EXPLORATION

Beckoned by the riches of the Orient, 16th-century European explorers crossed the Atlantic Ocean seeking a northerly passage around North America. Jacques Cartier’s 1534 discovery and mapping of the St. Lawrence River inspired others to test their theories on the shape of the mysterious new lands. They traced their routes on self-made maps, probing coastlines that seemed to stretch on forever and enduring harsh, isolating winters. It would take close to four centuries of exploration to piece together a map of all the land and seas that today define Canada.

Seeking the Orient
England’s contribution to New World mapping began with Martin Frobisher, who sailed into Frobisher Bay in 1576 while searching for a passage to the Far East. He later excavated mines of ore from Baffin Island that he thought contained gold but in the end proved worthless. Rock depressions and stone ruins left by his men can still be seen on Koldiikan Island in Frobisher Bay.

Into the continent
Known as the “dean of land surveyors,” Champlain penetrated deeper into Eastern Canada than any previous explorer. He began the formal mapping of the country, employing an astrolabe and compass, and he was guided by native peoples, as depicted in this painting (1637) by J. H. de Riny, above; an adaptation of a 1652 map produced by Champlain.

Star guide
The Greeks invented the astrolabe in the 2nd century BC to measure the altitude of celestial bodies. Eighteen hundred years later, French explorer Samuel de Champlain used the one pictured above (now in the collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization) to chart the St. Lawrence River and much of the waters of Atlantic Canada.

West Coast probe
Captain James Cook painstakingly mapped the intractable coastline of Newfoundland from 1763-67. A decade later he sailed east across the Pacific in search of a northwest passage to the Atlantic Ocean. Landing at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island in 1778, depicted (above) in a painting by J. D. Lilly, Cook soon established a lucrative fur trade with the Nooksack.

Maping by memory
Maps by Canada’s aboriginal peoples were not permanent but sketched from memory on the ground, in the snow and on skins and birchbark. Their knowledge was often incorporated into maps of early European explorers, such as a map drawn in 1822 at Winter Island by the Inuk Illiaulik.

Society of adventurers
Charles Canoe, founded in 1929 of The Royal Canadian Geographical Society, explored and mapped large areas of northern and central Canada. The Canoeist spirit lives on. In 1992, the Society, in partnership with the Geological Survey of Canada, organized an expedition to measure Mount Logan, Canada’s highest point of land. Using global positioning system (GPS) receivers linked to orbiting satellites, they found that the peak is 5,959 metres above sea level.