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DAVID THOMPSON

Canada's Greatest Geographer

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AN APPRECIATION

by

J. B. TYRRELL, F.R.S.C.

in connection with the opening of the David Thompson

Memorial Fort at Lake Windermere, B.C., August 30th, 1922.

DAVID THOMPSON: An Appreciation

By J. B. Tyrrell.

David Thompson was the greatest land geographer who ever lived; and, therefore, one of the greatest scientists. He came to Fort Churchill a 14-year-old boy from a London charity school in 1784. While his greatest work was being done during twenty-eight years, he was never within a thousand miles of any civilized community of five hundred souls. He died in obscure poverty sixty-five years ago and lies in a nameless grave at Montreal. The opening of the memorial museum and hall at Lake Windermere, B.C., is the first public recognition of the debt that civilization owes him, for, though the Thompson River is called after him, a few years ago not one geographical student in a thousand knew anything about him.

With extraordinary accuracy he placed on the map the main routes of natural travel in one million two hundred thousand square miles of Canada and five hundred thousand square miles of the United States; he surveyed the head waters of the Mississippi; he discovered a new route to Lake Athabasca; he opened the first trade between what is now Canada and the territory beyond the Great Divide; he fixed the locations of outstanding geographical points over this vast area with the sureness of an expert astronomer, though he had to learn how to figure with the stars when he was a boy wintering at Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River.

His skill won for him the appointment of Astronomer to the Commission which, from 1816 to 1826, delimited the frontier between British North America and the United States. Some of his surveys are included in the official maps now being issued. His "Narrative," published in 1916, is a wonderful story of life in the wilderness and contains very much information of the prehistoric existence of the Indians never given elsewhere. So far as is known, he is the only man who has ever surveyed the Columbia from source to mouth, 1150 miles. His locations are as accurate as others which have been made with the most modern instruments and the most recent almanacs that Government Departments can buy. The record of his work is contained in forty notebooks, which have long been in the possession of the Ontario Government. Their story, for unremitting labor, conscientious devotion to science, and for the unconscious evidence they give of a noble character, so far as a somewhat extensive research enables one to judge, is not equalled by anything that has been left by all the explorers whose names are honored wherever our language is read.

I have called Thompson one of the greatest of scientists. His work is open for inspection. It is the more remarkable because, not only was a great deal of it performed literally thousands of miles from the outskirts of civilization, but because, except for one year, it was a side-line to his activity as a fur trader, first for the Hudson's Bay Company and then for the North-West Company, which afterwards was united with it. He travelled almost incessantly during spring, summer and fall—often most hazardous travel, such as is told in the journal of his opening of a new route to Lake Athabasca, during which he was almost drowned, and was within a few hours of death by starvation.

Frequently the Thompson parties were in danger from hostile Indians. Indeed, to get his furs out of the mountains after he and his people were threatened with extermination, he was compelled to use an undesirable route. In 1807 he came in to the Kootenay county, Idaho and Washington by way of the Saskatchewan and Howse Pass. In 1811 he had to abandon the Saskatchewan route and get out by way of the Athabasca, at the cost of a journey which, for perils and escapes, surpasses anything invented by the most romantic writers. The detour was about 400 miles. Roughly, it meant going by the Grand Trunk Pacific instead of by C.P.R., with the difference that the furs had to be taken four hundred miles down the Athabasca up to Lake la Biche, one hundred miles north of Edmonton, and thence down the Churchill River to Cumberland House.

Several winters Thompson lived in houses he had to build when the snow began to fall. His last winter in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company was spent at Reindeer Lake, the ice on which, he says, did not disappear until July 7th. The fort he built at Reindeer Lake was in the present Province of Saskatchewan, about 300 miles from Prince Albert. When it is prophesied that the banana belt will presently extend to beyond the Saskatchewan, it may be well to remember that there have been prolonged winters in that salubrious region.

After all, how could the surveys made by a fur trader, and their record on paper, marked with the degrees of latitude and longitude, be among the greatest scientific contributions to human knowledge? Geography is one of the primary sciences. It is indispensable to the most elementary progress in many sciences—geology, for instance, to which the prosperity of British Columbia mining is a debtor. It is only through geography that you know where you are, and when you want to go somewhere you can only tell how to get there through geography—the science of the earth's surface, and the relation of one part to another, with all the inhabitants thereof. Without the aid of geography you could neither build a railway nor carry on a war. Christopher Columbus was a geographer. Sir John Franklin was a geographer. The immortals who explored this continent—Champlain, La Salle, La Verendrye, Franklin, MacKenzie, Fraser—the men who found a way for steel through these mountains were geographers. But, though Champlain, La Salle, La Verendrye, MacKenzie, Franklin, told us much, they left their information in no such useful shape as Thompson put the fruit of his persistent journeyings. What Thompson did has been of inestimable practical value to this continent and to the world.

A little personal testimony on this point may be permitted. When the C.P.R. was being built across the plains and mountains, the Government of Canada, preparatory to the Columbia Valley and others becoming safe and agreeable for their present dwellers, found it necessary to have the country explored. Thirty-nine years ago, Dr. Dawson, of the Geological Survey—a child of the geography which Thompson enriched—was sent into this region with assistants, of whom I was one. Thenceforward, for many years, I was occupied in surveying territory from the Kootenays to Chesterfield Inlet. From time to time the number of places of unknown origin shown on, and the accuracy of the main features of, the existing maps, very much impressed me, and set me to finding out how it was that we were so much better off in the matter of fundamental geographical information than we had any right to be, according to all the available literature on the subject, and in comparison with the United States. The quest put me on the trail of David Thompson. During fifteen years I owed a personal gratitude for the way in which Thompson labored. The Canadian people, in their great business of transforming barbarian wildernesses into prosperous communities, have entered into his labors. It has been a great delight to learn all that was possible about this scientist, of whom his equals knew nothing, and of their obligation to whom the people of Canada are too scantily aware.

I had thought to give a summary of the Thompson journeys, with what they yielded for the advantage of succeeding generations. But to attempt it, in anything shorter than a long volume, would be to lose the reader in an expanse of prairie, mountain, forest, lake and river, half as big as Europe. Study of his journals shows that on foot, by canoe, and on horseback he covered fifty-five thousand miles. His map includes all the territory between the 84th and 124th degrees of latitude, and the 45th and 60th degrees of longitude from Sault Ste. Marie, at the junction of Lakes Superior and Huron in the south-east corner, to Astoria, in the State of Oregon on the Pacific Ocean in the south-west, and to the northern boundaries of the Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta on the north. How different he was from the other explorers whose names are in all North American histories, is suggested by his achievements as an astronomer. He was not satisfied with being a traveller, trader and hunter by day, but was a scientist at night. He worked out his astronomical calculations mainly during the winters. But before astronomical calculations there must be astronomical observations. Nobody could read the firmament in daylight. While others slept, or idled, Thompson, on clear nights, was measuring the stars. At Cumberland House one winter he spent thirty-five nights in the open air. Everywhere, at every opportunity, he scrutinized the jewelled heavens. To the Indians his wizardry became a proverb. In his "Narrative" Thompson tells vividly of his first winter at Kootenae House when the Piegan Chief Kootenay Appee sent spies from the plains to learn all about his fort with a view to coming to destroy it and him. When they reported to their Chief, he said, "What can we do with this man? Our women cannot mend a pair of shoes but he sees them," "alluding to my astronomical observations," simply comments Thompson. A further idea both of Thompson's fame as an astronomer and of his patriotism—for he never forgot his British nationality and was always thinking of extending her renown—is given by my friend Mr. Elliott, of Walla-Walla, a living encyclopaedia on the course and history of the Columbia River, who is honoring the celebration at Lake Windermere with his presence. Mr. Elliott has pointed out that Alexander Ross, one of the early adventurers across the line, says that at the confluence of the Columbia and Snake Rivers, near the southern boundary of the State of Washington, he found "triumphantly waving in the air ... a British flag, hoisted in the middle of the Indian camp, planted there by Mr. Thompson, as he passed, with a written paper laying claim to the country north of the forks as British territory." Ross adds that these Indians called Thompson "Koo-Koo Saint," which, being interpreted, is "The Star Man." The Star Man indeed, for only a true scientist with a rare and loving capacity for astronomy could produce the accurate results to which I have already alluded, and of which I will give two instances before speaking of his personality.

The remains of his Fort Kootenae are just outside the town of Athalmer. The degrees of latitude are located as from

Greenwich. Thompson's log house here was six thousand miles from Greenwich, to communicate with which, in his day, required several months of travel. Thompson's location of this place by his observations of the stars was within four miles of its precise spot on the earth's surface. His location of Cumberland House is within one mile of exactitude—nearer than the Capitol at Washington was placed by the foremost scientists up to the time when the Atlantic cable brought Washington into instantaneous communication with Greenwich Observatory.

What manner of man was David Thompson? No picture of him was ever taken, but his daughter, Mrs. Shaw, thirty years ago showed me a picture of John Bunyan, and said it might be that of her father, so striking was the similarity.

Dr. Bigsby, the naturalist, of the International Boundary Commission, for which Thompson was the astronomer, says that at fifty years of age he was a short compact figure, with black hair, long all round, and cut square just above the eyebrows. He was very like Curran, the famous Irish orator, and—listen to this confirmation of his daughter's description—"Never mind his Bunyan-like face and short cropped hair: he has a very powerful mind and a singular faculty of picture-making." And then making more complete the comparison with the author of "The Pilgrim's Progress," Dr. Bigsby continues:—"He can create a wilderness and people it with warring savages, or climb the Rocky Mountains with you in a snowstorm, so clearly and palpably that, only shut your eyes and you hear the crack of the rifle or feel the snowflakes on your cheeks as he talks."

From his last surviving son-in-law, Mr. Scott, then living in Evansville, Indiana, I obtained, a few years ago, some account of Thompson in his age. He let his beard grow and was white-headed; talked little, read much, and had few callers besides the rector. His wife was his chief companion. He would stay out at nights observing the stars, which were his continual delight. Mr. Scott said he abhorred the sight of liquor, but he occasionally bought rum for his friends, as his journals show.

There is nothing new under the sun, not even bootlegging. Thompson begins his "Narrative" with an account of a Dutch lugger hailing the ship in which he had just started for Hudson Bay, allowing some liquor to be sampled, selling a case for a guinea, and hurrying off, for fear of the revenue officers. The sampled bottle was all right. Every other bottle in the case was filled with sea-water. I allude to liquor because that is all we can do with it now. Thompson was the first prohibitionist of British Columbia. He refused to sell fire-water to the Indians. After his first winter at Kootenae House he took his furs to Rainy River House, and returned with two canoe-loads of goods, 1800 lbs. each, for trade. This is what he says about one aspect of that journey:—

"I was obliged to take two kegs of alcohol, overruled by my partners, for I had made it a law to myself that no alcohol should pass the mountains in my company, and thus be clear of the sad sight of drunkenness, and its many evils: but these gentlemen insisted upon alcohol being the most profitable article that could be taken for the Indian trade. In this I knew they had miscalculated: accordingly, when we came to the defiles of the mountains, I placed the two kegs of alcohol on a vicious horse; and by noon the kegs were empty, and in pieces, the horse rubbing his load against the rocks to get rid of it. I wrote to my partners what I had done, and that I would do the same to every keg of alcohol, and for the next six years I had charge of the fur trade on the west side of the mountains, no further attempt was made to introduce spirituous liquors."

Thompson refused to debauch the Indians, not only because it was bad for trade, but because it was morally bad. He was a deeply religious man. Throughout his journals, when he records an escape from perils, the expression constantly recurs, "Thank good Providence." His relations with the Indians were marked by kindly courtesy. His inquiries into their manners always touched their religious beliefs. He was as different from the prevailing type of fur trader as a man could well be. Like most of them, he married a native girl, daughter of Patrick Small, a trader at Isle à la Crosse. He carried his young family with him on many journeys, and when he left the West, in 1812, never to return, he took them to the East. He lived at Terrebonne, in Quebec, and at Williamstown, in Glengarry County, Ontario, where his children increased to a total of thirteen. Other traders and travellers, including some who received titles and scientific honors, abandoned their native wives and families. Mrs. Thompson was a model housewife, scrupulously neat, and devoted to him, as he was to her. He died at Longueuil, in his eighty-seventh year, after fifty-eight years of wedded life, and his wife, fifteen years younger than himself, survived him only three months.

Thompson toiled in the wilderness without thought of the public distinctions that usually incite scientific men. He never learned to advertise. He suffered privation in his old age without a murmur. With a noble humility he exemplified the Christian virtues during nearly thirty years in the wilderness, where not a single missionary had ever been. For what he did and what he was he deserves to be held in everlasting homage.

[End of *David Thompson, Canada's Greatest Geographer: An Appreciation* by J. B. Tyrrell]