

Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Loyalist son and explorer of British Columbia



From humble beginnings to the heights of international society, Sir Alexander Mackenzie followed his dreams and was instrumental in extending the Dominion of Canada to the Pacific Ocean.

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

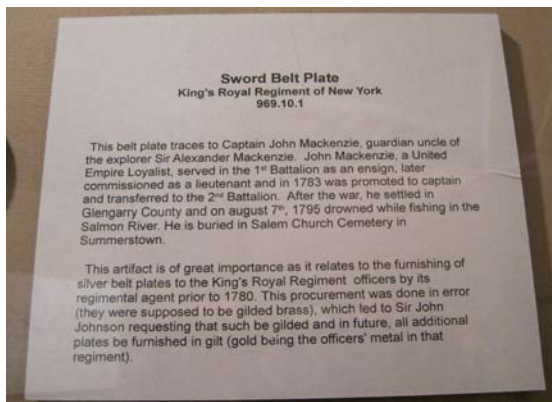
Born in 1764 at Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, Sir Alexander was the third child of Kenneth and Isobel (MacIvor) Mackenzie, a family who confronted rebellions both in Scotland and North America.

As the Scottish clan system collapsed in the violent aftermath of the [Jacobite](#) rebellions, Mackenzie's father moved to New York in 1772 with the intention of having his wife and children follow. Things did not go as planned. Alexander's older brother Murdoch, who studied medicine, perished at sea near [Halifax](#), Nova Scotia and his mother died suddenly in England just days before Alexander and his two sisters set sail on the 'Peace and Plenty' in 1774.



*Photo courtesy of Gavin Watt and the
[King's Royal Regiment of New York - Reenactors](#)*

[Rebellion](#) was breaking out in America, and Alexander's [Loyalist](#) father Kenneth and uncle John were named Lieutenants in the [King's Royal Regiment of New York](#) under the command of [Sir John Johnson](#).



Photos courtesy of Nor'Westers and Loyalist Museum, Williamstown, Ontario

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Alexander and his sisters were moved to [Sir William Johnson's](#) estates in the [Mohawk Valley](#), where his maternal uncle, John 'Ready Money' Macivor lived. At the age of 14, when the War of Revolution was at its height and Loyalists were under constant threat, Alexander moved to Montreal with the intention of attending school.

But the lure of the fur trade proved irresistible and Alexander soon joined the firm of Finlay & Gregory where, after five years of office work, he embarked upon one of the most storied careers in the Canadian fur trading industry.

At the age of 20, after his original employer was amalgamated into the [North West Company](#), Mackenzie was asked to take "a small adventure of goods" to Detroit where he impressed his employers enough to be offered the first of many corporate shares in the growing business. During three years at the English (Churchill) River department, he was reacquainted with his cousin, [Roderick Mackenzie](#), who would also leave a tremendous legacy in the young nation of Canada.



In 1787, Mackenzie was dispatched to the outermost station on the continent, the 'Old Establishment' on Lake Athabasca in northeast Alberta, where he worked under the ruthless American-born trader [Peter Pond](#). Soon, Mackenzie was given charge of the department, and led the building of [Fort Chipewyan](#), where his cousin kept the largest library in the wilderness, nicknamed 'Athens of the North'. Here, Mackenzie planned the explorations that would make him famous.

Mackenzie's dream was to find the fabled [North West Passage](#), a waterway that would link the fur trade of North America with sailing ships on the Pacific Ocean, and hence an economical trade route through Asia and beyond to Europe.

On June 3, 1789, with a party of four [voyageurs](#), an unnamed German and a Chipewyan [First Nations](#) guide, Mackenzie departed in a bark canoe on the largest river that flowed west out of Great Slave Lake. Soon, it was apparent that the water was flowing north, but Mackenzie and his party carried on, averaging an astonishing 75 miles per day and completing their journey to the Arctic Ocean in only two weeks.

Mackenzie spent four days at the outlet of the river that now bears his name, where he saw beluga whales and observed the effect of the tides. The return journey was considerably more difficult, and Mackenzie arrived back at the Fort Chipewyan on September 12, traversing a total 3,000 miles in 102 days.



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His determination to find a river to the west coast was not diminished by the apparent failure of his journey, and in the winter of 1791-92, Mackenzie traveled to England where he purchased navigational equipment and learned the proper use of the compass, sextant, chronometer and a large telescope for use in his subsequent travels.

His second and more famous expedition - to the Pacific Ocean - began Oct. 10, 1792 on the [Peace River](#). The first 500 miles of the journey were fairly easy paddling up reasonably well-known waters and brought him to [Fort Fork](#), a small stockade built by a small company of men the explorer had wisely sent ahead to dig in for the long and cold winter. Here, Mackenzie wrote eloquently about the northern First Nations and his expectations of the geography and hazards ahead.

On May 9, after months of contemplation and writing, he departed Fort Fork with [Alex Mackay](#) as second in command, six voyageurs - only two of whom are identified, James Beauchamp and Francois Beaulieux - two Athabaskan guides to serve as interpreters, and a hunting dog. Paddling up and into the mountains was slow and arduous, but just five days later Mackenzie crossed into what would soon be named the [Colony of New Caledonia](#), and later the Province of [British Columbia](#).

In his journal, he described the enormous strange-looking bears of the region as "[grisly](#) and hideous". He also recorded many species of birds and animals plus the edible and medicinal plants that grew wild in the country. Mackenzie was always careful to record his direction of travel, miles crossed, readings of latitude and longitude, and any obvious mineral deposits such as coal or bitumen.

In the Peace River Canyon, an area that is today inundated under the water held by the W.A.C. Bennett Dam, Mackenzie encountered his first set of un-navigable rapids and began the long succession of treacherous portages that would become the hallmark of his "dubious journey". Here, the canoes were frequently swamped and in need of constant repair, forcing the party to take long detours overland as they searched for the birch bark necessary to effect repairs. Mackenzie wrote: "The river above us as far as we can see, was one white sheet of foaming water." One particularly risky manoeuvre was called "travel by line" which required having at least one man riding in a heavily over laden canoe along the worst of the rapids.

Despite the difficult travel, Mackenzie's optimism was evidenced on May 29 when the first of many kegs of rum was finished and the explorer wrote a letter to his cousin [Roderick](#), encased the document in the empty barrel and hopefully cast his "epistolary cargo" into the rapid east-flowing river.

Throughout the mountains, Mackenzie met small groups of First Nations families, who typically lived in seasonal lodges. While the majority of these encounters were friendly, they were often confused affairs marked by either an inability or reluctance to communicate. Some meetings were more hostile, but Mackenzie usually countered these animosities with offers of candy for the children and trade goods for the men and women. (Mackenzie typically lay down his rifle as a peace gesture, and strode into the campsite. Only occasionally would he carry two small pistols under his coat.)

Exactly one month after leaving Fort Fork, while still travelling through the Rocky Mountains, Mackenzie encountered a family of [Sekani](#) natives who owned a variety of iron goods and European trade beads, which they described as coming via the [Carrier](#) First Nation from white men who sailed upon "the stinking lake" - a reference to the pungent salt water of the Pacific Ocean.

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After traversing the [Continental Divide](#), the party paddled along the 'Great River' - later named the [Fraser River](#) in honour of its most famous explorer, [Simon Fraser](#), UE - turning around five days later after recognizing the rapidly rising waterway was headed south and would not be his quickest route to the western sea. At this point, the travelers had just 30 days of provisions remaining. Soon they were eating just two meals a day - "a regulation particularly offensive to a Canadian voyageur," Mackenzie wrote.

Despite these setbacks, the body of men slowly made their way west along the West Road and Bella Coola Rivers, and as their encounters with First Nations became more frequent, the party found evidence they were nearing the sea.

On July 21, 1793, Mackenzie's journey of discovery reached its end near the present-day village of [Bella Coola](#), where they spent several days exploring the various inlets and channels. Here, the plentiful First Nations peoples told them stories of their earlier encounters with white men, and not all of them were pleasant.



Mackenzie Reaches the Pacific 1793, C.W. Jefferys

One of the native chiefs said he was recently visited by two white men; one named "Macubah", who had struck him with the flat of a sword, and the other named "Bensins". Translations being what they are, the chief was likely referring to Captain George Vancouver and his surgeon Archibald Menzies, who, according to Vancouver's own journal, had sent a scout named Johnstone into the inlet just 41 days earlier.

At his destination, Mackenzie took remarkably accurate* navigational readings and on a rock overlooking the wide inlet used vermillion paint to write the famous words: "Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada, by land, the twenty-second of July, one thousand seven hundred and twenty three."



[Mackenzie Rock at Bella Coola](#)

His return journey was equally perilous and slow, but by August 24, he was back at Fort Fork, where he officially ended the expedition. That winter, he fell into a melancholy and had difficulty writing the first draft of his eventual journal. At the shareholders meeting in Grand Portage the following summer, Mackenzie received a hefty cash bonus and another share in the North West Company.

The following year, on his way to Montreal, Mackenzie developed a proposal to make the continental fur trade more efficient by amalgamating the North West Company with both the [Hudson's Bay](#) and [East India](#) Companies.

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His journal was formally published in 1801 and received international acclaim. His writings inspired [Napoleon Bonaparte](#) to ambitiously plot the overthrow of North America, while U.S. President Thomas Jefferson made sure his own western explorers, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, carried a copy of Mackenzie's book on their own journey of exploration.

In the years following his explorations, Mackenzie continued his campaign to reorganize the North American fur trade. During a trip to London in 1801-02, he was befriended by [Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and Strathearn](#), and [knighted](#) by King George III.

Upon his return to Canada, he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Quebec in 1804, but the explorer was unhappy with his inability to persuade others of the import of his planned grand restructuring of the fur trade. Frustrated, Mackenzie moved back to London in 1805 and made only brief visits to Canada thereafter. Around this time, he was granted 100 acres in the township of Charlottenburgh, Glengarry County in the 'Eastern District', now the Province of Ontario.

Mackenzie eventually retired to Scotland, where he married Geddes Mackenzie - no relation - who had inherited half of her father's estate at Avoch. Mackenzie bought the entire parcel where he farmed the land, raised oysters and fathered three children - daughter Margaret (Geddes), and two sons, Alexander George and Kenneth Thomas. He is also believed to have had two other children through a ["country wife"](#) in Canada - a son, Andrew, who worked for the Hudson's Bay Co. and died in his early 20s, and a daughter, Maria, who moved to Scotland and lived with Mackenzie's sister Margaret.

Sir Alexander Mackenzie contracted what was likely Bright's disease and died unexpectedly in 1820 after visiting an Edinburgh doctor. While Mackenzie's own heirs have lived in relative obscurity, his cousin, [Roderick Mackenzie](#), is the forefather of several esteemed Canadians.

Roderick's daughter, Louisa, married [Angus Norman Bethune](#), the son of Loyalist, [Reverend John Bethune](#) who became a Chief Factor of the Hudson Bay Company. Roderick's great-great-grandson is the famed Canadian physician Dr. (Henry) Norman Bethune, who brought modern medicine to China, has two university colleges named in his honour and was declared a Person of National Historic Significance by former Prime Minister [Pierre Trudeau](#).

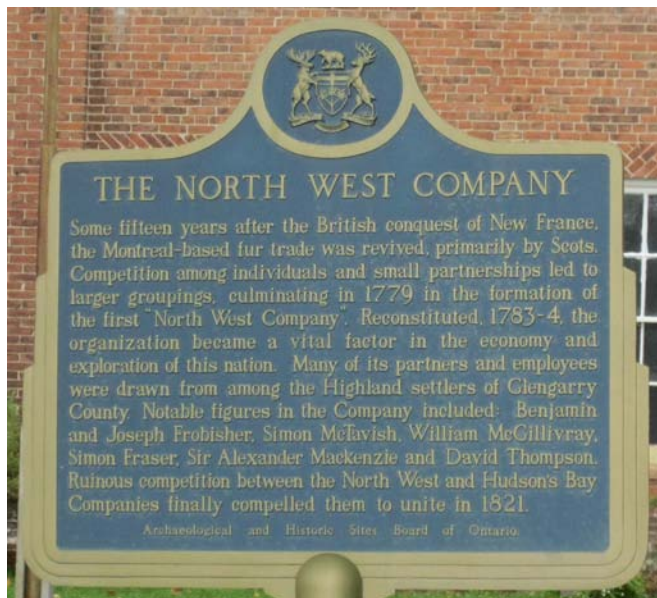
* Mackenzie navigational readings at the end of his journey were of 52° 20' 48"N, 128° 2"W.
The village of Bella Coola is actually located at 52° 22' 5"N, 126°, 45'W.

by Dan Hilborn



Cairn and marker located near Prince George, B.C.

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These photos and the following are
courtesy of
"The Norwesters and Loyalist Museum"
in Williamstown, Ontario:

King's Royal Regiment Sword Belt Plate
and Plaque

The North West Company Insignia
(by Dr. Wilfred Johnston)

"Map of Mackenzie's Track from Fort
Chipewan to the North Sea in 1789"

