



By Pat Toscano, LS

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Epic Wanderer—David Thompson & the Mapping of the Canadian West

by D'Arcy Jenish

Surveyors who want to learn more about our profession's proud history frequently ask me to recommend books. Generally, people seem to want to know about surveyors from their own part of the country, that is, Southerners don't usually request books about Northerners, and Easterners don't usually request books about Westerners. It is a pity—although not a surprise—since our survey businesses and thus our professional focus is limited by state boundaries. While there are plenty of good books about regional surveying and mapping, many of which are regional in nature, now and again a book comes along that simply transcends geographical limits. *Epic Wanderer* is such a book. Its subject, David Thompson, is one of the most impressive men ever to explore and survey on the North American continent and this excellent new biography will be a very welcomed addition to anyone's collection.

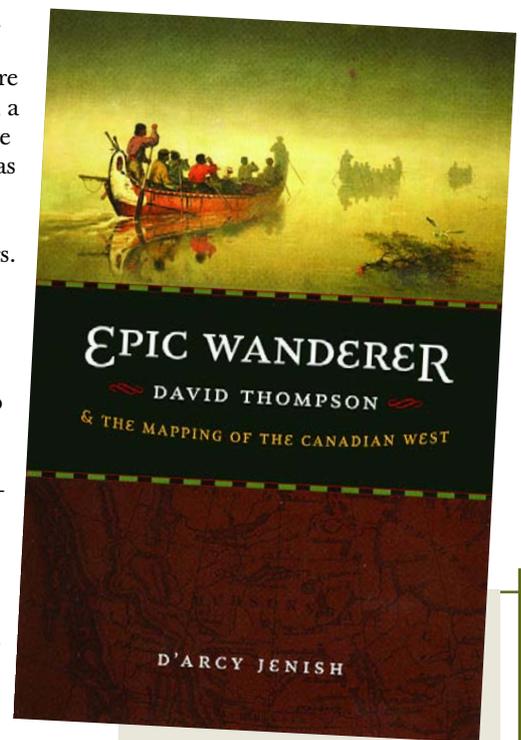
Thompson has been called the greatest land geographer in history because of the immense area he personally mapped. He was also the first man to map the Columbia River from its source to its mouth. Later in his career he spent years working for the international boundary commission; he also performed boundary surveys for real estate developments. There is no part of the surveying and mapping industry that Thompson did not succeed in.

David Thompson was born in 1770 to Welsh parents. At age seven his father died and young David was sent to live at

the Grey Coat School in London, a royally endowed Christian charity school, still in operation today. There he was raised in the faith and given a mathematical education. Most of the school's graduates joined the navy as midshipmen, but when Thompson came of age, England was between wars and not in need of navy sailors. At the age of fourteen he was apprenticed to the Hudson's Bay Company along with another boy who, upon hearing of their mutual assignment, fled the school never to be seen again. In a company ship young Thompson sailed to Churchill House, one of the company's fur trading outposts. The image lingers of a very young and likely very lonely man landing at the edge of the Canadian wilderness, possessing an education and a rosewood octant, and little else. It would not be overly romantic to describe him as being cast to his fate.

The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was an English fur trading company with enormous interests in North America. Thompson's job was to be a clerk, a vital position for a company with such far-flung interests. Good records were required to keep the trading operations accountable and profitable. Many of the employees of the HBC were illiterate, as were some of the traders. It was the clerk's job to keep the books and inform the trader of the post's financial status. The book has much information about the organization of the fur trading

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Title: *Epic Wanderer—David Thompson & the Mapping of the Canadian West*

Author: D'Arcy Jenish

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Toscano continued from page 62 industry and some vivid descriptions about life in the wilderness. Included are descriptions of how the traders and the Indians denuded the landscape of wildlife. It was not uncommon to move a trading post to a new location when all of the fur-bearing animals sought by the traders and the game animals had been consumed. Also described is the impossible cold the traders lived and worked in. In one cabin where Thompson wintered over, water was sprayed on the interior of walls to freeze and seal them. His journal entries relate travel by foot and by horse in temperatures colder than twenty below zero.

A New Direction

When Thompson was nineteen he suffered a severe break to his leg that necessitated a long recovery over the winter. He spent the time being tutored by the company's inland surveyor, Philip Tournor and exercised his then rusty math skills. Thompson practiced throughout the winter and by spring he'd become proficient in celestial navigation. This was the start of a new direction in his life. Rather than principally being a trader, Thompson decided to focus his energy on surveying and mapping. Tournor informed his superiors that Thompson's data was good enough to incorporate into a map he had prepared for them. Thompson, in turn, informed his superiors in London that upon completion of his apprenticeship in 1790 he would prefer to receive instruments and a watch rather than the contractual suit of clothing. The company responded amply by sending Thompson the clothing as well as a sextant, some books and a watch as a "present." Henceforth, he surveyed wherever he was sent to trade, and surveying became his principal professional interest.

Thompson worked hard and applied himself to mapmaking. The company rewarded him with a raise in pay and encouragement. In 1796 he made an exploring trip to the West to find and map trade routes. But there was a limit to the HBC's interest in Thompson's surveying and he soon realized that his future with the company was trading, not surveying. The strong desire to explore was likely the foundation of his momentous decision to quit the HBC and join the rival Northwest Company (NWCo) the following year.

The two companies could not have been more different in culture and management style. The HBC was aristocratic

and predominantly manned by Englishmen. The Northwest Company was egalitarian and predominately manned by Frenchmen. Thompson's change of companies may seem trivial to modern readers, but such a decision was quite uncommon at the time. He has been criticized by some for being disloyal to the company that supported him, but it was exploration that he loved, not the trading of trinkets for furs.

His first mission for the NWCo was a dream come true. He was to survey the source of the Mississippi River, and delineate the 49th parallel from the Lake of the Woods to the Red River. Other expeditions followed. The book well describes his years of exploring and mapping and connects it to the business rivalries between the various companies. The author also does a fine job of describing a very moral man who refused to trade liquor to the Indians, who refused to work on Sunday even in the wilderness, and who had a difficult time with his men from the East who feared they'd discover primitive beasts in the mountains. Author Jenish tells a fascinating tale, particularly the details of contact with Indians who had never seen metal goods or white men. Thompson was a keen observer and readers will discover many comments from his journals.

In 1810 Thompson was given the job he is most famous for, finding a route to the Pacific. He was the first man to map the entire Columbia River. Jenish describes how he dressed in his finest clothes to enter the American camp of John Jacob Astor when he reached the Pacific.

He retired not long after and entered into a variety of businesses with uneven results. His first project was his notable map of the Canadian West, which the NWCo kept in private as propriety information. He farmed, built canoes for the army, and worked for the International Boundary Commission from 1817 to 1820. He invested in real estate and lost money, and he was literally generous to a fault. He loaned money and had his creditors default. He lost his house and did not have the comfortable retirement he planned for himself and his wife.

Epic Wanderer, like the man himself, covers a lot of ground and does so very well. If you'd like to purchase just one biography on David Thompson, make it this one. 