

WILL THE REAL NORTHWEST PASSAGE PLEASE STAND UP?

Or: How a mountain range pistol-whipped the British Empire.

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The search for the Northwest Passage has been in the news recently with the discovery of Franklin's ship in the Arctic. In earlier centuries, it was the subject of massive exploration efforts, not just by Arctic explorers¹ working their way west from Hudson's Bay, but by many others. The Russians were making their way down the Alaska coast from the west, the British, Russians, Spanish, and later, the Americans, were all exploring the west coast by ship, looking for the fabled "river of the west". But there was one other player. The fur traders of the Hudson Bay Company and the North West Company were expanding west across the continent looking for fur, but they also had, in the back of their minds, the holy grail of exploration in the 1700s; the Northwest Passage. Alexander Mackenzie personified this dual interest in the trade and the fantasy of a Northwest Passage. It drove him to carry out some of the most amazing voyages of discovery in history. And he did it by canoe.

Their thinking in that era would have been defined by what they knew of the river systems of eastern North America. They had found quite amazing river routes, from Montreal and Hudson Bay that led thousands of km inland, with only a few, relatively minor portages between watersheds. It was as if God had ordained connections between the St. Lawrence/Great Lakes system, the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Saskatchewan and the Churchill systems. One could, for example, travel from Montreal to Ft. Edmonton, some 1850 miles, as the crow flies, with only one major portage of 8.5 miles/13.7 km. They likely assumed, based on this experience, that there would be a similar set of river routes from the northwest to the Pacific. And then they found the Methye Portage (12 mi/19 km), near present day Fort McMurray, which gave them access from these systems into the vast Mackenzie River system. It is hard to imagine what it was like for Alexander Mackenzie as he stood at the Methye Portage, looking down into the vast unknown watershed that one day would bear his name. It was 1789. Behind him lay the Saskatchewan and Churchill River systems and their established canoe routes and trading posts. Ahead of him was a land completely unknown to Europeans. He would have known of the Russian presence on the Alaska coast dating back to 1742. The Spanish had been established on the west coast far to the south for over a century and had explored the west coast as far north as Sitka Sound, Alaska, by 1775. Captain Cook explored the west coast from Oregon to Alaskan 1778, just a year earlier. (It is unlikely that McKenzie had access to his journals or maps just a year later).

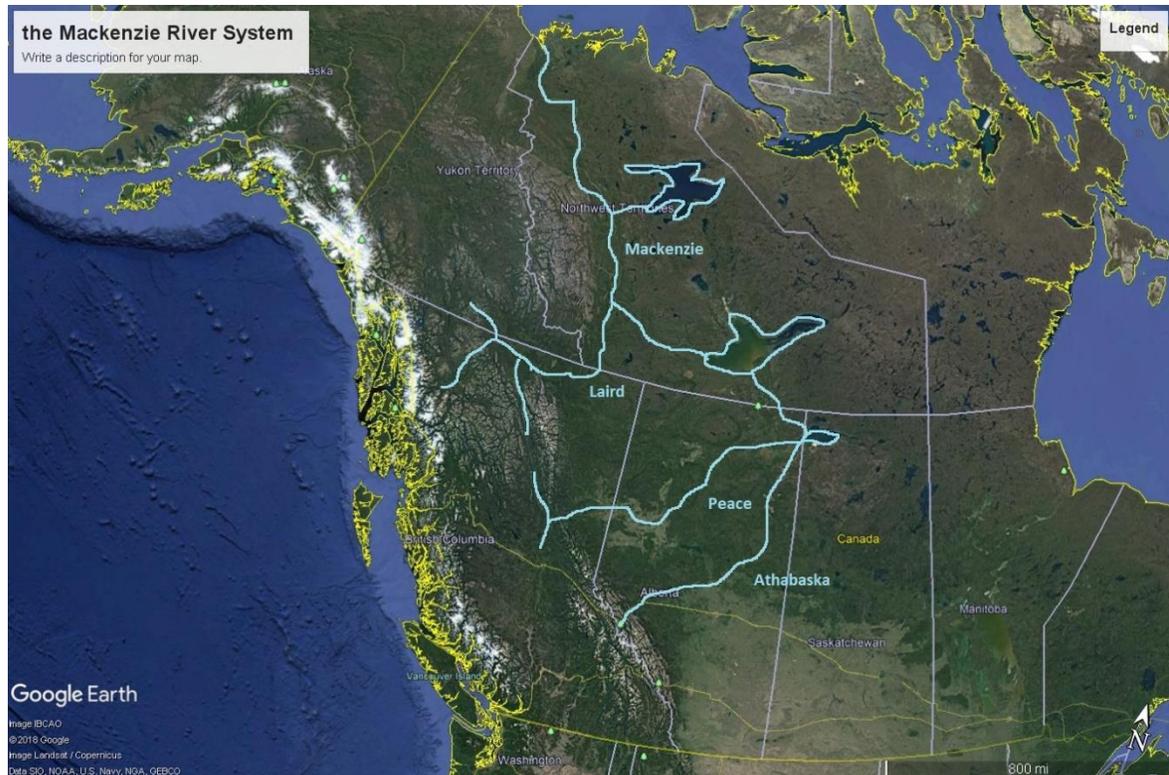
So it was that in 1789, it was Mackenzie's turn. He was tasked with exploring this new fur country, perhaps, finding the Northwest Passage. But for a twist of fate, he might have found the canoe equivalent of the Northwest Passage, by a route that is almost unknown today. He might have done so 14 years before David Thompson found a way over the mountains far to the south, and 44 years before another fur trader and explorer, John Campbell finally followed the Liard River to its source at Dease Lake and walked over into the Stikine watershed, a northern river that drains into the Pacific Ocean.

At first, it seemed that Mackenzie had found a river system that would lead to the west coast. From the Methye Portage he soon found a large river running north (the Athabasca). He came to a great delta, where the Athabasca and Peace came together and then faced a 5 mi portage at the Slave rapids. No big deal in his world. And then he came to an inland sea, Lake Athabasca; a vast lake that he could not see across. There the local people told him that this vast lake drained to the west, and went to a salty sea, exactly what he hoped for.

If the Mackenzie River had in fact drained west into the Pacific, rather than turning north, then we would have had the perfect river route to the Pacific; connected to eastern Canada by a long canoe route with only two major portages. And he would have arrived there before the Spanish and the Russians were firmly established on the west coast. However, much to his chagrin, his river went west for 266mi/428km but then turned directly north to the Arctic. He thus went the whole way to tidewater in the Arctic before swearing for a few minutes, then turning around and going all the way back up the river. His river was perfect for the trade, with few rapids, no major portages, and a current that one could paddle against, going upstream. Large barges and 100 foot ships still use the river today. It just went the wrong direction.

Where the river turned north he described the “River of the Mountains” coming from the west. At that point (present day Ft. Simpson), the Liard is just as big as the Mackenzie where they join. If Mackenzie had gone west up that river, instead of downstream to the Arctic, North American history might have been very different. He can be forgiven for giving it a pass, if you have ever seen that river in flood. It pours into the Mackenzie River, brown and dirty and going like a watery express train. It discolors the Mackenzie for miles downstream.

But before we proceed with this story, we need to look at a map of the Mackenzie system, as we know it today. There are 4 major tributaries. The Athabasca River starts in Jasper National Park and runs north. The Peace River is next. It drains a large chunk of northern BC, then flows into Alberta and joins the Athabasca in Wood Buffalo National Park. Combined, they form the Slave River that drains the lake to the north and flows into Greater Slave Lake. This huge northern lake then drains to the west and becomes the Mackenzie River. The Liard River also drains a vast area in northern BC and the Yukon. The source of the south fork of the Liard, the Dease River, originates in Dease Lake. The south end of Dease Lake is only a few km from the Stikine watershed and originates far closer to the west coast than any of the other tributaries of the Mackenzie.



The Mackenzie River system and its major tributaries.

After his voyage to the Arctic, Mackenzie returned to England and learned the basics of navigation and the estimation of latitude (north and south, easy to calculate from the height of the sun above the horizon, and longitude, east to west, which was not so easy to estimate in that era). When he came back to the north five years later, the first trading posts were established in the Mackenzie basin. He was charged with building forts up the Peace River and exploring that region. It is a much more navigable river than the Liard, at least in the lower sections. It runs to the west for hundreds of miles, though flat country with lots of wildlife (i.e. dinner, including buffalo); with a current that one can canoe upstream on right to the edge of the mountains. And it had gravel bars for lining the canoes, a critical component of rivers good for upstream travel with canoes or York boats. Travel upstream in that era involved canoeing against the current in slower sections and then getting on shore and with ropes pulling the boats upstream through swift sections and rapids (i.e. “lining”). This is not that difficult actually, if you have a nice gravel shoreline to walk along. It likely seemed to him to be the best option for getting west to the coast, since the Mackenzie, he thought, could only take him north. And critically, he talked with local natives there that told him of a short portage that would take him over the divide into a river that drained to a salty sea to the west².

At the edge of the mountains he ran into the geological fact that would be the demise of the dream of the overland Northwest Passage. On Google Earth (below), you can see the problem. The ranges of the Rocky Mountain chain run in parallel waves, like some vast geological set of huge ocean waves, aligned south east to northwest, a relic of the actions of the Pacific and North American plates grinding against each other millions of years ago.

These ranges are made up of softer rocks which eroded to create the many river valleys in the Rockies, and the harder rock of the “white rock” ranges, formations that were harder and eroded very slowly. These rocks make up the peaks of the range, and were the rock layers that were the hardest for the major rivers to erode. Over millions of years, the rivers eroded these hard rock layers, but they didn’t get rid of them entirely. The end result was the canyons and rapids on each of the major rivers where they break through the mountains.



The gaps in the Rocky Mountains Chain.

The Rocky Mountain chain is in effect four major ranges separated by relatively narrow gaps between each section of the range. The Colorado Rockies are separated from the main chain to the north by 100 miles of open desert to the peaks of Wyoming south of Yellowstone. This was called “South Pass”. It was first used by Henry Ashley in 1824. There was no major river through this gap; the Ashley party travelled by horse. Since it was sage brush desert country it was relatively easy to develop a wagon road, some years later,. This eventually provided the route for the Oregon Trail.

The complex of mountains around Yellowstone National Park is just to the north. North of that block there is about 60 miles of low mountains between the Yellowstone block and the south end of the main chain of the Rockies to the north. This was the route used by Lewis and Clark in 1806. The Missouri provided river access to the edge of the Rockies. The “white rocks” in this area create a canyon called the Gate of the Mountains (now under a reservoir). Once through that Canyon they entered the Three Forks area (west of present-day Bozeman). From there they had to “portage” with horses about 40mi/65km) over a low pass into the Bitterroot Valley and the Clark Fork River, a tributary of the Columbia.

The main block of the Rockies, from central Montana north to the Peace River gap provided few easy options for getting across the mountains. The one option that was used later was the Athabasca River to Athabasca Pass. The “white rocks” on this option are very narrow, just at the edge of the mountains near Jasper. They called it Disaster Ridge. It was a short but very difficult portage. Above that point the Athabasca provides pretty good travel by water as far as Jasper and then good travel with horses, or on foot, up to very close to the continental divide. However, the descent to the BC side of the mountains was difficult, steep and could not be portaged with canoes. From the pass to the Wood River on the BC side is a drop of 3200 ft/980m. It did provide access to the Columbia River; but that is another story.

The next major break is 700 miles to the north where the Peace River breaks through the Rockies and drains a large part of BC west of the Rockies chain. This was the route found by Mackenzie on his trip to the west coast (via what is called Pine Pass today), but it led to major difficulties in the coastal range.

North of the Peace is the stone sheep country of the northern Rockies, another 300 miles of steep and difficult mountains. And then there is the Liard River gap, where the Rockies end. The gap is 30 mi/50 km wide. It is the option that was missed until very late in the game. To the north are the Mackenzie Mountains and the other ranges in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, again with few options for getting through to the west.

Meanwhile, back on the Peace River....

After several days of easy travel up the Peace, Alexander and his crew ran into the “white rocks” near present day Hudson’s Hope. The river had worn through those rocks, but left a canyon full of rapids. McKenzie made the mistake of trying to work his way up the through the canyon, missing the portage that natives used to get around the canyon (9 mi/12 km). From there he got through one of the large gaps in the main range of the

Rockies, with relatively good travelling, on a large river. Things were looking good. 75 mi/120 km upstream the river split. The Findlay went north, he chose to go south. The Parsnip is a smaller river, but it was headed south and west. And his guide indicated that it was the route to the river of the west. It was difficult travel for a long way (180 mi/240 km) south. Then he faced a major portage through a mess of beaver dams and swamps to the upper Fraser River. When he got there, close to Prince George, he must have thought that he has found the way west. The Fraser is placid and very navigable from Prince George south to Williams Lake. There his dreams of a northwest passage departed. The local people told him of the vicious canyon on the Fraser. Again, geography, and geology raised their ugly heads. This time it was the hard rocks of the coastal ranges. So, he had to walk west over the Grease Trail³ to Bella Coola. He got to the Pacific, but not by a useable route. The Grease Trail “portage” was 95 mi/150 km long. It included climbing over a mountain range with a very steep descent (4500ft/1380m) down into the Bella Coola River. In 1793, the people there did not have horses. It was not a viable route to the Pacific.

But just suppose he had tried the Liard instead....

It is an interesting “what if”, to consider how history might have been altered if he had tried the Liard rather than the Peace. He had good reason to pass on this option. The Liard drops 2 to 4 feet/mile (.8m/km) from Lower Post to Fort Simpson at its mouth. It is a river in a hurry. It is likely that Mackenzie had extended discussions with the other senior people in the HBC back east, over some port and wine no doubt, , about the big river that joined the Mackenzie River and led west. But all bets were against that route. The major problem was that it was very difficult to paddle against the current in this river, unlike the other options. To get from Fort Simpson (at the confluence) to the edge of the Rockies was tough work but doable. But there again, geology and geography raised their ugly heads. The white rocks again. There is a gap in the mountains, but the river flows for miles and miles through the Grand Canyon of the Liard. It is almost unknown outside of the north. It is an utterly spectacular place. The river basically skirts the very north end of the Rocky Mountain chain proper. And, again, another accident of geology; there are few gravel bars on that river, and so lining canoes upstream was a very tough job. This canyon is about 25 mi/40 km long. The first rapids at the lower end are imposing, but there is a side channel that could be used as a portage route during low water.



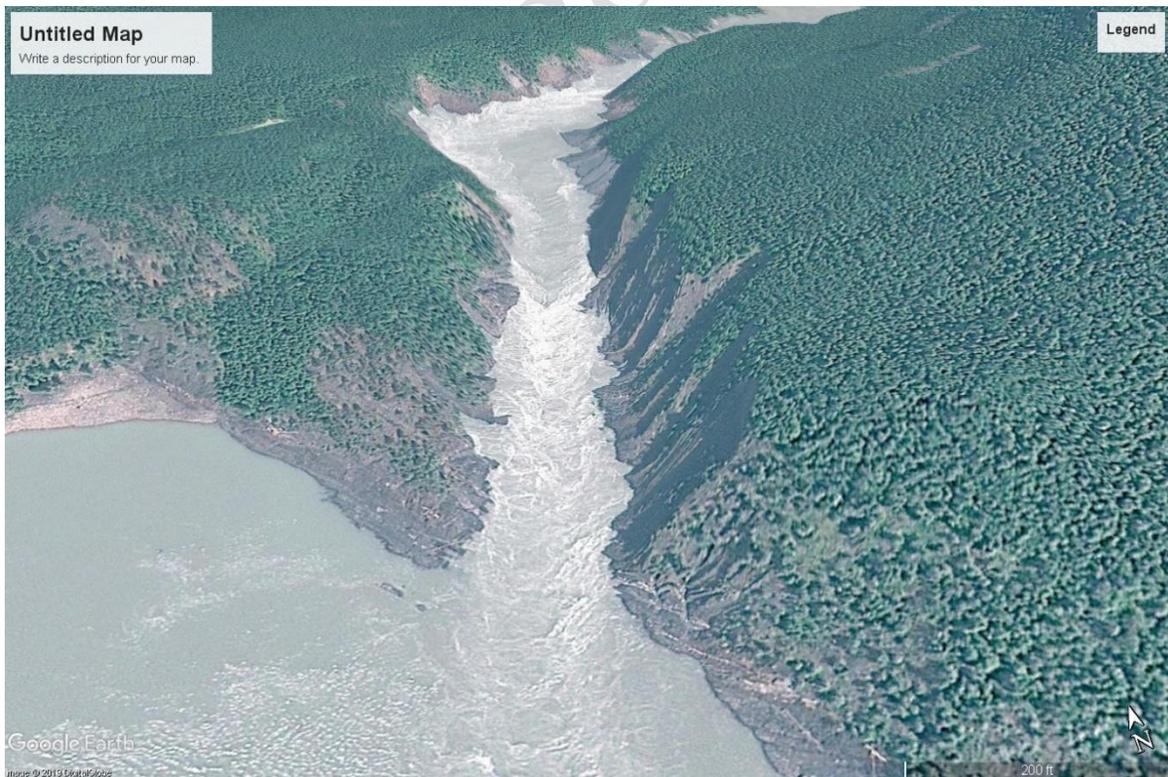
The first major rapid at the lower end of the Laird River canyon.

Unfortunately, just above this portage is another longer and more difficult portage. (The river drops at 7 feet/mi (1.5m/km) through the canyon. And there are few gravel bars for lining. In the fur trade era a few decades later, the HBC folks used the canyon, but it was a major problem.

It would have constituted a major challenge, more or less equivalent to the Grand Portage at the Lakehead. If this had become the way west, they likely would have constructed a short portage trail around the first rapids and a longer portage around the middle (4 mi/6 km of rough terrain on either side of the river), then figured out some way to line up the upper canyon (20 mi/30 km) and then built a portage around the top end rapids (13 mi/20 km. This portion would have been on mostly flat benches with relatively easy travel.



The portages in the Grand Canyon of the Laird.



The second of the rapids at the upper end of the Grand Canyon of the Laird. (Do not jump in a canoe at the Laird Hot Springs and go for a "little" trip down the Laird...)

It would have been slightly tougher than the Methye or Grand Portages, but still doable with some effort. But if the old fur trade guys had built a portage around this canyon, and I am sure they discussed it in many a company meeting, it would have opened the way west, both into the Yukon system and the Stikine system.

But, then once you are above the canyon (Near Laird Hot Springs on the Alaska Highway), things change entirely. The main bulk of the Rockies are behind you and it is very good going with a canoe, with a few short portages and rapids, all the way west to Lower Post 120mi/200 km). There the river splits. If Mackenzie had taken the south option he would have found a great canoeing river, the Dease; that would have taken him 240 mi/370 km south and west to Dease Lake. Dease Lake is about 25 mi/38km long. The south end of the lake is only 2mi/3km from the Stikine watershed, and only 56 mi/90 km to Telegraph Creek, the head of navigation on the Stikine River. The Tahltan and Tlingit used large ocean canoes on the river and regularly travelled from Telegraph Creek to the coast. When this route was finally explored 35 years later in 1838, by John Campbell, there was a well-used trail from the south end of Dease Lake to Telegraph Creek. (*His story is described in detail by Kenyon's book on the history of the Liard, a wonderful book*⁴).

This route would not have been easy, but it was certainly an option that would have been competition with the other options such as Athabasca Pass into the Columbia. In effect it would have provided a canoe route from Montreal to the Pacific, over some 3000mi/5000 km (direct distance), with 4 major portages. But he didn't try it, and by the time that route was explored later in the 1800s, other events (Russians, Americans, British on the coast) has intervened.

Below is a fascinating map that shows what they knew of the northwest in that era, published in 1828, based on the explorations of Cook, Vancouver, Fraser, Arctic explorers from Hudson Bay, Russian explorers, Mackenzie and David Thompson. The "river of the mountains", i.e. the Liard, barely registers on the map. It does show the various major canoe routes used by the trade in that era.



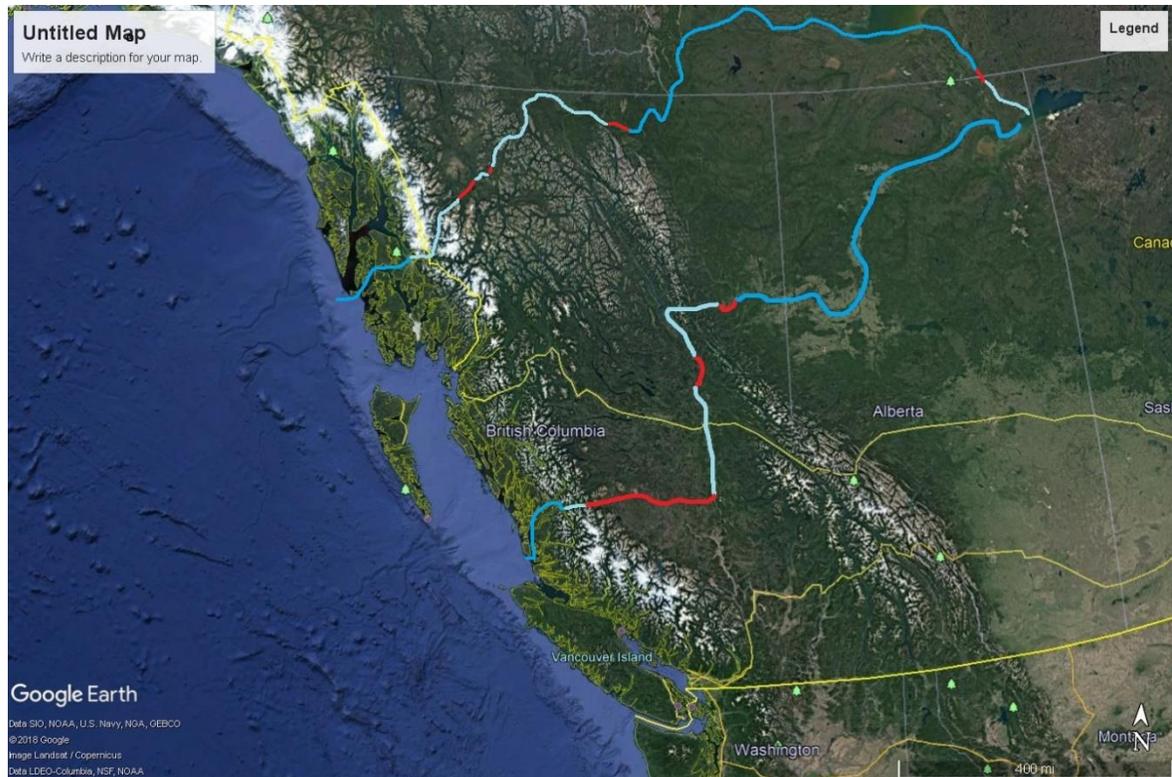
A 1828 map of the northwest. Source: Princeton university library historic map collection⁴.

The section of the map below shows the great blank spot on the map that the Liard traverses.

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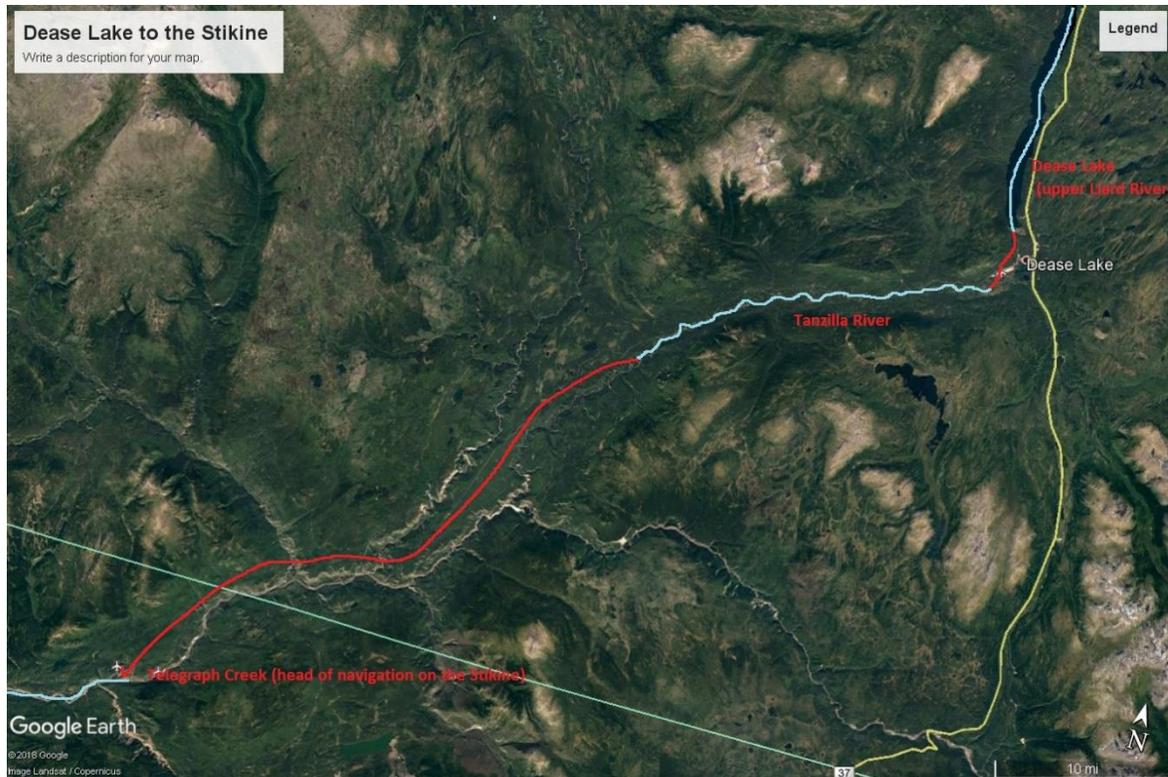


So, the Northwest Passage did exist, for canoes. We just didn't find it until later. Below is a map that shows the Liard and Peace River routes. The Liard River route has far fewer mi/km of portage.



The northerly Liard River route to the coast, vs the Peace River/Bella Coola route (portages in red).

When Cambell got to Dease Lake in 1838 there was a well-established trail to Telegraph Creek. If this had become a major trading route for moving goods and furs across the continent, then there were some interesting options for reducing the length of this portage. Just 3mi/5 km to the south of Dease Lake town, is the Tanzilla River. It flows into the Stikine and the Pacific. Though a narrow little creek 50ft/15 m wide, it has a gentle grade for about 25mi/40 km, doable with canoes, until it is effectively looking down onto the Stikine River. This would have substantially reduced the length of the portage required. As with the other routes there was a serious down and uphill involved (1000ft/640m), but nothing like that on the Athabasca and Peace to Bella Coola routes.



The route from Dease Lake to Telegraph Creek, via the Tanzilla River.

So there you have it; the Northwest Passage that we missed. If the fur trade had established this as a route to the Pacific in 1789, or 1794; it is interesting to contemplate how such a route might have altered the “great game” of dominance for the west coast fur trade, with the Spanish coming up from the south and Russians down along the Alaskan coast, the British Empire and the HBC coming toward it from the east and via the Arctic islands. Would 30 years have made a difference? Perhaps. Ocean based exploration and the transport of furs around Cape Horn became viable by about 1820. So that would have been an important factor. But if this route had been found earlier, it is likely that David Thompson would have been sent further north and put to work on forts along the Liard and Dease, rather than being charged with establishing forts on the Upper Columbia. Lewis and Clark and President Thomas Jefferson would have known that the British had a useable route established to get to the west coast. (Lewis and Clark had Mackenzie’s journal with them as they travelled west). Perhaps the treaty that the Russians signed with the Americans in 1825, effectively giving the Americans control of the west coast fur trade, might have been signed with the British Empire. This, in turn; might have forestalled the loss of Oregon to the Americans a few years later in 1846. And then, in 1867, it might have been Canada, not the USA, that bought Alaska from the Russians. (This is unlikely given the costs of the across Canada railway in the same era). Who knows how this single choice of route would have altered the history of the west. Perhaps everyone from California to the Bering Strait would now have a Canadian accent. Eh?

So there you have it; the mountain range that defeated the British Empire. Just one little river route that made sense, and was found in the late 1700s, and the map of western North America might look very different.

Literature Cited

1. Sisterton, D. 2015. This is an exceptional geographic description of these efforts, from 1500 on, look up *the Northwest Passage, Dennis Sisteron, 2015, on YouTube.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqxT2aOg0og>

2. Sheppe, W. 1962. *First Man West. Alexander Mackenzie's Account of his expedition across North America to the Pacific in 1793.* Univ. of Calif. Press.

3. In pre-settlement times there was a network of trails that the aboriginal people used for trade and travel from the west coast into the interior of British Columbia. One of the trading items was the Eulachon (oolichan), a small fish that was dried or rendered into fat. This Eulachon grease was carried inland along trails that are now called the "grease trails". Mackenzie travelled along one of these trails.

4. 1828 map of the northwest. Source: Princeton university library historic map collection
<https://catalog.princeton.edu/catalog/4656255#view>

5. Kenyon, A. 2016. *The recorded history of the Liard Basin, 1790-1910.* Published by the Fort Nelson News, Fort Nelson, B.C. (This is an exceptional history of this little known watershed.

Author

Bob Jamieson is a wildlife biologist, former horse outfitter and rancher in southern BC. He owned a guiding area in the north that included the Grand Canyon of the Liard, thus his interest in that area. He has spent much of his life in canoes, on horseback and on shank's mare (the two sticks attached to your hips), in the Rocky Mountains from the northern Yukon to Arizona.