through such a sudden narrow canyon it was often described as a river set on its edge. Celilo with its spray and tumble was the Indians' best fishing ground. But Lewis and Clark, passing through in 1805, were downright critical: "This agitated gut," wrote Clark, "this bad whorl & Suck ... swelling, boiling & whorling in every direction." They marched the portage and tossed in the canoes to the entertainment of Indians they considered "badly clad and illy made," but who nevertheless were long used to the lethal rapids. "The whorls and swills arising from the Compression of the water," Clark wrote, "water passing with great velocity forming & boiling in a most horrible manner." Celilo Falls, once a layered white cascade of foam and salmon, is drowned today in the backwash of a dam. It is a quick tourist hop off the road, a mild ache of wishing in the sepia photographs and neat scripted explanation.

Toward Portland the jetskis start, and boats of every kind: catamarans and sailors tacking across the wakes of the grain barges and merchant ships filled with Japanese cars. Portland is 110 inland miles from the Pacific, but still the tide drops noticeably, the Columbia sinks as though it were holding its breath farther west, shrinks back from its mudflats, and leaves a rippled beach behind until the tide returns. Near Portland the planes begin to dart like fish, Lear jets and 747s, National Guard fighters swinging in an arc above the water. A tinge of blue fume hangs in a cloud over the boat ramps here, a smell of oil and gas.

There was no river. No passage. No vast, inland sea, no easy road from there to here (though Walt Whitman could write of "the circle almost circled," and mean it). And yet there was--the best measure of the fever is that the Columbia River and Puget Sound were disappointments. Such dreams as the dream of the Passage are only very slowly and reluctantly released. They never really die, fading instead into a melancholic wonder, a wonder that lingers, driving the dreams of generations, rolling down time.

