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The Star Man

By

Grace Flandrau

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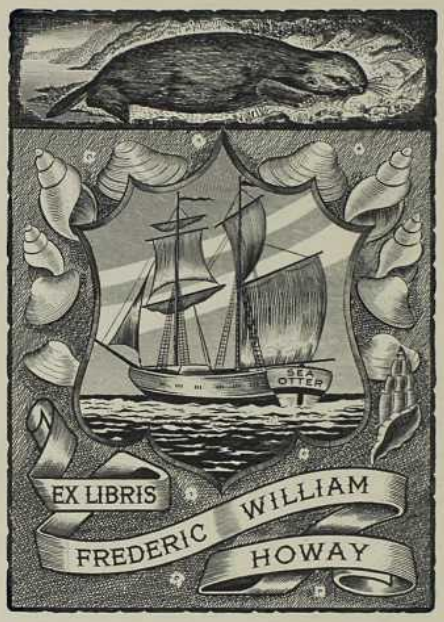

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The Star Man

A Chronicle of David Thompson

By
GRACE FLANDRAU

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Great Northern Railway

Westminster Abbey, London, England

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By

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"This school was formerly something of a monastery and belonged to Westminster Abbey . . . it is still held of the Dean and Chapter by the tenure of paying a pepper corn to the said Dean and Chapter on a certain day . . . The great part of [our holidays] I spent in this venerable Abbey and its cloisters, reading the monumental inscriptions and as often as possible in the Henry the Seventh chapel."

I do not know what there was in the Henry Seventh chapel to attract a little boy. But it is rather a coincidence that this particular part of the ancient Abbey should have interested this particular child. For it was Henry VII who sent England's first expedition of discovery to America under the Venetian navigator Cabot, and it was this charity pupil in the ancient Grey Coat school of Westminster parish who was to become one of the foremost and least known explorers of that new world and the greatest of all its geographers and mapmakers.

The school for which a yearly rental of one pepper corn was paid, which had been a monastery before monasteries were banished from England, was already ancient when David Thompson, a fatherless boy of seven, was sent there a hundred and fifty years ago. Time stained and covered with vines it stood and still stands within a few minutes' walk of Westminster Abbey; and it is still a school.

The "principall designe" of the institution was and probably still is "to educate poor children in the principles of piety and virtue and thereby lay a foundation for a sober and Christian life," a purpose which, at least in Thompson's case, it seems thoroughly to have achieved. As to learning, although most of the books were already a hundred years old when he first went to study from them, it seems to have accomplished as much as most schools. It supplied him before he left at the age of fourteen, with a very respectable ground work of information and left unimpaired the zest of his keen and thirsty mind.

Recreational reading among the pupils was limited to the very few books which could be borrowed from highly insolvent parents. Gulliver's Travels, Robinson Crusoe, the Arabian Nights, were read many times. But much leisure seems to have remained to Thompson for lonely ramblings in the Abbey, to "Vauxhall, London Bridge, Chelsea and St. James Park."

Long after Thompson had died at a very old age in Canada, a tardy fame began to dawn. People looked for information of this man who had lived so greatly and died so obscurely. And it was said by those who remembered him that while no portrait of David Thompson existed, none was needed, he so precisely resembled pictures of John Bunyan.

I suppose if it were possible to conceive of John Bunyan as a child, we should know what Thompson looked like in that early time before Destiny whisked him away from his tradition shadowed haunts in the heart of London to a lonely fur trading post on the stark shore of Hudson's Bay. But personally I can not conceive of Bunyan as anything but a middle aged Puritan who wrote a book in astoundingly fine prose which I never have been able to read clear through.

Nevertheless I have my own picture of Thompson, sturdy, cheerful, studious, with red cheeks, homely intelligent face, black hair cut square above brave, out going eyes. A very small boy, wandering in a very great and dim cathedral, deciphering half effaced inscriptions; trudging grey pavements or playing under tall elms and oaks in Vauxhall and Spring Gardens; watching from London Bridge the vessels with many colored sails stand down the river bound for strange seas and distant lands.

John Bunyan

An entry may still be found in the old minute book of the Grey Coat school made in June, 1784: "On the 20th, David Thompson a mathematical Boy, was bound to the Hudson's Bay Company etc. the Treasr then paid Mr. Thos. Hutchins, corresponding secretary to the said Company, the sum of five pounds for taking the said boy apprence for seven years."

Frills were not indulged in at Grey Coat school and the etc. in the text stands I presume for Gentlemen Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay, an elaborate but nevertheless illuminating title.

Over a hundred years before this time a king had granted these gentlemen absolute power over and a monopoly of trade in a piece of the New World, I don't know how many times as big as England. This great feudal holding was called Rupert's Land in honor of a prince who obtained the charter in virtue of two elk and two black beaver skins to be paid as token of allegiance to his royal cousin, Charles the Second, "whenever he shall happen to enter these dominions." It included all countries, territories and coasts lying along all lakes, rivers, creeks and sounds within Hudson's Straits; and the overlordship of the company was to be sustained if necessary by His Majesty's ships and soldiers.

Except for the occasional raids of French privateering parties, business in the semi-arctic shores of Hudson's Bay had been carried on very profitably. The Gentlemen Adventurers did not venture far from the coast. It was the Indians who made the long journeys by canoe, bringing their furs to trade, while the governor of this or that fort merely stepped out of his door dressed in scarlet coat and gold lace, preceded by drummers, followed by a shabby retinue, and received them.

South of the domain of the royal monopolists and separated from it by an imaginary and quite indefinite boundary had been New France, with her master waterway into the heart of the continent—the St. Lawrence, the Great Lakes, the rivers flowing into them from the southwest which connected by narrow portages with the tributaries of the Mississippi; and west from Lake Superior a net work of lakes, rivers and beaver flooded marshes which made of the Northwest a gigantic, savage Venice. Over these the paper thin canoes of the French traders floated to the very feet of the Rockies.

From Ballantyne's Hudson's Bay
Trading Store

But at the time this "mathe-

David Thompson Monument at Verendrye, N. D.

matical Boy" was apprenticed to the Great Company there was no longer a French empire in America. The English ruled on the St. Lawrence and Scotch merchants had pounced upon the fur trade in all the regions which had been occupied by France. They wisely associated with themselves experienced French traders and employed seasoned Canadian woods runners and voyageurs born and bred in the business, and it was not long before these newcomers began seriously to interfere with the rulers by divine right over Rupert's Land. They intercepted bands of Indians dutifully traveling to Hudson's Bay and coaxed or bribed away their furs; worse still, they not only threaded every lake and stream known to the French but plunged far deeper into the wilderness carrying goods to the remotest tribes.

For some years these traders—the shrewdest, most courageous, aggressive and ruthless set of commercial gentlemen you will read of in many a day—were as busy fighting each other as they were fighting the Hudson's Bay Company and the forest highways rang with the murderous clamor of their brawls.

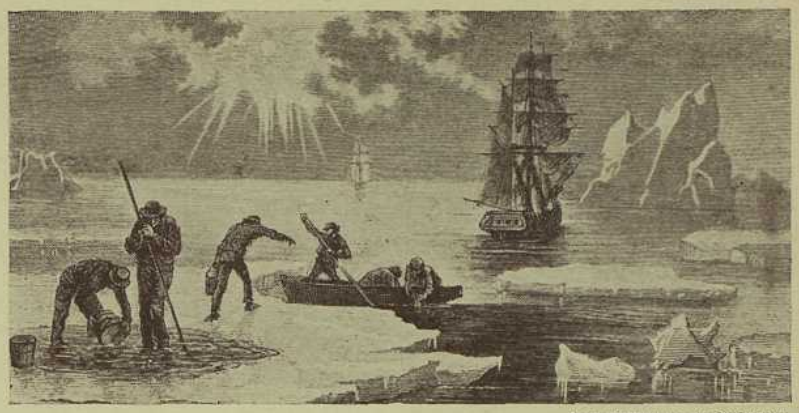
The royal monopolists began by giving to their rivals the contemptuous name of Pedlars and ended by imitating their methods. Opposition posts sprang up side by side on lake and stream in the remotest depths of the wilderness, rival traders shot at each other through chinks in the logs; hired "bullies" of the Montreal merchants set upon the Orkneys from Hudson's Bay—robbed, beat and even killed them. Meanwhile the Indians, snatched from each other's grasp by the contending companies, came out of the fray much the worse for wear.

Whiskey was a bribe, laudanum a weapon when the drunkenness of the Indians menaced the purveyors of the liquor; when bribery, calumny, flattery could not wrest from the savages furs belonging by indebtedness to another company, they were taken by force.

Such was the fur trade when the evils of competition were at their worst.

In 1787, three years after Thompson arrived on Hudson's Bay the Scotch merchants of Montreal united, forming the famous North West Company and directed their united forces against the overlords of Rupert's Land.

It would seem that a boy of fourteen parting perhaps forever from family and friends, setting out alone on a sailing vessel for the semi-arctic shores of a half savage continent might have



From Ballantyne's Hudson's Bay

Hudson's Bay

had some heartache and some fear. The companion chosen to accompany Thompson—the Hudson's Bay Company having requested two apprentices—had promptly "elopd from this Hospital the 7th Jany" rather than face such an ordeal.

But although Thompson at the age of seventy, wrote an account of this journey filled with unquestionably authentic detail, he recalled and apparently at the time experienced no misgivings.

The small fleet of three Hudson's Bay vessels anchored first off the rocky coast of Stromness, Scotland, chiefly, it seems, to pick up contraband gin cheaper than the tariff burdened article could be bought in England.

There all was wonder and interest to this child whose world had been a grey old city.

"I see no trees," he exclaimed, astonished at this first glimpse of a country where the great oaks and elms of Spring Gardens did not grow. Fascinated and with youthful pity he watched the kelp burners, wading waist deep in water or bent over their smoking kilns for the hard profit of ten pence a day; true to Grey Coat teaching he went to hear the preaching Sunday, surprised to see the congregation put on its shoes and stockings only to go *into* the church. Three weeks at Stromness then—"We now held our course over the Western Ocean."

He says nothing of the discomforts of that voyage. Doubtless the Grey Coat pupils were not much in the habit of luxury. Yet it took many early travelers as long to recover from the trip as it did to cross the ocean. Bad food, bad water, bad air in the suffocating hold, bad weather when the small ships rocked and staggered among mountainous seas, masts snapping under whip-

From Ballantyne's Hudson's Bay

Typical Trading Post

ping winds, passengers rolled and tossed about, lucky if they escape without broken legs and arms—as many did not—these were part of the program of a sea voyage at that time.

The Hudson's Bay ships spent three months climbing the heaving breakers of the Atlantic, steering close reefed among the ice bergs off the coast, threading the ice choked channel of Hudson's Straits into the bay. Then they separated, one to go to Moose and Albany "factories," one to York, and Thompson's ship to the mouth of Churchill River, where it arrived in September, 1784.

Not a moment now could be lost or the vessels would not be under weigh before the rapidly approaching winter filled the bay with ice. All hands at work to discharge the cargo—blankets and beads, gin, rum, scalping knives, guns, lead for balls, powder, tomahawks and other civilizing articles sent to the Indians; then the hold crammed with precious beaver skins and the work was done.

In ten days the ships stood down the bay with phantom sails wide spread, slipped over the rim of the horizon, and David Thompson's first winter in America was begun.

Ice crept upon swamps and marshes and silence came where lately all had been clamorous with the honk of wild geese and the whirr of ducks in flight. Snow fell, soft, smothering and persistent or was driven in powdered ice before screaming gales. In a white and frozen world white hare and white grouse were hunted on snow shoes; white polar bears prowled about the settlement waiting for the margin of the bay to freeze so that they might hunt seals beside the air holes in the ice. Cold cracked the granite boulders and exploded the trees; froze the spruce beer at mess and lined the fort with rime four inches thick which

the men melted with water to a solid wall of ice, thus "making the builder warmer!"

The hardships of the nine months' winter seemed, however, negligible compared to the torments of mosquitoes and flies during the short fierce summer. They tortured the men night and day; the air was thick, "the narrow windows so crowded with them that they trod each other to death in such numbers we had to scrape them out twice a day." Smoke was no relief, "they can stand more smoke than we can. A sailor finding swearing no use tried Tar and covered his face with it, but the musketoes stuck to it in such numbers as to blind him and the tickling of their wings were worse than their bites."

Thompson's chief at Churchill was Samuel Hearne, a man difficult to estimate. After two unsuccessful attempts to reach the Arctic sea at the mouth of the Coppermine, he accomplished that truly heroic journey of exploration; then he turned over his fort on Hudson's Bay to the French without firing a gun. He read divine services on Sundays to the men, and flaunted Voltaire's dictionary—a veritable devil's handbook to a boy trained at Grey Coat school.

Thompson spent the first two years on Hudson's Bay, one at Churchill, the other at York factory. He was able to while away the tedium by borrowing a few books on "history and animated nature" and begged for a little copying that he might not forget how to write. Then in the summer of 1786 he was sent inland to assist in the building of a new post on the Saskatchewan.

Regularly each year many brigades of canoes loaded with trade goods to supply the remote posts or to establish new ones, took the water trails into the interior.

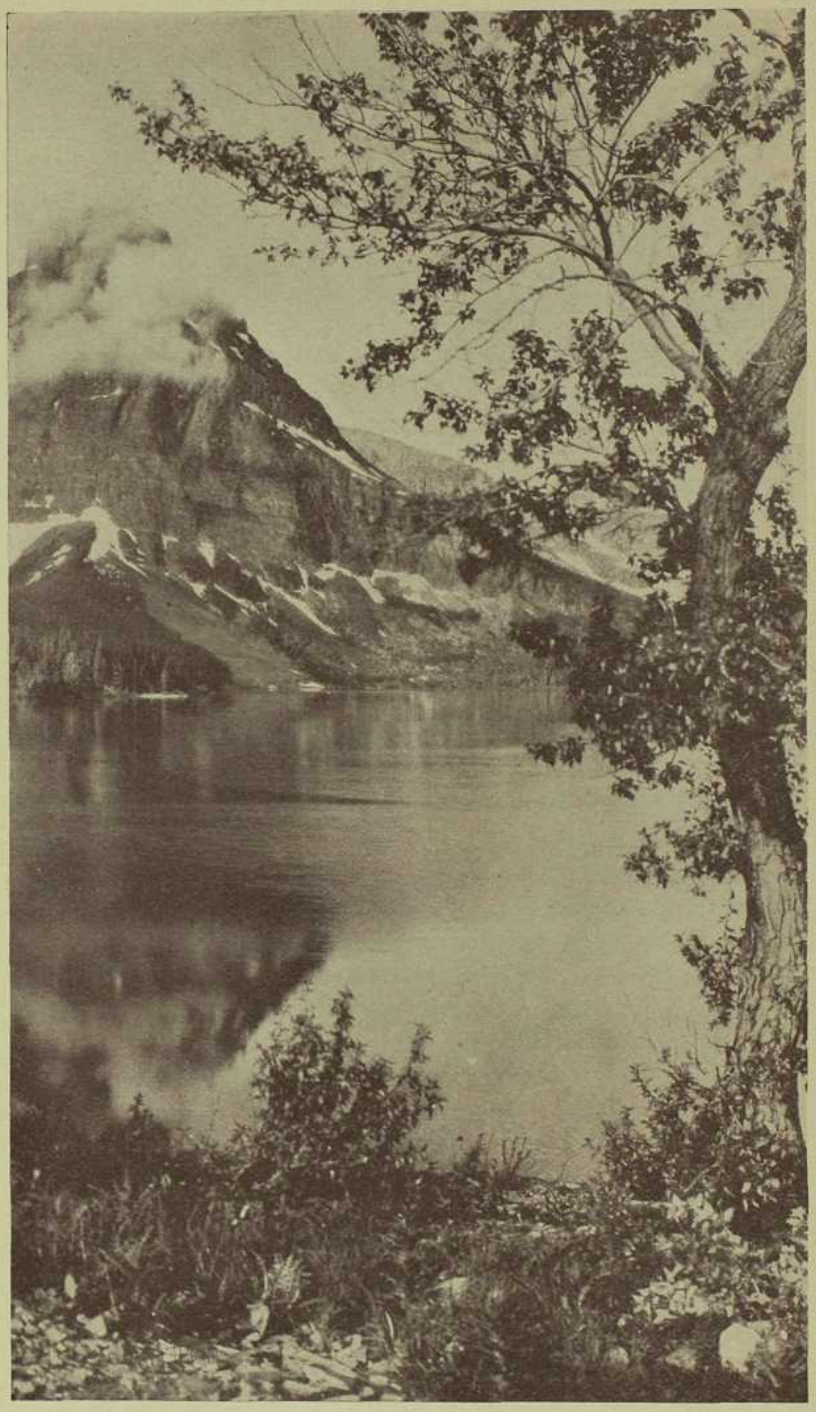
Rivers, threading their way through deep forest or swampy lowlands, along flowering game filled prairies, or over barren plains, rivers that broadened into lakes, or tumbled over falls around which heavy carries must be made, in spring swollen with melting snows, in late summer often too low to float the canoes, in winter stilled by the death-like grip of ice—these were the avenues of travel from every part of the country to the posts on the bay. They connected by portage with rivers emptying into Lake Winnipeg, Great Slave and Athabasca Lakes, the Arctic Sea and across the greatest portage of all, the Rocky Mountains, with the rivers of the Pacific.

At the time Thompson turned his face westward, all of this vast region was a savage wilderness dotted, as far as the Rockies, by the rough log forts of the fur traders. Beyond the mountains, no one as yet had gone.

Much of this country was unexplored, practically all of it unmapped. The year Thompson came to America the great map of the world accompanying the narrative of Captain Cook's third voyage appeared. On this most of the Northwest was left simply a blank. What records there were were inaccurate; Hearne's voyages to the Arctic sea and a few misplaced lakes and rivers traced on this chart were all that, a mere hundred and forty years ago, the world knew of the American Northwest.

Some rough sketches of the fur routes were being made by trader-surveyors such as Pond of the Northwesters and Fidler of the Hudson's Bay Company; moreover an experienced man, Philip Turner, had recently been sent out from England by the latter company. He was technically educated but his achievement does not seem to have been great. He remained in the Northwest a relatively short time traveling mostly in the regions about Athabasca and Great Slave Lake. The greatest contribution he made toward promoting knowledge of the Northwest was the instruction in surveying and the use of astronomical instruments he gave David Thompson during one winter at a lonely fur post on the Saskatchewan.

Thompson had at this time spent several winters in the interior. The first was passed in the lodges of the Blackfeet on the great buffalo plains about Bow River, the upper waters of the South Saskatchewan. At this time the foundations of a lasting and important friendship were laid between this youngster from a London charity school and the splendid nomad chieftains. Among Thompson's many valuable descriptions of the American Indians I particularly like his picture of the Piegan war chief. "His height was six feet six inches; tall and erect he appeared to be of Bone and Sinew with no more flesh than absolutely required; his countenance manly but not stern, his features prominent, his nose somewhat aquiline, his manners kind and mild; his word was sacred, he was both loved and respected. He had by his five wives twenty-two sons and five daughters. His grown up sons were as tall as himself and the others promised the same. He was friendly to the White Men and in his speeches reminded his people of the great benefit the Traders were to them, and that it was by their means that they had so many useful articles and



Glacier National Park, the Ancient Hunting Ground of the Blackfeet Indians

guns for hunting and to conquer their enemies." This conquest, incidentally, the Blackfeet had already very successfully accomplished. The great buffalo plains extending south from Bow river along the entire east slope of the Rockies, had been the hunting grounds of Shoshone, Saleesh (Flatheads) and Kutenais. These the various tribes of Blackfeet—Bloods, Piegans, Blackfeet proper—aided by guns obtained from traders, had driven across the mountains.

All these tribes are known as plains Indians and they seem to represent one of the best types of American aborigine, less cruel and darkly superstitious than the forest Indians, cleaner, prouder, more chaste and honorable than many of the coast tribes.

Thompson's second winter inland was passed at a post on the Saskatchewan. He had already begun to take great interest in surveying and in observing and recording climate, geographic, topographic and geologic features and other natural phenomena. This year he made the first definite achievement in what was to be the chief occupation and ruling passion of his life. By a series of observations he established the position of this post, Cumberland House, almost precisely where the most modern instruments and the most expert surveys have since placed it. This was before his winter of study with Philip Turner.

Apropos of this achievement Tyrrell says: "When one considers the nautical almanacs that were available at that time, this result is quite astonishing and puts to shame much even of the good observing of the present day. At that time there were very few other points in this whole continent of America whose position on the earth's surface were as accurately known as this remote trading post on the Saskatchewan. On the maps of Canada its position has been changed many times but the latest surveys have brought it back to the place to which it was assigned by this young astronomer one hundred and thirty-five years ago."

Thompson remained with the Hudson's Bay Company thirteen years. Most of this time was spent in the interior, trading, establishing new posts and, on his own account, surveying, resurveying and checking by astronomical observation over 3,500 miles of hitherto unmapped wilderness. The results of his surveys sent to England by the company were incorporated in the Arrowsmith and other maps.

After having accomplished an exploring expedition of the utmost difficulty to Lake Athabasca he received a curt and inexplicable order from his chief at York factory to stop surveying.

Thompson's term with the company expired at that time (1797). He promptly made up his mind to withdraw from its employ and offer his services to the more progressive Northwesters. He put his belongings on his back, walked to the nearest North West post and engaged himself to that company. From there he proceeded to Grand Portage, the frontier emporium and roystering halfway house of the concern on the shore of Lake Superior about 150 miles northeast of the present city of Duluth.

Grand Portage was a stockade post covering several acres. There the partners from Montreal, bringing champagne and silver plate and French cooks to set off the feasts of beaver tails, buffalo humps and filets of antelope, met the wintering partners from the interior.

There too, were the huts and lodges of the Indians, voyageurs, forest vagabonds and humble workmen of the trade who were employed or hung about the station and the establishments of free traders. An immense number of squaws were retained by the company to scrape and clean the peltries and make up the packs of skins; and a chorus of praise rises from all the early journalists for the dancing of the sloe-eyed half-breed girls in whose veins the blood of French aristocrats or of the Scotchmen who fought at Culloden for the Highlands and Lochiel, blended indifferently well with that of Chippewa or Cree, Sioux, Saulteur or Assiniboine.

Up the lake from Montreal 1,800 miles eastward, swept the brigades bringing trade goods, liquor, food stuffs, tea—eight men and from three to five tons of freight to each canoe. From the mysterious and savage West, from Great Slave Lake 2,000 miles away came the fur laden craft of the men who had wintered in the wilderness. Crack crews raced each other down the lake, or sang, paddles beating the rhythm on the slender gunwales of their craft; or, wind and current favoring, the whole fleet with interlocking oars, swept abreast into the crescent shaped bay to the long anticipated rowdy welcome of the frontier metropolis.

Then feasting, dancing, music of bag pipe, flute and violin—sixty gallons of rum issued in one evening—fights, murders, marriages, prayers and at the same time business keenly carried on, for the season was short and from the wilderness station this costly traffic reached far beyond Montreal, beyond the eastern seaboard and the Atlantic to Paris, Leipsic and London.

The money of the fur country whether here at Grand Portage or at Fort Union a half century later was beaver skins. A blanket for ten skins, a gun for twenty, a pint of rum for all the Indian had—although prices of course varied.

Thompson was warmly received by the Northwesters at Grand Portage and was given his first opportunity to make a scientific expedition entirely unspoiled by the irksome duties of trade.

The 49th parallel had just been definitely agreed upon as the boundary between the English and American territories but its position was not yet established. Many of the most important fur posts of the North West Company lay along and south of the line. Thompson was now to survey the boundary, determine the exact position of the stations, visit the Mandan villages on the upper Missouri in what was still Spanish Louisiana and to look for the fossil bones of large animals!

Equipped with a ten-inch sextant, two telescopes, drawing instruments and thermometers he set out by canoe with a fur brigade in August, 1797. He followed by the usual traders' route the chain of lakes and rivers along the northern border of what is now the state of Minnesota, made a wide detour northwestward to include Lake Winnipeg, the upper Red Deer River and Lake Manitoba, and then swung southward to the Assiniboine. Here, in the North West Company post at the mouth of Mouse river he spent some days copying his journal and the survey notes of this expedition.

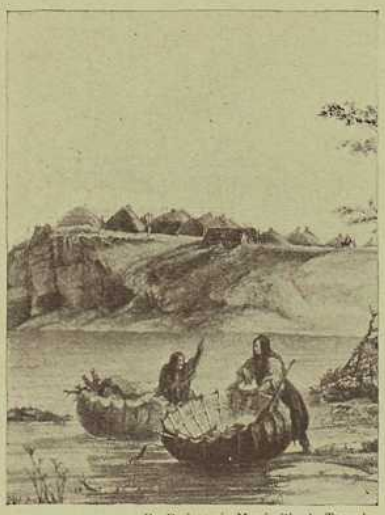
> Then; "having made our preparations for a journey to the Mandane Villages on the banks of the Missisourie River; on the 28th November 1797, we set off. Our guide and interpreter, who had resided eight years in their Villages was a Monsr René Jussomme who fluently spoke the Mandane Language. Mr. Hugh McCrachan, a good hearted Irishman, who had been often to the Villages, and resided there for weeks and months; and seven french Canadians, a fine, hardy, good humoured sett of Men, fond of full feeding, willing to hunt for it, but more willing to enjoy it: When I have reproved them, for what I thought Gluttony, eating full eight pounds of fresh meat pr day, they have told me, that, their greatest enjoyment of life was Eating. They are all extremely ignorant, and without the least education, and appear to set no value on it. All these excepting my servant man, A. Brosseau, who had been a soldier, were free traders on their own account for this journey, each of them on credit from Mr. McDonell, took a venture in goods and trinkets to the amount of forty to sixty skins to be paid in furrs, by trading with the natives of the Villages. I was readily supplied with every thing I required which was chiefly ammunition, tobacco and a few trinkets for expenses. For my service I had two Horses.

Monsr Jussomme had one, and the men thirty dogs, their own property, each two hauled a flat sled upon which their venture was lashed; these Dogs had all been traded from the Stone Indians, who made great use of them in their encampments. They were all like half dog, half wolf, and always on the watch to devour every thing they could get their teeth on; they did not (do) willing work, and most of them had never hauled a flat sled, but the Canadians soon break them in, by constant flogging, in which they seem to take great delight; when on the march the noise was intolerable, and made me keep two or three miles ahead."

Their course followed the old Indian trail; it lay generally southward by way of the Turtle Hills and Mouse river and across country from the southerly bend of that river near the present town of Verendrye, N. D., on the Great Northern Railway, to the Missouri.

Winter had set in early; the mercury coquetted between 20 and 40 degrees below. The small party struggled across the rolling North Dakota plains in the teeth of blinding storms. Snow fell almost constantly and the air was filled, too, with drifted snow driven like smoke before the wind. The travelers stumbled on with only Thompson's compass to guide them, unable to see a foot before their faces, calling to each other or tied together with ropes.

Often they were obliged to remain camped for days in the meagre shelter of the oak or cottonwood groves along the river, the tent so full of smoke that to be able to breathe they must lie down and press their faces to the ground. Then a dash across the open to another refuge in the woods.



By Bodmer in Maximilian's Travels

Indian Village *Bull Boats*

An occasional buffalo cow or tough old bull kept them from starving. There was a constant threat of hostile Sioux and once a party of these Indions was sighted but fortunately failed to observe the white men.

After thirty-three days of this arduous travel, they reached the Missouri.

There were at that time five so-called Mandan Villages strung along the Missouri in the vicinity of the Knife River. The upper of these villages, however, were not occupied by Mandans but by the Hidatsa—a racially distinct but allied tribe.

Ditches and stockades fortified these settlements and the low domed houses built of timber and mud resembled, Thompson says, great hives. These Indians raised plentiful supplies of corn, beans and squashes. They were a wily, intelligent and thrifty people, lighter in color than most Indians. They are said to be of Siouan stock and there is a hint, a rumor, a legend probably without foundation, which involves either Welsh or Norsemen in the story of their origin.

Within their ramparts and the solid walls of their houses they were comparatively safe from their bitter foemen, the Sioux; but the white man's terrible ally, Smallpox, which again and again ascended the Missouri, practically exterminated them within the next fifty years.

Thompson remained among these people ten days during which time he established the position of the villages and set down an alphabet of their language. He then retraced his steps northward to the Assiniboine post where he remained to map the survey.

From there his route lay eastward. With three Canadians, an Indian and three dog sleds he traveled down the Assiniboine to the Red River of the North and up that river to the North West trading post at the mouth of Pembina River (across from the present town of St. Vincent's on the Great Northern Railway), arriving there March 14, 1798.

The weather was milder. The damp snow weighted the snow shoes till knees and ankles were sprained and the men obliged to lift their feet at each step by strings tied to the tops of the snow shoe; water covered the ice in the river. Dogs and sleds disappeared in the slush, baggage had constantly to be dried. Bull meat shared by a few poor Chippewa sustained them.

By Bodmer in Maxemilian's Travels

Dance of the Mandans

The post at Pembina was found to be in United States territory. Later a half-breed settlement grew up at this place where the town of Pembina now stands.

Thompson continued up the Red passing a second North

West post now the town of St. Vincent, Minnesota. Before reaching the mouth of the Red Lake River where, as was usual at the forks of rivers, a trading post was built a little later and which has since become the city of Grand Forks, on the Great Northern Railway, he cut across overland to a post higher up on Red Lake River, on the site of present Red Lake Falls.

He found the small fur bearing animals of this region pretty well trapped out and even the deer almost exterminated. After reaching the Red Lake post, the ice and snow became too soft for overland travel, and Thompson was obliged to wait till the river should be free enough of ice for canoes.

He spent as his habit was, much of this time with the natives, learning what he could of their language and traditions. Here he was in Chippewa country and here a curious incident was brought to his notice.

There had been, at a village on Lake of the Woods, a most promising young man, true warrior, successful hunter, particularly beloved by his family and respected by the tribe. One morning on awakening, he announced that he felt an overwhelming impulse to eat his sister. At first this startling news was ignored; but as he persisted in the notion friends and family tried hard to talk him out of it. Each day they anxiously inquired if he were

still in the same mood and each day the afflicted young man regretfully acknowledged that he was. The sister and her husband had hastily removed to another village, but it was not certain that she or anybody else was safe.

The young man had evidently become Weetego or Man Eater. This obsession was not infrequent among certain tribes of woods Indians. The victim of it became an outcast, wandered alone in the forest lying in wait for human prey. Such persons were supposed to be possessed by the evil spirit and for this reason the Indians were usually—though not always—reluctant to kill them.

In the present instance, sentence of death was finally passed. The condemned man fully acquiesced in the justice of the proceeding and announced himself quite willing to die. Whereupon his old, unhappy father, a true figure of tragic saga, rose and strangled his son.

Had another than the boy's own relatives done so, his family would have been obliged to retaliate and an endless feud established.

Early in April the ice was sufficiently broken up for Thompson to continue his journey. He built a canoe of "birch rind" eighteen feet long and with three Canadians and the Indian wife of one of them he set out.

Rivers and lakes were swollen, meadows and forest awash with icy water. They traveled through an inundated world, cutting trees to sleep on at night. Wild rice swamps stretched away in every direction, noisy with geese, ducks and swan northward bound to their far breeding places.

Nineteen days' travel brought Thompson to Turtle Lake which he believed to be the head waters of the Mississippi. While not the ultimate source it is the most northerly point reached by the river and was of particular interest to Thompson for that reason. He was engaged with the problem of the international boundary, not with the question of just where the Mississippi took its rise. His surveys made at this time are the first ever recorded of the upper reaches of this stream.

Continuing south and east, passing one or two North West fur posts, he finally reached the St. Louis River and the trading station at its mouth where the city of Duluth now stands.

Spring had kept pace with them as they traveled; the ice had left the great lakes and Indian canoes passed like phantoms through the early mists, a boy kneeling in the prow, a woman in the stern and the fisherman standing rocklike with poised spear.

The Indians in all this region were very poor. Fur-bearing animals were no longer plentiful. Fish in summer, wild rice and maple sugar in winter, were their principal food.

Thompson spent a brief period at this place to establish its position and put his notes in order; then the party continued their journey. They followed the south shore of the lake along steep cliffs and straggling forests of white pine, birch and aspen. In a craggy gorge of tall red rock they paused to hear the echo; but a simple minded voyageur worked himself into such a fury because he could not have the last word that Thompson hurried on "to be out of sound of his swearing."

At the Sault de Sainte Marie he met the great explorer-trader Alexander McKenzie who five years before (1793) had surmounted the Rockies and descended the western watershed to the Pacific being thereby first across the continent.

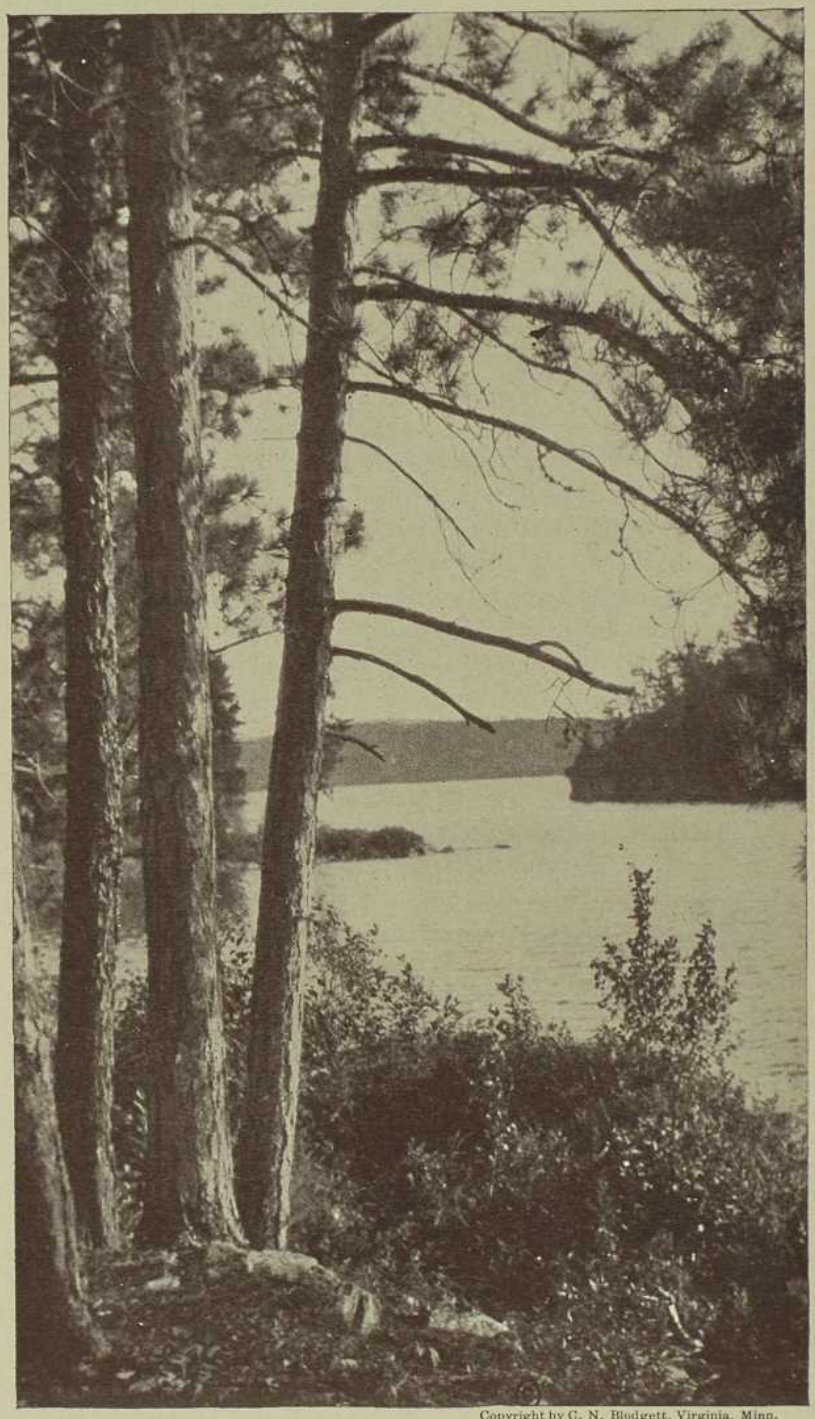
McKenzie believed that the survey just accomplished in ten months would have taken any other man two years, and his praise was music to Thompson. Accompanied by McKenzie and two other traders Thompson now completed his journey around the north shore of the lake to the Grand Portage post, having accomplished 4,000 miles of survey.

The North West people were highly pleased with his achievement although he seems to have accomplished little in the way of fossil bones. But they were traders, not paleontologists or indeed cosmographers, and we find Thompson during the remainder of his connection with them carrying on the vocation of trader and avocation of geographer simultaneously.

During the next six years Thompson traveled constantly back and forth along the winding waterways between Grand Portage and the Rockies with his canoe loads of trade goods or of furs, wintering and trading at remote outposts and establishing new ones.

He worked as he traveled, incessantly observing, recording and sketching the connecting topography. Long after the trail-weary voyageurs slept he studied the skies with sextant or astrolabe and set down his notes by the flickering light of the camp fire.

Indians love incantations; they longed to understand the deep and potent magic this solitary watcher prepared, and in remote bark lodges of the forest and painted leather teepees of the plains, spoke of him darkly by his Indian name—Man-Who-Looks-at-the-Stars.



Copyright by C. N. Blodgett, Virginia, Minn.

Along the Rainy River Route

When the Northwesters absorbed their active rival the X Y Company in 1804-05 they felt strong enough to extend their trade into the regions west of the Rockies. Moreover the American exploring expedition under Lewis and Clark had reached the upper Missouri that year, bound for the Pacific. The powerful Canadian company had no idea of allowing anybody else to acquire prior rights to the ultra-montane country by occupancy. In 1805 Simon Fraser established the first trading post west of the Rockies and later descended by the Fraser river to the Pacific.

The next year found Thompson in charge of Rocky Mountain house on North Saskatchewan river at the foot of the mountains, preparing to cross them in the spring.

The Blackfeet were extremely opposed to having the deadly weapons by which they had so greatly profited, taken across the mountains to their vanquished foes. Thompson would have found it difficult to undertake his journey had the Piegan tribe of Blackfeet who belonged in that neighborhood been at home. But the warriors had all traveled south seeking to avenge the killing in the previous year of two Gros Ventre allies. A band of these Indians had attempted to steal the guns of the small party headed by Meriwether Lewis which was exploring the headwaters of Maria's River and in the ensuing conflict two of the Gros Ventres were shot. The way to the mountains was clear and in June, 1807, Thompson with his half-Irish, half-Chippewa wife, three small children and a party of voyageurs, set out. With goods loaded onto pack horses they entered the trackless and magnificent defiles of the mountains, traveling with incredible difficulty through a splendid region of glacier, forest and towering, snow crowned peaks where the roar of torrential streams was echoed in the ocean-like surge of wind among the pines.

They crossed the height of land by what is now called the Howse Pass, although Howse, a clerk in the Hudson's Bay Company, never set foot on it until Thompson had beaten his way through many times. After a month of painful travel they reached the upper waters of the Columbia where "We builded Log Houses—" the first trading post on the Columbia. It was known as Kootenai House or Old Fort Kootenai.

The party spent the remainder of the year at this place, Thompson as usual trading and exploring in the vicinity. Part of the time game was scarce and they fed on their horses and the salmon which had ascended the river 1,200 miles to spawn; but in fall and winter red deer, antelope and mountain sheep

From Schoolcraft's History of American Indians

Indians Traveling

supplied them plentifully with food. The long haired goat, however, remained far above on inaccessible ledges and amused themselves, the Indians believed, by kicking down stones upon them.

During this time they had menacing visits from the Piegans who threatened to destroy the post, but Thompson's courage and tact in handling them and his old friendship with the chiefs saved the situation.

In the spring (1808) with a small party of voyageurs Thompson ascended the Columbia to its headwaters, crossed the narrow portage of two miles to Kootenai River—called by him the Flat Bow or McGillivray—and descended the beautiful but dangerous stream beset with sharp rocks and whirlpools.

Willows and gooseberry bushes dipped their trailing branches in the jade blue waters and magnificent forests of pine and hardwood clothed the surrounding slopes. All about them the mountains spread away in unsurpassed loveliness. Every bend of the winding river brought a new vista of the slumbering monsters graced with ethereal delicacy of light and shadow—cloud shapes as it were, of silver and plum color and the profound and touching blue with which distance curtains the West.

But scenery, however pleasant, is not nourishing, and the question of food became an urgent one. Game was so scarce that the travelers held themselves fortunate to "kill an animal of the tiger species." The greedy voyageurs devoured even the liver of this mountain lion which, it is reported, did not agree with them.

Photo by Reed

Blackfeet Camp, Glacier National Park

From the present town of Rexford, just south of the Canadian border, the main line and a branch of the Great Northern Railway parallel the entire down river journey of the expedition.

Between the present towns of Libby and Troy in Montana the party reached the falls of the Kootenai, called by Thompson the lower dalles. Baggage must now be landed and carried on the men's backs along the difficult portage path which ascended to a broken rocky ridge several hundred feet above the boiling rapids and whirlpools of the river. The sharp débris along the ledge cut the men's mocassins to ribbons and wounded their feet—an hour and a quarter to travel one mile and the journey repeated many times as they toiled back and forth transporting goods and canoe!

That night, hungry and exhausted, they stole a tainted antelope from an eagle and made themselves sick.

Two days later they came upon a band of Kootenai Indians. These were camped near the site of Bonner's Ferry, Idaho. It was there that the ancient Indian road from the southwest, used by the Flatheads (Saleesh) and called the Flathead road, reached the Kootenai. The half starved travelers were thankful to obtain from the Indians some dried carp and a kind of bitter and not very nourishing bread made of fine black moss which grew on the resinous bark of fir and larch.

Thompson arranged with the Kootenais to bring their furs to the post he planned to establish in this vicinity. These were the first white men in the Kootenai country and this the first encounter of Indians and traders. That autumn Thompson sent his able

assistant, Finan McDonald, to build the post. It stood on the site of the present city of Bonner's Ferry where for many years the great fur traders' highway to the Columbia was to pass.

The Great Northern Railway has erected a monument at this place in memory of Thompson and his successors—the first travelers into Idaho.

The Kootenai bends northward from Bonner's Ferry, accomplishing its great loop back into British Columbia, where it empties into Lake Kootenai. This last stage of the river's journey through what are now known as Kootenai Bottoms, is followed by a branch line of the Great Northern as far north as the International boundary.

Thompson continued the descent of the river through these lowlands. The whole country was inundated with spring floods; game had taken refuge in higher country and hunger again stalked the white men. On May 14 Thompson notes "a few small antelope" killed but this seems scarcely to have made a meal for the fabulous appetites—and capacity—of the voyageurs. Dried moss continued to be the meagre staple of their diet and "gave us all the belly ache."

Having explored the river to its mouth, the party turned back. The floods had prevented other tribes whom Thompson had expected to meet at Bonner's Ferry from reaching that place. He immediately set out on the return journey, choosing a route which led through higher country.

Bodmer in Maximilian's Travels

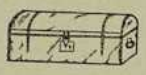
Blackfeet Hunting Buffalo

Leaving the canoe near the Kootenai camp, he bought horses from the Indians and persuaded two of them to accompany him as guides. The party traveled northeastward across the bench land half enclosed in the encircling arm of the Kootenai and struck the river once more north of the border. This route was later much used by the miners and pack trains when gold was discovered in the Kootenai district.

In June Thompson reached his post on the upper Columbia and with his family, his clerk Finan McDonald and four voy-

ageurs who had been left there, he traveled back across the Rockies to the Saskatchewan. Another month took Thompson to Rainy River House with the furs collected in the mountains.

After a respite of only two days Thompson started westward once more with the loaded canoes. This time the partners compelled him to take two kegs of alcohol for the Indian trade. But "I had made a law unto myself that no alcohol should pass the mountains in my company and thus be clear of the sad sight of drunkenness." When he reached the rocky defiles leading to his own private domain he put the kegs on a vicious horse and let him smash them to pieces trying to rub them off.



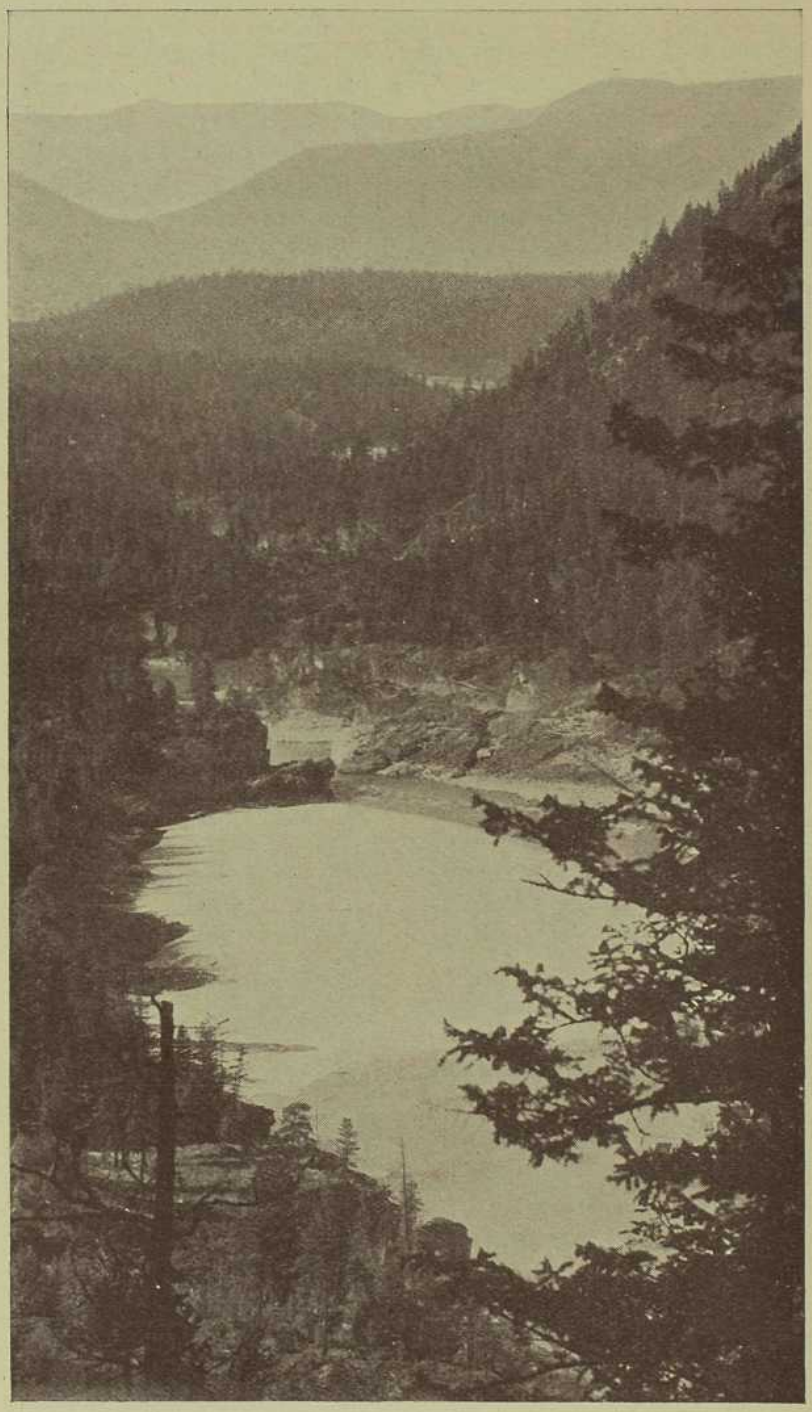
He wrote back to his partners what he had done and what he proposed always to do under similar circumstances, and for the six years he had charge of the posts west of the Rockies no liquor reached the Indians of those regions.

Thompson's unquestioning belief in the religion taught him as a boy at Grey Coat school was only less unique among the wild, hard drinking, high handed adventurers of the fur trade, than his sobriety. When he said Thank God for a safe journey, it was not a mere phrase, but a confession of faith.

It was his habit to read aloud from the Bible to his voyageurs in astoundingly bad French and it is probable that his own blameless life and unobtrusive goodness won for him their attention. A contemporary writes, "Many a time have I seen these uneducated Canadians most attentively and thankfully listen, as they sat upon some bank of shingle, to Mr. Thompson while he read to them three chapters out of the Old Testament and as many out of the New, adding such explanations as seemed to him suitable." This commendable spirit, however, does not seem to have kept them from flogging their dogs to death the next day.

Monument at Bonners Ferry, Idaho

That winter Thompson remained at the Columbia River



Kootenai Canyon
Where the Great Northern Railway Follows Thompson's Route

post while Finan McDonald was at the Kootenai post. The following summer (1809) Thompson himself again descended the Kootenai to the vicinity of Bonner's Ferry. Procuring horses from the Indians he took the Flathead road across country to Pend d'Oreille Lake where a trading post was built and called Kullyspell House.

The Kootenais at this place who were armed only with bone spears and flint head arrows, eagerly bought guns and ammunition with which to fight the Blackfeet. Soon they had an advantage over the latter for the Blackfeet were accustomed only to shooting buffalo at short range which gave them no practice in taking long aim at small objects whereas the Flatheads, Kootenais and other Indians west of the mountains practiced on antelope at a hundred yards and more and were far better marksmen.

It is small wonder that the Piegan Blackfeet—their particular foe—should have seriously resented white men crossing the mountains with their dangerous trade goods.

A second post, Saleesh House, was built that autumn sixty miles southeast of Pend d'Oreille Lake on Clark's Fork River for trade with the Flatheads.

Thompson traveled extensively through all this territory exploring and making surveys. Finan McDonald, Jaco Finlay, McMillan and other traders assisted him at various posts and conducted the canoe brigades to and from the mountains. The following year these men built a post on Spokane River about ten miles northwest of the present city of Spokane. It was the principal northwest trading post of the entire intermountain region for many years.

Thompson in the meantime recrossed the mountains, made the long trip eastward to Rainy River House, exchanged furs for trade goods and hastened back to the mountains, but now the Piegans resolutely opposed his crossing.

At this time (1810) it was well known that John Jacob Astor planned to establish American trade on the lower Columbia. The Pacific Fur Company had been formed, and two expeditions, one overland from St. Louis, the other by the ship Tonquin around the Horn, were on their way to that part of the little-known Northwest coast.

Opinion is divided as to just what attitude the Northwesters and David Thompson in particular took at this time toward the Astor enterprise.

Thompson's journals make no reference to it except the one statement that he must be on the lower Columbia in August, but it seems probable that his race down that river in the summer of 1811 was inspired by the hope of planting the British flag at its mouth before the arrival of the Americans. In this he was disappointed. And in this disappointment the Piegans guarding the mountains against the passing of English guns and scalping knives to their enemies beyond, played an important part.

When they met and sent back his canoes, Thompson determined upon an heroic measure. It was late in the season and winter had already set in, yet he turned his face to the north. He would cross the Rockies above the Blackfoot country.

A difficult journey through trackless forest brought the party to Athabasca River. There horses were abandoned, goods loaded on dog sleds, snow shoes made and the men entered the gloomy, snow choked defiles of the Rockies.

His companions, Thompson writes, "were the most hardy that could be picked out of a hundred brave and hardy men, but they were appalled by the desolation before them." Complaining, cursing, threatening to turn back, flogging the unfortunate dogs to the disablement of two and killing one outright, they ascended into the glacial regions. Wood and food were scarce; they camped without fire on snow thirty feet deep under a glittering star spangled sky almost, it seemed, within reach of their hands. They were on the top of the Continental Divide. Down then, by a slope so steep that dogs and sleds shot forward and wrapped themselves around the trunks of the great pines. Four men deserted; the damp snow on this milder side of the mountains retarded their march to a mile or two a day. At last they reached the Columbia at the mouth of Canoe River, the Boat Encampment of later days when Athabasca Pass was frequently used.

From Pacific Railroad Report

Kettle Falls of the Columbia

When the ice broke up a canoe was built, loaded with dried moose meat and the journey resumed. Only three men would follow Thompson on the

dangerous journey to the sea among unknown Indians whose temper it was feared might be hostile.

Thus weakened in force he could not proceed down the Columbia as he had hoped; but must swing round by way of Kootenai River, to his posts in the Flathead country where he could obtain more men.

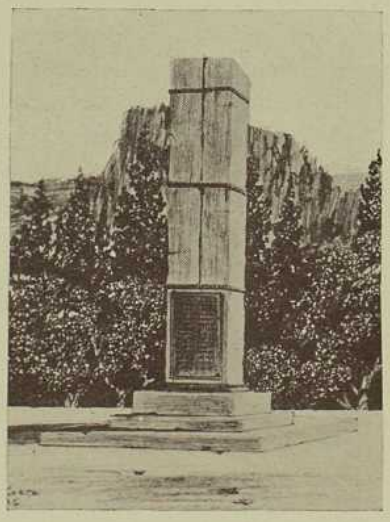
By June 14 he had reached Spokane House and five days later cut across country through the valley of the Colville following a well beaten Indian road to the Kettle Falls of the Columbia near the present town of Colville on the Great Northern Railway.

There they found a village of fishing Indians engaged in spearing and netting salmon. The salmon were to the Columbia River Indians what the buffalo were to the plains' tribes. Their villages dotted the banks of the river from Kettle Falls and above to the Pacific and their canoes made of its waters a relatively busy thoroughfare.

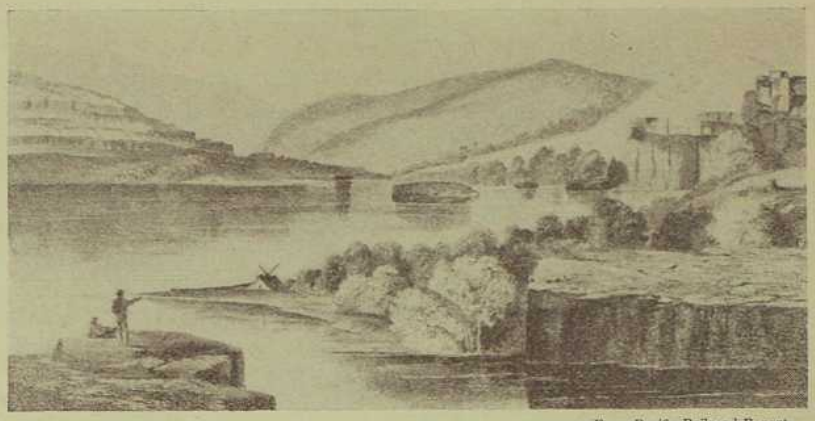
The tribe found at Kettle (Chaudière) Falls and called the Chaudières by later traders, belonged to the Salish nation. They lived in community houses or sheds from thirty to sixty feet long, with cross poles for smoke drying the fish. These sheds were built of cedar planks laboriously split with stone axe or wedge from the logs which drifted down the river.

The chief welcomed the white men with a gift of roasted salmon and roots; "but what," writes Thompson, "was that to nine hungry men?" and adds that a horse had to be sacrificed to augment the meal.

The process of procuring fish, like all the daily activities of the savage, was enhanced by ceremony and haunted by superstition. The five days of dancing and prayers which had welcomed the return of the salmon were just over and the business of the season engaged upon. At first, while the salmon were few, they were taken by a single spearsman, and later were netted.



Monument at Wishram, Wash.



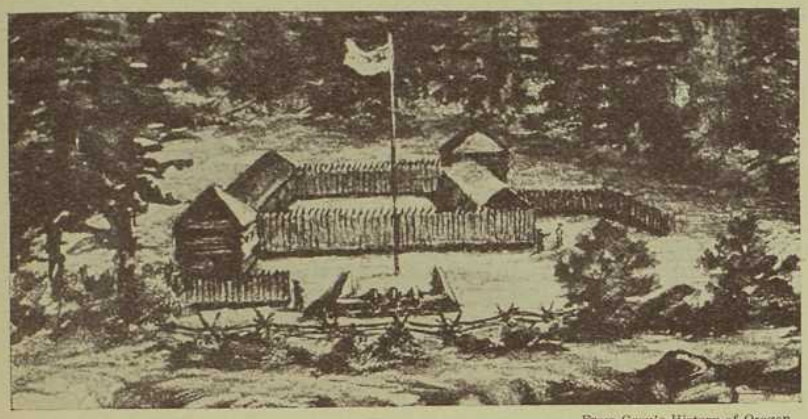
From Pacific Railroad Report

Columbia River Near Present City of Wenatchee

The Indians were extremely careful not to pollute the river with refuse or to permit any of the blood to remain on the spear, believing it would drive away the salmon. One morning the spearsman on his way to the river, passed too close to the bleached skull of a dog. He returned at once to his lodge where he underwent a long ceremony of purification.

The travelers remained a few days at this place to build a canoe and then "after praying the Almighty to protect and prosper us on our voyage to the ocean," they swung out into the current of the absolutely unknown river. There were besides Thompson five Canadian voyageurs, two Iroquois Indians and two of the local natives for interpreters.

Most of the tribes found along the river had never seen white men though they had heard rumors of the traders eastward in the Flathead country and knew of the ships which traded along the coast. They advanced to greet the travelers dancing and chanting "mild plaintive" songs, feasted them and performed elaborate prayers or incantations that the strangers might reach and return from the sea in safety. They assisted the carries which had to be made around the many rapids and brought presents of roots, salmon and sweet arrow berries. In return for one such gift which also included five horses and "the dried meat of four small, very fat animals which I took to be marmots" Thompson records that he gave "three feet of tobacco, fourteen plain and stone rings, eighteen hawk bells, six feet of a string of blue beads, nine feet of gartering, four papers of vermillion, four awls and six buttons which they thankfully received." He requested the chief to keep the horses until their return.



From Gray's History of Oregon

Fort Astoria as it Appeared Upon Thompson's Arrival

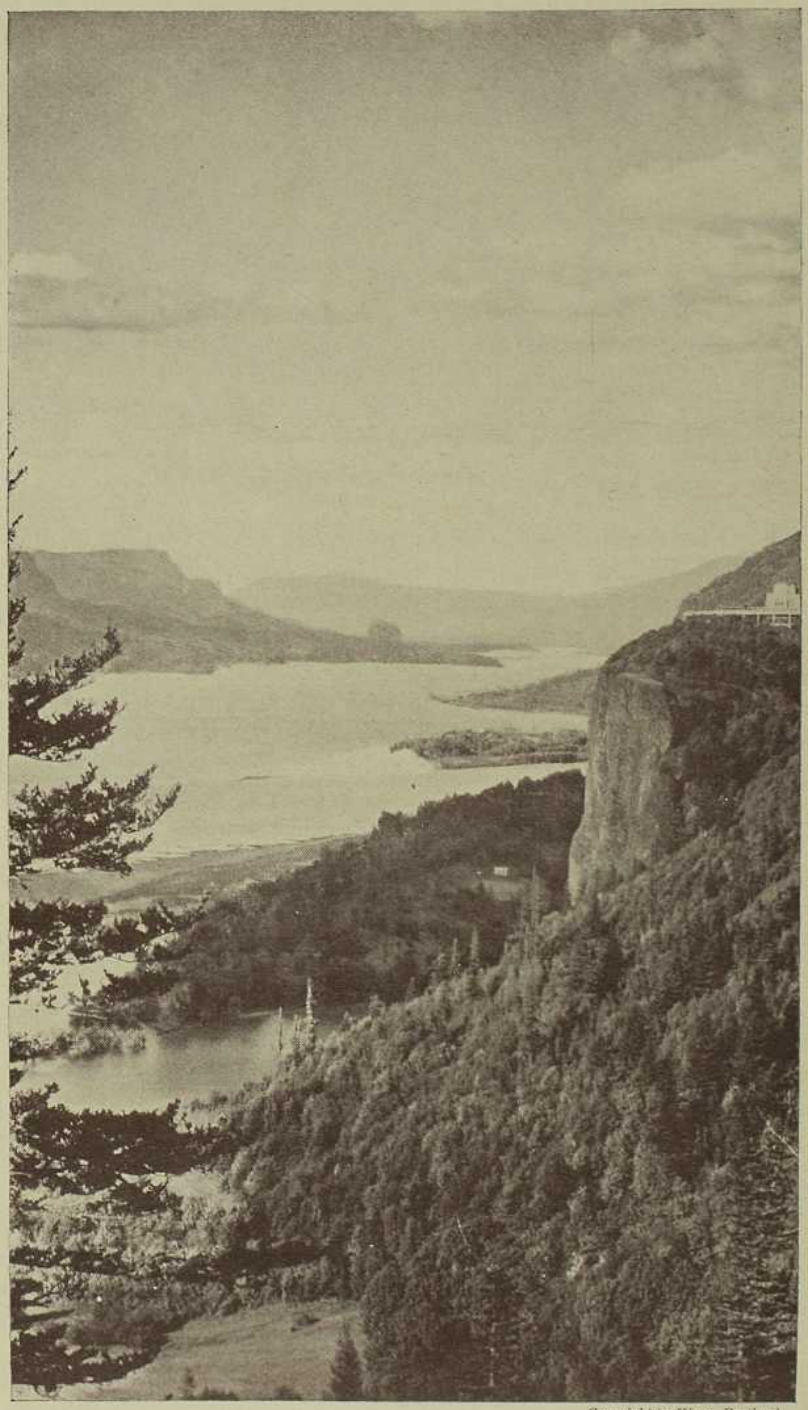
At the mouth of Snake River where the city of Pasco on the S. P. & S. Railway now stands, Thompson put up a pole and bound to it a paper bearing this inscription: "Know hereby that this country is claimed by Great Briton as part of its Territories, and that the North West Company of Merchants from Canada . . . intend to erect a factory at this place for the convenience of the country around. D. Thompson."

A few days later at John Day River, Thompson learned from the natives that the American ship (The Tonquin) had already arrived at the mouth of the Columbia; he makes no comment on the information in his narrative.

On down the Columbia where only Lewis and Clark had preceded him; around the great falls by a difficult portage and where at the present city of Wishram a monument has been erected by the Great Northern Railway Company to the early traders and emigrants who descended the Columbia from this place; and past the Dalles where for many years robber Indians were to attack and harass the fur brigades; through the deep gorge of the Cascades, among Indians now who had traded with ships "mostly of the U. S. and learned a great part of the worst words in their language," then tide water at last and the end of the long journey.

In full view lay the Pacific, and with British flag flying from the prow, his canoe swept up to the landing place at the "fur trading Post of Mr. J. J. Astor of the City of New York; which was four low Log Huts, the far famed Fort Astoria of the United States—"

He made no reference to rival trade but spoke only of the subject so near his heart: "Thus I have fully completed the



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Lower Reaches of the Columbia River

survey of this part of North America from sea to sea (Hudson's Bay to the Pacific) and by almost innumerable observations have determined the positions of mountains, lakes and rivers, and other remarkable places on the northern part of this continent."

A few days only at Fort Astoria and then the indefatigable traveler turned his face eastward. When he reached Kettle Falls, he proceeded up the Columbia along the stretch not before traversed, to Boat Encampment, surveying as he went. Thus he had traveled and surveyed every inch of the great river.

Thompson spent one more year among his posts in the Kootenai, Flathead and Columbia valley country and then retired from the far west forever. His final work for the company was the preparation, during the years 1813-14, of his great map of the Northwest.

Twenty-three years and over 50,000 miles of travel by canoe, on foot and on horseback, through forest and prairie, along tumultuous waterways, across mountain gorges choked with fallen timber, roots, tangled underbrush and broken rocks, where no path lay and no white man had ever been, in winter blizzard and summer sun, and such careful surveying and observation as only a loving absorption in the subject could inspire,—all this was the stuff of which Thompson's map was made.

It was no mere survey of individual lines of travel. His purpose was to give a complete physical knowledge of the vast region.

"Careful traverses were made by a master in the art, short courses taken with a magnetic compass the variation of which was constantly determined . . . and the whole checked by numerous astronomical observations for latitude and longitude." (Tyrrell.)

Although he had no public recognition, his work was well known to persons of authority and from 1816 to 1826 he was employed by the British government to survey the line of the International boundary between Canada and the United States.

From the time of the first treaty following the Revolutionary War to the settlement of the Oregon question in 1846, the boundary between the British possessions and the United States was a matter of unending dispute between the nations.

Thompson believed that Great Britain had never been adequately represented on the various commissions and that she failed in each decision to obtain full justice. He repeatedly sent

long and urgent letters to England explaining the topography and history of the regions under dispute and what he believed to be the just claims of the British.

These communications were ignored and Thompson saw even the magnificent country which he himself had discovered and occupied—now part of Washington, Idaho and Montana—yielded to the Americans.

The latter years of his life were darkened by misfortune; a large sum of money loaned to assist in building a church was never repaid; his sons whom he established in business failed and it took the last of his competence to pay their debts. He was obliged to sell the comfortable home where he had lived since his retirement from the Boundary survey and move to Montreal where he could find employment. He was an old man, but he took up once more the arduous labor of his youth. When almost seventy he surveyed the canoe route from Lake Huron to the upper Ottawa and the shores of St. Peter Lake. (Cochrane.)

His strength and eyesight failed. At last the veteran leader of so many heroic journeys, the scientist who made the first important and by all means the most comprehensive and accurate map of the Northwest, whose topographical records including the early surveys made for the Hudson's Bay Company had been incorporated with no acknowledgment in the Arrowsmith and other English maps, found himself destitute. He tried to sell a few remaining charts and sketches to a gentleman who did not buy but mercifully loaned $5.00. Another time he thanks God for being able to borrow two shillings from a friend.

In 1857 when Thompson was eighty-seven years old, the Canadian government wanted a map of the Northwest. They helped themselves to his—the only one there was—making no mention, taking no slightest notice of the author.

That same year, poor and forgotten, Thompson died. His wife, who had borne him thirteen children, survived him only three months. With no monument marking either grave, she was buried beside the man whose noble work laid the foundation of all accurate knowledge of the West.

THE END

Printed in U. S. A.

GREAT NORTHERN