LEWIS & CLARK REFRAMED

Examining Ties to Cook, Vancouver, and Mackenzie

DAVID L. NICANDRI

FOREWORD BY
CLAY S. JENKINSON

WSU PRESS

Washington State University Press
Pullman, Washington

James Webber, "Captn James Cook, F. R. S." in *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, by James Cook and James King (London: G. Nicol and T. Cadell, 1784), frontispiece. This engraving of James Cook is from a drawing by Webber composed in 1776 at Cape Town early in Cook's third and final voyage. Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society. WSHS 2011.0.60.3.5.1.

CHAPTER 1

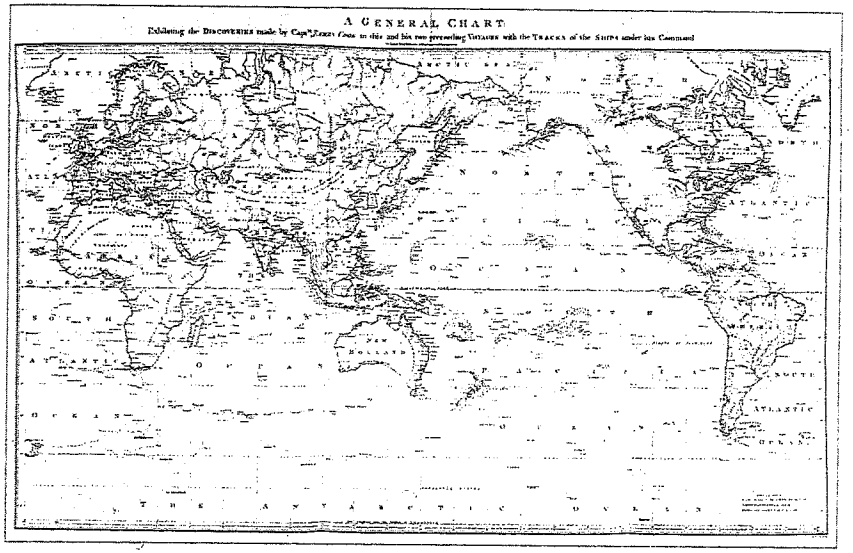
LEWIS AND CLARK IN THE AGE OF COOK

James P. Ronda, in videotaped valedictory remarks at the 2013 Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation annual meeting in Bismarck, North Dakota, made two salient observations. The first was a restatement of a point he had made in many of his essays over the course of the previous two decades: that it was time—long past time—to put the Lewis and Clark Expedition in a comparative context. His second comment, emphasizing the more general point, was this: "It was not the age of Lewis and Clark," rather, "it was the age of Cook and Vancouver."[1] With this remark Ronda meant to reverse the polarity of common perception of the Lewis and Clark story which, when studied in juxtaposition to other expeditions, is neither as triumphal nor even the exceptional event it is often made out to be when studied in isolation. This axiom is even truer when we include Alexander Mackenzie in the equation.

James Cook made scientific exploration central to the intellectual life of the Enlightenment and inspired a generation. France's response took the form of Jean-François de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse's voyage, a largely vain attempt to expand on Cook's geographic discernment of the Pacific Basin. La Pérouse sailed from Brest in 1785, the year after Cook's third-voyage account of the search for the Northwest Passage was published to customary acclaim. His mission included looking for any interesting openings in the Northwest Coast that might become the long-sought passage. La Pérouse was skeptical about the prospects for finding any such thing (for the same reason Cook was, as explained below), though he did explore Lituya Bay in Alaska near 59°N. His principal contribution to geographic comprehension of the Pacific Basin came in his delineation of the coastline of East Asia, such as the Korean peninsula, the only part of the Pacific Basin Cook never explored (only because he was killed before he had a chance to do so).

Curiously, La Pérouse had an indirect influence on Spain's long-delayed response to Cook. When La Pérouse reached northern California in 1786, he broached to Spanish colonial officials there that he had just sailed into the increasingly contested waters of the North Pacific. Historically, the Spanish had been concerned about Russian fur trade incursions into their presumptive control of the basin at its northern perimeter, followed by the even more ominous appearance of Cook in that zone in 1778. Now even the French were engaged in the quest for the Northwest Passage. When Alejandro Malaspina's instructions were first drawn up over the winter of 1788–89, the Northwest Coast of America was not a part of his discovery agenda. Sailing from Cádiz in July 1789, Malaspina's two ships reached their staging station on the Pacific Coast of Mexico in late 1790 with the same general scientific agenda that had impelled the voyages of Cook and La Pérouse. But in Acapulco his instructions were amended with the directive to sail north, rather than toward the Philippines as had been intended. Not only had the French joined the British in a search for the Northwest Passage that was heating up again in what was formerly their backyard, the British were also now tussling with Spanish officials over trading prerogatives in Nootka Sound, first discovered by Cook and popularized as a sea otter haven in his third-voyage account.

So, in May 1791 Malaspina's two-ship flotilla dutifully sailed north. Feeling distracted, he did so more in resignation than with enthusiasm, and so too some of his men who nearly revolted at the prospect of sailing for Alaska instead of Hawaii. In any event, Malaspina reached as far north as Yakutat Bay. When he returned to Mexico at the end of that summer, he was eager to resume the original mission, only to find that the colonial officials there had learned of new inklings of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, recently "rediscovered" by Spanish navigators and British fur traders working out of Nootka Sound. Malaspina was ready to move on, thinking he had already squandered a season of exploration in higher latitudes, and in March 1792 he resumed his original course toward the Philippines. But before leaving Mexico he detached two of his best navigators, Dionisio Alcalá and Cayetano Valdés, who had sailed with him from Spain. In separate vessels they explored the strait and circumnavigated what was discerned and named Vancouver Island. Because the travels of Alcalá and Valdés had originated with Malaspina, their work in the inland waters of the Pacific Northwest is considered an adjunct of the latter's expedition.

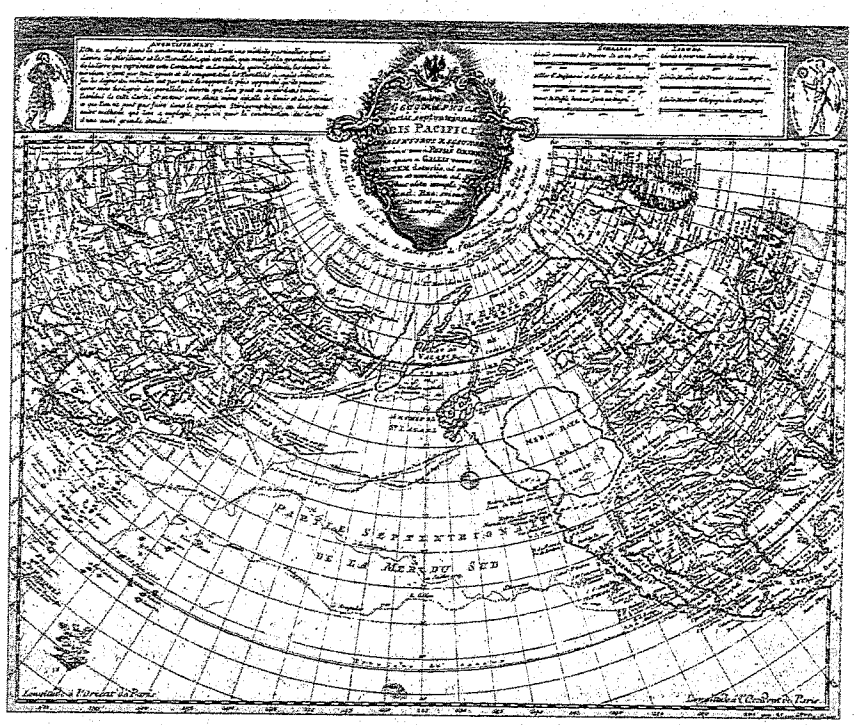


Henry Roberts, *A General Chart Exhibiting the Discoveries made by Captn James Cook*, in *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, by James Cook and James King (London: G. Nicol and T. Cadell, 1784), atlas, frontispiece. This map, prepared for inclusion in the official account of Cook's third voyage and published after his death, is the first modern map of the world. Initially intended to show the track of Cook's ships during all three voyages, the chart is noteworthy as a cartographic image because it was the earliest normative projection of the globe's surface in the sense that it provides a generally accurate depiction of the continental masses, especially in regard to the oceanic expanses that separate them. This was achieved by a rigorous adherence to gridlines depicting latitude and longitude, in contrast to its pre-Enlightenment predecessors, which were often decorated with fanciful representations of nautical mythologies and usually embellished by purely speculative geographies. Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society. WSHS 2011.0.60.3.3.1.

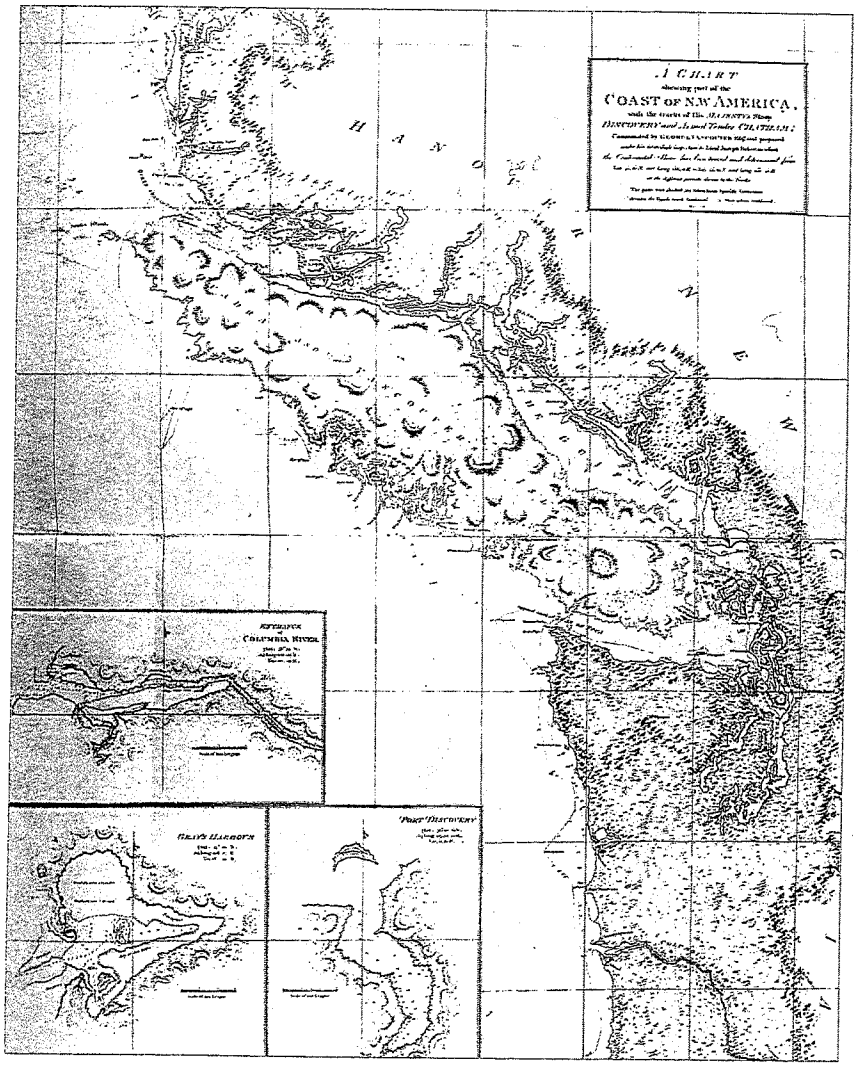
In another curious twist, Alcalá and Valdés met George Vancouver in the summer of 1792 near the San Juan Islands. Vancouver had been sent to the Northwest Coast to negotiate an on-site settlement of contested claims with Spain at Nootka Sound, but having to go that far he was also given a discovery agenda. The numerous British fur traders who had followed Cook's track to the Northwest Coast were beginning to reveal a far more intricate coastline than Cook had reason to suspect, or need to discern. Extravagant claims, most famously those propagated by John Meares, about how far inland these various inlets extended, dictated a follow-up survey. In this fashion, Vancouver's expedition to the Northwest Coast (1792–94) preceded Lewis and Clark to the western end of their discovery zone, where their work overlapped Vancouver's. (See chapter 5.) Nonetheless, it was the Canadian fur trade explorer Alexander Mackenzie upon whom the American captains were the most reliant, as detailed in the next chapter.

But Cook was the progenitor of Northwest discovery and there we return. A few key themes will provide some flavor of what the Cook context of Lewis and Clark will yield by way of understanding and appreciation. Let's start with the historiography. Historians have been far too forgiving of Meriwether Lewis's idiosyncrasies and too critical of Cook's, at least in regard to his third and final voyage. Lewis consistently seized upon or manufactured the circumstances that allowed him to jump ahead of William Clark in pursuit of exploratory glory. He did this by proceeding in a solitary fashion to the junction of the Yellowstone and the Missouri; then later to the Pacific Ocean, while Clark was marooned with the detachment at Dismal Nitch; and most notoriously, by venturing on the quest for the Shoshones and the Continental Divide at Lemhi Pass. The Lemhi vanguard movement, which the journals of both captains unmistakably insinuate Clark intended to make, was compounded by Lewis's outright expropriation of geographic information from Clark's subsequent foray west of the divide. Lewis did this to make himself appear to be a more discerning explorer in narrative form than he was in practice. Even when Clark was the first to a noteworthy benchmark, such as the Three Forks of the Missouri, Lewis larded his account with such grandiose text about this long-wished-for spot and the naming of its constituent rivers after national leaders and their personal attributes that historians have invariably gravitated to Lewis's account of this accomplishment, not Clark's.

Cook, however, has been victimized by the scholarly community's fundamental misunderstanding of the third-voyage's mission, if not more



Leonhard Euler, *Tabula geographica partis Septenrionalis Maris Pacifici*, 1760. 15" h x 17" w. This map, originally published in Berlin in 1753 and again in 1760 by Swiss mathematician Leonhard Euler (1707–83), appeared subsequent to, and is based upon, an image that influential French cartographer Philippe Buache issued in 1752. Euler's *Atlas Geographicus Omnes Orbis Terrarium Regiones in XLI Tabulis* contained forty-one double-paged maps, all of which were based on the work of other cartographers, in this case Buache. In the wake of Vitus Bering's recently completed voyages that drew the interest of geographers to the North Pacific, both Buache and his occasional collaborator J. N. DeLisle issued dueling projections for the location of the Northwest Passage. Both versions included the long-standing French cartographic notion of the *Mer de L'Ouest*, an imaginary analogue to Hudson Bay, but Buache gave the concept its fullest expression. Conceived as a second-generation Northwest Passage limiting the distance between the Atlantic and Pacific Basins, the *Mer de L'Ouest* image outlasted James Cook, who thought his final voyage demolished the idea. It was not fully vanquished until George Vancouver's three-year survey of the Northwest Coast, 1792–94, during which he often mocked the idea of the "Mediterranean" of North America. Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society. WSHS 2003.16.19.



George Vancouver, *A Chart Showing part of the Coast of N. W. North America.* 1798. 22" h x 17" w. This chart displays the intricacy of Vancouver's survey of the Pacific Slope's mid-latitudes. This map was studied intently by Meriwether Lewis in preparation for his expedition and we know from his own account that he made a working copy of it. Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society. WSHS 1911.5.4.

generally by the strictures of what I call the "Palm Tree Paradigm." This model reached its pure crystallized form in Tony Horwitz's *Blue Latitudes: Boldly Going Where Captain Cook Has Gone Before.*[2] Horwitz's topical and geographic orientation, as implied by the main title, suggests that the significance of Cook's exploratory ventures are to be understood within the context of the sandy beaches of Polynesia and the cross-cultural encounters that took place on those shores. This approach, informed by the European fascination with Polynesian exoticism that has dominated the study of Cook since the time of his voyages to the South Pacific, effectively wrote off Cook's more extensive reach (as measured by distance traveled or time sailed) into and along the icy, high latitudes of the Indian, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans. Indeed, the actual missions of his second and third voyages were, respectively, the search for the rumored great southern continent (*Terra Australis Incognita*), followed by his quest for the equally elusive Northwest Passage in the North Pacific. During the course of his last two voyages, Cook occasionally called on the island paradises of the South Pacific, but they were merely his staging grounds, not the actual zone of discovery.

This has been compounded by the "Antipodal Axis" that dominates Cook studies, a paradigm that skews our understanding of Cook much in the same fashion that Lewis and Clark's Missouri River stories are privileged. This model of thought revolves around Great Britain, Cook's homeland and originating nation for the Greenwich meridian, and New Zealand and Australia, approximately on the opposite side of the globe. (Cook discovered and named the Antipodes, an island chain southeast of New Zealand precisely opposite Greenwich, England.) During his first voyage, which was initiated in the multinational effort to track the transit of Venus in 1769, Cook delineated New Zealand's insularity and the east coast of Australia. Given his centrality to those dominions becoming a part of the British Empire, much of the Cook documentary record came to be found in the cultural repositories of those countries. More importantly and characteristically, John C. Beaglehole, the editor of Cook's journals and the author of the most oft-cited biography of the man, was a New Zealander. The Northwest Passage, by definition a North American geographic perplex, is a distant and alien place from the British and Southwest Pacific centers of Cook studies, explaining why it is frequently dispatched with brevity in books that purport to be a comprehensive analysis of the great navigator's work.

Worse, in his annotation of the journals and in his biography of Cook, Beaglehole laid down the outlines of what has become a rigid interpretive

orthodoxy about Cook generally and the third voyage in particular. Beaglehole considered Cook's undertaking of the third voyage a mistake, if not a disaster. The specific shape of his critique takes the form of the three Fs: fatigue, friction, and failure, a typology that is mine but a lens through which we can see the effect of Beaglehole. Let's take these themes in turn.

Beaglehole was the first to hint that Cook was worn out by his first two voyages to the South Pacific. That led him to suggest that Cook never should have allowed himself to be talked into taking command of what would prove to be his last voyage so soon upon returning from the second in 1775. Beaglehole perceived inklings of fatigue in Cook during his last swing through the South Pacific when, having gleaned knowledge of the islands of Samoa and Fiji, he deigned not to explore them further. Beaglehole, who hailed from New Zealand, seems to have taken this as an affront to the Southwest Pacific, asserting that the Cook of old, that is, the one from the first two voyages, would not have missed an opportunity to follow up on leads like this.

What Beaglehole, and most historians who have followed him, have failed to appreciate, is how devoted Cook was to the notion of fidelity to mission. Because of the time required to travel the great distance to the Northwest Coast of America from Great Britain (which involved following the generally westerly winds across the Indian Ocean to New Zealand and Tahiti in the South Pacific), Cook's third-voyage instructions specifically advised him to avoid distractions along the way, in Polynesia or elsewhere. Cook needed little convincing along these lines, having declared in his second-voyage journal near the end of the three-year circumnavigation of Antarctica that he was "done" with the South Pacific.[3] In a sense, Cook had become bored by the prosaic work of outlining a seemingly limitless number of insular groups in the vast Pacific. He began gravitating instead toward what might be called a continental framework, in the form of a passage through or above and around North America, a goal of Columbian proportions.

Taking their cue from Beaglehole's diminished explorer hypothesis, historians of the Pacific Northwest have casually applied his argument to Cook's explorations of the Pacific Slope of America. It has long been an orthodox understanding of regional history that when Cook glided past the outfalls of what would later be denominated as the Columbia River and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, he supposedly missed these mid-latitude openings into the continent. In truth, the British Admiralty specifically advised

Cook not to begin to look for a Northwest Passage until he reached 65°N. This was sensible guidance. In the early 1770s, Hudson's Bay Company fur trade explorer Samuel Hearne reached the mouth of the Coppermine River where it emptied into the Arctic Ocean at what was calculated to be 72°N. Hearne had actually only made it to 68°N, but the larger point was that on his outbound route and subsequent return to Hudson Bay via the eastern extent of Great Slave Lake he had literally walked over any conceivable temperate-latitude corridor that might hold a passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic. Bearing this knowledge, and wary of losing time in what was to him a backwater region, Cook stopped along the Northwest Coast only to restore his ships and replenish his supplies at Nootka Sound. This inlet was later discerned to be part of an island named after its principal delineator, George Vancouver. (La Pérouse directly secured Hearne's insight about the impossibility of a mid-latitude saltwater passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic when he conquered Hearne's fort on Hudson Bay in 1781.)

A concomitant aspect of Cook's supposed fatigue during his third voyage was his increasingly fractious relationship with fellow crew members and South Pacific islanders. Regarding the latter, it may be fairly said that the rigors of managing the cultural encounter in Polynesia took its toll on Cook during the third voyage, but there is nothing in the documentary record relative to his dealings with Native people in the Northwest, Alaska, and Siberia to conclude that there was an endemic lack of cross-cultural sensitivity on his part. As for his shipboard colleagues, the conceit of Cook scholarship, as first put forth by Beaglehole but replicated endlessly since, is that the only variable on the final voyage is Cook himself. A fair reading and comparison of the journals for all three voyages indicates that Cook was dealing with a younger, less experienced, and more irritable set of officers and seamen during his final expedition. For instance, there were increased attempts at desertion (anticipating the mutiny on the *Bounty* in the ensuing decade), plus a large number of illicit journals that crept into print in the wake of the last voyage, despite specific directives from the British Admiralty proscribing it. Also, it is worth noting that Cook left England for the last time in July 1776, when the rebellion in the colonies was both draining the pool of available talent and exemplifying the spirit of an anti-authoritarian era that would reach a crescendo with the French Revolution in 1789.

In the same way that the early post-expeditionary death of Meriwether Lewis clouds the historiography of his venture with Clark, any expedition

that ends with its commander dead is, by definition, less than fully successful. Still, Cook's third-voyage discoveries in the North Pacific, once he vacated what to him became the worked-over precincts of the South Pacific (Beaglehole's modern protest notwithstanding), were extraordinary by any measure, and deemed by his contemporaries as the most noteworthy of his career. A short list includes the detection and charting of the Hawaiian Islands, the trend line of the northwestern quadrant of the North American coastline, and the shape of the Alaskan subcontinent, including the specific delineation of the distance separating Siberia from North America at the Bering Strait. The strategic value of the Hawaiian archipelago, from its first sighting by Cook in January 1778 to this very day, is self-evident. His general depiction of the Pacific coast north of California and the Alaskan subcontinent to above the Arctic Circle stands as a distinct accomplishment in contrast to the fanciful notions that predominated in geographic circles in the centuries, indeed, in the few decades prior to his last expedition. As late as the 1740s, British armchair geographer Arthur Dobbs imagined a Pacific coastline that ran in a northeasterly direction from Cape Arago on the southern Oregon coast toward Baffin Bay west of Greenland.

Perhaps least appreciated of Cook's major findings, drawing on the proximity of the continents at the Bering Strait and the commonalities between Native people on either side of this watery divide, is that his third voyage popularized what has come down through time as the Bering landbridge theory for the populating of the Western Hemisphere. These were not small accomplishments or ideas. And, as for not finding the Northwest Passage because he met with impenetrable ice: can the inability to find what does not (or at least prior to global warming, did not) exist be deemed a failure? Disproving the existence of the great southern continent made Cook the toast of Europe and not finding a shortcut to Europe should not have diminished the man's reputation. Had Cook not been killed overwintering in Hawaii after what he envisioned as his *first* season of Arctic exploration, it is doubtful that the failed third-voyage trope would have ever taken root. Besides which, Cook was never more vigorous nor perhaps as daring an explorer as when he coasted along the Arctic ice pack and probed the depths of Alaska's Norton Sound looking for a way around the ice and across the top of North America.

My point, returning to Ronda: there is every bit as much of a need for a new look at Cook as there is for fresh perspectives upon the Lewis and

Clark story, and separately I have responded to that challenge.[4] Ronda once perceptively averred that at its root exploration history is really environmental history.[5] This assertion is particularly relevant to Cook because if he was voyaging north through the Bering Strait and the archipelago of northern Canada in 2020 instead of 1778, he would have found his way through to Baffin Bay and out Davis Strait near Greenland and back to England. Global warming, without prejudice to the debate over the origins of the same, is ineluctably creating the very same passage that eluded Cook. The great navigator's high-latitude exploits amid snow and ice are, for our time, far more relevant than sandy beach crossings and the anthropological debates that surround them.

In this way, seeing Lewis and Clark as part of the "Age of Cook" also puts the American overland expedition into the widest possible context: Enlightenment-era exploration and, more specifically, the search for the Northwest Passage, one of the two great concerns of that age, the other being *Terra Australis Incognita*. It is frequently stated that the Lewis and Clark Expedition proved the nonexistence of the passage, but this is a simplistic understanding. The concept of the Northwest Passage evolved over time and it actually continues to evolve.

Captain Cook proved for his time that a high-latitude saltwater passage from the North Pacific to the North Atlantic did not exist. Cook was followed by Vancouver, who had sailed on Cook's last two voyages. Much like Cook's third-voyage record has been accreted with myth, so too has Vancouver's expedition. The common misunderstanding is that Vancouver was sent to finish the survey and make up for the deficiencies that Cook, a supposedly fatigued and lessened explorer, left uninvestigated. In fact, Vancouver was sent on a completely different mission: to find a temperate-latitude Pacific analogue to Hudson Bay, an old cartographic concept that was first made popular in French geographic circles and called the *Mer de L'Ouest*. The thinking behind Vancouver's voyage was that this North American "Mediterranean," accessed off the Pacific, would facilitate a communication with the lakes of Canada or Hudson Bay, creating a de facto passage that British fur-trading interests could dominate. Vancouver's explorations from 1792–94 demolished that idea.

No *idée fixe in* North American history has been more durable than the Northwest Passage and thus its image evolved to a concourse of rivers. This vision was first articulated by the American-born but Canadian-employed

fur trade explorer Peter Pond. Inspired by Cook's geographic discernments and perhaps more particularly by the promise of marketing North American furs in the Chinese market (a prospect Cook's crew stumbled upon near the end of the third voyage), Pond gradually expanded his range of operations in the 1780s to the Canadian Northwest first touched by Hearne a decade earlier. Pond's problematic relations with business partners truncated his efforts in the fur-rich Athabasca District, but he was able to pass his transcontinental vision to a fellow trader, Alexander Mackenzie. This phase of the Northwest Passage is, of course, the one of which Lewis and Clark are a part, having been dispatched by Thomas Jefferson in response to the Mackenzie expedition that reached Pacific tidewater in 1793. Like Cook, Vancouver, and Mackenzie, Lewis and Clark also failed to find a practicable version of the passage, their best efforts notwithstanding. It was not until the fourth version, the one instituted severally by the Northern Pacific, Canadian Pacific, and Great Northern railroads, that the functional equivalent of a passage was finally realized. Of course, as intimated above, in our time a new, and now fifth, Northwest Passage is becoming real, one which, in a few centuries, if the pace of warming continues, will truly serve as the "Northern Mediterranean."

Let me conclude by offering one last reflection on Cook and Lewis and Clark's mentor, Thomas Jefferson. In one of the great coincidences in history, Cook was preparing to leave Portsmouth, England, for what would prove to be the last time, the same month that Jefferson inscribed the Declaration of Independence. Indeed, Cook saw the ships in the neighboring slips filling up with arms and men intended for the Atlantic side of America at precisely the same time he was preparing to venture to the far Pacific coast of the same continent. Historians, generally, have done a bad job of introducing "contingency" to their narratives and the attendant perspective such sensibility can bring. So, let us hark back to Beaglehole and his implied premise that Cook should have stayed home and enjoyed his retirement and not undertaken his third and final voyage. Is it conceivable that one of Britain's greatest naval masters and commanders would have sat out the war with the colonies? The implication of Barbara Tuchman's *The First Salute*[6] is that, from the time of John Paul Jones's (of "we have not yet begun to fight" fame) significant battle off Cook's native Yorkshire coast early in the war to the British naval debacle in the run-up to Yorktown that brought it to an end, the British needed only one capable, energetic naval

leader to counter the American rebels and the French navy. The rebellion might have been put down or concluded in a fashion distinct from outright American independence, but the Royal Navy's best captain (who was on a career track that would have made him an admiral) was instead in the North Pacific. Either way, it seems, James Cook was destined to make history in the last half of the 1770s. It was, truly, the Age of Cook.

NOTES

1. This essay is based on a presentation at the Forty-Fifth Meeting of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, Bismarck, North Dakota, July 31, 2013, at which Ronda's remarks were presented via videotape.
2. Tony Horwitz, *Blue Latitudes: Boldly Going Where Captain Cook Has Gone Before* (New York: Picador/Henry Holt, 2002).
3. John C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 2: 587.
4. David L. Nicandri, *Captain Cook Rediscovered: Voyaging in the Icy Latitudes* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2020).
5. James P. Ronda, "Counting Cats in Zanzibar, or, Lewis and Clark Reconsidered," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 33: 1 (Spring 2002): 15.
6. Barbara Tuchman, *The First Salute: A View of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1988).