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# Simon Fraser's River

*I do not know much about gods; but I  
think that river is a strong brown god—  
sullen, untamed and intractable.*

— T.S. Eliot

At the bottom of the great forbidding chasm, the four big canoes looked like tiny specks, skimming the surface of the raging waters, racing at lightning speed through the tortuous rapids. Between the vertical walls of narrow, dark canyons, constantly in danger of being sucked into deadly whirlpools or being dashed to pieces against projecting boulders, twenty-four brave adventurers hurtled down the wild, uncharted river.

They were led by the stubborn, brawny, Canadian explorer Simon Fraser.

It was late spring of the year 1808. Fraser had set out to reach the mouth of the noble western river that would one day bear his name, and nothing—not even this nightmare of mad, frothing, frenzied water—could divert him from his ultimate goal.

Simon Fraser and his valiant little crew survived the churning hell of the most savage river in North America. They followed the mighty waterway to the sea and they claimed the river for Britain, an act that proved to be instrumental in fixing the present international boundary between Canada and the USA.

High in Canada's Rocky Mountains, the Fraser River begins its eight-hundred-mile journey to the western sea. Collecting trickles of water from thawing glaciers and melting snow on its downhill journey, the lovely little alpine stream empties its frigid waters into emerald-green Moose Lake, a few miles west of Yellowhead Pass on the British Columbia-Alberta border.

The highest peak in the Canadian Rockies, majestic snowcapped Mount Robson, stands guard over the docile young Fraser River as it slides out of Moose Lake. Soon after it separates itself from the lake, the river begins to absorb the flow of clean, cool mountain water from tributary creeks, initiating a pattern of assimilation that will be repeated continuously over the next eight hundred miles, constantly swelling the size and altering the character of the Fraser as it flows steadily along toward the Pacific Ocean.

In its upper reaches, the Fraser is a picture-postcard trout stream; the scenery in the headwaters region is incomparable. Almost within sight of Mount Robson, at Overlander Falls, the river drops sharply over a steep vertical ledge into a vivid turquoise pool, while an ethereal mist, rising from the pool below, places a shifting, drifting, ever-changing veil over the face of the tiny waterfall.

Along the riverbank at the top end of the river, I've seen the poplar, spruce, and cedar trees reflected in the mirror surface of the gentler runs, and I've watched the whitewashed froth dancing on the translucent blue-green water in the boulder-strewn rapids. On a sunny autumn morning, I witnessed the contrasting play of bright sunlight and deep shadows upon the tumbling, cascading waters of Rearguard Falls, with a backdrop of evergreens and fall-painted deciduous trees. Listening to the murmuring music of flowing water and breathing deeply of the sweet intoxicating mountain air—contemplating the splendour of the idyllic alpine scenery on the upper Fraser River—I knew for certain that I was in the presence of the Great Creator.

From the village of Tête Jaune Cache the river flows northwest to the busy city of Prince George. Halfway between Tête Jaune and Prince George, a CNR bridge spans the river. From the railway bridge, I have observed the Fraser River's first dramatic change of personality. The riverbed is now quite wide, the water carries a hint of the colour of coffee, and the current is strong, steady, and unrelenting.

The big Nechako River flows into the Fraser at Prince George. Two important tributaries, the Quesnel and Blackwater Rivers, are consumed by the Fraser at Quesnel. Heading south, Simon Fraser's river is a large waterway, silt-laden, muddy, and brown. The river has taken on the pale opaque brown colour that inspires some of its admirers to refer to it affectionately as "Old Muddy."

The river now reveals a new character trait. When confined to a narrow channel, the big stream puts on an awesome display of brutal raw power. In British Columbia's not-too-distant past, numerous steamboats, skiffs, and scows ended their careers on the Fraser between Prince George and Quesnel—smashed, battered, and scuttled by the treacherous currents.

The awesome waterway advances through the vast Cariboo region of south-central British Columbia, the land of huge cattle ranches, wild and woolly rodeos, snake fences, sagebrush, bunch grass, good fishing, good hunting, and bad roads. In the cowboy country near Williams Lake, a splendid steelhead and salmon stream, the Chilcotin River, joins the Fraser.

South of Williams Lake, between Pavilion and Lytton, the road travels high above the river, affording splendid panoramic views of the deep canyons, the river far below, and the distant multi-hued mountains. As the highway drops down to river level, a small town comes into view on the west bank of the Fraser River. This is historic Lillooet, the original Mile Zero on the old Cariboo Road, built in the 1860s for the stampeding herds of prospectors heading for the great Cariboo gold rush. A busy hub of activity as long as the gold fever lasted, little Lillooet today squats peacefully on the flats above the river, far from the hustle and bustle of industry and freeway traffic, seemingly immune to progress.

One of the world's finest steelhead streams, the Thompson River, joins forces with the Fraser at Lytton. I feel I am witnessing a clash of giants as I watch the chalky-green Thompson collide with the muddy, amber-coloured Fraser. The Thompson is a tremendous river, but its sparkling green waters are devoured instantly by the murky-brown Fraser.

Below Lytton, the big river—its mood now violent and destructive—plunges into its deepest, darkest canyon and rages on through the tight

confines of Hell's Gate, the narrowest passage in the rock-walled Fraser Canyon. Here the savage Fraser is at its dramatic best. With incredible fury, it forces as much as two hundred million gallons of churning water per minute through a channel only thirty-seven yards wide.

How did Simon Fraser and his brave little band of adventurers—a few strangers in a hostile, alien environment—muster the fortitude to continue their epic journey of exploration, after witnessing the frightening spectacle of water gone mad in the deep and malevolent canyon?

Incredible and unlikely as it may seem, Fraser and his companions actually made their way safely through the vertical-walled chasm without being swept away by the roaring, demented current—but only because they managed to recruit some expert guides in the Indian village at Lytton. The natives believed the white men were mad, but a few brave souls, including the chief, agreed to accompany them through the black canyon.

Leaving their canoes with the Lytton Indians, Simon Fraser and his men followed the Indians on footpaths through the misty, dark canyon. High above the thunderous roar of the wild river, the natives' trail utilized every reasonably flat ledge, no matter how narrow; when the ledge ended the travellers were obliged to climb to another ledge above or below on ladders made of vines and branches. On these primitive ladders, hung from rocks and stumps, and along the narrow, slippery rock ledges, the explorers somehow clambered, crawled, and clawed their way through the deepest, most terrifying gorge in the entire length of the savage river, then obtained new canoes from the natives near Spuzzum, below Hell's Gate.

After it squeezes through Hell's Gate, the silt-laden Fraser River hurries past the village of Yale, site of the first gold strike on the river and the head of navigation in the days of the paddlewheelers. At the riverside town of Hope, the big stream gathers in another important tributary, the Coquihalla, a superb steelhead river. Now within a hundred miles of the city of Vancouver and the Pacific Coast, the muddy Fraser changes direction and heads west, to follow an unobstructed path to the western sea.

On the last leg of the river's long journey—from Hope to the Pacific Ocean—because of the large number of anglers in the lower Fraser Val-

ley and Vancouver, all the tributaries of the Fraser are subjected to heavy angling pressure on all popular species of game fish. In addition to such fine rivers as the Harrison and the Vedder, many of the sloughs between Agassiz and Hatzic have provided exciting fishing for Western Canadian anglers since the turn of the century.

I recollect one winter's day when my fishing partner Norm Young and I set out to do some float-fishing at the mouth of Maria Slough, a side channel of the Fraser near Agassiz. The air temperature was far below freezing, snow covered the ground, and there was ice near the shoreline of the slough. Sombre grey clouds were moving threateningly across the sky and a young hurricane was attempting to blow us into the dark, choppy, icy water. Conditions were far from ideal.

Although we usually caught plenty of fish at this particular slough, we both were well aware that we had always drawn a blank in freezing weather when there was snow on the ground. I'd like to say we were sane enough to just turn around and go back home, but it wouldn't be true. For some perverse reason that only another angler would understand, we had to give it a try.

Our dew worms froze solid before we could stick the hooks through them, and the frigid wind turned our lines into thick icicles. We were wearing parkas, Indian sweaters, long underwear, wool socks, and waders—but we shivered and shuddered, our faces turned blue, and our fingers were so numb we couldn't crank our reels.

Not surprisingly, we went home fishless. But, in a way, the day was a success. We had shared a few hours on the slough; we gave it our best shot, and we got skunked. There were no regrets, no resentments, and no recriminations. And in my memory, that grim day stands out more clearly than does any day when we enjoyed perfect weather and the fishing was easy.

Many moons ago, when I was a kid in New Westminster, I caught my first sea-run trout—a silver-bright Fraser River cutthroat—while fishing with a hand line on a Lulu Island bar. I'll never forget the panic when I hooked that fish! I grabbed the line and ran up the bar, away from the water, dragging the trout out of the river until it lay flopping helplessly on the sand. Finesse wasn't a part of my technique in those days.

But I had my trout in hand, and at that moment I joined a unique angling fraternity peculiar to the sandbars of Old Muddy—the bar fishermen of the Fraser.

The Fraser River bar fishermen are the most relaxed, friendly, optimistic, and patient anglers on earth. On the sandbars from Yale to Steveston, these easy-going outdoorsmen cast their baits into the river, prop their rods on sand spikes, recline in their lawn chairs, sip their beer, listen to their transistor radios, and wait for a bite from a trout or salmon.

Comfort is the key to this style of fishing. Any bar fisherman worth his salt will be equipped with a camp stove, groceries, beer, coffee, lawn chair, blankets, pillows, umbrella, radio, reading material, and sunglasses.

An indispensable accessory for the dedicated sandbar angler is a small bell that attaches to his rod tip and emits an audible signal when a fish nibbles on his bait. Without a bell, the fisherman might feel obliged to remain awake—and this could become extremely tiring.

Anglers can indulge in some genuine big-game fishing in the lower Fraser River between Yale and Matsqui. Sturgeon weighing over eight hundred pounds have been caught here on rod and reel.

Near New Westminster, where the channel is deep enough for sea-going ships, the mighty Fraser reaches its maximum size. It is carrying the combined flow of the Nechako River system, the Quesnel River, the Chilcotin drainage, the North and South Thompson Rivers and their tributaries, the waters of the entire Shuswap region, and the run-off from all the rivers in the lower Fraser Valley. The Fraser River is sombre and solemn here as it moves purposefully westward from New Westminster to the salty shores of the Strait of Georgia.

Pushing through rich delta land, skirting around Sea Island, Lulu Island, and Westham Island, the river empties its soiled waters into the Pacific—arrogantly spreading a huge muddy brown blot over the surface of the clean blue-green sea.

Simon Fraser's river has left its mark.