Hell Or High Water
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Chapter 13  Powell’s Conquest of the Grand Canyon

The paramount message of James White’s 1867 voyage was that there were no insurmountable obstacles in the Grand Canyon to bar exploration. Did Major Powell believe it? He certainly had no specific knowledge to weigh against it and no evidence to prove it false. Even if he had been skeptical or suspicious, the very nature and scope of the publicity given to White’s journey meant that it was perceived as fact, which in itself was powerful enough to make another attempt at the canyon inevitable. It was, after all, the age of exploration and adventure, and there were undoubtedly many who were eager to try. It was highly fortuitous that Powell’s earlier activities and his preparations for an assault on the Grand River, coupled with his curatorship of the Illinois Natural History Society, placed him in a perfect position to make the rapid shift to exploring the Grand Canyon.

Despite Powell’s silence on any knowledge of White’s journey, diaries kept by two of his expedition members while actually on the river in 1869 point to the inescapable conclusion that Powell claimed not only to have known about White but to have had a face-to-face meeting with him, passing the raft story on to the team as firsthand
information. Jack Sumner’s entry for August 13, 1869 (after a particularly nasty rapid) says, “How anyone can ride that on a raft is more than I can see. Mr. White may have done so but I can’t believe it.” George Bradley’s August 10 entry reads, “This point has not been determined though it is said a man went through from here on a raft to Callville in eleven days. If so we have little to fear from waterfalls below . . . his story has been published with much show of reason and Major has seen the man.” Since neither Sumner nor Bradley ever claimed acquaintance with White, where else could their information have come from except Powell?

William Culp Darrah, in his biography Powell of the Colorado, states, “The Major sought out James White, who, it had been reported, came through the canyons from the San Juan River to Callville on a raft in eleven days, but the fellow’s simple story seemed too vague to credit.” This claim of a meeting probably came from the Sumner and Bradley diaries, which Darrah had edited for publication, but it is hardly convincing evidence that such a meeting ever took place. Where the offhand dismissal of White’s story came from is anyone’s guess.

While Sumner and Bradley were making their notes, General Palmer was hearing a different story from White.

Whatever else these vague statements do, they fail to explain where or when White learned about Powell or whether these men had any opportunity to meet. Of course, one can always come up with a logical, if not provable, possibility. Like the fortuitous coincidence that placed James White, General Palmer, Dr. Parry, and Major Calhoun together in the vicinity of Hardyville in the fall and winter of 1867 and led to Parry’s interview, it is possible that in the spring of 1869, White was in the vicinity of Green River City, Wyoming, the starting point for Powell’s expedition.

The preparations there during 1869 must have made the expedition a lively topic of conversation in that remote and sparsely populated area. White, after visiting his home in Kenosha in January 1869, returned to the West that spring. Because he had worked for the Union Pacific Railroad in Utah for several months in 1868, it is not unreasonable to assume that he had a pass for the train. The trains stopped at Green River City, where, in those early days, passengers had their meals at the station. These were typically friendly occasions for
 Powell’s Grand Canyon expedition began at Green River City on May 24, 1869, with four stout boats and ten strong, adventurous men. The descriptions of the team and its equipment might prompt a wild speculation that Powell had adopted Parry’s fourth conclusion: “In time of high water, by proper appliances in the way of boats, good, resolute oarsmen, and provisions secured in water-proof bags the same passage might be safely made, and the actual course of the river with its peculiar geological features properly determined.”

By July 21, 1869, the expedition had passed the confluence of the Green and Grand Rivers and entered Cataract Canyon. The team members found the beauty of this canyonland awe-inspiring but soon viewed the Colorado River with less exalted emotions.

That morning the rapids forced them to portage their boats along the slender strip of sand that edged the river. In the afternoon, Powell, in the Emma Dean, decided to run a rapid; however, the boat was soon swamped and overturned, dumping the three men into the turbulent river. The rest of the team landed their craft above the rapid and made a safe portage. The crew of the Emma Dean—Jack Sumner, Bill Dunn, and the major—wet but unharmed, managed to get their boat ashore, undamaged except for the loss of its oars and some equipment. They might have shrugged this mishap off, but they had already lost one of their boats back on the Green and could not afford to lose another. More to the point, this part of the Colorado River, where Parry’s report had placed White and Strole on their raft, was supposed to be smooth sailing. These terrible and furious rapids must have been quite a shock to the expedition and obviously destroyed whatever credence these men had given White’s journey up to then.

A month later, the explorers had apparently become even more cynical. Darrah tells us that “the men took turns ridiculing the story of Mr. White and his raft. Assuredly he had not gone through this place.” After all, Powell’s expedition had been one long, terrifying
ordeal; it had survived near catastrophe; the men were exhausted by physical exertion, sick to death of the dismal diet of coffee, spoiled flour, and dried apples, and irritable from the alternate soaking in the silty water and steaming in the blazing sun.

On August 28, the Howland brothers and Bill Dunn left the river at Separation Rapid. They climbed to the plateau above—just a few miles short of the end of the Grand Canyon—and were killed, supposedly by Shivwits Indians. The rest completed the short distance to the end of the Grand Canyon at Grand Wash Cliffs. Powell and his brother left the expedition at the mouth of the Virgin River; Jack Sumner, Andy Hall, Billy Hawkins, and George Bradley continued downriver, stopping at Hardyville, the first town after the Virgin River—a visit recalled by Bill Hardy. Considering Hardy’s proprietary interest in White, he might even have treated them to his version of the story. Two of the men left the river at Yuma, and the other two continued to the head of the Gulf of California.

When Powell arrived in Salt Lake City on September 15, the press was waiting to cover his successful Grand Canyon expedition. That same day the official report that O. G. and Seneca Howland and Bill Dunn had been killed by Shivwits Indians was relayed to Powell. His statement regarding this tragedy was carried within days by the Cheyenne Leader and the Chicago Tribune, as was another intriguing news item. In what was possibly the first indication of Powell’s post-expedition attitude toward James White and his raft journey, this September 16 article stated, “Colonel [sic] Powell pronounces the reported adventures of the man White, who furnished the data for the article in Lippincott’s Magazine, on the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, a complete fiction.”

Powell left shortly thereafter for home and on the way found himself involved in another one of the remarkable coincidences that seemed to dog this odd, triangular association. He met by chance with none other than General Palmer. In a letter written some years later in response to a request by a Colonel Robert C. Clowry for information on James White’s raft journey, Palmer wrote, “It gives me great pleasure to send you a copy of my report of the survey made for the Kansas Pacific Railroad, across the Continent in 1867.” After a short description of White’s journey and rescue, the general continued,
That adventure was in the autumn of 1867. Some two or three years later I was going from Denver to the East, by way of Cheyenne, when I met on the Union Pacific Railway, coming home from his exploration of the Grand Canon, Major Powell, with whom I had a long talk.

Palmer and Powell had not met before this time, although they possessed some knowledge of each other’s Union Army activities and reputations during the Civil War. Powell was doubtless aware of Palmer’s survey sponsorship of Parry’s report on James White, and Palmer clearly had great interest in Powell’s Grand Canyon expedition. But one can guess that Powell found this “long talk” with Palmer something of a mixed blessing. Questions posed by anyone else might have been summarily dismissed, but it was only four years since the end of America’s devastating Civil War, and even officers who were not career army were careful to maintain the rigid rank-conscious deference of majors to generals. Powell was no exception. He was diplomatic and respectful, but he was clearly determined to deny White’s voyage.

Palmer’s letter continued,

I found [Powell] to be disposed to be quite incredulous with regards to White’s adventure, saying that it was as much as he could do with his large party, ropes, boats, and all the assistance of the U. S. Government to make the passage of that Cañon safely, and it was simply impossible for a man, lashed to a raft, to have done so. I replied, “Major, I have a copy, fortunately, of my report of the Kansas Pacific Surveys . . . in my satchel. White mentions a great many detailed circumstances. You have certainly been through the Cañon, and he says he has been through, so there is a good opportunity for you to check these statements, many of which are of a nature not at all likely to be invented or imagined by an illiterate man, such as White”. I then went over the report, sentence by sentence, and as anything was stated as facts, or approximate facts, I appealed to know if that was right. For instance I said, “Now, Major, here he says, ‘The walls seemed to be at times three to four thousand feet high.’ “Well, said the Major, they are higher than that at places.” “And the river seems to be 200 feet wide in such places”—he said, “That is about right”. I said “he speaks about a certain white sandstone that prevails in certain places”—“Correct”, said Powell. “And he speaks of the high water mark made by the river as approximately 30 to
40 feet above the stream”. Powell said, “This is about right” and so forth. The result was that if I had any doubt before I was absolutely convinced now not only that White had traversed the Cañon, but also of the substantial accuracy of his report. Major Powell, however, would not give in, and still claimed that he had been the first man to have made that wonderful and perilous passage.

Just one month before this, Palmer’s meeting with White had strengthened his belief in the man himself. His statement, “if I had any doubt before I was absolutely convinced now not only that White had traversed the Cañon, but also of the substantial accuracy of his report,” was clear evidence of Palmer’s careful evaluation of all available aspects of the story. He concluded the letter with “I am therefore as fully persuaded that White did, in 1867, pass through that Grand Cañon on a raft, as I am that Columbus ever crossed the Atlantic.”

This letter seems to confirm Powell’s intent, beginning with his statement on the Lippincott’s article, to exploit his fame not only as an eminent explorer but as the first to conquer the Grand Canyon, despite the fact that all publications at that time were giving James White this honor. Once Powell had brought his own expedition to its successful conclusion, however, he could not help but realize that the circumstances of White’s voyage—he was an uneducated prospector, the sole survivor of an escape from hostile Indians on a flimsy log raft—might easily render early accounts of his trip suspect. After all, the Cataract Canyon rapids pointed to a glaring flaw in Parry’s report and, by inference, cast doubt on White’s entire journey. This, of course, is exactly what happened.

Powell went on to make public appearances in Detroit, Cincinnati, Chicago, Bloomington, and points east. Heavily supported by the press, his colorful names for Grand Canyon landmarks, like Bright Angel and Dirty Devil, were widely quoted. He used all this publicity to good advantage.

In 1871, the major embarked on a second Grand Canyon expedition but considered it merely a routine surveying and mapping effort. It began at the same place and on nearly the same date as the 1869 expedition, but the major spent a great deal of time exploring the surrounding country, which stretched this expedition into a second year.

Early in 1872, Powell left the team on the river and went to Washington, D.C., to raise money for future scientific endeavors. He
rejoined his expedition in August and spent one month with the men before they all left the river at Kanab Creek, well shy of completing a Grand Canyon transit.

In 1875, he published his account of his expeditions. An examination of this report, titled *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries Explored in 1869, 1870, 1871 and 1872 Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution*, reveals several inexplicable discrepancies. Although the report’s title includes Powell’s second expedition, he did not refer to it directly; other than casual praise for a land trip to the mouth of the Dirty Devil River made by A. H. Thompson, he did not even identify the team members. Instead, he credited information which was acquired in 1871–72 to the 1869 expedition and combined portions of his own diary with parts of Jack Sumner’s diary and several letters written to the *Chicago Tribune*. All this is evidence of selective editing.

Excerpts from what he claimed was his original 1869 diary contain statements like “We are now ready to start on our way down the Great Unknown . . . we have . . . an unknown river yet to explore . . . what falls there are, we know not; what rocks beset the channel, we know not; what walls rise over the river, we know not. . . . Ah, well! we may conjecture many things.” These phrases create the impression that he had never heard of James White or Dr. Parry. While still on the river in 1869, Powell had probably discarded the raft story, maybe considering that he had good reason to do so. By 1875, he was sufficiently sure of his preeminence in the Grand Canyon to make statements like this without any fear of contradiction.

Without denigrating the purpose served by this document, an objective analysis reveals it as an extensively edited work containing many self-serving statements, errors, and misdirections.

In 1878–79, Powell became heavily involved in the creation of the United States Geological Survey (USGS), as well as the Bureau of American Ethnology; not surprisingly, he was appointed director of both organizations. He continued to achieve political importance throughout the closing years of the nineteenth century, steadily acquiring power in government and scientific circles. His most ambitious goal, founding the Bureau of Reclamation, was realized just before his death in 1902.
In 1917, an enormous bronze plaque was erected at Grand Canyon for his achievement of 1869. And in 1964, as an even grander monument to him, the huge reservoir rising behind Glen Canyon Dam was named Lake Powell.

While Powell did not commit himself in print on the subject of James White, it is undeniable that his opinions and accusations were liberally voiced to others who were not reticent about quoting them for publication. Such surrogate allegations were presented to the public not only through the writings of his loyal supporters but by those who were not even Powell admirers. These quotes began with the September 16, 1869, article in the Chicago Tribune and continued well into the twentieth century.

Of course, Jack Sumner and George Bradley echoed Powell’s opinions about White since they had, after all, endured the perils of Powell’s first expedition, but, except for their diaries and a few letters, these men did not pursue the issue. Not so Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, one of the most persistently vocal of James White’s attackers.

Dellenbaugh was a distant relative of Powell’s brother-in-law, Almon Thompson. He joined the 1871–72 expedition, where, at the tender age of seventeen, he developed an adolescent case of Powell hero worship, from which it is said that he never recovered. In 1902, Dellenbaugh’s book Romance of the Colorado River was published. In Chapter VII, which he called “James White’s Masterful Fabrication,” he wrote,

Had I the space I would give here the whole of White’s story, for it is one of the best bits of fiction I have ever read. He had obtained somehow a general smattering of the character of the river, but as there were trappers still living, Kit Carson, for example, who possessed a great deal of information about it, this was not a difficult matter. The many discrepancies brand the whole story as fabrication. I doubt if any have been more picturesque than this champion prevaricator . . . he had related a splendid yarn. What it was intended to obscure would probably be quite as interesting as what he told.

It is highly unlikely that Dellenbaugh’s virulent opinions were anything other than a reflection of Powell’s, fanned and probably exaggerated by his early admiration of the major. It certainly appears that
his unsubstantiated suggestion that White was crooked in some way led to the vaguely generalized assumption that White was the villain in the Goodfellow shooting and therefore probably responsible for the deaths of Baker and Strole as well.

Dellenbaugh’s obsessive determination to purge White from Grand Canyon history is evident in his view of Powell’s “meeting” with James White, contained in a 1917 letter:

The Major always treated the matter as a joke, and so did all of us, and our puzzle merely was to determine the man’s object in spinning the yarn . . . the Major had never seen him—I am sure of that—for I cannot recall a single reference that would indicate any sight of the man or any serious consideration of his claim.

This may be interpreted as Powell’s early dismissal of White, but one should keep in mind that Dellenbaugh was not describing the 1869 expedition but the second one, by which time Powell no longer had any use for White or his raft journey.

Edwin Corle, in his 1946 book Listen, Bright Angel, quotes Powell as saying that White was “the biggest liar that ever told a tale about the Colorado.” Even Robert Stanton, clearly no admirer of Powell, quoted the major’s sentiments in an article in the Engineering News of September 21, 1889: “Nobody has ever successfully traversed the Colorado cañon but my parties. The story that a raft once lived to get through is preposterous and was long since exploded.” It seems the major could not even bring himself to name the raft’s passenger!

It has been said that Powell did not wish to share this magnificent canyon with anyone at all, and although that may have led to the remarkable Grand Canyon arithmetic which counted Powell as number one and Stanton as number two (ignoring their team members), it does not account for his failure even to mention the members of his 1871–72 expedition. Many years later, Almon Thompson wrote a letter on that subject to Frederick Dellenbaugh, revealing an interesting view of his brother-in-law:

The phase of the Major’s character which led him to ignore the second expedition is no mystery to me—he had no fine sense of justice nor excelled loyalty to a high ideal of honor and so far as his subordinates were concerned did not know the meaning of noblesse oblige.
Major Powell’s expeditions showed him to be a man of great physical courage, and his vision for the future of the American Southwest was certainly bold and true, but sadly, even to friends and colleagues, his ethics did not appear to match his many great accomplishments.