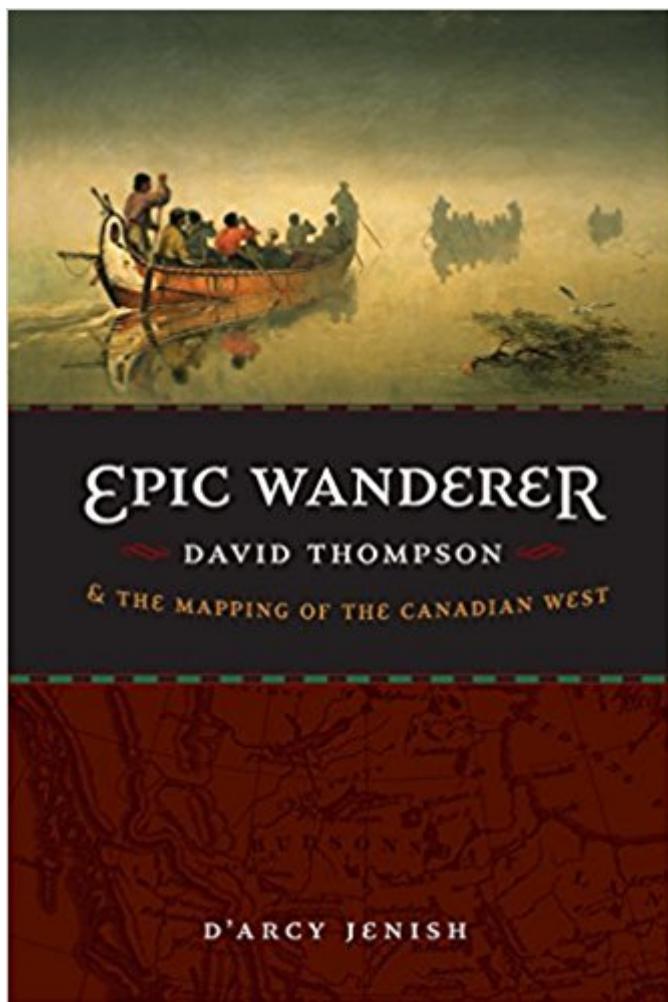


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Epic Wanderer: David Thompson And The Mapping Of The Canadian West



Synopsis

Epic Wanderer, the first full-length biography of mapmaker David Thompson (1770â€”1857), is set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries against the broad canvas of dramatic rivalries between the United States and British North America, between the Hudsonâ€™s Bay Company and its Montreal-based rival, the North West Company, and among the various First Nations thrown into disarray by the advent of guns, horses, and alcohol. Less celebrated than his contemporaries Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Thompson spent nearly three decades, beginning in 1784, surveying and mapping more than 1.2 million square miles of largely uncharted Indian territory. Traveling across the prairies, over the Rockies, and on to the Pacific, Thompson transformed the raw data of his explorations into a map of the Canadian West. Measuring ten feet by seven feet and exhibiting astonishing accuracy, the map became essential to the politicians and diplomats who would decide the future of the rich and promising lands of the West. Yet its creator worked without personal glory and died in penniless obscurity. Drawing extensively on Thompsonâ€™s personal journals and illustrated with his detailed sketches, intricate notebook pages, and the map itself, Epic Wanderer charts the life of a man who risked everything in the name of scientific advancement and exploration.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

David Thompson first crossed the Continental Divide in 1807 and devoted the next five years to the fur trade and exploration in the Columbia River drainage. He was the first person of European descent to explore the entire length of the Columbia River. His journals and maps laid the

foundation for European resource exploitation and subsequent settlement of Washington State, western Montana, and southeastern British Columbia. In fact, all exploration in the Columbia River drainage was largely British rather than American during the first half of the nineteenth century. Writings and symposia on David Thompson are predictably increasing in both Canada and the United States as we enter the bicentennial period of that exploration. Parts of David Thompson's long life are enigmatic and seemingly contradictory. "Epic Wanderer" is a journalistic account of the known facts. It is not as insightful as "Sources of the River," the book that has emerged as the definitive account of Thompson's northwest explorations. However, "Epic Wanderer" does provide a more complete account of David Thompson's life after he left the active fur trade and settled in the vicinity of Montreal. Since Thompson died in 1857, this eastern experience represents more than half his life. During that time, Thompson experienced considerable success in several endeavors, but a financial collapse left him and his wife to die in poverty. David Thompson was a skilled surveyor. His maps were more accurate than those of his contemporaries. Overlooked by those who focus on his contributions to western expansion is the fact that before and after his time in the Northwest, he made important surveys on the eastern border between British Canada and the United States.

D'Arcy Jenish's "Epic Wanderer" is a life of David Thompson, a British fur trader who spent nearly three decades exploring and mapping the Canadian West from Hudson's Bay to the Pacific Coast. Thompson was apprenticed to the Hudson's Bay Company out of a boy's school in London in 1784, at the tender age of 14. He grew up in various trading posts around Hudson's Bay, followed the fur trade across the Canadian Prairies, helped open up routes across the Canadian Rockies, and was the first European to explore the entire length of the Columbia River from its source to the Pacific Ocean. More importantly for the history books, Thompson had a gift for astronomy and surveying that he used to provide accurate mapping data for huge swaths of North America. The heart of this book is the narrative of Thompson's travels across the interior of the continent, on trips that often took years to complete, accompanied by fur company employees, French voyageurs, and Indian guides. Jenish does a good job of providing the context for Thompson's travels: the competition between rival trading companies for access to new sources of fur; the rising tensions between the young United States and British Canada over the North American continent, and the inevitable frictions between European intruders and Native American tribes. The last third of the book is Thompson's return to civilization in Eastern Canada after 1812 and a slow spiral into poverty for a man never quite able to adjust to life away from the wilderness. Thompson today is

remembered primarily as a footnote in Canadian history. Jenish's history goes far to rectify Thompson's undeserved obscurity.

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