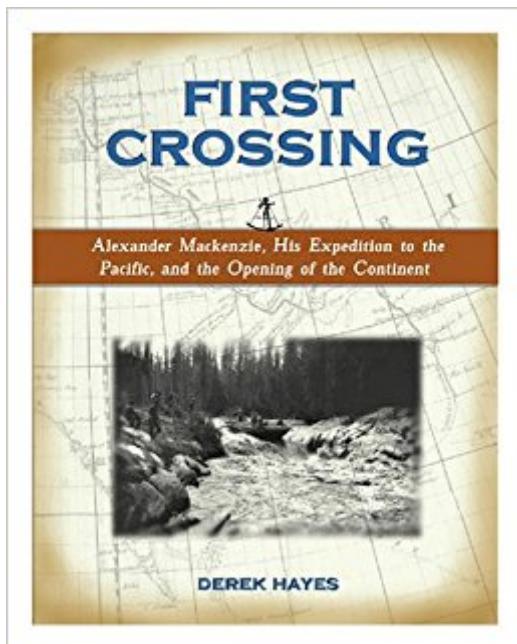


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# First Crossing: Alexander Mackenzie, His Expedition Across North America, And The Opening Of The Continent



## Synopsis

Timed to coincide with the anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition is this remarkable account of Alexander Mackenzie--the explorer who beat Lewis and Clark across the North American continent. Mackenzie accomplished this feat an astounding twelve years before the Corps of Discovery. Drawing extensively on the journals of Mackenzie and other turn-of-the-century explorers--and featuring historical and contemporary photographs, illustrations, and maps--Hayes presents a lively portrait of the explorer who both preceded Lewis and Clark and provided an impetus for their expedition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Scottish-born Alexander Mackenzie's (1763-1830) journal of his travels across North America was published in 1801 as *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence Through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793*. Mackenzie undertook this voyage from Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, for the North West Company and became the first European to cross the North American continent from the East. His book was an immediate best seller. Napoleon Bonaparte requisitioned a French translation, and Lewis and Clark carried a copy on their westward journey. Hayes (Historical Atlas of the Pacific Northwest) here provides an exegesis of Mackenzie's journal, throwing light on the factors driving the Canadian fur trade, the adventures and misadventures of the fur traders, and the serendipitous discoveries that led to the opening of the Northwest. Like Hayes's earlier book, this is richly illustrated, containing several historic maps. Those who wish to read another account of Mackenzie's expedition across North

America may refer to Barry Gough's *First Across the Continent* (Univ. of Oklahoma. 1997).

Recommended for academic and large public libraries. Ravi Shenoy, Naperville P.L., IL Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The author begins this engrossing account with a brief history of Alexander Mackenzie's early years in the Canadian fur trade, then he focuses on the explorer's navigation of what came to be called the Mackenzie River to the Arctic Ocean in 1789, and his expedition by boat and overland to the Pacific Ocean in 1793. Hayes draws on the journals of the Scottish-born explorer and those of other voyagers, having spent years researching the history of the Northwest and collecting historical maps of the region. Mackenzie's journals describe the hardships, dangers, weather, food, and the indigenous population and their villages. "In the distance of two miles we were obliged to unload four times and carry everything but the canoe," he records. "Our stock was reduced to 20 pounds of pemmican, 15 pounds of rice, and six pounds of flour, among 10 half-starved men in a leaky vessel, and on a barbarous coast." This book, illustrated with photographs, prints, and maps, is a vivid portrait of an intrepid adventurer. George CohenCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

OK, there is some new information here. Mostly it seems that Hayes has helped illustrate the travels of Mackenzie, something that was not available previously. Barry Gough's book is notoriously lacking in any illustration of Mackenzie's voyages and Mackenzie's own book is virtually without useful illustration. Maybe having read the previous two books makes me jaded but Mackenzie's voyages can only be retold so many times. Hayes has presented us with a slightly new take on telling the story with pictures, maps and historical vignettes but I hunger for a more thorough job. Perhaps more in the nature of Moulton's "Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition". Finding someone willing to wade through Mackenzie's rather impenetrable prose may be a challenge. Notwithstanding the above this is probably the best explanation of Mackenzie's voyages since the original journals.

This book is a welcome collection of facts about the stupendous exploits of Alexander Mackenzie's Canadian exploration. But the words are curiously bleak & dispassionate, and separate panels of information on the pages, intrude into the flow of the narrative. What is needed now is for someone to take on the story, light it up with the raw romance of the period, paint the picture of the landscape, add colour photos of the places in the text, tell us about the man, and keep the size of the book

down to normal. Let us see the landscapes in all their glory. The raw detailed story of the man remains to be told.

Why do Lewis and Clark get so much attention when explorers of Hudson Bay and what became the North West Companies made earlier and much more daring crossings of the continent? It is the same old myopia which makes invisible our biggest trading partner, crucial supplier of oil, and much more civilized neighbor to the north. Although this book gives no evidence of it I have often suspected that Lewis and Clark were not the first Europeans seen by the inland Indians of the US Pacific Northwest. In pursuit of furs and shipping routes via the Pacific Ocean, especially to the orient, the fur companies sent lightly loaded explorers north and west. Starting with Champlain in early 17th century French trappers began exploiting the interior of what is now the mid-western border of the US and Canada. Until late in that century the English were restricted to lands lying near the middle western coast of Hudson's Bay. The defeat of France in what was truly the first world war, the Seven Years War, in 1763 utterly changed the history of North America. The Hudson Bay Company took over the network of Voyageurs and pushed westward. In 1771 Samuel Hearne was sent with a group of Chippewas to find both copper and a northwest passage. He made it to the Arctic Ocean going down (up on the map) the Coppermine River where at Bloody Fall his First Nations companions massacred some Inuit. The copper was minimal and he arrived at the wrong ocean. Trading in furs was truly and international corporate business: it required credit, stocks of goods, and pelts all of which took months and months to arrive. A complete cycle of exchanges took four years. Hayes' book combines geography (he loves maps and treats us to many of them), the business side of trapping (which he says was the motive behind all the explorations---unlike Lewis and Clark's more nation building effort), and selections of trappers journals and published books. It is in some ways more like a coffee table book, admirably illustrated, than a critical history but he does get into aspects of that history. Reading the book inspired me to look for a really critical history of the explorers. There are excellent volumes about both Hearne and John Ray, who came much later, by Ken McGoogan but I have found nothing on Sam Black. This volume is mostly about Alexander Mackenzie with abundant quotes from his journals and published works. If I have any criticism of the book it is that there are redundancies in the sidebars. Reading a sidebar I would think, "Didn't I just read the exact same words in the text?" This could have been easily corrected by a good editor. While Hearne's river ran north a successor and ornery trapper named Peter Pond came upon the first rivers running west in central Canada and by including native description believed these to be the route to the Pacific. Mackenzie followed up on Pond's ideas. He found the

Slave River exiting Lake Athabasca and passed the Peace River heading north. In so doing he missed the route west. For all the outward flow of the rivers thereabout eventually head north to empty into the Arctic Ocean, whereas at the headwaters of the Peace Mackenzie could cross the great divide where the rivers run into the Pacific. This he did on a subsequent trip. He was able to cross Great Slave Lake fighting ice, wind and bugs and travel along its northern shore until he came to the exit of the river which bears his name. Then in about 11 days of down river paddling he arrived at the delta. Because of the volume of flow it took him days to figure out that he was actually at the ocean. He knew it was the wrong one, realizing he was going in the wrong direction when he encountered its north bend less than half way down it. He continued on despite the fact that a continued exploration wouldn't contribute any commercially valuable information. He began again in 1792 armed with better navigational instruments and training. Trying this time the Peace River, he traveled upstream passed the last trading outpost, the furthest west from the interior. Further upstream he founded Fort Fork where he and the others wintered, finishing the buildings around Christmas in zero degree cold. In May they began again pushing upstream through the Peace River canyons until they came to the fork of the Finley and Parsnip Rivers where Indians warned them of the difficulties of the former even though it was the larger stream. Heading south on the Parsnip they passed the Pack River which would have taken them to the divide with the Frazer, their sought after goal because they thought it was the Columbia. They eventually came to another divide which was well used and followed it to the Western slope. One coming down the precipitous descent into the Bella Coola valley they knew they had reached the Pacific even though the ocean lay beyond a complex inlet. They achieved their goal which turned out to have much more hostile natives having already been part of the Russian trade networks for more than half a century. Although it was the first crossing of the continent, beating Lewis and Clark by 12 years, it had little commercial value. The route was not useful for the fur trade. It was as difficult as the Frazer would turn out to be and neither was the Colombia the desired goal which had it been reachable might have upstaged the Americans and led to a very different history for Washington state. Mackenzie worked on for a while in Canada and went back to England to marry and promote western fur trading, but occupied with Napoleon, the British government was little interested in northwestern North America. This book is good introduction to exploration in the north. It was discovery on the par with Lewis and Clark but being far less cutthroat and speculative than the hoards south of the border, the British in Canada had a less frightful impact on the First Nations and the landscape than did us gringos. Lucky for Canada. Charlie Fisher emeritus professor and author of *Dismantling Discontent: Buddha's Way Through Darwin's World*

First Crossing by historian Derek Hayes is the amazing story of Alexander Mackenzie, and his trailblazing journey across the North American continent before civilized society conquered the North American wilderness. Illustrated throughout with maps and photographs in black-and-white and color, the deftly researched and meticulously reported details of Mackenzie's voyage vividly reconstruct an 18th Century expedition of truly insurmountable bravery and pivotally important discovery.

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