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EVED TO BE THE EARLIEST
NIAGARA FALLS.

The Course *of* Empire

BY BERNARD DEVOTO

with an introductory essay on the author
BY WALLACE STEGNER
maps by Erwin Raisz



Sentry Edition

1962

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DeVoto

which could not easily be less satisfactory. If in these passages the probability of error increases, I would have used more help had more been available.

Throughout the action too I try to keep the reader aware of what the geographical reality was as well as what the people with whom I deal thought it was. I do not apologize for this insistence: too many treatises have erred through forgetting or ignoring our geography — and some from being ignorant of it. The forces which our continental unit has exerted on our historical experience cannot be understood unless the unit is understood. Lincoln reminded us that though a people and their laws change, a third part is bound up with them in the nation, their land, and that the earth abideth forever.

This is not to set up a determinism: no one who reads my book can suppose that I believe in historical predestination. Men are masters of their societies, society's will is free, and history is not geography, it is men and the events they produce. But the natural conditions in which men live help to shape their societies. They can and do live in the desert and on the Arctic ice, but on terms which desert and ice impose. A river or a mountain range will not stop a society that has a strong enough desire to cross it, or a sufficiently compelling dream. Yet there are places where the river can be bridged and places where it cannot be; a road can be built across the mountains by some routes only. Some soils will not grow wheat, steel cannot be made where iron and coal cannot be brought together, some areas lack resources to support large populations, currents and channels take shipping near one headland and away from another. In such elementary ways geography admittedly conditions history. There are more complex ways, larger conformations, reciprocals of greater generality, and some day we must try to state them. Meanwhile though no one can say to what degree the physical and psychological forces of our continentalism have conditioned our history, no one can avoid seeing that they have conditioned it to some degree. Nothing in history is more visible than the transformation, in response to the continent, of Europeans into Americans.

In a climactic passage herein I quote Lincoln on the national homestead and its adaptations and aptitudes. The trilogy which this book completes is a gloss on that passage in his Second Annual Message to Congress some things it has meant to the peo occupy the national homestead whil tions and aptitudes that enabled then melancholy anyone must feel on fini tensified by another consequence of t had to write this book. An expanse of eight years foreshortens individual fi of individual men must be fragmente little space. Furthermore one who sp the records of wilderness men is in da the labor, strain, hardship, weariness fear, anger, pain, desire, and wonder t cannot for a moment be taken for gra one who writes about the past permit compose it diminish from his touch.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
December 1 1951

idea of the landshaping a society

I say
When night has fallen on your loneliness
And the deep wood beyond the ruined wall
Seems to step forward swiftly with the dusk
You shall remember them. You shall not see
Water or wheat or axe-mark on the tree
And not remember them.
You shall not win without remembering them,
For they won every shadow of the moon,
All the vast shadows, and you shall not lose
Without a dark remembrance of their loss
For they lost all and none remembered them.

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

Even more than other history the Age of Discovery is men come upon strangeness and traveling it mostly in dream. The historian works in an obscurity that ranges from twilight through dusk to dark. By sea or land he will seldom know whether the peaks and headlands on the horizon are real or creations of fear, hope, or faith; most will retreat before him with the horizon; the clouds will seldom open and disclose Polaris. It was not otherwise with the men he has chosen to follow. The archipelago was fable but they threaded it and found a channel. The ridges that hemmed them round were myth but one day they felt the west wind on their faces and had found a pass. Indeed facts are the historian's accidentals; his chronicle is the illusion, for which the Western star is a better guide than Polaris. It was a wanderer and it was desire, therefore illusory but therefore also constant, and it led them at last to the Indies, with the Americas an accident along the way.

EMERY HEYWOOD

A nation may be said to consist of its territory, its people, and its laws. The territory is the only part which is of certain durability. "One generation passeth away and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth forever." It is of the first importance to duly consider and estimate this ever-enduring part. That portion of the earth's surface which is owned and inhabited by the people of the United States is well adapted to be the home of one national family, and it is not well adapted for two or more. Its vast extent and its variety of climate and productions are of advantage in this age for one people, whatever they might have been in former ages. Steam, telegraphs, and intelligence have brought these to be an advantageous combination for one united people.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Description of Escalante's journey

one put himself in a reverent state of mind, they said the rosary and some litanies and then cast lots. It came out Santa Fe. There has always been a suspicion that Escalante nudged divine wisdom by making sure that the right lot fell.

Now the journey is out of the apochryphal books, incredible to those not greatly gifted with belief. They passed to the east of St. George and into the Arizona Strip along the Hurricane Cliffs, then northeastward through a gigantic lacework of stone, to the Paria Plateau and on to the Grand Canyon wilderness. "The descent to the river is very long, high, rough, and rocky, and has such bad ledges of rock that two pack animals which went down to the first one were unable to climb up in return, even without pack saddles." Many days were like that — many descents, many ascents, and no sure trail. They found their bearded Indians, who were frightened as all tribes hereabout seemed to be, and others as well; but though all were fluent with advice none would guide them very far. Frequently in danger of death from thirst, sometimes with only sickening dried seeds or cakes of "sunburned" cactus to eat, they kept on going with serene assurance, and when there were no Indians to find crevices for them to travel they went alone. There was only one place where the Colorado could be crossed, an immemorial ford used by Utes and Navahos. It was frequently described to them but they had no idea where it was. They missed it when they at last got down from the cliffs to the river and so had to go back for a time into the apochryphal geology. At last one more narrow canyon, where "it was necessary to cut steps in the rock with axes" so that the horses could make it, led out to a place where the Colorado looked slack enough. It was the ford. "About five o'clock in the afternoon [the last members of the party] finished crossing the river, praising God our Lord and firing off a few muskets as a sign of the great joy which we all felt at having overcome so great a difficulty." No white man had crossed it before them. They named the ford for the Most Holy Conception of the Virgin Mary but ever since Americans got to this country it has been the Crossing of the Fathers.

After that it was an anticlimax in fortitude that they had to cross similar country till they reached the sullen Hopis and could go on from there to Santa Fe in something like comfort.

. . . Nothing came of this sunnily stupendous journey. Thirty-odd years later, traders out of Santa Fe and Taos took to using some of their route in Colorado, and on the way to California crossed their trace in the Parowan country. Little is known about these shadowy figures, whose pathway came to be called the Old Spanish Trail. But no one followed Escalante into the Great Basin now, to baptize the Utes and Timpanogos whom he had promised salvation. The brilliant promise of the Spanish reawakening turned out to be a sunset color after all and it had already begun to fade. That power and energy and desire alike had failed, events at Nootka Sound would soon demonstrate. California itself became a dreamy anarchy. The Spanish made no effort to explore beyond Escalante's pathfinding or to colonize the Valley of Our Lady of Mercy of Timpanogos. That had to wait for the next century, William Ashley and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, and Brigham Young and the Latter-Day Saints.

After the islanders killed Cook, Captain James Clerke succeeded to the command. In the summer of 1779 he tried Bering Strait again but the ice stopped him and he concluded that the assigned task was hopeless. Presently he died and the American-born John Gore took the ships to England, ending the great voyage in October 1780. But in December 1779 he touched at Canton, and the sea otter furs that had been so casually and cheaply acquired at Nootka and up the coast sold for a small fortune. At least two-thirds of them had been spoiled or given away; the remnants, which were certainly disposed of at much less than their value, fetched two thousand pounds sterling in China goods. "The rage with which our seamen were possessed to return to Cook's River and, by another cargo of furs to make their fortune at one time, was not far short of mutiny." So wrote James King, who was now keeping the expedition's journal. Forthwith in two and a half pages he sketched out, practically to the last detail, a trading plan that adventurers of England were to put into effect, a plan for the Northwest Trade. The first British trading ship went to Nootka in 1785.

The American marine John Ledyard also saw the oppor-