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Review of *Fur Trade and Exploration: Opening the Far Northwest, 1821-1852* By Theodore J. Karamanski

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Historians of Canadian exploration have repeatedly told the tale of the great journeys
that made known the major lineaments of
orthern North America, but rarely can one
find an integrated account of the exploration of
a major region. Theodore Karamanski makes an
important contribution to the exploration liter­
ature of North America not only by providing
a comprehensive history of the exploration by
Euroamericans of northwestern Canada, a region
larger than many countries, but also by provid­
ing much new information on the course of
individual exploratory journeys within a con­
text where the significance of

Karamanski set himself the task of unravel­
ing the exploration of the complex mountain,
plateau, and canyon country extending be­
tween the Mackenzie River basin on the east
across the northern Rockies and Mackenzie
Mountains into the northern British Columbia
and Yukon plateaus up to the Coast Mountains
of British Columbia and the Alaskan Panhandle.
This terra incognita was explored from 1821–
1852 by Hudson's Bay Company traders. They
were spurred on by the need to extend the fur
trade in search of greater profits, by the often
enticing stories of their Indian informants,
fragmentary information from other distant
explorations and ventures that were often mis­
interpreted, and their own curiosity and zeal.

The chief primary source is the splendid
Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg,
where the past journals and correspondence of
the Hudson's Bay Company servants are avail­
able. Karamanski has researched them thor­
oughly and used them well. He always bears in
mind that the strategies by which the British
fur traders advanced were related to activities
of Americans and Russians on the Pacific
Coast. It was Governor George Simpson who
deployed his men from afar, not always wisely,
as circumstances warranted. Then within this
framework Karamanski gives a succinct account
of each exploration, taking space to present
brief vignettes of the chief explorers—John
McLeod, Robert Cambell, and John Bell—
and describing those aspects of life in the fur
trade related to exploration, such as provision­
ment.

Karamanski knows the narrative is complex
and persistently tries to place each journey in
perspective. But even this is not enough; the
over-all pattern remains difficult to follow be­
cause there are by my count at least nineteen
significant journeys, though others might
reckon differently. The easiest way to have led
the reader through this maze of travels would
have been maps showing new areas actually
opened up by each major advance. This would
have revealed the over-all pattern in a proper
cumulative sequence. The eight maps that Kara­
manski does use simply show rivers, place
names, and a few relief features. No routes are
shown, let alone how the unknown turned into
the known. At the least there should have been
a chronology or table summarizing the expedi­
tions, and serving as an easy reference. That is
what I finally resorted to. These last comments,
however, directed as much to the publisher and
the history and geography professions as to
this book, should not detract from a fine and
useful scholarly achievement—and a good read.

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