



Setting the Stage 1754-1885



According to legend, on a frosty autumn morning in 1754 Anthony Henday gazed westward from the foothills of what is now Alberta toward the Rocky Mountains. Dazzling white under their first winter snow, the great wall of peaks stretched from horizon to horizon, presenting an impressive sight. Although Henday stayed only a few months, trapping beaver along the eastern slopes of the mountains, he was the first European to witness this magnificent panorama. Henday, who was exploring on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company, returned to Fort York on the shores of Hudson Bay with stories of a land rich in furs, of new Indian tribes, and of course he brought news of the great jagged barrier to the west—the Rocky Mountains.¹ However, it would be many years before any white man would venture into the craggy wilderness beyond.

Twenty years later, with the establishment of Cumberland House near the present border of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the Hudson's Bay Company began creating a network of outposts in what was then called Rupert's Land. They had been forced to move beyond the shores of Hudson Bay in order to harvest furs from the distant west, and also to counter increasing competition from independent Canadian fur traders who, despite the Company's monopoly, were encroaching on their domain.

By 1789 these independent traders, uniting and calling themselves the North West Company, had become a major rival of the Hudson's Bay Company. A leading figure among them was Alexander Mackenzie, a 25 year-old Scotsman. In that year, he followed the great river that now bears his name north to the shores of the Arctic Ocean. However, it was really the Pacific Ocean that he was searching for, and three years later he tried again.

On October 10, 1792, he left Fort Chipewyan, on the shores of Lake Athabasca in northeast Alberta, on the first stage of his second search for the Pacific. He wintered along the Peace River, near its confluence with the Smoky River, and in the spring resumed his journey. His company numbered ten: seven French-Canadians, two Indians and another Scotsman. A little over three months later, with a mixture of vermilion and melted grease, he wrote upon a rock on the Pacific coast, "Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada, by land, the twenty-second of July, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three."

Mackenzie and his small band were the first to cross the broad American continent. However, in doing so he had made an end run around the northern ramparts of the Rocky Mountains. The first explorer to really come to grips with the peaks and passes of the Canadian cordillera was David Thompson.

30: Part of David Thompson's map of the North-west Territory from actual survey during the years 1792-1812. Height of land at the top left of the map indicates Athabasca Pass.

30/31: Part of a panorama sketched by David Thompson in 1807 from Kootanae House (near present-day Invermere). Looking west to the Purcell Range and Mount Nelson (far right) "which stands alone in native grandeur." Thompson put its height at 13,123 feet; its height is actually 10,807 feet. It was named by Thompson after Admiral Nelson's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar. The name Nelsons Mountains refers to all the mountains within the loop of the Columbia River.



Thompson was born in England in 1770. As a young man he worked in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company, but in 1797 he joined the aggressive North West Company. Over the next fifteen years he was to play a major role in the exploration of the Rocky Mountains, and indeed of all of western Canada, and would become known as the great mapmaker.



In 1792 Captain Robert Gray, while trading for furs on the Pacific coast, had discovered the mouth of a great river which he named Columbia in honour of his ship. It was felt that this river drained the interior of the British northwest, and the North West Company committed themselves to what they called "The Columbia Enterprise." They intended to find the source of this river, establish trading posts along its upper reaches and dominate its outlet at the Pacific. In this way they could extend their domain across the continent, find an economical outlet for their furs from the landlocked Athabasca Region, and could dominate the rich trade in beaver and sea otter along the Pacific coast. It was a bold dream, and Thompson was to play a central role.

By 1800 Rocky Mountain House was established at the foot of the Rockies just west of present-day Red Deer, and from here David Thompson and Duncan McGillivray rode south along the eastern slopes of the mountains. They then turned west and followed the Bow River into

the sombre and silent limestone ranges. They were the first Europeans to penetrate the great barrier, but they advanced only as far as present-day Exshaw before they stopped and scrambled up the lower slopes of a peak for a better view. They could see that these mountains were a formidable obstacle, and that it would take patience and commitment to unlock their secrets.

It was not until seven years later that Thompson found his pass through the Rockies. Travelling west from Rocky Mountain House along the North Saskatchewan River, he passed beneath the towering walls of Mounts Wilson and Murchison, entering what one day would become Banff National Park. On June 21, 1807, camped in the heart of the Canadian Rockies, and waiting for the snow to melt on the high passes, he described what he saw: "The Heights of the Mountains still present that cold clear shining white Snow.... They have all Rocky Peaks...destitute of all verdure...dark grey or blackish rugged Rock...they all appear of the same kind of Rock; no variation of Matter...some being in a state of decay, much split by Lightning & Frost.... Some have about 2000 ft perpend of greenish Ice, which seemingly never thaws...." This was perhaps the first description of the Rocky Mountains to be written.

Thompson crossed what came to be known as Howse Pass, then descended the Blaeberry River. On June 30 he reached a large river that was, in fact, the much sought after Columbia. However, the river was flowing in the wrong direction, north instead of south, so he turned south, travelling upstream to reach Lake Windermere where he established a fort called Kootenae House. Thompson spent several years exploring on the west side of Howse Pass. He crossed to the Kootenay River and explored farther south, establishing forts in what is now Idaho and Montana.

In 1810 he returned east over Howse Pass to begin his journey home, back to civilization and a much deserved rest. Here he was intercepted with instructions to once again try to find the elusive Columbia River. The Americans, under fur baron John Jacob Astor, were making their play for the Pacific trade, and his ship the Tonquin had been dispatched to establish a fort at the mouth of the great river. Thompson returned to Rocky Mountain House intent on crossing Howse Pass again, but this time he found the way blocked by hostile Peigan Indians. However, it was rumoured there was another pass to the north at the headwaters of

the Athabasca River, so on October 29, 1810, with 24 men and his Iroquois guide Thomas, he set out once more.

What followed was an epic journey. Thompson travelled north for several hundred kilometres to the Athabasca River where he turned west toward the mountains. Continuing into what is now Jasper National Park, Christmas day found him and his band camped in -35°C temperatures. After making sleds and snowshoes, they continued up the Athabasca River, then up the Whirlpool River beneath the crags of Mount Edith Cavell. On January 10 they finally reached the sought after pass, deep in snow. They had to carry firewood to their last camp high on the Continental Divide. As the night progressed their fire died out. Later Thompson was to write, "...in this exposed situation we passed the rest of a long night without fire, and part of my men had strong feelings of personal insecurity, on our right about one third of a mile from us lay an enormous Glacier, the eastern face of which quite steep, of about two thousand feet in height, was of a clean fine green colour, which I much admired..."

Thompson's party descended the western slopes of what would come to be called Athabasca Pass, then continued down the Wood River to reach the Columbia. As his group was dispirited and much diminished, he wintered here. In the spring, rather than follow the Columbia on its indirect course as it travels north, then curves back south, he made his way upstream to Kootenae House, then continued south along the Kootenay River, eventually joining the Columbia farther downstream. On July 15, 1811, he reached the mouth of the legendary Columbia on the Pacific coast. Unfortunately, he found the Americans erecting a fort. On his return journey back to Athabasca Pass he ascended the Columbia River in its entirety, rounding what would later be called "The Big Bend," to rejoin his earlier route at the Wood River.

For fifteen years Thompson had charted the Rocky Mountains and the Columbia River. Throughout his travels he had kept meticulous records, and during 1813-14 he would create his famous three metre-long map which would later hang in the North West Company field office in Fort William. Athabasca Pass would become a national highway and for many years would see the passage of fur



traders, missionaries, military men, artists, explorers and scientists. The gateway through the Rockies was now open.

The new route was primarily a commercial corridor, and one of the first people to use it was Gabriel Franchère, a French-Canadian fur trader returning from the Columbia District. He camped at the pass on May 14, 1814, and noted, "...there was near the spot where we camped a rock cut as sheer as the walls of a fortress, and which rose majestically to the height of 1200 to 1800 feet and whose crest was crowned with ice."

In 1817 another fur trader, Ross Cox, crossed the pass and wrote: "The country round our encampment presented the wildest and most terrific appearance of desolation that can be well imagined. The sun shining on a range of stupendous glaciers, threw a chilling brightness over the chaotic mass of rocks, ice, and snow, by which we were surrounded." That night, camped in the open under the stars, "One of our rough-spun unsophisticated Canadians, after gazing upwards for some time in silent wonder, exclaimed with much vehemence, 'I'll take my oath, my dear friends, that God Almighty never made such a place.'"

In 1824, "The Little Emperor," George Simpson crossed the pass. The North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company had joined forces in 1821, and Simpson was the head of this powerful continent-spanning empire. In only 84 days he and his voyageurs travelled from Hudson Bay to Fort George (Astoria) at the mouth of the Columbia River.

In 1827 David Douglas made the first recorded Canadian ascent.² This Scottish botanist had been sent in 1824 to the Pacific coast of North America by the Royal Horticultural Society, and after three years of work he chose to return home by crossing the continent. At 28 years of age he set off up the Columbia River with a group of fur traders and voyageurs, and by May 1 found himself at the Athabasca Pass in the shadow of the great peaks. It was then that he made history.

"After breakfast...I became desirous of ascending one of the peaks, and accordingly I set out alone on snowshoes to that on the left hand or west side, being to all appearance the highest. The labour of ascending...is great beyond description.... Half-way up vegetation ceases entirely.... One-third from the summit it becomes a mountain of pure ice.... The ascent took me five hours.... I remained twenty minutes.... The sensation I felt is

33: David Douglas. Pencil drawing by his niece Miss Atkinson. Courtesy Glenbow Archives, Calgary, 581.970 D733j.



34 Above: Paul Kane. Photo courtesy Glenbow Archives, Calgary, NA 4063-1.

beyond what I can give utterance to. Nothing, as far as the eye could perceive, but mountains such as I was on, and many higher, some rugged beyond description.... The aerial tints of the snow, the heavenly azure of the solid glaciers, the rainbow-like hues of their thin broken fragments....”

His elation and joy upon reaching the summit can still be understood by mountaineers today. He named the peak, which he felt was “the highest yet known in the Northern Continent of America,” Mount Brown “...in honour of R. Brown, Esq., the Illustrious Botanist,” and another peak just to the south, Mount Hooker “...in honour of my early patron, the enlightened and learned Professor of Botany in the University of Glasgow, Dr. Hooker...” By assigning elevations of 16,000 to 17,000 feet to these peaks—Mount Brown is actually only 9,156 feet and Mount Hooker 10,782 feet—he unknowingly created a myth that was many years later to send mountaineers searching in vain amongst the Rocky Mountains for these giants.

Many others crossed the Athabasca, but we only know of the few who left a record. In 1845 Captain Henry Warre and Lieutenant Mervin Vavasour made a military reconnaissance on behalf of the British government. In 1846 Father Pierre Jean de Smet, a Belgian priest, crossed the pass in the service of God. That same year it was travelled by a young artist by the name of Paul Kane. He spent the following year sketching in the Columbia District,

then returned east over the pass once again. His book *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America from Canada to Vancouver's Island and Oregon* describes “the sublime and apparently endless chain of the Rocky Mountains.”

Although hushed now in this age of jet travel, the pass still murmurs of the soft tread of moccasined feet, and camped at night under the stars, one can still experience the thrill of the wild and beautiful country.

Farther south in the Rockies, white men were exploring new trails and passes. In 1841 George Simpson made a remarkable journey around the world. In doing so he once again crossed Canada, this time taking a southerly route through the mountains and discovering a new pass in the process. With his native guide Peechee, he travelled along Lake Minnewanka and ascended Healy Creek, not far from present-day Sunshine Village Ski Resort, to a pass that now bears his name. To the west he descended the Simpson River, and travelling light soon reached the Pacific Ocean. That same year James Sinclair, leading a group of settlers bound for Oregon, journeyed past Lake Minnewanka to the site of present-day Canmore, then continued via the Spray River to another new pass called White Man not far from Mount Assiniboine. And in 1847 the Rev. Robert Rundle truly brought European civilization to the mountains when he held a religious service for a small group of whites and natives not far from the site of

34 Left: An early painting of the Bow Valley near present-day Canmore, Rocky Mountains. Chinaman's Peak (Ha Ling Peak) on the left and the East End of Mount Rundle on the right separate Whiteman's Gap. Watercolour by Henry James Warre entitled *Pass in the Rocky Mountains*, July 24, 1845. From his book *Journey to and from the Oregon*. Courtesy National Archives of Canada.



35 Right: Mount Hooker. Photo Michael Teekens.

35 Bottom: John Palliser and James Hector. Photo courtesy Glenbow Archives, Calgary, NA 588-1.

present-day Banff. Waves of the modern world were breaking upon this silent and vast land, and for better or for worse it would only be a few years before the valleys would be alive with the noise of men and machines.

In 1857 the Royal Geographical Society sent an expedition to the Canadian west to determine its suitability for settlement and to look for possible routes for roads and railways. Leading the expedition was a genial and adventure loving Irishman, Captain John Palliser. Over the next three years he and his group travelled all the way from Fort William to the Pacific coast, and charted many new passes through the mountains.

In August and September of 1858 the expedition split up so as to cover more ground. Palliser and his group explored the Kananaskis River and Kananaskis Pass, while Blakiston and his men ventured farther south, eventually reaching the shores of Waterton Lake. Perhaps the most exciting exploration was done by 24 year-old medical doctor and amateur geologist James Hector from Edinburgh, Scotland. On August 7 he and the expedition botanist Eugene Borgeau left Old Bow Fort near present-day Morley, and rode into the mountains through the Gap where today's Highway 1 is located. They were thrilled to be in the mountains where Hector had endless rocks and strata to examine, and Borgeau could spend his days discovering and examining new plants.



Led by their native guides Nimrod and Peter Erasmus, they made their way up the Bow Valley to the site of present-day Banff where Borgeau decided to remain and continue his field work. Hector continued up the Bow River, turned west at Castle Mountain, and crossed Vermilion Pass. Descending to the Kootenay River, he followed it northwest to reach the Beaverfoot River. Running very low on food, he and his small band then returned to the Bow Valley via Kicking Horse Pass where Hector was kicked in the chest by a horse.

Hector wanted to explore farther north and if possible examine Thompson's old route over Howse Pass. So he continued up the Bow River past a lovely lake and an impressive mountain, which would both one day bear his name, crossed Bow Pass and descended the Mistaya River to the North Saskatchewan River. After continuing a short distance to Glacier Lake, he camped for several days. Here he decided to examine the glacier descending from the Lyell Icefield and climb a mountain. On September 13 Hector and his companion Robert Sutherland ascended the tongue of the glacier, rounding and jumping crevasses where necessary, then "struck off to the north side of the valley to ascend a peak that looked more accessible than the others." By 3:00 pm they had reached the summit of their mountain that to this day remains unnamed. Hector wrote, "We only got along by crawling at some points, while sometimes an abrupt nick in the knife-like edge had to be passed by dangerous climbing."

On the descent they took a different route. "At one point we thought at first we should require to turn back, and gain the surface of the glacier, as we came to a precipice that was closely hemmed in between a wall of ice and one of rock. However by knotting our leather shirts together and taking off our moccasins, which were now frozen, we managed to get past the difficulty, and pushing on rapidly, reached our camp at eight o'clock."

After this exciting adventure Hector tried to reach Howse Pass, but was unsuccessful, so turning east he left the mountains along the North Saskatchewan River. In the late summer of the following year he returned. This time he ascended the Bow River, crossed to the North Saskatchewan River via Pipestone Pass, turned west and was successful in traversing Howse Pass to the Columbia River.

The Palliser Expedition greatly extended the understanding of the intricacies of the Rocky Mountains. It had explored half a dozen passes, and filled in many blanks on the map. Hector had been very active naming peaks along the way, including Cascade Mountain, Mount Ball, Castle Mountain, Mount Forbes and Mount Murchison.

The same year that Hector was exploring Howse Pass saw the arrival of the first tourist in the Canadian Rockies. James Carnegie, the 9th Earl of Southesk, came to western Canada in search of "sport." Travelling with his large entourage and reading from Shakespeare, he rode west in August from Fort Edmonton. Late in the month he neared the mountains, and "arriving at



36: *The guide Assiniboine, Viscount Milton, Walter Cheadle, Eugene F. O'Beirne and Assiniboine's wife fording a river. Three mountains at Yellowhead Pass near Mount Robson are named in their honour. Engraving from The North-West Passage by Land. Courtesy Glenbow Archives, Calgary, NA-1240-13.*

the brow of a hill... a glorious sight opened upon my view—the Rocky Mountain Range, stretching along the horizon far as the eye could reach.” Hunting, reading, camping and philosophizing, Carnegie continued down the front ranges of the Rockies past the Kootenay Plains, to the site of Banff, where he came out of the mountains at Old Bow Fort. The times were indeed changing!

Not long afterwards, in the winter of 1862, a 23 year-old aristocrat and his companion, a 27 year-old medical doctor, approached the mountains. William Fitzwilliam (Viscount Milton) and Dr. Walter Butler Cheadle wintered in the wilderness not far from Fort Carlton on the North Saskatchewan River, then in the spring crossed the Rockies by the Yellowhead Pass. Although their chosen route had been travelled the year before by the Overlanders, a group of settlers on their way to the Cariboo country, Milton and Cheadle’s account is a great story of misadventure. Along the way they passed below the greatest peak in the Canadian Rockies, and Cheadle commented, “This... is certainly the finest scene I have ever viewed. To the right Robson Peak, a magnificent mountain, high, rugged, covered with deep snow, the top now clearly seen, although generally covered with clouds.”

The Rockies were now being surveyed, tourists were arriving and settlers were crossing the passes. Although no mountaineers had yet arrived, it was only a matter of time.

In 1867 Canada became a sovereign nation. At that time it was not the Canada we know today—it was a small group of eastern provinces: Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. That was soon to change. In 1870, the lands of the Hudson’s Bay Company were transferred to Canada, and that same year Manitoba joined Confederation. A year later the young province of British Columbia opted to join the Canadian Confederation, and to seal the bargain Prime Minister John A. Macdonald made a promise: a railway would be built across the nation, linking the west coast with the cities of the east. It was to set in motion an enterprise of magnificent proportion that was to dominate the Canadian debate for fifteen years. When it was finished, the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway would open up the west, quite literally creating the Canada that we know today.

Sandford Fleming was appointed engineer-in-chief, and immediately began searching for a route across the nation. In 1872 he crossed the continent via Yellowhead Pass, and soon it was assumed this

would be the route the new railway would take. The initial search for a group of Canadian financiers capable of building the railway ended in disaster with the Pacific Scandal of 1873, and resulted in the fall of Macdonald’s government.

By 1878 Macdonald was back in power, and the push for the railway was on again. In February of 1881, under the leadership of George Stephen, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company was launched, and on May 2 it resumed construction. The Canadian government by this time had laid 1130 kilometres of rail, but there was still close to 3200 kilometres to be completed. The story of the next five years is the story of the boldest enterprise ever undertaken by Canadians. At the height of construction there were tens of thousands of men working: blasting their way up the Fraser Canyon, laying as much as eight or nine kilometres of track a day across the prairies, and struggling with the granite of the Canadian Shield north of Lake Superior.

The CPR abandoned the idea of a northern route through the Yellowhead, and were now in favour of a southerly route. With this in mind, Major A. B. Rogers was dispatched to investigate Kicking Horse Pass and find a pass through the Selkirk Mountains. This decision was to have immense importance for future mountaineers. Although both Kicking Horse Pass and Rogers Pass would prove tremendously problematic in the future, and would eventually require tunnels, they were located in the heart of the finest mountain climbing country in Canada. Only a few kilometres south of Kicking Horse Pass lies Lake Louise, surrounded by some of the greatest peaks of the Rockies: Mounts Victoria, Lefroy and Temple. Above Rogers Pass towers the immense spire of Mount Sir Donald and other giants of the Selkirks: Mounts Dawson, Tupper and Macdonald.

The last spike was driven at Craigellachie in the Monashee Mountains on November 7, 1885. It was now possible to reach the Canadian west after only a few days of comfortable travel. The way was open for men of means with leisure time and the necessary skills to climb the great summits of the Rockies and the Selkirks.

¹ There is now debate as to whether Anthony Henday did actually see the Rocky Mountains. For further information refer to the forthcoming *Anthony Henday, Journey Inland, 1754-55*, edited by Barbara Belyea.

² Although native Indians have crossed the mountain passes for thousands of years, there is no evidence one way or the other to indicate they climbed to the summits.



37 James Carnegie, Earl of Southesk. Courtesy Glenbow Archives, Calgary, NA-1355-2.