

## Exhibit at the Canadian Museum of Civilisation / Exposition au Musée canadien des civilisations The North West Company at the Canadian Museum of Civilization

Patricia E. Roy, University of Victoria

Despite being greatly overshadowed in history by the Hudson's Bay Company which took it over in 1821, the North West Company has a better claim than its one time rival to the honour of creating a Canada from sea unto sea. Beginning in 1779, Montreal fur traders formed the North West Company, travelled through the Great Lakes, crossed the prairie, touched the Arctic Ocean, explored and mapped the far west, and established a series of trading posts in what is now British Columbia. In a spectacular exhibit that ran from September 2009 to September 2010, the Canadian Museum of Civilization has given due credit to the Nor' Westers.

The exhibit draws on a variety of artifacts held by the Museum or borrowed from other museums and archives. It is especially rich in paintings and sketches. Some are contemporary renderings; others are later impressions such as the 1879 painting "Shooting the Rapids" by Frances Anne Hopkins that serves as a motif for the presentation. The maps of Peter Pond, Simon Fraser, and David Thompson are fascinating both as marvels of cartographic skills and as revelations of how much was known and unknown of what is now western Canada although full appreciation of them requires longer lingering than the average museum visitor can enjoy.

Several themes emerge. One is the sheer physical effort required to operate this venture. What first grabs the visitor's attention is a life size recreation of the Montreal canoes that teams of paddlers (mainly French Canadian) propelled through rivers and lakes and carried across portages as they took supplies westward to Fort William [now Thunder Bay] and returned with furs. A musical background of these voyageurs singing enhances the visitor's experience, though it requires little imagination to realize that paddling was hard and hazardous work and not the romantic experience that the setting suggests. Nor could the work have been any easier in the smaller canoes that were used inland. An accompanying guide, *Profit & Ambition: The North*

*West Company and the Fur Trade 1779-1821* by David A. Morrison reveals that the paddlers were contract labourers, perhaps even "debt slaves" who often worked for 14 to 16 hours a day for as little as £30 a year.

That contributes to the theme of the "Vertical Mosaic," economic, social, and ethnic divisions within the company. One of the most striking artifacts representing the voyageurs is the *ceinture fléchée*, the colourful sash whose function was practical as well as decorative since it supported the back. In contrast, elegant garments, highly polished silver ware, and portraits in oil vividly portray the comfortable lives of the Scottish Montreal partners whose ambition yielded them much profit and, as a contemporary sketch shows, contributed to making their city a major commercial centre.

The First Nations and Métis people rightly have an important place as trappers, paddlers, and suppliers of pemmican who, in return for their labour, acquired fire arms, metal goods, and jewellery. In addition, the exhibit includes videos performed by actors. One of the most telling is of a Métis woman complaining of her lack of respite from cooking, sewing, and other chores. A number of artifacts and some paintings give a glimpse of the domestic life of the Métis.

The exploratory work of Simon Fraser and David Thompson is well explained but as a British Columbian I would have liked more attention to far western posts such as Fort

Kamloops and Fort St. James. The exhibit, however, nicely covers the Battle of Seven Oaks at Red River and the ultimate merger of the North West Company with the rival Hudson's Bay Company. The generously illustrated catalogue offers a generous taste of the exhibit. With its brief text it can stand on its own and its full colour illustrations could be effectively exploited for classroom use. The Canadian Museum of Civilization plans to make this into a travelling exhibit in order to give many Canadians an appreciation of this remarkable Company that had such a vital role in developing Montreal as a metropolis and in making the West Canadian. Watch for it!



"Shooting the Rapids"  
Frances Anne Hopkins, 1879 © Bibliothèque et Archives Canada