

William E. Logan's 1845 Survey of the Upper Ottawa Valley

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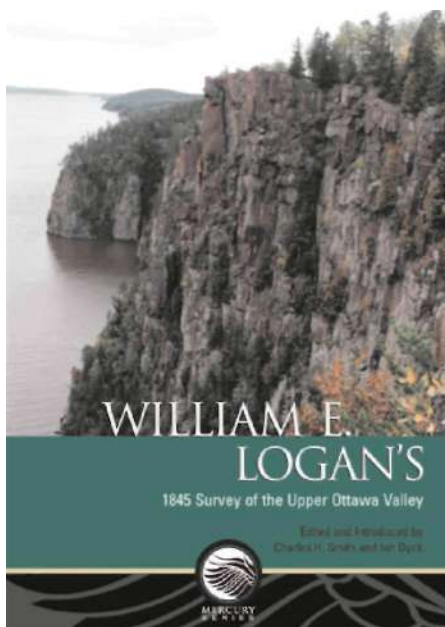
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William E. Logan's 1845 Survey of the Upper Ottawa Valley

Edited and introduced by Charles H. Smith and Ian Dyck
Canadian Museum of Civilization, Mercury Series, 2007
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We know Sir William Edmond Logan, in all his impressive and inspirational glory, as one of Canada's greatest scientists, as the Father of Canadian Geology, and as the founder of the Geological Survey of Canada. Indeed, it is hard to imagine what the state of earth science research in Canada would be today without his imprint and the kickstart he gave it in the 1840s. Or for that matter what our national museums would be like, seeing that the geological museum he founded in the mid-1850s spun off, over time, into the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Canadian Museum of Nature – both of which have at their core the Logan-instilled imperative that solid research must support the public displays.

The heart and soul of

William E. Logan's 1845 Survey of the Upper Ottawa Valley is a journal kept by Logan during fieldwork that took him up the Ottawa River to Lake Timiskaming from late June to November in 1845. The back-story of the book is an interesting one. Charles Smith, who has devoted much time and effort over the past two decades to tracking down and transcribing Logan's voluminous correspondence, hit the motherlode at the McGill Archives when he unearthed this journal, which had long been hidden from view; he immediately realized that it was important on many levels. More informal than Logan's field notes and correspondence, the journal reveals the human, everyday Logan, in his very own words. Jotted down at the end of a long day, usually after his field notes were written up and his maps updated, Logan's journal also provides a glimpse of life and work in Canada in the 1840s.

The chatty, anecdotal entries have a remarkable freshness, immediacy and candour, as if Logan were recounting his adventures and tribulations to a close friend and confidant, which, of course, is exactly what the journal was for him during that long trip. Logan had as keen an eye for the detail of everyday life as he had for geology. He provides vivid thumbnail sketches of the people and places he encounters, all infused with his indefatigable good humour. We meet, through his words, the "mighty talkative" landlady who had chickens and pigs strolling in and out of her inn, we witness the ceremony at which Logan was given the Indian name "Tanya rhita" (meaning "breaker of rocks), we share his frustration at the despised green tea he was offered everywhere and the hard biscuits he had to break with his geological hammer, as well as his delight in some of the meals he had along the way – including an exotic mixed boil of duck, pigeon and pike seasoned with the edible weed, lamb's quarters, that received a rave review from him.

All this is not to say that geology is not a recurring theme. That would be an impossibility for Logan who told many a disappointed Montreal matron with daughters to marry off that he was "wedded to the rocks."

Most entries include a comment on the geology encountered during the day and often refer to how the work was carried out – the finicky equipment and the incredibly tough slog of it all. Logan, who was 47 years old at the time of this expedition (an advanced age for the times when the average life span was 50), kept up a punishing schedule of hard work and long hours.

To appreciate Smith's challenge in transcribing Logan's words, one has only to look at the reproductions provided of actual pages from the journal. At first glance Logan's handwriting gives the impression of elegant penmanship, but upon closer inspection the individual words are devilishly hard to decipher. Smith's co-editor, Ian Dyck, is an archaeologist with the Canadian Museum of Civilization who has a keen interest in the history of the Geological Survey of Canada. He brings to the book a strong sense of the human history significance of Logan's journal.

Smith and Dyck have pinned the journal into the context of its times using a wealth of supporting information. These include background materials about the 1845 expedition, a description of the Geological Survey in the 1840s, and the field tools and methods in use at that time. The significance of Logan's 1845 fieldwork is discussed from various points of view including geology, topographical mapping, economic development, national museum development and the history of the upper Ottawa Valley. Appendices provide a biographical sketch of Logan and notes about the members of his field party; a discussion of the 1845 Geological Survey Act, which renewed the Survey's mandate, and Logan's take on it; an inventory of the minerals, fossils and water samples collected during the 1845 expedition; a catalogue, prepared by Logan in 1851, of the economic minerals and deposits to be found in the Ottawa Valley; a description of the Rochon micrometer telescope, which Logan introduced to Canada for topographical surveying; and correspondence relating to the expedition. All in all, this is an excellent collection of materials that nicely rounds out Logan's journal.

I can offer up only one half-hearted quibble. The book has a hand-

some colour cover showing Devil's Rock on Lake Timiskaming, which Logan passed on October 31, 1845, but the interior photographs are a bit fuzzy and faded, apparently due to a cost-cutting method of printing. It does not diminish the book overly much, but it is truly a shame that the fabulous portrait of Logan in his field clothes, taken by the great Montreal photographer William Notman, is a mere shadow of itself.

There is no rule that a book reviewer has to be objective and I will confess that William Edmond Logan is one of my great heroes, so naturally I am going to like and recommend any book that brings him to our attention. But what is so compelling and unusual about this book is that it gives you the opportunity to meet Logan on the same ground as he addressed his journal – as his friend and confidant. At the end of the read, I think you will have reached my conclusion that the great man Logan was also a great guy! Plus you will have been given a fascinating glimpse into life in Canada in the 1840s, warts and all. Well worth a read, and not just for the earth science community. Historians, anyone living along the Ottawa River and genealogists will also find this book to be a treasure trove of information from a time long past.

Available from the Canadian Museum of Civilization (1-800-555-5621 or publications@civilization.ca).