



## *Stories of Canada*

# Mapping the Wilderness

The Story of  
David Thompson

by **Tom Shardlow**

**A story of great adventure and  
accomplishment in early Canada**

David Thompson's story is one of the greatest tales of Canadian adventure. His life was a mixture of truth and legend, but he was without a doubt one of the greatest surveyors and mapmakers of the North American continent. From 1790 to 1812, he mapped most of the country west of Hudson Bay and Lake Superior, across the Rocky Mountains to the source of the Columbia River, and the length of the Columbia to the Pacific Ocean.

David Thompson was born in London, England in 1770 and at the tender age of seven, he was placed by his mother in the historic "Grey Coat" charity school for poor and orphaned children near Westminster Abbey. Having shown an aptitude for mathematics, his education was oriented towards preparing him for life as a midshipman in the Royal Navy. At age fourteen,

as Thompson neared the end of his education, he was apprenticed to the Hudson Bay Company in Canada. In May 1784, he set sail and never saw his mother or England again.

In 1788, at the age of eighteen, Thompson, while recovering from a broken leg, was invited to join the Hudson Bay Company's official surveyor for lessons. He eventually became his understudy and learned practical astronomy under an excellent master of the science.

And thus began a turbulent life of adventure, travel, work and love, befriended by the First Nations people from whom he learned his survival skills. By the time he finished his explorations, he had travelled some fifty thousand miles on foot, horseback, and canoe. He charted a continental area so vast it remains a mapping achievement unparalleled in human history.

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