

northwest to fortune across mcdougall pass

Alan Cooke

My title comes, in part, from the name of Vilhjalmur Stefansson's fascinating book, Northwest to Fortune/The Search of Western Man for a Commercially Practical Route to the Far East, published in New York by Duell, Sloan and Pearce in 1958. Late in the summer of 1958, Larry Lyons and I pushed and pulled our red, 16-foot, double-V-stemmed, cedar-and-canvas, copper-keeled, Guide-Prospector's Model, Old Town canoe across enough beaver dams on McDougall Pass to make me sorry I had not thought of bringing some dynamite with me. During the following winter, 1958-59, when I was teaching all subjects to a schoolroom of some 25 Slavey Indian children, Grades 3-6, in Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories, I read Stef's book for the first time.

If I had read Stef's book before we crossed McDougall Pass, I should have had more to think about than the colossal boredom of following a tightly meandering stream sunk some 15 or 20 feet below the surface of the muskeg, our progress impeded by interlaced, overhanging alders that blocked the passage of anything larger than mosquitoes and black flies, of which large clouds attended us--and those wretched beaver dams, one after the other, all the way across McDougall's expletive-deleted Pass.

Now, for a little background. In 1954, while I was still an undergraduate at Dartmouth College, I had worked as deckhand on the riverboats of the Mackenzie River. During the winter of 1956-57, when I was a meteorological observer at the McGill Sub-Arctic Research Station in Schefferville, northern Québec, one of my colleagues, Ivan Hamilton, an Ulster Irishman, listened with interest to my account of a summer on the Mackenzie River. During the next winter, 1957-58, when we were both living in Montreal, he began to talk about canoeing down the Mackenzie River. Ivan did not know anything about canoes nor, indeed, did he know anything about the Northwest Territories. Before long, I had taken over his plans.

I sent Ivan by rail, with our canoe in his baggage, from Montreal to Edmonton, while I hitchhiked from Montreal to Edmonton to save the money my fare would have cost. Together, we took the train to Waterways, northern Alberta, and there we put our canoe in the water for the first time. We descended the Clearwater, Athabasca, and Slave rivers to Fort Smith, just inside the Northwest Territories. There we picked up mail for the first time, and Ivan learned of serious illness among his family at home. This news obliged him to return to Northern Ireland at once. He has never ceased to regret having to give up our expedition, and we still talk of resuming it.

I wrote at once to Trevor Lloyd, then professor of geography at Dartmouth, to ask if he could find me a replacement paddler. Lloyd was away, but his daughter, then about 18, was looking after his mail. Moving heaven and earth was nothing for this young lady. She soon found me a Dartmouth undergraduate who was willing to pay his own way to Fort Smith from his home in Minnesota, and Larry Lyons and I were soon continuing the journey Ivan Hamilton and I had begun.

I shall say nothing of canoeing down Mackenzie River except that we had wonderful weather, no trouble of any kind, and a month to waste in the settlements in and near the delta--Arctic Red River, Fort McPherson, Aklavik, and Inuvik--while we waited for low water on Rat River and for the first frosts to dampen somewhat the enthusiasm and number of mosquitoes and black flies. T.J. Wood, founder and headmaster of Sedburgh School, Montebello, Québec, had crossed McDougall Pass in 1936. He had told me just what we might expect and we could not have had better advice. Eric and Pamela Morse, I should add, had not yet made their crossing of McDougall Pass.

Nor shall I say anything about tracking our canoe up Rat River. This labour cost us about a week of cold, wet work, and we were looking forward to the supposed freedom of McDougall Pass as to our hope of the Promised Land. To our surprise and disappointment, we could see nothing at all from the meandering stream bed, sunk as it was deep into the

muskeg. We could see nothing but one corner after another--they all looked the same, exactly the same--interlaced alder branches, the blue sky directly overhead, and clouds of mosquitoes and black flies. And, for variety, one damn beaver dam after another.

During the next winter in Fort Simpson, I was astonished to learn from Stef's book how much more there is to say about McDougall Pass. The rest of my talk is taken mainly from his book. I shall skip what Stef had to say about the Greeks, about Columbus, and about early attempts at a Northwest Passage by sea, and I shall close in, at once, on the truly astonishing story of the fur traders' search for an inland Northwest Passage.

Samuel Hearne, a servant of the Hudson's Bay Company, in his third expedition to Coppermine River, 1770-72, had established that there is no ocean passage inland from the west coast of Hudson Bay. Alexander Mackenzie, a servant of the North West Company, explored the great river that now bears his name in 1789. He had hoped this river might carry him to the Pacific. On July 14th, a rising tide soaked his baggage, and he realized then that he had not reached the Pacific, he had reached Hearne's Arctic Ocean. He returned back up the river he now named The River of Disappointment. I now quote Stef.

Mackenzie did not realize, nor did anyone else for more than half a century, that the river he had discovered [in 1789], and another great river [the Yukon], to be discovered forty years later, have nearly or quite the strangest relationship possible to rivers, and one made to order as a passage through the [North American] continent. It is common with rivers that boat travelers can ascend one, pass over a divide, and descend another; but there appears to be only one pair of great rivers in the world so placed that the traveler can go downstream to one river's delta and then, through making a reasonable portage, continue, still downstream, a thousand miles to the delta of the second stream, without material change of course. The Mackenzie and the Yukon alone meet these requirements. From near the center of the North American continent they, taken as one, run in practically a great-circle course toward China; and a portage, commercially satisfactory to the fur trade as it was in the time before railways, leads from the delta of the Mackenzie to the headwaters of the Porcupine component of the Yukon system.

Eluded is the right word to apply to Mackenzie and this unrealized discovery. For had he wintered 1789-90 at the delta of the river he discovered, his interpreters would have learned, as interpreters of other fur traders were destined to learn, that a portage, of a kind routine to the fur trade, leads from the head of the Mackenzie Delta to waters that flow westward.

This discovery...would have been likewise the effective discovery of the Yukon, and would have led, as things then were, to the British occupation of Alaska nearly or quite down to Bering Sea.... The United States in 1789 was not a country powerful enough to object to British expansion in northern North America, or in a temper to do so. The British failure to push to the Pacific by the Mackenzie-Yukon route is one of the striking geographical might-have-beens of history (pp. 131-32).

There are other might-have-beens associated with Mackenzie's discovery on 14 July 1789, the original Bastille Day. Mackenzie's narrative Voyages from Montreal...appeared in 1801. Napoleon is said to have ordered a translation of it, interested in the possibility of invading British North America by Mackenzie River to connect with French territory in Louisiana. On reading the book, he very sensibly gave up the idea.