

Curious Fame: The Literary Relevance of Alexander Mackenzie Reconsidered

Alexander Mackenzie has a notable place in the history of exploration as the first documented person to cross the continent of North America—a feat achieved fully twelve years before the much better-known Lewis and Clark expedition. His account of this expedition, and of its precursor which took him to the Arctic Ocean, was brought before the public in *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*, first published in London in 1801. In this period, travel literature was hugely popular; the “reading elites of Britain . . . took all geography and all history into their consciousness” (St. Clair 233), and travel writing and the “literary” genres of poetry and fiction constantly mixed and shaped one another. Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” with its multiple and well-documented debts to printed voyages and travels, is just a colourful instance of a much more widespread literary symbiosis. Yet the footprint of Mackenzie’s remarkable travels on the imaginative literature of the period is all but imperceptible. Much of this essay has to do with asking why this was so, and what Mackenzie’s limited literary impact tells us about the reception of travel writing in the early years of the nineteenth century. In a much-cited article on “The Literary Relevance of Alexander Mackenzie,” published by *Canadian Literature* in 1969, Roy Daniells averred that Mackenzie’s book is “not in the front rank of narratives of exploration” (20), but that it possesses “immense narrative strength, derived directly from the energy of heroic achievement” (23), and that its subject matter approaches the scale and dignity of epic by virtue of its association with the destiny of a nation:

If we follow the delineation of Canada's western boundaries, beginning in 1783 with the Treaty of Paris, we are surprised at the immense stretch of territory involved, more than two million square miles, and our astonishment grows as we come to realize the crucial role played by Mackenzie's two voyages in securing title to this vast empire. (25-26)

As one might expect, the tone and content of Daniells' admiring account have been challenged by more hostile perspectives in recent times. By way of undertaking a fresh appraisal of Mackenzie's "literary relevance," I propose to scrutinize the early (chiefly British) reception of *Voyages from Montreal* in greater detail than has yet been attempted, using the insights of quantitative research into the production and consumption of travel literature in the early nineteenth century, and analyzing such records as exist concerning historical readers and readings of Mackenzie's work.

First, a brief resumé of Mackenzie's life and work is in order. Born in 1762 on the Outer Hebridean island of Lewis, at the age of twelve he and his family joined a mass emigration from the Highlands and Islands to North America, arriving early the next year in New York just months before the American Revolution broke out.¹ Having been relocated to Montreal to escape a conflict in which his father was to die (on the loyalist side), Mackenzie found himself in the headquarters of the Canadian fur trade, which the British had taken over after the conquest of New France in 1763. Initially employed in an office job by one of a number of competing traders, after five years he became a partner in the firm on condition that he move into the Northwest frontier trade as one of the "wintering partners," the leaders of the trade in the interior. This push to the Northwest had taken on new urgency for Montreal traders following the Treaty of Paris, which surrendered all territory south of the Great Lakes to the United States, and put many previously lucrative fur catchment areas and important trading posts into American hands. Mackenzie's company initially competed with the largest trading partnership yet to emerge, the North West Company (which came together in the winter of 1783-84), but a literally deadly confrontation between partners of the two companies in the lawless outer reaches of trading territory led to the merger of the two companies in 1787. It was as successor to the North West Company man implicated in this death, Peter Pond, that Mackenzie went to the Athabasca region, then the western boundary of the fur trade, and from which he set out on his two voyages in 1789 and 1793.

Mackenzie spent the winter of 1787-88 in conversation with Pond, who "first interested [him] in the idea that at Lake Athabasca you were near enough to the Pacific Ocean to attempt to traverse the intervening land"

(Hayes 51), and discover thereby an alternative, via inland waterways, to the fading vision of a marine Northwest Passage—the existence of which earlier naval expeditions, notably Cook’s third voyage (1776–79), had done much to discredit. Based on his own travels, and on a creative interpretation of information from Native sources, Pond’s sometimes fanciful cartography appears to have convinced Mackenzie that a river flowed westwards out of Great Slave Lake and eventually reached the North Pacific at what was then called Cook’s River, south of Anchorage, Alaska. This was the Northwest Passage that Mackenzie set out to discover in 1789. The significance for the fur trade would be in establishing a line of commerce between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and opening up the lucrative markets of eastern Asia. (In the long run, as Daniells points out, these commercial goals would have political consequences, in that the area over which the fur trade established itself would be roughly co-extensive with the eventual boundaries of the Dominion of Canada.) Mackenzie’s first voyage took him not to the Pacific but to the Arctic Ocean, along the length of the river to which his name would become permanently attached. His second voyage brought him, via sometimes hazardous whitewater canoeing, arduous portages, and a final gruelling 180-mile trek across the Coast Range using a Native trade route or “grease trail,” to Pacific tidewater at modern-day Dean Channel, where he inscribed a memorial to his achievement on 22 July 1793.² This was just 50 days after George Vancouver had visited and surveyed the same waters on his grand voyage in the North Pacific.

Early the next year Mackenzie left Athabasca, never to return. He devoted the next few years, indeed the rest of his life, to developing the commercial benefits of his exploration—most immediately by extending the territory of the North West Company, but in the longer term promoting his larger vision of a British trading empire centred on fur and fisheries capable of penetrating the markets of Russia, China, and Japan. Mackenzie lobbied persistently for state support for this project, but the British government was too preoccupied with the Napoleonic Wars to give much time or thought to his grand schemes. It was almost as an afterthought to this activity that he set about preparing the journals of his two voyages for publication—a goal eventually achieved, famously, with the assistance of William Combe (author of the picturesque satire, *The Tour of Doctor Syntax*) as ghostwriter, in December 1801. A second British edition, two American editions, and French and German translations followed in short order.³ Less than two months after publication, Mackenzie was knighted.

There is no doubt that Mackenzie desired recognition of his achievements, if only because the prosecution of his commercial aims depended upon it, and the knighthood offers irrefutable evidence of public esteem. The early publishing history of *Voyages from Montreal* is also frequently cited as proof of his celebrity: indeed, scholars typically assert that the book was a “bestseller” (Smith 148), or “was widely read by his contemporaries” (Venema 89), or “sold briskly at every bookstall” (Gough 179), but the basis on which such claims are made is far from plain, and the *Edinburgh Review* is invariably the only journal cited to demonstrate contemporary acclaim. As for Mackenzie’s longer-term reputation, it is hard to fault W. Kaye Lamb’s assessment that after an initial flurry of interest his book “was largely forgotten for the better part of a century” (50), and that it was only in the 1920s, which saw a republication of *Voyages* and three biographical studies, that he decisively resurfaced. In modern times, critical and biographical attention has tended to bifurcate in a manner typical, as Nigel Leask has pointed out, of studies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorers and travellers: that is, either celebrating the protagonist’s heroism and “restating exploded myths of empire,” or over-eagerly “subscribing to post-colonial blame” (4). On the one hand, plenty of accounts celebrate Mackenzie as a father of the nation: only a difference in register and tone separate Roy Daniells’ assessment 38 years ago, which compares Mackenzie’s voyages to the Arctic and Pacific to the mythological voyage of Jason and the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece (*Alexander Mackenzie* 198-9), and Barry Gough’s affirmative conclusion in his 1997 biography that Mackenzie was “one of the chief national architects,” a “Giant among a special breed of fur traders” who “opened Canada to its western destiny” (206, 211). On the other hand, a vein of hostile criticism, exemplified by essays by Parker Duchemin and Kathleen Venema, views Mackenzie as a racist imperialist and focuses in particular on his interaction with indigenous peoples and the alleged poverty of his ethnographic constructions, seeing these as vital discursive support for colonial and imperial policies of intervention and exploitation. The contrasting opinions of Euro-American scholars have been triangulated in recent years by the perspectives of First Nations commentators: priceless, if highly mediated, testimony from oral history describes how the Bella Bella people on the coast regarded Mackenzie, giving a much less flattering account than Mackenzie’s of his allegedly aggressive treatment at what he calls “Rascal’s Village” (Hayes 226); while Carrier and Nuxalk people whose ancestors developed the trail system in British Columbia, pointing out that Mackenzie

was successful only because he “followed the advice and expertise he received from the native people along the way” (Birchwater 15), have objected to the establishment of an “Alexander Mackenzie Heritage Trail” on their territory. Historians of the Dene nation, aboriginal inhabitants of the land traversed by Mackenzie on his first voyage, acknowledge that their “reality has since changed because of him and others that shared his interest,” but imagine their ancestors would have “wondered at this strange, pale man in his ridiculous clothes, asking about some great waters he was searching for,” and would “never understand why their river is named after such an insignificant fellow” (*Dehcho* 7, back cover).

Notwithstanding the contrasting perspectives of different interest groups, there is general recognition of the importance of Mackenzie’s expeditions in the context of Canadian and British colonial history, and I have nothing to add to the admirable work in this field of inquiry. My narrower focus is on the early literary reception of Mackenzie’s *Voyages*, and on asking both what appeal the book held for the contemporary reading public, and why the narrative of what now seem historically significant and symbolically resonant travels should have failed to excite the imaginations of the poets and novelists of the period. This story has not been told, and is worth reconstructing in view of the rapid growth of critical interest in travel literature over the last ten to fifteen years.

As a starting point, it seems reasonable to enquire a little more closely into Mackenzie’s alleged “bestseller” status—to establish, that is, the probable size and composition of the actual readership of *Voyages from Montreal*. If Mackenzie’s work was a commercial success, he had undoubtedly had a head start, because his publisher, Cadell and Davies, belonged to the “highest aristocracy of the trade” (Besterman viii), and was regarded by contemporaries as one of the top two or three businesses. Cadell and Davies were efficient—capable, despite the limitations of the obsolescent technology of the hand press, of bringing a book to publication within four months of the author’s original enquiry. Their typical print run was 750 copies for “a serious book of some general interest” (Besterman xxxi), and they marketed to the upper and upper-middle classes. To put this process in a wider context, we now have the benefit of William St. Clair’s systematic quantitative study of book production and reading patterns in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. St. Clair’s data for travel books show that 750 to 1000 copies was the norm for this genre, with most appearing first in an expensive quarto edition, the average price for which was in the region of £2 14s; books

that sold reasonably well in this format were sometimes republished in a cheaper octavo edition in a process St. Clair calls “tranching down.” Mackenzie’s book fits this profile, and was by this measure entirely typical of the genre, though at £1 11s 6d it was cheaper than the average of St. Clair’s sample; insofar as it came out in octavo in 1802, it was from a commercial viewpoint rather at least moderately successful. However, that no further tranching down took place indicates that demand was perceived to have been met, with perhaps a maximum of 2000 copies (and probably fewer) in circulation in Britain. To contextualize the price, St. Clair’s baseline for a gentleman’s weekly income is five pounds: Mackenzie’s *Voyages* would therefore have cost nearly a third of that gentleman’s weekly income, the entire weekly income of a skilled carpenter and three times the weekly income of a lawyer’s clerk. St. Clair’s economic analysis suggests that books—new titles, at any rate—were hugely expensive in this period relative to other commodities, and Mackenzie’s would certainly have been a luxury item within the reach of only the wealthiest individual purchasers.

Mackenzie’s readership would nevertheless have been larger than the 2000 copies in circulation, if one allows for multiple readers of individual copies in large households and copies bought by commercial circulating libraries, private subscription libraries, and book clubs. One (unique) source of hard evidence is the borrowing registers of the Bristol Library Society. These reveal that Mackenzie’s book was purchased on publication, was borrowed 12 times in 1802 and 11 times in 1803; a steep falling-off followed, with the result that in 1806, and again in 1807, the registers record only a solitary borrower.⁴ I infer from this that the interest generated by the book was intense but short-lived. It is safe to assume that the Bristol Library, with its members’ demonstrable enthusiasm for travel literature,⁵ provides an extreme multiplier for individual copies of this work, and that most copies did not enjoy such wide circulation. Nor did collective reading institutions like the Bristol Library, thanks to their subscriptions, admission fees, and borrowing charges, extend reading very far down the social ladder. Research on patterns of reading among lower-income groups has confirmed that travel literature had little reach at these levels of society. Surveys of the reading habits of the working class carried out in the 1830s revealed that cottage libraries might include “the odd volume of travel and exploration,” most likely Cook’s “*Voyages*,” but generally contained little secular writing (Vincent 110). Ideas of travel gleaned by working-class readers were far more likely to come from the widely disseminated *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Robinson*

Crusoe than from any work in the tradition of Enlightenment travel. Exceptions can, of course, be found, notably among self-taught urban radicals. Francis Place, the tailor and political activist, was fortunate in having a landlady who could acquire books for him from chambers she looked after, and during a period of unemployment in the early 1790s Place, “read many volumes in history, voyages, and travels, politics, law and Philosophy” (119); shoemaker and future Chartist poet, Thomas Cooper, was similarly blessed by circumstances in having access to a wide variety of books, and read “many volumes of travels” (64). But these seem not to be representative cases, and most working-class autobiographies of the period are bare of reference to this species of writing. This is hardly surprising, given punitive prices and the fact that travel works were seldom reissued in smaller and cheaper formats even when copyright had expired,⁶ but it is worth dwelling on the inequalities of access and readership to which a work like Mackenzie’s gave tacit support. St. Clair observes that the explosion in travel writing between 1790 and 1820 encouraged the reading public to appropriate imaginatively “the whole civilized and uncivilized world,” with the result that “there was nothing in the world which the British did not feel was partly their own” (234). But this was an experience, as he makes plain, largely restricted to the elite of readers who had access to the new travel literature in expensive quartos and the new verse romances with their learned notes acknowledging debts to that same body of literature for exotic settings and content; at the popular end of the market, readers’ mental geography would have been far more circumscribed, this audience “mainly staying at home with Thomson, Young, and Cowper” (234) and other out-of-copyright literature purveying a similar blend of patriotism, family values, and natural religion.

In seeking to excavate the historical reception of *Voyages from Montreal*, therefore, I am necessarily focusing on the responses of a wealthy fraction of the reading nation. A number of treatments appear in the literary reviews and a number of allusions in mainly very minor literary works—largely from the 1820s, long after publication of the book and when its survival rested chiefly on anthologized excerpts. The autobiographies, diaries, and collections of letters from the period that I have examined are virtually devoid of reference to Mackenzie. For all their well-recognized dangers as evidence of individual acts of reception,⁷ the reviews demand attention first. These exhibit many similarities in tone and content, a symmetry less remarkable (leaving aside the realistic possibility of unacknowledged debts

of one to another) when their close ideological affiliations are taken into account: the British journals, at any rate, are all Whig, liberal, reform-minded, intellectually progressive organs, and exclude the Tory, High Church publications with which they competed in the periodical wars of the 1790s and early 1800s. Mackenzie could reasonably expect a sympathetic hearing in these journals. His most generous review, judged by length alone, was in the first issue of the *Edinburgh Review*. This was undoubtedly a fillip for the book, given that the *Edinburgh* was more selective in its reviewing policy than any of its predecessors, but its inclusion was consistent with the principles of the new quarterly: in Marilyn Butler's account, high among its priorities for coverage were "matters of national political importance, such as foreign relations, the conduct of the war, geographically informed travels in the distant empire and territories contingent"; "it spoke," moreover, "for the efficient, meritocratic, and socially progressivist Scottish professional class that increasingly either worked for the government and aristocratic opposition in London or built the empire in Canada and India" (131, 136). It is not hard to see how *Voyages from Montreal* addresses this agenda and this constituency.

All the British reviews identify the same personal qualities in the author: his "bold and persevering spirit" (*Monthly Review* 225), his "fortitude, patience, and perseverance" (*London Review and Literary Journal* 116), his "intelligence, his spirit, and perseverance" (*Critical Review* 379), his "diligence and intrepidity . . . temper and perseverance" (*Edinburgh Review* 157). The one word linking these assessments, "perseverance," encapsulates the single-minded determination which, in Mackenzie's narrative, overcomes all threats to his survival and the recalcitrance of his companions, and elevates the completion of his journey into a moral imperative.⁸ The currency of this word also demonstrates how thoroughly the professional reviewers have bought into what T.D. MacLulich calls Mackenzie's "highly selective picture of the explorer as hero" (66), which entails casting himself, against the grain of actuality, as solely responsible for the success or failure of the expedition.

Two other notable points of comparison among the reviews are the degree of interest shown in Mackenzie's portraits of Native customs and beliefs, in his occasional ethnographic interludes; and their judgements on the criteria by which *Voyages* claims the attention of the reading public. The first of these is on the face of it surprising, given that Mackenzie himself appears to set little store by these parts of his book:⁹ referring in his preface to his constant need to "watch the savage who was our guide, or to guard

against those of his tribe who might meditate our destruction” (59) sends an unpromising signal of the extent of his interest in Native peoples. But the *Monthly Review* picks out the description in the second voyage of a murder committed among the Beaver people for reasons of sexual jealousy; the *Annual Review* and the *London Review and Literary Journal*, suspiciously, fasten upon the same passage, despite its occupying a mere two paragraphs: the former includes it among a number of “curious facts respecting the Indians and their country,” finding the “picture of savage life . . . disgusting, and evidently faithful” (28), while the latter generalizes about the similarities between these “Indians” and “the savages of the islands and coasts of the South Seas” (199); the *Critical Review* is particularly interested in the customs of the coastal peoples, especially their treatment of the dead, which it finds “too curious to be overlooked” (376); while the *Edinburgh Review* dwells on Mackenzie’s observations of differences between these indigenes, with their “improving art and civilization” (155), and the Dene people encountered on the first voyage, who have allegedly made no progress in the 200 years since first contact. The *Edinburgh Review* ventures that the fur trade may have kept Native people in a backward state by putting a bounty on “the preservation of barbarism” (147), yet notes the reverse phenomenon of Europeans “going native” (the French-Canadian *coureurs de bois*). Like the other journals, the *Edinburgh Review* finds Mackenzie’s description of first contact between Europeans and Native communities “a spectacle . . . well calculated to excite our curiosity” (141), but goes beyond them in its anxiety to relate new empirical data to the general schema of social progress—the “four stages” theory that primitive hunting cultures developed through intermediate stages of pastoralism and agriculturalism to a modern (and culturally superior) commercial state—that was one of the governing doctrines of the Scottish Enlightenment.¹⁰ In this concern, it exemplifies, as Troy Bickham has shown, the wider interest of Scottish intellectuals in North American “Indians” as “living windows on Europeans’ past” (171).¹¹

The reviews all pronounce, too, on the cumulative yield and significance of Mackenzie’s voyages. The *Monthly Review* praises both their entertainment and information value, and concludes that Mackenzie’s narrative is “of considerable importance to geography and commerce” (347), while the *Monthly Magazine* places Mackenzie “among our first nautical adventurers” and declares that he has “settled, perhaps for ever,” the question of a Northwest Passage. Other reviews are more equivocal. The *London Review* stresses the importance of weighing the perils of exploration against the

“general utility of the objects to be pursued” (113); it finds plenty of interest to the “scientific geographer” in *Voyages*, but although it quotes extensively from the political and economic arguments Mackenzie puts forward as the conclusion to his work, it refuses to evaluate them. The *Edinburgh Review* has no such qualms, freely taking issue with Mackenzie’s proposal to remove the Hudson’s Bay Company’s monopoly, and belittles the practical results of his expeditions, declaring that the regions he has explored are “the least interesting of any with which modern enterprise has made us acquainted” (158). The *Critical Review* goes even further, concluding that Mackenzie has added greatly to geographical knowledge, but only to the effect that these “barren and dreary” dominions, indeed “the whole of this northern continent may be resigned without a sigh, or even the slightest regret” (381). Robert Southey, in the *Annual Review*, finishes by claiming that Mackenzie has neither disproved the existence of a Northwest Passage nor found a practicable commercial route to the Pacific: “What then has the traveller discovered? that going sometimes by land and sometimes by water, it is possible to penetrate from fort Chipewyan to the Pacific. But who ever doubted this?” (30). These negative judgements did not bode well for the success of Mackenzie’s grand design of a single transcontinental fur and fisheries company operating under the aegis of the British government, to which he was to devote many futile years of “knocking on official doors and getting nowhere” (Smith 169).

Sources are far fewer, but many of the features of British responses that I have summarized are present too in North American reviews. The *Port Folio*, announcing the publication of the Philadelphia edition of *Voyages* in 1802, is noteworthy chiefly for its egregious error in identifying Mackenzie as brother to Henry Mackenzie, author of *The Man of Feeling*; but in admiring the “enterprize, intrepidity, and genius of the Scottish character” (2.18: 142), and in simply quoting two paragraphs concerning the Chipewyans’ ideas of creation and the afterlife “to promote the knowledge and popularity of the journal of this very intelligent traveller” (2.19: 148), its reviewer is perfectly consistent with British attitudes. The much more substantial treatment in the *American Review and Literary Journal* of the New York and Philadelphia editions takes considerable interest in Mackenzie’s account of the failure of missionary activity in North America and of the practical operations of the fur trade. Interestingly, it comments on what for modern readers is the narrative highlight of Mackenzie’s voyage, the near-catastrophe on “Bad River” and his subsequent efforts to persuade his crew not to abandon the quest. In

other respects, it follows the established pattern. It considers the book not only “instructive to the merchant” but “amusing to men of general curiosity” (121), and what it finds curiously amusing is mainly information about Native people: Cree smoking rites and feasts, Chipewyan religious beliefs, the way of life of the Dogrib nation, and especially “the condition of the female savages” (135).

Although the focus of this essay is upon the popular and literary reception of Mackenzie’s *Voyages*, it is also worth remembering that in broad historical terms the most significant reader of the book was undoubtedly Thomas Jefferson, whom it propelled into organizing the Lewis and Clark expedition—furthering the United States’ westward expansion and ultimately guaranteeing its transcontinental destiny. While Mackenzie struggled to interest the Colonial Office in his warnings about American ambitions, his book was frequently invoked as Jefferson made arrangements for his own journey of discovery, and in June 1803 he ordered a more portable “8vo edition of McKenzie’s travels with the same maps which are in the 4to edition” (Jackson 56), presumably for Lewis to take with him. Given the expedition’s declared and undeclared aims of finding a trade route to the Pacific, securing the Columbia region from British territorial claims, and facilitating the spread of American settlement into Louisiana, Jefferson’s reading of Mackenzie therefore took its part in events of huge commercial and geopolitical consequence. These aspects of Mackenzie’s work have been amply treated, however,¹² so I turn again to consider the wider impact of his *Voyages* on the literary culture of the period.

Looking for tangible evidence of such impact in the early 1800s is a frustrating business. Among the better-known writers of the period, even those who were avid readers of travel and exploration literature, and even those for whom we have detailed records of their reading, there is an almost complete dearth of reference. A satirical comment by Jane Austen in a letter of 24 January 1813 on a local book club whose members were apparently enthusiasts for travel writing, scoffing at “their Biglands & their Barrows, their Macartneys & Mackenzies” (Austen 199), is unfortunately taken by Austen scholars, largely on the basis of proximity of publication date, to be referring to Sir George Mackenzie, author of *Travels in Iceland* (1811). As so often, however, Coleridge comes to the rescue. Two passages in his *Notebooks* comment on *Voyages*: the first merely observes that a description in John Franklin’s later Arctic *Journey* (1823) of a Chipewyan man allegedly suckling his baby after the death of the mother is a “worthy . . . successor to Hearne’s

and Mackenzie's volumes" (4: 4947); the second occurs in a discussion of the supposed commonness of homosexuality in uncivilized countries, asserting it to be "frightfully prevalent" among North American Indians on the rather dubious evidence of a reference by Mackenzie to the vice of "bestiality" among the Cree (5: 6160). The most striking characteristic of these references, which coheres with the bias of the reviews, is their focus upon details in Mackenzie's ethnographic digressions. The same pattern emerges in the handful of allusions to Mackenzie in imaginative literature that I have located to date. These include mentions in two poems by the popular Irish writer, Tom Moore, and quotations in works by the Christian missionary-turned professional writer, Timothy Flint, the American poets Robert Sands and James Eastburn, and the Canadian poet Adam Kidd.

Tom Moore toured America and Canada in 1804, having quickly tired of his government sinecure in Bermuda. A series of poems prompted by his travels was first published in *Epistles, Odes and Other Poems* in 1806 and later grouped more distinctly as "Poems Relating to America."¹³ In a typically symbiotic relationship between Romantic-period verse and travel literature, these poems make extensive use of travellers' descriptions and observations in the form of learned notes, offsetting the dreamy exoticism of the poetry with a parade of tough scholarship and appealing thereby to both an emotional and an intellectual response. "To the Lady Charlotte Rawdon, from the Banks of the St Lawrence" cites Mackenzie among several different sources regarding the language, customs, and beliefs of Native people. Moore takes Mackenzie's description of his sighting of the Camsell Range of the Rockies, and of "a No. of White Stones upon them which glistens when the Rays of the sun shines upon them" (Mackenzie 180)—called "spirit stones" by local people but assumed by Mackenzie to be talc—and recontextualizes it within the imagined chant of a departed "Indian Spirit":

From the land beyond the sea,
Whither happy spirits flee;
Where, transform'd to sacred doves,
Many a blessed Indian roves
Through the air on wing, as white
As those wond'rous stones of light,
Which the eye of morning counts
On the Appalachian mounts. (lines 57-64)

That the Rockies have morphed into the Appalachians is assumed not to matter: the allusion and accompanying footnote to Mackenzie's *Journal* imports the required note of "scientific" precision to authenticate what

might otherwise appear a mere flight of fancy. A similar strategy is at work in Moore's "Canadian Boat Song," very loosely adapted, according to its elaborate paratext, from a song supposedly sung by *voyageurs* as they set out on their annual journey from Montreal to Grand Portage on the Utawas River. "For an account of this wonderful undertaking," Moore notes, "see Sir Alexander Mackenzie's General History of the Fur Trade, prefixed to his Journal," and a second footnote, to the line "We'll sing at St. Ann's our parting hymn" (line 4), quotes Mackenzie's observation that it is "from this spot the Canadians consider they take their departure, as it possesses the last church on the island, which is dedicated to the tutelar saint of voyagers" (Moore 323). Once again, travel literature is invoked to give historical and geographical veracity to a work of the imagination—rooting "the music of the glee" (Moore xxiii) in recorded experience—although here Moore's appropriation of Mackenzie helps to convey the romance of departure.

A generation later, a similar tactic is observable in Timothy Flint's *Francis Berrian, or The Mexican Patriot* (1826), noted as "the first novel in English set in the American Southwest" (Gale 133). Flint (1780-1840), a man who travelled widely in North America on missionary business and who also produced respectable scholarly work on the geography and history of the western states, evidently had something in common with Mackenzie, even if his fundamental perspective on the West was agrarian rather than commercial. In fact, his eponymous hero, in tracing his restlessness as "a wanderer in . . . distant regions" back to his youthful fantasy of following "the intrepid Clark and Mackenzie over the Rocky Mountains to the Western Sea" (Flint 20), shows a taste for "romantic adventures" of the kind that Mackenzie disowns in his preface (59), but his "presentiment of future wealth, greatness, and happiness to befall me somewhere in that region" (Flint 20) is more in sympathy with Mackenzie's material ambitions.

Robert Sands and James Eastburn met at Columbia College in the 1810s and became associates in a number of editorial and publishing ventures. *Yamoyden* (1820), begun by Eastburn and completed by Sands after his friend's untimely death, is a poem in six cantos on the subject of "King Philip" or Metacomet, leader of the Wampanoag people, who waged war unsuccessfully on the New England colonists in 1675. Sands and Eastburn allude twice to Mackenzie in the course of the poem, footnoting on both occasions a passage from his account of the Chipewyan "Indians" in the "General History." A reference to his eye-catching summary of their beliefs concerning death, judgement, and the afterlife, which pictures "bad" indi-

viduals eternally “up to their chins in water” (Mackenzie 150), in sight of the heavenly island from which they are excluded, is complemented by an invocation of the Chipewyans’ creation myth, featuring in Mackenzie’s telling “a mighty bird, whose eyes were fire, whose glances were lightning,” descending to the primeval ocean and touching the land into existence (149). In line with most other records of reception, here again it is colourful facts concerning the “very singular” (Mackenzie 149) traits of native people that prove most interesting and serviceable to Mackenzie’s literary end-users.

The Irish-Canadian poet, Adam Kidd (1802-1831), took up a literary life after his initial plan for a career in the Anglican ministry collapsed, possibly as a result of an affair with a native woman. Because Kidd was a youthful admirer of the poetry of Byron and Tom Moore, his change of path had a certain logic to it; Kidd became an “unofficial voice” displaying, in D.M.R. Bentley’s words, “an elective affinity for the mistreated native peoples of North America and a personal grudge against the presiding religio-political order in Lower Canada” (Introduction). The title poem of *The Huron Chief, and Other Poems* (1830) is a rambling piece in which the sentimental narrator encounters the elderly chief, Skenandow, and other “remnant[s] of [his] tribe” (Kidd 51) in his wanderings around Lakes Huron and Erie, immerses himself in their way of life, and listens to stories of their conflict with white men, a violent and tragic episode which he eventually witnesses himself. Kidd cites Mackenzie four times in footnotes in the course of the poem, in an apparent effort to claim documentary verisimilitude for his representation of Native people and their culture: the notes quote Mackenzie on the “well proportioned” figures of “Indian women,” on ritual feasts and sacrifices and the use of portable household gods, and on the “fatal consequences” of the spread of alcohol resulting from “communication with the subjects of civilized nations.” However, that all these references are to Mackenzie’s account of the Algonkian-speaking Cree nation (Mackenzie 134-37), rather than any people related ethnically or linguistically to the Iroquoian-speaking Huron, who are the subject of Kidd’s poem, exposes the illusoriness of this favourite authenticating strategy of the exotic romance poem: in contradiction to Bentley’s claim that “Kidd conceives the Huron, Sioux and other races as named and historical collectivities” (Introduction), it seems that any randomly-chosen piece of “Indian” ethnography is equally capable of providing his poem with a skeleton of “facts” on which to hang his primitivist fantasies of the “forest-home” where “nought but nature’s plan / Is felt, and practised, by contented man” (Kidd 34).¹⁴

With certain exceptions, then, Mackenzie's earliest readers consistently focused upon parts of his text that most modern critics, in common with the author, consider peripheral to the main narrative of his heroic quest for a route to the Pacific. Indeed, they were mostly underwhelmed with his achievements in this latter regard, the significance of his expeditions emerging more slowly over time. As for what the *Edinburgh Review* had pointed to as the imaginative appeal of the *Voyages*—"the idea of traversing a vast and unknown continent" is said to give "an agreeable expansion to our conceptions" (141)—little in the record suggests that Mackenzie's readers were affected in this way. A key word in the early reception I have traced, clustering as it does around Mackenzie's occasional passages of ethnographic observation, is "curious" and its cognates, which crop up in most of the reviews. Nigel Leask has demonstrated the importance, as well as the epistemological ambivalences, of the discourse of curiosity in Romantic-period travel literature. Drawing in particular upon Henry Home's *Elements of Criticism* (1762), Leask foregrounds a vital distinction between "positive and negative, rational and vulgar, valences for 'curiosity'" (28), the former aligned with bona fide empirical enquiry, the latter with a superficial and unsystematized, acquisitive or even prurient, pursuit of novelty or singularity. While Mackenzie, in asserting his claim to having extended "the boundaries of geographic science" (57), is clearly appealing to a legitimate "rational" curiosity, the evidence suggests that readers inclined to a more distorted and "vulgar" interest in his book. While there was some effort to relate new anthropological data to the reigning theories of social and historical progress, for the most part reviewers and fellow writers treated *Voyages* as a somewhat trivial "cabinet of curiosities" or selectively misread it for intriguing "facts" about North American "savages." (In so doing, they were arguably reproducing a pattern established in the reception of Samuel Hearne's more sensational *Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort* [1795], the primary point of reference for travels in these remote parts of the continent.)¹⁵ However, as Barbara Benedict has argued, the power to define the other as curious was in this period "a weapon in the competition for cultural eminence, both within Europe and between Europe and the rest of the world" (82), so a merely vulgar curiosity was not inconsistent with Mackenzie's project of extending Britain's commercial sway.

There is no short answer to my opening question as to why a work narrating such stirring and historic feats of European "discovery" seems to have made so little impact on the imaginative writing of the period. It is demon-

strably not true that either the reading public in general, or creative writers in particular, had little interest in North American travels compared to other parts of the world. The issues of price and access I have discussed do not offer sufficient explanation. In conclusion, though, it is worth noting the very real anxiety of reception displayed in Mackenzie's preface, which goes beyond the usual false modesty exuded by first-time authors. In quick succession, Mackenzie apologizes for his probable failure to gratify assorted readerly desires, in terms that help reconstruct the genre-specific horizon of expectations pertinent to travel writing around 1800: he will not, he says, supply the variety, whether of character, setting, or incident, that readers may crave; lacking the scientific credentials, he will not be supplying new information about the flora and fauna of the country; neither will he quench the thirst of those "who love to be astonished" or "are enamoured of romantic adventures"; and anyone looking for "embellished narrative, or animated description" will search his book in vain. Behind these defensive manoeuvres we see the author's awareness of the different subgenres of contemporary travel writing: "philosophical" travel, the imaginary or "marvellous" voyage, the sentimental journey, and the landscape tour. The boundaries between these discourses, in particular the boundary between scientific discourse and the emergent tradition of romantic, internalized travels, were fluid in this period, and writers often strove with greater or lesser success to integrate diverse strands into a single narrative. Mackenzie, unfortunately, was no Humboldt: in appealing to the scientific geographer but not providing enough science; in responding to public demand for knowledge of North America but not delivering on his own promise of practical discoveries; in providing some, but perhaps not enough, "curiosities"; in bringing before readers a wilderness scenery outside their personal experience, but leaving the few passages of colourful landscape description to his ghostwriter;¹⁶ and in telling a story of epic achievement against the odds but writing nothing of his personal feelings, it seems to have been his misfortune—or miscalculation—to have fallen between all the available stools furnished by the contemporary literary marketplace.

For the modern reader, the reception history of Mackenzie's *Voyages* provides particularly rich evidence of how profoundly evaluative criteria have changed, and this recognition inevitably forms part of his enduring "literary relevance," given the current level of critical interest in travel writing. This shift does not mean that *Voyages* is now no more than a historical "curiosity" itself. It is still possible to read its author with appreciation of his monu-

mental “perseverance,” as both explorer and writer: to find in his story “the massive sweep of a heroic tale (MacLulich 61), the fascination of a man “determined to discover what he has hypothesized” (Greenfield 55). Equally, extreme discomfort with the colonialist mentality of earlier times means that, for many readers at least, any pleasure in his narrative is a troubled one—dependent, as Tzvetan Todorov provocatively suggests, on both strengthening and disowning a sense of cultural superiority;¹⁷ and that for some, his words become mere cannon fodder for an unsparing postcolonial critique. Ironically, perhaps, the reading of Mackenzie’s *Voyages* today is a more complex, multilayered experience than it seems to have been for his contemporary audience.

NOTES

- 1 On the unique circumstances of the exodus from Lewis, which seemed at the time to be “in the process of complete depopulation,” see Bailyn 307-12; on the family context, see Gough 9-19.
- 2 For a vivid reconstruction of the two voyages, see Hayes.
- 3 For full bibliographic details see Lamb 531-37. Lamb’s scholarly edition of Mackenzie’s *Voyages* follows the 1801 text for the second expedition and the introductory “General History of the Fur Trade,” but for the first expedition reproduces an extant manuscript copy of Mackenzie’s journal.
- 4 I draw this information from the Bristol Library Society Registers, nos. 19-26, held in Bristol City Reference Library.
- 5 Kaufman’s pioneering research on borrowing patterns in the Bristol Library Society between 1773 and 1784 disclosed this bias—noting, for instance, that Hawkesworth’s *Voyages* and Brydone’s *Tour through Sicily* were the two most frequently borrowed books over this period. My own analysis of borrowings in the sample month of April 1802 reveals that travel literature accounted for 58 out of a total of 365 borrowings.
- 6 Access to this literature in general anthologies was patchy. Mackenzie’s work was included, in a curiously truncated form, in William Mavor’s 28-volume *Collection of Voyages and Travels* of 1809-10, but not in John Pinkerton’s more authoritative 17-volume *General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in all Parts of the World* of 1808-14 (though it is listed in the voluminous catalogue added to the final volume).
- 7 For example, there is no way of knowing how representative they are; they record the responses of the most articulate and opinionated, not the “average,” reader; they borrow freely from other reviews and may lack authenticity as a result; they were written with particular implied audiences in mind and were subject to commercial pressures and institutional (self-)censorship. However, precisely for the latter reason, as St. Clair observes, they can be “valuable sources for reconstructing the historical horizons of expectations against which newly printed texts were perceived” (285).
- 8 The emphasis persists, for example, in Victor Hopwood’s description of Mackenzie as “the very type of pushing Scot who has contributed much to Canadian development,” in his excellent survey article in the *Literary History of Canada* (30).

- 9 I leave aside the question of whether some of these interludes (those contained in the first section, "A General History of the Fur Trade") were written by Mackenzie's cousin Roderic. See Lamb 33.
- 10 On eighteenth-century "stadial history," as expounded in works like John Millar's *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771) and Lord Kames' *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), see O'Brien 132-36.
- 11 Bickham's study, which deals with diverse British representations of Native Americans in the second half of the eighteenth century, argues that these were conditioned by the shifting context of imperial politics: at times when the stakes were raised, the discourse was more pragmatic, emphasizing "fact and authenticity over entertainment and generic exoticism" (64). Broadly, Mackenzie's reviews illustrate the reverse tendency.
- 12 See, for example, Daniells, as previously cited, and Gough 163-211.
- 13 For a stimulating account of Moore's Canadian expedition and of his influence on later Canadian poetry, see Bentley, "Thomas Moore."
- 14 Kidd's approach, representative as it is, nonetheless takes its place within a broader spectrum of literary treatments of American "Indians" in the Romantic period, which, Tim Fulford has shown, veer between "standard renditions of noble or ignoble savagery" and more "complex, ambiguous and challenging figures that placed stereotypes in doubt and undermined prejudices" (32).
- 15 Hearne's book, like Mackenzie's, was published by Cadell and Davies, and was favourably reviewed. I.S. MacLaren comments that the "climactic scene" of Hearne's book, the massacre at Bloody Fall, with all its "gothic horror of torture and pathos," became and remains "almost a synecdoche of the frozen North" ("Exploration" 56-57); as he has also demonstrated, the published version of the massacre bears little resemblance to Hearne's field notes, its sadistic and sentimental excesses manufactured to suit the "taste of the age" ("Samuel Hearne's Accounts" 41). Bruce Greenfield argues that, in other ways, the goals of his expedition having proved illusory, the "real fruits" of Hearne's labors were his "invention of the land and people in and of themselves" (40).
- 16 For details, see MacLaren, "Alexander Mackenzie," and Montgomery.
- 17 Todorov writes of the ambivalent appeal of all narratives of colonial journeys, typically finding in them "an image of the traveller with which I identify while at the same time distancing myself from it, and which thus absolves me of all guilt" (295-96).

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