

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1993

New World Encounters: Exploring The Great Plains of North America

John L. Allen
University of Connecticut

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Allen, John L., "New World Encounters: Exploring The Great Plains of North America" (1993). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 750.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/750>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

NEW WORLD ENCOUNTERS

EXPLORING THE GREAT PLAINS OF NORTH AMERICA

JOHN L. ALLEN

Arising partly from the debates, scholarly and otherwise, surrounding the commemoration of the Columbian Quincentennial, the claim has been made that the European discovery and exploration of the New World was a process that had “meaning only in terms of European ignorance, not in terms of any contribution to universal knowledge”¹ and that the study of exploration and discovery is therefore ethnocentric or (worse) racist. Such a claim, which denies the mechanisms of exploration and discovery their important place in the broader epistemological process of how we know and understand the world, is contentious.

John Allen is professor of geography at the University of Connecticut, editor of the three-volume North American Exploration, and author of dozens of books and essays on exploration and landscape perception. His Passage through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest (1975) is a classic in its field.

[GPQ 13 (Spring 1993): 69-80]

Neither discovery nor exploration can be examined outside the context of the cultural and intellectual milieu of the discoverers and explorers. Major discoveries—whether they be geographical or not—are made by people who recognize data that do not conform to their preexisting world view. Thus Europeans did “discover” (meaning to find out about, to realize, to see) the New World because neither North nor South America was previously a part of their geographical conceptualizations. Had Native Americans sailed eastward across the Atlantic and arrived on European shores that were not previously part of their world view, they too would have achieved “discovery.” It will be argued in this paper that various groups, at different times, have “discovered” the Great Plains—not necessarily meaning that they were the first to find out about, to realize, or to see the Plains but that they were the first representatives of their cultural milieu to do so and that, therefore, their “discovery” had special meaning for them and for their culture group in terms of what we can call “non-conforming data.” They had, in other words, encountered New Worlds.

MODELS OF GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGE

The essential failing of the arguments that the study of discovery and exploration is "ethnocentric" or "racist" is that such arguments ignore a substantial body of scholarship that is neither. This literature views exploration as a subjective process both dependent upon and creating geographical images or patterns of belief about the nature and content of the world or any of its regions; built into that view are considerable analyses of indigenous peoples and the environments they occupied and modified. Nearly a half century ago, John K. Wright, a geographer, described a geographical approach to the study of exploration that, had it been adopted as a basic paradigm of historical scholarship, would have led to the development of scholarly literature on explorers and exploration that would have been palatable to current critics. But a number of studies of exploration by geographers *have* followed Wright's non-antiquarian, systematic, and integrative approach. There is little evidence in the critical evaluations of the literature of exploration that either Wright's pioneering work or those studies based on it have even been read by the critics. Similarly, the works of Bernard DeVoto—an essayist and popular historian who also dealt with subjectivity in the exploratory process—have not been given their proper due by the critics of the literature of exploration and discovery.

In 1943 Wright suggested that the history of exploration should involve an approach that focused upon the role of geographical knowledge in exploration. Wright argued, along with the Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman, that America was not so much discovered or explored as it was "invented," with the "invention" coming about as the result of the attempt to reconcile the world view that preceded the events of 1492 with the expansion and change in geographical knowledge that followed the first landing of Columbus. It is important to keep in mind that when Wright spoke of geographical knowledge, he was not just thinking of European or Euro-American geographical

knowledge but of geographical knowledge from any or all points of view, covering (in his words) "the geographical ideas, both true and false, of all manner of people—not only geographers, but farmers and fishermen, business executives and poets, novelists and painters, Bedouins and Hottentots." For this reason, geographical knowledge, as Wright defined it, necessarily had "to do in large degree with subjective conceptions." Similarly, Bernard DeVoto, writing in 1952, proposed that those scholars studying North American exploration should seek to examine the ideas that explorers had about geography, the misconceptions and errors in those ideas, the growth of geographical knowledge following exploration, and "the relationship to all these things of various Indian tribes that affected them." Like Wright, DeVoto stressed the subjective elements in exploration, particularly with regard to the American West.² DeVoto could also well have agreed with Wright that the process of North American discovery and exploration incorporated the "invention" of geographical knowledge and regional images as much as it did the accumulation and accretion of lore.

There are three common elements in Wright's and DeVoto's work: a belief in the importance of geographical knowledge, particularly its subjective nature; a belief in the significance of the relationship between natural environment, indigenous peoples, and European and Euro-American explorers; and a belief in the subjective influence of the exploratory process upon later historical events. A model for a study of the exploration and discovery of the Great Plains based on Wright and DeVoto would therefore include: first, investigation of European, Euro-American, and Native American geographical knowledge of the Plains and the importance of that knowledge for explorers and exploration; second, examination of the contributions made to subsequent geographical lore of the Plains by those involved in the exploratory process; and third, analysis of the impact of exploration of the Plains upon subsequent processes, including the subjective process whereby the results of exploration are used to create

belief systems that become so dominant as to be defined as "traditions."

I submit that such a model would not only be productive in terms of our understanding of the Great Plains but would provide links between the exploration of the Great Plains and the broader process of exploration and the shaping of geographical knowledge in general. Taking what I view as essential in the viewpoints articulated by Wright and DeVoto and enlarging them somewhat, let me offer an example of a study of Great Plains exploration that might both satisfy the critics of exploratory studies and place Great Plains exploration in conjunction with the Columbian Quincentennial by linking the discovery of America with several "New World encounters" or "discoveries" of the Great Plains and with the subsequent "invention of American tradition."³

GEOGRAPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS AND THE INVENTION OF AMERICAN TRADITION

"The invention of tradition" refers to that process whereby a relatively limited body of geographical knowledge becomes both shared and taken for granted by a people and, ultimately, becomes so fixed in their collective mind that the tradition begins to influence thought and action. Some traditions emerge when preconceived geographical lore based upon myth and folklore is given substance by geographical knowledge obtained through exploration. Other traditions develop as new geographical knowledge helps to create new ways of thinking.

An example of an invented tradition is the Euro-American belief

that our forefathers and mothers conquered a pristine wilderness untouched by humans before the European migrations, that those who preceded Europeans upon this continent did nothing to modify that wilderness environment, and that our ancestors who conquered the wilderness can be invariably cast in the heroic mold.

This belief constitutes a tradition that is

dependent not upon the reality of the historical-geographical process but upon the invention of it; that is, our shared view is of a past as we believe it was or would like it to be rather than as it was. . . . These invented traditions have played an important role in shaping our conceptions of who we were as European migrants to a new continent and continue to govern our current understanding of who we are as a people with traditions rooted in European-American thought processes and experiences and largely ignorant of Native American ones.⁴

Shortly after the first landfall of Columbus on an island off the North American continent, the invention of American tradition began. Emerging from the first half century of exploration in North America (between the first Columbian landfall and the early 1540s), there were four frequently contradictory interpretations of North American geography and the North American environment (including its native peoples) that became so fixed in the minds of European explorers and settlers that the interpretations served as conditioners of behavior and as shapers of what would become American traditions. These four interpretations were: the New World as Barrier, the New World as Passage, the New World as Desert, and the New World as Garden. Each of these interpretations was transferred to the region of the Great Plains as representatives of three colonial empires (Spain, Great Britain, and France) "discovered" and explored that region prior to 1804. And in the Great Plains, after 1804, the interpretations evolved into the American traditions that became crystallized as part of nineteenth-century American images of the Plains and that, to a certain degree, remain as part of the way in which we view this region today. In this fashion, images of the Great Plains as Barrier, Passage, Desert, and Garden still serve as metaphors for images of America in general.

The objective of Columbus on his first voyage was to secure for the merchant houses of Spain a route to the riches of the Orient that would be shorter, safer, and easier than the Great Silk Road across Asia, disrupted by the collapse of the Khanate of the Golden Horde. As soon as Columbus and his fellow explorers in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico began to understand the nature of the continental configuration of North, Middle, and South America, they began to view the New World as a barrier lying athwart their path to the riches of Cathay and Cipangu. The interpretation of the New World as Barrier was little more than an extension of the medieval concept of the impediment of the all-encircling Ocean Sea that surrounded the known world and—before the Columbian voyages—separated western Europe from Cathay and Cipangu. The replacement of the barrier of the medieval Ocean Sea with the barrier of a new continent simply redefined the limits to the ambitions of European commerce, and much of European exploration along the coastal margins of North America from 1492 to the middle of the sixteenth century was devoted to defining the nature of this barrier.⁵

As the search for a way through or around the barrier of North America continued, the second great interpretation of North American geography began to take shape—the interpretation of North America as Passage. The strength of the European preconception of an easy route to the Orient combined with the geography of logic and hope to create in the European imagination a vision of a passageway to the Sea of the Indies that could be uncovered by exploration. Even before Columbus, classical and medieval geographical theorists had posited a continental configuration for the world that would admit the passage of waters (and the ships borne upon those waters) from east to west.

On his first, second, and third voyages, Columbus sought the “indrawing seas” of medieval theory but, despite the promising currents of the western Caribbean, failed to find the potential passage of medieval and Renaissance cosmographers. Shortly after the initial Columbian search

for a passage to the west, in 1497-98, John Cabot and the Corte-Real brothers explored the Labrador-Newfoundland region, searching for a sea-level strait through what they were beginning to conceive of as a continent. Subsequent explorations by Giovanni da Verrazzano and Jacques Cartier added to the growing store of geographical information and developing geographical images of North America and helped to perpetuate the belief in a sea-level route to Asia through what was, by the 1540s, fully recognized as a continental barrier between Atlantic and Pacific. The interpretation of North America as holding the key to the Passage to India became so imbedded in both the theory and practice of geography as to become virtual tradition within a century of the Columbian voyages and, in one way or another, much of European and Euro-American exploration down to the opening years of the nineteenth century was devoted to the search for this invention.⁶ In time, the tradition of the Passage also came to imply the faith in growth and progress represented by the new land.

Like the interpretations of Barrier and Passage, the interpretation of the North American environment as Garden dates from times even before the earliest explorations of Columbus and his contemporaries. The concept of garden-like islands in the Ocean Sea west of Europe were part of the cosmography of the Mediterranean classical writers who described islands of bliss and splendor off European shores. Similarly, Celtic mythology—in the form of the isles of Hy-Brasil and the *Isla Fortunata* or Blessed Isles of the Saints—conditioned Europeans in the belief in a paradise-like island environment in the Ocean Sea. From medieval geographical lore and the idea of a designed earth that was a commonplace of Renaissance geographical thought, there emerged the idea of the terrestrial Paradise—with lands of God-given richness, fullness, and variety—shown on the easternmost verge of Asia on the maps of the immediate pre-Columbian period.⁷

As soon as the news of the initial landfall of Columbus reached Europe, there began to circulate geographical descriptions of the newly

discovered lands that surpassed in their extravagant description of the New World environment anything the classical theorists or medieval and Renaissance theologians had written on the evidences of God as seen in the works of his creation. Columbus himself believed he had located the terrestrial Paradise on his third voyage, and lengthy descriptions of the Atlantic seaboard of North America, penned by Giovanni da Verrazzano only a couple of decades later, stimulated the preexisting European belief in a Garden where the winds blew gentle on man and where the native inhabitants were people of the First Man, living in a state of grace. The New World was Garden in the European mind from the very beginning—partly because of the teleological demand for “sacred” spaces within which Christian Europe could find surcease from the Old World and partly because of the secular promise of economic opportunity demanded by an expanding mercantile system. The Garden, perhaps more than any of the other earliest interpretations of the North American environment, crystallized into an tradition that still dominates much of American thought.

As the Passage and Barrier were conflicting interpretations of North American geography, occupying the same space in reality and the same temporal framework in the minds of those who contemplated them, so was there a counter-image to the Garden—the interpretation of North America as Desert. Although some Europeans, particularly those from the Mediterranean region, understood the concept of climatic deserts, the Desert interpretation of the North American environment was less a conceptualization of an arid and barren environment than it was an impression of a profane and challenging one. Because North America was not inhabited by Christian folk, it was viewed by some Europeans as being initially beyond God’s salvation and was, therefore, understood as “profane” rather than “sacred” space.⁸

The gentle Arcadian people of the Garden image became rude and barbarous savages in the Desert image and in erroneously viewing North America as land “unimproved” by the

hand of the “savages,” Europeans of the sixteenth century and later used the words “desert” and “wilderness” interchangeably to mean land unsanctified by God. But it was a desert that could be transformed into sacred space or Garden by European occupation, thus providing a religious as well as an economic justification for European conquest and colonization. Like the image of the Garden, that of the profane Desert quickly became a dominating influence in American tradition and still provides a rationale for American exploitation of the environment.

Let me now take these four interpretations of the nature and content of North America dating from the time of the Columbian explorations—the images of Barrier, Passage, Garden, and Desert—and combine them with a cursory look at Great Plains exploration, focusing on the relationships between geographical knowledge and exploration, between the environment and the exploratory process, and between exploration and subsequent events, including the subjective process of inventing tradition. Space does not allow me to do anything other than to provide brief glimpses of those explorations of the Great Plains that were the most representative as New World encounters or “discoveries” for the three great cultural groups—Spanish, English, and French—responsible for most of pre-nineteenth-century North American exploration and, hence, for the invention of traditions that, in the nineteenth century, became distinctly American.

SPANISH DISCOVERY AND THE TRADITION OF BARRIER

The Spanish were the first Europeans to “discover” the Great Plains—and recall, if you please, that I am and will be using the word “discover” to mean a “New World encounter,” in other words, an individual or group recognition of geographical data that does not conform to that individual’s or group’s preexisting world view. The Spanish discovery of the Plains grew out of one of the best known geographic inventions of the entire First Age of Discovery.

Medieval Mediterranean (particularly Iberian) geographical lore contained the legends of a Spanish or Portuguese archbishop and seven bishops who had fled the Moorish invasions of the Iberian peninsula by sailing westward, with their followers, into the Ocean Sea. Somewhere in the Atlantic, they had found islands upon which they had built seven cities of gold and alabaster, cities that appeared on medieval and Renaissance maps as the *Isles of Antilla*. Columbus and his contemporaries sought for the cities of Antilla in the Caribbean; not finding them, they nevertheless gave to the Caribbean islands the name that has stuck—the “*Antilles*.” As Spanish exploration into the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean coastal regions failed to locate the cities of Antilla, the mythical cities retreated into the continental interior until they had become identified as the Seven Cities of Cibola and as a primary goal of Spanish exploration of the first half of the sixteenth century.⁹

During the latter years of the 1530s, several Spanish explorations in northern Mexico and the American Southwest provided additional geographical data on the supposed location of Cibola.¹⁰ The contact of these early Spanish explorers with the pueblo culture of the Zuñi led to distorted descriptions of “many-storied” cities and, finally, in 1540, the viceroy of New Spain dispatched Francisco Vázquez de Coronado to seek for and find Cibola. Coronado and his men wound their way through the rugged mountain country of western Mexico and into southeastern Arizona, where they located and conquered the Zuñi and Hopi pueblos they called Cibola and Tontoneac. These “cities” of adobe, containing little more precious than copper and turquoise, were a shock to minds that had come prepared to find rooms filled with gold and emeralds and Coronado shifted away from a reliance on his geographical preconceptions in favor of data obtained locally from Native American populations.

From a captured Native American the Spanish named “the Turk,” Coronado learned that far to the northeast, in what was described as a “sea of grass,” lay cities of gold so rich that their

lords were lulled to sleep under trees hung with little golden bells and sailed in boats with prows of solid gold. A new myth—that of Gran Quivera—arose to fill the gap left by the disappointment of Cibola, and in the spring of 1541, Coronado and his force left the Rio Grande Valley and struck out eastward across the Staked Plains of New Mexico and Texas and into the Great Plains physiographic province, ultimately reaching as far as central Kansas. Here, among the grass huts of the Wichita Indians, the search for a new Mexico or a new Peru ended in failure and Coronado returned to Mexico.¹¹

The exploration of Coronado is a classic example of the relationship between geographical knowledge and exploration: it was preconceived geographical lore that determined the goals of Coronado; it was geographical lore—obtained through contact with native peoples—that altered his exploratory behavior and caused him to push ever northeastward; and it was geographical lore—obtained through his observation of the Great Plains environment—that ultimately caused Coronado to abandon his search for a geographical will-o'-the-wisp.

The Coronado expedition also provides an excellent case study of the relationship between the exploratory process and the development of geographical knowledge, primarily because Coronado, or at least his chronicler Pedro Castañeda, provided the European or Euro-American world with the first and, for many years the most accurate, depiction of the Great Plains environment, including its native inhabitants. Are there more evocative descriptions of the Great Plains than Castañeda's “sea of grass” or his comment that “the land is the shape of a bowl . . . [and] wherever a man stands he is surrounded by the sky at the distance of a crossbow shot”? Or is there a better characterization than the chronicler's of the buffalo hunters of the Plains who “wander in companies . . . following the pastures according to the season . . . the hunch-back Kine [the buffalo] . . . are the food of the natives . . . They are meat, drink, shoes, houses, fire, vessels [dishes and utensils], and their masters' whole subsistence”? There is no better early description of the

agricultural potential of the Plains than Castañeda's comment that, whereas Coronado's men

did not find the riches of which they had been told . . . they found the beginning of a good place to settle in, so as to go farther from there. Since they came back from the country which they conquered and abandoned, time has given them a chance to understand . . . the good country they had in their hands, and their hearts weep for having lost so favorable an opportunity.¹²

Finally, Coronado's exploration illustrates well the relationship between exploration and subsequent events, including the invention of tradition. For Castañeda's favorable assessment of the Plains as farmland notwithstanding, the Spanish—over the course of the next two and a half centuries—transformed that solid and accurate geographical assessment into the invented tradition of the Barrier. Castañeda's account had spoken of the Gardenlike quality of the Great Plains—but it had also spoken of vast, awesome spaces and distances and, fearing the encroachment first of French and English and later of Americans from the north and east, the Spanish created—out of Castañeda's dream of “that better land that we did not see”—a buffer zone against the imperial advance of other powers. The government of New Spain suppressed the knowledge of abundance in the heartland, and Spanish settlements in the Plains—other than military garrisons—were discouraged as the Spanish empire in North America strove to erect a barrier that would separate them from the English and French and Americans just as effectively as the original interpretation of North America as Barrier had separated Europe from Cathay and Cipangu.

The nomadic buffalo-hunting tribes were traded with but, unlike other Native Americans with whom the Spanish had come in contact, they were mostly left alone. They were part of the barrier invented by Spain in the Great Plains. The invented tradition of Plains as Barrier gradually merged, in the Spanish geographi-

cal lore, with the interpretation of the Plains as Desert, and during the last period of Spanish occupation of Louisiana there began to appear in the Spanish literature comments about the aridity and barrenness of the Plains that were quite at odds with Castañeda's favorable descriptions of fertility and abundance. But the Spanish cannot be said to have invented the tradition of the Plains as Desert. That role is reserved for the English—the next European group after the Spanish to discover the Great Plains environment.

ENGLISH EXPLORATION AND THE TRADITIONS OF PASSAGE AND DESERT

From the very beginning of North American exploration, English efforts were focused on the interpretation of the New World as Passage. Indeed, even before the first Columbian landfall, English mariners sailing out of Bristol had sought westward across the Atlantic for a route to Asia. The discovery of Newfoundland and Labrador by John Cabot in 1497 gave the English a fix on a route across the North Atlantic that they believed, for more than a century, would lead to the commercially feasible route to Cathay and Cipangu. By the beginning of the last quarter of the sixteenth century, when the concept of North America as a separate continent was firmly fixed in European cosmography, English theorists such as John Dee and Humphrey Gilbert were developing treatises for the discovery of a Northwest Passage to the Pacific through the northern portions of the continent.¹³ From the 1570s to the 1630s, the English efforts to discover the Passage took them into Arctic waters and led to discovery of the Hudson Bay drainage region. There the search for a sea-level strait to the Pacific died out for a time and the British, through the operation of the commercial venture known as “the Company of Adventurers” (later called the Hudson's Bay Company), began exploring the lands south and west of Hudson Bay in search of a passage and of native populations to provide the furs upon which English commerce in northern North America had come to depend.

By the later years of the seventeenth century, English explorers in the Hudson Bay region had learned something of the regional geography of the lands immediately adjacent to the Bay; they had also learned of great rivers west of Hudson Bay that might hold the key to the Passage. Knowledge of the potential rich fur areas beyond the Hudson Bay littoral and conjecture over the great rivers that supposedly flowed in the direction of the setting sun prompted the Hudson's Bay Company to send out, in 1690, one of its most remarkable explorers—and the first British subject to encounter the New World of the Great Plains. This young explorer (only nineteen years of age in 1690) was Henry Kelsey; his mission was to obtain geographical knowledge of the interior and “by all faire psuasion & kind usage to Invite [Indians] to come downe & trade only” at the posts of the Hudson's Bay Company.¹⁴

It is difficult to reconstruct Kelsey's route south and west from Hudson Bay because much of his journal was written in poetry (and dreadful poetry it was, too). Nevertheless, it would seem that over the course of the next couple of years he traveled from York Factory at the mouth of the Nelson River on Hudson Bay as far south and west as the southern branch of the Saskatchewan River and even beyond, nearly to the 50th parallel. It is clear from his journals that he passed through the series of vegetation belts that the British—after him—recognized as the transition from the tundra of Hudson Bay shores to the boreal forest of the interior to the parkbelt bordering the grasslands of the northern Great Plains, and ultimately, into the Great Plains province itself. In 1691, Kelsey, traveling west and south with Native Americans, noted reaching “ye outtermost Edge of ye woods” and entering into a region of short grass prairie that he referred to as “barren grounds.”¹⁵ For a time he lived among Native Americans of the Great Plains including, quite probably, the Blackfeet, with whom he traveled, hunted buffalo, and fought with grizzly bears. He was almost certainly the first European to do most of these things. From his Native American hosts he not only

learned much about the character of the Great Plains region but about the mighty rivers that traversed it and even heard rumors of the great mountains that bounded the plains on the west. His one failure, in his own estimation, was in not reaching the mountains and the tribe of Indians that he came to call “the mountain poets.”

Kelsey's magnificent efforts were largely ignored by the English until the middle years of the eighteenth century, but when his accounts were retrieved from the already enormous Hudson Bay archives, two clear views of the western interior began to emerge. The first was the view of the river systems of the northern Plains as holding the key to a water passage through the interior to the Pacific. Kelsey certainly knew that the Saskatchewan River, which he had crossed, flowed toward the east; in the hopeful imaginary geography of the Hudson's Bay Company officials, however, the Saskatchewan's course was reversed; it flowed toward the west, toward the Pacific, and it was not until Alexander Mackenzie's explorations of the late 1700s that the English learned they could not reach the Pacific directly via the river systems of the interior.

The second element in the English image of the interior was of the Great Plains as “barren ground,” with soil and climate insufficient to support European-style agriculture.¹⁶ This interpretation of the Plains as Desert became so fixed in the English geographical knowledge as to mature into an invented tradition that controlled English behavior toward the grasslands regions well into the nineteenth century. Even as skilled a geographer and excellent an observer as the great David Thompson wrote of the Great Plains in the 1790s: “these Great Plains may be said to be barren for great spaces, even of coarse grass . . . even the several Rivers that flow through these Plains do not seem to fertilise the grounds adjacent to them.”¹⁷ Like Coronado's discovery of the Great Plains, Kelsey's discovery was borne of geographical misconception, was influenced by geographical knowledge, and was responsible for the creation

of subsequent geographical ideas and invented traditions—in this case, the invented tradition of the Desert.

Of all the invented traditions that characterized the English views of the New World, the tradition of the Desert of the interior was perhaps their greatest mistake. Because of the Desert tradition, the English—like the Spanish who viewed the Plains as Barrier—made little or no attempt in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to penetrate the region or to use it for productive purposes. Their unwillingness to do so quite probably cost them the greater part of their North American empire.

FRENCH EXPLORATION AND THE TRADITIONS OF GARDEN AND PASSAGE

The third and last group of European explorers to discover the Great Plains—nearly two centuries after the Spanish but only shortly after the English—were the French, penetrating the region from two directions: the northeast via the Great Lakes drainage basin and the southeast via the Gulf Coast and lower Mississippi valley. It might seem strange that the French, the most active and widely ranging North American explorers, took so long to move into the Plains. At least part of the reason was the invented barrier of the Spanish that became an operational geographical idea and an imperial geopolitical reality of Spain's North American empire. Also important was the fact that the English, moving into the northern Plains from the Hudson Bay drainage, had begun to compete with the French in the area west of the Great Lakes and may have thus delayed French entry into the Plains region for several decades. But most meaningful, perhaps, was quite simply that the French had plenty to occupy their exploratory energies east of the Great Plains region.

France had entered North America via the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the river that ran into it. From the very beginnings of French exploration of the St. Lawrence, two of the four early interpretations of North America were opera-

tive: the interpretations of Garden and Passage. French explorers from Cartier in the 1530s to Champlain in the early 1600s and even later were familiar with the works of Giovanni da Verrazzano, sailing the Atlantic coast for Francis I of France and describing, along the northern portions of that coast, what he believed to be a terrestrial paradise.¹⁸

The modified notion of the terrestrial paradise of Verrazzano appeared (often in the guise of great cities such as Norumbega or Hochelaga) on the beautiful French maps of the Dieppe school of cartography, and well into the seventeenth century, French explorers penetrating further into the interior via the St. Lawrence sought for the gentle natives and forests with aromatic and narcotic liquors described by Verrazzano. As French explorers entered the Great Lakes and began moving down the valleys of the Ohio and Mississippi, the rich fur resources and the smiling meadowlands of those regions reinforced the French tradition of the Garden—as did geographical information provided by Native Americans—and wherever the French traveled in eastern North America, they tended to see the Garden in the landscape.

Verrazzano's account also contained the interpretation of North America as Passage. While sailing off the sand bars separating North Carolina's Pamlico Sound from the Atlantic Ocean, Verrazzano had looked westward into the Sound and believed he gazed upon the Sea of the Indies. Much of his later exploration was devoted to finding a route through the narrow barrier and locating the Passage. The Passage concept, articulated by Verrazzano and also appearing on numerous French maps, drove the French explorers westward as much as had the search for the Garden. Stimulated by Native American reports of great waters to the west, Cartier believed the St. Lawrence was the Passage; three quarters of a century later, Samuel Champlain, also deriving accurate but misunderstood geographical lore from native peoples, held the same belief.

The earliest Frenchmen to penetrate the Great Lakes region sought the Passage through

that inland waterway system, as did the French explorers who traveled westward from the Great Lakes toward the Canadian Plains and Lake Winnipeg or who crossed from Great Lakes drainage to Mississippi drainage and followed the Mississippi down to the Gulf of Mexico.¹⁹ By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the French vision of a Passage had come to center on the Missouri and other western tributaries of the Mississippi that would, they believed, lead to a great interior sea from which mighty rivers flowed westward to the Pacific. Of the Missouri, for example, Father Marquette wrote: "I hope by means of it to make the discovery of the Vermillion Sea or California."²⁰ The French discovery of the Great Plains was thus prompted by two interpretations of North American geography: that the interior of North America was a Garden holding great riches and that through that Garden flowed the rivers that would lead to the Sea of Cathay and Cipangu.

In 1700 the French had established a presence along the Gulf Coast and in the lower Mississippi valley and from that region began the westward penetration that, they hoped, would lead to the Pacific.²¹ A number of French parties were sent out by way of the Red and Arkansas rivers to seek the Passage to the Gulf of California—by way of New Mexico. Some of these travelers may have reached the eastern fringes of the Great Plains but the literature of their efforts is geographically inconclusive on that point.

The first documented entry into the Plains by a French explorer began in 1718 when Bénard La Harpe was dispatched to follow the Red River upstream, cross to the Arkansas, and attempt to locate the Passage from that river.²² La Harpe ascended the Red River into Oklahoma and then crossed the height-of-land to the Arkansas River, ultimately traveling as far west as present-day Tulsa, believing he would locate not only the source of the river but the Spanish settlements of New Mexico and California (viewed as only a short distance beyond). Native American informants near his farthest westward penetration of the Plains told him that he was still a great distance from the

Spanish settlements and could tell him nothing of a route to the Pacific, and he returned to the Mississippi valley. Like Coronado, whose dream of Quivera had died out in the grasslands of Kansas, La Harpe's ambitions for the discovery of a Passage came to an end in the grasslands of Oklahoma.

Bénard La Harpe and his French contemporaries were driven westward by the twin objectives of the Garden and the Passage—both interpretations of North American geography derived from the earliest French contacts with the continent and reinforced by nearly two centuries of exploration. Their explorations were based on mixtures of early European conceptions of the New World, the knowledge gained through exploration, and Native American geographical knowledge, and provide us a clear illustration of the importance of geographical lore for explorers and exploration.

Again, as suggested by our model for studying exploration, La Harpe's penetration of the Plains made important contributions to subsequent geographical lore. La Harpe met neither the Comanches nor the Pawnees—both tribes he had hoped to contact—but he did meet a number of peoples new to the French and had an opportunity to view firsthand the great cultural revolution taking place among the Plains tribes as a result of the introduction of the horse. La Harpe penned the first written descriptions of buffalo-hunting horse Indians; if for no other reason, his exploration was therefore significant for developing geographical knowledge of the American interior. La Harpe, steeped in the French tradition of the Garden, also wrote glowingly of the prairies and short-grass plains. "The country was wonderfully beautiful, with its 'savannas,' its river bottoms choked with berries and fruit trees and wild roses, its inexhaustible forage, its salt springs, its endlessly receding horizon, and the wind forever running across the bending grass."²³

La Harpe had returned with a mass of geographical data on the Great Plains, most of it misunderstood. He had obtained accurate information from Native Americans but was incapable of understanding it, and resulting from his

and other early French penetrations into the Plains, were three “thickly clustering misconceptions”: distances across the Plains were grossly underestimated, the sources of the rivers of the Plains were viewed as being far away from where they actually were, and total ignorance prevailed of the nature or even the existence of the Rocky Mountains.²⁴ The legacy of La Harpe’s discovery of the Great Plains was, therefore, a mixture of fact and totally erroneous ideas, all of which were bequeathed to the Spanish who would shortly succeed the French in Louisiana (and would do little to clear up the misconceptions because of their persistent view of the Plains as beneficial only as a barrier). By the time of La Harpe, the French interpretations of the Garden and the Passage had already become invented traditions. As such they were passed on to the Americans who would strengthen them and would utilize the invented traditions of Garden and Passage to stimulate their own exploration of the Great Plains region.

EXPLORATION AND THE INVENTION OF AMERICAN TRADITIONS

When the Great Plains became American territory in the opening years of the nineteenth century, the period of “discovery” was over. As Americans like Thomas Jefferson began to assemble the data of Great Plains exploration from the “New World encounters” of Spanish, British, and French, it became clear that further geographical investigation of the Plains would be through exploration rather than discovery. Because their intellectual and cultural milieu included contributions from the discoverers and explorers of Spain, England, and France, Lewis and Clark and other early American explorers of the Great Plains were not encountering lands that were new to their cultural milieu but were, rather, relatively familiar. It can be argued that, as representatives of a people with a two-hundred year history of westward migration through a forest environment, Lewis and Clark, during their epic journey of 1804-06, could have recognized the great grass-

lands of the Plains as something that did not conform to existing geographical data. For Lewis and Clark, however, the Plains *did* conform to their preexisting geographical lore—most of it derived from the French but with a healthy measure of Spanish, British, and Native American data added as well. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that—by the time of Lewis and Clark—the Plains was a “known” geographical region (*not* the same thing as an *understood* geographical region) for which an entire complex of invented traditions already existed in the American imagination.

Remember our earlier definition of the “invented tradition” as a relatively limited body of geographical knowledge that becomes both shared and taken for granted by a people and, ultimately, becomes so fixed in their collective mind that it begins to influence thought and action. When Thomas Jefferson began to set in motion the events that culminated in the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Garden and the Passage were already invented American traditions, certainly not shared by all but shared by a majority of Americans of the time. Jefferson’s motives in sponsoring Lewis and Clark were conditioned by these traditions. The expedition itself, including its aftermath, was also conditioned by the traditions of Passage and Garden. Other invented traditions existed, derived from British and Spanish interpretations of the Plains as Desert and/or Barrier—and these were of variable strength for some Americans throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century as they were given substance by geographical knowledge obtained through exploration and as new geographical knowledge helped to create new ways of thinking. But the invented traditions of Garden and Passage remained paramount.

Beginning with the first entries into the region of the Great Plains—the “New World encounters” of Spanish, English, and French discoverers—and continuing into the period of American exploration and beyond, this region has been viewed by different groups through lenses of different understanding. And in the viewing, we have all created our own

invented traditions and have found, in the exploration of the Plains, our own metaphors for America. For those of us who study the Great Plains, there may be something in the region itself that engenders this process: "There is nothing much to see," wrote Wright Morris, "but perhaps that is why one goes on looking. . . . Where there is almost nothing to see, there man sees the most."²⁵

NOTES

1. Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 119.

2. John K. Wright, "Where History and Geography Meet: Recent American Studies in the History of Exploration," *Proceedings of the Eighth American Scientific Congress* 10 (1943): 17-23; reprinted in J.K. Wright, *Human Nature in Geography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 24-32, citation from p. 27; Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1961); John K. Wright, "Terrae Incognitae: The Place of the Imagination in Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 37 (1947): 1-15; reprinted in Wright, *Human Nature in Geography*; citation from p. 83; Bernard DeVoto, "Preface," *Course of Empire* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1952); Ted C. Hinckley, "Vanishing Truth and Western History," *Journal of the West* 31 (1992): 3.

3. See Martyn J. Bowden, "The Invention of American Tradition" *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (1992): 3-26.

4. John L. Allen, "Editorial," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (1992): 1.

5. John L. Allen, "From Cabot to Cartier: The Early Exploration of Eastern North America," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 82(1992): 500-521.

6. John L. Allen, "The Indrawing Sea: Imagination and Experience in the Search for the Northwest Passage, 1497-1632," in Richard Abate, ed. *American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), forthcoming.

7. Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 357-74.

8. John Stilgoe, *Common Landscapes of America, 1540-1845* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 18-35.

9. William Babcock, *Legendary Islands of the Atlantic* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1922); Stephen Clissold, *The Seven Cities of Cibola* (New York: C.W. Potter, 1961).

10. George P. Hammond and Agipito Rey, eds., *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940).

11. John L. Allen, "Lands of Myth, Waters of Wonder: The Place of the Imagination in the History of Geographical Exploration" in David Lowenthal and Martyn J. Bowden, eds., *Geographies of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 46-52.

12. Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his pilgrimes* (London, 1612), cited in DeVoto, *Course of Empire*, (note 2 above) pp. 44, 48.

13. Allen, "From Cabot to Cartier" (note 5 above); Allen, "The Indrawing Sea" (note 6 above).

14. *Hudson's Bay Company Letters Outward*, vol. 11 (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1948): 48.

15. See Richard I. Ruggles, "British Exploration of Rupert's Land" in John L. Allen, ed., *North American Exploration*, vol. 1 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), forthcoming.

16. John L. Allen, *Passage Through The Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), pp. 15-23.

17. J.B. Tyrell, ed., *David Thompson's Narrative of His Exploration in Western America, 1784-1812* (Toronto: Champlain Society Publications, 1916), p. 186.

18. See Verrazzano's letter to the King of France, excerpt in John Conron, ed., *The American Landscape: A Critical Anthology of Prose and Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 95-99.

19. Lawrence J. Burpee, *The Search for the Western Sea*, 2 vols. (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1908).

20. R.G. Thwaites, ed., *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, vol. 59 (Cleveland: A.H. Clark and Co., 1900): 141.

21. Abraham P. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804*, vol. 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990): 8.

22. Ralph A. Smith, "The Exploration of the Arkansas River by Bénard de la Harpe in 1721-22," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 10 (1951): 339-63.

23. DeVoto, *Course of Empire* (note 2 above), p. 174.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

25. Wright Morris, "Our Endless Plains," cited in John L. Allen, "The Garden-Desert Continuum: Competing Views of the Great Plains in the Nineteenth Century," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (1985): 217-18.