

The Strange Case of Miss Agnes Laut and David Thompson



CAN women write history? Of course they can, and do. Miss Jane Stoddart has just published a book on Mary Queen of Scots that has won unqualified praise for its thoroughness and insight. Mrs. John Richard Green has a peculiarly enviable fame in the historical field. Other instances are plentiful. The question was propounded by a friend while discussing Miss Agnes Laut's "The Conquest of the Great Northwest." The book is history or it is nothing. It is too bad that a friendly reader should be provoked to ask whether a woman can write history.

The general question cannot be argued here. Though in the writing of history there is neither male nor female, it *does* seem invidious to question a woman's production; and the disagreeable task is only rendered possible by the challenge that recurs throughout Miss Laut's book, sometimes a little veiled, sometimes as uncompromising as a mistake in spelling.

I have never known a woman writer who wished allowances to be made for her work, because of its feminine origin. The literary crown is sexless. If one's views are of the slightest interest it may be superfluous to say that in every field in which a woman may care to work, I would accord her the utmost welcome and liberty. It has always seemed to me absurd for a man who is eternally a debtor to his mother for any strength of mind or body, to wish to limit the activities of his mother's sex in any noble pursuit. Which attitude means that the more you would have fair fields for feminine powers, the more anxious you are that women pioneers in unaccustomed fields should succeed uncommonly well.

Miss Laut has produced two volumes of absorbing interest. She has examined records in the London office of the Hudson's Bay Company that have never before been accessible to outsiders. For example, she has discovered Peter Skene Ogden's journal, which is an invaluable illuminant of early Oregon history. She has used great quantities of material in a way that makes her subject scintillate, like a novel. She is almost a historian, and might become a first-rate novelist. It would be delightful to proffer her the fullest meed of praise which can attach to so imposing a word as "historian." But scintillation is the special temptation of the historical writer. When it comes in at the door, accuracy is apt to fly out of the window.

One sinner destroyeth much good. Three serious inaccuracies may vitiate a great quantity of excellent facts. How far this is the case in "The Conquest of the Great Northwest" it is impossible to say. For as the story is mainly that of the Hudson's Bay Company, and is written from records that only Miss Laut has seen, many of her versions, and, perhaps, her aversions, must stand. If, when she occupies other ground her step is misleading, questions about the value of her exclusive trip through treasures of historical lore will surely arise.

Miss MacMurchy, who does a great deal of excellent reviewing for the *Toronto News*, says that in "The Conquest of the Great Northwest," Miss Laut almost invites controversy. She does; and she does it by dangerous introduction, and still more dangerous footnote. "I am Sir Oracle." In witness whereof:

"In many episodes, the story told here will differ almost unrecognisably from accepted versions and legends of the same era. This is not by accident. Nor is it because I have not consulted what one writer sarcastically called to my attention as 'the secondary authorities'—the words are his, not mine. Nearly all these authorities from earliest to latest days are in my own library and interlined from many readings. Where I have departed from old versions of famous episodes, it has been because records left in the handwriting of the actors themselves compelled me; as in the case of * * * Thompson's explorations of Idaho, Howse's explorations in the Rockies. * * *"—Foreword.

"It is necessary to give the authorities somewhat explicitly because in the case of 'Pathfinders of the West,' the *New York Evening Post* begged readers to consult original

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sources regarding Radisson. As original sources are not open to the public, the advice was worth just exactly the spirit that animated it."—Footnote, page 110.

"It has been almost a stock criticism of the shallow nowadays to say that an author has rejected original authorities, if the author refers to printed records, or to charge that the author has ignored secondary authorities, if the writer refers only to original documents. I may say that I have not depended on secondary authorities in the case of Radisson, because to refer to them would be to point out inaccuracies in every second line—an ungrateful task. But I have consulted, and possess in my own library every book that has ever been printed on the early history of the Northwest. As for original documents, I spent six months in London on records whose dust had not been disturbed since they were written in the sixteen-hundreds. The herculean nature of this laborious task can best be understood when it is realised that these records are not open to the public and it is impossible to have an assistant to do the copying. The transcripts had to be done by myself, and revised by an assistant at night."—Footnote, pages 196-197.

About Radisson, we must be silent. The last word has been said, until the transcripts—the same, perhaps, that were "revised by an assistant," appear. But about Thompson, the most original authority of all is, happily, available. Unhappily he does not agree with Miss Laut. Miss Laut has written a chapter headed, "David Thompson," which must be read in the light of the declaration that she has relied on "records left in the handwriting of the actors themselves." The footnotes following the Thompson chapter contain several statements which provoke questions. Miss Laut tells us that she has given Thompson's explorations in greater detail than any other writer; that Thompson's MS is in Toronto; that she has travelled over the Thompson country; that Howse was as great an explorer as Thompson, but his work was kept secret by the Hudson's Bay Company, while Thompson's became known; that Thompson never received any recognition, and died unknown; that Thompson "far exceeded" Alexander Mackenzie as an explorer, and that there is a mystery about Thompson's seven months' trip in 1811, down the Columbia, through the Arrow Lakes.

Take these presentations of fact seriatim:

(1) "I have given the explorations of Thompson in great detail because it has never before been done, and it seems to me is very essential to the exploration period of the West."

This cannot be the fruit of a scorn for secondary authorities. Secondary authorities have not taken the trouble to tell about Thompson's travels, and Miss Laut's sixteen pages give more detail than has been published before; and that's all that can be said about it. Well, Dr. Coues published in 1897, two wonderfully encyclopaedic volumes, which he called "New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: Henry-Thompson Journals." He gives an immense amount of detail, which he himself took from Thompson's journal. He also refers to "Mr. Tyrrell's admirable paper" on Thompson's travels, published in 1888, which traces Thompson's journeys with a minuteness which Miss Laut might regard as tiresome and undramatic. Mr. Tyrrell spent every summer from 1883 to 1897 in Thompson country, from the Kootenay to Fort Churchill, and even unto Chesterfield Inlet, for the Geological Survey of Canada. He spent weeks taking his facts from Thompson's journals. He has checked dozens of Thompson's observations.

(2) "Thompson's manuscript is in the Parliament Building, Toronto, Ontario."

This is true, though Miss Laut refrains from saying that she makes the statement of her own knowledge. It is not the whole truth, though. Thompson's journal is in the Parliament Buildings, and consists of forty manuscript volumes. But there is another manuscript of his in Mr. Tyrrell's possession, which perhaps not six living people have seen, and which will be published shortly.

(3) "It ought not to be necessary to say here that I know both regions traversed by

Thompson well, very well, from personal travel."

This is immaterial, except so far as it strengthens the claim to be the authority on Thompson.

(4) "Howse did as great service as an explorer as Thompson, but Thompson's services became known to the world. Howse's work passed unnoticed, owing to the policy of secrecy followed by the Hudson's Bay Company."

If Howse did as great service as Thompson, Miss Laut has singularly overlooked him. Chapter XXIII, according to the heading, deals with "The advance up the Saskatchewan to Bow River and Howse Pass." But it says not a word of the advance to the Pass. Longmore, it is said, was chief factor at Edmonton with "Howse as 'patroon of the woods' west as far as the Rockies." (Vol. II, page 51.) On page 87, Vol. II:—"Mr. Howse, who found the pass, follows Thompson's tracks over the mountains."

The account of the Howse achievement, which you would expect to find under the heading I have indicated, is given in a chapter, "Extension of Trade toward Labrador." Here it is: "In 1795 Joseph Howse is sent inland from York to explore the Rockies, where he gives his name to a pass, and 'it is resolved that forts shall be erected in this country, too.'" This year, 1795, when Howse was sent to "explore the Rockies," is the year in which, Miss Laut says, Thompson quitted the Hudson's Bay service in disgust, because exploration was discouraged. The fact that Thompson left the Hudson's Bay Company on May 23rd, 1797, and not in 1795, does not affect the point as to the place of Howse among explorers.

Dr. Coues says Thompson discovered Howse Pass. He did, in the sense that he was the first man to use it to reach the country west of it. McGillivray actually found the pass, but did not examine the descent into the valley of the Blaeberry River. Thompson, following his custom, probably called the place after his friend Howse. Where are the data on which is based the claim that Howse was as important an explorer as Thompson? Miss Laut gives no account of how or where she discovered material about his explorations. The only book of Howse's that I have heard of is a Cree grammar, which no doubt is in Miss Laut's library. In the introduction he makes no reference to explorations. There is no evidence that he ever took a survey. In "Pathfinders of the West," Miss Laut refers to neither Howse nor Thompson. If the Hudson's Bay Company sent Howse "to explore the Rockies," it is a pity the exact words of the minute referring to this are not given, as well as the resolve to build forts "in this country, too." Which country? Would they resolve to build forts in mountains not yet explored?

One's reluctance to accept an off-hand assertion of this kind is increased by two sentences on page 88, Vol. II: "When he returns to the mountains in 1808, Thompson joins Henry's brigade coming west from Pembina. It is September when they reach Edmonton, and both companies have by this time built fur posts at Howse's Pass, known as Rocky Mountain House, of which Henry takes charge for the Nor'-Westers. Sixteen days on horse-back bring Thompson to the mountains."

Observe, "Howse's Pass, known as Rocky Mountain House." But Howse's Pass is at the Divide, and Rocky Mountain House was and is near the confluence of the Saskatchewan and Clearwater Rivers. Thompson was "sixteen days on horse-back," reaching the mountains. Sixteen days from where? Miss Laut does not say; but it was from Rocky Mountain House, which, it is said, was known as Howse's Pass. For Thompson had come up the Saskatchewan with Henry's brigade, and Rocky Mountain House was built at the end of satisfactory navigation, where its ruins now are. Everything is possible to a historian who mixes a mountain pass and a fur post that are a hundred miles apart as the crow flies.

(5) "Thompson never received any recognition whatever."

(6) Thompson "died unknown."

If Thompson's work became known to the world, how can Miss Laut now give us, in sixteen pages, more about his explorations than has ever been given before? How could he have received no recognition whatever, and how could he die unknown?