

## ALEXANDER MACKENZIE AND THE LANDSCAPES OF COMMERCE

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Samuel Hearne's location of the Northern Ocean in 1771 made possible in the one hundred years before Confederation an astonishingly ambitious campaign of Arctic exploration by British fur traders and mariners. The literary and pictorial output of this campaign amounts to more than forty published and a dozen unpublished works. The first of these to appear in the nineteenth century records the expeditions of Sir Alexander Mackenzie (1764-1820), a relentlessly commercially-minded Scot whose geographical and aesthetic interests in the discovery of lands and landscapes are secondary to his interests in land as the domain of fur-bearing animals.

Mackenzie's "darling project" of reaching the Pacific Ocean in 1789 was motivated, he informs the reader of *Voyages . . . through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans* (1801), by the expectation of "commercial views," and not landscape views.<sup>1</sup> "Being better calculated to perform the voyages, arduous as they might be, than to write an account of them" (p. 57), Mackenzie professes himself "not a candidate for literary fame" (p. 59). He expresses apprehension at the lack of "the charms of embellished narrative, or animated description" (p. 59) furnished by his three narratives and, thus, appears aware of the prevailing taste among British readers for landscape tours; but he provides an apologia to readers of "romantic adventures" which emphasises the sublime aspects of solitary travel, the vast, empty stretches of "deserts" traversed, and the threat of attack by "savage" bands of banditti (p. 59). Judging by the notice in the first issue of *Edinburgh Review*, the British reader excused Mackenzie the literary deficiencies of his narrative:

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Mackenzie, *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*, ed. W. Kaye Lamb (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, for the Hakluyt Society, 1970), pp. 328, 57. For another discussion of the literary, though not the aesthetic, merits of Mackenzie's narrative, see T. D. MacLulich, "The Explorer as Hero: Mackenzie and Fraser," *Canadian Literature*, 75 (Winter 1977), 61-63.

There is something in the idea of traversing a vast unknown continent, that gives an agreeable expansion to our conceptions; and the imagination is insensibly engaged and inflamed by the spirit of an adventure, and the perils and the novelties that are implied in a voyage of discovery.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, parts of the work are sufficiently "tedious and perplexing" (p. 143) to the reviewer to warrant no higher praise for style than that it is "uniformly distinct and consistent" (p. 142). Mackenzie's landscape observations, "though not numerous, are sagacious and unassuming" (p. 142), faint praise at best; and the initial compliment seems to be qualified if not finally retracted by the reviewer's penultimate paragraph.

The countries which Mr. Mackenzie has brought to our knowledge by these expeditions, are certainly the least interesting of any with which modern enterprize has made us acquainted.—The barrenness of the soil, the severity of the climate, the remoteness of their position, and the small number and intractable character of their inhabitants, place them very low indeed in the scale of political importance, and reduce their influence upon the rest of the world to a very humble denomination. The believers in perfectibility expect, of course, to see the whole universe covered with the miracles of polity and art; but these regions will probably be the last to put off their original barbarity; and philosophy will have apostles among the Mantchew Tartars and New Hollanders, before any progress has been made in the conversion of the Knifteneaux and the Chipewyans (p. 158).

Despite the fact that the reviewer has other axes to grind, notably one against William Godwin's doctrine of "perfectibility," it is clear in terms of art, that he does not think that Alexander Mackenzie was the right man to introduce the landscapes of the North and the West of British North America to the landscape-conscious early-nineteenth-century British reader: Mackenzie's sensibilities were too commercial, possessing neither the careful and sensitive discrimination of David Thompson, nor the artistic temperament of George Back, Robert Hood, Sherard Osborn, or even John Franklin.<sup>3</sup> A lack of trees in a

<sup>2</sup>*Edinburgh Review*, I (1802), 141; quoted by Victor G. Hopwood, "Explorers by Land (to 1867)," in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, eds. Carl F. Klinck et al (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 29; and 2nd ed. (1966), I, 30. Further references to the review will appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Given the reviewer's conclusion, it appears likely that Mackenzie's account of the North and West reinforced the myth of the regions as, largely, a wasteland. For a discussion of this myth in the context of the west, see Doug Owsram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1980), chpt. 1.

landscape frustrated Mackenzie's commercial, not his aesthetic, eye: it meant that the landscape likely did not sustain fur-bearing animals. The few concessions to "polity and art" present in his journals and history are, it may be argued, not the explorer's at any rate. Franz Montgomery's note, "Alexander Mackenzie's Literary Assistant" (1937), identifies William Combe, the creator, nine years after working with Mackenzie, of Dr. Syntax (1810), as the explorer's ghost writer.<sup>4</sup> A "rationally structured" narrative may, as Roy Daniells has argued in "The Literary Relevance of Alexander Mackenzie" (1968), be present in Mackenzie's original MS, but even a cursory comparison of the surviving portion of the Stowe MS of the *Journal of a Voyage to the Arctic Ocean* with the 1801 published version indicates how often Combe emended Mackenzie's efforts.<sup>5</sup>

## I

On the Mackenzie River in the summer of 1789, three miles above the Ramparts, the explorer made the following simple observation: "The River appeared quite shut up with high perpendicular White Rocks, this did not at all please us."<sup>6</sup> Combe alters this slightly, to read: "... the river appeared to be enclosed, as it were, with lofty, perpendicular, white rocks, which did not afford us a very agreeable prospect."<sup>7</sup> In the Mackenzie delta, the explorer remarks that the river "runs in narrow winding channels amongst low islands with hardly a Tree, and the only ones are Willows, very small and low" (Lamb, p. 198), while Combe translates it, as he did the passage above, into picturesque parlance: "... it then flows in a variety of narrow, meandering channels, amongst low islands enlivened with no trees, but a few dwarf willows" (Combe, p. 56). "Enclosed," "lofty," "agreeable prospect," "variety," "meandering," and "enlivened"

<sup>4</sup>Canadian Historical Review, XVIII (1937), 301-04.

<sup>5</sup>Roy Daniells, "The Literary Relevance of Alexander Mackenzie," *Canadian Literature*, 38 (Autumn 1968), 20.

<sup>6</sup>W. Kaye Lamb, *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*, p. 190. Lamb prints the MS version of the northern narrative. It is the only part of Mackenzie's work which has survived in a pre-Combean state. Subsequent references to this edition of Mackenzie's works will appear in parentheses in the text, with the designation, Lamb, preceding the page number.

<sup>7</sup>*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* (London: T. Cadell, 1801; facs, rpt. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1971), p. 42. All subsequent references to the facsimile reprint of the first edition will appear in parentheses in the text, with the designation, Combe, preceding the page number.

represent Combe's aesthetic rendering of generally unaesthetic observations. In the first example, Mackenzie's concern lies chiefly with the discovery of the river's debouchement on an ocean: anything appearing to preclude that frustrates him, and his frustration increases as he gradually recognizes that "the disappointing river" will not deliver him to the Pacific Ocean. Combe's phrasing suggests that the prospect of the blocked river disappoints the explorer only on aesthetic grounds. Similarly, where Mackenzie records the absence of trees as a sure indicator of a paucity of beaver in the delta, Combe's alterations of the MS indicate that the delta area offers little of interest to the landscape viewer who requires "enlivened" scenes full of "variety."

## II

In turning to the passage in Mackenzie's work most indicative of an aesthetic response to landscape—the description of the Methye Portage—one regrets the loss of the MS for the history of the Fur Trade which precedes the narratives of discovery. (The Methye, or La Loche, Portage runs for twelve miles, from 56°34'N and 109°42'W, to 56°43'N and 109°52'W, over the height of land in northern Saskatchewan which divides the Hudson Bay and Arctic drainage basins.) W. Kaye Lamb has attributed this passage solely to Combe, calling it one of his "added purple passages" (p. 34), without offering evidence. Presumably, given the kinds of changes in the northern journal noted above, Combe was largely responsible for the scene's colour, but he must surely have been working from some text. He had not visited the site, and Mackenzie would not have omitted from his account all description of *the* significant landscape feature on the Fur Trade routes from Montreal. Mackenzie's depiction may have been as dull as that of Eric W. Morse, a modern day canoeist without a fur trader's interests, who states that "all that is offered" in the view from the northern side of the portage "is a distant prospect down a narrow valley, from a seven-hundred-foot drop . . ."<sup>8</sup> Combe and, perhaps, Mackenzie saw the portage, crossed first by a white man (Peter Pond, a fellow trader) in 1778, differently. In "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West" occurs the following single-paragraph description of the prospect looking

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<sup>8</sup>Eric W. Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada / Then and Now* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1968), p. 99.

west, down the valley of the Clearwater River, as seen from the precipice, or The Cockscomb, on the Methye Portage.<sup>9</sup>

This precipice, which rises upwards of a thousand feet above the plain beneath it, commands a most extensive, romantic, and ravishing prospect. From thence the eye looks down on the course of the little river, by some called the Swan river, and by others, the Clear-Water and Pelican river, beautifully meandering for upwards of thirty miles. The valley, which is at once refreshed and adorned by it, is about three miles in breadth, and is confined by two lofty ridges of equal height, displaying a most delightful intermixture of wood and lawn, and stretching on till the bluemist obscures the prospect. Some parts of the inclining heights are covered with stately forests, relieved by promontories of the finest verdure, where the elk and buffalo find pasture. These are contrasted by spots where fire has destroyed the woods, and left a dreary void behind it. Nor, when I beheld this wonderful display of uncultivated nature, was the moving scenery of human occupation wanting to complete the picture. From this elevated situation, I beheld my people, diminished, as it were, to half their size, employed in pitching their tents in a charming meadow, and among the canoes, which, being turned upon their sides, presented their reddened bottoms in contrast with the surrounding verdure. At the same time, the process of gumming them produced numerous small spires of smoke, which, as they rose, enlivened the scene, and at length blended with the larger columns that ascended from the fires where the suppers were preparing. It was in the month of September when I enjoyed a scene, of which I do not presume to give an adequate description; and as it was the rutting season of the elk, the whistling of that animal was heard in all the variety which the echoes could afford it (Combe, pp. lxxxv-lxxxvi; Lamb. p. 128).

The passage marks the first of many published responses to the Clearwater River valley as seen from the height of land. The single-paragraph structure acts as a narrative equivalent of the picture frame, controlling the view being described. The presence of such vocabulary as “meandering,” “lofty,” “enlivened,” “charming,” and “variety” ap-

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<sup>9</sup>Roy Daniells has asserted, without evidence, that Roderic Mackenzie, Alexander's cousin, and the owner of an extensive library at Fort Chipewyan, Lake Athabasca, probably wrote the preliminary “A General History of the Fur Trade.” See the Introduction to the Hurtig edition, p. vii. James K. Smith has disputed the claim for Roderic's authorship on the grounds that when the *Voyages* were being compiled (that is, in the last years of the eighteenth century), the cousins were not on speaking terms, Alexander having dropped out of the North West Company in 1799, and having failed to entice Roderic to join him in the XY Company. See *Alexander Mackenzie, Explorer: The Hero Who Failed* (Toronto: McGraw Hill-Ryerson, 1973), pp. 3, 136.

pears to suggest, given the examples of Combe's alterations to the passages previously considered, that this Methye Portage scene ought to be attributed to Combe. Such an attribution is justifiable as well on the basis of its integrity as a landscape picture, such integrity seldom occurring in what the Edinburgh reviewer was pleased to call Mackenzie's "sagacious and unassuming" observations. Of course, Combe had at his disposal all the ingredients for the Picturesque: the view from a high prospect of a valley, "confined" or enclosed by natural *coulisses*, an "intermixture of wood and lawn," "stately forests" and "finest verdure," interspaced with all the more variety by a scene of natural ruins in the fire-ravaged "dreary void." The *coulisses* restrict perception while the meandering river conducts the eye through the middleground and the distance which lends "romantic" enchantment,<sup>10</sup> to the vanishing point thirty miles away. "At the same time," the foreground is "enlivened" by the movement of people and signs of humanity, the brigade's encampment replacing the English village, the elk and buffalo the English cattle, the campfire's smoke, the smoke rising from the English cottage chimney. As well, the smoke produces the added delight for the picturesque enthusiast of an artificial *sfumato* in the atmosphere. The domesticated foreground is replete with the feature of suppers "preparing," which, though a small detail, colours the whole view in a Claudian<sup>11</sup> suppertime sunset (fur traders being accustomed to camping at dusk). Thus, the foreground provides a small-scale order amidst a scene whose dimensions are too extensive to be governed conventionally by the Picturesque. Combe seems to appreciate that retention of the picture's integrity depends upon some detailed focus. The extensive view is not picturesque, is not made "complete" as a "picture", without the human focus.

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<sup>10</sup>My allusion is to Thomas Campbell's *Pleasure of Hope* (1799), a moral, didactic poem contemporary with Mackenzie's work, in the manner of Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744, 1772). Campbell's famous lines read:

'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view,  
And robes the mountains in its azure hue. (pt. i, l. 7)

<sup>11</sup>Claude [Gellée] Lorrain (1600-1682), whose painting were well known in eighteenth-century England and have been widely recognized as the single greatest influence on the development of the habit of viewing nature as a series of landscape paintings. See, for example, E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 186-87; Leslie Parris, *Landscape in Britain c1750-1850* (London: The Tate Gallery 1973), p. 75, and passim; and John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to The Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 14-20.

The landscape of the Clearwater River valley held significance for the voyageur/fur trader/explorer which rendered it deserving of Combe's attention. It was a grand sight for the voyageur both because it marked the termination of the longest portage on the Fur Trade route from either Montreal or York Factory, and because it was the first sight of lands lying within the Arctic Ocean drainage basin. As well, the view of the Clearwater River affords the rare prospect of a river *down* which the voyageur will paddle: it marks the first such sight for the voyageur en route from York Factory, and only the third such sight for one coming from Lachine. Moreover, it signifies fewer portages and no more upstream struggles in the trip to Fort Chipewyan or down the Mackenzie River.

For the fur trader also the view holds an attraction beyond the aesthetic. As the faintly biblical tone of the Mackenzie/Combe remark, "I beheld my people," hints, and as the situation of the leader/prophet on the heights beholding his people suggests, the view confronting the survivor of the interminable trek through the wilderness of the Methye Portage may be the reward of the sight of the Jordan River and the promised land. Lying beyond the Hudson Bay drainage basin, the westward flowing clear water drains lands beyond the control of the Pharaohs of the Hudson's Bay Company, and effectively under control of the North West Company, Mackenzie's employer at the time of his exploration, though not by the time his *Voyages* were published in 1801. The lands' riches were substantial, earning them the name of "the great Eldorado of Athabasca."<sup>12</sup> From Mackenzie's point of view, they were indeed the promised lands.

Of equal importance to the fur trader in this sense is the presence in this picture of buffalo and elk, not because their hides were sought for trade (the beaver was the pelt in highest demand), but because these animals, especially the buffalo, provided an essential source of meat which could be prepared in the winter months to feed summer expeditions and brigades. Without such a ready food supply, non-stop transportation of goods, crucial in the short ice-free season, would have had to be interrupted while men hunted for their food. As well, without pemmican, exploring expeditions could neither have mapped new territories as quickly as they did nor have wintered in remote localities.

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<sup>12</sup>E. E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest, to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), pp. 172-73.

Finally, for the explorer the valley clearly represents a personal, symbolic vision. The use of the first person singular in an account purporting to be a level-minded history of the Fur Trade belies this fact and strengthens the imaginative bond between Mackenzie and such a biblical figure as Joshua. Mackenzie, of course, urged exploration of the promising Northwest, holding that the North West, and, latterly, the XY Companies' futures lay in opening up passage to the Pacific Ocean, thereby enticing British merchants and the British government with another route to the riches of the East while, likely, earning the company the "Charter and Exclusive Right in the lucrative Fur trade in those parts."<sup>13</sup> Not only does he seem to be rejoicing in the first sight of the promising land to which he has led his people and to which he hopes to lead many partners and investors, as well as the British Parliament, but the adaptation of the Picturesque unites the geographical properties of the landscape with his vision. It is only when "I [emphasis added] beheld this wonderful display of uncultivated nature," that the picture could be made "complete." Mackenzie supplies a crucial element of the Picturesque, the "moving scenery of human occupation" of the foreground, which is otherwise "wanting." But the human presence is confined to the foreground: this is notable because only in uncultivated nature could the beaver hunt be conducted profitably.<sup>14</sup>

The specific detail in the foreground is balanced by the unpicturesque absence of a limit to vision in the background. The distant view is terminated only by the "blue mist," a mist which, given the fact that this passage occurs as almost the last, and certainly the climactic paragraph in the narrative which precedes those of Mackenzie's expeditions, can be interpreted as representing the Pacific Ocean. Failure to pursue this expansive prospect can be attributed only to a lack of vision, to "commercial views" less expansive than the ones Mackenzie claims led him "at an early period of life . . . to the country North-West of Lake Superior, in North America . . ." (Lamb, p. 57). There is, Mackenzie argues, no limit to the great potential to be garnered from exploring, claiming, and exploiting the resources of such a territory; for him, the view from the Methye Portage must have been a truly "ravishing prospect." Its remoteness

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<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Rich, p. 179.

<sup>14</sup>Like the Hudson's Bay Company, the North West Company opposed Lord Selkirk's settlement of the Red River Valley because they perceived settlement as a threat to their concerns.

would not have concerned him; Fort Chipwyan on Lake Athabasca (at 58°42'N) shares the same latitude with Stomoway (at 58°12'N), his birthplace. But to allay apprehension of the commercial viability of his "darling project," Mackenzie has Combe, in a sense his ad man, convey the prospect as a safe, secure venture; hence, the completion of the commercial view as well as the picturesque view by means of the Picturesque, the aesthetic which customarily celebrated in the eighteenth century the accord between man and nature, and the contentment of English rural life. The whistling elk step in for the lowing cattle, adding a last element of picturesque "variety," and one connoting fertility and the growth of the vast potential which even Mackenzie professes an inadequacy to project, though not to perceive.

That Mackenzie had Combe add this "purple passage" of aesthetic and commercial ravishment seems probable in view of the explorer's efforts to allay doubts and to persuade his partners of, as E. E. Rich has put it in *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (1967), "the idea that somewhere an overland passage to the Pacific must exist, and that the North West Company must discover it, must exploit it, and use it as evidence of their competence and their public spirit, to secure from the British government that monopoly of the fur trade which lay at the centre of their planning."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the passage advertises the prospect. Like his fellow trader Peter Pond,

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<sup>15</sup>Rich, p. 185. The following account from James K. Smith testifies to the fact that Mackenzie had no intention of allowing his "darling project" to die a quiet death: "Mackenzie was not content to enlist the sympathy of the general reader, who probably enjoyed an adventure story that reflected the hard-driving nature of its author and missed the economic pleas. In January 1802, barely a month after the publication of the *Voyages*, he submitted a detailed plan of imperial and commercial expansion to Lord Hobart, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies. Entitled 'Preliminaries of the Establishment of a Permanent British Fishery and Trade in Furs &c. on the Continent and West Coast of North America,' it is Mackenzie at his shrewdest and his most persuasive. The scope both of his thinking and his ambition was bold" (*Alexander Mackenzie, Explorer*, p. 153). Mackenzie urged the establishment of a military base at Nootka Sound, the repeal of the trade monopolies granted the East India and South Seas Companies, the repeal of the Hudson's Bay Company's transit rights in its territories, and the grant of such rights along the Pacific Coast to a London-based fishery and fur-trading concern. As Smith observes: "Mackenzie was proposing nothing less than the occupation of part of the North Pacific coast by the British government and a linkage of that coast with the St. Lawrence via a unified, regulated fur trade. His plan conjoined imperial interest and private enterprise . . . [his] solution was to establish yet another chartered company under the aegis of the British government" (p. 154).

who drew up three different maps of the northwest for his three prospective patrons—the Empress of Russia, the government of the United States, and the parliament of England—emphasising the more attractive aspects of the region differently for each, Mackenzie knew he had some selling to do.<sup>16</sup> Not only does the Picturesque serve to emphasize the prospect at the top of portage, but it also manages to draw the reader's attention away from the obstacle which the portage presents. It remained the fur trader's single greatest obstacle to a single-season trade communication between the Northwest and Montreal. In a letter written at Athabasca, May 22, 1789, to the agents of the North West Company at Grand Portage, Mackenzie states: "The bearer Mr. Roderick Mackenzie goes in a light canoe by a new Road to L'Isle à la Crosse [via Lac La Biche] and if he finds [it] practicable for loaded canoes, they will pass that way in future, as the Portage La Loche [Methye] discourages the men very much, it being 11½ miles long. We measured it last fall" (Lamb, p. 437). The diversion did not prove acceptable and the Methye Portage remained part of the main route to the Northwest until supplanted by the railway. That Mackenzie's account ignores the difficulty of the portage attests to his awareness that his promotional efforts could only suffer from any mention of it.

Robert Hood, midshipman on Sir John Franklin's first overland expedition to the Arctic, seems almost to acknowledge the success of both the advertising and commercial campaigns waged by Mackenzie and his partners, when he notes in his journal of 1820 how great the achievement the opening up of the region beyond the Methye Portage in fact was: "daring was the spirit of enterprise that first led commerce, with her cumbrous train, from the waters of Hudson's [sic] Bay to those of the Arctic Sea, across an obstacle to navigation as stupendous as this; and persevering has been the industry which drew riches from a source so remote."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>For a discussion of Pond, the first white man to cross the great divide at the Methye Portage, see Roy Daniells, *Alexander Mackenzie and the North West* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 35-40. Daniells suggests that Pond's marketing skills must have influenced Mackenzie.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Hood, *To the Arctic by Canoe 1819-1821: The Journal and Paintings of Robert Hood, Midshipman with Franklin*, ed. C. Stuart Houston (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University, for the Arctic Institute of North America, 1974), p. 118.