

Abstract Submission for 5th Canadian River Heritage Conference

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A.P. Low: Canada's Second Greatest Geographer?

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A.P. Low: Canada's Second Greatest Geographer?

1. The Iron Man of Canada:

I roll the canoe off my aching shoulders onto sphagnum-covered boulders, as Jim wades slowly uphill through waist-high wet Labrador tea, bent under the food pack for our six- week trip. Half-way across Long Portage, we collapse, exhausted, where the faint trail disappears, this time for good. Under another drenching rain, with the muskeg sucking at our boots, and the black flies sucking at our blood, we are forcefully struck again by the incredible stamina and endurance of previous travelers and the Aboriginals who guided them over this now half-forgotten route. We had expected that 1000 km route from Naococanne Lake, in the geographic centre of Quebec, to the community of Waskaganish, where the Rupert River dumps its waters into James Bay would be tough, but not this tough.

Once again, I am reminded of a poem by Alfred Desrochers that describes just how we feel:

"We are the dwindled sons of a race of supermen,
The violent, strong, adventurous, from this strain,
We take a northbound homesickness, which comes
With the Grey Days that autumn brings again."

[source: "Wilderness and the Canadian Psyche, by Bruce Littlejohn, in Endangered Spaces, edited by Monte Hummel, p. 18]

One of these "supermen" was Albert Peter Low.

Albert Peter Low is a typical Canadian hero. He did much for Canada, but his accomplishments have been largely forgotten. Like many characters who have helped to shape our view of the

world, he has fallen through the cracks of history. He worked as a geologist for the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC), the pre-eminent scientific organization of that time, created in 1842 by Sir William Logan, and still in existence today (See Chapter X: Early Years and Personal Life for more details on the GSC) during the last 18 years of the 19th century and the first 12 years of the 20th. He and his colleagues contributed much to filling in the cartographic blanks in the map of Canada. When he began his career, it was only fifteen years after Confederation and much of Canada was still largely unknown and unmapped, particularly the vast northern areas acquired through the acquisition of Rupert's Land from the Hudson Bay Company [Footnote: In 1870, Canada purchased Rupert's Land, the vast area defined by waters draining into Hudson's Bay and James Bay, given by royal charter in 1670 to the Hudson Bay Company. No one knew then just how big this addition to Canada was]. Rising from relatively humble origins, he became the Director of the Geological Survey and then Deputy Minister of the Department of Mines. In his private life, he was a keen sportsman, playing on some of the first hockey teams in Canada, and a figure in the early days of football in Ottawa. But it is his accomplishments as a map maker, geologist, explorer, and wilderness traveller, documenting and photographing the vast Labrador Peninsula, that he is almost without peer. Between 1881 and 1899, he spent over 2,500 days travelling by canoe and snowshoe – that's almost seven years sleeping in a tent or under the stars! He covered more than 20,000 km (12,000 miles) of wild territory in his journeys by canoe and snowshoe, and described by map and in written notes more than 200,000 square miles of the Labrador Peninsula. He was the first to detail the geology and the river routes across this huge area, which was largely unknown, except to a few quiet people in the Hudson's Bay Company and the Aborigines who had lived here for thousands of years. But his full story has never been written or told.

A few wilderness paddlers know Albert Peter Low for his accurate descriptions of the extensive canoe routes he mapped through what is now northern Quebec and Labrador¹, published in the

¹ Between 1867 and 1898, the northern boundary of Quebec was the northern height of land of the watersheds which flowed into the St Lawrence. The region to the north of this boundary was called various names including Ungava and the North-east Territory, and the

Annual Reports of the Geological Survey of Canada of the closing years of the 19th century. These descriptions still guide canoeists intent on following obscure routes across the north of Quebec and Ungava. Portages are listed and rapids described with meticulous accuracy. Eastmain, Rupert, Caniapiscou, Leaf, Riviere aux Melezes², Mistassini, Nichicun, Clearwater, Churchill, Romaine, these are just some of the lakes and rivers Low mapped. Their names still ring out with adventure.

Albert Peter Low is best known his tough canoe trips. Perhaps more than anyone else of his time, he perfected the skill of travelling by canoe over long distances and rough terrain, while at the same time, making maps, recording observations and putting up with hardships that few today can envisage. Duke Watson of Seattle, who has a paddling resume few, if any, can match today, ranks A.P. Low at the top among the great Geological Survey of Canada explorers, and ranks his 1893-4 trip through Ungava and Labrador - more than 5,500 miles – as one of the great canoe trips of all time! [Che-mun, Outfit 100, spring 2000, p.2] (How's this for an itinerary? Rupert, Eastmain, Lake Nichicun, Kaniapiscou, Koksoak, Churchill Falls, Lake Petitsikapau, Lake Michikanau, Romaine River, and St. John River to Mingan.) His pencilled field notebooks and hand drawn maps are a source of inspiration for the small cadre of extreme canoeists who have retraced his routes, unencumbered by his duty to map, but blessed by accurate maps, and waterproof materials. His best-known exploit shows the strength of the man. After the first six months of a year-long federal-provincial expedition for which he was second in command, he had had enough of the numerous delays in the trip which he blamed on the expedition leader. In February 1885, he decided to return to Ottawa to obtain authorization to take over the expedition. This required snowshoeing 200 miles from Lake Mistassini to Lac St Jean in very cold weather and deep snow with one partner, then sledding to Quebec City to catch the train to Ottawa. Once

eastern boundary was not yet defined with Labrador (part of the United Kingdom's colony of Newfoundland). In 1898, the federal government moved the boundary of Quebec north to the Eastmain River and to Low's surveyed route along the Hamilton River, with a section in between which followed a line of latitude.

² Names of geographical features are those used by Low. Where they have been changed beyond a simple translation from English to French, the new name follows in parentheses.

armed with a letter giving him the mandate to lead the expedition, he returned via a similar route, with a party of 6, over rapidly melting snow which forced him to travel at night when the snow had frozen.

Canadian geologists know of Albert Peter Low. His descriptions and analyses of his mineral findings cover an immense area. He was the first to describe the vast iron ore deposits of the Labrador trough, which were eventually the source of ore for the mines at Schefferville, Labrador City and Fermont. He also described the surficial geology of much of the northern Quebec region, and applied his interpretations to describe the role of glaciers in sculpting the land, and re-distributing its mineral treasures, using the relatively new theory of continental glaciation. He was one of the last of the golden era of generalist geologists, which included Robert Bell, Joseph Tyrell and many others who worked for the Geological Survey of Canada before the 20th century. His work predated the concept of the term "Shield" as applied to the extensive areas of exposed ancient volcanic that cover vast areas of Canada.³

For the geographer, his descriptions of the geology, geography, forest, history, peoples and life in northern Quebec in the 1890's, all based on first hand experience, was described by one admirer as "une Bible, le plus important texte jamais paru sur le Quebec-Labrador".⁴ Though he did not discover new lands, he meticulously mapped long travel routes used by others in the area, and put precision in what had only been roughly described before, along with a wealth of details on the geology, forests, Aborigines and their way of life. His reports published by the Geological Survey of Canada are a vivid benchmark of a vast area that is now in the throes of rapid and irrevocable change – a vivid portrayal of what was then, what is now, and what is gone and what has changed.

³ The term "Shield" was first used in 1892 by the Austrian geologist Eduard Suess to describe large continental masses of Precambrian rock; see Moon, Barbara; *The Canadian Shield*, McLelland, 1970, p. 18

⁴ Caron, Fabien; *Albert Peter Low et l'exploration du Quebec-Labrador*, *Cahier de Geographie du Quebec*, no 18, (April - Sept 1965), pp. 169 - 182, quote on p. 176

For the anthropologist and historian, Albert Peter Low is best known for his command of the Canadian government expedition to reinforce Canada's sovereignty claim to much of the eastern Arctic. His book, The Cruise of the Neptune, records a glimpse of life in the eastern arctic just after the turn of the century. It is replete with photos of Inuit and descriptions of their culture, meetings with American whalers, accounts of the marine wildlife, and an evaluation of the navigational potential of Hudson Bay, as well as some new observations of geology of this vast area.

We unexpectedly found out that his sporting exploits, as well as geological and geographical accomplishments, also merit a place for him in Canadian history. While a student in engineering at McGill, in 1881 and 1882, Low played hockey for the newly established McGill team. Organized hockey was just coming into being, and the earliest known photograph of a hockey team in uniform shows Albert Peter Low. He brought his experience with him when he moved to Ottawa in 1882, and was an early member of organized hockey in Ottawa, before the founding of the Stanley Cup in 1892. A football player on the McGill team, he also brought his football skills to Ottawa, where he was President of the Ottawa football club for several seasons in the 1890s. As he matured, he turned to more sedate sports, and was an avid curler.

As a volunteer in the militia in Ottawa between 1896 and 1901, he rose to the rank of lieutenant in the 43rd Battalion of infantry. Militia service was not a career for him but his experience was a common one for social contacts and advancement at the time

As a citizen of Ottawa during the period 1882 until his death in October 1942, he experienced a capital transformed from a small town to a large city. During his time he saw the introduction of sewers, telephones, electricity and automobiles. A house he had previously occupied was destroyed in the great Ottawa fire of 1900. He and his wife, Isabelle, the daughter of an influential alderman, E.R. Cunningham, had three children. But Low lost both sons and his wife long before he died. Only his youngest child, a daughter named Estelle who never married, outlived him.

As a lifetime employee of the federal government in the Geological Survey, his career is a window for us to look into the workings of the federal government in that era. A trained scientist in the premier government scientific institution of its day, his career was one of slow progression in an institution that was often starved of funds and kept small. Like some of his colleagues, he complained about the low pay scales and finally left for better pay in the private sector. Unlike many of these colleagues, he returned to the Geological Survey. In 1906 he was appointed Director of the Geological Survey 'over the heads' of some geologists who bitterly resented that he had fewer years of service than they had. In 1907, he was appointed Deputy Minister of the newly formed Department of Mines, but was struck with a debilitating disease, officially described as cerebral meningitis, but whispered to be syphilis.

So why haven't we heard more of him? While he lived to 81, he does not seem to have left behind the story of his life. At least, we have not found any treasure troves of private papers and diaries left in some long-forgotten trunk in a dusty attic. We haven't found one personal letter! What did his friends call him. Bert? Pete? The only living relative that we found, Mrs. Wynn Turner of Perth, Ontario, great grand-niece of Albert Peter Low, told us that oral family history has always referred to him as "A.P".

In contrast, several of his colleagues in the Geological Survey - such as Joseph Burr Tyrrell and Robert Bell - did leave behind large volumes of letters, diaries, clippings which are accessible and which provide good insight into their professional and personal lives. Perhaps the illness which caused his retirement also deprived him of a productive period, when many write their memoirs or organize their materials.

A second reason may be that there was a lack of surviving family members in a position to ensure that his materials were not lost. Low's two sons and wife died before he did, and only his unmarried (and childless) daughter survived him. Little is known of her or what she might have done with any of her father's personal papers. The only known trove of Low's handwritten material is his survey notebooks in the National Archives.

A third reason is that Albert Peter Low does not seem to have marketed himself and was modest. In contrast and in the same decades, Joseph Tyrrell captured the public imagination with his trips across the central barren lands and his brother's report on the first expedition, "Across the Sub-Arctic of Canada" has become a well known book for Arctic collectors. Tyrrell also had the luck to find dinosaur bones in southern Alberta, which has led to a museum being named after him. Low, on the other hand, only wrote good, accurate geological reports, which do not make vibrant reading – unless you are a wilderness paddler. His book, The Cruise of the Neptune, is a good read for those who are interested in the era and locale, but does not seem to have been reprinted. Lastly, his tenure in the office of Director of the Geological Survey was short, and his tenure as Deputy Minister of Mines was marred by his debilitating illness, so that he had little time to make his mark as a senior bureaucrat.

We have attempted to put together the pieces of Albert Peter Low's life that have survived, scattered in archives and libraries, together to form a portrait of a man, and of a time. A time when there were still vast unknown areas of Canada to explore. A time when no one knew what the riches hid just beyond the next bend in the river, or over the next hill. A time when basic knowledge of geography, vegetation, wildlife and the indigenous peoples who lived in these shadowy unknown lands could be brought to light, into the knowledge and consciousness of Canadian society, that largely hunkered down south close to the United States border. Canada was a young and vibrant nation, defining its dreams and visions of the future, and evolving as a nation. The first Canadian National Park, Banff, was established in the Rocky Mountains in 1885, while Low was in even wilder country east of James Bay. The next year, the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed, while Low was in wild country west of James Bay. The Northwest Rebellion, the Klondike Gold Rush, the death of Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald, the election of Sir Wilfred Laurier's Liberal Party in 1896. What an exciting and colourful time that must have been.

Life in a Lumber Town: A Picture of A.P. Low

We know much about the career of Albert Peter Low. We know about his geological accomplishments, travels and experiences. But after all our research, we have to admit that we still don't know the man. The personal picture of A.P. Low is blurry and faded.

We found few keyholes through which to glimpse his personal life. We found no personal diaries and not even one personal letter or post card. His sole child that lived to adulthood, his daughter Estelle, did not have children. He was not a brash person who attracted much press. In the writings of his colleagues, we have found only a few scattered references to his personality, and there are no people left today who knew him personally. The only writings of his that we have found have been the articles and reports he wrote as a bureaucrat. Newspaper articles, archival photographs, and the journal writings of those who traveled and worked with him provide some clues. When we put it all together and make some guesses, the picture – in sharp focus in some areas, but blurred in others, starts to appear like a Polaroid print.

Albert Peter Low was born on May 24, 1861, in St. Henri, Québec, at the time a separate town just west of the old town of Montreal. His parents⁵ were United Empire Loyalists, those British subjects who had emigrated to Canada (often under forced circumstances) from the United States following the American Revolution. His father, John William Low, was a Methodist whose

⁵ Information about Low's ancestry and pronunciation of the family name is found in Fabien Caron's MSc thesis Exploration et Géographie, Albert Peter Low dans l'Ungava-Labrador, L'Institut de Géographie de l'Université de Laval, 1965, pp. 27-28

ancestors were Hessian (from a province in what is now Germany) soldiers engaged as mercenaries by the British to garrison and enforce British rule in the American colonies before 1776. The family's Germanic element survived until A.P.'s time as his surname was pronounced "Lau" until the 1860's. His mother, Tryphene Winchester, was descended from a British army doctor in the Revolutionary War. Albert was the youngest of five sons in the family (we don't know if there were any daughters). He grew up in the New York Temperance Hotel⁶ that was owned by his father on Boulevard St. Henri. Given the name of the hotel, his parents were likely abstainers, and with a strong Protestant work ethic. Nothing is known of his four brothers.

In the 1870's the St. Henri area was a distinctly lower class neighbourhood, with a highly transient population speaking both French and English.⁷ The industrial barons and the wealthy of Montreal lived elsewhere, and the Low family certainly did not rub shoulders with them. With his father's German background, and his childhood in St. Henri, Albert grew up speaking English, with some French and German⁸. Growing up in a "working man's" hotel, with dress makers, furniture dealers and leather goods makers as neighbours, he must have met many interesting characters. Growing up in a working class neighbourhood, Albert Peter must have had a rough and tumble childhood.

Low attended the Montreal High School in the 1870's, the city's main English language Presbyterian school. Given his later career, it is likely that Albert was in the upper school scientific division.⁹ Nothing is known of Albert's school days.

⁶ Lovell, Montreal City Directory, 1871-1872. Listing for John W. Low; 12, 14, 16, 18 St. Henry. Albert Peter Low is listed as a resident in the Census of 1881 (National Archives of Canada, census of 1881, microfilm C-13217, district 90, subdistrict A, division 10, page 30, household number 188).

⁷ Société Historique de Saint-Henri, website <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/sthenri/hist.htm>, information collected 20 October 2003.

⁸ His language skills were put to good use while he was in charge of the Canadian mineral exhibition at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900, Summary report of the Director, Annual Report of the Geological Survey for 1900, Volume XIII, part A p 34.

⁹ Rexford, Gammell, McBain; The History of the High School of Montreal, publisher: Old Boys' Association of the High School, Montreal, 1950, pp. 55 - 58.

Low entered McGill College in 1878. Coming from such a modest background, he must have done well academically in High School to gain entry to McGill. He excelled at his courses, and graduated in 1882 with a First Class degree in Applied Science, making him an Engineer. His Applied Science class size had only five students.¹⁰ The course work entailed some geological teachings, and he was taught by the Dean, Sir William Dawson, who at that time was one of the foremost geologists in Canada, and the father of George Dawson, the geologist who became the Director of the Geological Survey in the 1890's and for whom the city in the Yukon is named. At that time, the Geological Survey was headquartered in Montreal on the McGill campus, and Albert made some connections there through his geological studies. Many of the Geological Survey's scientists were graduates of McGill.

Albert Peter participated enthusiastically in McGill team sports. He was short, stocky and very rugged.¹¹ The first photograph of showing Low as a young man is also the first photograph¹² of a hockey team in uniform¹³, taken in 1881. His name as goalie and those of his teammates are inscribed on the hockey trophy¹⁴ memorializing McGill's victory in the 1882 Quebec winter carnival game. Hockey was in its early days as an organized sport. The McGill hockey rules had just been written in 1878 to standardize an acceptable list of hockey rules so that teams could play each other using common rules. Neither goalies nor other players wore padding, play was rough and injuries common. Albert also played football on the McGill team, and can be identified in an 1883 photo of the team¹⁵. No record has been found that he participated in clubs of other popular sports of the day, such as snowshoeing - he would get more than enough later in his life - or in cultural clubs. There is no way around it - he was a 'jock'.

¹⁰ Annual Calendars of McGill College and University sessions 1879-1880, and 1880-1881, and Alcock, Frederick J.; "Memorial of Albert Peter Low", Proceedings Volume of the Geological Society of America, Annual Report for 1943; April 1944, pp. 195 - 200.

¹¹ Poitevin, Eugene; "Retrospections into the unwritten history of the Geological Survey of Canada", unpublished paper presented to the Logan Club, May 4, 1960, p. 7.

¹² National Archives of Canada, photo number C81739, taken February 28, 1881 at Crystal Palace Skating Rink, Montreal shows 10 players on the ice.

¹³ Fittell, J. W.; Hockey's Captains, Colonels and Kings; The Boston Mills Press; no date; p. 44.

¹⁴¹⁰ McCord Museum, Montreal, item number M976.188.

¹⁵ McGill University archives, photo 001002, 1883.

We are not even certain what his friends called him. Was it Albert or Peter or some variation? In the McGill hockey team photo, he is identified as Albert Low. Nevertheless, all further references are to “A.P.” including his signature on official Geological Survey correspondence, his field notebooks and news articles. The only living relative that we found, Mrs. Wynn Turner of Perth, Ontario, great grand-niece of Albert Peter Low, told us that oral family history has always referred to him as “A.P.”.

JOINING THE GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

In the summer of 1881, while still at McGill, he joined a Geological Survey field party as the summer-student assistant to R. W. Ells to survey the geology of the Gaspé Peninsula in Québec.¹⁶ For this job he was paid \$30 per month plus board. As an assistant, he did basic mapping which involved pacing distances along roads where they existed, or measuring with optical surveying instruments. Labourers were hired to establish camps, transport supplies and do the camp chores. Low learned to respect their abilities ‘in the bush’ and on the trail. In the summer of 1882, Low again assisted R.W. Ells in continuing the survey of the same area, but this time as a permanent employee of the Geological Survey, starting on 1 July 1882, with the salary of \$700 per year.

Low had to move to Ottawa to take up his position at the Geological Survey, which had just completed its move to Ottawa from McGill in 1881. In keeping with his salary and bachelor status, as well as with the general housing shortage in Ottawa at the time, he took a room in various boarding houses. In 1884, he lodged in Mrs. Buchanan’s boarding house on Rideau Street, near the Geological Survey, which at the time occupied the Clarendon Hotel (still standing, but now with an exclusive fashion shop and a premium coffee house) on the corner of Sussex Avenue and George Street in the Byward market. This boarding house could have had the title “geologist central” as it also housed other geologists employed at the Geological Survey, including Joseph Tyrrell (and his brother James who later wrote the classic Across the Sub-

¹⁶ Alcock, Frederick J.; “Memorial of Albert Peter Low”, Proceedings Volume of the Geological Society of America, Annual Report for 1943; April 1944, pp. 195 - 200.

Arctics of Canada), Robert G. McConnell (a future Director of the Geological Survey), W. McInnes and Frank Adams¹⁷.

¹⁷ Inglis, Alex, Northern Vagabond; the Life and Career of J.B. Tyrrell, 1978, McLelland and Stewart, p. 89.

Epic canoe trips - final 14 April 2004

The Geological Survey of Canada was founded in 1842 by Sir William Logan, one of the world's leading scientists and thinkers of his time, and in whose honor Mt. Logan, the highest mountain in Canada, is named. Its mission was to prepare a survey of the geology of the colonies of Upper and Lower Canada. In those pre-confederation times, the two colonies occupied a narrow strip of land between the U.S. border to the south to the height of land separating the watersheds of rivers flowing north to James and Hudson Bays, and rivers flowing south to the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes. In 1867, the Confederation of Canada added New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, in 1870, Manitoba (at the time very small) and the 1870 purchase of the lands from the Hudson Bay Company added millions of square miles. 1871 added British Columbia and Prince Edward Island. The job of the Geological Survey had become continental in size.

When Low joined the Geological Survey in 1882, it had about 50 employees, a number which was more or less constant for the next 20 years. About half were permanent, and the rest part-time. All of its employees could fit into one photo. The organization operated as a separate unit under the Department of the Interior. Its ability to survey and report on the overall geology of Canada was complicated by the continuous demands by politicians and mining interests to devote more of its resources to work which would have a more immediate pay-off, such as detailed surveys of promising outcrops for the development of mines. In addition to geology, the Survey also had the mandate to collect and publish observations on forests, Aboriginals, flora and fauna.¹⁸ In the 1870s and 1880s it was the main scientific institution of Canada. When the Royal Society of Canada was established in 1882 to promote scientific exchanges and debates among the small scientific community in Canada, about half the members came from the Geological Survey.

¹⁸ For a comprehensive history of the Geological Survey, see Zaslow, M.; Reading the Rocks - the Story of the Geological Survey of Canada 1842-1972; Macmillan, 1975; for a history of the politics within and surrounding the Geological Survey during this time, see Daschuk, James W.; Fear and Loathing at the Geological Survey: Politics and Science in Canada 1868-1910, Master's thesis, University of Manitoba 1991.

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During Low's career and prior to his Directorship, the Geological Survey had three directors with whom Low had a day-to-day relationship. The first was Alfred Selwyn (Director, 1869-1895). Selwyn oversaw the expansion of the Survey following the death of William Logan, including the hiring of a number of young geologists, such as Low and Tyrrell. When Low had a leadership dispute in Mistassini expedition of 1884-1885, Selwyn backed him up and placed him in charge of the entire expedition. Between 1895 and 1901, the Survey's third Director was George Dawson, son of the eminent geologist Sir William Dawson. In spite of a major back deformity, George Dawson participated in many expeditions, particularly in the west. His tenure as director was marked by a frozen budget and increasing demands from the mining industry to devote more attention to their interests. Low seemed to get along with him quite well, and it is possible that Dawson recommended Low for an award by the UK Royal Geographic Society in 1896. Following Dawson's sudden death in 1901, Robert Bell was made Acting Director, but never appointed as full Director. Bell had started working for the Survey part-time when he was 15, in 1857, four years before Low was born. Bell was an influential scientist, a charter member of the Royal Society of Canada. In spite of their large age difference, he and Low seemed to be on friendly terms, until Low was appointed as Director over the head of Bell in 1906.

Between 1882, and 1905, Low was one of the Geological Survey's foremost travellers and was away on a mission every summer that he worked for it during that time. Low's life as a field geologist followed a yearly cycle. In the spring, he would receive a written letter of instruction from the Director of the Geological Survey, about the area to be surveyed, the amount budgeted, and the major expectations. He would prepare for the coming field season, leaving Ottawa in May or June. At least several weeks at the beginning and the end of each field season was spent simply travelling to and returning from distant survey areas by train, canoe or sailboat. Following his return in September or October (except for the four winters he spent in the field for the Survey), he would refine his field notes into a report on the summer explorations and its interpretation for the minute editing by the Director for publication in the Geological Survey's Annual Report. He would also plot his maps, exchange notes and advice with his fellow geologists and tend to his

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family. The work of the winter and early spring would sometimes be relieved by travel to
geological conferences in various parts of Canada or the United States.

THE NINE EPIC CANOE TRIPS 1884-1896

Low established his iron reputation as a canoe traveller during nine seasons of exploration, all but one in the Labrador-Ungava region. These trips were remarkable for their length, the difficulties encountered, the meticulous way in which he described their results, and most of all, for the fact that summer after summer, he would return for more. After reading his field notebooks, his official reports and looking at the maps produced, we can almost hear him say: “What? ... another lengthy canoe trip, through buggy swampy terrain, with only sketchy maps, poorly informed guides and almost continuous dampness? *When do we start?*”

Comment: [Watermark]

These trips took place in 1884-1885 (Mistassini Expedition), 1886 (Berens, Severn and Hayes Rivers in what is now northern Ontario and Manitoba), 1888 (Fort George, Great Whale and Clearwater Rivers), 1892 (Chamouchouane and Eastmain Rivers), 1893-1894 (Chamouchouane, Eastmain, Caniapiscau Rivers, wintered in Hamilton Inlet, then the Hamilton River to the Romaine River), 1895 (Manicouagan River to its source) and 1896 (Clearwater and Larch Rivers). These nine seasons took slightly more than 1450 days - over four years - almost half a year per season!

Working conditions in the Geological Survey building reflected those of the times. Writing of the report and their many revisions was done by hand until typewriters were introduced in the 1890's. Several geologists would share a cramped office lit only by coal oil lamps. Telephones were introduced in the late 1890's and then only in the Director's office. Civil servants normally worked on Saturday mornings in addition to long weekdays – normal working conditions for the time. The crowded offices forced everyone to know each other well. The atmosphere was slightly poisoned by the competition for promotion and salary increases. The geologists often knew politicians, and were not afraid to work them behind the scenes.

A recurrent complaint about the Geological Survey at this time (and up to the present day) was the low pay in comparison to the private sector. Low started his career in 1882 at \$700 (no income tax, but a deduction was made for payment into the superannuation fund). By 1892, his pay had risen to \$1350, and by 1901, \$1850. There are no reliable statistics of inflation during that time, but it did exist. In the years before 1900 the Survey lost a number of experienced geologists to the higher pay and brighter possibilities of the private sector including Joseph

Tyrrell. Joseph Tyrrell tried to live on nine cents a day for food in order to make ends meet - this was largely a diet of wheat and beans and chickens he kept in the backyard.¹⁹ Low's salary and the costs of supporting his family meant that he could never afford to own a house. He quit the Survey in 1901 and joined a private mining firm for a \$10,000 salary, which he enjoyed for two years before the company ceased operations, and he rejoined the Survey. Appointed Director in 1906, his pay increased to \$3,500.

YACHTING IN ICE: THE SAILING JOURNEYS OF 1887, 1897-99, 1901-02)

For a man whose life and career were marked by major but little known accomplishments, A.P. Low's sailing voyages stand out as among the least known. For these trips, he abandoned the use of a canoe and used various boats to survey the east coast and islands of James Bay, the east coast of Hudson Bay, including the Nastapoka Islands, and the coast of Ungava Bay. These surveys were made in the days before radar, radio or accurate navigational charts of the region. His only aids were British Admiralty charts of the coast which dated from 1853, and which were notoriously inaccurate, and placed some prominent features up to 40 miles out of their actual positions.

By the time Low had finished, he had surveyed close to 1,400 miles of shoreline, had spent two winters on the coast of Hudson Bay, had examined the coastal Nastapoka islands for potential mines. While we of a later age have overlooked these exploits, at the time they attracted considerable attention, particularly his conclusions that a continental ice-sheet that had once covered the Labrador-Ungava area, and his work on the vast iron-ore deposits on the islands and coast of Hudson Bay.

CRUISING FOR CANADA - THE VOYAGE OF THE NEPTUNE 1903 - 1904

¹⁹ Inglis, Alex, Northern Vagabond; the Life and Career of J.B. Tyrrell, 1978, McLelland and Stewart, p. 130.

The *Neptune's* voyage has been the subject of more writing than all of Low's other exploits combined. This is due to partly because it is an adventure story, but more because it is a major and overlooked part of the establishment of Canada as a northern nation.

The story has political intrigue, personality conflicts, and hidden agendas. There's a mad scientist, an irritable police officer, and behind all the calming influence of Low, to whom this was just another routine assignment. This episode in Low's life also shows some glimpses into Low's personality as the commander of a large group, much in contrast to his canoeing and earlier sailing experiences when he led groups of six or fewer on long expeditions. The legacy of the voyage was the strengthening of Canada's claims to sovereignty of its northern lands, and Low's meticulous descriptions and photographs of the Inuit, portraying an era and way of life that has now disappeared.

It is odd that the real reason for the voyage – northern sovereignty – although mentioned in the four official sources of information about the voyage.²⁰, is not mentioned by any of the voyages participants. Perhaps the reason for this collective omission is that, as public servants, neither Low nor Superintendent John Moodie of the Northwest Mounted Police (NWMP)²¹ questioned the purpose of the trip, and only reported on the trip itself. Perhaps they were told to avoid any mention of the political impetus for the voyage. Certainly they were aware of the political

²⁰ Low's book *Cruise of the Neptune* whose official title is *Report on the Dominion Government Expedition to Hudson Bay and the Arctic Islands on board the D.G.S. Neptune, 1903-04, by A.P. Low, B. Sc., F.R.G.S., Officer in Charge*, Government Printing Bureau, Ottawa, 355 pages; Low's *Fisheries Report* "The Government Expedition to Hudson Bay and Northward by the S.S. "Neptune" 1903-04" in *Annual Report of the Geological Survey*, Vol XVI, part A, pp. 122 - 143; Low's "Preliminary Report on the Dominion Government Expedition in the SS. *Neptune* to Hudson Bay and the Northward", *Thirty-Seventh Annual Report of the Department of Marine*, Appendix 12 to Sessional Paper No. 21, 4-5 Edward VII, pp. 116 - 136; and the "Report of Superintendent J.D. Moodie on Service in Hudson Bay, per SS. *Neptune*, 1903-04", *Report of the Royal Northwest-Mounted Police 1904*, Sessional Paper No. 28, 4-5 Edward VII, pp. 3 - 12.

²¹ The NWMP became the Royal Northwest Mounted Police in 1904 in recognition of the volunteer service by many NWMP men in the Boer War.

purpose, as Low eventually wrote in 1906 in The Geographical Journal in 1906 that the voyage "... was primarily intended for political purposes".²²

Life in Ottawa in the last twenty years of the 19th century was not easy. Ottawa in the 1880s still had very strong streaks of its origins as a lumber town, and the large square log rafts were still being driven down the river as late as 1901. In 1887, fully 20 years after Confederation, the city had grown only to 40,000.²³ Socially, it was composed of Irish and Scottish immigrants, a large French speaking group, a small contingent of people from England and the newly formed federal government, including the members of Parliament who were physically present only when the Parliament was in session. The market area where the Geological Survey was headquartered was best known for its many saloons and brothels. But it was on the main street connecting the Parliament Buildings and the Governor General's residence.

Many of the current landmarks of the city had not been built, such as the War Memorial, the Chateau Laurier and Union Station. Roads were dirt, and even as late as 1900 there was only one paved street in the city. "Sparks Street [now one of the main shopping streets in downtown Ottawa], the principal mudpath, looks like a canal of pea soup... It is covered from one end to another with about three inches of liquid mud. One enterprising shop has rigged up a canoe....with 'for hire' painted in large letters.", wrote James Seton Cockburn, a young immigrant draftsman, in 1884," [FOOTNOTE, . p. 43, THE PRIVATE CAPITAL, SANDRA GWYN, 1984, MCCLELLAND AND STEWART LTD]. The first cars did not appear until the early 1900's. Plumbing and water mains were first introduced in the late 1880s, but until the network was expanded most people obtained water from backyard wells (often located close to outdoor privies), or by buying it from water deliverers. Wood fires provided heating and

²² Low, A.P.; "Geographical Work of the Geological Survey of Canada, 1900 - 1905"; The Geographical Journal, vol 28, no. 3, pp. 277-279 on p. 278.

²³¹⁶ Nagy, Thomas; Ottawa in Maps - A Brief Cartographic History of Ottawa 1825 - 1973; Public Archives of Canada, 1974, map and text for 1887.

cooking; coal oil lamps provided light. The daily menu was simple and varied with the seasons. Meat was pork and beef. Oranges were a luxury, bananas non-existent. In winter, root crops, stored apples and grains, were staples. In summer, with the heat, cooking smoke, the outdoor privies, the horse manure and the lack of drains, you can imagine the smell. Houses were largely made of wood, and there was an acute housing shortage.

Socially, life in Ottawa was, to use a geological term, stratified in a social pyramid. At the pinnacle was the social circle of the Governor General.²⁴ While the federal government in Ottawa had less than 1000 bureaucrats in 1887²⁵, only the top bureaucrats were wealthy enough to buy the proper clothes and live a life style in which they could mix with the Governor General. Low was not part of this circle. As a civil servant on a modest salary with a young family living in rented accommodations, he would not have been able to do so.

In Ottawa Low led an active life. Organized sports were a main social focus at the time and provided Low and others with an outlet for energy and a place to make social contacts. As a member of the Ottawa Hockey Club, he played in a famous game at the Montreal Winter Carnival in 1884²⁶ where Ottawa succumbed to sudden death in overtime in the final game in a series with only five teams playing. Whether or not Low scored in those games is not recorded. Low clearly played a leadership role, and in 1889, he was a founding member of the Ottawa Amateur Athletic Club²⁷. The newspaper announcement of his wedding in 1886 notes that he was “well known in athletic circles”.²⁸ His sports participation continued in the 1890's when he was elected President of the Ottawa Football Club for the seasons 1892-95. In a photograph of the team from those years shows him in the centre, looking vigorous, fit and a bit dashing. He was so well thought of that he continued as president during the 1893 season, even though he

²⁴ For a colourful description of Ottawa life in the 1870s, see: Gwyn, Sandra; The Private Capital; McLelland and Stewart, 1984, Chapter 3: “Drains, drains, nothing but drains” pp.45 - 58.

²⁵ Most of the civil service fit into three buildings (the Parliament Buildings, the Geological Survey and the Langevin Block), see: Gwyn, Sandra; The Private Capital; McLelland and Stewart, 1984, p 227.

²⁶ “Sporting notes”, Ottawa Citizen, February 6, 1884, p 1.

²⁷ Annual Report of the Ottawa Amateur Athletic Club 1889 (available at the Ottawa City Archives).

²⁸ Ottawa Evening Journal; January 7, 1886; p. 4.

was absent for the entire season in Ungava-Labrador canoeing on the Eastmain and Caniapiscou Rivers.

For 1897-98, he was elected Vice-President of the Ottawa Amateur Athletic Club. Low was also active in the Rideau Curling Club, and served variously as Secretary (1895-96)²⁹ and Vice-President. (1905).³⁰ There he would have met Francois Gourdeau who later as Deputy Minister of Fisheries appointed Low as the Commander of the *Neptune* expedition in 1903. Low was also a member of the Ottawa Country Club³¹. Low's participation in sports central to his life. He played in regular games, and held executive positions, a major commitment of energy and time, even though he was often absent for long periods.

In addition to sports Low joined scientific clubs - for example, in 1887 Low was a founding member of the Geological Survey's Logan Club³² and an active member of the Ottawa Field Naturalists Club³³ until the mid 1890s, where he gave several papers on his explorations in Ungava and Labrador. He was also a fellow of the U.S. Geological Society, and in 1907, a vice-president of the newly formed Canadian Forestry Association.

Low's life and career occurred during an exciting and formative time for Canada. He was six years old at the time of Confederation. The Canadian Pacific Railway was completed in 1886. The Northwest Rebellion occurred in 1888. The Liberal government gained power in 1896, after nearly 30 years of near continuous Conservative government for which Sir John A. MacDonald had been Prime Minister for most of that time. In the 1890's immigration doors were opened. The gold rush in the Yukon in 1898 was a main geological event, which absorbed the energies of some of his Geological Survey colleagues. In 1899, the Boer War broke out in South Africa, and militia volunteers were called - while Low was a militia member at the time, he did not

²⁹ Little, C. H.; Short History of the Rideau Curling Club, 1979 (available in the Ottawa City Archives); p. 6.

³⁰ Ottawa City Directory, 1905, p. 36.

³¹ The Canadian Men and Women of the Time; second edition, ed. Morgan, Henry James; William Briggs, Toronto, 1912; pp. 667-668.

³² Geological Survey Logan Club history webpage http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/gsc/logan/loganclub_e.html downloaded Nov 7, 2003.

³³ For example, see list of members, The Ottawa Field Naturalist, vol IV, 1890-1891, p. 5.

volunteer, but a number of his militia colleagues did. Low played a part in the assertion of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, a process which took on greater importance after Canada lost the Alaska Boundary arbitration in 1903. Low's career effectively ended in 1907, but he lived in retirement for another 35 years.

Low also was a family man. On January 6 1886, he married Miss Isabella Cunningham³⁴, the daughter of C. R. Cunningham, a Scottish businessman and Ottawa alderman who later became chair of the city improvement commission³⁵. He was 25 and she was 26. How or when he met her is not known, but in one of his poems³⁶ at the back of his 1885 field notebook he makes a passing reference to her, so they must have met before he left on that expedition in the summer of 1884. Perhaps they met during a social function at the Knox Presbyterian Church where Low was a member.

Dating in Ottawa in the 1880's was a chaperoned affair, and going to restaurants was not an option because of the expense and the notion that they were slightly disreputable, as they were frequented by out-of-town politicians with their questionable female companions and sold liquor. There would have been visits by Low to the Cunningham's house for discussions in the parlor, and Sunday dinners after a long Presbyterian service. The romance survived his 16-month absence in the Mistassini region in 1884 -1885, except for the brief time in March 1885 when he returned to Ottawa on his famous snowshoe trip to get authority over the Mistassini expedition. Maybe that March was when he proposed. Perhaps seeing Isabella was another motive for the long and arduous trip. While work, and not romance, appears to have been Low's prime motivation, it seems more reasonable to us to walk that far for love than for bureaucracy.

³⁴ Ottawa Evening Journal; January 7, 1886; p. 4

³⁵ Charters Ramage Cunningham was a well known Ottawa personality at the time. On his death, Ottawa City flags were flown at half mast ("Died this Morning", Ottawa Evening Journal, 26 July 1910, p.1). He was reputed to be a major fund-raiser for the federal Liberal Party which was in power when it appointed Low as Director of the Geological Survey in 1906, and in 1907 as Deputy Minister of the Department of Mines.

³⁶ Only two of his poems exist - both long and uninspiring, and have not been published for good reason; e.g., National Archives of Canada, RG45, vol. 160, file 2415 pp 84-87

Isabella had grown up in Ottawa in a family involved in local dry-goods and banking business and would have gone to high school, but not university. A.P. and Isabella were married on January 6, 1886 at the house of the bride's father, in keeping with the custom of the time. As the house was not large, only close friends and family were invited. Low's sporting and Geological Survey friends added a raucous touch to the party. In that early winter, evening, a sumptuous dinner was served – likely roast beef and pork, with potatoes and turnips, and apple pie for dessert. The piano played until late at night, with everyone singing the latest ditties. Perhaps the men slipped out on to the porch for a cigar and a furtive drink. Following the wedding the Lows lived in a boarding house until their first child, Estelle, was born December 6, 1886³⁷ after which they moved into a house owned by his father-in-law.³⁸

In an age when political influence was very useful, having an influential father-in-law would likely have helped Low's later career. Low's connection with the Cunninghams was life-long. After Isabella died of consumption in 1898³⁹, he and his two surviving children shared a house with her unmarried sister Jessie Cunningham (until her death in 1938) and his widowed father-in-law (he died in 1910).

Isabella and AP were married for twelve years, until her death in April 1898 from consumption from which she had suffered for more than a year. During their marriage, they had three children. Money, as for others in the Geological Survey, was continuously short. Low was absent every summer during their marriage, and was away one winter as well. Based on the dates of his expeditions from the Geological Survey reports, Low was away almost 1600 days, the equivalent of more than four years, during their marriage - a third of their married lives. After Low left for the field by train, Isabella would receive a last letter mailed from the last post office, and then not know of her husband's fate until he reached "the wire" months later, telegraphing her to announce his return to Ottawa a few days later. As well, his expeditions often provided for awkward family timing. He missed the birth of his second child in 1889, left on a trip within a

³⁷ Estelle's birth date is listed in the 1901 Census of Canada, district 100, sub-district b-6, household number 96, National Archives of Canada RG-31, microfilm T-6487.

³⁸ Ottawa Directory, 1890.

³⁹ "Death of Mrs A.P. Low", Ottawa Evening Journal, April 19, 1898.

few days of his death the next year, and in 1895 left for a trip two weeks after the birth of his third child.

Low was extremely busy in his work and sports, and one wonders when and if he found the time to be a good husband and father. Even when he was at home during the late fall, winter and early spring, free time on weekends was devoted to playing football or hockey. Several evenings a week were dedicated to fulfilling his positions as an executive officer in sporting clubs. Between 1896 and 1901, he had the added obligations as a part time soldier in the militia.

Perhaps it is no surprise, and a bit sad, to learn that in the last few years before she died in 1898, Isabella devoted her time to the Knox Presbyterian Church, according to her obituary.

Nevertheless, they found time to have children. Their first child, Estelle, was born in December 1886. Their second, Andrew Cunningham Low was born on August 29, 1889⁴⁰ and died the following May. By then the family moved to a house owned by his father in law on Wellington Street, near the then-plentiful sawmills and lumber piles close to the current Chaudière Bridge.⁴¹ It was not in a prestigious part of the city, being surrounded by piles of drying lumber and close to the area where the mill-hands lived. In fact, the piles of lumber caught fire in April 1900, and burnt a large section of Ottawa, including this house. Fortunately, the Lows had moved out two years before. In June 1895, their second son Albert Reginald was born⁴². After Isabella's death in 1898, Low continued to live with her sister, Jessie. Jessie must have been a surrogate mother to Estelle and Reginald. Low lived with her for 40 years.

⁴⁰ Ottawa Evening Journal, August 30, 1889, p. 1.

⁴¹ Ottawa Directory 1890 to 1900.

⁴² Ottawa Evening Journal, January 19, 1895, p.7.

As if the long trips and long hours in the Geological Survey building were not sufficient to occupy his time, Low volunteered for the militia in 1896, receiving an appointment on June 13 as a provisional second lieutenant in E company of the Ottawa based 43rd Battalion of Rifles "Ottawa and Carleton".⁴³ This was an infantry battalion, part of Canada's part-time military units which in 1897 had 36,000 men and 3000 horses.⁴⁴ It was not a glamorous battalion, and did not have the prestige or the splendid uniforms of the Governor General's Footguards which attracted Low's flashier colleague, Joseph Tyrrell. Low's uniform, shown in an 1896 photo of the regiment's officers, was plain dark blue with little trim.⁴⁵ While the battalion would train on week-ends throughout the year in the armoury drill hall on Cartier Square in downtown Ottawa, Low's long summer field trips would have precluded participation in the annual field exercise.

By missing the summer field exercises, Low did not miss much military training as little was provided. The militia's purpose was not so much to defend the country against invasion but to be on hand to quell internal insurrections, a potentially serious mission given the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. But mostly the militia were called out for much less serious reasons where the military muscle was untested. Just before Low volunteered, the 43rd enforced the collection of taxes in the township of Low (purely coincidental) about 50 kilometres north of Ottawa in the Gatineau River valley.⁴⁶ While good at cowing local farmers the Canadian militia was recognized as "useless for military purposes" by the commander of the militia.⁴⁷ Low was promoted to full lieutenant April 6, 1897⁴⁸, but resigned on February 28 1901.⁴⁹ Why did he join? The militia at the time was important for social and political reasons and becoming a

⁴³ Canada Gazette, vol XXIX, no. 50, 13 June 1896, column 2484.

⁴⁴ The Statistical Yearbook of Canada for 1897, Department of Agriculture, Ottawa 1898, p. 454.

⁴⁵ Chambers, Capt. Ernest; A Regimental History of the Forty Third Regiment, Active Militia of Canada, E.L. Ruddy, Ottawa, 1903, photo on p. 48

⁴⁶ "A Call to Arms! The Militia Likely to Wade in Mud through Lowe", The Ottawa Citizen, November 16, 1895.

⁴⁷ Hutton's quote is found in Low, Captain Floyd; "Canadian Militia Policy 1885 - 1914"; Canadian Defence Quarterly, vol 11, No. 2 Autumn 1981, pp 29 - 38.

⁴⁸ Canada Gazette, vol XXXI, 23 April 1898, p. 2351; General Order 37/97, 20 April 1898.

⁴⁹ Canada Gazette, vol XXXIV, vol 37, p. 1808, 16 March 1901; General Order 25/01, 1 March 1901; as lieutenant he was paid \$1.58 per day for annual drills - see National Archives of Canada RG9, series II-F-6 vol 10, microfilm T-16679.

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officer was a sure route to social acceptability. Men of low social origins could be received by the Governor General (the pinnacle of the social pyramid), provided they were in uniform. Any pay was handed over to the regimental fund to purchase prizes for competitions, and with the expense of uniforms⁵⁰, it is not likely that Low actually made any money from joining. Maybe he joined for fun, and maybe he wanted social advancement. As a lieutenant, he may even have met the Governor General as Low named a large lake after the Earl of Minto (Governor General between 1898 - 1904) in Ungava in early 1899. Low's resignation from the militia almost coincides with his resignation from the Geological Survey to take employment with the Dominion Development Company.

It seems incredible that Low was able to devote so much time to sports, the militia and scientific clubs while at the same time raising three children, coping with a low salary, long office hours coupled with extensive annual absences. The secret seems to have been that his family relied heavily on the extended family of in-laws with whom the Lows lived, and who would be of enormous help to Isabella and her children while her husband was away.

HE HAD THE PERSONALITY OF A....???

What sort of personality did Low have and what was he like to talk to? Right away we can say that he did not seem to be as gregarious as some of his colleagues, such as Robert Bell or Joseph Tyrrell. In his written reports in the Annual Reports of the Geological Survey, his language is to the point, with a great economy of words which make for accurate, if dry, reading. There are not many references to colours and the prose is devoid of sentiment. While this might be expected from an official government publication on geology, Low's writing seems to specialize in this manner, when compared to the writings of other geologists of the time, such as that of Joseph Tyrrell. His almost total lack of use of the pronoun "I" in his reports stands out in comparison with those of other geologists.

⁵⁰ Dyer, Gwyne and Viljoen, Tina, The Defence of Canada; MacMillan and Shuster; p. 147.

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His writings for outside publications, such as for the *Ottawa Naturalist*⁵¹, the *Geographical Journal*⁵², and his chapter in Dr. Grenfell's book *Labrador the Country and its People*⁵³ are a bit more lively and provide more details of the hardships that he endured on his trips. In several sections in the *Cruise of the Neptune*, Low makes his feelings known when he decries the utility of polar expeditions that have as their goal the attainment of the North Pole without scientific research. In describing the marriage customs of some of the Inuit he met during this expedition, Low avoids a Victorian moralization of the exchange of spouses, noting that "Judged by the standards of sexual mores of civilization, the Eskimo [sic] is a minus quality; but who is to say what is right in this respect among a people situated as they are".⁵⁴

When speaking to groups, he never used prepared notes or flowery embellishments of oratory which were the hallmarks of presentations during this period. In January 1905, his talk to the Canadian Club in Toronto was described as "... a plain concise recital.... He made no pretense [sic] to literary or oratorical style, but just talked in what may well be described as a quiet, homely way."⁵⁵ In private, he seems to have had a brighter style as Frank King, one of the Geological Survey personnel on the *Neptune* described him in 1905 "A.P. Low is fat and sassy as usual"⁵⁶. He also had some leadership qualities, as shown by his executive positions in various sports clubs, his position a lieutenant in the militia, his command of the *Neptune*, and finally, his directorship of the Geological Survey.

There are not many accounts by others of his personality. Dr Borden, the medical officer on the *Neptune*, who shared the captain's table with Commander Low daily, described him as "a likeable and companionable man, much respected and admired by his men." But Dr. Borden also

⁵¹ Low, A.P.; "The Mistassini Region", *The Ottawa Naturalist 1890-1891*, vol VI, pp. 11 - 28.

⁵² Low, A.P.; "Explorations Through the Interior of the Labrador Peninsula 1893-1894"; *The Geographical Journal*, vol V, no. 6, June 1895, p. 514.

⁵³ Low, A.P.; "The Hamilton River and the Grand Falls", chapter 5 of Grenfell, W. et al., *Labrador the Country and its People*, MacMillan Company, 1913.

⁵⁴ Low, A.P.; *Cruise of the Neptune*; p. 181.

⁵⁵ "The Hudson's Bay Expedition, by Commander A.P. Low", *Proceedings of the Canadian Club of Toronto, 1904-05*, pp. 76-78.

⁵⁶ Letter of 18 March 1905 from Frank King to L.E. Borden (the doctor on the *Neptune*); National Archives of Canada, MG 30, B46, L.E. Borden papers vol 1.

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noted that in 18 months of working with Low, Low never spoke about himself.⁵⁷ In his diary of the trip, Dr. Borden generally refers to Low in a rather distant manner generally as “ Mr. Low” or “the Commander”.⁵⁸ Perhaps the best quote is from Siméon Raphael, a canoeman from Lake St. John who paddled and snowshoed with Low in 1893 - 1894 on the expedition from Lake St John to Fort Chimo, and up the Hamilton River. Dr. Jacques Rousseau, the famous Quebec botanist and a long time admirer of Low engaged Siméon in the 1940s for a trip, and stated: “Pour Siméon, il n’y avait pas ‘de meilleur garçon que monsieur Low’”⁵⁹ - loosely translated, Siméon said “there was no better guy than Mr. Low”.

Low got along well with most men, as his leading role in organized sports over several decades shows. In his field trips, several of his assistants (who would have shared a tent with him), as well as canoe-men, went with him for several field seasons in a row - at least he did not drive them away - even the closest of friendships can suffer from sharing a tent for a long time. He also inspired loyalty in the Geological Survey. Following his illness in 1907, which led to his early retirement, questions arose over whether he was eligible for a pension because his contributions had lapsed when he had left the government in 1901. His colleagues were loyal enough to approach the Prime Minister for a favourable consideration, and pushed the case successfully. His physical toughness is covered in other chapters, and is evident by his participation in football and hockey teams of the day - no padding!

He was also able to respond to what he saw as needless obstruction when pushed. His willingness to challenge authority was shown by his challenge of Bignell’s authority during the Mistassini expedition (whether it was deserved is a separate question). His dislike of pomposity and officialdom manifested itself in the difficult relationship he had with Colonel Moodie of the Northwest Mounted Police during the cruise of the *Neptune*, where by the end of the voyage, the two were communicating by memoranda, even though they ate at the same table every day. The

⁵⁷ Letter from Dr. Borden to Dr. Cooke, quoted in Caron, Fabien; MSc thesis Exploration et Géographie. Albert Peter Low dans l’Ungava-Labrador, L’Institut de Géographie de l’Université de Laval, 1965; p. 52.

⁵⁸ Dr. Lorris Elijah Borden, typescript diary, National Archives of Canada, MG30, C52, vol 2.

⁵⁹ Rousseau, Jacques; “Le Bataille des Sextants”, extract from l’Action Universitaire, January 1948, pp.99-116, see p. 4; Mr. Raphael was 79 at the time he was interviewed.

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relationship between Low and Dr. Robert Bell also shows this element of Low's character. Apparently for decades they enjoyed a seemingly friendly relationship as colleagues in the Geological Survey, which culminated in 1901 when Bell, as acting Director, lent Low the Survey's boat to allow him to undertake his work for the Dominion Development Company, which had just lured him with the offer of a much higher salary, away from the Survey. After Bell had arranged for the Survey to rehire Low in 1903, Low brought back birds eggs from his *Neptune* expedition for Bell's son. The relationship worked well while Bell was senior to Low. However, in April of 1906, once Low was appointed as the supervisor of Bell, their relationship changed quickly and drastically. Bell objected to being subordinate to Low, and strongly complained to the Minister that he (Bell) deserved the appointment, and provided a long list of reasons as to why Low was not qualified. The length to which the relationship deteriorated is shown by a lengthy series of written memoranda between the two over the fulfillment of office procedures and missing files.

A person's sense of humour (or lack of it) can tell something of the character. Following Low's return from his expedition in 1894, he was unpacking some barrels of rock samples when Selwyn, the Director, walked in and started to harangue him. Apparently Selwyn always started his day with a harangue. The verbal onslaught was returned, and as Selwyn was leaving the room, Low rolled a barrel after him; Selwyn jumped⁶⁰ A second anecdote relates to a fisherman who charged Low an exorbitant rate for his boat. "Never mind", said Low, "we'll get it back before this trip is over". And he did - at poker.⁶¹

It seems Low was a plain spoken man, perhaps a little quiet, very private, and somewhat modest about his achievements, but proud of his athletic abilities. He published 37 articles and chapters, of which 23 were official government publications, and recognized as an expert in the geology and geography of the Labrador peninsula. However, there is not much evidence to consider him

⁶⁰ Poitevin, Eugene; "Retrospections into the unwritten history of the Geological Survey of Canada", unpublished paper presented to the Logan Club, May 4, 1960, p. 8.

⁶¹ Quote from H.C. Cooke, in Fabien Caron's MSc thesis Exploration et Géographie, Albert Peter Low dans l'Ungava-Labrador, L'Institut de Géographie de l'Université de Laval, 1965, p. 53.

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as a brilliant scientist, in the sense that he conceived new geological theories - a careful scientist whose observations are sometimes still quoted, but not brilliant.

Because he spent so much time away, either on field trips, or at sports while at home, we can only conjecture that his relationship with Isabella was not one of burning passion. Nevertheless, he had a strong relationship with her family, as he lived with one or another of them for over 50 years. Did Low have a secret sensitive side because he wrote a bit of poetry? From the texts we found of two poems written in 1885, the obvious answer is no, as the poems themselves are doggerel. This verse from a longer poem⁶² is indicative of the quality and seems to have been written to Andrew Cunningham, his future brother-in-law:

now if you would learn more
of the poor lonesome lad
just read the letters written to your sister
also the one to your dad

All of our description of his personality is conjecture. The bridge of time is now too great to form a clear picture. And we have not found any personal letters which might provide a window.

DECLINE TO OBLIVION

The life of AP Low unexpectedly fizzled out, starting in 1908 when he took extended sick leave at the age of 46. He officially retired in 1913. Nothing is known for certain about the nature of his illness. He survived another 34 years, able to lead a life that seemed close to normal, but perhaps his acuity was gone and he had lost his stamina. He continued to live with his unmarried sister-in-law Jessie Cunningham in her house on McLaren Street⁶³. This continued the living arrangement since Isabella's death in 1898. Also in the house were his daughter Estelle and his

⁶² National Archives, RG45 vol 160, file 2416, pp 98-100.

⁶³ Ottawa Directory for the years 1913 - 1939.

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son Reginald. Estelle apparently suffered from unspecified ill health⁶⁴ and never married.⁶⁵ She appears to have spent her adult years taking care of her ailing father. Reginald died on January 22, 1918 at the age of 22⁶⁶ of natural causes. Low's friend David Eaton, who had accompanied him for expeditions over three years, served in the artillery and was killed at Vimy Ridge just prior to the Canadian attack in April 1917 in World War I.⁶⁷

What was Low's mysterious illness, and just how debilitating was Low's illness? Dr. Morgan Gross, a retired Geological Survey of Canada geologist, states that Low was sometimes seen walking to movies in the neighbourhood during his retirement. While his illness was rumoured to have been syphilis, there is no evidence of this, and there were some people at the time who spread rumours about superiors to further their own.⁶⁸ He also visited Montreal where he spent some time smoking cigarettes and recalling old times with fellow geologists.⁶⁹ After his sister-in-law died on February 28, 1939⁷⁰, the Cunningham house was sold and Low and Estelle moved to a modest rented apartment in a nearby house on Waverley Street⁷¹.

He died without a will⁷² on October 9, 1942 (he was 81) after a "lengthy illness"⁷³ and was buried in Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa, beside his wife and two sons⁷⁴. His obituary lists a number of surviving friends who attended the service, including Geological Survey colleagues, and

⁶⁴ Caron, Fabien; MSc thesis Exploration et Géographie. Albert Peter Low dans l'Ungava-Labrador, L'Institut de Géographie de l'Université de Laval, 1965; p. 52.

⁶⁵ Estelle is identified as "Miss Estelle Low" in "Loss Seen to Canada in Passing of Albert Low", The Ottawa Citizen, October 8, 1942.

⁶⁶ The Ottawa Evening Journal, January 23, 1918, p. 13; his death would not have been caused to the Spanish influenza which hit Ottawa in the autumn of 1918.

⁶⁷ Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol XIV, University of Toronto Press, pp. 327 - 328.

⁶⁸ Conversation with Dr. Morgan Gross, retired, Geological Survey, March 26, 2002.

⁶⁹ Poitevin, Eugene; "Retrospections into the unwritten history of the Geological Survey of Canada", unpublished paper presented to the Logan Club, May 4, 1960, p. 8.

⁷⁰ The Ottawa Evening Journal, March 1, 1939, p. 20.

⁷¹ Ottawa Directory 1940.

⁷² Estelle Low had to apply for in the surrogate court to execute his estate; see Archives of Ontario, RG22-354, file 21481/1942.

⁷³ "A. P. Low Noted Explorer Dies in Ottawa After 30 Years' Illness", The Ottawa Evening Journal, October 9, 1942, p. 2.

⁷⁴ Beechwood Cemetery, section 48, lot 14 NW.

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several militia people. When you are 81, you may not have that many friends left to attend to your departure. The two newspapers in Ottawa at the time contained surprisingly long obituaries for him, given the World War II battles going on at that time and the casualty lists. The graves of A.P., Isabella, Andrew and Reginald are marked in the Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa by a simple rough-hewn rock, in contrast to the polished granite obelisks that surround it.

What happened to Estelle who was 55 at the time of her father's death, and who would have inherited any of her father's private writings and mementoes? The year after her father's death, Estelle donated to the National Museum some Inuit ivory statuettes belonging to him⁷⁵ which may have been the ones he mentioned as having collected during the Cruise of the Neptune. According to the Ottawa City Directories, Estelle left the apartment of her father and lodged in several addresses in Ottawa⁷⁶ until 1947, after which all traces of her disappear. No one even knows where she is buried. What happened to the rest of her father's belongings? No one knows. Such was the life of Albert Peter Low. A private man, who rose from humble beginnings to the top of the government's best scientific institution, who exhibited physical toughness for almost three decades that few of his time or ours can match. But missing from this portrait are expressions of Low's personal views and values. Our portrait of Low is still fuzzy and in black and white. Perhaps someone someday will find Low's personal diaries and letters in a forgotten trunk in an attic somewhere. Only then can the colour and sharp focus be added to the blurred image of his personality and life.

⁷⁵ Von Finkenstein, Maria; "A Few Things in the Way of Curious - Historic Ivories at the Canadian Museum of Civilization"; Inuit Art Quarterly, col 14, winter 1999; as found on at the Museum of Civilization website http://www.civilization.ca/academ/articles/finck1_1e.html downloaded Feb 3, 2002.

⁷⁶ Ottawa Directory for years 1943 - 1947.