

*David Thompson's Imaginative Mapping
of the Canadian Northwest
1784-1812*

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THE NORTH WEST COMPANY directive of 1806 that sent Simon Fraser to explore his river also instructed David Thompson (1770-1875) to explore a pass through the Rocky Mountains.¹ The journals written by these men while fulfilling this directive during the next two years differ from each other as widely as each of them does from the journal of the first great North West Company explorer, Alexander Mackenzie. Mackenzie had chosen to present the records of his travels in 1789 and 1793 to the British public with the aid of a ghost-writer, William Combe, who could embellish the *Voyages from Montreal* (1801) in the idiom of landscape appreciation that was current in Mackenzie's day. This decision produced a journal complete with sublime and picturesque descriptions of the views seen by the famous explorer.² Simon Fraser, on the other hand, wrote his on-the-spot account of the harrowing descent to Georgia Strait in the spring of 1808 without thought of publication. His narrative's aesthetic qualities are restricted largely to a comparison of the river valley to the Scottish Highlands as he had come to know them only through his mother's descriptions of them, and to his impressive dramatization of the Fraser River discovery as a descent into a sublime underworld.³

Thompson neither employed a ghost-writer's fashionable parlance nor left his account of travels made between 1784 and 1812 in the form of spontaneous jottings. His narrative bears the marks of a careful construction and frequent revision of notebooks. These literary endeavours were carried out (but never completed) many years after the actual twenty-eight year period covered by the

notebooks. They produced a massive volume of work, only selections of which have been published to date. However, the published portions do reveal Thompson not only as the contributor to nineteenth-century knowledge of geography, cartography, biology, and ethnography, but also as one of the first writers to evince an intense interest in the relation between the human mind and Canadian nature. It is this latter contribution which Victor G. Hopwood notes in his selection of Thompson's writings, entitled *Travels in Western North America, 1784-1812*, when he calls Thompson "one of the mapmakers of the Canadian mind,"⁴ and it is the one which the present essay will consider in estimating the significance of Thompson's literary mappings of the great North-West.

I

David Thompson was born twenty-three days after William Wordsworth, on 30 April 1770, and while Samuel Hearne was travelling along the banks of Seal River, northwest of Churchill, on his second attempt to reach the Coppermine River. From 1777 to 1784, Thompson attended a charity school in London — Grey Coat, near Westminster Abbey. The school was preparing him for a career in the Royal Navy with instruction in mathematics, but when naval recruitment was curtailed at the peace with France in 1783, Thompson was apprenticed to the Hudson's Bay Company. The school appears to have instructed its pupils strictly but humanistically, although its founders' credo always may not have been practised. One cannot help thinking of the sort of education Coleridge claimed he had got at another charity school in London — Christ's Hospital — during this same period, or of the "Grey-headed beadles . . . with wands as white as snow," who oversaw the annual parade of charity-school children to St. Paul's Cathedral in William Blake's "Holy Thursday" (1784-85).

Only fourteen when he arrived in Hudson Bay in the autumn of 1784, and largely urban-reared, Thompson clearly developed his strong love for nature in North America. In considering his responses to the landscapes encountered on his travels, Thompson's reader must remember that the boy's acquisition of any understanding of contemporary British landscape aesthetics (the

Sublime and the Picturesque) derived almost entirely from books and the opinions of fellow fur traders. (One notable exception to this development of his interest in landscape is the fact that he often did include St. James Park in his walks around London [p. 62].) He was familiar with sublime literary landscapes, for example, for he says that James Ridley's *Tales of the Genii* (1764) was one book "which pleased us most" (p. 63) while at school.⁵ Moreover, as Hopwood points out,

There is evidence in his notebooks and *Travels* of extensive reading in science, philosophy, travel, and literature. His friendship with Roderick Mackenzie [the explorer's cousin], who maintained a library at Fort Chipewyan, was deep and it is possible that Thompson knew all of the books in that library. (p. 23)

Of most significance, however, is the fact that the concepts of any fourteen-year-old are still in the process of formulation and are still open to influence from the world around him. This helps to explain why Thompson assimilated so many Indian customs and myths in the course of his development and travels. Significantly, it was with the Hudson's Bay Company that he started his career. The practice at the time in that company (although it varied through the centuries) was for the trader to live with the Indians. While Scottish agents in the North West Company had their voyageurs interpret the Indians' communications for them and procure food on their behalf, Hudson's Bay Company officers were expected to do their own paddling, hunting, and camping. This policy necessarily brought the fur-trading Englishmen of the 1780's closer than the Scots to Indian lifestyles. Thompson encountered those lifestyles as a boy and as a young man, from the ages of fourteen to twenty-seven. Hopwood, in linking this fact to Thompson's narrative style, writes as follows:

Thompson speaks of the difficulties of learning the real thoughts of the Indians, a problem fully recognized by modern anthropologists, since, as Thompson says, the Indians answer direct questions in the manner "best adapted to avoid other questions, and please the enquirer." . . . But above all he shared their lives and spoke their languages. Possibly some of the mechanical problems of Thompson's style are the price we have to pay for the fact that he began to learn Indian languages at the age of fourteen, and could

learn them, because his mind was not encumbered with the linguistic fallacies of classical grammar twisted to fit English and all other languages, whatever their patterns. (pp. 24-25)⁶

Consequently, many of Thompson's writings assume the aspect of fable, as the explorer charts the oral legends of the various tribes he met. Elsewhere, however, and often it is in descriptions of landscape, another influence on style and content appears. This is Thompson's scientific learnedness. The desire to be precise in his astronomical calculations and map chartings was the product of his training in map-making by Philip Turnor at Cumberland House during the winter of 1789-90, and is reflected in "his special concreteness in word choice," in his "colloquial vitality and sharp observation and characterization" (p. 17), and in his "precision," all of which lead Hopwood to assert that "the primary feature of Thompson's prose is directness; it is a practical style" behind which "lies a tremendous power for exact scientific observation" (p. 20).

In the writings of other contemporary travellers the deployment of the conventions of the Sublime and the Picturesque operate as schemata for landscape identification that are related to but different from the metaphors that identify all space in terms of Greenwich — latitude and longitude.⁷ In Thompson's writing, by contrast, the computations, as well as the influence of Indian mythology, form the basis of the identification of nature. The general *effect* of landscape, so central a concern in the eighteenth-century British aesthetic tradition which bred the Sublime and the Picturesque, is displaced in Thompson by the quest for the objective, even numerically measured, relations among landscape features. The parlance of the British landscape tradition is not absent, as will be seen, but it is not central. Colour and various intensities of light are less significant to the explorer who was perceptually trained only partially in Britain than to writers for whom the Sublime and the Picturesque were exclusive schemata. For Thompson, it is not essential or even desirable that he view a landscape at sunset, or that he view it from the best perspective.

One qualification of Thompson's aesthetic must, however, be made before passages of his prose are considered. If his style is not conventional in the terms of the Sublime and the Picturesque,

neither is it unique. It is reminiscent of the concept of poetic diction articulated by one of his contemporaries. Quite appropriately, Hopwood argues that, "Thompson's prose exemplifies something of the ideals of Wordsworth's *Preface*: the compatibility of science and poetry, the expressive power of common speech, and the power of nature as a teacher."³⁸ Thus, an examination of Thompson's imaginative mappings of landscape necessarily must consider the differences from as well as the affinities with the prevailing conventions of landscape description in Britain.

II

In the summer of 1796, during his last year with the Hudson's Bay Company prior to a discreditable transfer to the rival concern, Thompson set out with Chipewyan Indians to survey and report on a new route from the Churchill River to Lake Athabasca by way of Reindeer and Wollaston Lakes, in modern Saskatchewan. His employers had desired such a route as early as 1793 in order to avoid the devilish twelve-mile Methye Portage but various problems including a lack of a guide and some unforgivable forgetfulness on Thompson's part had delayed the formation of an expedition until 10 June 1796. Thompson supplies the following description of the second large (Wollaston) lake on the route, then called Manito Lake:

This great Lake is called Manito (supernatural) from it's [*sic*] sending out two Rivers, each in a differnet direction; from it's east side a bold Stream runs [north and then] southward and enters the Rein Deers Lake on its east side [and so into the Hudson Bay drainage basin]; and from the west side of the Manito Lake, it sends out the Black River, which runs westward into the east end of the Athabasca Lake [and so into the Mackenzie River drainage basin]; which [phenomenon] is perhaps with out a parallel in the world. Some have argued that such a Lake must soon be drained of its water; [but] they forget that it is the quantity of water that runs off, that drains a Lake; and were the two Rivers that now flow in opposite directions made to be one River in a single direction, the effect on the Lake would be the same. Add to this, the head of a River flowing out of a Lake is a kind of a Dam, and can only operate on the Lake in proportion to the depth to the bottom; which in general is several hundred feet below this bottom of

the head of the River; and were the River to drain this Lake to this level, the River would cease to flow but the Lake would still contain a great body of water.

The last fifty miles had been over a low rocky, swampy country, and tormented with myriads of Musketoes; we were now on the banks of the Manito Lake, all around which, as far as the eye could see, were bold shores, the land rising several hundred feet in bold swells, all crowned with Forests of Pines; in the Lake were several fine Isles of a rude conical form, equally well clothed with Woods. I was highly pleased with this grand scenery; but soon found the apparent fine forests to be an illusion, they were only dwarf Pines growing on the rocks; and held together by their roots being twisted with each other. On our route, seeing a fine Isle, which appeared a perfect cone of about sixty feet in height, apparently remarkably well wooded to the very top of the cone; I went to it, my companions saying it was lost time; on landing, we walked through the apparent fine forest, with our heads clear above all the trees, the tallest only came to our chins; while we were thus amusing ourselves, the Wind arose and detained us until near sunset. To while away the time, we amused ourselves with undoing the roots of these shrub Pines for about twenty feet on each side; when the whole slid down the steep rock into the Lake, making a floating Isle of an area of four hundred feet; and so well the fibres of the roots were bound together, that when it came to where the waves were running high, it held together, not a piece separated and thus [it] drifted out of sight. We set loose a second islet of about the same area; then a third, and a fourth islet, all floated away in the same manner: On the Isle, the roots of these small pines were covered with a compact moss of a yellow color, about two inches thick.

The mould on the rock under these pines, was very black and rich, but so scant, that had the area of four hundred feet been clean swept, it would not have filled a bushel measure, perhaps the produce of centuries. This Isle was a steep cone, the sixteen hundred square feet we uncovered, showed the rock to be as smooth as a file, and no where rougher than a rasp; and had it been bare it would have been difficult of ascent; it was about two miles from other land; then how came these pines to grow upon it; they bare no cones, nor seeds and no birds feed on them; These wild northern countries produce questions, difficult to answer.⁹

The unparalleled sight of a lake that spans a continental divide induces Thompson not only to value the mythical significance attached to it by the Indians but scientifically to explore the tale that Manito Lake must only be temporary, that it will drain itself

in time. Had Hopwood included Thompson's exercise in cold logic that follows the initial description of the lake, the reader would have been in a position to note the unique aspect of the explorer's response to landscape. Indian myth, which is not discredited by the ease with which the drainage myth is discounted, is combined with a European engineering logic to account for this physiographical and lacustrine rarity. Yet, in turn, the conventional response to the landscape of the lakeshore, based not on logic but on eighteenth-century British landscape aesthetics, is apparent also; thus, as the typical Thompsonian account progresses, the number of ways in which the Book of Nature is read increases impressively. As a scene, the shores "please" Thompson with their "grand scenery." Here, the landscape enthusiast in Thompson gaining sway and pursuing pictured *effects* in nature is not disappointed — at least, not initially — with the enchanting view from the distance. But, of course, Thompson's inquiring mind will not rest with the distance that lends enchantment. Unlike the landscape viewer who is content to observe from the correct prospect the textures and surface character of the country, Thompson penetrates the picture, so to speak, even as he figuratively penetrated the lake to its bottom in order to dispel the first myth. In plotting more carefully the details of that picturesque effect beheld from a distance, he discovers why his Indian companions, who do not employ a picturesque way of seeing, advised him not to waste his time. Their way of seeing is not tricked by the dwarf stature of the pines. The Briton's perception of landscape *is* tricked however: since, in a picturesque view, proportion is crucial while scale is not, dwarf spruce can fool the eye exercising a picturesque landscape aesthetic. Thus, where European logic discounted the first illusion about drainage, European aesthetics create a second illusion which only an Indian perception of the country can dispel.

Interestingly, Thompson's European logic also betrays him in his discoveries on the conical isle in the lake. The island is a sort of hill of mythical truth. (It must rise several hundred feet from the floor of the lake, given Thompson's estimates of the lake's depth.) Its empirical constituents are a sixty-foot cone, dwarf spruce, and a bushful of mould/soil. In a compelling scene Thompson — a

sort of precursor to Darwin in the Canadian North — attempts empirically to unearth the oddity of this island by unravelling the tree roots, but he succeeds only in uncovering and producing new myths that haunt his logic — organisms apparently feeding since time immemorial on rock “smooth as a file, and no where rougher than a rasp.” And in a highly imaginative act, the surveyor/cartographer creates a new island. Fascinated and incredulous, he sends forth on the waters — a holy spirit breathing life into the abyss — a second, then a third and fourth enchanted isle. Now the useful logic has given way to pure fancy. In a way, Thompson incarnates the manitou’s imaginative power with a magic that defies logic. This defiance mimetically represents the defiance of logic by pines that grow with neither soil, nor seed, nor cones, on an island two miles from the nearest shore. The account achieves a tautology: the logic which unravelled one myth is defeated by others. The landscape, in a manner that is foreign to the eighteenth-century Briton’s conception and perception of the external world, probes deeply into Thompson’s mind and rearranges his understanding of that relation between himself and the external world which constitutes his identity.

“These wild northern countries produce questions, difficult to answer”; they display on their hills/isles of truth a reality, a manitou, which Thompson can only record without wholly comprehending. To some extent, his experience is like the “spot of time” experienced by his contemporary on Esthwaite Water, and depicted in the first Book of *The Prelude*. Closing on an admission of nature’s sublime ineffability, Thompson’s landscape description admirably exemplifies Hopwood’s recognition — despite the fact that he chose not to include the complete account — of Thompson’s powers as *both* mapmaker and mythmaker. These powers reflect in part the boy’s British background, and in part the self which has grown out of the voyage to lakes that span continental divides, as well as to other wonders of the natural and native worlds of British North America.

III

On 25 June, Thompson exited from this lake of spirits into a river he named Black River because of the wasteland through which it

runs: "The whole is a wretched country of solitude, which is broken only by the large gull and loons" (pp. 136-37). If Thompson felt that he had sensed the manitou in the landscapes of Manito Lake, he surely must have wondered whether he had discovered the spirit's haunt when, after descending four falls on the Black River, he arrived at a point where the river rushed into a subterranean passage:

For half a mile farther [below the fourth fall] the current is very swift; it is then for 118 yards compressed in a narrow channel of rock of only twelve yards width. At the end of this channel a bold perpendicular-sided point of limestone rock projects at right angles to the course of the river, against which the rapid current rushes and appears driven back with such force that the whole river seems as if turned up from its bottom. It boils, foams, and every drop is white; part of the water is driven down in a precipice of twenty feet descent. The greater part rushes through the point of rock and disappears for two hundred yards, then issues out in boiling whirlpools. The dashing of the water against the rocks, the deep roar of the torrent, the hollow sound of the fall, with the surrounding high dark frowning hills form a scenery grand and awful, and it is well named Manito Fall.

While the Nahathaways [Creeps] possessed the country, they made offerings to it, and thought it the residence of a manitou; they have retired to milder climates; and the Chipewyans have taken their place who make no offerings to anything, but my companions were so awestruck that the one gave a ring, and the other a bit of tobacco. They had heard of this fall, but never saw it before. (p. 137)

An objective exactness governs this passage initially: "118 yards," "twelve yards," "limestone rock," "at right angles." Yet, the force of the river appears to exact a stylistic change that overruns the observation of specific detail. The viewer becomes alerted not to detail but to effect; simultaneously, the language then becomes less precise. An extended simile ("as if turned up from its bottom") introduces a series of abstractions not at all scientific, as the river momentarily disappears. "Boiling whirlpools," "dashing of the water," "the deep roar," "the high dark frowning hills" — such descriptions make aesthetic effect paramount again, and the inclusion of an aesthetic tag — "grand and awful" — acknowledges this shift. However, even though the conventionality of

these two adjectives detracts from Thompson's unique combination of detail and sensation, the British convention is made to accord with the native, indigenous, local aesthetic by virtue of the explorer's inclusion of the final clause — "and it is well named Manito Fall."

Hopwood is right to demarcate a paragraph at this juncture, but where there is not one in the MS it is interesting to note how that final clause ushers in the next observation, a description of the Chipewyans' responses to the scene that counters as well as accords with the white man's, Thompson's own. As so often occurs in Thompson's *Travels*, both the foreign and indigenous views of a scene are included. So the "grand and awful" scene of God's power (as the British landscape enthusiast would think of the falls) is juxtaposed with the wild subterranean lair of a manitou (as even the agnostic Chipewyan viewer might think of them).

IV

Thompson writes at his best when his multi-level perception of the external world is operative: when only one perception dominates, his landscape descriptions lack the intensity notable elsewhere. One example of a scene viewed only through one set of eyes is printed by Hopwood. It describes a view westward from the banks of the Red Deer River on 20 November 1800, when Thompson was riding from Rocky Mountain House to a Peigan camp on the Bow River, near the modern city of Calgary:¹⁰

The latter part of this day the ground became knobby and the surface tolerably good, all fine open meadow with chance patches of willows. We went on a line parallel to the mountains which everywhere were covered with snow and seem to present an impenetrable bank; the view is grand in a high degree. On our right we have the Bow Hills, lofty in themselves and brown with woods; above them stately rise the Rocky Mountains, vast and abrupt, whose tops pierce the clouds. On our left, before and behind us, is a verdant ocean. (pp. 222-23)

Use of the maritime metaphor to describe the grasslands is perhaps not too familiar by 1800 to be termed conventional but, otherwise, the account which deploys only the British aesthetic of

the Sublime pales beside others. The mountains are set in the "grand" background while hills occupy the right side of the scene and the grasslands offset them to the left. Yet, if this scene is simplistic, more intriguing descriptions are never far off. After riding westward on 29 November along the banks of the Bow River, "which to the very mountains has beautiful meadows along its banks" (p. 224), Thompson, together with his North West Company partner, Duncan M'Gillivray, and the voyageur Dumond ascended one of the first mountains they reached later the same day:

Our view from the heights to the eastward was vast and unbounded; the eye had not the strength to discriminate its termination. To the westward, hills and rocks rose to our view covered with snow, here rising, there subsiding, but their tops nearly of an equal height everywhere. Never before did I behold so just, so perfect a resemblance to the waves of the ocean in the wintry storm. When looking upon them and attentively considering their wild order and appearance, the imagination was apt to say, these must once have been liquid, and in that state, when swelled to its greatest agitation, suddenly congealed and made solid by power omnipotent. There are low shrubs of fir and Canadian pine almost to the very top in places. We also found the dung of cows [buffalo] for about two-thirds up the mountain, though we saw no grass.

(p. 225)

The view in both directions is sublime: the infinite plain outreaches perception to the east, while the mountains' curious "wild order" runs off with the imagination to the west. The oceanic metaphor is carried from the grasslands to the granite, although it now constitutes ocean waves in a winter storm, not the tranquil, equatorial oceans suggested in the phrase "verdant ocean," used to describe the prairie. As he did with his description of the spruce-treed landscape on Manito Lake four years before, Thompson expands perception temporally by entertaining an image of the terrain at its creation. Were one to credit him with reading or knowing Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684) — and it may have been just the sort of book in Roderick Mackenzie's library at Fort Chipewyan — then his romantic outburst of geological surmise must not be regarded as unprecedented, but what is more significant is Thompson's observation of

the equality in the heights of the peaks. This feature of the Rockies near Banff is what creates so strong an impression of the range as a wall rising uniformly from the prairie floor in the continent's single greatest geographical event. The aesthetic effect is startling, for while the mountains are of course sublime in their vertical extent they also exhibit a regularity, a "wild order," which does resemble the approximate equality of height in ocean waves.

Besides the aesthetic and geological, a final significant aspect in Thompson's multi-dimensional account is the ultimate return to what Thompson the fur trader sees in the scene. His last two sentences answer the practical questions regarding the availability of food, fuel, and shelter.¹¹

V

Finally, it is needful to consider Thompson's response to the massive territory on the Pacific Slope which is watered by the Columbia River. He came to know the territory intimately during the five years after the North West Company had directed him over the mountains, that is to say, from the time of his first transmontane trip in Howse Pass in 1807 until his retirement from the fur trade in 1812 at the age of forty-two. On 25 June 1807, he and his family climbed over Howse Pass (between the North Saskatchewan River and the Blaeberry River, in modern Banff National Park) and into the Pacific Slope. They had been waiting two weeks for the snows to melt at the height of land, but they might have waited much longer, for most of them comprised the glacier now known as Freshfield Icefield. Thompson writes of the effect of the changing season on the landscape as they waited:

The weather was often severe, clothing all the trees with snow as in the depth of winter, and the wind seldom less than a storm. We had no thunder [and] very little lightning, and that very mild, but in return the rushing of the snows down the side of the mountain equalled the thunder in noise, overturning everything less than solid rock in its course, sweeping the mountain forests, whole acres at a time, from the very roots, leaving not a vestige behind. Scarcely an hour passed without hearing one or more of these threatening sounds assailing our ears. The mountains themselves

for half way down were almost ever covered with clouds. In the chance intervals of fair weather, I geometrically measured the height of three [peaks]. . . . (p. 241)

It is understandable that Thompson should heighten the dangers to which he and his family were exposed on the first recorded traverse of the Canadian Rockies. Keenly aware as a writer of the potential of the landscape picture in action before him, he paints it in its sublime mercilessness. The second sentence especially, with its sequence of present participles, imitates the unpredictable chaos of the moving mountain sides. Against this scene is set the placid, diminutive, tranquil picture seen at the height of land: ". . . by 10 am [24 June 1807] we were at the head of the defile where the springs send their rills to the Pacific Ocean. This sight overjoyed me . . ." (p. 241).¹² The sublime modulates into the small, beautiful, quiet, and elegant scene that powerfully, because understatedly, proclaims Thompson's arrival at the height.

The next two years of Thompson's narrative are burdened, as he was, by the business attendant upon opening a new fur trade district. His travels were many, including two trips down to Rainy Lake, in modern northern Ontario; however, his concerns lay less in exploration than in cementing relations with Indians and trading for and transporting furs. In 1810, the threat, perceived or real, of a Peigan ambush forced Thompson, who had effectively excluded the Peigans as middle men in trade by crossing the mountains to trade directly with the Kootenays, to abandon the North Saskatchewan River/Howse Pass route for the more northerly Athabasca River Pass. Delays and an apparent failure of will on the explorer's part to confront Kootenae Appee, the Peigan chief (and virtually Thompson's alter ego by this point), meant that the crossing had to be attempted during the winter of 1810-1811.¹³ As Paul Kane was to discover thirty-five years later, the pass could be cruelly unseasonable even in the autumn. In January it was treacherous. 10 January 1811 marked the day on which the height of land was crossed:

The view now before us was an ascent of deep snow, in all appearance to the height of land between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It was to me a most exhilarating sight, but to my uneducated men a dreadful sight. They had no scientific object in

view, their feelings were of the place they were [in]. Our guide Thomas told us that, although we could barely find wood to make a fire, we must now provide wood to pass the following night on the height of the defile we were in, and which we had to follow.

My men were the most hardy that could be picked out of a hundred brave hardy men, but the scene of desolation before us was dreadful, and I knew it. A heavy gale of wind, much more a mountain storm, would have buried us beneath it, but thank God the weather was fine. We had to cut wood such as it was, and each took a little on his sled. Yet such was the despondency of the men, aided by the coward Du Nord, sitting down at every half mile, that when night came we had only wood to make a bottom, and on this to lay [the] wherewith to make a small fire, which soon burnt out, and in this exposed situation we passed the rest of a long night without fire, and part of my men had strong feelings of personal insecurity.

On our right about one-third of a mile from us lay an enormous glacier, the eastern face of which, quite steep, of about two thousand feet in height, was of a clean fine green colour, which I much admired, but whatever the appearance, my opinion was that the whole was not solid ice, but formed on rocks from rills of water frozen in their course. Westward of this steep face, we could see the glacier with its fine colour and its patches of snow in a gentle slope for about two miles.

Eastward of this glacier and near to us was a high steep wall of rock; at the foot of this, with a fine south exposure, had grown a little forest of pines of about five hundred yards in length by one hundred in breadth. By some avalanche they had all been cut clean off as with a scythe; not one of these trees appeared an inch higher than the others.

My men were not at their ease, yet when night came they admired the brilliancy of the stars, and as one of them said, he thought he could almost touch them with his hand. As usual, when the fire was made, I set off to examine the country before us, and found we had now to descend the west side of the mountains.

I returned and found part of my men with a pole of twenty feet boring the snow to find the bottom. I told them while we had good snow shoes it was no matter to us whether the snow was ten or one hundred feet deep. On looking into the hole they had bored, I was surprised to see the colour of the sides of a beautiful blue; [near] the surface [it] was of a very light colour, but as it descended the colour became more deep, and at the lowest point was of a blue almost black. The altitude of this place above the level of the ocean by the point of boiling water is computed to be

11,000 feet [by] Sir George Simpson. [Actually, the pass is at approximately 6,000 feet.]

Many reflections came on my mind; a new world was in a manner before me, and my object was to be at the Pacific Ocean before the month of August. How were we to find provisions, and how many men would remain with me, for they were dispirited? Amidst various thoughts I fell asleep on my bed of snow. (pp. 282-83)

The full day's entry is quoted here to emphasize the confusion rampant in Thompson's brigade that winter. The "dreadful sight," or "scene of desolation" was perceived by the voyageurs with more dread than Thompson greeted it. The snow-filled pass, together with the glacier of "a clean fine green colour" obviously alarmed the men. The only signs of vegetation had been severed by the sublime natural chaos of an avalanche, leaving the travellers with little fire wood, and, hence, bitterly cold as well as "not at their ease." Their admiration of the stars is fascinating but the thought that the stars could be reached and touched suggests a disorientation from landscape which is compounded by the men's fascination to discover the earth beneath them. Indeed, the sense of alienation accruing from the disjunctive sensation *vis à vis* the stars and the impossibility of their reaching solid ground with a twenty-foot pole is palpable. Certainly, it is not allayed by Thompson's assurances regarding snowshoes.

But Thompson also is fascinated by the soundings taken through the glacial cap. (Or else, he became fascinated over the course of time, for his reference to *Sir* George Simpson's estimation of the pass's altitude dates the final form of the passage at least to 1841, when the governor was knighted.) On the height of land for the entire continent, Thompson attempts to penetrate to the earth's depths and can only describe gradations of colour in the ice. Yet, these gradations appear to signify to him, like the rings of a tree trunk, ages of being. At the continental divide he likens his observations to the sensation of experiencing a brave new world, as if he were projected into the future by examining the past. From Manito Lake to the continental divide, from 1796 to 1811, the wilderness seemed only to ask questions, puzzling the explorer whose vast imagination had led him, from the headwaters of the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, to map the

great Northwest by means of a multitude of perceptions. But in plumbing the depths of the known world, he only uncovered wherever he travelled another of nature's hieroglyphs. In January 1811, on the eve of his last great voyage of discovery — down the Columbia River — and surrounded by nature in a void of uncertainty, Thompson pauses to rest his mind and body "on my bed of snow," between the temporal earth and the timeless stars. Such a void is also, of course, a physical place in the Rockies, but at it Thompson's state of imaginative and physical suspension finds a large space in the Canadian psyche which generations of Canadian writers are still mapping. Thompson was the first and one of the more successful to attempt a charting of that space.

NOTES

- ¹ See *David Thompson's Narrative 1784-1812*, ed., introd., and notes by Richard Glover, Publications of the Champlain Society, vol. xl (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1962), p. xlviii.
- ² Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence, through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans; in the Years 1789 and 1793. With a preliminary account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country* (London: T. Cadell, 1801); facs. rpt., introd. by Roy Daniells (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1971). For a discussion of the aesthetic aspect of Mackenzie's landscape descriptions, see "Alexander Mackenzie and the Landscapes of Commerce," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 7 (1982), 141-50.
- ³ Simon Fraser, *The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser 1806-1808*, ed. and introd. by W. Kaye Lamb (Toronto: Macmillan, 1960).
- ⁴ David Thompson, *Travels in Western North America, 1784-1812*, ed. and introd. by Victor G. Hopwood (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971), p. 34. Besides Hopwood's and Glover's editions, there is the first edition of Thompson's narrative: *David Thompson's Narrative of his Explorations in Western America 1784-1812*, ed., introd., and notes by J. B. Tyrrell, Publications of the Champlain Society, vol. xii (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1916). Any reader of Thompson will be indebted to Tyrrell for his chronology of Thompson's travels between 1785 and 1812, pp. lxxv-civ; rpt. by Glover (1962), pp. lxxiii-cii. These three editions of Thompson's narrative provide different texts. Except where noted, further references will depend on Hopwood's edition and will appear in the text.
- ⁵ Sir George Back, who explored the Canadian Arctic by canoe and ship from 1819 to 1837, also made use, indirectly, of Ridley's *Tales* in order to describe a sublime landscape. In fact, it is the English painter John Martin's depiction of one of the *Tales*, "Sadak in search of the Waters of Oblivion," to which Back refers while describing the landscape of the Mattawa River which he encountered in 1833. See Captain George Back, *Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition to the Mouth of the Great Fish River, and along the Shores of the Arctic Ocean in the Years 1833, 1834*,

and 1835 (London: John Murray, 1836); facs. rpt., introd. William C. Wonders (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1970), p. 35.

- ⁶ Hopwood cites no curriculum as evidence that Thompson learned no classical languages at school. Although curriculae were not taught universally, and Thompson had been assigned mathematics, Coleridge certainly learned some Latin and Greek at a charity school.
- ⁷ Two examples, one contemporary with Thompson's early career, one contemporary with his later period when he surveyed the Great Lakes, may be cited to illustrate the prevalence of the Sublime and the Picturesque in the description of nature by British explorers. The first is the response to the Pacific Coast in 1792-94 by George Vancouver. He regarded the Puget Sound district as astonishingly similar in appearance to the landscape gardens then in vogue in England. At the top of Georgia Strait, on the other hand, the coastal mountains rendered the landscape desolate and sublime for the mariner, who named one inlet Desolation Sound, and another after the author of the most popular treatise on the Sublime (Edmund Burke) Burke's Canal. (Captain George Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean, and round the World . . .*, 3 vols. [London: G. G. and J. Robinson, and J. Edwards, 1798]; facs. rpt. [Amsterdam: N. Israel; New York: Da Capo, 1967], I, 226, and II, 261.) Vancouver's aesthetic response to nature is noted by Maria Tippett and Douglas Cole in *From Desolation to Splendour: Changing Perceptions of the British Columbia Landscape* (Toronto and Vancouver: Clarke Irwin, 1977).

In the 1820's, Captain John Franklin led two expeditions through the Northwest to the northern continental coast. In his accounts of the expeditions, the Sublime and the Picturesque play significant rôles both in the description of nature and in some of the decisions regarding the routes to follow and the sites of winter quarters. See Captain John Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1819, 20, 21, and 22* (London: John Murray, 1823); facs. rpt., introd. Leslie H. Neatby (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1969); and *Narrative of a Second Expedition to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1825, 1826 and 1827 . . .* (London: John Murray, 1828); facs. rpt., introd. Leslie H. Neatby (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1971). The aesthetic dimension of the first expedition is discussed in "Retaining Captaincy of the Soul: Response to Nature in the First Franklin Expedition," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 28 (1983).

- ⁸ Victor G. Hopwood, "David Thompson: Mapmaker and Mythmaker," *Canadian Literature*, 38 (Autumn 1968), p. 8; rpt. in Hopwood's introd. to *Travels*, p. 23.
- ⁹ This passage has been quoted from Glover's edition, *David Thompson's Narrative 1784-1812*, pp. 111-12, since Hopwood's edition (pp. 135-36) has elisions of two key sections.
- ¹⁰ This location is deduced from Tyrrell's chronology for 1800.
- ¹¹ Thompson had not always quite so enthralled a response to the Rockies. On 8 June 1801, while travelling up the North Saskatchewan River from Rocky Mountain House in search of a mountain pass, he writes: "At 7¼ pm we camped at the foot of the first chain of mountains, where we found snow in several places. The scene around us had nothing of the agreeable in it; all nature seemed to frown; the mountains were dreary, rude, and wild beyond the power of the pencil" (p. 228).

¹² The elision at the end of this sentence is Hopwood's. It is therefore not clear whether the innocent ring in this understated phrase derives from Thompson's narrative intentions or the editor's.

For a recapitulation of the route followed by Thompson, see James K. Smith, *David Thompson: Fur trader, explorer, geographer* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 75-76.

¹³ See Glover's discussion of this period in his introduction to *David Thompson's Narrative 1784-1812*, pp. xlix-lxiv.