Hell Or High Water

Adams, Eilean

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Hell Or High Water: James White's Disputed Passage through Grand Canyon, 1867.
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When I was in the sixth grade, we had a test on the history of the American West; one of the questions was “Who was the first white man to go through the Grand Canyon?” The textbook answer was “Major John Wesley Powell,” but I wrote “James White.”

Naturally the teacher marked this answer incorrect, but her curiosity was aroused, for she asked me, “Who, pray tell, is James White?”

“He went through the Grand Canyon in 1867,” I said, “two years before Major Powell.” Then I added, “He was my grandfather.”

She replied that family loyalty was commendable, but it was not a substitute for historical fact. She returned my test (with its B+) and said she would allow me an A, if I corrected my error.

Ignoring the warning signal, I insisted that our textbook was wrong and I had a book to prove it.

Suddenly, family loyalty became insubordination. Her smile vanished; she said sternly that I was not there to teach but to learn. She refused to look at my book.

No doubt imagining myself too noble to consider the cost, I protested that I couldn’t change my answer. As it turned out, the cost was an F; so much for heroism.
But the book I had begged my teacher to read was not a family myth as she supposed. It was very real: a small volume, bound in black Moroccan leather with its title, *The Grand Canyon*, embossed in gold. In the lower right-hand corner was the name Esther M. White, also embossed in gold. Esther M. White was my mother, and she had helped prepare this book.

The overleaf reads,

65th Congress, 1st Session, SENATE Document No. 42

THE GRAND CANYON

An Article
giving the credit of first traversing the Grand Canyon
of the Colorado to James White, a Colorado gold
prospector, who it is claimed made the voyage
two years previous to the expedition under the
direction of Maj. J.W. Powell in 1869.

By

THOMAS F. DAWSON

Presented by Senator Shafroth May 25, 1917

On the next page, it continues,

SENATE RESOLUTION No. 79

Reported by Mr. Smith of Arizona

IN SENATE of the UNITED STATES

June 4, 1917

Resolved, That the manuscript submitted by the Senator
from Colorado (Mr. Shafroth) on May 25, 1917, entitled
“First Through the Grand Canyon” by Thomas F. Dawson,
be printed as a Senate document, with illustration.

Attest: James M. Baker, Secretary

Had the teacher read even the introduction to this book, she might (hopefully) have discovered why I was willing to stand up for my grandfather. This is what she missed:

WHEREFORE

The erection by the National Government of a monument
to the memory of Maj. John W. Powell, as the “first explorer”
of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, has had the effect of
raising a question among pioneers of the West as to whether
the honor conferred upon Maj. Powell in connection with
the early navigation of the Canyon should not be shared with
another. Mr. Powell’s friends claim for him the distinction of
being not only the first to “explore” the canyon but also that
of being the first to pass through it under any circumstances. This claim is challenged on behalf of one James White, a mining prospector, who, they contend, went through the canyon two years previous to the time of the Powell expedition. Powell made his voyage in 1869; White claims to have made his in 1867.

So persistent has been the contention that White was the first to traverse the Canyon that the writer set himself the task of investigating the subject, which he has done as thoroughly as possible consistent with other duties, with the result that he has succeeded at least in convincing himself that White’s claim is not unfounded. The undertaking has not been easy; for, while much literature has grown up around Maj. Powell’s expedition, comparatively little has been written about White, and that little of the distant past, and now to be found only in publications long since out of print. It is believed that enough of this material has been revived to make a case for White; but if not, it is hoped that at least it may aid the future investigator in arriving at a just conclusion.

In entering into the merits of the controversy it will be well for the reader to bear in mind that the Colorado River is formed in southeastern Utah, by the union of the Grand and the Green, the former rising in northern Colorado and the latter in the adjoining State of Wyoming, and that the stream thus created flows in a general southwestern course into the Gulf of California. Roughly speaking, from the junction to the gulf is a distance of 1,000 miles, the upper half flowing through canyons varying in depth from 1,000 to over 6,000 feet. . . . From the upper to the lower end of this vast stretch of hemmed-in water, there are few crossings, and those difficult and not easily discernable.

The first white men to look into the great gorge were members of the Spanish exploring expedition sent out in 1539 under Coronado; but their investigation was made only from the rim, thousands of feet above the stream. After their casual inspection more than three centuries were permitted to come and go without an exploration of the canyon’s depths, and this exploration, like many other things, did not come until after the control of the region had passed from Spain and her heirs into the hands of Americans. Indeed, the canyon plateau was so distant from centers of population, so inhospitable and desolate, and, withal, so inaccessible, before the comparatively recent day of the railroad that it was visited but rarely by any except a few wild Indians. . . . The little knowledge actually existing among white men was confined almost entirely to prospectors, trappers, and a few Government scientists, who had
looked into the canyon from one end or the other or had shudderingly peered over the far-away rim into the abyss below. The adventurous frontiersmen were equal to any ordinary task of exploration, but the canyon was too awe-some for the vast majority of even this hardy class. True, it was currently reported that at different times some of them had entered the vast inclosure, but none of the reports brought back any of these adventures. Indeed, of these 500 miles of chasm there were vast stretches of which nothing was known. What wonder, then, that the great fissure was regarded as a stupendous mystery and that legend and imagination fill it with untold dangers?

In the face of this universal awe it would have been a brave man indeed who should undertake voluntarily the exploration of the canyon by following the river. Much more probable is it that the first voyage should have been due to accident, as it was if the contention made in behalf of White be correct.

Powell . . . needless to say was well equipped with boats and provisions and . . . was accompanied by a carefully selected body of assistants. He began his first voyage at Green River Station, Wyo., where the Union Pacific Railroad crossed Green River. The start was made on the 24th day of May, 1869, and the end of the journey was reached on the 30th of August following. His party suffered so much hardship and experienced so many narrow escapes from utter destruction that the achievement has been universally and justly exploited as one of the greatest of all feats of daring, skill, endurance, and good fortune. Consequently several books have been written and many stories told about the one-armed ex-Army officer’s exploit. And now Congress has decreed that the record which so far has enlivened only the destructible printed page shall be perpetuated in enduring bronze. Very well, so long as the claims in Powell’s behalf are confined to his work as a scientific investigator and explorer. But if he is to continue to be hailed forth as the first navigator of the canyoned river, objection probably will continue to be interposed by White’s friends in his behalf.

White’s trip was the farthest possible from a premeditated proceeding. He had not heard of the canyon, except in general terms, before he found himself locked within its walls, and he continued to the end because he discovered no means of escape from its compelling embrace. Gold was the lure that led him to the Colorado, and pursuit by murderous savages the force which drove him to embark upon its waters.

T.F.D.
I honestly believed that in publishing this little book, the United States Senate was bestowing the seal of truth on my grandfather’s journey. I was too young to wonder why, if Mr. Dawson’s book had settled a fifty-year-old controversy over the first person through the Grand Canyon, our school textbook remained unchanged fifteen years later. I had, of course, missed the point: Major Powell’s expedition had many eyewitnesses; James White fought the river alone, tethered to a crude log raft—his voyage would never make it to the textbook.

Over the next quarter century, my knowledge of my grandfather’s story (and even the Grand Canyon itself) remained much as it had been in that sixth-grade classroom. What interest I had was casual and anecdotal, and it might have stayed that way except for a remarkable gentleman named Otis (familiarly known as “Dock”) Marston, a dedicated Colorado River runner, Grand Canyon expert and historian, and energetic researcher. He was investigating the history of James White with, he said, a view to either proving or disproving his raft voyage down the Colorado.

My association with Dock Marston and others with similar interests in the Grand Canyon began in 1959, so the reader may wonder why it took so long for this book to evolve. In addition to the usual mundane reasons which manage to sidetrack any project, I harbored the occasional suspicion that White might not have made that trip after all. My doubts were gradually resolved, but as research progressed, a new dilemma arose. Under Dock Marston’s aegis, much of my outlook was dominated by the physical aspects of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon and the opinions of both those who had shaped its nineteenth-century history and Marston himself. I thought almost exclusively in terms of needing to prove that James White’s journey had actually happened. But before long, a different picture emerged. The relatively few men who, at first glance, seemed to have legitimately demonstrated the flaws in James White’s story had, in fact, engaged in unethical and often licentious means to discredit White’s journey by destroying his character.

Unfortunately, my grandfather left behind only one handwritten letter and a colorless, dictated statement about his life, neither of which adequately revealed him as an individual. As is often the case, only family records and oral history could complete such a fragmented
story, and it was clear that I had the best access to those who held the memories. My relationship to the leading character might have called my objectivity into question, but I had never known my grandfather personally (he died when I was four), and while I was not entirely without righteous family indignation, I was free of any close, sentimental attachment. I was neither historian nor scholar, but, having been a technical writer for many years, I was determined to maintain the fly-on-the-wall approach inherent in that discipline.

I never viewed James White as a classical hero. I saw instead an unremarkable nineteenth-century pioneer of the American West whose remarkable survival of his Colorado River journey made a contribution of some importance to the history of the Grand Canyon. This book is as much about the men whose paths, for better or worse, crossed White’s and about the century-long controversy which brought his journey, and especially his character, under attack. It presents old documents which have only recently come to light and new data about them. It asks a few new questions about old accusations, opinions, theories, and judgments. It offers new research and some excellent detective work, all of which point to a more reasonable answer to an old question:

_Who was first through the Grand Canyon?_
Figure 1
Lava Falls in the Grand Cañon
(Woodcut, drawn by Thomas Moran from a photograph; in Clarence E.
plate xix.)