

THE LITERARY RELEVANCE OF ALEXANDER MACKENZIE

Roy Daniells

SIR ALEXANDER MACKENZIE has been given a formal welcome into the confines of Canadian Literature by Victor Hopwood, whose clear and summary chapter on western explorers, in the *Literary History of Canada* (1965) cannot fail to stimulate readers to further thought and further enquiry.

Mackenzies' two great journeys — from Lake Athabasca to the Arctic and from Fort Forks to Bella Coola — were brought to the attention of the public by the appearance in 1801, in London, of a quarto volume, with dramatic maps, entitled *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 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*. Mackenzie's name is on the title page but the preliminary account of the fur trade was written, it is believed, by his cousin Roderick, who loyally served under him in the Athabasca region.

The invisible editor of the *Voyages*, who rewrote Alexander's journals (and may have rewritten Roderick's account) was William Combe. Combe was a highly skilled and reputable writer, author of the immensely popular stories of "Dr. Syntax", and he had already written up the *Voyages* of John Meares, for publication in 1790. The easy assumption is that, as we peruse the 1801 quarto, we are really reading Combe, working from rough journals kept by a semi-literate explorer. The style of the book is lucid, cadenced and at times soberly eloquent. By great good luck, however, a copy bearing all the marks of a faithful rescript has survived of the journal Mackenzie kept during the 1789 trip. Even the slight incoherence of the last two days, when his joy at being almost home runs the two entries together, is faithfully preserved by the copyist. Microfilm copies and an edited edition by T. H. McDonald (University of Oklahoma Press) enable us to check the original entries against Combe's version and — *mirabile dictu!* — the

comparison is not odious; both men rise in our esteem, Combe for his faithfulness to the original, Mackenzie for the clarity and toughness of his journal style.

Combe's distortions of Mackenzie's meaning are so few and so slight they have to be searched for. As the expedition to the Arctic starts, Mackenzie says, "Mr. Leroux got his men and Indians to salute us with several Volleys to which we returned a few Shot." This nicely differentiates the party close to base, able to fire volleys, from the party already intent on the journey and unwilling to waste powder on more than a few token discharges. Combe's version loses this urgency: "We were saluted on our departure with some vollies of small arms, which we returned." It is not a very important loss. A fairer sample of Combe's editing is seen in the sentence, "The Indians complained of the perseverance with which we pushed forward, and that they were not accustomed to such severe fatigue as it occasioned." Mackenzie had written, "The Indians complain much of our hard Marching, that they are not accustomed to such hard fatigue." Frequently when Combe's phrasing sounds literary, it is Mackenzie himself who is responsible. In the *Journal*, when some Indians are encountered, "we made them smook, tho' it was evident they did not know the use of Tobacco, we likewise gave them some Grog to drink, but I believe they accepted of those Civilities more through Fear than Inclination." The literary cadence and balanced structure are there in the original. How can we account for this? It is surely the product of what Arnold called "our excellent and indispensable eighteenth century", when even a suicide note could be rationally structured.

We may fairly claim for Mackenzie a place among Canadian writers, or rather among writers who left a literary record of their engagement with Canada.

SO FAR, SO GOOD. We must now admit that this volume of *Voyages* is not in the front rank of narratives of exploration. It concerned a terrain and a type of enterprise so remote from the English reader's experience that a great chunk of preliminary explanation was needed. Furthermore, its events did not provide a dramatic structure. In 1793, Mackenzie and his men paddled, poled, portaged, ploughed through the bush, then plodded three hundred miles overland, turned about and came back; just as, in 1789, they had paddled and portaged and pushed aside the ice and plunged into the current of the Mackenzie, then, reaching the Arctic sea on Bastille Day, had turned about and come back. As for the scene, the terrain itself, this marvellous Canada of ours, let Mac-

kenzie himself speak; he is explaining why his references to flora and fauna, to Indian customs and habits, and to natural scenery must appear so scanty and inadequate. He had been obliged to pass on "with rapid steps": "I had to encounter perils by land and perils by water; to watch the savage who was our guide, or to guard against those of his tribe who might meditate our destruction. I had also the passions and fears of others to control and subdue. . . . The toil of our navigation was incessant, and oftentimes extreme."

As for the characters in the story, there is only one, Alexander Mackenzie. The voyageurs are barely named, the Indians barely numbered. At the end of its journeys the party do not encounter the princes of India or the court of Kublai Khan, only the nets and pots of some Eskimo who never show up in person, or a friendly fellow in a village who feeds them roast salmon.

The *Voyages*, however, possess very high literary values of a secondary kind, that is, values which can be elicited by a process of editing which reveals the superb, taut thread of narrative; or else by a process of extending the story to show its dramatic and epic features. We will examine these possibilities briefly, in the order mentioned.

If we follow each expedition from its point of departure, the onward linear movement is continuous; the canoe pierces all obstructions; the single will of Mackenzie drives forward. There are, in fact, no digressions, only obstacles; no delays, only pauses for brief recuperation and repairs; no hesitations of more than a few hours even when Mackenzie is most perplexed as to his best direction; and, with one small exception, there is no back-tracking. It is this simple, continuous, linear drive that gives impetus to the narrative. To take one example: on June 13th, 1793, they had just crossed the continental divide and were feeling their way toward a rumoured great river (now known as the Fraser).

They pushed off into a rapid current and at once the canoe struck and broke itself sideways on a sandbar. As they jumped out, the torrent swept them into deeper water, leaving one of the crew behind, then drove them downward into a rock which shattered the stern below the gunwales, making steering impossible. Thrown to the edge of the channel, the canoe smashed its bow. The foreman was swept out by branches of a tree he laid hold of to check their course. On went the canoe into the fury of a cascade which pounded it on rocks, ripping the bark into great holes and wrenching the thwarts so that now the wreck floated flat on the water. After several hundred yards of surging forward, in extreme peril, a small eddy enabled the exhausted crew to let the canoe's weight rest on some stones. The Indians climbed to the bank, sat down, and wept. In great pain

from the icy waters and badly bruised, Mackenzie held the smashed framework on the outside until the crew got everything ashore. Among their losses was the total spare supply of bullets.

Now, miraculously, the two lost men reappeared. A fire was built and, after a hearty meal and an allowance of rum, Mackenzie began, like Odysseus, to rebuild morale. So effective were his arguments and so persuasive was his eloquence that by nine the next morning a party went off to look for birchbark and to locate, if possible, their point of junction with the great river. In the meantime, Mackenzie, though he had come ashore from the wreck so benumbed and bruised he could scarcely stand, had found the strength to make his usual attempt at astronomical observations and had established their latitude as $54^{\circ}23'$, though not their longitude, for he could not get a sufficient horizon among the mountains to try for the satellites of Jupiter.

One could, of course, write Mackenzie's life in the manner of Lytton Strachey. Beginning with the predatory nature of the fur trade and its slaughter of animals, continuing into the violent competition of the trading companies, and concluding with Mackenzie's adumbration of the "fatal impact" of the white man, one could interpret his non-violence as no more than prudential, classify his mercantile designs as imperialistic, look sideways into the mystery of his son Andrew's unknown Indian mother, and end by making Alexander Mackenzie almost as contemptible as Lytton Strachey.

It would be a fruitless exercise. Mackenzie, at least up to the time of his conflict with Selkirk, fulfils too magnificently the requirements of the Jason figure, the adventurous far-seeker, as the Western world has conceived his image. His family is poor but they are Scottish clansmen; his father and uncle are both loyalists; he is early thrown upon the world and in his twenties has established a reputation for honesty, courage, diplomacy and enterprise. Appointed to a post in the remote wilderness, he receives maps and plans from an older, more experienced man, whom he succeeds. His first voyage, in search of a western passage, is unsuccessful, in spite of the loyalty of his Argonauts. He retires to England, to learn more of navigation and acquire better instruments. Returning to his original starting point, he sets off again, a veritable Odysseus in the skill and craft of his voyaging and his ability to endure and survive; doing better than Odysseus, in that he never lost a man, or forfeited a loyalty or harmed an Indian. Every sordid aspect of the trade withers away out of the picture; the commercial and imperial motives retire into the wings; Mackenzie's return to Athabasca is like the clasping of a necklace strung with the real and shining jewels of courage, hope, resource-

fulness and fair dealing. The *Voyages*, below their level of surface detail, possess immense narrative strength, derived directly from the energy of heroic achievement.

But let us press on, as Mackenzie did, toward our ultimate objectives. These are the dramatic and epic elements of his story.

THE DRAMA ASSERTS ITSELF after the voyages ended. It is neither comedy nor tragedy but a true history play in which interest centres upon conflict between two great figures; each backed by diplomatic, financial and armed forces; each representing a territorial interest; each desiring absolute power, under the aegis of a more remote superior sovereignty, to which both appeal. Dramatic elements abound; situations develop climactically; tragic disappointments and ironies of fate are present. The historical implications are enormous and fitly symbolized by the identification of each contender with a vast natural feature of our country — Sir Alexander Mackenzie with the great river and Lord Selkirk with a range of mountains paralleling the Pacific coast. The best account of Mackenzie is still that published in 1927, by M. S. Wade; John Gray's *Lord Selkirk of Red River* (1963) has the triple advantage of being a definitive historical account, a labour of love, and a complete apologia.

The action of the drama commences about 1808. Selkirk and Mackenzie were buying shares in the Hudson's Bay Company on joint account. Selkirk was thirty-seven years of age. He had been Thomas Douglas, the seventh son of a noble family, and by certain untimely deaths had inherited an earldom at the age of twenty-eight. He was a natural philanthropist and deeply concerned about the cotters and crofters who were being pushed out of the Highlands. Having already, in 1803, led a group of them to Prince Edward Island, to establish new homes, he was now turning his attention to the fertile prairie land of the Red River and buying up Hudson's Bay Company shares, which had fallen to three-fifths of their par value because of competition from the North-Westerns and a renewal of the Napoleonic conflict. Selkirk was advancing money to Mackenzie, who was short of liquid capital. Mackenzie, at the age of forty-four, was an experienced fur trader and renowned explorer who had retired to England but was still pursuing the interests of his company.

By 1810 the irony of the situation became apparent. The two men were hoping to get a controlling, or at least a decisive, interest in the Hudson's Bay Com-

pany for totally opposite and utterly incompatible reasons. Mackenzie wanted to secure an outlet for the fur trade through Hudson's Bay, which the old company controlled. Selkirk desired a huge grant of prairie upon which to found an agricultural settlement. The incompatibility was as old as Cain and Abel: the tiller of the soil, who encloses and guards his land, is at perpetual war with the herder or hunter on the open range.

The two men stand in dramatic contrast. Although their dates of birth are separated by only seven years, one is young, the other over the hill. Selkirk is eager and impulsive. Early in 1811 he has made his proposal to the Hudson's Bay Company. His optimism absorbs all difficulties, even the six hundred miles of wilderness between the proposed point of disembarkation for his settlers, on the shores of the Bay, and the most suitable land in the Red River valley; even the climate, with its frequent sub-zero winter temperatures.

Mackenzie, on the other hand, is a man defeated after a protracted struggle to induce the British government to form the fur trade into a single enterprise with bases (at once military, naval and commercial) on the Pacific coast. He now does all he can to defeat Selkirk's plans for settlement. There is good material here for a dramatist who could bring to life a series of related scenes: Mackenzie insisting that Selkirk's proposal be brought to a general meeting of Hudson's Bay Company stockholders; Simon McGillivray writing to his brother that "His Lordship is a designing and dangerous character — and Sir Alexander has not been sufficiently aware of him"; Mackenzie telling Miles Macdonnell, leader of the settlers, before the expedition left Britain, that the North-Westerns would not tolerate the colony and could incite the Indians against it; the deplorable set of incidents at the dockside where an official related to Mackenzie used every means to dissuade and intimidate the prospective settlers, so that the captain put to sea in haste, leaving part of his stores behind.

The rest of the drama is well known: the massacre in 1816 at Seven Oaks (not connected with Mackenzie), where Robert Semple, governor of the Red River colony, and about twenty of his men were killed by the métis, who gave no quarter to the wounded; Selkirk's arrival with a troop of disbanded soldiers, many of them Swiss, with which he restored order; arrests, action and counter-action in the Canadian courts, Selkirk being ordered to pay damages of £2,000; his return to England at the end of 1818; his death eighteen months later, at Pau, within sight of the Pyrenees, dictating during his last days his plans for an experimental farm at Red River.

During these years, Mackenzie's own health had been declining and his in-

volvement in affairs lessening. He writes to his cousin, in 1819, that events in Canada have not been as disastrous to the North West Company as was feared. "The losses sustained in the country, though severe and serious have been in a considerable degree recompensed by the high prices obtained for the furs, the sale of which was certainly managed with great judgment in London." He is to the last what he always claimed to be — a trader. "Sono mercanti", said Napoleon of the British, borrowing a phrase from Paoli. A good line to bring down a curtain. Mackenzie's death occurred in March 1820, among the mountains of Killiecrankie, scarcely a month before Selkirk's death by the Pyrenees.

At the time of their death, what each had fought to establish, through defeat after defeat, was precariously sustaining itself: the North West Company, relying on a dwindling animal population and desperately over-extended in its communications, was to be absorbed by its old rival the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821; Selkirk's settlers, clinging to the land, had many dangers ahead of them, including Riel's rebellion.

IN A CONTEXT LARGER than its dramatic possibilities, the story of Alexander Mackenzie may be seen as possessing the scope and grandeur that belong to epic tradition. Absolute powers are involved; wars hang on the horizon like thunder clouds; long, hazardous journeys are undertaken by a leader and his faithful band of followers; recuperation after disaster is a recurring pattern. Granted the gods do not intervene; or do they? Mackenzie almost nightly directs his telescope toward the moons of Jupiter or watches for the appearance of Diana, that he may receive direction and achieve orientation. When the long journeys, undertaken to extend His Majesty's territories, are accomplished, he receives in knighthood a royal reward. After the second voyage, he falls into an underworld of helplessness and disturbing visions. He writes to Roderick, "I never passed so much of my time so insignificantly — nor so uneasy — Although I am not superstitious — dreams amongst other things — caused me much annoyance I could not close my eyes without finding myself in company with the Dead."

The principal epic element in the Mackenzie story is, however, much more definite, extensive and significant. It is the old motif of the fate of nations. Harold Innis has said, "It is no more accident that the present Dominion coincides roughly with the fur-trading areas of northern North America."

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 terri-

tory 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, as large as Europe minus Russia.

It is true that the boundaries were not as extensive as Mackenzie had at first hoped. In theory, Britain was entitled by the Treaty of Paris to territory extending as far south as navigable water on the Mississippi, and from that point west to the Pacific. In practice, an ambiguity in the wording, arising out of an ignorance of the terrain, made it possible for the Americans to claim the entire Mississippi basin. In 1818, the 49th parallel was agreed on as a boundary up to the Rockies.

At the time of Mackenzie's death, in 1820, Britain still had a strong claim to the Columbia valley, but after 1838 American settlement steadily increased and in 1843 the settlers demanded union with the U.S. The Democratic party even pushed the American claim northward in the famous slogan, "Fifty-four forty, or fight." Earl Cathcart, governor of Canada and commander of the forces, made extensive preparations for defence. Finally, by a compromise settlement, the territory west of the Rockies was divided along the continuation of the 49th parallel and the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

For the Alaskan boundary there is a similar story of compromise unfavourable to Canada, but not disastrously so. In 1903 Roosevelt threatened to use force and used the old Russian claim (bought by the American government) to cut off the northern half of what is now British Columbia from the sea. Farther north, the boundary between Alaska and the Yukon was more equitably drawn, running for seven hundred miles through wild, almost uninhabited, potentially rich country. The fur traders who followed Mackenzie up the valley of the river named for him, reinforced by goldminers in the 1890's, established a firm claim.

THIS HISTORICAL SERIES of events, played against a geographic background, has great possibilities as literary material. A double irony emerges, on a scale to provoke the laughter of the gods. The impasse between the North West Company and the Red River settlement, with all its stupid and brutal elements, its harassments and murder, proved in its outcome to have held in balance the two forces necessary to the formation of Canada as a viable body politic. Without the West and access to the Pacific, Canada would have remained in

continuous danger of absorption by the United States. And without both the fur trade and the agricultural settlement, the West could never have been claimed. Had Lord Selkirk's farmers abandoned their lands, the Red River basin (if that great fertile plain can be so named) would have been filled, inevitably, by American settlers and would have gone the way of the Oregon territory. If, on the other hand, the North West Company had lost its supply routes, as seemed possible when at one time supplies were not allowed to be taken out of Red River, it would have failed to achieve the few years of frenetic expansion which gave "the lords of the lakes and forests" their place in history. A network of canoe routes, extending beyond the Rockies, and pinned down by hastily established posts, sufficed to establish a British presence right to the waters of the Pacific. But for this trading right, bought out by the Hudson's Bay Company soon after Mackenzie's death, and translated into a political claim by first the British and then the Canadian government, Canada would have established almost no mainland claims west of what is now Winnipeg. The epic quality of the story resides in the immense and decisive national issues hanging on the deeds of half a dozen paladins, among whom Mackenzie was foremost.

The second enormous irony arises from the failure of the British government to follow Mackenzie's many times urged advice, by founding bases that could dominate the Oregon territory and part of the present Alaskan coast. It is tempting, especially to the present writer, who has worked as a farm labourer among the bright orchards of Oregon, to think in terms of a lost empire, a surrendered inheritance. Such romantic regret, however, will not stand the cold scrutiny of the historian. It is ten to one, given the pace and temper of American westward expansion, that had such claims been stoutly maintained, war would in due course have broken out. In that event, Britain (and therefore Canada) stood to lose the whole Pacific slope — if anything so magnificently mountainous can be so named. The very failures and inhibitions, because of the Napoleonic threat, on the part of the British government may be reckoned providential for Canada. In the end, Mackenzie's voyages achieved their full political potential; they established our initial claim to God's plenty as we now, in the fact of Western Canada, possess it.

William Cowper, a contemporary of Mackenzie, summed up the issue in the prophecy of the Bard to Boadicea,

Regions Caesar never knew
Thy posterity shall sway;

ALEXANDER MACKENZIE

Where his eagles never flew
None invincible as they.

Some day this theme will find heroic and definitive expression, as the Canadian writer, “long choosing and beginning late”, comes at last to a sense of its epic dimension. In the meantime, as Milton put it, we have “some naked thoughts that roam about / And loudly knock to have their passage out.”