

Albert Peter Low : découvreur du Nouveau-Québec. Par
Camille Laverdière. (Montréal : XYZ, 2003. 160 p., ill., cartes,
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Albert Peter Low : découvreur du Nouveau-Québec. Par Camille Laverdière. (Montréal : XYZ, 2003. 160 p., ill., cartes, chronologie, bibl. ISBN 2-89261-382-5 \$16.)

This attractive little book adds a volume to a popular series edited by Xavier Gélinas, of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, commemorating “les grandes figures” in Quebec history. Its worthy subject, Albert Peter Low (1861-1942), ranks as “Canada’s ‘Iron Man’ Geologist” in the *Trailblazers* section of Natural Resources Canada’s official website. An outstanding second-generation field explorer for the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC), Low earned this reputation by opening New Quebec, from Labrador to the province’s vast northern reaches, to both geological/mineralogical and topographic/cartographic scrutiny. His work laid the foundation, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for Quebec’s transformation by the Second Industrial Revolution, which reached its fulfillment some half-century later, in the building of the Manicouagan Dam and the development of the Churchill Falls hydroelectric power project.

Inspired as a youth by the illustrious career of his fellow Montrealer, the GSC’s founding director Sir William Logan, we are told, Low earned a Bachelor of Arts and Science (BAS) in geology at McGill University and joined the GSC under Logan’s successor, Alfred Richard Cecil Selwyn, in 1882, just as the Survey was leaving Montreal for its new headquarters in Ottawa. The broader institutional contexts of Low’s

career trajectory, with recurring (and often very public) infighting over the GSC's directorship, included Low's replacement of Robert Bell as director in 1906 (Bell had been acting director since George Mercer Dawson's death in 1901). Yet such influential contours figure only peripherally in this sharply-focused account, with the author, the geographer Camille Laverdière, remaining true to the series' purpose by spotlighting Low's remarkable field achievements in New Quebec.

Low was assigned by the GSC in 1884 to assist the Quebec land surveyor John Bignell in mapping Lake Mistassini and the area westward to James Bay. Before both investigators even arrived on the scene to commence this arduous work, the younger Low utterly lost patience with the leisurely pace of the elder Bignell. Low abruptly abandoned the survey party, trekked 500 km by snowshoe to catch the nearest train to Ottawa, and returned weeks later by the same route with a letter of recall for Bignell. The Iron Man had nerve! Low then completed this first assignment accompanied by the naturalist James M. Macoun—not his father John Macoun, with whom this book consistently confuses him (p. 42-43, 48-68, 149). From 1887 Low spent a decade exploring northern Quebec and Labrador, reaching the Ungava Peninsula as a member of the Canadian government's Hudson Strait expedition in 1897. Some of this work was assisted by George Albert Young, Low's nephew and a future GSC chief geologist, mentioned briefly in this book simply as "Garry" Young, whose personal connection to Low goes unexplained (p. 109). After quitting the GSC in 1901 to join a mining enterprise, Low returned in 1903, capping his extraordinary exploratory career as commander of the *Neptune* expedition sent by the Laurier Liberal government to stake Canada's territorial claim to the eastern Arctic Archipelago, now part of Nunavut.

One advantage of this focus on Low as a pioneer geologist of New Quebec is insights into the personal price that Low—and his family—paid for his frequent travels to the remotest regions of the province. In 1886 he married Isabella Cunningham, whose family's powerful Liberal Party connections are never broached in this book, even though they fuelled resentment among Low's GSC rivals, including Robert Bell. The couple had two children, Estelle (b. 1887) and Reginald (b. 1888), who, according to Laverdière, barely remembered their father after each of his lengthy absences. It became an irony of Estelle's later life that, after a cerebral disorder cruelly began depriving Low of his mental faculties at age 46, only shortly after he became GSC director in 1906 and forcing his retirement in 1913, he would remain in his daughter's care until his death in 1942.

Among the disadvantages of the author's limited perspective, however, we remain unclear about Low's own role in the GSC's many difficulties during this transformative period in the survey's (and the country's, and Quebec's) history. We also miss out on Low's other important accomplishments, including his contribution to the GSC's landmark 1907 study of *The Falls of Niagara*, which marked out the fine details of the international boundary there and guided public policy on hydroelectric power.

The author does well to provide informative maps and even useful timelines, since his presentation is strong on geographical description and geological explanation, but less so in providing dates even for major watersheds in Low's life, including his various excursions. These challenges combine with those of the series' popular format, which precludes the citation of sources; at times it becomes difficult to discern fact from fiction here, especially in the conversational quotations. A certain measure of uneasiness results too in the reader who notices not only James Macoun but also George Mercer Dawson misnamed John (p. 98), and the Low children's birth order interchanged (p. 115). If editors for XYZ Press could not catch these errors, it may perhaps be time to consider sending manuscripts for this fine series to more specialized readers for assessment.

This book nevertheless serves its intended purpose of attracting popular readers to interesting and important contributors to Quebec's history. Among Low's geological contributions, as Laverdière explains in his easy literary style, he garnered evidence both to help unravel the mysteries of the ancient Huronian formations so prominent in the Canadian north; and to help clinch the case for glacial theory during a time when the GSC's leadership remained notoriously resistant to the accumulating evidence. Among his other lasting contributions, Low assembled an invaluable photographic record of his pioneering excursions into New Quebec, including Inuit people he encountered. Stunning examples of these photographs are wisely included, and enhance this book's accessibility still further. Clearly a labour of love by its author, this book stands not only as a welcome addition to its companion volumes, but also as a promising beacon for popular interest in history of science in this country.

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