Shooting the Rapids by Frances Anne Hopkins

The Express Canoe

When General Brock learned of the outbreak of war, he called on North West Company fur trader William McKay (or MacKay). Brock knew that McKay could organize the 12 elite voyageurs needed to take an express canoe the nearly 2000 km trip from Montreal to St. Joseph Island in record time. Brock wanted his commander Captain Charles Roberts to capture the fort on Mackinac Island before the Americans realized the war had started. The trip to St. Joseph Island routinely took four to six weeks in a fully loaded canoe. A lightly loaded canoe with expert paddlers could make it in as few as 18 days. McKay set off late June from Lachine. The voyagers paddled the Ottawa River for 563 km to its junction with the Mattawa River, making eighteen portages. The 56 km Mattawa River required poles as well as paddles against the swift currents. The usual speed of the express canoe on lakes was about 80 strokes a minute, which propelled the craft at about 16.09 km per hour. The 14 hour days took the crack team of French-Canadian, Mohawk and Metis paddlers along the Mattawa to Lake Nipissing, and then down the French River leading to Georgian Bay and from thence through Lake Huron to St. Joseph Island. McKay and his crew arrived at St. Joseph Island July 8th—in a mere eight days! An express canoe was about 11 metres in

Colonel William MacKay, 1816 by Levi Stevens www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/ en/collection/artifacts/M17684/

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length and 1.8 metres wide. Empty, it weighed around 270 kg. It carried only light provisions to ensure speed. From years of paddling heavily-laden canoes that carried up to 3600 kg of freight, the voyageurs had the capacity to get the next leg from St. Joseph Island to Fort Mackinac in just 17 hours. The successful surprise attack on Fort Mackinac took place on July 18th. As well as the North West Company's schooner *Caledonia,* and 10 bateaux, 70 war canoes took part in the assault—many no doubt manned by McKay's astounding express canoe paddlers.