

THE EXPLORER AS HERO

Mackenzie and Fraser

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ALEXANDER MACKENZIE and Simon Fraser are the Canadian examples, *par excellence*, of the kind of explorer who knows where he wants to go and eventually gets there after overcoming innumerable obstacles. Once they begin their narratives, Mackenzie and Fraser are almost as single-minded in their literary pursuits as they are in their actual voyages. They seldom allow digressions on Indian habits or on scenery or animals to divert their tales from being unremitting accounts of the hardships and difficulties they faced, and their modes of overcoming those obstacles. They rarely allow a hint of personal emotion to colour their accounts: especially they allow no suggestion of fear, doubt or discouragement to sully the pages of their narratives. Yet, for all their utilitarian single-mindedness — and often because of this quality — their stories have a grandeur and inevitability that approaches the massive sweep of a heroic tale or romance.

Mackenzie's accounts of his journeys are cast in the form of journal entries; they have not been reworked into a full-scale narrative in the manner of Samuel Hearne's book. Instead, the original journals have been edited by the eighteenth-century literary figure, William Combe. Roy Daniells asserts that "Combe's distortions of Mackenzie's meaning are so few and so slight they have to be searched for."¹ True, if one understands "distortions" in the sense of gross alterations in meaning, emphasis, and the order of ideas, and not simply as changes in the text. Combe's task was considerable, although for the most part quite simple.

His changes can be assessed by comparing a manuscript version of Mackenzie's journals of his first voyage, a copy of which is preserved in the British Museum, with the final published version. Combe has expanded Mackenzie's numerous abbreviations and turned his frequent sentence fragments, often written in the compressed style of a diary or a log book, into readable English prose. For example, Mackenzie wrote:

Rain'd hard since early afternoon last Night till this Morning. We embarked at 4 o'Clk A.M. at 8 we landed, at 3 lodges of Indians.²

Combe rendered this as:

It rained from the preceeding evening to this morning, when we embarked at four o'clock. At eight we landed at three large Indian lodges.³

As well as removing errors and expanding contractions, Combe often contributes subordinations which smooth out Mackenzie's style, as he does in the above passage. He makes some alterations in sentence structure, usually in the direction of increased euphony and variety; and he is responsible for quite a few changes in vocabulary, which tend to give the narrative a less colloquial, more latinate and educated flavour. Mackenzie wrote:

Close by the land is high and covered with short Grass and many plants, which are in Blossom, and has a beautiful appearance, tho' an odd contrast, the Hills covered with Flowers and Verdure, and Vallies full of Ice and Snow. The Earth is not thawed above 4 Inches from the Surface, below is a solid Body of Ice. The Soil is a Yellow Clay mixed with Stones. (*J* 199)

Combe gave this passage a slight elevation in tone by a change or two in vocabulary and by introducing new constructions based on Mackenzie's original phrases:

The adjacent land is high and covered with short grass and flowers, though the earth was not thawed above four inches from the surface; beneath which was a solid body of ice. This beautiful appearance, however, was strangely contrasted with the ice and snow that are seen in the valleys. The soil, where there is any, is a yellow clay mixed with stones. (*V* 185-86)

Ideas are shifted here more than is usual in Combe's work; and one qualifying phrase, which adds an air of literate deliberation to the last sentence, is entirely his own contribution. Nonetheless, the observations and the attitudes are true to Mackenzie's. And, since the effect of the *Voyages* depends chiefly on the step-by-step unfolding of the story, both in large and small details, we can fairly assign most of the credit for the final result to Mackenzie rather than to Combe. Without a good basic story, well told, Combe's talents for polishing the prose would have been wasted. But the final literary finish he gave to Mackenzie's journal entries, although preserving the day-by-day entry form, gives the book a smoother, more appealing, flow of language.

That Mackenzie was not devoid of a literary sense of his own is proved by his "Preface," which must be presumed to represent his own ideas, if not entirely his own exact words. His apology for the lack of detailed scientific observations in his narrative shows that he is aware of the expectation, fostered by the Royal Society since its inception in 1660, that a travel account should contain scientific notes, or at least exact observations of specific details about the things the traveller has seen. His description of the peculiar qualities of his own narrative shows that he is aware of the general reader's usual motive for reading books of travel and exploration — namely a thirst for the exotic, the extreme, and the unusual. His own narrative, he admits, does not provide these fabulous elements; nor does it provide the pleasant,

pastoral scenes, or the descriptions of highly cultivated native peoples that narratives like Cook's had led readers to expect. Nonetheless, he insists that his story has its own particular virtues, which will not disappoint the open-minded reader:

The events which compose my journals may have little in themselves to strike the imagination of those who love to be astonished, or to gratify the curiosity of such as are enamoured of romantic adventures; nevertheless, when it is considered that I explored those waters which had never before borne any other vessel than the canoe of the savage; and traversed those deserts where an European had never before presented himself to the eye of its swarthy native; when to these considerations are added the important objects which were pursued, with the dangers that were encountered, and the difficulties that were surmounted to attain them, this work will, I flatter myself, be found to excite an interest, and conciliate regard, in the minds of those who peruse it. (*J* 59)

The chief purpose of Mackenzie's book was in fact commercial. The accounts of the two voyages, which comprise the heart of the book, are preceded by a description of the fur trade and followed by a brief concluding statement in which Mackenzie interprets the significance of his voyages, and urges the utility to British commerce of his favourite project, a union of the Hudson's Bay Company with the Northwest Company. But for the modern reader, these considerations no longer matter. For literary purposes, the important parts of Mackenzie's book are the "Preface," which makes some revealing statements about his conception of his journeys and his conception of authorship, and his accounts of the two voyages themselves. Moreover, although Mackenzie's historical significance may be equally divided between his roles as the first explorer of the Mackenzie River and the first man to cross the continent north of Mexico, his literary reputation must rest primarily on the account of his second voyage, which is a much longer and more substantial piece of writing than the story of the first voyage.

THE VOYAGE DOWN THE MACKENZIE RIVER was, everything considered, a remarkably uneventful journey. The chief problem was the finding of the river, hitherto known only by Indian report. Once launched on the new waterway, Mackenzie and his voyageurs were borne swiftly along with the current to their eventual stopping point on Garry Island in the Mackenzie Delta. The journey upriver, although longer and more laborious than the descent, involved few of the difficulties and uncertainties which lend so much interest to Mackenzie's second voyage. The second voyage, in contrast to the first, was one continual succession of difficulties. Mackenzie met and overcame almost all the obstacles which could confront a canoe voyageur in the northern wilderness, from raging rivers to nearly impassable terrain to reluctant and timorous companions,

insufficiency of supplies and lack of game in the countryside, hostile Indians and failures of his own equipment. Given this intrinsically suspenseful story and a variety of exciting incidents, Mackenzie's talents were well suited to recounting in a clear, simple manner how he persevered and overcame every obstacle to his progress.

Fortunately, from a literary point of view, the events of Mackenzie's second expedition form a pattern which gives an effective dramatic shape to his narrative. The story begins slowly but satisfactorily, with Mackenzie's departure from Fort Chipewyan and his journey to the place where he built the establishment he called Fort Fork, his winter headquarters and staging-point for his spring departure. The winter is quickly passed over, so that the narrative impetus is not lost in a mass of day-to-day detail. Such incidents as are given help to give the reader the minimum of knowledge about the Indians and the wilderness necessary to an appreciation of the events of the later narrative. When the journey is begun next spring the difficulties seem to occur in ascending order, so that Mackenzie surmounts one impossible obstacle only to be faced with an even more impassable barrier. The worst crisis comes when Mackenzie and his men find it necessary to retrace their steps partway back up the Fraser River (as it came to be known) in search of an Indian route through the coastal mountains. At the same time, Mackenzie faces a potential rebellion among his men, who have grown increasingly tired and discouraged in the face of apparently endless obstacles, and are now frightened by the apparent hostility of the natives in the area through which they are passing.

This crisis is surmounted by a combination of Mackenzie's determination to continue and his forceful eloquence, both of which he uses to persuade his people to continue to support him, and by the discovery that the difficulty with the natives is all a misunderstanding which quickly resolves itself. After a further series of difficulties and adventures, the climax of the story comes when Mackenzie and his men reach an arm of the Pacific and, despite the incipient hostility of the natives of the area, succeed in taking an astronomical observation for position and in making their mark (in vermilion and grease) on the rock where they are encamped. The return journey is much more briefly described than the outward trek. It is an easier trip, but nonetheless has its own difficulties, chiefly uncertainty over the food supply, which keep it from being an anti-climax. Not until Mackenzie is almost all the way back to his starting point is the reader certain that he will keep his heroic posture to the end, and not suffer an absurd and ignominious humiliation on the return journey.

Incidents of extreme hardship, discouragement, or resourcefulness make up a good part of the *Voyages*, and are linked together by many other incidents which are only relatively less dramatic. Here is how Mackenzie describes one of the mishaps which were an almost daily occurrence:

Here the river narrows between steep rocks, and a rapid succeeded, which was so violent that we did not venture to run it. I therefore ordered the loading to be taken out of the canoe, but she was now become so heavy that the men preferred running the rapid to carrying her overland. Though I did not altogether approve of their proposition, I was unwilling to oppose it. Four of them undertook this hazardous expedition, and I hastened to the foot of the rapid with great anxiety, to wait the event, which turned out as I expected. The water was so strong, that although they kept clear of the rocks, the canoe filled, and in this state drove half way down the rapid, but fortunately she did not overset; and having got her into an eddy, they emptied her, and in a half-drowned condition arrived safe on shore. (*J* 311)

The prose here is clear and readable. Mackenzie's doubt about the safety of this undertaking, yet his unwillingness to forbid it for fear of discouraging his men by imposing a too heavy task on them, is well portrayed. The reader is reminded, without being told directly, that Mackenzie's desire to forward the journey is far keener than that of his men. Mackenzie's anxiety over the outcome is suggestively brought out by the report that he "hastened to the foot of the rapid with great anxiety" to observe the outcome.

One of the most vivid adventures in the entire narrative occurs at a rapids on a tributary of the Fraser. The clearness with which Mackenzie can recall and enumerate the successive stages of the peril through which he and his men passed gives his circumstantial account an impact usually associated with a much more deliberately evocative kind of writing:

We . . . had proceeded but a very short way when the canoe struck, and notwithstanding all our exertions, the violence of the current was so great as to drive her sideways down the river, and break her by the first bar, when I instantly jumped into the water, and the men followed my example; but before we could set her straight, or stop her, we came to deeper water, so that we were obliged to re-embark with the utmost precipitation. One of the men was not sufficiently active, and was left to get on shore in the best manner in his power. We had hardly regained our situations when we drove against a rock which shattered the stern of the canoe in such a manner, that it held only by the gunwales, so that the steersman could no longer keep his place. The violence of this stroke drove us to the opposite side of the river, which is but narrow, when the bow met the same fate as the stern. At this moment the foreman seized on some branches of a small tree in the hope of bringing up the canoe, but such was their elasticity that, in a manner not easily described, he was jerked on shore in an instant, and with a degree of violence that threatened his destruction. But we had no time to turn from our own situation to inquire what had befallen him; for, in a few moments, we came across a cascade which broke several large holes in the bottom of the canoe, and started all the bars, except one behind the scooping seat. If this accident, however, had not happened, the vessel must have been irretrievably overset. (*J* 297)

The wreck, now almost flat on the water, finally came to rest "from the weight of the canoe resting on the stones, rather than from any exertions of our exhausted

strength" (*J* 298). Despite the somewhat abstract vocabulary and typically eighteenth-century use of generalized expressions, the passage succeeds in conveying the danger and violent action the men passed through.

THE CHIEF CHARACTER of Mackenzie's narrative is, of course, the author himself. His self-portrait is not a rounded characterization but is instead a highly selective picture of the explorer as hero. He depicts himself as the originator of and leading participant in the expedition. His determination inspires the men to emulation; his resourcefulness finds a way around each difficulty and discovers the best route to follow whenever choices present themselves; his bravery and quick-wittedness overcome the hostility of the Indians and secure their co-operation. Mackenzie presents himself almost totally in this public role. Glimpses of his private thoughts and feelings are rare. It comes as a mild shock when he reports his sorrow at losing the dog they had brought with them for almost the entire journey. The surprise is increased because Mackenzie, unlike almost any other writer, has resisted any temptation to include amusing anecdotes of the dog's behaviour on the trip. The dog's presence is not even announced when the expedition sets off on the journey; he is never mentioned until Mackenzie tells us, "we had lost our dog, a circumstance of no small regret to me" (*J* 372). Yet this is more emotion than he has shown over any of the sufferings of his men.

Mackenzie casts himself almost exclusively as the man of single-minded vision and determination. Yet there is a self-effacing quality to Mackenzie's depiction of his own efforts, for he never seems to act purely from self-interest but always in the best interest of the expedition, the completion of which assumes all the urgency of a mission. During the crisis on the Fraser River, when it is feared the Indians have turned hostile, Mackenzie tells his readers:

These perplexing circumstances made a deep impression on my mind, not as to our immediate safety, for I entertained not the least apprehension of the Indians I had hitherto seen, even if their whole force should have been combined to attack us, but these outward events seemed to threaten the prosecution of my journey; and I could not reflect on the possibility of such a disappointment but with sensations little short of agony. (*J* 326)

The completion of the journey has become a moral imperative. When his men begin to waver, Mackenzie seems to try to win them back to his cause by attempting to imbue them with a desire to do what he feels is no less than their duty:

I brought to their recollection, that I did not deceive them, and that they were made acquainted with the difficulties and dangers they must expect to encounter,

before they engaged to accompany me. I also urged the honour of conquering disasters, and the disgrace that would attend them on their return home, without having attained the object of the expedition. Nor did I fail to mention the courage and resolution that was the peculiar boast of the North men: and that I depended on them, at that moment, for the maintenance of their character. (*J* 299)

In this speech, as elsewhere, Mackenzie's shrewd handling of his own men is made evident; simply by giving a paraphrase of his speeches he is able to convey the way he manipulates the men, without offering an intrusive explanation of his state of mind or of the reasoning behind his arguments. Sometimes, as above, he appeals to their pride. At other times it is plain that he exploits their sense of being inferiors on a fixed social scale, and comes close to intimidating them by the sheer force of his avowal of the desire to continue:

I informed him that I was not altogether a stranger to their late conversations, from whence I drew the conclusion that they wished to put an end to the voyage. If that were so, I expressed my wish that they would be explicit, and tell me at once of their determination to follow me no longer. I concluded, however, by assuring him, that whatever plan they had meditated to pursue, it was my fixed and unalterable determination to proceed, in spite of every difficulty that might oppose, or danger that should threaten me. The man was very much mortified at my addressing this remonstrance particularly to him; and replied, that he did not deserve my displeasure any more than the rest of them. My object being answered, the conversation dropped, and the work went on. (*J* 333)

He is also able to confront the Indians when necessary, or to conciliate them and win them over to serving his purposes. Near the coast, for example, as they approach a village on the Bella Coola River, they see that the Indians are running about "as if in a state of very great alarm."

This very unpleasant and unexpected circumstance, I attributed to our sudden arrival, and the very short notice of it which had been given them. At all events, I had but one line of conduct to pursue, which was to walk resolutely up to them, without manifesting any signs of apprehension at their hostile appearance. This resolution produced the desired effect, for as we approached the houses, the greater part of the people laid down their weapons, and came forward to meet us. (*J* 364)

His manipulation of the Indians by more subtle means is often also well described. At one point an Indian chief wishes to borrow Mackenzie's canoe to transport his family across a river, a circumstance which would delay the expedition and might expose the canoe to the danger of accident or theft. However, Mackenzie knows it would be impolitic to refuse outright, without offering an explanation the Indians can understand. "Several plausible reasons," Mackenzie says,

suggested themselves for resisting his proposition; but when I stated to him, that, as the canoe was intended for a voyage of such consequence, no woman could be permitted to be embarked in it, he acquiesced in the refusal. (*J* 260)

At other times Mackenzie must allow his European sense of delicacy, surprisingly strong for a man of his profession, to take a back seat to the need for retaining a reluctant Indian as their guide and sponsor to the next village. On several occasions, the expedient he uses is to share the sleeping robes of the refractory Indian, thus ensuring his presence on the morrow:

These people have no covering but their beaver garments, and that of my companion was a nest of vermin. I, however, spread it under us, and having laid down upon it, we covered ourselves with my camblet cloak. My companion's hair being greased with fish-oil, and his body smeared with red earth, my sense of smelling, as well as that of feeling, threatened to interrupt my rest; but these inconveniences yielded to my fatigue, and I passed a night of sound repose. (*J*342)

Mackenzie's single-minded determination to succeed, his subordination of all other considerations to that end, becomes the repeated theme of the narrative. He contrasts his purposeful way of thinking with the less disciplined outlook of the members of his crew and with the chaotic behaviour of the Indians. In the end the crooked is made smooth, and Mackenzie achieves his goal. In the process, the modern reader may think, opportunities for valuable insights into himself or the people he passed among have been lost. But whatever the ultimate judgment may be, it is difficult to deny that the spectacle of the powerful Scotsman, Alexander Mackenzie, prevailing single-handed (or so it seems) over raging rivers and precipitous mountains is an impressive and exciting one. The climax of his labours, the moment when he "mixed up some vermilion in melted grease, and inscribed, in large characters . . . this brief memorial — 'Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada, by land, the twenty-second of July, one thousand seven hundred and ninety three'" (*J* 378), is a suitably evanescent emblem of the power and mastery he thought his journey embodied. Yet the scene is nonetheless both dignified and moving.

ALTHOUGH, IN FACT, Simon Fraser's journey down the Fraser canyon may have been a match for Mackenzie's journey in danger and excitement, the written accounts of the two voyages are not equal. Fraser's journal is in diary form, and is characterized by brief reports of the day's events, seldom very detailed, and by no attempt at narrative continuity other than that provided by the events of the voyage itself.⁴ Fraser's account reveals great potential for heroic character portrayal, but the materials are not developed sufficiently for the reader to form a clear picture of Fraser or of the magnitude of his achievements. Fraser's journal remains a document of primarily historical interest, with secondary value as an account of an exciting adventure. But Mackenzie's account,

by contrast, is clearly seen to have values which transcend its purely historical significance, and which make it a piece of writing with intrinsic merits.

Nevertheless, Fraser's journal provides an interesting comparison with Mackenzie's narrative. Fraser's journey was in many ways similar to Mackenzie's 1793 western voyage, so that in Fraser's diary of his journey we have a document similar in nature to the lost original journal of Mackenzie's second voyage, upon which the final narrative was based. By examining Fraser's journal, we can obtain a fuller appreciation of the powers of analysis and expression which must have been displayed in Mackenzie's original manuscript. From a literary viewpoint, a reading of Fraser's account serves chiefly to reveal how greatly the way Mackenzie's story is told — not simply its skeleton of events — contributes to its final impact.

In basic structure, and in the nature of the materials of the story, Fraser's journal closely resembles Mackenzie's narrative. The story is composed of a series of adventures and hardships, involving near-disasters in the rapids, difficult terrain, hostile or recalcitrant Indians, and rebellious members of the expedition. These are also the materials of Mackenzie's narrative. But Fraser's presentation is different. For one thing, he does not keep attention focused rigidly on himself; instead, he usually speaks of "we," referring to his whole party. As a result, the reader is not made constantly aware of a single will driving the party forward, although from occasional incidents we can infer that Fraser does need all his resourcefulness and persuasive powers at times to keep his men committed to the journey. But generally in his account some of the sense of dramatic isolation and forceful endeavour that is ever-present in Mackenzie's narrative is missing.

The descriptions of encounters with the Indians are also frequently lacking in the drama and suspense which Mackenzie infuses into his stories of such incidents. Where Mackenzie's account is circumstantial and clear, Fraser's tends to be general and vague, giving least detail where the reader would most like to be informed:

I applied to the Chief in consequence of his promise of yesterday for his canoe, but he paid no attention to my request. I, therefore, took the canoe and had it carried to the water side. The Chief got it carried back. We again laid hold of it. He still resisted, and made us understand that he was the greatest of his nation and equal in power to the sun. However as we could not go without [the canoe] we persisted and at last gained our point. (*L* 104)

The means, so lightly passed over in the final sentence, by which Fraser and his men "gained our point" is the very thing the reader would most like to be told at length. But the dramatic details of the confrontation are omitted. Likewise, when forced by policy to bed down with one of the Indians, Fraser omits the personal details which made Mackenzie's account so vivid: "Apprehensive that the old man might regret his undertaking and give us the slip in the course of

the night," Fraser reports in his undemonstrative way, "I had his bed made in my tent by way of security" (*L* 67).

Nonetheless, even the laconic Fraser is at times moved by the extremity of the perils through which he passes:

It being absolutely impossible to carry the canoes by land, yet sooner than to abandon them, all hands without hesitation embarked, as it were *a corp perdu* upon the mercy of this Stygian tide. Once engaged the die was cast, and the great difficulty consisted in keeping the canoes in the medium, or *fil d'eau*, that is to say, clear of the precipice on one side, and of the gulphs formed by the waves on the other. However, thus skimming along like lightning, the crews cool and determined, followed each other in awful silence. And [when] arrived at the end we stood gazing on our narrow escape from perdition. (*L* 76)

The precarious spiderweb of Indian ladders, upon which he must rely when climbing up and down the canyon walls, calls forth this understated yet evocative description:

We had to pass where no human being should venture. Yet in those places there is a regular footpath impressed, or rather indented, by frequent travelling upon the very rocks. And besides this, steps which are formed like a ladder, or the shrouds of a ship, by poles hanging to one another and crossed at certain distances with twigs and withes, suspended from the top to the foot of precipices, and fastened at both ends to stones and trees, furnished a safe and convenient passage to the Natives — but we, who had not the advantages of their experience, were often in imminent danger, when obliged to follow their example. (*L* 96)

These passages, however, are the rhetorical high points of Fraser's account. They are almost the only places where he writes with an attempt to create an effect, or tries to convey something of his own mental state in other than the most general and neutral terms. In addition, he seldom expands on the incidents he describes. The only lengthy account of an adventure is a story, given in the words of the man to whom it happened, telling of an upset in one of the rapids in which the man was swept downstream for three miles clinging to an overturned canoe (*L* 90-91). This account, however, does not come anywhere near the excitement of Mackenzie's story of canoe-wreck and near disaster.

Usually, Fraser's story is couched in quite undramatic terms. Yet the potential for exciting scenes like Mackenzie's is present in Fraser's account. Like Mackenzie, upon occasion he can express a single-minded determination to succeed. When the Indians suggest an overland detour to the easier Thompson River, he announces: "But going to the sea by an indirect way was not the object of the undertaking. I therefore would not deviate and continued our route according to my original intention" (*L* 69). And Fraser's sense of the isolation of his party amid hostile peoples, and of their utter dependence on their own resources, is sometimes as strong as Mackenzie's:

Here we are, in a strange country, surrounded with dangers, and difficulties, among numberless tribes of savages, who never saw the face of a white man. Our situation is critical and highly unpleasant; however we shall endeavour to make the best of it: what cannot be cured, must be endured. (*L* 81-82)

Fraser's shrewd and bold handling of the Indians is often evident. At one point when the Indians appear to be on the point of commencing hostilities of some kind, he reports:

Sensible from our critical situation that mild measures would be improper and of no service, I pretended to be in a violent passion, spoke loud, with vehement gestures and signs exactly in their own way; and thus peace and tranquility were instantly restored. (*L* 108)

At times Fraser too must shore up the flagging spirits of his men:

I remonstrated and threatened by turns. The other gentlemen joined my endeavours in exposing the folly of their undertaking [to go another way], and the advantages that would accrue to us all by remaining as we had hitherto done in perfect union for our common welfare. After much debate on both sides, our delinquents yielded and we all shook hands, resolving never to separate during the voyage; which resolution was immediately confirmed by the following oath taken on the spot by each of the party: "I solemnly swear before Almighty God that I shall sooner perish than forsake in distress any of our crew during the present voyage." (*L* 113)

Interesting as such an account is, it still lacks the immediacy of Mackenzie's suggestive paraphrases of his own speeches to his men on similar occasions.

Although Fraser never revised his narrative for publication, we nonetheless have an opportunity of observing him at work as an editor. The only complete journal extant of his voyage is a shortened account which he prepared for his superiors in the fur trade from his original notes. A section of what appears to be the original diary entries made at the time of the journey have also survived, and show how Fraser altered his original version in preparing his revised account. Fraser's revisions actually lessen the literary impact of his writing. Although he introduces a great variety of sentence structure and phrasing, he eliminates most of the details of day-to-day (and sometimes minute-by-minute) difficulties with the erratic and changeable Indians. He eliminates many of the comments which indicate the perplexed state of mind of his men and his exasperated impatience to get moving again. In short, he loses many of the human details which could give his story colour and depth. The most notable losses are the repeated observations on the strength and danger of the river, which by sheer repetition give to the diary fragment, despite its unsophisticated form, a profound sense of the awe which the powers of nature inspired in Fraser, and an acute sense of the smallness of man before such prodigies of nature.

MACKENZIE AND FRASER are, when all is said, heroes in an old-fashioned mould. At least that is how they appear when seen through the lens of their own writings. It is too easy and perhaps too tempting for the modern reader to impose a layer of irony onto the basically simple vision of writers like Mackenzie and Fraser; too easy to remember that Mackenzie did not, after all, really find a practical fur trade route, and that Fraser did not follow the Columbia River to the sea, as he had hoped to do; too easy to introduce the modern distrust of unambiguous statement and black-and-white vision; especially too easy to invoke our distrust of unquestioned self-sufficiency and superiority.

The worlds of Mackenzie and Fraser seem to contain no ambiguities or shadows. Every event is clearly either a step towards the goal, or a setback to the quest. We know that the raw nature which Mackenzie and Fraser appear to have mastered is in fact stronger than any individual human being. Yet, in reading the narratives, we suspend for a time our awareness of this truth. If the simplicity and narrowness of Mackenzie's and Fraser's vision prevents their writing from achieving elaborate literary effects, nonetheless the very simplicity and narrowness of their concerns create the strengths of their stories — strengths which are considerable.

The first issue of that formidable periodical, the *Edinburgh Review*, carried an article on Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal* which, as Victor Hopwood has observed, "touches shrewdly upon the attraction of Mackenzie's Voyages":⁵

There is something in the idea of traversing a vast and unknown continent, that gives an agreeable expansion to our conceptions; and the imagination is insensibly engaged and inflamed by the spirit of adventure, and the perils and novelties that are implied in a voyage of discovery.

The author of the article goes on to describe the single-mindedness with which Mackenzie pursues his journey:

He followed a painful course, through difficulties and dangers, to an unknown termination; and went steadily forward, without knowing where he was to issue, amidst the roaring cataracts, and the solitude of mountains; exposed to the daily hazard of shipwreck, and famine, and mutiny; and to the danger of treachery or assault from the melancholy savages that roamed across his course, or reluctantly consented to direct it.⁶

This description makes plain the romantic aura with which a sympathetic reader can surround Mackenzie's story, and suggests the heroic dimensions which the author and chief protagonist has assumed by the end of his tale.

Today we tend to dislike the man who sets out to impose himself on others or on nature. But Mackenzie and Fraser did not share our prejudices against simplicity or dogmatism. Nor did they share the contemporary ironic distrust of success.

Mackenzie feels he has gained his objective, and says so. He does not assert that he is a hero, but his narrative makes him one. He and Fraser tell stories which are, in underlying form, closer to the heroic tale or romance than to the modern novel. Their deeds and their determination make them seem to be greater men than the reader imagines himself to be. Their limited outlook gives every step of their journeys a greater significance than the reader feels exists in the world around him. They appear to have achieved more than common mortals can aspire to do.

NOTES

- ¹ Roy Daniells, "The Literary Relevance of Alexander Mackenzie," *Canadian Literature*, No. 38 (Autumn 1968), p. 20.
- ² W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 211. Subsequent references are given in the text and are identified by the abbreviation *J*.
- ³ *Voyages from Montreal* (Toronto: Radisson Society, 1926), p. 206. Subsequent references are given in the text and are identified by the abbreviation *V*.
- ⁴ W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser, 1806-1808* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1960). Subsequent references are given in the text and are identified by the abbreviation *L*.
- ⁵ Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 29.
- ⁶ *Edinburgh Review*, I (1802), 141, 142.

THE BURIED SELF

Joyce Carol Oates

innocent as lace it is froth groping
gumming its speech
its small measured breaths mimic yours

wading enormous in the Everglades
stinging like nicotine in your sight
the Arctic of its appetite appalls