



NFB FILM

STUDY GUIDE

David Thompson **THE GREAT MAPMAKER** (The History Makers series)

Black & White — 28 minutes
Produced by the National Film Board of Canada

Suggested Uses: History classes in junior and senior high schools.

SYNOPSIS

David Thompson, a boy from a London charity school, was apprenticed at fourteen to the Hudson's Bay Company. Under the watchful eye and careful guidance of the Company's Factor at Cumberland House, he developed his abiding interest in surveying and map-making. Because the Company was unsympathetic towards his ambitions as a geographer, he accepted a position with the rival North West Company where the value of his work was more appreciated.

Now free to pursue the work he loved, he surveyed the land around the forty-ninth parallel in the Red River country, the Athabaska region, and the Columbia River from its source to its entrance into the Pacific. These regions, as well as many others, were charted by the dedicated explorer, David Thompson, who during his lifetime surveyed and mapped a million-and-a-half square miles of new country — the greatest known achievement in land geography.

CONCEPTS

Major Concept:

David Thompson probably made the greatest achievement in land geography. So accurate was his work, that modern survey techniques can only slightly improve it. While his explorations are impressive, his chief monument must always be the great basic map of the Canadian West.

Supporting Concepts:

- In 1784 David Thompson, a fourteen-year-old charity school pupil from London, was apprenticed to the Hudson's Bay Company.
- He began to study surveying and map-making at Cumberland House, under the guidance of the Company Factor, Philip Turnor.
- Neither the riches of the Orient nor the wealth of the fur trade inspired Thompson: the wilderness for him was challenge enough.
- Thompson was transferred to York Factory, where he was directed to forget about map-making and concentrate on the fur trade.
- After six years he received grudging permission to search out a route between the Churchill River and Lake Athabaska.
- The valuable route found, he was ordered back to the main task.
- Discouraged and frustrated, he accepted a position with the rival North West Company.
- His new employer, impressed by his skill in survey work, assigned him the job of charting the border region around the Red River.
- He travelled 4,000 miles and located the exact position of every North West Company post in the area.
- Thompson's next project was to find a useable overland route to the Pacific.
- The first attempt by way of the Ram River ended in failure.

- The next few years were spent in the Peace River country, trading for furs and making detailed notes on wildlife, landscape, weather and geography.
- By 1807 the attempt to reach the Pacific was more urgent.
- Despite some problems with the Piegan Indians, Thompson found the Columbia River and spent three years in the Kootenay region mapping the whole area south of the river's source.
- By the spring of 1811 all was in readiness for the long-delayed journey down the Columbia.
- By this time it was a question whether the North West Company or the American Fur Company would reach the mouth of the river first.
- When Thompson was still two days from salt water, he learned that the Americans had beaten him by nearly three months.
- Although John Astor's men had won the prize, Thompson must get the credit for being the first white man to follow the Columbia River from its source to the Pacific.
- His chief memorial, however, is the basic map of the Canadian West.

SUGGESTED CLASS PREPARATION

a) Introduction:

A knowledge and appreciation of the work of David Thompson is a pre-requisite to the understanding of the exploration of Western Canada. It relates not only to the physical problem of this great region, but also to the economic considerations implicit in the rivalry between the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies. By using still pictures of Thompson, Fraser, Mackenzie and the various other explorers of the West, the teacher can establish an effective focus for class attention. Then the film, can in its turn, not only delineate the main achievements in this great period of exploration, but also bring a realism to these dramatic events, which could not be obtained by other more traditional methods.

b) Words That May Cause Difficulty:

ultimate	smattering	fraught
apprentice	venture	embark
elude	obscurity	obstinacy

c) Directive Questions:

1. Where was David Thompson first apprenticed?
2. Who inspired his early interest in survey work and map-making?
3. Why did the Governor of York Factory object to Thompson's interest in geography?
4. How many years passed before he was permitted to carry out an exploration project?
5. What did he discover on this expedition?
6. Why did Thompson join the North West Company?
7. What was his first assignment for his new employer?
8. Where did he make his second survey?
9. How did Thompson find a route through the mountains to the Pacific?
10. When and where did he reach the Pacific?
11. Why was he unable to claim the region at the mouth of the Columbia for his Company?
12. Why should David Thompson be remembered?

SUGGESTED FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Take up and discuss the directive questions.
2. Have the class prepare a large map of Western Canada and on it indicate the main explorations of David Thompson.
3. Students should locate the following: Fort Churchill; Cumberland House; York Factory; Lake Athabaska; Wallaston Lakes; Bedford House; Grand Portage; Fort Augustus; Rocky Mountain House; Kootenay; Ram River; Columbia River.
4. Discuss the degree to which Thompson's achievements were recognized in his lifetime.
5. Try to discover why Thompson delayed so long in making his descent of the Columbia.
6. Find out and sketch the type of survey equipment used by Thompson.