




the river is mine

**It's not every day an actuary writes a novel.
Especially one in which adventures involve the
exploration of the American West rather than numbers.
Here's an excerpt.**

BY ARDIAN GILL



JOHN WESLEY POWELL'S 1869 VOYAGE THROUGH the Grand Canyon had been in my mind since the seventh grade, when I did a term paper on National Parks. Amid the brochures picturing bison shooting down slides in Grand Teton and logs petrifying in the Painted Desert, there was one with a long shot down a mile of cliff into the Grand Canyon, showing a tiny boat nestled in a bend of the Colorado River.

It wasn't until the mid-1980s that I actually traveled the rivers, first rafting and hiking the Grand Canyon and later, as I became fascinated with Powell and his journeys, doing the first leg of his trip in a dory.

You all know the story: It's a few years after the end of the Civil War. The transcontinental railroad has just been connected with a gold spike in Promontory, Utah. War veterans and deserters are drifting westward, hunting, trapping, prospecting, stealing, whatever came handy.

Ten of these men gather in Green River City, Wyo., intending to undertake a journey of a thousand miles of river, from Wyoming to the Gulf of California, the last "great unknown" in the westering United States. They're a pick-up crew: a teenager, several trappers, a newspaper editor and his kid brother, a demented ex-Army captain, an overweight Englishman—all led by a one-armed botany professor, John Wesley Powell. The teenager and the Englishman were recruited on the spot, just a day or two before the trip began.

These 10 odd bedfellows set out in four boats on what they think will be a leisurely year's journey. A hundred days later, six half-starved men in two boats emerge at a Mormon camp in Nevada. In between, they experience floods, fights, near drownings, fire, boat wreck, attempted homicide, and an Indian ambush.

It's quite a story. And as far as the public was concerned, it was the story Powell himself told. It's his versions that inform several biographies, including an otherwise marvelous one by Wallace Stegner.

But when I came across the daily and secret diary of a crew member, George Young Bradley, in the Huntington Library, my whole view of the trip and of Powell changed dramatically. Instead of Stegner's leader of "granitic will," Powell came across as controlling, stubborn, and indifferent to the needs of his crew. The letters and reminiscences of other crew members told a similar story. It is, if you will, an enlisted man's view of his commanding officer, and, as Nicholas Monsarrat had it in *The Cruel Sea*, "The view from below is unflattering."

After several false starts, I chose Bradley for the narrator, not only because his was the most complete account, but also because he was a New Englander, and I recognized his voice.

While *The River Is Mine* is fiction, it tracks closely the day-to-day trials and tragedies of the trip, imagined conversations filling in between the brutal facts. The excerpt quoted here is pure invention, intended to illuminate the character of the chief boatman, Jack Sumner, and to begin to reveal the character of the narrator, Bradley, that of Powell's demented brother, Walter, and to a lesser extent that of John Wesley Powell himself.

Why did I write this novel? For the same reason the men took the trip. It's the same reason Sir Edmund Hillary said he climbed Everest: "It was there."

I found a different story, one that wasn't in the official record, and it seemed to want to be told.

—Ardian Gill

On the Green

ORAMEL HAD ANOTHER MAN ALONG WITH HIM, neat looking feller, buckskin jacket, cord pants, plaid shirt open at the collar, a sight more appealing than Sam Adams. Oramel introduced him to us, “Mr. Jed Dawes, works for Bill Byers as a writer of the *Rocky Mountain News*. We used to work together in Denver. Jed is wanting a story for his paper, about the trip, if you have the time.”

“If you’ve come all the way from Denver, I’ll make the time. By the way, Mr. Dawes, I know your editor, Mr. Byers. We climbed Long’s Peak together. Fire away.”

It seemed a remarkable thing to say, for a man who’d lost his arm being fired at in the Battle of Shiloh. I wasn’t going to stay, but when I heard Mr. Dawes’ first question, I could tell he’d put Major off.

“Why are you undertaking this adventure, Major?”

“It’s not an adventure,” Major said, a little louder than was strictly necessary for Dawes’ hearing. “It’s a scientific expedition. We expect to measure latitude and longitude, direction, distance run. In other words, to produce a reliable map. We’ll also collect specimens of flora and fauna, try to determine the geological origins of the land. We’ll examine fossils, which will help to determine the age of the formations. In short, everything you’d expect from a scientific expedition.”

I could see Mr. Dawes looking over at the crew sitting by the fire or poking oakum in the boats and while I can’t say what went through his mind, I suspect it was much the same as would have been in mine in his position and, truth be told, was then anyway: A demented captain singing a slave song, trappers with more hair than most women, a red-faced Englishman, a boy with a man’s head. About as loose a collection of scientists as you’re likely to find anywhere.

“Who in this group of scientists will draw your map?”

“Oh, Howland here is our cartographer.”

I could see Oramel’s eyebrows raise almost to meet his hairline, and Dawes’ near as far, but he wasn’t the type to back off. Goes with the newspaper trade, I guess.

“Our readers will want to know how you’ll determine latitude and longitude in primitive circumstances.”

It was probably the “primitive” that got to Major, for you could see a shade of carmine start to fill the void between beard and brow. “We’ll use a sextant, we’ll shoot Polaris, Beta Ceti, the moon at night, use calendar charts for lunar distances, set our clocks by the sun at its meridian.” He just rattled them off like he was a schoolboy saying the alphabet, or maybe a teacher teaching it. “We’ll have a chronometer set to Greenwich Mean Time. The earth rotates fifteen degrees every hour, so every noon we can determine our longitude by simple multiplication. It’s an old science.”

Jack Sumner came up just then with Walter Powell, who went to work on the other side of the *Maid of the Canyon*, about as fine a name as a boat ever had. Jack shook Dawes’ hand and said if he needed any detailed information he’d be happy to oblige. But Dawes had a question or two more before he finished with Major, or could be it was t’other way round.

“And who besides you, Major, can use a sextant?”

“Oh, Sumner here is expert at it.”

This time it was Sumner’s eyebrows went up, but just a little as you could see he saw the humor in it.

“One final question, Major Powell. Are you sure this trip hasn’t been done before? There have been newspaper reports of a man named White going down the entire length of the river on a raft.”

“Knowing the accuracy of newspapers, I find that reassuring, Mr. Dawes. It means we’ll have a pleasant journey. And now I must wish you the same, as we have work to do.” And Major took Oramel and headed off to the fire with his coffee cup at the ready.

That left Jack to deal with Dawes, and by the time the battle was over, there was some doubt in my mind about the victor.

“Mr. Sumner, you seem like a sensible man. What possessed you to go along with the idea of spending a year exploring a thousand miles of unknown river under the leadership of a one-armed, greenhorn botany professor from the East?”

I knew my mission, and I’d just heard Major tell his, but I didn’t know Jack Sumner’s. So while I’m not partial to eavesdropping on another man’s conversation, I stopped my poking oakum to hear Jack’s answer.

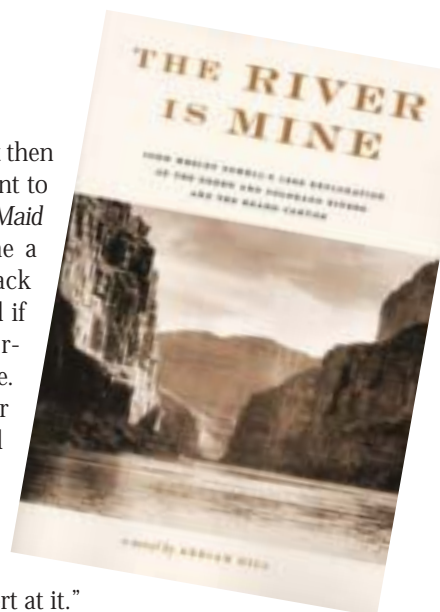
“Waal, you got a few things ain’t quite right there, Mr. Dawes. First off, it warn’t precisely the Professor’s idea, and he ain’t exactly leadin’ it, and he ain’t exactly a greenhorn.” I could hear Jack was in his storytelling mode, another reason to listen in.

“What do you mean? He’s in charge, isn’t he?”

“Surely, surely. He’s surely in charge of the science, and welcome to it. But I’m the chief boatman, and I’ll see to it that we get down the river somehow while he does his botanizing and geologizing and makes his maps, same way I was in charge of things when we climbed Long’s Peak or went out on the Berthoud Trail or wintered on the White River. He pretty much takes my advice, just like he did for this trip.”

“You mean it was your idea?”

“Let me give you a little history. I been out with the Professor two years runnin’ now, and I could see he warn’t all that interested in those plants and things his wife and those college students were bent on picking up. His mind was elsewhere and I saw right away it was the rivers that took his fancy, especially those that white men hadn’t traveled yet. Hills, too, if they



hadn't been climbed. Of course that didn't come 'til after I led him up Long's Peak, and he learned to get used to the heights."

"You mean he was afraid of heights and you cured him?"

I could see Mr. Dawes was entertaining some doubts, but Jack went right on. "Waal, he ain't exactly cured, but leastways he ain't crawlin' on his hands and knees any more."

"Hand and knees," Dawes said, and I heard Walter snort on the other side of the *Maid*.

I began to guess Jack might have met his match because he broke stride just a little then, but he went on readily enough, "I guess he had a right to be a little skairt when we was gettin' to the top of Long's Peak, as it warn't never climbed before, leastways by white men. When I see him crawlin' along behind me, I just took him by the hand and said, 'Follow me,' and he did. Mrs. Powell too." Walter snorted again and I guessed it was a trait of his I'd best get used to if we were to spend a year sharing a ten-foot space.

"Anyways, last year when I had him down to explore the White River, we got to talking about rivers, and he wanted to know what river I thought would be the hardest to navigate. I told him about the Grand River, or the Colorado as the politicians want us to call it now, a river which the Green here joins, and which no man, Indian or white, ever navigated upriver from Grand Wash, Arizona Territory, or downriver from Brown's Hole. Told him I was planning to take Bill Dunn and make the trip, trappin', huntin', lookin' for gold or silver, maybe even map out a route for a railroad, no tunnels, no bridges, just a rail-bed flat as a plain.

"Waal, that got his interest all right. He'd hardly talk of anything else all winter but that river, he was that desperate to join me. His wife wasn't so keen on his going when he sprung it on her, but when she heard I was leadin' it, she felt comfortable enough.

"Come to the question of boats, he couldn't think what sort of boats would stand the pounding against the rocks nor sink beneath the billows." I stopped all pretense of work then and sat up to listen as it appeared Jack was just getting up to his natural gait and rhythm.

"So I drew out my design for him. Told him how there ought to be a small pilot boat to scout out the way and bigger boats to carry the freight. When it came to keepin' 'em afloat in the wash, I designed those compartments, front and aft, you see there. Sealed tight so the water can't get in."

"I think the phrase is 'fore and aft,'" Dawes said, but Jack seemed not to take that advice to heart and just went on. "You can see that little pine thing over there, eighteen foot long, just as I planned, and floats like a feather. The big ones are oak so strong you couldn't break 'em with a cannon ball, twenty-one feet fore to stern."

"I think 'stem to stern' is the phrase you want. Or you could say, 'bow.'"

"Don't know as I'd say it, but I'll take a bow for the design. The Professor took my plans to Chicago, had 'em built to my specifications by the Bagley Boat Works, none better. They won't

sink, they won't roll, they won't break. Finest boats ever put on a river. You can ask the sergeant there, fixing up the caulking like I showed him."

"I'll take your word for it, Mr. Sumner. Now let me ask you something else: The Major says you can use a sextant."

"Oh surely. Hadn't been for me knowin' how to use a sextant, we'd still be lost on the Berthoud Trail."

"Tell me about that."

"Waal, we was on what they call the 'Berthoud Trail.' though it was so little used you could call it 'lost.' I was leadin the party. We had the Professor's brother, your friend Oramel Howland, my trappin partners, Bill Dunn and Billy Hawkins, or 'Missouri Rhoads' as he called himself until he got out of the purview of the Missouri constabulary. Had Mrs. Powell on her little piebald pony, weepin' and carryin' on the way she allers did when the Professor warn't around. 'Oh, Mr. Sumner,' she says, 'we are surely lost and done for without the Major to find the way.'" Jack's imitation of a meek female voice would have done credit to a jay bird.

"She called him the Major?"

"Oh, yes, and she could salute pretty as you please. I said, 'Don't you worry, little lady, I'm never lost, and when the snow stops and I can shoot a star with my sextant, we'll be back on the trail as soon as you can say 'General Grant.' And so I did and soon we were back on the trail, smart as you please."

I heard Walter snort again.

"What star was it that you shot, Mr. Sumner?"

"As I recall, it was one of those in O'Brien."

"Is that Patrick O'Brien?"

"No, just O'Brien. Don't know as he had a first name, being a mythical figure, you know. It's a clutch of stars called a 'constellation.'"

"Thank you, I was wondering about that. One last question, Mr. Sumner: Who's paying for your services as chief boatman?"

"Oh, there ain't no pay. We're all volunteers, goin' just for our grub and whatever minerals we might find, maybe a beaver skin or two if we're lucky."

"Thank you, Mr. Sumner, and good luck."

"It won't be a matter of luck, Mr. Dawes; the trip's in good hands. You can bet a year's salary on it."

"I wouldn't take the risk, Mr. Sumner." Howland told me later that Dawes didn't have a salary.

I asked Jack, "Don't you have some concern that the Major will read Mr. Dawes' story and maybe take minor exception here and there?"

"Oh that won't get into print," he said. "Paper's owned by my brother-in-law, Bill Byers. Bill will recognize a yarn when he hears it. He'll print a story of his own makin'." And Jack went to join the boys at the fire. ●

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