CHAPTER V

A SCOTTISH EXPLORER OF IMPERIAL MIND—MACKENZIE

IT is men of brains who move the world. Men may be shaped in their ends to some extent by their circumstances, but this does not explain the whole matter of human success. There is a power in man—a Divine spirit, it may be—which enables some men, despite their circumstances and despite limitations which hamper and confuse others—to compel success and appear as giants among the pigmies of their time. Such men, in our national history, as King Robert the Bruce, John Knox, and Dr. Chalmers are gigantic figures which would have been, not only in Scotland but in any land in which they were placed, the men to compel their circumstances and to bring forth success.

Among the many able men of the North-Western traders there stood out one who was as a giant among his fellows. This was Alexander Mackenzie, afterward Sir Alexander Mackenzie. His greatness in Canada stands to the credit of the Scottish people.

Alexander Mackenzie, though both the place and

date of his birth have been misstated in a number of standard works, was born in Stornoway, the chief town in the Island of Lewis, in the year 1763. As a lad he was fond of the sea, received a fair education, and at the age of sixteen, with the spirit which animated so many of his young countrymen, went abroad to seek his fortune in the world and arrived in Montreal.

We have already spoken of the competition among the fur traders of Montreal, led on the one side by Simon McTavish and the Frobishers, and on the other by Gregory and A. N. McLeod, incited to opposition by the two Americans Pond and Pangman. Whether it was the spirit of opposition to constituted custom and authority or a desire for more speedy advancement, the young Highlander of the Seaforth stock was led to join the weaker Company. The spirit of the lad attracted the attention of his employers and led to his selection, after a few years of experience of his work, as leader of a trading expedition to Detroit, on the border of the United States and the British possessions—a trying position surely for a mere lad just out of his teens.

Already raised at twenty-two years of age to the dignity of a bourgeois—a partner in the Company—he was dispatched to represent the Gregory Company, and was greatly attracted by the bustle of Grand Portage, then the rendezvous of the Montreal fur traders, where the "pork eaters" of the route from Montreal to Lake Superior

finished their journey and the "runners of the woods," *coureurs de bois*, who lived on pemmican, took over their merchandise and carried it inland to the far Athabasca region.

Allocations of districts were made here, and Alexander Mackenzie received the region where most responsibility rested—the Churchill or English River—the boundary of the western district which was to become the scene of his great explorations and his fame. Though a keen trader, Mackenzie showed his tact in this difficult region. He fraternised with the neighbouring bourgeois of the older Company, P. Small. In carrying their furs to the first meeting-place of the traders of the district, Ile a la Crosse, the rival partners joined their brigades and made the solitudes of the watercourses over which they passed resound with the cheerful voyageur songs. This harmony was greatly in contrast with Peter Pond's management of the Athabasca District, where John Ross, a trader of the old Company, was killed. Pond, it is necessary to state, had treacherously deserted the younger Company and gone over to McTavish.

Alexander Mackenzie had just left the Ile a la Crosse when the news reached Roderick Mackenzie, his cousin, the master of the place, that Ross had been murdered. So serious was this news that Mackenzie dashed off in a light canoe, manned by five voyageurs, to reach the meeting of the partners while it was still in session at Grand Portage.

Both companies, though rivals, were greatly alarmed at the news which he had brought, and it was now recalled that Pond had been somewhat involved in the death of a Swiss trader, Wadin, some five years before.

This alarm drove the two Companies together, and the North-West Company was established in 1787, and thenceforth McTavish, Frobisher, and Gregory became joint agents for the great aggregation.

It being now necessary to supersede Pond in the management of his district, all eyes turned to Alexander Mackenzie, although still young, as the man to meet the Athabasca emergency.

Now, as head of the great important Northern District, Mackenzie showed his surpassing ability. Not only did his presence at once restore peace and give confidence, but in the face of the Hudson's Bay Company's opposition which he had to meet did his policy prove successful. It has been said, "At twenty-four Mackenzie had the energy of maturity and the adventurous instincts of youth."

He now turned his attention to the unknown lands beyond, and came face to face with his great life-work.

He selected the new policy of "Advance," and chose a French-Canadian leader, Leroux, and his party of half-breeds and Indians to push out to Great Slave Lake and carry on the trade with vigour. Leroux, under the advice of Mackenzie, chose a well-known Chipewyan, known as the

"English Chief," to go to the far North to induce the Indians to bring their furs to his depôt. He also dispatched an adaptable Highland trader, named Sutherland, well laden with presents, to take another route and bring in the Indians for trade from another direction. Leroux was now known as the lavish monarch of the North. Like all great leaders, Mackenzie had infused his own policy, open spirit, and attractive manner into the whole body of his subordinates.

Another stroke of genius was shown by Mackenzie when he chose a new outpost for trade on the Peace River. At a spot where the little Red River flowing from the south enters the Peace River a French-Canadian trader, Boyer, under Mackenzie's direction, founded a new fort and opened trade on what was to be the route to the Western Sea.

Like a great general, Mackenzie now began to plan for a base of supplies from which greater projects might be carried on. Pond had built his first post belonging to the far North at Elk River in 1778—thirty miles south of Lake Athabasca. This was only a post by the way for the adventurous Mackenzie . Here one could only rest in inglorious ease, and, like Ulysses in Ithaca—

> Strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,

Mackenzie could not rest satisfied ; he must out to the far north. His plan was clear,

but there were drawbacks. The great McTavish of Montreal was a man of strong prejudices, and so still retained an antipathy to those who had not belonged to his section of the Company. Even in the minds of a number of his own Company Mackenzie's rapid promotion had roused jealousy of the young officer. Besides, to go on an expedition to the far interior would incur expense and danger to those who went upon it.

In addition to all this, Pond's cruelty and tyranny had left the district unsettled, and it would be hard to get a competent substitute to take his place while he was absent in the unknown North.

These difficulties were sufficient to deter most men. But genius does not recognise obstacles, except to remove them. Mackenzie's cousin Roderick now belonged to the same Company as Alexander. He was of a poetical spirit and literary disposition, as we have seen. He disliked the fur trade, but could not afford to leave it, though that was in his mind. In a good moment Mackenzie suggested to his cousin Roderick the extension of trade to Lake Athabasca.

This pleased both cousins, and accordingly work was begun. The new Fort Chipewyan was built, and Roderick Mackenzie was duly installed as founder and as bourgeois. It was Roderick's dream not only to make Fort Chipewyan the centre of the Northern trade, but also to be the seat of a library for the Northern posts ; and this he did, although under the ribaldry of the

Philistines it was called "The little Athens of the Arctic Regions." It afterward became a well-known library, as General Lefroy tells us in his book on "Magnetic Observations in the Far North."

The position of administrator of a vast remote northern district like that of Athabasca involved a great responsibility, and, to a certain extent, a large amount of liberty. Alexander Mackenzie had exercised that liberty to the full in sending out as never before his "runners" to the far Northern Indians and in now establishing his new depôt of Fort Chipewyan.

It would be difficult to hinder the steed that has tasted victory, and which scents a new race, from taking the opportunity offered him.

And now the first dream of the man who has been chiefly a fur trader and head of a district was likely to be accomplished. Alexander Mackenzie determined to be the first to reach overland the Arctic Sea by following down the greatest of Arctic rivers to its mouth. Hearne had reached the Arctic Sea at the mouth of the Coppermine River, and Hearne and his achievements were a great incentive to the young, as yet uncrowned, explorer.

The story of Alexander Mackenzie's expedition has the advantage of being told by the explorer himself. It is not necessary for us to dwell upon the details of the difficulties, disappointments, and preparations of his great journey. Leaving Fort Chipewyan on June 3, 1789, he worked out his plans. For exploratory work in an absolutely wild

country the opinions of the natives are of the greatest value. Accordingly Mackenzie chose a crew made up of half-breeds and Indians and took as his guide the "English Chief." In his own canoe he was accompanied by four French Canadians—the best of voyageurs. His Canadians were François Barrieau, Charles Ducette, Joseph Landry, and Pierre de Lorme. Leroux, being present with him at Fort Chipewyan, piloted the party northward through the district well known to him. The region was wild and dangerous ; within twelve miles in one section of the route there were the rapids called "D'Embarras," "Mountain," and "Pelican," followed, as the recital tells us, with fierce rapids, boiling cauldrons, and whirling eddies.

On June 25th, leaving Leroux at Great Slave Lake, the explorer started into the unknown upon his Northern voyage amid volleys from the small arms of the traders and servants who were left behind. This custom was long followed on the departure of the officers of the Company. We omit the details of their meetings with new Indians, passing dangerous rapids, and going through numerous interesting adventures through thirty or forty days of constant travel from Fort Chipewyan. The end of the Northern journey was made when he reached Whale Island in the mouth of the river, where the latitude was taken at 69 7 N. The tide from the ocean rose and fell on the shores of the island. They were a degree or two within the Arctic Circle and found themselves

in the land of the midnight sun. His party was anxious to return, and though it is a matter of regret to all of Mackenzie's admirers that he did not pass through the delta to the open sea, yet he yielded to their desires and began the return journey on July 15th.

On August 22nd the returning party reached Great Slave Lake, and on September 12, 1789, arrived at Fort Chipewyan, having concluded the voyage in 102 days.

The great results of this voyage as summarised are :—

1. The discovery of two thousand miles of new country, containing coal, petroleum, salt, and a great quantity of furs.

2. The proper location of the Yukon River.

3. Laying the foundation of a policy of friendship toward the Northern Indians, which has been carried out ever since.

As Mackenzie quite expected, the information came to him from his cousin Roderick that the regular traders were not quite in favour of the exploration in which he had been engaged. When he went to the next meeting at Grand Portage he found the traders somewhat cool toward him. He says : "My expedition was hardly spoken of, but that is what I expected."

His rivals, the Hudson's Bay Company, however, looked on the matter differently and undertook an expedition to examine the ground.

Alexander Mackenzie, with his usual suavity, received the agents of the English Company and

gave hospitality to their leader—a young man named Turner—in Fort Chipewyan. In 1791 Mackenzie again attended the meeting of the traders at Grand Portage. But his projects of exploration were not yet completed, and so instead of returning immediately to the far West, he went eastward and crossed the Atlantic to London. Here he spent a portion of a year in astronomical study that he might with greater accuracy use the instruments necessary in his explorations. In 1792, having returned to Athabasca, he began to lay his plans for a dash to the farther West, that he might by crossing the Rocky Mountains reach the Western Sea. Earlier in the season he had dispatched a party to the Peace River to prepare timbers for a house in which he might winter. This was but following up the policy which four years before he had adopted, when he had sent Boyer to the Peace River.

Towards the end of October in 1792 Mackenzie reached Finlay's Fort on the Peace River. This was so called from the younger Finlay who had just arrived to take charge of the new fort. The latter, a young man of promise, would be the connecting link with the Athabasca forts. On his arrival the explorer was received with the firing of guns and much demonstration. In November he sent out parties of Indians to hunt, and went on building his house. His plans for the fur trade were, however, all broken up by an Indian murder, which drove the forest hunters into parts unknown. Waiting restlessly for spring, he saw

that the ice on the Peace River was clear on April 25, 1793. He had obtained a monster canoe, 25 feet long, of 26 inches hold, and 4 feet 9 inches in beam, and yet it was so light that two men could carry it. In this he was to carry his whole party, provisions, goods, presents, ammunition, and baggage—all weighing 3,000 lbs. His crew consisted of ten persons. They were his lieutenant, Alexander McKay, an experienced traveller; Joseph Landry, and Charles Ducette, of the Mackenzie River party. Four other French-Canadian voyageurs were ready to go, viz., Baptiste Bisson, François Courtois, Jacques Beauchamp, and François Beaulieu—the last of whom died in 1872, nearly a hundred years old. He was baptized by Archbishop Tache at the age of seventy. Two Indians completed the list—one of them so lazy that he was called Cancere—the crab.

How simple were the arrangements for this great expedition! How much was accomplished with such insignificant preparations! The explorer simply records: "My winter interpreter with another person, whom I left here to take care of the fort, and supply the natives with ammunition during the season, shed tears on the reflection of the dangers which we might encounter in our expedition, while my own people offered up their prayers that we might return safely from it."

As our object is chiefly biographical we shall not give a detailed account of the great voyage of Alexander Mackenzie. It was up the Peace River to the Mountains, so danger beset the party at

every turn as they ascended the river ; bears were to be seen at every landing-place ; the route was once puzzling—once nearly baffling—and beset by hostile Indians who mystified the travellers as to the route ; but at length the carrying-place at the height of land was reached. It was a critical moment when they stood at the Rocky Mountain Divide.

"At this point," says Mackenzie, "two streams tumble down the rocks from the right and flow eastward toward the other lake, and from the left two other streams pour down the rocks and empty into the lakes they are approaching."

From this point the explorers began their western descent of the Rocky Mountains.

For a time they were descending the stream which Simon Fraser afterwards in 1806 followed down to the Fraser River. This descent of Fraser's has always been regarded as one of the most dangerous feats ever undertaken by man. This river, the "Tacouche Tesse," "Nechaco," or Fraser, was so precipitous that Mackenzie decided to leave it. Their guide now led them by rocky heights and by descending streams until they met a chief who had ten years before this time gone to the South with a party of forty of his Indians to meet a great white man. This was probably Captain Cook. Another Indian declared that lately a large canoe (ship) was on the coast in which was a man "Macubah" (Vancouver). Mackenzie knew that now he was coming near those that go down to the sea in ships. Persevering he reached

at last the Pacific Ocean, and here on a rock by the seaside he made with vermilion and melted grease his notable inscription, "Alexander Mackenzie from Canada by land, the twenty-second of July, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three, Lat. 52 20′ 48″."

Mackenzie had achieved his great design. It is interesting to know that on the day of his arrival there anchored off Point Maskelyne, two and a half degrees north of his stopping-place, one of Captain Vancouver's vessels.

The return journey was urgent and the high mountains were reached on August 13th. On the 16th the height of land was gained which separates the Columbia from the Peace River, and next day the party was floating down the latter stream.

They landed at the Peace River post, which they had left seventy-six days before. Pushing on, Mackenzie reached Fort Chipewyan, somewhat worn out after his long journey.

In the spring of 1794 the explorer journeyed down the watercourses to Grand Portage, Lake Superior, and turned his back upon the upper country (*pays d'en haut*), never to see it again.

His fame as a great explorer had been achieved. From being the towering figure in the fur trade beyond Lake Superior, Alexander Mackenzie found at the Grand Portage assemblage that the influence of Simon McTavish and the leading partners at Montreal was somewhat against him, but the winterers were all for the young hero of the West. Mackenzie, however, acted cautiously. Dislike of

"Le Marquis" led Forsyth, Richardson and Co. to break off from the North-West Company, but though the explorer did not then withdraw, the dissentients knew very well that his sympathies were all with them. Thus was formed, as we have seen, the X Y, or New North-West Company. Mackenzie now withdrew for a season from any close connection with the fur trade, and for a time he obeyed the Royal Command to act as the travelling companion in Canada and the United States of his Royal Highness Prince Edward, Duke of Kent, the father of Queen Victoria. On his return from the coast he had begun his book of travels, but could not settle down to it at Fort Chipewyan. Going over to England the now renowned explorer completed and published his work, "Voyages from Montreal," &c., dedicated to his Most Sacred Majesty George the Third. Mackenzie's service to his country was marked by his being made Sir Alexander Mackenzie. He soon became the head of the New North-West, or "Little Company," this Company, indeed, being sometimes called "Sir Alexander Mackenzie & Co." In 1806 Sir Alexander assisted, on the death of Simon McTavish, in welding the rival companies into one again.

In 1812 Sir Alexander married Geddes Mackenzie, one of the most beautiful and gifted of Scottish women. Geddes Mackenzie brought to her husband the property of Avoch (pronounced "Auch") in Inverness-shire.

Quite unexpectedly on March 12, 1820, Sir

Alexander died, having been taken ill in the coach on his return from London. He is buried in the churchyard of Avoch.

His name shines forth brightly among the great men of Scottish blood in Canada.

Sir Alexander accomplished many great things, but the two greatest were his heroic voyages to the Arctic and Pacific Oceans by new routes. His greatest service to the Fur Companies was the courage he inspired in the other explorers to face the problems and difficulties of travelling in the lonely wilderness.

As fur trader, explorer, and author he was a great Scotsman.