

Alexander Mackenzie: The Lord of the North

Study Guide

Historical Context

Alexander Mackenzie, an ambitious fur trader and explorer, was the first European to reach the Arctic Ocean by travelling Canada's longest river (which now bears his name). Armed only with a crude map drawn by explorer Peter Pond, he set off from Fort Chipewyan in 1789, hoping to reach the Great Western Sea (which we know now as the Pacific Ocean) and hence a route to China. Instead, by finding a route to the Arctic Ocean, Mackenzie solved the last great geographical puzzle of the Canadian northwest. The 81-day journey covered approximately 4 000 kilometres. Undaunted by his failure to find the Pacific, Mackenzie organized a second expedition, in 1793, which did travel successfully to that ocean.

This film presents a dramatization of Mackenzie's voyage. It is particularly powerful because most of the narration comes directly from Mackenzie's own journal.

Research, Discussion and Writing Topics

1. List some of the risks faced by adventurers like Mackenzie during the great age of exploration.
2. Write a brief biography of Alexander Mackenzie, focusing on one of the following themes: his youth; his career as a merchant; his role as second-in-command at the Athabasca River trading post, his role as director of Fort Chipewyan; his career as an explorer; his career as a writer.
3. List the highlights of Mackenzie's voyage to the Arctic Ocean.
4. Using a large map of Western Canada, indicate the routes of Mackenzie's explorations.
5. Research and write about Alexander Mackenzie's 1793 voyage to the Pacific.
6. In many ways, the 20th century was another great era of exploration, with the launching of space missions. Compare the exploits of 18th-century maritime explorers and those of astronauts, as well as the risks they each faced.

Questions

1. What moments in the film show Mackenzie's:
 - a. daring as an adventurer
 - b. knowledge of exploration
 - c. humility
 - d. firmness as a leader
 - e. human kindness

2. What do you know about Peter Pond, who is mentioned in Mackenzie's journal?

3. For Mackenzie, what were the advantages and disadvantages of employing First Nations guides?

4. What is significant about Mackenzie's remark that the sun rose at two o'clock by his watch?

5. On what note of hope does the story of this expedition end?

6. What was the significance of Mackenzie's first voyage?