In the summer of 1811, Thompson travelled south from Kootenae House and rejoined the Columbia River overland in what is now Washington State. His party canoed down-river to the coast, only to find that the Pacific Fur Company ship had reached the river's mouth first. The Americans had claimed the area and erected “Fort Astoria” that spring. After a week as guests at Fort Astoria, Thompson’s party travelled north on the Columbia to the river’s hairpin turn around the Selkirk Mountains. When they had passed the area that is now Mount Revelstoke National Park and reached Boat Encampment, Thompson became the first European to have travelled the entire length of the Columbia River.

Thompson journeyed past the Mount Revelstoke area twice during the following eight months - heading south in the autumn to over-winter in Montana, and travelling north in the spring of 1812. It was his last trip on the Columbia. Thompson paddled north to Boat Encampment, crossed Athabasca Pass on foot and travelled by canoe to eastern Canada, never to return to the west again.

Settling near Montreal, Thompson was appointed to the commission that established the Canada-US boundary after the War of 1812. Had his boundary proposals prevailed, almost all of Washington State and much of northern Idaho would be part of Canada. Until his death in 1857, Thompson continued work on his atlas of Canada from Hudson’s Bay to the Pacific Ocean.
By 1800, fur trader David Thompson had spent more than ten years exploring and surveying west of the Great Lakes. His employer, the North West Company, knew that US President Jefferson had dispatched Lewis and Clark in 1803 to find a water route to the Pacific Ocean. Within two years, the American team crossed the Rocky Mountains and reached the coast. Thompson was sent to find a river route across the northern Rockies to counteract the potential American threat to business.

Leaving Rocky Mountain House on the east side of the mountains in 1807, Thompson made his first successful crossing of the Rockies at Howse Pass. From the pass, Thompson followed the Blaeberry River down to the Columbia River, but he did not recognize the north-flowing Columbia as the “great river of the west” and instead turned upstream (south). That season, he established Kootanae House, his fur trading post at present-day Invermere, B.C.

From Kootanae House, Thompson explored present-day Montana, Washington and Idaho in 1808 and 1809, and established trading posts on Lake Pend d’Oreille in Idaho and the Clark Fork River in Montana. Thompson was guided through the lands west of the Continental Divide by the people who had lived on the land for centuries. Thompson was respected by the First Nations people who guided him and traded with him.

His Salish-Flathead companions named him “KOO KOO SINT” (the man who looks at stars) for his nightly sextant navigation.

In the autumn of 1810, a Pacific Fur Company ship left New York bound for the mouth of the Columbia River. By then, the North West Company had directed Thompson to follow the Columbia down to the ocean and establish a company presence on the coast ahead of the Americans. A dispute between the Peigan (Blackfoot) and the Flathead blocked Thompson’s usual route over Howse Pass, and he detoured north to follow the Athabasca and Whirlpool rivers through what is now Jasper National Park.

Struggling through deep snows on the Divide, his party made it down to the confluence of the Wood, Canoe and Columbia rivers in January 1811. Thompson was forced to spend the entire winter there at the “big bend” of the Columbia River, at a site which later became known as Boat Encampment. Over the winter, he determined that the river that he had named the Kootanae was actually the Columbia, the great river of the west. If he had originally turned north rather than south at the confluence of the Blaeberry and Columbia, he would have discovered the route to the sea four years earlier.
In his lifetime, David Thompson explored and mapped 3.9 million square kilometres (1.5 million sq. mi.) of North America. Thompson travelled more than 100,000 km (60,000 miles), including his work as a surveyor with the commission that established the Canada-US boundary. His grand 1814 map of the Northwest Territory of Canada was considered to be the most accurate representation of the area for the next 75 years.

Parks Canada strives to protect cultural resources and present the cultural history of Mount Revelstoke National Park.