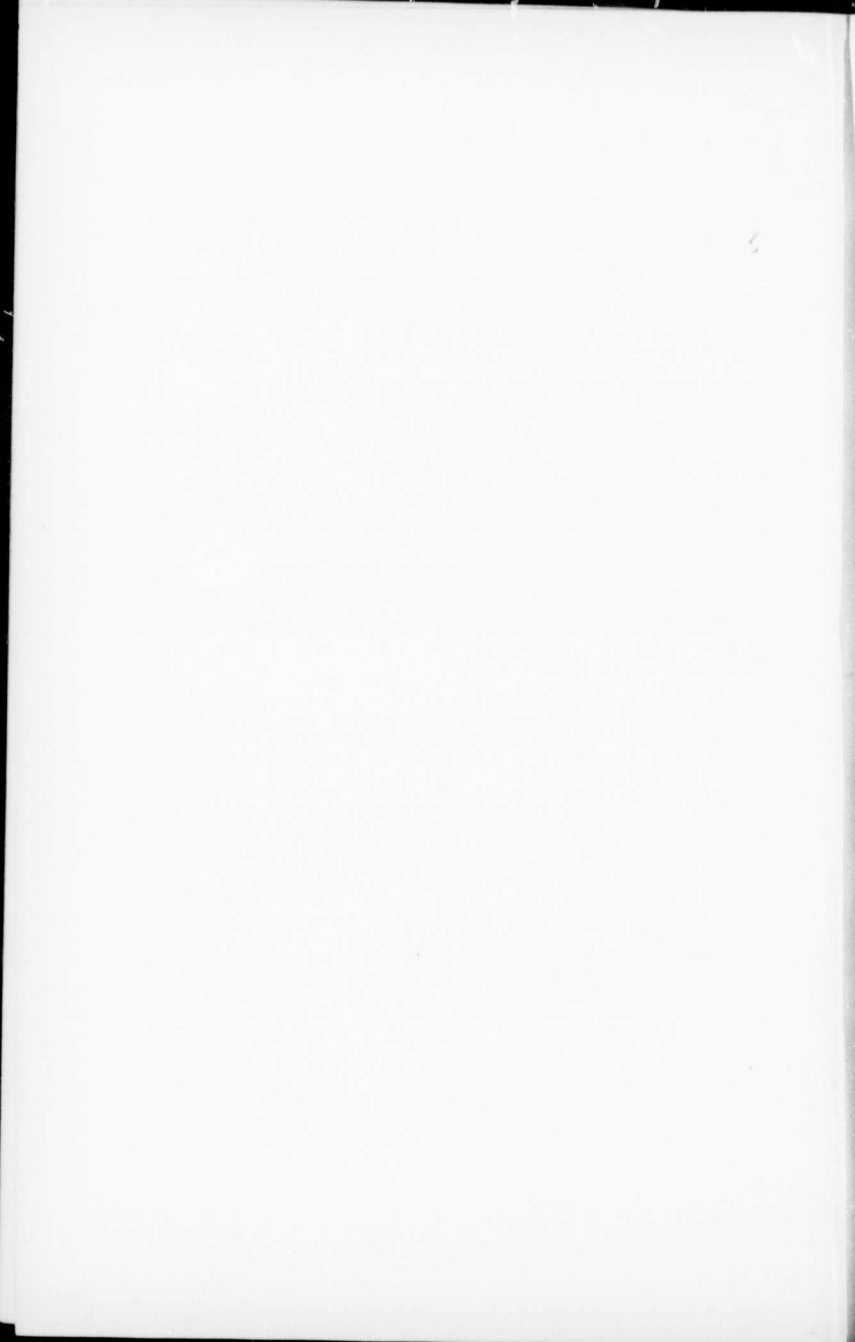


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EARLY EXPLORATION OF THE CHURCHILL RIVER

By J. B. TYRRELL

In the *Review* for December, 1916, Mr. Alcock gave an interesting account of the Churchill River,¹ the second in size of the two largest rivers that empty into Hudson Bay from the west. As the history of the exploration of this river is but slightly known, a few additional facts about the early surveys and journeys made on it may be of interest.

After its discovery by Jens Munck in 1619 very little attention was paid to the river until after Captain Gazer (Geyer) of the Hudson's Bay Company built York Factory on the northwest bank of Hayes River in 1684.² In 1688 the same company established a fishery for white porpoises at the mouth of the river. The existence of this fishery is recorded on an old French map of Hudson Bay, a copy of which is in the possession of the Canadian Archives in Ottawa. It is undated, but internal evidence shows it to have been made between 1691 and 1694. On this same map the Churchill River is shown up to and a little above the confluence of the Deer River, or for about thirty miles upwards from its mouth.

About 1718 the Hudson's Bay Company built a trading post within the mouth of the river, and in 1733 it began the construction of Fort Prince of Wales, the great stone fort on Eskimo Point.

In the years 1769 to 1772 Samuel Hearne made his three journeys inland from this fort, but he appears never to have made any attempt to survey the Churchill River, for on the great map of the world accompanying the account of Cook's third voyage,³ which was issued in 1784, no indication is given of the course of the river above its mouth, though all the geographical information in the possession of the Hudson's Bay Company appears to have been incorporated on this map, including Hearne's surveys towards the Coppermine River, and two routes from York Factory to Cumberland House (approx. 54° N. and 102° W.) on the Saskatchewan River, one by the Nelson and Grass Rivers and the other by Hayes River and Lake Winnipeg. On the map in Hearne's own book on his journey,⁴ published in 1795, the mouth of the river alone is indicated.

In 1775 Joseph Frobisher, a fur trader from Montreal, urged his canoes westward to Lake Superior and thence onward through Lake Winnipeg

¹ F. J. Alcock: The Churchill River, *Geogr. Rev.*, Vol. 2, 1916, pp. 433-448.

² For location of most of the geographical features here mentioned, see map in Mr. Alcock's article, p. 434.

³ A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean Undertaken by the Command of His Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Northern Hemisphere, . . . Performed under the Direction of Captains Cook, Clerke, and Gore in His Majesty's Ships the *Resolution* and *Discovery*, in the years 1776, 1777, 1778, 1779, and 1780, 3 vols., Published by order of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, London, 1784.

⁴ Samuel Hearne: A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson Bay to the Northern Ocean . . . in the Years 1769, 1770, 1771, and 1772, London, 1795.

and up the Saskatchewan and Sturgeonweir Rivers to the Churchill River, which he reached at Frog, or Trade, Portage. Here, overlooking the river, the upper waters of which he had now discovered, he established himself for a time. His object was to intercept the northern Indians as they came down from the Athabaska country in their canoes loaded with furs to trade them for guns, ammunition, knives, and "English brandy" with the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Prince of Wales. In this enterprise he was so successful that he was not able to carry away all the furs that he secured, and he established trade relations with the Indians from the Athabaska country which were maintained by him and by the company with which he was connected for the next forty-seven years.

The following year Alexander Henry and the brothers Joseph and Thomas Frobisher, all from Montreal, left the trading post on the shore of Beaver Lake in the present Province of Saskatchewan, in which they had been living, and went to Frog Portage, where they built a house. As the Indians from Lake Athabaska had not arrived they paddled up the Churchill River to meet them, going about as far as the mouth of the Mudjatiek River (56° N. and $107\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ W.), where they met a band with canoes loaded with furs. They turned about and came back with them to the house at Frog Portage, where they obtained from them 12,000 beaver skins, "besides large numbers of otter and martin," giving in return such articles as they had at the house.

After such a successful trade Alexander Henry and Joseph Frobisher returned to Montreal, while Thomas Frobisher went up the Churchill River to Isle à la Crosse, where he established a trading post.

In 1778 Peter Pond followed Frobisher's route from the Saskatchewan River by Frog Portage and up the Churchill River to Isle à la Crosse, whence he continued to its source near Methye Portage on his way to Lake Athabaska.

A few years later Pond drew several maps of western Canada, one of which is said to have been made for the Empress of Russia. One of these maps, dated 1785, has been published by L. J. Burpee in his "The Search for the Western Sea,"⁵ while another, dated about 1790, has been published in the "Report of the Archives of Canada."⁶ These maps are crude and imperfect, but the former one is the first that shows the Churchill River from its source to its mouth.

In 1787 Malcolm Ross, who four years later was associated with Philip Turnor in the survey of the upper Churchill River and Lake Athabaska, ascended the Churchill River from its mouth and crossed to Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River, though by what route is not exactly known. It is probable that he went up the river through Northern and Southern Indian Lakes, and by Nelson House (56° N. and $100\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ W.) and the upper waters of the Burntwood and Grass Rivers. Of this trip he

⁵ Toronto, [1908], p. 182.

⁶ 1890, p. 53.

reported that he had "many difficulties to encounter before he reached Cumberland House from Churchill, the water so shoal as to prevent the navigation of small canoes." In commenting on the results of his trip Samuel Hearne says "no less could be expected; this river a little distance from here is inaccessible for anything much heavier than a light canoe." In 1788, however, Robert Longmore, an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, was sent "to prosecute the discoveries from Churchill inland." Though he did not succeed in opening a trade route to the Saskatchewan, several trading posts were shortly afterwards established by the company up the Churchill River and in its vicinity.

In 1791 Philip Turnor, accompanied by Malcolm Ross, in charge of a survey party sent out by the Hudson's Bay Company to survey and locate the position of Lake Athabaska, left Cumberland House on Saskatchewan waters, surveyed the Sturgeonweir River up to Frog Portage, and thence made a track survey of the Churchill River up to its sources in Methye and Swan Lakes. His report and map were sent to the head office of the Hudson's Bay Company in London and his map was incorporated in Arrowsmith's map of North America.⁷ His original map, which appears to have been remarkably correct, was copied by Kohl, and the copy is preserved in the Library of Congress in Washington.⁸ A copy of this copy is published in Burpee's "The Search for the Western Sea."⁹

In 1793 David Thompson,¹⁰ then in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company, crossed Burntwood Portage ($55^{\circ}12' N.$ and $100^{\circ} W.$) from the Burntwood River into the Churchill River and surveyed that river to a point 33 miles above Duck Portage ($55^{\circ}23' N.$ and $102^{\circ} W.$).

He again reached Duck Portage in 1795, where he met George Charles, an old schoolmate of his and then a fur-trader in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company at Churchill, who had ascended the Churchill River to this place. Though in the employ of the same company the two men occupied separate trading posts, and, while competing with *Canadian* traders from Montreal, they also competed with each other for the furs that were caught and brought to them by the Indians, and they sent the furs obtained in the winter's trade to different headquarters, Thompson sending his furs down the Burntwood and Nelson Rivers to York Factory and Charles down the Churchill River to Fort Churchill.

In 1796 Thompson surveyed the Churchill River from Duck Portage up to the mouth of the Reindeer River, the Reindeer River to Reindeer

⁷ See footnote 13.

⁸ Justin Winsor: The Kohl Collection (now in the Library of Congress) of Maps Relating to America (a reprint of *Bibliogr. Contribution of the Library of Harvard University* No. 19), Library of Congress, Washington, 1904, map No. 39, listed on p. 74.

⁹ p. 170.

¹⁰ For an account of this eminent trader and surveyor's explorations see J. B. Tyrrell: David Thompson, A Great Geographer, *Geogr. Journ.*, Vol. 37, 1911, pp. 49-58, and "David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America, 1781-1812," edited by J. B. Tyrrell, Toronto, 1916 (reviewed in the *February Review*, p. 156).—EDIT. NOTE.

Lake, and the west side of the lake up to the portage route to Wollaston Lake, beyond which he surveyed Wollaston Lake and Black River to the east end of Turner's survey of Lake Athabaska. In 1797, while in the employ of the North-West Company, he surveyed the Churchill River from the mouth of the Reindeer River to Frog Portage, on his way to Cumberland House, and the following year he surveyed the river from Frog Portage upwards to Isle à la Crosse, making a detour on the route into Lac la Ronge. From Isle à la Crosse he ascended Beaver River, the principal upper branch of the Churchill River, past Green Lake to the source of the stream, whence he carried his canoes to Lac la Biche, where he built a trading post. In May, 1799, he was on the Clearwater River, a branch of the Athabaska, which he ascended to Methye Portage, from which place he surveyed the Churchill River down to Isle à la Crosse, and thence checked his survey of the river made the year before down to Frog Portage.

The absurdity of maintaining two sets of trading posts on the Churchill River and the upper waters of the Burntwood River, both belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company, but one sending its furs down the Churchill River to Churchill and the other down the Burntwood and Nelson Rivers to York Factory, was recognized in 1798, and the chiefs at York Factory recalled their traders and left the district to the men from Churchill. From that time onwards until 1821, when the Hudson's Bay and North-West Companies united under the former name, and perhaps for several years after the union of the companies, the furs from this district which were secured by the Hudson's Bay Company were carried down the Churchill River to Churchill, whence they were shipped to England.

In 1799 a trading expedition was sent from Fort Churchill up the Churchill River all the way to Green Lake on the Beaver River. It left Churchill on June 26 in three boats and one or two canoes in charge of Messrs. Thomas Stayner and William Auld. Everything went well for a while, but at about 130 miles from the fort, somewhere near the mouth of the Little Churchill River, the canoe containing the two principals was upset in a rapid, and, though the men were saved by the accident of the tracking line becoming entangled in the loose rocks in the bottom of the river, the contents of the canoe were lost. On this account Stayner returned to Churchill, while Auld continued up the river and established a trading post on Green Lake, where he spent the winter. On his arrival there he was greatly distressed to find that he had not brought enough brandy with him, but on his appealing to some of the posts on the Saskatchewan River they helped him out.

In the same year Peter Fidler of the Hudson's Bay Company, under direction from York Factory, left Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan waters and went by Frog Portage to the Churchill River, thence up that river and its tributary, Sturgeonweir River, to Green Lake and Lac la Biche. Thus Fidler and Auld, one from York and the other from Churchill,

transferred the rivalry of these two centers from the country on the lower to that on the upper portion of the Churchill River.

In 1804 and 1805 David Thompson, on behalf of the North-West Company, was trading and surveying on the Churchill River as far downstream as Southern Indian Lake, which was as far as he ever descended. During this season and the preceding twelve years he had made track surveys, checked by great numbers of astronomical observations, of the river down to this lake from its three principal sources, one at the head of the Beaver River, near Lac la Biche ($54\frac{3}{4}^{\circ}$ N. and 112° W.), and the others in Methye and Wollaston Lakes. He never had the opportunity of traveling over that portion of the river from Southern Indian Lake down to Hudson Bay.

In the winter of 1804-1805 Thompson was opposed in the fur trade by his old schoolmate George Charles of the Hudson's Bay Company, who, like himself, had received a rudimentary education in surveying at the Grey Coat School in London, though there is no published record that he ever made use of his early training.

At that time there were three fur-trading posts on this lower portion of the Churchill River, namely (Southern) Indian Lake, Granville Lake, or Musquawegun, and Nelson House. William Conelly, afterwards so well known in connection with the Hudson's Bay Company's affairs in British Columbia, was in charge for the North-West Company at Indian Lake, David Thompson for the same company at Musquawegun, and George Charles for the Hudson's Bay Company at Nelson House.

The following account of an incident which occurred during the previous year in the conduct of the fur trade at Nelson House is given in Thompson's own words¹¹:

Oct. 2. In the evening paid a visit to Mr. Charles to enquire the reasons of his seizing Louis Duplein. He informed me that in the spring on the arrival of all their party at this place, a Mr. Clarke deposed that Louis Duplein entered his tent with arms and forcibly took from thence a bundle containing 30 beaver skins, and that another small bundle of furs had been stolen out of his tent in the night previous to the above, the wrapper of which small bundle he found in the morning at the door of the said Louis Duplein. They all then proposed to seize him and take him down to Churchill to be tried as Criminal for the above actions; but that he Mr. Charles overruled the motion as not thinking it an affair of sufficient consequence to cause such violent measures. But upon the arrival of Mr. Linklater &c. at the Factory (Fort Churchill) they by their representations to the Trader there got an order to seize on the person of Louis Duplein, commanding all persons that should be found present to be aiding in seizing the said Louis Duplein. In consequence of which, when they arrived in the summer, after having settled their affairs and ready to return to the Factory, they invited Louis Duplein to breakfast, which invitation like a blockhead he accepted (for they had no intention of entering the N. W. Co.'s House to seize him). At breakfast they asked Louis Duplein if he actually took by force the above 30 skins from Mr. Clarke, to which he replied in the affirmative, owning his guilt and offering to pay half the skins on the spot. Having thus declared himself guilty they were obliged to seize him and put his hands in irons. They then embarked him, leaving orders with their clerk at

¹¹ Thompson's MS. notebooks in the Provincial Archives of the Province of Ontario, Toronto.

the Indian Lake to aid and assist Du Bois in the care of the N. W. Co.'s property till some person should arrive to take charge of it. He further added that on the arrival of the ship from England the opinions of the Commander and officers of the ship were that Louis Duplein would be hanged, and that they did not see any likelihood of his escaping the rigour of the law.

Several years before Thompson reached Indian Lake some one, doubtless one of the men in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company, had made a survey of the lower portion of the river, for in the general map accompanying Mackenzie's "*Voyages*,"¹² which is dated October 15, 1801, this portion is shown with a rough approximation to correctness up to about the position of Nelson House in 55° 50' N. and 100° 30' W. Above that, up to near the mouth of the Reindeer River, it is shown by a dotted line. The positions of the lakes are merely indicated on this map without shores on either side, giving the impression that the surveyor, like many another surveyor down to the present day, noted his directions and distances, but made no attempt to sketch in the surrounding country. It is clear also that the map was not copied from a sketch made by an Indian, for in that case there would have been some indication of the shapes of the lakes. This map is said to have been "reduced by Mr. Arrowsmith from his three-sheet map of North America, with the latest discoveries, which he is about to republish."

In the 1802 edition of Arrowsmith's own map¹³ the dotted line on the above map is replaced by a solid one, but no details are indicated.

Later surveys of the lower part of the river made during the early part of the last century appear to have been the work of Peter Fidler.¹⁴ In 1807 he repeated some of Thompson's surveys of the Reindeer River and Reindeer Lake. In 1809 it is probable that he made a survey of the Churchill River from its mouth up to Isle à la Crosse, and in the following year that he surveyed the Seal and Paukatakuskow Rivers, north of Churchill, from Hudson Bay to Southern and Northern Indian Lakes respectively, as all these three streams are shown on the edition of Arrowsmith's "*Map of the Interior Parts of North America*" dated June 14, 1811.

From that time onward till 1879, when Robert Bell of the Geological Survey of Canada descended the river from the confluence of the Little Churchill River to its mouth, nothing was added to the knowledge of the geography of the lower part of the river.

As stated above, the Churchill River was regularly used as a trade route from about 1792 down to the time of the union of the Hudson's Bay

¹² Alexander Mackenzie: *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence, Through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans, in the Years 1789 and 1793*, London, 1801.

¹³ A Map Exhibiting All the New Discoveries in the Interior Parts of North America, Inscribed by Permission to the Honorable Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson Bay, in Testimony of Their Liberal Communications to Their Most Obedient and Very Humble Servant, A. Arrowsmith, January 1st, 1795, [1:4,500,000], London, A. Arrowsmith, 1795; additions to 1802.

¹⁴ See J. B. Tyrrell: Peter Fidler, Trader and Surveyor, 1769 to 1822, *Proc. and Trans. Royal Soc. of Canada*, 3rd Series, Vol. 7, 1913, Section 2, pp. 117-127.—EDIT. NOTE.

and North-West Companies in 1821. In this latter year there were two districts on the river and in its vicinity, known respectively as Old and New Churchill Districts. In Old Churchill District there was only one trading post, namely, Fort Churchill, near the shore of Hudson Bay. In New Churchill District there were in all five trading posts, three of which, namely, Indian Lake, Nelson House, and Reindeer Lake, were on the Churchill River or its tributaries, while the other two at Net (Setting) and Split Lakes were on the waters of the Nelson River. The Chief Factor, John Charles, had his residence at Indian Lake, and every year he brought supplies up the Churchill River from Fort Churchill, and distributed them to the above-named trading posts, after which he collected the furs from these posts and took, or sent, them down the same river to Fort Churchill to be shipped to England.

A few years after this date, but just how many I do not know, the number of trading posts maintained by the company was considerably reduced, and several of the more northern ones were abandoned, including most of those on the lower portion of the Churchill River, for the old-time competition between the North-West and Hudson's Bay Companies was now a thing of the past, and, as the Indians were confined to the traders of the Hudson's Bay Company for their supplies, they could be depended on to come much longer distances to the trading posts than formerly. About the same time the Churchill River was abandoned as a trade route from the interior country to the coast; the Indians soon ceased to travel up or down its treacherous current; and before long the fact that it had ever been used as a regular trade route was almost entirely forgotten.