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978-1-107-68369-3 - The Exploration of Western America 1800-1850: An  
Historical Geography

E. W. Gilbert

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# HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

## Chapter I

### THE EARLY EXPLORATION OF WESTERN AMERICA

In the year 1800 more than half the area that is now included in the United States was virtually unknown. In 1806 John Cary, the famous London cartographer, produced a "New Map of North America" (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>, a large portion of which is almost devoid of geographical features or names, thus showing that a vast area in the west of the present United States was still unexplored. This map was compiled from "the latest authorities", and nothing was marked on the map unless Cary possessed reliable information concerning its existence. Other map-makers had been content to draw on their imaginations when making maps of North America, but Cary did not attempt to fill up the blank spaces of his map with imaginary features. Cary's map reflects the stage which the exploration of America had reached at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE PACIFIC COAST.<sup>2</sup> The outline of the Pacific coast was accurately indicated by Cary. The exploration of this coast had begun in the early years of the Spanish occupation of Mexico. In 1513 Balboa discovered the existence of the Southern or Pacific Ocean, and Cortés subsequently despatched several expeditions to explore the western coast of America. In 1533 one of these squadrons discovered lower California, which was at first believed to be an island. Cortés' last maritime expedition, led by Francisco de Ulloa in 1539, reached the head of the Gulf of California, doubled the southern

<sup>1</sup> John Cary, *New Universal Atlas*, sheet no. 51, A New Map of North America, dated December 1, 1806. The Atlas was not published until 1808.

<sup>2</sup> Fig. 2.

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point of the peninsula, and sailed along its western coast as far as Cedros Island. Soon after America had been discovered, geographers evolved the theory that somewhere in the heart of the continent, there flowed a great waterway which connected the Atlantic with the Pacific. One of the main objects of the Spanish explorers of the Pacific coast was the discovery of this strait, which would provide them with a short route from Spain to China. The Spanish slowly ascended the coast and marked on their maps an imaginary strait, some distance north of their latest explorations. In 1542 an expedition of two ships under the command of Rodríguez, generally called Cabrillo, having coasted the western side of lower California, entered the Bay of San Diego, and then sailed through the Santa Barbara Channel. After the death of Cabrillo, Ferrello the pilot continued the voyage, and having missed the entry into the Bay of San Francisco, passed Cape Mendocino, and may have sailed as far as lat.  $42^{\circ} 30'$ . In 1579 the English adventurer, Drake, traced the outline of the coast, possibly even further north, in a vain endeavour to find the passage. In 1602 Vizcaíno discovered Monterey Bay, and sailed as far north as lat.  $43^{\circ}$ , but no further exploration of the Pacific coast of America was undertaken by the Spaniards during the following one hundred and fifty years. They had become afraid lest the discovery of a passage should prove to be of greater value to their enemies than to themselves.

The Spaniards were roused from this policy of inaction by the news of Russian coastal exploration in the distant north. In 1774 Juan Pérez sailed as far north as lat.  $55^{\circ}$ , and on his return voyage entered the harbour afterwards known as Nootka Sound (lat.  $49^{\circ}$ ), and named it San Lorenzo. In the following year, a second expedition under Heceta, with Bodega y Cuadra as second in command, was sent out with orders to sail as far north as possible. It seems probable that Bodega reached lat.  $56^{\circ}$  N., while Heceta is believed to have seen the mouth of the Columbia. In 1779 Arteaga and Bodega sailed as far as lat.  $61^{\circ}$  N., and obtained some information about Russian traders, who were already present in the region.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A useful account of the Spanish exploration of the Pacific coast can be found in C. E. Chapman, *A History of California: The Spanish Period*

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As the result of Vitus Bering's discoveries, made in the years 1728 to 1729 and 1741 to 1742, the straits between the continents of Asia and North America, and the south coast of Alaska, were first revealed to Europeans. Russian fur-traders at once exploited this area, and continually moved their headquarters further south, along the American coast, until in 1800 they were established at Sitka, on Baranof Island. In 1813 a Russian fortified trading post was built even further south at Bodega Bay, not far north of San Francisco. Spain considered these coasts and islands to be her own and protested against the Russian encroachments. Captain Cook's careful exploration, in 1778, of the coast between the latitudes of 43° and 60° N. added further intruders into the Spanish domains, as large numbers of English traders followed in the wake of Cook. The most notable of these men was Captain Robert Meares, who, in 1788, sailed into the strait between Vancouver Island and the Olympic Mountains,<sup>1</sup> and gave it the name of Juan de Fuca Strait, and also started an English settlement at Nootka Sound. The Spaniards, who regarded the coast as Spanish territory, seized several English ships, and it was only after a prolonged international controversy that Spain agreed to abandon Nootka Sound and all the coast north of the Columbia. Both countries sent representatives to undertake the transfer of the territory. Between the years 1792 and 1794, the British envoy, George Vancouver, an able navigator, made an accurate survey of an extensive part of the intricate coast, and his lieutenant, Broughton, sailed up the Columbia River and named Mounts Hood, Rainier and St Helens.<sup>2</sup> American fur-trading vessels from Boston appeared on the coast at the same time and in 1792 an American, Captain

(1923). For a fuller history of the earlier period see H. R. Wagner, *Spanish Voyages to the Northwest Coast of America in the Sixteenth Century* (1929), and H. E. Bolton, *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest 1542-1706* (1916).

<sup>1</sup> Meares gave the name of Mount Olympus to the mountain on the south of the strait, which Pérez had named Santa Rosalia in 1774.

<sup>2</sup> "Vancouver's task was carried out with a thoroughness rarely equalled in the history of maritime exploration." E. Heawood, *A History of Geographical Discovery in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1912), p. 286.

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Robert Gray, in the *Columbia* had preceded Broughton in the mouth of the Columbia, a river which he named after his ship. Thus, before the end of the eighteenth century, the coast-line of North America had been accurately mapped, and a flourishing fur trade had sprung up. A desire to carry on this trade by inland routes as well as by sea was one of the incentives for the exploration of the unknown interior of the continent.

EARLY ATTEMPTS TO CROSS THE CONTINENT FROM THE EAST. I. FRENCH AND ENGLISH.<sup>1</sup> Although so great a part of the interior of America was still unknown in 1800, it must not be imagined that there had been no attempts to cross the continent from the east. The French were the first to undertake this task, but they had no conception of the immense breadth of North America. The French, like the Spaniards, believed in the existence of a mythical trans-continental waterway, which would help them in their westward journey. In 1720 Father Charlevoix was sent out to draw up a report about the possibility of routes to the Pacific. He said that two courses were open to the French, either to send an expedition up the Missouri, or to establish a line of fur-trading posts among the Sioux, and gradually advance into the interior. The latter course was adopted by the authorities, and Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vérendrye, spent many years in endeavouring to find a way to the Pacific. During the years 1731-43, he established a chain of forts, known as the "Post of the Western Sea", which stretched from Lake Superior to the banks of the Assiniboine. From this river, one of La Vérendrye's parties pushed south to the Missouri and, in 1743, the Rocky Mountains were seen, probably in the neighbourhood of the Big Horn range. However, in spite of years of determined effort, the French did not find the western sea.

Early inland exploration by the English was confined to regions which lay north of French territory. The Hudson's Bay Company, at its formation, was entrusted with the duty of discovering a new passage to the South Sea, but did not expend much energy in endeavours to carry out explorations of this

<sup>1</sup> Fig. 2.

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nature. When, in 1763, Great Britain obtained control of all the French empire in Canada, English adventurers were soon seeking a waterway across the continent. Among these men was Jonathan Carver, who, in 1766–8, attempted to find his way to the Pacific from the upper Mississippi. He explored the Elk and Minnesota tributaries of the Mississippi, but was unable to find the river which he described as the “Oregon, or the River of the West, that falls into the Pacific Ocean at the straits of Annian”.<sup>1</sup> He did not make any substantial additions to geographical knowledge, but his account of his travels stimulated interest in the subject.

The northern part of the continent was now crossed three times by Englishmen. In 1771 Samuel Hearne, of the Hudson’s Bay Company, reached the Coppermine River and followed it to the Arctic Ocean. Alexander Mackenzie, a member of the North-West Company, in 1789 reached the Great Slave Lake and descended the river which now bears the name of Mackenzie, until he sighted the Arctic Ocean. In 1793, on his second journey, Mackenzie crossed from the head of the Peace River to the Tacouche Tesse (afterwards called Fraser), and after descending that river for some miles, he made a direct western march and reached the ocean near Cape Menzies.

2. SPANISH. The Spaniards of New Mexico sent out many expeditions from their northern base at Santa Fé, in the Rio Grande valley. Some of these expeditions were undertaken as a means of protecting the province against invasion by foreign intruders, while other parties were sent out with the object of discovering overland routes from New Mexico to the Pacific. Westward exploration from Santa Fé was greatly stimulated by the establishment of Spanish settlements in upper California, as the result of coastal exploration. Missionaries played a leading part in this work and a Franciscan named Garcés in 1771 followed the course of the Gila and nearly reached the mouth of the Colorado. In 1774 Garcés and Captain J. B. de Anza made their way by the Gila and Colorado to the mission of San

<sup>1</sup> J. Carver, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North-America, in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768* (1778), Introduction, p. ix.

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Gabriel, which had been established near the site of modern Los Angeles. In 1775 Anza was sent out with orders to establish a mission and Government post on the Bay of San Francisco. He was accompanied by Garcés, who explored the Colorado River as far as Mojave (lat. 35°) and undertook further exploration in this area. As a result of these and other expeditions, contact was established between New Mexico and upper California, both areas of Spanish colonisation, and a land route had been traced across the south of the continent of North America.<sup>1</sup>

The Spaniards did not neglect the possibilities of exploration in the regions which lay north of Santa Fé. As early as 1720 a party of Spanish explorers are said to have reached the Platte River and to have sought information about French traders, whose presence had been reported by Indians who were friendly to the Spanish.<sup>2</sup> The most important journey was undertaken, in 1776, by the Franciscan Fathers Dominguez and Escalante, who penetrated as far north as Utah Lake and returned by way of Sevier Lake. The results of these and other Spanish expeditions north of Santa Fé were not generally known, and the region remained unmapped.

After the Spanish had obtained possession of Louisiana from the French in 1763, they sent out men from St Louis to explore the possibilities of the Missouri as a western route. In 1793 the Lieutenant-Governor of Spanish Illinois (upper Louisiana), Zenon Trudeau, organised the “Compañía de Descubridores del Misuri” or Company of Explorers of the Missouri, for the purpose of developing the fur trade and to find a way to the Pacific Ocean. The first expedition of 1794, led by J. B. Truteau, a schoolmaster of St Louis, was a failure, and the expedition

<sup>1</sup> See H. E. Bolton, *Anza's California Expeditions*, 5 vols. (1930), and Elliott Coues, *On the Trail of a Spanish Pioneer. The Diary and Itinerary of Francisco Garcés in his Travels through Sonora, Arizona, and California*. 2 vols. (1900). Bolton describes Anza as the “first to open a route across the Sierras and first to lead a colony overland to the North Pacific shores.” 1, Introduction, p. vi.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred B. Thomas, “The Yellowstone River, James Long and Spanish reaction to American intrusion into Spanish Dominions 1818–1819”, *New Mexico Historical Review*, IV (April, 1929), 164–87. Thomas states that the expedition of 1720 “until 1819, so far as is known, remained ‘the farthest north’ of Spanish expansion activities from New Mexico”.

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under Lecuyer, in 1795, was also unsuccessful owing to the hostility of the Indians. The third expedition was under the command of James Mackay, a Scotchman who had become a Spanish subject. Mackay established three trading posts between the Platte and the Niobrara, and it seems probable that one member of his expedition, John Evans, a Welshman, reached the villages of the Mandans. President Jefferson is known to have possessed a copy of Mackay's instructions to Evans, and Evans' map of the Missouri. The map was sent to Lewis and Clark before they set out on their great journey.<sup>1</sup>

3. AMERICAN. Thomas Jefferson, long before he became President of the United States, did his utmost to promote the exploration of western America. He was keenly interested in all scientific questions, and was one of the first Americans to make a serious study of American geography.<sup>2</sup> On December 4, 1783, he wrote to George Rogers Clark, "I find they have subscribed a very large sum of money in England for exploring the country from the Missisipi to California. they pretend it is only to promote knolege. I am afraid they have thoughts of colonising into that quarter. some of us have been talking here in a feeble way of making the attempt to search that country. but I doubt whether we have enough of that kind of spirit to raise the money. how would you like to lead such a party? tho I am afraid our prospect is not worth asking the question".<sup>3</sup> This letter is of particular importance, because the great explorer of the West, William Clark, was a brother of George Rogers Clark. Clark refused Jefferson's proposal, and in his reply he asserted that "large parties will never answer the purpose. They will alarm the Indian Nations they pass through.

<sup>1</sup> F. J. Teggart, "Notes supplementary to any edition of Lewis and Clark", *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1908*, I, 185-95, Washington, 1909. See also "Journal of Jean Baptiste Truteau on the Upper Missouri, 'Première Partie', June 7, 1794-March 26, 1795", *American Historical Review*, XIX (1914), 299-333.

<sup>2</sup> G. T. Surface, "Thomas Jefferson: A Pioneer Student of American Geography", *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*, XLI (December, 1909), 743-50.

<sup>3</sup> *American Historical Review*, III (July, 1897), 673.



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Three or four young Men well qualified for the Task might perhaps compleat your wishes at a very trying Expence".<sup>1</sup>

In 1786 Jefferson, when serving as American Minister in Paris, made serious proposals to an adventurer named John Ledyard and suggested that he should carry out the exploration of western America. The history of this incident is described by Jefferson himself as follows :

While I resided in Paris, John Ledyard of Connecticut arrived there, well known in the United States for energy of body and mind. He had accompanied Captain Cook in his voyage to the Pacific ocean, and distinguished himself on that voyage by his intrepidity. Being of a roaming disposition, he was now panting for some new enterprise. His immediate object at Paris was to engage a mercantile company in the fur trade of the western coast of America, in which, however, he failed. I then proposed to him to go by land to Kamschatka, cross in some of the Russian vessels to Nootka Sound, fall down into the latitude of the Missouri, and penetrate to and through that to the United States. He eagerly seized the idea, and only asked to be assured of the permission of the Russian government. I interested myself in obtaining that of M. de Semoulin, M.P. of the Empress at Paris, but more especially the Baron de Grimm, M.P. of Saxe-Gotha, her more special agent and correspondent there, in matters not immediately diplomatic. Her permission was obtained, and an assurance of protection while the course of the voyage should be through her territories. Ledyard set out from Paris and arrived at St Petersburg after the Empress had left that place to pass the winter (I think) at Moscow. His finances not permitting him to make unnecessary stay at St Petersburg, he left it with a passport from one of the ministers, and at two hundred miles from Kamschatka, was obliged to take up his winter quarters. He was preparing in the spring to resume his journey, when he was arrested by an officer of the Empress, who, by this time, had changed her mind, and forbidden his proceeding. He was put into a close carriage and conveyed day and night, without ever stopping, till they reached Poland, where he was set down and left to himself. The fatigue of this journey broke down his constitution, and when he returned to Paris, his bodily strength was much impaired. His mind, however, remained firm; and after this he undertook the journey to Egypt. I received a letter from him, full of sanguine hopes, dated at Cairo, the 15th of November, 1788, the day before he was to set out for the head of the Nile, on which day, however, he ended his career and life; and thus failed the first attempt to explore the western part of our northern continent.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Temple Bodley, *George Rogers Clark* (1926), p. 238. See also J. A. James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark* (1928), p. 305.

<sup>2</sup> *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H. A. Washington, VIII, 482-3, in a biographical sketch of Meriwether Lewis.



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In 1792 Jefferson persuaded the American Philosophical Society to finance an expedition, with orders to accomplish its purpose “by ascending the Missouri, crossing the Stony mountains, and descending the nearest river to the Pacific”.<sup>1</sup> André Michaux, a French botanist, was chosen as leader of the party; unfortunately he became involved in political intrigues, and his expedition had no considerable geographical results, as he did not venture far into unexplored territory.<sup>2</sup> Jefferson’s third plan had come to nothing, and the Americans made no further attempts to explore the country west of the Mississippi until they had purchased Louisiana.

Winterbotham’s *History*,<sup>3</sup> published in 1795, contains an interesting map (Fig. 3), which shows the prevalent conceptions of the time. The most striking feature of the map is a large inland sea above lat. 42°. To the south-east of the sea is a smaller lake with a large stream flowing into it from the west. The main authority for marking these lakes must have been the vague reports of Indians.

Cary’s map of 1806 is a more reliable illustration of the stage which exploration had reached, because Cary was exceedingly careful in the compilation of his maps. These two maps prove that very little was known of the area west of the Mississippi. The little French villages are marked by Cary on the upper Missouri, but the source of that river was a mystery. The plains of the Platte, Little Missouri and Yellowstone and the country that lay between them and the Pacific were absolutely unknown. The Rocky Mountains were not known to exist in the present area of the United States, although, under the name of the Stonies, the northward extension of the Rockies in British America was known, and Cary tentatively extends this range southward.

In 1800, although the Pacific coast had been explored and the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* VIII, 483.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of André Michaux*, 1793–1796, reprinted in *Early Western Travels Series*, 1748–1846, vol. III, ed. R. G. Thwaites, Cleveland, 1904. The series are cited below as E.W.T.

<sup>3</sup> W. Winterbotham, *Historical, Geographical, Commercial and Philosophical View of the American United States and of the European Settlement in America and the West Indies* (1795), 4 vols.

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continent had been crossed in the south by the Spanish and in the north by Hearne and Mackenzie, there had been no trans-

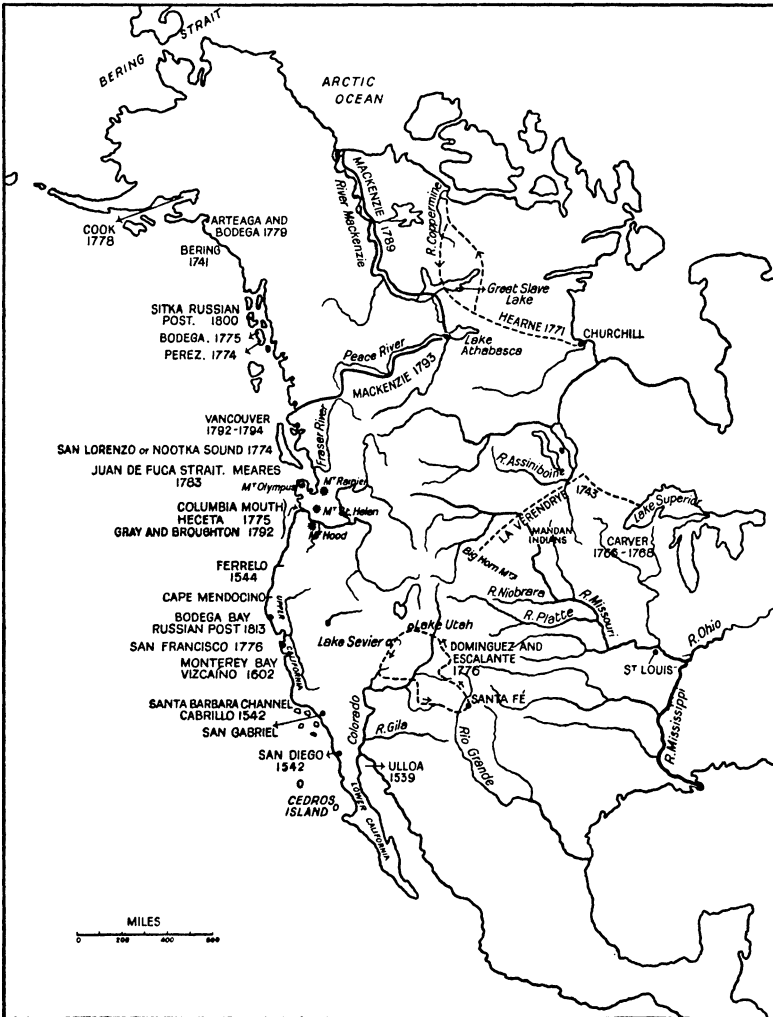


Fig. 2. The early exploration of western America.

continental journey across the central part of North America (Fig. 2). The greater part of the area that the United States was