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FROM THE

ASSINIBOINE TO THE YELLOWSTONE

1805

EDITED WITH NOTES BY
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INTRODUCTION.

In a letter dated November 7th, 1806, Sir Alexander MacKenzie writes his cousin, Roderick McKenzie, of the North West Company: 'When I wrote you respecting the publication of the second edition of my voyages, I had not the most distant idea that it was the intention of the Company to give the History of the Northwest, and now, instead of asking your assistance, I offer you mine, as you are the person that seems to take the lead.' In a foot-note to this letter, in his Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest, L. R. Masson throws some further light upon this project: "The Hon. R. McKenzie was a man of considerable literary attainments and very extensive reading. He appears to have at one time entertained the idea of publishing a History of the Aboriginal tribes of the Northwest, as well as a History of the Northwest Company. In order to procure the necessary materials for that work, he sent printed circulars to many of the wintering partners and clerks of the Northwest Company, requesting them to collect, and send to him in the form of letters or journals, such information as they could obtain relating to the country in which they were respectively stationed; the natives, their origin, religion, morals and customs; their most eminent chiefs, their government; the origin of their trade with the white, &c. He received in response several reports, "accounts," and journals from the Northwest,—some of which are published in this collection (Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest)—but he does not appear to have carried out his original plan, but seems to have been content with collecting a vast number of most interesting extracts from the books of different travellers and writers, and arranging them so as to prove and establish a perfect analogy of race between the Aborigines of the Northwest and other nations, ancient and modern, throughout the world, by the similarity of their ideas, customs and modes of living."
The material so gathered by Roderick McKenzie, or most of it, came eventually into the hands of Senator Masson, and a selection of it was published, with an introduction and notes, in his *Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*. After the death of Senator Masson these valuable documents were sold at auction, many being acquired by the Dominion Archives, others by the Library of McGill University. Among those in the McGill Library is a draft outline of Roderick McKenzie’s projected work, which apparently was to have been in two volumes. It is entitled: ‘Some Account of the Northwest Company. Containing Analogy of Nations Ancient and Modern. By Roderick Mackenzie, Esq., a Director. Member of the Legislative Council of Lower Canada. Lieut.-Col. of Militia. Member of the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec. Member of the American Antiquarian Society; and Fellow of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquities at Copenhagen.’ Whether Roderick McKenzie was appalled at the magnitude of the task he had undertaken, or discouraged by its cost, there is no means of knowing; at any rate his ambitious work never saw the light, in spite of its elaborate title-page.

Among the journals that McKenzie had obtained for his work were the narratives of a series of expeditions overland from the Assiniboine to the Mandan villages on the Missouri. These journals, by François Antoine Larocque, and Charles Mackenzie, clerks in the employ of the Northwest Company, covered the years 1804, 1805 and 1806, and are interesting, not only because of the light they throw upon the history of the fur trade, but also on account of the particulars they furnish as to the life and customs of one of the most remarkable of western tribes, the Mandans. Larocque’s ‘Missouri Journal, 1804–05,’ and the first part of Charles Mackenzie’s ‘Missouri Indians,’ cover the same journey. The expedition was in charge of Larocque, and Mackenzie accompanied him as an assistant.

In the second expedition, of a much more ambitious nature than the first, Larocque was again in charge, with Mackenzie as assistant. Of this journey, or a portion of it, an account is given in Mackenzie’s ‘Second Expedition, 1805,’ but until quite recently Larocque’s own narrative has not been available.
It may have formed part of the material collected by Roderick McKenzie, but if so was not acquired by Masson, and in fact does not seem to have been known to him. References are made in Mackenzie’s narrative of his ‘Third Expedition, 1805,’ to Larocque’s journal, but for a long time no trace could be found of the document itself. In fact the original journal is still missing, but what purports to be an exact copy is now in the Library of Laval University, Montreal, with a number of other manuscripts bequeathed to that institution by the late Judge Béby of Montreal. This ‘Journal of a Voyage to the Rocky Mountains from my leaving the Assinibois River on the 2nd June, 1805,’ as it is entitled, is now printed for the first time, being, so far as can be ascertained at present, a verbatim transcript of the original.

Mackenzie accompanied Larocque only as far as the Mandan and Minnetaree villages on the Missouri. Up to that point each journal forms an admirable commentary upon the other, as in the case of the previous expedition. Mackenzie also supplements Larocque in regard to the preparations for the latter’s journey from the Missouri villages to the country of the Rocky Mountain Indians, or Crows, and the attempts of some of the Minnetarees to block the enterprise. From the time of Larocque’s final departure, however, until his return in October nothing has hitherto been known of his movements beyond Mackenzie’s meagre reference, in his ‘Third Expedition.’ ‘On the 18th November,’ he says (he was a month out, Larocque’s journal proving that he returned on the 18th October), ‘to our great joy our worthy friend Mr. Larocque and his party made their appearance from their visit to the Rocky Mountain. It is not necessary that I should give the particulars of his journey, as Mr. Larocque himself has kept an account of it, I shall merely observe that he was disappointed in his expedition, suffered great hardships and took no less than thirty-six days on his return to our establishment.’ It was thirty-four days, to be strictly accurate.

Before going further it may be worth while to quote an interesting passage from Daniel Williams Harmon’s ‘Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America.’ Under date of April 10th, 1805, he writes:

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'While at Montagne à la Basse, Mr. Chaboillez induced me to consent to undertake a long and arduous tour of discovery. I am to leave that place, about the beginning of June, accompanied by six or seven Canadians, and by two or three Indians. The first place at which we shall stop will be the Mandan Village, on the Missouri River. Thence, we shall steer our course towards the Rocky Mountain, accompanied by a number of the Mandan Indians, who proceed in that direction every spring, to meet and trade with another tribe of Indians, who reside on the other side of the Rocky Mountain. It is expected that we shall return from our excursion in the month of November next.'

To this statement Harmon added the following, apparently when preparing his narrative for publication: 'This journey I never undertook; for soon after the plan of it was settled, my health became so much impaired, that I was under the necessity of proceeding to Headquarters, to procure medical assistance. A Mr. La Rocque attempted to make this tour, but went no farther than the Mandan Village.' This last statement reveals remarkable ignorance of the extent of Larocque's journey; all the more strange when it is remembered that Harmon and Larocque were members of the same fur company. and that Harmon was upon terms of intimacy with Charles J. B. Chaboillez, the Bourgeois or partner in charge of the Upper Red River, or Assiniboine, Department, who had sent Larocque upon his journey, and to whom he reported upon his return. Possibly, from motives of trade policy or for some other reason, the particulars of Larocque's journey may have been so carefully suppressed at the time, that even Harmon was ignorant as to its extent. It will be clear, also, after reading Larocque's narrative, that Harmon was inaccurate as to the movements of the Indians, upon whom he relied to accompany him to the 'Rocky Mountain.'

The special interest of Larocque's journal lies in the fact that it describes the first visit of white men to the country of the Crow Indians, with the exception of La Vérendrye's expedition of 1742–43, and contains the earliest authoritative account of that tribe. The narrative is remarkably clear and full, bespeaking an exceptionally intelligent and wide-awake
traveller; and, despite the comparatively limited field it covers, deserves to rank with such classics of the fur trade as the journals of Alexander Henry, *the Elder*, and his nephew of the same name, Daniel Williams Harmon, John McDonald of Garth, Alexander Ross, Gabriel Franchère, Charles Mackenzie and Ross Cox. Larocque's journal is in fact more readable than many more ambitious narratives of the fur trade. It contains here and there vivid touches that carry the reader back into the heart of that vanished period in western history, when men of fearless, and often heroic, mould blazed new trails through a vast wilderness, taking most of the time gamblers' chances of winning through, descending unknown rivers in their frail canoes, dashing overland in midwinter from one remote trading post to another, accepting even chances of death by starvation or exposure as part of the day's work, penetrating single-handed into the territory of hostile tribes. These rough fur-traders were no saints, but nevertheless they were for the most part men of whom any country might be proud. Their faults as well as their virtues were those of a virile race. They were the true pioneers in that land of marvellous possibilities to which all eyes are now turned, and it is not too much to say that they were largely instrumental in winning the western half of the continent to civilization.

While Larocque's narrative is chiefly notable for its descriptions of the Crows and their country, it also throws new light upon the characteristics of the Mandans and Minnetarees, and offers a valuable commentary upon the narrative of Lewis and Clark as regards those tribes of the Pacific slope, the Flatheads and Snakes. Like Alexander Henry, *the Younger*, and other chroniclers of the fur-trade period, Larocque is entirely frank as to the seamy side of native life. As Dr. Coues said of Henry's Indians, these 'are the genuine aboriginal articles, not the mock heroes of Leatherstocking romance.' For this very reason the narrative is all the more valuable as a contribution to North American ethology.

Of the writer of this journal, François Antoine Larocque, not much is known. According to Masson, he was a brother of Joseph Larocque, who 'occupied for many years a very prominent position in the Northwest and Hudson Bay Companies.'
'Mr. F. A. Larocque,' continues Masson, 'was a man of good abilities, of great courage and energy. He was well read, studious and equally proficient in the use of the French and English languages, but he decidedly preferred the latter. The life of an Indian trader had not for him the attractions it had for his brother; he soon left the Northwest, came to Montreal and entered business, in which he was most unfortunate. He passed the last years of his life in close retirement and arduous study, and died, much advanced in years, in the Grey nunnery of St. Hyacinthe. Mr. Larocque married a Miss Coté, the daughter of an independent Northwest trader, and the sister of Mr. Jules Maurice Quesnel. He left only one son, Mr. Alfred Larocque, the father of Mr. le Chevalier Larocque, ex-papal zouave; of Mr. Armand Larocque and of Mrs. Aldéric Ouimet, the wife of the [former] Speaker of the House of Commons.' Dr. Elliott Coues has a biographical note on Larocque, taken for the most part from Masson, in his *Henry-Thompson Journals* (I. 361); and Joseph Tassé has a few words to say of him in his *Canadiens de l'Ouest* (II. 324–5).

Larocque is frequently mentioned in the journals of Lewis and Clark, who met him at the Mandan villages on the Missouri; and is also referred to by Alexander Henry, *the Younger*, Charles Mackenzie, and Daniel Williams Harmon. Larocque's own narrative, here published, supplies some meagre details not hitherto available as to his life in the west previous to his first expedition to the Missouri with Charles Mackenzie, in the autumn of 1804. From these fragmentary notes, which will be found at the end of his journal, it appears that he left Montreal, or Lachine, on the 26th April, 1801, in the service of the X Y Company, and arrived at Grand Portage the latter end of June. From there he was sent to Fort Charlotte, on Pigeon River, and later in the year to English river, where he spent the winter. In the spring he journeyed farther west, to Fort des Prairies, on the Saskatchewan, and around to Red river. In 1802 he was still in the service of the X Y Company, but does not say where he was stationed. For the two following years he gives no particulars whatever, but we know that he was stationed at Fort Assiniboine in the autumn of 1804, and, as already stated, left with Charles Mackenzie. J. B. Lafrance,
and four voyageurs, on a trip to the Mandans. His name is mentioned, as a commis, or clerk, in the department of Haut de la Rivière Rouge, in the 'Liste des bourgeois, commis, engagés, et voyageurs de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest, après la fusion de 1804,' at the end of v. I of Masson's Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest.

The accompanying map will be of assistance in following Larocque step by step, from his departure from Fort a la Bosse, on the Assiniboine, on June 2nd, 1805, to his return to the same place on October 18th of the same year.

The following bibliographical notes will also be of service to those who may wish to dig deeper into the rich mines of ethnology, history and crude human nature to be found in the literature of the western fur trade. These notes serve the more immediate purpose of a commentary upon Larocque's narrative:

**Larocque's personal history:**

- Elliott Coues. 'Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and David Thompson,' I, 301.

**North West Company:**

- L. R. Masson. 'Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest.'
- George Bryce. 'Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, including that of the French Traders of Northwestern Canada and of the Northwest, X Y and Astor Fur Companies.'
  - 'History of the Fur-Trade,' in Alexander Mackenzie's 'Voyages from Montreal to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans.'
- 'Report on Canadian Archives, 1888, Note E, Northwest Trade.'
Northwest manuscripts, in Canadian Archives.
Masson papers, in McGill University Library.
Elliott Coues. ‘Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and David Thompson.’
Alexander Ross. ‘Fur-Hunters of the Far West.’
Ross Cox. ‘Adventures on the Columbia.’
Gabriel Franchère. ‘Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America.’
Edouard Umfreville. ‘The Present State of Hudson Bay.’
H. H. Bancroft. ‘History of the Northwest Coast.’
Joseph Tassé. ‘Les Canadiens de l’Ouest.’
G. Dugus. L’ouest Canadien.
Alexander Begg. ‘History of the Northwest.’

The Mandans and other Tribes of the Upper Missouri:
Journal of La Vérendrye, 1742–43. Canadian Archives MSS.
Maximilian, Prince of Wied. ‘Travels in the Interior of North America, 1832–34.’
Lewis and Clark. ‘Expedition to the Sources of the Missouri,’ &c., 1804–5–6.
George Catlin. ‘Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians.’
George Catlin. ‘O-Kee-Pa and Other Customs of the Mandans.’
Charles Mackenzie. ‘The Mississouri Indians.’ *In Masson, I.*
E. A. Larocque. ‘The Missouri Journal, 1804-5.’ *In Masson, I.*