



MAP I. "MAP OF LOUISIANA, VIRGINIA, AND CAROLINA, UP TO THE GREAT LAKES."
 BY J. GIBSON, C. 1750. FROM *The Gentleman's Magazine*. MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY
 LIBRARY MAP COLLECTION.

While portraying the mid-eighteenth-century West that sparked Jefferson's imagination, this map also makes plain a fundamental reality of the region: the land was already settled, already home to native nations. Whatever European imperial aspirations, the country remained in the hands of its first possessors. European and American territorial expansion would come at the expense of native lives and estates. J. Gibson's map was a chart for future conquest.

CHAPTER ONE

IMAGINING THE WEST

The View from Monticello



JOHN LOGAN ALLEN

There is something about mountains that invites us to look beyond them, to find what is on the other side. Whether these are mountains of reality, such as the Blue Ridge of Virginia, west of Monticello, or whether they are mountains of the mind, such as the Stony Mountains or Mountains of Bright Stones that appeared on only a scattering of late eighteenth-century fur trader maps, the invitation is the same. For those born, as was Thomas Jefferson, with a geographer's mentality and inclination, the invitation is so strong as to be compulsion. Looking west from Monticello, the Blue Ridge Mountains dominate the horizon and block the view of the eye but not of the mind. And in the view of the mind's eye, the farther Stony Mountains also permit penetration by the imagination. We cannot know at what point in his life Thomas Jefferson the geographer decided to pursue systematically the compulsion to look beyond the Blue Ridge, although we can (and will) make some informed guesses. What we can know is that pursue he did, and the implications were not just continental but global in scope. My purpose in this essay is to lead the reader through the development of the geographical imagination of Jefferson, the formation of his image of the West beyond the Blue Ridge and, yes, beyond the Stony Mountains.

Scholars have been prone to think and write of Jefferson as statesman, political theorist, architect, gentleman farmer, natural historian, eclectic scholar, amateur archaeologist—in short, as the quintessential Renaissance man—but few have explicitly dealt with him as geographer. Among those few who have was Donald Jackson, a man to whom I owe a great deal, both personally and professionally. When Don was working on his marvelous book *Thomas Jeffer-*

son and the Stony Mountains (1981), I presumptuously supplied him with some of my doctoral dissertation notes on Jefferson as geographer.¹ Don expanded some of my immature musings and, I would like to think, eventually came to understand Jefferson in much the same way I had—as a geographer by birth, by training, and by inclination. The suggestion is still strong in my mind—a quarter-century after completing my doctoral work—that Thomas Jefferson, like most geographers, was born a geographer as much as he was made a geographer by virtue of training and circumstance. He evidenced, from a very early age and before training and circumstance had a chance to act upon him, a curiosity not just about the elements of nature that surrounded his boyhood home at Shadwell but also the arrangements in space of those elements. The geographer's spatial perspective, an innate sense of place and scale and spatial organization, was early on a vital part of Jefferson's formidable intellectual inventory; it later became what may have been both his most well developed intellectual sense and his most important contribution to the future of his country—the Declaration of Independence notwithstanding.

Nowhere in the heritage that Thomas Jefferson left us do we find greater evidence of his sense of geography than in his writings, particularly those few sections in *Notes on the State of Virginia*² that bear on the trans-Appalachian region and the documents related to the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition. It is in these writings that Jefferson gives us evidence of his easy mastery of the traditional tools of the geographer's trade—the ability to view the world at different scales and to work easily up and down the hierarchy from the local to the global and back again; the tendency to seek concepts that help make sense of the complicated spatial patterns that make up the world's natural and cultural mosaic; the fascination with maps and the ability to convert the map view to a view of the real world; the understanding that geography is a point of view, a way of looking at things, rather than a study of any particular thing.³ Most important, in Jefferson's writings on the West, including his only book, *Notes on Virginia*, and four documents written in late 1803 and early 1804,⁴ we find evidence of his geographical imagination, of his ability to look beyond the Blue Ridge or Stony Mountains without ever leaving Monticello. Ask any regional geographer practicing his art and science today and you will be told that the imagination is as important for doing regional geography as any of the traditional tools noted above. Some regional geographers are great travelers; others are "armchair specialists." And no professional in the field can tell you which is the more qualified or does the best work. Much has been made of the fact that Jefferson was a "vicarious Westerner," that he never traveled beyond the Blue Ridge. He didn't have to. In addition to

actually living farther west than any other major political figure of his time, he lived farther west in his mind.

THE EDUCATION OF A GEOGRAPHER

How did Thomas Jefferson become a geographer?—arguably the most accomplished geographer of his age, save the great Alexander von Humboldt, the father of modern geography and, not so coincidentally, one of Jefferson's most frequent correspondents.⁵ Let us begin with his beginning and the assumption that geographers are, at least in part, born. His father, Peter Jefferson, was one of the first of his generation to abandon the worn-out soil of the Tidewater for the new lands of the Piedmont.⁶ In sight of the Blue Ridge, Peter Jefferson built Shadwell, where Thomas Jefferson was born in 1743. When the Virginia tobacco culture moved out of the Tidewater and spread west to the base of the Blue Ridge, there was a need for qualified surveyors to establish property boundaries and settle conflicting land claim disputes. It was in this field that Peter Jefferson received his first recognition. Even before he moved west with his family, he had made several trips into and across the Blue Ridge on surveying assignments. In 1746 he was appointed as one of the official surveyors, along with another Piedmont farmer named Joshua Fry, of the limits of the Fairfax grant between the Rappahannock and the Potomac Rivers and extending into the Blue Ridge.⁷ The result of the surveying project of Jefferson and Fry was one of the first accurate maps made in the colonies—the 1751 Jefferson-Fry map of the inhabited parts of Virginia.⁸ The map was not superseded until 1787 when Peter Jefferson's son used it for a base map and made improvements thereon for the London edition of his *Notes on Virginia*. If there is such a thing as geography genes, Thomas Jefferson possessed them in abundance.

The Jefferson-Fry map of the Fairfax line represented the geography of reality, but other events that occurred while Peter Jefferson was engaged in the Fairfax survey embodied the geography of the imagination. Peter Jefferson found the opportunity to purchase several tracts of land west of the mountains, extending in theory to the banks of the Mississippi.⁹ He also acted as an unofficial purchasing agent for other interested Albemarle County residents—including Joshua Fry, Dr. Thomas Walker, and Reverend James Maury—and by 1749 several prominent Albemarle gentlemen had acquired tracts of land beyond the mountains. It is probable that these land purchases were for speculation; late in 1749 a company to be known as "the Loyal Land Company" was chartered for the purpose of "the discovery and sale of western lands."¹⁰ What of Fry and

Walker and Maury and their impact on the budding imagination of a young geographer? To answer that question, we need to go back in time to the early years of the eighteenth century, well before the Loyal Land Company was formed.

As early as the 1720s, British promotional literature on North America had introduced the concept of symmetrical geography—the idea that all major American rivers flowed from a common source area. One of the foremost proponents of the symmetry of American drainage systems was Daniel Coxe, author of the promotional tract *Carolana* and its accompanying map. Coxe described great rivers in the western parts of the continent that flowed from interior mountains “passable by Horse, Foot, or Wagon in less than half a day.” West from these mountains of the mind were other rivers “which run into a great lake that empties itself by another great navigable River into the South Sea.”¹¹ The great lake Coxe called “Thoyago,” and it existed only in the imagination. The great navigable river flowing into the South Sea or Pacific was also imaginary, but as imaginary geographical features sometimes have a way of doing, it became real in the 1790s with the discovery of the Columbia. Joshua Fry obtained a copy of Coxe’s book, and he and Peter Jefferson, Thomas Walker, and James Maury used it to concoct a grand scheme. Maury would write about it years after the fact: “Some persons were to be sent in search of that river Missouri, if that be the right name of it, in order to discover whether it had any communication with the Pacific Ocean: they were to follow the river if they found it, and make exact reports of the country they passed through, the distance they traveled, what worth of navigation those rivers and lakes afforded, &c., &c.”¹²

The “grand scheme” (that was Maury’s description of it) was based on an idea so ridiculously simple that it is surprising that it had not been suggested before. “When it is considered,” wrote Maury,

how far the eastern branches of that immense river, Mississippi, extend eastward, and how near they come to the navigable, or rather canoeable parts of those rivers which empty themselves into the sea that washes our shores to the east, it seems highly probable that its western branches reach as far the other way, and make as near approaches to rivers emptying themselves into the ocean to the west of us, the Pacific Ocean, across which a short and easy communication, short in comparison with the present route thither, opens itself to the navigator from that shore of the continent unto the Eastern Indies.¹³

Maury had stated the principle of continental symmetry—and its derivative of the Passage to India—as well as anyone had ever stated it.

Dr. Thomas Walker, who had already made one journey west of the Blue Ridge—through the Cumberland Gap and northward to the Shenandoah before returning to Albemarle County—was chosen to make the grand scheme operational. Part of Walker’s potential as a leader of an expedition was his field experience west of the Blue Ridge. But also important—especially to a group calling itself the Loyal *Land* Company—was his belief in the interior plains on both sides of the Mississippi River as a veritable garden of fertility, a future pastoral paradise. Such a belief lent credence to the plans of a group of land speculators and seekers after a passage to the Pacific. The bulk of the early-to-mid-eighteenth-century British geographical literature on North America with which the members of the land company could be expected to be familiar either ignores or disparages the agricultural potential of the West. However, the French literature of the same period (with which Walker was apparently reasonably conversant) was enormously enthusiastic about what several early French writers referred to as “the garden of the world.”¹⁴ What Daniel Coxe had called “Carolana” the French called “Louisiana,” and it was a land of abundance. One French chronicler—whose book appears on Maury’s library list and with whom Walker was also apparently familiar—claimed that “the soil is so fertile that, almost without cultivation, it produces European wheat and all kinds of fruit and vegetables which are unknown in France.”¹⁵ The Loyal Land Company sought what Meriwether Lewis and William Clark would seek a half century later—a passage through the garden. With the full cooperation of Governor Robert Dinwiddie and the governing council of Virginia, the Walker expedition got as far as the planning stage. Walker drew up “a list of all the necessary implements and apparatus for such an attempt, and an estimate of the expense, and was upon the point of making all proper preparations for setting out, when a sudden stop was put to the further prosecution of the scheme for the present, by a commencement of hostilities between this Colony and the French and their Indians.”¹⁶

It is hard to imagine a bright, lively, and intelligent boy, ten years of age, not knowing about this activity and being impressed by it. We do know, at the very least, that Coxe’s book was passed to Peter Jefferson upon Fry’s death and, subsequently, was left by Peter Jefferson to his son. We also know that Peter Jefferson’s will appointed Thomas Walker as one of the guardians of young Thomas, charged specifically with the duties of educating the boy, fourteen years old on his father’s death. And we know that Walker’s first step in carrying out this responsibility was to remove young Jefferson from the Latin school where he had been studying for five years and to place him in the school run by James Maury.¹⁷ Here young Thomas received what was probably his only formal geographic education, Maury being a believer in a knowledge of geog-

raphy as extremely important for the well-rounded young gentleman.¹⁸ And here Jefferson would have learned more about the West, about the principles of symmetrical geography that dominated the thinking of Daniel Coxe and the Loyal Land Company, and about the West as a potential agricultural paradise—a prominent topic in most of the geography texts on Maury's library list. While there were many other influences on Jefferson's life and intellectual development, I have to believe that the "early associations" played more than a small part. Everything I know about the ways that geographers develop their bent for faraway places with strange-sounding names tells me this was the case.¹⁹ It may have taken years to manifest itself, but the influence of the Loyal Land Company, of Thomas Walker and James Maury, of stories of the Lake of Thoyago and mysterious mountains and great western rivers and fecund interior plains loomed large in the development of Thomas Jefferson's image of western North America.

WRITING AND READING GEOGRAPHY, 1781–1801

The first written evidence we have of Jefferson's developing image of western geography is in his *Notes on Virginia*, a book compiled and written between 1781 and 1785 in response to a questionnaire from François Marbois, first secretary of the French legation to the new United States. During the years between his boyhood and his writing of *Notes on Virginia*, there had been little discernible trace of Jefferson's geographical imagination, little evidence of the latent geographer who "saw his father return bone-weary from journeys across the Blue Ridge, heard Dr. Walker's tales of the Cumberland Gap, and knew that his neighbors dreamed of an expedition to the great South Sea."²⁰ But *Notes on Virginia* changed all that. Jefferson's book was not, of course, a book on the western parts of North America; it was, more than anything else, a natural and economic and political history of the region between Chesapeake Bay and the Allegheny Plateau. But I do not believe that it was purely accidental that, during the writing of *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson wrote to several correspondents requesting "information of the country between the Mississippi and the waters of the South Sea" or that, in 1783, he wrote to George Rogers Clark and proposed that Clark lead an American expedition in search of a water route to the Pacific.²¹

If we define *geographical image* as a pattern of beliefs about the nature of a region (principal geographical features such as mountain ranges, lakes, and rivers) and the content of a region (secondary geographical features such as mineral deposits, climate, soil, vegetation, animals, and people), then *Notes on*

Virginia provides at least some evidence of Jefferson's image of the West in the mid-1780s. For example, Jefferson describes the Missouri River as the principal stream of the Mississippi-Missouri system, with a source north of the Mississippi's and west of that of the Rio Grande. He notes that Spanish traders from St. Louis ascend the river two thousand miles, that silver, lead, and salt are available in the Missouri valley, and that the soil and climate are potentially productive. He makes no specific mention of trans-Mississippian mountain ranges in *Notes on Virginia*. He does, however, comment on the mountains east of the Mississippi:

The mountains of the Blue Ridge . . . are thought to be of a greater height, measured from their base, than any others in our country, and perhaps in North America. . . . [They] are not solitary and scattered confusedly over the face of the country; but that they commence at about 150 miles from the sea-coast, are disposed in ridges one behind another, running nearly parallel with the sea-coast, though rather approaching it as they advance northeastwardly.

He also notes that the courses of great eastern rivers are at right angles to the eastern mountains, and for someone immersed early, as was Jefferson, in the tenets of symmetrical geography, the obvious does not even have to be stated: mountains west of the Mississippi should bear the same relationship to the Mississippi valley and the Pacific coast as the eastern mountains do to the Mississippi valley and the Atlantic coast; western rivers, like eastern rivers, should flow at right angles to the north-south orientation of western ranges, and, in places, burst through the Stony Mountains like the Potomac through the Blue Ridge.²² If Jefferson did not think of continental symmetry while writing *Notes on Virginia*, I would be very surprised.

Jefferson's geography book (and that is exactly what it was) also addressed the issue of the quality of interior lands west of the Appalachians. They were, Jefferson concluded, lands that were warmer in climate than the Atlantic Seaboard. Having a warmer climate, the interior could form a very suitable place for the expansion of agriculture, particularly the cultivation of those exotic and subtropical crops that could not be grown on the coast.²³ And running through the center of this interior garden were the Mississippi and Missouri rivers—"principal channels of future commerce for the country westward of the Alleghany."²⁴

In writing *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson crossed an intellectual meridian and became a practicing geographer. In addition to textual geographical description, the book contained Jefferson's first and only published map—*A Map of the*

Country between Albemarle Sound, and Lake Erie, Comprehending the whole of Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania, with Parts of Several Other of the United States of America. Latent geography was becoming kinetic geography; thought would give rise to action and over the next two decades Jefferson's image of the West would expand and grow as he took on, more and more, the role of the young nation's leading geographical authority on the trans-Mississippi West.

The first burst of Jefferson's awakened geographical imagination began at approximately the same time that *Notes on Virginia* was published, stimulated by the writing exercise itself and the opportunity afforded Jefferson by his appointment as U.S. Minister to France in 1784. For a five-year period, Jefferson engaged in a feverish book-buying spree in Europe and, as he would comment later, "purchased everything I could lay my hands on which related to any part of America, and particularly had a pretty full collection of the English, & Spanish authors on the subject of Louisiana."²⁵ We do not know for certain what works Jefferson possessed prior to this period of acquisition; certainly he had Daniel Coxe's *Carolana*, although that volume had burned, along with his entire library, when Shadwell itself burned in 1770. There is good evidence that between then and 1783, he had replaced Coxe and two other geographically oriented books from the Shadwell library—Thomas Jeffrey's *Natural and Civil History of the French Dominions in America* and Anson's *Voyages to the South Seas*—and had purchased two new works, Baron Lahontan's *New Voyages to North America* and Robert Rogers' *Concise Account of North America*.²⁶

The latter two acquisitions were critical. Lahontan's travel account (almost certainly apocryphal) described a journey made in 1689 up "the Long River" that flowed into the Mississippi from the West. At the head of the Long River, Lahontan came upon a large lake, fed by springs that came out of a ridge of mountains, on the other side of which were the headsprings of another great river that flowed west to "a great water"—all of this in a landscape of fertile meadows filled with deer and turkeys, an abundant land that Lahontan described as "the most agreeable in the world."²⁷ In a few pages, Lahontan conveyed not only the rudiments of symmetrical geography but also the image of the farther West as a garden.

Rogers' account was less bombastic than Lahontan's but, ultimately, only slightly less fanciful. While petitioning Parliament in 1765 for sponsorship of an expedition across the North American continent, Rogers claimed that he had discovered the Northwest Passage by land. That passage lay "toward the Head of the Mississippi, and from thence to a River called by the Indians Ouragan which flows into a Bay that projects North-Eastwardly into the

Country from the Pacific Ocean."²⁸ Rogers' petition was denied, but he turned to the public for support and, in *A Concise Account*, made the claim that he had unlocked the riddle of the geography of the western interior and, hence, of a route to the Pacific. Rogers' description was the epitome of the British concept of symmetrical geography. Toward the center of the continent was a mountain range that served as a pyramidal height-of-land from which rivers drained in several directions: "by these rivers the continent is divided into so many departments, as it were from a center."²⁹ Through the writings of Rogers and his lieutenant, Jonathan Carver (more of whom we will learn later), British symmetrical geography and the hypothetical height-of-land were reinforced as geographical concepts in Jefferson's imagination.

The reinforcement continued as Jefferson commenced purchasing books in France and England. A partial listing of the geographical titles acquired would include: Jonathan Carver's *Travels in the Interior of North America*, Pierre F. X. Charlevoix's *Histoire et Description Generale de la Nouvelle France*, Thomas Jeffrey's *American Atlas*, Thomas Hutchins' *A Topographical Description of Louisiana and the Floridas*, Louis Hennepin's *Description of Louisiana*, Dumont de Montigny's *Historical Memoires of Louisiana*, Henri Tonti's *Late Discoveries in North America*, and Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz's *The History of Louisiana*.³⁰ From this inventory, Jefferson himself would note the works of Carver, du Pratz, and Hennepin as being "a particularly useful species of reading."³¹

Carver's work was an extension of that of Robert Rogers, whom Carver had served as field lieutenant and cartographer. But Carver's popularity as an author exceeded that of Rogers exponentially—where Rogers had had to publish *A Concise Account* himself, Carver's *Travels in the Interior* went through more than thirty editions after its first English publication in 1788, remaining for most informed people (including America's foremost geographical writer and gazetteer, the Reverend Jedediah Morse) the authoritative source on the interior of the continent. Carver's comments on the content of western geography—on the climate, soil, natives, rivers, and mountains of western North America—became an important part of Thomas Jefferson's imaginary geography. The climate of the lands west of the Mississippi, Carver wrote, was "much more temperate than in those provinces that lie in the same degree of latitude" east of the Mississippi. The soil was fertile, producing mighty forests and a "great deal of land that is free from woods" that promised to "produce a sufficient supply of all the necessaries of life for any number of inhabitants."³² There were also mountains in the West beyond which could be found

other lakes, rivers, and countries, full fraught with all the necessaries or luxuries of life; and where future generations may find an asylum,

whether driven from their country by the ravages of lawless tyrants, or by the religious persecutions, or reluctantly leaving it to remedy the inconveniences arising from a superabundant increase of inhabitants. . . .³³

Years before anyone had heard of Manifest Destiny or the words *Oregon Country*, Jonathan Carver was expressing thoughts that would find action.

But it is in Carver's thorough descriptions of the nature of western geography that we find what was perhaps his greatest impact on Jefferson. "I have learned," he wrote, "that the four most capital rivers of the Continent of North America, viz., the St. Lawrence, the Mississippi, the River Bourbon, and Oregon or River of the West have their sources in the same neighbourhood."³⁴ This "neighbourhood" was the highest land in North America, the center of continental geography. "It is," Carver continued, "an instance not to be paralleled on the other three quarters of the globe, that four rivers of such magnitude should take their rise together, and each, after running separate courses, discharge their waters into different oceans at the distance of two thousand miles from their source."³⁵ He even named the mountains that gave rise to these mighty rivers: they were "the Shining Mountains . . . from an infinite number of chrystal stones, of an amazing size, with which they are covered, and which, when the sun shines full upon them, sparkle so as to be seen at a very great distance." The Shining Mountains they would become for later generations, and Carver, looking beyond his mountains of the mind, had even discovered the passage through them: if one followed a

branch of the river Messorie, till having discovered the source of the Oregon or River of the West, on the other side of the summit of lands that divide the waters which run into the Gulph of Mexico from those that fall into the Pacific Ocean, then he would have sailed down that river to the place where it is said to empty itself near the Straights of Annian.³⁶

"The Straits of Anian"—a name out of Renaissance cartography entered American geographical lore and the developing image of Jefferson's West.

Although Jefferson acknowledged the importance of Carver's work for his own ideas on the West, the works of the other two authors—Hennepin and du Pratz—may have been nearly equal in significance because they bore explicitly upon the territory of Louisiana: an area that would soon become American territory and the focus of Jefferson's geography of the imagination. Hennepin was a Recollect father and official historian of La Salle's first expedition to the Mississippi River. Wandering west from the Mississippi in 1680, he sought geographical information from native peoples, and in his reports appeared state-

ments that could be added to those of Coxe, Rogers, Carver, and others as core segments of the emerging Jeffersonian image. Hennepin's West, like Carver's, was a garden "of exceeding great fertility and beauty. . . . There are vast Meadows, which need not to be grubbd up but are ready for the Plow and Seed; and certainly the soil must be very fruitful."³⁷ Flowing through this garden was "the River of the Osages and Messorites" and it was formed "from several other Rivers, which spring from a Mountain about twelve days' journey from its Mouth . . . from this Mountains one might see the Sea, and now and then some Great Ships."³⁸ Hennepin added that by proceeding up the Missouri one might "find some great River running into the Pacifick-Sea, whereby . . . it will be easie to trade and have commerce with China and Japan."³⁹ The work of du Pratz, the historian of French Louisiana, was also significant.⁴⁰ Du Pratz related the story of an Indian with whom he had become acquainted while living in Louisiana. This Indian was a great traveler who had ascended the Mississippi to the mouth of the Illinois River and then overland to the Missouri. Keeping always to the north-northwest, the Indian traveled up the Missouri until he reached its source and there visited several nations "on a neighbouring river, which ran to the opposite direction, since as he judged, it ran from east to west into a sea, of which the Indians did not know the name any more than that of the river."⁴¹ The Indian named the river "the Beautiful River" and he later traveled down it toward the Pacific where he took part in an ambush of white bearded men who dressed like Europeans. The evidence from du Pratz's relation was inescapable and fit the geographic logic of Coxe, Carver, Hennepin, and other authors in Jefferson's growing collection: from some point on the Missouri a traveler had made a crossing between the Missouri and a westward-flowing river that took him eventually to the Sea of the West.

While Jefferson was in residence in France, buying books on the West and other topics, another event transpired that must have bolstered his developing impressions of western geography. He was visited in Paris by an American named John Ledyard, who had served with Captain James Cook during the great navigator's exploration of the Pacific coast of North America. Cook's maps and journals were becoming available, and they portrayed a range of mountains paralleling the Pacific coast and no great distance inland—just as the tenets of symmetrical geography had suggested a century or more earlier. Ledyard proposed to Jefferson a remarkable strategy: Ledyard would leave Paris for Russia, cross Siberia and pick up passage on a Russian fur trading ship for Kamchatka and the Pacific Northwest; here he would locate the Great River of the West and follow it to its source, across the mountains to the Missouri, and down to the Mississippi.⁴² It was a remarkable plan that went nowhere but it illustrates the power of the concept of symmetrical geography nearly two

decades before the Lewis and Clark expedition would test Jefferson's ultimate imaginary geography.

After returning from Europe, Jefferson continued to purchase books on the West—adding to his library, for example, Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal*, which was to play an important role in shaping his objectives for Lewis and Clark, as well as recent American geographies and the latest French and English histories of Louisiana. When, in 1793, Jefferson (acting on behalf of the American Philosophical Society) drew up a set of instructions for the French botanist André Michaux, who, it was proposed, would make an attempt on locating the connection between Atlantic and Pacific streams, it was clear that Jefferson was relying primarily on his understanding of western geography as derived from source materials as old as Coxe and as recent as Mackenzie. The "fundamental object" of Michaux's proposed travels, noted Jefferson, "and not to be disposed with," was the location of that source region of the upper Missouri where "a river called Oregon interlocked with the Missouri for a considerable distance, & entered the Pacific ocean, not far southward of Nootka sound."⁴³ In his early years as president, when he began thinking and writing about the West, it was the works of Coxe and Lahontan, of du Pratz and Hennepin, of Carver and Rogers that he would turn to again and again as "a particularly useful species of reading." And when events in 1802–3 transpired so as to make Louisiana Territory a part of the United States, that "useful species of reading" became even more useful as Jefferson prepared to launch the expedition of Lewis and Clark.

THE JEFFERSONIAN IMAGE OF THE WEST

There can be little question that, at the time of the purchase and the expedition, Jefferson was the best informed American on the trans-Mississippi area. He certainly had the most complete library on western subjects. Unfortunately, he never translated all of the information in his possession into a definitive statement of the geography of western North America. He came the closest in four documents written during the latter part of 1803 and the first part of 1804, documents that are—at the same time—remarkable for their lack of speculation yet still fully illustrative of Jefferson's geographic imagination. These documents, in ascending order of their importance rather than their chronology, were: "An examination of the boundaries of Louisiana," "A chronological series of facts relating to Louisiana," "Official account of Louisiana," and Jefferson's instructions to Meriwether Lewis.⁴⁴

The first two of these documents are closely related in that both were drawn

almost exclusively from Jefferson's library collection. Neither contains much "hard" geographical information, but inferences can be drawn from both. In "examination into the boundaries of Louisiana," for example, Jefferson's comments on the newly acquired territory's western boundary are instructive of his imaginary geography. The western boundary of Louisiana, he wrote, would be "up the Rio Bravo [by which he meant the Rio Grande] to its source; thence to the highlands encompassing the waters of the Missisipi, and along those highlands round the heads of the Missouri & Mississippi & their waters."⁴⁵ The nature of these highlands is not mentioned, but it is probable that Jefferson saw them as a simple dividing ridge or even just a height-of-land rather than a great mountain range. Most geographical writers of the time (including Jonathan Carver) had described "the mountains of New Mexico" as terminating near the forty-seventh parallel of latitude, and recent evidence from the British fur trade supported that description. Jefferson knew mountains, he had grown up near mountains; if he had meant to describe the divide west of the Mississippi-Missouri system, it is unlikely that he would have used the term *highland* rather than *mountain*. And from "A chronological series of facts about Louisiana," although again we see little real evidence of Jefferson's image of the West, inferences can be made. The sources that Jefferson relied on the most heavily in writing his chronology were Coxe, Hennepin, and du Pratz. It is unlikely that he would have accepted and used their history without accepting and using their geography as well. And in the geography of each, the Missouri heads in mountains or a height-of-land from which there also flows a great river to the Pacific.

In Jefferson's "Official account of Louisiana," presented to Congress in November 1803, there is considerably more "hard" geography, although relatively little of it applies to the farther West and most of that relates to the content of the region rather than its nature. When describing Upper Louisiana (the region north and west of St. Louis), for example, Jefferson notes that the face of the country, although somewhat more broken than the Mississippi valley, was "equally fertile." Furthermore, the area of Upper Louisiana had many advantages that were not normally characteristic of regions in the same latitudinal zone. It was elevated and well watered and had a "variety of large, rapid streams, calculated for mills and other water works." The soil was more fertile than anywhere else in the same latitudes, and the land was said to yield its produce almost without input of human labor. To the north and west, along the Missouri itself, was "one immense prairie" that produced nothing but grass—not because of aridity but because the soil was "too rich for the growth of forest trees." Beauty combined with utility in this land, and the landscape was "carved into various shapes by the hand of nature," presenting the "ap-

pearance of a multitude of antique towers." Throughout the western interior, "idealized Rivanna Rivers flowed by future Monticellos."⁴⁶ In the "Official account," Jefferson did not speak of the mountains or highlands at the head of the Missouri, and we learn little about his views on the nature of western geography. But he did not have to comment on those broader aspects of the region for us to know what was in his mind: he had, by this time, already presented Meriwether Lewis with his instructions.

From Jefferson's instructions to Meriwether Lewis, we obtain as precise a picture of Jefferson's imaginary western geography as can be had. We can also see the two primary biases—utilitarian and agrarian—that colored Jefferson's thought about the West. In June 1803, Jefferson prepared his instructions, incorporating what was literally a lifetime's worth of imaginary geography, into a document that was remarkable not only for its geographic content but also as a blueprint for exploration.⁴⁷ "The object of your mission," wrote Jefferson, "is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado or any other river may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce. . . ."

The first and most obvious thing that strikes us about this passage in Jefferson's instructions to Lewis is that the plan for exploration was virtually identical to that proposed for Dr. Thomas Walker a half-century earlier—up the Missouri to the highlands separating it from a river that would flow to the Great South Sea. The primary objective of exploration? A water passage across the continent for the purposes of commerce—and this, too, is identical to the goals of the Loyal Land Company and illustrates the importance of utilitarian thought in Jefferson's view of the West. Only one river combination on the continent was understood to permit the attainment of this objective, and that was the Missouri and "whatever river heading with it" flowed to the Pacific. For the Loyal Land Company, that river had no name, but they knew it was there; for Thomas Jefferson, the river of the imagination that had been the "Great River of the West" of Daniel Coxe, the "Beautiful River" of du Pratz and Hennepin, and the "Oregon" of Rogers and Carver, was now the "Columbia," a river that existed in the mind well before it existed in what came to be understood as geographic reality.

The utilitarian nature of the connection between the Missouri and the Columbia was reinforced in three subsequent sections of the instructions:

The interesting points of the portage between the heads of the Missouri, & of the water offering the best communication with the Pacific

ocean, should also be fixed by observation, & the courses of that water to the ocean in the same manner as that of the Missouri. . . .

Should you reach the Pacific ocean, inform yourself of the circumstance which may decide whether the furs of those parts may not be collected as advantageously at the head of the Missouri (convenient as it is supposed to the waters of the Colorado & Oregon or Columbia) as at Nootka sound, or any other point of that coast; and that trade be consequently conducted throughout the Missouri and U.S. more beneficially than by the circumnavigation now practised. . . .

Atho' your route will be along the channel of the Missouri, yet you will endeavor to inform yourself, by enquiry, of the character & extent of the country waters by its branches, & especially on its Southern side. The North river or Rio Bravo which runs into the gulph of California, are understood to be the principal streams heading opposite the waters of the Missouri and running Southwardly. Whether the dividing grounds between the Missouri and them are mountains or flat lands, what are their distances from the Missouri, the character of the intermediate country, & the people inhabiting it, are worthy of particular inquiry. The Northern waters of the Missouri are less to be enquired after, because they have been ascertained to a considerable degree, & are still in a course of ascertainment by English traders and travellers. But if you can learn anything of the most Northern source of the Missisipi, & of its position relatively to the lake of the woods, it will be interesting to us. . . .

What separated the source waters of the Missouri from those of the Columbia and other western streams? Some of Jefferson's literary informants had written of mountains and some of highlands and some of simple heights-of-land as the French fur traders in the Laurentian shield comprehended that term: a low-lying drainage divide affording a portage between two navigable streams. Jefferson himself was less specific on the mountains of the mind than he was on the river systems that rose from them. But from a variety of sources, including a map⁴⁸ that was constructed for Meriwether Lewis' use, it can be concluded that Jefferson understood clearly that there were mountains in the vicinity of the headwaters of the Missouri and Columbia. To the north were the mountains crossed by Alexander Mackenzie in 1793 on his way to the Pacific, mountains that had been appearing in British literature and on British maps for a century. To the south were the mountains long known as the "mountains of New

Mexico" that had been described in French and Spanish accounts of Louisiana for a long period of time. There was nothing in the literature that said the two ranges had to be connected, but Jefferson's imaginary geography was based not just on the literature but upon interpretations of it—and upon experience. Raised on the principles of symmetrical geography and growing up at the base of the Blue Ridge, it is likely that Jefferson envisaged a highland region connecting the Stony Mountains of the North and the New Mexico mountains of the South. This highland region lay no great distance from the sea (as verified by exploration along the Pacific coast in the 1790s), and the source region itself was level enough that the upper Missouri and upper Columbia could be connected with a portage. And from this highland region there probably flowed not only the Missouri and Columbia but other great western rivers—the Rio Grande, the Colorado, and perhaps several others as well—and might they, too, be connected via simple portages? Jefferson was not engaging in metaphysical speculation, he was operating upon his long-standing utilitarian understanding of river systems. If portage connections existed between western rivers—and everything in Jefferson's geographical experience suggested they should—then something else was also possible: canals. Just as Jefferson had proposed connecting the Potomac and the Ohio nearly twenty years earlier,⁴⁹ so might he have visualized the development of navigation improvements on western rivers, improvements that might have the ability to "spread the field of our commerce Westwardly and Southwardly beyond any thing ever yet done by man."⁵⁰ Jefferson's utilitarian imaginary geography thus afforded connections between the east and west of the continent and between the north and south as well. A transportation nexus would satisfy both Jefferson's imperial ambition and his utilitarian geographical imagination. And what had the Loyal Land Company been if not imperialistic and utilitarian? Small wonder that clarifying the geography of the imagination was so important to the president raised in the shadow of the Blue Ridge. The view beyond the Stony Mountains opened upon the Passage to India.

But Jefferson envisioned more than a simple passage; the other component to his image of the West was the content of the region. Although the primary purpose of Jefferson's expedition was the location of the passage to the Pacific, he gave Lewis other directives that illustrated Jefferson's awareness of the ingredients of western regional geography as they bore upon the agrarian tradition he saw as necessary to the future of the republic. In addition to locating the passage to the Pacific, Lewis was to make careful observations of the character of the native inhabitants of the land through which he would pass, of the botanical and zoological features he would encounter, and of the region's mineral productions of every kind. Second in importance only to locating the

passage, Lewis was to make himself fully acquainted with the quality of the lands between the Mississippi and the Pacific and record carefully soil fertility and vegetative and climatic characteristics. Jefferson's imaginary geography was not only utilitarian in a commercial sense; it was also agrarian in a political context. Agriculture was, in his view, not only the most useful of human endeavors, but necessary if the United States were to remain a democracy based on a firm agrarian tradition. Jeffersonian Republicanism made a simple analogy: in Europe the "lands are either cultivated or locked up against the cultivator."⁵¹ In Europe were to be found despotic governments. But in the United States and the remainder of North America, there was "an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman."⁵² In America was a republican form of government. The availability of land for the yeoman farmer that was the backbone of Jefferson's republic was therefore necessary for the well-being and continuation of that republic. To maintain the republican system, more and more land was necessary in order to maintain the growing population of "those who labor in the earth . . . the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people."⁵³ Meriwether Lewis was sent westward to find the passage to the Pacific and satisfy Jefferson's utilitarian geography; he was also sent westward to explore that interior garden of Jefferson's agrarian imagination, a garden that was necessary to preserve the republic. "Our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries," Jefferson wrote to James Madison in 1787, "as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America."⁵⁴

Thus Thomas Jefferson's imagined West in 1803: a vast and fertile land too rich for the growth of forest trees, bordered by western analogues of the Blue Ridge, and crossed by stately rivers offering unparalleled connections between American civilization and the Orient. It was the realization of the commercial desideratum that had existed since Europeans recognized the presence of a barrier continent barring their way to the riches of Cathay. This was Jefferson's dream, as stated eloquently by James Ronda: "Americans would never be seduced by city lights so long as there was rich land available and reliable sources to world markets. Ouragon could secure the republican dream of simplicity and virtue in a peaceable kingdom."⁵⁵ The dream died hard but, as dreams often do, it died fast. Thomas Jefferson thought it would be "a thousand years" before American civilization filled up the great spaces between the Mississippi and the Pacific and the republic was threatened. Could he have foreseen what would happen in one scant century? A Virginian contemporary of Jefferson's, better known for his supposed "give me Liberty or give me death" speech, apparently did when he also said, "The greatest patriot is he who fills gullies." But Patrick Henry was speaking of the worn-out tobacco lands of

the Piedmont—not the Garden of the World. No, Jefferson could not have known—no one could have known—that the technological revolution just getting underway as Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were wandering the West would transform the face of western America in less than a century. Jefferson's mighty rivers were made redundant by rivers of steel carrying enormous cargoes on the back of steam and extracting enormous environmental costs. Jefferson's fertile lands were transformed to near desert by the vision of public land policy, rapid immigration, and greed-induced agricultural practices.⁵⁶ The Passage to India and the Garden of the World was a dream in the mind of a Virginian who imagined beyond the Blue Ridge of his boyhood. The impact of that dream, particularly for the environment of the American West, was a curve that was hyperbolic when plotted against the two centuries that followed.

NOTES

1. John Logan Allen, "The Geographical Images of the American Northwest, 1673–1806: A Historical Geosophy" (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, Worcester, Mass., 1969).
2. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: John Stockdale, 1787). Unless otherwise indicated, the copy of *Notes on Virginia* consulted for this paper is Jefferson's own copy in the McGregor Rare Book and Manuscript Collection of the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia. This copy carries a number of significant marginal notations in Jefferson's hand.
3. See Donald W. Meinig, "A Life of Learning," Charles Homer Haskins Lecture, American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper No. 19, 1992, for a contemporary geographer's viewpoint on "the geographer's perspective."
4. The four documents are: "A chronological series of facts relating to Louisiana," Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, vol. 139, fol. 24017-19; "An examination of the boundaries of Louisiana," *ibid.*, vol. 136, fol. 23692–93; "Official Account of Louisiana," *ibid.*, vol. 126, fol. 23535, printed in *American State Papers*, vol. 20 ("Miscellaneous," vol. 1, doc. 164, 8th Cong., 1st sess., 344–56); and Jefferson's instructions to Meriwether Lewis, dated June 20, 1803, copies in the Jefferson Papers of the Library of Congress and elsewhere and also published in a number of sources, including Donald Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 61–66.
5. Helmut De Terra, "Alexander von Humboldt's Correspondence with Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 103 (1959), 783–806; see also Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, and Julian Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1950–).
6. Most of what we know of Peter Jefferson comes from Thomas Jefferson's "Autobiography" (New York: G. Putnam and Sons, 1959). An excellent source for the influence of Peter Jefferson on his son is the first two chapters in John Dos Passos, *The Head and Heart of Thomas Jefferson* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954).

7. Thomas J. Lewis, "Diary of the Fairfax-line Surveys" (Charlottesville, Va.: Albemarle County Historical Society, 1934).
8. *The Fry and Jefferson Map of Virginia and Maryland: Facsimiles of the 1754 and 1794 Printings* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1966).
9. In the records of Albemarle County, the copy of Peter Jefferson's will ("1757 July 13-filed. Albemarle County Courthouse. Probated 13 October 1757, John Nicholas, Clerk") notes that a tract of land of unspecified size and location but "on the Missisipi river" was left to Thomas Jefferson.
10. A photostat copy of the charter of the Loyal Land Company is in the rare manuscript collection of the McGregor Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.
11. Daniel Coxe, *A Description of the English Province of Carolina by Spaniards Call'd Florida and by the French la Louisiane*, 2d ed. (London, 1741).
12. "The Letters of James Maury" [letter of January 10, 1756], in Ann Maury, *Memoirs of a Huguenot Family* (New York: G. P. Putnam's and Sons, 1912), 391.
13. *Ibid.*, 388. Maury cited Coxe as the source of his geographical information and noted that he had seen Coxe's book at Joshua Fry's house (389–90).
14. See Thomas Walker, *Journal of an Exploration in the Spring of the Year 1750* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1888).
15. Jean Bernard Bossu, *Travels through That Part of North American Formerly Called Louisiana* (London, 1771), 131.
16. *Ibid.*, 391.
17. This information is from Peter Jefferson's will (see note 9 above) and from Thomas Jefferson's "Autobiography," in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Random House, 1944).
18. See Maury's "Treatise on Practical Education" (ms. in Maury Papers, Manuscript Division, Alderman Library, University of Virginia). Richard Beale Davis, in *Intellectual Life in Jefferson's Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), describes the traditional type of education that a young man in colonial Virginia might have received (5–14).
19. For an opposing viewpoint, see Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains: The West from Monticello* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), which claims that "none of these early associations with geographers, land speculators, and would-be discoverers played more than a small part in the early orientation of young Thomas Jefferson" (12). Don and I disagreed on very little, but we agreed to disagree on this point.
20. Jackson, *Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 21.
21. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 6:204, 301.
22. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 20; see also Jackson, *Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 37.
23. Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 75.
24. *Ibid.*, 7.
25. Jefferson to William Dunbar, March 13, 1804, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, vol. 139, fol. 24017.

26. In 1771, after the Shadwell plantation burned, Jefferson sent a friend a list of 150 books that approximated his destroyed library; Coxe, Jeffreys, and Anson were included in that list (Boyd, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:76–81). In 1783, when asked to provide a book list for a prospective national library, Jefferson included Lahontan and Rogers, both authors who seem to have been included in his personal library (*ibid.*, 6:216).

27. The English edition of Lahontan's account, and the one apparently owned by Jefferson, was Louis Armand de Lom d'Arce, Baron de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North America*, 2 vols. (London: H. Benwicke, 1703).

28. Cited in David Lavender, *Westward Vision* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 52.

29. Robert Rogers, *A Concise Account of North America* (London: published by the author, 1765), 153–54.

30. Ms. catalogue of Jefferson's library purchases, with notes by Stephen T. Riley, Jefferson Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society.

31. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 8:411.

32. Jonathan Carver, *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768*, 3d ed. (London, 1781), 533–36.

33. *Ibid.*, 121–22.

34. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

35. *Ibid.*, 76–77.

36. *Ibid.*, 542.

37. Louis Hennepin, *Nouvelle Decouverte, A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, trans. and ed., Reuben Gold Thwaites (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co.), 213.

38. *Ibid.*, 188.

39. *Ibid.*, 373.

40. Antoine Simon le Page du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana, or the Western Parts of Virginia and Carolana . . .*, 2 vols. (London, 1763).

41. The version of this tale cited here is found in Benjamin French, ed., *Historical Collections of Louisiana* (New York: Lampport, Blakeman and Law, 1955), 5:123–24.

42. John Ledyard to Jefferson, August 16, 1786, in Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 10:259.

43. Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 669–72.

44. See note 4 above for bibliographic information on these source materials.

45. Ms. copy, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, 12.

46. Charles A. Miller, *Jefferson and Nature: An Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 241.

47. My discussion of Jefferson's instructions to Lewis is based upon a similar discussion in John Logan Allen, *Passage through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (New York: Dover, 1991), 106–8.

48. This was the Nicholas King map of 1803, manuscript in the Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress. For an extended discussion of this cartographic document, see *Passage through the Garden*, 74–103 (reproduction of the map, 100–101).

49. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 6:548.

50. *Ibid.*, 7:558.

51. Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 289.

52. *Ibid.*, 290.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 12:442.

55. James P. Ronda, "Calculating Ouragon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 94 (Summer/Fall, 1993), 125.

56. An intriguing summary of American environmental history may be found in John Steele Gordon, "The American Environment," *American Heritage*, October, 1993, 30–51.