

The Man Who Walked Too Much

About six years ago I started walking. Well, to be more accurate, I first walked when I was 13 months old, but six years ago I took up race walking. However, much to your disappointment, I'm sure, this paper is not about race walking or even about me, although walking did lead me to this evening's subject—John Ledyard. Born in 1751 in Connecticut, Ledyard was part of the Revolutionary generation, but never a revolutionist. Still, he counted among his acquaintances such luminaries as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Paul Jones, as well as Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks, the celebrated naturalist and president of the Royal Society in London. Yet, he is little remembered today. Nevertheless, when I discovered a book sub-titled “The Man Who Dreamed of Walking the World,” well, I just had to pursue the topic.

Strong-willed and physically strong, independent, romantic and Quixotic, Ledyard seemingly accomplished little in life . . . but he dreamed large. He came from sturdy New England stock. Three of his grandparents descended from those 17th-century Puritans, and his ancestors settled along the lower Thames River in Connecticut and on the tip of Long Island. Young John spent much of his childhood traveling between Groton and New London, Connecticut, and Southwold, New York, among a tight web of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, made up of Ledyards, Youngses, Averys and Hempsteads. Like so many others in the region, Ledyards were seafaring people. John's father, known as Captain John, was a semi-successful merchant who walked a fine line between solvency and indebtedness and between legal commerce and smuggling. In 1762, however, at the end of the French and Indian War, he died at sea, probably from malarial fever picked up in the Caribbean. John was ten years old.

Due to his father's current indebtedness, the comfortable house in Groton was lost and the family, now a widow with four children, moved to Long Island to depend on maternal relatives. Shortly after that, Grandfather Ledyard, known locally as Squire Ledyard, had young John sent to him in Hartford. A rather stern, flinty, practical and unbending man, he hoped to train John to be a merchant. There is little record of Ledyard's next ten years, but there are indications he both disliked his grandfather and resented his controlling influence. His grandfather apparently considered him something of a dreamy fool. Being something of an outsider among his Hartford relatives may account for his developing contrary ways about this time. As a teenager, he also began his solitary walks.

In 1771 his grandfather died. By tradition, as the eldest son of the eldest son, young John should have inherited a significant estate; instead, Squire Ledyard practically disinherited him. He received about £60 out of an estate valued at £5,000, and this amount not to be distributed until John was twenty-one, still two years in the future.. Now under the legal guardianship of his Uncle Thomas Seymour, he was pushed towards a legal career, but the law held no interest for him. Then, in 1772, he was sent off to Dartmouth College to become a missionary to Native Americans, the school's reason for existing. No Yale College for him. Yale, of course, was the college of choice for most Ledyards. And Dartmouth was no Yale either (with apologies to those Dartmouth alumni here this evening). Less than three years old, it consisted of three log buildings and twenty-four students, situated along the east bank of the Connecticut River on the New Hampshire frontier. Under the direction of the Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, a domineering evangelical Congregationalist, the school provided little stimulation for the nineteen-year-old Ledyard's growing imagination. Besides, it was surely the only college then, and perhaps ever, where students had to watch out for wolves on campus. Far worse, the tiny village of Hanover lacked even a single tavern, although this would soon change.

Into this primitive setting, Ledyard made quite an entrance. Borrowing on his inheritance, he obtained a two-wheeled sulky, the first ever seen in that part of the state, and a set of clothes that included loose fitting Turkish-styled pantaloons and an open collared shirt, along with several bolts of brightly colored fabric, hardly the somber clothing suitable for a future missionary. This became the opening salvo in a test of wills between young John and the Rev. Wheelock.

It soon became quite clear that Ledyard was not interested in theological studies, or even studies of much of anything. In his short time at Dartmouth, friends and fellow students remembered him for his curious arrival, his singular dress, his organization of the play *Cato*, written by Joseph Addison, and a variety of high-spirited pranks, most of which remained unappreciated by the Reverend Wheelock. At one point, Ledyard apparently spent several months visiting various native tribes of the Six Nations, an absence taken without the president's permission. All of this must have exasperated the pious Wheelock, but a greater sin, given the school's precarious financial situation, was Ledyard's failure to pay his debts to the college, a transgression for which Wheelock never forgave him. After one year, Ledyard departed as dramatically as he had arrived. He turned a large tree trunk into a dugout canoe and, with his few possessions, set off

down the Connecticut River, wrapped in a bearskin. Two weeks later he arrived in Hartford, almost unrecognizable, even to his relatives.

In spite of his brief tenure, he quickly became Dartmouth's most famous alumnus, at least until Daniel Webster's emergence on the national political stage a half century later. A mid-winter camping trip he had organized anticipated the later Dartmouth Outing Club. In 1920, Dartmouth students started the Ledyard Canoe Club and retraced his trip down the Connecticut River on their first outing, and just a few years ago, another group of students repeated part of the trip, only, as befitting the twentieth-century, they did it in the nude. Of more lasting impact, Ledyard's angry seven-page farewell letter to the Reverend Wheelock provided the young institution with its signature color when he wrote that the college would "flourish in immortal green." The spot where he supposedly took down the pine tree and hollowed out his canoe became a shrine to his memory—there is still a marker there-- and the bridge connecting Hanover to Norwich, Vermont, is still called the Ledyard Bridge. On the other hand, Robert Frost, a Dartmouth dropout himself, once referred to Ledyard as "the patron saint of freshmen who run away."

All of this future adulation was, of course, unknown to the young man. A college dropout, with no interest in law, and clerical and teaching careers thwarted by his shattered relationship with the Rev. Wheelock, Ledyard now turned to the sea. In 1773 he sailed as a common seaman in search of his future. After two trips across the Atlantic, as tension was building between Great Britain and the colonies, Ledyard either joined or was pressed into the British army while his ship was docked in Bristol, England. Soon he managed a transfer to the marines, the Royal Navy's military detachment, and in 1776, when the British Admiralty commissioned two ships for Captain James Cook's third voyage into the Pacific Ocean, Ledyard seized the opportunity to escape the boredom of shore duty and to avoid being sent to fight his countrymen. As *The Discovery* and *The Resolution* sailed out of Plymouth harbor, the twenty-five year old American could see the great fleet gathering to put down the rebellious colonists.

For the next four years, John Ledyard sailed with Cook, visiting the Canary Islands, the Cape of Good Hope, Tasmania, New Zealand, Tahiti, Tonga and Christmas Island. While much is known about this voyage, there is little mention of Ledyard; even his own account focused more on description than on personal activities. However, he did find Tahitian customs fascinating,

even speculating that circumcision, done with an oyster shell, may have come from contact with one of the lost tribes of Israel. In a more prescient comment, he expressed disappointment with Cook's often harsh treatment of natives who casually stole ship's equipment or livestock. In Tahiti he also acquired tattoos on his hands and arms, almost a requirement for a young marine on the voyage; and he also picked up a venereal disease, also something of a requirement for a marine.

Following two months in the South Pacific, the expedition set sail for the Bering Strait and the hoped for discovery of a water passage through northern Canada—a reverse Northwest Passage. In the process they became the first Europeans to set foot on Hawaii, named the Sandwich Islands by Cook. The crew spent two weeks there, re-fitting the ships, stocking provisions, and happily leaving their venereal calling cards. On March 7, 1778, the expedition arrived off the coast of Oregon, where Ledyard joyously commented in his journal on his return to North America.

Slowly the ships moved northward, fighting storms, steering through fog, searching for possible passages, and charting the harbors. A brief visit to Nootka Sound, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, provided the crew with lots of sea otter furs and planted the seed for Ledyard's later interest in developing an American fur trade. On August 17th, they finally reached the icepack in the Bering Sea, four degrees above the Arctic Circle. Disappointed, Cook turned back, but before departing the frigid waters, he sought out Ledyard for a particularly challenging and risky foray into Unalaska, a large island near the eastern end of the Aleutian chain. Having observed European implements among some of the native tribes, Cook wanted to learn whether any Europeans had settled in the region. Ledyard's intelligence, education and physical hardiness made him the best candidate . . . and, as a marine, he was expendable. So, in company with a native Siberian and his two servants, along with a bagful of trinkets, the foursome set off. Cook gave them two weeks to return before he would depart, which would leave them stranded. Amazingly, they encountered a group of Russians on the second day. For the next week Russians and Englishmen visited back and forth, and Cook even left several letters to be forwarded to London. They arrived at their destinations some sixteen months later!

Having fulfilled his orders with regards to a passageway, Cook set his sails for Hawaii. Here, everything began to go wrong. Although John Ledyard managed an attempt to reach the summit

of Mauna Loa, most of the next few weeks on the island passed in sexual encounters, increasing conflict with the natives, a re-occurrence of stolen property, and, finally, the death by natives of Captain Cook and four marines. Ledyard was not with Cook at that fatal moment. In retaliation, the crew, including Ledyard, destroyed a village and butchered almost one hundred Hawaiians.

The return voyage, by way of the Siberian coast, China, the Indian Ocean and Cape Town, brought no new adventures to the weary crew. After more than four years, Ledyard was now back in England, and for his services to the Crown, he received £27 sterling, 16 shillings and 2 ½ pence. Not much for four years. He promptly invested this in the London Stock Exchange, where it soon disappeared. Ledyard and money were often strangers. Once again, he was without funds . . . and he was still in the marines. In 1781 his company was assigned to a frigate heading out to patrol Long Island Sound. At his earliest opportunity, Ledyard deserted. Despite the American victory at Yorktown earlier that year, the British still controlled New York City and most of Long Island, including Southwold. To be caught meant almost certain hanging for Ledyard, and after a brief visit with his mother, who ran a boarding house largely occupied by British soldiers, he crossed Long Island Sound for Groton, Connecticut. Homecoming here was just as bittersweet, for Benedict Arnold's men had just massacred the garrison at Fort Griswold and sacked the town. Twenty-seven Ledyards died in the conflict.

After publishing *A Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage*, which displayed surprisingly sympathetic and understanding views of native peoples, along with serious criticism of Cook's behavior, Ledyard embarked on his next adventure. He traveled to Philadelphia to seek support for a return to Nootka Sound and the development of an American fur trade. His plan found interest with financier Robert Morris and former congressman Gouveneur Morris, men searching for new markets to replace the British Empire. In the ensuing intrigue and double-dealing over financing, additional partners, shipbuilding, and provisioning, the endeavor collapsed, leaving the naïve and restless Ledyard once more without money or a future.

By the end of 1784 he had departed for Europe where he peddled his ideas about the future of furs. In Spain he discovered that the recent war had siphoned off available investment funds. However, in Paris he met Thomas Jefferson, then the United States minister to France. Remarkably different in personality, temperament, background and education, the two men discovered common ground in books and ideas. Almost daily they could be found in animated

conversation walking the streets of Paris. Through Jefferson, Ledyard dined with Benjamin Franklin, John Paul Jones and other Americans.

Paris, with all of its pre-revolutionary charms and excesses, soon bored Ledyard. He devised a new plan. He would travel across Europe and Asia as best he could and then walk across North America, a plan that both freed him from commercial ties and fed his romantic wanderlust. Having almost circumnavigated the earth, Ledyard now saw himself as being the first person to go around the world by land. When he discussed his idea with Jefferson, the future president immediately tied it to his own interests in the lands beyond the Mississippi, and gave it his blessing. Jefferson shepherded Ledyard through the thickets of international diplomacy. The key was Russia, one of only two countries to require a passport, so his proposal, along with strong endorsements from Jefferson and the Marquis de Lafayette, went off to Empress Catherine II. While waiting a reply, Ledyard prepared himself for the arduous journey by running four miles every morning; and on occasion walked the twelve miles into Paris from his rural retreat in Saint-Germain-on-Laye. The weeks stretched into months. Finally, in July, 1786, Catherine's refusal came. She had just underwritten her own expedition to explore the northeast coast of Siberia and had no interest in promoting a rival.

Re-buffed again, Ledyard returned to London. Several British ships were preparing to head to the western coast of Canada but none had room for the American, and it may not have helped to have been a deserter from the navy four years before. He did become friends with Sir Joseph Banks, president of the Royal Society and a powerful social force in England, as well as with Colonel William Smith, secretary of the American legation and soon-to-be son-in-law of John Adams. Ledyard certainly had a knack for making friends in high places. After his final attempt at securing a place on a British ship failed, an attempt in which most of his possessions were impounded, Smith wrote a strong letter of official support that he hoped would serve as a type of passport. By this time, Ledyard had reverted to his earlier plan of crossing Europe and Asia and then on to North America. He wanted, as he phrased it in a letter to Jefferson, a "small degree of honest fame." He wanted to walk around the world. Always conscious of his reputation, he was already shaping his image. On at least one occasion, he referred to himself as "John Ledyard the Traveler," and in a letter to his cousin Isaac he boasted that some in England referred to him as "the mad, romantic, dreamy Ledyard." By the end of 1786, he had charmed some £50 sterling

from London friends, including Banks, and set off—this time with no strings attached. He would travel alone.

After landing on the continent, he wandered across the Low Countries and through various German principalities. He caught an open ferry boat down the Elbe River and nearly froze to death in a winter storm. In Hamburg he learned of a fellow American who was also on his way to Saint Petersburg, for Ledyard was not the only intrepid walker of his generation. An Englishman, John Stewart, known as “Walking Stewart,” rambled across vast areas of Asia in the 1780s; and William Langborn, the fellow American, walked across much of Great Britain and Europe, sometimes covering fifty miles in a day. Indeed, Ledyard even tried to convince Langborn to join him, but the eccentric Langborn was too much the loner.

Ledyard pushed on. A close look at a map convinced him that the quickest way to the Russian capital was through Sweden and Finland, but north of Stockholm he discovered that the Gulf of Bothnia had not frozen over. His fifty-mile shortcut turned into a twelve-hundred mile trek around the open water. For several months he trudged alone across vast stretches of northern Sweden and Finland, and this during winter’s darkest days. Finally, in mid-March, 1787, he appeared in Saint Petersburg, half-frostbitten, bruised and battered, his shoes ripped, and one extra shirt his only baggage. Yet, he characteristically remained upbeat.

Using Sir Joseph Banks’ letter of introduction, he acquired funds through an English firm. The Banks’ name also brought him into contact with Peter Simon Pallas, a German who had led a Russian expedition into Siberia and had become one of the country’s most prominent scientists. The two men dined regularly and believed they were kindred spirits. It was also at Pallas’ elegant apartment that Ledyard fell in love with a blue-eyed German girl, about whom he later wrote that “I wish I could die tonight at her feet, or higher up . . .” By then, of course, he was in Siberia.

Although Ledyard failed to get Empress Catherine’s approval, by chance he met an officer on Grand Duke Nicolai Pavlovich’s staff. With Empress Catherine in the Crimea, the grand duke, Catherine’s son who felt he should be the emperor, issued a passport for passage across Russia to North America. Within days, Ledyard had joined up with William Brown, a Scottish physician returning to Siberia, and the two set off. While Ledyard dreamed of walking the world, the

vastness of Siberia could not be done; at least not with his limited financial resources, but he now had a free pass all the way to the Pacific. He and Brown traveled in a kibitka, a leather-hooded three-horse coach shaped like a large cradle. Every thirty miles or so, horses and drivers were switched—much like our own stagecoach system—and the two men moved methodically eastward: through Nizhni Novgorod, Kazan, Yekaterinburg, and across the Baraba steppe. At the town of Banaul, William Brown stopped. Ledyard pressed on, alone once again. On to Tomsk where he got drunk with the governor; then to Irkutsk, just forty miles from Lake Baikal. By now, he had been traveling two and one-half months since Saint Petersburg.

After ten restorative days in Irkutsk, he left for Yakutsk, the last major town before the coastal mountains. By the end of September he had reached the end of the kibitka line, and he boarded a boat to go down the Lena River to the Arctic Ocean. With temperatures dropping, Ledyard was now in haste to reach the ocean before the long, bitter winter arrived. After reaching Yakutsk, just three hundred miles from the Arctic Circle, winter closed in. In less than ten months, however, he had covered 130 degrees longitude, or about thirty percent of the world, and was now just five hundred miles from the Pacific Ocean.

Borrowing money on Peter Pallas's credit, Ledyard outfitted himself with garments made of fur and reindeer hide and prepared to wait out the long dreary winter. Snow came almost daily and on November 19, his thermometer froze at -40 degrees Fahrenheit. He spent most of his days huddled around peat-burning stoves and writing in his journal about the native peoples, whom he greatly admired. In his jottings, he suggested that Tartars and Native Americans were related, pointing out the narrowness of the Bering Strait, and reflected on a pre-Darwinian form of natural selection as the likely explanation for differences among humans. He concluded that women the world over were "civil, obliging, humane, tender beings." He had less kind words for men.

In mid-November Captain Joseph Billings, an Englishman, appeared in Yakutsk. Billings headed a Russian Siberian expedition, but previously he had been Ledyard's shipmate on *The Resolution*. It was a happy reunion. Bored with the thought of five more months around a peat stove, the free-spirited Ledyard threw in his lot with Billings. Billings promised to take him to Nootka Sound, but not until 1790. So with two years to kill, Ledyard joined Billings on a return by dogsled to Irkutsk. It was not without some bitterness that he relinquished so many hard-

fought miles, but to reach Nootka Sound for a lone man appeared increasingly difficult, especially if he had to hop-scotch along the Alaskan and Canadian coasts, which might take several years.

Unknown to Ledyard, political forces were grinding away in Saint Petersburg. Several officials in Siberia felt that the American's curiosity about Siberia and the fur trade indicated that he was on a secret mission, perhaps for the United States but more likely for Great Britain, and they sent reports back to the capital. When Empress Catherine returned from the Crimea, she was not pleased that Ledyard had brashly circumvented her, and the reports from her governors were truly disturbing. On February 1, 1788, Russian police in Irkutsk burst into his rooms and placed him under arrest. Within hours he was heading west, again in a kibitka, leaving many of his notes and much of his newly purchased clothing behind. Traveling almost non-stop, the police unceremoniously deposited him across the Polish border. Sick, exhausted, emotionally depressed, and dressed in what was left of his Siberian wardrobe, once more Ledyard faced a cloudy future.

Using all of his remaining money, he moved slowly through Poland and Lithuania and on into Prussia. By the end of May, 1788, he was back in London where eighteen months and fifteen thousand miles earlier, he had started. On this occasion, his timing was impeccable. The newly formed Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, of which Sir Joseph Banks was a director, set out to engage the now thirty-seven year old adventurer. When Henry Beaujoy, another of the Association's key members, invited him for dinner, the two men studied a map of Africa, and Ledyard told him of his desire to traverse that continent. Beaufort traced a line from Cairo first south and then west to an area where he thought lay the source of the Niger River. Although neither man knew much about the interior of northern Africa, Beaufort enthusiastically asked when he could leave. Ledyard famously replied, "Tomorrow morning."

Actually, several weeks went by. The Africa Association wined and dined the American, provided funds for his London expenses--he spent the equivalent of \$21,000 in four weeks--and procured the necessities he would need. Ledyard intended to travel as lightly as possible, carry little in the way of money or trade goods, and depend on the kindness of native peoples. On July 1 he left for Paris, where he spent ten days visiting friends, including Jefferson, and restoring his

physical strength from the ardors of Siberia. Five weeks later he was in Egypt. In letters he mourned the decline of Alexandria, noted with dismay the poverty and dirt of Cairo, and expressed disappointment with the Nile River. “Compared with the accounts we have of it,” he wrote Jefferson, “it is a mere puddle.”

Ledyard used the next several months to educate himself about the African interior, and he spent hours at the slave market talking with traders and captives alike. Gradually, his plans took shape. First, he would tie in with a trading caravan going south to Sennar on the Blue Nile, and then he hoped to travel westward with another caravan to western Sudan, then to the Niger River, Timbukoo, and finally the Atlantic Ocean. It seemed so doable. On November 15, he penned his last letters to Jefferson and others, announcing his eminent departure. The following spring, May, 1789, rumors reached London of Ledyard’s death in Cairo. Many could not believe it, especially since he was supposed to be deep in the interior of the continent by that time.

Alas, poor Ledyard had never left Cairo. Just before his scheduled departure, he had fallen ill, probably suffering from dysentery, and to ease his intestinal pains, he took a strong tartar emetic, apparently potassium antimony tartrate, to induce vomiting. When that failed to improve his situation, he doubled the dosage. Death came a few days later. Eulogies quickly followed news of his death, first in London and later in the United States. Henry Beaufoy, in the *London Times*, described him as an “enterprising genius,” “a traveller of observation and reflection.” While an unknown writer for the *Connecticut Courant* spoke of his scorn for “the allurements of ease and social life . . . for the sake of shedding that new light upon science. . . .” He at last achieved the “honest fame” he had so eagerly sought. The Africa Association hung his portrait in its quarters, and in the United States his cousin, Isaac Ledyard, became keeper of the great traveller’s flame. Isaac tracked down much of Ledyard’s late correspondence, talked to many who knew him, and, with the help of the poet Philip Freneau, eventually announced the forthcoming publication of “The Interesting Travels of John Ledyard: With a Summary of His Life.” This almost five hundred page tome, to be printed on fine paper and include a full length portrait, was to cost two dollars. A bold undertaking, but it never appeared in print.

Some thirty years later, Jared Sparks, the future biographer of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, and later president of Harvard College, reignited interest in Ledyard with his *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of John Ledyard from His Journals and Correspondence*. From Sparks’

deft pen came a man of great fortitude and an abiding refusal to be cowed by failure. For Sparks, Ledyard represented a selfless counterweight to an increasingly materialistic nineteenth-century America, but soon, except in his early haunts of Groton and Hanover, he slipped from public memory.

So, what is this man's legacy? Why is he worthy of a paper this evening? Buried in Cairo, his grave has long since disappeared. There are no marble memorials or bronze statues; even the portrait by Carl von Breda has been lost. His feats were, of course, astounding. Perhaps no man, certainly no European, saw as much of the world as he did. As one of his biographers summed it up, "He sailed on the greatest circumnavigation in the age of sail. He took an epic land journey across a third of the world." His travels and interests helped spur American trade with China, and his conversations with Jefferson paved the way for the Lewis and Clark expedition. Yet, he never walked the world, and, indeed, never achieved any of his grand ambitions.

Perhaps his most profound legacy, however, was in forging a new American image—not the practical Yankee or the moccasin-clad frontiersman, but the heroic explorer, the American of fortitude and determination. Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, John Wesley Powell, Henry Stanley and others followed in Ledyard's footsteps, and he certainly captured the imagination of several generations in the nineteenth-century. Herman Melville mentioned him in *Moby-Dick*; Mark Twain used Ledyard's journals when he wrote travel essays from Hawaii; and Henry David Thoreau imagined seeing him crossing the fog-shrouded Connecticut River.

In the past decade, this country has seen its economic position decline, its moral authority crumble, its political core weaken. Pessimism and disenchantment reign. No longer do we have heroes, or, it seems, even leaders. As we struggle to regain our confidence, to learn again what we are as a nation, new interest in this curious man has emerged. Whatever one means by the American character, perhaps Ledyard represents at least a part of it. Three biographies of the man in recent years suggest that John Ledyard still may have something to say to us.

The Literary Club

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