

## A. P. Low (1861-1942)

A. P. Low's written reports of 23 seasons in northern Canada constitute one of the most significant substantiated achievements in Canadian exploration. Fabien Caron, the most enthusiastic and comprehensive chronicler of Low's travels, described the immense scope of his geographical work on the Quebec-Labrador Peninsula:

It is due to him that we first learned in whole or in part the exact course of the following rivers: Grande, l'Eau-Claire, Great Whale, Eastmain, Kaniapiskau, Hamilton, Achouanipi, Attikonak, Romaine, Mouchalagane, aux Mèlèzes, Nastapoka, Chibougamau and Obatagamau; the location and extent of Lakes Manouane, Mistassini, l'Eau-Claire, Caouachagami, Nichikun, Kaniapiskau Cambrien, Melville, Winokapau, Dyke, Petitsikapau, Menihek, Michikamau, Ossakmanouan, Attikonak, Mouchelagane, Matonipe, Attikopi, Attikopis, Naokakan, du Sommet, au Phoque, Minto, Chibougamau, Waconitchi and au Doré; the position, the relief, the subsoil, the vegetation and the exact shorelines of Charlton, Danby, Strattons, Petite Charlton, Watson, Jumelles, Walter and Spencer islands in James Bay, Grand, Lead, de l'Ours, Manitousouk, Nastapoka, Hopewell, Smith and Digges islands in Hudson Bay, Maiden, de Galles,

Eider and Gyrfalcon islands along the shores of Hudson Strait and Ungava Bay; the exact delineation of the east shoreline of Hudson Bay, James Bay, the Gulf of Richmond and part of the southern shoreline of Hudson Strait and Ungava Bay. An amazing accomplishment when one consults the map.

Albert Peter Low was born in Montreal in 1861 into a loyalist family that had left the United States in 1783. Immediately after graduating in applied science from McGill University in 1882, Low began his association with the Geological Survey of Canada. The last two decades of the 19th century were an exciting and heady time for the G.S.C. Although Canada's political boundaries were known, detailed knowledge of the actual topography, geological and forest resources, flora and fauna was, in many areas, nonexistent. It fell to Selwyn, Dawson, McConnell, McGinnis, Tyrrell, Bell, Low, and others of the Geological Survey to fill in much of the map of Canada.

On his first trip into the Quebec-Labrador region in 1884-1885, at the age of 24, Low became a central figure in "the Lake Mistassini incident." The expedition, a joint effort of the G.S.C., the Quebec government, and the Quebec Geo-



Crew of the *Neptune* in winter dress, 1903-1904, Cmdr. A.P. Low standing fifth from right. Photo by J.D. Moodie. Public Archives Canada/Neg. no. PA 53567.

graphic Society, was led by John Bignell, a veteran surveyor aged 67. Travelling northward from the St. Lawrence, the party eventually set up a winter base at the Hudson's Bay Company post on Lake Mistassini after several days of extremely cold travel on minimal rations. Disagreement with Bignell had apparently been festering for some time, and Low took action toward a resolution. He left Mistassini on February 2, travelling by snowshoe and dog team to Quebec City and thence by train westward, arriving in Ottawa on March 2. Here he was given command of the expedition, and by April 29 he was back at Mistassini — a phenomenal feat illustrating the initiative and physical strength that was to sustain Low through many more seasons on the trail. In spring, Low finished the work on Lake Mistassini, determining it to be about 160 km long and 24 km wide, not the immense interior sea that Indian tales had suggested. The party left the region via the Rupert River in the fall of 1885.

The next few seasons Low continued work in the Hudson Bay watershed, surveying the islands in James Bay and exploring in the large area on the east coast of Hudson Bay, then known as "the Eastmain." The three years 1889-1891 found Low doing geological mapping in the more well-known and settled regions of Champlain, Portneuf, Quebec, and Montmorency counties.

The travels of the succeeding four years were chronicled in Low's "Report on Exploration in the Labrador Peninsula along the Eastmain, Koksoak, Hamilton, Manicouagan and Portions of Other Rivers in 1892-93-94-95." Low traversed and criss-crossed the peninsula using a variety of routes. On the 1893-1894 trip, during which the party wintered over at Northwest River, Low covered over 8700 km — 4730 by canoe, 1600 by ship, 800 by dog team, and 1600 on foot. Not only were the technical aspects of the main travel routes detailed, but his report included extensive historical, geological, botanical, meteorological, entomological, ornithological, and ethnographic information that to this day constitutes a standard reference on the region. Its accuracy is remarkable when we realize the report was compiled without aerial photography or sophisticated measuring and sensing equipment. In addition, Low was continually dealing with the exigencies of northern wilderness travel: extreme cold, insufferable insects, exhausting physical labour, and the frequent need to hunt and fish.

Low's visual estimate of the volume of water at Hamilton Falls on the Churchill River demonstrates the quality of his field work. Judged by Low to be, on average, 50 000 cubic feet per second, the flow was calculated at 49 000 c.f.s. by Brinco Limited in the 1960s, when hydro development was taking place. Low was the first to identify the extensive iron deposits around Schefferville and Labrador City. He was also the first man to realize that the centre of the Labrador Plateau had been the pivot for a continental ice sheet and was, in fact, part of the Pre-Cambrian Shield. On journeys from 1896 through 1899, the work on the interior was complemented by extensive mapping and surveying of the Hudson Bay and Ungava coasts. After a brief period in private business, Low assumed command of the *Neptune* for its 1903-1904 voyage to the eastern Arctic, which resulted in Canada officially claiming the Arctic Archipelago.

In 1906, at the age of 45, Low retired from active field work to become the director of the Geological Survey. Although his tenure was only 18 months, he oversaw the transfer of the G.S.C. from the Interior Department to the new Mines Department. In 1907 Low became the first deputy minister of the Department of Mines, but within a few months he was stricken



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by what is thought to have been a cerebral hemorrhage and, soon after that, by spinal meningitis. He never fully recovered and eventually retired in 1913 under a cloud of controversy over his physical inability to carry out his work. Amazingly, the strength and endurance of his youth did not totally fail Low, for he lived out a long, apparently quiet, retirement in Ottawa, ultimately dying in virtual obscurity in 1942 at the age of 81.

#### FURTHER READINGS

- ALCOCK, FREDERICK J. 1944. Memorial of Albert Peter Low. Proceedings of the Geological Society of America, Annual Report for 1943.  
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 LOW, ALBERT PETER. 1895. Report on Exploration in the Labrador Peninsula along the East Main, Koksoak, Hamilton, Manicouagan and Portions of Other Rivers in 1892-93-94-95. Ottawa: Geological Survey of Canada, Annual Report Volume 8, Part L.

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