

Book Reviews

Travels in Western North America, 1784-1812, by David Thompson.
Edited by Victor G. Hopwood. Toronto: Macmillan, 1971. Pp. vii,
342. \$10.95.

David Thompson is a significant figure in Canada's story. The Hudson's Bay Company, to whom he was apprenticed, brought him to North America in 1784 and first trained and then employed him as a surveyor and cartographer. He continued his surveys for the North-West Company which he joined after leaving the Hudson's Bay Company in 1797. When he retired from the fur trade in 1812 he had mapped an amount of virgin territory which may justify J. B. Tyrrell's description of him as "the greatest practical land geographer who ever lived." His employers permitted London cartographers, like the firm of Arrowsmith, to publish his discoveries — an act which Professor Hopwood describes as "pirating." This term is hardly correct, for Thompson's maps were the property of the employers who had paid him to make them. The result was nevertheless unfortunate. It caused the world that used Thompson's splendid maps to be denied almost all knowledge of their author.

But this ignorance of the man ended dramatically in 1916. Then Tyrrell published, with the Champlain Society, *David Thompson's Narrative of his Explorations in Western America (1784-1812)*, a book which Thompson in his old age had compiled out of the journals he kept in his youth. That volume made Thompson famous, but, like the edition prepared for the Champlain Society in 1962 by this reviewer, it had only a small circulation, limited to members of the society. Now Professor Victor G. Hopwood, of the Department of English in the University of British Columbia, offers the general public this well chosen selection of Thompson's writing.

Professor Hopwood has made his choice from both the *Narrative* published by Champlain Society and Thompson's journals and papers preserved in the Ontario Provincial Archives and other repositories. He begins with excerpts from Thompson's account in the *Narrative* of life beside Hudson Bay in 1784-86. Next comes the whole of Thompson's long lost

chapter on "The Saskatchewan and the Bow, 1786-1790," which Professor Hopwood himself discovered in the Ontario Archives in 1957; and the text given here is to be preferred to that printed in 1962 in my edition of the *Narrative* which was taken from a too hastily made transcript. There follow, also from the *Narrative*, but with some excisions, chapters on "Life with the Nahathaways," on "Explorations in Athabasca," on Thompson's work as "Astronomer to the North West Company" and on "Plains and Foothill Indians." The next, that is the seventh, chapter, "Probing the Passes of the Rockies" contains new material taken from Thompson's journals and blended with parts of a report preserved in the Public Library of Vancouver. Chapter VIII, on "Exploring the Upper Columbia" is also from Thompson's journals and includes what may be an attempt at fiction; this is a description of the battle between the Piegans and the Salishes, in which Finan McDonald took part, written as if Thompson himself had been there, which he was not. Chapter IX gives "an early version" of Thompson's "Journey to the Pacific in 1810-11"; and the last chapter, called "Final Explorations in the West" is drawn from the three closing chapters of the *Narrative*. All told, it is a varied and interesting selection.

One of the things which roused Professor Hopwood's interest in Thompson was admiration for his prose style; and Thompson was indeed among the most literary of explorers. His love of books began in his charity school in Westminster where *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels* were among his favourites. Common literary interests are perhaps more likely than the greater distaste for other Hudson's Bay Company men postulated by Professor Hopwood to explain why Thompson describes Joseph Colen, the chief at York Factory, as "enlightened." For Colen had a really remarkable library of some 1400 volumes. We may be sure that Thompson enjoyed this library during his visits to York, since Colen, who lent Thompson money, would hardly refuse to lend him books. As Alice Johnson has reported, Thompson's numerous purchases included *Paradise Lost* and *Johnson's Rambler*; and it is good to have a professor of English pay attention to this facet of Thompson the fur-trader and explorer.

But Thompson was also a man who played a part in events of historic importance; and Professor Hopwood is less at home in history than in literary criticism. Thus he can write

In 1846, the British government, betraying Canada, completely yielded to the United States under the pressure of the slogan "fifty-four-forty or fight" Canada's historic claims to Oregon by accepting the 49th parallel as the British Columbia boundary.

On this one can only comment, first, that a Britain which pushed American claims back from $54^{\circ} 40'$ to the 49th parallel had not "completely yielded to the United States;" second, in 1846 no nation of "Canada" existed for Britain to betray; but, third, the inhabitants of the colonies of New Brunswick, Canada East and Canada West might fairly have complained of betrayal if Britain had exposed their homes to invasion by electing to fight the U.S.A. over a claim so remote from their interests as the ownership of part of the Pacific coast.

This matter of imperial diplomacy may be rather far on the perimeter of Professor Hopwood's subject; but he is also weak on some matters much more central to Thompson's career. He indeed declares that Thompson's statements, as "an original historical source," must be "tested against other evidence." There he is dead right; but then, after stating the principle, he too often ignores the other evidence.

An example is the way he treats Thompson's departure from the Hudson's Bay Company. Thompson's story on this is, first, that he left because Colen wrote him a letter saying "he could not sanction any further surveys"; and, second, that he left when his "time was up," implying that his obligations to his employers were fulfilled. Professor Hopwood repeats this story. Unfortunately it would appear to be false. I have questioned whether Colen's famous letter, which so many have mentioned but none have quoted, was ever written. If Professor Hopwood has found it, he would put us all in his debt by publishing it. But, even if it was really written and delivered, this letter did not cause Thompson's departure. The only possible date for it is the one Professor Hopwood gives, 1796; and Alice Johnson has published evidence that Thompson had agreed to join the Nor'Westers as early as 1795. In the event, the death of his North-West contact and namesake, Robert Thompson, caused his switch of employers to be deferred till 1797 when his contract ended; but even so Professor Hopwood is mistaken when he credits Thompson with having "completely fulfilled" his obligations. "All contracts made by the Hudson's Bay Company with its employees," writes Miss Johnson required a man to give a "year's notice of his intention" to resign. Thompson had done nothing of the kind.

This is not the only place where Professor Hopwood has been misled by an excessively trusting faith in Thompson, but the point perhaps need not be laboured any further. Enough has been said to show how wisely the late Arthur Morton wrote when he declared: "It is not safe to rely on the evidence of the man Thompson himself, all the more so," he added of the

Columbian enterprise, "because there is a strange, perhaps a determined, silence in his journals at this point."

We hope, then, that when Professor Hopwood writes the biography of Thompson which we are promised, he will indeed carry out his own prescription of testing Thompson's assertions against all the available evidence. Meanwhile we have to thank him for making much of Thompson's best writing accessible to the general reader for the first time.

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Gastown's Gassy Jack, by Raymond Hull and Olga Ruskin. Gordon Soules Economic Research, Vancouver, 1971, 48 pp.

John Deighton, the man who won the wets, by building the saloon around which coagulated the town that would become the city of Vancouver, was a man of several parts. All of them well lubricated. In his time he was a sailor, a steamboat pilot, a prospector and a publican. Yet only recently has Gassy Jack — as he was called because he was highly gifted with the gab — become of interest to residents of the city he sired with some help from the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. For at least the first half-century of Vancouver's development John Deighton was something considerably less than a household word, and it is not unfair to suspect that much of the attention he is receiving belatedly derives from the renaissance of Gastown as the liveliest quarter of the city.

As Raymond Hull and Olga Ruskin have described in their little book on Vancouver's first citizen (in the broader sense), Deighton was a colourful figure. But a noble figure he was not. The colours are those of an ill-assorted collage: red-white-and-blue overlaid with venous purple and a very off-white. Now that we know more about him than we knew before, we are still not charmed by him. His statue, centring Gastown, remains as a monument to the skid row whose tone he set rather than to the evocation of a pioneer cast in the heroic mould.

One reason for our resistance to being beguiled by the master of Deighton House is that his history is only sketched by the facts, his character never fully fleshed, even by anecdote. The cause of his death is itself the subject for conjecture, posthumously, in a rumbling appendix of the Hull-Ruskin biography.

The authors may therefore be almost forgiven their lapses into School-girl Style, with its use of the terminal shriek (!), to try to add verve to