

Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Notes on David Thompson

Lawrence J. Burpee

Volume 2, numéro 1, 1923

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300024ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300024ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Burpee, L. J. (1923). Notes on David Thompson. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 2(1), 75–84.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300024ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1923

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

NOTES ON DAVID THOMPSON

BY

LAWRENCE J. BURPEE

Some years ago, while hunting material for a history of western American exploration—using American in the continental sense—I came across a curious prospectus, which interested me because the man who issued it was at one and the same time the greatest and the least known of Canadian explorers, David Thompson. Thompson had devoted a lifetime to western discovery, he was in a very real sense one of the most remarkable geographers the world has seen, and yet neither during his lifetime nor afterward had the value of his achievements been recognized. He ended a long life of tireless activity, the value of which to his country and the world it would be impossible to overestimate, in obscure poverty, and he lies in an unmarked grave at Montreal.

The prospectus, with its characteristic punctuation, is much too long to quote in full, but one may find room for a few lines:—

“To be published, in England, by David Thompson, a new and correct Map of the Countries in North America; situated between the Parallels of 45 degrees; and 60 degrees of North Latitude; and extending in Longitude from the east

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

side of Lake Superior, and Hudson's Bay, quite across the Continent to the Pacific Ocean; and from his own local knowledge; being the result of 22 years employment in discovering, and laying down the several Rivers, Lakes, Hills and Mountains on this extensive tract of Country; many parts of which had never before been explored; these discoveries were only finished in 1812. The whole founded on astronomical observations, the Author being an astronomer by profession."

Referring in the prospectus to the immense fund of new information which he had brought together, Thompson adds this rather pathetic comment: "In early life he conceived the idea of this work, and Providence has given him to complete, amidst various dangers, all that one man could hope to perform." He did indeed complete his work, and embodied the results on the great manuscript map which hung for years in the hall at Fort William, the headquarters of the North West Company, of which Washington Irving gave such a picturesque description, but it is not the least of the tragedies that surrounded the last years of David Thompson that his life-work never appeared in print until the appearance of the Champlain Society volume, except in a fragmentary form on official and private maps which gave no credit whatever to the man who had gathered the information through long years of toil and privation.

Thompson left behind him a long series of manuscript journals, and an autobiography based upon the journals. The latter was published a few years ago by the Champlain Society, of Toronto, under the editorship of J. B. Tyrrell, himself an eminent geographer and traveller. Tyrrell, who as a government surveyor had had occasion to go over much of the ground covered by Thompson, has testified to the extraordinary accuracy of his work. As an example he mentions the fact that his location of such a remote trading post as Fort Cumberland, on the Saskatchewan river, has been found to be within one mile of its precise spot on the earth's surface, which is actually nearer exactitude than the Capitol at Washington was placed by the foremost scientists up to the time that the Atlantic cable brought Washington into instantaneous communication with the observatory at Greenwich.

Thompson's work involved something over fifty thousand miles of travel, sometimes on horseback but generally in canoe or on foot. With very imperfect instruments, and under extraordinarily difficult conditions, he placed on the map the "main routes of travel in one million two hundred thousand square miles of Canada and five hundred thousand square miles of the United States." Although his work as an explorer and surveyor, first in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company and later with the North West Company,



Thompson and his voyageurs landing at the Kootenay village.
(Photograph of pageant)

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

was completed considerably more than a hundred years ago, much of the information on the official maps remains to-day substantially as he left it, not because the territory he covered has not been gone over since, but simply because his work was so accurate that it could not be improved upon. Such a man was surely worthy of remembrance.

For years there had been suggestions for some sort of a suitable memorial to Thompson, but the suggestions never took tangible shape, largely because money was needed and those who controlled the purse-strings were not sufficiently interested to loosen them. It was therefore very welcome news to those who had kept on hoping for some sort of recognition of David Thompson, that a monument had actually been built and that invitations had been sent out for the opening. The memorial takes the very appropriate form of a reproduction of a typical trading post of the old fur-trading days, with palisades and bastions. It stands on the shores of lake Windermere, British Columbia, near the spot where Thompson built his first post west of the mountains, in 1807. Lake Windermere lies not far from the source of the Columbia, between the Rockies and the Selkirks. It is a charming little lake in a very beautiful valley, and can be found on the map by running the finger west along the international boundary to the crossing of the Kootenay river, then north up the Kootenay to its source and a little beyond. It will be remembered that the Kootenay and the Columbia rise very close to one another, the first flowing south and the second north.

Before describing what took place when we met at Windermere to pay this rather belated tribute to the memory of one who was in a very real sense one of the world's greatest explorers and surveyors, it may be worth while to follow Thompson's trail over one small fraction of the immense territory he covered in his travels, if only for the purpose of suggesting the difficulties and hardships that were his portion most of the time throughout a long period of years.

Thompson used two routes through the Rockies, one by way of the upper waters of the Saskatchewan and Howse pass, and the other by way of the upper waters of the Athabaska and Athabaska pass, both leading to the Columbia west of the mountains. Howse pass had been discovered by one of his colleagues of the North West Company, but Thompson himself was the discoverer of Athabaska pass, and under dramatic circumstances.

He was, it must be remembered, a fur-trader as well as an explorer, and the object of his first journey west of the mountains was partly to further the interests of exploration and partly to open up trade relations with the Kootenay and other tribes on the Pacific slope. Thompson himself was essentially a pathfinder, but the North West

Company which employed him was naturally more interested in extending the fur trade.

For several years he had been in close touch with the Piegan, a tribe occupying the foothills east of the Rockies. The Piegan, having obtained guns and ammunition from the traders, had for some time terrorized their hereditary enemies the Kootenay. Consequently when they learned that Thompson planned to cross the mountains, and trade guns and ammunition as well as other desirable commodities with the Kootenay, they determined to prevent him. They managed to intercept some of his men on their way up to Howse pass, and sent them back with a message to Thompson that they would destroy him if he tried to get through the pass. That route was hopelessly barred, for the present at all events. One alternative remained—to find a new route farther north, beyond the Piegan territory. It was already late in the season, and he would have to climb through an unknown pass in the heart of winter, to penetrate the very fastnesses of the Rockies when every gorge would be filled with snow and swept by deadly avalanches. No man less intrepid than Thompson would have made the attempt, knowing what was before him.

With a train of pack-horses, he made his way through the forest from the Saskatchewan northwest to the Athabaska. It was hard going, not because the forest was dense but rather because it was filled with dead timber. Any one who has attempted to ride a horse through "down" timber—even a mountain horse with its sagacity, resourcefulness and ability to climb like a cat—will appreciate the difficulty of the journey, and Thompson and his men had twenty-four loaded horses to look after. The Piegan had followed Thompson's party for a time, but coming upon three grizzlies blocking their track, they were persuaded that Thompson, who, because of his astronomical observations, was deemed a great medicine man, had placed them there as a rearguard, and abandoned the pursuit.

Thompson reached the Athabaska about the end of October, and turned up the great valley through which the Canadian National Transcontinental line now runs to the Pacific. His way lay through what is now the Jasper National Park, but at Brulé lake he found it impossible to take the horses farther. He therefore camped there for several weeks, making snowshoes and sleds, while some of his men went back for dogs to take the place of the horses, and the hunters brought in game to convert into pemmican.

A month later he was off again, with dog-trains, making his way slowly up the Athabaska over the ice. This part of the Rocky mountains is inexpressibly beautiful in summer. The river winds down through a valley clothed with splendid timber and here and there a meadow carpeted with such a wealth of wildflowers as one finds only in the Rockies. Hills roll up on either side, and beyond them tower

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

the tremendous peaks with their glittering crowns of eternal snow. One travels over excellent trails on a sure-footed mountain pony, equipped with a tipi, that most comfortable and convenient form of tent, plenty of provisions, and a fishing rod. One enjoys all the delights of mountain travel with no serious discomforts.

David Thompson was in very different case. He was travelling through unknown country in mid-winter, with the thermometer ranging down to thirty and forty below zero, sometimes accompanied by gales of wind. He had a whole season's trading goods to get over the mountains, with uncertain transport. His provisions would be sufficient to feed his party if he made the pass. If no practicable way were found through, they might have to face starvation before they could retrace their way to the nearest post.

His men were selfish and irresponsible. He was the brains of the party, the leader, on whose shoulders rested the entire burden of responsibility. If things went wrong, he alone would be to blame. The men would not even for their own protection stick to a reasonable ration. They have, says Thompson, the appetites of wolves, and glory in it. Each man put away eight pounds of meat a day or more. Upon Thompson reproaching them with gluttony, and reminding them that their lives depended upon saving enough provisions to carry them through, they replied, "What pleasure have we in life but eating." As a matter of fact they were worried and alarmed over their situation in this unknown part of the mountains at such a season of the year, and were trembling on the verge of mutiny.

Thompson had now passed the junction of the Sunwapta and Miette which together form the Athabaska, and had turned up the former stream. The Miette leads up to what was afterward known as the Yellowhead pass, and the Sunwapta and Whirlpool to Athabaska pass. The Indians in his party assured him that the defile of the mountains they were approaching was the haunt of immense animals which from their description appeared to be mammoths. These stories naturally did not tend to restore the confidence of the voyageurs. A few days later they came on the track of a large animal, which seems to have puzzled even the scientific Thompson. The Indians insisted it was a fabulous monster. The explorer believed it to be an unusually large grizzly, but confesses that the different appearance and great size of the footprints were hard to explain. The men were getting out of hand, and were only kept from open rebellion by the iron will of their leader.

On the 10th of January, Thompson found himself in a narrow gorge leading up to what appeared to be the summit of the pass. The cold was intense and the surroundings appalling. "My men," says Thompson, "were the most hardy that could be picked out of a hundred brave, hardy men, but the scene of desolation before us was

dreadful. I knew that a heavy gale of wind, much more a mountain storm, would bury us beneath it, but thank God the weather was fine. . . . On our right lay an enormous glacier, about two thousand feet in height; eastward of this a high steep wall of rock. At its foot a forest of pines had been cut clean off by an avalanche as with a scythe. . . . My men were not at their ease." . . .

They slept as well as they could in this wind-swept gorge, on snow which they found with a pole to be twenty feet deep. In the morning Thompson found to his delight that they had reached the height of land, and were looking down on the Pacific side of the mountains. "A new world," he exclaims, "was before me." But he was not yet out of trouble. He still had a long way to go, at the worst time of the year, had to find provisions, and his men were still dispirited and disaffected. However, he began the descent, following what is now known as Wood river, a small tributary of the Columbia. The slope was so sharp that the dogs could not control the sleds; they went flying down the incline at breakneck speed, and brought up on either side of a tree in a confused and howling wilderness of dogs, sleds and scattered loads.

Thompson mentions in his journal that on January 13 he sent some men to bring forward certain goods that had been left behind, "which they brought except 5 pounds of ball which being in a leather bag was carried away by wolverine." In August, 1921, one hundred and ten years later, one of the members of an interprovincial boundary survey party discovered at the summit of the pass, where the leather bag had been purloined by the wolverine, 114 deeply corroded musket balls in a cache.

The summit of Athabaska pass, which Thompson found so uninviting and even terrifying in the depth of winter; is a very beautiful spot six months later. In the depression between the hills lie three little mountain tarns, the middle one of which, known since the days of the fur trade as the Committee's Punch Bowl, perhaps from some fancied resemblance to a famous punch bowl in the old Beaver Club in Montreal, the social home of the partners of the North West Company, empties on one side to the Pacific and on the other to the Arctic. Magnificent peaks tower up on every side, among them two that have for years been the subject of a curious controversy. All the maps, up to a few years ago, showed Mount Brown and Mount Hooker as the highest peaks in Canada, and among the highest in America. The height of the former was given as 16,000 feet and of the latter 15,700. This misinformation was finally traced back to the English botanist, David Douglas (after whom the Douglas fir was named), who visited British Columbia in 1827 and crossed the mountains by Athabaska pass. Douglas climbed one of these peaks, and estimated their height above sea level on the supposition that

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

the summit of Athabaska pass was 11,000 feet. As a matter of fact it is just about half this height, and Brown and Hooker are respectively 10,782 and 9,156 feet. Douglas apparently got his information from Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, who is credited in Thompson's "Narrative" with having computed the height of the pass to be 11,000 feet.

It will not be necessary to follow Thompson beyond the mountains, except to mention that some of his men finally became so unmanageable that he was rather relieved than otherwise when four of them deserted and turned back over the mountains. He descended Wood river to the Columbia, at a place famous afterward in the history of the western fur trade as Boat Encampment. Here he spent the rest of the winter, built canoes, and in the spring made his way up the Columbia to Fort Kootenay on Windermere lake. Portaging over what was long afterwards known as Canal Flats, between the head of the Columbia and the Kootenay, he descended that river to the Columbia, and the Columbia to the sea.

Among his other achievements, it may be noted here that Thompson shares with Robert Gray and Lewis and Clark the honour of having discovered and explored the most important river on the Pacific coast. Gray discovered the mouth of the Columbia; Lewis and Clark explored it from the mouth of the Snake to the sea; and Thompson explored and very carefully surveyed the entire river, as well as its principal tributary the Kootenay, from their sources to the sea. Even to-day it is said that Thompson's work remains as the only complete survey of the Columbia.

To return to Kootenay House, the original trading post was built near the source of the Columbia, over eleven hundred miles upstream, four years before Astoria was constructed at the mouth of the river as the headquarters of John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company. The young and ambitious American fur-trading organization was thus standing guard over the mouth of the Columbia, while its sturdy Canadian rival the North West Company had taken possession of its upper waters. The subsequent rivalry between these two companies is too big a question to go into here. It might be noted, however, as a little foot-note to the history of the fur trade, that Washington Irving, who had used his brilliant pen to throw the glamour of romance around the story of Astoria, at one time proposed to David Thompson that he might turn over his journals to him for publication, but as it appeared that Irving's idea was merely to extract from them such material as he could make use of in his own work, the Canadian explorer declined the offer.

Sixty-five years after Thompson's death, on the last day of August, 1922, a group of representative Canadians and Americans, public men, historians, business men, travellers and mountain-climb-

ers, poets and novelists, were gathered together on the shores of lake Windermere to take part in the opening of a peculiarly fitting memorial to the explorer. The new Fort Kootenay rises from the ashes of the old, as a monument to a man who never sought, and certainly never received, those marks of recognition which have been showered upon many men of inferior worth. In measuring the value of his services to the world one must not forget that the explorer who puts the results of his surveys on the map with the precision of David Thompson is not merely a pathfinder scouting ahead of the tide of settlement, but he is at the same time making a tremendous contribution to human knowledge, he is laying the foundation upon which the geologists and the miners, the road builders and railway builders, and many others, must base their work. The results of Thompson's fifty-thousand miles of exploration and survey, embodied in his great manuscript map, and incorporated from time to time in the printed work of official and private mapmakers, have been unquestionably of great and permanent value.

For this memorial we are primarily indebted to the fine public spirit of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company and the old Hudson's Bay Company, which between them bore its cost, and whose officials have laboured in many ways to make it a success. The fort, it is understood, is to be maintained as a public museum of the fur trade, under the direction of a local organization.

As a picturesque introduction to the more formal ceremonies in opening the building, the Windermere committee had arranged an historical pageant, and had enlisted the co-operation of a number of old-timers, voyageurs and trappers and early settlers, as well as a neighbouring tribe of Kootenay Indians. The inclusion of the Kootenay was a particularly happy thought, as their forefathers had been intimately associated with David Thompson during all the years that he was engaged as a fur-trader and explorer west of the Rocky mountains. The Kootenay, who are a remarkably capable and fine-looking lot of people, intelligent, industrious and self-respecting, notable hunters and splendid horsemen, and some of them, both men and women, with faces that made those of the whites look decidedly commonplace, threw themselves into the pageant with enthusiasm, and did perhaps more than any others to make it a success.

The pageant represented David Thompson landing with his trading goods on the shores of lake Windermere. The circumstance that a pretty stiff wind was blowing across the lake made the approach of the brigade of canoes so much the more effective and dramatic. The Indians, who were encamped in their tipis on a level piece of ground high above the lake, mounted their ponies and swept down a sharp slope to meet the explorer at the water's edge.

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No photograph could give any adequate idea of the spirit and effectiveness of this picture. The movie people were of course on the spot, and got some excellent material for the screen, but even they could not catch the riot of colour, gaudy blankets, buckskin tunics and breeches and skirts covered with beadwork, feather head-dresses, plumes and necklaces and bracelets, spears and glittering horse-furniture, that made the scene one to be long remembered.

Other scenes represented Thompson in his fort, smoking the pipe of peace with the Indians, entering into negotiations with the chiefs, meeting Father De Smet, the famous Belgian missionary (this, however, was something of an historical anachronism as De Smet flourished about fifty years after Thompson's time), and carrying on his work as fur-trader and explorer.

The celebration closed with an evening of short addresses by Canadian and American historians who had made special studies of various phases of the work of David Thompson, and an original poem on the spirit of exploration by Bliss Carman, the veteran Canadian poet. Altogether this Windermere meeting, with its permanent memorial, has done at least something to redeem the long years of neglect which the name of David Thompson has suffered at the hands of his fellow-countrymen and the world.