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Review of *Epic Wanderer: David Thompson and the Mapping of the Canadian West* By D'Arcy Jenish

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Epic Wanderer: David Thompson and the Mapping of the Canadian West. By D'Arcy Jenish. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 309 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

David Thompson, often known as “the great mapmaker,” spent twenty-five years traveling the entire West and Northwest of North America, covering 75,000 miles by canoe, horseback, and foot, and in the process produced the first comprehensive map of this vast region of about 1.2 million square miles. He then spent many years surveying the new 49th parallel boundary between the United States and Canada.

D'Arcy Jenish has produced, according to his publisher, the first full-length biography of Thompson—in that previous works have not given much consideration to his early and declining years—and has done a creditable job

of following and explaining Thompson's travels in the West. The book describes in some detail how Thompson worked to achieve the precision characteristic of his surveying, the key to which was his innumerable astronomical observations taken with infinite care under often extremely adverse conditions. These allowed Thompson to fix the exact position of thousands of points across the West, which, coupled with his careful running surveys between these points, yielded maps of unprecedented accuracy.

The book does not seem to cover much new ground or reveal any new research. There are no new answers to the question of precisely what drove him in 1797 to leave the Hudson's Bay Company and take up with the North West Company, and no new reasons why Thompson suddenly gave up his life in the wilderness in 1812 and started living in the first house of his own as a sedentary farmer and land investor—the latter being what ultimately got him into so much trouble and left him a pauper. And there is nothing new that might explain better why Thompson took so long to reach the mouth of the Columbia in 1810, when his company's—and even his country's—fortunes depended on it. He arrived at the Pacific to find Fort Astoria already built and occupied by the men of Jacob Astor's rival Pacific Fur Company. Has all we are going to uncover about David Thompson already been found?

Overall, the book is an excellent review of the life of one of history's most underrated explorers and goes some way towards redressing the balance. It could certainly have used more illustrations and, ironically, modern maps showing clearly the routes Thompson took. As it is, small excerpts of the redrawn version of his great map of 1813 are employed, but reproduced so diminutively as to render them useless from a practical point of view.

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