

Discovery of a Discoverer

By Jean Ritchie Anderson

THE STORY of David Thompson, and his explorations in Western Canada, are subjects one never wearies of hearing about. Thompson was the greatest land geographer who ever lived, having left in note-books accurate observations upon the topography of one million two hundred thousand square miles of North Western America.

Thompson's only instruments were his watch, sextant and candle, and his mathematics and navigation had been learned from books that were published between the years 1655 and 1755. He learned to take astronomical observations in 1789 at Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan when he was barely twenty years old. At that time he had had six years experience in the fur trade.

Thompson remained in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company until 1797, but that year, at Bradford House on Deer's Lake he was given to understand that exploration and survey were not the services expected of him, so he travelled down to Grand Portage and joined up with the North West Company. By these gentlemen he was given the job of determining the location of their posts, locating the forty-ninth parallel of latitude, and of travelling as far as the Missouri to visit the natives and enquire about fossils and ancient modes of living.

Enters North West Company

Thompson left Grand Portage on the ninth of August, 1797. He carried with him orders on all the agents of the company's posts for men or help of any kind. From then until the spring of 1812 he worked in the West. He was forty-two at that time and from the day when he had left England twenty-eight years before he had never been in a place where there were as many as two hundred white people.

For our knowledge of Thompson we have to thank Dr. J. B. Tyrrell of Toronto, who confesses frankly that one of the pleasures of half a lifetime has been the effort he has made to gain recognition of the great geographer's name. In the permanent record the names of Thompson and Tyrrell will be as closely allied as those of Macdonald and Pope, of Osler and Cushing, or Johnson and Boswell.

In a paper he read before the Royal Society of Canada in 1928, Dr. Tyrrell gives the touching story of how he first became interested in David Thompson. In 1883 he was appointed assistant to Dr. G. M. Dawson, Director of the Canadian Geological Survey. Dr. Dawson had just finished work as one of the International Boundary Commissioners whose work had been to delimit the boundary along the forty-ninth parallel of latitude. His new venture, in which Dr. Tyrrell was to have a share, was to make a geological examination of the Rocky Mountains from the boundary line northward to the Bow River.

The Geological Cavalry

At that time the Canadian Pacific went as far as Maple Creek and from there the geologists took their outfits southward to the mountains. In Ottawa the company was described as the "Geological Cavalry" and as a matter of fact every one was well armed for bad Indians and horse thieves were supposed to be roving over the prairie. During that summer and fall they explored and surveyed the south Kootenay Pass, which crosses the north-west corner

of Glacier National Park, the north Kootenay Pass, Crow's Nest Pass and the Bow and Kicking Horse Passes, all through the main ranges of the Rockies.

They surveyed also the trail along the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers from the International boundary northward to the present town of Golden, and some of the valleys on the eastern side of the Rockies. Dr. Tyrrell was in charge of geological parties working east of the mountains from the Bow River northward to the Saskatchewan for the next three years.

At that time of very few maps, the one most frequently referred to was one made by Hector and Palliser for the British Government and dated 1860. When the winter season approached the surveyors would return to Ottawa to compile reports and plot their discoveries. The Government maps used during his year with Dr. Dawson were notable for their accuracy and Dr. Tyrrell, when in Ottawa, made it his business to ask for an explanation.

The most remarkable instances were in connection with the courses of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers, and in such a place name as Mount Nelson. Right back into the first and second decades of the century mountain and river features had been appearing on the maps, evidently just copied from one to another.

An Arrowsmith map of 1813 showed a wealth of detail of the region in question and a comparison with everything else that could be found after the Lewis and Clark expedition (the first explorers to reach the Pacific across the United States) proved conclusively that some one with a rare store of knowledge and some imagination had been on the spot. We will let Dr. Tyrrell tell his own story.

The Search Begins

"Search where one would, nothing tangible could be found about what was surely the strangest mystery in cartography that baffled a young geological geographer. At last, in reading Bancroft's histories of the Pacific States and British Columbia, one came across a footnote which, with other references in the same history, indicated that one David Thompson had done a great deal of exploratory work on both sides of the International boundary. Who Thompson was, whence he came, or what befel him—there was scarcely more than a clue to the intriguing mystery of the naming of Mount Nelson and the faithful plotting of the Columbia.

"You all know how it is in exploration—whether among files or defiles—you keep on going even when sometimes it looks as if there's nowhere to go. In the fourth year after the Dawson party in the Rockies had discovered the undiscoverable, and Thompson's name having been found, inquiry was made of Andrew Russell, retired Surveyor-General of Ontario, who, like myself, was living in Ottawa. Oh yes; he had known Thompson; and his original notebooks were somewhere among the storages of the Ontario Government. Russell also told me that two of Thompson's daughters were living, one Mrs. P. E. Shaw, being at Peterborough, Ontario."

Mrs. Shaw was found and she gave Dr. Tyrrell considerable information about her famous father. She showed the geologist trunks full of his papers and belongings, including the watch with which he used to time his lunar observations and the compass. So much for David Thompson's daughter. It was not so easy to find the explorer's notebooks.

Discovery of the Note-Books

At that time the Ontario archives were not in the fine order that they are in today. The invaluable Thompson material might be anywhere but Dr. Tyrrell was persistent and eventually an old man was found who knew about it. After a lot of hunting he disinterred a certain amount but he could not find all the note-books.

While home on a holiday in 1887 Dr. Tyrrell went every day to the Parliament Buildings in Toronto to study the note-books and on March the third, 1888, he read a paper before the Canadian Institute entitled "Brief Narrative of the Journeys of David Thompson." This was afterwards published as a pamphlet as well as in the Institute Proceedings. Up to that time the Columbia River books had not been found.

Publication of the paper brought the subject to the attention of Mr. Charles Lindsey, biographer of his father-in-law, William Lyon Mackenzie, and author of "Report on the Boundaries of Ontario." In a letter from Mr. Lindsey, Dr. Tyrrell learned that the manuscript in which Thompson described his western journeys was in his possession. Mr. Lindsey said that he thought this the only record available

of a remarkable life and that he had begun to re-write the story for publication. He asked Dr. Tyrrell if he would look over the manuscript.

A Precious Manuscript

Late in the fall of that year Dr. Tyrrell received part of the manuscript from Mr. Lindsey with a suggestion that, as the geologist had personal knowledge of much of the territory covered, he should re-write it, publish it in book form and divide the profits equally with the owner of the papers. The manuscript was returned later and the offer declined, but in May, 1888, Dr. Tyrrell bought the manuscript from Mr. Lindsey and in 1916 he published it through the Champlain Society under the title "Thompson's Narrative." In the interval between 1888 and 1895 Dr. Elliott Coues inspected the original Thompson material and from it he procured material for his book "New Light on the History of the Greater North West."

Dr. Tyrrell explains that the "Narrative," of which only five hundred and twenty copies were printed, is Thompson's own story exactly as it was written by himself. A preface and introduction of eighty-four pages give the fullest account of Thompson's life.

"It was written," says the biographer, "when Thompson was seventy-seven to seventy-nine years old and in need, and it bears singularly few evidences that it is the work of an old man. Like the journal, the story is absolutely bare of egotism and reflect; an underrating devotion to his work. He seemed to care for nothing except his duty—surveying, trading, and gathering information about geography and human beings. You might not guess that he had a young and increasing family, with whom he could spend but little time, but from the whole story you would know that it was written by a man of singularly unselfish character amid surroundings that were often far from elevating. One who has spent many hours with him gets the impression of a noble soul, 'sans peur et sans reproche'."

The Search Continued

Dr. Tyrrell's story of how he searched for news of Thompson reads like a romance. Sometimes he was in the West, where the sites Thompson had occupied, or even just noticed, seemed to take on a glamour of their own. At other times he was in England trying to re-capture some of the color surrounding his early childhood. He visited the Grey Coat School in Westminster, the London charity school where Thompson was living when the opportunity presented itself for a job in the wilds of Hudson Bay shores. There the matron showed Dr. Tyrrell all the records including the list of school books studied by David Thompson.

At the parish church of St. John's in South Square, near Westminster Abbey, the verger told Dr. Tyrrell that the records might be searched for sixpence per search. "As the parish was founded in 1727," he writes, "and I wanted to find out all I could about this Thompson family, I asked him if he would search 'pound's worth. He was glad to do it; so I gave him the golden sovereign and when I returned he had discovered that David Thompson's baptism was followed by that of a brother John; and by his father's death in 1772. As no fee was entered on the record, Mr. Thompson was buried by the parish—and Mrs. Thompson was glad to have one of her boys in the charity school. Beyond this there is no record of David Thompson's mother, except one. Thirteen years after he last saw her, he was leaving the Hudson's Bay Company service, and from the Red Deer River, in the far North, he wrote to the chief at York Factory, a letter which began with thanks to him 'for your loan of two guineas to my mother. I have enclosed a bill to you for the above amount.'"

Thompson's Appearance

A contemporary of Thompson, Dr. Bigsby, who worked with the geographer on the International Boundary Commission, described him thus: "Never mind his Bunyan-like face and short cropped hair; he has a very powerful mind and a singular faculty of picture-making. He can create a wilderness and people it with warring savages, or climb the Rocky Mountains with you in a snow-storm, so clearly and palpably that, only shut your eyes and you hear the crack of the rifle or feel the snowflakes on your cheeks as he talks."

In Dr. Tyrrell's search for material bearing on Thompson he found a son-in-law who lived in Evansville, Indiana, and from him learned that, in his old age, Thompson had white hair and a beard. He

talked little, read much, and had few ers besides the rector. His wife's chief companion. He used to be very of going out at night to gaze at the which were his continual delight.

Thompson was a pioneer prohibi He used to tell of an experience when starting out from England to son Bay. The ship in which he sailed signalled by a Dutch lugger. strangers came alongside they sa had liquor for sale so a bottle was up as a sample. A whole case was and the Dutchmen hurried off for the revenue officers. The sample right but the other bottles were fill water.

A Pioneer for Prohibition

He was always against selling li the Indians. Writing of one of his j in the West he said:

"I was obliged to take two kegs hol, overruled by my partners, fo made it a law to myself that no should pass the mountains in my c and thus be clear of the sad sight of enness, and its many evils; but the tlemen insisted upon alcohol being t profitable article that could be ta the Indian trade. If this I knew t miscalculated; accordingly, when w to the defiles of the mountains I pl two kegs of alcohol on a vicious ho by noon the kegs were empty and i the horse rubbing his head aga rocks to get rid of it. I wrote to n ner what I had done, and that do the same to every keg of alcol for the next six years I had charg fur trade on the west side of the tains, no further attempt was mad troduce spirituous liquors."

David Thompson married a hs girl, the daughter of Patrick Smal trader at Isle a la Croix on C River. He left the West for good and he brought his wife and fam him to the East—something that ci said about most of the early trad lived at Terrebonne in the Prov Quebec, and afterwards moved Hamtown in Glengarry County, Ont died in his eighty-seventh year at ull, across the St. Lawrence from real. His wife survived him onl months. Their graves are in Mou Cemetery and they are marked by tiful shaft erected a few years ag Canadian Historical Society.



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