Ode to Sacagawea

By Bert Huffman

This piece by poet Bert Huffman of Pendleton was probably written in commemoration of a bronze statue of Sacagawea created for the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition, now located in Portland's Washington Park. It expresses an interpretation of Sacagawea's role in the Lewis and Clark Expedition that first became popular in the 1890s. She is portrayed as the Expedition's guide, leading the "conquering captains" westward to the Pacific. Celebrated as a pathbreaker, Sacagawea is depicted as the first to chart "the trails that led the hosts across yon mountain crests," and in the illustration that accompanies the poem, she is shown pointing the way to the West. Her role in bringing to fruition America's "manifest destiny" is strongly emphasized.

Early and mid-nineteenth century accounts of the Corps of Discovery rarely paid much attention to Sacagawea. This began to change in the 1890s, when interest in the Expedition grew in connection with the upcoming centennial. During this period, which also saw important changes in the role of women in American society, Sacagawea was transformed from an obscure young Shoshone woman into an American heroine, an "Indian princess" who not only led a party of intrepid adventurers to the Pacific Ocean, but who also set an example for emancipated women everywhere.

Women's rights advocates like Susan B. Anthony, Eva Emery Dye (author of the popular novel The Conquest), and others characterized Sacagawea as a model of the independent woman. This interpretation is particularly ironic considering the fact that Sacagawea was taken as a slave at the age of 12 or 13 and sold to a man more than twice her age, but it complemented the popular vision of her boldly leading the American republic forward.

Such characterizations tended to distort Sacagawea's role in the Expedition as well as her own life story. Nevertheless, the stereotype of Sacagawea as a "good Indian" who eagerly worked on behalf of American expansionism quickly took root in the popular imagination. She became a mythic figure, a "patron saint" of empire as Huffman puts it in the poem reproduced here.


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