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JOSEPH SCHAFER

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The
Acquisition of Oregon Territory

PART I.

Discovery and Exploration

By

JOSEPH SCHAFER, Ph. D.

Professor of History in the University of Oregon.

*Author of a History of the Pacific North-
west, The Pacific Slope and
Alaska, Etc.*

The Acquisition of Oregon Territory

Part 1. Discovery and Exploration. *

I. Exploration of the Oregon Coast.

The earliest voyages along the Pacific seaboard, of what is now the United States, were made by Spaniards. The expedition of Cabrillo and Ferrel, from Mexico in the year 1542-3, brought into view nearly the entire extent of the California coast; these discoveries were confirmed, and extended to at least the forty-second parallel—the southern boundary of Oregon—by Vizcaino and Agullar¹ in 1602-3. But having thus early established a claim upon more territory than she was ever able to subdue and occupy in a thorough manner, Spain took no further interest in maritime discoveries northward from Mexico for one hundred and seventy years. When she at last bestirred herself, in 1774 and 1775, sending out expeditions as far north as Alaska, the purpose was not to seek a new field for the expanding energies of her people; history proved that they were not able to make proper use even of California. The northern voyages were undertaken in response to a species of counsel of despair. The Spaniards feared that Russia, already lodged in Alaska, would come down the coast, and that England might succeed in finding a northwest passage from the Atlantic into the Pacific, jeopardizing all Spanish possessions along that coast; they hoped to avert both of these calamities by fastening their claim upon as great a stretch of coast as possible. In a word, the voyages of Perez, Heeceta and Bodega, while notable as exploits of eighteenth century seamanship, and historically fortunate in becoming connected with the American territorial claims of half a century later, represent a forced, irrational expression of the Spanish national life, and could not have been expected greatly to benefit that nation. On the other hand, it can be shown that British navigators were brought to these coasts, independently of the Spanish activities,

*The present paper is designed to cover one feature of the historical process by which the territory of Oregon, or the region known as the Pacific Northwest, fell into the hands of the United States. The attempt has been made to set out the essential facts relative to discovery and exploration, not for the sake of their dramatic effect as part of a historical narrative, but for the bearing they have upon the evolution of a title to territory. The facts relating to the early history of the occupation of the Oregon country will be presented in the same spirit. Finally an attempt will be made to clear up the questions of diplomacy involved in the acquisition of Oregon. On this head the author has recently come into possession of a large amount of new data, gleaned chiefly from the manuscript sources preserved in the archives of the British Government.

¹ A convenient and careful summary of these voyages may be found in Davidson. *Voyages towards the Northwest Coast*. U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. Report, 1880.

and almost contemporaneously with them, in direct response to a strong national demand for commercial expansion, and as a feature in a well matured, consistent policy of maritime discovery.

The search for a Northwest Passage, so ardently pursued by the British during the first third of the seventeenth century, was thereafter partially, though not wholly, intermitted.² The idea of continuing the search from Hudson's Bay persisted,³ so that when, in the twenty-second year of Charles II the Hudson's Bay Company was organized, one of its professed objects was to undertake explorations to the northwest from Hudson's Bay with a view to the discovery of a passage into the South Sea; under the charter the company was expected to prosecute this search.⁴ The company, however, which was at first composed of leading courtiers, and afterwards of a few of the merchant princes of London, because engrossed in the safe profits to be reaped from the trade, either wholly forgot the exploratory aims professed at the time of seeking its charter, or remembered them only when strenuously importuned by those of its agents who were ambitious to explore.⁵ But at last public sentiment in England grew extremely hostile to the Company, threatened them with loss of the charter for failure to fulfill their engagements to the public, and, in a word, practically compelled them to act.

The man who more than any other was instrumental in arousing the public conscience on the question of the delinquency of the Company, and at the same time blowing the embers of the cooling national ambition to discover the Northwest Passage, was Mr. Arthur Dobbs.⁶ This gentleman studied with care the records

² The early voyages, beginning with Cabot and ending with Foxe and James, may be studied in *Voyages Towards the North-west*, 1596-1631. Hakluyt Society, Y.

³ A convenient summary of the matter is given by Miller Christy in his introduction to the *Voyages of Foxe and James*. Hakluyt Society, 1894.

⁴ Copies of the charter may be found in Dobbs, Arthur, *An Account of the Countries Adjoining to Hudson's Bay* Ap., and in the *Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Hudson's Bay*, 1749, Ap. I., also in Wilson's *The Great Company*, Ap. The charter recites that the incorporators, naming them, have already "undertaken an expedition for Hudson's Bay, in the northwest parts of America, for the discovery of a new passage into the South Sea, and for the finding of some trade in furs, minerals, and other considerable commodities. . . ." the charter was granted "to encourage the said undertaking."

⁵ For evidence concerning the organization of the company at this time, its profits, and its neglect of exploration, see Dobbs *supra*, especially 2-3, 43, 47-48; 93 ff. *Report on Hudson's Bay Company*, *supra*, 231-234, 347, 257, 258-9, 260-61, 262 ff. Its first exploring expedition was sent out in 1719, two vessels, the *Albany* and *Discovery*, under Captains Berley and Vaughn. They never returned. The instructions given these navigators by the company are printed in the *Report on Hudson's Bay*, Ap. XX. A list of the vessels sent out by the company on a similar errand is given in Ap. II of the same report.

⁶ We know very little about his early life. He was born in 1689 or 90, was a member of the Irish Parliament in 1732, and was the author of an Enclosures Act for Ireland; he wrote many pamphlets on the question of the Northwest Passage, most of them strictures on the conduct of Capt. Middleton, and was the author of the book cited above, which was published in 1744. In 1749 he testified before the House of Commons select committee which investigated the Hudson's Bay Company, and from 1758 to 1765 he was Governor of the Royal Colony of North Carolina.

Some light is thrown upon his character by certain official letters of his recently published in the "Correspondence of William Pitt with Colonial

of all the earlier voyages to Hudson's Bay and convinced himself that the passage existed. He also investigated, privately, the conduct of the Hudson's Bay Company, proving to his own satisfaction that they were doing all they could to prevent the discovery of a passage, which, by developing a great northern commerce would be likely to destroy their monopoly. He took depositions from ship captains, sailors, retired Hudson's Bay servants, and French woodsmen, gathering information upon every phase of northern geography, and upon the state of the company's business in those regions. The results were published by him in 1744 in his book on Hudson's Bay, which, although written in a very bad style, with no sense of order, and with much repetition, is nevertheless in some respects one of the most significant books produced in the first half of the eighteenth century. In it, Mr. Dobbs, who has the characteristics of a true seer, traces for us, with startling distinctness, the great outlines of that maritime and trade policy whose execution was to make up so large a part of English history from his day to ours.

Mr. Dobbs begins with a discussion of the geography, peoples, and potential trade of the Hudson's Bay country and the adjacent regions extending southwest towards the Rocky Mountains and south towards the Great Lakes. He shows that the Hudson's Bay Company have failed to develop the trade of those countries, contenting themselves with maintaining a few factories near the Bay, and there exchanging an unvarying round of trade articles with the Indians who bring down their furs, at a comparatively unvarying but exorbitant price.⁷ In consequence, the French from Canada have been pressing in, and they have already gained a very large share of the trade properly belonging to British subjects in the southern, eastern, and western districts appertaining to Hudson's Bay.⁸ Besides, he says: "The Company avoid all they can making Discoveries to Northward of Churchill, or extending their trade that way, for fear they should discover a passage to the Western Ocean of America, and tempt, by that means, the rest of the English merchants to lay open their trade. . . ."⁹ His remedy is to take away the Company's monopoly and make the trade free to all who desire to engage in it. This would result in the planting of trading settlements in the eastern, southern, and western districts which have been neglected

Governors" etc. 2 vols., N. Y. 1908. He was an intense Protestant of the Anglican type, an ardent hater of France, and an enthusiastic believer in the high destiny of England. When Quebec was taken, Dobbs proclaimed a day of "Solemn Thanksgiving," and composed a hymn to be sung throughout the province. He has been, he says in a letter to Pitt, enclosing the hymn, "a little enthusiastic in my expectations; as the object of my wishes for more than thirty years in regard to the British dominion over North America is now so near its accomplishment." II. 206. Dobbs died in 1765.

⁷ Hudson's Bay, 43, 46-8; 57; also trade tables on pp. 193-202.

⁸ Hudson's Bay. See especially testimony of Joseph La France, pp. 29-39; and comparison of French and H. B. Co. for sales in 1743, p. 201. Also, incidents related on pp. 55-6.

⁹ Hudson's Bay, 48.

to the advantage of the French, as well as the more complete development of the northern trade.¹⁰

Moreover, by thus pressing southward under the impetus of trade rivalry, the British would soon reach the Great Lakes, and these they ought to secure by planting a strong settlement on the River Conde, which flows into Lake Erie near its southeastern extremity, and there building vessels to navigate the lakes throughout. This settlement, protected by the Iroquois and Fort Oswego, and supported by its neighborhood to the colonies of Pennsylvania and Maryland, whence constant accessions of population might easily be derived, Dobbs regarded as the key to the control of the continent. The French would thereby be confined to Lower Canada, being cut off not only from the Great Lakes but also from the Mississippi. To make assurance doubly sure, another settlement might be made on the Ohio near Lake Erie. "By having the Cherokees and Chicasaws to the southward as a barrier between us and Louisiana," he says, "and by securing the Choctaws, we might spread our commerce beyond the Mississippi; by which means the inland trade of that vast northern continent, much greater than Europe, would in time be wholly enjoyed by us in Britain, independent of any other European Power."¹¹ When we add that Dobbs proposed the acquisition of the Great Lakes and their free navigation by treaty, in case of victory over the French, in war, we have filled up the outline of what may be termed the continental division of his scheme.¹²

The second portion is equally bold, and still more alluring in its character. It embraced, as a point of departure, the opening of the Northwest Passage into the Pacific. This done, an immense trade could at once be begun with China, Japan, the Philippines, and the Spice Islands; with Mexico, Peru, Chili, and all the islands thus far discovered in the Pacific.¹³ But this would be only a beginning; for the Pacific Ocean had as yet been explored only in certain narrow regions, along well defined lines of navigation usually followed by all ships. No doubt, he says, the vast reaches of that ocean not yet searched contain many islands, perhaps continents, inhabited by numerous peoples. He proposed a systematic exploration by Great Britain of the Pacific Ocean in both the southern and the northern hemispheres, for

¹⁰ *Hudson's Bay*, 56-7.

¹¹ *Hudson's Bay*, 61 ff. quoted from p. 65. The scheme of a settlement on Lake Erie and another on the Ohio was launched by Franklin ten years later and for reasons not altogether dissimilar. See Franklin's Works (Bigelow) II: 474. An abstract of Franklin's plans may be found in Alden, *New Governments West of the Alleghanies*, 3-5.

¹² In discussing Dobbs's administration of North Carolina, Doctor Raper says: (N. Carolina, 57) "But to Dobbs it was much more important to aid the other colonies, especially those in the North, than to defend or work for the interests solely of North Carolina. To drive the French from North America seemed to him of far more importance than to make North Carolina a very prosperous province." See also letter to Pitt, Oct. 31, 1758, in which Dobbs exults over present prospects. With the French expelled from the continent, the Mississippi and Mobile in possession of England, the only thing left to do would be "opening the Hudson's Bay trade to give us the whole trade of the northern continent to Mexico." Correspondence of William Pitt, etc., II, 316.

¹³ *Hudson's Bay*, 166-7.

the purpose of bringing these lands and peoples to the light, and beginning a trade with each in turn.¹⁴

In conclusion, Dobbs suggests the method to be followed by Great Britain in making discoveries in the South Sea, and in carrying on a trade with the islands and countries discovered. He says: "If, then, a discovery should be made of this (North-west) Passage, to carry on so vast a trade to advantage, a considerable settlement should be immediately made in California, or rather upon some convenient island near the coast. . . . That settlement should be made the rendezvous for all ships going from or returning to Europe, . . . and should be the head settlement, as Batavia is to the Dutch in India, and from hence the trade might spread to Asia, India, Mexico, and Peru; and from this place the islands in the great South Sea might be discovered, and a commerce be begun with them.

"After this settlement is made secure, another should be formed in a southern latitude, about 30 degrees, about 7 or 800 leagues from the American coast, perhaps the Isle of Easter, or some other island with a good harbor and fruitful soil, where the natives are peaceable and humane, and from thence a further discovery southerly and westerly, and a trade may be begun with these regions, as well as with those nearer the line; so that those two settlements would be as two centers, the one for the southern, and the other for the northern countries and islands dispersed through those seas; when these were made, if the only true and laudable method was followed, of civilizing and assisting the natives, and putting them upon proper improvements in their several countries and islands, suitable to their different climates, that might be beneficial to themselves and proper for trade; the English might be the carriers of all those nations, which would give them an immense profit, and furnish them with all our manufactures, and such other European commodities as they should want, without being at any great expense of people to settle other countries in those seas. Here would be room for improvements in trade for ages to come, and would give full employment to our manufacturers and merchants in Britain, and a perpetual return to wealth; and at the same time, we should civilize and make happy numberless nations, and bring them, by degrees, to be capable of knowing divine truths."¹⁵

Turning from this literary forecast of events to the events themselves, we find first, that the search for the Northwest Passage was resumed as a consequence of Dobbs's agitation. The Hudson's Bay Company, in 1737, had sent out two vessels possessed to make exploration for a passage, but the expedition accomplished nothing of consequence.¹⁶ Mr. Dobbs next turned to the Lords of the Admiralty, inducing them to devote government ships to the object. Two vessels of the navy were selected,

¹⁴ *Hudson's Bay* 134. To show how small a space in the Pacific, comparatively, had as yet been searched, Dobbs reviews all the voyages in that ocean of which journals had been published. 133-168.

¹⁵ The quotation is from the last page of the book, 168, with four lines from 167.

¹⁶ Barrow. *Voyages Into the Arctic Regions*, 278-9. No journal of this voyage has been published.

the "Furnace" and "Discovery," and were placed under Captain Middleton and William Moor. The voyage was made in 1741-2; it resulted in a careful survey of the waters north of Hudson's Bay, and in the conclusion that no passage existed.¹⁷ This conclusion Mr. Dobbs undertook to refute; and so influential was he, with public opinion all running in his direction, that he was able to induce Parliament in 1745 to pass an act¹⁸ offering a reward of £20,000 "to any of his Majesty's subjects who should discover a Northwest Passage through Hudson's Straits."¹⁹ He also raised, by public subscription, the sum of £10,000, and purchased two vessels called the "Dobbs" and "California," which sailed in May, 1746, under the direction of Captain William Moor and Captain Francis Smith. The expedition returned in 1747, no more successful than its predecessors had been.²⁰

This was the last attempt to find a passage from Hudson's Bay or Strait. Indeed, for a period of about twenty years, the general question of the Northwest Passage remained in partial abeyance. Meantime, the British Government had secured Canada and the eastern portion of Louisiana in consequence of the Seven Years War. Britain had also become interested in making explorations in the Pacific, and by a series of great voyages, prosecuted by Anson, Byron, Wallis, Carteret, and Cook, had won for herself the vast new empire of which Dobbs, in 1744, had only dreamed. Anson's voyage was begun in 1740 and terminated in 1744. It had as its object to attack the Spanish power, with which England was then at war, in the Pacific, especially on the coast of South America, and in the Philippines.²¹ Through great misfortunes at sea, the program of offensive warfare could be only partially carried out. Yet, the results of the voyage were important. Anson stormed Payta, a port on the Peruvian coast, and captured it in spite of the weakened condition of his own forces.²² He cruised off the Mexican coast for the Manila galleon, but it went into hiding and escaped him;²³ he then sailed to China, and around the Cape of Good Hope to England. The historian of the voyage²⁴ insists that, had the squadron rounded Cape Horn at the proper season, and thus saved itself from partial destruction, it could easily have captured Baldivia in Chili, terrified that kingdom, and "awed the most distant parts of the Spanish Empire in America."²⁵ He also gave to his English readers a graphic account of the trade between Manila and the Mexican Port of Acapulco, with suggestions as to how British seamen might profit by the information;²⁶ and he described the

17 Barrow, 280-286.

18 18 Geo. II, c. 17.

19 Christy, *Introduction to the Voyages of Foote and James*.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Anson's *Voyage Round the World*, 2-3.

22 *Ibid.*; 187 ff.

23 *Ibid.*; 249 ff. Anson afterwards sailed from China to Manila and caught the next galleon for Manila, taking a prize valued at \$1,500,000. *Ibid.*, 270-285.

24 Mr. Richard Walter.

25 Anson's *Voyage*, 280.

26 Anson's *Voyage*, 288 ff.