

On the trail of the Great Stone Chief

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Robert Bell (1841–1917) likely explored more of Canada than any other person. Mostly as an employee of the Geological Survey of Canada, but at times on private ventures, Bell collected details on the geology, natural history, forestry, and ethnography from Newfoundland to the Yukon. He was a charter member of the Royal Society of Canada, and was honoured at home and abroad. Bell's story is being written as a book, based on earlier research by Ian Brookes, to be published to celebrate both the 150th anniversary of Canada and the 175th anniversary of the Geological Survey of Canada. Much of Bell's materials were saved from the debris of a house fire of his daughter in 1962, and are now housed in the National Archives.

The main focus of his mapping was the rivers draining into Hudson Bay, but he also completed comprehensive studies of the Paleozoic of Ontario, gold fields of Nova Scotia, the Appalachian thrust belt of the Gaspé, the Red River Valley of Manitoba, and routes from the Metis heartland in Saskatchewan to Great Bear Lake and the Klondike. Bell was responsible for naming over 3000 geographic features in Canada, and his later explorations resulted in the naming of the Bell River, downstream from Matagami, Quebec, after him. Serving as geologist, naturalist, medical doctor, and linguist, he pioneered canoe-based excursions of all the large rivers entering Hudson Bay and James Bay east from Churchill, and provided both navigational and medical support in three expeditions from St. John's to Hudson Bay through Hudson Strait. He interacted with aboriginal peoples, and was given the title "Great Stone Chief" by the Inuit of the Ungava Peninsula.