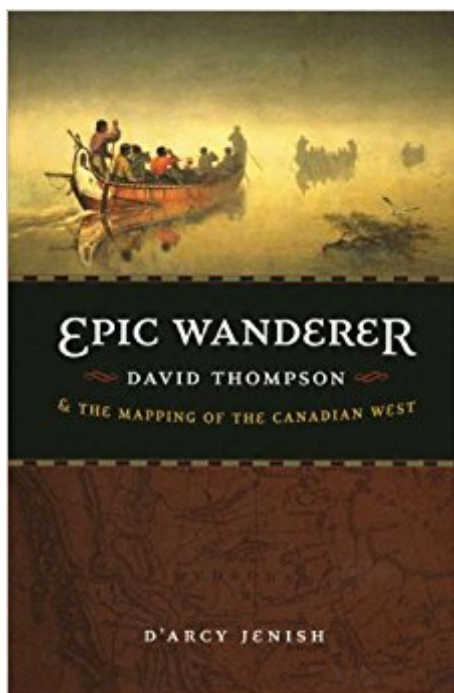


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# Epic Wanderer: David Thompson And The Mapping Of The Canadian West



## Synopsis

*Epic Wanderer*, the first full-length biography of mapmaker David Thompson (1770–1857), is set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries against the broad canvas of dramatic rivalries between the United States and British North America, between the Hudson's Bay Company and its Montreal-based rival, the North West Company, and among the various First Nations thrown into disarray by the advent of guns, horses, and alcohol. Less celebrated than his contemporaries Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Thompson spent nearly three decades, beginning in 1784, surveying and mapping more than 1.2 million square miles of largely uncharted Indian territory. Traveling across the prairies, over the Rockies, and on to the Pacific, Thompson transformed the raw data of his explorations into a map of the Canadian West. Measuring ten feet by seven feet and laid out with astonishing accuracy, the map became essential to the politicians and diplomats who would decide the future of the rich and promising lands of the West. Yet its creator worked without personal glory and died in penniless obscurity. Drawing extensively on Thompson's personal journals, illustrated with his detailed sketches, intricate notebook pages, and the map itself, *Epic Wanderer* charts the life of a man who risked everything in the name of scientific advancement and exploration.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"*Epic Wanderer* is a thoroughly enjoyable, easy read of the life of the fur trader David Thompson." —Arcy Jenish, WAML Information Bulletin (D'Arcy Jenish WAML Information Bulletin) "Thompson's travels in and accurate mapping of the

interior between 1797 and 1812 exceeded the combined mileage of all of the U.S. Geological Survey expeditions into the American West in the 1800s. And that accounts for only a part of the man's greatness and why this book is worth reading cover to cover, maybe twice.

- Outdoor News Bulletin (Outdoor News Bulletin)
- David Thompson was an important, if little known, explorer of the Canadian West. . . . Jenish tells this remarkable man's story from the journal Thompson kept throughout his life and the narrative he wrote in his old age.
- Donna Roper, Journal of the West (Donna Roper Journal of the West)
- Arn Keeling, Oregon Historical Quarterly (Arn Keeling Oregon Historical Quarterly)
- Ruffed Grouse Society (Ruffed Grouse Society)

"Well illustrated and served well by a thorough bibliography, this imaginative reconstruction will whet readers' appetites to seek out the copious literature on Thompson, the 'epic wanderer.'"

- Choice (Choice)

Epic Wanderer, the first full-length biography of mapmaker David Thompson (1770-1857), is set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries against the broad canvas of dramatic rivalries between the United States and British North America, between the Hudson's Bay Company and its Montreal-based rival, the North West Company, and among the various First Nations thrown into disarray by the advent of guns, horses, and alcohol. Less celebrated than his contemporaries Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Thompson spent nearly three decades, beginning in 1784, surveying and mapping more than 1.2 million square miles of largely uncharted Indian territory. Traveling across the prairies, over the Rockies, and on to the Pacific, Thompson transformed the raw data of his explorations into a map of the Canadian West. Measuring ten feet by seven feet and laid out with astonishing accuracy, the map became essential to the politicians and diplomats who would decide the future of the rich and promising lands of the West. Yet its creator worked without personal glory and died in penniless obscurity. Drawing extensively on Thompson's personal journals, illustrated with his detailed sketches, intricate notebook pages, and the map itself, Epic Wanderer charts the life of a man who risked everything in the name of scientific advancement and exploration.

I first saw this book in a store in Banff, at the tail end of a 10-day hiking trip through the Canadian Rockies. I didn't want to lug a book home, so I ordered through . Perhaps I like this book because I hiked a bit of the area it describes, but more important to me is the astonishing story of David Thompson by itself. To get from the east coast to the west, we get an airline ticket. Thompson routinely traveled thousands of miles each year in the late 1700's and early 1800's - mostly in canoes, hauling thousands of pounds of goods to trade for thousands of pounds of pelts and furs. Most astonishing is that armed with only a compass and sextant, Thompson and his little teams found their way across a continent to trade with native tribes. They did 100 miles in a day with nary a thought. What engages me the most is Jenish's ability to weave multiple sources including Thompson's diaries into a compelling you-are-there story of the crossing and mapping of the Canadian west. My highest compliments to the author. If you like adventure and the tingle of learning how men and women (Thompson had his wife and kids with him) did things we'd never attempt today, you'll love this book. It'll make you want to get up and go do something outdoors. It'll make you realize we have fallen behind in 200 years. We are lazy, and we are missing the adventures of our world.

This is the book you need to read to understand David Thompson's life. I previously read his personal account and struggled through some of the raw entries from his journals, D'Arcy Jenish straightens the record by including important Background before the trip and missing information about the aftermath. He does this with an even hand and shows very little bias to the final outcomes. I read the book quickly and reread some parts of it just to be sure I understood what the chronology and geography truly was. The comments and observations that Thompson made , essentially in the margins of his journals, provides an equally fair and unbiased descriptions of the many local and regional native groups Thompson encountered. I was somewhat surprised by his descriptions of the personal and cultural practises he encountered. The die was cast for interactions between Natives and Europeans long before Thompson's encounters. I saw no compelling evidence of any "destruction" of a benign, peaceful and loving Utopia.

If you have ever canoed for a few days or ever trekked in the wilderness with a pack on your back, you will be astounded by the extraordinary physical and intellectual energy of this English-born Canadian explorer. From 1784 to 1812, he traveled many tens of thousands of miles between Montreal and the mouth of the Columbia River, and mapped much of the region in between -- well over one million square miles. Perhaps the single most impressive physical feat of his decades-long

career as a fur trader and surveyor was his crossing of the Canadian Rockies, in the depths of winter, to discover the upper reaches of the Columbia River. It's a daunting enough landscape even in summer. How he ever crossed in winter, dragging heavy supplies and trade goods over high passes in deep snow, I can hardly imagine. For nearly 30 years he worked for the Hudson's Bay Company and the North-west Company, the two great fur-trading companies of the era in the northern part of North America. At the age of 14, he was transplanted from London to the bleak, treeless, windswept shores of Hudson's Bay, there to serve out his seven years apprenticeship at a fur-trading post. He somehow survived the wrenching transition, avoided hungry polar bears, learned French and at least a couple of Indian languages, and mastered the business of fur-trading as well as the art of surveying. The maps he created in the early 19th century were so accurate that they were still in use at the end of the century, despite the immensely greater resources available to the government surveyors who followed him. He also, after he retired as a fur-trader, worked as the chief surveyor for the British as part of the US-British boundary commission that defined much of the border of Canada and the US after the War of 1812. He was one of the greatest map-makers of his time. He was also a man of interesting character, working in a very rough wilderness well beyond the bounds of urban civilization or any kind of government. He was very religious. He married an Indian woman when he was 29 and she was 13, had 10 children with her, and stayed with her until he died at the age of 80, despite the prejudices of pioneer society. He opposed the alcohol trade that was destroying so many Indian tribes and refused to deal in it. He worked extraordinarily hard, away from his family for a year or more at a time. Even in his old age he continued working, writing a several hundred pages-long Narrative of his travels and explorations, which was only published decades after his death. The author of this biography, D'Arcy Jenish, does an excellent job of weaving all this material together in a way that is always interesting and often compelling. Ironically, if I have one complaint, it is this: a book about a map-maker should have a lot more maps in it! The only way to follow Thompson's progress is to sit with the book in hand and an atlas open in your lap. This is a pretty major failing for the book, but if you an atlas with a decently detailed map of the Canadian west and of the US north-west, you will do fine.

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