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Insightful Exploration: An Early Explorer's Perspective on Western Aborigines

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Abstract

Arguably one of the greatest cartographers in Canadian history, David Thompson has been widely praised for his contributions to the study of geography. Though less acclaimed, his interaction with the Natives of the Canadian West has been equally significant, contributing to a greater historical understanding of the Native peoples of North America. In examining his understanding of the Native people he encountered and his desire to learn about their heritage, one is presented with a picture of the respect Thompson held towards the aborigines and the awareness of their distinct culture. In relating to Western Natives, Thompson exemplifies the understanding which is so desperately needed in the realm of present day political discourse between government and aboriginal leaders.

Current news reports in Canada are full of issues that bear great significance to many Canadians. Corruption in government, our role in the Afghanistan conflict, and our relationship with the United States are just a few of the concerns which have been subject to extensive attention by Canadian

media. Few issues have such a deep and substantial history as those involving Canadian aborigines. Throughout its history, Canada has struggled to find concurrence between government and aboriginal leaders on issues ranging from land claims to the provision of social services. At the heart of this struggle often lies the inability or unwillingness of the greater populace to recognize the distinct and unique character of the aboriginal peoples. Particularly problematic has been the lack of understanding and knowledge that pervades existing dialogue which attends to Native issues. Euro-Canadians have had the tendency to view aboriginal social cultures as "static, overly structural, and qualitatively distinct from one another" without appreciating the intricate dynamics of Native society.¹ Exploring the early history of interaction between Euro-Canadians and Native communities provides the twenty-first century viewer an insight into the earliest attitudes and behaviour between the parties.

Arguably one of the greatest explorers in Canadian history, David Thompson spent prolonged periods of time in remote Native communities. The extensive records he kept of his endeavours in the rugged Canadian West have left a treasure of history, providing present day analysts with a wealth of material by which a greater picture of early Native life can be painted. Exploration of the effects of Native influence on Thompson's life presents the framework by which one can understand his attitudes and behaviour towards the aborigines of the West. David Thompson presents an example of respect and acknowledgement the unique qualities of the Native culture. Carrying this picture into the twenty-first century, one can postulate that Thompson's manner may be a fair model by which Canada's governing elites approach its dialogue and interaction with the aboriginal people of the nation.

Touted as one of the greatest cartographers and geographers to explore the North American interior, David Thompson is revered for his ground breaking work, most notably in the Columbia River region. As an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, Thompson was one of the earliest explorers into the interior of present day North America, and as such relied heavily on the skills and techniques of the aboriginal peoples in navigating the territory and traveling through its grueling environment. As Thompson ventured further west, he was among the first of European origin to have contact among a number of Native tribes and communities. Thompson was incredibly diligent in recording the minute details of his endeavours, both in geographical calculations and sociological observations. The praise he has received has often been directed at the magnificent scientific work he did in mapping the Canadian West and the intricate calculations he recorded. Although his work was incredibly advanced for its time, the significance of his work was not recognized until well after his death in 1857. There were a number of notable accomplishments and contributions accredited to Thompson that went almost entirely unacknowledged in his lifetime. Of particular merit was his collection of detailed maps, used in Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans*, as well as surveying work which helped establish the Ontario portion of the Canada-United States border.² These achievements have since been

heralded for their significance in Canadian geography, though Thompson never received due praise for them while he was alive.

Continuing in this trend of tardy recognition, historians did little to acknowledge the significance of Thompson's work until the century following his death. It was not until 1916 that J.B. Tyrell published the valuable *Narratives*, a description of Thompson's journeys and endeavours derived from his extensive journals.³ These journals were later published as well, contributing to the availability of Thompson's manuscripts to the scholar of today.⁴ Other historians have done well to publish Thompson's writings, including Dempsey's three installments of Thompson's journal in the *Alberta Historical Review*.⁵ Efforts such as these have increased exposure to Thompson's records, and provided a vast wealth of insight into the history of geography, cartography, and exploration. Perhaps most captivating in the records is the array of entries devoted to the detailed description of aboriginal community life. This resource has been tapped into by linguists to explore the extensive vocabulary and language records that Thompson made as he dwelled among the Salish community.⁶ Unfortunately, historians have not utilized this resource to its fullest extent, so as to develop both a deeper understanding of the attitudes of explorers in Canada towards the aboriginal people and a greater knowledge of the lifestyles and behaviours of aboriginal communities. This study will analyze the movements of Thompson with the Native people of North America to gain insight into the way in which Thompson viewed the aborigines as individuals as well as larger groups. This insight into early contact between Euro-Canadian explorers and Western aborigines can be carried into a discussion of contemporary issues surrounding the Native people of Canada.

David Thompson was born to Welsh parents in Westminster of London, England in 1770. He boarded and studied at the Grey Coat School in London, which is recognized by today's scholars to be a "first class institution."⁷ There he undertook common lessons which would have been taught to most boys, but was singled out with another companion to learn the skills that would propel him into geographical folklore, mathematical skills necessary for naval service.⁸ The 1783 Treaty of Paris reduced military demands of the British Royal Navy, and a year later Thompson boarded the Prince Rupert to join the Hudson's Bay Company as an apprentice in North America. At such a young age, Thompson did little outside the proximity of Churchill Factory where he began his duties for the Hudson's Bay Company. It was not until he was sent to the western interior at the age of sixteen that he began to gain a deep understanding of the Native way of life. Under Mitchell Oman, Thompson learned about life, travel and trade from a man who was respected amongst the aborigines, whose language he had acquired.⁹ This preliminary tutorial prepared Thompson for his frequent and substantial interactions with western Natives, and instilled within him a respect for the Natives.

After spending the winter with Oman, Thompson and his expedition traveled further west to Alberta, where they caught their first glimpse of the Rocky

Mountains. His description captures the majesty of the range.

"At length the Rocky Mountains came in sight like shining white clouds in the horizon, but we doubted what our guide said; but as we proceeded they rose in height their immense masses of snow appeared above the clouds, and formed an impassable barrier, even to the Eagle." ¹⁰

As Thompson and his party approached the Bow River, they came into the company of the Peigan tribe, with whom Thompson would spend the next winter. Here he would gain intensive first-hand knowledge of the Native way of life. This is the most significant winter to impact Thompson and his attitudes and concerns for the Native North Americans.

Thompson was only seventeen years old when he met the Peigan aborigines near the Bow River. Though he had learned a great deal under Oman, he had little prolonged interaction with the Native people and himself, and this winter with the Peigans would serve to establish their prominent place in his work. In his records, Thompson speaks of an elder in the tribe with whom he would become well acquainted. Saukamapee appears to have been a strong and powerful man, despite the fact that he was considerably aged. Thompson depicts him with great detail, describing his distinctive features and his impressive stature. ¹¹ It is Saukamapee that takes a mentoring role in Thompson's life for this winter, showing him the way of the hunt and life within the camp. Thompson learned of the deep and rich history of the Peigans, including the effects of the small pox epidemics and the transition of a society accustomed to guns and horses. ¹² In his *Narrative*, Thompson describes the great deal of time he spent in the tutelage of Saukamapee.

Almost every evening for the time of four months I sat and listened to the old man without being in the least tired, they were blended with the habits and customs and manners, politics and religion such as it was, anecdotes of Indian chiefs, and the means of their gaining influence in war and peace that I always found something to interest me. ¹³

Thompson develops an appreciation for the history of the Peigan people, its leadership, and its structure through Saukamapee's stories. Thompson was also shown cultural subtleties while he spent the winter with the Peigans. Thompson learned always to shake with the left hand, for the "left hand is next to the heart and speaks truth and friendship... and is the hand of life." ¹⁴ Thompson was also exposed first hand to the more harsh realities of Peigan life, witnessing war and violence within the camp. Though not all aspects of life

are pleasant or virtuous to him, Thompson gained a deep respect for the distinct culture of these Peigan people.

This deep respect instilled during his winter with Saukamapee and the Peigan people deeply affected the rest of his long career in the Canadian West. His perception of Native culture was shaped by these experiences, and had great a great impact on the way he conducted his business for his employers, both the Hudson's Bay Company until May 1979, and the North West Company thereafter. Particularly with regards to the fur trade, Thompson's perceptions of the Natives held the same respect formed in the winter with Saukamapee. Thompson would not allow the use of liquor in Indian trade, refusing to give it a place in commerce between Company men and the Natives.¹⁵ Thompson had made note of his antipathy towards the involvement of liquor in the lives of the Natives. Noting its ill effects on the Peigans, Thompson wrote that it "seems to dominate them, and has taken such a hold on them that they are no longer the quiet people they were."¹⁶ There is no doubt that Thompson had a concern for the welfare of the Natives with whom he dealt to a far greater extent than was common amongst his trading peers. This regard for the Natives holds fast in Thompson's career, and would serve those in present day legislative bodies well in their interactions with Canadian aborigines.

Thompson not only learned from the Native people about their way of life and methods of survival, but a mutual partnership was often formed between his parties and those of the aborigines. It is believed that David Thompson was the leader of the first group of Euro-Canadians to contact the aborigines in the Kootenay region.¹⁷ Through his interaction with the Pegians, and the informal education he received under Saukamapee, Thompson had adopted skills that would allow him to interact with Native tribes throughout the Northwest of North America. It became customary for Thompson to write letters to the Native peoples and have the correspondence passed from tribe to tribe as if it were an epistle.¹⁸ Thompson knew the importance of communicating with the Natives and establishing connections early in an expedition. The reward of such networking paid great dividends in his work. On one occasion, Thompson received the aid and support of Natives when his party was in great distress at the hands of severe dysentery. Having eaten the meat and fat of an eagle which had been previously caught, Thompson's men fell severely ill within several days. Thompson had given up hope of living through the ordeal when a group of Chipewyan men came upon his party. The men gave the party a broth which healed them of the illness, and supplied them with enough provisions to make it their destination.¹⁹ Thompson's efforts in maintaining an open dialogue with the Western Natives proved to be valuable in his work, and particularly in his life.

Thompson took great pains in ensuring this dialogue was interactive and useful to both parties. When at the Peigan camp for the winter, Thompson notes that Saukamapee was "fond of conversation in his native tongue."²⁰ Thompson demonstrated determination in undertaking the task of learning the

Peigan language at such a young age, with the help of Oman and Saukamapee himself. Thompson moved on from his time with the Peigan Natives on the Bow River to the Salish community near the forty-ninth parallel between present-day British Columbia and the United States. With the help of an interpreter, Thompson compiled a rich collection of terms in a vocabulary list. Michel Bordeaux had preceded Thompson, reaching the Salish communities before Thompson, and had learned the language prior to Thompson's arrival.²¹ Thompson's list is heralded as an incredibly significant resource in the history of aboriginal language studies, and he was not acclaimed for this work until long after he had passed away.²² Thompson's primary work for his Company would have been focused on the trade of pelts, the pursuit of new markets and suppliers of pelts, and the practice of cartography and geographical sciences. Thompson's rigorous efforts in recording and learning the language of the Native groups which he encountered demonstrates the personal significance such a task held for him, and the importance in its pursuit.

Despite having strong respect for the Native communities with which he interacted, David Thompson held strong loyalties to his respective employers. Whether he was under the auspices of the Hudson's Bay Company or the North West Company, Thompson sought to pursue the best interests of the Company for whom he traded with the aborigines. After leaving the Hudson's Bay Company in 1797 for work with the North West Company, Thompson arrived at the Mandan villages along the Missouri River.²³ The demand for these pelts was felt at the factories along the Hudson's Bay, and the company was pushing for its traders to deal in beaver skins. Thompson did not seek to disturb the aboriginal way of life for the purpose of subverting their position or status, but instead he sought to further the economic growth of his employer. This proves to be a consistent theme throughout his journals and *Narrative*. On one occasion, Thompson received word that there might be another trading party which had embarked on a trek across the Rockies. Thompson wasted no time in pursuing rigorous endeavour in order to bring these Native traders to his post at Rocky Mountain House, which was run by the North West Company.²⁴ Thompson's efforts to create a channel by which goods could move from one side of the Rockies to another led to him being recognized as the pioneer of cross-continental trade.²⁵

In exploring Thompson's activities with the Native people, one may grow suspicious of the loftiness of his morality and the distance with which he observes the vile practices before him. There is legitimacy to the wariness that one might find in seeing Thompson aloof of these practices. Thompson was a strictly religious man, whose regard for the "sacred scriptures" permeates his writing.²⁶ The commitment with which Thompson undertakes any task put forth to him by his employer suggests that he would have a similar devotion to the "higher authority" of God. Despite these assurances, questions arise in considering Thompson's apparent ethical detachment from the relative debauchery intrinsic in his Company's activities. Though disputed in recent

studies, the practice of privately trading Native women as slaves has been mentioned in historical studies of the fur trade.²⁷ Though there is no record that Thompson himself was involved in the private acquisition of Native slave women, his close proximity to such activity leaves some questions unanswered. Thompson's marriage to Charlotte Small may alleviate some suspicion. Thompson married the young Métis woman in 1799 and remained married to her through the remaining 58 years of his life. His fidelity in this marriage provides backing to his strict temperance, and suggests that Thompson refrained from the vile activities involved in common trade affairs.

In the world of early exploration and fur trade, David Thompson is a stark contrast to his peers. His acknowledgement of the uniqueness and character within the Native populations, and his respect for these cultures, stood as an exception to the common attitudes of Euro-Canadian elites. According to some of those whose eye was on the conquering of the land, "assimilation, not mutual acculturation was the highest ideal."²⁸ In his own records, Thompson himself acknowledges the prevailing attitude amongst Whites, particularly those in the United States, which is a "mortal antipathy to the North American Indian" and the confidence that the "Red Man, must soon cease to exist and give place to the White Man."²⁹ It is this contrast that strengthens the picture of David Thompson as an exemplary figure in the interaction with Native populations, and the recognition of their distinct place in North American society. Thompson's recognition of the need to uphold the Native community resonates throughout his writing, acknowledging the value and importance of these unique societies in a Euro-Canadian dominated arena.

Where would discussions be between Canada's governing elites and the aborigina leaders if the greater populace was to embrace the attitudes of David Thompson in its interaction with Native communities? What would become of land disputes and program initiatives if there was a predominant sense of understanding, respect, and acknowledgement of unique and distinct heritage which envelopes the aboriginals' history? The major barrier to this dialogue is ignorance, a barrier which is destroyed by recognition, education, and awareness. David Thompson's understanding of the Native people, his efforts in learning their language to maintain active dialogue, and his commitment to their wellbeing as a culture stand as shining examples to the policy makers of today. His perspective heralds the importance of these cultures in our society, and then need to actively pursue understanding between aborigines and government, in order to enrich the dialogue through which policy will be formed and the nation will be directed. Leaders of our government would do well to follow Thompson's example in their interactions with aboriginal leaders for the progression of both the Native people and Canada as a whole.

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