Discovering Nothing
In Pursuit of an Elusive Northwest Passage
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Reinventing the Northwest Passage

It might have been expected, once the intelligence gleaned from two summers’ worth of exploration (1778–79) in the Arctic under James Cook and Charles Clerke settled in, that the Northwest Passage would have disappeared as a geographical projection. After all, Cook’s third expedition failed to find a saltwater route from the Pacific Ocean to Baffin Bay. The Admiralty’s complementary attempt, led by Richard Pickersgill and Walter Young in successive command of the Lyon, to support Cook when he was expected to emerge on the Atlantic side of the supposed passage, was even less productive. Lyon fell many degrees short of previous northern sailing records in Greenland’s waters. Thus, Cook’s northern venture seemed to have destroyed yet another cartographic image, just as he had Terra Australis Incognita during his second voyage. In the immediate aftermath of his final expedition’s return in 1780, there was no movement in Britain to launch another high-latitude investigation of a passage in the north.

This perception was reflected in the considered thinking of Johann Reinhold Forster, who, in 1783, published the original German-language edition of Voyages and Discoveries Made in the North (translated into English in 1786). No Cook apologist, Forster referenced the great navigator’s most recent effort, asserting that “in our days new discoveries have been made, which have brought us better than ever acquainted with the North, and have left us little more to discover with respect to these regions.” Cook, complemented by recent Spanish and Russian exploration, had “rendered
it pretty probable that no passage is to be expected there.” Like Cook, Forster deemed the legends of Admiral de Fonte and Juan de Fuca, which both posited the existence of mid-latitude access off the Pacific coast deep into the North American interior, “absurd and incongruous” and “rather fabulous.” Hudson Bay had been “so often explored, that we need not seek any more for a passage in those parts.” All that remained of the Northwest Passage concept, Forster added, “can only exist in the weak brains of idle visionaries.” Howard T. Fry, Alexander Dalrymple’s biographer, charged that a “cautious scholar would have waited for more evidence,” but before the decade was over, Forster’s castigation was vindicated.1

The passage may have been a moribund concept in Forster’s mind, but it is nevertheless true that when Jean-François de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse left Brest in August 1785 at the head of France’s national response to Cook’s efforts in the Pacific Basin, he was tasked with looking for it on the Northwest Coast of America. French cartographic projections had long posited theoretical eastward projections off the Pacific, but, like Cook before him, La Pérouse was dismissive of such geographical tales. In an ironic twist and narrative convergence, in 1781, during the course of the war in which France was allied with the rebellious American colonies, La Pérouse captured Fort Churchill on Hudson Bay from none other than Samuel Hearne. He thereby had direct access to the same pivotally conclusive geographical findings that had worked their way from Hearne to the Admiralty’s instructions for Cook the previous decade.

In July 1786, La Pérouse, hugging the Northwest Coast, found an indent near latitude 59°N – Lituya Bay. For a moment, the pulses of those on his two ships quickened when it seemed they had entered a large body of water. Inevitably, La Pérouse hit a wall of solid glacial ice emanating from high, snow-covered peaks, providing a dead-end moment reminiscent of Cook’s entry into Prince William Sound in 1778. The French explorer joked that his ships “completed in a few hours our voyage into the interior of America.” The Northwest Passage, he concluded (then, if not half a decade earlier in Hearne’s company), “is a dream.” Sailing away from North America for the balance of what would prove an ill-fated voyage, La Pérouse framed a reflection in his journal expressing frustration with speculative geographers. Channelling Cook’s earlier sentiments, he railed against such obvious inventions as the de Fonte story, which he considered an English invention. In this he was not mistaken. But as we shall see below, just when the pre-eminent French explorer categorically rejected his nation’s cartographic tradition for
depicting the west coast of America, the de Fonte legend was about to return to life in Great Britain.2

From 1780, when John Gore returned to Great Britain with Cook’s ships, until 1787, Cook’s third voyage, like the second, appeared dispositive relative to its central mission. Intervening developments soon changed that perception. There was no short-term commercial consequence from Cook’s Antarctic voyage, which banished the idea of *Terra Australis Incognita*. But, as a by-product of the maritime fur trade seeded in China and in print during and after the return of his last expedition, the Northwest Passage hypothesis was resuscitated. It is routinely posited in Cook historiography that this revival is evidence of the great navigator’s deviation from the standard of accomplishment seen in his first two voyages, necessitating the follow-up voyage of George Vancouver to finish the work that Cook had left incomplete. But, like many aspects of Cook third-voyage interpretive orthodoxy, this conclusion is mistaken. The features of the Northwest Coast that Cook supposedly “missed” occurred because he was guided by what might be termed the Hearne dictum. To wit, that North America was a wider continent than previously believed and, concomitantly, its broad northwestern quadrant west of the 110th meridian was not bisected by salt water south of latitude 70°N. Pursuant to this understanding Cook was directed to begin his quest near latitude 65°N. For this reason, he sensibly avoided pursuing the legendary straits of Juan de Fuca and Bartholomew de Fonte in more southerly latitudes.

Before I assailed the standard interpretation of Cook’s supposedly lag-gard third-voyage conduct in *Captain Cook Rediscovered*, Barry Gough was one of the few historians who had insisted that Cook should not be faulted for having “dismissed the possibility of Juan de Fuca’s strait” because “Cook had his orders, and he followed them to the letter.” In his estimation, Cook’s great modern biographer J.C. “Beaglehole, and other historians, have been unduly and carelessly guilty of attacking Cook for missing the entrance to the strait.”3

Compounding matters, bad weather happened to force Cook far off shore after he left Nootka Sound for the icy northern latitudes. Thus, Cook’s charts depicted the Northwest Coast from latitudes 49°N to 58°N as a simple and slightly wavy line trending to the northwest, until it was broken into detail when he reached the discovery zone and investigated Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet. But in the last half of the 1780s, British maritime fur traders detected many inlets and a complex array of islands dotting a
coastline that Cook saw only intermittently and, by Admiralty order, surveyed at a distance and in a fleeting manner. The newly revealed intricacy of the Alaska littoral and the coast of present-day British Columbia became, to less thoughtful and capricious observers, an indictment of Cook’s thoroughness. Most historians, failing to discern the actual nature of Cook’s mission as it relates to the Northwest Coast, have also neglected to make allowance for the idiosyncrasies of Cook’s contemporary fault-finders and the nuanced nature of their impeachment.
Cook had proved, at least until the twenty-first century, that the classic version of a Northwest Passage that he was sent to find—a saltwater conduit from ocean to ocean over the top of North America—did not exist. But as the historian and geographer John Wright has noted, the history of exploration is replete with *idées fixes*, which he defines as concepts resistant “to change in the light of factual evidence or rational thought.” The Northwest Passage is an example of this phenomenon, arguably one that endures to this day. Though some of Cook’s contemporaries seized upon the gaps in the great navigator’s coverage to further their commercial prospects or for self-aggrandizement, the underlying reality of Hearne’s dictum had not been obviated by any subsequent exploratory disclosure. But as Richard Van Orman observes, with sufficient incentive there was a tendency in matters of geography “to push aside unpopular facts that did not fit into the established image.”

As a function of this dynamic, the notion of a navigable Northwest Passage was able to survive Cook, though with an important distinction. Historians, in their enthusiasm to abide with standard criticism of Cook’s third voyage, have missed how the passage subtly evolved as a cartographic image between 1784 and 1801. These bookend dates are a function of two landmark publications: the Admiralty account of Cook’s third voyage and terrestrial fur trade explorer Alexander Mackenzie’s *Voyages from Montreal*, respectively. In less than two decades the Northwest Passage was transformed from (1) the imagined high-latitude saltwater throughway Cook was sent to find, initially succeeded by (2) the concept of inland seas thought to “communicate” with each other mid-continent in some undefined manner, and finally to (3) a set of interconnecting rivers.

The key figures in this conversion process were the propagandist fur trader John Meares, theoretical geographer Alexander Dalrymple, and practical investigators Peter Pond, George Vancouver, and Mackenzie. Though these men quibbled with the findings of Cook’s last voyage, none of them, contrary to the convention of Cook historiography, not even Cook’s supposed arch-nemesis Dalrymple, took issue with the fundamental truth about the impracticability of what Cook had been sent to find on his third voyage. Even Vancouver did not correct Cook in any truly substantial fashion. Indeed, the Northwest Passage as an *idée fixe* endured long after Vancouver and Mackenzie, to attain, in the words of Felipe Fernández-Armesto, the status of a “pathological quest, an irrational obsession” in the middle of the nineteenth century, when explorer after explorer traversed the Arctic “as if
blinded by the snow and maddened by the ice.” This ancient dream was not truly realized until the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, and, on the American side of the border, the Northern Pacific and Great Northern lines.

The Quest for Soft Gold, by Sea

The history of the Northwest Coast fur trade, and the Vancouver expedition it spawned, is both complicated and best told in detail elsewhere. A few key developments stand out for presentation here, starting with the observation that by 1784 several published narratives from Cook third- voyage veterans highlighting the promise of an extensive sea otter trade in the North Pacific were already in circulation. Of these, James King’s contribution to the official Admiralty account, issued in June of that year, was particularly noteworthy. It served, in the words of Barry Gough, as “a blueprint for commerce.” Merely one year later, Gough adds, “almost identical projects had been launched simultaneously from London, Bombay, Calcutta, and Canton” in response to what Cook’s last voyage had revealed. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this phenomenon for the subsequent history of North America. In the estimation of Peter Stark, “Cook’s surviving officers and crew ... made a discovery that would determine the future of the Pacific Rim.”

The first to set sail was James Hanna from Macao, the Portuguese colony at the mouth of the Pearl River downstream from Canton, not surprisingly since that is where the enchanting news of this promising trade had first arrived via Cook’s ships. Captaining, fittingly, the Sea Otter, Hanna left port on April 15, 1785, and reached Nootka Sound on August 18. His ship was flying Portuguese colours, a ruse to avoid violation of the monopoly charter of the East India Company (EIC). In December of that year, James Strange, an EIC merchant who had read the official account of Cook’s last voyage, sailed from Bombay as supercargo for a trading expedition to the Pacific Northwest. It consisted of the equally apt Captain Cook (piloted by Henry Laurie) and the correspondingly resonant Experiment (led by Henry Guise). These ships were another private venture but indirectly assisted by the EIC as a test voyage. They reached Nootka Sound on June 25, 1786.

Back in the mother country, Nathaniel Portlock (master’s mate aboard Discovery on Cook’s third voyage) and George Dixon (armourer on the same vessel), respectively captained the King George and Queen Charlotte (after
the reigning monarchs) for the King George’s Sound Company. This new British joint stock association was named after Cook’s transitory name for Nootka Sound, and was formed by Richard Cadman Etches with support from the influential Joseph Banks. These ships left Great Britain about the same time that Hanna left Macao, but, with a greater distance to travel, they did not arrive in the North Pacific until July 1786. They called serially at Cook Inlet, Prince William Sound, and Nootka Sound, the precise itinerary Lieutenant James King had mapped out in the Cook third-voyage account.

William Beresford, the company’s supercargo managing the business side of the Etches venture, in a post-voyage narrative of the trading expedition published in 1789, explained their route with a testimonial to Cook’s thoroughness: “To say that these different harbours are laid down with accuracy and precision, would be unnecessary; it is sufficient to observe that they were surveyed by Captain Cook.” Beresford added that Nootka Sound had been “pointed out by the late Captain Cook, as the most eligible spot where a valuable cargo of furs might be collected,” but this was a misreading of history because, as noted earlier, it was King’s narrative, not Cook’s, which seeded the fur trade. Elsewhere Beresford volunteered that Cook’s discovery of Hawai’i, where the ships overwintered, was “sufficient alone to render his name immortal.” Portlock and Dixon, having studied under the master, plied the coast of Hawai’i for an extended period rather than “coming to anchor.” Beresford considered this a “somewhat extraordinary” circumstance until he learned that the company’s ships “easily procured” the hogs and greens “we chiefly wanted ... by plying off and on.” In yet another unintended vindication of Cook, who was criticized by his crews and later by historians for laying off the island for what was perceived as an inordinate amount of time, Beresford recorded the great difficulty Portlock and Dixon had trouble approaching the islands because of the same troublesome winds that had bedevilled Cook and Clerke in 1779.

Captain Hanna reached Nootka Sound for the second time in August 1786, in what could be called the fourth sea otter trading voyage to the Northwest Coast. There he met Strange and his two East Indiamen – the first competitive meet-up. That summer, John Meares arrived in the North Pacific, having sailed from Calcutta to Prince William Sound in command of the Nootka, accompanied by the Sea Otter captained by William Tipping. The Meares venture represented the fifth trading expedition and the seventh and eighth ships to respond to the promise outlined by King. Captain
Strange and his East Indiamen encountered the Meares vessels at Cook Inlet, representing Strange’s second competitive meet-up. During the winter of 1786–87, Meares made the fateful decision to overwinter at Prince William Sound rather than retreat to Hawai’i like Portlock and Dixon, or to his home port in Asia. Dixon found Meares’s expedition in May 1787 under extreme duress, with many men dead from starvation or scurvy, having spent the winter ice-bound. Dixon was a rival but Meares welcomed his providential appearance “as a guardian angel with tears of joy.” Having learned his lesson, Meares limped to Hawai’i and back to China with his frst cargo of furs. Captain Tipping and all hands on the Sea Otter were lost at sea. Meares returned to the Northwest Coast in both 1788 and 1789 in a new partnership arrangement. As a consequence, he became a pivotal fgure in a sequence of events that almost resulted in war between Great Britain and Spain and led directly to the commissioning of the Vancouver expedition.

In June 1787, the Imperial Eagle, a British ship but outftted at the Flemish port of Ostend with partial fnancial support from former East India supercargoes and also fying a false fag, captained by William Barkley, became the ninth ship to reach Nootka Sound. There Barkley met Captain Charles Duncan of the Princess Royal and James Colnett in command of Prince of Wales (the tenth and eleventh ships). These craft had been readied by the same King George’s Sound Company that sponsored Portlock and Dixon, who themselves re-attained Nootka Sound in August after rescuing Meares. (Colnett was another Cook veteran from the Antarctic voyage; it was his venture that John Ledyard had tried to join.) Barry Gough’s comprehensive catalogue of trading voyages gives the impression that by the summer of 1787 the Northwest Coast, particularly Nootka Sound, was getting crowded because “too many vessels pursued too few sea otters.”

Rivals hoping to cash in on the lucrative trade were coming from all directions, seemingly criss-crossing the Pacifc and each other. Traders left Asian or British ports with goods of value to Indigenous hunters who would acquire pelts, which after one or two seasons of coastal commerce were transported to Macao and Canton and exchanged for silk and tea that would be subsequently conveyed back to Europe. Some of these ventures were more proftable than others, as the sea otter pelts could not always be procured from local hunters with ease or at an advantageous price. And what the traders could not acquire through fair exchange they did through ever more violent means, including the destruction of entire villages. But it is not the commercial dynamic or tyrannical deportment of the traders that most interests us here,
but rather the geographical information they secured, as well as its contemporary interpretation and propagation. In this regard, the voyages of Dixon, Duncan and Colnett, Barkley, and especially John Meares are probative.

During the 1787 trading season, Dixon discovered the Queen Charlotte Islands, named after his vessel but now known as Haida Gwaii after its Indigenous People. The strait to the north of this archipelago is named after Dixon. In his account, Beresford noted that this was the zone of de Fonte’s supposed gateway eastward across North America, a purely mythical concept that had been resurrected by French cartographers in the 1750s. Cook thought he had banished this idea from serious consideration for all time and, with the authoritative publication of the Admiralty account in 1784, most sensible observers, including Johann Reinhold Forster, agreed. Beresford, like Cook, termed the de Fonte legend “almost incredible.” Nevertheless, when Dixon brought the Queen Charlotte closer to the continent, Beresford wrote that “it appears very probable, that there are deep inlets into the country.” Noting the many islands and inlets that faced out toward the Pacific, he “doubted whether we have yet seen the main land.” That proposition, Beresford mused, was “to be determined by future navigators.”

Concurrently with Portlock and Dixon, Colnett and Duncan also discerned that the mainland coast between latitudes 53°N and 58°N was strewn with islands (including two large ones that they named after their ships, the Princess Royal and the Prince of Wales). This was the latitudinal range Cook “missed” on his way north from Nootka Sound (at approximately 50°N) before re-establishing contact with the coast at Mount Edgecumbe (neighbouring present-day Sitka) near 57°N. More astonishingly, Captain Barkley believed he had stumbled into the legendary Strait of Juan de Fuca, which, as Barry Gough put it, “Cook had emphatically declared could not exist.” Since Cook had not explored this coast, who really knew what this labyrinth of islands in the mid-50s concealed, or where the strait sighted by Barkley might lead?

Traders avidly exchanged geographical information in ports like Nootka, and so after Duncan learned of Barkley’s find in August 1787, he sailed the Princess Royal into de Fuca’s strait the following year to see for himself. Entering, he spied a rock pillar, a geological feature that Fuca had described to Michael Lok in 1596. Duncan then proceeded to the southeast as far as an imaginary line running from present-day Victoria, British Columbia, to Port Angeles, Washington. When Duncan returned to England in 1789, he showed his chart of this voyage to Alexander Dalrymple, who found it of
such interest that he had it engraved the following year. At this point, de Fuca’s strait was literally back on the map (and the subject of much public discussion, to which we will return). Correspondingly, Duncan’s chart also provided the first cartographic hint of Vancouver Island’s separation from the mainland. The wide saltwater gap between Cook’s “Cape Flattery” and Neah Bay on the south side of the opening ran inland for nearly 100 miles along what would later be discerned as the Olympic Peninsula. The south coast of this inlet was now seen to lie opposite terrain that had heretofore – that is, since Cook – been presumed to be part of the continent. If the apparent breadth and depth of this gap was not propitious enough, Duncan gleaned intelligence from Makah villagers near Neah Bay that at its eastern limit this passage led to a “Great Sea” that thence ran north and south. This was an intimation, of course, of Puget Sound to the south and the northerly Strait of Georgia, both later mapped by Vancouver.12

The Quest for Soft Gold, by Land

Here we must shift the orientation of discovery away from the maritime sphere to consider an explorer with a terrestrial orientation who also exerted great influence on the evolution of the Northwest Passage – Peter Pond. A Connecticut Yankee like Ledyard, Pond fought on the side of his colonial militia against France during the Seven Years’ War. After that conflict, he entered the fur trade. From his base in New York City, he worked his way west into the Great Lakes region before migrating to Quebec, a move that, prior to the American Revolution, did not have patriotic implications. Given the cellular proliferation of the fur business as traders moved from one lake or river to the next, Pond ultimately trapped his way to the northwest of present-day Alberta and into the Northwest Territories. As an independent trader, he conducted his business through a series of intermittent and ephemeral partnerships. However, he was so energetic and effective that in time he became a principal in the North West Company, headquartered in Montreal. This firm became the great rival of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) once it was formally organized over the winter of 1783–84. Pond’s discoveries, once they were relayed by British colonial officials in Canada to Great Britain, and to major figures in geographical circles there such as Joseph Banks and Alexander Dalrymple, added even more yeast to the ferment in London over what might have been missed when the Admiralty sent Cook so far north.
The Pond connection to the Northwest Passage begins on July 1, 1776, while Cook was preparing for his third voyage at Plymouth and the Second Continental Congress was framing the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. That day, a fur trader from Quebec, Alexander Henry (the elder, to distinguish him from a nephew by the same name), recorded in his journal that he had met Natives from a “Lake Arabuthcow” (Athabasca) who had travelled south and east of there to barter with him. Writing from what was then the most distant post in the continental trade, Lac Île-à-la-Crosse in the northwestern corner of present-day Saskatchewan, Henry claimed: “They informed us, that there was, at the further end of that lake, a river, called Peace River, which descended from the Stony or Rocky Mountains, and from which mountains the distance of the salt lake, meaning the Pacific Ocean, was not great.” This same Lake Athabasca, Henry was informed, “emptied itself by a river, which ran to the northward, which they called ... Slave River; and which flows into another lake, called by the same name [i.e., Slave Lake]; but whether this lake was or was not the sea, or whether it emptied itself into the sea, they were unable to say.” Furthermore, Henry’s Indigenous informants told him that “they also made war with the Indians who live at the bottom of the river; where the water is salt,” implying an outlet into the Arctic. All this geographical information was a reasonably accurate description of the complex Mackenzie River Basin, including the relationship between the eastward-flowing Peace River, with its headwaters on the Continental Divide, and the great inland lakes (Athabasca and Great Slave). These lakes are in turn linked by the Slave River, whose waters do in fact drain to the Arctic via the Mackenzie River. Finally, Henry’s informants from Lake Athabasca told him that “they also made war on the people beyond the mountains, toward the Pacific Ocean, to which their warriors had frequently been near enough to see it.”

These key insights inspired one of Henry’s associates, Peter Pond. Two years later, as part of the constant quest for new fur country and the geographical information that would enhance such endeavours, Pond was the first Euro-American to cross the Methye Portage into the Athabasca district. His successor in the field, Alexander Mackenzie, later described this traverse’s vista opening into the Athabasca country below it as “a most extensive, romantic, and ravishing prospect.” Historian David Chapin, defining the significance of Pond’s discovery, writes: “Like Cumberland Gap in
the Appalachians or South Pass in the Rockies, the Methye Portage is a geographical gateway that provides the easiest access between separate regions of the continent.” Barry Gough, explaining the commercial significance of Pond’s extension into the Athabasca country, states: “He had opened to his partners an entire new realm of opportunity. He had outflanked the Hudson’s Bay Company, stolen from them precious Native trading partners, and increased the value of the trading shares of all the partners.”

Pond built a fort, “Pond House,” on the Athabasca River, about thirty-six miles above where it entered Lake Athabasca. This was the first fur trading post in the Arctic watershed (not counting the Hudson Bay), and its development accelerated the diversion of furs from the interior away from the HBC’s main post on the bay at Churchill to Montreal. The Chipewyan hunters were happy with Pond’s incursion because they no longer needed to travel hundreds of miles downstream to Churchill to unload their pelts. Even if they got less value in trade with Pond and his early associates, Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher, than they could have negotiated with the HBC men, it was far less trouble for them. Pond’s outpost was the only one in the Athabasca country until 1785, and its monopoly standing made it fabulously successful. Pond’s success in the Canadian Northwest laid the foundation for the incorporation of his enterprise under the rubric of the North West Company in 1783.

Pond’s path-breaking Methye Portage gateway was first ascertained in 1778, the same year that Cook was off the Northwest Coast. Pond was inland twelve hundred miles at the same latitude as Cook’s Mount Edgecumbe. His discovery precipitated a rush for the soft gold of beaver pelts every bit as lucrative as the maritime trade in sea otters that followed in Cook’s wake. When Pond returned to the great fur mart at Grand Portage near Lake Superior in July 1779, to drop off packs of fur and to procure supplies for another season of trading, he disclosed his findings. Other traders joined his enterprise and followed him across the divide into the Athabasca country. At the same time, word of his exciting discovery of the Methye Portage and verification of Henry’s earlier intelligence spread eastward and into the intellectual currents of the Atlantic seaboard and eventually all the way to London. Henry, who had retired from the trade and was then travelling in England, wrote Joseph Banks in 1781 proposing that a formal scientific expedition be sent west from Hudson Bay to authenticate the Indigenous geographical understanding he had first gleaned, and which Pond seemed
to have confirmed. He suggested that it was by this network of northwestern rivers, lakes, and adjacent land routes that objects of European manufacture that Cook had discerned at Nootka had made their way west. In the event, a government-sponsored investigation proved unnecessary because of further explorations by both Pond and especially his successor, Alexander Mackenzie.

As with the maritime fur traders introduced above, our intention with Pond is focused on his geographical insights and their distribution to the outside world in the immediate aftermath of Cook’s third voyage. Not that Pond thought of himself principally as an explorer; the commercial requirements of the fur trade always took precedence over discovery. Nevertheless, reconnaissance was an essential part of a trader’s job. Pond was unusually good at it because he was always attentive to Indigenous insights about topography, which he combined with his own study of the land. Pond overwintered several seasons in the Athabasca country, during which he refined his understanding of how the rivers and lakes of the northwest interior might flow alternatively to the Arctic or the Pacific.

Pond himself never travelled to the extremities of these rivers. During the winter of 1783–84, he queried his Chipewyan neighbours about waters beyond the immediate horizon of Lake Athabasca. He received thereby his first real intimation of Great Slave Lake and its contribution to what would later be termed the Mackenzie River Basin. He also learned that this system’s principal western tributary, the Peace River, had its headwaters in mountains not far from what his informants described as a salt lake – the Pacific Ocean. When he finally returned to the Atlantic seaboard in late 1784 or early 1785, Pond began circulating the first of several maps that provided the first cartographic insight on the question of the Northwest Passage, from a terrestrial vantage, since Samuel Hearne’s expedition to the mouth of the Coppermine River northwest of Hudson Bay in the summer of 1771.

Pond’s first visual representation is known among historians as the “Congress Map” because in March 1785, after returning to Connecticut, he presented it to that body in New York City (then the capital of the nascent United States). Scholars have pondered Pond’s motivation for this maneuver since he was working for an enterprise headquartered in a British colony. It is conceivable that he submitted his map to Congress merely out of a native son’s pride – if not the usual patriotic variety then a corollary – as his own modest contribution to Enlightenment-era enthusiasm for discovery. His often contentious relationship with partners in the fur trade (he had been
Figure 1.2  Peter Pond’s “Congress Map,” 1784. Pond’s original manuscript maps did not survive, though some, like the one he submitted to Congress, were copied. Because of their size and often faded nature, plus stark divergence from normative geographical understanding, their use in a small book format is limited. Pond’s cartographic presentation to Congress depicted a vast network of lakes and rivers to the northwest of the Great Lakes. | Based on David Chapin, Freshwater Passages, 208; redrawn by Eric Leinberger

seriously implicated in a frontier murder in 1782) and the subsequent reaction in Quebec to his sojourn in the United States suggest that Pond was trying to lay the groundwork for a combined American discovery/trading venture of an overland variety. This would have been similar to what John Ledyard was pursuing from a maritime angle at almost the same time, and possibly with some of the same individuals. Pond’s manuscript map was probably drawn over the winter of 1783–84 at his post on the Athabasca River. The original tendered to Congress was lost, probably due to the immature record-keeping capabilities of the new nation. We know what it depicted because Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (otherwise famous for his Letters from an American Farmer), the French consul to the Mid-Atlantic States, made a copy of it. (See Figure 1.2.)
Advertised, according to Crèvecoeur’s inscription, as representing the findings of an “Extraordinary Man” who had “resided 17 Years in those Countries” of the far Northwest, Pond’s map represented several geographical concepts, some of them previously mentioned by Henry. It showed Lake Athabasca and Great Slave Lake feeding a river flowing north where it emptied into the “Mer du Nord West.” At first glance, this was hint of the Arctic Ocean, but its positioning in juxtaposition with the Great Lakes put it at a latitude too far south of the pole to represent that body of water. The French nomenclature is probative because it evoked that nation’s long cartographic association with fanciful notions about the Northwest Passage, including transitional inland seas from which one could navigate to and from the Pacific. Another river, the “Naberkistigan,” from a narrow range of mountains that ran transversely from the Arctic to New Mexico, emptied into the “South Sea,” i.e., the Pacific, near Cape Mendocino and the 42nd parallel. This was a long-resonant depiction, lasting until Thomas Jefferson’s time as president and the origin of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, showing the headwaters of the Great River of the West theoretically accessible from the continental interior after crossing over a single chain of mountains.15

Pond’s strategic purpose with the Congress Map seems to have been the captivation of an audience in New York. As a cartographic image, it projects a line running diagonally across the continent via lakes and rivers from (using modern geographical terminology) Duluth on Lake Superior to Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, straight through his rich fur-bearing district of the Athabasca. The visual effect was unmistakable: Pond’s Athabascan system was the means by which the young United States could hem in the British, leaving them bound to the increasingly trapped-out basin of Hudson Bay. The far Northwestern interior, all the way to the Arctic, could be dominated by interests in New York through intermediating entrepôts in Detroit and Michilimackinac.

Pond’s depiction of the Pacific coast gives no hint of any awareness of Cook’s last voyage, a function of its preparation in the wilderness. Though his image was insightful, in another sense it was already archaic because of Cook’s charts. While Pond was in the Athabasca country, the unauthorized accounts of Cook’s last voyage by William Ellis (1782) and John Ledyard (1783) had been published, copies of which may even have been in circulation at Grand Portage when Pond emerged from the backcountry. At the time of his presentation to Congress, it was almost a year since the Admiralty published the official account. At home in Connecticut or in New York, Pond
probably would have now had a chance to read James King’s seismic prospectus on the maritime trade, and time to study Cook’s maps. So informed, as David Chapin observes, Pond began “to modify his own theories in response.”16 Cook’s third voyage was central to Pond’s subsequent cartographic projections of North America.

Pond’s incipient proposal to Congress was ahead of its time. The new country’s business and political leaders were overwhelmed by their fresh responsibilities, and its most visionary figure, Thomas Jefferson, was on assignment in Paris (fashioning John Ledyard’s quest). So, with no reciprocal interest in his concept, Pond turned to Quebec. A month after leaving New York, he was back in association with some of his former partners. Their new gambit was an attempt to fend off their mutual nemesis, the Hudson’s Bay Company, with a proposal to the colonial government for a ten-year trade monopoly in the rich Athabasca district that Nor’ Westers like Henry and Pond had opened up over a decade earlier. In April 1785, as a part of a larger North West Company delegation, Pond met with the lieutenant governor of Canada, Henry Hamilton, the second-highest authority in the colony, and presented a new chart. (See Figure 1.3) Chapin asserts that “Pond and his map were brought in as evidence of the importance of the company to the well-being of the Empire.”17

The revised map that Pond showed Hamilton was one clearly informed by Cook because it shows King George’s Sound (Nootka Sound), Prince William Sound, and “Cook’s River” on the Pacific coastline. But there was another important evolution from the Congress Map that Cook also influenced. The river draining Lake Athabasca and Great Slave Lake now emptied into a supposed “Ice Sea” close to the Arctic Circle, this in lieu of the classic French idea of the *Mer de l’Ouest*, adapted by Pond to *Mer du Nord West* in the chart presented to Congress. Curiously, its mouth was seven degrees of latitude south of where Hearne placed the outfall of the Coppermine River. The “Naberlistagan River” flowing into the North Pacific, for which Cook had seen no evidence, disappeared altogether. But the “River of Peace” that empties into Great Slave Lake more clearly points to its source in the western mountains, now depicted as several ranges deep. However, south of the 52nd parallel, it retains a single ridge line, an enduring concept that in time proved so attractive to Thomas Jefferson’s imagination. It seems, then, that Cook had the effect of convincing Pond that the continent’s coastline was difficult to penetrate. At the same time, however, Pond bent several
Figure 1.3 Peter Pond’s “Hamilton Map,” 1785. As redrawn here, Pond’s revised conception of the continent west of Hudson Bay drew upon his cognizance of Cook’s account and charts, showing both “King George’s Sound” (Nootka Sound), Prince William Sound, and “Cook’s River.” Waters from Lake Athabasca and Great Slave Lake now reach the “Ice Sea” that Cook encountered instead of the legendary “Mer du Nord West” shown on the Congress Map. | Based on Derek Hayes, *First Crossing*, 56–57; redrawn by Eric Leinberger
elements of his Athabascan river system closer to Cook’s newly defined Pacific coastline. On Pond’s second map, “Cook’s River” was aimed north into the interior of the continent far deeper than Cook showed it, while at the same time, per the insight of his mentor, Alexander Henry, the headwaters of the Peace River were depicted tantalizingly close to the Pacific.

Like the Congress Map before it, the “Hamilton Map” had its own strategic vision to convey, to wit: there may be discoverable connections to Cook’s three main coastal harbours by way of the Athabascan system Pond had discovered. Again, Barry Gough explains: Pond “had unlocked an essential secret of western waters and drainage basins. He had revealed a vast interior space, one with a door to the Arctic in the north, the Coppermine River in the northeast, the Churchill River system in the east-northeast, and possibly some form of communication west.” Thereby, Pond also provided the first glimmer of an eventual successor to the classic Northwest Passage that Cook sought: a system of interlocking rivers and lakes that could carry commerce from the Atlantic to the Pacific and vice versa. This cartographic image would be popularized by his protege Alexander Mackenzie and pursued in turn by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.¹⁸

Nothing spurs activity more promptly than the threat that others may seize an opportunity before it can be capitalized upon. Accordingly, in the written memorial accompanying the chart, Pond apprised Hamilton that he “had positive information from the Natives, who had been to the Coast of the North Pacific Ocean that there is a trading post already established by the Russians.” This was not news: Cook’s third-voyage account had long since communicated that fact. But the implication behind the word “Coast” is that the Russians had moved east of the point where Cook had encountered them. In fact, the Russians had extended their fur trading empire to Kodiak Island in 1784, but there is a legitimate question as to whether Pond could have learned of this development so soon. But the Russians were not the main threat because Pond added what he hoped might clinch the argument in favour of the monopoly grant to the North West Company. He asserted that there was credible information “that Ships are now setting out from the United States of America, under the Command of Experienced Sea-Men who accompanied Captain Cook in his last Voyage in order to establish a furs trade upon the North West Coast of North America, at or near to Prince William’s Sound.”¹⁹ Though the language is overly expansive in the pluralized “Sea-men,” this must have been a garbled reference to the
scheme John Ledyard was trying to put together, news of which Pond would have picked up during his visit home in Connecticut and around Congress in New York. Robert Gray, the first American to look for furs on the Northwest Coast, was not a Cook man and did not leave New England until two years later.

The Nor’Westers did not succeed in gaining their charter but Pond emerged from the meeting with a burnished reputation as a practical geographer. Hamilton wrote Home Secretary Lord Sydney in the wake of the meeting. After allowing that Pond was “an American by birth,” he thought the results of his “active mind” might “prove of infinite utility to this country, consequently of great importance to the parent state,” Great Britain. This was important because the British, he felt, needed a presence on the Pacific shore to fend off the “encroaching spirit of our neighbors,” i.e., the Americans, echoing the hint that Pond had laid before him about the scheme Ledyard was propagating. Given Pond’s dalliance with Congress, Hamilton was eager to keep him attached “to British interest, a want of it may drive him to court employment elsewhere.”

As it turned out, Pond’s American flirtation was short-lived. He returned to the far northwest of Canada in the summer of 1785 for three years’ worth of trading and exploration, near the end of which sojourn he made the acquaintance of a new trader. As a consequence of the North West Company reorganization in 1787, Alexander Mackenzie, a recent immigrant from Scotland, was sent to Lake Athabasca to become Pond’s deputy. Pond tutored Mackenzie in the intricacies of northern geography during the course of their one year together in-country before they parted company. Mackenzie would in many respects realize the promise that Alexander Henry the elder and Pond had envisioned, though he was stinting in his recognition of their contributions to his accomplishments and attendant fame. But that lies ahead. Our immediate interest is focused on the third map that Pond prepared, which, like the first one, was also completed in the field, most likely in July 1787 (see Figure 1.4).

That summer, Pond and his engagés left the fort on the Athabasca River and after reaching the western end of Lake Athabasca they entered the Slave River. On their downstream course to Great Slave Lake, they crossed the mouth of the Peace River where it flows into the Slave, eventually reaching Great Slave Lake itself, a body of water larger than either Lake Erie or Lake Ontario but little known today because of its remoteness. Pond may have travelled as far east as Yellowknife Bay.
Figure 1.4  Peter Pond’s “Empress Catherine Map,” 1787, so called because he gave a version to Alexander Mackenzie to present to the ruler of Russia if his fellow trader got that far. This image, redrawn from a copy of the original chart that Pond shared with Mackenzie, depicts the continued evolution of his theory for an inland Northwest Passage. It shows the continued relevance of Cook’s third-voyage cartography, including a new addition not found in his previous charts – an outlet from Great Slave Lake heading toward, but not connected to, “Cook’s River.” Based on Chapin, Freshwater Passages, 280, and Hayes, First Crossing, 64; redrawn by Eric Leinberger
On the basis of this and his previous journeys, plus the continuous procurement of Indigenous intelligence about the hydrology of their homeland, Pond refined his cartographic projection of the region. The most significant evolution depicted in the 1787 version was the unusual idea, evoking the spirit of the Admiral de Fonte fable, that Great Slave Lake had three outlets. Two of them, reflecting his original presentation to Congress, flowed respectively to the northwest and northeast and emptied into “water that ebbs and flows” upon which the “Eskimaux” lived. This clearly was an allusion to the Arctic. The main outlet, however, flowed west in the unmistakable direction and approximate latitude of “Cook’s River.” David Chapin reckons that “no one looking at the map could fail to conclude that they were the same” concept. Notwithstanding “a great Waterfall” (also in the de Fonte tradition), Pond’s insinuation about the interior origins of “Cook’s River” conveniently passed to the north of the chain of mountains extending north from Mexico, terminating at latitude 62°30’N. Pond was hedging his topographic bets. His third projection clearly conveyed the promise of a tie-in to one of Cook’s major Pacific coast inlets while still, ever so deftly, preserving the potential of one or more outlets for the Athabascan system of lakes and rivers into the Arctic.21

Though Pond’s third map utilizes place names derived from the great navigator, his definition of the coastline for the Alaskan subcontinent echoed archaic Russian projections more than it did Cook’s, though this may have been a function of Pond’s rudimentary map-making skills. Cartographic deficiency is also evident in the compression of the longitudinal spacing between the actual location of Great Slave Lake and Cook Inlet, amounting to seventeen degrees of longitude or nearly 700 miles. Here another explanation applies, one that resonated throughout the long history of the Northwest Passage both before and after Cook, though excluding the great navigator himself – the geography of hope, or, to be less kind, wishful thinking. On the map presented to Hamilton in the spring of 1785, Pond was content to use Cook’s west coast harbours as markers, as a mere intimation of possibility. The 1787 version now tilted in favour of probability. Pond believed he was merely six days of travel from his Athabasca post to the outfall of the “river” Cook spied in an inlet that others later named for him.

By the spring of 1788, Pond had spent almost three full years at his post in the Athabasca country building up the trade – a long time for such duty. He was now forty-eight years old and his continuously problematic relations with partners in the trade, including allegations that he was responsible for
the murder of a colleague, and possibly a second one, complicated his stay in the interior. And so he withdrew, turning over matters to a younger generation, whose principal figure was Alexander Mackenzie. Before leaving, Pond gave Mackenzie one of the four copies of his third map known to exist. But that was not the most remarkable element of this transition, for Pond also imparted to Mackenzie a Promethean vision that was remarkable in its coincidental imitation of John Ledyard’s conversation with Jefferson. Since setting out from Quebec in the spring of 1785, Pond had cultivated the dream that it was theoretically possible to travel across Canada to the Athabasca country, thence to the mouth of “Cook’s River,” and then, once linkage was made with merchants from Russia, sail to Kamchatka. Going in the opposite direction to what Ledyard was envisaging at exactly the same time, he merely had to cross Siberia to reach St. Petersburg.

Pond never set his reverie in motion, but he fired Mackenzie’s imagination and largely formed the Scotsman’s subsequent plan of action. To others, Mackenzie may have mocked Pond’s idea of laying his chart “before the Empress of Russia” as an “incomprehensibly extravagant notion,” but in his practical field operations he followed Pond’s formula. This included taking a copy of Pond’s third map and a letter of introduction to any Russian fur traders he might meet so that at least these two documents, if not the circumambulator in person, could wend their way to Petropavlovsk if not St. Petersburg. In the event, Mackenzie’s 1789 expedition, borne along by the river that now carries his name, took him from Lake Athabasca to the Arctic, not Cook Inlet. Even though his first voyage carried him to the wrong ocean, four years later, on the eve of his departure for the Pacific via the Peace River that Pond had first charted, the Scotsman told his cousin Roderic that he took some money so as to “traffick with the Russians.” In 1793, Mackenzie didn’t make it to Cook Inlet or Unalaska either, coming out further to the south, near Bella Coola on British Columbia’s central coast. But the larger point of Pond’s plan, and Mackenzie’s attempt to implement it, is that Cook had so stirred the imagination of his generation that, if the great navigator had done all that was possible at sea, others wanted to boldly carry the banner as far as they could by land. Another fur man, Sir George Simpson, near the end of his tenure as governor of North American operations for the Hudson’s Bay Company, would end up being the first person to circumnavigate the world overland, in 1841–42.22

Pond left his fort on the Athabasca River on May 15, 1788, hoping to renegotiate the terms of his partnership in the North West Company. It was
his intention to return to Athabasca country but he never did. Pond perma-
ently severed his relationship with the firm in 1790. His whereabouts
during the interim are largely unknown. Pond may have spent time in the
Great Lakes region, or possibly he returned to Connecticut. We do know
that he was in Montreal in late October or early November 1789, and there
discussed his most recent three years of northwestern travel with two colonial
figures, John Mervin Nooth and Isaac Ogden. The former, a physician and
a member of the Royal Society then serving in Canada as an army doctor,
was a frequent correspondent with Joseph Banks on matters botanical,
zoological, geological, and geographical. Ogden was a judge of the Admiralty
court in Quebec (and was also the father of a famous explorer for the HBC’s
Columbia River district, Peter Skene Ogden). Pond’s conversations with these
ten were important because their gist was conveyed to the most prominent
geographical circle in Great Britain, landing there at precisely the same time
the wave of new information derived from the Northwest Coast maritime
fur trade did.

Isaac Ogden was a guest at Montreal’s famous Beaver Club, where he
encountered Pond and saw the latest version of the fur trader’s map. On
November 7, 1789, he wrote to his father, David Ogden, also a judge but
living in London. He related what he had learned from his conversation
with Pond. This information, he wrote, was “exclusive of the Map itself,
which I could not get a Copy of.” As conveyed to the elder Ogden, Pond
asserted that out of the Great Slave Lake “runs a very large River, which
runs almost South West, and has the largest falls on it in the known World,
it is as least two miles wide where the Falls are, and an amazing Body of
Water.” This was pure fantasy of the de Fonte variety (as Mackenzie would
prove). The more important point, which Ogden related with the confidence
Pond had instilled, was that “there can be little doubt, but that the Source
of Cook’s River is now fully discovered and known.” Several supposed proofs
were offered, the most salient being Pond’s claim that in 1787 he had seen
two Natives on the shore of Great Slave Lake “who came (as they said) up
a River from the Northern Pacific Ocean” and presented him a blanket
“which they received from Vessels which were at the Mouth of the River;
they said that the River he was in is large to the place of Discharge and
Navigable.” There is no reason to doubt that Pond had actually met Indigen-
ous People in possession of trade items, but such artifacts may have come
inland from any number of places, such as Hudson Bay, or from the Pacific
Ocean by way of the Stikine River. This stream’s headwaters are opposite
the upper reaches of the Liard River, which itself joins the Mackenzie just
downstream from where it flows out of Great Slave Lake.\textsuperscript{23}

Ogden’s narrative explains why Pond’s third map depicts a prodigious
western flow from Great Slave Lake versus the trickle of the two outfalls
into the Arctic. According to Ogden, Pond never asserted reaching to the
far “north ... where the Waters ebb and flow,” but Indians he knew did in
1787, where “they met with & killed a number of Eskimaux.” This was
perhaps of little consequence in itself except, Ogden added, that those killed
were the same people “to be found only on the Banks or Boundary of the
[Arctic] Ocean from the Labrador Coast Northward, and they are found
on the whole Extent of that Coast as far North as we have any Knowledge.”
Ogden concluded by noting that via this inland network of lakes and rivers,
“an Advantageous Commerce may be carried” to “the mouth of Cook’s River
to be thence carried to China.” In furtherance of that objective, Pond had
left a man in the Canadian interior “with orders to go down the River and
from thence to Unalaska and so to Kamtskats, and then to England through
Russia.” Ogden advised his father to expect to see this man, who went “by
the Name of McKenzie,” “next year,” presuming “he meets with no Accident.”
This news was too exciting to keep private, so on January 23, 1790, the senior
Ogden forwarded its contents to Alexander Dalrymple, Evan Nepean, the
minister in charge of colonial affairs, and the redoubtable Joseph Banks,
president of the Royal Society, who kept an abstract of it in his files.\textsuperscript{24}

Nooth’s letter, written the same week as Odgen’s, was sent directly to
Banks. His was a shorter missive, and the Northwest Passage was not the
main focus. Nooth referred to Pond as “a singular person” who had been
“some years in the western parts of America” and had recently presented a
map (a copy of his third one, dated December 6, 1787, drawn while he was
still in the wilderness) to Hamilton’s colonial successor, Lord Dorchester.
Nooth averred that Pond “positively asserts that he had discover’d an im-
mense Lake nearly equal to Great Britain that communicates in all probability
with Cooks River” or Prince William Sound. To cement Pond’s notion, the
Nooth letter centred on the same trade blanket story that captured Isaac
Ogden’s attention: “In the River which was form’d by the Water that was
discharg’d from this Lake [Great Slave Lake] he met with Indians that had
undoubtedly seen Cooks Ships and who had with them a variety of Euro-
pean Articles evidently of English manufacture.” Nooth also viewed the
latest version of Pond’s map, “in which the Latitude is well laid down.”
Pond disclosed, or Nooth intuited, that the fur trader “was very capable of
ascertaining that circumstance” but “the longitude seems to be guess-work and not in any respect accurate enough to be depended on.”

Unlike Nooth (or the Odgens), Banks had heard of Pond earlier. When he received Ogden’s letter, it prompted a memory that he recorded on his copy of the correspondence, to wit:

A Mr. Pond set out from Quebeck in the Spring of 1785 Alone with the intention of Crossing America Westward & returning [to Europe] by Siberia, he had before travel’d till he met the Tide in a river which ran to the west & supposes he then was within three days Journey of the Sea in the Neighbourhood of Jesuits Harbor.

This report, Banks noted, came to him from a “Capt. Bentincks ... when at Revesby 1788.” (Revesby was Banks’s country estate in Lincolnshire, and he divided his time between it and his home in London.) Captain (later Admiral) William Bentinck (1764–1813) had served in the American War for Independence and later in Canada. The most relevant issue is not Bentinck’s respect for Pond’s ambition but the relative importance he placed on the story of the European goods he saw in Indigenous hands at Great Slave Lake. We know that Cook and his men did not use blankets in trade, and it is unlikely that the first wave of maritime fur traders in those waters did. (Indigenous trading patterns, we now know, were truly transcontinental in nature, and far more extensive than Pond’s generation believed possible. For example, Lewis and Clark were surprised to see how far and how quickly manufactured trade goods could cross the continent.) The more important point is how this intelligence was interpreted in England. Chapin writes: “Here was an appealing notion that seemed to tie together two disparate strands of British exploration: Native people meeting Cook on the shores of the Pacific, and a few years later meeting Pond at Great Slave Lake.”

If Pond’s supposed link to Cook on the Pacific were not already provocative enough, he propagated yet another beguiling idea. It was self-evident to those who spoke to Pond, or read of his theories through intermediaries, that he was well travelled in the same latitudes that Cook had been sent to explore from a seaborne vantage. Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, on the north shore of Great Slave Lake is just above the 62nd parallel, roughly equivalent to the latitude of Norton Sound off the Alaskan subcontinent. Pond’s map, and what we glean indirectly through Judge Isaac Ogden’s correspondence, indicates that Pond thought the Arctic coast lay in navigable
latitudes. This, of course, is equivalent to what Hearne had found nearly two decades earlier, which was in itself sufficient to guide Cook’s exploratory parameters. But in his letter to his father in Great Britain, the younger Ogden added: “My Informant [Pond] tells me, that if he [Cook] had been a month later, he would have met with no obstruction from Ice in that Quarter.” Modern understanding of polar climatology confirms what Pond’s Dene guides, on the basis of their war parties against the Arctic Inuit, said: the maximum recession of the northern ice pack is in September. The upshot, Ogden related, is that if Cook had simply been able to get past Alaska’s Icy Cape (named by the great navigator), he “might have passed the Northern Coast of America, and have returned to Europe by that Rout.” According to Ogden, Pond believed that “on the North Western Coast of America there is a large or long Point of Land that extends to the Lat. of 71 or further, and then the Coast trends South Easterly” to such an extent that the Arctic eventually “washes the Land in Lat. of 68 1/2.”

Since the parties to this discourse presumed no European had yet visited the western portion of the Arctic coast, this was merely interesting speculation. But unbeknownst to Pond, Ogden, Banks, or anyone living in Quebec or Great Britain in the winter of 1789–90, Alexander Mackenzie had reached the Arctic on July 14, 1789, news of which took time to reach the Atlantic seaboard of North America or Europe. Nevertheless, Pond’s prefiguration of the “long Point” and the southeasterly trend of the Arctic coastline east of its northernmost point, and the Indigenous reckonings it was based upon, proved true. During the nineteenth-century wave of maritime Arctic exploration, Alaska’s northernmost projection, Point Barrow, was discerned at latitude 71°23′N, as forecast by Pond. Hearne had reached the northern sea where the Coppermine River falls in, far to the east of the Mackenzie River at a latitude he mistakenly calculated to be just shy of 72°N, later determined to be four degrees of latitude too high. Thus Pond correctly comprehended from his own experience and Indigenous intermediaries (or simply guessed correctly) that in places the Arctic coast actually ran lower than 68°N and that the principal impediment to reaching Hearne’s coast from the Pacific was the northern shore of Alaska where Cook hit the Arctic ice pack.

Of course, the Boothia and Melville peninsular extensions north of Hudson Bay, to say nothing of the extensive complication of the northern Canadian Arctic Archipelago, would have remained obstacles for Cook, just as they were for another hundred years and more until Amundsen made it
through early in the twentieth century. However, the important point to consider within the Cook context is that although Pond seemed to have reopened the practicability of an ocean-to-ocean Northwest Passage, this prospect – the original vision of the Northwest Passage – was not an idea that captivated the minds of geographers in the late 1780s. The notion that Pond had found a freshwater route to the Pacific was far more appealing. Barry Gough asserts that Pond’s discoveries in the Canadian interior “again raised new hopes of the Northwest Passage.”28 True, but this was not the passage Cook was sent to find, demonstrating how thoroughly Cook had demolished the classic formulation of the Northwest Passage. As an idée fixe, the fabled route from the Atlantic to the Pacific was evolving.

Thus, with the convergence of two streams of geographical information, we see that Pond’s continental reports trickled back to attentive audiences only a year or two after those from Dixon, Barkley, Duncan, and other seafarers. Fertile minds in Great Britain were well stimulated by the end of 1789. For example, Richard Cadman Etches, the managing partner of the King George’s Sound Company, which sponsored the Portlock and Dixon trading voyage, along with the peripatetic Joseph Banks, floated a scheme in London to emulate the penal colony plan that had already been launched toward Australia’s Botany Bay. In their vision, a critical mass of felons intermixed with some soldiers would sail in a Royal Naval vessel to the Northwest Coast and after the human cargo was landed at Nootka Sound, a more detailed survey might commence from there to Cook Inlet. Captain Dixon endorsed this idea in a July 1789 letter sent to Evan Nepean, the British undersecretary handling colonial afairs, arguing for an expedition to the northwest that would promote both trade and settlement. It was in this fashion, Glyn Williams notes, that “casual observations along the coast raised the frst doubts about Cook’s conclusions.”29 Both from the sea and from Pond’s inland vantage, the Northwest Passage was taking new forms.