

David Thompson: The Great Mapmaker

User's Guide

Historical Context

In the mid-seventeenth century, British explorers took up the search begun by Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Vérendrye for a western passage to the Pacific Ocean. Once they reached the Pacific, they reasoned, the riches of the Orient would become accessible to them.

David Thompson was one of the greatest of these explorers. Some of the Native people who knew him called Thompson Koo Koo Sind: the man who looks at stars.

Early attempts to find a passage to the Pacific led explorers (like Alexander Mackenzie) to the Arctic Ocean instead. And since it was frozen most of the year, the Arctic Ocean could not serve as a reliable trade route.

So the British turned their hands to mapping the western territories of what is now Canada. It was an enormous land: covered with prairie in the south and boreal forest in the north, inhabited by many Aboriginal nations, filled with roaming herds of bison and home to countless beavers — the key to the fur trade.

For most of the 18th century, the Hudson's Bay Company had enjoyed a near-monopoly on the fur trade. But in 1784, the North West Company began mounting a serious threat to the HBC, by hiring the people who knew the western territories best: Métis, *coureurs de bois* and *voyageurs*.

David Thompson arrived at Fort Churchill as a Hudson's Bay Company apprentice in 1784. He was just 14 years old at the time. In 1789, he began studying cartography with the HBC's official surveyor, Philip Turnor. But before launching his career as a mapmaker he was engaged in the fur trade for six long years. During that time, an impatient Thompson frequently requested the right to go on an expedition to territories never seen by Europeans. Finally, in 1796, he was allowed to go, on condition that he finance his own expedition. It proved to be a miserable journey, from which Thompson returned discouraged. The Company did not believe that the recently discovered route to Lake Athabasca would prove profitable, and they ordered Thompson to concentrate his efforts on trade, not exploration.

A few years later, Thompson was hired by the North West Company as an explorer and cartographer. He would be the first European to discover a route to the Pacific

through the Rocky Mountains — which he did by following the Columbia River from its source to its mouth.

Thompson died at Longueuil, Quebec en 1857, leaving behind an extraordinary legacy: the first map of all of Western Canada, a territory covering 2,4 million square kilometres. It was the greatest achievement in the history of cartography.

Research, Discussion and Writing Topics

- What positive influence did Philip Turnor have on the young David Thompson?
- Using the words of company directors and shareholders, compare the goals of the Hudson's Bay Company with those of the North West Company.
- Write a biographical sketch of David Thompson, using the following landmark dates:
- 1770, 1784, 1787, 1789, 1796, 1799, 1800, 1807, 1811, 1812, 1816, 1826, 1857 and 1916.
- Do you believe that geography and history are complementary disciplines?