

R. Frank Blackwood: 1950–2020

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A TRIBUTE



Frank in his managerial role as Director of the Geological Survey of Newfoundland and Labrador.

R. Frank Blackwood: 1950–2020

On the 4th of August, 2020, I, together with the geoscience community of Newfoundland and Labrador, learned with shock of the death of Frank Blackwood, long one of our principal champions of geoscience in the Province and indeed the entire country.

I first met Frank in the summer of 1974 when I was engaged in my post-graduate field work in southern New Brunswick and he in a similar endeavor in eastern Newfoundland. I took Frank on a tour of my field area and rapidly came to realize that here was a force of nature with a remarkable ability to challenge established thinking in an articulate and erudite manner.

Our paths crossed again in 1976 when we both joined the Geological Survey of Newfoundland and Labrador at the time when Frank was engaged in extending his MSc thesis work into a broader part of eastern Newfoundland, very close to the area of Bonavista Bay where he had been born and raised. Frank had studied geology at Memorial University of Newfoundland (as it was then) and completed his MSc degree at the same institution, also in 1976. These were halcyon days for geological surveys as new federal-provincial funding agreements led to a surge in growth of government geoscience activities across Canada. As part of this surge, Frank went on to extend his work into southern Newfoundland around the remote communities of Grey River and McCallum. In this, his work contributed greatly to application of the then relatively

new principles of plate tectonics to the development of models for the amalgamation of the Avalon zone, representing part of proto Africa, with the internal zones of the Appalachian orogen.

In 1986 Frank hung up his field boots and became editor of the Newfoundland and Labrador Geological Survey's publications system where he introduced high standards of map and report production, following which he moved into management as head of the Publications and Information section. Here he took on the additional responsibility of overseeing the Survey's efforts to promote the province as an attractive place for mineral exploration. In 1998, Frank took another step up the management ladder to become Director of the Survey. Under his guidance, the Survey continued its expansion to provide a full spectrum of services, including bedrock mapping, terrain science, geophysical and geochemical surveys, all tied together by a robust publication and promotions system that with time became increasingly dominated by digital applications and computerization. It was during the 1980s – early 1990s that the Newfoundland and Labrador Survey established its reputation as one of the most active surveys in Canada and greatly expanded its contribution to the understanding of the evolution of the Canadian landmass and its resource endowment. However, in the latter half of the 1990s, the growing problem of financial deficits began to constrain the ability of both federal and provincial governments to fund geoscience surveys at the previous levels. As a consequence, various financial reviews forced surveys to reduce their activities – a problem that affected the Newfoundland and Labrador Survey as much as any. In dealing with this challenge, Frank proved to be an example of the right man for the time and provided exemplary leadership in dealing with successive crises. In this his strategy was to take advantage of whatever opportunity presented itself to use his formidable powers of oratory and persuasion to promote the value, indeed the necessity, of geoscience surveys to senior bureaucrats and politicians. I was privileged to see Frank in action in this respect when on one occasion he took advantage of the publication of a new geological map of Labrador to get himself in front of the provincial Minister of Natural Resources and his staff, and then proceeded to successfully persuade them of the necessity of maintaining geoscience (including of course the survey budget) in resource dependent provinces such as Newfoundland and Labrador.

In his every-day duties, Frank was a strong and effective manager who could always be relied upon to rise to the chal-



Frank addressing the (somewhat wet) masses in 1976 on a GAC field trip to his project area in eastern Newfoundland.

lenges of the day. He preferred to manage through his powers of charm and persuasion but ran a tight ship and could clamp down when required. Even then he had the rare managerial gift of being able to administer a rebuke in a positive and encouraging manner that left no rancor behind.

Also in his Director role, Frank was active on the national scene as a member of the Committee of Provincial and Territorial Geologists, which reported to the annual Mines and Energy Ministers conference. This committee undertook as one of its key missions to garner the support of the principal mineral industry associations of Canada in order to promote the importance of government geoscience to the federal, provincial and territorial ministers. This work was critical in reducing the impact of continued financial pressure through the 1990s and into the 2000s.

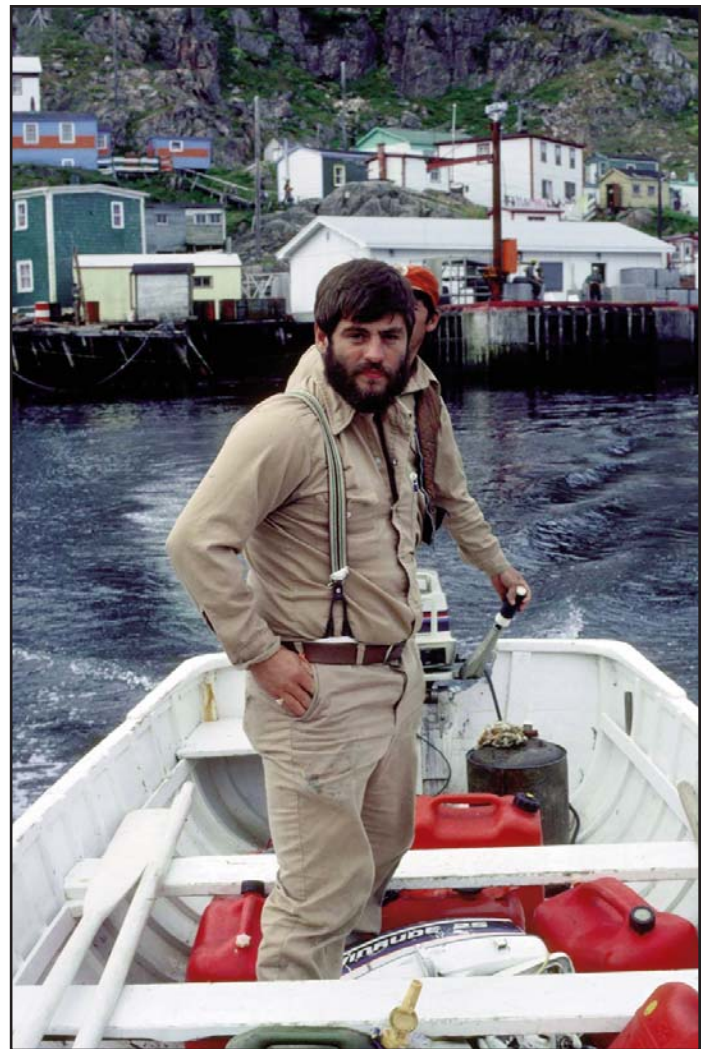
Frank had two passions in his professional career. One was, as outlined above, the Geological Survey of Newfoundland and Labrador; the other was the Geological Association of Canada (GAC), a passion that was probably initially inspired by Dr. Ward Neale, Chair of the Department of Earth Sciences at Memorial University during Frank's university days and a passionate advocate for the GAC. Frank became a fellow of GAC early in his career and went on to become its Secretary-Treasurer during the period 1987 to 1990 and then President in 1993–94. During these years Frank contributed to the growth of the Association and to its increased national and international recognition. Frank's interest in GAC culminated in 2001 with his chairmanship of the hugely successful joint GAC/MAC/CSPG annual meeting in St. John's.

In 2002 Frank became chair of the Canadian Geoscience Foundation (CGF), a charitable organization set up to fund worthy geoscience outreach projects across Canada. During his tenure (2002–2008), Frank was able to significantly increase the CGF's funding base through the securement of the Jerome H. Remick III endowment and left behind a legacy of strong, well-organized governance and a solid investment policy that set the CGF up for long term success.

Frank's interest in public outreach also brought him to the attention of Paul Johnson, a prominent St. John's business-

man, who in the late 1990s was in the conceptual stages of creating a geoscience facility that would promote interest in Newfoundland's spectacular geology to the general public. Frank was initially asked to assist in defining the scope and theme of the facility, then moved on to the development committee where he played an influential role in steering the project through its design and construction phases. The dream was realized in 2002 when the Johnson Geo Centre opened its doors on Signal Hill, adding a major tourist attraction to the scenic park that overlooks downtown St. John's. Frank continued to maintain his involvement in the new Geo Centre as a member of the Board of Directors and contributed significantly to the acquisition of new exhibits, including the Exxon-Mobil Oil and Gas gallery.

Frank eventually decided to retire in 2007, however he maintained an active role in the geoscience community and went on to administer a granting system to fund selected private sector mineral exploration research projects under the auspices of the provincial Research and Development Corporation, which was set up in 2007. Frank also became involved in professional geoscience through membership of the Awards



Frank engaged in field work, southern Newfoundland in 1982.

Committee of the Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Newfoundland and Labrador. His final involvement in public geoscience was assisting the Shorefast Foundation with its "Geologists in Residence" project on Fogo Island in eastern Newfoundland.

Frank also continually sought honours and awards for his many deserving colleagues, whether in government, industry or academia, but was self-effacing about his own recognition and on several occasions refused to accept nominations that he felt should go to others. However, GAC did manage to persuade him to accept a Distinguished Fellow Award in 1996, followed in 2002 by a Distinguished Service Award and then in 2008 the J. Willis Ambrose Medal, which is awarded for sustained, dedicated service to the Canadian Earth Science community. The Ambrose medal in particular provided fitting recognition of Frank's work to build GAC and to promote the importance of geoscience to governments and the general public.

Frank was above all a gifted communicator, and whether chairing a committee or delivering a major public address, will long be admired for his command of the English language and ability to distil complex issues into readily understandable summations. Listening to his presidential address at the 1994 GAC/MAC annual meeting on "The Poetry of Geology" (Blackwood 1994; <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/GC/issue/view/402>), was to see a master orator in action as Frank delivered his views on the importance of geoscience to society and our way of life to a rapt and attentive audience.

On August 4th, Frank passed away after a battle with bile duct cancer. His passing has left a deep sense of loss in the geoscience community. He was a strong and effective leader who could always rise to the challenge of difficult times and who commanded respect for his thoughtful and respectful eloquence. He was also a tireless advocate for the importance of geoscience, particularly public geoscience. He will long be remembered with great admiration and respect as a colleague, a friend, a manager and a leader. His loss is also a terrible tragedy for his family, notably his wife Verna, his mother Evelyn and his sons Michael and Alexander.

In keeping with Frank's desire to help others in geoscience, an annual award is in the process of being established at Memorial University where it will be given to a full time graduate student in the Department of Earth Sciences.

He will be sorely missed.

Richard J. Wardle, with contributions from Baxter Kean, Dave Liverman, Paul Dean, Jeremy Hall, Lawson Dickson and Andy Kerr.

REFERENCE

Blackwood, R.F., 1994, Presidential Address: The Poetry of Geology: Geoscience Canada, v. 21, p. 45–48.

With the support of the family, a scholarship fund has been established at the Department of Earth Sciences, Memorial University, in recognition of Frank's many contributions. The fund will provide an annual award for a graduate student engaged in field-based geoscience research.

Contributions in memory of Frank can be made online at <https://www.mun.ca/give/Donate.php>.

Select "Other" from the dropdown list located in the "Area of Designation" and enter 'R.F. Blackwood Memorial Award' in the "Designation Information" field.

Receipts for tax purposes will be issued.

For more information about the fund and its objectives, please contact Dr. Stephen Piercey at Memorial University (spiercey@mun.ca).