



## **The Young Napoleons: Isaac I. Stevens, George B. McClellan and the Cascade Mountains Route**

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**By Kent D. Richards**

The United States in the middle third of the nineteenth century was an ideal time to be alive for a young man of intelligence, energy and ambition. These were characteristics shared by a goodly number of Americans, but few could claim a greater portion of talents than Isaac I. Stevens and George B. McClellan. Each was undoubtedly ambitious, intelligent and energetic. It is equally certain that each had an ego that could negate their more positive characteristics. This combination of great talent and flawed character led contemporaries to label each as a "Young Napoleon."

McClellan and Stevens were the products of well-to-do families. The former was born in Pennsylvania in 1826, the son of a prominent surgeon and teacher. Stevens, born eight years earlier in North Andover, Massachusetts, descended from a long line of prosperous farmers and mill owners. Both distinguished themselves at the United States Military Academy which, in the 1830s and 1840s, was beginning to make its mark as a training ground for military engineers. Stevens graduated first in a class of 31 in 1839 and McClellan second of 59 in 1846. Both were tested in the crucible of the Mexican War where they served with the command of General Winfield Scott on his march from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. The young lieutenants' peers included Robert E. Lee and P. G. T. Beauregard in a distinguished cadre that won numerous brevets (honorary advances in rank) and the praise of the commanding general. After the cessation of hostilities, these officers returned to the often demanding but prosaic duties of the peace time military. Stevens resumed his pre-war task of constructing fortifications on the East Coast and then won assignment to the Washington, D.C. office of the Coast Survey. McClellan served as an instructor at West Point and participated in an exploration of the sources of the Red River in the Southwest.

In 1853 Stevens received appointment as governor of the new Washington Territory. At the same time, Congress authorized a series of transcontinental surveys to ascertain the best railway route across the continent in the forlorn hope that the political deadlock created by the clash of sectional interests would be broken by the clear topographical superiority of one of the alternatives. Stevens lobbied hard for appointment to the northernmost of these routes, which would survey the territory between the 47th and 49th parallels from St. Paul to Puget Sound. He saw the railway survey as the best way to begin his duties as governor and superintendent of Indian affairs for the Union's newest territory. The survey would provide valuable geographic, scientific and topographic information, enable contact and preliminary negotiations with Indian leaders and, with luck, bring a transcontinental railroad which would fill the new territory with the one commodity it desperately needed settlers.

Stevens was well qualified to head up the survey, but one touchy point was his resignation from the army to accept the governorship. General Joseph Totten, the head of the Corps of Engineers, had suggested to

Secretary of War Jefferson Davis that leadership should go to someone still in the Corps and privately put forth the name of Captain George McClellan, still on duty in Texas. Stevens assured Davis that many of his former colleagues would have no hesitation at serving under him, and the Secretary made the appointment.

In one of his first acts, Stevens, to the consternation of Totten, requested that McClellan be assigned to command the western portion of the survey which would have responsibility for locating passes in the Cascade Mountains while Stevens made his way west with the main party. Totten professed acquiescence if the two divisions were created as separate commands, but Stevens countered that the route was of a piece and had to be under one command. When Davis supported Stevens, Totten backed down. The general told Stevens that he possessed all of the military and engineering talent as well as the enterprise and energy to successfully carry out the survey. But Totten felt compelled to add, "With your zeal for command, which is laudable and natural, you should understand how McClellan would feel, and the general asserted, I hope he will receive the credit due to him."

At least initially, Stevens' perception appeared the more accurate. McClellan had known Stevens in Mexico and each respected the other as an able fellow officer (Stevens called him the "gallant McClellan"). He jumped at the opportunity to escape dreary duty on the Texas frontier. In fact, McClellan had asked for transfer to Oregon even before he learned of Stevens' offer, which warned that the work would be "arduous", but which also held the promise of building reputations for all involved. After accepting the challenge, McClellan told a friend that he looked forward to the survey with pleasure and, "I would not miss it for a great deal."

Competition for engineering and scientific personnel for the four transcontinental surveys was intense and was further complicated by Commodore Matthew Perry's expedition to Japan and ventures setting out for arctic exploration. Stevens' presence in the nation's capital and his personal acquaintance with many of the leading scientific and military personnel in the country put him in a position to secure much of the available talent. For the western party Stevens hired Lieutenant Johnson Kelly Duncan as McClellan's second in command. J. K. Duncan, an artillery officer, was, like McClellan, a native of Pennsylvania and a graduate of the Military Academy. When he made the appointment, Stevens noted that Duncan was "a strong friend" of McClellan.

Duncan immediately departed for Fort Vancouver (Columbia Barracks) to begin gathering men and supplies for the coming summer's expedition. For all parties speed was the order of the day as Congress had set January 1854 for completion of the work. The ever optimistic Stevens promised to meet or beat this deadline. While Duncan worked with Ulysses Grant, among others, to assemble the necessary supplies, McClellan journeyed to the Northwest in a light-hearted mood suggested by his query to a friend in the East whether he wanted "a live grizzly or a tame Indian chief" brought back as a present. His spirits sank upon arrival at the former Hudson's Bay Company post. In addition to Duncan, McClellan found Lieutenant Rufus Saxton, whom Stevens had ordered to outfit a supply train that would travel to the Bitterroot Valley to rendezvous with and re-supply the main survey party arriving from the east. The meager supply of horses, mules and related equipment (such as pack saddles) at the isolated frontier post might have been adequate for one party but not for two. Duncan had brought the scientific equipment with him, but shortages in the East prevented the purchase of some of the more desirable models, and the rigors of the journey took its toll on that which was acquired. McClellan took inventory of what he had available and gloomily described the inventory as one very good sextant; two chronometers "one worthless and one indifferent; one surveyor's compass" also indifferent; barometers, hydrometers, and thermometers, all in various stages of disrepair. The best news was the availability of two good Schmalcalder compasses.

McClellan was later known for his skill at organizing armies of upwards of 100,000 men, but he found that problems of organization in the wilderness created "annoyances beyond imagination." He predicted, "I shall

be as pleased as a child with a new toy when I get started." On July 18 the party of 66 men, 73 saddle and 100 pack animals left Fort Vancouver. Included were Lieutenants H. C. Hodges and Sylvester Mowry, the latter serving as meteorologist, and civilian scientists George Gibbs and Dr. James G. Cooper. Gibbs, a lawyer attracted west by the lure of gold, was by inclination an ethnologist. He, as much as anyone of his generation, would engage in careful examination of the languages and culture of the native peoples in the Pacific Northwest. Cooper, a physician, was by inclination a naturalist. Equally as distinguished as Gibbs, he later became widely known for his work in California. The remainder of the party was composed of about equal numbers of enlisted men and civilian packers.

J. K. Duncan, in addition to serving as second in command, filled the roles of astronomer, topographer and draftsman. His talent in the latter capacity led to his becoming the unofficial artist of the party (Cooper also contributed some sketches, of which at least three survive). His work combined with that of Gustav Sohon, an enlisted man with Saxton's supply party, and John Mix Stanley, a member of Stevens' eastern division and the only official artist with the survey, produced a remarkable collection of illustrations that in many, if not most, instances are the only visual record of the persons or events they depict. This is particularly true of the sketches of Indian leaders made by Sohon and Duncan.

The initial portion of McClellan's trek which took him north to the Lewis River and then east to the south of Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Adams is hard to track with any more than approximate accuracy. McClellan preferred to use Indian names, or what he thought were the Indian names, to designate geographic features; most of these were later supplanted by other names. In 12 days the survey party covered only 78 miles over a route that was at some points rough Indian trail and at others no trail at all. The rugged terrain lacked grass and the heavily laden pack animals weakened.

McClellan was beset by a myriad of problems that quickly dampened the early enthusiasm of the would-be pathfinder. Some of the civilian crew proved unreliable, including one who forged McClellan's name to drafts. Ordered to leave, he appropriated a revolver, and the party had to pause while a detail set out after the miscreant to retrieve the government's property. The unreliable equipment naturally made it difficult to chart their course with precision. An added difficulty arose from numerous forest fires that cast a thick cloud of smoke over the landscape, making it impossible to get fixes on the major mountains or to take celestial readings that could be used to calculate longitude. It was even hard to determine the general direction the party should take. McClellan noted, "Guides we took as we could find them; for even among the Indians there were none who knew more than a small portion of the country." Despite the smoke, clouds of mosquitoes plagued the men, and hordes of large horseflies drove the animals to distraction. Even the pack saddles began to deteriorate. McClellan called a halt while Duncan went back to Fort Vancouver for some old army saddles someone remembered seeing in a storeroom.

The party passed by Red Mountain (in present Skamania County), from which Duncan, on one of the clearer days, was able to view Mt. Rainier and several sharp needle points to the south of the peak. Below Red Mountain they examined Indian Race Track, a gathering point for area natives which included a cleared track for horse races. Upon reaching the Klickitat River, McClellan correctly determined that they had not gone through a pass but merely a pocket between the mountains. He observed that the mountains contained poor timber and nothing else that would "tempt settlement and civilization." Moving out of the mountains to Toppenish Creek and then on to the Yakima River, McClellan saw even less that impressed him. He mused, "To what useful purpose this country can be put is difficult to imagine."

In the Yakima Valley he visited the Oblate priests at their Ahtanum Mission and met with the Yakima leaders Kamiakin and his brother Skloom. These men were wary of white intentions, a concern unalleviated by McClellan's talk of whites passing through their country. He said nothing of permanent settlers, honestly believing there was no inducement for them to come to the east side of the mountains. Kamiakin did profess

his friendship, sold the party cattle (at a high price), and provided a guide up the Naches River to examine its feasibility as a pass over the Cascade Mountains.

By this point McClellan's animals were in sad condition. He made a decision to send a party over Naches Pass to the army post at Fort Steilacoom to requisition fresh mules and additional rations. While he waited for their return, a thorough exploration of the east side of Naches Pass was conducted. He found the grade steep with the prospect of many bridges, cuts through solid basalt, and tunnels. McClellan predicted, "It seems doubtful to me whether I shall ever ride down the valley of the Naches [sic] in a railroad car." At the end of August the party returned from Fort Steilacoom with few provisions and no mules. McClellan sent half his men back to Fort Vancouver with the horses and pushed on with the remaining men and the mules. He explained, "I must do so at all risks in order to carry out my orders this fall, at least as far as the Cascade Range is concerned."

The Indians touted Naches as the best pass, but Father Charles Pandosy of the Oblate Mission declared Snoqualmie far superior. Thus, McClellan crossed the ridges into the Kittitas Valley and pushed up the Yakima River to its headwaters. Encouraged by the expanses of the lower valley, he continued until September 7, when his party reached the divide at Yakima Pass near present Snoqualmie Pass. They climbed a peak 2,000 feet above the pass to make observations, but again smoke impeded visibility. McClellan and George Gibbs examined the west side for several miles and then retraced their steps to explore lakes Keechelus, Kachess and Cle Elum. McClellan thought this route across the mountains the best of the possibilities he had seen, but cautioned that an examination of the west side was necessary before a final determination could be made. With the benefit of hindsight, McClellan has been criticized for not conducting that examination himself. But a survey of the west side of the Cascades was not part of his orders, and he feared, for good reasons, that there was little enough time to continue the survey and make the rendezvous with the eastern party before winter set in.

After turning up traces of gold in early August, the party had been rife with rumors of impending riches. To settle the issue McClellan allowed Duncan to lead a party of men to prospect the tributaries of the upper Yakima River, a venture McClellan characterized as a "wild goose chase." He was correct; traces were found, but not in paying quantities, and McClellan could refocus his men's attention on the survey work. The Kittitas Valley did provide a different kind of bounty when McClellan was able to enlist the aid of Owhi, chief of the Yakima band in that region, who supplied provisions and 29 horses, and personally led the surveyors over the Wenatchee Mountains. Owhi and other natives told McClellan that there were no additional mountain passes until well north of Mt. Baker. McClellan moved up the Columbia River to the Okanogan River, where he set up camp at the old fur post at Fort Okanogan. He thought the Methow Valley promising, and that route was explored until it proved narrow and rugged. They then struck north as far as Lake Okanogan, turned back down the Columbia River, and moved east to the rendezvous with Stevens at Fort Colville. McClellan arrived there one day before the governor.

Angus McDonald, the Hudson's Bay Company agent in charge at Fort Colville, had laid in an extra ration of 50 imperial gallons of wine and brandy for his American guests. Over the next several days the two leaders partook freely, but neither had the endurance or capacity to win his approval. Nonetheless, he sent them off on October 21 with a keg of cognac "to cheer the hearts of the members of all parties. A council of Stevens, McClellan and Lieutenant Andrew Jackson Donelson, who joined them from a survey of Clark Fork and Lake Pend Oreille, determined after vigorous arguments by McClellan and Donelson that it was foolhardy to attempt a complete crossing of the Cascades that winter. They pointed to the poor condition of the animals (Donelson had just lost 20) and the disastrous shape of the scientific equipment. Stevens wrote at that point, "I was unwilling, after so much labor and fatigue...to assign the gentlemen to duty, when they did not have confidence in their means." He ordered the party to start moving to Fort Vancouver via the Walla Walla Valley and the Columbia River.

However, as Stevens rode on ahead of the main party, the snows of Eastern Washington vanished in the mild Walla Walla Valley. He sent a message back to McClellan holding out the prospect of 20 fresh horses if he was willing to traverse Naches Pass. His lieutenant predictably responded that he saw no purpose to running a line over that pass at that time of year. Stevens would not give up. He wrote again hinting that another survey leader, Frederick West Lander, might be willing if McClellan would give him the proper instructions. McClellan, increasingly exasperated by Stevens' persistence, told him it was not worth the risk as they already knew that Naches Pass was not suitable for a railroad no matter what additional information was found. He told Lander to go if he wished, but warned that the odometers would not work, that he had had difficulties in good weather, and that the snows would greatly compound the problems. Lander, not surprisingly, declined.

As McClellan, Donelson and Lander followed in Stevens' wake down the Columbia River, they had leisure to gossip and reflect. It appeared to them that they were being asked to take the risks and that Stevens would grab the glory. McClellan now chafed at being under Stevens' supervision. After he found it impossible to carry out the governor's orders to dispose of some animals at The Dalles, McClellan fumed, "I will not consent to serve any longer under Governor S unless he promises in no way to interfere, merely to give me general orders and never say one word as to the means, manner, or time of executing them." McClellan remained on the coast during the winter and was sent out from Olympia by Stevens to conduct a survey of Snoqualmie Pass from the west side. He demurred that he had never seen a snowshoe in his life and did not anticipate any pleasure in using them. After getting as far as Snoqualmie Falls and peeking at the western approaches to the pass, he returned to Olympia and was able to make his escape in March to accept an assignment in Europe.

It is easy to exaggerate the differences between McClellan and Stevens, or to criticize McClellan for timid and dilatory actions. Much that has been written along these lines has occurred because of McClellan's later prominence. It is tempting to see the seeds of Civil War failures in the Cascade Mountains survey. However, both men agreed on the general purposes of McClellan's assignment to survey the Cascade Mountain passes during the summer and fall of 1853. Despite numerous difficulties, McClellan carried out his task and correctly identified Snoqualmie as the superior of the passes. This was contrary to the prevailing opinion that Naches or perhaps a pass near Mt. Baker would prove best. Differences between the two men arose for three reasons. First, each was tired and testy from the arduous efforts of a long season of exploration. Secondly, neither was very comfortable under the command of the other (or of anyone else). Both were ambitious and did not take criticism easily; it was a classic clash of two large egos. Finally, Stevens viewed the survey as part of a grand design for the exploration and settlement of the Pacific Northwest. His natural energy and enthusiasm knew few bounds because he believed the survey was the first important step in a larger plan. In his view, nothing should be left undone that could contribute to the ultimate goal. McClellan had no such stake in the region. His was a temporary assignment to be carried out in good faith and to the best of his ability, but he saw no reason once the basic task was completed to redouble his efforts and begin again. It should be noted that Stevens consistently praised McClellan's survey work and quibbled only about details such as McClellan's comments about the worthlessness of the interior.

Despite the bickering at the end, the western portion, as indeed the entire survey, was a great success. Stevens and his lieutenants had made the work more than just a reconnaissance for a possible railroad route. It was a geographic, topographic, geologic survey which included assessments of animal and plant life, climate, soils, terrain and the native inhabitants. On the western portion George Gibbs made major contributions with his "Report on the Indian Tribes of Washington" and another on the geology of the central portion of the territory. Dr. Cooper proved an indefatigable collector of specimens. And J. K. Duncan, in addition to his other duties, left an unexpected series of sketches including those of Owhi and his son Qualchin. Neither Stevens nor McClellan had any reason to be other than proud of their survey work in

1853. Before they began only the major features of the vast territory had been identified. When they had finished, all but a few details were known to the entire nation.

Stevens and McClellan made their mark in civilian life during the remainder of the 1850s. Stevens served as governor and then territorial delegate from Washington until the start of the Civil War. McClellan left the army in 1857 to work as a civil engineer and to become president of the Illinois Central Railroad. When the Civil War began, both men volunteered. Circumstances led to Stevens serving under McClellan's command during the early years of the war, a fittingly ironic footnote to their earlier sojourn in the Pacific Northwest.

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#### Sidebar 1

##### Western Disappointment

McClellan's low opinion of the survey, Olympia, Washington Territory, indeed the entire West Coast, is vividly portrayed in this excerpt of a letter from the future general to his mother, dated November 24, 1853. We have to pass the winter at Olympia on Puget's Sound, a flourishing city of some 10 or 12 houses, fine prospect that. In addition I have to start again for the mountains as soon as we reach there, a trip of perhaps 3 weeks, in the rain & mud until we reach the Mts & then snow, I shall only take 1 or 2 men & a couple of Indians with me. As I never saw a snowshoe in my life (except in a museum or a picture book) I don't anticipate much pleasure during the jaunt & am desirous of finishing it as soon as possible. I feel doubtful whether we can reach the summit but we can try our best anyhow. As there are no houses in Olympia, that can be had, I expect to spend the winter in a tent, labored by the rain & mud, for you must know that we don't expect to see the sun anymore until next summer, except at rare and short intervals of time, it is raining almost constantly....I don't think much of it [the Pacific Coast] it is surely vastly overrated in every respect.

#### Sidebar 2

##### A Famed Encounter

LATER IN LIFE, Hudson's Bay Company trader Angus McDonald reminisced at length about his short but famed encounter with Isaac Stevens and George McClellan at Fort Colville in 1853:

I was in charge here in 1853 when Governor Stevens met here. I had full instructions as to the hospitality and the discretion of it entirely trusted to myself. The Governor had ample credentials from the east crossing the Rocky Mountains by the Hell Gate defile.(1) McLellan met him here with an escorting party from Puget Sound. I had fifty imperial gallons of extra rations to entertain the gentlemen. McLellan drank but little. The Governor was rather fond of it and laid back about ten on the first night to sleep the darkness out. His last words that night were "Mac this is powerful wine. All hands had been steeped during the day and found the grass and their blankets the best way they could. As all the party had disappeared McLellan began to sip the juice of the vine more freely and we sat on the old sofa together, as closely as space allowed. Having to undergo the hospitalities of the day to all hands, I felt my grog inviting me to go to my blankets. But I was well trained to that splendid brandy and in prime of life too, and hard to make me give in at it. Suddenly the General put his arm around my neck and whispered in my ear "Mc, my proud father too was at

Culloden,"(2) and he quietly slipped down off the sofa to the floor. I soon made the sofa an easy place for him and he and the Governor snored the night till daylight. This spree has been spoken of, God knows where not...

1. Hell Gate defile is near present day Missoula, Montana.

2. Culloden, in Scotland, was the scene of the famous battle of 1746 wherein the fate of "bonnie Prince Charlie" and the Stuart restorationists was sealed.

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