“The World’s Lost Dream”:
The Mythical Geography of the Eighteenth-Century
American Northwest

by

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Whether or not, sir poet, you tell truths
Seen or unseen, yet dreamed and therefore true,
Your Spanish soldier, if he wander north,
By one report will find the world's lost dream,
That silken flag flung to the winds of time
And tattered into ribbons—El Dorado.
Some builded it in tropic isles, and some
Along the passage to the southern seas;
Máthieu Sagean declared the marvel lay
Along the river, northward.

Howard Mumford Jones, *Tales of the Mississippi*
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To the friends, relatives, and teachers who instilled in me an abiding love for all things done and gone away…

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Finally, to Professor Lennox, who, believing (however unthinkably) that he did not already have enough children to tend to, adopted Yan and me as disciples over the last four years.
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THE BURIED HISTORY OF THE OLD NORTHWEST

As the Phoenicians of old ventured out of the Mediterranean even as far as the tin mines of Cornwall, on the coast of Britain, so the little Yankee brigs crept down and down the coast, and around the Horn, until every village had its skippers in the far Pacific. Some went for furs, and some went for whales, and all for bold adventure. Never again will this land see more hardy sailors than the tars that traveled the seas at the close of our Revolution.

Eva Emery Dye, Stories of Oregon, 1900

The history of the American Northwest traditionally begins in the late eighteenth century – “while revolutionary cannon thundered along our Atlantic border,” as American author Eva Emery Dye wrote in 1905, celebrating the centennial of Lewis and Clark’s arrival on Pacific shores. Dye achieved a small degree of fame after publishing The Conquest: The True Story of Lewis and Clark, which introduced the American public to Sacagawea and her role in the expedition. Featuring flowery prose and dramatized dialogue, The Conquest was largely a work of historical fiction – Dye marketed it as “the Iliad of the West” – but critics and teachers nonetheless touted it as “a book useful to the student of history” in the years leading up to the Centennial Exposition in Portland, Oregon.

Having moved from Ohio to Oregon in 1890, Dye was a living embodiment of the famous expression, “Westward the course of empire takes its way.” Hers was a

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2 Sherri Butler Browne, Eva Emery Dye: Romance with the West (Corvallis, Ore.: Oregon State University Press, 2004), 76.
romantic and singularly American obsession with the western frontier. “Along the hilltops we follow the tawny paths of buffalo and Indian,” Dye rhapsodized in The Conquest. “Other lands record the drama of kings; ours is the drama of a people.”

Her history of the Pacific Northwest centered on Thomas Jefferson’s vision of the future: “Seer and Prophet,” she wrote, after the American Revolution “to him it now fell, as to one ordained, to open the passage to Asia.” Through a century of relentless westward progress and divine providence, the American people overcame European obstruction and finally realized Jefferson’s dream of “this hour, ‘when free and independent Americans shall have spread through the whole length of that coast.’”

This sort of history of the American West, which draws upon the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, is today more associated with historiography than history. At the time, however, the “closing of the frontier” posed a serious problem to expansion-minded Americans. “This one hundred years in which the American people have been moving west and west is at an end,” Dye reflected in Stories of Oregon. “There is no more west, but into the ocean, or north into Alaska. You, boys and girls, belong to the twentieth century.”

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4 Dye, The Conquest, 2.
6 Ibid., 21. Dye embellished Jefferson’s letter congratulating John Jacob Astor on his “progress … towards an establishment on Columbia river. I view it as the germ of a great, free & independant empire on that side of our continent, and that liberty & self government spreading from that as well as this side will ensure their compleat establishment over the whole.” Thomas Jefferson to John Jacob Astor, 9 November 1813, Founders Online, National Archives [hereafter FO].
8 Dye, Stories of Oregon, 7. The annexation of Hawaii following the Spanish-American War altered conceptions of the western frontier and represented a further step on Whitman’s “Passage to India,” but it also signaled the end of an era.
Yet as she eyed the future, Dye had a more urgent task in mind. Looking back on decades of progress, she also recognized that the local histories of the Northwest – “the tales of long ago” – were fading as the earliest generations of settlers passed away. “These stories ought to be preserved,” Dye continued:

> you, boys and girls of to-day, have a precious opportunity that may be gone to-morrow. In a few more years all the pioneers who can tell these tales of the olden time will be dead. Sit by them to-day and write their stories out.  

Dye recognized that these stories were being lost to “the realm of myth and fable” as subsequent waves of Anglo-American settlers arrived in the Northwest. What Dye failed to consider was that she and countless other writers (sometimes unwittingly, sometimes purposefully) were burying the stories that preceded her “Iliad of the West” – the history of an older world, a place that later generations saw as an enigmatic wilderness encountered and eventually conquered by Anglo-Americans.

What I offer is a mythological history of the American Northwest, the study of a mostly imaginary place. It is my position that myths are just as useful a lens into the past as facts. They are, as historian Bruce Mazlish writes, “not intrinsically an antithesis of reason but an alternate, nonscientific form of reasoning. … Nor do they represent simply a primitive or non-Western mode of thinking; they are, as Gananath Obeysekere argues, ‘equally prolific in European thought.’”  

This story begins long before Europeans determined and documented the “true” geography of the region, but does not end there. Although Euro-Americans did not arrive in the region until late-century, by virtue of myths, legends, and hearsay, earlier generations were familiar with many different possible versions of the region, its geographical features, and its

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9 Ibid., 6.
inhabitants. These myths drew people toward the Northwest; even before reaching the Pacific coast and northwestern interior of North America, Europeans and Americans uncovered evidence of these mythical places and peoples rumored to exist in the Northwest. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the four principal European nations in the ‘contest for empire’ in North America and a nascent American one had already developed distinct yet intertwined histories with the mythical Northwest. And as travelers arrived at the Northwest in numbers in later decades, these myths continued to shape their experiences in the region and their textualization of its geography.

Generations of Americans from Washington Irving to Theodore Roosevelt considered the West a “virgin land” awaiting the arrival of U.S. society, echoing John Winthrop’s seventeenth-century claim that the soil of North America was “open to any that could and would improve it.”¹¹ In 1950, Henry Nash Smith recognized this frontier mythology in Virgin Land: The American West as Myth and Symbol, which introduced a school of thought treating the West as a “cultural landscape.”¹² However, modern historians have continued to fall victim to this mythology, a product of teleological national narratives that frame the history of the Northwest as an Anglo-American space from the late eighteenth century. For this reason, modern studies of the Northwest continue to suppress the lost worlds of early colonial North America in the same manner as traditional frontier histories.¹³

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¹² Smith’s Virgin Land was one of the foundational texts to the discipline of American studies. See also Richard S. Poulsen, The Landscape of the Mind: Cultural Transformations of the American West (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).
¹³ Recent studies have skillfully incorporated Indigenous cultures into the regional history of the Northwest. Two outstanding examples are Daniel Clayton, Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), and Jennifer S. H. Brown,
Recent scholarship has examined the European mapping of the world as an inscriptive and politically charged process. Geography was one way in which the “imperial fashioning” of a place began during and even before contact. Following the argument that America was “invented” rather than “discovered,” I argue that the construction of the American Northwest as a geographical place into a political and cultural space began long before contact in the modern-day Pacific Northwest. For centuries, Europeans and colonial Americans constructed the “anticipatory geography” of the Northwest before the late eighteenth century through myths and conjectures, a development that has been widely overlooked by historians of the region, although its traces are strikingly apparent in present-day cartography.

Mythical geography allowed the American Northwest to remain a peripatetic and multifarious place – or rather the idea of a place, representing different things to different people – before its imperial inscription. In 1779, Didier Robert de Vaugondy published an “Atlas to accompany articles on America, Asia and Arctic regions in Diderot’s Encyclopédie, 1770-79,” re-issuing ten popular eighteenth-century maps in

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Two maps are reprinted below [figs. 1–2], illustrating the wide variety of imaginative geographies that held sway in the highest intellectual circles nearly four decades after Russian voyages first encountered North America. These conjectures did more than appeal to the map-buying public and placate mapmakers who viewed blank spaces as an admission of failure. Theoretical geography was an important first step in the European appropriation of land, part of the “improvement” project for the world championed by Enlightenment intellectuals and imperial officials alike.

Recent scholarship has embraced a view of knowledge as a circulating commodity in the early modern world. Sverker Sörlin argues that eighteenth-century European reconnaissance “operated within two spheres of action, one pursuing national political interest – with its obvious military and mercantile implications – the other pursuing the more specially designated interests of science.” Geographical information was prized by members of both spheres, because, as Henry Nash Smith wrote about Thomas Jefferson, “a responsible statesman was not likely to forget that geographical knowledge was a necessary preliminary to economic penetration and eventual political domination.” By potentially offering geographical information and inviting speculation, myths gained currency among officials and intellectuals.

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Figure 3.
Didier Robert de Vaugondy (1772)
_Carte générale des découvertes de l’amiral de Fonte et autres navigateurs espagnols, anglois et russes pour la recherche du passage à la mer du Sud par M. De l’Isle, 1752._
The publication of this map ignited a firestorm among Enlightenment geographers. The brainchild of the bombastic French astronomer Joseph-Nicolas Delisle, it depicts the geography of the Northwest as described by the apocryphal Spanish Admiral Bartholomew de Fonte after his putative voyage through a northwest passage in 1664. Chapter 1 will detail the circumstances behind this fascinating account and the wide influence it had on British Americans as renowned as Benjamin Franklin.
By the late eighteenth century, prominent Europeans believed they had completed the quest for universal scientific knowledge. “Now the great Map of Mankind is unrolld at once,” Edmund Burke famously wrote in 1777, complimenting William Robertson’s publication of *The History of America.* But at the same time, vast regions of the world, including northwestern North America and the northern Pacific, remained *terra incognita* to Europeans, populated on maps only by legendary accounts of mythical places. Jacques-Nicolas Bellin’s 1754 map of North America more faithfully illustrates the extent of European geographical knowledge before the 1780s [fig. 3]. Even so, officials and intellectuals needed to consider the geography of these places as they became increasingly important to political designs and scientific pursuits. Eighteenth-century Europeans and colonial Americans saw immense potential for future commerce and dominion in the American Northwest. However, lingering myths and uncertainties about its geography complicated the efforts of statesmen, naturalists, traders, and other interested Euro-Americans to describe and deploy the region’s potential confidently.

The Pacific Northwest, a place best known today from maps and scenic imagery, was not simply a nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-American creation, but was also a product of earlier centuries of mythmaking about the elusive Northwest. Most – but not all – of these myths centered on the “world’s lost dream” of wealthy lands and maritime passages in the *terra incognita* of North America.

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However, a different myth, the theory of American degeneracy advanced by eighteenth-century French natural historians, was equally important in shaping later images of the American West. Euro-American reconnaissance sought mythical people and places theorized by scholars as well as mapmakers, and a second Northwest Passage – the terrestrial passage across a landbridge connecting Asia to North America – was also central to European conceptions of the Northwest before the nineteenth century.

While critical cartographic and postcolonial studies allow scholars insights that only retrospect can offer, a study of the myths surrounding the Northwest and its geography better captures the region's symbolic meanings in the eyes of Europeans who imagined and encountered it in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, despite exceeding the period and regions usually considered relevant for the history of the American Northwest, this thesis will explore how myths allowed a number of NorthWests to exist before the late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25} My approach aligns in some ways with Paul Mapp’s as outlined in \textit{The Elusive West}, 14n6. But where Mapp is interested expressly in the imperial application of theoretical eighteenth-century cartography, I aim to explore the creation of these geographies and their consequences in the region. Similarly helpful was David Beers Quinn’s approach to sixteenth-century theoretical North American geography in “The Northwest Passage in Theory and Practice,” in \textit{A New World Disclosed}, ed. John Logan Allen (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 292-343.

\textsuperscript{26} Central to my argument is Peter Mason's notion of an “imaginary world” – an accretion of names and ideas about a place that takes on a “certain reality effect” without a concrete basis or manifestation in the “material external world. … Therefore they are constitutive of the social practice of individuals within the world.” The mythical American Northwest in the eighteenth century was a product of both Indigenous and European knowledges, and accordingly its geography (names and ideas) reflected the social practices of both worlds as they encountered one another. Peter Mason, “Imaginary Worlds, Counterfact and Artifact,” in \textit{Myth and the Imaginary in the New World}, ed. Eduardo Magaña and Peter Mason (Amsterdam: Centrum voor Studie en Documentatie van Latijns-Amerika, 1986), 43-60.
It was no coincidence that Dye chose the *Iliad*, the oldest extant work of Western literature, as the model for *The Conquest*.27 If Lewis and Clark’s story is the “Homeric song” she claimed it to be, then history leaves no room for precursors to her American heroes. But this is a misleading and teleological perspective. Dye herself instructed her young readers, “Do not let your speculation on the future cloud your interest in the past. The wisest look both ways.”28 Her visionary idol, Thomas Jefferson, would have agreed, as did many others who envisaged the American West before the nineteenth century. “The American Revolution submerged earlier strata of society, culture, and politics,” writes historian Daniel Richter, “but those ancient worlds remain beneath the surface to mold the nation’s current contours.”29 In her revisionism, Dye overlooked how “each new layer spread over the older ones, but what came before never fully disappeared. Indeed, the new was always a product of the old, made from bits and pieces retained from deeper strata.”30

From first contact in the Americas, European imaginations connected the Northwest with lands of wealth and marvels. Myths took on newfound power in the intercultural exchanges of ideas that occurred between Indigenous peoples and European travelers.31 Early Spanish efforts to learn about the unknown regions north

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27 Dye claimed that her original intention was to dedicate *The Conquest* to Theodore Roosevelt, hawkish U.S. president at the time, but settled for a nod to Homer in her foreword. Browne, *Romance with the West*, 76.
30 Ibid., 4.
31 Neil Safier writes: “Increasingly, historians of science have come to recognize that knowledge acquired by European expeditions overseas included at least some portion of knowledge derived from indigenous sources and that in many cases imperial reconnaissance depended entirely on these contacts with local cultures.” Safier, “Global Knowledge on the Move,” 136.
of New Spain were largely motivated by the desire to find mythical places and people, some of which predated first contact in the Americas. In 1493, when Columbus learned of a group of women “who dwell alone in the island Matenin,” known for their brass armor plates, bows, and javelins, he believed he had found the mythical Amazon women on the eastern shores of Asia.\textsuperscript{32} Indigenous geography promised more than the realization of an ancient Greek myth: Columbus gathered from his Taíno informants that “there is another island larger than Española, whose inhabitants have no hair, and which abounds in gold more than any of the rest.”\textsuperscript{33}

After no such island was found in eastern waters, the myth’s location continually adapted to accommodate changes to European geographical knowledge. It had moved to the western coast of the mainland by 1522, when Gonzalo de Sandoval heard reports in Colima of an island, “rich in pearls and gold,” that was similarly populated solely by women.\textsuperscript{34} Eight years later, Pedro de Castañedo, a Spanish soldier who later traveled north with Francisco Vázquez de Coronado’s expedition, recalled a story told by a Native slave named Tejo. As a boy, Tejo had gone with his father “into the back country” to trade for “gold and silver, of which there is a good deal in that country. … He had seen seven very large towns which had streets of silver workers.” This place was forty days away from his hometown, “up through the country between the two seas, following the northern direction.”\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{32} Boston Public Library, \textit{The First Letter of Christopher Columbus to the Noble Lord Raphael Sanchez Announcing the Discovery of America} (Boston: Trustees of the B.P.L., 1891), 14.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 14-15.

\textsuperscript{34} Harold T. Wilkins, \textit{Secret Cities of Old South America: Atlantis Unveiled} (New York: Cosimo Classics, 1952 [repr. 2008]), 156.

Although Tejo died soon thereafter, the geography of his tale was supported by new Spanish and Indigenous reports of large settlements to the north in the 1530s. These testimonies resonated with stories in European lore of an island (or group of islands) to the west of Europe, known as “Antillia,” where seven Spanish bishops founded seven distinct settlements after fleeing the Moorish invasion in the eighth century. “The Island of Seven Cities” appeared on a number of fifteenth-century European maps, often alongside its twin to the north, “Satanaxio” – “the island of the hand of Satan.” Antillia was even allegedly re-discovered by a Portuguese sailor in 1474, but today its only vestiges remain in the Caribbean island chain known as the Antilles.  Still, its geographical description in legends fused with information from Indigenous sources and grew into the mythical Seven Cities of Gold.

Spanish expeditions to the north in search of mythical places ended in disappointment. Dreams of finding the Amazons in the Americas were more or less laid to rest in 1532 when Nuño de Guzman reached “Ciguatan” – which he translated as “province of women” – but learned that the men had left only temporarily to avoid the Spaniards or to prepare an attack. Searching for the Seven Cities of Gold, Coronado encountered only pueblos and “villages like those in New Spain,” and returned to Mexico in 1542 “very sad and very weary, completely worn out and shamefaced.”

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37 Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of the North Mexican States and Texas, 1531-1800* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1886), 34-35.
38 Ibid., 402. A Native known as “the Turk” informed Coronado that he would find “some gold and silver” in a land called “Quivira” to the north. The expedition arrived in Quivira, an Indigenous settlement believed to be in present-day Kansas, but “there was nothing in the country of Quivira which was worth returning for.” Speaking of the Seven Cities, Castañeda lamented, “it was God's pleasure that these discoveries should remain for other peoples and that we who had
Vaugondy’s maps, Europeans filled the northwestern *terra incognita* with kingdoms such as Cibola, Quivira, and Teguayo – all variants of the Seven Cities myth that adopted Indigenous names for the famous Zuñi pueblo and other settlements.

Indigenous origin myths offer another clue to the lasting power of the Seven Cities legend. One of the first European texts composed in America, *The History of the Mexicans as told by their paintings*, was written by a Franciscan friar in the 1530s. This report on the cosmology and history of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples (including the Aztec) mentioned a place known as “Chicomoztoc,” meaning “seven caves” in Nahuatl. In their origin myth, the Nahua are descended from these Seven Caves. The tradition lacks a cardinal direction, but oral histories recount, “From the north we came walking” – from Aztlan, the traditional Aztec homeland [figs. 4–5].

Spaniards probing northward encountered traces of the great southeastward Anasazi migration into Mexico, which took place in the centuries directly preceding European arrival in the Americas. While the Spanish eagerly interpreted Indigenous information to fit the Seven Cities of Gold myth, in reality they were probably learning about Aztlan. Similarly, the myth of Atlantis found new life after encounters with Natives.

Francisco López de Gómara posited in 1553 that refugees from Atlantis had come to

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been there should content ourselves with saying that we were the first who discovered [Quivira] and obtained any information concerning it.” Ibid., 528-31. See William Brandon, *Quivira: Europeans in the Region of the Santa Fe Trail, 1540-1820* (Athens, Oh.: Ohio University Press, 1990).


the Americas before Columbus, reasoning that the Nahuatl word for water, “atl,” was associated with their maritime ancestral homeland.41

The presence of myths in Enlightenment geography indelibly affected European reconnaissance of the globe, and myths were shaped by European experiences in the most remote regions of the world. Naturalists, mapmakers, and their ideas had a dynamic relationship with the exploration and colonization of the world. In *Histoire des Navigations aux Terres Australes*, French scholar Charles de Brosses assiduously documented past voyages to the southern Atlantic and Pacific regions to promote French participation in the search for a Southern Continent. Responding to rival British exploratory efforts, de Brosses’ 1756 publication was

politically motivated, but his belief in a hitherto undiscovered continent also had scientific grounds: only a great southern landmass, he claimed, would be “capable of holding the globe in equilibrium in its rotation, serving as a counterweight to the mass of northern Asia.”

Even these hypothetical ideas were useful in the Enlightenment project of canvassing the globe. Many of the maps in de Brosses’ work were speculative, yet European travelers in subsequent decades often carried the book with them [fig. 6]. De Brosses himself conceded that his work “is without any exactitude to that part of the Southern Sea.” Yet, upon departing Australia in 1770, James Cook wrote: “I have compared the part of the coast that I have visited with the maps found in the French work Histoire des Navigations. I have found them quite exact.”

The European exploration of the Pacific Northwest is usually considered a quintessential case of eighteenth-century scientific reconnaissance. The period between Bering’s voyages and Lewis and Clark’s journey is seen as a quintessential example of logos triumphing over mythos: as Europeans brought Enlightenment ideals to the furthest reaches of the world, empirical observation and geodetic surveys are presumed to have prevailed over speculation and uncertainty. But Cook’s substantiation of de Brosses’ guesswork proved only that the French scholar had made a lucky guess. Other travels pursuing imaginary geographical features were not so fortunate. The Russian expedition that brought the first Europeans to the Pacific coast of North America is one prominent example. The mythical geography of the

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43 Quoted in ibid., 93.
44 See, for example, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006).
Northwest shaped Russian encounters by determining their route, framing their ideas about the places they encountered, and restricting their contact with North America – all of these factors limited the conclusiveness of their findings.

A critical re-examination of the expeditions from Bering to Lewis and Clark reveals the lasting power of myths. When Europeans reached the parts of the world previously unknown to them, they did not only encounter and map uncharted virgin lands. They also navigated the extant geography of these places, which was largely grounded in myths and conjectures. In fact, as the first chapter will detail, the sparseness of Russians contact in North America actually allowed the Northwest to remain an elusive yet multifarious place in European minds. As they had for centuries, myths of the Northwest simply adapted to fit advances in European geographical knowledge.

The persistence of these mythical places and the dynamism of their geography support Hans Blumenberg’s description of myths as “stories distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation.”45 While the general description and allure of rich lands farther northwest remained intact for centuries, the precise coordinates and larger cultural meanings of these mythical places adapted to fit changing European perceptions of the world. By the eighteenth century, the mythical geography of the Northwest had adjusted to reflect not only the results of imperial reconnaissance but also European and Indigenous political affairs. This adaptation of myth continued as Europeans and Americans arrived in the Northwest, influencing intercultural exchanges of

geographical knowledge in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the Northwest largely retained the same powerful symbolic meanings throughout the century. Myths, then, “are not a remnant of the human past but a persisting part of the present … wherever found, [they] have a lasting power.”

The mythological history of the Northwest has been dismembered and spread across a number of disciplines, ranging from archaeology to the sociology of science to the fur trade in North America to [ethnohistory…] Much as Dye recognized that her “stories of the olden time” were being forgotten as Anglo-Americans settled the region in the late nineteenth century, Euro-American approaches to the Northwest before the late eighteenth century have likewise been considered in “the realm of myth and fable” today. Imaginary cartography of the region was treated by Henry R. Wagner in the early twentieth century, but has seen very little critical examination in recent decades. A wave of anthropological and historical revisionism in the mid-twentieth century reshaped our perceptions of the so-called exploration of the world; for the Pacific Northwest, this reappraisal centered on J. C. Beaglehole’s 1973 publication of James Cook’s journals in their original prose for the first time. But modern historians give short shrift to the generations pursuing the American Northwest before European arrival in the 1770s.

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46 Mazlish, *The Uncertain Sciences*, 116.
A study of the primary source documents from the early and mid-eighteenth century – many of which were also republished in the 1960s and 1970s – reveals there was in fact many reconnaissance efforts and exchanges of geographical knowledge before the late eighteenth century. In places as disparate as Hudson Bay, Baja California, and Louisiana, Euro-Americans pursuing mythical places and peoples encountered the Northwest earlier than is commonly believed.

The first chapter will illustrate that although Euro-Americans were largely ignorant to the geography of the Northwest in the mid-eighteenth century, the region nevertheless factored crucially into their intellectual and political designs. This was made possible by myths, borne out in apocryphal accounts and Indigenous knowledge, which allowed the Northwest to take on symbolic meaning in both national (political and commercial) and more cosmopolitan (scientific) spheres. Myths are also easily manipulated and adapted, and ulterior motives contributed to the elusiveness of its geography by mediating the diffusion of geographical knowledge about the Northwest across Europe and colonial America.

The second chapter will explore the mythical geography of the Northwest as manifest in geographical knowledge obtained from Indigenous sources. Unlike the approach of European intellectuals and officials, whose appraisal of the geography of the Northwest was largely an epistemic endeavor, the overland approach in North America took place on Native American terms, both geographical and sociopolitical. European attitudes towards Indigenous societies and knowledges influenced the intercultural exchange of ideas that took place in North America, and vice versa. Like geography, reconnaissance also had a dynamic relationship with field of natural
history, and the hypothesized landbridge between Asia and North America similarly drove Euro-American efforts to learn about the region.

The final chapter will argue that the mythical geography of the Northwest remained extant and potent after contact, influencing European reconnaissance of the region and shaping Euro-American experiences in the region. Myths of the Northwest were not eradicated when scientific reconnaissance reached the coast and canvassed the interior; instead, they took on newfound power in intercultural exchanges.

Finally, the conclusion will examine the traces of the mythical Northwest in present-day cartography. The European “textualization” of the world was not a straightforward process of discovering and documenting the “true” geography of hitherto uncharted places. The toponymy of the Pacific Northwest is one prominent area where the mythical history of the elusive eighteenth-century Northwest lives on to this day, a testament to the allure and staying power of “the world’s lost dream.”
Chapter One

THE ELUSIVE NORTHWEST IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

There emerged from my chamber a large, florid man, announced on behalf of M. Buffon. He said to me, ‘Monsieur, I come from Kamchatka. I know Siberia by heart, my name is Delisle, brother of the great Guilliame. I bring you my works and my maps. Whatever you say to me, the Northwest Passage is true, the Admiral de Fonte is no less true and did not lie in a single word.’

Charles de Brosses on Joseph-Nicolas Delisle, 1754

The geography of the American Northwest remained uncertain to eighteenth-century Europeans and Americans. Spanish officials turned their focus away from the Northwest after the early Spanish entrada into North America failed to realize the Seven Cities of Gold myth and English privateers scored a number of victories harassing treasure galleons and outposts on the Pacific coast in the late sixteenth century. Thereafter, the Spanish crown adopted a defensive policy of secrecy concerning the regions beyond Lower California. By remaining terra incognita, the Northwest avoided becoming a source of trouble and expense. This status quo fostered perceptions of the Pacific Ocean as a “Spanish lake” or mare clausum; the ocean was more commonly known as the South Sea, reflecting Europeans’ ignorance to the geography of the entire northern Pacific region. By the eighteenth century, the coasts of Japan and California represented the modern Pillars of Hercules.

47 Quoted in Pedley, Bel et Utile, 93.
49 The term “Spanish Lake” was coined by William Lytle Schurz in “The Spanish Lake,” Hispanic American Historical Review 5.2 (1922): 181-94. This claim has been revised by recent scholars to allow for both a “literal” mare clausum, meaning the route sailed by the annual Manila galleon
The overwhelming silence from Spain also fueled speculation about the geography of the Northwest from other Europeans and Euro-Americans. Appraising the geography of the American terra incognita was vitally important to eighteenth-century European intellectual and political ambitions. Prominent geographers debated whether the Russian voyages led by Vitus Bering had reached the North American landmass or some hypothesized islands in the northern Pacific. Still, British and French ships did not traffic the Pacific coast of North America until the second half of the eighteenth century.  

Instead, British approaches to the Northwest centered on Hudson Bay, where the entrance to the fabled Northwest Passage was rumored to exist. This orientation reflected political affairs in addition to extant European geographical knowledge. Following the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, France ceded its claims to the watershed emptying into Hudson Bay. As politically interested Britons adopted geographical discovery and scientific observation as a pretense for commercial voyages, the region became the theater of a battle between the long-standing Hudson’s Bay Company monopoly and advocates of British free trade, a cause gaining momentum throughout the century.  


50 The most famous exception to this generalization is George Anson’s squadron of eight ships, which captured a Manila galleon in 1743 while circumnavigating the globe. His four-year voyage was part of a larger disruption of Spain’s treasure fleets in both hemispheres during the War of Austrian Succession, which marked an important step in the weakening of Spanish hegemony in the Pacific. Still, the fleet’s death rate of 90 per cent – only 188 of 1,854 crew members survived – attests to its premature timing relative to technological and medical advances that made extended maritime travel feasible in later decades. See Timothy R. Wilson, *The Spanish Treasure Fleets* (Sarasota, Fla.: Pineapple Press, 1994), 169-70.  

over nearly every European voyage in search of the Northwest. Contemporary political issues and scientific theories shaped the myths surrounding British ideas of the Northwest. Proponents of British free trade substantiated the Northwest Passage myth by claiming that a sea route connecting European ports with the markets of Asia existed in British territory – namely, through Hudson Bay. Likewise, scholars embraced the imaginary terrain of the region in their attempts to appraise its geography and to incorporate it on the “great Map of Mankind.” Therefore the potential value of the elusive American Northwest in the mid-eighteenth century lay in its many possible geographical features, which were supplied by apocryphal accounts and Indigenous reports.

This chapter will detail the practical applications and consequences of mythical geography for Europeans and Americans imagining and approaching the Northwest by sea. British and Russian attempts to ascertain the Northwest’s geography were by and large epistemic and maritime endeavors that did not involve Indigenous groups as heavily as did overland efforts to reach the Northwest through the North American interior. Nonetheless, through conjectures and apocryphal travel narratives, myths informed European geographical conceptions of northwestern North America and the northern Pacific and influenced reconnaissance efforts in these regions before the late eighteenth century. Far from ignoring these uncharted areas or disregarding them as realms of hearsay and fable, Europeans and colonial Americans employed mythical geography for personal, national, and transnational benefits in many of the same ways as they exploited more familiar or accepted information about a place.
**Russian Encounters with the Mythical Northwest**

The Russian thrust into the northern Pacific came as the result of an effort to conquer the eastern end of the Asian mainland. Semen Dezhnev was the first Muscovite to round the easternmost point of Asia on his 1648 voyage. But Dezhnev was unaware that the waters he navigated formed a strait between Asia and the Americas, and no voyages followed his until Bering’s 1728 expedition that gave the sea its modern name.\(^{52}\) In the early eighteenth century, Peter the Great reformed the tsardom of imperial Russia in the mold of western European states, embracing the Enlightenment ideal of scientific pursuit as a formalized object of national interest. Peter was especially keen on geography and mapping, issuing “An Instruction for Russian Students Studying Navigation Abroad” in 1714 to promote naval service.\(^{53}\)

At Peter’s invitation, French astronomer Joseph-Nicolas Delisle relocated to St. Petersburg in 1726 to establish an observatory and work at the newly founded Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences. Although he undertook a voyage of his own to Siberia in 1740 to observe the transit of Mercury, Delisle was a géographe du cabinet (“geographer of the study”) – “what the English would later call, in a not altogether friendly way, an armchair geographer.”\(^{54}\) In the preface to his *Atlas Universel*, Didier Robert de Vaugondy outlined the duty of a géographe du cabinet: “He gathers, without leaving his study, all the details he can acquire, combines and compares them with authentic relations and determines them with the help of astro-

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\(^{52}\) A 1732 expedition anchored a few miles off what is now known as Seward’s Peninsula in Alaska, but the crew (which included a geodesist) was unaware of their achievement.  
\(^{54}\) Williams, *Voyages of Delusion*, 258.
nomical observations.” Yet practicing geography in the eighteenth century entailed more than performing these rote tasks. As Robert de Vaugondy elaborated:

Geography is not, as many think, a science which only demands eyes and ears; otherwise, learning it would consist only in the talent of filling one’s memory with a prodigious quantity of names and places and provinces, without understanding the connection these things have with the heavens, with each other, and with history. … [It] embraces everything that constitutes the physical and moral existence of our globe.56

As Russia’s official geographer, Delisle was responsible for preparing Bering’s second expedition to face the unfamiliar geography beyond Kamchatka. The map he created in 1731 populated the northern Pacific region with a number of rumored islands familiar to those well versed in early modern cartography [fig. 7]. When Portuguese Jesuits arrived in China and Japan in the sixteenth century, they learned of a land to the northeast known as “Yezo” or “Yedso,” though spellings varied innumerably. Yezo derived from reports of the island of Hokkaido, known as “Ezo” – the Japanese word for “foreigner” – but Europeans “thought [it] to be rather some part of the continent Tartaria,” as one English traveler expressed in 1611.57

More prominent was “Gama Land,” based on the testimony of João da Gama, grandson of the famous Portuguese explorer, who claimed to have spotted land while sailing from Macao to Acapulco around 1589. Gama Land was alternately represented as an island in the North Pacific or as a northwestern extension of North America nearly reaching Asia. A Dutch expedition believed they had discovered a similar island north of Japan in 1643, which they named “Company Land” for the Dutch East India Company. Yezo, Company Land, and Gama Land were often

55 Quoted in ibid., 258.
56 Quoted in Pedley, Bel et Utile, 102.
confounded on early modern European maps, but on his 1731 map Delisle clearly noted the existence of all three around the 47th parallel [cf. figs 7–9].

Delisle’s brother, astronomer Louis Delisle de la Croyère, had accompanied him to Russia in 1726. La Croyère joined the Second Kamchatka Expedition as something of a geographical expert, carrying a version of his brother’s 1731 chart. After an arduous overland passage across Asia, the expedition’s members built two sturdy vessels on the Pacific coast – the St. Peter, commanded by Bering, and the St. Paul, commanded by Captain Alexsei Chirikov – then set sail from Avacha Bay in April 1741. La Croyère sailed on the latter, where his influence was short-lived and somewhat infamous.
On May 4, 1741, Bering called a “council made up of [Bering], officers, the professor of astronomy [La Croyère], and navigators,” which agreed to sail southeast-by-east in search of Gama Land until 46°N, at which point their course would be changed to east-by-north if no land was found. The Russians’ faith in the existence of Gama Land was based on their belief that “the author of the map would not have represented anything on uncertain ground.” In fact, this route led the ships to miss the Aleutians entirely, delaying their arrival in North America and complicating greatly the return voyage. Early in the vain quest to discover Gama Land, the two ships were separated in heavy fog and would never reunite.

No land was spotted until July 15, when Chirikov’s St. Paul sighted modern-day Alaska at 55°N; the next day, over 300 miles to the north, Bering and those on the St. Peter spotted Mt. Saint Elias on the horizon. By this time, Bering was convinced “of the nonexistence of the Land of Gama,” and thus that the Delisles’ information was inaccurate. “I suspect that the gentlemen who drew up these plans obtained all their knowledge from visions,” wrote Sven Waxell, a lieutenant aboard the St. Peter. Meanwhile, a debate ensued on the St. Paul over the true character of the newfound land. Chirikov ultimately judged “this land was without a doubt the American coast, because, according to the map of the Nuremberg geographer Johannes Baptist Homann and others, we were not far from parts of America that are well known.” No mention was made of the fact that the Russians’ investigations had uncovered no evidence of Homann’s “Terra Esonis” stretching from North America

58 Quoted in Mapp, The Elusive West, 108.
60 Golder, Bering’s Voyages, 313-14.
Figure 8.
Detail of Nicolas Sanson’s 1691 world map showing his depiction of North America and the northern Pacific region. California remains an island, and the landmass between the Americas and Asia is represented as “Terra de Iesso,” with an added label of “Company Land” on the coast.

Figure 9.
This 1711 map of the Americas by Johannes Baptist Homann proved influential in the Russian voyages to North America. Homann represented Yezo – “Terra Esonis” – as a massive northwestern extension of the North American mainland, and his note along the coast remarked that João de Gama spotted the land while journeying from China to Mexico in 1589.
to Asia. Instead, Chirikov endeavored to “join on the chart which is being sent to the Admiralty College our discoveries with the American coast as it appears on the map of Homann and Professor Delisle de la Croyère.”

Unable to make landfall, the *St. Paul* turned for home and reached Avacha Bay by October 1741. The rebuffed La Croyère was one of six crewmembers to die from scurvy on the difficult return journey through the Aleutian Islands. The return voyage of the *St. Peter* similarly ended in disaster when a storm forced the crew to beach the ship on an uninhabited island off the Kamchatka coast. The crewmembers named the chain the “Commander Islands” after Bering, who perished there along with 28 others. The Second Kamchatka Expedition had achieved many of their navigational goals. However, looking back on the catastrophes that had arisen during their misguided search for the mythical islands between Siberia and the American Northwest, Bering’s men could only believe that they were “misled to a useless navigation.” As Waxell bitterly reflected:

> It is after all an easy matter, and one that requires no great knowledge, to sit in a warm room setting down on paper the distorted accounts and guesswork of others. … Those who produce uncertain things of that kind would do better to hold their peace, or, if they must exercise imagination and speculation, let them keep the results to themselves and not put them in the hands of others. I know I am writing all too much about this matter, but I can hardly tear myself away from it, for my blood still boils whenever I think of the scandalous deception of which we were the victims.

The disasters that befell the Second Kamchatka Expedition during their quest to find mythical islands in the northern Pacific speak to the practical consequences of imaginary geography in eighteenth-century travel. The allure of these places continued to push Europeans to reconnoiter the region, but more telling – and more often

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61 Ibid., 314.
overlooked – are the ways in which mythical geography shaped Euro-American experiences in and conceptions of the Northwest. Reconnaissance efforts that failed to reach their destinations or to complete their surveys provoked more speculation. Writers and mapmakers adapted myths to reflect changes to European knowledge of the world, and conjectures continued to influence ideas about and encounters with the Northwest. As the following sections will show, by no means did Delisle and other imaginative geographers of his stature heed Waxell’s advice to “hold their peace.”

**Enlightened Imaginations of Northwestern America**

In May 1762, just before departing Edinburgh for Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to a friend, the Scottish physician John Pringle, outlining what he believed comprised the vast *terra incognita* to the west of Britain’s Atlantic colonies. These lands were French and Spanish territory, but in the waning years of the Seven Years’ War, as the territorial implications of their victory became increasingly apparent, British Americans turned their attentions to the acquisitive western border of their empire. But the lingering uncertainty surrounding the geography of the region frustrated European efforts to form charts, plans, and treaties involving the Northwest. Instead, mythical places and peoples continued to populate European imaginations of the region.

The most persistent of these myths was the famed Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Conjectural straits, lakes, and rivers promising a waterway to the wealth of Asia had captured European imaginations since Marco Polo’s travels. But by the mid-eighteenth century, dozens of “voyages of delusion”
had not disclosed more than a hint of such a passage. News of Bering’s landfall reached western Europe in the 1740s, but the information was spotty and confused.63

Then, in 1747, Joseph-Nicolas Delisle returned to Paris after twenty-one years in St. Petersburg. Upon his celebrated return to France, Delisle resumed his position as chair of astronomy in the Collège de France and began work on a paper detailing the new discoveries in the North Pacific. Delisle came from a family of renowned geographers and mapmakers, and he asked Philippe Buache, his uncle by marriage, to draw a map to accompany the paper [fig. 3]. The map combined Delisle’s imperfect understanding of the new Russian discoveries (aided by some stolen documents) with some imaginary geography of the American Northwest: the conjectural “Mer de l’Ouest” – a seventeenth-century creation of Delisle’s father, Claude – and the alleged discoveries of a number of legendary seventeenth-century Spanish naval officers.64

Delisle based his depiction of the regions north of the Sea of the West on the contents of “A Letter from Admiral Bartholomew de Fonte, then Admiral of New Spain and Peru, and now Prince of Chili; giving an Account of … his Discoveries to find out if there was any North West Passage from the Atlantick Ocean into the South and Tartarian Sea.”65 The letter first appeared in the spring of 1708 as part of The Monthly Miscellany; or, Memoirs for the Curious, a London journal that, along with

63 Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 246-47.
64 Besides Fonte’s, the two most commonly depicted openings on the Pacific coast of North America were sighted by Spanish navigators around the turn of the seventeenth century. One, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, will be discussed in the conclusion. The other, commonly known as the Entrance of Martin d’Aguilar, was spotted by a Spanish mariner on Sebastian Vizcaino’s 1602 mission up the coast. Although details are sparse, it is possible that Aguilar sighted the mouth of the Columbia River, but was forced to turn back due to violent storms and the outbreak of scurvy on the ships. See Cook, Flood Tide, 12-13; Pedley, Bel et Utile, 74-78.
65 The letter is reprinted in Appendix I of Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 417-22.
the letter and its putative author, was the brainchild of the British botanist and entomologist James Petiver.66

Fonte, the letter purported, had been given orders in 1640 “to Equip four Ships of Force” and sail north from Lima in response to reports in Spain of “some Industrious Navigators from Boston” in the region.67 Between the four ships, whose captains Fonte ordered to carry out various navigational tasks, the expedition allegedly explored as far north as 79°. Fonte discovered a system of lakes and rivers that eventually brought him (by canoe) into an arm of the Atlantic Ocean, where he encountered some Natives and the rumored New Englanders. Apparently disregarding his orders to arrest the infringing British mariners, Fonte met amicably with “Captain Shapley,” the ship’s navigator, and its owner, a “fine gentleman” from Boston named “Scimor Gibbons.” After acquiring a few “fine Charts and Journals,” the Spaniards rendezvoused and peaceably “returned home, having found that there was no Passage into the South Sea by that they call the North West Passage.”68 The letter’s concluding line especially stimulated geographically-inclined Europeans: “The Chart will make this much more demonstratable.” Of course, no such chart was ever published, or likely even existed in the first place. Nevertheless, Delisle, Buache, and many other European mapmakers took up the task with great zeal in the mid-eighteenth century – Franklin himself appended his letter to Pringle with a marked-up copy of the Buache map [fig. 10].


67 Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 417-18.

68 Ibid., 421-2.
Figure 10.
An English re-edition of Delisle and Buache’s initial 1750 map, which depicted the purported navigation of the apocryphal Admiral Bartholomew de Fonte. Besides challenging the authenticity of Fonte’s account, European geographers attacked Buache for misrepresenting the geography of the Northwest by placing the entrance to Hudson Bay ten degrees too high. This colorized map illustrates “where I have made two crooked red Lines,” as Benjamin Franklin wrote to John Pringle in 1762, explaining his corrections to Buache’s map in a letter supporting the authenticity of the Fonte account.

Figure 11.
This French re-edition of Gerhard Friedrich Müller’s 1758 map of the northern Pacific, which represented the official Russian position on the Fonte controversy. Delisle had used misinformation stolen from official Russian archives in his original paper; as official Russian historiographer, Müller was in a position to refute Delisle and Buache’s conjectures, and his map offers a more familiar outline of Alaska.
After Delisle’s presentation to the French Academy of Sciences in 1750, the paper and map ignited a heated debate in intellectual circles over both the veracity of Delisle’s sources and the faithfulness of Buache’s representation. As premier géогraphe du roi and géогraphe adjoint to the Academy of Sciences in Paris, Buache could claim to be the foremost geographer in France at the time.\(^6^9\) In a long series of maps and articles, Buache defended the authenticity of the Sea of the West and Fonte’s account against the critiques of numerous contemporary geographers, primarily Didier Robert de Vaugondy, who represented another illustrious French mapmaking family.\(^7^0\) The argument became increasingly personal towards its conclusion in 1753, but did little to add any conclusiveness to the matter. The Russian position, expressed five years later on a map by official historiographer Gerhard Friedrich Müller, offered a more familiar outline of the Alaskan coast, but also depicted Fuca, Fonte, and Aguilar’s putative openings alongside Bering and Chirikov’s landing points [fig. 11]. Skeptical mapmakers subsequently included the controversial geography with disclaimers or omitted it altogether: “It is in this region that some geographers have placed the presumed discoveries of Admiral de la Fuente,” noted Jacques-Nicolas Bellin on one map, “but I have found the story too suspect to use.”\(^7^1\)

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\(^6^9\) Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 248. The position of géогraphe du roi (in Britain, Geographer to the King) was largely titular, inherited by generations of Delisles and Buaches. The latter title, however, carried with it a great deal of respect. It is worth noting that the term “cartographer” is a neologism from the 1830s – the same is true of “scientist” – and accordingly the term “geographer” was applied to amateur commercial mapmakers as well as formally trained astronomers. Peter Van der Krogt, “The Origin of the Word ‘Cartography,’” e-Perimetron 10.3 (2015): 124-42.

\(^7^0\) Robert de Vaugondy not only argued that the Fonte letter was a fabrication, but also noted that Buache had placed the entrance to Fonte’s system ten degrees higher in latitude than the letter described. A revised map was released in 1753. Franklin applied this same correction to the copy of the 1750 map that he enclosed to Pringle a decade later [fig. 10].

\(^7^1\) A vocal critic of Delisle’s work – and custodian of the official Dépôt des Cartes, Plans et Journeaux – Bellin also sometimes opted to signify the hypothetical basis of Fuca’s and Fonte’s openings with dotted lines. Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 263-68.
In September 1762, four months after Franklin wrote to Pringle, French officials made a secret agreement to cede Louisiana to Spain after war’s end. Britain would never lay territorial claim to the trans-Mississippi West. But with British accession of the western lands seemingly imminent in 1762, the Philadelphian was happy “to give you my Reasons for believing as I do, that De Fonte’s Voyage is genuine.”\(^72\) To be sure, the expansive tract of land was itself promising. But while Fonte’s description of the Northwest was not overly enticing per se, his letter was invaluable for its report that a navigable waterway between the oceans lay in northwestern America, albeit one passable only by canoe. Although “the Country is not decribd to be wealthy, and the Passage for Ships from Sea to Sea is deny’d,” Franklin wrote, “My Opinion upon the whole is … there is nevertheless such a Passage for Boats as DeFonte found and has describd; and that the Country upon that Passage is for the most part habitable, and would produce all the Necessaries of Life.”\(^73\)

Fonte’s Northwestern geography potentially had tremendous ramifications for imperial aspirations in North America. A navigable waterway between the Atlantic and Pacific in the Northern Hemisphere threatened to upset the European political status quo. For centuries after first contact, the Portuguese and Dutch dominated the passage to India around the Cape of Good Hope, while Spain maintained hegemony over the Pacific region by commanding the Strait of Magellan and the Cape Horn rounding.\(^74\) When Francis Drake appeared in the Pacific waters in the *Golden Hind* in

\(^72\) From Benjamin Franklin to John Pringle, 27 May 1762, *PBF*, vol. 10, 88.
\(^73\) Ibid., 89, 100. Franklin’s support of the Fonte account is often omitted in many biographies and popular histories. For instance, see Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).
\(^74\) Despite profits sometimes reaching 400 percent, even the annual galleon between Manila and Acapulco was nearly terminated a number of times because it was diverting precious bullion from
1578, harassing Spanish ships and marauding settlements along the coast of the Americas, Spanish officials suspected that he had discovered the mythical Strait of Anian. In reality, Drake had sidestepped the Americas altogether, sailing through the subantarctic passage that now bears his name. But the episode speaks to both the geopolitical significance of a Northwest Passage and to the Spanish paranoia that informed their policy of secrecy regarding geographical discoveries. An entrance in northern waters would allow the British access not only to the Pacific Ocean but also to the vaunted Asian markets. For these reasons – and because reconnaissance around Cape Horn and northward along the Pacific coast was highly impractical – the eighteenth-century British approach to the Northwest took place almost entirely in Hudson Bay.

Delisle was also not the only person in possession of a version of the Fonte letter. George Forbes, the 3rd Earl of Granard, likely supplied the French astronomer with his manuscript copy while serving as British ambassador to Russia in the 1730s. Back in London a few years later, Forbes gave another copy to a fellow member of Irish Parliament named Arthur Dobbs, a lifelong proponent of the Northwest Passage. Upon learning of the Fonte account, Dobbs added it to his growing arsenal of evidence supporting the existence of a maritime passage. In 1744, he expressed his beliefs in a book, *An Account of Hudson’s Bay*, which printed the Fonte letter in full for the first time since the original edition of 1708. Dedicated to George II, his *Account* used the Spanish admiral’s conjectural geography to highlight the “great

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Madrid. The fact that the Hawaiian Islands, which lie just a few hundred miles from both eastward and westward galleon routes, was first encountered by Europeans only when Cook sailed for the Northwest Coast in 1778 is a testament to the single-mindedness of the Spanish crown towards its colonies. Wilson, *The Spanish Treasure Fleet*, 172.

75 Williams, *Voyages of Delusion*, 135.
Probability of a North-west Passage, so long desired” and the practical “Advantage to these Kingdoms” it would bring to Britain at the expense of its rivals. He extolled “the Benefit to be made by settling Colonies, and opening a Trade in these Parts; whereby the French will be deprived in a great Measure of their Traffick in Furs.”

More importantly, Dobbs recognized that voyages outfitted expressly for geographical discovery and scientific inquiry offered an acceptable pretense for sending ships into Hudson Bay, where the Hudson’s Bay Company had an exclusive right to trade dating back to its royal charter of 1670. The abolition of the long-standing H.B.C. monopoly was Dobbs’ true aim. Dobbs saw this archaic measure as inimical to British free trade, a cause gaining momentum in the eighteenth century. In 1735, Dobbs approached an H.B.C. captain named Christopher Middleton about undertaking such a voyage after reading a paper written by the captain on magnetic needles in the Royal Society’s *Philosophical Transactions*. The H.B.C. griped that Middleton’s expedition “might affect their Property and be Prejudicial to the Company in their Trade;” but the Admiralty intervened and compelled all factors to assist the scientific expedition as needed. Middleton’s voyage was unsuccessful, but controversy ensued when Dobbs refused to accept his captain’s results; like Delisle and Robert de Vaugondy, the two engaged in a highly public and vitriolic argument in which Dobbs accused Middleton of neglecting to probe every opening. Five years later, Henry Ellis made another attempt in two ships, the *California* and the *Dobbs Galley*. His thrust into Hudson Bay proved equally unsuccessful, but two accounts were published:

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Ellis’ own, and a two-volume treatment by Charles Swaine, aka Theodorus Drage, the clerk of the California.\textsuperscript{77}

Dobbs presented the discovery of the Northwest Passage as a chief concern for all patriotic Britons. The voyages he sponsored in the 1740s failed to find any promising signs of access, but his efforts led Parliament to offer a £20,000 prize to “His Majesty’s subject or subjects, as shall discover a north west passage through Hudson's Streights, to the western and southern ocean of America.”\textsuperscript{78} In 1750, Ellis published a paper espousing to his countrymen “the Great Advantages which would Arise from the Discovery of the North West Passage.”\textsuperscript{79} Many colonists answered the summons, among them Benjamin Franklin, who in 1752 became one of the leading sponsors of a voyage out of Philadelphia on a ship “called the Argo, commanded by Mr. Swaine, who was in the last Expedition in the California, Author of a Journal of that Voyage in two Volumes.”\textsuperscript{80}

In their preparations for the voyage, the Philadelphia merchants almost immediately ran into the same politically charged debate over free trade. When one sponsor leaked their plans while in London, a number of English merchants quickly formed a

\textsuperscript{77} The true identity (or identities) of Swaine/Drage is one of many historical mysteries wrapped around the search for the Northwest Passage. The clerk of the California was known as “Mr Dragg” in the journal of naturalist and H.B.C. factor James Isham, but a Captain Charles Swaine appeared in Pennsylvania in 1750 claiming to be the same person. On October 27, 1758, Philadelphia church records indicate Hannah Boyte married Charles Swaine; exactly one year later, the same church noted her betrothal to one Charles Swaine Drage. Five years later, both names appear on the muster list of Fort Pitt on the Pennsylvanian frontier. Some believe Swaine and Drage to be a composite figure; others (referencing the contrasts between their handwritings) maintain they were two individuals. See Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 210-3; Adams, Travel Liars, 64-72; PBF, vol. 4, 381.

\textsuperscript{78} Anno regni Georgii II. regis Magnae Britanniae, Franciae, & Hiberniae, decimo octavo… (1744-45), 483-6.

\textsuperscript{79} Henry Ellis, Considerations on the great advantages which would arise from the discovery of the North West Passage (San Francisco: Sutro Library, 1959).

\textsuperscript{80} From Benjamin Franklin to Cadwallader Colden, 28 February 1753, PBF, vol. 4, 449.
company of their own and petitioned the government for a monopoly of the Labrador trade. In response, the American sponsors released a “Petition of the Merchants of Philadelphia to the King” in late 1752, outlining their intentions “to improve, and carry, the Trade to New Britain, into a compleat Execution.” The Board of Trade upheld the Philadelphians’ petition, affirming the Americans’ “humble hope” that “they, and all other Your Majestys Subjects, shall be left free, to pursue the said Trade, in their great and common Benefit and Advantage.”

However, Franklin had in mind a higher goal than finding “Success in your Expedition to the Benefit of Trade for there is no hopes of a North west passage,” as a friend termed the venture in 1753 after learning of Delisle’s recent publication. Rather than national mercantile interests, Franklin sought to advance the European quest for knowledge of the natural world through the Argo’s mission – specifically, through Swaine’s observations and testimony. The possible existence of a Northwest Passage was just one of countless geographical questions to be addressed through European travel. To Franklin, a “voyage of discovery” was an opportunity to gather pieces of “useful knowledge” – one of his favorite expressions – regardless of the outcome. “We think the Attempt laudable, whatever may be the Success,” Franklin wrote before Swaine set off in 1753: “if he fails, Magnis tamen excidit ausis [at least he fell in daring to great things].”

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81 Petition of the Merchants of Philadelphia to the King, [18 November 1752], *PBF*, vol. 4, 380-4.
82 To Benjamin Franklin from Peter Collinson, 27 January 1753, *PBF*, vol. 4, 416.
83 Franklin drew the quotation from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. From Benjamin Franklin to Cadwal-lader Colden, 28 February 1753, *PBF*, vol. 4, 449.
**Benjamin Franklin and “Useful Knowledge” of the World**

To understand how Franklin saw the interests of scientific pursuit embodied in Captain Swaine, it is helpful to understand the terms on which eighteenth-century science – which is less anachronistically termed natural philosophy – took place. European philosophers heralded the relationship between exploration and edification: as Europeans saw more of the world, the more they learned about it. For centuries in Europe, the Straits of Gibraltar – known in lore as “the narrow inlet where Hercules let stand/His markers beyond which men were not to sail,” in Dante Alighieri’s words – represented the furthest extent of human knowledge and dominion. What lay beyond the Pillars of Hercules was a primordial expanse laden with theological images of the Great Flood and Purgatory – “that chaotic vestige of disasters buried in mankind’s past.”

In the seventeenth century, English philosopher Francis Bacon turned this idea on its head to symbolize the worldview of his “new science.” The frontispiece to his *Novum Organum Scientiarum* depicts a ship returning from the open sea through the mythical Pillars of Hercules above a quotation from the Book of Daniel: “Many shall pass to and fro, and science shall be increased,” as Bacon loosely translated the Latin Vulgate Bible. God’s prophecy to Daniel portended, Bacon wrote in 1603, “as if the opening of the world by navigation and commerce and the further discovery of knowledge should meet in one time or age.” Over a century removed from Christopher Columbus’ voyages and Copernicus’ observations, Bacon saw that navigational

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and scientific advancements had ushered in a new era in human history, which he termed the “autumn of the world.” In this time of enlightenment, God’s prophecy to Daniel would be realized through European achievement.\(^{86}\)

Bacon’s work was designed to replace the Aristotelian worldview of a fixed earth. Early modern travels – especially encounters in the Americas – fundamentally reshaped European conceptions of the world and their place in it, enlarging the globe in scale and increasing the variety of its known peoples.\(^{87}\) To Bacon, travel also offered a solution to a methodological problem he saw plaguing European thought. Opposing the “pernicious and inveterate habit of dwelling on abstractions,” he admonished thinkers to “betake themselves seriously to experiment.”\(^{88}\) Today the term “empirical” is often associated with “factual,” although it derives from the Ancient Greek \(\text{ἐμπειρία}\) for “experience.” In Bacon’s empiricist formulation of acquiring knowledge, the European traveler took on crucial importance as an agent of science: “for so in travelling in one country, he shall suck the experience of many.”\(^{89}\)

John Locke followed the empiricism of Bacon’s approach, often drawing upon his English forbearer verbatim.\(^{90}\) In 1704, Locke concluded his meticulous chronicle of European exploration, *The History of Navigation*, with a similar guide to would-be amateur scientists. “Every traveller,” he wrote, “ought to carry about him several sorts of measures” – a watch, a compass, some maps, and “a table-book at

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\(^{89}\) Francis Bacon, “Of Travaille,” in *The Essays, or Counsels Civill and Morall* (1602).

\(^{90}\) Bowen, *Empiricism and Geographical Thought*, 38.
hand to set down everything worth remembering.” Locke outlined dozens of “principal heads by which to regulate their observations,” including “strange adventures … and whatsoever may be curious, diverting or profitable.” Highlighting the quest for cartographic accuracy, Locke especially advised carrying “a parcel of the best maps to make curious remarks of their exactness, and note down where they are faulty.”

Throughout the seventeenth century, Bacon’s prophetic coincidence of exploration and edification seemed to be coming true. Flourishing global trade brought about European contacts in Asia, fashioning the Atlantic and Indian Oceans into worlds of their own; meanwhile, advances in cosmography, philosophy, and the natural sciences fostered the creation of universal theories, laws, or systems to describe and order the world. By the turn of the eighteenth century, “this was the Newtonian universe: immense and boundless; rational, comprehensible, and above all mechanistic.” Locke triumphantly summarized The History of Navigation in 1704:

To conclude, the empire of Europe is now extended to the utmost bounds of the earth, where several of its nations have conquests and colonies…. The relation of one traveller is an incentive to stir up another to imitate him, whilst the rest of mankind, in their accounts, without stirring a foot, compass the earth and sea, visit all countries, and converse with all nations.

In both intellectual and political life, European visions of the future depended on studying and understanding – “knowing” – the natural world. In general, “knowledge of the world itself [was] understood as purposive, part of an enlightening

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European vision for the future order of the world.”

The exploration of new places and peoples took on—and still today has—resonance beyond geographical “discovery” by invoking the teleology of scientific and colonial progress: contact leads to the mapping and “taming” of the interior, part of a project to “improve” the land through cultivation and governance. Enlightenment naturalists were obsessed with creating a system in which every species, place, and idea could be assigned “a unique position in a comprehensible pattern.” The world map was one such system: the *Encyclopédistes* adopted the *mappemonde* alongside the “Tree of Knowledge” to symbolize their universal knowledge project.

More than any other, Franklin embodied in North America the European “new science” thirst for worldly knowledge. He quickly adopted the rhetoric championing the “usefulness” of the terraqueous globe and the “improvement” project of enlightened European society. When he settled in Philadelphia in 1726 at the age of twenty, he had already spent time in Boston and London, and the Pennsylvanian capital was

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95 The modern verb “to improve” originally meant “to put to profit,” and especially implied the act of enclosing common or “waste” land. Botanists such as Linnaeus (whose taxonomies were another attempt at a universal knowledge system) recognized the practical benefits of horticulture to medicine, agriculture, and commerce (for subarctic Sweden in particular). Drayton, *Nature’s Government*, 52-54.

96 Bowler, *The Earth Encompassed*, 141.

97 Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment*, 171.

98 Some have controversially claimed that Franklin’s ignorance of a number of foundational European texts and principles gave him the ability as a naïve yet perspicacious American to penetrate through faulty European notions. For example, his inability to read Latin has been widely cited in response to Netwon’s *Principia*, but more overlooked is the fact that he could have read Newton’s later *Opticks*, published in English. For a discussion of this historiographical debate, see James Campbell, *Recovering Benjamin Franklin: An Exploration of a Life of Science and Service* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1999), 37-40.
growing into a cosmopolitan center of tolerance and intellectual pursuit. The following year, as Franklin later wrote in his autobiography, he “form’d most of my ingenious acquaintance into a club, for mutual improvement, which we called the Junto.” The Junto, made up of aspiring artisans and tradesmen, developed into the Philadelphia Library Company, which spawned the first subscription library in North America.

After the success of the Junto, Franklin envisioned an inter-colonial association, replicating the sort of royal societies that had proliferated throughout western Europe in the seventeenth century – for instance, the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, to which he was admitted in 1756 for his experiments in electricity. Following the lead of botanist and fellow Philadelphian John Bartram, in 1743 Franklin published a manifesto, “Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations of America,” which called for “One society [to] be formed of Virtuosi or ingenious Men residing in the several colonies, to be called the American Philosophical Society.” These “Men of Speculation,” drawn from diverse areas of interest or expertise, “might produce Discoveries to the Advantage of some or all of the British Plantations, or to the Benefit of Mankind in general.” After the success of Franklin’s Philadelphia-based society, dozens of

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101 Campbell, Recovering Benjamin Franklin, 80.
“useful knowledge associations” were founded across the British colonies, with a marked uptick in the decades following American independence.  

For Franklin, the lifeblood of these societies was “a constant Correspondence” among its members as well as with the general scientific community. He counted some of the preeminent European minds among his correspondents, but also conversed with men of the lowest stations to collect what useful information they could offer him. Franklin had an egalitarian and utilitarian vision for the study of the world, and he shared the belief that Euro-American knowledge should encompass the entire world.

Yet much as vast regions of the globe remained unknown to Europeans, not all the sciences experienced the quantum leap of knowledge that Newtonianism seemed to promise. Unlike botany, which could be practiced from afar in botanical gardens or personal libraries, the initial practice of geography – the acts of “discovery,” “exploration,” and empirical “observation” – necessarily took place in situ. As a discipline, eighteenth-century geography existed on the margins of Enlightenment science, but in many ways, it was also a universalizing discourse, designed to gather information about people and places in the world. Yet as the natural world was increasingly revealed to and ordered by Europeans, knowledge about the maritime world, especially concerning the open seas, remained a bastion of secrecy and mysti-

105 A telling passage comes from Claude Leibniz in 1693: “The entire body of the sciences can be thought of as being like the ocean, which is everywhere continuous and without division, even though men have conceived parts for it, and give them names according to their convenience. And just as there are seas that are unknown, or which have been navigated by a few vessels cast there by fortune, one can say that there are sciences of which we only have knowledge through chance encounters and without design.” Quoted in Delbourgo and Dew, *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World*, 1.
106 On geography as a more formalized area of study in the eighteenth century, see Bowen, *Empiricism and Geographical Thought*, ch. 5
cism. This posed a problem to natural philosophers and imperial officials alike: because so much travel took place on the water, maritime knowledge constituted a large portion of geographical information “useful” to Europeans. And although rumors of wealth in the American interior persisted, for eighteenth-century Euro-Americans, the appeal of the Northwest largely lay in its potential maritime geographical features.

The issue for intellectuals and officials was a lack of experienced sources. Superstitious fears of the sea lingered among the general public into the nineteenth century, and the air of secrecy with which mariners plied their trade actually bred myths of its own. One such myth that influenced voyages as late as Cook’s was the common misconception that salt water could not freeze. Knowledge of the maritime world was thus obtained through “years of accumulated experience, earned through lengthy apprenticeship, not charts.”

For these reasons, the Europeans who actually gathered geographical knowledge about the world were laymen as often as they were geographés du cabinet or formally trained astronomers. “It was a golden age, which united humanity and science,” James Bruce, a Scottish writer who chronicled his African excursions in Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, waxed poetical in 1774. “Men of liberal minds and education, [were] employed in the noblest of all occupations, that of

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107 Even sailors’ jargon was designed to keep outsiders oblivious to and confused by their knowledge of the maritime world. Chaplin, “Knowing the Ocean,” 81; Corbin, The Lure of the Sea, 52.
108 Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 323.
109 In tricky waters, “charts did exist, but these were of lesser significance than familiarity with prevailing winds and ocean currents … and the knowledge acquired from those who had sailed a route before.” Olaf Uwe Janzen, “‘Of Consequence to the Service:’ The Rationale Behind Cartographic Surveys in Early Eighteenth-Century Newfoundland,” The Northern Mariner/Le Marin in du Nord 11.1 (2001), 2.
exploring the distant parts of the Globe…”  

110 But European travelers (especially the literary types – or even simply the literate ones) often had commercial or other non-scientific interests at heart. The pitfalls of this complication are clear on early modern maps, where the coasts of North America are more thoroughly depicted than features of its interior, although even the outlines of the known continents were highly imprecise.  

111 To this end, some of the most prominent European philosophers wrote what were effectively field guides to geographical practice. These works, often short pamphlets, formed a genre alongside popular travel narratives attempting to regulate the terms on which travel was conducted and travel literature was written – essentially, the terms on which empirical science was practiced. Like Locke in *The History of Navigation*, Bacon made an early attempt at such regulation in his 1596 essay, “Of Travel.”  

112 Robert Boyle, renowned for his ideal gas law, penned a travel guide outlining geographical areas of study “for the Use of Travellers and Navigators.” “Considering the great Improvements, that have of late been made of Natural History … by the Travels of Gentlemen, Seamen, and others,” Boyle lamented that many “ingenious” travelers suffered in ignorance of “by what Method they may make Enquiries about things to be known there.”  


111 Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment*, 94.  

112 Bacon, “Of Travaille.”  

113 “General Heads for a Natural History of a Countrey, Great or Small, imparted likewise by Mr. Boyle,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* XLVIII, pt. 1 (1753), 186. Boyle’s instructions were first published in the inaugural volume of *Phil. Trans.* (1666), reissued after his death in book form in 1692, and later reprinted in a number of instructional booklets. Drayton, *Nature’s Government*, 17.
A century later, just as Dobbs was impressed with Christopher Middleton’s scientific acumen, Franklin believed Charles Swaine to be precisely one of Boyle’s “ingenious” seamen. Before the Argo departed in 1753, Franklin wrote to Jared Eliot, a Connecticut farmer who published a number of essays on agriculture and husbandry: “If you have any queries to make concerning that Country, its Productions, &c. or would have any particular observations made there; write them, and I will send them by our captain who is an ingenious and observing man.” Swaine’s credentials were his prior experience (on the California expedition), his literacy (having written a two-volume account), and his discerning eye – these made him, in the mind of his empiricist sponsor, a man of science.

**The Useful Myth: Admiral Fonte’s Northwestern Geography**

Benjamin Franklin’s interest in the sea dates back to his childhood in Boston. Among his maternal relatives were the Folgers, a prolific Nantucket whaling family. A number of Franklins – including Benjamin’s older half-brother, Josiah – followed suit by joining the whaling fleet or the Royal Navy. His keenness for maritime matters began on one of his first trans-Atlantic voyages, when he contemplated whether the longer travel times for an eastward journey “are not in some Degree owing to the Diurnial Motion of the Earth … [or] the more frequently westerly winds.” Indeed, Franklin’s examination of the Fonte account decades later in his letter to Pringle was the first time the term “Gulph Stream” was applied to this phenomenon. But he was also careful to note that this was the name as “called by

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114 From Benjamin Franklin to Jared Eliot, 19 December 1752, *PBF*, vol. 4, 389.
115 Chaplin, “Knowing the Ocean,” 81-2.
Seamen,” and later revealed his source on the matter: “Captain [Timothy] Folger a very intelligent mariner of the Island of Nantucket” – his own cousin.\textsuperscript{116}

Evidently, Franklin saw the same opportunity to gain a friend and informant in Captain Swaine. Before the \textit{Argo} set sail in the spring of 1753, Franklin dutifully compiled as many sources on the Northwest as possible to prepare Swaine for his mission.\textsuperscript{117} Deterred by ice in Hudson Bay, the 1753 voyage was a resounding failure; a second voyage the following spring made even less headway into the bay. The second attempt carried a mineralogist, but he and two other deckhands were killed by Inuit while ashore collecting samples.\textsuperscript{118} Nonetheless, ten years after the \textit{Argo}’s voyages, Franklin was able to reflect that while the search for Fonte’s passage “proved unsuccessful, … the Journals contain some valuable Information; and the Charts taken of the Coast, Harbours, and Islands of Labrador, for a considerable Extent, may be useful.”\textsuperscript{119} As the Pennsylvania Gazette announced on November 29, 1753:

\begin{quote}
Several of the principle Merchants and Gentlemen of this City, who, with other Merchants and Gentlemen of North America, subscribed to fitting out Captain Swaine, in the schooner \textit{Argo} on the discovery of a North-West Passage … expressed a general Satisfaction with Captain Swaine's Proceedings during the Voyage, tho' he could not accomplish his Purpose, and unanimously voted him a very handsome Present.\textsuperscript{120}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{116} From Benjamin Franklin to John Pringle, 27 May 1762, \textit{PBF}, vol. 10, 99; Chaplin, “Knowing the Ocean,” 86.
\textsuperscript{117} The fruits of this search can be seen in the thoroughness of Franklin’s citations in his letter to Pringle. In addition to the voyages of Middleton and Ellis, the letter referenced Francis Drake’s experiences, Vizcaino’s ill-fated mission up the California coast in 1602, and a number of histories written by French Jesuit priests.
\textsuperscript{118} Williams, \textit{Voyages of Delusion}, 212.
\textsuperscript{119} From Benjamin Franklin to John Pringle, 27 May 1762, \textit{PBF}, vol. 10, 99.
\textsuperscript{120} Quoted in Edwin Swift Batch, “Arctic Expeditions Sent from the American Colonies,” \textit{The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography} 31.4 (1907), 423.
The distance between Franklin’s and Dobbs’ understandings of a voyage’s “success” ably illustrates the range of interests motivating European exploration of the American Northwest. Dobbs used scientific aims as a pretense to advance his commercial ambitions, but both objectives were contingent on the discovery of a passage through the continent. Although Middleton advanced European knowledge about the tides and other maritime features of Hudson Bay, Dobbs found the voyage’s results utterly unsatisfactory. In contrast, Franklin adopted the Philadelphian merchants’ commercial venture as a chance to contribute to Enlightenment theories and overall scientific knowledge. In Dobbs’ terms, Swaine’s voyage was even less successful than Middleton’s, but Franklin was nevertheless satisfied with the “useful knowledge” it had gathered – in spite of the fact that Swaine’s observations did not concern the unknown Northwest directly.

Indeed, it appears as though Franklin considered Swaine more of a collaborator than an informant. For a time, the Philadelphian kept Swaine’s journals, “Charts,” and “a number of Letters and Papers” related to the rumored passage and their attempt at navigating it. The next known connection between the two is a letter of recommendation Franklin wrote for “Mr. Drage” in 1769, when this “honest man … [who] has lived very reputably in or near Philadelphia” was applying to be ordained as an Anglican minister in North Carolina despite having not completed divinity school.¹²¹ In 1771, Drage (as Swaine styled himself from the 1760s) wrote Franklin a long letter detailing his attempts to set up a missionary parish; three years later, having abandoned his parish dream, Drage died in South Carolina. Still, in his last

¹²¹ From Benjamin Franklin to Daniel Burton, 26 March 1769, PBF, vol. 16, 70-2.
letter to Franklin, he expressed his “pleasure and Honour … in your long acquaint-
ance and Friendship,” and conversations between the two surely helped arm Frank-
iln’s position as expressed to Pringle in 1762.122

The letter – which Pringle forwarded to his fellow Scotsman the Earl of Bute, serving as Prime Minister of Great Britain at the time – features Franklin at his most scientifically curious. As English appetites for travel and tourism abroad blossomed around the turn of the eighteenth century, a genre of fictional travel narratives emerged alongside legitimate accounts. In retrospect, Petiver’s fictitious Fonte letter fits into this genre as a subtler parody of European travel narratives than Gulliver’s Travels. In Franklin’s eyes, however, the Fonte letter contained “none of the Features of Fiction”:

Entertainment does not appear to be aim’d at in it, nor does it seem calculated to promote any Scheme of a new Voyage for Discovery…. ’Tis in short a mere dry Account of Facts, which, tho’ all possible and probable, are none of them won-
derful like the Incidents of a Novel.123

Franklin’s analysis is ironic, of course, because promoting further “schemes” is precisely the effect the letter had on many Euro-Americans, including Franklin himself. Yet his defense of the Fonte’s geography demonstrates how and why he believed this “mere dry Account of Facts” offered the unfiltered “useful knowledge” coveted by philosophers from Bacon to Boyle. The importance of Fonte’s account was thus not solely based on the specific features it described in northwestern North America, but also simply because it offered geographical information on the area in the first place in the first place.

122 To Benjamin Franklin from Theodorus Swaine Drage, 2 March 1771, PBF, vol. 18, 38-50.
123 From Benjamin Franklin to John Pringle, 27 May 1762, PBF, vol. 10, 89.
Fonte’s letter offered a rare first-hand European account of the unknown American expanse, the observations of which Franklin was eager to append to the growing body of geographical information he and other intellectuals were gathering. As he examined Fonte’s notes, they seemed to corroborate unanimously the European “body of systematic ideas.” “The Description of the Birds, Beasts, Trees, Wild Fruit and Berries,” he wrote in 1762, “are likewise all such as we know are proper to the Northern Parts of America.” Moreover, Fonte’s maritime geography was consistent with Franklin’s loose understanding of “the People of the N.E. Coast of North America, who live by Whale Fishing” – the Inuit – whose “singular kind of light Boats, made of Skins” adapted perfectly “to such Lakes and Passages, fishing in either Sea.”

To Franklin, the weight of empirical evidence in Fonte’s letter clearly appeared to affirm the work European intellectuals were carrying out in the eighteenth century. Fonte’s geography confirmed Georg Wilhelm Steller’s universal theory, which held that the eastern coasts of America and Eurasia corresponded in habitat while “the Western Coast of America … is as happy in respect to Climate and Vegetation as the Western Coast of Europe.” Steller, the German-born naturalist on Bering’s Second Kamchatka Expedition, “assures us from his own Observation that the Western Coast is a fine Country.”

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124 Ibid., 90.
125 Ibid., 92.
126 Ibid., 90.
127 Ibid., 92. For more on Steller, who famously (and bitterly) quipped that ten years of preparation for the Second Kamchatka Expedition had resulted in only ten hours of investigation in North America, see Glyn Williams, *Naturalists at Sea: Scientific Travellers from Dampier to Darwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), ch. 2.
Circumstance” by noting that “the Country grew sensibly worse as they came farther Eastward tho’ in nearly the same latitude.”

In addition to corroborating other Europeans’ experiences in the Northwest, Fonte’s account advanced the Enlightenment quest for universal geographical knowledge by submitting new evidence to support scientific theories. The letter contained a morsel of maritime information so improbable, Franklin deemed, “no Writer of a feign’d Voyage … would of choice invent and insert a Circumstance so objectionable.” The observation in question, that the levels of the two oceans differed by as much as 32 feet, offered a chance for Franklin to mobilize his sizeable knowledge of the seas. Franklin turned to the “Gulph Stream” to explain “such an Improbability,” and extrapolated based on empirical evidence. He referenced the northwesterly winds mentioned by “Middleton, Ellis, and others” and “all Accounts of Voyages in those N. Western Seas … [that] the Northwest Wind is there a kind of Trade Wind, and blows violently.” Based on his own hypothesis, Franklin judged universally that “if Winds may produce a Difference of Level in the same Ocean, they certainly may in different Oceans, where the free Communication is obstructed by a Continent or by Islands.”

After the firestorm of the early 1750s, the Fonte controversy died down during the Seven Years’ War. Then, in 1768, a treatise entitled The Great Probability of a Northwest Passage: Deduced from Observations on the Letter of Admiral De Fonte was published in London “with three explanatory Maps,” bearing only the name

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128 From Benjamin Franklin to John Pringle, 27 May 1762, PBF, vol. 10, 92.
129 Ibid., 94.
“Thomas Jefferys, Geographer to the King” [figs. 12–13]. Swaine’s multiple identities lend more questions than answers to the provenance of the text, but Swaine is believed to be the author: one copy survives with a covering letter, signed “Theodorus Swaine Drage,” and an appendix including some of his journals from the first Argo voyage.

Following Dobbs’ lead, Swaine explicitly connected the Northwest Passage with national mercantile interests in Great Probability: as the title page announced, “The Whole Intended for The Advancement of Trade and Commerce.” Franklin’s letter to Pringle explained the usefulness of Fonte’s geography to European intellectuals; Swaine did the same for those with commercial or political interests in mind. Although the Fonte account was clearly believed to be a myth by many prominent figures in the mid-eighteenth century, both Franklin and Swaine promoted its contributions to the European quest for universal knowledge of the world – as “useful” probability.

“Probability,” Locke wrote in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, exists “to supply our want of knowledge.” Assent to probability, he continued, is based on its conformity with extant knowledge and the testimony of others “vouching their observation and experience.” Important in such matters were “traditional testimonies” – Indigenous reports and apocryphal travel narratives both fell under this

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130 Theodorus Swaine Drage, The Great Probability of a Northwest Passage: Deduced from Observations on the Letter of Admiral De Fonte (London: T. Jefferys, 1768). Thomas Jefferys, another ardent supporter of the Northwest Passage, was a renowned amateur mapmaker who rose to prominence after his maps of England and North America.

131 Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 214.

132 John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (London: T. Tegg and Son, 1836), 500. Even if Franklin was ignorant of many foundational texts of European thought published in Latin and other languages, he (like almost every other writer in the eighteenth century) was well acquainted with the work of the man he called “the great Mr. Locke.” See Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania, [October 1749], FO.
Figure 12.
The title page to Charles Swaine’s (aka Theodorus Drage) book defending the authenticity of the Fonte account. Like Dobbs, Swaine used the Fonte account to advance his commercial goals, but he also agreed with Franklin that the scientific observations propounded by the Fonte letter aligned with European knowledge of that part of the world. The book includes many pieces of evidence gathered by Dobbs and Franklin in their campaigns.

Figure 13.
Didier Robert de Vaugondy’s re-edition of Thomas Jeffery’s original 1768 map that accompanied Great Probability. It coheres the Northwestern geography depicted by Müller in his 1758 map with the descriptions of inland waterways found in the Fonte letter. Jefferys, a renowned supporter of the Northwest Passage myth, published Great Probability under his own name.
category, and Locke was careful to note: “in traditional truths, each remove [from the original account] weakens the force of the proof.”\footnote{Locke, \textit{Essay Concerning Human Understanding}, 502, 507.} His formulation of knowledge left room for the power of myths like the Northwest Passage and other conjectural geographies of the Northwest: “These Probabilities rise so near to Certainty, that they govern our thoughts as absolutely, and influence all our actions as fully, as the most evident demonstration; and in what concerns us we make little or no difference between them and certain knowledge.”\footnote{Ibid., 506.}

Supplementing their appeals to Enlightenment rhetoric and imperial rivalries, a different side of Franklin and Swaine’s argument indicates the more mystical element inherent in approaching the Northwest before contact. To verify the existence of Captain Shapley, the navigator whom Fonte allegedly met on the Rio Los Reyes in 1640, Franklin solicited the help of the pastor Thomas Prince, “a great Antiquarian of that Country [New England]” and another leading American proponent of the “new science.”\footnote{Thomas Prince, “Extraordinary Events the Doings of God, and marvellous in pious Eyes,” \textit{The News Media and the Making of America, 1730-1865} (1745), http://americanantiquarian.org/earlyamericannewsmedia/items/show/129.} After some investigative work in South Boston, Prince ultimately “gave Credit to the Voyage in general.” Among the traditional testimonies Franklin found credible was one from “a Deacon Marshal, then above 90 Years of Age,” whom Prince interviewed in Boston. As the nonagenarian told Prince, “when he was a Boy, there was Much Talk among the Boys of a Capt. Shapley, and of his great Learning, he having, as they exprest it, learnt as far as the Black Art.”\footnote{From Benjamin Franklin to John Pringle, 27 May 1762, \textit{PBF}, vol. 10, 96.} Swaine added that Shapley “was famous as a Navigator, for his knowledge in the Mathematicks and
other Branches of Science, [and] the common People supposed he dealt in the Magic Arts, and had the Name given him of Old Nick.”

Ultimately, a sleight of hand on the part of an anonymous proponent of British free trade kept the Fonte myth alive decades after it was exposed as fraudulent. Franklin and Swaine both believed that Spanish officials had recognized the potency of Fonte’s mythical Northwest, and thus were “interested to keep the most material Part [the proof] a Secret, in hopes to turn it to Advantage.” As Franklin wrote in 1762, “That the Spaniards should now deny the Reality of this Voyage, is natural enough, jealous as they are of the maritime Power of their Neighbours, and apprehensive for their extensive Settlements on the Coasts of the South Sea. They deny it however but faintly.” Six years later, Swaine assented:

Their continued Silence with respect to such Passage, implies they are acquainted with there being such a Passage, though not to an Exactness. It cannot imply they are dubious, when we consider the Number of Circumstances there are already mentioned, which express the contrary.

In fact, a three-volume history of California, Noticia de la California, had been published in Spain in 1757, advancing clear evidence that the letter was a fiction and the voyage, like the admiral, had never existed. Its author, the Jesuit priest Andrés Marcos Burriel, had extensive access to Spanish archival sources and devoted nearly 150 pages of Appendix VII to debunking the Fonte myth. In addition to the

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137 Drage, Great Probability, 65.
138 Ibid., 21.
139 From Benjamin Franklin to John Pringle, 27 May 1762, PBF, vol. 10, 90.
140 Drage, Great Probability, 108.
141 Published under the name of Padre Miguel Venegas, the work was actually another Jesuit priest’s revised and expanded version of Venegas’ 1739 manuscript, Empresses apostólicas. Andrés Marcos Burriel, an important figure in the Spanish Enlightenment, downplayed the role of the supernatural in his new edition and aligned Venegas’ account with Enlightenment natural history and geographical texts. Bryan Green, “‘Apostles and men of learning’: Miguel Venegas, Andrés Marcos Burriel, and the Jesuit Vocation for Natural History,” Journal of Jesuit Studies 4 (2017): 28-55.
qualms raised by French mapmakers earlier in the decade, Burriel combed through the letter’s contents and pointed to a number of inaccuracies that Franklin and other proponents of the Northwest Passage either overlooked or attributed to faulty translation. Moreover, Burriel found not one reference to the Admiral or the 1640 voyage in Spanish archives on either side of the Atlantic. As far as Spanish speakers were concerned, Burriel ended finally the Fonte controversy.

However, when Burriel’s Noticia was translated and published in London as A Natural and Civil History of California in 1759, Appendix VII was conspicuously omitted – the same was true in the French and Dutch translations, both based on the English edition. The anonymous editor assured his misguided readers that “the ablest judges” deemed the existence of the Northwest Passage to be “very probable.” Pointing to the translation’s preface, scholars have argued that this was a politically calculated move. The British editor noted, “every discovery of this kind must affect our navigation and commerce” – as Dobbs recognized a decade earlier, keeping the Fonte myth alive would accomplish exactly that. Despite the failures of Middleton, Swaine, and countless other navigators seeking a passage to the South Sea through Hudson Bay, the powerful symbolic meanings surrounding the American Northwest continued to motivate efforts to reconnoiter the region. In his own efforts in Philadelphia and a number of European cities, Franklin believed the testimonies of Fonte, Swaine, and numerous other travelers offered him and other Enlightenment intellec-

142 Among these: the author’s habit of measuring time by the reigns of English kings; the seemingly superhuman speeds and unprecedented ease with which Fonte and his captains navigated up the coast, which especially contrasted with the “violent Trade Wind” that Franklin observed in the accounts of Spanish navigators and others; and Fonte’s comfort in disobeying official orders and treating the Bostonians with great generosity.
143 Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 263-66.
144 Ibid., 266-67.
tals immediate first-hand knowledge of the region. Though Fonte’s “mere dry Accoun
t of Facts” was in reality anything but truthful, the imaginary terrain and chan-
nels contained in his putative observations proved exceptionally useful to Europeans
in their efforts to subject the unknown Northwest to political designs and scientific
theories. For these reasons, myths had practical value to those considering the geo-
raphy of the Northwest before the late eighteenth century, and speculation founded on
mythical accounts programmed European seaborne attempts to reach and reconnoiter
the region.
“No Part of the Globe hath more engaged the Attention of the Geographers, and with respect to which they had more different opinions,” Swaine wrote of the American Northwest in *Great Probability*.\(^\text{145}\) Repelled by a recalcitrant ice floe, his search for the Northwest had failed in navigational terms. As Swaine’s book and Franklin’s letter demonstrate, for eighteenth-century British Americans, appraising the geography of the Northwest was largely an epistemic task – a matter of investigating and substantiating secondary sources. Their acceptance of the Fonte myth was a quintessentially Lockeian “assent to a proposition” – albeit one colored by their commercial, political, and intellectual aspirations. As Swaine recognized, interpreting the testimony of others was a troublesome enterprise: “These accounts were given by Foreigners; we could not receive them from any other, as we did not frequent those Seas, and at present have no ready access to them…”\(^\text{146}\)

Eighteenth-century French and Spanish encounters with the mythical Northwest differed fundamentally from British and Russian experiences. Russian eastward approaches and British voyages into Hudson Bay – both searching for access to the Northwest – took place almost entirely at sea. Before the mid-eighteenth century, British America was largely a peripheral coastal entity, treated with benign or salutary neglect on the mother country’s part. Moreover, because British imperial visions highlighted the cultivation of land and did not pursue fur trade contacts with


\(^{146}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{147}\) Stuart Banner, *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier* (Cambridge,
the ardor that the French in North America did, British Americans generally viewed Native Americans as obstacles to expansion.\textsuperscript{147} Accordingly, information from Native American sources did not factor heavily into their efforts. Instead, the Northwest sought by Russian and British navigators was mostly a product of conjectures and distorted information from European and Asian accounts.

In contrast, overland efforts to learn about and reach the American Northwest took place almost entirely in Indigenous North America, beyond European pales and known communication routes. This search was carried out on Native American terms, both geographical and sociopolitical. In addition to navigating Indigenous cultural norms, French and Spanish in the Northwest were forced to interpret Indigenous forms of geographical knowledge. Neither of these tasks was easy to accomplish. European travel was contingent on Indigenous cooperation and inter-tribal relations, and misunderstandings of Native American geography contributed greatly to the persistence of myths in Spanish and French visions of the Northwest.

The French approach consisted of \textit{voyageurs} pushing westward from the Great Lakes region, ostensibly pursuing fur trade contacts and expanding French dominion, but also seeking geographical information about mythical places in the interior and on the coast. Like Bering’s islands in the north Pacific, the mythical geography pursued by French Americans originally derived from European imaginations. But much as reports of Aztlan had combined with the legend of Antillia to stoke Spanish imaginations, Indigenous accounts of faraway places fused with European conjectures, giving new life to myths and motivating further French travel.

As they had in the sixteenth century, Spanish efforts consisted of expeditions to the north launched from New Spain, but Spanish Americans probing the Northwest in the eighteenth century were mostly Jesuit priests seeking new groups of Native Americans to convert to Christianity. These evangelical missions took on an added political dimension when California and the lands to the north became a prized object in the contest for empire after the Seven Years’ War. Spanish priests thereafter sought geographical information about the Northwest as well as souls to save.

Much as Franklin believed he had parsed “useful” fact from fiction in Fonte’s account, Euro-Americans in the North American interior received “useful knowledge” from Indigenous sources. However, these exchanges often took place through forms that were often incompatible with traditional European modes of thinking. An examination of the documentary record of the overland search for the American Northwest demonstrates that information often relegated to “myth” status – such as the existence of white people, bodies of water, and lands of inestimable wealth – was eminently useful to both Natives and Euro-Americans. In their efforts to ascertain the geography of the Northwest, Franklin and Swaine dealt only with secondary sources. However, those who did reach the mythical frontier of colonial America – what G. Malcolm Lewis has termed *terra semicognita* – soon realized it was subject to entirely different (Indigenous) forms of knowledge and power.

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148 Indigenous ideas often allowed for greater fluidity between familiar geography (such as homelands) and mythical places (such as worlds inhabited by deities) than European geographical conceptions outwardly did. See G. Malcolm Lewis, “Native North Americans’ Cosmological Ideas and Geographical Awareness: Their Representation and Influence on Early European Exploration and Geographical Knowledge,” in *A New World Disclosed*, 71-125.

French Encounters with the Mythical Northwest

Like the Strait of Anian and other forms of the Northwest Passage, the two most prominent geographical features informing French visions of the Northwest were navigable waterways: the *Rivière Longue* ("Long River," which in some accounts either emptied to the west or was connected to a westward-flowing river), and the *Mer de l'Ouest* (an inland "Sea of the West"). Both date back to the turn of the eighteenth century. The Sea of the West was a European fiction first propagated by French mapmaker Guilliame Delisle in 1703 [fig. 14].\(^{150}\) On the other hand, the River of the West, as it was sometimes called, originated in two stories of travels deep into the northwestern interior of North America: first, the testimony of Māthieu Sagean, an illiterate soldier, as related to a French official in 1701; and second, *New Voyages to North America*, a travel account published by Baron Lahontan in 1703.

Sagean’s tale recounted his travels up the Mississippi with eleven French and two Mahican companions, ultimately reaching “the river, called Milly in the language of the country; it signifies gold river, or river from the north-west.”\(^{151}\) The group encountered the Acaanibas people, who lived opulently under “a king who calls himself a descendant of Montezuma.” In this version of Northwest, most everyday objects were from gold; their mines in the mountains – which Sagean never saw himself but said “could not be far from the town” – supposedly leaked with gold during floods. These lands of plenty, “where verdure reigns the whole year, … and the woods and plains are the most beautiful that can be seen,” allowed the Acaanibas

\(^{150}\) Pedley, *Bel et Utile*; or Wagner, *Cartography of Northwest*.

\(^{151}\) General Department, “Matthew Sagean and His Adventures,” *The Historical Magazine* 10.3 (1866), 69.
to carry out “a great trade in gold” with an unknown nation a “six moons’ journey from their country.” To their identity, Sagean could only hazard a guess: Japanese.152

After French officials were sent to Louisiana to interrogate Sagean, his story was exposed as a fiction.153 Yet the geography of his short-lived myth resonated with Euro-Americans on a number of levels. For one, his account connected with established Spanish traditions that the riches of El Dorado lay to the northwest. For another, the name “Acaanibas” echoes both “Conibaz,” a mythical lake rumored since

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the sixteenth century to exist in the North American interior, and “cannibals,” a myth often associated with the “savage” inhabitants of the Americas. Finally, the precise coordinates of his tale linked the riches of ancient Mexico to the potential wealth of Asia expressly in French territory. By highlighting the Acaanibas’ trade with northern nations, Sagean beckoned to the farthest Northwest through the gold-paved passage that supposedly lay in French domain.

In the late seventeenth century, Louis Armand de Lom d’Arce, baron de Lahontan, had familiar goals in mind as he set out west from modern-day Wisconsin. A French soldier who could speak the Algonkian language, Lahontan had commanded an attack on the Iroquois before heading west. Yet as he assured an “Outagami” (Fox, or Meskwaki) chief, he intended neither to ingratiate himself with “his enemies, the Sioux,” nor to engage in the fur trade; instead, he wrote, “I had some discovery in view,” which the Native chief was “extremely glad” to hear.¹⁵⁴ Lahontan’s chronicle is both more intriguing and more controversial than Sagean’s tale because it obscures myth and reality in a way that Sagean – or even Petiver in his fictional narrative of Fonte’s travels – could not have. Lahontan explicitly claimed to have ventured past the furthest limits of French experience and knowledge, which gave him creative license to invent geography that later travelers would have to navigate and gauge for themselves. Beyond the French pale, in terra incognita, the Northwest began to be populated by hitherto unheard-of peoples, who often resembled Asians as much as Americans. From his Indigenous guides and their captured slaves, Lahontan learned of the “Mozeemlek” people, enemies of the other

downstream nations, who were purported to live beyond a great mountain range on a saltwater lake that drained into a westward-flowing river. “Tahuglauk,” he wrote of another Northwestern tribe he learned about, “wear their Beards two Fingers breadth long … they cover their Head with a sharp-cap … their women never shew themselves.” These features, especially the predominance of men, were hallmarks of Indigenous accounts of European travelers. It is possible that Lahontan misinterpreted his informants and was actually hearing of Native encounters with the early Spanish northward *entrada*.

However, as Lahontan was careful to note, he had not reached these lands or encountered these people personally. He appended his narrative with a map tracing his journey into the Northwest, but clearly delineated with a fleur-de-lis the epistemological boundary between information to which he could attest and knowledge gained from the “Gniceatares,” who he claimed sketched the western half of his map [fig. 15]. Lahontan’s tale reveals some of the pitfalls inherent in obtaining geographical information from Native North Americans. Lahontan and other Euro-Americans often found it difficult to discern a clear sense of direction when questioning Native Americans about rivers and other geographical features. Similarly, as later encounters will illustrate, confusion over different bodies of water is characteristic of intercultural exchanges of geographical knowledge. As Lahontan reported, the salinity of water was often the only indicator for distinguishing different types of bodies of water.157

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Ultimately, the authenticity of Lahontan’s journey remains controversial, but it is widely considered to be fictitious. Scholars have been able to verify some of his information about the Northern Plains, such as connecting his “Eokoros” to the Arikara tribe; based on his account of the Long River, some claim that he was the first European to ascend the Missouri River.\textsuperscript{158} However, his account of the furthest northwestern reaches of North America, detailing the Gnicsatares, Essenapes, and Mozeemleks and their lands, is more dubious. Nonetheless, Lahontan’s narrative informed European conceptions of the North American interior and influenced the search for the Northwest’s true geography well into the eighteenth century. In his 1741 reflection on Russian navigation to North America, Captain Chirikov mentioned “the mouth of the Moozemleck River” as one of the “parts of America that are well known.”\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{158} Mapp, \textit{The Elusive West}, 197.
\textsuperscript{159} Golder, \textit{Bering’s Voyages}, 314.
Lahontan returned to Europe several years later, where he wrote and published *New Voyages*. Whereas Lahontan’s stay in Indigenous North America was only fleeting, many French Americans lived more permanently in “Indian country.” These enduring contacts were generally related to the fur trade, an integral part of intertribal relations that predated European arrival. Those who lingered in the backcountry – known as *coreurs des bois* or, later, *voyageurs* – took the time to learn Native languages, understand their cultures, and in the process adopted many of their practices. Unsurprisingly, the French found greater success than other Europeans acquiring not only furs and profits but also geographical information from their Indigenous counterparts.\(^1\)

One of the most famous early *voyageurs* was Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vérendrye, a linchpin in the fur and slave exchange between French and Native Americans in the Great Lakes region. But like Lahontan, his ambitions for discovery transcended commerce or conquest. For decades, La Vérendrye and his sons had been accruing knowledge about various waterways and other geographical features of the Northern Plains region. To receive “immediate” knowledge from first-hand accounts of the western reaches of North America, La Vérendrye turned to Indigenous sources. But rather than differentiate between European (known) and Indigenous (rumored) geography, La Vérendrye cohered the two into eminently “useful” charts for French fur trappers and officials. In 1729, a Cree named Auchagah sketched a map for him showing what the French trader interpreted to be the route to

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the Sea of the West [fig. 16]. Where Lahontan drew a fleur-de-lis to demarcate where his testimony ended, the margins of La Vérendrye’s maps contained pictograms of animals alongside European signatures. His maps display many telltale signs of Native American geography: curved lines instead of squiggles to signify rivers, interconnected circles to signify portages, and, perhaps most important, no grid by which to frame spatially the features being represented.

In addition to his knowledge of inland river systems, La Vérendrye believed that the Sea of the West existed, and that the “Mantannes,” rumored to be a group of white people living on the River of the West, were the key to its discovery. Thus in 1738, he set out as “lieutenant of a company of the detachment of marine in Canada, commissioned by his orders for the discovery of the sea of the west.”

The only extant primary source on this venture is a “Journal, in letter form, sent to M. the Marquis de Beauharnois … Governor and Lieutenant General of the whole of New France” in 1738. Lahontan’s tale was similarly presented in the form of letters, but where the French soldier had a wider European audience in mind, La Vérendrye’s account was addressed to a very specific and politically interested reader. Accordingly, he used the second person throughout: speaking to Beauharnois, La Vérendrye detailed how he carried out “your orders,” told the Natives of “your kindness,” and through traditional Native American ceremonies received them “into

163 A group of “52 persons – 20 engagés, all good men, La Marque, his brother, my two sons, a servant and a slave; the rest were Indians.” Hubert G. Smith, The Explorations of the La Vérendryes in the Northern Plains, 1738-73 (Omaha, Neb.: Nebraska University Press, 1980), 48.
164 Ibid., 43.
the number of your children.” Although the letter is written in a copyist’s hand, it is believed that La Vérendrye at least consulted his field notes as he dictated.\footnote{Ibid., 68.}

La Vérendrye’s official orders were to find the Sea of the West, but first, as he told a Cree war chief before departing, “during the fall I wished to visit the nation of white men of whom so much had been hear.” These reports resonated with long-standing stories of white settlers who had populated the Americas in the centuries before Columbus. According to one European legend, a Welsh prince named Madoc had sailed west from Wales in 1170 and landed in America, where his legacy could be seen in light-skinned, blond-haired, Welsh-speaking Natives.\footnote{Elizabeth A. Fenn, Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014), 184-85.} The myth of Welsh Americans continually moved westward as Europeans probed the interior; by Lahontan and La Vérendrye’s time, reports of white Tahuglauk and Mantanne peoples may have recalled these stories that predate contact in the Americas.
Regardless, La Vérendrye informed the Cree chief, “Another year I would go in a different direction.”

The expedition began auspiciously. “Every day the Indians talked to us about the white men we were about to see – French like ourselves – who said they were descended from us,” La Vérendrye recalled. “Everything we had heard gave hope of making a notable discovery.” However, after passing through Cree and Assiniboine territory, the Frenchmen were disappointed to find that “Mantannes” they encountered, who are now recognized to be the Mandan people, did not live up to their hopes of finding Europeans hidden in the North American interior. “I admit that I was surprised,” La Vérendrye wrote, “having expected to see a people different from other Indians, especially in view of the account we had been given.” He continued:

They are not at all different from the Assiniboines; they go naked, covered only with a buffalo robe carelessly worn without a breechcloth. I knew by this time that we would have to discount everything we had been told about them.

La Vérendrye’s realization is revealing insofar as the advice imparted to him by his Cree and Assiniboine guides had been up to this point completely accurate. They had warned him that the water levels of the Assiniboine River were dangerously low; that the tribes to the west did not know how to trap beaver, instead clothing themselves in buffalo hides; and that the Mandans “were not supplied with fat,” which was a necessity for wintering beyond French supply lines – all of this geographical information was accurate and factored as “useful knowledge” to the French.

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167 Smith, Explorations of the La Vérendryes, 44.
168 Ibid., 50.
169 Ibid., 51.
170 Ibid., 51.
expedition.\textsuperscript{171} However, La Vérendrye recognized that the Mandan villages were beyond the extent of both European and his Indigenous informants’ knowledge. He and his men were now truly in the frontier between mythical and accepted geography.

Still intent on “making a notable discovery,” after being received warmly by the Mandans, La Vérendrye began to probe the furthest extent of their knowledge of the places around their homeland, known to them as “the Heart of the World.”\textsuperscript{172} He sent his son with a number of Frenchmen and Mandans to a nearby Native settlement “to inform themselves as best they could concerning the direction of the river on which this people lived and whether they had knowledge of the lower part.”\textsuperscript{173} Their geographical inquiries concerned “whether there were many people along the river, descending, and what tribes, and whether they had any knowledge of more distant places.”\textsuperscript{174}

His exchanges with the Mandans display many of the hallmarks of obtaining information about the Northwest from Native Americans. “The lower part of the river,” La Vérendrye was told, “is so wide that from one side one cannot see land on the other and the water is unfit to drink.”\textsuperscript{175} Here it was important to distinguish that the water was undrinkable not due to its salinity but because it was “brackish.” These reports seemed to indicate that this body of water was not the vaunted Sea of the West, but further details resonated with the accounts he had heard earlier in the pays d’en haut. The Mandans informed him:

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 44, 49-50.
\textsuperscript{172} Fenn, Encounters at the Heart of the World, xiv.
\textsuperscript{173} Smith, Explorations of the La Vérendryes, 58.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 58.
All these regions are inhabited by white men like ourselves, who work iron. These white men travel only on horseback, both for hunting and for war. They cannot be killed with arrow or musket, because they are covered with iron…. Women are never seen in their fields. Their forts and houses are of stone.  

La Vérendrye was careful to note that the “word iron among all the tribes of this region means all kinds of metals,” making it impossible to distinguish gold from ore in their reports. These accounts allowed the Northwest to remain peripatetic even as Euro-Americans encountered first-hand knowledge of the region. As Euro-Americans neared these white people and wealthy lands, the location of these mythical features of Northwestern geography continued to move farther away from where they were purported to exist. And, as Euro-Americans soon realized in their dealings with Native informants, these myths were not always relocating in the desired direction. In his efforts to learn about the farthest Northwest, La Vérendrye soon found himself better informed about the southwestern regions.

Besides working to interpret his Indigenous sources in the Heart of the World, La Vérendrye also had to navigate the politics of this unknown world. When he inquired “if it took very long to reach the white men,” the Mandans told him it would take “a whole summer to make the journey, even if only the men made the trip.” But more important were the Panana and Panani tribes occupying the intermediate land, who “had some horses like the whites.”

176 Ibid., 57-58.
177 Smith, Explorations of the La Vérendryes, 57.
178 Lahontan recognized this fact by highlighting the negotiating power of the calumet (ceremonial peace pipe), but also recognizing that at a certain point when he crossed into the furthest Northwest, “the calumet has no power here.” Lahontan, New Voyages, 75-76.
179 Smith, Explorations of the La Vérendryes, 58.
180 Ibid., 58.
with the Panana,” La Vérendrye reported, “they would not dare go very far, the trails being closed to them.”\(^{181}\)

La Vérendrye and his sons were well acquainted with Native American ceremonies and rituals, but even they were frustrated that their quest for geographical discovery was forced to progress at the pace of their Indigenous guides. “Of necessity we had to be patient,” he wrote when their first Assiniboine guide took them 22 leagues off course to find a neighboring village: “Nothing that I could say to the guide to make him hasten was of the slightest use.”\(^{182}\) At the risk of appearing impolite, the group was forced to remain in a number of Native villages “to afford [them] the pleasure of seeing and feasting us.” In these moments, La Vérendrye exchanged gifts and pleasantries with his Native hosts, informing them: “this day the French were established in their country and would provide them with all necessities.”\(^{183}\) These ceremonies, which centered on “placing their hands on my head, taking me in your place as their father and our Frenchmen as brothers,” generally went smoothly. The Natives responded with “great displays of gratitude,” “profuse tears,” and “promises to do wonders.”\(^{184}\)

Yet a number of problems arose in the second Mandan village they visited. First, La Vérendrye recalled, “our interpreter, whom I had paid well to ensure keeping him, had run away … following an Assiniboine woman he had become enamored of

\(^{181}\) Ibid., 58. Although no tribes by those names are known, the Panani are hypothesized to be Pawnee, while other scholars posit that reports of the Panaux (or Panana) may have been referring to the Arikara. Ibid., 158.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 49.

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 46-48.
but who would not consent to stay with him.”\(^{185}\) This development was a fatal blow to his efforts to learn about the Northwest from the Mandans: “I was much hampered all day … to crown our misfortune, we were reduced to making ourselves understood by means of signs and gestures.” His son the Chavelier elaborated:

> The Indians often interrupted the conversation; not being able to understand the questions asked, they answered about other things because they did not comprehend. … We saw that it was useless to attempt to question the Mandans further, since they could not understand us.\(^{186}\)

Even worse was the robbery of “the bag of goods containing all my presents,” which was vital to the expedition’s progress.\(^{187}\) Without these gifts, the French had no way of formally ingratiating themselves with the unfamiliar Native groups they would encounter: unequivocally, “this made it impossible to continue farther.” A despondent La Vérendrye called a council with the most experienced members of the expedition. They agreed that “the season was too unpleasant to undertake anything more,” and the Mandans informed them there was “good reason to fear that the trails would become impassable in the spring because of high water.” “Above all,” La Vérendrye acknowledged, “there was no interpreter, nor any hope of obtaining one during the winter.”\(^{188}\)

When his son returned from his fact-gathering mission, he described similar difficulties expressing himself and interpreting the Mandans. The detachment had heard numerous reports of prodigious quantities of corn, but beyond that, “all they could understand was that there are men like ourselves on the lower part of the river

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 57.
\(^{186}\) Ibid., 60-61.
\(^{187}\) Ibid., 60-61.
\(^{188}\) Ibid., 54.
who make woolen stuffs and linen. They are very numerous and carry on wars with a
great number of Indians.” The Chevalier had managed to gather that the lower part of
the river “probably runs to the sea southwest by west,” which aligned with his
observations with a compass of the river in the Heart of the World.189

The French finally “decided that we must go, leaving behind only two men
capable of learning the language of the Mantannes quickly.”190 The two men who
stayed in the Mandan villages witnessed a massive bazaar he next summer, attended
by many Plains tribes, but they made little progress in their efforts to learn about and
find mythical peoples and geographical features in the interior. For his part, La
Vérendrye never returned to these regions in the extreme west. My theory is that he
started to realize that Mandan reports of bodies of water and white people were
pointing him to Mexico rather than the Northwest (that is, the river of the white
people was the Colorado, draining to the south, rather than the unknown River of the
West). Paul Mapp hypothesizes that the French may have conflated accounts of
Spaniards and Utes into one.191 In any case, while French voyageurs continued to
pursue fur trade contacts in the North American interior, no further efforts were made
to reach the mythical northwestern settlement of white people, and the Sea of the
West receded from popular imaginations of the region.

**Spanish Encounters with the Mythical Northwest**

For Spanish officials and colonists, the second half of the eighteenth century
witnessed a renaissance of interest in the Northwest and its potential geography. For

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189 Ibid., 61.
190 Ibid., 61.
191 Mapp, *The Elusive West*, 220.
centuries, the region remained unproblematic to the crown as *terra incognita*. The secrecy surrounding the Northwest armed Franklin and Swaine’s misconceptions of both the Northwest’s geography and Spain’s ambitions in the area. However, Burriel’s *Noticia de la California* was actually at the head of a wave of renewed interest in the regions north of familiar Mexico. Alarmed by Russian activity in the north, officials in New Spain ordered a fort and naval base to be founded at San Blas in Alta California in 1768. The establishment also reflected Spanish fears that, as the Viceroy of New Spain Carlos Francisco de Croix wrote that year, “England, owner now, as a result of the late war, of Canada and a great part of Louisiana, will spare no expense, diligence or effort to advance discoveries of the French towards … the west coast of this continent.”

Resurgent concerns about the future of the regions north of New Spain led officials to send out a number of expeditions from Mexico in the second half of the eighteenth century. Before the 1770s, northwestern New Spain was largely a Jesuit front where the missionaries had relatively free reign. But by the mid-eighteenth century, as a result of efforts to convert Natives in the neighboring regions, Spanish Jesuits were well acquainted with the lands directly north of Mexico. The California island debate had finally been put to rest by the reconnaissance of Padre Eusebio Francisco Kino, who traveled extensively on the peninsula and the surrounding regions around the turn of the eighteenth century [fig. 17]. Still, while Kino had

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193 Ibid., 6-8. This was a part of the conservative turn in the seventeenth century that infused paranoia into defensive policy. The upshot of this change in ideology can be seen in Spain’s silence on their own exploratory efforts, for fear that other nations use their information for imperial gain (and Spanish loss). This meant that as late as the 1960s some Spanish elementary textbooks still attributed European arrival in the Northwest to James Cook. Ibid., 434.
picked up some information on the vast lands and many peoples beyond New Spain during his travels, geographical details about the extreme Northwest remained uncertain. In a letter written to the viceroy in 1703, Kino eyed expanding the Spanish frontier “along the northern coast on to regions known as the Gran Quiviria and the Gran Teguayo, as far as Cape Mendocino and the land of Yeso, and following the northwestern and western coastline even as far as the territory close to Japan.”  

So when the Bohemian Jesuit Wenceslaus Linck, who had arrived in New Spain in 1756 to continue his ecclesiastical studies, set out on a northern expedition in 1767, he followed in the footsteps of his evangelical forebears. Eyeing the future, Linck outlined three primary reasons California was important to Spain. The first two concerned the Manila galleon: the need for harbors further north along the coast to “put ashore its wretched scurvy-victims … without this relief few would reach

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Acapulco in normal health,” and the importance of protecting against enemy ships hiding along the coast to ambush the returning galleons, as Drake and Cavendish had famously done in the late sixteenth century. The third reason revealed the Bohemian’s foresight: “The peninsula is important because of the nearby regions which are now so highly praised but may well be the source of concern later on.” Linck, of course, was referring to the northwestern terra incognita. Although Britain’s long-standing claim to a transcontinental American empire – based on Drake’s Elizabethan stake to the Pacific coast as Nova Albion – was tenuous at best, their victory in Seven Years’ War and the recent Russian incursions to the north heightened Spanish worries of a clear and present danger in the area from their imperial foes.

In this atmosphere, Linck’s mission had political connotations by carrying out imperial reconnaissance as well as evangelical outreach. For this reason, a crucial component of his expedition was learning as much as possible about those “nearby regions” and their populations from the indigenous inhabitants of California. In this endeavor Linck was forced to deal with Natives on their terms. His encounters with Native Americans in California feature many of the same hallmarks of an intercultural exchange of ideas seen in French experiences in the north. However, unlike La Vérendrye and the French fur traders, Linck’s vocation was priestly, and his language made clear that he championed a Spanish vision for the future that did not make room for Native American traditions as the French had. “The missionaries long to advance into the heart of the country in order to better look after the eternal

196 Ibid., 62.
Linck carefully differentiated between converted and pagan Natives. While he spoke highly of the former, who “were always the first among the Indians to help us,” he denigrated the latter for their mystical traditions, which included a “deceitful trickster of the settlement, commonly called a sorcerer” or “their wizards.” These healers initially caused “some concern” among the Christians, but as Linck claimed:

They insist that they never thought that, by devoting themselves to their healing arts, they were doing anything wrong; and they assure us that they would, of course, discontinue them. They have brought us their instruments, idols, garments, and paintings, all of which we burned publicly.

Linck’s religiosity colored his view of Indigenous Californians. When another tribe brought their “idols” to be burned, Linck observed, “these are not exactly works of art, nor altogether rude and primitive.” Linck used the term uno de razón (“one of reason”) to describe a European taken prisoner by one tribe: although the haggard man appeared to be Native American, Linck made sure to distinguish the man’s perceived mental acuity from the crudeness of his captors. His patronizing view of Native Americans was reinforced by their astonishment at the sight of white men riding large beasts: “The very sight of us caused the Indians no little amazement; and on beholding our horses they were seized with fright, for they had never seen any either here or in all the Colorado country traversed by them.”

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197 Ibid., 50.
198 Ibid., 49.
199 Ibid., 49.
200 Regardless, “These objects were consigned to the flames. It is not clear what idols they venerate, nor what honor they pay to them.” Ibid., 50.
However, Linck also recognized that he had to navigate the customs of the indigenous inhabitants of California if he wished to succeed in his quest to learn about the Northwest and its people. When “numerous wild Indians” attempted to block the expedition’s advance, Linck “dispatched in company of the soldiers and the two Germans a native who spoke the language of these Indians. Our men regaled them with necklaces of glass beads, mirrors, and other gifts.”202 Like La Vérendrye, Linck repeated this act of “regaling” regularly, sometimes “in the hope of obtaining food from them,” sometimes “so that they would accompany us.”203 This was no political ceremony of adoption like the French carried out in Mandan country, but nonetheless was necessary for Linck to ingratiate himself with the Indigenous groups of the area. In the process he discovered that the Natives often “were delighted by such trinkets, and went to the trouble of showing us a better route.”204

Yet he also ran into many familiar problems gathering useful geographical information from Native sources and guides. While Linck hoped to trace the coast of the Gulf of California to its conclusion, he soon learned that his guides did not have the same innate desire for discovery in mind. At one point he “noticed that our guides were veering us away from the direct northern route to lead us northwestward. … The Gulf in swerving far to the northeast has receded from us.”205 The Natives had a practical reason for altering their course: “They assure us that only along such a route will we find water.”206

202 Linck, Reports and Letters, 48.
203 Ibid., 34, 38.
204 Ibid., 33.
205 Linck, Diary, 76.
206 Ibid., 76.
Linguistic issues posed a constant problem beyond the areas more commonly traversed by Spanish expeditions. Linck remarked at one point,

> It seems that this place marks the outermost limits of the Cochimí language. We heard these natives utter with exceptional speed a language which resembles in no way that used up to this point. Our interpreters, despite all their efforts, could not understand a single word; and even the guides, virtually their next door neighbors, found it hard to grasp anything the natives said.

Still, the Natives communicated “through signs that the Colorado River is three or four days away.” To Linck, they seemed knowledgeable about the river itself, but “totally ignorant about the mouth of the stream … they indicate with very expressive gestures that the Pacific Ocean reaches close to the Colorado – or, to put it in other words, the river runs close to the shores of the Pacific.”

> “Likewise,” he continued, “the two aged natives … told us that some twenty or more days to the north there was a strait which extended from shore to shore.” These geographical features were promising, but Linck was hesitant to speculate based on these dubious exchanges:

> “Some claim that this extensive strait linking the two seas in the Anian Strait; but of that I can give no proof.”

Other reports pointed him to a different conclusion:

> “When they insist that one can drink the water of the ocean which flanks the isthmus, we think that they are giving the name of the ocean to the river – that would be the logical way to make sense out of this bit of information!”

Like La Vérendrye, Linck was intent on determining the whereabouts of other white people relative to these unknown lands. He recalled, “The natives assure us that there are no white people in all the country they have seen in the north and along the

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207 Ibid., 74-75.
208 Ibid., 80.
209 Linck, Reports and Letters, 36.
210 Linck, Diary, 81.
banks of the river. All the inhabitants, they insisted, are Indians; but, as they went on to explain, they wear clothes.”

However, in his efforts to learn about the Northwest’s coastal geography, he was also informed about inland North American geography. One group in particular, who “did not gaze in awe at our dwellings and churches, as most natives are wont to do,” reported “that if one went to the interior of the land he would see larger buildings and of better materials.” As Linck discovered, centuries after the Spanish entrada into North America, Indigenous information of faraway places continued to resonate with sixteenth-century testimonies of mythical places in the northern interior.

In addition to navigating myths, the learned Jesuits practiced science on the expedition. The group carried an astrolabe and a telescope; in one place, they “stayed on for three days in order to observe the sun.” Another night, Linck made an astronomical discovery when “the sky cleared” and a comet, which scientists have since identified as Helfenzrieder’s Comet, became visible to the expedition in the northwestern sky. But as imperial tensions heightened in the decades after the Seven Years’ War, neither scientific practice nor evangelism were priorities in Spanish visions of the Northwest. In 1768, the crown expelled all Jesuit priests from New Spain – Linck was actually the last outstanding missionary in the region before he returned to Bohemia. The Northwest he sought differed in both character and location from La Vérendrye’s and Dobbs’ ideas of the place, but all were equally “so

211 Ibid., 82-3.
212 Linck, Reports and Letters, 50.
213 Ibid., 35.
214 Linck, Diary, 84-5. Spotted in the constellation Aries, aka the Golden Fleece, aka what Jason’s original Argo was chasing, aka the metaphor Europeans used for the sea otter’s skins in later decades.
greatly desired,” as Dobbs described the Northwest Passage in 1744. As they had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spanish imperial policies contributed to the elusiveness of the American Northwest in the eighteenth century.

Back in Europe in 1778, Linck composed a report to Spanish officials detailing his experiences in northern California. In addition to some notes on the indigenous populations, Linck wrote a spirited dissent against the mischaracterization of Californian geography:

Had geographers in writing about those regions distinguished more carefully the peninsula from the said continent – also termed “California” – they would not have spoken so lightly about enchanting meadows and pasturelands, the charming plains, and all the other wonders. Whoever wishes to include in California Cabo Blanco, Cabo Mendocino, or even the Archipelago of San Lázaro, well, he can write whatever he wishes about such regions beyond Lower California, but all that must never be applied to the peninsula itself. … Failure to distinguish these two regions has been the cause of numerous errors regarding the history of California.215

While Cape Blanco and Cape Mendocino had long been the northernmost points on the Pacific coast known to Europeans, Linck included alongside them the islands of St. Lazarus, which were rumored to exist in the mythical Strait of Anian, where, as Linck wrote, “for so many years a fruitless search has been made for the Northwest Passage lining the Pacific Ocean with the Hudson Bay.”216 Linck’s experiences probing the Northwest in California were markedly different from British endeavors in Hudson Bay (or, for that matter, the eastward Russian thrust into the Pacific). The geography of the extreme Northwest remained unknown, but his contact with Indigenous Americans and his ability to interpret the information they conveyed to him were central parts of his mission. Although Linck did not discern enough to repudiate conclusively the mythical terrain that Europeans continued to associate with

215 Linck, Reports and Letters, 60-1.
216 Ibid., 72.
the Northwest, he accrued a great deal of useful knowledge about California, the surrounding regions, and their populations from Indigenous guides.

Before concluding his report, Linck took notice of another indigenous inhabitant of the Northwest. “A word should be said,” he wrote looking back from Bohemia, “about an amphibious animal found along the Pacific shoreline, called beaver because we have no other term for it.

The history of California published in Madrid [Burriel’s Noticia] describes it very briefly. This amphibious animal is very different from a real beaver. Its snout and the rest of its body resemble more a pig about six months old, except that in place of its hind legs it has fins which enable it to swim with incredible speed. Its fur is softer and finer than that of any beaver, and so black that it can hardly be distinguished from the darkest velvet cloth. To the touch it is much softer than the finest velvet.

The pelts would be the sources of considerable income if one knew how to prepare them in California, and the missionary could derive no little profit from them if he could export them in good condition. But the heat is so intense, and no one has any idea how to tan them, with the result that most of them spoil. Undoubtedly, in time means will be found to use these precious pelts.217

What Burriel had named castores became famous to Europeans and Americans at the end of the eighteenth century as the sea otter. This animal brought untold wealth from Asian markets to Euro-Americans who arrived at the Northwest Coast by sea— a realization, if only metaphorical, of the elusive maritime Northwest Passage.

“The Count’s Degenerate America”

Native Americans, who factored as geographical informants since pointing Columbus to the much-rumored Amazonian women, were also involved in the British search for the Northwest Passage. As French experiences show, the fur trade was integral to Europeans trying to learn about the geography of North America. Whereas French traders journeyed into Indigenous North America to carry out this trade,

217 Ibid., 60; Linck, Diary, 72.
British exchanges with Native Americans in the Northwest took place on the shores of Hudson Bay, where numerous tribes – known collectively to the British as the “Home Indians” – stayed at the H.B.C. factories for extended periods of time. An H.B.C. director named James Knight learned from Cree and Chipewyan sources wintering at York Factory that “at some distance to the northward, and on the banks of a navigable river or inlet, into which vessels might go from the bay, there was a rich mine of native copper.”

Knight petitioned H.B.C. officials to outfit a voyage in search of the rumored passage and riches, reminding them (as Dobbs later reiterated), “They were obliged by their charter to make discoveries, as well as to extend their trade.” Two other Home Indians gave reports of the same geography, and moreover “sketched out the country with charcoal upon a skin or parchment before they left.” In 1719, Knight finally succeeded in outfitting a voyage “to find out the straits of Anian, in order to discover gold and other valuable commodities to the northward,” but he and all his crew perished in Hudson Bay.

Alongside apocryphal European voyages, Arthur Dobbs cited a number of Indigenous testimonies in his defense of the passage’s existence. In his campaign, Dobbs enlisted a French-Canadian *coureur du bois* named Joseph La France, who had traveled into the interior from 1739 to 1742. Dobbs persuaded the British Admiralty to retain La France “on a Prospect of his being of Service in the Discovery of a Northwest Passage.” The two met in London, where La France told Dobbs about the Northwest and related a story of a band of thirty Natives who traveled from York

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219 Ibid., 185-6.
220 Ibid., 186.
221 Quoted in Williams, *Voyages of Delusion*, 128.
Factory to the Pacific coast, where they encountered black whales and strong tides.

On the floor of a London tavern, La France "chalked out this map, till he was satisfied it corresponded to the idea of his travels." In Dobbs’ interpretation, the Pacific coast curved to the northeast from California, eventually connecting to Hudson Bay just north of York Factory. The Pacific was also enticingly close – only a few hundred miles west of the familiar parts of North America, as his 1744 map of the region illustrated [fig. 18]. His map was a striking mix of fact and fiction, displaying the power of mythical geography to fit extant knowledge. The interior contained geography obtained from fur trade contacts and Indigenous sources – for example, the Lake of the Woods and Lake Ouinipique (Winnipeg) – alongside more dubious

222 Ibid., 128-31.
features such as Lahontan’s Lake Tahuglauk. Dobbs manipulated the direction of the inland riverways to point northward, where the “Unknown Coast” of North America curved to the northeast to meet Hudson Bay around 60°N. His depiction of Canada excised Alaska altogether; instead, the Pacific Ocean appeared to be enticingly close to British possessions around Hudson Bay, suggesting that a transcontinental passage was feasible and inviting speculation about the commercial possibilities that lay beyond the better-known parts of the Northwest.

Indigenous testimony was also presented to oppose the existence of the passage, but Swaine remained skeptical of these sources: “on a little Examination, it would appear that those Indians, whose Accounts are produced, are almost equal Strangers as to those Parts with the Europeans.”\textsuperscript{223} The enigmatic Swaine’s opinion of Native Americans is unclear, but he did at least hold a slightly nuanced view of the indigenous populations of North America. “It is from experience known,” he wrote in \textit{Great Probability}, “that the Eskemaux [Inuit], who are along the Coast of the Labrador, are cruel and thievish; but that Indians of a different Disposition live within Land.”\textsuperscript{224} Not all Euro-Americans shared this belief. As French and Spanish experiences probing the Northwest demonstrate, those who dealt personally with Indigenous peoples often adopted more charitable views towards their ways of life. But Europeans speculating about Native Americans often did not have this first-hand experience upon which to draw. Two giants of eighteenth-century European thought, Locke and Buffon, famously never left Europe. Their sequestered view of Native Americans led them to consider Indigenous peoples as part of the natural world;

\textsuperscript{223} Drage, \textit{Great Probability}, 21.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 60-61.
Unlike Swaine, Europeans often generalized Native Americans as a uniform mass of savage populations. In the late seventeenth century, Locke perceived two forms of human existence: the “state of nature” and “civil society.” While Europe represented the latter, he saw in the Americas “the beginning [of] all the World” – a new Garden of Eden.225

In Locke’s eyes, the fertile “New World” invited Europeans to make a second paradise in a land full of promise for the future and secrets of the past. Because the project of “improving” the world was a divinely ordained task, the cultivation of virgin soil became a moral and patriotic responsibility. In 1664, upon arriving in New England, John Winthrop expressed his belief that this virgin land was “open to any that could and would improve it.”226 In European eyes, Native Americans simply lacked the capacity to undertake this task. Referencing the inhabitants of Brazil and the Caribbean specifically, Locke wrote, “These are instances of nations where uncultivated nature has been left to itself, without the help of letters and discipline, and the improvements of arts and sciences.”227 “As for the Natives of New England,” Winthrop wrote, “they inclose noe Land, neither have they any setled habytation, nor any tame Cattle to improve the Land, and soe have noe other but a Naturall Right to those Countries.”228

This subordinating view of Native Americans formed the basis for the revolutionary theories of the eighteenth-century French naturalist and polymath Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. Buffon’s magnum opus was the Histoire

227 Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 51.
228 Quoted in Drayton, Nature’s Government, 55-56.
The Propagators of Myth

Figure 19. Joseph-Nicolas Delisle

As official astronomer to the Russian Academy of Sciences, Delisle was responsible for preparing the map informing the Second Kamchatka Expedition about the geography they would face in the northern Pacific, but his speculation resulted in a catastrophic failure that led to the death of both Captain Commander Vitus Bering and Delisle’s own brother. Undeterred, Delisle returned to France six years later and devoted his efforts to defending the authenticity of the apocryphal Admiral Fonte and his Northwest Passage.

Figure 20. Arthur Dobbs

A supporter of the British free trade cause gaining momentum throughout the eighteenth century, Dobbs used mythical geography of the Northwest to motivate voyages to Hudson Bay in order to weaken H.B.C. hegemony over the region. His true objective was the abolition of the H.B.C.’s monopoly to trading in the Bay, and he eagerly adopted geographical discovery as a pretense for commercial voyages.

Figure 21. Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon

Buffon was one of the most famous and influential natural philosophers of the eighteenth century. His theory of American degeneracy, based on the hypothesis that Native Americans lacked the physical strength and mental acuity to “correct Nature” properly in the European sense of land cultivation. The degeneracy myth armed early U.S. visions of the Northwestern terra incognita and helped coalesce early national sentiments promoting the conquest of the West.
Naturelle, générale et particulière, published in over 40 volumes from 1749 to 1804, in which he theorized an evolutionary relationship – what he termed “the generation and degeneration of species” – from “the most perfect creature to the most formless matter.” Buffon applied his radical designs to the entire terraqueous globe.

Although he found the biblical Flood impossible to reconcile with modern chronology, he maintained that at one time water had covered the entire globe, after which the continents emerged sequentially as global sea levels descended. His “Theory of the Earth” thereby gave literal meaning to the terms “Old World” and “New World.” Buffon compared “the heat and cold of every degree of latitude” and the size of animal species across both continents to support his claim that the Americas – “an unprolific land … these melancholy regions” – existed in an “abandoned condition; every thing languishes, corrupts, and proves abortive.”

To explain the disparity, he pointed to the indigenous American, whom he generalized as “small and feeble; he has no hair, no beard, no ardor for the female.” He continued:

Chiefly, then, is it from the scarcity of men in America, and most of them living like the brutes, that the earth has been neglected, remains cold, and is unable to produce the active principles of Nature. … These extensive regions were thinly inhabited by a few wandering savages, who, instead of acting as masters, had no authority in it; for they had no control over either animals or elements; they had neither subjected the waves nor directed the motions of rivers, nor even cultivated the earth around them; they were themselves nothing more than animals of the first rank, mere automatons, incapable of correcting Nature…

It was crucial that the Histoire Naturelle examined both the general and the particular, as the subtitle proclaimed. Beyond Linnaean taxonomies, he sought

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230 Ibid., 42.
231 Ibid., 38.
232 Ibid., 38.
“something greater and worthier of our concern,” as he wrote in the introduction to *Histoire Naturelle*: “that is, to combine observations, to generalize facts, to link them by analogies.” Only then could Europeans answer questions about the natural order and history of the world – and, as befit the Newtonian tradition, “form from them a body of systematic ideas, after having carefully estimated and weighed the probabilities.”

Beyond the contents of an illustrated dictionary or a botanical garden, Buffon spoke of a different kind of worldly knowledge: “that of the man of the countryside, of the huntsman who would locate the deer for the hunt the next day, of the breeder who must lead cows to the bull or plan the birth of lambs.” Ironically, this was exactly the sort of practical knowledge of the natural world commanded by Native Americans, those supposedly “mentally inactive” indigenous inhabitants of a degenerate world. French and Spanish efforts to learn about the Northwest highlight the many forms of “useful knowledge” that Indigenous sources had to offer Europeans.

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233 Like the taxonomists, Buffon was concerned with classifying and describing the entire natural world. Both the *Histoire Naturelle* and the *Systema Naturae* can be seen as forebears to Darwin’s theory of evolution. However, Buffon used the early volumes of his work to oppose Linnaeus’ method and content. He attacked the taxonomists for subordinating science to their belief in divine creation. Although the Linnaean system represented the breadth of Enlightenment natural philosophical scrutiny, to Buffon, its descriptions were superficial and its classifications arbitrary, avoiding the tougher historical questions about natural order by deferring to the theory of intelligent design. The French naturalist acerbically dressed down Linnaeus’ classifications as “so unjustified and bizarre as if the author had intended to make it such. … One must really be obsessed with classifying to put such different beings together.” Buffon instead intended to combine physics with history. Whereas Locke had begun *The History of Navigation* with Noah’s ark, Buffon found the Flood impossible to explain physically. He opted for a naturalistic hypothesis to explain the creation of the earth: “Above all,” he noted, “bad physics should not be mixed with the purity of the Holy Book.” Building on taxonomies, Buffon hoped to give “not the history of the individual but that of the entire species” without tarrying on anatomical trivia. This was, in the words of one French biographer, “biology before the term existed.” Jacques Roger, *Buffon: A Life in Natural History*, trans. Sarah Lucille Bonnefoi (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), 83-85; Bowler, *The Earth Encompassed*, 170-71.

Earlier sections explored how the theories of European geographers, astronomers, and commercial mapmakers had a dynamic relationship with the reconnaissance of the globe. In many of the same ways, theologians, historians, and other natural philosophers shaped European ideas about the world – especially terra incognita and other unknown places such as the prehistoric world. To the extent that we can retroactively distinguish between them as formalized areas of study, the disciplines of geography and natural history were intimately connected in the eighteenth century.  

Lost Worlds: Early Visions of Prehistoric America

The unknown American Northwest played a central role in European conceptions of the ancient world. The origin of Native Americans was an essential question for natural historians to answer as intellectuals endeavored to order and classify the populations of the world into a fixed number of races. There existed a long-standing debate between advocates of the so-called auto- and allochthonous theories of origin. Proponents of the autochthonous theory held that Native Americans were indigenous to the Americas, a view that supported misconceptions of Indigenous populations as uniform and static in the eras before European arrival. The allochthonous theory centered on a migration that took place from Eurasia to America at some point: although some posited a maritime journey across the Bering Strait,

235 Charles W. J. Withers notes that both “developed and were represented as ways of seeing and knowing the world during the ‘age of Enlightenment.’ ... Geography in the Enlightenment drew in closely related ways upon natural history and the results of explorers’ voyages as well as, to a lesser degree, upon mathematical knowledges.” Withers, “Putting the World in Place,” 138-41.

236 Pedley on Buffon and Robert de Vaugondy doing this…first is four, then expanded to six.
most theories depended on the existence of a landbridge connecting northern Asia to the Americas – an alternative, terrestrial northwest passage.237

At mid-century, Buffon joined this debate on the allochthonous side, stressing the unique source of the New World’s inhabitants as descended from a migration from Asia. Buffon was one of the few scholars who emphasized the impact of migration on racial diversity; in his view, the effects of colder American climates distinguished Native Americans from Old World Tartars after eons of miscegenation.238 Encounters in Indigenous North America corrected many misconceptions about places and people, but also reinforced other myths. The degeneracy myth took center stage in the second half of the eighteenth century: Buffon himself revised his claim to human degeneracy in a 1777 reissue, but other French intellectuals took up the cause and went further still, implicating white Americans as well as Indigenous in their theories.

Theories of the history of the world often retained a theological dimension to their timeline or narrative; even in cases where natural philosophers spurned the scriptures (such as Buffon’s), their theories often propounded myths of their own.239 A revealing early natural history text is *Description of the Province of New Sweden*, published in 1702 by a Swedish engraver named Thomas Campanius Holm, though it was not translated into English until the nineteenth century. Holm’s grandfather,

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238 Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 255.
239 The naturalist John Ray found “The Wisdom of God Manifest in the Works of Creation,” as he titled his 1691 book. Works such as Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred History of the Earth* illustrate how closely natural history and natural theology were aligned at the turn of the eighteenth century in the belief that knowledge of the world would lead to knowledge of God. “The world became the deliberate product of an all-knowing creator, and Nature itself was to be revealed to Man through science.” Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment*, 112-13.
Johannes Campanius, was a Swedish priest who traveled to modern-day New Jersey in 1642. For six years, he served as garrison priest at a Swedish fort, during which time he learned the language of the Lenape (Delaware) people and translated Luther’s Catechism into their tongue. Holm, who never visited America himself, constructed his Description based on his grandfather’s notes.\footnote{Thomas Campanius Holm, Description of the Province of New Sweden: Now Called, by the English, Pennsylvania, in America, trans. Peter S. Du Ponceau (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1834), v-vi.}

To explain the peopling of the Americas, Holm turned to familiar theoretical European geography: “Almost all the geographers and learned men agree in the opinion, that the Old and New World touch each other, and so all living creatures may have passed over from one into the other.”\footnote{Ibid., 34.} In Holm’s geography, California was an island, which “extends itself to that part of Asia, which is called Terra de Jesso or Terra Esonis:—The passage is only through the straits of Anian, which hitherto has remained unknown, and, therefore, is not to be found in any map or chart.”\footnote{Ibid., 21.} This was the same land sought four decades later by Russian navigators consulting Delisle’s conjectural chart of the northern Pacific.

Like Locke two years later in The History of Navigation, Holm used the Holy Scripture to frame his chronology and narrative, explaining, “The inhabitants of the New World, men as well as beasts, must, in their origin, have come out of Noah's Ark, which at last rested in this our old world, on Mount Ararat, in Armenia.”\footnote{Ibid., 32.} Holm outlined the numerous theories of Native American origin that held sway in Europe at the turn of the eighteenth century: “Some think that they came from Asia,
through the Straits of Anian, and that they drew their origin from the Scythians and Tartars: others believe that they derive it from the Chinese, and others again, from other nations, such as the Phoenicians, Athenians, &c.”

Regarding the Delaware peoples specifically, Holm’s grandfather (and William Penn, among other Pennsylvanians) advanced a more radical theory of Jewish origin based on similarities between Hebrew and the Lenape language, which echoed past comparisons between Indigenous languages and the Welsh tongue.

Much as early Euro-American imaginations of the Northwest drew upon Indigenous information alongside European legends, Native American traditions blended with European theories to inform conceptions of ancient North America. Regarding their origin, Holm acknowledged, “The Indians of New Sweden, as well as other tribes on the American continent, have various traditions current among themselves on this subject.”

But like many others at the time, he dismissed them categorically as “all alike foolish and ridiculous.” Still, as they probed farther westward throughout the eighteenth century, Euro-Americans encountered traces of this ancient migration – and from Indigenous sources even heard of the prehistoric landbridge whose existence is only confirmed today by archaeological evidence.

After the Seven Years War, English-speaking Americans were introduced to an aged Yazoo man named Moncacht-Apé, who claimed to have traveled across North America from coast to coast in his youth. In his native tongue, Moncacht-Apé’s name meant “the killer of pain and fatigue,” a sobriquet he had acquired from

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244 Ibid., 35.
245 Ibid., 114-15.
246 Ibid., 112.
247 Ibid., 113.
undertaking “the most dangerous and painful journeys, in which he had spent several years of his life.”\textsuperscript{248} As the Yazoo elder told a French traveler, after losing his wife and children, he had first gone up the Ohio River to “the country of the Iroquois or Five Nations,” visiting Niagara Falls and the “Great Water” to the east with some Abenaki guides before returning home. Invigorated by his “journey to the sun-rising, … as I had longed to see, with my own eyes, the land from whence our fathers came, I took my precautions for my journey westwards.”\textsuperscript{249}

Moncacht-Apé was aware that “the Chicasaws, our friends and neighbors, … are our ancestors, since it is from them that the language of the people comes.”\textsuperscript{250}

Despite learning “nothing new from them,” as Le Page du Pratz narrated, he “persisted in the design of discovering the origin of his people.” With the help of some “nations of the west” with whom he was “only able to communicate by signs,” he ascended the Missouri River until they reached the “Beautiful” or “Fine River.” The “clear and beautiful water” of this river flowed westward into the “Great Water,” which Le Page du Pratz hypothesized might be the Sea of the West. Moncacht-Apé, who learned the language of the coastal peoples from a tribe further up the Beautiful

\textsuperscript{248} Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz, \textit{The History of Louisiana, or of the Western Parts of Carolina and Virginia} (London: T. Becket, 1774), 285.

\textsuperscript{249} His story originally appeared in 1758 in a French natural history text, \textit{Histoire de la Louisiane}, which was translated into English six years later. The author, Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz, a French engineer and mathematician who also sent over 300 botanical specimens back to Paris, had arrived in Louisiana in 1718 to set up a plantation near New Orleans, but soon joined the \textit{Compagnie de l’Ouest} and moved upriver to a plot of land adjoining a number of Natchez villages. Through his partner, a Chitimacha woman who had been his slave, Le Page du Pratz gained a close relationship with the Natchez people. “About forty leagues north,” he encountered the Yazoo man “the French called the Interpreter.” Le Page du Pratz described him as “remarkable for his solid understanding and elevation of sentiments; and I may justly compare him to the first Greeks, who travelled chiefly into the east to examine the manners and customs of different nations, and to communicate to their fellow-citizens, upon their return, the knowledge which they had acquired.” Ibid., 285; Truett, “Lost Worlds,” 313.

River, heard from “the old men … the coast still extended for a great distance to the North and West; that finally it turned short to the West, and finally it was cut through by the Great Water directly from North to South.”\textsuperscript{251} Farther north, the elders related, “the country was sterile and cold and consequently without inhabitants, and they counseled me to return to my own country,” so Moncacht-Apé turned and headed back to the Yazoo homelands, returning after an estimated five years.\textsuperscript{252}

The author, a French engineer named Le Page du Pratz, had French westward expansion in mind when composing his account, but after the Seven Years’ War, British Americans found it more useful. The English translation, published in 1763, adopted a new title, \textit{The History of Louisiana, or of the Western Parts of Carolina and Virginia}, illustrating how French knowledge of the Northwest was easily adapted to inform British visions of the future of the region. Another compelling aspect of Le Page du Pratz’s book was the story of Moncacht-Apé’s encounter with “the bearded men,” white kidnappers who appeared on the coast, “short and thick, with large heads, covered with cloth … their arms making a great noise and a great flame.”\textsuperscript{253} He and his companions ambushed a group of bearded men, killing eleven of them (the rest fled, “flying westward upon the Great Water”).\textsuperscript{254}

However, Le Page du Pratz’s book resonated more with American audiences for the lens into American antiquity offered by Moncacht-Apé’s narrative. While inquiring into the geography of the western coast, one of the northwestern tribe’s elders told the Yazoo traveler “that when he was young, he knew a very old man who

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., 331.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 331.
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 329.
\textsuperscript{254} Le Page du Pratz, \textit{The History of Louisiana}, 289.
had seen that distant land before it was eat away by the Great Water, and that when the Great Water was low, many rocks still appeared in those parts.” These descriptions resonated with familiar theories of natural history, particularly the much-speculated landbridge over which the Americas were peopled in prehistoric times.

In his *Histoire*, Le Page du Pratz addressed “The Origin of the Americans,” joining the debate on the allochthonous side. Drawing upon “the voyages and discoveries of M. de Lisle,” some Indigenous “traditional testimonies,” and a number of ancient theories, he found “good grounds to believe, that the Mexicans came originally from China or Japan….” Further examining the “form of government” and “manner of living among the northern nations of America,” he noted “a great resemblance betwixt them and the Tartars in the north-east parts of Asia.”

Moreover, physical evidence recently uncovered in the western frontier seemed to align with the Northwestern geography the Yazoo tale offered. Le Page du Pratz continued:

Moncacht-apé’s account of the junction of America with the eastern parts of Asia seems confirmed from the following remarkable fact. Some years ago the skeletons of two large elephants and two small ones were discovered in a marsh near the river Ohio; and as they were not much consumed, it is supposed that the elephants came from Asia not many years before.

Le Page du Pratz was referring to the fossils of numerous mastodons that had surfaced throughout the first half of the century. In 1705, a Dutch farmer in Claverack, New York, uncovered a tooth the size of a man’s fist [fig. 22]. The tooth was sent to London, labeled “tooth of a Giant,” and soon became known as the

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255 Ibid., 289.
256 Ibid., 284. Earlier he had noted: “The great antiquity of the Chinese nation likewise makes it possible that a colony might have gone from thence to America early enough to be looked upon as the Ancients of the country, by the first of the Phoenicians…” Ibid., 283.
257 Ibid., 290.
258 Ibid., 290.
“American incognitum.” The initial debate around the specimen concerned the question of whether it was an animal or human tooth, which led American Puritan clergymen to speculate about the existence of human giants in prehistoric North America. A year after the discovery, Edward Taylor, a minister from Massachusetts, composed a long “poetic description” of the “Gyant of Claverack” and his “great bones dug up on the banks of Hudsons River,” which combined natural history with stories in Native American lore of a race of men taller than the tallest pine trees.259 That same year, Cotton Mather authored the first “learned account” of the Claverack monster, asserting that the fossils were scientific proof of the existence of the human giants mentioned in the Bible.260 Subsequent studies contended that the incognitum was a prehistoric carnivore whose disappearance from the world after the Flood was God’s blessing on the human race. When similar teeth turned up in South Carolina, slaves pointed out that they closely resembled those of the African elephant. As Le

260 Semonin, American Monster, 11.
Page du Pratz’s work shows, the elephant hypothesis became the prevailing theory by the 1760s.\textsuperscript{261}

The \textit{incognitum} and its material remains took on even greater importance after Buffon’s theory of American degeneracy gained prominence at mid-century. The fossils to which Le Page du Pratz was specifically referring, “discovered in a marsh near the river Ohio,” were found in modern-day Kentucky by some French soldiers in 1739. More bones continued to surface in the same place, and the site became known as “Big Bone Lick” for the fossils and the salt lick deposited in the area, which is believed to have drawn many animals to the area. Baron de Longueuil, the leader of the French detachment who found the bones in 1739, sent them back to Paris to join the cabinet of curiosities in the \textit{Jardin du roi}. That same year, Buffon was appointed to oversee the \textit{Jardin du roi}. Buffon himself initially did not dedicate much attention to the \textit{incognitum}, but the relative size of quadrupeds across both continents factored centrally into his evidence for the degeneracy myth.\textsuperscript{262}

In response to the degeneracy myth, many principal figures of the early United States adopted the view of America as a virgin land of plenty. A large number of Americans traveled to Paris after the Revolution in official and unofficial capacities, and their presence influenced the debate over degeneracy. By this point, Buffon had rescinded his claims to human degeneracy, but other French intellectuals – most notably Abbé Raynal and Cornelius de Pauw – took up his mantle, arguing that even European immigrants to America degenerated due to the change in climate. Franklin, who by then was one of the most famous figures in cosmopolitan European

\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{262} Ibid., 112.
social circles, confronted these claims personally in Paris in his typically tactful style.

Thomas Jefferson later recalled an encounter between Franklin and Raynal at a dinner party in Paris:

He [Franklin] had a party to dine with him [Raynal] one day at Passy, of whom one half were Americans, the other half French, and among the last was the Abbé. During the dinner he got on his favorite theory of the degeneracy of animals, and even of man, in America, and urged it with his usual eloquence. The Doctor at length noticing the accidental stature and position of his guests, at table, “Come,” says he, “M. Abbé, let us try this question by the fact before us. We are here one half Americans, and one half French, and it happens that the Americans have placed themselves on one side of the table, and our French friends are on the other. Let both parties rise, and we will see on which side nature has degenerated.” It happened that his American guests were Carmichael, Harmer, Humphreys, and others of the finest stature and form; while those of the other side were remarkably diminutive, and the Abbé himself particularly, was a mere shrimp. He [Raynal] parried the appeal, however, by a complimentary admission of exceptions, among which the Doctor himself was a conspicuous one.\textsuperscript{263}

As historian Gilbert Chinard observed, “These questions [raised by the degeneracy myth], which at first were purely philosophical or speculative, became, after 1776, political problems of vital importance.”\textsuperscript{264} In Paris himself as minister plenipotentiary to France, Thomas Jefferson saw there were both political and scientific incentives to convincing European audiences that America was “worth a voyage across the Atlantic,” as he described the Virginian scenery.\textsuperscript{265} In addition to his personal affinity for French culture, Jefferson recognized that France was the only country “on which we can rely for support, under any event” in the years after the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{266}

To refute Buffon’s claims, Jefferson almost immediately turned to the unknown American Northwest, the incognitum fossils, and Indigenous knowledge:

\textsuperscript{263} From Thomas Jefferson to Robert Walsh, Jr., 4 December 1818, FO.
\textsuperscript{266} Quoted in Dugatkin, \textit{Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose}, 59.
It may be asked, why I insert the Mammoth, as if it still existed? I ask in return, why I should omit it, as if it did not exist? ... To add to this, the traditionary testimony of the Indians, that this animal still exists in the northern and western parts of America.... Those parts still remain in their aboriginal state, unexplored and undisturbed by us, or by others for us. He may as well exist there now, as he did formerly where we find his bones.267

Alongside the mammoth, the Virginian highlighted the megalonyx and moose as evidence that American quadrupeds could contend with the size of their “Old World” counterparts.268 In regard to Native Americans, Jefferson offers an interesting case compared to Locke, Buffon, and others. On the one hand, he adopted Locke’s language – “traditional testimonies” – and the European political ideology behind the idea of America as a second Paradise. As Locke and Buffon had before him, he generalized Native North Americans into a largely homogenous mass, and agreed that they had only a natural right to the land. Notes expressed his belief that Euro-Americans should teach Natives to cultivate the land, allowing them to be sedentary peoples with permanent residences. This redistribution of the frontier’s indigenous inhabitants would facilitate the western advance of the American people into the virgin or waste land of the West, cementing its destiny as an “empire of liberty.”269

Jefferson’s vision of the American Northwest has been widely treated and mythologized in its own right by writers from Washington Irving to the present day. In The Conquest, Eva Emery Dye featured Jefferson’s outlook on Native Americans in his final remarks to Lewis before the Corps of Discovery departed: “Above all, express my philanthropic regard for the Indians. Humanity enjoins us to teach them

267 Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, 84.
268 See the detailed tables of measurements comparing the relative sizes of the megalonyx (an extinct species of sloth) and the African lion in “Memoir on the Megalonyx,” [10 February 1797], FO. For a comprehensive treatment of Jefferson’s involvement in the incognitum and degeneracy debates, see Dugatkin, Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose.
269 Ibid., 144-45. For an articulation of his views on living with Natives and the enclosure of their land, see From Thomas Jefferson to William Henry Harrison, 27 February 1803, FO.
agriculture and the domestic arts.”270 In this way, the exploitation and resettlement of Indigenous peoples was advertised as philanthropy. On the other hand, Jefferson clearly took the degeneracy myth to heart and disagreed with Buffon’s characterization of Indigenous Americans as mentally and physically inactive. In fact, he devoted more space in Notes to the claims about Native Americans than any other French assertion. Of the Native American, he wrote, “I can speak of him somewhat from my own knowledge, but more from the information of others better acquainted with him, and on whose truth and judgement I can rely.”271 From this vantage point, Jefferson systematically and spiritedly challenged Buffon’s claims of Native American degeneracy:

He is neither more defective in ardor, nor more impotent with his female, than the white reduced to the same diet and exercise … he is brave, when an enterprize depends on bravery … he will defend himself against a host of enemies, always chusing to be killed, rather than to surrender … and endures tortures with a firmness unknown almost to religious enthusiasm with us. … He is affectionate to his children, careful of them, and indulgent in the extreme. … His friendships are strong and faithful to the utmost extremity. … His sensibility is keen, even the warriors weeping most bitterly on the loss of their children, though in general they endeavor to appear superior to human events.272

Ultimately, although “more facts are wanting,” it seemed clear to Jefferson that “they are formed in mind as well as in body, on the same module with the ‘Homo sapiens Europaeus.’”273

In addition to the foremost officials and intellectuals, laymen also had an interest in natural history and racial theories. One such figure was John Ledyard, a native of Connecticut, who sailed with Cook on his third voyage. Over the centuries, Ledyard has taken on his own mythology as “an American Marco Polo” – popular

270 Dye, The Conquest, 146.
271 Ibid., 97.
272 Quoted in Dugatkin, Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose, 75.
273 Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, 103.
histories tout him as “the first American explorer,” albeit an unsuccessful one. Dye highlighted Ledyard as the “first of all Americans, [who] pleaded for an American Northwest.” As fit her style, Dye’s version of his “plea for Pacific commerce” included a dramatic and patriotic exchange when Ledyard met Jefferson:

“Why, Mr. Jefferson,” Ledyard was wont to say, “that northwest land belongs to us. I felt that I breathed the air of home the day we touched at Nootka Sound. The Indians are just like ours; I felt I knew them. And furs – that coast is rich in beaver, bear and otter. Depend upon it, Mr. Jefferson, untold fortunes lie untouched at the back of the United States. The American Revolution invites us to a thorough discovery of the continent. Who but us should have the honor?”

In some respects, Dye was not wrong about Ledyard’s ambitions. He had come to Paris in late 1784 searching for backers for a fur-trading venture to the Northwest coast after his American prospects had fallen through. In Paris he met John Paul Jones, the famous naval captain, who was in France seeking the prize money due from a victory over the British “which his most Christian Majesty was pleased to equip and support under the Flag of America.” Ledyard and Jones formed a company to outfit a voyage, but their plans soon foundered on financial grounds, leading Ledyard to “inter this hobby at Paris.”

But in contrast with Dye’s portrayal of him in the Lewis and Clark Journal, Ledyard did not “pour into [Jefferson’s] ear a plea for Pacific commerce.” Instead, the two met in early 1786 on more intellectual grounds: “While at Paris,” Jefferson

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276 To Thomas Jefferson from John Paul Jones, 23 June 1785, FO.

277 Quoted in Eric Jay Dolin, Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 146.

recalled in his autobiography, “I became acquainted with John Ledyard of
Connecticut, a man of genius, of some science, and of fearless courage, and
talent.” Rather than a profit-motivated merchant, Jefferson found an agent of
empirical science in the eccentric Ledyard. Accounts vary as to whose idea it was, but in Paris they conjured up the idea that Ledyard should travel to Russia and

procure a Passage, with a promise from the Captain to land him on the Western
Coast [of North America], … march thro’ the Indian nations, to the back parts of
the Atlantic States, for the purpose of examining the Country and its Inhabitants,
and expects he will be able to make his way thro’. possessed of such information
of that Country and its produce, as will be of great advantage to ours.280

This was a decidedly scientific mission, and Jefferson solicited Catherine the Great
for “permission for him to pass thro’ her dominions to the Western coast of
America.” Skeptical of the Americans’ scientific objectives, Catherine ultimately
denied the request – as Jefferson wrote Ledyard, “she thinks it chimærical” – but not
before Ledyard set out for Kamchatka, oblivious to this development.282 The
expedition would end in Ledyard’s arrest and eventual death, but a close reappraisal
of his travels on the terms of eighteenth-century natural philosophy illustrates how
Ledyard was much more successful than is typically believed. He set out searching
for evidence of the terrestrial Northwest Passage, hoping to uncover an unknowable
truth through empirical observation on both sides of the Pacific. Although Ledyard
never returned to the Americas, he felt satisfied with his research in Russia, believing
he had made a useful contribution to European knowledge about the Northwest, its
inhabitants, and its natural history.

279 Quoted in Ledyard, Journey, 260-61.
280 To Thomas Jefferson from William Stephens Smith, 1 September 1786, FO.
281 To Thomas Jefferson from John Ledyard, 7 February 1786, FO.
282 From Thomas Jefferson to John Ledyard, 16 August 1786, FO.
Ledyard and Jefferson developed a relationship similar to the one between Charles Swaine and Benjamin Franklin. Like Swaine’s, Ledyard’s credentials in his sponsor’s eyes were his past experience, his literacy, and his discerning eye. As Jefferson introduced him to the Marquis de Lafayette: “he accompanied Capt. Cook in his last voyage to the North-western parts of America, and rendered himself useful to that officer;” he had written an account of the voyage, published in 1783, and Jefferson believed “he will give an interesting account of what he shall have seen;” finally, “he has genius, an education better than the common, and a talent for useful and interesting observation. I believe him to be an honest man, and a man of truth.”

In time, Jefferson could count Ledyard among the “others better acquainted with [the Native American], and on whose truth and judgment I can rely” to whom he referred in *Notes*.284

Ledyard had studied at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire for a year. Rather than follow the ecclesiastic studies designed for the purpose of converting Native Americans, he instead found himself drawn to observing Iroquois ways of life. In 1773, he dramatically deserted Dartmouth by descending the Connecticut River alone in a hand-made dugout canoe. At this point he endeavored to travel: as he wrote a cousin, “I allot myself a seven year’s ramble.”285 The question of the origin of Native Americans became Ledyard’s fixation. Like many of his contemporaries, he believed that all Natives were descended from the same ancestors as the “Tartars,” an umbrella term under which Europeans grouped the inhabitants of eastern Europe and central and northern Asia. The racial composition of the world’s populations was a

283 From Thomas Jefferson to Lafayette, 9 February 1786, FO.
focus of many prominent European geographers – among others, Buffon and Robert de Vaugondy made attempts at universal ethnological classifications [fig. 23] – and an expedition through North America via Siberia afforded Ledyard an invaluable opportunity to observe the facts of the matter first-hand.286

Deprived of his inheritance, personal financial reasons led Ledyard to enter the British Navy and to attempt his short-lived commercial ventures. Ethnographic observation, however, was his passion, and he jumped at the chance to undertake a scientific investigation for such venerable patrons as Jefferson, Lafayette, and Sir Joseph Banks, whom he met in London before setting out for Russia. As he traveled east, Ledyard kept a journal and continually made observations, such as his claim that Russians were descended from the Egyptians and Greeks, pointing to “the true Russian Dress” to support his argument.287 He paid special attention to people of mixed descent, the observation of whom led him to oppose Buffon’s theory of degeneracy-based racial distribution: “I conclude therefore that after the first descent the Operations of Nature by Generation have little or no effect upon the Colour…” Instead, his observed a “nice Gradation by which I pass from Civilization to Incivilization.”288

In the people he called Tartars, he observed an unparalleled “uniformity of features;” still, he added, “it is not an European Face but very remote from it.”289 This was a direct rebuttal to Buffon, David Hume, and others who classified Tartars as

286 Pedley, Bel et Utile, 103.
287 Ledyard, Journey, 156-57.
288 Ibid., 144, 179.
289 Ibid., 178-79.
Ledyard turned to his experience in the Northwest and among the Iroquois to support his claim. At Lake Baikal, he encountered “tents or wigwams covered with matting bark or Skins, and are the genuine American wigwam form thus;” Tattoos on the Tartars reminded him as much of “the Mohegan tribe in America” as “the Peasantry of Moldavia;” and he determined Tartar ornamentation to be “but a modification of the Wampum ornamenting.” More curious was his “very remarkable” note that “both the Asiatic and American Tartars have the same chaste or superstitious notions of Women during the Menstrual Illness.” Therefore, pointing to these geographically disparate yet “indisputable signature of Tartar;” he judged:

“No matter if in Nova Zembla, Mongul in Greenland, or on the banks of the

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292 Ibid., 195.
Mississippi, they are the same.”293 He wrote Jefferson from Siberia to inform him of
his findings:

In my travels I have made it my rule to compare the written with the living
history of Man…. Sir I am certain that all the people you call red people on the
continent of America and on the continents of Europe and Asia … are all one
people by whatever names distinguished and that the best general one would be
Tartar. I suspect that all red people are of the same family. I am satisfied myself
that America was peopled from Asia and had some if not all its animals from
thence.294

One line of inquiry he particularly hoped to carry out in America: “by uniting
Customs, traditions and history I am satisfied that this common origin was such or
nearly as related by Moses and commonly believed among all the nations of the
earth.”295 Ledyard would have encountered a myriad of cosmologies and origin myths
in North America, just as he surely had in Asia. But he was never able to return to the
American Northwest to carry out his comparative studies. 200 miles from the Pacific
coast, Ledyard was arrested and sent back through Russia to Europe, where he was
dumped on the Polish border. On July 4, 1788, Ledyard sent his one of his last
communications to his American patron:

Mr. Ledyard presents his compliments to Mr. Jefferson. He has been imprisoned
and banished by the Empriss of Russia from her dominions after having almost
gained the pacific ocean. He is now on his way to Africa to see what he can do
with that Continent.296

One American contemporary hailed Ledyard as “an eccentric Genius,” lamenting that
“the Caprice of a Woman probably prevented the world from receiving some new and
important information that would have been the result of this extraordinary Journey

293 Ibid., 180.
294 To Thomas Jefferson from John Ledyard, [before 3 July 1788], FO.
295 Ledyard, Journey, 254-55.
296 Ibid., 252-53.
had it been compleated.”297 After his American designs failed to materialize, he traveled to Cairo to investigate the path of the Niger River and the African interior under the sponsorship of Sir Joseph Banks and Henry Beaufoy. He was set to depart for Africa just after New Year’s Day in 1789, but “bad weather or other causes” held the caravan up – “as happens to most caravans,” Beaufoy noted. Thomas Paine relayed the news of Ledyard’s demise to Jefferson: “Mr. Ledyard took offence at the delay and threw himself into a violent rage which deranged something in his conductors that he thought to cure by an emetic.” By overdosing, he accidentally poisoned himself with sulfuric acid and died three days later.298

Although he traveled to four continents, Ledyard is typically considered a failed explorer because he was unable to fulfill his dreams of studying the indigenous inhabitants of every continent. Nevertheless, he succeeded in his quest to find a different mythical Northwest Passage in the prehistoric landbridge from Asia to North America. Jefferson offered perhaps the most appropriate eulogy of Ledyard even before the adventurous American departed for Russia: “He is a person of ingenuity and information. Unfortunately he has too much imagination.”299 But if the history of the mythical Northwest is any indication, imagination was also a crucial component in navigating the unknown parts of the world. More broadly, Ledyard’s episode in the early history of the Northwest illustrates that the pursuit of mythical places long associated with northwestern North America continued to take place in a variety of places after Europeans and Americans arrived on the Northwest Coast and

297 Extract from the Diary of Nathaniel Cutting at Le Havre and Cowes, [28 September-12 October 1789], FO.
298 Ledyard, Journey, 30-31.
299 From Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, 20 September 1787, FO.
reconnoitered its geography. Ledyard’s aspirations to investigate the theories of natural historians sent him to Siberia and the northern Pacific, where Russian navigators and naturalists had followed the speculation of European astronomers and mapmakers earlier in the eighteenth century.

Euro-Americans encountered information about the Northwest and its possible geographical features as they pushed west from the Great Lakes region and north from Mexico. Yet in these encounters beyond the “known” world, Euro-Americans learned that obtaining geographical information was a matter of navigating both the political and cosmological terms of Indigenous North Americans. These exchanges continued on the Northwest Coast after contact. The early years of Euro-American activity on the coast are traditionally viewed as the first stage of the processes by which Europeans subjected the land and its peoples to geographical practices and commercial projects. However, a closer examination of encounters on the Northwest Coast and in the Northwestern interior in the 1780s and 1790s indicates that Indigenous authority over these regions endured after contact. Furthermore, the mythical terrain of the Northwest persisted in Euro-American imaginations of the region and influenced European reconnaissance of the region. The encountered Northwest in the late eighteenth century was not a *tabula rasa* or virgin land. As they had for centuries, Euro-Americans navigated preconceptions and conjectures when they reached the Northwest.

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Chapter Three

MYTHICAL ENCOUNTERS ON THE NORTHWEST COAST

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, European expeditions championing the pursuit of scientific knowledge arrived on the Pacific coast of northwestern North America. In moments such as Linck’s brief astronomical observations in California and Steller’s attempts to study the marine life on the Alaskan coast, earlier attempts to reach the Northwest practiced empirical science, but the ships canvassing the Northwest Coast in later years – “floating laboratories,” in one scholar’s words – epitomized the Enlightenment pursuit of useful knowledge.\(^{301}\) In popular memory, the first European to reach the shores of modern-day British Columbia was James Cook in 1778. Best known for observing the transit of Venus, discovering the Hawaiian Islands, and surveying the Northwest Coast, in many ways, Cook’s expeditions represented the paragon of eighteenth-century technological advancement.\(^{302}\)

But Cook’s contact with North America propagated a number of myths about the exploration of the Northwest and its Indigenous population. For one, Juan José Pérez Hernández, not Cook, was the first European to reach the region, followed a year later by his Spanish countrymen of the 1775 Hezeta-Bodega expedition.\(^{303}\) Furthermore, John Douglas, the editor of Cook’s journals from his third and final voyage, fabricated a passage detailing the cannibalistic practices of the Indigenous peoples of Nootka Sound, perpetuating a long-standing myth about Native Ameri-

\(^{302}\) Glyn Williams, ed., Captain Cook: Explorations and Reassessments (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2004); Fraser MacDonald and Charles W. J. Withers, eds., Geography, Technology and Instruments of Exploration (Surrey, UK: Farnham Ashgate, 2015).
cans. Finally, and most important to this thesis, his reconnaissance of the Northwest Coast did not put the myth of a maritime Northwest Passage to rest.

This chapter will explore the variety of ways in which myths, legends, and conjectures concerning the Northwest influenced Euro-American reconnaissance of the region and their textualization of its geography. As they had for centuries, the coordinates of mythical features of Northwestern geography moved to accommodate changes to European knowledge of the region. Europeans kept the Northwest Passage myth alive by exploiting gaps in Cook’s observations and manipulating geography learned from Indigenous sources to fit imaginary visions of the Northwest. For these reasons, the Northwest’s mythical past interfered with European scientific pursuits in the late eighteenth century in many of the same ways displayed by Russian experiences navigating extant knowledge of the region. Even the Admiralty’s orders to George Vancouver, whose hydrographical work on the coast over a decade after Cook’s encounters was long considered unexceptionable, included a notice obliquely instructing him to uncover the Northwest Passage:

In which examination the principal objects which you are to keep in view, are,

1st, The acquiring accurate information with respect to the nature and extent of any water-communication which may tend, in any considerable degree, to facilitate an intercourse, for the purposes of commerce, between the north-west coast, and the country upon the opposite side of the continent, which are inhabited or occupied by His Majesty’s subjects.

By the 1790s, hopes of navigating the Strait of Anian had been dashed, but the Admiralty’s valuation of such a passage “in any considerable degree” indicates the symbolic meanings that the Northwest Passage retained to Europeans. These and

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305 Quoted in Andrew David, “Vancouver's Survey Methods and Surveys,” in *From Maps and Metaphors*, 56.
many other moments along the coast tell a story with a different tenor than usual accounts of imperial reconnaissance and capitalist competition in the American Northwest around the turn of the nineteenth century. Mythical geography remained extant and “useful” as Europeans professed knowledge of imaginary rivers, straits, and people based on apocryphal European accounts – the undying Admiral Fonte’s among them. Moreover, in spite of seasonal trading activities on the coast, the Northwest remained a world dominated by Indigenous customs and modes of thinking, as Europeans and Americans hoping to survey the coast and learn about the geography of the interior realized. For these reasons, encounters on the coast often point to the mythical history of the region as much as they indicate the processes of settler-colonialism beginning in the late eighteenth century.

Peter Pond and the Usefulness of Mythical Geography

As news of Cook’s findings disseminated in the early 1780s, a scramble for territory ensued in the capitals of western Europe. European officials quickly equipped maritime expeditions to the Northwest for a variety of reasons, recognizing, as Dobbs had half a century earlier, that scientific pretenses could cover for imperial ambitions. In this light, when Jefferson was informed in Paris in the summer of 1785 that the French crown was outfitting a massive seaborne operation, he was naturally skeptical of its aims and unsure of its destination. To John Jay, Jefferson made his worries clear: “They give out that the object is merely for the improvement of our knowlege of the geography of that part of the globe. Their loading however … appeared to me to indicate some other design: perhaps that of colonising on the Western coast of America, or perhaps only to establish one or more factories there for
the fur trade.” These developments were potentially ruinous for both the future and the present: “If they would desire a colony on the Western side of America,” Jefferson confessed to Jay, “I should not be quite satisfied that they would refuse one which should offer itself on the Eastern side.”

He then asked John Paul Jones, who was in Lorient seeking his war spoils and arranging his fur trading venture with Ledyard, “to make an enquiry into all the circumstances … with as little appearance of interest in it as possible.” Jones confirmed his misgivings: “There is no Doubt but the perfectioning the Geography of the Southern Hemisphere is one of his Majesty’s Objects in View: and it is not difficult to percieve that he has others equally worthy the Attention of a great Prince.” For his part, Jefferson was content with the their “intention to settle factories, and not colonies,” or at least for the present. The French ships were named L’Astrolabe and La Boussole – the “astrolabe” and “compass,” respectively – as France’s principal objectives for the expedition were eminently scientific. Over three years later, while he awaited news of Ledyard’s return, Jefferson reserved similar praise for the French voyage:

The return of la Peyrouse (whenever that shall happen) will probably add to our knowledge in Geography, botany and natural history. What a feild have we at our doors to signalize ourselves in! The botany of America is far from being exhausted: it’s Mineralogy is untouched, and it’s Natural history or Zoology totally mistaken and misrepresented.

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306 From Thomas Jefferson to John Jay, 14 August 1785, FO.
307 Ibid.
308 From Thomas Jefferson to John Paul Jones, 3 August 1785, FO.
309 To Thomas Jefferson from John Paul Jones, 5 October 1785, FO.
310 From Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Willard, 24 March 1789, FO. Part of receipt of J.D. from Harvard University: “such institutions as that over which you preside so worthily, Sir, to do justice to our country, it’s productions, and it’s genius.”
However, although he visited six continents and completed nearly all his objectives, Lapérouse would never return to Europe. His ships, “floating laboratories” as they were, had departed Australia over a year before Jefferson’s letter and after being lost at sea were never heard from again.

Ventures such as Cook’s and Lapérouse’s indicate that the whole Pacific region became, in Charles W. J. Withers’ words, “the Enlightenment’s sandbox” in the last decades of the eighteenth century. But upon closer examination, European travelers to the Northwest championing transnational scientific pursuit had at best a questionable track record adding to “our knowledge in Geography, botany, and natural history,” often because of the persistent influence of the Northwest’s mythical geography both in the region and in cosmopolitan Europe. As it had in the overland approach, mythical geography of the Northwest factored crucially in the maritime approach to the Northwest on a number of levels, often with tangible results. Before the hydrographical efforts of the 1790s, enough ambiguity remained between Cook’s observations and extant knowledge of inland waterways that politically and commercially interested Euro-Americans could manipulate the mythical geography of the Northwest to their benefit.

Peter Pond was something of a latter-day La Vérendrye figure in the Northwest, but as events played out, his approach to employing European geographical information about the region for his personal gain more closely imitated Arthur Dobbs’. Pond was born in Connecticut in 1739 or 1740, around a year after La Vérendrye wintered with the Mandans in the Heart of the World. Both were intrepid

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fur traders, but whereas the French *voyageur* had been the first Euro-American to reach the Northern Plains, Pond opened the Athabasca watershed farther northwest in the 1770s and 1780s. And just as La Vérendrye learned as much as possible from Auchagah and other Native Americans, Pond gained a deep knowledge of the geography of the Northwestern interior through his dealings with Indigenous groups in the interior. Pond probably explored waters north of Lake Athabasca, but how far is not known. From Natives, he learned the approximate location of numerous inland bodies of water, such as Great Slave Lake and the Peace River, but was also fully aware of the maneuverability of Native forms of geography, which were not anchored by longitude, latitude, or cardinal directions. He would later exploit these factors in his pursuit of geographical discovery and commercial profits.\textsuperscript{312}

In addition to the more familiar features of Canadian geography, Pond claimed that his Indigenous sources had informed him about the fabled River of the West, he named “Naberkistagon.” When around 1782 Pond learned of Cook’s discoveries along the coast, he saw a magnificent opportunity. One area Cook had probed but not investigated completely was an opening around 60°N – today it is known as Cook Inlet, but Pond labeled it “Cook’s River” to pique imperial interest. Armed with his knowledge of Indigenous communication systems in the interior, Pond believed this pivotal moment in the reconnaissance of the Northwest afforded him a unique chance at leading a nationally sponsored expedition for discovery, which he also recognized would proliferate his commercial outreach and intake.

The opportunistic Pond was not particular as to which nation enlisted his services. The Connecticut native first went to the Continental Congress in New York, presenting them in 1785 with a map drawn specifically for this audience [fig. 24]. It placed the river-and-lake system further south than it exists in reality – partially in U.S. territory (or, before the Louisiana Purchase, eminent domain) – to appeal to American visions of the West. He highlighted the proximity of Pittsburgh (on the Ohio River) to the Mississippi River, which on his speculative map continued north and connected to the watershed that eventually emptied into the “Mer du Nord West.”

Looking west from the Mississippi, the Naberkistagon River, emptying into the South Sea, beckoned beyond a mountain range “Called by the Natives Stony Mounts.” In short, harkening to inventive travelers in earlier generations such as Máthieu Sagean, Pond tried to make his message as geographically clear as possible: the waterways of the Northwestern interior offered a potential connection between the coasts of America, and thus with Asia, in U.S. territory.

However, consumed with the task of securing independence and hampered by the restrictive Articles of Confederation, Congress turned down Pond’s 1785 proposal. The American fur trader headed back to Montreal, the entrepôt of the Canadian fur trade after the Seven Years’ War, to try his luck with the British administration there. In a meeting with Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton later that year, Pond produced a second map offering a new depiction of the Northwest, which differed starkly from the one presented to the U.S. Congress [fig. 25].

The map Pond gave to British officials omitted the Naberkistagon River and other southern geographical features (although he did leave an opening on the coast
Figures 24 & 25.
Copes of the maps Peter Pond presented to U.S. Congress (above) and Henry Hamilton, Governor of Canada (below) in 1785. Note the differing orientations of the various waterways in the North American interior: where Pond highlighted the Naberkistagon River (the fabled River of the West) as most intriguing to the Americans, the map presented to British officials pointed to the North Sea as the ultimate destination of these waterways.
for the “West River”). Instead, like Dobbs, he designed his Northwestern geography to be as attractive as possible to British desires. Cook’s survey of the coast precluded him from manipulating the coastline as Dobbs had, but Pond outlined a clear riverine passage from Lake Superior through Slave Lake into the “Supposed Ice Sea,” where “according to the account of the Natives, the Water ebbs and flows, and they know of no Land to the North.” His map also included a note in the Californian area relating Indigenous testimonies of “People with long Beards” in the area – a vague nod to the potential Spanish, Russian, or American visitors who could potentially preempt British claims to the Northwest.

To Hamilton, Pond made his message seem all the more urgent: he had “positive information from the Natives, who have been on the Coast of the North Pacific Ocean” about a growing Russian presence there, and he was likewise “credibly informed” of a trading voyage being prepared in New England “under the Command of Experienced Seamen (who accompanied Captain Cook in his last Voyage).”313 Hamilton was captivated by Pond, describing him as “qualified by an excellent constitution … and by an active mind” with “a passion for making discoveries.”314 He assented that Pond’s envisioned mission “may prove of infinite utility to this country, consequently of great importance to the parent state.”315 As Pond reminded his British audience, the passage to Asia would likely “very soon fall a prey to the enterprizes of other Nations” without the crown’s backing.316

313 Quoted in Wagner, Peter Pond, 82.
314 Quoted in ibid., 77.
315 Quoted in ibid., 77.
316 Quoted in ibid., 83.
But officials in London did not concur, and Pond’s proposal failed to cull royal favor. Undeterred, in 1787 he prepared a third map, this one intended for presentation to the empress of Russia. Neither Pond nor the map made it to Russia, because two years later he secured the backing of the North West Company to explore the rumored passage to Cook’s River. By this time, Pond had gained a reputation for his short temper after being involved in two murders in the backcountry. Alexander Mackenzie, Pond’s protégé, was picked to lead the expedition over the volatile older man. Mackenzie became the first Euro-American to cross the North American continent, but the path he traveled was so arduous that it was not followed again until a number of decades later. Certainly he did not end up in England by way of Russia, as Pond had hoped.\(^{317}\)

Nevertheless, while Mackenzie spent most of 1789 ascending the river that now bears his name, Pond continued his promotional tour of the Atlantic seaboard — first in Philadelphia, then in Quebec, where he met a prominent merchant named Isaac Ogden. Like Hamilton, Ogden was captivated by the trader, and he raved to his father in London about this “Gentleman of observation and Science, who has actually traversed [the western lands], and made his map in it.”\(^{318}\) As Ogden assured, he “was supplied with the proper Instruments here to take his Latitude and instructed fully in the knowledge of Astronomy &c. &c. His Latitude is undoubtedly Right and his Longitude is near Right.”\(^{319}\) In this way, like Swaine and Ledyard before him, Peter Pond’s mastery of mythical geography allowed him to become an amateur scientist in the eyes of prominent Europeans.

\(^{317}\) Ronda, *Astoria and Empire*, 9-10.
\(^{318}\) Quoted in Wagner, *Peter Pond*, 86.
\(^{319}\) Quoted in ibid., 95-96.
The geography of the western interior produced by Pond and others became important source materials for British cartographers in the late eighteenth century and for the shaping of subsequent American images of the interior. But his actions in the 1780s illustrate how the mythical terrain of the Northwest remained extant even after contact. The obscurity around geographical information obtained from Indigenous sources allowed the most important features of the Northwest – by the late eighteenth century, its riverine communication systems – to remain peripatetic even when the overall contours of North America were determined. Moreover, politically and commercially interested Europeans and Americans exploited uncertainties about Cook’s survey of the coast to pique imperial attentions and benefit personally from potential discoveries. Embodying aspects of both Arthur Dobbs’ and La Vérendrye’s approach to the American Northwest, Peter Pond combined ambiguous European knowledge with maneuverable Indigenous geography to advance his personal agenda, but when Alexander Mackenzie was unable to actualize Pond’s imaginative depictions, his ambitious designs were foiled by the realities of Northwestern geography.

**Admiral Fonte’s Return to the Northwest Coast**

The mythical past of the Northwest reared its head in more mysterious ways as well as Europeans arrived on the Pacific coast in the late eighteenth century. The Northwest Coast was a theater of imperial politics in addition to the focus of transnational scientific pursuits in the late eighteenth century. The Nootka crisis is traditionally considered the watershed event not only in the early history of the Pacific Northwest but also in the atrophy of Spain’s colonial possessions in the Americas. Events
that took place during the summer of 1789 in Nootka Sound in modern-day British Columbia almost precipitated another conflict between Britain and the Bourbon houses of France and Spain. As one British critic at the time derisively put it, the British government sought to fashion “a claim to the catskins of Nootka Sound” into a “cogent motive for war,” protesting that exclusive Spanish claims to the Pacific coast of North America were unjustifiable. Spain was forced to back down from negotiations because France, seized by revolutionary fervor, was unable to commit to back their longtime allies. At a ceremony in 1924 commemorating Cook’s arrival at Nootka, historian Frederick W. Howay remembered Nootka as “the victory of two principles which Britain had championed from the days of Queen Elizabeth.” In rhetoric reminiscent of both Arthur Dobbs and John Winthrop, Howay enumerated these principles:

(i) That the sovereignty of waste lands may be obtained by that civilized nation which first with the consent of the natives enters into real possession, occupies, and puts them to use.

(ii) That the great oceans of the world are not, and can not be, the private property of any nation; that they are the great highways for the intercourse of the nations.

The Nootka crisis has been analyzed and immortalized over the centuries as a pivotal moment in both eighteenth-century European politics and relations between Europeans and Natives on the Northwest Coast. However, an aspect that has remained unnoticed is the influence of apocryphal accounts of the Northwest during...

322 Ibid., 24.
the events that instigated the diplomatic controversy. In more ways than one, Admiral Bartholomew de Fonte was present in the dealings between Native groups and the American, Spanish, and British visitors to the coast in 1789.

The events of that summer will sound familiar from Fonte’s putative letter. Spanish officials were alarmed to learn of some British trading vessels at Nootka Sound, and Estéban José Martínez was sent north to apprehend the navigators. The sticking point was whether the British traders – who had sailed directly from China under Portuguese colors – were constructing a permanent settlement, which in Spanish eyes constituted an infringement on their exclusive right to establish factories. Like Fonte, Martínez traveled up the coast with orders to arrest the intruders. Finding the Portuguese ships suspicious and a schooner, the North West America, that had been hastily built on the coast, Martínez carried out these orders and seized the British ships.

In Nootka Sound, Martínez also encountered two American ships, the George Washington and the Columbia Rediviva – the two Boston trading vessels whose preparations Pond had reported to Hamilton in his letter of 1785. Rather than apprehend the Americans in addition to the British, Martínez opted to treat them with kindness – a defiant act, as Burriel had pointed out about Fonte in Noticia de la California, because it meant disobeying his orders directly. Much as Fonte had treated the New Englanders with respect and traded with them, Martínez immediately engaged amicably with the Americans. The New Englanders gave Martínez some clothes and three exotic tropical birds as a token of friendship, then “saluted the flag.

324 The Portuguese flag and captain were a ruse to avoid obtaining the East India Company license to trade on the coast and ship furs across the Pacific, a requirement of British law that many traders circumvented. Howay, British Columbia and the United States, 2-8.
of his Most Catholic Majesty with seven guns,” a gesture that impressed the Spanish official. John Kendrick, the ship’s captain, had been trading with the indigenous Nuu-chah-nulth groups of the sound for weeks. Kendrick accompanied Martinez to visit Maquinna and the other chiefs, and introduced him as his brother, who would protect and assist them, and to whom they should be very friendly. Thereafter, as Martinez proudly recorded, the Indians saluted him as “friend.”

When pressed about the Americans’ designs in the region – which were, of course, to profit from the burgeoning fur trade between the Northwest Coast and China – Kendrick regaled Martinez with a pitiful tale of broken rudders and sickly sailors. “Finding the natives Inofensive & a good Harbor to repair my ship,” he told the Spaniard, “now as you may observe we are getting our Ship in readiness for Sea with all possible dispatch and as soon as this is accomplished shall depart from the port.” While Kendrick did not disclose that he hoped to trade with the Natives, he did admit a desire make some geographical discovery. “I thought it best,” Kendrick said of the Columbia Rediviva, “to employ her on discovery to the Northward of this port particularly to explore the Streights of Admiral De Fonte.”

In this moment, Kendrick found the mythical past of the Northwest immensely useful. Through Fonte’s apocryphal account, imaginary geography allowed him to use the investigation of myth as a pretense for commercial gain, his true objective.

Given the political atmosphere following the American Revolution, the similarities

325 A crewmember of the Columbia Rediviva wrote that Martínez “was no sooner informed who we were than he said if there was any thing in his ship we stood in need of he would supply us.” Quoted in Frederick W. Howay, “Captains Gray and Kendrick: The Barrell Letters,” Washington Historical Quarterly 12.4 (1921), 250.
326 Quoted in ibid., 251.
327 Quoted in ibid., 248.
328 Quoted in ibid., 249.
between Fonte’s and Martínez’s actions are more interesting than inexplicable. For one, Martínez likely thought the American ships were actually owned by George Washington himself. Besides the name of the ship, Martínez was misled by Kendrick’s practice of addressing his letters to Washington as “President of Congress” – not because Washington was the intended recipient of his reports, but, in Kendrick’s words, “the Extream distance these letters have to pass through the Spanish dominions renders it Necessary to direct them to some public Carachter to insure their safety.”  

A letter written by Martínez to George Washington in 1792 reveals more about his ulterior motives behind treating the Americans with kindness. “Supposing that Y[our] E[xcellency] is acquainted with the services which I rendered to the Bostonian expedition commanded by Capt. John Kendrick at the time when I was commander in chief of another on the North West coast of America, I take the liberty of troubling Y. E. to the end that interposing your influence with Congress, they may distinguish me with the order of Cincinnatus, for which I shall be very thankful to your Excellency.”

After the Americans had sailed from the coast in the fall of 1789, Martinez recorded his version of events to his superiors in Mexico. In a long review of the whole situation, Martínez revealed his role in abetting the Americans’ subterfuge: “The sloop Washington continued on her way, not on a voyage of discovery as her commander said, but in pursuit of the fur-trade, which is the principal object of all the people who come to this coast. I could have taken this sloop and the frigate Colum-

329 Quoted in ibid., 254.
330 To George Washington from Estéban José Martínez, 14 April 1792, FO.
bia, but I had no or my situation did not permit me to do it. I treated this enemy as a friend."  

He even entrusted a number of furs to Kendrick to be sold in Canton on his account, though he doubted any profits would ever materialize.

The Fonte account, despite its fictitious nature, helps to contextualize how events on the coast often contrasted with affairs in imperial Europe. According to the letter, Fonte had disregarded his orders and treated the New England captain with respect when one crewmember told me the Owner was a fine Gentleman, and Major General of the largest Colony in New England, ... so I received him like a Gentleman, and told him, my Commission was to make Prize of any People seeking a North West or West Passage into the South Sea, but I would look upon them as Merchants trading with the Natives for Bever, Otters, and other Furs and Skins....

In accepting Kendrick’s subterfuge and cooperating with the Americans, Martínez made the same calculation that Fonte made in Petiver’s invention after recognizing that his counterpart was a “fine Gentleman.” He reaped the rewards in the form of improved relations with the Mowachaht, personal financial gain, and even the hope of additional glory, as his letter to Washington attests.

The same cordiality between foreigners who perceived one another as peers is apparent a few years after the first tenuous exchange at Nootka. Two naval officers, the Spanish Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra and the British George Vancouver, were dispatched in 1792 to carry out treaty negotiations at Nootka Sound. While the diplomatic conflict remained combustible, the two officers developed a friendly relationship with one another. Modern scholars posit that Quadra’s goodwill towards Vancouver was a ploy to disarm the British negotiator and direct political events to

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332 Quoted in Williams, Voyages of Delusion, 421.
the advantage of Spanish interests on the coast. Even so, these moments during the watershed events of the early colonial history of the Pacific Northwest point to the hidden legacies of the myths that informed centuries of European ideas about the place. The more explicit return of Fonte in the form of his mythical waterway, which came when Kendrick offered investigation of the hoax’s geographical descriptions as the reason for his voyage, illustrates that the mythical terrain of the Northwest continued to factor into not only European reconnaissance but also encounters on the coast with tremendous political ramifications. As the following section will show, mythical geography influenced empirical observations taking place on the coast in the name of Enlightenment science.

**Malaspina y Maldonado**

Myths had the power to influence even the most thoroughly prepared and scientifically inclined travels to the Northwest Coast. Like the imaginary Pacific islands had determined the Russians’ route and contact in North America, the Northwest Passage myth decisively shaped Spain’s late-century attempt to bring enlightened European scientific pursuit to the Northwest.

Alejandro Malaspina was born in Italy and studied at Clementine College in Rome before becoming a member of the Order of St. John in Malta in 1774. That year, at the age of 20, he was accepted into the midshipman school in Cádiz, Spain, where he began a prosperous career as a mariner. Over a decade later, in command of a frigate owned by the Spanish Royal Philippines Company, he completed a circum-

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navigation of the globe and set his sights on an official expedition of exploration to the northern Pacific. An educated polymath and experienced navigator, Malaspina had both political and intellectual aims in mind for his voyage, and he outlined three in his proposal to the minister of the Spanish Navy. The first, “which can be termed the scientific part,” asserted that the Spanish should follow the “voyages of this sort in which navigation, geography, and humanity itself have made very rapid progress,” undertaken in recent decades by British and French ships “in noble competition.” The latter two were specifically for Spain’s benefit: first, the compilation of hydrographic charts and sailing instructions “covering the most remote parts of America;” second, “the investigation of the political status of America both in relation to Spain and to other European nations.”

A scholar of the Enlightenment, Malaspina saw his mission as a response to Adam Smith’s political theories as much as it “follow[ed] earnestly in the wake of Cook and Lapérouse.” His travels aimed to reform Spain’s approach to their vast American colonies. Whereas previous British voyages were inspired “by the desire to find new possessions and new opportunities for trade … and thereby to achieve fame, novelty, economic advantage and a happy triumph,” Spanish efforts necessarily “were fixed on acquiring thorough knowledge of a range of immense possessions, prudently disengaging from those that proved useless or deleterious, and establishing much-needed communication between [them].”

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335 Quoted in ibid., 175.
337 Ibid., lxxx.
Still, the expedition had higher goals than political reconnaissance. The two corvettes were christened *Atrevida* and *Descubierta* – “the daring” and “the discovering,” respectively. “Would that I were able,” he wrote in the introduction to his published journals, “in the exercise of so great a duty, to apply the utmost energy in philanthropy; the greatest assiduity in the study of nature, the highest impartiality in examining the nature and rights of man, and bring them all to bear on social questions.” Botanical and astronomical observations were crucial to the mission’s success; Spain’s monarch, Carlos III, was an ardent supporter of the arts and sciences, and his embrace of Enlightenment ideals explains the contrast between Malaspina’s endeavors and the paranoia that surrounded earlier Spanish travels up the coast.

But where Malaspina hoped to add a sense of finality to the Northwest’s geography, in reality – like so many others before him – he encountered the Northwest’s imaginary geography, still eminently potent a decade after Cook’s initial survey. Two retrograde obstacles, the reemergence of the Northwest Passage myth and Spain’s reactionary response to the French Revolution, fatally ended his hope to forge a new direction for scientific inquiry and to reform Spanish colonial administration. In 1770, a noble Castilian family came forward with a manuscript letter dating from the early seventeenth century, written by one Lorenzo Ferrer Maldonado. The letter recounted a voyage circumventing North America in 1588, in which Maldonado allegedly sailed northwest from the Atlantic Ocean into the Strait of Anian, reaching the northern Pacific, where he turned around and completed the return voyage to Spain.

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338 Ibid., lxxii.
340 The Maldonado account is reprinted in Appendix I of Williams, *Voyages of Delusion*, 423-30.
teenth-century archival work exposed Maldonado as “a deceiving promoter” and “inventive charlatan,” but his work intrigued many at a time before the Pacific coast north of California was unknown to Europeans.  

After the reconnaissance of the coast in the 1770s and 1780s, the precise coordinates of Maldonado’s tale proved crucial to keep his mythical geography possible. Maldonado claimed to have entered the Strait of Labrador (Davis Strait) in Hudson’s Bay at 60° and sailed northwest into a westward passage at 75°, which he followed for nearly 800 leagues before emerging again around 60° between two coasts – what he believed to be Asia and America. As Pond’s efforts demonstrated, the potential access around 60° into Cook’s Inlet (or River) kept hopes of a Northwest Passage alive in the northernmost reaches of North America. The coastline just south of 60° was also an area that had not been observed by Cook on his final voyage. Maldonado’s far-flung passage around 75° further piqued Europeans’ interests and remained elusive even by the time of Malaspina’s preparations in 1789. The entrance on the Pacific coast was said to be cut from jagged hillside, wide enough to harbor 500 vessels, and Maldonado claimed the passage had already been traveled by Chinese ships.  

Several of Malaspina’s men, combing the official archives in Madrid, came upon a seemingly authentic report of Maldonado’s voyage of discovery – his memoir, which he had originally offered to the king in 1609. The account, which in Malaspina’s eyes “bears all the hallmarks of authenticity,” gave the expedition hope that there

341 Quoted in Cook, Flood Tide, 21.
remained “some certainty not taken into account so far concerning this voyage, which [would] leave room for a new search.”

Malaspina accordingly included Maldonado’s geography in his plans: “Of course the journal or narrative in question require that the lower regions of America from $60^\circ$ to $65^\circ$ be closely explored, since Ferrer himself declares that the mouth of the Strait of Anian is very difficult to find; and … in the wake of Maldonado it is necessary to reach $75^\circ$.” The expedition was to sail first to Montevideo, then around Cape Horn and up the Pacific coast of South America, visiting the Hawaiian Islands before continuing northward along the Californian coast to the regions mentioned by Maldonado. The two ships set out in July 1789, rendezvousing in Acapulco after nearly two years of reconnoitering Spain’s possessions in the Americas. However, unexpected developments in Europe altered their planned route. In addition to new scientific instruments, officials in Acapulco brought news of potential war with Britain over the conflict in Nootka Sound and sealed orders redirecting the expedition directly to the Alaskan coast rather than the Hawaiian Islands [fig. 26].

Rather than the Nootka crisis (which was beyond Malaspina’s political purview), the new destination was a response to a paper published in Paris substantiating Maldonado’s claim of a navigable passage around $60^\circ$ on the Pacific coast of North America – the same region as Pond was highlighting to American and Canadian officials. The paper was the work of Jean-Nicolas Buache de la Neuville, premier géographe du roi at the time and nephew (and something of a surrogate son) of the famous mapmaker Philippe. The younger Buache had been just nine years old when

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344 Ibid., 175.
his uncle and Joseph-Nicolas Delisle presented their original paper and map affirming the authenticity of Admiral Fonte’s voyage to the Academy of Sciences. In November 1790, Buache de la Neuville did the same for the Maldonado manuscript, publicizing the documents uncovered by Malaspina’s researchers to a wide European audience. In response, the Spanish crown ordered that Malaspina personally inspect the controversial claims.345

A Spanish translation of Buache’s memoir had been sent to Acapulco; even before they departed on May 1, Malaspina and his officers agreed that Buache’s work was full of inaccuracies – in fact, “the existence of the passage actually seemed very improbable.”346 After examining the coast as far as Alaska “with the utmost carefulness,” Malaspina finally judged that “the Russians settled in Cook’s River could not be ignorant of nor hide a channel of communication, and thus navigation any further west appeared just as useless.”347 But besides changing Malaspina’s priorities, Buache’s presentation had practical consequences for Spanish experiences with the American Northwest and its people. While in Yakutat Bay, one of the northernmost points reconnoitered by the expedition, Malaspina’s men had their first encounter with the Indigenous peoples of North America. The Tlingit, notoriously aggressive and volatile, were known to live in the area, and Malaspina chose a safe anchorage where “the harbor was more like a basin, with the natives living nearby in numbers large enough to be studied without fear of disturbing their customs.”348

346 Lang and Walker, Exploring the Globe through Primary Documents, 183.
347 Ibid., 183.
Here the Spaniards learned to navigate the customs of the Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast. The Tlingit were apprehensive of the foreigners until some Spaniards agreed to descend into the Tlingit boats as hostages. After this concession by the Europeans, a lively trade of salmon and furs for nails and other metals ensued on the ships. The Tlingit communicated to the Spanish through signs that Europeans had visited them previously and “explained to us about some battle with very strange gestures and postures, which showed they were very warlike.”

A Tlingit chief, whom the ship’s artist, Tomás de Suría, described as “old, venerable and ferocious,” had lost a son in the battle. Delighted by a portrait painted by Suría, the chief asked the artist to draw the mask of the enemy who had killed his son, and Suría acquiesced.

The next day, the Spaniards witnessed the grandiosity of Native American rituals.

Figure 26.
The proposed (red) and actual (black) routes taken by Malaspina’s expedition to the Pacific, which felt the consequences of the persistent Northwest Passage myth not only in their itinerary but also in their dealings with Indigenous groups along the coast from Nootka Sound to Yakutat Bay in Alaska.

349 Lang and Walker, Exploring the Globe through Primary Documents, 188.
350 Henry R. Wagner, trans., “Journal of Tomás de Suría of his Voyage with Malaspina to the Northwest Coast of America in 1791,” Pacific Historical Review 5.3 (1936), 249.
when some strangers approached the Tlingit beachfront. The chief asked Malaspina to fire one of the *Descubierta*’s guns to frighten the enemies; after Malaspina complied, the chief hailed the visitors and welcomed them ashore with embraces and songs. What the Spanish thought was a narrowly avoided conflict was in fact a mock battle, part of the Tlingit’s ritualized welcoming ceremony [fig. 27].

These experiences with Native Alaskans directly informed Malaspina’s encounters with Indigenous peoples further down the coast at Nootka Sound. Reaching Nootka in August 1791, the captain openly wondered why more Natives had not approached the ships, but also acknowledged, “various causes … had brought about, on the part of the natives, a timid and cautious behavior towards our establishment.” What Malaspina could not have realized was that he was inserting himself into a complex network of intertribal relations, centered on both exchange and warfare, in which rival chiefs made alliances with rival European visitors to enhance their own power.

In 1789, as part of the events precipitating the Nootka crisis, Esteban Martínez had killed a chief of the Mowachaht group of the Nuu-chah-nulth people, whose traditional homeland is on the west coast of modern-day Vancouver Island. This chief had been aligned with the British; after his murder, Maquinna, another British-allied Mowachaht chief, fled and endeavored to limit contact with Spanish visitors. For this reason, the Spanish immediately found friendly relations with Tlupananú, a rival

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352 *Malaspina’s Journals*, vol. 2, 172.
of Maquinna’s who “always stood out” among the chiefs, according to Malaspina.\textsuperscript{355}

On the other hand, the Spanish navigator observed “considerable mistrust in his face” when Maquinna finally came to meet the corvettes in Nootka Sound.\textsuperscript{356} One Native chief told Malaspina that the Spanish were viewed with “vexation, coldness, and fear.”\textsuperscript{357}

But in spite of their past history, the Spaniards departed Nootka Sound after several weeks of trade and astronomical observation with “our peaceful relationship with the natives now more solidly established, although at the cost of various presents … as well as a continual contribution of biscuit.”\textsuperscript{358} Suría sketched a portrait of

\textsuperscript{355} Lang and Walker, \textit{Exploring the Globe through Primary Documents}, 195.
\textsuperscript{356} \textit{Malaspina’s Journals}, vol. 2, 179.
\textsuperscript{357} Clayton, \textit{Islands of Truth}, 106.
\textsuperscript{358} \textit{Malaspina’s Journals}, vol. 2, 179.
Maquinna in the same style that had captivated the Tlingit chief two months earlier [fig. 28]. Looking back on their encounters, Malaspina added:

The canoes no longer fled at the sight of our boats and we were daily surrounded by fishermen, with many fish of excellent quality, while some of the natives spent the night beside the observatory. There were few chiefs who had not visited us.359

His account of events at Nootka may be colored by his desire to appease Spanish officials in Madrid and New Spain, who instructed navigators to treat the Natives with benevolence. Malaspina’s description was also in some respects self-congratulatory: not until later negotiations between Vancouver, Bodega y Quadra, and Maquinna was this web of competing interests actually smoothed out.360

However, even if these friendly exchanges were not fictitious, they were only temporary. After the tenuous exchange in that led to the international crisis, few Euro-American vessels trafficked Nootka Sound. European relations with the Mowachaht disintegrated after the Spanish departed. Local Indigenous oral histories – as told to a missionary in 1905 – recall that in the intervening years, “Maquinna became spiteful and vowed to plunder the next ship that came.”361 When that ship, the Boston, arrived in 1803, the Mowachaht seized it and slaughtered the crew. Mowachaht oral histories recount that after the Boston attack, Maquinna grew stingy and wanted to keep everything for himself.362 Following the original Spanish itinerary would have deprived the Spaniards of experience dealing diplomatically with the Indigenous peoples along the coast. Crucially, the original plan would have brought Malaspina’s ships to the Northwest Coast at a later date in the local political history

359 Ibid., 177.
360 Clayton, Islands of Truth, 106.
361 Ibid., 127.
362 See Dolin, Fur, Fortune, and Empire, pp..
of Nootka Sound. Likewise, their encounters at Yakutat Bay would have been in-formed by earlier experiences at Hawaii and Nootka. These developments, which influenced later relations between the Spanish, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Tlingit, were contingent on the enduring allure of the Northwest Passage myth, kept alive by the geographical details of Ferrer Maldonado’s account.

Encounters as part of Malaspina’s scientific inquiry along the Pacific Coast also engendered mythical interpretations of the Northwest’s natural history. While in theory the studies done on board the *Atrevida* and *Descubierta* represented the height of enlightened European science, the theological dimension of natural history persisted in a number of its members’ accounts of the Northwest. Inspired by the jagged coastline, the artist Suría – who had never sailed on the open sea – hypothesized that “some continents became separated and lost when that terrible earthquake took place at the death of Jesus Christ, demonstrating even to a stubborn person the pain of

![Figure 28.](image-url)

Maquinna, chief of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples during the height of the coastal fur trade (and during the Nootka Sound crisis), as sketched by Tomás Suría, the artist attached to the Malaspina expedition, who drew similar portraits of Tlingit chiefs in Alaska.
seeing Our Maker suffer.”

This divinely orchestrated geological movement would explain how the same people “lacking as they did a knowledge of navigation,” as he believed, could populate islands as disparate as the Hawaiians, Guadalupe, and those along the coast of North America. “All of them, men and women,” Suría noted of the coastal peoples, “generally speaking, have something of Chinese features.” Alternatively, Suría offered, “possibly in ancient times America was wider and who knows if it did not connect with Asia … and in consequence the many islands which are close to both coasts were united to them.” This phenomenon would also explain why “all Americans were heathen … before the Spaniards propagated among them the light of the evangel.”

When Malaspina returned to Madrid in 1794, he found the political atmosphere in Spain had changed drastically since his departure. After Carlos III’s death and the outbreak of revolutionary activity in France, reactionary officials did not share the zeal for scientific pursuit that had motivated his expedition. Just as he had endeavored to use Adam Smith’s political theory to inform his inspection of Spanish colonial possessions, Malaspina promoted the liberation of the American colonies in favor of a confederation of free states upon his return to Europe. He engaged Prime Minister Manuel de Godoy in a heated argument; although Malaspina and Godoy agreed on many reform issues, the minister feared that Malaspina was part of a conspiracy to depose him. In response, Malaspina was blacklisted and sent to prison; only in 1803, with the intervention of Napoleon Bonaparte, was he freed from

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364 Ibid., 253.
365 Ibid., 270.
366 Ibid., 271.
367 Lang and Walker, Exploring the World through Primary Documents, 197-98.
prison and ultimately exiled from Spain in 1803. His expedition was subject to the persistent European infatuation with the Northwest Passage, which reappeared in 1789 in the form of Philippe Buache de la Neuville’s treatise with practical consequences not only for Malaspina’s reconnaissance of the region’s geography but also his dealings with the Indigenous groups living along the coast. And as the Spanish crown had pursued a policy of secrecy surrounding the Northwest to dissuade travel in earlier centuries, officials withheld Malaspina’s journals from public view until 1885, furthering the influence myths and retrograde policies had on the Spanish navigator despite his devotion to Enlightenment principles of political equality and scientific pursuit. 368

**The Legacy of the Mythical Northwest**

Later visitors to the Northwest came face to face with the traces of the Northwest’s mythical past. People of mixed descent encountered around the turn of the century offered undeniable evidence of earlier encounters that are known only through archaeological evidence and oral accounts. For years, the Manila galleons never tarried long on the California coast; prevailing wisdom among Spanish navigators long held that spending as little time as possible in higher latitudes diminished the effects of scurvy. Although no Spanish ship ever reported wrecking above the Californian coast, a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century galleons were lost and never reached their destination after departing from Manila. When Lewis and Clark arrived on the reached the mouth of the Columbia River, they confronted the

368 Ibid., 174-75..
indisputable traces of past contact between the Spanish and Clatsop people. As William Clark wrote in his journal on December 31, 1805:

> With the party of Clatsops who visisted us last was a man of much lighter colour than the natives are generally. He was freckled with long duskey red hair, about 25 years of age, and certainly must be half white at least. This man appeared to understand more of the English language than the others of his party but did not speak a word of English. He possesses all the habits of Indians.\(^{369}\)

More clues were revealed six years later, when the Astorian fur traders ascended the Columbia and met a blind old man who went by “Soto,” who claimed to be “the son of a Spaniard who had been wrecked at the mouth of the river.”\(^{370}\) According to report, the Clatsops massacred all but four men of the ship’s crew, who “were spared and married native women.”\(^{371}\)

Other testimonies from Anglo-American visitors to the mouth of the Columbia affirm these early accounts. The fur trader Alexander Henry arrived in 1813 and added an interesting fact: “They bring us frequently lumps of beeswax fresh out of the sand which they collect on the coast to the S. where the Spanish ship was cast away some years ago.”\(^{372}\) This wreck at Nehalem Beach in Oregon was likely one of the Manila galleons, whose cargo often consisted in part of beeswax from southeastern Asia being shipped to Acapulco to supply Spanish demand for candles. Scholars deem it likely that these castaways arrived on Pacific shores long enough ago to leave more than one bloodline among the indigenous groups of the Northwest.\(^{373}\)

These encounters live on in Indigenous oral histories as well. A Chinook story, recorded by anthropologist Franz Boas in 1894, tells of an old woman “who lived

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370 Quoted in Cook, *Flood Tide*, 32.
371 Quoted in ibid., 32.
372 Quoted in ibid., 32.
373 Ibid., 32-35.
in a Clatsop village near the mouth of the Big River.”

Mourning the loss of her son, one day she “took a walk along the beach where she had often gone in happier days.” On the shoreline, “she saw a strange something out in the water not far from shore. At first she thought it was a whale. When she came nearer, she saw two spruce trees standing upright from it.” The sight of it shocked her: “‘It is not a whale,’ she said to herself. ‘It is a monster.’”

However, this beast was no mystery to the Clatsop woman. When a bear with the face of a human appeared, she cried, “Ah, the thing we have heard about in tales is lying over there. There are two bears on it, or maybe they are people.” Of course, it is impossible to know to what forewarning the woman was referring. However, European goods traveled great distances between Indigenous groups, and the networks of communication that La Vérendrye encountered in the interior attest to how quickly information circulated between Native populations in the Northwest well before Euro-Americans first arrived. It is very possible that other groups had warned the Clatsop about “these strange-looking men” and their contraptions – alternatively, as other groups’ traditions relate, they may have been warned through dreams and premonitions.

In any case, the Chinook story tells that when two foreign creatures arrived on the shore, the Clatsop “climbed up the strange thing” and set fire to it: “The strange thing burned just like fat. Everything burned except the iron, the copper, and the brass. … None of the Indians had ever seen iron and brass before. The Clatsop

375 Ibid., 37.
376 Ibid., 38.
became rich selling the metals to the other tribes.” Two chiefs from separate villages kept the marooned sailors as captives, a detail that helps to explain how European-infused bloodlines multiplied in the years before more extensive late-century contact.

These accounts are important to understanding that events on the Northwest Coast and in the interior exist – and have been similarly mythologized – in Indigenous history as well as more Euro-centric stories of the past. In 1992, the Squamish Chief Philip Joe gave his people’s account of European arrival and the intercultural exchanges that ensued in the region – events, he noted, that “have been inexorably entwined, although recalled from different perspectives.” As my elders tell the story,” Chief Joe related, a “mysterious floating island” arrived on the shore, which the Squamish thought carried “people from the land of the dead – and they are wrapped in their burial blankets!” In subsequent decades, Squamish histories tell, the Indigenous groups of the region competed over the floating islands that came to their lands, until the land and resources were taken away from the Natives.

Like Europeans, the Squamish commemorated this mythical encounter in geography by thereafter referring to the site as Whul-whul-LÁY-ton, meaning “Whiteman place.” Many place-names of the Pacific Northwest, named after European statesmen or travelers, speak to its “imperial fashioning.” But in moments like first contact between Squamish and Euro-Americans, the lasting power of myth in geography is patently clear.

378 “A Chinook Story,” in ibid., 36.
379 “How the Squamish Remember George Vancouver,” in From Maps to Metaphors, 5.
380 Ibid., 3.
381 Clayton, Islands of Truth, 233.
382 “How the Squamish Remember George Vancouver,” in From Maps to Metaphors, 5.
Conclusion

THE PERSISTENCE OF MYTH

With the mythical past of the Northwest in mind, looking at a modern National Geographic map of North America, one is led to wonder, Where does the Northwest Passage exist today? There are a few suitable answers. One option is the “true” passage, navigated by British sailors in the nineteenth century, which passes from Davis Strait into the Gulf of Boothia and into the Pacific Ocean through Bering Strait. Another possibility is Bering Strait itself – separating North America from Asia, in many ways it is the body of water that most closely resembles the mythical Strait of Anian. Or perhaps the nearest realization of a mythical Northwest Passage is in the evidence of the prehistoric passage across a landbridge connecting the continents, uncovered by archaeologists and anthropologists following the same line of inquiry as John Ledyard centuries earlier.

But the Northwest Passage is also manifest in modern cartography in a more subtle way: the inscription of myth into geography. European toponymy of the Pacific Northwest testifies to the power of a maritime passage to motivate and influence reconnaissance and mapping efforts. In recent decades, historians have examined the narrative power of place-names. This is exceedingly true about the Northwest. In my opinion, the closest geographical feature to the mythical passage sought in earlier decades is the Strait of Juan de Fuca, a familiar body of water that contains the western bound of the imaginary border between the United States and Canada. Its geography is not only reminiscent of the entrances on the Pacific coast sought by

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European navigators from Francis Drake to George Vancouver. Its name also immortalizes a sixteenth-century sailor whose testimony factored centrally in the search for such a passage.

Juan de Fuca was the Spanish name adopted by a Greek sailor named Apóstolos Valerianos when he joined the Spanish Navy. In 1592, he claimed, on a reconnaissance mission sailing north from Mexico, he discovered an opening on the Northwest Coast that led him into the North Sea. His account was popularized in the widely read *Purchas, His Pilgrims*, published in 1625, but the tale actually dates from 1596, when a promoter of exploratory voyages named Michael Lok interviewed the Greek “Mariner and ancient Pilot of Shippes” while in Venice. Lok claimed that Fuca described to him a “broad Inlet of Sea, betweene 47 and 48 degrees of Latitude … with an exceeding high Pinacle, or spired Rocke, like a pillar thereupon.”

The strait named after him lies between 48° 25’ and 48° 38’ – reasonably accurate for the sixteenth century. Moreover, a chain of large columnar rocks jutting out at Cape Flattery, where the strait meets the Pacific Ocean, recalls the geography described by Fuca. Today the largest promontory bears the name “Fuca Pillar” [fig. 29].

Historians in the twentieth century remained skeptical that Fuca had actually traversed the Northwest Coast, let alone sighted and sailed through such a dramatic opening. In 1826, Henry Wagner expressed his belief that “while on the whole Lok probably concocted the story of the expedition to the Strait of Anian to support his well-known views about the existence of a northwest passage, it is not beyond the realm of probability that there may have been some foundation to it after all.”

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384 Reprinted in Appendix I of Williams, *Voyages of Delusion*, 413-16.
should be noted that like Fuca, Michael Lok was a renowned proponent of the Northwest Passage myth, having arranged Martin Frobisher’s polar expedition in 1576–1578. Allowances must also be made for errors in translation between Fuca and Lok, but in the original account, the “spired Rocke” lay on the northern side of the strait, whereas in reality the chain protrudes from the southern coast. Nevertheless, based on gaps in Spanish archival data, scholars have recently been more inclined to give credibility to Fuca’s claim to sailing on the Northwest Coast, if not through a Northwest Passage.  

Places such as Fuca’s Strait, where legends and hoaxes permeate empirical geographical observation, point to the power of myths to shape our understanding of

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386 While Fuca did often navigate the Pacific waters, there is no Spanish archival evidence for a voyage in the 1590s of three ships with “one hundred men, Souldiers…to discover the Straits of Anian, and…to resist the passage and proceedings of the English Nation,” nor of the following voyage “armed with Mariners onely.” Ibid., 22-29; Williams, *Voyages of Delusion*, 130-33.
the physical world. The verdant Northwest brought to mind by the Pacific Coastal Highway and other cultural images speaks to the symbolic meanings of the frontier mythology that spurred American westward expansion. However, in more ways than we realize today, the older worlds of the American West – what later generations saw as a vast wilderness to be overcome by Anglo-American settlement – were equally powerful in shaping modern conceptions of the region. Those earlier worlds are written into present-day geography, a lasting reminder of the persistent power of myths to influence and narrate our experiences in unknown or unfamiliar places.
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