

"David Thompson, Surveyor"

By Barbara Belyea

For almost two centuries David Thompson's map of western North America and his boundary surveys of the Great Lakes have been familiar references for Canadian surveyors. Recently, thanks to efforts of an international bicentennial committee, Thompson has become a popular hero. His fur-trade career recalls a romantic era; his marriage to a Métis woman suggests a harmonious blending

to survey professionally. However, the fall of 1798 saw Thompson as an outpost trader at Lac la Biche. Although Thompson attempted to find a way across the continental divide, most of his time and effort were spent getting ahead in the trade. He was made a partner of the North West Company in 1804. At last he crossed the divide in 1807 and for the next five years set up a trade network along the



Thompson's Travels - Gregory Harlin, National Geographic Image Collection.

of Native and immigrant cultures. Thompson's fame may be increasing, but there is a good chance that his professional achievement will be glossed over. Heroic cults blur and oversimplify evidence from the past. Only trained surveyors can understand Thompson's contribution to exploring and mapping this country.

Thompson lived a long and varied life. Born in London, he was educated at the Grey Coat School and sent to Hudson Bay in 1784. The first of seven years as an apprentice was spent at Churchill, under the direction of Samuel Hearne. During the next decade Thompson served at frontier posts on the Saskatchewan River. Frustrating attempts to find a short passage from Hudson Bay to Lake Athabaska prompted the young man to join with Canadian traders, whose routes to Athabaska were well established and whose interest in the southern limits of the trade offered a chance

Columbia River and its tributaries, exploring and surveying at the same time. From 1812 to 1814, still employed by the North West Company, Thompson mapped the western territory he had surveyed and then, from 1814 to 1827 he worked with the International Boundary Commission to survey the Canada-US border from the St. Lawrence River to Lake of the Woods. Loss of capital from bad business deals kept Thompson at work as a surveyor until the 1830s – a hard life in those days for a man almost sixty years old. Efforts to publish his maps were unsuccessful. British government officials negotiating the Oregon border responded to Thompson's maps with indifference. Thompson's accomplishments as an explorer and a surveyor went unrecognized in his lifetime.

Thompson owes his subsequent reputation as "the greatest land geographer" to J. B. Tyrrell of the Geological Survey of

Canada. From scattered references Tyrrell pieced together the outline of Thompson's life, published his memoirs and promoted his achievements in papers read to the Royal Society of Canada. Tyrrell's admiration of Thompson was that of one surveyor for another. When he annotated Thompson's *Narrative*, Tyrrell explained features of the landscape and the fur trade but took for granted that readers would be familiar with Thompson's survey techniques. Tyrrell also assumed that the procedures he followed, the same as those Thompson had followed, would continue to be standard practice. He did not anticipate the future time, only a few decades away, when these procedures would be outmoded and mastered by only a few specialists. For this reason more than any other, Thompson's achievement as a surveyor now receives only lip service, an echo of Tyrrell's praise rather than thoughtful, informed analysis.

Professional surveyors could make an important contribution to the historical study of Thompson and his contemporaries (Turnor, Fidler, Lewis and Clark) by once more learning the survey techniques of the fur-trade period and then analyzing the work of the explorer-surveyors. How do Thompson's surveys compare with those of Turnor and Fidler? Was Lewis's suspicion of British surveyors' "varacity" justified? How do the maps of these explorers compare with maps made now? There might be some inter-

esting surprises in store for the modern surveyor who is willing to learn old methods.

Barbara Belyea is a faculty professor in the Department of English at the University of Calgary. Her multidisciplinary interests include the history of publishing, literary theory, fur-trade exploration and the history of cartography. She has just released a Bicentennial Edition of her book "Columbia Journals - David Thompson". It is featured in the Book Reviews section on page 42.

Author's note with regard to the spelling of "varacity": "Varacity" is correct and should be in quotation marks. It is Meriwether Lewis's comment on Fidler. Neither Lewis nor Clark could spell properly. I would love to see a report from surveyors in various regions of Thompson's travels, who would analyze his techniques and comment on his accuracy. Quite a few historians, myself included, have made questionable (because ignorant) statements about period instruments and methods. I know two experts, both in Calgary, who have taken observations at places that Thompson mentions, and have re-calculated his results. More of this sort of "re-enactment," including the transfer of running surveys to maps, would tell us a lot about late 18th-early 19th-century exploration and cartography.

