

David Thompson (1770-1857)

David Thompson's cartographic achievement is still one of Canada's best-kept secrets, even though the maps of this patient and determined surveyor were the first accurate and complete representations of the country. That Thompson's work should have been ignored so long and so completely would appear to be due to the circumstances of its first reception — circumstances intimately bound up with politics and the fortunes of the fur trade in the early nineteenth century.

Although Thompson was prepared for a career in the Royal Navy, there was no place for him after the peace of 1783. Instead he was apprenticed to the Hudson's Bay Company and sent to Prince of Wales Fort, then under Hearne's command. He was to do warehouse duty, keep accounts, and be "employed in . . . occasionally making Observations." But the boy found that apprentices were generally used as simple labourers and that any further training depended on his own initiative.

His big chance came in 1789: a broken leg stranded him at Cumberland House (located near Le Pas), where he spent the winter with Philip Turnor and studied "practical Astronomy." Turnor had participated in the worldwide observation of the transit of Venus in 1769 and had sent several important charts of the region north of Lake Winnipeg to the HBC London Committee. Turnor could not have found a more diligent disciple. In all his subsequent work in the western interior, Thompson used the same techniques of observation and conventions of drawing that are recorded in Turnor's journals and maps. So did Peter Fidler, Turnor's other pupil, but with much less care and accuracy.

Turnor's method of survey was limited by the instruments available (compass, sextant, and watch); although relatively crude, it was reliable for all practical purposes. It required a succession of compass bearings and distances and coordination of these in a "route traverse" corrected by frequent observations. Only the routes thus surveyed were charted, so that large spaces were left blank, while lakes and rivers were drawn in amazing detail. Thompson's maps show even the sand bars of large rivers such as the Columbia.

For the next seven years, Thompson traded and surveyed in the Churchill and Nelson watersheds, going west to Nipawin and north as far as Wollaston Lake. After spending the winter of 1796-97 at Reindeer Lake, he packed up his instruments and walked to the nearest "Canadian" fort. Even a cursory reading of Graham's *Observations on Hudson's Bay*, Umfreville's *Present State of Hudson's Bay*, or the *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence* of this period, edited for the Hudson's Bay Record Society by Alice Johnson, will provide reason enough for Thompson's shift of allegiance: the HBC posts were chronically short of trade goods, restricted in their methods of trade with the Indians, and overly cautious in their advance into new territory. For a young man of Thompson's ambition the Bay was a backwater, and once more he saw his chance: the loose association of merchants from Montreal would allow him to accomplish more than Fidler, or even Turnor.

Thompson immediately set out on the first of his only two expeditions of pure survey and exploration, to the country of the Mandan Indians south of Lake of the Woods. In 1799 he

followed the Athabaska River to its junction with the Clearwater, and then east to Methy Portage, Peter Pond's old route to the rich fur region of the Peace and Slave rivers.

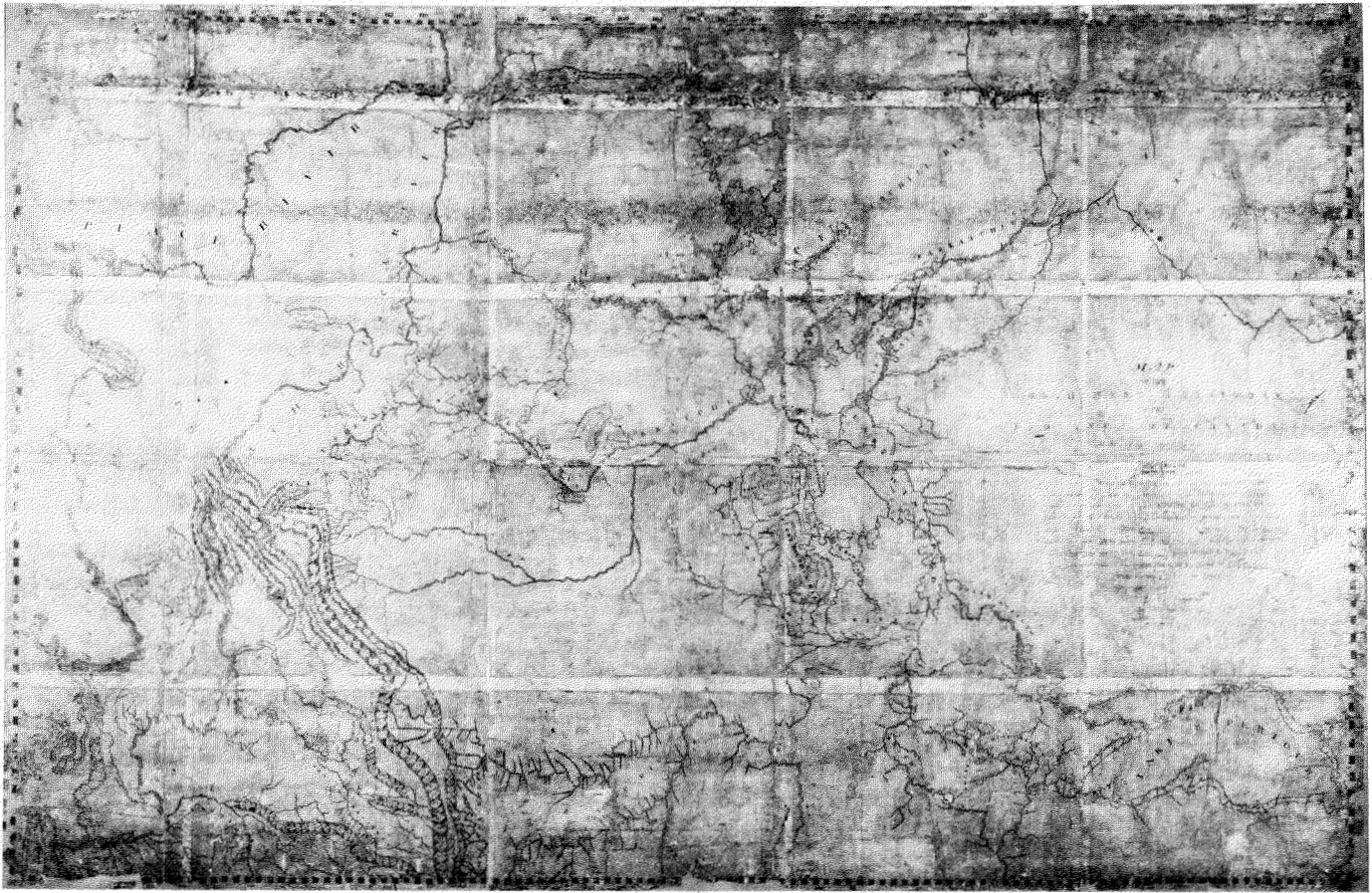
Thompson was greatly impressed by Mackenzie's daring voyages beyond the Athabaska region to the Beaufort Sea and the west coast, even though Turnor, sceptical of Mackenzie's navigational skills, wondered whether the great explorer really knew where he had been. Thompson also admired Vancouver's scrupulous surveys, and he resolved to chart the vast area from Lake Winnipeg to the Pacific. But even in the North West Company, trade took precedence over exploration. More than ten years were to pass before Thompson arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River, in July 1811. During this time he solved the puzzle of the Columbia, which had left both Mackenzie and Fraser mystified, and charted the tortuous routes of the Pacific watershed from the source of the Columbia River to the Snake and Willamette rivers near its mouth.

By then the North West Company had met with stiff competition. A deal was proposed to contain Astor's Pacific Fur Company, and after a desperate, often vicious period of rivalry, the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company. In fact this union was a simple takeover. The HBC structure prevailed; the North West Company's initiatives and interests were overridden. Records at Fort William were lost or destroyed, a fortunate exception being Thompson's huge map of western North America, completed in 1814 and now displayed in the Provincial Archives of Ontario.

But George Simpson, the presiding genius of this amalgamation, had no time for Thompson's work. Repeatedly he ignored information that Thompson could have given him or discounted that which his map indicated. At the same time, Simpson unscrupulously forwarded details of Thompson's discoveries to the HBC London Committee, "who may perhaps allow Arrowsmith to correct his map thereby which in its present state is very erroneous."

Meanwhile, the bankruptcy of a North West Company agent deprived Thompson of his fur-trade income. Instead of retiring, he was obliged to return to survey work on the International Boundary Commission under the Treaty of Ghent. Now he could use more sophisticated instruments (a more finely calibrated sextant, accurate watches, a theodolite) and methods — longitude by the satellites of Jupiter, and survey by triangulation. From Lake of the Woods to Quebec, the Canadian-American border is in part the work of David Thompson.

What still interested Thompson, however, was the far West, especially his Columbia department. Negotiations to run the border through the Oregon Territory, explored as much by Thompson as by Lewis and Clark, prompted him to offer the information he had to the British side. As soon as he had time, he recalculated all his courses, reworked his observations, and drew new maps showing this area. A first set of maps sent to the Foreign Office in 1826 was followed by a second, covering a larger area, in 1843. They met with the same complete indifference. Thompson then petitioned the Earl of Aberdeen, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. On the advice of Arrowsmith, Lord Aberdeen refused him all but a token remuneration.



Thompson's map of the North-West Territory of the Province of Canada, 1813. Courtesy of the Archives of Ontario.

Thompson could not forbear replying, "I have several times been obliged to point out the errors on [Arrowsmith's] Maps of North America. He has had his revenge on me."

Thompson then turned to writing a narrative of his years in the fur trade. It is for this narrative, rather than his maps, that he is best known. Twice edited by the Champlain Society, it is one of the most popular texts published in the series.

Historians' subsequent neglect of Thompson's achievement as a surveyor and mapmaker may well originate in the combined indifference of Simpson, Arrowsmith, and Aberdeen. Official channels were closed to Thompson, both in the fur trade and in the government, and as everyone knows, institutions and organizations write history, even that of individuals.

Certainly there is irony in the fact that Thompson the narrator is more esteemed than Thompson the cartographer. He himself feared neglect of his life work and wrote of "the mass of scientific materials in my hands, of surveys, of astronomical observations, drawings of the countries, sketches and measurements of the Mountains &c &c &c, all soon to perish in oblivion."

Fortunately, however, this "mass of scientific materials" has not perished: it is merely in eclipse, waiting in various archives for interest in Thompson to bring it to light.

FURTHER READINGS

- COCHRANE, CHARLES NORRIS. 1928. *David Thompson, The Explorer*. Canadian Men of Action Series. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada.
- GLOVER, RICHARD (ed.). 1962. *David Thompson's Narrative*. Toronto: The Champlain Society.
- HOPWOOD, VICTOR G. (ed.). 1971. *David Thompson: Travels in Western North America, 1784-1812*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada.
- SMITH, JAMES K. 1971. *David Thompson: Fur Trader, Explorer, Geographer*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- TYRRELL, J.B. (ed.). 1916. *David Thompson: Narrative of his Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812*. Toronto: The Champlain Society.

Barbara Belyea
 Department of English
 University of Calgary
 Calgary, Alberta, Canada
 T2N 1N4