

# The True Northwest Passage: Explorers in Anglo-Canadian Nationalist Narratives

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**Abstract:** The Northwest Passage has always held a symbolic role in the mythology of Canadian nationalism, but the imagined geography of which it is a part has changed drastically over time. From Confederation to the present day, explorers have been described as the first builders of the Canadian nation. But in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Canadian historians showed little interest in the Far North. Instead, they were fascinated by the story of westward exploration. They created a romantic grand narrative celebrating the explorers who mapped out the path later followed by the Canadian Pacific Railway. For them, this westward path—the “true Northwest passage”—led both to the Pacific and to Canadian nationhood. Arctic exploration came to the forefront of nationalist concerns only after this paradigm had been established. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, British explorers like Sir John Franklin were also seen primarily as nation-builders. In the second half of the century such claims were re-evaluated. However, the romantic nationalist tradition has persisted, though in an altered form, among the writers who prefer new Arctic heroes such as John Rae and Samuel Hearne. These explorers are now thought to have shown the way to a very different “true Northwest passage” through their sympathetic understanding of the northern landscape and its Aboriginal inhabitants. This article analyzes both the continuities and the differences between the old and new imagined geographies of Canada.

Alexander Mackenzie forced the North West passage by land over the Rockies; the first of his race to succeed in that most perilous adventure ... Within ninety years ... the steel track of a railway stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific ... and among the architects of that great Road are the men who made the trails and little roads amidst the untrodden wilderness. The pioneers, the frontiersmen and the explorers. Especially the explorers.<sup>1</sup>

For as long as Canadians have written about their country's history, geographical exploration has been seen as an integral part of nation-building. The men whose successive journeys led from the St. Lawrence River westward to the Pacific—Samuel de Champlain, Pierre Gaultier de

Varenes de la Vérendrye, and Alexander Mackenzie—hold a special place in Canada's nationalist mythology. After the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1881–1885, these explorers were proudly proclaimed to be “among the architects of that great Road,” which provided the basis of Canadian unity “from sea to sea.” From the late nineteenth century through much of the twentieth, Anglo-Canadian writings on western exploration provided a highly romantic national narrative, in which the explorers' masculine qualities and their conquest of the wilderness were emphasized and celebrated.<sup>2</sup> Their vision and the determination with which they “forced” a passage from the St. Lawrence to the Pacific were held up as examples for succeeding generations of Canadians to follow. This narrative was central to the writing of popular historians, including Lawrence Burpee and Agnes Laut in the early twentieth century and Pierre Berton and Peter Newman in later decades.

It was also a key element in one of the most durable academic interpretations of Canadian history, the Laurentian thesis.<sup>3</sup> The Laurentian thesis combined geography, history, and nationalism, arguing that the system of waterways followed by the early explorers as they made their way west gave Canada its geographical coherence as a nation. In the 1960s literary critic Northrop Frye wrote of “that gigantic east-to-west thrust which historians regard as the axis of Canadian development,” an inexorable “drive to the west” that had “attracted to itself nearly everything that is heroic and romantic in the Canadian tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Like Frye, poet Douglas LePan saw works of the Laurentian school as an important “rallying point for national pride,” but he noted that it occasionally seemed the historians might have “succeeded almost too well,” since “if an explorer or a fur-trader wanders too far from the east-west routes ... he might just as well have vanished from sight altogether!”<sup>5</sup>

Westward exploration in the United States also formed the basis of a colourful nationalist historiography, which has been critically analyzed in a number of scholarly works.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the equally romantic and fascinating Canadian interpretation of early western history is a largely neglected subject among academics.<sup>7</sup> Yet it is important not only in itself, but because it provided the paradigm that shaped Canadians' understanding of exploration in other regions of the country. As LePan pointed out, the imagined geography created by the east-to-west narrative excluded vast areas. Ironically enough, this observation was particularly true of the actual Northwest Passage through the Arctic Archipelago. Sovereignty over the Arctic islands was transferred from Britain to Canada in 1880, but until the early decades of the twentieth century the quest for the northern sea

passage was neglected by Canadian writers.<sup>8</sup> For them, “the true Northwest Passage” — the fulfillment of the dreams of early adventurers like Champlain and the foundation of Canada’s growth to nationhood — was “the Northwest Passage by land.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1889 Sir Sandford Fleming (who had surveyed the CPR’s route across the prairies and through the Rocky Mountains) chose “Expeditions to the Pacific” as the subject of his presidential address to the Royal Society of Canada, noting that the topic had been suggested by the recent completion of the railway. Fleming began with a brief section on northern voyages but, as he pointed out, these expeditions had established only that the long-sought sea passage to the Pacific was “of no commercial value whatever.” In the Arctic, nature had “imposed an adamant barrier beyond the power of man to remove.” Fleming then turned to a far longer account of discoveries in the continental interior with the comment: “If the maritime efforts ... were ... barren of fruit, the overland journeys must be regarded in a different light.”<sup>10</sup> In 1926 former prime minister Sir Robert Borden offered a more detailed version of the same narrative to a British audience, informing them that in the “forest-covered expanse” of the continent “lay possibilities of future power and influence infinitely greater than those which the longed-for but elusive passage would reveal.” While some explorers stubbornly sought to pass the icy barriers of the North, others turned to the mighty St. Lawrence, which “penetrated the interior for nearly two thousand miles, almost to the very heart of the continent.” Following this path, Mackenzie reached the western sea; ninety years later, “as earnest of a young nation’s courage and vision, a transcontinental railway traversed the unpeopled prairies, forced the barriers of the mountains and linked the two oceans.” The dreams of the early explorers had been fulfilled.<sup>11</sup>

In the mid-twentieth century Canadian writers finally began to perceive the Arctic story as central to their nation’s development. However, their understanding of its significance was shaped by the pre-existing, and very powerful, narrative of western exploration and expansion. Although many writers expressed great admiration for the northern explorers, there were ambiguities and contradictions in the resulting narrative of Arctic conquest. Most notably, the main hero of the northern saga, Sir John Franklin, had failed and died without reaching the Pacific. Perhaps because of these disturbing anomalies, it was through the history of northern discovery that Canadian writers first re-evaluated the idea of exploration as conquest. Franklin and his fellow British naval officers were removed from their pedestals at a time when Mackenzie, the archetypal conquering hero, remained a national icon.<sup>12</sup> Franklin’s story seemed to demonstrate conclusively that Eurocentric

approaches to the wilderness were bound to end in disaster. Nationalist writers, including Farley Mowat, Pierre Berton, and Peter Newman, along with academics Hugh Wallace, Ian MacLaren, and Richard Davis, then constructed a new narrative of northern exploration, in which the main tenets of earlier nationalist discourse on exploration seemed to have been rejected. A different set of Arctic heroes, including John Rae and Samuel Hearne, emerged among academic and popular historians.

The characteristics for which these men are praised differ sharply from the qualities previously attributed to Mackenzie. Nevertheless, there are important similarities and continuities between the older western narrative and the new Arctic story. In particular, the adoption of Aboriginal diet and travel techniques is given central importance in both discourses, though the significance attached to this factor has changed drastically over time. In the earlier era such adaptability was perceived as a technique of conquest, but Rae and the other new heroes of exploration are now said to have shown the way to what might be termed a “true Northwest Passage” of post-colonial Canadian nationhood based on sympathetic understanding of the northern landscape and its Aboriginal inhabitants. However, the popularity of this view stems mainly from its appeal to responses conditioned by the old romantic nationalism. Indeed, the search for heroes who embody the spirit and values of a nation is in itself a profoundly romantic enterprise.

This article examines the ways in which one highly romantic nationalist narrative of exploration shaped and complicated the development of another, and demonstrates that even after a powerful historical interpretation has been discredited, it can live on in an altered and almost unrecognizable form. The essay begins with the western narrative and traces its development from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, with particular reference to the links between the popular history of the early twentieth century and the later tropes of nationalist academic history. It then outlines the development of Canadian views on Arctic exploration from the 1910s to the 1960s, noting the many ways in which the earlier western narrative influenced Canadian responses to this other story of heroism and geographical discovery. Finally, it describes the re-evaluation of Arctic heroes in the post-colonial era.

The western narrative first appeared in survey histories of Canada written during the 1880s and 1890s. The interpretation thus created became more elaborate in the early decades of the twentieth century. The key figures in this period were George Bryce, a Manitoba historian, and Lawrence Burpee, a civil servant with a keen interest in exploration history. Burpee's *The Search for the Western Sea* (1908) synthesized the elements scattered throughout Canadian writing on exploration into a single clear and compelling narrative,

in which the high point of the drama came with Mackenzie's arrival on the shores of the Pacific. "No man," Burpee fervently declared, could ask for "a theme of richer possibilities" than the discovery of the west, "that land of incalculable resources."<sup>13</sup> At the same time, a number of explorers' narratives and journals were published by Burpee and others. These books made the careers of previously little known explorers part of Canadian history: La Vérendrye, David Thompson, Anthony Henday, and Henry Kelsey were all but forgotten until Canadian writers in search of national heroes rediscovered and edited their manuscripts.<sup>14</sup>

Although the late-nineteenth century survey histories were concerned mainly with political history, they all began with chapters on early exploration. The westward journeys of both French and British fur traders were presented as part of a continuous and highly significant story. While the English tradition of exploration by sea and the deeds of Martin Frobisher, John Davis, William Baffin, and the rest were always referred to with respect, the work of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French explorers was allegedly of far greater importance to the subsequent development of Canada. The French had followed the St. Lawrence River system farther and farther inland—or, in a suggestive phrase which Canadian writers employed with increasing frequency, they had "penetrated the interior,"<sup>15</sup> while the English colonists and traders remained in their coastal settlements and forts.

Champlain, as the founder of both settlement and westward exploration in New France, was presented in these books as a man of exceptional character and vision.<sup>16</sup> According to historian W. H. Withrow, he was "a hero of the mediaeval type of chivalric courage" who also possessed "the prescience of a founder of empire."<sup>17</sup> La Vérendrye, the first explorer of the prairies, was this paragon's worthy successor. Burpee described him as "a man of the broadest and most unselfish patriotism," who should be revered for "his singleness of purpose, his devotion to duty, his resourcefulness, his power of rising superior to all obstacles, and his extraordinary perseverance."<sup>18</sup> After the conquest of New France by Britain in 1759, the work of the French pioneers was carried on by the men of the North West Company (popularly known as Nor'Westers). In response to the competition of these Scottish traders from Montreal, the older Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) also turned to the exploration and active exploitation of the interior. According to Canadian writers in the early twentieth century, the trader-explorers of the North West Company were "men of heroic stature, types of an adventurous age, dowered with masculine virtues, strong, fearless, enterprising, and imbued with the divine gift of imagination."<sup>19</sup> The westward exploration of Canada was completed by a Nor'Wester, Mackenzie, in 1793. J. Castell Hopkins

called Mackenzie “the greatest ... among the many who endured unknown hardships and met every form of peril, in order to provide the modern map of a vast civilized region.”<sup>20</sup> In 1821 the rival companies merged. The HBC, infused with the vigorous spirit of the Nor’Westers, then kept the great tradition alive.

The supposed lesson of this story was most clearly stated by Bryce in his *Short History of the Canadian People*. The fur trade, he wrote, should never be forgotten by Canadians, because it was “a powerful agent in preparing for the opening up and colonisation” of the west.<sup>21</sup> The traders’ journeys were far more than colourful incidents in the early history of Canada: they had provided the foundation without which all subsequent developments would have been impossible. The lands these men discovered eventually became the fertile wheat fields of western Canada and the basis for the country’s economic prosperity. The central theme developed in this literature was that through both their geographical discoveries and their exemplary characters, the trader-explorers had helped to found a great transcontinental nation. As Bryce put it, “the fur trade was an important element in the building up of Canada, not only in wealth but in some of our higher national characteristics. ... Physically and mentally the successful trader requires to be a man among men. Thus the fur trade has cultivated a manliness, straightforwardness, and decision of character which has proved a heritage of greatest value to the Canadian people.”<sup>22</sup>

Bryce emphasized that trader-explorers must be open-minded and adaptable, and he believed that the French explorers and the Nor’Westers who followed in their footsteps possessed these qualities to an outstanding degree. They understood the ways of the “Indians” they dealt with, and they had adopted the Native way of life to a large extent. In particular, their use of the birchbark canoe marked them as men who were not afraid to exchange European customs for those indigenous to North America. However, it would be a serious distortion to suggest that Bryce believed Native culture was in any way superior to that of Europe, or that he saw the relationship between traders and “Indians” as one of equality. Bryce portrayed the traders in general and Mackenzie in particular as masterful, aggressive conquerors, who subdued lesser men through sheer force of character. Mackenzie was described as a “born leader of men,” an individual “of heroic mould” who possessed “determined courage” and “a dignified self-respect which we call manliness”; he had therefore been followed willingly by his “faithful French-Canadians,” who felt “the greatest confidence in *l’Écossais*, commanding and imperative as he was to them and to all.”<sup>23</sup>

Mackenzie, then, was a worthy representative of the Nor'Westers. These traders (mainly Scots) were "men of daring and self-confidence ... full of spirit and resource"; they were "aggressive,"<sup>24</sup> and because of the superior knowledge of the country they gained from their French-Canadian *voyageurs*, they had quickly "penetrated" into areas unknown to the men of the HBC (the majority of whom were English in Mackenzie's day). As two popular writers put it in their biography of Mackenzie, the Nor'Westers were "Canadian to the core" while "the great Hudson's Bay Company stood, alien and aloof, its policies dictated ... in London."<sup>25</sup> From the time the HBC was founded in 1670 until the 1760s, the Englishmen had made few journeys into the interior, preferring to let the Natives bring their furs to the coastal forts. They had gained little geographical knowledge of the land which was to become Canada, and they had performed no deeds of heroism which Canadians might strive to emulate. In short, they had not been men with an inspiring vision of empire, and it was such a vision that early twentieth-century Canadian writers were seeking in the past.

These writers saw their country's history in terms of empire-building as well as nation-building; indeed, they made no clear distinction between the two. For popular historian Agnes Laut, the Nor'Westers were the "vanguard of empire," and their discoveries had given to a later generation of Canadians "a new empire of their own to develop, equal in size to the whole of Europe."<sup>26</sup> Charles G. D. Roberts agreed that the fur traders had provided Canada with an "imperial heritage."<sup>27</sup> As Laut summed it up, "What they conquered we have inherited."<sup>28</sup> The manly qualities of the Nor'Westers were the qualities Canadians would require to successfully develop this heritage. The behaviour of the HBC men before the period of rivalry, in contrast, stood as an object lesson in the dangers of faint-heartedness and lack of imperial vision. They were described in terms suggesting effeminacy and inadequate drive: "the languid Company," Laut wrote with scorn, "never attempted to penetrate the unknown lands beyond the coast."<sup>29</sup> According to Mackenzie's biographer M. S. Wade, the HBC men preferred to "cling closely" to their forts, and accordingly developed a "policy of masterly passivity."<sup>30</sup> Although Canadian writers expressed particular interest in the first HBC traders to "penetrate the interior" — Kelsey, Henday, and Samuel Hearne — there were a number of difficulties in elevating these explorers to the status of Canadian heroes. The travels of Kelsey and Henday had inspired no others to follow in their footsteps, being quickly forgotten even among the traders, while Hearne, whose journey through the Subarctic to the mouth of the Coppermine River made him a celebrity in eighteenth-century England, possessed some disconcertingly unmanly traits.

Trader-explorers were expected to adapt to their new environment; but, in the opinion of Canadian writers, Hearne had carried this process altogether too far. Rather than mastering the Natives and their mode of travel, he had been mastered by his guide, Matonnabee. It was evident from Hearne's narrative that Matonnabee had made all the important decisions on their journey together and that Hearne had been almost completely dependent on the Natives. "Unfortunately," Burpee wrote, "Hearne, though gifted with wonderful pluck and perseverance, lacked that power of command so necessary in dealing with Indians."<sup>31</sup> One of Burpee's contemporaries, geologist George Dawson, disdainfully observed that Hearne had merely "wandered ... in company with Indians whom he was unable to control."<sup>32</sup> Burpee highlighted Mackenzie's heroic qualities through a comparison with Hearne: Mackenzie's Native guides "would willingly have deserted [him], as their countrymen had deserted ... Hearne," but Mackenzie "was of a more masterful spirit. [The Natives] soon learned that they must ... follow the impetuous white man wherever he chose to lead them."<sup>33</sup>

For Canadian writers in the early twentieth century, then, fur traders were divided into two groups: those who could be considered as the embodiments of Canadian values and founders of the Canadian nation and those who could not. The first category included mainly French and Scottish trader-explorers, while the second was made up chiefly of Englishmen. The English failure to "penetrate" the wilderness until forced to do so by the vigorous competition of the North West Company was contrasted with the "search for the western sea" — a quest combining romantic visions of imperial greatness with hard-headed business sense, which had continued through both the French and British regimes in pre-Confederation Canada. This process of westward exploration was the forerunner of the westward expansion on which Canada embarked in the years following Confederation. Moreover, not only had the nation and its identity supposedly been shaped by the early explorers, but their stories provided a template for self-discovery in the lives of individual Canadians. When poet Al Purdy (born in 1918) first saw the Rockies in 1936, he immediately thought of the chapter on La Vérendrye in his high school history textbook. In later years, Purdy felt "privileged" to visit many of the "real and yet mythical places" associated with explorers. "I felt I was mapping the country, long after those early cartographers ... Not mapping it the way they did, but ... saying I was there, adding something personal," he explained.<sup>34</sup>

During the 1930s the academic approach to fur trade and exploration history began to differ from the popular tradition of Bryce, Laut, Burpee, and the rest. However, the similarities and connections between the two types



of writing were strong. Both continuity and change can be found in such books as John Bartlet Brebner's *The Explorers of North America* and Arthur S. Morton's *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*, but no other writer combined innovative academic analysis with the romantic tradition in so striking a fashion, or had such an influence on later developments, as Harold Innis.

Both Brebner and Morton questioned some aspects of the romantic tradition, while incorporating other aspects into their own works. In particular, they both attacked the portrayal of La Vérendrye as a visionary obsessed by the "search for the western sea."<sup>35</sup> They presented him instead as a pragmatic businessman. However, this seemingly more objective and realistic view did not eradicate the long-standing tendency to see journeys of exploration during different historical periods as episodes in a continuous grand narrative of nation-building. Brebner was careful to place Mackenzie's achievement of 1793 firmly in the context of Canadian exploration history as a whole, and to emphasize the idea that the western transcontinental route was "the true Northwest Passage." For him, "Mackenzie and his voyageurs were the lineal heirs of two lines of explorers—the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mariners who tried to sail to the Pacific by the north, and the followers of Champlain who set out in canoes. The North-West Passage had been made, but it was the North-West Passage 'by land.'"<sup>36</sup>

Although Morton pointed out the extent to which the Nor'Westers had been portrayed as larger-than-life figures by earlier Canadian writers, at the end of his book he, too, emphasized that "the adoption of the Indians' canoe ... enabled the traders to penetrate farther, and yet farther, westward, till the Rocky Mountains and finally the Pacific Ocean were reached." He made no explicit link between these journeys and the creation of Canada, but his observation later in the same paragraph that the building of a railway from east to west had made possible "the union of all the British colonies in North America in a Dominion from sea to sea"<sup>37</sup> could hardly fail to suggest to readers that exploration—preferably by indigenous modes of travel—was an essential part of nation-building. It was, apparently, impossible for these historians to shake off the influence of the romantic tradition. The story of the explorers' "penetration" of the west was simply too compelling. Despite the unease with which Brebner and Morton viewed the romantic aura surrounding the trader-explorers, Champlain, Mackenzie, and the others had become figures of such impressive stature that they simply could not be ignored. This tension between academic writers' discomfort with the romantic tradition and their need to make use of it in their own nationalist interpretations took a particularly fascinating form in the work of Innis.

Eighty years after its first publication, Innis's *The Fur Trade in Canada* remains among the most revered and influential works of Canadian historical scholarship.<sup>38</sup> However (and without in any way seeking to diminish its iconic status), it can also usefully be considered as a re-writing of Burpee's once popular but now almost forgotten *The Search for the Western Sea*, with the very important difference that while Burpee explained the traders' actions by the indefinable call of the unknown—the "spirit of adventure of a vigorous people acting upon a deep-rooted racial tendency to follow the path of the sun"<sup>39</sup>—Innis offered a brilliant and innovative analysis of the economic factors underlying the fur trade. He was the first historian to examine the influence of colonial Canada's "staples economy" (that is, one geared to the harvesting of natural resources like fish, fur, and timber for the benefit of mercantilist European mother countries) on political and cultural developments.

For Innis, the St. Lawrence system linked Europe and the interior of North America. At one end lay dependence on Europe and enduring intellectual and emotional as well as economic and political ties to Britain, but on the other lay the frontier, which required innovation and adaptability. His traders are not visionaries, but they are founders of the Canadian nation, both because their westward explorations defined the geographical boundaries of the country and through the example they provided for later generations. Their daring and their willingness to adopt new techniques of transport marked them as figures to be admired and emulated.

For all its originality, Innis's book drew on the romantic tradition at many points. Statements such as "The Northwest Company was the forerunner of Confederation and it was built on the work of the French *voyageur* [and] the contribution of the Indian, especially the canoe" or the still more romantic "The lords of the lakes and forest have passed away but their work will endure in the boundaries of the Dominion of Canada"<sup>40</sup> could easily have been written by Bryce or Burpee.<sup>41</sup> Innis's fellow historian Frank Underhill observed in a review of *The Fur Trade* that the book's "chief value" lay in "the insight which it gives into the influence of the fur trade in building up our Dominion of Canada ... the fur traders may justly be called the first architects of the Dominion."<sup>42</sup> Clearly, *The Fur Trade* was read as well as written within the intellectual and emotional paradigms provided by the romantic nationalists.

While later academic writers might have balked at overtly romantic descriptions of trader-explorers as visionaries who adapted to the land in order to conquer it, Innis's work has continued to exert a profound, if often indirect and subtle, influence on Canadian views of exploration. From the

1930s on, summaries of *The Fur Trade* were a standard feature in survey histories. The opening chapters of such books almost invariably described Canada's east-to-west system of waterways and the journeys of the men who explored it. The durability of the interpretive framework set by the romantic tradition, and of the gendered imagery employed by the romantic writers, is demonstrated in school texts and academic works from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. A. L. Burt's *The Romance of Canada*, a textbook for elementary school students published in 1938, echoed Innis's claim that the Montreal-based fur trade "was one of the greatest determining factors in the history of this country. It extended the British Empire over the territory between Hudson Bay and the Pacific Ocean, and thereby it laid the foundation of the broader Canada of to-day."<sup>43</sup> Academic historian Donald Creighton wrote in his influential *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*: "The whole west, with all its riches, was the dominion of the [St. Lawrence]. ... [The river] offered a pathway to the central mysteries of the continent."<sup>44</sup> Arthur Lower noted in his equally influential *Colony to Nation* that when Europeans "first gazed upon the North American coast," they were "confronted with a shaggy barrier of forest. They were forced into the openings that nature provided in the way of rivers and once within the rivers, they felt the urge to ascend them." Lower declared that "no man with blood in his veins could have resisted the mystery ... The great river pulled men into the very heart of the continent."<sup>45</sup> According to J. M. S. Careless, the "challenge of the land steadily led men across it from east to west ... the gateway of the St. Lawrence gulf and river stood wide, inviting the venturesome to thrust boldly into the middle of an unknown continent. ... The St. Lawrence rewarded daring by unlocking the interior of North America."<sup>46</sup>

The saga of westward exploration and expansion fit perfectly into the prevailing intellectual framework in the 1950s and 1960s—the period when the Laurentian thesis dominated Canadian historical writing. As late as 1969, it was still possible to describe Mackenzie chiefly in terms of his manly qualities, and to celebrate his achievements in language that would now be considered embarrassingly inappropriate. Poet and literary critic Roy Daniells claimed that Mackenzie's journey to the Pacific offered "a parable through which to interpret Canadian history," and that the Canadian "sense of identity with him" was "ineradicable." The imagery Daniells employed was heavy with overtones of aggression. He described the birchbark canoe as "the only weapon with which to assault" the wilderness. Armed with this weapon, and possessed by an "inexorable drive," Mackenzie "moved boldly into unknown regions," until at last he "pierced the Rocky Mountains."<sup>47</sup>

Although Mackenzie still has staunch defenders,<sup>48</sup> since the publication of Michael Bliss's debunking article "Conducted Tour" in 1988 he has unquestionably fallen from his once lofty position as the greatest of all Canadian explorers. (According to Bliss, Mackenzie was more of a passenger than a conqueror, being completely dependent on his Native guides.)<sup>49</sup> However, Sir John Franklin and other British naval explorers of Canada's Arctic have fallen farther still. These explorers were subjected to earlier, more frequent and harsher criticism than Mackenzie, and they are now widely condemned for their supposed determination to "outwit and out-muscle nature" in a "desperate attempt to control" the Arctic.<sup>50</sup> To fully understand such shifts in historical writing, it is necessary to consider Canadian Arctic literature in relation to the romantic narrative of western exploration—a paradigm so powerful and enduring that it could shape the expression of more than one nationalist ideology.

The areas north of the Arctic Circle and the islands of the Arctic Archipelago were seldom referred to in the literature produced before 1910. However, in the early years of the twentieth century Arctic exploration began to be seen as an important part of Canadian history. From the late 1890s on, it was clear that the so-called "barren lands" might be a hinterland well worth possessing. There was a growing awareness of the mineral wealth to be exploited in the Subarctic and the Far North, and some optimists even claimed that agriculture might be possible in the Subarctic.<sup>51</sup> Northward expansion appeared to be the inevitable next stage in the development of Canada. One historian proclaimed that the regions "stretching far beyond the Arctic Circle" contained "possibilities so boundless, resources so various and vast, that the imagination is dazzled in the effort to foretell their future."<sup>52</sup> Beginning in the early twentieth century, nationalist Canadian writers eagerly took the long established British narrative of Arctic exploration and used it for their own purposes; eventually, there emerged a Canadian Arctic literature with distinctive characteristics of its own. This process was all the easier because western explorers had already been used to define and illustrate the Canadian national character. However, the story of Arctic exploration, as it was written by Canadians, was at first merely a supplement to the epic of east-to-west discovery,<sup>53</sup> and in many ways both the earlier and the more recent Canadian representations of northern explorers can be understood only against the backdrop of the nineteenth-century romantic nationalist tradition.

In the original Canadian narrative of exploration, fur traders played a central role, and the Indigenous techniques of travel they adopted became symbols of the traders' claim to be considered quintessentially Canadian

figures. Nevertheless, exploration was not seen as a process of adaptation to the land; instead, it was a series of virile exploits in which the superiority of white civilization and the masculine qualities of the explorers themselves were repeatedly demonstrated. Arctic exploration could be fitted into this scheme of things, if rather uneasily. The best-known explorers of the Canadian Arctic were not fur traders but officers of the Royal Navy. The northern explorers' reputation for stoicism and perseverance was extremely appealing to most Canadian writers. However, the most striking incident in Arctic history was not a triumphant moment comparable to Mackenzie's arrival on the shores of the Pacific, but the disaster of the 1845 Franklin expedition, in which 129 men lost their lives.

The quest for the northern passage was different from the search for the western sea in a number of important ways: the explorers were mainly English; they had usually arrived by sea rather than overland; there had been no immediate economic benefit from their explorations; and, in the end, they had failed. Franklin had indeed discovered the passage, but his ships were trapped and immobilized in the Arctic ice. Instead of conquering the wilderness, he and his men had apparently been conquered by it.

For earlier Canadian writers, the main significance of exploration lay in the discovery of fertile new lands that could eventually be settled and farmed; in this area, clearly, Arctic exploration fell far short of the exploits of the men who had made the prairies and other western regions known to Europeans. In addition, because Arctic exploration was chiefly exploration by sea, the naval explorers had little reason to make use of birchbark canoes and the other highly vaunted paraphernalia of the *coureurs des bois* and *voyageurs*. They were therefore in some ways more difficult to claim as distinctively Canadian heroes. As exemplars of the national character, however, they fared much better. In general, Canadian writers chose to concentrate on their courage and perseverance—qualities which could be considered all the more admirable when viewed against the backdrop of the desolate Arctic landscape and when considered in light of the sufferings the explorers had endured.<sup>54</sup> For the authors of the earliest Canadian accounts of Arctic exploration, the naval heroes were fully the equals of Champlain, La Vérendrye, and Mackenzie in their manly characters and their imperial vision, if not in their success as explorers.

In a book written for the popular *Chronicles of Canada* series, Stephen Leacock commended Franklin for his "high Christian courage and his devotion to the flag and country that he served," while John Richardson was described as a man of "iron nerve" and "striking energy, of the kind that knows no surrender." Although these explorers had achieved no practical

end, the “splendid record of human courage”<sup>55</sup> that they had created in their encounter with an appallingly harsh environment could now serve as an inspiration for Canadians. W. L. Grant devoted a major portion of his *History of Canada* to the stories of great explorers, first praising the French traders and the Nor’Westers for the “splendid daring” with which they had “struck boldly inland.” Then, in a new departure, Grant also lauded the naval explorers. “While fur-traders were showing much wild daring on the plains, still greater daring was being shown amid the barrens of the north and the frozen seas of the Pole, not from love of gain but in the purest spirit of adventure,” he pointed out. Grant went on to say that “the sailors of the Royal Navy ... merit fame as well as did the heroes in Homer.”<sup>56</sup> A few years later, Roderick Macbeth suggested that while the fur traders had set an example of daring and perseverance in business, the men who searched for the Northwest Passage had left behind them “an accumulation of traditions which had the good effect of inspiring others to duty without regard to financial gain.”<sup>57</sup> Both groups were thus important examples for the new generation of Canadians.

The imperial vision of the Arctic explorers, then, did not lead directly to new sources of wealth, but rather to dauntless courage and a high-minded and disinterested patriotism. Their story could inspire stronger loyalty to both Canada and the British Empire among the rising generation. Yet when compared to the bold and successful “thrusts” of explorers like Mackenzie, the often-thwarted British ventures in the Arctic Archipelago appeared, if not exactly unmanly, then at least a less satisfactory basis for a grand narrative of nation-building. Burpee, who had omitted the nineteenth-century Arctic naval voyages from *The Search for the Western Sea* in 1908, did include them in the account of Canadian exploration he contributed to Adam Shortt and Arthur Doughty’s series *Canada and Its Provinces* six years later. In the latter work, Burpee praised the “indefatigable” Franklin, but he described Arctic expeditions by sea as “futile,” with the explorers usually being “frustrated” by channels “blocked with ice,” so that they were “compelled to return” after a “bootless voyage.”<sup>58</sup> For writers like Leacock and Burpee, the naval explorers were far more manly than the early HBC men, but all their courage was not enough to overcome so formidable an opponent as the Arctic.

Canadian writers had always portrayed explorers as masculine and the interior which they “penetrated” as feminine and submissive. But beginning in the late 1930s, the Arctic was often personified as an exceptionally deadly female monster which first trapped and then destroyed the Franklin expedition. This image originated with William Gibson, a Hudson’s Bay Company trader who retraced the route of the explorers’ last march and wrote

several magazine articles on Arctic history. It was then taken up by other writers, including broadcaster Richard Lambert, whose 1949 biography of Franklin won Canada's highest literary prize, the Governor General's Award, and Leslie Neatby, a professor of classics who published two popular books on northern exploration, *In Quest of the North-West Passage* (1958) and *Search for Franklin* (1970). In the early 1960s poet Gwendolyn MacEwen wrote a verse play about the lost expedition, *Terror and Erebus*. In one of the play's most striking passages, she described the "virginal" Arctic ice "fold[ing] in" around Franklin's ships, intending to "hold [them] crushed forever in her stubborn loins."<sup>59</sup>

Despite such disquieting images of failure and death in a hostile Arctic, a favourable view of the naval explorers as heroic nation-builders remained common until the early 1970s. Leslie Neatby, for example, declared in 1958 that the "martyrs of the Franklin expedition" belonged "equally to the traditions of the British navy and of the Canadian nation."<sup>60</sup> Many writers emphasized that Franklin and the others had laid the foundations of Canada's claim to Arctic sovereignty, and therefore to the vast mineral resources of the Far North. As in the case of western exploration, past journeys of discovery were considered to be part of the same ongoing story as later nation-building activity. Popular writers Lawrence Jones and George Lonn explained that their book *Pathfinders of the North* was about the heroes "who led the way to ... present-day developments." The early explorers had their "modern counterparts" in "geologists, prospectors, traders, engineers, and civil servants." Arctic history, then, was a continuous process in which brave men "penetrated the fastnesses of the North," thus "breaking a trail for others to follow," and making possible the "slow northward march of civilization."<sup>61</sup>

However, even in the earlier years of the century one maverick (but in the end extremely influential) explorer and writer, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, compared Franklin's achievements unfavourably with those of the fur traders. Stefansson did not reject the idea that Canadians should be inspired by an imperial vision; he simply believed that the example set by Franklin was not likely to ensure Canadian success in the exploitation of the North. The idea that Canada, having gained its western empire, would turn next to the creation of a northern empire, was developed in Stefansson's books *The Friendly Arctic* (1921) and *The Northward Course of Empire* (1922).

Stefansson suggested that like the west, the North could be "penetrated" by those who were open-minded enough to accept the way of life evolved by the original inhabitants of the region.<sup>62</sup> In his view, the North was destined to be settled and exploited by white Canadians, but it could never be conquered by "English" methods. Therefore, Stefansson devoted much of

his career to debunking the naval explorers and to creating the image of a different hero for Canadians to emulate. Given the prevailing beliefs about the Nor'Westers, it is hardly surprising that he chose a Scottish fur trader. John Rae, a Hudson's Bay Company employee, made his Arctic journeys during the 1840s and 1850s (that is, in the period after the two companies had merged). He was remembered mainly as the man who discovered the first evidence of Franklin's fate, and until Stefansson brought him to the notice of the public he had received little more than passing mention in Canadian writings on Arctic history. For Stefansson, Rae was the embodiment of the traits Canadians would have to develop if they were to make the North their own. Not only had he lived off the land and successfully mastered Native techniques of travel, he had "combined the scientific point of view with leadership, imagination and physical prowess."<sup>63</sup> In short, he had "out-Eskimoed the Eskimos," demonstrating what could be achieved by those who possessed both "primitive knowledge" and "the white man's knowledge and equipment."<sup>64</sup>

Stefansson became embroiled in a number of controversies during the early 1920s, with the result that he lost the support of influential Canadians who had at first been much impressed by his arguments.<sup>65</sup> However, Innis's work then bestowed intellectual respectability on the idea that the adoption of Native diet and travel techniques marked explorers as exemplars of the Canadian national character, making a later revival of Stefansson's theories possible.

By the middle of the twentieth century, northern development was increasingly perceived as a central—even, according to historian W. L. Morton, the central—element of Canadian nation-building.<sup>66</sup> John Diefenbaker won a huge majority in the 1958 federal election on the strength of his "Northern Vision." Diefenbaker (a fiery nationalist and an avid reader of polar exploration literature, who as a boy had often imagined himself participating in the Franklin expeditions) argued that Canadians could free themselves from the threat of American economic domination by developing the resources of the Far North. Once, the west had strengthened Confederation through the prosperity it brought; now it was the turn of the Arctic.<sup>67</sup>

However, the economic independence prophesied by Diefenbaker failed to materialize. The new focus on the Far North produced little more than heightened resentment over the ongoing American military presence in the Arctic. As the years passed, there were proposals for major development projects with American financial backing. It seemed that the profits from northern development would go mainly to the U.S., thus undermining



rather than strengthening Canadian nationhood. Following the voyage of the American oil tanker *Manhattan*, Canadian writers began to complain about the economic and ecological violation of their northland by foreign business interests.<sup>68</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, the confident historical narratives recounting Canada's acquisition and development of its western and northern "empires" lost much of their appeal. Because Franklin had failed while the western explorers succeeded, and because the Arctic was now a key focus of nationalist concerns, the narrative of penetration and conquest in the Far North seemed most urgently to require reconsideration and revision.

As a result, there was a growing tone of criticism and even hostility towards Franklin and the other naval explorers (though the process of repudiation was far from straightforward, and even today a few writers continue to idealize them). Early twentieth-century Canadian writers had used the term "adaptability" in a social Darwinist sense, but in later decades the adoption of Native ways by explorers was seen as an indication of tolerance and understanding—qualities which Canadians began to celebrate as part of their national character during the 1960s. When Winnipeg newspaperman George Derkson proclaimed in 1975 that God had given Canada the north in order to provide for the needs of the south, and that (with the help of American capital) the Arctic would soon be "raised out of its slumber like a sleeping giant by aggressive and imaginative men who are adapting scientific achievements to overcome the harsh and brutal environment which so long has thwarted man's attempts,"<sup>69</sup> he was merely echoing earlier rhetoric; but to the younger generation of nationalist writers he appeared to be frighteningly out of touch with the true Canadian spirit. Justice Thomas Berger, whose 1977 Royal Commission report recommended against the construction of a pipeline through the Mackenzie Valley, remarked that the values of northern Aboriginal people might help other Canadians to "redefine the whole idea of progress."<sup>70</sup> It was easy to believe that certain explorers, more enlightened than their fellows, had foreshadowed this new vision of Canadian nationhood.

The works of Bryce, Laut, and Burpee were seldom if ever referred to during this period, but the views of Stefansson were revived with surprisingly little sense of the historical context in which they had been formed.<sup>71</sup> The lack of critical detachment from the popular writings of Stefansson might well have been impossible without the credibility lent to such notions by Innis, whose reputation stood higher than ever in the nationalist intellectual climate of the 1960s and 1970s. (Ironically enough, Innis himself was not an admirer of Stefansson: he pointed out that Stefansson had neither personal

experience of the area in which the last Franklin expedition met its doom nor training in historical research, and he sharply criticized the explorer's "persuasive dogmatism and cocksure ingenuity."<sup>72</sup>

The new vision of Arctic history was constructed gradually, over a period of several decades. The first strong hint of things to come was given at the beginning of the 1960s, when Farley Mowat linked imperialism, non-Indigenous travel techniques, and disaster in his popular *Ordeal by Ice*. Mowat described all the naval expeditions as motivated by a desire for domination over nature, and he characterized the explorers as overbearing and insensitive. They were pointedly contrasted with Rae, who understood that "survival in the north had to be on the land's own terms." According to Mowat, less ethnocentric explorers like Rae, with their small, modestly equipped exploring parties, had demonstrated that "acquiescence would succeed where force would not." Franklin had been unable to "force a passage," but the Norwegian Roald Amundsen, following the "principle of submission to the primordial defender," at last "slipp[ed] through the ice barriers," becoming the first explorer to sail through the archipelago. Mowat's concern with contemporary nationalist issues was evident: in discussing the Franklin search, he made the revealing comment that the naval expeditions of the late 1840s and the 1850s were "an assault upon the Arctic which was not to be equalled in weight or intensity until the late 1940s brought the U.S. Navy steaming north to take *de facto* possession of Arctic waters."<sup>73</sup> For Mowat, the elaborately equipped and provisioned British explorers were not the fathers of Canadian Arctic sovereignty, but rather precursors of the threat posed to Canada's national integrity by American military and economic might in the Cold War era, while Rae and Amundsen represented the smaller-scale but more peaceful and appropriate Canadian presence.

In 1985 journalist Peter Newman's best-selling *Company of Adventurers*, a history of the HBC, celebrated Rae in similar terms, while also doing much to rehabilitate Samuel Hearne. Hearne had already been the subject of some quiet revisionism in the academic world: Maurice Hodgson, for example, observed in 1967 that by "voluntarily succumbing to the land and its people," Hearne was "rewarded with an experience beyond the imagination of those explorers who simply traversed the land and used the people."<sup>74</sup> In 1979 T. L. MacLulich praised Hearne for his "adaptability" and "tolerance." Hearne had "adjusted completely to the Indians and to the natural environment," and he was therefore capable of realizing "that the world contains more than one way of looking at things."<sup>75</sup> Hearne's passivity had become a positive trait. According to Newman, Hearne's dependence on his Native guides was a matter of choice rather than necessity: the explorer

willingly “gave himself up to the natural rhythms and diet of the Barrens ... melding into the nomadic bands of accompanying Indians so effectively that he nearly became one of them.” However, in Newman’s mind Rae was the more admirable of the two heroes because of his active nature. Like Hearne, Rae accepted the North on its own terms, but unlike his predecessor he was able to “harness the Arctic environment to [his] advantage.” Both Hearne and Rae belonged in the Arctic, while the British naval officers (described by Newman as “protocol-encrusted admirals” and “Admiralty poohbahs”) were clearly alien beings.<sup>76</sup>

During the 1980s another best-selling popular historian, Pierre Berton, also derided the naval explorers while pointing to the fur traders, and especially to Rae, as models of open-mindedness. Berton suggested that Franklin was a typical example of the “pukka sahibs” who maintained a determinedly English way of life in the “outposts of Empire.” In contrast to Franklin and the other “gold-braided bluecoats of Arctic exploration,” Rae did not fit the pattern of the imperialist explorer: “Like most Hudson’s Bay men, he didn’t consider it a stigma to go native. Indeed, he brought his adaptation of Indian and Eskimo methods to a fine art.” When compared to Rae, the naval explorers were clearly revealed as arrogant bumbler.<sup>77</sup> In fact, Rae regarded Aboriginal people in a markedly paternalistic manner. He reported from the winter quarters of one of his expeditions that about thirty “starving Indians” were “more or less dependent upon us.” On his orders, these people were “made to exert themselves in setting hooks ... for trout, and spearing herrings.” Rae noted that this work, “easy and simple as it is (for a child might do it) does not suit the thoughtless natives here, and it is only by threatening to give them nothing to eat that they can be prevailed upon to attend to it at all.”<sup>78</sup> Later, Rae described the Inuit as people who would not hesitate to lie if it was to their advantage; he stated that he believed their accounts of the Franklin expedition’s fate only because he trusted his own ability to distinguish truth from falsehood.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, Rae’s most recent Canadian biographer, Ken McGoogan, claims that he was a “post-colonial figure in a colonial age,” a “peerless” individual who “repudiated the prejudices of Victorian England.” Unlike other explorers whose aim was conquest and exploitation, according to McGoogan the “maverick” Rae saw the North in a way that “undermined the deepest foundations of the colonial enterprise: the unshakeable conviction of absolute superiority.” In McGoogan’s version of the Arctic narrative, only a conspiracy by powerful forces in England kept Rae from being acclaimed in Franklin’s place as the true discoverer of the Northwest Passage.<sup>80</sup> McGoogan followed his book on Rae with a biography of Hearne, in which he presented

the eighteenth-century explorer as Rae's forerunner, a man who willingly "immersed himself in a foreign culture," gaining incomparable wisdom in the process.<sup>81</sup>

Because the northern naval explorers were British (and in most cases, English) officers, their story was particularly well-suited to the needs of a former colony in the process of repudiating its last emotional ties to the mother country. A recurring theme in recent Canadian accounts of the nineteenth-century quest for the Northwest Passage is the naval explorers' characteristically English inability to understand or appreciate the North and its people. (Scottish or Irish officers and non-naval men of any nationality almost invariably receive more favourable treatment from Canadian writers than do the English naval explorers.) According to literary scholar Richard Davis, Franklin failed because of his "tunnel vision," a product of the "British imperial ethos."<sup>82</sup> The entire enterprise of Arctic exploration by sea was frowned upon by academic historian Hugh Wallace because "members of the Royal Navy were less aware of indigenous factors than were Hudson's Bay Company men." Naval explorers seldom abandoned their ships for birchbark canoes; instead, they attempted "to perpetuate the old environment, or to dominate, not adapt to, the new one."<sup>83</sup> Another academic, Ian MacLaren, claimed that the English officers perceived the North American landscape only in a distorted fashion. This was because they had been conditioned by the European artistic ideal of "the sublime." Not only were their paintings and narratives inadequate depictions of the Canadian scene, but the lack of true understanding led these men to believe they could impose European technology on the new land. They arrogantly refused to learn Native survival skills and, as a consequence, many ultimately perished from starvation.<sup>84</sup>

In keeping with this new interpretation, the naval officers have been represented as figures of brutally aggressive masculinity whose approach to the land they journeyed through constituted a symbolic rape.<sup>85</sup> For novelist Rudy Wiebe, they were "men who [would] force themselves upon a landscape, [would] try to bulldoze their way through whatever confront[ed] them."<sup>86</sup> The naval explorers, rather than the traders, are presented as the possessors of an imperial vision, and the vision is condemned rather than praised. The fur traders, formerly renowned for their success in "forcing" an overland passage, are no longer represented as triumphant conquerors, but rather as men who wisely and modestly adapted to Native ways and therefore were able to survive in the North. To sum up, the contrast between Nor'Westers and HBC men in nationalist historical writing has been replaced by a contrast between fur traders and naval officers. The suffering and death

of the members of the last Franklin expedition, not the success of Mackenzie, is currently seen as the appropriate fate for the “manly” explorer.<sup>87</sup>

The elevation of Rae and Hearne as open-minded Canadian heroes is a fascinating example of the shifts and transformations in nationalist writing during the post-colonial period.<sup>88</sup> Franklin is now largely relegated to the role of a despised outsider, while Rae and Hearne have taken his place as examples for Canadians to imitate.<sup>89</sup> These new heroes of the fur trade bear little obvious resemblance to the figures of Champlain, La Vérendrye, and Mackenzie as they appeared in the works of Bryce, Laut, and Burpee. Nevertheless, it would surely have been difficult if not impossible to produce such representations without the paradigms furnished by the romantic nationalist tradition. The most cynical view of these newer representations would be that, like the romantic depictions of heroic conquest, their true aim is to legitimize the appropriation of Aboriginal land. Whether trader-explorers were masterful conquerors or humble students of Native lore, the end result of their activities was European expansion. However, the second representation is far more palatable to current tastes, and indeed it allows nationalist writers and readers to have their post-colonial cake and eat it too.

Though the phrase “the true Northwest Passage” fell out of use by the second half of the twentieth century, clearly the idea of exploration as a journey of national self-discovery remained strong in the work of popular historians, academics, novelists, and poets. For novelist Robertson Davies, writing in 1977, the quintessential Canadian figure was the fur trader “who must understand—understand, not tame—the savage land” and whose travels symbolically represented Canadians’ ongoing quest to understand themselves and their place in the world.<sup>90</sup> During the 1980s, political scientist Franklyn Griffiths passionately expressed the belief that the assertion of Canadian sovereignty over the Northwest Passage would serve both a political and a psychological function, enhancing Canadians’ sense of national identity and purpose. This project would necessarily involve rejecting nineteenth-century British images of the Arctic.<sup>91</sup> The “true Northwest Passage” of Arctic exploration as it was practiced by Rae and Hearne is a metaphor of progress from beleaguered European colony to self-confident Canadian nation, with firm roots in the North American environment. In both the old and the new imagined geographies of Canada, the Northwest Passage leads the nation to itself. The underlying ideology of Canadian nationalism has changed almost beyond recognition, but so convincing and deeply engrained is the image of exploration as the road to nationhood that the process still seems all but inevitable.

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## Notes

1. John Henderson, *Great Men of Canada* (Toronto: Southam, 1928), 25–26. This book was written for use in Ontario school libraries, and copies were provided free of charge by the Ministry of Education.
2. This article considers only Anglo-Canadian writings. It is based on approximately 100 sources, mainly academic and popular books found through reviews in the *Review of Historical Publications Relating to Canada*, its successor the *Canadian Historical Review*, *The Beaver*, and the *Canadian Geographical Journal*, as well as through Library and Archives Canada's AMICUS catalogue and the CIHM/ ICMH microfiche series. The works chosen for detailed consideration are those which received favourable reviews in more than one publication, remained in print for a significant period of time, and/or were referred to by later writers. On the very different nationalist mythology of French Canada, see Jacques Mathieu and Jacques Lacoursière, *Les mémoires québécoises* (Sainte-Foy: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1991). The northern vision of Quebecers has generally been limited to their own provincial north. See Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Canadian Nordicity: It's Your North, Too*, trans. William Barr (Montreal: Harvest House, 1979), 5–6.
3. See A. B. McKillop, "Historiography in English" and "Laurentian Thesis," *Canadian Encyclopedia* (first edition, 1985).
4. Northrop Frye, "Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*," reprinted in Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), 219–20.
5. Douglas V. LePan, "The Outlook for the Relationship: A Canadian View," in John Sloan Dickey, ed., *The United States and Canada* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 159.
6. The relationship between American and Canadian writing on western exploration is outside the scope of this article. However, the likely influence on nineteenth-century Canadian historians of Francis Parkman and other American writers should be noted. On the American interpretation of western exploration, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950) and Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975). See also note 40, below.
7. Though Canadian scholars have written extensively about the influence of British culture on exploration literature, there have been relatively few studies of explorers as constructed figures in Canadian culture. Among the

- few exceptions is an excellent article by Alan Gordon comparing English- and French-Canadian representations of Jacques Cartier. See Gordon, "Heroes, History, and Two Nationalisms: Jacques Cartier," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, new series 10 (1999): 81–102. On nationalist narratives generally, see Lloyd Kramer, "Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, 3 (July 1997): 525–45.
8. See Janice Cavell, "The Second Frontier: The North in English-Canadian Historical Writing," *Canadian Historical Review* 83, 3 (September 2002): 372–73.
  9. These phrases recur throughout Canadian writings on exploration. The first seems to have originated with Matthew Macfie, "The True North-West Passage," *Fortnightly Review* 3 (1865): 227–39. The article advocates the building of a transcontinental railway. Viscount Milton and W. B. Cheadle's *The North-West Passage by Land*, an account of the authors' journey across the prairies to the Pacific, was also published in 1865. For an example of the enduring appeal of this trope among Canadian writers, see Eric W. Morse, "Fresh Water Northwest Passage," *Canadian Geographical Journal* 70, 6 (June 1965): 182–91.
  10. *Presidential Address before the Royal Society of Canada, with Papers from the Transactions* (Montreal: Dawson, 1890), 89, 100.
  11. Robert Borden, *Canada in the Commonwealth: From Conflict to Co-Operation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929), 1–2, 25.
  12. Franklin was first debunked by Vilhjalmur Stefansson in 1938; see Stefansson, "The Last Franklin Expedition," in his *Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic* (New York: Macmillan, 1938). Numerous critical accounts by Canadian popular and academic writers followed. Though Stefansson was not technically a Canadian, he often presented himself as such, and he made a conscious effort to reach Canadian readers. On Stefansson's citizenship, see Janice Cavell and Jeff Noakes, "Explorer Without a Country: The Question of Vilhjalmur Stefansson's Citizenship," *Polar Record* 45, 234 (July 2009): 237–241. On Stefansson and Canadian readers before 1930, see Janice Cavell, "Arctic Exploration in Canadian Print Culture, 1890–1930," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 44, 2 (Fall 2006): 7–43; see especially 32–38. On his Canadian imitators in the later part of the twentieth century, see Cavell, "Comparing Mythologies: Twentieth-Century Canadian Constructions of Sir John Franklin," in Norman Hillmer and Adam Chapnick, eds., *Canadas of the Mind: The Making and Unmaking of Canadian Nationalisms in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 33–34, 39–40. The first negative account of Mackenzie was not published until thirty-five years after Stefansson's *Unsolved Mysteries*. See James K. Smith, *Alexander Mackenzie, Explorer: The Hero Who Failed* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1973). This book had little impact.
  13. Lawrence J. Burpee, *The Search for the Western Sea* (London: Alston Rivers, 1908 and Toronto: Musson, n.d.), vii.
  14. See "York Factory to the Blackfeet Country: The Journal of Anthony Hendry [sic], 1754–55," ed. Lawrence J. Burpee, *Transactions of the Royal Society of*

- Canada*, third series 1, 2 (1907); *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America 1784–1812*, ed. J. B. Tyrrell (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1916); *Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de La Vérendrye and his Sons*, ed. Lawrence J. Burpee (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1927); *The Journals of Henry Kelsey (1691–1692)*, ed. Charles N. Bell (Winnipeg: Dawson, 1928); *The Kelsey Papers*, eds. Arthur G. Doughty and Chester Martin (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada and Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 1929).
15. George Bryce seems to have been the first writer to use this expression extensively. See *Manitoba: Its Infancy, Growth, and Present Condition* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1882), 94; the first edition of *A Short History of the Canadian People* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington / Toronto: W. J. Gage, 1887), 329, 340; and the introduction to *The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1902). Another early example occurs in W. H. Withrow's *A Popular History of the Dominion of Canada* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1884), 529. By 1926, when Robert Borden used it (see above), it was very common.
  16. On the appropriation of Champlain as a national hero by English-speaking historians, see M. Brook Taylor, *Promoters, Patriots, and Partisans: Historiography in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 90, 92, 155.
  17. Withrow, *Popular History*, 50, 59.
  18. Burpee, *Search*, 210, 270.
  19. *Ibid.*, xv.
  20. J. Castell Hopkins, *Canada: The Story of the Dominion* (New York and London: Co-Operative Publication Society, 1900), 216.
  21. George Bryce, *A Short History of the Canadian People*, 2nd ed (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1914), 292.
  22. George Bryce, *Mackenzie, Selkirk, Simpson* (Toronto: Morang, 1905), 282–89. Other biographies of Mackenzie included Adrian Macdonald, *Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1926); M. S. Wade, *Mackenzie of Canada* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927); Arthur P. Woollacott, *Mackenzie and his Voyageurs* (London and Toronto: Dent, 1927); and Hume Wrong, *Sir Alexander Mackenzie: Explorer and Fur-Trader* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927). See also Morden Long, *Knights Errant of the Wilderness* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1920), Ch. 7, and Walter N. Sage, "Sir Alexander Mackenzie and His Influence on the History of the North West," *Queen's Quarterly* 29 (1921-22): 399–416.
  23. Bryce, *Mackenzie, Selkirk, Simpson*, 40, 51–52, 59, 60, 82. It should be noted that though Bryce lauded the French explorers and the Nor'Westers, he also played a very important role in fostering a more favourable view of the Hudson's Bay Company. Some earlier Canadian writers had seen the HBC primarily as an obstacle to westward expansionism, but Bryce emphasized its positive role as the guardian of order and civilization in the west after 1821. See Doug Owram,



- Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856–1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 193–208.
24. Bryce, *Mackenzie, Selkirk, Simpson*, 2, 5.
  25. Maxine Shore and M. M. Oblinger, *Knight of the Wilderness: The Story of Alexander Mackenzie* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1943), 76.
  26. Agnes Laut, *Empire of the North: Being the Romantic Story of the New Dominion's Growth from Colony to Kingdom* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1909), 318, vi. There are no discernible gender differences in early twentieth-century writing on exploration, and indeed Laut was one of the most vocal admirers of "manliness."
  27. Charles G. D. Roberts, *A History of Canada for High Schools and Academies* (1897; rpt. Toronto: Morang, 1909), 254, 361.
  28. Agnes Laut, *Pathfinders of the West* (New York: Macmillan, 1904), 333.
  29. *Ibid.*, 241.
  30. Wade, *Mackenzie of Canada*, 4. To some extent, such remarks simply echoed the strictures of earlier British critics such as Arthur Dobbs. See E. E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 109–117. However, the Canadian condemnation of the HBC clearly owed its impetus and tone to the context of early-twentieth century boosterism.
  31. Burpee, *Search*, 141.
  32. G. M. Dawson, "On Some of the Larger Unexplored Regions of Canada," *Ottawa Naturalist* 4 (May 1890): 37. On the connections between the work of the Geological Survey of Canada and nationalist visions of the west and its resources, see Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) and Bruce Braun, "Producing Vertical Territory: Geology and Governmentality in Late Victorian Canada," *Ecumene* 7, 1 (January 2000): 7–46.
  33. Burpee, *Search*, 424–25.
  34. Al Purdy, *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea: An Autobiography* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 1993), 67, 238, 249–50. The title of Purdy's book is a tribute to Stan Rogers' song "Northwest Passage," which describes similar emotions during a cross-country trip. For an excellent analysis of the song itself and of the reasons for its popularity, see I. S. MacLaren, "Tracing One Discontinuous Line through the Poetry of the Northwest Passage," *Canadian Poetry* 39 (Fall/Winter 1996): 35–39.
  35. John Bartlet Brebner, *The Explorers of North America* (London: A. & C. Black, 1933), 361–62; Arthur S. Morton, "La Vérendrye: Commandant, Fur-Trader, and Explorer," *Canadian Historical Review* 9, 4 (December 1928): 284–98 and *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (London: Nelson, 1939), 204–5.
  36. Brebner, *Explorers*, 456.
  37. Morton, *History of the Canadian West*, 342, 931–32.

38. For assessments of Innis' work, see Hugh G. J. Aitken, "Myth and Measurement: The Innis Tradition in Economic History," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 12, 5 (Winter 1977): 96–105; W. J. Eccles, "A Belated Review of Harold Adams Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*," *Canadian Historical Review* 60, 4 (1979): 419–41; Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 94–100; Charles R. Acland and William J. Buxton, eds., *Harold Innis in the New Century: Reflections and Refrctions* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999); and Arthur Ray's introduction to the new edition of *The Fur Trade in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
39. Burpee, *Search*, xiii.
40. Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1930; rev. ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956), 262, 392. "The lords of the lakes and forest[s]" is an unattributed quotation from Washington Irving, *Astoria; or, Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, Vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley, 1836), 23. Innis evidently expected this romantic work by an American writer, with its vivid account of the Nor'Westers, to be so familiar to his readers that an attribution was not required.
41. The similarities between many of Innis's statements and those made by Bryce in Chapter 8 of *Mackenzie, Selkirk, Simpson* ("Canada's Debt to the Fur Companies") are particularly strong.
42. Frank Underhill, "The Economic Interpretation of Canadian History," *Canadian Forum* 11 (1930): 27. See also Burpee's review of Innis, *American Historical Review* 36, 1 (October 1930): 177–79 and W. A. Mackintosh's assessment in the *Canadian Historical Review* 12, 1 (March 1931): 65–67. Both Burpee and Mackintosh (an economic historian whose work was a major influence on Innis) suggested that Innis's work placed the history of the fur trade on a sounder basis without destroying its romance. Publisher Lorne Pierce of the Ryerson Press, a leading exponent of the romantic vision of Canada's past, had no difficulty in accepting Innis's interpretation. See Sandra Campbell, "From Romantic History to Communications Theory: Lorne Pierce as Publisher of C. W. Jefferys and Harold Innis," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 30, 3 (Fall 1995): 91–116.
43. A. L. Burt, *The Romance of Canada: A New History* (Toronto: Gage, 1938), 180.
44. Donald Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* (1937; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1956), 6.
45. A. R. M. Lower, *Colony to Nation: A History of Canada* (Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1946), 12–14.
46. J. M. S. Careless, *Canada, a Story of Challenge* (1953; 3rd edn., Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), 4.
47. Roy Daniells, *Alexander Mackenzie and the North West* (London: Faber, 1969), 90–91, 19, 32, 26, 13.

48. For example, see Barry Gough, *First Across the Continent* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997).
49. Michael Bliss, "Conducted Tour," *The Beaver* 69, 2 (April/ May 1988): 16–24. See also Parker Duchemin, "'A Parcel of Whelps': Alexander Mackenzie Among the Indians," *Canadian Literature* 124 (Spring 1991): 49–74.
50. Edward Struzik, *Northwest Passage* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1991), 91; Christy Collis, "The Voyage of the Episteme: Narrating the North," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 59 (Fall 1991): 27.
51. See Ernest J. Chambers, ed., *Canada's Fertile Northland* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1907).
52. Roberts, *History of Canada*, 362.
53. For example, see Burpee, *Search*, Ch. 7.
54. See Cavell, "Comparing Mythologies," 24–25.
55. Stephen Leacock, *Adventurers of the Far North: A Chronicle of the Arctic Seas* (1914; rpt. Toronto: Glasgow, Brook, 1920), 89, 103, 106, 3.
56. W. L. Grant, *A History of Canada* (1914; 2nd ed. London: Heinemann, 1916), 251, 266–67. This much-reprinted work was used as a high school textbook during the 1920s.
57. R. G. Macbeth, *The Romance of Western Canada* (1918; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1920), 16–18.
58. Lawrence J. Burpee, "Western Exploration, 1763–1841," in Adam Shortt and Arthur G. Doughty, eds., *Canada and Its Provinces: Vol. 5, United Canada* (Toronto: Glasgow, Brook, 1914), 679, 684–85.
59. William Gibson, "Sir John Franklin's Last Voyage," *The Beaver* 17, 1 (June 1938): 49; Richard Lambert, *Franklin of the Arctic* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1949), 236, 284, 291; Leslie Neatby, *In Quest of the North West Passage* (Toronto: Longmans, Green and London: Constable, 1958), 52–3, 103, 131, and *Search for Franklin* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1970), 25; Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Terror and Erebus: A Verse Play," in Margaret Atwood and Barry Callaghan, eds., *The Poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen*, Vol. 1 (Toronto: Exile, 1993), 104–5.
60. Neatby, *Quest*, 185. See also Morden Long, *Sir John Franklin* (Toronto: Ryerson, [1930]); Lambert, *Franklin of the Arctic*, and Paul Nanton, *Arctic Breakthrough: Franklin's Expeditions, 1819–1847* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1970). The writers in this note and n. 59 are discussed in more detail in Cavell, "Comparing Mythologies," 17–18, 26–30, 34–37.
61. Lawrence F. Jones and George Lonn, *Pathfinders of the North* (Toronto: Pitt, 1970), xi, 1–3.
62. See Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic* (1921; rev. ed. New York: Macmillan, 1943), 6.
63. Vilhjalmur Stefansson, "Rae's Arctic Correspondence," *The Beaver* 33, 4 (March 1954): 37.
64. Stefansson, *Unsolved Mysteries*, 127.

65. See Richard Diubaldo, *Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978).
66. See W. L. Morton, *The Kingdom of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), and *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W. L. Morton*, ed. A. B. McKillop (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980).
67. John G. Diefenbaker, *One Canada: Memoirs of the Right Honourable John G. Diefenbaker, Vol. 2: The Years of Achievement, 1957–1962* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976), 10–13.
68. For example, see James Woodford, *The Violated Vision: The Rape of Canada's North* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972); Robert Page, "The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline and the Future of Canada North of 60°," in Abraham Rotstein and Gary Lax, eds., *Getting It Back: A Program for Canadian Independence* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1974); Farley Mowat, *Canada North Now: The Great Betrayal* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976); Bruce W. Hodgins, Jamie Benidickson, Richard P. Bowles, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *The Canadian North: Source of Wealth or Vanishing Heritage?* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1977).
69. Reprinted in Hodgins, Benidickson, Bowles, and Rawlyk, *The Canadian North*, 248.
70. Thomas R. Berger, "The North as Frontier and Homeland," in *The Arctic: Choices for Peace and Security* (Vancouver: Gordon Soules, 1989), 41. On the impact of the Berger report among younger Canadians, see Robert Page, *Northern Development: The Canadian Dilemma* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 120–22. The use of the report to inculcate the vision of a tolerant, multicultural Canada among high school students was advocated in Peter L. McCreath, George G. Abell, Paul Robinson, and Jim Stanley, *Learning from the North: A Guide to the Berger Report* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1977).
71. It should be kept in mind that Stefansson (1879–1962) was a contemporary of Leacock (1869–1944), Laut (1871–1936), Grant (1872–1935), and Burpee (1873–1946), and shared many of their assumptions about the purposes of exploration; however, Stefansson's longevity permitted him to present his ideas in a more appealing form to a new generation of readers.
72. Harold Innis, "Recent Books on the Canadian Northland and the Arctic," *Canadian Historical Review* 20, 1 (March 1939): 43.
73. Farley Mowat, *Ordeal by Ice* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), 276, 356, 357, 240.
74. Maurice Hodgson, "The Exploration Journal as Literature," *The Beaver* 47, 3 (Winter 1967): 9.
75. T. D. MacLulich, "Canadian Exploration as Literature," *Canadian Literature* 81 (Summer 1979): 81.
76. Peter C. Newman, *Company of Adventurers* (Markham, Ontario: Viking Penguin, 1985), 260, 293, 295.

77. Pierre Berton, *The Arctic Grail* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 337, 158–59. On the inaccuracy of such claims about the naval explorers, see Janice Cavell, “The Hidden Crime of Dr Richardson,” *Polar Record* 43, 225 (April 2007): 155–64; “Representing Akaitcho: European Vision and Re-Vision in the Writing of John Franklin’s *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea*,” *Polar Record* 44, 228 (January 2008): 25–34; and “Going Native in the North: Reconsidering British Attitudes during the Franklin Search, 1848–1859,” *Polar Record* 45, 232 (January 2009): 25–35.
78. *John Rae’s Correspondence with the Hudson’s Bay Company on Arctic Exploration 1844–1855*, ed. E. E. Rich and A. M. Johnson (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, 1953), 156.
79. “Dr. Rae’s Report,” *Household Words* 10, 29 (30 December 1854): 457.
80. Ken McGoogan, *Fatal Passage: The Untold Story of John Rae, the Arctic Adventurer Who Discovered the Fate of Franklin* (Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2001), 304–5, 255, 234, 257–67.
81. Ken McGoogan, *Ancient Mariner: The Amazing Adventures of Samuel Hearne, the Sailor Who Walked to the Arctic Ocean* (Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2003), 3.
82. Richard C. Davis, introduction to *Sir John Franklin’s Journals and Correspondence: The First Arctic Land Expedition, 1819–1822* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1995), cv.
83. Hugh N. Wallace, *The Navy, the Company, and Richard King* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1980), 2–3, 13. The use of canoes on the sea route would, of course, have been disastrous.
84. See I. S. MacLaren, “Retaining Captaincy of the Soul: Response to Nature in the First Franklin Expedition,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 28 (Spring 1984): 57–92 and “The Aesthetic Map of the North, 1845–1859,” in Kenneth Coates and W. R. Morrison, eds., *Interpreting Canada’s North* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1989), especially 22, 46.
85. In fact, the colourful language of penetration and conquest is conspicuous by its absence from British Arctic narratives in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. Such language appeared simultaneously in British, American, and Canadian polar exploration literature during the 1880s and 1890s. This change seems to have been the result of broad common developments in the English-speaking world (in particular, the spread of social Darwinism). See Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (London and New York: Belhaven Press, 1993), 33–34. Most Canadian writers have simply taken it for granted that the metaphor of conquest also characterized the earlier period. On the characteristics of the earlier British literature, see Janice Cavell, *Tracing the Connected Narrative: Arctic Exploration in British Print Culture, 1818–1860* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

86. Rudy Wiebe, *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic* (Edmonton: NeWest, 1989), 43.
87. For example, see Mowat, *Ordeal by Ice*, 322 and Berton, *Arctic Grail*, 339.
88. Among the most perceptive summaries of post-colonial theory is Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).
89. David Thompson has taken Mackenzie's place as the most admired western explorer. Thompson always received approval from Canadian historians due to the very high quality of his work as a surveyor, but in the early twentieth century his relative lack of "aggressiveness" placed him in much the same category as Hearne. His rise to favour has not been discussed here because the focus in the second half of the article is on northern exploration. See J. B. Tyrrell's introduction to *Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations*; Charles Norris Cochrane, *David Thompson, The Explorer* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1924); Arthur S. Morton, *David Thompson* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1930); V. G. Hopwood, "David Thompson, Mapmaker and Mythmaker," *Canadian Literature* 38 (Autumn 1968): 5–17; James K. Smith, *David Thompson, Fur Trader, Explorer, Geographer* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971); and a recent popular biography: D'Arcy Jenish, *David Thompson and the Mapping of the Canadian West* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2003).
90. Robertson Davies, "The Canada of Myth and Reality," in Paul Denham and Mary Jane Edwards, eds., *Canadian Literature in the 70's* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980), 14.
91. Franklyn Griffiths, *Politics of the Northwest Passage* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), Ch. 1; see especially 3–4, 17–18.