

THOMPSON, DAVID (1770 - 1857), colonial surveyor and explorer in British North America

Name: David Thompson
Date of birth: 1770
Date of death: 1857
Spouse: Charlotte Thompson (née Small)
Parent: Ann Ap Thomas
Parent: David Ap Thomas
Gender: Male
Occupation: colonial surveyor and explorer in British North America
Area of activity: Travel and Exploration
Author: Robert Thomas Jenkins

Born 30 April 1770 in Westminster, and christened as 'Thompson,' but his father (David) and mother (Ann) had borne the surname 'Ap Thomas ' until they moved to London. The father died when the boy was three. David was educated at the Grey-coat school, until, in 1784, he was apprenticed to the Hudson Bay Company. After serving for five years as clerk and fur-trader, he came, in 1789-90, under the influence of the company's surveyor, Philip Turnor, who taught him the elements of astronomy and of triangulation. Surveying and exploration now became his passion, despite the company's disapproval; he learned several Indigenous languages, and 'with *Bible* and sextant in hand' (he was also an aggressive 'teetotaler') he diligently explored and mapped. With two Ojibwe guides, he surveyed a shorter route to Lake Athabasca. In 1797 he transferred his services to the North-Western Company which, though it granted him two years' leave for exploring, was yet not too willing to see him relegate fur-trading to a secondary place. Meantime, he had traced the Red river and the Assiniboine river to their sources, had followed the Assiniboine to its confluence (in the Winnipeg region) with the Red, had followed the downward course of the Red, and had found the source of the Mississippi. In 1799 he married Charlotte Small, a thirteen-year-old Métis girl of Scottish and Cree parentage, who thereafter accompanied him on all his journeys; they had seven sons and six daughters. He explored the course of the S. Lawrence to Lake Superior. In 1807 he crossed the Canadian Rockies; he found the source of the Columbia river, and was the first white man to descend it from source to mouth (1811), mapping as he went - a journey of over 1,200 miles. He left the North-West Company in 1812, settling at Montreal in order to construct his great map of the Far West, 'the basis of every Canadian government map for 100 years, and it still cannot be surpassed for accuracy' - it is now in the Ontario provincial archives; in 1816-26 he was on the commission which drew part of the boundary between Canada and the U.S.A. His latter years were years of adversity; he had moved, in 1836, to Williamstown (Ont.) and opened a shop, but bad debts, reckless generosity, and the business failures of some of his sons, reduced him to penury. He died at Longueil (on the outskirts of Montreal) in 1857, and was buried in Mount Royal cemetery at Montreal. He and his work were completely forgotten till a later geographer, J. B. Tyrrell, retraced his journeys and, in 1916, published his diaries. There are now monuments to him, on his tomb at Mount Royal, in British Columbia, and in North Dakota; and the Thompson river in British Columbia was named in compliment after him though not actually explored by him. In 1957 the Dominion government issued a postage stamp to mark the centenary of his death.

Authors

Emeritus Professor Robert Thomas Jenkins, (1881 - 1969)

Revised by the editorial team, 2024

Sources

Dictionary of American Biography (good references)

Dictionary of Canadian biography

Maclean's Magazine, 9 November 1957

The Canadian Encyclopedia

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [David Thompson](#)

Additional Links

VIAF: 7563353

Wikidata: Q763043

Published date: 1959

Article Copyright: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/>

[Copy to Clipboard](#)

[Privacy & Cookies](#)
[Copyright](#)
[The Project](#)
[Help](#)
[Contact](#)



LLYFRGEL
THE NATION



Wedi'i gerddu
Llywodraeth Cymru
Supported by
Welsh Government