



Preface : Young Ambition

Sea of Glory by Nathaniel Philbrick

He was not yet forty-five, but he looked much older, his health broken by four years of hardship and danger. But he had done it. He had successfully completed the voyage of a lifetime—the kind of voyage that had made heroes of Christopher Columbus and James Cook.

The odds had been against him from the start. When his squadron of six sailing vessels set out from the Norfolk Navy Yard in 1838, most of the world's oceans had already been thoroughly explored. That had not prevented the United States from sending him on a bold, some said foolhardy mission: to scour the Southern Hemisphere of the earth for new lands.

Miraculously, he had made discoveries that would redraw the map of the world. He and his officers had surveyed dozens of uncharted Pacific islands. They had completed America's first survey of what would one day become the states of Oregon and Washington. His team of scientists had brought back forty tons of specimens and artifacts, including two thousand never-before-identified species. Most impressive of all, he had established the existence of a new continent. Battling icebergs and gale-force winds in his fragile wooden ships, he had charted a 1,500-mile section of Antarctic coast that still bears his name: Wilkes Land.

But on that September day in 1842, just a few months after his return to the United States, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes was anything but a hero. Instead of being honored with speeches and parades, he had been put on trial in the crowded cabin of the USS North Carolina anchored in New York Harbor. Beside him sat his attorney; across from them were the judges—thirteen naval officers who were about to decide whether he was guilty of illegally whipping his men, massacring the inhabitants of a tiny Fijian island, lying about the discovery of Antarctica, and other outrages. Sitting in the gallery were many of his own officers. They whispered among themselves and smiled, confident that their hated commander would soon get his due.

He was a slight man with brown hair and a sharp blade of a nose, his cheeks pitted from smallpox and burned red by the sun and wind. Despite his haggard appearance, there was a fierceness in his eyes. After almost three weeks of testimony, it was now time for him to deliver his defense. He cleared his throat, and in a quavering, indignant voice, he began to tell his side of the story.

America's first frontier was not the West; it was the sea. The United States began as a string of coastal communities dominated by the Atlantic Ocean—a storm-wracked wilderness that made the forests of the interior look like a beckoning refuge. But travel by road was slow and difficult in the early years of the nation, while the sea was a highway that led to just about anywhere in the world. By the late eighteenth century, American mariners had ventured around Cape Horn to the Pacific. In 1792, a sea otter trader from Boston discovered Oregon's Columbia River—thirteen years before the arrival of Lewis and Clark. When the United States did finally send an overland expedition beyond the Rockies in 1803, it was to find a navigable waterway to the Pacific. That was why the Lewis and Clark Expedition was called a voyage of discovery. Until the Gold Rush turned the nation's attention to the winning of the West in 1848, America's predominant frontier was still the sea.

A decade earlier, this young nation of sea wanderers became part of an international effort to discover and explore the last unknown portions of the planet. It had begun in 1768, with the voyages of the legendary British navigator James Cook. Earlier explorers such as Columbus and Magellan had been in search of new ways of getting to old, already well-known places—in particular, the spice-rich islands of the East Indies. Their discoveries had been accidental. There had been nothing accidental about Cook's explorations of the South Pacific. When he returned with reports of palm-fringed islands teeming with people, plants, and animals unlike anything ever seen before, the scientists of Europe clamored for more. In the decades to come, England sent out twenty-eight exploring expeditions to the Pacific; France followed with seventeen, while Spain, Russia, and Holland mounted a total of thirteen voyages among them.

In spite of all these efforts to probe the islands of the Pacific, there remained a region that had so far resisted scientific inquiry: the ice-studded mystery at the bottom of the world. Cook had ventured below the Antarctic Circle and found nothing but snow and ice. Given the dangerous conditions and the slender prospect of significant results, further exploration hardly seemed warranted. But by 1838 there was renewed interest in the high southern latitudes. What had once been regarded as a forbidding wasteland was now one of the few places left where a discovery of Cook-like proportions might still be possible. Seventy years after the English explorer's inaugural voyage, the icy waters of Antarctica were just one of the many destinations planned for America's first oceangoing voyage of discovery.

They called it the U.S. Ex. Ex., or simply the Ex. Ex., shorthand for the United States South Seas Exploring Expedition of 1838. It was an unprecedented naval operation, especially for a nation with a navy that was less than half the size of Great Britain's. Whereas most European exploring expeditions comprised two modest-sized ships, the American squadron consisted of six sailing vessels and 346 men, including a team of nine scientists and artists, making it one of the largest voyages of discovery in the history of Western exploration.

No American or European expedition could compare in size to the flotillas launched by the Chinese emperor Yung-lo in the first half of the fifteenth century, some of which included 27,500 men and ventured as far as the east coast of Africa and perhaps beyond. When China chose to disband her fleets of discovery, Portugal became the world's leader in exploration. Under the guidance of Prince Henry the Navigator, Portugal developed a new type of vessel called the caravel, specifically designed for exploration. Based on Egyptian and Greek designs and only seventy feet long, with shoal draft to keep from running aground on unknown coasts, the caravel enabled Portugal to become the first European country to round Africa's Cape of Good Hope and, in 1498, reach the fabled shores of India. By that time, Spain had launched its own expeditions, placing its hopes in an Italian mariner named Christopher

Columbus. Columbus insisted that the fastest way to the East was to sail west, and when he subsequently came upon the islands of the Bahamas and the Caribbean, he stubbornly insisted that they were what he had been looking for all along—the Spice Islands of the East Indies. Three hundred and forty-six years later, the history of exploration had come full circle as a nation from the New World Columbus refused to believe existed launched its own voyage of discovery.

With the U.S. Ex. Ex., America hoped to plant its flag in the world. Literally broadening the nation's horizons, the Expedition's ships would cover the Pacific Ocean from top to bottom and bring the United States international renown for its scientific endeavors as well as its bravado. European expeditions had served the cause of both science and empire, providing new lands with which to augment their countries' already far-flung possessions around the world. The United States, on the other hand, had more than enough unexplored territory within its own borders. Commerce, not colonies, was what the U.S. was after. Besides establishing a stronger diplomatic presence throughout the Pacific, the Expedition sought to provide much-needed charts to American whalers, sealers, and China traders. Decades before America surveyed and mapped its own interior, this government-sponsored voyage of discovery would enable a young, determined nation to take its first tentative steps toward becoming an economic world power.

The Expedition was to attempt two forays south—one from Cape Horn, the other from Sydney, Australia, during the relatively warm months of January, February, and March. The time in between was to be spent surveying the islands of the South Pacific—particularly the little-known Fiji Group. The Expedition's other priority was the Pacific Northwest. In the years since Lewis and Clark had ventured to the mouth of the Columbia River, the British and their Hudson's Bay Company had come to dominate what was known as the Oregon territory. In hopes of laying the basis for the government's future claim to the region, the Ex. Ex. was to complete the first American survey of the Columbia, and would continue down the coast to California's San Francisco Bay, then still a part of Mexico. By the conclusion of the voyage—after stops at Manila, Singapore, and the Cape of Good Hope—the Expedition would become the last all-sail naval squadron to circumnavigate the world.

By any measure, the achievements of the Expedition would be extraordinary. After four years at sea, after losing two ships and twenty-eight officers and men, the Expedition logged 87,000 miles, surveyed 280 Pacific islands, and created 180 charts—some of which were still being used as late as World War II. The Expedition also mapped 800 miles of coastline in the Pacific Northwest and 1,500 miles of the icebound Antarctic coast. Just as important would be its contribution to the rise of science in America. The thousands of specimens and artifacts amassed by the Expedition's scientists would become the foundation of the collections of the Smithsonian Institution. Indeed, without the Ex. Ex., there might never have been a national museum in Washington, D.C. The U.S. Botanic Garden, the U.S. Hydrographic Office, and the Naval Observatory all owe their existence, in varying degrees, to the Expedition.

Any one of these accomplishments would have been noteworthy. Taken together, they represent a national achievement on the order of the building of the Transcontinental Railroad and the Panama Canal. But if these wonders of technology and human resolve have become part of America's legendary past, the U.S. Exploring Expedition has been largely forgotten. To understand why, we must look to the Expedition's leader and the young officer who began the voyage as his commander's biggest fan.

It had taken more than a decade to get the U.S. Ex. Ex. under way. By 1838, years of political

infighting had severely damaged the Expedition's credibility with the American people. But the turmoil made no difference to a twenty-two-year-old naval officer named William Reynolds. Reynolds was a passed midshipman—the pre-Annapolis equivalent of a Naval Academy graduate, who after several years of sea duty and study had passed a rigorous series of examinations. For Reynolds, the U.S. Ex. Ex. was the voyage of his young life, and on October 29, 1838—seventy-two days after the squadron's departure—he poured out his enthusiasm into the pages of his journal. "And behold! Now a nation which a short time ago was a discovery itself...is taking its place among the enlightened of the world and endeavoring to contribute its mite in the cause of knowledge and research. For this seems the age in which all men's minds are bent to learn all about the secrets of the world in which they inhabit." Reynolds then turned his attention to the Expedition's commander, Charles Wilkes, a controversial choice to lead such an ambitious undertaking. "Captain Wilkes is a man of great talent, perhaps genius," Reynolds declared. After describing his leader's extensive scientific and navigational background, he concluded, "In my humble opinion, Captain Wilkes is the most proper man who could have been found in the Navy to conduct this Expedition, and I have every confidence that he will accomplish all that is expected."

Months later, after the Expedition had rounded Cape Horn, plunged south into the icy Drake Passage, and surveyed the island paradises of Polynesia, Reynolds would return to this passage in his journal. Over the reference to Wilkes he would scrawl, "great mistake, did not at this time know him."

Reynolds would not be alone in changing his opinion of Charles Wilkes. By the end of the voyage, most of the Expedition's officers had grown to despise their commander. The feelings were mutual. Wilkes would bring charges against several of his officers, who then countered with charges of their own, meaning that what might have been the triumphant return of the U.S. Ex. Ex. became clouded by a series of courts-martial.

According to common practice, all the Expedition's officers had been required to keep journals that they were to surrender to their commander at the end of the voyage. Unbeknownst to Wilkes, Reynolds kept two journals: an official log and a secret, far more personal journal that would eventually expand to two volumes and almost 200,000 words. Today these big, twelve-by-twenty-inch unpublished journals reside in the archives of Franklin and Marshall College in Reynolds's ancestral home of Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Sensitive and well-read, Reynolds was a natural writer, and his journals contain some of the best descriptions of the sea to come from a nineteenth-century American's pen. But the journals are much more than the chronicle of a four-year voyage. Along with the twenty-one letters he wrote to his family back home, the journals tell the story of one man's coming of age amid the ice floes of the Antarctic, the coral reefs of the South Seas, and the giant pines of the Pacific Northwest.

At the center of Reynolds's account is his changing relationship with Wilkes, a relationship that would come to dramatize the tangled legacy of the Expedition. Largely because of its arrogant and uncompromising commander, the Ex. Ex. was never able to shake free of the personal animosities and political intrigue that had plagued it from the start. Even though his journal provides a remarkable window on the Expedition, Reynolds was unable, in the end, to fathom the seemingly inexplicable motivations of his commander. Indeed, for more than a century, Wilkes has stood astride the legacy of the Ex. Ex. like an inscrutable colossus, a forbidding impediment to all who would want to know more.

But there is a way to see past Wilkes's rigid professional demeanor. The dozens of letters he wrote to his wife Jane during the long four years of the Ex. Ex. are full of startling revelations. Just a few months into the voyage, Wilkes almost cracked under the pressures of command. What happened to him over the course of the Expedition is part passion play, part object lesson in how the demands of leadership can at once confirm and transform a person's character.

By all rights, the Ex. Ex. should have become an enduring source of national pride. But Charles Wilkes was no James Cook. Insecure and egotistical rather than self-effacing and confident, Wilkes had a talent for creating discord and conflict. And yet, there was something quintessentially American about Wilkes and the brash, boisterous, and overreaching expedition that he managed to forge in his own makeshift image.

Late in life, Mark Twain would remember the excitement he felt when he learned that Wilkes had discovered Antarctica. "When I was a boy of ten, in that village on the Mississippi River which at that time was so incalculably far from any place and is now so near to all places, the name of Wilkes, the explorer, was in everybody's mouth....What a noise it made, and how wonderful the glory! Wilkes had discovered a new world and was another Columbus....[He] had gone wandering about the globe in his ships and had looked with his own eyes upon its furthest corners, its dreamlands—names and places which existed rather as shadows and rumors than as realities."

Henry David Thoreau was also fascinated by the Ex. Ex. "What was the meaning of that South Sea Exploring Expedition," he wrote in the final chapter of *Walden*, published in 1854, "with all its parade and expense, but an indirect recognition of the fact that there are continents and seas in the moral world, to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet unexplored by him, but that it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans of one's being alone."

In 1851, Herman Melville published *Moby-Dick*, a novel that includes several references to the U.S. Ex. Ex. More than a decade before, Melville had set out on his own personal voyage of discovery aboard a New Bedford whaleship bound for the very same waters then being plied by the Exploring Expedition. Later, while researching his whaling masterpiece, Melville read Wilkes's narrative of the voyage with great interest. There he learned how Wilkes mercilessly drove his men beyond the edge of their endurance in search of the icy coast of Antarctica. One literary critic has even argued that Melville based his description of Captain Ahab's mythic pursuit of the white whale on Wilkes's search for the white continent.

Every generation has its great men and women, people who, for whatever reason, feel compelled to push themselves to achieve what others might feel is impossible or not worth the effort. Judged by those standards, Wilkes was a great man. But he was also vain, impulsive, and often cruel. Do his personal flaws negate his greatness? As Melville recognized, they were one and the same. "For all men tragically great," Melville writes in *Moby-Dick*, "are made so through a certain morbidness. Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease."

For both Wilkes and Reynolds, the Exploring Expedition would be as much a voyage into the private sea described by Thoreau as it would be a voyage around the world. With their help, perhaps we can gain a new appreciation of an undertaking that should be a recognized and valued part of our nation's heritage. The frontier of Lewis and Clark has long since been civilized out of existence. But as Wilkes and Reynolds came to discover, no one will ever

civilize the sea.

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