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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barry Gough. *First Across the Continent: Sir Alexander Mackenzie.* Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. xxi + 232 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8061-3002-6; $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-2944-0.

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Barry Gough's biography of Alexander Mackenzie, *First Across the Continent*, is described by the author as "an interpretive reappraisal of Mackenzie rather than a comprehensive or full biography" (p. 217). A broad range of subjects has been addressed in the Oklahoma Western Biographies, the series in which *First Across the Continent* has been published.[1] The series editor, in his "Preface," states the two goals of the series are: "to provide readable life stories of significant westerners and to show how their lives illuminate a notable topic, an influential movement, or a series of important events in the history and culture of the North American West" (p. xi). Toward these goals, Professor Gough has produced a carefully researched and well-written summary biography of Mackenzie. Understandably, it emphasizes the latter's defining expeditions to the mouth of the Mackenzie River and to the Pacific. Professor Gough has made a concerted effort to provide a socioeconomic context for Mackenzie's business and exploratory efforts. He emphasized the impact that Mackenzie had on the way the geography of western North America was conceptualized, and in turn how it was developed in response to mercantile strategies. As such, the book seems to address precisely and effectively the mandate of the series, and to provide an effective synthesis and interpretation of the life and work of Mackenzie.

One of the interesting things about this book is the impression it gives of a fairly explicit attempt to locate the protagonist in the pantheon of heroes of the North American "frontier." This in turn seems to correspond to a recent and observable change in approaches to "western" and "frontier" history in North America. This shift is seen as a reaction against the current emphasis on social history and structural history, which has produced a body of work identified as "the new Western history." The recent move away from this approach is manifested in what may be termed neo- romantic studies of western history. Typically, these involve the repackaging and broad dissemination of the stories of well-known (to professional historians) characters in the non- Native exploration and resettlement (in the sense used by the historical geographer Cole Harris) of western North America.[2] It has been suggested, in the H-Canada discussion list and elsewhere, that there is a groundswell of public interest in such BIG history, combined with a hunger for historical information, historical anecdotes, and perhaps more significantly, historical heroes.

The subtext of this suggestion, which may or may not be wishful thinking on the part of historians, is that the (literate) public is looking for a historically-based symbolic system, presumably to provide a mythological location for concepts of cultural or national identity. This perceived market demand is supported by an impetus among some historians to tackle BIG history, spurred on by the sense that the broad organizing themes in the development of the country have been ignored in favour of "micro-historical studies."[3] This convergence of market demand and academic inclination means that a broader approach, rather than dense analysis, has become evident in the reexamination of some themes such as the non-Native exploration of North America. Apparently it has become acceptable once more to write in terms of firsts, and perhaps even more controversially, the impact of "heroes."[4] Events are viewed, and valued, in terms of their larger symbolic value to those who are writing about them, and those, it is anticipated, who will read about them.

Social history and historiographical trends of the recent past have had an impact on the realization of these neo-romantic studies. Typically they differ from the Whig history and biography of the early twentieth century in that there is an acknowledgment of the imperfections of the heroic protagonists, and of inputs or assistance from "others," including people of different race or gender. The emphasis remains on the mythic character of events and actors, but the lessons of social history tend to be incorporated, or at least recognized. This approach coincidentally seems to correspond better with the more cynical attitudes of the modern audience, which is less

inclined to believe in the infallibility of heroes. However, there seems to be if anything greater appreciation of a hero who exhibits human frailties, but accomplishes mythic tasks in spite of them.

On a continental scale, it is Stephen Ambrose's book about the Lewis and Clark expedition, *Undaunted Courage*, which serves as a prototype of this neo-romantic movement.[5] Not only did the book become a best seller, but it was developed into a documentary for PBS by the noted film maker Ken Burns. Clearly, it has struck a responsive chord in the marketplace for historical publications, and has in turn entrenched in a modern audience the mythic significance of the expedition and its members. There is a demonstrated demand for BIG stories of historical adventure, and the BIG characters that were the actors in them.

First Across the Continent seems to fit into this trend, as a well-constructed example of a neo- romantic biography of a great man performing great deeds. The title itself makes a bold statement, without any of the qualifiers of gender, class, or most important, race, that would be essential in "the new Western history." Likewise, the appellation given to Mackenzie as "a northern Sinbad," (p. 5) provides an explicit linkage to an existing cultural symbol representing adventure and heroism. The popularization of a well-known historical narrative for a broader audience is also evident in the eminently readable style of the book, and in the two-part "teaser" currently being published in the journal *Montana*.[6]

Writing in a post-modern era, Professor Gough acknowledges the factors of race, gender and class. However, throughout the book there is a strong subtext linking Mackenzie's personal and business life, together with his famous travels, to the established tropes of the western or frontier hero. For instance, his origins are in an aristocratic, but economically diminished Scottish family (pp. 13-19). This, combined with his later experiences in North America, equips him to act not only in the "wilderness," but as the intermediary who can translate the lessons of the wilderness for the consumption of "civilized" society. The earlier trader/explorer Peter Pond is portrayed as something of a Leather stocking to Mackenzie (pp. 58-75). Pond has the local knowledge, which Mackenzie appropriated and used, but due to failings of "character" (Gough describes Pond as "that crabbed genius" [p. 207]). is unable to bridge the gap between "wilderness" and "civilization." Professor Gough uses Mackenzie's lack of acknowledgment of Pond's contribution as an example of the former's overpowering ego, one of the hero's imperfections. Meanwhile Mackenzie is able to survive and be transformed by the trials of the wilderness, but is likewise able to reconceptualize his experience for the consumption of the civilized world. It is the capture of special knowledge under arduous circumstances, and its dissemination to the originating culture, that is diagnostic of the mythic hero.

Also typical of the mythic hero, Mackenzie is portrayed as something of a loner or renegade, working toward a higher goal, or a dream, in spite of the strictures of the larger system in which he operated. For example, in the conclusion of the text, it is noted that Mackenzie's achievements "rested on European capital and markets, on native trading and advice, and on French Canadian grit and brawn. But he alone drove on the expeditions to their goals" (p. 211). In other words, it took the vision and managerial expertise of one special person to muster and focus the diverse inputs required to explore the routes to the Arctic and the Pacific Oceans. Additionally, the conclusion explicitly invokes the Horatio Alger myth; that any person with sufficient ability and a strong enough work ethic can improve their economic standing and so "rise in the world" as a result of their own efforts (p. 211).

A preview of the conceptual structure of this book is found in Professor Gough's 1992 conference paper, "The Politics of Trade, Exploration and Territory: Alexander Mackenzie's Scheme for North Pacific Dominion."[7] Some of the motivation underlying the ideation of Mackenzie as a true hero is revealed in this paper. It was produced in part as a response to the 1989 Michael Bliss article in *The Beaver*, "Conducted Tour," which argued that Mackenzie was little more than a tourist, escorted to the Arctic and Pacific Oceans by Native guides fully familiar with the routes.[8] Although Professor Gough acknowledged that the trips would have been impossible without Native guides, he believed that emphasizing this aspect does not address adequately the central importance of Mackenzie's expeditions to the subsequent development of North America. Gough's rebuttal is located in the enormous economic and cultural impacts which were brought about by Mackenzie's trips. Although the routes may have been familiar to indigenous people, without Mackenzie making the knowledge available to the EuroAmerican capitalist system, these impacts would not have been realized. The trips themselves may have diminished intrinsic value as adventures, but increased value in how the information gained was used to develop strategies for economic and imperial growth, synonymous with the reconceptualizing, reshaping, and ultimately resettling of North America. As expressed in this book, what is central in defining the significance of

Mackenzie's adventures is not the geographic knowledge that permitted the trips, or even the trips themselves, but the packaging and transmission of the newly-acquired geographic knowledge to the movers and shakers of the business and colonial power structures.

There is also a sense in the book of a reaction to the great significance and mythic value currently accorded to the Lewis and Clark Expedition. There is an implied desire to redress the balance; to place that more celebrated adventure in its historical context as an outcome of Mackenzie's travels, and more specifically, the dissemination of information concerning them. Not only were Lewis and Clark twelve years later, but were carrying out orders based on the geographic knowledge furnished by Mackenzie. Mackenzie, on the other hand, had the visionary attributes of the true hero, striking off into the "unknown" in search of his dream (pp. 6, 184, 209-210). Following the logic of heros, the self-directed hero should be accorded a higher position in the pantheon than the "journeyman hero," who simply was carrying out political orders.

Professor Gough has produced a well-researched and readable narrative summarizing Mackenzie's life and work. He has done an effective job in locating Mackenzie, his expeditions, writings, commercial ventures and lobbying in the broader cultural, colonial and mercantile context of the times. The arguments supporting Mackenzie's position as "one of the greatest travelers of all time" (p. 3) and a "giant" among the fur traders (p. 211) are effectively and eloquently presented. The list of sources consulted supports the narrative effectively, and provides a good entry into the literature of the North West fur trade of the late eighteenth century. Finally, the book seems to fulfill explicitly the mandate of the series in which it appears.

The primary issue raised for me in the narrative is the remarkable correspondence between the portrayal of Mackenzie and the mythic paradigm of the frontier hero. Is this just coincidence, does it relate to the use of Mackenzie's own literary record to supply much of the historical information, or is it an effort on the part of the author to redress what seems to be an underrating of Mackenzie's significance to the development of North America? It may be that all of these factors contributed, and there is no denying that, based on his impact, Mackenzie should be placed solidly in the top echelon of EuroAmerican explorers of North America. It is possible that mythic forms, such as that of the frontier hero, are inevitable if a neo-romantic approach is taken in writing history. The portrayal of the "sweep of history," to provide broad organizing concepts and increase public appreciation of our past, leads naturally into the use of symbolic characters and mythic forms. These provide an effective mechanism for telling an appealing story, that will interest and hopefully educate the public. The danger of the neo-romantic approach lies in its potential for the oversimplification of complex patterns of historical actors and actions into mythic narratives of great people performing great deeds. In this book, Professor Gough has managed to include many of the structural factors that influenced the course of Alexander Mackenzie's life, all the while maintaining a firm vision of Mackenzie as a mythic frontier hero.

Notes:

[1]. As an example, the preceding thirteen volumes have included biographies of George Armstrong Custer, Narcissa Whitman, Red Cloud, John Ford and Cesar Chavez.

[2]. Harris refines the definition of early non-Native settlement [usually identified as "pioneer" or "frontier" settlement] of British Columbia as "resettlement," capturing explicitly the concept of preexisting social systems and land use patterns of indigenous populations; Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, Vancouver, UBC Press, 1997.

[3]. For example, Michael Bliss suggests that the move towards "specialized" history was paralleled by a loss of the sense of national community. He argues that the work of historians should help in the "quest for public self-understanding"; Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol.26, no.4 (Winter 1991-92), 5-17.

[4]. Allan Greer attributes a temporal shift in research away from the early post-contact era in favor of later periods to a philosophical inclination away from "origins" and "firsts" in structuralist approaches; Allan Greer, "Canadian History: Ancient and Modern," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol.77, no.4 (December 1996), 575-590. Does this imply the opposite; that in a neo-romantic approach, the description and analysis of mythic origins and firsts is most appropriately located within the context of early post-contact, or "frontier," history? Are myths best, or most safely, located in the mists of time?

[5]. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

[6]. Starting in; *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol.47, No.3 (Autumn 1997), 2- 15.

[7]. Unedited copy published in "Papers on the Vancouver Conference on Exploration and Discovery, April 24-26, 1992," Part II, Burnaby, BC, Simon Fraser University, 1992.

[8]. Michael Bliss, "Conducted Tour," *The Beaver*, Vol.69, No.2 (April-May 1989), 16-24.

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