

Max Finkelstein and James Stone, with a foreword by Becky Mason. *Paddling the Boreal Forest: Rediscovering A.P. Low*. Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2004, ISBN 1-896219-98-5

IT WAS THE INDEPENDENCE DAY weekend of 2002 in my home city, Washington DC, a typical summer holiday weekend except for a brownish haze — smoke from massive fires in the boreal forest of northern Quebec. In Ottawa, two outdoor enthusiasts, self-described as “50-year old civil servants with desk jobs,” were preparing to enter this very region to retrace the steps and canoe-paddle strokes of a now obscure geologist-explorer from a century past, Albert Peter Low (1861-1942). The why and how of their trip unfolds in *Paddling the Boreal Forest*.

Before setting out on their voyage, Max Finkelstein and James Stone carried out extensive research at Library and Archives Canada, the Library of the Geological Survey of Canada [GSC], and elsewhere, to piece together the story of an important figure in geological science and in the exploration of Canada. From his field notes, hand-drawn maps, photographs, and other original materials, they have skillfully pieced together a history of the official man. The authors bemoan the lack of personal insights in Low’s writings and in the materials that he left behind, conceding that we are left with only a partial picture of Low. Yet even this partial view of the man, and of the era of Canadian exploration following Confederation, make this a worthy contribution.

Low was not always the first non-aboriginal person to explore a given region of eastern Canada, but his scientific mission, and the dogged pursuit of mapping data and geological observations under extreme conditions, were unique. During the period 1883-1896, he made ten canoe/snowshoe trips on the rivers and lakes of the Quebec-Labrador Peninsula, and, during the period 1897-1904, he explored the shorelines of Hudson, James and Ungava bays. Low made major contributions to the field of glacial geology and discovered the vast iron ore resources of the “Labrador Trough” (which includes the rich deposits near Schefferville, Quebec, and Labrador City, Labrador). The economic import of his work was obviously huge, and his final explorations, before moving to a “mahogany canoe” (a desk as Director of the GSC in 1905), had major political implications for Canada’s claim to the northern islands of Hudson Bay.

Paddling the Boreal Forest will appeal to a variety of audiences. By skipping the “Interlude” chapters that describe the Finkelstein/Stone canoe trips of 2002-2003, it can be read strictly as scientific biography. However, the description of the authors’ trips add a vivid sense of place and of the rigours of travel to Low’s archival record — the mummified black flies squashed on the pages of Low’s field notebooks, and the scene of the authors sipping coffee through the mesh of their bug hats during their trip are images that stick in the mind.

The endnotes are enlightening, often answering questions that the main text raised in my mind. The historical details on the GSC were of particular interest to a

scientist in the U.S. Geological Survey. The description of the three-building government complex in Ottawa circa 1887 — the Parliament itself; a large office building housing most of the bureaucracy (about one thousand persons); and the Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada headquarters building with its staff of about 50 persons — was emblematic of this agency's distinct role in exploring and mapping new territories in the late nineteenth century, and of its relatively large segment of the federal workforce. What is missing, however, is a set of maps showing the many named locations that Low visited on his journeys; in their absence, one needs a good atlas at hand to follow the story in detail.

A.P. Low's 1896 map of the Labrador Peninsula was the subject of much discussion during the Labrador Explorations Symposium at North West River, Labrador, in June 2005. In 1903, Dillon Wallace and Leonidas Hubbard set out from North West River by canoe, intent on reaching Ungava Bay via the George River. Hubbard died of starvation after they got lost, soon after exiting Grand Lake. In his 1905 book *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, Wallace criticized Low's mapping of rivers entering Grand Lake, upon which Hubbard had relied. But as Finkelstein and Stone (and others before) have argued, the rivers here were shown with dotted lines, indicating that that the features were based on speculation and never intended to be used as authoritative guides. Finkelstein and Stone go on to show that Low and his assistant David Eaton used this dotted line representation in other places (i.e., a section of a river avoided by portage) where conjecture was used. Low, the very private man portrayed throughout the book, apparently left no recorded replies to Wallace's assertions. What emerges from Finkelstein and Stone's account of their trips is a high measure of respect for his ability as a mapmaker; indeed, they were "humbled by the accuracy of Low's maps and the pace of his travel."

Low faded almost completely from the public scene in 1913, after the onset (around 1907) of a debilitating illness. His decline lasted more than 30 years, ending with his death in 1942. In a memorial to Low that spotlighted his enormous contributions to our knowledge of the geography and geology of the Labrador Peninsula, his fellow geologist Frederick J. Alcock observed that "the names Low and Labrador are almost synonymous." Max Finkelstein and James Stone have done a great service in rediscovering this remarkable explorer, and introducing him to a wide audience.

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