

Digging up the Great Stone Chief

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Though Robert Bell (1841–1917) was one of Canada’s foremost pioneer geologists, he is largely forgotten today. While planning a book on the geomorphology of Canada, Prof. Ian Brookes (York University) came across Bell’s work on glaciation, and turned to a study of Bell himself. Brookes’ detailed biography, largely based on Bell’s extensive correspondence housed at Library and Archives Canada, and which was nearly complete at his recent death, is now being finalized by his colleagues for publication. Over his nearly 50-year career at the Geological Survey of Canada, Bell’s explorations made him widely recognized as an authority on geology, natural history, forestry, and ethnography. He mapped rivers draining into Hudson Bay, scouted out the route for a transcontinental railway, was medical and science officer on two expeditions to explore Hudson Strait, and “illuminated” the geology and mineral deposits of Sudbury and Cobalt, the Athabasca tar sands, and diamonds found in glacial sediments of the Great Lakes region. Along the way he gathered information on weather, ice and oceanographic conditions, forests, fauna and flora, and aboriginal peoples, who gave him the title “Great Stone Chief.” Bell was a charter member of the Royal Society of Canada, and was honoured at home and abroad. He was a frequent public speaker and government expert on national development, confident of a prosperous future for Canada. Despite his stellar service to the Survey, Bell was denied the title he really coveted and ended his career as ‘Acting Director’, not Director, of the Geological Survey. His output was prolific and his work unique, but not so his struggle with bureaucracy and political intrigue.