

# The "Columbian Enterprise" and A. S. Morton: A Historical Exemplum\*

BARBARA BELYEA

My title is derived from A. S. Morton's article, "The North West Company's Columbian Enterprise and David Thompson," which appeared in the 1936 number of the *Canadian Historical Review*. Morton argues that the North West Company endorsed a long-term policy of discovery and economic expansion from 1801 to 1811; he then comments on the success and failure of westward exploration during this period, judged by the extent to which it furthered the "enterprise." Morton's argument is ludicrously thin, and has in fact suffered sporadic attacks. Yet several reputable historians have adopted Morton's thesis, and gradually it has come to be accepted as a correct, factual account.<sup>1</sup>

\* The author wishes to thank David Smyth of the Historical Research Branch, Environment Canada, for his careful reading and constructive criticism of this article. The argument and conclusions nonetheless remain the author's sole responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> A. S. Morton, "The North West Company's Columbian Enterprise and David Thompson," *Canadian Historical Review* 17 (1936): 266-88, and "Did Duncan McGillivray and David Thompson Cross the Rockies in 1801?" *CHR* 18 (1937): 156-62. He reiterated the argument of these articles in *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*, rev. Lewis G. Thomas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 463-69.

Morton's thesis was opposed by J. B. Tyrrell, "David Thompson and the Columbia River," *CHR* 18 (1937): 12-27, and "Duncan McGillivray's Movements in 1801," *CHR* 20 (1939): 39-40. Tyrrell's earlier article and edition, "David Thompson and the Rocky Mountains," *CHR* 15 (1934): 39-45, as well as F. W. Howay's edition, "David Thompson's Account of his First Attempt to Cross the Rockies," *Queen's Quarterly* 40 (1933): 333-56, may have drawn Morton's attention to Thompson's role in the North West Company.

Richard Glover took up Morton's thesis and "advanced" it in "The Witness of David Thompson," *CHR* 31 (1950): 25-38 and in his Introduction to *David Thompson's Narrative* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1962), xi-lxxii; as did E. E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the West to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 185-201.

American historian Bernard de Voto, in *The Course of Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), 528-39, tried to balance the views of Tyrrell and Morton; subsequently David Lavender, *Winner Take All: the trans-Canada canoe trail* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 290-315, drew principally on Glover for the race against Astor and Thompson's "blue funk" (310). The Canadian counterpart to these popular American historians is Peter C. Newman, *Caesars of the Wilderness* (Markham: Viking, 1987), 85-94.

Hugh Dempsey, "David Thompson under Scrutiny," *Alberta Historical Review*

Morton's article sets out to show that "the line of progress in writing the history of the north-west is to get away from treating the individuals as self-dependent units, and to place them in relation to the policy of their company."<sup>2</sup> This policy, the "Columbian enterprise," owed its conception, says Morton, to the Afterword of Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal*, published in 1801. Mackenzie had suggested that greater profits could be drawn from the fur trade if an agreement were to be worked out between rival fur companies and the trading network extended to include markets in China and the East Indies.<sup>3</sup>

Although Mackenzie's project provoked mixed reactions in the North West Company partnership, already divided by personal animosities, "it held the imagination of the wintering partners long after Mackenzie's influence was removed." Morton claims that Duncan McGillivray took up Mackenzie's cause, since

it is not a great assumption to take that he [McGillivray] became aware of his [Mackenzie's] Columbian enterprise as sketched [by Morton]. We may assume that the young man's imagination would be fired by the possibility of inaugurating a new era in the history of his company, and the glory that would be his if he succeeded in extending the trade of the concern to the Pacific coast.<sup>4</sup>

By 1800 Duncan McGillivray, together with David Thompson, was actively searching for a southern pass across the Rockies.

Morton briefly describes the forays that these two men made along the front ranges, and mentions a report to Mackenzie of a failed expedition to cross the divide during the summer of 1801. Mackenzie's information

---

12:1 (1964): 22-28, called Glover's Introduction to the *Narrative* "a shocker," but concluded, "Dr. Glover presents a case which cannot easily be dismissed. . . . If the arguments by Dr. Glover are correct he has undoubtedly performed a service to history by presenting them" (28).

John Nicks, "David Thompson," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 8 (1985), 878-84, rejected (as Glover had done) Morton's proposal of a successful 1801 crossing, while skating past the debate of a "race to the sea" and reaffirming that Thompson was "paralysed into inaction for a short time" in October 1910 (882).

Support for the "race to the sea" theory is still found in R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones and Donald B. Smith, *Origins: Canadian history to Confederation* (Toronto: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1988), 366.

<sup>2</sup> Morton, *CHR* 18: 156.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of intercontinental trade, which Morton ascribes to Mackenzie, was first suggested by King in the published journals of Cook's third voyage. It was reiterated by maritime fur traders such as James Strange and John Meares, then specifically associated with the Hudson's Bay Company in Dalrymple's *Plan for Promoting the Fur Trade*, published in 1789. Mackenzie's aim was to associate the "Canadians" with this scheme.

<sup>4</sup> Morton, *CHR* 17: 270-71.

must have been erroneous, says Morton. "Mackenzie, being in opposition [to the "old" North West Company], would naturally get his information indirectly, and possibly none too accurately."<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, Morton argues, the expedition was a success: McGillivray, with Thompson in tow, succeeded in crossing the mountains by White Man's Pass early in the summer. They made their way to the Kootenay River, over Canal Flats to the Columbia River, and returned to the eastern side of the divide via Athabaska Pass. Like Mackenzie, Duncan McGillivray followed up his successful exploration by actively supporting the Columbian enterprise policy in negotiations with the Hudson's Bay Company.

Meanwhile, far from representing an independent interest in territories west of the United States, the American government's Lewis and Clark expedition was, in Morton's view, a response to the North West Company's policy of expansion. Lewis and Clark were ordered to explore the Missouri River and to find a way to the Pacific coast. Now the "race to the sea" was on as the North West Company insisted on its imperialist initiative. Thompson was called back from the Churchill River and ordered to cross the mountains; at the same time, Fraser prepared to go down the "Columbia" (Fraser) River that Mackenzie had left unexplored.

Fraser obeyed orders, and arrived at the sea on 2 July 1808: "here was a model execution of the Columbian enterprise." By contrast, Thompson advanced slowly — worse, he procrastinated for no good reason. Although he was "in familiar country," having followed McGillivray to the Kootenay River in 1801, Thompson went no farther in 1808, although by that time Fraser had already arrived in Georgia Strait. "Thompson ignored the advantage of pressing on, in the interest of taking his furs out in safety." For the next two years Thompson "diverged from the original plan. . . . he abandoned the goal of his enterprise for the immediate advantage of the moment."<sup>6</sup>

Thompson's failure was most evident from July 1810 to July of the following year. Morton has no doubt of the reason for Thompson's "hasty" return west from Rainy Lake in August 1810: "he was to reach the mouth of the [Columbia] river, to erect a fort, and to display the Union Jack floating over the Oregon . . . to the Americans at their arrival." Although engaged in a race to the sea, the last and desperate stage of the Columbian enterprise, Thompson perversely took his time. He was slow, over-cautious and "guilty of misjudgment." After a winter crossing of Athabaska Pass

<sup>5</sup> Morton, *CHR* 17: 273.

<sup>6</sup> Morton, *CHR* 17: 279-83.

and a circuitous journey to the coast, he arrived in time to see “the stars and stripes . . . afloat on the breezes of the Oregon.”<sup>7</sup>

Here Morton argues against Tyrrell’s earlier contention that there was in fact no race to the sea, that Thompson merely wanted to set up a rival trade and was in no hurry to do so.<sup>8</sup> Morton comments:

It has been [so] assumed by some on the evidence, or strictly the lack of evidence, in Thompson’s journals . . . But it was not safe to rely on the evidence of the man himself, all the more as there is a strange, perhaps a determined silence in his journals at this point.

After darkly hinting that Thompson destroyed his journal record of crucial events in the fall of 1810, Morton moves to his damning if tautological conclusion: “By failing to make the main object of the Columbian enterprise the main object of his activities, Thompson fixed the predisposing conditions of his failure.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Thompson failed to fulfil the company’s aim because he failed to espouse it. Morton’s idea of a Columbian enterprise is narrowly focused on one explorer’s role and one event of the North West Company’s struggle to obtain convenient access to its most profitable regions and an exclusive right to exploit them.

Confronted with miscellaneous and detailed evidence, Morton looked for a theme that would shape the assorted details into a single, coherent series of events. A “Columbian enterprise” would link the westward explorations of Mackenzie, Fraser and Thompson, just as it would explain the North West Company’s drive to gain access to Hudson Bay, and the American government’s interest in the Oregon territory. Morton’s attempt to mould a multiplicity of details into evidence of a single motivation is in no way exceptional as a historical approach. Even so, his theme is audacious. To prove his contentions he is obliged to ignore gaps in documentation and give undue significance to certain details.

This forcing of the evidence is apparent, for example, in Morton’s assertion that there were two expeditions from Rocky Mountain House during the travelling season of 1801. Mackenzie’s letter mentions a failed attempt to cross the divide at this time, but Morton insists on a subsequent, successful journey despite the fact that there is no direct evidence available — no journal, report, or map — of such a venture. Morton is obliged to work by inference and conjecture. Certainly his article is strewn with tentative words and phrases: “inference,” “imply,” “assuming,” “I am in-

<sup>7</sup> Morton, *CHR* 17: 283-85, 288.

<sup>8</sup> Tyrrell, *CHR* 15: 41.

<sup>9</sup> Morton, *CHR* 17: 284, 288.

clined to believe," and "it is entirely probable" are a few of his expressions. Even "doubtless" is doubtful. But however tentative his assertions, Morton clings to his thesis: in the absence of direct proof, he resorts to place names and constructs an argument that has been justifiably rejected.<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to note that, as support for his suggestion of a second, successful expedition in 1801, Morton does not refer to the testimony of Thompson himself:

In 1801 the northwest company determined to extend their Fur Trade to the west side of the Rocky Mountains, and if possible to the Pacific Ocean; this expedition was intrusted to me, and I crossed the Mountains to the head waters of McGillivray's River; but an overwhelming force of the eastern Indians obliged me to retreat a most desperate retreat of six days for they dreaded the western Indians being furnished with Arms and Ammunition.<sup>11</sup>

Morton seems to have been unaware of this document, which must have appeared to him infallible proof of his assertions, even though Thompson obviously confused the expeditions of 1801, 1807 (across Howse Pass) and 1810-11 (across Athabaska Pass). But Morton loses no time in amassing and arguing for circumstantial evidence. As with his speculation about events of October 1810, Morton fills the gap of missing evidence with a web of conjecture.<sup>12</sup> The proposal of a second expedition in 1801, like the hypothesis of Thompson's cowardice in 1810, is characteristic of Morton's historical method.

Morton's article discusses four issues concerning the priorities and direction of the North West Company, with particular attention to the context within which Mackenzie, Fraser, and Thompson explored the Pacific Northwest. Here are the issues, posed directly as questions:

1. Is there evidence that the North West Company developed a consistent policy of expansion west of the Rocky Mountains, a key factor of which would be to gain control of the Columbia River mouth?

2. To what extent did the North West Company identify its commercial interests with claims of British sovereignty in the disputed Oregon Territory?

<sup>10</sup> Glover, Introduction, xlv-xlvii; cf. Dempsey, 25-27. Glover does not mention Thompson's letter to Alexander, quoted in the next paragraph and cited in note 11.

<sup>11</sup> Public Record Office FO 5/441: David Thompson to Sir James Alexander, 9 May 1845.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson's journals are fragmentary between 1797, the year he joined the North West Company, and 1806-07, when he wintered at Rocky Mountain House and crossed Howse Pass for the first time. From 1806 to 1812, the years of his explorations west of the continental divide, his activities are fully documented for much of this period in more than one version, except for the short span of 23 July to 28 October 1810. Morton and Glover have made much of this "missing journal," but it is not the only gap in Thompson's fur trade record.

3. To what extent did explorers of the Pacific watershed (Mackenzie, Fraser, and Thompson) act on their own initiative, or in line with a single, aggressive North West Company policy?

4. What evidence exists of Thompson's failure to beat Astor's Pacific Fur Company to a "race to the sea"?

The answer to the first question depends on an understanding of the North West Company's organization. Unlike the Hudson's Bay Company, a monolithic hierarchy directed by its London Committee on advice from York and Churchill, the "Canadians" formed an association of equal partners under limited-term agreements and employed various companies in Montreal and London to act as their suppliers, distributors, and legal agents. Mackenzie, to whom Morton attributes the genesis of the "Columbian enterprise," was one of the most volatile of the North West Company elements. Originally a member of Gregory, McLeod and Company, a rival of the first North West Company, Mackenzie dissociated himself from the united concern in 1799, a year after his voyage to the Arctic, to found his own firm known as the XY Company. In 1804 he once more entered into an agreement with the North West Company that was to last until 1822. But Mackenzie died in 1820, and Simon McGillivray negotiated an agreement with the Hudson's Bay Company in December of that year.<sup>13</sup> Mackenzie's influence, though great, was personal and did not go unchallenged in a company based on association rather than subordination. His project to unite the British fur companies and to rationalize trade on a global scale — the project Morton has called the "Columbian enterprise" — was never adopted as a single, official company policy.

Mackenzie's ideas were nevertheless accepted and echoed by certain other partners and agents. His memorial to the Board of Trade in 1808 was brought forward two years later by Nathaniel Atcheson, secretary to the Committee of British North American Merchants, a group in which North West Company interests had a strong voice. In this memorial Mackenzie argued for "an exclusive Right of Trade in the Columbia and its tributary Waters and along a certain extent of coast for a given period";

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Mackenzie to Roderic McKenzie, 14 January 1819, in *Journals and Letters of Alexander Mackenzie*, ed. W. Kaye Lamb, Hakluyt Society extr. ser. 41 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 523: "The North West Agreement is now drawing to a close. I should not be surprised to see a serious change take place in the direction of its affairs. To me this can be of no consequence. . . . I shall be most happy however to see the business continued and carried on with vigour."

See also Charles Davidson, *The North West Company* (1918; New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 175-76. Davidson infers that Simon McGillivray was acting on his own, rather than on the authority of the assembled partners, in negotiating a merger with the Hudson's Bay Company soon after Mackenzie's death.

he also urged that accommodation be sought with the Hudson's Bay, East India, and South Sea companies, all of which had been granted British monopolies of trade. Essentially the memorial repeated what Mackenzie had advocated in the epilogue to his *Voyages from Montreal*, the source-document for Morton of the "Columbian enterprise."<sup>14</sup>

Mackenzie's scheme depended on government approval of a new, global trading pattern: here the second question, the degree to which the North West Company identified its interests with imperial claims, comes into play. Duncan McGillivray, whose interest in the Columbia River was longstanding, organized several attempts to cross the Rocky Mountains in 1800-01 and attempted in 1804 to negotiate a North West Company supply route via Hudson Bay.<sup>15</sup> Just before his death, he appears to have drafted a pamphlet, revised by his brother William the following year. In this sketch Duncan McGillivray warned that

the integrity of British North America is in the hands of the traders; and will continue so, while the present system of traffic . . . is not materially changed, not withstanding the labours of the ascendent party in America, to weaken and divide it. Embassies, bribes promises and experiments, have all been rendered abortive by the vigilance and influence of the British traders whose interest is inseparable from that of the Government in relation to the Indians.

In other words, what was good for the North West Company was good for Britain, given that the company would work to inhibit American political influence and rival American commercial activity. The McGillivrays' sketch was incorporated into a pamphlet published in 1811 and entitled *On the Origin and Progress of the North West Company*. Authorship of the published pamphlet has been attributed to Nathaniel Atcheson, the promoter of Mackenzie's memorial before the Board of Trade.<sup>16</sup>

But there was also competition within the British sphere of influence.

<sup>14</sup> Mackenzie, *Journals and Letters*, ed. Lamb, 415-18; Davidson, 123.

<sup>15</sup> Vancouver Public Library. David Thompson, Notebook: the Preface to extracts from Vancouver's *Voyage of Discovery* relative to the Columbia River is attributed to Duncan McGillivray: "Captain Vancouver's Narrative as far as regards the Survey of the NW Coast of America & the River Columbia, appeared to me to contain such interesting Information to the NWt Company, that I have been induced to extract Sheets from it . . . nor do I think that any Thing worthy of Remark in the Narrative has been neglected from Columbia River. . . ." The handwriting is Thompson's.

Cf. also Hudson's Bay Company Archives A.10/1, Duncan McGillivray and Thomas Forsyth to the HBC London Committee, 1 February 1805: "[The NWCo.'s purpose is] to extend their trade beyond the Rocky Mountains and carry it, if practicable to the Pacific Ocean — and that this object would be greatly facilitated by their having a Transit through Hudson's Bay."

<sup>16</sup> Royal Commonwealth Society Library. [Duncan McGillivray,] "Some Account of the Trade carried on by the North West Company" (1808), revised and endorsed by William McGillivray as a "Sketch of the Fur Trade in Canada, 1809," printed in *Report of the Public Archives of Canada (Annual Report of the National Archives*

To be assured of the trade routes it had opened up, the North West Company proposed that British North America beyond Canada be divided along the Saskatchewan River, between its own partners and the Hudson's Bay Company traders. The HBC refused, pointing out, in a letter dated 24 July 1811, the advance of the Northwest Company beyond the continental divide.

We conceive your posts now fully occupy the Country on the head waters of the St. Lawrence, and likewise on all the waters of Mackenzies River & some of the Branches of the Columbia. But there is also on the west side of the Rocky Mountains a large extent of Country where neither party have as yet established any permanent Post. We see no reason to debar ourselves from the privilege of extending our trade into these unoccupied Countries if we should hereafter see fit to do so.<sup>17</sup>

This response is interesting for its disregard of "pure" exploration: the "large extent of Country" at issue had been explored by Mackenzie and Fraser, just as Lewis and Clark had first explored the lower Columbia. But what counted for the Hudson's Bay Company was commercial activity, the establishment of continuous trade in a region. The HBC respected the North West Company's superior right, by establishment of trade, to the Athabaska and Columbia regions, but did not recognize its right to the Fraser and Thompson rivers, or what is now the B.C. coast. Thompson's posts on the Columbia's tributaries carried more weight with the Hudson's Bay Company than the dramatic voyages of Mackenzie and Fraser.

However, for the North West Company, the 1670 charter represented a galling advantage for its rivals. Its London agents petitioned the Board of Trade for a similar charter to trade exclusively in the area west of the divide between 42° and 60° North, as well as for in the Athabaska and Mackenzie regions. The Board "considered" successive petitions until November 1812, when it declared itself unfit to decide on the matter. This refusal to grant legal recognition of the North West Company's de facto

---

of Canada) (1928), 58-73. Cf. [Nathaniel Atcheson,] *On the Origin and Progress of the North West Company, with a History of the Fur Trade* (London: Cox and Baylis, 1811). The published pamphlet has also been attributed (but no more plausibly) to "author and spy" John Henry: see F. Murray Greenwood, "John Henry," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 8 (1985): 387-90.

Cf. Glover's comment, Introduction, xlix: "Statements of this kind, smelling somewhat of blackmail as they suggest that nothing but official negligence can ruin a promising scheme, are only too frequent in the appeals of those who lobby governments."

<sup>17</sup> National Archives of Canada MG 19 E1. Selkirk Papers I: 190-91: "Proposed Line of Boundary, to be fixed with the Honble Hudson's Bay Company to remain in force between the NW Co & them for 12 years, commencing 1811," Montreal, 7 November 1810, and subsequent London correspondence, I, 199-215.

presence along the Columbia, a presence acknowledged by the rival British company, seriously weakened future British claims to sovereignty over the Oregon Territory.<sup>18</sup>

The North West Company's partners, assembled at Fort William, nevertheless pursued their interest in the area: they voted to negotiate an agreement with the East India Company, to purchase stock in both the Hudson's Bay Company and Astor's Pacific Fur Company, as well as to send a supply ship to the Columbia River mouth. Petitioning of government offices continued. At the outbreak of war, the company's London agents asked the Admiralty to send an armed escort to Astoria. On 30 November 1813, the Royal Navy's *Raccoon* anchored in the Columbia estuary, but not before the North West Company had freed the area of immediate competition by purchasing Astoria. In the end government patronage and naval force proved to be less effective than commercial management and negotiation. The North West Company's identification of commercial interests and patriotism seems to have been purely expedient and ultimately to no advantage.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Davidson, 124-29. See [Simon McGillivray/Samuel Wilcock,] *Notice respecting the Boundary between His Majesty's Possessions in North America and the United States* (London: McMillen, 1817) and Frederick Merk, *The Oregon Question: essays in Anglo-American diplomacy and politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 41-52, 60-65, 284-85, 397-99. Basing his research on government documents, Merk infers, incorrectly, that Thompson's activity was limited to territory north of the forty-ninth parallel (42, 399).

<sup>19</sup> "Minutes of . . . the North West Company . . . 1810," in *Documents relating to the North West Company*, ed. W. S. Wallace (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934), 266-68; Davidson, 135-40.

Francis Phillips, a clerk on board the *Raccoon*, was indignant at the commercial rather than naval takeover of Astoria: "This piece of business of buying the settlement of the Enemy's people (by which the North West Company by no means acted proper after petitioning to Government for a force to be sent to take the place, plant the British Flag, and establish it under their firm) in my opinion to all intents and purposes is diametrically opposite to the fundamental laws of Great Britain under the head of assisting an Enemy." Cited by Barry M. Gough, "The 1813 Expedition to Astoria," *Beaver* 304:2 (1973): 50.

However, George Keith's attitude was one of sympathy with the opposition and a privileging of commercial over national motives. National Archives of Canada MG 19 C1 vol. 51, Keith to Roderic McKenzie, 8 November 1812: "We always entertain a hope that this unfortunate American war would evaporate. . . . We have had reports from Montreal last Spring respecting Mr Astor's first expedition, that the vessel had been seized. . . . I hope that report may prove false. Innocent mercantile people, I think above all others demand our pity in these disheartening times."

Cf. Hudson's Bay Company Archives B.60/a/12, James Bird, Edmonton Post Journals, 24 March 1814: Bird hints that the 1813 takeover was made easier by political loyalties, especially during wartime: "The Agents and Traders for the American Company in the neighbourhood of the Columbia are principally British Subjects and therefore on being informed of the War between Great Britain and the United States made, it is said, little Difficulty in resigning themselves 80 in number and their property into the hands of their rivals."

By its purchase of Astoria, the North West Company effectively gained the trading corridor for which it had negotiated and petitioned during the previous five years. Mackenzie's "Columbian enterprise" was realized, not by means of exploratory dashes to the sea or British government charters, but by commercial initiative and the steady advance of a trading network along the Columbia River. North West Company partners and their agents tried to exploit imperialist ambitions and patriotic sentiment when these were to their commercial advantage. Trade remained their object, and by trade they effectively occupied not only the Athabaska region, and north of it along the Mackenzie River, but also the country drained by the Columbia River, from its source to its mouth.

The third issue raised by Morton's article, the relationship between exploration and the "company's policy," is complex and in some instances difficult to ascertain. By "company policy" must be understood the deliberations and resolutions of the partners who met first at Grand Portage and later at Fort William: partners' and agents' references to the company's direction and decisions were always, in the last analysis, references to these assemblies. Morton assumes that the partners gathered at Grand Portage waited eagerly for news of Mackenzie's discoveries: "Obviously there would be much discussion, among the partners and clerks, of his experiences, and of the bearing of his journey on the policy of the company."<sup>20</sup> But the assembled partners showed no such interest. Mackenzie's letters to the partners in 1789 make only passing references to his Arctic voyage — all is trade, Indians, and accounts — and after his return Mackenzie wrote to his cousin Roderic from Grand Portage: "My *Expedition* is hardly spoken of but this is what I expected." In another letter to Roderic written three years later, as he was preparing for his second voyage, Mackenzie clearly distinguished between company business and his personal ambition to push on to the Pacific.

I have been so attentive to the Companys affairs that I have not been able to do anything For my own amusement. I worked once the distance between the Sun and Moon for the Longitude. . . . I was thinking that if McKay could be spared he would be of great Service to me should I undertake any expedition.<sup>21</sup>

Mackenzie's practice of navigational skills is for his "own amusement," his personal ambition to explore; McKay would be "of great Service" on any expedition of discovery if he were not taken up, like Mackenzie him-

<sup>20</sup> Morton, *CHR* 17: 268.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Mackenzie to the Agents of the North West Company, 15 February and 22 May 1789; to Roderic McKenzie, 16 July 1790 and 10 January 1793, in *Journals and Letters*, ed. Lamb, 436-38, 443, 449-50.

self, by the "Companys affairs." Exploration could not take precedence over the day-to-day business of trade. Fraser made the same distinction between company business and "our discoveries": in 1806, two years before his successful voyage to the coast, he observed that the failure of supply canoes to reach New Caledonia was "a considerable loss to the company, and a severe blow to our discoveries."<sup>22</sup>

Thompson's journals clearly reveal the conflict that he experienced between exploration and the company's usual activities. Discoveries had to be justified by demonstrating the profits that could be made in new territory. Thompson's most precarious season was not the fall of 1810, but the summer of 1807, when he first crossed to the Columbia River. There he found a flooded and impoverished country: contact with new tribes was delayed, and his men were so weak from hunger they could scarcely build the new fort.<sup>23</sup> Thompson's chance to explore the Columbia River was dependent on gaining a commercial foothold at its source. He reacted to rumour of an American post downstream as a trader would, not in terms of a "race to the sea":

This establishment of the Americans will give a new Turn to our so long delayed settling of this Country, on which we have entered it seems too late; but, in my opinion the most valuable part of the Country still remains to us, and we have nothing to obstruct us, but the difficulty of getting Goods from Fort des Prairies, & the still more formidable poverty of the Country in Animals. Time & Perseverance will show what we can do, & if worth our Expencc & Trouble.

Thompson regretted that these problems, immediate and all important, curtailed his exploration of the Columbia River:

What a fine Opportunity was here lost of going to the Flat Bow Country, from the embarrassed Situation of my Affairs. . . . I hoped still to have Time enough between my Departure and the 15th Sepr (the day when the People must go off for the Goods from Kam[inistiquia]) to explore at least the Flat Bow Country, & by the Course of the large River, determine whether it is the Columbia or not.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Simon Fraser to James McDougall, December 1806, in *Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser*, ed. W. Kaye Lamb (Toronto: Macmillan, 1960), 244.

<sup>23</sup> Archives of Ontario. David Thompson, Journals, no. 19, pencilled draft of a letter: "The Flat Heads &c &c were only 12 day's March from us last Winter [1807-8] & the Lake Indians only 6 days & yet both [were] as completely shut up by Mountains as if they were on the other side . . . & the Waters rising in the Summer have nearly the same effect. . . . I labour under many disadvantages which only Time and a generous assistance can overcome."

<sup>24</sup> Royal Commonwealth Society Library. David Thompson, Report addressed to the Senior Partners of the North West Company, 1807.

Nevertheless, in October of the same year Thompson risked leaving his new post open to a Peigan attack while he travelled south to the Kootenay River. In his journal Thompson expressed his wish to explore the river, at the same time repeatedly declaring that this trip would further the Company's trade:

By personally examining that Country I may be enabled to form a judgement whether we can with any hopes of Profit form a trading Post. But principally I wish to see if the large River to the south of us, which I name McGillivray's River, is navigable . . . and I wish to see a few Indians who are that way, to encourage them to work Beaver.<sup>25</sup>

This passage also shows that Thompson himself named "McGillivray's River," only seven months before Duncan's death, and that the region was unknown to him, although Morton claims he explored it in 1801.

Two years later, Thompson still had to juggle his own interest in exploration with the seasonal demands of the fur trade. He cut short his exploration of the Pend Oreille River in October 1809, "as we have barely time to get to McGillivray's River before the [supply] Canoes arrive." Thompson's comment on this about-turn is preserved in a later journal: "1809. The Partners of the Coy allow of no further discoveries but only trading Posts on a small scale, and I have means for nothing else."<sup>26</sup> It is plain that no order forbade Thompson to explore, while the lack of special accommodation prevented him from making more than brief forays beyond his posts — despite his title of company "Astronomer." Only in 1811, four days before he arrived at Astoria, did the partners assembled at Fort William reorganize the Columbia department, "intending by this arrange-

---

Cf. HBCA B.60/a/6, Bird, *Edmonton Post Journals*, 23 December 1806: "Mr David Thompson is making preparations for another attempt to cross the Mountains, pass through [the Kootenays] Country and follow the Columbia River to the Sea. . . . the object of his enterprise is said to be to ascertain positively whether a Trade can be formed with that Country valuable enough to be worth pursuing . . . and if it should, the uniting of the Commerce of the two Seas." Cf. note 29.

Thompson's commercial emphasis is in contrast to the spurious American edict he received from Kootenay visitors to his fort, issued by the commanding officers of "Fort Lewis," 10 July 1807, and copied by Bird (HBCA B.60/a/7: 10 November 1807): "The new ceded Territories of the American States . . . comprehend the Mississourie, Red River and all the Lands westward to the Coast of California and the Columbia River with all its Branches, of which we have now taken possession and on which we are now settled down to the Pacific Ocean . . . all of which we shall comprehend as within our said Territories until some further Explanation takes place on this head between the United States of America and the Court of St James."

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *Journals*, no. 20: 29 September 1807.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, *Journals*, no. 22: 2 October 1809; *Journals*, no. 75, ed. Tyrrell, *CHR* 15: 44.

ment that Mr David Thompson should be left to prosecute his plans of discovery on the west side of the Rocky Mountains towards the Pacific."<sup>27</sup>

Yet Morton repeatedly asserts that there was an aggressive, directing policy on the part of the North West Company to explore west of the prairies and south of New Caledonia. He speaks of "*instructions* to advance on the Saskatchewan front . . . [Fraser's] model *execution* of the Columbian enterprise . . . the significance of his [Thompson's] *company's policy*. . ." Morton imagines that "[Thompson's] *instructions* must have run that he was to build a post" and observes with disapproval that "[Thompson] did not push on *as directed* . . . he diverged from the *original plan*" (my emphasis). Morton ends by confusing company policy with Thompson's personal ambition — "the goal of the Columbian enterprise . . . the goal of his [Thompson's] enterprise" — and thus arrives at his odd and illogical condemnation: "By failing to make the main object of the Columbian enterprise the main object of his activities . . . David Thompson fixed the predisposing conditions of his failure." Obviously the failure is Morton's, for refusing to admit that Thompson, among others, was not directed, instructed, and bound by explicit company orders to reach the Pacific Ocean.

Instead, it would appear that the initiatives of Mackenzie, Fraser, and Thompson furthered the aims of the North West Company and met with general approval in so far as they provided new commercial opportunities. Far from responding to "instructions" or a clearly defined policy, as Morton maintains, Mackenzie, Fraser, and Thompson elicited, at worst, indifference, and at best, complaisance: Mackenzie's Arctic voyage was "hardly spoken of," and Thompson was "*left* to prosecute *his* plans of discovery" (my emphasis). Thompson's dutiful consolidation of trade meant slow progress to the coast, but in terms of serving the North West Company's commercial advantage, his achievement was more considerable (not less, as Morton claims) than either Mackenzie's or Fraser's earlier voyages to the Pacific.

Thus far, Morton's argument needs to be explained and qualified, but not rejected out of hand. With the final question of the "race to the sea," however, Morton tries too hard to make the evidence (or dearth of it) fit his thesis. The latter part of his article focuses on what he considers to be the crucial episode of the Columbian enterprise, the attempts by both Thompson and the Pacific Fur Company to establish a post at the Columbia River mouth during the summer of 1811.

<sup>27</sup> "Minutes . . . of the North West Company . . . 1810," in *Documents*, ed. Wallace, 266.

In line with his patriotic view of the Columbian enterprise generally, Morton nationalizes this "race"; he describes it in terms of flags "floating over the Oregon," instead of seeing Thompson and Astor's men as representatives of commercial concerns that were open to negotiation and mutual accommodation. Rather naïvely, he takes at face value the North West Company's diplomatic identification of its own interests with those of British imperial power. This is perhaps understandable since Thompson himself repeated, in his notice left at the Snake River, the confusion of commercial and patriotic aims that also characterized the North West Company petitions and Atcheson's pamphlet:

Know hereby that this Country is claimed by Great Britain as part of it's Territories and that the NW Company of Merchants from Canada . . . do hereby intend to erect a Factory in this Place for the Commerce of the Country around.<sup>28</sup>

But at the same time, Thompson repeated the commercial aim of his earlier explorations in describing the purpose of this voyage to the sea: "to explore this River, in order to open out a Passage for the Interiour Trade with the Pacific Ocean."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Thompson announced to his hosts at Astoria that "the Wintering Partners have accepted the offer of Mr Astor"; the North West Company was willing to make a financial arrangement which, comments Thompson, "in my opinion will be to our mutual Interest." Whatever the patriotic sentiments of the North West Company partners, they were prepared to make deals with Astor to further their trade. The "Americans" at Astoria (formerly of the North West Company) were of the same mind:

With you [we] sincerely wish that final arrangements may take place to the mutual satisfaction of both parties, which would inevitably secure to us every advantage that can possibly be drawn from the Business.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Thompson, *Journals*, no. 27: 9 July 1811.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *Journals*, no. 27: 3 July 1811.

<sup>30</sup> David Thompson to Duncan McDougall, David Stuart and Robert Stuart, 15 July 1811, and their reply, 16 July 1811, in Dorothy Wildes Bridgwater, "John Jacob Astor relative to his Settlement on Columbia River," *Yale University Library Gazette* 24 (1949): 52-53.

The unchanged attitude of North West Company partners to Astor and his concern is indicated in Mackenzie's letter to McTavish, Frobisher & Company, 30 January 1798, in *Journals and Letters*, ed. Lamb, 463; and Hudson's Bay Company Archives F.3/2, William McGillivray to John George McTavish, 19 June 1815: "our Hands must be strengthened so as to make the best Bargain we can with [Astor] or with some other People — the fact is that was it not that Mr Astor has it more in his Power to annoy us in the Indian Trade than any other man, I should prefer an arrangement with any other Person, for he is a most unpleasant Partner to deal with. We must however act from expediency." Cf. Lavender, 303.

Cf. also Glover, Introduction, xlvi: his argument by inference and conjecture is

The North West Company's purchase of Astoria two years later, during the War of 1812, was made in the same accommodating spirit.

Morton's claim that Thompson was engaged in a "race to the sea" leads him to make three unfounded affirmations. First, he insists that Thompson was "under orders" from the partners at Rainy Lake, although no transcript of these orders has come to light. In this way he may have been influenced by Washington Irving,<sup>31</sup> but his reconstruction of events resembles even more closely James Bird's account of Thompson's voyage, in which Bird states that "conformably to Orders he had received from their Agents, Mr David Thompson proceeded (July last) down the Columbia to the Sea." Used to the Hudson's Bay Company's hierarchy of power and decision, Bird, who refers inaccurately to "Agents" and "servants" of the North West Company, apparently misunderstood the rival company's structure, and quite possibly introduced the notion of superior direction rather than arrangements or group decisions.<sup>32</sup>

---

overtured by the evidence that Bridgwater published thirteen years before: "It is surely *inconceivable* that after all this scheming and hoping, planning and exploring, the Nor'Westers would have been content to give up their own Columbian enterprise. . . . *Inherent probability* here supports Irving's statement that they rejected the offer" (my emphasis).

<sup>31</sup> Washington Irving, *Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), 65: "[Thompson's] was the party despatched by the North West Company to anticipate Mr. Astor in his intention of effecting a settlement at the mouth of the Columbia River. . . . As his original plan was defeated by the desertion of his people it is probable that he descended the river simply to reconnoiter and ascertain whether an American settlement had been commenced. . . . Though Mr. Thompson could be considered as little better than a spy in the camp, he was received with great cordiality."

<sup>32</sup> HBCA B.60/a/10, Bird, *Edmonton Post Journals*, 30 January 1812; and B.60/a/11: 29 December 1812.

Glover, Introduction, xlvi, states that "David Thompson, as Hudson's Bay Company men wrote home, was directed on the . . . errand of finding the Columbia River and reaching it as early as 1806." Glover's reference is most probably to Bird's report of 23 December 1806: cf. note 22.

Thompson's only contemporary reference to what went on at Rainy Lake is contained in a letter to Alexander Fraser, 20 December 1810, printed by L. R. Masson in *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, 2 vols. (1889-90; New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960), II, 42n: "I intended to have paid you a visit at Montreal this last summer, but the critical situation of our affairs in the Columbia obliged me to return. The Americans, it seems, were as usual determined to be beforehand with us in the Columbia in ship navigation. . . . they will probably get the start of me." NAC archivists have been unable to locate the original document.

Cf. "Minutes . . . of the North West Company . . . 1810," in *Documents*, ed. Wallace, 266-67: "July 14th . . . Partners were named to various departments but the Wintering Proprietors not being all arrived — the further arrangement of the departments — was put off until their arrival. . . . 20th July — The Proprietors whose presence was waited for in order to Arrange the Different Departments, being arrived The Meeting proceeded upon that Business and the following Arrangement of Partners was agreed upon — viz. — . . . Columbia: John McDonald, David Thompson."

Morton's second affirmation is that Thompson's missing journal of 23 July–28 October 1810 points to a deliberate suppression of the truth. Again, Bird's journals seem to contain the germ of this suspicion. After recording the news of Thompson's arrival at Astoria, Bird adds,

It is impossible for me to ascertain the Truth of the above Statements, the story has been related by several of the Nwt Cos Clerks at several places, and with a great deal of Consistency; and I have been shewn passages of Letters from Mr Thompson, and Party, which confirm apparently the oral Information we had received on the Subject; but this amounts to no more than a proof that the story has not been fabricated on this side the Mountain . . . it [is] impossible for me to place much Belief in a Report of this Nature that is not supported by infallible Confirmations of its Truth.

One wonders what "infallible Confirmations" would have to consist of, beyond these corroborated oral and written reports. The Hudson's Bay Company, from John McNab at York Factory to James Bird at Edmonton House, was not keen on transmontane trade. Repeatedly Bird doubted the success of North West Company expansion along the Columbia; he recalled the scarcity of food west of the mountains, the "long and extremely bad" route across Athabaska Pass; finally, he suggested, "a successful Competition with Traders from the west Coast of America is a Question that can be better decided in England than here." Bird refused to credit Thompson's success, preferring to accuse Thompson of resorting to a "fabricated" story, because acceptance of the evidence would have forced him to take vigorous and competitive action. Morton's reason for discrediting Thompson's real achievements is presumably to maintain his thesis of a Columbian enterprise. The historian's vocabulary and suspicious disbelief are remarkably similar to Bird's, although neither Morton, nor Glover after him, cites Bird by name.<sup>33</sup>

Morton also neglects what evidence there is of Thompson's 1810-11 voyage, preferring his thesis of cowardice and suppression of the "missing journal." Morton refers to Alexander Henry's account of events in October 1810 and praises the way in which Henry apparently took charge when Thompson became separated from his canoes:

. . . past master in handling the savages, [Henry] sent the brigade downstream as if the enterprise were given up, got the Peigans dead drunk, and then sent the brigade back upstream under cover of night.<sup>34</sup>

Henry thus joins Mackenzie and Fraser as an example of decisive action.

<sup>33</sup> HBCA B.60/a/10, Bird, Edmonton Post Journals, 30 January 1812, and B.60/a/12: 28 February 1814.

<sup>34</sup> Morton, *CHR* 17: 285.

But a glance at Henry's journal entry for 13 October 1810 is enough to show how Morton has slanted its evidence:

This affair of his [Thompson's] Canoes being stopped by the Peagans, has induced him to alter his route, and endeavour to open a new road . . . to the Athabaska River, and from thence across the Mountains to the Waters of the Columbia. . . . By this route we shall never be subject to the control of the Slave [Blackfoot and Peigan] Indians. But we shall avoid their Country and War lands intirely. . . . It is therefore determined that the Canoes should be ordered to return below in as private a manner as possible to avoid all misunderstanding with the natives.<sup>35</sup>

Henry's journal entry shows Thompson to have made a decisive choice, that of a new route across Athabaska Pass. And far from taking sole charge of a confusing and dangerous situation while Thompson dithered and left his men exposed to danger, Henry's journal entry indicates that the movements of the brigade were part of a coherent strategy: "It is therefore determined. . . ."

Not content to misread the evidence of Henry's journal, Morton imagines that Thompson committed a grave error and then tried to cover it up. Threatened by the Peigans, Thompson was "guilty of misjudgment," even of cowardice; he fled to the north instead of pushing through Howse Pass.

It was a grave mistake on Thompson's part not to go bravely up to the Peigans, and seek for some arrangement by which at least part of the brigade . . . could be allowed to pass through unmolested. It can scarcely be doubted that such would have been the course followed by Alexander Mackenzie or Simon Fraser. . . . As it proved, this decision was fatal to Thompson's [*sic*] plan to reach the mouth of the Columbia before the Americans.<sup>36</sup>

Morton assumes, moreover, that Thompson's choice of the Athabaska Pass route was in reaction to an exceptional confrontation with the Peigans. But Thompson's detailed record of his years in the west, as well as the journals of Duncan McGillivray, James Bird, and Alexander Henry, witness to "perilous times" from 1794 to the war between Peigans and Salish in 1810-11: every summer was punctuated by tribal conflicts from which the traders, as suppliers of arms, were not excluded. Henry described the Peigans as being "of a fickle and changeable disposition, and no confidence

<sup>35</sup> National Archives of Canada MG 19 A13, Alexander Henry, Journal, transcribed by George Coventry [1824]: 1021. As for Henry's own powers of decision, cf. Hudson's Bay Company Archives F.3/2, William McGillivray to John George McTavish, 17 July 1814: "Mr Henry has not acted with decision indeed it is not in his character."

<sup>36</sup> Morton, *CHR* 17: 284, 286-87.

can be placed in them, a mere trifling circumstance will cause them to change their minds.”<sup>37</sup> Thompson later recalled:

I had often requested permission to change the route across the Mountains, as we must sooner, or later, be cut off by the Peagan Indians, but the great Partners assured me there was no danger.<sup>38</sup>

In July 1811 the assembled partners did indeed reject “the new Plan proposed by Mr David Thompson. . . the Route . . . which Mr Thompson attempted last winter to pass through would be attended with more expence & difficulty than the old one.”<sup>39</sup> Howse, Henry, and John McDonald of Garth risked the established crossing in 1811, but thereafter Thompson’s judgement prevailed; as he had noted during his first trip over Athabaska Pass, his new route was cheaper as well as safer.<sup>40</sup>

Not only does Morton twist the evidence of Henry’s journal to assert that Thompson fell victim to momentary fear at Howse Pass in October 1810, he turns the very lack of evidence, the “missing journal” of 23 July to 28 October 1810, into an accusation: “there is a strange, perhaps a determined, silence in his journals at this point.” It will be remembered that Morton also speculates on Thompson’s activity in the summer of 1801, for which there is no journal extant. Like the cosmographers who argued

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, *Journals*, no. 20: 3 October 1807 and passim. Cf. Duncan McGillivray, *Journal*, ed. A. S. Morton (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), passim and “Account of the Trade,” 67; also HBCA B.60/a/4-12, Bird, *Edmonton Post Journals*, passim; and Henry, 1129 and passim.

<sup>38</sup> Thompson, *Journals*, no. 75, ed. Tyrrell, *CHR* 15: 45. Exemplary of the partners who minimized the Peigan threat is McDonald of Garth. National Archives of Canada MG 19 A17, John McDonald of Garth, *Memoirs*, 126, recalls that his “Pilot” sent ahead to Howse Pass fell into an ambush: “His story I soon got. . . a party of about 6 Black feet came upon us pillaged all we had & took our Horses Arms &c. . . . A halt was made my Companions (shame upon them) thought that consequently we should return [to] the Rocky Mountain House full tilt, Canoes & all — I thought otherwise. . . much debating took place all night amongst the Men — but they saw that nothing would make us return.”

By contrast, Bird’s journals reflect HBC cautiousness: for example, HBCA B.60/a/9, 13 May 1811: “The Muddy River Indians [Peigans] have promised not to molest Mr Howse . . . but declared that, if they again met with a white Man going to supply their Enemies, they would not only plunder & kill him, but that they would make dry Meat of his body.” Bird adds, “This threat they are sufficiently brutal to fulfill to its utmost extent.” A few days later (HBCA B.60/a/9, 30 May 1811), Bird notes that “[Mr. Howse] has thought it too Dangerous, till a safer Road, than that by which he went, is examined, further to pursue a Trade so advantageously begun.”

<sup>39</sup> “Minutes . . . of the North West Company . . . 1810,” in *Documents*, ed. Wallace, 265-66.

<sup>40</sup> Thompson, *Journals*, no. 25, “Navigation of the Athabaska River”: “This is only 2 days more than the other Route and avoids much of that tedious & expensive business of Horses, which can never be brought within strict Calculation, being liable to too many Accidents.”

for a northwest passage in the gaps of coastal surveys, Morton gives free rein to his imagination when there is no text to curb it. However, the journals which record Thompson's first trip over Athabaska Pass and his arrival at Astoria have survived. Far from hinting at cowardice and confusion, these journals indicate that Thompson thought himself "safe & well" in his winter camp west of Athabaska Pass; they also register his cool reaction in the face of danger (in contrast to the Astorian David Stuart) at the Dalles the following summer.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the extant journals of 1810-11 betray no haste or uncertainty, but instead record Thompson's cartographic project and reflect his usual preoccupation with trade. A lengthy bill of goods, the merchandise Thompson transported over Athabaska Pass to supply his posts in the Columbia department, is included, as well as a note of "Furrs taken by D. Thompson as an adventure to the Mouth of the Columbia." Always a trader, Thompson did not travel light even when fleeing the Peigans. And the "adventure" of furs may be evidence that Thompson anticipated the Pacific Fur Company's establishment at the river mouth.<sup>42</sup>

These journals also set out the bare events of Thompson's meeting with Astor's men. On 10 July 1811 Thompson noted laconically, "Heard news of the American ship's arrival." Five days later he wrote, "we came to the House of Mr Astors Company — Messrs McDougall, Stuart & Stuart — who received me in the most polite Manner."<sup>43</sup> In light of Morton's thesis, such simple statements are nevertheless pregnant with failure to arrive at the sea before the Astorians did, to uphold the North West Company's Columbian enterprise, and to gain the Oregon Territory for Britain. But if Morton's argument, particularly as it concerns the race to the sea, is *not* considered viable, these remarks seem insignificant. By the same token, the fact that Thompson left no journal for the weeks of 23 July–28 October 1810 loses its sinister implication of cowardice and prevarication when Morton's string of causes and motives is questioned.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, Journals, no. 25: 26 January 1811 and 28 July 1811.

Glover, Introduction, lix, disputes the second instance: "Thompson could be steady and cool in the face of immediate danger. But it is often easier to face a brief immediate danger than to endure uncertainty and anxiety; and Thompson's conduct after his canoes were stopped in 1810 suggest that under the stress of such anxiety his nerves had reached breaking point."

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, Journals, no. 25, 27 December 1810; Journals, no. 27, flyleaf.

Glover, Introduction, l, acknowledges that Thompson was heavy-laden on this voyage, but assumes that these goods were destined for a new establishment at the river mouth rather than for Thompson's existing posts.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, Journals, no. 27, 10 and 15 July 1811. Cf. note 30.

Unfortunately, a number of historians, far from doubting Morton's argument, have accepted and developed it. In this they have been encouraged by the increasing firmness with which Morton himself presented his case. For a number of years Morton and Tyrrell debated the issue of Thompson's 1801 crossing in the *Canadian Historical Review*; they differed not so much in historical method as in their judgement of wilderness travel. Morton ended the debate in 1939 with the publication of his *History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*. In this hardback overview, Morton abandons the tentative vocabulary of his articles. His argument is, he still admits, "inferential, and therefore to some extent precarious," but this confession is relegated to a little footnote, while the text itself gains in firmness and illusive factuality. In writing about the race to the sea, for example, Morton states:

While we have no record of the exact terms, we can make no mistake in believing that [Thompson] was ordered by the panic-stricken agents of the Company to hasten to the mouth of the Columbia.<sup>44</sup>

No new evidence has been uncovered; Morton is still working by inference and conjecture. But his language is an odd mixture of certainty and trust: "we can make *no mistake* in *believing* . . ." Morton has come to rely on his own historical authority.

The nature of this authority may be seen most clearly in Morton's attitude to sources of his *History*. Although "it has been the aim to base this history entirely on primary sources" — like E. E. Rich after him, he had the run of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives — Morton refrains from "plaguing" the reader with notes: "Indeed, the bibliography is so extensive it would make this work . . . too cumbersome for any but a scholar."<sup>45</sup> Morton's *History* has since become a standard scholarly reference, although its statements rest purely and wholly on its author's judgement and reputation. Morton's omission of references was criticized, but not severely enough to prevent acceptance of this "definitive" study. Lewis Thomas re-issued the *History* in 1973, claiming that "[despite] the passage of a generation . . . Morton's stature has not noticeably diminished." Proof of Thomas's assertion is that almost fifteen years after the re-edition, that is, almost half a century after its original publication, Morton's *History* has become itself a source: it is listed in the bibliographies of three plates of the new *Historical Atlas of Canada*. The scheme that Mackenzie endorsed,

<sup>44</sup> Morton, *History*, 468, 490.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

that Fraser worked for, that Thompson neglected has enjoyed its greatest success as a historical enterprise.<sup>46</sup>

As well as presenting Morton's argument for a Columbian enterprise more confidently than do the articles, the *History* makes bolder psychological claims. In the *History*, Morton writes that Thompson "does not appear to have been of a masterful nature. . . . There is reason to believe that Thompson's heart was not in the Columbian enterprise. . . ."

No Alexander Mackenzie or Simon Fraser this, but a scholarly surveyor, not without an element of timidity in him. . . . He proved himself as without that "spirit of the North West Company," which by argument, by bargain, or by sheer masterfulness, won the savages to its will and forced its way through to its goal.

Morton reproaches Thompson's hesitation during the decisive weeks of October 1810: "In this crucial hour of his life" — crucial by Morton's own measure of the Columbian enterprise — "David Thompson was weighed and found wanting."<sup>47</sup>

Richard Glover follows this lead in constructing a detailed psychological portrait of the explorer in his Introduction to Thompson's *Narrative*.<sup>48</sup> Having concluded, in an earlier article, that "the historian must walk delicately when he relies on the unsupported word of David Thompson," Glover is most interesting when he considers the problem of Thompson's missing journal. In the absence of Thompson's own "witness," which he is persuaded would have been unreliable in any case, Glover turns, like Morton in the *History*, to the journals of Alexander Henry, who played a role in Thompson's escape from the Peigans in October 1810.<sup>49</sup> But again, by his own "witness," Henry seems to have been more perplexed than decisive:

. . . to crown all that there was 4 Tents of Peagans camped upon the Banks of the [Saskatchewan] River, at the first ridge of the Mountains (one day's journey on horseback from [Rocky Mountain House]) who were placed there

<sup>46</sup> Lewis G. Thomas, preface to Morton, *History*: xxi; R. Cole Harris, ed., *Historical Atlas of Canada*, 3 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987- ), vol. 1, 195-97 (plates 61, 62, 67).

<sup>47</sup> Morton, *History*, 480, 485, 491.

<sup>48</sup> Glover is heavily dependent on Morton's method and specific arguments, notwithstanding his criticism of Morton's far-fetched place name conjectures. Cf. notes 1 and 10.

<sup>49</sup> Glover, *CHR* 31: 36-37. Cf. his Introduction, l-li, xlvii: Glover deplores the "sparse" evidence of North West Company minutes and the "senile" evidence of Thompson's *Narrative*, all the while accepting the novelist Washington Irving as a "key witness." He also accepts without question the evidence of Malcolm Ross and Alexander Henry; only Thompson's record is subject to a critical reading.

to prevent any supplies going across. This was a sad piece of intelligence for us, and I knew not how to avoid them.<sup>50</sup>

Glover adopts, albeit more subtly, Morton's technique of comparison between a timorous, indecisive Thompson and one or two brave counterfoils. For Morton these are Mackenzie and Fraser, while Glover emphasizes Henry as the decisive rescuer — despite Henry's own evidence.

Thanks to Glover's focus on psychological motivation, Morton's idea of "a determined silence" (Thompson's destruction of his own admission of cowardice) is revealed as triply dubious: it assumes that Thompson gave in to fear in the first place, then assumes that Thompson would have described this weakness in daily instalments as he sat waiting for his canoes, and finally assumes that he heaped wrong on wrong when he prudently shredded the self-indictment of his fearful paralysis. From first to last this fantastic scenario is pure speculation; the wonder is that serious historians have entertained it. Glover has done so, nevertheless. He even attempts to explain why Thompson was afraid: "If one cannot tell what Thompson actually did from day to day through all this long episode, one can perhaps fathom his state of mind." Working from inference to conjecture, Glover does not stop short of mindreading: he constructs a character for Thompson and follows this character through the "crucial hour of his life." Thompson was paralyzed with fear because "his nerves had reached the breaking point," and this state was due to long-standing anxiety, caused in turn by the fact that "the Piegans had no reason to feel kindly toward him."<sup>51</sup>

While Morton's tendency is to integrate and generalize, Glover undertakes to reach inside the individual and "fathom his state of mind." Morton's instinct is that of the general historian; Glover's, of the biographer. Even so, Glover employs the same methods as Morton: he works from inference to conjecture, and by fitting the data to the dogma. Lack of suitable evidence is no deterrent to either historian; in its place both of them weave a net of circumstantial detail carefully selected to prove the point. Not content to let Morton's dark hint lie, Glover repeats the earlier historian's accusation that Thompson had destroyed his journal for this "crucial" period.

The inference that Thompson himself destroyed those of his records which originally ran from 22 July . . . to 29 October . . . therefore seems a by no means unlikely one; and Arthur Morton's suspicions, that Thompson did away

<sup>50</sup> Henry, 1008-09.

<sup>51</sup> Glover, Introduction, lvii-lix. Cf. note 41.

with the evidence about his conduct during this period, are worth considering.<sup>52</sup>

In this short passage Glover states his accusation twice, and also cites Morton as an authority of like mind. By dint of repetition his psychological speculation gains credence without any increase in credibility. Thus both Morton and Glover are able to provide daring responses to apparently insoluble questions which, given the evidence available, might be better left unasked. By repeating and supporting Morton's arguments, Glover establishes a tradition of conjecture: he justifies his argument by appealing to undocumented, purely historical authority.

Also contributing to this tradition is Rich's *Fur Trade and the West to 1857*, published in 1967. Rich does not retain earlier speculations on the missing journal, but he falls lock stock and barrel for Morton's narrowly focused definition of the Columbian enterprise, and he too uses Morton's methods of argument. Like Morton's McGillivray, Rich's Thompson "must have felt to the full the attractions of serving such a company" as would promote Mackenzie's scheme of global trade. Such a statement can be neither right nor wrong, since it is frankly speculative; at the same time, it freely attributes motivation where none is documented. What is more, Rich repeats Morton's insistence on a successful 1801 expedition. A researcher used to handling primary sources, having had "for over twenty years . . . free and privileged access"<sup>53</sup> to the Hudson's Bay Company Archives when these were closed to all but a few scholars, Rich is disappointing in his blind dependance on previous historical arguments.

With such a commitment to Morton's thesis, it is not surprising that Rich also notes, disapprovingly, Thompson's repeated failure to "press onward towards the ocean." Rich states flatly that "at Rainy Lake in July 1810 . . . [Thompson] found urgent orders from the North West partners," although no documentation of these orders is offered. Thompson still "arrived too late" at the sea.

The six years, from 1805 [*sic*] to 1811, which David Thompson had taken to establish a way across the Rockies, were irretrievably lost, and the North West Company had forfeited the initiative in Pacific trade.<sup>54</sup>

What is of interest here is the continuous sliding from Morton's first, tentative, admittedly inferential argument, full of qualifiers and conditionals, to Rich's straightforward, factual account. From Morton's early ar-

<sup>52</sup> Glover, Introduction, lx-lxi.

<sup>53</sup> Rich, 185, 197, 311.

<sup>54</sup> Rich, 199-201.

ticles to Tyrrell's objections, to Morton's retrenchment in his *History*, the Columbian enterprise took on substance and familiarity. Rich relies on Morton's theory as if it were incontestable, a well-documented truth rather than a series of imaginative conjectures.

Morton's theory, together with its developments by Glover and Rich, illustrates the problematic relationship between evidence and history. Morton uses documents and place names as proofs to answer inappropriate questions. The "race to the sea" is a false issue, as the internal contradictions and tautologies of Morton's original article should have made immediately evident. And the question of Thompson's missing journal is a red herring, not only because it is built on a series of speculations, but also because it goes against the nature of the document at issue. Fur trade journals, as a genre, record "remarkable occurrences"; they deal very little in projects and motivations, and are restricted to the writer's immediate sphere of activity. To judge from Thompson's extant journals, as well as those of his fellow traders, an admission or even intimation of misjudgement and its attendant emotions is extremely improbable. Sometimes available evidence cannot be made to answer the questions that historians would like it to. A passage in Henry's journal is exemplary in this respect: in February 1810, Henry announced that he would soon build a new fort upstream, and gave one reason for the move — to avoid a clash between contentious tribes. The journal entry ends with this comment: "Many other reasons could be given in favour of this arrangement. Too tedious to detail."<sup>55</sup> The historian is left with *one* reason for Henry's decision; any others he or she may come up with are at best circumstantially defined, at worst irresponsibly speculative. The evidence is incomplete, and the historian should not try to force more significance from it than it can reasonably and properly yield.

Historians' fondness for psychological motivations is especially abusive of the documentary sources on which they depend. Even so, Glyndwr Williams speaks of the fur trade era as providing "all the ingredients of human motivation and accomplishment which historians and their public seek." Carl Berger paraphrases Collingwood in defining "the chief task of the historian [as] the reconstruction and re-enactment of past thought and activity in his own mind."<sup>56</sup> Tempting as it is to create a picture of the past by giving shape to events, by characterizing the actors and articulating

<sup>55</sup> Henry, *Journal*, 902.

<sup>56</sup> Glyndwr Williams, "Epilogue," *Old Trails and New Directions*, ed. Carol M. Judd and Arthur J. Ray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 318; Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976), 220.

motivations, the scrupulous historian is at the mercy of available contemporary documents.

In nearly every instance this documentation is partial and fragmentary. But by forcing the evidence, by making it seem to answer questions it cannot and by building on purely historical authority, Morton and his successors have audaciously tried to fill in the blanks and fit the data to their dogma. They have failed: responsible historians recognize that the past cannot be made to answer completely or exactly the questions which the present poses — that historical accuracy depends from first to last on the appropriateness of the questions they ask, and less on the evidence, documentary or circumstantial, that can be amassed in response to faulty premisses. Only when history is as discreet and tentative, as fragmentary and "silent" as its documentation, can it justify any claim to being reliable and true.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 17. The fragmentary nature of evidence may be said to play the role that Foucault assigns to discontinuity: "[lors de] son intégration dans le discours de l'historien, . . . il ne joue plus le rôle d'une fatalité extérieure qu'il faut réduire, mais d'un concept opératoire qu'on utilise; et par là, l'inversion de signes grâce à laquelle il n'est plus le négatif de la lecture historique . . . mais l'élément positif qui détermine son objet et valide son analyse."