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Dissecting the Columbia: Lewis and Clark West of the Divide

William L. Lang
Portland State University, langw@pdx.edu

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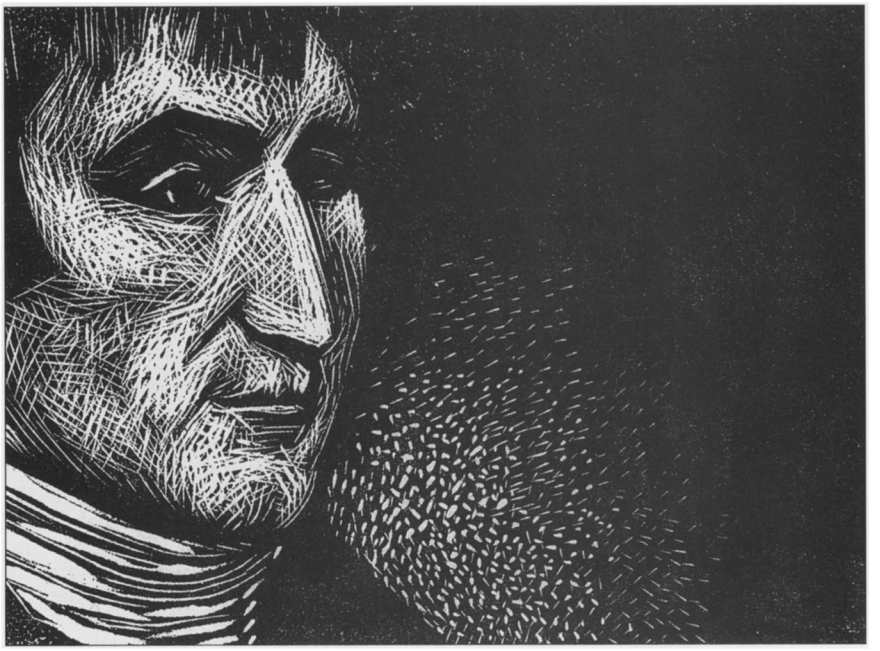


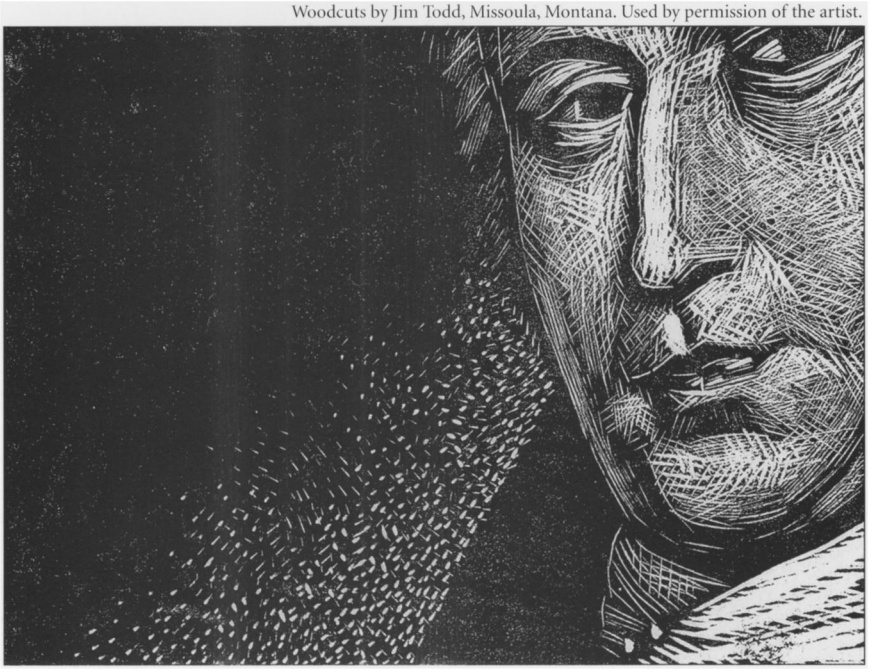
Meriwether Lewis

Dissecting the Columbia

An Introduction

EURO-AMERICAN EXPLORERS had seen much of the world before they directed their attention to the northwest corner of North America. Mariners from Spain, Great Britain, and the United States had circumnavigated the globe before they made their way to the rugged, natural resource–rich coastline of present-day Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska. In the late eighteenth century, adventuring mariners sought out resources and the illusive Northwest Passage. Meanwhile, land explorers had charted the Mississippi River Valley and traders had made their way up the Missouri River to Indian villages as far north as present-day North Dakota. Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company fur traders had fanned west from Hudson Bay and

Woodcuts by Jim Todd, Missoula, Montana. Used by permission of the artist.

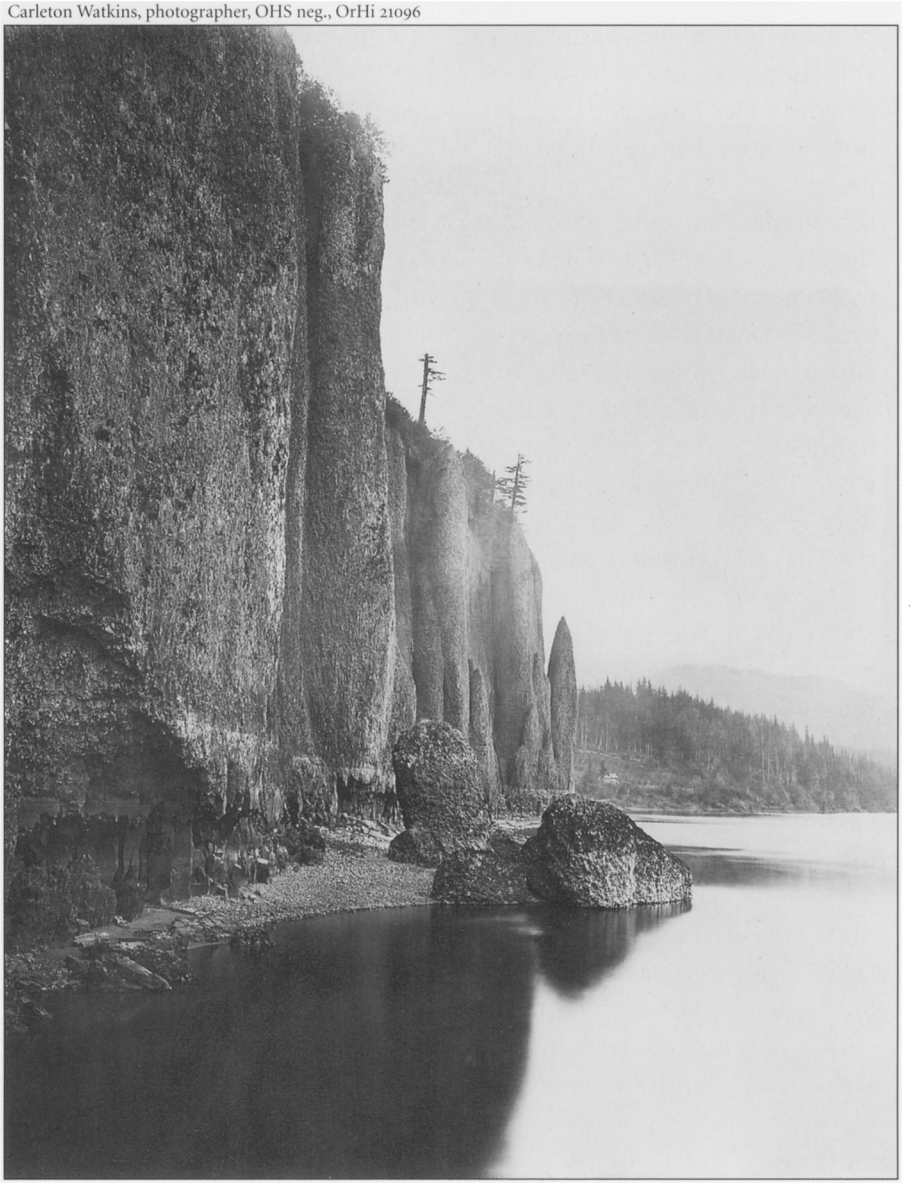


William Clark

Montreal to the Continental Divide; and one of them, Alexander Mackenzie, had trekked across the continent to the Pacific Ocean in 1793. These explorations were part of what historian William Goetzmann has called the Second Great Age of Discovery, a burst of aggressive investigations of continents and seas far distant from Europe.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition was the first of a succession of explorations of the trans-Mississippi West that carried out dual missions of imperialistic claim and scientific discovery. The expedition was also part of a broader exploration of regions that had not been mapped or described by Euro-Americans, an effort that would occupy scientific explorers for most of the nineteenth century and would take them to Africa, South America, and the Arctic. In the American West, Zebulon Pike, Thomas Freeman and Peter Custis, Charles Wilkes, John Frémont, Stephen Long, and John Wesley Powell carried out missions similar to Lewis and Clark's. Acquiring accurate information about topography, watersheds and river systems, flora and fauna, and natural resources served nationalistic and scientific purposes. It is also important to remember that the Corps of Discovery and subsequent expeditions went west as official government parties, most as military contingents. They were meant, as President Thomas Jefferson wrote in his instructions to Meriwether Lewis in 1803,

Carleton Watkins, photographer, OHS neg., OrHi 21096



Cape Horn, Columbia River, 1867

to be investigations, "to be taken with great pains & accuracy, to be entered distinctly & intelligibly for others as well as yourself."

In practical terms, Jefferson's instructions required that Lewis and Clark catalog the regions they traversed. That meant a purposeful, careful, and often meticulous survey of the environment. Nowhere in their trek was this more important than in the Columbia River Basin. The United States had not acquired the region and had only Capt. Robert Gray's 1792 survey

of the mouth of the Columbia River as a pretext for a claim. The explorers' discoveries in the basin provided the U.S. government with its first detailed description of the region, the result of scientific observations and notations that Lewis and Clark recorded in their journals. The voluminous journals of the expedition — including daily entries, maps, field notes, course and distance records, miscellany, and collected plants — document the explorers' observations in fine detail. Reading the journals, we learn what they discovered and often the conditions of discovery, from their first descriptions of plants and animals to the location of Indian villages and the geography of the Columbia country. Reviewing and analyzing their descriptions of the Columbia River Basin environment provides an opportunity to see the landscape as they did and to ask questions about what they understood, what subsequent scientific investigations have discovered about the region, and what enormous ecological changes the river has endured since 1806.

My interest in Lewis and Clark comes from a broader set of questions about environmental change in the Columbia River Basin, especially how we have understood the ways in which human activity has altered the landscape. It is, in large part, a focus on the history of place and how we have understood the changes over time. Scientific observation — by Lewis and Clark and scientists since their great exploration — provides a baseline for understanding what has happened since the expedition, and that becomes a prime justification for studying it. As important, though, are the explanations we have offered for Lewis and Clark's experience on the Columbia, because the meanings we attach to it connect to the longer arc of change in the region. The exploration epic is part of a larger story that comes up to the present and the issues we face today.

We begin this issue with a discussion of the explorers' scientific description of the Columbia River Basin they encountered in 1805–1806. Eighteenth-century science wanted to know what made up the world, especially parts of the world unknown to scientific description. Lewis and Clark conducted a reconnaissance, a stock-taking of the region, which included describing flora and fauna new to science but also Native American villages and geography. They interpreted what they observed in a surprisingly holistic way, because they viewed the environment through the lens of Enlightenment science, which emphasized rationality, balance in nature, and human instrumental knowledge of nature.

Jefferson instructed Lewis and Clark to draw accurate maps of the expedition's entire route, but that charge carried even more importance in the Rocky Mountains and west of the Continental Divide, where contem-

porary maps showed only open spaces. Historian Robert Carriker explains in his article that a good share of the discoveries Lewis and Clark made were geographical. The complex relationships among river courses in the Columbia River Basin had vexed the explorers on their westward trek to the Pacific; but on the return journey they kept refining their knowledge, as with an important reconnaissance of the Salmon River that they conducted during a nearly month-long stopover with the Nez Perce in 1806.

The journals offer a baseline scientific description of the Columbia River Basin environment — the first of its kind — but throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scientists have learned a great deal more. By comparing the descriptions and information in the journals with modern scientific data and interpretation, geologist Jim E. O'Connor and anthropologist Virginia Butler gauge how accurate Lewis and Clark were and how the explorers' descriptions provide a way to understand the changes that have taken place since 1806. O'Connor focuses on the dynamic character of Columbia River Gorge geology, arguing that Lewis and Clark understood it better than we might expect and that figuring out how and when the Gorge was formed was a continuation of the spirit of discovery exhibited by the explorers. Butler compares the fish species that Lewis and Clark recorded on the Lower Columbia River with the species that inhabited the river at the end of the twentieth century. The differences are staggering and remind us that Lewis and Clark saw a river quite different from the one we know today and that human activity has been the chief cause of change over the centuries.

Interpretations of the Columbia River and the Lewis and Clark Expedition, like changes to the environment, have been products of human volition and human imagination. The connections between historical interpretations of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and changing viewpoints on nature, historian Mark Spence contends, shape our understanding of the entire region. The effect of this intertwining of viewpoints on Lewis and Clark and nature has broadly affected people in the region, perhaps most importantly through attitudes non-Indians hold about Indian people. These changes, like the changes to the environment, are composed of a mixture of imagination, observation, and reflection. The photographs assembled by Terry Toedtemeier are a superb graphic commentary on the scope and power of change on the Columbia River, one marked by physical difference that creates new visions of the place. Thinking about Lewis and Clark and their dissection of the Columbia requires an understanding of what they saw and how they saw it as well as what subsequent changes might tell us about any visions we may have for the future of the river.

Exploring the Columbia River Basin — in the eighteenth century and today — is part of a continuous process, launched during the Enlightenment, that seeks knowledge through scientific description. As in that Second Great Age of Discovery, however, what we think about the places we describe and investigate says as much about what is important to us today as it does about the discoveries that we have made. The point of this special issue is to confirm the centrality of understanding the past as an essential part of our knowledge about this region, the Columbia River Basin, the landscape that spread out before Lewis and Clark in 1805 west of the divide.

William L. Lang
Guest Editor

Suggestions for Further Reading

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