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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Features



History of Geology

1985: Centenary of a Famous Journey by A.P. Low

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1984 is the centenary of one of the more celebrated journeys in the history of Canadian geological exploration, namely A.P. Low's return to Ottawa from Lake Mistassini in mid-winter to settle the question of who was in charge of the party.

Albert Peter Low was an outstanding geological explorer who worked in many parts of Canada, but his finest achievement was undoubtedly the exploration over a period of twenty years of Labrador-Ungava, a region of at least 750,000 square kilometres that was considered the least known part of Canada. He crossed the peninsula in several directions, over-wintering twice, and in one journey covered 9000 km, of which 1600 km was on foot, 800 km by dog sled, and 4800 km by canoe. During the journeys he discovered the Labrador Trough and its iron formations; this in turn was to lead to the development of the Quebec-Labrador iron mines of the Schefferville (Burnt Creek) area during the 1950s. Low became director of the Geological Survey of Canada in 1906, after having acted as commander of the 1903-1904 Neptune

expedition to the eastern Arctic islands, an excursion in which Canada went a long way toward establishing sovereignty claims over territory that had been acquired in 1880.

The years 1884-1885 mark the beginning of A.P. Low's great journeys into the interior of Ungava (then known as the North-East Territory). The area to the east of Hudson Bay was then virtually unknown, and the Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada arranged for the Province of Quebec, "after considerable negotiation", as Dr. Selwyn described it, to contribute \$1500 toward the cost of a survey of Lake Mistassini, whose outline was only partly known, and the Rupert River down to James' Bay. Command of the party was originally vested in John Bignell P.L.S., since the primary purpose was a topographical survey, and A.P. Low was appointed geologist and second in command. Bignell appears to have been very slow with his preparations. Low reported to Bignell in Quebec on June 12, 1884 but the party did not leave until July 19. It was August 8 before they started up the Bersimis River, and even then Low left ahead of the main party. This date was, of course, extremely late for starting into the interior of Ungava, especially when the route was imperfectly known. The record of Low's later journeys leaves us in little doubt about how impatient he must have been at the delays. Bignell's reports do not seem to say much about the causes of the delay, but Low refers to waiting for the schooner to arrive for the journey from Quebec to Rimouski, and the "delay in engaging Indians and preparing the outfit". How much of this delay can reasonably be blamed on Bignell is difficult to say, but Selwyn's comments in the introduction to his Summary Report for 1884 and 1885 suggest that he had his doubts about Bignell.

Low's journey up the Bersimis was an arduous one. From the Bersimis the expedition made its way to the Peribonka River and there awaited Bignell's party, which had travelled by a different route in order to survey the rivers. Here, they constructed toboggans and waited from October 23

until Bignell arrived on November 4. They left on snowshoes on November 27, hauling the toboggans, and reached the Hudson Bay Company post on Lake Mistassini on December 23, travelling via Lake Temiscamie and the Temiscamie River "thus finishing a long and difficult tramp on snowshoes, having walked for the last ten days of the journey on very short rations, with the thermometer ranging to forty degrees below zero". The remainder of the story is best told in Low's own words (Low, 1885):

Shortly after our arrival I made arrangements with Mr. Miller, the gentleman in charge of the post, by which I obtained quarters in his house, and there set up the instruments and took regular meteorological observations during the month of January. At the end of this time, having had several disagreements with Mr. Bignell regarding the operations of the party, I determined to return to Ottawa, and having arranged with Mr. Miller to continue the meteorological observations during my absence, I left on the 2nd of February, accompanied by two men whom Mr. Bignell was sending to Lake St. John with letters. On leaving the post we proceeded to the south-west end of the lake, crossing the Height of Land near that point, and, after traversing several small lakes, reached a branch of the Chief River, followed it to its junction with the Chamouchouan River, and continued down the latter, reaching Lake St. John February 21st.

Two heavy snowstorms occurred while we were on the way, making the walking so difficult that our tent and sheet iron stove had to be abandoned, and we were obliged to sleep in the snow for more than a week.

The country passed through is very similar to that seen on the Peribonka River, and is described by Mr. McQuat in his report on the Mistassini River (Report of Progress Geol. Survey, 1871-72).

Since Mr. McQuat's exploration, the country has been wholly burned over, and few clumps of green woods remain.

Leaving Lake St. John February 23rd, I continued my journey with a horse and sleigh to Quebec, and reached Ottawa March 2nd. On the 23rd I received instructions to return to Mistassini, in charge of the party, and left Ottawa next day, accompanied by Mr. Macoun. Having been delayed in Montreal and Quebec, Lake St. John was not reached until April 5th.

Here we secured four men and provisions

for the return trip through the kindness of Mr. J.H. Cummins, of the Hudson Bay Company, who also forwarded provisions for us to Lake Ashouapmouchouan, to be there stored until my men could return for them with canoes when the rivers had opened. Leaving Lake St. John, April 9th, with a party of eight, we started to return to Mistassini by the route taken by Mr. James Richardson, a full report of which is given in the Geological Survey Report for 1870-71.

It was found necessary to travel mostly in the early morning, before the heat of the sun melted the crust of the snow. We therefore commenced our day's tramp about 3 a.m. and stopped about noon. We proceeded up the Chamouchouan River to the Shagobee Branch, and, following it to the lake at its head, crossed from it by a short portage to Lake Ashouapmouchouan, April 15th. Here, having replenished our stock of provisions, we continued up the Nikaubau River, through Lake Nikaubau and several smaller lakes, following the route laid down on Richardson's map, and reached the Height of Land.

Crossing this, we soon reached Lake Obatigoman, and, having passed along its eastern shore four miles, we passed overland to Lake Chibougamoo, arriving there on the 20th of April. Up to this time the weather, being cold and clear, was very favorable for travelling, but we were now overtaken by a period of mild weather, which made the snow so soft and heavy as to render tramping with loads almost impossible. In addition to this we were short of provisions, and on the 24th I decided to send four men ahead without loads, with instructions to reach the Hudson Bay post on Mistassini and send back provisions from there. These men travelled over sixty miles in forty hours, without food, and thus reached the post. From here two Indians were sent back with provisions to relieve us, and arrived at our camp, on the east side of Lake Chibougamoo, April 28th. Continuing our journey, we reached the post the next day.

There can be little doubt that the director, Selwyn, took Low's part in the matter. In the introduction to the Summary Report, admittedly written after the event, he is at pains to say of Bignell: "On the 13th of May... he was instructed to engage men and make all necessary arrangements to start as soon as possible... and for his further guidance a memorandum was given him, stating generally the objects of the expedition, and also instructions drawn up by the Assistant Commissioner of Crown Lands at Quebec, and approved by myself." (Selwyn, 1885, p. 9A) The Memorandum and Letter of Instructions, not really necessary in the Annual Report, are meticulously reproduced and are followed by what can only be described as a considerable criticism of Bignell when one remembers the polite turn of phrase that was standard in official documents at this period:

I fully expected Mr. Bignell would start not later than July, and was very much surprised to learn from Mr. Low that he did not leave Bersimis — the route by the Bersimis or the Betsiamites River having been determined on

— till the 20th March. [Surely a misprint for August 20th (JG)] I had received no communications from Mr. Bignell since the 18th of August, at the end of the year. I had, however, received letters from Mr. Low, dated Lake Pimpuakan, August 25th and September 1st, and Lake Manouan the 9th of October. (Selwyn, 1885, p. 11A)

This support for Low is made very clear in Selwyn's introduction to the 1885 report (Selwyn, 1885, p. 37A):

In regard to the survey and exploration of Lake Mistassini, referred to in my last report, I regret to say that my anticipation respecting it, as then stated, were subsequently verified. On the 2nd February, Mr. Low left the party encamped on the lake shore, and came out on snow shoes to Lake St. John, whence he proceeded to Ottawa, arriving there on the 3rd of March. From his report, I considered it expedient that he should at once return, and take charge of the survey. He accordingly left Ottawa on the 28th March**, accompanied by J.M. Macoun, as assistant, and reached Lake St. John on the 5th of April. Thence they proceeded on snowshoes to Lake Mistassini. Owing to the lateness of the season, however, travelling at night became necessary and with much difficulty and hardship they reached the lake on the 28th of April. Up to that time no attempt had been made to ascertain the size of the lake or to survey its shores. (Selwyn, 1885, p. 37A)

Selwyn's reference to no attempt having been made by Bignell to do any surveying in the three months between Low's departure on February 2 and his return to Mistassini on April 28 is a rather stinging indictment.

Further indication of the extent to which Selwyn supported Low is the \$250 increase of salary that Low received on July 1, 1887, from \$850 to \$1100 per annum at a time when every other officer received only \$50 per annum increase.

The rates of pay are rather interesting:

J. Bignell, party chief	\$5.00 per day
W. Bignell, assistant surveyor	\$2.50 per day
F. Bignell, assistant surveyor	\$2.00 per day
Guide	\$2.00 per day
Cook	\$2.00 per day
Labourers and axe men	\$1.50 per day
A.P. Low, geologist and, later, chief:	1884: \$2.05 per day 1885: \$2.20 per day

In common with his colleagues of the day, Low had not submitted his accounts by November 16, 1885, when the Auditor General wrote to the director: "Please let me have a list of your explorers, if any, who have not yet rendered their accounts for the summer of 1885. As I have mentioned to you before, there is no reason why

these accounts should not be closed within a week after returning to Ottawa. In cases of neglect, salary cheques should be withheld until the vouchers are produced." The "...if any..." was a joke! Two days later Selwyn dutifully included Low's name in the list of geologists who had not submitted their accounts: every geologist except one!

References

- Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada, Summary Report of the Operation of the Geological Survey for the years 1884 and 1885 by Alfred R.C. Selwyn, pages 8A – 14A, 37A, 5D – 12D.
Reports of the Auditor General of Canada for the years 1884 to 1889 (miscellaneous pages assembled as a separate manuscript over the signature of J.B. Tyrrell, and in the possession of J. Gittins).