

## **Alexander Mackenzie's Voyages: Indians, the Fur Trade and Northwest Expansion**

*Robert Sayre, Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée*

**Keywords:** Alexander Mackenzie, North American Indians, fur trade, early America, eighteenth century

**Mots-clés :** Alexander Mackenzie, Amérindiens, traite de la fourrure, jeune Amérique, XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle

Alexander Mackenzie's historically important travel account is best understood, in my view, in the context of the three interrelated terms of this article's subtitle. In colonial North America, through to the end of the eighteenth century, there was a marked difference, broadly speaking, in the form taken by imperial European expansion in more southerly regions, east of the Mississippi River, and in the far north and far west. Whereas in the south and east it involved settlement, and the progressive expropriation of the land further and further westward, in the north and west expansion was closely linked to the fur trade. In both cases these processes entailed domination and exploitation of the indigenous peoples, but while in the southeast Europeans took the Indians' land and often displaced the peoples themselves further west as they did so, the fur trade in the northwest kept the Indians on their lands and used them as a dependent labor force in what came to be a kind of industry: the extraction of furs from the forests and plains as raw material for the European market.

The fur trade was in large part carried out by the French at first, but starting in the early 1760s, with the conquest of New France, the British participation dramatically increased and the trade came to be significantly transformed. Under the French regime the trade had not been entirely controlled by market forces,<sup>1</sup> but when it came to be dominated by British commercial civilization there developed intense

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Richard White, "Because the French fur trade was a combination of entrepreneurial traders, merchant financiers, licensed monopolists, and government regulators, it was a hive of diverse interests which, while incorporating market concerns, tended to check their dominance" (115).

competition between rival companies and a strong impulse to expand production. This necessarily meant finding new fur-bearing territories further west, since the animals, notably beaver, were quickly depleted in the older areas of exploitation further east. There was also, in the period following the Conquest, an increased intensity in the search for a route to the Pacific – the legendary “Northwest Passage” – which might open up vast outlets for the goods in the Orient. Hence, the strong thrust towards exploration and “discovery” in the Northwest.<sup>2</sup>

Like a great many of the British fur traders, Alexander Mackenzie was a Scotsman.<sup>3</sup> Born in Stornoway in the Hebrides in 1764, he was brought to New York by his father as an adolescent, then sent to Montreal in 1778 to get him away from the revolutionary conflict. After several years as a clerk in a small fur trading establishment, he became a partner and moved out into the fur territory west of Lake Superior. In 1787 his firm merged with the larger North West Company. Under the influence of Peter Pond, another trader/explorer in that company, he conceived the plan – one that was tacitly accepted but not actively sponsored by the company – of attempting to reach the Pacific by river (thereby establishing the existence of “a Northwest Passage”), starting from Lake Athabasca, nearly the furthest point north and west that had hitherto been reached by fur traders.<sup>4</sup>

Mackenzie made not one, but two trips with this purpose in mind, because the first, from June to September, 1789, took him to the Arctic Ocean instead of the Pacific. He therefore saw this first attempt as a failure, though he was the first European to explore the large river which runs from Great Slave Lake, above Lake Athabasca, into the Arctic, and which was later named after him by the British. Mackenzie undertook the second trip several years later (1793-94), taking off from another river running out of Lake Athabasca, one going more directly west. He succeeded this time in reaching the Pacific, but did not find a continuous water passage. The expedition portaged across the Rockies, found what later came to be called the Frazer River, then made another overland trek and finally connected with the Bella Coola River which took them to the coast. On both trips Mackenzie traveled by canoe and on foot, with a crew of French “voyageurs” (the other manual laborers of the fur

---

<sup>2</sup> For the broader context of the social and economic underpinnings to relations between Indians and colonists in eighteenth-century North America, see Sayre, « Introduction ».

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough study of the presence of Scotsmen, as fur traders and explorers, in the American Northwest, see Szasz.

<sup>4</sup> On the career of Mackenzie in the context of the British fur trade and exploration of the American Northwest, see Daniells, Gough, Newman, and Woollacott.

trade), as well as with several Indians who served as hunters and interpreters. They took on other Indians as guides, as they went along. On both trips the travelers experienced extreme hardships of various kinds, and often both the crew and the accompanying Indians wanted to abandon the expedition.

When he set out on his expeditions Mackenzie seems to have had three aims in mind, all of which were mercenary: to earn the reward offered by the British Crown for finding the Passage, to make contact with new Indian tribes that could be brought into the fur trade, and, most important, to take the first steps toward setting up a western trade route to the Orient. According to Mackenzie's plan, the Russians, who had established several posts on the coast, were potential intermediaries with the Chinese. Mackenzie met with no Russians, however, when he finally reached the Pacific in July, 1793. Partly because he encountered hostile Indians, and partly because the travelling season was too far advanced, instead of going further along the coast he returned to Lake Athabasca. He left there several months later for Montreal, and never returned.

He did not leave the fur trade, though, but continued to be involved in business dealings and manoeuvres in Montreal until he finally returned to Britain in 1805. During this period he also attempted to convince British colonial officials to establish bases on the northwest Pacific coast as relays in a trade route to the Orient – a project which, as one commentator points out, “neatly conjoined imperial interest and private enterprise” (Smith, 154) – but without any success. Barry Gough, Mackenzie's most recent biographer, feels that earlier biographers on the whole have “failed to appreciate one fundamental fact – that his life in the wilderness was dedicated to one grand purpose, the making of money” (3), and it does seem clear that his was a thoroughly commercial mentality. The exploratory journeys were a mere interlude in a life mainly devoted to business, but they were also part of a larger commercial ambition to create an international trade network.

Mackenzie's book itself was in a real sense a part of his campaign to promote this project. For although he called on a ghostwriter to edit the original manuscript (Hayes, 7) – with the purpose of increasing its appeal to a broad public – he also clearly aimed at colonial administrators and traders who might be convinced that his ideas were feasible. The book appeared only in 1801, in London, under the (typically long) title : *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.*

This title is strangely inaccurate, since the travel narratives themselves start from Lake Athabasca, as already mentioned, and not Montreal. A possible explanation is that in the preliminary account of the fur trade referred to in the title, there is a detailed description of the route habitually followed by the annual fur trading expeditions from and to Montreal. The text, then, includes a kind of essay on the fur trade, as well as accounts of the two voyages. This structure resembles that of many travel books of the same kind, in that it includes not only a diachronic account of travel but also a synchronic, synthesizing or generalizing section. Moreover, within Mackenzie's synchronic section, mainly devoted to the fur trade, one finds another kind of synthesis more typical of works involving travel in Indian territories: extended treatment of the mode of life of the two major Indian nations he encountered on his travels, the Knisteneaux (or Crees) and the Chipewyans.<sup>5</sup>

The work went through several editions, as well as translations, in the years immediately following 1801, achieving substantial success as a publication. As already mentioned, it aims at a mixed public, like many works in the genre: a broad one curious to read about exploration and encounter with exotic peoples, and a more limited one interested in detailed factual material such as miles covered, compass directions and astronomical readings. Many pages are filled with this kind of minutiae, which perhaps explains why, after the initial publications, Mackenzie's work has often appeared in abridged form.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, I will explore what seem to be some of the more interesting aspects of this text. A first remark should be made as regards the section on the fur trade. Although it is entitled "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West", and although there are indeed some historical elements introduced, this section is more a description of the components and mode of functioning (or disfunctioning) of the trade in the period since the British had taken it over. The author's treatment makes it clear that the fur trade in its contemporary form is a modern commercial industry, organized for efficiency, profit-maximizing, hierarchical and competitive. The author fully identifies with this industry and with the "spirit of

---

<sup>5</sup> On accounts of travel in Indian territory in 18th-century North America, including those by other fur traders, see Sayre.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent bibliography of editions, see Lamb.

enterprise” that animates it, the same spirit that he sees as animating more generally his country, Britain.

In the preface to the overall work, Mackenzie expresses confidence that his treatise on the fur trade will “prove interesting to a nation, whose general policy is blended with, and whose prosperity is supported by, the pursuits of commerce” (Mackenzie, 5). In the discussion of the Canadian context in which the fur trade takes place, groups of people are measured in terms of their usefulness to the trade, that is, to those who direct and profit from it. The French “*coureurs des bois*”, for example, in spite of their dissolute ways,<sup>7</sup> are deemed “extremely useful to the merchants” (10), and the missionaries, in spite of their failure, in Mackenzie’s view, to proselytize the Indians, “were of great service to the commanders who engaged in those distant expeditions, and spread the fur trade...” (13).

The Indians, of course, are of the greatest service of all to fur traders, and the text reveals their entrapment and servitude within the system. In discussing the competition between the Hudson’s Bay Company, which required of the Indians that they bring the furs to their trading posts, and the North-West Company which sent canoes out to the Indian villages, Mackenzie notes that the Indians had to pay correspondingly higher prices to the latter, but sometimes were willing to do so because they often had to spend all of what they earned from the former to buy the very ammunition which they used up hunting while traveling to the Hudson’s Bay Company posts (20, 97). But whether they chose one or the other company, the Indians were locked in, since they were compelled to “exchange their furs for such European articles as were now become necessary to them” (88). The text acknowledges that this situation has in some cases led to conflict and violence between natives and traders, just as the bitter competition has done between traders (17, 21). Such is the realistic picture of the fur trade painted by the author, with no expression of moral judgment offered. His only source of concern is that the trade as he describes it is enormously costly, because of the lengthiness and difficulty of transportation of the goods. Profit margins are often small, and returns are at risk. Hence the need to find a new conduit to the west.

With this as the backdrop against which the voyages of exploration were set, we may now turn to the narratives of those trips. In these accounts, what seems most

---

<sup>7</sup> The *coureurs des bois* had a reputation for unrestrained indulgence in eating, drinking, and sexual relations with Indian women.

revealing and significant is the way in which Mackenzie portrays himself on the expeditions – the persona he constructs – and the relations that this persona entertains with others and with the environment on his travels, as manifested through the narration.

The authorial persona is first of all defined as the absolute prime mover of the expeditions, their sole instigator and only leader. In undertaking them, Mackenzie has put aside the position of trader to assume the glorified role of explorer and discoverer. As such he lays claim to the oft-invoked imperial powers of the European explorer, telling the reader in the preface that in his narrative he will be “unfolding countries hitherto unexplored, and which I presume, may now be considered as a part of the British dominions” (7-8). The explorer’s goal is to cover terrain and reach a destination, and this is significantly different from the author’s habitual activities. Yet he applies many facets of the trader’s mindset to the new task, and incidentally, when circumstances permit, in fact does engage in occasional trading on the side; or if they do not, he sometimes tries to set up future trading possibilities (207, 234). So the trading never entirely ceases, but the main thrust of Mackenzie’s energies is directed towards the new objective of reaching a place – the Pacific ocean –, an objective which he alone has determined to achieve and which he pursues single-mindedly, even obsessively, throughout the trips. Again and again the text returns to the extreme urgency of this goal for the author personally; in one passage he calls it “his darling project” (366), and he admits that when seemingly insurmountable obstacles loom, the prospect of having to turn back produces “sensations little short of agony” (364).

This intensity of purpose leads Mackenzie to focus on time. Time is of the essence, and the author often signals either satisfaction at not having wasted time or anxiety at having lost valuable time. Consulting his watch regularly is of great importance, and he notes with wonder once: “I was so busily employed in collecting intelligence from our conductors that I last night forgot to wind up my timepiece, and it was the only instance of such an act of negligence since I left Fort Chepewyan” (389-90). The preoccupation with time and its efficient management is of course also characteristic of commercial dealings.

In the above quotation about his watch, the author excuses his “negligence” by the fact that he was “busily employed” in attempting to gain information. This points to another aspect of Mackenzie’s self-portrayal in the text. He is described as almost

continually applying himself, through thought and action, to achieving his purpose. He not only steadily applies energy, but directs that energy rationally. He disciplines and controls himself so as to attain maximum efficiency, reining in any impulsive desires or emotions that might get in the way. Thus, in the narrative these latter appear almost exclusively in others, while he, as he has already told the reader in the preface, “had [...] the passions and fears of others to control and subdue” (6). When he occasionally lapses, temporarily losing his calm or making an imprudent decision, the author takes himself severely to task, recognizing that he may have jeopardized his mission.

This intensity of purpose leads Mackenzie to systematically instrumentalize others who are associated in any way with the trip, both Europeans and Indians, and among the latter both those who are members of the party and those who are encountered along the way. Moreover, Mackenzie’s overweening sense of self leads him often to belittle and subordinate the selves of others. We might first consider the Europeans. Two categories of those were part of the expeditions: other traders, and the crews of French-Canadian canoemen, the so-called “*voyageurs*”.<sup>8</sup>

The case of the other traders is instructive. On both of the two trips, another fur trader was present: on the first, a Frenchman named Le Roux, who only went the first leg of the journey, and on the second, another Scotsman named Mackay, who made the entire trip. Le Roux, as we know from other sources (Gough, 79-80), was in fact an important trader in the North-West Company, one who had already played a role in expanding to the north of Lake Athabasca and who was going to engage in his own mission once he left Mackenzie’s party. Yet Mackenzie only very briefly mentions him, and calls him a “clerk” (136). As for Mackay on the second trip, he is sparingly mentioned also, and never as someone who plays a significant part, or who is on a par with the author. Ironically, it is the Indians on the Bella Coola River who seem to recognize the social parity between the two traders, since the narrative reports that both were treated to a whole salmon on one occasion, while the rest of the crew was given smaller portions (411).

The crew of French Canadians is of course considered as subordinate and inferior by Mackenzie, who, while paying homage to their physical prowess, sees it mainly as a tool for the accomplishment of his aims. He consistently drives his crew very hard,

---

<sup>8</sup> On the historical figure of the “*voyageur*”, see Podruchny.

calculating the limit beyond which he cannot go without breaking them. When they complain of the pace, or consider that it would be madness to go on, Mackenzie cannily responds by in some cases listening, soothing, giving temporary respite, while in others rather ordering, rebuking, ridiculing, etc., depending on the technique that most promises to get them to perform as he wants them to. Mackenzie seems to have been charismatic enough to command respect for much of the trip, but in some passages the distrust and resentment of the crew is alluded to in different ways. In one instance, when Mackenzie directs them to set out over a threatening set of rapids (in passing over earlier ones they had narrowly escaped disaster), saying that he will walk beside the river so as to lighten the canoe, they refuse unless he comes on board as well (322).

Another incident well illustrates Mackenzie's calculating, tactical approach to dealing with his men. Mackenzie has heard rumblings of discontent, and has understood that the men do not wish to continue. So, as they grudgingly prepare a canoe for departure, he singles out one of the crew, who

though a good man, was remarkable for the tardiness of his operations ... I therefore took this opportunity of unfolding my sentiments to him, and thereby discovering to all around me the real state of my mind, and the resolutions I had formed for my future conduct. After reproaching him for his general inactivity, but particularly on the present occasion ... I mentioned the apparent want of economy, both of himself and his companions, in the article of provisions. I informed him that I was not altogether a stranger to their late conversations ... I concluded, however, by assuring them, that whatever plan they had meditated to pursue, it was my fixed and unalterable determination to proceed ... The man was very much mortified at my addressing this remonstrance particularly to him; and replied that he did not deserve my displeasure more than the rest of them. My object being answered, the conversation dropped, and the work went on. (373-74)

In this passage Mackenzie displays the managerial acumen with which he has defused the threat of insubordination, by making a breach in the men through the focus on one alone.

So we are given glimpses of the master-servant dynamic as it works itself out over these extraordinarily arduous voyages, dictated by Mackenzie alone. A master-servant relation it certainly was, or perhaps better, given the business-like nature of it, an employer-employee relation. And so it remained to the end, in spite of the extreme experiences shared – experiences of a kind that in many cases created strong ties. Mackenzie never reports fraternizing amicably with his *voyageurs* during

the journeys, and he maintained no further contact with any of them after the journeys were over.

In his dealings with the Indians, as the text delineates them, the author is equally concerned to exercise control and assert superiority, to make the natives submit to the imperatives of his expedition and, on occasion, also to assure that they will perform their functions properly in projected future fur trading activities. As with his crew, though, he encounters different forms of resistance from the natives to these impositions.

The Indians accompanying him on the trips as hunter/interpreters are continually pushed and ordered, and they find the regime harder to stomach than the *voyageurs* (160, 223, 304). That they complain of fatigue, and often wish to turn back or leave the expedition, are clear indicators of their total lack of interest in Mackenzie's objectives, since when their own were at stake it is well known that Indians were indefatigable. Even the chief – familiarly called the “English Chief” – who is engaged for the first trip, and who has had much experience collaborating with whites before, complains bitterly and threatens to leave on several occasions. It is noteworthy that Mackenzie makes no attempt to befriend this man, who as a leader and as one who has been willing to work with whites might have invited a closer, more amicable relationship. Instead, Mackenzie treats him as an inferior.

When, for instance, the Indians led by the English Chief do not immediately respond to Mackenzie's command to pursue a group of natives who have fled, Mackenzie reprimands the chief as he might a subordinate director:

I rebuked the English Chief with some severity for his conduct, and immediately ordered him, his young men, and my own people, to go in search of the fugitives ... The English Chief was very much displeased at my reproaches, and expressed himself to me in person to that effect. This was the very opportunity which I wanted, to make him acquainted with my dissatisfaction for some time past. I stated to him that I had come a great way, and at a very considerable expense, without having completed the object of my wishes, and that I suspected he had concealed from me a principal part of what the natives had told him respecting the country, lest he should be obliged to follow me ... These suggestions irritated him in a very high degree, and he accused me of speaking ill words to him ... His harangue was succeeded by a loud and bitter lamentation; and his relations assisted the vociferations of his grief ... [A]s I could not well do without them, I was at length obliged to sooth it, and induce the chief to change his resolution, which he did, but with great apparent reluctance ... (225-26).

Here, as with his French crew, Mackenzie adjusts his approach to obtain the desired performance from the Indians he considers to have contracted for the trip, in this case through the intermediary of their chief.

Other Indians are temporarily brought into the traveling parties, to serve as guides of the area for as far forward on the itinerary as their knowledge of the terrain warrants. These also are almost always highly reluctant, sometimes getting cold feet even before the expedition gets underway, and in many cases they are simply compelled by Mackenzie to come on board, and to stay when they want to leave. They are essentially prisoners, and Mackenzie (in his own person, because the others are far less enthusiastic about keeping guides against their will) is obliged to continually watch them. In one of the few passages with a hint of humor, Mackenzie recounts how the only method he could find to keep one such guide from escaping during the night, was to share his bed: "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" (386-87).

As for the native tribes that are encountered along Mackenzie's route, they are approached almost exclusively with an eye to what they can do for the expeditions (mainly information, directions, and food). In some cases, though, Mackenzie attempts to create a new trade link, or to put an old one back on track. In the latter instances, he sometimes "lectures" the Indians, like a father to children; in one place not far out on the second trip, Mackenzie rebukes their recent misconduct in the trade, and tells them that they will be treated well only if they "deserve it". Otherwise, he would be "equally severe if they failed in those returns which I had a right to expect from them" (246-47).

In trying to obtain the aid of tribes further out on the journeys, Mackenzie is usually obliged to adopt a more conciliatory tone since his small group is isolated in uncontrolled Indian territory. He sometimes holds out the promise of the benefits of future trade (in particular the lure of guns and ammunition), but he also uses the usual tool of gifts – many kinds of European products, importantly including rum. This item is often made use of in spite of the fact that the author has shown in the fur trade treatise that he is aware of the devastating effects of alcohol on the native populations.

Mackenzie is at pains, though, to use several means of demonstrating his power as a white European: through the firing of guns to impress natives that have had little or no contact with whites, but also by exhibiting the power of European knowledge. At one point a native wonders why Mackenzie is seeking information, since whites are said to know everything. Mackenzie answers that indeed they do know everything in general; the only help Indians can give them is with local details. “Thus”, he concludes, “I fortunately preserved the impression in their minds, of the superiority of white people over themselves” (360).

Another form of knowledge-as-power that Mackenzie wields is medical, but here the results are rather comical. Being far from well versed in European medical science, when several times he wishes to impress the natives by making a cure, he always uses “Turlington’s balsam”, a well-known eighteenth-century ‘patent’ medicine claiming miraculous curative powers. Unsurprisingly, a patient who did not seem very sick in the first place gets better, and one that was gravely ill, dies.

One further aspect of Mackenzie’s relations with Indians should be mentioned. He encounters in the Indians a mentality entirely foreign to his in regard to property and exchange. Their communal and gift-giving culture clashes with his own thoroughly mercantile one. Although Mackenzie also gives gifts, he does so to achieve specific purposes and so they can be seen as a kind of payment for which he expects a return. Indeed, often in the text the concept of “honest payment” recurs. Mackenzie is happily surprised in the few cases when a native seems to be “paying” him for something, and he in turn insists on paying for objects taken from the Indians, even when no payment is asked for. In this sense, throughout the voyages “cultural misunderstanding” is rife.

The misfit between Mackenzie’s set of values and that of the Indians is also illustrated in the “ethnological” remarks made in the narrative part as well as in the long section included within the fur trade essay. The author of *Voyages* almost exclusively concentrates on the material culture of the various indigeneous populations he came into contact with, showing virtually no interest in their spiritual life, which of course is essential to understanding them. Although clearly curious about some of their primitive techniques, Mackenzie ultimately judges them inferior. As one perceptive study of Mackenzie’s relations with Indians points out, since spiritual wealth is ignored his perspective suggests that the Indians lead

impoverished lives, and provides ideological justification for European commercial penetration (Duchemin, 65).

A final vantage point from which to observe Mackenzie's mentality involves his relation to the natural environment through which he passed on the trips, as well as that which had been his habitat as a fur trader since leaving his clerical position in Montreal and coming west. Both were areas sparsely peopled (in European terms) by Indian tribes whose imprint on the land was light, mainly forests that were the realm of a multitude of wild animals – an environment little modified by human beings, defined as “wilderness” by Europeans. Towards this natural setting the author feels on the whole either indifferently or negatively. In describing his explorations, natural phenomena are for the most part portrayed as obstacles (precipitous mountains, dangerous rapids, etc.) or sources of discomfort (insects, in particular). Animals mentioned that are not pests, are generally seen simply as sources of food.

In one exceptional passage where the author pauses at more length in the narrative to comment on animal life, it is unsurprisingly the beaver that is singled out (the expedition has just passed through an area of higher concentration of these animals). Here the treatment is positive, but precisely because the beaver seems to exemplify a quality especially valuable to the trader: industry. The author exclaims with admiration that “the time which these wonderful creatures allot for their labours, whether in erecting their curious habitations, or providing food, is the whole of the interval between the setting and the rising sun” (296). The beaver has value for Mackenzie, then, not as a living organism that is part of the natural world but only in two strictly commercial connections: as raw material for the fur trade on the one hand, and on the other as the embodiment of a key virtue for traders, indeed as the epitome of the capitalist work ethic. Here, in effect, Mackenzie “naturalizes” his own economic activity.

As for the description of landscape, it is usually presented through a technical, or scientific framing: indications of numbers of miles between one point and another, readings of points on the compass and locations of longitude and latitude. Very rarely, the author seems to have been impressed by the beauty of a scene, but the descriptions that follow are rather wooden and conventional; in one instance the attempt is cut short with the avowal that “no expressions of mind (sic) are qualified to describe” those scenes (267). In fact, Mackenzie seems to have been largely

indifferent to scenes of wild nature, and the few exceptional passages that show admiration for a natural landscape were most probably embellishments made by his ghostwriter.

One description of this type, which occurs in the fur trade essay, has been interpreted by Ian Maclaren as incorporating Mackenzie's commercial vision as a kind of subtext. This passage, clearly rewritten by the ghostwriter, portrays, in the style of the "Picturesque" genre, the view of the watershed between the Hudson Bay and Arctic drainage basins, at the end of a long portage. Maclaren persuasively argues that the rewriting of the scene translates Mackenzie's thoroughly mercantile perception of it into artistic prose, thereby subliminally "selling" Mackenzie's commercial projects for future development (Maclaren, 141-50).

After his return to Lake Athabasca from his second expedition, Mackenzie left as soon as he was able for Montreal. There, in the urban environment that he clearly preferred to the wilds of nature, he devoted himself once again to the immediate pursuit of business on the one hand, and on the other to promoting the grand project – the development of a western trade route to the Orient – that in his eyes held an even greater business potential for the future. The parenthesis, opened by Mackenzie's period of exploratory travel in search of the Northwest Passage, was closed.

Such, then, is the portrait of Mackenzie that emerges from an examination of his travel account. In the above discussion I have endeavored to show how the text is permeated throughout by the all-absorbing commercial concerns of its author. In this respect my analysis breaks with a dominant tendency in writing about Mackenzie. In Canada especially, and to some extent in Britain and the United States, Mackenzie is a legendary figure. Like many other explorers, he has acquired a quasi-mythical status, and much of the literature about him treats him in the heroic mode. Studies of Mackenzie often emphasize his courage and leadership, and the thrilling quality of his "adventures". Derek Hayes articulates explicitly what others also implicitly assume, when he claims that "Mackenzie was, first and foremost, an explorer in the true sense of the word. Although his bread and butter was the fur trade, he also had a large dose of that idea of wanting to know the unknown, of wanting to see for himself what was over the next mountain" (Hayes, 12). It is this image of Mackenzie

as a selfless, devoted explorer bent on a quest for its own sake, that I have attempted to challenge.

The characteristics I have pointed to in Mackenzie's text – particularly involving his relations with Indians – are to be found in the writings of other fur trader-explorers in North America as well. As a general rule, since they were engaged in a commercial activity that instrumentalized Indians as providers of the raw material of the trade, fur traders were among the least susceptible to fulfilling the potential of ethnographic travel accounts: "recognition" of the Other. But there were significant differences among the writings of such travelers. A case in point is French-Canadian fur trader Jean-Baptiste Trudeau's account of travel on the Missouri River at about the same time as Mackenzie's excursions (1794-96), since it shows a much greater complexity of attitude toward, and interaction with Indians. Sent by Spanish authorities to counter English trading incursions in the area, Trudeau's mission was commercial and political in nature; but he partially transcends this context in his account, coming to understand the destructive dynamic of European penetration and to admire the wilder tribes he met on the upper Missouri. While the commercial mentality is thus tempered in Trudeau's work, Mackenzie's seems on the other hand to concentrate it in a particularly pure form. This, though, is perhaps precisely what makes Mackenzie's *Voyages* an interesting text.

## **Bibliography**

DANIELLS, Roy. *Alexander Mackenzie and the North West*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.

DUCHEMIN, Parker. "A Parcel of Whelps': Alexander Mackenzie among the Indians". "Native Writers and Canadian Writing", special issue of *Canadian Literature*. Ed. W. H. New. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990.

GOUGH, Barry. *First Across the Continent: Sir Alexander Mackenzie*. Norman and London: U of Oklahoma P, 1997.

HAYES, Derek. *First Crossing: Alexander Mackenzie, His Expedition Across North America, and the Opening of the Continent*. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 2001.

LAMB, W. Kaye, ed. *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*. Published for the Hakluyt Society. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970.

- MACKENZIE, Alexander. *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*. Text of the first edition: London: Cadell & Davies, etc., 1801. Toronto: The Radisson Society of Canada, 1927.
- MACLAREN, I. S. "Alexander Mackenzie and the Landscapes of Commerce", *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 07:2 (1982).
- NEWMAN, Peter C. *Caesars of the Wilderness: Company of Adventurers*. NY: Viking, 1987. Vol. II.
- PODRUCHNY, Carolyn. *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade*. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2006.
- SAYRE, Robert. *La Modernité et son 'Autre' : Récits de la rencontre avec l'Indien en Amérique du Nord au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Bécherel: Editions Les Perséides, 2008.
- SMITH, James K. *Alexander Mackenzie, Explorer: The Hero Who Failed*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1973.
- SZASZ, Ferenc Morton. *Scots in the North American West, 1790-1917*. Norman and London: U of Oklahoma P, 2000.
- TRUDEAU, Jean-Baptiste. *Voyage sur le Haut-Missouri, 1794-1796*, eds. Fernand Grenier and Nilma Saint-Gelais, Québec : Éditions du Septentrion, 2006.
- WHITE, Richard. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- WOOLLACOTT, Arthur P. *Mackenzie and His Voyageurs, by Canoe to the Arctic and the Pacific, 1789-93*. London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1927.