

Thomas Simpson (1808-1840)

Thomas Simpson was born in the north of Scotland and graduated from the University of Aberdeen with more than competence. He was enrolled in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, and in the New World he exemplified the popular conception of the clever academic launched into society. He expressed the utmost contempt for his colleagues and in a letter assured his brother Alexander that his talents would secure him speedy advancement. This arrogance made him most unpopular in the service and caused George Simpson, in doubt of his kinsman's fitness to command, to appoint Chief Factor Peter Warren Dease to lead the expedition that he was planning to extend the northern coastal survey earlier initiated by John Franklin and John Richardson. Although the leadership escaped him, Thomas Simpson was made responsible for the actual survey work, an arrangement that worked admirably. Dease and Simpson's first task was to fill the gap between Franklin's Return Reef and Point Barrow, Alaska. Simpson proved his zeal and adaptability on this 1837 assignment. When the boats were blocked by ice, he took to the shore to do the work on foot; on seeing that the ice had receded, he borrowed an *umiak* to finish the work. No one applauded his success more than himself: "Mine alone is the victory," he wrote. "Dease is an unworthy, indolent, illiterate soul."

In the next season — 1838 — when an eastward thrust from Point Turnagain was halted by ice, Simpson landed and added 160 km to the map on foot. The summer of 1839 proved more friendly. They sailed through Simpson Strait, which divides King William Island from the continent, passed the estuary of Back's Fish River — to become grimly memorable 15 years later — and reached Boothia Isthmus at the mouth of the Castor and Polux River. The ruthless Simpson still did not spare the boat crews; overruling the kindly Dease, he slowed the return voyage to map parts of the south shores of King William and Victoria islands, forcing the crews to ascend the Mackenzie River in sub-zero weather with ice masses already floating downstream.

Dease now took the European leave, to which both explorers were entitled. Simpson made application for the sole command of an expedition to complete the outline of the north shore. But the governor still mistrusted his cousin's fitness for command, so Thomas Simpson transferred his request to the directors in London. Word of its acceptance was slow in arriving, and consequently the impatient young man, overwrought, frustrated, and fearing that Dease would reap the honour for work already done, also applied for leave. With an escort of four half-breeds, he set out for St. Paul, en route to New York. On the American prairie, Simpson met a violent death that has never been fully explained.

Alexander Simpson vowed that his brother had fallen a victim to the "long-treasured animosity" of the half-breeds. Those of the latter who survived the fatal brawl made a report that was plausible and contained a most convincing portrayal of Simpson's profound despondency. They were crossing the prairie in some fear of hostile Indians when Simpson was seized with the conviction that his escorts were plotting to murder him, and he ordered a return to Red River, alleging ill health as the reason. Told that a doctor could be had in a settlement nearby, he replied that "no doctor could do him any good. He did not need one."

Asked one evening whether they should encamp, he answered moodily that "that was just as the others chose." They were pitching the tent when Simpson shot two of them with his double-barrelled gun. He came forward declaring that he had done no wrong, that they had plotted to murder him. The two who remained mounted their horses and galloped off to join a wagon train that was not far behind. The next day one of them returned with four men who testified that they found two bodies lying in the open, while Simpson was stretched in his tent with the top of his head blown off.

Depositions were taken in Iowa and at Red River, but the matter ended there. The Company had no jurisdiction over the conduct of its servants in foreign territory, and the Iowa justice of the peace on the rude, unpoliced frontier was doubtless willing to accept a report that was quite probable and that spared him the labour of further investigation.

It occurred, however, that Simpson's death was a twofold tragedy. Had he lived to continue the survey, he might have saved over 100 lives by averting the *Erebus* and *Terror* catastrophe.

FURTHER READINGS

- SIMPSON, ALEXANDER. 1845. *The Life and Travels of Thomas Simpson, the Arctic Discoverer*. London: Richard Bentley.
 SIMPSON, THOMAS. 1843. *Narrative of the Discoveries on the North Coast of America; effected by the Officers of the Hudson's Bay Company during the years of 1836-39*. London: Richard Bentley.

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