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SIR ALEXANDER MACKENZIE

By
ADRIAN MACDONALD, M.A.

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PRICE 10 CENTS
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THE RYERSON PRESS
TORONTO

2193072

152, 133

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F5819.1

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I

ON JUNE 5, 1789, old Fort Chipewyan, situated on the south shore of the Lake of the Hills (now Lake Athabasca), in the heart of that vast, desolate region which stretches from the Rocky Mountains to Hudson's Bay, was the scene of considerable bustle and excitement. The lonely inmates of this remote trading post, who usually had nothing better to do than smoke their pipes and whittle withes for snowshoes, had been hurrying about in a decidedly purposeful manner since early morning; and at nine o'clock four birch bark canoes shoved off from the rough landing-place under the fort and headed westward down the lake. The largest canoe held eight occupants—four French-Canadian *voyageurs*, two of whom were accompanied by their wives, a German, and a young fur-trader of the North-West Company, named Alexander Mackenzie; the second was occupied by a stalwart Indian chief, the guide of the expedition, with his squaws; the third contained two sharp-eyed and sinewy native hunters; while the

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fourth, which was to go with the others only as far as Great Slave Lake, was full of general merchandise in charge of a clerk of the company, called Leroux. Two thousand miles away, in the villages along the St. Lawrence, summer was in full swing; but as these hardy voyagers struck their paddles into the water, though the trees and shrubs were in leaf, the nip of winter was still keen in the air. Farewells were shouted; muskets were fired; and the little party settled down to the long, long journey which lay before them.

Alexander Mackenzie, the strong, bold, weather-tanned youth so conspicuous in the largest canoe, was the leader of the expedition. A daring spirit, never content to remain idle, he showed all the enterprise and love of action so characteristic of his Scottish ancestors. Twenty-four years earlier he had been born in the little town of Stornoway, in the Hebrides; but the scent of the sea must have set him dreaming of adventure, for at sixteen he had crossed the ocean and was in the counting-house of one of the fur-trading companies in Montreal. The firm in whose warehouses he had found em-

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ployment was a small corporation that had been started in opposition to the North-West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, who were the two big fur-trading firms of that day. For five years he counted furs and made neat figures in a ledger; but nature had cut him out for something more active than a clerkship, and at the end of that period he was sent inland to Detroit, a lonely settlement in the midst of the forest.

In Detroit he spent about a year, learning the shrewd art of bartering powder and shot, blankets, beads and simple utensils for valuable peltries, after which he was given a share in the company and was sent several hundred miles farther into the wilderness. The new task that was assigned him was one that required astuteness and daring. At that time the rivalry between the various fur companies was intense, and it was Mackenzie's duty to intercept the Indians on their way to the Hudson's Bay Company's post at Fort Churchill, and by flattery and gifts to obtain from them the rich products of their hunting. This duty he performed with such success that he became known as

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one of the most enterprising young men in the business.

But his wanderings had not yet reached their end. The bitterness between the rival companies went from bad to worse, until in the end it led to bloodshed. A popular young trader of Mackenzie's firm, whose post lay far to the west, was killed as the result of a long-standing feud between himself and a rival in the employ of the North-West Company. Saner heads decided that something must be done to put an end to the strife, and a union was effected between the company of which Mackenzie was a member and the North-West Company. Following this union Mackenzie was appointed to take over the duties both of the murdered man and of his murderer, and business once more went energetically forward.

With his headquarters thirty miles south of Lake Athabasca, on the Elk (now the Athabasca) River, he settled down to the routine of fur-trading. But the monotony of the existence palled upon his restless spirit. He was young; his ambition ran high; the prospect of spending the best

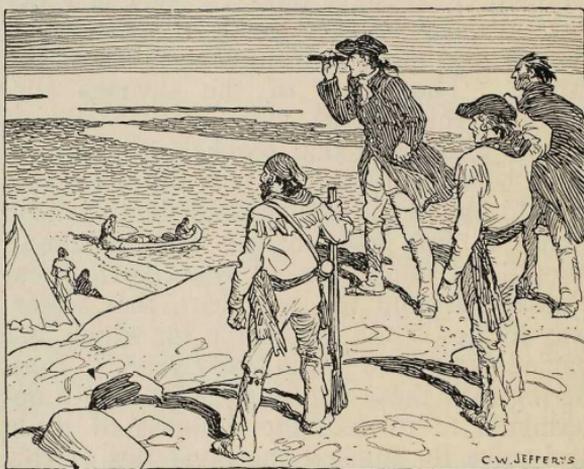
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years of his life in haggling with the Indians became loathsome to him; and he longed to do something more heroic. Rumours kept coming to his ears of a mighty river which drained Great Slave Lake (a body of water several days' journey north of Lake Athabasca) and flowed on into the mists of the Arctic. The fancy of the savages surrounded this stream with such stories of marvel and terror that Mackenzie's imagination was fascinated. Where did it empty? Would its course lead through lands whose riches in furs had not yet been touched? Would its mouth reveal that North-West Passage around the continent, that waterway to the Orient, the search for which had baffled navigators for so many years? Pondering over these questions he at length determined to forsake the dullness of trade and solve for himself the mysteries of this great unknown river.

Certain difficulties, however, stood in his way. The recent trade rivalry had stirred up such feelings of unrest amongst the natives that it would have been unsafe to leave the affairs of the post in charge of any subordinate. It was doubtful, moreover, if

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the governor of the North-West Company would take kindly to a request for leave from this young man who had been until recently such an enterprising enemy of the



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company's interests. The first difficulty Mackenzie surmounted by calling upon his cousin, Roderick Mackenzie, also a fur-trader, to come and take charge of the post; the second he disposed of by saying not a

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word about his intentions to any one except his most intimate friends. When his cousin arrived they decided upon moving their headquarters to a more advantageous spot on the shores of Lake Athabasca. Fort Chipewyan was built; Roderick was initiated into the business of the company; and Alexander Mackenzie was enabled to put off on his daring voyage of exploration.

II

The four canoes proceeded to the western end of the lake and then struck northward into the river which flows from Lake Athabasca through several leagues of thickly wooded country to Great Slave Lake. The winding course of this river was more or less familiar to the voyagers—Leroux and the Indians had been over it many times before—but it was not without its perils. The rapids and falls were particularly dangerous. One of the canoes, which at the time was being paddled by a squaw, was caught in the swirl of the current above a falls, and, although the woman was able to save herself by plunging into the water and swimming wildly for shore, the canoe itself, with everything in it, was lost. But otherwise

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they proceeded on their way without mishap. Some of the less tumultuous rapids they ran, but most of them they avoided by laboriously dragging the boats and baggage over rocks and fallen trees—a task that was doubly unpleasant on account of the mosquitoes and ‘bulldog flies’ which followed them in clouds. Snow still lay in the more sheltered spots of the forest. Rain came on, and fogs, and a bitterly cold north wind; and when, after six days’ travelling, they arrived at Great Slave Lake, they found it still a dreary sheet of unbroken ice.

It was several days before the wind and the rain had broken the ice sufficiently for them to proceed. But on the 15th the wind, which had been in the north, veered to the west and opened a navigable passage. Seven days’ hard paddling brought them to the north shore of the lake. Here they fell in with some Indians of the Redknife tribe, who provided them with a guide. But this guide, who professed great knowledge of the region, was really of very little use. His information was exceedingly vague and inaccurate. The outlet for which they were seeking lay somewhere in the west—that

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was all he seemed to know. Day after day they searched for it, sometimes scudding through the waves of the open lake under a little patch of sail, sometimes paddling cautiously into deep bays that looked as if they might lead to an outlet. But finally, at five in the morning of June 29, they rounded a point which revealed to them the object of their search—a broad, shallow estuary, the feeding ground of hundreds of wild fowl, which gradually narrowed into the course of a river. Night found them encamped on the bank of this unknown waterway, in territories which no white man had ever before visited.

Each day that followed was very much like every other day. By four or five in the morning, while the mists still hung in the chilly air, their frail flotilla was afloat on that great river, now called after the leader of the expedition, which is as broad as a lake and as majestic as the sea. The constant dread of the party was lest the easy current of the great stream should imperceptibly quicken and, before they were aware of their danger, dash them headlong over the brink of some huge cataract; and

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often when the weather was thick their intent ears were deceived into believing that they caught the roar of rushing waters ahead. Day after day, as they journeyed on, great mountains whose tops were lost in the clouds appeared and vanished. Frequently they came on the remains of former Indian encampments, but for a long time they encountered no human inhabitants.

Their supplies of pemmican (pemmican is meat that has been dried in the sun, pounded into shreds and packed in sacks) were supplemented by the products of the country through which they passed. Whenever occasion offered, nets were set out and many kinds of fish were taken; and every morning the Indian hunters wandered off by themselves, to return at night laden with wild game of various sorts. The squaws, too, were able to add to the supplies by picking berries—cranberries, juniper berries, raspberries and several other edible varieties.

On Sunday, July 5, they descried blue-white columns of smoke rising from amongst the trees, some distance farther down the river. A nearer approach showed

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them that the smoke came from the fires of an Indian encampment. But as they pressed eagerly forward they could see that their sudden appearance had caused a wild panic amongst the natives. Some of them were vanishing into the woods, while others were scrambling hastily into their canoes. Mackenzie's Indians shouted to them and made friendly advances; but it was only with the greatest difficulty that they were persuaded to return.

When their fears had been laid to rest by trinkets—they seemed to know nothing of the use of tobacco or grog—they answered questions put to them through an interpreter. Their answers were not encouraging. Mackenzie wrote in his diary:

“It will be sufficient just to mention their attempts to persuade us that it would require several winters to get to the sea, and that old age would come upon us before the period of our return. We were also to encounter monsters of such horrid shapes and destructive powers as could only exist in their wild imaginations. They

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added, besides, that there were two impassable falls in the river, the first of which was about thirty days' march from us."

But one of their number was induced, in consideration of a kettle, an axe, a knife and a few other articles, to act as their guide.

From this point on the whole character of the region gradually altered. The trees decreased in size until they were little more than stunted shrubs; the banks became low and naked and were observed to be faced with ledges of ice; and the land itself was covered with short, coarse grass and flowers—some of these quite pretty despite the fact that snow and ice lay in the hollows. On a certain night Mackenzie sat up to make observations. At half-past-twelve he called one of his men to view a spectacle he had never before seen—the midnight sun. But the fellow, perceiving the sun high above the horizon, aroused several of his companions, and Mackenzie could scarcely persuade them that it was not time to embark. As they proceeded on their way they dis-

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covered, much to their relief, that the promised falls were nothing more dreadful than accelerations in the current so slight as to be almost imperceptible. The course of the river, however, was shortly broken into a maze of channels by many low, sandy islands. Traces of the Esquimaux were noticed—burnt-out ashes of previous fires, footprints, huts, whalebones—but no human creature could be found. One evening, after they had lain down to rest, the water rose so high that it became necessary for some of the party to get up and move their belongings farther back. At the time they thought little of this strange action of the water—attributed it, in fact, to the force of the wind. But next day, they caught sight of a school of whales disporting themselves in the waves, and they knew that they had reached the ocean.

So great was their exultation that they immediately clambered into one of the canoes and gave chase! What would have happened if they had come up with the huge monsters in their frail canoes can easily be imagined; but luckily for them a fog soon hid their quarry from sight and forced them

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to return to shore. The island upon which they landed after this rash escapade was named Whale Island; and Mackenzie erected on it a post upon which he inscribed the date and all the details of the expedition.

The return journey was toilsome, but uneventful, and, contrary to all expectations, the party was safely back at Fort Chipewyan before the winter set in. The following spring Mackenzie went down to Grand Portage, on Lake Superior, the assembly point for western fur-traders, where he made known the story of his explorations. But the other fur-traders were too much intent on their own business to pay much heed, and the heads of his own company seemed to think that he would have been much better employed in attending to his trading. This lack of enthusiasm, however, did not greatly disappoint him. His cousin had already prepared him for it, and in his own mind plans were forming for a more notable expedition.

On his way back from the Arctic he had questioned all the natives with whom he had come in contact about the country

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which lay beyond the mountains. In their big, imaginative way they had told him of another great river which flowed through that region and emptied into the sea. Fired with zeal for exploration, he had set his heart upon floating down this river to the Pacific Ocean. His Arctic voyage had convinced him, however, that for the making of accurate observations he required greater mathematical and astronomical knowledge. To make good this deficiency he journeyed to England where, for a year, he studied hard the required sciences.

III

When he returned to Fort Chipewyan, fully equipped with instruments and knowledge, he lost no time in starting on his second voyage of discovery. The early spring of 1793 found him far up the Peace River, headed for the mountains. On this expedition his whole party (there were ten in all), together with 3,000 pounds of baggage, was embarked in a single large canoe, built especially for the purpose.

The conditions of travel were vastly different from those of his earlier journey. Instead of floating down the broad bosom of

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a great, smoothly flowing river, he was this time laboriously forcing his way, by alternate towing and poling, up a brawling, turbulent stream, whose current at best was too strong to be stemmed by paddling, and at worst was a turmoil of rushing water, boiling and bubbling and dashing itself into spray against the rocks. The surrounding country was now as striking and picturesque, as entrancing in its massive loveliness, as the previous region had been dreary and desolate. Great mountains, capped with snow, towered into the clouds; abrupt precipices were interspersed with gently ascending lawns; willows and spruce trees and birches overhung the water and stood in inviting groves on the hillsides; and the whole scene, as he naively puts it, was "enlivened with vast herds of elks and buffaloes."

The hardships and perils of this second journey would furnish material for a thrilling serial in the movies. Towing their canoe through the more tumultuous rapids, poling it carefully up the smoother reaches, carrying it with infinite labour around some impassable cascade, they slowly ascended the mountain defile. Sometimes the banks

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of the river were low and accessible, but more often they were sheer walls of rock several hundred feet in height. One of the voyagers' chief dangers was from falling boulders. Without warning huge stones, dislodged from some ledge far above, would come hurtling down the mountain side. Several members of the party escaped being crushed to death only by the narrowest margin, and the canoe itself was frequently in peril.

At one point the travellers came to a foaming rapids which scouts reported to be fully nine leagues in length. To push on through the turmoil of waters was out of the question. No alternative offered but to portage all their goods and the huge canoe over a steep and thickly wooded mountain ridge. Nothing daunted, they set about the almost impossible task. A rough path was cleared through the forest by felling trees; a strong line was tied to the bow of the canoe and one man would hitch this around a tree trunk or a stump and hang on, while the others would hoist and pry and pull the heavy boat foot by foot up the steep incline. For three days they chopped and hauled

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and sweated, and it was with deep feelings of relief that they at last launched their canoe on the comparatively smooth water above the rapids.

From the general appearance of the surrounding country at this stage, Mackenzie began to suspect that they were approaching the head of the Peace River, and he watched the bank anxiously, but in vain, for some indications of a carrying-place that might lead to another navigable waterway. One day, however, while his men were paddling steadily up the river, they caught the scent of burning wood in the air, and a few moments later heard a confused sound of human voices excitedly talking in the woods ahead. Not wishing to encounter an unknown number of natives who might prove hostile, Mackenzie ordered his men to make for the opposite shore; but scarcely had the bow of the canoe been turned towards land, when two Indians appeared on a knoll directly ahead, and, brandishing their spears and displaying their bows and arrows, shouted and gesticulated in a very threatening manner. Mackenzie's interpreter entered into parley with them; but it

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was not until they had thoroughly satisfied themselves of the friendliness of the white men's intentions, that they permitted them to land.

It turned out that the party of Indians to whom these bold warriors belonged consisted of only three men, three women and seven or eight children. At the sight of the great canoe full of strangers coming up the river, they had been thrown into a state of considerable alarm, and the women and children, accompanied by one of the men, had been sent into the woods to hide. So great had been the consternation of the weaker members of the company, that they had not waited even to put on their leggings and shoes, with the result that when they were induced to return they were found to be in a sad condition, with scratched legs and bleeding feet. Gifts of trinkets and food, however, convinced them that the white men meant no harm, and the two parties encamped together peacefully for the night.

When Mackenzie judged that his new friends had somewhat recovered from their fright, he invited the men of the party to his

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tent, and questioned them closely as to whether or not there was a big river flowing from the mountains to the sea. They told him that other tribes farther to the west sometimes travelled to the sea (or as they called it the Stinking Lake) but they declared that they knew of no river which flowed in that direction. Again and again he put the question, but always in vain. Either they did not know of any waterway to the coast, or else they were unwilling to share their information with a stranger. When they departed for the night, they left him in a state of deep perplexity. What should he and his *voyageurs* do next? To strike across the mountains on foot, with all their goods on their backs, would be impossible; and to keep on paddling upstream in an attempt to discover a water-route which even the Indians were unfamiliar with, would be even more hopeless. For long hours he lay awake puzzling over the difficult problem, and in the morning he once more questioned the Indians.

At first his efforts brought no greater success than the night before; but about nine o'clock, as they all sat around the

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camp-fire, his sharp ear caught the Indian word for a big river, and he saw one of his new friends point significantly up the stream whose course they had been following. When Mackenzie eagerly asked about this big river, he was told that a branch of it could be reached by travelling on through the mountains, but that it flowed towards the mid-day sun and did not empty into the sea. Believing, despite what the Indians said, that this must be the stream he was looking for, he gave one of them a strip of birch bark and a piece of charcoal, and had him draw a map of the intervening country.

So exact was this rough sketch that Mackenzie knew for a certainty that he was not being deceived. Without delay, therefore, he gave orders to pack, and by ten o'clock, with one of the friendly Indians acting as guide, he was once more on his way. For some distance they proceeded upstream, then portaged to a small lake which nestled tranquilly amongst the hills, and from it portaged to a second lake, which brought them to the topmost ridge of the vast watershed. Two streams, soft and white as lace, tumbled down the rocks into the body of

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water they had just left, while two others fell into a third lake which they were just about to enter. From this latter lake they pushed their way into a narrow stream, much obstructed with sand bars and fallen trees, and began their descent of the western slope of the mountain range.

IV

If their progress up the Peace River had been hazardous, their descent of this new stream was fraught with even greater danger. Not knowing what whirlpool or cataract might lie in wait beyond the next bend, they plunged headlong down with the current. Even the Indian guide was terrified. Something of the dangers they encountered every day is suggested by the following abridged extract from Mackenzie's diary:

“We accordingly pushed off, and had proceeded but a very short way when the canoe struck, and the violence of the current was so great as to drive her sideways down the river, and break her by the first bar, when I instantly jumped into the water and

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the rest followed my example; but before we could set her straight, or stop her, we came to deeper water, so that we were obliged to re-embark with the utmost precipitation. We had hardly regained our situations when we drove against a rock which shattered the stern of the canoe. The violence of this stroke drove us to the opposite side of the river, when the bow met with the same fate as the stern. At this moment the foreman seized on some branches of a small tree in the hope of bringing up the canoe, but he was jerked on shore in an instant, and with a degree of violence that threatened his destruction. But we had no time to enquire what had befallen him; for in a few moments we came across a cascade which broke several large holes in the bottom of the canoe. The wreck becoming flat on the water, we all jumped out. In this condition (clinging to the wreck) we were forced several hundred yards, and every yard on the verge of destruction; but at length we most fortunately ar-

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rived in shallow water and a small eddy, where we were enabled to make a stand, from the weight of the canoe resting on the stones, rather than from any exertions of our exhausted strength."

In this predicament Mackenzie showed real genius for leadership. The situation seemed utterly hopeless: everything the party owned was soaked through and through, their bullets had been lost in the stream, their canoe was almost a complete wreck, they themselves were aching from the cold of the water. The Indians, who had been following along the bank, when they arrived on the scene and saw the desperate state of their companions, instead of trying to help, "sat down and gave vent to their tears." And both Indians and white men were loud in their declarations that nothing remained but to turn back. Mackenzie listened to them patiently; raised no objections; appeared in fact to agree with all they said; until with their clothes dry and their hearts cheered by an extra hearty meal and an extra large measure of rum,

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they assembled around the camp-fire. Then he addressed them. After a few inspiring words about the honour that would be theirs if they succeeded in overcoming such great difficulties, he went on to point out how new bullets could be manufactured from smaller shot, how the canoe could be repaired with birch bark and gum—how, indeed, with a little work everything could be put in condition for a renewal of the voyage. The effect of his speech was all that could be desired. When he finished speaking his men declared with enthusiasm that they were ready to follow wherever he would lead.

After much toil—the stream they were following ran through low-lying swampy land extremely difficult for portaging—they came to the big river which was the object of their search, and floated easily out upon its broad, smooth surface. The surrounding country still continued mountainous, but it was pleasanter and more fertile than that through which they had been passing. The shadows along the shore were deepened by the sombre branches of tall fir trees, and the damp river mists which hung in the air were perfumed with the sweet scent of

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cedars. For several days they proceeded downstream with comparatively little effort; but just when they were beginning to hope that the hardest part of their journey had been left behind, they were once more plunged into difficulties. Certain natives whom they met told them that this river (it is called on our maps the Fraser River) certainly emptied into the sea, but that it was so long and its course was beset with so many dangers that they could never hope to reach its mouth. These Indians went on to say, however, that if they would go back upstream for three days' journey they would find the beginning of a much shorter route overland to the sea.

To turn back at this juncture and to forsake the only navigable waterway they had encountered Mackenzie felt would be very discouraging for his weary followers; but he rightly concluded that no other course lay open to him. His supplies of food were running short; only 150 bullets were left, and time was becoming very precious. With some reluctance he therefore turned about and started back upstream. Much to his disgust, however, at this point the canoe, as

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a result of the rough usage it had suffered, completely gave out, and a new one had to be built. Much valuable time was wasted in gathering birch bark and gum and in fashioning the new craft, but at last his little company arrived at the trail referred to by the Indians and made ready for the long tramp which lay before them. A hut was hastily constructed for the canoe and such other belongings as could not be carried; pemmican, corn and powder were secretly buried for the return journey; and with their goods upon their backs these indomitable travellers set off through the forest.

Seventeen days' hard travelling brought them to the sea. The Indians along the way had proved to be very friendly and hospitable; but those who lived on the coast were quite different. Not in the least afraid of strangers, they showed themselves exceedingly aggressive and insolent, examining everything the white men owned, stealing whatever they could lay their hands on, and even threatening violence. One particularly impudent rogue, who shoved himself into Mackenzie's canoe, declared that he had been shot at only a few days before

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by a white man called *Macubah*, who had come there in a big canoe, and that another of the white men named *Benzins* had beaten him with the flat of his sword. Mackenzie wrote feelingly in his journal that he did "not doubt but he well deserved the treatment which he described"; but he himself could not continue the lesson in manners for fear of offending the fellow's tribe. Mackenzie, indeed, for the first time admitted that he was alarmed. He warned his followers to be constantly on their guard, and he remained in the neighborhood no longer than was necessary. Before starting on his return journey, however, he took accurate observations of his position and painted on a rock the inscription:

"Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada, by land, the twenty-second of July, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three."

It may be noted in passing that the impudent Indian's story of being mistreated by white men was probably quite true. At the very time that Mackenzie was writing his inscription on the rock, another great explorer, whose name was not *Macubah*, as

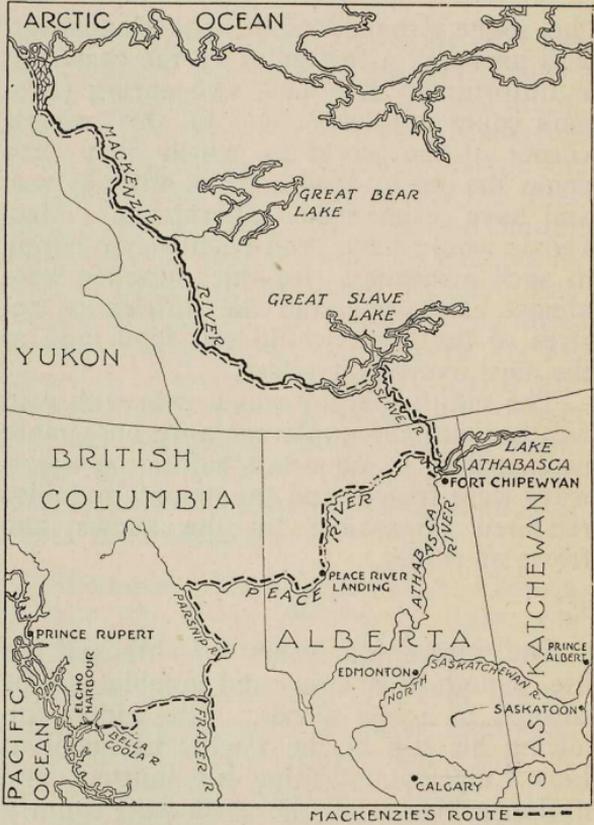
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the rogue pronounced it, but Vancouver, was anchored a few miles up the coast. It is unfortunate that these two daring voyagers could not have met in this remote corner of the world to which they had come, the one by land and the other by sea, and have exchanged experiences. Mackenzie would have been particularly happy at such a meeting, for his supplies were almost exhausted, and the unfriendly natives of the coast would sell food only at the most exorbitant prices.

The return journey was a race with cold weather, but the explorers were once more back at their headquarters before the waterways were frozen, and the mountain defiles rendered impassible by the snows and frosts of winter.

V

The succeeding years of Mackenzie's life, though prosperous and notable, can be covered in a few words. The winter following his trip to the Pacific he spent at Fort Chipewyan writing his journal; and in the spring he left the north-west country for good. Not long afterwards he began a



MACKENZIE'S JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

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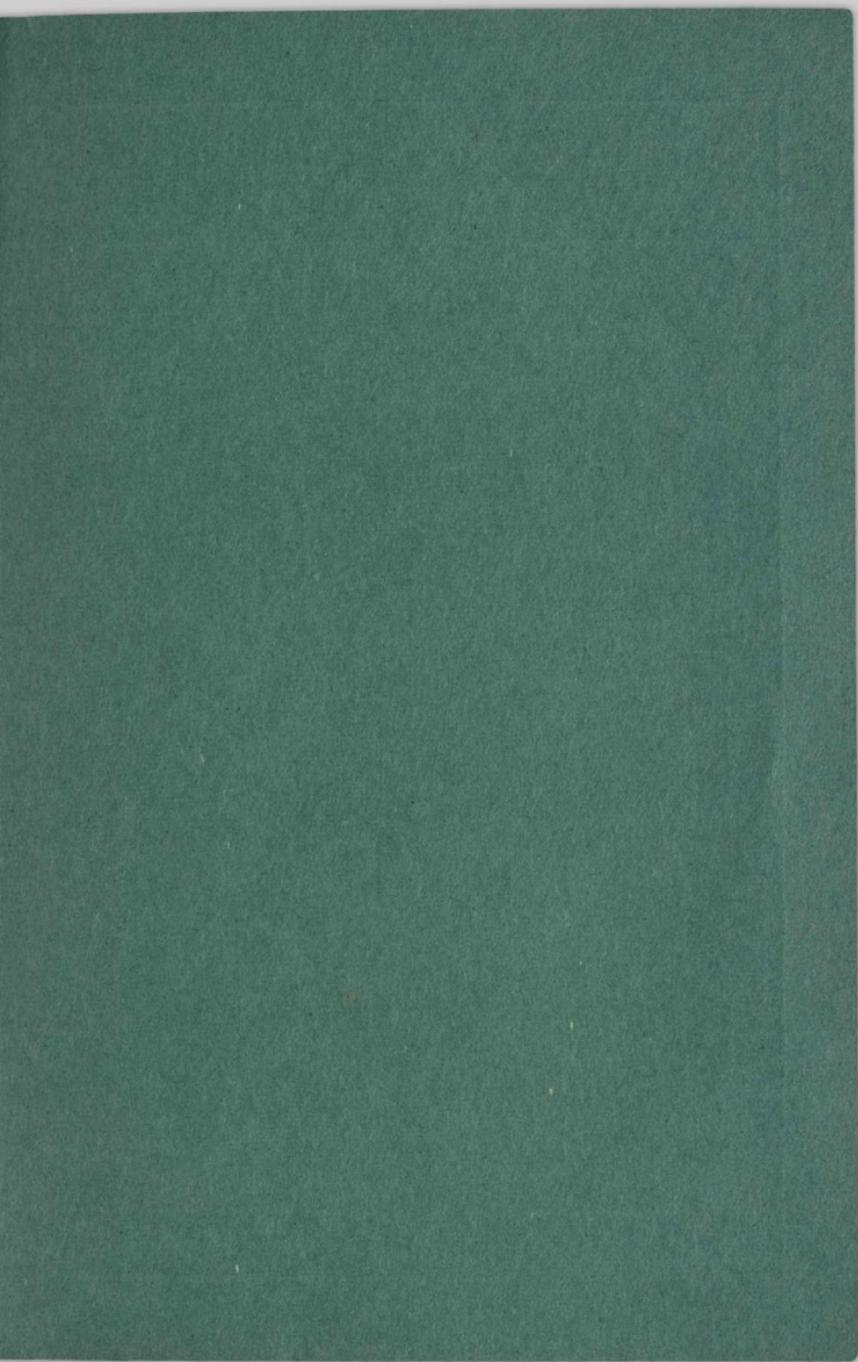
lasting friendship with royalty by acting as travelling companion to the Duke of Kent, Queen Victoria's father, while that nobleman was stationed in Canada. In 1801 a book telling the story of his two famous voyages was published in London under the title, "Voyages from Montreal through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans."

This book, a heavy volume with maps and a portrait of the author, has an interesting story of its own. Two episodes in connection with it are worth mentioning. At the time of its publication Napoleon was at the height of his power, and, eager to distract England's attention from the continent, he conceived the idea of striking at her through her colonies. This idea was to be carried out in a most daring manner. A French army was to be landed at New Orleans, and, by proceeding up the Mississippi, was to pour into Canada from the south. Bernadotte, one of Napoleon's favorite marshals, was assigned the task of organizing this amazing expedition, and was instructed to read everything he could get on the geography of North America.

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Mackenzie's volume, which was being much talked of, was obtained from smugglers, was translated into French, and was studied with the closest attention by both Bernadotte and the Emperor. The wild scheme of invading Canada was soon forgotten in the turmoil of the Russian campaign; but years afterwards Bernadotte, who had meanwhile become King of Sweden, could still recall the interest with which he had perused and re-perused this fascinating book of travels. The second episode was, perhaps, less romantic, but rather more productive of results. The Earl of Selkirk read the volume and was inspired by it to start his famous settlement on the banks of the Red River, which has since grown into the city of Winnipeg.

Mackenzie himself became a well-known man in the fur-trade, was knighted, was married, and ultimately settled down upon an estate in Scotland where he occupied himself with the unexciting duties of a gentleman farmer. His death occurred in 1820, very suddenly, while he was returning from a visit to London.



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* These are published. Others are in active preparation.

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