Westward to the Mountains: Preliminary Hudson's Bay Company Exploration of the Northern Rocky Mountains, 1789-1824

Theodore J. Karamanski
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master’s Theses by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1977 Theodore J. Karamanski
WESTWARD TO THE MOUNTAINS:
PRELIMINARY HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY EXPLORATION
OF THE NORTHERN ROCKY MOUNTAINS,
1789 - 1824

by
Theodore J. Karamanski

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
January
1977
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to extend a word of thanks to Dr. Robert McCluggage, Chairman of the History Department, for his guidance and instruction over the past two years. I am further grateful to Dr. James Penick, Professor of History, for the assistance and insight that he has afforded me in my association, both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student. To Ms. Shirlee Smith, Hudson's Bay Company archivist, I am indebted for the friendly and efficient manner in which she and her staff speeded my research in Winnipeg.

A special word of gratitude must be reserved for Mr. Glenn A. Petersen. In addition to providing congenial companionship during the more arduous phase of researching the topic, he willingly gave valuable assistance in preparing the manuscript.
INTRODUCTION

It often seems as if the discovery and exploration of North America has had as many historians as it had actual explorers. The drama of an unknown continent gradually revealing its mysteries has been an alluring theme to even our earliest men of letters. Washington Irving, with his Life and Adventures of Christopher Columbus and Astoria, tapped a vein of historical gold that has been mined by such memorable historians as Francis Parkman, Justin Winsor, and H.H. Bancroft. Contemporary scholarship, notably Samuel Eliot Morison and Bernard DeVoto, has continued to work this claim, until it would seem that the mother lode has been exhausted.

Hence most historians would be surprised to discover that the exploration of over eight hundred miles of the Rocky Mountains, and the discovery of the headwaters of the fourth largest river on the continent, not to mention the early exploitation of both, have heretofore escaped the historian's inquiry. It is the purpose of this study to begin to fill this gap; to discuss the background and impulse for the exploration of this region. We shall, however, analyze only the preliminary explorations conducted by the Hudson's Bay Company, bowing to the huge scope of the topic. The important explorations of the 1830's and 1840's will be left to a subsequent study.

The neglect that this topic has suffered is all the more glaring when one considers the growing importance of the oil and mineral resources with which this area is laden. The scene of this study, the western Northwest Territories, the Yukon, and Alaska, is on the verge of a new era. The vast agricultural and industrial belts of the United States and Canada stand poised to begin the last act of the drama of the North American frontier. The undeveloped north is a latter day sister to the Ohio Country,
Oregon, California, and the Indian Territory; we will not see its like again.

I hope in this study to trace the roots of these contemporary events. It is after all from the explorer's narrative that we can see most clearly man's initial impression of the land. These impressions, whether they be misunderstandings and myths or farsighted perceptions, become the basis for man's attitude toward the newly discovered area. So let us then seek out these first men who exploited the last frontier.
Summer 1821, York Factory. Here at the Hudson's Bay Company's great tidewater depot gathered two groups of wary men. One of these groups, although sullen-eyed, "stalked about the buildings of the old dilapidated fort with" a "haughty air and independent step." They were the Nor'Westers, the now vanquished partners of the defunct North West Company. In over three decades of competition they had challenged and nearly conquered the Hudson's Bay Company.

In the end it was geography which brought them down. Their three thousand miles of canoe trails leading back to the Montreal headquarters proved too fragile a bond to hold their continent-wide trade empire together. The English, with a deep water access at York Factory on Hudson's Bay, had a much more economical avenue to the interior. The fundamental advantage, plus vicious price wars, which the English, financially strong, could endure, combined by 1820 to put the North West Company in perilous straits. With destruction facing them only one or two years distant, the partners of the North West Company agreed that "union", or absorption by the Hudson's Bay Company, was the only course.

By the end of February 1821 this was achieved and that summer the first Nor'Westers began arriving at York Factory. They were bitter men, independent owners of their own business, now bought out by a larger concern. They were haughty men, and although the accountant's ledgers may have said that they were beaten, up to the very end they had bullied, outmuscled, and outwitted the Hudson's Bay men; on the frontier they were still masters. But most of all they were wary men, unsure of what their place would be in this new concern. Would they be scorned as "junior partners", shunned from the promotion rolls,
merely tolerated names on a ledger until they retired or died in some far distant corner of the continent. Were they to be partners in fact as well as in name, would they still be able to exercise their considerable skills of organization and leadership. And what of the Hudson's Bay Company "bourgeois", how was one to now work with a man who you had shot at more then once, and who in return had played havoc with your rabbit snares and fish nets, trying to starve you out of your post. With the disappointments of the past year, and the uncertainties of the coming years, the Nor'Westers had reason to be wary.

Finally the dinner bell rang for the gala affair that the Hudson's Bay Company had arranged in order that the two groups of officers could get acquainted. The fur traders filed into the mess hall, still remaining in two completely separate groups. John Todd vividly described the scene:

...evidently uncertain how they would seat themselves at the table, I eyed them with close attention from a remote corner of the room, and to my mind the scene formed no bad representation of that incongruous animal seen by the King of Babylon in one of his dreams, one part iron, another of clay; though joined together (they) would not amalgamate, for the Nor'Westers in one compact body kept together and evidently had no inclination at first to mix with their old rivals in trade.

But the tense situation was rescued by "that crafty fox", George Simpson, a thirtyfour year old Scotsman with only one year of practical experience in the fur trade. That year, however, was spent commanding the Hudson's Bay Company's operations in the Athabasca Country. This was the very cockpit of the competition and it involved a bitter rivalry
with the very best of the Nor'Westers. In this year of opposition he earned the respect of many of the Nor'Westers, as he was a man cut from the same cloth. Under the terms of the "Union", Simpson was given command of the Northern Department, which included much of the Canadian West (not to mention a good chunk of what was to become part of the United States). Now, at the very beginning of this new era in the Company's history, Simpson was faced with the problem which could nip the first shoots of progress in the bud. How did one take open enemies and mold them into a unified concern, how do you join iron with clay?

George Simpson was up to the occasion and he warmly stepped up to the Nor'Westers "with his usual tact and dexterity on such occasions, succeeded...somewhat in dispelling that reserve in which both parties had hitherto continued to envelope themselves." With Simpson's "stratagems in bows and smiles" and a good natured, open attitude toward all, the natural confidence of self-made men emerged and the good natured commradre of the forest replaced the animosities of the past. "Their previously stiffened features began to relax a little; they gradually but slowly mingled together, and a few of the better disposed, throwing themselves unreservedly in the midst of the opposite party, mutually shook each other by the hand."³

Of course there were a few cautions before all was good cheer. Someone had foolishly (or maliciously) seated the Nor'Wester Allan MacDonell opposite his old foe from the Swan River District, Chief Factor Alexander Kennedy of the Hudson's Bay Company. Only a few months before they had been dueling with swords and now stood literally growling at each other. Fortunatly their good natured, and no doubt slightly amused
comrades, separated the two without a renewal of violence, and with the length of the table between them their rage visibly subsided.

Then out came the wine, puddings, and tarts which marked most fur trade feasts; with the main course, moose, goose, partridges, and whatever else the fort hunters had been able to run down. As the wine and the meal mellowed their memories, conversations turned to trapping and Indians, to the far off mountains and seldom visited country, the Athabasca, New Caledonia, Peace River, the "Baren Lands", shop talk of nineteenth century fur barons. With the words from both sides of the table tumbling forth in a thick Highland brogue and the mutual interests, ambitions, and experiences exchanged, the scrimmages and defeats of the previous years looked less like Culeodon and more like a family squabble. In the good cheer of that evening, in the exciting and prosperous days ahead, the unyielding iron and the supple clay fused as one.4

* * * * * * * * * *

The Union of March 26, 1821 was a successful joining of the Hudson's Bay Company's capital and superior geographic location with the methods and spirit of the North West Company. Although news of the agreement was bitterly received by many on both sides, it was in fact a very necessary action. The competition had not only wrecked the North West Company but it had the severest effect upon the land.

The final stages of the long rivalry brought a proliferation of trading posts in nearly every area of the North West. Each of these posts relied upon the food resources of the countryside to feed their staffs, this meant fish and game. If provisions for its staff had to be shipped into the interior the post would be too costly to maintain, to keep overhead low
the fur traders had to live off the land. Hence, many areas became dangerously overhunted. This excerpt from the Lac la Pluie District is typical:

The large game animals are the Rein Deer and Moose, but in such small numbers that the natives cannot kill enough to supply themselves with leather for their moccasins and snow shoes.  

So dire was the situation in this district that many bands were forced to reduce their trapping activities so as to devote more time to the plaintive quest for game.

Fur returns were also on the ebb. Intensive competition resulted in the diminishment of the forest's fur bearing populations. The formerly rich preserves of the Churchill River, the Red River, and Rainy Lake (Lac la Pluie) were in critical condition. The "cry of no beaver" was even echoed in the vaunted Athabasca District, for years the very heart of the industry. It seemed that the "boom" period of the fur frontier was at an end.

As if this were not enough, George Simpson, Northern Department Governor, was faced with a dangerous over-staffing problem. The Union had obsoleted many trading posts whose sole function was to oppose a rival trader. With all the North West under one flag, the men who staffed these posts became surplus. Furthermore, in the final stages of competition each side had strained to keep its staff at full strength and in doing so had often accepted men less than competent, they too were now surplus.

In short, Simpson would have to reassess the utility of every post and sift out the incompetent and untrustworthy to make way for the energetic and responsible.

These were difficult problems and to them Simpson turned
his considerable administrative skills. With characteristic energy, the Governor launched a reorganization of the over-trapped districts, moving the locations of posts out of barren territory, while at the same time reducing the number of establishments in each district. The Indians were therefore encouraged to follow the Hudson's Bay men to these new posts, leaving the older areas free to recover their diminished fur and game populations. This was the beginning of the Hudson's Bay Company's attempts to put the fur trade on a sustained yield basis.

Less happily received were Governor Simpson's plans to reduce the excessive employment rolls. The Company's staff was cut by over fifty percent and wages of those remaining in service were slashed from their competition era high. "In short, the North-West is now beginning to be ruled with an iron rod." On the bright side of the ledger, the Company did arrange transport for those unfortunates and their families to Red River, where homesteads were made available to them.

Also struck by Governor Simpson's economy measures were the Indians. Union meant the end of price wars. Union meant the end of liquor regales. Union meant the beginning of monopoly control. Prices were gradually brought into line and the native trapper had little voice or choice in the matter. The Company tried to wean the Indians on more conservative trapping habits. Young, underaged, beaver were no longer accepted, nor were summer beaver with their next to worthless hides. In fact, in some districts such as Nelson River there was a complete moratorium on beaver and only fox, marten, and other lesser furs were accepted.

The final, and for our concern, the most important of Governor Simpson's new policies, was his decision to expand
the Company's frontiers. As an inducement to consummate the marriage of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, the British Government presented, as a dowry, the power of full monopolistic control over the whole of British North America west of Rupert's Land. This legitimated the new Company's operations in the Columbia, New Caledonia, Athabasca, and Mackenzie River regions. It was the latter two of these districts, New Caledonia and Mackenzie River, that the possibilities of expanding the trade were prime. Hence, these districts became the scene of determined exploration. As Governor Simpson explained,

"I have turned my attention very particularly to the affairs of Mckenzies River generally, as there is a greater Field for the extension of trade there than in any other part of the Country."

Exploration was necessary to expand the trade. Exploration was necessary to sustain the "tired" older districts as they recovered their fur, and exploration was necessary to show the British Government,

that no exertion is wanting on our part to secure to the mother country by discovery as much of this vast continent and trade there of as possible."

There you have it, Governor Simpson's ambitious program for putting the Hudson's Bay Company's affairs on solid footing; conservation, economy, and exploration. The focus of this study is of course exploration, but because this was merely one leg of a platform the other two will also be kept in view.

* * * * * * * * * *
As George Simpson planned his reorganization of the Company, moving the locations of older posts, checking off establishments to be retired, it should be remembered that the map he used to plot these developments was far different from the map we know today. Take for example those intriguing blank sections in the upper left hand corner of the map. The modern student looking at his chart will see the upper Fraser River Valley, the orderly set out ranges of the Rocky Mountains, the rough topography of the Rocky Mountain Trench, and the towering ranges of the Coastal Mountains. He will see scores of highways, towns, and hamlets. Turning his attention gradually northward, the countryside, although very much a wilderness, is accurately portrayed; the Stikine and Liard Rivers, nice blue lines flowing west and northeast respectively; the Alaska Highway, in bold red print dissects the terrain. The Mackenzie River, Francis Lake, the Yukon River, Whitehorse with its 12,000 residents, Dawson with its Klondike legends, and the vast expanse of Alaska, jutting out boldly into the North Pacific, are all easily distinguished on nearly any map of North America. But to George Simpson these lonely spaces were filled with little but their names, New Caledonia and Mackenzie River.

In the latter district, the map has delineated two large lakes, Great Slave and Great Bear. Flowing from Great Slave's western end is Mackenzie's or Grand River. The river travels west until it is joined by another large river, about two hundred and fifty miles from the lake. The second river, a stream of nearly equal size, is the "Riviere du Liard", though some maps had it as "The River of the Mountains." At the junction of these two rivers Simpson's attention was drawn to the obscured legend which read "Fort of the Forks." This was
a North West Company trading post, in fact this entire district had been penetrated solely by Nor'Westers, the Bay Company having never entered its borders. There were three other Mackenzie River posts, Fort Norman, Fort Good Hope, and Fort de Liard. Besides the names of a few of the Indian tribes, the Slave, Dog Rib, Rabbit, and Squint Eye, plus some garbled legends, this was all that Simpson knew of the Mackenzie region. But the establishment of those four small posts and the accruement of the small amount of knowledge the civilized world had of this far frontier is an exciting story itself, one that needs, if however briefly, to be told.

When considering the early exploration of the Mackenzie one must mention two men who never knew the great river's valley, Peter Pond and Captain James Cook. Cook, on his 1778 voyage into Arctic waters, had sailed the length of America's northwest coast. Unfortunately for the dreamers and schemers of the day, the good Captain failed to discover the Strait of Annian, the western opening of the fabled Northwest Passage. Furthermore, as Cook continued up the coast he found that the continent of North America extended much further west than most geographers thought, and most cartographers portrayed. But if Cook placed another nail on the coffin of that recurring spectre, the Northwest Passage, and quashed the hopes of the many individuals expecting a sea route through the Americas, Cook did manage to kindle the hopes of those daring souls who sought a fresh water passage to the Pacific.

While cruising the coast of Alaska Cook entered a large inlet, which today bears his name. At first it appeared to be a deep water strait; visions of Annian, de Fuca, and Fonte danced in the heads of many of the crew, but as they proceeded east a high range of mist shrouded mountains lined the waterway.
But the drift piles of wood, the silty fresh water, and an open channel to the north of the inlet, bid a fair indication that the expedition had discovered the mouth of a large river. William Bligh, of mutiny fame, ascended the supposed river a short way finding it deep and navigable. These salt water voyageurs, however, failed to grasp the importance of their discovery. A large river flowing from east to west and emptying into the Pacific might prove a new avenue of commerce, a western St. Lawrence. But to Cook, Bligh, and their mates, it was fresh water be damned. They noted the location of the river and cast off. Had they grasped the importance of their discovery and explored this river further they would have prevented much idle speculation and fruitless searching. Just up stream, a matter of yaris from where Bligh turned back, "Cook's River" became shallow and unnavigable, for it was no great stream, merely the junction of mountain freshets. That, however, was not to be known for sometime, and the apocryphal concept of "Cook's River" was allowed to mold historical events.

Cook's findings were not long in reaching the various dreamers, adventurers, and fur traders who were probing westward, opening up the area to commerce and trying to sift out the geographic realities of the continent. The failure of a salt water Northwest Passage was no news to most of them, but the discovery of a great western river, that was something to mark.

It was of special interest to one Peter Pond, a Connecticut Yankee who in the same year as Cook's voyage had established the first fur trade post in the Athabasca region. Pond's travels had taken him even further north—to Great Slave Lake. Here Pond heard Indian reports of a large
river flowing from the west end of Great Slave Lake. When Pond returned to Montreal in 1784 he produced a map of his explorations; this chart, although only mildly in error concerning Great Slave Lake's latitude, was grossly mistaken in portraying only a small unexplored territory between the lake and the Pacific. However, Pond correctly plotted the course of the river draining Great Slave Lake, it turned north and emptied into the Arctic.

A year later Pond was back in the northwest, continuing his geographic enquiries and pioneer commerce. As he did so, his perception began to change. Having undoubtably read the journals of Cook's expedition, he began to work its discoveries into his picture of northwestern America. Furthermore, he seems to have traveled an indeterminate distance down the mysterious river that flowed from Great Slave Lake. He found that it did not initially send its waters north but that they continued west. Could this be the beginning of the river Cook had discovered on the Pacific? The mouth of Cook's river was roughly seventy miles north of the 60th parallel, Pond's source, almost exactly the same. Considering the misconceptions of the actual longitude, and trusting that the river held its westward course, then this river had to be what was sought, the fresh water Northwest Passage.13

Peter Pond never had a chance to follow up his theories. He was exiled from the northwest forever in 1788 after John Ross, a rival trader, was accidentally killed in a scuffle with Pond's men. This was the second time that Pond's name had been linked with a competitor's death and the consensus feeling among the fur traders was that two such "accidents" were enough. But before he left Pond had laid the groundwork for the further expansion of the trade in this region. In
addition to the Athabasca establishments, Pond had supervised the founding of Fort Resolution at the mouth of the Slave River on Great Slave Lake, and Fort Providence on the north shore of the same lake. But more importantly, Pond had laid out, in his letters, journals, and maps, a perceptive interpretation of Indian reports and maritime discoveries.

The young man who fell heir to Pond's work was a 25 year old Scot, Alexander Mackenzie. With the same rare mixture of inquisitiveness and energy of Peter Pond, Mackenzie set out in the spring of 1789 to track down the truth about this promising fresh water passage.

On Monday, the 29th of June, 26 days after leaving Fort Chipewyan, Mackenzie entered the river he had so long heard of. Its course was indeed westward, and as each day passed, the dour Scot's spirits no doubt rose in expectation. By the first of July Mackenzie passed "the river of the Mountain" (the Liard River) and to the south he could see the rising ground of distant mountains. But as long as those mountains remained to the south and the river continued west, the passage would be clear. The next day, however, "we perceived a very high mountain ahead, which appeared on our nearer approach, to be rather a cluster of mountains, stretching as far as our view could reach." Still the river drove westward, though the Scotsman could not hide his apprehension.

The next day the river turned north. For a week the great stream held substantially to this course. As each day passed Mackenzie's gloom grew until on the 10th of July he admitted defeat. "From hence it was evident that these waters emptied themselves into the Hyperborean Sea." The great fresh water passage was not to be. The dream of a great Northwest Trade Empire, based on the far Pacific, was quashed,
at least temporarily. But Alexander Mackenzie's determination and indomitable curiosity remained unshaken, though this waterway, which today bears his name, had become a river of "Disappointment." Yet he had entered upon its exploration and he would not be stopped until he had reached its mouth.

As Mackenzie bore north his attention was constantly turned to the west, to those distant uplifted shadows, the mountains. The mountains which separated him from his goal. The mountains that had deflected his river to the desolate north. The mountains whose imposing and foreboding presence were to a man of Mackenzie's bent an agonizing question mark. A question to be answered, a mystery to be solved. Be it the blue ocean waters of the Pacific, the valley of a river as yet unnamed, streams alive with beaver, or meadows lush and luxuriant with flowers and game, whatever the far side of those mountains looked down upon, men like Mackenzie must know. At every occasion he would question the Indian population. From their reports, he learned (on the return voyage) of a great river, many times the size of the Mackenzie, flowing west. At this river's mouth, they reported, white men had built a fort. To the disappointed Scotsman this meant one thing; the river to the west was Cook's River, and the white outpost a Russian settlement. Excited by this news Mackenzie began to make overtures that he would set out at once in search of this river. Fortunately, neither the Indians nor the rest of the exploration party were ambitious or foolhardy enough to join him, and the thought was abandoned.

On the 15th of July, 1789, Mackenzie's party, camped on Whale Island in the great river's delta, erected a memorial "on which I engraved the latitude of the place, my own name, the number of persons which I had with me and the time we remained there."
The great voyage had, like Cook’s, put another nail in the coffin of the fresh water Northwest Passage. If the passage had indeed existed, Mackenzie would have passed it on his trek northward. But also like Cook, Mackenzie had raised the prospect of a river to the west. Instead of answering the major geographical question of the northwest, he merely postponed the problem. Pond’s theories and Cook’s river had excited the interest of the British Government, which went so far as to authorize an expedition to trace Cook’s river from its source to the sea. But the discouraging reports of Mackenzie’s voyage cut short that expedition and quickly deflated public concern in the issue. The search for this great westward river would have to wait until the fur frontier had digested the huge helping Mackenzie had just claimed for it. It was enough that the Mackenzie River had been discovered and its vast territory opened up to the Northwest Company.

At first the partners of the Northwest Company were less than enthusiastic about Mackenzie’s discoveries. It was this type of attitude that would eventually drive Alexander Mackenzie out of their ranks and into opposition. Not until 1796 was an attempt really made to take advantage of the Mackenzie River as an avenue of fur trade expansion. In that year Duncan Livingston, a Northwest Company clerk, founded a post on the river, not far from its exit from Great Slave Lake. After three years of trade, Duncan Livingston attempted to descend the Mackenzie to its mouth. But instead of retracing Alexander Mackenzie’s great voyage, Livingston met with disaster. About two hundred miles from his goal the party encountered Eskimos, whose deadly arrows left only one survivor. This unfortunate, James Sutherland, was reportedly taken to the river, weighted with a large stone, and thrown into the water, where he drowned.
No doubt shaken, but undaunted, the Nor'westerners returned to the Mackenzie the following year. Clerk John Thompson, after abandoning Livingston's post, founded Rocky Mountain Fort, across from the mouth of the North Nahanni River, and Great Bear Lake Fort on the shores of that fresh water sea.

In the next four years there followed a proliferation of trading posts in the Mackenzie region. A group of wintering partners rebelled from the main body of the North West Company and formed the XY Company (later Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Company). This new concern quickly followed the Nor'westerners into the Mackenzie. During their bitter struggle an opposition establishment was erected at Great Bear Lake. Fort Alexander, near the Willow Lake River, Fort George, near the Mackenzie's source, Fort Castor, below the Keele River, Fort Norman, south of the Great Bear River's mouth, Fort Good Hope, near the Hare Indian River, "Forks" Fort, at the junction of the Liard and Mackenzie rivers, as well as other less significant establishments, all date from this period.18

1805 brought a reconciliation of the two warring concerns and the new North West Company consolidated its hold on the Mackenzie Valley by abandoning all of the upper posts with the exceptions of Fort Norman, Fort Good Hope, and Forks Fort. In this same year the fur trade made its first advances up the Liard, westward toward the mountains. Fort Liard was established where the Petitot River joins the Liard. And sometime between 1805 and 1807 Fort Nelson was built, where the Fort Nelson River joins the Liard.19

The founding of Fort Nelson and Fort Liard were signs that the Nor'westerners realized that the "River of the Mountains" (Liard River) was the best avenue for expanding the trade still further. In some ways the Liard was the only
possible direction for expansion. Northward, we have seen, was blocked by the Eskimos; few traders were anxious to duplicate Livingston's fate. To the east of the Mackenzie Valley were the Barren Lands, whose thousands of miles of rock and lake knew only the roots of lichens, caribou moss, and a few stunted pine. This was hardly inviting beaver country. Besides, the furs from this region were drawn off by the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Churchill. With the fur traders driving up from the south, that left only the west, but the Mackenzie Mountains formed a single wall which flanked the Mackenzie River and blocked its westward progress. Only the Liard remained.

The Nor'Westers knew little of the country into which they proposed to expand their enterprises. We know it today as rough, undulating terrain, dissected by the Rocky Mountains. But to the geographers of the time the very concept of a continent-long mountain chain was not yet in focus. There was no reason why the fur traders might not find an open and commercially feasible route around or through the Mackenzie Mountains. The Liard River itself was a fog. The first three hundred miles or so they had travelled regularly, but of the Liard's upper stretches nothing broke the darkness but the flickering lights of legends and Indian reports. It was a mysterious land inhabited by strange creatures, like the great beast that had "about the size and bulk of an elk, with short legs, a long neck, and has two great horns like a stag, under which two small ones sprout out." It was also a land of venomous springs whose bubbling yet clear and invitingly cold waters quenched not the adventurers thirst but attacked his nerves, bringing on a "sloth fever" and a peaceful, reposed death. Then there were the mountain tribes, the Nahanni, the "Dahoteena", and the "Nombahoteenais", savages yet unknown
to the white man; swiftly moving shadows, secretly out of sight, staying in the high country, living on the flesh of the caribou and mountain sheep, making war on each other. 22

The Liard River was thus begging for some adventurous spirit to enter upon her upper shores and explore those wonders. Furthermore, the Liard provided the best pelts in the entire Mackenzie District. But surprisingly, the Nor'Westers did not follow up their fine beginning on the Liard River. This was not because of a lack of adventurous spirits; God knows the Company had plenty of them. Nor was it because the Nor'Westers decided to shun the Liard's lucrative beaver fields; has a Scot ever been known to pass up a profit? Instead the North West Company's enterprises in this quarter were stalked by an unlucky star and progress was checked by a number of unseen reverses.

In the winter of 1812-13 Fort Nelson was destroyed. An unfortunate mixture of distress, starvation, and despair upon the part of the local Indians and the "morose" and "inconsiderate" nature of the post trader, Alexander Henry, no doubt ignited the unfortunate affair. In addition to Henry, four men plus the fort's women and children all perished in the unexpected assault. The massacre shook the entire District. It was a blow to the Company's strongest prop in maintaining their empire, their elevated and respected position among the native peoples. Hence, one trader considered the situation so serious that

unless some strong measures are applied
soon to recover in some degree our
former respectability, matters must
soon come to an end in this Department. 23

Nor was this an idle prophesy of doom. In 1815 these
difficulties with the Indians combined with food and supply shortages to force the North West Company to pull back its operations from the Mackenzie District altogether. It was not until 1818 that the Company returned to the Mackenzie in force, reoccupying Fort Good Hope, Fort Norman, The Forks, and Fort Liard. But by this time the North West Company was well on the way to extinction, and the stage had been set for the merger of iron and clay in 1821.

Chief Trader Alexander Roderick McLeod was a worried man in the fall and winter of 1822. As the gentleman in charge of the Mackenzie District, he felt that the destiny of his career and the fortunes of the District were intertwined. Of late he had seen signs that did not bode well for the District.

First of all news arrived that Willard-Ferdinand Wentzel, a clerk in the District, was to be recalled. Wentzel was a former Nor'Wester who had recently served on the Franklin Expedition. Although his "jovial" disposition and happy talent with a fiddle won Wentzel friends among his fellow traders, his "sarcastic turn of mind" and indiscreet ways often left him unappreciated in high places. None the less, of all the fur traders in the entire Northwest, few could claim the expertise of Willard-Ferdinand Wentzel when it came to affairs in the Mackenzie District. He had spent over twenty years in the far north. Only the year before he had supervised the relocation of the Fort of the Forks. The old site under the shadow of the Cros Gad at the Liard's mouth was abandoned and construction begun on an island a short distance up the Mackenzie. If the District was to grow, men of Wentzel's talents were going to be needed. His sudden recall no doubt caused Chief Trader McLeod to pause.

Also plaguing McLeod was another action by Governor
Simpson. Following the latter's tour of the Athabasca District during the past summer, the Governor traveled north to Great Slave Lake. McLeod expected the Governor to continue north and visit the new District headquarters at the Mackenzie Forks. But when McLeod heard that the Governor had turned about, and was returning to Fort Chipewyan, he was left speculating about the possible reasons for Governor Simpson to avoid the District. Perhaps as part of his new economy programs he would withdraw the fur traders from the Mackenzie District, just as the North West Company had done in 1815.

At the base of A. R. McLeod's doubts was the uncertainty of what the recently completed amalgamation would bring. An old Nor'Wester like the Chief Trader was suspicious of what this "gentleman", George Simpson, planned to do. Was Wentzel to be merely the first of many Nor'Westers to be axed from the District's rolls? Perhaps in his agitation McLeod looked back on his own roll in the North West Company's "Athabasca Campaign", that violent yet unsuccessful attempt to drive the Hudson's Bay Company from the valuable far north. Were the sins of the past really buried? To ease these doubts McLeod resolved to address a letter directly to the Governor, who was wintering at Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca.

Simpson responded promptly and his missive of January 2, 1823 alleviated McLeod's uncertainties. Not only did Simpson accept McLeod's judgement that Wentzel should stay in the District, confessing "I find we have been giving the prooning hook too much latitude", but he also went on to reassure McLeod that it had been only the want of a guide to the lower Mackenzie that had prevented him from visiting the "Forks" that past summer. As for curtailing Mackenzie operations, Simpson chided McLeod, he could not have been
more wrong:

The Trade of Mackenzie's River is so valuable and important and holds out such prospects of extension to advantage that instead of wishing to curtail its means as you seem to apprehend the Council is desirous of rendering its every support and assistance, that may be considered necessary.

After easing McLeod's mind, Simpson proceeded to instruct him in the specifics of his policy of expansion, first the New Caledonia plans:

With Mr. Smith and Dease I have had a great deal of conversation on this topic,... the later has undertaken a very interesting and I should hope important expedition next summer(in) the country laying to the West of the Mountains, through which by Indian reports there is a water communication running parallel with the Mackenzie's River is quite unknown to us, altho supposed to be rich in Fur bearing animals.

Once again rumors of a western river, Cook's River? This expedition would proceed up the Peace River to a place where that river divides into its two main feeders, the Parsnip and Finaly Rivers. From there the expedition was to strike out:

...due west accross the Mountain and along the skirts of it or as the water communications to the North West may serve as far as the season permits with safety, and when accross it so as to fall upon the headwaters of the River au Liard, or some of the streams leading into Mackenzie's River.

Simpson then turned his attention to affairs in McLeod's District. For many years the fur traders had heard reports of
Indian tribes dwelling in the mountains west of the Liard and Mackenzie rivers. One of these tribes was known to the Slave Indians of the Mackenzie as the "Nahanny"(Nahanni) Indians. Their mountain retreats were reported to be rich in beaver. Simpson wanted these savages lured down from the mountains and induced to bring their furs to trade at Fort Liard. Dispatches from Fort Norman, one of the lower posts, also mentioned a distant tribe, the "Dahotys", who were known to extend their hunting grounds to the Russian settlements on the coast. Hence Simpson suggested to A. R. McLeod, "it is desirable that our discoveries and intercourse with those distant tribes should be prosecuted" 32, and "I trust you will set every engine to work consistent with your means."33

A. R. McLeod was relieved and no doubt pleased with the Company's plans for expanding the trade. It was in true keeping with the "ancient spirit of the Nor'West", and imbued with that spirit McLeod immediately began preparations to follow through with the Governor's wishes. Setting out in the middle of the subartic winter, A. R. McLeod was accompanied by a group of Indian companions. The Chief Trader, about forty years old and a "stout strong active man; a good pedestrian", headed southwest, up the frozen Liard.34 After a one hundred and ten mile march, McLeod and his party arrived at the junction of the Liard and "Nahanny" Rivers. The "Nahanny" was a large river which tumbled through the mountain sanctuaries of the Indians of the same name. Up the river and into the Mackenzie Mountains McLeod led his party.

The exact details of McLeod's winter journey have been lost to history. We do know, however, that he passed through rich beaver country. But excepting this, the voyage was a failure. They met no Nahanni Indians, an unfortunate con-
sequence of bringing Fort Liard Indians on the trip; the Nahannis remained in their lairs, wary of a party containing their bellicose enemies. McLeod retraced his steps in disappointment. On the 6th of March he was back at Mackenzie River Forks, but not before he "suffered considerably from privation—for the natives who accompanied him were no animal hunters."\(^{35}\)

A. R. McLeod's unsuccessful endeavor did not deter the Company's desire to open commercial relations with the Nahanni Indians. In April of 1823 the Chief Trader wrote to Simpson of his failure, but he hastened to add that he was not giving up the fight by announcing that he "appointed Mr. John McLeod to command a party...on a voyage of discovery to the westward."\(^{36}\)

John M. McLeod (no relation to A. R. McLeod) was a man in his thirties when he reached Mackenzie River Forks. As did many a young Scot he had joined the North West Company in the period before 1821, and he saw service on the Churchill River. While stationed at Ile-a-la-Crosse, John M. McLeod seems to have been the trader who sacrificed his own supplies to aid the Franklin Expedition. He further helped the explorers by dispatching a canoe to lessen their overloaded outfit.\(^{37}\)

McLeod had recently spent the winter as Governor Simpson's traveling companion on the long journey from York Factory to Fort Chipewyan. Simpson was favorably impressed with what he saw of McLeod under the revealing conditions of life on the trail and he described him to A. R. McLeod as "a young gentleman of much promise...and I am much mistaken if he does not turn out to be a valuable acquisition to your Staff."\(^{38}\) Indeed, it seems that John M. McLeod may have been Simpson's personal choice to lead the westward explorations. In any event he left the Governor in the early spring of 1823 and arrived at
Mackenzie River Forks, now beginning to be known as Fort Simpson, before the ice went out.

At the unusually late hour of 9:00 a.m. on the 5th day of June, John McLeod walked out from Fort Simpson's stockade to the edge of the high bank on which that establishment was built. From here the explorers were afforded a fine view of the junction of the Liard and Mackenzie Rivers. The sun would now be right above the Gros Cap, a large tree covered hill which shadows like a stern minister the merger of the two waters. The Liard does not seem amiable to this union, for instead of mingling with the Mackenzie's clear waters, she pushes her dark current, choked with silt plundered from the western mountains, into a separate channel, and so flows north, adjacent, but not really a part of the Mackenzie. Before John McLeod descends the river bank to join his crew it is perhaps best if we pause for a moment and consider the character of this important, if unheralded explorer.

From his journals and letters only a cursory outline of John McLeod the man emerges. We see him as a determined man, as indeed anyone who challenges the Liard must be. He is a man who in spite of constant confrontations with delays and dangers, is able to keep the goal, the larger picture, ever in focus. John McLeod was not a man of reflection, in times of despair he does not muse on the fickleness of fate but strives to alleviate reversals. In this same vein he was not like his successor, Robert Campbell, who would turn to Providence for consolation and guidance. John McLeod would just as soon be left up to his own means as drag the Almighty into the affair. He would later explain to missionaries: "There is no Sabbath in this country." On the trail McLeod was boss, griping or sullen and mumbled complaints were likely to be treated with a
dose of "corporal chastisement." On his 1831 voyage when he noted "some discontent in the bosoms of some part of our crew" he prescribed just that "medicine." But he was wise enough not to embark them the next day in the rain, keeping them "snug to our encampment" to rest and revive their spirits. This same firm yet amiable disposition marked his dealings with the Indians. A man with a unyielding nature could never successfully trade with Indians. McLeod used his firmness to keep relations with the Indians on an even keel; respected but not overly aloof. His success at this can be seen by his successful trade returns and a record devoid of violent confrontations. McLeod further enamored himself with the Indians through his skill as a woodsman and by proving himself a crack shot and a successful hunter; qualities a stone age culture, by necessity, valued highly. Post journals also show him to be an active man more comfortable out of doors handling the strenuous tasks of maintaining a fort than remaining indoors checking inventories or account books.

Later in life while leading Hudson's Bay brigades to the Rocky Mountain Rendezvous, McLeod revealed another side of his personality. The hardy adventurer showed that he was a gallant gentleman. Returning from the 1836 rendezvous McLeod agreed to escort the Whitman Mission party to Walla Walla. Narcissa, Marcus Whitman's beautiful bride, had already been the belle of the mountains as she had won the rough frontiersmen's hearts with her kindness, smiles, and plucky attitude toward the adversities of the trail. John McLeod was no different, he had her tent ready and waiting as she rode into camp. When Narcissa grew weary of pemmican for breakfast, noon, and supper, he would hunt up some ducks, grouse, or perhaps a mess of fine mountain trout. Around the evening fire he spun tales of
the places, peoples, and adventures he had known in his lifetime of wilderness travel. It is clear that John McLeod was especially attached to Narcissa Whitman, but she was another man's wife. His conduct was ever exemplary and his relationship with Narcissa was that of a gentleman to his lady. It must have been particularly painful for him, after guiding her and her husband safely to the Columbia, to blaze his trail in the opposite direction, pausing perhaps, only to look back with regret.

McLeod's tenure in the Columbia Department, in addition to showing us a very human side of the man, also presents a wrinkle, one that should be straightened out. It comes from that same return trip from the 1836 rendezvous. William Gray, a young American with the mission party, took sick and could not keep up with the fast moving Hudson's Bay party. Whatever the illness, it was not serious, just somewhat inconvenient. After struggling to keep up, the young man could not go on and wanted to rest by the side of a mountain stream. As Gray tells it in the third person, "A word from McLeod would have stopped the caravan." But the word did not come, leading Gray to surmise, "My impression of this transaction has always been that McLeod wished to get rid of this young American."

This is of course rubbish, but the record should be clear. William Gray, by the time he "could not keep up" was miles behind the caravan and even further from McLeod, who was probably at its head. He was in the care of a physician, Marcus Whitman, and was obviously not on death's door as he caught up with the caravan before the end of the day. The fact is, Gray was not McLeod's responsibility, the caravan was. Gray eventually made it to camp with the aid, Narcissa relates, of an Indian, probably sent back by McLeod. This fact is
reenforced by Gray himself who deviously neglects to mention the Indian. William Gray was a bitter man, envious of many, spiteful toward all. He hated mountain men, he hated the Whitmans, and he hated gentlemen. John McLeod was a friend of the Whitmans, part mountain man, and every bit of a gentleman, especially to Narcissa. Furthermore, in all that this researcher has found, this is the only black mark against John McLeod, and considering the source of the accusation it is probably to McLeod's credit that Gray was his enemy. 43

Now, with that behind us, and John McLeod's first exploration ahead of us, let us return to Fort Simpson. McLeod descends the bank to the boat landing where his party is prepared to embark. Among the crew were two Canadians, a half breed interpreter, and seven Indians who would serve as canoe men and hunters. Plying their paddles in a spirited fashion, the crew soon pulled the North canoe out of the Fort's view and into the channel of the Liard River. 44

The Liard was still running hard and fast, swollen with the spring run off, its current powerfully swirling past the high cut banks, its surface twisting and boiling in restrained fury, dirty brown with silt. Against the rivers display of strength, the party made slow progress, yet through determined effort they reached the foot of the Liard's lower rapids by 8:00 p.m., having come thirty miles. McLeod rewarded his crew with a mug of rum and "gave a small quantity of very weak stuff to the Indians." 45

The Liard River at the lower rapids is essentially a different river from that which we saw at Fort Simpson; gone are the elevated clay banks, gone is the steady, smooth current. Replacing them are the upward reaching limestone cliffs, and the roaring water and dancing whitecapped waves that mean dangerous
water to those who travel this river. The first challenge to the McLeod party as they began their toils at 4:30 a.m. on the next morning would be a terrible yet peculiar riffle now known as the "Beaver Dam." The obstacle was of course not a real beaver dam but a three-quarters of a mile long reef which threw a white water wall across the entire river. As if this was not enough, the laws of hydraulics then take the water as it falls over the reef and hurl it back against the current, creating a hazard to navigation.46

After tracking (pulling the canoe from shore upstream by means of a line) through the "Beaver Dam", McLeod's party plodded along, slowly making their way against the current. The most difficult sections of the rapid were those where the party would come to a jutting point or rocky shelf which extended out into the current. The effect was that of a natural wing dam. Not only were they forced to fight the doubled ferocity of the river, but the canoe men were also harried by violent back eddies which tried to turn and twist the canoe broadside to the current. Furthermore, the tracking surface was poor, when they were not sinking knee deep in mud they would stumble across the rocky points, whose jagged sharp surface did rude things to their moccasin covered feet.47

McLeod would no doubt have liked to have put the rapids behind him on that second day, but by 8:30 p.m. they had not yet reached Cape Island, the last of the white water, and since his crew had labored hard all day, camp was made. With an early start the following day the rapids were soon dispatched of and the party's pace again began to pick up. However, at noon McLeod came upon an Indian encampment and he cast up to recruit additional aid. Although in a hurry, anxious to proceed, McLeod, as a fur trader knew he must keep relations amiable and
observe the proper etiquette of the trail. Hence, the rest of the day, not to mention the next, were spent trading for provisions, taking on more hunters, and taking part in the traditional gift giving and ceremonialism that Indian courtesy and temperament demand. The following day they were again on the river. McLeod now entered that section of the Liard known as "The Long Reach", a twenty mile piece of river, straight as a cannon shot. The river banks were now lower with boulder strewn beaches and richly timbered forests fanning out into the back country. With the rivers slackening current, the North canoe skimmed over the glassy summer surface toward the dark outlines of mountains ahead. During the course of the days progress, McLeod engaged four additional Indians. The expedition now numbered more than twenty men. Such a large group traveling together would scare off any large game, and wild meat seems to have been their main source of sustenance. Consequently, they would frequently break into smaller groups in order to hunt during the days advance. After "casting up" for the night the main party would light signal fires in order to guide the hunters into camp.

As the party embarked on the tenth of June, Nahanni Butte was clearly in view. Looming up from the river's banks a full five thousand feet, it is a prominent feature for many miles around. The Butte also marked the confluence of the Liard River with the South Nahanni River, and it is the first of a series of ranges which shadow that river as it tumbles from the mountains. McLeod dispatched a group of hunters to scale the Butte, to no doubt report on the country ahead and hopefully bag a few mountain sheep. That afternoon the party parted with the Liard and started up the Nahanni.

In its initial stretches the Nahanni seems to be trying
to lure the voyageur further upstream. The current is barely noticeable and in spite of the twisting oxbows, the traveler makes good upstream progress. But this is merely because the water is tired and its opaque surface reveals nothing of the river's true nature. For over one hundred miles from where the Nahanni plunges four hundred feet in a steep cataract rivaling the Falls of the Niagara, the river boils through a series of sheer canyons and rock bound riffles, all at a mill race speed. Through the centuries the Nahanni has taken its mountain waters and carved out a magnificent, yet hauntingly dangerous, domain, the limestone cliffs and canyons make this river the Colorado of the North. Like its southern sister the Nahanni provides the voyageur with a spectacular downstream trip over its steep gradient, but do not try to travel far upstream for the Nahanni rewards such impetuosity with only double the pain, danger, and hardship. This McLeod was to find out.

The party camped for the night a short distance up this "dangerous river." It was well after dark before the hunters began returning. A black bear and a beaver provided the evening fare and if McLeod had his choice it would be grilled beaver tail in his mess for a spring bear is none too tasty. The hunters who had been sent over the Butte did not arrive until morning. They brought with them some fresh mountain mutton.

The party set out in the rain, although dampened they could not but be heartened by the thought of fresh moose steaks for supper, for one of the hunters had jumped a big bull. That, however, was their ration of luck for the next few days. A short distance upstream from where they butchered the moose the country began to change, and with it the character of the river. The change as one modern traveler relates it was awesome:
...the wooded banks and quiet, sheltered water had given place to a wide-open flood plain stream with sand-bars, shingle islands, huge driftpiles, and queer, dead-looking forests of snags where uprooted trees had lodged and settled on the river bottom and now, swept clean by ice and floods of all their branches, projected bleakly from the water, their broken tops pointing downriver. Through this desolation rushed the Nahanni in, perhaps, two main channels and a maze of smaller ones. From a wooded bank nearby came the thudding lash of "sweepers"—trees that have been undercut by floods into the river, but which still cling with their roots to the bank, lashing and beating at the water which drives through their branches. From all sides in this wasteland of the river came the noise of rushing water—it was the foot of the Splits.49

The "Splits" is the river man's nomenclature for that section of the Nahanni where the river, freed from her constricting canyons, fans out over an up to two mile wide flood plain, carving out a multitude of channels and a myriad of obstacles. McLeod seems to have agreed with the name, "The Course of this river is very various, and the channels much obstructed by shoals and driftwood."50

Trusting that the river would improve, McLeod pushed into the midst of this confusing labyrinth. But with the rain that had accompanied the party all day, the Nahanni, already high from the spring run off, increased its force with the fury of a river in flood. Still the party struggled with the track lines, trying, however agonizingly, to pull their canoes upstream. Finally, at 4:00 p.m., McLeod ended the unequal struggle. In spite of persistent effort, their progress since entering "The Splits" had been negligible, no more than five miles. Although he did not know it, the worst part of "The Splits" still remained ahead. McLeod studied the day's progress,
or lack of it, looked at the river ahead, stared up through the rain, saw the grey sky above, and called it quits. The young Scot was persistent but he was not pig-headed, this was not a river for upstream travel, especially not in its present condition, if he was to proceed further it would have to be by land.

The party remained in camp again the next day, it was raining something awful. McLeod, however, kept his men active by ordering the construction of a scaffold so that they could cache the big North canoe out of harm's way. The next day, with the canoe properly secured, they pushed into the forest, north-west, toward the Nahanni Lands.

By the fourteenth, after two days of steady travel, McLeod reached the Jackfish River, the first definite landmark in his journal. McLeod noted that although the river had "a sufficiency of water for North Canoes", it was nothing but a succession of rapids, totally unnavigable. McLeod ordered the ignition of large piles of driftwood that they found along the Jackfish, hoping that these would attract the attention of the Nahanni Indians. But no Nahanni Indians came into camp and as McLeod closed his journal entry for the day he noted that they were near the end of their provisions. But the Indians maintained that there was good hunting in the area and he did not worry. To cap an already hard day, the men were lullabied to sleep by the dreadful drone of the mosquitoes who invaded the camp in swarms and bothered McLeod no little bit.

The tough going continued the next three days, they cleared the Yohin Ridge and pushed through the numerous valleys and smaller ridges that lay beyond. On the fifteenth, McLeod remarked, "in several places in the course of this day, we had the greatest difficulty in walking, owing to the thickness of the woods in several parts of the valleys." But their per-
severance was rewarded when at about 5:00 p.m. the Indian hunters downed "two very large Buck Moose, one of which was in excellent order." So it was moose steaks for supper, guaranteed to revive even the weariest voyageur. The next day some of the remaining meat was dried and packed into the outfit.

As they pushed forward, the distant Tlogotsho Mountains began to dominate the western sky. By the seventeenth of June, McLeod's party was on top of those mountains, camped above the timberline. It began to snow and they had little firewood, but at least the mosquitoes were left behind. Furthermore, the Indians proved to be right about the game, caribou and mountain sheep were abundant.

The party stuck to the high country for at least the next twenty miles, making good time across the open tundra above the timberline. Pressing on they descended from the Tlogotsho Mountains and continued northwest, up, then down the Headless Range, crossing the Meilleur River. Yet still they had not made contact with the Nahanni Indians, and discouragement was slowly beginning to settle in. At this point we lose track of McLeod's progress. The party was probably somewhere between the Headless and Funeral Ranges when they came upon the remains of a Nahanni camp, dating from the early spring. Further on, they stumbled on to an even older camp from the winter.

The hunting had been poor of late, and their provisions were just about played out. The Indians, even the interpreter, were discouraged with what must have seemed the pointless wanderings of the expedition. But as has been stated, John M. McLeod was a determined man, he saw no reason why they should not press on, and so they did. For the next three days, the expedition must have been doing a lot of hunting as their line of march zigzagged through the rough terrain of the upper Meilleur River Valley.
Finally, their luck began to change, near what is now known as the Caribou Range. Here the hunters brought in caribou meat to spare and the fires of discontent were extinguished by the mellowing effects of a full belly. McLeod set up camp here and sent his scouts out in various directions to try and hunt up the elusive Nahanni. In two days the Indians sent out to the west returned with the report that they "fell on a River which they suppose to be the Nahanny River." As R. M. Patterson reasons this was probably Caribou Creek, a feeder of the Flat River, the Nahanni's main branch. Unfortunately, all of the parties failed to run into any Nahanni Indians. What to do now? McLeod had seen the country ahead from a convenient mountain top, "To the Westward I could perceive no regular ranges of mountains, altho' some parts appeared very high but much broken and detached, the valleys appeared well wooded." Obviously, this sounded like good beaver country, but it would make difficult overland trekking. Furthermore, the land, which was low, might not yield the substantial amount of game the men were consuming; as it was summer, the caribou and mountain sheep preferred the cooler high lands. Hence it was decided to turn back, at least they had seen signs of the Indians behind them, with luck they might fall upon the band that had made those spring and winter camps discovered earlier.

Four days of determined marching saw the party again enjoying open country on the crest of Yohin Ridge. Their luck continued to change for the better. The Indians reported fresh signs of the Nahanni Indians and the whole party started off in hot pursuit, not camping until 9:30 p.m., by this time having advanced into the Jackfish River Valley. John McLeod saw a chance to salvage success and achieve his expedition's goals.
He had the party on the trail by 2:30 a.m. in the morning. The N'ahannis seemed to know that they were being followed and they did their best to shake the Hudson's Bay party. The N'ahanni Indians blazed their trail up a very steep section of the Yohin Ridge. One look at the ascent convinced the Canadians that they wanted no part of it, even most of the Indians balked at attempting it. But McLeod was not going to be thwarted now and after having "had some difficulty in obtaining the Summit", the traders were again on the N'ahanni's trail.

But the pursuit was at an end, in the distance they saw a signal fire, the traders answered it and proceeded toward the N'ahanni's camp,

both parties approached each other slowly. Yelling, Singing and Dancing as they advanced, at 7 P.M. both parties joined unarmed, each holding a small piece of meat in their hand—shortly after a Dance was formed, which amusement continued for the remainder of the day.56

The friendly reception by the N'ahanni Indians should properly be credited to two Indians that McLeod had sent out to scout a few days before. These men met up with the N'ahannis and no doubt assured them of the Hudson's Bay Company's peaceful intentions. The N'ahanni band numbered fourteen all total and they were led by a head man known as White Eyes, "a tall strong and robust built man" whose beard reminded McLeod of "an old Roman Sage."57 McLeod made the chief and his band recipients of many wonderful gifts designed to wet their appetite enough to make them regular customers in the future. The N'ahannis were honored with such marvels as mirrors, metal kettles, axes, knives, fire steel, and vermilion.

After another night of dancing and singing, McLeod started
for home, but not before arranging to rendezvous with White Eyes and his band the following year. McLeod also,

sent five young Indians to the upper part of the Nahanny River with instructions to make pine canoes and go downstream, and await my arrival where we left our canoe. 58

After a hot and uncomfortable march the party reached Mattson Creek where the canoe was found in fine shape. Upon regumming it the expedition set out for Fort Simpson which they reached on July 10th.

When McLeod reached Fort Simpson that July it was quite a different place from the active bustling establishment he had left in June. The reason being that since he embarked, the summer brigade had departed. About the middle of every June the gentleman commanding the district would travel downstream to the lower posts, Fort Norman and Fort Good Hope, inspect those establishments and collect the annual fur returns before arriving back at Fort Simpson. He would then supervise the loading of the Fort Simpson and Fort Liard returns (the latter having been brought downstream by canoe or boat) and again embark, this time for the Portage La Loche, the long portage. To help speed the brigade on its summer long race with fast closing old man winter, Fort Simpson would be stripped of every available hand. Hence the quite peaceful atmosphere McLeod found at the post.

After leaving Fort Simpson the brigade would head east, up the remaining miles of the Mackenzie and out across Great Slave Lake. Passing Fort Resolution, the brigade would abandon lake travel and enter the Slave River for a three hundred and ten mile journey to Lake Athabasca and Fort Chipewyan. Here the brigade would pause, ever so briefly, for the Chief Factor to have a friendly pipe with the gentleman commanding the Athabasca
District while the brigade voyageurs might have an opportunity to slap the back of a long separated friend. But the short summer season allowed for no tarrying and the brigade was soon continuing its upstream journey this time on the Athabasca River. Only after entering the Clearwater River did the Mackenzie Brigade near its goal.

Portage La Loche had been the gateway to the Mackenzie since Peter Pond discovered it in 1778. Its twelve and one-half mile trail was a crucible for the voyageurs, a test by which they measured a man's mettle. For the Mackenzie Brigade it was the end of a summer of what had mostly been a terrible upstream battle, from here to Fort Good Hope it was downstream all the way.

In the summer of 1823 Alexander R. McLeod had been the gentleman commanding the Mackenzie Brigade south. But when it came time for the boats to again head north, A. R. McLeod was not in charge, Chief Factor Edward Smith would be the new master at Fort Simpson. Part of the reason for the change had been A. R. McLeod's "preposterous and galling use of authority" in managing the District. 59 A large part of the change can be explained by the growing importance of the Mackenzie District, and the feeling that the District should be controlled by a Chief Factor, a full partner in the Company. 60 A. R. McLeod's thoughts concerning this change of events have gone unrecorded.

Edward Smith was eminently qualified for his new charge. He had been a wintering partner of the North West Company since 1814 and hence well acquainted with the problems of fur trade management. Furthermore, he had formerly been the commander of the Athabasca District and so was no stranger to the problems of the adjacent district to the north. Smith had also made a favorable impression on Simpson during the winter of 1822-23 when Simpson had wintered at Fort Chipewyan. The Governor no
doubt wanted a man he could trust in this far removed corner of Rupert's Land.

Hence, when the Mackenzie Brigade again arrived at Fort Simpson John McLeod had a new officer to report his explorations to. Smith, it will be remembered, was well versed in Governor Simpson's expansion strategy, and with John McLeod also wintering at Fort Simpson, the two would have plenty of time to plan the next years exploring campaign. The first thing to do would be to assess the accomplishments of the recently completed expedition. Most importantly, contact with the Nahanni Indians had been effected and a trade rendezvous had been arranged. But McLeod had also discovered that the majority of the Nahannis inhabited "the West branch of the Riviere au Liard" and that White Eye's band "had not visited them now three winters." Hence, the South Nahanni River area might not be the best place to focus exploration in as it would seem to be only peripherally in the Nahanni tribe's range. Also Smith was no doubt interested in what McLeod had heard of a great trans-mountain river that Mackenzie had heard of. McLeod had pushed further west than anyone had done from the Mackenzie, surely he had found out more concerning the western river? The mystery of the river reported by Sir Alexander Mackenzie, the river that replaced Cook's River as an object of speculation, remained just that, a mystery yet unsolved.

As for the coming years plans, John McLeod would be sent back into the South Nahanni River area. His main goal would be to meet up with White Eye's Nahannis and try to induce them to bring their furs down to either Fort Liard or Fort Simpson. Furthermore, McLeod was to scout out the fur possibilities of the Nahanni area and no doubt enquire about the country west of the mountains. At the same time explorations were to be pursued in the country of the upper Liard. An enterprising clerk,
Murdock McPherson, would advance up the Liard until he arrived at one of its main tributaries, the Beaver River. He would then scout as much of this stream as possible, keeping an eye as to its promise as beaver country and making contact with any of its natives.

There would be one more push into the mountains in 1824. This would be the expedition into northern New Caledonia that Governor Simpson had informed A. R. McLeod of in January of 1823. Unfortunately, the expedition was stopped before it began by a number of circumstances, not the least of which was high water conditions. But the task was given new life in 1824 and a new leader as well; Samuel Black was to replace Peter Warran Dease as the head of the expedition. Hence, the Hudson's Bay Company had plotted a three-pronged thrust into the formidable western divide, two assault teams from the Mackenzie, one from New Caledonia.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

On the 8th of June, 1824, John McLeod began his second Nahanni expedition, "I left Fort Simpson Forks Mckenzie's River in a North Canoe. My crew consisted of one Canadian and two Half Breeds Engagés with Two Indians." McLeod was also accompanied by a party of fur traders headed for Fort Liard, the flotilla was rounded out by three Indians who joined McLeod on the Liard. The ascent up the Liard need no more than be mentioned, the problems and dangers were the same as in 1823, save in one respect, "The quantity of ice...along the Banks of the River made tracking very bad and in several places the Mens lives were endangered by pieces falling down."

In spite of these problems they arrived at the mouth of the South Nahanni River by the twelveth of June, and after bidding the Fort Liard party God Speed, McLeod again entered
the Nahanni country. Camp was made near Nahanni Butte. John McLeod’s journal entry for the evening: "Weather very warm and mosquitoes worse and worse." There was a great deal of ineffectual swatting and irreverent invocation of a God who could curse his children with such a irrepressible insect. To make matters worse the Nahanni rose up past its banks during the night, inundating part of the camp and sweeping away some of the canoe paddles. This proved a perfect overture to the "Splits" into which they "proceeded with very little progress." And once again John McLeod’s determination was tharted by the impetuous river. The party cast up not much further upstream than the year before, below the mouth of the Jackfish River.

The fifteenth of June saw McLeod and his eight companions heading up the Jackfish River, moving deeper into the mountainous interior, lighting signal fires as they went. Before leaving Fort Simpson McLeod had arranged to meet up with a band of Willow Lake Indians (who regularly traded at Fort Simpson) and join forces with them in trading with the Nahanni Indians. Unfortunately, the Indians were not at the prescribed meeting place. So McLeod decided to press on alone, but before doing so he "ordered that three of the Indians should follow the Nahanny River, as near as possible and keep up constant fires along the Banks." Later that day,

He came in sight of the Nahanny River where the current appears smooth and the Indians inform me at this part they some time cross on Rafts but at some distance below it is not practicable for any craft to pass.

McLeod added:

...and in my own opinion as far as I could see with my glass, I think it not practicable in the present state of the water, the
Mountain through which the bed of the River flows being perpendicular on both sides.

The terrain John McLeod was observing was the south end of Deadman's Valley, the quiet water where the Indians would cross on rafts would be that calm section of the South Nahanni unofficially known as "Patterson's Lake", while the rapids feared by the Indians were George's Riffle (a.k.a. Cache Rapid). Although always a tricky stretch of water, and doubly so in highwater as McLeod saw it, George's Riffle is indeed passable, with a little luck, a prayer, and a legitimate amount of skill.

In any event McLeod's description is important because we can then pinpoint his position as being in the upper reaches of Deadman's Valley, just beneath the Tlogotsho Mountains, near the headwaters of Ram Creek. From a camp at this beautiful location McLeod spotted smoke drifting from the mountains to the north and across the river. The Nahannis? The Willow Lake Indians? McLeod was all for finding out, but his Indian companions balked. They feared running into Nahannis with such a small party. It was well that they did fear, for these chaps had no doubt at one time or another had an opportunity to bully about the Nahannis under more advantageous circumstances. This particular band of Nahanni Indians lived secluded in the mountains out of fear of the more populous Mackenzie River Indians. McLeod realized that when Indians decided something there was no way to force them into doing otherwise. So he adapted himself to their decision and resolved to wait five days for the Willow Lake Indians, if by then they did not arrive McLeod would push on, by himself if necessary.

So they sat in camp. Fortunately, the hunting was good and they dried a lot of meat to take with them. But the
mosquitoes were "as thick as the dust that flies before the wind." After enduring a few days of the mosquitoes, they encountered another unpleasant factor, snow. That day two of the Indians slogged into camp reporting that upon climbing an eminence they thought they could see smoke off in the distance. On the strength of that report McLeod proposed to set off. The next morning was showdown time. McLeod, the Canadian, and the two half breeds, began packing their gear. With a quiet determination that seemed to say, "We fear not the consequences, we are going on alone," they prepared to break camp. It no doubt seemed a challenge to the Indians. Camp, what with the mosquitoes and now the snow, was hardly an inviting place and the little irritations of the last few days had no doubt dulled their apprehension of the Nahanni Indians. Still the Indians "remonstrated for some time, but seeing that I was determined on going, they began to arrange their little bundles to follow." McLeod and his party pushed on until 3:00 p.m. Hunting had been good during the day's march and two sheep had been shot. With the morning disagreements behind them McLeod sought to reaffirm the comradeship and spirit of adventure in his party. With snow-capped mountains about them, darkness closing in around, McLeod had the evening fire built up high, throwing a warm and comfortable orangish glow through the camp. Hungry and tired, the party gathered around as the sheep, cleaned and spitted, were hung over the fire. The rich meat would crackle
as it roasted and browned while the men with knives ready anticipated the feast with yarns of past feeds; great gorgings on goose, caribou, or moose. The Indians and half breeds, in a half English, half Slavey, patois would expound on the delights of moose nose or beaver tail. Perhaps even McLeod himself would join in with memories of roasted stag, slain in the wooded glens of the Highlands. But when the meat was ready the talking would stop. Huge pieces of flesh would be cut from the roasted carcass and the only sounds in the camp would be animated chewing and gobbling as hungry men wolfed down the meat with relish, or their belches as they patted their stomachs and readied themselves for more. Good will had been reestablished and McLeod could note in his journal that it was a camp "where all hands, before a blazing fire, passed a Night of festivity." 72

The next day good fortune smiled on them as they ran into the Nahanni Indians. They turned out to be just a group of hunters so McLeod gave them gifts and bade them to inform White Eyes. The next day they met up with the main party. The Indians apprehension proved groundless as the Nahannis were glad to meet up with McLeod. They had passed a hard winter and had been near starvation, consequently they had gathered little in the way of furs. Equally disappointing was the inability to get sound geographic information for want of an interpreter.

McLeod, however, was not going to let the voyage prove fruitless, he tried to lure White Eyes to the trading establishments of the Company at Fort Liard. McLeod would travel with White Eyes into the Beaver River country where they could meet up with Murdock McPherson's exploration party. However, White Eyes refused to even contemplate putting himself or any of his tribe in so easy a reach of the hated Fort Liard Indians. McLeod was persuasive and through persistent effort he did
manage to convince White Eyes to accompany him to Fort Simpson. The agreement was followed by gifts and of course much singing and dancing. The dancing was much the same as that of the Slave Indians, McLeod's party would have had little difficulty in joining in.

Before beginning the journey to Fort Simpson it was agreed to go on a joint hunt. That way White Eye's band would be well fed while their chief was away, it also would prove an excellent opportunity to show the Nahanni Indians the benefits that could be accrued from contact with the white man. The hunt was to take place on the barren, tundra like, country on top of the Tlogotsho Mountains. The task proved ridiculously easy. McLeod with his "glass" scanned the horizon until a herd of caribou was sighted. He then dispatched his hunter and a group of Nahanni Indians to surround the herd. In less than two hours nine caribou were downed, the Nahannis would eat well for some time.

It was then time to be off. After a tearful adieu with much sobbing from their families, White Eyes, his two sons, and his nephews, tramped off with the McLeod party. The next day, however, White Eyes expressed his intention of returning immediately to his people. It seems that he had been troubled by bad dreams throughout the night, in his mind this was a powerful omen to turn back. In fact, White Eyes would not proceed until McLeod:

...assured him that his dreams would turn out quite the reverse of what he then anticipated, after some time had elapsed in Interpreting the Old Leaders dreams, with some fine words and few promises, he with some reluctance agreed to follow, and was under way at 5:00 a.m.
On the 30th of June they reached the canoe, but not before a very difficult trek during which they were beset by a snow storm and forced to hide like dogs "among the crevices of the rocks from the inclemency of the weather, having no wood to make a fire." The last two days of the march were equally as pleasant having nothing to eat the whole time. But now they were back at the canoe and they no doubt thanked the Lord for their prudence for they had cached a supply of pemmican for the return voyage. With unabated relish these hungry men stood gathered around as the cache was opened—sometimes it seems as if there is no justice in the world—the pemmican, which just the thought of had kept them going the last "Misserable bad" four miles, was gone, "eat by small Animals." They went to sleep without supper again; a few more days of this and they all would be having dreams.

Up early the next morning the canoe was gummed and repaired, by 1:00 p.m. the party cast off. The Nahannis being mountain Indians, were ignorant of water travel; like many a white man before them, they marveled at the lightness and strength of the North canoe. But they were more than a bit concerned when it was only that thin bark shell that separated them from the treacherous waters of the Nahanni River. The swift moving current aided their progress and by 5:00 p.m. they reached the Liard. With the thought of a dry bed and a hot meal waiting at Fort Simpson, one hundred and ten miles distant, McLeod elected to push on downstream. They traveled straight through the night, taking turns in the stern, and reaching the fort by 2:00 p.m. the next day.

Fort Simpson, although a recently built establishment, was none the less a rough and rather primitive place. Still the Nahannis were poor Indians, their lives precariously balanced on the success of the hunt. Their nights were spent in the
open or at best in crude shelters, to them Fort Simpson must have looked like Versailles, "for some time after entering the House, they seemed lost in astonishment and suprise." While at the fort the Nahannis were treated as honored guests. They were instructed how to dress skins so as to best preserve the pelts and they were quizzed at length concerning their country. Little new was learned except that the Nahanni's neighbors, the Dahadinnis, who lived on the western slopes of the Mackenzie Mountains, were in contact with white traders from the sea.

The Nahanni Indians were given a proper send off, perhaps a dance with Ferdinand Hentzel reeling off a few tunes on his fiddle. "Music seems to delight them in short they were lost in wonder and admiration." Old White Eyes had seen more these past few days than his years in the bush had prepared him for, he was deeply impressed by the Hudson's Bay Company.

I am like a Child now in my own estimation, you treat me so well. That I have nothing to give makes me ashamed to speak, which is the reason I appear silent...all my Party and children will be curious to come here and see what I have seen, it is the Whites who have made the Earth, we see that now.

On the 4th of July John McLeod ferried White Eyes and his relations across to the west bank of the Liard. The Nahannis had a difficult march ahead of them but the Company supplied the needed provisions, not to mention a few gifts, the Nahannis left "pleased and elated beyond description." Two days later, and a good two hundred and thirty miles to the southwest, a second exploratory mission set off. Commanding this enterprise was Murdock McPherson, the gentleman
in charge of the Company's post at Fort Liard. McPherson had been born some twenty-eight years before in Gairloch, Ross-shire, Scotland. In 1816 he joined the North West Company and a year later he was dispatched to the Athabasca District. After the union in 1821 he was appointed a clerk in the Hudson's Bay Company. Only the year before in 1823 he was reassigned to the Mackenzie District. The young clerk was anxious for advancement and was not at Fort Liard long when he dispatched a band of Fort Liard Indians, seven in number, led by one Niltsitaibeta, to reconnoiter the upper Liard. Hopefully, the band would be able to discover "the source of the West Branch of this River." This group must have been mainly a hunting party which in a secondary capacity was ordered to keep a sharp eye out for the lay of the land, in any event after nearly two months of voyaging the party broke through a range of mountains which the river dissects and called a halt to their advance. Their farthest progress was probably the Liard Plain, far short of the river's source. McPherson's 1824 expedition was designed to explore the Liard River as far as the mouth of the Beaver River. Upon advancing up this stream, McPherson was to take note of its fur yielding potential and make contact with any of the area's inhabitants; this was supposed to be the main territory of the Nahanni Indians.

McPherson set out on the sixth of July, hiking overland along the Liard River. The Liard was in flood and moving fast, McPherson, who had never thought it practical for upstream travel anyway, figured he would move faster by foot. Although he does not mention it, he also may have had difficulty in procuring good canoe men, most of the local Indians shunned water transport. Accompanying the clerk was an interpreter and the necessary Indian hunters. The weather was hideous, rain,
rain, rain. The streams and rivulets that normally meandered into the Liard were all rushing torrents which made crossing tricky, cold, and inevitably wet. The more difficult of these could only be forded by cutting down trees and bridging the bed of the stream.

Considering these conditions they made good time, marching all the way to "Rivere de la Biche", almost halfway to the Beaver, on the second day. Fortunately the men were traveling light, the majority of the outfit had been sent ahead with an advance party by North canoe, the two parties were to rendezvous at the mouth of the Beaver River. Still, McPherson was setting a hard pace, "We had our Bundels on our backs at 5 a.m. and travelled along the River in Mud and Weather, Hills and Branches exc. exc." The pace was too hard for some of the men, "the Interpreter and Indians complained of fatigue."

The hard marching continued the next day, July ninth. But at least the men could be consoled with the thought that by evening they would reach the Beaver River and that their comrades there would have a hot meal waiting for them. Their "comrades", however, were not that considerate, in a very imprudent manner they had squandered all of the provisions. With empty stomachs and hearts no doubt filled with black thoughts, McPherson's party went to sleep.

Having arrived at the Beaver, the clerk set taking note of its character:

The Beaver River is at this place about 150 yards wide with a strong and steady current, the water being at present very high. The country in this vicinity, in looking toward the south and west appears to be fine and well wooded in the Contrary derations it looks barren and Mountious.
Saturday, the tenth of July, saw the united party set off at an early hour. Hunters were sent overland to join up with the canoe in the evening at a selected rendezvous location. The canoe's progress was slow,

The current was extremely strong all day but with the continued setting poles, line and Paddles alternately and all sometimes together we got to the appointed place about an hour after sunset.

Unfortunately, the hunters were unsuccessful in their efforts, no game was brought down.

McPherson stayed in camp the next day, he knew it would be foolhardy to advance any further into the unknown with the larder barren. Those nearby hills seemed just the place for mountain sheep and so he dispatched his hunters up its slopes with every hope of success. He was not disappointed as one of the hunters returned to camp "with a fat Goat on his back, & with which we very soon regaled ourselves." More hunting the following day, but the hunters returned empty handed.

On July thirteenth they hit the river again. The canoe had been gummed the day before and that was well for the current picked up and they were forced to ascend a number of rapids. In spite of this it was a happy encampment, the hunters had bagged a moose, there would be meat for a few days to come. During the days progress McPherson kept a careful eye out for the lay of the land,

The Country in the vicinity of this place, especially the South side of the River looks fine, the Hills, However are heights but well wooded with Pine, Birch, and Liard, on the North side the Hills are snow baren.
Along the river's banks beaver cutting abounded.

Signs of that valuable little critter continued to reveal a heavy population in this area. The hunters also noted his presence and beaver began to make their appearance at the evening mess. At about 1:00 p.m. on the fifteenth of July, McPherson came upon a small river falling into the Beaver from the north. He landed at the forks of the two and on a tree "I engraved my initials as acting for the H. Bay Company."89 The course was "north-northwest" the next day as the party continued to push into rough terrain. The evening camp was made at about 7:00 p.m., "and at half past 8 all our party was assembled round a blazing fire with four Beavers and some pieces of Moose meat."90 But good cheer did not abound at this camp fire, "The Indians complained of fatigue, and I must confess with reason, not being accustom to so regular duty."91

They set off as usual the next morning but the idea of turning back, the seed so to speak, had been planted, all that was needed now was a sprinkling of adversity and a healthy dose of discomfort to make the plant thrive. This the river soon seemed willing to provide. During the next two days travel the river left the heavy timbered topography that had marked the abundant beaver hunting, in fact, signs of the creature gradually disappeared. The river bed itself narrowed and the current quickened, progress was slow. Mountainous country made tracking upstream doubly difficult. On the 18th of July the interpreter, the Indians, the entire crew, all with one voice, called for going back.

McPherson agreed, his instructions, vague to begin with, had been fulfilled. The Beaver River was becoming difficult and it seemed that they might be near the end of practical navigation. Furthermore, they had found no Nahanni Indians,
the encampments they did stumble upon were old, even the sca-
folds were barren and weathered. The Nahanni Indians had long
ago deserted this area in fear of the Fort Liard Indians.

The best beaver country they had visited lay behind them
and it was resolved to divide the party, half to return to
Fort Liard, half to trap for beaver. The downstream trip was
suprisingly quick, by the 22nd of July McPherson was back at
Fort Liard.

The accomplishments of the voyage were few, the Beaver
had only been ascended for about one hundred miles. They had
encountered no new tribes, indeed they made no strong effort
to make contact with the Nahannis; for instance, no signal
fires were lit as McLeod had continually done. True, new
beaver territory had been opened, this was to prove to be one
of the most important of the Fort Liard Indian's hunting grounds.
Part of McPherson's problems were of his own making, he seems
to have picked a poor group of traveling companions, they were
improvident, in ill-shape, and unambitious. McPherson does
not seem to have been able to discipline these chaps. To
complain of fatigue after less than a week of travel is
incredible! McPherson may have been a good Indian trader but
he was not a leader of men, the Indians seemed to know that they
could have their way with him.

On the plus side, new beaver country had been opened.
McPherson was correct in perceiving it as "a long time a
treasure to them." Furthermore, the frontiers of the district
had been broadened "to the westward." McPherson completed his
journal and he compiled a map of the Liard area, incorporating
his explorations with those of the Indian hunters he had dis-
patched the summer before. If Murdock McPherson did not know
how to handle men, he did know how to impress his superiors.

* * * * * * * * *
The third westward thrust of the Hudson's Bay Company in the summer of 1824 was to come from the Mackenzie's neighboring district, New Caledonia. New Caledonia was the fur trader's name for the vast territory which would now embrace the central and northern interior of British Columbia. It had been pioneered in the early nineteenth century by one Simon Fraser, who had followed Alexander Mackenzie's footsteps over the Rocky Mountains. Like the Mackenzie District, New Caledonia had until the union of 1821 remained the sole dominion of the North West Company. Hence, the land had been spared the ruinous effects of competition and it was among the Hudson's Bay Company's most valued treasures.

Because of New Caledonia's removed position, west of the Rockies, and the rough topography of its landscape, its true extent was unknown. Great rivers, lakes, and fresh mountain valleys abounding with fur, waited over the next mountain range. Exploration would be the key to uncovering these riches. Throughout the period of this narrative, explorations would be underway in New Caledonia, we will consider only the ones important to our study; initially this means Samuel Black's 1824 journey.

The reader will recall Governor Simpson's missive of January 2, 1823. Peter Warren Dease was instructed to advance up the Peace River to its forks, take its Finlay branch up into the mountains, and after heading overland, fall upon either the great waterway which Mackenzie had heard of as running parallel to his discovery, or take the Liard River down to Fort Simpson. It was a tall order, one which Peter Warren Dease did not appear too anxious to execute, he produced a number of delays and excuses all of which resulted in the expedition being postponed until 1824. Whether Dease's tarrying was legitimate, or he just did not want the mission, does not really matter.
Governor Simpson wasted no time in replacing him with another man, Samuel Black.

Simpson referred to Black as,

The strangest Man I ever knew...A perfectly honest man and his generosity might be considered indicative of a warmth of heart if he was not to be known to be a cold blooded fellow who could be guilty of any cruelty and would be perfect Tyrant if he had the power...his word when he can be brought to the point may be depended on. A Don quixote in appearance, ghastly, raw-boned and lanthorn jawed, yet strong vigorous and active.93

Of course Simpson had been scalded by Black's furious opposition during the last days of the Athabasca Campaign and hence was likely to highlight the sharp points of the man's character. Still he thought enough of the old Nor'Wester to entrust him with the important expedition.

Samuel Black set to the task with his characteristic energy. He spent the winter at the Rocky Mountain Portage, where he would have easy access to the Finlay River as soon as the ice went out. In addition to "shaking down" his outfit he enquired among the natives as to the lay of the land west of the mountains. These enquiries held him in good stead. For rather than looking for a river that would flow northwest into the Artic Ocean, like the Mackenzie, he heard reports of a river that flowed westward, to the Pacific. This brought his quest into line with the realities of geography. He would be searching out the headwaters of the Stikine River instead of the Yukon River or some imaginary stream.

If Black was getting a clearer idea of what lay beyond the mountainous frontier of knowledge, Simpson seemed to be hopelessly lost amid its box canyons and deadfalls of rumors and
Indian reports. Here are his orders to Black: After Black explored the upper Finlay he would hopefully discover the headwaters of the river which paralleled the Mackenzie. Having achieved this he was to turn east, cross the divide, and fall upon the headwaters of the upper Liard. The Liard would be followed until he reached Fort Liard or Fort Simpson where Black and his party were to winter. By this time Black's party would have explored the entire length of one river, discovered the headwaters of a great inland waterway, and upon crossing the Artic slope a second time, travel the entire length of a river whose upper reaches remained clothed in mystery. Total distance covered: about 750 miles! But this was not all! The next summer, Black, having wintered in the Mackenzie, would turn back, travel the entire length of the Liard River (against its considerable current), recross the Artic slope and explore the great trans-mountain river to its mouth, presumably to the Artic, "the Frozen Ocean will be the boundary of your researches to the North West." Total distance, at least 1500 miles; not a bad summers work.

All this was quite preposterous, even Simpson realized this in a less exuberant mood. It does, however, give notice of the tendency of men to imagine water courses in the unknown, map out terrain in lands yet discovered, and give detailed advice to explorers venturing into areas beyond the ken of even the wisest. In addition to Sir Alexander Mackenzie's report of a rumored river to the west and a few subsequent garbled translations confirming this by the mountain Indians, Simpson was basing nearly all of his perceptions upon pure conjecture. But this can be very persuasive reasoning, one merely has to form the image of the unknown to the proportions of what has already been explored; example: the quest for the Northwest
Passage was sustained by the knowledge that a pathway was open to the south (the Strait of Magellan), hence, there must be a similar route to the north, or the way in which geographers and explorers were certain that a great river of the west existed, an open trail to the interior from the Pacific, a sister to the east's St. Lawrence River. Imaginary geography was based upon proportion and a balanced view of physiography. Simpson ignored Sir Alexander Mackenzie's belief that the trans-mountain river flowed to the Pacific. In the Governor's mind, the Mackenzie, the great river of the north, flowed into the Artic Ocean, its valley spread out on a north-south axis, if a great waterway lay across the mountains it would drain those mountain's waters north, like the Mackenzie, to the "Hyperborean Sea."

Back to the expedition. Black embarked on the thirteenth of May with a party of ten, including a Chipewyan hunter and his wife. After an incredibly difficult ascent Black managed to reach Thutade Lake, the headwaters of the Finlay River. It was a month long battle to get this far but Black was still for pushing on. The canoe was abandoned, and throwing their packs on their backs, the explorers set off overland.

Black was now in that confusing cross section where the drainages of the Liard, the Peace, and the Stikine rivers all meet. It was in this area, amid mountains and marsh, that the explorers were supposed to discover the headwaters of the great trans-mountain river of Mackenzie's reports. It was here that Black had heard of a river rising that eventually fell into the Pacific, and it was in this same terrain that his guide told him he could find a water connection with the Liard.

The Hudson's Bay men were fortunate enough to meet up with a group of "Thloadenni" Indians. They were a poor and fearful lot, living their lives in the sparse mountains ever watchful
for their enemies, a tribe Black called "the trading Nahannis." These "trading Nahannis" (not as Black supposed, related to the Nahannis of John McLeod) had contact with the Russian coastal trading establishments and were formidable armed. They conducted occasional trade with the unfortunate interior tribes, exacting steep prices for the few goods they offered. Because the "Thloadennis" were at present at war with the "trading Nahannis" they refused to lead Black into their lands. But they did confirm Black's hopes for a river flowing down from the mountains to the Pacific, as they spoke of a stream known as the "Schadzue" which flowed off in the direction of the setting sun.  

Here was a discovery of note. Black set off toward the northwest, following the "Thloadenni" Indian's trail along the crests of the mountains. The going got tough, rain and snow slowed their progress, four men deserted. Black crossed the three main sources of the Stikine, on one of them using the resourceful tactic of forming a human chain, but instead of altering his plans and following up this important discovery, Black remained faithful to his orders and continued north.

A partial explanation for this can be found in the topography of this region, it is a bewildering wilderness of peaks, ridges, valleys, streams, and rivers; a puzzle only aerial photography could sort out completely. Furthermore, Black's own ideas concerning this natural maze were quite contradictory and confounding. First of all he did not seem to completely trust the "Thloadinnis" reports that the "Schadzue" or Stikine flowed west to the Pacific Ocean. This doubt opened the ground for error. Black was aware that in 1822 the Company had established a new post in New Caledonia, Fort Kilmaurs on Babine Lake. Babine was drained by a large
river, which flowed northwest, Simpson's River (our Skeena River). In his confusion Black imagined that this river continued its northerly course, dissected the Stikine and Liard drainages and emptied into what is today the Gulf of Alaska. In fact Black's mental map of the area included the apocryphal concept of Cook's River.

As a geographic possibility, Cook's River had been exploded in 1794 by the thorough survey of Captain Vancouver. It was merely an inlet of the sea, fed by a few mountain streams. Unfortunately, the preparation and planning of the Hudson's Bay Company failed to include any concerted effort to gather any of the conflicting reports and scientific discoveries effected by its own explorers, those of other concerns, the British, and foreign governments. If Black was groping in the dark it was not entirely his fault.

Eventually Samuel Black and his weary and wet party came upon an easterly flowing river, they followed it until they approached a large mountain which deflected the river to the north. It was the seventeenth of August, the short summer season was swiftly winding down. Unsure if the river they had been following was another branch of the Stikine, or a tributary of the Liard, apprehensive of what appeared to be rough country ahead, physically exhausted and mentally perplexed, Black called a halt. After a short conference it was agreed to turn back and retrace their trail to the Finlay River. It was the right thing to do, nonetheless Samuel Black, bitterly dubbing the river they had followed the "Turnagain", could not but muse, as his eyes searched over the distant hills, and his mind wondered what lay beyond, "I wish I had wings to go & see." But that was for the hawks and eagles, whose feathered dexterity lifted them above the peaks and ridges, and as they gently floated upon the winds kind currents, before them
was stretched the rivers, lakes, and trails that would have led the Hudson's Bay Company into the Yukon, Alaska, the empire of the north. It was Samuel Black's lot to struggle south, through the deadfalls and defiles, in defeat.

The campaign of 1824 marked the end of the beginning so to speak. Although the Company had a confused idea concerning the physiography of the Northwest, they were on the right path. Possibilities of expansion north from New Caledonia were now known to be unrealistic. The tangled terrain Samuel Black had traversed, the poor tribes he met, and the difficult access the area presented, all persuaded the Company to close the book on the region. No further explorations would push north toward the Stikine. It would be the Mackenzie District that now afforded the route with the least resistance. Here trade was opened with the mountain Indians, the Nahannis promised to bring their furs to Fort Simpson in 1826. More importantly the first probes had reached toward the west, to the upper Liard. The trade prospects were lucrative, but there were ominous warnings. For as the Hudson's Bay Company reached toward the setting sun it was entering the domain of the Russian bear. Both McLeod and Black heard reports of Russian settlements, and from some distant tribesmen the Company could see the material evidence, carried inland via a series of middlemen. Fur trade exploration was approaching the fringes of an international rivalry.
Footnotes


2 Ibid, p.626.

3 Ibid, p.626.

4 As their bitterness subsided many a Nor'wester would see that they had been more than just "well received" into the Hudson's Bay Company. Former Nor'Westers commanded the richest and most extensive of the fur trade districts, New Caledonia, Columbia, Athabasca, and Mackenzie River. Furthermore, of the twenty-five Chief Factors, the generals of the fur trade, eighteen were former Nor'Westers. This galled some of the Hudson's Bay Company's former inland managers, men more accustomed to bullying and brawling (which of late had been valuable qualities) than sensible commercial management. One of these men, John Clarke, of Astoria fame, bitterly wrote,

To the joint efforts of Mr. Robertson & myself are the H B Coy in a great measure indebted for the splendor & importance of their rank in the great commercial world. Glyndwr Williams(ed.), "The Character Book of George Simpson, 1832", in, Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870, (Hudson's Bay Record Society, Winnipeg, 1975), p. 172

But neither Clarke or Colin Robertson were able to adapt to the changing needs of the trade, pensions not pelts were in their future.


6 Ibid, p.50.


Merk, (ed.), Fur Trade and Empire, p.204.

Sir George Simpson's Letter Book, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, D. 4/3 fos. 83. Hereafter material from this collection will be referred to as H. B. A.

Samuel Hearne had said the same thing concerning the Northwest Passage, but nobody seemed willing to listen.


Ibid, p.54.

Ibid, p.64.


Ibid, p.40. Stager's "Fur trading posts in the Mackenzie region up to 1850" is the most authoritative treatment of the subject. He argues persuasively that 1807 is the proper date for the founding of Fort Nelson. The Fort is thought to be named
for Admiral Nelson, hero of the Napoleonic Wars. Nelson's crushing defeat of the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile in 1798 might have made him famous enough in the Northwest to have a fort named after him. This would coincide with the sometimes suggested date of 1800 for the fort's construction. However, it is difficult to believe that at this early date the North West Company would push over two hundred miles up the dangerous Liard. After the establishment of Fort Liard a post at the Fort Nelson River would be a logical extension. Furthermore, Nelson's magnificent victory at Trafalger in 1805 surely have made him notable in all of British America. Allow a two year time lag in the spread of the news, and there you have 1807, the date of the founding of Fort Nelson.

21 Ibid, p.84.
22 Ibid, p.78.
23 Ibid, p.126
24 Stager, "Fur trading posts", p.41.
27 George Simpson to A.R. McLeod, H.B.A., D. 4/2 fos.34.
28 Ibid, D. 4/2 fos.34.
29 Edward Smith joined the North West Company at an unknown date. But by 1806 he was a clerk in the Athabasca Country. In 1814 he was elevated to a partnership in the North West Company and at the union of 1821 he was made a Chief Factor in the new Hudson's Bay Company. He spent most of his remaining fur trade days commanding the Athabasca or Mackenzie Districts. Following a furlough in 1837, Edward Smith retired from the trade. In

Peter Warren Dease, one of four brothers who pursued the beaver into the Northwest. A nephew of Sir William Johnson, famed Indian agent. He joined the XY Company in 1801 and in their service as well as in the service of the North West Company he traded in the Mackenzie District. At the union of 1821 he was elevated to the rank of Chief Trader. He worked on the Second Franklin Expedition during the 1826-27 season. His most important exploit was the 1836-39 survey of the Arctic coast from the Mackenzie delta to Point Barrow. He died in 1863 after twenty-one years of prosperous retirement. The Dease River and Dease Lake in British Columbia are named after him. W. Stewart Wallace, (ed.), Documents, p.436.

30 Simpson-McLeod, H.B.A., D. 4/2 fos.34.

31 Ibid, D. 4/2 fos.34.

32 Ibid, D. 4/2 fos.34.


38 Simpson-McLeod, H.B.A., D. 4/2 fos.34.


42. DeVoto, Across the Wide Missouri, p.264.

43. Ibid, p.264. DeVoto discusses this whole episode, and it is his rendering that I based my account upon.

44. Fort Simpson Journal 1823, H.B.A., B. 200/a/2 June 5 entry. My account of John M. McLeod's two Nahanni journeys will in the main be based upon his journals in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, and upon Mr. R.M. Patterson's article "The Nahanny Lands." Mr. Patterson, along with Mr. Dick Turner and Mr. Albert Fallie of Fort Simpson, is one of the most experienced of the "old hands" concerning the South Nahanni River area. Mr. Patterson's practical experience "on the trail" brings valuable insights into many of the ambiguities of McLeod's journals. The difficulty of following McLeod's sketchy line of march has in part been alleviated by Mr. Patterson's previous work, modern topographical maps, and the author's own travels in this area.

45. Ibid, B. 200/a/2 June 5 entry.

46. In 1951 two men perished trying to run the Beaver Dam in a canoe. (R.M. Patterson, "Liard River Voyage", The Beaver, Spring, 1955, p.25.) The rest of these rapids are not to be taken cavalierly either. While in Fort Simpson in the summer of 1974 a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer related to me the death, a few days before, of a fellow American from California. The man's powered scow was capsized by the rapids and he drowned in the white water.

47. For more details on the joys of tracking up the Liard see: Dick Turner, Nahanni, (Hancock House, Saanichton, B.C., pp.25-26).

48. Patterson, "Nahanny Lands", p.41
It was standard practice to appoint a Chief Factor, a full partner in the Company's trade, to the command of the larger and geographically removed districts. A look at the appointments in New Caledonia, Athabasca, or the Columbia would support this claim.

66 Patterson, "Nahanny Lands", p.45.

67 Fort Simpson Journal 1824, H.B.A., B. 200/a/5 fos.34.

68 Ibid, B. 200/a/5 fos. 34.

69 Patterson, "Nahanny Lands", p.45.

70 Ibid, p.45.

71 Ibid, p.46.

72 Ibid, p.46.

73 Ibid, p.46.

74 Ibid, p.46.

75 Ibid, p.46.

76 Ibid, p.46.

77 Ibid, p.47.

78 Ibid, p.47.

79 Ibid, p.47.


82 Stager, "Fur trading posts in the Mackenzie region up to 1850", p.42.

83 Fort Simpson Journal, H.B.A., B. 200/a/5 July 8 entry.

84 Ibid, B. 200/a/5 July 8 entry.


88 Ibid, B. 200/a/5 fos.27.

89 Ibid, B. 200/a/5 fos.27.

90 Ibid, B. 200/a/5 fos.28.

91 Ibid, B. 200/a/5 fos.28.

92 "To the westward" is the vague phrase the Hudson's Bay Company employees used to describe the country of the upper Liard River and the trans-mountain region.


97 Morton, History of the Canadian West, p.711.

Bibliography

Archival Sources


Printed Primary Sources

Franklin, John, Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the years 1819, 20, 21, and 22, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Tokoyo, Japan, 1970.


Hudson's Bay Record Society, London, 1938.

Wallace, W. Stewart, (ed.), Documents Relating to the North West

Williams, Glyndwr, (ed.), Hudson's Bay Miscellany, 1670-1879,
Hudson's Bay Record Society, Winnipeg, 1975.

Secondary Sources

Bryce, George, Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company,

Cameron, Allan, E., "South Nahanni River", Canadian Geographical

Camsell, Charles, Son of the North, Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1954.

Cooke, Allan and Holland Clive, "Chronological List of Expeditions

Davidson, Gordon, Charles, The North West Company, University

DeVoto, Bernard, Across the Wide Missouri, Houghton Mifflin Co.,
Boston, 1975.

DeVoto, Bernard, Course of Empire, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston,
1962

Dillon, Richard, (ed.), "Peter Pond and the Overland Route to
Cook's Inlet", Pacific Northwest Quarterly, October, 1951,
pp.325-329.

Drury, Clifford, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the opening of

Galbraith, John S., The Hudson's Bay Company As an Imperial


King, Cornwellis W., "York Boat Brigade, as told to Mary Weeks", *The Beaver*, outfit 271, December, 1940.


Morse, Eric W., *Fur Trade Routes/Then and Now*, National and Historic Parks, Ottawa, 1969.


Patterson, R.M., "River of Deadmen's Valley", *The Beaver*, June, pp.8-13, 1947


The thesis submitted by Theodore J. Karamanski has been read by the following committee:

Dr. Robert McCluggage, Professor, History, Loyola, Chairman, Department of History, Director.

Dr. James Penick, Professor, History, Loyola.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

12/12/71
Date

Director's Signature