

The Columbia River

Salish Trade 1808–10

As the season [was] too late to proceed to the Salish Indians, [I] sent off horses and goods to the Lake Indian country, all in safety, as the snow on the mountains [was] too deep for a war party to cross. At McGillivray's River a canoe took the goods, and the horses returned with the men in charge of them.

December 22. At 8¼ am the sun was clear and the sky clear to the left of the sun, but to the right [was] a dense atmosphere about twenty degrees from the sun, its height about eight degrees and its breadth full ten degrees. In this a very bright halo was formed, at times it had the colours of the rainbow, but of a deeper tint, in the clear sky nothing could be seen. About 9 am the halo formed a mock sun, fully equal in splendour to the real sun, so that my men called out there are two suns, and no doubt a similar appearance caused the supposed appearance of two suns in Thrace as related by historians. This remained for about twenty minutes, when the mock sun began to lose its splendour, and in half an hour more was not to be seen. . . .

January 11 [1809]. . . . As there was now plenty of shore ice of sufficient thickness, we made a glacier for frozen meat. This is a square of about twelve feet, the bottom and the sides lined with ice; in this we placed 160 thighs and shoulders of red deer, and forty-seven thighs of antelopes; this is necessary, for as soon as the fine weather comes on the deer of all species leave the low lands, and retire for fresh grass and shelter to the valleys of the high hills. In these meat glaciers, a layer of meat is laid on the ice, and then a layer of ice, and thus continued; when the warm weather comes on, it is covered with fine branches of the pine. The ice is found so much thawed that the pieces are joined together; the meat is also thawed, but remains very sound, but has lost its juice and is dry eating. I have even seen the meat covered with a kind of moss, but not in the least tainted.

On the seventeenth the Kootenay hunters brought six red deer, which I had split and dried for the summer provisions. On the eighteenth a number of handsome birds made their appearance, somewhat larger than a sparrow, their head, breast, and back of a bright brick red, the rest of a blueish colour, the beak short and strong; three foreclaws and one hind claw. I could not learn on what they fed. The Kootenays went ahunting the wild horses and brought eight near to us. The next day my men and the Indians set off and had a hard day's chase, but caught none of them. I have often hunted and taken them. It is a wild rough riding business, and requires bold surefooted horses, for the wild horses are regardless of danger; they descend the steep sides of hills with as much readiness as racing over the finest ground. They appear to be more headlong than the deer.

A dull mere pack horse was missing; with a man I went to look for him, and found him among a dozen wild horses. When we approached, this dull horse took to himself all the gestures

of the wild horses, his nostrils distended, mane erect, and tail straight out; we dashed into the herd and flogged him out. An Indian (half-breed) has now eighteen of these wild horses, which he has caught and tamed, and we also caught three of them. . . .

To ascertain the height of the Rocky Mountains above the level of the ocean had long occupied my attention, but without any satisfaction to myself. I had written to the late Honourable Wm McGillivray to buy for me a mountain barometer for the measurement of these mountains; he procured for me a mountain barometer which he placed in the hands of Mr John McDonald of Gart[h], a partner, with a promise to take great care of it and deliver it to me in good order, but he tossed it on the loaded canoes, where it was tossed about, and when brought to me at the foot of the mountains, the case was full of water, and the barometer broken to pieces. Mr Wm McGillivray bought for me another barometer, which unfortunately was delivered to the same person, who made the same promises, with the same performance; seeing it was hopeless to procure a barometer I had to follow the best methods of measurement which circumstances allowed. By a close estimation of the descent of the Columbia River from its source to the sea, I found it to be 5,960 [actual descent 2,700] feet (including its falls) in 1,348 miles, being an average of four feet, five inches, per mile. Let the descent at the second Kootenay Lake [Lake Windermere] be 5,900 [feet] above the level of the sea; here was one step gained, and the fine plains on the east side of this lake enabled me geometrically to measure the height of the secondary mountains. Due east of me were a chain of bare steep mountains, on which no snow lodged, and destitute of vegetation; to the west was the rude pyramid of Mount Nelson (for so I named it); the base line was carefully measured, and the angles of the heights taken with the sextant in an artificial horizon of quicksilver. By this method I found the height of Mount Nelson to be 7,223 feet above the level of the lake, which gave 13,123 [actually 12,125] feet above the Pacific Ocean, of the secondary mountains on the east side, of one peak 10,889 feet, and another 10,825 feet above the level of the sea, but for the primitive mountains I could not find a place from which to obtain a measurement and be in safety, but 5,000 feet may safely be added to the height of Mount Nelson to give the height of the primitive mountains. At the greatest elevation of the passage across the mountains by the Athabasca River, the point by boiling water gave 11,000 [actually 6,025] feet, and the peaks of the mountains are full 7,000 feet above this passage, and the general height may be fairly taken at 18,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean.

This river [the Columbia] is perhaps the only river that is navigable from the sea to its utmost source. On the steep, bare, sides of these mountains I twice saw the first formation of the clouds of a storm. Its first direction was from the Pacific Ocean, eastward up the valley of the lower Columbia River, and McGillivray's River, from which the hills forced it from east to north. The sun was shining on these steep rocks when the clouds of the storm entered about 2,000 feet above the level ground, in large revolving circles, the northern edge of the circle

behind cutting in its revolution the centre of the circle before it, and thus circle within circle for nearly twenty miles along these high hills until the clouds closed on me, and all was obscurity. It was a grand sight, and deeply riveted my attention. . . .

In the afternoon of June 9, we left the Columbia River . . . and entered the defiles of the mountains. . . . On the twenty-fourth we arrived at Fort Augustus on the Saskatchewan, where everything was put in good order, assisted by Mr James Hughes who is in charge of the place. On the twenty-seventh of June, early, under the care of Parenteau, the guide, [I] sent off the two canoes for the Rainy River House, there to discharge the furs and return with merchandise....

Late in the afternoon of the twentieth [of August, 1809] we embarked on McGillivray's River, and went down it, safely over the rapids and falls, to the road to the Salish River, on the evening of the twenty-ninth instant. As we had now to proceed with horses only, [we] laid up the canoes for the winter, and arranged everything to be transported by horses to the Salish River....

On my arrival here, I had sent off Mr Finan McDonald and a man to follow the road to the Salish River, and find a camp of those Indians, to bring horses and help us to the river. On the fifth of September, sixteen men with twenty-five horses arrived; they brought us lines to tie the loads on the horses. They appeared a mild intelligent race of men, in whom confidence could be placed; they lent to us fourteen horses, which we loaded, and with those we had, we set off... to the foot of a high bank, so steep that the horses often rolled down. At length all got up, which took us four and a half hours. We then went five miles to a brook, and put up, the road and country good, the former often too narrow for our loaded horses, and we had to cut down many small trees.

September 7. We advanced sixteen and a half miles, crossed a large brook three times from its windings, the woods of several kinds of fir and pine, with plenty of cedar, the ground good and level.

September 8. Having gone one mile we crossed a fine brook of fifteen yards in width, easy current and deep, but [it] had good fording places. We went on six miles to a rill, which we followed for near two miles, and came to a lake [Pend d'Oreille]. Here canoes met us, made of pine bark, and the Indians embarked twenty pieces of goods and baggage. . . .

The next day the canoes set off, but the wind rising we had to take part of the cargo of the canoes on the horses. At 2 pm, thank God, we arrived all well at the Salish [Clark's Fork] River; here we were met by fifty-four Salish Indians, twenty-three Skeetshoo, and four Kootenay Indians, in all eighty men, and their families; they made us an acceptable present of dried salmon and other fish, with berries, and the meat of an antelope [deer].

The next day with two Indians [I] went to look for a place to build a house for trading; we found a place, but the soil was light, and had no blue clay which is so very necessary for plastering between the logs of the house and especially the roofing, as at this time of year the

bark of the pine tree cannot be raised to cover the roof, for want of which we had an uncomfortable house. We removed to the place and set up our tents and a lodge [Kullyspell House].

On the eleventh we made a scaffold to secure the provisions and goods, [and] helved our tools ready to commence building; our first care was a strong log building for the goods and furs and for trading with the natives. Our arrival rejoiced them very much, for except the four Kootenays their only arms were a few rude lances, and flint-headed arrows. Good bowmen as they are, these arrowheads broke against a shield of tough bison hide, or even against thick leather [they] could do no harm; their only aim was the face. These [weapons] they were now to exchange for guns, ammunition, and iron-headed arrows, and thus be on an equality with their enemies, for they were fully their equals in courage, but I informed them that to procure these advantages they must not pass days and nights in gambling, but be industrious in hunting and working of beaver and other furs, all which they promised. Some few distant Indians, hearing of our arrival, came with a few furs, but took only iron work for them; everything else they paid no attention to; even the women preferred an awl or a needle to blue beads, the favourite of the sex for ornament. All those who could procure guns soon became good shots, which the Piegan Indians, their enemies, in the next battle severely felt; for they are not such good shots, except a few. They are accustomed to fire at the bison on horseback, within a few feet of the animal; it gives them no practice at long shots at small marks. On the contrary, the Indians on the west side of the mountains are accustomed to fire at the small antelope [deer] to the distance of 120 yards, which is a great advantage in battle, where every one marks out his man.

September 27. In order to examine the country along the river [Pend d'Oreille] below us, with four horses, one of my men, by name Beaulieu, and an Indian lad, [I] set off. My view was to see if we cannot change our route to cross the mountains, as at present we are too much exposed to the incursions of the Piegan Indians. We found the country along the river of a rich soil well clothed with grass, as low meadows.

September 30. . . . We saw the tents of a few Indians, our Indian called to them, they came with a canoe, and crossed him; he soon returned, and pine bark canoes with six men, two women, and three boys came to us. As usual an old man made a short speech, and made a present of two cakes of root bread (not moss), twelve pounds of roots, two dried salmon, and some boiled beaver meat, which I paid for in tobacco. These roots [of the camas lily] are about the size of a nutmeg, they are near the surface, and turned up with a pointed stick. They are farinaceous, of a pleasant taste, easily masticated and nutritive. They are found in the small meadows of short grass in a rich soil, and a short exposure to the sun dried them sufficiently to keep for years. I have some by me which were dug up in 1811 and are now (1847) thirty-six years old and are in good preservation. I showed them to the late Lord Metcalfe who ate two of them, and found

them something like bread, but although in good preservation they in two years lost their fine aromatic smell.

These poor people informed me there were plenty of beaver about them and the country, but they had nothing but pointed sticks to work them, not an axe among them. I enquired of the road before us; they said it was bad for horses.

“Then how is this river to where it falls into the Columbia?” They said it was good, and had only one fall to that river; I requested them to let me have a canoe, and one of them to come with us as a guide, to which they readily assented. . . . This account of the river below us differs very much from the description of this river by the Lake Indian chief, whose information I could always depend on; he described the river above where it enters the Columbia to be a series of heavy falls for one-and-a-half day’s march to the smooth water, the sides of the falls steep basalt rocks.

October 1. This morning they came with an old useless canoe, which I refused, and they soon returned with a good canoe. We left the Indian in care of the horses, until we should return. We descended the river till late in the afternoon, when heavy rain obliged us to put up for the night. The next day we descended the river for three hours. The river had contracted, and the current become swift, full near four miles per hour. This brought us in sight of a range of high rude hills covered with snow. I enquired of our guide where the river passed. He said, he could not tell; he had never been on the river before; vexed with him, I saw plainly the description of the lower part of this river by the Lake Indian chief was too true, and we had to turn about, having come in the canoe about twenty-six miles. . . .

October 6. In the afternoon [we] arrived [back] at the Salish House [Kullyspell], all well, thank God. All along our journey the river had plenty of swans, geese, ducks, cranes, and plover. We [had] come seventy-five miles, which with twenty-six makes 101 miles that we examined this fine river, and the country about it, which some day will be under the plough and the harrow, and probably by the natives, who are a very different race of people from those on the east side. These latter seem utterly averse to every kind of manual labour. They will not even make a pipe stem, their great favourite, which is trifling work of day and takes them a month. Those on the west side pride themselves on their industry, and their skill in doing anything, and are as neat in their persons as circumstances will allow, but without soap there is no effectual cleanliness; this we know very well who too often experience the want of it. Take soap from the boasted cleanliness of the civilized man, and he will not be as cleanly as the savage who never knew its use. . . .

October 11. I set off . . . to meet the canoes from the Rainy Lake. On the twentieth of October we arrived at McGillivray’s River. . . . [Returning] on the ninth of November, thank God, we arrived at the place we had builded a store and were now to build a house for ourselves

[Salish House, near Thompson Falls on Clark's Fork River]. . . .

On the evening of the twenty-fourth [of February, 1810], the Indians informed me that the Piegans had attacked a hunting party, killed Mr Courter (a trader and hunter from the U[nited] States) and one Indian, and wounded several others. My hunter, hearing that two of his brethren were wounded, requested to go and see them, which I readily granted; my guide deserted and went to distant camp for safety, but I soon procured another. On the twenty-sixth in the afternoon [we] came to twenty-one tents of Salish Indians, who received us with their usual kindness; they seemed to think that the imprudence of Mr Counter, by going on the war grounds with a small party to hunt the bison and set traps for the beaver, which were numerous, was the cause of his death and the accidents to the Indians. During my time the traders and hunters from the United States were most unfortunate. There seemed to be an infatuation over them that the natives of the plains were all skulkers in the woods, and never dared show themselves on open ground, and they suffered accordingly, being frequently attacked in open ground and killed by the Piegans until none remained. . . .

On the tenth [of March] while at the Salish camp, an alarm came of the tracks of Piegans being seen near the camp; everything was now suspended, scouts went off and came back reporting having seen a body of cavalry about three miles from us. About one hundred men now mounted their horses, proud of their guns and iron-headed arrows, to battle with the enemy; they soon returned, having seen these cavalry to be the Kootenays under their old chief, who had quitted hunting the bison, and were returning to their own country, but [it] gave me, as well as the old men, great pleasure in seeing the alacrity with which they now went to seek the enemy, when before, their whole thoughts and exertions were to get away from, and not to meet, their enemies. . . .

On the thirty-first the thermometer rose to 46°. Thus ended this month of much travelling by land and by water; the impression of my mind is, from the formation of the country and its climate, its extensive meadows and fine forests, watered by countless brooks and rills of pure water, that it will become the abode of civilized man, whether natives or other people; part of it will bear rich crops of grain. The greater part will be pastoral, as it is admirably adapted for the rearing of cattle and sheep. (These fine countries, by the capitulation of the blockhead called Lord Ashburton, now belong to the United States.) . . .

Source: Victor Hopwood, ed., *Travels in Western North America, by David Thompson* (Macmillan of Canada, 1971) 257-259.