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Don Antonio de Alcedo's Spanish Slant on the Upper Country

By Ted Bays

Early descriptions of the Upper Country emerge from unlikely latitudes.

Don Antonio de Alcedo's 1786-89 *Diccionario geografico-historico de las Indias Occidentales o America*¹ includes entries about countries, provinces, cities, villages, and hamlets; about every aspect of political, cultural and natural history; and about products from cochineal to zarzaparrilla, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. As a Spanish military officer² he naturally focused most of this monumental five-volume work on New Spain, from the North American southwest to Patagonia and Chile.

Published serially in Madrid, 1786-1789, Alcedo's *Diccionario* soon attracted an industrious translator, G. A. Thompson. By 1812 the huge Spanish work was available in English—substantially augmented. Thompson added material—meticulously set off by brackets but regrettably not footnoted with sources—from Spanish, Portuguese, French, English and American sources.³ Alcedo himself claimed to have referred to 300 sources. The full text of Alcedo's entries with Thompson's additions follows this brief Introduction.

Alcedo's Preface from Vol. 1 succinctly describes the overview and the particulars of his work:

What has in no small degree contributed to the connection between the Old and New Worlds, is the introduction of certain American productions into the former, which, through luxury have been rendered indispensable, such as cacao, cochineal, tobacco, vicuna wool, &c., as also for their specific medicinal virtues, bark, jalap, zarzaparrilla, culaguala, conchaguadala, and the balsams of Tolu, Maria, Canime, &c. not to be found in any other part.

These, it seemed to me, were sufficient reasons for requiring an universal history of America, which might contain every thing worthy of note, as well in its civil, natural, and ecclesiastical relations, as in its geography, productions, commerce, navigation, and interests with European powers: but being well aware of the difficulty of combining such information, it seemed to me more advisable to reduce it to the form of a dictionary (Vol. I, p. 1).

Upper Country entries include Lake Superior, Nipigon, Michipicoten, and Michilimackinac.

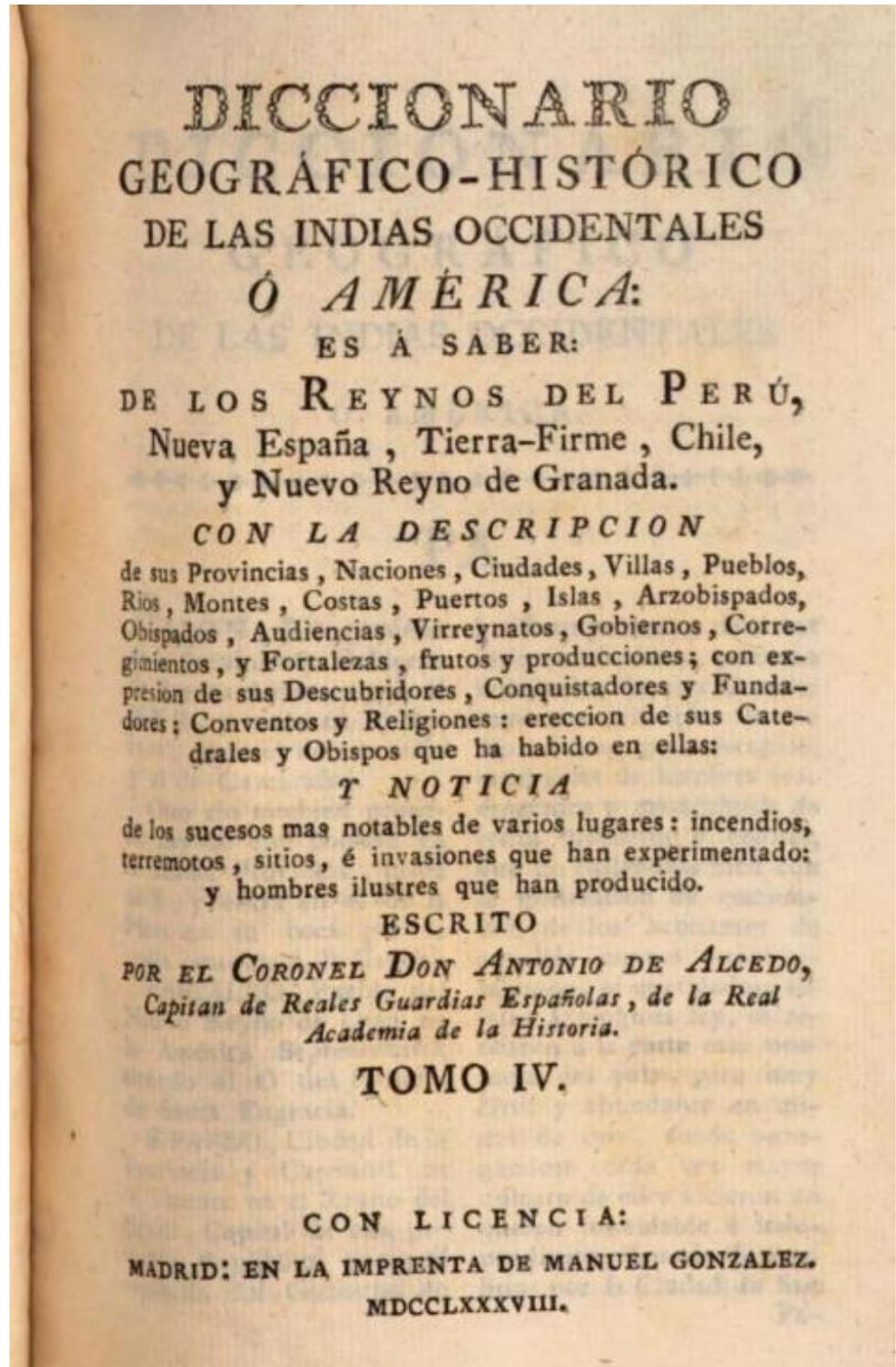
Three quarters of the "Lake Superior" entry comes from Thompson, and half of Thompson's share comes quoted from an unidentified "Mr. M_____", about the year 1790, departed from Montreal . . .", almost certainly Alexander MacKenzie.⁴

Alcedo and Thompson agree on one thing: Lake Superior is mightily impressive: "SUPERIOR, a large lake of Canada in N. America; or, more properly a small fresh water sea." "[Lake Superior, formerly termed the Upper Lake, from its *n.* situation, may justly be termed the Caspian Sea of America, and is supposed to be the largest body of fresh water on the globe.]" Without footnotes, the Alcedo/Thompson entries sometimes seem suspect, or perhaps

misinterpreted or mistranslated. What to make of, for example, “These {tempests} never occur without a warning of two days. ... the following day, the whole lake is covered with a thick mud...” (Vol. 4, p. 474-476).

Hereinafter, Alcedo and Thompson’s text.

SUPERIOR, a large lake of Canada in N. America; or, more properly, a small fresh water sea. [From the most w. point of this lake, in a straight line to the Falls of St. Maria, it is 344 geographical miles in length. Its breadth is very various, being from 10 to about 100 miles from n. to s.] It is full of islands, and the whole of its s. coast is straight and sandy; but the n. coast is more convenient for sailing, as it consists of rocks which form little bays or inlets, in which vessels may lie secure in times of tempests. But these never occur without a warning of two days. The first day, the waters of the lake become somewhat disquieted, a murmuring noise being heard over every part, and, the following day, the whole lake is covered with a thick mud, being still navigable if the wind be favourable; but on the



Front cover of Diccionario... courtesy of Google Books.

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Diccionario_geogr%C3%A1fico_hist%C3%B3rico_de_la/OITdN388qykC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PP7&printsec=frontcover. Accessed Aug. 2022.

third day, what it is least expected, the waters become suddenly agitated like those of the ocean; and then it is that vessels on the *n.* side of the lake make into the shore for the aforesaid inlets, whilst those on the *e.* side take the precaution, on the second day, to ride out from the shore.

The country surrounding is but little known, and is frequented only by the Indians who go thither to hunt. These Indians hold the lake as a kind of deity, offering to it sacrifices, by way of gratitude for the great quantities of fish which they extract from it, and in token of the respect which they bear to it from its vast extent. They assert that Michabou, God of the Waters, formed it for the hunting of castors.

In the channel by which it empties itself into Lake Huron, is a cascade formed by great rocks, which, according to the tradition of those barbarians, are the remains of some causeways which were built by their god, to restrain the waters of the rivers and those of the Lake Almipegon, which formed this lake. The French missionaries of the Jesuits, called this cascade the Falls of St. Marie, from a church which they had there. In some parts of the coasts, and in various islands of the lake, are found large bits of copper, which form an object of great superstition to the savages; and they look upon this metal as being sent them by the deities residing beneath the lake; collecting even the smallest pieces with the greatest care, and keeping them without ever making any use of them. They say that there was formerly standing out of the water a rock of this material; but as it does not now exist, is thought by them to have been removed by their deities to some other spot; whereas, in all probability, the waves of the lake have by time covered it over with sand. Certain it is that a great quantity of the above metal has been found in various parts; and in the aforesaid church, the missionaries used to make of it their crosses and incensories.

[Lake Superior, formerly termed the Upper Lake, from its *n.* situation, may justly be termed the Caspian Sea of America, and is supposed to be the largest body of fresh water on the globe. According to the French charts it is 1500 miles in circumference. A great part of the coast is bounded by rocks and uneven ground. It is situated between lat. 46° and 49° *n.* and between long. 84° and $92^{\circ}15'$ *w.* The water is very clear, and transparent. If the sun shines bright, it is impossible through this medium to look at the rocks at the bottom, above a minute or two. Although the water, at the surface, is much warmed by the heat of the sun, yet, when drawn up at about a fathom depth, it is very cold. Storms are more dreadful here than on the ocean.

There are many islands in this lake; two of them have each land enough, if proper for cultivation, to form a considerable province; especially Isle Royal, which is not less than 36 miles long, and in many places 12 broad. The natives suppose these island to be the residence of the Great Spirit.

Many rivers empty their waters into this mighty reservoir; of these one is called Nipegon, another Michipicooton; which are described under their respective heads. {see below}

Not far from Nipegon is a small river, that, just before it enters the lake, has a perpendicular fall from the top of the mountain, of more than 100 feet. It is very narrow, and appears at a distance like a white garter suspended in the air. On the *s.* side of it is a remarkable point or cape of about 60 miles in length, called Point Chegomegan or Kuwenaw. About 100 miles *w.* of this cape, a considerable river falls into the lake, the head of which is composed of a great assemblage of small streams. This river is remarkable for the abundance of virgin copper that is found on and near its banks. Many small islands, particularly on the *e.* shores, abound with copper-ore lying in beds, with the appearance of copperas; thus warranting the assertions made by Alcedo on this subject respecting the opinions of the Indians. This metal might be easily made a very advantageous article of commerce. This lake abounds with fish, particularly trout and sturgeon; the former weigh from 12 to 50 pounds, and are caught almost any season of the year in great plenty. Storms affect this lake as much as they do the Atlantic Ocean; the waves run as high, and the navigation is equally dangerous.

The entrance into this lake from the Straits of St. Marie affords one of the most pleasing prospects in the world. On the left may be seen many beautiful little islands that extend a considerable way before you; and on the right, an agreeable succession of small points of land that project a little way into the water,

and contribute, with the islands, to render this delightful bason calm, and secure from those tempestuous winds by which the adjoining lake is frequently troubled.

This lake discharges its waters from the *s.e.* corner through the above-mentioned Straits of St. Marie, which are about 40 miles long, into Lake Huron. Although about 40 rivers empty into Lake Superior, many of which are large, yet it does not appear that one-tenth part of the waters which it receives, is discharged by the above-mentioned strait; great part of the waters, it is thought, find to themselves subterraneous vents, whilst more evaporate; and Providence, doubtless, makes use of this inland sea to furnish the interior parts of the country with that supply of vapours, without which, like the interior parts of Africa, they must have been a mere desert. A number of tribes live around Lake Superior, but little is known respecting them.

The following extract from the journal of a late traveler will be acceptable to the curious.

“Mr. M_____, about the year 1790, departed from Montreal with a company of about 100 men, under his direction, for the purpose of making a tour through the Indian country, to collect furs, and to make such remarks on its soil, waters, lakes, mountains, manners and customs of its inhabitants as might come within his knowledge and observation. He pursued his route from Montreal, entered the Indian country, and coasted about 300 leagues along the banks of Lake Superior, from thence to the Lake of the Woods, of which he took an actual survey, and found it to be 36 leagues in length; from thence to the Lake Ounipique, of which he gave also a description. The tribes of the Indians which he passed through were called the Maskego Tribue, Shepeweyau, Cithinistinee, Great Belly Indians, Beaver Indians, Blood Indians, the Black Feet Tribe, the Snake Indians, Ossobians, Shiveytoon Tribe, Mandon Tribe, Paunees, and several others, who in general were very pacific and friendly towards him, and are great admirers of the best hunting horses, in which the country abounds. The horses prepared by them for hunters, have large holes cut above their natural nostrils, for which they give as a reason, that those prepared in this manner will keep their breath longer than the others which are not thus prepared: from experience, knowledge is gained, and the long practice of this custom, consequent on these trials, must have convinced them of the truth and utility of the experiment; otherwise we can hardly suppose they would torture their best horses in this manner, if some advantage was not derived from the measure.

In pursuing his route, he found no difficulty in obtaining a guide to accompany him from one nation to the other, until he came to the Shining Mountains, or Mountains of Bright Stones, where, in attempting to pass, he was frustrated by the hostile appearance of the Indians who inhabit that part of the country. The consequence of which was, he was disappointed in his intention, and obliged to turn is back upon them. Having collected a number of Indians, he went forward again, with an intention to force his way over those mountains, if necessary and practicable, and to make his way to Cook’s River, on the *n. w.* coast of America, supposed by him to be about 300 leagues from the mountains; but the inhabitants of the mountains again met him with their bows and arrows, and so superior were they in numbers to his little force, that he was obliged to flee before them. Finding himself thus totally disappointed in the information he was in hopes to obtain, he was obliged to turn his back upon that part of the country for which his heart had long panted. Cold weather coming on, he built huts for himself and party in the Ossnobian country, and near to the source of a large river called the Ossnobian River, where they tarried during the continuance of the cold season, and until some time in the warmer months. Previous to his departure from Montreal, he had supplied himself with several kinds of seeds, and before his huts he laid out a small garden, which the natives observing, called them slaves, for digging up the ground, nothing of that kind being done by them, they living wholly on animal food; bread is unknown to them; to some he gave remnants of hard bread, which they chewed and spit out again, calling it rotten wood. When his onions, &c. were somewhat advanced in their growth, he was often surprised to find them pulled up; determining therefore to know from what cause it proceeded, he directed his men to keep watch, who found that the Indian children, induced by motives curiosity, came with sticks, thrust them through the poles of his fence, to ascertain and satisfy themselves, what the things of the white men were, and in what manner they grew, &c. The natives of this country have no fixed or

permanent place of abode, but live wholly in tents made of buffalo and other hides, and with which they travel from place to another, like the Arabs; and so soon as the feed for their horses is expended, they remove their tents to another fertile spot, and so on continually, scarcely ever returning to the same spots again.”

By the treaty of 1783, it was agreed that a water communication should be had into the Mississippi, by a line drawn due *w.* from the Lake of the Woods; but this was afterwards found to be impossible, since it is now ascertained that there are no waters flowing into Lake Superior from the *n.* but only a height of land. If the spirit of the treaty had been to be acted on, a line drawn through the river St. Lewis, which rises within a few miles of the Mississippi, and runs *e.* into the lake, would have formed the obvious boundary.] (Vol. 4, pp. 474-477)

Before transcribing the *Diccionario's* entries on Michilimackinac, Michipicoten and Nipigon, a brief biographical sketch of Don Antonio de Alcedo:

Born in 1735 near Quito, Ecuador, Antonio had the advantage of his father's position and travels in New Spain. Dionisio de Alcedo Herrera (1690-1777) was president of the Real Audiencia de Quito, then moved on to administrative positions around the vast territory of the Spanish empire in the New World. Antonio returned to Spain in 1752 to begin his military career. He made the grade of Colonel as he worked on the *Diccionario*, and made brigadier general by 1792.

As Governor of A Coruna, Galicia, Alcedo's garrison held off the French commander Marshal Soult, enabling the British force under John Moore to return safely to England, following the battle of Corunna, in the Peninsula War (1807-1814) that eventually secured Spanish independence from the Napoleonic scourge.

Back to the *Dictionary*.

MICHILIMACKINAK, a small island of lake Huron in New France or Canada, in N. America, situate in 45° 45' *n. lat.* I has a moderate-sized town, in which used to be carried on a trade in skins, owing to its being resorted to by, and being very convenient for the meeting of, several savage nations of Indians: this traffic, is, at the present day transferred to Hudson's bay the river Borbon.

The situation of the island is very advantageous, from lying between the three great lakes, the Michigan, which is 300 leagues in circumference, exclusive of the great bay of Puants, into which it empties itself; the Huron, which is 350, and of a triangular figure; and the last, the lake Superior, which is 500; the whole of them being navigable for large vessels, and the two first being divided only by a small strait, in in the which there is sufficient water for the same vessels, without any obstruction through the whole of the lake Erie to Niagara. Between the lakes Huron and Superior is a communication by means of a canal 22 leagues long, but which is interrupted by many cascades or falls, which impede the canoes from arriving to disembark at Michillimakinak whatever they might bring from lake Superior. [This island, within the line of the United States, was delivered to them by the British, by treaty, in 1794, and retaken in the present year, 1812]. (Vol. III, p. 235)

[MICHIPICOTON, a river which empties into Lake Superior on the *n.e.* side of the lake. It has its source not far distant from Moose River, a water of James bay. It forms at its mouth a bay of its own name; and on the *w.* part of the bay, is a large island so called, close to the land; a small strait only separates it from Otter's head on the *n.*] (Vol. III, p. 236)

[NIPEGON, a large river which empties into lake from the *n.* It leads to a tribe of the Chippewas, who inhabit near a lake of the same name. Not far from the Nipegon is a small river, that, just before it enters the lake, has a perpendicular fall, from the top of a mountain of 600 feet. It is very narrow and appears like a white garter suspended in the air.] (Vol. III, p. 432)

CANADA, or New France, a province and colony of N. America, the limits of which are esteemed various, and have in fact been the occasion of many disputes and wars between the French and the English. . . . The climate of Canada is very various: The whole of the part inhabited by the French, to the shore of the river St. Lawrence is excessively cold during the winter, although hot in summer; the other parts, as far as has at present been discovered, contain immense forests, lakes and rivers, and the cold there is very great. Nevertheless, fertile plains are not wanting which produce all kinds of grain, fruits, and plants; of the latter the tobacco plant is most abundant, and is particularly cultivated by the French. The forests abound in deer, *dantas*, wild cats, bulls, many kinds of goats, wolves, and other animals; also in a variety of birds. The plains, which are well irrigated, afford excellent pastures, in which breed numerous herds of cattle, both of the larger and smaller kind. On the mountains is found pit-coal, and some even assert that there are also mines of silver and other metals, though to the present day we have never heard of such mines as having been worked. In the uncultivated wastes of an immense extent, are found beavers, and in the rivers and lakes every kind of fish. Its principal lakes are Erie, Michigan, Huron, Superior, Fontentac or Ontario, Nipysing, Tomiscaning, and many other of less note The French established themselves in this province in the year 1535, under the command of Jacob Cartier. They also commenced a commerce with the Indians, taking of them hides in exchange for brandy, tobacco, powder and shot, axes, and all kinds of iron tools; and for the proper conducting of this mercantile system, a body of men were established, called runners of the mountain, who, traversing in their canoes the widest lakes and largest rivers, carry at the present day, with incredible industry and patience, effects to the most distant inland and unknown parts. (Vol. I, pp. 256-257)

Thompson's 25 pages of additional information include the categories listed below. Of most interest to *Upper Country* readers and researchers, the Fur Trade also includes more detailed descriptions of Alexander MacKenzie's ventures, alluded to by Thompson in his Lake Superior notes and quoted above.

[INDEX To Additional Information Respecting Canada:

1. Situation and Divisions.---2. Climate.---3. Natural Curiosities.---4. Soil and productions.---5. Religion.---6. Population.---7. Manners and customs.---8. Government.---9. The Military.---10. Laws.---11. List of governors.---12. Roads and distances.---13. Expenses of government.---14. Commerce.---15. Exports and Imports.---{ . . } 16. *Fur Trade*.---The fur trade has been the principal source of all the wealth which has for many years been accumulated in the province. This branch of commerce, which fell into the hands of the English after the conquest, was carried on for several years by individuals, on their own separate account; but about 27 years ago, the enterprising and active spirit of Mr. McTavish laid the foundation of that association at present known under the title of the North-west Company, for the purpose of extending that trade to its utmost limits. This was more likely to be accomplished by the joint stock of a company than the small properties of individual merchants, and the result has justified the expectations of its author. Much jealousy and competition was, however, excited by those north-west traders who did not associate with Mr. McTavish and his friends, and for several years the greatest animosity subsisted between them. This opposition naturally gave rise to a second company, consisting of the individuals opposed to Mr. McTavish. Among the most conspicuous of the second association was Mr. McKenzie, now Sir Alexander. The enterprising spirit of this gentleman is well known, since the publication of his Travels across the North-west Continent to the Pacific Ocean. The concerns of his company were, we find, managed with as much ability as the other, which made their opponents seriously wish to combine the two associations into one; but the high spirit of Mr. McTavish would not allow it: he resolutely withstood all attempts at an accommodation, and spared neither expense nor trouble to crush the exertions of his rivals. Death, however, which too often annihilates the fairest hopes of sublunary bliss, put an end to the contest; Mr. McTavish

died, the companies immediately joined their stocks, and commenced partnership, in which state they remain to this day; the business being conducted under the firm McGillivray, Roderick McKenzie, and Co. though the number of persons who have shares in the company amount, it is said, to more than forty. The clerks, voyageurs, and Indians employed by the north-west company, amount to upwards of 3000. The clerks are all adventurous young Scotchmen, who emigrate, from penury, in the islands of the Hebrides, to certain hardships and dubious affluence in the dreary wilds of the north-west. They engage for a term of five or seven years, after which they have a certain yearly allowance, or become partners in the company. The hardships and fatigue which they undergo, frequently tend to the enervation of their frame, and the destruction of their health; so that at the period of fifteen or twenty years, it is not uncommon for them to retire from the company, with a fortune of 20,000 *livres*, and a broken constitution. Of late years, the profits of the company have been considerably diminished by the restrictions on our commerce on the continent of Europe, where the chief demand for furs exists. Considerable quantities are, however, sent to the United States, from whence they are exported to Europe under the neutral flag; an opening is thus created for the company's peltry, which would otherwise have been very much contracted during the war. The number of skins exported to England in 1807 was 460,000, and to the United States 286,703; but the embargo in 1808 must have much lessened the demand from that quarter. Upwards of 20,000 *livres* is annually paid in England for the duties on furs from Canada. The capital employed by the north-west company must be very extensive, as the returns are extremely slow. The trade is now pushed to the very extremity of the continent, from the coast of Labrador to the Pacific ocean, extending to the northward beyond the arctic circle. The goods sent up annually from Montreal, for the barter of furs from the Indians, are upwards of four years before they produce a return. The dangers and difficulties attending the transportation of these articles so many thousand miles across rivers, lakes, and portages, have been well described by Sir Alexander McKenzie in his History of the Fur Trade. The same well-informed writer observes, that the articles necessary for this trade “are coarse woollen cloths of different kinds, milled blankets of different sizes; arms and ammunition; twist and carrot tobacco; Manchester goods; linen and coarse sheetings; thread, lines, and twine; common hardware; cutlery and ironmongery of several descriptions; kettles of brass and copper and sheet iron; silk and cotton handkerchiefs; hats, shoes and hose; calicoes and printed cottons, &c. &c. &c. Spirituous liquors and provisions are purchased in Canada. These, and the expence of transport to and from the Indian territory, including wages to clerks, interpreters, guides, and canoe-men, with the expence of making up goods for the market, form about half the annual amount against the adventure.” The necessary number of canoes being purchased at about 300 *livres* each, the goods formed into packages, and the lakes and rivers being free of ice, (which they usually are in the beginning of May), they are then dispatched from La Chine, eight miles above Montreal, with eight or ten men in each canoe, their baggage, and 65 packages of goods, six cwt. Of biscuit, two cwt. Of pork, three bushels of pease, for the men's provisions two oilcloths to cover the goods, a sail &c., an axe, a towing line, a kettle, and a sponge to bail out the water, with a quantity of gum, bark, and watape, to repair the vessel. The voyagers are frequently obliged to unload their canoes, and carry their goods upon their backs, or rather suspended from slings upon their heads; and this they call *a decharge*. In the same case each man's load is two packages though some carry three, and the canoe is towed by a strong line. There are some places where the ground will not admit of their carrying the whole, they then make two trips; that is, leave half their lading, and go and land it at the distance required, and then return for that which was left. In some places both goods and canoes are transported, and this is denominated a *portage*. But there is another association established within these few years, called the South-west or Michillimackinac Company; some of the partners in this association also have shares in the north-west company, but the general concern is totally separate. The south-west merchants pursue their trade across the lakes Ontario and Erie, and down the rivers Illinois, Ohio, and Mississippi, in the territory of the United States. (Vol. I, pp. 282-283)

Diligent researchers and thorough readers will find other ancillary nuggets buried in the long entries de Alcedo and Thompson compiled about other major Upper Country sites. But even with a key word to focus the search, hours of careful scanning lie ahead. For example, among the 24 pages on Quebec, Thompson includes among his exhaustive (and exhausting) lists of imports and exports, “Furs &c. Exported: Beaver skins... Martins... Otters... Minx... Fisher... Deer... Musquash... Raccoon... Bear & cub... Fox... Woolvereen... Kegs & Casks of Castorum...” and so on, with volumes and numbers for each species of pelts and products. (Vol. IV, pp. 275-276)

(NMU history professor emeritus and editor of *Upper Country* Dr. Russell Magnaghi recently commissioned this author to scan all five volumes of the *Dictionary* for references to specific agricultural products, especially cochineal, indigo, and native medicinal plants. We found many.)

Quaint and sometimes lyrical observations leaven Thompson’s long lists: “No part of the Canadian winter is more interesting than the conclusion of it, when the snow begins to disappear and the ice in the rivers to break up, which is the case in the end of April. One would naturally suppose that six months frost and snow would have become insufferably tiresome to a stranger; but this is not the case. The winter may be divided into three seasons, or portions, as it were: for two months at the beginning the snow is falling, and the frost becoming daily more severe. The middle two months of severe frost is not without interest : for then is to be seen winter in all his majesty, after he has bound up the lakes and rivers in fetters of ice, and covered the earth as with a mantle. The last two months are interesting because there is then an anxiety to see by what means, and in what manner, such an immensity of snow and ice is to be got rid of.” (Vol. I, p. 258)

Upper Country residents—those who don't go south for the winter—will concur.

As digital publication progresses, de Alcedo and Thompson’s massive dictionary may someday lend itself to easier scanning and sifting for particulars via the enormously helpful “key word search” function. In the meantime, this article may provide an initial point of access to this under-appreciated treasure.

Endnotes

¹ *The Geographical and Historical Dictionary of America and the West Indies (Diccionario geografico-historico de las Indias Occidentales o America)*, containing an Entire Translation of the Spanish work of Colonel Don Antonio de Alcedo with Large Additions and Compilations from Modern Voyages and Travels and from Original and Authentic Information by G. A. Thompson in Five Volumes; Burt Franklin, New York, undated; Lenox Hill Pub. & Dist. Co. (Burt Franklin), New York, NY, 1970.

² Bandelier, Adolph Francis Alphonse, "Antonio de Alcedo," in Herbermann, Charles, (ed.), *Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 1*. New York: Robert Appleton Company.

³ Alcedo/Thompson, *Dictionary*, Vol. V, Preface Part III, pp. xxv-xxxv. As noted above, Thompson did not footnote his sources in the text; this part of his Preface lists "...the chief books, documents and authorities consulted...."

⁴ History of the Voyage from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence, through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans, in the Years 1789 and 1793; with a Preliminary Account of the rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country. By ALEXANDER MACKENZIE, Esq. London.