

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Alexander Mackenzie

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Alexander Mackenzie biography from [\*The Canadians\*](#) series. Mackenzie was the first white man to reach the Pacific Ocean by travelling over land and he was the first fur trader to be knighted for his accomplishments.

### Aims

Students will study Mackenzie's accomplishments and consider his contributions to Canadian history, while exploring the relationship between his explorations and the First Nations people he relied on for his survival and guidance.

### Background

It was a simple message scrawled on a flat rock with fish grease and red dye. It read, "Alex Mackenzie, from Canada by land, 22nd July 1793."

Alexander Mackenzie had become the first white man to discover a land route across Canada to what was then called the Western Sea. Born in Stornoway in the Outer Hebrides in 1764, he moved with his father to

New York following his mother's death. Later moving to Montréal, he was influenced by fur merchant John Gregory. Joining the corrupt and ruthless North West Company, Mackenzie learned the trapping, trading and cut-throat skills needed to advance the Company. He later met explorer Peter Pond, who would advise him to discover a land route to the Western Sea if he wanted to make a name for himself. After one failed attempt that saw him reach the Arctic Ocean, Mackenzie persisted and at the age of 30 successfully reached the Pacific.

He returned to England to write a book about his explorations and was the first Canadian fur trader to be knighted.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

### **Procedures:**

Mackenzie was reliant on First Nations for survival and guidance in the Canadian wilderness. They played a significant role in his travels, and it is debatable whether or not he would have achieved his goal of reaching the Pacific without their assistance. His achievements for European civilization were great, but so were the pain and anguish felt by the Aboriginal communities who were destroyed by those who would follow Mackenzie's routes. Students should remember that although Mackenzie's discoveries are impressive he would not have succeeded without the support of First Nations who for thousands of years lived on the land he set out to "discover."

1. Create a timeline to illustrate the key events in Sir Alexander

Mackenzie's life. Include ten key events or developments. Direct your students to select three key events that they think are turning points in Mackenzie's life. Have each student, individually or in small groups, describe why they think these three events are major turning points. Compare these events and encourage a group or class discussion on why they have selected different events. Emphasize that there is more than one correct answer and that all answers need to be supported with historical facts and well-constructed arguments.

2. On a map of North America, trace the exploration routes of Sir Alexander Mackenzie. Mark the sites of his major discoveries, both triumphs and failures, and the locations where he lived.

3. Formal debate topic:

"Sir Alexander Mackenzie should be remembered as a great leader and explorer whose discoveries, and interactions with various Native peoples, contributed to the development of Canada as a nation."

Be sure to consider the opinions and attitudes expressed by various Indigenous leaders throughout the video. Did Mackenzie help establish a precedent for Anglo-Indigenous relations OR were his attitudes and behaviour simply a reflection of existing beliefs of his age? Clearly many members of the Indigenous community believed Mackenzie had a detrimental effect on their culture during the course of his exploration. How do these attitudes affect our present day interpretation of Mackenzie's contributions?

4. In making the video of Sir Alexander Mackenzie for *The Canadians* series, the production team used various types of information to tell the story. How many different types of information can you identify? Rank the

various types of information according to what you found most interesting, most reliable, and most effective. Explain why you ranked them in the order you did with specific examples and references.

5. Write an obituary column for Sir Alexander Mackenzie. (For examples of obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to [The Globe and Mail](#))

6. Select what you believe to be the most dramatic moment in Mackenzie's life. Use this moment to create a [Heritage Minute](#) about Mackenzie. Storyboard your Sir Alexander Mackenzie Minute. If you have the equipment and time, produce a video of your Minute.

7. Call on your students to write two journal entries during a voyage to the North. One entry should be similar to one that Mackenzie would have written during his voyage to the Pacific. The other should be similar to one that a First Nations guide would have kept on the same voyage. Remind students to keep in mind that the first voyage to the Pacific was not successful.

10. Even though Mackenzie was warned that travelling North was dangerous, he continued. Is Mackenzie a hero? Divide students into groups to discuss this notion. Groups should be able to state reasons why they agree or disagree with this idea.

11. Divide your class into groups. Have students make a list of some of the technology that Europeans introduced into First Nations culture. Then ask them to make a list of the technology that First Nations introduced to the Europeans. After these lists are prepared, direct your students to select three or four items from each list and write out the impact of these items on either the Aboriginal peoples or the Europeans.

12. When Mackenzie travelled west, he encountered a group of First Nations who spoke a language that was unknown to any of his guides. Divide your students into two groups, and experience - through role-playing - language barriers and differences in culture. Each group should receive a description of the characters they are playing. Don't reveal the descriptions to opposing groups. Encourage the groups to find some way to communicate and work together, and then lead a class discussion on the obstacles they had to overcome to do so. How does this compare to the difficulties Mackenzie would have encountered when trying to communicate with his Aboriginal guides?

Group 1 represents the Europeans that have recently settled in a new land, with English as their language.

*Goals to Achieve in this Exercise:*

Your purpose is to introduce yourselves to the other group. You will do this shaking hands, and saying things such as "Welcome" and "It's nice to meet you!" Each student should pick an individual to approach.

Group 2 represent the Aboriginal people that have never met any Europeans. Their appearance is disturbing to you. All the words you speak begin with "b" and end with "a". You can use English words but you must begin with b and end with a; for example, "my name is Bob" would become "bmya bnamea bisa Boba." When you get excited or happy you say "baffa, baffa" in a very high voice. When you get angry you say "baffa, baffa" in a very low voice.

*Key Elements of Culture:*

Shaking hands is a threat to personal safety. It is also an insult to your

culture. You get angry if anyone attempts to do so. Words such as "happy" or "nice" make you very excited and your voice becomes very high. Everyone in your culture always travels in groups, never alone. Do not allow anyone to take you somewhere away from the group.

13. As a class, create a list of items that Mackenzie would have required on his journey. In groups, students should come to a consensus for ranking each object in order of importance to survival. They cannot select more than fifteen items.

## **Resources**

[The Canadians: Alexander Mackenzie](#)

[Alexander Mackenzie, Explorer - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Alexander Mackenzie \(Explorer\) - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Mackenzie-Grease Trail - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Daniells, Roy. *Alexander Mackenzie and the North West*. London, Daber. 1969.

Gough, Barry M. *First Across the Continent: Sir Alexander Mackenzie*. Toronto, M&S. 1997.

Smith, James K. *Alexander Mackenzie, explorer: the hero who failed*. Toronto, McGraw Hill. 1973.

Woollacott, Arthur P. *Mackenzie and his voyageurs: 1789-93*. London, Dent. 1927.