

SUMMER ON THE BARRENLANDS

with James W. Tyrrell ~ 1900

by David F. Pelly

— The route Tyrrell followed in 1900.



“It seemed that there could
be no great difficulty.”

In 1899, when the Surveyor General was looking for someone “to explore and map” the vast area east of Great Slave Lake, they called on one of the best surveyors in the country, James W. Tyrrell. In the 1890s, he had accompanied his (now more famous) older brother J.B., a geologist, on descents of both the Dubawnt and the Kazan Rivers. At the time he received the request, “in the hands of an Indian courier,” the younger Tyrrell was working on a survey of timberlands in northern Ontario. He lost no time in complying.

James W. Tyrrell at Fort Reliance, 1900.



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His party consisted of nine men. In Winnipeg, a short while later on the way west, Tyrrell engaged “two half-breed voyageurs from the St. Peter’s reserve,” Robert Bear and John Kipling. In Edmonton he added Percy Acres as cook, and two expert Iroquois canoe men he knew from the earlier barrenlands expeditions, Pierre French and Harry Monette. Later, in Fort Chipewyan, another voyageur was hired, a Dene named Toura. A surveyor from Ontario, C.C. Fairchild, came along to assist with the fieldwork, and Archdeacon Lofthouse, whom Tyrrell had met in Churchill, completed the team, though it is clear who from this list performed the burden of work.

Their wilderness quest began literally at the end of the road, 290 kilometres north of Edmonton. On February 26, 1900, five heavily laden dog sleds pulled away from the Hudson’s Bay Company post, to begin a journey by sled and canoe of 7,360 kilometres. By early May, after a difficult but ordinary—for the time—trip north, the nine men and about three tons of equipment reached Pike’s Portage at the eastern extremity of Great Slave Lake. The dogs’ work was finished; those that had survived were sent back to Fort Resolution. Henceforth, the party advanced strictly under its own power, at first pulling the sleds over candled ice, and then by canoe.

By June 18 there was enough open water to allow their advance up Artillery Lake. Tyrrell apparently relied on the 66-year-old sketch map drawn for George Back by a local Native. Fortunately for Tyrrell, he too benefited from local knowledge, when he met Pierre Fort Smith, who was familiar enough with the country to draw his own version, not substantially different from the earlier one.

Once over the height of land and into the Thelon system, Tyrrell’s party moved as quickly as their mapping duties permitted. At a hill beside Sifton Lake, in the upper reaches of the Hanbury River (so named by Tyrrell), on June 27, he and Fairchild spotted some muskox. Despite the late hour, they went in pursuit of fresh meat. For Tyrrell, it proved to be a most remarkable spectacle, which he mentioned frequently in years to come. His cook, Percy Acres, and a young muskox bull ended up playing a version of ring-around-the-rosy about a huge boulder. Even at 1:30 in the morning, there was enough light for Tyrrell to get a successful photograph of the incident. Today, the maps mark the place as Muskox Hill.

This branch of the river he named after Hanbury, acknowledging “the first white man to ascend it,” in what proves to be Tyrrell’s only reference to his predecessor on the river. The three canoes reached the junction with the main branch of the Thelon on the morning of July 7. Subsequently he comments on the validity of Hearne’s second-hand description of the river valley, offering his own observations as confirmation of former Native habitation. Indeed, farther downstream, he documented the remnants of former camps, including at least one standing tipi frame.



Top: Tyrrell’s expedition dog-team leaving Edmonton.

Middle: James W. Tyrrell.

Just where the river exits sharply out of the widening around what is now known as Ursus Islands, and heads straight east toward Beverly Lake, Tyrrell encountered people for the first time. “The encampment consisted of three or four lodges, and thirty-three souls in all, chief amongst whom was an old coast Eskimo, named Ping-a-wa-look, commonly known by the traders at Fort Churchill as ‘Cheese cloth.’ With him, as well as with one or two others, our archdeacon was acquainted, and one of them had met me in 1893, so we found ourselves amongst warm friends.”

On Beverly Lake, waiting out a ferocious barrenlands storm, Tyrrell made a decision to split the party, knowing that he had very nearly reached the point where the Dubawnt River—which he had paddled in 1893—joins the Thelon. Fairchild, Lofthouse and four of the voyageurs were to continue the mapping on down to Chesterfield Inlet, concentrating on those sides of the larger lakes which Tyrrell himself had not surveyed in 1893. Then, as his instructions read, they were to return upstream by the same route, making sure to arrive back at

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Fort Reliance by September 15. Tyrrell, together with the remaining voyageurs Robert Bear and Toura, headed back upstream determined to explore the uncharted main branch of the Thelon, upstream of the Hanbury-Thelon junction. The two groups parted company on July 16.

At Pingawalook’s camp, Tyrrell traded for some moccasins. “They were much needed before we got out of the country, for as my men tracked the canoe upstream, the sharp rocks and stones over which they had to walk, cut through two or three pairs of shoes a day.” Nevertheless, on the 28th they reached the Hanbury-Thelon junction, and three days later headed upriver into unknown country, on the main branch of the Thelon.

On August 9, the upstream march, “obstructed in several places by shallow rapids,” reached the confluence with the Elk River. Neither fork appealed to Tyrrell, with “both branches rapid and shallow.” And so, “judging from my progress during the last two weeks, and the prospect of increased difficulties ahead, I came to the conclusion that it would be unwise to attempt to push through to Lake Athabasca.” Instead, he returned back downstream about halfway to the Hanbury junction,

where he remembered seeing a small stream joining from the west. That, he thought, might provide a route over the divide, back toward Great Slave, via Artillery where they had begun paddling two months before. The stream, however, was too small; only a few miles up it, there was not enough water to float the canoe. Tyrrell, as ever, was decisive.

“I decided to send my two men with the canoe, around by the way we had come, to Artillery lake, and that I would walk across alone.

“It seemed that there could be no great difficulty in doing so, for the distance in a straight line I knew to be only about eighty miles [from his own surveying]; the season was still early and there were now plenty of deer roving over the country. Thus viewing the problem, I sent my men back with the canoe and its contents, and having selected my necessary outfit for the tramp, bundled it up into a neat pack of about fifty pounds and started off. It did not feel heavy at first, and the weather being fine I made fair progress, but as the day wore on, my pack became burdensome and by evening I was quite ready to lay it down and creep into my sleeping bag. This first day’s march, which covered thirteen miles, was along the course of the stream, [and] took me to the shore of a small lake, which of itself formed no serious obstruction to travel. Because of the irregularities of the shore and the impossibility of seeing any great distance ahead, it required a twelve-mile tramp to get free from this lake, and that represented my second day’s journey. My rations were obtained from the carcass of a deer, which I had shot, and some biscuits, which I had brought in my pack.



Tyrrell first encountered Inuit along the Thelon at Pingawalook’s camp, just upstream of Beverly Lake.

“On the morning of my third day, only three miles from my ‘camp’ I came upon a large lake—to which I have taken the liberty of attaching my own name—since I am sure it has never been, and perhaps never will be, of as much interest to any one else as it proved to me.”

It was far from an easy trek. He was impeded by large lakes—the largest named after himself—and streams too cold and swift to swim across. He tramped through muskeg up to the ankles. His moccasins, from Pingawalook’s camp, were soon worn out; he resorted to removing the sleeves from his jacket and wrapping them around his feet. After five days he had moved west only 25 kilometres. There remained, by his own calculation, more than 100 kilometres ahead to the shore of Artillery Lake. Then the weather turned sour, and his real trouble began.

“The morning of my sixth day set in with a chilling northeast wind and pelting rain, which not only saturated my clothing, but also the moss, so that I could make no fire. Having a small flask of brandy with me, I refreshed myself with a little of it, in water, and a biscuit, and tramped on, making thirteen miles during the day. The night being dark at this season, it was not possible to travel continuously, so, wet and shivering as I was, I lay down on the rocks in the pelting rain to try and sleep, but this was not to be, for my bed soon became a puddle of water, and I was uncomfortable indeed. I earnestly longed for the daylight, so that I might get up and travel, and at length it came, but still the cold rain came down, so that I could only wring out my single blanket and start on without breakfast. A deer skin which I carried in addition to my blanket had become so water-soaked as to be too heavy to carry and was left behind.”

The next day, the sun came out at mid-day and Tyrrell managed to shoot a caribou, so his circumstances improved dramatically. However, he still had a long walk ahead. And by late August in the barrenlands, the weather can become very unstable. Tyrrell knew this well enough; he and his brother only just escaped with their lives from their first barrenlands expedition seven years earlier in 1893, when they were caught by the onset of early winter weather. Now, on his lonely trek west across unmapped country, he kept a watchful eye on the sky.

“Observing the approach of a heavy storm, I proceeded to fortify myself as well as my blanket and canvas wrapper would admit of, and so fairly well weathered out a bad night. But the next day was intolerable. I endeavoured to push on, but so cold and drenching was the rain that I shivered even as I travelled, under my water-soaked burden. Later in the day the weather became so thick, that I was as one walking in the dark—not knowing what was before me—and soon found myself almost entirely surrounded by water. I was now forced to await an improvement in the weather, and so, partaking of a wet biscuit, for I had nothing dry, and a drink of brandy, I lay down on the sand.



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Tyrrell setting out alone on his long trek overland from the upper Thelon to Artillery Lake.

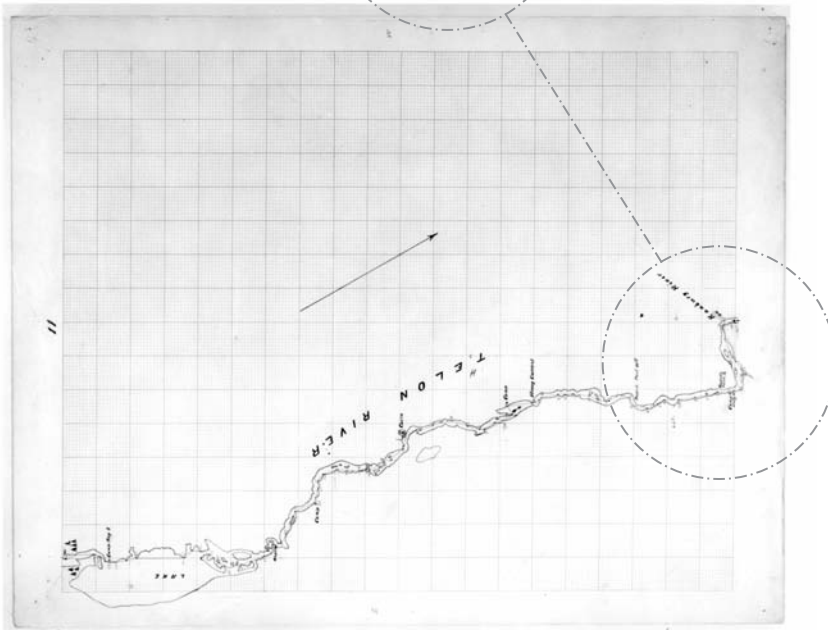
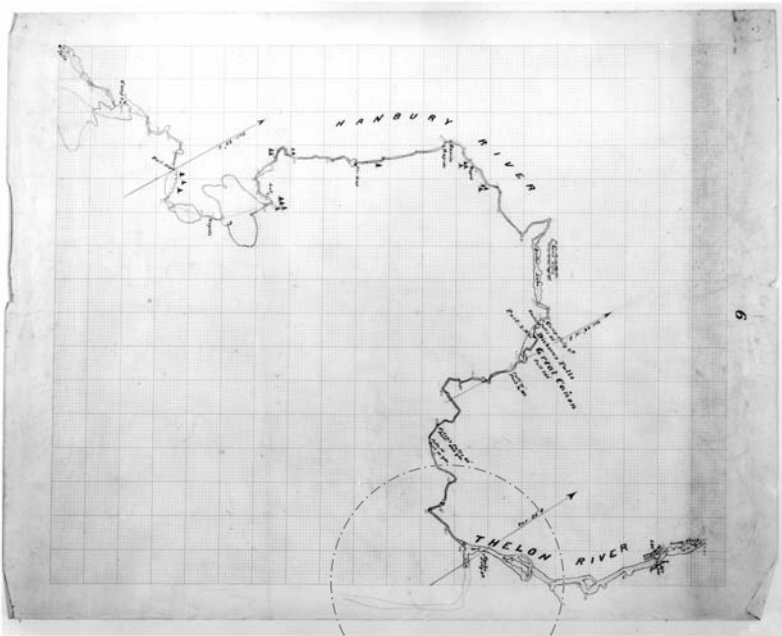
“All night the cold rain came down in torrents, so that I was perfectly saturated with it. As the morning dawned, conditions were not improved, for the rain had changed to snow and clothed the landscape in her chilling garment of white. It left me in an extremely uncomfortable condition, to say the least, being without shelter, fire or cooked food, but the worst seemed to have passed, for at eleven o’clock the next day the sunlight broke forth again and brought me much needed relief.”

It was now August 22, and Tyrrell found himself retracing his steps back up a long peninsula and working his way slowly around a large lake. Through all this, despite the conditions and his own miserable state, he somehow managed to keep a careful and detailed account of the land, and produce sketches from which he could ultimately draw the first maps of this territory with remarkable accuracy. The next day brought another storm.



Tyrrell ascended the upper Thelon, above the Hanbury junction, with voyageurs Robert Bear and Toura.

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These two sketch maps actually fit together, to show the junction of the upper Thelon with the Hanbury River. Tyrrell recorded similar maps of his entire route, which stood as the basis for Canada's official map of the central barrenlands for decades to follow, until his work was overtaken by aerial survey.

“A gale from the northeast, with driving rain and sleet—so severe that I was forced to seek shelter, which to some extent I found on the lee side of a rock. Here I spread my canvas and, wrapping my wet blanket about me, remained for two days until the storm of wind, rain and snow had spent its fury. My biscuits were now all gone, and the only available stimulant I had at this camp was the remainder of my flask of brandy, of which I gladly availed myself.

“My condition had become decidedly serious. I had not slept a night since I had left my canoe, and this wretched weather and lack of food was already telling seriously upon me. The barren ground is a most inhospitable place in bad weather, but having exposed myself to its inhospitality there was only one thing for me to do, and that was to get out again as best I could, and this I was quite resolved to do.”

At the end of August, nearly spent himself, Tyrrell reached the shore of Artillery Lake, and found a cache he had left there in June. Of the comforts that implies, he says only that he made “a snug camp in the spruce grove,” and leaves to the imagination the pleasures of once again being warm, dry and nourished.

Two days later, Robert Bear and Toura, his two voyageurs, paddled into camp having completed their ascent of the Hanbury River. Only a few days after that, Fairchild and his party arrived in Artillery Lake, having been all the way out to Hudson Bay and back. Reunited, the expedition headed south. It took them three more months for the return to Edmonton, by canoe, steamer, and dog sled.

Tyrrell's mapping of the territory east of Great Slave Lake—in all he set down 2,766 kilometres of new survey—became the basis for the official maps of Canada for many years to follow, until his job was taken over by aerial surveying. It is as an explorer and a mapmaker, therefore, that James W. Tyrrell is remembered. Surely, though, his sheer endurance is equally noteworthy. “It seemed that there could be no great difficulty ...” Indeed. 

Regular contributor David Pelly, himself a seasoned barrenlands traveller—who places James Tyrrell (with John Rae and a few others) in the tiny but elite group of the most stalwart early non-Native travellers—is retracing a small part of Tyrrell's long walk this summer, during a family canoe trip in the barrenlands. He is the author of the bestseller Thelon: A River Sanctuary. www.davidpelly.com



Expedition members at Fort Chipewyan.

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