

# The Search for the Fraser by Sea and Land

By C. E. Howay

JUDGE Howay, of New Westminster, delivered a lecture before the Art and Historical Association on "The Attempts to Find the Fraser by Water and Land." The Judge traced in a most interesting manner the voyage which earlier explorers made on this coast without finding the mouth of the Fraser, and continuing, said:

Two great desires compelled the explorers of northern America during the 17th and 18th centuries—to discover the Northwest Passage, and the Great River of the West. The search for these weaves itself into the history of British Columbia; indeed that search is for many years its history.

From the earliest times, vague rumors of the existence of a great river rising in the east, and vanishing into the sunset are recorded by successive explorers. In 1673, when Pere Marquette and Sieur Joliet, first of Europeans, floated down the Mississippi, they were assured by the natives that beyond the sources of the Riviere des Missouris, there existed a large river which flowed into the Western Sea. This is the first reference to the River of the West. Although that river proved to be the Columbia, the search for it is interesting, as in groping for it the Fraser was discovered.

As this search progresses, we find truth and fiction skillfully combined, gross exaggeration, and pure romance. For example, La Fontaine tells us that in traveling up the "Long River" (which no one has since seen) he met four Indians, who told him of the River of the West. He states that, "All they could say was that the great river of that nation runs along westward, and that the salt lake into which it flows is three hundred leagues in circumference, and thirty in breadth, its mouth stretching a great way southward." This is manifestly fiction, pure and simple.

In 1742, Pierre Gauthier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vandreury, the most energetic of the French explorers, heard of this river from the natives he met near the Shining Mountains. From their reports he believed that the sea was visible from the mountains' summits, and that the course of the Great River must therefore be quite short. We are prone to forget that while the Hudson's Bay company clung to shores of their inland sea, this great Frenchman carried the name, and the flag of France even to the base of the Rocky Mountains.

For almost a hundred years the river so anxiously sought was known simply as the Great River of the West, but in 1766 Capt. Jonathan Carver, of Connecticut, spent some months in the neighborhood of what is now St. Paul, among the Dacotah Indians, by him called the Naudowessie. From them, "together with my own observations," he says, "I have learned that the four most capital rivers on the continent of North America, viz., the St. Lawrence, the Mississippi, the river Bourbon and the Oregon or River of the West, have their sources in the same neighborhood." Hence forward the river is called the Oregon.

I pause to remark that not only the brave captain's information, but his observation also, was much at fault.

The spirit of trade rivalry between the Hudson's Bay company and the North-West company of Montreal caused the latter to seek new territory, to whose exclusive trade its opponents could not by any possible construction of its elastic but much-attacked charter, lay claim. The story of the Oregon was known to the Nor' Westers, who saw in it a possibility of avoiding the thousands of miles of inland travel which so increased both the cost and the danger of transport.

After Alexander Mackenzie, one of their bourgeois, had made his celebrated voyage to the Arctic ocean, and opened up trade possibilities in that direction, it was agreed at the annual meeting of the company at Fort William that he should be sent westward to explore the country and report on the opportunities for traffic with the natives. Early in May, 1793, Mackenzie started from Fort Fork, on Peace river, where he had spent the winter. We pursued his journey up the Peace to its source, crossed over a divide 817 paces in length, and found himself on a small stream flowing westward. Following this, Bad river as he named it, he on the 17th of June, 1793, saw the river we now call Fraser. He says: "At length we enjoyed after all our toil and anxiety the inexpressible satisfaction of finding ourselves on the bank of a navigable river on the west side of the first great range of mountains."

In his narrative Mackenzie at first simply calls this river the Great river; later on he speaks of it as the Tacoutche Tesse, which the Rev. Father Morice suggests is his reproduction of the Carrier word Lthah-khoh; at other times he calls it the Columbia. In his journal it is shown as the Columbia. In his journal he says: "The more I heard of the river the more I was convinced that it could not empty into the ocean north of what is called the River of the West, so that with its windings the distance must be very great."

It nevertheless did flow into the ocean two hundred miles north of the Columbia or River of the West.

From the 17th to the 23rd of June, 1793, he continued to descend the river, and had reached a point near Alexandria when, owing to the distance to the sea by following the river, the dangers and difficulties of navigation as described by the natives, and the scarcity of provisions, he concluded to retrace his course to the Blackwater, or Westward river,

as he called it, and proceed up that river to the ocean. Pursuing this plan, Mackenzie on 22nd July, 1793, reached the Pacific at Bentinck Arm, just about a month after Vancouver and Broffington in the Discovery and the Chatham had been exploring that very locality.

In 1804, Thomas Jefferson, then president of the United States, at the urgent solicitation of John Ledyard, who had been with Capt. Cook at Nootka, in 1778, formed and sent forth as a government undertaking an exploring party under the command of Captains Lewis and Clark. It is not intended to deal with their work, as it was confined so far as the Northwest coast was concerned, to an examination of the Columbia and its immediate vicinity. In their travels they saw and noted a large river flowing into the Columbia from the northwest. This we now know as the main body of the Columbia; but when the expedition returned in 1806, without having traced this to its source, many regarded it as the same river that Mackenzie had discovered in 1793. It remained for Simon Fraser to follow to its mouth the Great river of Mackenzie and show to the world that it formed no part of the Columbia.

Simon Fraser, like Mackenzie and Thompson, and all other co-temporaries whose names are prominent as explorers in this province, was in the employ of the North-West company. He it was who proceeded to take possession of the territory west of the Rockies, hence forward to be known among the fur traders as New Caledonia. Late in 1805 he built Fort Macleod, on Macleod lake, the first permanent trading post in British Columbia, or New Caledonia, as it was then called. The next spring he followed Mackenzie's route up the Parsnip, across the same carrying place and down the Bad river to the "Great River" of Mackenzie. On the 10th of July, 1808, Simon Fraser first saw the mighty river that now bears his name. It is fitting that his remarks on that occasion should be transcribed here.

In his first journal, he says: "At 10 a.m. we arrived at the large river opposite an island, without encountering any other difficulty than cutting several trees that laid across the channel, and we were most happy at having exempted the long and bad carrying place, and seeing ourselves once more on the banks of a fine and navigable river." In July, 1806, Fraser founded Fort St. James, on Stuart lake; later in the same year he built Fort Fraser on Fraser lake; and in the fall of 1807 he established Fort George at the confluence of the Nechaco and the "Great River."

By the "Brigade" from Fort Chipewyan arriving in the fall of 1807, Fraser received instructions from the North-West company, to explore to its mouth the "Great River," supposed by everyone, himself included, to be the Columbia. Accordingly, in the following spring preparations were made for the thorough examination of this mysterious river, which had hitherto baffled all attempts by land and sea to discover its secret. The expedition consisted of four canoes manned by twenty-one men, Fraser was in supreme command, with Quesselle and Stuart as lieutenants.

On the 22nd May, 1808, the explorer started on what Dr. Bryce very truly calls his "terrific voyage." The "round, unvarnished tale" of that awful trip as told from day to day in his journal, is to be found in Masson's *Les Bourgeois du Nord-Ouest*. Some doubt exists as to whether the expedition started from the newly founded Fort George or from Fort St. James. Rev. Father Morice inclines to the opinion that the latter was the starting point; according to him, Fraser left Fort St. James on the 22nd of May, and arriving at Fort George, did not commence the descent of the Fraser itself until the 28th May. The journal is silent on the point, but the internal evidence afforded by the dates and positions seem to support Rev. Father Morice's view.

At the outset, one of his canoes was almost wrecked in the Fort George canyon, being driven "against a precipice which forms the right bank of the river." On Sunday, the 29th May, having lightened the canoes, he ran them down the Cottonwood river canyon. That night he camped at the mouth of the Quesselle river, where now stands the town of Quesselle.

The next day he had reached a point near Soda creek, when the apparent hostility of the natives and their sending couriers to their neighbors for reinforcements, caused him to delay his journey and spend some time in explaining his purpose and in conciliating them. Finally a good understanding was reached, and they then endeavored to dissuade him from journeying down the river. They informed him quite truly, that "the river below was but a succession of falls and cascades, which we would find impossible to pass, not only on account of the difficulties of the channel, but from the extreme ruggedness and the mountainous character of the surrounding country." Seeing he was determined to proceed, they told him of a slave at the next camp, who, having been to the sea, might possibly be obtained as a guide.

Starting early on the morning of May 31, Fraser soon arrived at the camp to which he had been referred. After some difficulty he found the slave, but soon discovered that his stock of knowledge was very slender indeed; yet the explorer could readily see even from his meagre details that the dangers of the way had not been exaggerated. "This tribe," he says, "is extremely fond of smoking, and were very troublesome, always plaguing us for our pipes. They make use in lieu of tobacco, of a kind of weed mixed with fat."

Pursuing his journey he arrived on June 1, at a rapid two miles long, with high steep

banks which in some places contracted the channel to forty or fifty yards. The water rushing through this canyon "in a turbulent manner, forming numerous gulfs and cascades, and making a tremendous noise had an awful and forbidding appearance." However, passage by land appearing even worse, the explorer resolved to venture down this dangerous pass. One canoe with five of the best men was ordered to run it, but becoming unmanageable in the awful whirl of waters, was driven against a rock, upon which the occupants hastily embarked. To rescue them from this perilous situation, a descent of the precipitous bank of the canyon was, with difficulty, made. This was so steep that Fraser tells us: "We had to plunge our daggers into the ground to check our speed, as otherwise we were exposed to slide into the river." Cutting steps in the declivity, they with much toil, succeeded in getting men and canoe to the top. No means was now left of going forward except carrying over "the immense high hills." The goods and three of the canoes were accordingly transported, but the labor was so great that the remaining canoe was abandoned at this spot. Incidentally we are informed that "the river and risen eight feet within these twenty-four hours."

The expedition was delayed here two days, which gives some idea of the difficulty of carrying over this spot. From these Indians he learned that "white men had lately passed down the first large river to the left; these we took to be some of our friends from the Fort des Prairies." As a matter of fact they referred to Thompson's journey in 1806, down a part of the stream which now bears his name.

Hence forward the record of each day is almost a repetition of the earlier ones. Canyons, rapids, cascades, follow each other in quick succession. Constantly the choice is before him of journeying by well-nigh impassable land or even more dangerous water. The Indian continually advised him to leave the river and journey to the eastward where beyond the mountains that line the gorge in which the river flows, they assure him he will find pleasant traveling. But his answer is always the same. As he records it: "Going to the sea by a direct way was not the object of the undertaking; I therefore would not deviate and continued our route according to my original intention." Persisting in this course in spite of difficulties which became truly awful the farther he proceeds, running canyons never before or since attempted so far as any record shows, carrying canoes and cargoes up high hills and down dangerous descents, Fraser makes his way slowly towards the ocean.

Even at the risk of being tiresome, I cannot refrain from quoting the explorer's simple yet vivid description of a canyon near Kelly creek which he ran on June 9: "Here the channel," he says, "contracts to about forty yards, and is enclosed by two precipices of immense height, which, bending toward each other, make it narrower above than below. The water which rolls down this extraordinary passage in tumultuous waves and great velocity had a frightful appearance. However, it being absolutely impossible to carry the canoes by land, all hands without hesitation embarked as it were a corps perdu upon the mercy of this awful tide. Once engaged the die was cast, our great difficulty consisted in keeping the canoes within the medium or fil d'eau, that is clear of the precipice on one side and from the gulfs formed by the waves on the other. Thus skimming along as fast as lightning, the crews, cool and determined, followed each other in awful silence, and when we arrived at the end, we stood gazing at each other in silent congratulation at our narrow-escape from total destruction." This rapid was run in the morning, and in the afternoon the navigation, if it might be so called, became worse. The journal states: "This afternoon the rapids were very bad, two in particular were worse, if possible, than any we had hitherto met with, being a continual series of cascades intercepted with rocks and bounded by precipices and mountains that seemed at times to have no end. I scarcely ever saw anything so dreary and dangerous in any country and at present while writing this whatever way I turn my eyes mountains upon mountains whose summits are crowned with eternal snow close the gloomy scene."

The party had now reached a point a short distance above Pavilion Creek; the natives here represented the remainder of the river as a "dreadful chain of insurmountable difficulties." A careful examination of the next few miles satisfied both Fraser and his lieutenants that the statements of the Indians were correct and that they had now reached a portion of the stream which was actually impassable. Here the canoes were left and such provisions cached as they did not require on the downward trip; and the party commenced to travel by Indian paths along the sides of the impending mountains. This traveling, though toilsome and fatiguing, was not so dangerous as had been expected.

On June 12, while camped a few miles above Bridge river, Fraser met an old Indian who had traveled and seen the sea and the "great canoes" of the white men. "This garulous old fellow thought," says Fraser, "that the white men were 'very proud, for continued he, getting up and clapping his two hands upon his hips then striding about the place with an air of importance, 'this is the way they go.'"

On June 14, Fraser came into the territory of a tribe who wore "coats of mail," whom he calls Askettiths, apparently the Lillooet Indians; and on the next day he reached their chief village near Lillooet, which he describes

as "a fortification 100 feet by 24 surrounded by a palisade eighteen feet high, slanting inwards and lined with a shorter row which supports a shade, covered with bark, constituting their dwellings." He noticed amongst them a copper tea kettle and a large gun, seemingly of Russian manufacture.

Continuing his journey, mostly by land, but where possible by water, in canoes hired from the Indians, and feasting occasionally with their chiefs on salmon and roots, while his voyageurs revelled in dog meat, always a favorite dish among them, he, on June 20, reached Lytton called by the Indians Camchin. Here he obtained canoes and the whole party trusted themselves to the unknown and turbulent waters once more. At Cisco rapids, near the present cantilever bridge on the C.P.R., he was forced to leave the water and make a portage over what he calls "a very steep hill"; it was so steep indeed that one of his men dropping a kettle it bounded into the river and was lost.

Some of his voyageurs finding the portage too long and the canoes too heavy (for they were wooden, of course, while those they had been accustomed to were bark) essayed the canyon. Once launched on that raging current these practiced men were helpless; the canoes, whirled and tossed by the angry waters, were unmanageable as corks; one of them filled and overturned—its occupants only escaping death by a miracle. After this experience, all preferred the rough land travel to the more exciting but infinitely more dangerous water journey through the canyon. It must not be forgotten that this occurred during freshet time; this canyon has often been run since at a low stage of the water in the fall; but I am not aware of its ever having been successfully run when at its mid-June height.

At Boston Bar, the Indians who had accompanied the expedition from Lytton, left it and as a token of his appreciation of their services, Fraser presented to their chief a large silver brooch. The happy recipient did not know just where he should attach it to his person, so the Journal tells us he fixed it on his head and seemed exceedingly well pleased with the arrangement.

Leaving Boston Bar, Fraser soon reached that frightful portion of the river known as the Big Canyon, or the Black Canyon of the Fraser. Of course he was now traveling by land, and certainly that was bad enough. At one point, "where the ascent was perfectly perpendicular," he tells us, "one of the Indians climbed to the summit and by means of a long pole drew us up, one after another. This work took three hours, then we continued our course," says the Journal, "up and down hills and along the steep declivities of mountains where hanging rocks and projecting cliffs, at the edge of the bank of the river, made the passage so small as to render it at times difficult even for one person to pass sideways."

Alternately journeying by land and water Fraser, on June 26, reached Hell Gate, in the Big Canyon, about twenty miles above Yale. Mr. Stuart examined it, and "reported that the navigation was absolutely impracticable." No way of advance remained but by land, and that was so difficult that it was well-nigh impossible. But let the explorer himself speak: "We could scarcely make our way even with only our guns," he says, "I have been for a long period among the Rocky Mountains, but have never seen anything like this country. It is so wild that I cannot find words to describe our situation at times. We had to pass where no human being should venture; yet in these places there is a regular footpath impressed or rather indented upon the very rocks by frequent traveling. Besides this, steps which are formed like a ladder or the shrouds of a ship, by poles hanging to one another and crossed at certain distances with twigs, the whole suspended from the top to the foot of immense precipices and fastened at both extremities to stones and trees, furnish a safe and convenient passage to the natives; but we, who had not had the advantage of their education and experience were often in imminent danger when obliged to follow their example."

The next day Fraser reached Spuzzum, even then known by that name. Here he visited a burying place of the Salish race. The tombs, he says, were superior to anything of the kind he had ever seen among savages. Their mortuary columns attracted his attention. "Upon the boards and posts are beasts and birds carved in a curious but rude manner, yet pretty well proportioned." Eight miles more of water travel brought the adventurer to the Little Canyon, where he again left his canoes, and journeying overland reached a point near Yale late in the afternoon of June 30. From the natives, he learned that the river was navigable for the remainder of the journey to the sea.

Obtaining canoes here, Fraser re-embarked on June 29, and that night camped near a large village which was situated at what we now call Ruby creek. Amongst these people he tells us that he found "a large copper kettle shaped like a jar, and a large English hatchet, stamped 'Sargate' with the figure of a crown." The river at this point, he says, is more than two miles broad, and is interspersed with islands. Starting early the following day, he met an Indian who told him he might be able to see the salt water the next day. That afternoon he passed Chilliwack. "Here," he informs us, "we saw seals and a large river coming in from the left, and a round mountain ahead which the Indians called 'Stremotch.' This mountain, it is manifest, is Sumas. The chief here made him a present of 'a coat of mail to make

shoes" (moccasins); this is one of the few well authenticated cases of beating swords into pruning hooks.

He had now reached tidal water, for he tells us that on July 1, 1808, the tide rose two and a half feet."

On Sunday, July 2, his difficulties with the Indians commenced. They stole a smoking bag; and refused to let him have a canoe which they had promised. However, by a show of force, he got it and proceeded on his way. This must have occurred at the mouth of the Coquitlam river, a short distance above the city of New Westminster, for his journal states that from this place "proceeding on for two miles, we arrived at a place where the river divides into several channels." No other spot in the vicinity answers this description. Here he was pursued by the Indians in canoes and "armed with bows and arrows, spears and clubs, singing war songs, beating time with their paddles on the sides of the canoes and making signs and gestures highly mimical."

It has been stated by many, including the historian, Hubert Howe Bancroft, that Fraser did not reach the mouth of the river, but turned back at a point near New Westminster. Indeed, Malcolm McLeod, the editor of a brochure: "Peace River; a Canoe Voyage from Hudson's Bay to the Pacific by the late Sir George Simpson, in 1828," claims that Fraser did not "navigate it" within over 250 miles of its mouth. But such ideas are erroneous, and likely arise from the fact that the complete journal of Fraser's trip down the river in 1808, was supposed to be lost, and was not given to the world until Senator Masson reproduced it in 1889.

Under the date, July 2, 1808, this entry appears in the journal: "We continued and at last we came in sight of a gulf or bay of the sea; this the Indians call 'Pas-hil-roe. It runs in a southwest and northeast direction. In this bay are several high and rocky islands, whose summits were covered with snow." This in itself proves conclusively that he had reached the mouth of the river. But the journal also shows more than this; not only did he reach the mouth of the river, but he reached it by the North Arm. For we find it stated that

"on the right shore we noticed a village called by the Indians 'Misquiam'; we directed our course towards it." Surely this is the place we now know as the Musqueam Indian reserve, at the entrance to the North Arm of the Fraser river. If any doubt remain it is dissipated by the further statement that through the village called Misquiam, Fraser found a stream of water running. That stream runs through the village of Musqueam today just as it did on that July morning when the first white man saw it. Here he found what he calls a fort, which was 1,500 feet in length and 90 feet in breadth. After examining it he attempted to re-embark, but was astonished to see his canoes left high and dry by the receding tide. The Indians seeing his position became quite warlike. In the language of the journal: "They began to make their appearance from every direction, dressed in their coats of mail, and howling like so many wolves and brandishing their war clubs." The Musqueams were evidently living up to their reputation; Fraser had been warned repeatedly of their savage dispositions.

Re-embarking he still proceeded, desiring, as he says, to reach the main ocean, but being short of provisions and the natives (that is, the Musqueams) pursuing the party manifesting further hostilities and adopting threatening attitudes in an endeavor to prevent his further progress he was reluctantly compelled to abandon his desire to reach the Pacific. In his journal under date of July 3, he writes: "Here I must again acknowledge my great disappointment in not seeing the main ocean, having gone so near it as to be almost within view; besides, we wished very much to settle the situation by an observation for the longitude. The latitude is 49 degrees, nearly, while that of the entrance of the Columbia is 46 degrees 20 minutes. The river is therefore not the Columbia; if I had been convinced of this when I left my canoes I would certainly have returned."

The return journey was begun that day; but it is not intended to trace in detail its difficulties and dangers. In addition to the perilous navigation, and the hostility of some of the native tribes, Fraser had to contend with the threatened desertion of a number of his voyageurs. (All these troubles, actual and threatened, he overcame with the skill of a born leader of men). On July 8 he had arrived at Yale; on the 14th he passed Lytton; on the 20th he reached the spot near Pavilion creek where he had left his canoes and cached his provisions on the downward way; the Chilcooten river was reached on the 25th, and on August 6 he was again at Fort George. It appears, therefore, that the descent of the river occupied 35 days and the ascent 34 days.

To those who have seen the Fraser at mid-freshet leaping and boiling through the canyons above Yale; who have seen its angry water whirling and swirling around China Bluff; who, looking through Hell's Gate have watched those tawny waters lash themselves into a white foam at the impediment it makes; who climbing Jackass mountain have gazed from its heights upon the mere ribbon of seething waters below; to these some idea of the labors and difficulties of the journey may be present. To them the simple unassuming narrative of the fur trader will appeal as the story of a man injured to dangers, who recounts the incidents of his travel in the plainest and most uncolored manner apparently quite oblivious of the fact that he has done anything unusual or extraordinary.