

HARBINGERS OF CHANGE

European Influences in the Aboriginal Northwest as Seen Through the Journals of Lewis and Clark

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"We . . . [are] about to penetrate a country at least 2,000 miles in width, on which the foot of civilized man . . . [has] never trodden." So a contemplative Meriwether Lewis wrote in his journal as the rain beat against the buffalo skins of his tent. It was April 7, 1805, and the Corps of Discovery was preparing to forsake its comfortable winter camp at Fort Mandan for the unknown reaches of the northwestern interior. Whether they would meet with "good or evil" along the way, Lewis reflected, "was for experiment to determine."

As the first whites to cross this section of the "Stony Mountains," Meriwether Lewis and William Clark might have reasonably believed that when they descended the headwaters of the Columbia they would enter a pristine aboriginal world, a place where the Indians lived as they always had. In fact, the Indians of the Columbia Plateau had already experienced the profoundly disruptive effects of indirect white contact. Horses, epidemic disease, Euro-American trade goods, political realignments and a steady flow of information had entered the region for nearly a century. Plateau natives had embraced and adapted themselves to these new influences and were actively reaching out for further contacts with the world beyond the Plateau when Lewis and Clark arrived.

The arrival of the Corps of Discovery in 1805 marked the end of the Plateau's protohistoric era. This period can be defined as the gap between the time when European influences and effects reached a region and the time when Europeans arrived to colonize. Across the Americas, European influences in the form of horses, trade goods and exotic diseases were exchanged along native trade networks far in advance of European settlement. This period was usually one of wrenching change for native peoples and has figured prominently in recent ethnohistorical literature for many regions. The journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition, rich in ethnographic detail, provide a lens through which to view the protohistory of the Columbia Plateau.

Horses were the first harbinger of protohistoric change in the inland Northwest. Lewis described the "immense numbers" of equines owned by some Plateau tribes as "lofty, eligantly formed, active and durable," and some of them "fat as seals." The half wild herds between The Dalles and the Snake River especially impressed Sergeant Patrick Gass, who declared he had seen "more horses, than I ever before saw in the same space of country." Horses were acquired from New Mexico via Shoshone middlemen, and most Plateau natives had enthusiastically adopted their use by the mid 18th century.

The resulting revolution in transportation helped shift tribal boundaries, expand the seasonal rounds for subsistence, and increase and reorient native trade. Tribes of the southern and central Plateau whose main trading relations had been with coastal tribes now turned their

attention to the south in an attempt to acquire more horses and trade goods. Lewis and Clark discovered that connections between the Plateau and the Spanish settlements of New Mexico and California were surprisingly direct. On several occasions members of the expedition observed horses with what they took to be Spanish brand marks; mules—almost certainly bred by Spanish New Mexicans—were reported as well. Northwest natives selectively acquired those bits of Spanish material culture and equine science that met their needs. Several members of the expedition noted that the Indians constructed their saddles according to the Spanish design. The Nez Perces demonstrated the Spanish method of gelding, which the captains judged "preferable to that practiced by ourselves."

Smallpox was the second major catalyst of protohistoric change to arrive in the Northwest. Plateau and coastal Indians alike were ravaged by smallpox at least twice before Lewis and Clark's arrival, first in the 1770s and again around 1800. Pockmarked survivors of the epidemics show up in several journal entries. Lewis noted how the disease "has destroyed a great number of natives in this quarter" and speculated that "the late ravages of the small pox may well account for the number of remains of vilages which we find deserted on the river and sea coast."

How great were the population losses from these protohistoric epidemics? It is impossible to say, since we may never know how many Indians lived on the Plateau before the epidemics. Pre-Columbian population estimates depend heavily on guesswork and inference and cannot be considered reliable. The usual estimate is that 30 percent of Plateau Indians died in the 1770s and another 10 percent or so in 1800-1801, for a total population loss of around 40 percent. But such estimates do not allow for the possibility that native populations may have partially rebounded from their losses by 1805. Such recovery can be surprisingly quick. An otherwise healthy population experiencing a modest annual population increase of 1 percent could recover from a loss of 40 percent of its population in 35 years, and with a 2 to 3 percent growth rate, in as little as ten years. The speed of recovery depends on native fertility—which brings us to consider another disease topic.

Venereal diseases, which can severely reduce fertility, were common on the peripheries of the Plateau. When some expedition members formed dalliances with Shoshone women, Lewis worried about the possible effect on the men's health. And Clark wrote of the Clatsops: "Pocks & Venereal is Common amongst them," an observation that some of his men soon proved for themselves. But there are few references to venereal disease on the Plateau itself at this time. Indeed, Lewis specifically noted that "in my whole rout down this river I did not see more than two or three with the gonnaerea and about double that number with the pox."

The difference was due to the more restrictive sexual mores of the Plateau Indians. Gass favorably compared the "honour of the Flatheads" to the "venery" of native women on the coast and on the upper Missouri, an observation echoed by many later explorers. The relative chastity of Plateau women formed a barrier to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in the proto- and early historic periods, a barrier that might have allowed native populations to rebound from at least some of their losses by 1805.

All across the Plateau the expedition met with Indians locked into debilitating conflicts with natives outside the region. Many of the Flathead men were away on an expedition against the Blackfeet when the captains first visited their village. The Nez Perce spoke of their perennial conflicts with the Shoshone and showed off their war trophies to the expedition. Along the

Columbia River the enemies were the Shoshone tribes to the south, and so great was the fear that virtually all the villages were located on the north bank of the river for protection against Shoshone raids. Everywhere that Lewis and Clark went, the Plateau Indians demanded guns of the explorers that they might defend themselves against their enemies.

Both the Blackfeet and Shoshone campaigns of expansion were fueled by protohistoric changes among those people. The Blackfeet and their allies exploited their superior access to firearms to force the Flatheads, northern Shoshone, and Kutenais to locate their winter camps behind the walls of the Rocky Mountains. These tribes responded by giving ground, forming alliances to field large, intertribal hunting parties, and seeking new sources of guns and metal weapons.

The Shoshone tribes of the Great Basin used horses and steel weapons to raid the southern Plateau, no doubt encouraged by the ready market for slaves in the Spanish colonies. At first the Plateau Indians were driven from their lands by the attacks. But as they acquired metal weapons and a few guns of their own via the coastal trade, they were able to launch counter-raids against their enemies, and Plateau Indians showed the captains numerous war trophies they had gained in battles against the Shoshone.

Northwest Indians were also experiencing a revolution in their trading patterns by 1805, and the Corps of Discovery found that European trade goods were ubiquitous on the Columbia Plateau. At different villages the captains noted white beads and blue beads, copper tea kettles and brass armbands, metal knives and steel cutlasses, English muskets and Spanish coins, red cloth and sailor's jackets—all among people whom no white man had ever visited. Plateau Indians could be finicky consumers and had already incorporated European trade goods into some of their social and religious customs—their gambling games and burial rituals, for example.

Some of these goods filtered up from the Spanish settlements of New Mexico and California. But from the native point of view the Spaniards were inadequate trade partners. "Their complaint is that the Spaniards will not let them have firearms and ammunition," Lewis recorded of the northern Shoshone, "thus leaving them defenceless and an easy prey to their bloodthirsty neighbors." So Indians sought other sources of trade goods. A second source was via the British and American traders operating in western Canada and the upper Missouri, perhaps with the Blackfeet and Crow Indians as intermediaries. At the confluence of the Snake and Columbia rivers some Wanapams used hand signs to tell corps member Joseph Whitehouse that they had obtained their brass beads and copper pendants "from white people on a River to the north." But only a trickle of goods seems to have reached the Plateau this way. Plateau Indians found that the best source of trade goods was from the coast, where American and British ships arrived each year to trade for sea otter pelts.

The influx of European goods created an economic revolution on the Columbia Plateau, transforming what had been limited exchanges of a few status items with neighboring tribes into a regional system of trade that linked Plateau Indians to both the Coast Salish and Great Plains tribes. Natives sought to acquire trade goods in two ways. Some individuals traveled outside the Plateau to trade with other Indians or even directly with whites. Some Nez Perce men told Lewis that they had traveled to the Missouri River to trade, while another man from the same tribe said he'd gone to the coast and received some cloth handkerchiefs from a white trader there, a journey some Flatheads claimed to have made as well. A number of Plateau natives went so far as to alter their seasonal rounds to produce tradable surpluses of certain commodities, which they exchanged for European manufactures during the yearly trade fairs at

The Dalles. Lewis and Clark noted that buffalo robes, beargrass, wapato, salmon pemmican, and camas roots were all produced by the Indians for this trade.

Finally, Plateau peoples were undergoing a revolution in knowledge at the time of Lewis and Clark. Expanded trade networks reduced village isolation and increased the geographical horizons of many natives. Lewis and Clark's journals provide many examples of this expanded geographical knowledge. The northern Shoshone described the courses of the Snake and Salmon rivers, the Great Basin, and the route to New Mexico via the Yellowstone country. The Nez Perce advised against trying to cross the still snowy Bitterroot Mountains in the spring of 1806 and instead sketched a route through southern Idaho that would later become the Oregon Trail. But the most impressive geography lesson might have come from the Chinooks, whose detailed instructions for travel to the Rocky Mountains point to frequent native travel across the length of the Columbia Plateau:

The Indians inform us that the Snows lyes knee deep in the Columbian Plains dureing the winter, and in those plains we could not git as much wood as would cook our provisions untill the driftwood comes down in the Spring . . . And even were we happily over those plains and in the woodey cuntry at the foot of the rocky mountains, we could not possibly pass that emence bearier of mountains on which the snow lyes in winter to the depth of 20 feet; in short the Indians tell us they [are] impasable untill about the 1s[t] of June, at which time even then is an abundance of snow [and] but a Scanty Subsistence may be had for the horses. . . .

This expanded geography was part of a larger knowledge revolution that transformed the Plateau in the 18th century. Unfamiliar European trade goods provoked questions—What sort of people made this? What are they like? Where do they live?—and stories of the white man were traded along with his manufactures. This exchange of stories probably set off the wave of prophecies regarding the approaching white men that swept the Plateau in the late 18th century. Indeed, one of the really striking things about the "first contacts" made by Lewis and Clark is how the Indians do not seem all that surprised to meet them. Curiosity seekers did sometimes crowd around the expedition to watch them set up camp, and most Indians expressed a strong interest in the expedition's possessions and intentions. But what is missing in the journals is the open-mouthed wonderment at the sight of strange white people that is so prominent and typical of first contacts elsewhere. When David Thompson explored the northern Columbia Plateau, for example, he reported that "the natives were at a loss what to make of us . . . [one man] felt my feet and legs to be sure that I was something like themselves, but did not appear sure that I was so." At another village "the Chief . . . Rode down to examine us, he appeared very much agitated, the foam coming out of his mouth; wheeling his horse backwards and forwards, and calling aloud, 'Who are you, what are you.'" Lewis and Clark never met with a reception like this.

Disappointed at the relative lack of surprise, the captains resorted to gimmicks to get the reaction they expected. Lewis was forever producing his air-gun, and gleefully recording in his journal what "great medicine" the Indians thought the device. Clark grew so exasperated by his matter-of-fact introduction to a Willamette Valley tribe that he secretly threw a piece of cannon fuse into the lodge fire to impress the laconic natives with his power.

What accounts for the blasé native reaction to what should have been such an amazing event? The wide distribution of European trade goods provides a partial answer. Several historians who have studied first contacts in other parts of the continent have argued that it was not so much the Europeans themselves that the natives found amazing but the cloth and metal and

gunpowder that accompanied them. But to the Plateau Indians these more-or-less familiar objects required no supernatural explanation.

It can also be argued that there were Plateau natives who had not only heard about white people well before Lewis and Clark, they had met some. Trading excursions outside the Plateau had produced any number of natives who could describe in detail the appearance, customs and powers of white people. Shipwrecked sailors living near the coast were another possible source for Plateau familiarity with Europeans.

At Fort Clatsop Lewis and Clark met the mixed-blood son of Jack Ramsey, an English sailor who had lived on the coast for a number of years. Later explorers reported meeting an elderly mixed-blood man called "Old Soto" near The Dalles, whom other Indians described as the son of one of a half dozen Spanish sailors who had lived among them. Lewis and Clark did not themselves meet Old Soto, but their map of the area shows a "Shotos village," probably a reference to the same man. Six Spanish sailors living for a considerable time at the great trading post of The Dalles would have diffused a lot of knowledge concerning Europeans. And among the Walla Walla Indians one expedition member reported a "half white child," proof, he thought, that white traders had already visited these people. Significantly, it was at the same village that Gass noted: "We were a very interesting sight to the surrounding crowd, as nine-tenths of them had never before seen a white man"—implying that 10 percent of the Walla Wallas had met white people before.

The journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition describe an Indian world in transition. Indians were active participants in the process of protohistoric change, seeking out knowledge of white people and sources of their trade goods, and adopting those goods and customs only selectively, in ways that met native needs. The Indians who encountered the first white men on the Columbia Plateau already knew what white men were, where they came from, and what their goods were like. They had knowledge of a broad slice of the geography of the West and knew where white people lived and came to trade. And they had experienced the worst of the white man's diseases—smallpox—and now had a substantial number of individuals with immunity to this disease. Perhaps most importantly, they knew that the white men were coming and had some idea of the dangers and opportunities this would present. This knowledge and experience would help guide Plateau natives as they entered the historic era.

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