

THE NAME OF MOUNT ROBSON A PUZZLE

Charming scenery and interesting history are the rewards for those who journey from Seattle to Mount Robson by the Great Northern and Canadian National Railways. He would be dull indeed who did not feel an enthusiasm for history while gazing at the great river from the beautiful park in New Westminster. Looking up from the river to the bronze figure of a rugged man, one may read on the pedestal: "Erected in honor of Simon Fraser to commemorate his discovery of the Fraser River 1808, New Westminster September 1908."

Thus the Royal City had reared its monument of approval one century after the courageous explorer had made his way in canoes from the headwaters to the mouth of the river that has since borne his name. Not far from the Fraser statue stands a fine large school bearing the name of John Robson. Too hastily The Mountaineers, the Alpine club whose members were to spend two weeks in the summer of 1927 in Mount Robson Park, concluded that the school had been named for the same man who had been honored by having his name bestowed on the greatest peak of the Canadian Rockies.

In addition to travelling by the side of the Fraser River, hours of travel were also enjoyed by the side of its largest tributary, Thompson River, named in honor of David Thompson, one of the greatest geographers to explore the wilderness of Northwestern America in the early years of the nineteenth century.

After leaving the Thompson River and before reaching once more a fork of the Fraser River, we crossed Canoe River, one of the northernmost tributaries of the Columbia River. This was certainly a place where the charm of the annals of fur-trading days could add zest to the marvelous scenery. It was a sufficiently great event to be there at the source of waters flowing in one direction toward Puget Sound and in another direction to the Pacific Ocean by the way of the Columbia River, but a still greater thrill of the same kind was ahead of us.

Leaving the train at a station called Mount Robson, we travelled through the Valley of a Thousand Falls to Robson Pass. Beyond Berg Lake, whose waters flow into Fraser River, we met a marker on the Interprovincial Boundary, which informed us that we were going from British Columbia into Alberta. We

camped on the shore of Lake Adolphus and were surprised to learn that its waters drained into the Smoky River, thence into Peace River and ultimately into the Arctic Ocean.

The very names of these rivers conjured up such heroic men as Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Frazer, David Thompson, David Douglas, John McLeod, the Ermatingers and others. Here we were drinking the water of those historic rivers at their sparkling sources.

Our best climbers were turned back by ice conditions on Mount Robson, but other peaks like Resplendent, The Lynx, Whitehorn, Mumm and Rearguard were ascended. Glaciers were explored, Moose Pass was visited and the outing was voted a complete success.

Our great surprise was the mystery wrapped around the discovery and naming of the giant of the peaks, Mount Robson. George Denison and Harold Brittain, who have been working and guiding in that vicinity for twenty years or more, could give no information and claimed that they had sought in vain for such information from all sources known to them.

It was believed that contact with good libraries would quickly solve the puzzle. Soon after returning from the mountains, search was begun. It was persisted in for weeks and the problem still remains a puzzle. A record of the searches may lead others to a final solution.

First of all a letter was sent to Judge F. W. Howay of New Westminster. He is one of the best informed authorities on Northwestern history and he was asked if there was any possibility that the naming of the school in his home city and of the great peak in the Canadian Rockies could have been for the same man. He replied:

"I received your note regarding Mount Robson and its possible connection with the Hon. John Robson after whom one of our schools is named. There is no connection whatever. John Robson was a newspaperman who became very prominent here in the late '80s and died in 1892 as Premier of the Province. We do not know when or why Mt. Robson was named but it was known by that name as early as 1863, for it is mentioned by Milton and Cheadle in their *North-West Passage by Land*. No earlier reference so far as I know has been found. It is said that it was named after some Robson, a trapper or fur-trader, but I have never been able to locate such a man. I have tried the Geographic Board on this question but they can throw no

light, nor can any one else to whom I have spoken. It is a puzzle."

His reference to the Milton and Cheadle book is also used by Howard Palmer and J. Monroe Thorington in their *A Climber's Guide to the Rocky Mountains of Canada*, published for The American Alpine Club by The Knickerbocker Press of New York in 1921. The same citation is here mentioned as the first reference to the mountain's present name, but the year is given as 1865. That was the year the Milton and Cheadle book was published. It was evidently a very popular work for it passed rapidly through many editions beginning with the first edition in 1865. The first sentence of the narrative tells of sailing from Liverpool for Quebec on June 19, 1862. The first winter was spent east of the Rockies. It was therefore July 14, 1863, when this famous record of the peak was made. The record is here reproduced in full from Milton and Cheadle's *North-West Passage by Land*, page 257:

"A few hours' travelling in the morning of the 14th brought us to the Grand Fork of the Fraser, where an important branch from the north or north-east flows by five separate mouths into the main body of the Fraser, which we had been following thus far. Here we pulled up, in order to search carefully for safe fords by which to cross these numerous swollen streams. This Grand Fork of the Fraser is the original Tete Jaune Cache, so called from being the spot chosen by an Iroquois trapper, known by the sobriquet of the Tete Jaune, or "Yellow Head," to hide the furs he obtained on the western side. The situation is grand and striking beyond description. At the bottom of a narrow rocky gorge, whose sides were clothed with dark pines, or, higher still, with light green shrubs, the boiling, impetuous Fraser dashed along. On every side the snowy heads of mighty hills crowded round, whilst, immediately behind us, a giant among giants, and immeasurably supreme, rose Robson's Peak. This magnificent mountain is of conical form, glacier-clothed, and rugged. When we first caught sight of it, a shroud of mist partially enveloped the summit, but this presently rolled away, and we saw its upper portion dimmed by a necklace of light feathery clouds, beyond which its pointed apex of ice, glittering in the morning sun, shot up far into the blue heaven above, to a height of probably 10,000 or 15,000 feet. It was a glorious sight, and one which the Shushwaps of The Cache assured us had rarely been seen by human eyes, the summit being generally hidden by clouds."

Palmer and Thorington's *Guide*, page 161, gives as the second known printed reference to the mountain's name as found in a report by A. R. C. Selwyn, Director of the Geological Survey of Canada, under date of October 23, 1871. It is there referred to as "the magnificent mountain, Robson's peak." Selwyn was told by an Indian that the Indian name for the peak means "The lines in the rocks." Palmer and Thorington place in parenthesis the Indian name as (*Yuh-hai-has-kun*).

With these known references considered let us now begin a rather tantalizing search among other sources.

The first civilized man to approach the vicinity of Mount Robson was Alexander Mackenzie in 1793. One of the maps accompanying his highly prized classic, *Voyages from Montreal Through the Continent of North America*, shows his journey up the Peace River, through the Rocky Mountains, a portage to what he calls the "Tacoutche Tesse or Columbia River." This stream fifteen years later was to become known as the Fraser River. Near the sources of these streams he shows a mass of mountains with the name "The height of Land." Nearby he enters on the map "Canoe Wreck'd." One cannot help the feeling that Mount Robson is part of "The height of Land" and that we see there at least one of the origins of the name for Canoe River.¹ Although it throws no positive light on the history of Mount Robson, there is here reproduced from Mackenzie's narrative, page 216, his entry for that June day of 1793 when according to his own map he was nearest to Mount Robson:

"The weather was the same as yesterday, and we proceeded between three and four in the morning. We took up the net which we had set the preceding evening, when it contained a trout, one white fish, one carp, and three jub. The lake is about two miles in length, East by South, and from three to five hundred yards wide. This I consider as the highest and Southernmost source of the Unjigah, or Peace River, latitude, 52.24. North, longitude 121. West of Greenwich, which, after a winding course through a vast extent of country, receiving many large rivers in its progress, and passing through the Slave Lake, empties itself into the Frozen Ocean, in 70. North latitude, and about 135 West longitude."

In a volume by L. R. Masson, entitled *Les Bourgeois de la Campagne du Nord-Ouest* there is a series of other works in-

¹ There can be very little doubt that Canoe River received its name from the canoes that were constructed at its mouth. Although called 'Boat Encampment,' it was at this point that Thompson 'finished the canoe,' 16 April, 1811.—James White Manuscript.

cluding one with the title: *Mr. Simon Fraser Journal of a Voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Coast 1808*. The start of the great journey is made on May 22, 1808, from Fraser's Lake on what he calls Fraser's River. They soon come to what he called the Columbia River, through the common error that had persisted from Mackenzie's voyage. Of course it afterwards came to be known as the Fraser River. He makes no mention of, nor near approach to, Mount Robson. One entry, June 1, 1808, is significant as being a hint of another stream that later became known as Thompson River. The entry is as follows:

"Numbers of natives came to see us in the course of the day and remained. They assured us that the navigation for a certain distance below was impracticable, and advised us to leave our canoes in their charge and proceed on our journey by land to a great river that flows from the left into this communication. The country, they said, consisted of plains, and the journey could be performed with horses in four or five days, thence we should have smooth water to the sea. But going to the sea by an indirect way was not the object of the undertaking; I therefore would not deviate and continued our route according to my original intention."

One of the great primal sources of Northwest American history is *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America 1784-1812*, edited by J. B. Tyrrell. The editor's preface, dated at Toronto, April 19, 1915, will please readers of the *Washington Historical Quarterly* by its reference to one of the contributing editors as follows: "In compiling the notes on the country west of the mountains I have been especially fortunate in securing the assistance of Mr. T. C. Elliott, of Walla Walla, Washington, U.S.A., who is intimately acquainted with the early history of the north-western states and especially of the Columbia valley. He was kind enough to visit me in Toronto, where we had the pleasure of reading over Thompson's original note-books together. His notes throughout are signed with his initials, T.C.E." Like the other beautiful publications of the Champlain Society, this book, in limited issue, was largely over-subscribed by a waiting list of libraries and individuals.

The missing of Mount Robson in this geographical masterpiece is in itself a baffling puzzle. Thompson River has its rise near the mountain. The *Narrative* carries a series of beautiful illustrations of mountains marked "As sketched by David Thomp-

son." One of these is labeled: "Rocky Mountains, East of the Head of the Columbia River, B.C." Another is labeled: "Nelson Mountains, West of the Head of the Columbia River, B.C." Mount Robson is not indicated. In a pocket at the back of the book is Thompson's great map of his manifold explorations. He there reproduces Mackenzie's "Height of land" at the source of what he calls the "South Fork of Peace River." Near the same spot he shows one of the sources of the Fraser River, on which, slightly southwest of the "Height of land," he wrote: "The Place of Mr. Simon Fraser and Party's departure." Again one has the feeling that an explorer was near the giant of the Canadian Rockies without seeing it. However, this conjecture may result from too close dependence on the original Mackenzie and Thompson maps. The British Columbia Department of Lands has issued a map dated 1923 showing Sir Alexander Mountain at 54 degrees North Latitude and 120 degrees West Longitude (which is nearer Mackenzie's own observations). Near this location rise the Parsnip River, a branch of Peace River, and the McGregor River, a branch of Fraser River. It may be that Sir Alexander Mountain is the older "Height of Land."² In that case Mount Robson would be 78.9 miles to the southeastward. In a footnote on page 453 of the *Narrative*, Mr. Elliott says, "Thompson refers to the whole Selkirk range as Mount Nelson."³

Probably the nearest approach to Mount Robson in Thompson's *Narrative* is his references to Canoe River. On crossing the divide through Athabaska Pass in January, 1811, he built a cabin at the mouth of Canoe River where he spent three months before starting on his journey to the Pacific Ocean. Mr. Elliott (footnote in *Narrative*, page 451) calls attention to the fact that the site of this cabin became the famous "Boat Encampment," the rendezvous for travel across the Rocky Mountains by the Athabaska Pass. The 1923 British Columbia map still shows Boat Encampment at that place.

On returning from the Pacific Ocean, Thompson reached his Canoe River cabin late in September, 1811. Not finding there the men and messages he expected from the east, his party poled

² The use of the term 'Height of Land' on Canadian maps and in accounts of explorations written by Canadians, is simply a survival of the French 'Hauteur des Terres,' which should have been translated 'water-parting.' The reference, therefore, is not to Sir Alexander Mountain, but the water-parting between the waters of the Peace River and the waters of the Fraser.—James White Manuscript.

³ Mount Nelson is a single peak in the Selkirks, and, therefore, one of the hundreds of peaks in Thompson's 'Nelson Mountains.'—James White Manuscript. It should be here added that Mr. Elliott's full note on 453 of *David Thompson's Narrative*, is: "Thompson refers to the whole Selkirk range as Mount Nelson. He is here at the northern end of the range."

their canoe up Canoe River forty-eight miles. On pages 534-536 he describes the river and its interesting valley. Says he: "The valley of this River with it's stream diminished to a Brook is computed by the Hunters to be near one hundred miles in length, with a breadth never exceeding one mile; the Moose Deer and Beaver have been, and are yet so abundant throughout this Valley, that the Hunters call it the 'sack of Provisions'; the paths of the former, from the low Hills on one side crossing to the other side are five to six feet in width and worn a foot deep in the ground; almost all our meat, while in this quarter, came from this River."

Not long after crossing the upper part of Canoe River, passengers on the Canadian National Railway come in sight of Mount Robson. Thompson's excursion up the river in 1811 was not far enough, or he failed to climb high enough from the river's bank, or something else prevented his seeing the great peak before he retraced his way eastward through Athabaska Pass. The hunters who wore down the moose trails he mentioned were, of course, Indians.⁴

One other source is interesting but, in a way, quite as baffling as the others. David Douglas, the famous pioneer botanist, also drew near to Mount Robson without seeing it.⁵ His *Journal* was published by William Wesley & Son, London, in 1914, for the Royal Horticultural Society. While the primary interest is botany there is also much of geography and history in the book. The following entry, page 259, shows his passing from the Columbia drainage to that of the Athabaska in the month of May, 1827:

"Wednesday, 2nd.—My ankles and knees pained me so much from exertion that my sleep was short and interrupted. Rose at 3 A.M. and had fire kindled; thermometer 20°. Started at a quarter-past four through a gradually rising point of wood which terminated three hundred yards below the highest part of the pass in the valley. An hour's walking took us to one of the head springs of the Columbia, a small lake or basin twenty yards in diameter, circular, which divides its waters, half flowing to the Pacific and half to the hyperborean sea—namely, the headwaters of the Athabasca River. A small lake, about 47° of N. latitude,⁶ divides its waters between the Columbia and one of the

⁴ The Moose trails were worn down by the moose and not by the hunters.—James White Manuscript.

⁵ The only occasion upon which Douglas could have seen Mount Robson was when he climbed Mount Brown. So long as he was in the valley, it would be invisible.—James White Manuscript.

⁶ An apparent error of about five degrees.

branches of the Missamac, which is singular. This being a half-way house, or stage, I willingly quickened my pace, now descending on the east side."

The botanist was quite meticulous about every genus and species of plants but often neglected the initials of his two friends McLeod. The editor's index grouped all references to that name under A. R. McLeod. A careful reading of the *Journal* will show that A. R. McLeod was with him during a journey up the Multnomah (now Willamette) River while John McLeod was carrying for him to Edmonton a precious tin box of collected seeds. This John McLeod had told him about work in 1825 around the region of the Smoky and Peace Rivers. Furthermore, in the 1826 season the same McLeod expected to meet and work with Thomas Drummond, a botanist returning with the Sir John Franklin party. The box of seeds had evidently passed to the custody of another as is shown by the entry for May 10, 1827, pages 264-265: "Learned that Mr. McDonald, the person who had charge of my box of seeds addressed to be left at Fort Edmonton on the Saskatchewan River, had endured much misery descending the Athabaska, the ice being taken before he had made good half his journey. In company with him Mr. Drummond. Hope my box is safe (do not relish botanist coming on contact with another's gleanings)."

Later the two botanists met and fraternized cordially enough. Still there is here a hint that each botanist might wish to keep to himself until published the record of his own scientific discoveries. The same might well apply also to geographical discoveries. If Thomas Drummond, botanist, and John McLeod, fur-trader, worked near the headwaters of the Smoky River⁷ they might easily come within sight of Mount Robson. If either or both of those men kept journals, it may be that they will yield a solution to the puzzle as to the discovery and naming of the peak.

If there is any value in this hint it may turn out that Mr. Drummond,⁸ from his experience with Sir John Franklin would have great respect for Joseph Robson, author of two important books appearing in 1752 and 1764. After six years' residence at Hudson's Bay, Mr. Robson wrote his book on strengthening the British hold there and on surveys of Nelson River fortifica-

⁷ Drummond and McLeod were not in the vicinity of the headwaters of the Smoky, Drummond's work being confined to the lower portion of that river.—James White Manuscript.

⁸ It is practically a certainty that Drummond was never in a position to sight present Mount Robson.—James White Manuscript.

tion for the entrance to Churchill River and other works in regions later familiar to the party of Sir John Franklin. The other book was called *The British Mars*. Part II "Contains methods to fortify dwelling Houses that even Women and Children may defend themselves from Indians with small Arms, designed for our Settlements in America, and other Places. . . . of a Copper Mine near Hudson's Bay; And of Discovering the North-West Passage, or determine there is no such Passage; with Cautions and Directions. The whole illustrated by Eleven Plates. By Joseph Robson, Engineer." (See Sabine *Biblioteca Americana* XVII., 418-419).

Sir John Franklin would certainly know of those books and it is quite reasonable to suppose that the author of the books would be held in high esteem by members of the Franklin party including the botanist, Thomas Drummond.

Judge Howay furnished the information that Mr. James White, Technical Adviser in the Canadian Department of Justice at Ottawa, had access to the original journal kept by W. B. Cheadle, from which some illuminating facts might be gleaned. The above portion of this article being in type, a proof was sent to Mr. White with a request for information. He was kindness itself and gave freely from his store of knowledge on the puzzling question of the discovery of Mount Robson, a matter which he has evidently studied with care over a period of years.

In the first place he gave the only reference found in Cheadle's original journal as follows: "This grand fork is the original 'Tete Juane's Cache' and is certainly the finest scene I have ever viewed. To the right Robson's Peak, a magnificent mountain, high, rugged, covered with deep snow, the top now clearly seen, although generally covered with clouds." From that brief entry was expanded the reference on page 257 of the Milton and Cheadle book as reproduced in full above.

Mr. White has written on this subject, as will be shown presently. In preparing his article he sought information about the discovery of Mount Robson from Cheadle's son, who "could not suggest anything in connection with the matter, nor could Milton's son, the present Earl Fitzwilliam."

The conjectures in the above study of this puzzle bear their own stamp of sincerity and are allowed to stand notwithstanding the fact that Mr. White has pointed out a number of misinterpretations. His corrections are gladly added as footnotes, in each case indicated as from the James White manuscript.

Mr. White's study of this problem was published in the *Canadian Alpine Journal*, as shown by the following extract from that periodical, Volume XIV, 1924:

"The writer hoped to find in the journal some information respecting the derivation of the name of Mount Robson. A study of the whole question, however, seems to demonstrate that it had been named prior to their expedition. Except 'Robson,' Cheadle's journal contains practically no names of geographical features between the foot-hills and Kamloops, except 'Athabaska' and 'Thompson,' which had been on the maps for many years.

"The question, then, arises: From whom did they obtain the name? A correspondent of the *Montreal Gazette* has stated that it was named by an overland party from Huntingdon, Que., who crossed the mountains in 1862, a year prior to the Milton and Cheadle expedition.

"The fact that the name is noted in the journal of 14 July negatives the theory that Cheadle could have obtained the information at a later date when in Victoria or in the Cariboo district and where he might have met some members of the 'overlanders.' Again, the Huntingdon party was travelling westward, and, between Ste. Anne, Alta., and Kamloops, Milton and Cheadle met only one white man, namely, Macaulay, at Jasper House.

"The only person connected with the Huntingdon expedition whom Milton or Cheadle met, prior to reaching Mount Robson, was André Cardinal, who had accompanied one overland party as far as the junction of the Albreda and North Thompson. Cardinal gave them 'a rough outline of the road as far as he had gone,' and, if the peak had been named by the overland party, one would expect to find it indicated on his plan. The reproduction of Cardinal's sketch in Cheadle's journal, however, does not contain the name nor is there any reference therein to the peak.

"The question immediately arises: If Cardinal gave them the name, did he give it correctly, assuming that he was speaking from memory respecting an occurrence of a year prior to his meeting with Milton and Cheadle? Is there any name that sounds like 'Robson' and that is a probable name? For instance, the name might have been Robinson or Robertson."

While disposing of a number of conjectures by others, Mr. White concludes with one of his own, which may yet point the way toward a solution of the puzzle.

He furthermore calls attention, in his valuable letter, to the

fact that Father Morice, in his *History of the Northern Interior of British Columbia*, page 157, gives a reliable statement respecting the discovery of the Yellowhead Pass and then hints that Mount Robson may have been discovered at the same time. Mr. White adds: "Certain persons have insisted that it was named after an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, but, as a matter of fact, an examination of the Company's records for forty years prior to 1863, fails to disclose anyone bearing this name."

Again he says about my references to Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser and David Thompson: "it should be borne in mind that not one of these men was in a position to see this peak, unless he climbed a high mountain, and, in the opinion of an old-time fur-trader, climbing mountains was a degree of foolishness which seemed to indicate insanity."

Of course we who had gone to climb the mountains, if possible, can hardly be blamed for ignoring that philosophy of the old fur-trader.

EDMOND S. MEANY.
