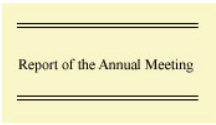
**Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association
Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada**



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DAVID THOMPSON MONUMENT

What amends posterity can offer for past neglect were made to the memory of a great explorer in the Mount Royal Cemetery, in Montreal on Monday, May 23, at noon. Seventy years ago in 1857 the body of David Thompson was laid there in an unmarked grave which was not even his own property. He died in extreme poverty and neglect and yet he was one of Canada's great men. By the efforts of the Canadian Historical Association which met with generous response a fund had been collected to rear a monument over the grave of the man who was the first to explore and to map large sections of the Canadian west, who discovered the sources of the Columbia river and indeed of the Mississippi and explored the Columbia from its source to its mouth. It was he who annexed the Oregon territory to the British Empire though this did not prove a permanent acquisition. During ten years after this he played an active part in determining the frontier between Canada and the United States from lake Superior eastward.

The memorial is a simple but dignified fluted pillar, surmounted by a sextant, and with its base is about nine feet in height. It is the work of the sculptor, Henri Hébert, R.C.A., who was present at the ceremony.

In the absence of the President, Professor George M. Wrong, Mr. Laurence J. Burpee, Chairman of the Management Committee of the Canadian Historical Association, presided. After explaining the purpose of the meeting and drawing attention to the fine quality of Mr. Hébert's work, Mr. Burpee called upon Sir Frederick Williams-Taylor, General Manager of the Bank of Montreal, to unveil the monument. Sir Frederick Williams-Taylor spoke as follows:—

One of the truest heroes in the history of our country, a history rich in heroism, is the man we honour to-day. Poor, ignored, neglected in his old age, David Thompson died among us unnoticed, and for seventy years has lain forgotten in a nameless grave. By raising this belated monument we not only proclaim the high rank of Thompson on our heroic roll, but we acknowledge and wipe out, so far as now we can, the stain of past neglect.

The long eclipse of David Thompson's greatness has been largely due to one of the noblest elements in that greatness—a quality as admirable as it is rare—a magnificent modesty, a self-restraint amounting to self-effacement. Even the name of Thompson river, till now his chief memorial, was given not by himself but by his friend Simon Fraser. He lacked "pushfulness" when his personal interests were concerned, but in carrying to success the Herculean enterprise of his life he was "pushful" to the highest degree.

Intrepid, strenuous, indomitable, he overcame every obstacle with a concentrated, prudent, and persistent enthusiasm. Confronting all the perils of the Unknown, taking his life in his hand, forcing his way through mountains by untrodden paths, running furious rapids in improvised canoes, deserted by followers and guides, threatened by hostile and suspicious tribesmen, by cold and starvation, his energy and courage never failed or faltered.

Our blindness to the magnitude of his achievement is also partly due to this, that he was chiefly known, when known at all, as a "map-maker." The word has a dull and sedentary sound. He was a "surveyor," we say

—and to many the word recalls a man prosaically drawing a chain across the countryside and measuring straight lines from point to point.

Indeed, we have surveyors still among us whose hardships, adventures and hair-breadth escapes, taken all in the day's work, if told, would thrill the dullest imagination and make the slowest heart beat fast.

A great part of Thompson's fame as a map-maker has been withheld from him by other map-makers, who have constantly reproduced his work without in any way acknowledging its creator.

With little exaggeration we may describe the maps and sketches of this prince of map-makers, this king of surveyors, as having been drawn with his own life blood. In his great map of the whole vast territory he covered, from Hudson bay to the Pacific, we see condensed the toils and travels and adventures of twenty-eight indomitable years.

And let us not forget that he did all this while earning his bread as a trader.

David Thompson was born within the shadow of Westminster Abbey on the 25th of January, 1770. After seven years in a charity school he was apprenticed at the age of fourteen to the Hudson's Bay Company, and spent thirteen years in its service, followed by fifteen years under the rival North West Company. His day's work was to trade with Indians for furs, and he did it well—all the better for his sympathetic understanding of the red man and his tact in dealing with him.

But he was not content to do merely the duty required of him. He did far more. Travelling on foot and in canoe at least 50,000 miles within three decades, under circumstances most unfavourable for study and writing, wherever he went he not only took careful astronomical and other observations but recorded them as fully and methodically as if he were sitting comfortably at a college desk. The forty volumes of his manuscript notes, now preserved at Toronto, are in themselves a prodigious achievement.

With Celtic imagination and the idealism of his pure Welsh blood he combined a fine practicality and accuracy probably instilled by his English training. With the vision and daring of the sanguine explorer was combined the cool calculation of a mathematical scientist.

As one of his companions said, "Never mind his Bunyan-like face and cropped hair, he has a powerful mind and a singular faculty of picture-making. He can create a wilderness and people it with warring savages, or climb the Rocky mountains with you in a snowstorm, so clearly that with shut eyes you hear the crack of the gun or feel the snowflakes on your cheeks."

Yet his records are no mere collection of travellers' tales for the amusement of posterity, they are a gold mine of exact information for posterity's practical benefit.

His maps were perfected by a passion for accuracy, a genius for taking pains. Every traveller since has found them an almost infallible guide. All surveyors following his footsteps and checking his work are astonished to find how very little they can improve on the results he secured without modern instruments. Many of the familiar features on the map of Canada to-day were put there by David Thompson alone, over a century ago.

Without exact surveys and accurate maps, it would have been impossible to open and allot our western plains and valleys for the homes of our present and future millions, or to develop that vast land with roads and railways. Remembering this, we begin to realize the heavy debt of grati-

tude our country owes to David Thompson. He worked not merely for his family and his employers but for the increase of knowledge—and not so much for his own time as for the future. He was resolved that posterity should reap the rich fruit of his labour, and we have been reaping it ever since.

When the prairies and forests of the west were nothing but a hunting ground, with prophetic eye he saw in them what they have since become, one of the most valuable possessions of our Empire.

It was David Thompson who discovered the source of the Columbia river, and, before he had done with it, left not a mile of its long and devious course unmapped. He was not only the path-finder across the Continental Divide between the Columbia and Athabaska, he explored the head waters of the Mississippi among many other rivers, and the shores of lake Superior. After his western work was done, he spent ten eventful years as British representative in laying down the international boundary from lake of the Woods to the St. Lawrence.

Had he returned to England and published the story of his travels, he would certainly have been hailed as one of the world's greatest explorers. But that was not his way. Retiring first to Williamstown, and finally to Longueuil, he continued his simple life, and earned a modest income by occasional surveys till his eyesight failed. Then, his savings exhausted by paying other men's debts he fell on evil days. A church at Williamstown, to which he had lent a considerable sum, could not pay. Deeply religious as he was, he forgave the whole debt. One by one his little possessions vanished. He had to sell his beloved instruments, to pawn his very coat for food, and when a friend lent him half-a-crown he thanked God for the great relief.

The greatest and final relief came on the 10th of February, 1857, soon after his 86th birthday.

Rejoicing that his fame has at last emerged from undeserved obscurity, I now have the privilege of unveiling this monument to mark the resting-place of that great Welsh-Canadian, the illustrious David Thompson.

When the monument was unveiled, Mr. J. B. Tyrrell, himself, like Thompson, a surveyor who has journeyed in regions surveyed by Thompson, and who has also edited Thompson's Journals in a notable volume issued by the Champlain Society, spoke as follows:—

We have come here to honour a man whose body has lain nameless in this grave for seventy years; of whose unique service to North America little might now be known but for the curiosity of surveyors who, in country he was the first accurately to survey, had greatly benefited by his surveys. David Thompson was a reserved, indeed a shy man, who spoke little of himself. I have spent many days and nights pouring over the foolscap notebooks which he filled in the midst of the hard labours of fur trading, but have not detected in them a single boastful word. He knew that he had done much notable work, but there is no vainglory in the summary of it, written after he had reached the Pacific ocean in July, 1811.

"Thus I have fully completed the survey of this part of North America from sea to sea; and by almost innumerable astronomical observations have determined the position of the Mountains, Lakes and Rivers, and other remarkable places on this continent; the maps of all of which have been drawn, and laid down in geographical position, being now the work of twenty-seven years."

A man who watched the stars by night sometimes looked into the future by day. Thompson was the first scientifically to search the sources of the Mississippi. Apropos the year 1798, he wrote:—

"Whatever the Nile has been in ancient times in Arts and Arms, the noble valley of the Mississippi bids fair to be, and, excluding its pompous, useless Pyramids and other works, its anglo-saxon population will far exceed the Egyptians in all the arts of civilized life, and in a pure religion. Although these are the predictions of a solitary traveller unknown to the world, they will surely be verified (1798)."

Thompson's last years were lived in the shelter of his son-in-law, W. R. Scott, at Longueuil. The story of his poverty in this city of Montreal is one of the most pathetic of men who have deserved well of their country and have fallen on unappreciative times. For sheer unintentional revelation of nobility in distress one doubts whether anything in all literature is more poignant than his journal at the end of April, 1943. Under cruel conditions he had to seek a house against the first of May. On April 29 he wrote:—

"I am the morrow seventy-three years old; but so destitute that I have not wherewith to buy a loaf of bread. May the pity of the Almighty be on me."

He had served the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company as no other man ever served them for twenty-eight years, and he wrote on his seventy-third birthday:—

"Being invited to dinner by Sir George Simpson, I took the maps of the Boundary Line with me; but he did not wish to give anything for them. Returned in a dark, rainy, bad night."

White-bearded, feeble, poverty-stricken, almost blind he was brought here in old age and when he died not even a paragraph in the newspapers mentioned the passing of the greatest practical land geographer whom, I venture to think, the world has produced. A more devoted, a more efficient scientist never lived.

It is questionable whether anywhere else is to be found as full, detailed and scientific an account of one man's daily exertions in contact with the phenomena of nature, as is contained in David Thompson's more than forty notebooks. On no continent has any other man, by his own unaided labour, left such abounding evidence of his geographic genius as David Thompson placed on the map of North America, and set forth in his journals and "Narrative." We sense Thompson's greatness when we compare the vacuous and shadowy map of North America accompanying Captain Cook's "Voyage to the Pacific Ocean," which was drawn in the year Thompson arrived at Churchill, with the map which Thompson, from his own surveys, drew of the northern half of the same continent, a territory half the size of Europe.

He left a London charity school at fourteen years of age, already a mathematical scholar, whose learning was derived from books, the oldest of them published in 1655, and the most recent in 1716. He learned practical astronomy from Philip Turner, at Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan. At nineteen he took observations which placed the Post so accurately that, though its location on the map was changed several times by astronomers whose instrumental facilities were greater than his own, it is back to where he put it. That quality of accuracy was splendidly characteristic of all that he did. During twenty-eight years Thompson dwelt amidst barbarians, never at any place met with fifty other men who could read; and never saw a woman of his own race. From such an environment it is marvellous indeed that so much scientific attainment issued.

David Thompson the man is as worthy of our commemoration as David Thompson the scientist. What manner of man was he? So far as I have been able to learn, no portrait of him was ever made. Dr. Bigsby, British Secretary of the International Boundary Commission of 1816-26, has drawn Thompson's portrait in words:—

"He was plainly dressed, quiet and observant. His figure was short and compact, and his black hair was worn long all round and cut square [He was twenty-seven years in a land where no barbers were], as if by one stroke of the shears, just above the eyebrows. His complexion was of the gardener's ruddy brown, while the expression of deeply furrowed features was friendly and intelligent, but his cut-short nose gave him an odd look. . . . I might have spared the description of Mr. David Thompson by saying he greatly resembled Curran, the Irish orator."

There is a second testimony as to his appearance. It was my fortune to know David Thompson's daughter, Mrs. Shaw, and his granddaughter, Miss Shaw, who, some of you may like to know was matron at Bishop Strachan school in Toronto until she died a few years ago. Mrs. Shaw showed me a picture of John Bunyan and said it was as good a likeness of her father as if it had actually been taken of him.

We are not expressing funeral eulogies to-day, but, in some measure the gratitude of Canadians to one who lived and wrought in Canada for seventy-four years. Perhaps no surer proof of excellence of character is ever forthcoming than the so-called barbarians' estimate of the man who comes to them professing a superior civilization and religion. What did the Indians think of Thompson?

I know of no man whose intimate acquaintance with Indians covered so wide a territory, or included more tribal variations. Inside the territory bounded by Fort Churchill, Sault Ste. Marie, the Mississippi river, the mouth of the Columbia (in Oregon), Peace River Landing and Fort Chipewyan, on lake Athabasca, are about a million and a half square miles of land, within which he knew the Indians better than any other fur trader. Of all the white men they saw he alone, so far as I have been able to discover, refused to carry brandy for trade with the Indians, holding that it was bad business as well as immoral. His attitude towards the Indians is always that of a Christian gentleman. They came long distances to him for help; not merely because they believed his knowledge of the stars gave him some special power, but because they knew and trusted him as a man.

When he was seventeen he was a member of one of the first parties to make a long journey afoot across the plains. The company travelled from Manchester House, about forty miles above Battleford, southwest to about where Calgary is. The object was to induce the Piegan Indians to trade regularly with the Hudson's Bay Company. Thompson spent the winter in the tent of Old Chief Saukamappoo. From him he obtained the account of Indian warfare, going back to about 1730, when arrows with flint heads were used, and the Blackfoot had no horses, which is the completest description we have of native war activity on the eastern slope of the Rocky mountains in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Repeatedly Thompson remarks on the absence of missionaries. He was in the Northwest of America, never farther east than Sault Ste. Marie, from 1784 to 1812. There is not a sign that in all the sub-continent over which he was constantly travelling, any Protestant clergyman had ever appeared. Recurrently throughout his journal, when some danger had been passed, some heavy journey accomplished—and indeed he was in journeyings oft and perils also—he says "Thank good Providence." In all he has written—and roughly, his notebooks and "Narrative" contain over four million words, the equivalent of forty modern novels—not a line is inharmonious with that attitude of mind.

to be able to go over some of that work, as he set it forth in his journal, this summer, or next and possibly to go over the whole of it in due course.

Thompson travelled, and surveyed, taking almost innumerable astronomic observations, and laying down his results on the maps, the water routes from Cornwall in Ontario, where the United States first touches the St. Lawrence, up the St. Lawrence, the shores of lakes Ontario, Erie, Huron and Superior, over the Grand Portage to the lake of the Woods, down the English and Winnipeg rivers, across lake Winnipeg, to York Factory and Fort Churchill. He found a new route from Churchill to lake Athabasca. He ascended the Saskatchewan and Athabasca rivers repeatedly, crossed the Great Divide, by the Howse and Athabasca passes which he had discovered, and traversed the whole length of the Columbia river to the Pacific ocean.

Over Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia of the Canadian provinces: over New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon of the United States, he journeyed and observed, traded and recorded, before man could travel faster than by horse on land or by sail upon the sea.

It might be useful, some time, to search for an explanation of the lack of recognition of Thompson during his life, and of his near oblivion after death. Simon Fraser, with a better eye than Thompson's other friends, named a river in British Columbia after him—Thompson never saw the Thompson, and he nowhere mentions that even so much honour was paid him. His work reached the Arrowsmiths, in London, who incorporated it in their maps with scant acknowledgment. But no public was on the look-out for unique geographical service between Hudson's bay and the Pacific ocean; and the Hudson's Bay Company, which he served for thirteen years, was singularly obtuse towards some of its own brighter glories and was already on the decline which finally caused its absorption by the North West Company. To this company Thompson went in 1797, because its partners, being themselves in British America and personally crossing and recrossing their territory, were of a larger mind.

The Hudson's Bay Company became known as the English company. The North West corporation was called the Canadian company. Thompson's greatest service, therefore, was primarily Canadian. It appeals to the Canadian who likes to think on distances, transportation and trade, as well as to those of us who care especially for Thompson's scientific renown. Nothing is more astonishing in commercial valour than the spectacle of this lone scientist, sometimes at peril of his life from savages, carrying his merchandise across the mountains to and from the far Columbia and over the Pacific-Arctic-Atlantic divides to remote Montreal.

No such private effort was ever attempted in the republic where the first crossing of the mountains was financed by public funds. Thompson was an imperishable prospector of the Canadian Pacific before its time, and unequalled consecrator of whatsoever has been lovely and of good report in the commercial emergence of this Dominion.

If, myself a humble geographer, I may venture to congratulate the Canadian Historical Association upon rendering this tangible homage to David Thompson, I do it with special warmth because it happens in the Diamond Jubilee Year of Confederation and may serve to widen our people's appreciation of the highest, most enduring treasures which enrich their own incomparable story."