

Four years later, in 1793, Mackenzie became the first European to cross North America north of Mexico. In 1811, David Thompson explored the Columbia River to its mouth. In 1815, the North West Company, distracted by mounting competition from the Hudson's Bay Company, abandoned its trade in the Mackenzie District. In 1821, as every schoolchild knows, the two companies amalgamated under the Hudson's Bay Company's charter. In 1826, John Franklin's second overland expedition discovered Peel River. Finally, in 1839, John Bell surveyed the Peel River some 90 miles upstream. Then he returned to the Mackenzie delta and explored Rat River to McDougall Pass.

So there Bell was on the continental divide, the autumn of 1839, and camped at a swampy meadow where the waters seep in two directions, one trickle bound for the Yukon and the Pacific, another for the Mackenzie and thus...to the middle regions of North America, without realizing...that here was the key to the final link in [an overland] Northwest Passage (p. 175).

More than 30 years passed before the Hudson's Bay Company clearly realized the importance of Bell's discovery of McDougall Pass in 1839. Meantime, in 1840, Bell returned to Peel River with Alexander Kennedy Isbister to establish a trading post, now known as Fort McPherson. Isbister explored Peel River again and returned to McDougall Pass again. Neither Bell nor Isbister had realized that the westward drainage from McDougall Pass is the headwaters of the Bell River, a tributary of the Yukon, the Great River of Alaska.

In spring 1842, Isbister made a five-day march from Fort McPherson west across the Richardson Mountains to the Bell River, which he named and which he descended for five days, perhaps as far as the Porcupine. In 1843, another man led a second attempt to find a practical route across the mountains and, in 1845, Bell made yet a third attempt, following his own route of 1842. This time, he built canoes and descended the Bell and Porcupine rivers to the Yukon River but, once again, he did not recognize the importance of his achievement. In 1847, Alexander Hunter Murray retraced Bell's route of 1842 and he established Fort Yukon where the Porcupine joins the Yukon.

For 30 years, the Hudson's Bay Company used dogs and sleds on a 90-mile winter road, up hill and down dale, to supply Fort Yukon from Fort McPherson. In 1867, the Russians, who had tolerated the existence of Fort Yukon within Russian America, sold Alaska to the United States for \$7.2 million. In 1869, the Americans invited the Hudson's Bay Company to leave Alaska. The company moved to a location on the Porcupine River they called Rampart House. In 1890, the Americans told them they were still in Alaska, so they had to move upriver once again.

It was in the pages of Stef's book that I first met Perry McDonough Collins, "a man," Stef says, "of immense vitality and charm, whose eyes saw everything and whose personality and credentials...attracted everybody, most especially everybody of diplomatic and commercial influence and consequence" (p. 248). Collins had conceived the notion of connecting the cities of the New World with the cities of the Old by a telegraph line that would run some 4,300 miles overland, at least 3,500 of these miles through unexplored territory--from New York, westward through Hudson's Bay Company territory, up Rat River, across Russian America, and then across Siberia to Europe, an enterprise breathtaking in its scope and implications.

In eight years, between 1856 and 1864, Perry McDonough Collins, almost singlehanded, and acting during at least the last four years solely as a private individual, had completed almost to the smallest material detail the prospectus of a telegraph that would link all the cities of the northern hemisphere.... He had purchased, with charm, civility, enthusiasm, generosity of spirit, and unremitting, cheerful labor, generous guarantees of cooperation and royal concessions in property from two of the great powers of the world [the United States and Russia] (pp. 252-53).

In 1864, Collins offered the Western Union Telegraph Company the right to build the Collins Overland Telegraph between San Francisco and Siberia. Between 1864 and 1866, news of the progress of this line was constantly in the pages of the

world's press. In July 1866, the American Telegraph Company, after three failures, finally succeeded in laying a trans-Atlantic cable between Newfoundland and Ireland. The Western Union Telegraph Expedition abandoned its overland line forthwith.

Only in 1872, did the Hudson's Bay Company, three years after leaving Fort Yukon and 33 years after Bell's discovery in 1839 of what we now call McDougall Pass, try to find, between Fort McPherson and the Bell-Porcupine drainage, a better means of communication than the 90-mile hill-and-dale winter route they had been using all that time to carry supplies and furs between Fort McPherson and LaPierre's House, the depot on Bell River for Fort Yukon. John McDougall's rediscovery, if we can call it that, of the pass that bears his name came too late to serve the fur trade, but it came in plenty of time to serve the Klondike gold rush of 1897-99.

Stef quotes some wonderful passages from narratives of the gold rush that used McDougall Pass, after having camped at Destruction City, near the mouth of Rat River, to burn the boats that had carried them down Mackenzie River. They burned their boats to recover the nails, then they carried the nails across the pass to build new boats on the other side.

The overland-telegraph scheme and the Klondike gold rush both had their influence on many ideas current during the late-19th century for a railway connection between New York and Paris. In 1898, E.H. Harriman, the railway baron, visited the Smithsonian Institution to invite some scientists to join him in a cruise along the Alaskan coast to Bering Strait. The scientific results of this informal expedition appeared in 14 volumes, 1901-14. We do not know exactly what Harriman's plans for a railroad were because he held his cards close to his chest, he died in 1909, and his papers were destroyed in a fire in 1913. Stef has pieced out this fascinating story from many sources.

In another chapter, Stef offers persuasive reasons that I do not have time to summarize now why the Alaska Highway and the Canol Pipeline should have been routed down Mackenzie River and across the Rocky Mountains, perhaps by McDougall Pass, to Fairbanks. I shall return instead to recollections of my own thoughts after reading Northwest to Fortune thirty years ago in Fort Simpson. Only then did I realize fully what my partner and I had accomplished.

While camped at Summit Lake, Larry and I devoted a day (28 August) to sightseeing. High on a mountain side above the pass, we looked down upon the mosquito-infested, alder-laced, beaver-dammed ditch that, during the past two days, had given new meaning to boredom. During a long silence, we watched ever-shifting bursts of sunlight, blinding in their sudden intensity, move across the subdued autumnal colours of the valley far below us. During seven days, we had tracked our canoe more than a thousand feet up a rough staircase of cold, rushing water to see this view spread out for us alone.

There lay McDougall Pass, dreaming in the moving sunlight, lonely and wild, its usefulness unused, its promises unfulfilled. The afternoon passed too quickly. Recollection of that vista moves me even now to tears. On every page of my journal, I complained of mosquitoes, beaver

dams, cold water, and wet work. Yet I knew then--and I confirm it now--I would gladly have repeated the longest, coldest, wettest day we ever had if, at the end of the day, I could climb once more into my sleeping bag and, with a big enamel bowl full of hot, buttered, overproof rum balanced on my knee, joke with my partner about the tribulations of the day we had just come through together and speculate about what tomorrow might bring. Our troubles vanished, and I could hear the goodness of life itself singing to me in the darkness.